

Chameleon
Moon

CHAMELEON MOON: Second Edition.
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Chameleon
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ROANNA SYLVER

For Intro

I still hope you're proud. I hope the words came out right.
You're what I remember. Dream sweet.



Prologue

"IT'S FINALLY HAPPENED, BABIES. PAROLE IS BURNING. THEY SAY WE STARTED OUT IN A BLAZE OF glory, and now we're all going down in flames."

Sidewalks split apart into huge cracks, and giant craters devoured cars and buildings and people like hungry jaws. Black smoke and tongues of flame licked up from the crevices as the asphalt crumbled, and everywhere screams cut through the terrible noise of the collapsing city. And a sunny girl's voice issued from every radio, every frequency, every speaker. She talked quickly, desperately, a rapid-fire barrage of comfort and direction, and every single person in the city shut up and listened.

"But it's gonna be okay, I promise, because I'm going to talk you through this. The center of the city is gone, so you have to get to the edges of Parole lickety-quick. Get away



from the crater but do NOT try to break through the fences.”

Not everybody listened. Hordes of desperate, hopeful souls tried to escape—but they were locked in. They flung themselves against electric fences and barbed wire and stormed the wall of masked men with guns and riot shields. Gunshots joined the awful roar, and bodies fell into the incinerator below. There weren't enough safe places left, and the fire found them.

“I repeat, do not try to break through the gates! They are all over the city exits, and they will kill you if you try to break out. This is what they've been waiting for! If you ever thought the law was on your side, let this open your eyes. We're on our own now.”

There was no escape as the streets sank into the lake of fire. The gates stayed shut, and the quarantine held strong.

“If you can fight, get to the Emerald Bar. If you can't, if you need shelter, get to the library—if it's even still standing! My friends are there, they'll help you. Somehow we're gonna make it through this together.”

The men in the gas masks stood firm and unmoving beside the closed gates and fences and the impenetrable barrier arcing overhead, not letting a single soul pass. Helicopters hovered above, blades spinning in a deafening roar. Their searchlights traveled over the devastation, white columns of light cutting through the carbon monoxide smoke.

*“And whatever you do, sweeties, **stay out of the light!** They're shooting anyone they see in the spotlight, so get down and stay down. Just try not to fall into the fire, okay?”*

The Eye in the Sky saw it all, and even as the skyscrapers and bridges collapsed and crushed the life out of the smoke-drowned Parole, they never blinked.

“I know it's scary, but I'll be right here with you. Just listen to my voice. I'm your

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Radio Angel and we're gonna make it through this, I promise this will all be okay, do you hear me? Just get to the library, or to the Emerald—"

An explosion shook the ground. The broadcast erupted into static snow, and her voice cut off. The radio fell silent, and collapsing buildings, helicopter blades, gunshots and screams replaced the comforting voice.

Nobody knew what had started the catastrophe, why tonight of all nights they were falling into the lake of fire. Nobody knew that it began in a dingy underground pub on a smoke-filled night like any other. And *nobody* knew that it all started with a song.

CHAPTER 1

The Show Must Go On

REGAN KEPT HIS BACK TO THE WALL, AND FOLDED HIS ARMS TIGHTLY ACROSS HIS CHEST. HE KEPT his scaly head down, tucked in his chin, and clenched his teeth. Despite the dense crowd in the dim bar, the hard, narrow stare he shot out from underneath his lowered gaze kept everyone at arms' length. This way nobody could hear the chatter in his pointed teeth, or see him curl his hands into fists to hide the shaking. He pressed his back more firmly against the wall and breathed. Steadied his nerves, focused on conserving precious body heat. Even in the heat of the small, packed house, even in this city where the smoke never cleared and the fire never went out, he needed all the warmth he could get.

No one saw his yellow eyes with their thin, vertical, snakelike pupils darting around the room, never still. And never together; they zipped in entirely



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different directions, flicking over every face, every figure independently.

“Welcome back to the Emerald Bar, angel-face! Excited for the show?”

Regan looked up at the chubby, pretty girl—no waitress or hostess uniform, but friendly enough to be one—smiling at him, all freckle-faced perkiness and bubblegum-pink hair. Her chair hovered around three feet off the ground, silently floating up and down. For a moment he was tempted to smile back, pretend this was a normal night and that everything wasn’t about to change forever.

“Wouldn’t know. Never seen one.” He turned away from her, letting his eyes slide back out over the full room. The people seated around tables and standing along the walls like him were happily noisy, with an aura of jovial anticipation hovering around them, instead of the smoke that never went away. Not in Parole.

“Well, you’re really in for a treat,” the girl in the chair continued. She had a nice voice; he couldn’t help thinking he’d heard it before somewhere. Maybe she did some kind of show here too. “Evelyn’s trying out some new material—it rocks. I mean, I’m biased, she breathes and I think it rocks, but this is really something great.”

“Uh-huh. The owner of this place—guy named Garrett Cole. Any idea where I could find him?”

“Yeah, he’s... the emcee tonight,” she said, giving him a curious look, as if he’d said something strange. “He’ll come out and announce Miss Ev, he opens and closes the show. Sometimes he talks and sings with the audience... you sure you’ve never been here before? I could swear I’ve seen you around.”

He scratched at his neck, adjusting the loose-hanging folds of scaly skin he hid under his collar. “No. First time.”

“Okay.” She floated away, shooting him a smile and wave. “If you need anything, ask for Kari, that’s me! Enjoy the show!”

Once she was gone, he turned back around and scanned the entire room again, but not with his eyes this time. The tip of a forked tongue flicked out of his mouth as subtly as he could while still testing currents of air. He’d never find what he was searching for here just by looking, or listening, or asking. Even smelling was a pale imitation. Nothing compared to tasting. Even in small rooms where a thousand different scents mingled and muddled together. Trying to pick one out was like tuning into radio stations, searching for one very elusive signal amid a sea of static.

Still, the one he wanted was here somewhere. All he had to do was wait and eventually the show would—

Silence hit the room like a bomb. Every mouth snapped shut, a hundred heads turned as one, like an ensemble of marionettes, to stare at the curtain.

“Ladies, gentlemen, and non-binary beings, good evening. And it is a very good evening indeed. Welcome to the Emerald Bar.” The voice came from everywhere, deep and resonant, echoing from the hidden speakers all around the room. Regan jumped—the sound made his bones reverberate and his chair vibrate. For an intimidating minute, he felt the familiar tinge of fight-or-flight—then he saw where it came from. The small, thin man with dark skin, center stage in the bright spotlight. He sat on the edge of the stage, sequins in the arrow collar of his ringmaster’s suit and band of his top hat casting thousands of tiny sparkles around the room.

The reason Regan was here.

“You’re here to have your frontal lobes injected with glamour, your eyeballs serenaded by liquid beauty, and your ears tickled and teased until you scream.”

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The small emcee's stature didn't match his enormous, spreading voice at all. Still, every eye in the place focused on the small, unassuming-looking man with the voice of a movie-preview announcer.

"I'm Master of Ceremonies Garrett Cole and tonight I'll be your pilot, flying you so close to the sun you can smell the wax melt and your wings burn just before we reach Heaven. So open up your minds, and let her step inside. I give you your shining high priestess of the microphone, the celestial siren of rock n'roll, golden goddess of the electric lullaby, our lady of audio ecstasy—raise your hands to Heaven and make a joyful noise for *Miss! Evelyn! Calliope!*"

Regan covered his pointed ears until the screaming stopped, and the intro music started. A single electric guitar chord in a minor key, synthesized strings weaving around it.

"Some people say that hope's a delusion." A new voice said from behind the curtain. "They say Parole is doomed. We're already burning and we just don't know it. They say we're lost, alone, nobody cares, we don't have a chance." The laugh that escaped her was filled with a barely-contained energy. She wouldn't have to hold it in much longer. "Well, I beg to differ. But it's easy to forget... so I'm here to help you remember! One, two, three, four!"

A drumbeat followed her tempo. Rhythm guitars exploded through the club as strobe lights began to flash and blue and purple lasers cut through the smoke-swirled air. The crowd rose again in screams and waving hands as deep-voiced house drums reverberated through the floor. The bass pounded in Regan's chest, but he wasn't there to enjoy the show. In the dark, he slowly rose to his feet.

"Ashes, ashes, we're all gonna learn to fly..."

Nobody saw him. Evelyn Calliope's captivating voice joined the rock

anthem, and the spell was cast. And even though Regan had a mission, he couldn't help looking up as her ruby-sequined heels clicked onto the stage.

He'd never seen anyone quite like the punk-rock superheroine who took the stage. At least that was his first thought, taking in the ruffles and spikes, ribbons and studs. The corset-like top and tiered skirt with the bow on the back, all made of metallic fabrics and black mesh. Her coordinated eyeshadow and lip gloss, the light brown skin that gleamed blue-violet under the rosy stage lights, and pink-purple, swirling hair like a cotton candy cloud. The deep purple cape that hung from her shoulders was the final touch. In this city of the powerless, somebody was taking some power back.

"Cause we're all catching fire, by the light of the moon..."

The audience hung on her every word, every movement and glance; and drank in her expression and inflection and domination of the stage. They didn't notice as Regan slowly leaned closer—not to her, but toward a small, private table by the stage. There sat emcee Garrett Cole, relaxing with his top hat on the table in front of him, sipping his martini in blissful unawareness. If Regan could get just a little closer, he could wait for the right moment if it took all night. Catch his scent and follow until he was alone.

"And we'll all keep on fighting to the last ember!"

Evelyn stood with her spiked heels far apart in a power stance, grabbing the microphone stand and pulling it closer as one glittering foot stomped out the rhythm. Regan's tongue flickered in and out, tasting the air that changed as she swept by; when she passed even the oxygen seemed electrically charged.

"You're not what you were, but you can be..."

But when Regan's heartbeat sped up, it wasn't for the same reason as the rest of the audience. It was the impulse to move. Every eye was on her now; he

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wouldn't get a better chance than this. Regan started moving around the room's edge, slipping closer to the man in the ringleader's suit.

"What you remember!"

The last high note hung in the air. The audience erupted into applause. And now the tunnel vision set in. Nothing existed except Garrett Cole.

"I hope that helped clear some things up." Evelyn smiled as the stark spotlight dimmed to cast a cozy, homey atmosphere over the club. Glitter sparkled in her hair and on her cheeks, and the lighting effects switched to something like a disco ball, casting a million soft points of starlight around the room. "Never forget that you're never alone. That's how we're gonna get out of this alive. Now, no more sad faces! Tell me how you feel!"

She laughed as the crowd whistled and cheered. "That's what I like to hear! People who can still smile and laugh and—ahhh, I'm just so glad you're all here tonight! There's nowhere I'd rather be."

Evelyn shifted from blazing power to gentle warmth, settling down and giving the audience a soft gaze that made every member feel included and welcome. She tapped her foot on the stage again, and the drums sped up to match it, rhythm guitar coming in lightly to deliver an energetic beat.

Regan moved.

Suddenly, everything went white. Regan gasped and clapped his hands over his eyes against a blinding column of light that stabbed into his eyes. Hissing, he shrank away from the painful brightness and staggered into a table.

"Looks like we have our first volunteer!" Evelyn purred, smiling at the silhouette in the spotlight.

"Wh-what?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, sweetie, I thought you knew. First person to stand up during

this song gets to sing with me! Duets are my favorite. Feel like joining me on stage? No press—”

“No!” Regan hissed, fighting for his balance. He couldn’t see, his light-sensitive eyes stung at the amber-green afterimage blur. He stumbled back to escape the spotlight and slammed into another table—then he tripped and went down hard, flat on his back.

The man in the top hat saw it all. His eyes fixed on Regan, and from the moment the spotlight had lit up the gleaming edges of his scales, Garrett Cole saw from point A to point B, and formulated a plan. He reached up, slid his hand along the wall, and pulled the fire alarm.

The audience screamed as the sharp keening of the emergency bell sliced through the smoky air. Regan scrambled to get up amongst the chaos, elbows and knees jabbing his ribs as people fought to escape. He rolled under one table and flew out the other side—but didn’t quite reappear. Instead, he faded into thin air.

Regan seemed to melt against shadows, blending into shades of burgundy and bar-light neon. It wasn’t perfect invisibility; strange ripples were just visible where he sprinted, as the air distorted around him like warped glass. But it was close enough to let him slip through the room untouched, blindingly fast. Tearing for his life through the panicking nightclub, he pulled out every one of his tricks, moved and bent in impossible ways, vanished where he should have stuck out like a sore thumb spray-painted fluorescent orange, did things human beings shouldn’t have been able to do. And he was gone.

Evelyn slipped behind the curtain, unnoticed for once. Garrett did the same out the side stage door. In a heartbeat, all three were gone.

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Evelyn's stiletto heels clicked against the concrete backstage floor, and her hands balled into fists. She gnawed her bottom lip, trying to get her pounding heart back under control, and forced herself to take deep breaths. Stay cool under pressure, don't panic. She'd get through this alive just like she had every other terrifying crisis that this nightmare city threw at her. She reached a door and snatched at the knob, which rattled in its socket. Without missing a beat, she pounded on the door. "Garrett!"

A muffled voice came from inside, then the sound of a deadbolt sliding back. The door opened a crack, and one dark eye appeared. It glared out at first, then softened. "What are you still doing here?"

"Same thing you are," she said, a level counterpoint to the tension in his voice. "When the going gets tough..."

"You get going." The strain in his tone made her pause. She hadn't heard that note of rising desperation in his usually-smooth, sonorous voice in a long, long time. Maybe never.

"Are you okay?" Evelyn softened. She leaned forward, tried to see better, but he just pulled the door closer. "Garrett? What's going on?"

"I'm fine, strawberry," he said, more calmly. "But you've got to leave. Now."

"Hey, talk to me. If something's going on, I want to know. I need to know. Can't defend a city and protect the innocent from all dangers without—"

"I'm not kidding around here, Evelyn. There are no innocents in danger tonight, but if you don't leave right now, there will be. Go. And say *nothing* about this to anyone. Now go."

"What aren't you telling me? Garrett, open the door."

"Sweetness, I am trying to protect you. Now go home, and don't come back

here tonight. In fact, maybe taking a few days off wouldn't be such a bad idea."

"On stage? Or off?"

"Both."

"All these years, it's been you and me. If you can't trust me, who can you trust?"

"Go! I'll talk to you as soon as I possibly can. I promise."

"If I don't hear from you in twenty-four hours, I'll be back. You know where to find me." There was more going on here than he was saying. Much more. And Evelyn hated not hearing it, almost as much as she hated leaving him or the Bar exposed to the danger she felt coming on like rain that hadn't fallen here in ten years. Reluctantly, Evelyn turned on one spiked heel and hurried down the hallway. The eye watched her go, then disappeared again. The door swung tightly shut.

Sixty seconds later, it opened again. Garrett Cole, no longer in his ringleader's costume, simply dressed in a nondescript black shirt, pants and shoes, exited. He paused in the hallway, then turned and hurriedly strode—didn't run—the opposite direction.



Regan slumped against the brick wall, fighting for breath. As he gulped in hot, lung-burning air, the dizziness and disorientation started to fade, but much more gradually than he did. Out front, people flooded the street. Nobody had bothered to shut the fire alarm off. With everyone pouring out the front, nobody watched the side alley where Regan gasped like a gutted fish.

"No more," he whispered, shaking his head slowly with his eyes squeezed shut. "Done. I'm done."

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He didn't expect an answer, but he got one.

"That's 'done?'" The voice seemed to come from everywhere, like somebody had installed surround-sound speakers in his mind. A wave of dizziness and nausea swept through him and he bent double, clenching his teeth together over the bile that burned the roof of his mouth. "That was your best shot? Hate to see your worst one."

"Dammit, Hans! Don't—don't do that!" Regan gasped, trying to get back his breath and make his head stop spinning.

"Sorry. My mistake." The young man behind Regan seemed to have just appeared out of thin air. He wore tight, rip-kneed black jeans, equally distressed sneakers, and a wide, toothy smile, more predatory than happy. Waist-length white hair flowed around him as if he were submerged in water, gently defying gravity. The translucent teenager actually defied gravity himself: he floated a few inches off the ground so he 'stood' eye-level with Regan. Even with the distortion, when he spoke, the edge of sarcastic mockery came through clear as day—but at least it was at a regular speaking-voice level. "This better?"

In any other city, Regan might have found that strange. In this one, it just made him look away as his heart started to pound and stomach twist. "You're not sorry. You're never sorry."

"I'm sorry you didn't get the job done!" His outlines jerked and shook, the air around him filled with what looked like static snow in a bad TV reception, and his voice sounded garbled. "He saw you! He definitely saw you. And so did Evelyn Calliope. And that's just great. That's fan-freaking-tastic, Regan. But that's also *fine*, because I can still salvage this. Time to move on to—"

"No. It's over." Regan spoke to the ground rather than look at the disjointed movements, the distorted voice and ghostly flickering. Then he shut

his eyes so he wouldn't have to look at all the disorienting, nauseating ways reality bent when Hans was around.

"It's over when I say it is." Hans tilted his head to the side, looking mildly annoyed. "You could at least look at me when I'm...oh that's right, you don't like when I do this, do you?"

"I don't like any of this." Regan kept his eyes shut. "And I don't like you."

Hans didn't reply immediately. A couple seconds of silence went by, and at last Regan opened his eyes—to immediately close them again.

"You seem upset," Hans observed thoughtfully as he floated upside-down. He frowned, rubbing his pale, pointed chin and one sharp cheekbone. "That's fine, go with that. Use that. Channel that rage. Maybe next time you'll get it right and Garrett Cole will actually end up dead."

"It's over, Hans." Regan made himself open his eyes and keep them open. "Find someone else to threaten."

"One job, Regan. You had one—I picked you because you're basically a ghost, and it takes one to know one. You are Mister Invisible. And what do you do? You let them see you! And when you're actually visible you kinda stick out with all the scales and junk!" He gradually rotated until he was right-side up again, smile disappearing as he did so, until he was facing Regan with a much more piercing, and more dangerous look. "You know... if I didn't know better—a lot better—I'd say you actually wanted to get caught."

Regan said nothing. Then, at last, he shoved himself away from the wall and started walking down the dark, empty alley.

"Hey!" Hans's voice snapped not from behind him, but from every direction again. Regan shook his head, but kept walking. "Don't walk away from me. You don't get to walk away from me." In an instant he was standing in front of

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Regan in the alley mouth, as if to prove it.

Regan stopped, head down and arms hanging loosely at his sides. The loose flap of skin hanging around his neck flared out, and his yellow eyes narrowed, vertical pupils enlarging until they were nearly perfectly round. “Get out of my way.”

“Where you going?”

“Home. Away from all this. Away from you. And there’s nothing you can say that will stop me.”

“Yeah? Good luck ever getting out of here without me. I’m your ticket to freedom, fresh air and blue skies, and you know it. Without me... well, you’re a lizard, right? You like it hot.”

Regan’s eyes narrowed further until they became glinting slits. His fingertips spread and curled into hooks, for the first time clearly displaying a hint of claws. A helicopter passed overhead, white column sweeping down across the alley where they stood, like a spotlight across a stage. Regan didn’t move an inch as the blinding light enveloped him, lighting up the edges of his scales and head ridges. In a moment, it moved past him and continued on. But when it was gone, he stood just as steady and calm, without a shiver in his spine.

“Oh,” Hans remarked with the mild raise of one eyebrow, looking surprised and intrigued. “Not so much scared lizard after all. Maybe I actually got myself a dragon.”

“I don’t need you,” Regan said, very quietly. No matter how softly he spoke, Hans would hear him. “We don’t need you. We’ll find our own way. It took us years to get our lives back, and longer to make our own, but we are not afraid anymore. Especially not of you.”

“Funny,” Hans shot back, face hardening into a sharp, calculating stare.

“That is not what you were saying a little while ago. That is not what you were saying when you were begging me to save the people you love.”

“We can save ourselves.” His voice grew stronger, and now he was smiling. “When we walk out of here, it’ll be all together, and it won’t be because I killed or betrayed anyone to do it.”

“Dare to dream! Sometimes you have to get your hands dirty. You can’t just—”

“I’m not going to let you destroy everything I have for a chance at escape.” He shook his head. “Maybe I don’t want to escape the life I have. Took me ten years to get it.”

“Yeah? Well—well, good luck hanging onto it!” Regan thought he heard a note of desperation under the usual light, flippant sarcasm of Hans’s projected voice. “Because I’ve got the only way out of here! You’ll never make it without me!”

“Worth a shot.” Regan started walking again, and didn’t stop when he reached the mouth of the alley. He passed directly through the flickering, frustrated, ghostly form and kept walking.

“I can still fix this,” Hans murmured, and it almost sounded like he was talking to himself now, trying to reassure himself that he hadn’t lost control of the situation entirely. “I can do anything I want.”

“Good night, Hans.” Regan paused, and let out a soft laugh. Then a deep sigh. “‘We can save ourselves...’ You know something? Until right now... I actually forgot that. Thanks for reminding me.”

Regan stopped dead in his tracks. Suddenly he couldn’t breathe.

“I told you I’d save you, and I meant it,” Hans whispered, sending chills down every inch of his scales, and shock waves through his soul. “Just one little

favor. That's all you had to do."

Regan couldn't move. The paralysis was complete, except for the pounding of his heart. If he could have sucked in a breath he might have screamed for help. Or maybe he would have breathed fire. The air around him, and the expanses of space and memory and time inside his mind crackled with the energy of a coming storm. He felt the beginnings of change like ripples on a clear pond. A leviathan was stirring beneath the water's calm surface.

"Now, unlike some people, I keep my promises," the ghostly boy whispered, looking him in the eye with a steady, calm expression. "So I'm going to do what you couldn't. I'm going to save us all."

Slowly, Hans reached out one ghostly finger toward his forehead. As he did, Regan finally found his voice.

"No—don't!"

Hans's fingertip was cold. The world as he remembered it was very bright. Then it was gone.



Moments earlier, Evelyn slipped out the rear exit and the heavy metal door locked behind her. She hurried down the steps to the alley's pavement, trying not to let her heels clang on the metal—before stopping dead in her tracks.

"No—don't!"

Evelyn looked up sharply to see a thin silhouette framed in the center of the alley mouth. The outline of pointed ears looked vaguely familiar; she remembered the audience member, the spotlight. She could hardly see a thing onstage with those lights, but she thought she'd caught a glimpse of those ears and what looked like scales, and here they were again. And like before, this

young man looked... distressed.

“Hey, you all right?”

He didn’t move or react to her at all. Just kept standing straight and still as if he’d just been struck by lightning.

“I said, are you all right? Need some help?”

Regan didn’t reply. He stood with his head tilted all the way back, staring up at the narrow strip of sky between the two dark buildings, not moving, not even blinking. He kept his eyes trained on the dark expanse overhead, as if enraptured by something invisible.

“You hear me?” She approached carefully, glancing up too, to see what had so entranced Regan. Nothing was there but the smoky sky and, beyond that, the barrier.

Regan slowly turned his head to look at Evelyn, face completely blank.

“Yes,” he said faintly, not entirely sure how words fit together. “I... I heard you.”

“Somebody giving you a hard time just now?” She leaned very slightly closer, squinting a little to get a better look at his eyes. Evelyn never liked this thought when it came up, but her home base did operate as a bar and club, she couldn’t be everywhere at once, and she had to consider the possibility that this guy had been drugged. Unfortunately, this particular Parole citizen’s eyes had yellow sclera and vertical pupils like a cat or snake’s—which, given the rest of him, she assumed was normal. She couldn’t tell by looking at him if he was on anything. But he did seem disoriented, that much was clear.

“I... I don’t know.” Regan frowned, looked down at his hands, then up and around at the alley, as if he’d never seen it before. In fact, somebody might have been. His entire body felt pummeled, and there was a strange ringing in

his head. He was surprised there wasn't blood dripping from his ears. His head hurt, his chest hurt from the frantic pounding of his heart, everything hurt. Finally, his eyes rested on Evelyn. "How did I get here?"

"I don't know," she said carefully. "Did you come here with someone?"

"I don't know," he said, almost in an echo. "I think I'm alone."

"Did you get separated from someone?"

"I don't..." he shook his head. Slowly his eyes widened until he wore an expression somewhere between terror and incredible loss. "I think I need help."

"Tell me what's going on." Evelyn slowly stepped closer. "That's what I'm here for."

"I don't know what's going on," he whispered, voice shaking. He glanced up at her, looking like he wanted to draw back a step, but couldn't bring himself to move. She stopped moving. "I don't know anything. I'm trying and there's nothing. It's blank, there's... just nothing? I don't know how I'm talking right now. I don't know where these clothes came from. I don't know my..." he stopped. Stared into space. Evelyn resisted the urge to speak or move; even though he'd frozen in place, she could almost hear his mind racing. She caught a flicker of motion at his mouth; the flash of a forked tongue. "I do know my name. It's Regan."

"That's a great start, Regan." She almost laughed, somehow overwhelmed with relief for this stranger. After losing everything, at least he still had one thing left. One of the most important. "My name's Evelyn. Just try to keep breathing, all right?"

"But that's all. Nothing else!" He sounded like he was starting to panic, and the loose skin hanging around his neck was starting to flare out with every breath. "I don't know how I got here, or where I was before, or where to go

after this, or—”

“It’s okay. It’s going to be okay, we’re going to figure this out,” she reassured him. “Do you feel like you hit your head on something? Or anything else that might lead to this?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember *what* I don’t remember.” He stopped. “Hans.”

“What?” She blinked, running the word over in her mind. “Was that a name too?”

“Yeah—but not my name. An important name—you asked if I knew how I lost my memory, and it popped into my head. But that’s everything I know. My name and that name. That’s all.”

Evelyn paused, shooting a look up at the sky. As always, black helicopters thrummed far over their heads, and bright spotlights cut through the smoky Parole sky. When she looked back at Regan, her face was resolved. “All right. Confused and vulnerable isn’t the way you want to spend a night on the street. Especially not these streets. I know you have no reason to trust me, but—”

“I’d rather trust you than stay here,” he said quietly but immediately. “I don’t know where I am, or where to start to find out. Please... anything you can tell me, I need to know.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, tone gentle but unwavering. “I’m not leaving you until we know exactly where you’re from and where your people are. And we start by finding you a safe place—which is easier said than done in Parole, I’ll admit. I’d say just stay at the Emerald Bar, but I think Garrett’s gonna want the place to himself tonight...”

Regan paused. Something about that name was important. “Garrett?”

“Garrett Cole. Manager, Master of Ceremonies...” she paused, as if trying to

decide how to explain. “Maybe Parole’s best hope for survival.”

His mouth fell open for a moment, and he looked back at the dark building, which looked perfectly ordinary from where he stood. “This must be one important bar.”

“It is. One of the only free places left in Parole—because Garrett and I keep it that way.”

“Only free places?”

“Yeah,” she hesitated. “Parole is—it’s a long story. I’ll tell you all you need to know to stay safe, but first we need to get you off the street. Eye in the Sky’s been real nasty about curfew lately.”

“Eye in the Sky?” Regan’s eyes still darted around, manic, and his heart began to pound. “Curfew? Parole, you keep saying that—is that where we are? Is that a place?”

She studied his face for a moment. “You really don’t remember anything about this, do you? Parole, SkEye, any of this?”

He looked down at his hands, then back up at her. He almost laughed, but held it in; whatever came out now would just be hysterical and terrified. “I don’t even know why I’m green, and you’re not.”

“Okay. First priority, get you to shelter—or at least out of this alley.” She gave a firm nod as if she’d decided, resolved, confirmed, and wouldn’t be dissuaded from helping him by anything in the world. It was more reassuring than Regan would have expected. “Bar’s not an option, so we’ll have to think of somewhere else. But tomorrow for sure, I’m taking you to Rose. If anyone can fix this, it’s her.”

“She can tell me who I am?” Regan looked at her with something close to desperation.

“There are a lot of people in Parole who’ve been through terrible things, and Rose has seen just about everything.”

“Good. I hope she can help me. I don’t like this, I don’t like not knowing—I know this is wrong. There’s not supposed to be *nothing* in my head! I know how to talk, I know that this is called the sidewalk—” He stomped, and she gasped.

“Stop!”

“Sorry!” Regan yelped, picking his foot back up and stumbling back a few steps. “Was that—what did I do?”

“The ground here is... unstable.” She said, much more calmly, though her own heart had just about leaped out of her chest. “I didn’t mean to startle you, but that’s very important. Don’t stomp, or hit the ground hard. Ever. Just walk carefully and look ahead for cracks, and you’ll be fine.”

“Sorry, I didn’t know! It’s what I was saying. I know how to talk and breathe, and my name, but nothing else!” He ran a hand over his scaled head, then looked up at her. “You said yours was Evelyn?”

When she looked at him, her eyes were calm and grounding. “Evelyn Calliope. I know that name doesn’t mean anything to you, but it does to the rest of Parole. That’s because this city is my home, and if you’re in it, you’re safe with me.”

Regan smiled, and she was struck by the way the angles of his face softened. “That makes you sound like some kind of superhero.”

“I don’t know,” she couldn’t help smiling back. “Doesn’t really take superpowers to help someone like this.”

Reincarnation

CHAPTER 2

REGAN AND EVELYN FROZE ON THE DARK WALK ALONG THE ALLEY AROUND THE SIDE OF THE Emerald Bar. A rumbling came from underfoot and a light stream of ash sprinkled down on their heads from the mortar above. Evelyn flung one arm out in front of Regan as they pressed themselves against a brick wall and slipped into a doorway, bracing themselves until the tremor passed. It was second nature for her now. Every child in Parole knew that when the ground shook, you stopped, felt for where the vibrations weren't, and got to solid ground fast.

This time, the little earthquake was gone in around ten seconds. No lasting damage. The city wasn't always this lucky. Less than half a block over was a gaping hole in the concrete where the street had collapsed.



Regan had just gotten his breathing back to normal when he jumped at another noise.

“It’s okay!” Evelyn said, holding up her hand. In it was a cell phone, screen illuminated. “Sorry about that.” She glanced at it. “I should probably take this. It’s been... a weird night.”

“Oh,” he nodded a couple times. Somehow, this, and the apparent fact that Parole had cell phone service, was one of the most surreal moments of the entire ‘weird night’ so far. “Yeah—yes, sure. Go ahead.”

“Evelyn Calliope.” She listened hard to the incoming call for a moment before a vague frown made her brow furrow and eyebrows come together. “Yes, be right around. Out front. See you there.” She hung up and nodded for him to keep walking. “That was a—I guess business associate of mine, Celeste. She wants to talk to me, right up here. Probably a good idea. If anyone knows about any weirdness afoot tonight, it’ll be her.” Her face brightened. “Actually, she might be able to help you too. If anyone would know...”

“Do you think she will?” Regan walked faster to catch up, hopeful despite himself. It couldn’t be this easy. He had no reason to doubt, but something told him that nothing came as easy as this. Ever.

“If she’s in a really generous mood. Anyway, shouldn’t take more than five minutes. Celeste is... not much of a talker.” Evelyn rounded the corner to the front street and continued on, but Regan hesitated. Some instinct told him to stop. Wait. Watch. Listen.

So he peered around the corner to see a figure in black stepped out from the darkness, and move steadily forward to meet Evelyn in a streetlamp’s pale circle of light.

From here she appeared to be a small-framed woman entirely covered in

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light-absorbing black, from gloves to boots to high collar. Half of her face was obscured by a wide-banded visor, its mirrored lens reflecting the street in a continuous curve. Her only exposed skin was a deep medium brown, visible in a narrow band across her cheekbones and top of her nose; the rest of her face was covered by the three-quarter helmet, earpieces and mouthparts. Her helmet's material, like the rest of her stealth suit, seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. All in all, aside from height, build and skin tone, it was impossible to tell anything about the woman, or maybe girl, behind the gear.

Regan knew her. Instantly, he recognized her. And he had no idea from where.

And just as instantly, his entire brain seemed to explode in alarm bells and nearly-voiced screams of terror. He had never seen her in his life as far as he knew, had no idea what her name was or what she looked like behind the helmet, and there was absolutely no reason the sight of her should make his heart leap into his mouth and his whole system surge with nearly painful adrenaline.

All he knew was his only saving grace—that his current angle behind this corner kept him from her line of sight. She hadn't seen him yet, and she *couldn't see him. She just couldn't see him, if she caught just one glance—*

An icy chill raced over his entire body. When he looked down, he barely suppressed a gasp, because he didn't see himself there. The air was slightly distorted, but Regan looked down and saw clear behind... under, through himself. Panic momentarily became fascination.

Then he remembered to run. He tore flat-out back toward the Emerald Bar.

Evelyn stared after him, half-amazed, half-concerned. She wasn't about to be surprised by anything Parole had to throw at her after all this time, but seeing

somebody disappear before her eyes did take a few seconds of adjustment. And a highly anxious young man with severe amnesia, and the ability to disappear entirely... this may be more of a challenge than—

“Evelyn.”

“Celeste!” She turned, almost having forgotten her previous engagement. Previous, very pressing engagement. She’d find him again, Evelyn resolved; he couldn’t possibly get far. The espionage and cyber-security specialist—adept at both bolstering and evading security—known as Celeste was elusive as a cool drink of natural spring water in Parole and her time was twice as in-demand and valuable. Give her half a chance and she’d disappear just as fast as Regan had. “Any word on tonight?”

“Enough to make me sit up and take notice.” Her voice was electronically altered, a custom addition to her Parole-standard gas mask, a model already much sleeker and more lightweight than average. “What happened in there?”

Evelyn considered her... colleague, she supposed, for a moment. This wasn’t going the way she expected. “Well, secrets are your business, Celeste. I was hoping you’d be able to tell me more.”

“You’re the eyewitness.”

“I’m not even sure what I’m supposed to have witnessed yet. Garrett pulled the fire alarm, the building evacuated,” she ran the events over in her own mind as she related them, re-checking for anything she’d missed. “I go back to his room to check on him and he tells me to leave too. It feels like he’s in trouble, but he won’t tell me anything.”

“Mm. Thank you.” The shorter woman turned on her heel and took a step away.

“Wait, wait. That’s it?” Evelyn almost laughed, part confusion, part incredulity. “Want to tell me what you’re doing here? I assume you heard

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something I didn't, or else why are we talking?"

"I received an anonymous tip." Celeste's voice never changed—her vocal transformer might read whispers and shouts the same for all anyone knew—and it was near-impossible to tell her expression behind it and her visor, but Evelyn could swear she was almost apprehensive. "About an attempt on Garrett Cole's life. I came to investigate. That's all." She paused for a moment, and Evelyn had to wonder what she was thinking. Along with most of Parole, probably. "I could ask you the same question. Your arrival time was quite short, Evelyn. What are you still doing here?"

"Just getting some last stragglers to safety." And now there was the question of where that straggler had so tracelessly disappeared to. "No sense in leaving anyone here if something's really going down."

"And there is." Her inscrutable electronic tone remained the same, but now it sounded like warning. Or a promise, but not a pleasant one. Evelyn shivered. "Something is absolutely hidden here. Something dangerous. And I will find out what it is."

"I don't doubt you for a second, Celeste."

"Good. That would be a mistake."



"Hey, I know you!"

Regan barely had time to shut the Emerald Bar door behind him before the voice made him jump almost a foot in the air. He whirled around, eyes wide. The wave that the skinny, 18-ish white boy with curly blonde hair and watery blue eyes looking back at him from the farthest barstool gave him was less than intimidating, but he wasn't about to trust anything that happened tonight, not until he got his bearings. He didn't answer, glancing toward the door,

wondering if he could make it in under three seconds. But no, no, that strange woman in all the black was out there, and he'd had such a powerful aversion to seeing her, it had almost been like an actual voice in his head telling him to run, escape, don't let her see him...

"You're, um," The young man was snapping his fingers now, eyes raised to the darkened ceiling like he was trying to fit a name to a face. As he did, Regan's eyes flicked automatically over his. Dark circles around his eyes, bags below them, healthy color in his cheeks but a little gaunt as if he'd lost weight fast and not safely. Yellow peach fuzz on his chin. The moment Regan realized he was trying to place the young man as well, he realized he'd committed his features to memory. His *photographic* memory, he dimly registered with some surprise at himself. That made this entire night stranger. The first very clear image he'd have of tonight was a stranger's face he knew better than his own. "You're—don't tell me, okay? I'm trying to get better at this."

"Yeah, okay," Regan said slowly, nodding but not stepping closer. "Uh, me too."

"Starts with a... I'm stuck between an R and a K, dunno why."

"Regan," he confirmed tentatively. Couldn't be harm in admitting one of the only things he knew for sure. And at least this kid hadn't set off any immediate alarm bells like the mysterious woman in the street outside.

"Yeah! Tip of my tongue, I swear." He smiled and the dark circles under his bright eyes faded instead of deepening as they did on some people. "You're with Jay and them, right?"

"Who?" Regan took a step closer, intrigued despite himself. "Was that another letter?"

"Ha, funny and badass! I like you." The young man seemed oblivious to Regan's deepening confusion, sitting up straighter on his stool and scratching

one ear, as if listening to far-off, but unexpected and slightly annoying music. “I’m Cai, by the way.”

“Sigh?”

“Cairus. It’s cool if you don’t remember me, I know I’m not one of the real crew.” Cai shrugged and slowly rotated on the stool, leaning back against the bar. “Someday, though. Garrett’ll give me a chance. A real one, not just a ‘listen and keep your mouth shut’ chance.”

Regan took a moment to run back over all this. It was gibberish, mostly. But important gibberish. Somehow, either this strange young man had mistaken him for someone else—unlikely, he caught the name ‘Garrett’ in there somewhere, the same one Evelyn had mentioned, they had to be connected—or... he knew Regan. And the same very strong, very insistent, almost-an-actual-inner-voice instinct screamed for Regan not to let on that he didn’t recognize him back.

“Well, I really hope you get that chance,” he said in what he thought was a smooth, encouraging tone, heading over to sit at a nearby stool. He realized that from here he actually had a much better vantage point out the window and could see the silhouettes of Evelyn and the woman she was meeting—what had she called her? Celeste?—parleying below one of Parole’s sputtering streetlamps. “You only need one.”

“Hey, thanks.” Cairus grinned and looked down quickly. “I know it’s probably not the smartest thing in the world, and I know how it sounds—everybody wants to be a superhero—but I just wanna help, you know?”

“Yeah. I hear you.” Regan nodded, trying to keep one eye on him and the other on the window.

“I mean, Parole would be so screwed without Ev—Miss Calliope, and

Garrett, and Radio Angel. And they're just the ones like, up on stage, in the spotlight!" He looked back up at Regan with excitement and a slight flush lighting up his young, tired face, starting to talk with his hands a little as he warmed to his subject. Regan sat very still and let him go, listening hard for anything useful. "But the guys behind the scenes, like—I dunno, behind the curtain? In the wings? You and CyborJ and..." He trailed off. Stared into space. Slowly his energetic spark faded and his hands lowered to rest on his knees.

"You, uh... okay there?" Regan asked reluctantly. Suddenly he was sure that he shouldn't. Actually, he was becoming increasingly uncomfortable in this room. He should probably get out of here. Now. But the young man—Cairus, he had a name, and he knew Regan's—had just been so excited, and now he looked almost... afraid.

"That's weird. I... huh. Guess I don't actually remember."

"Oh." Regan shifted uncomfortably. "Well, give it a little. I'm sure it'll come to you."

"No, um..." Cai scratched his head, making his loose mop of yellow curls ruffle and shake. "This is—this is weird, I don't... suddenly there's just like... nothing? I can't remember anything. Like, any of these guys' names. Or girls, or—other people, and..." He swallowed fast, sharp Adam's-apple jerking as his face paled. "And I love them, you know? They're like... they're my heroes, and their names are just... and their faces, I..."

Regan held very still. He knew this exact feeling. Eerily well.

"Oh, my God. They're gone. I... I know they're not, they're somewhere, I just can't rem—this is bad. This is so bad? It's... they were here and now they're not. It's like I'm alone."

His heart began to pound. Cairus might as well be reading his mind and

relaying his own thoughts and feelings of terrifying loss and isolation.

“I gotta go.”

Regan watched, paralyzed with a sudden wave of shock as the young man slid unsteadily off his stool and headed shakily toward the door. Suddenly, among all of the bewildering strangeness, he knew one thing with crystal clarity, the same way he knew he had to escape the woman in the street.

He could not let Cairus leave this room.



“I have to say, I’m getting a little worried,” Evelyn folded her arms and tapped her elbow with her nails. “I’ve never seen Garrett like this.”

“What was he like, exactly?” The mysterious Celeste always played her cards close to her chest, but Evelyn had never seen her quite this pokerfaced before. She had yet to see or hear her without her voice alteration device or wide, visor-like shades. Not for the first time, Evelyn wondered exactly how she could see at night. Maybe some kind of infrared night vision. Given her colleague’s reputation for near-psychic levels of technological information gathering, she wouldn’t be at all surprised.

“Nervous. Almost seemed desperate.”

“Desperate for what?” Whether consciously or not, Celeste was mirroring her posture, folding her arms and standing with her small feet set far apart. Nobody even knew how old she was. Given her height and build, Evelyn suspected she was actually a teenager, but had no evidence to support that. Certainly no hint of adolescent immaturity in any of her frighteningly efficient takedowns, cybersecurity-evading deductions or ruthless stealth operations. But then, Parole did make you grow up fast.

“To clear the bar. To get everybody out of there. Even me.”

“Anyone left inside now?”

“I’d assume Cairus Maddox and Jenny Strings,” Evelyn said slowly. “Garrett’s pragmatic but he’s not about to kick any kids out of their home. Celeste,” she spoke up as her shadowy counterpart actually turned to leave. “Mind if I ask a couple questions now?”

“Quickly, please.” She didn’t move, but didn’t turn around either. Evelyn got a good look at one of the only identifying, personal-looking details in Celeste’s gear; tiny studs in the shape of silver stars on the exterior of her headphones, like stylized, practical earrings.

“You said someone actually tipped you off that there was going to be an attempt on Garrett, specifically?” Evelyn spoke fast, as requested, and thought faster. Something here was bothering her, and she felt driven to identify it before Celeste melted back into the shadows and disappeared for good. Finding her when she didn’t want to be found was the devil’s own work. “Not a general raid on the Bar, Garrett Cole himself was a target?”

“I never reveal my sources, you know that.”

“I didn’t ask who. I just asked if someone said Garrett specifically.”

“Yes, they did. Sounded quite convinced. I evaluated and concurred. I wouldn’t have come personally if I thought the source was unreliable, or the threat implausible.”

“I know,” Evelyn said smoothly. “Your judgment’s always been more than sound.”

“And now I’ve decided to end this conversation.”

“I don’t like this, Celeste,” Evelyn followed, catching up easily with much longer steps even though her fellow... agent? Evelyn was an undisputed heroine,

but what did that make Celeste, really? She'd never quite been sure. She didn't stop, that was for certain. "The Emerald Bar—this whole district, actually—it's under my protection. I have the right to know what's going on. Especially if it involves Garrett's safety. That could very easily become my safety, my family—"

"And I have the right to protect my clients' privacy."

"If you know more about this than I do—"

"It's safe to say I know more than most of Parole put together." Now she did look up and Evelyn saw her own determined face reflected in her mirrored visor. She had to wonder what Celeste saw. "But don't worry, Evelyn. I have the situation well under control."

"I have to admit, your track record is good."

"The best. As is yours. We simply work in different arenas. I'll leave you to yours, if you leave me to mine."

Evelyn let her go, and she didn't reply or look back. Celeste had never been confirmed for any kind of Chrysedrine enhancement, but she thought that the mysterious, semi-masked figure with the star-studded earphones disappeared into the shadows as easily and completely as the other, much less-composed disappearing act she'd seen tonight.



Cairus Maddox knew who Regan was.

And now he was walking out the door.

He couldn't walk out that door. Regan's brain screamed at him, so loudly and clearly that it almost had a voice he could hear. Stop him, do not let him leave, do not let him leave and tell anyone Regan was here, he was never here, if that boy leaves and talks, everything's over, plan's ruined, no escape, no

hope, no, no, *no*—

He couldn't breathe. Then he was gone.

Cai saw what hit him, but just barely. To him, it appeared as if the strangely familiar, reptilian-ish man he'd just been talking to sort of faded away in a half-visible rushing blur that moved so fast he could barely follow it—until it knocked him off his feet from the side, snapping back into focus to slam him hard against the wall.

Regan pinned him down with a forearm against his chest, pressing up toward his neck as the young man's hands desperately struggled to push him away. But even Regan's wiry arm was so much stronger than a teenager who'd obviously seen some physical as well as emotional trauma, and it just wasn't happening. He looked up at him in shock and terror, wide eyes spilling over with tears.

"No—don't!" he managed to gasp out.

Regan's eyes snapped open. Disturbing recognition. Again. Why?

Didn't matter. Still had to escape. Cairus Maddox still had to—

He shut his eyes again and clamped down on the bizarre, terrifying impulse screaming in the back of his brain, intruding on his conscious mind and overriding his most reasonable of thoughts. Think. Why? No reason. No reason this young life should end here. He knew nothing. He'd done nothing. All he'd said was that he knew Regan, knew his friends, knew where he—

Run, run, run, run!

Regan moved his forearm up just a few inches to press it into Cairus's exposed, vulnerable throat. He did not slam it against the brick wall. He did not grip and twist, he did not dig in with the claws on the ends of every finger, no matter what demands his suddenly-horrifying instincts made. And he did

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not dwell on the disturbing fact that he knew exactly how to implement all of those options.

He pressed down with restraint and—it would be absurd to call it gentleness, he thought wildly. Just... hold him there. Until the first sign of unconsciousness. As soon as Cairus's eyes slipped out of focus and grip on his assailant's arm weakened, Regan lowered him to the floor.

Then he turned and ran. He was across the room in what felt like half a beat of his heart, rapid and pounding as it was from disgust and horror.

As he opened the door and stepped out, a small bell tinkled overhead—and he stopped dead. For the first time, Regan noticed the long-haired grey and white Himalayan cat that now loped across the bar stage, hopped down and continued over to Cai's crumpled, unconscious form, proceeding to sniff urgently at his head as if checking whether he was breathing. It must have been in the room the entire time, Regan thought, and he simply hadn't seen it until it moved. He would have noticed that cat before. Fluffy, bright green eyes instead of the usual blue, and it looked... not quite real, somehow. That was harder to put a finger on, but it definitely—

He gasped. The cat turned its head to look up and stare directly at him and he felt something like an electric shock of... he'd call it 'recognition' if he knew what it meant at all. But now he could see that its green eyes were some kind of synthetic metal, made of several layers of interlocked gears and wheels, all spinning together but different speeds, directions... gyroscope, that was the...

Go!

He stopped staring at the cat, but kept wondering why it was so significant. Why he knew the cat's face with more clarity than any human one he'd seen tonight. And why it was so important that it had seen what he had just done to

Cairus Maddox.

Regan ran out the door so fast, he didn't see Cai slowly, painfully lift his head. Or the way the cat turned its head and ran to the stage door as it opened, meowing as if to alert him to the presence of the pale, thin girl with long, platinum-blond hair who stepped through.

"Jenny?" he groaned, weak and breathless as she hurried over to him, steps quick and light in the faded ballet slippers she wore, untied ribbons trailing behind her feet. "Jenny, there's—a guy just—he—"

"Shhh," she whispered, kneeling down beside him. "It's all right. He's gone now. He won't hurt us."

"How do you..." He struggled into a sitting position with her help, reaching gingerly up to touch his aching head. "We gotta tell Garrett. This is one of his guys, Jenny! He's gone bad, rogue, something! I sensed something bad, weird in his head, and now he's..." He looked up, seeing her bite her lip and look away. "Jenny?"

"He's gone too..." her voice was a faraway whisper. Her hands spread out in the air, as if she were playing an invisible Cat's Cradle. The cat in the room itself raised its head to sniff at her arm, fixing her with its artificial eyes, and rotating its ears, also delicately crafted of intricate metal. The entire cat was, but it was much easier to tell in the patches where fur was wearing off from repeated pets.

"Who's gone?" Cai turned to search her face with much more anxiety than the cat's gentle scan. "Jenny? Who's gone? What happened?"

Slowly, she reached out and took his hand, pulling him gently along as she rose to her feet. "Garrett left a message. He wants us to listen."

"A message... did he go somewhere? Did—the fire alarm earlier, I knew

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there was something weird about...” still stunned, he allowed himself to be led a few dizzy steps, then caught a glimpse of her face. “Jenny! What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

She shook her head and pulled her hand from his, turning away to hide behind her hair. “Can’t follow him. Just listen to the words. That’s all that’s left.”

“What are you talking about, Jenny?” Cairus’s voice shook as he forced the words out. He felt the answer before he heard it. Sadness radiated off his friend in waves, like turning on the cold water faucet in a warm bath.

“Don’t look for him. He’s a ghost.” Jenny Strings’s voice never rose above a whisper and her face remained downcast; she never met his eyes to see the confusion in his eyes turn to disbelief, then, finally, horror. She kept looking at the floor, so all she saw were his feet as he flat-out ran across the stage and through the back door. Head hanging low and ribbons trailing, she slowly followed.



Evelyn looked up to see the scale-covered young man she’d found tonight beside her again, reappeared as if by magic. “Oh! Here you are! Where’d you disappear to?” She almost smacked herself in the forehead a moment later, realizing she hadn’t just used an expression. He’d actually done that a moment ago. It had been a hell of a night.

“Oh, uh, sorry,” he panted, breathless. She wasn’t sure if he was capable of it, but figured anyone without scales might look pale and sweaty. Couldn’t blame him, really. Hell of a night for both of them, really. “Sorry about that. I just, um, I saw your friend coming? Um...”

“Celeste. She’s on the case,” she reassured him. Figured he could use all the reassurance he could get. “If there’s anything really bad cooking around the Emerald Bar, she’ll find it. We’re both on it, but my end will have to wait until tomorrow.”

“Yeah—sorry for not sticking around to meet her, I just...I don’t think I...”

“It’s fine, you don’t have to explain,” she said easily. “New people are hard even on normal nights. Now come on,” she took a couple steps—much slower than Celeste’s near power-walk—and called over her shoulder, nodding for him to follow. “I have to keep looking for answers. And you have to get some rest.”

“Where? I thought the Bar was one of the last safe places in Parole.”

“One of them, yes. But it’s more of a stronghold and planning center—I mean, aside from an actual bar and performance space. If you need help and a place to stay, you want the library.”



The library was dark as the Bar, but much quieter. They used a lower entrance instead of the main one, and instead of knocking or using a key, Evelyn simply walked inside, holding the door for Regan to follow her in.

“Pretty empty tonight,” she observed as they entered a large room filled with bunk beds and cots. “There’s almost always somebody down here.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“Not really bad, I was just hoping to find somebody at least. Let them know you’re here and your situation, ask if they know what happened at the Bar. But the library’s a safe place, it’s defended, neutral ground, nobody’s going to start anything here.”

“Where are you going to be?”

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“I need to get back to the Emerald Bar, find Garrett, figure out what happened tonight. But don’t worry, I won’t be far away.”

“Okay.” Regan nodded, sinking down on a nearby cot and trying to get acclimated to the four walls around him. It looked so normal in here, and that was the strangest part of the night so far. Inside a room with a floor and ceiling and beds instead of a smoky street with fire glowing up from the cracks, it was easy to pretend everything else had been a bad dream. “I’ll see you in the morning though, right? You’re coming back?”

“Of course! Before you wake up, probably.” He doubted that, but said nothing. “I’m not leaving you in a strange place. Don’t worry.”

He couldn’t help it; worrying was what he seemed naturally programmed to do. Regan swallowed hard, flaps of skin around his neck twitching as if they were about to flare out in alarm. His breathing was quick and shallow, and his green skin had a sick sheen of cold sweat.

“Hey, you all right? Look at me.” Evelyn stepped back into his field of vision (his eyes were whizzing all around the room, unable to stop and focus on anything). With effort, Regan forced himself to look back. “Take a breath. Deep breath, in and out. You going to be okay?”

“I’m scared,” Regan whispered. “I’m so scared. I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t know how to make it better or what’s wrong with me and I’m just... oh, God...”

“It’s gonna be okay,” Evelyn said quietly, and it actually sounded like she was telling the truth. Or at least believed it herself.

Then, she softly started to hum. Then sing. And, slowly, the choking anxiety faded. Each breath became a little easier. His heart was still rapid, but it wasn’t pounding painfully anymore. It wasn’t just the song, Evelyn was doing...

something.

Good night... Dream sweet... In the morning, I'll be here...

Evelyn's voice had been spectacular onstage, but now, in the same way Regan could turn invisible at will and had scales when in full view, her singing went beyond what anyone outside this strange world could recreate. She self-harmonized, modulated in artful but gentle ways that brought his terrified, obsessive thought patterns to an easy halt.

"That's nice..." He knew there were so many reasons to be afraid, but he wasn't.

But it was more than that. He'd heard this song before. It was a warm, familiar melody that Regan couldn't place, but he knew it, as certainly as he knew his own name. It felt old. It felt right. The song itself whispered across his memory like a warm breeze, and in this moment, he wasn't afraid. Not while he could hear the strange, familiar music.

He gradually felt his muscles relax, from his jaw through his locked shoulders and slowly moving down. Soon even the shadows and shapes of the beds in the library basement looked familiar and reassuring instead of alien.

"I know this song," he whispered, though he almost hated to break the spell.

"Good," Evelyn said softly. Even after she stopped the melody, it stayed in Regan's head like an echo, like ripples across the surface of a pond. "Do you know from where?"

"No..." his scaly brow furrowed as he tried to chase the song back to where it lived. But it might as well have come from a songbird itself; the moment he reached for it, it flew away. Regan's chest ached, but it was a different feeling from the terrible constriction from a minute before. Heavy. It wasn't fear, and

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he could breathe just fine. It just hurt. “It’s... I remember I heard it a lot. But not where, or... who. Where’d you hear it?”

“Me? I’ve heard it a couple times in Parole. Never a recording, though. Always meant to cover it, never got around to it. Makes a nice lullaby, though.”

“Yeah. Really does. And I liked what you did. How you made it feel. Is that part of your power too?”

“Yeah. Audio frequency manipulation. It’s just a little lullaby on a therapeutic wavelength. Great for getting friends through anxiety and panic attacks. Comes in handy more often than I’d like.”

“Thanks. It’s really... it helps. You use that on stage?”

She laughed quietly. “Not as often there. Only when people really need calming down. People get real scared, they need something to take their minds off for a night. And if distraction doesn’t work, just knowing they’re not alone can help.”

“Okay. I’m fine now.” Regan shut his eyes and tried to convince himself that it was true. “I’m not afraid. This is fine. I can do this.”

“Yeah you can. But you don’t have to do it alone,” Evelyn promised. “Your memory is... it’s like that song. You knew by heart once. And you will again. It’ll come back even if you don’t know the words right now. You do recognize it. It means you belong here—or we’re close. Wherever home is, we’ll find it.”

Regan couldn’t answer. He couldn’t even open his eyes. If he did, they’d spill over with tears.

“Just listen, and keep breathing.”

Once she started to sing again, it got easier.

Everything is Going to Be Okay

CHAPTER 3

"HOW ARE YOU FEELING?" EVELYN ADJUSTED THE CLOTH MASK OVER THE LOWER HALF OF HER face as they walked.

"Scared, all day, every day." Regan glanced over his shoulder back at the library where he'd spent the night. "I think I'm just... always nervous. Gets hard to breathe."

"It'd be easier if you wore a mask, or at least a handkerchief," Evelyn said gently. "Everybody does. I have a spare, if you—"

"I'm fine," he said quickly. "I don't—I mean, no thank you. I tried it, back at the library, there was a free box. It wasn't... good. I know it's not good to breathe the air here but... when I tried, I couldn't breathe at all."

"Okay," she nodded. "Nobody's going to force you. Honestly, the safest



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things are the expensive gas masks... and only Eye in the Sky has those.”

“Then why do people wear anything?” He cast a baleful look at the cloth stopgap measure she wore. “I mean, what’s the point?”

“Because anything is better than nothing. We’ll take what we can get, until we can get something better tomorrow.” She glanced at him, and it wasn’t condemning. “But you decide how you go about it. And if something gives you a panic attack... claustrophobia?”

“I don’t... know.” He folded his arms tight, hugging his upper body. “It was bad, but... everything’s bad. I swear, everything’s bad right now. Maybe it’s the lizard in me.”

“Or your run-of-the-mill chronic anxiety.” Evelyn gave him a look that tried to be uplifting but fell a little flat. “I think most of us in Parole have it to some degree. And post-traumatic stress disorder. Lots and lots of PTSD. ”

“This feels like a little more than your basic—I mean, none of this is basic,” Regan tried to breathe deep, then remembered that even breathing could be dangerous in this city, and curled his hands into tight fists. “But this is different, someone did this to me.”

“That’s what it’s looking like, yeah. Or some kind of drug—and if it’s that, Rose will recognize it in around three seconds.”

“Right, that’s right,” Regan nodded, trying to convince himself or at least calm his racing heart. “Your wife knows all about this stuff, right? Brains? Weird stuff that happens to brains?”

“Rose knows more than almost anyone on that subject,” Evelyn said, and Regan could see the smile in her eyes even behind her mask. “She’s one of Parole’s last remaining therapists. Don’t worry, she won’t analyze you or do anything without your say-so, I promise. Just putting that out there, everyone

gets nervous. But I don't think you'll be nervous once you meet her."

"Okay. Yeah, thanks for that. But I mean... I know enough to know that all this isn't normal." Regan carefully examined the scales on the back of his hands, tiny close to his knuckles and slowly enlarging further up his forearm. When he rubbed them with his thumb, they brightened considerably; they were covered with a thin layer of what almost looked like ash. It must just be from constant exposure to the smoky air. He hated to think what it was doing to the insides of his lungs, but he couldn't stand the thought of anything covering his face either. He didn't need to feel any more trapped and helpless than he already did.

Sun-scorched concrete blocks of apartments stood squat and secure as the city's distant white-noise hum slowly increased. Still, they were alone—no lights shone behind the barred windows, nobody else walked the cracked sidewalks. The stark white glare of the sun on the metal and asphalt hurt his sensitive eyes, and all he could smell-taste was oily exhaust and smoke.

Evelyn smiled behind the cloth mask. "Well, try to relax, because Rosie and Danae are wonderful and sweet, and they both protect this city as much as I do, just in different ways. And they'll like you."

"How do you know? I don't even know if I like me."

A bouncy little shrug. "I like you."

Before Regan could answer, several deadbolts slid back and the door opened, revealing a pretty young woman with dark brown skin and loose, natural curls that fell down to her waist. She had a round figure and soft curves, and was wearing what looked like a fresh grass skirt, and a pink T-shirt that read "*Everything Is Going To Be Okay.*" Dozens of small flowers were sprinkled through her hair; vines twined around and through it, coiling around

her ears and snaking down around her neck, peeking out from under her T-shirt sleeves.

“Evvie!” A bright smile lit up her entire face the second she laid eyes on Evelyn, and she opened her arms wide. “Welcome home! One, two, three!”

“Hello, Rose petal,” Evelyn said, pulling her into a hug and kiss as soon as she’d finished counting. “Miss me?”

“It’s been about an hour on your day off, so—yes. Terribly. You don’t get enough.”

“I know. And I still don’t know if this is a good or bad one,” Evelyn’s tone and eyes dropped momentarily as they parted.

“You haven’t heard from Garrett?”

“No. The whole Bar’s still dark too—I’ll check in with Celeste and CyborJ if I still haven’t heard by this afternoon, but...” Evelyn looked over at Regan and nodded him over. “I wanted to at least introduce you two first.”

“I’m so glad to meet you, Regan. I’m Rose.” She turned her warm smile toward him, and for the first time since Evelyn’s song, he actually felt his clenched muscles start to relax.

“Rose?” He asked, looking at the vines and blossoms sprouting from her hair and twining around her arms like sleeves. “That’s... a pretty name.”

“I thought so!” She laughed and ushered them inside. “Evelyn’s told me you’re feeling a little disoriented.”

“Yeah, uh, you could say that,” he gave a nervous laugh as he followed; it sounded tight and brittle even to his own ears. “I can’t remember anything. I mean, I know my name, it’s Regan—you know that, sorry.”

“It’s fine, please don’t worry.” Rose said gently. “And that’s a great start. A lot of people suffering from amnesia don’t even have that.”

“But this is some weird amnesia.” Evelyn tugged her mask down and settled it around her neck, where it converted into a scarf. “Not sure if it's your everyday Parole psychological damage or... something else.”

“Something else?” Rose’s brow furrowed. “Chemically induced?”

“Maybe, but I’m thinking it’s someone playing with his head more directly. A psychic attack, telepathy or something. So I figured I'd bring him to you and cover all the bases.”

Rose smiled under the implied praise and looked up at Regan with her chin resting on her fist. Despite the fact that she was a stranger, and looking right at him with her full attention, he felt no increase in anxiety or impulse to flee. The fact that he even noticed this about his train of thought said something, and Regan wasn’t sure he liked it.

“So this is actually pretty interesting, because I don’t remember seeing you around here, Regan. And Ev wouldn’t have brought you to me if she knew, obviously,” she sucked on her lips as she considered, and Evelyn watched her thought process with a combination of fondness, amusement and pride. “Between us and Danae, I think we know almost everyone in the immediate area—oh, but you might not be from the immediate area, if your amnesia actually comes from some sort of psychic attack, whoever did it might have just dropped you here to throw everyone off the trail. Wait, hold up, Danae. I wonder if she knows? Let’s start there, simple first.”

“Simply amazing,” Evelyn couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m sorry, I just love watching you do that.”

“Hmm? What?” Rose looked up at her, then Regan, as if she’d forgotten there were other people in the room. “Oh. Sorry! I get a little... I just like figuring things out.”

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“Uh... sorry I can’t be of more help,” Regan tried to smile back and found it hurt his face. He must be out of practice. “And, uh, with the scales and eyes and—and tongue? I think I’d remember... me.” He held up one hand and studied his long nails. He wondered if they came to points naturally, or if he’d filed them that way. When he lowered it, he wasn’t smiling anymore.

“Don’t worry, Regan. Whether this is mental or emotional, basic physical or with an element of Chrysedrine enhancement, we’ll figure it out. That’s what I’m here for.”

“Seems like Parole could, uh, use a lot of therapy.”

“Healing of all kinds, and that’s how I like to think of it.” As Regan watched, a blossom beside her ear opened before his eyes, green tendrils curling up and around it. “There’s so much trauma here, physical and emotional, and I do whatever I can, wherever I can.”

“Well... I want to get better,” he said quietly. “So whatever you can do for me, that’d just be great, okay? I don’t like not knowing where I am or what’s going on or—it feels like falling. I’m off-balance and I don’t like it. I know I could just ask people until I know everything but I want... I just want everything back, that’s all. So how do I get it back?”

“Well, I know it sounds backwards, but we could start by me asking *you* questions. I’d like to get a feel for where you’re starting from, if that’s all right.”

“Shoot.”

“Can you tell me what year it is?”

“Uh... twenty... twenty-something.”

“All right, good. Where are we?”

“Parole.” He looked from Rose to Evelyn, suddenly nervous about giving a wrong answer, even though the entire point was that he wouldn’t know them.

“But I only know that because Evelyn told me.”

Rose paused, chewing her bottom lip. “Regan... where is Parole?”

“I don’t know,” he whispered. A tingle of fear went up Regan’s spine. Suddenly he wanted to run right out the door. Except that once he got outside, he wouldn’t be any safer. There was nowhere to run. “Somewhere hot. There’s a barrier over it... and we’re all trapped-trapped inside. Over fire.”

“Yes, but we’re surviving.” Rose nodded, her voice steady. “Life goes on, and we go on with it. We find ways.”

“But why are we here? Did we do something wrong?”

“It’s...” Rose glanced up at Evelyn, one hand going to unconsciously fiddle with a blossom sprouting from her wrist like a corsage. “It’s not so much something we did. It’s just something we live with now.” As she spoke, a sound rose from behind her, a rhythm like small rapid footsteps. Regan’s eyes swiveled, anxious to find the source of the sound, but Rose just smiled. “Someone’s awake.”

“EVVVVIEEEE!”

“Jack-o-saur!” Evelyn scooped up the little boy with the olive skin and poofed black hair around in a whirl of dress ruffles and pink hair, and they both giggled and squealed. “How has your morning been, my big lovely man?”

“I had cereal and I made a picture for you!”

“Oh my, I can’t wait to see it! But oh no, what’s this? I’m suddenly so *hungry!*” Evelyn bared her teeth in a play-monster grin, snorting and chomping and leaving lip-gloss kisses on his face. “Raawr! I’mma eat’cha!”

“Nooo!” Jack shrieked and blew a raspberry as she set him down, wiggling away and hiding behind Rose’s trailing skirts of vines. He grinned up at them like a nature pixie in the forest of flowers that draped and coiled around his

face-then his dark brown eyes grew wide and round when they fell on their green, scaly visitor.

“Oh, I’m...” Regan started to apologize and take a step backwards, fighting the urge to turn invisible again, now that he knew what that felt like. He’d jumped as his own reflection the last time he’d caught a glance of himself in the mirror. Now he was about to make a child cry.

“Dragon.”

“What?” Regan blinked.

“You’re the dragon.” The little boy grinned. “Count to ten and find me!”

“Regan’s busy right now, sweetie. Give us a minute.” Rose said gently when he didn’t respond. “Or maybe five minutes.” She turned back to the staring Regan as the little boy tore happily away around a corner with Rose’s flowers in his hair. “And that adorable little natural disaster was Jack.”

“Uh-huh.” Regan stared after the little boy, smiling without expecting or meaning to.

“Remembering something?” Evelyn asked gently.

“Huh? Oh,” Regan looked back at her. “No, I don’t think so. It’s just, that kid... he wasn’t scared of me.”

“No. We get all sorts here, including scaly people.”

“I just... I figured with the teeth and eyes...”

“Mm-hmm. Nice and dragon-y. One of his favorite things.”

“You’d better remember your promise, Evelyn.” Rose smiled. “He’s been talking about showing you that drawing all morning.”

“I wouldn’t dream of breaking it! It’s just as fun for me.”

“Anyway.” Rose led the way down the hall, her vines swaying and rustling. There were vines and flowers on either side of her as well; shelves lined the

hallway, each one of them covered in small pots and troughs of plants, all of them bursting with flowers. “Danae’s shop is through here. I’m sure she’ll want to meet you anyway. If she knows you, we’ll be able to help a lot faster, and if not... I’m just getting warmed up. Regan, it goes without saying, but anything you can tell us would be a big help. Not just significant memories, but impressions, feelings you have, if something strikes you as important for any reason, don’t hold back.”

“Okay,” he said hesitantly. “What if... I don’t think... um, speaking up doesn’t come that easy?”

“Then even that’s a clue right there. Thank you.”

“You’re, um, you’re welcome.”

Something whizzed past Regan’s ear as they walked, too fast to see beyond the shape of a shining metal butterfly. Regan became aware of a faint whirring noise, like small gears or a far-off engine. Rose’s step was irregular and a little jerky, and as he looked closer, Regan noticed she didn’t wear a grass skirt after all. It was a cascade of thick vines, blossoms and tendrils that twined around her legs like flowering ivy climbing up lamp posts. Her legs were made of some kind of gleaming metal that flexed and stretched as she moved. Regan peered closer at the tiny gears and delicate clockwork beneath the main chassis of shining, flexible alloy, tongue flickering in and out in thought.

“Nice legs,” he said. Then he immediately shut his mouth, then eyes. “Sorry.”

Rose turned around and looked at him with raised eyebrows, then broke out laughing, shaking her head. “You’re fine. Yes, these are my favorites too—almost seven years old, but they’ve always been the most comfortable. My wife made them,” she explained as she opened a door at the end of the hallway.

“We make a lot of things. The plants are obviously mine... but metal and moving is her department.”

The room she revealed opened up into what might have been a large garage at one point, but there was no car. Instead, it looked more like a museum, with huge arcing skeletons like the displays of dinosaur bones and half-finished humanoids—but everything was metal. Regan’s next thought was that they’d walked into some avant-garde artist’s metalworking studio, or maybe an auto mechanic’s workshop, given the wide array of tools, iron pipes and gears that hung from the walls and stood like indoor jungle gyms.

“Everything?” Regan turned around in a circle, taking in the metallic sculptures—and now that he looked, he saw what Rose had meant by ‘moving.’ There was no wind in the closed room, and all of these pieces were much too heavy to be moved even if there were, from the small individual cogs to what looked like a half-constructed elephant in the corner... but they were shifting, ever so slightly. Almost as if they were breathing.

“Everything,” Rose nodded. “Now, most of these are works in progress, so they won’t do much even if you go right up and kick them. But there is one you might get to meet later, and he’s pretty special. So if you see or hear something big moving around, don’t be surprised.”

“Okay. These are all so...” Regan trailed off and froze as a new bizarre development sloped around the corner.

A giant black bear of a dog stared at him with bright blue eyes that *weren’t* eyes, the way Rose’s legs weren’t legs. They were some kind of swirling halogen light, shining fire-bright and hard, and fixed on Regan. He couldn’t move. For the second time since entering the house every instinct in his brain screamed to run. A rushing flooded his ears, and his breathing became quick and shallow.

There was nothing left in the world but him and the five-foot tall dog, and the beast was winning without blinking an eye.

“It’s all right, this is who I was telling you about just now.” Rose noted his discomfort and stepped forward. “And Toto-Dandy loves people, don’t worry.” She stopped as the wolf’s black lips curled in a snarl, revealing jagged-edged metal teeth. “Usually. What’s wrong, puppy?” She went up to the beast and scratched its ears. The snarl faded, but those disturbing blue not-eyes stayed on Regan.

“Hi there, boy.” Regan swallowed hard against his instincts and held his ground. “Good dog.” He slowly reached out his hand—and recoiled at the low rumble from the black throat. The growl had a strange, mechanized sound, like it was being played through a speaker from inside a tin can.

“It’s okay, boy.” Rose soothed the sleek, dangerous animal. “He’s our friend. It’s okay.”

“Dandy?” Jack poked his head out from his hiding place underneath a table, eyes round. The wolf-thing turned its head toward the little boy and all hostility melted away. It gave a gentle little yip and bounced over to Jack like a giant puppy, keeping itself between the boy and Regan.

“See, it’s okay.” Jack threw his arms around his friend’s thick, furry neck. The wolf swished his tail and opened his huge maw wide—the needle-sharp metal teeth disappeared, replaced with soft, terrycloth-cushioned gums. He closed his mouth gently around Jack’s entire midsection and picked him right up off the ground while the little boy chattered happily. With a last warning glance at Regan, the beast loped off, carrying his ‘pup’ to safety.

“Wear a mask if you’re going outside, sweetie!” Rose called after the little boy, then turned back to her guest. “I’m sorry, Regan, I don’t know what got

into him..." She shook her head, as three more little metal butterflies whizzed by her head. "Toto-Dandy is a wonderful guard dog, but maybe he needs an adjustment or two. I'll ask Danae to tinker around with his head a little."

"I dunno, I made him to keep out strangers. Seems like he's doing his job." A new voice made Regan turn as a short young woman with pale skin, freckles and a bushy ponytail of fiery red hair descended from a metal staircase behind them. She looked like she might have just crawled up from the fire—her face was smeared with ash, and the heavy welder's gloves she wore were stained with oil and burns. She removed the chunky gloves from her hands and wiped her sweaty face on her freckled forearm before blowing Evelyn a kiss and giving Regan a friendly little wave and grin. "Sorry if he gave you any trouble—you're right, Rosie, he might need a little mellowing out, since I assume this guy's not here to ruin all our lives."

"No, no, I promise! I'm just here for some help. My name's Regan."

"I'm Danae. Nice to meetcha." She held out a callused, rough hand, and happily almost crushed Regan's when he shook it.

"You too." Regan shook his head and cleared his throat, still trying to shake off the strange disorientation he'd felt earlier (and trying to get the feeling back in his hand). "Uh, this might be a weird question, but is that dog... real?"

"Oh don't worry! I get that all the time. He's alive, if that's what you mean. He's also a conglomeration of gears, scrap metal, old car parts, broken lawnmowers, super glue, and whatever the hell else I can get my hands on. I put it all together, added some fur and fangs, and gave it some juice. Brought the pieces to life. He's something more than the sum of his parts." She stood grinning with hands on her hips and caught her breath, pride seeming to burst out of every cell in her small, compact-muscled body.

“He sure is... something.” That seemed to be Regan’s cue to comment. Now he shivered, remembering the cold adrenaline that flooded him at the synthetic beast’s growl. He never wanted to be that afraid again, but was sure that was too much to ask.

“Thank you!” Danae seemed to take it as a compliment, unaware of his misgivings. “Toto-Dandy’s one of my special babies. Infused him with extra instinct to guard and protect, and a nice little silent alarm that tells me whenever he’s agitated... like he did just now. He’s a great pal for Jackie, too.”

Regan nodded, and tried to move on to anywhere but the memory of those huge metal fangs. “Rose and Danae... what? If I can ask?”

“You can ask. But nope, sorry. No last names. Not in Parole, not to strangers.” Danae shook her head apologetically. “Not trying to be rude, it’s just safer that way.” She exchanged a glance with Rose. “Actually we’re not even saying these are our real first names.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the name ‘Rose’ was a pretty big coincidence.” He smiled as Rose laughed and gave a little shrug. “Okay. I understand.” He nodded, even if he didn’t, not entirely. “Well, Regan’s my real name, as far as I know. So you made... everything here?”

“Yep. And lots more where that came from.”

“Do you ever make cats?” He asked before he could stop himself.

“Yeah, all the time.” She nodded. “They’re some of my most popular models.”

“Why? What are they for?”

“Anything,” Danae said. “Anything you need.” She held out a hand, and one of the little whirring butterflies landed with a clink to perch on her pinkie finger. “These little honeys are great for carrying notes, finding lost keys,

zapping mosquitoes...” The butterfly fluttered away, glinting. “I make animal models like Toto for lonely people or kids who want pets but have allergies. Helpers for the elderly and disabled. Or just...friends.”

“And they’re alive?”

“Yes.” Danae nodded firmly. “That’s what Chrysedrine gave me. After the pain stopped, the gift started. Might as well use it to improve peoples’ lives.”

“Chrysedrine? What is that, a drug?”

“It’s *the* drug,” Danae said, with a hint of bitterness. “Some people call it Wonderland. I think it’s because once you’re down the rabbit hole, there’s no going back.”

Regan looked at one arm. His scales regularly had a dull greenish gleam, but when he moved them directly under the light, they shone a brief, striking iridescent. He quickly pulled his arm back and wished for longer sleeves. “And this was my... side effect.”

“It does a lot of different things to different people,” Evelyn said slowly. “Sometimes it shows, but not always. I can knock down buildings with my voice. Rose...”

“My circulatory system is primarily comprised of plant matter now,” Rose explained with immediate enthusiasm, apparently finding the concept much more scholastically intriguing than disturbing. “It’s largely self-repairing and sustainable thanks to photosynthesis, I can actually produce a variety of different plants for a wide range of uses, not to mention my defensive capa...” she stopped, seeming to realize the abnormality of their lives, and the potential for overwhelming anyone who didn’t live them daily. “Anyway, it’s a spectrum.”

“And you... bring metal to life?” Regan asked, watching one of Danae’s works-in-progress slink by. A cat without fur, he thought, just a metal frame

right now, but the smooth way it moved was definitely catlike. The one he'd seen before had definitely been one of these, just a much more finished version.

"Metal, plastic, most inanimate material," Danae gave a half-nod, half-shrug. "It helps if they're already put together, usually? So, I put them into the shape I want, then... yeah. Life. Mostly limbs, though. A lot of prosthetics."

"They're amazing." Rose knocked on one of her legs; it made a solid clicking noise. "I don't know where I'd be without her."

"Pff." Danae slipped one arm around Rose's waist. "Right here, brewing miracle medicines and helping thousands of people, just like now."

Rose giggled and tapped Danae on the nose, wiping off a spot of ash. "You know what I mean."

"You do all this for free?" Regan asked, incredulous despite himself.

"Cups or gallons, depends on the job." Danae nodded to herself. "It's tight, but we can usually get by from month to month."

"Cups of...what?" Regan blinked.

"Oh—water!" Evelyn said, remembering that some things would have to be explained. "I'm sorry, yeah, that's something you should know here. You notice how hot it is here? Hot and dry? Yeah. The most valuable substance in Parole is water. We get big water shipments in once every couple of months, but it never lasts long. So people save it, and use it to trade for stuff."

"Trade it, fight over it, die for it." Rose gave a sad shake of her head. "It's not right. It's not fair. Access to clean drinking water is a basic human right... whether it's granted or not. But here it's currency."

Regan swallowed, starting to feel thirsty already. He didn't like thinking about this, so he changed the subject (and reminded himself that he wasn't

afraid). “So what can you make besides animals and prosthetics?”

Danae smiled. “Anything, probably. I can take a piece of scrap and give it life, make it better than it was before. And they *are* alive,” she said softly, wide blue eyes tracing a butterfly’s path with something like a dreamy reverence. “Maybe not like you and me, but... they are.”

Regan thought about cracks in the sidewalk and what happened if you stepped on them. The barrier, impenetrable and deadly. The legions of armed men keeping them all inside, pushing them unerringly toward the fire raging below. “So—could you make a weapon?”

Danae snapped from her peaceful reverie. “Now why would you ask that?” she asked, eyes going hard and narrow.

“That wolf thing is dangerous as hell. And if you can give life to, say, guns that never miss or something? The possibilities are limitless. We could really have a chance here!”

“You’re just like the rest of them,” Danae whispered. “I have a family now. Is everything a weapon to you people?”

“What?”

“*I don’t do that anymore.* Why won’t you leave me alone? Evelyn, what is this?” She looked from Regan to Evelyn, an edge of fear in her voice. Her arm tightened around Rose, who unconsciously returned the squeeze.

“He doesn’t know what he’s saying,” Evelyn said quickly. “That’s why we’re here. He’s got some kind of amnesia, and we figured Rose could help.”

“Listen, I’m sorry if I said something offensive.” Regan said, dropping his eyes. “I really don’t know what’s going on in this place. Just that Hans said...” He broke off as Danae gasped. She and Rose stared at each other for a moment. Then, together, they slowly turned to look back at Regan.

“Did you say Hans?” Rose asked finally.

Regan slowly nodded. “That name. Yes. And that he can get me out of Parole.”

Danae stared at Regan, eyes narrowed and mouth twisted in what looked like a grimace of pain. “Who are you?”

“I don’t—”

“The first thing you ask me is if I can make a gun,” she cut in. “And now you know the name *Hans*? And you expect me to believe it’s a coincidence?” She shook her head. “No. There’s no such thing. Who *are* you?” She let go of Rose and stepped toward him and Regan wanted very much to step back from her hard eyes; he felt like a bug under a microscope.

“I don’t *know*. That’s why we’re here.”

“Wait.” Rose frowned. She exchanged a little glance with Danae then Evelyn, and Regan had the feeling they’d all just had an entire conversation. “We’ll help you. It’s what we do. But whoever you turn out to be, if it involves Eye in the Sky, we don’t want any part of it. Ever.”

“Mamas?” a small, scared voice called. They all turned to see Jack peering around a corner. Then a huge black wolf’s head popped around to look too, snuffling the top of his head.

“What is it, sweetie?” Danae asked, fighting to keep her voice controlled when it threatened to shake.

“Why are you sad?”

Danae tried to smile. “I’m not sad. We’re just... having a talk.”

“Everything’s fine, baby,” Rose said gently. The little boy started toddling toward her, and she held out one hand for him to stop. “Wait for Mama, baby. One, two, three.”

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This time, Regan watched more closely and saw what the countdown was for. Rose's skin *was* covered in thorns as well as flowers, and as he watched, the tiny barbed points withdrew into her flesh like a cat's retracting claws. "Okay, ready!" She opened her arms and Jack rushed into them. She wrapped her son in a warm hug, kissing the top of his head. "Go play with Dandy for a little, okay? We'll all be there in a minute. We'll have lunch and you can show Evelyn her picture."

"What about the dragon guy?" Jack looked up at Regan, eyes every bit as wide as they'd been before.

"I'm... I'll be here," Regan said, trying to nod reassuringly, but just feeling faint and a little sick.

Jack wasn't entirely satisfied, but he nodded solemnly. "Okay." He disappeared around the corner and the sound of small feet and big paws on linoleum faded.

Rose looked back up at Regan—and the tiny, curved thorns protruded back out of her skin. If it hurt, she didn't make a sound. "You didn't ask anything terrible," she said at last. "It's a natural question. A normal reaction. What do you do when you're locked up? Try to escape."

"For about the first five years," Danae shook her head, red curls flying. "Eventually you gotta figure out when to quit."

"Yes." Rose nodded, much more calmly. "We do have... a history here. That you couldn't have known about."

"I'm sorry," Regan said quietly.

"Listen, questions like that are dangerous, okay? For us and you both," Danae sighed and rubbed her temples like she had a sudden headache. "Just forget it. I don't make weapons anymore, but ... I used to. For the people who

are supposed to protect Parole, but really keep us trapped like rats and wait for us to burn.”

“Who are they?” Regan asked in a dry whisper. “What’s going on in this city?”

“Eye in the Sky.” Danae said, lip curling into a snarl. “SkEye for short. And they are watching, always. It’s not paranoia if they’re really watching you. Excuse me.” She turned on her heel, and without another word she stalked out of the room. Regan stared after her and opened his mouth, but suddenly there was a soft hand on his arm.

“I’m sorry. But you have to understand, she only has our best interests at heart,” Rose said quietly. “Danae doesn’t trust easily. I can’t blame her, really. Not after what Eye in the Sky did to her.”

“She’d do anything to keep our son safe,” Evelyn said, eyes on the doorway Danae had just left. In an adjacent room, Jack’s laugh mingled with the sound of heavy metal paws on linoleum. “I couldn’t ask for anything more.”

“Our?” Regan had to ask, but still hesitated. Even in this small, safe-feeling oasis in the middle of a fiery nightmare, it felt important to walk carefully and check for cracks before trusting solid ground.

“Yes.” The warmth and pride in Evelyn’s smile melted the last bit of any lingering heaviness in the room, replacing it with the security of certainty. Even if he couldn’t explain the relief he felt, Regan found himself giving her a rare, small smile back. “It’s hard to make a life for yourself here. Family is even harder. But it’s more than possible. Almost anything is in Parole.”

“Yeah... I...” He couldn’t even say why, but Regan couldn’t stop smiling. The relief was overpowering; he almost felt the need to sit down.

“Are you okay?” Evelyn zeroed in immediately, taking a step closer. “That

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did something. That was important, right there.”

At first, all Regan could do was nod. Then he stopped, realizing he wasn't sure what he was nodding about. His smile slipped away. “I did feel... what you said, when... I don't know. It's hard to explain.”

“Family?” She asked gently.

“Yes!” His eyes brightened again. “Something about this. Being here. Seeing your... your wives?”

“Mm-hmm.” Evelyn nodded with a proud grin. “Like I said, we made our lives together possible. Do you think you had one like ours? A poly family?”

“L...” Regan stopped, creases deepening in his ridged brow as he thought, trying with everything he had to put a name to the feeling—faces if possible, faces with names? Out of everything he'd learned, all the too-few answers and far more questions, this seemed by far the most important.

“It's okay. Take your time.”

He tried. With everything he had, he tried, feeling like something or someone incredibly important—or more than one someone important to him—were just out of reach, out of sight. The feeling was so powerful, so certain, so inarguable, he knew he was staring the answer to a huge part of his life and himself right in the face. Instead of a window to his past, this place felt like a mirror. Unfortunately, if this was the answer, he didn't know the question to ask. And if it was a mirror, he still didn't recognize the face in his reflection.

“I don't know,” he said at last, shoulders sagging. “It... the song. The song you sang last night. It feels like that. I know it, but not from where.”

“Well, at least that means you know it by heart.” Evelyn looked at him like she wanted to pull him into a hug, like her own heart ached. “It'll come back. I

know it will.”

“I hope so.” His eyes were downcast, and he seemed every bit as exhausted as he’d been hopeful and excited a moment before. How could you miss someone without knowing them? He didn’t know, but he was sure finding out.

“Well, let’s pencil in ‘polyamorous family’ on our list of clues,” Evelyn couldn’t help but sound both encouraged and encouraging. “I know we don’t know for sure, but... that reaction was a very good sign. Can’t fake that.”

“Not that kind of love, no...” He sighed, still deep in thought. He didn’t pay much attention to the automatic words that came out of his mouth, because a new thought occurred to him. “I don’t think there were any kids around, though. Don’t get me wrong, Jack seems really—real sweet and all, I just don’t think I’ve been around kids much.”

“Probably not,” Rose wisely understated, automatically giving Evelyn’s hand a squeeze as she passed and headed into the kitchen, mechanical legs clinking on the tile. “But it’s still helpful. Anything is. We’ll do our best to help you get your life back, Regan.”

“Thanks. Yeah.” For some reason he had a hard time getting his hopes up. He wondered if his pervasive anxiety and difficulty trusting anything at all was useful information. “Anything would be great. Thank you.”

“My experience with... I guess you’d call it telepathically-induced amnesia?” Rose easily fell into deep thought too, but she seemed to have a lot more fun doing it. “Hm! It’s rare, but I know I’ve seen it at least once before, and if I did, I took notes.”

“Of course you did,” Evelyn grinned at her. “Copious ones. Because you have a system.”

“An excellent system,” Rose’s easy response might have been the next line in

one of her wife's songs. It certainly seemed like an exchange they'd had several times before. "The more chaotic the world gets, the more order I'll maintain in my little corner of the universe, to balance it out. And Parole is very... chaotic." Her look tried to turn pointed, but she failed to hide the smile underneath.

"Superhero-ing is messy work, Rose," Evelyn folded her arms with mock seriousness. "I will not apologize for being a defender of justice. But I did apologize for that file cabinet incident. And I do again. That was unfortunate."

"Perils of the pursuit of goodness—but I can carry on, adapt, and recover from any fiendish assault. And so can my file cabinets."

"That's what heroines do," Evelyn just smiled up at her, chin in her hand and sleepy-eyed; for a moment it seemed like she almost forgot they were having a conversation. "You know, if you ever get bored... Parole's still there, and so am I. Ever think about stepping out of retirement for one night?"

"More often than I care to admit. Especially given recent events."

"Me too. But just imagine-you and me. Defending streets, saving lives, messing up evil plots, just like old... well nah, it won't be just like old times, Danae won't come near any of that with a ten-mile pole, but still. I swear, those were some good times. Even when they... weren't."

"Mmm, I have to admit, sometimes it's tempting."

"And there's no one else I'd rather have watching my back."

"But I'll leave the sound and fury to you, darling. Some people fight the good fight on the streets... some people alphabetize." Rose smiled and nodded for Regan to follow. "Now come on, let's find you some answers."

Feeling lighter and more hopeful already, Regan started after her. But before he got there, a pounding at the door erupted, so forceful and abrupt he jumped a couple inches into the air.

"I'll get it!" Danae rushed past them from another room, undid the inside locks and jerked the door open. Immediately, she tried to slam it shut, but a black-booted foot jammed it ajar.

"We have a warrant to search the premises." The voice was muffled, like it came from behind a mask. "Straight from Major Turret himself."

"How dare you come back here?" Anxiety tightened Danae's sharp voice. "For the millionth time, I'm not your bomb builder anymore!"

"Stand aside. A wanted murderer is in the building. Your cooperation is required."

"What? Murderer?!" Shocked, Danae opened the door a little bit, revealing two men in full-body black uniforms. Regan's mouth fell open. Their masks completely covered their heads, with black reflective visors and a shape that reminded him of skulls, or mustard gas masks from old World War One photos. But that wasn't where he recognized these shapes from. They were important for another, frustratingly unknown reason, and the ominous familiarity was what made his blood run cold.

"He was seen entering your residence minutes ago. *Stand aside* or you will be charged with abetting."

Evelyn stepped forward. "Danae, what's going—"

One of the masked men caught sight of the dumbfounded Regan "There he is!" He shoved past Danae and she yelled in protest, reaching out to stop him, but he elbowed her in the chest, slamming her into a wall.

"Danae!" Rose dashed from the kitchen, fists raised and thorns out. "Get away from her—"

The masked men drew their semi-automatics, then everyone froze as a bloodcurdling howl cut through the air.

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They whirled as Toto-Dandy bounded in front of them, fur standing on end and metal fangs bared. A terrified Jack clung to the beast's thick neck—apparently he'd been riding bareback when Toto-Dandy transformed from babysitter to attack wolf. Rose lurched forward and grabbed him from the livid beast's shoulders, stumbling backwards into Evelyn.

Dandy let out a bellow like a lion's roar mixed with the grinding, smashing gears of an engine from Hell, and a spurt of fire burst from his mouth. He charged forward, lunging at the invaders in his home, roaring and breathing streams of flame.

“Open fire!”

Danae dashed toward her family as gunfire and snarls exploded in her hallway, screaming “Go, go, go!”

They went. They stampeded in a terrified tangle of legs and wigs and vines, Danae shoving them from the back and Evelyn dragging Regan forward, leading the way. One of the officers was down, while the other one aimed his gun at—

“Dandyyy!” Jack screamed, leaning back over Rosie's shoulder with his little arms outstretched, watching as his friend fell limp against the wall in a hail of bullets. The wolf lurched spasmodically, making mechanical grinding noises as tiny shining clockwork cogs and gears scattered like broken glass among the bullet casings. “Nononono, go back, go baaaack!”

They tumbled out the back door, through a sandbox, past a swingset and down a backstreet alley. They kept running, cutting through scorched yards and side streets until Evelyn finally panted, “Stop, stop, we lost them!” So they slumped, exhausted against brick walls.

“Do you wanna tell us...” Danae panted, slumping against a dumpster. “Just

what the hell you did? Who did you *kill*?”

“Nobody!” Regan protested, though his brain was frantically flashing back over the past 24 hours. The kid in the library; he'd been unconscious, not dead. There was no way, no possible way, Regan hadn't hit him that hard, he was breathing... “I swear! I don't even know—”

“All right, everyone stay calm,” Evelyn kept glancing around and up at the sky, expecting to hear a helicopter's thrum any minute. “How many back at the house, two? I saw two. Assuming they'll call for backup, that means we can expect at least four more after us, coming from—”

“You mean after *him*.” Danae hissed. “They pulled their guns when they saw you, Regan! Whoever you killed, you managed to piss off Eye in the goddamn Sky, and now we're all going straight to—”

“I didn't kill *anyone*!”

“How do you know?! You can't remember anything!”

That stopped him. Cold panic gripped his lungs, and sweat started to sneak up the back of his neck. A now-familiar chill began to creep up his arms, and he fought to remain visible. Do not fade. Stay in the moment. “I... don't.”

Evelyn shook her head as Rose sat down between her and Danae. Jack, still whimpering, wiggled between his mothers and tried to hide behind them. “You were with me all last night, you couldn't have killed anyone.”

Regan swallowed, remembering the boy on the floor. The eyes of the mechanical cat, staring at him. “But I don't remember anything from before then. I must have killed someone, I—”

“I don't believe that. SkEye lies constantly, it's what they *do*.”

Regan remembered something else. Something even worse. He gasped. “I was *supposed* to.”

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A moment of silence, broken only by Jack's muffled sobs and cries for Dandy.

"What?" Evelyn said at last.

"I was supposed to kill someone. I remember that." Regan said flatly. "But I *didn't*. If I killed someone, I'd know!"

"How can you be sure?" Danae demanded.

"Danae, calm down for just a second," Rose said, level. "Hear him out."

"Oh no, no!" Danae shook her head stiffly. "I am not having this. I am not letting you endanger my family. You must have killed someone pretty important to SkEye to piss them off that bad, and frankly, good for you! The enemy of my enemy is always my friend. But now they're shooting at my wives and little boy—"

"We don't even know who's dead, if anyone really is," Rose said calmly. "How many times have people disappeared in this city when they really just don't want to be found? Or fallen through the cracks—sometimes literally? Regan, I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. The moment we start jumping all over each other without a very good reason is the moment we're doomed."

"Then why did SkEye shoot up our house looking for him?" Danae put her hands on her hips, looking around at all of them in disbelief. "How can you trust him?"

"Stop it." Evelyn glared, voice hardening for the first time. "When has SkEye *ever* told the truth? Hm? When have they ever done a thing that wasn't Godawful? And Danae, sweetness, when have you ever trusted the Eye over us? I'm not letting anyone get arrested and killed for something they *might* have done. Everyone deserves a fair trial, and you sure as hell won't get one in this

city.” She took a deep breath, shoulders rising and falling. “The ground’s burning right from under our feet, dears. Times like these... we all have to stick together.” A moment of quiet. Then Evelyn’s eyebrows came together as apprehension crossed her face. “Rosie...did you save your notes?”

Rose groaned. “Ohhh, no, I dropped them when I picked up Jack ...”

Evelyn sighed, stroking the little boy’s hair. “Well, I’d rather have Jackie than... anything else. We’ll find another way.”

“In any case, we need to find a permanent place to lay low.” Rose furrowed her brow in thought. “Evelyn, how about the Bar?”

Danae shook her head. “No way. Those guys come by every month to badger me into making more bombs. They know us, they know who we run with, they saw Evelyn today... and they know where she sings. If they survived the wrath of Toto-Dandy, they’ll stake out Garrett’s place too.”

“You two don’t need to run.” Regan frowned. “You haven’t done anything. Or you, Evelyn.”

Danae gave that awful, mirthless laugh again. “You think that matters to SkEye? They’ve seen you with us. Now we’re involved—hell, right now we’re aiding and abetting. They won’t stop until we’re all in custody, and they *will* interrogate us. Nobody wants that, trust me.”

“So where do we go?” Rose said, tone suggesting she was asking herself as much as any of them. “The Bar?”

“Still haven’t heard from Garrett,” Evelyn shook her head, voice tight. “Nobody knows a thing, everyone’s running dark—I don’t like this. We lie low until we know more.”

“The library, then?”

“That’s our last safe house,” Danae cut in. “And SkEye is after *us*. We could

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lead them right to it, if the library goes down we lose everything, we're dead—"

"I think I know a place." Evelyn said quietly. "I could... take you all home."

"But you just said—"

"No, not there ... *Home*."

Rose gasped, put a thornless hand on Evelyn's arm. "Oh—oh, no ..."

"It's the safest place in Parole. If there's anywhere we can hide out until this blows over... it's the Turret House."

Danae looked at Evelyn as if she'd grown a second head. "Well, yeah. It's absolutely ridiculous to even think about going there." There was a moment of silence, and then she sighed, muscled shoulders sagging. "Which is exactly why we're gonna do it, aren't we?"

They sat in silence for a few long moments. Then Jack looked up, face wet and red from tears. "I never showed you the picture of you," he said mournfully to Evelyn.

"I'm sorry. I'm sure it was beautiful."

"It was, 'cause you are."

"Thank you, Jack-o-Saur."

"Well," Regan said, moving toward the alley mouth, "I'm not sitting behind a dumpster while there's a price on my head."

Evelyn lagged a few steps behind, dialing on the black cell phone he'd seen earlier when she'd met her contact. And as before, the first few words of the call were the same. "Celeste? Evelyn. I need a..."

"I wouldn't worry about anyone following us," Rose gave Regan a making-the-best-of-it sort of smile. Beside her, Danae folded her arms and resolutely refused to look at any of them except for Jack. "It's... a ways."

"Long walk?" Regan's shoulders sagged as he realized what now seemed

obvious. “Guess Parole doesn’t have stuff like taxis anymore, does it?”

“Well actually...” Evelyn pointed over his shoulder at the yellow car with the checkered stripe that had just pulled up at the mouth of the alleyway. She hung up her phone, looking quite satisfied. “You’d be surprised.”

House of Locked Doors

CHAPTER 4

“GOOOOOD MORNING, PAROLE! IT’S A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN EVERYON’ES FAVORITE GREAT BIG BUBBLE in a government quarantine, and I’m your Radio Angel, saying wakey-wakey, eggs and bakey!”

“Oh God,” Regan slumped in the front seat and stared out the window, teeth clamped down over rising bile. The voice on the radio was familiar, but right now he was focusing more closely on not losing his lunch. “Can you change the channel? She’s talking about food and I’m gonna be—”

“Sorry, buddy!” the cab driver, a 20-ish young man with round, freckly cheeks, a bright smile and brighter orange hair chirped. “Only get the one station. And it’s important to stay current, right? Safety first!”

Evelyn sat stiff and straight, hands clamped on her knees, ignoring



the screeching tires and yells from the streets. There were barely any other cars on the road (gasoline was almost as rare as water), but their driver still managed to almost hit everything even vaguely in their path. He didn't seem to understand the concept of driving in the right lane or what a stop sign meant, and Evelyn wasn't going to tell him. She hadn't said a word since directing the hyper kid behind the wheel to "the Turret House, please. Quickly." Their driver apparently knew exactly where it was, because he didn't stop to ask them for directions, or, apparently, stop signs.

Jack climbed up on the seat back and pressed his nose against the back window as a crack in the arid ground belched out a spurt of flame. Regan held onto his seat as they whipped around a corner, and wished he could be half as calm as the small child watching fire erupt from the ground.

"I don't want to go," Jack said while Rose lifted him down onto her lap to where she sat squashed between Evelyn and Danae. She wrapped her arms securely around him, giving him the hug they both needed. "I wanna go home. I want Toto-Dandy."

"It's not forever, sweetie," Rose reassured him. Danae looked up at her and started to say something, but Rose shook her head. For a moment they looked straight at each other and the rest of the world disappeared while they held something like a duel with their eyes. Rose won, and Danae looked away with a reluctant nod. "We're going to stay with Evelyn's family for a little bit. Tomorrow I'll call somebody to pick up some things from home."

"And I'll fix Toto," Danae promised softly, gnawing at her lower lip, eyes narrowed. "I'll fix this whole mess."

"See? So it'll be just like... a vacation."

"It's not a vacation," Jack said in a cold, flat voice that made everybody turn

and look at him. He wasn't crying, or gearing up for a tantrum. He just stared out the window with an expression of strange intensity and understanding his three parents had never seen before. "The policemen hurt Toto, and they were trying to get us. I don't like it."

"Neither do I," said Evelyn quietly. Rose couldn't hug her while holding Jack, but she leaned her head against Evelyn's shoulder. Evelyn rested her head on top of Rose's, and they sat in silence for a few seconds. The driver had turned the radio down, but the girl's voice still continued as background noise.

"...Is still missing, if you have any information please call me; I want all my babies safe and sound, and I bet his family's real worried too. Radio Angel's always here for you, and you know where to find me. Stay beautiful, Parole..."

"What is that?" Regan croaked, still trying to keep down his lunch. "The news?"

"Huh? You, uh new in town?"

"You could say that."

"I was kidding—nobody's been new in Parole for ten years. Except for babies," he said thoughtfully.

"I don't listen to the radio much?"

"How do you live, man?" Thankfully, he didn't wait for an answer, because by now Regan was getting afraid to open his mouth. "Well that's Radio Angel. She's the only source for good information in Parole! She lets me know if there's anybody who really needs a lift, traffic jams, new fire craters in the road...Anyway! Eye in the Sky shut down all TV and internet—or they tried to! 'Till CyborJ brought it back! But Radi—"

"What?" Regan blurted.

"I know! They took the internet, evil, right?"

“No, no, who brought it back?”

“CyborJ! He’s—” the excitable young man answered immediately, then stopped. “Wait, you’ve never heard of him, or Radio Angel?”

“Amnesia,” Evelyn supplied, as Regan fell silent from a combination of nausea, embarrassment, and something else he was having trouble putting into words. “He won’t have heard of a lot of common Parole knowledge.”

“Oh. Wow. Sorry about that!”

“It’s fine,” Regan mumbled, bent over with his head almost on his knees and eyes shut. Maybe if he couldn’t see the world blurring by...

“That sucks. I mean, that really sucks. I mean, at least we’re all used to this weirdness. Can’t imagine just waking up in Parole one day.”

“Mm-hmm.” Something their driver had just said was important. One of those things. There had been a lot of things. He might have an easier time picking out exactly what his brain was currently vibrating with recognition about once he was out of a car that seemed determined to break the sound barrier and all traffic laws, but right now, all Regan could focus on was avoiding hyperventilation.

“But anyway, yeah, that was Radio Angel! And she keeps us connected. On the air, anyway. But yeah, listen to the radio! That’s how you stay alive!”

“How’d she know where to find us? And how does she keep SkEye from shutting her down?” Regan asked to distract himself from his pitching stomach.

“I dunno! She does something really cool so they can’t grab her signal or something, jumping frequencies or whatever. Almost everyone here has some kind of power. I guess that’s hers! Knowing where the radios are, broadcasting through all of them, and turning ‘em off whenever SkEye’s around. She’s saved us all so many times, it’s just like, really important! So I always listen. Most

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people do! Woah, was that stop sign always there?”

“It’s all a little much, isn’t it?” Evelyn asked in a lowered, sympathetic voice. Regan could only nod back. She forced a smile, and somehow the sunny voice on the radio made it easier. “It’ll calm down. It has to. Everything really will be okay.”

“Yeah, it will!” The driver’s bright voice made them all jump. “So, the Turret House, huh? You know, I was actually already headed there! Cool coincidence, huh? If by ‘cool’ you mean ‘kinda creepy,’ because it’s just about the last place anyone really wants to—hey! I know you!”

“Hmm?” Evelyn suddenly looked concerned.

“You’re Evelyn Calliope, aren’t you?” A wiggly little grin appeared on the baby-face in the review mirror. The young driver with the bright orange-dyed hair was definitely blushing.

Evelyn sighed, but had to smile. “Yes, that’s me. I’m, uh, traveling incognito. And I’d really appreciate if you just forgot you saw me, or anyone else here.”

“I could try, but it wouldn’t work. I could never forget you! I’m a huge fan!” He started bouncing up and down in the seat now, making the car swerve noticeably back and forth. Regan clenched his teeth and shut his eyes, briefly wondering what religion he’d been before his memory loss. “I’ve seen all of your shows! Hey, what happened last night? The fire alarm, everybody getting kicked out early? Was there an actual fire? I mean, it’s Parole, but I thought the Emerald Bar was like, super good about that stuff.”

“Oh... just a false alarm,” Evelyn’s eyes slid over to Regan, who was pressing his fist against his mouth. The little knot in Evelyn’s stomach clenched even tighter—and not from the way the taxi zoomed through a stop sign and

crosswalk. She'd actually forgotten her own problems in all the recent confusion. "Uh, but I'm really glad to have come across a fan! Because I know I can trust you to keep my secret, right?"

"Of course! It's safe with me, I promise. I'm Finn, by the way! It's amazing to meet you, I really mean that!"

"That's very nice of you, Finn." She couldn't help but feel a little better; the young man's smile was contagious. Even if he talked almost as fast as he drove.

"You know, I've always wanted to go inside the Turret place. Everyone says you gotta have a death wish to actually go there—but I really do, you hear the weirdest stories, and I gotta know if they're true."

Evelyn looked up sharply, frowning. "What kind of stories?"

"Well, some people say it's the only way out of Parole, like they have a secret door or something," He turned all the way around to talk to Evelyn, driving with one hand, unbothered by the screams and shouted curses as people dove out of the way. Regan clutched his stomach and gasped, eyes jarred open, as a streetlamp scraped a nick of paint off the side mirror. "But I don't think that's it, 'cause if that were true, everyone would know about it, right?"

"For the love of God, keep your eyes on the road!" Regan shrieked.

"Sorry!" Finn said, but didn't turn around. "But like, they can't actually have a way out, and just keep it all to themselves, can they? Everyone says the Turrets are evil, but nobody's that evil."

"Sidewalk—sidewalk, you're on—sidewalk!"

"Sorry again! Oh wow, how'd we get all the way over here?" Finn briefly glanced out at the road again, but quickly went back to his conversation. "Anyway, speaking of death wishes, other people say it's haunted—like actually haunted, like by a real ghost—well I mean, not like a real ghost-ghost, more like

a bunch of psychic people live there? And it's like they're making the ghosts!"

Regan resigned himself to staring out the window, turning as a large, ornate sign flew by. He caught a glimpse of the word "Turret," just before his eyes crossed and his stomach made one final lurch.

"Anyway, a friend of mine actually got a chance to look in there—like I said, I was going there right now to pick them up! Can you believe that? An actual invitation. To the Turret House. Lucky! But they're not gonna tell me anything, bet you a million bucks they don't tell me anything, they're just gonna say it's for my own protection or something boring like that. I'll go 'what's in that place that's got everyone so freaked out?' And they'll say..."

"Nothing!" Evelyn yelped as they swerved around a corner. "It's just an old house, and there's nothing to be afraid of!" She was definitely trying to convince herself as much as anyone else.

"Well, that's good, 'cause we're here!" Finn jerked the cab to a halt. He popped out of the car, opened the back seat door and bowed, offering his hand to assist Evelyn out of the car. She accepted, not sure if she could stand on her own after that roller-coaster ride from hell.

Regan leaned out the door and hurled his guts onto the asphalt.

"Thank you, love." Evelyn gave Finn a tired smile, digging in her purse to give Regan a tic-tac. "You did a wonderful job getting us here so quickly."

"He sure did." Danae grumped, leaning noodle-legged against the cab. Rose got shakily out, with the uncharacteristically pale and silent Jack, who clung to her like a traumatized baby koala. "You gonna live?" she asked Regan, who grunted and waved her away, still heaving.

"And more or less in one piece." Evelyn smiled as the young man waved away the compliment with another squiggly little grin. "How many cups do we

owe you?” Evelyn grimaced, remembering the state of their rusty rain barrel at home. “It’s not going to taste that great, but it’s clean at least. Just got a new filter.”

“The ride’s on me!” Finn chirped. “Very least I can do for my favorite singer and superhero ever.”

“Oh, honey, no.” Evelyn shook her head. “That’s not right at all, I’m not—”

“I never said it was free, did I?” Finn giggled, orange eyebrows waggling. “I won’t tell anyone I saw you today... If I can have your autograph!”

Evelyn hesitated, and Regan held his breath. Leaving a paper trail was not a bright idea. But neither was leaving behind a gabby kid. Of course, as he’d recently, nauseatingly discovered, there were all kinds of things that could go wrong here...

“Oh, please!” Finn begged, doing a little dance on the spot as Jack looked up and giggled. First the dragon guy, then this dancing man with bright orange hair... “I’ll give you another free ride! Anywhere! I’ll drive you to the moon and back, I promise!”

“Ev. Come on.” Danae was getting edgy. She shared another silent-communication look with Rose, then glanced nervously at the orange-tinted, smog-choked sky. She jerked her head at the mansion monolith. “We need to get inside.”

“Okay.” Evelyn relented, and whipped out a Sharpie marker from her purse. “Anyone got a sticky note?”

“Oh nonono! No paper!” Finn grinned, and pulled his shirt clean off, spreading his arms like an invitation for a bear hug. His belly was pink, soft and happy, except for the curved line of fresh stitches across its right side. “Sign me!”

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“I’ve been asked to sign so much worse.” Evelyn exploded into a snorting giggle, then carefully scribbled her name on Finn’s freckly skin while he tried not to wiggle.

“Just be careful of the stitches, okay? I just got my appendix out—aaahaha! Tickles!”

“Okay. There you go, sweetie.” Evelyn finished with a last flourish. “Just keep your shirt on, okay? Don’t go showing it off. Remember, we were never here.”

“Sure, you got it!” Finn nodded like an orange-haired bobble-head. “Thank you so much! I’m never washing this belly again!”

“You’re welcome, hon.” He somewhat reluctantly put his shirt back on as Evelyn turned to face the house, and several of her own worst fears. The driveway was long and had probably wound through lush green grounds at some point. The mansion itself stretched above Evelyn like a skyscraper, casting a long, black shadow she could have sunk into completely. The structure stretched in every direction, and multiple turrets stabbed at the sky like angry nails in a coffin.

And now there was so much more of it. The place had been built up and added onto while she was gone, more than she could have imagined. On all sides were additions, senseless and random, turrets and towers where they shouldn’t have been. Stairwells that led nowhere, and corridors that just ended, like a bunch of different buildings all put together. And everywhere were barricades and scaffolds: the place was still under construction, built on a foundation of scrap metal and dead buildings. All around the edges of the platform were lines of dead trees, brown and brittle and leafless, and dry skeletons of topiary bushes. Stone gargoyles stood between them, guarding the

place against the dying city that pressed in on all sides.

With a shiver, Evelyn remembered the story of the Sarah Winchester House. The rifle-empire heiress haunted by the blood spilled by her family's guns, convinced she had to keep building and rebuilding her house, or else the angry spirits killed by their weapons would come for her. The Turret name certainly wasn't spotless either. And it haunted her, in its own way.

The heavy door opened, and someone came out. Regan froze, and watched as a tall, hooded figure shuffled down the stairs. They wore so many worn layers of black and gray it was hard to tell anything about the person beneath them, and their movements were disjointed, as if the bones didn't quite fit inside their skin.

They slumped down the stone steps and toward the taxi, but stopped when they saw the orange-headed kid who leaned against the car.

"Hi, buddy!" Finn called, waving. The tall, imposing stranger looked like they were staring at him, but it was hard to tell under the hood that shadowed the top half of their face, and the dark cloth wrap that covered most of the bottom. "So what's in the Turret House?"

The eerie stranger didn't reply, but after a moment they took a slow step forward again. They moved forward with an irregular slouching gait, like they were half-dragging themselves along in ill-fitting shoes to go with their piles of ragged clothing, and slunk right past them all, ignoring the small group outside. Without a word, they climbed into the passenger side of the yellow cab and shut the door.

"I knew it! I knew they wouldn't tell me anything!" Finn laughed, entirely unfazed by the newcomer's off-putting appearance, complete silence—or anyone else's stares. "Oh, here's my card." He dug a crumpled rectangle of

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cardboard out of his pocket and handed it to Evelyn like a bouquet of flowers.

“Fastest wheels in Parole. All explosions free of charge...?” she read. “Do I want to know what the last part means?”

“Uh, maybe later.” He grinned sheepishly. There was a small boom from somewhere far off down the mountain, and Finn’s face turned a brilliant red. “I gotta go, but call me any time you need a lift anywhere, always a freebie. No, I mean it!” he insisted as Evelyn opened her mouth to protest. “Worth it just to have Evelyn Calliope in my taxi! See you later!” Before anyone could reply, he’d popped back in the car beside his mysterious friend and started his engine.

The taxi started to back out—but then it stopped, and the passenger-side window rolled down. A head in a dark hood and cloth wrap poked out, and now Regan could see that they also wore a pair of very dark mirrored sunglasses, because they moved them an inch down to peer out over the lenses. Their visible skin had an unhealthy grey pallor, and Regan caught a glimpse of one green eye and one blue that instantly flicked to his face.

Regan waited for a moment, but they didn’t speak. The strange person gave a slow nod, eying him over their lenses.

“Do I know you?” He asked at last, feeling... not intimidated, exactly; more like he was forgetting something very important. His heart had begun to speed up, and he had the strangest impulse to... he didn’t know. It was beyond frustrating.

Silence. They flicked the shades back over their eyes and bumped Finn on the shoulder. The taxi peeled out of the parking lot in a squealing whirlwind of dust and ash, leaving them all standing on the metal platform in front of the House. As he watched the car disappear and tried to shake off the wave of dizziness, Regan had the strange sensation that he’d answered his own

question.

Regan's eyes slid over to Evelyn. "Did you see that?"

"What?" She shook her head, still staring up at the house, looking pale and drawn herself.

"That person in the..." he stopped. She'd missed that entire exchange, and Regan wasn't sure now was the time to explain. "Never mind."

"Okay." She nodded to herself in a steeling sort of way. "So, before we go in there, just, uh... be ready for some strangeness."

"Stranger than the rest of this day?" Danae muttered, but Evelyn didn't smile back.

"I haven't been home in a long time, for good reasons. You'll see, Regan. My family is... well, you don't want to start a conflict. Just stay out of their way—and that's easy, it's a big house." She frowned, staring up at the disjointed additions, the puzzle-house. None of it made sense. "And it's gotten bigger."

"We'll be fine. So will you." Rose said, giving her arm a squeeze.

"Thanks, honey. Let's just... let's go." She yanked the door open like ripping off a band-aid, and they crowded inside.

Regan blinked in the white light. The room was brightly lit, surprisingly large, and very, very clean. It was deserted, and silent as if deep underground. The lack of windows increased the impression of stepping into a concrete cave. The floor was unadorned cement, and the walls were solid and soundproof.

On the far wall was a window of bulletproof glass and a reinforced steel door. Regan felt a tingle of alarm run up and down his spine. Something wasn't right.

"Evelyn?" Rose glanced around in confusion, while Jack held tightly onto the vines that twisted around her metal legs. Surveillance cameras hung from

the ceiling corners and slowly rotated. Even here the sky had eyes. “Things look different to you?”

“Little bit.” Evelyn slowly turned in a circle, taking in the entire strange, bunker-like room. “I don’t know what any of this is. It looks like a fallout shelter or something.”

“Where is everyone?” Regan’s neck frill twitched as he glanced around. “I don’t like it, it’s wrong here. It even smells wrong.”

“Well, we could start over here.” Rose had crossed the room to investigate the thick steel door. “It’s open, there’s a stairwell.”

“Okay then. Up we go.” Evelyn started for the door.

“Are we sure this is a good idea?” Regan asked hesitantly.

“It’s still my house. At least I think it is. And I want to see what’s going on.”

Regan kept his mouth shut. He wanted to protest, tell her that this was a terrible idea, that none of them knew what in the hell was going on here. But even though he was terrified, curiosity outweighed the fear. He needed answers and had nothing but questions. The way the strange, grey person outside in the hood and sunglasses seemed to know him, the strange familiarity buzzing in the back of his own mind. Everything here was connected. So he nodded grudgingly, and moved forward. “Let’s go.”

The stairwell was all cold concrete and harsh fluorescent lights same as the entry, and Regan’s nostrils burned from an acrid chemical smell. Chips and scratches peppered the metal railings and cement walls, like something with claws had been dragged through, fighting tooth and nail. As they climbed the stairs, a faint sound began to fade in against the muffled silence. It sounded like a far-off bell ringing—not in slow tolls, but in rapid, continuous high-pitched alarm jangling. The group stuck anxiously close together as they

climbed.

“Defense protocol activated. Stand down.”

As they rounded the first corner, Danae held out her arm to bring them all to a stop. She nodded to a ceiling corner, and they saw the surveillance camera stationed there, dark lens trained on them. They hesitated, exchanging nervous glances, but wordlessly came to the decision that all they could do was press on. They continued up the stairs.

The second floor door was heavy steel too, with a sophisticated lock requiring a number code. No amount of pushing, pulling or banging made any difference, and it was so thick and solid that knocks fell flat and quiet. All they could hear from the other side was the intensified keening of the alarm bell. Nobody said what they were all thinking: there was something wrong in this house, they shouldn't be there, and they all wanted to run down the stairs and out into daylight again. Instead they kept moving, up and around in square spirals, until they found a heavy door that opened.

It slid open, into an expanse of darkness interrupted only by faint red exit signs and flickering emergency lighting. The power was out on this floor, but the alarm bell still shrieked. Regan's tongue flicked in and out in nervous twitches.

“Defense protocol activated.”

“I really don't like this,” Rose said, anxious. “We need to get out of here. Now.”

“Where are we gonna go?” Danae's desperation cut sharper than the bell, and one hand went protectively to cover Jack's head. The little boy's wide, scared eyes darted around while he held on tight. Since his strange comment in the car, he hadn't said a word.

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“We’ll figure something out. There’s something wrong here.”

“You’re right.” Danae looked at Evelyn. “Maybe we should just come back later, or—”

“Shut up!” Regan hissed out of the corner of his mouth. He stared frozen into space; like a deer in the headlights, not even breathing. He looked as if he’d been hit with an electric shock, rigid and bug-eyed, tongue spasmodically tasting the air. “Listen.”

A sound of grinding gears and shifting metal filtered through the walls. Maybe in the next room, maybe from above or below, they couldn’t be sure—only that it was getting closer.

“What is that?” Regan whispered, his heart racing with panic.

“I don’t know,” Evelyn replied, not sure why she was whispering too. “Is it another tremor? Oh, God, is the block collapsing?”

“No...” Danae said, strangely firmly. “It’s not the ground. It’s the house.” She pointed up to a corner of the stairwell, where the hanging cameras had rotated to point directly at them.

“Look!” Rose yelped, pointing up the flight of stairs. A metal gate was sliding out of the wall, blocking their way.

“Back down!” Evelyn snapped, turning. They all started to run—then she stopped. “Regan! Move!” She pulled at his elbow, but he didn’t respond, rooted to the spot and staring at the camera, the gate, entirely overwhelmed. The floor vibrated under their feet, so strongly they feared the entire house might shake apart and drop them into the fire.

“Evelyn, come on!” Danae shouted.

“No, I’m not leaving—”

“Now!” Danae and Rose half ran half stumbled back down the stairs, while

Jack shrieked and buried his face in Danae's shoulder. Then they skidded to a halt, gasping. Another metal gate blocked the way back down.

"Shit—! This way!" Danae grabbed at the handle to the door leading out into the hallway of whatever floor they were on, and thankfully, it opened.

Evelyn turned back—they still weren't all there. Regan had remained frozen, eyes so wide they looked about to bug out of his skull. As he stared, the camera disappeared. It withdrew into the wall, another metal panel sliding over where it had been. Evelyn's eyes darted around the room, realizing that the ventilation grates in the ceiling and walls had slid shut. The stairwell was becoming airtight. And she wasn't sure if it was some optical illusion, but it looked like—no, it was. The walls were closing in. They were all trapped in a nightmare with the ceiling lowering, and walls inching in closer and closer, and Regan still wasn't moving.

"Regan!" Evelyn shouted as the scraping and awful grinding noises grew louder, but he didn't respond. Gritting her teeth, she charged back and grabbed his elbow, but he was inanimate and immovable, like a warm wax figure. "Come on, move!"

Regan's head whipped around and he stared at her like a sleepwalker waking up, then he surged forward, running with her through the door Danae was holding open. Evelyn stopped just long enough to help her shut the heavy door behind them, then kept running. They rushed forward blindly until they caught up with Rose—whose path was blocked by metal bars over a chain-link partition.

"This just happened," she said breathlessly, gesturing to the metal gate separating them from the rest of the dark hall—and beyond it, a pair of elevator doors in a red shaft of emergency lighting.

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“What is this?!” Regan yelled, slapping at the metal. “What the hell is this?” He shook the bars, kicking them, trying to climb them like a tormented lizard trapped in a box. He struggled desperately with the bars, completely panic-stricken.

“I don’t know!” Evelyn looked around at the hall of her childhood home, the familiar walls that had somehow transformed into a nightmarish prison lockdown. The cameras were gone now, and something else was coming out of the walls to take their place. Gun barrels.

“Oh, God,” she whispered. “Guys. Guys, get ready.”

They whirled around and pressed their backs against the gate. The alarm still blared, and back down the hall, more metal shutters descended from the ceiling. Like the cameras before them, the gun turrets hanging from the ceiling rotated to point at the group of horrified people clinging together. And the automated voice was still screaming, “Defense protocol activated. Defense protocol activated. Stand down.”

“Oh, we’re not standing down. Give me your keys.” Danae hissed. “Or pens or loose change or anything you have.” She stepped forward, putting Jack down, keeping herself in front of him and one hand on the gate. As she held tightly, the metal began to undulate and wave, like water or a wheat field in the wind. “I can use this. Stay behind me.”

“What are you doing?” Regan gulped.

“This has SkEye written all over it,” Danae said grimly. “The guns, the cameras, this whole shebang. And I know how to deal with SkEye.”

“Just stay behind us, Regan,” Rose said, voice level and calm. “We’ve got this.”

Rose reached into her hair and pressed a metal barrette and bracelet into

Danae's hand. In an instant they were fluttering like the little creatures from their home, but these had sharp edges. They split into four razorblade butterflies that whizzed back and forth. Finn's business card and Evelyn's pen joined and sharpened to become a tiny sword with paper wings. Rose's thick bangle bracelet seemed to melt in midair, bending and flattening itself into a round, hovering shield that floated between them and the guns, ready to deflect bullets or energy beams or anything else that flew at it. Behind them, the gate writhed like a living thing, it twisted and squirmed like it was in pain, trying to rip itself off its hinges. And all around, thick coils of vines and venomous flowers were growing up in a shield, with thorns and razor-edged petals.

And now Evelyn was elbowing her way in front of Regan, opening her mouth wide and sucking in a deep breath. Regan didn't know what she was going to do: she was unarmed—and unafraid. She had something planned. Wild energy was creeping into her eyes; she was back on stage with a microphone in her hand, but she acted like she held a shield and a shotgun, ready to blast anything that came at them down that dark hallway.

Weapons. The whip-cracking of little blades and vines that snaked through the air. Regan knew this process. All three women were readying themselves for a brutal fight, and Regan didn't know what to do, except let them take the lead and believe them when they said they would be alive in five minutes.

He shut his eyes, and waited for the first shot.

Nothing happened. Silence. The scraping, grinding noises in the walls petered out, and the rotating guns from the ceiling lowered. The floor stopped shaking under their feet, and at last, everything was still. They stood there for a confused moment, all looking at each other, unsure what to make of any of it.

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“Hey!” A new voice cut through the rushing in his ears, along with a beam of light that seemed sent from Heaven itself. On the other side of the bars, a swath of white light cut through the far wall as the elevator doors opened. Two silhouettes stood inside, black against the blinding light. Their rescuers ran out of the elevator: a dark-skinned girl with afro puffs and pink scrubs and another youth, very pale with white hair, hurried behind her. Working fast, the girl hurried up to the metal gate between her and the small group, somehow unlocking a hidden mechanism, and opening it from the center.

“Come on, come on!” She bounced on the spot, frantically ushering them through. “We shut down the defenses, but it won’t last long. Hurry up!”

They wasted no time in getting through the gate, and the girl quickly shut it behind them. Then she turned to face the group of very confused people staring at her. “Go-go-go!” She pointed toward the elevator. “Get out of here!”

Evelyn looked down as someone grabbed her hand—the white-haired teenager from the elevator—pulled her toward the elevator, making little insistent sounds.

They all dashed toward salvation, leaving the metal jungle of bars and vines behind to take over the hallway like alien kudzu, but the little butterflies made of barrettes and pens and business cards came flying after, just making it before the elevator door closed behind them with a sunny ding.

They collapsed against the elevator’s padded walls and soft strains of elevator muzak floated around them.

“Hey! Everybody alive?” They all jumped, then turned to see the girl in the pink hospital uniform somehow standing behind them in the back of the elevator. Everyone let out some noise or four-letter word in surprise. They’d definitely left the girl out in the hall, but here she was. The kid with the long

white hair stood next to her, calm and quiet as ever.

“Where did you—” Evelyn stared. “What are you kids doing here? What is going on here?”

“Hi! I’m Lisette,” The girl gave them a wide, confident grin, as if the entire building hadn’t been trying to kill them moments before. “And this is Wren.” She looked down as the younger person took her hand again. The androgynous youth wore grey scrubs that matched Lisette’s pink. Wren stared steadily up at all of them with bright blue eyes that squinted slightly, examining each of their faces in turn, and lighting up when they reached Evelyn. When they got to Regan, he had the feeling they were committing his features to memory and felt oddly exposed. “And we are really, really glad you’re here.”

Evelyn took a deep breath. “What’s going on? What do you do here?”

“This is the Turret House.” Lisette said slowly, and Regan couldn’t decide if that was supposed to explain everything, or if she was trying to avoid the question. “Major Turret’s not here right now, so his son Liam’s in charge. And we’re here to... learn.”

“Learn—are you here for school?”

After a moment of what looked like deep consideration, Lisette nodded, eyes flicking over as if to confirm with Wren, who nodded quickly back. “Yes. School. And we... help with things.”

“Things?”

“Th—” Just then, Wren pulled at Lisette’s sleeve, and she paid close attention as her friend gestured from her to the group in the elevator and back, fingers flashing in rapid sign language. Once their hand dropped, the pair stared into one another’s eyes for a moment without blinking, and then Lisette turned to look back up at Evelyn. “What’s your name?”

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“Evelyn—Evelyn Turret.” As soon as she said her name, Wren subtly nudged Lisette’s elbow with a faint smile and triumphant little jut of their chin. “Is Liam here now?”

“Sure is.” Lisette barely suppressed an eye-roll, but went quickly right back to studying Evelyn intently. “You’re his cousin, right?”

“He’s told you about me?” Evelyn brightened, then looked apprehensive.

“Uh... no.” Lisette looked at Wren, who busied herself with a strand of their long hair, looking troubled. “He doesn’t talk to us about anything. He’s too busy with—”

Lisette didn’t have time to finish. The elevator jerked to a stop, and the doors slid quietly open. A very pale man stood in the doorway to meet them, ramrod straight and tall, with his hands clasped behind his back. He was immaculate, clean-shaven and impeccably dressed in a black velvet suit. His gleaming steel-grey hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail and black velvet ribbon, and his hard blue-grey eyes took in the gathered group with a coolness that might have been boredom were it not for their sharp edge of calculation.

“When I was told my cousin was here to see me, I must say, I expected someone else.”

Evelyn’s face flushed a furious dark red. Momentarily lost for words, she stared him with a combination of rage and disbelief, mixed with something else not easily read. When she spoke, her voice was deliberate, quietly controlled, and carried remnants of pounding guitars and banshee tornadoes. “Well. Here I am.”

He didn’t so much as blink, and he spoke in a bland tone that suggested detached observation rather than any kind of investment. “It’s just that I almost didn’t recognize you, given how much you’ve... changed.”

Evelyn shook her head, mouth twisting in a sharp smile; no joy, all bitter confirmation. “And you haven’t changed at all.”

“After ten years, Liam?” Rose said, voice uncharacteristically hard. “This is what you say to your cousin?”

“Then just keep your mouth shut.” Danae’s eyes flashed a challenge up at Liam as she stepped up to stand on Evelyn’s other side. “You don’t have to put up with this, Evelyn. We’ll find somewhere else. He’s not worth it.”

“Rosie, Danae, I love you, but this is my decision. And I’ve made it. We’re staying.” Evelyn spoke through clenched teeth. “There’s no place safer. If we leave, SkEye will find us. He knows the only reason I’d come back here and subject myself to this is if death or exposing our last safe houses were the alternative.” She nodded to the controlled but definitely smug look on the man’s face, then turned to look at Regan, who’d been silently wondering if it was still too late to cut and run. “He also knows he can’t keep me out of my own home.”

“I’d never try,” her cousin said levelly. During his guests’ interactions, he’d quietly watched and studied each of them with intense focus. Regan had the uncomfortable impression that Liam was carefully analyzing their expressions, mannerisms, motivations, and drawing far more conclusions than he should. “You know you’re always welcome here. You and your friends... not all of whom I’ve met.” Liam’s cold eyes fell on Regan... then quickly moved on. Regan had been dismissed. He wasn’t sure whether he should feel relieved or insulted.

“All right, if we’re really doing this,” Evelyn shook her head, marveling. “Liam, you remember Rose and Danae, and I’m sure they remember you.”

“He was a brat ten years ago, and now he’s... another four-letter word.”

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Danae stopped herself just in time, glancing down at her son. Jack was staring intently at Liam with quiet suspicion on his small face, while Rose fixed Liam with an expression of cold incredulity, eyes half-shut and eyebrows raised.

“Likewise, I’m sure.” Liam inclined his head in a little bow; the barest hint of a smile appeared around his thin mouth, accompanied by the arch of an eyebrow. Coming from him it felt like an invitation to a duel.

“And Liam, meet Regan.” Evelyn waved her hand between them. “Regan’s—ah...”

“Just looking for answers,” he said, trying to smile in a way he hoped was charming instead of nervous. “Nice... nice house.”

Liam gave Regan his attention for a full half-second, expression a complete and non-commenting blank, before turning back to Evelyn and addressing her alone. “I take it you didn’t see the sign at the entrance? The one that clearly stated we were having... difficulties? What about the blaring alarms? Or the gates might have been a clue?”

“I had an inkling,” Evelyn said slowly, “but I didn’t think I needed to knock before coming into my own house.”

“Yes, well. Things have changed, as you, clearly, so well know.”

“They’re not very good changes.” Liam looked down with a start as Lisette spoke; he’d clearly forgotten she was there. “The house ones, I mean.”

“Young lady, I will thank you to keep your mouth shut about things you don’t understand.” Liam sneered down at her, and then at Wren—and his frown deepened. Instead of quailing under his glare, Wren just stared up at Liam, unblinking and unflinching. “Honestly, why can’t you be more like your quiet little friend?”

Wren gave a deliberate eye-roll and exchanged a smirking glance with

Lisette, who stifled a laugh. Liam's shallow face flushed red, but he didn't get the chance to start another tirade.

"Liam, if you're done bullying children..." Evelyn folded her arms as her cousin opened his mouth. "I think it's time for some answers. Automated security? What is going on here?"

"Ah, yes. There have been several... changes, in your absence. I would have written to inform you, but you neglected to give a forwarding address."

"Silly me."

"Indeed. Now," Liam waved them deliberately down the hall, inclining his head ever so slightly. "You will remain on your own designated floor. You should have everything you need there and no reason to bother me."

"But we're here too!" Lisette grinned up at them; Wren took her hand and gave the group a little smile and nod. "I'll check on you guys later. We'll...talk more then." She didn't seem to notice Liam's deadly glare, but Evelyn could practically hear his teeth grinding.

"We'll stay," she said firmly. Regan's eyes flicked from one to the other and back, noticing that the cousins had become weird mirror-images of each other. They couldn't have looked more different on the surface—the rigid, waxy-skinned, pinch-mouthed man and the colorful, earnest, expressive woman opposite him. But after a few moments in the same room as Liam, Evelyn had started to pick up his formal way of speaking and studiously dignified mannerisms. If you looked past superficial appearances, you could see the resemblance. "Now stop avoiding my questions and give me a straight answer. What—"

"We'll also talk in the morning," he interjected smoothly, shooting a glance at Lisette as if somehow he'd just scored a point. She smiled back mildly. If they

really were playing any kind of game, she didn't seem worried about losing. "As you can see, we're dealing with something of a crisis here. But if you must have a recap of the past decade, please meet me for brunch on the balcony tomorrow morning. End of discussion."

Evelyn nodded. "I'll be there. Just... give me your word that we're safe here. All of us." She glanced down at Jack, who'd fallen completely silent during the entire exchange, watching them with large, dark eyes. Then, pointedly, up at Regan, who stood equally silent but much less relaxed with his arms folded and back against the wall.

"Of course."

"Your word?" Danae raised her thick eyebrows, looking from Evelyn to Liam and back. "His word. That's all we get: this pompous, slimy, pasty little boy's word that he won't turn us all in?"

"Believe me, I know." Evelyn kept up the staredown with Liam. "My cousin's a colossal, privileged jackass, but he never breaks a promise. We're safe here."

"Safe as anyone can be in Parole. Now excuse me." Liam turned on his heel and took a long-legged step back into the elevator. "Lisette, Wren, come." He waited, but nothing happened—they were both gone.

"Where did—" Evelyn blinked in confusion, turning around in a complete circle to look in all corners of the elevator. The two young teenagers had been standing in the back, behind everyone else. There was no way for them to get out past everyone, but somehow, they'd disappeared. "Did you see where—"

"Good night," Liam said, and it sounded like a warning not to ask any more questions. Not about the disappearing kids, about him, or the house, or about anything at all.

“One last thing!” Evelyn held the elevator doors before they slid shut. “Mama—how is she?”

“See for yourself.” She let go, and the doors closed over Liam’s cold, unblinking gaze.



Regan was almost asleep when a half-transparent teenage boy materialized at the foot of his bed. He was fully awake and scrambling as far away as he could get by the time apparition started talking to him.

“Do you know who I am?” the ghost boy asked—then broke into a grin. “Oh, sorry, that’s your line, isn’t it?”

“No—you’re a dream. You have to be a dream.” Like many things on this surreal day, the stranger was familiar. And now he flickered in and out of existence like an image on a TV screen with bad reception. “I hit my head, or something, and I can’t remember anything and... and now... now I’m...”

“So it worked,” said the teenager who seemed to be only half-real. A smirk spread across his sharp-edged face and his gleaming eyes narrowed. “Cool.”

“How did you—wait.” Regan narrowed his eyes in thought, flicked his tongue in and out. But he didn’t smell anything, didn’t taste anything; the ghostly intruder had no scent, no taste, as if he wasn’t there at all. He paused, cogs in his damaged brain working to put it together. “*Hans!*”

“That’s right.” Hans cocked his head and smiled, revealing very white, very straight teeth. “I am the answer to everything you want to know. I am the sleeping princess locked in the tower. It’s your job to help me... to help you.”

“You can start by making sense.”

“Oh, good! See, you haven’t lost everything! You still have your sense of

humor!”

“I’d rather have my life back.”

“You’ll get it, promise! But there’s something I need you to do for me.” Hans’s presence seemed to envelop Regan like a fog, even though he hadn’t come closer. “You do exactly as I say... and I’ll tell you who you are. I’ll give you back your brain, safe and sound. All your memories, and then some. But don’t worry, you’re not alone. There’s someone here who can help you. You met ‘em today.”

As Regan thought, he slowly made a face. “Liam?”

“No! Think harder.”

“I didn’t meet any...” then Regan stopped, frowned. The tall, hooded figure on the steps of the house. When the hood lowered, stitches across their face. Dark sunglasses. Familiarity in the eyes behind them. “I remember now.”

“Good. They’ll be back soon. They’ll take you upstairs to see me—to my body, anyway. We’ll all sit down and chat about the next step.”

Regan folded his arms. “Just tell me what you want right now, and I’ll do it. Stop drawing it out.”

Hans appeared to give the matter serious thought, then shook his head “No.”

Regan couldn’t glare at Hans, since he seemed—dizzily—everywhere and nowhere at once, so he shut his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Why the mind games? What the hell do you want from me?!”

Hans floated, cross-legged, at Regan’s eye level and explained slowly, as if to a child. “If I told you everything, you’d have no reason to help me, now would you? Oh!” He grinned, realizing a silver lining. “You did a great job so far, though! Not a hundred percent, but I didn’t take total control either.”

“What are you...?”

“You’re a way better listener than I expected! You didn’t let Celeste the secret-finder-outer see you, you listened to me when I told you to get rid of that nosy psychic Cai kid—even if you didn’t get rid of him all the way. But, I mean, better than nothing.”

“It was you,” Regan whispered. “You were the... when I got so scared, and I had to—the voice, it was—”

“Yeah, yeah, but I probably won’t even have to do that again, you listened so fast! I mean, almost. Whatever, we got this far! And you’re so much easier to deal with like this! No idea why I didn’t do this sooner. Anyway, see you in the morning!” Hans began to fade away. “This is gonna be great, just trust me. Oh, and one last thing. Do *not* tell Rose or Danae that I’m talking to you. Don’t tell them about me at all. Kay, dream sweet!”

“Wait!” Regan shouted, lurching up and forward, shivers running down his spine. “Give me back my head! *Give me back my life!*” But Hans was gone. Only blue shadows, starched linen sheets and silence remained. Regan flopped backwards and stared at the ceiling until dim Parole sunlight beamed through the window.



As Regan lay in sleepless fear, Jack slept peacefully snuggled between two of his mothers. The third pressed the elevator button and stepped inside. Evelyn clutched a pillow and blanket to her chest, staring at the floral walls as the little box descended. She crept through the dark and now-unfamiliar entrance and

pushed against the doors—locked. There was a thumb pad next to the door, which probably recognized fingerprints. Likely programmed for Liam, Lissette, Wren—and maybe...

She tentatively pressed her thumb against the plate—and shook her head in wonderment as the mechanism hummed and clicked open. Wasn't quite sure how to feel about that... but someone had done that on purpose. Left her fingerprint in the system, a little candle in the window all these years. Who, she couldn't imagine. Surely not Liam.

The place wasn't just an unhappy childhood memory anymore, it was a prison. The ghosts of bad dreams and traumas had been replaced by actual horrors and guns pointing at her through the walls. Though one thing remained the same: the Turret House would give her nightmares for the rest of her life.

Evelyn shoved the door open and stumbled outside into the hot, smoky night, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders and head like a long hooded cloak. The fires burning from below kept the asphalt painfully hot against her feet, and she hurried across as fast as she could. Parole was boiling in a frying pan, and the stove was always on.

A large garden circled the outside of the Turret House, filled with brick paths and archways, and what had once been snaking tunnels and spreading canopies of green. Now it was dead, like everything else here. Brittle, dry ivy clung to the walls and hung all over the ledges and spilled from window sills, brown tangles of vines like waterfalls of brittle hair. Once, this house must have been like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, a place of flowing life and beauty. And not just above—on the ground level, topiary animals stood tall and lonely

around her. Sad shapes of giraffes, dolphins and elephants still soared above her head, graceful curves dead and brown. A parade of brown, singed topiary animals stood guard against the distant helicopter lights in the sky.

Beside them, a huge stone gargoyle sat in a thinker's position in a silent vigil, chin resting on its giant sculpted fist. It cast a comforting shadow, and Evelyn spread the blanket on the ground and curled up under the protective stone wings.

She slept. This wasn't home—but it was as close as she could get.



In his dream, Regan was buried alive. He couldn't move, he couldn't breathe, and the entire weight of Parole pressed down on him, suffocating him in a pitch-black, roaring furnace. He opened his mouth to scream but no sound came out. Searing, toxic air burned his lungs; he was drowning in smoke, in darkness and fire. He reached up, trying to claw his way to the surface, but his hands closed on flames.

And he wasn't alone.

"*Help me!*" Someone was crying in the dark and heat. Someone's voice echoed from miles away. "*Help me—I'm trapped!*"

"What? Where are you—talk to me!" Regan still could see nothing but black smoke and blazing fire. "Hans? Is that you?"

"*No! My name's Gabriel!*" The name had a Spanish accent instead of the Americanized "Gabe." Like so many words, so many names, so many faces, this name had the feeling of disjointed importance, of recognition but with nothing

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attached to it. Whatever belonged had been cut off. Regan grasped for it the way he grasped for a handhold, but just kept spinning in the dark.

“I’m so sorry—I don’t remember,” Regan felt the tears dry instantly on his scorched face. “I knew your name once but I lost it. I can’t—”

“You have to remember me! Somebody has to remember me!”

“I can’t! I don’t even know who I am, I lost my... no. No, he took it.” Regan’s slow, cold anger was the only thing that didn’t burn. “Hans took it from me. He took everything. He took away me.”

“*You’re trapped,*” said the voice, not screaming anymore. It was soft, not like Hans’s mocking voice in his ear, but somehow from within. And yet still from far, far below. “*You’re trapped just like I am.*”

“I know,” Regan whispered, somehow sure that whoever was speaking to him would be able to hear. “I don’t know how to escape. I have to get out. I have to breathe, I have to see what’s out there. I don’t remember anything else, but I remember that.”

Silence. He tried to take a breath, and found he could.

“*Through the fire,*” whispered the voice. Gabriel. Gabriel whispered the words.

“What?” Regan started as if shaking himself from a deep sleep, but the dream remained. “No—no, I don’t want to go down there. I don’t want to burn—”

“That’s where you’ll find the answers. That’s where you’ll find you.”

“The only way out is down, is that it?” He sobbed, almost a laugh but not quite. “I—I knew it. Falling, that’s the only way out for—”

“No. Walk through the fire.”

ROANNA SYLVER

He couldn't answer. But somehow, nothing hurt anymore. Nothing burned.

"Find me. Save me. Find you. Save you."

"I'm afraid."

"Me too. Everyone's afraid here."

"How do we stop?" The question was faint. Tired. Even a voice in a dream had to know more than he did. "Being afraid?"

"I don't know... I think it starts by waking up, and taking a breath.."

When Regan woke up, he didn't stop being afraid. But he did take a breath.

Enough Air

CHAPTER 5

SOMETIMES ROSE THOUGHT SHE WAS STARTING TO FORGET THE SUN. IT HADN'T SHONE OVER Parole for nearly ten years. Perpetual smoke blocked out the sky, blotting out the blue with a sick, orange-gray canopy of smog. Her son had never seen it, and all she could tell him about it was that “it was wonderful, bright and warm, and it fed all the plant life. Even me!” But now, even with their sun lamp and greenhouse at home, Rose was hungry all the time. Every day she spread her arms to soak up the sick remnants of a forgotten sun, and every day it got a little harder. She could never get as much as the day before, and that scared her almost as much as the fading memories.

But there was a way to supplement, and after adjusting to life in Parole, one tended to accept survival wherever it came, and leave judgment behind.



Rose's metal feet crunched on the thin strip of dry, dead earth as she slowly made her way through the long-dead gardens surrounding the Turret House, looking for the clearest patch of ground. Stomach grumbling, she bent down, scooped up a handful of earth, more ash than soil, and stuck it in her mouth, chewing carefully. Crunchy. And dry, powdery with a sharp, oily taste that made her nose wrinkle. Everything here had been scorched by the fires underneath and tainted by the polluted air, all the nutrients burned away, leaving behind all the nutrition and flavor of a papery communion wafer soaked in gasoline. Rose let the remaining cinders trickle through her fingers and moved on, rubbing her complaining stomach.

Rose stopped beside a huge stone gargoyle in a thinker's pose, stone wings spread protectively over the dead garden. He couldn't protect the plants—or Parole—from decay, but the ground in the wings' shadow wasn't quite so burnt. She bent down again.

Rose laid her hands on the ground and shut her eyes, whispering in a singsong prayer, and her skin began to open. Little slits parted in her wrists and out crept new-green little tendrils, baby vines reaching for the air and sun like newborn fingers. They flowed down into the earth, tunneling and taking root, soaking up nutrients from the soil and giving some back. She stayed there for a long time, eyes closed and humming softly while the vines embraced the dead earth.

When she opened her eyes, the vines stopped growing. Rose gave her hands a vigorous shake, breaking the stems, and scooped up a heaping handful of soil, now much darker, cool, and with a fresh scent of newly-fallen rain. She took a tentative bite and smiled. Moist, sweet and nourishing—like biting into a fresh apple. She stood up, happily munching her earthy snack, and took a few strides

to circle around a large stone gargoyle—and promptly crashed over something lying on the ground on the other side, going down in a tangle of hair and legs and vines.

“Good morning.” Rose peered over her shoulder at the bedraggled Evelyn who lurched upright under her ankles. “Did I wake you?”

“You could say that,” Evelyn mumbled, untangling herself from the vines and sitting up. She picked dry brown leaves out of her pink hair and blinked sleepily, leaning back against the gargoyle’s cold knee. She didn’t meet Rose’s eyes, didn’t look like she was really seeing anything.

“What are you doing out here?” Rose asked slowly.

“Until very recently? Sleeping.”

“You slept out here?” Rose’s eyebrows shot up as her eyes widened in concern. “The whole night?”

“Part of it. Maybe two, three hours of actual sleeping. Surprisingly, the ground is even less comfortable than you’d think.” She drew her knees up to her chest and rested her chin on them, still looking anywhere that wasn’t up at the house.

Rose looked around, seeing a rumpled blanket but nothing else. “Without a mask? Not even a handker-Evelyn.”

She shrugged. “I left mine at home.”

“Okay,” Rose took a slow breath in and out—which Evelyn noted, and Rose definitely saw her watching. “I understand you not wanting to set foot back in that place—”

“Well, good,” Evelyn grumbled. “If you didn’t by now... Sorry,” she sighed, rubbing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose. “Sorry, Rosie, I’m just... cranky. Bad sleep, that’s all.”

“Cranky? I’d be furious in your position. Terrified. Frustrated, feeling trapped, helpless, unheard, powerless...”

“Yeah, okay,” she sighed. “All of the above. But also cranky.”

“And if you weren’t, I’d be even more worried.” Rose reached out one hand to caress Evelyn’s cheek. Evelyn hesitated—then closed her eyes, smiled, and leaned into Rose’s hand. She let out a long sigh, some of the awful tension melted from her bones, and her rigid shoulders sank. They stayed that way for a while, Rose’s thumb gently stroking Evelyn’s cheekbone, until Evelyn opened her eyes again. She took Rose’s hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it. “You do need a mask, though. Just because we’re surrounded by poison doesn’t mean you have to breathe it in too. If you don’t want to go inside, I’ll go get you one.”

“No, no, stay, please.” Evelyn kept a hold on her hand, and Rose didn’t move. “I’ll go in, really, just—just five minutes. Besides, you’re not wearing one.”

“I’m a plant person, Ev, I filter my own air.” She brushed aside some dead leaves and scratched gently at the surface of the dry earth over here, trying to gauge if it was any more promising. It wasn’t. “But they don’t have a sun lamp and I couldn’t bring ours from home, or any of my good stuff.” She held up a loose handful of ashy soil and let it sift through her fingers. “I got hungry. Had to make my own.”

“Right, right... I knew that.” Evelyn put her forehead in her hand and massaged her temples. “Sorry. This place is throwing me off, I don’t know if I’m coming or going or standing still...”

“Don’t be sorry, babe. They’re the ones making their guests make their own breakfast.”

CHAMELEON MOON

Rose leaned back against the stone gargoyle and they sat together in the noise of the morning. Parole was never really quiet, and birdsong had long since been replaced by crackling flames and helicopter roars, but they still managed to grab a few minutes of peace now and then.

“Putting something together?” Evelyn asked after a little while, turning her head to see her wife’s face scrunched up in a downcast variation of one of her thinking-so-hard-it-was-almost-telepathic expressions.

“It’s just...in the taxi, did you hear Radio Angel?”

“No,” Evelyn’s eyebrows came together as she frowned at the memory, one of many. “I was a little... there was a lot going on. Bad news?”

“One of my patients, Cairus Maddox. He’s missing.”

“I’m sorry,” Evelyn said, squeezing her hand like she was consoling her after a funeral. ‘Missing’ in Parole usually meant about the same thing. “I think I... he’s come to some of my shows, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah. He lives at the Bar. Wants to help however he can—actually, I think he wants to be Garrett when he grows up. Or maybe you. Good kid. Got a lot on his plate, though.”

“Don’t we all.” Evelyn sighed. “Hope he turns up. I’ll keep an eye out... soon as we actually get out of here and back where we belong.” She looked over again, painful muscle tension and even headache melting away a little at the warmth in Rose’s serene, never-judging eyes. Her pink shirt was wrinkled and sweat-stained, but it still told her that *Everything Is Going To Be Okay*. Even Evelyn doubted the words sometimes, at least when she said them. But never when they came from Rose. “I haven’t belonged here for... never. I never have.”

Rose reached out and picked some dead leaves out of Evelyn’s hair. “I know,” she said quietly. “You don’t have to explain.”

“I want to talk about it,” Evelyn said, quickly and quietly. “Just for a second. Just to you. I’ll power through it as soon as we go inside but I just... I need...”

“I’m here. I’m listening.” Rose’s hands were always warm and usually coated with a fine layer of soil, tiny leaves sprouting from the valleys between her fingers. Today was no different, and Evelyn held on tightly, focusing on the feeling, how some things never changed.

“I can’t be in there. Everything comes back. Even though it’s so different now, I still see everything the way it was, and I don’t know which is worse: how it’s changed or...” She trailed off, shaking her head. Evelyn glanced over her shoulder at the towering building. Like a stalker, she thought, always there in the back of her mind. But now she looked up, and it was really there. “I just can’t stay. This place crushes me—and I can’t breathe. So I came out here.”

“Stay out here all you want—just wear a mask. You can help me make it beautiful.” She rested her hand on the back of Evelyn’s neck, wishing she could bring her back to life the same way she’d helped the earth. A blossom opened between her second and third fingers, and she tucked it behind Evelyn’s ear.

“Heh.” Evelyn looked around at her and managed to smile. “Won’t take much, with you here.”

“You know it’s different this time, right?” Rose said, searching her face. “You’re not alone now. You’ve got me. And Danae, and Jack—and our new friend Regan. You’ll never have to face this place or these people alone ever again, I promise.”

“Thanks, love.” Evelyn smiled a little, and slowly stood up. Her bones ached after a night on the ground, and grime clung to her skin and clothes. “You’re right. I’m being ridiculous, hiding from a house...” She started toward the stairs, but stopped to stare at the huge looming shape, the black, sharp angles

CHAMELEON MOON

that cut against the sick orange and grey sky.

Rose quietly came up behind and slipped her arm through Evelyn's. "I'm right here. Breakfast can wait."

"Okay," she whispered back.

They slipped back inside, arm in arm.



Evelyn clenched her teeth and took a deep breath. On the other side of the door waited dear Liam, and their brunch date from Hell. Every memory of this house, every ghost weighed her down like balls and chains and she stripped them off one by one and laid them down.

"I am strong," Evelyn whispered to herself, eyes closed. "I am brave. I am a goddess who contains multitudes of galaxies. My spirit is infinite, my soul is towering, and my shoes..." she cracked open one eye, glanced down. This entire morning had been one giant anxiety-blur. Had she even remembered to put on shoes? Yes. She smiled. "Hella cute. All right. I can do this."

Evelyn filled her lungs with fear and exhaled. Then she pushed the door open.

"Hello, dearest cousin!" she chirped, heels clacking on the marble and skirt rustling in a flourish of noise and energy. "And how are you this beautiful morning?"

"Afternoon." Liam swirled his crystal clear water, listening to the ice cubes clink. The balcony jutted over the bottom half of the Frankenstein's-Monster house, looking out on the gutted, burning city. Sick orange sunlight filtered down through the perma-smog, and Liam sat stiffly on a metal patio chair, waiting for her. His white suit was immaculate despite the smoke and heat. A

white cloth mask covered the lower half of his face, the kind most sensible people in Parole wore when they had to be outside for more than a minute. He only lowered it to sip the chilled water, replacing it immediately after. “You must have gotten lost on the way down.”

“Well, like we noticed yesterday, a lot of things changed around here.”

“Have they? I suppose when one watches it change gradually instead of coming back after a long absence, one hardly notices.” Liam gestured to a silver tray on the table, with another breathing mask and sparkling glass pitcher of ice water. Evelyn’s mouth watered at the sight and the sound of ice clinking against the sides—it had been years since she’d seen so much, so clean, so accessible. “Please, drink.”

“I... thank you.” Evelyn poured herself a glass, careful not to spill a drop, but then just held it in front of her without drinking. Could she somehow steal the pitcher to share with her friends, or store for later? She held a small fortune in her hands now, and was already thinking of all the necessities it could buy.

“Oh, please, enjoy.” Liam prodded again. “You don’t have to hoard your water rations here. There’s more where this came from, believe me.”

Evelyn gave him a slow nod, gingerly picking up the water glass and taking a sip. Her teeth ached at the unaccustomed cold, and her tongue tingled; the water was freshened with lemon, a luxury she hadn’t tasted in over a decade. She’d almost forgotten it existed! Her eyes widened, and she drank again, this time gulping down the entire thing. Without meeting Liam’s eyes, she wiped her mouth and secured the cloth mask and over her nose and mouth. Evelyn had to admit she felt more secure with it on. Sleeping outside really hadn’t been one of her best ideas, and she was starting to get a cough from Parole’s toxic smog. “Thank you.”

CHAMELEON MOON

Liam watched her carefully over the rim of his glass. “I did always hope to see you again.”

“Well, that’s a relief. I wasn’t ever really sure.”

“Of course. You’re family, that’s everything. And besides that, you’re the only one of this family I ever felt really understood me.”

“Thank you, Liam. I *was* sure we’d see one another again. I hoped we would, at least.” Maybe the power of diplomacy would be enough to get her through this. It helped when what she said was true, in a way. She was almost able to smile.

“But I just have to say,” he continued, and Evelyn held very still, waiting and preparing to minimize her visible reaction. Whatever came next might make her sigh in annoyance, or get up and walk out the door—but whenever Liam ‘just had to say’ anything, you were going to react. “That I expected to see you as I knew you. As I remembered.”

“The person you were expecting never actually existed.”

“Sixteen years of trust and confiding in him would indicate otherwise.”

“All right, now it’s my turn to ‘just say something.’” Evelyn put her glass down on the table with a loud clunk and slid her chair back from the table. “You haven’t called me by my name once since I got home.” She waited. When he said nothing, she pulled her mask down fully so he could clearly see her entire face, and uncompromising glare aimed directly into his eyes. “It’s Evelyn.”

Liam broke their gaze and looked away, busying himself with his water glass.

“Listen, Liam. You don’t have to admit it, and you have a funny way of showing it, but you want me here. You have for years.”

“Yes,” he said quietly, hands folding on the table and eyes dropping to

follow them. "I have. Very much."

"Well, there are conditions! And they're not hard! In fact, given the alternatives, the bar is at an all-time low!"

"Name them."

"You can start with mine." She waited until he looked back up at her. Like hers, his face was a studied blank.

"All right. Evelyn." He said the name slowly, turning it around in his mouth like he was trying out the syllables.

She didn't nod, smile, or move, just continued to stare at him, as if still considering. "I'm here for the sake of my family. Not the Turrets," she said quickly as he opened his mouth. "Rose, Danae and Jack. I'm here to protect them, no other reason. If you want me to go above and beyond whatsoever, and interact with you in any kind of way aside from bare survival..."

"What?" He gave his head a little shake, looking genuinely confused.

"Bare minimum human decency!" Her face flushed. She'd given him the chance to fill in the blanks and he hadn't. "Realize that this is not all about you, and respect my *name* and the fact that I am a goddamn *woman*. You say 'she,' you say 'her,' you say use those words when I'm here, and you use them when I'm not. Do you understand me?"

"Yes. Yes, I understand. Evelyn."

She nodded, slowly, and scooted her chair forward again, placing a paper napkin on her lap. Silence stretched on, long and uncomfortable, until Evelyn broke it, clearing her raw throat. "I meant what I said, Liam. Growing up in this family was... more traumatic and dysfunctional than I'd like. But you were a good part. And I hope we can at least be friends, or something like it."

"Traumatic and dysfunctional," he repeated quietly, shaking his head with a

strange, rueful smile. “You don't know the half of it.”

“You can tell me if you want.” Now, that reaction she hadn't expected. Curious despite herself, Evelyn watched as her cousin's expression darkened momentarily, quickly replaced by his careful neutral. It was definitely an effort, however. He was hiding something. She didn't even need to know him well to know that.

“There's not much to tell,” he said at last. “Every family has their burdens.”

“That's always meant the world to you, hasn't it?” She said, trying to catch a glimpse of whatever lay behind that blank mask he wore. “Family, image, honor—this house. Keeping up appearances. You used to throw fits when we'd get the carpets replaced.” She shook her head, looking up at the mismatched towers and wings, random pieces plastered on with no order or reason. “What *happened* here?”

“I'm not sure what you mean.”

“Automated defense systems?”

“I have to defend what's mine. Ours. It's a dangerous city.”

“It doesn't have to be.”

“Admirably idealistic. But wishing doesn't change reality.”

“No, actions do. And what are you doing, Liam?”

“Again, I'm not sure what you mean.”

Evelyn's eyes narrowed. She started to wring and twist the napkin in her lap with restrained frustration. “Yes, you do. The house. Which now has automatic metal gates and locked doors and an elevator and... medical staff?” She stopped destroying the napkin and held very still. “Are they here to take care of Mama? Liam, has she started to deteriorate? Why didn't you call—”

“No, no, your mother is fine,” he assured her, before visibly scowling

behind his mask. “As ever.”

Evelyn sat back in her chair and enjoyed the relief and the glow of an early lead. “She’s giving you hell, isn’t she?” Liam did not reply. “Good.”

“But surely, you of all people should understand the need to protect oneself.”

“I’m just... *surprised*, that’s all,” she said, cycling through several adjectives before landing on the most diplomatic one. “Last we talked, you were passionate about helping Parole. Now it seems like you just want to shut everyone out.”

“Seeing as our last conversation was ten years ago, you’ll forgive me if my memory isn’t what it should be.” Liam folded his hands in front of him. “But my motivations have remained the same. I trust you occasionally glance out a window?”

“I listen to a girl on the radio. You should try it sometime; she’s got some great stuff to say.” She’d started to pick and tear at the napkin now, tiny shreds collecting in her lap.

“The city our family built from the ground up is dying, and the Turret name along with it. One day Parole will slip into the fire, and oh, a part of me *wants* to see it fall...” His eyes slipped out of focus, and he seemed to glare right through her. “Fools. Street gangs squabbling over drops of water, peddling their *drugs*, fighting for inches of solid ground—they’re *slipping into the fire* every day and they don’t do anything about it, *I’m the only one doing anything about—*”

“Liam!” Evelyn cut in, and his eyes snapped back into focus. “Look at me, take a breath. You’re okay.”

“I’m... sorry,” he said, coming back from miles away. He settled back into his chair and tried again. “But you do understand. When the river dried up

and the fires started, the entire city blamed us..." Evelyn kept her mouth shut, but he looked up sharply at her anyway. "Yes, I know what you're thinking. That they were right."

"What do you want me to say, Liam?" She shrugged, spread her hands. "That it wasn't our family's fault? That the quarantine barrier wasn't the worst decision anyone could have possibly made? That bringing in Eye in the Sky didn't sentence us all to death? That your father—my uncle, the Major, God help me—his hands aren't stained with—"

"The Major did what had to be done," Liam cut in, voice flat and nearly a monotone. "It was the only way to save us all. Everything was falling apart around us, our house and our lives, and you know it."

"I don't know that." She folded her arms and crossed her legs, slid back away from him. "And I don't really know what to say to you right now either."

"I'm not a monster, Evelyn." His eyes traced the path of a black helicopter, and hers stayed fixed on his face, hard and narrow.

"No, you're not," she said very quietly, slowly, and deliberately. "I don't believe in monsters. Or if I did... you wouldn't be one. But him?" She stopped, quelling a surge of nausea and something worse, something sharp and hollowing that twisted and ate away at the inside her rib cage. For the briefest of moments, her control slipped, and Liam did not miss the split-second of fear in her eyes. "I take it back. Some monsters are real. The worst ones look just like us."

"Parole looks up to him with respect instead of blame!"

"You're confusing *respect* with *fear*."

"How can anyone tell the difference in all this smoke?" He turned and gazed out over the smoldering ruins a million people called home. The only clear

sunlight came from the trails of black helicopters that perpetually crisscrossed the city. “It’s awful, it clogs up the view. Blocks out the sky. Coats the lungs black. And everyone stumbles around in it; no one can see an inch in front of his nose—no one but the Major, and myself.”

Evelyn gritted her teeth and tried to hold on to reason amidst her aggravation. “I’m sure I’ll regret asking, but what do you see?”

“Hope.” Liam gave her an expression she didn’t expect and almost didn’t recognize. A smile. “Our exile in this city of the damned is almost at an end.”

Evelyn shut her eyes briefly. He’d always had more than a slight fondness for the dramatic. She had to admit, it ran in the family, but at least she tried to save hers for the stage. “Please, Liam, you must tell me how.”

“Just give me a chance and I’ll save us all from the fire.”

“And how’s that?”

“By putting it out, of course.” Liam didn’t seem to notice her expression of incredulous surprise. His eyes were shining, and for the first time since she’d seen him, he lost the pinched, haggard tension. Years melted away from his face, and at last she caught a flash of the cousin she remembered. “Once the fires are out, once the Styx flows again, we’ll have our name back! This city will be saved, and some of the blood...” he faltered. “The blood spilled, will begin to be washed clean.”

Evelyn studied him for a moment, tapping her elbow in thought. She couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually been optimistic about anything; even when they were young he leaned far more toward mood swings and angst that bordered on performance art. So far this brunch had been a fair-to-middling display, but now the tone was shifting. “How?”

“What?”

CHAMELEON MOON

“How are you going to do it? Just practically speaking. Parole’s been burning for eight years. That fire’s huge, no amount of water could put that out.”

He stopped, seemed to realize he’d gone too far. “I’m afraid you’ll have to be home longer than a day to learn the family secrets again. Just know that I have everything under control and, as soon as the fire’s out, we’ll be out too, and back to normal life.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t really... see the connection?”

“If we have a fire burning beneath us and a wealth of sins around us, wouldn’t a logical first step be to extinguish and address them?”

“So just put out the fire, and everything will be fine? Parole will be released, we’ll be welcomed back into the United States, and life goes on like nothing happened?”

“An oversimplification.” He took a sip of water. “But yes.”

“You really think this is about the fire?” Evelyn stared. “The barrier went up two years before the fire started, it was never about that. Putting it out won’t bring that barrier down.”

“Then what is it... about?”

“The people inside. Even if we had a flood tomorrow, they wouldn’t let us out of this prison. It’s *us* and our identities they want to destroy! They won’t stop until every last one of us is dead!”

“I see you haven’t lost your flare for dramatics.”

Evelyn gritted her teeth and resisted retorts about pots and kettles. Her hands jerked and the remaining bit of napkin ripped in two. “So that’s it? Just telling me ‘I’m putting out the fire,’ but nothing else?”

“I just wanted you to know I have the situation in hand.”

“Is it your hands though? Or your father’s?”

He let out a long sigh. “You don’t trust the Major at all, do you?”

“You call your own father ‘the Major.’ You don’t think that’s kind of a red flag?” Liam didn’t answer. After several awkward seconds, Evelyn stood, clenching the shredded remains of the napkin in her fists. “Anything else I should know?”

“Just stay out of my way—and keep a leash on your friends—and we should have nothing else to say to one another.”

She stared at the bows on the tops of her shoes. They hadn’t helped as much as she’d hoped. Finally she made herself look back up at her cousin, not wiping the tears threatening to spill from her eyes. “Does it really have to be like this? I did miss you—you, not all the... all the rest.”

“I’ve... I’ve missed you too.” Liam’s blue-grey eyes slowly traveled up to meet hers.

“I don’t know what happened.” Evelyn managed to keep her voice from shaking, but just barely. “You always wanted to do good. Back when we were kids, all you wanted to do was help people. What knocked you off course? Was it your father?”

“I’d be a fool to deviate from any course my father designed.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Then ask me a better question.”

“The Liam I know, did he actually exist?”

“He did.” He paused, nodded slowly to himself. “He does.”

“Then show me. It’s not too late to chart your own course.”

He looked up then, expression hardening into something guarded, something distant. “We don’t all have that option.”

“I took that ‘option’ because I had to. Leaving was one of the hardest things

I've ever done, but it was also one of the most important." Now she wiped her eyes, as they hardened into a glare.

"You turned your back on us. You walked away from your family, your house, your responsibilities—"

"The atrocities I saw committed in my uncle's name every day. That was the final straw, that erased any guilt I ever might have felt. I left because I had to, and because after I saw what—"

"And me! You left *me* behind! After telling me how you'd always be beside me, one day I look up and you're gone! You have a new life—"

"You wouldn't have come with me! You'd never leave this place!"

"You could have *asked!*"

"I did! Maybe your memory isn't what it should be, but mine is! You wouldn't move, you still won't! Do not lay this guilt on me, Liam! I did what I had to do to survive! And now if you won't be there for me, I'll—"

"*You* left *me*, not the other way around!"

"I had to get out of this place before it killed me, and I don't owe you a thing!"

They were both breathing hard. Liam hadn't risen from his seat, but his hands were clenched into fists resting on his knees, and a red tinge crept into his pale, thin cheeks. He glared up at Evelyn, and slowly pulled off his cloth mask. Without being entirely sure why, she did the same. It just seemed right to have this conversation face-to-face.

"You always were the survivor," he said quietly, voice shaking with quiet fury, and something else, an old lonely pain that never healed. "But so am I, in my own way. I'm tired of watching what's left of us die, and I'm tired of watching this city burn."

Evelyn stared back into his eyes. “You don’t save yourself by throwing someone else into the fire, Liam. That’s rule one.”

“A lot of things have changed,” Liam said quietly after a very long pause, expression unreadable. “But I take back what I said before. You haven’t. Not one bit.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“I’ve heard what they say about you down there,” Liam slowly turned to stare down at the smoking city. “Evelyn Calliope. Defending the streets. Upholding the weak and punishing the wicked.”

“Only between shows.”

“A heroine? Is that what you are?”

“Not if I don’t act like one.”

“And what am I?”

She tilted her head, never breaking their held gaze. He held his breath as she considered. “I really don’t know anymore, Liam. And I don’t think you do either. Tell me when you know for sure.”

A thin smile tugged at the corner of his pale lips, and as before, Evelyn couldn’t tell at all what was behind it. It didn’t come close to reaching his eyes. “Welcome home.”

“Thank you.” She un-clenched the hands she’d balled into tense fists, and realized they were filled with shredded napkin bits. “Ah, guess this is for the homecoming party.” She raised her hands and tossed the impromptu confetti into the air, letting out an only slightly nervous laugh as the tiny white flecks fell. Liam sat still as the confetti littered his hair and fluttered down around him, not moving to brush himself off. He didn’t look up, lost somewhere very deep inside his own thoughts. Her smile faded, but when she spoke it didn’t

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have a hint of her previous uncertainty. “No more trouble if we stay, then?”

“Of course not. This house is yours, as it’s always been.” Liam still did not meet her eyes, and his tone remained low, pensive, and faraway. But somehow these quiet words sounded a hundred times truer than his fiery declarations about family names and obligation. “As am I.”

Evelyn stared at him for a moment, unable to resolve the contradictions that made up her cousin. She’d never known what to make of him, and couldn’t begin to now. Finally, she turned to go, and gave him a last nod. “See you around.”

“Yes, you will.”



“Turn left.” Hans floated just ahead, always in the corner of Regan’s eye, flickering out of reality and popping up somewhere else every time Regan tried to look at him straight on.

“I don’t like this,” Regan muttered. Once Hans had led him to a steel door that opened, the hallway beyond it started to look more like a hospital than an actual house. He fought the feeling of claustrophobia as he followed the ghost in the corner of his eye through mazelike, whitewashed, windowless tunnels, only differentiated by the numbers beside more locked doors. The glare of the fluorescent lights on the bright tile floors gave him a headache.

Hans gave a thin smile. “You don’t like anything anymore, do you?”

Regan gave him a sideways look. “I don’t like what I don’t trust.”

“You don’t trust me?” Hans asked, looking wounded. “I’m the only one who can help you.”

“You wouldn’t have to help me if you hadn’t messed with my brain in the

first place.”

“Would you have listened to me if I’d just asked? No, of course not, you always have to do everything the hard way.”

“Yes, I’m the one doing everything the hard way.” Regan rolled his very mobile eyes, then kept rolling them. “Why not just tell me what you want, instead of manipulating and blackmailing, or whatever this is?”

“Because we’re here now.” Hans said stopped in front of a white door just like all the others. “And I can just show you.”

Gritting his teeth, Regan pushed the door open and stepped inside—then stopped dead. In the room stood an immaculate hospital bed, an EKG machine, and a chair. The bed was occupied. So was the chair—by the strange person with the patchwork, stitched-together skin Regan had seen leaving the building the day before. They stared directly at Regan, unblinking, sitting very straight, very tall, and very, very still.

“Hey,” Regan said when he could speak again, heart still pounding from the surprise, and the stranger’s bizarre appearance. But the strangest thing of all was that it wasn’t entirely unfamiliar. “You... you knew me. Yesterday, outside.”

The strange figure sat scarecrow-still under their many layers of clothes, and behind their dark, mirrored sunglasses. For several seconds, they didn’t move a muscle or say a word. If Regan hadn’t seen them move before, he wouldn’t have even been sure they were alive.

“What’s... your name?”

Now they moved. Very slowly, they reached up with one very long, thin arm and slid the sunglasses down, peering at Regan over their lenses. One green eye and one bright blue eye stared at Regan, and he found he couldn’t look away. “Zilch.”

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A shiver he couldn't explain ran down his spine. He didn't feel the urge to run. He didn't know what he wanted or needed or remembered, what he was looking at and not seeing—but it was something. “Okay. Hey, Zilch.”

They were quiet for a full second. Two. Only an EKG machine's slow, steady beep broke the silence. When they spoke, their voice was guttural, rasping, and unnaturally toned, as if the cords were somehow... off. “Hello, Regan.”

Regan just nodded back, but couldn't think of what to say to make the strange moment any clearer. But now that he looked away, he couldn't stop staring at the hospital bed. Carefully tucked under the starched linen sheets was Hans.

Not the grinning ghost in the skinny jeans and feathered hair that flicked in and out of Regan's vision. He was older than the Hans projected in Regan's brain—at least ten years older, hair taking on a premature grey instead of blonde highlights. He was smaller than Regan's mental projection appeared, thin, skin pale and sallow, eyes bandaged shut. There were IV needles taped to his bony wrists, and plastic tubes connected him to a respirator.

“You're not hallucinating.” Zilch said suddenly. Regan jumped just a bit; when they spoke it was very abrupt, a fast break from their unnatural stillness.

“What?”

“Hans. I see him too.”

Regan shot the ghostly form over his shoulder a nervous glance. “Really? Good. That's—good, okay.”

“You thought he was...?” they trailed off, leaving the thought unfinished but easily inferred. It seemed like they were unused to forming complete sentences, or maybe it was that their vocal cords—which sounded malformed, or maybe

mismatched like the rest of them—tired easily.

“All in my head?” Regan ran his fingers down the loose flap of skin at his neck, unconsciously setting his frill in a neater order. “It crossed my mind.”

He waited for Zilch to reply, but they didn’t. For once, Hans didn’t fill the silence with his chatter either. Feeling like he was supposed to do something other than just stand there, Regan circled the bed and lowered himself into the remaining chair. “Someone wanna tell me why I’m here?”

“Can’t. Sorry.”

Regan folded his arms and frowned, tilting his head to the side. “Okay. Then how about the name ‘Gabriel?’ Does that mean anything to you?”

This time, he didn’t get any response at all. He did notice with some alarm that Zilch didn’t seem to be breathing. Even more alarming was the fact that they didn’t appear to need to.

“Oh, come on,” Regan gave a slightly nervous laugh. Up close, he could see the individual stitches that ran across Zilch’s definitely corpselike face, and the conspicuous way their eyes never blinked or moved from what they were looking at. Right now, that was him. Making eye contact back was a challenge. “You’re the first person to actually see the ghost kid or seem to have any answers at all. So why not share some?”

“Hans... has leverage.”

“What, he got your brain too?”

“No. My heart.”

“Oh.” Regan’s eyes couldn’t help flicking down to the only other visible part of Zilch’s skin; their hands. A stitch ran around their left wrist like a bracelet. That hand was darker than its wrist, and it hadn’t yet lost all its color. It still wore chipped red nail polish. The other, much lighter, grey hand didn’t. “That

would be a problem.”

“I’m not easy to kill,” they said in response to Regan’s obvious morbid curiosity. Now their voice was even flatter than before and they stared at the opposite wall, eyes dull, half-open, and still as the rest of them. “I don’t need to breathe. Or eat or drink. If I fall into the fire, my skin will burn, but I’ll live. An arm can be replaced. A leg repaired. But my heart...”

“Yep,” Hans confirmed easily. “One little poke with a pin, and pfft! That’s it! Done. Not just a pin, I mean, there are all kinds of ways. Hearts are super fragile, but I mean, you’d know all about that, I can basically just—”

“He’d do that?” Regan stared in horror, first at Zilch, then at Hans in the bed. “You’d really kill them? Just to get what you want?”

Hans’s ghostly projection floated back across Regan’s frontal lobe with a sharp, thin smile. “Hey, I want what you want. Escape, hope, life, all those great things! And yes, really. I’d do anything.”

“No. This isn’t the way you get it. You can’t—”

“Sure I can,” Hans said, shrugging. “But I don’t think I’ll have to. I’ve got tons of ways to get people to do what I want...”

“So you’d stop their heart...” Regan glanced at Zilch, then paused. A slow smirk spread across his face. “And do what to me, exactly?”

“Oh. My God. Are you really going there, lizard boy?”

“Why not?” Regan challenged. “You’ve got the power of mind control, right?”

“Yeah! It’s a nice little toy. Everything’s a nice little toy when you’re me!”

“Then if you’re so smart and powerful,” Regan said very deliberately, feeling the upper hand for the first time. “Why are you messing around with all these games? Making me forget, pushing me through all these complicated steps—

why don't you just *make me* do whatever it is you want?"

"Because I don't think he can," Zilch interjected softly, eyes flicking up to meet Regan's. He could swear that strange, lopsided mouth was curling up in something like a smile too. "He would if he could."

"Sure I can!" Hans retorted with an annoyed glare. "I just want him to do it himself. For personal growth, like a whole big journey thing, or whatever."

"Liar." Zilch smiled.

"Am I?" All at once, Hans's voice was much louder and seemed to come from all around them, as if a movie theatre's speakers had just turned on. "I told you. I can do whatever I want." Suddenly Regan jerked as if he'd been struck by lightning, every muscle rigid and locked. His head snapped back so he was facing the ceiling. His eyes were wide open and staring, and their vertical pupils grew so round and dark the golden sclera nearly disappeared. He held so unnaturally still and upright it was almost as if he were suspended by an invisible string, only movement the frill at his neck when it flared out, twitching in rapid spasms.

"No!" Zilch lunged forward now, statue-like stillness gone as they rounded the bed. Until now they hadn't raised their death-rattle voice above speaking level, but they were shouting now. "Hans, let him go!"

"Love to! You know, soon as you admit you guys were wrong, and you'll actually listen to the stuff I say. It'll just make life easier on everybody."

"I'm the one you made the deal with!" Zilch's voice sounded like it was being ripped out of their mismatched vocal cords, torn; somehow it harmonized with itself in layers of pain. "You want to hurt somebody, I'm right—"

Regan's hand shot out and clamped down around Zilch's bony wrist. The

rest of him was paralyzed, but his panicked eyes locked with theirs when they looked up. Zilch turned fully to face him without hesitation.

“Chimera,” Zilch’s voice dropped to a near-whisper as they spoke a word like an incantation, almost powerful enough to let Regan take a breath. Almost. The word—the name?—was strange but familiarity rang in the back of Regan’s head even as panic overwhelmed him. Zilch’s hand spread flat across Regan’s chest, finding it still except for the panicked hammering of his heart. The other went to his neck, first smoothing down the frantically shaking frill, then slipping beneath it with unexpected gentleness. Somehow, Regan gasped in precious oxygen. “There is enough air.”

“Mm, there really isn’t.”

Zilch ignored him, keeping the very light contact on Regan’s chest, and even lighter touch on his neck beneath his frill. Regan’s hand tightened around their wrist, pulling them closer. “He does not have you. I have you. There is enough air.”

“You know why I’m doing this, right?” Hans floated idly by like a leaf on the surface of a creek. “You just had to push my buttons. Just had to—”

Zilch’s head snapped up. “He can’t breathe, Hans!”

“Oh, sorry, do the living need to do that? My mistake...”

Regan gagged as bile burned up his throat, teeth clenching together so hard his jaw ached and trembled. Zilch looked up to see tears spilling from his still-open eyes.

“Chimera,” Zilch’s voice lowered to a near whisper again as they spoke the unfamiliar but very important word, the ragged and dissonant tones overwhelmingly familiar instead of alien. Without knowing why, Regan relaxed by degrees—even as his knees started to shake beneath him. There was nothing

holding him up except this malevolent spirit's will—until the hand on his chest moved around to support his back and keep him from falling. The other hand at his throat could still feel the pounding of his heart, desperate and fast as the terrified wing beats of a frightened bird. “Listen to my voice. Feel this. Right here.”

Slowly, Regan's other hand reached out a few agonizing inches to touch Zilch's thin outer shirt, fingers curling around it.

“Yes. You will survive this. There will not be fire. There will be another night. There is enough air.”

His chest rose as he sucked in the first lungful of oxygen since this awful possession began. A long shudder went through Regan's flared neck frill, and it fell flat and limp, as if exhausted. He breathed.

Zilch watched for the space of a few breaths. Then they shut their eyes. “I'm so sorry.”

“There you go!” Hans chirped. “Was that so hard?”

Regan fell like a puppet whose strings had been cut, and Zilch caught him long before he hit the floor.

“See?” Hans shrugged as Regan coughed and sobbed for breath on the floor. He hadn't let go of Zilch's shirt, kneeling upright instead of lying sprawled or even leaning against a wall. “That's why it's a good idea to listen to me, so I don't have to do that again.”

Zilch's blue-and-green stare was steady, narrow, and very hard. “I wasn't talking to you.”

“Whatever,” Hans yawned. “Now you know I'm serious. Try to run away, or get all heroic or anything—oh, or tell anybody, definitely if you tell anybody about this, my plans, me in general—I'm doing that again. Got it?”

Silence, except for Regan's labored wheezes.

"Okay, great! Love the enthusiasm, guys. So now if we're done here, let's get down to actual business. Regan, the first part of your assignment is preparing to withstand a great deal of heat. So you're gonna need someone who can... what?" Neither of them responded. Hans rolled his eyes. "Ugh! This isn't hard! Fireproof suits! And guns! Lots of guns. Who do we know who can make guns? And bombs?" Now Hans shot an intense, raised-eyebrow stare at Regan, arms akimbo.

"Danae?" Regan managed to get out, rubbing his sore neck. He was sure his tender frill would be bruised blue and purple tomorrow, somehow, despite the fact that the only painful pressure had been non-corporeal. Zilch's solid hands hadn't been nearly as rough—and now they seemed to realize one of their hands was still resting on Regan's back, and moved away.

"Good! Yes!" Hans gave them an exaggerated slow clap. "Bingo, good job! Wow! How hard was that?"

"Hans..." Regan slowly rose to his feet. "You want my attention? You've got it. So just... enough. Tell me what you want. What we're actually doing. Just tell me the truth."

"Mmm... no."

"Why?"

"Because if I told you, you wouldn't do it." Hans said flatly. "And then we'd all be dead. Even more dead, I mean. Faster."

Regan stared, for once completely speechless.

Hans lowered his 'voice,' and his presence took on more the feeling of an intimate chat. "But really, for real, I'm doing this to make the world a better place. With the fires out, and once the river comes back, everything will be the

way it should be. People will stop dying, we can bring the barrier down, everybody gets out of here, everybody lives..."

"You can't be serious." Regan shook his head. "Nothing's that easy. Not in Parole."

"I know. But soon we won't be in Parole." Hans spoke quietly, without a trace of his usual cavalier snark—instead, there was a strange hope in his eyes. "Just like you always dreamed... *Chimera*."

Regan suppressed a shudder. When Zilch had called him by the strange-but-familiar name, it had been comforting; he felt grounded just from the memory. Coming from Hans, the syllables sounded mocking and wrong. "I don't think we're dreaming the same dream."

"Uh-huh. So anyway, you two have your little projects and I've got a lot on my end too. So if you'll excuse me, I have other people to see today." Hans began to fade away before their eyes, vanishing like smoke in a breeze. "Just remember—don't go spreading our business where it doesn't belong. Nobody else needs to know about any of this. Or we'll do this again. And again."

"Wait—" Regan grabbed at him, but Hans just smiled and disappeared faster. "The fire! You can't make us go down there! Dammit!"

He was gone. After a few seconds marked by the regular beep of the EKG, Regan glanced around and lowered his voice, making sure they were alone. "Zilch?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. That was... that wasn't fun." His damaged frill twitched at the memory. Not just of the too-recent pain, the terror of being unable to breathe, the panic, the shock of adrenaline. There were hidden memories in the back of his brain, waiting just around a corner or behind a door. He knew the feeling

of one hand on his chest, another at his neck. Or behind his back, keeping him from falling. These had happened before.

He knew the slow, wordless nod Zilch gave him in reply.

“Can I ask you something?”

Another nod.

“You called me something... another name. Chimera. Does that mean... were we friends?”

Zilch did something very strange with their face; the lower half twisted one direction and the upper another, mouth opening over chipped and broken teeth and black gums. The expression was horrifying, or would have been to most other people—but here again was the reprised feeling of recognition. Zilch was smiling. He even recognized the sadness in their mismatched, clouded eyes. They stood there, looking at Regan for a moment, then took a long-legged step toward the door.

“You really can’t tell me anything? Nothing?”

They just stared at him for a moment, then slowly put the dark sunglasses back on. “I can’t. But keep asking questions. Curiosity doesn’t always kill... cats.” With that, they stalked out the door.

Pieces of Home

CHAPTER 6

DANAE HELD HER HANDS OVER ROSE'S BARETTE AND CONCENTRATED. SHE CLOSED HER EYES AND CHEWED her lower lip; her fingers stretched and flexed and twitched with the effort involved in bringing the metal to life. Her eyes rolled back into her head as she fell into a quiet place in her mind. The edges rippled and slowly the hair clip curled into a delicate spiral. It lifted slowly into the air, changing as it rose. It shifted and melted and turned in midair and Danae let herself smile, power surging through her like a current of pleasurable electricity—then it stopped, and the half-formed thing fell to the tabletop with a sudden clatter.

Danae panted, crushed—it had taken all of her energy, all of her will, to make this sad, crumpled little thing, dead before it had even begun to live. She sat there, hands curled into fists, clenching her teeth against hot tears.



fell to the tabletop with a sudden clatter.

Rose had always been the one to bounce back first, find the jewel in the turd. She was out right now, walking in the gardens with Jack, trying to bring the flowers back to life and actually making something of their time in this bleak house. But when Danae closed her eyes, she saw her front door shot through with bullets, heard Jack screaming as Toto's screws and clockwork spattered across the floor. The armed men in the police gas masks, the eyeless faces...

"Aagh!" Danae shoved her chair away from the table, snatched up the twisted barrette-thing and flung it against the wall. The half-transformation had made it brittle, and it shattered. Danae raged. She stomped around her room, punched pillows, kicked the bed and the walls—then picked up the abused pillows, pressed them to her face, and screamed.

"WHY—WON'T—THIS—WORK?"

After several minutes of rampaging around her room like a girl-shaped Godzilla, she stood very still and tried to get her breath back. The rest of the floor was silent, thank God. Nobody had heard her. And now the room seemed six sizes too small. Danae stomped out into the hall and slammed the elevator button. It dinged and opened, and she huffed inside. She folded her arms and flopped against one wall, drained after her outburst.

Then she caught sight of something orange out of the corner of her eye. She wasn't alone.

"Bwah!" she yelped, jumping back from the elevator's other occupant.

"Hi!" The young man with the bright orange hair and wide smile said, sticking out his hand for a shake, which she shook automatically despite her shock. "Remember me?"

“Uh, uh,” Danae stammered, trying to get her heart rate back under control. “Finn, right You, uh, you drove us here. I wouldn’t forget that drive... ever.”

“Aw, thanks!” he seemed to take it as a compliment. She wasn’t sure if she meant it as one, but let it go. “Me neither. Evelyn Calliope, and the Turret House—and now I’m inside! I’m actually inside the place! I got an actual invite! Inside! I mean, I’m just here to pick up my buddy, and it looks like this elevator only goes to this one floor, with this one random hallway, but I’m inside!”

“Checking the place out already, huh?” She smiled despite herself. Something about this kid with the messy orange hair and smiling, open face made her heart stop hammering, even if he’d been the one to knock her off-balance to begin with.

“I mean, wouldn’t you?”

“You got me there. So how’d you score an invite again? I don’t mean that the way it sounds,” she said quickly, but it didn’t appear he’d taken the least offense. “It’s just that I don’t even think I can come and go as I please. Or Evelyn.”

“Oh—like I said, I’m here to pick up Zilch.”

“Zil...”

“Yesterday, they came outside, said hi to everybody? They’re really the one here on business or whatever, so I guess it’s not me who got invited, I’m just their ride. Which is fine! Still gets me in. They actually get to see what’s going on, though, and they’re still not talking.”

Danae wasn’t surprised to hear that. She remembered the tall, cloaked figure with the hidden face and the way they’d stalked past her in complete silence. If that was ‘saying hi,’ she wasn’t sure she wanted to hear them speak at

all.

“So, is the Turret House anything like you were expecting?” She asked, remembering the variety of theories he’d fired off on the way here. “Seen any... what was it, ghosts?”

“Nah,” he shook his head, smile dropping off his face. “Just a bunch of locked doors. I mean, there might be cool stuff behind them, but if you can’t get past ‘em... elevator’s the most exciting thing, really.”

“Sorry,” she said noncommittally, mind still on the barrette and its eventual shapeless disappointment.

“Ah, it’s fine! I’m just bored. But in Parole that’s a lot better than most things you could be! How are you?”

“Hm?” Danae looked over, surprised, and then a little guilty for only half-listening. She knew full well that most people didn’t actually expect or want an answer to the question he’d just asked, but coming from him it sounded genuine. And, maybe it was just the fatigue talking, but she wanted to tell him. “I’m... frustrated, See, I, uh—make things. But not today. Can’t make anything turn out right.”

“Aww, I’m sorry!” Finn said sincerely, an even rarer response than the question itself. “That has to suck.”

“Guess I just don’t like feeling useless,” she mumbled.

“You’re not useless!” He said it fervently and with full conviction. Then there came the far-off sound of something exploding, and the elevator shuddered. Danae gasped and grabbed at the padded wall, but the kid seemed completely unfazed.

“What was that?!” her wide eyes darted around the tiny cubicle. She checked the wall for an emergency call button, but there wasn’t one. In this house, she

wasn't surprised.

"Nothing to worry about..." Now it was Finn's turn to mumble as he looked at the floor, and she could swear his ears were turning a pink tinge. "It won't happen again."

"Wait. That was you?"

"Don't worry, it's fine! We're fine, everything's cool. I got it under control."

She kept her mouth shut. In Parole, you didn't mention the special things you could do in polite conversation. Side effects of Chrysedrine were personal, private. You didn't ask why someone took the drug, what horrible disease or injury they wanted to fix. And you didn't ask what they could do after they took it. Some people could bring inanimate objects to life, but most people didn't get powers as useful (or invisible) as Danae's. Wonderland had something different for everybody, and sometimes the surprises weren't very nice.

Danae really couldn't wait to get out of this elevator.

"So, what are you trying to make?" Finn asked after a few seconds, sounding visibly relieved she hadn't inquired any further.

"I don't know. Anything that could help us."

"Maybe you have to know what you're making before you can make it."

"That's the problem, I know exactly what I want—I just can't get to it."

"Hmm. Can I help?"

"What?"

"Maybe I can get the thing you want!"

She looked up. "Hey. You got a car, that taxi. And you can actually leave and get back in. If I give you an address, can you go there and bring something back for me?"

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“Sure! Usually I bring people from place to place, but stuff is fine too!”

“Great.” Danae smiled. “You could actually be a big help. I need you to go to our house, and bring back some essentials... toothbrushes, clothes, some of Jack’s toys, stuff like that. Uhh, let me think...” She chewed the inside of her cheek and gave herself a once-over. She glanced at the unwashed clothes she was wearing—still burnt and stained from her work yesterday—down to her shoes. “Clean clothes would be just great.”

“Got it! Anything else?”

“Okay, I have a bunch of works in progress. Upstairs workshop, you’ll see three suits of what looks like body armor—grab those, very important. And...” She paused, bit her lip. “In the hallway, you’ll find what looks like a dead dog.”

“A dead dog?” Finn looked like he might cry. There came the sound of a distant rumbling like far-off thunder, or a distant detonation. “Oh no...”

“But he’s not dead really, he’s just broken!” Danae hurried to reassure him. Strangely, the noise decreased as well. “He’s mechanical, all metal and gears. I’d really appreciate if you could collect as much as you can and bring Toto-Dandy back here, so I can fix him.”

“Will do—wait, what was that last part?”

“What part?”

“What you just said. Toto-Something.”

“Dandy. Just bring back as much as you can, okay? If you can’t find all the pieces, that’s fine, I’m sure I can find replacement parts somewhere around here.”

“Okay, got it!” He nodded firmly as if imprinting the request in his brain, but quickly returned to the subject that had caught his attention like a shiny metal bit. “Why’d you call him that?”

“Oh...” Danae hesitated, then actually giggled, looking around ten years younger when she smiled. “Rose’s favorite movie is *The Wizard of Oz*, so she wanted to name our first dog Toto. But Jack wanted to call him Dandy, after me. When he was really little and learning everybody’s name, he couldn’t say ‘Mama Danae’... so he called me Mama-Dandy. He still calls me that sometimes.”

“That’s so cute,” Finn said, voice quiet but rising in pitch. “Oh my gosh. I love it. That’s amazing.” He made himself take a breath; nothing rumbled outside but she was listening for it now. “Parole’s so scary so much of the time so... I dunno, it just makes me happy when people have... good things.”

“Well, Jack and Rose are around here somewhere, and Toto-Dandy will be soon, hopefully. You can tell them yourself.” The thought made her smile, but she couldn’t stop and fully enjoy it just yet. “One last thing, if you run into Rose or Evelyn before you go, ask them if they need anything, okay? I know I’m forgetting stuff. Are you coming back here? Is a second trip okay if we forget things? I...” she scowled. “I’m just realizing I don’t know how long we’re going to be here.”

“Yeah, I’ll be back! I know Zilch is gonna need to come back up here for at least, like, I dunno, a couple more times to get whatever it is they’re doing done.”

“Huh.” Danae considered for a moment. “Are they meeting with Liam Turret?”

“Nope, I know that much. Zilch doesn’t like him at all. I don’t think he’s very nice either.”

“Well, that’s something we have in common.”

“Aw, that’s great! You’d probably be good friends, now that I think about it!

I should introduce you guys whenever you're both free."

"Uh-huh," Danae imagined the dark specter silently walking the Turret House's long corridors. Then she imagined the elevator doors opening, and felt better.

"Cool! So I'll grab your stuff, and me and Zilch will be back later tonight, get everybody together, we can all hang! Well," he hesitated. "Actually, they're not really big on like, parties and stuff. But they can at least say hi to everyone! I think they know that guy Regan from somewhere already. Ahh, this is exciting!"

"Yeah," she said slowly, wondering about a theory and listening hard for far-off rumbles. "Try not to get too excited. Remember, you have no idea where we are, you don't know us. You're not a huge Evelyn Calliope fan in particular, and..." She trailed off, remembering yesterday's impromptu autograph session. "Incognito, remember?"

"Right. Gotcha. I will keep everything very, very quiet."

"Thank you. That's all I ask. That, and all the other things I just asked you for—so thank you again."

As Danae fervently hoped Finn wasn't overestimating his own capabilities, the elevator lurched to a stop and the doors slid open. They stepped out, and nearly crashed right into Regan as he half-walked, half-stumbled by. He jerked away as they popped out at him, slamming back-first into the opposite wall. He was panting and shaking as if he'd just been running for his life, and his eyes darted around in a frenzy. There was a distinct blue and purple bruise around his frill, which rose and fell with his fast, irregular breathing.

"Hey. Hey, you okay?" Danae peered at him. "You need some—"

"No. Nothing. I'm fine." Regan waved her off, but he stayed leaning heavily

against the wall, trying to catch his breath.

“You really don’t look fine.” Finn asked. “What happened? Can we—”

“I’m fine.” The narrow yellow glare he shot up at them warned them away as clearly as bared teeth or claws, but he didn’t move away either. Danae imagined that if he tried he might fall right over and sprawl across the floor.

“Okay. Um, I should go find Zilch and head out,” Finn said, awkwardly shifting from one foot to another. “This place is so big and there are so many locked doors, I can never find them—or anything, really.”

“Hans’s room,” Regan said faintly, and they both looked back over at him. He said nothing more and didn’t look up at either of them, now leaning back against the wall in a position that suggested less panic and more casualness, but the attempt fell flat when he stifled a cough. “I mean, upstairs.”

“Okay. Feel better,” Finn waved as the doors slid shut, eyes still on Regan. The floor vibrated faintly, and it wasn’t because of the elevator motor. “I’ll have your delivery tonight, Danae!”

“Thanks, Finn,” she said without looking away from Regan, or the way he folded his arms across his chest, bowing his head slightly, and very deliberately made himself breathe, slow and regular. As soon as they were alone, she stepped closer very slowly to get a better look at his frill. “That’s a bruise around your neck. Who did this?”

“No one. It’s nothing.”

“Bull. It was that Zilch, wasn’t it? Knew they were bad news. They’ve got height, but I can take ‘em. Absolutely.”

“No!” Regan looked up quickly, almost hurting his own throat with how fervently he answered. “I mean no. It wasn’t them. Without them it would’ve been a lot worse.”

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“What would’ve been worse? Who was—wait, Liam? Oh man, he had to give me a reason, didn’t he? Wouldn’t have pegged him for the strangling type, but I guess I shouldn’t be surprised by anything he does by—”

“No, it wasn’t...” he shut his eyes, stammering over several wrong words and false starts—then blurted it right out. “Danae? What would it take for you to start making weapons again?”

“Regan, I don’t need a weapon to take out just about anyone I want. Including whatever low-life scum did this. If they want a fight, they can just come and get it.”

“No, no, I mean big ones!” He lowered his voice and raised his intensity at the same time. “Guns. Bombs. The kind that can break us out of here for good.”

Her eyebrows shot up, and her mouth fell open. Then, slowly, she shut her mouth again and folded her arms, staring at him with an expression of what could only be described as resigned disdain. She drummed her fingertips on her elbow and didn’t say a word.

“Danae, listen. It’s just a matter of time before Eye in the Sky finds us. They always find you, I remember that. You and I both know it’s gonna happen.”

“No, I don’t, And neither do you. We’re safe for now and when it’s time to move, Evelyn and Rose and I will figure something out. We always do.”

“How can you be so calm?” His heart was pounding again. He was scared, desperate, all he knew was that he was in a cage, thrust into a hell he couldn’t even remember; suddenly all Regan wanted was out. And you needed guns to break out, and Danae could give them to him. “We all might fall into the fire tomorrow!”

“I know.” She planted her feet and stood firm, glaring straight at him and

refusing to budge in any sense, manner or degree.

“And you have this amazing power to make all the firepower we need to bust out of here—and you’re just sitting here, doing nothing!”

“Nothing?” Danae’s voice was like a rock, solid and immovable. Even though its edges were hard, it was something to hang onto, to keep his equilibrium. “You think that weapons are the only way we’re going to survive?”

“I don’t know,” he threw out one last shot. “Maybe they aren’t. But I know that if something were threatening my family, I’d want to defend them with everything I—”

“No.” Danae’s whisper sent chills down his spine. “If something threatened Rose, or Evelyn or Jack, I would throw them into the dry Styx all by myself, and watch them burn. But I don’t need to make a bomb or a gun to do it. And I don’t need you to tell me how to protect my family, or my city, or my life.” She dropped her arms to her sides and cocked her head. “Especially because you really don’t know the first thing about how anything works here, do you? You just said it. You don’t know.”

“No,” he blinked and raised his eyebrow ridges; somehow she didn’t seem angry at him anymore. And he wasn’t terrified as he’d been a moment ago either. But he was certainly still confused. “I guess I don’t.”

“Damn straight. You don’t even know enough to know what you don’t know.”

“Oh. Okay. Um, why don’t you... tell me?”

“If you tell me how you got that bruise on your neck.”

Regan froze. “It’s... hard to explain.”

“Lots of things are here. Listen, regardless of all the other nonsense, you did hit on something important just now. The whole ‘threatening my family’ thing.

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If you did it to yourself, whatever, none of my business. But if someone did it to you and you're covering for their ass? My wives and little kid are in this house, and I don't want to see any bruises around their necks. So spill it."

He stayed very still and quiet, except for the nervous twitching of his discolored frill.

"And, okay, I don't really want to see any more bruises on your neck either. I don't think you're a bad guy, Regan. I think you're scared and don't know what's going on in this bizarre-o world place, and people do crappy things when they feel boxed in and desperate. So give me a name, let me beat 'em up for you, never ask me to make weapons again, and we'll all feel much better."

For around three seconds, Regan was sincerely tempted to tell her everything. Her offer was oddly reassuring, and made him feel safer than he would have expected. In a fair fight, if Hans actually had a solid face to punch, he'd bet on Danae and her fists every time. And spend actual money for a seat; front row, center. But then he remembered that where Danae had an offer, Hans had made a promise, and he turned away, more in disappointment than shame. "Panic attack."

"Hmm?" she looked at him and gave her head a slight shake. "Come again?"

"I had a panic attack. Couldn't breathe. Throat started to close up. This skin around my neck—frill? I think it's called a frill, I've seen lizards with... anyway. It's sensitive. When I couldn't breathe, I dunno, I started messing with my neck, I must've been too rough with it. So... if you want the guy's name, you better beat up... me."

A moment of silence went by. Then he did feel an impact, but it wasn't the one he was expecting. Still, in his unsteady state, even one of Danae's friendly claps on the back was enough to nearly knock him off his feet. "Jeez, I'm sorry,

guy. Brains can be your own worst enemy, can't they?"

"Yeah. They really, really can."

They stood in silence for a couple seconds. Regan just had time to make the observation that usually people didn't do this outside elevators if they weren't actually waiting for them, when Danae spoke again.

"So a minute ago you said Zilch was up in 'Hans's room.'" She watched him out of the corner of her eye with her hands jammed in the pockets of her faded jeans.

"Yeah?" Regan answered hesitantly, gauging the distance to both ends of the hallway and trying to decide which one was closer.

"You've been in to see him?"

"I—what? No."

"You don't know him at all? Because yesterday, just before Eye in the Sky shot up my house... looking for you..."

He stopped looking for escape routes, head dropping slightly. "I'm sorry about that."

"Yeah. Anyway, you said something about Hans then too."

"I... yeah. I don't know." Regan hesitated, nausea rising as he gingerly touched his neck, and the very real consequences of pushing Hans too far. "I remember the name, but, uh. That's about it. I don't know where from. Maybe a different Hans." He looked up at her. "Do you know him?"

"I did." She nodded slowly, staring at the floor. "This one, anyway. Not that I've ever met a lot of Hanses, but... I knew this one."

He stared. Despite her obvious suspicion, he hadn't actually expected anyone to ever say yes. But she still didn't look up, lost in something he couldn't see or hope to touch. "Sure didn't expect to be back here. Hearing

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that name... and now this house? Now he's here? Was—was moved here? I don't know. I should go see him, talk to him a little, but... I don't know. Just a whole lot of past-blasts at once. Not sure I like 'em."

"You and Hans—what, grew up in this house?"

"No, I—" She paused, glanced over at him, then away again. "I never lived here, and—shoot, I don't think he did either. This was Ev's old place. No, we all just kind of... knew each other somewhere else. For a while. Then we... we lost touch. Like you do. I mean, it was more than..." She cleared her throat and shook her head, then shook off the rest of the memory. "Anyway. I always hoped he was... doing better."

Regan was quiet for a moment. "But you don't know me, right? And you probably would. I mean, the scales and all."

"I don't remember you. But you know, that doesn't actually mean much. Jeez, this was almost ten years ago. We were kids, and we all... had other stuff on our minds. Besides, dragon people are more common in Parole than you think." She paused. "So are panic attacks. Don't beat yourself up about it. Literally or figuratively. Looks painful."

"It, uh... it's not fun."

"Boy, I know it. I wish bad brain stuff was an actual guy I could punch in the face. PTSD, panic attacks, anxiety, flashbacks, hallucinations, anything that gives you hell, could just send 'em to me, I'd fight them all." She rocked back and forth on her heels, looking genuinely pleased by the idea. "Stuff's a lot harder to fight when they're stuck in your own head."

"Yeah... didn't stop me from trying, though."

Danae looked over with a nod of sympathy, but Regan didn't have the downcast look she'd been expecting. He couldn't help it. The primary source of

his mental and emotional anguish did, in fact, have a very smug, smirking face. And even if this particular face was translucent and un-punchable, at least by Danae's small but eager hands, the mental image alone made the last of Regan's tension fade. It also made him smile.

Danae's eyebrows knit together she took in Regan's expression, and her own shifted from confusion, then hesitation, then hope. "Was that an actual joke, lizard man?"

Regan couldn't quite speak, but he could nod.

Danae's own crooked smile grew until she actually laughed. And for the second time since this all began, Regan actually felt a split second of something he couldn't identify. He realized after a moment that it was relief and security. And that the first time he'd felt it was when Zilch's hands freed him from the same mental torment he could smile about now. Like their touch, laughing made it easier to breathe.



The second time Evelyn sat down on the highest center balcony that day, she did it on her own terms. And this time, she'd brought her own water. Another round of exploration, trying her thumbprint on more doors—some opened, many more didn't—revealed a small side kitchen with a fridge filled with nothing but glorious plastic bottles. More water than she'd seen in years. Her head was filled with transcendent, heavenly visions of swimming in it, taking real hot baths, real showers, smelling moist, perfumed air, sinking beneath the surface and letting it close above her head. Riches beyond compare. She'd grabbed as many as she could carry and took them up to the room she shared with Rose and Danae, then made a second trip.

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When her hoard was complete and the fridge was empty, she headed out here, cold bottles in hand and hoping to find someone to share them with. She found Regan. He was coming the other direction but didn't look like he was going anywhere, hands in his pockets and eyes out of focus. If he could look pale under his greenish scales...

"It almost looks pretty from up here," he observed with only a little irony, looking down at the blackened city spread out beneath them, and the vast, glowing red-orange crater in Parole's center, a little wider every day. With the day progressing, the foot traffic was starting to come out, along with the few cars supported by gasoline rations. Traces of Parole's thriving metropolis past remained in the tall buildings left—skyscrapers and church steeples, some with lights on. If Regan squinted, he could see the beauty under the layer of ash.

"I always thought so." Evelyn took another gulp of cold, clear water. She wasn't sure if guilt or the icy water in her stomach made her suddenly nauseous. "I'd look out at it all the time from up here. Me and Liam."

"Planning escapes?"

"No—this was before the fires started. We were dreamers, both of us, if you can believe it. We just wanted to make a difference. I guess we are... in our own way. For better or worse."

"Well, I think you're doing a better job than he is."

Evelyn nodded after a few seconds, but didn't say anything. They sat in a comfortable silence, looking down at the damaged cityscape below them, and the ever-present helicopters churning up the smoke above.

"How are you holding up?" Evelyn turned to look at him at last. "I've been meaning to ask for a while."

"I'm... breathing." He couldn't remember why, but the anxiety was a

constant presence, like a too-tight collar that didn't let him get quite enough oxygen. He hadn't drunk nearly as much water as she had, and had come to the conclusion that he didn't actually need or even like it that much. One of the sole silver linings in all this was that his lizardlike adaptations were particularly well-suited to Parole's hot, dry, smoky atmosphere. And sometimes, when the desperate edge of anxiety faded from his eyes, and especially when he smiled, the angles in his jaw and gleams of his teeth and scales reminded her more of a dragon. She hoped she would see more of the dragon eventually.

"Glad to hear it. And I meant what I said before—we will find you the answers you're looking for, Regan. Coming back here, I just..." she turned away from the cityscape, then found herself looking up at the house and turned away from that too. "Everything starts to blur together. It's easy to get overwhelmed."

"I know that feeling," he said immediately, firmly. "I mean, I had to have found a way to deal with everything before, how else could I live here, but now? I just want to hide, all the time. You know what the most intense part is? The smells. Tastes." His tongue flicked out and back in. "Which are pretty much the same thing as smells to me—I think I can smell with my tongue or something."

"That does sound overwhelming. But kind of interesting too, I have to say." She shot him a brief smile. "Gotta be better things to taste than Parole, though."

"Yeah. Lots of smoke, obviously." He gave a sniff, and then a flick of his tongue. "Metallic. Almost sal... no. Bitter. I don't know. Lots of different flavors of bitter, if that makes sense. Sharp... cutting? I don't have words. Words haven't been invented." He paused, holding very still. "I think it's fear. I don't know if it's everyone else's, or mine."

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“There is a lot of fear in Parole,” Evelyn nodded. “I’ve never smelled it... but I think if I could, I’d never take a single breath without wearing a mask.”

Regan shook his head. “Still can’t breathe with one on. Rather smell the fear. And, hey, maybe I’ll actually taste something important.”

“You’ll know when you taste it, I guess.”

“I’ll keep my... tongue out.” He tried to smile, but it just came out looking tired. All the terrifying, gut-twisting words and scenes from the past several days seemed to fight to pour out of him right there. He wanted so badly to just tell her everything, if there was anyone he could trust he knew it was her—but he couldn’t say a word about Hans without risking another terrifying episode, or Zilch’s heart. Couldn’t tell her about what he’d done to the boy in the Emerald Bar. Saying he thought there was a cat following him just sounded ridiculous. Still, he had to ask questions if he wanted answers. “Evelyn? Do you know anyone named Gabriel?”

“Gabriel...” Evelyn repeated slowly, turning the name over in her mouth. “Name doesn’t ring any bells. I know a lot of names, but... nope, sorry. Haven’t seen many angels here lately.”

“It’s fine.” Regan sighed, slumping back down his chair. “Just thought I’d ask. I thought that name was important, but...”

“Well, that’s a new name, isn’t it? Before, the only one you remembered was ‘Hans.’ That’s progress, Regan, I’m happy for you.” She watched his face carefully for changes in expression; even a subtle unconscious reaction could be a clue. “Have you remembered anything more about him yet?”

It wasn’t subtle. He shook his head, a scowl curling up at the edge of his lip, revealing a pointed canine. “Hans? No.”

When Evelyn spoke, it was slowly and carefully. But with a red flag like that,

she had no other choice. “You know, Rose and Danae told me they actually know someone with that name.”

“Probably a different Hans.” He regretted the obvious evasion immediately, and shut his mouth. “I mean, wasn’t theirs from like ten years ago?”

“Yes... except that he’s apparently resurfaced. He’s been in a coma, and—”

“Yeah, no then, definitely not the same guy. Probably not.”

Evelyn hesitated, proceeding very gently. “Regan, when I met you, you were alone in an alley with no memory except for your name and the name ‘Hans.’”

“No. No, I don’t remember any...” Regan shook his head as his still-sore frill twitched, remembering the terrifying feeling of suffocation and unseen hands around his neck with a prickle of fear. “Never mind. It’s gone. I don’t know where I heard those names.”

“I’m sorry, Regan,” she said quickly but quietly. “We don’t have to talk about him.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” He sucked in a fast breath; suddenly he just wasn’t getting enough air. Regan would never be able to forget the choking feeling of... he could only call it possession. A psychic attack, Evelyn and Rose had called it? It felt more like being restrained. Imprisoned, but far more forcefully than simply living in Parole. A violation, certainly, though even that concept was too terrifying to stay on for long. He remembered Hans’s warning about secrecy, and looked away. “If I knew him once, I don’t now.”

“Okay,” she nodded and didn’t pursue it, but didn’t stop looking deeply concerned either. When she remembered a much better question a moment later, her relief was palpable. “What about family memories? Have any of those gotten clearer?”

Regan’s relief was immediate; the moment his mind shifted away from the

traumatic memory his borderline-painful tension faded and he relaxed back into his chair. “Sometimes I think so. Little things. Feelings. The sound of someone’s voice, like...” he shook his head, shut his eyes, let his head drop down. “It’s like hearing someone talk in the next room. Can’t understand what they’re saying, can’t see them, but I know who it is.”

“You still thinking poly?” Evelyn’s tone sounded calm and neutral, but he thought he detected a very faint, hopeful note in it. He cracked his eyes open and looked up at her. It was hard not to hope to find someone like yourself. He knew that feeling now.

“I never know what to think about myself.”

“But...?” She hadn’t been imagining the hesitant hope in his eyes, because now he smiled just a little.

“But sometimes I know how things feel.”

“It was a good feeling, wasn’t it?” She recognized that smile. It was the same one she’d seen in her home, in the last five normal minutes of her life before everything turned upside-down. It was probably similar to one she wore regularly.

“Yeah. I don’t know if... I mean, I can’t say for sure...” his face fell and he looked away. “What if I’m wrong? What if I never had that? What if I just... want it?”

“Then you still found something out about yourself,” she said firmly. “That’s still important.”

“Thanks. Yeah. I think that is one thing I know for sure.” He still didn’t look up at her and he didn’t smile. His snake-eyes narrowed, his head lowered until he was almost looking out at the world with a challenge. If she had to pick a word, she’d say ‘determined.’ And then she’d say ‘dragon.’ “I’ll get them

back.”

“Regan,” she said quietly, as if not wanting to break a fragile spell. “Get who back?”

He opened his mouth so fast and with so much eager energy that for one wild moment she honestly thought he’d say a name. When he froze, silent, fire slowly fading from his eyes, her heart sank too.

“It’s okay,” she said quickly. “It’s okay, Regan. We’ll find them, wherever they are. Whoever they are, I’ll help you, I—”

“I hate this,” he said through clenched teeth, and slowly drew up his feet onto the chair. He wrapped his arms around his legs and dropped his forehead down to rest on his knees, curling into a tight, armored ball of scales. “I don’t know who they are. I don’t even know if they exist! If they exist, I don’t even know if they’re looking for me, or if they miss me, or want me back!”

“They do,” Evelyn said immediately, wholeheartedly. “Babe, if they knew you for a hot second, they’d miss you, and they wouldn’t stop until they found you again. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t deserve you in their lives!”

He was silent for a few seconds, eyes squeezed tightly shut, face pressed down against his knees. When he looked up again, he wasn’t crying, but it was close. “I wonder if my family’s got parents, or brothers and sisters, or... I mean, probably not all of them, right? Nobody’s got... everyone, in Parole. Everybody loses someone, one way or another.”

“Most of the time,” Evelyn nodded sadly, and he had to appreciate her honesty. “We lose a lot of people here. But not all in the same way. Most people without Chrysedrine abilities are evacuated as soon as they’re located.”

“So if I’m the only one like...” he stared down at the short points on the ends of his fingertips. “Like this in my family... then I’ll be left behind.”

“Yes.” She said, gently but again with no pretense. “But we are going to get out of here someday. That’s the second-most-important reason we fight; escape, reunion with our loved ones outside. Life outside Parole. The first is survival inside it. But I’m focusing on that ‘reunion with loved ones’ part for you, Regan. And you should too. They’re alive until proven otherwise and they do want you back. Whatever you find, it’ll be a good thing, not awful.” She smiled. “I’m just going by your reactions here, but honestly, that’s a pretty good road map.”

“Well, I wish I had your super-sense of direction,” He did look up at her now, and actually flipped her some snark—but he was smiling, not bitter. It was a good sign. “You made a whole life for yourself with two wives and a kid.”

“Awesome wives, and an awesome kid.” She took a chance and grinned back; not bragging, all fondness, still unable to believe her own luck. “If you think I make it look easy... it’s not. We all found each other. We all work and live and cry together and keep each other going. I didn’t even find them, they more... yeah, they found me. Then we all found each other, for real. Point is, I didn’t do anything all by myself here and you don’t have to either.”

“Thanks.” He did feel better for a moment, but as usual, another practical concern raised its head, and he spread his hands. “But I don’t even know if I was with ladies, or guys, or another gender, or none, or...”

“Well, you said you knew how things felt, right?”

“Yeah,” his brow furrowed and his forked tongue flicked out, apparently a deep-thought reflex.

“So, perhaps an awkward question,” she acknowledged, instantly reminding herself of Rose’s gift for dry understatement. “But have you... felt anything?”

His eyes flicked over to her. “Are you asking me who I dig?”

She gave him a little shrug and a faintly sheepish smile. It wasn't an expression Evelyn Calliope wore often. "It might help narrow things down if we knew who you were attracted to."

He thought for a second before shaking his head.

"It's okay, don't worry about it. It's been a very weird week."

"I know," he said, and now he sat up a little, as if realizing something else, something important. "But I don't know if I would even if it wasn't."

"Hmm?"

"Um," his expression shifted to a near-perfect blank, though his eyes slowly widened. "I...really... this is gonna sound weird, and I swear I'm not messing with you... but... I don't think I'm attracted to anyone. Not in the way you're thinking."

"Not weird," she assured him. "Not weird at all."

"I haven't even thought about it," he mumbled. "I mean, I've wondered, but like just in a vague 'who am I, what was my life' way. I haven't really... felt anything about...Anyone." He scowled for a moment, then let out a frustrated noise, neck frill flaring out. "But that's not right either, because I know I have, all this means is that I don't look at someone I don't know or trust, like a stranger, and think they're hot—I don't think anyone's hot when I first meet them! No offense," he said hurriedly.

"None taken," she said just as fast, then let him keep going, actually looking relieved to see him venting a little frustration.

"This is—do you see how—I don't know how to make sense of this!" His hands rubbed the sides of his head and pointed ears, as if soothing irritated scales. "This isn't my normal life, and I'm not in my normal place, so I can't tell you how I'd be around people I'm actually with because I'm not—with them!"

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So I can't tell you who they are! But I do know that can't even imagine letting someone I don't know or trust, or—or love, near me! I don't—how does anyone do that?" Evelyn's eyes shot wide open, but she said nothing. "I've never felt that. Ever."

Evelyn kept her voice low. "You've never felt sexual attraction?"

"No! Not for—" Regan took a deep breath and let it out. "I've never wanted to sleep with anyone as far as I can remember. I've never thought about it." he trailed off and shook his head, swallowing hard. "But beyond that? I don't know. Because I.."

"You haven't been around someone you trusted and loved?"

He paused for a long time, then slowly nodded his head. "I know I wouldn't until then. If I found them? I don't know. Maybe still not. But I'd at least I could trust them enough to... see."

"You will find them," Evelyn said very softly. "And when you do, however you feel, it's okay. This is a very weird situation, but it doesn't change who you actually are."

"Don't know who I actually am," he mumbled. "No way to tell surrounded by strangers, that's the problem. Don't feel anything unless I'm already *with* someone. I'm a freaking paradox."

"If it helps," she said, tone tentative but casual. "I don't think you're a paradox. But you might be asexual."

Regan's mouth fell open. He looked up with wide eyes again but for a much different, much better reason. Slowly, the tension melted out of his shoulders and his frill dropped back down to hang loose. When he looked at her now she saw something else in his eyes. One of her favorite things to see. Hope.

"I can't say for sure, obviously, but it might explain a few things," she said,

voice calm but with an undertone of restrained optimism. “I’m not, myself, but I’ve known a lot of wonderful ace—asexual—people in my life, and you’re saying a lot of the same things they do.”

“Tell me.” He was still looking at her, but with a different kind of intensity now. It was the same look he’d had when he was listening to the familiar song, trying to remember where he’d heard the words he knew by heart but couldn’t place. “I think it’s important.”

“Me too. And from what you’re saying—never experiencing sexual attraction, or maybe only sometimes, or only for someone you really trust?”

“Yeah. It fits.”

“Then try it on.” She smiled. “There’s no one size. And your words exist for you. As long as they help you instead of making you feel trapped, everything’s... aces.” A ghost of a smile appeared on his face, and she encouraged it with one of her own.

“You know a lot.” He looked at her with raised eyebrow ridges. “Probably more than I’ve even forgotten.”

“I want to keep people safe, so I try to learn all I can,” Evelyn said as her heart swelled with an intense feeling of recognition. “About minds, hearts, sexuality, gender, identity, your whole life, it’s all important... Wish I’d known a lot more a long time ago. It makes everything easier.”

“Just having the words helps,” he said quietly.

“Yeah,” She nodded; her cheeks ached from smiling. “Words are important. They let you know it’s real, you’re fine, more people like you exist. They let you know you’re not alone.”

“What was the other one?” He asked. The intensity of focus passed, replaced by excitement. “What you called your family, and... what I might have? Or be?”

Or something?”

“Poly—polyamorous. Loving more than one person at the same time. Not cheating, different than that. Everyone on board. Everyone happy and okay. Just more people, more love.”

“Wow,” he said, almost a sigh. Regan stared into space, eyes wide; as she watched, the vertical black slits of his pupils slowly grew until they were rounder as well. He blinked a few times, very quickly. “Um, sorry about all that. You asked me about practical stuff and I was really unhelpful.”

“Sounds like it helped you, though.”

“Maybe it did.” He gave a soft laugh. “No closer to finding where I came from, though.”

“But no kids, right?”

“I’m not sure what to do with kids, I’m sorry.”

Evelyn laughed, shaking her head. “Well, we got poly, ace and kid-less. There’s three things we know for sure.”

Regan nodded, but his smile was more bittersweet than anything. His tongue flitted involuntarily in and out, tasting the heat under the smoke. “It’s so frustrating catching these little bits of—of myself. They’re like puzzle pieces. But they don’t fit together right—or at all. I can’t tell what the picture is supposed to be yet. And then it’s like they disappear in my hand.”

One piece stood out very starkly. Sharply. The palm of a hand spread across his chest, another supporting his back. A gentle touch beneath his neck frill, a light solid contact that chased away the intangible strangulation. The memory alone reminded him to take a breath.

“Have you ever talked to Zilch?” He asked at last.

“Hmm?” She looked up. “I’m not...is that a person?”

“Yeah. They were here when we first got here, they came outside. They’re...” he paused, tongue unconsciously tasting the air again in thought. The faint memory of Hans’s hospital room floated back; the smell-tastes of antiseptic and linen sheets. He tried to remember any other scents, any tastes... nothing. That in itself was almost as strange as the rest of the incident. “Tall, thin. Wearing a ton of black clothes, like a hood and cloak type outfit, but kind of ragged and—”

“Oh!” Evelyn blinked, eyes going wide. “That’s—Zilch? Am I saying that right?”

“Yeah.” He kept his face as neutral as possible; now it was his turn to watch her reaction, but unlike Regan, she didn’t appear to be concealing anything. “They’re, uh, not as creepy as you’d think, actually.”

“I’m... glad to hear that. I haven’t talked to them, no. Did they mention...?”

“Why they’re here?” Regan paused. “Uh no, not exactly. I was just kind of hoping you might recognize them. Or someone would. They sure seemed to recognize me.”

“That’s right,” she nodded, the encounter in the driveway seeming to dawn on her. “But they didn’t say from where? That could solve everything right there.”

“No.” He sat very still. Hans’s ultimatum buzzed in his head like a live wire. Say nothing. He had Regan’s brain, memories, identity, entire life hostage. And if he was to be believed, Zilch’s heart. Regan couldn’t bring himself to do anything to endanger either of them. “And I don’t remember them... exactly.” But he couldn’t stop himself from saying that last word either.

“They’re a piece of the puzzle?”

“Yeah. Even if I can’t see the picture on the box yet, I’m pretty sure they’re

on it.”

“Well, if I see... Zilch, I’ll try to find out more.” She was quiet for a moment in deep consideration, running over several things he’d said in her mind. “In the meantime, keep trying to fit the pieces together.”

“I’m trying. And it hasn’t been that bad,” he tried to smile again and had more success. “Aside from the part where we’re fugitives and accused of murder. Mostly, I don’t really know what to do with myself. If this is it, this is my life now? I could live with that. If I never remember anything, that’s...” he paused. “It would hurt. But at least I’d have a life. Even if I don’t really know how to... live it.”

“I think the most important thing is just to live it. Figure out exactly what you want... then go for it with everything you have. As long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else, your life is yours to express yourself to the fullest. Get in as much living as you can.”

“Because tomorrow the ground might open and swallow us up.”

“Part of living in Parole is having that in the back of your mind, yes. We have... a unique relationship with ‘tomorrow.’ Some people don’t think there’s any such thing. Some do people plan for the future.”

“Which do you do?”

“A little of both.” She grinned. “I decided a long time ago to live as much as I can, while I can. Do as much good and love myself as much as possible, while I still have the chance. But that doesn’t mean you give up on the rest of your life. Let yourself fall in love if it comes your way. Start a family, or find one. Live for today, but plan like tomorrow exists too. Otherwise...” she trailed off, shrugged.

“Otherwise you’ll find yourself alone,” he finished.

“That’s the secret to surviving life within Parole,” she said, looking out over their home with a mixture of steel and tenderness. “It’s easy to forget that you don’t have to do it alone. So I try to help everyone remember. Self included.”

Regan had seen a lot in his life (he thought so, anyway) but never anything like the warm, confident strength she radiated. Nothing like the determination to survive, the fierce love with which she surrounded her family. With Evelyn here, they might actually have a chance. Or at least she might. Wasn’t sure about himself yet.

He watched the still-living city for the space of a few breaths. It was still alive, just in a different way than he expected, if not remembered. “Evelyn... what... how did Parole...”

“Happen?” She smiled and shook her head, still gazing out across the city toward the fiery crater at its center. Her expression was faraway and bittersweet, as if she were seeing not the surreal landscape around them, but a memory made of the farthest extremes of joy and pain.

“Yeah. I’ve picked up bits and pieces but...” He tried to laugh and quite didn’t make it. “Everyone kind of seems to have a vested interest in keeping me in the dark. So... feel like shining a light?”

“Started ten years ago,” she said quietly. The smile slowly faded from her face, and Regan had to lean closer to hear her low voice. “Almost everyone you see with a gift was dying. From cancer, or AIDS, incurable diseases, injuries, or horrible genetic conditions. But then a miracle happened, a way out. A brilliant doctor here invented an amazing medicine: Chrysedrine.”

“Wonderland,” he murmured.

“Yeah. Some people called it that. It cured... *everything*.” Her voice went soft and dreamy, almost reverent. “And it saves you. It fixes everything. Any human

ailment, it would fix. Any physical ailment, I guess.” She added as an afterthought.

“Jeezus,” Regan shook his head. “Why wouldn’t that put Parole on the map forever? Quarantine doesn’t make sense. You don’t block off something that could save the world.”

“Because everything comes with a price.” She took a deep breath, haunting memories at the edge of her mind.. “The healing process was excruciating. And even after it worked, there were... side effects. People developed strange afflictions, and they started to change. Sometimes they were like magical powers, stuff out of a storybook.”

“Or a horror movie.”

She tried to smile, but it didn’t quite take. “Some people are fine afterward, except for being so addicted to it for the rest of their lives that they’ll die if they stop taking it. Some people are wrecked, mentally and emotionally.”

“And some people...” Regan held up one green hand, gently touched the frilled flesh hanging from his neck, his eyes and tongue.

“Yeah. But you’re one of the lucky ones, Regan. People died. A *lot* of people died, in... awful ways. And the drug was incredibly addictive. Once you started, you couldn’t stop. If the drug didn’t kill you, the withdrawal stages would.”

“Shit.” Regan sucked in a breath and found it a little more difficult than he would have liked. His throat felt uncomfortably tight. “Why would anyone take that crap, if they knew it could kill them? Or turn them into a monster, or worse?”

“You’re not a monster. None of us are.”

“You know what I mean. Why take the risk?”

“Desperate people take desperate measures, I guess.” She shivered, despite

the permanent Parole heat. Regan kept quiet, spellbound. He folded his hands tightly together to keep them from shaking, and kept his eyes on Evelyn. Breathing came more easily when she spoke. "Everybody took the new miracle drug, and at first everyone got better. It was amazing. The biggest medical breakthrough in history."

"Didn't last, did it?"

"No, it didn't. A few weeks later, the deaths started. Sudden. Brutal fevers. Their systems violently rejected Chrysedrine. And the ones who survived... could do things they couldn't before."

"How many?" He whispered. "How many lived?"

"Not enough," she answered, almost as quietly. For a moment, her eyes slipped out of focus, as if she were seeing something very far away that he couldn't see. He didn't think he wanted to, and was sure she didn't want to either. "Around two thirds. The... it was..."

"It's okay, it's fine, I don't..." he shook his head. "What about them? The ones who lived? Us, I guess?"

"All at once, awful, gorgeous, dangerous powers. Overnight. It was anarchy. We have people with wings and tails and dragon scales, little girls who talk to machines and turn anything into a living bomb. And that's just our friends, good people who try to do the right thing. Everybody who got them was... not a good person. There were superpowered street gangs, serial killers."

"Military police."

"Exactly." She smiled for the first time. It wasn't a happy one. "We were a problem. Their solution... Major Turret's solution, was a private army called Eye in the Sky."

"I've heard that name." Regan hunched over, drew his elbows in closer to

his body.

“Everyone in Parole has. He would be the man behind the curtain. And the man behind SkEye, the barrier keeping us all trapped in here... and my uncle.”

“Your...” he stopped. “I’m... I’m sorry.”

“Can’t choose your family.” She sighed. Then her grimace melted into an actual smile. “Well, you can. Just not the one you’re born into.”

“But still,” he tilted his head, looking at her through slightly squinted eyes, still and steady in a rare moment of complete focus. “You’re not with him. Turret. or SkEye. Are you?”

“Far from it,” she said mildly with a laugh beneath her words, as if they scratched the surface of an understatement so stark, she couldn’t begin to express it. “We had... a difference of opinion. I left home for a lot of reasons, but that was... a big one.”

“I would too. If my uncle was basically in charge of keeping everyone like me locked up over a fire until we...” He stopped. “Wait.”

“What?” She sat up straighter and leaned forward. “Did you remember something?”

“No... I just can’t believe I never thought of... Oh God, that’s it, isn’t it?” he whispered. He suddenly felt too muffled, restricted by his cloth mask, and pulled it off of his face. “I always wondered why SkEye didn’t just kill us all, and... they don’t have to. That’s why they haven’t just wiped us out, but nobody’s coming to help us either—they really are just waiting for everything to collapse. And for us to kill each other. All they have to do is wait, and eventually we stop being a problem, and... we prove we’re too dangerous to live.”

“That might be what they want, but it’s not going to happen.” Evelyn’s voice

was level, calm and regular. “We’re still alive. We’re going to stay alive, all of us together.”

Regan’s blood ran cold. He clenched his teeth, and willed himself to stop shaking, and *don’t panic, don’t run*. “We’re all going to die. They’re just waiting for the round to give out, and we’ll all fall in, and burn, if we don’t kill each other first, we’re going to go up in smoke and—”

“No. We’re not. Regan, listen to my voice. That is not happening. It’s not happening now, and it will not happen. It won’t.”

“They’re not going to let us out. When the ground opens up and everyone starts to burn, those bastards in gas masks still won’t let us out.” He shut his eyes, a rushing starting to build in his sensitive, pointed ears.

“They don’t have to. Parole is filled with people who will help, and keep you safe from the inside. And someday we will get out, whether they let us or not.”

“Okay. I’m fine.” Regan nodded quickly, trying to get his breathing back under control.

“You don’t have to be.” There was a moment of silence, and then Regan heard the scrape of chair legs against the floor, and the click of Evelyn’s heels. Then, a warm hand on his shoulder. Regan let out his breath in a kind of shuddering sob, shoulders sagging as he slumped forward. He kept his eyes shut, and Evelyn’s hand didn’t move away. “Even I’m not fine all the time. I don’t think anyone is.”

“You’re basically a superhero. And you’re not fine?”

“Not every day. And especially not every night.”

“It’s not going to be okay.”

“Maybe it’s not. But we’re all sure going to try. And for what it’s worth, I’m right here. And it’s not just me either. Wherever you were before, you’re here

with us now. You're not alone."

He couldn't answer, so he listened instead. Evelyn was humming a soft melody. *Good night, dream sweet...* And just like that first night, it made the terror rising in his chest subside and his throat relax enough for him to take a breath. He took another, and the rushing in his ears began to fade, along with the chill that had started running up his spine. He wondered if he'd started to fade himself as well, but couldn't bear to open his eyes yet to check.

After a while he could breathe again. A while after that he could speak.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Really wish I could remember where I heard that. Starting to bug me."

"Like a jingle you can't get out of your head?" Evelyn smiled.

"Yeah. Except backwards. I can't get it... *in my head*. At least it's a nice one."

"Mm-hmm. And I remembered where *I* heard it first, at least."

"Where?" He lifted his head and looked up, eyes opening wide; he could swear even his frill was flaring out just a little in anticipation.

"My mom. I'm sure she sang it to me when I was little, at least a couple times."

"Oh." Regan sat back, somehow disappointed. "Pretty sure I've never met your mom. I mean, I don't know for sure, but..."

"Well, I can ask her. Or you can, if you see her—but you're right, lullabies belong to everyone. One thing we do know from this, though."

"What's that?" He asked without looking up.

"You sing songs like that to people you love. Maybe it's from a long time ago, and you were little, like I was, but you do remember it. You relax and take a deep breath the second you hear it. Whatever memory you have of it, even if you don't know what it is—it's good. Can't fake that." She smiled. "So we

know that you were loved.”

Regan opened his mouth but no sound came out. He folded his arms across his chest, tight; it felt heavy again. The words should have made him happy—and he was. It was a wonderful thing to know. One of the best in the world. But now he knew he’d had something once, and didn’t anymore. That realization hurt more than anything he’d felt since this began.

Before, he’d almost been frightened of what he would discover once he regained his memory. What did he know of himself? Hans, a terrifying ghost. Parole, a terrifying city. Garrett Cole, the man he may have murdered. He *had* assaulted an innocent boy. He didn’t want to see these things; he didn’t want to know them. They almost made him not want to know himself. If that Regan was a killer surrounded by—no, made of ugly things, maybe it was better to have lost him. Leave him behind. Wipe the slate clean, become someone else with a new life.

Now, he had something to lose. He had lost it. He wanted to know who had given him that song, and if he deserved the love he felt in its echoes. He wanted to look into the eyes of the familiar cat that followed him wherever he went, and know who was really looking back. He wanted to know the name ‘Chimera,’ and if that name should inspire pride or guilt. He wanted to know why he could look at a silent, hooded figure in black made of stitched-together corpses and feel safer than he ever would by himself. He wanted to escape Hans’s cold grasp and find every single answer he’d been denied, everything that had made up the person he’d been, the ugly and the sublime, hold them to his aching chest and never let them go.

It had almost been easier not to know he’d been loved, or had a life. Because now Regan knew he would never be able to rest until it was his again.

CHAMELEON MOON



Music held promises of safety, and Evelyn had never trusted silence. Just like she remembered, this sprawling place was silent every minute of every day. Methodically, she made her way through the Turret House, trying the thumbprint lock beside every door. Unlike the one that had opened to the kitchenette with the water, every one she met was locked. The stairwells were open, as was the elevator—to the main floor and the single approved one. She could travel up and down, but what actually lay on the off-limits floors was infuriatingly beyond her reach.

Still, there was only one door she *had* to open. As long as that one was still open, none of the other mattered. Evelyn thought about lullabies, about old memories, and went in search of hers.

It wasn't hard to find the door she wanted. But it was harder to turn the knob. She stopped in front of it, at the end of a long hall, and paused with her hand raised, praying it wouldn't be locked. For years, that door had been closed, but never locked, not to her. When she was at her darkest, the only thing that made her feel better was stepping through.

She lifted her hand to knock on the door, but it opened before she even made it. A tired smile spread across her face.

“Hi, Mama.”

CHAPTER 7

Zero Hour



LIAM PACED IN FRONT OF HANS'S BED, JAWS AND FISTS CLENCHED. TEN FULL MINUTES HE WAITED, when it didn't even have to be one. Hans was letting him stew. Playing with him, like always.

“Sorry about that,” The voice reverberated through Liam’s skull and he clapped one hand to his chest. “My appointment calendar is just, really, super full lately. I’m not used to being such a popular guy! But I could probably get used to it.”

Liam fought to catch his breath, leaning heavily on the metal bar on the foot of the hospital bed. “You are *not* sorry. You've never been sorry. You don't know what that means.”

“Ow. That hurts me. It does.” Hans drawled, floating around Liam’s vision



like a speck in his eye fluid—look directly at him, and he'd disappear. "You're always such a downer, Liam. Li-Li. Lima Bean."

"I can't do this anymore."

"Uh-huh. Hey." He sank down to float horizontally at Liam's eye level, and pointed to one of his eyes. "Check out the eyeliner. I was just thinking, hey, I'm a mental projection, right? I can look however I want. Why the hell didn't I do this years ago?"

"Years of following," Liam continued, but he wasn't talking to Hans anymore; his tone was quiet, scrutiny turned inward, and from the deepening of the lines on his face and clenching of his fists, he didn't like what he saw. "Following where? In my father's footsteps? Down a road of good intentions? Everyone knows where that leads. And then once I dare deviate, do I strike out on my own? No. I find another leader going in another direction—but the antithesis of one vice isn't always a virtue, is it?"

"Hey, look!" Hans stuck out his tongue. "Instant tongue piercing. Like it?"

Now he looked up. "I can't trade one set of sins for another, Hans."

"Okay, listen." Hans's voice softened; and everything about his mental presence became the tiniest bit gentler. "None of this comes back to you. It's all me, I'm in charge here. I'm doing the hard shit so nobody else has to! You're fine."

"No. I'd like to believe that, but I can't, I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just put out the fire! That's all I want!" A flare desperation shot through Liam like an electric shock. It wasn't his own.

"You don't want to stop everything right now, set everything right? You don't want to wake up?"

"Don't you get it? *I am never waking up!*"

“Nonsense. Say the word and it’s over. I know we decided it’s safer if you remain dormant, but—”

“Oh my God, you really think I’m doing this because I want to? Believe me, if you want a job done right, you do it yourself, and I’d love to! Don’t you think I’ve tried? Don’t you think I’d love to just walk on over, take what I need, do it all, save us with my bare hands? Come on, Liam! Think! The only reason I’m putting all this time and energy into herding this bag full of cats into doing what I want is because I can’t do it myself!”

Liam fought down nausea for a few slow beeps of the EKG. “You’ve never said anything about this before,” he said at last.

“It’s been ten years,” Hans said at last, mental voice faint like a distant memory Liam had to concentrate to remember. “After everything my body’s been through, I don’t... I don’t know if I even can get back... in it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why would I give you one more thing to worry and feel bad about? When you worry and feel bad about stuff, you come in here and start... worrying at me.”

“I thought... I thought you just...”

“You thought I enjoyed floating around out here? For ten years? I’m a ghost. I don’t exist anymore, except in peoples’ brains—you’re imagining me right now! I’m a hallucination! I float around, yeah, I jump out and go ‘boo,’ I have a little fun, sure! But at the end of the day, I have to watch while everybody else burns up, and falls through the cracks. And they do *not* come back as ghosts.”

Liam shut his eyes and spent a long moment in silent contemplation. When he opened his eyes again, they were hard. “I still can’t let this continue. For all our sakes, but... now yours as well.”

CHAMELEON MOON

“Mine?” Hans sounded genuinely surprised.

“If what you say is true, if your body is too damaged for you to return to it, then yes, it is just one more thing for the Turrets to add to their litany of crimes.”

“Oh no. No, no, no, you’re not using me and my ghostliness to back out of this now!” Hans floated around to ‘stand’ in the air directly in front of Liam’s face, arms firmly crossed. He had to hover a good four or five inches in the air to glare at him at eye level. “We had a deal.”

“The circumstances have changed.” Maintaining his professional demeanor was becoming more difficult with every word. Liam grasped one wrist behind his back to hide the shaking in his hands, though there was little point in trying to keep a brain-projecting ghost from detecting just about anything so obvious. “My original intent was to mitigate harm, not exacerbate it. As our continued partnership would lead to grievous suffering, the only humane course of action is to see our business concluded at this point.”

“Blah, blah, losing your nerve, breaking your word, breaking your promise, blah.”

“I am trying to spare innocents needless pain,” Liam said through clenched teeth. “Including... including you, Hans.”

“That’s real sweet and all, especially you calling me innocent, but for real... we’ve been over this. Can we please skip to the part where you go back to following the plan?”

“Not this time. I don’t know why I ever agreed to this madness in the first place. I don’t know why I ever listened to you; you’re a tortured soul, and I’m only making it worse.”

“You don’t know why? Okay, small words. I have what you need, and you

have what I need. Actually, together, *we* could have what the whole city needs, which is... not to die, right? Now, I need people to walk through the fire. I need someone who can make guns and bombs that are actually alive. I need someone who won't burn, because they're already dead. And most of all, I need people who won't betray me, because they don't have a choice."

"You can't do it." Quiet desperation crept into Liam's tone, uninvited and easily as a thief in the night. "I can't let you."

"And you told me you needed way to make up for everything. You want to do some good, Liam? This is good! We are gonna be so good together!"

"No. No," he shook his head faster now, voice growing louder, more certain, more strident. "I don't know what we're doing anymore, but 'good' isn't a part of it. Maybe it never was. All we're doing is continuing the cycle. More suffering. More death. More lives destroyed, burned."

"Hey, suffering comes from above," Hans said, casually as if he were relating some proverb or favorite saying. "We're just dealing with the stuff that falls off the roof. It's not like you're at the very top of this whole big evil monster system."

"No, I've just stood idly by and watched while the Turrets created it. While my—while the Major, who is the very head..." He forced air into his lungs. "As you so astutely mentioned... Parole is now all under one roof. We built it, along with this house. And the Turrets... are the very sharp, highest point. We have a fine view from up here. If the smoke ever were to clear, my father would be able to see a very long way. But all I can see... contrary to what I told my cousin... all I can see is the blood on our hands."

"Hm." Hans thought for a moment, floating by him like a leaf on the surface of a stream. "Your cousin. She got to you, didn't she?"

“She's right.”

“She's the most ridiculously positive human being I've ever seen in the entire universe. It's incredible. And annoying.” Hans made a face. “She's like a nuclear explosion of rainbows and sunshine and ‘hey yeah, the world doesn't totally suck in every way, everything's gonna be okay, ‘cause I'm gonna save you, ‘cause I'm Evelyn, and I'm a super—”

“That's enough,” Liam said sharply. “She's done more for this Godforsaken place than you could even comprehend.”

“Oh, okay, you're the only one allowed to be a douche to your family. I get it.”

“You don't save yourself by throwing someone else into the fire,” Liam murmured, ignoring the latest round of Hans's frustrated snark. “Rule one.”

“Her rules, not mine. Look where following the rules got her. Look what it got everyone!” Hans raised his voice when Liam didn't look up. “If we want to survive, we have to forget about the rules, and make our—”

“My father. The Major. He brought you here to use you.”

“Darn skippy.”

“Like you're using me.”

“What, our work together is torture now? That hurts.”

Liam shut his eyes. He didn't need to see Hans's face to know that when he opened them, his nearly ever-present toothy grin would be gone. The shiver reverberated throughout his consciousness, the feeling of regret as soon as the words were ‘said,’ the desire to rewind time just a few seconds. But slips of the tongue weren't reserved for people who physically had them, and the damage was done. “So that's it, then.”

“No—hey, no,” Hans started, pitch of his projected voice rising with an

urgent, stinging hum in Liam's head, almost like an electric shock. "I didn't say anything about actual torture, that was all you. I didn't confirm or deny, you can't take that from what I said."

"This is why you can't return to your body, isn't it?" Liam's voice was brittle, almost as dry as Zilch's death-rattle rasp. "He went too far. He always goes too far."

"Aw come on... Liam, co—nothing's changed! This isn't new information, the plan's the same! We still go down into the fire, put it out, boom, that's done. Then we move on just like before, second verse, same as the first—are you listening? You're not listening. Liam!"

He wasn't responding either. Or hearing. His eyes were open but out of focus, so he likely wasn't seeing anything either. At least nothing in this room. The hands behind his back clasped each other tighter, but shook anyway.

"Hey. Don't go there, okay? You really don't have to." Hans said in a rare, gentle voice, almost a mumble. "Nothing you can do about it, anyway. Nobody can. So just let it go."

Nothing. Liam was still and silent as the young man in the bed, at whom he'd been staring since he opened his eyes.

"It's okay. It's not your fault, Liam." Hans slowly floated down to the floor until he appeared to be standing next to him, solid as any living soul. "None of what happened was your fault. Nothing that's happening now is your fault."

"It is. What he did to you—and what you're doing to them now—"

"Hey. It's gotta happen." Hans only came up to Liam's shoulder on the floor and he couldn't tap him to make him turn, so he resorted to floating in front and at eye level again. "If we want to live, it has to be done."

"No!" Liam gripped the metal bar on the end of the bed, swaying as if it

were the only thing keeping him standing.

“For real, man, you gotta let it go. Just stick to the plan—”

“Stop!” Liam cried, voice taking on a note of hysteria, harsh and discordant in the quiet room. “You can’t do this—”

“I know you’re way messed up in this too, and I don’t want you to get hurt...”

“I can’t let him—I can’t let you—”

“Okay, maybe I should just... yeah, I’m gonna go. I’m gonna give you some space.” Hans began to fade, then stopped, spoke as soothingly as he knew how. “It’ll... everything’s gonna be okay. I... promise. Trust me, okay?”

Hans vanished, but Liam couldn’t stop shaking. He fell to his knees, grasping at the bed, at the still hand on the white linen.

“Damn you, Hans—come back! Come back! *Help me!*” Hot, bitter tears flowed down his gaunt cheeks and pooled on the immaculate sheets. “I’m sorry...”

Nobody came.



Evelyn didn’t even try to fight the tears that stung her tightly shut eyes. “I missed you so much!” she sobbed, feeling like she might collapse with relief and the exhaustion that suddenly hit her like a ton of bricks.

There were warm arms around her, holding her close and returning every bit of love. Cassandra Turret lifted up the semi-opaque black veil over her face and draped it over Evelyn’s head, welcoming her into her safe cocoon. “I missed you, darling. I miss being your mama!”

“You’re always my mama.” Evelyn buried her face in Cassandra’s shoulder,

snuggling as close as she could, surrounded by her mother's arms and the familiar smell of her lilac soap. The black veil Cassandra wore was warm and soft, and it fell around Evelyn like a protective shroud. Although her mother hadn't always worn the veil, the old and familiar feeling remained one of Evelyn's strongest associations with home. "Always! I'm sorry, I'm sorry for running, I'm sorry for leaving you behind!" Most of all, she was sorry she'd never gotten a chance to say this until now.

"You had to go." Cassandra held her close, one hand on the back of her daughter's head. "You did what it took to survive. Sometimes that means running. Escaping. I was the one who said no when you asked me to come with you."

Evelyn shook her head and made herself speak; if she didn't focus on forming words all that would come out were sobs. "Still. I'm sorry I haven't been here for you."

"It's not *you* who's not here, honey. It's me. I'm not here. More and more, I'm... seeing other places. That's what the veil is for. It helps me not see so much."

"I'm glad it's helping. I'm glad that something's helping."

"I still see them. All the different paths, all the endings. Not enough happy ones. But today... I want to see you." Slowly, she removed the veil to look into her daughter's eyes for the first time in years. The lines Evelyn remembered had deepened, and new ones had appeared, spreading out from her eyes and mouth like spiderwebs. Her once-full cheeks were gaunt; her warm brown skin had taken on an unhealthy grey pallor. The only thing that hadn't changed was the slow smile that spread across her face as she held Evelyn's in both of her hands, and the light that gradually came back into her eyes. "Well, would you look at

that. There's still one beautiful thing left in this God-awful place."

Now the words wouldn't come. Evelyn shut her eyes so the next thing wouldn't be tears.

"Hurry. I'm still fighting, but. It's getting harder to stay in the moment. Even when the moments are bad, they're better than where I..." She shook her head and forced her eyes to clear. "Your turn, baby. Go!"

"I'm home for now—not long, probably. I'm—we're fugitives," she made herself say the word, and watched her mother's face for horror, shock, disappointment, anything, and it didn't come. "You know already, don't you."

"I saw scenarios where you were arrested. I saw you die. I saw you escape Parole and breathe clean air."

"Well, it would have been nice if that one had come true," she couldn't help muttering. But she spoke quickly; she had too many questions and not enough time. A common side effect of the drug was a pervasive fever-like delirium. It varied from person to person just how much it took over their mind—some were lucky, like Evelyn, and went through life essentially unaffected. Others, like Cassandra, could feel like they were walking in a dream nearly every waking moment. "Something happened at the Emerald Bar. Garrett Cole's disappeared, he's still missing. Then SkEye stormed our house and we ran, now it's me, Rose, Danae—our little boy, Jack, I've told you about—"

"I've watched him grow. Not the way I wanted to. Not the way I want to. I love who he is and who he's been and who he will be, every single version."

Evelyn shut her eyes for a moment and made herself continue. "And now I get home and everything's different. So many locked doors, and—the house, it's all automated, gates, defenses—*Liam!* Mama, what's—"

“Be very careful.” Her mother spoke flatly, a dramatic departure from her warm, expressive tones from a moment earlier. Evelyn recognized her mother’s poker face, the carefully neutral expression she got when she was measuring how much to reveal. She had a similar one she wore herself, and had learned from the best. “He’s walking on very fragile ground. Everyone is in Parole, but the trouble is, that boy doesn’t even know it.”

“I’m... worried about him,” Evelyn said at last. She was a lot of things, but that was one of them. “He told me he has a plan to put out the fire. That should be a good thing, but I have a really bad feeling. I don’t even know whose side he’s on anymore.”

“Liam doesn’t know himself. It’s hard to be on anyone’s side when nobody’s on his. Not even his father.”

“His father. Turret. The Major.” Evelyn’s voice went hard. “I knew he was at the top of this.”

“He thinks he’s at the top of all things, and can see all the answers.”

“What’s he doing, Mama?”

“All the wrong things.”

“I know. But it’s worse than usual, isn’t it?” Evelyn could feel her face getting hotter as her anger rose. “Liam won’t tell me what, but I know the Major’s involved in whatever he’s doing. And it’s not just about putting out the fire, is it? He’s always had this city crushed half to death under his boot and now he’s getting ready to—”

“Evelyn.”

“Yes?”

“Some evil sweeps like a tidal wave. Systems of it, building on itself until it’s unstoppable, until it eats everything in its path like wildfire. Some stays quiet

and small in a little room, where no one sees. There's no fire, no thousands in pain, just a man in a high place who wants to get business done."

"Major Turret," Evelyn nodded slowly. "He's always been all about results. Doesn't care about right or wrong; the ends are everything, not the means. But he's the head of Eye in the Sky! His evil *is* a tidal wave, there *is* fire, thousands *are* in pain!"

"That's not where he's looking. That's not the result he wants."

"That's the result he's had, even if—"

"That's the evil you fight, sweetheart." Cassandra looked at her with tears in her eyes and without slightest waver in her smile. "You rescue the thousands. You hear their voices crying out and come running."

"Yeah." Evelyn nodded and felt her own eyes sting in reply. "Anyone with any sense would run the other way, but. I'm just not very good at that."

"You're here fight against the wildfire. I'm here to fight the evil in the little rooms."

"You're... you're fighting him?"

"When the time is right, yes. We're not powerless. That's the mistake everybody makes, thinking we are. Please don't ask me any more questions about this place, it's safer that way. Trust your mother. I still know best."

"I can't accept that, Mama. If you're in danger here I have to help you. You just said it, that's what I do."

"Darling, things are going on that you cannot see." There was a hard edge to Cassandra's voice, one that wasn't there often. But when it was, Evelyn listened. "You only see one side of this story. Mine will be told another day. Evelyn?"

"Yes." She prepared to absorb the next round of information, analyze, alter

course.

“I’m so proud of you.”

Now the tears came. Now she fell back into her mother’s arms and cried on her shoulder, finally letting go of all the worry, anger, heartache and exhaustion she’d been holding in ever since that last night at the Emerald Bar. But no, it hadn’t started then; Evelyn was too practiced at burying vulnerability and carrying on with the show. That night had just marked the end of one act and the start of another.

It felt like a long time and only a few seconds at the same time before she let go, wiping her eyes. When Evelyn’s vision cleared at last, her heart sank. Cassandra stared into space over Evelyn’s shoulder, eyes out of focus. Whatever she saw, it wasn’t her daughter, or this room, or maybe even this day. Feeling a little chill, Evelyn moved back into her line of vision. “Mama? Can you hear me?”

“Haven’t seen the moon in a while, but it never goes away. Just changes its face...” Cassandra said softly, and now she looked faraway. A jolt of alarm shot through Evelyn—she recognized this look very well. “And it’s not a full moon, it’s not a blue moon... it’s a chameleon moon.”

“What does that mean?” Evelyn asked very carefully, paying just as careful attention to the answer. Even if the things her mother saw were only potentialities, she knew better than to dismiss them. Especially not now, and not after all this time.

“The world moves in cycles. We go from one phase to the next and everything’s different. The moon changes phases. Chameleons change everything too. The city on the Styx has seen a lot of change, but this is a big one. This one, oh, this puts the fire to shame.”

CHAMELEON MOON

“What... what do you see?”

“Chameleon moon means change, and it’s coming closer. Storms and plague, dragons and ghosts, everything falling down into the fire, falling down, down...” Her eyes shone with a sudden glassy sheen, and widened in something that might have been awe, or fear.

Evelyn swallowed hard. “Mama, stay with me. Take a deep breath, okay? Please breathe.” Cassandra didn’t seem to hear. “Please try to stay here with me.”

“I have to look! It’s the only way we’ll know when it’s coming!”

“You are stronger than they are.” Evelyn put both hands on her mother’s shoulders and looked directly into her eyes. “And it is not your job to save us all—”

“This isn’t just a possibility, Evvie, it’s the real thing, the one real thing I know for sure. And I have to warn everyone else, they have to *listen to me*, nobody *listens* to me!” Cassandra grabbed at her daughter’s wrist and clamped on like a steel vise. “There’s a storm, and there’s poison, and everyone is going to fall—”

“Okay. Okay, I’m listening.” Evelyn whispered, voice catching in her throat.

“I’m doing all I can here, but it’s not enough. No matter what, we’re going to lose people, you have to warn them, they won’t listen to me, nobody will *listen*—”

“I’m listening. I promise. I’m listening.” Tears streamed down Evelyn’s face now as Cassandra sank back into the familiar depths of drug-poisoned waking nightmares. Her mother’s eyes closed and she began to slump forward even as she frantically gasped for breath and choked out terrified words. Evelyn caught her in her arms and held her close, gently replacing the veil over her eyes.

Cassandra clutched at Evelyn's shoulders, and now it was her turn to cry while being held close. Slowly, her panicked breathing slowed to normal and she came back to her senses. The attack faded, leaving her exhausted, but herself.

"I love you, Mama."

"I love you too. Stay with me a while longer. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere." Softly, Evelyn began to sing. Her voice wrapped around them both like a warm blanket, and Cassandra relaxed, lines smoothing from her face.



"You really think there's something down in the fire?" Finn took his eyes completely off the road to shoot Zilch a curious look. His taller, greyer companion didn't seem at all disturbed, despite the speed at which they flew by Parole's few functioning traffic signals, and many active fire pits. "I mean, nothing could survive in there. Hans has to be making it up."

"*It's a quiet night in beautiful downtown Parole,*" Radio Angel's voice, ever-present in Finn's cab, was perky and bright as usual. "*Birds are singing, toxic gas clouds are billowing up from flaming cracks in the ground, and my old high school just went up in a puff of smoke...*"

"I don't know his reasons," Zilch said, choosing their words much more carefully than Finn chose his lane. "All I know is that we're going. I don't have a choice. Not if I want my heart back."

Whatever concern Finn felt as he turned back to face the street wasn't enough to make him actually slow down. "I don't like this. He's messing with you, but in a bad, scary way—okay, from what you've told me this guy messes with everyone, but this could actually kill you, which basically nobody else in

Parole can do. I dunno, just sounds like a guy I'd want to get away from real fast."

"Now, it would absolutely make my night if anybody's seen my good friend Cairus Maddox? He's probably scared out of his mind by now, and really, for real, so am I."

"I know. But I—Finn?" They looked down quickly and pulled back their hood to get a better look at the previously animated driver, who had let out a sharp gasp, looking pale and sick. One hand pressed against a spot on his abdomen, and he seemed to be holding his breath.

"Ow..." he gasped, rubbing his side. Multiple small explosions echoed outside, but the car only weaved a few feet back and forth across the side street. Fortunately there wasn't much traffic in this neighborhood.

"Stitches again?" Zilch's tone softened in an instant. "Breathe, Finn. Deep. Slow."

"I know!" Finn yelped. "I—ow! Man, I thought they took my appendix *out*, but I swear it feels like they put something *in*! It hurts..."

"Stop the car here." Zilch put their arm around Finn as he jerked the wheel in the general direction of the curb and slammed on the brakes. Their head smacked the window in a greasy spot with a network of cracks already radiating out from its center—but with less force than usual. This landing was unusually lackluster for Finn's normal driving habits: a further symptom that only made Zilch worry more intently. "Deep breaths. In and out. Listen to the radio."

"He's 19 years old, white and skinny with blonde eyes and blue hair—oh no, sorry, I'm nervous, got those mixed up..."

"Okay. All right, I'm good now." Finn caught his breath, looked up and smiled, a little shakily. "Besides, it's all gonna be worth it to see Danae's face."

"Mm. Working on her projects. Keeping busy. Important to feel useful."

“No, her dog!” Finn laughed. “She’ll be so happy! And she could really use some happy.”

Zilch hid a smile by getting out of the car and closing the door, raising their black hood to completely obscure their face. “Don’t get too excited. Noise at the Bar last night got attention. Area will have Eyes.”

The street was way too quiet, except for the constant undertone of sirens and helicopter blades. They both looked up at the long rectangle of night sky between the dark buildings like soldiers in a trench. Black helicopters with their searchlights cut bright paths through the sick, murky sky—more than usual.

“Wow...” Finn breathed, swallowing hard. “They are busy tonight. They sure are.”

“We’ll be fine.” Zilch took a slow look around, sharp eyes thoroughly inspecting the perimeter and coming full circle to rest back on Finn. “Angel would tell us if we were walking into danger. Unless you heard something?”

“Nope. Come on, Danae said it was right up here,” Finn stopped in front of a mess of a broken door crisscrossed with bright yellow police tape and half-shattered windows on either side. “It’s probably this one.”

Zilch surveyed the demolished front and refrained from further comment. The windows might have been edged with jagged broken glass, but they weren’t completely broken, suggesting nobody had yet been in and out. Unusual in Parole, where abandoned or condemned houses were picked through almost immediately for harshly scarce resources and shelter. “No lockdown. No entry. Strange.”

“Maybe SkEye doesn’t care.” Finn shrugged. “They were after Regan and Evelyn, not Rose and Danae.”

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“Too valuable. Someone would want it. If not SkEye, someone else. Library would send someone to recover the machinery, medicine.” Zilch shook their head and cast a baleful look up and down the breezeway. “And if SkEye was here, the area should be locked down.” Their eyes narrowed. “Something’s wrong.”

Finn rocked back on his heels, hands in his pockets. “Well... I don’t see anyone around now. And we’re just in and out, right? Badda-bing, badda-boom!”

“No booms.”

“Okay! So just badda-bing, then.”

Zilch didn’t reply. Instead, they pulled their hood down lower, stalked forward and climbed silently into one window like a huge, long-legged black spider in trailing black rags, ignoring the jagged glass that scratched and caught in their grey skin. Finn started to scramble up behind them, but they held up one bony hand, gently steering him back down to the ground. Still perched on the windowsill, they swept their skeletal but iron-strong arm around in the frame ridding it of any more broken glass, before extending their free hand to help Finn through.

“Thanks, buddy!” Finn clambered up and the rest of the way through, before stopping dead with a little gasp as soon as he saw what looked like an enormous, dead black wolf splayed across the floor. “There he is. I hope Danae can fix him.”

“I’m sure she can,” Zilch said softly, hooded head slowly tilting to one side very slightly as they gazed at the still form.

“I hope you’re right.” Finn couldn’t resist petting the motionless fur as he picked up the small gears and cogs, piling them up beside the limp pelt. “This

is a pretty big mess. I dunno how anyone could bring this guy back to life.”

“Life comes back...” their whisper was soft as a breeze through an empty sanctuary. “Easier than anyone knows. But not always the same.”

Now Finn did look up at them with an expression that few people ever saw, but Zilch did more than most. Deep empathy, assurance and understanding. He opened his mouth to reply—but didn’t get out a single word.

Nobody looking at Zilch’s otherworldly, towering form ever expected them to move quickly. But before Finn could blink, they’d flown across the room and flung him to the floor, throwing themselves on top of him and covering him with their torn black layers and heavy hood like a camouflage cloak. A surveillance helicopter’s thrum suddenly grew much louder, like it hovered right above them. He could almost hear the crackling of radio communication and the pounding of heavy combat boots. Finn held perfectly still, suddenly worried that somehow the men in the body armor would be able to hear the pounding of his heart, and intensely glad that only one of them needed to breathe... but the unnerving roar faded.

“Too close.” Zilch gingerly climbed off Finn, gentle hands checking his fragile human form for injury. “They’re all around.”

“Why are they here?” Finn whispered back. Below his anxious voice, they could hear a rumble like far-off thunder. “Why do they even care?”

“SkEye doesn’t forgive or forget.” Their hands stopped, stayed on Finn’s round shoulders. “Stay here.”

“Where are you going?” Finn almost squeaked, grabbing at Zilch’s thin arm as they started to move away. “Don’t leave me here! There are guys right outside!”

“I know. I’m going to see what they want,” their voice was low and steady

and as comforting as they could make it. Finn didn't seem comforted, but they kept going anyway. "If I can, I'll lead them away."

"What? No! Don't do anything dangerous, Zilch! Let's just go! Let's just grab the rest of the stuff and get back in the car and go home—back to the Turret House, I mean, then let's go home! I just want this to be over!"

"It will be. Soon. Just give me five minutes."

"I don't like this, Zilch..."

"Five minutes. Get the dog in the trunk. Then wait for me." Zilch started for the window. "I'll be back. Start counting now."

"Okay," Finn nodded, trying to get a handle on his nerves—as he did so, he remembered the rest of his list, and tried to gauge how long it would take to collect them. "Might still have some to do, but I'll get as much as I can done while you're gone."

Zilch slid back out through the window, silent and smooth as a shadow, and Finn stuffed another handful of gears into a bullet hole torn in the dog's pelt. A few minutes later he'd gotten all the delicate bits he could find, and the wolf seemed to all be in one piece otherwise. Carefully as he could, he dragged Toto-Dandy by the back legs out the door and to the back of his cab.

He popped the trunk, and managed to wrestle the dead weight inside, then leaned against his car, panting and sweaty but proud of himself. The sets of armor upstairs, lightweight and much more intact than poor Dandy, weren't nearly as much of a hassle, even if they took three trips. He did wonder what a nice lady like Danae would be doing with what looked like modified body armor, but at least she didn't have any guns.

Four trips. He picked up toothbrushes, pajamas, changes of clothes, trying not to look too closely at anything he shouldn't, and get done quickly. The

street outside was empty and dark. Still no sign of Zilch. It had definitely been more than five minutes, and his heart was starting to pound.

Then a bright light appeared at the other end of the street.

“Zilch?” Finn looked up quickly, squinting. Maybe they’d found a flashlight or something. It was small and white, like a little searchlight bobbing at head level, like the ones on the lighted helmets worn by miners before the fires.

Another bright light appeared next to the first one. Finn could clearly see the figures behind them now: two men in black body armor, helmets and gas masks. He gasped and froze, cold panic flooding his every vein. Swallowing hard, he very slowly raised his hands above his head, and looked desperately for tall shadows. They’d have to come to him, because he couldn’t scream.

The two men stood facing him, very still and silent. Finn held just as still—and just as aware of their size, their heavy armor, and their weapons.

There was an electronic click-hum as one turned his skull-like mask to look at the other, communicating silently on a police radio frequency wired into their helmets. Finn waited for almost ten seconds—but it seemed like much longer—anxiety rising as they held a conversation he couldn’t hear. Suddenly the radio-hum clicked off, and both men lurched forward as one, each taking an arm and pinning Finn facedown on the car.

He tried to scream, but a gloved hand muffled his voice. Cold handcuffs snapped around his wrists, biting painfully into his flesh, and a fast series of loud pops sounded from somewhere above them, like a string of fireworks exploding all at once. Finn struggled but couldn’t move, panic overwhelming him—

“Take your hands off him.”

All three heads snapped up to see a very tall, thin figure standing in the

middle of the street, sharp and pitch black against the pale sputtering light of a streetlamp. Their long shadow stretched toward them all, so dark and solid it almost seemed like an extension of themselves. A slight breeze wafted a puff of smoke through the street and blew at the hanging shreds of their ragged layers; Finn remembered an old cowboy movie he'd seen once, a gunslinger, high noon...

Then their thin arms reached up and slowly lowered their hood. Now the pale light shone on a cold, hard stare, stripes and angles of stitches, and bared, broken teeth.

"Zero." One of the SkEye men actually spoke out loud on a frequency everyone could hear. The electronically-altered voice sounded marveling, admiring and accusatory all at once.

Their eyes narrowed. Slowly, they took a step forward.

"Zilch!" Finn was simply overjoyed. He also hadn't heard the other word at all. He couldn't see anything but their intensity and determination; nothing stopped Zilch once they started to walk like that, and now they were walking right to him. "I knew you'd come back! Five minutes!" He laughed, face lit up with relief, almost excitement—then one of the enforcers slammed a savage fist into his ribs, knocking the wind along with all resistance.

Immediately, Zilch froze mid-step, jerking as if they'd been the one punched. For one long moment they hung perfectly still in the air as if paralyzed, eyes nearly popping from their sockets. Then, as Finn watched, horrified, they clutched desperately at their own chest, doubled over in stunned agony—and went down hard.

Finn gasped, struggling harder against the armed men; he still couldn't form words, much less scream, but he wanted to. Zilch was sprawled on the ground,

motionless, and he couldn't see why. There had been no gunshots, no explosions, but when they moved it was to slowly curl onto their side. He couldn't remember he'd ever seen Zilch in pain before. He hadn't actually known they could feel it. But they still weren't getting up.

One of the SkEye men waved a hand high, and the ever-present background noise of overhead engines grew louder in response. A moment later harsh white light flooded the street and a helicopter descended into the urban trench with a deafening roar. Its searchlight was blinding, and the wind from its spinning blades churned up the ashes and smoke like a cyclone.

"No!" Now Finn screamed. Now he fought, kicked, tried to bite, all while struggling to get his breath back, his head spun. Something slammed into his temple and his world exploded and then went black. All up and down the street, garbage cans and mailboxes exploded and lit up the smoke-filled night like the Fourth of July. And above it all the engine roar rose, closer and louder with every second.

As the men shoved his limp body into the chopper, Finn forced his blurred vision back into focus for just a second longer. Zilch still wasn't here. But they were trying. Even clinging to consciousness and overwhelmed with terror, Finn felt a faint wave of warmth. He watched as with what had to be every last bit of strength in their dead, stitched-together body, Zilch forced himself up onto their feet, and staggered forward—and fell again.

The chopper was lifting up and away now, and Finn was going along with it and Zilch wasn't going with him. They were a small figure now, and getting smaller, crawling on their hands and knees and clawing at the air and walls.

Finn thought he heard Zilch yell something, but their voice was lost in the blizzard of garbage and ash and howling wind and the rushing in his own head.

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But it was too late. The chopper lifted up and away before Zilch made it halfway there, its searchlight still sweeping the area. All they could do was watch helplessly as it disappeared. As they gasped and tried to push themselves to take another step, the roar faded, and the street was still again. The enforcers, the helicopters, and Finn were gone.

“I’m sorry...”

Zilch collapsed to the ground—and their heart, wherever it was, sank.

CHAPTER 8

To Hell And Back

“AT LEAST YOUR MOM’S OKAY,” ROSE SAID, SEARCHING FOR A SILVER LINING. IT MIGHT TAKE A while, but she always found one.

“Okay’ is relative term at this point, I think.” Evelyn buried her face in her hands. The only sounds were Danae and Jack’s soft breathing from the nearby bed; they were curled up together, sleeping. In dreams, Danae looked the happiest she’d been all day, with Jack’s little arms and legs splayed out and one finger almost in his mama’s mouth.

“Was she always like this?” Rose asked gently.

“No. She used to be my best friend.” Evelyn brought her knees up against her chest, rested her chin on them. “She still is. This isn’t her, it’s her... I can’t even call it an ability. Before, she always had anxiety and depression. Horrible,



debilitating. But with Chrysedrine..." Evelyn sighed. "It's a kind of future sight, but several possible futures, and usually they're... not good. All the things that scared her before, now she actually sees it happen. Like hallucinations but—but worse. Because some of them are real, she just can't always tell which ones."

"That's... I can't imagine."

"You wouldn't want to. Seeing all the things she sees? And then watching some of them come true, and then the relief when others don't? I can't imagine either, how infuriating that must have been, trying to pick out the truth from the lies. And terrifying. But she'd try to warn us, about everything. Every single one. And eventually... we stopped listening. I stopped." She shut her eyes, curled tighter around her knees. "And then I had to leave. And I tried to keep talking to her, but I stopped even that... it hurt to see her. If I hadn't left her alone, maybe she wouldn't have—"

"Evelyn, stop," Rose said gently. "You had to save yourself. You know how it goes, secure your own oxygen mask before assisting others."

"I know. But now that I'm back..." Evelyn frowned, and let out a frustrated noise. "I'm trying to fix this, and just keep running into roadblocks. I thought she'd tell me everything but she didn't and it's not because she doesn't know. She wouldn't. She actually—Liam's up to something. My uncle is up to something even worse. My mother knows what it is, but she's not talking—and I can't help if I'm in the dark!"

"I know you want to help," Rose said after a pause, "And I agree, Cassandra definitely knows more than she's telling us. But from everything you've told me, it would be a mistake to underestimate her. That nurse, Lisette, seems to care too—and be pretty on top of things. Even if she's just a kid." She chewed her bottom lip, slipping back into her thoughtful analysis groove, and Evelyn

had to smile at this small reminder of life as it should be. “A smart kid. Who definitely seems to have Liam read like a book. I wonder who sent her and—what was the other one’s name? Wren? I wonder where they’re from. I bet they know a lot about what goes on behind the scenes here...”

“I’m so glad you’re here.” Evelyn smiled. “Nobody else I’d rather have in my corner.”

Rose looked up and smiled back once the words sunk in through her contemplative reverie. “Just trying to put all the pieces together. Do you think your mother would talk to me?”

“Can’t see why not. She’s always said she wanted to meet you and Danae. And-and Jack.” Evelyn’s voice caught and Danae’s hand went to rub a slow circle between her shoulder blades.

“The feeling’s mutual, believe me. And I might be able to help her cope better with her attacks. She might not see horrible things so much, then.”

“Thank you so much—you’ve just been amazi—”

The loud banging on the door made them both jump.

“Yes?” Rose called softly so as not to wake Jack or Danae. Nobody answered after a second, so she turned back to Evelyn. Then they both jumped at the second knock that nearly broke down the door. “What in the—”

“Shh!” Evelyn sprang up, placing herself between the door and her family in a heartbeat and instantly slipping into a fighting stance, ready to kick, punch or scream, all of which would do significant damage. Instead, she carefully opened the door.

A tall figure in hooded black rags stood outside, looking like it had crawled there directly out of the grave. Or maybe up from Hell.

Evelyn and Rose both jumped back, letting out soft gasps, and Rose

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automatically raised her forearms as a forest of sharp thorns sprang out of her skin. In front of her, Evelyn opened her mouth wide, ready to let loose a hurricane blast—

“Help me.”

Evelyn stopped just in time. She let out her breath, but not in a scream, as the a pair of long arms reached up and slowly lowered the hood, revealing a face that appeared to be stitched together from different people, skin of different colors and ages and textures, but none of them at all healthy. Their strikingly wide eyes were fever-bright and unnaturally still, fixing her and Rose with an unblinking stare, and even these didn't look quite alive. If she didn't know better, she'd say a living corpse stood before her, some kind of dead and re-animated horror movie monster—

Until they raised their hands from in surrender.

“I'm sorry. Don't—please don't be afraid. Help.”

Rose stood up and stepped toward them very slowly, trying not to feel like she was walking toward death itself. “Who are you?”

“Where's Chimera?”

Rose and Evelyn exchanged a glance more confused than terrified now. “I don't know th—”

The stranger whirled around and staggered back into the hall. Evelyn and Rose slowly turned to face one another, expressions shocked mirror-images, and followed. Rose stopped to close the door behind them over the sleeping Danae and Jack. In the hall, their unexplained guest banged on the door and didn't stop until Regan pulled it open.

“Zilch? What—”

“*Chimera.*” Their voice sounded like the scraping of metal across concrete as

they leaned in close, terror in the whites of their boggling eyes. “*I need your help.*”

“What happened?” Regan whispered, neck frill starting to twitch and jump as his yellow eyes widened and pupils narrowed to slits.

“Arrested. They took him!”

“Okay. Okay, just hang on, we’re gonna—Evelyn?” Regan called, opening his door the rest of the way and stepping outside. He immediately waved her over when he saw her and Rose doing the same, looking almost more relieved than Zilch when she hurried down the hall toward them. “Evelyn, this is—”

“Zilch,” she finished, several puzzle pieces snapping together in her head. “Hello, good to finally meet you face to face, sorry it’s under these circumstances.”

“Evelyn Calliope.” The face in question was, admittedly, terrifying under the dark hood under which it had been previously obscured. But more relevantly, its eyes were wide and staring with what she immediately knew to be fear. At once, the strange and unsettling Zilch got a lot less frightening; Evelyn always knew what came next when people were frightened, and needed protecting. “Finn. My friend. Taken. Save him. Please.”

“Of course.” Evelyn’s hands balled into fists. “It was SkEye, wasn’t it?”

“Wait. Start from the beginning,” Rose said as calmly as she could, and made herself look up at the strange and intimidating figure looming over them in the hallway. Zilch didn’t look like any other trauma survivor she’d ever encountered, but she’d learned fast and early in Parole that this was one area in which appearances couldn’t matter less. They were showing the same signs. So she was going to treat them the same way. “Now. What happened after you left the house tonight?”

Strangely, Zilch's bone-thin, angular shoulders rose and fell, as if they were going through the motions of taking a deep breath. No lungs inflated in their chest—the organs were stored miles away in a jar of formaldehyde in the library basement—but the ritual helped to calm them down. They opened their lopsided mouth to speak, but didn't get the first word out.

"S'going on?" Danae asked, coming out of their room and rubbing one eye with the heel of her hand. She stopped dead, freezing as soon as she laid her one open eye on Zilch, and immediately let out an involuntary scream, stumbling backwards into the wall.

"Dee, it's okay!" Evelyn immediately slipped between her and Zilch, blocking her view of the cadaver-like face or flowing black layers. "This is Zilch, and they—they?" She shot a quick glance over her shoulder, and Zilch did indeed shoot her a quick nod back, though they didn't make eye contact either. "They're not gonna hurt anyone, they need our help. Breathe, hon."

"I'm good," Danae gasped, nodding a few times but still sucking in breaths. "Jeez Louise—I'm fine, wow, just startled is all, just a little... little bit."

"That's it," Evelyn rubbed her back and gently steered her over to Rose, so she could look back up at Zilch with an apologetic and carefully calm expression. Truly, she couldn't blame Danae for being startled. Evelyn might have picked a stronger word. "We're gonna help their friend Finn in a minute. Remember Finn? He was arrested by SkEye tonight."

"I'm sorry." Zilch whispered. "This is not... I don't like. Meeting. People like...I'm sorry."

"No, no, it's—you're fine, my fault, I know the fe..." Danae risked a glance up at Rose. "I asked Finn to pick up some of our stuff. Wanted to surprise you. Looks like I set the kid up for..." Then she realized something, and she

immediately paled. Her eyes snapped up to Zilch. “Wait. You went with him? To our house?”

“Yes.”

“I told him not to tell anyone!” Danae exclaimed, before shutting her mouth again and looking anywhere but at the bizarre, patchwork-gray face.

“He only told me.” Zilch pressed a hand against their forehead hard, trying to keep more skin from peeling off, and keep themselves focused. “He thinks I don’t count. He tells me everything.”

“You care about him, don’t you?” Rose asked gently, one arm still around Danae’s shoulders. She might not have seen anyone quite like Zilch in her life before, but she knew despair, vulnerability, and exhaustion when she saw it. They were common symptoms for life in Parole, often occurring simultaneously, and Rose made it a priority to alleviate them wherever she could. “He’s important to you.”

“Yes.” Zilch fell silent. When they spoke again, their words came out in a tumble much faster than their usual measured rhythm; anyone else might have been close to hyperventilating. “Help me, help him, Finn did nothing wrong, never anything wrong, just the wrong place, wrong time, always, always the wrong place, always the wrong time, doesn’t listen, no sense, never any sense, wants to help, tries too hard, I’m not breakable, he is—”

“Just take it slow,” Rose said, voice low and grounding. “We’ll focus on Finn one-hundred percent once we’re done here, and we’ll move fast, I promise. But first, just take us through what happened, nice and easy.”

Zilch focused on her warm gaze with an intense stare of their own. She had the unsettling impression that she was looking into the predatory eyes of a bird of prey—just colder, dead—and tried not to shiver. Rose tried to stay in the

moment, remember her training, be an anchor no matter who the person she was working with looked or sounded like. It seemed to help, because they continued more easily. “We found your house. It was too quiet. Unsecured. That was wrong. I knew it was wrong. Shouldn’t have let him go in...”

By the time they were done relating the night’s traumatic events, Danae was leaning against the wall, rubbing her forehead. “Oh, God...” She sighed. “I should have never sent him there. I should have known SkEye would be swarming the place. If something happens to him, it’s my—”

“No, hon.” Evelyn said firmly. “It’s SkEye’s fault, same as always. Not yours.”

“Zilch?” Rose spoke up from her thoughtful silence. “Where were you when the enforcers arrested him? Were you inside the house?”

“No.” Zilch jerked as if they’d been slapped—or struck by whatever had incapacitated them back on the street. “I saw them arrive. On foot, outside. I went to head them off. I came back, and they had him. Then something hit me. It... hurt,” they tilted their head, as if deeply confused by the memory. “I fell. They took him. Explosions. Too much. I couldn’t reach him.”

“Explosions...” Danae frowned, reflecting back over something that had puzzled her before. It made perfect sense now. “I kept hearing booms when we were in the elevator together—and on the taxi ride here. Those were him, aren’t they?”

“Yes. Emotional spikes. Adrenaline rushes.” Zilch gave a sad little smile. “Apparently, his driving does not produce this. For him.”

“I was gonna say,” Regan gave a weak half-smile. He’d stayed quiet during most of this conversation, trying to absorb all the information he could, but he just didn’t like seeing that bittersweet look on Zilch’s face. He had to say

something. “And he seems like a pretty happy guy all in all.”

“Happiness is... a necessity. Even manufactured happiness. Otherwise, people get hurt. Except for me,” Zilch’s tone wasn’t bitter. Instead it sounded almost grateful, fond. “He can’t kill me. But Eye in the Sky will kill him.”

Regan stared. “Wow. SkEye doesn’t fuck around, do they?”

“No.” Zilch closed their eyes. “They’ll interrogate him. He’ll hold out for a while. But nobody lasts.”

“I have to ask,” Evelyn’s voice was level but soft. “Does he know anything sensitive? Anything that could be dangerous if it fell into the wrong hands—their hands?”

“No.” Zilch said immediately. “But they’ll think he does.”

“Why is that?” she asked in the same gentle tone.

“His taxi. That must be why they picked him up. That or they recog...” Zilch paused before continuing. “His car has a signal scrambler. Hides Radio Angel’s channel, and masks—” they stopped, eyes sliding over to Regan.

“I see,” Evelyn nodded, not seeming to notice the sentence’s sudden end. “That’s bad. They’ll connect dots where there aren’t any, SkEye’s been after her for years.”

“When they’re done...” Zilch sucked hard on their teeth. “We have to get him out.”

“Wait! His explosions!” Danae pounded a triumphant fist into her other hand. “You said that things go boom around him when he’s anything but happy—and he sure won’t be now. Won’t he blow his cell wide open? He might even be able to demolish the place and break out himself!”

But Zilch shook their head. “They’re random. Finn can’t control when. Where. Force. Never knows. He feels too hard, something explodes. Someone

gets hurt.” Zilch looked pained themselves. “Suppressing emotion... can be its own torture.”

“It’ll be okay,” Rose said softly. Interacting with the looming, undead-looking figure should have been immediately disconcerting. Dead flesh and stitches and staring eyes set off a primal fear reflex in any human being. But she didn’t pick up any hostility in Zilch’s admittedly hard-to-discern tone or body language. What she did read was fear, pain and desperation, and that could only come from one place. “We’ll bring him home.”

“Fast. Or he’s dead.” Their face shifted from concerned to grim, eyes narrowed to slits as if they saw nothing but bad omens and worse outcomes.

“Then let’s go.” Evelyn started down the hallway. “That’s a big fan of mine in there! You know how I feel about people hurting my babies. Somebody’s going to hurt, and it’s not going to be him.”

“Gotta say, I love it when you talk like that!” Danae rocketed off after her down the hall, and Rose and Regan hurried to catch up.

“Thank you,” Zilch said in a faint voice, drawing up even with Evelyn on surprisingly fast steps. She caught a glimpse of blue and green eyes before they pulled up their black hood, and wasn’t sure how she ever could have found them emotionless before. In her long career as one of Parole’s primary defenders, she’d seen more frightened people searching for lost loved ones than she could remember. All their eyes tended to look the same: just like the ones under that hood.

“It’s what I’m here for.” She nodded. “Now let’s go get your boy back.”



Everywhere he looked was bright, blinding white light. Finn turned around slowly, then glanced straight up, trying to find some definition of corners or walls or even a floor, but there were no shadows, no lines. He couldn't tell if the walls were right in front of his face or if the white stretched on forever. His breathing became rapid and shallow under the glare; he sweated like an ant under a magnifying glass.

He glanced down at himself to make sure it wasn't his eyes, that he hadn't gone blind. He wore disposable paper hospital clothes that left him feeling naked and vulnerable. He was barefoot; he instinctively hugged his upper body, and tried to make himself small. His head pounded. He ran a careful hand through his hair; no blood, but a nasty raised bump on the back of his head sent a spasm of pain through his skull at the slightest touch.

"Hello?" Finn called. His voice seemed to die in the air, muffled as if he were surrounded on all sides by several feet of snow. He swallowed hard, shivering despite the uncomfortable heat. No answer. A little cold knot started to form in his stomach.

He took three steps and hit a wall—there *were* walls here, then. The surface was smooth and hot; it hurt to keep his hands on them. But he felt along the wall and realized it was smoothly curving. He was inside a white cylinder, with no windows, no doors. How had he gotten here? The last thing he remembered was... It had been night. Outside? He'd been outside, because he'd had to go somewhere....

Everything flooded back in a rush. Going to Danae and Rose's house to get their things, Evelyn's list, Zilch telling him not to worry, then Eye in the Sky... the helicopter's bright lights bearing down on him, the impact and pain on the back of his skull. Screaming for Zilch... who lay on the ground, not moving.

CHAMELEON MOON

Why hadn't Zilch saved him? Were they hurt? Worse? Or was Finn just not worth the effort? A chill went through him, even as the temperature rose. He could barely breathe, was there something wrong with the air?

Finn gasped. Air. How much air was in here? He struggled to keep his breathing and heart under control—and more importantly, his fear. He couldn't afford to panic and risk an explosion.

“State your name.”

Finn started at the harsh voice that suddenly cut through the silence. He spun around, searching for a hidden speaker or camera, but found nothing but white.

“Wh—tell me why I'm here first! Where am I? What did I do?”

“You entered a secured zone in an unapproved vehicle. A preliminary scan revealed it to be equipped with illegal signal dampening, EM-signature masking and field-scrambling devices. Force was authorized to neutralize this threat, and you have been detained for questioning.”

The voice hadn't answered his question about where he was being held, but it wasn't hard to guess. His mouth fell open but no sound came out. Sweat poured down his face and the paper shirt stuck to his skin.

“You provided shelter and assistance to confirmed criminals. This interrogation will continue indefinitely until you provide us with the location of Evelyn Calliope and Chimera, as well as their connection to the cyber-anarchist CyborJ Syndicate.”

“What? Why?” Finn stammered. “They haven't done anything wrong! I entered your unauthorized whatever area, fine, and I have some—the dampening devices are just to protect my passengers' privacy, okay? People still deserve some safe places even here, that's all, but Evelyn's never done a bad

thing in her life, so you just leave—”

“Chimera is wanted for multiple counts of theft, trespassing, espionage and murder as well as treason, and Calliope has long been identified as a propaganda-distributing agitator at militia base Emerald Bar.”

“*Militia base?*” Finn’s mouth dropped open. “It’s a club! Evelyn’s not an agitator, she sings! She’s like, the opposite! She makes people happy!”

“This is your final warning.”

“And who’s Chimera? I don’t know anyo—”

Finn smelled the burning flesh before the pain registered. He fell over, screaming, as the floor under his bare feet erupted in blazing heat—he was paralyzed, jerking as a cruel electrical current coursed through his body. And all the while, the voice slammed into his eardrums like a tidal wave, a constant droning pounding that he couldn’t shut out, no matter how hard he clutched at his ears.

Finn twitched and spasmed on the floor long after the electricity stopped its attack on his system, gasping for breath in the hot and airless room. He fought to clear his eyes and control his bowels, couldn’t even see straight, his bones felt like they turned to jelly.

After what felt like forever, the agony ceased, but he still couldn’t move. He was limp as a rag doll and helpless as a wounded dog in the pound, begging to be put out of its misery.

And all he could think was oh, God, oh, God, I’m going to die. This is an interrogation chamber, the Eye in the Sky is on the other side of this light, and I don’t have the answers they want. I am going to die. I am never going to see Zilch or any of the others again, and *I am going to die*.

“Are Calliope and Chimera associates of the CyborJ anarchists? Or are they

Syndicate members?”

“What? I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“How long has the Syndicate been using your vehicle to mask their activities?”

“I don’t—that’s not—”

“Is the radical malcontent known as Radio Angel in league with the Cyborj group or an independent agent? Do your EM-dampening devices and signal scramblers serve to disguise her location as well?”

“I don’t—wait,” Finn stopped. “Why would you ask, when... you could just look at my car. You don’t have my car, do you?”

Silence.

A shaky smile spread across his face. Zilch. They must have gotten away. They must have taken Finn’s taxi and gotten away. For the first time, a flutter of hope rose in his chest. “You don’t actually have anything on me, do you?”

“The name Evelyn Calliope was found on your person during processing.”

Finn’s mouth twitched but no sound came out. A rushing filled his ears. Frantically, he lifted up the paper shirt, and felt his hot panic turn to a cold chill of terror when he saw the still-clear and intact swirling ink autograph, letter ‘I’ dotted with a heart.

“I... I like her songs.”

Tears of fear and pain flowed down his face now, and he curled into the fetal position and tried to bury his face in his arms. His ears were ringing, eardrums felt like they had to be exploding...

Wait. Something was wrong. Because nothing was exploding. No thunderous bursts shook the ground; there was no boom and flare of fire and shrapnel. And that sent another cold jolt through his stomach—what was

wrong with him? His uncontrollable detonations were his only defense, and they weren't coming.

"Where are Calliope and Chimera? How are they connected to the CyborJ group?"

"I don't know! You can ask me as many times as you want, and I'll never—"

The floor erupted into lightning again and he fell back into the ocean of pain.

White. *No air.*

He arched his back, screams ripped from his throat as the blinding fire of agony consumed him—

Then it stopped. He was allowed a brief time of silence, though little residual currents still snatched at his body. But still there were no explosions. No sound. Nothing. His mind didn't race, it didn't even crawl, it was blank as the cell walls. In the emptiness, he was almost happy. For just a moment, the pain was gone. The absence of pain was the sweetest thing he'd ever felt.

"Zilch."

Finn's head jerked up. He froze.

"How did you obtain knowledge of this designation?"

Desig...?

"You were arrested while conspiring with confirmed public enemy Operative Zero, alias 'Zilch.' What is your connection to this traitor?"

Finn couldn't think. He didn't know what any of that meant, but Oh, God, he hadn't even known what he was screaming when the electricity had ripped through him. He must have yelled for Zilch to save him.

"Zilch, that's all I can tell you, nothing! Nothing! *Zilch!*" He shrieked, voice unnaturally high, hysteria creeping in from all directions.

CHAMELEON MOON

There was no answer. He waited, hands balling into fists. Any second now they'd shock him again, the pain would come back... but nothing. Just the sizzle and stink of burned skin and paper cloth. He started to breathe again. Then screamed.

Finn wailed his heart out as the silence pressed in.



“Ev, pull over!” Danae shouted, as Evelyn stepped on the accelerator. “Right there!”

“Gotta get there if we’re gonna get there!”

“Can’t believe I’m the one telling you to slow down—but we gotta think for two seconds before we just charge right in!”

Rubber burned and screeched as Evelyn pulled the car up against the curb and slammed on the brakes.

“*It’s a scary night out tonight, duckies,*” the ever-present girl on the radio said, usually cheerful voice dead-serious in warning. “*A little bird told me that there’s been another arrest, and it’s a guy I love a whole lot. Baby, if you can hear me, stay strong!*”

“Finn...” Zilch cranked the volume up just a little too loud.

“*We’re all pulling for you, and I’m not gonna rest until you’re home safe and sound. And neither will your friends. You’re loved, and you’re not forgotten, just hang on! Help is on its way, we are all—*”

Letting out a growl that made them all turn and look, Zilch grabbed the old circular volume dial and twisted it so hard it sounded like they might have snapped something clean off. At least it turned off the radio. “Five minutes. Then I go in. With or—” They stopped mid-sentence, eyes wide, mouth

hanging so far open their jaw looked like it might unhinge, nothing coming out but strangled gasps.

“Hey,” Regan leaned forward from the back seat, feeling an uneasy chill. If he recognized anything tonight it was that look of shock and panic. He must have worn something like it when Hans had possessed him and stopped his breath. “What—”

Zilch pitched forward, slumping against the steering wheel. The horn blared and they all jumped. Danae lunged forward and dragged them back to stop the noise. They couldn’t answer—their fingers curled into hooks, as they clawed desperately at their hollow chest, eyes wide with terror

“Help me—”

“Zilch? Listen to me, just breathe, okay? Just breathe.” Regan leaned forward from the back seat, talking quietly in their reattached ear. “In and out. I’ve... we got this. It’s okay.” He paused. He had no idea how Zilch actually breathed, or if their lungs were even in their chest at all—somehow he doubted it—but he did know one thing. “There is... there is enough air.”

They shut their eyes very tightly. Gradually, over several seconds, their spasmodic hyperventilation and violent shaking slowed, and finally stopped. Their hands loosened their desperate hold on their own shirt and chest, and finally fell into their lap, shoulders and head dropping. When they were still, their eyes opened again, and they turned their head the slightest angle to look up at Regan, partly pulling back their hood to better see his face.

“Thank you, Chimera.”

“Don’t mention it.” A shaky smile spread across his face.

Zilch turned slowly around to see Evelyn, Rose and Danae staring at them and Regan with near-identical wide-eyed expressions of awe. Their own face

now showed no indication of distress, returning to their relatively neutral default. “Now. Plan.”

“Okay, cool,” Danae took a deep breath, shaking it off and gearing right up. “So as far as I’m thinking, we split up—now I know what you’re thinking, that’s how we get killed, right? But no, no, we all have different talents. And at least two of us are really good at being really loud. Ev?”

“Naturally.” Evelyn smiled, recovering fast. “We’ll be outside on diversion duty, while everyone else gets in, search-and-rescues Finn, and gets out as fast as possible.”

“Figure his explosions will give us some cover,” Danae picked up again automatically. “But we still need something big to draw their attention.” She smirked, which Evelyn just as automatically mirrored. “Which we got more than covered. So. Plan?”

Zilch must have been considering, but their stare didn’t change one bit. It rarely did. Finally they nodded.

“Of course, there’s Finn himself,” Rose spoke up for the first time since arriving; she’d been sitting deep in thought the entire way and only just emerged. “There’s no telling the state he’ll be in once we actually reach him.”

“Good point,” Evelyn nodded. “Poor kid’ll be totally traumatized—maybe I should go, I can sing him down, fast and easy.”

“That might work,” Rose acknowledged, but looked unconvinced. “But that means I’d be covering the outside. I bet whatever distraction I could think up, yours would be bigger and louder. And honestly, you’ve got the action experience here.”

“And you’ve got the trauma-rescue experience.” Evelyn nodded, seeming almost relieved.

“Then there’s the question of how we even find him.” Rose’s brow remained furrowed in deep consideration. “And then get back out again. Every minute we’re in there is longer he’s in danger—we all are. If we don’t even know where they’re holding him—”

“He’ll be in interrogation. Ground floor,” Regan answered without hesitation. Everyone turned to look at him, and he raised his own eyebrow ridges in surprise.

“Are you starting to remember something?” Evelyn asked hopefully.

He thought hard. “Maybe. I know this building. I know its layout, how to get in and out.”

“How do we get in?”

“Same as everyone else. Drop-off isn’t locked, no reason. We just have to get everyone away from the intake door, that’s all. It’s a detention center, it’s designed to keep people in, so the hard part will be getting back out.”

“No it won’t,” Danae snorted. “Trust me.”

“Do you think you were held here before?” Evelyn studied Regan’s pensive expression with one of her own.

Regan frowned, didn’t answer. He glanced up at Zilch for some indication or at least a clue either way, but they’d pulled their hood back up, and what he could see of their face was as inscrutable to him right now as others must find it all the time.

“Remember anything about surveillance?” Danae squinted through the grimy windshield at the building, voice low and cool.

“Tons.” Regan muttered, feeling his frill beginning to twitch and wishing he didn’t have such an easy giveaway when his heart began to pound. “But I *don’t* know where they’ll come from, and there’s nothing we can do about that.”

“Yes there is.” Danae nodded sharply. “That’s what me and Ev’s diversion’s for. If you hear a great big crash, just try to go the opposite direction.”

“A crash?” Regan stared at her, heart speeding up.

“Yeah, I don’t think you’ll miss it. Probably be some other noise too. Screams, if we’re lucky. Theirs.”

“Danae...” Rose said quietly. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to make a big boom of my own. I just hope Finn doesn’t expect this cab back in one piece.”

“Let’s go.” Zilch made to open the door, but Evelyn put a hand on their shoulder.

“One last step,” she said, picking a large purse up from off the car floor and opening it. “Ladies, put on your finest.”

“Makeup?” Regan wasn’t so much incredulous as completely nonplussed.

“Armor.” Danae shot him a grin as she flipped down the sun-shade, opened the mirror. “Happy Halloween.”

“Didn’t bring masks tonight, so we go for unrecognizable... and scary.” Evelyn smirked, and smacked her lips together to even out the thick coat of firetruck-red lipstick, then turned her attention to layering on the and black eyeliner. Then she rubbed at her eyes to smear everything she’d done, gleefully transforming from her colorful default into some kind of monster clown in the driver’s seat. In front of her, Danae was doing the same, drawing what looked like blood coming out of her mouth in red lipstick.

“You go for scary.” Rose said, taking a deep breath. The thorns that covered her arms and chest grew further out, lengthening until her skin was covered in long, deadly barbs. “I can do scary without any makeup.”

Regan shook his head. He couldn’t understand how they could be so cool.

It was almost more like a slumber party. They chatted and did their makeup, as if they weren't all about to plunge into a war zone. Whatever helped you stay alive, he thought.

"Okay," Evelyn said after everyone was properly transformed. "Now let's move."

Regan hung back for a second while Rose gave Danae and Evelyn quick goodbye kisses. Zilch made an immediate beeline for the detention center back entry, and Rose hurried after, suddenly worried that they might rush ahead before they were all together.

"Careful," she called over her shoulder—then she was off.

"You too," Danae returned, rolling down the window and sticking her head out. She watched Rose follow Zilch inside, and didn't look away until she disappeared. Then she noticed Regan still nearby, frill rising and falling as he took deep breaths, apparently gearing up before what promised to be a high-stress rescue. "Hey! Lizard man!"

"Hm?" He turned to look with an expression of dizzied confusion. Or maybe some kind of realization, something that momentarily knocked him out of the present. But whatever it was passed quickly, and he focused on her.

"You doing all right?"

"Yeah! Yeah, I'm good."

"Glad to hear it. Stay focused, okay? Remember, panic's a guy, and we just punch him in the face." Danae searched his eyes for any sign of that strange flash of disorientation from a moment before, but they were clear, and he met hers as he nodded.

"That's right," he smiled, some of the tension in his own face fading. "Feels good."

CHAMELEON MOON

“And we watch each others’ backs. Watch *her* back,” she emphasized. “Rose is tough, but she’s not a fighter. Not this kind anyway.”

“Got it. I got her.”

“Good. She’s definitely got you. We all do.” She gave him a grin and a salute. “See you on the other side.”

Regan gave her a shaky nod back, turned, and disappeared. Except where the other two had simply found a back driveway and an unlocked door, he did it into thin air.

“Nice trick,” Danae murmured as she slid back into the driver’s seat, smile fading as fast as Regan did. “Glad he’s on our side.”

“She’ll be okay,” Evelyn said in a low voice. “It’s been a long time, but she knows how this goes.”

“Mm-hmm. And I mean what I said, our flower girl’s tough.”

“So are we. I’ll be waiting for the sounds of chaos, dear, so do what you do best. This is going to be fun.” Evelyn got out and ran to the dark shadow of the building, hiding and ready.

“Yeah. Fun.” Danae kept her smile on until she was alone—then gritted her teeth in a snarl. She threw the cab into gear, steering it straight at the side entrance of the interrogation complex. There was a long-dead fire hydrant and a generator box on the side of the building—if the impact didn’t destroy it, she’d bring the cab to life like raising the mechanical dead, and do it all over again.

Danae took a slow, deep breath, pushed all her fear into the backseat, and slammed her foot down on the accelerator.

CHAPTER 9

A Near Miss



FINN WASN'T SURE IF HE'D BEEN LAYING THERE IN THE BRIGHTNESS AND HEAT FOR HOURS OR seconds or years. He'd always imagined the cells as cold and dark, like medieval dungeons deep underground. But this awful brightness, this sickening shock and stabbing pain, the terrible light—this was a nightmare, worse than anything he could have dreamed up. Every inch of him was pain.

Then the lights went out.

He gasped and raised his head, blinking rapidly at the amber-green afterglow. The entire building shook, something had crashed into it or exploded and it wasn't him. Had the power gone out? Was someone actually trying to reach him, was Zilch... but no. He couldn't trust anything, this was all wrong, this had to be another trick to get him to talk.



He scooted backwards, skin raw and covered in blisters, and pressed his back against the still-hot wall, staring up into the darkness. He'd never made anything of his life—how could he? The moment he felt anything but happy or neutral, anyone he touched went up in flames. Except Zilch.

Tears rolled down his face. Finn's only surprise was that he still had any left.

Then a crack appeared, beaming white light. It widened into a doorway, a tall, sharp figure silhouetted against the glare. Circles of purple and green still danced in front of Finn's eyes, but he saw the figure move closer. He closed his eyes and waited for the bang and the silence.

“Finn.”

He gasped at the unusual, familiar, wonderful voice, and opened his eyes. He struggled to get to his feet, but the moment the soles of his ruined feet touched the blazing floor he let out a strangled cry of agony and toppled over—until a pair of thin, strong, open arms caught him.

Zilch slowly dropped to their knees, lowering the both of them to the floor as Regan and Rose stood in the doorway and watched both ends of the hall. Finn threw his arms around their neck, sobbing—but before that, Zilch caught a good enough look at Finn to wish they'd gotten here sooner. The disposable paper clothes he wore were scorched black, swaths of his skin were blistered red and white, and he burned with fever. Zilch very carefully wrapped their long arms around him, eyes

narrowed to glinting slits.

And now Rose hurried in and joined them on the floor, reaching for a thick, succulent plant that looped around her metal leg and snapping it in two. “Here, aloe.” She gently applied the clear gel that came out to a vicious burn on Finn’s chest. He didn’t answer, just clung even tighter to Zilch. “These are burns, what—”

“It’s a hot cell,” Regan said, sounding faraway. He wasn’t looking at her, or at Finn—his eyes slid anywhere but his shaking, damaged form—but at the curving, white cell, its door, the visible hallway, “The floor and walls are electrified and heated. Extreme heat and electrical currents encourage cooperation. We should go. Now.”

“Soon.” Zilch’s eyes flicked up at him, held steady for a moment, then back down to Finn, whose eyes were open. But he didn’t seem to see any of them any better than when they’d been squeezed tightly shut. They were dry now; he seemed to have run out of tears, and now he wasn’t looking anywhere at all. “Almost home, Finn.”

At the sound of their voice, however, he sharply looked up. Silently, he buried his face in their shoulder and didn’t look up.

“Listen, can we do any of this and move at the same time?” Regan’s head whipped around from where he half-leaned out the doorway. “I’m sorry, I know he’s hurting, but we have to go, right now—”

“Working as fast as I can,” Rose continued extracting precious aloe out of her friendly vines. She’d been ready to calm Finn down from a panic and break through a terrified fog, but there hadn’t been a need.

Not with Zilch here, she thought with a little surprise and a lot of warmth. Still, Rose didn't like the look she'd caught in the young man's eyes, that emptiness. Something here had shaken the life out of him. "We both are."

"Okay, just—we don't want to be here when anyone else is. This is—this is not a good place. Nothing good happens here."

"I'm glad you're remembering things, Regan..." Rose suppressed a shiver as she finished with the worst of Finn's burns she could easily reach. "I'm just sorry it's this."

Zilch picked Finn up easily then, holding him gently to their hollow chest. "Leaving now," he whispered, rising up with Rose and moving toward the door where Regan waited. "Sleep."

"And we'll get out..." Finn whispered now. He couldn't help writhing in pain just a little; the slightest touch or pressure against his damaged skin was agony. "We'll go where it's safe, right?"

"Away from here," Zilch promised. "Where you can feel anything."

"Okay." A long, awful shudder went through Finn's body, and he went limp. He hung like a broken rag doll in Zilch's arms, head resting on their shoulder. The moment his eyes slipped shut, Zilch lifted their hooded head to look up at Rose and Regan, and any softness in their own bright eyes disappeared, replaced by something grim and hard.

"Now. Fast." They started to head back the way they'd come on long-limbed strides that got faster and faster with every step, but Rose caught one of their trailing piece of black clothing as they passed.

“Wait!” She had to run a few clanking steps of her own after Zilch to catch up; even with her hanging on, it seemed to take a moment for them to realize she was there, and finally stop. “We should go out the back, away from Danae’s big crash.”

Zilch froze, staring down one end of the hall, then turned in place to face the identical other end. “I don’t know this building.”

“I do.” Both of them turned to look at Regan. Rose wore an expression of mixed relief and increasing worry, and Zilch had reverted back to their default blank-eyed mask that even he had trouble reading. “Follow me.”

Regan flat-out ran down the hallway in the opposite direction as Zilch had gone before, away from where they’d come in, anywhere they’d been before, and anything he should have known. Somehow, he knew without question this was absolutely the right decision, just as he knew that staying in that cell or anything like it for a single second was the wrong one, and always would be. Whether anyone followed him or not, this was the direction he needed to go. But after just a few tense seconds, he heard footsteps behind him and smiled.



Two minutes before Finn’s door opened, Danae gritted her teeth and threw herself out the driver’s-side door. She hit the pavement and rolled, covering her head and neck, and hunkered down as a thunderous impact shook the ground. Through the smoke and dust she spotted the cab, nose-deep in the building’s

wall. She army-crawled over and smacked the side, sent it a message: fix yourself up, and be ready to roll.

She dashed to the generator box (grateful to Zilch for bringing her the sneakers she'd asked for), and placed her hands on its warm, humming surface; detonation in T-minus 3, 2, 1—

Danae threw herself into the air and felt the rush of searing air behind her, letting the blast's momentum catapult her out of danger. She scrambled behind another parked car and peeked out as the dust cleared, and saw just how bad it was.

They were surrounded—the craters left by Finn's explosions littered the street like monster potholes. The entire wall the taxi had hit caved in, covering the street with brick and mortar dust. Black smoke poured out from between the cracks in the street, and Danae suddenly thought *maybe* it hadn't been a good idea to undermine the area's already shaky foundation—but she couldn't think about that now, she had to get her friends out safe.

Eye in the Sky had seen her and now soldiers were gathering. They appeared frighteningly quickly, as they always did, pouring from around corners and from shadows. Clumps of black body-armored figures hunched together, drawing weapons and reorganizing into formations amid the explosions. A wall formed around the perimeter—one of huge, ballistic riot shields, bulletproof plastic and gas masks—and started moving toward the wreckage of the taxi, and where Danae hid.

With every step, the shields crashed down on the ground, all together in a thunderous drumbeat, a practiced military rhythm made for intimidation. It worked.

Crash, crash, crash.

The beat grew louder, faster; Danae shuddered. Everyone in Parole knew that sound, and what it meant was coming. She was more familiar with it than most, and it only made her more afraid. She gritted her teeth, forcing her brain to take the next step, figure out what the hell happened now.

Then, the click of stilettos on cement, a counterpoint to the riot-shield smashes, and Evelyn emerged from the shadows like stepping from the wings of her stage. She climbed onto the hood of the crashed taxi, then the roof, her red-mouthed grin flashing. Always, Evelyn's full glory sent a thrill jolting through Danae; she was a razor-edged, glorious pirate queen in the midst of a gale with her fist in the air—and she took no prisoners.

And all around, an audience of black gas masks and assault rifles bristled, barrels snapped to point at her, garbled voices babbled over radios for her to stand down—and she put her hands up. One mascara'd eye flicked toward Danae, then down to the ground, and winked. Danae grinned back—then looked down to follow Evelyn's unspoken direction. She smiled, and picked up the object she hadn't seen but might have stepped on: a police megaphone.

"Thank you all for coming out tonight!" Evelyn called, hands behind her head. "Enjoy the show!"

Danae pulled her arm back, wound up like a pitcher, and launched her surprise secret weapon toward Evelyn. Then she plugged her ears and got down on the ground. The megaphone arced toward Evelyn, whipping end over end in midair—until her hand shot out and grabbed it. She raised it to her mouth, red lips stretched wide over bared teeth. She took a deep breath—

The sonic blast shook the pavement like a mortar bomb. Hurricane winds tore at the ragged buildings, and her banshee shriek became an air raid siren from Hell. Riot shields fell, stalks of wheat under the scythe of her scream,

while commandos in body armor clapped their hands against their helmets, some even collapsing to the ground. Street lights slanted like they'd been hit by a tornado, and cars skidded across the asphalt, alarms wailing.

While the street became a war zone, Danae crouched behind a pile of rubble with her fingers jammed in her ears. Evelyn had been aiming away from her, but she still caught a backdraft of sonic asskicking, and her head was starting to spin. She quickly dug into a pocket and jammed a pair of self-designed earplugs into her ears, telling them to filter out the frequency of Evelyn's shriek, but let her hear any other danger.

Once she could think again, the adrenaline flooded back—but more than that. *Joy*. The thrill, the giddy rush of action alongside Evelyn. She giggled out loud before clapping her hand over her mouth. It had been so long since she'd played like this. It was exhilarating, it was *fun*. Adrenaline had always been her drug of choice.

But, even as the intoxicating headiness threatened to take over, Danae stayed focused. She had a job to do, and she would not let her friends down. She waved at Evelyn, who sat on the hood of the taxi, legs dangling, happily blowing out glass windows and picking off dizzy commandos with her focused screams. Danae slipped around the blasted corner, still barely able to keep her maniacal excitement in check. If the others were smart at all, they wouldn't come out the same way they'd gone in. There was a prisoner loading bay around the back, she'd try there first.

Once she was clear of the explosions and the echoes of Evelyn's violent song, Danae doubled over against a wall, and laughed so hard she almost threw up.



Regan led the small group down a hallway that seemed familiar, hoping they were heading the right way and not deeper into the compound. Zilch bent awkwardly double over Finn, as if protecting him from driving hail, or just further pain. “You sure this is the way?”

“Sure hope so. I mean—yes!” They rounded the corner, and burst through one last set of heavy metal doors, into a wide driveway. At its end, someone peeked out from around a corner and waved: Danae, flushed and sweaty and grinning from ear to ear. She mouthed something and beckoned them on, practically bouncing with glee. Rose, relief flooding her face, signaled to Danae to wait a moment and turned around as Zilch rushed forward with Finn. Then she stopped as Regan’s entire body went rigid, every muscle locking.

“Regan, are you all right?” He didn’t answer, and she took a step closer. She couldn’t tell if he was even still breathing. “What’s wrong?”

He didn’t hear her. He couldn’t turn to answer, or move. All he could do was stare. Someone was in the doorway they’d just come out, leaning heavily against the side, panting with effort and pain. A skinny white kid with knobby knees, a mop of curly blonde hair, and dark circles under his eyes. Barefoot and vulnerable and wrapped in scorched paper like Finn.

Regan knew him. It had only been a few nights, but it already seemed like a lifetime. His fingertips twitched with the muscle memory of balled fists, slamming him against a brick wall, the smell of blood. He even remembered his name. Cairus. Cai.

The young man—Cairus—stared, bright blue eyes boring a hole in Regan as if he was the only other person in the world, widening until the whites stood out all around and his face twisted into a grimace of horror, or maybe pain.

Regan opened his mouth, but Cairus’s arms snapped up and the motion

CHAMELEON MOON

was enough to shock him into silence and stillness.

Then he saw the gun. The young man's white-knuckled hands held it, tight but unsteadily, and the barrel shook as it pointed at Regan's head.

He froze.

Suddenly he felt like he'd been thrown back to that first night in the alley behind the Emerald Bar, when there had been nothing in his head but a terrifying vacuum and crushing silence. He didn't know where he was anymore, if there was ground beneath his feet or sky above him, or anyone else around; right now he had even less than he did then, because then at least he knew his name. Right now, all he knew was the gun.

There was someone behind him, he registered dimly. But that was background noise, faint and nonspecific. In front of him, in brutally harsh relief, was the gun. Held by the one person in Parole who recognized Regan, but not for any of the reasons he wanted.

"Regan?"

Someone said his name. He knew the voice. But that was all.

He could have turned around then, but he couldn't take his eyes away from the weapon aimed unsteadily at him and the way it pitched in the air as its holder trembled. He could have answered. Or raised his hands in a sign of surrender. He could have done a lot of things.

Instead, he did the only thing that made any sense in the face of this terror. He faded. Immediately he felt the telltale chill run up his spine like icy fingers as his image distorted into nothing, seeming to fall into some hidden dimension beyond what they could see. As he vanished, he tried to shrink to one side, moving away from the weapon's aim, hoping his disappearing act would be enough to mask his escape.

But the young man's shaking hands followed Regan's hidden but just-visible movement with one big, jolting twitch. A small thunderclap snapped through the air—and Rose pitched forward.

Danae whipped around, grin freezing on her face. Rose hung suspended in the air for what felt like hours—then dropped to the concrete, mechanical legs clanking against each other.

Cairus's mouth hung open and his shoulders heaved in frantic hyperventilation. Tears immediately spilled from his already-red eyes as he stared at Rose in her tangle of metal limbs and vines and hair and blood.

"Miss Rose?" he mouthed, face going white in horror. *"Why are you—no, no, oh God, no, I didn't mean to..."*

Before anyone could react, and before his stunned brain had quite caught up with what he was doing, Regan was flying across the driveway, scooping Rose up with a strength he didn't know he had. Adrenaline would do wonders. He tore back the other way without another thought. Behind him the kid in the hospital gown slumped against the building and didn't move.

Regan couldn't be sure, it might have just been his terrified imagination in all the confusion—but as he ran, he thought he caught a glimpse of bright green cat's eyes.

By the time they reached the open street, he was thoroughly visible again. He just barely had time to wonder if this was good or bad, or how he would manage carrying Rose any further, whose metal legs were much heavier than they appeared—when an earsplitting screech made him turn to see the crushed-and-repaired yellow taxi cab screaming toward them. SkEye men leaped or were violently shoved out of the way as the car sped toward them, horn blaring. With every last bit of his terror-fueled strength, Regan charged toward it, and it

screeched again, this time to a skidmark and burned-rubber halt directly in front of him.

“Get in the car, get in the car, get in—” Regan jabbered. He somehow managed to free one hand to wrench the backseat door open and toppled inside the instantly-moving car, shielding Rose from being jostled. Across the seat, Zilch was doing the same thing with Finn.

“Rose!” Evelyn gasped, seeing the blood. “She didn’t—tell me she’s just unconscious!”

“She’s alive,” Regan panted. “But we gotta go, go, drive!”

“Wait, where’s Danae?” Evelyn stuck her head out the drivers-side window. “Oh no.”

Danae stood perfectly still exactly where she’d stood when Rose had fallen, face sheet-white, eyes wide and mouth hanging open. She didn’t move. She didn’t even breathe. Regan recognized that kind of stillness, that horrible shocked paralysis; he’d felt it often enough.

“Sweetie, can you hear me? We have to go!” Tears filled Danae’s eyes. Slowly, she began to shake. “Danae, Rose is here! She’s over here, Danae! She’s alive, but you have to get in the car!”

But before she could, a gargantuan tank emerged into the street, its long metal barrel growing longer and longer until the rest of it rounded the blasted corner. The mechanical one-beast army rolled toward them on massive conveyor-belt treads. It centipede-crawled over cars, crushing the metal like a junkyard compactor while sirens and car alarms wailed. People disappeared down streets and into ruined buildings to escape.

Everyone but Danae—she stared, unblinking, at the monster approaching.

The men with the gas masks and riot shields stayed too; the war machine

was on their side. The commandos organized into two columns on either side of the street, blocking off escape with the impenetrable wall of ballistic shields. And down the aisle of police shock troops came the tank.

The shields banged against the ground again. Slowly at first, they crashed against the concrete—then the tempo gained speed, faster and faster until it grew into a deafening drumroll.

“*Not again...*” The whisper scraped its way out of Danae’s seizing throat under the noise, and she stood rigid as she faced the tank. The small, vulnerable people in the taxi froze, staring wide-eyed at the metal monster bearing down on them. It didn’t slow down, ready to roll right over the short redheaded woman in the middle of the street, who stood very still and stared it down.

Evelyn gripped the steering wheel, hands shaking but face resolute. “Regan, when I tell you, get ready to take the wheel.”

“Me?” He looked up, eyes wide. He was still back in that driveway, fading, seeing the gun, hearing the shot. Rose falling. Danae’s smile, turning to horror. *Watch her back*. He was supposed to... “I don’t know if—I can’t—”

“If we want to live, someone needs to drive! Now, I’m letting go of this wheel in about ten seconds, so somebody better take it!”

The huge central turret rotated with a terrible gear-shift clank, and the enormous gun barrel leveled itself directly at Danae. She stood, rooted to the spot, as the metal monster came closer, quaking from head to toe. Her fists and teeth were clenched, and hot tears streamed down her face. Her breathing came in irregular, ragged gasps and all she could hear was the pounding of her own heart. Her mouth hung open and her eyes squeezed shut as panicked, desperate hyperventilation made her head spin.

The metal grinding stopped, and the deadly muzzle hung mere feet from her head.

“No.”

Something inside her broke—and she roared. Danae threw back her head and stretched her jaws so far open it hurt, a shriek of agony and terror and rage exploding out of her like a detonating bomb. And in reply, the ground fractured. Cracks spread across the surface like shattering glass, and Parole started to uproot itself. Pipes burst out of the concrete, writhing like giant metal snakes; scaffolds and chain-link fence and metal grates twisted themselves into angry tangles, slicing at the black helmets and wall of riot shields.

“AAAAAAGGHH!”

Danae charged forward, running right under the tank’s muzzle and up to the front armor plating, and slammed her hands down onto the metal, digging her fingers in like puncturing claws. The steel screamed, and so did she, absorbing the impact that should have shattered human bones. The tank shuddered and sputtered, the roar of its engine dissolving into struggling grinding and bangs. Metal panels flew off or twisted as if they were melting, and the entire machine began to collapse on itself like a ball of tin foil crumpled in Danae’s fist.

She gritted her teeth and *pushed*—and the tank pitched backwards. The behemoth reared up onto its back treads, front coming completely off the ground. And it kept rising. For one long, horrifying moment it hung vertically in the air like the broken Titanic before its final descent into the sea, gun barrel pointing straight up into the sky.

Then it fell, crashing onto its back on the concrete with an earthquake impact. The ground jumped and everyone in the taxi felt the shock wave—but

Danae didn't seem to notice.

"Rose..." Tears pouring down her face as she fought for breath, shaking so hard she looked ready to fall over any second. "No, no, no..."

The tank sat upside-down, treads still rotating in the air like the helpless legs of an overturned turtle. For a moment, shocked silence settled over the street, as everyone, Danae's friends and the men in the black masks stared at the small woman in the street, and the downed military tank.

"Holy crap..." Regan whispered, awed and sick and proud at the same time. "She punched it in the face."

Then the earth gave way. The hollow concrete of Parole's street caved under the tank's impact, and the metal beast slid down. Sidewalk slabs shattered and sank from view, entire chunks of earth and buildings and road started to collapse and tumble into the deepening crater, soon the dead tank would punch a hole right through the ground and fall into the fire.

Evelyn slammed the struggling taxi into gear, and stepped on the accelerator. The car catapulted forward, and Regan almost swallowed his tongue screaming. Evelyn pointed the taxi right at Danae, and rolled her window all the way down.

"Regan, now!"

"What now?"

"Wheel! Take it! Drive right by her, close as you can, and *do not stop!*"

Regan climbed carefully into the front seat and grabbed the steering wheel as Evelyn gripped the window frame, kicked off her shoes—and started to climb through. She gritted her teeth, bare toes curling around the window's edge as she pulled herself up onto the hood of the car. Evelyn crouched there on all fours, hands and feet splayed across the hood and windshield, as the

speeding car screeched across the torn-up pavement.

Men in body armor ran, scrambling away from the collapsing hole, riot shields forgotten. By the dozens, they dropped their guns and dove out of the way of the wildly swerving taxi.

Regan was almost to her, coming up on Danae so fast he could see the tears in her clothes, the blood and sweat on her raised arms. That's when he started to panic, and realize exactly how fast they were speeding right for her.

"Evelyn, we're going to—"

"*Closer!*" She was standing up now, hanging ten, barefoot on the hood of the taxi with her arms outstretched. "*Closer, Regan!*"

He'd just gotten Rose shot and now he was about to mow Danae right down, no, *no*, he couldn't let this happen again but it was too late, they were on her—

Evelyn caught her. She leaned forward and snatched Danae up from behind as the car shrieked past at 70 miles per hour, yanking her up onto the hood of the car and falling backwards into the windshield. Danae slumped against her, limp and shuddering, but alive. Together they hunkered down toward the right side of the car, getting a more secure grip on the moving surface and actually letting Regan see ahead of them.

"Yes!" Regan pumped his fist in the air out the open window—then happily gave the scattered commandos the finger. "Ev, you did it, we're gonna be—"

"Just drive!" He wasn't sure who yelled it at him; Evelyn still on the hood with Danae, or Zilch from the back seat. He thought it might have been everyone all at once.

Regan couldn't believe they were still alive. Alive, and as far as he could tell, free, leaving the chaos of the tank's crater in the city far behind them. A

successful jailbreak. A terrified dragon gripping the wheel with shaky, scaly hands; Finn, burned and traumatized but cuddled in the gentle embrace of the Frankenstein-esque grim reaper in the back; and Danae, the tiny woman whose fearsome strength had just killed a tank, laying on the hood of their speeding car with Evelyn Calliope, superheroine who'd saved them all this time without singing a word. Regan sucked in his tongue and let out a nervous laugh. All of them, together. Damaged, but alive. Somehow, it felt like the way it was supposed to be.

And then there was Rose, bleeding in the back seat.

Regan's smile froze, along with his own blood. He gripped the wheel and drove.

CHAPTER 10
Dream Sweet

DANAE HATED HOSPITALS, AND THIS ROOM CAME CLOSE ENOUGH. SINCE HANS'S ROOM ALREADY contained an array of medical equipment, it seemed logical to move some extra beds in here for Rose and Finn. Or it would, if Danae were capable of logical thought. She followed in a half dream state while Evelyn—who somehow seemed to get more energized the worse a crisis became—made decisions, told people to do things, then dashed off to find something or someone, Danae couldn't really comprehend words. She stood there frozen as the sterile world blurred and rushed around her. Tunnel-vision fixed on Rose, and Danae couldn't look away or move or think or breathe. Too drained to scream, too battered and exhausted to fight. All she could see was Rose and all she could do was stare, then slowly reach for her hand.



Lisette's big brown eyes were calm above her blue surgical mask as well as she strode confidently into the room; Wren followed her, also in a mask, and tying their long hair back in a ponytail. Danae dimly wondered how a pair of teenagers could be so unworried about all of this, while she held tighter to Rose's hand, both as an anchor to herself, and to somehow keep her wife from slipping away.

"Excuse me, Miss Danae," Lisette's voice made Danae jump. "She'll be fine, we know what we're doing, but you have to give us a little room, okay?"

"You know what you're..." Danae forced herself back into the present. Behind the short girl in the scrubs, Wren was gingerly cutting Rose's favorite T-shirt away from her wound. Her shirt was stained brown instead of pink, and the white gloves over Wren's small hands were red. Danae's head spun and when she could form words she was surprised they didn't come out in a scream. "No. Rose needs actual help! You're kids, and you can't be the only ones here. We need someone in charge, a grown up, a doctor, I'm sorry, but—"

"Listen, if you want a grown-up, I guess that's Mr. Liam. But if you someone in charge who can help your wife, that's us." Lisette's confident gaze held the unspoken promise that yes, she knew exactly what she was doing. For a kid who didn't even come up to the never-tall Danae's armpit, she projected the energy of someone who had the situation under control and knew it. Still, it didn't do much to quell the barely-restrained panic screaming through Danae's head and heart.

"I can't find Liam, I can't find anyone!" Evelyn burst into the small room, breathing hard but still maintaining composure with much more success than Danae was feeling. "It's a ghost town. The security gates are up again. I think he put the place on lockdown."

“Like I said. Now will you let us—” Lisette’s voice was steady as her gaze, as Wren’s hands tugged on Lisette’s sleeve. “What?”

They pointed back at Rose. And there, instead of the terrifying red, Danae saw another color, something that had always been the color of hope, love, and promise.

Green.

Something green was emerging from Rose’s wound, poking out its small tip like the first head of a crocus in spring’s thaw. A tangle of vines sprang up before their eyes, actually moving, welling up like a spring’s flow from far beneath the earth’s surface—and like always, there were tiny points of pink, purple and gold amid the greenery. Flowers.

“She’s healing herself,” Lisette whispered, eyes wide and tone awed. Wren moved to get a better look, staring so intently at the vine it seemed like they were trying to memorize its every inch. Danae and Evelyn just held one another, struck silent and still by the paralyzing combination of pain and hope. “Her circulatory system is made up of vines and flowers, right? So it’s gotta be healing her hardcore. Purging all the toxins, and just... growing and growing and...”

Something rose up like a seed casing from inside the tiny jungle, pushed out by insistent tendrils and leaves. A tiny metal slug rose on a rope of twisting vines that grew from under Rose’s skin like a plant sprouting in time-lapse photography.

“She’s rejecting the bullet.” Lisette exchanged a glance with Wren, which quickly turned into an obvious huge shared grin behind their masks. For the first time since entering the tension-filled room, the excited teenagers actually looked as young as they were. “This is so cool.”

Staring, Danae picked up the tiny object between her finger and thumb. A little cylinder of crushed metal, with hair-thin curls of vines still clinging to it. This tiny, insignificant thing could have killed Rose. Danae snapped from her daze and flung it away. It clanged into the sterilized tray. Then, weak and pale with relief, she sank down and rested her head on Rose's mattress, comforted by the regular, gentle rise and fall of her wife's chest. Evelyn's hand was warm on her back and she heard her give a relieved sob. The worst was over.

"What about him?" Zilch's voice made them all turn; with a slight pang of guilt Danae realized she'd forgotten they and Finn were even in the room. How she possibly could have forgotten the tall, hooded figure who hovered nervously beside the unconscious Finn, was beyond her. Their patchwork face was, frankly, terrifying, and often hard to read, but nobody would have been able to miss the worry in their reconstructed eyes, or even their distorted voice.

Now that she'd landed back in the present, she realized Regan was nowhere to be seen.

Lisette turned her attention to Finn, but didn't touch him. "Pretty severe burns, but they're mostly superficial, so what you see is about the worst of it—" Wren interrupted her with a few quick signs. "Yeah, and severe dehydration and shock." She gave Finn one more look as if she were making sure she was absolutely correct, then nodded in satisfaction, hands on her hips.

"Skin." Zilch looked down at Lisette; given their height differences, they had to look down at quite an angle. "Does he need it?"

"What, like grafts?"

"If he does, I have skin."

"You... have skin?"

Zilch held out one hand, the dark grey with red nail polish. They gingerly

pulled at a loose flap of skin that hung off their wrist, and it peeled off in a strip. If it hurt, they didn't make a sound, and their serious, earnest expression didn't change a bit. "I can get more."

"This is the best day of my life," Lisette whispered. "Can you—how does this work? Like organ donating? It looks like you can receive parts from just about anyone, but does this mean you can give them too? Like, universal giving, receiving—and the actual parts coming back to life, how does it—I just have so many questions..." Slowly, she reached out to touch the detached skin—then shook her head, like snapping out of a daydream. "Sorry! No, keep your skin. He'll be fine, we got this."

Zilch pressed their skin back against their wrist and said nothing more, turning back to Finn as his face screwed up, and his eyes slowly opened. "Finn."

"Please don't leave..." Finn reached out to curl a weak hand around their bony wrist.

"No. Never."

"I didn't say anything. I—I don't think I did, anyway. I..." his eyes widened and a look of panic broke through his exhaustion. "I don't know for sure. What if I said something—"

"Shhhhhh." The soft hush was the first sound any of them had heard Zilch make that sounded absolutely ordinary. "You survived. That's enough."

Finn's mouth stayed open but he couldn't answer. His eyes filled with tears, then closed. Slowly he relaxed, but didn't let go of Zilch's wrist; if anything he pulled them closer.

"Sleep." Zilch whispered. They raised their free hand like they wanted to touch Finn's shoulder or face, but didn't quite make it.

“Be here when I wake up?”

A strange expression spread across Zilch’s face. Finn knew it as a smile. Slow and tired and not devoid of pain, but that could be said for everyone in this room.

“Good night. Dream sweet.” Evelyn glanced up, hearing the familiar words. They sounded so strange in Zilch’s rough and murky voice. But not frightening. She thought after this, she wouldn’t easily find the hooded figure frightening again. “In the morning, I’ll be here.”

Finn sank back down onto the bed with a deep sigh, eyes closing—then opening again as they fell on Evelyn. “Wait,” he whispered, reaching past Zilch and catching Evelyn’s sleeve. She stepped closer and took his hand. “In there, they said—they said you and Regan... you killed someone. Is that true?” He looked terrified of the answer.

Evelyn made herself look steadily into his bright, feverish eyes, and keep her expression calm and reassuring. She shook her head, stroked the small undamaged area of his hand. “No, sweetie. It’s more of SkEye’s lies. Please don’t worry.” After he let her go, satisfied, Evelyn stood up; she only let the worry enter her face after she turned away.

Zilch waited for a moment, until Finn’s breathing slowed, became more regular. Then they looked up at Lisette. “*No Chrysedrine*,” they intoned; this time it was the intensity that sent shivers down Danae’s spine instead of the guttural rasp. “He’s clean. Years. Not going back.”

“Don’t worry,” Lisette said quietly. “I wouldn’t do that. Not without any other choice, and definitely not without asking him.”

“Thank you.” Their thin shoulders rose and fell over the pantomime of a deep breath. Then they seemed to sense someone staring, because he turned

around to meet Danae's thoughtful gaze.

"You'd do anything to keep him safe, wouldn't you?" she asked quietly. Zilch's eyes widened, but they didn't answer. "It's okay," she went on, fingers curling around Rose's hand. "I get it, I do."

Zilch didn't reply, but they did give her a very slow nod. Progress, she thought.

Wren tapped Danae on the shoulder. She turned to see the androgynous, white-haired youth smiling at her, and holding something in front of her face—a big purple lollipop. Their scrubs had no pockets, there were no drawers or boxes in the room, and she genuinely had no idea where they could have gotten it. For some reason she remembered the elevator from the day they'd arrived, but was too tired to grasp the thought.

"Thanks..." she croaked, slowly unwrapping the paper and sticking it in her mouth. Wren gave a bouncy nod and turned around, revealing a fistful of more colorful treats for everyone like a bouquet of flowers. For a dizzy moment, Danae wondered if Wren's ability was magically producing candy out of thin air. Even Zilch took one in a thin grey hand. A surreal ending to what had been a terrifying and bizarre night; Danae couldn't really make sense of any of it.

But she could look at Rose. Her wound was completely covered by vines and flowers, the explosion of life obscuring any damage and working overtime to repair it. The color was coming back into her face, and she looked serene.

"She's doing great, babe." Evelyn moved from where she stood on Rose's other side, and put her arm around the near-comatose Danae's shoulders. "You should rest too. We've all been through hell and back tonight."

"No sleep for me. Not for about a week." Danae shook her head, and didn't move. "Soon as I know Rose is okay though, I'm starting on that heat-resistant

armor, I figure I can have three sets done in—”

“Danae.”

“Oh, like you’re gonna be able to rest right now,” she shot back, but there was no fire in her look; it didn’t even manage to be a glare. “Not unless you’re sleep-working. Or sleep-worrying. Listen, Rose needs somebody in here for when she wakes up, and if I stand up and take a step, I think I’m gonna crash and burn. So I’ll be in here. And because rushing off to save the day is pretty much how you process trauma—which you have, okay, don’t even—that frees you up to go do whatever you need...to... do.” Danae ran out of steam and stopped then, looking up at Evelyn with an exhausted slow nod, as if expecting her to finish the thought.

“I’m just going to turn on the radio,” Evelyn was surprised at her own level tone. The longer this went on, the more it started to feel like some awful dream. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to laugh and hug Danae, or start to cry from exhaustion and the night’s—trauma was the word, yes—but it was one of those. Or both. “Regan and I are supposed to have... killed someone. If somebody’s actually dead at all, Radio Angel will know. Then I’ll come back to check on Rose, then I’m resting, I promise, and you should do the same.”

“Mmmmm.” Danae just gave her a long stare, chin resting in one hand. “You’re like... everything’s starting to seem surreal and junk, isn’t it?”

“A little, yes.”

“Me too. We are dissociating so hard right now. But you know what? Just go with it. It helps you get through the really bad stuff.”

“I love you.”

“You too. Go do your superhero thing. Process. I’ll be here. Same.”

Evelyn turned to leave, then noticed Zilch still standing where they’d been.

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They remained perfectly still, staring vacantly at Finn, while Lisette and Wren made small adjustments and did their best not to intrude on them, communicating in their silent way. They'd been so perfectly silent she'd forgotten they were there, something she figured this must happen a lot. "You staying there too, sweetie?"

"I'm here." They didn't need to be acquainted with Zilch's abnormal voice or stoic body language. Exhaustion, pain and borderline-despair seemed to seep out of their dark, ragged form and long, low-hanging limbs like a tangle of clouds.

"Yeah, you are. And so is he." Evelyn looked at them and Finn for a moment and couldn't help but smile. She turned her soft gaze on Rose and Danae for another few seconds—then headed out the door, shaking off the last remnants of fatigue and embracing her second wind. Some people processed mentally. Some coped through action. Some wouldn't be able to rest until they had answers. Tonight she felt like all three.

A few moments of relative quiet passed by, then Zilch's hooded head slowly turned to look up at the door Evelyn had just exited. When they were done staring after her, they turned back just as slowly—and stopped, replacement eyes actually widening in surprise to see Danae grinning at them through her own exhaustion and worry.

"You don't get called 'sweetie' a lot, do you?"

"No."

"Should probably get used to that."

Zilch didn't answer, and it was admittedly hard to read the subtle expressions of someone whose face was made up of the faces of other people, but Danae would bet her next barrel of water that they were smiling just a little.



Regan stayed successfully out of sight and out of mind until the crisis was over, very late at night, or maybe early morning. When the house was at its quietest, he finally ventured back toward the room Finn, Hans and Rose now shared—but he didn't go inside. He made it almost to the threshold, hesitated, turned, and walked back down the dark hallway.

A few hours earlier, Danae had slumped forward onto Rose's bed, slept for a couple more hours, then awakened to the soft noise of Zilch's slow, reluctant steps as they moved past and out the door. Now she rose stiffly to her feet and stretched her aching muscles. She lingered for a moment, gave Rose's hand one last squeeze, and followed.

Regan saw them leave, but they didn't see him. He was getting better at controlling his invisibility shroud reflex; it kicked in when he was scared, and even though his heart was pounding now, he at least was fading because he wanted to. He certainly did want to disappear.

Just looking at the back of Danae's head was bad enough. He couldn't imagine her face. Or her voice. *Watch her back. She'll have yours.*

Silently, Regan slipped into the now-still room. He stared at Rose's sleeping form for a long time, and held very still.

He reappeared slowly, over several seconds. It was almost harder to un-fade now than it was to turn invisible. Maybe it was because he'd disappeared the moment she needed him. It played back in his head, over and over, but he still couldn't believe it; it was like someone else's memory. He'd seen the gun. He'd seen the kid aim it, at *him*, he'd frozen, he'd faded... then Rose was bleeding. Regan might not have pulled the trigger, but he was responsible.

Who was he, really? A person just beginning to hope, standing up with

these people he'd found in this terrifying world of fire and despair? Seeing the strength of heroes like Evelyn Calliope, and Rose, right here—and believing in them with his whole heart? Or the frightened lizard who skulked in the shadows and vanished the moment anyone depended on him? For the first time, the dark recesses of Regan's own brain frightened him. If this was who he was, maybe it was better that he didn't remember.

"I'm sorry, Rose," he whispered at last, in a faint, dry voice. She didn't stir, deep in the wound-healing sleep that was more like unconsciousness. He shut his eyes, feeling them begin to sting.

"She'll be fine, you know," Hans shrugged, appearing to float cross-legged beside him. Regan didn't look up or acknowledge his presence. After a while, he got bored and drifted up toward the ceiling.

"I don't want you here," Regan said at last. "I don't want *me* here. I don't want any part of this anymore."

"You do if you want your memories back." Hans said, levelly, rotating to hang upside-down. "And hey, bright side! We saw what Danae can do, right? That's some firepower right there. Just needed a little jumpstart, that's all. Great job!"

Regan's eyes snapped open, his nostrils flared... but he clamped his mouth shut, gritted his teeth. When he spoke, his voice was low and calm. "It's gone too far, people are getting hurt."

"Well, yeah. That kind of happens in Parole."

"It was supposed to be just you, me, and Zilch. And now everyone else is caught up in this."

"Uh, correct me if I'm wrong, but it was your choice to go with everyone tonight. I didn't do a gosh-darn thing, Rose got shot and that Finn kid got

burned all on their own. Oh, and the whole little crisis you're having right now, you're doing that all on your own too."

"You're right, Finn was tortured. Rose did get shot. And Danae did break down. Because of me." He glared at Hans. "Because a scared kid at the detention center recognized me, because I knocked him out and scared the hell out of him, because I listened to you."

"Oh, so you kicking the crap out of some kid, who later shoots someone else, is my fault?"

Regan shook his head. "I'm done."

Hans stared impassively back, head tilting and pale eyes narrowing into a squint. He studied Regan like an incomplete jigsaw puzzle, where none of the remaining pieces fit. "I've... never seen you like this before."

"Well, that makes two of us." Regan actually smirked. He didn't like the way it made his face feel. He didn't like much right now. "I've never seen me at all."

"You will. Just keep doing as I say, and I promise—"

"No." Regan folded his arms and shook his head in a decisive jerk. "I don't like the guy you're showing me. I don't think he's who I want to be."

"Well that's kinda too bad, isn't it, Regan? You are who you are. I can't help it if who you are turns out to be—"

"You erased my life. You violated my brain, and you *did* take over my body without my permission. You took Zilch's heart."

"Yeah, which I still have. I have your memories too, so maybe it's not a good idea to—"

"You're not going to do anything to us. Not even if we walk away right now."

Hans stared at him, mouth open like a fish out of water. “That’s a pretty big assumption for a guy who literally doesn’t know how *anything* works here.”

“I know how you work, Hans. And that’s enough.” Regan was almost smiling now, but it wasn’t a pleasant one. “You’re all about leverage. You have to have something on people to make them do what you want. You’ve got Zilch’s heart, but if you destroy it, you kill the one person you can actually control. Because once they’re gone... I walk. You got nothing on me.”

“I have your entire *life* in the palm of my see-through hand!” Hans said very slowly, holding one up like he was swearing an oath. “Or don’t you want to know who you are? Or where you’ve been, what you did, who you love—”

“Maybe I don’t care where I’ve been.” Regan’s voice was sharp, but it didn’t shake at all. “Maybe I only care about where I’m going. And maybe I don’t need what you can give me, because I have something of my own.”

“And what do you have now?” Hans asked in a whisper that reverberated through Regan’s skull. He leaned in closer, staring directly into Regan’s eyes, unblinking. He never blinked. Mental projections didn’t need to.

Regan didn’t blink either, but he was looking past Hans, not back at him, watching the peaceful rise and fall of Rose’s chest. “A new life. People. Who have my back, even when...” He shut his eyes. “Even when I disappear.”

“Well, that’s great,” Hans’s voice was like a breath of icy air through his mind. Regan shuddered, but didn’t move or open his eyes. “But it’s a little late for guilt. She’s down. It’s done. You’re not gonna un-ruin anything by crying about it. And this is just what you know. This is one night eating you up inside. What do you think an entire lifetime is like? You don’t need that, let it go. Let them go. We got work to do.”

“I can’t go back and change what happened, but it’s not too late to stop this

right here.”

“You stop this right here, you’ll never know how much you even need to make up for.” Hans’s unnerving, dry whisper continued, seeping through the cracks and wrinkles in Regan’s brain like cold water. “If you really want to wallow in a lifetime of guilt and broken promises, then by all means, go ahead. But I’m the only one who can help you do that. You want to upgrade your trial-version struggle for redemption, Regan? Great, I’ve got the key to the real thing.”

“Keep your key.” He opened his eyes. “These people are getting their lives back... and I’ll make my own from here. My own life. Maybe it’s not the one I had before, but it’s not whoever you want me to be. And that’s worth it.”

“*Knowledge is power, Regan.*” Hans’s furious voice rattled in his head like bones on stone, crackled like a surging current in a live wire, flared like a firecracker with a very short fuse.

“And ignorance is bliss.” Regan smiled, and turned away. “Goodbye.”

Before Regan could react, Hans reached out and touched his forehead.

Not afraid. Up here there’s no fear, no doubt, no pain; there’s air in his lungs and solid ground beneath his feet. When he runs, it’s not because he’s running away from something. Up ahead, everything ends in empty space, but instead of stopping he speeds up and charges toward the rooftop edge, not away. He leaps into the open air and holds his breath as he hangs in empty space. He doesn’t need to be invisible to feel invincible. He can trust that the ground will be there when he gets back, the air will come when he needs it. Then gravity reminds him he has to land, and keep running through the fire.

Not alone. A crooked smile with stitches around the mouth, stretching so far they might rip right out. The features are different, they change all the time, but he’ll always recognize them. A hand on his chest, another supporting his back, and when his heart

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beats faster it isn't because of panic. He more feels the rough voice than hears it, it vibrates in his own chest. He sometimes wonders if re-animated, stitched-together flesh remembers being still and cold, if it ever feels itself come back to life when it joins the other pieces, if it regains a kind of life, and breathes again. He wonders if it felt like this.

Not silent. The constant tapping of a computer keyboard fills his ears, a reassuring background sound that becomes white noise. The room is small and illuminated only by the glow of dozens of computer screens, but this hidden place is comforting instead of claustrophobic; his sleepy eyes follow, hypnotized as long fingers in black gloves rapidly weave lines of brilliant, enemy-befuddling code, building walls and setting snares to keep them safe. Regan smiles, chin in his hand and chest warm and full. A whole shadowy syndicate couldn't match the cyber-victories that happened in this room. Then there's an even louder rumbling purr and something warm and furry bumps against his hand. He looks down into a pair of bright green gently spinning gyroscope eyes and murmurs soft words, pets the cat's synthetic ears. He doesn't notice the typing's stopped until he looks back up into another pair of much softer, darker, human eyes, and a smile filled with triumph. Warm arms pull him close and he relaxes into a slow kiss that asks nothing from him except for him to remain. He can't remember what fear is, or pressure or rejection or tension or worry that any of this will disappear even if he drifts off again, and closes his eyes.

Good night. Dream sweet. In the morning, I'll be here.

Not cold. Parole's fire has never kept him warm. Regan can never hold onto heat; when his heart hammers with too-familiar terror, when he's hurt in any of several ways, chill seeps down into his bones like ice water and stays there. But he's warm now. He's curled up in something soft, a beanbag chair, a blanket, blue, knitted by hand, carefully created just for him. The voice that sings is soft when it speaks to him in words too, like the blanket and chair; like the fur his hand touches when he reaches out. But no cat

purrs here, no typing. Instead he can hear the turning of a page in a book, and the sound is just as much a promise. Regan's life had turned a page as well. In his old life, he hadn't even lived for today. Living meant struggling through pain. Fear. Never knowing which crack would give way under his feet. Now he knew he was home, because not only did he know would tomorrow come, he wanted to see it. You couldn't fake that kind of love.

Not gone.

Regan panted for breath, struggled to suck in desperate oxygen. He felt like he'd just been dropped a million miles, slammed back into his body, into this room, he was drenched in cold sweat; he hadn't really even known he could sweat with his scales, even in Parole's heat, but now he was, and—he felt his head, his face, his chest to make sure he was all really him, all really there.

"Hey. Hi. Hello!" Hans waved a hand in front of his face. His wide, toothy smile floated in the dark like a sideways crescent moon as he stretched out horizontally like he was lying on his stomach in midair, feet kicked up behind him and his chin in his hands.

Regan looked up, shocked to somehow find himself close to tears. "Told you... never do that again!"

"Sorry." The ghost boy had never sounded sorry in a single one of their conversations, and he didn't start now. "But you said no possessing. Not no sharing."

"Who were—what was that?"

"What did it feel like?"

No sound came out of Regan's open mouth; all he could do was suck in deep breaths and shake his head.

"Well, it was a good thing," Hans sighed, rotating until he was face-up,

hands behind his head and hair spreading out like he was floating on his back in a swimming pool. “Some of your memories. Nice, right? You belonged there, didn’t you? It felt good, didn’t it?” Hans gave his characteristic, wide smile, but it seemed strained.

Regan looked at the floor as he slowly regained control over his panicked breathing. “Why would you show me that? Those people—I knew them, didn’t I? I knew... they were...”

“Just giving you a taste of what you had. And what you can have again!” He shook his head at Regan, smile almost pitying. “So maybe now you’ll think twice before you go all, ‘I don’t care where I came from, I don’t care about my old life, I have a new life now! I don’t need you!’ Maybe you do care. You just don’t... remember.”

“Still not right,” Regan said, but his voice came out in a weak near-whine, and he almost didn’t recognize it, the way he barely recognized the rest of himself tonight. “Not if I hurt people now, trying to get back what I had. Not if I let you turn me into someone I’m not. Not if...” he caught his breath, made the next words come out stronger. “Not if I can be better than I was.”

“Yeah... but you were loved, remember?” Hans shrugged. “All those good feelings, all those warm, fuzzy thoughts. So you must’ve done something right. You sure do belong somewhere. Somebody sure wanted you around. I bet they’d love to have you back... of course, you’d better make sure you have *their* back this time. If you know what I mean?”

Regan’s eyes flicked to Rose’s bed, then back up to the floating, grinning face that had haunted his every moment since he’d found himself outside the Emerald Bar. Maybe he’d lost himself then too. “You’re... evil. You’re actually evil. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“How would you know that without me, though? But seriously... I’m not evil, I’m not even your enemy—I’m your best friend right now. And you can do whatever the hell you want, Regan, for real, you can *be* whoever you want. I really don’t care. But not until after we’re done. We still have a job to do.”



“It’s gonna be okay, sweetie. I’m right here.”

“Thanks. Just. I can’t... we almost...” Evelyn sniffed, swiping a forearm across her face to stop the tears that flowed down her cheeks. “Oh, God...”

“I know. I know, honey. I’m so sorry. I wish I could be there to hug you!” The warm girl’s voice came out of the radio on the table next to where Evelyn sat on the floor, like her very own private broadcast. She wasn’t speaking into a phone or speaker of any kind, but the voice on the other end could clearly hear her.

“Yeah. I could really use a hug. I thought Rose was dead. I was so scared.”

“I know, that sounds so awful! But it’s over now, she’s safe, you’re safe. You held it together for everyone, you did so good. You don’t have to be the strong one right now.”

“Okay. Okay, yeah.” Evelyn took a deep breath, forcing herself back under control. “But... that’s not why I called you.”

“I know.”

“Eye in the Sky thinks Regan killed someone.”

“Yeah.”

“Is anybody we know dead?”

There was a long silence on the other line. When the girl spoke again, her voice was lifeless and slow. *“Garrett was found in his room a couple nights ago. I’m sorry, Evelyn.”*

“No. No, God!” Evelyn clenched her teeth. She couldn’t fall apart—if she

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started to cry again, she'd never stop. "How?"

"I don't know. Eye in the Sky locked it up real fast. The Bar's not on lockdown anymore, you should be able to get in, but. They got to him first."

"God..." Evelyn sniffed again, and now she wiped her face. She took another deep breath, shut her eyes, and made herself talk. "Did everyone get out in time? Anybody get caught in the crossfire?"

"Well, the Bar cleared out. Everyone except for Garrett."

"I told him to get out of there..." Evelyn's voice was high, tight, close to tears again. She took another deep breath. "Okay. Well, I gotta get back there. Somebody must have seen something."

"You sure about going back there, sweetie? I wouldn't want to."

"I have to know."

"Okay. Then I'd ask Jenny. She's probably still there."

"Yeah. Yeah, that's the first step." Evelyn cleared her throat and swallowed. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Are you safe?"

"You mean in the house?"

"I mean in every sense of the word. Physically, emotionally. Are you safe?"

"I... I'm alive. We're all still alive."

"Okay. Well, please hang in there. And I'm here for you, I promise. Any time you need me. I'm gonna help you through this as much as I can."

"You have a whole city of people to talk through every day. You're everybody's Radio Angel." Evelyn gave a little laugh she didn't entirely feel. "Don't make me a special project."

"You are special, though. You're my friend. It's what I'm here for, but especially for you."

“Okay. Well, I should go. I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“Yeah, me too. So much has happened on my end too, I don’t even know where to start. Oh, well here’s a little bit of good news! We found Cai!” The relief was clear in the girl’s voice.

“Hey, that’s great.”

“Yeah, I bet Rose’ll be happy to hear that too! Give her a hug for me. And Danae, and Jack, and my new friend Regan who I haven’t met yet!”

“I will.” Evelyn thought about Rose in the hospital bed, and didn’t say a word. They all had enough to worry about. “Talk to you later, Kari.”

She sighed and drew her knees up to her chest. Shoulders slumping, Evelyn buried her face in her knees and shut her eyes. Without her friend’s voice filling the air, the room was silent and still. But then, not ten seconds later, there was a knock at the door.

“Ev? You in there?” Regan’s voice, muffled.

“Yeah,” she croaked, throat sore from crying. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Yeah! Come in.”

“Hey,” Regan opened the door slowly, then stopped, seeing her on the floor. She caught a flash of exhaustion—understandable, really—and something else in his face before it shifted to curiosity and concern. Couldn’t say what that something else had been, but he looked shaken up. They all were. She certainly was. “Oh. You okay? Is this a bad time? I can leave you alone, I’ll talk to you later.”

“No. Stay, please.” Evelyn shook her head and patted the floor next to her. “I’d, uh. I’d rather not be alone. If that’s okay. I was just talking with a friend about... about who SkEye framed you for murdering.”

“So, any luck?” Regan stepped over to the space she’d offered, squatting

down awkwardly beside her.

“Yeah.” Evelyn said quietly, still staring at the floor.

“So...” Regan prodded when she didn’t respond. “Who is it?”

Evelyn hesitated, took a deep breath. “The owner of the Emerald Bar was found dead. Garrett Cole. The last time I saw him was right before I met you. I knew he was acting strange that night, hiding in his room. He knew someone was after him—he told me to go right home. I told him to go home too, but he wouldn’t. I don’t know if he was trying to hide something from me, or protect me from whoever... got him. Maybe both.”

Regan was only half-listening. He’d tuned out at the name Garrett Cole. He knew that name, and two puzzle pieces snapped together in his exhausted brain with a satisfied click, and he suddenly knew one thing. Garrett was supposed to be dead, it was good he was dead. And it frightened Regan, the satisfaction, the way he knew it was true...

Then he knew a second fact. The reason Garrett was supposed to be dead was because Regan was supposed to kill him.

“I’m sorry,” Regan said haltingly, feeling unfamiliar with his tongue. He couldn’t begin to say those words enough.

Evelyn shrugged, still wouldn’t look at him. “It’s okay. I’m just kind of—it hasn’t sunk in yet, you know? That he’s really gone.” She took a deep breath, shoulders rising and falling, head hanging a little lower. “Garrett helped me when I really needed it, years ago. He’s... where I got my gift.”

“He gave you Chrysedrine?”

“Lots of people made their own after the formula got leaked, hoping to cash in.”

“Bet they cashed in a lot.”

“Yeah, well he didn’t even charge me for it. Even though I wasn’t sick.” She smiled, soft and slow, but at something far away from this time and place. “And I took it. And Garrett gave me a home, and a stage where I could be myself. I could make walls crumble and fall at the sound of my voice, cast a spell over an audience... I was free.”

“It didn’t hurt you?”

“No. He actually knew what he was doing, and I was one of the very few lucky ones. I got exactly what I wanted. And now I’m clean. Garrett helped me survive the withdrawal. Held my hand all the way through.” Now she did look at Regan, eyes steady. “I know what you’re thinking. This city is full of monsters, but Garrett Cole wasn’t one of them.”

“Okay. I believe you.” Regan chewed the inside of his cheek for a minute, like he was trying to figure out how to word something he wanted desperately to ask. “You said you weren’t sick. Then why did you...?”

“That’s really not a question we ask here.”

“Ah, okay. Sorry. Yeah, that was really rude of me, I won’t—”

“I wasn’t sick. And I’ve never needed fixing,” she said, tone level and cool, looking directly into his eyes. “I wanted power. The power to protect the people I love, and just maybe, the power to free us all. The whole game changed here, Regan. It was time to level the playing field.”

“So you took the drug knowing you could have died—or worse?”

“I could have died. Or I could have gotten a voice that could bring down a mountain. My voice has always been my weapon. Now it’s just more literal.”

“It could have killed you. Or you could have ended up like...” he hesitated, staring at his hands. “With something else.”

“It was a calculated risk. Like I said, I was lucky, I got exactly what I wanted.

But I wouldn't have minded scales either. Not everybody got a pretty power, though," she said, more softly. "I'm well aware of how privileged I am on that front. It's easy to be confident and badass when it works out for you."

"Do you ever regret it?"

"Not one heartbeat." Regan shivered at the controlled force of her voice. It could so easily have been a hurricane that swept him away, but all she did with it now was tell the truth. "I have the power to survive and protect the ones I love. That means everything."

For a second, all Regan could do was stare. "How do you do it?" he asked at last. "How do you keep going through all of this? Being so brave and confident and not just...collapsing." He thought about caving in like the city on the flaming Styx, crashing and burning.

"Knowing you don't have much time kind of forces you to make decisions fast. You gotta be who you want to be while you have time. That's what shoved me into taking the drug. That's what made me say 'fuck it, I'm going to love myself while I can.'"

"So... power of love? Or is it knowing we're all going to die tomorrow, so it's more like, who cares?"

She looked at him for a moment, then broke into a laugh. "God, I know how it sounds. We're in as about a literal of a Hell you can get on Earth. Stuff like trust and faith might not seem like they apply."

"But that's what it is?" He shook his head. "Can't be that simple. Nothing in this place is."

"There are good people around me." She shrugged, as if it was that simple indeed. "I love them, and I want to keep them out of the fire for as long as I can. So I can either cry and scream and self-destruct and live in fear, or I can

live in that love and do as much good as I can. So I sing at the Emerald Bar, and that makes people feel better for just a little bit. Even if that's all I can do, I have to try."

"And be a superheroine everywhere else." Regan smiled. "And save the day."

"I try. It's like..." Evelyn thought for a second. "You know that saying? 'Evil triumphs when good people see, and do nothing?' Something like that? Well I can't do nothing. Or say nothing. I just can't."

"Yeah..." Regan's smile faded as he swallowed hard.

"Hey. You okay?" Evelyn looked at him carefully. "Feeling anxious?"

"It's not... I mean, I have something to..." Regan cleared his throat and opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it again as if he'd changed his mind. After a moment, however, he did speak. "So. Now we figure out who killed Garrett, and why."

"That's right."

"And why they made it look like we did it."

"I can think of lots of reasons, but..." Evelyn's eyes narrowed a little, and she gave Regan a long, searching look. "Before we go any further, I just have to ask you, straight-up. Did you kill Garrett Cole, Regan?"

Regan shook his head, but had to smile. "I really don't remember, but if I did—you actually believe I'd tell you? You're giving me the benefit of the doubt. Like I'm a good person, or something. Why?"

"Because what people call you doesn't make you who you are." Evelyn shrugged. "Other people don't tell you who you are, you decide who you are."

"You got no reason to trust me."

"You helped us save Finn tonight, and you got Rose out of that war zone."

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Regan looked away. "So? A good deed doesn't make you a good person."

"And a bad deed doesn't make you a bad one. And who says you have to be perfect to deserve a family?" She smiled. "We're all in this together now. Good or bad, we help each other out of the fire. If we're gonna make it out of this alive, we have to take care of our own."

Regan thought of Rose and the bullet and felt a cold weight of guilt in his stomach.

Evelyn slowly got to her feet. "Now I need to go to bed. Kicking ass and taking names takes more out of you than you'd think."

"Oh. Good night," Regan said, but didn't stand up. All of a sudden he felt so drained, and wasn't sure his legs would support him.

"You should try to get some rest too. We all had a hell of a day, and tomorrow's going to be another one."

"Yeah. Uh, do you have plans?"

"Garrett's dead," she said, voice flat. "And if you didn't kill him, that means somebody else did. Think my job here's pretty clear." When she looked at him, he couldn't even think of looking away. "And I need you to help me do it."

CHAPTER 11

What You Remember

“IT’S OKAY TO GO TO SLEEP, YOU KNOW,” ROSE SAID SOFTLY, UNTANGLING A SNARL IN DANAЕ’S bushy red hair and leaving a flower behind her ear. “I’ll still be here when you wake up.”

“I know.” Danae had to smile a little. “I didn’t, but now I do.” She rubbed her temples; her head throbbed from lack of sleep and worry. Her other hand unconsciously tucked the sheets around Rose, the rounded flesh where her legs ended at the upper thigh. The metal prostheses stood up against the wall, and Rose lay back on a mountain of pillows, free of blood, safe and clean.

“I’m feeling a lot better, really.” Rose said, sitting up to kiss Danae’s cheek. “Go cuddle Jack; I know he’s missing his mommies. And I know Evelyn’s off somewhere beating herself up for all this. She said she wasn’t, but she is, and



none of you are sleeping enough.”

“You never stop, do you?” Danae stared down at her. “What about you getting enough sleep?”

“I’m in a hospital bed and it still hurts to move.” Rose sighed. “Whether I like it or not, I’m resting. And making sure you do the same.”

“You could have died. I’m not sleeping for a long time.”

Rose’s gentle fingers stroked Danae’s face, twined through her wild hair. “Listen. It was my choice to go with you to rescue Finn and I’d do it again. Even if I get hurt, my decisions are mine to make.”

“I should be able to protect you.”

“Your lady can take care of herself.”

“I know.” Danae softly pressed a kiss to the back of Rose’s hand. “But you still got hurt.”

“Yes I did.” Rose said, carefully watching her wife’s face. “But we’re not like... other people. Everyone else doesn’t have flowery bulletproof vests. I’ll be fine.”

“Fine?” Danae said faintly, eyes slipping a little out of focus. “Please don’t tell me that. You can’t be—and you don’t have to be, not with me.”

Rose was quiet for a few long seconds. “I’m not fine. But I’m... processing. I’m... it’s...”

“It’s okay. You can’t think about it, can you?” She stopped for a moment. “Just like you can’t stop and take a break. It’s easier to focus on other people. And keep busy.”

Slowly, Rose nodded her head. “It doesn’t feel real. It hurts, I know it happened, but, it feels like it happened to someone else.” She smiled a little. “Classic post-trauma reaction. Initial shock and emotional numbness combined

with defensive dissociation. Double-edged sword of being a therapist—I can track my brain’s exact responses and processes. But it doesn’t make them any easier.”

“No.” Danae bit her lip; the pain was grounding. “Sometimes even seeing the broken parts doesn’t make them any easier to fix.”

“What exactly happened back there?” Rose asked, frowning like she was trying to make sense of a particularly baffling puzzle. “Everything happened so fast. I saw people running. Heard crashes. But everything was chaos and noise and... and pain.”

“Regan got you into the car,” Danae answered, voice flat. “So maybe he actually saw it happen. I didn’t know how—I mean, you looked—there was a lot of blood. And I... freaked out. Pretty bad.”

“God. I’m sorry, honey.”

“Sorry? You’re the one who got shot!”

“Just in general. I’m sorry for me too. It just sounds like a nightmare.”

“Well, good. And yeah. Yeah, it—it really...” Danae trailed off, breathing hard, face pale and drawn. “It was bad. I saw you, and... and then I saw *them*. Eye in the Sky. They were there with their armor and shields and—and guns, and I couldn’t see anymore. I couldn’t think, I just wanted to destroy everything. *Everything*.” Her angular shoulders fell as she gave a deep sigh and stared at the floor.

“I don’t blame you. It sounds like Hell. Or at least like our old life.”

“I mean, that’s basically the same, right? It was all happening again, and I couldn’t stop it. You were hurt, and the guns were pointing at me, and I just...” She stopped. Sucked in a few fast breaths. Rose squeezed her hand and waited. “I punched a hole in the ground. With a tank.”

“Honey... I know you’re feeling guilty and sick about this, and it had to have been absolutely horrific in the moment, and however you feel is valid...” Rose spoke slowly. “But I am also very, very sorry I missed that.”

“I knew you’d think it was awesome.” Danae groaned, flopping back onto the pillows. “And it was *really awesome*, that’s the worst part, I can’t even enjoy it! It just—oh, God, it sucked so much! It wasn’t just seeing red, it was *being red*. I was gone. And I couldn’t breathe, I was so angry, and... so scared...”

“A flashback. You relive the trauma, and in that moment, it *is* real.”

“Felt really freaking real. I dunno what the hell’s wrong with me, but if it never happens again, that’d be just great.”

“Nothing’s wrong with you.” Rose’s smile was rueful and disappeared fast. “For Parole, this is the new normal. Do you know how many people with PTSD I’ve seen since the fires started?”

Danae didn’t answer, just dug the heels of her hands into her eyes and pressed hard.

“You reacted. Everyone reacts.” Rose looked down at the cluster of flowers sprouting from her chest, over her heart. “It’s just self-defense.”

“It’s not going to get better, is it?” Danae whispered. “It’s not. It doesn’t get better. Not unless we make it better. Not unless I...”

“What are you thinking?”

Danae nodded slowly, face hard and resolute. “If we’re going to survive this... we need protection. We need firepower.” Danae shut her eyes. “We need me.”

Rose was quiet for a long moment. “Like I said... the decision is yours to make. And I’m with you, no matter what. But if you’re trying to make up for something...”

“No. No guilt. I’m doing this to keep us alive.”

“Okay then.” Rose nodded slowly. “As long as we do things for the right reasons.”

Danae smiled a little, but it didn’t last long. She took a deep breath. “But I’m still scared.”

“Why? Aside from... oh, there’s so much, isn’t there?”

“I don’t want to go back there.” Danae’s voice broke. “We have a beautiful life. I make things now, create, I don’t destroy. We tried so hard to make our own lives, and for a while, I really thought we were free! And now it’s pulling us back in, and I want to scream and I just don’t *want* any more of this! We had peace. I just want peace. No more anger, no more fighting. I’m so tired.”

“I know. God, I know.” Rose said quietly, reaching up to stroke Danae’s cheek. “I wish I could pick up this entire city in my hands and just—make it stop. Make it quiet, make it safe.”

“Me too.” Danae sniffed. “And I’m scared. I’m exhausted. But it’s worth it. If I keep you alive, and keep Jack and Evelyn and everyone we love alive... It’s worth it, to be a soldier for a little while longer.”

“It’s not right,” Rose whispered, and now it was her turn to blink back tears. “It’s not fair. Just... just come here.” Rose’s soft hands found Danae’s jaw and gently pulled her down into a gentle kiss. “I love you. Remember that, please, I love you, and I’m with you. Always.”

Danae shut her eyes, rested her head on top of her wife’s, and just breathed. “Love you too. So much.”



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Later that night, Danae opened the door marked “EMPLOYEES ONLY,” slipped inside and closed it behind her. The place was still a ghost town but deep-ingrained mom instincts meant she tiptoed anyway. But Jack was asleep ten floors up, finally, after a thousand kisses and promises that Mama Rosie would be better soon.

Inside the dingy laundry room to which Lisette had given her the key, Danae stood with her hands on her hips, staring at her array of projects. Several suits of body armor stood against the wall, and a pile of fur and clockwork gears lay in a heap on the floor. She took a slow step forward, nervous as if Toto-Dandy were alive and snarling at her.

Deep breaths. Just start slow. She didn’t need to start making weapons or bombs again, not today. But remembered pain and gunshots stung under her skin like splinters, and now she wasn’t sure of anything. She closed her eyes and saw Rose’s face spattered with blood; it made her want to say *to hell with peace*. It made her want to cry and cry and never stop. It made her want to flip another tank and send a thousand more men with guns falling into the fire.

It made her want to mow down the whole damn city, ripping and screaming and defending until this violent, sick world was safe for sweet flower girls and little boys who tucked flowers into her hair and called her Mama.

Something had to give.

But right now, all she could do was kneel down onto the floor, and start tucking Toto-Dandy’s mechanical guts back inside the heavy pelt, stroking his ears. She began to pet the limp fur and start trying to breathe life back into the battered shell. Back into both of them.



Finn couldn't stand the silence.

He'd awoken with his entire body on fire and his tongue so swollen he couldn't speak. Still, he'd recovered quickly, thanks to Lisette and Wren's medical magic, and hadn't even needed skin grafts or an extended 'hospital' stay. The huge burned swaths peeled easily off, leaving behind tender, painful scars but nothing else. And even though he was still sore and weak, his scars were nothing compared to what they could have been. At least the physical ones.

There hadn't been a single explosion since that night in the cell. Silence pressed in like a palpable weight.

After he was let out of bed, he'd gone back to his own room and closed the door. Now he stared at the wall and tried to feel again.

Finn tried to slip on different feelings, but they felt like clothes that didn't fit. They often didn't; he was out of practice. He'd never let himself feel real panic, real fear, really think he was going to die, because if he did, people got hurt. So he learned to bottle up everything to avoid catastrophe, pushing sadness and fear far down into a dark, sick little place in his stomach. And now, he didn't know how to dig the feelings back up again.

But it was different now.

In that white cell, something in his head snapped. The rush of emotion, that mortal terror and despair had been so overwhelming, he'd... overloaded. Somehow. Nothing had exploded or burned around him since; for the first time in his life, he'd known quiet. But the silence came from inside.

He felt nothing. He was broken.

Or maybe he was free. Maybe he could cry and the world wouldn't end.

Except that he couldn't.

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Finn thought about sunny days and ice cream and holding hands and warm puppies with waggly tails... and felt nothing. He thought about being back in that white, airless cell; electrical currents shooting through his blood; smoke coming from the bottoms of his feet. The smell of his own burning skin. He thought about screaming for Zilch. The silence—heavy as what he felt now—when nobody came.

Nothing. A *nothing* more devastating than any explosion. He couldn't cry or scream. He couldn't do anything except sit here and stare at the wall and...

"Hey."

He looked up, hopeful for his own smile, as Zilch entered the room, knocking quietly on the door as they opened it. Finn prayed for the usual rush of joy and pounding heartbeat. It didn't come. He did not jump up and run to hug Zilch. He sat motionless, and looked away again. "Hi."

Zilch stood in the doorway, uncomfortable, not sure whether to sit down next to Finn, or stay standing, or apologize and leave. "Are you...feeling better?"

"Oh. Yeah. Everything's fine."

Zilch moved to stand in front of him, searched his face. "I don't believe it."

"Why?"

"You're never just *fine*." Zilch's crooked mouth curled in a smile. Most other people would have found it frightening, but Finn didn't look away. "You're either bouncing on the moon, or bawling your eyes out. Just not much of the second one." Finn shrugged and said nothing. So Zilch continued. "Nobody's fine after what you went through."

"Then why did you leave me alone?" There was no accusation in his tone, it was just an impassive, cool question.

"I knocked. Several times. Danae made me stop."

“She *made* you?”

“She... advised strongly. Said you needed to process. She’s right. Anyone would need to hide for a while.” They frowned. “But nobody would be fine.”

“Well, I am,” Finn said, and that emotionless tone worried Zilch more than anything else. It sounded like their own. “I don’t feel... anything.”

“Normal to be numb after that. Easier than feeling—”

“No, you don’t get it,” Finn interrupted, a little more forcefully. A note of desperation, a crack in the shell. “I don’t feel *anything*. I’ve been sitting here, trying to feel something, and I can’t. The explosions are gone too. I think that somehow I... broke something. Inside.”

Zilch hesitated, then, slowly, sat down next to Finn. Not touching him, not even looking at him, but there. “Have you been hurting yourself?”

“No.”

“You said you ‘broke something.’ How?”

“I was always sad, my whole life. And tired. And I just wanted to feel better! And I thought that the drug would make it better. But it didn’t, it just made everything worse!”

“It does that.” Zilch studied a long line of stitches curving up the back of their hand. “For some people.”

“I tried to keep it under control. I tried for years to be happy, even though I wasn’t. Just don’t think about anything, pretend I’m not scared and sad all the time, because if I ever give in, people get hurt.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t,” Finn said. He unconsciously drew away, shrinking, deflating. “You’ll never know what it’s like to always be afraid of yourself because one day you might cry, and someone you love might get hurt. And

then you'll cry more, and more bad things will happen, and—and you'll never stop! *It never stops!*" Finn swallowed hard, entire body tense and rigid. "So I just have to *smile*. And you're always so strong. You can't understand. You've never been helpless."

Zilch stayed quiet for a long few seconds, rolled up their sleeve. "I've shown you these before," they said quietly. It wasn't a question. Finn's eyes flicked to the long, deep, branching scars along the inside of Zilch's forearm.

"Yeah."

"Original skin. Could've replaced it. Didn't."

"Yeah," Finn said, more softly.

"You remember. Why it's important."

Finn nodded, said nothing.

"I've felt it. The way you feel. The *nothing*. Days go on forever. You drag yourself. Want to feel something. Anything. While it crushes the life out of you." Their strange, rattling voice was gentle as if they were soothing a frightened bird in the palm of their hand. "It's not the same. But..."

"I know." One of Finn's hands had come to rest on Zilch's arm, touching the long-healed scars from another life. "I don't want to die. I just... I don't know. Everyone else is important and together. I'm not important. I'm just kind of... here. I'm so helpless."

"Not true."

"Feels like it."

Zilch hesitated. Somewhere, their heart began to pound. They reached up to their neck and tugged on a chain that had always been hidden under their shirt and shaggy, multi-colored hair. They pulled it up over their head, and dangled it in front of Finn. "Something to show you."

Finn looked up at the chain with two small things hanging from it. Little metal ovals, like military dog tags. “What is it?”

“Read them. That one first.” They plucked at the shining object, and Finn took them from their hand.

“There’s just the number zero on it...” Finn said, then frowned. “Parole Substance Control and Surveillance Force.” He looked up at Zilch, and for the first time in days, something started to break through and spread across his face. Horror. “Surveillance Force? That’s Eye in the Sky!” He gasped. “You’re with *them*?” His heart pounded, and he jumped up, backing away.

“No. Finn, sit down,” Zilch said calmly.

“You’re with SkEye! You’re gonna—” Finn could barely speak, and his back hit the wall. “I trusted you, more than—*no!*”

“Stop, Finn! It’s okay. I’m not with them anymore. Not for years,” Zilch promised, standing up and raising their open hands. “I will not hurt you. I will not turn on you. Or take you back there. Look at me. It’s still you and me. Same as always.”

Finn was still staring, wide-eyed and ready to run. “How do I know?”

“Because you’re here.” They didn’t move. Nobody living held this still. “Nobody comes out of SkEye detention. You did. Second time that’s happened. Ever.”

“Because... you came and got me.”

“I’d do it again. Thousand more times.”

Finn breathed hard, past the lump in his throat. He couldn’t say what he was feeling, but for the first time since that electric floor... *something*. “So why are you telling me all this?”

Zilch looked away; ran a hand over their patched forehead, smoothed out

the duct tape holding two pieces of skin together. “Should have a long time ago. I’m sorry. Just didn’t want to scare you. Or hurt you.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I know that now. You kept your mouth shut under SkEye torture. That takes guts.”

“Thanks.” Finn didn’t smile.

“You deserve to know who you were protecting. And this—” Zilch held up the chain with the tags. “Means everyone feels helpless sometimes. But you’re not.”

“They’ve got us all trapped in here. They’re killing us. It’s hard not to feel like that.”

“Yes. But back then... I was helpless in a different way.” Their eyes dropped. “We both were.”

Finn blinked, confused. “What does that mean?”

Zilch didn’t answer.

“Zilch? That last part. Who’s ‘we?’

Still no answer. They held still as a statue.

“You’re not talking about me anymore, are you?”

Now they turned their head to look at him. “No. You were always better.”

“Who was with you?”

“You know him. Ten years ago, we called him Chimera.”

Finn’s eyes widened. “Regan?”

Silently, Zilch held up the second tag. Finn stared at it, eyes round, and mouthed the words inscribed on the metal.

“He was in SkEye too?!”

“We were partners. Tasked with stopping the Chrysedrine epidemic. Took

out the dealers. People who could do things they shouldn't. If you want to fight a superhuman menace... you need agents. They snatched us off the street. Gave us a choice, work for them... or die."

"You didn't want to die, did you?" Finn asked quietly.

"No. We were scared. Kids."

"I'd be scared too."

"So we... worked. Brought people in. Some were just kids. Like us. Not criminals. A lot were dying already."

"You could have brought me in any time you wanted," Finn whispered.

"No. Quit by the time I met you."

"You killed people like us."

"I contributed to their deaths. Don't expect you to forgive me. Or trust me. But you deserve to know."

"I can't believe it." Finn shook his head, staring at the floor. "That's how you know Eye in the Sky so well. And how to keep away from them..."

Zilch nodded, not looking at Finn. "They want me dead, too. Good thing I can change my face."

Finn was silent for a long time. "You quit, so you wouldn't have to hurt anyone anymore?"

"Story's longer than that. But yes." Their eyes slipped over to study Finn's downcast face. When he didn't reply, they went on. "I can't take it back. Just move forward. Do better. Help people instead of destroy them."

"What did you do?"

"Went to the other side. Garrett Cole's side. Worked against the Eye in the Sky. Taking them down, instead of each other."

"I want to hear the whole story someday," Finn said at last. "Sounds like

there's a lot more than what you've told me."

"There is."

"Good and bad."

Their eyelids lowered. "Yes."

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to." Finn studied their reconstructed face, so strange to most eyes but easily read by his. "You... didn't really mean to tell me about Regan just now, did you?"

"No, I didn't. Just going to tell you about me." Zilch shut their eyes briefly, but their mouth twisted in the potentially-terrifying expression Finn recognized as a smile. "Can't keep anything from you."

"I figured you two had like, a history."

Now they frowned. "Obvious?"

"Oh, probably not to anyone else! But I mean, I know you. And you're just, like, different around him than you are with anyone else. You look at him and you're... soft." Finn smiled for the first time since his ordeal. "It's like you're looking at me."

Zilch turned their head to look away and hunched far over, letting out a slow hiss between their clenched teeth. "I need to keep better secrets."

"Can't keep anything from me, remember?" He wasn't even trying to smile. He didn't need to force it; it was automatic as it always was with Zilch. "And you don't have to. I mean, I see why you did. With what you used to do. But you don't do it anymore, right? So it's okay."

"No. I don't. Haven't for years. When I met you, I was running missions for Garrett Cole. So was Chimera. Covert ones. Under the radar. Invisible."

"Cool, there you go." Finn nodded. "But... you still care about him. Chimera. Regan."

Zilch's eyes widened. They said nothing.

"And that's still okay too." Finn said, carefully watching the minuscule changes in Zilch's patch-mosaic face as they continued to stare across the room. "He was important to you, wasn't he?"

They went through the motions of a deep, calming breath. Somewhere, so did their lungs.

"And he still is, isn't he? You're trying to protect him. Just like saving me from the detention center, you'd do it a thousand more times, wouldn't you? Some things change, and some things don't."

No answer.

"It's okay, Zilch. It's really okay if you still love him."

"He doesn't remember," they said at last, whisper dry. "Hans. Took it. His mind. Memory..."

"I know."

"And my heart. If I tell, if I—with words, or... I can't."

"That's so evil," Finn shook his head. "This is why you've been walking around like... I mean, seeming half-asleep all the time. You're trying not to let anything show."

"Don't say anything."

"I won't, I promise."

"I know. I trust you." Zilch hesitated. "But it's not just Hans. I don't... if Regan doesn't remember... I can't."

"You don't want to pressure him..." Finn trailed off. "Wow."

"Yes. Wow."

Finn thought for a second. "You could have told me about him. Not now," he said as Zilch opened their mouth. "Before all this happened. Before Hans

took your heart, or his memories, or anything else. I would've loved to meet him, and—it just would've been fine.”

“Like I said, he lived off the radar. Invisible. Didn't talk to anyone outside Garrett's circle, getting the job done. Had to, safer.”

“You still could've told me. It wouldn't have changed anything.”

“I'm sorry,” Zilch rasped, words falling out much faster than their usual slow, deliberate speech. “Trying to keep you safe. One dark, terrible part of our lives was over. But not all. You're a civilian. You didn't need to know.”

“Hey, I help! I drive my cab, which is a lot more dangerous than it sounds in Parole! I scramble signals for Cyborj's networks, I help Radio Angel when she...”

“It's different, Finn. We see things you don't need to see.” They thought for a moment. “It wasn't him I was keeping... separate. It was that life. Still dangerous. Deadly.”

“Were you ever going to un-separate it?”

“I... didn't know how. Wanted to. You... you're both...”

“It's fine.” Finn shook his head. He wasn't smiling anymore, looking down at the healing burns on one arm. “Maybe you're right. You and... Chimera, I guess? You saw really bad stuff, didn't you?” Zilch stayed quiet. “And now you're working with Cyborj and Celeste and Radio Angel—and now Evelyn Calliope! I can't believe it. You're doing all this really good stuff. And I can't really handle either, can I? The good or the bad? So, you're right. I don't belong in your world. After... after what happened, I don't really know how much more I can face.”

“Nobody does.” Zilch said slowly, dissonant voice just above a whisper. “There are different kinds of Hell. You've been through one already. But you're

stronger than you think.”

“It almost broke me down and turned me into... nothing. I felt nothing.”

“Feeling gets harder. But I’ll try to remind you.” A moment of their perfect, unbroken stillness.

Zilch looked up at the soft sob to see tears flowing down Finn’s face. They hesitated, then slowly opened their arms. Finn wordlessly fell forward to lean against them, and Zilch’s long arms encircled him in a slow, secure embrace.

“Lost my chance to tell him. But I can still tell you.”

“Tell me. Please.”

“You’re not nothing, Finn. You’re everything.”

Finn buried his face in Zilch’s shoulder and let the tears come. Crying never felt so good. Nothing broke the silence, but he didn’t mind this time.



It was dark and still when someone slipped into the room where Rose slept for the night, and Hans’s body slept for a decade. A hand raised a syringe and flicked the needle. The sharp tip plunged into a vein that stood out blue and sick against Hans’s jaundiced skin. The door opened and closed again. Silence.

Then Hans wheezed and gasped, and an alarm on one of the life-support machines beeped, growing louder and more insistent by the second, its red lights flashing. Hans’s long limbs began to shake and twitch, then full-body spasm.

Across the room, Rose blinked several times and propped herself up on one elbow. Jolted awake by the alarm and sudden noises, she stared half-asleep at Hans’s thrashing body. For one still half-dreaming moment, she almost thought her old friend, lost all these years and finally found, had finally woken up and

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was getting out of bed; she almost smiled. But as soon as it registered, she jerked upright—too fast—a lance of pain shot through her entire torso. She gritted her teeth and pushed herself upright with shaking arms.

“*HELP!*” Rose shouted even as lances of fire shot through her abdomen. Hans’s body was wracked with spasms and the monitor alarm screamed. “Danae! Lisette! Someone—help!”

Better than Expected

CHAPTER 12

WHY WASN'T ANYONE COMING? THE EKG'S ALARM CUT THROUGH ROSE'S SLEEPY HAZE, AND A RED light flashed, bathing the room in red. The metal bed frame rattled like an earthquake had struck as Hans convulsed, his face twisted in an agonized grimace.

Rose gritted her teeth and sat fully upright, and immediately her head spun. She shoved the covers off, forcing herself to stay conscious as the edges of her vision went dark. Pain shot through her entire body, and her solar plexus throbbed with nauseating fire. She cast a desperate glance across the room where her prosthetic legs leaned against the wall, then at Hans, caught in the throes of what looked from here like an intense seizure. There was no time. It would take a minute to re-attach them and get over to Hans, or go for help.



Hans didn't have a minute.

"Hello?!" Her voice cracked as she screamed. "*Help! Emergency!*"

Nothing. Hans was writhing in lockjaw agony, and no one was coming. Rose had spent ten years wondering whatever happened to him, then she and Hans and Danae had been brought here by some strange twist of fate—and now he was going to die right in front of her.

Something in the back of her mind erupted, like her ears had popped harder than ever before. A teenage boy with white hair was crouching on her bed beside her and screaming in her ear: "*You do it! You're the only one here, save me! Save me!*"

Rose took a deep breath and leaned forward, flopping onto her stomach and clawing her way across the rumpled sheets. She peered over the edge of the bed...

"Hang on!"

Rose rolled over the edge and dropped to the cold linoleum, absorbing as much of the shock as she could with her hands. Panting with the pain and effort, Rose army-crawled across the floor, substantial upper-arm strength propelling her forward. She clawed at the sheets hanging from Hans's bed, grabbed at the metal bar and mattress and yanked herself upright. Summoning every bit of determination she had, she pulled herself up onto his bed and fell beside him. Gasping from exertion and pain, Rose propped herself up and took a look at her patient. He shook and thrashed and Rose grabbed his wrists, holding him down.

"*Help me!*" The voice in her head crackled like an out-of-tune radio as Hans blipped in and out of the edges of her vision, and she just barely registered that his mental image at least looked exactly as she remembered from ten years ago.

His screams jangled inside Rose's skull, and her heart pounded with a cold fear that wasn't her own.

"Tell me what's wrong—"

"I don't know! Rose, please just don't let me die!"

White foam bubbled and poured between his clenched teeth, and she knew. Poison.

She lurched forward and tore the IV needles from Hans's wrists, tape and all, then clawed frantically at the bleeding holes they'd left, using her fingernails to make them bigger. But it wasn't working. In a flash of horrible insight, she grabbed the scalpel sitting on its metal tray and drew it across the papery flesh in one quick slash. Hans's blood was dark and sluggish and Rose didn't pay it any attention. She was closing her eyes and pressing her wrist against his, as tiny strings of green curled and bloomed out of the pores in her skin, reaching for the air and sun. They found the opening in Hans's skin.

Rose slowly drew her arm back from his, but the connection of vines and stems did not break. It stretched and drew further out of her and into him, and the green faded where it burrowed under Hans's skin. The tendrils sucked the poison out like straws and neutralized its power, vines dying and taking the venom with them before it reached Rose. The life-giving plants shriveled and turned brown.

Hans's convulsing slowly eased, and the tension in his facial muscles and neck released. Rose wiped the foam away from his mouth and felt him exhale in a long hiss.

"Thank you..." Hans's projection in her mind sobbed. He huddled in the back of her brain like a frightened child in a corner, and she didn't know how to reach out to him. Already his presence was starting to fade away.

“You’re welcome,” Rose whispered. The dry, brittle vines easily broke off and floated to the floor. Her own cut healed over and she collapsed beside him. The alarm was still shrieking, and now someone rushed into the room. She heard a voice (Lisette, she vaguely registered) but Rose was too drained to understand the words.

Her eyes rolled back into her head and a deafening rush filled her ears. Her vines and powerful antibodies could cleanse his tainted bloodstream, and at any other time, all she would have needed to recharge would be a quiet afternoon and some hot tea. Now...

Within seconds, Rose fell into a sleep almost as deep as Hans’s coma.



“Hey, Zilch. Can I talk to you?”

“Yes.”

Regan hurried down the long hallway to catch up; Zilch walked much faster than anyone would believe with their long-legged steps, even if they did appear slightly uneven. “Did you hear what happened to Hans?”

They didn’t answer, but inclined their head in a slow, stony-faced nod. Apparently they weren’t that broken up about it. Truly, neither was Regan. He was more curious.

“Pretty lucky he didn’t actually die, right?” Again, no response. Now he was curious with a slight edge of anxiety. “Because if he died... what would actually happen if he died?”

“My heart would be lost.” Their words were even more flat, brief and hollow-sounding than usual. “As well as...”

“My memory? Yeah, I figured.” Regan let out a breath he didn’t know he’d

been holding in a fast sigh. “So... it wouldn’t really make sense for...” He glanced up at Zilch, but their face was impassive and cold. They’d slipped back behind their world-class pokerface, and even Regan couldn’t dig any kind of reaction out of that. “I sure don’t want him dead. Do you?”

“No.” They answered without hesitation, to Regan’s further relief. “I want him to stop playing games. But not die.” Their face twisted in a look anyone else would find ghastly. “At least not without giving me back my heart.”

“You’re joking, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t try to kill him, Chimera. Don’t worry.”

“Okay, good.” Regan relaxed fully. His frill must have been twitching until this very moment, because it was only now that he noticed it had fallen still.

“But it crossed my mind.”

“I... yeah. Mine too.” There it went again, just from the memory of his throat constricting, the terrible, cold suffocation.

“Did you?”

“What? No!” Regan shook his head. “Hans is an ass, but I don’t want him dead. If he dies, my memories die with him. And I... would really like those back.” Zilch didn’t say anything else, and Regan thought for a moment before speaking again. “Out of curiosity, why do you ask?”

Zilch stared at him unblinking. “Because if you did, you’ll need help escaping.”

Regan stared back. “Are you joking again?”

“No.”

“You’d help me get away with... hypothetical murder?”

“Yes.”

He remembered the vision Hans showed him. The feeling of safety,

belonging. When Hans showed him, he thought it might have been an illusion. A lie. By this point, Regan was ready to believe anything that came from Hans was a lie. But coming from Zilch, he'd hear anything and believe it was the truth. "Well, if we survive this, I owe you one. Hypothetically."

"If we survive." They frowned, entire ghoulis countenance darkening. The intensity at which they could glower was almost impressive. "Which remains to be seen."

"Pfff." Regan flicked out his tongue where it tickled Zilch's nose. Like the strange déjà-vu feelings he'd been having more and more, he knew he'd done the joking, familiar gesture a million times before. "Have some freaking faith."

Zilch didn't move or even blink, but their expression slowly shifted from abject dourness to complete confusion. Slowly, their asymmetrical eyes crossed to stare at their reconstructed nose and Regan's forked tongue. They remained perfectly still and said nothing, but after a moment the corner of their mouth twitched in a faint, lopsided but genuine smile.

Regan grinned, and slurped in his tongue like a long spaghetti noodle. "There. Feel better?"

They repeated something that had now become familiar, almost a Zilch-specific ritual: just taking a moment to look at Regan, eyes traveling over his face, before responding. "Yes."

"Good. So, seriously, thanks," Regan said, lowering his head and his tone. "That means a lot, you, uh. Being willing to cover up my potential murders." His shoulders dropped as well. "Which... even I have to... wonder..."

"Don't wonder." Zilch said, voice monotone but kind. "Just survive."

Regan gave them a sideways, searching look. "Didn't you say before that Hans had to live, if we were going to live?"

“I said that. Once.”

“Before you... thought I was in trouble.” Regan looked up, but the patchwork face was an unreadable mask again. They stood there together for a few seconds, one smiling, one inscrutable. “Or maybe that I *was* trouble.”

“Are you trouble?” Zilch asked at last.

“No.” Regan fixed both eyes on them without blinking, rock-solid for once. “I might not know much about this place, but I can tell how rare it is to find anyone who gives a crap about you. And everyone here... seems to. About me. I’m not gonna throw that away.”

Zilch blinked slowly, just watching him with a steady gaze he knew logically he should find viscerally horrifying from the amalgamation of death, but simply didn’t. Regan almost thought was like looking at any friendly face, but realized immediately that it wasn’t. When he looked at Zilch, he hadn’t once felt a shiver of anxiety or worry that he was being judged and found wanting.

“What?” Regan squinted back. “You’re going to say something, about how I used to be. Right?”

“Maybe. A little.”

“Have I changed? Do you like me better now? Am I better now?”

“No.” Zilch shook their head. “Not better. Happier.”

“I’m... glad.” Regan nodded a couple times, then sighed. “This is weird. Our lives are weird.”

Zilch picked at a loose thread on their forearm. “Yes.”

“I’m glad we have them.” Regan shot them a covert glance to see if he could catch one of their rare expressions he was growing to recognize as happiness. When he was rewarded, he shot Zilch one of his own. “So listen, I’m going with Evelyn to the Emerald Bar tomorrow night.”

“Why?” Zilch looked over fully, completely serious in an instant. Regan resisted the urge to even think the phrase ‘dead serious’ to himself, and, naturally, failed.

“Turns out Garrett Cole is actually dead. Which means this is... actually on-subject.” He cleared his throat, itching at his frill. “SkEye’s saying I killed him—which I, obviously, don’t remember doing... but it’s still the kind of thing I’d like to clear up. And it’s just something Evelyn needs to do, so. Figured I’d tag along.”

“Bad idea.” Zilch frowned, a much more recognizable expression than their smiles. “Safe at the house. Parole in general isn’t.”

“I know. Still gotta find the answers, safe or not.” Regan sighed. “I think I just said something weird, for me.”

“No,” Zilch had to admit, looking away. “You always wanted answers. Even more than safety. Anyone who thought otherwise... was wrong.”

“Hey,” Regan said, and they looked back, wearing a slightly different look from their usual default neutral. On anyone else’s face, he’d call it soft. “When this is over, how about you tell me more about myself?”

“When this is over, you’ll remember. I won’t have to.”

“Yeah, but it might still be kind of nice.”

They nodded. Regan smiled.



The smoke from the sidewalk cracks parted in swirls like thick fog as Regan and Evelyn carefully skirted the edge of the blazing crater that used to be the city center, nervously testing each step. Even cracks in the sidewalk could be deadly. And they didn’t see a soul. Like the halls of the Turret House, the streets of

Parole were deserted; people were holed up inside after the explosive encounter at the detention center. No horns or alarms or gunshots, no sound except for the ever-present white-noise thrum of helicopter blades far above.

When a chopper's searchlight swept up and down their street, Evelyn grabbed Regan's arm and forced him to keep walking steadily through the white glare. A sudden dart away from the light would trigger the enforcers' suspicion, but continuing as usual wouldn't draw attention. Law-abiding Parole citizens were well used to surveillance.

They made an attempt at disguise. Regan wore a dark, heavy trenchcoat and wide-brimmed black hat, and Evelyn wore an actual gas mask Lisette found in storage. An older unit, left over from the early days of the fire scare, when oily black smoke first choked the city streets. The kind nobody could really afford now, except Eye in the Sky, the only people actually supposed to be alive here. The thing was bulky and uncomfortable, but it would keep the wearer from dying slowly from Parole's black lung.

Lisette had even found one for Regan, but he couldn't even try. Just thinking about the cloth mask—and remembering the feeling of gasping for breath, ghostly hands clamped around his throat and lungs—anything more was unthinkable. Maybe walking around without a mask was playing with fire, but everything was in Parole.

Evelyn had more sense, as always. And for once, Regan was glad he couldn't see her face. He knew what he'd see, and he didn't like it. Before she'd put on her mask, Regan saw the tension in her eyes. The stress of this nightmare weighed her down, drenched her like cold water. Nobody could be on all the time, Regan thought, but she should never look this tired.

Up ahead, as grey and empty as Evelyn had to feel, was the Emerald Bar. No

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golden lights spilled from the windows; they were dark, empty holes like a skull's eye sockets. Where bright lights and curtains had once been, only wet asphalt remained, with bits of paper and broken glass littering the street. "Evelyn Calliope Tonight" was still emblazoned across the marquis, but they'd been hastily pasted over with a torn paper banner reading "CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE." Yellow police tape crisscrossed the grand entrance, and Evelyn suppressed a shudder.

"At least there are no white chalk outlines," she said, voice muffled by the mask. "That's what I was afraid of."

"Mm-hmm." Regan agreed, staring at the dark building. "Ready?"

"Yeah." They slipped around the sad front and into the side alley where they'd met and where fate had turned their lives so completely upside down. Just a few days ago, but it seemed like another lifetime, another world. They hurried up the metal stairs and through the small side door that clanged shut behind them.

They were followed.

Without A Burn

CHAPTER 13

BACKSTAGE WAS AS DARK AND EMPTY AND SAD AS THE HOUSE FRONT. EVELYN KEPT HER ELBOWS close in, hugging her upper body; with all the lights out, the shadows were menacing, the black pits at the edges of the wings seemed bottomless. Ropes and pulleys made strange crisscrossing shadows in the pale slivers of light. She stopped, and stared at the reverse of the heavy red velvet curtain. How many times had she stood here, waiting for her entrance, hearing the drums pulse with the adrenaline through her veins, feeling her heart rise in her chest?

“So. Where do we start?” Regan prodded.

Evelyn jumped—she’d been lost in her head. “Oh... it doesn’t seem like there’s anyone here.” She was almost relieved. “I was expecting someone. But without her, I don’t really think there’s much we can—”



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“Shhh,” Regan hissed, letting the noise dissolve into a hiss of his tongue. “There is someone here.”

“What does it... taste like?” Evelyn whispered, immediately on alert.

Regan took a deep breath and drank in the air, rolled it over his tongue like tasting a fine wine. A look of concern crossed his face. “Sick.”

Evelyn held up her hand. “Listen.”

Regan was still, and held his tongue. At first he heard nothing, but after a few seconds, a faint sound leaked through the thick curtain like a stain. A girl, singing. Pale light, soft as a nightlight in the gloom, slipped from behind the curtain. Evelyn pulled it back and peered out onto the stage. Regan leaned forward to look over her shoulder. He froze at what he saw.

The stage wasn't empty. Someone swept across the smooth surface like a ghost, feet barely touching the ground. A girl in torn white lace, long limbs all sharp angles and hollows. She swayed and tilted, seeming pulled by an invisible string through the top of her head. She floated upright as if led by an unseen dance partner. She whirled and pirouetted in her eerie waltz, long fingers outstretched to the imaginary strings that supported her. Undone, fraying ribbons trailed from her toes that glided across the stage, tracing patterns in the dust.

And she was not alone. Hanging from her hands were little dolls, marionettes that followed her every movement—but they had no strings. They floated, just like her.

Evelyn took off her mask and motioned for Regan to do the same. She took a deep breath and took a soft step forward. “Hello, Jenny,” she called softly.

The pale ballerina jerked, and plummeted back down to earth, as if the strings that held her up were cut. She dropped with a soft thump, and turned

slowly to face them. “Oh, hello, Evelyn,” she said in a high, whispery voice. “You’re back. I hid when the men in the gas masks came, I hid until everybody left. I’m all alone.”

Regan froze in place as the girl started moving across the stage toward them. Her grey eyes hung half-open and her pale skin was almost as colorless as her long white hair.

“Is she... all right?” he asked quietly.

“Chrysedrine was harder on Jenny Strings than most,” Evelyn answered. “She’s sweet, but she has bad days.”

On the ground, Jenny had a strange, limping gait, her feet scuffing and dragging along the floor. “I love it here,” she said, and a little smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “When I dance like this, it’s like I’m the one being held. I’m the doll, I feel safe... I wish Garrett would let me dance in his show.”

She held her hands up, wrists bouncing, fingertips twitching. And the delicate dolls floating beneath them danced. A wooden ball-joint ballerina doll in a pale pink tutu—maybe Jenny’s ruined one had looked like that years ago—and another in a tuxedo and little top hat. They spun and bowed to one another, spinning through the air beneath her hands.

“I know, sweetie.” Evelyn said quietly—oddly, she looked down and directed the words to the dolls that floated beneath Jenny’s thin hands. “Maybe someday you will.”

“Maybe.” Jenny sighed. “But people don’t like dancing with me. And I don’t want to hurt them. So I just play with my dolls instead...” She smiled to herself and gave a dreamy sigh, and the pair of tiny marionettes swooned and leaned against one another for a moment. “Who’s your friend?” she asked suddenly. The puppets turned to look up at Regan, but Jenny’s half-open eyes stayed on

Evelyn.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Evelyn laughed nervously, looking up. “Jenny, this is Regan. Regan... meet the amazing Jenny Strings. She’s been a good friend of mine for a long time.”

Regan gave her a slow nod. “Ev says you saw what happened here.”

“No!” Jenny recoiled, hiding her face behind her arms. The marionettes stood protectively in front of her like tiny guardians, trembling a little on their invisible strings as her hands shook.

Evelyn moved between them. “Oh, God, I’m so sorry Jenny, I forgot!” she looked ashamed. “Please forgive me. Regan, just talk to the dolls. Gently.”

“Tell him,” Jenny whispered, voice shaking. “That you’re never supposed to look at the puppeteer during the show. She doesn’t exist. It’s only them...” Then, slowly, her head tilted up, and she stared at Regan with large, pale grey eyes. “I remember you,” she whispered. The marionettes turned their heads toward Regan and began to shake.

Evelyn brightened. “Really?” She asked the dolls. “What do you remember about Regan?”

“He was there,” Jenny whispered. “The night... he was there when...” She trailed off. Very quietly, she began to tremble as well. “When it happened.”

“You don’t have to say it, honey, we know part of it,” Evelyn said gently. “But we don’t know everything that happened, and we need to find out. Can you help us?”

Jenny Strings trembled on the spot. “No!” She gasped, lurching backward, flying away with only her pointed tiptoes dragging across the floor. “I don’t—I don’t want to, no, no, nononononono...” She turned away and curled up into a floating fetal position, cuddling her dolls close.

Evelyn sighed, and shook her head sadly. “Give her a while to herself, she’ll be okay.” She turned and started to move off stage. “Maybe seeing you for the first time was too much of a shock.”

“But it wasn’t the first time.” Regan frowned. “She recognized me. I’ve been here before. We can’t leave now, she definitely knows something.”

“Jenny Strings knows a lot of things, more than anyone ever thinks. But right now, I think it’s better if we—”

“It’s in his room,” Jenny said suddenly, shrill voice echoing through the dark theatre.

“What’s in his room, honey?” Evelyn asked. “Do you mean Garrett’s office?”

“Yes...” Jenny quavered. “He left you some words on a record. I put it in the machine.”



“Here we are.” Evelyn stopped outside a door with a brass nameplate on it. The door hung ajar, and she gingerly pushed it open with one fingertip.

The office had been turned upside-down. Drawers were pulled out with their contents emptied on the floor. Garrett Cole’s financial life was scattered across the room, loose paper and books and old photos of famous faces who’d graced his establishment. A smashed laptop lay dead on the floorboards, discs and data drives fallen around it like shrapnel, or like a robot dog shot full of bullets.

There was an overturned chair in the middle of the room, far from anything else. Regan frowned. The chair clearly belonged behind the desk, and there was nothing above it on the ceiling. Why would someone move that chair, then knock it over?

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But Evelyn was staring at an antique gramophone, a record player with a funnel-like megaphone that sat on the desk, the only undisturbed thing in the room. A large round disc rested on the platform, already spinning, and she slowly, gently, pressed the needle to the vinyl. After few seconds of white-noise static, the record began to play. Eerie, dark jazz filled the room like smoke, pops and crackles distorting the tinny music like wrinkles in a ragged ancient paper. And then, above it, a voice.

“Hello, Evelyn.”

She gasped—it was the canyon-deep, midnight-blue voice that vibrated in her breastbone and the soles of her feet. Garrett’s voice, captured on this ancient vinyl circle. She shivered and drew unconsciously closer to Regan, listening to the dead man talking.

“You’re hearing this because you deserve to know the truth. Secrets tend to eat you from the inside, and compared to you I’m hollow as a snare drum. And you’re the only one I can trust.

“Celeste was right. Someone was trying to kill me that night at the Emerald Bar—that’s why I hit the alarm and evacuated the place. I know who sent them, and I know why.

“How do I begin... oh, everyone knows the Wonderland story. But you don’t know my part in it.

“I wasn’t always a club owner, my darling. I was a scientist once. I helped create the first syringe of Chrysedrine, the drug that plagues this city. So in a very real sense... this place is mine. Its wonders and horrors. Every child who accidentally hurts someone and gets cut down by the Eye in the Sky, every back that arches in the agony of withdrawal. The quarantine. The barrier and the guns and the ruined lives, all mine.

“I had good intentions of course, we all do on the road to...well, Parole. Ask your

friend Rose. I gave her the injection that saved her life after the attack that took her legs. I brought people back to life, I gave them beautiful gifts, I did so many things to so many people, thinking I was saving their lives...

“All at once, people started to change. Half of Parole metamorphosed, gifted with beautiful, or nightmarish powers overnight. And then they started to die. And when I realized reality, when I saw the body count rise, I couldn’t do it anymore. Instead, I left. But I kept making my precious drug. I thought I could make it the lifesaving miracle I intended. I thought I could fix everything. I was a fool.

“And there was... a boy. A boy I thought was a casualty of war. I was wrong.

“There were thousands of casualties, don’t get me wrong. But it’s hard to imagine thousands of faceless masses. It’s much, much different when it’s...

“Well. When I saw what I’d done, I ran away—like you did, when you burned to become yourself, Evelyn. We two runaways found each other, and we helped one another fulfill our dreams. When you said you wanted the power to help save this city, I told you to roll up your sleeve. Soon you had your voice, and that was all you needed. And working with you fit, we clicked, you defended the streets and I ran Parole from the backstage of a bar—and for the first time I was doing something good with my life.

“But I had a bigger goal: I needed to save this city. So I put the lives of thousands over just one life. I fully committed myself to Parole. All of us. And some precious nights, singing with you.

Oh, now where was I? Ah. The boy. A ghost now, in more ways than one. Haunting me. His name was Hans.”

Regan’s mouth dropped open. He hadn’t been sure which name he’d expected, but he knew which one he’d been hoping for. It hadn’t been that one.

“How do I explain him? Too smart for his own good; chaotic and unpredictable; a

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sad, wandering spirit; a terrified child in over his head; a sharp-toothed wolf, I still don't know which he is. But that ghostly young man was very interesting to Major Turret, and anyone who attracts the Major's attention... well. To make a very long, very dangerous story short, I promised to set that boy free, and I failed him. I failed us all.

"I wasn't kidding when I said 'ghost,' by the way. He's a powerful psychic. Projects himself... pray you don't get his attention, Evelyn, it's not a walk in the park. It's not even a run through a dark alley. Just stay away from him.

"Hans screamed at me in my mind after I left—after I abandoned him. For months he wouldn't let me eat or sleep, kept rattling his chains. And I didn't listen. I just kept up my work. But I swear, Evelyn, I swear to God, I thought I was doing the right thing. Ha—put that on my tombstone. No, never mind, you know what I actually want.

"Well, one night, he stopped. For days, weeks, there was nothing. At first I was relieved. But then the guilt came, I was sick... I went to find him, praying he was alive. To apologize, say I'd do anything to help him again. Worst part was, I really would have.

"But Hans was gone. Nobody knew where. Now honestly, even in Parole, how does a coma patient disappear? Particularly right from under the nose of Major Turret himself, and all his little Eyes up in the Sky? Even I'd have trouble pulling off that little number. But an honest-to-goodness ghost boy? Now that... might be a hat trick.

"Now, I'm a man who knows disappearing acts. I knew he was alive. And angry with me. I still owed him a life. And the night of your show, he tried to collect. I wasn't surprised, I'd been waiting for the axe to fall for years.

"I just never expected him to send someone I trusted. And I never expected one of my own men to actually betray me. Least of all Chimera."

Evelyn and Regan both stared at one another, and almost missed the next words.

ROANNA SYLVER

“Why did he send Chimera? Was it to make my death easier? Or more painful?”

“But that doesn’t matter anymore. That night was a wake-up call. I saw the blood on my hands, what I’d done to this city—and to you. Enough waiting in the wings! Time for me to bring my sins to light. Center stage. And stop holding onto these secrets! My soul is... tired. All of me is so tired. Sometimes the heaviest words are the ones don’t say.

“And I need to ask forgiveness.

“I... I lost my chance to ask Hans’s forgiveness. I don’t even know where he is.

“But I can ask you. Evelyn, my most brilliant songbird, my brightest star, my sweet little strawberry... please forgive me. Promise me you’ll learn from my mistakes. Stand by your friends, the ones you trust and the ones you love. Ten years ago, you took a stand. I wish I was brave enough to step out of the shadows, and do the same. I wish I could become someone new and leave everything I’ve done behind.

“It’s too late for me. But it’s not for you, Evelyn Calliope. I believe you can do anything. I believe you can do the impossible. Like save us. If there’s anyone brave enough, or strong enough, or good enough to carry us through the fire and out the other side without a burn, if anyone can do what I could only dream about... it’s you.

“And if that sounds hard, my dear, don’t forget... it’s all just a show. And the show must go on. I...”

There was a crackling pause. Then, a deep, booming laugh rang through the room.

“I can breathe again. I know who I am again. My name is Garrett Cole, and I am better than my worst mistakes. The sky is open. My heart is free and clear. I know what I have to do.

“Don’t look for me, my dear. I’m a ghost. But at last, I am at peace.

“Thank you, Evelyn. And good night.”

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The music stopped.

Evelyn wiped the tears from her eyes, and looked up at Regan. They stared at each other for a few long moments, speechless. A soft noise broke the oppressive quiet and they whirled around to see Jenny Strings standing in the doorway, hanging from one edge.

“I remember now,” she said in her soft voice. “I saw it. Once upon a time...” she began as she let go of the door frame. Jenny swayed into the room, gently raising her hands to start the show again. This time the ballerina doll stayed still, spying on the doll in the tuxedo tails and top hat.

The little tuxedo doll paced, then stopped. He stood very still for a long time.

Until, finally, he pantomimed taking off his tie and climbing up onto something. He looped the shiny black tie around something above him, then tied it around his neck. He took a step—and a sharp drop. The little doll jerked and twitched at the end of the tie, invisible as the strings connecting him to Jenny’s fingertips. Finally his spasms slowed... and he was very, very still.

Jenny brought her hands together, and the ballerina and dapper doll joined hands and bowed for their audience, while a sleepy smile spread across Jenny’s face. “The end.”

“So that’s it?” Evelyn asked quietly, tears in her eyes.

Jenny hesitated, and opened her mouth, hands trembling. For a moment it looked as if she very badly wanted to say something... but then she closed it again, and nodded slowly. “I’m sorry.”

“Okay.” Evelyn sighed, and straightened up, pressing a kink out of her back from leaning over to watch the puppets. “Thanks, Jenny.” She looked up at Regan, and gave a sad shrug. “At least we’re starting to get answers.”

“Yeah. Now, let’s get out of here.”

“Wait.” Evelyn turned to Jenny and her marionette friends. “Jenny, sweetie...you really shouldn’t be here all by yourself.” It wasn’t safe for anyone, living in an abandoned theatre, where a man just died. Particularly not anyone as vulnerable as Jenny.

“The Emerald Bar is my home,” Jenny said quickly. “And now it’s quiet. There are no bad people around. Nobody bothers me now.”

“But they might come back,” Evelyn said slowly. “Nobody else is here now with you? None of our friends?”

“This is my home.” Jenny’s eyes were starting to clear, and she stood straighter. “I’m safe here.”

“Honey, how long has it been since your last shot?”

“Not since he died... too long. I’m starting to hurt. I don’t like it, Evelyn. I start to shake and hurt and I can’t—I can’t make them dance!” Her breath caught. “But mostly it hurts!”

“You’re in withdrawal, Jenny, you need help.”

“I can take care of myself,” she insisted, but her voice was tight and pained. “It’s just a little hard sometimes. I’m fine.” She took a deep breath. “Listen, Evelyn. I know I’m... not right. But I don’t want to go to a strange house. I can handle the pain. I *can*.”

Evelyn shut her eyes for a moment. “It sounds like you’re in stage three right now. Another few days without Chrysedrine and you could die. We have to get you off it slowly. Please, come with us. We can help you, if you come with us.”

“No.” Jenny shook her head, stepping away. “I know what everyone thinks of me. I know what they say, they’re scared, but I’m not dangerous! I don’t hurt

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anyone! Even when they try to hurt *me!*”

“I know you’re not, honey, we don’t think that. And we’d never send you to—”

“I know what goes on in centers. People go in there and they never come out. Eye in the Sky rounds up everyone—and they want to put me in there, and then I’ll never come out either!” Hot tears spilled from her eyes. “I just want to stay home. Please don’t make me go.”

“No. Never.” Evelyn promised. “Not a detention center. The library. It has people who know how to help you, and keep you safe and sound.”

“The...” Jenny blinked and sniffed, but didn’t take another step away.

“That’s right. If there’s nobody left here, that’s where they’ll be, and they’ll help you. You can stay there, you won’t be alone anymore.”

“Friends?”

“Yes. I know them, they’re very good people. Find Kari, okay? She’s still on the radio, which means she’s okay. So she’ll be at the library. She’ll help you.” Evelyn waited for a moment, looking into Jenny’s eyes. “Do you hear me?”

“Kari...” Jenny nodded slowly. “Yes. She’s good. I’ll find her. She’s everywhere, if you listen. Now watch, watch me, Evelyn!” And she sailed away across the stage, taking flight again. As they watched, she danced with her dolls in the pale spotlight—then Jenny spun into the deepest shadows backstage and disappeared.

A Disappearing Act

CHAPTER 14

“YOU KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS, RIGHT?” PAROLE’S EVER-PRESENT SMOKE CURLED AND ROILED around them, but to Regan it was all blue skies and sunshine. Everything was fresh and open now, everything was beautiful.

“I heard.” Evelyn did not share his enthusiasm. She stared straight ahead, weighed down by mental and emotional exhaustion.

“It means,” Regan continued, still smiling. Once, it felt like his face was unused to it; now he couldn’t stop. “That I’m not a murderer! I mean—” he broke off, smile fading a little as he turned to look at Evelyn. “I’m sorry he’s gone. I really am.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“But I’m just so—I mean, this is great. I can *breathe*.” Regan laughed. He



couldn't remember the last time he'd done that. It felt wonderful. "It's like he said in the recording—the sky is open! Hans sent me to kill Garrett, but I didn't! I said no! He wanted me to be a murderer, but I'm not! *I'm not!*" If he said it enough times, it might sink in. It was too good to be true, but it was.

"Yeah," Evelyn said again, looking up for the first time. She shook her head, trying to snap out of it. "I'm really relieved too, Regan. Seriously. I'm jazzed that you're innocent. I'm just... this just isn't a surprise. I hoped this was the case the whole time, and it is, so... good."

Regan frowned. "So you thought it was suicide all the time?"

"I suspected it. Garrett... had challenges. The entire time I knew him. This was just the last straw."

"He thought Hans was sending me after him." Regan swallowed, looked at the ground. When he spoke again, his voice wasn't saturated with relief, but guilt. "He wanted to go before I got to him."

"That's not what he said. You can't blame yourself for this. Nobody's to blame. Garrett was troubled and wracked with guilt. He took his own life after years of struggling with it."

Regan didn't answer, and they continued in a contemplative silence for a few seconds.

"He did say something that didn't make sense, though," Evelyn said thoughtfully. "At the very end. He said '*don't look for me.*' Why would I look for him, if he was dead?"

"I don't know. Maybe he just didn't want you to torture yourself about it. Jenny said... I mean, she acted out, what he, uh. Yeah."

"Yeah. I'm probably just..." Evelyn sighed. "It doesn't matter."

"Whatever he did, I pushed him to it. I *was* there to kill him. So he did it

first, before I could get to him.” He looked away. “I thought I wanted to know who I was. I don’t think I like... Chimera very much.”

“Whoever you were before... I don’t think that’s who you are anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been thinking about what you said before. How losing your memory gave you a second chance.”

“I don’t think it works like that.”

“Listen. You might have been sent to kill Garrett, but you didn’t. The man who was going to kill him—that’s not you anymore. You got another life. You remade yourself, better this time—something I know a thing or two about. The whole time I’ve known you, you’ve been proving that. We couldn’t have saved Finn without you, and when Rose got shot, it was you who got her out safe.”

Regan missed a step and almost tripped. *Rose.*

But Evelyn was still speaking, talking with her hands, coming out of her sad reverie and back to her normal energy level. “You could have been killed any number of times doing all of that, but you did it anyway, because it was the right thing to do.”

“I... yeah.” Regan gave her a hopeful look. “You look like you’re feeling better.”

“I am.” Evelyn turned to look him in the eyes. “I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense. I—I’m devastated that Garrett’s gone. And I will be even more once I take the time to feel it—but hearing the things he said? He died... almost happy. Feeling forgiven, remembering who he was. I know that feeling—it’s taken me a long time to feel it. And he’s right, you’re right, the sky is open! We’re going to get past this, Regan. I know everything’s a mess right now, but oh, God, I can see it, I don’t know how, but everything is going to be okay, I

just know it. We're all going to be okay!"

Regan nodded, not looking at her. "Listen, Ev. I got something to tell you."

"What?"

"I'm... not the good person you think I am."

"What do you mean?" Evelyn watched him carefully. The street was empty and open; aside from the ubiquitous helicopters overhead, they were alone. For some reason she was so strongly reminded of the night they met outside the Emerald Bar, she wondered if she would look over and see Celeste's mysterious silhouette standing beneath a streetlight.

Regan stared at her, eyes wide and mouth open—then broke away. "Nothing. Forget I said anything."

"It's all right, you can tell me," she said quietly. "I'll listen, I promise."

"I just—I've done things, Ev. Bad things, for all the wrong reasons, and you should know about them before you trust me."

"Are you starting to remember more?"

"No." He gave a hollow laugh. "No, this is new. Since you've known me."

Evelyn took a deep breath. "Listen to me. Good people do bad things. And bad people do good things, and sometimes good and bad are just words, and don't *mean* a thing."

He shook his head, slow at first, then faster. "Then what do you do? If nothing means anything?"

"You figure out who you are, for yourself. You find your identity. What means *you*. Not what you did, who you are. *That* means everything. You mean everything."

"Ev..." He stopped. And he was smiling too, he couldn't help it. It felt like a weight had lifted from his shoulders, a cold, hard layer of steel had come off his

chest, and for the first time he let himself breathe. “Before, when I kept saying I wasn’t afraid? That was bullshit.”

“Oh, honey, I know it was.”

“But now? I think it might be actually true. Or getting there.”

“Good. Remember that feeling.” Evelyn smiled, the only thing on the street he could see. “Keep it in sight while you learn to love yourself.”

“That one might take a while,” he said quietly.

“That’s okay. It’s worth the wait.” She stepped closer, and a warm hand slipped into his. “Now what were you going to tell me?”

“I... it’s that...”

“It’s okay. Whatever it is, you can tell me. Believe me.”

Regan believed in her. Like Garrett Cole had said in his last words, the sky was open. The next breath he took came more easily than any he could ever remember. “I saw who shot Rose. The night we went to rescue Finn.”

“You did?” Her breath caught in her throat. “Who—”

“It was my fault,” he said, and she barely caught the regret in his eyes before he shut them and turned away.

“Regan,” she said, moving to stand in front of him again, heart starting to pound. “What are you talking about?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he stared straight ahead, looking right past her. But he didn’t look angry. His face held no expression at all. As if some switch had flipped, he was rigid like someone in a comatose fugue. Now he seemed to hang in the air like one of Jenny’s marionettes, manipulated by invisible strings.

“Regan?” She stepped back toward him, a slow cold fear spreading through her as she looked at him and realized exactly how wrong everything about his body had gone. His eyes stared, stretched open, yellow sclera all around the

irises. He held perfectly still, as if paralyzed, except for the frill of skin on his neck, flared and shivering in distress.

“Get out of him, Hans!”

It wasn't Evelyn who spoke. She felt a sudden wind as someone sped past her, sweeping up to Regan and catching him up in a rush of long arms and flowing black.

Zilch's hood was warm and soft. That was what nobody ever expected. What not many people besides Regan ever knew or found out. He felt it now. He felt their hand on his chest, long fingers slipping beneath his frill and resting on his collarbone, a reminder to breathe, slow, deep, let the air fill his lungs; there was enough. He felt their hand on his back, a reminder that he was supported, safe, protected, not alone. Never alone. He heard their voice in his ear. Speaking his name. A very old name.

He remembered it.

He remembered them.

Zilch's eyes widened as a warm hand closed around their wrist. They looked down in surprise to see scales, gleaming dully iridescent under the dim light of Parole's smoky sky and bright, crackling barrier arcing far above. They looked up then, into gleaming yellow eyes with vertical pupils. No fear. The quick flash of a smile, a gasp of silent laughter like the pause before the punchline of a very old, secret, inside joke. Their eyes just had time to widen, their mouth to open, before there was another hand on the back of their neck.

Regan pulled Zilch down into a kiss that made their head spin, wiry arms wrapping around them and holding them closer than skin against bone. For a fraction of a second, they were the one paralyzed. Then they were holding him too, eyes closing, one hand stroking the side of his face and pointed ear, the

other arm never letting him go. Wherever their heart was, it leapt.

When Regan finally drew back enough to catch his breath—something Zilch reminded themselves that yes, other people had to do much more than they did, no matter how inconvenient—it was his hand that stayed pressed against palm down across their hollow chest.

“I missed you,” he whispered. “So much.”

“You didn’t know,” they stared into his face, still in awe. Of the moment, of the reunion, of the fact that he’d ever been theirs to lose and be reunited with, of so many things. “How could...”

“Don’t know. Don’t care. I missed you anyway.”

Evelyn stared. Whatever she’d expected when she came down to the Emerald Bar tonight, it hadn’t been this. For several seconds, she wondered how to proceed—wondered several things, in fact, but chief among them how exactly to address, or if she even should, or even, in fact if she should be looking in this direction—

“Evelyn.” There was no need. Regan was stepping, reluctantly, away and turning to face her. He was shaking his head, hands spread and open, face lit up with the biggest smile she’d ever seen him wear. It wasn’t completely different from any expression he’d worn, but she hadn’t seen anything like it often. She thought about the times he’d been the most comfortable, savvy, even fearless. Dragon. This was that Regan. This might have been... whatever Zilch had called him. This might be Chimera. “Thank you’ doesn’t even start. And neither does ‘sorry.’”

“For... for what?” She gave a nervous laugh. Wasn’t sure why she should be, but seeing someone transform completely and get their life back before your eyes tended to do that. “I’m—happy for you! You’re remembering things now?”

“Yes!” He nodded, the single most sure, confident nod she’d ever seen. Then the smile slipped from his face, and his eyes slipped away from hers. His gaze turned questioning, and oddly, he seemed to direct it to someone over her shoulder. She turned to look, but there was nobody there. Confused, she turned back to face him. When she saw him again, he wasn’t smiling anymore. Instead, his expression was a rare and powerful mix of determination borne of absolute clarity. “I have to go.”

“Go?” Zilch’s voice was sharp and edged with panic as they stepped forward, hand immediately on his shoulder. “Slow down. Breathe. You need rest.”

“No, no, I have to go...” he turned around, shaking his head, but his hands curled into the loose black fabric of Zilch’s outer layer as he did. He pulled them close again, but now his eyes were shut, and he looked like he was suffering deeply instead of overjoyed as he had been a moment before. “I—I know now. I know how it all started. And I know how it ends. Gabriel told me.”

“How what ends?” Zilch reached out for him, but now he was taking slow, reluctant steps back. He wasn’t looking at Zilch anymore, but down at the ground. “Chimera?”

“Into the fire,” he whispered. He still didn’t look up, as if suddenly it would be too painful. But he was slowly nodding to himself as if he’d figured out the most important riddle of his life, and almost looked like he was faintly smiling. “Just like we planned.”

“No!” Zilch rushed forward shockingly fast. But it was too late. Regan faded away, blending in with the shadows and ash. Evelyn sprinted after him too, but he scrambled away. He evaded both of them, slipping away into the smoky dark before her eyes.

“Damn it, Regan!” Evelyn came to a stop, feeling sick. She didn’t know who she was furious at now, him for dropping a bombshell and disappearing, or whoever had taken him over, and taken him away. Maybe both.

But now Evelyn Calliope felt powerless. It wasn’t for the first time this week or even this night, and she if she never experienced this least-favorite feeling again, it wouldn’t be too soon. Regan was gone and the street was silent. And Zilch was still here, looking as powerless as she felt—but more than that. Hopeless. Devastated. Exhausted beyond words.

“What are you doing here?” she finally asked, not unkindly. “You and Regan know each other? You must,” she reflected. “Or else that really... really wouldn’t make much sense.”

“We... yes.”

“And I take it he just remembered something?” He had said something about Zilch being a piece of the puzzle. She just hadn’t expected quite this central a piece.

“I told him not to go tonight.” Zilch’s voice sent shivers down her spine regularly, but nothing compared to the grim note of fatalistic warning she heard now. “I was right.”

“Zilch... what just happened?”

“Hans said he would make us walk through the fire.” They were still staring at the empty alley where Regan had disappeared, and Evelyn didn’t need familiarity with their unusual expressions to see their helplessness. “I didn’t think Gabriel would make him do the same thing.”

“You know them too?” It wasn’t just the names she recognized. Clarity cut through her confusion like a flash of light. But Zilch didn’t reply; they didn’t even look at her. “Walking through the fire? That’s it, isn’t it? Regan loses his

memory. Then all of us end up back at the Turret house, where Liam is trying to put out the fire too—and where ‘Hans’s just happens to be after ten years! It’s connected!”

“He can’t go down there,” Zilch whispered. “He doesn’t even have a gas mask.”

Evelyn’s burst of triumphant energy softened. “We’ll get him back. I promise.”

“Thank you.” Zilch turned around now and started walking down the dark street back toward the Turret House, much faster than she expected someone their height and proportions to be able to move. Evelyn followed, past a burnt-out streetlamp and smoke billowing out a grate, and a cat whose green eyes flashed briefly in the dark, before it turned and ran the opposite direction. “First, we need to find the others. Then I’ll tell you everything. If Regan doesn’t get to wear a mask... Hans doesn’t get one either.”

CHAPTER 15

Things The Fire Told Me

ROSE WASN'T GOOD AT SLOWING DOWN. BEFORE THEIR LIVES HAD BECOME THIS STRANGE nonstop rollercoaster of chases and confrontations and surprises, it had been... quieter. But she'd still always been reading or experimenting with a new plant or medicine, or working with someone in need to improve their life. Or working to improve her own life. A bullet, while nowhere near lethal, did slow her down at least. She supposed she should take the opportunity to rest, but it wasn't easy.

Especially not when she had a mystery on her hands.

Hans. Poison. Attempted murder. The thought was terrifying, but after everything that had happened very recently and very fast, nothing should surprise her anymore. At least she knew the people she cared about were safe—



although this particular mystery, like everything else in the past several harrowing days, might not be satisfied until it sucked them into its grasp.

Evelyn and Regan had gone down into the city for some undisclosed reason; Rose's mind perked up at further intrigue but refused to connect them to anything actually sinister. Danae was holed up finishing her latest project—total fire invulnerability, she'd happily explained. It had done Rose's heart good to see her actually excited about something. It was also good to see Jack off playing with Finn, with the promise that they wouldn't leave the floor. Seeing Jack actually smile and laugh like a... like the child he'd been until recently, and still was, and would feel like again, had been the best thing she'd seen in a long time.

Rose needed all the encouraging signs she could get. Ten years ago, her old friend Hans had fallen into a coma and disappeared. Now he'd mysteriously reappeared, both in a bed upstairs and in the projection image she remembered. He'd always thought of himself as a ghost, in a sense, even if she disagreed—and now someone had tried to kill him in a much more literal way.

Now Rose walked the House's silent halls, eyeing the cameras and the locked metal gates, gently testing her range of motion, and trying to make sense of the questions swirling in her head. Somewhere in this place was a killer, or at least an attempted one.

Rose's priority was protecting her family, and this threat was too close, too deadly... but it raised questions. More than one person here seemed afraid of Hans.

Why?

"Miss Rose!" The quiet didn't stay that way for long. She looked up to see Lisette and Wren scooting toward her, holding hands. "How are you feeling?"

“Much better,” she said. It was the truth, but maybe not the whole truth. The pain from her injury had faded to a dull throb she sometimes actually forgot, and while she tried not to pick or poke at her self-made bandages of greenery or anywhere near it, she couldn’t keep herself from poking at unanswered questions. “Just trying to get used to moving again, looking around, thinking.”

“Yeah, we do that too.” Lisette nodded easily. “This place is creepy at first, but once you get used to it, it’s kinda fun to explore. It goes on forever, all the hallways and doors and rooms. And there’s just Liam and Ms. Cassandra and Hans. Until Major Turret comes home, anyway, the rest of the house is his.”

Rose kept in her gasp, but couldn’t hide the widening of her eyes and hitch in her ordinarily smooth step. “The Major still comes here?”

“Yeah, it’s his House,” Lisette said, looking up at her as if confused why Rose wouldn’t have this common knowledge. “He’s not always here, but he drops in every couple of weeks.”

“To see his son? Liam?”

“No...” Lisette said, but didn’t elaborate. Rose let it go; her mind was racing already.

“This explains so much,” she murmured. “The automated security, Liam’s paranoia. But why Hans? Why Cassandra? Why—oh, this would be so much easier if I could get past these!” Pushed to her limit by the past week, Rose aimed a frustrated kick at one of the steel gates. Her metal foot made a satisfying clang, but aside from that, nothing happened.

“I know,” Lisette said in a sympathetic tone that suggested she was breaking out the bedside manner to handle an unreasonably cranky adult. Rose glanced down, recognizing the tactic in an instant, and she shot her a grin; it had been

worth a shot. “Seriously, if it makes you feel any better, there’s nothing that interesting in there. That room used to be a study or something but they moved everything out. They store fake plants in there now. It’s a whole room full of fake plants. There’s like fifty.” She exchanged a nod of assent with Wren. “So I guess that is kinda interesting. This house is wild.”

“Wait,” Rose said slowly. “You’ve gotten past the gates? Not just the locked doors, but the metal gates too, past the security partitions?”

“Yeah sure, they don’t stop us... from getting our jobs done!” Lisette giggled, only a little nervously, as if she’d narrowly avoided saying something else. “Even if Mr. Liam makes them a lot harder than they have to be.”

“And, if I can ask...” she paused, chewing the inside of her chin. “What is that, exactly? What is it that you two do here?”

“Oh! Um,” Lisette’s dark brown eyes widened, as if she’d just realized a new and slightly frightening possibility. “You don’t know?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“We’re here to...” Lisette trailed off. Sensing their friend’s near-crisis, Wren bumped her elbow until she glanced over, then nodded down at the medical scrubs they wore. “Hans! You know him, right? The coma patient upstairs?”

“Yes, I do. He’s an old friend of mine, actually.”

“Well, we’re here to take care of him! And Ms. Cassandra, she’s Miss Evelyn’s mom and Mr. Liam’s aunt.” Lisette nodded a couple times. “That’s why we’re here. We take care of them.”

“That’s a big job,” Rose said with a warm smile. “But it looks like you two have it all figured out. You seem like the most responsible people I’ve met so far.”

“We make a great team!” Wren gave her a nudge, and she smiled. When her

friend took her hand, she automatically squeezed back. “Wren gets me. Our lives would just suck without each other.”

“Still, it must be tough working in this big old house, taking care of grown-ups—I’m including Liam in this.”

“Ha, yeah, he thinks he’s in charge here! It’s really kind of sad.”

“I know, he never was the most perceptive.” Rose continued easily. “I wonder if he knows what’s actually going on here?”

“He doesn’t even know what his dad’s doing with Hans.” Lisette folded her arms, young face taking on a look of profound frustration.

“That would be a problem.” Rose spoke slowly, controlling both her growing excitement and rising sense of foreboding. Not for the first time, she had the feeling that these kids knew a lot more than she did.

“And if—never mind.” Lisette shut her mouth. She exchanged a near-frantic look with Wren; they seemed to be trying to decide whether to tell Rose something.

“What is it?” Rose prodded gently. “Maybe I can help.”

The mysterious pair in front of her stood silently and very tense for a few seconds, eyes locked and seeming to have a silent conversation that bordered on panic. Finally, Lisette looked back up, looking somehow defeated and hopeful at the same time.

“Okay,” she said quietly, voice shaking. Rose suddenly had the urge to wrap her in a tight hug. Her usual confidence had been shaken, and for the first time she truly looked fourteen, caught with her best friend in a storm of terrifying events, and very scared. “When Hans—when somebody—did you see how it happened?”

“I’m sorry,” Rose shook her head. None of the really important answers ever

seemed to come to her when she needed them. “I was asleep. I know someone came in, and I know it was poison. I know someone injected him with something, but I didn’t see who.”

Lisette nodded, biting her lip and looking about to burst into tears. She hadn’t let go of Wren’s hand, and held on very tightly.

“Please don’t worry. I promise, I’ll help you through this,” Rose reassured them. “This is going to be okay. We’ll find out who did this, and we’ll make this place safe ag—”

“This was our job!” Lisette cried at last. “We were supposed to keep Hans safe, and Ms. Cassandra safe, and watch Liam and make sure he wasn’t doing anything dangerous, and keep an eye on Major Turret, and see what he was doing, and if anything bad was coming! And we didn’t! We messed up, Hans got hurt, there’s someone walking around killing people here or—or trying to, and Turret’s *still* doing stuff and we don’t know what it is and we’ve been here forever and haven’t found out anything, and *Garrett’s gonna be so mad!*”

“Oh, honey, no!” Even as her mind reeled from the rapid-fire revelations, Rose leaned down as fast as she could with the lingering pain in her wound to put both hands on Lisette’s shoulders. After a moment she turned to move one over to Wren’s—even though they, of course, hadn’t said a word, they looked just as distressed and near tears. “This isn’t your fault! None of this is your fault, please don’t blame yourselves. You didn’t do anything wrong. You tried your best, for so long, and you’re just kids! You’re kids, you shouldn’t be...” She stopped, eyes narrowing and mouth setting in a hard line. “You shouldn’t be here at all. Did you say Garrett? Garrett Cole?”

Lisette and Wren both gasped, and held perfectly still. “No.”

“Honey, it’s okay.” Rose gave both their shoulders a squeeze. “You can talk

to me. I think I know what's going on. Being married to Evelyn Calliope gives me a... unique perspective. Special clearance, you might say."

"I... we... okay." Lisette whispered and let her head drop for a moment. Beside her, Wren looked away, hiding their eyes behind their long white hair. "Nobody pays attention to us because we're kids, and Wren doesn't talk. Nobody sees us, but we see everything. And then we take it back to Garrett. And then he saves Parole, and keeps everyone alive."

"You're his spies." Rose stared at them, heart aching. These kids' eyes were old. They'd seen too much, they'd found out there really were monsters, and they didn't all live under the bed.

"Not very good ones," Lisette mumbled. "We've been here for like six months and we still can't find out what Turret does when he comes home. All we know is Hans used to be stuck behind one of those big metal gates in a restricted part of the house—one of the parts we can still get to. Then Liam brought him out and put him in a normal room, and started actually going to see him like they were friends. Major Turret comes home sometimes and does stuff in the wings we can't get in. He's got some kind of field set up, we can't poof there."

"Poof?"

Lisette shrugged, like she hadn't said anything strange. Her eyes remained downcast, sadness and fatigue weighing painfully heavy on her round face and small shoulders. "Doors don't mean much to us. Except for the ones Turret puts up. He can lock us out, and set up... something, I dunno, it's like he closes up the curtains around a room so nobody can see or hear into it?"

"Sounds like a dampening field," Rose remembered something Danae said once that she hadn't thought much of at the time, but came into sharp relief

born from urgency now. “He’s put one up around the house?”

“Just around Hans’s room!” Lisette’s eyes were wide with fear. “He’s doing something in there, and it can’t be good. And we can’t get past it! Radio Angel can’t listen in! And CyborJ can’t hack into it, and—Garrett tried everything! People with really good ears can’t hear inside, X-ray vision people can’t see in...”

“You’re right, this is bad,” Rose said quietly. “I see why you got scared. But listen to me, this isn’t your responsibility. You shouldn’t have been put in the middle of this in the first place. Garrett’s an adult, and so am I, and so is...”

Suddenly, Rose saw everything with perfect clarity. And she knew exactly where to go. The little leaves and tendrils that stuck out of her hair and sleeves started to shiver as if they were frightened.

“Miss Rose?” Lisette asked. “Did you just...?”

“Everything’s going to be fine,” Rose promised, and hoped she wasn’t lying. “Thank you two so much. Garrett will be just as proud of you as I am.” She pushed herself to walk down the hall through the remnants of pain and mounting conviction that this was going to be a hell of a fight. After a brief, apprehensive pause, her new young friends followed.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m going to resolve this,” Rose said firmly. “You’re staying here where it’s safe.”

Lisette opened her mouth to protest, but didn’t get the chance. Without warning, Hans popped into all of their consciousnesses, presence saturated with anxiety.

“Hey—Rose?” He was tentative, as if unsure if he had the right to use her name after all these years.

“Yes, Hans?” Rose smiled and gave him a slight nod despite the pounding of

her heart. Even under the strangest of circumstances, the strongest emotion she felt when she looked at the ghostly image of the teenage boy was fondness and relief.

“Evelyn is in the foyer,” he said, hand on his cocked hip. Even his projection was shaking; Rose immediately saw the fear behind his cavalier posture. “I think she wants to talk to all of you.”



“When you two told me you’d reconnected with your old friend, this... wasn’t what I expected.” Evelyn’s fingers were clenched around her upper arms to keep them from shaking.

For the first time, Hans stood before everyone in plain sight. The time for subtlety was over, he’d decided, and broadcast his consciousness into all of their brains. But the simultaneous signal didn’t come in as clearly as when he spoke to them individually, and his image flickered in and out, popping across the room in an instant and disappearing again. His static snow distortion came back, but now it didn’t seem like he was controlling it for intimidation, and while he appeared to lean casually against an invisible wall in midair, tension twisted his default smirk into a barely-hidden grimace.

“Believe me,” Rose tried to focus on Hans, but as usual, he floated in the corner of her eye, gone when she looked straight-on. “It wasn’t what we expected either. When our friend Hans... disappeared ten years ago—” she glanced up as he rolled his eyes, but didn’t stop. “We never thought we’d see him again. And definitely not like this.”

“Where’s Liam?” Zilch’s snapped growl made them all stop. Almost immediately, Zilch looked like they regretted the minor outburst, but not

because of Hans. It had taken a while for Zilch to calm Finn down after Hans's dramatic entrance, and he was still shaking like a leaf. Finn hadn't said a word since coming downstairs; he sat perfectly still next to Zilch, eyes flicking after Hans around the room, fists resting on his knees.

"I don't know," Hans sounded like he was sulking, and didn't appear at all as he spoke. "It's kind of weird. Usually I can see everyone no matter where they are, but... eh, guess Liam's hiding somewhere, I don't really care what he does."

Apparently Rose did. Evelyn caught the telltale faraway look in her eyes as she slipped back into her thoughtful analytical reverie—but then looked up again with a subtle half-shake of her head. Evelyn picked up on the cue and kept her mouth shut.

"I knew it couldn't just be a coincidence that we all ended up back together," Danae said, fist pounding her hand in a small, fierce burst of triumph. "I knew something bigger was going on!"

"You were right," Rose said, shaking her head and sounding halfway between amused and exhausted. "All this time I thought it was fate, or destiny. Losing Hans all those years ago, ending up here and finding him here of all places—wondering if it's our Hans, finding out yes, it is! And then..." she did manage to focus on his ghostly projection for a moment, and he looked back at her briefly before winking out of her field of vision again. "It seemed like a miracle—but it's not. He wanted us here."

"And I'm so glad you all came!" Hans laughed and it only sounded halfway nervous. "I'm sorry for not just coming right out and saying hello to everyone but... I mean, even I know all this can be a little much!" He gestured down to all of himself; he still looked like he might have stepped right out of high

school, but he'd at least tried to tone down some of the edge. No rips in the jeans, tucked in shirt, he even appeared to have cut and tamed his ghostly hair.

"Didn't want to cause any heart attacks."

"You wanted to keep control," Zilch cut in. They didn't even attempt to follow Hans's wild zigzags, fixing a point on the opposite wall with a deadly glare from beneath their dark hood. "So you stayed hidden. For a while."

"Well, yeah, can't have a party without inviting the guests!"

"It was my decision to take us here," Evelyn maintained. "We did exercise some free will in this at least."

"I didn't." Zilch said quietly. "Neither did Chi... Regan."

"That's right," Evelyn's eyes flashed over to Hans. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing! I didn't do a—"

"He's terrified of you. Now it turns out you're at the center of everything that's been going on, and you expect me to believe there's no reason for that?"

"I wouldn't hurt a single scale on his little green head!" Hans insisted. "But just out of curiosity, what did he say?"

"You nearly killed him," Zilch snapped. "Many times. In many ways."

"I admit, there were aspects that could have gone a little smoother," Hans's mental voice sounded strained, like it was taking a great deal of effort to maintain composure. "But all in all, my intentions were good, and I still think we can salvage this... venture."

"Salvage it by telling them the truth." Zilch's voice was the sharpest any of them had ever heard, and even Hans gave a mild start.

"What are they talking about, Hans?" Rose asked, and he focused immediately on her much gentler tone and face.

“I... may have... enlisted their and Regan’s help in... certain... endeavors.”

“Great. Endeavors.” Danae looked up at Hans with a lot less warmth than Rose, and a lot more suspicion. “Want to talk about them?”

Apparently Hans did not, because he disappeared entirely.

“Regan’s disappeared, Hans,” Evelyn raised her voice and stepped into the center of the room, turning in a slow circle and scanning the walls and ceiling as she spoke. “I don’t know whether to call it kidnapped, or run away, but he’s gone, and I’d bet every last drop of water in my bottom barrel that you know where he went.”

“Why would you think I know anything about that?” He evaded, both verbally and visually, appearing only to blink away again in dizzying flashes. Evelyn tried to follow Hans’s frenetic movements for around three seconds, but glancing all around the room made her head spin, and she had to close her eyes to stay centered.

“Because you do,” Zilch rasped. “Everything comes back to you. My heart. His head. Everything.”

“I—listen, I had everything under control!” Hans snapped. Finally, he’d stopped his panicked struggling, and floated in one singular point.

“Maybe you did at one point, but it got a little out of hand, didn’t it?” Evelyn tried to keep the accusatory note from entering her tone, but maybe the sharp note wasn’t such a bad thing after all. It did seem to get Hans’s attention at least; he turned away from where he was glaring at Zilch to look at her with a much different, almost pleading expression.

“Yes, Ma’am.” He pulled his knees up to his chest, floating in the fetal position.

“And now, if we’re going to go down there and get Regan back—and

believe me, we *are* going to get him back—we need to go into it with our eyes wide open. Tell us everything.”

Hans’s mental presence wavered, like a TV channel breaking up with static. “There’s too much to tell. There’s no time. I can’t, not all of you—”

“It’s over, Hans,” Zilch intoned. “No more secrets. No more lies. Tell them.”

“I’m—I’m still in control here! I still have your heart!” Hans’s voice got tighter, higher. “I can just throw it right in the fire, is that what you want?”

“Better than obeying you for one more day.”

The long, silent expectation was like the pause before an infamous gambler finally laid down the losing hand the entire audience knew he held. He’d played a long game and might have even done well—if he hadn’t turned out to be marking his cards, stacking the deck and pulling every dirty trick in the book. After this long, after this many years of uneven odds, and all the burned bridges and cities, there was nobody left who wanted to see him win.

“The one who... took him...” Hans spoke slowly, as if every syllable were carefully measured—and difficult. “His name is Gabriel.”

“I know that name,” Evelyn tried to hide her victory celebration as she tried to place the name, but couldn’t help one flash of a grin. “Regan said he was having dreams about him.”

“That’s right. Gabriel is... was... is...” Hans trailed off, pulling his legs up to sit cross-legged in the air, and rested his chin in his hand, looking deep in thought but suddenly exhausted. At last, he sighed, hunching over and letting his long hair flop forward over his face. It looked like it had returned to its normal length, and the knees of his jeans were shredded again. He didn’t look up when he spoke, or after. “I’m gonna make this a lot easier.”

In every mind’s eye, Hans reached out slowly, like it took the last bit of

energy he had, and touched his fingertip to the center of their foreheads.



Evelyn sees everything in a heartbeat. They all do—and they see through Regan’s eyes.

A city rises beside the river, black skyscrapers jutting toward a blue sky. Regan takes a breath, feels a surge of hope, his heart swells—there’s a light on the horizon, bathing him in golden warmth. A chrysalis, a butterfly’s shroud opening, spilling healing out over a wounded multitude. People scream for the healing, beg for it. Chrysedrine’s golden light washes over Parole and everything changes.

Blinding pain. Now the screams are of agony, not desperation. People die in writhing horror. People lose their senses, they kill each other with guns and bombs and things out of nightmares. People shoot fire at one another, they fall apart and are pieced back together wrong, they twist and change, the city is filled with monsters.

His wrists are wrenched behind his back and clamped in cold, sharp handcuffs. Panic. The lizard in him screams. Men in black masks rise up around him, staring down at him with soulless Eyes in the Sky. And oh, there it is, the white-hot light above him, a black helicopter’s searchlight, like Evelyn’s spotlight, freezing him to the bone. It’s got him, they’ve got him. There’s a chain around his neck. Shackles at his wrists.

Then he’s not alone. Even in handcuffs, he relaxes because there’s someone beside him, and when he speaks his voice is tentative, but doesn’t shake. “They said it’s Chimera. Some kind of—I don’t know, a monster? Sounds Greek.”

“That’s right.” The voice that answers is guttural, throaty, almost a death

rattle. It scares him at first; soon it doesn't. "Not a monster. Constructed creature, made of different parts. Three heads. Breathes fire."

"Fire... and constructed." He looks down at his new scales. They shine, almost iridescent. He can't stop touching them. He feels eyes on him wherever he goes, piercing human eyes, and endless cameras, cold, plastic inhuman stares. "Two out of three. Ha, like heads... what are they?"

"Lion. Goat. And dragon."

"Oh, that's hilarious."

"They did it to me too. My designation is... Zero." His new friend holds up a cold, dead hand with a stitch running across the palm. Regan thinks about horror movies, zombie apocalypses and Halloween, and doesn't smile. "As in 'Patient.' Someone thought they were funny. They weren't."

"Nothing funny about calling you something they don't want to be called. Nothing. No way. Zilch."

They fix him with a one-eyed stare. It's still hard to read some of their expressions, either from the facial reconstruction or their... shyness, really, and he can't blame them. But Regan thinks they're smiling. "That's better."

There's a sweet taste on Regan's tongue.

Regan smiles, lets out a long sigh—then he gasps. There's a collar around his neck, a chain, and now he chokes and gags.

The cold iron constricts around his neck, cutting into his soft flaps of fragile skin. It's hard and too tight and almost draws blood, but when he opens his mouth or tries to escape it just gets tighter, he can't see. He sucks in a choking breath and the air isn't hot or smoky; instead it's frigid and smells like antiseptic cleaner. He's freezing. He can't remember being cold in Parole aside from the quick shivers when he disappears, but this cold is forever, and it sinks

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into his bones. He escapes the paralyzing spotlight but fluorescent lightbulbs shine in his eyes. It's too bright. This place is made of sharp angles and hard floors and high-pitched, whining lights, and cold, *cold air*. Everything hurts.

He looks down again. Regan looks down, and his hands are not green. They're red with bright, warm blood.

A building. The Turret House? No; cubelike, industrial, stark, sterilized. The imposing intimidation he feels when he looks up at it reminds him of it. Inside, cages. Four children behind bars. It's not dark anymore, the place is flooded in white light—but it's cold, antiseptic, like the terrible light of Finn's prison cell.

"Aren't they amazing?" someone says beside Regan. He looks up, into the thin face of a younger Liam Turret. But he isn't talking to Regan. He isn't even looking at him. Beyond him stands Garrett Cole, staring straight ahead in silence, eyes narrowed, calculating. The brilliant scientist's hands are behind his back, and clenched into shaking fists.

"They're the future," Liam says in a soft whisper, his eyes wide with wonder as Garrett Cole begins to shake his head, slowly at first, then faster. "They're going to save us all. Look at them."

Regan steps toward the cages and looks inside.

The first is a wiry girl with wild red hair and a huge grin, dancing in a whirlwind of little metal birds and butterflies. Her metallic creations protect her, she wears living armor that embraces her, holds her safe and warm.

"Look what I made!" She giggles. "They love me!"

Beside the laughing, dancing girl, another one smiles from behind the bars. A girl with dark skin and long, free-falling black curls raises her arms and spreads her fingers as thousands of tiny vines twine around her limbs—her

metal legs are smaller and nowhere near as advanced as they will be—flowers blossoming at her fingertips. Then the thorns sprout through her skin, and she gasps in pain. Blood leaks out along with the spines, but she’s still standing.

“It hurts... but I feel better than I did,” she says. “And I’ll keep getting better. I’ll learn how to make everything better.”

The next boy wears tight jeans and expensive sneakers. Aside from his hair—still feathered, dyed bright blonde with brown roots, not flowing white—Hans looks the same as in Regan’s head, the way he’s looked for ten years. He does something nobody else has done yet: looks directly at Regan and shoots him a grin. It’s the one Regan knows well by now. Hans knows a secret. Maybe he knows them all. The smiling boy who isn’t yet a ghost turns his wave into some jazz hands and spins on his heel, so easily it’s almost like he’s walking on air.

“They can’t hurt me now,” he says, but his smiling mouth doesn’t move. “I’ll never be helpless again.” But as Regan watches, the boy’s eyes close, and he starts to disappear, just like Regan’s ability but much more gradually. Almost painfully slowly, like an inevitable fading instead of anything quick and painless. Hans’s desperate cries ring through Regan’s memory long after he’s gone. “Don’t forget me! Don’t let me die!”

The last child huddles in his cell, curled into a shaking, frightened ball. With his light brown skin and head full of dark curls, he reminds Regan of Jack, how he might look in five years. He rocks back and forth, hands over his ears, mouth open in a scream, tears running down his face.

“Make it stop hurting!” He sobs, looking helplessly up at Regan through the bars. “They’re so scared, everyone’s so sad, they’re *feeling* too loud, it hurts! Make it stop!”

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Regan steps closer to the bars, heart pounding. “Gabriel.”

“Chimera...” He looks up now, just like Hans did. As soon as he sees Regan, hope enters the boy’s his red, puffy eyes. He scrambles to his feet and reaches through the bars. Regan moves closer and takes the small hands in his, and a smile shines through Gabriel’s tears.

Then Regan gasps and lets go as sudden searing pain shoots through his hands. He looks down and his palms and fingers are covered in angry, shining burns. He looks up, and Gabriel is on fire. He’s not in pain, he doesn’t scream as the flames envelop him; he just stares mournfully out at Regan, reaching through the bars.

“Please,” he begs quietly. “Make it stop.”

Suddenly, millions of voices, screams like a tidal wave crash over Regan’s head; he drowns in an onslaught of noise and panic. He can’t breathe and he knows it’s all of Parole, all of its people and their pain pressing down on him, all of their fear and despair, and he knows it’s not his pain, it belongs to the boy in the cell, it’s what’s killing him.

“Stop sticking needles in him! Stop drugging him! Don’t you get it?” Danae appears beside Gabriel, looking up at Regan with firm, determined protectiveness in her young face. “He’ll die! We’ll all die, but he’ll die first!”

“She’s right,” says Rose from his other side. “But you can save us. Please. Just let us go.”

Garrett Cole and Zilch stand on either side of him now; Regan realizes the three of them are mirror images of the three children on either side of the bars. He has the very uncomfortable feeling he’s on a jury, deciding not only these young prisoners’ fate, but his own.

“Thoughts, Chimera? Zero?” Garrett prompts. “You know where I stand.”

“Does it matter?” Zilch asks without looking up or away from the cells. “You’ll do what you want with or without us.”

“Of course it matters.” When Garrett looks up at them with a half-smile, Regan catches the faintest hint of the charismatic Master of Ceremonies before he disappears back into worry and grim regret. “I’d rather have help. And after your little demonstration, Zero, I know I’m not the only one who’s seen enough of Major Turret and Eye in the Sky to last a lifetime.”

“I’m in. I’d rather walk barefoot through Hell than spend one more minute in this place.” Regan says the words without hesitation.

“If we’re discovered...” Zilch watches him with their unblinking gaze. Both eyes are bright blue, and he’s never seen them look so frightened. “That might be less painful.”

“I don’t care what happens to me.” Regan’s voice holds steady. “You’re right. We’re on the wrong side, and we should have seen that a long time ago.”

“Choice wasn’t yours to make even if you saw,” their voice didn’t shake, but pain has never been clearer in their all-too-living eyes. Or the resolution. “Now it is.”

“Thanks to you.” Regan smiles, and his heart feels light instead of constricted in terror. “You made the right decision. Now you’re making it again. Let’s go, Zilch.”

Zilch stares at him for a moment. “I hope so.”

Then they push the bars aside like they’re made of smoke.

“Thank you, Ze... Zilch,” Garrett adjusts with a slight smile and appreciative nod. “I’ll access max-security and find Hans if you take the rest. Run, and don’t look back.” The scientist with the melodious voice opens a door to set them all free. Then he disappears.

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Running with Zilch again. This time with the children shepherded between them; Regan holds Gabriel's small, unnaturally hot hand. Dodging the spotlights, jumping over cracks in the asphalt, crumbling holes in the pavement. Parole had always been on hollow ground even before the fires. Even more so as they moved through the city limits and away from its lights, cutting across a vacant construction site. The trenches were already deep, but they'd broken deep into the ground, hit a subterranean network of caves, and now the black pits seemed endless, the ground above a thin crust. They keep running.

Then, an eruption of white light—they're caught in a helicopter's searchlight, and men in black body armor appear all around.

The earth crumbles at last beneath their feet. Regan, Zilch and the two girls scramble away from the light, but there's a sharp cry behind them. He lunges forward and catches Gabriel's wrist as he falls into darkness. Regan screams as fire envelops his hand, but forces himself to hold on. All he can see are Gabriel's eyes, huge and terrified.

"Don't let me go!" The boy begs. "Don't let me fall!"

"I won't," Regan grits his teeth as fire licks up his arm.

"You're gonna be fine, just hang on—"

But he can't. Regan's tortured, scorched hand opens and Gabriel falls into the darkness. His high, piercing scream echoes in Regan's ears as the city and its noise fades away.



Evelyn opened her eyes. There was Hans, still touching her forehead with one long finger. For once, he wasn't smirking; he looked nearly as frightened as he

had in the memory.

“Parole... it was them?” she whispered.

“Yeah. Powder keg only needs one spark, and Gabriel was it. An empath, a really freaking powerful empath... but you know how people sometimes get two powers? Like, say, calming pipes and sonic screams? Or looking like a lizard, and invisibility? Gabriel’s was...”

“Fire.”

“What else, right? And emotion was the gasoline. Bad emotion, anyway. Fear in, fire out, and this is one scared city. And as long as he’s alive, it keeps going. That’s why nothing can put the fire out. Kinda the definition of self-sustaining burn by now.”

“Zilch and Regan...”

“They got us out,” Rose whispered, shaken. “It was him. I... I remembered scales, and eyes like a snake, but—but Parole’s full of people with scales and eyes like his.”

“I didn’t want to see” Danae shook her head, looking exhausted. “All this time, I wanted to think was just a different man who looked like the one who got us out, but no, no, of course it is! I was fooling myself and I knew it!”

“You couldn’t have known,” Rose insisted. “It was ten years. And Zilch too, they looked so different, you couldn’t have known, neither of us could have!”

“Zilch,” Evelyn said, looking up slowly. “You and Regan...”

“Eye in the Sky attack dogs.” They nodded, somehow looking sick. “Hunting dangerous people with deadly abilities. Capturing them. Sometimes killing them. We thought we were doing the right thing...”

“But you saved us,” Danae said faintly. “You helped us escape from Eye in the Sky. You saved our lives!”

“We tried,” Zilch whispered. “We tried to make our own choices. Choose life instead of death. We almost succeeded. And after we escaped, we did what we could to atone. Fight against SkEye. Fight what we were. Protect our home. But we let Gabriel fall. And now Parole is burning.”

“Yeah, yeah, ashes, ashes, we’re all freaking doomed.” Hans tried to roll his eyes, but ended up just closing them. “I could’ve told you that. Actually, I did. A ton of times. When I kept saying I knew how to put out the fire, and all anyone had to do was listen to me, and we would have gotten through this just fine.”

“Except that when you said we’d put out the fire, you meant *kill Gabriel*.”

Hans opened his eyes again to glare, but he floated gradually backwards instead of advancing in any menacing way. “Yeah. Yeah, I did. Because it’ll work.”

“That’s why you wouldn’t tell Regan, that’s why you took his memories. It wasn’t to protect him. It’s because he wouldn’t do it if he knew.” Evelyn frowned, and her eyes narrowed. “None of us would. That’s why you kept us in the dark.”

“I needed some insurance,” he said, and now defensiveness clanged out loud with his anxiety. “I needed to make sure that nobody would turn on me the first chance they got! Or abandon me! You know, like how certain people abandoned me, ten years ago!” His voice rose until he yelled in all of their heads. “Not like that hasn’t happened before! Not like I didn’t have reason to be scared! Or like I was right! People don’t just stick around and help you out of the goodness of their hearts, you need leverage! You need to give them a reason! You need—”

“You needed help,” Rose spoke softly, voice with just the barest of shivers.

“Didn’t you, Hans?”

“Yeah! Yes! God, it took about ten years, but somebody’s finally noticing—”

“Why did it take ten years?”

“Huh?” He stopped, knocked off-balance by her gentle question.

“Why didn’t any of this happen until now? Why didn’t...” She stopped. “I’m not saying ‘why didn’t you say something sooner,’ because that’s not helpful.”

“It’s kinda a good question though,” Danae cut in. “If you could’ve grabbed someone and gone down into the fire to kill Gabriel any time, why wait so long to do it?”

“I... I didn’t know he was down there before. Alive, I mean.” Hans said quietly. “Until he started haunting me.”

Evelyn folded her arms, not sympathetic. “Just like you haunted Garrett, when he didn’t come back for you.”

“Yeah.”

“So instead of actually helping him... you decide he has to die?”

“Well—I mean, it’s the only thing that makes sense! I’m trying to save everyone here, okay? I’m not the bad guy, I’m actually the only one who’s doing any—”

Evelyn looked at him coolly, then shook her head. “You’re trying to kill an abused child who’s been... what, basically in solitary confinement for ten years? Has he been conscious all this time? No, actually it doesn’t matter. You’re trying to kill him, and you endangered other people’s lives to do it.”

“I’m trying to save the entire city! Gabriel’s out of control, as long as he’s alive he’s just gonne keep burning, and burning, he’s dangerous—”

“That’s what they say about all of us!” Danae burst out at last. “That’s what

Eye in the Sky says, that's their excuse for keeping us trapped in here! That we're dangerous, we can't be controlled, so we all should die! And that's what you're doing, Hans. You're condemning Gabriel to death, just like Eye in the Sky's done to us. Now *admit it.*"

A long few seconds of silence stretched between them. Evelyn and Rose nodded silently, on either side of Danae, who was breathing hard and sweating. Zilch looked stricken, and Finn had been silent this entire time, watching the proceedings with wide, anxious eyes.

"This doesn't change a thing." Hans's steely voice rang through their head. "We still have to go down into the fire. We still have to kill him."

"No." This time it was Rose who spoke, unequivocally and immovably. "That boy has suffered enough. This city is not going to be saved by the loss of one more innocent life. We save him—and we save Regan."

"You're going to kill us all!" Hans's eyes flicked desperately from Rose to Evelyn to Danae, seeing each face hard and determined. "You don't know what you're doing!"

"Yes we do. Your secret is out, Hans. You have nobody left to control."

"That's not entirely true." Hans's eyes locked with Zilch's—but they shook their head, and smiled.

"Do what you want with my heart. My friends will walk through the fire and save Chimera. Save Gabriel. Save Parole." The twisted smile Zilch gave Hans bore absolutely no resemblance to the one reserved for Regan, or the more subtle one that Evelyn, Rose and Danae—their friends, they confirmed with a slight nod—were beginning to recognize. But it was triumphant. "And I'll die happy."

"Oh yeah, you'll die, for sure! Parole will collapse! You *need* me!"

“We don’t,” Evelyn said, head high. “You already tried to sentence one innocent person to death, because you *think* it’ll save your own ass. We’re not letting you do that to another one.”

“We’ll save them. Both of them.” Danae cracked her knuckles.

“You’re wrong! All of you! This is the only way!”

“There’s always another way besides death, Hans.” Rose shook her head. “There’s hope, there’s love, and maybe you’ve given up on those things, but we haven’t.”

“And you can either help us,” Zilch added, “or you can sit here and wait.”

Hans’s raging filled their brains. He screamed and stomped his feet, throwing an incoherent tantrum ten years in the making. He howled and cried and rattled around in their brains like a ball bearing in a tin can. They all sat silently, and waited for him to wear himself out... and eventually, he quieted.

“Are you done?” Evelyn asked, when he fell into a sulking, impotent silence.

“We’re *all* done.” Hans glowered.

“Good. Now are you with us or not?”

“Lead on,” Hans conceded, painfully, and at last. “Your final wish is my command.”

Before I Change My Mind

CHAPTER 16

DANAE TORE INTO THE LAUNDRY ROOM, EXHILARATED AND GALVANIZED, AND MUCH TOO EXCITED to notice the subdued look on Evelyn's face as she followed.

"This is it!" She couldn't contain herself any longer, she turned and threw her arms around Evelyn's neck, and then reached back to pull Rose close as well. "No more waiting! We'll save Regan, and we'll save Gabriel. It all ends tonight!"

She pulled Evelyn forward, diving into a passionate kiss. The one she gave Rose soon after was more gentle and slow, but sacrificed none of the intensity. Then she was gone again, flying around the room collecting pieces of armor, tramping through the empty space where the broken Toto-Dandy had once lay.

"Are you excited, Danae?" Evelyn said, smiling in spite of her pounding



heart as she imagined the treacherous walk and whatever awaited them. “You’re so quiet tonight.”

“Just a little more! Just down into the fire, bam, grab the dorks, drag ‘em back up, everything’s over, we’re done!” She stopped, then, casting a hesitant look at Rose. “Um, I could only make three suits, and...”

“No no, that’s fine! You’re right. It’s almost over.” Rose was smiling too, but considerably more reserved, as if her thoughts were occupied by something else. Something very significant.

“Rose... listen.” Evelyn stopped, reluctant to speak, then forced herself. “I have something to tell you. Both of you guys.”

“What? Does it have to be now?” Danae looked up from where she’d been bending to gather up the fireproof suits she’d been working on along with repairing Toto-Dandy.

“Has to be.” Evelyn chewed the inside of her cheek, not knowing how to begin—so she just said it. “Regan said he saw who shot Rose.”

“Wait—what? Wasn’t it just a SkEye commando?” Danae shook her head, looking nonplussed. Beside her, Rose turned slowly to face them, an expression of apprehension gradually crossing her face. “They were all over the place. And they all wear masks, you can’t tell them apart.”

Evelyn didn’t answer, frown deepening. “What’s worse is... he said it was his fault.”

“What?” Danae nearly dropped the helmet she was holding. “What the hell does that mean?”

“I don’t know.” Evelyn shook her head. “But that’s what he said. A second later he was gone.”

“Rose? Rose.”

“I’m thinking,” she said quietly, arms folded and eyes closed. They both could see the thorns that protruded from her skin stick out a little farther, a little sharper.

“If it’s his fault?” Danae prodded, voice hardening along with her face, teeth clenching so hard her jaw began to hurt. “I say we leave him right down there! Let him burn—”

“You don’t mean that.”

“The hell I don’t! You could have been killed!”

“Yes, thank you.” She cracked one eye open. “I know that.”

“So then how can you possibly—”

“I can feel however I need to.” Rose closed her eye again and didn’t raise her voice, but Danae still shut her mouth. “And right now I don’t feel much of anything. I don’t know if I will, until I have all the facts in front of me. I know myself, I know how my heart and mind work better than anyone. Even you, babe.”

“He said it was his fault,” Danae said, every word filled with deliberate fury.

“Doesn’t make it true. You said it was your fault Finn got arrested.”

“I... that’s different.” Danae paused, frowning. “But he also said he saw who shot you! Like it was someone else, not just a SkEye creep! So—his fault! Somehow!”

“That I can’t explain.” Rose opened her eyes. She’d stayed successfully centered that entire time. But when she looked up at Danae, her gaze wasn’t a glare, but it was much more intense than any look they usually shared. “But do not tell me how to react to this, Danae. It happened to me. Nobody else. That means it’s my decision how I feel, nobody else’s.”

“So you still want to save him?” Evelyn asked cautiously. None of this felt

over, but unfortunately they were on a tight schedule. Cataclysmic disasters rarely waited for the emotional resolution she wanted.

Rose gave her a look of genuine surprise. "How is that even a question?"

"I think it's a pretty valid one. You went through Hell because of this."

"Well, I want to know exactly what he knows." Rose shot Danae a smile. "And if he did have anything to do with it, then he'll wish we left him down there."

"Rose... you're deflecting."

"I'm processing my trauma at my own personal rate. Give me a while to think it through, okay? Of course we save him, that's what we do."

"And you both know where I stand." Evelyn grinned, then turned to look at the third member of their little congress. "Danae?"

"It'd be two against one anyway, what's the point?" she grumbled, shaking her head. But then she shrugged, and spread her hands. "Fine, fine, whole story, important. I vote save. I can always change it later. Lots of holes in Parole." Her sour face lightened the slightest bit. "I'm kidding."

Evelyn's face broke into a relieved smile. "If he's guilty, you might have to wait your turn."

"Believe me," Rose said, voice just as strong and determined. "We'll get to the bottom of that little mystery. But right now I'm working on one of my own right here."

"What's that?" Evelyn turned a curious look her way.

"I know who tried to kill Hans. And I know what Major Turret is up to in this place. And I... I just cracked a lot of cases lately. A lot."

After a couple seconds of stunned silence, Danae let out a laugh. "So that's why you're not fighting tooth and nail to come with us!"

“That, and I’m still recovering. I do have some common sense.” Rose’s eyes had lost none of their warmth but now they gleamed with an uncommon intensity. Or rather, they’d regained it. “So, both of you, get out of here. Save Regan, save Gabriel, save Parole. I’ll be fighting too, right here. Jack needs at least one mommy close by in case things get nasty.”

“You’re amazing, Rose.” Suddenly Evelyn felt like she was back in their kitchen, surrounded by familiar things instead of world-ending fears, daydreaming about fighting side by side with her wives again. Reality was harsher than she’d envisioned, but it made her heart beat faster all the same.

“Some people fight injustice in the middle of the fire. Some people...”

“Alphabetize?”

The smile Rose gave her back wasn’t soft in the least. “Drag liars and villains to the light, kicking and screaming.”

“Oh. Coming back out of retirement after all, aren’t you?”

“What can I say? Once you got the bug...”

“So proud of you, Rose Petal.” Evelyn pulled her close, first into a gentle embrace, then a deep kiss. It might have more time they had any right to linger, but they’d spent so much of their lives rushing around doing damage control, in crisis, in action, they’d earned the right to take one moment slow. “See, you’ve still got your thorns.”

“If Regan really had anything to do with getting you shot, make him feel ‘em.” When her wives looked up at her, Danae’s eyes were still intense and deadly serious. “Or I will. Dandy’s up and at ‘em now, and he’s got some shiny new fangs.”

“Of course.” Rose nodded, just as seriously. “I need to know the truth first, that’s all.”

“Okay. Me too. And... and just be careful, okay?” Danae whispered. Her fire was gone all at once as she looked at Rose and realized how short their next, maybe last few seconds together would be, and her eyes filled with tears. “I need to know at least one of us is going to make it through this.”

“Hey. We all are.” Evelyn stroked her cheek, other hand going to Rose’s. “We are all coming home. We will save the city, we will finish this ridiculous night, and we will come home and kiss our little boy, and then kiss each other, and sleep for about a month, and then we will wake up... and then we’ll do it all over again, because that’s who we are, apparently, and that’s what we love. Because we wouldn’t keep doing it otherwise.”

“I love *you*. Both of you.” Rose sniffed, tears falling too, but smiled. “Now go. Before I change my mind and try to stop you.”

“Or I change mine and try to stay.” Danae tried to smile and almost succeeded. “God help us all, it’s gonna be a hell of a night.”



“Too dangerous,” Zilch shook their head, looking grave, which for them was significant.

“I can help!” Finn protested.

“Your abilities are unstable. You’d—”

“But they’re gone,” he insisted. “I can’t even do it anymore. I’ve tried!”

“Until they’re back, you don’t know,” Zilch maintained a reasonable tone, but Finn knew their voice too well not to easily hear their anxiety. “Too risky.”

“Please!” Finn’s desperation cut through the air and Zilch shut their eyes as if they’d been cut by a knife that could actually hurt their dead skin.

“No. Three suits. For me, Evelyn and Danae.” Their eyes dropped. Suddenly

they seemed to struggle under the crushing weight of fatigue, gravity increasing slightly on their entire tall, thin frame. “Regan doesn’t even have one.”

Finn’s face fell. “I’m sorry. I know you’re really... really scared.”

They stepped closer, hesitating before laying one large hand and one smaller one on Finn’s shoulders. “And now so are you. I’m sorry.”

“Listen, Regan scared the heck out of you when he ran down into the fire—now you’re doing the same thing to me!” Finn looked intently up into a pair of eyes most other people would call emotionless. He’d call them sad, scared, and do anything to make them smile again. But he’d do more to keep them safe. “You’re going down there and making me watch!”

“I won’t burn, and I have a suit. He doesn’t.”

“Still scared!”

“I have to go.”

“And I’m not trying to stop you, I just want to go with you!”

Zilch let out their breath in a long, slow hiss. “Too dangerous.”

“You guys are always the ones saving me. I’ve caused you so much trouble.”

“No,” they ground out the word. “Not true.”

“And—I can’t just do *nothing* anymore! I want to help you.”

“I need to know you’re safe.” Zilch’s hands tightened the slightest bit on his shoulders. His eyes stung. “I need to know one of you is safe. That helps me.”

Finn tried to glare up at Zilch but his vision swam and eyes threatened to spill over anyway. So he did what he wanted to do all along—which was pull them close and rest his head against their thin, hollow chest. After a stunned moment (although a much shorter one than the first time they had experienced this) Zilch wrapped their long arms around the soft, warm human hugging them and shut their eyes. Somewhere, their heart ached.



The black and rust-red jumpsuits looked like the ones fighter pilots wore, but looked able to withstand a small tank assault. Straps, buckles and thick patches of a hard, lightweight material studded the things, providing extra protection. Danae was already wearing one, and her thick, heavy steel-toed boots clunked on the floor as she moved with frenetic energy rivaling Finn on a sugar high.

“Okay, listen up. These things resist up to 4000 degrees Fahrenheit,” she said, lumping the duffel bag slung over her shoulder to the ground. Then she held up her newest finished project, a modified gas mask with with opaque visors and grills over the mouthpieces. “Independent air reclamation system, completely fire-resistant, and pretty much foolproof. But Lord, if we’re not about to put *that* to the test.”

Oddly, it was Zilch who raised a tentative question. “Are they... alive?”

“Not sentient, no.” Danae shook her head, trying for the usual proud smile she had when showing off one of her creations. “Their only concept is ‘embrace and protect.’ They...” Her voice wavered for just a moment, and so did her smile. “They think we’re their babies.”

“Where did you get these?” Zilch hadn’t picked up a suit or helmet yet, arms folded and staring at the pile with an almost accusatory gaze.

“I modified some SkEye uniforms to resist fire.”

They were silent for a half-second, then spoke again, slightly more insistently. “Where?”

“Liam had them in storage.” She held out one black helmet in Zilch’s direction and cleared her throat, still not meeting their eyes. “I just kicked them up a notch.”

After another silent moment, Zilch slowly reached out and took the helmet

from her hands with both of theirs, staring into the helmet's dark visor like it might stare back. When they lowered it, they could see Danae looking up at them tentatively. They were momentarily puzzled; this was an expression they didn't often see on others' faces. It wasn't terror—so, not the usual reaction to their looming, undead form—and she wasn't looking for approval, but she was concerned about... something else. Zilch made their face form the least threatening approximation of a smile they could, and saw her face relax, her relief telling them they'd guessed right. "Thank you."

"For what?" she asked. Now they recognized that expression; confusion.

"Finn. What you did. Saving him."

"Oh..." She broke their gaze; looked down. "It's nothing. He would've done the same for me—like, you say that a lot, but I know he actually would've, he's a great guy. And... and it was my fault anyway. I sent him to get our stuff, wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for me."

"Not true." Zilch's firmness made her look up again, and even her surprise didn't give way to fear. They almost smiled again when she didn't back away, but their voice maintained a serious edge. "SkEye was...is always after us. He'd be dead without you." A pause, while a slow smile spread across Danae's face.

"Thanks," she said quietly. Her voice was a little shaky, but definitely not from fear. "You guys are... I'm glad you're coming with us."

"Of course." Their face regained some of its grimness, and when they spoke it was with absolute certainty. "Have to find Chimera. Bring him back."

"Yeah, I hear you." Danae'd face hardened a little as well. "Gotta find out what he meant about Rose. Don't get me wrong," she said quickly. "We're bringing your boy home safe, I got his..." she faltered. "I got his back. But I gotta know. We all do."

“I understand.” Zilch slowly pulled their hood up, and placed the helmet on over it, ending the conversation.

“Hans, can you check on Regan?” Evelyn asked as she nervously adjusted one of her protective gloves.

“He’s far down... It’s really hot. I mean, obviously. But let’s see, there’s fire, steel... Steel bars, crisscrossing...pipes...” As his consciousness descended, Hans began to speak in a strange, faraway tone as if he were in some kind of trance.

“Okay.” Danae nodded sharply, wiggling her foot down into the boot of the one-piece. “Under the city, lots of pipes and steel—it has to be the support scaffolds. Easiest way there is through the sewers.”

Hans phased in and out of focus. “He’s lost in a world of... good and bad things, all memories...”

“And Gabriel’s still there with him?”

“Yes. They’re interacting. Not just talking, it’s—huh.” Hans stopped, tilted his head, looking confused. “It’s like when I showed you all his memories. They’re learning about each other. Regan’s not afraid anymore.”

“Well that’s a good sign,” Evelyn was already suited up, gas mask helmet tucked under her arm. “Looks like the kid just wanted a friend. Stay with them.”

“I will. I’ll be there if you need me.” Hans slipped out of their minds in an instant.

CHAPTER 17

The Fall of the House of Torret

ROSE BRUSHED ASIDE SOME BLACK CURLS AND PLANTED A KISS ON JACK'S FOREHEAD. "I'LL BE back before you know it. Everything's going to be okay, baby."

She didn't like the look in his wide, dark eyes, the way he stared up at her, and then past her. That scared her more than anything else she'd seen in the past week, more than gunshots, more than a tank, more than any ghost or fire or army. She wanted to shove all of that to the side, shut the door and sit right here with Jack until he smiled again; it was too much for a little boy to handle and it was too much for her.

But the crisis wasn't over yet. Just outside that very door, Wren and Lisette stood where she'd asked them to wait, and in a minute they'd all go upstairs to confront something that had been turning over in her mind and building to a



chilling but inescapable conclusion.

This was so much more important. He was her priority and always would be and one more round of confronting the worst this place had to offer could just sit and wait a minute while she hugged her son—and took another moment to let herself worry.

“It’s not.”

Rose blinked in surprise as her son mumbled the words, the first things he’d said in a long time. “What do you mean, sweetie?”

This entire ordeal had been chaotic, traumatic, terrifying for all of them. And Jack had been so *good*, he’d always been good, maybe too good, too quiet, too obedient. He accepted the upheaval of their lives so readily, she couldn’t help but wonder if there was something wrong. She almost wanted him to cry or and scream, something babies were supposed to do, especially in the middle of horrors. But he didn’t. He never had. He just nodded quietly and stared up at her, and God, when she had time to breathe again she was going to spend days just cuddling him and letting him know that it was okay to be scared, because even mommies got scared sometimes, but it would be okay because they were all together.

“It’s not gonna get better.” His gaze slipped past her once more, his eyes wide and lost.. “Gonna get worse first.”

Rose was quiet for a moment, searching for an appropriate answer. She disliked lying to her child—even comforting lies—and had the disconcerting feeling that he’d see through it if she even tried. “Then we’ll get through it together, sweetheart. We’ll just keep going until it does get better. Please don’t be afraid, okay? Your mommies are all going to be back soon. We’ll all be together soon.”

“Okay.” Jack didn’t seem completely satisfied, but at least he made eye contact now. He seemed like he was making the choice to believe her, because he didn’t like the alternative. Rose was struck by how much her son had aged since the day a spray of bullets tore through their doorway. Love and attention. That’s what Jack needed right now from all his moms, and none of them had really been able to give enough of it. She would, Rose promised both of them. Soon.

But right now she had to keep fighting. There was one last thing to do before they could rest.

“All right then.” Giving Jack’s head a last stroke, she turned to Lisette and Wren, who waited for her by the door. “We’ve got some work to do.”

“We’re ready.” Lisette nodded, looking too serious for her young face. Wren nodded too, but seemed distracted by something above them, upstairs. “This is what we’re here for. I think. We volunteered to keep this place safe, and...” she trailed off, determination fading into nervousness.

“It’ll be okay. You’re not alone and you’ve done so well.” Rose said gently but steadily, giving Lisette an anchor with her voice and warm hand on her shoulder. “Just a little more, and we’ll all be safe and sound. Now let’s go.”



Evelyn hated the suits. The stiff material restricted movement and made her feel trapped. The helmet fit too tightly over her face and impeded her vision, and all she could smell was her own breath, too warm on her face. This decade-old mask wasn’t nearly as comfortable as the ones Parole had developed out of necessity. But if they were going to survive in Parole’s long-dry sewers, where the metal walls already glowed red-hot and half-melted, none of them had a choice.

“Doing all right?” Zilch’s voice was muffled and tinny through a speaker in her ear. All Evelyn could see of their face was the top half, their sharp eyes glinting behind the dark visor.

“Spectacular. Let’s keep moving.” Evelyn’s own voice sounded nasal and pinched, and the mask gave soft hisses as she breathed. She kept moving, her feet heavy, feeling cut off from the rest of the world. Descending gave her the impression of being a deep-sea diver, with water pressure getting stronger with every step down.

Danae moved on without a word. She’d barely said anything since putting on her own helmet. Neither of them disturbed her. They ran hunched over and low to the ground through the dark tunnels. The decimated sewers ran beneath Parole’s center, the easiest way to access the cliffs above the fire. The subterranean structures were dangerous, more likely to collapse than even the ground level. But this was the way Regan had gone, so this was the way they followed. Out toward the ragged, torn edges chewed up by cave-ins and explosions, where the scaffolds stuck out like exposed bones. There were no electrified fences or SkEye patrols down here. Nobody ever escaped Parole by walking through the fire.

The sewers’ angular tunnels had long gone dry, devoid of waste and water, a prime indication of how and why the entire city was dying—why people fought and died to capture the secure water drop-off points, why they killed for a cup of tainted water. Along with everything else, the city’s lifeblood water had gone up in steam. And it gave SkEye their stranglehold over the entire population. They held the water, they held life.

Evelyn closed her eyes and focused on her breathing, and the intermittent presence of Hans in the back their minds. He popped in and out, trying to

guide them, monitor Regan and check back on the others left at the house—trying to be a million places at once. Every time he returned to them, he seemed a little fainter, a little weaker.

They stopped at a T-shaped intersection. Both directions sloped down sharply, into a murky darkness lined by outlines of charred, rusted and partially melted steel plates.

“Hans?” Evelyn called. “Which way?”

It was a few disturbing seconds before he replied, silence broken by the increasing roar of the fire, and what sounded like far-off creak and grinds of twisting metal. No place in Parole was completely free from the sound of the blaze, aside from insulated rooms, but here, the noise was inescapable and ominously loud.

“This would be your last chance to turn around,” came Hans’s quiet voice. He sounded like he was trying for his usual mocking tone, maybe singsong sarcasm, but he just sounded weak and tired. He didn’t even bother showing up visually in any of their minds’ eyes.

“Oh, you’d love that!” Danae shot back. “If we just went back up and forgot the whole thing? You could always just poke us in the forehead and make us, if you really wanted, I guess.”

“Yeah, making people forget comes with its own set of challenges...”

“Were you ever going to tell us Gabriel was alive?” As Zilch let out a low growl, Danae glared up into the darkness in general, since Hans still hadn’t appeared.

“Pff, of course not,” Danae shook her head. “He waited until Gabriel woke up and got strong enough to call for help, then he panicked because someone might find out, and started sc—”

“I didn’t have a choice,” Hans whispered. “I was doing what I had to, I didn’t want to. I’m trying to save us. When he woke up, when he started calling out, and I realized he was still alive? I tried to think of everything. This is the only way. It’s the last resort.”

“No, Hans,” Evelyn said in a more level tone than Danae’s, and less acerbic than Zilch’s, but her own voice held a controlled edge. “We can still put out the fire and save Parole. Gabriel doesn’t need to die. No one else has to die.”

“You think I haven’t thought about this from every angle? As long as he’s alive, he keeps producing fire. As long as he’s producing fire, it’s kind of hard to—”

“It’s kind of hard for me not to want to punch you in the face.” Danae stomped forward, heading toward the intersection even without knowing which way to turn, like she couldn’t stand still for another minute. “I can’t believe you picked death and lies and manipulation over actually—just—just asking us! We’d help if you asked, we just draw the line at murder, that’s all!”

“I was alone,” he said, voice faint and staticky like a weak radio channel.

“No you weren’t!” she shouted back. “We were your friends! You stayed silent for ten years, but all you had to do was ask! And Rose and I would have come running if we knew you were in trouble! But you didn’t trust us, and I don’t think—”

“Hans,” Zilch cut in, but they didn’t sound annoyed. And even Danae recognized a smile when she saw one. “Which way?”

“Left,” he mumbled, sounding defeated, but not arguing further. “It’s left up here.”

“Keep going,” Zilch said to Danae as they moved forward. “Just walk at the same time.”

“Sure thing,” she grinned up at her much taller new friend, and followed them down the left tunnel. “Hans, just about everything possible that someone could have done wrong here—congrats, you did it! We’ll fix your mess, though. Sure will save the day, despite all your crap.”

Under any circumstances this would almost be fascinating, Evelyn thought as she followed. She could actually sense Hans more clearly now; he was sulking in the back of their minds, still invisible but presence growing much and much more evident the longer Danae went on. The more attention she gave him, Evelyn realized. Even negative, annoyed attention. She would have gently smacked her own forehead if she hadn’t been wearing a helmet and thick glove. The boy she’d seen in Regan’s memory had looked about sixteen years old. He still did, really.

“Yes, Hans,” she said at last, making her voice as calm, level and adult as possible. She ended up reminding herself of the tone she used when Jack started asking ‘why’ about something, usually why he wasn’t allowed to do something. It was always better just to take a minute, listen and explain. “We really will help you with this mess. You got us into it... but we’ll help you get out of it.”

“Oh.” Very slowly, the image of a white-haired boy appeared over their heads. He looked a lot more tentative than he ever had before, and ready to fade away again at a moment’s notice. “Well... thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She said politely, and kept walking.

“Um, you’re gonna want to turn right up here,” Hans continued after a moment, floating along after them. She could swear his form was gradually becoming more and more substantial. “Then there’s a ladder down, and then be really careful, ‘cause the next ladder’s rusty, and...”



“I need to talk to you.”

Liam dropped the heavy velvet curtain and spun around. He’d been lost in a deep, half-dazed reverie, staring out the floor-length window at the smoke-draped skyline, and now his wide-eyed gaze was fixed on her. “Rose! I didn’t expect... I mean you...” He cleared his throat and tried again. When he spoke again, there was still a distinct edge of paranoia. “How did you get in here? We’re under lockdown!”

“I have to admit, I had some help,” she said as Lisette and Wren stepped from behind her, meeting his glare without fear. “You’re not the easiest man to find.”

“You little—” he sputtered, face flushing at the pair of them with a look of absolute betrayal and indignation. “How dare—I told you explicitly not to allow anyone in here!”

“We had to.” Lisette’s voice shook, but her eyes didn’t waver. “It’s the only way to fix everything.” She fidgeted, looking nervous for the first time until Wren took her hand. “But it’ll be okay. We can even help you, Mr. Liam, we know you’re scared t—”

“I don’t know what you thought you’d found out, but just keep your mouths shut.” His glare faded, replaced by a look of smug assuredness. “Well, I know at least *one* of you will.”

Slowly, calmly, and with a nearly matching expression, Wren raised their middle finger.

“They’re right, Liam,” Rose said, keeping her tone studiously calm. She arranged her gentle words into a regular rhythm, like a heartbeat—a subliminal, calming effect. From here she could see a sheen of sweat standing

out on his pale forehead, and his trembling hands worrying at the cuffs of his expensive suit. “There’s a lot more going on here than you’re saying, and you’ve got me worried.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” he said in clipped tones, voice steady despite the rest of his obvious unease. “I’m sure you understand the need for security.”

“Of course.” Rose monitored his every inflection and poker tell. “This has been hard on you, Liam. Maybe harder than the rest of us, except Evelyn... and Hans.”

“Who? Oh. Yes. Of course.”

“I know how much you value having power over your own life. You must feel like it’s spinning out of control.”

He didn’t answer, just folded his hands behind his back where she couldn’t see them shake.

“Is there anything you’d like to talk to me about?” she asked quietly, and waited.

At last, Liam looked up at her, and she saw that while he had never been a specimen of health and vigor, now there were more bags and dark circles under his eyes than she had ever seen. His eyes flicked wearily to the teenagers still in his private chambers, but he didn’t say a word, as if not dignifying his predicament with a request.

“I need to talk to Liam alone,” she said, nodding toward the door. “Wait outside, okay? I’ll be right out.”

As they joined hands with Lisette and started walking backwards, Wren held up two fingers, pointing first to their own eyes, then at Liam, glaring daggers with every step. When they left, it wasn’t through the door. Without a

sound, they both disappeared into thin air.

Feeling that to show surprise or any reaction at all would weaken her position, Rose gathered her thoughts and formulated her first tactic as she turned around. "Please. if you just tell me what's been haunting you... you'll feel better."

"I get the feeling," Liam said stiffly, drawing himself up to his full height and standing ramrod-straight. "That you think you already know. You and those delinquents."

"I'd rather hear it from you, Liam." The bridge between them was crumbling, and she could feel the distance growing larger.

"What exactly," he said coldly, turning three-quarters toward the window to catch the last rays of the fading sunlight. "Did you come up here to say to me?"

Maybe bluntness would shake something loose. "Last night, Hans almost went into cardiac arrest."

"Yes," he said in a near-monotone. "Thank God you were there."

Rose stared at him for a moment, incredulous. "I barely got to him in time. Luckily, Lisette and Wren showed up a minute later."

Liam said nothing. The silence in this wing of the house was truly rare for Parole; it was almost distracting. Almost like the entire room had been insulated, covered in a thick cloth as heavy as the hanging purple velvet curtains behind him.

"At the same time, you disappeared," Rose continued.

"Meaning what?"

"Someone tries to kill Hans, and then immediately afterwards you're nowhere to be found? What do you think it means, Liam?"

Again, Liam was silent—and now he turned back to the window to face the

setting sun, hands still clasped behind him. With them facing her, Rose could clearly see his hands were gripping one another much more tightly than they had been before, and still shaking.

“Liam, talk to me. I know we haven’t been in contact much since the... all those years ago, but I really believe you were...” she stopped, struggled for the words. “I believe you thought you were doing the right thing. I still think you’re trying to do the right thing. It’s hard to know what that is sometimes, it’s the hardest thing in the—”

“You don’t understand.” He sounded like he was speaking through clenched teeth. “You can’t understand.”

“Then help me understand. Tell me what happened.”

“Say it!” He whirled around to face her, eyes wide, façade cracking before her eyes as easily as Parole’s fragile streets. “If you’re so damn sure of yourself, then say it!”

“I don’t want it to be true!” As soon as the words were out, Rose realized exactly how desperately she meant them. It surprised her more than a little.

“And what if it is?!” He fired back with just as much fear and far more despair.

“Then I’m even more relieved I wasn’t too late, because I think I saved two lives that night!”

They just stared at each other for a few seconds; Liam was almost panting now, as if he’d run a very long way very fast. “Say it.”

Rose’s eyes filled with tears. She wasn’t surprised to feel them. She was surprised it had taken them this long to sting. “You poisoned Hans.”

Liam closed his eyes. His mouth moved in what looked like a twitch, a spasm. Then he let out a whisper so faint she almost had to lean closer to hear.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I had to!” His head whipped up; some stray hairs were starting to spring out of his immaculate greying ponytail. “It’s my fault! It’s all my fault, this monster I created, this ouroboros we’ve become, devouring Parole, devouring ourselves, the blood is on my hands! What’s one more? Just one more life, to save so many more? To begin a cycle of redemption instead of destruction? To—”

“Liam!” Rose kept her voice from becoming a cry, but it was harder to keep herself from rushing forward; she made it a few steps before stopping herself. “Breathe. Please, please take a deep breath. I want to help, and I want to understand. Just breathe. In, and—”

“I’ve killed us all!” His hands went to his head, he gripped his forehead as if he were trying to hold the pieces of his breaking skull together. “I didn’t see, I didn’t see how dangerous he was, and people died! So many!”

“How dangerous who was?” Rose asked, quietly but intensely; she was so close to unlocking this entire entanglement and the mystery at its heart she could feel it, but still had to tread so carefully.

“No. No, no, I can’t—”

“It’s just like before, isn’t it, Liam?” she continued, talking fast, somehow she’d break through, she would, before he withdrew again. “Eight years ago, when we were kids first getting Chrysedrine, you and Garrett Cole, you weren’t trying to hurt us, you thought you were doing the right thing. But you realized it was wrong—”

“Yes,” he whispered. “You don’t save yourself by throwing someone else into the fire. Rule one.”

“That’s what Evelyn says, yes!” Rose smiled despite the fear and tension magnified between them. “And you didn’t. You didn’t then, and you’re not now, isn’t that right?”

“That’s right. I had to stop him. I saw what he was doing and he had to be stopped.”

“So you tried to stop him,” Rose almost laughed with relief. “It was to protect Regan and Zilch, wasn’t it? You saw what Major Turret and Hans were doing to them and how wrong it was, didn’t you? And how else could you stop him? Liam, it’s all right, I know what you were trying to do. Same as before, prote—”

“No,” Liam said suddenly, looking up at her. Instead of relief and catharsis in his eyes, she saw nothing but complete and total confusion. “I wasn’t trying to protect anyone from Hans. I was trying to protect *Hans*... from the Major.”

“What?” Rose blinked, trying to make sense of this contradictory puzzle. “Protect him from... I thought... Liam, isn’t Hans taking orders from your father? Aren’t they working together to—Liam?”

Rose didn’t think she could have possibly been more confused. She was wrong. Liam was starting to laugh. “Is that what you’ve been thinking... this whole time? That my father—that he’d work with anyone? Ever? Anyone, that he couldn’t order—or blackmail—or torture, into submission?”

“What are you saying?” She asked, eyes wide and hands shaking. “What’s he—”

“My father’s been ‘*working*’ with Hans for years,” Liam spat. “Trying to discern the *specifics* of his ability, what can be *done* with it. I don’t know what he wants. Hans doesn’t know what he wants. We don’t even know the effects of his experiments, only the results. *Pain*,” he said before she could ask. “Awful,

excruciating agony. So unimaginable that it's left Hans unable to return to his body. He can..."

"He can't wake up, can he? Even if he wanted to?"

"No."

"God," Rose whispered. "A monster."

"Yes," Liam agreed. "I am."

"That's not what I meant!"

"Maybe not, but it's what I've become! My father, the Major, made the decision that quarantined Parole from the rest of the world! We became our own brave new world, a world over which he crowned himself king! And when he ruled with an iron fist, crushing us in his grip, I stood by and watched the blood drain! And when I finally had the chance to atone, I sided with the ghost of a tortured boy—so twisted and broken that he sends more innocents to their deaths! Yes, I know what Hans has done! And that's my fault as well! Instead of saving him, I stood by again, while my father used his pain to fuel his gears of war and suffering! We are never escaping our prison, Rose! Blood cannot quench fire, it can only stain!"

By the end of his outburst, Liam was exhausted and Rose was dizzied and dismayed. The fight had drained out of him and he looked around ten years older, seeming to hang in the air like one of Jenny Strings's puppets.

"We can't change the past," she said at last, very carefully, still overwhelmed. Finding any words at all after all of that was a challenge. "But we can move on. And more death isn't the answer."

"Better he die than suffer further," he muttered, voice flat.

"I don't think you wanted him to die at all."

"What?" He looked up sharply.

“You knew I’d be there. In the same room with Hans. You could have done it any other time, but you picked when you knew I’d be able to save him. You didn’t really want to kill him, did you?”

“Of course I did. He has to die!” Liam paled, intensity returning in a rush, but not the same righteous, fiery passion he’d had a moment before. Now he almost looked afraid. “He does or—or I do!”

“Or you do?”

“Yes!” He took a step forward, and now he glared at her again. Rose did not step back, but she did awaken her thorns and spread her fingers. “His suffering ends, or mine. Either way, we’re both free.”

“Liam, stop. You’re not thinki—” He charged her. Rose jumped back, forearms crossed in front of her face as her body’s leafy defense mechanism sprouted to life. Vines shot out of her sleeves and whipped toward Liam. They snapped around his ankles and wrists and tripped him. “Stop it!”

Caught in the vines, Liam struggled against the thorns to get to her, face twisted into a mask of furious desperation. He ripped vines apart in his frenzy, ignoring the cuts in his clothes and skin as he freed himself one inch at a time.

“I don’t want to hurt you!” He lurched forward again, and Rose gasped. She gave up her defensive position and stretched out her arms and fingers toward him. “But I will!”

All her energy and focus and life rushed out of her in a tidal wave of thorny vines that surged across the room. Liam screamed in fury, then a wall-shaking *thump* shook her bones, and she looked up to see him pinned against the opposite wall by massive tentacles of vines. They curled tighter around him, pulling until his limbs were outstretched and immobile.

“Yes, *hurt me!*” Liam shouted, his voice strangled, tears streaming down his

face as he strained against the thorny bonds. He stared at Rose, his eyes now wide and pleading. His chest jerked up and down in frantic hyperventilation, and though his wrists were pinned to the wall, his fingers curled into trembling hooks. "It's my fault! It's all my fault! I should have stopped him!"

"Relax, Liam," Rose said quietly. "Just breathe."

"Please, just let it be over!" He sobbed, blinded by tears, his entire body shuddering with violent, overwhelming pain. Rose's vines weren't tight enough to hurt him. Every bit of agony came from within. His heart pounded so hard, Rose knew it'd speed the mild poison seeping from the tips of her thorns through his bloodstream. His thrashing slowed as the strong sedative kicked in. Liam's voice slurred and his limbs grew too heavy to struggle. "Let it be over..."

"I'm sorry." Rose wasn't even sure which one of them said it. Maybe both. Liam no longer moved, just stared, locked gaze with her... then his head slowly fell to the side and his eyes slipped shut. She could've sworn fleeting gratitude passed through his expression as they did.

"Are you okay?"

Rose leaned wearily against the wall, too exhausted to keep herself upright. Lisette and Wren had once more appeared behind her, and stared at Liam, sprawled across the wall, with wide, horrified eyes.

"Hi, sweeties," she said slowly, trying to keep her voice from shaking. "I think the worst is over, but he was in... a bad place."

"What happened? Did he try to hurt you?"

"He... discovered some things about himself I don't think he liked." Rose said wearily. "He needs help, and he's not used to asking for it. I think. That was his way of doing it." She sighed, looking at the unconscious Liam. The harsh lines had finally faded from his face; she'd never seen such a peaceful

look there. "Did you check on Finn? And Jack?"

Wren shot Lisette a glance, raising their white eyebrows in a silent prompt, and she nodded up at Rose, a few times more than was absolutely necessary. "Finn's fine. Everything's cool. We're good."

"Good," Rose said in an accidental echo, and her voice cracked with fatigue. She was suddenly so *tired*. "I want to check on Jack... then I'll come back up and figure out what to do with... him."

"Just go," Lisette followed her gaze to Liam, who still hung on the wall, unconscious in his tangled restraints of vines and flowers. She sucked her lips in for a moment; neither of them actually laughed, but behind her, Wren made much less of an effort to conceal their overjoyed grin. "It's okay, we'll watch him. We got this."

"Those vines should hold against just about anything," Rose made herself focus just a little longer, and ensured Liam's bonds were firm and strong. "But if they don't, come find me right away."

"Yes, Ma'am." Lisette nodded, all seriousness and attention, and only a slight twitch at the corner of her mouth.

"I'll be right back. Don't move." Rose's head spun as she walked out of Liam's office and tried not to collapse in the elevator.

As soon as Rose was gone, Wren ran right over to Liam's still form against the wall to see him close-up, grinning as they looked up at Lisette and back down again, as their fingers signed their appreciation of just desserts, satisfaction of good triumphing over evil, and a desire for selfies.

"I know, right?" Lisette let out a little squeal and clapped. "But no time, now's our chance, tons to do! First thing, let's tell Ms. Cassandra!" They joined hands again, then spun around in a perfectly synchronized, hopping dance. In

an instant they vanished, far more abruptly and completely than Regan ever did when he simply hid from view. Liam was alone in the room once again.



“He’s gone.” Jack looked up as soon as Rose entered the room. She’d been hoping to find him asleep—no such luck. But even worse, that strange, faraway look was back.

“Who’s gone, sweetie?” Anxiety gnawed at the back of her mind and tightened around her heart like a band.

“He went down into the fire. Now it’s gonna fall,” he said, and Rose barely kept her mouth from dropping open. She’d never heard this tone of voice from him before—quiet and intense. So sure, so definite. No child talked like that. Certainly not hers.

“What are you talking about, baby? Tell Mama.” What was happening? She was almost afraid of the answer. Afraid her baby son knew more than she did, and then a cold hard weight dropped in her stomach, confirming it. Something was definitely coming, and it wasn’t good.

“All gonna fall. All gonna fall down. We gotta get out.”

“Get out? Out where?”

“Out of the house.” He looked up at her and his small hands went to the sides of her face, making her look directly into his eyes. He sucked in a deep breath, and screamed. “Out! Out! We gotta get out of the house!”

Rose didn’t hesitate. She scooped him up and, yelling for Lisette, Wren, Finn, and anyone else who could hear her, she ran from the room.



CHAMELEON MOON

The enormous sewer pipe they'd been walking in just ended, like a hollow log that thrust out over the edge of a cliff. They hung in the middle of nothing, suspended by rusted cables and scaffolding and rock that by some miracle, hadn't yet crumbled. The ground just dropped away into a cavern hollowed out by years of detonations and fire... and the fire was still here.

It still burned. Here were the last remnants of the precious oil that made Parole a rich city. Here was their lake of fire. The one Zilch and Regan had made together, when they couldn't keep one young boy from falling. It stretched out below them for miles, a molten ocean of glowing slag and sharp black outlines of rock wrapped up in darkness and flames burning too bright to look at straight-on, everything a jumble of green and amber afterimages.

"Hey!" A strong hand gripped their shoulder, steadying them. "You okay? Started to look kinda shaky there."

"Yes. Thank you." Zilch gave Danae a nod and climbed down the scaffolding protruding from the rock as quickly as they dared. The charred pieces of metal jutting from the rock face made a pretty good ladder, though they couldn't shake the feeling that they were climbing down rusted metallic bones.

They landed on a long, narrow ledge. On one side was a stark cliff, and on the other side, Zilch could see down forever into the molten, churning bowels of the oil veins. Then they looked up, craned their neck and squinted. If they looked just right, they could see the darkness of the night sky, and the illumination of the barrier...

Without a word, Evelyn, Danae and Zilch crept forward and around the corner, between the rock wall and the chasm's edge.

They all saw the figure at once, with a collective gasp. Someone hunched

low on the ground, a mess of bruises and blood and torn cloth and discolored burns from the superheated air. The familiar shape crouched in front of them, head hanging down... scales gleaming dully under a layer of ash.

“Chimera!” Zilch shouted and immediately started forward, but stopped when both hands on either side of them took hold of their shoulders. Danae shook her head and Evelyn held up one hand for everyone to wait.

“Regan?” Evelyn called, in a more level voice, carefully watching as he turned his head to look up at them with a slightly dazed expression, blinking as if he’d just woken up from a long sleep. “Hey. Want to tell us what’s going on?”

“Sorry, guys. I know how this looks...” Ash, dirt and burns covered Regan’s face, but he was smiling as he rose to his feet. Behind him on the ground lay a strange shape—what looked like a sleeping child shielded beneath a golden, curving energy field. “But I know what I’m doing. I finally know what we have to do. I know everything.”

“And we want to hear it, we really do.” Evelyn reached out a hand. “But first we have to get you out of here. Both of you.”

“Wait.” He shook his head and didn’t move. “There’s something we need to do first.”

She felt the tinge of apprehension, but asked anyway. “What’s that, Regan?”

“I’m going to set Gabriel free.”

Take My Hand

CHAPTER 18



“SET HIM FREE?” EVELYN’S TONE WAS SLOW, HESITANT. “YOU MEAN FROM THE FIRE? YEAH, WE’LL take him up with us, of course. Is that shield going to be a problem?”

“No.” It wasn’t Regan who answered. Suddenly the boy on the ground appeared beside her, but he hadn’t moved from where he slept. She saw a transparent image like a double-exposed photo—or like Hans, she realized, reeling. “I can drop it whenever I want.”

“Aah!” Danae stumbled backwards a few steps, then crashed into Zilch, and they both barely managed to stay upright. “He’s—Gabriel, you’re—you too?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, drawing back. The fact that he floated instead of taking steps, however, was less comforting than he intended. “I didn’t mean to scare you! I didn’t mean to scare him either,” he looked up at Regan, who was



shaking his head.

“You didn’t, don’t worry. You did the opposite. You set me free. I had to come return the favor.”

“What’s he talking about?” Zilch glared at the ghost child as if they didn’t trust for a moment that this wasn’t all the worst, deadliest trap they’d fallen into yet. “What favor? Chimera, what did he do?”

“It’s okay,” he looked up at them, and despite the ash and burns on his face, he actually looked serene. “I wasn’t kidnapped. I went on my own.”

“Is this true? Or did he possess you?” Zilch’s stare instantly narrowed with suspicion.

“No. Gabriel isn’t like Hans.” Regan shot the ghost boy a glance. “He didn’t take anything from me, he gave it back. And I remembered... everything. I knew I had to go with him.”

Evelyn nodded slowly, recalling that strange moment on the street. “He did say that.”

Zilch gave all of them a hard stare. Then without a word they strode forward toward Regan. They didn’t shake off Evelyn or Danae’s hands; they didn’t need to. Nothing was stopping them from moving forward. By the time they reached Regan, he was taking one slow, slightly painful step forward to meet them—but then stopped in surprise bordering on horror as Zilch reached up to remove their helmet.

“Zilch, no—” Too late; sometimes even Regan forgot how fast Zilch could move, and now they surprised everyone here. The helmet was off their head and over Regan’s before he could even finish the sentence.

“You remember everything?” Their voice was barely above a low murmur.

“Yeah.” Regan had taken hold of their wrists when he tried to stop them

from removing the helmet, and now he didn't let go.

"Then you know I won't burn." It was true; the hot air should have burned their exposed face, but they looked at Regan through calm, steady eyes. Now that he at least was wearing a helmet they looked much more relaxed.

"You might not burn, but how did Gabriel even survive down here?" Danae looked around at the severe rocks, the melted, twisted metal, and the fire.

"Come here." Regan stepped to the side and held out his hand, drawing their gazes down to the ground beside him. "Look."

A young boy with curly black hair, dressed in light blue scrubs like Lisette's and Wren's slept on the ground, safe inside a golden, egg-shaped shield of light shimmering around him. He lay perfectly still, eyes closed and face peaceful, without a single scratch or burn

"Oh..." Danae brought a hand to her chest. "Oh. He looks the same. Exactly the same..."

"It's a... stasis field," Gabriel explained slowly, pausing over a few words, as if trying to remember an unfamiliar concept he'd only heard secondhand. "I had to learn to protect my body while I'm... projecting out of it. It kept me safe, and... and the same. I didn't have to eat or drink. I slept down here for ten years."

"And you didn't age a day." Danae sniffed, revealing the tears hidden by the mask covering her face. "You taught yourself to do this? It's beautiful."

"And hard," he sounded like he was near tears too, but for a different reason. "Down here I can feel... everything. It's too loud. Everybody is *feeling* too loud. They're all so scared and angry and sad, and they won't stop. And when I feel the pain, it burns in me, hotter and hotter... until it catches fire."

"It was us fueling the fire," Evelyn whispered. "Our fear. Our pain. Oh,

Gabriel, I'm so sorry!"

"Don't be. It's not your fault. You can't help being afraid. Just like how I can't help lighting the fires. But I can fix it now! I can make the fires stop."

"You can?" Evelyn sensed they were all coming up on fragile ground. Lots of cracks ahead. She'd heard that so much before, everyone wanting to put out the fire. It hadn't meant a good thing yet. "What do you need, honey?"

"I'm still doing it," Gabriel nodded to the sleeping boy on the ground—himself. "I can't stop. I don't know how, the shield isn't helping anymore."

"That's not your fault either," she reassured him. "It's been ten years, of course you're getting tired. But you don't have to keep it up anymore, we're here to bring you home!"

But he shook his head. "No. I can't go back up there."

"What are you talking about, sweetie? It's okay, we'll get you back up—"

"I'm going to drop the shield. I'm so tired... I need to let go."

"You want to die?" Evelyn almost fell back a step, reeling in horror. "No! No, that's not why we came! Hans wanted to kill you, we want to save you!"

"I don't want to die. But I can't keep the shield up much longer. It's coming down anyway."

"But we're getting you out of here, you won't need the shield anymore!"

"I'll still feel all the pain. I'll still turn it to fire." He smiled, and it was one of the saddest smiles any of them had ever seen. "I'm still slipping away. I just want someone to be here to catch me."

"What?" Evelyn shook her head, completely lost.

"That's not me. Not anymore." He cast a sad look at the solid version of himself on the ground, the one beneath the stasis shield that had kept him protected but isolated, and still outwardly twelve years old. "I can't even get

back inside it anymore. And now I can't keep my shield up much longer. If it drops, I'll burn. It got weak enough so I could get out to call for help but... it'll be gone soon. And then I'll be gone." His young face was set in firm determination. "But you can still carry me out of the fire. Just not my body. Me."

She opened her mouth but no sound came out. Nobody could speak at all.

"Take my hand." Gabriel's large, dark eyes were fixed on Regan. In them shone not the reflection of flames, but a memory. A chance to start again. In an instant, he understood.

"Okay," Regan nodded, head reeling at the enormity of what he'd just realized—and hoping he'd gotten it right. "I know what to do—and I'll do it. I've got you this time."

"Wait—what's going to happen?" Danae asked suddenly, eyes wide; she looked like she'd just become painfully aware of exactly where they were, how far below the city and how surrounded by flames. "Regan, what happens when he drops that shield?"

"He should be able to stop the fire, that's for sure" Regan answered slowly. His eyes slid over to Gabriel, who was looking up at him with a faint, shy smile. "But he needs...someone to hold onto while he does it. Like an anchor. That's me."

"What does that mean?" Zilch's face remained hard, their eyes narrow. "Anchor?"

"It's getting harder to hold on. If I want to stop the burning, I have to let go," Gabriel explained hesitantly. "But if you all... hang onto me? I can... join your minds."

"Join our..."

“Only for a minute. If it’s all right. It’s hard to explain.”

“Sounds like you’re a kite in a storm and the string’s about to break,” Evelyn said thoughtfully. “But Regan holds your hand, catches you, and then we’re all holding his hand so nobody flies away either...” She looked up to see everybody looking at her. “Did that make sense?”

“Everything except the mind-joining thing.” Danae sounded dubious. “Aren’t you in all our heads right now?”

“Yes, but you’re not in mine.”

“Guys, I know how this sounds,” Regan said. “And how it sounds is weird. And if you wanted to walk away right now I wouldn’t blame you. But I’m just asking you to trust me. Please.”

“I do.” Zilch looked from him over to Evelyn and Danae. “And don’t see another choice anyway.”

“And then he’ll be... free.”

“Free?” Danae still wasn’t satisfied.

“As much as he can be. Like Hans.”

“Like...” she trailed off, face darkening as if she’d come to a slow, ominous realization. “Has anybody seen Hans since we got down here?” Nobody answered. She grit her teeth and nodded at the tense silence. “Didn’t think so. Something’s just feeling wrong here, guys. Are you sure this is the right call?”

Regan and Gabriel exchanged a look. Unlike the terrifying dynamic he’d shared with Hans, Regan was the one giving the slow, subtle nod when Gabriel wordlessly asked for approval. “We’re sure. It’s the only way.”

“Wait.” Danae’s voice was just tentative before. Now it hardened. “If this is all gonna go belly up in a second, I have to ask right now. Rose.”

Regan’s breath caught in his throat and he froze mid-step on his way over to

Gabriel's shield.

"You said you saw what happened to her."

"Yeah. Yes." Now his shoulders sagged, but with fatigue, not resignation. "I saw, and... I couldn't do a thing. I froze. She got shot. I was supposed to have her back. Instead, I disappeared."

Danae stared. "That's it? You said it was your fault! Everybody fr—did you not see what I did back there?"

"It was my fault. I saw who shot her." His voice was so flat she would never have heard it if it wasn't for the speakers in Zilch's helmet.

"Who..." she suddenly sounded afraid to ask the question, much less hear the answer. "Who was it? Who shot Rose?"

"Cairus Maddox. He was aiming for me."

"What are you—the missing kid?"

"Find him. Ask him. He'll tell you all you need to know about me." Regan's words landed, and perfect silence followed. So he turned away and took the last few steps to the golden shield where Gabriel was waiting in body and spirit. "You ready?"

"I'm scared," the young empath admitted, face crumpling. He looked at the ground, as if afraid to look at Regan's face in case he'd find disappointment there. "I'm tired. I... I want it to work, but..."

"Hey. You're not alone this time," Regan said quietly, eyes on Zilch, before glancing over at Evelyn and Danae. "I let you down before. That's not happening again. Give us... give me another chance. I swear, this time I won't let you down."

Gabriel looked up and smiled—then he slowly faded away, leaving only his sleeping physical form. A moment later, the golden shield followed. It

dissipated like fine mist under a hot summer sun, leaving him lying alone on the ground with nothing around but rushing, hot air, and no time to lose.

As Regan knelt down on the ground, he remembered a night long ago when he'd reached out for Gabriel's hand and felt it slip away. He remembered ten long, exhausting years of fire and hopelessness, the frantic escapes and the unexpected relief at finding he didn't have anything left to run from. He remembered everything he forgot that first night outside the Emerald Bar.

He thought about coming home.

Slowly, he took Gabriel's small hand in his. This time no fire seared his palm. He didn't let go. Regan smiled, and held on.

As the world faded from his view, he was sure he saw Gabriel's body fade away first.



The stage was dark except for a single spotlight, but even its light wasn't harsh. Nothing was here. Evelyn felt like she was floating in a warm bath, even the air around her soft, time as it passed felt liquid. Someone else was here, in a second spotlight, in their own twin pool of light. It was the boy, the one who'd been sleeping. Everything here felt like a dream, but he was awake now.

"Hi, Gabriel," she called out, voice echoing. They must have been in a wide open space. She couldn't quite see well enough to make out things like edges, curtains, or even the audience yet. Just the two of them.

"Hi." He gave a shy little wave, and didn't step closer or move out of the light. "Thank you for letting me in."

"No problem," she said. Suddenly she couldn't remember what he meant or where she'd been before this. "In where? Where'd everybody go?"

CHAMELEON MOON

“It’s your mind. I let you pick. Everybody’s around here, though. They’ll find us.” He looked around too, eyes widening at just the bare expanse of stage he could see, as if it was one of the most interesting sights he’d ever seen. Evelyn wondered how long it had been since he’d seen anything but fire. “Do you know where this is?”

“It looks like...the Emerald Bar.” Evelyn squinted to see out past the bright light, beginning to make out familiar shapes of tables and chairs. Off in the distance, she caught a flash of crinoline as a ballerina spun through the shadows.

“I don’t know where that is. Is it fun?”

“Yeah, it’s my favorite place. It’s where I feel safest of all.”

“It feels nice. It’s quiet. Nobody’s yelling. Or hurting.” Gabriel stopped talking, like he was suddenly self-conscious and shy. He looked at the ground and wiggled his toes, and for the first time she realized he was barefoot on the stage—even though he was wearing a small tuxedo. He must have tried to dress to match. “So... what do you want to do? While we wait? Do you want to play a game?”

“Well...” She stepped out of her own spotlight and it moved to follow her, as did Gabriel’s wary eyes. She kept her movements slow, having the feeling that anything sudden might startle him. Evelyn’s heart hurt. This little boy couldn’t be more than twelve. He’d been twelve for ten years—a decade of unimaginable pain. “We’re on a stage. Do you like to sing?”

“I’m not very good. I like dancing better.”

“Well, that’s perfect!” Evelyn smiled. In the background, familiar music started to play. It wasn’t the high-octane rock from her last show. Jazz. Heavy on the brass. An old record, she couldn’t remember the name, but Garrett would.

One of his favorites. She should remember... “Maybe you can show me a few steps.”

“Okay. Here, you take my hands like this, okay?” He held his out for her to gently take; even in dreams his skin burned hot like he had a perpetually high fever. “This is a box step. You step forward, then to the side, then together, then back...”

As they moved, their two spotlights grew and dissolved, until the entire stage was lit up with a soft, ethereal light.

“Hey, you’re pretty good!” Evelyn laughed as Gabriel twirled under her arm, then moved for her to do the same in reverse. The music grew louder. She could pick out the piano, the drums, the guitar and bass. It sounded warm—perfect music to dance a night away. If she thought hard enough, she imagined she might even be able to hear Garrett’s voice over everything...

“Thanks! I would think about dancing a lot, when I was sleeping. Most of the dreams were bad... but not all of them. Sometimes I’d hear music like this.”

“Well, you won’t have so many bad dreams anymore. Not if we have anything to say about it.” Her words rang in the space like echoes through a canyon, promise remaining long after she’d sworn. “Watch out, I’m gonna dip you!”

Gabriel giggled as she leaned him back. The music rose, its beat getting stronger until the drums pounded through their hearts. “I really won’t be alone? You won’t forget me again?”

“How could anybody forget you?” Evelyn’s answering laugh rang like a climactic note through a packed auditorium. “And you’re never alone! You got us!”

She took his hand as the music modulated to a more glorious major key.

CHAMELEON MOON

The stage fell away along with all their fears, and together they flew far from bad dreams, beyond despair, and past the faintest memory of anything lonely or cold.

“And we got you. It’s okay, honey. We got you.”

Their own galaxy-bright glow lit up the sky brighter than any spotlight, stronger than any flame. As they spun together in a dance through the stars, bathed in endless light, their hearts hummed with the voices of a thousand lives singing out in joy instead of fear.

Evelyn’s heart leapt. In this moment she knew exactly who she was: the golden goddess of the microphone, stage, word and her own heart, striking power chords with the strings of life and love and victory. Her own song was an unbreakable lifeline in a roiling sea, solid ground in a world of pitfalls and snares, and an unconditional stairway to heaven.

For a half-heartbeat (or maybe an hour; time happened all at once here) she thought about Regan and how badly he’d wanted this exact feeling, this self-knowledge that was a sword, shield, armor and healing kiss all in one. Like Evelyn, he’d finally found it. But unlike her, he’d had to lose it first.

It seemed like the cosmic song ended before it began. Golden and magenta notes gradually faded into the gentle darkness. A moment of silence stretched, eternal, soothing, patient and kind. Then, a bright and piercing whistle split the calm, followed by a wall of applause that broke over them like a white-capped wave.

“I thought I’d be alone forever,” Gabriel whispered. “I forgot what anything else felt like. I forgot I could even be happy. I forgot... I...”

“I know. But it’s not too late. You’re not what you lost.” She gently lifted his chin, and they both turned to see the truth. “You’re what you remember.”

There wasn't an empty seat in the house. Not until the entire audience rose to their feet to clap and yell their delight and love. She saw Regan first, his fingers still in his mouth and tongue flickering from when he'd given that first whistle. Danae's freckled face was bright and shining with joy and pride, Rose right beside her, cheering them both on with boundless love. Jack was snuggled between them, giggling and reaching for the light. Zilch's patchwork face stretched in a wide, wonderful grin, while Finn wrapped an arm around them, laughing and secure. Lisette and Wren appeared as if by magic to applaud together, Jenny Strings twirled in joy and her own spotlight. Liam sat in the front row, subdued and still, but smiling. And floating over their heads, faint and fading but present, was Hans. Eyes full of tears, he looked directly at Gabriel and mouthed two words: "I'm sorry." With that, he was gone.

Then one more figure emerged of the soft darkness, walking toward the stage. Garrett Cole, in his gold-sequined ringleader's hat and tails, his arms full of the biggest flower bouquet Evelyn had ever seen. He handed it up to her, and then faded away like smoke. Tears blurred his wide, bright smile, the last thing Evelyn saw of him.

"Looks like we've got a standing ovation," she said quietly, standing beside Gabriel to face their adoring audience. The light shone bright on their raised hands, and she realized every one of them was reaching out to help Gabriel up from the dark. Evelyn turned and offered her hand too.

"We're right here with you. You're going to be okay."

Gabriel took her hand.



“Did you feel that?” Zilch whispered. They felt warm—not the scorching heat of the fires, but pleasantly warm, like they were laying in sunshine, with skin that could feel its rays. Or maybe like they were made of sunlight, entire being suffused with the wonderful, golden glow. And whole. For the first time since they could remember, they felt whole.

“Yeah,” Danae whispered back. “It was... it was all of us. I could feel all of us.”

“But did we do it?” Evelyn asked quietly, feeling suddenly very small and cold. She’d been basking in the light too, joyful in the connection, and now that it was gone, she felt empty. “Did we save Gabriel?”

“We did it.” Regan was standing straight and tall, staring up the tall cliffs stretching far above them, and the faint, small pieces of sky. Evelyn recognized something in the way he stood. She’d seen it before. What she hadn’t seen was his smile, free of anxiety or fear. His eyes were so calm it was almost like he was just waking up from a dream—but it had to be the best and sweetest dream he’d ever had after a lifetime of nightmares.

“Regan?” She took one step toward him. She didn’t get to make another.

BOOM.

The ledge shuddered from a thunderous explosion, knocking Evelyn off her feet and into Danae, who instantly curled around and shielded her as they fell. Huge chunks of rock plummeted into the flame, and more fell from above. Loose bits of metal and pipe and dead machinery rained down on them while choking dust clouded the air and flew into Evelyn’s nose. For a moment they were all laid low, disoriented and blind on the ground.

Zilch staggered to their feet, dust and small rocks raining off them. They wiped the oily dust from their face, and immediately froze at what they saw.

“No...”

Peeking out from behind the bend in the chasm ledge, covered in dust and filth and wearing every bit of clothing he owned, plus a makeshift mask of rags was Finn. He was covered in ash, his clothes ragged and covered in burn marks where they'd actually caught fire and been stamped out. His orange hair stuck out at wild angles, singed black on the ends, and shiny red burns spread across the slivers of his exposed flesh. “Zilch I.. I think the booms are back.”

Zilch charged across the ledge and grabbed him by the shoulders. “You said you'd stay at the house! Stay alive! Safe! You never stay—sense! No sense!” Then they pulled the young man into their arms, squeezing the air from Finn's lungs.

“I thought I'd never see you again—couldn't let you go alone—”

“I know!” Zilch groaned. “Why does nobody listen? I won't burn! You will!”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Furious. And so glad you're here.”

The low rumbling that had been building through their conversation rose to a deafening roar. The booms were indeed back, with a vengeance. Another explosion ripped through the air, and the world shook from the fracture-bomb blast. Finn's screams blended with the rest of them; the world was a mess of debris and fire and smoke and nobody could see a thing.

Evelyn groaned, sitting up from where she'd fallen to the ground. She registered with some surprise that of all of them, Regan was still standing, looking back at her. At all of them. With an expression she'd only caught glimpses of on his face before: peaceful, serene, fond, and resolved all at once.

“Regan! Come on! We have to get out of here!”

“You have to,” he said, not moving. “We're not coming.”

“What?” She froze halfway to her feet. Something about the difference in his face scared her.

“There’s something I have to do, and I can’t stay here to do it.” His words were steady, voice full and unwavering. When he turned away from her, his movements were smooth and sure.

“Don’t do this,” Evelyn lurched the rest of the way upright. “Whatever you have to do, you don’t have to do it alone!”

“You’re right,” he shook his head, smiling. “I won’t be alone.” He turned, as if he were listening to someone softly speaking, who none of them could see anymore. “I’m doing what I couldn’t ten years ago. I’m carrying him out of the fire.”

Her eyes slowly widened with a slow realization that chilled her like a cold winter wind cutting through her suit, the fire, and down to the bone. “Gabriel’s still with you, isn’t he?”

“I’m sorry for not telling you,” he said, and regret passed over his face, but only a flash, and only for a moment. “You’d never let me do it.”

“Do what? Regan, what are you going to do?”

“He’s leaving.” Zilch’s voice was low. Almost incredulous. But it carried the same note of near-panic as their cries when they’d seen Regan gasp for air in Hans’s strangling grip, or when Finn had been carried away by SkEye.

“Leav—no! No, Regan, stop!” Evelyn cried. “What about everything you learned? Everything you did—we did, together? You came so far! You got it all back, doesn’t any of it matter?”

“It does.” His voice dropped, rough, and in that moment it did shake. “It does, so much. That’s why I’m doing this.”

“You don’t have to,” Zilch’s said, lowering their voice to match his. “You

don't have to fight anymore. You've done too much already. Rest."

"Can't," Regan smiled up at them, but it looked like it hurt. "Hans said he was going to help, but he was lying. Of course he was. He only wanted more death, and revenge. But I—I really mean it! If I have even one shot at getting us out of here, I'm taking it!"

"I know how you feel!" When Finn looked at him, it was with something nobody else here offered. Regan turned toward the hope in his eyes and held on. "I do! I know how much it hurts when you can't help the people you love—and how much you need to try, at least! You'd do anything, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah. Yes. I would."

"Then try! I believe you can do it! Just stay alive, and home again!"

"Thank you, Finn," he said quietly, suddenly remembering a dash across Parole's rooftops. Working in the shadows for the pursuit of life and resistance against despair. A voice in his earpiece telling him the next step. Soft, rapid typing; long fingers on a keyboard. A cat purring in the background. A rush of endless joy and boundless freedom. Leaping into empty space and flying instead of falling. Complete trust in himself and in the solid ground that would meet him. "Don't worry, I know what I'm doing. It'll be oka—"

"No it won't, not if we separate!" Danae shouted, her voice cutting through his memory and shaking his momentum. "Don't you walk away, not now! Not after all this! Nobody needs you to—"

"Listen." He looked away, breaking the connection and his friends' combined, desperate attempts to reach him. "There's a storm coming. You have to be ready."

"What does that mean?" Evelyn frantically tried to remember where she'd heard that word before. "What storm?"

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Regan didn't move, and he raised his eyes to give them all one more long, lingering look. But his outlines became indistinct and started to shimmer, rippling like air rising from the sidewalk in the dead of summer heat.

"Chimera! Stop!" Zilch's cry held a note of desperation nobody had heard before. They still held onto Finn, but much more tightly, like all their fear left buried and dormant had reached its breaking point, leaving them paralyzed. Like maybe they would if they might fall if they let go. Or Finn might disappear. Or they'd rush across the quaking ground to Regan and seize him in the same desperate hold and never let him go either. "Not again. Just got you back. Don't disappear. Not again. Please no. Please."

All at once Regan was solid again, looking directly into their eyes. He took a step closer.

"Please don't go." It wasn't Zilch who spoke softly, voice barely audible over the fire's roar and ever-growing rumble. Finn blinked back tears. "You remember now, right? So that means Zilch can tell you everything. And you can say it back. And I... I want to know you too. Because you have to be pretty amazing, if..."

"If they love me." Regan smiled, and closed the distance. "I could say the same to you."

Just as Zilch had done before, he was beside Finn before either of them could react—and then the helmet was off his head, and being gently pressed over Finn's singed hair and down onto his head. A thunderous roar from below them shook the ground and their bones, and then Finn's arms were around Regan, hugging him close as Zilch wrapped both of them in their tight, increasingly desperate embrace.

"Thank you," Zilch's eyes were dry. They always would be. But the pleading

look on their face as they held Finn close with one arm and gently touched the fragile, still-bruised and now heat-damaged skin around Regan's neck almost brought tears to his own. "But you'll burn."

"Not for long." He caught their hand and held it. "And neither will you."

Regan pulled Zilch into a kiss that was faster, deeper, surer than the one he'd given them hours before and thousand feet above.

It was more like the ones he remembered.

He fell into the recognition like finally falling asleep after the longest, most exhausting journey of his life. The familiarity, the confirmation, the warmth entirely unlike the deadly heat surging around them. The absolute certainty that lifted the heavy weight of fear and made him brave enough to take a breath and a step and a chance. He knew them like he knew his name, and everything else.

But that was no surprise. Zilch hadn't changed. They hadn't. This hadn't.

Regan had. He'd always trusted them. But in no moment remembered or newly forged, could he remember trusting himself this much. There was no solid ground below him, but that's what happened when you jumped.

"This place is coming down now so you have to go," he said quietly as he took a step back. He gave Zilch's gloved hand one last squeeze, and when they let go it wasn't because they'd been torn apart by fire. They looked steadily into his eyes and their own were still full of fear, pain, loss... but now, faith. That's what he was looking for. That's what he needed. "So do I."

"Regan, it's not too late!" Evelyn's voice rang out above the rising noise, and he recognized all its truth and love and undaunted hope as well. "You can still come with us! You and Gabriel, but we have to go now!"

"I'll be back," he promised. "Then we'll all walk out of here together."

“Dammit, Regan!” Danae’s voice nearly broke under the strain of all her frustration, exhaustion and limit-breaking pain. “Walk out of here with us now! You don’t have to do this! We didn’t ask for this! We don’t want you to throw your life away! We don’t need saving if it means—”

“I’m not throwing anything away. Took me ten years to get here, I’m not letting anything destroy it! But when I’m done, I’ll give you back everything you gave me.”

“Chimera...” Zilch said quietly, slowly, like they were trying to memorize the syllables of his name, the one that once had meant control and imprisonment and torment and death, and in their dark, familiar tone meant only warmth and love. “Where are you going?”

“To help us save ourselves. Because we can save ourselves.” As soon as he said the words, he realized he knew them from somewhere, but couldn’t remember where. “You know something? Until right now... I actually forgot that.”

Regan smiled, and stopped trying to place the memory. Instead, for one last breath, he focused on the present. Like when Gabriel had joined their minds like linking hands, he saw them all in a moment, and tried to capture it like a photograph in his heart.

There were tears in Finn’s kind eyes, but he held Regan’s gaze and gave him a slow nod, as if he were trying to send him some of his unshaken faith and determination, even as the ground shifted beneath their feet. None of it was fair. But he believed in second chances and happy endings anyway, with strength of spirit that could move mountains.

Danae and Evelyn held each other tight, steady together on the shaking ground. Danae wasn’t angry anymore, instead looking caught between

helplessness and fear. She'd conquered a tank and an army even at her lowest and most terrified, but she couldn't stop these walls from crumbling, or Regan's decision. More than anything, she wanted to protect the people she loved from anything that hurt them, even the demons in their own minds and hearts. Regan remembered her half-snorting laugh when he surprised her by joking back. She'd had his back. Time for him to have hers.

Rose. Brilliant, generous, patient, cerebral, intensely protective, steel-nerved, nerdy, perennial survivor Rose. Cold, hard steel had never been so sweet and warm. Regan never got a chance to ask forgiveness or explain, and maybe there was no way he could make it right—but he wouldn't stop until he could come home and try.

Evelyn had told him once that even heroes got afraid. When you felt overwhelmed with it, sick with fear, and stood your ground or moved forward anyway, that was bravery. Evelyn Calliope's bravery didn't fight back tears, or spend last precious face-to-face seconds in blame. She didn't know what was coming but promised without words to do whatever it took to see them all through it alive. Regan smiled back and believed her with all of his heart. He'd carry Evelyn's songs with him too, beside her every warm memory and strengthening thought. Their intensity, their sweetness, their gale-force power and healing beauty.

Good night, dream sweet. Regan recognized those words now, where he'd first heard them and how to get back there again. It hadn't been a dream. But now he was finally waking up.

Regan's eyes slowly returned to where they'd begun, where they always seemed to end up, every time. He held onto the fierce love and patient promise in Zilch's bright, strikingly alive eyes as the now second-nature icy chill began to

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run up his spine, holding onto the image of their face until the very last second.

“Thanks for reminding me.”

Regan faded into the shadows and was gone. A rush of red-hot air buffeted all of them like the winds of a hurricane, and then died away to nothing.

They were alone as the world fell down around them.

CHAPTER 19

Through the Fire

THEY RAN. EVELYN, DANAE AND ZILCH POUNDED BACK UP THE WAY THEY'D COME, MAKING FOR THE scaffolding and relative safety of the sewers. The two women led, their intact suits protecting them as they kicked debris out of their path. Finn kept up as fast as his short legs could, and bits of his exposed skin starting to bubble. Zilch pulled him along, running with their eyes squeezed shut, the exposed skin on their face starting to singe black, ripple and curl at the stitches.

They charged over the gutted concrete, and into an enormous metal tunnel—it was a huge sewer pipe. Rusting girders and cables held it up, and on the other side of the pipe-bridge was a massive scaffold, surrounded by abandoned construction equipment and digging machines. If they could just get there, they could climb up, and just maybe escape this nightmare. They



charged through the metal cylinder, footsteps echoing while the steel swayed and trembled under their feet.

SNAP.

The sound cracked through air like a whip, and the whole pipe jumped and came apart. Their section broke clear off, and they swung away from safety, falling.

Danae charged forward without hesitation, metal tilting and pitching under her feet until she reached the edge, and she launched herself out into space; Evelyn followed a moment later. A horrifying breath of open-air suspension, hurtling through fire in a desperate leap, thoughts of a deadly fall and a fiery end. Then she landed hard, her feet finding solid ground. She let out a sound that was half triumphant whoop, half exhausted groan, and turned to make sure Evelyn landed safely, grinning as they steadied one another.

“Well, making that was a good sign,” Danae panted, actually beginning to hope that they might get out of this alive after all. “Now if we can—”

“Oh no. Danae, look!”

She spun around as Evelyn pointed behind her, just as she heard one of the worst sounds she’d ever heard. Danae turned in time to see what had made it: one of the huge cables supporting the pipe snapped.



There was a horrible crack like every bone in their bodies snapping at once, and the metal pipe lurched—then it broke in half. Screaming, Finn grabbed for Zilch, who snatched him from the air and held him tight, curling around him like a protective cocoon. The pipe dropped, slamming into the rock and flame and metal scaffolding still holding the city up, and inside they were tossed

around like rats in a tin can, bashed against walls and licked by flames on all sides. Finally, the pipe came to rest on a lower rock ledge—by some miracle they hadn't fallen right into the fire.

Finn scrambled for solid footing once the thing stopped pitching, but he could feel the rubber soles of his sneakers melting to the metal, and soon his feet would be exposed to the burning steel. "Oh, God!" Finn clawed desperately at Zilch's chest with his eyes squeezed shut against the agony, the skin on his arms and exposed legs red and bubbling. "We're gonna die, right now, we're gonna—"

"No we're not!" Zilch shouted. They let go of the tortured Finn with one hand and started stripping off their fireproof suit. They gasped as the white-hot air seared their skin and squeezed their eyes shut.

"No! No, you'll burn, you'll—" Finn was scrabbling at the helmet now, trying to take it off, give it back—

"Yes." Zilch forced the helmet back onto Finn's spiky orange head, silencing any further arguments. Then they ripped the rest of the protective suit off, wrestling the writhing, tormented Finn into it. "I'll burn," they said grimly, tongue drying brittle and cracked in the heat. "But not to death."

"Zilch, I'll—" Finn was sobbing behind the helmet's visor. "I'll get you out of here, I promise—"

Silently, they turned Finn toward the end of the metal tunnel and the fire beyond it. If they could get to the scaffolds, they could still climb up, they might live through this. Zilch hung tight on Finn's shoulders, every inch of them burning and smoking, realizing that it was Finn who was keeping them from falling.

"Just hang on!" Zilch whispered as their skin crackled. "Just survive."

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Danae stared at the pipe and tried to decide if they were blessed or screwed. It was only around ten feet down, but still out of easy reach, and right now, every single second was going to count. The thing had landed on a rocky outcropping below the ledge on which she and Evelyn stood, and hung tilted at a deadly angle, thrust up into the air like the bow of a sinking ship. She couldn't see anyone inside—they had to have fallen out, there was no possible way they could have survived...

But there it was. A helmet poked out, with orange hair sticking out from underneath it. *They were alive.*

And then there was Zilch—God, she could almost smell the dead skin sizzle from here—raising their flaming arm to wave it like a burning flag. Finn held on just behind, keeping Zilch from falling backward into the inferno, and Danae could see smoke rising from his hastily-donned suit. Even these things weren't meant to withstand being surrounded on all sides by superheated metal with fire outside. Heat radiated from the scaffolds and abandoned backhoes and bulldozers, long since bent and melted partly out of shape.

"Hang on!" Danae yelled over the furnace roar and the falling rock and bits of metal that battered her helmet. The pipe was rocking now, trembling, the ledge holding it up could crumble any second. "*Don't you dare let go!*"

"Can you reach that far?" Evelyn shouted back, trying to gauge the distance. "I don't—"

"Gotta try!" Danae threw herself to the ground and stretched out over the ledge and into space. "Reach for me!"

Zilch lunged forward with their one good arm, bare skin starting to crackle black. Finn was reaching too now, both arms stretching for Danae. But they fell

short. Crashed back down and sent the pipe swinging. Finn muffled his screams in the back of Zilch's neck and clung with everything he had, while they hung in a tin can over Hell.

"Come on!" Danae screamed, throat raw and burning.

"Danae, it's too far," Evelyn said more urgently. "We have to find some other way to—"

"Well, do you have one?"

"No." They tried again, driving joints and muscles to the breaking point, outstretched, desperate fingers just bare inches from touching, just a little farther and she'd have them, they'd be safe, they were so close—

CRACK.

The terrible sound split through the rushing roar around them. Agony contorted Zilch's face, and their arm suddenly flopped down to hang, lifeless-

"Oh no, no—"

A falling rock had hit their arm. Their already tenuously-connected shoulder popped out of joint and now they hung ragdoll-limp and helpless. Pain, battery and exhaustion finally overwhelmed them. Skin burned black, hair fallen out and clothes a mess of oily ash, shot and bloodied and broken, Zilch could no longer go on any farther.

"Just reach for her, Finn..." They forced the words out between teeth locked together, unable to even move their jaw. "You can still make it..."

"No, we're not leaving—" Finn started to protest, but Danae heard too.

"Hang on!" she bellowed, and pushed herself upright. "Don't you dare let go, Zilch!" Danae struggled to her feet and closed her eyes. The blaze's roar, crashes of collapsing earth and shrieks of twisting metal receded until she could only hear herself.

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And so could the machines.

Wake up, come on, help me, help my friends.

The dead machines twitched. They heard Danae's call, and answered. Rusted backhoes stretched out their cranes like giraffes with stiff, aching necks. Drills spun again and wheels turned, grinding back to life, moving toward them.

Cables snaked down from above her like Rose's living vines. Long chains curled and looped around the pipe like octopus tentacles, lifting it slowly up toward her—yes, yes, she could see her friends' faces clearly now, they were going to be all right. Danae clenched her teeth and stretched out her fingers.

Somehow we are all—going—HOME!

The sky opened up. A brilliant shaft of light washed over her, over them, like the golden rays of Heaven leading the way out of purgatory, and for just a second Danae thought her prayer had been answered in the most literal possible way. But something wasn't right. That light shouldn't be there... hadn't it been night the last time she'd seen the sky?

And then something fell. Not a choir of angels come to save them, not the hand of God; Danae squinted as it fell toward them, getting larger and larger—

It was a swingset.

“Oh, God...”

It was *the* swingset, with blue rubber safety-chain and red and yellow plastic bucket seats. It stood outside Jack's preschool, and she'd walked there to pick him up so many times, stayed a while longer to send him flying through the air in one of those deep seats when he was still too little for a big-boy swing. And now it was falling. So slowly, like it was floating underwater, the long chains flying out as if there were still kids on the swings. Danae stared, transfixed. This

wasn't really happening. It was too surreal, a dream—

Something massive blocked out the light—an avalanche of falling city she realized with horror. Parole toppled on their heads. Pavement and stop signs and trees, telephone poles and power lines and cars came hurtling at her like meteors, and she *recognized* these things, they were right outside her house, she saw them every day and now her entire neighborhood was rushing toward her—ashes, ashes, everything was falling down.

“Look out!” Evelyn cried, pulling Danae back before she could get crushed by a falling piece of building.

Screams filled their ears. Horrified shrieks cutting through the furnace roar and grind of metal on metal as small, writhing dark shapes fell from the light into this fiery underworld. People. *People* were falling from the sky. Tumbling and slamming into the rock and metal, arms outstretched—and as they hung in the air in front of Danae, she thought she could almost make eye contact, they were *reaching for her*.

“Danae! Focus!” Evelyn shouted, hands on Danae’s shoulders and giving her a little shake. “We have to save Zilch and Finn! We save them first, then we try to help everyone else!”

“Okay!” Evelyn was right, she understood, even as her stomach twisted. Danae shook herself out of her awful, shocked reverie and faced the pipe. She took in one great, burning breath, planted her feet, and spread her hands to the sky raining sidewalks and traffic lights down on them. Danae screamed to the living steel things around her to *help, please, before everything falls* and the pipe began to rise again. She could do this, she could do this.

A massive blunt object hit her. Before she could blink or breathe she was on the ground, crushed by an earth-shattering impact. She couldn't see Evelyn, or

anything at all, she couldn't breathe—all the life had been bashed from her body, and she could not make her lungs work. *None* of her worked. A bone-chilling screech of metal filled her ears, and a shape slashed through the air toward her like a sword.

Her ears rang with her own screams. Danae's world went black, then exploded in white-hot pain. She thrashed on the ground, arms still outstretched like she hoped to catch one of the falling people, save them with her bare hands.

Hand.

Danae thought she was reaching out with both hands, but only saw one, only moved one, only *one hand* hung out into the infinite space. Her eyes flew to her left shoulder and saw nothing. No arm. Just the ragged edges of her suit and, pouring from it, a torrent of dark blood and overwhelming pain.

Danae lurched upright, screaming, but fell to the ground, gritting her teeth against her own strangled moans. She remained in a sitting position for a full second before her head spun and she fell back down again, sprawled on the ground, screaming for Evelyn—

The concrete was sticky-slick and dark with blood—her own blood. Gagging, she clapped her hand over the terrible stump where her shoulder just *ended*. But her fingers couldn't stop the flow, couldn't stop the darkness at the edges of her vision from getting closer. She had to *stop the bleeding* or she would die right here, right now—and so would Evelyn and Zilch and Finn and so many others—but she couldn't, she didn't have any bandages or a tourniquet or—

She saw a smooth, scorched slab of metal resting beside her; she vaguely remembered it slamming into the ground and nearly crushing her head. And

she looked up at it, frayed brain trying to piece together what it was...

A *slide*. She could see the bright yellow plastic steps and the waves of heat coming off the red-hot metal. Danae didn't think—couldn't think—about what she was about to do. She just pulled herself closer, army-crawled with only one arm, and pressed the awful stump against the blazing steel.

This time she drowned in the pain. For hours, for years, until she seemed to melt into the molten steel herself. Her entire being was made of searing agony. A little voice in the back of her head told her not to give up, calling her name. She opened her eyes and someone looked back at her. Evelyn. Kneeling over her, hovering with her nervous hands flitting around, not sure where to touch, what would help and what would hurt. And Danae didn't say anything, she couldn't—it was just easier to turn her brain off, and not wonder what it meant when Evelyn's eyes widened in horror.

"Oh, no, oh no, oh no," Evelyn whispered over and over again, and Danae clung to that sound, made herself focus on Evelyn's voice, and come back to herself.

Danae gritted her teeth and fought to sit up, letting out an agonized groan—but her head went flying up into the stratosphere and the rest of her was so *heavy*, she saw rather than felt her body slam heavily back down against the concrete and Evelyn rush to catch her. Screams echoed around them and there were still two people trapped in a red-hot pipe and she could still save them and Evelyn was saying something -

"Please Danae, get up!"

"Finn! Zilch!" Danae gasped, gritting her teeth to keep from blacking out. "They're still down there!"

"What can I do to help?" Evelyn stared hard into Danae's pain-slitted eyes.

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“Just stand up with me.” Danae dragged the words out through clenched teeth. “Help me—stand me up, don’t let go of me—”

“I’ve got you! I’m right here. Got you.” Evelyn pulled Danae to her feet, bringing her back to lean heavily against her. Evelyn kept her hands on her shoulders, guiding Danae forward and keeping her standing solid and balanced. She would have fallen in a second otherwise.

“Closer!” Danae screamed over the roar of the fire she could swear was getting louder. “Get me to the edge!”

Evelyn gritted her teeth and shut her eyes. “Okay.” She whispered. “One, two—three!”

They stepped forward together. Danae reached out with her one arm, drawing every last bit of strength and power hiding deep inside herself. Eyes stinging from blood and sweat and smoke and tears, Danae peered over the edge.

The pipe was rising.

“Yes—” Danae gasped. “Yes, yes! They’re gonna make it—”

The chains screeched against the pipe’s metal as they raised it up. Every inch of Danae’s body shook, trembled. She thought she’d known pain before. Exhaustion, desperation, *trying*. Now she knew what trying meant. She raised her hand to the sky like there was a lifeline down from the clouds, and maybe there was, maybe heaven’s help was Evelyn’s voice in her ear.

“You can do this, sweetie, you can do this.”

But it was so *hard*. They were both sobbing for breath, each one a struggle. Every cell screamed in agony and suddenly the entire night’s trauma hit her like a collapsing city. She was so tired. Beyond exhaustion, beyond pain. This was too much for one person, too much to ask of her, of anyone.

“Come on, honey,” Evelyn whispered, holding her up, holding her close. “Just a little more. Just one more try...”

Danae shut her eyes and threw back her head. Power flowed through her veins, pounding like adrenaline, so hard it hurt, her blood was on fire, her head was exploding, she had to be dying but something in the burning, electric pain made her feel *alive*.

Then there was a terrible, wonderful, shuddering scrape as the pipe connected with the ground on which they stood—and Danae and Evelyn lurched forward with arms outstretched. They pulled the burned, blackened, half-dead tangle of arms and legs up onto the broken sidewalk, and then they all fell down together. Finn, hurting but safe inside the fireproof suit, sprawled across the ground not knowing whose arms were around him, unable to believe he was still alive. He couldn’t even speak or cry or even see, all he could do was breathe and try to inch closer to Zilch. The entirely burnt, scorched skeleton looking like they’d been dragged up from Hell.

“Zilch...” Evelyn murmured; as they’d pulled them up, her hand came to rest on the black, ash-coated forehead. Beneath it was a sliver of exposed white bone, and she pulled away. Her gloved hand came away black and oily, and she fought down nausea. “You still with us?”

Zilch slowly let out a wheezing, sick hiss of air between clenched teeth—no words, no tone, but the message was clear. *I’m alive. But that’s all.*

Evelyn looked around to smile at Danae—but she wasn’t there. Evelyn shivered despite the blistering heat, and rushed to find Danae struggling across the concrete, back toward the inferno. She lay sprawled on the ground, half over the edge, reaching desperately for the few straggling people still falling from above, and God, they *were* reaching for her. But her machines wouldn’t listen

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to her anymore. The cables twitched, exhausted, trembling but unable to function. Human lives slipped through her cables and fingers like grains of sand. She was crying.

Someone was picked her up. Many hands touched her, she was supported between two people and they were just holding her, talking to her.

“Miss Danae, it’s time to go...” Finn held her close.

“You can’t save them all!” Evelyn whispered, turning her face from the nightmare, resting her forehead against Danae’s. “I know, baby, you can’t help but try, but... God, look at us. We’re all dying too.”

Danae slowly nodded, then fought to get to her feet. Just a little bit longer and then she could collapse. She could cry uncontrollably in Rose and Evelyn’s arms. She could hug Jack and breathe him in. It would all be over. It had to be over. Everything had an end. Even fires.

“Okay, let’s do this.” Danae heard herself say it, like she was somewhere else, someone else, listening from far away. Like she hadn’t just lost an arm, and almost her life, in a hammerfall of fire and steel and falling swingsets. She didn’t recognize herself anymore. She’d always tried to be her family’s superhero—but hadn’t had any idea that this strength, this resilience was sleeping inside her. This was someone close to the goddess Evelyn found within herself, the heroine who danced with the music of the spheres. Even if all she could see was blood and fire and empty spaces where limbs were supposed to be... This brave stranger, this new person named Danae knew what she was doing.

Finn gathered Zilch’s fragile, charred skin and bones into his arms, whispering apologies for the further pain. They all moved forward slowly, bit by bit. They carried each other and became one, pushing their broken bodies just a little further, just a little more, then they could all go home.

Together they walked through the fire.

CHAPTER 20

You Know What They Say
About An Eclipse

LIAM STOOD STRAIGHT AND TALL IN FRONT OF THE OPEN FLOOR-LENGTH WINDOW, AND WATCHED what was left of his world burn. Even the thermals of hot wind that floated up from the permanent blaze below felt like a cool caress to his feverish brow, damp as it was with beads of sweat, and tears.

It was over. Parole was crumbling into a burning grave, and soon he would fall too. He could feel the bones of the Turret House shake, the floor tremble beneath his feet as the building's foundation started to go. Any moment now. From the moment he'd awoken in his office with the dried remnants of Rose's vines still clinging to his sleeves, he'd known it



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was over. And he hadn't left his room.

Without a shake or whimper or even so much as a blink, he faced the inferno, and opened the window. Now he stood precariously on the windowsill, balancing himself in the frame as the heavy velvet curtains billowed around him in the high wind, sparks flying past him into the room.

A faint and distance voice called his name, at the edge of his awareness. It was so far away, *everything* was so far away. The floor's shaking intensified, and a rushing sound began to fill his ears, like a great beast's death rattle.

Liam took a step.



They were almost home. They'd reached the surface and staggered down the shaking streets, with screams and sirens and the sound of collapsing buildings all around. They'd saved each other, even as they'd left parts of themselves behind in the fire. They'd laced up their boots and put one tortured foot in front of the other, and scraped what was left of each other up off the floor, dragged themselves kicking and screaming back to life.

All of them searched the terrified crowds for green scales. Nobody spoke.

They kept moving together in one mass of limbs and burned skin and pain, kept each other from falling. Just a few more steps and they'd be home. The Turret House was right behind this last smoking pile of rubble in what used to be a city street; desperate people ran in every direction and paid them no attention. Just a little further and they could all fall down, everything was going to be okay, somehow they were all going—

Something crunched under Danae's foot. She stopped, looked down with a frown. She reached down and picked it up, a cracked shell of plastic and metal.

A cell phone. One she'd made, special, untraceable by SkEye. She turned it over in her one battered hand, saw the faded address sticker on the back, the floral design...

"No..." Danae held the little thing to her chest and fought her way forward. She had to see beyond the next pile of scrap and ripped chunks of road, she had to see the Turret House standing there with her family safe inside, just a few more steps and she could see—

It wasn't there.

"No, no, no, nononono—" The sound escaped from her own chapped, bloody lips, then a scream exploded out of her, ripped from her raw throat and she fell to her knees.

The entire group tumbled to the ground with her. They sprawled in a shattered pile, all crying in different ways. Finn silently slumped against Zilch, both too hurt and beaten to say a word. Evelyn let out a low moan, a faint continuous broken sound.

The Turret House was gone. Instead the ground just dropped away, the sidewalk *ended*, and opened into a wide open space of nothing.

Crawling with one arm, struggling and falling and still fighting to move forward, Danae screamed against the blackened, broken concrete. Face pressed against the ash and the filth, her howls floated up with the oily smoke.

"Rose—Jack, Rose—" Danae's words turned incoherent with agony. "No, no, no, *it's not*—I got us all home, I brought them all back safe, *why aren't you here?*"

Her face touched something cool and soft. Her tears weren't falling on dry, burnt concrete anymore, her head rested on a pillow of... something. She didn't smell fire and smoke and blood anymore. Slowly, Danae found the

strength to lift her head and open her eyes.

“Come—look!” she croaked, but barely any sound came out, her throat was so raw and painful. After a deep breath, she tried again. “Look!” She heard the soft, labored shuffling of her friends struggling over to her, followed by soft gasps of wonder.

Danae’s head lay in the center of a garden—a patch of green in the shape of a heart. Flowers swam in a rainbow blur in front of her stinging eyes, filled her nostrils with sweetness, soothed her burned, bloodied skin. An oasis of life and love amid the scorched concrete and steel.

“Rose...” Danae whispered, fingers twining around the tiny vines and blooms and fresh green life. “Jack. You’re alive. *I’ll find you.*”

Silence stretched out, broken only by the whispered, repeated *Thank God, Thank God* under Evelyn’s breath. Danae just lay there and breathed. She could do nothing else.

Zilch hissed and made themselves speak. “S’go. Collapse again.”

Danae turned to look down at them, laying on the ground. Their head rested in Finn’s arms while bits of ruined skin peeled off and flaked everywhere. “Where? If you got a plan, this’d be a good time.”

“Library.” Zilch’s voice was more labored and agonized than any they’d ever heard; it sounded like their jaw was locked together. “They fix me. They can...help. If... alive.”

“Let’s add your fixer to the list of people to—wait. *Hans,*” Evelyn said suddenly, couldn’t believe she’d forgotten until now. “His body was in the house! Have any of you seen him, since—” she looked back at Zilch.

“No.” Zilch grated. They shut his eyes, extinguishing the only bright spots in their burnt face. “If he’s gone... my heart. I’m dead.”

“God...” Danae pressed the heel of her hand against her forehead to stop the spinning. She grabbed at the fragile bits of Rose’s cell phone. Clutched it so tight her knuckles turned white and hand started to shake.

“We’ll be okay,” Evelyn said quickly, reading the signs. Pushed herself up on one battered elbow, found a way to lie that didn’t send stabbing pain up her leg and spine.

Danae closed her eyes. “How can it possibly be okay.” It wasn’t a question.

“We’re alive. We’re still together... and we’ll find them. And we’ll *make it* okay.” Evelyn swallowed hard, clamping her teeth down over the taste of copper and salty tears. Looked around at her friends, and felt her broken face slowly grow into a smile. Finn and Zilch and Danae, all lying completely spent on the ground, all touching, all hurting and broken and all fitting together and keeping each other going.

Danae took a deep breath and forced herself to sit up, aching ribs heaving as she tried to find whatever strength was left deep down inside her. It was getting harder to find, but it was there. Slowly, one breath at a time, she made herself stand up, then bent down to help the others up.

“Let’s go.”



It had finally happened. Every single person in Parole lived their lives constantly waiting to feel the earth give way beneath them, and they were all ready. Rose certainly was. She held Jack in one arm, other hand clamped over Liam’ wrist as they flew down the stairs.

“Let me go, I said!” Liam snapped. “Leave me! I want to die—”

“Well, we all might along with you unless we get out right now!” Rose

shouted back. But where *was* everyone? The stairwell was as empty as always, but the emptiness was almost as unnerving as the tremors and screams of bending beams and cracking foundation.

She held Jack to her chest with one hand while he silently wrapped his little arms around her neck—if she could just make it out of this with him alive, she'd rejoice. And he didn't cry, he didn't make a single sound while the windows shattered apart in a rain of glass shards, and the carpet started to curl at the edges and erupt into flame behind them. His silence was frightening in itself.

"Finn?" She called, feeling the urge to cough with her next deep breath with a pang of alarm. "Wren? Lisette?"

Her metal feet clanked as they ran, frantic, desperate, around the corners. As they descended floor after floor, the temperature increased and they struggled for breath. The smoke was thicker down here, and the hot air hurt Rose's lungs. The small exposed plants around her neck and wrists were withering, singed. On every landing she tried a door—but as always, they were locked. Panic rising in her chest, Rose led them further downstairs, reassuring them all that it couldn't be far, the next door would be open—

"Aaahh!" Rose gasped and stopped dead, flinging her free arm out across Liam like a protective seat-belt in a car crash. Below them the stairwell was collapsing. As Rose watched, horrified, the floor tiles started to warp and crack, snapping in half like glass, smoke poured up through the cracks. And there, on the stairs below them, was Cassandra. She looked up at them, actually smiling and entirely serene, as if she weren't surrounded by fire.

"Mrs. Turret!" Rose gasped. "Come with us, we have to get out of here!"

"I'm not done here yet," Cassandra said firmly, staring directly into Rose's

gaze. She pointed back the way they had come. "Go back up. You can still get out."

"I'm not leaving you! Liam, take Jack." Rose said through clenched teeth, handing her son to Liam and giving them both a shove back up the stairs to relative safety. "I'll be right there." They both stared at her, faces blank, and Rose jabbed her finger up. "Go!"

As Rose turned around, she could feel the stairs just barely start to give beneath her feet. She had seconds at most. "Mrs. Turret! This building is about to come down!" She reached out a hand, but the old woman didn't move. She stood serene and unmoving in the fire, and for the first time, Rose realized that the veil Cassandra wore was gone. The warm dark brown eyes that looked up at her were clear and full of hope.

"I have my own way out!" She said, voice as unwavering as her eyes and twice as steadfast; she was grinning amidst the flames and Rose somehow imagined a storybook sea captain walking her deck without fear, confident in the knowledge she could weather any storm. "It's time for you to find yours!"

"Please, just take my hand!"

"A storm's coming outside. So all of us inside had better get ready." Her eyes hardened. "This house might come down, but the Turrets won't."

"Yes, it is coming down! So we have to—"

"There are ghosts out there, my dear!" Cassandra called, and Rose thought she could hear her laughing above the flames. "But it's the living you have to fear. That brother-in-law of mine is going to be trouble! But oh—evil men in high places have a long way to fall!"

In the instant before Rose could speak, someone cried out from above her. "Miss Rose!" came a young girl's voice. "This way!"

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Lisette leaned out a door a flight up, an angel in pink, waving frantically. She grabbed Liam's hand and pulled him forwards; her other hand, as always, was clamped around Wren's. "Come on!"

"But Mrs. Turret is still—" Rose turned to look behind her, but she was alone. The stairwell was empty.

"She'll be fine, trust me."

"Fine? The building is—"

"She's like us. She's got it all figured out." Lisette said, her young face set and determined. Warily shaking her head, Rose took her hand and followed her through the blissfully open door, where Liam was waiting with Jack. "Now come on, let's go!"

They charged across the lobby. Rose whispered to all of them that they just had to keep moving, they'd make it, just as much to reassure herself as them. She didn't feel half as confident as Lisette looked. Wren seemed unfazed as usual, even as the house collapsed around them. They held tight to Lisette's hand, and helped her pull Rose forward.

A voice cut through the chaos, from the speakers in the ceiling above. "*If you can fight, get to the Emerald Bar. If you can't, get to the library—if it's even still standing!*"

"I turned on the radio!" Lisette shouted, then Rose recognized the voice. Radio Angel. They needed her now more than ever.

"*My friends are there, they'll help you. Somehow we're gonna make it through this together—*"

Rose gasped, tripping to a stop. Her pocket had caught on an exposed pipe where a wall had been a minute ago. Something flew out of her torn pocket and smashed against the ground—her cell phone. But she couldn't stop, the

floor was going to give way any second.

They rushed out the double doors and down the cracking stairs. spurts of flames shot up through the cracks, belches of fire like small volcano eruptions, and the little bunch dodged around them as best they could, scrambling for the relatively safe concrete of the surrounding streets. And at last, the ground was a little more solid, the smoke and fire thinned. It was here they couldn't help turning back to watch.

They stared as the Turret House crumbled, the towers fell, turrets collapsing in on themselves. The middle sagged, and with a terrible *crack* like a million bones shattering at once, the house broke in half. It sank down as the ground beneath it gave way. The Turret House, with all its senseless wings and locked gates and history and corruption, disappeared into the fire like a sinking ship. Finally, it was quiet. An oppressive, stifling silence, except for the sirens and muffled crashes and screams from surrounding streets.

"The Emerald Bar," Rose said at last. "We'll be safe there, but we have to go now, before another collapse. Let's go—" she started off down the shattered street.

"*It'll be okay, I promise,*" the girl's voice followed them from some other unseen speaker, maybe a car radio, faint but ever-present. "*Just get to the Emerald—fzzz...*" They all stopped dead. A far-off boom shook the hollow ground under their feet, and the radio stopped. The voice was gone, replaced by static.

"No," Rose whispered. For a moment they looked at each other, listening to the horrifying silence. Nobody could remember the last time they hadn't been able to hear her. Kids like Lisette and Wren and Jack had grown up hearing the Radio Angel talking and singing to them, reading them stories, reading names

of the dead and missing, and giving them words of hope when nobody else could. She'd always been there, and now she wasn't.

Liam broke. He turned away from them, staggered blindly, then fell to the ground. Heaving with struggling breaths and dry sobs, Liam crumpled to his hands and knees, head hanging down so low it nearly touched the burnt earth.

"Leave me!" he gasped. "I want—I want to go down with my—"

Rose gritted her teeth. "*Stop it.* We don't have time for this."

"It's over, it's *over*."

"You're coming with us. Now get up."

"I want to die! I might as well be—"

"*Stop it, Liam!*" Rose couldn't believe she was yelling, but she was out of patience, strained to the breaking point, and something had to give. "This isn't about your guilt, it's about surviving! It's about getting these kids somewhere safe, getting through this alive and seeing the ones we love again, and we have a better chance of doing that if you're alive—"

"But I did this! I can never—"

"So you're just gonna give up?" Lisette interrupted, and both adults fell silent, turning to look at her. "We dragged you out all kicking and screaming, you can't just die on us now."

"Quiet, girl!" Liam snapped. "You don't know what you're talking about—"

"Yes, I do!" Lisette shouted, and Liam's mouth snapped shut, eyes wide in surprise. "The only time it's hopeless is when you're dead! Long as you're alive, you can get better—you can *make it* better!"

She fell silent, panting. Getting those words out had taken a lot out of her. Beside her, Wren folded their arms and stared daggers into Liam's eyes: listen, or else.

“And you’re *not* alone, you butt. Listen to us for once.” Lisette held out a small hand, pink nail polish smeared with ash. “We’ll help you. We’re all in this together.”

A long silence stretched between them while Rose and Jack watched, wide-eyed, looking from Liam’s haunted, dark-circled eyes to Lisette’s outstretched hand. Then Liam put his hand in hers, and Lisette pulled him to his feet.

“Fine. I’ll come with you.”

“I’ve got one condition,” Rose said, folding her arms. “When we find Evelyn—and we *will* find her—you are going to get down on your knees, but this time to beg her forgiveness for the way you treated her over the last ten years. You will never misgender her again and you will treat her with the love and respect she deserves from everybody, but especially family.”

“All right. Yes. Yes, I promise.”

“Good.” Rose said with a quick nod, turning away. “Now, we can’t stay here, the ground might give any second. But...” She bit her lip. “Danae. Evelyn, what’ll they think if we’re gone?”

“They’re dead.” Liam said flatly. “Nobody’s coming out of that fire.”

Rose’s face flushed. She clenched her teeth, shot him a glare, and reconsidered her decision to let him stay. “Yes they will,” she took a deep breath, and spoke far more calmly than she would have thought possible. Her movements were jerky and irregular as she turned away; the metal gears and joints of her legs were starting to clog with ash and expand from the heat. “And so will we.”

Not looking to see if he was coming after, Rose picked her way through the wreckage of the street, giving a wide berth to snapped wires and cables that spat sparks. Lisette and Wren walked beside her holding hands, while Liam

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followed a few steps behind, shoulders hunched and head down.

After a few silent steps, Lisette leaned closer to Rose and spoke out of the corner of her mouth with a grin. “Ooh, that was fun watching you put him in his place. I like it.”

Rose didn’t answer, just stared straight ahead and rubbed Jack’s back. He’d stayed silent this entire time, and she was starting to worry. Wren squeezed Lisette’s hand and shot her one of the looks only they understood—and she looked up at Rose again. This time she wasn’t smiling, large dark eyes full of worry.

“Miss Rose?”

“Hmm?”

“She’s gonna come back, right? Radio Angel? I just... really want her to be okay. She’s always there for us, we need her.”

“Yeah. Everything’s going to be okay.”

They left the red-glowing wound of what had been the Turret House behind them.

CHAPTER 21

Open Air And Endless Sky

ZILCH SHOULDN'T HAVE STILL BEEN CONSCIOUS—OR ALIVE. ANYONE ELSE WOULD HAVE GONE into shock or passed out from the pain long ago. Or died, succumbed to the sheer mass of excruciating burns and trauma. That would have been easier.

“Hi, Zilch.” Finn knelt by their head and tried to smile. Smile or cry.

The battered, bloodied group had found a bit of shelter in the lee of a collapsed skyscraper. They hugged the deep shadow, staying away from the orange spurts of fire and pale yellow light from the rising sun.

Zilch’s mismatched eyes, the only bright and undamaged spots in their face, traveled up to Finn. They didn’t answer or move, but somehow they smiled with their eyes alone.

“How are you feeling?” Finn asked, immediately feeling himself flush. “Oh,



I'm sorry! Never mind, that was... I mean, how could you possibly..."

Their eyes slowly drifted to half-shut; lowered their gaze.

Finn wavered for a moment, biting his lower lip. Then the dam burst. "Zilch..." His voice was high-pitched and tight. "I'm so sorry—it's all my fault, you wouldn't be hurt like this if I'd listened to you! I should have stayed, and oh, God, the whole city, it's burning! I—*broke Parole*, Zilch! And I hurt you! I hurt you all with my feelings!" Now the tears were coming, though he clenched his teeth to keep them in.

Zilch let out a low, extended hiss.

"Look at you. You're hurt, and just lying here, and it's all because of me! You shouldn't have given me your suit, this is all my fault—"

"*Don't!*" Zilch's voice was rough and broken and it made Finn shut right up.

Finn gasped as something touched his hand. There, with the smallest movement imaginable, but the most they had the strength for, Zilch's fingertip was touching the back of his hand.

"More... important."

Hot tears rolling down his face, Finn very gently took their hand. They stayed that way for almost a full minute, Finn crying silently and Zilch just hanging on.

"I'm so sorry about Regan," Finn said at last in a ragged voice. "We'll find him. Okay? I promise we will. I know he didn't leave because he doesn't care anymore, he just..." He stopped. Zilch had closed their eyes again, as if under another wave of pain. "I'm sorry."

Zilch let out a soft noise and he knew what they'd say if they could.

"I know it's not my fault. But it hurt you to lose him again, and I'm still sorry."

They were quiet for a little while. Finn wiped his face.

“I know what brought the explosions back,” he said softly, and smiled. “Is it weird if it’s kind of a good thing? Because what made me lose them was being overloaded with awful feelings until I couldn’t feel anything at all. But when Gabriel connected all of us, I could feel all of you guys—you were all right there with me. I wasn’t alone. And there you were.” He gave a nervous little giggle, then looked away. “I just... I looked at you, and I... I think I felt what you...” He looked back again, shaking his head, eyes wide with wonder. “You *feel* so much, all the time, don’t you? Nobody knows it, but you do.”

Very slowly, the burned, cracking corners of Zilch’s mouth curved up into a smile.

“I’ve never felt that... much, before.” Finn’s voice shook. “I’ve never felt that kind of anything. I’ve never let myself. But when I...” He trailed off. His face was burning red again, but it wasn’t from the fire.

Zilch just looked at him, eyes inviting him to continue.

“It was love, wasn’t it?” Finn made himself ask, despite his nervous, pounding heart. “It was the best thing I’ve ever felt. It felt like holding your breath forever and then finally taking one, it was like everything, all at once, like, I don’t even have words! It just... exploded.” He marveled; it was true, even now words failed, even when the powerful memory of that overwhelming, healing emotion remained. “Even if it wasn’t mine. And even if it was yours for—”

“Both.”

“What?” He looked down quickly to see Zilch looking up at him with what he could swear was apprehension. Their face had never been the easiest to read and now had nearly lost all expression from its terrible injury. It didn’t matter.

The shyness was there.

“Him. You.” A hissing breath. “Yes.”

Finn laughed, but he was crying again too. Vulnerable and suddenly shy and hardly able to believe what he was hearing. “R-really?”

“No heart.” Their hand reached up to stroke Finn’s face, wipe away the tears—but couldn’t quite make it. Finn caught their hand before it fell, and let it gently rest on his own chest instead. “Still feel.”

Finn couldn’t speak. It was too good.

“Love you. Always have.”

“I knew it!” Now he could speak. Not in his usual squeal, not an exuberant exclamation. “I knew it, I did. And I love you too, so much. So much.” It was all Finn could do not to tackle Zilch and shower them with hugs and kisses, but that would have to wait until they were both in much less pain. “But don’t worry. I’ll keep it under control.” He contented himself with holding Zilch’s hand against his chest, and smiling harder than he had in weeks.

They stayed that way for a while, both feeling more than could possibly be contained, but forced to try. At least for now. Then Zilch gasped. “No...”

“What?” Finn looked up—then gasped too, a shuddering, stunned breath, because he could feel it too. There was a staccato, joyful rhythm coming from his lower right side, where his appendix should be, and a heart definitely shouldn’t.

“Explains,” Zilch said at last, breaking the shocked silence. “A lot.”



Danae shielded her eyes from the orange glare, squinting across the broken wasteland of the collapsed city. The sick glow didn’t just come from the sunrise,

but from below, as shafts and cracks in the earth spewed out light and smoke and tongues of fire. She leaned against a half-crushed car to keep herself upright, gritting her teeth against the dizzying pain where her left arm had been. She could swear she still felt five fingers, every one of them on fire.

“We can’t stay here long,” she said at last. Beside her, Evelyn sat on the ground, no energy left to do anything but sit and stare at the devastation. They rested a little way from the others, letting Zilch and Finn have a brief, precious moment of togetherness and privacy. “Eye in the Sky’s wide open today.”

“I’ve never seen so many choppers at once...” Evelyn stared up at the machines that hovered above them. Dozens, maybe hundreds, filled the air with a constant thrum of blades over the sirens and roar of the fire below. Black shapes blotted the sky, a milling cloud that blocked out the pale sun. “I didn’t even know there were this many troops in the city. It’s... I’m...”

Words failed. They listened to the helicopters and far-off screams of the wounded, painful moments slipping by until Danae spoke up again.

“Evelyn, I...” She swallowed hard. “I’m sorry about Regan.”

“Do you remember what he said?” Evelyn asked in a whisper, watching a cloud of ash float up in a column of smoke. “For the first time he wasn’t afraid. Him and Gabriel...”

“It wasn’t just to help Gabriel,” Danae said, shaking her head. “Instead of sticking around to actually fix anything—Rose, or even Cairus, the missing kid? Whatever he said down there? No, Regan just dumps a bunch of confusing stuff on us, then goes off to do God knows what, and leaves us alone.”

“I think this *was* his way of trying to fix things.”

“Well, he didn’t think about what it would do to anyone left behind.” Danae shrugged, shoulders hunched. “To you. Or—God, to Zilch. That’s

selfish.” Danae crouched down beside her, then dropped awkwardly to the ground. Her legs had finally had enough. All of her had. She carefully reached her arm around Evelyn’s shoulder, Evelyn wrapped her arm around Danae’s waist, and they held one another up. Danae sighed, looking some distance away to where they’d left Zilch and Finn together.

“So love saves the day.” She turned to look up at the helicopters range over the ruined crater that had once been parole. “For some of us.”

“The city was going down anyway.” Evelyn shook her head and fiddled with the dial of a handheld radio they’d picked up in the street. The thing still worked, but every channel was fuzz. All the stations had been knocked out, and there was no voice on the airwaves to guide them through this time. “It was only a matter of time. Finn gave the inevitable a shove, that’s all.” She paused, staring out at the destruction. She bit her lip, reopening a half-healed cut and swiping at the warm trickle.

“Oh no, I’m not blaming him! If someone tries to blame Finn for this, I’ll kick their ass right into the barbecue. It’s just that we got lucky. A lot of other people didn’t.”

“No, they didn’t.” Evelyn said quietly, looking out at the destruction. “Sometimes love isn’t enough.”

“So what is?” Danae cast a long, exhausted look at the space where her arm had once been, still stunned by the phantom-limb pain. “I mean... I’m asking you, Ev. Looking at all this, how do you keep going? What do you believe in?”

“I..” Evelyn swallowed hard, biting her lip. Rose’s absence gaped like a hole in her ribcage. “I don’t know. Right now I don’t know. Sometimes everything isn’t going to be okay.”

“Listen. I’ve never had much faith. In anything. When you look for the

worst in humanity, you tend to find it. But I believe in you, Evelyn Calliope.” Danae sighed, leaning over and kissing her, soft, deep and warm. Resting her forehead against Evelyn’s, it was easier not to cry, as it always was—but she did anyway. When she opened her eyes again, they were wide and bright, even as tears cut clean streaks down her blood-and-ash-covered cheeks. “And I believe in Rose. She’ll protect Jack, she’ll keep the others safe until we find her. I swear to God, we’ll find her.”

“Or she’ll find us.”

Many things changed. Some things didn’t. For a while, the longest time they’d had together since this nightmare began, but not nearly long enough, they held one another, felt the absence of the missing pieces of their heart, and remembered all the things that remained the same.

“Supposed to be a full moon tonight.” Evelyn looked up at the smog-choked sky. They couldn’t see the moon or a single star, just the white searchlights of helicopters. Past those, the iridescent, crackling dome of the barrier, like lightning through storm clouds, ever-present and impenetrable as ever. Nobody in Parole had seen the moon in almost ten years, but it wasn’t the kind of thing you just forgot. “I guess it’s a chameleon moon.”

Danae furrowed her brow at the funny phrase. “What’s that?”

“Something my mama said.” Evelyn’s smile was slow, but one of the first things that day that didn’t hurt. “What Regan said down in the fire... about a storm coming. It got me thinking—she said the same thing. I wonder what they know. I wonder what’s on its way.”

“Whatever it is, we’ll be waiting.”

“With open arms.” Evelyn held Danae close in her own for a moment and just breathed; tried to capture and freeze this moment in her mind where she

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breathed *her* in, instead of smoke. Remembered the smell of roses and new grass, resolved they would be a reality. One day there would be reunion instead of just memory. “And then... cycles of the moon. Like a blue moon, or a blood moon. A ‘chameleon moon’ means change. A shift. The world is about to turn. Nothing will be the same.”

“Well...” Danae said softly, looking out at the black sky and orange haze. “Sometimes that’s a good thing.”



Screams of sirens and victims filled the smoky air, but for now, the scorched, shattered wound of what had been the Turret House was deserted. Except for a dog.

A repaired Toto-Dandy sat still and calm, sitting in front of the wreckage. He knew his mamas Danae and Rose, and his small pup Jack would be back to find him soon, to pet him and scratch his ears and tell him he was a good boy. His gleaming, gemstone-hard mechanical eyes stayed calm as his tongue lolled out in a doggy smile, and his tail thumped in contentment. And very patiently, he waited all alone for his humans. That’s what good dogs did.

Then, suddenly, he wasn’t alone.

A long shudder went through the synthetic wolf’s body, from the tip of his metal nose to the end of his tail. Then Toto-Dandy did something no dog ever did. He held out one front paw in front of his face, and studied it. He looked at the paw for a long time with hard, cold, very intelligent eyes, formulating complex, very human thoughts.

He shifted carefully on his paws, testing their balance. He began to stretch out front and back legs, experimentally move the tail. Slowly, the wolf that

wasn't a wolf anymore took a step down the hill of rubble and twisted metal. Then another, faster. He kicked up his huge paws, tail waving behind him like a flag of victory, and let out a howl that echoed throughout the ruined buildings under the hundreds of thrumming helicopters.

Then, just before he bounded away into the smoky streets—he stopped dead. Raised his muzzle to the air and gave a long sniff, rotated the sharp ears. His new, intensified senses picked up a familiar scent, and he turned his oblong, pointed head to face its source.

“Heard you wanted me dead,” said Garrett Cole, leaning casually against a battered building, as if the city around him wasn't crumbling to cinders. He didn't wear his sequined tuxedo today, just the plain black shirt and pants he'd worn when he'd left the Emerald Bar, but somehow, even with everything else around him falling apart, there wasn't a hair or thread out of place, or so much as a fleck of ash on one sleeve.

The smile that seemed to cross Hans's new, metal face was wolfish indeed. It was amazing how expressive fangs could be. *“No hard feelings.”*

Garrett just smirked and surveyed the huge metallic form before him, meeting its cold blue eyes with a slow blink of his own, like one a dog might get from a cat who knows it's safe behind a window. “I always did say you were a wolf in sheep's clothing.”

“Looks pretty good on me, don't you think?”

“I think you got very lucky.”

“I'm not lucky!” For the first time, Hans bared his new teeth in a snarl. *“I'm prepared. And I have a lot of loose ends to tie up.”*

“Mmm.” Garrett stuck his hands in his pockets, giving the wolf a sympathetic nod. “We have that in common. We certainly do.”

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“Honestly?” Hans let out a frustrated bark as his adversary relaxed further, leaning back against the ruined brick wall and crossing one ankle over the other. *“This is even better than I planned! Killing you personally is gonna be so much more satisfying!”*

“I’d think so.” Garrett examined a frayed fingernail.

“And I get to find out exactly what this new body can do!” He took one slow step forward, dinner-plate-sized paw raking the ash-covered ground.

“I’d love to hear all about it.” He paused, considering as Hans took another step toward him. “After you tell me what in the world you were after in the first place.”

“I’m about to sink my teeth into your lying neck, and you want to know what I’m after?”

“I do indeed. This is just so unlike you, Hans,” He sounded almost concerned. “You usually think things out so much better than this. A lot more carefully. First of all, even thinking of coming after me? That alone...” He scratched the side of his nose to hide a smile. Even Garrett Cole wasn’t about to laugh in a snarling wolf’s face, but he had to let it out somehow. “But then, what’s this I hear about blackmail, kidnapping, coercion, assault...”

“My plans were solid.” Hans growled. *“I did everything right. I had leverage. I had control. I did everything you ever taught me to—”*

“Everything I—? Please. I taught you to look at the big picture and make big changes with small touches. This?” He spread his hands, looking around in dismay and standing very still as if suddenly surrounded by an invisible minefield. “This is an embarrassing avalanche of amateur mistakes. A tragedy of errors turned deadly, and avoidable from the start.”

“It wasn’t my fault! I was really trying to help them!”

“Hans,” he said in a patient, sympathetic tone. “Even if that was true, you and I both know that’s the one thing in any plan that matters least. Ever.”

“I was. All they had to do was listen to me, and everything would have been fine. I really was trying to save them all!”

“Funny,” Garrett’s tone dropped, sudden as opening a stage trapdoor. “From here it looked like you were trying to kill me.”

Hans’s growl returned with a vengeance. *“You got way too comfortable at that Bar of yours. While you were giving ‘em the ol’ razzle-dazzle playing emcee—no, playing superhero, playing king—I was a ghost! For ten years!”*

“I had a life, Hans. And a plan, unfolding on my own time.”

“Too long!”

“The world doesn’t move just because you want it to.”

“You started believing your own play, Garrett. Everybody loves you now, everybody thinks you’re the amazing Garrett Cole, you’re gonna save the day—but that’s not who you are. That’s an act. I mean, you’re literally up on a stage, wearing a sparkly tuxedo, this isn’t even a metaphor any—”

“It was my life. And you took it.”

“Because you owed me one! You were going to let me rot. Well, I wasn’t going to let you leave me behind so easy. You’re not allowed to forget me.”

“Fine,” he said, voice lowering again. When Garrett Cole lowered his voice, it had the same effect as someone else raising it. It caught attention, made people listen. Every word he spoke did that, but when he put so much careful consideration into every syllable like this... “Go ahead. Kill me. Then you’ll never find out what Turret wanted.”

Hans held very still. Finally his black lips slid back over his new sharp teeth, hiding them from view. His snarl faded, but the agitated lash of his tail said it

could return at any moment. *"You're stalling."*

"Of course I am. But I'm also telling you the truth. I know what it was all for."

"No you don't," Hans gave his new, furry head a shake, just to see how the human gesture worked. It didn't really translate, so he stopped. *"Nobody knows why Turret chose me, or why he made my life a living Hell. I don't even know. I didn't know what he wanted, and I didn't know how to make him stop, or—or I would have done it, instead of spend ten years...."* he couldn't continue. He wondered for a few seconds what the high-pitched whining noise was, before recognizing it as a wolf's pained cries. Hans turned it into a growl instead and looked away.

"Ten years of pain." Garrett spoke quietly, in the same intense, captivating, nearly-hypnotic voice, almost as enthralling as Evelyn Calliope's song. "I'm sorry, Hans. I really did try to save you. Turret doesn't let anyone go, you know that."

"You got away. They did. Chimera—Regan, whatever—Zilch, and Danae, and Rose, and... and Gabriel. You all escaped. Why didn't I? Why'd you leave me behind?"

Garrett was quiet for a long time. "Escape with me now."

"Why should I trust you?"

"Because you've got the teeth." He smiled at Hans. "And I've got the plan. Do you still want to know why he chose you, and why you suffered? Do you want to help me do something about it?"

"Of course I want to know!" When Hans's anger flared now, his borrowed, triangular ears lay flat against his metal skull and the thick ruff of fur around his neck bristled and stood on end. There would be a lot to get used to, but not this desire for revenge.

"Then come with me. It's a long way to the middle of the Tartarus Zone,

but that's where we'll find him."

"*Tartarus...*" Hans turned the word over in his mind. He could only recall vague foreboding, pain, delirium and a sense of dread. "*What's he doing all the way out there?*"

"You think you're the only ghost in town?" Garrett started to walk, steps slow and smooth and sure. "Not anymore. Turret thinks he's got a brand new toy, but he's playing with fire, he just doesn't know it yet."

"We'll stop him. Whatever he's up to, I'll stop him."

"There, you see?" He grinned down into the wolf's bright blue eyes. "We were heading in the same direction after all."

"You say one wrong word and I'm still tearing your head off, old man." Hans turned his metal head to look directly up at him. "*And no, I'm really, really not kidding.*"

"You're welcome to try." Now Garrett didn't hide his chuckle. His voice reverberated through the shattered streets and broken buildings, and even Hans paid attention, new eyes and ears taking quick and very serious notice. "Now. Let's go for a walk."

Together, they made their way through the smoke and ash toward the edge of Parole, and the world beyond. The wall around the city didn't slow either of them down, and neither did the barrier. Nobody saw them leave, not even a single Eye in the Sky. Some things were meant to be shared—like lifesaving resources, shelter, safety and protection.

Some things were meant to remain secret. At least for now.

Garrett Cole exited, pursued by a wolf.



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Regan entered the new world, lifted his eyes, and saw for miles.

He wasn't sure what he'd expected to find on the outside. Maybe verdant forests. Maybe the world had flooded, and they'd come out to find ocean as far as the eye could see. (Oh, dare to dream.) Even an arctic wasteland; nothing would have surprised him anymore.

It was the same reddish California earth he remembered, the far-off jagged shapes of towering rock formations jutting up against the sky. He vaguely remembered this stretch of highway, though it was cracked and overgrown from disuse—he and Gabriel must have emerged in a very remote location. There had been... something here once, a gas station, a fast food place, something. There wasn't one now. The area had been cleared. Parole really was alone.

But that wasn't the emptiness he was struck by. The one he saw was beautiful.

"Look," he whispered. He didn't have to speak; Gabriel would hear him if he just thought the word.

"It's blue..." Gabriel spoke softly, gradually appearing to stand beside Regan, staring up at the eternal sky. He usually hovered in the back of Regan's mind, present but not overpowering—vastly unlike other, much more aggressive 'ghosts' he could name. This one's mental imprint was like half-listening to far-off music or being vaguely aware of a faint dream when Gabriel wasn't consciously projecting himself. It felt like he was sleeping and maybe he was. If anybody deserved to rest after ten traumatic years, it was Gabriel. "I almost forgot about blue."

"Me too. I kind of forgot about... sky." Regan nodded slowly, transfixed by the color and its expanse, infinite and dizzying after ten years of claustrophobic enclosure. He almost felt weightless, like nothing attached his feet to the

ground. He might just slip right off and fall forever, right up into space. This world was cloudless and never-ending, and stretched so far the only 'barrier' left in was the horizon. He'd forgotten about birds. Free little feathered things that flitted by on wings instead of helicopter blades. Alive. Singing. The sky was open.

And he'd forgotten air could smell like this. Heavy and heady with the freshness of fallen rain instead of oily smoke, the cool petrichor floating up from moist soil. He breathed deep and his head spun. Not from poison. From the first lungful of clean oxygen he'd had in a decade. The second was even sweeter.

"Regan?"

"Hm? Yeah." He shook his head, then swiped away the stinging tears that also had nothing to do with smoke.

"I'm glad we're here." Gabriel gave him a tiny smile that faded fast; maybe he wasn't any more used to it than Regan was. He remained partly translucent, much more ghostly than even Hans, who usually at least appeared solid unless he was deliberately trying to intimidate someone.

"Yeah, me too." Regan nodded several times, folding his arms tightly across his thin chest and looking down at the ground—at the green grass between his shoes. He tried not to think about how perfectly the color of new shoots of baby-green grass matched his brightest scales, and Zilch suggesting ways to dull down the shine so they didn't reflect light as much on nights he needed some extra stealth. "It's, uh. Really, really great."

"But we can't stay here." The voice that called him back to reality was soft but insistent.

Regan looked up, slow concern dawning. "Yeah, I know... There's

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something big happening out here, and if Turret's involved, that's bad right there. So first step's finding out what." A small, grim smile crossed his face as he glanced back at the barrier rising up behind them. He'd never seen it from this side before. It looked very much the same, and yet *felt* so different. "And getting everybody from back in there—out here."

"We'll save your friends," Gabriel promised, young face as calm as ever; Regan wondered if it was serenity or exhaustion. "But first we need to find some of mine."

"Your friends? You know people... outside?"

"Mm..." Definitely exhaustion. The boy's image was already starting to fade like a picture left out too long in the sun. Projection apparently took more effort than it appeared. "They'll help us."

"Okay, sure," Regan nodded, though this raised several more questions than it answered. He wasn't sure how a teenager recently freed from a decade's imprisonment in an inferno under a quarantined city had a more active social life than he did, though considering his own circle, he supposed he shouldn't be surprised. "You go ahead and take a nap, I'll find us... you're gone already."

He was alone. Regan took another breath, enjoying the rush of oxygen—and noticed for the first time how incredibly quiet it was. There was no roar of fire, no helicopters, no engines, no sirens, no screams. The barrier must be soundproof. He shook his head, letting out a mirthless laugh as he turned back to face it.

"No wonder nobody came to help us. They probably don't even know we're—"

Regan froze. He wasn't alone after all.

The cat with the metallic ears and bright green eyes—green like the new

grass, like his scales when they were bright and clean—stared at him through the undulating energetic field. Her mouth opened in a silent meow, and one paw raised to bat at the air in his direction. Clearly she knew better than to actually touch the barrier, but the cat-impulse remained.

This time Regan didn't run away. He didn't fade. He raised one hand, reaching out toward the barrier and felt the intense heat radiating from its vast, curving surface. If he'd had any hair, it would have stood on end from the crackling energy, lethal to so many thousands desperate for escape. He did not touch it; just stood, arm extended and flat of his palm facing its surface several inches away, and locked eyes with the cat. Inside, she did the same. His eyes filled with tears, and this time he didn't wipe them away either.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. If he couldn't hear the cat's meow through the soundproof dome, she couldn't hear his words. But she could see him, and her cybernetic eyes would transmit his image to someone who wouldn't have a hard time reading his lips, or his face. "CyborJ... Zilch... Evelyn... everyone. But I'm gonna fix—I'm gonna make—everything..." he stopped. Slowly let his hand drop to his side and shook his head. "I'll come back for you. Promise."

The cat tilted her head, as if asking if that was all. When he didn't continue, she turned around and trotted off into the smoky darkness to deliver the message, fluffy tail held high.

Slowly, deliberately, Regan turned around and stood with his back to the barrier and everything inside. He stood with his eyes wide open, and saw no horrors—but he was still afraid.

He shouldn't have been afraid, but he'd never been more terrified, maybe more than he'd ever been in Parole. Now he faced an outside world, just as strange, just as terrifying, but for a different reason. It was unknown, when at

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last, he knew the world behind him, and had fought so hard to know it. Know them. He'd fought so hard to regain not only his memories, but his sense of identity and equilibrium, his place in the world, and the people who made it up. His entire life.

It wasn't just fire that lay behind him. It was his hard-won self. Once regained... how could he give it up? Give them up?

Once, all he'd hoped for was escape. Once, he'd thought Parole was where hope went to die. Now he knew that couldn't be further from the truth. That place behind him was filled with more rebellious hope, more powerful love, and more triumphant beauty than anywhere he knew, because of the people who made their lives there, and their refusal to submit to despair.

It wouldn't be so different out here, Regan thought, feeling Gabriel's subtle presence like a sleeping kitten, curled in a soft ball on the edges of his consciousness. He would keep his promise; the people he loved wouldn't be confined in a fiery prison for long. And he wouldn't be alone. He carried them within him, through open air and endless sky.

Regan took another deep, sweet breath.

Then he took a step.



"HELLO EVERYONE... I DON'T KNOW IF YOU CAN HEAR ME ANYMORE. I HOPE YOU CAN. I'M GOING TO say it anyway, just in case.

"This is your Radio Angel. I told you I'd always be there for you and I meant it. Even if I had to run, I'm there in spirit, and I'm listening, I promise I'm still listening. I'm so, so sorry for leaving you for a while there, but things got real nasty and I had to get the heck out of Dodge. Or in this case, Parole. I'm okay, I'm with some friends who got me out safe, but obviously I can't tell you where. I will say that I can see the smoke from here, and I'm hoping and praying you're okay and that a lot of you made it out safe too and... and like I said, that you can even hear me at all. 'Scuse me, something in my eye.

"But don't worry. I'm not leaving you. I'm never leaving you.



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“Anyway. In the coming weeks, you’re going to hear a lot of scary things. You’re going to hear that this is pretty much World War III, and that everyone on Earth is pointing a finger at Parole and everybody who lives here. That’s... that’s if the world even knows about us at all. I hope they do. I hope they find out about us, and everything that’s happened here. Somebody needs to know. I’m going to do my best to make sure they know.

“But even if they do, they’re going to hate us, and say terrible things. You’re going to hear that you were born wrong, or you made the wrong choice, or that you’re sick and disgusting and evil and need to be wiped off the face of the earth.

“But listen to me. *You’re beautiful.* I really mean that, I mean it from the bottom of my squishy, fuzzy heart, every single one of you listening to this is beautiful, and worth it, and you need to survive. We need you to survive.

“People will try to hurt you. People will try to shut you up and bring you down and even kill you, and they’ll do whatever they can to convince you that you’re alone, and nobody cares, and that’s how they’ll win. They’ll use guns and they’ll use words, and the worst part of all is that you might *listen* when they say you’re a freak or a monster, and you might start to believe it.

“But they are *lying*. Don’t believe them for a minute. Just keep singing. Sing for the ones you love, sing for the people who are fighting, and for everybody who didn’t make it. Maybe even sing a little bit for me. But mostly, sing for you.

“And they can’t silence us. My signal is still going strong, and so is yours. Listen to my voice, and use your own and never, ever stop. Your voice is your power, and nothing and nobody can take it away from you. Love yourself, love the people around you, and never give up. If you need help, reach out. If you’re drowning, make some noise. There are people who love you, who will throw you a life preserver. That’s what it all comes down to, love. That’s how we’re gonna get through this. And we *are* gonna get through

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this.

“Now I’m gonna play you some music, starting with my favorite lady, Miss Evelyn Calliope. Let her take you someplace safe and warm. Dream sweet, and remember that I’ll be with you when the music’s over. Sing with her, and I’ll be singing along too.

“Just remember that you are not alone. You are never alone, no matter how much it hurts. I promise.

“Now sing it out.”

This concludes Book 1 of the CHAMELEON MOON series.

Stay tuned for Book 2 from RoAnna Sylver!

Thank you so much for reading!

A decorative graphic featuring five stylized stars of varying sizes and orientations, clustered in the upper left. To the right of the stars, the word "Acknowledgments" is written in a large, elegant, black cursive script. A thick, black crescent moon is positioned to the right of the word, partially overlapping its end.

Acknowledgments

Claudie Arseneault saved this book with editing. You heard it here first. Claudie Arseneault also probably saved my nerves, my brain cells and me, from crying, on many occasions. Thank you. So much.

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Eri, thank you for this book of many pages, about a house of many doors. Thank you for the same-braining and mutual-flailing and poking and shipping and loving this into reality a second time. Thank you for the forehead kisses. Thank you for believing in me, even when I hadn't done anything yet.

Now you listen to me, Jack. You're gonna rattle the stars. Let this lighthouse

in the sea of time light your way.

Quinner. Hey. See you in Book 2. Break out the black leather and fast bike. Let's go real fast.

Love and love and love, Tobias. All of the snuggles. Every one of them. I seek bees now.

Thank you to my writer-family on Twitter (I'm @RoAnnaSylver!), with special mentions to Shira Glassman (@shiraglassman), Kiran Oliver (@koliver_writes), Rachel Sharp (@WrrrdNrrrdGrrrl) and B. R. Sanders (@b_r_sanders). There are so many awesome people I have to stop there. Tweet me for recs, I'll throw confetti 'in person' instead.

Thank you to my wonderful community of followers and friends on tumblr.com. (Come say hello; I'm TheSylverLining!) Please imagine me standing outside your window blasting songs of adoration. I always am. In my heart. And my mind. And my soul. Truly. Deeply. Madly.

Thank you to my amazing patrons on Patreon, who support me while I create things that I hope make the world a little more beautiful and safe, with less fear and pain. That's what you do for mine. (I'm at patreon.com/RoAnnaSylver. If my words helped you, checking that out would help me more than I can say.)

I could write a book entirely of Thank You's and still need more pages—but I only have this one, so I need to stop here. I'm more blessed than I ever imagined, with more loved ones than I could ever Acknowledge half as much as they deserve. Thank you all. The moment I let go of it was the moment I got more than I could handle. The moment I jumped off of it was the moment I touched down.

✧ ✧ ✧ ✧ About The Author)

RoAnna Sylver is passionate about stories that give hope, healing and even fun for LGBT, disabled and other marginalized people, and thinks we need a lot more. Aside from writing oddly hopeful dystopia books, RoAnna is a blogger, artist, singer and voice actor. She lives with family and a small snoring dog, and probably spends too much time playing videogames.

RoAnna has worked as a contributing fiction writer, concept artist and voice actor for videogame company Phoenix Online Studios, appeared on several episodes of NBC's Grimm and The Librarians, and now writes for entertainment news website Moviepilot.com.

