

Words of the Silenced

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THIS IS how I live:

I take advantage of the crowd—parades always draw a gaggle of people—and slit the cords holding a ripe coinpurse to the belt of a fat (and I mean *really* fat) Regulator who finds more interest in the passing flower-maid than on his belongings. The blade bites quickly, deeply, and the bag drops into my outstretched and waiting hand. This chap is silver, so I don't worry about him starving because of this loss. The Nords know he could stand to lose something—weight for one; his money for another.

I penetrate the throng of citizens, letting them close over the wound of my passing. I feel the marks through the silk fibers—foolish tourist. Really, I did him a favor, wising him up to the way things work in the city of Tintyr. Behind me, a bellow drifts over the sound of cavorting and merriment. I smirk to myself. The reward rests in my hand, but the satisfaction resides in hearing my target realize—but too late—that he has lost everything.

Turning down my escape route, I start to trot. Now that he knows he's a victim, he will alert the Militia. I don't need to get into any scrap with them.

Hoping to make a clean escape, I duck into an alley behind a smithy's shack and a stable. It has the nose-walloping stench of horse, piss, sweat, and mud. I dodge a pile of less-than-savory remnants from one of the steeds and increase my speed, heading toward the opening of the alley.

I burst out into the bright sunlight and plow directly into a red-faced, round, and distressingly familiar Regulator. I bounce off his wide belly, getting a whiff of curdled goat-cheese and bad breath as I rebound. The bag of marks soars out of my grasp, the loose leather thongs peeling away as the coins tumble free, sparkling and winking in a taunting way—"We're free, and there's nothing that you can do to change that!"

I reel against him, trying to catch myself on his scarred and stained leather vest. Instead, he catches me, fat fingers encircling one wrist in a fleshy bracelet while the other hand is crushed by his grip. Stumbling a bit, I try to wrench free, but only manage to twist my arm.

"Got me a wench, hey?" His voice bites coldly. He smiles, but not out of mirth.

"You're gonna get less than that," snarl I as I drive my knee up toward his groin. A tiny part of my mind cringes, because the man is only wearing an oversize plum smock that barely brushes the middle of his knees, the wide belt on which his coinpurse had hung cinching the cloth about his considerable middle. Dark forests of hair sprout up on the thick legs, which must have expected my response. One trunk-like leg shifts and blocks me, and now I have my knee wedged into a rather uncomfortable spot. I wobble a bit, trying to keep balance on one foot.

"Am I?" His gap-teeth—yellowed, crooked, spittle streaked—glimmer in the hot summer sun. With his face so close to mine, I can see the red sores on his face better than ever before, and his thick nose with its own crop of lengthening nose hairs. Greasy strands of hair fall in front of hate-filled eyes, a dull black to emphasize his dark skin. On one cheek a large mole sprouts a collection of wiry ebony hairs, which tremble like whiskers on a dog. To my right, the crowd cheers some of the pageantry, as oblivious to my plight as they were to my crime. "You're a pretty one, hey?" The smile turns into a leer. "Mayhap you're worth the price o' the purse." His grips—all three of them—

tighten.

I squirm. “Gimme my leg and the purse and you’ll get more than you meant, fat-boy!”

The leer dissolves into a flabby frown. “Your mouth may be smart, but your head ain’t.” He squeezes again.

“Let go of me!”

“You probably wonder how I caught you, hey, pretty girl?” he says, ignoring my protest. I do wonder how he did that, but I don’t say so.

“Let go!” My voice squeaks a little bit, no doubt because of the fear that’s racing through me faster than a milch-mouse scurrying away from a cat.

“See, I can still move fast, even though I’m a big fellow.” He pauses meaningfully. “You know what I say, little girlie?”

“No,” I reply through clenched lips.

He grits his teeth. “Yes, you do understand! You don’t cut the purse of Bline the Wyn!”

I feel my stomach sink, splashing somewhere around my single hopping foot.

He’s no Regulator—or any governmental official for that matter. He’s a Wyn. A Wyn! Messing around with them will get anyone cooked in less time than it takes to think.

How did he get so small? Wyn’re supposed to be giants, not the size of a normal (albeit very fat) man. I swallow, my dry throat bobbing. I’m going to die.

Before he can say another word, he lurches forward, his face falling into a grimace of confusion and surprise. The various vices that enclose my limbs loosen, though not very much. Still, it’s enough for me to shake free my leg, which in turn gives me enough leverage to almost slip out. Almost.

The Wyn turns to see what hit him while trying to get my clawing, writhing hand under control.

“Let her go,” a new voice says. We both stop struggling at the unexpected amount of authority that it carries. A tall, auburn-skinned man stands, his hands clenched in fists at his sides, a look of anger and just a trace of fear etched across his handsome face. He juts out his broad, square jaw and shakes a forelock of brown hair from his sparkling eyes. His unassuming clothing—homespun breeches, a white sleeveless tunic, and well-worn, earth-colored boots stained from travel and use—only add to his aura of cool, controlled power. “I said, let her go.” I can hear a bit of heat in each word.

“This ain’t none of your business.” The Wyn, Bline, barks more than speaks. “So just find a different alleyway to drop your trousers, hey? I’m busy.”

“I won’t tell you again.” His eyes grow wider, as if he had just stepped in something unseemly and didn’t like the feel of it between his toes. “Leave the girl alone.”

With a vicious shove, I find myself sprawling on the alleyway floor, inches away from a pile of rotting cabbage, and just a few feet from the remnants of the bag of marks. Bline has turned his full attention on the newcomer, so I steal forward, pulling toward the prize as slowly and inconspicuously as I dare.

“What’s she to you? You her brother or something?”

I almost laugh. My brother could never rescue me from anything.

The fact that Bline had asked one of the stupidest questions possibly uttered in a great space of time doesn’t faze the boy, who stands at the opening of the alleyway to the

thoroughfare, his face a study in frozen bravado. Maybe he realizes that Bline towers over most everyone, not just me. Maybe he knows now that all he has to defend his fragile little body with is his fragile little body. Maybe he sees that I, as always, aim for the money. I'm but a handspan away from the marks now, and I can almost feel the still-bulging coinpurse in my hand.

Newcomer says, "She's a stranger."

"Then walk away." Bline talks with a surprisingly exasperated wheeze here, as if he has just spent the last hour arguing with a brick wall and has finally come to the conclusion that he'll simply have to agree to disagree. I snag the bag and make it disappear into the folds of my tattered longjacket. It really is too warm to wear something like this, but I have pockets within pockets in this longjacket, and I don't feel terribly inclined to change it. Ever.

Newcomer looks anxious, as if he doesn't want things to get out of hand. Frankly, I don't blame him. "I just want the girl to be safe."

Bline throws Newcomer an insulting laugh. "She's long lost the chance of that. Where were you when she started to slit my purse, hey? Why didn't you come to protect my marks?"

"You're bigger than she is."

"And she's bigger than my coinpurse is!" Bline tosses a glance behind him, checking on me. I remain on the ground, hoping that he doesn't notice that the coinpurse is missing. He returns his attention to my unexpected savior.

"Just, leave her alone. I don't want to have to hurt you."

Bline chuckles and wipes his disgustingly round fingers across his sweating face. He flicks the sweat off, then dries his hands on his shirt. Long grease stains mark the trail where his fingers had fondled. "Don't worry. You won't."

Against my own will and common judgment, I yell out—but too late—"Be careful! He's a Wyn!"

"A Wyn?" Newcomer frowns, as if the word tastes foreign to his tongue. How could he not know a Wyn? Then his breath flies out of him as Bline's bulky shoulder collides solidly with his jaw. Newcomer soars in a graceful arc, crashing against a bag of what looks like cement or flour. Either way, it provides no padding for him. It obliterates beneath him in a cloud of dust. He moans and slumps to the ground. His eyes roll about his head, almost as though he were waking up from a heavy sleep. Finally, he collapses.

I can't help but feel sorry for the fellow. He only wanted to help, and now he probably would have to deal with a bruised jaw with luck and much worse without it.

Bline turns his attention back to me. "Where was I?" He taps his thick finger against his worm-like lips. "I remember! We was talking about my payment!" He darts forward, hoping to snatch me again. This time, however, I know what he can do, and I'm not running aimlessly through a smithy. I saw how he blocked my punches, and how he took Newcomer unawares. His bulk belies his speed, and I have to move fast to avoid him.

I would never receive awards for Fastest Runner, Most Wily, or even Quickest Thinker. But I do learn fast, and I rarely make the same mistake twice. Good for me, bad for Bline.

His fat hands come snatching at me, all pincers and pain. I drop low, letting his momentum carry him past me as I dive to the left. Coming up from rolling, I move my

legs and speed away, instantly improvising a new route with each alleyway, street, and building I come across.

Knowing of Bline's true nature, I can't beat a straight march to my home. I need to find a way to either stop him solid (doubtful), or completely throw him off my scent (difficult). Neither appeals to me; I prefer as little attention as I can get, for the most part, so I don't spend a lot of my life being pursued. Sure, the Militia sometimes get down on us thieves, but those who can't really make a living off of cutting purses soon enough find themselves making a living off of cutting stones in the King's Quarry or in Rythkar's. Hard, backbreaking work for no pay and lousy meals.

I'll take the street, given the choice.

I turn left, heading north, ducking and diving in between people—lovers, strangers, parents and children—before slipping into the cool shadow of an herb merchant shop. The wares of her store almost overpower me. When I remember the smell of Bline, I suddenly don't mind the mixing scents of garlic, ginseng, and vinegar.

The merchant's old, hoar-frosted head jerks up at the sound of the door opening, but I drop low and prowl past the front of her counter. "Welcome to Nanty's Herb shop," she croaks, turning her cataract-covered eyes in the opposite direction. I ghost away, sliding through the short aisles and away from the rest of her greeting.

The back window opens up to a tightly enclosed alley, both ends barred by large wooden fences. I normally don't stall at fences—I can get over nice and easily. Added boon: Here I don't have to worry about Bline; he's too fat to fit back here. I can touch the walls of the shop and the building with both hands fully outstretched.

Angling myself in between the walls of the herb shop and the neighbor's building, and using my right foot as a wedge, I start to shimmy up, higher and higher. The crowd roars as the hotrocks display shoots explosions into the air, the diversions crackling with a wicked heat. I pass the second story window and glance down. The ground pulsates and I feel my stomach lurch. I didn't think I had climbed so high...yet there awaits the floor of the alleyway, hoping I make a mistake and drop. My palms start to chill despite the heat of the day—nerves, I figure and try to brush it aside. Instead, I feel my grip slipping and I actually drop a couple of inches before alarm—no, fear—tightens my muscles and I slam to a stop.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes.

Mistake.

The world starts to spin nauseatingly, tipping me upside down and making my stomach tumble. My eyes snap open and my fingers convulsively tighten against the warm brick. I rest only two short feet from the lip of the roof. I can almost reach it from where I stay, but not quite. I yearn to move up and get off the increasingly hot wall. While I have limited maneuverability up here, I also have the advantage of remaining where I can see—and I usually prefer knowledge to maneuverability. Not only that, but the odds of the fat man lumbering up the steps of the neighboring building to get me...

The window beneath me breaks out, crashing against the neighbor's wall. Ignoring my better judgment, I glance down. In the shadow of the herb shop I see a now-familiar and always ugly face jut out of the recently removed window.

Bline tips his head left and right, as if trying to...trying to get a scent, it seems. He hasn't seen me yet, so I stay where I paused. Not that I have any choice; my right leg, the anchor against the neighbor's wall, spasms and twitches. If I try to move, I have little

doubt that I'd fall rather than climb any more. If I could just reach the lip...

A disgusting sound of breaking, bending, slurping, and bloating, along with the distinct sound of flatulence, all seem to echo toward me at once. I instinctively look below. My vertigo abandons me. Instead, my stomach starts to roil with revulsion.

Bline is forcing his way out of the window, but it doesn't look like Bline. The once meaty leg stretches and distorts like pieces of sweet-taffy, pouring onto the ground in a controlled stream of hairy meat. The foot shivers and shudders, as if being tugged on by invisible dogs. Suddenly there's a snapping sound and the foot stays in place, taking up a third of the width of the alley. A leg rolls out of the window. From my view, it looks like a zit has popped and the butter-colored puss is flowing out past the fingernails of the window's shutters. The leg solidifies with the same deafening snap, a sound only slightly muted by the sounds of the pageant nearby.

The skin throbs as muscles begin to gush from the herb shop. Soon a leg has formed, longer than almost any man's shin has a right to be. I stare in horror as the process accelerates. Within moments—seconds, it seems like—Bline's hideous face rises to meet me.

His features appear distorted, as if his body had spent too much time on the rack. With a final pop of bone his eyes open, hatred and anger boiling out of them. While a tall and wide man before, what I can see of him proves him as an extraordinarily tall man and not nearly so wide.

When he looks at me, my leg throbs and I almost drop. With a shout I shift legs, keeping myself from a dizzying—and possibly fatal, definitely painful—fall.

"Where you goin', wench?" He has to tip his head up to see me—not a lot, but some. Yet he grows, his head slowly traveling the distance toward me. In a few more seconds he and I will see eye to eye—literally, rather than in any sort of figurative way.

I can't get my smart tongue to speak. I stare, my mouth open wide.

"I told you before, I'm a Wyn! You think you can escape me?" Another pop, like every joint in his body has cracked, and he gains a couple of inches. "Now you're making me ruin my clothes and Stretch. Do you know how much I *hate* Stretching, hey?" He says it in a way that makes me feel like I should know what he's talking about. "I hate it. A lot. That makes me want to *eat* you rather than anything else. Have you ever been eaten, little girl?"

It seems like a stupid question, which fits in well with what I know of Bline. Still, I shake my head mutely, trying to come to grips with what's happening.

"It ain't fun, I've heard. Never done it myself. You'll have to tell me what it's like, hey?" With that his jaw drops impossibly wide—like a snake that's about to eat a rodent, jaws unhinged, fangs bared—and starts coming for me. I stare down that maw, the blackness almost vertiginous in and of itself. The yellow teeth gleam despite the shade. His eyeteeth must be as big as my head! No, just my hand. Just as big as my hand...

My hand?

What about my body? I'm about to be eaten alive, and all I can do is ponder the size of his teeth? I must have lost my mind. I have never heard the whispers, but that doesn't mean I can't go insane, I suppose.

The mouth creeps closer.

Another pop.

Another few inches. The heat from his breath boils across the back of my legs. A large, undulating tongue starts working toward me, its length about half that of my forearm.

Another pop.

Another inch closer.

The lips peel back into a smile, as if he already tastes me.

I decide that I really have lost my mind. Any sane person would have already run. Yet I sit, entranced by the growth, disgusted by this creature and its malformation. The teeth almost touch the dangling hem of my longjacket.

Another pop.

Another inch.

I think of the coinpurse that's sitting in that jacket.

That's when I move.

Finally, I act on instinct, desperation, and more than a little bit of fear. I lunge forward, catching the lip of the roof and pulling—*pulling*—with my arms just as another blast of foul breath and the heart-stopping snap of his jaws burst behind me in the alley.

Rolling to my feet, I listen to Bline's howl. I don't want to see what else the Wyn can do. I start to run.

I don't look back.

THE FIRST few steps propel me away faster than I've ever moved before. I figure the fear drives me. So long as I stay driven, that will work for me.

The bright yellow sun has beaten the clay roof for the better part of the day, now that it has started its westward dip. Barefoot, I hop as much as run, jumping from one roof to the next without so much as a pause to get my bearings. I know instinctively where to go.

Home.

But I have to lose Bline before I get too close—the last thing I want to do is get my family in trouble. So I start to vary my angles once I hit the street, drifting east sometimes, floating west sometimes. I crisscross avenues and boulevards, streets and roads. Sometimes I even double back on my own tracks to see if Bline has followed me.

He hasn't.

After three hours of paranoia, I stop and lean against the cooling side of a double-house. The people inside don't see me, and I prefer it that way. Most people don't see me.

Ragged breaths burn against the back of my throat. The sky has finished bleeding, and now burns the purple of a bruise. The sun's heat will return tomorrow, filled with fury, but for now the night holds sway. The cooler air feels good on my sweat-streaked skin. I cast about for a drink of water, but I see nothing, not even a gutter. Dearth always has a way of sucking the world dry. I sigh and sink onto my haunches, relaxing and taking a deep breath. Pops will want me home soon, but he knows better than to worry about me. It's not like his worrying will do much anyway, since he rarely ever leaves the house.

I moan a bit as I shift the bulk of the coinpurse from out of the small of my back. Some of the marks litter the ground by the smithy, who will no doubt thank the Nords for the unexpected gift. Oh, well. I made off with at least half of what the bag had originally contained, and that makes me happy. It'll make Mama and Pops happy, too, which only makes me happier. I wish that I could do more, but a girl of nineteen can't do a lot if she won't wave her charms—and Pops won't have me do that. Not that I'd want to. In my mind, that's more dangerous than running from a Wyn, no matter the day or the week.

That gets me remembering Bline, but a noise to my right distracts me.

"Who's there?" I ask, my voice wavering more than I like. I try to get to my feet, but they protest. I've run too much today, and I can feel exhaustion leaking into my bones. My grip tightens around the bag.

"I can't believe I found you!"

To my surprise, Newcomer steps out from behind a moldering pile of rushes, probably the discards of the beds found in the house that I'm leaning against. How did he catch me? I've been running for hours. Strange.

"What do you want?" I shift, ready to run if he proves hostile. He doesn't look dangerous, but he knows that I have the money. With the dearth so strong, I don't want to take any chances. Everyone fights hunger; everyone is desperate.

"I wanted to be sure you're not hurt."

"I'm fine." I speak with more sharpness than I mean, and Newcomer looks a little upset. I moderate my tone. "Thanks to you. If you hadn't've come when you did, I

would've been squashed.”

A light smile touches the edges of his lips. He brushes his long, dun-hued hair from his forehead and gazes at me with those warm brown eyes. “It was my pleasure.” He pauses, as if unsure. He takes a quick step forward, hand extended. I jump back, more ready than ever to run. With a jerk he stops, raising the hand in a gesture of peace. “Calm down. I just wanted to introduce myself.”

“Fair.”

He waits a beat, perhaps unsure of what I meant. Newcomer seems to struggle with some of the streettalk I use. I imagine he'll get used to it. Either that or go away. Both work for me.

“Uh, well,” he begins.

“You were doing better with your hand out.” I shove back a dark crop of hair that has fallen into my eyes.

He smiles again, more abashed this time. “Sorry. My name is Dalm. I'm not from around here.”

“Noticed.”

“Good...I guess. I want to make sure you were safe...”

“You already said that. And I am.” He keeps acting like he wants to talk. I don't. We'll see who wins.

“Glad to hear it.” He clears his throat and wipes his hand on his tunic. “Would you like to give me your name?”

“No.”

The response draws him up, as if he truly hadn't expected that. “I...I'm sorry, but are all people here as rude as you? Especially with the person that saved them from being smashed?”

“I don't know about others, but I am.” *Honesty*, Pops always said, *you've got to give them your honesty*. Unless, of course, you're trying to steal from them. That's a different situation.

“I see.” Newcomer—Dalm, I mean—drops his gaze for a moment. When he tips his head back up, his inviting smile has returned. “Then I wish you good luck, and a safe life.” With a curt bow of his head he spins on his heel and starts to walk away.

“Thank you!” I don't know why I say it, but I do. He stops and glances back at me, over the shoulder, cool and in control.

“You're welcome.” He starts to leave again.

“And you can call me Mel.”

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Mel.” He doesn't stop. For some reason, I want him to. I want him to stay, even though I know I shouldn't trust him—I shouldn't trust anyone, really, not if I want to survive. Which I do. But not enough to keep my big mouth closed.

“And you.” There! I go and talk again!

“Take care. Don't go stealing from men fatter than you.”

“Every man is,” I shoot back. “Besides, he wasn't a man.”

This brings his attention back to me. He turns and begins to wander closer. “What, exactly, did you call him?”

“A Wyn.” I must look confused, because Dalm babbles out a justification for the question.

“Like I said, I’m not from around here. In fact, I only came because of the pageant. I heard that the King would be here, and I am to...seek audience with him.”

I frown. I knew I should have let him walk away. “You’re royalty?”

“No. No, I just need to beg him a favor. For my village, out in the Sparselands.”

“Why would he worry about someone from the Sparselands?” I take a hesitant step back.

“It’s...it’s very complicated. I understand that he’ll be hearing the Woes of the Peasantry tomorrow, and I must plead my people’s case.”

I blink. Sounds suspicious.

“Look,” he says, opening up his palm in a pleading gesture. Then he drops his hand, shaking his head and turning away. “Never mind. You wouldn’t listen.”

“I’ll listen. I never said I’d do anything about it, but I’ll listen.” His voice sounds like the taste of honey.

He nods. “Can we walk? I need to return to my inn.”

“Which direction?” I won’t wander the streets with a strange man, even if he did just save my life. Stupid choices lead to stupid deaths. (Pops claims he made that one up, but I know that it’s mine.)

“South...I think.”

I squint at him. “I still don’t trust you.”

“I swear that I’m a good man.”

“Swear on what? Your honor? It doesn’t take a lot to lose your honor around here.” Nevertheless, I start heading south, Dalm falling in step with me. That’s the way to home, anyway—thus I justify my curiosity a bit.

“Well, I have nothing but my good name to swear by. There is little that is familiar here.”

I look at him from the side of my eye, keeping more than an arm’s length between me and him. “Sparselands?” I snort and shake my head. “You’re a long way from home, Dalmy.”

“Dalm.” He stiffens, as if I’ve offended him. Apparently he hadn’t joked about his good name. “And yes, I know that. But this is important, so it is worth the travel.”

“You keep saying that. What is it that you must ask the King?” In the back of my mind, I add that he probably won’t even get to see the man in the first place. The Woes of the Peasantry are an old tradition, though I’ve never heard of anyone actually having his woes headed. Desperate wishes, that’s all they are.

“It’s...personal.”

“I see.” I don’t pry. I don’t care, really.

“What’s a Wyn?” Dalm asks after a few streets of silence.

“A Wyn? One of the four types of behemoth? You don’t know about them?”

He shakes his head and looks away.

I sigh and answer. “There are four groups of behemoth, all of them much bigger than a normal person. Even though I’m short, *everyone* is short to them. They’re giants, huge monsters that would probably want to kill every last person in the Realm, given half a chance.

“But the Wyn, they’re the smallest. They love to fight, they aren’t very organized, and they live far, far to the south. They only get to be about fifteen feet at the tallest, which is too much for me, but not much for them. I personally think that they are so

ornery all of the time just because they're smaller than the other behemoths."

"Is that why you're ornery, Mel? Because you're smaller than other people?"

I glare at him. "Very funny. Watch my mirth. No, I'm not ornery—I'm cautious, that's all."

Dalm smiles, his brown eyes sparkling in the moonlight. "So, if they're so big—compared to us, of course—why was that Wyn so tiny?"

"Dalm, if you call that Bline chap 'tiny,' then we're going to have to part ways right here. That man was a giant of a man. His fat had fat on it!"

"He didn't seem that big to me, that's all I'm saying." Dalm shoves his hands into his pants pocket. I oddly wish that he would have wrapped my hand in his, instead. Shaking the unexpected thought away, I continue.

"Well, you should have seen him after he knocked you senseless. He was running through the streets, right behind me, knocking over people and stacks of stuff. I managed to sneak into an herb shop, then out the back window. I was trapped inside of an alley, with no way to go but up. I started climbing up when all of the sudden Bline appeared beneath me—"

"Bline's the Wyn, right?" Dalm interrupts.

"Huh? Of course, aye. So he shows up beneath me and then...then he started to Stretch."

"He was stretching?" Dalm imitates the movement, pushing his arms out far in front of him. The action triggers a yawn, which he doesn't even try to hide. "Like that?"

"No, he said it differently, as if I should have known the word. Stretching. 'Do you know how much I hate Stretching?' he asked, or something like. I don't remember too much, because he was actually stretching, like a piece of heated wax starts to pull. I could hear his bones rearranging, and his body growing up to eat me."

"Eat you?"

"He's a behemoth. They eat people." I can't believe this guy's ignorance. "Where have you been living? In a pit?"

"Sparselands," he responds offhandedly.

"Same thing. So, anyway, Bline's Stretching and coming to get me, so I clamber onto the roof and start running. I assume that he didn't fit so he couldn't get up and after me. I ran for the next little while, and only stopped a few minutes before you found me." I hate that I had said so much. Something about Dalm puts me at ease, makes me ramble. Makes me comfortable.

I don't like it...and I like it too much.

"You're all right, though?"

"I'm fine. I told you. But that's what a Wyn is."

"A stretchy monster?" Dalm arches his eyebrow.

"No, fool's head. Don't you listen? A Wyn is just one of the behemoths that's smaller than the others. He lives in the south, in the Wynlands."

"Appropriate."

"It should be. Anyway, the strangest thing about this isn't that the Wyn tried to eat me, but the fact that he's here at all."

"Can all behemoths change shape like that?"

I shake my head. "I don't really know. Besides being bigger and meaner, I don't know much about behemoths."

“Have you tried talking to them?”
“Who? I? Personally?” He nods after each question. I shake my head again. “No.”
“Why?”
“We don't have a lot to do with them, Pops says. They are where they are, and we are where we are. They don't bother us that much, and the same goes on our side. Not only that, but who wants to talk to a behemoth? They're big, scary, stinky, and uncivilized...at least, the Wyn are. I'm not as sure about the Vyn.”
“Vyn?” He stares at me again. “Oh, right. You said that there were four groups. This is another one?”
I nod. “The Vyn are much bigger.”
“How much?”
I shrug. “Forty, fifty feet maybe. Just like us, they have different sizes, too. They live in the far east, on an island they call their Isle.”
“Not terribly creative.”
“No. But they are dangerous, and not only because of their size. In fact, if it weren't for the Spooks, we probably would have died beneath the feet of the Vyn a long time ago.”
Dalm chuckles. “I'm sorry, you lost me. Care to repeat that?”
“Spooks?” I stare at him again.
“Don't give me that look! I told you that I'm not from around here!” He smiles, his teeth nothing but whiteness in the night. “What are Spooks?”
“People who hear the whispers. Haven't you heard of those?”
“No.”
“I thought that the whole Realm had people who hear whispers.”
He lowers his voice. “You mean, like this?”
“No, fool's head! The whispers take you, don't you ever pay attention? If I meant someone who speaks softly, how would that protect us from the behemoths?”
Dalm shrugs. “I couldn't figure it out either.”
“All right, clear out your ears. Spooks are people who hear whispers, inside of their heads. These whispers, these voices, they tell them to do things. Crazy things, unreasonable things...they'll do stuff that you wouldn't even dream of trying. And then, because they listen to the whispers, they can *do* them.”
“I only partially follow. You're saying that the Realm is safe because crazy people do what the voices in their heads tell them to do, right?”
“Right.”
“And when they do what the voices say, they can accomplish them.”
“Have you ever punched through a stone wall?”
Dalm pauses, then looks away. “I don't think so...no, I would remember it if I had.”
“I saw a Spook do that once.”
“Why?”
I roll my eyes. “He's crazy, of course! Why do they do anything? But the whispers tell them ways of defeating behemoths. They're our only protection against the giants that roam the other parts of Des. If it weren't for them, we'd be as squashed as Bline would have made me.”
He eyes me warily. “I think you might be making this up.”

“You’re dumb enough to think that.”

“That hurts, Mel.”

“Thanks,” I say.

He smiles, so I figure he didn’t take offense. We stop. “This looks familiar,” he says, pointing. “I think my inn is just down that street.” I follow the direction of his finger with a glance and nod.

“Best of luck to you, then. I’ll leave you to it. Have a nice life.” I walk away. He calls my name, softly.

“Mel?”

“What?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Maybe I’ll see you again?”

I throw him a single-shoulder shrug. “We’ll see.”

But I doubt it. I don’t usually trust people who lie to me. The street he pointed down won’t have an inn on it anytime soon—it leads out of the city of Tintyr and one direction: south.

THE DOOR to my house always squeaks whenever I open it quietly. If I hurry in, flustered about something or in a rush, the door glides open, the hinges as silent as a milch-mouse. It comes as no surprise, then, to know that it will squeak every time I try to open it stealthily. Coming from a thief, you would think I could open any door and enter any place without attracting notice. Not me. In fact, that little detail paints a perfect picture of my life.

Pops is waiting for me, which makes me wonder why I ever bother trying to sneak in at night in the first place. He waits for me, he says, because he worries too much. Being a cripple, he says, makes you worry, since you can't do too much else. I say I don't know, because I'm not a cripple. He usually glowers at me, then refuses to talk the rest of the evening.

I swallow as he stares at me. His heavy brow, beaten by his cares, is puckered and lined. He rubs at his gray halo that surrounds the polished skin of his head, then strokes one square finger down his slender nose. Mama says I get my features more from Pops than from her, but I wonder sometimes. Sure, I have that same nose, but my hands are also elegant and shapely, and my skin is the same soft copper color as hers. Pops has a russet tinge to his skin, and his eyes bulge. Mine are like Mama's—slightly almond shape and dark as jet. Pops also has a trembly jaw, that works constantly whether he's talking or not. I did inherit Pops' chin—thin and pointed. Mama's face is rounder, all over. She also has dark hair, like I do, though I keep mine pretty short, rather than up in a bun like she does.

“Quiet.” Pops' usual greeting. “Mama's asleep.”

I nod. I wish I were sleeping, too. I'm tired. “How's she?” My voice cracks a little from the thirst and because I haven't spoken in a while. I took my time getting home after leaving Dalm; I didn't want him to follow me. I can't have my family in danger.

“Fine, though you aren't helping much.”

“I do what I can, Pops,” I say through gritted teeth. I'm really too tired to argue with him right now. Usually, Pops is a pretty calm man. But when he starts to worry, and—more than anything—his lifeless legs start up with their itching, he gets irritable.

“And what did you do today, Amela? Bump into trouble?”

“I—” I almost say that I pulled a heist problemless, but then I remembered Bline. Funny how the other thoughts of the day can crowd in, make you think that what happened earlier either wasn't as important, or just smaller in perspective of everything else. “I got us some marks,” I finally say.

“From where?” His eyes twinkle a bit, a devious glint in his smile reminds me that I can still make Pops happy, even when things go rough. “Did you hit a merchant shop?”

“I try not to do them, Pops, you know that. They work just as hard as us, and they don't need me taking from them.”

Pops makes an irritated noise in the back of his throat. “Then what'd you get?” He rolls off the low couch where he spends most of his days, his useless legs flopping after him. He drags his skinny body to the table and works his way into his seat. I don't bother asking to help; I already know his answer. The grunts and groans and complaints end as soon as he situates himself, crossing his fingers together and resting his hands on the table.

“This.” I produce the fat—though not as fat as when I first picked it—bag of marks and toss it to him. He lets it hit the tabletop and slide toward him.

“All—in one haul?” He seems surprised. I mention this. “I am,” he says, “but mostly because I worry that the owner’ll find us easy. Where’s he from?”

This gives me pause, but I tell the truth in the end. I have yet to see a time when lying helps me with Pops. “Wynland, I think.”

He turns on me, eyes sharp again. “Wynland? Did I hear you right?”

“Yes, Pops.”

“Why do you think that?” Despite his sudden concern, Pops eagerly fingers open the bag. The marks spill out, glittering and singing as they roll about. I recognize most of the seals as being from mints within the Realm, but it looks like a couple come from as far away as the Shores—and even one from Darshur. I frown, wondering but not speaking.

“What makes you think that?” repeats he, pushing the marks about. I don’t really hear him. This haul had more in it than I had thought, originally. Bline is—*was*—one rich behemoth.

“The...the man caught me.”

The coins stop moving. Pops lets out a slow sigh, the candle at the edge of the table flickering with the breath. “He did?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I...It’s not a simple story.” I take a seat and relate the whole tale to him, step after step, not forgetting anything. Even the parts about Dalm’s appearance after I escaped and his lie about his inn found their way into Pops’ ears. When I finish, I stand up and take a pull from a waterskin that Mama must’ve refilled before I got home. She knows how I work up a thirst when I’m out picking.

He stares at me a while, then says slowly. “We can’t keep these.”

“What?” I almost spit out the water. “Why not?”

“I won’t put Kev in danger of a Wyn. No way. Mama either. That won’t happen.”

“What do you mean, Pops? That’s a lot of marks! We can maybe even slide town with that!”

“Don’t use streettalk with me, Amela. I won’t hear it.”

I bite my tongue. I forgot that he doesn’t like streettalk so much. He says it makes him feel old. “Sorry. What I wanted to say was that I bet we could leave Tintyr with that amount of marks.”

“Where would we move to? Where else would we find the Dandyn-trained healers to help Kev? If it weren’t for them, he wouldn’t have a chance at life! Did you forget about him?”

“No.” I never forget about Kev. “But Pops, there’s a whole Realm outside the boundaries of Tintyr! I’m sure that there’s a Dandyn-trained healer out there somewhere, if we look in the right place.” Heat creeps into my voice. “Don’t throw away all my hard work, Pops. Please? I nearly died for that coinpurse. I know that it’s dangerous to spend his money, that he might work it back to us. I know that, but we always have that worry, no matter where the pickings came from.”

“Look, Amela.” Pops takes a deep breath and shakes his head. “I appreciate your hard work. Don’t think I don’t; I do. And Kev appreciates it, after his way, as does

Mama. But you're wrong in thinking that this is like every other pick you've done. This is a *Wyn* we're talking about. The very fact that he knows your face, has your smell, and almost *ate* you tells me that we can't keep this."

"Superstition," I say, but he cuts me off with a gesture.

"I've been alive for quite some time, and it isn't because I throw stuff out and call it superstition. That can't work forever, living in a hole of ignorance." He pokes at the bag with his gnarled, square finger. "I'm not rejecting you, Amela, nor your work. It's these marks. They're probably leading him to us right now." He glances warily at the door and, despite my feelings, I follow his gaze.

"Pops, I..."

"Stop talking. That time's passed. I'll have to get rid of these."

"How?"

He smiles a bit. "I have my ways."

"I'll do it for you, Pops. Please?" I look at him with my best imploring look, but he remains firm.

"No, I won't let you have the chance to disobey me. If we keep even one of these marks, a *Wyn* can hunt us down. He might even find you because of your scent anyway." He shakes his head, as if it pains him just as much as it pains me to let the money go. "I'm sorry."

I nod, not because he has convinced me so much as that one phrase sticks in my head. "Wait, what do you mean that he has my scent? He smells me?"

Pops grunts as he clumsily shifts from his chair to his wheels. "*Wyns* are known for that, kid. They have sharper senses than we do, and they also have a mean streak that runs from here to the Inland Sea. You don't want to ever bother a *Wyn*. They can track you if they get a whiff of you."

I say to myself, "So that's how he managed to find me so quickly."

"What?" Pops tips his head toward me, eager.

"I was thinking about how *Bline* got to me so fast. I thought that I had him square for the pick, but then he just showed up in front of me. I guess he followed the smell of his coins." I pause, thinking. "And, now that I think about it, he was pretty close behind me for a while, until I slipped into the herb merchant's shop. That's when I had a moment of space."

"The mixtures of smells threw him off, I wager." Pops winks at me. "You did well, Amela, you sure did. But it's not worth the risk."

"Not even for Mama and Kev?"

"Because of Mama and Kev," he corrects me.

I watch, silent, as Pops puts on his dusty brown cap and drops the bag in his lap. "Don't go thinking that this is your fault, Mel." He's always at his most serious when he calls me that, because he knows that I'll listen closely when he uses my pet name. "It isn't."

"I know, Pops." What I don't say is that I still don't believe him.

"Good. I'll be back in an hour, mayhap less. Can you watch the house?"

"Problemless."

Pops glowers at me. "You best change your language, missy. I didn't teach you all those many years how to talk and think just to hear your foolish streetspeak."

I apologize meekly and look away. I feel stupid for having forgotten again so

soon, but it has been a stressful day. I feel justified in slipping a bit, and take the time to say so to Pops.

He shakes his head. “Don’t slip, Mel. That’s when people die.” He shifts in his wheels, pushing himself along at a reasonable speed.

The door closes behind him, but it doesn’t squeak.

I sigh and sit at the table, staring morosely at the empty spot where the bag had been. The stink of sweat, dirt, and the streets hits my nostrils, and I realize that I smell like the smithy’s shop. Normally, I don’t mind too much, but normally I have something to show for all my hard work. Trying not to feel bitter, I close my eyes and lean back in the seat, hoping to forget what I saw earlier.

To one side, a floorboard shifts noisily, drawing my attention and my gaze. “Hail?”

A tall, slender figure steps out of the darkness of the hallway, his stubbly black hair reflecting the candlelight. Scrawny, stick-like arms jut out of the plaid sleeprobe, each hand ending in long, sharp fingers. They twitch randomly, as if bugs crawl over them. Thick, full hair races about the bare legs that run up and underneath the robe. Overly-large feet balance the whole mess.

“Kev!” I don’t bother getting up as my younger brother takes a seat, his face aglow with happiness at seeing me. “How have you been?”

His smile gets bigger, and a thick tongue drops out of his mouth. A thin trail of drool creeps from one corner.

“Drooling, big guy,” I say and lean forward, producing a handkerchief out of one of my many pockets and tossing it to him. He picks it up awkwardly and wipes the wrong side of his face.

“Hail, ‘Mela. You home,” he says slowly, genuinely, carefully. Kev is nothing if not sincere in everything that he does. “Early?”

“No, I’m late tonight,” I reply. He still struggles to understand the concept of time, which makes it almost impossible to take him somewhere—healer’s appointments, for example—with anything approaching punctuality. “Were you asleep?”

He shakes his head, more drool slipping to puddle on the lapel of his sleeprobe. “Dreamthink.”

“Ah. That’s good.”

“You safe?” I love the concern he has for me. I smile.

“Always.”

“Where Pops?” comes the next careful question.

“He...” I hate lying to my family, but sometimes I find it difficult to explain things simply to Kev. “Well, he had to step out. Business.”

“Why business?” He frowns, his face all angles. “Not night?”

I say, “No, it’s night, Kev; you’re right. But Pops wanted to get it done right away.”

“What done?”

Silence drifts for a moment as I contemplate what to say. Finally: “He had to make sure we’re safe. Tonight.”

“Oh.” That seems to make sense to Kev, because his face dissolves the frown and his smile opens up again. “Good. That good.”

“It sure is.” I can see that Kev wants to ask another question, because his jaw—he

has Pop's chin, too—starts to twitch as much as his hands do. “Do you want to ask me something, Kev?” I have to prompt him sometimes to get the conversation going. I think that he forgets that he hasn't asked the question yet, and he will wait for the moons to fall from the sky before he gets impatient for an answer.

He nods and swallows—maybe for the first time since sitting—his spit. “What do you?”

“Today, you mean?”

Another nod.

“Well, I went to pick, you know. The pageant was on today.”

“Pretty!” Kev rarely interrupts, but when I start talking about pageants, parades, or plays he lights up like the dawn sun. If we didn't have the money spent on Dandyn-trained healers and medicines, I would see to it that he visited a play every week, maybe more. But that isn't an option. Yet.

“Yes, it was very pretty. There were jugglers and dancers, clowns and jesters, all sorts of motley. Pretty flower-maids threw petals into the air, showering the crowd with sweet rain.”

“Horses!”

“Oh, yes! Loads of horses, some the color of sablecloth, some as pure as milch. Others were dappled, or gray, or brown. They had mules and donkeys, oxen and even a bear, I think. The long-shanked sifs strutted, and they brought a Darshurian devil-toad, all displayed in a glass aquarium pulled by two giraffes.” I sigh and lean back in my seat. “It was a sight.”

I hate lying to Kev, but he only takes one story of a pageant. The fact that there were flower-maids and horses and donkeys make me feel none the better. He doesn't want to hear that most of the procession showed off the Militia's newest set of uniforms, a general, and a host of servants who mostly looked bored. Granted, they had the fire-shooters, and the thumps of the elephant-drums, but that's only because tradition insists that a pageant have them.

He eats up every word, a rapturous smile creasing his face. He starts to laugh, a bray that's loud enough to wake Mama, who sleeps more soundly than our ancestors. A slap of the table, a hoot, and then he finishes.

“Good?”

“Always.”

He yawns, and I echo the idea. I want for a bath, but know that I'll have to wait for morning. There isn't a lot that I can do without stoking a fire, and I don't have the energy to get the water hot. I know that Kev would do it for me if I asked, but I avoid taking advantage of that. I always worry that he'll burn himself on accident, and look at me with those mournful eyes, so filled with hurt and confusion. That snaps my heart every time, and I can't handle that now, not with having scarcely escaped death only to have my work prove fruitless.

“You ready for bed?”

He nods.

“You won't dreamthink anymore tonight?” Sometimes Kev will sit and stare, his mind not asleep but not alert either. He thinks and thinks, and it is almost impossible to get him out of it short of shaking him. Days will pass between actual hours of sleep for him, his rest gained through dreamthink. I wish that it would do more for him beyond that

—help heal his mind, perhaps—but it is nothing more than his word for a meditative state.

He shakes his head.

“Promise?” ask I.

“Double-promise,” he replies.

“Good. Now, I’ll tuck you in then kiss Mama goodnight.”

“Pops?” His concern is open on his face. Neither one of us likes to think of Pops getting hurt.

“He’ll be safe. He probably will be home before you fall asleep, Kev.”

“Love ‘Mela.” He smiles.

“I love you, too, Kev.”

We walk a matter of steps to his room, a tiny sectioned off space that would serve better as a closet. The warped walls make the door a chore to open, but I manage it and let him in. He has to stoop to get through the jamb. The rushes of his bed seem flat, but we haven’t the money to buy others, and I have yet to find the time to harvest some myself. I want to apologize, but Kev wouldn’t understand.

I close the door after seeing him bed down, then stare at this squalid home of mine, the mildew that creeps in after a rare rain, the cracks and warping that come from the heat. One of the windows in the tiny kitchen has been broken longer than I can remember, and a constant traffic of flies floats in to brood over the dishes and food. Everything appears worn or in disrepair. He deserves better; they all do. I don’t know how we’ll ever get out of this mess, but we have to.

Somehow.

NIGHTMARES WAKE me three hours before dawn. I blink at the inkiness in front of my eyes, trying to remember what had scared me. Sweat from the heat of the night and the fear of the dream drench me, and I shift out of my bed, swinging my callused feet idly before dropping to the cool ground. The loft of my bed space stretches above the common room, giving me little privacy, but keeping me from feeling too enclosed. I slept in Kev's bedroom for a long while, but that became too confining. Now I sleep up high, where I like to be.

I move stiffly at first, my well-abused muscles angry at the work they had done earlier, and now being roused from a good sleep. I don't blame them, but I also don't listen. I know pain. Not as well as some, but I know it.

Rubbing my eyes, I think through what awakened me, but to no avail. I stumble to the waterskin that still sits on the table. After a mouthful of tepid water, I sit in my worn, wobbly chair to think. Nothing else to do at a time like this.

I run through a hundred different things, finally landing on something that should have alarmed me upon awaking: Pops hasn't come back.

Another reason why I like the loft is that it keeps me out of people's sight (nobody ever looks up), yet lets me see everything that happens in the house, if I'd like. I would never miss someone leaving—or, in Pops' case, coming back.

Just to assure myself, I creep to Pops and Mama's room, the only other room besides Kev's. No door hangs there, just a tattered piece of cloth that has more age than I do. Wooden rings click quietly together as I push the curtain aside and gaze in. Mama's large form engulfs the bed, her light snores tickling my ears.

Pops' spot...empty.

Wiping away an itch under my eye, I replace the curtain and prowl back to my loft, hiking up the rings as nimbly as a minivan. I peel off my private clothes and replace them with fresh, non-sweaty ones. I snug into the same trousers I wore earlier, and then toss on a fresh brown tunic—stained, but clean. My longjacket finds its way across my shoulders, and I lower myself to the ground again.

The door squeaks as I open it; I sigh, roll my eyes, and step out into the night air anyway.

Our house sits wedged between two rather large buildings, almost as an afterthought. Both of the other structures house rooms that people can live in—for a price. We don't worry much about the neighbors, because they don't worry about us. Our front door empties out into the street, with only a strip of weeds behind the house as a pretend yard.

I wander down the avenue a few steps and cast about, guessing where Pops might have gone. We have a number of fences throughout town. Any one of them could pass those marks around, and I know that Pops won't be sloppy in the transfer; he'll get all he can out of them. A couple of those seals looked rather rare—probably valuable. I hope that nothing has gone wrong, because he left hours ago and he hasn't returned. Then again, his wheels don't work really well, and if someone isn't pushing him (which he hates more than anything, I think, but suffers it anyway) it can really take some time.

I tip my head, trying to catch a hint of his approach, the telltale squeak of the wheels and the familiar, exasperated grunt as he gets stuck on the rutted cobbles of the

street.

Nothing.

A slight breeze kicks a bit, flirting with the sleeves of my longjacket, and I revel in the coolness.

I think through the list of possible fences again, hoping that one of them might sound more likely this time around, but to no luck. He could have gone anywhere.

Turning to the house, I notice a movement at the end of the street, heading my way. It looks like a drunk, some obese sod who forgot where he beds down. Lurching about, he makes an uneven path toward me. Squinting in the pale light of the night, I see that this man is an overflowing-his-belts-and-bursting-his-buckles kind of big.

My nightmares return.

Memories of the day's pursuit return.

Blinc chased me all through the dreams, his face growing and stretching and changing, trying to lick me, trying to eat me. I had run down the corridor of a long building, with closed and locked doors to every side. Screaming, I tried to raise help, but no one listened. At last, bloated and dripping saliva and puss from his face sores, Blinc caught me, his girth filling every side of the hall, the floor, the ceiling. Terrified, I had awoken.

My nightmare stumbles, as real as the rocks pressing against my naked feet, stumbling...lurching...Stretching. I can feel my knees start to quake, and my hands tremble as badly as Kev's. With a heave I realize that my tongue has swollen and sticks to the roof of my mouth while my stomach tries to leap out of the constriction that was, moments earlier, my throat. My innards turn to water and rush out into the street. The sharp stink of my piss wakes me out of my shock, and I jerk myself toward the door.

It's no dream.

It's real.

Behind me comes the noise.

Pop.

I can't wake up from reality.

Pop.

Like bones breaking.

Pop.

Joints cracking.

Pop.

Death approaching.

Pop.

I have to get Mama and Kev away.

Pop.

Now.

I shove open the door. The hinges don't squeak, but the door slams against the wall, rattling the house and causing Kev to immediately start wailing in fear.

"Mama! Wake up! Get up, we have to go!" I yell as loudly as I can, no doubt waking the closest neighbors. I don't care. "Get up!"

"Amela? What's going on?" Mama sounds confused and sleepy. I rush into her room, throwing the curtain aside so forcefully that I rip it. "Amela?" She fumbles for the sheet as she tries to cover herself and her sleeping clothes—as if I've never seen those

before.

“No time to explain. Get up. Put on your shoes.” Mama won’t go anywhere without her shoes. “I’ll see to Kev.”

“Amela?”

I throw my body against Kev’s door, the warped jamb barking in protest. Kev is curled up on the center of his bed, his blanket in his mouth and his cheeks wet with tears.

“I’m sorry, Kev. I didn’t mean to frighten you,” I say breathlessly. “Do you want to go for a walk? See the stars?”

Kev shakes his head and starts to wail, a mournful howl that sets my hair—and nerves—on end.

Mama lumbers in, her size eclipsing the door frame. “What’s the matter, Amela? What are you doing?”

“Mama, I told you to get your shoes on! We have to leave now!”

“Where’s Pops?”

Exasperated, I grab her and give her a shake. “Mama, listen! *We have to go!* Why aren’t you understanding that? Calm Kev down and...”

I feel a tremor under my feet, as though a heavy load has dropped nearby. It cuts my commands off, and I fall silent. I step from the bedroom and toward the still open front door. Standing on the street are two legs with a forest of hair that I recognize.

Bline.

He stands so tall that I can only see from his waist down, a sheet draped about him to cover his nethers. I only come up to the just above his knee. He must be three times my size, and then half again, I wager. His body isn’t as fat—I assume that he lost all of that while I was trying to get Mama roused out of bed—but I still recognize it. Kev peeks out of his room, his wails stopping for the moment. If he understands what he’s looking at he gives no sign. Mama, for her part, starts to gum her half-hand, a nervous habit that comes out only when she’s distressed. Like now, for example.

“Amela, what is that?”

“That’s...”

I don’t get anymore out before the whole house trembles. Dust cascades on us from the cracks in the ceiling, and the walls groan as they shift ever so slightly. Another shaking blow makes me reel a bit, clutching at Mama to keep from falling. Her too big bulk steadies her, and she picks up the same obnoxious tone as Kev. Their cries do little to drown out the sound of the roof creaking down, bending beneath another blow.

“Get Kev out of here!” I shout, though I don’t know how they’ll do it. The house has only one exit—the door—and right now there’s a Behemoth guarding it. I could fit through the back window, but Mama? There’s a better chance of Pops walking again than her fitting through that miserable hole. She probably couldn’t even climb the counter, her weight making it crumble—

The house reels beneath another hit. A chunk of the roof drops loose, smashing against my shoulder. It hurts. The pain brings me back to the most important issue: surviving.

“Mama, take Kev into your room and stay low!” I order, pushing her down the warped hall as the building groans again. The sound of splintering wood gives her a better shove than I ever could, and she stumbles away, Kev’s wailing form right behind her.

The sharp stinging of my shoulder helps me to keep my mind focused as the house shifts backward, the front breaking down and in with an unholy crunch. Pieces of timber, shattered glass, and twisted metal adorn the floor. The table catches a load of debris and then buckles, the chairs beneath it splintering and spinning away.

“You there, girl? You missed me, hey?” The voice sounds bigger, meaner, and right above me. I ball my fists as I look up at him through the ribs of the roof. His face still looks as hideous, bloated, and boil-covered as before. Even his disgusting mole is in place, easily the size of a man’s hand.

“Blinc.”

“You remember me! I’m flattered.”

“It’s your smell I remember,” I snap back, my shoulder throbbing and my head swirling. I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I have to try something. Maybe if he gets angry he won’t flatten our house. Something in the back of my brain says that that doesn’t make a sniff of sense, but I shut it out and glare at Blinc. He seems to think it’s funny, and starts to laugh, his mouth wider than my head—and maybe my upper body, too.

“Good! I was afraid you’d lose some of your heat! I wanted a spicy morsel to eat today. After all, why else would I Stretch? I gotta eat you somehow, hey?” He grins again, a leer perverse enough to make me feel naked. He shakes his bloody hands, torn ragged on the house’s bones.

“Come and get me!” I yell, reaching into my pocket and feeling my fireball. I grip it in a trembling hand and suck in a deep breath.

He lunges for me, and I try to scramble away. When I try to smash a bug, it always seems like I’m moving frozen, but the stupid fly moves like lightning. I figure it should be the same for me, in comparison to a behemoth standing over fifteen feet tall.

Wrong.

Like a cat pouncing, Blinc swats me to the side, like an adult batting away at a large doll. I bounce off the wall and land in a pile of rubble that had, moments before, been Pops’ favorite book stand, with his tiny but precious collection of stories. I see a title page, *Gamie’s Gamble*, and I feel a fire of rage erupt within me. That was Pops’ favorite book, and he said that there weren’t anymore around.

“What, is that all? I was expecting a bit more.” Blinc sounds disappointed.

“Step close and you’ll get more,” I hiss as I resume my wobbly feet. The blow had knocked my fireball loose, and I see it spinning uselessly next to the remains of my loft, across the house. I don’t bother checking to see Blinc’s position. Instead, I leap forward, sprinting toward my goal.

The back of a meaty hand flicks into my gut, catching me beneath the ribs and sending me sailing back into the kitchen. I crash against a cupboard which—somehow...miraculously—hadn’t toppled yet. The mismatched and cracked dishes explode beneath my back and shower over me as I slide to the ground. My wind staggers in my lungs, and I can’t get a decent breath in me.

“You fly good, girl! Maybe I should see how far you can go with a *real* throw behind you!” He leans over the crumbling lip of what used to be the front wall, his knobby, bleeding hands rushing toward me. I try to fumble my way to the fireball, but I only make it to the cutting board before he snatches me. My searching fingers grasp the handle of a meat cleaver that is wedged in the counter top. I barely manage to grip it

before he jerks me into the air. I dangle the one hand that holds the cleaver over his knuckles so that he—I hope—doesn't see it. His face shows strain as he lifts me, and his other hand comes up for support. He starts to squeeze.

I feel my loose lungs compress, and the world swirls darkly about me. I struggle to put my thoughts together without the aid of air. It isn't working very well.

I probably look like a babe in his arms. I decide to show him how dangerous a baby I can be.

"You'll provide me three meals," he says and squeezes tighter. I gasp and roll in his arms a bit, trying to get air again. "Well, maybe two." He laughs again.

I mumble something.

"What?" he says, bringing me closer.

"I said, I hope I make you choke!" I swing the cleaver as hard as I can, as fast as I can. Reflexes and luck save him from having a meat cleaver plugging his neck, and his shoulder shoots up to block the attack. The cleaver buries its razor sharp head—one of Pops' quirks: Always keep your blades sharp—into the jaw of the Wyn. It races through layers of fat and muscle before coming to a stop in his cheekbone.

With a roar, Bline drops me. I fall through the air, tumbling a bit before landing on my feet. I take a brief moment to breathe—oh, the sweet rush of dust-filled air!—and then shoot toward the fireball.

Bline has wrenched the meat cleaver out of his face. With a vicious throw, he hurls it at my head. I trip, and the blade clatters harmlessly against the still mostly-intact low couch. I scoop it up at the same time as I snatch my fireball off the ground. I spin and face him, swiping at his fingertips as he tries for me again.

"Didn't I tell you?" I snarl as I take a piece out of his forefinger. "I bite back."

Bline has one fat hand covering his cheek. More blood than I thought possible dribbles from between the cracks in his fingers. The wounded forefinger finds its way into his mouth, where he sucks it forcefully.

"Why don't you just walk away, behemoth? I don't have your marks, if that's what you're after."

Bline spits at me, a glob of saliva and blood that splatters against the wall. It reeks like a butcher's shop. "We're beyond that, hey? Maybe if you hadn't tried that cute trick just now. But talking time is over."

"Wonderful," I mutter as I prepare for another attack.

Only now do I realize that a crowd has gathered in the street—a goodly distance back. No one has moved; they only stare.

"Help me!" I shout, trying to get them to respond. Bline's a big boy, but he isn't invincible. A few men could topple him. "Help me, please! Get the Militia!" Never though I'd say that.

"Quiet, girl!" barks Bline. "You are more dead than the dead!"

"That makes a whole world of sense," I say with an air of bravery that I don't feel. I start to move a little bit, trying to get some momentum to get me out of the house. I'm trapped, and I know it. I have to find a better place to fight, I have to move the fight away from Mama and Kev, both of whom are screaming in the bedroom, no doubt covers tossed over their heads. Mama doesn't think so clearly when she's under a lot of stress. I get my levelheadedness from Pops, I think.

Bline doesn't want to talk anymore, apparently, and he lunges for me with a

grunt. I hack one hand, the blade biting through to the bone, but it gets stuck for a second longer than I need it to, and the other hand comes up from behind. Sticky blood smears against me as I am again lifted into the air. He jerks his hand away from me and flicks it with an irritated grunt, the meat cleaver shaking loose and spiraling into the night, a ribbon of blood attached to the edge.

The air rushes past my ears and I find myself crushed against the wiry hairs of his bulging chest. I gasp as I feel my spine bend, a popping noise filling my ears. He's literally crushing the life out of me.

I realize as the world spins that I don't know how to defeat him.

BLINE SUDDENLY drops me. I land maladroitly on my feet and curl into a ball amid the rubble, trying desperately to get air into me. A rushing, hissing sound fills my ears, and it takes a little bit to realize that the sound comes from the gathered crowd. A couple of my neighbors—men I don't know and, to be honest, would have robbed blind given half a chance—are hurling pieces of my house at the behemoth, pelting him, stabbing him, and generally making him really angry.

Bline hasn't lost interest in me; I know because he says so. "This ain't over, girl!" But the crowd has become violent, and he doesn't seem inclined to stay. With two quick bounds he is a block and a half away. I hear the telltale *pop*; he has started to shrink again.

I gasp for air and comfort my bruised ribs. I ache all over, and in ways I didn't know a person could ache. To my surprise, I still have my fireball in one hand, clutched so tightly that I marvel it isn't broken and burning. I drop it into its appropriate pocket and try to stand.

It doesn't work.

Strong hands suddenly wrap themselves around me, and a blanket is draped over my shoulders. "Are you hurt?" The voices start speaking at once, a buzzing that just aggravates the pain in my head.

"Who was that?"

"What did it want?"

"Have you ever seen anything like that?"

"I never thought I'd see a Vyn in my whole life!"

"That wasn't a Vyn."

"Yes, it was!"

"No, because a Vyn has horns. Did you see horns?"

"Are you sure it wasn't a Goryn?"

"It sure weren't a Dandyn. Them's nice!"

"How would you know?"

"I know more 'an you, 'parently. That weren't no Vyn, I says."

"Is she all right?"

"What a mess!"

"Can we go to bed now, Mommy? I'm tired."

At the mention of a mother, I remember Mama and Kev. A wave of guilt for having forgot them washes over me, but I don't let it fester. I was fighting for my life—a tenuous excuse, but it'll serve.

Pushing past the eager, sympathetic crowd—not even bothering to look into their concerned faces—I stumble through the rubble that had been my tiny home. Now it looks like...well, a giant had sat on it.

"Mama?" My voice sounds raw, hoarse, and uncomfortable on my tongue. "Kev? Where are you?"

My ears still ring from the fight; I can barely hear anything. A bucketful of dust from the only remaining piece of roof pours over me, and I cough. The action hurts, stretching my injured ribs and muscles more than I care to admit.

"Kev? Mama?"

I think I hear a whimper coming from the direction of the bedroom. I peek in to the remarkably intact room. Both Kev and Mama are hiding beneath the covers, crying softly. Pieces of the roof have fallen over the floor, making it treacherous to pass through. Lighting doesn't exist save as the waning moonlight that pierces through the gaps in the roof.

"Mama?" I think I speak softly, but the larger lump leaps. Maybe I startled her. Brushing off some of the broken pieces of wood and shingles that cover her bed, I gently pull on the sheet. A grip beneath tightens. "Whoa," I say gently, "don't worry. Kev, it's me. Amela. I'm here now, and the monster's gone." I don't mention that he'll like as not be back. They don't need to hear that yet. "Will you let go of the blanket?" The thinner shape, the section holding the blanket still, shakes its head. "Please?" Another shake.

I take a deep breath and try to think clearly. It doesn't work too well. I think I hear more talking outside, but I ignore it. The crowd is probably picking through our stuff now, taking what they can. That's what I would do, anyway. The Militia is no doubt on their way, and, now that the behemoth has left, I really don't want to see them. They might ask questions, and, as a thief, I hate giving answers. After all, how am I supposed to explain this house when Pops is a cripple, Mama disabled, and Kev the way he is? How do we eat, when the little girl is the only one in the family with a working body *and* brain? Even if they didn't think of thieving, prostitution will get me jailed just as fast—and they are more than likely to assume that of me.

"Kev. Can I come in with you?" I wait for the nod. I use that voice that Kev can never deny, the honey-sweet tones that always convinces him to obey.

No surprise that it works.

The blanket relaxes and I slide underneath. I can't see anything for lack of light, but the smell of sweat and bad breath, mingled with Kev's accident (doesn't surprise me) sure give me a lot of information.

"Mama?" I turn to the weeping sound, and the sound of gums working over a stump. Her wooden teeth are gone—I think I saw them smashed beneath a piece of timber from the wall. "Mama, the Behemoth's gone. Do you hear? He left. I'm not hurt, Kev's not hurt. We're all right, you hear?"

She moans a little louder.

"Look, I know you're scared. King's blood, Mama, I'm scared, too. I don't know what's going to happen. But we need to leave."

"Why? Why leave?" The words—just a hiss above silent—are almost lost to my still-ringing ears.

"Why?" I pause. I have to tell the truth—she's Mama. But how much truth? After all, saying that the behemoth might come back would only frighten her more. "Because the Militia are coming." Right. Good. Truth. "The Militia are bound to be here, and we don't need them looking at us. We have to disappear."

"Pops?" Again, I barely catch the word.

"Pops can find us. We'll go to Carly's, and Pops will definitely think to go there." I hope.

She doesn't say anything for a long moment. Or maybe she does—if so, I can't hear her. Finally she shifts and starts to move the blanket. Kev moans and clutches the fabric closest to him.

"We gotta go, Kev-baby. We don't got a choice." She sounds as terrified as I feel.

“She’s right, Kev. You come with me?” I ask in my sweet-voice. “You come with me to Carly’s?”

Kev makes his *All right* noise, a weird mix between a grunt and moan. “Huuuhhhmmm.” Like that.

I nod and start to move, casting off the blanket. Mama stands up and pulls a loose robe over her sleeping clothes. We shoo Kev to his room, where he steps into his sandals and drops a tunic over his short pants.

I stomp into the kitchen. My neighbor—I can’t remember his name—straightens suddenly. I look at him blandly, waiting for his explanation.

“Is anyone hurt?”

I throb at the words. Somewhere I’m bleeding, I just know it, and my head vibrates mercilessly.

“We’re fine.” Lying to others comes easily.

“I was...I just was looking...”

“Give me our food.”

“What?”

I point a still shaking finger at a still-standing cupboard behind him, the one that’s missing a door. “Give it to me.”

“Oh. Yes.” He crosses over some rubble, the remnants of a soup bowl powdering beneath his feet, and pulls out the wheel of cheese and half loaf of bread. We have other stashes of food elsewhere, but, frankly, I can’t remember where they are. He hands the food to me and asks if there’s anything he can do. I turn on my heel, not answering.

“Mama. Kev. Come.”

They follow obediently, Mama helping Kev through the wreckage while I fight back the sudden wave of nausea that hits me. I often have a rush of bile after a tricky pick or a close encounter, but this is more. This is too much. My empty stomach turns over. I marvel that I’m alive, but don’t have time to dwell on it.

We step out of the mess and into the street. A few of the neighbors are still lingering, but the show has ended, and the majority have left.

A nasal, penetrating voice breaks over me. “Mel! Wait, Mel, are you hurt? Is everyone all right?”

I turn, surprised. Logan stumbles in the low moonlight over a twisted scrap that must have been the fire tongs at one point. He curses and scurries to catch up.

“By the Crown, you’re bleeding!”

I knew it. “I’m fine,” I lie, turning my shoulder and helping my family through the final scattered ruins of our home. “Nothing we can’t handle.”

“Can I help?” Logan has known me since before the accident, and he thinks he knows almost everything about the family. He might even suspect me of being a street, though I don’t know for sure. He has a way of simply deflecting straight questions and ignoring direct commands. In other words, a perfect thief himself. Still, I can only trust him as well as he knows me, and right now he doesn’t know me well enough.

“No, thank you.”

“Look, the Militia are coming. They can help...”

“I’m not interested.” We head north, up the road toward Carly’s. I hope that Pops hasn’t taken the coins there. Blin might not have been interested in them, but he knew where I lived because of them, the way I see it. If Pops tried to fence the stuff at Carly’s

place, then Bline can pick up where he left off.

“You were interested in me helping back there!” The way he says it draws me up.

“It was you who started throwing stuff at him?”

He nods, smiling a buck-toothed smile, his wiry red hair a subdued flame in the darkness. He claims that his parents are many times removed Darshur, giving him his fair (and freckled) skin, but I have to wonder sometimes. Every other Darshur I’ve ever seen had yellow hair, like threads spun from the sun. None ever looked like a frostbitten carrot—pale at one end and fiery on the other. “I try to help whenever I can.”

“Great. Do me a favor—”

“Anything, Mel.”

“—and leave us alone.”

His face falls. “Oh.”

“It’s not that we don’t appreciate it, Logan. It’s just that I have a hundred different aches in me right now, our house is ruined, and I don’t know where Pops is. If I have to think of something for you to do, too, I think my brain’ll burst out of my face through my nose.”

“Eww,” says Kev, who never has understood sarcasm or exaggeration. He looks concerned, and Mama has to explain, in a soft tone, that my brain is fine where it is and that it won’t go anywhere.

“Let me find Pops, then,” offered Logan. I wonder if he’s attracted to me, or something weird like that. I can’t understand why else he hangs around so much. He’s only in his fifteens; maybe that has something to do with it. “Please?” Begging. I hate begging.

“Fine.” Whatever gets him out of my shadow. “We’re going to Carly’s. He knows where that is. If he comes back, tell him that we’re all right and that we’re waiting for him.”

Logan throws me a gesture that I take to resemble (loosely) a Militia salute. “I will deliver the message!”

“Wonderful,” say I and push on, with Mama and Kev close behind.

We’re only a few steps away when I notice the sounds of muffled sobbing. I slow enough to pull even with Mama, and notice that it is she, not Kev, who weeps.

“Mama? You hurt?”

“No, dear one. Oh, Amela, our beautiful house! Why did this happen? Why did it attack us? Was that a Vyn?”

“No, Mama, don’t you remember? The Vyn are the biggest behemoths. That was only a Wyn.”

“*Only?*” She sounds ready to dissolve into tears again. “How can you say *only* a Wyn?”

I shrug. She hasn’t heard the story from earlier in the day. I tell her, in a low voice, of everything that happened, including Pops’ insistence that we ditch the marks. I sigh as I finish. “Now he’s probably fenced them, and we could really use that money now, knowing as we do that Bline has his fat foot on us anyway.”

“I’m sorry, Amela,” says Mama in a blubbery tone. “We ain’t no help to you at all.”

I roll my eyes. She’s diving into her pity pool right now, and I don’t have the patience for it. Not only did I just survive two encounters with a behemoth (how did I do

that, anyway?), but I'm also fighting against the small amount of sleep I got. Fact: I'm tired as death, and wish for nothing more than the chance to lay my head down and sleep.

"You're a help, Mama," soothe I.

"No, I ain't." Pops would yell at her for streettalking. I ignore it.

"You're fine."

"No."

"Kev, don't butt in. Look, Mama, you're my family. After the accident, you and Pops couldn't really do anything except starve. That's why I'm here; that's what families do for each other. We stick together, because there isn't any other choice. Because we want to."

"But, still..."

"Still, you're my Mama. Kev's my Kev, and Pops is my Pops. There's no changing that. We do what we have to so that we can stay together."

"If it weren't for us..."

This argument is as old as the scar on Kev's head. "We've been through this, Mama. If you weren't around, who'd be my parents? No one. I wouldn't be born, and this conversation would not be held, which is looking to be a better proposition as time goes on. The fact of the matter is, we're here, our house ain't, and now we move." I take a deep breath to steady my nerves a bit. "We shouldn't argue about this. I'm not abandoning you. We'll talk to Carly and see what he can do for us; put us up for the night or something. Once we reconnect with Pops, we'll talk to some of his friends. They'll get me some good work that'll pay partway well and we can worry about getting another home soon."

"Will it come back?"

That gives me pause. I haven't thought about that question because I'm not too keen on how it'll answer itself. "I don't... We don't have what he wants. The marks, I mean." I swallow and hurry on with my justification, hoping it sounds less hollow to her ears than it does mine. "We don't have them anymore, and there isn't any way for him to follow us. Pops says that it was the marks that he followed when he chased me, and now that we don't have them..." My words run in circles, and I shake my head wearily. "I can't talk now, Mama. I'm too tired."

She nods and we plunk along, the dust of the road rising beneath our bare and sandaled feet. Carly's place sits at the corner of a square, a run-down goods store that has more to it than first appears. Originally a butcher's store, Carly bought the place from the widow of said butcher at a bargain price. It took him years to clean out all the bloodstains from the back room. When younger, I wondered to Pops why Carly had wanted that particular shop, when a hundred other better-smelling and bigger shops were available. Once I started thieving, however, I learned that Carly's goods often came in from less-than-legitimate owners of aforementioned goods. The butcher had an extensive cellar system, which actually connected to some of the old, broken down aqueducts that honeycomb the city. Using those, Carly can move hot merchandise beneath—literally—the noses of the Militia and his competition.

I still think the place stinks.

Dust from between the cobblestones kicks up and into our eyes as we tromp the deserted streets. We walk past a junction that, if we took the right hand turn, would lead us directly to the herb merchant's shop where I first evaded Bline. The parade route

obviously ran this way from earlier, for litters of paper, flecks of broken glass, and wooden debris scatter about. Why does the Crown have to hold a pageant every time the King passes through? Yes, I know that the Woes of the Peasantry are important to some, and it makes the King look better to his people, but to me it seems a waste of time and marks.

The wind picks up more than a mile from Carly's, and with it comes the scent of rain. "Just what I need," I mutter bitterly. Kev looks at me curiously, a content grin on his face. Already he has forgotten the attack, and now sees this evening romp as a greatly fun game. Sometimes he'll rush ahead with our food, laughing and gurgling to himself in his Kev-speak, a language that only he understands or says. Mama tries to rein him in, but it only goads him, more often than not. Only when he starts to get too loud and a lamp or two light up in the homes we pass do I bother to jump in and ask him in rough tones to shut his lips.

It usually works.

The wind shoves at me, all hot and angry, pushing me back every few steps or so. I grit my teeth, only to find my mouth filled with grit. I spit out the dust, try to wipe it from my eyes, and do my best not to complain. After all, what good will that do? I have to conserve my energy for walking anyway.

We're still nearly a half mile away from the shop when the rains finally come. "Not a surprise." All anyone has been talking about the last few years is the weather: heat, dying crops, sparse rain. It all connects, right? Well, now we'll get some rain—during the time when my whole family is stuck without shelter.

The whispers take the weather.

Drops begin to fall, making Kev nervous at first. When he realizes that it's warm rain falling on him, he begins to laugh. The rain hits hard, large pellets of water splashing in the dirt, making the air muggy and humid. Soon enough, the water has washed the heat of the day away, along with the blood and dust that covers me. Kev starts to dance with joy. In his rapture, he accidentally drops the bread in a muddy puddle. The dry loaf soaks up the muddy water like the Crown laps up flattery.

"Now it's moist," I say without a hint of humor. Kev laughs and laughs. Mama sighs and tries to keep her sopping hair from completely unraveling itself from the hasty bun she has tied.

We reach Carly's a little while later, and, as he opens the door, his suspicious eye darting over our sodden forms, the rain stops.

Naturally.

"Where da Lander?" he says, his long, crooked nose the only thing passing the crack in the door.

"Don't know." I shake my head as I speak, flecks of water sparkling away from the tips of my hair. "Hoped he'd be here." If Pops hasn't come here, then where is he?

"Ain't." He puts more of his limp face out, checking left to right, searching for Militia no doubt. "What you want?"

"Please, Carly, not now," I beg him.

"What you want?" Apparently, even a half hour before dawn, Carly still wants to run the same stupid dialogue as ever.

I sigh. "In."

"Can't have trouble."

“You’ll get it if we can’t come in.”

“Says you, girl. What you want?”

“In.”

“Won’t have trouble.”

“You’ll have more if you leave us.”

“Says you, girl. What you want?”

“In. Now.”

“Well, well. Come in. Might’n I have a place for you.” He closes the door and unchains it, then unlatches the lock, the rusty gears protesting louder than Kev does come bath time, and lets opens the door. “Time’n told me whats you did,” he says as we walk in.

“Can’t that wait until morning?”

“Already mornin’.”

“I’m keeping my story until after I sleep,” I say as my gaze roves over the gathered heaps of miscellaneous junk that crowd his store. In the back he keeps a moldy pile of rushes he claims for a bed with chamber buckets and pail of stale water, which I remember from a previous visit. I don’t see any place for us to relax, not really, and mention this to him.

“Good couch ‘neath that drum,” he says, pointing with his chin. “An’ a chair—yonder, good price, clean—hold a person.” He glances at Mama. “Hold him,” he decides while staring at Kev.

Mama’s glare bites worse than a blood-bug, but Carly ignores her.

I nod. “Mama, clear the drum, take the couch. Kev, you rest in the chair.” I turn to our host. “So you haven’t seen Pops?”

“Says no, ain’t I?”

I shrug. “Fine. Have you heard word of him?”

Carly shakes his head, his thinning silver Darshur hair floating about him in ghost-like wisps. The low light from the candle on the counter doesn’t push back the darkness. In fact, I think that I could see better outside than I can inside. “Not for the wantin’.”

“Why?”

“Job.”

“A job? What?” My interest piques. First of all, Pops almost always lets me in on any offer of a job. Second, I’ve yet to see a job that he could do without my assistance; I do the heavy stuff in the family. Third, I’m nosy.

“Not yours.”

“Not yet.”

“Lissen, girl, this’n Lander job. Not yours.”

I bristle. “Pops always tells me anyway—”

“Not always.”

This brings me up. Does Pops keep stuff from me? I don’t want to believe it, so I don’t. “Fine. He doesn’t.” Lying to non-family doesn’t bother me. Sometimes, I can even lie to myself. “Tell me the job.”

Carly shakes his head again. “Late.”

“It’s already morning. You said so yourself. Now are you going to tell me the job?”

He snorts. “After you sayin’ the reasons, then tells I the story.” He folds his scrawny arms over his stained brown tunic with a triumphal bob of his head.

“Where can I land, then?” I really am too tired to argue with the old bat. I’ll find time—and energy—later.

He gestures to a sack of clothes. “Leave to yous.” He stomps off to his stinky back room, snuffing the candle as he goes.

I bed down, closing my eyes and trying to ignore the stink of mildew that wafts up when I shift on the bag. I drift off to the sounds of Mama sniffing and Kev snoring.

I DON'T think that Carly gets a lot of traffic during the day—in fact, I would bet that he doesn't get a lot of traffic ever. Maybe that explains why I start with surprise when the door suddenly gets kicked in. The light from the sun blinds my tired eyes, and I raise a hand to shield against it. My heart hammers in my chest, fear burning through the haze of sleep faster than a hare hopping from a hound. Only after I see who it is do I calm down enough to decide that the door wasn't kicked in.

“Pops!” I yell as I roll off the stink-bag. My shout does more to rouse Mama and Kev than the door banging open. I smile at him, his silvery hair disheveled and his eyes glaring. Under normal circumstances, I might dread that glower of his, but right now I just smile the wider. I wouldn't say it aloud, but I feared for him. “You're not hurt, are you?”

He ignores my question and focuses his eyes on Mama. “Are you safe, Mayleen?”

“Yes, Lander. I ain't—I mean, we're not harmed.”

“Good.” His eyes slide past Kev, who grins broadly. “Boy,” he says in passing. He shifts his body on his wheels. “Amela, you hurt?”

“No. Now, will you answer my question?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

He rolls his eyes and gives an exasperated sigh. “No, I mean, *No*. I'm not hurt.”

“Oh.”

“Listen, we can't stay here long.”

“Lander!” Carly finally sticks his scrawny head out of the back room. “Wantin' to talk!”

“Not now, Carly. I'm talking to my family.” Pops turns his head and looks at me. “We really need to move, I think. We don't know how much time we have, so we best not waste it.”

“But, Pops, I'm really tired.” The joy of seeing Pops has faded, and the drag from the long night pulls at me, drowning me like an anchor on a boat. “I need to rest. We all do.”

“Resting now might get us killed.”

Mama squeaks and Kev starts to whimper. Carly shakes his head and grumbles. “You might'n runnin' from the clinks?”

“No, it's not the Militia.” Pops shifts on his wheels, his face creased with worry. “They were prowling about the house.” He pauses. “Well, what's *left* of the house. I thought I'd lost you all. Then Logan saw me and told me to come here.” He tips his head with a grunt, indicating the outside. “I had him push me here.”

“Logan's here?” I blink in surprise. “Why's he outside?”

“Waiting. Watching.”

“For what?”

Carly steps forward. “Wantin' to help yous. Gotta try the goin'.”

Pops shakes his head forcefully. “No, Carly, we won't endanger you like that.”

“Wanna I. Got a job, need to speak yous.”

“Look, Carly. I appreciate you wanting to help. We'll need work, I'm sure. But we've got to get out of here.” He shoots a glance over his shoulder. “Logan! We still

clear?”

“As the daylight!” comes back the quick reply.

“Well, daylight fades,” muses Pops under his breath. He glances at Mama, who looks at him with terrified eyes. I wonder if she’s ever seen him like this before. “I fenced the marks and made it back to the house just as the Militia started to clean up. I know that they’ll be looking for us, if only to interrogate. The problem is...”

“We don’t need that kind of attention,” I finish for him as he trails off.

“But that’s not the greatest of my concerns. I worry about this—what was his name again? The Wyn who attacked us?”

“Bline,” I supply.

“Right. We need to move quickly. I’m afraid Bline might find us soon if we aren’t away..”

I shake my head. “I feel the same way, Pops, but I hurt him. A lot. You know the meat cleaver?”

Pops nods. “Of course.”

“Well, I got him with it.”

He blinks. “Where?”

“In the jaw,” I say after thinking for a moment. I would prefer not to recollect on that incident, but Pops doesn’t know the details. In fact, no one does.

He shakes his head. “Not enough.”

“For what? Killing?” Mama squeaks as she asks it.

“That’s what I was hoping,” admits he. “If you had hurt him bad enough, he might leave us alone. But I guess that isn’t the case.”

I fight against the crush of guilt that I feel for having disappointed Pops. He might not blame me, but I blame myself. It doesn’t matter that it involves killing a Wyn; if it would make anyone in my family happier, I’d do it.

Carly butts in. “Eatin’ better ‘an talks. Gets for the food.” He gestures to his back room.

I turn my head and wrinkle my nose. Kev sees it and starts to chuckle. He probably doesn’t know why I made the face, but he thinks it’s funny anyway. Mama throws me a glare, which I ignore. She says, “Food would be great, Carly.”

But Pops resists. “We can’t do that to you, Carly.” The shopkeep stares in surprise. “It’s not that we don’t want to, either. The Nords know what I wouldn’t give to eat right now, and I don’t doubt that my family feels the same.”

“Eat to food?” asks Kev. He often gets the words mixed up when he’s tired.

Mama shushes him, gently resting her only hand on his arm.

“Food’n the needs, now,” Carly insists.

Pops shakes his head, though, despite how adamant his friend and family act. “We simply can’t stall here. We need to—”

Before the sentence ends, I feel the ground shake.

“Oh, no.”

Kev groans and covers his head with his hands.

“King’s blood,” Pops says.

I’ve never heard him swear before. Logan bursts in, his eyes wide and his hair wild. “It came up faster than a windstorm, I swear! Nothing! There was nothin’, and now...”

The ground trembles and my body tenses. I tremble a little myself.

He found us.

Bline found us.

I glance over at Mama. Her face is whiter than the clouds, her dark skin notwithstanding. Pops wheels himself a bit closer, away from the door.

“Girlie! Come out, girlie!” Knees and legs appear by the window, and I think for the briefest of naive moments that he has passed us. Then the shop shudders beneath Bline’s heavy strike.

“Get! Down an’ out, down an’ out!” Carly begins to wave, herding us toward his smelly back room. I don’t argue; no one else does, either. Logan leaps behind Pops and starts shoving him, wheels and all, into Carly’s bedroom.

The shop is made of stiffer stuff than our home, so Bline starts kicking in the windows. Glass shatters and merchandise cascades to the ground, breaking and snapping and bouncing. He starts pounding the roof, each hit causing the walls to buckle and the ground to shake. Tacky crystals shimmy loose and crash against the floor while chipped vases drop to their doom. Instruments suddenly find themselves beneath trunks of moth-ridden clothes; reams of cloth tear as a box full of nails pepper them, catapulted from where they had perched at the end of the counter. The till clatters, its few marks sprinkling the shop and adding an ironic splash. Carly has definitely lost money on the place.

Tables, chairs, and even Mama’s sofa break beneath the avalanche of roof and wall. Bline hits the shop hard, and a gaping wound of early morning sunlight bleeds over the wreckage. Carly, much to my surprise, doesn’t seem to care—yet. He’s too busy with self-preservation. He rips up the carpet that’s covering the tiny floor of his sleeping room, revealing a trapdoor.

“Down!” he shouts over the sound of his life crashing in on him. He wrenches up, yanking on a frayed piece of rope. With a snap the rope breaks, sending him tumbling against the wall. Kev moans again and starts pounding at the sides of his head with his hands. Mama alternates between sucking on her stump, trying to comfort Kev, and glancing out at the mess that Bline is making. The Behemoth stomps everything, it seems, reveling in the destruction. I guess he figures that he has us trapped.

Carly curses and tries to pry the trapdoor open with his bare hands.

Maybe Bline figures right.

Finally, I push the shopkeep out of the way. “Let me try.”

“Girl can’t do it. No, might’n a boy.” Carly looks at Kev, sizing him up. Kev’s a big boy, and certainly capable of opening the trapdoor...

“Forget it, there’s no way to explain it to him,” Pops interrupts, flinching as an ornate statue breaks through a collection of fine earthen dishes, the sound almost deafening. “Mel, try it!”

I hunker over it, one leg on each side of the door, looping my fingers through the gap that had housed the rope. I take a deep breath and pull, using my legs as leverage. My ribs scream, and I can feel the scab from the cut I had taken across my shoulder separate. I want to let loose with a shriek of my own, but I hold it in. I can feel the door start to move.

“By the blood of the King, Carly, what’s wrong with the door?” shouts Pops.

“They’n pushin’ from the downwards up, not the upwards down,” Carly explains

lamely. “And th’ sides’n long time usin’.”

I ignore the argument and focus on pulling.

Thud.

He’s closer now. I can’t stop.

Thud.

The pain makes me dizzy.

Thud.

Mama screams as a piece of granite sails into the room and ricochets off the wall. Kev wets himself, the stink mingling with bachelorhood and long gone butchery.

Thud.

I grimace and pull harder.

Thud.

The door moves one inch. Then another.

Thud.

It budges once more, and now Carly can get his spindly fingers into the crack.

Thud.

Logan leans over, trying to help. He only gets in the way.

Thud.

My fingers have fallen off by now, I assume. I peek through squinted eyes, marveling at the fact that they are, actually, still there. Purple, quivering, and numb from pain, but still there. That’s a bit of a relief.

Thud.

We heave.

The door falls open, and it’s my turn to lose my footing. I roll backwards and land on my back. I crack my head something fierce against the hard ground, the world spinning.

“Amela! Amela, oh, Logan, grab her!” Mama’s voice sounds far away. The pain I’d ignored is interfering with sound.

Logan starts toward me.

My eyes widen as I gaze up. Blaine has crouched down enough to see me, the way an adult would to a child’s doll house.

“Hello, pretty. I missed you!” He starts to reach for me, his fat fingers bigger than overripe zucchinis. His ruined fingernails have flecks of dust and wood stuck between them.

But something looks wrong...

The world lurches again as I find myself on my feet. Logan has me by the arms and is pushing me. My legs splay, pitching me forward, unable to move correctly. I bounce a bit as Logan gets me going again. Somehow, Pops is already underground, and Kev and Mama have fit through, too. Carly waves us in, and suddenly I find myself in a black tunnel, trapped in a rectangle of light.

Carly jumps through and the trapdoor snaps shut behind us, plunging us into darkness.

NO ONE can see. There are screams and curses and cries. Then the ceiling cracks beneath the behemoth's onslaught.

"Cave in!" shouts Pops. "Take cover!"

The brutal sound of rock crushing rock fills my ears. Grit and dust fill my eyes and mouth. Then it fades.

The echoes of Bline's attack are felt more than heard. It's as though the force of his punches travel through the building and then vibrate the tunnel. Everything feels muffled, enclosed, like we're stuck in a sarcophagus. The darkness pushes in, threatening to suffocate me. Kev moans next to me, and I can hear Mama whimper somewhere off to the right. The scraping sound (accompanied with grunting) is probably Pops, toppled off of his wheels.

Thud.

"I...that hurts," says Logan, on my left.

Carly coughs, a dry hacking wheeze that rips out of his lungs.

Thud.

The ground shivers again, and I duck beneath my hands as an overwhelming cloud of dirt cascades over me. The world roars; I fear my bones will tremble loose. The crashing ends only after what seems long minutes—hours—of waiting as the entire shop collapses over the closed trapdoor.

"Anyone hurt?" Pops asks, pain lacing his voice.

I stiffen as the tears in me scream upon my movement. "More than before?" I cough, which make my bruises punish me.

"Yes."

"No."

Mama mutters something.

Logan says, "Can we get some light in here? I can't feel my fingers."

Carly coughs again, a sound that hurts to hear. "Pockets...flint'n steel."

"Who's closest to Carly?" Pops wonders aloud.

Kev wails a bit, but Mama must be close enough to comfort him, because I hear the sound of shifting rubble and Kev quiets.

"I am," confesses Logan, "but I can't feel my fingers."

"Amela?"

"What, Pops?"

"Can you reach Carly?"

"Give me a minute." I have to collect my mind, remember how to move the injuries I used to call my body. "One more minute."

Before I can move, Carly coughs over the sounds of flint and steel striking against each other. In the sudden light, I get the briefest glimpse of our situation, like a lightning strike.

Mama's face looks hollow, dark splotches where her eyes usually are. Kev is at her side, curled into her breast and nestled beneath her handless arm. Carly's face is etched with deep, bright strokes and outlined with trickles of blood. The image disappears, leaving blue and green phantoms to dance in front of my eyes.

"Do it again," I croak.

Spark.

This time, I'm waiting for it. I see Pops, overturned as I had thought, facing the wrong way. His legs are splayed out behind him, but he looks whole, so far as I can tell. Logan, however, can't say the same. A large rock has trapped his hand, pinning it between itself and the ground.

"No," I whisper as the scene fades. "That's bad."

Before I know it, I have shifted off my pile of rubble and rushed to where Logan lies. In my haste, my bare toe catches on the edge of a rock and I lurch forward. An exquisite pain blossoms in my mouth and streams of light flicker on the edges of my vision. I yelp and roll over, clutching at my wounded lips. Warm blood oozes between the cracks of my fingers. I shudder, trying to put my pain aside. My empty stomach roils at the taste. I roll to my side and feebly spit out the warm wad of saliva and blood.

"What happened? Amela, are you all right?" Pops sounds worried.

A spark and a flash.

The world swims in the bright flare from the flint. I cinch my eyes closed and take a deep breath. Dirt, blood, and mildew assail my nose.

"Amela?" He's more frantic now.

"I'm all right," I lie, the words spoken through pain.

"I don't feel too well," admits Logan in a weak voice. I try to push past the hurt and focus on Logan.

"Help him," I grunt out.

Spark. Flash.

A wordless scream comes from Mama. I knew that she'd react this way if she saw Logan. It would remind her of the accident.

"Logan! Poor boy! Logan!" I hear Kev grunt as he loses his spot at her side, and the sound of debris and rock rolling under foot as Mama works her way closer. "Lander, we have to save his arm!"

"What?" Pops must be shifting to get a better view.

Spark. Flash.

"The whispers take me," he says, hushed. "Not again."

Logan starts to cry, softly. I don't blame him, but I don't have a lot of sympathy running through me right now. The pain has pricked my anger as well.

"Why did you come?" I try to hiss, but the hurting makes me stop.

"Leave him safe, Amela," chastises Pops. "This isn't his fault."

Spark. Light.

I look up. Carly has managed to find a small lantern, the tiny wick providing just enough light for us to see by. The oppressive blackness lopes backwards, and my mood improves slightly. Maybe we won't die in this tunnel-tomb after all.

Carly works his way past me, muttering under his breath. Kev watches with large, mournful eyes. Mama and Pops whisper to Logan in low voices.

"This isn't as bad as it seems," Mama says.

"Can we move it?" asks Logan, the question strained. Now that he can see his predicament better, I can hear panic ghosting into his words. "Can we slide it off of me?"

Pops looks at Mama. "When Mayleen had hers removed, it took half a day of cutting to get through the mangled area. They said that we made it worse by trying to shift the rock."

Logan's already fair skin pales in the weak light. "But it hurts."

"It always will," mutters Mama.

"Right now, you're probably bleeding a lot. But it's clamped shut on your arm—that means that you probably won't bleed to death."

"Excuse me?" Judging by Logan's reaction, Pops didn't say the right thing.

"What he means, darling," says Mama soothingly—under the circumstances, "is that you're probably better off staying here until we can come back with help."

"By myself?"

Pops shakes his head. "No. I can't go anywhere anyway. My wheels're broken, and no one here is strong enough to carry me free. You and I will stay while Mayleen, Amela, Kev, and Carly seek help. If they move quickly, we can get you freed and to a Dandyn-trained medic. That's your only chance."

"Will they leave the light?"

"Can't. Might'n needin' it," bites Carly gruffly. I sneak a glance at him. His face is drawn, and he looks worried. The blood from a scrape on his face adds a tinge of menace. I look away.

Logan whimpers again. "I'm afraid of the dark."

Kev adds, "Too! Me, too, Kev, too, Kev...bad dark." He waves his hand feebly at the empty blackness that trails into the tunnel. He returns his hand to his head. I wonder if he's hurt.

"Carly's right. They will need it to get out of here." Pops gives Mama a long stare. "Take Kev with you. He's getting more and more frightened the longer we stay here, and there's nothing that I can say to comfort him." He points a square finger at me. "Amela will go with you all. She's good at finding her way back." He glowers insistently. "Don't get sidetracked."

I roll my eyes, disbelief coloring my words. "You think that I'd abandon you down here?"

"No. I think that you might get chased again. Pretend the Militia are watching your every step. You cannot afford to get caught, either by the Wyn or by the Militia. We need help, but we need *our* kind of help. Find friends. Understand?"

I nod. "I will, Pops." I work him into a sitting position, his back against a pile of rubble.

He coughs a thanks at me, then says, "Get moving. Take Mama and Kev. Carly, can you at least spare the flint and steel?"

Carly grudgingly hands over the requested items, and we all start to move. It only takes a half dozen steps and one turn before any sign of Pops and Logan disappears from view.

Mama and Kev progress gingerly, and Carly walks with a limp that I don't remember from before. My mouth throbs, my teeth ache, my sores—well, they're sore, and everything seems ready to collapse. Adrenaline staved off the exhaustion and hunger for a short time, but they come back now—the dragging weariness and numbing ache in my stomach that make me want to cry.

Mama gnaws at her stump; Kev holds onto her good hand. I can see in the sallow lamplight but few feet in front of me. I shove back the pain, but that takes energy, and I don't have any left. Whatever is moving me runs deeper than I knew—I've never felt so drained.

The tunnel rolls onward and onward, the brickwork that comprises the walls shining with moss and mildew. Dust occasionally mists over us, filthy clouds that make me sneeze. I trudge out of habit, rather than will. I figure I may as well use what momentum I have—no reason to waste it.

Abruptly, we stop as the path comes to a fork.

“Which way?” I ask, leaning against the wall.

Carly shrugs and lifts the lantern a little higher, as if trying to arc the light farther down the tunnel’s black throat. “Ain’t full knowin’.”

Mama’s wide eyes take in both options. “I don’t like the idea of going to the left. That makes my hand hurt.”

“Mama, you don’t have a left hand.” I say it gently, but, even after all these years, she still feels a little self-conscious about the handicap.

“That’s what I mean.”

“Oh.”

I wait for someone to make a decision, until it becomes quite apparent that they wait for me. “Are you waiting for me to decide?” I ask, just to be sure.

Mama shifts a bit, hugging Kev who has been mercifully quiet throughout our trek. “Well, I suppose.”

Carly coughs, another grating sound that scratches my hearing.

“Mama, I’m only in my nineteens! I don’t know what to do!”

“Yous’n the reason for the breaks.”

“It’s not my fault that Bline smashed your building, Carly,” I reply testily. Well, in a way it is. But that doesn’t mean it should be said. “Besides, why does that make me responsible for our choice?”

“Right!” Kev declares.

“See? Kev agrees with me.”

“Fair,” declares Carly. We end up taking the right.

As we walk, I fume over the implied—and maybe not so implied—accusations. Why blame me? Anyone could have made the simple mistake. If Bline had really been the Regulator that he looked like, we would be buying food and new clothes and another couple of visits to the Dandyn-trained healers for Kev. Instead, I’m broken, bleeding, aching, sweating, stinking, and a whole lot of other words—one of which would be *trapped*—in a never ending tunnel with two people who blame me for the circumstance and one half-wit.

Needless to say, it has not been a good day.

We trudge on until we reach another split. “Do you know which way to go this time?” I ask of Carly, who merely glares at me and eyeballs the lantern in my hand.

“Haven’t we been here before?”

“Right!” announces Carly.

It twists, turns, breaks off, but Carly no longer hesitates now. He acts as though he remembers at every intersection. Kev sometimes will yell out a recommendation; Carly ignores him, always taking the appropriate turn.

After about an hour or so, the lamplight starts to wane. “Oil,” explains Carly in a soft, cracked voice.

“Magnificent,” whisper I.

We stumble along, sloshing through stagnant, muddy puddles, groping past tight

turns where debris chokes the artery, and try not to think what some of the softer, squishier items might be that ooze through our toes. My stubbed toe has probably already become infected, because it aches even more than my face.

Finally, Carly stops and points. "Here'n we."

"What do you mean, we're here?" asks Mama in a tired voice.

"Done."

I look around. A rusted, eroded ladder, embedded into the rock wall, hangs loosely. A small pile of the bolts that had attached it rests beneath the steps. Of the twenty or so rungs, it looks like half a dozen are missing. The ladder leads up a shaft, stabbed down into the tunnel like a straw in a melon. I lick my lips nervously, afraid of what someone might recommend.

"Up."

I shoot a withering glare at Carly. "Up? That's where we're going?"

"Up!" echoes Kev. Mama tells him to shush.

"Up," repeats the old shopkeep, his eyes shifting away. He refuses to meet my gaze.

I roll my eyes and look at it. "Isn't there another exit?"

Carly nods his head in the direction we were headed before stopping, looking anywhere but at me. "Two, three miles more."

I grab the lowest rung. "Forget it. I'll take my chances." I glance up. The lantern's weakening beams can't penetrate the thick blackness. "What's on top?" I ask of Carly.

"Closet."

"A closet?"

He nods. He acts like it hurts to talk.

"In, what, a house?"

Another nod.

"Fair." I hoist myself up, scrambling as quickly as I can. The less time I spend on the stupid ladder, the better I'll feel.

"Amela!"

I turn back, looking down at Mama. "What?"

"Be careful. I can't climb it, and Kev won't."

"Too tired," adds Carly.

"So, I'm on my own?" I stare at the pitiful group of people collected at the foot of the ladder, haloed in the dying light of the lantern. "Wait." I drop back down. "This can't work. What will you do? The lantern's dying, and..."

"We'll wait. When it goes out, it goes out." Mama sounds resigned and immensely weary. "You'll bring help, food, water. That way, we can walk the final bit necessary to get."

"Down this tunnel?" I ask.

She nods. "We'll wait for you to come back."

This is getting ridiculous, but I agree anyway. I don't have any other ideas. "All right." I grab the lowest rung and swing up. "Don't go anywhere."

"No plans on it."

"Bye!" shouts Kev, who waves. "Bye, 'Mela!" It doesn't seem like he notices the gravity of the situation. I guess that's a good thing.

"Be safe, Kev."

“Yup.”

I start to climb, moving fast. Two different rungs drop out from the wall as I clamber, but I catch myself both times. I keep climbing, up and up.

Did I say twenty? I probably should've said two hundred. I swear I've been climbing longer than we were walking, but eventually I hit the top. Literally.

Rubbing my head and cursing, I press my back against the wall, wedging my feet against the rungs and praying that they hold. Gingerly, I start probing at what stopped my progress. It feels like a metal door, and, in the middle, there is a wheel or valve. Something.

Grasping the wheel, I wrench it to the left. Rust bites into the palms of my hands. Even as overwhelmed as I am with pain, the new hurt wakes me up a bit. Doubling my efforts, I finally grind it enough to start it moving. A fine shower of dirt, rust, and who knows what else sprays into my face. I spit out some of the offending grit, and blink furiously to get it out of my eyes.

“Why are my eyes even open?” I ask myself, the tired, frustrated voice echoing down the tube. I can faintly hear the murmurs of the conversation below me, no doubt a million miles away.

I breathe a deep breath, reseal myself against the wall, and grab the wheel again. This time, it shifts suddenly as my footrest breaks out from beneath me. I lurch about, dangling by my fingers above the long black tube. Wordless yelps of panic and fear eke out of me. I kick my legs out, grinding my toes against the rough brick.

“Help? Help!” I shout, softly at first, but then louder.

“Amela?” Mama's voice drifts up below me. The echoes make it impossible to tell how far away she really is.

“I'm...” I don't have time to explain any more, because the wheel I'm holding onto to keep from falling has started to turn.

With a jolt the trapdoor unlocks and I find myself being lifted up.

Just like that, I'm out of the tunnel.

THE FIRST thing I notice: The “closet” has a number of occupants as they haul me clear. I squint against the daylight leaking in—apparently, we had not spent half a lifetime underground like I had originally thought. The grabbing hands don’t let go of me, and I squirm a bit and try to shake loose. I don’t like being touched by strangers, especially after everything I’ve done today.

“She stinks,” says one man. I can’t see details; everything blurs that I try to look at. Probably the grit from the trapdoor in my eyes.

“That’s a lot of blood from such a little girl,” remarks another.

“Help,” I croak as the set me on the floor. The trapdoor clangs shut behind me. “Mama, Pops.”

“What’s that? What’re you saying?” the first voice asks.

I know I should wait to learn who cleared me, but I don’t always have luxuries like that. Right now, I’m still trying to get to my feet. That seems more important at the moment.

“Down. In the tunnel.” I speak between gasps as I breathe in clean air for the first time since forever. “Logan’s hand. It’s stuck. Mama, Kev, and Pops. Waiting. Carly.”

“We’ll see that they’re helped. Boy, you go and tell Layne. You, go get these others out of there,” says the second voice. On the surface, it sounds like help. But as he speaks, I get the feeling like he’s actually leering at me. I suddenly want to know who pulled me free.

“Who are you? Where am I?” I try to shout louder, but most of the questions just wheeze out. I struggle to move. Heavy hands and a rope bind me down, despite the kicks and squirms.

“Hold still, we probably ain’t gonna hurt ya,” the first voice insists.

“Then lemme go,” say I, inwardly berating myself for such foolishness. I imagine that these men come from the Militia, and I did exactly what Pops told me *not* to do: I got caught.

A cupful of water splashes in my face, startling me so badly that I jump. This generates a laugh, and I feel a flush of heat on my cheeks. I hate being embarrassed.

The water trickles into the cuts and abrasions that my face has accumulated of late, and I hiss at the pain. I blink furiously, hoping to get my eyes cleared at least enough for me to see, but the grit hurts them, and what glimpses I see only prove what I already know: I’m face down, on the ground, tied. I grind my teeth in frustration and kick one more time. That gets me a kick back, and I feel my already harshly abused ribs scream at me, as if I didn’t already know that they hurt. The air rushes from my lungs, my head reels with the hurt, and I finish. No more fight.

“That’s more like it,” says the leering voice. “Sinet, do you have the time?”

“Two hours past the zenith, I’d say,” replies Sinet, the first voice.

Only noon has already passed? I could have sworn it had been three or four days down there. That’s what it had felt like, at least. I moan a bit, against my will. The ache just leaks out of me through my mouth in the form of a groan.

“Close yer mouth,” grunts Sinet as he kicks me. His steel-toed boot grates against my bony hip, and I bite my tongue to keep from yelping. I desperately want to rub my eyes, but they lashed my hands behind my back. I struggle feebly; not so much in protest

as in reflexive reaction to the grinding pain on my wrists. It gets me another kick and I stop.

“Look, Layne won’t be ready for at least another hour. What’s say you and me have some fun? With her, I mean.”

“Gef, are you wrapped? Layne said that he wanted her to be unhurt.”

“You just kicked her!”

“He won’t know that came from me. He’ll think it’s somethin’ the behemoth gave her.”

That piques my interest through my hurting.

“So?”

“So? She beat the behemoth, mate. She may be banged up, but he didn’t get her, she didn’t get nothin’ happened to her, if you get my shrift.”

“Drift, you dummy.” Gef sounds peeved. “The word is ‘drift.’ And I get it. No fun.”

“Right. So, is he going to meet her here?”

Gef snorts. “Sinet, you sure are stupid most of the time.”

Sinet snorts back. “Ain’t that a bit like the ocean callin’ rain wet?”

“Funny man. But to answer your question, I ask you another.”

“Go on, then.”

“I’m gettin’ to it.”

“Good. I’m eager to hear it.”

“I bet you are.”

“I am.”

“Then quiet yer noise or I won’t ask it.”

“Fine.”

Gef clears his throat. “How did we know that she’d pop up here?”

A lengthy pause stretches through the hot closet. Sweat trickles down my back and burns my eyes. Down in the tunnel, the heat of the day hadn’t penetrated, and we had walked in relative comfort. Now, I think that Carly misnamed the exit. This isn’t a closet; it’s an oven.

“We didn’t,” Sinet says at last.

“Good,” purrs Gef.

Everything hurts. I ache for water.

“So why did we come here?”

Another pause. “On the off chance that we could...find her?”

“Right again! Maybe you ain’t so stupid.”

“Maybe,” agrees Sinet. “But we found her.”

“Aye. And we sent out our little runners to let Layne know, correct?”

“That’s what you told ‘em to do. And to help her family.”

“Of course. We don’t want them to think somethin’ happened to her!”

Sinet stops his chuckle abruptly. “Are you sure that we should be saying this in front of her?”

“What, the Spook? Aww, who cares? They’re crazy anyways. No need to worry.”

Spook? They think that I’m a Spook? I lick my lips worriedly. The tears have started to wash my eyes clean, but there really isn’t a lot to see. Just dust, dirty clothes, and some old boots. The light that streams in from the open door casts heavy shadows,

making a lot of what lies in my view hidden. I focus my attention on their conversation again.

“Wait,” Sinet’s saying, “what if she ain’t a Spook? What if she’s a Spark?”

A derisive snort. “Look at her! She’s all...skinny and bony. There ain’t much chance of her bein’ a Spark.”

“But a Spook, says you? If she’s too scrawny to be a Spark, I *know* that she ain’t gonna be a Spook. They’re big ‘uns. Have you ever seen a Spook?”

I want to ask them why they would think me as either half of a Scrapper, but then I remember: I fought off Bline. I’ve survived two—no, three—of his attacks. Not a lot of people can claim that. But how had word gotten about on that score? It had only been a few hours. The Militia hadn’t even come by the time I had left the house. And no one but Logan knew we were headed to Carly’s...

My neighbors, I realize with a start. They saw it all. Logan and the rest. Granted, Logan would never have said anything. But the Militia can cause people to lose their heads on occasion, and Logan is not as brave as some. If they had pressured him, would he have snapped? Maybe not too willingly, but the kid couldn’t lie to save his—or, in this case, my—life. He might have given a shrift and not even meant to do it. That stupid kid. He didn’t mean it, but I bet he betrayed me. I hope he loses his hand.

Sinet repeats himself. “Have you ever seen a Spook in action? A real one, listening to the whispers? Not one like those we have at the building, but a real one?”

Gef scuffs his shoe against a square rug. “No.”

“I have.”

A braying sniff of disbelief streams from Gef. “You lie.”

“No, honest to the whispers truth.”

“You hear whispers.”

“Shut yer noise, Gef, or I won’t tell you ‘bout when I saw me a Spook.”

“I’m probably better off. Lies fillin’ a man’s head? Methinks it can’t be good for it.”

“Youthinks? You ain’t thinkin’ now, I tell you that much.”

Gef makes another vulgar sound. “Fine. Tell me your story. I love hearin’ tales anyhow.”

“You think this is funny?”

“Not particularly.”

“Good.”

“Go on, then.”

Sinet clears his throat. “So there I was, in the back of this caravan, see? I’m goin’ as a bodyshield, ready to take a arrow for me master, right? I figure, it pays plenty of marks, I ain’t doin’ much anyways, and the odds are good that I won’t see so much as a miniman while I’m out. Low risk; high gains, that’s my kind of bet. So, we’re marchin’ through the Narrow Neck on the Bridge South when suddenly what must’ve been a behemoth four stories high busts out of the sand, right? Just huge. He’s one of ‘em, whacha call ‘em? The Vyn! Aye, he’s big as life, friend, just rearin’ out of the sand. He has these teeth—tusks, rather, I’d say—that seem to glisten like they’ve been soaked in oil. They’re juttin’ out of his lower lips. He’s got ears that belong on an ass, all big an’ floppy, but eyes as mean as sin and as frightenin’ as the whispers, I tells you. So he’s bustin’ out of the sand, right, just rippin’ the ground to pieces. His hand, mate, must be as

big as your whole body—no, bigger, I bet. You’re kinda small.”

“You’re kinda stupid.”

Sinet’s getting too worked up telling his story to return the insult. “So the caravan is busted, right? Just smashed. Asses and oxen and horses and runners and what-have-you. Everyone is scramblin’ for their lives, right? Nothin’ but crazies we’re actin’ like, on account of bein’ so scared. The sound is horrible, what with the screamin’ and the cursin’. Animals trampin’ people. It was horrible.”

“Sounds like.”

“So then, of a sudden, there’s this yell, right? Like someone’s lungs’ve just popped, and all their soul is rushin’ out of there lips. I look to see, and there’s this Spook. I didn’t even know they had a Scrapper as part of the caravan, but sure enough, there’s the Spook. I figure his Spark ain’t far behind, though I can’t see anyone that I guess should’ve been with him. Now that I think on it, I probably should’ve spent some time learnin’ ‘bout who was travelin’ with me.” He pauses. “Oh, well. Anyways, I’m watchin’ the Spook, right? What’s he gonna do?”

Gef actually sounds impressed—a little—as he says, “So, what did the Spook do?”

Sinet claps his hands, making me jump. Neither man notices me. “Jumps through the air and punches the Vyn right in the stomach! Smashes him right down to the ground with a single punch—a single punch, mind you! He must’ve leaped, I don’t know, almost twenty feet in the air, straight into him! It was amazin’! I didn’t believe it. Even as I watched it, I didn’t believe it. So I stand there, all wettin’ myself because I don’t know what else to do, and watch as the Spook takes out a sword—must’ve been as tall as you—and starts to hack at the downed Vyn. He moves faster than I can watch—*slash, slash! Hack, hack!* Blood shoots up into the sky like a starkin’ geyser, eruptin’ all over the place. The sand starts turnin’ brown and dark. Every time the Vyn starts to try to get up, he gets stabbed down again by the Spook. Before I even knew it was over, it was over. Nothin’ but blood and a festerin’ pile of Vyn on the desert sand.”

Silence.

Finally: “What did you do?” Awe laces Gef’s voice.

“I got myself out of that situation. I don’t want to be around a Scrapper! Are you wrapped?”

“No.”

“Would you want to be around a Scrapper?”

“Not really.”

“So, what would you have done?”

“Found other work.”

“That’s what I did.”

“And now you’re here?” Gef wanted to know.

“For the most part. There were a couple of other odd jobs that I did twixt then and now, but here I am, huntin’ Spooks.”

Gef swallows, and I can almost sense his eyes glaring at me distrustfully. I don’t dare even to shift, afraid of what they might do if I try. Instead I close my eyes and try to picture a happier time in my life.

Nothing comes quickly to mind.

“So, ain’t you a-scared of this runt?”

“Why? You still think she’s a Spook?”

“Well, maybe,” mutters Gef noncommittally.

“Naw, she ain’t a Spook. Possibly a Spark.” I hear Sinet take a swig of water. He smacks his lips afterward, and I feel my parched throat blaze in envy.

“Suppose she wants some?” he asks his companion.

Gef prods at me with his toe. It hurts. All of me hurts. “She ain’t movin’. She’s cracked, you know she is. It’s a good thing she’s tied down.”

“Why?” asks Sinet.

“In case she’s a Spook.”

Sinet throws out an exasperated grunt. “Fool’s head, she ain’t a Spook! She’s too small!”

“Shouldn’t we be more careful if she’s a Spark? You know, we don’t want damaged goods.”

“Why bother? I told you, Layne’ll think they’re battle wounds from her fight with the behemoth!”

Gef whines, “I still think...”

“Besides, if she were a Spook, do you really think that we’d be safe with just that rope tying her down? It barely even has a knot!”

I perk up, but only internally. If my hands are free...

“What’s your point?”

“If she’s a Spook, that may as well be thread from your mammy’s loom, mate! Ain’t nothin’ that stops a Spook, ‘cept a stronger behemoth. They can’t be killed by normal folks.”

“So why don’t we use them in the war ‘gainst Darshur?” asks Gef. I wouldn’t have admitted it to them, but I wondered the same thing.

“They have their own Spooks, their own people who listen to the whispers.” Sinet lowers his voice conspiratorially. “I heard that the Darshur have somethin’ even more cracked and twisted than Scrappers.”

“Worse than Vigilantes?” Gef sounds intimidated.

Filled with his own self importance, Sinet says, “Naw, Vigilantes is only a Scrapper that ain’t got the King’s approval. They ain’t any worse than a normal Spook and Spark team.”

“So, what, then? Monsters?”

“I don’t know. Somethin’ ‘bout the breedin’ of people to the behemoths. Sacrifices. Soulless stuff.” The room grows hushed.

I hear footsteps pounding through the ground.

“Someone’s comin’,” announces Gef a few moments later. I bite my tongue to keep from telling him that any fool’s head could have heard them coming minutes ago. Probably a good choice on my part.

“Who’s there?” barks out Sinet in a gruff voice. The unmistakable scrape of a blade leaving its short sheath tickles my ears. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Why would they come if they didn’t come armed? Plus, with the possibility of recruiting a Spook? I would bring a weapon, too. More than just a knife though. That sounded like a knife. I would want something bigger. Stronger. And that could strike from, say, a mile away. That would make me feel safe (safer, rather) if I were recruiting Spooks. But that’s just me.

“I, sir,” comes a timid voice. One of the runners.

“Good. Did you tell Layne that we have a candidate?”

“Aye.”

“Good boy. Is he comin’ here?”

A quick silence, followed by, “What do you mean, no?” Gef bites his words angrily.

“I mean, he wants you to bring her to the office.”

“Why?”

Another silence.

“Fine,” decides Sinet, his frustration apparent. “Gef, you truss up the lass better; I’ll go make sure no one has seen us.”

The world shifts a moment later, after a brutal tweaking of my arm and shoulder. I’m fairly sure something is broken, but I resolve to myself not to make a noise of protest. Not the easiest oath I’ve ever kept, let me just say.

Suddenly I’m thrown over the shoulder of one of the men and carried into the brilliant day outside. There’s a wagon awaiting us on the curb. The sunlight dazzles my eyes, and I can only get the faintest bearing on our location. If I don’t miss my guess, I popped up...near the bazaar.

Gef (or Sinet) heaves me into the back of the wagon and slams the caged door shut. “Don’t move, girlie. We’ve got a short trip ahead of us. He laughs and pulls down the shutter that seals out the light. Sinet (or Gef) whips the horses and we lurch forward, my journey to the office commenced.

I finally allow myself a tiny, insignificant yelp of pain.

The walls shake as Gef (or Sinet) smacks the other side. “Shut yer noise in there!”

I do.

For now.

THE CART stinks worse than a soiled cur, the heat in the box makes the heat in the closet feel like ice by comparison, and I gain more bruises with every jolt. Still, it's a chance to move a bit, ease the pain in my arm. I try not to think about this office, or the fact that Mama, Pops, and Kev are as good as lost to me. That thought sends a stab of panic through my chest that hurts more than everything I've accumulated over the last couple of days. I don't know what I'd do without them—that's why I've always worked so hard, done so much. I push and push and push myself to keep them safe and away from the Militia's eyes. What good has it done? Answer: none.

Another bounce tosses me casually against the wall. I barely feel it. My mind mulls over the conversation held in the closet. The whispers take anyone who hurts my family. I wonder what will happen to them. With me taken away, and Pops crippled, and Mama spending all of her time taking care of Kev, I can't see how they'll survive.

I have to lam it. I have to break free, if only for them. No, wait. *Only* for them; no if. My life stopped being mine the day of the accident, when they got hurt. My childhood ended then, and everybody's life changed. Everything for them.

Everything.

Groggy from pain, thirst, hunger, and fear, I stagger to my feet in the low-ceilinged box cell. The tipping and tilting as we move make things harder, but I start to work my hands free of the rope. Not only had Sinet (or was it Gef?) neglected to tie me well, but he had also failed to realize how skinny I really am. It takes but a moment for first one hand and then the other to slide loose.

I can hear the murmured voices of my captors outside, in the front of the carriage. Even straining I can't distinguish one word from the next. Instead, I thump to the back, to the cell doors. Thanks to the cracks and holes in the cell, I'm able to see some of my surroundings. Not that there's really a lot to see.

Manacles bolted to the ground and tethered by a long, rusting chain, and a low, splintery bench on one wall prove my only companions. A broken mug shifts with the heavier jostles in one corner. Other than that, nothing presents itself as useful.

I feel at the cold iron that faces the inside of my cell. For all my thinness, I doubt that I could fit my arm past my elbow through each bar. I push against the wood, but it doesn't yield. I guess it wouldn't matter anyway, since I can't get past the irons. Still, a breath of fresh air would be nice.

A particularly sharp bump knocks me up and into the roof. I accidentally bite my tongue. I drop to the filthy floor, clutching my head and fighting against tears. Whimpering, I curl up, defeated.

"I'm sorry, Mama," I whisper. "I'm sorry, Kev. I'm sorry, Pops." Caught in the mire of guilt and fear, I lose track of time. Before I know it, my dirt-streaked face meets the hot sun—a vast improvement from the cage—and I see, for the first time, my captors.

Gef talks first, and I recognize his voice. "Why, ain't that pretty? She's loose!" His dark skin glistens beneath a sheen of sweat, and the tiny traces of black hair on his upper lip boast a vain manliness. His bare, bulging gut offsets his spindly arms, which right now grasp each lapel of a soiled, well-worn leathern vest. A sliver of wood juts out between his crooked yellow teeth, and his eyes sparkle with a perversity that chills.

"It's your fault," rebuts Sinet. A twice-descended Darshur, by the look of him, all

death-pale and sunkissed-red, colored like a strange mix of a corpse and a beet. His narrow eyes blend into his swollen cheeks, and a split tongue oozes around both sides of his teeth. His fat fingers stick out of a long-sleeve habit, the red cloth tied at his waist with an umber sash. I know that the clothes represent something to Regulators, but I can't remember what. I should have paid more attention, I know. He shakes his long yellow hair out of his eyes and regards me coolly. "You're the one that tied the knots," he says, shooting a glance up at his companion.

"No, I ain't. You was."

"You."

"Naw, you," bites back Gef, his face darkening with anger. Sinet doesn't pay him any mind.

"You comin', missy?"

I don't want to move, heat notwithstanding. I've dealt with men like this before; I have no desire to follow. I drop my gaze.

"She's bein' coy, now! How sweet!" Sinet laughs.

"Say, what about now? Can we have some fun with her?" Gef's look fills me in on the details he doesn't say aloud.

"No, you fool's head. She's goin' to Layne as she is now. Square?" Sinet slaps Gef on the shoulder to get his attention. When the bigger man meets his eyes, Sinet asks again: "Square?"

"Square."

"Don't go changin' your mind, neither. I've got to go..." He squints I me, and I cower. Better to let them think that they have me cowed. If they keep me under a loose guard, I might slip away sooner. "No, never mind. You go."

"Me?"

"No, your crippled Auntie Cerci! Of course, you!" He slaps him again.

Gef pulls a face, a revolting experience. "I don't wanna. You're better with words, Sinet. Why don't you go report?"

"I'm gonna watch the Spark."

"Spook." Gef pushes on Sinet's shoulder lightly, as if to emphasize his point.

"If she's a Spook, then *I'm* your Auntie Cerci."

"They say she killed a behemoth, Sinet. That makes her a Spook."

"And she ain't crazy, so that makes her a Spark!" Sinet gets taller as he gets angry, I notice, raising himself up on his tiptoes.

Their banter stops. They look at me simultaneously.

I stare silently.

"Maybe she's..." says Sinet in a low voice.

"...both," finishes Gef.

They stare a bit longer. I shy away.

"No, probably not. That's impossible," decides the Darshur. "So, you go report. I'll stay here."

"Only if you say that she's a Spook."

"You're Auntie—" begins Sinet again.

"You already said that," interrupts Gef. "But I'm gettin' hot, and there's a good chance that there'll be a flagon of somethin' cool inside to please my parched throat. So I'll go."

I assume that he says that last statement to try to swindle Sinet into going, but the Darshur holds his ground. He folds his fat arms over his bulbous chest and stares. “Then go,” he says at last.

With a faint curse Gef turns to leave.

“We’re gonna wait here, beautiful,” he says to me once Gef goes.

“I’m ecstatic.” My first words to them since I hit the carriage.

“I can tell.”

I wish to curse him out, to scream and swear. Instead I sit patiently, trying not to feel my body. If I hold myself at just the right angle, and breathe only shallow breaths, I can avoid too much pain, save for the hunger, thirst, headache, and exhaustion.

In short, it doesn’t do much.

Gef returns quickly, his dark eyes wide. The wrinkles march all the way up from his black eyebrows to the top of his bald pate. “Layne almost killed me for not having her with me right now!”

“What?” Sinet sounds as surprised as I feel. “He always wants warnin’ before he interviews someone!”

“Not this time. Hurry it up! I don’t fancy losin’ my place here. Starvin’ ain’t my choice of deaths, I’ll have you know.”

“Brilliant choice, Gef,” mutters Sinet sarcastically as he fishes in his baggy robe for the keys to the lock. “Here, now, where did they go?”

“Don’t you have the keys?”

“Of course I do!” Sinet snaps as he pats at every possible place on his robe. “I have it here...” He fumbles for another moment or two before I get sick of waiting in the hot box.

“Is that it?” I ask, pointing to the thin chain that dangles from his neck.

“What?” He glances down, then pulls it off with a grunt. “Saucy girl,” he mutters, along with other sentiments less than polite.

The lock unhinges and the door swings open. Anxious hands wave me forward and help me to the ground. In their haste, they don’t even bother with the rope, but I’m smaller than both of them, and they have me secured between both of their large bellies. I’m too tired to fight back, and so my chance at an easy escape slips away.

They lead me into a building in a section of town that I don’t recognize—strange, since I consider myself well-versed in that particular subject. Still, if Regulators and Recruiters and the Militia house themselves here, little wonder I never found this portion of town very interesting. Thinking on that distracts me, so I shove the thoughts aside. I need to absorb details like the piece of bread that Kev dropped last night did to the muddy water.

Thinking of the rain, I glance around.

Dust hovers over the cobbled streets, as dry and brown as ever. I idly wonder if I had simply imagined the storm; there’s not a trace of it left. The drought will continue, then, I suppose.

They push me down an alley that’s filled with debris, garbage, and a cat that dislikes our presence. After receiving its spit-laced chastisement, we work our way around the refuse to the side door. Gef turns the handle and the door silently opens. This surprises me: I expected a door like that to squeak loud enough to make the dead deaf. I note this, and continue with my observation.

The hallway we walk through is made even more cramped than it would be with normal sized people. In fact, the narrow passage forces us to walk in a single line, again with me in the middle. Their stench sickens me, but I pass over it. More important details await my attention.

The carpet we trod on, thick and lush, detailed in an ornate, spinning pattern, still looks almost new. The whitewash that coats the walls faintly glimmers, and I fight the urge to touch the potentially tacky surface. Fresh candles burn in the wall mounted candelabras. Money. Wherever I am, it's probably part of the government; no one else can afford to burn candles during the day, not to simply light a hallway in some small building. I glance down. No pools of wax puddle on the ground, meaning the lights are well cared for. It smells fresh and, though not necessarily cool, the scorching heat doesn't grip the hallway, either.

Whoever owns this place is pure silver.

Reaching a spiral staircase that splits both directions, we proceed upwards, turning in tight circles. A too-tired body like mine struggles; Gef and Sinet almost die from the exertion. They both gasp for breath and sweat more than they did outside, in the heat.

I count the steps, despite the exhaustion. I always count the steps in my head, one, two, three...I actually lose track halfway up, but then I start over, doubling the number when we reach the top. A thief can't afford to trip on the stairs, so I want to know beforehand how many it will take to get down, if it comes to an escape. This set has over forty.

The second floor boasts greater opulence and a wider passageway. The candles sit in silvered candelabras here, rather than bronze, and large windows at the far end add more light. These doors have a more natural hue, rather than painted, and the names of the occupants grace the plaques which hang like proud badges on each entrance. The ground doesn't squeak as loudly up here, either.

I stare at the slightly warped view of the outside through the ripples in the glass, and wonder how hard I would have to hit it in order to break free. Not that hard, I wager. It doesn't look very strong.

I give my head a shake. What kind of thinking is that? Even if I broke through, the fall would result in a lot of pain. They would recapture me instantly.

Of course, there is a building on the other side of the alley...

My thoughts are interrupted as we stop our march at what seems (to me) to be our destination.

"Is he in there?" whispers Sinet. Incredibly, I agree with his volume. It would feel somehow wrong to speak too loudly in the hallway. I try to shake off that impression. I want to cough, or spit, or do something to break the fragile silence that cocoons me, but I don't.

Reasons: exhaustion, injuries, and being two times smaller than each man. Not that that stopped me when I fought Bline. I remember that with pride. Not everyone can say that they survived an encounter with a behemoth. Then again, that fact explains why I'm standing in this stuffy hallway. The heat has a stronger sway on this floor.

Gef nods. Sinet licks his lips, his forked tongue darting in and out faster than a lizard's. "We go in," says the latter. Gef nods again, and reaches for the doorknob.

"Hurry up!" comes a shout from the inside.

Both men jump a little, then shove open the door. In their haste to enter, they actually push me backwards. I stumble a bit, my arms waving to keep from toppling. Gef sees me and darts back out, snagging me by my longjacket sleeve. He pulls me in and shuts the door.

“I wondered what took you so long,” drones the smooth voice.

I don’t have much time to study the room, save a quick glance at shelves of books. Two large windows splash the afternoon sun into the office, spilling onto the dark mahogany desk that seems to drink the light. Behind it, partially obscured by a stack of parchments, voluminously feathered quill pens, and ebony bottles of ink, sits a short, squat, surprisingly attractive little man.

“You may leave,” says the man I can only assume is Layne.

“Yessir,” slurs Gef.

“Aye,” agrees Sinet. They bump into each other on their way out.

“Fools,” mutters Layne once the door closes. He shifts out of his chair and moves around to look at me. I try to wipe the shock from my face: He’s as tall as I. “But, they serve their purpose.”

His eyes—darker than the ink bottles—take me in. I feel exposed, as if he’s looking at me while I wear nothing save my private clothes. I tuck my hands into my sleeves. My fingers caress a sharp file that I always keep with me, a detail I had forgotten in the darkness of the hot box. Not that I matters. I never would have been able to free myself from there in the time it took to go from that closet to here. Wherever here is.

“Where am I?” My voice cracks a little, and Layne arches an eyebrow.

“I apologize. Where are my manners?” His brown hands come out from behind the small of his back and he steps to a petite cabinet. With a flourish he produces a key, with which he unlocks the door. Inside is a sweating carafe of water. He pulls out a perfectly white linen, wraps it about the decanter, and removes it and a glass. Setting the items on the top of the cabinet, he again locks the door and the key disappears into his lace-embroidered sleeves. His purple and gold doublet shimmer as he pours the liquid into the glass. A silver whistle, strung from a chain so delicate it looks like a spiderweb, dangles from his neck. He replaces the crystal stopper and turns to me, cup in hand. “A drink?”

I want to refuse, but my thirst overpowers my mutinous desires. I nod.

“Here. There’s plenty more. Please. Help yourself.” He hands me the glass and then turns on his heel, the dark square shoes reflecting brightly, almost as if he could not care if I accepted the water or no.

“It could be poison,” I say, the brim inches from my lips. I can feel the coolness radiating toward me. How could it be so cold?

“It’s more probably just water. Cold? Yes. Delicious? Most definitely. Refreshing? Absolutely. Poison? Doubtful.” Layne has reached his desk and resumed his seat, his long black hair swishing about him. He shakes it back and smooths errant strands behind his ears. His narrow face and sharp eyes take me in as I sip the water. Tight lips purse all the tighter until I succumb to my desire and gulp it down.

Two seconds pass and I stare hungrily at the decanter, the empty glass clutched in one hand and the other wiping the trailing drops off my chin.

“Go ahead. The whole thing is for you, if you’d like.” He sits back and watches, a tiny smile playing about his tiny eyes.

It takes but a moment for me to snatch the carafe and drink it straight from the neck, dropping the glass onto the plush red rug in my haste. It bounces (to my relief) rather than breaks. I ignore it, focusing only on the water pouring down and over my throat. When the decanter is empty I set it back down, a sheepish look crossing over my face.

“Good?” He eyes me, obviously expecting honesty.

“Very,” I say as I gasp for breath. The experience has left me winded.

“I’m glad to hear it.” He glances down at a parchment spread in front of him.

“Tell me, why are you here?”

The question strikes from a different angle, and I stutter. He brought me here. Why would I know the answer to that? “Excuse me?”

“Why are you here, Amela?”

I gawk. How did he...? “How did you know my name?”

“I read it. Now, I answered one of your questions. Please do the same to mine.”

“I...I don’t know.”

“You have no idea?”

I do. I can’t decide if I should lie or not. He isn’t family, so it shouldn’t be a problem. But he has a stare that strips away my audacity, and I fear—for the first time in my life—to tell a lie. “Some.” A full confession probably isn’t necessary.

“Some? So little? I had hoped that you’d have a better idea once you saw the carriage.”

“Carriage?”

“The one they brought you in?” Layne stands and paces about his desk, his hands behind his back again. “Didn’t you see it?”

“I wasn’t...I wasn’t really in the position...”

“Did they manhandle you?” His question barks out faster than a hound pouncing on a hare.

“No...not really.” I wonder why I feel compelled to protect the two men. I change my answer. “Yes. They did.”

“Badly?”

Honesty. “It’s hard to say. I’m in pretty sorry shape already.”

Layne grunts.

I take a turn. “I guess, if we’re asking questions, I’ll give you one.”

He eyes me. I can’t read him. “Please.”

“What did the carriage say?”

“Layne’s Delivery Service. It’s meant to say a lot to those who know, and to say nothing to the rest. But its purpose failed you, since you didn’t see it.”

“I see.”

“Now, it’s my turn. How—”

I interrupt. “No, you asked a second question. I want another.”

He sighs, bothered. “Fine.”

“Where are we?”

“In my office. How did—”

“That answer won’t work,” I declare. Some of my audacity must’ve stuck with me. Perhaps something in the water. “I need information that I didn’t already know.”

He smirks. “Very well. You are in a Recruiter’s office.”

My knees go weak. Recruiter? How could this have happened?

“Now, my turn. How did you defeat the behemoth?”

“I didn’t.”

His face drops. Maybe honesty can be effective after all.

“You lie,” he accuses.

“I do. But not about that. I didn’t defeat Bline.”

“You know his name? How?”

“Yes. He told me. That’s two questions. Now I get mine.”

Layne grits his teeth. I wonder where my bravery is coming from, and hope that it stays. He waves a hand, which I take as leave to question.

“How did you know my name?”

“It is on the Writ of Recruitment.”

“How did it get there?”

“Someone shrived you.”

So it’s true, then. Someone has betrayed me. Logan. He’s the only person I can think of.

It’s Layne’s turn, and he doesn’t seem to want to wait for me to get my thoughts together. “How did you survive your encounter with, eh, Bline?”

“I—a lot of luck, I suppose. My neighbors helped.”

“I see.” I doubt he does.

My turn. “Who gave the shrift?”

Layne shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

“Excuse me?” He bore the air of someone who always knew the answers—to everything.

He scratches at one eyebrow, his fingernail leaving white trails in his tan skin that fade almost as soon as they are born. “It does not say. People who shrive others will often remain anonymous to protect themselves.”

“I can’t imagine why,” I mutter sarcastically.

“Hmm.” Layne sniffs. “What do you know about the Ascendancy of the King?”

The change in topic causes me to blink. “N-nothing, really. Only that, without an heir, there can be a lot of fighting for the throne.”

He smirks again, all sneer and smile and discomfort. “Very well. Ask your question.”

“Will you let me go?”

“No.”

“But—”

“Why did Bline attack you?”

“I stole his coinpurse.”

“Come again?”

I sigh. I figure, Be liberal with this one. It might help a little later on. Layne seems interested in equity here, and I figure I should capitalize on that. So I tell him the short version of my encounter with the Wyn. I end it with his two lackeys dropping me off in his office.

“My questions: Where is my family, and what do you want with me?”

Layne quirks an eyebrow at me. “Your family is, so far as I know, safe. For how long, of course, will remain up to you. You are, after all, a family of criminals. If nothing

else, you all deserve to be in prison.”

My head swims. If we go to prison, then Kev dies. It’s that simple. He has to have the help of the Dandyn-trained healers, or else he’ll fall into a coma and die.

Mama...Pops...

“As for you?” Layne pins me with his stare, his cold look. The unnerving sneer creases his face. “I need you to be part of the Slayers of giants.”

IT TAKES all of my self-control not to laugh in Layne's narrow face. The tiny man had delivered his line with all of the melodrama befitting the situation, but the revelation does little to shock me. Gef and Sinet both had talked more than they should have. I doubt they knew anything substantial about what Layne has in mind for me, but that doesn't mean they didn't know enough to clue me in. Details, really are the only thing missing. Maybe that's why I decide to play along.

I feign surprise. "You want me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He sighs. "That is less important. I need your answer."

"To your demands?" I snap.

"Request."

"Request? I accept it, or my family dies."

He blinks. "I wouldn't kill your family."

"If my brother doesn't get his medicine, then he'll die. If he dies, Mama won't have anything to live for. Without Mama, Pops will just expire. You'll kill my family."

"Then let's avoid that, shall we? What do you say?"

What can I say? Still, I bite my tongue for a moment, afraid. If I say yes, then who knows what will happen next? They think that I'm either a Spark or a Spook, and either way they've Recruited me. Layne has made it obvious what will happen if I say no...

"Yes."

"You accept?" He arches his eyebrows. It irritates me.

"Yes, I'll be Recruited." Then it occurs to me. How would I know which I am, Spark or Spook? "So, you want me to be part of a Slayer? But I'm not wrapped."

"Insane, you mean?"

"That's what it means," I shoot back. I don't like his "greater-than-you" attitude; it's started to wear on my nerves. Unfortunately, this sends him on a tangent, and I don't get my answer.

He twists his mouth and shakes his long locks away from his piercing eyes. "No, that's what it has *come* to mean. You streets are all alike in that regard, thinking that you have thought up everything that exists in your world. What are words, Amela, more than just random sounds, after all? But if you can push past that simple sound, an entire world of meaning has erupted. You can't think that a word means what it means by virtue of the word itself. You must know the reason why we use the words. It's important."

I blink. "So?"

"Words mean things because we say they do. Nothing has a word embedded within it. Air is not air by virtue of us calling it air. So saying that you're 'wrapped' does, in no way, have any connection to insanity beyond what you apply—and imply—as its meaning."

I still don't follow, and tell him so.

"What I'm trying to tell you, Amela, is that you only look at this world from your view. All you know is filled with lies, theft, and running from the authority who rightly try to stop your reprehensible behavior for the good of all society. Yet, according to you, I am your enemy."

“Do you consider those who keep you prisoner as your friends?” I spit out.

“Hardly. But I am saying that I am only your enemy to you. I do not view you as my enemy, and the average person out there—” and he flicks his stubby fingers at the window “—would see things my way. I am a Recruiter, and I have the prerogative of apprehending such antisocial individuals who seek to disturb the order of things. So I am only an enemy to you and yours, while the world at large would see me as a protector of innocence. Do you see?”

In a way. I don’t like it, though, so I ignore it. “What does this have to do with me saying that I’m not wrapped?”

He tuts. “You needn’t slip into a streettalking tough, Amela. I am neither impressed nor interested in hearing it. The reason I say this, is because you bandy about words like ‘wrapped’ and ‘cracked’ as if you know what they mean.” He stands, his chair skittering out from behind him. “But you don’t. So I will show you. Follow.”

Layne breezes past me, his hair stinking of rosewater. He doesn’t turn to ensure my compliance; he simply stalks away.

I can lam it now, but I don’t. Mama and Pops and Kev haunt me, and I can’t walk knowing that I might be able to help them.

My bare feet toeing the carpet gingerly, I follow after, trying not to jar my body too much. The water helped to clear my head a little from everything, but the hunger strikes at me constantly, almost more than the aches and tears and fatigue.

We head toward the stairs, my strides echoing Layne’s. Descending, I count. Thirty-nine. Forty. Forty-one. Forty-two. I was off by two. I’d like to dismiss the miscount as the effect of an exhausted fog, but excuses won’t protect me. I berate myself in silence.

The cooler air of the first floor caresses my face. We continue down, the stairs turning. This time I count more thoroughly, and come up with fifty-nine. I groan inwardly. I’m much too tired to run up fifty-nine stairs. I’d best play along with Layne; any chance at a lam has slipped away like a mud-coated milch-mouse.

The air gets progressively cooler. The cellar reeks of mildew and the stench of darkness. I cringe, thinking back to what I had just escaped in the tunnel. It reminds me: “What happened to Logan?”

“Logan?”

“The boy with Pops. At the site of Carly’s store.”

“Oh. He’s fine.”

“Fine?”

“Yes. Fine.”

“His hand was crushed.” I say it slowly, like when I talk to Kev.

“Did I not say that he is fine?”

I don’t answer. Layne is lying to me, I’m sure of it. But why would he? What does he have to gain by lying?

“You doubt me?”

Honesty. “Not specifically,” I decide after a long pause. “You wouldn’t need to lie to me. The truth is enough to keep me listening.”

“Smart girl.”

But which truth? I tuck the thought into a different corner of my mind. I don’t want to focus on it now, and I don’t want to doubt my instincts. I have to follow Layne.

He knows too much about me to be making things up about my family, anyway. After all, didn't his two henchmen send a kid off to get them? I grimace and set about studying the dank passageway in the flickering light.

Every dozen feet or so an ensconced torch throws out shifting shadows. Cobblestone brickwork races in front of me, and covers the lichen-layered walls. Doors punctuate the long hallway like exclamation points, a shock of vertical iron bars among the horizontal bricks. Moans and creaks drift out from the murk, though the origin of each hides in the black. Water—or maybe not—ripples out in puddles in front of every cell, and it slows me down as I skirt each one. Layne, also, avoids them, making me think that I'm in the right in avoiding them.

The mildew stink fades as I acclimate to it, but a new one slides in. It smells of piss and worse, and I shudder to think what made it. Chains clank, bodies slam against the bars, and the occasional shrill laugh interrupts everything else. The chill cacophony of cries creeps across my spine, shivering and shaking at my bones.

"Where are we?" I finally whisper.

Layne sounds only marginally impressed. "You're braver than you look. It took you longer to ask that than almost any other Spark I've recruited. Most ask ere we get down the flight of stairs, terror in their voices. I think you were a good choice."

"Choice?" I snort, then regret the action. I took in an extra-powerful lungful of something that I didn't want a whiff of, and now it chokes me. I cough it out and finish my retort. "Choice means that I get to make a decision. You forced me to take your offer."

Layne waves his hand, as if batting at a fly. I guess it's my comment that he's swatting away. "You chose. You said yes."

"You have my family hostage. Where's the choice in that?"

He casts me a mysterious, unreadable look. The snapping torchlight shades his face, twisting it into a sinister glower. Skin prickles race up and down my arms, and I stop involuntarily.

"Leave them. That's what I did."

No more words. We march along for a bit longer. He at last comes to a cell where he stands primly, his tiny hands clasped behind his back. Without ado or explanation, he produces an iron key and inserts it into the padlock.

"This," he says as he grates the lock open, "is your new best friend. If he doesn't suit you, we'll try another cell." He gives me a pointed look. "Amela, meet Vald." Lifting a torch out of its sconce, he shifts it closer to the now-open door. Shadows retreat grudgingly, and, though my eyes are now accustomed to the gloom, I can't see any details.

"Who?" I ask, stepping closer. My teeth snap together and my head lurches back as Layne shoves me from behind. Surprising; he doesn't look that strong. I stumble into the dark cell, reeling for something to balance myself with. My hand brushes the wall, but slips off of some moss (I hope that it's moss), and I topple. Stars dance just for me on the black canvas of the back of my eyelids as my head cracks smartly against the stone ground.

"Vald." The answer echoes slowly about me, lethargically, and I struggle to understand why he repeats the name. When I remember, I moan.

Layne hasn't left, yet. He still stares at me from the good side of the iron bars.

“You said that you weren’t ‘wrapped.’ I told you that you couldn’t even understand that word.” He flicks his hand at me, and I feel something hard and light strike me on the chest. It tinkles as I move. “Now you’ll learn first hand why a Spook is considered ‘wrapped.’ I hope you enjoy your first meeting with him.” He disappears down the hall, though he leaves the torch ensconced. Light dribbles in reluctantly.

I grab at the item he threw at me with one hand, and massage the back of my head with the other. Twisting to catch the dim light, I investigate his gift.

A set of two keys.

“By the King’s blood,” I oath. I don’t swear often—only in moments of extreme distress. This moment counts as one of those.

One of the keys fits the cage door, and is my way of laming this place. The other one, much smaller in size, belongs to only one thing that I can think of, one rumor assembled from scraps of memories, information, and eavesdropped conversations like the broken pieces of a shattered vase slowly rebuilt. If what I heard before has even a kernel of truth...

A chain rustles behind me, dead and metal and fear.

“That’s their problem,” says a voice that surprises me with its enthusiasm. “That’s their problem right there. They don’t understand. Air and clouds. It’s the itching. No! Not the itching. It’s the burning. Yes, *burn* where it can only hurt for a minute. We...no, wait. Not we, not I. You. You, you, you, you.” Laughter. “You’re who you are because of who you are. When will you change that?”

I almost soil myself. I’ve been thrown into the cage with a Spook.

And I’m supposed to release him.

Layne had given me two keys—my two choices. I can run—the big, iron key; or I can free the Spook—the small, silver key.

“Yes, that’s the time right there. Right *there!*” Vald shakes a bit, and I can see but barely a rough guess of his size. He’s big. Much bigger than I had expected. It seems like he fills the room.

“What?” I manage to squeak. I grip the iron key and start to shift toward the door, my breath ragged and jumpy. The *throbbing* in my head is only made worse with the movement, but I don’t give it a foothold. I have to focus on lamming this place. I can’t stay—I can’t stay!

“The time? What? You don’t know the time?” A shrill, angry laugh. “And they say that *I’m* the one who’s cracked? Of course I know the time! It’s *my* time!” Then he screams. He just screams and screams, getting closer and bigger. The chains clink together ominously. I scoot back, trying very hard not to cry.

“What do you want?”

“Don’t go!” Suddenly Vald’s voice goes quiet, soft, and imploring. I still inch away, heading for the door through a thick layer of slime (I hope it’s slime). “Don’t go, please.” Sadness drips from his words like the sludge down the walls. “You can’t go.”

Shuddering and shivering, I battle against the fear that strangles me. “Why?” I whisper.

Sucking in a diaphragm of rank air, he bellows, “*Germs!*” before falling into a gale of screams and laughter. Sick, deranged laughter, reminiscent of Bline’s cackle.

I’d take on Bline any time, day, or night, over this.

I love Mama, Kev, and Pops, but I can’t do this. This is too much. Too much.

Scrambling onto my feet, I bolt for the door, the keys clutched tightly in my hand. Rustles echo behind me, but that only spurs me on. I guess Layne's push threw me farther into the room than I thought, because I run for probably five or six hours before my hands are within reaching distance of the rust-encrusted bars.

Even when I'm completely stopped, I still reach for them, my fingers outstretched—yearning. But I don't get any closer. Stretch, stretch, but no good. I'm stuck.

I throw a quick glance over my shoulder.

Vald has the tail end of my longjacket tightly clenched in his teeth. A small part of my mind notices that his teeth are very white and straight, not all slightly crooked like mine. But I don't really pay mind to the observation. Instead I wonder at what is going on with him.

Veins bloom across his neck and face, visible through his dark beard—I can only see from the top of his snarling lips down to where a heavy leathern jacket has him pinned up to the bottom of his throat. He growls and wrenches backward, and I lose my footing. I lurch back a few steps, but instantly rush forward again.

Around my jacket he screams.

And screams.

And screams.

Then it turns into weeping. The tightness on my jacket lessens, and I can move again. Idly, I wonder why I didn't just shuck off the longjacket in the first place. That is rather unlike me. Then again, I really like this jacket, even though it has now been dragged through more slime and muck than could ever be washed out. Best not to think on it.

I slowly turn, the keys impressing themselves still into my palm. Vald is at the length of his chain, which is tethered to the back of the strangest tunic I have ever seen. Made of supple, strong leather, the sleeves are several times too big and long for him. Wound back and forth, double, treble, they work like a huge restraint but without the worry of chains or manacles. Holding it shut is a large lock, which attaches to the tethered chain. It reflects a silvery light in the murk of the cell. Large rips in his stained trousers give glimpse to well-muscled shanks, coated in dark, wiry hair. His face, though, most captivates and alarms me.

It looks normal.

Like any other face.

Granted, there is the trace of spittle caught in his thick beard, and a rather intricate scar on his left cheek, as if a piece of charcoal had landed there, but his olive skin and dark hair, though stained, tear-streaked, and dirty, appear perfectly whole and normal.

Save his eyes.

Wide, wild, and strangely empty, yet simultaneously deep, as if wisdom is trying to seep out. I've seen the look before, on a person who was just about to die. The situation takes a while to explain, so suffice to say that the crowd was intent on stoning the chap, and he cast about the ring of angry people, desperate for a way to lam it.

That look is in Vald's eyes.

But so is the other look, the kind of expression that only one other person I know has worn. That's the kind of look that Kev gives me when he needs my help, but doesn't know how to ask for it.

I swing the silver key into my hand and approach his lock.

THE SILVER key slides in without protest. Vald stares at me, trembling and twitching, but otherwise remains still. In fact, my hand shakes more than he does. The click echoes in the suddenly silent room as the tumblers twist over.

Hissing and clinking, the chain that has him tethered slithers to the ground, a linked snake, inert and harmless—now. The sleeves unravel themselves, slipping and flipping about like loosened strands of hair tossed in the wind. Layer after stitched together layer stretch and float to the ground.

I step back as he flexes his muscles, the bunches of fabric slough off him, and he stands. Arms as thick as I am (probably) turn about, breaking free of their long imprisonment. Black hair curls up his umber forearms, and his bare chest glitters with a slight sheen of sweat. I swear, the man has muscles on top of muscles. His torso ripples more than a flag in the wind whenever he moves.

Taking a deep breath, Vald arches his back and lets out a long sigh of relief. “Free,” he says after the stretch. “Free, and free! Do you know what that means?”

I shake my head, suddenly afraid again. What have I just done?

“They don’t have me anymore!”

“Who?”

“They! The men who rule the world!”

“I see.” I don’t, but I can’t think of anything else to say. Instead, I drop my eyes off of him and rifle through the reams of leather, looking for the dropped set of keys. A thin, leather bound book topples out, almost landing in a particularly large pile of slime. “What’s this?” I bend to pick it up, scooping the keys free of the muck at the same time.

Just as I curl them both into my hands, I am lifted up and slammed against the wall. Pinned by the colossal force in his one hand alone, Vald presses me to the stone. My feet dangle uselessly inches above the scum-ridden earth. I gasp for breath and claw at his wrist. It doesn’t seem to affect him, and he leans in closer to me. Fetid breath washes over my face, a disturbing counterpoint to his brilliantly white teeth. The book squishes into the mud.

“You touching?”

I gasp.

“No touching!”

I nod, faintly.

“Who are you?” I can’t even see his eyes. The pain, lack of oxygen, and darkness strip away my sight.

I choke in response.

“Who are you? Are you with them?”

I squeak. The world blurs, and I just barely manage to shake my head.

“Tell the truth!”

My vision swims, a hollow ringing fills my ears, and the cell starts to disappear. A half gasp later, I drop to the ground. Choking, coughing, and otherwise doing my best to comfort my abused, raspy throat, I nod, one hand and my knees steadying me against the floor, the other one clutched over the burning spot on my neck. Tears blur my eyes, so now I don’t know if I really have been released, or if I passed out and am now dreaming that he let me go.

I cough again, painfully. If it's a dream, I'd prefer not to have it.

"You with them?" he repeats, his tone sounding distressingly sane, the previous hysteria that trimmed his tones utterly gone.

I shake my head. The effort hurts. Everything hurts.

"Good. Good, good, good, good. That's good, because I don't know what to do with them. I don't! Do I listen, or don't I? I'm a good boy, you see, and if they think otherwise I'll go to the prison. I don't want to go there. They use chains, they chain you up. Skyward? You see what I mean, skyward? I thought as much. I didn't doubt you, not for a second, no, not you. *No touching!*" I cringe at that. Then he says, "What's your name?"

My head spins as much from his attack as his attempt to speak. I cannot follow his logic. Maybe that's my problem. "Amela," I croak, still keeping my eyes down. Deep breaths of the stinky air. I never thought that mold and sewage could smell so sweet.

"Amela?" He starts to laugh, a high pitched, grating, forced laugh—the sound a five year old makes when he doesn't know why everyone is chuckling, so he decides to join in. That kind of laugh. "That's a funny name. Familiar. Like snow on your tongue. Do you remember snow?" All of his violence, all of his rage has evaporated, like a puddle beneath a midday sun.

I finally scoot off of my knees and regard him warily. "Are you..." I almost say *wrapped*, but I understand what that means a bit better. Now I see why Layne took issue with my use of the word. I didn't know what being *wrapped* really meant. I had had no idea. I know better now. "What are you talking about?" I say instead. "There hasn't been snow in a decade. The drought, remember?" I want to say something about the rain being all we've had, but I've already hissed out too many words, and my throat protests.

"No, no. Snow!" He stops and laughs, this time more genuinely. "Snow, no. Hear it? What's that? Snow, no. Ho! Ho, so, no, snow..." He trails off and looks at me expectantly.

I give him a puzzled, contemptuous glare. I should cower, but his juvenile attitude irritates me to the point that I bite out, "You're rhyming. What of it?"

"Yes! That! Rhyme! Time, fine, line...no, no, no, sign. Yes! Bless! Guess! Jest?"

"*Jest* and *guess* don't rhyme, Vald," I say, slowly picking myself up. I want to get out. I start inching my protesting body to the cell door.

"Vald. Bald, scald? What about, what about...Amela? A good fellah?"

"*Fellah*?" I scorn, shoving the iron key into its hole. "What kind of word is that?"

"Fellah. Rhymes with Amela."

"No, it doesn't. *Fellah* isn't even a real word, fool's head," I say, unconsciously dropping into streettalk. I do that when I'm tired, nervous, or have just had the life almost throttled out of me. Those are the only times.

"Fine. That's fine." He shakes his fingers at me, though each seems to twitch in a different direction and at different rates. "What about Vald? That's a good word, that's real!" Vald follows me, utterly entranced by our conversation. He doesn't notice the fact that I have released him from his foul-smelling lair (though I'm well convinced that he carries the majority of that stink with him in his pockets; the stench doesn't improve even after we leave the place), nor does he see that he is free of his wrappings. Instead, he babbles like a little child with her doll, making the toy talk the nonsense that is only intelligible to the very young. "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes," he's saying, "that's a good, good

word. Word, bird, turd. Gross. Who wants a turd? Not Vald! No, I don't. Don't try to give it to—what's that, a puddle?" He jumps in it, splashing stagnant water (I assume it's water—I hope it's water) all over the place. I don't care. I'm too tired.

We march along, Vald being more childish and difficult to control than Kev. I ignore everything that he does, not because it doesn't disturb or even (on some level) fascinate me, but I have to conserve energy for more important things. Breathing, for example.

We reach the stairs. Was it forty-one or forty-two to the top? No, that's not right. The other staircase had that many, not this...wait, now I can't remember. What does it matter? I start to hike. Vald follows after.

He counts each step precisely, never missing a stair.

"Fifty-seven," he proclaims as we near the top. I don't doubt him. It feels twice that. "Fifty-eight." I press myself against the wall, squinting in the brightness of the first floor hallway. "Fifty-nine," concludes Vald. "Fifty-nine. Not that you'd know that without counting. But I counted, because I can. I *can!*" His last word is a shout, an imperative that I acknowledge. I stare at him blankly.

"Fine."

This satisfies him, and he grins.

Now that I can see him better, his body has more on it than just muscles. Especially on his back. Heavy, twisting, branching scars map his body. None look new, particularly, but they all look gruesome and deep. Some appear older than others, which is probably a good thing. He wouldn't have skin now if it had happened in the recent past. I also notice that his trousers are in greater disrepair than I had previously noted. If he turns just so, I can see where the back of his thigh rushes up to—

"Amela!"

The sharp tones pull me away, and I see Layne descending from the second floor. He moves with a lightness of step that makes me wonder if he's happy to see me.

"Glad to see you chose so wisely. I knew that I hadn't misplaced my trust in you." As soon as he catches sight of the mess I am, he stops, wrinkles his nose, and the cool demeanor returns. "Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"You must be very proud."

"Why?"

He glances from Vald to me, and then back to the Spook. "You're an official Slayer now."

"What?"

"You're his Spark."

I swallow, the lump of spit dropping down my throat taking a chance to punch all the way down. Once the pain stops, I repeat, "His Spark? *His* Spark?"

"What did you think we were doing? That was your assignment. *He* is your assignment."

"Cuckoo birds taste delicious," spouts Vald.

"Quiet," I tell him, more out of habit than anything else. Kev sometimes has the same problem of firing his mouth off during the least appropriate moments.

"Yes, he is your Spook. Together, you are officially recognized Slayers, though you might think of yourself as 'Scrappers' instead, what with your streettalk. You'll be

protecting King and country from those who would seek them harm.”

I stare. I’ve never been officially anything. So few people know who I am or what I’ve done, I doubt if I’m even “officially” wanted by the Militia! I struggle with the feelings inside of me. They’re too complicated to pick apart now, so I leave them behind.

“What am I supposed to do with him?”

“Whatever I say.”

Those three words strike me heavily. I hate taking orders.

Layne sniffs, his nose wrinkling. He fingers the silver whistle about his neck.

“And the first thing I will have you do is get cleaned up. Eat. I expect you in my office by the third hour past zenith.” He turns, and I see both Gef and Sinet standing at a respectful distance. I hadn’t noticed them. I must be tired.

“Boys, see that she finds a nice bath and plenty to eat.” He gives them a reproving glare. “And if you touch her again, you’ll take Vald’s cell.”

This makes Vald laugh. “You have to be careful of the rats, there. They’re big—bigger’n me!”

Gef stares with wide eyes, and Sinet tries to come up with a defense.

“Don’t bother,” snaps Layne. “You probably thought she was a false lead, didn’t you? Is that it? You thought she was a maybe Spook, or plain insane perhaps? Now, you’ll treat her better, won’t you? You’ll do what you’re supposed to, rather than what you want to do. Is that right?”

“Yessir,” Gef slurs. Sinet nods, his forked tongue shooting out nervously to wet his lips. He at least has the decency to look chagrined and plenty embarrassed.

I follow the two henchmen out of the side door—the same one we entered in—and back through the garbage-littered alley. We cross the baking cobblestoned street, strafing past the green, horse-made mines of scat. I blink and squint a lot, trying to keep my eyes from watering against the brightness. Vald whistles a sharp, annoying tune as we go. It seems to irritate Gef, so I don’t say anything. I guess, now that I’m a Spark, it’s my responsibility to take care of my Spook.

That’s my job, right?

The thing is, the only Scrappers I’ve ever seen—and always in passing, at that—were Vigilantes, and they were normally running. Fast and in the other direction. So I actually don’t know what I’m supposed to be, what I’m supposed to do, and that makes me nervous.

Sinet and Gef breeze in through the round front door of The Quiet Inn, a predictably named establishment, with a crudely painted bed on the sign that hangs over the front window. Flowers spring out, small explosions of color against the faded white boxes in which they live. They must water them daily. Custom must be good in order to afford water for flowers. It impresses me, I’ll be honest. The steps creak beneath my feet as I follow the henchmen.

A scrawny lad in his teens stands behind the receiving counter. He nods at me with wide eyes, which seem, actually, to water as Vald and I pass, no doubt on account of the smell. I assume from the businesslike way that Gef and Sinet act that their presence is either common or prearranged—maybe even both. Still, it would have made me feel more important if the boy had at least tried to stop two stench bags and a Scrapper. Then again, I doubt I would want to stop Vigilantes or Scrappers either.

So the henchmen lead me to a bath, which has a towel hanging outside of the room.

That's how I know it's a bath.

"Get cleaned up," says Gef, his eyes focused squarely on his feet. I notice that Sinet is staring at Vald with naked fear. I imagine that the fool's head is remembering Layne's threat.

I suddenly know what it feels like to have power.

I like it.

"He needs to be cleaned, too," I say, gesturing to Vald with my head. "See that it's done."

Gef stiffens as he replies, "Right away," but at least he says it.

I open the door, the smooth ivory handle warm in my grasp. Billows of steam roll out of the door like a fat man invited into a wedding feast. The hot air slaps me and punches itself down my throat. My breath stutters for a second, stuck on my uvula. Then I step in, chewing the air, and close the door behind me.

Hotrocks, arrayed like jewels upon the brow of royalty, gasp and hiss steam and overheated water into the air. Mist and fog coat the room in a shimmering, sweltering translucency. It's hotter in here than outside, but there's a difference: I can get naked in here.

Stripping off my sodden, stinky, and (for the most part) ruined clothing, I step through the steam until I reach the hotrock-enveloped pool in the middle of the room. I ease my way in, toes, heels, calves, knees. By the time I get to my thighs, the color of the water has already turned darker, mud sloughing off—my own type of snakeskin. My legs, waving and stunted in the pool, are bright red from the heat. I pause and let my legs acclimate before fully submerging the rest of my body. That takes a few minutes, and I'm feeling dizzy by the time I can finally sit. The water is only about mid-chest deep, so I have to squat to get completely wet.

Bags filled with the soft, scented soaps and barks that I have heard about but never used are within arm's reach. It takes me a few minutes to figure them out. By the time I have lathered up, rinsed, lathered again (each time being extra careful to avoid the bruises, cuts, scrapes, and wounds—most of which I don't even remember how I got them), and rinsed again, the water is positively murky. I check on my stubbed toe, but it doesn't seem any worse than any of my other hurts. I sigh, close my eyes, and lean back, enjoying the sense of rest. It feels good.

I don't think I doze, but when I open my eyes again, the water has cleared. I look around, and see that the water slowly fills from a pipe in the wall, which dribbles down a short gutter and into the pool, constantly refreshing it. The excess flows over, spilling into the hotrocks which then steam. Anything else that makes it past the hotrocks ringing my bath trails about the walls, striking the 'rocks there. The more I move, the more water overflows, and the more steam the room creates.

Aye. Very good custom.

The heat makes my head swim, so I decide to get out. In one corner I spy a chest. Upon limping over and flinging open the lid, I find stacks of cotton-spun towels, neatly folded and arranged. More than once I accidentally towel too vigorously a sore spot (I think they're all sore spots) and gasp, hiss, or curse in pain.

Next to the chest is a dresser. In the drawers are some cotton-spun slacks and tunics. Because of the drought, cotton has become scarce. Seeing this much of it in one place solidifies my earlier impression: money. For all its poor naming, The Quiet Inn has

a large amount of cash coming in. I think about filching the towels, but that wouldn't work the way I would want it to. After all, they would probably know I did it, being the only bather in here, and the towels have *The Quiet Inn* stitched into one corner.

Never mind.

I dress in the clothes, but the white shirt's too loose and the brown slacks're too tight. Still, it's the best that I can do, so I won't worry about it.

Running my wrinkled fingers through the gnarls of my wet hair, I try to place the black locks in place. It doesn't really do much, but I figure I had to try.

Taking a deep breath of the hot air, and feeling sweat begin to prickle against my clean skin beneath the new clothes, I step out of the room, stuffing the tails of the shirt into my waistline.

An empty hallway greets me. I toe the plush carpet as I consider my options. I can try to find the people I know (fool's heads of the highest rank), my Spook (a man who appears just as willing to kill me as look at me), or the boy from the front desk (while wearing ill-fitting clothes). Just now I remember my longjacket and the sundry items I have hidden in the sleeves. I slip back into the room and remove them all. I had recently emptied most of the pockets, which is a good thing, because I don't have room for everything. Washing my again sullied-hands, I bundle up my belongings into a towel and heft it over my shoulder.

I guess I'll borrow the towel after all.

Gef is walking down the hall, his face pinched with displeasure and streaked with sweat. Now that I don't stink so much, I can nose his stench much better.

Lucky me.

"You done?"

"Aye," I say, my throat stinging from the suddenly dry air.

"Layne had a emergency meetin'. He won't be seein' you today. Your room is yours until you don't need it no more. Dinner's at six after zenith, so don't be late."

"What time is it now?" I don't know how long I had been in the bath.

"Second hour past zenith. There's cheeses and breads in your room, so you can eat." He doesn't really look at me, and every glance he tosses me carries a smudge of fear in it.

I like that, too.

"I'm coinless."

Gef blinks, surprised. "The Crown pays for everything. That's the way things work."

"And Vald?" I ask, because I don't know what else to say.

"His room is next to yours. As always."

I nod, as if that was what I expected. Who knows anything about Scrappers, Spooks, or Sparks in the first place? "Well."

"By your leave," he says and turns to go.

"Gef?" I call out after he disappears around the corner, headed for the front door. A moment passes before he returns.

"Aye?"

"Which room is mine?"

"Oh." He paws through his pocket and pulls out a key. A small tag dangles at one end, a gilded number 4 etched into it. "Here y'are."

I take it and walk away, not bothering to throw out a thank you. I bet that he remembers how he treated me before, and now he's really worried—especially because I turned out to be the Spark after all. As I think about it, I guess it's debatable who is more dangerous: The crazy, powerful Spook, or the cold, capable Spark.

A cold Spark.

The thought makes me smile.

I EAT, sleep, arise in time for dinner, am visited by a healer (not Dandyn-trained, unfortunately), who patches me up with poultices and potions, then go back to my room to sleep. The entire process passes without interacting with anyone I know. Even the person who serves me my food is different, a demure girl in her fourteens, I imagine. She barely begs a word from me while serving up the stew, and she says even less after depositing me my ham hock. I don't catch her name.

As my head drops onto a feather-filled pillow, my body stretching across the freshly rolled straw mattress, the ropes holding it in place tightened while I ate, I feel a pang of conscience. My family is not bedding down on straw mattresses, pillows—who knows if they even have food in their stomachs? And what of Carly and Logan? I abandoned them in the tunnel, and then believed a man—a rich man, at that, as if one of them can be trusted—when he said that they would be cared for.

I brood on the thought until I fall asleep.

I am ashamed to admit that it doesn't take very long.

When I arise, the Night Sisters have fled from the burning rays of the sun.

Dampness on the windowsill and in the street outside my window testify of a small bit of rain that landed. Two storms in the last two days? Perhaps the stranglehold the death has on the Realm is slipping? I'll believe that later.

A tap comes at the door.

"Hail?" I call out as I pad forward, pulling the tunic over me as I go. "Who is it?"

"Shema," comes the soft reply. "I've got your clothes."

Clothes? Then I remember; I had asked the serving girl—probably this Shema—to clean up the clothes I had left behind in the bathing room.

I open the door. Sure enough, the server stands there, petite and pretty with dark hair curled loosely about her round, brown face, looking just as bashful and timid as before. She holds my clothes gingerly in her arms. I take them quickly, and offer a small smile and thanks.

"Aye, m'lady."

"M'lady?" I say before the door can close. "Why do you call me that?" I want to point out that I only have three years on her, hardly enough to be called *lady*.

"You're a Spark?" Though a question, she says it in such a way that it sounds more a statement, or maybe an accusation.

I nod.

"Sparks come through here all the time. Every time Recruiter Layne has a new one, we treat them with all due respect and diligent service."

"But I just barely became a Spark yesterday," I insist.

"Then since yesterday you've become a lady, as it were." She hasn't met my gaze this entire time. In fact, she's blushing, as though she's embarrassed to be explaining this to me. "So, good day, m'lady."

"Good day." I shut the door, worried.

Having a title—even if it comes because of something like being a Spark—is too much. Much too much, in fact. I can't look Pops in the face and talk to him if he has to call me "my lady." And what would Carly say? Or Logan? Well, Logan probably would swoon to say it, because I'm now well convinced he is pants over pate in love with me.

Then again, he shrived me. I don't think he did it on purpose, but the fact still stands. I should feel angry at him, should feel betrayed. I do feel guilt about not appreciating them while I had them, but even that is too much for me. The well of emotions dips dry, and I can't manage more than just an empty, aimless anger.

I grunt and shake my head. Too much thinking, that's my problem. I need to do something. I still feel the aches and pains of all that I've done, but this resting has already driven me mad with inactivity. The sooner I can do what Layne wants me to, the sooner I—and my family—will be free. And that's what this is all about. My family.

I have to remember that.

I toss my clothes on the bed, shuck my borrowed clothes to the floor, and dress. Even my longjacket looks nicer than it has since I first...obtained it. Even the blood stain on the white inner lining is gone. Every pocket has been restitched, resealed, and reinforced. I stuff my items into their appropriate homes and slide the longjacket on. It's like a brand new jacket.

I break my fast on cooked eggs, gravy, and biscuits. Just as I finish eating, Vald enters, trailed by the henchmen. He is clean, *cap-a-pie*, dressed in brown leathern leggings and matching boots and vest. Small tassels swing from the hem. A nearly sleeveless green tunic peeks out beneath the vest. Tucked within his broad, metal-studded belt I can just see the corner of the book he nearly killed me over in the dungeon. His broad chest seems only enhanced by the clothes. His once greasy hair is clean and straight, brushing against the tops of his shoulders. The beard has been combed out, the snarls removed. I had thought that he would be fully barbered, but I must have missed my guess.

"I have the key," he declares.

"Oh?" I arch my eyebrow.

"Oh, aye. It's wonderful."

"Great." I look to Gef, who skips his gaze from mine, while Sinet finds his grubby fingernails of sudden and great interest.

"Layne's called us."

"Great," I say again.

Standing, I nod to Vald. "You coming?"

"Surely! Only I have the key."

"Of course. How could I forget?"

"I don't know," confesses Vald, shaking his head as he falls into step with me and the henchmen. "I really don't. It seems like stardust."

"Stardust?"

He ignores my question. "I suppose that's to be expected. That's to be expected, really, expected." He shakes his fingers, twitching each one individually as he speaks. "But there comes a time when the milch-mice can't sing like they used to, and that only makes things harder to understand."

"I don't doubt it."

Vald laughs. "You're too sharp, Amela fellah."

"I told you, that isn't a real word."

"You did?" Vald frowns, his dark brow puckering. "You did. That's right. Don't you remember?"

I blink at him, confusion creasing my face. "Yes. I remember. That's why I told you."

“You told me?”

By now, we’ve crossed the street and move toward the alley.

“Yes, I told you. Vald, that’s how this conversation started.”

“I see.”

We enter by the silent side door. We always enter by the side.

Curious.

“I’m so very glad,” I say, a bit of sarcasm creeping into my voice. He grins, letting me know that my sardonic comment has widely missed its mark.

I’m coming to see that being a Spark might come with power and titles, but it has its difficult parts, too.

We wind up the stairs and proceed down the hall to the office. Sinet taps softly on the door.

“Let the Slayer enter.” Layne sounds like an idiot, but that’s his business. I won’t comment on it. I think he also meant, somehow, that the henchmen should stay behind. They do, so I guess I’m right.

Layne is facing away from me as I enter, his long hair braided down his back. A dark black doublet, worked with gilded thread throughout, covers him. White lace peeks from the wrists, and his square fingers are clasped together at the small of his back. His white stockings race up to his knees, with the same brightly polished shoes on his feet as he had yesterday. He turns to face me—us—with his whistle shimmering in the warm morning light. He looks from me to Vald, then back to me.

“He got new clothes. Why didn’t you?”

I feel my face start to burn, and I look away. I like my longjacket. At least it’s clean now. I want to say something about that, but I don’t, though I’m not sure why.

“Well?”

“So, do I give him the key?” For some reason, Vald looks at me as he asks this.

“I’m sorry?” ask I.

“What key?” pounces Layne like a lizard on a bug.

I shake my head. “He told me that he has the key.”

“What key?” asks Layne again.

“I don’t know,” I mouth to him as Vald speaks up.

“That’s none of your concern, little man. My Spark is in charge here, and don’t you forget it.” Vald nods decisively, then places his hands behind his back. I don’t know if he does this normally, or if he wants to mock Layne...maybe to imitate the man? Despite the poultices, potions, pillows, and provisions, my body still hurts. This distracts me, and I can’t make much sense out of the situation.

“What do you want?” inquire I, with much less strength than I had intended.

“Peace, young lady. All I really want is peace.” Layne starts to pace a little, marching back and forth as he talks to me. To us. Which is it? Well, in this case, it really is just me. Vald is clucking at the swirls worked into the carpet, not paying a moment’s attention to the Recruiter.

“Peace?”

He smirks a bit. “Of course. Isn’t that what everyone wants?”

“Some of us just want a crust of bread and our families back.” Bitterness comes out against my will.

“Sounds peaceful.” He returns to the window and gazes at the wide gardens

spread beneath his balcony, green despite the dearth.

I don't know how to respond, but I have to break the silence. "What do you want me to do, then?"

"I need you to help provide that peace."

"How am I to do that?"

He snorts. "First of all, you need to become more duplicitous in your thoughts. *You* are no longer just *you*, girl. You are you *and* he."

"Fair." That answers that question. Yet part of me resents the fact that Layne is telling me how to consider the relationship.

He continues. "There is a special pact, a special bond formed twixt a Spark and a Spook that can't be described in words. You simply have to experience it."

I give Vald a glance askance. "Oh?"

"Yes. How many Slayers have you ever met, Amela?"

"Vigilantes, mostly. I saw one punch through a wall."

He doesn't seem impressed. He says, "Ah. Those who were once Slayers and decided to no longer do their sworn duty. The whispers take both Spook and Spark." He pauses and regards me—us. "There is a problem, you see. Do you recall yesterday?"

How could I not? "Aye."

"Do you remember how I had to cancel our first appointment?"

"Yes." I never know if I can streettalk to Layne or not. He has barely passed a comment on it since he pounced on my use of the word *wrapped*.

"An unexpected...occurrence transpired that precipitates my next choice. This means, to put it in the most bald—"

"—Rhymes with Vald!" interrupts my Spook.

Layne slows, but doesn't stop. "—manner possible, that I need you now. Under normal circumstances, you would be given a chance to study and consort with other burgeoning Sparks. You would have a few weeks to acclimate yourself to the responsibilities, read the policies—you do read, don't you?" I nod tightly, and he continues. "You would also learn what it is you're supposed to do. I will allow you an abbreviated course, because the luxury of time will be denied us for the nonce. You have a special assignment for which you need to prepare, and that will take the majority of your time and attention."

"Oh, good," say I, but I don't really know what he's talking about.

He gives me a curious look. "You don't understand what you mean by that comment, do you?"

I shake my head.

Taking a deep breath, Layne paces to his seat. Turning, he sits and steeples his fingers, his whistle glinting with every movement. "The King died yesterday."

I stare, waiting for him to add to it. Yet he looks at me, as if expecting an additional reaction. "Oh, no," I say at last, not sure what else to do.

With an exasperated snort, Layne shakes his head. "Do you understand anything?" he snaps, jaw tightening with frustration.

"Yes. But not about this. What I do understand is that I have yet to see my family or been told what needs be done so that I can see them. The whispers take the King for all I care. He doesn't mean a drop of rain in a storm to me."

Layne is apparently shocked at my response. "You don't care about the King?"

“Have I ever met him?” I ask. I know that Layne can probably guess the answer, but I provide it anyway. “No. Has he ever helped me? No. What has he done that would demand my loyalty besides saying that he’s my sovereign? Nothing. I owe more allegiance to Vald than I do to him, and I met Vald yesterday!” A crazy man holds more of my loyalty than the King? Doubtless these are traitorous words. I imagine that, were I not just some street, pulled in and coerced into helping him, Layne could have me killed for having said what I just said. I can’t keep my scorn held in check; I can’t help myself. “What happens to the Royal Family has no bearing on me.”

Layne chuckles, the shock slipping away to a smug smile. “That is no longer true.” He points to a seat. “This could take a little while. Would you like to sit?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so. Still, if you change your mind...”

“Just like kind!” interrupts Vald.

“Be quiet,” I tell him offhandedly. To Layne: “Just talk.”

He laughs again. “I’m glad that you’re so willing to say what you did, Amela. I was worried that you might have...overly patriotic sentiments.”

“Why would I?” I’m wary, now.

He pouts his lips and furrows his brows. “I don’t know. A lot of streets don’t understand the way that our system works here, and they don’t care. Then there are others who fight against it, still wrapped in a warm blanket of ignorance. Then there are those like you who probably can or do understand the way things work, but aren’t willing to do more than take advantage of it.”

“Why am I that way?”

“You steal.”

I drop my gaze and study the floor. I don’t know how he knows that.

“Curious? Do you want to hear how I came by that information?”

I remain mute.

After a lengthy pause, Layne gloats, “Let’s just say that the shrift that brought you to my attention also divulged suspicions of your pastime.”

Logan.

My stomach sickens.

Vald hisses, laughs, and starts to unlatch his boots, only to latch them up again.

“All about this *noise*,” he says, pinning Layne with a glare. Then he glances up at me.

“Not that you’d care.”

I ignore him and swallow back my anger. “So, what now?” I force myself to ask.

Layne holds the silver whistle up so that I can see it well. “Do you know what this is?”

“A whistle.”

“That’s right. If I blow on it, this room will have five, maybe ten armed guards in here before four seconds elapse. Each and every one of them is dedicated to serving those who hold power. I am one of those people, and their job is to put their lives before mine. I ask anything short of murder, and they will do it. Sometimes, I even have enough authority to demand death. They execute. It’s that simple. I blow this whistle, they obey. Do you understand?”

No wonder he never fears being alone with a miserable Spark and her crazy Spook. He doesn’t feel threatened; he doesn’t know danger, he doesn’t know hardship.

Idly, I wonder how much good that whistle would do if Bline's face popped up behind him, filling the window with his hideous, boil-encrusted face. That's the feeling of fear; that's being threatened.

"Aye. What of it?"

"I need you to obey me. You are not like those guards. You think that you hold your own power, that what is more powerful than you cannot touch you. You need to change that feeling."

"Why should I?"

Layne laughs. "Family's sake? Your sake? His sake?" He indicates Vald with the inclination of his head. "I know you don't care much for him now, but you will. Later."

I don't answer him.

"The King's death has created...problems. Political problems, vacuums of power—everything you might expect."

"I didn't notice any panic in the streets."

"They don't know, yet. Besides, the commoners usually don't care, so long as their lives continue relatively uninterrupted. In fact, short of a full invasion or call to war, I doubt anyone out there would notice if the entire government switched hands. That's what we're worried about."

"We?"

"You and I, Amela, and those who require my assistance. You are involved now."

"How." It's more of a declaration, a type of disbelief, than a question.

"The King had a son, the Prince, who also died with him. Early reports indicate an attack, but things are still being looked into. At any rate, he has his wife and daughter who are still here. They must be protected, Amela. This has put our country into a precarious position."

"Why?"

"The Ascension of Kings." He says it with melodrama.

I blink. "Haven't heard of it."

He grimaces. "Then I will explain just the smallest bit. If the Queen or her daughter dies before either can remarry and birth a male heir within five years, then the kingdom will fall into the hands of the King's sister, Reika."

"Why five years?"

He shrugs. "That's the law. If the King dies without a male heir to take the throne, the Queen must remarry and birth a male heir to carry on the dynasty. If no male is born, it is the Nords' will that the dynasty end and a new bloodline take over."

"But she's a woman, married in and not of the bloodline," I observe.

"The law is that the Queen has been graced by the Nords with the blood of her monarch. She is considered an extension of the King's bloodline upon nuptial consummation."

I frown. "So, why won't a female heir serve? Why must the heir be male?"

Layne twists his lips in a grimace/smile. "The daughter has not slept with the father. At least, that's what we hope."

Well, to me it doesn't matter. I shake my head and say, "I don't care who's in control." I disagree with his earlier statement about how I feel about the way the monarchy works. I don't understand it, and I couldn't care less about it. But I haven't told him that.

“Fair. But I do. You see, the Queen is now in a desperate situation. She must remarry and have a child—a boy—before five years elapse. If she does not, both she and her daughter, Princess Eva, will be executed.”

I frown. “That seems like an extreme result.”

He shrugs. “As I said, it's the law. The Queen's biggest concern right now is the fact that she is past childbearing age—she has almost no chance of having another son.”

“How could she? She isn't married. I imagine bastards aren't allowed to the throne.”

Layne shakes his head. “You're right. She must get married. Her new spouse would be the King Elect, and he would be in power until a son was born—or seal his fate with the Queen.” He holds up a finger. “However, there is still Eva to consider.”

“The Princess?”

He nods solemnly. “If her mother dies, she's heir apparent, and the man she marries would be King Elect. The chances of a boy in the next five years from a woman whose womb is barely two decades old are much greater.”

“Then, what of Reika, this sister of the King?”

He layers his hands flat in the air, moving them down as if descending a ladder. “The hierarchy goes like this: King, Prince, Queen, Princess, brothers to the King, sisters to the King, vote for the next ruler.” He looks at me darkly. “Strike, now, from the list, the King, the Prince, and the brothers to the King. The first two are now dead, the last one doesn't apply. The King has but one sibling, his sister, Reika.”

I think for a moment. “If the Queen and Princess die, Reika will take control.”

“Precisely.”

I shake my head. “Again, what does this have to do with me?”

“Protection, Amela. The Queen is in a perilous position, and her daughter could be the target of assassination! To the common folk, the details of the King's death are still rumors only, but the possibility of an assassin aiming for the Royal Family is real—it always is.”

The way he trails off leads me to say, “You think that Reika is behind the death of the King?”

He grimaces a smile. “I would never *say* something like that aloud, Amela. I will only say this: If the Realm is to remain strong against the behemoths that live on all sides, we cannot let the dynasty die. The Queen must be protected.”

Silence drifts through the room. “How am I to do that?”

“Learn your duty. Protect the Realm. Training begins today. Everything else will fall into position.”

“When do I get to see my family.” It isn't a question, really.

“Soon.” I don't believe him. He continues. “You need to do this for me.” He holds up the whistle and tips his head. “This is what I meant when I described this whistle a moment ago. You will do this for me because I say so, with no more reason than that.” He spreads his hands open, letting the whistle drop to its customary place about his neck. “Besides, when you do something for me, you're doing it for your family.” He takes a calming breath.

“Let me say this,” he continues, tapping the smooth, polished wood on his desk. “You don't want Reika to gain control of the crown.”

“Why not?”

He points the finger at me. “Take my word on it.”

“Is that an order?”

“Yes.”

This gives me pause. If I obey once, I obey forever. I think of Kev, of Pops and Mama. How can I say no if it hurts them? I look at Vald. I don't care for him, so I certainly won't obey because of him. Layne meets my hot glare. I grind my teeth, trying to decide. He arches his eyebrow, a facial inquiry, as if to say, “What's your answer?”

I take a deep breath and shift my posture ever so slightly. “Fair.” The word hurts to say, and I feel an anger that I haven't felt before well within me. I feel...violated somehow, as if I've just been stripped of something essential. In a small way that can never really be repaired, I am broken. Nevertheless, I ask, “What am I supposed to do?”

“Protect the Queen and her daughter.”

“Why me? Why us?”

He grunts. “As I understand it, she has but few Slayers about her already, and none has seen a real behemoth yet. You'll be the most experienced when she arrives.” He pauses. “Whenever she arrives,” he amends.

“Where is she?”

“If my sources are correct, she is headed to the Shores of the Dandyn to discover if she truly is barren. This sort of situation is rare, but the Dandyn are the only race who can accurately diagnose her.”

I pause. “She won't be going to a Dandyn-trained healer? Isn't she worried about the fact that the Dandyn are another type of behemoth?”

Layne shakes his head. “No. She can't have a human look her over that simply trained with a Dandyn. She needs a real one, behemoth or no.”

I don't like the sound of that. “If I understand things correctly, the Queen will be headed away from the Realm right when it's most likely that someone is trying to kill her. She is heading across the sea to the Shores—which is just east of the Isle of the Vyn and north of the Darshur—to meet with a behemoth. She's sauntering past known enemies to check her fertility?”

“Yes,” Layne says after a long moment.

“At least she'll have guards there, right?”

“No,” he draws, “we need her to sneak there with little ado.”

This seems foolish. “Why?” I ask.

“Do you know what the Queen looks like?”

“No.”

“Odds are, neither will most of her enemies.”

“So, what, she's alone?”

“No, she has a few of the best of the Elite Guard with her.”

“And Slayers, inexperienced though they may be,” I muse aloud.

Layne laughs. “Amela, why would she bring Spooks to a country that is *filled* with behemoths?”

I stare in amazement. “So she's barely protected?”

“Aye.”

“That's folly.”

“Your job,” he says, bristling at my comment, “is to protect her when she returns, not to question her reasons or methods. We are all worried about her, Amela, but it is the

only choice left to her. She is doing what she must do. I expect the same from you.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

He flicks his gaze at Vald, who is biting at his toenails, and arches his eyebrows suggestively. I tell him to stop it and put his boots back on. He gives me a grudging look and complies.

Layne simply laughs. “May the Nords protect us all,” he whispers.

LAYNE ESCORTS me to a large field not far from his office. I've seen this park before, though rarely had a reason to enter it. Still, like most things in Tintyr, I have at least a working knowledge of them, and often an intimate acquaintance. As a street, it helps to know the area.

Gathered next to an oak standing near a drying canal, six men await us. They stand poised, yet casual, a mixture of preparation and insouciance that intrigues me.

Layne leads by a couple of steps, followed by me. Vald trails after, frequently laughing to himself, though occasionally he mutters, "No, not to them. Not to them! They're on the good side." That makes me a little uncomfortable, so I try to ignore it. The henchmen follow at a distance. The additional armed guards that Layne touts are at his constant beck and are either invisible or not real. Whichever the case, we five approach the six at a brisk pace.

"Gentlemen," says Layne when we are still a few dozen paces away, "I want to thank you for coming so promptly. Your sovereign recognizes your devotion."

One man steps forward, his dark eyes sparkling. "Thank you, Recruiter Layne. We appreciate the sentiments." Then he looks at Vald. "Are you ready for your training, Spark?"

Vald straightens with self-importance. "Fully, perpetually, and indubitably," he responds. "I can't tell you how long I've waited to do this!" Layne looks as if he's about to interrupt, but Vald pushes on, extending his one hand while the fingers on the other twitch. "Yes, this is how we grace the sky, my fellows, this is how we grace the sky!"

The soldier's brow puckers with confusion. "Is it?"

"Thank you!" declares Vald, who then wraps another of the soldiers in a crushing embrace. "Thank you," he whispers, clapping the man on the shoulder. "Your family is beautiful."

I bite back a smile, but lose my composure as the henchmen start to laugh behind me.

Layne finally joins in—the most emotion I've seen on him yet—as the various soldiers each receive similar treatment, their faces shocked, distressed, and, in one case, repulsed.

"That's a wonderful color of skin on your head," Vald says to one who is hairless. To another he speaks as he hugs: "When you finally learn the sound of silence, your world will be revealed in resplendent glory, you mark me." To another: "Don't deny that rhythm!" To another: "I salute your maternity." By the time that Vald has made his round, everyone is laughing. "Don't mother my child!" is his final admonition to the last soldier.

"This is Vald," say I, stepping forward and touching him on the shoulder. "He is my Spook."

The first soldier laughs and shakes his head. "Many apologies. I didn't mean to mistake you for a Spook, young lady."

"This is Amela," introduces Layne.

"Call me Mel," I interrupt.

"Mel, welcome. My name is Captain Jeskin."

"Jeskin?"

“Aye. I will be training you with the stave.”

I arch an eyebrow at Layne, who merely nods. “Stave. Aye.”

“Behind me is Lor.” Lor waves. “He will instruct you on hand projectiles.”

“How’s that?”

“Throwing knives, stones, darts, and the like,” answers Lor. He smiles broadly, and I return the greeting.

“Next to him is Willem. He’s our resident swordsman, and he will show you what to do with a blade.”

“My lady,” he says with a bit of a bow. I nod at him.

“Standing by Willem is Hank. He will show you how to make, string, and use your own bow, as well as the theories behind fletching and arrow-work.”

“Mel.” He waves with two fingers.

“Hank.” I smile.

Jeskin points to the hairless chap. “Rodbert there—”

“Call me Roddy,” he insists, interrupting the Captain.

“Yes, Roddy has actually developed his own style of combat. It is utterly weaponless—”

“Weaponless?” I blurt out in surprise.

“I call it sans-swords, Mel, and it requires the most discipline of any of what you will learn.”

“Ignore him,” advises Willem. “He boasts that he doesn’t need weapons, but you’ll see that he always has a dirk or something with him.”

“No, that’s not right,” says Roddy, bristling. “How many times do I say this, Will? Sans-swords is about being able to protect oneself *without* using a weapon! I never said that weapons aren’t needed!”

“Boys, that’s enough,” barks Jeskin. His dark brows knit together as he glares at them. He folds his finely muscled arms across his tight chest. Like all of the soldiers, he’s wearing a black leathern vest without sleeves, dark trousers, and well worn boots. I toe the yellowed grass, feeling suddenly under-dressed. The sun burns down on us and I begin to sweat in the longjacket. I don’t take it off.

“I’m Rall,” says an extraordinarily tall—taller than even Jeskin, who towers over me and can look Vald straight in the eye—man. Each arm is laced up to the elbows with a leather strap, as well as having one bound about his waist. “I will teach you to build and use a sling.”

“As a medic?” question I.

He chuckles. “Nay. As a weapon.” He whips the strap off his arm, then dangles it from one end. I can see now that there is a small pouch in the center, the perfect place to set a stone.

I nod. “Fair.” I turn to Layne. “Why am I training with these men?”

Layne takes a deep breath. “You only have a few weeks’ time to prepare to protect Vald, who in turn will be protecting Her Majesty. These six men are a part of her Elite guard, stationed here as a matter of course. It also happens that they are some of the best fighters in the Army—part of the reason they are considered Elite.”

“I see.”

Jeskin steps up, his handsome smile in place again. “To be honest, we were a little surprised at the assignment. We didn’t know that there would ever be a need for us to

train Slayers, and...well, we mean no offense, but the fact that you're a woman never even crossed our minds. We had expected someone more like..." He trails off, looking over at my Spook.

"Him?" I supply.

"Yes." He grins again, and I can see a bit of a flush on his cheeks—or maybe he's red from being sunkissed, I don't know.

Layne takes a deep breath. "Amela, you have two assignments for the nonce. One is to take care of Vald and all of his needs. Generally speaking, Sinet and Gef will be about only as emergency help. They can be contacted by sending a runner to my office." He hands me a slip of paper with the directions to his office on it. "Here is your purse." A bag full of marks. I lick my lips nervously. "This is your pay as part of being a Spark. If you run low—by buying new clothes, for example—I might be able to find a bit extra for you."

"Thank you." I don't really know what to say, and am a bit wary of the sudden generosity. I remind myself that this man knows where my family is and won't let me see them. It quells the feelings of gratitude just a little bit.

"Keep a sharp eye out. Bline has yet to be spotted since he destroyed that pawn shop." I want to tell him it was Carly's shop, but why tell him what he doesn't already know? "He is a Folder, a rare form of behemoth that can Fold into human form. All of the mass and strength of a behemoth is contained in him no matter the size, so you must be careful. If you see him and Vald is not there, run."

Of course I'd run. Does he take me for, a fool's head? Besides, Vald is always going to be there. He's my job. I glance at him. A look of tight concentration pulls his face as he tries (in vain) to lick his elbows.

"Worriless, Layne, I'll be fine. I've seen him Stretch, too, so I think I know what he can do."

Layne grunts. "You know how to find me. You may stay at The Quiet Inn until the Queen comes and you join her entourage." He nods at the soldiers. "Train her well, Captain. Train her quickly. We don't have much time."

"Yes, sir." Jeskin salutes him. Layne turns to leave. I remember something before he's too far to hear, and call him back.

"What about my training as a Spark?"

He shakes his head. "That will be infrequent at best. I'll see if I can't send someone to tutor you, if they get the chance. You'll most likely pick things up as you go along, but there isn't time in your life now for anything more than training, eating, and sleeping. If you're lucky, that is."

"Lucky?"

"On the sleep part." He throws Jeskin a glance. "Captain."

"Sir."

Layne departs. Jeskin turns to talk with his crew, leaving me alone with the Spook. I idly kick at the dusty grass again.

Vald sees a locust and starts chasing after it, claiming that it robbed him of his favorite bread. I watch the man stumble about, tripping over himself and dirtying his clothes in a vain attempt to capture the insect. I watch impassively, my mind in turmoil.

I don't want what's been given to me. I don't want ladyship, I don't want this responsibility. More than anything, I just want my family back. We have a home to

rebuild, after all. Every day I waste with these political games, pointless conversations, and worthless trainings pushes us closer to the colds, and I don't want to be out of a house then.

And then there's the bizarre assignment. We are a team consisting of a new Spark who doesn't know a thing about her post, and a Spook who's so wrapped that he is trying to eat dirt (I yell at him to stop; he throws me a withering glare before obeying). Why entrust us with guarding the Queen? Not only that, but why invest the time of these six men in training me? Either I've missed something crucial, or the sum of the situation is lacking.

Jeskin calls to me, and I mosey to them. He looks me over with an inscrutable look on his face. "I apologize again for having mistaken you."

"Forgiven."

"I want one thing to be clear: We are here to train you. There is nothing besides your training, so far as you are concerned. We are not aiming to be friends or mentors; we want you to be a teammate, which is much more than the other two. We need to be able to rely on you as we rely on each other. Your Spook—what's his name?"

"Vald."

From a distance I can hear him shout, "Rhymes with bald!"

Jeskin squints at him, then returns his gaze to mine. "Vald is your only other concern. I know that you haven't had Spark training, so let me fill you in on the most important aspect of your job: You have to watch him and take care of him. Everything that he does, you are responsible for it. If he makes a comment that offends someone, you feel embarrassed. If he soils himself in public, you claim the stench. He kills someone, you have to explain why—and you'd better do a good job, because *you'll* be the one imprisoned if you can't. Does that make sense to you?"

"He's like a babe," I say in sum.

"Precisely. A babe who can walk, talk, and make a bigger mess of anything faster than you can believe. We have all seen our share of Slayers. Part of being in the Elite guard, I suppose."

I nod. Layne's words begin to make more sense, now, about having duplicitous thoughts. After all, if I consider both of us, both Layne and me, as being part of a single whole, then the responsibility of one devolves onto the other. Unfortunately, it only works one way. If I do anything wrong, he certainly won't take the blame. He is, for all intents, guiltless of any crime. I wonder at how liberating that would feel, and a tiny part of me wishes that I could claim it.

Jeskin gestures, and Roddy tosses him a staff that's just a bit taller than he. A second rod is flung at me, but I drop it to the ground.

"You're going to have to work on that," notes Jeskin dryly. "As I said before, I will teach you stave work. There are a lot of different ways of fighting with a stave. One day a week, I will instruct you."

"For how long?" I bend to pick up the staff.

"All day. The next will be Willem, then Rall, and so forth. Every seventh day you will get a respite, a chance to regain your strength." He grins a sly smirk, his tan skin a beautiful counterpoint to his white teeth. "You'll really look forward to those days."

I nod. I already know that I agree with that.

"We'll give you a half day today. The remainder of the day will be given you to

find better clothing.”

“What’s wrong with what I have now?”

He stares a long moment. I don’t flinch. I happen to like what I wear. At last he responds, “You don’t have anything covering your feet.”

“So?” The question is barely out of my mouth when he (lightly) drops the butt of his staff onto my bare toe. I yelp and hop on one foot for a moment, waiting for the pain to subside.

“You need footwear. Also, the longjacket might be your preference for clothing, but it is too bulky for the kind of movements you’ll be learning with us. Considering your build, I would recommend a short-sleeved tunic, a supple leather vest for armor, a leather cap for a helmet, and sturdy trousers. You will be sore enough as is—you needn’t make it any worse with the wrong clothing.”

“Will I have the luxury of changing clothes before every battle?” I snip.

He clangs at my stave with his. “Tut, friend. Your lip lags behind your wit. You should take care with that.” He smiles a bit to take the sting out of his words.

“I thought you didn’t want to be friends,” I say, taking the stave in my hands in what I feel is a good position.

“I want us to be teammates. That means we can’t hate each other. Look, Mel, I already respect you. You’re, what, in your seventeens?”

“Nineteens.”

He shrugs, as if the two years don’t matter. To me, they do. Two years from now I’ll be past majority and well into marriageable age. While I have no real desire to wed, it is significant that I will be old enough in less than a year to do so.

“You are about to go through the most hasty training course that I’ve ever given. We are doing this out of necessity.”

The Queen. He means the Queen.

“Well, are we to begin?” he asks.

“Aye.”

He looks me over, then throws a glance over to his men. “It’ll be as I said, men. We’ll start the schedule tomorrow. The rest of the day is leave.”

They whoop and break rank, but no one leaves. I guess they want to see a bit of a show. I grit my teeth and swing the staff experimentally. I refuse to be intimidated by them.

“The first thing you need to do is learn how to stand,” instructs Jeskin.

“I am standing.”

He laughs. “Try it this way.” He adjusts his legs, widening the stance so that his feet are directly below his shoulders. “Now, hold the stave thus. Yes, that’s right. Now, swing thus. No, not like that; like this. Eh, try again. Again. Good, now, try it this direction.”

“That hurts my shoulders.”

“Good. That means you’re doing it right.”

“I can’t tell you how much that pleases me.”

“I’m glad. Now swing again.”

“Ow.”

“Again.”

“Ow.”

“Again.”

“Ow.”

“Again.”

I pass the day this way, swinging the stick. By the end, my muscles scream in protest with every movement in my body, my throat shrieks for water, and my head yearns for a pillow. I thought that I hurt from fighting Bline—a story that precedes me; during one of the breaks, the men all want to hear the details of the attacks—but now I know that I haven’t learned about pain.

The worst part is, I’ve only just begun, a fact that Jeskin relays to me constantly. Just after midday, I ask him if he plans on letting me go shopping, as he had suggested before. He simply shakes his head as we do some light sparring. “You’re in worse shape than I had hoped. You’ll have to wait for your free day.” He smacks me in the shin. I yelp and cuss at him. He just laughs.

“When is my free day?”

“In six days,” he answers in a voice that says, “Didn’t I already tell you that?”

I groan.

He smacks me again.

I doubt the day will ever end.

I HATE boots. They cramp my feet, they hurt my toes, and I can't run nearly as fast in them. I mention these things to Jeskin after our first week of training. He says to get used to them.

No plans on that.

Vald and I have been in continual practice every day. The other trainers often find other things to do, but there is always at least one of them who floats around, watching, heckling, and generally being annoying. Vald seems to like the company, though, and it helps to keep him out of trouble, so I don't protest. Too much.

Everyone works me. Hard. I almost weep with exhaustion every day, and all I want to do on my free day is sleep. Sleep and sleep and sleep.

Jeskin tells me to get some boots. Reluctantly, I agree to look, though I haven't found any yet.

I wish I could find my family, but I don't know where to begin. I figure I'll play with Layne for the nonce, and lam it as soon as I learn where they are. So now I walk the familiar streets with Vald in tow, breezing through the bazaar. Despite the dearth, a lot of businesses seem to thrive. That's good, I guess. Above us, held in place by long wooden planks and poles, are brightly draped sheets and lengths of cloth, acting as a gigantic parasol. During the normal years (it is said), the cloths helped to protect the wares of the merchants from rain, too. It only rains at night, now, and then only sparsely like it did the night of Bline's attack. Enough to moisten the ground and get everything good and wet, but not enough to help the crops. Let me put it this way: My family wasn't the only one who found it necessary to steal in order to survive.

Vald stares in wonder at everything, muttering, twitching, and sometimes shouting at items he recognizes. For whatever reason, when we reach Nanty's Herb shop, he insists on entering and staring at her products for nearly twenty minutes.

"Sweet marjoram!" He holds up a bottle eagerly. "Sage!" Another one. "Cloud pine!" He shows yet another. "Parsley!" Each one excites him more.

"You gonna buy?" queries Nanty from behind her counter. Her cataract-covered eyes look past me. I glance around the room, staring at her wares. I notice that some have been swept to one side.

"You had a bit of a problem?" I answer her question with one of my own, pointing (why, I don't know; she is blind, after all) at the pile of broken jars and debris.

"Oh, aye, aye. A monster stomped through here not more than a week past. I haven't had a chance to clean it, yet."

Vald: "Pebbled moon!"

I: "That's horrible. What happened?"

Vald: "Queen's-wreath!"

Nanty: "It sounds like your friend well knows the herbage!"

I: "I suppose."

Vald: "Sanded-cinnamon!"

Nanty: "Well, the monster came in, chasing what sounded like a barefoot girl."

I: "How could you tell?"

Nanty: "She walked as soft as a cat on clouds, I admit, but I could hear her breathing. Light, quick breaths. Besides, I'm not fully blind—not yet. I simply figured

she was running from something. Then, naught but moments after she disappeared out the back window, a monster of a man, reeking of sweat and filth and anger, breathing as hard as a blacksmith's billows, shoved his way through the store. He knocked over one of my displays (she points to the pile) and broke out of the back window."

I: "I'm sorry."

Nanty: "Don't be. 'Tweren't your fault."

Vald: "Pickled rhubarb?"

Nanty: "I heard him break. You know, like his bones. He popped and snapped and broke. Then, in a sudden rush, he was out my door and I didn't hear him again."

I: "Strange tale."

Nanty: "Strange times."

I marvel that so much has happened between then and now. My whole world, as crazy as it was when I robbed Bline, has become even more insane. Vald helps with that.

Bidding the spinster a good day, I grab Vald by the wrist and rush out of the shop. When I steal, I choose my targets carefully, cautiously, and particularly. Rare circumstances have forced me to pick wantonly, and I have always taken solace in the fact that I try to maintain some level of ethics about thievery. Vandalism and blatant, pointless destruction really irk me, and it burns me up knowing what Bline has done to Nanty's shop.

Also: I hate to see the aftermath of my jobs. Once things are ended, over and done with, that's where I like to leave them.

I finger the bag of marks that Layne gave me. Jeskin said that I can either buy those that I like, or he will find some that *he* likes. I contemplate returning to Nanty's shop, ghosting in and depositing the marks as an attempt to make restitution. Then I realize something: If I find Bline, I can make *him* make restitution for what he's done. I'm a Spark after all. Shouldn't I try to find a Wyn that's loose in the city?

I tighten my grip on Vald. "Are you ready to—" The rest of the sentence dies on my lips as I look at him. His pockets bulge to overflowing with pilfered bottles. Every herb, potion, and poultice that he had gleefully named—and more besides—had found its way onto his person. Stopping in the middle of the street, I start pawing at him, looking for more. Sure enough, he has tucked over a dozen bottles into the billows of his loose tunic. He regards me with his head cocked to one side and a quizzical look on his face.

"Rosewater," he says as I hold up a bottle to his face.

"I know what it is!" I shout, even though I don't. "Did you think we can steal? We have to pay for this! Just because we're Slayers now doesn't mean that we can just take people's things without paying." I understand the irony. Of course I do. But this time, it's different. It's different when I didn't mean to steal something, when I don't need to steal to survive. "What are you, wrapped?" I know what it means now, but I say it anyway. The word actually seems to make a difference, and Vald closes—almost physically, I can see him retreat inward.

I regret it.

"Vald, I'm sorry." I fumble for a more substantial apology, but he doesn't look at me. Instead, he stares at the cobbles and starts to count the milch-mice (there aren't any).

"One milch-mouse, two milch-mouses, three milch-mices..." and so on. He gets to twelve, then starts over.

I take a deep breath. I've never had such a snap of conscience after a pick before.

This is (usually) the sort of thing that I would do problemless and then move on with my life. But for some reason, things are different now. How can I justify stealing from Nanty after she already lost so much from my first blunder into her shop? “Vald,” I say, “this isn’t food; I’m not starving. You’re not starving. If we have to, we take. *Have* to. But this is just you wanting her herbs. I’m glad that you know what (I glance at the label) flakes of sassafras are, but we don’t need this. We’re taking this back.”

“Amela,” he pleads, looking at me with wide, urgent eyes. “I need a sword.” He sounds lucid, the invisible milch-mice forgotten.

“I’m sorry? What does a sword have to do with...”

He cups my hands together, then begins to unload bottle after bottle into them. Soon, my arms are boiling over with herbs. They clink softly as I shift to accommodate them all. I stare at him in surprise. He moves so quickly that I can’t form a word of protest before everything that he’s pilfered rests in the crook of my arm.

“Hide.” His eyes are alight with fervent heat, and a passion that I can neither understand nor truly call mad. There’s...comprehension there. Something real, something substantial...

“What’s wrong?” I say in a low voice.

“The whispers,” he responds, his eyes searching mine. For a moment—oh, so briefly—I see a flicker of what Vald might have been ere the whispers. “They’re calling me.”

All moisture in my mouth evaporates and my body weakens. The whispers take me...no, I stop the oath mid-thought. The whispers have taken *him*.

He turns on his heel and starts heading back the way we came, weaving through the crowd so quickly that I blink and he has disappeared.

I stare in his general direction, blank. Finally, I say, “This is insane,” and start running after him.

My bundle of purloined wares pulls a glare, glance, and glib remark from many a passerby, but I ignore them all. If I can follow Vald’s wake quickly enough, I can keep him in line. That’s what Sparks do; they make sure no one else gets hurt by their Spooks. Right? After all, Vald has always been benign (save that time when he attacked me for touching his book, which I haven’t tried to do again since), so being a Spark has been easy.

Except when it isn’t.

Like now.

I see Nanty’s Herb Shop, duck in, and deposit everything on the counter. Nanty jumps a bit at the abruptness of the return. “I’m sorry, he didn’t mean it,” I gasp. “Good luck putting them back in their places!” How does she know where those go, anyway?

Then I’m gone, blazing out of her shop and across the scalding cobbles. My bare feet a blur, I hurdle horse pucky, human obstacles, and, in my haste, even roll beneath a long-bed wagon rather than waiting for it to pass.

I have almost reached the place where I first picked Bline when I learn the easiest way to find an errant Spook: follow the screams.

By the time I arrive—sweating, breathless, and afraid—the battle has already commenced.

Bline is trying to Stretch while keeping himself out of Vald’s grasp. I know how strong Bline is (he’s knocked me around a couple of times) but Vald takes each blow

readily and without even pausing to register the punch. I think back to what Layne said about a behemoth who can Fold. *All of the mass and strength of a behemoth is contained in him no matter the size, so you must be careful.* I swallow nervously and watch them, sometimes little more than blurs of violence

For instance: Bline breaks free of Vald's grip, and hooks back with a savage elbow to the ear. Vald drops to the ground and rebounds immediately, swinging a wide left hook that catches Bline in his boil-lined jaw. Bline rocks backward, his head snapping so hard that I could have sworn his crown cracked against his spine. The direction of the blow sends him reeling, out of Vald's reach.

The Wyn rubs his jaw and glares at the Spook, spitting out teeth and a glob of blood. He says something, but I can't hear it. Even from this distance I can see that Bline doesn't carry the wounds I inflicted on him. I try to maneuver through the crowd—the more macabre of the people linger, while the safety-conscious have fled to safer areas—but it's hard for someone as small as I to wiggle closer. By the time I get to another spot, they have already rejoined the battle.

Bline attacks viciously, his fat hands a blur as he tries to punch through Vald's consistent blocks. His bulbous knee knocks Vald's leg out of the way, then kicks up, sending the Spook a dozen feet into the air. Before Vald hits, Bline stretches quickly, his body breaking and snapping in the most perverse, disgusting way. Skin ripples, undulates, bulges, expands. He grows—*pop, pop*—the fat that lines his belly rolling into him as his height increases.

Vald is up on his feet and running to the target, a rock he snatched from the dirt clasped in his fist. He leaps, one hand outstretched, catching Bline by the shoulder (ten feet off the ground) and wrenching him down. Vald lands lithely while Bline cracks his head against the cobbles. The Spook rears back and hurls the stone at the space in between the Wyn's eyes, obviously intending to break his skull open.

Unfortunately, Bline's reaction—probably more reflex than anything—saves him, batting the rock out of the way with one hand. The projectile soars over the heads of the spectators, causing some to cringe and others to shriek in fear. It shatters an abandoned fruit stall (I imagine the proprietor fled when Vald and Bline started trading blows), toppling the victuals in a colorful cascade that pools and runs down the street, a river of hues.

The crowd, suddenly forgetting the fight, rushes in, pushing and shoving for a chance at the choicest fruits. As I watch them, I notice a familiar face. Dalm, the Newcomer that saved me from Bline, stares with a strange mixture of emotions burning through his eyes. My heart flops to see his handsome face, but the situation isn't right for infatuation. Besides, he looks scared, though not of Bline. He makes eye contact with me (sending a thrill through my body), nods his head in recognition, and disappears into the throng.

Shaking my head, I turn my attention back to the fight. With fewer people in the way, I can make it closer, and hear the words that Bline (who has regained his feet) is shrieking at Vald. The Spook doesn't seem to notice. In fact, I've never seen Vald so focused. The normal vacant stare, twitching, muttering, and bizarre speech has escaped him, and everything is tightly bound on the Wyn in front of him. The only remnant of the Vald I know is a sporadic tipping of his head as if...as if he's listening to something.

Jumping through the air, Vald splays out his legs in a large windmill kick. Both

feet strike the Wyn at separate points, sending the behemoth reeling. Vald continues to push the attack, using random debris that comes into his path as additional weapons. Bline, however, seems intent on finishing his Stretch, so he perfunctorily evades the strikes. And grows.

Pop.

Grows.

Vald gets sloppy and a fast punch takes him in the side while midair. I involuntarily yelp as he crashes down ten feet from where he was hit, shattering through a display of clay jars. Lazy puffs of red dust waft upwards, like the final hiss of breath on a cold night. Bline closes his eyes and *Stretches* outward, finally achieving his maximum height, which I estimate stands at about fifteen and a half feet. He more than doubles Vald's height, yet the Spook doesn't seem to care. Vald breaks free of the pottery, sending jagged pieces scattering in different directions. His chest heaves and he charges again, a wild gleam in his eye.

Terrified, I clutch my hands to my mouth and hold my breath. Vald dives to one side, then the other, then rolls as Bline tries to smash him down with his huge fist. The behemoth's clothes lie strewn in the street, and I try not to pay attention to any other details. Vald takes advantage of his opponent's wiry hair, and, snatching a handful on the back of Bline's arm, swings himself up onto the Wyn's shoulders. He looks like a kid in his fives riding on the back of an uncle. A fat, smell, disgusting uncle.

Bline screams a wordless, incoherent bellow, but Vald ignores it. Keeping a tight grasp on Bline's hair, the Spook shifts back and forth, avoiding and punching back the grasping fingers.

At this height, Vald is able to reach one of the poles that holds up the long sheets over the street. Moving so fast that I almost lose track of him, he snaps a pole and plucks the cloth off of it, dropping it over Bline's head. Loops and whorls dance through the air as the fabric spins again and again, blinding and binding the behemoth. The Spook leaps backwards just as the Wyn claps his hands together in a move that very well could have crushed Vald...had he still been there.

Instead he's spiraling backwards in a quick back flip, the edges of the wrapped cloth clasped in his hands. As he falls, the sheet tightens like a noose, cinching the awkwardly held appendages together. With no leverage, Bline cannot wrest free of his homespun prison. He screams and wrenches his body, twisting his torso back and forth in a desperate attempt to loosen the ream of cloth. Vald holds his end of the billowing sheet in one hand; the other holds the jagged pole he had broken.

For a moment I think that Vald is going to kill the Wyn with the cloth, suffocating the monster before my eyes. But then he lets go, the strip of cloth flapping wildly as Bline finally breaks free. Gasping, the behemoth seeks about for the culprit.

It's the last thing Bline sees.

An impromptu javelin erupts from his eye, and he drops with a thump that reminds me of a heavy bag of potatoes falling to the floor. Except this bag of potatoes makes the ground tremble.

Blood gushes out, running through the cracks in the cobbles, mingling with the dirt and turning it a strange brown-black. The cloth flutters over him, covering up his nethers (much to my relief) and soaking up some of the gore. Vald stares blankly, blood coming from a dozen different wounds and trembles as if he's going to collapse himself.

The bazaar is silent. No one moves, no one speaks.

Timidly, I approach him. “Vald?” I say softly. Everyone in the area is staring in open shock and—something I’ve never seen directed at me before—fear. They’re afraid of us. To be honest, I’m more than a little afraid, too.

“Vald? Are the whispers gone?” I touch his shoulder. I expect him to lurch away, but he doesn’t.

“My...my head. It hurts. I need some water.” Vald looks at me for a second, imploringly. His eyes roll, and he drops like his legs were cut out from under him.

I guess this is another reason why a Spook needs a Spark.

LAYNE STARES at me as the henchmen load the still-unconscious Vald into the back of the carriage. It takes both of them to move him. Some of the Militia mill about, trying to figure out how to dispose of a body that's literally more than twice as big as one of them. Plus he's bloody, sweaty, nude, and stinks like a rotting rat. No one wants to get close to him, but somebody has to do it. Glad it ain't me.

"Care to tell me what happened?"

"I thought you already knew," snip I, feeling the heat and the stress of the day build up inside. I'm weary enough from the long week of training; I don't need his sanctimonious questions to bog down my mind. "You got here fast enough."

"I don't live that far," he replies in a cool voice and clears his throat—almost nervously, as if my accusation bothers him. Turning, he regards the rank corpse. I might be angry, but he's treating this with his normal level of aplomb. That makes me mad, too. "And you could've heard the commotion leagues away."

I don't speak.

Arching his eyebrow, he regards me again. "You know, you should be a bit more generous with your information."

"Why's that?"

"Part of your duty as a Spark is to report the events that lead to—and the aftermath of—any encounter with a behemoth. Especially with such an unparalleled encounter as this." He gestures with his hand. "It isn't every day that a behemoth is found inside of the city."

"It is for me," I remind him.

"Yes." He pauses, looking from Bline to me and then back again. "Is...is this the same behemoth that attacked you before?"

I nod. "Aye."

"Hmm." He taps his chin. "So, this is the creature that ruined your home?"

"Aye."

"This must be very satisfying, then."

Unexpected, more like. I can't really comprehend the situation, and tell Layne so.

"That's understandable," he hums.

"Would you care telling me a bit more about what it is that I'm supposed to do, now?"

"Continue as we've done before."

I stare in surprise. "This doesn't change anything?"

"You sound almost accusatory."

"Probably because I almost am."

His eyes narrow as he takes me in. "What, do you blame me for this?"

I snort. "Don't flatter yourself. I blame Bline for this. Bline and Vald. But I do blame you for not letting me know what I am supposed to do! I didn't know what to do to help, I didn't know if I could help. I just stared and stared! Any chance you're going to give me a clue about my 'duties' that you keep talking about? You keep pushing me in training my body, but not my mind. I don't know how to handle a situation like this! It's like I don't even know up from down!"

Layne glances at his henchmen, who are waiting patiently for instructions. "Take

him to the inn,” he orders, then turns on his heel. He waves to a Militiaman, who promptly comes over. “Captain, I want this body interred quickly. Take him past the outskirts of the city.”

“Sir, he’s bigger than—” begins the captain.

“He’s no bigger than a tree,” Layne contests cantankerously. “Get a buckboard and a team of oxen and clean this mess up. I want his grave to be filled by sunup.”

“Sir?”

“Did you mishear?”

“No, sir.” The captain gives a salute. “I will see it done.”

“You’d best.”

“Sir.” The captain leaves.

“Walk with me,” he says to me, and immediately begins walking down the dusty, crowd-filled street. Everyone has come for a gander now that the danger has passed. The smell has kept them from getting too close, so the people are packed tightly about the edges. Still, despite the close quarters, Layne’s authority pushes ahead of us, parting the rabble so that we can pass. I notice tempting pieces of jewelry and the occasional unguarded coinpurse as we brush through, but manage to beat the temptation to filch anything.

I follow his purple doublet-clad form, watching his perfectly polished black shoes scuff and dirty themselves in the filth of the road. His white stockings are soon smudged with dirt. Sometimes I get the strongest urge to just kick the man, to knock him down and leave him. I ignore the impulse.

Once clear of the thickest of the throng, I pull up even with him. He speaks; I listen carefully to his soft, strong voice.

“A Spark’s job is simple: Allow the Spook to protect the Kingdom. Now, the *way* you do that is rather complicated, and a lot of it, I will be the first to admit, is bureaucracy. Filling out forms. Reporting activities and expense logs. Following orders. For the most part, however, you will do whatever is necessary to keep Vald from getting in trouble with others.”

“Because he’s crazy?”

Layne nods. “Precisely. The mad have no place in our society. They are shunned, chained, and kept out of the view of the common people. And rightly so. They are different—they’re freaks. But the insane are not entirely bereft of purpose and use. That is why we suffer them.”

“Suffer them?”

“Yes. We provide for them: food, clothing, shelter.”

I remember Vald’s shelter. It makes me cold, despite the pounding heat of the day. Sweat trickles into my eyes and I wipe it away with the sleeve of my longjacket. “I know their purpose and use, Layne. But what about mine?”

As always, he answers indirectly. “Like all other Spooks, he is utterly amoral.”

“Immoral?” I ask.

“No, *amoral*. You, a street, still have your scruples, your standards, your expectations, your morals. You do not simply kill for the sake of killing.”

I’ve thought about it, but I don’t say so to Layne. Besides, most people do, don’t they? Swear in their wrath that they’ll have blood? None do, of course. I would say it, but I’d never do it. I’m no different.

“You probably don’t steal from people who are poorer than you.”

“Why do you say that?” And, more importantly, how did he know?

He shrugs. “I assumed. But Vald isn’t like that. He acts the way he acts because he does. That’s all. Neither moral nor immoral, neither good nor evil, all labels of responsibility and expectation slough off of Spooks. They are mentally and ethically cracked—pristinely flawed, by one way of reckoning. They are neither conscientious nor conscienceless because they are something that doesn’t fit; something in between that doesn’t quite belong.”

“So, I’m to be, what, his conscience? You want me to be the morality, the goodness, the pangs of guilt when he does something wrong?”

Layne quirks a smile. “You catch on quickly.”

I don’t reply immediately. “I guess I actually spark his sense of...” I grope for the right word.

“Rightness?” offers Layne.

“That will work,” I say, though I don’t know if it really does. “I guide him.”

“A Spark lights the way for the Spook,” remarks Layne in a tone that makes the phrase sound like some old adage.

“And why are they called Spooks?” I want to know.

“Have you ever been scared by Vald? Spooked by him?”

I think of when I released him, and nod.

“There you have it.”

“I see.” I don’t. Not really, I mean. But I guess it fits.

“Just think of him as a tool. He is that, too. He’s a tool in your hands. You are the sheath, while he is the sword. When he is unsheathed—when the whispers take him—you do nothing for him. You maintain a safe distance, watch, record, and prepare to report. You will also do your best to minimize the damage done to people and properties when...incidents transpire. Like today. Fortunately, no one was hurt, though we will need to see what we can do about remunerating the merchants whose wares were ruined in the debacle.”

“Of course.” I guess that’s the right thing to say. I, frankly, don’t care, which makes me wonder why Layne picked an erstwhile thief to be the active conscience of an amoral man. Something feels out of place.

“That, in brief, is your duty. Keep Vald in line as best you can, stay out of the way when the whispers come, and make sure no one else is hurt. Or yourself, for that matter.”

“That shouldn’t be too difficult,” I say sarcastically.

“Right.”

I don’t think Layne caught the sardonic tone in my voice.

“So, what’s wrong with Vald now?”

“He’s going to need a few days to recover. We’ve found that, when in battle and when the whispers have a Spook, he’ll heal quickly—almost instantly, sometimes. But once the behemoth is gone, the Spook has to heal at a more normal rate. We’ll put him up at the inn, make sure he has food and such. You’ll want to check on him, help to clean him up and feed him if necessary. I’ll give you three days leave before you start training again. Vald should be well enough by then to accompany you to the training field. Until then, your job is to take care of him as you would a babe.”

Reminds me of Kev. And thinking of Kev makes me think of my family. I ask

Layne about them, how they are doing, and when I can see them.

“Soon,” is his cryptic answer.

I grind my teeth, but don’t argue. I’ll find them. One day I will. “Answer me a question, then.”

“If I can,” he evades.

“I’ve heard that Vyns have horns, that a Spook’s insanity is contagious, and that the Darshur are interbreeding humans with behemoths. Is any of that true?”

He thinks for a moment. “In brief: no, no, and that’s new to me.”

I wait. Finally, I give him a verbal nudge. “And?”

He smiles a little. “In detail: You will hear lots of speculation about behemoths, what they look like, and how they act. Behemoths look just like humans, except bigger. They have language, they have cultures. Despite this, they are monsters. They don’t have fangs and horns, claws or wings. The Vyn, in particular, are more debased and vile than the Wyn.”

“More?” I can’t think of anything more disgusting than Bline.

Layne nods. “They’re revolting creatures who loom over their land.” He shudders. “They may look human at a very great distance, but they deserve nothing more than destruction.”

I think for a moment. “And the insanity?”

He laughs. “That’s a popular one, and utterly untrue. A Spark can’t become a Spook just because of proximity.”

“Can a person be both?”

He emphatically shakes his head. “Nay. The whispers’ price for power is sanity. You can’t be both a Spook and a Spark...if you’re one, you can’t be the other.”

“And the inbreeding?”

“Rumor, no doubt. I wouldn’t pay it any mind,” he answers.

I think for a moment. “How is it that Bline can change sizes?”

Layne grunts and reaches into a pocket. He removes a small parchment on which a short list has been hastily scratched. He hands it to me.

“What is this?”

“An illustration. Take that paper and fold it in half ten times.”

“Why?”

“You are a Spark, aren’t you? Shouldn’t you know more about behemoths? Besides, you asked the question.”

Slowly, I fold the paper in half.

“There. Just like that, nine more times.”

I fold and fold. By the time I hit my sixth fold, the paper is bulging and unwieldy, much too fat to fold. After a moment of futile effort, I throw it to the ground. “I can’t do it. The paper isn’t big enough.”

“Oh, the size of the paper doesn’t matter. To do what I asked you is impossible.”

I frown. “What?”

He shrugs. “Mass, Amela. There is a certain amount of mass in that paper. Everything has a certain amount of mass in it—the bigger or heavier it is, the more it has inside. People, rocks, animals...and behemoths.”

“You’re saying that a behemoth is like a paper?”

“No, it’s like a *folded* paper. If you unfold your work, you’ll see that the paper is

still the same size as before you started to fold it, correct?"

I nod.

"The amount of paper in the paper hasn't changed, it simply changed its dimensions. Are we clear?"

"Aye."

"A behemoth, a Wyn like Bline, for example, is normally the size of that paper—to further the analogy, of course. A normal human would be about a third the size of that piece of paper. So, if he wants to get into the city, he needs to Fold himself down a certain amount. However, he can't simply shed the mass—the paper's mass remains the same, remember, only the dimensions change."

I interrupt. "So he had to Fold down his behemoth body so that he was just as massive, yet smaller." Makes a twisted kind of sense. "That's why he was so heavy, so thick. All of his fifteen feet of behemoth body had to be smashed down into a smaller container." I think back to his crushing embrace when I first picked him, mistaking him for a Regulator. "That's why he was so strong even when human size."

Layne nods. "Precisely."

"Can all behemoths Fold?"

He sighs. "More than we originally thought, but not many. Bline is the third...no, fourth we've found since I've started Recruiting."

We arrive at The Quiet Inn, and I step to the door, but pause ere turning the knob, suddenly remembering something that I had thought of a moment earlier. "You said that one of my responsibilities to Vald is to clean him." I look Layne in the eye. "I'm a woman."

Layne chuckles a bit. "My men cleaned him before, but it's your time. He's your charge. Besides, you're in your nineteens, am I right?"

I nod.

"Well, then, you must be familiar with the opposite gender by now, so you won't have any surprises."

I feel my face begin to flush, and I unexpectedly think of Dalm. Pushing that thought aside, I focus on how offended I feel at the insinuation. He must think me a strumpet as well as a street. I almost tell him that I'm still a maid, but bite my tongue. He needn't know every detail about me.

"Of course," I say instead. "Do you always pair up female Sparks with male Spooks?"

"No. The Spook picks the Spark. That's how things work."

I nod again and go inside, fighting against the flames on my cheeks. I stew over the unintended slight that Layne has dished me—or maybe it was intended. Reading that man is almost impossible. So angered am I that I don't even realize that the last thing he said doesn't seem to make sense.

With a frustrated grunt, I storm into my room and shuck off the sticky longjacket. The fireball rolls out of the pocket, trolling across the wood floor until it gently bumps against the carpet.

I squat down and push the glass container to and fro, watching the distorted amber vial inside the clear liquid slosh about. It's dangerous—immensely dangerous—to carry around a fireball like this. But poor folks don't have a lot of safe places to store their valuables, so I keep mine close at hand.

The fireball is a souvenir from my first pick. I plucked a military man's wagon—stripped it clean, almost. Then, on a whim, I picked open a tiny tin box that he had hidden beneath the seat. In it sat this fireball. I'd heard of them—everyone has—but I was curious. So I purloined it, putting it in the pocket where I've always kept it since.

The extra seconds it took to open the box and pocket the prize were the extra seconds that also let me get caught. The military man came out from his house to see a miserable street rooting through his belongings. If he had had his sword on him, I probably would be dead, my neck suddenly finding itself headless. Instead, he hurled me to the ground and tried to throttle me.

In the scuffle, I managed to work the fireball loose. With thumb posed over the sharp pin, I held it in front of the man's angry eyes. He let me go faster than if I had told him I were his mother in disguise. I rolled away, ran, and never looked back.

I consider it my lucky fireball—more luck because I have yet to use it. Still, if I ever find the need, I will shove the sharp pin down, breaking the seal around the top of the amber vial, and shake the contents together. Once the outer glass orb breaks and the combined liquids hit the air, a conflagration hotter than a smithy's fire will burn, and nothing will quench it. The flames will only stop once they have consumed themselves.

A knock at the door spurs me to movement. I snatch up the longjacket, stuff the fireball into its appropriate pocket, and step lightly to the door. "Hail?" I query.

"'Tis me, Shema," comes the muffled response.

"Shema?" I open the door. It's the serving girl, the one who cleaned my longjacket. "How can I help you?" I say.

"Nay, m'lady, I'm here to help you."

"With what?"

"Recruiter Layne relayed an order to clean the man." I don't have to ask whom she means. "He said you might need some assistance."

I pause, confused. "I...I suppose so."

"Shall we go then?"

I nod. Time to learn even more about Vald than I had anticipated.

IF I were to stop to think about it, I would probably be quite glad to take this job. After all, I thieve because it provides means for my family. Now, I've received (essentially) a pardon for my past crimes—which they couldn't indict me for, anyway—as well as a promised reward greater than any other lift I've done before. We'll live the rest of our lives problemless. By working with Vald and the rest of my family secure, we'd have money for Kev's visits and a place that isn't a shamble of broken mortar and timber. We won't be coinless, we won't be on the wrong side of the Militia, fearing their interference in everything.

Life will be great.

I'll see to that.

But for now, I rest at the table where I break my daily fast. Vald is clean and asleep in his room, and has been for the better part of an hour. I stare at the sun as it descends toward its bed, and think that it's time that I followed its example.

I can't really move, though. Well, I can, but I'd prefer not to. Mostly, I just ache—my head throbs, every joint creaks; I feel as though I'm falling apart. Shema helped a great deal with the cleaning of Vald. I take a pull on the bottle of chilled juice that Shema thoughtfully brought me, swishing the sweet nectar about in my mouth.

Plus, Bline is dead.

That leaves me staggered.

After a long moment of indecision about how that should make me feel—elated that the beast is dead, angry that I couldn't be the one to exact revenge, frustrated that I chanced across him—I decide to sleep after all. Vald will be recuperating, and I will need to be ready in case something happens.

With a sigh I finish off the bottle and head to my room. To be frank, I assume that I will mull things over again and again tonight, spending more time thinking than dreaming.

Sleep clubs me with my pillow and I slumber without fully undressing.

Dreams plague me, but when sunlight pierces the window and penetrates my eye, the dreams evaporate like traceless dew. With a groan, I roll over and pine after blissful unconsciousness. I know that the dreams were unpleasant, but I can't recall them, and one thing's sure: Dreams don't hurt. I do.

Perhaps I doze, perhaps I simply sit in a stupor, I can't tell. Eventually I arise, aching and bruised. I step lightly to Vald's room, see that he is doing well, and retire to the bathing room. I shudder to think of my old life's hygiene. It was more out of necessity than anything else, but I was a filthy girl. Being clean means something to me, the only thing that I can control.

I can't see my family.

I can't cure my Spook of his insanity.

I have to wait the Queen's arrival.

But filthiness? I can control that.

Once I'm done, I slip into some clean trousers and pull on a new tunic. These clothes fit loosely to keep me cool in the heat of the day, and are more my size. They couldn't be considered high fashion, but they serve just fine. I don't know where they came from, but Shema dropped them off for me, and I appreciate it. For once, I leave my

longjacket behind.

Today feels different, and I want to mark that.

On my way out, I bump into Shema, who curtsies cutely for me. “Is there anything I can do for you, m'lady?”

I pause. “Aye, there is. Will you keep a careful eye out for Vald? I know that he's sleeping, but who knows when he'll awake? Keep him happy, if he needs anything.”

“Aye, m'lady.”

I nod my thanks and smile weakly. Snatching some fruit from a bowl and a couple of day-old rolls, I head outside. The sunlight marks it about three hours until zenith, so the day lies in front of me to explore and enjoy.

Yes, I'm leaving my charge.

Yes, something could happen to him while I'm away.

But right now, I don't care.

My feet take over, and I find myself wandering. Perhaps twenty minutes pass before I realize that I'm homeward bound. So I sharpen my aim and head to my old neighborhood. Maybe the house will look different—less demolished—in the daylight.

I let my mind meander, tracing thoughts lightly with the tips of mental fingers, never dwelling on any one thing for too long. I contemplate all that has happened loosely, like a handful of smoothed pebbles bouncing in my hand, trying to understand it as a whole, rather than individually. I don't know how I feel about anything—my position as a Spark, the death of the creature, the fact that I am supposed to guard the Queen. I—of all people! I couldn't even protect my house or family.

Ruminations and ambulation take nearly three hours. By the time I reach the neighborhood, the fruit and rolls are gone and my tongue sticks to my hot mouth, anxious for a drop of water. The clear sky won't help me, so I have to ignore the thirst.

It isn't difficult for me to find my way home; I know most of Tintyr so well that I can navigate the labyrinthine avenues on a moonsless night. The only section I'm unfamiliar with is far out to the west, where the Dart is supposed to be. I've never seen the thing, and don't much care to. Everything out there is too far for it to be useful to a street like me, so I never bothered learning about it.

I make the final turn that puts me in view of my house and my breath catches in my throat.

The devastation is widespread and thorough. Sticks instead of timbers, rubble instead of rock.

The entire neighborhood is ruins. Every house looks like mine.

Destroyed.

I think of that phrase that Pops was fond of saying. He would tap the table with one square finger and say, “Evil stems from good intent, Amela. Look at us! The good intent of a Slayer running through the city brought us nothing but evil.”

The neighbors who saved me and mine reaped Bline's wrath.

I can see it in the wreckage.

Logan's house is nothing but a shattered husk. I feel I owe it to him to check in, to see if his family survived.

Before I can move, something stirs to one side and (somewhat to my surprise) I drop into a defensive stance that Roddy taught me. If someone is nearby, I could be in danger. Roddy's sans-sword system is still more theory than anything really useful to me,

but I can learn quickly if I have to.

“Hail,” I cry out, ashamed of how thin and weak my voice is. “Who's there?”

I hear a chuckle. “Don't you remember? That's what you asked me before?” A voice that sounds like the taste of honey trickles into my ears.

In surprise, I reply, “Dalm?”

The handsome face peeks around the edge of what had once been a door frame. A slight breeze kicks at the dust that has settled in the area, tugging at his brown hair. The same intoxicating smile is fixed on his lips. He doesn't look much changed from the way I remember him when we first met.

“It's good to see you again, Mel.”

I can't think of anything to say, so surprised am I. Instead, I blurt out, “It...what are you doing here?”

His smile fades and he looks around. “This is where that Bline creature was. Yesterday.”

I frown. “Yesterday?”

“Aye.”

“But you were in the bazaar. I saw you.”

He nods. “I was. That's why I came here today.”

“Wait, I'm confused. What's that supposed to mean?”

“Who's the fool's head now?” he asks, the smile returning. I blush as I remember all of the names I had called him. I try to conjure the feelings of distrust for the ease he puts me into, for the fact that he lied about which direction he was headed, but I fail.

I decide to trust him, which is easier than trusting someone like Layne. We start to walk through the debris, talking softly to each other as the day's heat bears down on us.

Taking my silence as just retribution, he continues. “I've been in the city, looking around...”

Interrupting (me): “Did you ever meet the King? For the Woes of the Peasantry?”

Hesitating (him): “I met the King. He said he'd be able to help my people.”

Replying (me): “That's good. I hope that his death won't ruin his promises.”

Explaining (him): “Oh, no, it won't. My people are on the road to restoration.”

Diverting (me): “So, you were in the city?”

Continuing (him): “Oh, aye. I've been looking around, waiting for...one of my kinsmen to come. I need his help. Anyway, I was in the bazaar, as you said. I saw you there while that...what was it?”

“The behemoth?”

He shakes his head, his lips tight. “No, the man.”

Vald. “That's a Spook. I told you about them.”

“That's a Spook?”

“Aye.”

“But he looks like any other person.”

“Exactly. I told you, they're crazy people who hear the whispers and then can do incredible things. You ran away, but Vald killed Bline without any help. He stabbed the behemoth through the eye with a pole.”

Dalm swallows nervously. “That's...interesting.”

Seeing his reaction, I realize that Layne was right: Spooks are frightening. They scare the normal people. They act spooky. Vald doesn't scare me because I know him.

He's—well, he's not a friend, a family, or any other kind of relationship that I know of. He's my Spook. That's all there is to it.

“He wouldn't hurt you,” I assure him.

“Oh? Why is that?”

“Spooks only attack behemoths.”

“Ah. I see.” This doesn't seem to make him any more comfortable, so I prompt him to continue what he was saying.

“Well, the behemoth and the Spook were fighting each other, and I thought it best to get to a safer place.”

“Fair.” I can't say I blame him. If it weren't for the fact that Vald was involved, I wouldn't have gone anywhere close to the fight.

He nods slightly. “Well, as I was headed as far away from the violence as possible, I heard people, naturally, talking about it. Rumors bounced around that the creature wasn't alone, and that it had already destroyed part of the city.” Dalm gestures at the rubble we walk through. I see what used to be Mama and Pops' bed. The shambles of my house sadden me, and I turn away.

Dalm gestures with his head. “I'm thirsty. Do you know of a place where we could get something to drink?”

He doesn't know that we're standing in the remains of my home.

Biting back emotion, I nod. “Keep talking. I'll lead the way.”

“Very well.”

We turn and head north, leaving the devastated neighborhood behind. I don't see anyone as we walk away. It's as if this section of the city has turned into a mausoleum.

Says Dalm, “I thought I had better investigate these rumors. If a behemoth can be like you say, Mel, fitting into any human shape, anyone could be a behemoth. So how could you know?”

“Spooks,” I whisper, but he doesn't seem to hear me.

“I traced the destruction Bline wreaked to here. Everywhere else, it was just random. A shattered out window, a broken door, a killed person—a couple of soldiers, I don't know what you call them...”

“Militiamen.”

“Aye. Two of them are being seen to by healers. But back there?” He gestures with his head, his air swinging about loosely. “That's focused. It's as if he, I don't know...hated that place. He broke it all. Everything that was standing.” He eyes focus on me. “Well, you saw it. You know.”

I nod. “Aye. I know.” And it's all my fault, I don't say.

“So that's why I'm here.”

“I see.” I take a deep breath and try to rid my mind of what Bline has done. Even though he's dead, he made sure that I wouldn't have a home to return to. He extinguished it all.

Even dead, he's ruining my life.

I'm glad he has a pole instead of an eye, that Vald skewered his brain.

“Why are you so interested in a behemoth, Dalm?” I ask, just to keep the silence from suffocating me.

“Oh, you know,” he says vaguely. “It's one of those things...”

“Really? What type of things?”

He clears his throat. "Security. I want to be safe."

"What makes you think you're safe with me?" I ask. I almost continue with a confession about being a Spark, and that the Spook he saw yesterday is my Spook, but he interrupts me before I can.

"What makes you think you're safe with me?" Then he gives me the smile that melts my legs and I suddenly wish to be on his lips. I completely forget what he was asking.

"Aye," I drawl. "I like that."

His smiling face clouds a little. "What?"

Realizing what I just said, I turn away, feeling my face turn warm. "Uh, I...I don't know. What were we talking about?"

He laughs, a genuine, warm laugh that stirs something inside of me. The idea of holding his hand, interlocking his fingers in mine, lurches into my head and it's all I can do to focus on walking.

I can't figure out what's happening.

"So, Mel..."

"Amela," I say. "Call me Amela." I don't know why, but it's what I want to hear from him. I want him to call me that.

"Amela?"

I nod.

"Fair." He grins at me, showing me that he remembers how I had used the word. I grin back. "So, *Amela*, what brings you to this section of town?"

"Oh." I pause before answering. I want to tell him the truth, but my instincts gained from my life as a street won't let that happen. Even to Dalm, I have to lie. Well, as much honesty as I can give him, for that's simpler, but he can't know everything. He shouldn't know much. He shouldn't know anything.

I glance at his inviting smile, and I forget my resolve. He shouldn't be able to do this to me. He shouldn't make me so comfortable. But he does.

"I was just wandering. I used to live in that neighborhood, and I thought I'd visit." Both very true.

His face falls. "Was your house in that rubble?"

"Bline didn't destroy it yesterday." Also very true.

Dalm looks relieved. "I'm glad that your home wasn't destroyed."

"Aye," I say softly.

"So, where do you live now?"

"Far from here."

His face clouds a little. "And you, what, just went for a walk?"

"Essentially, yes."

"I see." I doubt he does, but by now we've reached Crannin's Shop, a small vendor of fruits and vegetables. He also has a special cooling machine that allows him to grind fruits together, eking out the juices. He mixes in some sweetened milk and then uses the machine to make it cool and palatable. His fruit is affordable, but his special mixes aren't. I tell Dalm all of this, then tell him that I'll pay.

"Oh, I couldn't let you do that," he says, reaching into the pocket of his brown breeches, presumably for some marks.

"Please. Remember? I stole from Bline." True. "I can afford to cover you mix."

Also true, though Statement One isn't what makes Statement Two correct. But honesty, even in conservative demonstrations, is better than outright lying.

He nods. "Fair."

I step up to Crannin. I know him about as well as I know anyone. Despite his wonderful mixing invention, he lives in this area of town because he is quite poor. Pops always refused to let me steal from him. Once or twice, after a particularly good heist, I would be allowed to buy a mix. Kev, in particular, loved the cool, sweet combination. The only thing he loved as much were pageants.

No, not were. Are. He loves mixes. He loves pageants.

I refuse to think of him as if he's gone.

I order the drinks, then join Dalm at a small table that's perched in front of the shop but off the road. We watch the few people walking past, most of them with their heads down, eyes averted, and business in each step.

"Amela," he says, and I feel a fluttering in my chest. It sounds so right when my name drips from his lips.

"Yes?"

"What is it that you do with your time?"

The drinks arrive—that was fast—and interrupts the awkward question. I gain a few moments' respite as I quietly enjoy the sensation of the cool flavor on my tongue. Dalm, it seems, is enjoying them too, and is silent save the occasional sighs of appreciation. Or maybe that's me. I can't tell. I'm too busy savoring mine.

But the question resurfaces after a few minutes. I clench my fists about the cold clay cup, letting my heat burn into it.

"Dalm, I..." I begin, but stop.

Suddenly his hand—surprisingly soft, but with a heavy strength there, too—covers mine. His hand is rather big, but only in comparison.

"You don't have to tell me if it makes you uncomfortable. I'm happy knowing you. You seem like a special woman." He looks me in the eyes. "Tell me about yourself," he says.

Against my better judgment and with a thrill of excitement, I do.

Chapter 17

Decision

I DON'T know quite what to say, and so I speak instinctively, the narrative no doubt confusing at times. Honesty pours out of me, despite my misgivings and the fact that I just barely met this man. I can't stop once it starts, even though it exposes some of the half-truths I've told him. He doesn't seem to mind. I explain all the way up to the point of being abducted by the henchmen and my interview with Layne. I don't use Layne's name. I just call him "my boss." It seems—appropriate.

"Then I had a choice," say I. "I could either let my family die, or become a Spark."

"What is a Spark?"

I laugh, a surprising, relieving reaction. "I don't know it. If I figure it out, I'll let you know."

He doesn't laugh back. He seems concerned, but he doesn't say anything.

I continue with my story. "He took me down these steps. There were...people, I guess I could call them. Aye, they were people."

"You seem hesitant."

"They weren't treated as such. They were chained, they were ignored. Were? No, they are. They're still there. I suppose that those that I heard and saw, that they are Spooks."

"Where was this?" he asks, his interest uncommonly piqued. "In your boss' building?"

"Aye. In the basement. There's a dungeon filled with shrieking, screaming people. They rattle their chains and scream about things that no one can see or hear. Some hurt themselves, so they are wrapped in long-sleeved jackets that keep their arms tightly bound. It's a horrible scene."

"I can only imagine." Dalm's voice sounds distant, far away.

"But what I don't understand, Dalm, is why people do it. Aren't Spooks people, too?"

He shrugs and shakes his head a little. "I don't know, Amela. It seems like everyone is always most interested in themselves, that they want what makes them happy and comfortable. The individual is everything, and since that's everyone, there is no community. There's nothing bigger. The branches, twigs, leaves, don't realize that they're all connected to one common trunk. Seeing creatures...no, humans, I guess, like the Spooks is frightening. The Spooks—well, they don't fit in. It's like a person with a malady or a handicap..."

My family...

"They're different from the rest. They are, perhaps, too obviously individuals. They don't fit in with normalcy. So others think that they should be shunned. They should be treated differently, caged, chained, and treated as animals, like you said."

"Have you thought about this a lot?"

"Aye. It has constantly confused me, actually. Your people, they seem to hate their own blood if it will get them gain—or somehow change their desperate circumstances."

"'My' people?" Does he mean my family? "What do you mean by that?"

Another shrug. "The Sparselands is different."

“Tell me about it.” I could use a rest from telling him what happens in the depths beneath Layne's Spook house.

“The...the Sparselands are broad and plain. Plain plains, I guess.” He quirks his mouth in a wry twist, then spins the empty clay cup gently in his hands. “Really, the name sums it up. The land is sparse. We live together as family groups, residing in a village.

“The village has a main council, a quorum of men and women who are the eldest and most wise. They decide what is best for the village. This dearth, it has affected the entire planet, I think. Even in the Sparselands we can feel the bite of hunger, the constant starvation as the ground is parched. We know that there are many things that are in the Realm—in this area of the Realm, I should say—that help the people survive despite the heat and the lack of rain. Technology, for example. That and what I was saying before about a single person.

“In our land, everyone helps everyone so far as they are able. There aren't many of us, and we all feel like family, so it's easy. It's how I was raised. Yet, out here, you, Amela, are the first person I met who is honestly interested in helping others, in helping *your* family. It isn't about you. It's about others as well.”

“But aside from me?”

“Aside from you, most everyone aims for marks and hopes to hit the mark.” He smiles a bit at the wordplay. I don't indulge him with a smile. I think it was a dumb pun. He clears his throat. “That's not to say that the Realm is the only place where that happens. Look at Bline. He not only tried to kill you, but he hunted you down, then destroyed your house, then came back and wrecked the neighborhood you lived in, just to be vindictive.” He opens his hands, conceding. “We can assume, anyway, that he returned only for that reason.”

I nod. “Well, I don't know what it's like out in the Sparselands, but I imagine that life is difficult there, too, even with everyone helping everyone else.”

He agrees, resuming his narrative. “We try to do things on our own, but it was getting to be too much. If our way of life is to continue, we will need the King's...assistance to get things right in the Sparselands.” I sip my much warmer but no less delicious mix as I listen.

“Well, the issue with the King isn't as important as getting the quorum to agree to send me. My brothers—I have two brothers—and I were willing to take the risks involved with traveling here and...requesting an audience with the King. I decided that I would act for my people.” He sighs and gazes out at the city, but looks into his past.

“Coming here,” continues he, “is no simple thing. There are great distances involved and many dangers. There were many pains—excruciating, unalterable changes. But I love my country. I love my land.” He looks at me and I see the sincerity there, the undeniable passion he has for the Sparselands, for the Realm. “I want nothing more than to see it saved from this dearth. The King has—well, had—the answer. I needed to come here—for him.” He pauses, obviously working something that he couldn't quite explain. “Let me clarify.

“I and my brothers will do anything—*anything*—to see our lands safe and healthy again. We'll do what must be done. I want to live to see that whatever must be done is done.” His mien hardens and he grits his teeth, his hands tightening. “That's why I fled the bazaar. I'm not afraid of Bline, or any behemoth, for that matter. But I am afraid of

failure. I won't let my country die. I love the way I live. I love where I live. I love life. And I need to save it. We're the only ones who can."

The clay cup shatters in his hand, making me yelp. The sticky shards rattle onto the tabletop.

"I'm sorry," he apologizes. "I didn't...I forget how strong I am."

"Don't worry," I say, palming a mark out of my trouser pocket and flip it jovially into the air, snatching it before it has a chance to hit the ground. "This'll cover it. And another mix for the two of us two, I warrant."

I turn and call out to Crannin. He catches the tossed mark and sets about making more mix. He comes out a moment later, cleans up the mess Dalm made, and deposits fresh mixes in front of us.

Dalm apologizes again, sipping the new mix quietly. I watch his tongue as it licks the froth off his upper lip. "I didn't mean to," he says.

It's my turn to touch his hand. A charge runs up me. Something says that I shouldn't trust a man I just met. But it's a small, easily ignored part of my mind.

Besides, he saved my life by stopping Bline from whatever it was he had planned on doing to me.

And he is bearing his soul, which, to my surprise, is much like mine. Everything he has said makes sense to me. I tell him so. "Dalm, I'm not sure what you had to do to get here, but I'm glad that you are."

His inviting eyes take me in, and the embarrassment leaks out of him. "Really?"

I nod. "You're just like me. Like you said, I'd do anything for my family. They need my help. My boss needs me to help him, and, once I have, I'll be out and with my family again. We'll pick up where we left off, we'll build a new house, or find another one to live in. We'll make it." I have to believe myself.

But my last declarative rings of desperation.

Dalm smiles.

Things suddenly look better.

"I thank you, Amela, for the wonderful drink. I hope to repay you for this soon."

He's leaving. "You're leaving?" I ask, alarmed.

"I have...business to attend to."

"Business?"

"Aye. But I want to see you again."

"And I you."

He smiles. "Then don't worry. We will."

"When?"

"Tomorrow? Here? Three hours till zenith?"

I think of how far it is from Vald. My Spook.

I haven't told him that I became a Spark. That I have a Spook. We hadn't reached that point of my story before getting distracted.

"We have more to discuss," I say by way of agreement.

"I'll pay for the mixes," he promises. He touches me lightly on the shoulder.

"Fair," I breathe. I doubt he hears me.

Dalm smiles again, and I am fairly sure the world stops while I soak it in. Then he turns, blending into the crowd, moving with an effortless grace that I didn't notice before. He always walks as if he's on glass, but he does it unconsciously, unaware that he more

glides than walks.

I wonder at how fast my heart is pounding, and my shoulder radiates with the memory of his hand.

I sit back and stare, my body weak. I feel as if I've just been beaten by something, and it feels wonderful—for once. Glancing at my clay cup, I realize that I've barely touched it. Not willing to let it go to waste, I begin nursing it, pondering everything Dalm said.

He's still mysterious. I shouldn't trust him. In fact, there are two parts of me that war over him. Which should I follow? My heart or my head?

The former says that what I'm feeling may turn into—though it certainly isn't yet—love. Love? Did I honestly think that? I don't know—nor do I expect, nor do I care for—love. It isn't me. It's beyond what I can expect. Love can't be a part of my life when there are so many other things, other responsibilities.

Yet if love feels like anything, this is what it should be: warm, accepting, helpful, wondrous. I can't fit it into any past experience or idea that I've had. So it must be love.

If I dare.

Then my head chimes in with the logic. One: he's an almost complete stranger. A man with similar experiences and feelings, true, but I can't be in love having only met the man in a couple of brief encounters. Two: he has nothing to do with me, really. This crazy word I keep rolling over...how can I know that he feels the same as I? I can't, so it's folly to think he would requite. Three: he has a smile that makes me tingle...

So my heart overpowers my head.

Besides, it seems as though everything I've done of late has been reactionary—something happens, and I'm scrambling to keep one step ahead of each new catastrophe.

I wouldn't mind terribly much if things calmed down to the point that I could anticipate something, plan for an eventuality, decide for myself.

This is for me, then.

I decide on my own, no coercion or mandates from others. This is personal. My individual finally listening to my individual.

Yes, it's selfish.

Yes, I understand the potential problems that could come if Vald wakes up and can't be controlled.

I know it isn't safe, or logical, or sound. But I do know that I want it.

I want to be in love. I want this feeling to continue.

I want Dalm to be the kind of man I can trust and confide in.

Don't I deserve it?

Can't I be selfish just once?

I decide that I can, and leave it at that.

Picking myself up out of the chair, I glance at the sky. King's blood, it's four hours past zenith! It'll be an hour until dusk by the time I make it back to Vald! I've abandoned him the whole day, and for what? A man I think that I'm in love with?

No, I decided to pursue this for me. I won't regret it.

I refuse to regret it.

Still, I'm done with Dalm, so I start to hurry back, weaving through the crowd on instinct—which I've found to be much more effective in situations like these. I return about when I expected, afraid that Vald might be dead, or that a medic came by with

instructions (I know how important it is to follow a healer's injunctions), or any number of possibilities playing on the stage of my mind.

Shema greets me. "Hail, m'lady. How goes it?"

"Fair," I say, more than just slightly winded. Sweat streaks down my face and my tunic is clinging to me. I pick at it a little, trying to air myself out. "How's Vald?"

"He's fine, m'lady. He slept all day."

I blink. "Really?"

"Aye."

"He didn't wake at all?"

"No, m'lady. Well, he did awake a couple of times, crying about a pressure on his pee-maker, so I gave him a chamber pot." She wrinkled her nose. "It was rather smelly. But other than that, he was quiet as a milch-mouse."

I make an intrigued noise and nod. "I'm going to bathe, Shema." Two baths in a day. Could life get better? "Get me if he awakens."

"Will you be eating with us, m'lady?"

I think back to all that I've eaten today, and nod enthusiastically. "That would be wonderful." Free meals. A definite perk to being a Spark. "And I'm sure that Vald would like some, too."

"Oh, of course, m'lady."

I smile in response, then hurry to go change. Shema has cleaned up after me, so I have a ready wardrobe when I exit the bathing room. Toweling my hair dry, I step into my room and prepare myself for dinner. The hot stew is steaming as I sit myself down, a half loaf of flaky, warm bread next to the bowl. I begin eating with a relish when, to my surprise, I hear an unfamiliar voice ask me, "You're a Spark, aren't you?"

THE VOICE repeats its question: “You’re a Spark, right?”

There, in the far corner, mostly obscured by shadows, is a man, dressed in a sleeveless tunic bound about the middle with a thick belt. A cloak rests over one arm—though who would wear a cloak in the stifling heat of the summer I don’t know. He does, apparently. Polished boots that turn back down once they reach his knee are crossed together, his shanks clad in an ebony leather. Sitting next to him is a small girl, who stares vacantly. Garbed in a white dress, apparently sewn out of a single bolt of cloth, she could be the man’s daughter. Somehow, though, I doubt it.

I don’t know when they came in—I don’t know how I missed them if they were already waiting for me. I look at him, confused. “Pardon?”

He points with his bearded chin at me. “You’re a Spark.” Different, this time—not a question.

“Who wants to know?”

He stands and approaches my table, the girl right after. “They call me Quinn.” He extends his hand. “Seli, well, she’s my Spook. What do they call you?”

I stare at him a long moment. “Mel,” confess I after a pause.

“That’s a lovely name.”

“I don’t believe you.” Something about his unctuous smile puts me off. It’s different than Dalm’s intoxicating grin. Quinn’s feels...hollow. I remain wary.

“But it is!”

“No.” A brief shake of the head. “I don’t believe that you’re Slayers.”

“We? Of course we are!”

I stare. He shifts from one foot to another. Seli remains quiet. I don’t offer them a seat.

“What do I need to do to prove to you that I am, indeed, a Spark? And that the lovely girl next to me is, indeed, a Spook?”

“Why do you think that I’m a Spark?” I want to know, avoiding his request. I haven’t thought of a good answer to his question, yet, so I’d rather not worry about it.

Just then, Vald stumbles into the room, his bed sheet wrapped about his form, his eyes red-rimmed. He pushes past the inquisitors and flops down in the seat.

“Amela! Amela, there’s a big problem!”

“I noticed! You’re out of your room.” I secretly thrill to see that he’s well enough to move. Still, the fact remains that he’s out of his bed.

“No, it’s worse.” He shoots a furtive glance at Seli and her Spark. His eyes narrow, and he leans in toward me and whispers conspiratorially, “It won’t work!”

I stare at him, no response. This only serves to agitate him more. “When you’re weeping, pray tell? Why no, no, not the way that it worked before! If ever there were sense in senselessness now would be it! Now would be the time! I can’t—No.” He looks at me with wide eyes. He starts to speak even faster, the words getting more insistent. “I can’t stop the feeling of hatred in the air. Blood and bones and broken homes. Do you see them? They are the walking dead. Not ghouls, no not ghouls.” He points out at the window, gesturing to the people who walk about the street, scurrying home as the dusk claims the sky its twelve-hour prisoner. “They walk now, but they’re as good as dead. Don’t you see what they’ve done to the animals? To the sky? It shouldn’t be so blue! It

shouldn't be so blue!"

I turn back to Quinn, who smirks. "Need I explain more?" he asks.

"It could be that Vald is just a half-wit."

Like a lit candle brightens a room, Vald relaxes. He sits up straight, regards Quinn, and declares, "I have my whole wit, Amela." I wait for him to finish. Quotes he: "It just so happens that my wit is *diseased*."

"Close that hole of yours, Vald," I snap, angry that he defeated my argument. I'm not necessarily angry at him, just at his impropriety. This conversation has put me on alert, but Vald is diffusing my instincts by talking too much.

"This one?" He points to his lips.

"Aye."

He pinches them shut with his fingers. Then he sticks out his tongue through the forest of his beard and crosses his eyes.

Normally, I might have laughed. But a deep level of irritation burns at me and I look away in disgust. I'm starting to believe what Layne said, that we suffer the crazy people. We *allow* them to be where they have no right to be. Because they're useful. Because we want their protection. But that doesn't give them full license to do as they please.

Then I wonder what Dalm would think, and push the thought out of my mind. I don't want to be irritated. I felt so good before these people started talking to me, and now...

Quinn chuckles. "Well, if he's a half-wit than I'm glad for it. He'll be much safer that way. And so will you."

"Why's that?"

Finally, he takes a seat, sitting directly next to me. Seli puts herself by Vald, who looks at her, then begins to pick at the fresh bandages that wrap his thick arm. I smack a hand and shake my head, glaring at him. He pouts, but stops.

"Do you know what a Spark is supposed to do?" asks Quinn, his frank air putting me on guard.

"I've heard some opinions." Something tells me to keep being wary around this one. This time, I listen.

"They are the thought behind the sword."

Another sword analogy. Inwardly, I groan. Outwardly, I inquire, "How's that, precisely?"

Quinn uses his hands to illustrate, clasping them together as though he held something in between. Any hints of joviality have disappeared as quickly as the remnants of night upon daylight.

"What is most lethal on a sword?"

I try to remember what Willem had said about the weapon, but then realize it doesn't matter. I spit out whatever arrives at my tongue, "The blade," fully expecting him to contradict me.

He does. "Wrong. It is the *thought* behind the blade. Neither handle nor blade, it is the person who wields it that makes it dangerous. A babe with a sword is as innocuous as the sun—but in the hands of a warrior or swordsman, it can cut both friend and foe alike."

I almost say, "A sword can be dangerous without a thought and the sun can still

burn,” but I don’t. I want to, but I refrain. Better to let him throw words at me as though I were a fool’s head than otherwise. Caution...caution...

“I see,” say I instead.

“So a Spark must be the guiding force behind a Spook’s actions. Do you see?”

“Yes.” Actually, no, but I can’t stomach another flawed comparison, so I let him continue. I wonder if this is the Spark that Layne intimated he’d be sending to help me understand my duties a bit more.

“Good.” He settles back in his seat. “I wonder, what’s the story of your Spook?” He shoots a glance at Vald, who is staring at the people out the window.

“So do I.”

He arches his eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know much about him save that he’s a Spook.”

“But all Spooks crack somehow.”

I don’t respond.

Quinn snorts. “How long have you been working with him? Do you know nothing about being a Spark?”

I shake my head.

“Fair. Let me explain this to you. Being a Spark is a good job. It pays well, you have some power, and there isn’t a lot demanded of you, usually. You get all of the benefits of being a lord or lady sans the bloodlines.”

His enthusiasm irritates me. “Why bother?” I snap.

“Didn’t you hear? It’s a chance to be great! Wouldn’t you want to have that?”

“All I want is my family back.”

“Well, that’s not part of the discussion, is it?”

I look at my hands, clutched about the spoon. I take a bite of the cooling stew. Quinn keeps talking.

“Well, you claim you’re a Spark, and I say you’re a Spark, so let’s say you’re a Spark, whether you know what you’re doing or no.” He chuckles, apparently amused that he used the title three times in a sentence. It merely bothers me. He continues, “I’m guessing they were desperate when they Recruited you, though.” He sighs as I bristle quietly at the slight. “That’s quite sad, I’d have to say. But these are lean times all around, aren’t they?”

“So what if I’m new?” I snap, irritation getting the better of my tongue. “Weren’t you?”

“No! I worked in a Recruiting office for a while, learning how to help people to understand a Spook when they came across one, how to handle an upset Spook who wasn’t listening to the whispers and was hurting himself as a consequence. I saw all of these things handled ere I ever met Seli.”

“Is it so bad that I don’t know anything? I can learn!” For some reason, I feel like fighting back, at least a little.

“That takes time, and that’s in scarce supply these days, too.” He gives me a searching look. “I don’t think that they made a mistake, necessarily, in making you a Spark.” He shakes his head. “We’ll have to see. But here we are, anyway. Since you’re so obviously uninitiated, I will elucidate my reasons for wondering about Vald.”

“Rhymes with bald!”

“Yes, it does.” Quinn continues without pause. “Being a Spook is altogether

different from being a Spark. It is something special; the whispers begin to take you, drawing you along with dulcet tones and beautiful promises. Promises of power, of strength, of wisdom, of fearlessness. Of physical beauty, sometimes. They sing inside of your head, just low enough that you can't distinguish them from your own thoughts without concentrating. Then they chip at your self-will as they tell you how to do things you're too afraid—or reluctant—to do."

"How do you know this?"

"Does Vald have a book?"

I think back to that frightening moment in his cell.

The book had fallen—I touched it—he pinned me—choked me—almost killed me.

My throat burns with the memory.

"Yes."

"Did you read it?"

"He won't let me touch it."

"Oh!" The response is more surprised than anything. "He won't?"

"He...he acted violently when I touched it."

"I see." He pauses. "Well, we only know about the whispers because of those books. That's where the term *whispers* comes from. A Spook will write down what happened right before he or she cracked. That's one of the first things that the whispers do to their newest victim: They insist that they write down their history. Based upon the level of intelligence, writing capability, and all the natural talents the pre-Spook has, the book will be a tome or a tract."

I frown and glance at Vald, who hasn't moved since his outburst. In fact, I doubt he moved when he yelled out the rhyme. He stares at the dark sky, entranced.

"Seli is a perfect example. You see, before she cracked, she was a liar. A crook, a cheat, a con. She would take advantage of people by putting up one face, but secretly be another. Then the whispers started to come to her, and she was compelled—literally forced—into writing down the steps leading to when she first heard the whispers. Then, she cracked."

"You say that as if it means something else."

"What does it mean to you?"

"Crazy; wrapped."

He nods. "It can mean that, absolutely. Vald is patently cracked. But there is an actual moment, a defining time when their sanity is replaced by the whispers—when they crack."

"They can pinpoint it?"

"Of course. That's how every book ends. They write, in one form or another, the event that was so traumatic or life-threatening or bizarre or sad that they have to put down their emotions on paper just to get the feelings out. On occasion, they can even recite what happened to them when they first started following the whispers' suggestions. At the end, though, the narrative stops and their sanity is lost. Forever."

I watch Vald for a moment. He recognizes the scrutiny after a moment, and looks at me. He smiles happily. I smile back, though it isn't sincere. I feel a welling of sadness in me, and break the visual contact.

I want to stop the silence. "What was Seli's moment? When did she crack?"

Quinn frowns, his eyes shifting away. I lean a bit to get a clear view of Seli. She's staring straight ahead, not heeding either of us, her eyes glassy with inattention.

"Her lover died—violently. Very suddenly, in a horrible incident inside of a burning building. A mob torched the place they were staying, anger in their eyes and hearts. She watched her hair crisp, smolder, her skin melt. A most gruesome death."

"How old was she?" I ask after a long moment, my mind trying to process everything he just said. What a sad story...

"In her twenty-sevens."

"She looks like she's in her teens."

"Well, that's Seli. One thing you should know about Seli—you can never believe your first impression."

I watch Seli for a moment. Her face is unmoved. I nod and recline in my seat. Now my curiosity is piqued, and I catch myself studying Vald. I wonder at his defensiveness about his book; Quinn seems surprised by it, after all.

"How do the whispers help? I mean, how can they actually empower the Spook to do anything?" I remember how Vald had killed Bline—how calmly, how in control, how perfectly he had executed the Wyn. "I've heard that they do what the whispers say to do. But how does that work?"

He shrugs. "No one knows, nor do we know where the whispers came from, though we have theories on how they function. Some say that it is the sheer faith—or lunacy, you judge twixt them, if there's a difference—of the Spook in trusting the whispers. They say to jump; you jump. Your bone breaks, and the whispers say, 'It doesn't matter.' You believe them, and the broken bone doesn't matter. Or that it's healed and, because the spark believes, it's healed.

"Others say that it's a type of magic, derived from the same power that created the behemoths in all their variety. Others say that it's one of the mysteries of the universe and we can't begin to fathom it—so don't bother."

"What do you think?"

"I?"

"Yes."

He strokes at his bearded chin. "I think that it's a little of all of them together. That it's a power that comes from the creation of the behemoths—and that power came from the mysteries of the universe. Because of that power—it's real; I've seen its effects—because of that power the Spook has the faith necessary to do what is asked. That's why a person must be moonstruck to be a Spook. Any normal person like you or me would shy away from the whispers' suggestions, saying that that's too difficult, too hard, too frightening to do."

"Too frightening?"

"The whispers tell Spooks to do a lot of strange things." His eyes glimmer in a way I can't decipher.

"Like what?" I already imagine a couple, but I don't think that he's referring to the same things. I remember what I asked Dalm when I first talked to him. I tried to impress him, make him feel intimidated by the fact that I had seen a Vigilante. It's true, I had seen a Vigilante punch through a wall—a rotten wooden one, not stone like I had told Dalm. The lie bothers me now. I don't know why. Maybe I'll apologize tomorrow. The thought of Dalm lifts my spirits for a moment, pushing through an incipient headache

that's gaining momentum.

Quinn grins thinly, his voice scratching away at the happiness I have when thinking of the Sparselander. "I don't think you'd believe me if I told you. Suffice to say that, when a Spook starts acting strangely—" He regards Vald, who is now plucking out his beard and counting the removed hairs. Quinn changes tactics: "When a Spook starts acting more strangely than usual, the best thing to do is to find a safe spot and make sure there is plenty of distance between you and whatever it is he's doing. I'll just leave it at that."

Vald stomps his feet next to me, fiercely, loudly, rapidly. It hurts my head. Then he stops. "It's the eggs," he explains to the curious stares. "See? I got them, now."

Quinn stands. "We must go." He nods to me, to Vald. Seli stands, too. "But it has been a pleasure meeting the both of you."

Somewhat surprised, I glance out the window to gauge the time. Night holds full sway; I don't even know what watch it's approaching.

"I—" Hoping to utter at least something resembling a formality, I trip on thanking him. Despite how personable he is—and how helpful he's been—I can't convince myself to trust him. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that I trusted others (most notably Layne) and still regret it. Or maybe that I don't know if I should trust Dalm, but I will anyway. After all, even Logan shrived me, putting me in this predicament. Granted, this could end up being better for my family...I still have yet to sort out my feelings.

Quinn doesn't stop at my half-uttered sentiment. He whirls the cloak about his broad shoulders, his copper skin disappearing beneath the ebony. They depart. I don't even see them outside the window.

With a sigh I recline in the chair and sip at the now-warm juice. Vald clucks his tongue and begins to tap an asynchronous rhythm on the table's lip. The thumping hurts my head, so I ask him to stop. He complies.

"Amela?" he says, his voice strangely lucid—not as strained as usual.

"Yes?"

He takes a moment to form the words, and he stutters a bit on each, a habit I've never seen in him before. I've been seeing a lot of new things on Vald in the past couple of days. "When will this end?"

"This?"

He gestures about himself, as if indicating the world.

"The world?"

He pauses and then slowly nods. I don't think I guess right, because when I say "The world itself will never end, Vald. We might, but the world will march on," he shakes his head, frustrated.

"Not the world...no, not the world, that's too simple." He swallows noisily. "W-when will the..." He stops, almost as if he's trying to force the word up from deep within himself. "The h-h-hurting...when will the hurting stop?" He stutters on the sentence.

I think for a long time. Death, and what it holds, the way that time is spent in the Realm, the point of everything...anything...pounds against the pain in my head. Finally, I find an answer.

"Never."

I GET up to go.

“Amela?”

Stopping, I turn my neck to face him.

Through the stutters, he asks, “When will you stop hating me?”

I stare. The pain in my head returns, more pointed than ever. “I...I don’t know, Vald. I’m sorry, I need sleep. I can’t answer that question. Go to bed.”

“Yes, Amela,” he says. He follows me at a distance until we reach our rooms. His on the right, mine on the left.

“Dream well,” I bless him.

“To you,” he returns, then enters the room, the door latching quietly behind him.

Frustrated, I enter my quarters and shut the door behind me. The room is almost completely dark, the lamp having not been lit before I left for the dining room.

Fumbling through the dark, bumping into the bed, and careening off the wardrobe, I finally manage my way to the writing desk on which an oil lamp rests. I fumble with the firestick, but at last get a spark to kindle the wick.

Spark.

I snort derisively.

Quinn’s presence seems calculated, not simple happenstance. If Layne wants me to study the other rigors of being a Spark when not busy training, he can bite a wall until it bleeds. I need my rest. I am utterly energiless, not only from a long week of learning the different ways of fighting, but from the past days, too.

Finally, after preparing myself for bed by dressing in my sleeping clothes, washing my face, and folding my longjacket next to the trousers I’ll wear come the day, I collapse into the straw-stuffed mattress. I turn the wick down so low that it almost extinguishes itself. I know of the dangers of leaving it on while sleeping, but I might need light. I never know when Vald will barrel away, running faster than I can—night or no night. The fact that he came into the dining room proves that he doesn’t need as much time to recover from being used by the whispers as Layne had thought.

Now, in the gloom of the night, I allow myself to think. Normally, I don’t want to analyze my feelings, I don’t want to fight with my mind. Action has always suited me better than thinking, and I often wonder in circles, preventing me from reaching any resolution. With an almost guaranteed frustration at the end, why should I bother to begin?

Yet my mind wanders and wonders anyway. Bline and Dalm war for my attention in equal portions. It irritates me that my concern over Mama and Pops and Kev and (to a lesser extent) Carly and (to an even smaller degree) Logan doesn’t pierce my feelings about either of the behemoth or the Sparselander.

I focus on the negative first, trying to come to grips with how I feel about having the behemoth dead. I hadn’t realized it until I saw his boil-encrusted face, lying in his own gore, his stench almost knocking me over, that the real reason I had followed Layne, gone along with his game, trusted his henchmen, was because I wanted revenge.

That’s the only word that fits.

Revenge for my home.

Revenge for my family.

Revenge for the fear.

Revenge because I couldn't have it.

Bline took something from me, something I can't describe. Not my virtue, but an innocence that I needed to survive. In a world where giants can roam the land, where my home and all that I hold dear can be snatched away in the gesture of something vastly more powerful—I am utterly powerless.

Therein lies the problem. I could never have killed Bline. Too big, too strong, too smelly. Like the society that discarded my parents after their accident and left us naught but a house and wheels to move Pops around in, I became utterly insignificant.

I can scream and rail, I can kick and fight, but, ultimately, my voice means as little to the powerful as a bug's life when it comes beneath my hand.

Bline was a physical representation of the powerlessness that I have felt almost all my life—ever since the accident.

Then there's Dalm. Just thinking of him warms me, and I smile in spite of my previous somber thoughts. He is beyond my ability to describe—yet I worry that I'm doing that which I always hated in other girls: focus only on what I could see.

But it's more than just an attraction to him, though I certainly feel that—and have ever since we first walked together the night after I picked Bline. And it's more than just a sense of appreciation for having stepped in to save me from the Wyn in that alleyway, though that colors things, too. I can't even say that my feelings for him aren't a mixture of both those and more.

I feel like I've finally found a piece of me that was missing. No, that's too presumptuous. I think I'm in love, granted, but does he feel the same? Sans that information, I can't claim completeness. Still, I've decided to care for him, even though I can't point to a reason for it.

Isn't that what love is anyway?

I roll over, unsure of what to think. My mind wanders and, like it always does if left on its own, I think back to the day my life changed. The ides of the fourth month.

The day of the accident.

Of course, I would never tell the story to anyone. I don't remember it. That isn't to say that I cannot recall the events. Rather, it means that I refuse to acknowledge it as a memory, even though I never forget it. I hate it—more than I hate the tool that I've become, more than I hate who has put me here. I guess that's because I can trace back everything that has happened to me in the last week or so to that day. The accident changed our lives.

And though I won't think of it as having happened to me, I still think on it, pick at it, recite the words and the actions.

At that time, we were in our home—not the one that Bline destroyed, but the nicer one, the one that I had been born in, that Kev had been born in. It was early in the morning two days before my birthing day celebration. I had just breakfasted and had started studying something Pops had given me—something about politics, I think. He always gave me things to study, insisting that a smart girl was the key to his future retirement. Language was particularly important to him, so maybe I was reading something with words normal people don't use as often. I don't know. I don't remember.

I *do* remember Mama's face as she came in the door with Kev—he was still small enough to be carried. She looked at Pops, who walked over and took Kev from her.

“They say it’s the only way,” she said, her thin face pale. With a sigh, she rubbed her hands through her hair, scratching at her scalp as she went.

“Then we don’t have a choice,” said Pops, shifting Kev from one arm to the other. Kev looked at me and smiled. I smiled back.

“Amela,” Mama called. I put down my book and came over. “Amela, we need to go out for a little while. Kev needs to see the medic...because he’s been sick for a little while. We won’t be home until late, so just take care of yourself and we’ll be home soon.” Thinking back, Mama looked beyond worried, to the point where being emotional wasn’t even a release. It was as though she were too taxed to even feel the stress. I didn’t recognize it then.

They were gone for two days.

For the first long while, I was content. I had enough food and my books to study. I thought that maybe they were planning a big surprise for my birthing day. Then the Militia showed up at the house. I answered the door, and two men stood with dour expressions on their faces.

One started speaking, saying words about an attack, a behemoth that some Slayers chased broke down a building just as my parents were seeking shelter.

It had happened the day before.

I went with the Militiamen, frightened and crying. Mama’s arm had been trapped beneath the rubble—amputation had been necessary to free her. Pops’ back was broken, and he would never walk again. Kev’s head had been struck by the falling debris, permanently handicapping his development. Though his body would continue to grow normally, his mind would never catch up. He acts like he is in his fives all of the time, and his speech is still difficult to understand at best. He is lucky to be alive. They all are.

It’s strange how large forces sometimes gather, crushing things in their path, wantonly destroying. The behemoth the Slayers were chasing did that to me. Bline was like that. He caught me over a bag full of marks—how trivial—and would’ve killed me had Dalm not stepped in to save me. Dalm...I can’t wait for the morrow, for another chance to see him.

My thoughts flip back and continue to roil. Thinking of Bline makes me again churn over my feelings of seeing Bline dead, and how I wish that it were by my hand, not Vald’s. Layne insisted that we were, essentially, one, which means I can count Bline’s death as an action of mine.

But I didn’t get to throw the make-shift javelin.

I didn’t pop the jelly from his face.

I didn’t scramble his brains with a pole.

Vald did.

And the fact that I spend every day with him as a matter of course doesn’t bother me at all.

Shouldn’t that terrify me?

So why do I feel envy?

I shake my head and toss onto my other side. This is why I don’t think about things; I leave the course of events to transpire. I don’t have any reason to think about them...it’s a waste of time.

Thinking of a waste of time, I remember that I have training soon. I groan. I enjoy training, but I don’t really look forward to it. Besides, it might impact how much time I

can spend with Dalm. Well, I'll worry about that later.

I lick my lips and flip the pillow over, pressing the cool cloth against my flushed cheek. I squirm and shift, but my mind won't cease talking.

"Is this what it's like, Vald?" I say aloud. "The voices don't stop their chatter?"

Defeated, I finally roll out of the bed and step lightly to the door. Stepping into the hall, I look both ways. Not surprisingly, it's deserted, dark, and makes my arms prickle. I don't know why.

Not sure what to do, I drift over to Vald's room and tap lightly.

No answer.

I tap more firmly.

Nothing.

I knock.

Naught.

I strike it with my palm.

The door clicks open, but only because of me; Vald still hasn't answered.

Pushing the door back, its hinges squeaking ever so softly, I peek in. Vald stands by the window, staring out, his arms clasped behind his back, trousers on but nothing else.

"Vald?"

He doesn't turn.

"May I come in?"

I recognize the stupidity of such a question. After all, I'm his Spark. I know plenty about him—especially after yesterday. I shouldn't worry.

I step inside. "Vald?"

Light glows from an oil lamp on the writing desk. His room is a mirror of my own. While my bed is on the left and the desk on the right upon entering, his bed—rumped and in disarray—lay on my right hand, while the writing table is on my left. Next to the lamp, the only other item on the surface, is his book.

The book Quinn mentioned.

The diary of his descent into insanity—how he became a Spook.

Unthinkingly, without remembering what happened last time, I reach forward to touch it.

Vald moves faster than I can follow. I don't know how he knew—maybe he saw my reflection in the window—but he pounces on me, knocking me backward with the side of his body. I fall with a yelp, thumping against the wooden floor. The table teeters, jostled by Vald as he rushed me. I stare with wide-eyed horror as the mostly full oil lamp starts to tip. If the contents of that lamp ignite outside of the lamp's well, the entire Quiet Inn will cease to be so quiet. The place—made mostly of pine wood, from the look and feel of it—will burn.

Too slowly, too late, I reach forward in an attempt to catch it, a wordless cry leaking from my lips.

I stretch, wishing my fingers could extend farther.

I'm too far.

It will crash into the ground.

Vald's hand darts beneath it, expertly catching it. He rights it so quickly that the light barely even quivers. He puts the lamp back in its place on his desk as I drop onto my

stomach, my abortive efforts doing nothing more than making me sprawl on the ground.

“Thanks,” I mutter.

He ignores me. Instead, he strokes his thin book protectively, staring at its cracked cover. The black leather, so worn, has turned brown or faded to gray where his hands had touched it. I climb to my feet, but keep my distance. At least this time he didn’t try to throttle me.

“Is...is that your story?”

He nods, slowly, after a long time.

“Can I read it?”

Vald takes a deep breath, then asks, without turning to face me, “What is the answer to my question?”

I don’t have to ask which he means. I work my jaw, trying to coax words out. I came from my room so that I wouldn’t have to think like this. But at least my ruminations proved somewhat useful. I have an answer now, something that I wouldn’t have had earlier.

“I’m jealous.” This confession feels good. I don’t know why, but I feel as though I’ve been relieved of a burden.

“Jealous?” A rare response from Vald; it makes sense.

I nod, though he can’t see it. “I...I saw what you did today. You have power.”

He waits for me to continue.

“That’s what I want.” I sigh. “I’m surrounded by that which I wish I were...but, in the end, can never be.”

“How?” I’m amazed at how lucidly he is speaking and responding. The conversation, though uncomfortable, is almost normal. To my surprise, he continues. “You are s-spoken to. They *look* at you.” He twitches suddenly. “They don’t fear you.” He whispers this.

I speak before I can think. “That’s why I envy you.”

“T-that’s why I envy y-you.”

The silence stretches. I turn to go.

“I want you to read.”

“What?”

He holds the book up in one hand, though he still won’t look at me. “W-will you read it-t?” His hand flinches for a moment.

I reach for it hesitantly, but pause before actually touching it. “You won’t hurt me?”

Shake of the head.

I take the book.

“Why—why do you fight?”

I pause. “You mean, with you?”

He nods, then twitches and laughs a little to himself. I don’t know what to make of it. At last I answer, “For my family.”

“F-family?”

“Yes. Pops and Mama and Kev, my brother. I fight for them.”

“Lov-ve?”

“I suppose.”

“They aren’t like m-me.”

I pause. “They are different, yes. But they are still people, just like you.”

He seems to think on this. For a moment I hope that it means he's lucid—and I fear a behemoth is close. Then he starts to giggle and I know that the moment is gone.

“Dream well,” he blesses. The light dies as he turns the lantern’s knob, and the room falls into darkness. I grope my way to the door.

“Dream well,” I bid him through the gloom. I close the door behind me, then rush into my quarters. A twist of the knob on my lamp illuminates the room. With eager hands, I crack the cover and begin to read.

I DIED today.

Everything that I thought I knew, everything that I thought I was, vanished.

And it's all my fault.

I was angry, and then, then...

No, now wait. Wait, wait. I have to start over.

I have to start over.

But where?

Where it first started.

At the beginning of the...

Yes, so I lived with Da and Mum. Mum cared for the house and watched over me. She stitched clothes to bring in extra marks, a difficult job but one that she enjoyed. She had a talent for stitching. And herbs. Herbs, too. She always had a lot of herbs.

Turned out to be quite useful, what with Da's constant needing to be patched up.

See, Da was a Militiaman.

Was.

Definitely was.

Not is.

Aye, Da served the Militia all his life, since before he was in his fifteens, he told me once. Everything was about the Militia—duty to King and country, protecting the people. Always protecting everyone, it seems, except for us.

No, no, that's not quite true.

He protected us, but just in a different way. He tried to make us strong. He would make us survive when we thought we couldn't. Sometimes it was on purpose. Sometimes not.

Let's see...I can't think with all of the shouting—this isn't making any sense.

Moving back to Da and the Militia. Right, he always fought for them, he always went out to keep the peace. Always, always.

Sometimes he would be gone for a week at a time, serving the King. See, we lived in Malvilyn, near the King's Palace. A beautiful structure, doubtless. I loved to go to there because it made me feel small.

Well, I don't like to feel small. But it made me feel like people weren't so strong as they always thought that they were. It took thousands of men and hundreds of years to build the Palace. No matter how strong, smart, fast, or beautiful a person was, they couldn't touch the majesty of the King's home.

Anyway, we were frequently invited to parties, galas, and events at the Palace, so I became familiar with the place. Prince Hal and I sometimes spoke, but it was never anything more than passing courtesy. He had fewer years, so we didn't have much in common. But his younger sister, Princess Eva, was fun to be with—so young and full of enthusiasm. Sometimes she and he would fight, but that is what happens in a family, I guess. My parents never had more children after I came along, so I don't actually know what it would be like to have brothers and sisters. Sometimes they seem annoying, but other times they don't seem as bad.

So, Mum and I always had to take care of ourselves when Da was out doing what he had to do. It was difficult, sure, but it was good for us. Often, when Da came home,

Mum would have to stitch up his wounds and apply “poultices and tinctures” as she called them. I learned what each herb could do, how to prepare them, and some of the risks of mixing them without proper understanding of the side effects. It interested me, and Mum was glad of the company.

Da, for his part, helped me to believe in the King and his orders. I learned loyalty to the Crown and what it meant, exactly, to be patriotic from Da. It helped me to actually have met the King and Queen, their children, and to know that they were real people, not just figureheads that I had heard of.

They knew of me, rather than actually knowing me, which was probably normal. I was only the son of a Militiaman—no one special.

By the time I was in my ninetens, I had begun my training in the Militia as well. Da expected it, Mum wanted it, and though I just wanted to become a Healer—maybe even study the Dandyn methods someday—I felt obligated to do as my parents wished. Besides, Da had trained me through hardships and through example how to be a Militiaman. He trained my body, made sure that I was fed well, and grew as strong as possible.

It was the morning before my first day, when I was to be sworn in as a Militiaman. Da asked me why I didn’t go get my hair trimmed.

I answered that I wasn’t interested, and wanted to go out and visit the Palace Grounds one last time before I became an official Militiaman.

He asked if I were wrapped.

I said no.

He demanded that I do what he said.

I said no. I was my own man, about to become what he wanted, and I didn’t want to have my last night of freedom to be a memory of a barber’s chair.

So we argued. Back and forth. Mum cried. Da screamed. I left in a huff, too angry to do anything but stalk away.

I was so angry at the argument—how stupid it was—that my desire to go to the Grounds was utterly spoiled. So, instead of heading toward the Palace, I turned cityward, aiming to get lost in the maze of streets of Malvilyn.

I visited places that I had seen before but had never before entered. There wasn’t a lot to do, since night had fallen and the majority of the shops and stalls had been closed down for the night. I ended up in a warm alley, stubbornly wrapped in my cloak and trying to get some sleep. I knew that Da would be at the ceremony the next day for my induction to the Militia—that’s what they called it; an induction.

But I suddenly didn’t know if I wanted to go. I didn’t know if I cared about my parents’ dreams for me anymore.

The night passed slowly. I spent more time thinking than sleeping, and even more time feeling uncomfortable and hungry than I did thinking.

So...so I stayed away. I ran away.

Over hair.

I ran away because I didn’t want my hair clipped.

Maybe there was more to it than that, but I can’t see it.

Hair.

It shames me to think it.

Still, I never went back to home. Never.

But Malvilyn is a big place, a place where I could lose myself easily and not have to worry about someone finding me. I toyed with fleeing all the way out east to the Sparselands or down south to Tintyr, but I never felt the need.

I learned how to survive by begging. I never stole—that's wrong—but I did suffer through a number of hunger-filled nights. I eventually found an old man who owned an herb shop who could use my skills. I was fed and had a place to stay. He didn't ask me about my past, save to know where I had learned about plants. I told him the truth: My mum taught me.

So I passed a couple of years there, working with Stev.

Tonight, though, just as we were closing up the shop after a particularly good day, a couple of streets tried to muscle their way into the store. See, the shop wasn't a stall, nor was it open air. Stev actually owned a building; we lived in the back and had the store in the front. A large glass window in the front had painted text, proclaiming his wares. The heavy oaken door was a little old, a little rotted, and losing its effectiveness, but it still kept people out when we were closed.

Except for this time.

These streets didn't seem to understand that when Stev said that we weren't interested in selling them herbs for them to burn that he really meant that we weren't interested in talking to them at all.

They shoved past him and knocked him over. I heard the glass display break, then a low, unnatural snap. A fire roared through me, a fire of rage and disgust. With a scream I threw the three boys out—literally—and then rushed back to Stev.

He was already dead, his neck twisted at an impossible angle.

Infuriated, I chased them down. The slowest one—he must have been in his thirteens, if that—was caught. I hurled him into an alley and began to pummel him, venting all of my rage and frustration on what soon became nothing more than a corpse.

Yet I continued to abuse him, raining down punches and kicks, using the skills of defense that Da had shown me to protect innocent people. Instead, I used them to hurt.

The two friends of the street attacked me with a brand. I don't know where they got it, but they burned my face, melting a searing pain in my cheek. I ignored it. The largest I attacked first, cracking his head against the nearest building. He slumped to the ground, unmoving.

The other one slashed at my back, carving into me so quickly I couldn't breathe. But the blade was short, and it could only deal me pain—no permanent injury. I shrugged off the wounds, frightening my attacker. The last street stumbled back, too surprised by my ferocity to do more than tremble.

He tried to run.

I stopped him.

Just as I was about to deliver justice, I heard a voice behind me, demanding that I let the street go. A bright light filled the dark alley, blinding me.

The surviving boy took the advantage of the opportunity—as urchins always do—and scampered away.

I glared at the Militiaman—who else could it have been?—feeling my anger grow. He had stopped justice.

Stev was dead.

I was alone again.

Because of my hair.

The fact that my life had unraveled so far—all because I didn't want to see a barber—boiled the rage inside of me. It overflowed, pushing me past sense. Somewhere in me, I heard a voice...not my own, but a distractingly seductive, easy to understand, and impossible to ignore voice.

Kill him.

The man with the lantern?

Kill him. You have the strength. You have the anger. Kill him.

So I did.

Faster than he could react, I bowled him over. The lantern broke against the wall—the same spot where I had smashed the street's head—and drizzled down the bricks, pathetically illuminating the scene.

The struggle was brief—the man never had a chance.

He did manage to strike my throat, causing me to gag. He squirmed and started to crawl away as quickly he could, but I fell upon him. I pulled him in close, my thick arms wrapped about his small neck, and I started to apply pressure.

Push.

Push.

PUSH.

The twitching stopped.

Look at him.

The voices were insistent.

I turned him over.

I looked at his face.

Horrified, I ran back to the shop, the only refuge besides my own home that I have ever had. Gasping, I locked the door behind me, as if I could somehow lock my actions out, too. Desperately, I sought out ink and paper, a chance to write.

I tore apart Stev's small room, looking for his writing desk. The only paper had already been divided into inventory lines—Stev was a meticulous bookkeeper. But I started to scrawl through them, anyway.

Write, the voices said.

I wrote a few words, but I tore them up after only a sentence or two.

The lines are in the way, the voices observe.

I searched for anything—a ledger, a notebook—anything that would satisfy the voices. At last I came across Stev's journal. It was cracked, well used, and almost completely full.

I sobbed as the voices insisted, Tear it out. You don't need his words. He is gone. You remain. Tear out his memory. Tear out his life. Tear out his words.

Yours are more important.

I obeyed.

The oaths that my father swore, his curse that the whispers take me—it has come true.

They have taken me.

I obey them.

They told me to write, to scrawl out what I have just done. So I did.

I do. I do what they say.

*But every word I write is haunted by the face of the Militiaman I killed—not the streets, not Stev, not even the face of Mum, who might still be alive.
I can only think of his face, purple and bulging with fear as life seeped out of him.
He was a Militiaman.
He was my father.
Something cracked inside of me.
Something broke.
I don't know myself, now. Yes, I still answer to my name, I can still feel—my body burns with the wounds...but I can no longer think. I can no longer reason. My guilt and the voices both convince me that I am insane. Crazy. Depraved. Mad.
These words are true.
I am insane. I know it. I know it, I know it, I know it, I know it.
I want to write more, to explain more. I want to put in words my old life, to preserve them. But I can't. The voices...they are getting louder, more insistent. They promise great power. I try to hear my own voice within them, I try, try, try, try...I can't hear me anymore. I can't feel who I am.
No.
No.
No.
I am a monster.
I hear whispers—and I obey them.
Always.
I am lost.*

The next page is blank save for the dried mud that cakes all of the pages. I stare and flip through more, expecting a deeper explanation. None appear.

“That’s it?” I whisper, frustrated. “This is what he almost murdered me over?” Frankly, I’m disappointed.

With a deep breath I set the book on the nightstand next to the lamp. I purse my lips thoughtfully, trying to shake my feelings of irritation. I decide to focus on what I had learned, rather than what is missing. After all, it didn’t take long to read the entry—the hardest part was deciphering his trembling hand—so at least I didn’t lose a lot of sleep. Still, though brief, the words haunt me. I dim the light and roll onto one side, disturbed by what I had read—and what I had seen earlier.

Vald...Vald killed his own father. He throttled him to death with his bare hands. He beat two people to death shortly before that, and today had killed a Wyn with nothing more than some cloth and a short stick.

The man is lethal.

Violent.

Insane.

And my sole responsibility.

With a chill I burrow deeper into the blankets, despite the warmth of the night. Layne said that whispers come when a behemoth is near. But there weren’t any around Vald when he cracked. Quinn said that a person who cracks goes crazy, but how can the whispers come without a behemoth? Is it something inside? Something a person is born with and it just manifests itself?

I try to force out the images in my mind, the story I just read, and all of the thoughts that harrow me. Even the thrill of seeing Dalm tomorrow does nothing to dull the edge of worry.

Sleep does not come to me quickly.

THE DAWN breaks and I'm already up. I'd still like a few more, say, days of sleep. The weariness of having slept fitfully tugs at me, making my eyes water and my ears ring. Nevertheless, I don't want to miss my meeting with Dalm, so I'll make what sacrifices I must.

I peek in Vald's room. He breathes heavily, still soundly asleep. The air is stale with bad breath. I slide the book onto the desk before pulling out. Better to let him sleep, rather than rouse him and drag him along. Besides, who wants a Spook hanging about? Dalm gave the definite impression of disliking Spooks...Slayers in general, it seemed. Come to think of it, I avoided telling Dalm outright that I am a Spark; I only said that I had to choose between my family and being a Spark. I promise myself that I will tell him the truth.

I mean, he's been quite honest with me, the least I could do is the same back.

Yet something tugs at me, a stray thought that warns me to be cautious—only as much honesty as is necessary.

I ignore the thought. I already chose Dalm, if he'll have me. I can be honest.

If I leave soon after my morning repast, I should make it to Crannin's Shop with some time to spare. I think about beautifying myself somehow—I've heard that some women wear a type of paint on their faces that helps to hide their blemishes and make them more attractive. I don't know where I would acquire any of that, and I doubt it would be finished before three-to-zenith, anyway.

Wandering into the dining room, I see a small meal prepared for any of the inn's tenants—boiled oats and honey. It isn't much, and the bread is left over from the previous day, but it satisfies my hunger.

I stand to go, then feel a little pang of remorse at abandoning my charge.

What if Vald awakes and hurts someone? Nords know—and I do too, now—what Vald can do when he's upset. What about him? Or Layne? What if Layne checks on me and I'm gone? The possibilities of *if* tug at me, and I pause for a brief second.

No, no. I won't feel guilty about this. I won't worry what others think. This is for me. I'm doing this for myself. I have to keep remembering that. I will resume my training tomorrow. I need to take advantage of Vald's convalescence...a plan that says volumes about what I'm willing to do for myself.

I work my way westward, and arrive almost a full hour early. Figuring that there's little harm in starting the mixes early, I order one from Crannin.

"You happen along extra coin of late?" asks he as he sets about making my order.

"Aye."

"Care to share your secret?"

I laugh a bit. "You wouldn't like it. Besides, you're doing pretty well, it seems."

Crannin's face puckers a bit, as if he'd sampled an unripe ware. "Nay, that's just appearances. My home got ruined by the behemoth that crashed through here just the other day."

Unsure of what to say, I look down. "I'm sorry to hear that." I'm surprised that I really am.

"These creatures, they've got to be stopped."

"I know."

“We have them Scrapers, right? Why ain't they helping?”

“They're only human,” I say perhaps a little too defensively. Crannin doesn't seem to notice.

“No they ain't. Not the way I heard it.”

“Oh?”

“Aye. Rumor quotes that the Scrapers are just as bad as the behemoths, that they both come from the Nords as punishment. Like this dearth, it's a divine punishment.”

“Punishment? For what?”

“Allowing the Darshur to live.”

I roll my eyes. This old thing again. I've heard this idea in more areas than I can remember, but it's never made sense to me.

“You needn't worry about the Darshur. They may be queer to us, but we're just as queer to them.”

Crannin stares at me a second. “How do you mean?”

I think of Logan and his pale skin, his fiery hair. I wonder if he's been looked after, if they saved his arm. “Look, we all know that the Darshur have been attacking us for centuries. We've attacked them for centuries. That's how it has always been. They want to get out of their desert lands, and we want to keep our fertile lands. They have pale skin and lighter hair. We have darker skin and hair. That's the only difference.”

“I don't like 'em.”

I shrug. “Listen, Crannin, they bleed just the same as we. King's blood, they have had children here. Generations of Darshur are spread throughout our Realm. Some show their Darshur heritage more than others, that's all. They're still people. Just like Sparks. Just like Spooks.”

Crannin's face clouds over. “I don't think so.”

“Oh? Then what are they?”

“Spooks are monsters incarnate. They listen to those voices and can do inhuman acts.” He lowers his voice conspiratorially. “I heard that they drink blood and howl at the moons.”

I think of Vald. He could easily do the latter...

“No, they're just humans who have something different.”

“Different? Being different makes all the differences in this world,” hisses Crannin. He hands me my mix. I hand him the coin.

I may disagree with Crannin, but his mixes make up for his bigoted ways. Thus I excuse his close-minded feelings and don't dwell on how wrong he is.

A glance at the sun shows me that the time has almost arrived for Dalm's meeting. I look around, but don't see him.

I wait.

A half hour passes and I wonder if he really will show up.

I wait.

Another half hour and another mix pass.

I wait.

Then he's at my elbow, looking as handsome as I remember. His eyes sparkle a bit when he sees the two empty cups.

“Getting started early?”

“I don't live around here, so I wanted to make the trip worth it.”

“You don't think that I make it worthwhile?”

“Oh, I do!” Clearing my throat and moderating my tone a bit, I say, “I do. No, I just meant that I wouldn't miss this opportunity.”

I scoot one of the heavy stone stools closer to him. “I got you a mix.”

He takes a long quaff before shaking his head. “Let's not stay here, Amela. Let's go somewhere else.” He glances around at the crowd, at the glowering Crannin. “Come on.”

I follow him, Dalm leading the way for a block or two. “Where are we headed?”

“Away. I...I feel uncomfortable there.”

“Why? You were fine yesterday...”

We stop in one of the many squares that speckles the city. This one boasts a large, dried up fountain, surrounded by a large opening where merchants might have their wares displayed, people might gather for a meeting, or lovers might meet for a precious few moments together.

I'm hoping that Dalm is thinking of that when he stops.

“Amela, I don't want to misguide you.”

“I'm sorry?”

“I think I may have...well, I feel awkward saying this.” He drawls to a stop, looking around abashedly. “I don't want you to think that I'm, well...”

I take his hand in mine. I don't know why, but it causes a warmth that starts in my heart and swells through the rest of my body.

I really, really like it.

“What's going on? You can talk to me.”

“I...I think that...”

His halting, pausing speech is distinctly uncharacteristic, and I tell him so. It makes him smile.

“Well, it's just that I've never been like this, before.”

“Been like what?” I think I know what he means, but I prefer to hear him say it.

“Been so...confused.”

“Confused?” I'm not expecting that.

“Aye, confused.” He takes a deep breath. “The thing is, Amela, I never expected to meet you.”

“I know.”

“I didn't think I would save your life.”

“That I really know.”

“I never considered seeing you after you pointed me off in the direction of my inn.”

“The inn you didn't go to?”

“Right. I—” He stops. “What?”

“The 'inn' you were talking about. I knew you weren't headed to any inn.”

Dalm blinks in confusion. “How?”

I laugh a little, squeezing his hand. I thrill when he squeezes back. It feels as good as I thought that it would, back when he bumped into me after my first escape from Bline. “Dalm, I know this city better than I know what I look like in a mirror. There's no inn in the direction you were headed.”

He breaks into a little smile. “Of course. You're right.” We begin walking again.

“I...I was ashamed to tell you the truth.”

“Ashamed?”

“Amela, I know that this sounds strange, but I didn't want you to think me a pauper.”

“A pauper?”

“Aye. I haven't the coin to purchase lodgings. As I said before, my brothers and I, we sacrificed a great deal to get hear from our home.”

“The Sparselands.”

He pauses for a moment. “Aye. The Sparselands. Because of that, I have had to camp outside of the city limits every night since arriving.”

I don't say anything, waiting for him to continue, but only listening with part of my attention. The other part is focused on the fact that his fingers have woven in between mine. It makes me smile—and focusing becomes almost impossible.

“Don't worry. I won't judge you.”

“But others might.”

“Others? Why, because you haven't money?” I laugh. “Dalm, I can't even begin to tell you how little money I'm accustomed to having.” I shake my coinpurse with one hand. “Remember how we met? It was because I was *robbing* Bline, that behemoth. Marks are not frequent residents on my person.”

This seems to relieve him only the littlest bit. “But it's more than that. It's crazy to say—it's crazy to think, let alone say.”

“What is?”

“I...I can't say.”

His sudden demureness doesn't flatter him. I point this out and demand to know what he means. He strokes the top of my hand with his thumb, making it almost impossible to hear his next five words:

“I think I love you.”

The ground hasn't spun this wildly since I was knocked backwards by Bline. My heart gallops into my throat, then free-falls into my stomach. I feel empowered and enervated all in a breath, and I marvel at the sound.

“Say again?” Not that I didn't hear. I simply want to hear it again.

“I said, I think I love you.”

I grin a giddy, girlish grin. I've never...how could he?

“Amela?”

“Wh-why do you say that?”

“One of my biggest regrets,” he says, stopping and pulling me close so that I can look at his face while he speaks, “is that I didn't kiss you yesterday before we left.”

“Really?” If it sounds to his ears as though I'm talking through a fog, that would be understandable. It feels like I am.

“Aye,” he whispers, tipping his head down. We're standing at the mouth of an alley, a cloth awning over our heads, blocking the sun so that it's easy to see him. I feel my already rapid breath increasing. His arms encircle me.

“Would it be strange,” I ask in a throaty whisper, “if I said the same?”

“Perhaps,” he acquiesces, his face coming closer.

“Would it be strange,” ask I as I raise up on my toes a bit, “if I said that I think I love you, too?”

“Perhaps.”

His mouth parts open ever so slightly.

The hint of white teeth peeks over his lips.

The sweet scent of the mix he drank dances past my nostrils.

“Dalm,” I want to say, “I’ve never kissed anyone,” but then his mouth is there, pressed against mine, soft and warm, yet firm and inviting at the same time. His arms tighten about my waist, and I’m drawn in, my body pressing up against his unmovable frame.

Pops and Mama once told me, before the accident, that their first kiss was rather disappointing. Nothing special, it seemed, simply pressure on their lips. Pops made some joke that I can’t remember now, Mama’s response to which was a quick slap across the arm. Something about how she needed to get better at kissing, maybe. Essentially, they told me not to worry about it, that there wasn’t anything terribly memorable about first kisses.

In this, they were wrong.

I can’t say how long we stand there, locked in each other’s arms, our lips speaking to each other in a new, intimate language. But it ends much too soon.

Dalm pulls back, his eyes riddled with pain. “I’m sorry, Amela.”

“You’re sorry?”

“Aye.”

“For what?” I lean in for another kiss. “That we stopped?”

He laughs a bit but pulls farther away. “Yes. Well, yes and no. I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

“What?” The warmth in my body drains out my feet and into the cobbles and dust. “What do you mean?”

“I want...I want to stay with you. But I can’t. I have to go.”

“Go where?”

“Away.”

My heart shatters. “Away?”

“Aye. It could be a little while, but I’ll come back.”

“You’ll come back.” It’s a frank delivery, not a question—yet I want it to be true, all the while doubting it.

He sighs and looks away. “I must meet up with my brothers. You’ve...you’ve changed my plans some.”

“Your plans?” All I can do is echo, disbelief in every word.

“Aye.”

I push away from him, out of the orbit of his arms. “You come back into my life, kiss me, profess your love to me, and then leave me?”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?”

“I can’t include you! Not yet. Maybe...maybe if everything goes according to plan, I can return for you.”

“What is it that you’re doing?”

He looks at me, a pained expression on his face. “I—I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“It’s for both of our best interests.”

This ignites me. “Our best interests?” I can feel heat creeping across my face, burning across my brow, blasting away the phantom of his kiss from my lips and teeth. “This isn't right, Dalm. What you've done? It isn't right. I want you. I love you. I really think I do. But you can't toy with my heart and expect me to go on loving you the same way. We should...we should trust each other, and be honest with each other. And telling me that you're doing something that might be a part of your 'plans,' yet you'll keep me free of what you're doing? That isn't what people do when they love each other.”

Dalm bristles. “Amela, I want to know you. I want to love you. I want to be with you. But sometimes there are things bigger than two people. Sometimes it just has to be this way.”

“So soon? Shouldn't we at least get to know each other a little, discover this kernel of love before you pass it away? Before you dismiss me?”

“I'm not dismissing you,” he says, heat and frustration leaking through his words. “I have to let you go. What, do you think that I just said that I love you so I could get a kiss? Maybe something more?”

I don't know. I hadn't thought of that. Men have never been of interest to me like that—at least, nothing serious. Logan has his infatuation with me, but he's just a child, and I never could conceive of thinking of him like that. “Why did you kiss me, then?”

“I told you, I regretted not doing it earlier.”

“Why?”

He sighs with exasperation. “Amela, I wanted to be as frank with you as I could. I can't be with you right now. It isn't you...it's what I have to do.”

“For your land?”

“Aye, for my land.”

“So your patriotism is more important than what you want to build with me?”

He snorts. “Don't think of it that way, Amela, because it's not. I want you, Amela, but I want you to trust me. And I can't be honest with you if I don't do what's right.”

I pause, looking out over the oblivious crowd. Not one of them is struggling with the same thing I'm feeling now, I'm sure of it. Not in this way. They haven't been picked up long enough to be told they mattered, then turned around and discarded.

At last I bite back, “If you want me to trust you, you need to be honest with me first.”

“I am being honest when I say that I can't tell you *right now* about what is happening. But I will come back for you.”

“When will I see you again?”

He shakes his head. “I don't know. Weeks, maybe. When it's over.”

When it's over? “What does that mean? That I'm not important enough?”

“Amela, this is ridiculous. I feel for you. I truly do. And I want you to be a part of my life. I want to pursue these feelings.”

“So do I,” I admit, but I doubt he hears.

“But I can't right now.” He slumps a little. “I just...I just wanted you to know.”

“Great,” say I, as callous as I don't feel. “Now I know.”

I thought I loved him.

“Anything else?” he asks, obviously irritated and more than a little deflated by what has happened.

In my mind, I plead to him. I say everything that this conversation is really about,

but I haven't the strength to tell him.

Don't abandon me.

Everyone else has.

I can't stand the thought of losing someone else.

If you go, the only friend I'll have is insane. Literally insane.

Don't do this to me.

"No," I answer in a low voice, looking down at the ground.

"I'm...I'm sorry." I can tell by how he says it that it's true.

Dalm turns to go.

"I am, too," I whisper to the dry wind, too softly to be heard, even by me.

JESKIN WAKES me at the typical hour. I ignore him, pretending that I dreamed his presence. In sleep, it doesn't hurt. In sleep, I don't miss Dalm, who remains free of my dreams. In sleep, I can cry and not have my head hurt at the end. It would feel so good to cry, to truly weep. I haven't done that in years.

Jeskin strips the blankets off me, revealing me in my bed clothing. I gasp in shock, then grope about blindly for the missing quilt.

“Get up, Mel. It’s time to train.”

“I had a hard day yesterday,” I gripe. After the revelations Dalm gave me—after feeling my heart hit the clouds only to obliterate upon crashing to the ground—I feel utterly drained. I stumbled home soon after zenith and didn't leave my room except to help with Vald. I didn't even bathe. “I don’t want to train today.”

“You have to. You've already had two free days.”

“I’m tired.”

“Too bad. You got to sleep. Count yourself fortunate.”

I glare at him from beneath my brow. “Why would I do that?”

“Didn’t I tell you that you’d be lucky to get sleep? Besides, not everyone has both a bed and time to sleep.” He flares the lamp. The light hurts my eyes.

“Don’t you?”

“No.” His sparse response catches me off guard. He only gives me a moment to think on it. “Get dressed. We leave in twenty minutes, whether you’ve eaten or not. I suggest that you hurry.”

He leaves the room to give me privacy. I know that he doesn’t jest—we’ll leave when he says. Jeskin's attitude can be disarming in that he is often congenial and polite, but he has an edge, a strength to him when he’s more austere and brooks no arguments. He pushes and pushes and pushes me, utterly focused on stretching my abilities. I never want to disappoint him...but emotionally, I can't force myself to do anything.

I want sleep.

There I am safe from heartache. I am sick with too much emotion and no way of getting it out of me. My family and home are gone, I've been abandoned by the man I love, and now I have to train for some reason that I don't fully understand. I'm tired of being used, and only sleep can deal with weariness.

But I guess I have a duty, which at least has a purpose. My selfishness has certainly brought me nothing but pain.

My stomach bites out a growl that drives me to my feet. I quickly don clean trousers and a loose tunic. As I dress, I decide to force Dalm out of my mind.

The hard part is getting him out of my heart. How could he have locked himself in so quickly? How can I get him out?

I reach for my longjacket and toss it casually over my shoulder. Jeskin doesn’t allow me to train with it on, but neither has he helped me find the list of clothing he gave me during our first day of training. Since this is only my second time with him—and the first full day of instruction—I wonder if he will help me purchase those. I forgot to buy the boots, I suddenly realize.

Lost is lost, I suppose, and refuse to worry about it.

That's it, Amela. Just focus on training. Focus on Vald. The heart will mend itself.

Dalm is gone, The more I say it, the less it hurts.

I hope.

Vald stirs and wakes up as I check on him.

“Hail,” say I as I step in.

“This constitutes an indecent breach of decency and etiquette,” he drawls sullenly.

“Well, get used to it. I have to go train. Do you want to come?”

He nods. I tell him to get dressed and that I'll see him at the field. I don't know if he will remember, if he can make it, or if it matters that I'm abandoning him again. I don't care, either. Right now, I just want to hit something. Hard.

I break my fast over cream and berries, a rare delicacy in this time of dearth. Warm, flaky bread with buttered honey and cool water top me off. It makes me feel a little bit better. I finish the last raspberry just as Jeskin walks in.

“We're leaving.”

I nod, wipe my mouth on a napkin, and, after scooping up my longjacket, follow him out, saying nothing, and hoping that the day's training is rigorous. I aim to beat something into oblivion. If I'm lucky, it'll be me.

Daylight creeps over the city as stealthily as an assassin, its blades of light harmlessly falling upon the clay building facades and banishing shadows into the depths of alleys. I can already tell that the day will hold plenty of heat.

We arrive at the training ground, and Jeskin begins without ado. We spar; he trains; I ache. Eventually, we take a short break for refreshment. Jeskin brought along a small lunch, so we enjoy the repast before taking up the staves again.

A couple of the other trainers—Roddy and Willem, the two least likely to be friends, yet the closest of any of the men—stop by to watch the bouts. Occasionally, there is an odd point scored by me, and they cheer it. Jeskin throws them irritated glances, then proceeds to beat me properly.

When a pointless taunt barbs me, however, I release. What little training I've had takes sabbatical and I lunge forward, screaming and swinging.

Jeskin cracks me hard across the back, sending me reeling.

I want to break something.

The world is too beautiful for me.

Something needs to be destroyed.

By the end of the day I basically somnambulate to The Quiet Inn. I eat, get the report from Shema that Vald hadn't stirred from his room, despite my request to him. I check on my Spook, then retire myself. I don't even bother to bathe.

The pain in my heart hurts less the next day.

Training comes from Lor next. I learn that he came from Malvilyn natively, the son of a Militiaman. I want to ask him if he knew Vald's father, but forbear. It might be because I don't even know if Vald is his real name. After all, he never says what it is in his journal. Who knows what his father's name was? But, more than that, I just don't feel comfortable asking about things that I only know about because of Vald's willingness to confide in me. Apparently, this thief does have some scruples, just like Layne said.

I hate it when Layne is right.

Lor has a proficiency with throwing weapons, and teaches me to hurl knives today. He promises to show me how to throw axes, stones, and even spears later.

He even has a way of walking the blade over his knuckles without it scratching him. He gives me a blunt knife to practice with, which I begin to do whenever I have a free minute. It takes my mind off of Dalm. When Vald (who has started coming to training again) and I return to The Quiet Inn, Shema gives me a weird look as I try to twirl the knife with one hand and eat with the other.

Willem is a swordsman, and begins to teach me how to properly wield the weapon. When I first started, he asked what I knew about swords. “Don’t hold the sharp end,” I said.

He chuckled. “That’s a good start. What’s a sword supposed to do?”

I shrugged.

“Ever see a pageant with sword fighting?” he asked.

I nodded. “On occasion.”

“That’s nothing like what it’s supposed to be. You’ll meet a lot of people who think that sword fighting is all about the clash of metal on metal, trying to best your opponent. Those people are fools. Sword fighting isn’t like what little kids do; the goal is *not* to hit the other sword.”

“So, what’s the point?”

“The point is to take the point—” and he thrust at me with his blunt practice sword “—and to kill someone with it. That’s it, savvy?”

I nodded again.

“Swords aren’t for looking regal; they aren’t for show. They aren’t designed to harvest grain like a sickle, or double as a cane with a staff. Nay, you’ve got to remember that a sword is meant for killing—usually other human beings.”

I think back on that first discussion. After the debacle with Vald a few days earlier, I have to wonder if I could do what he had to do. I don’t have problems stealing from people, nor running from behemoths. Even standing up to one—still don’t know what possessed me to do that—has its purposes. But killing a person? For some reason, I shudder at the thought. I don’t know if I have that sort of strength or resolve. How could I do that?

Willem trains me all day long, showing me different ways of blocking attacks. For the most part, though, he wants me to focus on attacking. “That’s the point,” he says again, jabbing at me. “To kill.”

Killing.

I just want my family back.

The aching lessens, and I choose to remember how it felt to be in love. I have to laugh at the irony: I found love just in time to taste it, want it, and feel its emptiness when I lost it. But that’s what the Nords decided for me and love.

I decide to hope that Dalm will come through with his word. I’m no longer angry at him. The physical bruises that I contracted from Jeskin’s training are healing, and my soul is, too—albeit much more slowly. Still, I frequently catch myself wishing that Dalm will come back, tell me what was so important that he break the fragile relationship that was blossoming, and I will finally be happy.

I want so desperately to be happy.

Hank teaches me archery the next day. Despite the girth of his belly, he still manages to show me how to nock an arrow, how to sight down the shaft, how to loose the fletch. He shows me how to stand properly, how to breathe deeply, how to loose only in

between heartbeats, lest the minute tremors in my body throw off the aim. “A small mistake at the beginning of its flight can send it yards off course by the time it comes to land. Tiny choice can lead to grave consequences.”

My arms always ache in new ways after time with Hank.

The one called Roddy—Rodbert’s his given name, and I don’t wonder why he prefers his nickname—is a big boy. He’s tall, muscular, and walks with a purposeful grace. All of this is noticeable as he teaches me how and why he learned to fight like he does. “Having a sword, a staff, or even an arrow can give you an advantage while in the fight. But what about before? If you’re unarmed, you’re automatically assumed to be innocuous. Especially as a girl—who would expect you to be just as deadly sans-swords as you are with one?”

His mention of *deadly* makes me squirm, but I nod along anyway.

“If you become a weapon, then you don’t have to worry if your sword is dull, or your bow has lost its spring, or if you can’t get your hand on a serviceable stave. Sans-swords fighting will turn you into a human weapon.”

He shows me how to strike at vital parts on the body, soft spots, weak spots. Angles for breaking bones and incapacitating victims from behind via neck strikes or strangulations fill his curriculum. I hurt the most after training sessions with Roddy.

My last training day is always with Rall—lanky, smiley, somewhat dreamy Rall—who shows me how to load a sling with a stone, spin it without losing the missile, and to fling with (when he’s generous in his compliments) fairly good accuracy. He stresses the importance of always having a sling about you—if it looks like a belt or the thong of your sandal, so much the better. In that way, you will always have a weapon nearby. This, of course, garners the scorn of Roddy, and the two often end my training sessions with digressions into which style of fighting is better, Rall harping on the benefits of a distance attack, while Roddy insisting that *mêlée* battle will always be the way of war, and we all had better get used to it.

The day after training with Rall is immensely relaxing. I finally buy those boots—and my feet are so sore that I’m actually eager to use them. I spend the rest of the day sleeping, bathing—three times, in fact; whenever my muscles start to get too tight—and doing as little as possible.

The next week is very similar in form, with the details changing very slightly. I learn more, train more, eat more than I ever have, and generally feel better and better about everything except the absence of my family. Another week passes, and I can’t even remember Dalm’s face.

At least, that’s the lie I tell myself.

Layne has yet to visit me—and I can’t decide if I like that or not—and so I feel as if there’s no chance of seeing Kev, Mama, and Pops again. I focus on this emotion instead, fostering the frustration and anger I feel at being severed from them. Since Dalm is gone, there isn’t anyone else for me to worry about, except for Vald, of course. He is fully healed now, and enjoys accompanying me to training.

He’s the best thing that’s happened to me since Dalm left.

I decide, now that he’s doing better, to take the time to talk to him. I know it won’t yield much, but after having read his journal and thought about the questions he asked that night in The Quiet Inn, I just can’t think of him as another crazy. There has to be something more to him, and I want to find it.

We wander out to one of the expansive, dried up gardens that speckle the city, a small picnic basket (packed by Shema) tucked under one arm. Vald marches ahead of me, stroking his beard regally and whistling at the birds that flit across the blue canvas of the sky. I smile, somewhat at peace. I decided to leave my inner turmoil about the situation behind and simply enjoy the afternoon.

I find a spot in the shade of a tree. A bard is stroking his lute not far away, the pleasing notes drifting toward us. “Vald,” say I, “we’re going to eat here.”

“But it’s dirt!” he announces as we settle. “How shall we eat that?”

“No,” I say with a bit of a laugh. “I mean that we’re going to eat at this spot.”

He chortles. “And they say *I’m* the crazy one.”

I laugh back, but don’t respond. I unpack the food and begin to eat without ado. I want to talk to Vald about his journal, about his experience, but I can’t. I know now where the lightning scars came from on his face and back. They remind me at every glance what he’s capable of doing. But here, in this setting, with the sun hot and high in the cloudless sky, I feel comfortable. He seems benign.

I guess nothing is ever really as it first appears, though.

“Do you like being a Spook?” I ask, knowing that every answer he gives me will be one shaded by his insanity. I decide that I’ll simply take them as I’m wont, and leave it at that.

“Oh, aye, aye, aye, aye,” he mutters, taking a bite out of the fried fowl on his plate. He doesn’t use his hands, this time; he eats by bending over and chewing straight from the plate. He has crumbs in his beard when he straightens. “It has this piquant hiss in the mornings that can’t really be excised.”

“...I...see...” I drawl.

“But what most irritates me is the abject feeling of bloating. I really can’t stand that,” he chuckles, “as you can well imagine.”

“True. Imagine only.”

“But they’re insistent!” he says, looking at me gravely, intently. “They never let you alone. Even when they’re there, and they aren’t telling you what to do, they’re there, telling you what to do.”

I take it to mean the whispers, and chill slightly at the thought.

His face breaks into a grin. “‘No, no, no, no,’ said Little Lamb Bamb. ‘There can only be *two* lawyers!’”

I stare.

He laughs.

And laughs and laughs and laughs.

Eventually I join in and eat some of the delicious food.

“I’m glad you’re my Spook,” I finally announce.

“You are the first one,” he says.

“First one what? To be your Spark?”

“Aye,” he says with his mouth full of bread. “Many people visited me, visited and ran, visited and ran. They wanted to try me on but they didn’t fit me, no, nay, no. They thought that they could understand me, and force me, and tell me what to do more than what I want to do and that’s what I do is all I can do—whenever I can do it. Savvy?”

I decide to be honest. “No. What are you talking about?”

He sharpens in frustration. “Of course not! You weren’t there! You weren’t there!

I was! I was *always* there, waiting, waiting, waiting. The milch-mice came, oh, aye, how they came. But it didn't stop them, it didn't start them. It just went that way and that's the way it went."

I clear my throat. "Vald, I'm sorry if I upset you."

His face clears. "Worriless, Amela fellah. I don't care."

I try a different tact. "What do you want out of life, Vald? What do you wish you had?"

"Chicken!" he announces, then starts to eat again.

One more try. "Vald, do you know what you're doing? Why you're important to me? Because you are. You are important to me." That wasn't what I was expecting to say, but it's out now.

Vald's face clouds a little, and he licks his lips nervously. "Does it have to hurt?"

I shake my head. "No. Being important to someone—that's all there is to it. You just have to take care of yourself."

With a laugh he smacks my thigh. "As if there's a better explanation!" Without warning, he spins a bit and faces the bard, who is still playing. "*This is a bad song!*" Vald shrieks, and smashes his plate against the ground.

The bard stares for a long moment before resuming his song.

Vald turns back to me, then starts breathing one long, heavy breath, as if he's trying to fog up a window on a cool night. He cups his hands beneath his mouth, 'catching' his air. Then he starts moving his hands—wadding it up. He imitates the motion of tying a petite bow, then presents his imaginary package to me, holding his fingers out as if he's displaying a valuable trinket. "See this?"

I stare.

He continues without my response, raising his voice so the minstrel can hear him. "This is a ball of *hate*. I've made it just for him!" Then he flings his arms violently, throwing his imaginary ball of hatred at the nearby bard.

The man puts his lute in its case, picks himself up, and scurries away.

I think about ducking my head in embarrassment, but instead simply watch the minstrel flee.

I start to laugh.

Vald joins in.

We finish the meal, and meander through the city until nightfall. As we walk, Vald invents stories for me, and I realize that he's trying to communicate *around* his insanity. It's as though there's a wall there—no, not a wall. Something more porous, like a type of thick filter. It seems like there are Vald's thoughts, then this curtain of insanity through which each thought is forced. This violence to his thoughts distorts them, twisting meaning. What he thinks he says sounds insane, but each phrase is supposed to make sense. When the whispers come, that filter lifts and he can be himself—doing only what the whispers demand of him, however.

That explains why he sounded so lucid when he went after Bline.

The longer I speak with him, the more I can understand. Perhaps this is what the rumor is based off of—that the Spook's insanity is contagious.

No, it just becomes somewhat comprehensible.

That, in some ways, is even more frightening.

ON MY next leave day, I stroll through the rebuilt bazaar, worryless and basically content. Vald remains a few steps behind me, chuckling to no one, making comments, and generally being himself. A few wenches walk by, giving him at first glances that say that they like what they see, and then expressions of repugnance as they hear what he says. More than anything, I think, it confuses them; a normal looking man shouldn't be declaring butterflies are nesting in his armpits.

I laugh to myself, but the chuckle dies on my lips as I notice someone watching us.

Quinn and Seli stare, partially obscured by the overhang of a merchant's stall.

"What do you want?" I ask, drifting closer. I always feel wary around them.

"I only mean to warn you," hisses Quinn.

"Warn me?"

He nods, and makes as if to speak more, when his eyes go wide and his lips snap shut. I follow his gaze, past my head, to a striking figure who approaches.

She stands almost as tall as Vald, with dark, dark hair that seems to drink the sunlight. A long white ribbon wraps around the crown of her head, disappearing behind her ears. Her almond shaped, umber-hued eyes sparkle as she watches me. Her copper skin glows—maybe it's a sheen of sweat, though she gives the air that she's above such mortal nuisances as perspiration—and her full lips turn up in a hollow smile. Her white teeth flash as she speaks. I'd call her silver, but she has more to her than just money. It's as though by her presence she demands respect.

I'm loathe to give it.

"Hail, Slayers," she purrs.

"It's a pleasure, m'lady." Quinn's response sounds strained and surprised. I wonder at that as he makes a leg. He smiles thinly and straightens, flexing (unconsciously, I hope) his arms, making his muscles ripple and dance. "You look fetching."

She doesn't respond, but instead looks to Seli. "Are you well?"

Seli nods tightly. The woman smiles—a bit more genuinely this time—and regards Vald.

"Hail, Vald." How does she know us?

"I happen to enjoy the scent of burned cloth, thank you."

"You're quite welcome," she responds. Then her eyes fall on me. "Mel. I've been looking for you."

"Is that so?" It should strike me as bizarre that an utter stranger is looking for me, but I find it only slightly irritating. She's invading my day off.

Her lips purse and her eyes narrow slightly. Yet her tones remain genial enough.

"True. I am a representative of the Crown. I have business to discuss with you."

"How do I know that?"

The question brings her up short. She blinks at me. "Because I represent the Queen."

"How do I know that?" probe I with an arch of the brow. "All I know is that you are a woman that I met in the marketplace." I shrug, looking over her clothes. "You have any proof of who you are?"

“I can vouch for her,” interrupts Quinn. “She is the amazing Recruiter of the Queen herself! She is as just as she is beautiful, as passionate as she is perfect, as...”

The woman slices the air, cutting off Quinn’s superlatives.

“His words are as empty as his head.” She pins me with a look, one that says that she didn’t appreciate my attitude of disbelief. That doesn’t bother me; after all of the soft answers and frustrating positions Layne has put me in, I don’t see a need to trust her—or anyone—instinctively. She must prove what she says. How...well, that’s up to her, I suppose. “I am the Queen’s Recruiter, as the man said. There has been a change of plans.”

“Whose plans?”

“We can discuss that. But you must come with me to hear of it. I also have information about your family.”

That grabs me. “What of them?”

“Come.” She gestures. “I have much to talk with you.”

“With me? Or with us?”

She looks Vald in the eye—something not a lot of people do—and throws him a wink. He belches. She doesn’t respond. “Both of you, if you don’t mind. Come with me.” She turns, her slender, high-collared crimson dress rustling with her movement, the intricate flower and bird motif seeming to move in time with every slipped step. The ivory ribbon flows out behind her, beckoning. All of her aplomb has returned, the unexpectedness of my responses no longer upsetting her. Vald stares as she sways away, entranced.

I smack his shoulder to get his attention. “Should we follow?” I want to hear what she knows of my family, but there’s no guarantee that she knows much, or that she truly comes from the Crown. I don’t want to put my foot in another trap.

“Indeed!” quips Quinn. His flippancy is met with a cool glance of the stranger, who has stopped. She’s waiting for us.

“I don’t recall inviting you, Quinn,” she calls back.

“Hermina, how is this?” He holds out his hands imploringly. “So cold?”

Hermina—the woman’s name, I assume—turns her glare to Seli. “Can’t you control him?” With those words she saunters off, seemingly knowing that we would follow. We do.

She doesn’t speak as we work our way through the crowd. A black and gold carriage awaits us just past the entrance to the marketplace. A well-tended ebony stallion prances as he waits permission to move. A proper looking steward of some sort perches on the seat, regally melting in the sun in his full woolen attire, which matches the color scheme of the carriage. A job is a job no matter the livery, and he does what he has to for his meals, just like I do.

Hermina enters first, nodding to the lackey who drops down and holds the door open for her. Vald pushes past me and sits next, claiming he’s the capitol here, not the other way around. I shrug and, trying not to feel irritated, I follow my Spook.

The window shades remain up, illuminating the inside, an opulent décor that seems to follow the theme of black and gold. Behind Hermina, who sits across from me, is a beautiful framed painting of a waterfall. A painting of birds in flight hangs behind me and Vald.

The door shuts, the carriage shifts as the driver situates himself, and then we are

away.

“Why didn’t you invite Quinn and Seli?” ask I when Hermina doesn’t show signs of speaking.

“Is there room?”

“No. Nay, not space almost for my knees!”

“Quiet, Vald.”

Hermina smiles again. I feel a strange pang of jealousy. I think I know why: She’s much, *much* more beautiful than I am. Granted, I’ve never really had a lot of use for beauty—utility always proved much more effective in survival than good looks. Keeping my hair short, appearing dirty and disorganized, wearing clothes that were more worn than had wear left in them—all of this I did to help me in my job. Adorning myself in beautiful apparel, lacing my hair with headbands and ribbons, letting it grow long and brushing fragrant oils through—I never did any of that. I couldn’t find the time, nor the desire. But looking at Hermina (who probably wouldn’t need those paints I’ve heard of anyway), with her effortless beauty, her slender face, and perfect complexion...I feel inferior. I can’t explain it more than that.

“You keep him in close control.” She says it as though it’s a statement when it should be a question.

“Vald does what Vald does. I like him that way. It’s how he’s supposed to be. I have no desire to change that.”

“Strange, for a Spark.”

I frown. “Why?”

“They usually want nothing more than to make their Spook blend in a little bit better. Surely you dislike the glances, the stares.”

“Fools mock. If they knew what he could do, they wouldn’t look at all. And, if they did, it would be out of reverence.”

“Maybe.” A smile creeps on her face. I want to slap it off, but instead I look out the window at the passing city. People mill about going to their sundry destinations, each looking intent and uninterested in everyone else. They stay out of the way (for the most part) of the carriage, allowing us to make constant progress. I chafe at the sitting, but decide I had best follow what this purported representative has to say.

“What do you know of my family?”

“We’ll get to that.”

“When?”

“After we’ve discussed my business with you.”

I glare at her. “No sooner?”

“Nay.”

“Do you expect to string me along, to lead me as if by a collar? Do you seek to leash me?” I surprise myself with the vehemence in my voice. Hermina recoils slightly.

“Not in the least!”

“Then tell me of my family.”

She glances from Vald to me and then out the window. “They are well enough. They were saved from the tunnel, and though I can’t disclose their location, they are being looked after. They are not living a life of luxury, but they are well for the nonce.”

“That’s all?” I ask when the silence stretches painfully.

Hermina shakes her head. “I can only say as much for now.”

“But you know more.”
“Aye. A little.”
“When will you tell me? Can you let me see them?”
Another shake. “Not now. If, however, you do as we have planned, I be able to get things...arranged.”
I arch my brow. “‘We?’ How many are there of you?”
“Just one of me, but I have friends. Friends with power.”
“The Queen, you mean.”
She chuckles a bit. “For example, yes.”
I glower a bit. I can’t decide if I should suffer her or just jump out of the carriage. Vald would probably find that entertaining.
“Have you any idea of what has happened recently? What it all means?”
I stare blankly. I will stay a little longer, I decide. “I was attacked by a behemoth.”
Her eyebrows raise. “Is that a fact? Did Vald help you?”
“Only the fourth time.”
Her pristine expression crumpled in confusion. Apparently, she hadn’t been filled in on all of the details of my recent escapades.
“Is that what you meant by what happened recently?” I ask.
“No.”
“Tell me what you meant, and then I’ll share my story.”
Hermina nods, her composure returned. “Fair.” She streettalks a bit. I wouldn’t have expected that. “I was referring to the regicide.”
“I’ve heard nothing.”
“Nothing?”
“Nothing save what Layne told me.”
“Truly?”
“As an oath,” reply I.
She hums. “Well, I’ll tell you what happened, so far as we know.”
“It isn’t perfectly clear? I mean, the King died, right?”
“Of that we’re perfectly clear, yes.” She sighs and looks out the window. “What we do know is saddeningly little, but there are some inconsistencies that need to be clarified.” She looks at Vald, who smiles at her. She smiles back, and he blushes. “You should know that this information is not widely circulated. You have the privilege of hearing it by virtue of your rank.”
“My rank?”
“As a Spark.”
“Right. Of course.”
“Here is what is known: King Pan and his son, Prince Hal, were headed away from Tintyr where they had gone to hear the Woes of the Peasantry.” That’s what Dalm was doing; talking to the King, petitioning for his people. I just wish I knew what he had to say to the King. He could have been one of the last people to talk to him. “On his way south, past Ashvale, he was waylaid. We have witnesses who claim that a man hailed the King’s Caravan. They stopped to help—after all, the King was on an altruistic tour. From there the stories differ. One source says that, once they stopped, the man who hailed them literally tore the Caravan apart with his bare hands.”
“Excuse me? A single man?”

“Aye. We have other eyewitnesses who say that the man called up beasts to assist in the slaughter, while others swore that the earth turned up its dead and the ghouls fought for the wayfarer. Those are the details we’re sifting through now, but the main point is that the King and his son have been murdered.”

“Sounds gruesome.”

“It is.”

“How does this matter to us?”

Hermina strokes her gloved hand across her delicate jaw. “I was told you had had experience fighting behemoths, and your ‘expertise’ was proffered by Layne.”

“That’s an interesting word,” I mutter.

“Expertise? Yes, well, you still owe me that story.”

“We’ll get to it,” I assure her.

She hums again. “Very well. Furthermore, you are supposed to protect the Queen, caorrect?”

“Aye.”

“She is still returning from the Shores, where she went to be diagnosed by Dandyn behemoths with regard to her fertility. She should be home soon, but she did want an envoy with Slayers to investigate the scene of her husband’s death before she arrives.”

“But haven’t you other Slayers that can protect the Queen, that can investigate the scene? Why me?”

“This was a special request.”

I can tell by the way she says it that more information won’t be forthcoming. I switch back to the previous line of discussion. “Have you seen the site of the murder yourself?”

“No.” She shakes her head, the ebony cascade shimmering in the light. “If I had, Layne probably wouldn’t like it. Of course, he won’t like the fact that I’m here right now, anyway.”

“Why not?” I straighten a bit at that. Anything that bothers that little man is a good thing to me.

“Let’s just say that...let’s say he isn’t my biggest proponent. How’s that?”

“Why?”

“Curious girl, aren’t you?”

“I have my moments.”

Hermina sighs again, as if this topic saddens her more than the loss of her liege. I guess she’s just like everyone else. Who cares who’s in charge, so long as life goes along uninterrupted?

“Well, Layne and I both left the Recruiter’s Academy together. I was stationed in Malvilyn, close to the court, while he was sent leagues to the south to Tintyr—a hole in a rock in a cave in a pit, as he called it. He and I...well, we did have a lot in common, what with studying as much as we did together—same classes and all that.” She pauses, searching for the right words. “I think he still bears me a bit of a grudge, especially since I have made a better career out of Recruiting than he did.”

“You also Recruit Sparks?”

“And Spooks,” she nods, smiling a bit at Vald. “Though I have to admit, Layne can find some pretty...intriguing specimens.”

I don't respond to that.

"So here we are," Hermina says around a sigh. "I'm doing this more out of a favor to the Queen, though, than anyone else."

"What, taking us in?"

"Essentially. I am obligated to help any Slayers who might need it, but my personal handling of this is only because she asked it of me."

"You help Slayers find lodgings and such?"

"Aye."

"So, why did you leave Quinn and Seli behind?"

"They aren't Slayers."

I blink.

"What? But..."

"They're Vigilantes."

I BLINK again. “They’re Vigilantes?”

“Yes.”

“But...”

Hermina leans forward and pats my leg. “Word of wisdom: Don’t believe everything you hear from those two.”

I swallow and nod. I don’t know why it bothers me; after all, I’ve seen a couple (maybe just one) Slayers before—I called them Scrappers back then; now, the streettalk doesn’t seem to fit what they do—and even knowing that they were Vigilantes didn’t make them any less impressive. But now I feel as if I’ve been lied to, betrayed. I hate that feeling. I hate lies—probably because I had to live with them for so long.. I decide not to think about it.

“Let me bring us back to the point of this discussion.”

“Please.”

She takes a breath. “I know that you’ve been training. I know that you’re planning on protecting the Queen and that Layne, for whatever reason, wants you and your Spook close to Her Majesty. None of that changes the fact that you are a really small girl.”

I stew on what she says, wanting to bite back a reply, but my anger roils itself into impotence and I can’t find my tongue to place a rebuttal. Hermina takes the silence as an indication to continue.

“That last one shouldn’t be too insulting to you, dear.” That word makes me stiffen a bit. I think she notices, but doesn’t let on that she does. “If something happens to the Queen that doesn’t involve behemoths, then you’re not going to be able to do a lot of protecting.”

I shoot a look at Vald, who is staring out the window at the passing world, his expression intrigued if a little distant.

“Oh, he’ll do fine against any behemoths, I have no doubt. But he’s pretty well wrapped, isn’t he?”

I return my gaze to her pristine face. “What do you mean?”

“As far as Spooks go, he seems even farther out to sea than most, if you understand me.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“I would. The point remains that Vald is next to useless if you’re fighting, say, a Darshur assassin.”

“Why?”

A flicker of confusion darts through Hermina’s eyes. “Because he’s a Spook.”

“I know.”

“He listens to the whispers.”

“I know.” I’m starting to get irritated.

Hermina places a weary hand against her forehead. “Did Layne tell you nothing?”

“Essentially.”

She sighs and looks away for a moment, no doubt thinking of a verbal evisceration she’d like to give Layne. Finally she turns to me. “The whispers only come when a behemoth is nearby.”

“Aye.” What’s her point?

“You’ve seen Vald fight, haven’t you?”

I nod.

“Well, he can only fight behemoths. Not humans. So we know that the whispers only come when the creatures are nearby.”

I disagree, silently. Vald’s journal proves otherwise.

Hermina continues, “Did he act strangely before he attacked the behemoth—what was it? A Wyn?”

“Aye, a Wyn.” I think back to his kleptomania inside the herb shop. “Be more specific about ‘strangely.’ Was he acting stranger than usual for him...”

Vald laughs to himself and starts to twitch his fingers at us. “Bam, bam, bam! Your heads are watermelons and I’ve got the crossbow!” Then he makes a hissing noise with his teeth.

After he finishes, Hermina says, “Strange as in he didn’t act like he’s insane.”

“Oh. Then yes.”

“That’s a sign that the whispers were coming. He starts to listen to them, and then he can do whatever it was that he did.”

“Kill a Wyn.”

“Single-handedly?”

“Aye.”

“Impressive.”

“I’ve fought him, too.” For some reason I want her to think that I’m impressive.

“Hmm. You owe me that story.”

I return to the previous topic, not interested in talking yet. “So, I saw that he listened to the whispers. What is that to me?”

Hermina sighs again. “You have many duties, many responsibilities as a Spark, Mel. One is the care of your Spook—he may be a fully formed and functioning human on the outside, but inside he is cracked, and little more than a babe.” Strange. Those were my words to Jeskin on our first day of training. Hermina continues. “You have to be his warden in almost every sense.

“Another duty is the protection of the public. We are most unsafe with these weapons in our midst, and it is your job to make sure that no one is harmed when the whispers take him.

“But there is another, much more difficult responsibility that lies at your feet, Amela. Anyone who is in a position of power—be it political, personal, economical, it doesn’t matter—is also in a position of envy from those without. Those without the responsibilities of a Spark envy the Slayers because of what they see as a great deal of power. My position as a Recruiter similarly makes me an object of jealousy.”

I don’t see her point and say so.

“I bring this up,” she responds slowly, “so that you will remember that there are as many enemies within as without. Your power is limited to what they perceive you have—nothing more. This leads me back to the last item I mentioned about my distrust of Layne’s decision: You are a small girl. If someone decides that they will not follow the power that you have and tries to attack, you are on your own. Vald will not protect you from another human. Behemoths are the soul purpose for our suffering the existence of Spooks and their ilk. Keep him safe.”

“Suffer his existence?” I ask. “What else would you do with him?”

“Remove his brain.”

I make a face.

“Look, if the Spooks didn’t help us against the behemoths, then who knows what they would do when the whispers took them.”

“I thought that the whispers came when a behemoth was about.”

She growls and flicks her fingers dismissively. “No, I’m saying that *because* the behemoths are about, the whispers take people. If they didn’t help against the giants, they could be potential mass murderers. They don’t feel pain—and, if they do, they push past it. It could take hundreds of men to kill one Spook, if the Spook were listening to the whispers.”

“But you just said that they can’t hurt humans.”

She shrugs. “So far as we know.”

I almost point out Vald’s story, but something else she said bothers me. “What do you mean, remove their brains?”

“Recently—in the past decade, really—we’ve determined that if we remove certain sections of the brain, then the Spook can no longer hear the whispers. The power is extirpated, and we are safe from their unconscionable acts. It is still mostly theoretical, but there are those who have undergone the treatment. Sometimes it’s a mercy.”

“What does that do to the Spook?”

Hermina shrugs. “Leaves them mentally crippled. Unable to function. Comatose. Dead.” She waves her hand. “I don’t worry about it, because, as I said, we allow them to be insane to help us. We would lock them away, take out their minds, leave them in pits—whatever we wanted.”

This irritates me. “They’re humans, too! They have a right to live!”

“Rights aren’t made because they are demanded, only because they are granted. Governments are designed to bestow rights upon those who deserve them. In reality, a right to live is merely a privilege. The Crown would never allow madmen and -women to roam the Realm unchecked. Their rights end when they start impinging on those who can reason.”

I think for a moment before speaking, not wanting to blurt out something that makes me sound stupid. I know that I don’t agree with her, but I don’t know which part, nor how to say it.

“And my job, then?” I finally say, shifting back to the previous conversation. “I am more of a protector, rather than a conscience?” That makes sense, what with the training that I’ve been given. Jeskin and the others had even mentioned that teaching me protected them. I only understood it superficially before. Hermina’s comment proves that it really is part of being a Spark. At least, for now. Things change so rapidly in my life I hardly know where I’m going.

“Conscience?” asks Hermina, her perfect brow puckering. “What do you mean, conscience?”

“That was the word that Layne felt described my job. He said that Vald was so amoral that he couldn’t make a choice on his own.”

She snorts. “Layne would say something like that. Amela, Vald is ethically neutral, fair. But that doesn’t mean that your sole responsibility is to chide him like a nagging mother.”

“I didn’t think of it in quite that way.”

Hermina nods at me. “Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

I look out the window again, watching the occasional person glance curiously in, trying to catch a glimpse of the mysterious people within the shade of the cart. Vald starts to sing softly to himself. “I broke the dawn, I broke the dawn. Hey, my deary dreary hey-ho. My wife is gone, my wife is gone. Hey, my dreary deary hey-oh. Nothing’s so dark as can’t be black, hate’s a fear that always comes back. Hey, my bleary dreary hey-no. Some call it fast, but it can’t last. Hey-no, my dreary, bleary hey.”

For some reason, the words somber the carriage, and despite the sunlight streaming in and the uncomfortable warmth, I lose interest in speaking. Hermina watches Vald for a long moment before saying to him—in a tone that I’ve never heard anyone use when speaking to a Spook: “That’s beautiful. You have a beautiful voice.”

He looks at her. A nervous smile twitches at his lips and his fingers shake. He starts to chew on the back of his fingernail, anxiously, as if picking at a hangnail.

“Say, ‘Thank you,’” I verbally nudge. So maybe I do act like a nagging mother, sometimes. But not always.

“Thank you,” he repeats automatically. He drops his eyes with a demure blush—I think, for his skin and the shadows prevent me from seeing well—and returns his attention outside. He chortles to himself every now and again, occasionally throwing a glimpse at Hermina.

Distracted by the passing buildings, I realize that I no longer recognize the view outside of the window. We’ve drifted farther south, out of Tintyr.

“Where are we headed?”

Hermina looks at me and smiles with only the edges of her mouth. Her beautiful eyes don’t echo the mirth. “To the scene of the crime.”

“Where the King died?”

She chuckles and nods.

“Why?”

“You’re the closest Slayers available.”

Suspicious, I shift a little, trying to get comfortable. “Wait, why did you come to get me? Why isn’t Layne here, too?”

Hermina, for her part, looks almost...guilty, though that expression would look decidedly uncharacteristic on her. Nevertheless, she seems to act as though I had caught her sneaking a pastry from a cooling rack of pies.

“Mel, there’s something you should know about Layne.”

Layne? Curious.

I wait.

“He and I go back a long way.”

“You already told me about the Recruiter’s Academy.”

“Well, it stems from that. He more than just begrudges my position as a Recruiter.”

“Position?”

“Being in Malvilyn *always* improves your chances for power.”

I don’t respond to that, unsure of what’s coming.

She pauses, planning her words ere saying them. “Layne was left here, in Tintyr, because of his political persuasion.”

With a shake of my head I say, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The court of the Realm is disgustingly complex, and can also be immensely frustrating when you try to insinuate yourself into it. I allied myself with those who were currently in power—the King, in fact, made me a personal assistant and Recruiter to the Queen. I work exclusively toward her ends.”

I can’t bite my tongue in time to stop the question: “What does the Queen need a Recruiter for?”

Hermina simply smiles that smug grin that lets me know that I may have asked a good question, but I will sooner freeze in summer than get an answer.

“Layne,” she continues, “was—and still is—good friends with one of the aspiring Dukes. This put him in a position of ill-favor, and the result was his permanent placement in Tintyr. We have Recruiters all over the Realm; this just so happened to be his new home. I don’t talk with him frequently, but I know that he still resents the fact that I have made a better career out of Recruiting than he has.”

I think of Layne’s opulence, his beautiful clothing, his haughty bearing that makes others feel insignificant next to him, despite his size. “He seems silver to me,” say I, slipping into streettalk for a moment.

“It goes beyond having money. Besides, it’s easier than you think to appear silver, Mel. All you need is the right disposition, enough to buy expensive-looking clothes, and a position that makes others believe you *are* silver, and the deception is basically complete.” She tips her head to one side. “A woman’s paints are much the same, aren’t they? An outside veneer of beauty that masks what lies beneath—corrupt, debased, or beautiful?”

“I’ve never used them,” I confess.

“Well, you’re lovely enough without them,” she says with a small smile. I thrill at the compliment—but only a little, considering its source. Not many people compliment me, so it always surprises me when I get one. I ignore the fact that I had wanted to paint myself for Dalm.

“Thank you,” I say slowly. Hermina has pushed on in the conversation, oblivious to my gratitude.

“Layne, then, is still struggling with his position and his lack of recognition. He does whatever the Duke asks of him, which makes him unpopular.”

“You’re saying that he’s a hench for this Duke?”

“Precisely.” Her razor-thin smile chills me a little. She continues, “There are reasons to worry about this whole situation, Amela, beyond the loss of King Pan. I don’t know if you knew anything about him...”

I shake my head.

“He was a good king,” she assures me. “I am sorry that he is gone, and even more sorry about the stress and sadness that has enveloped Her Majesty since his death.”

“He has been dead for weeks now. Why are we headed to the scene of his death now?” I glance out the window, watching the dry, yellow grass rustle past us, swaying gently in the warm breeze. The carriage hasn’t stopped moving, which helps to circulate the air, but the warmth inside makes it hard to stay awake and to concentrate.

“We want a Spook to look the place over.”

“Because of the claims that one person did all of this?”

“Precisely.”

“You believe that it really was only one person?”

She sighs and looks out at the dun landscape. “The only thing that is agreed upon by any of the survivors is that there was a single man who hailed the caravan. Odds are, the entire column was accosted by robbers, who stole what few goods there were and murdered the soldiers. But I have my own suspicions.”

I consider for a moment. “You think that it was a behemoth.”

She nods. “I do. If a behemoth Folds himself, he could look like a normal human. They’re rare, but not unheard of.” She says this as if it might be new information to me.

“So...a behemoth waylaid the caravan and single-handedly destroyed it?”

Hermina nods again.

“And you think that the behemoth is still around?”

She shrugs. “It’s possible. The site of the murder is only half a league away from Ashvale, a small village. It’s possible that he might have hidden in the hamlet.”

“Wouldn’t he have escaped by now? Headed back to a more populous area where he could hide?”

“Probably. However, we’ve had troops in the area investigating, cleaning up, and keeping an eye out for the assassin ever since we first heard of the incident, so there’s a chance that the culprit can’t flee.”

“But if the assassin is a behemoth, what does he have to fear?”

She shakes her head. “It’s a long stretch, I know, but it’s the only option we have. It hasn’t been easy getting someone down here.”

I grunt noncommittally.

Hermina says, “Layne told you that you needed to protect the Queen, is that right?”

“Aye.”

“From assassins?”

I shrug.

“Well, this is the one that we’re most concerned about. I think that the assassin that we’re after is actually a Folded behemoth, one capable of killing two hundred men, allowing only a handful of survivors. It is from him that you must protect the Queen.” She says this, looking at both me and my Spook.

All I can do is swallow.

WE STOP in Ashvale a couple of hours later, which is just north of the place of the King's demise, having traveled for well over half the day. The driver hops out, opens the door, and ushers us out. A pack of soldiers begin to gather around the carriage.

"Go get yourself and the horse something to drink, Thoman. You look like you're more puddle than person."

I look over the liveryman as he bows, a "Yes, milady," on his lips. Sweat rivulets score across his face, his dark hair looks like a paint stroke plastered to his brow, and large streaks of wet beneath both arms and racing down his spine stand out in stark contrast to the formal, stiff way he holds himself. A droplet of sweat falls from his chin as he straightens, splashing inconspicuously against the front of his doublet. Appreciation for his lady's magnanimity is patent on his face, and he hurriedly takes the animal with him in search of refreshment.

I turn to face the men who stand at attention, apparently not only expecting Hermina, but knowing fully well her status. They treat her as they would the Queen, I imagine.

"Who's in charge here? Which one of you is Captain Jarrett?" demands Hermina after taking the seven soldiers in with a glance.

"I am," says one. He steps forward, his bulk intimidating me. Vald shifts uncomfortably. Jarrett is helmeted, so his features are obscured by the deep shadows the metal casts. Long plumes of white horsehair stream from the crown, swishing as he moves. He bows a little from the waist, holding back his sable cloak, which he wears despite the heat. His leather and steel armor creaks as he moves. A long, ornately pommeled sword rests at his hip, a gauntlet-clad hand resting on it lightly. Chaps of steel extend beneath his belt almost to his knees. The rest of his legs are wrapped in an ebony leather that look thicker than most trousers. Black boots, reaching about mid-calf, cover his feet.

"Are you ready for war, Captain?" Hermina asks with a quirk of her lips.

"Always." He doesn't return her small smile in his voice, and, though I can't see his lips, I doubt they can do much beyond frown and grimace anyway. I take another small step back.

Hermina drops the slightly coy attitude and instead assumes full authority.

"Remove your helmet, soldier. I like to see the people I talk to."

I'm surprised at the speed with which he shucks the protective helm. I suppose they're used to following orders.

Jarrett's bald head shimmers with a sheen of sweat, yet he doesn't bat the irritating drops from his heavy brow. Thick concourses of wrinkles, scars, and creases make his face appear more worked in than a tanner's hide. Piercings adorn his ears, shoot through his nose, and glint off of his lips. He glowers fiercely at me, then Vald, and then finally settles his uncomfortable gaze on Hermina. She doesn't flinch.

"Captain. What is your report?"

"We have still had no luck, my lady, as I reported to you earlier last week through letter."

"Yes, well, you are only men."

"We are some of the best, my lady," argues the massive captain. He stands about

a hand taller than even Vald, and is more heavily muscled than anyone I've ever met, so I don't think that I'd argue with him. Still, I have to wonder if he would be a match for any of my trainers—particularly Jeskin. With a stave in hand, the captain of the Elite Guard can best the other five of my trainers in a free-brawl. He could probably show Jarrett a bit about fighting.

“You don't listen to whispers, though, do you?” purrs Hermina.

His men stiffen at the question. Jarrett doesn't reply.

“I thought not. I have brought Slayers with me to look at the site. They are long time partners and will be able to help you determine if this really was a behemoth attack.”

Jarrett pierces me with a glare that could cripple. “My lady, we needn't a child Spook and her distracted Spark to tell us that: We have, since our last letter, ruled it as fact.”

Why does everyone think I'm a Spook? Do I look insane? Of course, Vald is too intimidated by Jarrett to perform any of his normal, idiosyncratic habits, making it difficult for anyone else to arrive at a different conclusion. What I wonder is, why is the small girl in her ninetens the one everyone thinks is the Spook? What do people think of when they consider Slayers? I can barely remember thinking about it before, so I can't really say what I thought...maybe I would have made the same mistake. I look at Jarrett again.

I wish that I really were the crazy one. Then I wouldn't have to worry about his glower. Or anything at all, for that matter.

“I am aware,” Hermina states slowly, “of your conclusions. Nevertheless, I feel that this investigation is far out of your abilities.” Jarrett tightens his grip noticeably on the pommel of his sword. “In fact, wouldn't you argue that it is for the best to have Slayers available when a behemoth is involved?”

“He has left the area, my lady. I already informed you of that, as well as telling you why we thought that.”

“Yes, the tracks, of course.”

I shift uneasily. I don't follow their conversation. I can only assume that it was this Captain Jarrett who sent the letter that resulted in my abduction by Hermina for the purpose of this investigation.

“My lady,” sighs Jarrett, exasperated, “we are guarding this area at the behest of the Queen. There is no reason for your presence; there is no additional information to be gleaned.”

“Well, then, you should have no objection to my audit, Captain—I will be out of your way shortly, if that is the case.” She nods at him—or, rather, in a southward direction. “Show me these tracks, and let us hear what the Slayers have to say about it.”

Jarrett throws a wicked look at Vald, who cowers appropriately.

“Very well. Follow me.” The captain waves a hand, dismissing half of the contingent. The others escort us farther south. As we begin our trek down the dusty road, Jarrett appraises Hermina's dress and shoes, commenting that she might want to change before we go too far. “The site is a mess, still, and though all the blood is dried, the stink gets into your clothes. Besides, it's not the friendliest terrain. You might have some difficulty getting through.”

She frowns but waves off the advice. “I work as well in dresses as anything else. I will be fine.” She tosses her hair back, letting the ivory ribbon cascade over shoulder.

“Why is it that the area is difficult to access, Captain?”

Jarrett leers—his version of a smile, I wager—and tells us to see for ourselves.

The sun drops through the sky, and the shadows lengthen. I estimate the sun about an hour and a half away from setting by now. After the long hike, I, too, am sweating like the liveryman. Vald is panting, and even Hermina is showing signs of fatigue. I’m not close enough to her to see if she’s sweating as much as everyone else—I doubt she is, what with her being perfect.

We continue across the barren landscape, following the gravel-encrusted road. Whithered scrub-oak surrounds each side, and the bright red sandstone that comprises the area reflects the heat of the day onto us. I’m glad my boots protect my feet from the burning ground. In the distance, I can see strangely wrought stone formations, twisting spires of stone that scrape at the sky. Dust cakes onto my sweat, making me feel even dirtier than before. I idly wonder if this is what Dalm’s Sparselands look like. If so, I marvel at his love of his land.

“We’re getting close,” advises Jarrett as we crest a hill and start down the other side.

I soon see what he means.

The scene is as horrible as I thought it might be. We’re upwind from it as we approach, which is good that we don’t have to dwell with the stink. Then again, it would have given us a greater warning as we get closer.

The sight sickens me, and I bite back bile.

“Revoltin’,” whispers Vald, the exemplar of understatement.

The road is painted with a brown, dry color—splattered blood.

“It’s been weeks, Capitan, since the attack; why does it still stink?” Hermina asks the question with a slightly nasal tone, as if she’s trying to avoid breathing in through her nose. I don’t blame her, and start breathing through my mouth, too.

“My lady, the Caravan was struck so quickly and with such force that it literally exploded.”

“Exploded?”

Jarrett nods. “Yes. From what we can deduce (and he begins to point at different areas, explaining with his hands as much as his words), the behemoth struck the center of the column from over here on the right. Do you see that butte? The survivors said that they all turned when they heard him cry. ‘Stop! Please! I need the King!’ or something along those lines. They all turned. It was gathering night, much like it is now. The behemoth would’ve only been a shadow on the rock, his features utterly obscured.

“King Pan insisted that the Caravan come to a halt. Once everyone was stopped, the behemoth didn’t waste any time. He leaped from that butte (he points at a formation easily three hundred feet away) straight up. The movement was so quick that it seemed almost as if he had disappeared.”

I shift slightly, squinting at Jarrett as he speaks. The sun is reflecting off the burnished steel of one of the other soldiers, making it difficult to see.

Jarrett claps his hands together, making me flinch. “Like that, the behemoth landed in the center of the column. In fact, he landed on top of the King’s carriage. It exploded outwards, pieces of horse, bone, blood, and wood firing off in all directions with such speed that a number of men were wounded gravely—three were killed—from the debris alone. Using pieces of timber, discarded weapons, and even bodies of the

fallen, the behemoth tore through the column like a whirlwind through a field of rice.”

“Incredible,” hums Vald. I shush him.

Jarrett glares. “Perhaps for those who weren’t in harm’s way. A few men fled, hoping to bring reinforcements from Ashvale. As you can see, it is no quick journey to the village, which hampered the report of the attack. Those who stayed behind were all slain.”

“All of them?” I find myself asking in surprise.

“All of them.” Jarrett waves at a nearby brush. “But to best answer your original question, my lady, as to why it still reeks of death here, there are a number of reasons. First of all, there have been no rains recently. All of the blood that was shed that sunset has remained, baking onto the rock and into the ground. Second of all, most people weren’t killed by weapons.”

I frown, but say nothing.

“They were ripped apart, pieces being flung every which way. Parts of people are still being found—under a rock, in a bush. Flies have spread so thickly that some areas where we know there are more corpses remain untouched by human hand.”

Vald makes a sympathetic noise. I don’t know what to say, so I keep my mouth closed.

“With such obvious evidence, Captain, how could anyone doubt the involvement of a behemoth?” Hermina asks.

Jarrett snorts. “People doubt everything. However, we just recently cleared enough of the remains to find the biggest piece of evidence. Follow.” He gestures, and we fall in line.

The road suddenly drops on one side, a deep gully that falls nearly fifty feet. At the bottom of it, I can see a number of pieces of the caravan.

“After colliding with the King’s carriage, the behemoth hurled other pieces—the food train, the medical tent, the endowment wagon—thither, ensuring that the column was more than just hurt; he demolished it. More corpses were rained down there. We don’t know of any easy way of extracting—or identifying—them. We may end up merely burying them all together.”

“I...” I realize, too late, that I made a noise. Jarrett and Hermina both look at me, the former with loathing, the latter with curiosity.

“What, Mel?” asks the Recruiter.

“I thought that there were rumors of it being ghouls or legions of monsters.”

Jarrett snorted and waved the ideas away. “Of course there are. Stories meant to make us less afraid.”

“Less?” I can’t fathom that.

“Aye, wench, less. If there are legions of monsters that it takes to kill an entire column, well, then that’s part of an army, savvy? So we’re up against a force, an army, something that can’t be easily hidden, that we can prepare for, that we can fight. If they’re ghouls, then that’s even easier to dismiss—ghouls aren’t real. But if it’s one man? One behemoth that’s folded himself to the size of a man and then wreaks this destruction? By himself? No help? That’s terror.”

I swallow and nod.

“Captain, we need to see some of these things you mentioned. Where was the King when he died?”

Jarrett points back, indicating an area a dozen paces away. “There. See the indentation? That’s our conclusive proof.”

I can see it. It looks like a single water drop on sand would to a baby milch-mouse. The dirt, gravel, dust, and pieces of wood spray out around the crater, aftermath and testament to the force that had struck it. I picture Bline almost four times bigger—his mass, anyway—slamming down there. A behemoth like that could easily make such a mark.

Jarrett and Hermina are right. There’s no question that the assassin was a behemoth.

“Aye,” says Hermina in response to his question.

Jarrett sweeps his hand toward the gully. “After shattering the King’s carriage and smashing it, he picked up what was left and flung it this way, sending it over the edge. He then laid waste to the rest of the Caravan.”

“We need to get down there,” Hermina decided.

“I thought you might. That’s why I recommended that you get into better clothes.” He squints at the sun. “But we can’t do it tonight.”

“Why not?” Hermina’s voice cracks sharper than a board breaking.

He gestures at the sun. “My lady, the daylight is rapidly leaving us. We can’t work you down, give you the time you need to investigate it, and then have you back up before full night is upon us. During the day, we can see carrion-eaters approach. At night, wolves, wild dogs, and other animals come to this place to feast.”

“There’s still food for them after all this time?”

Jarrett nods—I daresay almost sadly. It’s the only emotion besides irritation and self-confidence that I’ve seen on him since we first met.

“You have extricated the King and the Prince, correct?” Hermina asks.

“Of course, my lady. That was our first priority. His remains are already on their way back to the capitol.”

She grunts. “Very well. We will return at first light.” She turns to me. “Come, we must find ourselves lodgings.”

I blink. “Hermina, my trainers are expecting me at dawn. I have stave training with Capitan Jeskin tomorrow.”

“The Spook knows Captain Jeskin?” asks Jarrett, surprised.

Hermina gives a humorless laugh. “She’s the Spark, Captain.” She looks at me. “Jeskin will survive without you for a day, Mel.”

“Layne won’t like it,” I argue, smiling inwardly at Jarrett’s shocked expression. That’s right. The little girl is the Spark.

“All the more reason for me to keep you.” She clears her throat and turns her attention back to Jarrett. “Lead the way. We’ll return on the morrow.”

THE ONLY place that has any room for us is a small farm on the outskirts of Ashvale's village. I would argue that everyone in Ashvale lives on the outskirts. It seems as if the "center" of the hamlet is a collection of common stores—an inn (filled with the officers, including Jarrett, who are investigating the King's death), a smithy, a commerce store—and maybe a home or two. Everyone else lives at a distance from there, which makes me nervous. If I were an assassin in such a desolate place as Ashvale, I would feel exposed trying to travel at all. Everyone knows everyone, and a stranger would quickly catch attention. If I could find, say, an abandoned home or barn that isn't frequented, then it could be easier to slip away, once the focus on the area has shifted. After all, if they were chasing me, I'd be content to let them think I had escaped, and so direct their efforts elsewhere.

I think of mentioning this to Hermina, but she doesn't really appear interested in me or anything I might have to say. Instead she's arguing with Jarrett about the farmhouse.

"I don't want to impose on these people," gripes Hermina. She only says this because she's already exhausted all of her other reasons for not staying with the stooped farmer and his equally shrunken wife. They stare at the captain and the Recruiter with wide eyes, slack-jaws, and no comments.

"You're imposing," argues Jarrett, "on everyone here, regardless of where you bed. So, rather than inconveniencing and imposing on *me*, why don't you just take their hospitality, use their lodgings, and get some sleep?"

Night has wrapped the village in its cool blanket. Out in the wilderness, the sun's heat is lost quickly, once twilight has left and the moons start their ascension. I shrug deeper into my longjacket. Vald clucks his tongue, bobs his head, and occasionally proclaims that he is the King of the Dances. The farmer's wife gives him a distrustful stare before looking away.

The argument bounces back and forth much longer than it should, but Hermina eventually capitulates. She waves to Thoman, who hands her a bag of marks. It's just slightly smaller than what I pilfered from Bline—a fortune for folks like these...or my folks, for that matter.

"Here," says the Recruiter. With a casual toss, she flicks the bag at the unsuspecting farmer. It thumps against his chest and drops to the ground with a noticeable thud. His eyes bulge wider—if such were possible—and he stoops to pick it up.

"T-thank you, my lady," he says while still in his bowing position.

"You're welcome. Please, show us to your lovely abode." She throws dagger-glances at Jarrett as we follow the aged couple. Jarrett lobs us a jaunty salute and turns on his heel, headed for the much more comfortable lodgings of the inn.

As we approach the farm, I first notice the squalid condition of the barn. I know that the dearth has made for hard years—I can't really remember anything different, to be honest, though I'm sure that there were times when people could live comfortably with greater ease—but the home and barn seem even more dilapidated than I would have expected.

I hope that the marks that Hermina gave them will be enough to renovate their

house so that it can be livable again.

The tiny house—so small, in fact, I wonder how all of us are going to fit in it, and we're only four, counting Thoman—has one wall that's leaning in treacherously. I can see from the bright moonlight that the chimney is on the verge of collapsing. When the colds come, it will be difficult for this family to heat their home without dying of too much smoke. The glass on the windows is still intact, for the most part, but it looks as though one or two panes have been replaced with small shingles—no doubt having fallen off of the roof and then used again. The roof itself is sagging a little. It probably drips during the rare thunderstorms that pass through.

The barn is in even worse condition, sitting a goodly distance away from the home. There is a large dark spot, and I can see that the roof has, in one place, already caved in. There are a number of missing planks from the wooden walls, like gaps in a toothy smile. I'd be surprised if it has more than rusty tools in there.

The land itself is well parched, and dust curls away from every footstep. I assume the acres of dirt we cross should have been a field overflowing with ripe crops. I don't know what that would look like, but the stories always seem to talk of a generous land. I imagine it is quite beautiful.

We enter the humble home, and I immediately—and, afterwards, guiltily—confess to myself that it's barely above a hut. It's strange for me to see how quickly I have become accustomed to living in an inn. I used to marvel at the food such an establishment could provide, and thrill at the clean sheets, comfortable bed, and (relatively) safer area. A month ago, I never would have thought I could become so soft so quickly. Even the callouses on my feet have almost completely worn away, spoiled by the protection the supple leather boots provide. I actually have to fight against the disdain I feel at having to “lower myself” to sleep in their home.

The dirt floor proves Vald's bed—which is fine with him, he announces. “What with my inability to breathe for hours at a time, it's best to leave the ducks to their walking,” he says by way of explanation.

Sometimes there's hidden meaning in his words, usually when he's responding to a direct question. Other times, it's better to not know what he means.

There is a small storage room that the couple take, giving the bed to Hermina. She offers to share it with me, but I vouch to stay close to my Spook, so I bed down in a surprisingly soft armchair that's positioned just to one side of the fireplace. Thoman says he'd rather be with his horse anyway, and goes to sleep in the carriage outside. Hermina disappears into her quarters (the spare bedroom); the couple retire in their closet (at least, that's what it looks like to me). Vald curls up in his clothes—boots and clothes intact—and promptly begins snoring.

I stretch a little, tossing off the longjacket and shucking off my boots. I stare out the window, wondering—from how my family is doing to Dalm and where he is to Layne and how upset he'd be if he could see me and my company now to Vald and how he's handling everything. Ever since I read his journal and our time together, I have felt closer to him in a way that surprises me. I don't feel that he's at all attractive—I don't dream about his muscular body embracing me at night like I do Dalm's or, strangely, Jeskin's. I wasn't lying when I told him that he's important to me. I worry about Vald when he's out of sight, I always want to be around him—but in a way that's different from how I wanted to be around Dalm. Layne was right when he said the relationship has to be

experienced.

He feels like one of the parts of Kev that's missing, as though he has the physical and speaking abilities that Kev lost after the accident. Maybe that's why I don't mind him so much; Kev prepared me for the care I'd have to give Vald.

Of course, Kev allows me to cut his hair. I haven't even tried, especially after hearing Layne's henchmen complain about their failed attempts. I look at him, his face haloed by the warped moonlight dropping through the rippled glass. He looks peaceful, childlike. I may get upset with his antics on occasion, but I can't imagine being without him. I wish there were something I could do to cure him of the whispers, that I could really find out about him, about what he felt. Yet something tells me that he will always be apart—and a part—of me. I'll never really know him, and that saddens me.

Still, I'm glad he came into my life.

I slump into my chair and begin to drift into sleep, trying my best to avoid thoughts of the remnants we had seen. I focus instead on pleasanter things: Kev, Mama, Pops, Dalm. That last one always wobbles between hope for his return and sadness at his departure. The pain I originally felt has mellowed to a longing. I love him still, and I want to see him again. Strangely, even Logan manages to receive a little mental attention before sleep claims me.

I awake when Vald stirs. He sits up abruptly, staring outside. Eyes wide, he looks at me, concern—no, fear—etched across his face. “So quiet. But I hear them. They talk to me.” He blinks a half blink and licks his lips. “This will not end quickly,” he prophesies. “The whispers must be followed.” He stands suddenly. “Don't follow me.”

Then he is gone, a blur of movement that is up and out of the door before I can think once. When I do, I shout after him, “Vald! Wait for me!” my voice covered by the rattling of the door as it shudders on its frame. From the horse, I hear loud whinnies of distress at being so abruptly awoken by Vald's sudden departure. I can hear Thoman trying to calm the animal.

Instinctively, I snatch up my longjacket, but leave my boots behind—no time to put them on.

Outside, the distressingly cool air pricks at my skin. I see Vald running toward the town. I start after him, wishing I could move faster, but knowing that he's possessed by the whispers; there's no way I can stop him now.

I hear Hermina shouting behind me, and Thoman replying, but I ignore them. It will take too long for them to get the horses ready for the carriage to provide any sort of help. I must remain focused on Vald, lest I lose sight of him.

Abruptly, he stops and begins to turn in a slow circle. It gives me just enough time to catch up to him. I clutch my knees and suck in large gulps of air. I've already had an exhausting day—more mentally than physically—and I'm tired. The shock of having to chase after him is rapidly being replaced with an eye-watering weariness. Before the fatigue can cripple me, I clutch at Vald's shirt and gasp, “Wha...where's it...coming from?”

He shakes his head minutely in response. “This is the one I felt before.” He looks at me, the lucidity patent on his face. When the whispers come, he isn't as wrapped, and I wonder what he means. I want him to stay this way.

I stop scrutinizing his face and focus instead on his words. “The one you felt before?” I repeat, dread knotting my stomach and draining what little energy I have left

into the ground.

Blinc.

Blinc is back.

“But, how?”

“He escaped me. But he is here.”

Now I wonder about my first thought. Usually, Vald’s “crazy talk” is simply random sentences or bizarre sentiments that never pertain to anything. But what he just said doesn’t have any sort of meaning. Blinc hadn’t escaped him—the behemoth died. I’m confused, but he is tensing up beneath my grip, so I don’t have time to question him.

“Vald, take me with you!” I insist, grabbing for his shoulders. He shakes me off.

“No. It isn’t safe.”

I can’t be away from him. I can’t let him go.

I won’t lose him—who would I have left if I did?

Before I can argue, he sprints away, faster this time. I stand, winded and unable to follow. He’s just too fast. “Don’t leave me,” I gasp.

I can see him heading for the timberline, perhaps two and a half acres away. He covers the ground in less than thirty seconds, then disappears into the trees. The sound of trunks shattering and branches breaking fills the air, then all drifts into a painful silence.

Hermina comes running up behind me, wheezing for air. “What happened?” she asks between gasps.

“The whispers,” I say, watching her out of the corner of my eye. No more sounds from the forest; it makes me nervous. Vald...

“The whispers?” she repeats in a hushed voice. “Now?”

I nod.

“Then...”

“I think it’s Blinc.”

“Blinc?”

I nod again. “The Wyn that attacked me.”

Hermina frowns. “You still haven’t told me that story.”

“I’m sorry.” I’m not.

“But isn’t he dead?”

“That’s what I thought.” I repeat what Vald said to me. “I’m not sure what it means, but if he’s right, then these Wyn are more dangerous than we thought.”

“We’ve always thought that they were dangerous,” insisted Hermina.

“And immortal?”

She simply purses her lips and glares at the timberline. “He went in there?”

I grunt a yes.

“Are you going to follow?”

I eventually shake my head. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Why—”

Before her question fully falls from her lips, a section of trees far away—too far to even judge its distance—explodes upwards, like a geyser of branches and leaves. A speck soars over the treetops, barely visible against the dark night. I can hear popping sounds coming from the projectile. It’s headed toward us.

“What is that?” asks Hermina.

The speck grows bigger. The sounds intensify.

I stare.

The speck becomes more defined.

It looks like...

“Is...is that Vald?” Hermina asks.

Numbly, I nod. It’s all I can do.

We both watch, mute, as the speck becomes a blob, the blob becomes a blur, and the blur becomes two grappling forms. Neither of us can tell which is Vald and which is Bline.

“Where are they going to land?” asks Hermina.

The dilapidated roof of the old barn, perfectly framed in a puddle of moonlight, shatters outward as the combatants smash through. Dust erupts out of all the cracks, and the ground trembles a little as they land.

Without thinking, I start to run, Hermina right behind me. It’s only then that I notice that she had changed out of her form-fitting dress and into a light nightgown. Her bedding clothes probably cost more than my family spends on food in a month. I swallow my irritation at her and plunge ahead, making a direct line for the barn.

Gullies and ditches pop up surreptitiously, though the farmer probably knows them perfectly. I stumble, stub my toe, and almost twist my ankle as I sprint toward Vald.

I keep the barn in view, but it still shocks me to hear the sounds of battle echoing from the inside. Suddenly, Vald is thrown bodily through one wall, leading with his back. He slides across the earth for a moment, his momentum slowly bleeding away. Then he flips onto his feet, skidding to a stop amidst a plume of dust. Before the descending dirt can even touch him, he has launched himself back into the barn. The sound of popping—now defined as the sound of flesh colliding—reverberates from behind the walls. Bline bursts out on the other side, rolling ungainly across the ground. Each collision makes the earth beneath my feet tremble a little.

The Wyn is staggering to his feet, and I notice that he looks thinner than before. He must have a way of making himself even smaller...

An anvil crashes into him, knocking him back a dozen paces and laying him flat on the earth. Vald bursts out of a hole in the wall, leaping in the air and directing what is no doubt meant to be a killing blow against Bline’s head.

Unfortunately for Vald, Bline reacts faster than he probably has a right to, hurling the anvil back at the Spook, knocking him out of the air. Vald collapses as he crashes back to the ground.

Bline moves in for a kill.

I scream Vald’s name.

I’m too far to do anything.

The behemoth rears back.

“Vald!”

Bline looks up at me, his face shadowed by the night’s gloom, but I can feel his eyes meeting mine.

My bare feet slap the ground.

His body stiffens.

I don’t feel anything except desperation.

Vald is about to die, and there’s nothing that I can do.

The Wyn stops.

“Vald!” I shout again. I’m getting closer. Something about the scene seems wrong, but I’m not sure what it is—aside from the fact that my Spook is about to have his skull punched in by a giant.

Then, without warning or a word, Bline turns and leaps into the air, soaring away on a jump so powerful that I swear I felt the earth move. In a moment he is out of view.

“Vald?” I slide to a stop. Stooping, I look him over. His clothing is torn, and blood bubbles from a dozen small wounds. A dark bruise on his side is visible through a rip in his shirt—I think that’s where the anvil hit him.

His dazed look focuses a little, then snaps back into full cognition. He starts to his feet.

“Stay down! You’re hurt,” I insist. “He got away.”

“Amela?” Vald seems a little confused. “What are you doing?”

“Helping you!”

“I have to stop him,” he says, getting to his feet despite my best efforts. He unintentionally knocks me back onto my buttocks. I feel some heat well inside of me.

“What do you think you’re doing? You can’t go after him! You just destroyed the farmer’s barn!” I yell as I clamber to my feet.

“It’s still standing,” replies Vald nonchalantly.

As if in response, the entire structure groans. All three (Hermina has arrived by now) of us turn to watch as the walls snap and break. Gouts of dark dust bleed outward, billowing as the roof fully caves in. The boards buckle, and the entire barn implodes with an ear-shaking crash. My longjacket rustles as the wind created from the collapsing silo rushes past me.

I stare for a moment.

Hermina curses. “Now I’ll have to pay for this, too,” she mutters under her breath.

“Look, Vald, you can’t go after him. We found him once, we can find him again.”

He shakes his head and turns his gaze in the direction that Bline went.

“No. I’m going to end this tonight.” The lucidity of his speech lets me know that the whispers have him again. What was it Layne had said? If the whispers tell him that it doesn’t hurt, it won’t hurt. He simply does as they say.

He trusts them because he has to.

I trust him because I choose to.

That’s all the difference I want.

“I’m coming with you,” I announce as his body begins to tense.

“What?” Hermina sounds beyond shocked. “Are you insane?”

I look at her with a bland stare. “No. But he is.” I return my gaze to Vald. “I’m coming with you. I’m your Spark. I go where you go, and the other way around.”

“You must be careful,” he says to my surprise. No argument? Fair. He scoops me up in his arms.

“Amela, you can’t do this! Your job is to minimize collateral damage from the activities of your Spook!”

“What do you think I’m doing?” I retort.

Vald takes a deep breath. “Hold on tightly.”

I do.

He jumps.

I scream.

The ground drops from beneath his feet so fast it feels as though the earth has been ripped away. The air snatches my shrieks and spirals them down and away. I can see Hermina turn and run for Thoman and his carriage. I doubt they'll ever catch up.

I soar through the air, held tightly in the arms of my Spook. The land blurs beneath our feet, shrinking as we reach our apex and then swelling as we descend. I bite back another shriek as I realize that we are going fast—too fast—and we are going to die.

The ground grows.

I lose my resolve, and scream again.

Vald's legs absorb the impact perfectly—I feel nothing but a slight jolt from the change of direction. Dust, dirt, and some pebbles explode out from beneath his feet, spraying the surrounding area with the light debris. Before the dust cloud he kicked up can even settle, he springs upward again, soaring above trees—twice the height of the tallest ash—before careering down again. The ground vibrates beneath his impact before we find ourselves airborne again. We repeat this prodigious jumping game two or three times more, each leap sending us higher and farther than the one that preceded it.

“Where are we going?” I shout into Vald's ear during the moments of silence near the pinnacle of a jump.

“To kill a behemoth.”

The ground rushes toward me.

The chase begins.

I'M SURPRISED to see that Bline fled northward. That's the direction of Tintyr, Malvilyn, and people. Then again, if he could remain hidden for weeks in a speck of a village like Ashvale, maybe it wouldn't be so hard to disappear in a city. In fact, if it weren't for the previous stupidity of leaving his marks so exposed, I never would have bumped into Bline in the first place.

Incidentally, I wouldn't have lost my house or my family, either.

Furthermore, I wouldn't be streaking toward the unyielding ground, clutched in the arms of a man who is, by almost every measure, insane.

Life sure can take interesting turns.

We collide with the ground, then heave upwards one more time. We've traveled for perhaps ten minutes or so this way, each jump using the momentum from the leap before. Vald seems intent on following the behemoth, but he looks as though his strength has started to flag. Perhaps not much, but some.

As we ricochet up again, I wish I knew *why* whispers can make a Spook do what he does. What allows them to tap these energies? What gives Vald this power?

I desperately hope that it's reliable, because we have almost caught up to Bline.

I can only imagine what it looks like to the people who come out of their homes at the approaching thumps. First from a distance, just a tremor, a single rumble that is indistinct and directionless. Then, after a moment's pause, another thump, now sounding closer, coming from the south. Then another, and another, each one gaining volume and intensity. A book that was placed too closely to the edge of a table topples as the ground ripples in response to the weight. Rocks crack beneath the explosive power, wind rushes outward from each landing place, trees bend away from the force. Then the thump comes right outside the window, breaking the glass and shattering the wooden bucket that was thoughtlessly left outside. The explosion of sound disappears just as rapidly as it came, the only remnants being the aftermath of the phantom force. The thump comes again, but now to the north, fading away in intensity as the Wyn-flea leaps ever closer to its destination. Moments later, the Slayers drop out of the sky, landing lightly in comparison.

We break a lot of things in between Ashvale and Tintyr during our thirty minute leaping competition. Bline keeps a pretty steady lead, but we're close enough that, when he drops earthward, we can see where he lands, see the circle of destruction that explodes from beneath him, see him launch heaven- and northward. A couple of times we almost pass each other—him ascending and us descending. The indistinguishable, grainy lighting makes it difficult for me to see him well, but one thing is for sure—he has lost some weight.

When we arrive at the south of Tintyr, I reflexively look out to see if I can spot my home. When I remember that I no longer have one, I tighten my grip and steel my resolve.

Killing Bline again will be a pleasure.

I can kill, if necessary. I know that now.

Some things need killing.

With a grunt Vald carries us to the very outskirts of Tintyr, right around the area to where I first escorted Dalm. The behemoth has landed and fled in the streets, trying to use the labyrinthine streets as a means of slowing us down.

That's a bit like a milch-mouse leading snakes into the serpents' own lair—Bline'll have no place to hide.

Vald hits the street running, deftly swinging me out of his arms and across his back. I clutch my elbows and tighten my knees just enough to keep myself from sliding off as he sprints. I don't doubt that I'm interfering with his stride, but that doesn't matter—I have to be with my Spook, and I have to get Bline.

I refuse to let him escape.

Vald turns where we saw Bline dive down an alley. The Spook has too much momentum to make it completely, and ends up running for a few steps across the wall of a building to keep from slowing down. We drop down, slaloming between mounds of midden and discarded barrels—typical refuse.

Bline is almost to the end of the alleyway, moving faster than he has a right to, in my mind. Each step echoes loudly, as if rocks, rather than feet, are falling the length of the alley. Bline dodges right as soon as he exits, heading north on Norday Avenue, Vald only a couple of dozen steps behind.

The cobblestones crack underfoot, which makes it easy to see which way he goes when he doubles back through Farthen's Square, taking advantage of the cramped clutter of buildings that surrounds the Square. We snatch a glimpse of him cutting past The Dorman's Stay, breaking through a wagon in front of a nameless armory, and smashing down a hitching post by The Drowned Bar. We sail through the wreckage, and I feel grateful that it's night; I hate to think of the people he'd be wrecking were it daylight.

He hurdles Hangman's Canal—Vald does the same—and arches northeast toward the bazaar. This is close to where I first ran from Bline, which makes me wonder why he's headed here. To be honest, it feels as though he does have a purpose, an ultimate goal in mind. Still, he just made a big mistake. He's about to go through the most complicated section of town, the area that was built independently of every other section of town—at least, it feels as if no one ever bothered to plan any of the streets or avenues. Sometimes a street ends because a row of buildings were built across it, only to continue on the other side. Because the buildings—often tenements—weren't supposed to be erected where they were, there isn't a way around them. They simply sit where they are. Other sections are completely circular, but you only find that out after running the entire circle, often a dozen or more buildings connected without a gap. I've seen a cartographer's map of the area (I saw it while stealing some of his marks out of his neglected pack), and this section looks more like scribbles on the paper than anything else.

I watch as he hits the first wall of buildings. I expect that he will leap over them—he should be able to do that problemless—but instead he literally hits the first wall. He crushes it down, breaks through the entire home, and smashes through the back wall.

Vald takes advantage of that, pursuing through the rubble and closing the distance to half a dozen steps or so.

I can finally make out the details of the behemoth. He has changed his clothes—which doesn't surprise me—into dark trousers and a darker tunic. Tears and dust mar the surface—some from his first encounter with Vald, some no doubt from the building he just broke through. If it weren't for the bright light beaming down from the two moons, it would be impossible to keep track of him, considering how fast he moves. His hair streams out from behind him, just out of reach. He doesn't look back as he pushes

onward.

Suddenly he dives left, springing forward onto his hands, then pushing off the ground with his arms. The force sends him soaring upwards, clearing an entire building and landing on the edge of another. Jagged cracks lightning down the facade, but he keeps moving, jumping and hopping from corner to corner. It's slower than on the street, but he's out of our grasp. We sprint along, heads craned, watching him, waiting for him to come down.

"Get up there, Vald," I say breathlessly. "Jump up there and get him!"

He shakes his head.

"Why?"

"You're here," he replies through heavy breathing.

Of course. He can't have me on him if he falls from up there. Bline probably figures the same thing, which doesn't make sense. Why wouldn't he attack? He made it pretty clear that he wanted me dead on a number of different occasions. Then again, maybe he doesn't relish the idea of dying at Vald's hand again, which is probably a fairly painful process. Having never done it, I don't know.

But this behavior is still inconsistent. It wasn't until he saw me that he stopped attacking Vald. In fact, he would've killed my Spook had I not shouted out when he had him pinned by the barn.

So what's going on?

I shove the questions out of my thoughts. Whatever the case, I have to make a choice: Stay with Vald and pursue from the street level, or drop off and let Vald do what he does best.

I glance up as we wind our way through a twisted alley and Vald leaps over a parked carriage, clearing it easily. Bline is working his way over the rooftops at a surprising rate, considering the care he's taking to make sure his weight doesn't break through the ceilings. Vald and I haven't lost sight of him yet, but we might with just a couple of jumps. For now, our luck holds, and Bline is forced to stay closer to the sturdier buildings, limiting his options. We follow, the black streaks of clotheslines strung between windows and the thick poles that hang the bazaar's sheets blurring past us as Vald desperately tries to cut off Bline's lead.

My arms are getting tired, and my legs ache with the effort of keeping myself on his back. The nagging thought that my presence has prevented Bline's capture countless times tonight irritates me just enough to start thinking of different options.

I want to be there when the creature dies again.

But more than that, I want the creature to die again.

We pass the herb shop again. Bline lands on the roof, collapsing the facade down into the front of Nanty's store.

"That's enough," I say through gritted teeth. I lean over and yell into Vald's ear. "Get him! Drive him to where you first fought him! I'll catch up with you there!" It's a place that I can find easily, and it's close. That's all the reason I need.

Vald shoots me a confused look. I point in the general direction. "Where you fought the behemoth the first time! Over there! I'll meet you!"

He nods.

Taking a deep breath, I push off of him just as Vald leaps. I crash to the ground, landing in a painful, tumbling heap as I roll to a stop. My Spook bounces off of one

building wall, rebounds off the other, and pulls himself onto the rooftops. Bline yells something, but his voice is strained and indistinct. They disappear from view.

I pull myself up slowly. I know that I need to move, but I feel drained, energiless. Not only do I hurt, but I have had a long day before now, and I still ache for sleep, despite everything I've just been through. I limp forward, massaging my bruised hip. I didn't know that I had fallen with such force, but my body is pretty intent on telling me that I did.

I hurry through the bazaar as quickly as I can, listening for the telltale crashing of behemoth and Spook engaged in combat. Vald is slowly working his way there, but I doubt that it will be easy for him. Bline isn't trying to kill Vald—he's only trying to escape. The Spook has the onus of directing a fleeing individual.

Glad it's not me.

The extra time works well for letting me think. Only the germ of an idea formed in my brain when I told Vald to lure Bline here. Unfortunately, that idea bounced out of my head about the time I hit the cobbles.

I reach the narrow street where the two had first fought, crouching in the shadows of an inconspicuous alley. I take stock of the area, trying to remember precisely where the fight had first happened. The pole that Vald had broken has already been replaced, as has the length of cloth that provides the shade during the heat of the day. I know that a behemoth died here, but I'd be hard pressed to point out any proof. Even the bloodstain has been trampled away over the intervening days.

I look up. Maybe I could rig something, a trap perhaps? Drop it from above...

"Don't be a fool's head," I say aloud, punching the wall of the building in frustration. I don't have time for that, nor do I have the strength.

The sound of breaking buildings and toppling stone echoes behind me.

They're getting close.

I chew my lip apprehensively, wracking my brain for the idea that had been there before I lost it in my dismount.

Nothing comes to mind.

I see some people stepping out of their homes or peeking out from windows. I shout at them and wave them away, screaming that a behemoth is coming and hadn't they better get to shelter? They disappear rapidly.

Frustrated, I sprint across the street, looking for a different angle. Just looking at a different angle can mean all the difference in the world, sometimes. I'm hoping that this is one of those times.

I accidentally stub my bare toe on an uneven cobble, eliciting a bark of pain from me. The pain is so unexpected that I actually topple a little, tipping forward and falling on my hands and knees.

Oathing, I fall over to one side, clutching at my toe. As I drop, I hear a light clinking noise.

My fireball. It's been in my pocket this whole time—including during my dizzying fall off of Vald.

My heart lurches as I cautiously remove it from my longjacket. The outside shell is cracked in a dozen places, but the inside vial is still untouched, and the cracks aren't deep enough to leak the external fluid, anyway. Still, it's fragile, so I pocket it cautiously. I release my bated breath. If that had gone off in my pocket...

I shake off the possibility. I have to concentrate on what to do to help Vald.

Then I run out of time—Vald and Bline land a dozen paces from where I sit, a prodigious crash heralding their arrival.

Vald and Bline square off, with the Spook facing me. Both look haggard, Vald even more so. He has new wounds that are oozing blood onto the street. Bline is favoring one arm—maybe Vald seriously hurt it.

I guess it's possible.

They grapple, moving faster than I thought they could, given the length of their battle and chase. Their blows occasionally land on the intended target, flesh and bones groaning under the impact. Fists and feet blur into an impossible speed as each tries to strike, scratch, grab, or simply break the other. Vald pushes the attack, driving a couple of punches through the defense, slinging Bline about so that he collides with a wall, a billow of dust erupting out from around him as the building grunts with the strike. The windows that had been replaced from their previous fight shatters in a glorious chorus of breaking glass. I cover my head with my hands as the pieces rain down. I duck over to a safer place, a few paces farther away from the fight.

Bline retaliates, dropping low and driving his fist into Vald's unprotected gut. Blood vomits from his mouth, and Vald crumples over the behemoth's arm.

"Vald!" I whisper, unable to turn away but afraid of what I might see.

I hear Bline chuckle, until Vald grabs the offending arm and drives the elbow down, breaking it over his knee.

The shriek that the behemoth renders cracks the walls. I duck and cover my ears. Despite my earlier warnings, I see a crowd gathering. Why do they always seem to flock to danger?

I face them and yell again, over the ringing of my ears, to get away. A few look at me, their gazes saying, "Why don't *you* leave, wench?" My anger flares, but I turn away. If they want to die, so be it. I have a responsibility; they only have curiosity.

It looks as though Vald is winning. He has pressed his advantage, striking the behemoth again and again, forcing him down. One blow crashes into the behemoth's neck, and Bline's one good hand clutches at his throat, struggling for air. Vald pauses for a brief second—perhaps to catch his breath, perhaps to ready the final blow—and Bline counterattacks, almost out of desperation.

The behemoth shoots his leg in with a vicious kick that catches Vald in the chest. I can hear his ribs snap from here. Vald's body soars over me, and I have to duck as he shatters through a doorway, chips of wood flying outward. Whatever was in the house—tables, chairs, and belongings—is now obliterated beneath the Spook.

I hold my breath, trembling with fright.

I was almost killed by my Spook.

Bline stands, staring at me. Moonlight frames him, shadowing his expression. I can see that he is breathing heavily. One hand clutches at his broken arm, but he doesn't move.

"I told you. I don't want to fight."

My legs wiggle a little. That voice...it isn't Bline's. The hatred, the anger, the maliciousness—they aren't there. It's harsh, broken, and hoarse from Vald's punch, but I know it isn't Bline.

What's more, it means that Bline isn't back from the dead.

I suddenly feel like laughing. Whoever this behemoth is, he's new. No less dangerous, but at least he isn't a reanimated corpse.

I wait for a moment, expecting an attack, or maybe Vald to come out of the house. Nothing happens.

The behemoth turns to leave. I finally get a glimpse of his face, blood smeared and bruised though it may be.

I gasp. That's why his voice sounds familiar; it sounds like the taste of honey.

"You?" I say, standing and brushing off the debris that peppered over me.

"You're a behemoth?"

Dalm steps forward, the moonlight revealing his handsome brow and his striking features. He straightens a little and looks at me. "I told you that I had plans."

I shake my head. "Dalm, I..."

I, what?

I loved him? Yes. I could say that.

I thought of him every day?

I could say that, too.

I don't understand?

Aye, that's the one.

That's what I say.

"Amela," he says, and my heart breaks to hear his voice so hollow, "I wanted to avoid this."

"But...you said you loved me."

He doesn't answer that. Instead, he says, "You chose to be a Spark. Though you didn't say so, I assumed as much. But I didn't know that *he* was your Spook." There's hatred in his voice.

"Would that have changed who I am?"

"Yes."

That hurts. Deeply.

"You don't love me, then."

"I...I have done things, Amela, that I can never undo. I was a fool to fall for you, a fool for helping you. But I did love you once. I wish that...I wish that things were different so that it might have always been so."

I swallow against the pain in my soul, the conflict that I feel. I should be finding Vald. I owe that to him. He could be dying.

But I relish hearing Dalm's voice.

It's been so long, it feels, since that kiss.

The warmth of him.

"Dalm, you're a behemoth?"

"I'm a Vyn, yes."

I don't know what to say.

"I won't see you again, Amela."

"Wait!" I cry, but he leaps away, clearing the block. I can feel the tremor as he lands.

I swallow, my head and heart reeling. I don't know how—or what—to feel. I don't know what has happened, even though I know what happened. It doesn't even make sense, and the only being that has to be an explanation just jumped over the closest

buildings.

I hear a stirring inside the ruined home.

Vald.

Holding my breath, I step in.

The light from outside only trickles in, doing nothing to break the gloom. Dust still settles over everything, making me cough. My bare feet scrape over splinters and pebbled rock, hurting more than they should. Too much time in boots.

I focus on the task at hand—namely, extricating Vald from the debris that covers him. He had crashed through a number of low benches, hutches, tables, and the like. It stinks like blood and sweat, but I force that detail away.

Gingerly—more from the exhaustion that has gripped me than for any other reason—I push away the bigger pieces. Vald moans, and I dig toward the sound. By the time I find my Spook, a number of people have come in, bringing lanterns and shovels. It doesn't take long before a couple of hearty men have taken over the job. This is fine with me; I'm so tired I can barely even breathe, I think.

“What happened here?” asks one person—by his bearing, I'd guess that he's part of the Militia. My first instinct is to try to lam it, but I manage to ignore the idea. Not only does it not matter now—I'm a Spark, after all—but I scarcely have the strength to stand, let alone escape.

“A behemoth...”

Dalm is a behemoth.

I didn't know a heart could be broken into so many pieces, yet continue beating.

The hate-laced word spreads through the crowd like a yawn, rustling from person to person as some people suddenly start backing away and running from the scene. Most, however, stick around, eager for more details.

I guess I still have a lot of things to learn about being a Spark.

I clear my throat. My feelings will have to wait.

With an effort, I manage to get my voice heard over the din. I cringe at its weakness and fragile timbre, but there's nothing I can do.

“No, Da—er, the behemoth is gone. My Spook, Vald, he fought him.”

“Fought him? He destroyed half of our home over by the square!” protests one.

“Aye, he thinks he can break down stuff worriless just because he's wrapped?” agrees another.

“What is with this city?” gripes a disgruntled old man. His wrinkled face bends into an unseemly frown. “This isn't the first behemoth attack.”

“Not at all,” the (presumably) Militiaman answers. He turns his gaze back to me. “So, what, you're a Spark? Is that what you're telling me?”

I nod. “Aye. My job is to take care of Vald...”

Just then, the workers heave off the large beam that has pinned Vald up until now.

“Vald!” I run toward him, pushing past those who helped unearth him. I gasp when I see him.

Large bruises and gaping cuts adorn his face. Blood halos his head and drips from his mouth. I fear for a moment when I see a couple of ribs jutting out of his side—then I realize that they are only pieces of white wood from the banister he collapsed that had fallen on him. Still, a large bruise is raising where Dalm had kicked him, visible through a large rent in his tunic. In fact, almost all of his clothes are little more than scraps on him

now. I look closer at his face. He isn't conscious, but he is breathing.

"Pick him up," I order the men who helped. "Gently. We need to get him to The Quiet Inn. Does anyone have a wagon?"

"The flaming behemoth broke mine," hisses one.

"Mine's in the shop for repairs," another replies.

The Militiaman interrupts. "Hold your wagons." He draws his glare from the crowd back to me. I star at his lined face, the creases deeper in the flickering lanternlight. His beaked nose seems as sharp as an ax, and his tight lips purse thoughtfully. "Miss, are you wrapped?"

I suddenly realize where this is going, what the problem is. Sans Layne, I have no proof of my status, of my responsibilities. All I have is a wrecked neighborhood and one of the guilty parties. Before, Layne had arrived on the scene in time to clear things up. This time? I don't know where Layne lives, so he may not even be remotely close to his office—which isn't too far away. That also means that The Quiet Inn isn't too far, either. I ache for my bed, but let the thought away.

"I'm not wrapped, and I'm not going to stand here and be interrogated by a stranger."

"I'm part of the Militia—" begins the man.

I cut him off with an angry gesture. I imagine what Hermina would do if she were in my position. How would she react? How would she speak? Before I know it, words have dropped from my tongue, fire propelling each syllable. "I don't care if you're the King Elect. You're in my way. I need to get my Spook to someone who can tend to his injuries. If you don't like that, you can take it up with the Queen."

I had hoped that the mentioning of royalty would bypass any other protests, but the Militiaman doesn't appear impressed.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure that she'll take full responsibility for this." He reaches out to grab me. "You're coming with me."

I dart away. "Don't touch me."

Militiaman's face tightens even more. Those who can fit into the destroyed remains of the house all stare in mute wonder. It is rare that someone stands up to the Militia, and it's even more rare when the rebel is a small girl in her ninetens.

Then again, most of my life recently has been pretty rare—so this seems to fit.

"You're coming with me," he repeats, one hand drifting to his side, no doubt headed for his cudgel, "whether you want to or not."

Roddy's instructions slip into my head, and I remember some of the things that I can do to protect myself sans weapons.

Before things explode into violence, a voice breaks from the back. "Make way! Make way!"

To my surprise, Sinet shoves his way through, his forked tongue flicking over his scabbed lips. "Mel! Look, Layne needs to talk to you." He shoves a bystander. "Get out of my way." The scrawny Darshur's arrival elicits a number of scathing glances and more than the occasional growl. He pushes on, oblivious.

"Sinet?" say I. "What's going on?"

"Layne heard," the breathless response comes, "that you've had another behemoth encounter. You need to be debriefed."

"Layne?" I hear the Militiaman whisper thoughtfully. Apparently, I picked the

wrong figure of authority to impress the man. Who would have guessed that the miniature man would have more clout than the Queen?

“Get Vald to the inn. I’ll be with Layne as soon as I’ve had a chance to rest,” I order.

“That won’t work, my lady,” stutters Sinet.

I shoot him a withering glare. “Yes. It will.”

He swallows, his throat bobbing noticeably. “Of course, my lady.”

I rake the quiet crowd with a glare, daring anyone else to challenge my authority. Wordlessly, I pass through the gaggle of people and out into the night. I hear people giving orders to help Vald.

Like Hermina said, the outside need not be true of what's inside. Outwardly, I no doubt appear in control and reveling in my power. Inwardly, however, it's turmoil.

It's a wonder I make it back to the inn at all.

I AWAKE much earlier than I want. Dalm is staring at me.

Not a bad way to wake up.

“I love you,” he says.

Then the memories come crashing in, and I sit up in alarm. Sleep parts from my eyes, the dream disappears, and Jeskin takes Dalm's place.

With a moan—whether of relief or distress even I don't know—I slump back, staring at my trainer with slitted eyes.

“Are you ready for training?” he asks me.

“What?” I say, eyes widening.

“Are you ready for training?” he repeats without a deviation in tone.

I drawl for a moment, then reply, “No, I am not ready for training. I don't think I'm ready for anything.” To be honest, I wish I had died last night. I wish that Dalm had kicked me through a house instead of Vald. It would have been less painful.

“Too bad. You already missed a day. We'll have to use your free day to make it up.”

“What!” Now I'm getting upset. “Do you know what I've just been through?”

“Does it matter? In battle, you fight one day just so that you can survive long enough to kill the next. In war, survival is the only reward for a fight well fought. What do you expect? You have a bed, at least.”

Now I'm angry. “I deserve this.”

“Deserve? Because of what?” He shakes his head, his countenance rife with disappointment. “What have you done to deserve this?”

“I chased down a behemoth last night!”

“That was two nights ago.”

“Two nights?”

“You slept all yesterday.”

I grunt. It doesn't feel like it, though my bladder feels differently.

“Get up.” He sounds remorseless. I mention this. He says, “I am.”

I look away.

“Now, as I heard it told, *Vald* fought a behemoth two nights ago.”

I shrug. “We're the same entity—together, we're Slayers. That's all that matters.”

“I have no problem with Vald resting and recovering; wounded men are allowed respite, after all.”

“I'm wounded.”

“For you, it doesn't matter.”

“Why not?” I can't help but sound indignant.

“Because I say so.”

I roll over onto my side. “Leave me alone.” In my misery is what I want to add. I keep that sentiment to myself.

“We need to continue your stave training.”

“Go train your flaming stick, then! King's blood, leave me out of it!”

The obscenity doesn't faze him. “Let's go.” I ignore him. When I don't move to follow, he comes back and says, “I am your trainer—”

“And you also pee standing up. What's your point?”

He takes a sharp intake of breath. I think I'm getting to him. "We need to go."

"No!"

His voice is sharp. "Mel, what is it that you really want right now? What do you want out of life?"

"Sleep."

"Overall, I mean."

"Sleep."

"Besides sleep."

"More sleep."

He sighs an exasperated sigh. "That's all you want out of life? Sleep? You just had a full day of it."

I respond without thinking: "And my family." And Dalm. I want him to be normal. I want me to be normal. I want us to be normal together.

I never get what I want.

Jeskin is quiet, his austerity gone, his voice compassionate. "Why don't you visit them?"

"I don't know where they are."

"And who does?"

"Layne."

"Why don't you get him to let you visit them?"

"He refuses."

He snaps his fingers. "I've noticed, Mel, that you are a very passive person."

That isn't how I'd describe me. I roll over to him and give him a glare. "What are you talking about?"

"You aren't taking charge of things. You're letting life happen to you. You aren't moving about—you're being moved. You're not making choices—you're following what other people have chosen for you. I know what happened the other day. I know that you were met by a Recruiter from the Queen, that you traveled to Ashvale to investigate the King's murder site, and that you came back without the Recruiter—on the back of your Spook. But let me ask you. In all that happened, how many of those situations came from your own choices?"

I frown and think. "Only the last one, really." I shrug. "Well, I guess I *chose* to climb into the carriage with Hermina, and that I *chose* to follow her—but it felt as though no matter what, I was going to do what she wanted, as though my choice was a...a formality. When I insisted on Vald taking me with him—well, that surprised her. She didn't like that."

"It was outside of her plans for you," ventures Jeskin.

Wary of his switch in mood, I nod. "You're right. She didn't want that, and it bothered her that I did it."

"She's back, you know."

I nod again. "Of course. Ashvale isn't so far away."

"No, but she's been back for over a day. She knows where you are, but she hasn't been to visit you."

"How do you know?"

He gives me a small smile. "Do you really think we would let one of our trainees be exposed just because she was sleeping?"

I frown. “You watch me?”

“Of course. We always watch our wounded comrades. As soon as you came back, we started a watch.” He takes a deep breath and smiles. “I wasn't really trying to get you to training, by the way. I figure you can have a rest. You do, after all, deserve it.”

That makes me feel good.

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” He sighs and shifts a little, making the bed squeak. “With regard to this Hermina woman—I only advise caution.”

“Why?”

“Because of what we've just been discussing. You're a wonderful person, Mel, but you're really easy to influence.”

This flares my temper a bit. “Why do you say that?”

“Because you are! Didn't you notice how I just got you angry, then I lulled your suspicion down with kind words and compliments? You're a very nice woman, and people will take advantage of that. I want you to recognize things and start thinking for yourself. You need to take control of your situations.”

“But they're all bigger than I am,” I grouse.

“Every situation is. Always will be.”

“Then what am I to do?”

He sighs before answering. “Mel, how big is a behemoth?”

Unsure of the change in topics, I answer hesitantly. “The only one that I've ever seen that wasn't Folded was Bline. He stood just over fifteen feet high.”

“Did you defeat him?”

“Vald did.”

“So, then, the answer is yes, right? Because you're one entity?”

I snort, hearing my words come back to me. “Fair. What of it?”

“How was it done?”

“By the whispers.”

“Nothing else?”

I shrug. “I don't know. I can't see your point.”

“Well, did Vald stop and complain about the size of the Wyn?”

“No.”

“What did he do?”

“He attacked it.”

“So, what should you do?”

“Attack my problems?” I sit up, confused.

“Right. Don't let them happen to you. Attack the problems—choose how you will live. Don't make the choice to throw away your agency to others, letting them dictate your life.”

“Just like that?”

He laughs a little. “Oh, no. It's never that simple. And you must be careful. Sometimes demanding your independence won't work—subtlety is involved, and there is always the chance that those who hold the other end of the leash won't like your actions. Be prepared to truly strike out on your own first, have your purpose, and then move toward it undeviatingly.”

I think of how I feel for Dalm, my arms wrapped around my knees. I've been

reacting to that goodness that came because of the love I felt, but maybe it wasn't love. Maybe I was infatuated with the handsome man who kissed me. Either way, I have to decide if I will push on or be crushed by the pain inside. Love or infatuation, either was real to me. Dalm...I have to choose what I feel for him. With him loose in the city, I need to decide soon.

“You came into my room just to tell me all of this?”

He chuckles again. “No. I came to bring you to training. This is just something that I’ve wanted to say to you for a long while.”

“Ah.”

“But I don’t think you want to go. Sleep, as I seem to recall, is more important?”

I shake my head. “No, I wouldn’t be able to sleep now.”

“Too much to think on?”

“Aye.”

“Well, stay worryless for today. We’ll make up your training later.”

“How?”

He rolls me a shrug. “Parse out bits of your free day, I’m sure.” He stands to leave. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Are you going to keep watch over me still?”

“Do you want us to?”

“No,” I say after a long moment, “I want to be alone for now.”

“Fair.”

The door clicks shut, and I stare at the ceiling for a while. A tap comes on the door.

“M’lady?” Shema peeks her head in. “There’s someone to see you.”

“Send them in.” Shema nods and starts to close the door. “Wait, Shema?”

She looks in, curious.

“Can you bring me something to drink?”

“Honeyed milk?” she asks.

I shake my head. “Too sweet.”

“Lemoned oats?”

“That’ll do nicely.”

“Yes, m’lady.” She bobs out.

A moment later, Hermina enters, splendid as always. To my surprise, Layne follows behind her. In the hallway, I can see his henchmen giving dirty glances at the stoic Thoman. She is attired in a white dress, sensibly cut that exposes nothing but her arms. Long gloves cover her hands, racing up to her elbows. Soft, silk slippers adorn her feet. Her ebony hair is done loosely, cascading over her shoulders and teasing the tops of her arms.

He has on a white tunic, covered by a woolen vest and dark trousers. The silver whistle glistens noticeably against the black scarf that’s bound about his neck. His shoes have been buffed to the point that I could no doubt use the polished leather as a mirror. As always, his small hands are clasped behind his back, and he regards me coolly, composedly, critically.

I become aware that my hair is in a tangle and the dirt, sweat, and grime of travel unwashed from my body. I feel a flash of heat creep up my face and duck my head.

“What have you done?”

I don't look Hermina in the eye. When Jeskin first spoke to me about standing up for myself and making my own choices, I had wanted to cheer and do precisely as he said. But hearing it said and having the resolve to do it don't coincide without effort. I don't have any energy left for that effort—my feelings are too raw. I try to make the ghost of constant heartache and hurting fade away.

Tools have no feelings.

They can't get hurt.

“What have you done?” she repeats.

“My duty.”

“You destroyed half of the city!”

“Hermina,” interrupts Layne sharply.

“What?”

“Hyperbole doesn't become you. Only a few buildings were severely damaged, and all the rest suffered cosmetic damage only.”

“Still, she shouldn't have been there.”

“What would you have had her do?” Layne snaps. I marvel a bit at his defense of me. I still don't fully trust the man, but he is protecting me. I don't understand it.

“Stay with me as she had been told.”

“She wasn't even supposed to be with you!” argues Layne.

I finally interrupt. Their arguments sound weary—I don't doubt that they have rehearsed them again and again over the last day. “How is Vald?”

Both Recruiters stop their altercation and stare at me. “He's fine.”

“Fine?”

“Well enough,” amends Hermina. “He is healing rapidly, as you might imagine.”

“Rapidly?”

“Yes. One of the things the whispers do is heal the Spook whenever there are behemoths about.”

“There's a behemoth about?” I almost say 'Dalm', but remember in time—neither of them knows what I had...what I lost. I don't want to give them that.

Layne glances at Hermina, who throws him a haughty look—the significance of it lost on me. He answers hesitatingly. “A Spook will hear the whispers when a behemoth is in close proximity. If they engage in battle and lose—but aren't killed—the whispers stay with them so long as the behemoth is still around. So, yes, as long as Vald is healing rapidly, it means that the behemoth is still close.”

That makes me uncomfortable. “How close?”

Layne shrugs. Hermina answers, “From what we've seen, it depends on the behemoth, actually. The bigger it is, the farther away it can be and still affect the Spook.”

“What about the other Slayers? Quinn and Seli? Have they had any encounters with the behemoth?”

Hermina's face darkens. “We don't deal with Vigilantes.”

I stare. “But they'll help, won't they?”

“They don't follow orders. They can't be trusted.”

“But...”

“If they wanted to help the Crown, their country, and their fellow people, why do they deny the orders that we give them?” She arches a perfect eyebrow at me, daring me to answer. “If they are so intent on doing what's right by ignoring and breaking the law,

how are we to trust them? That's what has kept us alive—listening to those who know and then doing as we are told, without thought, without question. A knife doesn't only cut when it finds it morally convenient; it cuts when it is told to do so, when wielded by one who knows why and how to use a knife. We can't work with blunt instruments, and Vigilantes surely are that."

I frown. "But, didn't you send them to me?"

"Who, Quinn and Seli?" Layne perks up at this.

I say, "Aye."

Hermina snorts. "No. We didn't send them. They must have come of their own volition."

Layne nods his agreement.

Curious. "So, what if they get in the way?" I ask.

"Get in the way?"

"When I find Dalm again." It slips out. I push on anyway. "What if they beat me to him?"

"Dalm?" whispers Layne, who pales a little. Hermina doesn't notice.

"Be the first one there. It's that simple."

I take my gaze from the little man and look at the voluptuous woman. "How?"

"So long as Vald is hearing whispers, the behemoth is about. As soon as you possibly can, you'll start to patrol the city. Find the behemoth. Stop him."

I want to ask why I should. I want to tell them that I don't want to.

I guess, in short, I want to be a Vigilante.

I do nothing but sit.

"Despite my misgivings," Hermina turns to Layne as she speaks, "I think you picked well for the Queen's bodyguard."

This surprises both of us. "You still want me to guard the Queen?" I ask.

"Aye," they respond in unison.

"But I have failed almost everything! Dalm escaped, my Spook is broken, the city is in ruins! I've cost the Crown more marks than I've ever seen in my life!"

"You are the best for this job," assures Layne, his smile hollow and his countenance twitchy. "You are resilient, young, and well-motivated. You'll do it just fine."

"There is no one else?"

"No one whom I more highly trust," replies Layne.

Hermina nods slowly. "I agree. After seeing your devotion to your Spook and your ability to observe, I think that you're our best chance of capturing the behemoth."

"Capture?"

Hermina seems surprised at my outburst. "Of course. To try him."

Layne faces her and shakes his head. "No. No, absolutely not. He is a monster and must be killed. That's all there is to it. He killed the King!"

He killed the King.

Dalm is responsible for this whole debacle. He was hiding in Ashvale. He must be the assassin. He is my target, my enemy.

I must choose how I feel about him—hate or love.

It would be easy to hate him...but, sometimes, easier to love.

Hermina looks at her fellow Recruiter. "But he still must be tried."

Layne shakes his head again, vehemently. “Not if he isn’t a human! He’s just a creature. He’s a monster! Besides, what if he grows?”

“You mean, Stretches?” I supply.

“Aye, that. If he Stretches, how can we possibly keep him under control?”

“Layne, a behemoth that’s Folded still has all the strength, stamina, and mass that he would have if he were full size. That’s why they’re so dangerous—all of that strength put into a deceptively small package! What difference would the height make?”

Layne chops at his palm with one hand, punctuating his words with his gestures. “It matters plenty! It makes all the difference in the Realm!” He shoots me a glance. “Get ready to start hunting just as soon as Vald is able. We spoke to Jeskin, and we’ve agreed to suspend your training until this threat has passed. Once you’ve eliminated Dalm, you will continue to protect the Queen, the Princess, and the King Elect.”

I nod.

Layne and Hermina take their leave, though I can see that the former still boils with anger over the discussion, while the latter seems disconcertingly at ease.

Do they really have that much faith in me?

Guiltily, I hope that Vald takes a long, long time to recover.

THE STORM comes unexpectedly, flooding the world for a day. I debate about hunting Dalm anyway, weather notwithstanding, but I eventually decide to stay inside. Part of me chaffs at the decision—I have been confined for three days now—but Vald is questionably better at best, despite the time. An extra day or two would make me feel safer and him better. He’s still healing at a surprisingly fast rate, the strips of skin that he had lost from his hands, the deep bruises, the minor cuts—everything fades so quickly that I swear that it happens before my eyes.

Vald sleeps, mostly, only awaking to relieve his body, eat a little, and mutter something insane (“Cavorting in the wilderness only leads to lechery,” is my favorite one so far) before heading back into the room to sleep some more.

I take the time to bathe and to rest myself. Though my training has been indefinitely postponed, I still practice what I can against my shadow. I work on forms, on balance, on walking the knife across my knuckles, on spinning my sling, on my accuracy with any projectile I can get my hands on. I use an old broom—after decapitating it—as a makeshift stave. When Shema finds out, she gets visibly upset but doesn’t say anything. I mean to apologize, but she leaves too quickly.

All of this is done to keep that choice at bay. The more things I have to focus on that aren’t Dalm, the less it hurts.

Aye. Right.

The next day is the same, the deluge still heavy. The once-parched streets are now shallow rivers of mud, the cobbles drowned and the paths a quagmire. I’m glad I’m not in it. I wouldn’t be able to move at all, doubtless. I ask Shema if this will prove to be the end of the drought, but she shakes her head.

“Why?” ask I.

“My papa, he’s a farmer. I asked him about the rains. He said it’d take days like today going for a month to fill up our reservoirs. The ground is so dry, and the plants’ roots so shallow, that they’re having a hard time using all of the rain that’s coming.” She shakes her head sadly. “What needs to happen, is rain like this maybe every week or so. Then the risk of flooding drops and we can start rebuilding and using wisely.” Then she gives me this strange, imploring look. “Can you do anything, m’lady?”

I blink. “I?”

She nods.

“Shema, I’m just a Spark, and a former street. I don’t do anything special.”

“But you’re a powerful lady, m’lady.” She adds the title hesitantly, as if she isn’t sure about including it.

I wave my hand dismissively. “I’m unlucky, that’s all.”

“Unlucky?” She’s so surprised by the confession that she forgets to add the irritating title.

I snort. “Aye. The only thing that’s put me here is rotten luck.” I give her a pointed stare. “Don’t ever think that I’m powerful, Shema. Do you think that your pot has power?”

She blinks. “No, m’lady.”

“Does your spoon?”

“Nay.”

“Why not?”

She shrugs, still unsure of how to answer, probably. “They’re just for cooking.”

“That’s their purpose?”

“Aye.”

“And do they do anything you tell them not to?”

“No, m’lady.”

“If you want a stew, your pot isn’t going to refuse and make bread instead, right?”

“Right.”

“So it’s just a tool.”

“If you say so, m’lady.”

“So am I.”

She frowns in confusion, still not understanding.

“But, you’re a person. . .”

“I know that, it’s a metaphor.”

“Oh.”

I shake my head and go. She calls after me, “I’m sorry I couldn’t help, m’lady. If you don’t mind me saying so, you seem like you could use some time alone. I know it’s raining and all, but maybe you should wander about outside for a bit. Clear your head. I’ll have fresh clothes and food ready for you when you come back.”

“Thanks, Shema,” I say, liking the idea. “I think I will do that.”

“Of course, m’lady.”

I return to my room and don my longjacket—cleaned of the spilled fireball oils by Shema—but ignore my boots. What’s the point of going out in the rain while wearing shoes?

I peek in on Vald, who is snoring loudly—as usual. Whenever he’s healing, he snores. Other than that, he’s quiet as a babe—a sleeping babe, at least.

I examine the still cracked fireball. It is in pretty bad shape, and I worry about carrying it with me. The last thing I want is for it to go off in my pocket. At the same time, it’s my best defense against Dalm, and I hate to be left defenseless. With a sigh, I slide it back into my pocket and double check my belongings. I’m ready to go, though to where I don’t know. Perhaps I’ll return to the scene of the fight. Maybe it will yield a clue.

Sadly, the trail, as it were, has gone completely cold. In fact, it went cold the moment that Dalm leaped away from me.

I have business here.

Dalm...I have to focus on his personality as a behemoth, on his role as an assassin. There’s little doubt that he was in Ashvale because he had done the murder. Layne and Hermina think it’s so, but I still want a confession from his lips. I want him to tell me that himself. I don’t want to be nagged by the small hope that it was all a coincidence. I can’t live with that.

I want to know the truth.

Then again, if Vald isn’t healing as quickly as he should, then maybe Dalm doesn’t really have business here. He could be lying. Of course. Naturally. Probably. Possibly.

I’m not sure. I fancy myself as a fairly adept liar, and I know that sometimes that fact is known—meaning that the truth can be confessed and others will act as if it were a

lie, doing the opposite of what is said.

Maybe Dalm assumed that I wouldn't believe him, and tried to turn my attention elsewhere. He knows that I'll look for him—he can't be such a fool's as to think otherwise. But why would he want me to catch him? Why leave a trail at all?

Does he want me to catch him?

No. He told me that I wouldn't see him again. That was said with pain in his voice—more than his ruined arm and his damaged throat. He won't try to find me again. He knows that I'm too dangerous.

I'm on my own for finding out what he is up to.

I head toward the battleground. Layne ordered the area cleaned immediately, so the debris of the fight is gone. The ruined house is getting a good drenching. I squish onto the sodden carpet and look around a bit.

Nothing of interest. In fact, it looks as though a few streets have been through—some of the drawers are ajar, their belongings missing. I snort in disdain. Layne always thinks that he has things perfectly in hand, and that his marks will pay for whatever damage comes about. Who knows how many priceless items are being fenced right now...

That leads me to think of Carly, the backwards-talking friend of Pops. He and my brother and Mama were in that tunnel, and then Layne took them. He also claims that he has Logan and Pops.

I want to see my family.

I need to speak to Layne.

Still, I'm in the area, so I look around again, checking through the damaged sections of the bazaar.

Nothing important.

I frown and turn back, shouldering against the rain. The drops have long since turned sharp and cold, biting at my neck and exposed hands. I berate myself for having left the warmth of the inn. The only thing I've accomplished is getting myself quite wet and covered in mud.

Just as I think this, my foot slips and I land in a puddle.

No one is about to hear my colorful, winding oath.

With a grunt and a groan I free myself from the mire. I wipe off as much muck as I can, then start slogging my way back.

Nothing is turning out right. It isn't Shema's fault for having recommended it. Before, I was miserable; now I'm *wet* and miserable.

As I pass close to Layne's office, I hear a familiar voice, whispering just a bit too loudly—surely to be heard over the rain—and my name slips into my ear.

I reverse direction quickly, then find a short detour around to a low-lying home. Two hops, a kick or two against the wall, and a heave take me to the roof. I prowl forward until my head is just above the alleyway next to Layne's office. Below me and to the right is one of the henchmen, Sinet it looks like. I have to strain to hear over the rain, but the cloaked, dark figure to whom Sinet is nervously speaking is facing away from me. From my position, only Sinet is audible.

"...didn't expect it," the henchman is saying.

The figure comments. I can only hear the murmur of speech.

"No, she weren't shrived...not technically, anyway, I think."

Another comment.

“I wouldn’t, no. Not yet. She barely knows what she’s doing. That’s why she’s there. The blame is easier passed, see?”

The figure moves a little, threateningly.

“No, look, I’m just the messenger. Come by tonight if you want more information. He’s busy right now.”

I think I’ve heard enough. I duck back, sliding toward the far edge of the roof. I’m not sure who the other form was, but I’m sure I’ll find out tonight.

Tonight.

I move quickly, going to check up on my Spook (he’s doing better than when I left him, which is a big relief) and getting Shema to clean my clothes and pick up some items for me. It sure is convenient to have a maid to help with little things like this. Meanwhile, I go prepare myself for the task ahead.

When nightfall comes, the rain drizzling quietly, I am crouched behind a short chimney on a roof near Layne’s office. The clouds block out the moonlight and the stars, so the only light comes puddling out of the nearby homes’ windows. I’ve situated myself so that I can see over the wall that contains Layne’s garden. A single taper burns on his desk, spilling just a tiny trickle of light onto the balcony that overhangs the verdure behind his office. I marvel that it’s so well watered, and wonder if the recent rain will affect the irrigation of the garden.

I can just see the road and, across from there, The Quiet Inn. My room’s lamp is still burning—I hope to give the impression that I’m there, if Layne or one of his henchmen glances over. Vald’s room is appropriately dark—no reason for him to have light. Even though he has slept all day, I hope that he sleeps all night. He can’t do what I’m going to do now. He couldn’t understand it.

A movement—so furtive and brief I almost doubt having seen it—blurs the light in front of my room. Someone just passed toward Layne’s building.

Not wasting a moment, I take an easy jump, landing in between the iron spikes that decorate the top of the garden wall. Moving as quietly and quickly as possible, I remain on the foot-wide wall, hopping and swinging over the spikes. By using the tall shrubs and occasional tree, I block the view of my approach from any casual viewer within the office building—and, I hope, an alert viewer, too.

I get to the joint where the wall meets the building and contemplate the gap between my position and the balcony. It’s too far for me to jump—about three times over. However, a latticework with ivy running up its length rests against the building on the far side. Ducking down, I grip the wall, using the iron spike as a handhold, and lower myself as far as I can go. Taking a deep breath, I drop down into the garden, rolling as I land.

Regaining my feet, I scurry beneath windows and through the soft mud until I reach the balcony. No one saw me—at least, no alarm has been called.

I jump to the lattice work and start heaving myself up, the ivy rustling and shaking extra extra water droplets on me. I just hope that the sound of the rain masks my approach.

I reach the balcony and start to lever my way up just as Layne gets out of his seat.

I freeze. I didn’t know that he was in his office yet.

Did he see me?

He paces to the side of his desk closest to the glass doors that lead out to the balcony, his hands clasped behind his back, as always. He looks out over the stormy garden, his face obscured by shadow.

I hold my breath, my muscles protesting. I'm holding onto one of the small, decorative pillars that supports the banister, but my legs—weighed down in water-drenched woolen trousers and heavy boots—dangle above the ground. A fire creeps through my arms and runs into my chest.

I can't hold on much longer.

My fingers, wet from the rain water, start to slip. If I try to regain my grip, the movement will catch Layne's eye for sure. I swallow and fight the pain, willing my fingers to tighten into the cool cracks and nearly invisible cavities in the stone pillar.

I slip another quarter inch.

My breath shudders loudly, and I'm sure that my pounding heart is audible from leagues away.

Another quarter inch. My pinkie is almost lost on the right hand.

My arms burn.

I grit my teeth to keep from crying out in pain.

I have two choices: Fall, and hope that Layne doesn't see me and that I don't break a leg, or adjust my grip, assuming that Layne *will* see me and immediately haul me in for questioning.

My left hand starts to spasm. The right gets a cramp.

I'll take my chances with Layne.

Just as I lurch forward, swinging my arm through the banister supports and hooking it, Layne turns away. I breathe a sigh of relief as I dangle, then desperately scramble up and over onto the flat of the balcony.

I glance into the office, and see that the Recruiter has gone to his cold cupboard and removed his carafe of water. He pours himself a glass, returns the pitcher to its place, and locks it.

Why does he do that, anyway? Why is he so protective? Aye, water can be hard to come by—usually, I think with a wry twist of my lips and a shake of my shoulders, shedding water from my longjacket—but who locks it up?

I press myself flush against the wall next to the glass doors that lead out to the overhang, edging forward bit by bit. Finally able to see in, I take a quick stock of the room with a glance. As I pull back, I see the door swing open.

"You're here." Layne doesn't sound surprised, but he does sound nervous. I can hear him quite well; no complaints here.

"What are you doing?" The gruff, angry voice comes from the visitor, whose voice is muffled by distance. It might sound familiar, it might not. I just can't be sure. I assume, however, that he's facing the balcony window, so I don't dare peek again.

"I might ask the same of you."

"You're siccing that wench of yours on me!"

"Siccing? Hardly. She's of no consequence. Don't worry about her."

"Don't worry? You act as if you command me, Layne."

The small man doesn't reply for moment. "This plan we're following is of my create."

"I'm afraid that there's a bit of confusion, then. I am helping you out of my

necessity, not because you rule me. You are communicating information to me, not ordering me about. Now it appears as though you have someone after me who is designed to hunt behemoths? You have betrayed me? Is that it?"

My mouth goes dry.

"I should make something perfectly limpid, Vyn," Layne is saying. I lean forward a little more closely, not wanting to miss a word. "We are both working for the same end. I want your skills. You want what I have. That makes it a deal that we're both interested in completing. How much have you sacrificed to get this far?"

The stranger's voice burns with anger. "Why do you think that it so alarms me to see you ordering your Slayers after me, Layne? I know *precisely* how much I've sacrificed, what my brothers have sacrificed, to get me here. Now I see you wantonly wasting it by playing political games!"

"You think this is a game?" Layne's voice is matching the visitor's in heat, now. "My entire career *and* my life is on the line. And more."

"And the possibility of an entire war, Layne. Never forget that. Do you truly think that you'll be able to stop us if we attacked?"

Venom drips out of the Recruiter's next words. "Don't threaten me, Dalm. I am not your enemy here."

My heart lurches traitorously.

I should have chosen ere now.

I should have been prepared for this.

Love.

Hate.

Is there no middle ground?

I tighten my fist in frustration and confusion and sadness.

"But you've betrayed me!" Dalm is yelling. His voice still sounds rough and uneven, no longer holding the beautiful timbre of before. I wonder if his arm still troubles him. How quickly do behemoths heal? Bline didn't show any sort of mark from the work I did on him when he attacked my house, so they must heal faster.

Layne is shouting back, pulling me out of my ruminations. "No! You betrayed yourself by letting that cursed Spook catch wind of you!" He means Vald.

"Why was he in Ashvale in the first place?" bites out Dalm.

"That was a mistake."

Dalm snorts.

"The Queen is not willing to sit around and be assassinated, Dalm. She's using her forces and resources, too, and she's doing more than simply keeping her head in place. I am not in the position to control what she does or plans."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"She sent one of her servants, a wench called Hermina, to investigate the King's death, instead of going herself, as we had expected. Hermina, of her own initiative—and surely just to spite me—took the Slayers with her. Maybe she suspected your presence, I don't know. Whatever the reason, the Slayers were there."

"I'm aware of that."

"Were you also aware of the fact that the girl knows who you are?"

Dalm's belated response is laced with frustration. "Of course I know that. I—" He pauses.

I loved her, I mouth, hoping he says it, fearing he might.
“I saved her from the Wyn weeks ago,” he finally says roughly.
Of course. Part of the reason I thought that maybe I was in love. Or still am.
“What?” Layne bites on the question.
“You heard me.”
“But, why?”
“She wasn’t a Spark then.”
“Just a girl in the street?”
“I thought the Wyn would ruin my disguise, so I tried to stop him from hurting the girl and causing a ruckus. He struck me faster than I expected. The wench took the opportunity to slip away. It was a mistake—one that I’m regretting now.”
He regrets it.
A part of me regrets it, too. If Bline had killed me at the beginning, this never would have happened.
“I used it to my advantage later, though; she directed me out of town without incident, allowing me to follow the King. I was able to ambush him a day or two later.”
“I already received your report.”
“Now you have extra details.”
Layne pauses. “We can still manage this.”
“No. I won’t run the risk of being killed by that Spook.”
“He’s laid down—he wouldn’t be able to attack you if he wanted. You nearly killed him.”
I can almost hear Dalm shaking his head. “I don’t care about the Spook—alive or dead, I have no desire to ever see him again. I have one goal: the Queen’s death. I am going to Malvilyn tonight to finish this.”
“She has protection.”
“Yes. But is it enough?”
Layne is quiet. “I...I don’t know.”
“I think you do.”
I hear a crash echo from across the way, muffled by the building and distance.
“What was that?” Layne’s voice.
“Where is the Spook?” Dalm’s voice tightens.
“A-across the street, in an inn.”
“Across the street? Are you mad? You led me to him!”
“No, no, he’s still—”
“He’s here!”
Glass breaks, the building shakes, and the next thing I know is that the large windowed-doors overlooking the garden explode outward, a shower of shards and scraps of wood flying past me. A blur accompanies the specks of crystal and is almost instantly airborne. The banister Dalm steps on as he leaps off the balcony pulverizes and I feel the overhang weaken.
I watch, eyes wide, as something drops down on top of the soaring figure.
Vald.
The two crash midair, then spiral to the ground a block away. Everything trembles a little when they connect to the ground.
I have to help my Spook.

Just as I start to move, I hear Layne's voice by my elbow. "This is bad," he whispers.

I turn to reply, but stop. He hasn't noticed I'm there. Instead, he stares out in the direction of the fallen Vyn and my Spook. "He has to know. They have to know," he says to himself. Then he turns and disappears in his office. I peek around the corner, watching as he struggles to get a lamp lit. I think about confronting him now, but I can hear footsteps. Those guards who are a whistle's call away must be approaching.

Layne will have to wait.

I shimmy down the lattice work and make a run for the garden wall. I don't even care if someone sees me retreating—Vald needs me.

Mud sucks at my boots, slowing me down. I try to ignore it and push for the wall, brushing through some shrubs until I hit the brick. I jump, kicking against the rough texture. Reaching up, I take one step, a second, and my hands clasp the lip of the wall. Flexing my fingers, I strain until I can lever myself over the wall and drop down to the other side.

I land harder than I expect, but don't waste any time catching my breath.

As I run, I hope that I can catch them quickly. Vald is still weak—Dalm is still in my heart.

I guess I've decided.

I want to love.

THE ALLEWAYS of Tintyr used to confuse me; the outskirts—near where I used to live—follow the canals, making the roads curving and often indirect. Yet the bazaar—which is closer to The Quiet Inn and Layne’s office—and the governmental and city center are all built on more rigid, square-like formations. Canals can cut across and the street will either end or a small bridge will gap the distance. The difference took a while to get used to.

Ever since the accident and my time as a street, though, I’ve learned all about the place. The watchtowers that dot the city help—in fact, they were designed specifically to do so. Getting a higher perspective on everything helped to map the city in my mind. Now I almost always know where I am.

Even now.

I know that because of the direction that the fight is headed—and I can hear it over my ragged breathing and the incessant rain—that the best way to get there is to hit the rooftops. This section of town may have straighter roads, but the cobbles are in disrepair, the debris that litters the ground is difficult to spot in the murky light that peeks through the clouds, and there is always the possibility of bumping into people.

The roofs have none of these difficulties.

I burst out of an alleyway and head straight for the lowest building. Using the same technique that I used on the garden wall, I catch an exposed timber in the facade. Kicking against the stones, I heave with my arms and roll through a large puddle on the rooftop. I regain my feet and head north, following the sounds of battle.

The buildings are often of different height, but they have the advantage of being close together. Frequently, I simply jump, clearing a few feet over an alley to land on the next roof and continue. Wooden arches span larger sections here, letting me run across roads that would otherwise be too spacious for me to pass. I occasionally have to circumvent a bigger building, or bypass a thatched roof that looks too waterlogged to trust.

I make good time, I think, and catch up to them in Farthan’s Square. The large statue of Farthan—some friend of a bygone king; said to be the first to understand how the whispers work, or something like that—is already down. A large, noticeable dent in its midsection tells me that someone—I hope it was Dalm, but, in a way, I hope it was Vald, too—struck that center section. The force bent the statue and toppled it.

The fountain over which the statue had stood is little more than rubble now. The porcelain is shattered and strewn over the square. The marble benches that had surrounded the long-empty fountain are likewise destroyed. In fact, Vald is using one right now as a weapon, swinging it wildly at Dalm, desperately trying to score a hit. Lamplight from dozens of windows with frightened and curious citizens cast a strange yellow hue on the scene. Glass, ruined property, and mud speckle the area.

Dalm dodges another swing from Vald. He’s keeping his distance, favoring his broken arm, but I can see from my vantage point (clinging to the chimney of a store on the opposite side of the square) that Dalm has committed himself to the fight. He isn’t going to run again. I can tell by his stance.

It ends tonight.

Vald rears back and launches the bench at Dalm, who ducks beneath the missile.

It shatters against the brick facade of a lawyer's office. Part of the exploding debris peppers the door and cracks a window that had somehow remained untouched so far.

Dalm dives in quickly, unleashing a volley of punches and kicks with such speed that I can't distinguish when one blow ends and another begins. How he does it with his injured elbow, I don't know. Vald, however, takes each punch with a leg or an arm, deflecting the force of the blow away from himself. His shirtless-chest bares a mural of bruises, and old wounds have opened again. Each new punch shakes water and blood off of my Spook, miniature explosions across his body. His cotton trousers—perfect for sleeping, not fighting—are soaked and torn, barely holding together at all.

They trade blows for a moment, neither one gaining any noticeable advantage over the other. Dalm will take a solid punch to the jaw, then return the favor by slamming his knee into Vald's stomach. They battle back and forth, sometimes catching the other unaware, sometimes slipping in the mud and water. The rain has stopped now, and a hole in the clouds lets in beams of moonlight that helps me to see.

An unexpected kick catches Vald in the midriff, sending him backwards, skittering against the ground and only stopping once he hits my building. I almost lose my balance, and have to clutch the chimney to keep from pitching over the edge. I don't even see when it happened, but Dalm is falling toward Vald, his remarkable face strained with hatred and stained with watery blood.

My soul trembles to see them fight.

I love them both.

I want this to end.

Vald sees the attack in time to put up a weak defense. The planet shakes as Dalm's punch is blocked by Vald's fist. Flesh and bone crumple beneath the force of the Vyn's strike. They hang for a moment—an eternity—staring into each other's eyes. Dalm is perched on the remains of Vald's arm, balanced as perfectly as though he were standing. My Spook grits his teeth and pushes, knocking Dalm onto his back.

Despite losing the use of his left hand, Vald regains his feet so quickly that I miss it. He punts Dalm in the stomach, which sends the behemoth into the far end of the square. The Vyn explodes against the corner of a building, mortar and timber spiraling away in all directions. Dalm strikes the face of one building, bounces off, and crumples to the ground.

Vald drops on him like an avalanche, driving the behemoth deeper and deeper into a crater that wasn't there before tonight. He starts to stomp, tamping Dalm's handsome face into the ground.

I think I can feel each blow.

I want to turn away, but I can't.

Something about the scene, so dreadful and wondrous, keeps me staring.

With each stomp, the hole deepens. Grunting—scarcely audible over the rain—Vald hefts the Vyn from the pit with one hand and tosses the almost unconscious form into the middle of the square.

I can see that Vald is dragging. He probably hasn't fully recovered from the last fight, and his left arm is a mess. I can see the glimmer of white bone through the strips of red flesh. It dangles uselessly at his side.

Dalm stirs as my Spook approaches. He manages to get onto his hands and knees before Vald darts in and kicks him into the air. Before the Vyn can get any altitude, Vald

drops his elbow into his opponent's back, forcing him back to the ground. Dalm's scream of pain sends chills up my back and rends my heart. I clutch the chimney tighter.

I may have to watch my Spook beat someone I love to death.

Dalm makes for a desperate tackle, hoping to knock Vald over. Taking advantage of the Vyn's ineffective attack, Vald brings his knee into the bottom of the behemoth's chin. I hear bone crack and see the blood and teeth spiral out from the mouth.

The kiss—my only kiss—came from those lips. I can't turn away as they crack and bleed, bursting like overripe fruit. My stomach heaves with distress.

I loved him.

Dalm becomes airborne with the momentum, his head snapped back and his body arched. Vald snatches the Vyn's foot with his right hand, twirls him about, and slams him against the ground. I watch as a rapidly expanding sphere explodes out from where Dalm landed, plumes of mud and water shooting out between the cracks of the cobbles. I feel the tremor shake up my legs and rattle my teeth.

With a surprising leap, my Spook rises higher than the buildings, the Vyn trailing behind, body limp. Vald spins before releasing the behemoth, sending him directly on the still-standing pedestal of Farthan. Rain water, dust, blood, and pedestal explode away. I duck behind the chimney as the building shudders and flying shards hail past me.

I peek back just in time to see Vald land—hard—on a building top next to where I am perched. The building cracks and shifts beneath him. He slumps and tumbles off the edge, dropping twenty feet to the ground.

He doesn't move.

Neither does Dalm.

Fighting against tears, I work my way off the roof, then pick my way through the detritus. I don't know which one to go to first.

I love them both, in their own way.

I want Dalm to be normal.

I want us to be normal together.

It will never happen.

I want Vald to be normal.

I want us to be normal together.

It will never happen.

Vald is more important.

I head for him. He is staring at the sky, flat on his back.

"Vald?"

He turns to look at me. "Amela?" he says weakly.

"I'll get help. You'll be all right."

He nods. "He isn't dead."

"What?" My heart leaps, but I force it down. The Dalm I love is dead—he never really existed, I suppose, save in my mind.

He gestures toward his fallen opponent, but the effort proves too painful. "He isn't dead," he repeats.

I swallow nervously. My trembling hand brushes against the bulge in my pocket. The fireball. Though cracked, I still (foolishly) carry it around with me. I've always felt as though a particular purpose awaited the fireball, as though I needed to save it for some reason.

Maybe this is it.
Maybe I have to do this—I have to do it out of love.
“Stay here,” I command him.
He grunts. I guess he has no plans of moving anyway.
I approach the landing site of the behemoth cautiously. Nothing moves.
I take another step. Then another.
Dalm is dead.
He must be.
I can't decide if I should cry or not.
I stride forward, then shriek with surprise when Dalm lunges forward. My heart hammers in my chest and it takes concentrated effort to swallow. I lick my lips and approach the writhing Vyn.
He groans in pain, and stretches toward me, dragging his body out of the rubble. His legs are twisted at all the wrong angles, and it's apparent that his back is broken somewhere. Still, he approaches. I expect hatred in his eyes.
Instead, I only see pain, fear, and what could be taken for longing.
“Kill me,” he whispers, just loud enough for me to hear him.
I hesitate, though my still shaking hand does close gently around the fractured fireball.
He wants me to kill him, to end his suffering.
I want to kill him, to end his suffering.
If it's what we both want, then why does it hurt so badly?
“Dalm?”
“Amela...please.”
I shake my head. I can't simply end it. Not this way.
“I can't.”
“Please.”
“I need to know why, Dalm. I need to know.”
“Why what?”
“Why didn't you run like you said you would? Why did you come back?”
His body slumps a little. I think he's dead—I almost wish he were, because then I wouldn't have to go through with this—but then he stirs and answers. “It has to finish. Somehow, it needs to end.” He shakes his head. “I...didn't want it to slip out of my control. I just needed it done.”
I don't quite understand what he means.
“What are you talking about?”
Dalm takes a deep breath, pushing past the pain and talking through his ruined mouth. “I sacrificed everything to do this. To Fold into this shape. I committed myself to the cause of unseating your King and Queen, of taking them out of power.”
This isn't what I meant. He knows that, but he wants to tell me something more.
“Why?” I repeat.
“It needed to be done.”
“You killed the King.”
“Yes.”
From his mouth, from my question. It's true.
“And you're saying it needed to be done? You butchered his people! His entire

Caravan! They're still finding pieces of them!"

"Everything I said was true."

"Everything?"

He pauses, pushing past the pain so that he can speak. "About my country. My land. I'm not from the Sparselands."

"I realize this now."

He almost smiles. "Fair. But the Isles of the Vyn, my motherland, that is where my heart is. I cannot let this drought kill us. We needed to be here—to preserve it. I needed to do this."

"Who else is in on this?"

He shakes his head. "Layne. He was my contact. His orders come from elsewhere. I don't know anything more."

I stare into his eyes. "Did you love me?"

He looks down for a moment, then back. "Yes."

"You sounded like you hated me when you were talking to Layne."

He frowns a little, and swallows past the agony that's surely burning in him. "You heard?"

"I was there."

"I didn't know...I didn't know that your 'boss' was Layne."

"He isn't anymore."

Dalm snorts, but the action hurts. I want to cradle him, I want him to feel safe. I want him to feel loved.

I don't move.

"Why did you speak like that of me?"

"To protect you."

I make a query in my throat, a grunt of confusion.

"I didn't want him to know what I really thought of you, how I really feel."

Swallowing against the emotion welling inside, I find my voice and ask, "How do you really feel?"

"I...I love you, Amela."

This nearly breaks me, and my eyes mist. Still, I refuse to let the tears fall.

"I love you, Dalm." And it's true. For both of us. It's true.

"But it must end this way," he rasps.

I nod.

"You asked why I didn't run?"

I nod again.

"The real answer is that it was for you. Don't think me a monster, Amela."

"Never."

He gasps and convulses. I wonder if he is about to die.

"It...it isn't enough," he says.

"What isn't?"

"What your Spook did to me. My body—it's stronger than this."

My heart swells for a brief moment. If he can heal, we can run away. We'll find my family, or return to his people, or...or something equally impossible, I realize. He can't recover from this. He is merely writhing in agony, waiting for his body to give up. But it won't do so easily.

I lick my lips, casting about for a reason to keep him talking, to hear his ruined voice again.

“Dalm?”

“Amela?”

“Why were you in the bazaar?” Anything to keep him talking. I want him to live.

“When?”

“When Bline died.”

He grimaces and twitches a bit, but answers anyway. “I was reporting to Layne there. Your Spook stumbled upon me, shrieking that a behemoth was near. Bline burst upon him before I could decide whether or not to attack. Layne fled, and then, moments later, you showed up. I don’t know if the Spook was originally after me or the Wyn, but either way, I managed to escape to the south again.” The lengthy answer leaves him winded.

“Why were you in Ashvale?”

“Waiting.”

“For whom?”

“The Queen. She was to come and investigate the King’s death.” He shakes his head a little. “But she didn’t come. And she didn’t come. And she didn’t come. Then I found you.”

Frowning, I stew on this for a moment. “But Dalm, I’m the Queen’s bodyguard—Vald and I, that is. We are specifically assigned to protect her. Why would Layne order you to attack her when a Spook would have been by her side?”

Dalm’s face clouds in anger. “Layne...Layne wanted me to fail. He must have been planning on using you to extinguish me—a loose tongue, perhaps, that needed to be cut out.”

His anger makes him writhe, which results in more pain than he can handle. He fades out of consciousness. Finally, I stoop down and cradle his head in my lap. “Dalm?” I whisper. “Dalm?”

Fluttering eyelids and a gasp of ragged breath.

“Amela?”

“I love you,” I say as thunder peals and shakes loose a fresh volley of rain.

“I know.”

“I do this for you.”

“It is for the best.”

Oh, how I hate that phrase.

He closes his eyes. I hug his head for a little bit longer, until the idea of what I have to do becomes too much.

I remove the fireball and place it next to his head. He has slipped into sleep, leaving me to finish the job myself.

I do this for love.

To end his pain.

I shove the plunger down, shattering the inner vial, then scramble backwards quickly. I only have a few seconds.

The explosion of the fireball is greater than I expected, obliterating concrete and sending me reeling. The fire burns hot and rapidly, and I see that Dalm’s body has been blown in half.

Dalm is dead.

Tears should fall from my eyes. I feel them, lodged right behind my tongue. But they stay in my bursting forehead.

I let the sky weep for me instead.

HERMINA HAS taken my favorite seat at the table. Shema looks up from the tray she's carrying over, her eyes wide. I've made it a point to use Shema's help whenever possible, and now she looks to me as her lady more than the owner of the inn. I force a smile for her, trying to tell her with my eyes that she needn't be embarrassed for serving someone else. She nods curtly and deposits the food—a light meal of bread, bacon, butter, and juice. It makes my stomach throb.

“Glad to see you awake.” Hermina crosses her legs, the ebony of her dress drinking the lamplight of the room.

“Vald made noise,” I explain. For the last couple of days and nights, I've been helping Vald recover. His injuries are dire, and his convalescence doesn't have the added perk of whisper-assisted healing that he had while Dalm was still alive. Without that, he heals like a normal person, and he's not doing well. The medics are amazed that he still draws breath. I sleep at the foot of his bed, now, on a cot provided by the inn. Vald often has nightmares and needs someone to calm him so that he doesn't damage what the medics have done to help him.

I often have nightmares of Dalm burning alive, screaming for me to help him. I can't do anything, for the flames are too intense.

I am exhausted, haunted, and generally in a bad mood.

Hermina's presence was expected, but sooner than now. Still, it's nice to see the face of someone who isn't Vald or the medic. Layne has been conspicuously absent, having only sent a letter to explain to both the owner of The Quiet Inn (whom I still haven't met) and the medic that all bills will be taken care of by the Crown's coffers. I haven't heard from him since, though I peek out of the window every night to see if the lamps in Layne's building are lit, announcing his return. I don't know where Layne actually lives, so I can't pay him a personal visit. I have questions, and Layne has answers. I plan on getting them as soon as possible.

“How is Vald?” She pours herself a small cup of juice.

I take a deep breath as I sit across from her. I snatch up a chunk of bread and layer bacon on top. I chew for a moment before I answer. I know it's rude—that's why I'm doing it. “How much do you care?”

Hermina's composure doesn't flap. “Enough to want to hear an answer.”

I sigh. Around the meat and dough in my mouth, I say, “Well, his left arm has been shattered—literally. Both of the bones in the forearm and all of the bones in his hand are pretty much pulverized. His arm started healing while in the fight, so there is something for the medic to work with, but he isn't confident about any permanent success. Amputation seems the most likely.” I fight back memories of seeing Mama after her surgery—the bloody bandages, the etchings on her face from the phantom pain. Eventually, her mind just stopped working quite right. She hasn't been the same since then. I fear to think of the same thing happening to Vald.

“When would they do that?”

The question brings me out of my brief reverie. “Not for a while. He has severe hemorrhaging internally, caused by the blows. Both shins are cracked from landing after his jump, and there are still several dozen contusions, rips, and cuts. The medic wonders if he'll be able to survive. He's running a fever that torments him with nightmares, so he

is bound to the bed to prevent him from undoing what has been done. Bedsores are opening on his shoulders, buttocks, and right side. Once he's a bit more stable from the injuries, then we'll discuss him losing the arm, provided it doesn't worsen." I ignore the pain the words poke in me. I focus on the food instead.

"Aren't they worried about gangrene?"

"Immensely. I'm sure that's what the fever is fighting, but I think his left arm is rotting with pus and infection." I take another bite of bacon. It's delicious. "It stinks powerfully in there. Do you want to visit him?"

Hermina quickly shakes her head and sets down the crust of bread she had been nibbling. "No, thank you. Not right now, at any rate." She sighs and looks out at the bright world. Yesterday, the rain stopped. Everything is heating up, though areas flooded, it's said. I hope that Layne isn't lying about where my family is. Both he and Hermina claim that they are safe and sound, but what if they're in a dungeon or prison like the one that Vald was in, below ground and inundated with water? I hope not, but I fear that such might be the case.

I miss Dalm and my family more than I thought possible. I fear for Vald. I swallow against that pain as well. I suddenly lose my appetite and sit back.

"He can't travel, then?"

"Who?" I ask, pulling out of my thoughts. "Oh, Vald?"

"Aye."

I shake my head. "No. The medic would never allow it. Besides, this weather? It would only make it worse, I'm sure."

Hermina nods, biting her lower lip, white teeth just barely visible. "She won't like that."

"Who?"

"The Queen."

I blink. "Why would the Queen dislike Vald's ability to travel?"

Hermina gives me the kind of look I would expect she gives half-wit servants who spill soup on the table. "Mel, Vald killed the King's assassin!"

I shrug. I told them that—Layne and Hermina and whoever was around when we finally got Vald back to the inn—rather than the truth. I can barely stand to think of what I had to do. Sometimes it cripples me with melancholy. Usually I just push it aside, and try to focus on helping Vald get better. Usually it doesn't work.

"The Queen wants to honor him."

"Honor a Spook?" I chortle a bit. "Why?"

"Because, that's what she wants to do. She is the Queen, after all. She gets what she wants."

"Well, two problems I see with that, Hermina: One, is that Vald is in the cusp of life and death. I'm not interested in seeing him tip the wrong way by making an unnecessary trip to Malvilyn. Two, is that Vald wouldn't care anyway! If she gave him a medal, he'd probably ask after the health of her flatulence or something equally embarrassing. Anyone who hears him knows he's completely wrapped. There's no reason to expose him to public ridicule. He already brings enough on himself anyway."

Hermina gases an exasperated sigh. "We don't award Spooks, Mel. We award their Sparks." She shakes her head, patently disappointed. "Don't you use sense?"

"Left that behind the day a Wyn tried to eat me."

Hermina pauses for a slight breath. “Fair. But the point stands: The Queen wants to meet you and Vald.”

“We’re not going anywhere.”

She regards me for a minute or so before saying, “I think you're right. I will inform her that now is not the time.”

I reach to grab her hand as she rises, apparently aiming to leave. “Hermina, I've done a lot for you. You and Layne, actually. Is there any way that I can see my family?” I swallow nervously. “I miss them terribly, and there's no chance Vald and I can do what we are supposed to do right now, what with his injuries. Please?”

Hermina pats my hand gently. “I'm sorry, girl. I cannot help you. Layne is the one who would authorize you seeing them, and I don't know where he is.”

“Why is he the only one?” I want to know. “Don't all Recruiters have the same authority?”

“That is the way of things. I'm sorry. I know that it is hard to hear.”

I snort derisively. “I don't think you do.”

After a moment: “Perhaps you're right. Still, you have my condolences.”

I grunt. She leaves. I push at the food on my plate a little, but it still doesn't appeal to me. I feel tired and stretched, as if I've been pulled too much and in too many directions. I keep falling back to the memory of Dalm exploding, but eventually it becomes a numb thought and I store it away, oathing that I won't think of it again. My mind then probes at the idea of having abandoned my family in the darkness of the tunnel, and the guilt cobbles me.

I think of the book—Pops' book, the one that he used to teach me to read when I was younger, the book that was so important to him...the one that Bline destroyed when he destroyed my house. It takes me but a heartbeat to recall the title: *Gamie's Gamble*.

Gamie's gamble is that her family would come after her if she ran away. Gamie is a young girl (at the time, someone I could really connect to) who decides that she isn't being treated fairly by her family. She decides to load up all of her personal belongings into a little sack and then run away. It tells about her adventures, how she meets up with jack-a-napes and trouser-trolls—an entire host of the fantastic. Things go poorly for her near the end, but she is rescued from the wind pirates by none other than her father, who came after her when he learned she had run away. He had spent all of that time looking for her. Her gamble paid off.

I don't deny wishing—on many occasions—to run away. I try to accept the pain and move on, but my conscience points out the bitterness that I held once—the anger at having to provide for everyone after the accident. But I still harbor tiny feelings of resentment against them, and would often voice discontent about situations that, to me, seemed too unfair.

I often wanted to be Gamie—especially after the accident. I always felt as though I were Gamie, and that I should run away from the difficulty of living with crippled Pops, slightly wrapped Mama, and half-wit Kev. If I were Gamie, Pops would rescue me in the last chapter; Pops would be able to walk, because Gamie's father doesn't use wheels. Of course, if I were Gamie, the fantastic would be story, not my reality. If I were Gamie, the book could be closed and I would stop being.

Aye, there it is.

I don't wish I were dead, necessarily. But I wish that my life weren't so hard, that I

didn't have to do what I have done. I do wish that. At the moment, I want nothing more than sleep—and what's so wrong with hoping with a tiny part of my mind that I don't wake up? What's the point of life when it's one painful event after another merely? Why can't I slip away?

But I can't close a book on myself. I can't simply stop being. Unlike a book, this is life. This is real. This is inescapable. And my family needs me. They do, wherever they are.

With a disgusted sigh, I step away from the table. The day is burning brightly, and I don't want to be inside any longer. I catch Shema's eye as I leave. “Watch Vald, please. Send someone to find me if there's a problem,” I instruct.

“Where will you be, m'lady?”

I pause on the threshold. “Out.”

As I leave—attired only in trousers and a thin, sleeveless tunic, leaving my longjacket behind—I wonder where I'm headed. I need to get away from the inn so that I can be alone and think. Yet it was thinking that drove me out in the first place.

I wish that we were training still; that, at least, would give me some direction, something to focus on. Something different. But, at the same time, that would require too much energy, and I'm glad I don't have to see Jeskin now. I release a gusty sigh, tired of rolling in my personal paradoxes.

I'm aimless as I wander, and my thoughts reflect that. Nothing stays in my mind for long. I keep turning facts over in my head, trying to coerce more meaning from each detail I know: Dalm's intentions and his love, Layne's involvement, and the blight of two behemoths in less than two months—and my folly for falling in love with one of them. I try to get the pieces to fit, to divine Layne's reasons for wanting the King dead—what, does he think that the Queen would marry him, making him King Elect? Besides, what good would marrying an infertile Queen? All it could earn him is a public death.

I wander the streets, at last finding a watchtower that will provide shade and a view of the city. I already know where I am, but looking from a different angle sometimes helps to clear my thinking. The Nords know that I could use a good mental cleaning.

The wind whistles through the open top, pushing around the cool air and a good bucketful of dirt as I open the door. A broad staircase spirals up the side, the iron railing rusting at the joints. A small table is visible behind the metal bars in what I've heard the Militiamen originally call “the Cage.”

I often wonder who it was who thought up the idea of turning the public service of watchtowers into small lodgings for Militiamen on patrol. It makes sense; take the most visible, easiest to find buildings, let the public use the outside while the Militia can use the inside as a place to keep a cot, some emergency supplies, and even some weapons. I once overheard a Militiaman bragging about having locked up a street inside the Cage, securing the metal grate with a large padlock that I doubt I could pick. The street howled and screamed, but no one could do anything about it. When they finally released the poor wretch, she was little more than skin-wrapped bone.

No one is in the Cage right now, though the dirty cot in one corner looks like it's been used recently.

With one hand on the cool stone to guide me, I start the upward hike. I look down the center of the stairwell at the top of the Cage. Bird dung from scores of years have

encrusted the iron bars with permanent white stalactites. It makes my stomach lurch, and I focus on walking instead.

I reach the top and stare out over the city, the new view doing nothing for me. Still, I sit for hours, watching the sun push the shadows around, the people scurry below. Though the avenues are almost always crowded during the day, I never feel a part of them. The density of people only further pushes me away, securing my isolation from them. At one time I considered them all potential victims—of a scam (which was rare) or a pick (much more common), it wouldn't matter. Later, after meeting Vald and assuming my new responsibilities, I realized that they were less victims and more innocents needing protection.

Now, however, I think of them as ignorant, hateful masses, blinded by soft living, simple pleasures, and endless avarice. I see people bickering over an insignificant trinket, each equally convinced that he is the destined and true owner—and, similarly, that life will be better upon the obtaining of it. I watch as a merchant is scammed—two streets pretend to study his wares while a third comes behind and thieves two pockets filled with goods, then walks off whistling. I don't cringe when an old lady gets knocked down, her basket of breads jarred loose. Buns and baguettes bounce away, a round loaf rolling beneath the hooves of a passing orse. None stops to help; some stoop to steal. My heart hardly moves as I see her crawl away, her cries unheard and unheeded.

I don't judge them, I think. I don't want to judge them, for I've been there, eking out a miserable existence. It hurts to think I would never be one who helped any of those below—mediated the situation between the arguing men, whose altercation has escalated to violence; warned the merchant of the swindle; helped the woman reclaim her feet and her wares. I cannot judge those who act as I once did, particularly those who do so out of necessity. Tintyr is hardly a city of impeccable morals; yet I wish that I could do something to dislodge this hatred I feel for those below.

Mayhap I do judge them, then, not for their crimes, but for being ignorant of them. Like I was.

Looking over the sea of teeming humanity, my back against the windowsill of the watchtower, my arms locked around my legs, I hope to see something that redeems—someone who behaves how I wish I would...an altruistic act, a kind word. A genuine smile.

The hours pass, the throng changes in kind but not in clamor; though the faces have moved on—the Militia has come and arrested both men involved in the disagreement, the merchant has realized his loss and closed shop for the day, and the old woman has been gone for hours—the deeds repeat with little variation. Dislike. Envy. Hatred. Violence. I keep hoping to see the scene at the mouth of the alleyway that Dalm and I performed, the first kiss of an enamored pair.

It is nowhere to be seen, despite hours of watching.

I itch to drop off the edge. I can almost hear the sounds of the rushing air. Jump, jump, jump. If I dive into the ground as I would a clear pond, I would break and sleep.

I could do it.

I could jump.

I could be with Dalm, if there's another side.

Without realizing it, I stagger to my feet. The wind, having blustered all day, now takes a break. The balcony, rimmed with an ornate banister, heats up. I can feel the sweat

trickling between my shoulder blades as the too hot sun reflects off the bleached colors of the city. Dust swims in what little saliva remains in my mouth.

I take a step to the edge.

Rough beneath my fingers, I grip the baking banister with both hands. The wind kicks up, hurrying past my ears. The light makes me squint. I glance into the pure blue sky and sigh.

I'll miss it, like I miss Dalm and Pops and Kev and Mama.

"I'll miss it," I repeat aloud.

My melancholy—my depression, my sadness—tells me that I could end it that easily. Yearning for sleep—when was the last time I truly slept? When did I last rest comfortably? When did I last dream without the heavy footsteps of behemoths haunting the corridors of my mind?

I don't think I ever have.

No sleep.

No rest.

No chance to change my mind.

I should follow what they say.

Jump, jump, jump.

I would be free.

Emancipated.

Unburdened.

Vald would become someone else's care.

Pops and Mama...Kev.

No, they are gone to me. I must let them go. I haven't seen them in over a month, a year, or a lifetime. I can't remember now.

Dalm is dead. He loved me. I loved him.

But gone, too, is he.

The heat burns salt into my eyes. I blink, surprised to feel tears running down my cheeks.

How long have I been crying. How long since I cried for myself?

I can scarcely remember what I've done the last week, but I remember the last time I truly wept. Not out of pain. Not out of fear, but out of the raw emotion that has no name and no other outlet.

It was the day that I learned of Pops and Mama and Kev. It was when they showed me my new family, changed. Ruined. Broken.

Nine years ago, I wept.

I did not cry when I killed him.

I did not cry at my heartache.

I did not cry when I lost my family.

I did not cry when Vald came back to me crippled and on the verge of death.

I weep now.

With a huff of exertion, I pull myself onto the banister, wobbling as I stand erect.

I will end proudly.

Jump, jump, jump.

I can do it.

Jump, jump, jump.

I can end it.

A wry smile tugs at my mouth as the wind tugs at my clothes, coaxing me to fall. If I were Vald, if I were hearing the whispers, I would be hearing the same thing, I figure, save it would be telling me that I would survive.

I finally understand what it must be like to be fully, unconditionally wrapped.

It's like breathing freedom.

Jump, jump, jump.

I take a deep breath, as if about to swim. With a giddy laugh I let the breath go.

I won't need it anymore.

Jump, jump, jump.

I SEE it:

My body, pristinely poised, arms out, palms down. I gather energy in my legs. I bend down, then leap. I scrape the sky and plummet.

Falling tears the tears off my cheeks, leaving me pure and clean.

The wind rips past me, powerless to stop my weight.

The oblivious crowd teems below.

The earth lurches up to embrace me, and I shatter.

Blackness.

Nothing.

Freedom.

With a deep sigh, I spread out my arms. I can see it in my mind; I will see it in reality.

I don't regret it.

Below and behind me, I hear a bang, a sudden noise that's so strange and curious that it jolts me. Did someone just enter the Cage?

I look between my feet. The earth beckons.

I hear another sound, over the wind, a voice, talking. It sounds vaguely familiar—nasal, insistent. I glance over my shoulder, but I can't see anything.

The ground still waits.

With a sigh, I clamber down. I don't want my final seconds plagued with curiosity. I'll simply check on who's below, then return to the edge and dive to my death.

What's a few more seconds, anyway? The ground can wait a bit longer.

I edge forward, being infinitely more cautious than when I perched on the railing of the watchtower. The voice drifts up to me.

"...flaming Militia. They think they can just do whatever they please, as if no one is as good as them. They think they own the people! Well, they don't own me!"

I peek over the edge, doing my best not to creak the wood of the landing. It happens anyway.

"Huh?" The voice snaps toward me. "What was that?"

With a mild curse, I straighten. I don't want to cause a problem, but I'm not worried about being caught. After all, I have a ready escape route. The ground is still waiting for me, I'm pretty sure.

Leaning over the edge, I start to see a flame marching up the spiral stairs. "Who's there?" The voice is strained and tight, like a reed close to breaking. I don't move, waiting for the stranger to round into view.

My jaw drops when it does. It isn't a flame—it's hair.

"Mel?"

"Logan?"

"What are you doing here?" I demand.

"What are you doing here?" he demands at the same time.

"I was about to jump," I reply.

"I live here," answers he over the top of me.

"Live here?" I grimace, confused.

"Jump?" He blanches, anxious.

I shake my head. “Logan, where have you been?”

“I might well ask the same of you.” His eager face hardens a little. “You left us to die.” Only then do I glance down. His right arm is gone after the elbow. Soft, pink flesh is visible beneath the short sleeve of his tunic. The bandages probably came off no more than a fortnight past.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “That wasn't it at all. I've been trying.” I look at his eyes, all the tears that I thought I had shed resurfacing, blurring my vision. “Nords only know how hard I've been trying to get back to you and my family.”

He snorts. “I sure believe you.” It doesn't sound like he believes me. He takes a step forward, and I can't tell if it's menacing or not. The sight of his anger gives me pause. It stabs at me, and I think back to the allure of the ground. If I jump, the hurting stops.

Then I look closer. It isn't just anger, but despair and frustration lurking in his gaze. For a blinding moment, I can imagine what he must be feeling—and what he felt. Abandoned in a tunnel, hand throbbing and utterly crushed, only Pops nearby for support, the darkness punctuated by the occasional flash of flint. His life was leaking out of his hand, relying on me. Both of them, their hopes pinned fully on me. The fact that Logan shrived me fades into an insignificant fleck, and I feel ashamed for having left them behind.

“What happened?”

“You don't want to know.”

“I do.” I looked into his pain-filled eyes, knowing that seeing me here was the last thing that he probably would have expected—or wanted. “I do want to know.”

My sincerity seems to take him by surprise. “You weren't told?”

I shake my head.

With a sigh he glances out over the city. “It's windy up here. Come, let's go talk.” He gestures with his only hand down to the Cage.

“You live in the Cage?” I ask as we descend.

He nods. “For now. I can't go back home—it's ruined.”

“I know.”

“How?”

“I saw.”

“You saw what the behemoth did?”

“Aye.”

Logan doesn't seem to hear me. “He wrecked it after you left us in the tunnel!” He swallows, his throat bobbing conspicuously. “My family...” He coughs a bit. “They didn't make it out in time.”

That's new. I don't know what to say. I had always begrudged Bline for taking our home, for thrusting me into this situation. But no one I know had died yet. I think of Logan's family, his parents and sister. I can't imagine them dead. They were always considerate and kind, if a little distant. I preferred it that way, of course. I hated thinking that anyone knew that I was a street.

But they are dead.

Because of Bline.

Because of me.

I shake my head and let a grim smile crease my face. “Well, he's dead now.”

“Who?”

“Blimey,” I say as we reach the ground floor. “He’s dead now.”

Logan looks at me blankly. “Who?”

“The behemoth that attacked your family.”

“Oh.” He nods, apparently unmoved. “So that’s what the story’s about.”

“What story?”

“The one about how you killed a behemoth this last week.”

Dalm. That’s who he means, not Blimey. But he can’t know the difference.

Dalm.

My heart skips a beat, but I refuse to focus on him. I will forget him as much as I can.

I remain silent as he jimmy’s the lock open with one hand, giving us entrance to the Cage. He swings the lock around and locks us in from the inside. I tip my eyebrow at him. “It makes it harder for them to get to me at night.” He gestures to the cot with his right arm. “When I’m sleeping.”

I nod. I guess it makes sense. I take a deep breath of the slightly moldy air and say, “I’m glad you’re safe, for now.”

He nods. “What have you been doing, Mel?” Pulling up a wobbly stool, he motions for me to sit. He takes an upturned bucket and makes it into his chair.

I quickly outline what I’ve been doing, what happened to me, and why I couldn’t help them earlier. I skip the part about Dalm, though I do mention that I went to the old neighborhood. “I tried to get back to you and Mama and Pops and Kev,” I confessed, “I truly did. I didn’t know what to do. Not only that, but I was so bitter about you shoving me that I almost didn’t care anymore.”

He held up his hand. “Wait. Stop. You think that I *shoved* you?”

This gives me pause. “Didn’t you?”

“Nords, Mel! I would never shove you!” His face falls back into the genuine, honest, buck-toothed mien that I’m accustomed to seeing. Then the countenance cracks, and a glower crosses his young face again. For that brief moment I see that he is just in his fifteens—too young by half to do have lost his arm and live on the streets. But the glower reminds me that, fifteens or no, he has survived. “No, I didn’t shove you. I told the Militiamen who came around that your family was in trouble. That was it.”

I frown. “Then, how did Layne know so much about us? He kept referring to the fact that I’d been shoved to the Recruitment Office and now I was going to be a Spark because of it.”

He shrugs. “I don’t know.”

I bite my lip. If Logan didn’t shove me, why would Layne’s henchmen be waiting for me where they were? How did they know that’s where I would come out? I had always assumed that Logan’s shoving had allowed Layne the time to create my capture—after all, I *was* captured, originally.

“Well,” I say, leaving that puzzle for another time, “tell me what happened to you. How did you get here?”

“Luck.”

“Tell me.”

He sucks in a breath. “After you left, Lander and I sat in the darkness for a long time. We didn’t talk much, especially since I was in so much pain. I started feeling groggy, and told Lander so. His only response was to start singing. Did you know he can

sing like the heavens?”

I nod slightly. Pops hasn't sung since the accident.

Logan continues. “I think a day passed. I was shaking and cold, so Lander scooted over to where I was and flopped over me, helping to keep me warm. I don't remember much after that, until I heard someone say, 'Hold him tight, boys! If he moves while we're cutting, we'll lose more flesh!' I thought I was dreaming, but then the pain started.”

His face blanches to an even paler white. “I...I can't describe it.”

I think of a saw chipping through my bones, ripping through my flesh. I shudder. “What happened next?”

He shrugs. “I passed out. The next thing I knew, I was in a cell with everyone.”

“Everyone?” I pounce.

With a nod he says, “Aye, with everyone. I'm not sure what happened in between the cutting and the waking up, but they rounded us all up and threw us into prison together. Seems that there was plenty of evidence to in...indi...” He stumbles to a stop. “You know, when you're caught breaking the law?”

“Indict? Incriminate?” I offer cautiously.

“Aye, that'll work. They had the evidence to blame Carly for all sorts of fence work. I says, 'Carly, I didn't know you knew how to put together a fence!' He glared at me and says something, but I can never understand the man. I just took it as a reply and nodded.”

“How was your arm?”

“Bandaged and painful.” A pensive look crosses Logan's face. “I can still feel my fingers, sometimes. I wake up and I think I've got wall-crawlers all over my arm, but I can't move it. It itches, too, right here.” He waves his hand past where his forearm should be. “I don't know how long it lasts.”

Mama says it never goes away. I keep that to myself.

“Why did they fix you up?”

“They weren't sure what I was doing with a bunch of criminals, so they were keeping us together.” He shakes his head. “Have you ever been to Rythkar's?”

It's my turn to shake my head. I've heard of it, though.

“Well, it's a mean prison. One big well, see, that goes down and down. They have an elevator that drops down the middle of the shaft, and they use hotrocks' steam to power it. They go up and down all day and all night, stopping at each floor to deposit a criminal, pick up a criminal, deliver food, drop off medicines, and what have you. Every thirty minutes it clanks into place, then drops down. Where we were, right in the middle, it took it another thirty minutes or so before it came clanking up to our floor again. Nearly made me wrapped!”

I force a smile, and I wonder if noise alone could make me insane. The words in the wind just a little while ago were much more enticing than the jarring sound of metal. I can't imagine going crazy by that.

“I figure, I'm innocent of any crime. They'll let me out soon, problemless.” He shakes his head angrily. “Not so.

“They kept us for a fortnight, tending to our wounds—though mine were the worser—and brought word of my family's death. Mayleen and Lander mad sure we had enough to eat, and Kev was kept fairly well.”

Those words nearly melt my heart into tears. I halt my emotion and listen.

“Finally, one day, they take us to move us to a different prison, one in Malvilyn. That's when I had the chance to lam it.” He shakes his right arm, as if his hand were there to wave a dismissal. “I won't bore you with the details, but Carly and I made a break for it. Lander, of course, was on the ground and couldn't move. Kev didn't budge from Mayleen's side, and she would never abandon her husband.” He shrugs, as if the outcome were obvious. “We were the only two capable of running. So we did.”

“What happened?”

Another shrug. “They fired off crossbow bolts. Archers took aim and fired. One hit me here.” He points to his left shoulder with his chin. “Bounced off the bone—no meat to stick into!” His grin is all teeth and no mirth. “Carly, however, had that limp from the fall into the tunnel. He never got over that.” He pauses. “Now he never will. Three crossbow bolts took him through the leg, the side, and the neck. I don't think he felt too much pain.”

The news of Carly's death weighs on me. If I had been faster, or done something to help Pops sooner, his friend would still be alive.

“I managed to get free and run.” He tosses his shoulders back. “Now I'm a street, living off my wits alone.” He scratches at a freckled cheek.

“When did you lam?”

Logan gives a little shake of his head. “Almost a month, I'd guess. I'm not really sure. It would be a lot easier if I didn't have this stump making me memorable. I've moved five or six times to different watchtowers. The locks are easier than a corner whore...” He stumbles to a stop and shoots a glance at me. I guess his time as a street *has* changed him. He blushes a bright red that creeps into his hair roots. “That is, I can pick them with one hand, so you know they're simple.”

I had heard wrong about the locks, apparently.

“So, you live in these different watchtowers?”

“Aye,” he says with a nod. “It's not an easy life, but it keeps me safe at night. Once a Militiaman needs to use my watchtower, I move along. No reason to let them keep track of me.”

I nod. I guess that makes sense. I always had my home and my family to return to after my picking was done. I never slept on the cobbles.

“By the time you ran, then, your arm was healed?”

He sniffs and looks away. “Healed enough. I wasn't in perfect condition, but I got away. The desert was long and hot. I survived, though. You do what you have to. You, of all people, know that.”

I don't know what to say in response, so I look around the area. I look at the rumpled blanket that's on the cot in the corner. Now I know who's been sleeping in it. I notice Logan scratching behind his ear furiously. When he pulls his fingers back, there's blood on them. “Flaming lice. The little bloodsuckers are everywhere.”

“Don't you bathe?”

“The rains have helped, but I can't really make it a habit. I only get a couple of marks a day by begging. That usually proves less painful than when I steal.” He gestures at his dirtied, threadbare clothing. “There isn't a lot I can do to make myself presentable, and bread in the belly is always better than a bath, I've come to say.”

“Logan, I'm sorry.”

“For what?”

“For this!” I'm surprised by his question.

“It's not so bad.” He grins again, his buckteeth gleaming in the fading light. Sunset is still an hour away, but there aren't any windows this far down into the watchtower, and the red beams of the slanting sunlight bathe only the upper reaches. “It's better than living at home.”

This surprises me. “How do you figure?”

One-armed shrug. “Mel, I know that you didn't interact with us much. We only kind of knew each other. One thing I never told nobody was that my parents didn't much care for me. In fact, they hated me.” He pauses. “You know how I said that my parents were part Darshur, and that's why my skin's so pale?”

I nod.

“Well, that's only partially true. *My* parents are full-blooded Darshur. The people I lived with, the people who took me in, they were very partially Darshur, which is why they were a little more pale than you.” He swallows, and I watch as his throat bobs again in his slender neck. “But I'm really from Darshur.”

“I see.”

“And my adopted pappy, he was very patriotic. He would've cried to hear the King had died.” He is looking past me now, his eyes vacant, his mouth rambling. “So it was only natural that his fully-blooded Darshur foster son be beaten, neglected, and hated. All out of his sense of national pride, mind you. I was the enemy's child, and so hurting me hurt them.” His eyes focus on mine and he flashes a humorless smile. “My mum felt similarly, though she had enough compassion to see that I was never killed.”

My head swims as I try to piece this together. “I had no idea.”

“Of course not. Why would my pappy let everyone know he had a future traitor in his midst? Besides, I wanted it that way. The fewer people who knew about my real life, the better.” I remember thinking the same thing, once.

Logan snorts at a thought, then says, “He would've beaten me bloody if he had lived to hear that the King had died—after drying his tears of mourning, you understand. I was the reason things didn't work the way they should have—why his job was worthless, why alcohol burned in him so frequently, why the dearth was scorching the Realm. You name it, it was my fault.” He give his head a small shake. “No, I don't miss him. Nor mum, neither. The whispers take their memory.”

I swallow. “But what of your sister?”

“Preferred princess and heir to everything? She was like furniture—a fixture in my life, a painting that watched my pain, silently agreeing to everything that they did.” He smiles crookedly. “I feel sorry that she didn't make it out, but it's the same sort of sorry I feel when I see a cat run over by a wagon's wheel.”

I sit quietly. “Why don't you come with me? I live at The Quiet Inn, and I can get you a good meal, maybe a bath...” I trailed off to his shaking head.

“I like the cobbles. I like being a street. It fits me.”

I can't fathom this and tell him so.

“You wouldn't be able to. Mel, this is freedom. You spent time as a street—Lander told me so—but you did it for others. Think how much freedom you'd've had if you hadn't had to worry about Kev and the others. You were quick. Were you ever caught?”

“Rarely,” I say, thinking of Bline.

“See? You could've lived a pretty good life problemless. With your quick wit and fast thinking, you'd've been the Queen of the cobbles. But you had different responsibilities. I don't. Following you back for a real meal...” He trails off to the chorus of his stomach rumbling. “You can ignore that.”

I give him an exasperated look. “No, Logan, I can't. Come with me. I want you to.”

Logan shakes his head again, then moves toward the padlock. He inserts a slender pick and works it up and down. “It wouldn't work. You live your life. I'll live mine.” He puts the pick in his mouth and works the lock free. Despite the thin bar in between his teeth, he says lucidly, “If I'm ever in a pinch, I know where I'll go.” He opens up the gate and steps through. “But I'm not in a pinch yet.”

I nod slowly and follow him out. He locks the gate and pockets the pick.

“You know what the *easiest* part of this whole ordeal has been?” he asks as we step into the twilight, breathing in the fresh air.

“What's that?”

“Forgetting about the past.”

Chapter 32

Hermina

I LEAVE Logan alone, as he requested, and go back to the inn. I have a lot to think about, a lot to do, and almost no time in which to do it. Rythkar's is not exactly close to the city, about halfway between here and the capitol. I have no access to carriages or horses, especially since Layne is still absent. I need to get northeast, but city life has made me a stranger to any sort of long distance travel.

I toy with the idea of finding Hermina and asking for her help, but since I had flatly refused to leave for the Queen, I doubt she'll make much effort to assist. I think over others I know, but the only contacts I have are those from my street days, people that Pops knew and would send me to when the job was over. I never did much save the occasional break-in or pickpocket for them, but the marks were pretty good, and they gave us that extra bit that allowed us to live and keep Kev on his medicines.

I shake my head. They would be unable to assist. They're on the wrong side of the Militia. Why would they want to go to prison? I suppose I could get arrested and hope they put me near their cell. With a snort, I dismiss the idea. I need to be free if they are ever to become free.

Perhaps my frustration at the situation is overly apparent, or maybe she's just observant, but Shema catches me before I can make it to my room.

"Are you well, m'lady?"

I shrug. "I suppose."

"You look like you've been crying."

My head feels like it. The pounding pain has been driving at me ever since I stepped off the banister. Strange, that I was so close to jumping earlier. What had possessed me to even think of that? I have a purpose, and I guess I simply forgot it. I push the incident from my mind. It didn't happen—I didn't step off the banister. Why dwell on it?

"It's been a rough day," I evade, sliding past her.

"Is there anything I can do, m'lady? We've got a stew that's almost done."

My stomach grumbles, and I wonder why Logan refused my generosity. I hope that he is well, wherever he may have gone. After we left the watchtower, he drifted toward the Canal District, saying that he had something waiting for him there. I had played with the idea of following him, but anxious thoughts of my family drove me back to the inn.

"Sounds like you'd like that," observes Shema with a wry twist of her lips. "Clean yourself up, put on some clean clothes, and go to your usual spot. I'll have some warm bread and stew waiting for you there."

Too tired to argue, I agree and pad to the bathing room. Twenty minutes pass and I soon find myself with a hearty mutton stew steaming in front of me. I smear some creamed butter on the bread and begin the repast.

Shema shows up part way through the meal. "Anything else, m'lady?"

I start to shake my head, then pause. "How would you get to Rythkar's?"

She smiles hesitantly. "The prison?"

"Aye."

"Commit a crime?"

I shake my head. "No, I need to visit it. Quickly."

Curiosity pricks in her brows, but she holds her question and thinks about mine. “Well, I suppose the Dart could take you pretty close to there. As I understand it, the Militia will often load up prisoners and ship them over on the Dart.”

“The Dart?”

She nods. “It's the large metal carriage capable of carrying over two hundred people. It's powered by hotrocks, and glides across these long metal poles that are held over the ground. I've seen it, occasionally, when my da and I came to sell his wares.” She pauses. “Before I started living and working here.”

I nod. I've heard of it. Everyone's heard of it. But only silver use it, and the Militia is heavy near the station. I never bothered trying to pick that far east, so I've never seen it. “It's fast, you say?”

“Oh, aye. It's very fast. It goes north and south twixt here and Malvilyn. It stops near wher you could get off and travel to Rythkar's.”

“I see.”

It's her turn to nod. “Is there a medic there for Vald? At the prison?”

“What?” I shake my head gruffly. “No, nothing like that. My family's there.”

“Oh.” She doesn't ask why.

I reach out and pat her hand assuringly. “It's actually just one big mistake. I need to see them so that I can fix this situation.”

She hums in a way that I take must mean she only partially believes me.

I return to my meal. “Thank you for the information, Shema. I think I'll be able to get there, then.”

She nods and leaves.

I muse to myself about the situation. Marks aren't a large problem; I still have quite a few left over from Layne's payment. I hope that they'll be enough. I can most likely pick what I lack.

I also hope that Vald will be safe while I'm gone. I smile at the fact that I couldn't be bothered enough to go see the Queen, but I am perfectly willing to abandon my Spook and my responsibilities as a Spark to run into the desert to find the prison where my family is kept...or to see Dalm...

I shake myself out of that thought. No, I need to focus on the problem, and the problem is that they are stuck—

Wait.

The Queen.

I straighten in my seat, the uneaten food forgotten in my epiphany.

If I go and speak to her, I can ask her the favor of freeing my family! She wants to award me anyway. What need has a Spark for a medal? Nay, she can do me a service by pardoning Pops, Mama, and Kev. Hermina said she couldn't help—only Layne had the authority to get my family free. But the Queen has more authority than Layne. She could release them problemless.

Without a moment of hesitating, I hurry back to my room. The day is long gone; night has stolen over the city, leaving it feeling hushed and quiet. I quickly assemble a few belongings—my longjacket (of course), some of its contents, and a change of clothes. Out of habit, I glance across the street. Layne's office is dark, which comes as no surprise.

I slip into Vald's room. It stinks—as always—but Vald is peaceful for the nonce. I

worry about what he'll do without me. In fact, it pains me to think of abandoning him yet again. But I will return as quickly as I leave, I'm sure of it. I can go to the Queen, make my request, and be back in two days, I estimate. Malvilyn is close, especially if the Dart is as fast as Shema's making me think. Maybe I could be back in a day!

With my clothes appropriately bundled, I head for the door, confident that I will have my family back with me by the end of the week.

My foot strikes the avenue in front of the Quiet Inn and my thoughts lurch to a stop.

I have no idea where Hermina lives. Both Recruiters have disappeared from me without a path to them. They could always find me—beckon me, boss me, berate me—but they remained aloof and away. I have no chance of getting to the Queen without Hermina.

My energy drains away, and I sink to the ground. If I had not just wept my soul out at the watchtower, tears would cascade from my cheeks like the dews of heaven. But I cannot feel that way again.

I'm too hollow to cry again.

I sit and stare at the cloudless night. Only the winking of the stars and the warm glow of the moons tell me anything at all of the passage of time.

Three hours pass.

During those three hours, my mind has tried again and again to come up with a solution, but every way seems blocked. Yes, I could try the Dart—but I have no writ of my status as a Spark. The mob that surrounded me after Vald and I chased down Dalm the first time is proof enough of that. Furthermore, after looking over my finances, I doubt that I'd have the marks necessary to pay for the tickets. Unless they ask for a half-mark per person, I'd be hard pressed to pay for us all on the return home. Walking back from the prison won't work—everyone knows that it's in an expansive desert. Trying to walk with Kev alone would be approaching impossible; add in Pops sans wheels and there is absolutely no way of returning them to home.

And what do I have to offer them? I'm living in The Quiet Inn on the Crown's coin. We have no place to lay our heads. The colds will be coming soon, and if I don't find a better place to live—some sort of home with access to medical supplies—I would get my family back only to lose them. Mama will surely be quick to follow Kev if he dies, and I don't know what Pops would do without his wife.

I grind my teeth at the enormous burden that crushes me. I don't know which voice to listen to—the one pointing out the problems, or the one seeking out a plausible solution. Maybe I should have just listened to that third voice. Without a purpose, without a focus, without my family, I'm better off a bloody mess on the cobbles...

A light flickers in the building across the street.

I stare dumbly at it for a long moment, not recognizing, not understanding.

Layne has returned.

I start to my feet and dart across the street to the side door in the alleyway. I try the handle, and, much to my surprise, it is unlocked. Layne was in a rush—I know that much from what I overheard outside his office—but I hadn't thought he would be so sloppy. I push the door open, grateful that its hinges won't squeak.

I enter in through the silent door and pad cautiously toward the stairwell. Outside of the building, I couldn't hear anything unusual. Now, however, I can hear the wails and

screams and shouts of the Spooks below. I hear the rattling of chains and the faint mutterings of leashed people. It is faint, but it is persistent.

I shiver slightly and press onward.

Because the building has been abandoned since Dalm broke through Layne's window, all of the candles that had so wantonly burned during my previous visits are gone, white waxen bones marking the floors and walls. Only the reflected light of the Night Sisters illuminates my way, but that's of little concern to me. It's a straight hall, and I know how many steps there are.

As I ascend, keeping careful count of each stair, I notice that the steps are actually broken underfoot. If I had shucked off my boots before coming, I would be able to tell better, but it feels as if the steps are off balance, bent somehow.

Then it occurs to me: Dalm forced his entire mass into a small frame. That was why he could move so quickly, jump so high—all of that muscle strength in a tiny body. The weight of a behemoth had taken these steps—and the stairwell is showing the effects.

I reach the forty-second step and phantom forward, hearing the sounds of rustling papers and opening drawers. Layne must be anxious to find whatever it is he's here for, because it sounds more and more frantic as time waxes.

Each step I take sounds heavy in my ears, though the carpet muffles most of it. I again wish I had skipped the boots tonight, but I don't dare to skin them off now.

The door is slightly open, allowing me to look in without too much worry about being seen myself. The brightness of the single candle burning on a candlestick is still bright enough to make me squint and pause for my eyes to adjust. The second story is almost pure pitch, save the few windows that allow in a glimmer of moonlight. The room directly across from Layne's has an open door, which is what let me see the faint candle in the first place.

I can hear stirring in the room, but I can't see where Layne is. Then I hear a thump off to the right. He's probably in the cabinet where he stores his water, which could mean that his back is to the door. I loosen the knife from its sheath.

Sucking in a deep breath, I stealth into the room, my knife held with the blade flat against my arm. I will do anything to get the answers I'm looking for. Anything.

Layne doesn't notice my entrance, and I duck behind a large, overstuffed armchair, hiding behind the shadows cast by the candlelight.

“Hail?” says a voice distinctly higher than Layne's. “Who's there?” Genuine fear laces the words. I feel my jaw slacken as I peek around the edge. A lithe form, attired in mottled blacks and grays, moves away from the cabinet. I start in surprise.

It's Hermina. In her hand is a half-stave. Jeskin promised me that we would train with that someday.

I doubt that day will ever come.

“Is anyone there?”

I watch her in the candlelight, slowly approaching the door. She peeks into the dark hallway for a moment, her hand clenching the half-stave compulsively. At last she turns back, apparently satisfied, closing the door softly behind her. “Must have been my imagination,” she says aloud.

She walks within touching distance of the armchair but doesn't notice me, crouched and confused, in the pools of darkness. I swallow noiselessly and peek around the edge.

“Where is it?” she says again as she resumes her search. “Why did he have to keep that flaming key with him?”

I wait patiently for a few moments, letting her become more involved in trying to break open the small cabinet. I hear the carafe of water clinking softly every time she strikes it overly hard. I take another deep breath and shimmy closer. I touch upon all of my skills—both gained from the Elite Guard and my time as a street—and creep closer to Hermina. I glue myself to the shadows, and make as little sound breathing as possible.

Finally, I am within arm's distance.

“What are you doing?” I ask in a normal voice.

She shrieks so loudly I imagine that Vald probably heard it in the inn. My eyes open widely at the sound, and almost stumble back, but her reaction is so wild that I end up laughing. I catch my mirth in time to dodge the poorly swung half-stave, which whistles past my head and cracks against the wall. Hermina yelps and drops the stave. I snatch it effortlessly from the air while simultaneously pocketing my knife.

She puts a hand to her chest as she studies me, her normally olive skin distinctly pale. A sheen of sweat appears on her upper lip—proof that she actually has normal human characteristics—and she stares at me with wild eyes.

“Mel?” she gasps.

“Aye,” I say through chuckles.

“What are you doing?”

I tut my tongue. “No, Hermina, I asked that of you first. It's only fair that you answer a direct question.”

She pauses and looks at me. “Were you the one who just snuck in?”

“Aye.”

The Recruiter gives an appreciative grunt. “I thought I heard something, but I decided it was the wind. You're good.”

“It was my life.”

She nods slowly, then starts to smile a devious grin. “Say, would you be able to open up this cabinet?”

“The water holder? Problemless.” I shrug. “Why do you want in?”

“Let's just say there might be something of great importance to me in there.”

“Does it incriminate Layne?”

She tries to regain her mask of pure aplomb, but my scare had been too much for her. “Why—what do you mean?” she says, flustered.

I wave an angry hand. “The man lied to me. He stole my family from me, he has imprisoned them, and now I have reason to believe that he is indirectly responsible for the death of one of my father's friends.” I don't bother mentioning that he has been dealing with a behemoth, plotted the King's death, and apparently wanted to kill the Queen, too. I don't know if Hermina has been helping him with any of this, putting on a front of veiled hostility to keep me from becoming suspicious. Obviously, there's a good reason for her presence here. I intend to find out what it is. “How's that?”

She nods a little. “Yes, but why incriminate...”

“You're sneaking through his office in the last watch of night. Aren't *you* looking for something incriminating?”

Hermina flushes a bit at this.

“Very well.” She taps the cabinet. “Will you open it?”

“Will you tell me what I want to know?”

“I will.”

“Fair,” say I, and reach over to the lock. In a moment's time it's open. A carafe of cool water and a couple of crystal glasses are all there is to see.

Hermina looks disappointed. “I told you it holds his water.” I say. “Now, I have some questions for you.”

She nods a bit and straightens. “Let's have a little light, shall we?”

I don't move to help as she ignites the wicks of a few other candles throughout the room. The shadows slip away silently. She takes a spot in the armchair, her trouser-clad legs folding over themselves and her arms dangling over the sides.

“I'm ready,” she says. “Speak.”

With a shake of my head, I say, “No. Please. You first.”

She shrugs indifferently. “Very well. What do you want to know?”

I regard Hermina for a long moment before saying, “Everything. I want to know everything.”

SHE LAUGHS. “Of course you do. Would you like to give me a place to start?” Her color has returned, she no longer reacts. She's back in control of the situation. That irritates me faintly, but I push it down. I won't ruin a chance to get the information that I've been lacking for so long.

“Why are you here?”

“Like you, I'm looking for something,” she says cryptically.

I chop at the air with my hand. “No. No deceptions, no veiled explanations. Straight words, Hermina. Speak to the matter. Why are you here?”

She glowers at me. Taking power back seems to bother her, something I wish I had known earlier. I warm slightly inside at the thought, but don't dwell on it.

“I have reason to believe that Layne is involved with traitorous plots and attempted political coup. I was hoping that, because of his absence, I would be able to gain documentation—receipts, proofs, communications—that verified this.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Not yet. I'm looking for many things, but I don't actually know what I'm looking for.”

I grunt. “What's with the box?” I gesture to the cabinet with my head.

“I thought it might have something.”

“It does,” I say sagaciously as I remove two glasses and proceed to fill them. “It has water.” I hand her a glass.

She makes a disappointed noise and takes the glass, not moving to take a sip. I drink mine down noisily.

“Why did you come here?” she asks me.

I finish the water with a breathy sigh. “I saw a light. I thought Layne was back.” I shrug. “That's all.”

“Fair.” Hermina can tell that I'm hiding something, but she doesn't know what; I see it in her eyes. “What else do you want to know?”

“I need to know what's going on,” I muse aloud.

“We already established your desire for information surfeit,” she purrs around a thin grin, “but if you have no other questions for me, I'll be going.” She makes as if to move. I gesture quickly for her to stay.

“No, I do have questions.” I just can't think of them. “How much danger is the Queen in?” I say, suddenly latching on to what Dalm had mentioned to me.

“How much?” Hermina frowns, her brow rippling. “You mean more than normal?”

Nod.

She hedges for a moment, then reveals, “None. In fact, she's in less peril than under normal circumstances. Right now, only two people would want her dead: Reika and Eva.”

“How is that?”

“She is, to use her phrase, 'the waking dead.' Though macabre, the sentiment is perfectly true: She is living simply because she hasn't died yet.”

“That's not as profound as I'm thinking you think it is.”

Hermina chuckles a little, like there's a bubble in her throat. “No, Mel, it is

perfectly profound. She already knows that her life doesn't matter. So it can't be in any great danger if she isn't trying to live."

I think for a moment. "She is infertile, then? Her trip to the Shores only proved it?"

"Aye, and conclusively at that. There is no chance that she can marry a King Elect and birth a male heir—any heir, for that matter. No, she understands perfectly that she must die. The only question is who dies with her, now."

My turn to frown. "What do you mean?"

"The Princess, Eva, is not much older than you. If married soon, she can begin producing offspring. The odds that she has a male child in five years are quite good—provided that everything else falls into place."

"Everything else?"

"Princess Eva cannot simply marry any person; she needs to marry a man who will be a good King Elect—and an even better King. She also has to meet the man who can give her good seed. If he is infertile, he has married his death. But, even barring these complications—including the fact that Eva doesn't want to be Queen—we have the issue with her mother."

I think for a moment, trying to understand its import. "She is, what, in the way of her daughter's claim to the throne?"

Hermia looks to one side, then slowly nods. "I think you have it, aye. If the Queen is still alive, then the man who marries Princess Eva is nothing more than a man who married a princess. He will not be King Elect. If Eva births an heir, say, a year hence, it does her no good if her mother is still alive. The Queen is the key, here."

I swallow. "I suppose that makes sense—so far as any of this makes sense. But what of Reika?"

Hermia looks down at the beautiful carpet. "She is a factor, true. We must focus on how to preserve the Queen's life until Eva can get married. Once that has happened, Reika will have the larger problem."

"Oh?" I ask.

She spreads her hands open, as if uncovering the most obvious truth. "Reika is trying to kill her sister-in-law and her niece. It is hard enough to kill royalty right now—unless you're a behemoth, I suppose—but it would be much more difficult once her niece's husband, and even their children, are to be considered as well. Not only that, but there will be almost no space to politic once everyone realizes that the King is dead."

I hold up a hand. "Doesn't everyone already know?"

She shrugs. "A few. Most don't care because they don't understand the way the succession works, so they think that everything is being handled correctly. A marriage of the Princess—so soon after her father's death—would get people talking. The Ascension of Kings will become a major topic of conversation, and the people will begin to watch the Crown with great interest for the next five years. The general ambivalence will abate as the King Elect and his wife try to have children. The deaths of any of them would be difficult to manage, and the finger is going to point directly at Reika if something happens to them then. No, Reika knows quite well that her best chance to strike is now—perhaps even passed."

"Passed?"

Hermia nods at me. "She is operating with but a few weeks' time. While we've

already lost precious weeks getting this behemoth situation resolved, she has to worry about putting all of her machinations into play. Fortunately, Vald killed the behemoth. The assassin is dead. The perfect time to strike—to use her assassin to clear out all opposition—has been killed. She must ask herself: How can the Queen be disposed of now? But that is less relevant—how can the Princess be destroyed without the blame coming to Reika? Everyone in power knows how the Ascension works; it would be a simple step to deduce who was trying to manipulate the lives of the Crown for her own ends.”

“You've pieced this together fairly effortlessly.”

“The only thing I lack is the proof,” Hermina says. “That's what I'm here for.”

“Wait,” say I, “you think that Layne is involved with Reika's plot?”

Hermina stops. “Isn't he?”

I pause. I don't honestly know, now that she asks me. “Layne said that he wasn't,” I defend lamely.

“When?”

I shake my head. “Before Bline died—before a lot of things happened. I asked him if Reika is responsible for the King's death. He said he wouldn't say that, but he intimidated it.”

Hermina frowns, deeply puzzled. “He said that?”

“Aye.”

“That was long before either behemoth was killed,” she ponders aloud. “So what did he mean by it?”

“Is he...is he trying to push off possible connection to Reika? Denying her with one breath and doing her bidding when no one is looking?”

A red fingernail taps against her lips. “Maybe. I suppose it's possible.”

The idea makes me sick. How manipulated have I been? Dalm's confession and what I overheard when he and Layne spoke in this very room ring in my mind. They definitely had been working together, and the end is obvious: Layne wants someone else on the throne. But Reika? His attitude when he first described her to me seemed quite clear. I chew a lip, frustrated. Whom do I believe?

Layne has my family; he incarcerated them and didn't tell me.

I'll believe Hermina.

“I have information to share with you,” I say, taking a deep breath and steadying myself on the corner of the desk. “About Layne and his allies.”

She looks up from the carpet. “Really?”

“Aye. It's something that I haven't told anyone yet, and I still don't know if I trust you enough.”

She regards me coolly, but I can see she's willing to do anything to solve this.

“What, no offers?” I ask after she doesn't speak, arching my eyebrow questioningly.

“You want me to play a game with you?”

“Game?” I blink. “No, I want to know if I can trust you, after everything I've been through with Recruiters. It isn't too difficult to understand that, is it?”

After a long moment, she finally agrees. “You're right. What should I do to gain your trust?”

“You said the Queen wants to award me for doing my duty.”

“Aye.”

“She wanted to meet me.”

“Aye.”

“It is not a good time to be away from my Spook. However, if you can secure for me a queenly favor, I might be willing to share what I know.”

Hermina snorts. “I think you misunderstand your position. You are required to report everything you know.”

“I refuse.”

She bristles. “What?”

“Until I get my family back, my secrets stay with me.”

“Family?”

“Aye. That's the boon. My family is being kept in Rythkar's Prison. I wanted to visit them, but I have no way of gaining entrance. You get the Queen to release my family, to return them to me and a home in which we can live, and I will tell you everything.”

“That's too much.”

“I saved the Queen's life!” I explode.

“You did your duty,” barks back she. “The Queen *condescended* to award you for what you had done, in part to raise public awareness of the death of the King. I can agree to get your family out of prison, but I will not secure a home for them.”

“Why not?”

“That's straining the generosity of the Crown.”

“Blime destroyed our house!”

“Because you lured him there!”

“It wasn't on purpose,” I fume.

She flicks her fingers dismissively, her aplomb returned. It does give me a small amount of satisfaction to see that I could get her riled, even if it was for only a moment or two. “Regardless, you will have to rectify the housing situation yourself. I will get your family back to you.”

“When?”

She sighs and looks at me. “You won't tell me anything else until they are returned?”

“No.”

Her fingers drum the armrest absently. “Three days.”

“Any other requests?”

“I need to know where Layne lives.”

“He isn't there, I've already checked.” She tells me the directions. It's on the outskirts of Tintyr. “If you feel like wasting your time, head out there. I wouldn't bother, though.”

I grunt in response.

“Anything else?”

“No.” I stick out my hand.

“What's this?”

“We made a bargain. You get me my family, and I'll help you solve this little riddle. Shake on it.”

“Why?”

I stare at her. "Are you a fool's head? You shake on bargains."

She glares at me and reaches out her hand tentatively. "Very well. We're agreed."

I grasp it firmly and pump it once. "Three days. You know where to find me."

Before she can say anything I disappear out of the hall and down the steps. I count the stairs as I run, allowing me to hit the ground floor without interfering with my rhythm. I'm outside and in the cool air before a minute elapses.

Burning around the alley, I scale the wall to Layne's garden, only stopping once I can see the back window again. If Hermina is still inside, I can if she discovered anything. The candles are all extinguished. Hermina has left.

Dropping down to the alleyway, I work my way past the piles of rubbish and broken crates to the main street, hoping to catch a glimpse of Hermina and which way she left. If I can, I'd like to follow her, know where she stays. Being left alone, waiting for them to reach me doesn't work well, and I'd like that to change.

I think, for the briefest of moments, that Thoman is going to be waiting with the carriage out front, but the street is empty. In the dim moonlight, I stand isolated.

But not for much longer.

"Three days," I say between heavy breaths. "It will be over in three days."

AT DAWN on the third day, I awake with the sun. Anxious, I roll off the cot in Vald's room, letting him sleep. He has entered a fugue-like phase, the medics say, and can't remember much when he awakes, and has no knowledge of what he's doing when he is conscious. I don't bother telling the medics that Vald never knows what he's doing ever, except for when the whispers are on him, and that he rarely remembers anything anyway. How they know he's in a fugue I don't know.

Still, his condition has worsened. He's constantly in pain, and sometimes it's enough for him to actually say something lucid (generally something like “Ow”), and he often will do so at the least convenient times. The vigil over him has stretched the three day wait to one closer to three weeks, it seems, but I can forgive him now.

It's the third day.

My family is on the way. I will finally get to see Pops and Mama and Kev again. For the briefest of moments, Carly's death burdens me, but I shrug it off. True, he was a friend of ours, but he wasn't family. I would've liked to have him released, too, but—after a sense—he is released.

Or maybe I'm just making things up so that I don't let his death ruin my good mood.

Aye, that's probably it.

Smiling, I make my way into the bathing room. It's early enough that none of the inn's other visitors are using the room. I still don't like the idea of taking a public bath, though there's space enough for three in there. I like my privacy, and I like being clean—two things that I didn't have with my family.

I try not to think of what I'm giving up by having them back. After all, once I have them to take care of, where will they stay? I've spent what time I could spare over the last three days trying to find a place to house them, but all of Pops' friends aren't willing to harbor someone who has been in prison for fear of being revealed themselves, and I'm hoping to keep honest with the duties I have as a Spark. My old life—and the life that we were forced to build after the accident—is as dead and gone as Bline. Because of my secrecy while a street, I was constantly reluctant to explore friendships or relationships. I even went to Logan—the only friend, as it were, that I have—to see what he could do to help, but the watchtower was empty and showed no signs of being recently inhabited.

Still, I suppose there's a chance that somewhere there's a home that's open to me and mine. I just have to find it. And I will.

But not right now.

I get ready, putting on trousers, a clean, white tunic, and my ever faithful longjacket. Shema has been just as excited as I, picking up on my enthusiasm as the day drew closer. She flashes me a happy, slightly tired smile as I make my way into The dining room. She had to cover the counter last night, in case any traveler made it to the Quiet Inn's doors while the owner slept, so she will most likely be sleeping the remainder of the day. Nevertheless, a warm pot of cooked oats waits over the fire, and she has a bowl spooned for me with as much sweets as I like added in.

“Dream well,” I bless her as she leaves my table.

“Aye, m'lady. I hope to.”

I smile back at her retreating form and start eating. Warm bread is ready soon after I start eating, and I help myself from the loaves by the oven. I glance out the window, judging that only an hour has passed since I awoke. My excitement makes me a little jittery, and strange, pointless questions rebound in my brain. When will Hermina arrive? Will she show them here, or am I meeting them elsewhere? And what of Hermina? How will I reveal Layne's accomplice to her? Will it even matter? It's the testimony of a Spark. What's that worth? Well, it doesn't matter. She's willing to do what I ask—I don't care if she's satisfied with my payment. I have to laugh at myself. Why did I think that jumping would be a solution? Look where I am now! My family is coming and I am ready for them. Or am I?

When I pause to consider, I don't know what to expect, and the nervousness floats the oats in my stomach. I think of pushing the food away and claim the nerves for my loss of appetite, but I never know how long it'll be before I eat again, so I tuck in as much as I can stomach, then a bit more. Doesn't hurt to have some caution.

Finishing, I stand, looking out at the street. The day blooms, full of hope and promises. I take a deep breath, and set about trying to find something to do to occupy the time. I can't go to the bazaar, especially today. Vald's condition kept me inn-bound for the past couple of days, so I feel unprepared, as though I should have a wooden horse for Kev (he loves wooden dolls), a new dress for Mama, and maybe even more comfortable wheels for Pops. Yet my bag of marks would perhaps be better spent as an endowment to my family, rather than being frittered away on meaningless baubles. Food will probably be more useful to Kev than a wooden horse. After all, where would he keep it? They're homeless, and, unless I can think of something soon, they're going to be less comfortable free than they were while imprisoned.

I swallow at that. I may call myself Spark and listen to the serving girl of an inn call me her lady, but without Layne or Hermina to validate my status, there's no prestige, no marks, no power.

I scrounging in my desk for paper and ink, taking it with me outside. The warmth of the day is promising; despite the approach of the colds, the days blister still. The nights, on the other hand, now chill appropriately—not much, but enough that I can tell that the weather has started to turn.

Settling down on the section of the porch that will remain shaded throughout the day, I take up my pen and my vigil. This way, I'm close at hand if Vald needs me, yet near the street so that I can see them coming.

I draft one letter, then crumple it and start again. On my third try, I give a full explanation of what I had overheard on Layne's balcony, and what Dalm had confessed to me. I left out my feelings for either of them, and declined to mention why Dalm was willing to explain his motives. She doesn't need to know the contents of my heart.

Once finished, I sit and wait.

And wait.

And wait.

To pass the time, I reflect on the good times of my life with my family. Pops and Mama, ere the accident, schooling me and teaching me to reason and write—two things, they always said, that were lacking in the world. Kev and his preserved innocence make me smile. With effort I can remember him before the behemoth's attack stole his mind—before everything went sour. I trace all that has happened to me since that day,

particularly since Bline, Vald, Dalm, and Layne appeared in my life. Little wonder I never pursued a relationship with men. It hasn't given me much but pain.

The sun marches resolutely, and I sit just as unflaggingly.

With a sigh, I finally stand and stretch. So they didn't arrive before my noon repast. Worriless. They probably had a bit of difficulty traveling with a cripple and a half-wit, to say nothing of Mama's girth to slow her down. Time. Time—worriless. I have time.

I go inside and try to eat again, but the pressing concern, the gnawing doubt that they aren't coming, that Hermina broke her word, echoes faintly in the corridors of my mind, distracting me and interfering with my appetite. By the time the sun starts to set, the echoes have become a cacophony, and everything I ate sits leaden in my guts.

Night falls.

They don't come.

Hermina lied.

With a sigh that does nothing to alleviate the disappointment, I find my way back inside. By now, Shema's awake and working, scrubbing at a stubborn stain on the finish of one of the dining tables. She glances up with a half smile, then returns to her work. As if jerked by an invisible string, she straightens and looks more closely. "M'lady? Are you well?"

I shake my head, biting away at the emotion that's raging inside of me. Rather than focusing on the disappointment, I rile my anger in Hermina's direction, feeling the flush of frustration burn toward her instead. This hardens my voice as I answer, "Aye. Well enough."

"You don't look it." She pauses. "What's wrong, Amela?"

Shema never uses my name. It's always "m'lady." Always. I look at her. I never really considered her a friend, but perhaps she is. I swallow, promising myself that I won't cry—I almost never cry; it does nothing and helps no one—and briefly relate what I was expecting. Shema doesn't know that I was a street, nor the indigent circumstances of my family's life before Bline and my unexpected position, so it requires a little bit of censorship and abbreviated accounts to explain what was promised, why it was promised, and why I'm so frustrated that Hermina lied.

I hate liars.

"Well, maybe it'll make you feel better, m'lady, if you take this." Shema steps behind the counter where she keeps the inn's books, and pulls out a package wrapped in oilskin cloth. "Here." She pushes the bundle toward me. "It's for you."

Jaw wide, I take it numbly. "What's this?"

"Open it and see!"

I undo the twine and reveal a night-black longjacket—though much finer than the worn, well-loved threads that I wear now. It is perfectly fitted for me, I can tell in a glance. I pick it up with trembling fingers. No one ever gifts to me. Even the boots that I bought with Layne's money felt more like a purchase for me, not a present.

"Shema, this is...this is wonderful," I whisper, too surprised to say anything else.

"Do you like it?"

I nod, utterly dumb.

"I wasn't sure about the color, but you're out at night so frequently, hunting the behemoths, that I thought this might help you."

A moment passes before I shake my head. “I can't accept this Shema.” I know that she doesn't make many marks, and this finely stitched, pocket-laden longjacket costs more coin than I have in my stash. I know that this did not come cheaply.

Her face cracks a little. “Why not?”

“It must have cost you everything you have!”

The crack dissolves into a smile. “Oh, is that all? No, m'lady, you're wrong on that. The cloth came from a merchant who liked the inn's service. He was low on marks, so he showed his gratitude to us by giving a bolt of that material. The master gave me most of it, saying he didn't like the color, and had no use for it anyway. He wanted to keep some to sell, but gave most of it to me for doing a good job.” She glances down, blushing a little. “The master can be quite kind, if the fancy takes him.” She meets my eye again and continues, “So, no, all it took was a little extra time to stitch it up. I finished it last night during my watch up front. I would've given it to you sooner, but I was so tired...”

I shush her and clutch it to me. It smells fresh and clean and new. It's a wonderful smell. “Thank you, Shema.”

“You're welcome, m'lady.”

I shake my head again. “You can call me Amela.”

Shema smiles. “If that's what you want, Amela.”

“It is. Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” Her face creases with sudden concern, her green eyes worried. I never noticed she had green eyes before. They somehow fit her auburn skin. “Does it fit you?” She hurries around the counter and helps me remove my old, stained, stitched, and well-worn one before sliding the new longjacket on. It fits perfectly, as I knew it would.

“I even put the pockets in the same places, knowing how you'd like it to feel the same as the old one,” explains she excitedly as I twist this way and that, feeling the light, breezy fabric rustle against my calves.

“Oh, it is perfect.” I start sliding out some of the random items from my pockets—small knife, some lock picks (I shoot a glance at Shema, but she doesn't seem to recognize them), a length of twine, a compass, a couple of marks for emergencies, some dried meat, some beads—and putting them in their corresponding pouches in the new longjacket. Once done, I look at the serving girl and give her a big smile. “This is possibly the nicest thing that anyone has done for me,” I say.

Shema almost responds when the door swings open. Turning on her demure serving-girl persona, she jumps forward, all smiles and sycophancy. “Welcome to The Quiet Inn, home of the Slayers of the Realm. How can I help you tonight?”

I don't really pay much attention—I've heard her script before. Instead, I twirl and twist a bit, getting the feel for the longjacket and what I can do in it. It's supple, yet feels substantial and strong. Its dark color matches my hair. Reaching up with one hand, I realize that there's an added bit to this longjacket: a hood. Shema has included the only thing that my old one lacked. I tug it over my head, only half-listening to the muffled speech behind me.

Pleased, I turn to tell Shema how happy I am with the addition.

There, in the doorway, ragged, tired, and sickly, is most of my family.

I think I am going to faint.

A TREMBLING hand—*my* trembling hand—reaches out to the counter and steadies me a little. “Pops,” say I, “Kev.” This moment has happened in my brain more times than I’ve blinked, yet none of the possibilities every struck me this way. I thought I would rush into their arms, or they into mine. I would possibly smile and smile and smile until my cheeks hurt and my jaw ached. Never did I think I’d swoon.

Shema glances from them to me and back again. “Oh, such distinguished guests! Please, come in, come in!” She steps forward to help them in.

“We won’t be long,” says Pops in a dry, hollow voice. Shema stops and glances at me.

I don’t know what to say.

“Pops,” says Kev, who has been looking at me for a long time without cognition, “who that?”

“Kev,” I gasp, suddenly hit with emotions I hadn’t expected and can’t define, “don’t you recognize me?”

His genuine face clouds a little, then his gap-toothed, rapturous smile—the one that has delighted me for years—erupts across his face. “‘Mela!’” he shouts, and lurches as if to run to me. Pops grabs his arm and holds him back. He shifts a little on rickety, used wheels, obviously uncomfortable and pained. Still, his usually open face is painted with a glower that reeks of disapproval.

“Sit, Pops?” implores Kev.

Pops’ glare at me has ceased, but he nods tightly. They stumble in, Kev awkwardly pushing the rusty wheels. The room is silent save the squeak and thump of wheels and the shuffling gait of my brother. Kev finally lurches to his own seat and sits down, his expression warring with enthusiasm at seeing me and desire to satisfy Pops’ request.

I stand, tables away, awaiting permission to come close.

Nothing happens for a while, save a long, painful silence that stretches until I want to break.

“Where’s Ma...” I start again.

He holds up a hand, his anger smoldering behind his gaunt hand. He has lost pounds of weight, no doubt because of the harsh conditions of the prison. Kev looks the same; he always looks the same. He shifts a little, and the silver scar across his forehead reflecting softly in the inn’s lamplight. I swallow against the wad of tears that somehow got trapped in my throat.

After a long moment, he straightens a little, his filthy clothes and bedraggled appearance stirring the ashes of anger in my stomach. They hadn’t treated him well.

Layne lied.

The flash of rage boils away the weaker emotions and I straighten, tossing the hood back and letting my hair cascade free. I’ve taken Pops’ anger before, his disapproval. I will weather this, too.

“You lied,” he accuses.

My desire to stay strong cracks. “What?”

“You didn’t do as you promised.”

I lick my lips and glance at Kev, who focuses on the blue and white tablecloth,

skipping his fingers from one colored square to the next, oblivious.

“I didn’t?”

“I told you not to get sidetracked.”

I shake my head, disbelief coloring my thoughts. “I didn’t get sidetracked. I got captured—”

“*We* got captured, Amela!” shouts Pops with a slap against the table, more angry than I’ve ever seen him. Kev recoils slightly, his eyes wide. Pops blazes “We’re the ones who suffered.”

“They said...”

“They?” Pops’ face turns dark with fury. I bite my tongue and wait for him to say his part before I open my mouth again. Any interruption will only add kindling to the bonfire. “I don’t care what *they* said about anything! Whomever you decided to believe, girl, lied to you, too. I *told* you not to get sidetracked. I *told* you to come back as soon as you had help! Now, weeks later, months later—I don’t even know how long we were in that hole—we finally get word that the Queen wants us free.” He snorts, his eyes turning into tear-coated gems. “Too late, though wasn’t it?” His throat bobs.

I don’t speak, knowing that he will continue when he’s ready.

“You left us to die in that tunnel.”

“Pops...”

“You left us to *die!*” The table rattles again beneath another slap. “But we survived. We survived the sudden influx of Militiamen; Logan survived the brutal surgery—butchery more like—that freed him from the rubble, only to escape weeks later. Carly, Carly was turned into a target-dummy for the guards, with more fletched feathers stuck in him than a hunted goose.”

I want to interject, to clarify, to ask, but he won’t let me.

“The cold there, the pervasive damp. Amela, have you any idea?” He is lost in his memories now, his eyes wide, fearful, and far from The Quiet Inn. “And the noise of milch-mice running around—over you while you sleep, in your food and swimming in your water. The screams as people went mad with the lack of sunlight or food. Logan didn’t seem to mind as much, despite the fever he fought after his arm became infected.”

He hadn’t mentioned that. I purse my lips and fight against the conflicting emotions—joy at seeing Pops and Kev; worry about Mama; sadness at what they went through; embarrassment for having failed them; anger at Layne for having left them.

“And the hunger. The hunger never stopped.”

“Hungry,” agrees Kev. I hear Shema stir—she has been standing to one side since they entered, but now disappears into the kitchen, no doubt to fetch some victuals.

“Kev needed food, Amela.” The anger is gone in his look, replaced by one who is haunted by a ghost that is all too real, a phantom of famine. “So there wasn’t much to go around.” He shakes his head, crystals dropping from his eyes. “Mayleen couldn’t stand to see Kev hungry, so she gave him his food.” He swallowed, his lip quivering as if palsied. “I told her to eat, but she wouldn’t. She said she had plenty stored up.”

At last his gaze meets mine. “She died two days ago, Amela. Starved to death.”

I reel and at last sit down, taking a seat four tables away from him and Kev.

“Mama hungry?” my brother asks, his face puckering in confusion as he looks around for Mama.

“No, Kev,” whispers Pops, who pats the boy on the hand. “Don’t worry.”

Kev nods and resumes his finger skipping.

“She...she died?” I can hardly get the words out of my mouth for disbelief.

“Aye,” says Pops, tears now falling unabashedly down his face. “They grabbed her body, threw it into the main elevator, and took it away. I never saw her again.” His voice cracks at the last word.

I crack at his last word.

“I told you, Mel, not to slip. That's when people die.”

I remember. I tell him I remembered.

“Not well enough,” he accuses, and falls silent as sobs shake him. At last unable to bear the grief, I rush over to hold him in my arms. He stinks of sewage and sweat and too little sleep, but I clutch him closely. He stiffens, but soon his heart melts enough and he sinks into my embrace. Kev stares at us quizzically, then resumes his game.

Our tears mix and our grief is one for a painful moment that lasts too long and ends too soon. When I finally release him, food has been brought to the table. Kev, who watched quietly for a while as we wept, eats with relish. Shema has disappeared, though no doubt close at hand if she's needed.

“Pops,” explain I, “I tried. I tried so hard not to slip.” I bow my head. “I'm sorry.”

“I know. Mayleen didn't blame you, Amela. She never could. She never would.” He sniffs loudly and selects a wheat roll from the basket on the table. He nibbles without relish, his eyes far and empty.

“I still feel responsible.”

He snorts, a bit of his earlier anger seeping through again. “You should.”

I look away.

“I miss her, Amela. Every hour. Every minute.” He takes a deep breath. “If it weren't for Kev, I would've followed her into the darkness. But here I am.” He barks a mirthless guffaw. “Right after they took Mayleen away from us, maybe an hour after, the captain of the guard told us we were free to go, and that we were to be taken here immediately.”

This information gives me pause. Hermina was as good as her word. The soonest that she could get them free—yet it wasn't enough. Nothing I do is ever enough.

I should have listened to my instincts and leaped.

Jump, jump, jump.

Then, at least, it would be silent—all would be silent, and the grief, frustration, and biting shame wouldn't be felt.

I would have been free.

I should have jumped.

Feeling too drained to do much else, I reach back to my last memory of Mama, standing at the bottom of the ladder as I headed to a closet—where Layne's henchmen were waiting.

“This is all my fault,” I say again. “If I hadn't've picked Bline...”

“Who?”

“The behemoth that attacked us. His name was Bline.”

“Was?” Pops has always been a stickler for language.

“He died. Vald killed him.”

“Vald?”

I pause, knowing what Pops will say when I explain. “Pops, I'm a Spark. Vald is

my Spook.”

To my surprise, he pales, his face a mix of fury and mortification. “They got you, then?”

Swallowing, I look at him askance. “Got me?”

With a groan, Pops cradles his head in his hands. Kev leans over and pats him on the shoulder, cooing wordlessly. After a moment, Kev returns to what he was doing.

Pops straightens. “When I fenced those marks, Jandy—do you know Jandy? No? Well, he took the marks.” He snorts. “I wonder if the behemoth found him and those marks before he was killed.” Waving a hand, he continues. “Jandy took the marks—we have a bit of credit there, now—but then mentioned something curious about Carly. He had heard through rumors and half-overheard conversations about how he wanted to talk to me about a special job that involved you. It was actually a job that a lot of people knew about, but no one would take.”

“Carly wanted that?” The scrawny shopkeep had alluded to a job, but hadn't wanted to talk to me about it without Pops there. I haven't thought of that in weeks.

“What does Carly have to do with me being a Spark?”

Pops shakes his head, lamenting, “While we were in jail, he confessed everything—he was the one who shrived us.”

“What?”

He nods, picking at the roll and avoiding my gaze, then shakes his head. “Maybe *shrived* is too harsh a word. See, he was going to be paid for the delivery of a person—preferably a street with no one who would ask about him—to a nameless benefactor. The street was going to be set up as a Spark, though why Carly didn't know. It was a lot of money, and what he wanted to do was talk to me and let me know. He wanted to split the money with me, to have you become a Spark.” He looks up at the ceiling. “But they got you anyway, and none of us even got the marks.”

I hold up a hand, still trying to understand. “Wait, Carly betrayed us?” In the tunnel, he wouldn't meet my gaze. He wouldn't look at me, right before I climbed. He knew that the closet would have the henchmen waiting at the top. He must have.

“*Betrayed* is too strong, too. Everything—you know well—happened so quickly that none of us knew what to do, how to react.” He opens his hands, helpless. “He had agreed to get us to the benefactor's men so that everyone could make an agreement together. He would get some marks for providing you, and we'd get some marks as compensation for your absence. That's why he didn't want you in the store before I showed up; he was worried that something might happen and we'd lose the money. He didn't want to shrive us, but he hadn't received my permission to...to...”

“Sell me to the Recruiters.” There's venom in my voice.

He shakes his head. “It's not like that.”

“No, it's exactly like that,” I say, burning anger erupting from my guts to my voice. “It wasn't even Carly, really, who betrayed us. It was you.” I feel hot tears sparkle on my face as the depth of the betrayal sinks in. “You wanted to sell your daughter like a common whore, just for some marks!”

“No!”

Kev starts crying in distress, clutching at Pops, who ignores him.

“No?”

“King's blood, Amela, you're taking this wrong...”

“How would *you* take it, Pops? You wanted to sell your daughter to a man—an evil man, I’ll have you know—so that she can do whatever he says? How is that not prostituting me? How is that protecting me?”

“I didn’t say I would have done it,” he defends lamely.

“Yes! You would have. ‘Another job,’ you’d say. I know you, Pops, you’d say, ‘This is the next job. This is what you need to do.’ Am I right?”

“No, you aren’t.”

I ignore his response. “Would you have let me into the meeting with you? Heard Carly’s proposal at the same time?”

“Of course!”

“Carly wouldn’t have!” I shot back. “I tried to ask him about the job—he mentioned it when you weren’t with us when we went to his shop—but he wouldn’t budge on it. He didn’t want me in on it because he knew that I wouldn’t like me being sold for a coin! Not only that, but he said that you often keep jobs from me.” *Often* is hyperbole, but it’s out and I don’t feel like amending it.

“First of all, Amela, it was only once. Secondly, it wasn’t a job, necessarily. Thirdly, Mayleen and I handled it ourselves. It wasn’t necessary for you to be there. That’s all.” His voice is darker now, his defense of that point more solid than what he would have had me do if he had spoken with Carly. “Besides, that’s irrelevant, now.”

I grit my teeth. “Like what you wanted to do?”

“Stop it, Amela, just stop it,” he shouts, making Kev recoil in confusion and fear. “We’re arguing in circles about something we can never know. Would I have agreed with Carly’s plan? Considering the way I feel about Slayers, I would say that I would have disagreed with him. I would have refused.”

“Is that supposed to mollify me? You’ve never mentioned how you feel about Slayers!”

“I hate them,” he says with a deep, passionate voice. “They are a blight on the Realm.”

This draws me up short, and causes my passion to wither a little.

Pops sits up a little more fully. “Now, while he did say that it was a lot of marks, he never gave a number. It wouldn’t have been enough. I hate Slayers, Amela. Passionately. Protect us with the insane? They’re lunatics if they think a senseless person could save us from anything.” He trails off.

I sniff, wiping away the tears. I’ve cried more times in the past half week than I have in the last half of my life. “Well, Carly was obviously interested in going through with it, even if you had said no. Two of Layne’s henchmen—Layne is the Recruiter who got me into this—were waiting for me on top of the closet. They sent off a runner. Later, I was told that you were safe, that Layne had you. I didn’t know that you were in jail.” I shake my head. “No, I didn’t know it was so bad. I assumed you were being kept prisoner—after all, we’re guilty of thievery, aren’t we? But I didn’t know where until just a few days ago. As soon as I learned that, I asked you to be set free.”

“You asked the Queen?” Pops’ intensity has passed, his interest in what happened to me overruling his previous passion.

“No, I asked her assistant, her Recruiter.” I open my hands in a futile gesture. “It’s all very complicated.”

Pops shifts in his chair. “Tell me.” He bites the roll, actively eating. Perhaps the

anger purged him of his reluctance; maybe he and I have equal reasons to be mad at each other, so the two emotions are canceled. Whatever the reason, things relax. Kev resumes his game, no longer feeling the tension in the room.

I tell Pops everything—including the embarrassing parts with Dalm, the meeting with Logan, and the questions that I have for Layne—knowing that he has to understand what I've been through and what I've done for my family. I finish and take a sip of now warm water that Shema has set on the table. Kev interrupts with a braying laugh, drool trickling from his open lips. I smile back, but feel the grin catch on a sudden thought. “Wait. How did Kev survive without his medicines?”

Pops shifts uncomfortably. Kev looks at me with his endearing, open smile splitting his face.

“That's a bit of a surprise to me.” He studies his hands. “Apparently, our healers were lying to us.”

“What?” I snap sharply.

“They took advantage of us and our ignorance. They wanted more marks, and so they told us to keep coming back or Kev would die. But it wasn't true.”

“Then, the medicine...”

“It did nothing, really. Kev is Kev, and their tinctures didn't keep him that way.”

“How did you find out?”

He snorts. “There was no medicine at Rythkar's. We thought that Kev would be dead within a week. As the days passed, however, and there were no changes, we realized that the medicines weren't necessary—we had been lied to.”

I clench my hands angrily. So many thefts, so many hungry nights...for naught. “How could they do that? Dandyn-trained healers have been schooled by the Dandyn on the Shores, and they take binding oaths to protect and heal others, right?”

Pops looks decidedly uncomfortable. “Dandyn-*trained* healers, yes,” he says slowly, “take that oath.”

Judging by how Pops says this, I make a quick conclusion. “Kev's medics weren't real Dandyn-trained healers.”

He shakes his head almost imperceptibly.

“You said they were. Pops, you said they were!”

Another slight nod.

“Why?” I can hardly believe this. “Why lie?”

“Amela, the accident...it wasn't as much of an accident as you thought.”

For a brief second I wonder if the floor has opened up, because I feel as though I'm falling. I glance down, honestly surprised to see the ground still intact. “Pops...”

He holds up a hand. “It's time I told you the full truth. About that day.”

I nod slowly. “I think you should.”

Taking a deep breath, he begins.

“When Kev was born, there were...complications. You know that he was smaller than expected, he came sooner than anticipated, and that he was blue when he came out. As a young girl, we didn't want to burden your mind with details you wouldn't understand. What actually happened, however, was death.”

“Death?” I echo numbly.

“Kev was blue because he was dead. However, we had a Dandyn-trained healer—a *truly* trained, fresh-from-the-Shores healer—who had helped to develop a new way of

breathing life into one that doesn't have any. I can't see how it works, precisely, but this healer forced air into the newborn Kev's mouth.”

Kev smiles at his name and taps his chest. “Kev,” he affirms.

Pops continues. “The technique worked; Kev survived, though born dead. Again, I don't know how they did it, but I am grateful to the man who saved his life. From then on, Kev was exceedingly precious to us. Mayleen and I would rarely let him stray far from sight, and we always strove to keep him safe and protected.

“Kev caught a sickness that had us worried. You were spending all of your time in the studies I gave you, and—again, to keep you from being overly concerned—kept the truth of Kev's malady from you. The healer who had saved Kev had moved, and a new medic—one who had not studied at the Shores, I came to learn, nor did he take any oaths—was there instead. We visited him a number of times. Mayleen even took Kev to one of this healer's partners to see what he advised.

“The sickness, they claimed, came from something in Kev's brain. The reason he was ill was because he was hearing the whispers, but didn't know how to follow what they said—he was too young to understand, and it was slowly killing him with this sickness.

“I can't explain how deeply that cut me, Amela. My little boy had barely escaped death once was now being killed by monsters inside of his head. What tincture could cure that?

“After hearing from the other medic that lobotomy—that's a surgery on the brain—was the only chance at curing the whispers' presence and preserve our boy's life, Mayleen and I chose to go through with it.”

“Kev heard the whispers?”

Pops nods. “He did. When he was a very young boy.”

“And they tried to cut them out?” Like Hermina had said. She would discard my brother because of the whispers. I crumple the letter I had written, wadding it inside my pocket. She deserves nothing from me.

Another nod. “I don't understand how they did it, but they did. We took him in, they preformed the surgery, and they told us the steps to ensure a full recovery.” His voice tightens with emotion, and it takes a moment before he can compose himself again. “Later, after everything changed, I discovered that the two healers were experimenting on gullible victims to learn better how the brain works. They didn't know—they still don't know—which part of the brain is susceptible to the whispers' suggestions, how the power works, or how they come about. These 'medics' were simply insane themselves, and used their positions to ruin lives.”

“The used Kev as an experiment?”

“Yes.”

“I'm going to kill them.” It's not a hollow oath.

“They're gone, Amela,” Pops says around a humorless laugh. “I tried to hunt them. For years, any spare moment I had was dedicated to putting together the reason for why my life spun out of control, why we were all hurt so much. Sometimes, there's no reason, there's no sense to it. It simply is, and that's what you have to endure.”

I nod, my temples pounding at the rage. I want to hurt someone. Anyone would probably do, but I really want to cause some pain to these fake healers.

“So Kev's scars didn't come from falling debris, like you told me?” I say at last.

Pops shakes his head slowly. “The accident didn't harm him at all.

“We left you, Amela, alone the day of the surgery, convinced that we would be able to return with Kev before the sun set. It took another day before we could take him—not knowing that their meddling had irrevocably ruined Kev's mind. He would never fully develop, his speech would never cohere. Everything that thrills a parent with the prospect of a new child was cut out of him.

“And then the Slayers came.

“A behemoth, they cried, was loose in the city. Run. Hide. Don't look back.” He snorts. “A building in the healing district—of all the places to be wounded, of course—started to collapse in front of us, falling down like wax from a candle, melting so slowly I could count the bricks, so fast we couldn't move. I tried to protect Mama and Kev, but a beam fell across my back, snapping my spine.” He gestures at his legs. “When I awoke, I was being cared for by yet another healer. Mayleen's arm had been amputated after they extricated her from the debris, the only way to save her. Kev was unharmed, for the most part, but the lobotomy caused a lot of concern. They wanted to know why it happened, and Mayleen was still in shock. She refused to answer anyone's questions, only crying that her arm hurt her.

“Once I was conscious, the situation was explained. That was where I learned the truth about the surgery—that it was impossible to remove the whispers, and that Kev's sickness was a typical sickness in a child, lengthened by the duration of cold weather we had been experiencing. The surgery was worth nothing save a chance to ruin his life.”

We are silent. I stare at the flickering lamp that sits in the center of the table, thinking.

“The healers,” says Pops, stirring out of his reverie, “of course, did everything they could to help us, but, in the end, I lost the use of my legs, Mayleen never recovered fully from the shock of losing her arm—they say she was conscious when they removed it, her body too weak to take anesthesia, and the infection too severe to wait for her body to strengthen. And Kev...” His voice breaks. “Kev is not the same.”

I've always known this. But we never speak about it. We never mention it. I can't look at my family without remembering the truth. But I never want to remember it. Hearing Pops speak, his jaw trembling more than normal, I ask a question that I'm afraid to hear the answer to. “So you hate *all* Slayers?”

“Yes,” he hisses, his eyes glimmering with unshed tears. Then he laughs a shrill, nerve-grinding laugh. “My family was *destroyed* because a Spook got a little crazy and chased down a monster.”

“Do...do you hate me?”

He shakes his head, though not as quickly as I would have thought. “I suppose, if I had to be absolutely accurate, they weren't Slayers, Amela.”

“Oh?” I say, afraid to point out that he didn't answer my question.

He nods, sniffing loudly. “They were Vigilantes.”

“How do you know?”

“As I said, I spent a good amount of time trying to piece it all together, after we had sold our house to pay the healers, found the house the behemoth destroyed, and while I was teaching you to be a street. A lot of the documents that you pilfered, those contained more information about what occurred.”

I remember those jobs—Pops had said it would teach me to lock pick. It did. I

didn't think that he had an ulterior reason for asking me to break in to those homes and offices.

“Do you know who the Vigilantes were?”

He shakes his bald head and rubs its smooth skin with a slow hand. “Despite it all, I never could learn. I always tried. But I never found their names.” He sighs. “I failed in that, like I failed in everything else.”

“No, Pops, it's my fault this happened.”

“Aye. In a way, though, it's their fault.”

My stomach knots.

“I'll find them.”

Pops glances up at me when he hears the resolve in my voice.

“How?”

I grit my teeth. “Layne.”

THE GUARD patrolling near the fence finds himself face down in the mud and unconscious before his breath is full knocked from his lungs. His partner, hearing the sound of two bodies colliding, comes closer to investigate, only to get a stone to the temple that might or might not leave him permanently brain damaged. A third comes around the bend in time to be hurled to the ground, the bow slung casually over one shoulder now pressing so hard against his throat that the world spins to darkness ere he knows he was attacked.

Nocking a feathered shaft to the stolen bow, I prowl across the manse's acre-wide lawn, keeping my eyes and ears open. Daylight is only an hour away, and the sky is already lighting itself to the incipient sun.

Pops and I had talked the majority of the night, and, after convincing him to take my room with Kev, I set out to Layne's home as identified by Hermina. At first, I had doubted that Layne stayed here. It wasn't the extravagance of the property, the lush lawns, sprawling garden, or multi-storied mansion that sat in the center. No, it was the fact that he would be hiding from anyone where he would obviously be drawn to. Most people, when hiding, don't go for the most obvious place in the world. Layne, of course, doesn't necessarily know that I'm after him—like Hermina, he's still ignorant of the fact that I know of his pact with Dalm. So maybe that's why he'd come here, not knowing that someone wants his blood.

I hope that I don't have to use the arrow against any of the guards. I will assume that the man I struck with my sling survives, though I'd rather not know either way. I have yet to knowingly kill a man, and I don't know if I can do it if my life isn't in immediate jeopardy.

Nevertheless, I move forward boldly. I assume that there are at the very least seven more guards—Layne intimated that he had a number of men at his disposal—and while I will use all of my skill, pathetic though it might be, to keep from murdering them, I won't hesitate to silence any throat that tries to raise an alarm.

I drift across the property, moving quickly and hoping that Shema's gift helps me to blend into the rapidly fading shadows. I reach the front door without incident, dropping the purloined weapons on the steps as I remove my lock picks. Just as I start to insert the first, the door creaks open a half inch.

It isn't locked anyway.

With a snort, I pocket the picks and scoop up the arrow. It's difficult to fire inside—chances of ricochets against the stone are greater, and the height of the roof always throws off calculations—but it's better than nothing, which is essentially all that I have.

I scoot through the beautiful foyer where marble pedestals and busts of people I don't recognize line the walls. Plush carpets pad any sounds my bare feet may make, and I start my search. Keeping my ears perked and alert, I listen for any additional sounds.

In the kitchen, I hear the creak of armor as a guard approaches down the hallway, and I just manage to duck behind cover as he saunters past. I step out behind him and touch his ear with the arrowhead.

“Don't move or I will kill you.” I surprise myself with the grim lethality layered in my voice. I even believe me when I threaten him with death.

He stiffens and his hands open reflexively. “D-don't,” he starts to say, but I cut

him off.

“Keep your hands wide open. Wider! Now, with your left hand only, unbuckle your weapons-belt and drop it to the floor.” As I speak, I step slowly away, the arrow trained on the man's eyeball. I doubt that I would miss if I fired from so close, but I don't want him to think that he has a chance of dodging away. He's easily three times my size, and if he attacks, he could kill me before I could even scream.

Idly, I wonder why my arm isn't shaking with fear.

The guard does as I say, and the weapons make a too loud sound as they clank on the wooden floor. “Kick them away from you.”

He complies.

“Kneel near that wall with your hands against the back of your skull,” I say, gesturing with the arrow.

“Why?”

“Now.” My voice brooks no argument, and I hope that my actions won't, either.

Slowly, he does. When he's kneeling, I drop my aim and shoot him in the back of his knee from four feet away. Had he been standing, the arrow would have ripped right through him. As it stands it pins him to the floor.

The scream of pain is short lived as I jump and kick the back of his head with both feet. His face smashes against the wall. Something cracks, and he falls silent. I don't think he'll be happy when he awakes.

Nauseated by the smell of fresh blood—oozing from the leg, leaking from the face—I stumble to the weapons belt. A number of throwing knives and a slender dirk find their way into my longjacket, and I hurry on. I can hear other voices calling out, curious about the shout.

They know I'm here, doubtless.

I need to find Layne, and quickly. There's little doubt he's here; why have the guards if otherwise? But where, precisely? Perhaps I can find a place to hide and wait until Layne comes out himself.

A voice, just loud enough for me, curses.

They've found the man in the kitchen. “...flaming face is broken,” I can just hear the voice say. I freeze, unsheathing the dirk, praying that Willem's instructions will fit the dirk as well as the sword. I crouch lower, in a stance that Roddy taught me, prepared.

“Get Layne,” the voice orders. “He's in the library.”

Library?

Excellent.

I ghost after the sound of the pounding feet, only taking time to ambush the guard who is hunched over his fallen comrade. I smash his ear in with the steel bow, leaving him unconscious and bleeding.

I wish I knew how I am doing this.

Half of the guards are down, at best.

I try not to think about at worst.

As I follow the messenger guard, I hear other shouts and noises. More of my work has been discovered. I glance through a window as I run past. Dawn is coming, and I'm losing—perhaps already lost—the edge of surprise.

I have to hurry.

I catch up to the guard just as he starts to hammer on thick double doors, his

shadow spinning dizzily from the two fully lit candelabra on each side of the door. “Sir! Sir!”

“Guard!” I shout just loudly enough to catch the man's attention. He turns and I toss him the bow. He catches it easily with both hands, and I drive my knee into his groin as hard as I can. His fetid breath rushes out and into my face, and I punch him in the throat as he falls. He gasps and writhes on the floor.

“If you value your life,” I say, leaning in closely, “you'll stay on the ground and keep your mouth closed.”

The door opens.

Layne is standing there, his clothing ruffled and his hair unkempt.

“What do you want you buffoon?” he snaps, not recognizing me in the mix of light and shadows in the hallway.

Straightening, I push Layne back into the room and shut the door behind us, twisting the lock and then snapping the end off in one fluid motion. Layne gasps as he recognizes me, then turns to run. With a frustrated snarl I hurl the dirk just as Lor taught me. It embeds itself into the ground in front of Layne's feet. He skitters to a stop and spins around, his eyes wide and fear-filled.

“What do you want?”

“Answers. Now, tell your guards that you're safe in here, and that the intruder couldn't make it in. Tell them that they aren't to come back until they find me.”

His face hardens. “You can't order me about. If you've forgotten, Amela, I *own* you.”

I want to break his fingers. I want to kick his perfectly white teeth. I want to slash open his stomach and feed him his dinner again.

I take a calming breath. “You didn't pay enough,” I say. With a mere gesture, I fling a throwing knife in between Layne's legs, the blade stuck point-first into the carpet. Lor would be proud (of my target, too; he didn't get along with Layne very well). “Do what I tell you. Now.”

Layne pales again and stumbles to the door. Heavy knocks echo in the room, but Layne orders the guards away without too much persuasion and no additional coercion. Once their footsteps fade, I shove him away from the door and back into a plush, overstuffed chair that looks like he had just been using it. He sits down hard and simply stares.

“I want answers.”

“About what?”

“Dalm.”

“Who?”

I slam my fist down, an action that would have seemed ridiculous if it weren't for the fact that I still clutched a throwing knife in it. The upholstery bleeds white stuffing. “This will be your throat if you don't talk.”

He looks at me, then paints a pathetic smile on his face. “Amela, why the hostility?”

“You lied.”

“About what?”

I snarl and punch him in the face. It hurts my hand. The pain feels good. I punch him again, enjoying the sight of blood erupting from his nose.

“Don't fancy talk. I want answers to every question, and you will tell me. I know that you hired Dalm to kill the King.” It chills me to say it.

Layne freezes, the blood gushing between his fingers, puddling in his lap, glistening in the light from the small lamp perched on the edge of his desk, utterly ignored. “What?”

“Dalm confessed, Layne,” I say in an annoyed, frustrated tone. “Dalm told me your plot—the only thing he didn't tell me was who or why.” I cluck my tongue. “You wanted the Queen protected, right? I'm protecting her. From you.”

“Amela, I—” He pauses.

“You what? You deny it?”

At last, he shakes his head. “It's different than what you think.”

“Tell me, by what divination do you know what I think?” Hot anger washes through me, and it's all I can do to keep the blade from the man's dark throat.

He swallows, then grimaces as he chokes down the gore that has coated his mouth. “I am not trying to kill the Queen.”

“No?” I smack him. Blood flies off from my fingers and his face as his head snaps to the side. “Why protect a woman who can't create an heir? Hey?” I smack him again. “Do you think that I'm so daft that I don't see the problem in having an aged Queen try to birth an heir when her fertile and young daughter is so much more suited to the task?” Smack. “Hey?” Smack. “Do you think I can't see exposed lies?” Smack. “I'm missing two pieces to this riddle: who set this up, and why?” Smack. “You know the answers!” Smack. “Tell me!”

Layne cowers behind his hands and I have to take a few steps into the stuffy study to keep from killing the man ere I get answers. I'm trembling now, fury and fear coursing through me in equal portions. I don't know what I'm doing, I don't know what I'm doing. But I'm doing it.

“Answer me,” I demand again, some of the passion gone from my voice.

Finally, Layne gains enough composure to speak. “The who is Duke Olthen, a man with great desires for power.” This must be the name of the Duke that Hermina told me of in the carriage. “The why is because he is holding my family hostage.”

This pulls me to a stop. My hatred ebbs some, for I know what that feels like.

“You said that you left them behind for your job.”

“I lied.” He doesn't meet my eyes. “Why would you need to know the truth?”

“But...” I stall a little, unsure now. “I thought that you were his hench.”

He snorts. “Who said that?”

“Hermina.”

“She would. Anything to make me seem the villain.”

“You are the villain, so far as I'm concerned. You know things that I need to know. Speak,” I command, cradling my hand against my stomach. The knuckle of my forefinger had caught his eyetooth on the last slap, tearing away a small strip of flesh. It throbs; I ignore it.

“It happened two months ago. I was away in Malvilyn when my wife and daughter were kidnapped. Olthen contacted me a day later, explaining that he needed my singular assistance in securing his position as King Elect. Everything that I did for him before was worthless to him. He wanted my full cooperation.”

“Didn't you go after him?”

“Did you go after your family?” he spits back. “No, I am no fighter. A girl—a *street*—has me beaten and cowering. I couldn't do anything but agree to help him. As he unfolded his plans, I began to embellish them, improve upon the original design. Using what I knew of his thinking from my years as his political ally, I helped to create failsafe measures and redundant plans to help ensure his success—and, barring that, his continued career with no worries of impeachment. He appreciated my creativity, and promised to grant me an additional desire besides the return of my family. Once King Elect, he promises to find me and my family elsewhere, so that we can leave this midden heap called Tintyr.”

“But what about Reika?” I want to know.

He shrugs. “She's the perfect scapegoat, isn't she? She isn't brave enough to make a coup, but she's the perfect target to blame in the case of an assassination. She'll receive the blame and have to work to prove her innocence while the Duke takes advantage of the Ascension of Kings. He has, of late, begun to woo Princess Eva, which gives him great headway in securing her for himself—once the Queen is out of the way, of course.”

“But why you in particular?”

“His plot involves...dangerous allies, and he wanted some insurance, some security against any rogue, uncontrollable situations.”

Dangerous allies. “You mean the Vyn?”

“Aye.” Layne snorts a little, his words hissing and stuffy through his damaged nose. “The Vyn. What a fool!” I can't tell if he speaks of the Duke, me, or himself.

“Why did he make a pact with the Vyn?”

“They are the only ones who would be able to work with us.”

“The only ones?”

“Aye. The other behemoths are either too weak, too stupid, or too passive. Only a Vyn, largest and strongest of the behemoths, could ensure the regicide we needed.”

“Why was I chosen?”

He snorts, blood bubbling as he does so. “Happenstance, girl. I sent out a request for someone with few ties—enough so that they felt they had something to lose, something I could manipulate—to become a new Spark. This Spark would be cut off from normal training and Sparks, left in the dark, and perfectly malleable. You were supposed to be the ideal tool because you didn't know that what you were doing was outside of the norm—hence the reason I needed a street or someone like.”

“Why?”

“Easier to deny knowledge. If you got caught, I could disavow with almost no difficulty, call you a Vigilante, and be done with it. Why do you think I didn't give you your Badge of Authority, a signet, or anything else?”

“What are those?” I feel my ire rise again.

“Precisely.”

I grit my teeth. His arrogance has returned, and I have to fight my frustration with him. “You stole my family for this?”

“It was necessary. And messy. And costly. And time-draining. In fact, I had Carly executed for giving me such a headache.”

I chill at the confession. “*You* had Carly executed? I thought he tried to escape.”

Layne snorts. “Of course he did. I asked that it look like an accident, so the situation presented itself. The loss of the other one, the boy...”

“Logan,” I don't even realize I've spoken until Layne waves his hand, dismissing it.

“Aye, him. He was a mistake—he wasn't supposed to be there, so we let him go.”

“You 'let him go'? As if you can play with his life?”

“My job, Amela, is to play with lives.”

“Even though your daughter and wife's lives were at stake?”

“*Especially* because their lives were at stake.” Heat returns to his voice and he straightens in the chair. “Nords above, Amela, do you not see? I *had* to protect my family.”

I shake my head. “No. You know the heartache it causes. You know the pain. Yet you did it anyway, and lied about what they meant to you.”

“I want my wife back!” he yells. “I'll do anything to see her again.”

“And I want my mother back!” I shout in return.

“Then ask,” he says magnanimously (an effect ruined by the gore dribbling down his face and staining his doublet).

“She's dead.”

Layne pauses, his eyes wide.

“And so are you,” I say as the blade leaves my fingertips.

THE BLADE vibrates, its point buried in the headrest. Layne stares at me with wide eyes, unblinking. I fear I might have given him a heart attack, but he swallows slowly, never looking at the blade by his head.

“You killed my mother,” accuse I.

“I did not,” defends he.

“You held her prisoner.”

“She was an accomplice to a street and a thief.”

“You never let me see her.”

“She was a criminal!”

“When was her trial?”

Silence.

I press my accusations. “She died thinking I had abandoned her.”

“You had.”

I burst forward, kicking him in the stomach. The momentum topples the chair, and we both roll on the ground. He tries to pin me, but I break free using a technique that Roddy had taught me. Layne screams when the maneuver breaks his wrist. I twist him about and pin him with my body, my hands about his throat. I hiss as he weakly battles me, “You...denied me...at...every...turn!”

“Let...go!” he replies, thrashing to get free of my grip.

Answers, answers, answers.

He still knows some of what I don't.

I need to know.

I let go.

Stumbling to my feet, I let him wheeze, cradle his hand, and spit out blood while I reclaim the knives I've thrown. “You live,” I pant, “because you know things I don't. You will tell me what I want to know.”

“And if I don't?” he asks, his eyes burning with hatred.

“Your family dies,” I say. And I mean it, too.

“No one knows where they are,” he argues.

“No one knew where you were, and I found you.” I don't mention that I had simply gotten lucky when I found him at this mansion.

The fight leeches out of him, and he slumps to the ground. He nods feebly. “Ask, then. I will answer.”

“No more games?”

“None.”

I take a deep breath and try to calm myself. I ask him about the attack ten years before, the one that destroyed my family. “I don't know anything about that. Vigilantes aren't tracked by my office.”

My lips tighten. I'll find them yet. I swear it.

“You haven't answered my original questions, Layne.”

“Very well,” he nods, “I will begin with why we picked the Vyn. As you know, there are four types of behemoth: the Wyn—pugnacious, violent, quick tempered, small; the Dandyn—larger, intelligent, passive, healers; the Goryn—bigger, stupid, agrarians, worthless; the Vyn—largest, smartest, cunning, envious.”

“Envious?”

“Aye. The Vyn aren't like the rest of the behemoths in that they are a dying breed. Something about their home, the Isle of the Vyn, is killing them off. They need new land, and they long have yearned to take ours.”

“But why ours? The Darshur are humans, too, they could be overrun.”

He laughs. “And take their desert lands? How would that be better, how would that help them? They have no desire to fight other behemoths—something in their nature prohibits that, much like incest is fundamentally repugnant to us—and so they have to turn their attention to the only land big enough, fertile enough, and fitting enough for their people.”

“The Realm.”

“Precisely.”

I put pressure on my injured finger. It stings. I ignore the pain. “So, why haven't they attacked?”

“Amela, do you know how the Vyn breed their warriors?”

“No.” I don't know anything. Layne had purposefully excised all knowledge of what I was doing. He knows that. I flare in anger—keeping the embers more than warm—lest I lose my resolve.

I still don't know what I'm doing.

“They are brotherhoods,” Layne is lecturing, “called Triads. It is rather rare, so their numbers aren't large. But they are, I suppose, to make up for it. Triads are composed of three brothers, triplets, born at the same time from the same mother. These Triads are all but unstoppable. Half a human army would be required to take down one Triad. But Spooks?” He clicks his tongue. “Ah, now they are something different.

“The only reason we are still alive is because of the insane among us. One Spook could easily kill an entire Triad with minimal injury to self. The whispers would see to that. It would take a half dozen Triads—that's eighteen behemoths, Amela—to kill one skilled, dedicated, focused Spook.”

He lets me think on that. Remembering the grief and effort that it took for Vald to get Dalm injured enough that the fireball could kill him—and I choke to think it—I find it difficult to believe that *one* Spook could kill *eighteen* Vyn. But, still—Vald came off conqueror. Dalm died at my hand...and I have to live with that daily.

“They do not know how many Spooks we have and, when coupled with the armies—which they can count, by the way—they know that we have superior numbers.”

“They could still attack,” say I.

“Of course they *could*. Didn't I mention they were cunning? Subterfuge is not beyond their capabilities, and they know that we humans can be a volatile, treacherous bunch ourselves. Duke Olthen found a Triad—a single Triad, mind you—that was willing to go into negotiations with him for a recompense that they found worthwhile: information.”

I feel my stomach knot. “How many Slayers there are in the kingdom.” It isn't a question; it's fact.

Layne nods. “Good girl. You've been paying attention.

“Olthen was willing to barter that much sought-after information for the price of one assassin with a behemoth's strength.”

“Dalm.”

“Precisely. Dalm Folded himself into human size, infiltrated the city, trailed his target, found the King near Ashvale, and killed him and his heir, just as Olthen requested.”

“But Dalm wanted to do more.”

“Not necessarily. He was also supposed to kill the Queen before returning to inform his brethren of his success. But the Princess Eva was crucial to Olthen's plan—which is where you came in.”

“He needed to become King Elect...” I think aloud.

“...and he can't do that without the Princess, alive and well.”

I pause. “You lied to me. Again.”

He nods. “You were never supposed to protect the Queen—only the Princess. We actually planned on having you fail at protecting the Queen—that way, when she died, the Slayers ordered to protect her would take the fault. The public would get a body they could blame—everyone loves having a scapegoat, Amela—and the Duke could step in, helping the Realm through its crisis.” He shrugs as I fume. “So it was a delicate deal: Three deaths for some crucial information.”

“But Olthen would gain the Realm only to lose it when the behemoths chose to attack.”

“*If*, Amela, *if* the behemoths chose to attack.”

“Would Olthen change the numbers?”

“Never.”

I blink in surprise. “Why not?”

“Would you double cross a behemoth? And if they found out?” He chuckles. “I wouldn't. No, he would give them the right numbers.”

“This doesn't concern you that he would leak such important information?”

Layne chuckles again. “Do you remember the dungeon beneath my office?”

I nod. Of course I do.

“That is at full capacity. We don't have enough trained Sparks to couple with the Spooks. If we were ever attacked, you need but release those prisoners and the behemoths would be repelled. Our number of Spooks is so high that every behemoth on the planet could attack us and the Realm would survive. It would be a grand war, Amela, of that there is no doubt. But we would be the victors.”

“We have that many who hear the whispers?”

“Aye.”

I can't decide if the information heartens me or heats me. Vald is a person, an individual, not a number, not a statistic, not just a crazy person, but a person. Real. Layne talks about them as if they are part of a quiver of arrows, utterly expendable.

But, at the same time, it is true—the people are the shield, the sword, the protection, the hope. The Realm is smoking ruin but for them.

“And what of Dalm?” I swallow, afraid that I already know his answer.

“We used him. Dalm wanted to get that information for his country, not knowing that it would be something of no value. He did what no other Vyn would ever be willing to do.”

“What's that?”

“Fold.”

“Fold? But Bline Folded...”

He laughs a little, humorlessly. “Blime was a Wyn. The difference is important.”
“How?”

Layne stirs a little. I tense, but he is merely shifting his weight. “Do you remember the illustration I provided you right after Blime's death?”

I nod. It was right before I met Dalm.

“Good. You see, when a behemoth Folds, the mass is rearranged again and again. With a Wyn—one that doesn't have as much mass—it can be done autonomously. A Vyn, however, requires additional help.”

“Help?”

“You see, if that original paper, unfolded, is a Vyn, then he must fold down ten times to reach human size.”

“It can't be folded ten times,” I argue. We've already been through this; I can't even fold it seven times, let alone ten.

“If you could, just imagine how dense the paper would be!”

I frown. “So, how does a Vyn Fold?”

“They lose something.”

“What does that mean?”

Layne shakes his head a bit. “Some Wyns, like Blime, can Fold and then, if they want to, they can Stretch. How they actually do it is still a mystery, but you've seen the effects. They can go in and out all of the time. This part of their nature is very irritating to us, and is one of the main reasons that we keep Slayers in the city—to flush them out of their smaller skins, to Stretch, and to exterminate.

“A Vyn, on the other hand, can only go one way. Once Folded, a Vyn is stuck in the smaller size. In terms of density—and, by scale and extension, muscles strength, speed, and other senses—a Vyn is much, much thicker, stronger, faster, and naturally more astute than a Wyn, and many times more than a normal human. But the Vyn—or, in the example, the paper—must be folded ten times to get to that point.”

“What do they have to do?” I ask, though I think I already know.

“They go through a special ceremony with their brethren. You see, only a member of the Triad can do this—something to do with their closeness while in their mother's womb. At any rate, this ceremony transfers some of the Vyn's mass to his brothers, who swell in turn. Once a certain amount of mass has been moved over, the Vyn can then Fold himself to human size.”

“Without his brothers, he wouldn't be able to get all of his mass back.”

“Close. If you cut a paper, can you put it back together into one piece?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“The mass would be reduced...”

“Aye.”

“...but the mass can't be put back together.”

I pause. “I see.”

“That is why a Vyn who can Fold is so much more dangerous, and has so much more to lose.”

“Dalm...” The name strikes a chord that I can't fully define, pierces emotions that I still have yet to understand. I loved him... “He did this?”

Layne smirks a little, a bizarre expression to see through the gore and in the flickering light. “Aye. He sacrificed for his people, for his brothers. Even if he were

successful in his mission, he would never be able to go back. What Vyn community would want someone so small?"

"Wasn't he just as strong?"

"It's not just about strength, Amela. And, no, he wasn't. His strength was proportionate to his mass, and he lost some of that mass when he gave it to the other brothers of his Triad. It's impossible for him to be as strong as they, though he was incalculably stronger than any normal person."

"Why did he do it?" What I'm really asking was, Did Dalm lie to me?

Layne shrugged. "Delusion? Mental instability? Fanaticism? I don't know, and I doubt he did, either."

I think of all that Dalm and I had talked about, his feelings for home and country. I thought he had been talking about the Realm, but now I see what he meant.

He was doing what he thought was right.

Every person—behemoth or not—does what he or she thinks is right.

I can feel my body wearing down. The talking has dulled the adrenaline that has kept me alive as I broke through Layne's defenses. I haven't slept, I'm hungry; I need to leave, and soon. But Layne has more answers than I need. "What is going to happen next?" I ask as I sheath the knives, preparing to leave.

"We will all most likely die," he confesses.

"Everyone dies, Layne. Speak to the point."

He struggles to sit up and says, "The point is this: Dalm is dead. His brethren will come for vengeance."

His brothers. He was going to meet with them...I swallow. They must be close, then.

Layne nods. "The death of the Vyn...why do you think I left after Dalm broke through my office?"

"Cowardice," I answer immediately.

He snorts. "You would think that of me. Rather, it was the opposite; I went to bargain with Dalm's brethren. I had to convince them not to attack us." They *are* close. My stomach sinks.

"Stem their revenge?"

He nods feebly. "I wanted to stop them from attacking. I might have wanted the Crown to change hands to save my family and get out of the city, but I did not want a Triad—even one that's missing a member—to attack us. That causes fear, that causes pain, that causes consequences that I would rather not deal with or manipulate. Complacent people can be controlled longer than those in fear." He sighs. "But the Triad didn't agree with any of my petitions. They feel they were betrayed."

"Did Olthen give them the numbers?"

"No, not yet."

"So we did betray them."

"Olthen demands the contract be fulfilled!" Layne says frantically. "So long as the Queen lives, Olthen will demand the bargain be met. I spoke to the brethren, and they refuse to honor the agreement. It's not about the information now, it's about blood."

I grit my teeth. "Then you've doomed our Realm! Olthen's plans are in ruins, just like our country will be!"

Layne winces at the heat in my voice. "I know. He is furious, too."

“*He's* furious?” I snort, incredulous. “Layne, don't you see? We have lost.”

“No, they aren't strong enough to destroy us,” he claims, but it sounds desperate. I frown. “Have you seen a Spook fight?”

He pauses. “No,” he finally answers. “Never an actual fight. I've seen only the aftermath, like with Bline.”

“It nearly *killed* Vald to destroy Dalm.” I feel tears burning as I say, “Vald couldn't even do it. *I* killed Dalm. By my hand he died.” Layne doesn't know what I felt...that I loved him. I killed the only man I loved. “One Spook could barely kill one Vyn who wasn't at full strength. Are you *wrapped*? Do the whispers hold you, too? A Triad could *obliterate* the Realm!” I think back to the dungeons filled with Spooks. “You would be lucky if a Spook could kill *one* Vyn in single combat, but to fight three? That's folly!” I want to curse, rend my hair, and kill Layne for his stupidity. “You fool,” I say at last. “Even a dungeon filled with Spooks can't protect you, not if those in the Triad are intent, not if they know where to strike, not if they have a purpose. They will attack.” I know it's true.

“I didn't mean for this to happen, Amela, you must believe me on this. I know that I've lied to you, but I...” He grasps for words, casting a pitiful picture—a crumpled, bleeding, broken man. “Olthen was the one. He wanted power. He wanted more than just his title.”

“I just want to make one thing clear, Layne: I do not care who is in charge of the government. I only want to be left alone. That's all I've ever cared about. Not who wears the crown, but who I am with—and that they be of my choosing. I don't care that Olthen manipulated you, or that he wants the Queen dead, or that he wants to tup the Princess. That means nothing to me.” I glare at him with murder in my eyes. “We are lost,” I repeat. I can feel it.

Jump, jump, jump.

I should have jumped.

Layne stares past me as the ground trembles. “No,” he says, his voice dead and emotionless. “No,” he says again, and I realize he's denying what he sees, rather than what I've said.

I look behind me as the ground shakes a bit again.

The truth I feel isn't a sentiment inside of me. It is the earth-rattling approach of the behemoths, looming over the sun-brightening horizon, and just visible from the study's window.

I LEAVE Layne's manse through the front door. Guards call out to me, but they can't catch a street, not one that is feeling the tremors of death rumbling up her feet.

I have to get back to The Quiet Inn. Pops and Kev are there...Vald is there.

This spurs me to faster speeds, and soon I find myself on the rooftops. The approach of the Vyn—they are still too far to begin attacking, but everyone can see them from almost any point in the city—has evacuated the people. Crowds flood over the cobblestones as the day breaks skull-gray, the sky muted by a paste of clouds. I can smell smoke on the wind.

Too many people get in my way, and I take to the higher paths, leaping over intersections, balancing on thin poles that stretch over an alleyway, and generally using all of my skills to keep myself moving. I have to drop from one rutted roof to another, a drop that usually would make me stop, lower myself, and then fall. This time, I simply hit the ground, pain blossoming in my feet as I stumble. I keep my legs for a couple of steps, but in the end tumble and roll.

I'm being slowed by all the weaponry I grabbed at Layne's manse, and dump it while running. The dropped dirk bounces and falls into the throng below, because I hear a loud cry, but I'm past that area and into the next block before I think to stop.

Pops and Kev need my help. They can't escape.

Vald needs my help to protect us.

He's our chance at survival.

I push my body harder, trying to keep my breaths as deep and even as I can. I can hear screams—mortal screams—off to the west. I spare a glance, and wish I hadn't.

More behemoths are visible, marching resolutely on the city. If the specks I'm counting holds true, I'm looking at a half dozen Triads coming my way.

“One Spook,” I snort, still reeling with all that Layne has told me. There's so much to understand, so much to process, yet all I can do is focus on the running until it becomes a painful blur of buildings, rooftops, jumps, and breathing. Soon, however, I have to descend—the rooftops are faster, but I haven't the stamina to keep making the necessary leaps. I push through crowds, panicked throngs of people all fleeing the impending doom.

Then I'm there, hot, sweaty, anxious, and more afraid than I have been in a long time.

Jump, jump, jump.

If I had leaped, I wouldn't be here now.

With a mental shove that physically moves me, I reject the thought. Kev and Pops are still alive, and they need me. I wasn't lying to Layne when I said I only want to be left alone. I don't care what's left of the Realm when this ends, so long as Pops and Kev aren't hurt, that they are safe.

The Quiet Inn seems deserted as I burst through the door. As I do, an arrow whizzes past my head, wiggling like a decapitated snake as it burrows into the wood next to my face. I duck (belatedly) and slide to a stop, my chest heaving and sweat burning in my eyes. My enervated legs barely hold me up; momentum alone accounts for how I am still moving.

I look around, trying to spot the shooter. To my surprise, it's Shema, a crossbow

(empty) held in trembling hands.

“Shema?” say I through gasps. “What are you doing?”

“P-protecting the inn,” she explains with a tremor in her voice—one that matches the ground. Outside, an almighty crash breaks over us, and I duck as the windows explode inward. Ears ringing, I peek over the edge of the shattered windowsill and see a huge stone—perhaps what was once part of a building—rolling away. I can see a smoking hole in Layne's building, debris and wood bouncing around like oil off a hot skillet. People are pinned beneath the rubble, screaming.

“Shema, we have to get out! Now!” I shout over the tumult.

She doesn't seem to understand.

“Why are you standing there?”

“The master told me to stay!” she says, tears brimming her eyes. She drops the crossbow onto the tabletop, her hands quaking at the subsequent rattle.

“The master's as wrapped as Vald. Don't listen to that fool's head if it means your life! The city's under attack!”

“Amela?” I hear the voice, and I don't believe it.

Standing against the doorway, his face clouded with confusion, is Vald. “What's going on?”

He's lucid. The whispers have him.

I glance at his bloodied arm, but am only slightly surprised to see that it is full and apparently strong. “Vald, you're arm...”

He glances down. “It's not broken.” He effortlessly tears off the wrappings. A cloud of plaster blooms where the cast once was. He looks at me with that awful expression that I love—of his sanity returned but held back by the ravings of voices inside of his head. “Run,” he says. “And don't look back.”

Then he disappears from before me, returned yet lost, leaping out of sight and straight up. A few people turn and point at him as they run, marveling as they run away.

“Vald,” I say in a voice harsh with emotion. “Be safe.”

He's gone.

Just like that.

Then another crash comes—another stone dropping from the sky like a hailstone the size of three men. With a jolt, I realize that they are actually aiming for this area of town.

With a sinking feeling in the pit of my soul, I understand why.

I told them. I told Dalm about the building, about what was below...he knew. The other Vyn are aiming here, trying to bury those who could defeat them.

And it's my fault.

Swallowing against the fury (at myself, at Dalm, at his betrayal, at the fact that I still, after all that's happened, love him) inside of me, I turn back to Shema. “We're all in deep danger,” I explain as I herd her from behind the desk. “We need to get to safety.”

“How?”

“I don't know,” I admit. “Have you heard anything?”

She is about to shake her head when she stops. “Yes! I did hear something!”

By now we're at my room and Kev is opening the door, hopping in excitement to see me. “Mela, Mela!” he cries with a smile, “Rocks!”

“Yes, Kev, it's raining rocks,” say I. “Pops! How sturdy are your wheels?”

"I've had worse," he admits as he edges toward us, away from the window. His tan skin looks sickly with worry, his jaw trembling more than normal. I don't blame him.

"Can you move?"

"Not over cobbles, not very well."

"Carry!" shouts Kev.

"No, Kev, you can't carry me," insists Pops, who turns toward me. "What do you have in mind, Amela?" He winces as another boulder half the size of our old house smashes a horse into a red pulp right next to the inn. Screams and the smell of burning waft in from the outside.

"Shema?" I pass the question to the maid. She looks to and fro nervously, but finally speaks up with a brief explanation.

"I heard that the Dart is being held until it reaches capacity. All of the rails that run out of Tintyr are being loaded with as many people as possible in order to evacuate." She shakes her head. "It's our only way, really."

I nod. "If nothing else, the station is on the east of town, farther away from—" The rest of my sentence is shattered like the ground the rock lands on. Layne's building won't be standing much longer, entombing all of those Spooks underneath it.

An idea sparks—a fitting event for a Spark.

I snatch up my boots and stomp them on, lacing them quickly.

"Amela, what are you doing?" asks Pops. I ignore him.

"Shema." I grab the girl's shoulders in both hands and look at her straight. She regards me with wide eyes. "You know where the Dart station is, right?"

"Of course, Amela."

"So do I," chimes in Pops.

"Kev!" shouts Kev.

"Will you make sure my family can get there?"

Her eyes cloud with worry. "Oh, no, Amela! I'm not brave, like you. I would just as soon stay here and wait for it to end—"

I interrupt viciously. "It won't end, Shema! Listen, there is something in this city that the behemoths want, and it's right across the street!"

Slam! Another boulder pulverizes a piece of the street. The debris starts to choke off the avenue, and the flood of people is getting blocked. The throng thickens, a morass of humanity that squishes every time another stone lands.

I can smell blood now. Kev stares at me with wide, confused eyes, wearing an expression that I hate because it pierces through my heart every time.

"Shema, it won't end. It won't end unless someone stops it."

"Why must that person be you?" demands Pops. I can understand his anger, his frustration, but we are out of time. I start pulling at them, shoving them out of the room. "Why you?" Pops insists on knowing as we roll out of the inn.

"Because no one else has been down there but me!" I snatch a lantern off a hook near the door and hurry out, shouting over my shoulder. "I promise, Pops, that I'll come back! I promise that I will! Just head north! Head for Malvilyn! I'll find you there!"

Pops yells something, but it's drowned out as the back section of The Quiet Inn shatters, a geyser of splintered, spiraling wood, stone, and shingles. Dust rolls out like vomit, pouring over us and choking the air. The last I see of my family is Kev hauling Pops out of his wheels (I didn't think he could do that) and Shema herding my half-wit

brother toward the safety of the east.

I grit my teeth against the grit in the air and plow forward, shoving people and generally making sure that I get where I'm headed. Another boulder collapses the roof of the building next to Layne's, and I have to move quickly to keep from being crushed. People scream—the chaos is distracting—I lose sight of my target—I fall and get up—I almost lose my lantern—

Then I'm inside the door, the dust and debris heavy in my nose and eyes. I fumble with the switch, but eventually get the lantern to light.

The building groans like a spinster complaining of bad joints and poor weather. I wave the thin beam about, desperately trying to get my bearings. I've never come in through the front door, and the shattered inside makes it difficult to understand where I am.

Moving on instinct, I head deeper into the building, ducking beneath fallen pillars and clambering over crushed walls. At last I find the stairwell.

Fifty-nine stairs down, fifty-nine up.

The building trembles as something heavy lands in the garden. I pray that it isn't a behemoth. If a Vyn gets close enough to deal with the building personally, I have just entered my sarcophagus.

I start down, the metal clanging dully beneath my booted feet. The shadows tip and twirl as I descend, giving me more than just passing instances of vertigo. Nevertheless, I push on, counting the numbers in my head. They're the only thing that keeps me focused as the sounds of insanity creep ever closer. The howls are inhuman, the banshee screams of Spooks unable to do what the voices tell them now that their prey—their purpose—is so close.

I hit fifty-eight and then breathe a sigh of relief when fifty-nine feels solid and distinctly less metallic. I swallow back the fear that I've made a serious miscalculation and hold the lantern up a little bit higher to get a better view of the long, straight hallway. On each side are ten cells, and there are two wings, making for forty Spooks. If Layne was telling the truth—something that seems distinctly foreign to him—then this dungeon should have more than enough Spooks to save the city.

Save my lanternlight, there is nothing to illuminate the dungeon. Whoever was in charge of keeping the place lit has lammed it as much as Layne, leaving the place rank and dark. I bite my lip and move ahead, doing my best to ignore the screams and cries.

As I start down one wing, I have to wonder what's keeping them in their places—the whispers can empower them to break through steel, to jump over buildings, to ignore pain. Why would being bound by a silver lock be enough to keep them in place? Vald is proof that the behemoths are close enough to ignite the whispers. He healed in moments, spoke lucidly, and leaped away.

So why are they all still inside?

I shriek as a metal door at the far end shatters outward, a twisted wreck of metal and stone. It sparks against the cobbles of the ground as it slides away. I pause, too terrified to move. What was I thinking? How can I get them out if they haven't left already? They're Spooks, yes, but they aren't Vald. Vald and I, we understand each other, after our own manner. Him I can control. Them, I cannot.

Am I wrapped myself?

When the thought that I should have jumped, jumped, jumped returns, I have to

wonder.

Ignoring the idea, I stare at the escaped Spook. She's ragged and bleeding, her arm dangling uselessly from her shoulder. The scraps of the long-sleeved jacket that had her bound drift about. The dirty tunic she wears underneath is soiled and threadbare, almost exposing her heaving breast. Slime and muck—how well I remember them—coat her bare legs. Trousers barely long enough to come halfway down her shanks cling desperately to her as she walks forward. A Darshur, her pale, pale skin seems to reflect the lanternlight back into my eyes. I can only glimpse at her face as she stalks toward me. I try to study more, but her features are lost behind the jagged strips of flesh she has torn away with her fingernails. Her eyes burn with a fury and an insanity and a hatred that I feel from the small of my back to the crown of my pate.

“The...” I start, but I lose my words as she walks past me, oblivious. Then, right next to the stairs, she starts to jump. Her first jump is higher, stronger, and faster than I thought possible, but she stops when she hits the ceiling. Loose dirt and accumulated slime drops down on top of me. She jumps again, cracking against the low roof, and I think to myself that she just might jump all the way up to the street *through* the ground, when she jumps again, striking her neck at an awkward angle. She drops to the ground and doesn't move.

I swallow hard and then start drifting away from the inmates of the dungeon. I look into one cell and see a person bound hand and foot, dead—starved to death. Another one is curled up in the corner, howling. He doesn't stir as I pass. The more I look, the more it comes clear: This is not a dungeon for Spooks. This is an insanitarium.

Hatred for Layne burns inside of me, and I take to the stairs, leaping over the corpse of what is probably the last Spook the fool's head Recruiter had in his dungeon. He never truly understood Spooks—behemoths, maybe, but Spooks and Sparks? No, he couldn't understand that he didn't have a dungeon full of the Realm's only defenders against behemoths, he simply had prisoners of the genuinely insane. There is no power resting here. The woman who killed herself, she was the last. I know it, though I don't know how.

Jump, jump, jump.

Layne lied.

Again.

And I believed him.

Again.

I wish now that I hadn't spared his miserable life, but there is no time to worry about that. Besides, his broken wrist would slow him down. Maybe the behemoths will kill him for me. Then it won't weigh down my soul.

I count the fifty-nine steps, stumble through the maze of rubble, and burst out into the street. I half expect the building to topple just as I hit the cobbles. I turn around to see that, for the most part, this area is cleared of fleeing crowds, and the building remains standing.

The ground thuds painfully and I almost lose my balance.

With a disgusted grunt I toss the lantern to one side. I need to head for my family, I need to help Vald...I don't know what to do. So I start dusting off my longjacket. It's filthy from everything I've been through, and it looks like I tore it—when I don't know. I pull a glob of dungeon slime out of my hair and flick it to the ground.

The earth trembles again and I stumble a bit. Cursing, I regain my feet and start to look around. I'm thinking about whether to follow Vald or my family, when it gets very dark around me.

A mixture of confusion and anger flow through me as I look up. My eyes widen as I see a very large, cratered, and scarred foot heading down to crush me.

I COWER. Yes, I admit that I cower. At this moment, a shadow swallows all light around me, casting a dark umbra over everything. I cower.

Perhaps the memories will distract me...

...there is so little time left...

...if I had jumped, I wouldn't have been squashed...

...I wonder how big of a splat I'll make...

...so this is death...

Silence.

Sound stops, and I can't hear anything but my breathing and smell the stink of a city in flames. I wait for the bone-crushing agony to end, to begin. I open my eyes.

I still see.

“Move!”

The voice is strained, tense, angry. Familiar.

A black cloak swirls around his shoulders, twists about his legs, prancing with the dust. Leather-clad shanks, running up to a broad belt and sleeveless tunic. The tan arms ripple and bulge as the muscles hold something...

“Move!” the voice says again, taut as the bunched muscles in his arm.

“Quinn?” whisper I, more confused than afraid now.

“*Move!*” he shouts, his quivering knees buckling.

He is holding the foot off of me—he caught the behemoth's foot.

I hear a bellow, surpassingly far above my head.

Taking his advice, I move, scrambling out from beneath my almost-death. I roll away, staring in disbelief at the Spark wrestle the giant foot.

Quinn lurches about, spinning the behemoth awkwardly but holding the foot in place. With a low moan, the behemoth starts to fall, tipping down toward the earth. He falls and falls, it seems, gaining speed with each moment, taking an eternity to move.

It's too surreal to comprehend.

The behemoth strains to catch himself, but Quinn's grip on his foot prevents any regaining of balance. The leg buckles, then starts to twist unnaturally as the behemoth gains speed. As he collides with the ground, shattering buildings and sending up a wave of dust and dirt so thick I can wade through it. His leg breaks, the bone snapping up in strange intervals, bulging against his flesh. The pain-filled roar bites into my ears, sending me reeling through the dust cloud.

As the fallen creature starts to move his injured limb upward—no doubt to cradle and comfort it, as any person would—I hear Quinn shout, “Seli! Now!” Out of the corner of my eye, I see a white-garbed girl—the cloth now smeared and torn, blackened and tattered—heave a sword upward. Quinn is dangling from the bottom of the foot with one hand. With the other, he snatches the blade by the handle. I boggle at the size of it—easily as long as me, and over a foot in width, the sword must weigh more than a hundred pounds. Quinn spins it as though it were a willow stick.

Then he flips around, landing on the top of the broken leg, and races away, the blade gleaming dully in the overcast light. He disappears behind a cloud of dust, and I lose track of him. Moments pass, and then the behemoth twitches. The leg spasms and then collapses. I have to backpedal furiously to avoid being crushed by the mound of

twisted flesh and broken bone.

For a long, piercing second, all is quiet. I look over at Seli, who is staring intently in the direction that Quinn went.

I approach her slowly. “You aren't a Spook, are you?”

She turns her large, mournful eyes to me. “No,” she says simply.

“Why did you let me think you were?”

She returns her gaze to the fallen behemoth. I wonder where the other two are of the Triad, but decide that I appreciate the brief respite. “Each Spook,” she says softly, “demonstrates his insanity in different ways. Some try to hurt themselves. Some, like yours, will simply act...uncouth. Quinn gets angry when people think that he's insane. So I let him pretend that he isn't.”

“Was everything he told me insane?”

She pins me with a look that holds almost as much meaning as her next words: “Not everything that a crazy person says is necessarily invalid.” She shakes her head. “But many of the things he said of me were actually of him.”

I think back to what he said that night at the inn.

Seli is a perfect example. You see, before she cracked, she was a liar. A crook, a cheat, a con. She would take advantage of people by putting up one face, but secretly be another. Then the whispers started to come to her, and she was compelled—literally forced—into writing down the steps leading to when she first heard the whispers. Then, she cracked...Her lover died—violently. Very suddenly, in a horrible incident inside of a burning building. A mob torched the place they were staying, anger in their eyes and hearts. She watched her hair crisp, smolder, her skin melt. A most gruesome death.

“Everything he said to me about you...”

“He was actually speaking of himself. He does that all of the time.”

“And the lover?”

“That was his wife. She was Darshur. The mob was angry at having a foreigner in their midst, and burned down the inn. That's what made him crack.” She waves her hand in front of her face, trying to pierce with a gaze the thick cloud of dust that has settled over us. “He always gives that hint away—some people catch it and think that I was a woman-lover. Others miss it completely, too caught up in the tragedy. He puts it in there on purpose.” She shrugs. I feel the fool's head for not seeing it sooner. I knew something sounded wrong, but hadn't caught it.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

Shrug again.

“You never asked.”

We wait a moment. Quinn hasn't come back. “Why are you Vigilantes?”

A trickle of a smile melts into the corner of her mouth. “Quinn hates taking orders.” She looks at me out of the edge of her eye. “I told you, he pretends to be the Spark. Because he is wrapped, he won't listen to anyone.”

“That must be difficult.”

She shrugs. “I'm used to it.”

“How old are you, then? Really?”

“He told the truth. I'm in my twenty-sevens.”

“You don't look it,” I mutter.

Seli smiles. “Thanks.”

I ask, "How did you get involved? Were you shrived?"

She shakes her head. "No, I volunteered."

"Volunteered?"

"I'm the daughter of high birth. I was tired of being told what to do—perhaps one of the reasons I go along with Quinn's rebelliousness—so I sought to live my own life." She points with her chin in the direction of the fallen behemoth. "I don't regret it."

"You say high birth."

She nods. "My father is a Duke."

"Not Olthen, I hope."

A laugh. "No. Olthen's my uncle." She turns to me, her big eyes curious. "Why? Do you know my uncle?"

"Only his current ploys for the Crown."

Seli sighs. "He has always wanted more power."

"Will he make a good King Elect?"

"I don't know. Probably. He wants power to help others—he wants to bring the Realm into a new type of government, one where people make choices for themselves about who rules and what the laws are."

This sounds a strange concept to my ears, but, as I said to Layne, I don't care who is in charge, so long as I am left alone.

"Well, you can blame him for this."

"What?"

"The behemoths are here because of his meddling."

"Explain as we walk." I can tell that Quinn's absence is starting to bother her. We begin picking our way through the wreckage, working closer to where Quinn could be. This reminds me that I have a responsibility to Vald—and my family. No, I have to trust Shema to get them to Malvilyn. If I can't help Vald, there won't be much left soon. I have to stay.

I talk as we walk, explaining everything I know as concisely as possible, making sure to only focus on her uncle's doings.

"This is extreme, even for him. But I wouldn't put it past him." Seli shakes her head, her olive skin smeared with dirt and soot. "I'm sorry to hear that he has done this. If he manages to become King, it might be for the best." She shrugs. "Maybe it was part of his plan all along."

"For me to succeed in killing his assassin? I somehow doubt it."

"The world needs change. Radical, permanent change. Perhaps this will be the war that breaks us out of an old world and into a new one." She clammers up a fallen pillar, then turns to help me. "Change is often violent and painful. You, of all people, should know that."

"You support this? This destruction?"

"No. I'm saying that it might be for the good, in the end."

"But at what cost?"

She surveys the wreckage, flinches as a handful of Militiamen land in front of us, crumpled and broken, tossed aside like tiny dolls, stares at the fleeing people who might not survive. "That depends on us."

"We have to pay his debts?" Anger sneaks into my voice, and I speak more sharply than I intend.

Seli laughs. “Why do you think that I preferred being a Vigilante than a Slayer like you? I clean up fewer messes, pay no one's debts but my own.”

“Until now.”

“This is survival. We'll settle the debt afterwards.”

A half-ton timber tumbles down, shattering the cobbles in front of us and blocking our way. “If we survive,” I grouse.

She chuckles and we find another route.

“How many are there?”

“Spooks? I don't know, a dozen, maybe...”

“No,” I interrupt before I fully understand what she says, “behemoths. How many?”

“I've lost count. Plenty.” She smiles as she hears a voice. “But that's why we're here! We should enjoy it!”

“Enjoy destruction?” I start to wonder if Seli isn't a little wrapped herself.

“Enjoy what we have!” She hurries away. “Quinn!”

I hear a muffled response. Quinn must be nearby.

“Wait, Seli!” I hurry after her. The lull in the destruction has passed, and now I find myself slaloming through shattered homes, over piles of rubble, and generally doing all I can to keep my body in one piece.

I catch up to the Vigilantes a few blocks later, just in time to see Quinn leap out of view. Seli is left behind and I catch up to her, breaths hissing from my already tired lungs.

“How did you know to contact me?” I gasp. “At The Quiet Inn? Hermina and Layne didn't tell you to, did they?”

She smiles at me. “When we heard that a behemoth had been found—and one the Folds, at that—we decided to investigate. It only took a couple of questions and a little deduction to figure out where you went. We wanted to see how you were handling it, how you were reacting to it. Behemoths are so infrequent in a city that we wanted to see if you were up to the task of protecting the place.”

“Apparently, I wasn't.”

She throws me a little shrug. “Everyone has their bad days. To be honest, though, Quinn was more interested in visitng with you than I was, but that shouldn't surprise you.”

I snort. “No, I guess it doesn't.”

“He's good at what he does,” she says. “In just about everything.” I follow her gaze and see that Quinn has leaped six or seven blocks. He has engaged two behemoths—I can see the corpse of the third in the Triad—bouncing from arm to arm, harassing the creatures with his massive sword. Each hit takes more and more out of his opponents, and ribbons of blood—just strings, it seems, at this distance—accompany the dull, silvery flash. One topples, and he focuses on the other.

“This reminds me of his first encounter.” Seli looks at me with a smile. “It wasn't as easy then as it is now. I didn't know what to do, and he was still new to the whispers.”

“What do you mean, you didn't know what to do?”

She gives me an askance glance. “You know why there are Sparks, right?”

I sigh. “To be a conscience, to protect people—I don't know! I've heard a million reasons, including some from *your* Spook!”

“Well, those are all true.” Seli pauses. “Do you ever feel like you simply *have* to be with your Spook? As if you aren't complete while away. Almost like an infatuation with a handsome man?”

I need to be with Vald. Over and above being with what's left of my family.

I nod. “I feel like that.”

“Well, that's because a Spark helps give the Spook focus.”

“What?”

She laughs at my reaction. “When did Vald fight his best? When you were watching?”

“I don't know! If I wasn't watching, how could I compare?”

She laughs again. “Fair. But when was he beaten the most? Did you see that, or was it after you showed up at the fight?”

“After,” I say without pausing.

“That's because you weren't there.” She nods at Quinn. “That's why I was looking for him. When he didn't come back, he must have struck out to find another Triad.”

She already knows about Triads. She knows how to be a Spark. I feel a surge of jealousy at her experience, but fight it down. Better to learn it just before death than to learn it never.

I ask, “That's why we're looking for him? So you can provide focus?”

“He fights better when I do.”

I shake my head and ask how that works. She merely shrugs and asks how whispers work. “We don't know,” she says, “the *how* of everything, only that it does work.” She nods at me. “That's why you're so important, and why the Spook picks the Spark.”

“What do you mean?”

“Vald picked you, didn't he?”

I think back to that dank dungeon. “I don't know.”

“You unlocked him, didn't you?”

“Aye.”

She shrugs, as if to say, “There you have it.”

“But that means I picked him!”

“You didn't leave.”

“No. I stayed.”

“Because he accepted you. Or the whispers did. I'm not sure how it all works. He wanted you to be his Spark, so you decided to unlock him. He chose you.”

I think about this for a moment. What possessed me to go along with this? To forsake my family and embrace this insanity? Surely I wouldn't have chosen to do this...surely. I have to wonder if I'm not more wrapped than any of the people I've met in the last few weeks. I shake my head.

“Well, I still don't believe you that my seeing Vald helps him against the behemoths.”

“I said it helps him focus. But why don't you believe me?”

“Because Vald always tells me to run and hide,” I reply.

“Of course! He's trying to protect you. That's what the whispers are for: protection.”

“By disobeying him I help him be stronger?” Why does that fight logic, yet

perfectly explain everything that has happened so far?

“That’s about right. It happened to us.” She smiles thinly. “It took a while before we figured it out. Quinn still doesn’t believe me when I tell him this, of course.”

I doubt that Vald would understand me. I guess that she’s right about each Spook demonstrating his insanity differently.

I shake my head and redirect the conversation. “You were telling me about Quinn’s first battle. When was this?”

“About a decade back,” she says after a moment’s reflection. We drift forward, always keeping the Spook in sight. Vald fights better than Quinn, I decide, though it is interesting to see how Quinn uses the huge blade to such good effect. Perhaps one Spook really can terminate a Triad.

“We chased it through a good portion of the city. In the end, we had quite the fight.” She smiles and looks at me, expecting a reciprocation of some sort, I suppose. But something’s bothering me about the story.

“What type of behemoth was it?”

“Oh, just a Wyn.”

“And it tore up the city?”

“After a manner of speaking. It was terrorizing the people, not causing this kind of destruction. We managed to stop it in the healing district.”

I freeze, staring at her as she hurries along, keeping her Spook in sight. When she sees that I’m not following, she stops. “What’s wrong?”

“Ten years ago? In the healing district?” Coincidence?

“Yes.” She looks at me. “Isn’t that what I said?”

“Was anyone hurt?” This can’t be real.

Jump, jump, jump.

Seli shrugs. “I don’t know. Probably. Lots of people get hurt.”

“But it was in the healing district?”

“Didn’t I just say so? Twice?”

“When was this?”

She rolls her eyes. “Ten years ago,” she says, exasperated.

I ask if it was around the ides of the fourth month. She says, “Aye, around then.”

I am paralyzed.

Seli and Quinn are responsible for the accident. They are the Slayers who caused the building to collapse and my world to spin downside up.

They are responsible for everything.

I SEARCH my pockets with a clandestine move, but come up empty. I have no weapons; I have no way of extracting revenge. Seli is small—smaller than I—but I can't let her go unpunished.

Roddy taught me how to subdue, how to wound, and even cripple people sans weapons. I can do this to Seli. She ruined my life. She and her deceptive Spook took everything from me. My studies, my home, my family—everything irrevocably changed. I should kill her.

I showed mercy to Layne, a man who killed Mama. More concerned for my family, I abandoned him, leaving him to find his family on his own, broken and bleeding. What am I doing? What have I done?

I didn't claim vengeance when it was presented to me.

My compassion is spent.

Seli revealed the truth at the wrong time. I can't handle this.

Pops' hatred, his revelation about the Vigilantes...it's all too much.

Jump, jump, jump.

Reaching forward, I snatch Seli's shoulder, kick out her feet from under her, and drop her to the ground. She screams until the breath gets crushed out of her by my body landing on top of her. In an unexpected twist, I lose leverage and we begin scrambling at each other, her trying to break free, me trying to get a grip on her throat.

All training and skills abandon me as I writhe with her on the ground, nails tearing and teeth snapping. She manages to get some of my hair in between her fingers. She twists, making me gasp. The pain starts to make it hard to breathe. Desperate, I jam two knuckles in the space between her ribs and rotate. She yelps and releases; we both scramble backwards, clutching at our injured parts.

"King's blood, Amela! Wha—what was that for?" she demands, one hand over her ribs, the other trying to pull up the torn dress over her now-bare shoulder.

"You, you ruined my family," I accuse between breaths. I rub my scalp fiercely, surprised that I don't find blood on my fingers.

"What? Are you wrapped?" She sounds genuinely confused and injured. "You just attacked me for no reason!"

"No reason?" I snap. "You and your flaming Spook destroyed my family!"

"What are you talking about?" she bites back, her normally wide eyes mere slits.

"That day. On the ides of the fourth month. You destroyed the Wyn."

"I did my job," she argues.

"Your fight collapsed a building on top of my brother! On top of Mama and Pops!"

She pauses. "What?"

"You fought the Wyn, didn't you? You just said that you did!"

Seli nods warily. "Aye. That's what Slayers do!"

"In the fight, you knocked down a building. Whether it was you or the behemoth, it doesn't matter. The falling debris shattered Pops' spine and broke Mama's arm so badly that it had to be amputated."

She stares, silent.

"You...it was you who ruined what my life could have been." Tears start to streak

down my face, and I can feel the rage build up inside of me again. “A chance for love! A chance for life! A normal family! You made me become a street, to steal from others just so that my family and I could live. It's your fault, Seli, and now you have to pay your *own* debts!”

I lunge for her again, snagging her arm. The dress tears a bit more as she tries to get away, but I manage to hurl her to the ground again before she can escape. I start to kick, to punch, to hit—anything to make my hurting stop.

Jump, jump, jump.

I stop as she whimpers at my feet. The wound from Layne on my knuckle has swollen up, red and angry on my hand. Seli cowers and hides behind her hands. It takes me a long moment to realize that she's talking to me, repeating the same phrase again and again.

“I'm sorry, Amela! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry...”

I stare, looking at my bloodied hands. Some is old, scabbed over, or remaining from Layne's face. Some is fresh, new—mingled mine and hers.

There has only been one thing that I've ever killed in my life, and I thought that I loved him.

I killed Dalm.

But I didn't kill Layne.

I didn't kill any of his guards.

I didn't kill Hermina or any of the others who used me.

I've been manipulated for a long time and I never fought back as hard as this.

Seli didn't mean for it.

I step back, my rage evaporated like a night's rainstorm. It's over. The accident is over; my life is changed. Beating Seli—a defenseless girl—will not bring back Mama or Pops' mobility. It won't undo the obliteration of my home, nor save Logan his arm or family. Carly's life is over, and his body is moldering in a grave, forgotten. Vald is my Spook; I have been used.

It has happened.

I have to let it go.

Seli is weeping now, and she refuses to look up at me. I swallow back the bile at her condition, her blackened eye, her split lip, her bruised face. I did that, and I did it on purpose.

Seli, she didn't mean to break my family. In fact, that's what she's blubbering through her wrecked mouth. “I didn't mean to, Amela. I'm sorry!”

Stooping down, I put a gentle hand on her shoulder. She flinches and whines again.

“No, Seli,” say I in the softest, most contrite voice I can manage. “It's not your fault.”

“Wha—”

“I'm sorry.” I help her up, trying to dust her off as well as I can. I frown as I pluck at the shreds in her dress. She has to use one hand to keep it up; otherwise it would be indecent.

“I thought you were going to kill me,” she confesses, tears blazing wet paths down her filthy cheeks.

"I thought I was too," I admit. "But you didn't do what you did to my family on purpose." To my surprise, I've been weeping this entire time. Sniffing, I wipe my nose on the back of my sleeve. "I was going to kill you on purpose, and that's different." I shake my head. "I hope you forgive me for hurting you. I was angry and confused. I didn't think. If I had, I never would have touched you. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry that I hurt you, albeit unknowingly," she says slowly.

"I think the worse crime lies with me," I answer.

Seli pauses for a moment. "Well," she says slowly, "then I will forgive you if you forgive me."

"Gladly." I mean it, too. This feels refreshing, like I've just bathed off a half-lifetime of grime.

"Thank you." She speaks carefully, and I hope that it isn't because she's afraid of me. She won't meet my gaze, however. "For not killing me."

I try to dismiss it with rationale. "It wouldn't be fair to kill you for something you didn't intend to do when I let Layne go."

"Layne?"

I nod. "Aye. He's the one who Recruited me." I swallow. "He took my family from me."

"Hermina has mentioned him," hums Seli as I help her up. I can tell that she's thinking about Quinn again, though she seems more focused on staying upright. I hurt her more than I thought. Guilt riddles me, but I help her along nonetheless.

"Nothing good, I hope," I say acidly.

"No, she was very much in love with him," replies Seli.

I simply laugh. A light, cathartic laugh. "I thought that she hated him, and he her!" This doesn't surprise me, though. The two never could be honest with me.

"I suppose that's possible. She was crushed when she found out that he had married, because she thought that they had had a special bond. Love, I guess. Maybe she just felt angry at the betrayal."

"I think I know what that feels like." Love turning into bitter hate. It's easy for me to understand that.

"Well, that's what I understand, anyway." Seli shrugs. "I don't know for sure. You could always ask her."

"I never want to see her again," I reply, perfectly honest.

"Then I wouldn't worry about it." It seems as though some of Seli's former confidence has returned, which mollifies me slightly. I still won't look at her; it makes me sick to think of what I had almost done.

"Where's Quinn?" I ask as we clamber over a fallen statue that bars our way.

She points with her chin. "This way."

"How do you know?"

She shrugs. "When you've been a Spark for long enough, you create a bond. Some Sparks say they can almost read the thoughts of their Spook, but I surely can't. Besides, who'd want to read the mind of a crazy person anyway?"

I hear a loud crash, some distant screams, and then nothing. We rove onward, passing in and out of chaos like sunlight through herds of clouds, never coming too close to danger, always on the lookout.

"I think..." I start to say, but Seli points anxiously, interrupting me.

“There!”

Quinn—a small black fly around the body of a behemoth—is bouncing back and forth, just like before. I squint. I think I can see another one. It's hard to tell, because there are four behemoths, each towering over the skyline. Most buildings only come up to their knees, and they seem to be using their height to great effect. Gigantic clubs and weapons are slung around, waved wildly at the two Spooks that harass them. I still marvel that they would attack creatures ten times their size. But that's what Spooks do.

“I think that's Vald,” I whisper. It feels right to say so.

“You might be right,” agrees she, and we set out at a faster pace. It's fairly easy to keep them in sight; after all, to find a Spook, I need only to follow the screams.

We run through a building that should have had more than just rubble for guts, then stop. The six combatants are still about a block away, but every building between us and them has been reduced to stones and dust, giving us a perfect view.

“Vald!” I exult, delighted that I was right. He doesn't seem to notice me, but I can see almost instantly what Seli meant; both he and Quinn look well beaten, bleeding and broken but fighting nonetheless. They seem to get their second wind as soon as we lay eyes on them.

“Come.” Seli grabs my hand. “Let's get higher.”

I nod, though I don't want to abandon Vald to the fight. We turn, and I recognize the area. We're not far from a watchtower, but closer—though not as high—is a housing structure. I once spent a week here, picking from a band of affluent merchants who were passing through and stayed in the rooms at night. I lead Seli, navigating the destroyed stairs and weaving my way upward until we at last come to the roof.

“Quinn!” shouts Seli, delighted to see him. He doesn't seem to notice, either, but redoubles his efforts against the behemoth.

“Isn't this dangerous?” I wonder aloud.

“Immensely,” she answers, childlike joy bubbling out of her. “That's what makes being a Spark worth all of the effort!”

I watch as Quinn and Vald drop twenty feet to the ruined pavement. I don't think that they're speaking—maybe the whispers are communicating, I don't know—but they suddenly begin to work in tandem. Vald braces himself and laces his fingers together, forming a stirrup of sorts. Quinn jumps toward him, sliding his booted foot into the awaiting hands. With a careless effort, Vald catapults the other Spook up and over his head. Quinn soars through the air, blurring past the Triad that's swinging for him in the sky, and plunges his sword all the way up to the hilt in the neck of a weakened behemoth. A geyser of blood erupts out, spraying over the wreckage, but Quinn has pulled the sword free and jumped away before a drop can hit him.

The behemoth teeters and falls. His brethren watch in anger and awe, but their passion doesn't help them.

Vald takes advantage of their distraction and, after heaving a large chunk of what was once a flower store over his head, he brings it down on the foot of the nearest behemoth. The creature howls and starts to hop on one foot, clutching the hurt in a large hand.

Quinn rebounds off of a rooftop and collides with his feet against the massive sternum of the giant. The force, coupled with his poor balance, tips him down. Quinn flips toward another behemoth while Vald races toward the descending head of 'his'

opponent.

I focus my attention on my Spook, watching as he scoops up two giant boulders, each the size of his torso, as he runs. I stand on tiptoe and can just barely see him dash both of them against the behemoth's eyes, sending out vile cascades of blood and eye-jelly. The behemoth roars again and reaches for his eyes. Vald steps out of the way of the descending hands, then, so quickly I almost lose site of it, grabs the creature's arm. With a leap and vicious maneuver that seems impossible to actually implement, he shoves the arm downward. The behemoth's open hand crashes against his nose, and I hear a snap even from this distance.

I remember a lesson Roddy taught me, about how to strike a nose so that the bone in the skull would break upwards into the brain.

Vald used the behemoth's own hand to kill him.

I hear Seli scream "Quinn!" just in time to see a black-clad Spook soar past us, sword spiraling away in one direction while his body breaks through three consecutive buildings. He lands in a smoldering pile in front of where we stand, and before I can take a breath Seli is headed toward him.

I glance up; I want to help, but Vald needs me right now.

To my surprise, he has already claimed Quinn's sword and is now leaping toward one of the two remaining behemoths.

Two giant steps and a leap, and the third behemoth's ankles suddenly find no support. The tendons snap like whips as the blade parts them, and the creature topples. Without wasting a breath, Vald jumps high enough to reach the top of the loincloth—all that the behemoths wear, apparently. He drops the blade down, into the flesh of the small of the back, and then races up the curve of the spine. The behemoth arches its back as the red ribbon of pain climbs up him, tipping his head so that he can howl at the sky. Vald runs on, ignoring the impossible angle of his trajectory.

Just as he reaches the apex, he wrenches the sword free and spins. The tip whistles through the air—I can hear it from where I stand—and then embeds itself into the base of the skull. The behemoth twitches once, then falls, Vald holding on to the sword as they descend. Buildings explode out from beneath it, and a wall of dust, dirt, and blood rolls over them.

The last behemoth stares in disbelief, three of his comrades felled by two men that barely come up to the middle of his shins.

He screams.

He stomps.

He shrieks.

He rends the air.

Then he screeches in delight.

He stoops down, plucks something up, and then begins to apply pressure with both hands, like someone trying to break an egg in between his palms.

It's Vald. I can see it.

My Spook's arms and legs are spread out, and he's pushing back, doing everything that he can to keep from being smashed by the colossal weight bearing on him from both sides.

The behemoth, suddenly incensed that he can't crush him, reels back, readying to throw my Spook.

“Vald!” I cry.

So busy am I watching as my friend spirals away that I don't notice that a large chunk of the dust is coalescing through the dirt-shroud in the form of what used to be the facade of a Regulator's office.

It crashes into the building I'm standing on, taking out a support pillar. I lurch like I'm in love, tumble, and suddenly realize that I'm about to fall to my death.

Yet the only thing I can think of is that I've failed Vald.

I CAN'T see. Dust whips into my eyes. Screams distract me—especially those coming from me. My mouth fills with dirt, and I have to spit it out so that I can breathe, or scream, depending on which one I need to do more. The sound of rocks colliding and buildings falling, the moans of victims, the roars of the Vyn all meld together in a cacophony that I feel more than hear.

How am I still alive?

I vaguely remember warm arms snatching me up, rescuing me from the fall.

Was it Vald?

No, I remember now. The beard, the sweat, the blood.

Quinn.

He caught me. Seli had yelled something at me, about being careful.

Then I fainted.

How long have I been unconscious?

The shouts of men, the rush of swords peeling out from their sheaths—utterly worthless weapons without the whispers there to guide them—and the constant thumping of the ground vibrate through me, rattling my teeth and making every sore and bruise shriek in pain.

An hour? Half hour? Something substantial, for the Militia is trying to tide the death brought on by the behemoths, a maneuver they hadn't tried when last I saw.

Then, like ice water in my heart, I realize: I don't know where Vald is. Seli and Quinn ran off, no doubt to take on another Triad, leaving me to figure things out for myself.

I swallow and think about Vald, about my family. I have to get my Spook back. My job is to protect him so that he can protect us. But the behemoth threw him so quickly, so fast...how am I supposed to keep track of a Spook when the whole world erupts?

I force myself to my hands, to my knees. I ache badly, but I should be all right—I will be, eventually. If I live long enough to see eventually. I cough, tasting blood. Another gust of wind fills my ears with sand and grit. The concussion that accompanies the nearby landing of what was once probably an entire bakery throws me pants over pate, tumbling me like a leaf in the face of a gale. I slam to a stop and crumple, holding my bruised sides and desperately trying to breathe again. The ground trembles again, and I lurch to one side, my face scratching against a rock—wall, statue, who knows?—and smearing blood as I drop back to the ground.

What's one more wound, after all? I have plenty already.

The trembles slow a bit, lessen. The wind stops rushing as forcefully, and I manage to force my eyes open, peeling out the grit and sand.

The last behemoth is dead—probably at Quinn's hand. But the city is in ruins. Gazing out over the (much reduced) skyline, I can see specks of dust flying past the shoulders of a distant Vyn—distant, I suppose, because he towers over the buildings. It takes me a moment to recognize the flecks.

People.

The dark flecks are people, launched into the air, who then spiral to the ground, fifty feet below. Their arms windmill, their legs spasm. Then they disappear behind the

building, and I can only imagine the results.

I have to help stop this.

Where is Vald?

We have to stop this.

Jump, jump, jump.

If I had jumped, I could have avoided being a part of all of this.

Spitting blood, mucus, sand, twigs—maybe a bug or two—out of my mouth, I find my feet. Wobbly, unsure, but I find them. My boots are gone, knocked off who knows when. I can't decide if that makes me happy or not. I can't let this happen. I have a responsibility...don't I?

Shouldn't I run? Isn't that what Logan would recommend? Run away, when the odds are against you. Best to regroup.

Regroup.

But how do you regroup a party of one?

I have to find Vald. Get him out, get me out, get to Malvilyn. Get to my family. I have to believe that they escaped, that they survived somehow.

I can barely walk, anyway. It's not like I'm fit for fighting or able to tackle the behemoths. These colossi aren't likely to just stop their attack because a Spark comes up, makes a curtsy, and asks, "Will you kindly stop rampaging through the city? I'm tired and would like to rest." Not likely at all.

The ground rumbles but I keep balance and start pushing closer to the nearest behemoths. Every instinct yells at me to turn around. Who (honestly) in their right minds would approach a Triad of Vyn? No one. That's why we have Spooks. They're never in their right minds. They'll attack.

And Vald is a Spook.

I've got to find Vald, so that means that I have to get to a Triad.

But which one? Which direction was he tossed? I know he survived it; I can feel that, deep within me, that he survived being thrown by a behemoth ten times his size. But where? I'm so lost that I don't even know which direction is north.

I lean against a still standing pillar, trying to expel some of the extra dirt that has crept into my lungs. It doesn't work too well, but I try again until I'm able to breathe. As I void my lungs, I try to think. How can I find him?

I glance at the sky. The sun has broken through the heavy clouds, but the sky is laced with haze. Fires are burning—I can smell them—and they aren't far. Dust and debris float through the air. It feels as though I peer through dirtied glass windows at the world. Everything looks faded, as though the color is washed out—except the stark red splashes of blood, memorials of the victims.

The earth trembles again. I have to move, to get out of the way of loosened stones or roof tiles. I have to avoid things falling from above.

Above.

Up.

If I can find the Triad that's being the most slowed, the one that seems to be battling instead of simply destroying, I will find a Spook. And if there's a Spook, that might mean that Vald is there, too.

That fits.

That works.

That's logical...

Which is the opposite of how the whispers work.

Still, if I can at least get a sense of the land, I might be able to find my Spook.

Vald.

Seli was right. I'm drawn to him because I care for him in a way that I didn't know was possible. I don't love him—not like I did Dalm. I don't love him as I do Kev or Pops or Mama. It's a...loyalty, and a sense of duty. I need him to be safe.

I think back to the times I was short or cross with him. Regret punches me in the stomach and only one thought stays with me: I have to find him.

I need to find a watchtower. I end up wandering for a good ten minutes, avoiding patches of flames and doubling back whenever a road ends in a dead end (sometimes that's literal). I work southward, edging toward the center of the city, trying to follow the wreckage like some sort of disastrous game trail. I can sometimes see the top of a Vyn's head floating over the skyline, but I can never beat a straight path toward it. I hurry as quickly as I can, taking turns sometimes at random, sometimes with purpose. At last I turn and see a watchtower at the far end of the street.

I run, stumbling as the ground lurches. I don't know what is making the earth shake so, because the Vyn probably aren't that heavy—I hope they aren't, anyway. Glass showers over me as a boulder sails from the north, crashing against an (I hope) abandoned building. Stone chips and wooden debris spews out of the opening. I duck underneath the overhang of the shop across the street, covering my ears as the rubble collapses down. Taking a deep breath, I resume my frantic flight. Two more rocks—both smaller than the first, but deadly nevertheless—crash behind me, cracking the air with sound as much as the cobbled street with weight. Stumbling, I make it to the shattered remnants of the doorway. With a kick I knock the final pieces out of the way and start up the tower.

Built at the top of a slight rise, this watchtower is but a slender cone, the Cage containing the typical sleeping area. Stairs wind about the wall, twisting upward. I start pounding up the steps, a tiny counter in my mind thinking, Thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six. I hit ninety-seven before sliding to a stop at the top of the tower. Panting, I lean against the wall, staring at the cramped platform. The corpse of a Militaman—rather, the pieces of the corpse of the Militaman—is strewn across the stone floor. I don't know how I missed it when I first came in. I swallow back bile and look out at the destruction, squinting through the haze and smoke.

In the farthest distance northward, I can see the silhouette of one Triad. It looks as though they are simply crushing any- and everything. A large swath of fire burns in between me and them. Even if Vald is fighting there, it would take me the better part of the day to trek around. Besides, I don't think he was thrown that far. Shaking my head, I cast eastward.

It is from there the rocks that almost killed me in the street have been flung. I can only see two of a Triad, and they both look to be digging. Dirt, pieces of building, and all other types of debris erupt from around them. Some pieces land as far away as a half mile, breaking buildings and sending geysers of dirt into the air. Maybe he was thrown that far, then...

Maybe.

Gazing westward, I see three Vyn, standing in a circle. I can spot only their heads

and shoulders, their bodies occulted by distance and edifices. They don't attack, but simply stare. I think I can see them speaking, conversing about something. I squint again, trying to glimpse more. One tips his head back, ostensibly laughing, his shoulders shaking.

I can go either to my left or my right. I flinch as a wagon, hurled from the hands of the eastward Vyn, smashes to pieces a dozen feet from the tower. One piece of wood, spinning violently as it ascends, almost makes it to my eye level before shuddering down to the earth, splintering upon impact. I grimace. If I head to the east, I will be slaloming through the random rubble that the Vyn carelessly toss. If I head to the north, I will have to circumvent a conflagration that could, quite possibly, end up consuming the majority of the city. If I head to the west, I have to wend my way through the damaged city toward a laughing Vyn.

That thought sobers me. I truly do not want to know what makes a Vyn laugh.

I think I'd rather brave a fire or missiles from above.

Seli said that she could sense her Spook. I haven't known Vald for years, but I feel like we've been through a substantial amount in our short time together. He's important to me.

And if I am to find Vald, I have to make a choice.

North.

West.

East.

I glance at each again, knowing that every moment of deliberation wastes precious moments I could use in finding my Spook.

North.

West.

East.

The ground rumbles as another rock bigger than a bull crunches against the root of the tower, shaking copious amounts of dust over me. I cough, wipe my eyes, and fight against panic. No matter what, I can't wait here.

I start down the stairs, counting down as my feet slap against the hard stones. Sixty-three, sixty-two, sixty-one.

The world shakes. With a lurch I fall forward, my hands scraping against the walls and my knees banging painfully on the steps. Reaching out desperately, I manage to snatch a crack in the wall, which jolts me to a stop. I take a few ragged, frightened breaths, blinking through the dust and floating pieces of mortar. A huge stone has punctured the wall of the tower in front of me, obliterating steps on both sides of the tower. I swallow at the fear. The ground looms farther beneath me, too far to jump—jump, jump, jump. Heights never bothered me before, but this is different.

"Come, come, Amela," I whisper to myself, reaching out with a bloodied hand. I hoist myself to my feet as the building moans. "You need to move. You need to move!" I stagger forward, dropping down to about the fiftieth step. The boulder has removed approximately ten of the steps, leaving a gaping hole that opens up to a panoramic view of the city. I can see the duo from the reduced Triad still intently digging. They probably wouldn't care if they knew that they had almost murdered me.

In fact, I know that they wouldn't.

Summoning all of my courage, I inch out onto the jagged, broken edge. The

surface is uneven and fragile. More than once a supposedly sturdy brick dissolves beneath my foot. I walk carefully, but must use the top of the hole to maintain balance. About halfway across, the top of the hole exceeds my reach. I stare mournfully at the stairs, still too far for me to risk a jump. Unintentionally, I glance to my right.

The ground stretches out invitingly.

Jump, jump, jump.

I can end it now. I can do what I didn't have the courage to do before.

I can jump.

“Oh, Nords,” I gasp, clutching at what fingergrrips remain. My left foot slips as I wobble, and the stone crumbles beneath my weight. With a sickening lurch, I fall, my stomach catching the lip of the hole. Air shoots out of me, my sight blurs with a mix of darkness and stars, and I start to slide.

Desperately, I shoot out my hands out, scrambling for a handhold. My fingers feel a cavity and I tighten my grip instinctively. I jerk for a moment, my legs swinging wildly beneath me. I try to calm myself with a steady breath and summon the courage to climb.

The ground shakes again as another piece of what was once a stone pillar crashes into the nearby street. The tower trembles in response, almost buckling. It moans and starts to lean. I don't have much time left.

With a grunt and a groan, I start to leverage my way up. My muscles strain, my legs kicking against the rough surface of the crumbling wall. I get my right elbow over, and work on getting the left up, too, when the grip powders beneath my grip, and I plunge backwards with a scream.

I topple down, my arms spinning uselessly. The fall seems to take an eternity, my body dreading the landing with every moment.

I smash against the top of the Cage, my teeth rattling in time with the iron bars. I remain still, unable to move. I lost my grip. I feel like I've lost everything...my family...my Spook...everything—including my mind.

What is there left?

Why continue?

The city burns.

The Realm is dissolving about me...I have failed everyone and everything.

I have lost.

Jump, jump, jump.

I realize that the Realm isn't dissolving about me; it's this tower. I force my bruised and protesting body forward. Giant pieces of brick and mortar cascade toward the ground, shattering and breaking the Cage scant seconds after I clear the edge. The walls begin to fold in over themselves. I sprint for the shattered door, pushing past the pain and panic. I lunge through the opening and throw myself as far as I can. The tower crumples, imploding downward and shoving me farther away. I hit the ground and roll, barely able to hear, but knowing what to do.

I head west.

THE PATH to the westward Triad is cluttered, to say the least. Broken bodies and ruined homes litter the expanses, and the congestion of people, Militiamen, animals, and goods makes it difficult to navigate. I press on regardless, unwilling to give in to bad traffic. More than once an officer stops to shout at me, insisting that I follow them as they evacuate. I merely shake my head and push on. They can flee, but I cannot.

Not again.

Never again.

I keep the Triad in view as much as possible, using them as a beacon to draw me onward. I cut through properties, shove past refugees, and at last come to the square. The Triad stands, each fifty-eight feet high—I have noticed that Triads are identical, even down to their height—their laughter louder than the screams, the burning, the breaking. I don't slow as I approach them. Instead, I vault up and around a large pile of rubble, crawling in through holes and cracked facades until I get to the tallest building surrounding the square. It's the only way that I can see what's happening.

My eyes widen as I take in the scene.

My blood chills, and my breath catches in my throat.

Vald, bloodied and scarcely moving, is in the middle of the Triad. Every time he tries to move, he is punted by one Vyn to another. As I watch, he is kicked seven different times. Never are the blows designed to kill. Rather, they are tormenting and torturing him.

The tears that I thought I had shed with Seli well inside me. I thought I was empty before, but the piteous scene touches a reserve of emotion that I haven't felt. His body is completely broken—I can see many bones jutting out of his arms and legs. His face is scarcely recognizable. I close my eyes, afraid of what I'm seeing.

I choke out, "Kev..." but I don't know why.

I guess that Vald hears me—how, I don't think I'll ever know—because he looks up, his one eye (the other is missing) imploring.

"Vald." I say it right this time.

A trace of a smile creeps across his face.

"I'm sorry," I whisper—whisper...I can never think the word again without shuddering.

I remember when we first met. My fear. His attack. How he irritated and frustrated me with his inane words. His theft of the herb shop. Then, of his sudden lucidity and victory over Bline. Our discussion in his bedroom. His journal. Our picnic, and the slowly growing realization that he was a part of me that I never knew had been absent.

My Spook.

My precious, precious friend.

He smiles wider at me, telling me that he is happy to see me, and that he's doing this for me. I can understand that, all in the curve of his lips, through the mangled blood and beard.

He's going to attack.

My Spook.

"No," I whisper. "Don't do it."

He does it. Using what little strength he has left, he grabs at the bare toe of the closest Vyn. They laugh, amused at his pitiful attempt to strike back.

Their laughter stops as Vald tears off the toe.

The attacked Vyn screams, a sound so monstrous that I have to clap my hands over my ears. One of the other Vyn scoops Vald up into his enormous hands. He, too, utters an incomprehensible bellow before pulling. With a grunt, he rips Vald in half, tossing the pieces over his shoulder, to land behind some buildings several blocks away.

I blink, stunned.

My mind cannot fathom what just happened.

I try to scream, but I can't.

I try to cry, but I can't.

I try to breathe, but I can't.

Vald is dead.

My Spook...

Vald...

I swallow my rage and fury, letting it burn inside of me until I can no longer contain it. The Vyn must be punished.

Jump.

I must punish them.

Jump.

The toeless behemoth starts to yell at the one who murdered Vald, no doubt arguing about who had the right to kill the Spook. They start fighting, grappling with each other, looking for all the world like two grossly overgrown boys in their fives. The other stands back, watching.

Jump, jump, jump.

And, for the first time, I actually listen.

I listen to the angry wind, the fluttering cloth that clots the air, the endless violence as the city is razed. But I see, too, I see the sounds.

My world shatters, and that something inside of me says, Finally. It says, Jump. At last, you can jump.

I unwind, ever so slightly, ever so much.

I repeat to myself a mantra of identity, that I am a Spark, a Spark, a Spark.

But, they ask me, but what's a Spark without a Spook?

Vald is literally in pieces.

It's only two letters' difference, they say.

Mama and her wooden teeth and her gnawed on stump have evaporated from my life.

It's only one sound, they say.

Jump.

What's a single sound? Nothing.

Nothing.

Pops is gone away, fled.

And I believe them.

Jump, jump, jump.

KeV will never be the same, not without Mama, not without me.

They hiss and murmur and purr against the insides of my ears, letting me see,

letting me touch, letting me know things I never heard or saw or felt or conceived before.

Dalm died at my hand.

The whispers take me. It is no longer an oath.

Jump, jump, jump.

They are angry that I didn't listen the first time—or any of the other times.

Layne will probably live, stay away from jail, and never pay the price he owes.

I could have had the power long ago.

I should have jumped, and changed.

“Duty to King and country,” he says, the silver whistle glimmering, winking its light at me. Crystal carafes and luxurious baths.

I could have broken Rythkar's jail, freed the prisoners my parents.

Hermina's aplomb intact as we sit in the gloomy office.

I almost killed Seli for the accident.

Jump.

Whatever you say, I'll do.

Jump.

Whose lover—wife—burned and melted? Quinn's. His story was told me, always had been told me. Seli allowed her Spook to act the Spark.

Death will equalize everyone, eventually. So find what matters and hold onto it.

Why did she put on an act?

Shame.

Shame.

Shame.

The regret burns through me, and I no longer think—I no longer am. I do as I'm instructed, each movement thought and recorded as if watching through a spyglass leagues away from me.

Wrap me, for safety's sake.

Vald...

I snatch up a nearby pole, probably used as something on which to hang laundry. With a deft maneuver, I break off one end, leaving a jagged, splintered edge. I heft it, testing its weight. Intrinsically, I knew that it was too light to do any sort of damage.

Their thick skin would handle a javelin the same way mine would handle a long splinter.

Rather than throwing it, I decide to finally do what the whispers have been demanding of me ever since I stood on the ledge of that watchtower a few days—maybe a lifetime—ago. I finally listen, truly listen to what they want.

I jump.

I take a couple steps away from the precipice before charging toward the edge. My toes curl as I hit the railing, and I launch myself into the air. I soar toward my target, the one not fighting. He isn't watching me—why should he? Who takes into consideration a bee until after it has stung?

I aim to sting this one in a way he can't ignore.

I land on his elbow, driving the make-shift spear in as deeply as I can. They tell me that it's a good idea. I don't question why I should jump toward a creature that towers over me—I only come up just above its ankle. I simply do as I'm told.

The behemoth flinches, instinctively swinging one large hand toward the offended elbow. I see it coming; in fact, I expect it. Wrenching my spear free, I hold on to wiry

hair thicker than yarn with one hand and adjust my grip on the shaft. Just as the hand is about to close over me, I leap into it, stabbing the javelin in through the webbing in between his fingers. He bellows in annoyance and flicks his wrist twice. On the second flick, I lose my grip and soar off of him, crashing onto the balcony of a home across the square.

Not what the whispers had planned.

I struggle to my feet as the behemoth spins around, looking for the offender. The other two continue to fight, oblivious to me. They break buildings in their battle, shattering what wasn't already obliterated. Stones pulverize, wood splinters. All of the commotion distracts my Vyn, and he misses me.

I step off the balcony and through the shattered glass, looking for something I can use as a weapon. Whoever used to own this tiny room with a view of the square has since abandoned the place, leaving less important belongings strewn all about. The only thing that I can see to use is a long, wrought-iron poker that has fallen in front of the fireplace.

This, the whispers tell me, you can use.

I swing it experimentally. This could work.

I return to the balcony and perch on the railing, building up energy in my legs. I wait for Dopey (my nickname for the behemoth) to turn before I jump.

I propel myself an easy thirty feet into the air, arms spinning and legs flailing. I land on Dopey's wrist, catching hold of the thick hair with one hand. I swing the poker around, stuffing it through my belt, a hasty, make shift scabbard. Then I start to climb.

I don't know if Dopey isn't paying attention right now, or if he's more interested in the battle between his brethren, but he doesn't notice the pinprick sensation of me climbing up his arm. I am not as big as Vald, and I know that I weigh much less, but I still wonder if that's reason enough for his inattention. Whatever the case, I make it to the rank section closest to his armpit before he starts to itch.

A large finger scrapes right by my head, dead skin and other filth raining over me. I hold my breath and hold on tighter. The scratching continues, and I see the other three fingers curling toward me. If he closes that cage of fingers, he's bound to notice, no matter how stupid he is.

I drop, letting flesh soar past me in a blur. Right about his waistline, where the broad belt that holds his loincloth in place rests, I reach out and grab on. The transfer of weight is noticeable, I guess, because Dopey turns to look, lifting one arm to get a better view.

Racing as fast as I can, I crawl one arm over the other, slinging my way to the small of his back. He scratches at the place where I landed, but comes up empty.

I pause for a moment, trying to mentally scout the path up I plan to scale. No easy way. Undaunted, I start pulling my way up his back, sometimes pulling hair out by the roots as I ascend. I do it faster than should be possible, each yank putting me higher and higher up his back. It doesn't take long before both of his arms are twisted behind him at an awkward angle, desperately trying to pin me between his massive fingers.

I grab at one of them, then flip myself on top of his hands. Before Dopey can react and flick me down again, I leap into the bottom strands of his hair, snagging at the greasy ropes and clinging with all my strength.

Dopey shakes his head, forcefully snapping me from one side to the other. My teeth rattle inside my head, my eyes water, and I accidentally bite my tongue. The pain

keeps me focused, and helps me to time my release precisely.

Left.

Right.

Left.

Right.

Release.

I use the momentum to roll up and onto his right shoulder. As I come up from a crouch, I snatch the poker free of its make-shift sheath. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a large shadow approaching. I try to ignore it, but it grows. I spare a glance, realizing with a lurch that it is his left hand, clawed and ready, descending toward me, anxious to brush me free.

I focus on running. The skin slides over the muscles with each step, making it difficult to keep my balance, kind of like trying to stay upright on a slimy log that's bobbing in a river. Somehow I manage.

Dopey cranes his neck, trying to see what it is that's scampering toward him. The hand claps down just behind me, the fingers raking reeking flecks of filth and long strands of hair away. I angle around the knot that makes up Dopey's neck, and ready my poker.

Snatching onto the outer ear lobe with one hand, I thrust the poker into an ear canal that has more wax in it than a candle maker's shop. The behemoth bellows as I make contact, and his head starts to shake. The poker is well lodged where I had shoved it, so I release the handle and hold on as he starts to toss his head about again. I can feel the approach of the massive hand behind me.

I have no time left.

As soon as I get caught in those large fingers, my fate will be the same as Vald's—I will be in pieces.

The whispers give me an idea.

Rearing back with one foot, I leverage myself into the air, then swing in, using my grips on his ears as supports. With a brutal kick, the poker shoots through the wax that clings to it and disappears into the chasm of his head.

I use the momentum of the last head toss to launch me free of the hand, which slaps down where I had hung moments before. I arch out and away, falling toward a nearby rooftop. Dopey groans and starts to tip. I land on the roof, rolling into a pain-laced heap as Dopey begins his descent. The shadow of his bulk starts to fill my view.

He's going to land on me.

Body protesting, I gather my feet and sprint toward the edge of the building. A quick glance shows me that I'm not going to make it.

The darkness deepens.

The air rushes around me. My feet slap on the rough rooftop, the planks—no doubt loosened from the behemoths' steps all around—tremble beneath me.

I increase my speed, arms pumping, legs churning, lungs burning.

I can see the precipice.

Five more steps.

The facade cracks as Dopey strikes it.

Four more steps.

Powdered stone erupts around him, like droplets of water from a fountain.

Three more steps.

I can make it.

I will make it.

Two more steps.

The whispers tell me I'll make it.

The planks beneath my feet fire upwards as Dopey crashes through the building, snapping the wood and firing me as if I had been on the wrong end of a catapult.

The whispers are right.

I'm airborne, all of my forward momentum from running added to the unexpected launch that Dopey provided me.

I soar, the wind tearing tears from my eyes and the breath from my lungs. My arms spin about, desperately trying to—to do what, I don't know. I probably look like I'm swimming in the air, eighty feet above the ground.

I look down, expecting a vertiginous wave to drown me. To my surprise, it doesn't bother me to see the corpse of a horse, no bigger from this perspective as if it were a wooden toy of a toddler.

Everything seems very far away, and moves very slowly.

I have a chance to look out over the destruction that the Triads have wrought. I see the ruined buildings, the mounds of corpses from where armies fell. I see the burning, the looting—even now, in the midst of crisis, the people still steal—and the horror. The sky seems dark with mourning for the loss of the city.

Suddenly, a broad back, impossibly large, looms in front of me. I slam against the sweat-streaked flesh, sliding down. My breath—lost on the rooftop already—bursts out of me, and my vision swims. The whispers demand that I stop, forcing my hands to reach out and grasp a knot of back hair, dangling right between where the searching fingers of the behemoth can't reach me. I resume consciousness only to understand my predicament.

I make a bunch of wordless noises, mingling them with screams. Suddenly, the whole trunk of the behemoth trembles, and the back bends at the waist. What was a moment ago nothing more than a sheer wall of skin now becomes a semi-flat plane on which I can again stand. As the behemoth doubles over, the other behemoth—judging from the pain on his face, the one that lost his toe to Vald—towers above the two of us. One hand is clenched in a fist, and I assume that Toeless just punched his brother in the gut while he struggled to get me off of his back.

Then I realize: This is the creature that killed Vald.

The fear I feel dissolves. Resolve enters.

It's time for these giants to die.

The whispers say so.

I'm going to be the one who does it.

Problemless.

I begin to sprint forward, racing next to the back ridge, powering myself forward on reserves of energy I hadn't had a moment before. I step deftly, my feet finding purchase in matted nests of hair or on the protruding lumps of skin-covered bone. I wish I had ran this fast on the rooftop—I would have avoided my impromptu flight.

Toeless spots me and raises his clenched fist, his enormous bulk tightening. Muscles larger than a man bunch and flex. He aims to squish me, much as we might aim

to do upon seeing a rodent. I run forward, regardless.

I can feel the giant beneath my feet wheezing and coughing. Apparently, the punch knocked the wind out of him. As big a brute as a behemoth is, that's a lot of wind to lose.

I'm running downhill, as it were, rapidly approaching the nape of his neck. The fist soars down from above, moving faster than should be possible. I angle my trajectory and prepare to jump. I have to time this just right—I'll regret it otherwise. The whispers tell me so.

Toeless' fist drops. Shoving off a mole the size of a wagon wheel, I leap backwards and out, wrenching my body about in the air to keep any stray parts from being tagged by the passing fist. Knuckles, hair, fingernails, and air rush past me, inches from the front of my body. The balled hand cracks against the gasping behemoth below me with such force that I am actually propelled upward even higher by the updraft. I hear a crack, louder than the splintering of a tree, and I know that the winded behemoth's neck just broke.

One less to worry about.

I am still airborne, rising even as Toeless' body still swings downward, following through with his lethal punch. I reach out to snag at a huge leather bracer on his wrist—its height greater than my own—as I pass, but the stretch throws off my momentum. I slowly somersault midair, legs passing eyes, arms flailing. My stomach lurches as I revolve, the gray sky smearing past me, turning into the ruined buildings. The panorama view disappears as the plains of Toeless' arm come into view. Everything rapidly turns flesh-colored before I bounce once, rebounding off of his hairy arm. I don't go very high, for Toeless has started to bring his arm back up. I land, gasping for breath and wondering what to do next.

Any time the whispers have an idea, I'll listen.

Toeless is bringing another hand up, moving faster than any other behemoth I've ever seen. I let my body go limp, sliding down and off his arm. I begin to fall—easily forty-five feet off the ground—letting gravity move me. Instinctively, Toeless cups his hand and catches me, large fingers quickly ensconcing me.

Before they get too close, I grab his index finger and swing around it. It's fat, scarred, and matted with hair. I move so quickly that Toeless, more out of reflex than anything else, rotates his hand so that I'm standing on a more level plane.

His mistake; my gain.

The tip of the nail comes to about my sternum, which gives me plenty of leverage. I wrap both arms around the digit, then, with one foot resting on the middle finger, I push, bending it backwards so fast that I can hear—and, more importantly—feel the finger break, just along the base where the knuckle joins the palm.

There is a howl of pain, and I suddenly find myself almost parallel with Toeless' eye. Our gaze meet. Hatred flares in his gaze. Revenge boils in mine. Despite the fact that his eyeball is bigger than my head, I still send the message: *You are dead.*

Fear flickers.

The moment ends.

His reaction to the broken finger must have jolted me upward, for gravity snatches at me and pulls my body toward its earthy embrace.

I slide past what seems like endless miles of behemoth flesh as the ground grows

in my view. The whispers tell me that this landing won't hurt. I believe them.

When I hit the ground, I land on my feet, instinctively curling into a crouch. The cobbled center of the square, already in ruins because of the behemoths who trampled it, fractures beneath me. I stand slowly, surprised. It truly didn't hurt, just as the whispers had said.

I notice that there is a four-toed foot descending, and I don't have time to contemplate much beyond survival right now.

I hurl myself to one side as the foot crashes down, feeling the deafening rush of air more than hearing it. I vault onto the top of Toeless' toeless foot, but am quickly kicked off. I tumble once, twice, then land a good thirty feet from the behemoth.

I glance around. I need a weapon. I can't imagine a way of destroying the giant sans-sword, no matter what Roddy might suggest.

Toeless roars and picks up a wall of a building.

This gives me pause. It's so big that I don't know how I can get around it.

Pause ends; I turn and run.

My footsteps don't make a sound—then again, maybe I've lost my hearing—as I scurry for cover. I see a bakery, one stand of breads still intact (strange, that), a smithy's, and a meat shop. I don't think; I merely dive forward, hearing the wall crash through two or three buildings to my right. The far edge drops toward me, and only by rolling three times over the debris-littered ground am I able to avoid being smashed. Choking on the dust, I regain my feet and stagger into the smithy's shop.

Blinking to clear my eyes, I glance over what's available, hoping for a sword, a spear, or something. I don't see a lot—most everything must have been taken by fleeing citizens who needed defense. I see a rusting machete in one corner and pilfer that, girding it to my back with a quick twist of the cloth in which I wrap it. I sizable length of chain, a couple hundred links it seems, is also available. I snatch that up and then slip through a hole in the wall that leads into the meat shop.

Behind me, the smithy collapses beneath the foot of the behemoth. I guess he thought I was still in there.

Some sharp meat hooks lay on the ground, still usable. I snatch up two, deftly securing them onto one end of the chain, which I quickly loop around my shoulder, crossing over the machete. I take a deep breath and step out into the ruin that was the square. Dopey is stirring to one side—apparently, the poker didn't scramble his brain like I had hoped. The dead behemoth hasn't moved—obviously. Toeless looks down at me with disdain and hatred, his crippled hand cradled against his chest. The square falls silent for a long moment.

"Let's end this," I say, working a few links free and swinging the meat hooks deftly, just like Rall taught me.

It's a good thing the whispers are telling me what to do, because I have no idea what I'm doing.

DOPEY STIRS some more, and I decide to go after the wounded first. Despite my exhaustion, I sprint towards him, working more links off of the chain as I go. Detritus trips me up a little, but I compensate before stumbling. Toeless bellows into the gray air, tossing his head and arching his back.

I press on regardless, leaping from fleshy ankle to flabby knee to bulging paunch to sagging pap, scaling Dopey as the behemoth struggles to comprehend what he's feeling—and why he can't really seem to move.

A final jump puts me on his shoulder, and I throw out the meat hook, snaring the behemoth in the flesh above his eyes. He grunts and begins to twitch, trying to pull his face free of the sudden pain. I hold on tightly, and let the strength of the behemoth carry me into the air. With a quick flick I work the machete free. I don't know if it'll work the way I want it to, but I have to give it a try.

Swinging ever closer, I shift on the chain, using my feet as leverage, and lean out, swinging the machete. It buries its notched, rusted blade into Dopey's throat. The momentum I've gained from the behemoth's twitch drives the machete along, tearing out flesh and rupturing a major artery. Hot blood bursts out as the machete is wrenched from my grasp, and Dopey's body flinches a couple of times.

I jerk the meat hook as hard as I can, feel it come free, and drop, rolling down the expanse of belly before tumbling to the ground. I don't even watch as the behemoth tips and topples, his arms and legs rippling with slight seizures. Instead I meet Toeless' hate filled eyes, my face set in a resolute scowl.

To my surprise, Toeless seems to understand what I'm trying to convey, and speaks.

“This should be interesting, little one. Brothers! Here!”

For a moment, I marvel that he understands me—after all, the other behemoths have merely been grunting, laughing, or howling. I haven't heard any words so far, so I think, for the briefest of moments, that behemoths simply can't talk. Then I remember Bline and Dalm; I guess they just didn't have anything to say. Then the ground trembles a little bit, rocking me out of my revirie.

Toeless has called his friends.

They are rather far away, if I remember correctly, but distance is devoured by their long shanks.

My stomach twists in an uncomfortable knot. Vald and Quinn together had trouble killing two Triads—and that was with Sparks focusing them from afar.

I have no Spark.

I swallow nervously.

The last action that Vald did in life was attack these creatures. Even if I didn't have a driving impulse in the back of my head to kill them, the endless pounding of the whispers as they shove my will aside and insist on being heard, I would want Toeless dead. Finish what Vald started. End what Dalm has done.

What I have done.

What Layne has done.

I'm airborne, chain whistling by my side. Toeless reacts instinctively—perfectly—by raising an arm to protect himself. The meat hook bites down through the flesh of its

arm, and I feel it anchor solidly.

I hope that none of my tools fail me.

As the pain registers, the behemoth snaps his arm the other way, allowing me—still clutching the end of the links—to swing up and toward his face. Letting go of the chain, I soar forward, the wind whistling through my ears and tousling my hair, black strings snapping into and out of my face. I rear back, thinking—no, being told—that if I punch him hard enough, right between the eyes, the creature will die.

I believe it...the whispers tell the truth.

I believe it...I have no choice.

Toeless ducks out of the way, and I overshoot my mark, tumbling downward. I see the expanse of the demolished block growing impossibly large around me, and I think that I have to somehow land on my feet, not my face—

A massive, meaty hand sweeps into view, slamming my body so hard that I hear something crack.

My leg ignites in a furnace of pain.

Then the building behind me jumps up and tries to catch me, it seems. I shatter through the entire length of the building, through every wall, each punishing slap forcing more and more air out of my already breathless lungs. Brick, wood, and nails tear at me, rending my longjacket into tatters, shearing off lengths of skin, buckling bones, and rattling my head on my neck.

I explode through the other side, enough momentum shed to ensure that I won't go through the next building. A spiderweb of cracks erupts around me as I hit the facade, and I drop down the remaining forty feet into a crumpled pile of agony.

It hurts.

A lot.

I cough as soon as air comes in, partly because of the dust in the air, and partly because that's all I can do. I survived, but I'm not so sure that I'm glad for it.

Moving only sends lightning strikes of pain from every speck of my body. I can feel things knit together—my leg only throbs now—and the strips of flesh that I left in the building are already scabbing and scarring over. The blood no longer flows out of me from hundreds of little scratches and wounds.

The ground thuds.

I'm healing...

The ground trembles.

...but not fast enough.

What little sunlight remains is suddenly blotted out; I'm being loomed over. This irritates me. I'm tired of people looming over me, blotting out that which I want, imposing their wills over mine.

I'm tired of that.

My family has been irreparably changed—again.

“I won't let you do it,” say I, my voice rough and thin. “I won't let you take my city.”

He laughs. “We'll take your city, mouse,” says Toeless with a great deal of control, considering the current state of his hand and foot, “whether you let us or not. It's ours by right and by promise.”

“Olthen lies,” I argue as the earth shakes again. Though the whispers are

somehow repairing my body, I can feel the flames of injuries burning through my veins. I am still defenseless.

“Olthen? You know of the puny man who wanted our help?”

I freeze. I thought that only Dalm and his brethren knew about the deal. Sans Dalm, there wouldn't be a third for the Triad. This Triad that I attacked was complete. So how does Toeless know about Oltehn?

“Aye,” I say slowly to the behemoth's question.

“We know he lies.” Toeless chuckles. “Of course he does. You little monsters, you all lie.”

I'm not a monster, Amela. I want you to know that. Dalm...

I want to shout that we're not the monsters—we didn't do this.

I can't think straight; I can't decide who the enemy is; the people who did this, they're the monsters; but I can't think straight.

But people invited the monsters in.

Monsters are monsters because of what?

I'm as much a monster, a freak, an aberration.

The world tremors.

I can't think straight.

Toeless is asking something, saying that I should have known better, I should have known not to trust my own kind. They didn't. All of them didn't.

I ask what he means, whom they didn't trust. Dalm? Did they not trust Dalm?

He says that Dalm was only the volunteer. Every behemoth attacking the city knew what Dalm was going to do. They all knew that Dalm would die. It wasn't a surprise that he never returned; it was expected. He is a martyr, a designed and assigned martyr.

My heart aches.

I killed Dalm.

I fulfilled their plans.

I brought this about.

I invited the monsters in.

My body heals...

I almost tell him of my part, of what I had been forced to do, but he interrupts.

He says, “You can't see, monster, what we've done, how hard we've worked.

Dalm knew what he was doing. He wanted to die.”

He told me he wanted to live.

“The deal with Olthen was created to ensure we could get where we wanted to be. You monsters (and he must mean me, he must mean Spooks) could stop us. The only thing that could stop us. But Olthen set things up for us, only to be betrayed. The fool thinks we *only* wanted information. No. We wanted *everything*.”

Everything, I say. What's everything?

Toeless laughs. “We wanted to tip the government into disarray and *then* attack. With both the King and Queen dead, the people would focus on the Royalty! Attention would turn inside. The time would be ripe.”

I ask, Why now? Why attack now?

“It is true that many of the Vyn live in fear of the Spooks, believing the fable that the Spooks would stop us if we attacked. But now we have a martyr—Dalm. The Isle is

demanding vengeance, and we finally have their support to attack.”

But you had no information.

“We had enough.”

I have to know, did they know about the dungeon? The insanitarium beneath Layne’s office?

“Of course. Dalm informed us before he died—which was all part of the plan.”

I told Dalm, and he told them.

Dalm.

He was supposed to die.

But did it have to be at my hand?

“His death,” Toeless explains, “provided a reason to fight, a purpose to vindicate. No one fights so strongly as when he fights for a purpose,” says the voice nearly six stories above me.

I think of what I've done for my family. I think of what Layne has done for his.

I know that the behemoth is right.

I did this.

Dalm did this.

I've been swept into a world I didn't know, didn't want, didn't seek. I let this happen. I chose to go along with everything everyone said. I did what they asked because it was easier than fighting for myself, for what I wanted.

This is the result.

This is my cowardice.

This is my fault.

I'm healing...

I hear another voice, also far above me, talking to Toeless. Help has come. But not my help.

...and it's just fast enough.

Blurring forward, I scoop up in each hand rocks that weigh about half of my weight. I smash them together like raucous applause on the exposed meaty strings, nerves, and bones that remain on Toeless' foot. Judging by the agony in the behemoth's bellow, the pain is exquisite.

I have to get up as quickly as possible, to get eye-level. The whispers tell me that even they—even I—even we are not strong enough to kill a behemoth without height. I can't burst through it; I must break it.

The approaching behemoths are close, but not close enough to stop me. Violence seethes in my veins, and I can already see how death will be dealt on each. I glance over.

There are only two. Well, so much the better.

I race up the nearest building, leaping over shattered husks and broken sections, mounting stairs faster than a miniman up a tree. I snatch up overripe melons that sit on a table, grabbing three for each hand as I run past. Jumping through the hole my body made, I find myself airborne again, aimed for Toeless' face.

The behemoth missed which direction I went when I lammed it from him after smashing his wound, and his broad back is toward me. I drop all but one of the melons, part me noticing that it takes more than a second before they squish noisily against the ground. With a loud slap I land against the irate behemoth, sliding as I struggle to grab at a solid handful of hair. Toeless starts to twist and turn, breaking my tenuous grip. Finally,

I simply let go and drop, not knowing what to do now.

The whispers have no recommendations—just an abiding presence in the back of my head.

A hand that is easily as large as I am scoops me out of the air, snatching me about my midsection. I hear something snap and breathing becomes painful.

I think he broke my ribs.

The gray sky blurs and the smell of blood and behemoth sweat and death struggle to suffocate me. Toeless' hand is winning, though. He brings me up to eye level, and the stench of his horrid breath gags me—a reaction so painful that I nearly swoon.

“Die,” he growls, the wounded hand rearing up to my left to come and crush me, his mouth open with a sadistic leer.

“Mayhap later,” I insist, and hurl the melon, aiming as Lor had taught me. It's just big enough that it slides past the teeth. It bounces against the tongue and then lodges in the back of the throat. Toeless gasps and instinctively drops me. Reflex, the whispers, and sheer luck allow me to land on his bare thigh and roll down it until I fall to the ground. I groan and feel my side.

Aye. Definitely broken. The whispers start to tell me that it's mending, that the pain isn't so bad. Fair. I believe them.

The behemoth is staggering around, his hands clutching at his neck while his face turns darker and darker. He makes for a pathetic sight: a broken finger flapping on one hand; a bloody, mangled stump on one foot; lacerations from the chain and hook on its arm; and a face bulging with approaching death.

Thud.

It isn't the body of Toeless falling that makes the sound; it's the arrival of his brethren. I turn and stare at the other two behemoths. They look...familiar. Like very large versions of—Dalm.

These are Dalm's brothers.

The whispers are silent for a long second as we all regard each other. Behind me, I hear Toeless drop to his knees and heave, desperately trying to get air into his lungs.

The air stirs with kicked up dust and disturbed ashes.

I glance around, desperate for a weapon.

There is nothing.

Well, I have little choice.

I decide to kill them. Both of them.

Not for Vald.

Not for Dalm.

Not for Kev.

Not for Pops.

Not for Mama.

Not for Layne.

Not for Shema.

Not for the Queen.

Not for anyone...

...except me.

Balling my hand into a fist, I take three steps and then jump—the whispers don't say to do this, they simply power it. Like silent observers to a public fight, they endorse it

by doing nothing to stop or change it.

My leap is more powerful than any other I have done. Arching back, I steel myself for the shock of impact.

These may be Dalm's brethren, but I don't love them. I loved him. And they are part of the reason why we aren't together, why I had to kill him.

I soar through the air, my fingers tightening into my palm so sharply that I think that the skin is breaking beneath my fingernails.

No matter.

I remember Vald's arm exploding when he fought Dalm.

No matter.

I think of Kev's stitches—a desperate choice to keep him from walking the path of the insane.

No matter. I push the memory away.

I think of Mama, gumming her stump because her wooden teeth are demolished, splinters in the rubble of our old home.

I push the memory away...

...and slam my fist into the nose of the first behemoth.

My reverie lasted the entire rapid flight toward it, and ended on impact.

This behemoth's head rolls down past me, his huge hands coming up to comfort his nose. I land on the back of his head and tumble through the stringy hair until I land on his shoulders. I kick him as hard as I can behind the ear, delighting in the snapping sound of his skull cracking beneath my foot.

I'm less than a tenth its size, like a sewer rat killing a human.

I jump, watching it fall and pulverize a building, dead and bleeding before gravity even claims me again.

The last behemoth rushes to catch me, but he misses. I roll to a stop inside the doorway of a tiny house, one no bigger than my own. To my delight, I see an unstrung bow and a quiver of arrows hanging over the mantle.

I quip that it's about time the Nords have done something for me, and I hurriedly take the prize, shrug the quiver over my shoulder, and string the bow.

Outside, the behemoth is looking around tentatively for me. Toeless has freed the melon of his throat and is trying to recover his breath. Maybe I had best make sure that doesn't happen.

Running out of my small hiding place, nocking an arrow to the string, I take aim on the exposed foot-tendon of Dalm's brother, Cautious. The arrow sings as it stings, going so fast that it bursts through the other side of Cautious' ankle. He howls and drops, bringing Toeless' gaze to me.

I end that gaze.

Permanently.

Three arrows whistle, fired so quickly that I didn't even see my hands do it. Hank's training, coupled with the power of the whispers, see it done. Two arrows in the left, one in the right.

Toeless falls backwards, tripping over the corpse of one of his former brethren, crumbling buildings beneath his fall. He rears up, ribbons of blood flowing from hundreds of different wounds, his hands still clutching at his blinded eyes. I watch as he staggers to his injured feet and limps away, screaming out that I will regret this, and that

he will never forget what I did.

I let him go.

The last behemoth is trying to drag himself away on his hands, his legs flailing but mostly useless. Cautious is, to be honest, making exceptional time, all things considered.

I catch up to his foot and grab it.

Cautious freezes.

I tell him that he should never have come. You made a mistake, I say. You shouldn't have come.

He nods his agreement, his eyes that are bigger than my head round with fear, his face that's taller than my body scrawled with panic.

People have to pay for their mistakes, I observe dryly.

"Don't, don't, don't," he pleads.

I'm beyond hearing pleas.

I tell him so.

"Don't, don't, don't," he says again.

I tell him that I was the one that killed his brother. That I wasn't a Spook when I did it. I say that I loved his brother so much that I had to kill him.

"Stop, please." The voice sounds small for coming from something so big.

I smile a little. It won't hurt, I say. I promise Cautious that death won't hurt. Not like it did for Dalm. Maybe for a little bit, I say, but then you'll just fade into darkness. Silence will envelop you. No more pain. No more joy. No more destruction. No more anything.

Life is gone.

Taken from you.

Removed forever.

Ended.

It's taken.

Hope your life was a good one.

"Please!"

I kill him.

And the whispers take me.

THIS IS how I die.

My body crumples next to the corpse of Cautious. All of the wounds that hadn't fully healed open up, bursting and breaking and bending and bleeding. I lay on the ground as sounds surround me, familiar voices and anxious words, echo and blur.

I fade out of consciousness.

Darkness folds over me, and I fold into it.

Nothing remains.

The Nords do not welcome me into any sort of bliss or eternal leisure. It is simply dark.

I wake up minutes—or hours, or days, or weeks, or years—later.

I come back. The whispers refuse to let me die. So I don't.

I feel arms, strong, behind my head. Words that come from outside of my skull start to speak, but they don't make any sense. They say:

“Wake up! Wake up, ‘Mela!’”

“She's hurt, Lander, she's hurt bad.”

“Can you help her? Shema, can you help her?”

“It's been three days, Lander. I don't know if there's anything we can do.”

“Get someone to carry her. Kev, carry her!”

“Loves, ‘Mela!’”

“What are you doing?”

“If we can get her safe, we can save her.”

“Lander, her wounds...”

“Don't argue with me, Shema! For the Nords' sake, look at my daughter! We have to try.”

“We will. We'll try...”

Then the voices fade out and I can't remember anything...life is nothing but sleep.

There's no pain, there's no hurting, there are no whispers when I'm asleep.

Nothing but sleep.

Then I hear voices, and I can see things that I can no longer name, but should be able to. I should be able to say what it is above my head—brown, wet, and dripping—made of cloth, stopping the rain.

I can't think. I need...I need something.

I need to write, I think I say. Someone responds, her voice happy.

“Amela! You're talking!”

An itch creeps up, starting on my fingertips, running through my body, tracing my veins. Something breaks through the thoughts, the pain, the emptiness.

Write.

I have to write, I say aloud. I think that's what I've said.

Write what you know. Write what happened.

I think of Quinn's comment, “A Spook will write down what happened right before he or she cracks. That's one of the first things that the whispers do to their newest victim: They insist that they write down their history.”

Write.

I have to write.

Get me paper! Get me ink!

Write what you know. Write what happened. Write the result.

But I don't know the result. Of what happened, I mean.

You are alive.

I am alive?

Yes.

“Here. Here, Amela. Write for me. Write for your friend. You’re all right now. You’ve been asleep for weeks. Oh, there’s so much to tell you about. You the Realm is dividing, there’s a war...” Her voice gets drowned out, her senselessness is overpowered by the raging sounds inside my head.

Write what you know. Write what happened. No story ends—things always move on. Write about how you cracked...about how you came to listen to us.

I don't want to.

Do it anyway.

Write about what happened to me? What happens after me is more important!

If that mattered, we'd tell you to write that.

...What I know?

Yes. Write what the voices in your head tell you to write. Don't worry about what remains afterward—or after words. Write what happened to you, not what will happen.

That's not your story.

Why not?

This is.

This is my story...

...I pick up the pen, I grab the book, and, not knowing how to start, I begin to write.

This is how I live...