



Christmas in Niemela

*a short story from
the Florence Waverley series*

ciye cho

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a short story

by Ciye Cho

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1. Decorating

*The following story takes place after the events of
“Luminaire.”*

ALONG THE BOTTOM OF THE OCEANARIUM, I walked through a forest of kelp. All around me, shiny leaves dangled off giant stalks, and light filtered through the kelp to become a bottle-green blur. The water tasted sappy. I kept walking, until I got to a clearing in the forest. Here, I found myself standing on a bed of short sea grass. Everything was so peaceful. Dreamy.

I took in a breath of water. My eyes settled on a lone kelp stalk that stood amid the clearing. Like all the other kelp, it stood upright like a streetlamp.

All right, Florence. Time to get started...

I turned around and stared upon a school of brightly colored fish. I used my thoughts to command them to swim forward. Told them to cling to specific parts of

the stalk. Soon, red, green, and white fish were waiting all along the plant. After this, I picked up a starfish from the ground and placed it atop the stem. The entire plant wobbled, but it didn't bend. I stepped back and stared at my creation.

“Now that's a first,” I whispered.

A few days ago, I'd told Yolee about human holidays. And the concept of Christmas had thrilled her. With this in mind, I decided it would be fun to organize a Christmas gathering. I'd lost track of the days in Niemela, but it had to be December right now, so I picked today to be 'Mer Christmas.'

My timing was serendipitous. The war between Niemela and the Darkness had come to a standstill as the monsters remained hidden in the distant canyons beyond the coral dome. Why they remained there was anyone's guess, but there was a sense of true calm in Niemela that I had not experienced before. And who knew how long it would last?

I stared below the 'tree' and filled this spot with kelp parcels. Each parcel looked just like the meal

parcels that the workers gave out from atop the meal whales; however, these ones contained gifts that I'd made earlier. Each one held a tiny stone engraved with a different person's name. I arranged the parcels below the tree and frowned. It looked somewhat pitiful that there were so few gifts. But then again, I had only managed to get a few people to join me.

Yolee was the first person I'd invited--and she'd been thrilled.

Wynn was equally enthusiastic. Before I could even explain what Christmas was about, he'd done a somersault and told me that he'd read a massive amount about human customs. He proceeded to explain Christmas to me (as if I were a merperson). He said, "Christmas is a time when humans decorate kelp with rocks and give each other objects."

"Well, there's a lot more to it," I had replied.

Yet, before I could finish speaking, he shook his head. "Of course, Florry. It's much more detailed than that. Humans also like to eat sticks painted with

different colors.” He lowered to the ground and drew a candy cane in the sand.

I had no idea what to say to that. Sometimes he made humans sound like creatures from outer space.

Mara however was another matter. I’d gone to the warrior area to see her. Told her about Christmas and asked her whether she’d join in. But she raised an eyebrow and told me that “merfolk are not sentimental. Or attached to ‘gifts’.” I remember staring at her weapon rack and pointing at weapons specially reserved for her. I said, “No attachments to things?” She glared and said, “Weapons aren’t things. They are an extension of one’s being.”

So much for that invitation.

Piribus had been overwhelmed by his healer duties, so I had left him be. Which left only one other person: Rolan, the one mer I really wanted to be present at the first Mer Christmas. He’d told me earlier that he would join the celebration, but he was surprisingly cold about the whole thing. Distant.

“Crissmass?” he’d said, trying out the word.

I went on to explain it to him, and all he said was “All right.”

I tried to convince myself that those two words were something more solid. “All Right”, as in *All right, that sounds great, Florence*. All right, as in *All right, I look forward to that*. But who knew what Rolan thought? Sometimes I had the feeling that his mind was somewhere far, far away.

Back in the present, Captain Dorsimer swam overhead. He paused to look at me and my ‘tree’, and I reddened before he swam off. I could only imagine what this looked like from above.

Dumbo appeared beside me. The animal flickered on and off before looking at the tree, then me. I shrugged, then whispered to Dumbo, “Yep. It’s weird and I don’t know why I’m doing this. I mean... Christmas? Underwater?”

Yet, deep down I knew exactly why I was doing this.

A memory came to me. Back on Hamilton Island, I used to look out from the top window of my uncle’s house. Used to stare down at the streets outside.

During Christmas, in the summers of Hamilton, all I'd see were these tropical decorations and street parties. And last Christmas, I remember seeing two girls running down the street, skipping and laughing. They were teenagers, but they looked as giddy as little kids, and I wondered what it was like to have a Christmas celebration to go to. To have some place to be on this special day.

And maybe that's why a Mer Christmas seemed like something special. Niemela wasn't just my chance to do strange, exciting things. Perhaps it was also my chance to do ordinary things that seemed extraordinary.

A shadow passed over me, and I looked up to see Rolan. He was swimming toward the Homestead. I got up and followed in his wake. I ended up in the warrior training ground and saw him kneeling on the kelp mat. Meditating.

“Rolan?”

He opened his eyes and looked at me. He was neither smiling nor frowning. Just being Rolan.

“Florence,” he replied.

“Just wanted to say that me, Yolee, and Wynn are starting our celebration just after the midmeal horns,” I told him. “So... I’ll see you there, right?”

He nodded.

There and then, I felt a strange atmosphere between us. I started to picture those barriers of water that Dorsimer could generate. Started to picture a barrier right between Rolan and me. *No*, I told myself. *Stop overthinking.*

“Alright,” I said before I swam off.

I headed back to my Christmas tree.

A shape burst through the forest, and I looked up to see Yolee head toward me. “How do I look, Florry?” she said with a giggle.

Her outfit consisted of a hula skirt made of kelp and a frilly top made of red sea grass. Her hair was full of white sea flowers.

I smiled. “You look *festive.*”

She twirled around, then raised her hands to usher forward a school of red and green fish. Another group

of mer drifted above us, and these stared down with cold expressions. They frowned at Yolee, me, and our strange tree. My smile faded and I said to Yolee, “Do you think this is silly? Christmas in Niemela?”

“Of course not,” she said. “Christmas is my favorite holly-day!”

That made me laugh. “You only learnt about it yesterday, Yolee.”

Yolee blushed but said, “Yes, but I *know* I’m going to love it.”

She was carrying a bag, and she reached in to pull out a wreath made of kelp. I blinked and she said, “Wynn told me that ‘Reeds’ are traditional.” She took one out and placed it around my neck. She placed another one around hers. “Here...” she said as she plucked some leaves off hers, and began to eat them. “You’re supposed to eat them like this.”

I raised an eyebrow. Apparently everyone was a Christmas expert. But I didn’t want to hurt her feelings, so I did as she did. All the while, Yolee looked

up at passing strangers and called out, “Merry Christmas, everyone!”

My mood lifted. Together, we decorated the clearing with fish. Yolee got the fish to swim in patterns, making everything shimmer. She then arranged red and green anemones around the tree I made.

At last we heard the horns of midmeal. And we waited.

And waited...

And waited some more.

Curiously, Wynn was nowhere to be seen. Along with Rolan.

“Did you remember to tell Wynn?” I asked.

“Of course,” said Yolee.

I thought of Rolan. “I’ll be right back.”

I made my way to the warrior courtyard, but Rolan wasn’t there. I searched the royal dome and the places he favored, but couldn’t find him anywhere. Which is why, at last, I went up to the coral dome. The outermost part of Niemela. Up here, I saw him floating above the corals, staring out into the Valley of

Waterfyre. I shivered as I thought of all that occurred beyond the dome, but I went beside him.

“Rolan?”

He turned slowly. The lights of the deep-sea volcanoes washed over him in different shades of neon. He looked radiant. All jagged shapes and eerie colors.

I said, “Why don’t you head down with me?”

He was silent for a moment. At last he said, “I’m sorry, but I can’t join you.”

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s... complicated,” he replied. His face stiffened, and I wondered to myself, as I sometimes did, whether merfolk felt things in the same way that humans did. Sometimes Rolan seemed so alien. So unshakably foreign.

I watched him turn away, then shook my head. I could feel my cheeks reddening. “No, it’s not complicated. Not at all. You make things difficult because you want to. Because you feel like you need to throw up walls.” I took in a deep breath as I tried to

swallow my frustration. “But you don’t need to do that with me, Rolan.”

He turned to look at me. “I am sorry, Florence.”

I didn’t want to let this drop. “Is this because of something I said, or--”

“I have things on my mind that I do not wish to tell you about. Is that so hard to understand?” he said, and his words ended with a suddenness. A sharpness that I rarely heard from him.

His expression softened, and I found it crazy that he could cram so many mixed messages into one sentence. I looked away for a moment, and it was only then that I stared into the Darkness and remembered all that waited there. And as much as I was angry with Rolan, I suddenly felt like a fool.

We were at war. Surrounded by monsters. Any lull in the conflict should have been spent preparing and readying Niemela--not organizing a holiday celebration. A holiday that wasn’t even Rolan’s.

I watched him turn away. With that, I too moved aside.

All right, I thought, as I left him floating above the world. Stay here, Rolan. Stay atop an entire world. Above everyone. And me...

My head was spinning, but I eventually found myself back beside the Christmas tree. Yolee arrived to tell me that Wynn was nowhere to be found, but I couldn't focus on that. I looked at Yolee, and said, "I'm sorry, Yolee. But I don't think this is a good idea."

I didn't want to disappoint her, but suddenly I couldn't linger here. Instead, I hurried away from the tree. Yolee called out my name, but I didn't stop.

Sometime later, I ended up standing on one of the coral balconies of the Oceanarium. The same one that I'd stood upon when I'd first arrived in the world of mer. Did I really belong here? Had I really grown to become a part of Niemela? Or was I merely hanging around in a fantasy world that wasn't my own?

I closed my eyes and heard the humming and droning of Niemela. The roaring of distant fooms. The pulsing beat of everyday life. The sounds relaxed me.

When I opened my eyes, a curious sight awaited.

Dumbo was floating in front of me. The dumbo octopus started flickering; but instead of its usual colors, it was glowing with reds and greens. I frowned. “Where’d you learn that?”

Dumbo swam off, and I found myself following it.

The octopus guided me to a tunnel just beyond my balcony. I followed the octopus inside and saw a distant light. I kept swimming until I entered a large chamber. Here, the walls were covered with glowing moss. But at the center of it all was a sight that left me winded.

2. Yolee's Gift

I SAW A TOWERING MOUND OF CORAL, widest at the bottom and narrowest at the top. It was made of different corals, and anemones were embedded like flowers amid its length. Each anemone was full of clownfish that fluttered in and out in flickers of color. Tiny ribbonfish corkscrewed up and down the structure.

Every inch of it was a glittering explosion of color.

Dumbo floated to the top of the structure and began to glow. And only then did I finally see it all for what it was: a Christmas tree! A rainbow-encrusted, living, breathing structure.

“Yolee...!” I whispered.

Dumbo's light brightened and spilled over the tree. As it did so, the light touched the corals to create multicolored auras. I walked closer and watched as

colors shifted along the tree whenever fish, crabs, and starfish moved.

I heard a voice say, “Do you like it? That’s my gift for you, Florry.”

I turned to see Yolee smiling at me. Before I could think of something to say, Wynn came over. He was wearing a wreath around his neck, and he said, “Merry Christmas, Florry. Sorry I’m late. I had to fetch some friends.” He gestured behind him at Piribus and Mara. Both were wearing wreaths.

Piribus smiled and said, “Merry Christmas.”

Mara was fiddling with her wreath, and she reminded me of a sick cat wearing a plastic cone. “Yeah. What he said,” she muttered.

I chuckled, but she added, “Well, if you must know... I came here because I thought it would be *amusing*.”

I smiled, then stared at all of them and said, “I’m not sure what to say.”

“Well, I think it’s obvious,” said Wynn. “*Merry Christmas*.”

“Merry Christmas,” I said. “Thank you... my friends.”

The others milled around the tree, and I turned to see Yolee smiling at me. She poked me on the shoulder. “What? You didn’t think you could just *uncelebrate* Christmas, did you?”

“I didn’t think Christmas meant so much to you,” I said.

She shrugged. “I think it’s all right.”

I raised an eyebrow.

Yolee said, “But it meant a lot to me... because it meant a lot to you.”

An invisible lump formed in my throat; however, Yolee merely gave me a hug. When she pulled away, I reached for the tree and pulled out a few strands of sea grass. I wound them into a makeshift wreath, and proceeded to put this around Yolee’s neck to replace the wreath she’d eaten up. She started eating this new ‘reed’ and we laughed.

I looked around me to see the others opening presents. Wynn gave Mara a black dagger, which made

her smile. She also got him a dagger, and in response Wynn actually chirped with excitement.

“A replica of Redstar!” said Wynn.

“Redstar?” said Piribus.

“Borealis’s legendary blade,” he said.

I smiled as the others exchanged gifts. Soon, I went over and gave them mine. Wynn took the opportunity to hand out ‘cards’ made of kelp, before we all ended up swimming around the tree. Everyone started laughing and joking, and they reminded me of those girls I’d seen last year on Christmas Day. And that’s when it occurred to me that maybe, just maybe, I’d finally gotten the Christmas I’d always wanted. Maybe I’d finally found a family among these mer.

But things weren’t perfect.

I wished Rolan were here. For even though I was frustrated with him--and maybe even a bit angry--I kept trying to picture him here. What would he think of all this? Would he understand it? Would he let down those walls for a brief moment of holiday cheer?

I guess a part of me needed a reminder that he wasn't all that foreign after all. But as the others settled down to eat kelapiri, I stared back at the tunnel entrance--and froze.

Rolan was floating there.

I hesitated, but he swam over and said, "Can I talk to you?"

I nodded and we headed outside. My heart drummed a bit faster.

Away from the voices and colors, he said, "I'm sorry." My gaze settled on him and he added, "I should have come over earlier."

I thought about the Darkness and said, "It's all right. I know you're going through a lot... what with the Darkness and the matter of ruling an entire kingdom. I know that it's--"

"No, you do not understand. This isn't about the Darkness or Niemela," he said. "I did not want to come over because I didn't want you to celebrate Christmas. I did not like the idea of it. In fact... I *hated* the idea."

His words took me aback. "Excuse me?"

His eyes lowered and he added in a softer voice, “I was... uneasy about it.”

I chuckled and a frown developed on his face. *A King of the deep sea... frightened of a little holiday spirit?* But instead of saying that, I looked at the tree and said, “It’s just a simple celebration. There’s no pressure or anything.”

He shook his head and said, “I thought it would remind you of the surface world. And I thought it would remind you... of all you’d left behind. And I was... afraid that it would make you think of returning.” He paused and said, “I did not care about making you happy. With all these thoughts, I became selfish. And shallow.”

I felt dizzy as his words echoed around me. It was sometimes hard to remember that Rolan worried about anything. Hard to remember that he too had fears.

I swallowed, then shook my head. “You’re not selfish. Or shallow. You’re human.”

That made him smile a little. “Will you try not to hold that against me?” he asked.

“I can try,” I said.

I moved over and took his hand. “Why don’t you come inside? Everyone’s there.”

He hesitated, then said, “I have a better idea...”

3. Winter Wonderland

ROLAN LED ME AWAY from the Christmas chamber and off to the Homestead. Here, we entered a kelp building, went down a hole in the ground, and emerged inside a chamber full of light.

When he let go of my hand, I found myself standing in a chamber covered in glowing white moss. But that was not all. The ceiling had a garden of white sea flowers, and each of these plants was showering the chamber with flecks of pollen. These flecks carpeted the floor in a soft layer of white.

A winter wonderland.

My eyes widened as I knelt amid the pollen. I had never actually seen snow with my own eyes, but this field was everything that snow should be. Beautiful and light, like something from a movie. Yet, like everything in Niemela, there was something extraordinary about

it. Each piece of pollen had a shimmer of pastel. Tiny crabs crawled through the whiteness to make strange shapes.

Rolan knelt beside me. “I had a discussion with Wynn about Christmas... and I believe that this is what your kind refers to as ‘snow.’ ”

“It’s perfect,” I said.

I turned to him, and there was so much I wanted to say. Yet, all these words vanished when my eyes settled on his royal armband. The sight of that band reminded me of all the conflict around us. All the Darkness.

I shook my head and said softly, “The snow is perfect... but I’m beginning to wonder if it’s wrong for us to celebrate.”

He said, “We are now in a lull. A momentary peace. Is that not a fitting time to celebrate?”

“But how long will the lull last?” I asked. “And how can we celebrate when monsters loom outside... and when so many people have suffered? How can we celebrate in darkness?”

I thought he would go silent, but he didn't hesitate. "Why? Because this is more than just a celebration of family and friends. It seems as if your human celebration is about light in the darkness." He reached out and gently brushed away pollen from my forehead. He said, "And if all the light faded from Niemela, I do not know what we would be fighting for. If you stopped shining... I don't know how we would find each other... or how I would even find myself."

He leaned in and kissed me on the cheek.

I didn't know how to reply. But at last, I wrapped my arms around him and said, "Merry Christmas, Rolan..."

Thank you

If you are reading this message, it means you probably have a copy of Florence. If so, you are awesome. And I thank you for your awesomeness. I hope you enjoyed this Christmas-themed short story. I also thought I would include the first seven chapters of “Rory” as a little teaser.

Have a great holiday season and best wishes for 2014!

- Ciye

Rory (Sample Chapters)



Introduction

Ever since I was young, my mother has always told me two things:

Never go out at night... and Always stay in the light.

I now understand her wisdom.

Jacksonville

Cake decorating isn't just an art form. It's a way to convey ideas to people when all words fail you. A way to offer hidden messages and meanings.

It's also one of the few things that I'm good at.

Sitting by a kitchen table, I focus my attention on a circular pound cake. I pick it up and use a knife to divide it into two disks. The inner face of each disk looks moist, and the smell of vanilla fills the air. I put aside one disk, then use a knife to spread strawberry cream on the lower disk. Once that's done, I sandwich the disks together and place them on a tray. There's a bowl of buttercream next to me, and I use a pastry knife to spread this over the cake.

Soon, all of it is encased in a smooth shell.

It's *perfect*.

Vanilla pound cake with strawberry filling has always been my mom's favorite.

I reach out for a tray with empty pastry bags and bowls of colored frosting. Red, white, and pink. After filling one of the bags with frosting, I carefully lift it over the cake. Only then do I freeze. In the past, designs would have erupted from my pastry bags. My imagination would have run wild. But these days, things are not the same.

I can say almost anything with my cakes. Anything except for ‘sorry.’

But then again, how could a cake ever make up for the unthinkable? And even if I could express how I feel, what would it matter when the person I need to apologize to just won’t listen?

I take in a deep breath and decide to go for a design that mom has always loved: pink and red fleurs-de-lis. Before her accident, mom would always smile whenever she saw a fleur-de-lis, or anything French. She would ramble on about how her side of the family was descended from King Louis the great—but I’d always snort and tell her that we were as French as a pack of french fries.

I wonder if she remembers those conversations. With a gulp, I start piping the fleurs-de-lis over the buttercream shell. Soon, all the cake is covered with them.

“That’ll do,” I tell myself as I slide the cake onto a plate, and then lift this plate into a cake box.

I frown when I look up. The kitchen windows are filling up with yellow light. *Crap*. I’m running late, I realize as I scurry up to my bedroom.

I change into a pair of jeans and an old t-shirt—one with the words ‘Team Zissou’ on it. I stand before a mirror, comb my hair, then grab my messenger bag. I put on my brown Timberland boots, then reach under my mattress for a small knife. The sort of knife that deer hunters use. The exact knife that mom used to carry in her pocket 24/7. I carefully slip it into a sheath inside the back of my left boot. As I do this, I wonder if it’s true what people say: that all of us are destined to become our parents.

Have I become my mother?

Am I already on a one-way trip to crazyville?

With this thought, I reach for the last part of my ensemble: a silver flashlight. I shove it into my bag before I head downstairs and grab my cake box.

The moment I step outside, humid air swirls around me. Muggy air that makes me feel like a chicken in a rotisserie. I stare around me, and the houses in Avondale look gorgeous in the afternoon. I see Queen Anne and Foursquare houses, all painted in soft colors, and all surrounded by topiaries and fifty-year-old trees. And like everything else in Avondale, each home is unique. Charming and artsy.

Alas, my mom's home is in a category of its own.

I lock the front door before I head to the sidewalk. My mom's house is the largest Queen Anne in the lane. It's also a total mess: half-destroyed in a fire, covered with creeper vines, and full of cracked paint. It was left to my mom in grandma's will—on the condition that mom restore it to its former glory. Alas, mom never got around to that.

When we first moved here, I thought the house was marvelous, like something from a ghost story. Now, it just reminds me of how messed up life could get in this broken-down house.

I look up at mom's main addition to the house: Christmas tree lights and a plastic Rudolph that lights up at night.

"Mom," I whisper with a shake of my head. "What were you thinking?"

I used to hate that plastic Rudolph. No matter how hard I tried to destroy him, mom would always resurrect him so he could shine 365 nights a year. "It's a Christmas day miracle," she'd say to herself.

I can't remember the last time she said that, and this saddens me.

I head down the lane, and the sky is now a bright orange. This makes me pause. By my estimate, I have two hours left before nightfall. And just like that, I wonder if it's a good idea to go out right now. I have two hours to make it to my destination and back, before darkness sweeps over the city.

Part of me wants to go back inside, but my eyes stare upon the cake box, and all my fears fade for a while. No, I have to go.

I have to see my mother.



I hurry down the street, and do my best to stabilize the box in my hands. If I go any faster, the cake will smear against the lid; but if I go any slower, there's a chance I'll be late. Or worse yet, stuck in the dark. And *that* is not something that I want to dwell upon.

Come on, Aurora. Get a move on.

A few moments later, I reach the bus stop.

A bus is about to pull away, and I know that the next one won't arrive for twenty minutes. Which is way too late. I could take a cab to my destination, but who knows how long it'd take to find one.

“Wait!” I shout out. I use one hand to hold the box, while the other waves in the air. “WAIT!”

The bus grinds to a halt and I run over to it. I climb aboard and thank the bus driver profusely. He looks like he’s seen a crazy girl. Nonetheless, I pay the fare to Downtown Jacksonville, then sit by a window. The bus continues on its way.

Beautiful houses pass by, and I see a variety of Prairie, Tudor, Queen Anne, and Foursquare buildings. Light filters through the trees and sparkles on the sidewalk. But things get more modern as we head into the King Street district. Slowly, grays, blacks, and skyscraper blues come into view as we approach Downtown Jacksonville.

The sky here is a deeper orange.

Without thinking about it, I reach into my bag to check that my flashlight is still there. In my mind, I can still remember that fateful night, almost a year ago, when I stormed out of my mom’s place... and into the dark.

“Rory!” she’d called out. “Where are you going?”

“Out,” I had replied without looking back. I hadn’t even taken the time to grab my phone, for all I wanted was to run away. Away from mom’s strange, inexplicable routines. Away from those stupid Christmas lights. But most of all, I wanted to run away from my mother. “Out...” I repeated. “Away from you.”

I didn’t turn but heard her slow down. I could imagine her face reddening.

“But it’s nighttime!” she had called out. “You haven’t even got your flashlight.”

I whipped around to look at her. “Mom! I’m seventeen years old. You can’t do this to me anymore. The things you see... They’re not real. And you’re not going to make me see them too. I won’t become like you.”

“Rory, let’s go back inside and talk about this. You know that you can’t be outside when—”

“I’m not going to be like you, mom! *Okay?* I’m not going to spend my whole life shackled up around nightlights and closed curtains. I’m not going to drive away everyone until I’m all alone.” I watched her blink.

She reddened some more, and I added, "I'm not like you!"

She took a step forward, and all I wanted was for her to back off.

That was when I said, "I'd rather spend my entire life in the dark than become you."

My mom quieted, and suddenly my chest felt tight as I watched her face pale below the flickering Christmas lights. Right then, all I wanted was to get away from those lights. All I wanted was to go against all my mother had taught me. Not because I wanted to upset her... but because I suddenly knew what shame meant.

I could never take back those words.

I turned around and said, "I'll be back. I... I'm just going for some air."

With that, I fled into the night.

Yet, an hour later, I would soon wish for my silver flashlight... and my mother's dagger.

The bus jars forward and I leave behind the world of memory. My hands grab the sides of the cake box. I wait for the bus to settle again before I open the box. I sigh in relief when I find that the cake is still okay. I close the lid and realize that the bus has stopped. People are getting off. I do the same and find myself standing outside a redbrick building.

Sisters of Mercy Hospital.

I take in a deep breath and head up the steps. Each brick is tinted with smog, as though this place can barely survive the city. I walk through the automatic doors and head to the right, over to a wing labeled *Psychiatric Ward*. Beside its doors is a counter. A woman with round glasses peers down at me. “You’re just past the visiting hours, Aurora.”

Nurse Charlotte.

“Look, I know it’s late,” I reply. “But I have to see her.” I raise the cake box and Charlotte’s eyes light up. “I made her a vanilla pound cake. Her favorite.”

“Oh, she’d love that,” says the nurse.

I smile. “Well... you can have some too, y’know.”

“Oh, I could never. Your cakes are always so special. I could never deprive your mother of even one bite.”

Liar, I think to myself, even as I smile.

She purses her lips and looks at her watch.

“It’s got strawberry cream,” I whisper.

She smiles and waves me toward the door. She presses a buzzer and the door opens.

I head inside, but Charlotte walks toward me when I move to the right.

“Hold on, Rory.”

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Oh, nothing. We just had to move your mother to a new room. The old one’s being refitted.”

“But—”

“I know, I know,” says Charlotte. “Your mother can’t stand total darkness. I *remember*. We moved her to a room overlooking a streetlamp outside.”

I nod to myself and let her guide me to the new room. Inside, a woman with blonde hair and brown eyes lies tucked in a hospital bed. Her hair is a lanky mess, and it’s hard to imagine that it used to be shiny

and curly. My mother used to be so fixated with brushing her locks. Now, she's fixated with other things, such as the images she draws.

Beside her bed is a stack of her latest drawings, and each one is a depiction of a demon with colored wings. All of them are faceless monsters.

I turn away from them.

At first, it seems as if mom's looking at me. But then I enter and realize that she's staring ahead at the shadows on the wall. "Mom?" I call out.

Her eyes shift to me for a moment, then become glassy. She mutters something before she continues to stare ahead.

I look to Charlotte, and the nurse sighs. "No change, Rory."

I nod but sit on a chair beside mom's bed. I take out my cake and place it on the table next to mom. "I made your favorite cake, mom. Vanilla pound cake with strawberry cream."

My mother doesn't say a word, and all I can do is stare helplessly at the cake. Every day for the last year,

my mom has been lost in a daze. Sometimes she talks. Other times she screams. But usually she just stares into space. That is, when she's not busy drawing.

I pick up one of the drawings and study it. In my mind's eye, I see a flash of a memory: Me... a year ago... standing before a creature just like the one in mom's drawing.

Mom has been in the psych ward ever since her accident—and though she's physically okay, the doctors believe that she's suffering from some sort of 'dissociative disorder.' The terms change from time to time, but the message stays the same:

Young woman, your mother has gone nuts.

Yet, I know they're wrong. Mom isn't even close to crazy.

For years, all I'd ever wanted was to shake her: my mother who wouldn't let me out past dusk; my mother who yanked me out of school one afternoon and told me I could never go back; my mother who always made me sleep with the lights on.

For years she'd talked about demons that lived in the night. Demons that waited for the chance to take young girls to a faraway prison. And for years, I thought she was crazy. Yet, all this changed on my seventeenth birthday... when I ran out into the dark.

My eyes settle back on the drawing, and I remind myself that it's all real.

"Aurora?" a voice calls out.

For a moment, I almost believe it's my mom, until I turn and see Charlotte pointing at her watch. "Sorry Rory, but you really must leave now."

I nod, then turn to look at my mom. Back when she was first put here, I used to imagine that she'd snap out of her fugue when no one was looking and scoff down these treats. But one day, after I'd left, I decided to go back into the ward, and that was when I saw Charlotte and another nurse sitting around my mom's bed. They were eating her cake.

That wasn't a big deal. But what upset me was hearing them gossip among themselves, as if my mom

didn't exist. As if she wasn't there at all. And that made me so angry that I forced myself to leave. Right then, I knew I would say something I'd regret if I stayed.

Charlotte sighs, then says, "Look. I'll give you a few more minutes." I turn to her, and she looks at me with a real gentleness. And in that moment, I have to admit that maybe she's not such an awful cow.

"Thanks," I reply.

She nods and leaves the room.

That's when I wonder why I keep baking cakes for mom. It's been ages since she paid any mind to them. Unlike before the accident. Back then, she would get so excited every time I dressed up a cake.

"Mom?" I whisper.

Her eyes line up with mine, and I take out some paint swatches from my bag. "What do you think about these colors?" I ask her. "I was thinking about painting the outside of our house, and I thought you might like to help me choose the colors."

Mom used to look over colors with dad, back when the three of us still lived under the same roof. Back before dad left us.

Mom stares at the swatches before she shakes her head. “How can I choose?” she mumbles. “He has so many colors in his wings. So many, many colors...”

She looks over at the stack of drawings, and I sigh. I take her hand and give it a squeeze, before I try something else to hold her attention. I pull out my flashlight and place it next to the cake. I want her to know that I remember all she taught me. That I’m staying safe. Yet, when she stares at the object, all I see is a frown.

“I’m taking care of myself, mom. I remember what you told me. I am careful.”

Translation: I’m scared, mom.

I need answers.

I need someone to be here for me.

And above all else, I need you to come back to reality... so you can understand how sorry I am.

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” I tell her before kissing her on the forehead. “Good night, mom.”

I take my flashlight and turn around before she says softly, “They’re dangerous.”

I freeze, afraid that any motion will scare her back into her hidden world. “The things that fly in the night and steal... young women?” I ask, looking at the drawings she’s made.

She sighs and I turn to see her shake her head.

“No,” she says at last. “Not the flying things... but the ones who control them.”

The ones who control them? I’m taken aback by those words, for in all those years at home, mom never mentioned any other creatures but the winged demons. Even then, she hardly told me anything about them.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Her eyes droop and she begins to sleep.

I want to shake her, but the light outside has darkened to a deep red. One hour, I realize. I have one

hour before night falls. One hour before the winged demons are able to travel in the shadows.

In my head, I can hear my mother's advice come back to me:

Stay in the light whenever it's nighttime. The shadows are not your friends...

"Stay in the light," I whisper to myself. All right.



I leave the room and Charlotte ushers me out. She promises to try to get my mom to eat some cake. That's a lie, but I feel better knowing that my mom won't be alone if the nurses gather in her room for cake.

I head to the bus stop. A moment later, the 5:10 bus to Avondale arrives. I get on, pay the fare, and settle in. The bus heads off and I pull out my phone. I should've sent a text message to my uncle hours ago, but I guess it's better late than never.

Went to see mom. Will be back before night, Rory.

The words *before night* don't mean anything to Uncle Rob. He doesn't know about the things mom talks about. He and she were never close, and to him, she's just a hopeless sibling who went nuts. But last year, after mom's accident, the court selected him to be my guardian.

He works as a security guard. I don't see much of him, but that's fine with me. He gets to live rent-free in my mom's house, and I get to do what I please. He doesn't ask me why I rarely go out. And I don't ask him about the rows of beer bottles in his room.

I turned eighteen a week ago, and I had meant to talk to him about our situation. Meant to ask him politely but firmly to move out. Yet, he's been a drunken mess for the last few days. He's probably in some bar in Jacksonville Landing. Or in some alley.

Later, I tell myself. Sort that out later.

As the bus goes into a tunnel, darkness rushes around me. I'm so aware of light and shade that it's as if the darkness becomes a physical thing that brushes

against me. I wonder what it's like for the other passengers. They don't have a clue about what lurks in the night.

As the tunnel ride stretches on, I wonder what it would be like to have someone to ride with me. Someone to make me feel safe. I had that once with my mom, but I never knew it. Maybe I had something similar with Jai... but who knows where he is now. He probably remembers me as some weirdo that he used to live next door to.

That is, if he remembers me at all.

Right now, all I have is my flashlight and dagger.

I hold my breath as the bus continues to travel through the tunnel.

Alas, when the bus comes out the other side, its wheels grind to a halt. I'm the first passenger to stand up. But before I can ask the driver what's wrong, he tells everyone that there's been a technical difficulty. "If you all wait patiently, we shouldn't be here for too long." He proceeds to talk on his radio, but I look out the window and wonder where 'here' is.

All I see is a part of Downtown Jacksonville that I don't recognize. The sky is so dark that streetlamps flicker on. They stake out parts of the sidewalk to watch over. But beyond this, all I see are dark buildings. All of which remind me of the street corner that I found myself on nearly a year ago.

My mind wanders.

A year ago, after my fight with mom, I'd wandered down the neighborhoods of Avondale for hours. I had no bus money. No idea where I wanted to go or what I wanted to do. But I just needed some air. I just needed to get away from that giant Queen Anne house that suddenly seemed as small as a matchbox.

Yet, there was something different about Avondale that night. Something heavy in the breeze. A slickness that clung to my skin. I wandered the streets for ages before something odd happened. I heard this rushing sound, like wings beating the air.

I stopped moving.

All the streetlights in the neighborhood around me went black. All at once. After the streetlamps, all the lights in every window went dark, until the only glimmers came from a full moon. “What’s going on?” I whispered to myself. A blackout?

I remembered something that my mom had said: *The shadows are not your friends. There are things in the night that will steal you away. Things that will take you to a place that you can never return from.*

Right, I thought to myself.

But there and then, her words didn’t seem so silly. Suddenly, all I wanted was to rush home—not only to apologize to mom, but also to escape from the darkness.

I turned around, trying to gauge my way back.

Come on, Rory. You’ll be fine...

Just head back.

I started walking. Yet, a few steps into the shadows, I froze and found myself gazing up at a tall man. A man with a cloak made from shards of colored glass. I stared

at these colors until I realized he was growling. *Oh geez... this is not good*, I told myself.

I took a step back and muttered, “Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Yet, before I could turn around, the cloak rippled. It lifted up like wings. My vision filled up with shapes of colored glass.

I gasped as he stepped closer. He wasn’t wearing anything, but he didn’t seem to have skin. Or features. Or muscles. What I saw was a stick-like body covered in a craggy layer. Sort of like the surface of a volcano. I couldn’t see eyes or a mouth. He had no face.

He’s not human, I thought to myself. *He’s a demon...*

I realized then that his wing-shaped cloak was actually a pair of wings.

Real wings...

The creature lunged and I shrieked. I tried to pull away, but he grabbed my arm and his touch was icy. I tried to kick my way out. Tried to punch him. Yet my fist slammed into his wing and popped out a glass shard. It cut my hand and I cried out. The creature

hissed (even though he had no mouth) but he didn't release me.

He started to rise up into the air.

But before he could, a voice called out from behind me: "Let her go!"

The creature halted and I turned to see something incredible. Something almost as surreal as the man before me: mom was standing in the street. *In the dark.*

Yet, she didn't seem like the mother I had always known. In her eyes I saw no fear. She was shaking, yet... she looked powerful. In control. "Let her go!" she shouted out, even louder.

Mom?

She pulled out her flashlight and shined it in his face. The creature reared back, and tried to pull me into the shadows. That is, until my mom rushed over and slammed her dagger into his chest. The demon hissed and let go of me. At the same time, a light materialized.

The demon recoiled from the glow, as if he'd been burned. Suddenly, he flew away.

I turned to the light and saw a car head toward us...

An old man stared at us from behind the wheel. Horror burst across his face when he spotted mom and me. The man braked. His car spun.

“Mom!” I called out.

A moment later, the car collided into her, and she was hurled across the alley.

“Mom!”

Everything after that passed in a blur. I remember colors: the streetlights coming back on; the red and blue of the ambulance; and the hospital’s halogen glow. But after everything settled down, nothing was the same for my mom. What she and I saw changed her. And nearly losing me to the demons she’d always known about... well, all of that seemed to break her mind.

Ever since that night, I have tried many times to tell her how sorry I am. But I never get the sense that she truly hears me.

A voice stirs me from my memories, and I hear the bus driver tell us that a new bus will arrive soon. All we have to do is wait outside. Everyone mills out—five strangers, including the driver. All of us lean against the bus. But before I know it, night falls, and the passengers wander off until it's just me and the driver.

He looks at me and frowns.

“What?” I ask when I realize he's talking.

My voice sounds harsh, and I wish it didn't. But *this* is the last place that I want to be. All I want is to be welcomed back home by a glowing Rudolph. All I want is to be back in my half-burnt house, eating some awful microwave meal and basking in a room full of light.

“Is something wrong?” I ask him.

“I should ask you that, missy,” he replies.

That's when I realize that my hands are shaking. *Really* shaking. You'd think I was going through hypothermia if it weren't for the summer heat. This part of the city is so dimly lit that everything a dozen steps ahead and behind of me is lost in shadow.

I want to shrug, but one of the streetlamps fizzes off.

Just like that, I'm spooked.

I get out my flashlight, put on my bag, and start running. *Just go somewhere bright, I tell myself. Go somewhere with lights and people and loud noises. Somewhere where you can get a cab or hide out overnight. But just keep moving, Rory...*

I see a 7-Eleven straight ahead, and I sigh in relief.

The demons never want to be seen. They would never go near the glowing lights of a 7-Eleven. *Just head inside and everything will be fine, Rory.*

I race toward the neon lights as if they were the gates to some hallowed ground. In my mind, I can hear my mother's voice call out to me: *The light... stay in the light.*

I get closer...

And closer...

And...

My foot crunches on something and I lose my balance. My hands shoot out as I tumble to the ground. In the dark, I'm surrounded by trash. But I look under my right boot, and all I can see are bits of broken glass. A bottle?

I look closer and my heart nearly stops.

The shards are brightly colored.

I get up and hear a burst of wind. One of the 7-Eleven's neon lights flickers out. There's another rush of air, and the sound makes me think of candles being blown out, as another bulb darkens. And another. The streetlamps fizzle out, along with the building lights around me. Soon, darkness fills the area.

No, no, no...

Behind me is a rustling sound, and I turn around.

At first, all I can see are colored bits of glass. Then, I realize the glass is clustered into a pair of wings. Shapes that are attached to the body of a demon. A faceless head tips to the side, and everything seems to spin around me.

"You..." I whisper.

The demon lunges.

It all happens so fast. The creature grabs me with his dark hands. His fingers wrap around my waist like thick metal wires. I freeze. A gust of wind rushes around me as the giant wings rise higher. But before I can pull away, the wings arc downward to propel the demon into the air.

I open my mouth, but no sound escapes from my throat. I can't move as the demon lifts me up. *This isn't happening*, I think to myself. *This isn't real.*

Yet, below my feet are building tops and antennas.
Oh God...

At that moment, I remember the look on mom's face—back when she had fought off a demon. I remember how hard she had struggled. With this in mind, I try kicking his body. I don't want him to drop me, but maybe if I make it hard for him to ascend, he might be forced to lower me. I have to try.

I have to *fight*.

We pass over the flat roof of a parking tower, and I see a chance to get away. The top level is just two yards below my feet. If I could force him to let me go, I could tumble to safety.

That's it.

I kick and scream. My hands ball into fists and I strike him in the chest. Yet, nothing happens. He barely flinches. I can't get to my dagger, but I remember my flashlight. It's still in my messenger bag, so I pull it out, ready to strike him with it.

"Let me go!" I shout out. "Let me go now!"

Suddenly, the hands around my waist loosen. The creature speaks.

"If you insist," he mutters in a croaky voice.

He lets go of me and I look down. I realize that I'm way past the parking tower. Below me is nothing but a concrete loading bay. I scream as my body rushes toward the top of a truck.

"WAIT!" I shriek. "Hold on!"

The creature grabs my left wrist and pulls me back up. My stomach turns as we go higher into the sky. I

have this horrible feeling that my left wrist is going to snap off, just like a nub of dough that's been stretched too far. Yet, my other hand just won't rise up. We're going so fast that I can't move.

My head is slumped forward, and all I can see is a blur of shapes.

That is, until we enter something damp. I start choking as a mix of air and mist rushes around me. It's not air and it's not water, but a bit of both. It's strangely warm here, and the mist smells like drain water.

Wait... am I... in a cloud?

A moment later, I can feel us lowering back down and I get a surge of hope.

We're going down.

I'm too much trouble, which is why he's bringing me back down. Wherever it was that he wanted to take me, I'm just not worth the hassle.

Alas, when I stare down, all these thoughts fade.

I don't recognize where I am.

The first thing I notice is the sound. Gone is the humming, droning, and roaring of traffic that you find in Jacksonville. Instead, what I hear is a mix of brass horns, mechanical noises, and a deep rumbling, just like the sort given off by a huge fire.

Looking around, I soon discover where the rumbling is coming from.

The sky is full of hot-air balloons. Giant balloons that look velvety and shiny, all of them linked via gold chains to jeweled baskets. This can't be right, I think to myself. What are they doing? Why haven't I seen them before? They look like giant Faberge eggs.

We go lower, and I see passengers in the balloon carriages. Women in evening gowns. Men in dinner jackets and black trousers. Some of the people gesture at me and whisper among themselves, as though seeing a demon carry a girl is nothing unusual. We go lower and I see a woman leaning over the rail of a hot-air balloon. She's smoking a cigar.

I want to scream for help, but her eyes pass over me and she blows a smoke ring in my direction.

The demon takes me below the balloons. And what I see is no less strange. The landscape below me is not one that I recognize. In fact, it doesn't look like anything I've ever seen.

There are no cars or motorways, just orange streets that seem to glow. These streets snake around a collection of spires, towers, domes, and castles. Oddball architecture that glitters. The lower we go, the harder it is for me to take it all in. I see black rivers that wind their way through the city like veins. Many of these rivers have giant flowers drifting on them.

Or at least, that's what I think at first.

As we go lower, I realize that the flowers are actually boats shaped like lilies and orchids.

This isn't Jacksonville.

"What is this place?" I gasp.

The demon rushes to the right and over a stone wall. He takes us lower, and my wrist begins to throb inside his grip. My feet are just a few yards off the ground, but soon I focus right ahead.

Straight ahead of me is a castle. It's made up of seven towers that are clustered together. It shines in the night, all of it pearly, and at first, I can't figure out where the light is coming from. But seconds later, I'm carried through a cloud of fireflies. They hiss and flutter as I enter their lights of yellow, pink, and blue. I close my eyes as the bugs buzz around me.

A moment later, the demon lets go of me.

I yelp as my body tumbles onto a solid surface. I open my eyes to find myself lying on cold marble. I'm in a room. A room with a high ceiling and walls made of polished wood. The walls have sconces filled with candles, but the light is so dim that it's hard to see much of anything. I get to my feet and begin to head toward the only exit I can see—a balcony to the front. This must be the opening that I was dragged through.

Before I get far, the shadows ripple, and I realize I am not alone.

There are winged demons waiting along the walls. At least a dozen of them. One of them walks over to

block the exit, but all of them raise their colored-glass wings.

Crap...

I come to a halt and sway on my feet. That is, until I remember the flashlight in my right hand. It's bizarre that I'm still holding it after the crazy flight. But I turn it on and the white light pools around my feet.

I raise the flashlight and point its beam at the demon blocking the exit.

Somehow, I feel that this demon was the one who dragged me from Jacksonville. Yet, he doesn't flinch in the light. I pale but guide my light around the room, shining it across all the other monsters. I swallow when they don't react. I turn off my light but do my best not to let my fear show.

"Where am I?" I demand, and to my relief, my voice actually sounds angry. Not like the whimper of some frightened eighteen-year-old girl. My hands though won't stop shaking. "Where am I? Answer me!"

The creatures look at one another, then stalk closer and form a circle around me. However, before I can

find a way through them, a voice echoes through the room. All the demons pause.

“Good evening,” says a raspy female voice.

I turn around and see a woman standing behind me. A freakishly tall individual with willowy limbs. The sort of body that you’d see in a Modigliani painting. Her platinum locks are held up in a bun. Her skin and eyes are very pale. She’s wearing a silk shirt and a pair of beige leggings, like something you’d see on a horse jockey.

She smiles darkly before raising a hand.

A current passes through the air as the demons lift up and shoot out through the balcony. All of them, save for the demon who brought me here. He waits by the doorway until she turns to look at him. “Go,” she says.

The creature lingers, then nods. “Yes, Madam Lorien.”

He turns and flits out, and as he does, I see a path to the land beyond. *Now, I tell myself. You can make a dash for it, Rory.* I take in a deep breath, ready to race

forward. Yet, the woman is faster. She raises her hand and the balcony doors slam shut.

I freeze as a realization sinks within me:
She's not human.

The woman—this Madam Lorien—tips her head to the side. “Well, what have we here?” she whispers. She comes closer to me and teeters on the points of ballet shoes. She moves so strangely, that I wonder if she'll topple over if I give her a push.

She reaches out to clutch a lock of my short black hair. “Interesting.”

I stagger back.

“Where am I!” I demand.

Lorien crosses her arms and walks closer. “You're in a strange land, my dear. One where you will have to adapt in order to survive.” She holds a hand to her chest. “Although, I have to say, I am surprised that Lady Cavendish would procure a new girl so close to the Unveiling.”

My eyes dart to the balcony doors, and I believe that I could escape if I had enough time. I stare at Lorien for a moment, before I do the only thing I can think of.

I raise my flashlight and get ready to knock her back.

Alas, she flits away to the right. And before I can turn, she rushes over to my other side and grabs the flashlight from my hands. She holds it to her chest and turns it on. The beam lights her face from below, and her face looks skeletal. Her brows rise haughtily. “My my, you’re a feisty one.”

I back away as she stalks toward me. But just a few feet away, she does a pirouette, kicks her heels together, and floats a few inches off the ground.

My breath leaves me in a gasp.

“What... are you?” I stammer.

She smirks. “Not like you, that’s for sure.” Before I can reply, she strikes my face with the back of her hand and I tumble backward.

When I open my eyes, I see a door on the left open. More pale women enter, and these individuals are

wearing gray leotards and ballet shoes. They also float above the ground. In their hands they carry a long blue ribbon. Lorien grabs hold of one end, and together, all the women wrap the ribbon around my body. Before I can free myself, I'm tied in a cocoon of blue silk that stretches from my neck to my knees.

“Let me go!” I shout.

The ‘ballerinas’ smile as they pick me up. I try to kick my way out, but they spin me around in circles, over and over again, until I can't focus on anything. At last, when they stop, they push me forward. My boots slide across the floor until the women position me before a full-length mirror attached to a wall. Soon the women leave, and it's just me and Lorien.

What I see in the mirror makes me hush.

In the mirror is a reflection that I do not recognize. It's me in there... and yet, it's not me at all. I see myself in a beautiful blue dress. My hair looks longer. It spills over my shoulders in a shiny ripple. I'm smiling and laughing and I look so happy. So un-me.

I try to break free of the ribbons but sink to my knees. My reflection kneels inside the mirror and places her hands on her lap. Lorien says, "Behold, my dear, all that you could be with a little help from us."

I have to get out. But how?

Think, Rory. *Think!*

I remember the knife in my boot, but can't quite reach it. I need more time, so I start talking to distract Lorien. "All I could be? What are you talking about?" I ask as I stretch my hand lower and touch the edge of my boot. I push my arm lower, twisting until pain flares along my arm. But seconds later, I reach the knife...

The handle is firmly in my grip when Lorien replies: "I'm talking about the opportunity to be something more."

She reaches out to place her cold hands on the sides of my head. "I'm talking about the chance to turn this..." Her hands tighten like a vice, before she lets go and points at my reflection. A reflection that won't stop smiling. "...into this."

“Enough!” I whisper.

I grab the knife and cut through the ribbons on my right. In a flurry, the binds came undone and I stand up. I turn away from the mirror to face Lorien. Her eyes flash before she tries to grab my arm. I lunge and cut her shoulder. Her sleeve rips. But instead of seeing blood, all I see is a scratch along her skin, as though she's made of stone.

I nearly drop my dagger. And this moment of hesitation is all that Lorien needs. She knocks aside my weapon and slams me backward. My body crashes against the mirror, and I hear the glass shatter. Bits of it slide down the back of my t-shirt.

My head aches as I slump against the mirror's backing. My gaze lowers to see shards all around me. In each of them, a smiling Rory waves up at me.

Lorien kneels before me. She lifts my chin with a finger.

“Well, you certainly are different from the others,” she says.

She purses her lips, but I shake my head and say, “What are you?”

Lorien smiles. “My kind has many names in your world: specter, phantom, spirit, and wraith.” She pauses. “But the name you are probably most familiar with... is ghost.”

Ghost? That's not possible.

I gawk at her, and she smiles.

“Boo...” she hisses.

I jerk back and my head slams against the mirror's backing. With that, I sink into unconsciousness.

Awake

When I wake up, it's now daytime. I'm lying in a warm bed, up to my neck in silk sheets. Above me is a ceiling covered with bits of nacreous seashells, all of which are fitted together to form a mosaic.

I rise to my elbows and stare around me at walls made of pale wood. The room is rectangular, and one of the long sides of the room has rows of beds; the other long side has wardrobes, dressers, and shelves with perfume bottles and fancy boxes. Beside each bed is a window made of gem-like glass.

Light filters through the glass to refract on the ceiling in rainbow glimmers. It's beautiful. But where am I? I try to leave the bed, but find that my arms are tied down to the sides of the bed by leather straps. So too are my legs.

I give the straps a tug and curse when I can't get free.

There's a rustling, and I turn to the side to see several girls watching me. They all look around my age, and each girl is dressed in an old-fashioned nightgown. That's not all though: they're all incredibly beautiful. They have the sort of faces that you'd see in a fashion magazine or a Hollywood movie.

I pause and they back away. They don't look like Madam Lorien and her helpers. These young women look worried. They look human.

"Hello?" I call out.

The girls whisper among themselves.

I turn away and study my wrist straps. They look like the ones the doctors once used to hold down my mother—back when she had a screaming match with things that only she could see. I lean forward, and use my teeth to loosen the strap around one of my wrists. It's hard work, but I manage to get one hand out. After this, it's only a matter of seconds before I'm free.

I look at the bed, with its straps lying limp, and everything seems surreal.

The shadows are not your friends. There are things in the night that will steal you away... taking you to a place that you can never return from.

No, I tell myself. That's not true. Wherever I am... I will find my way out.

I turn around to check whether the girls from before are still here, but they are nowhere to be seen. Fine. I head to a window and my eyes settle upon a latch; however, I can't find a way to open the lock on it. *Okay, think, Rory.*

I look around me and that's when I realize that I'm no longer wearing my t-shirt and jeans. Instead, I'm wearing a white nightgown with frills and lace—a dress that's so *not* me. I still have my Timberland boots; but judging by the messy laces, I suspect that someone has tried (and failed) to undo the knots. It's a good thing that I always tie my boots with extra knots.

My gaze lowers to the floor, and I see a bedside table with a lamp. A tiffany lamp made of green glass. I pick it up and find it to be heavy. Perfect. I smash the lamp's base against the window.

The latch falls away and I pull open the window. More light comes in, but it's gauzy and soft, making me think that it's early morning. I can taste dew in the air, and I can smell an intense floral perfume.

I climb out the window and find myself standing on a balcony shaped like a seashell. The railing is made of gold vines that coil, twist, and trail off below. I peer around me at the castle—the towers that rest side by side. Each tower is of a different height and size, but they're all tied together by gold vines. And each tower is made of pink marble.

I look up and down and realize that there are more balconies jutting out from each tower. Many balconies have flowers planted on them—orchids, morning glories, and roses that spill over like sea foam. Marble mermaids are tangled amid the gold vines and half-hidden by flowers.

The castle is the most beautiful building I've ever seen.

Yet, something from above soon draws my attention. Above me, winged demons are flitting in the

sky, their wings catching the light to cast rainbow glows on the ground beyond the castle. The creatures look more like butterflies than demons, but I shiver as I think back to last night.

I have to get out of here. I have to get down. But how?

I stare around me but can see no steps or ledges. All that scales the towers are the vines and balconies. I turn to look behind me, but the window I opened is now shut. I give it a thump, thinking I can get back in, but it's stuck.

Oh great...

Now, only one option remains.

I've got to climb down.

"Oh lordy..."

I give myself exactly ten seconds to calm down. When those seconds are up, I reach forward to grab the rail. It seems sturdy.

There are at least ten floors between me and the ground level, but I *can* see a path of vines that leads all

the way down. I take in a deep breath, then climb over the railing, hooking my arms around loops in the vines and pressing my Timberlands into a coil below me. Down I go, careful to hold only the curly parts of each vine.

Everything is covered in dew, and all it would take is a wrong step or grip and I'd slide off the vines. Still, I do my best. All the while, I stay away from the windows, and slowly, I make my way down.

I can do this.

I just need to stay balanced and move carefully. I follow a vine down to a balcony two levels below. This one is full of flowers and I climb into a bed of lilies and morning glories. The flowers are so tall that they rise above my head when I crouch down. Their scent is intensely sweet, but I try not to breathe it in. I have to focus.

Yet, before I continue down, I hear voices and duck amid the flowers.

"...I don't understand why she's here. She'll never fit in among the lineup," says a woman. I'm guessing that

this voice belongs to Lorien. “Not to mention she’s hardly a *classical* beauty.”

Another woman replies. Her voice is melodious: “No. She is not a classical beauty, but she is unique... unique in a way that *he* would go for.”

Are they talking about me?

There is a creaking sound as a window opens. I peer through the morning glories to see a woman step out amid the flowers. She’s dressed in a swathe of golden chiffon. Her hair is black, swept back in a long wave. Her eyes are the same color as her dress, and her face... her face is flawless. Like an airbrushed photo of a silver-screen siren. A Hollywood dream.

Someone who’s probably lived on in the imaginations of others.

Before she even speaks, I know that she’s the woman whose voice I couldn’t identify.

“He will be drawn to her,” she says. “Mark my words.”

She floats closer to me and I lean back. The flowers behind me rustle, and I freeze. The woman stares

down, and for a moment I'm sure our eyes will meet. I watch her lower her hand. She plucks a morning glory and pulls it out.

She closes her eyes and sniffs its perfume.

Then, she turns away and closes the window.

He will be drawn to her.

Who were they referring to?

Never mind, I tell myself. I don't have time to linger. I need to find a way out of this strange city. I stare out and see a high wall of stone surrounding the castle. I have no idea how I'll scale it. But for now, it doesn't matter.

I wait for the voices to fade, before I climb over the balcony and head down. I move over to a group of marble mermaids, and hook my arm around one of the mermaid's arms to balance my weight.

As I twist about, I hear a crack.

I look back and watch a dark line course over the mermaid's arm as a fissure appears in the marble. *Uh oh*. The carved arm snaps off, and I shriek as my body is airborne. Down I tumble, ready to slam into a balcony

several levels below. That is, until a blur of motion comes beside me and sweeps me up. In a flash, two arms latch around my waist and lift me up.

Sky rushes past me, and I look to the side to see colorful wings. But before I can do anything, the creature lowers me onto a balcony. It's empty here, save for orchids. I stand up and find myself staring at a demon.

The creature rumbles softly. His wings rise and fall slightly, and light filters through them to stain the floor with colors. I suspect that this is the demon who kidnapped me. There's something about his wing colors that separates him from the others of his kind: he has more shards of green than any other colors.

His hands flex, and his fingers make me think of spiders.

Yet, I'm no longer frightened of him. Even though mom's been warning me for years about winged demons, I now realize that he can't hurt me. He's just someone's minion. Just a creature who was sent to fetch me. But why was I taken? And what is going on?

“You should be more careful, human,” says the man.
“Go back to the sleeping chamber.”

I cross my arms. “And what if I don’t feel like doing that?” I ask.

“Then I shall take you down myself.”

He takes a step toward me, but I stand my ground.
“Go ahead,” I challenge him.

“Human—”

“I’m not going anywhere until you tell me where I am. What is this place?” I demand.

“What is this place?” he repeats. He stalks closer to me, fingers stretching out. “You will not like my answer.”

I don’t back down. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

He pauses for a moment and I step closer. That’s when he lunges and wraps an arm around my waist. In seconds, he kicks off from the ground and soars up.

“HEY!” I cry out. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you your answers,” he replies. “Or rather, *showing you the answers.*”

I hush. He carries me away from the castle and its stone wall. He flies in such a way that we're gliding above the city. In the daylight, the orange streets no longer glow, but they still shine. I see vivid colors and shapes as we pass the tops of buildings. Butterflies drift above the city in huge swarms. Blue ones encounter red ones to become a blur of purple. I see gardens with giant flowers.

Wow...

The city has an olden feel to it, and it's full of different styles, such as Medieval, Gothic, Victorian, and Art Nouveau. Some of the architecture could possibly fit in within the modern world. Yet, the whole place seems like some otherworldly creation.

I look around me, but the city seems endless.

"This world around you... is a city known as Palladino," says the creature. "Yet, some of the people who live here have different names for it: Utopia... Eternia... Haven." He swoops low and I shriek. I can feel my internal organs moving at different speeds as we rush toward the ground.

Just a few yards off the ground, the demon hovers over a marketplace where people float instead of walk. “This city is a home for ghosts,” he whispers, as if it were still a secret. “This city is also far away... from planet earth.”

“Is this the afterlife?” I whisper.

“No... well, not truly.” He pauses as he lifts up. He rushes over to a yellow hot-air balloon. The top of this balloon has a bed of flowers fenced in by a silver rail.

He tells me to stand atop the balloon.

I do as he says and carefully step into the flowerbed. I hold on tightly to the railing around the garden. Beneath me, the rubber is warm. The whole balloon is vibrating. The fire that lifts the balloon gives off a roar.

The demon stands beside me and picks out a dried dandelion.

He holds it up and says. “All living creatures must die.” He shakes the dandelion, and its seeds fly off in all directions. He looks around him and says, “Most people go to heaven or hell or whatever it is that they are meant for. But some people...” he holds out the stalk,

and I notice that one seed won't leave the dead flower. The demon plucks off this piece. He drops the flower and cups the last seed in his hands. "Some people, though, are unwilling to enter the afterlife. They become ghosts who wander the earth, and one by one, these ghosts eventually find their way to the city of Palladino."

"Why?" I ask.

"Why? Because Palladino is a place where they can continue to live some semblance of a life—even if they are only ghosts of their former selves. Palladino is a place where they can avoid judgment for their sins... a safe haven for those frightened of the great beyond."

I frown. "You make it sound like a paradise for ghosts."

"Maybe it is... to some," he says. "But in order to live in Palladino, a ghost must *choose* to enter this city. And as with all choices, there are consequences."

"What?"

“Firstly, should a ghost die in Palladino, his or her soul is instantly destroyed. Secondly, no ghost can ever leave Palladino once they step inside its walls.”

I shake my head. “But I didn’t choose to come here... and I’m not a ghost.” I cross my arms again, trying to check my heartbeat without letting him know it. I can still feel my pulse.

“No, you’re not,” says the creature. “But I guess it doesn’t matter now. Because there is no way for you to leave this place.”

“What do you mean?”

“No one can leave this place. You, young one, will live in Palladino for the rest of your life. And when you die, your ghost will linger here for all eternity.”

“No... that’s ridiculous. If you can bring me to this place, you can certainly take me back to Earth...”

“No. That is not how it works. I am neither a ghost nor a human, and the laws of Palladino prevent me from taking you back. That is all there is to it.”

“But—”

I want to argue that this doesn't make sense, but I suddenly remember what my mother said: *The shadows are not your friends. There are things in the night that will steal you away... taking you to a place you can never return from.*

"No, this can't be right. There has to be a way," I tell him as my face goes white with panic.

That's when he extends his right arm. I notice that there are tiny scratches along his arm, like the day markings that prisoners scrawl on their walls. "What's that?" I ask.

"The number of young human women I have brought to Palladino. I remember each one. The ones who faint, the ones who go as lifeless as dolls... and the ones who scream and fight."

I count at least fifty.

"What happened to them?"

"I don't know," he replies. He holds out his other arm and I see no marks.

"What's that side supposed to show?" I ask.

He goes quiet for a moment, then says, “This arm shows the number of humans I have returned to Earth.” He pauses. “That is to say... absolutely none.”

I feel numb, as though someone has flicked a switch and shut off my emotions. For a while, all I can do is look around me at the hot-air balloons, the strange city, and the bright colors. Nothing seems real. Nothing makes sense. But through it all, I hear the demon whisper, “I am sorry for bringing you here.”

I look up at him, and though he has no face, I see his head sag.

I sink to my knees and breathe in and out. *No, I tell myself. He's wrong. I can't be stuck here... there has to be a way out.*

Before I can say anything, the hot-air balloon starts to drift ahead. The creature clears his throat. “We must return,” he says.

I still have so many questions, but the demon takes us back toward the castle. This time, I don't make a sound as we hurtle through the air. I don't feel anything.

He sets me down at the foot of the castle, and I fall to my knees. When I look up, I watch as ghost women drift around the castle. Madam Lorien heads over to stare at me. In the daylight, her eyes are pale pink. Her skin is actually tinged with a shade of lavender.

“You test my patience,” she says. “Which is not a good idea, considering how much you will need my help to survive.”

Survive?

“Get up.”

I stare numbly at her, before she repeats. “Get up...”

I stand up on shaky legs.

Lorien though spins around me. “In order for you to flourish here, you will have to become something more.”

“Or else?” I ask.

A window creaks open, and we turn to see a woman stare out from the topmost level. It’s the dark-haired woman from before. She doesn’t say a word, but Lorien nods to herself. “This should be interesting.” With that, Lorien turns and waves the ghosts back.

She grabs my waist and carries me into the air. She settles me onto the balcony I came from, then peers through a window. She spots a girl watching from inside and waves her over. “You!”

The young woman walks to the window. Her eyes are round with fright. “Yes, Madam Lorien?” she says.

“Get the new girl cleaned up. Lessons shall begin soon.”

With that, Lorien leaves.

I feel numb, but the girl on the other side helps me climb back through the open window. She leads me to my bed and makes me sit down. She says, “Well, you certainly know how to make an entrance.” She gestures at the broken lamp and window latch. “Or, should I say, an *exit*.”

She sounds British, but I have no idea which region she’s from.

She’s now smirking, but it looks like an expression of humor. It’s funny, but she seems almost nonchalant

now, when just seconds ago she seemed terrified of Madam Lorien.

I gaze past her at a mirror on the wall. Unlike the magic mirror from yesterday, this one shows me for what I look like. And in its surface, I see a frightened young woman. Something damp touches my forehead, and I focus back on the girl as she uses a wet towel to clean my face. I don't say a word.

She's beautiful. Her hair is a milk-chocolate brown, shiny and slightly curly. It looks so soft, and I wonder how she gets it to look like that. Her eyes are also brown. Her cheeks are rosy and her hands are warm, and I know that she has to be human.

I suppose that she's about my age.

She finishes wiping my face, and her eyes lower to my boots.

"I like your Timberlands," she whispers. "But they won't let you keep them."

"Well, they can try taking them away," I mutter.

Another smirk appears on her face. "Bah... Madam Lorien tried to get them off last night, but she couldn't

undo the laces. She thought about cutting them off, but then paused. I think she thought there was a chance she might cut you.” She pauses and says. “I’ve never seen someone tie up their laces so tightly.”

“It’s just a habit,” I mumble.

A nervous habit, I suppose. One that I started doing after my mom’s accident.

She pauses then says, “I’m Nadine.”

“You’re not a ghost,” I reply, even though it’s obvious.

“Nup. You?”

“Last time I checked? Me neither.”

“Cool.”

There’s a long pause, and I feel less numb.

“I’m Aurora,” I tell her. “But everyone just calls me Rory.”

“Aurora, like Princess Aurora? Y’know like in—”

I sigh. “No. Not like Princess Aurora from Sleeping Beauty.”

If I had a dollar for every time...

A shape floats beyond an open door, and I see a ghost in a gray leotard. She must be one of Lorien's helpers. I watch her float by, but Nadine looks away and begins checking her fingernails. She starts prattling on about nail polish, but I suspect that she's spooked by the ghosts.

I ask, "How is it possible that we're surrounded by ghosts? Talking to them... interacting with them... and *trapped* by them?"

She shrugs. "Well, you get used to it. In some ways, they're not that different from humans. And I guess that explains why they take an interest in us."

"What do you mean?"

She looks up and her eyes narrow. "Wait. You mean no one's told you why Lady Cavendish brings young women here, have they?"

I shake my head. "No. Why? What are we here for?"

She pauses, then says. "Lady Cavendish brings in young women to become human companions... to the Ruling Lords." She straightens the creases from her

skirt. “We are trained to entertain them, and remind them of what it was like to be alive.”

I rear back in surprise, and a door to the left swings open. Lorien comes in and looks at me. “Follow me,” she says.

Elsa Cavendish

I follow Lorien in silence as she heads across the hall and over to a stairwell. I don't know whether to laugh or recoil as I watch her teeter on those ballet points. All at once, she's both the most ridiculous creature I've ever seen and the most disturbing. Soon we enter a series of passages and tunnels.

"Keep up, human," she tells me when I slow down to stare at a mural full of mermaids.

Human? How long has it been since she thought of herself as a human? Does she remember her life before Palladino?

Finally, we come to a small corridor. At the end of this is a wooden door with a rose carved on it. This rose is filled with nacre. Lorien opens the door and steps aside. Through the opening, I see a room lined with shelves upon shelves of dollhouses. Whole neighborhoods of ornate Victorian miniatures. Some of

the houses resemble the older Queen Anne homes in Avondale and Riverside. The ceiling here features a stained-glass window shaped like a giant rose.

When I turn around, Lorien is nowhere to be seen.

I turn back to the doorway and head through it. A few steps in, I see a woman standing before a dollhouse to the right. It's the woman from before. She's adjusting some of the dolls inside this dollhouse. She floats an inch above the ground, and her gold chiffon drifts about as if caught in a breeze. Yet the windows are closed.

I think of my mom and wish I could tell her about this place.

"You were right, mom," I whisper to myself. There really are things that defy logic and explanation. Demons... ghosts. They're real. "You were right, mom."

The woman straightens. "Mothers usually are."

She puts down a doll and glides toward me. Up close, she's even more beautiful. She circles around me, and her face is a mask that gives away nothing as she studies me. I try not to shiver.

I wonder if she was this radiant on Earth. What did she look like then? What did she do? Once, she must've been a real person. Someone with dreams, fears, and hopes. Anything but this porcelain creature.

I start to think of what the demon told me. If what he said was true, why did this woman choose to come to Palladino?

She halts before me. Her lips part and she frowns. Then, she shakes her head as she reaches forward to brush back part of my bangs. "What is your name, my dear?"

"Aurora."

Her lips curl up at the sides. "Aurora, like the northern lights above the Earth's north pole?" She tips her head to the side. "The sky fire that can only be seen in the coldest tops of planet earth?"

I frown, for if there's one thing I truly dislike, it's misinformation. I clear my throat and say, "Actually, the Aurora Borealis can sometimes, on rare occasions, be seen in places far from the north pole. The lights originate in the north, but places such as Florida have

had sightings.” I pause, then add, “The same applies for the Auroras that originate in the southern hemisphere—the Aurora Australis.”

I don't know whether it was the homeschooling or the fact that mom did her best to keep me indoors, but growing up at home, I developed a passion for reading. Fiction, non-fiction... I love them both. But as I watch Lady Cavendish go still, I'm reminded that people don't respond well to mini lectures.

“Yes, Lady Cavendish.” I bow my head. “Aurora, like the northern lights.”

I keep my head low and she laughs softly. But when I look up, I see no warmth in her eyes. Only a strange glint. “Maybe you're right. One can see lights in the most unexpected of places,” she replies. “Such as in the eyes of a fiery young woman.” She pauses. “You are an interesting specimen. I daresay that you are unique among all the girls who come here.”

The girls who come here?

I step back. “Begging your pardon, Lady Cavendish, but I didn't come here. I was *taken*.”

In my mind, I add the words, *Kidnapped... just like all the other girls.*

She pauses, and her face takes on a cold light.

At last she says, “Yes, so you were. However, I suggest that you work hard to fit in inside my castle.” She smiles, then adds softly, “...That is, if you wish to remain here in one piece.”

I pale as her words echo.

She leaves the room.

I wander in a daze toward the far wall. I hold on to a shelf to keep myself up. At last, my eyes settle on the dollhouse that Lady Cavendish was adjusting. My eyes widen as I see a doll with black hair, a white dress, and a pair of boots. She looks like *me*. Her eyes are blue beads that stare out plaintively.

I brush a finger over her cheek. Then, I wander toward a dining room inside the dollhouse. I pick up a tiny knife and go over to the doll. I stick the knife into a gap between one of the doll’s feet and boots.

“You’ll find a way out,” I whisper to myself. “You’ll escape this place.”

I repeat the last sentence like a mantra.



A while later, Lorien returns and escorts me back to the chamber from before.

Once I step inside, the ghost wanders off.

A whole bunch of girls are now milling about inside the room. All of them seem to be around my age. Nadine and a couple of girls are sorting through a pile of peach-colored dresses. All seem to be the same cut and size. There are girls in various states of getting changed, all fitting themselves into the dresses. Some of the girls are gathered by a mirror, applying blush and combing their hair. Some of them are talking quietly. I watch as they slip on these cream-colored three-inch heels.

Nadine notices me and claps her hands.

“Hey, listen up, everyone,” she says. “New girl’s called Aurora... a.k.a. Rory... a.k.a. not Princess Aurora. Be nice.”

The girls look up at me.

A moment later, they turn back to what they were doing. All that is, save for a blonde girl with lips that seem too small for her face, just like Betty Boop. Her eyes linger on me, and I can’t tell if she’s glaring or if that’s how she normally looks.

“Hey,” I greet.

The blonde girl turns away.

Nadine heads over to me. She pats me on the shoulder. “I know: feel the love.”

I don’t know what to say. It’s been a while since I’ve been around so many girls my age. In fact, after my mom pulled me out of the seventh grade, I was homeschooled for the rest of my teens. Homeschooled under a very specific teaching program: Keep Aurora inside the house at all costs.

The last time I was around this number of girls, I was eleven years old, surrounded by school friends. We'd watched American Idol and eaten pizza.

"What's everyone doing?" I mutter.

"What's it look like?" says Nadine. "We're getting ready. Hurry."

"Ready? For what?" I ask.

"The lessons," says Nadine. She's wearing one of the dresses, but it's loose at the back. She looks around the room and then picks up a dress. She says, "Here. I think this is your size."

The blonde girl snorts, then says, "Don't be stupid, they're all the same size. We're *all* the same size. We're all the same height, weight... the only things that are different are our names and colors. Hell, we could've all come from the same Mattel factory." She looks at me through the reflection. "Well, except for the new girl."

She's right. All the girls are around the same height and build. Except for me. I've always been tall for a girl, but it's more than that. These girls are gorgeous. Not

just pretty or beautiful, but *gorgeous*. Not a single mole, pimple, freckle, or crooked nose. I'm the only one with a few moles and imperfect teeth.

Nadine raises an eyebrow. She says, "Are you sure that we're *all* still the same size, Heidi?" She points at the back of Heidi's dress, where loose threads betray a makeshift retailoring job. One designed to widen the outfit's waistline.

Heidi reddens but turns away. "Whatever," she mutters.

Nadine turns to look at me. She smiles and hands me the dress. "Try it on."

I strip down to my undergarments, then put the dress on, trying not to think of the other girls watching me. I have no idea how large the dress is; or for that matter, if it will even fit. I've always been slender, but in a gangly, tomboy kind of way.

The dress gets tight as I pull it up, but I hold my breath.

It fits like a glove and I take a moment to study it. The peach outfit is a cocktail dress made of satin. It has

a high neckline and a tulle skirt. It feels soft. So soft that you get the feeling it might tear if you sit wrongly. The skirt has a rose pattern sewn in gold thread. Nadine hands me a tiny gold belt, and I watch the girls put theirs on. I follow them and adjust it so that the clasp—a gold leaf—is right at the front.

My gaze lowers to my boots. They clash with the dress, but I decline to swap them for a pair of high heels.

I study the girls around me, and they look like modern-day princesses. Then, I stare at my reflection and frown. I look so awkward in this dress. The other girls' skirts come down just below their knees, but mine lines up in the middle of my kneecaps. All at once, my dress looks too small and too big.

Great...

I hear someone snicker, but let Nadine pull me to the far wall. Here, I see several makeup tables with mirrors. We sit down behind one of them, and around us, other girls are applying makeup. Nadine turns her

back to me and says, “My zipper’s stuck. Help me get it up.”

I start to pull up the zipper when I notice a series of cuts that crisscross along her back like the straps of a corset. I freeze and she goes quiet. I wonder how she got those cuts...

“Nadine...” I begin.

Her head shifts so that her eyes don’t meet mine in the mirror. She shrugs. “Accident with a jet ski.”

“Right,” I reply as I zip her up. I turn around and she does my zipper. I add quietly, “Do you come up with new explanations all the time?”

Nadine shrugs again. “I like to mix things up.” She brushes away the creases in her skirt and I wonder what her thighs look like. Are they also crisscrossed?

Most of the other girls have left, but Nadine begins applying blush to her face using a small brush. I pick up a similar brush from the table and test it on my palm. Back home, I used eyeliner quite regularly. Lip-gloss and lipstick too. But blush? Well, I can’t

remember the last time I went to a makeup department.

“Err...” I begin.

Nadine pauses as she stares at me. “Fashion isn’t a big deal to you, is it?”

“Not really, I suppose,” I reply. Which is true.

Back on earth, I was never too fussed about makeup, which I guess was because I didn’t go out very often. Well, save for that brief period of time when Jai was living next door. Back then, we hung out every afternoon. And he seemed to like me just the way I was. Or at least, I think he did.

“Well, you’ll have to learn how to style yourself,” says Nadine.

She puts down her makeup brush, then pulls over a small lacquered box. Inside it are several compartments with different colored powders. She dabs the brush in some pink powder, then applies this to my face. A moment later she says, “Bah. This blush has gone stale.”

She opens a drawer and pulls out a glass jar full of butterflies. Dead ones. Nadine reaches in to pull out a pink one. She gets out a tiny brush and uses it to flake off some of the butterfly's wing pigments onto the table.

She dabs her makeup brush into the pigments, and I stare in disgust. I look below the table and realize that the floor is full of wing flecks. "It's terrible to capture butterflies," I tell her. "Is this all you have for makeup?"

She smirks and says, "Well, we don't get any Avon ladies in purgatory." She applies some blush to my face.

"You think this place is purgatory?"

Nadine shrugs. "Well, it might as well be."

Now it's me who snorts. "Really? I thought purgatory was supposed to be full of flames, monsters, and screaming souls. Not some city that ghosts decide to migrate to."

Nadine pauses. "Evidently you haven't seen *all* of Palladino."

I raise an eyebrow. “Nadine?”

“Shh... shut up so I can apply some gloss,” she says. She takes some of the butterfly powder and uses her finger to mix it with a bit of clear gel from a bottle. She applies this shiny stuff to my lips. The gel is sticky, but I don’t want to know where it came from. In fact, I don’t think I want to know what Nadine meant by “all of Palladino.”

She applies gloss to her lips. She combs her hair and I do the same. But halfway through, I peer out the window and see Lady Cavendish floating through the air. The train of her dress spills out behind her, resembling the tail feathers of a bird of paradise. I frown and say, “Earlier on... you said that ghosts aren’t that different from humans. What did you mean by that?”

Nadine shrugs. “Well, they’re not like the ghosts you read about as a child. They cannot turn invisible and they can’t fly through walls or anything. They’re solid like you and me. They’re strong and fast and they live forever... usually.”

“Usually?”

She turns around to see if anyone else is still in the room. A moment later, she heads over to close a door, then hurries back and says, “Well, usually. But they can be killed. I mean, dematerialized.”

“Dematerialized?”

She opens a drawer to pull out a hairpin. She takes the sharp end and lifts the hem of her skirt. She pokes the pin through the cloth and smiles. “A ghost can be destroyed if you strike him or her right through the heart. Or at least, the place where they once had a heart. Do that... and their entire being—their very soul—is unmade. No afterlife or anything.”

I pause. “So even in ‘death,’ the ghosts of Palladino can never leave.”

She nods. “And neither can we.” She lowers her voice and says, “So I’d suggest that you try to fit in... before Lady Cavendish decides that it’s too much trouble bringing in a new girl this close to the Unveiling.”

There it is again, another mention of an ‘Unveiling.’

“What do you mean by—?”

“The Unveiling is when the girls—those who are eighteen or older—are put up for auction before all the Ruling Lords.”

“An auction?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says. “But of course, one has to pass several tests to be worthy of the opportunity.”

“An auction?” I repeat. “Now wait... hold on one moment!”

A bell rings and Nadine gets to her feet. She opens the door and runs outside. “Come on,” she says.

“Hurry!”

The Lessons

Nadine guides me down several corridors, and I wonder how the towered castle can hold so many long passages. It's like magic. But eventually, we get to a hall. Other girls are already waiting here, standing straight with their hands clasped behind them. They're all standing against a wall, and they all look gorgeous. All of them have beautiful locks that gleam in the light, unlike me with my messy hair.

Nadine and I head over to them, and I try to mimic their posture. Through the corner of my eye, I see a door on the far side. I hear a creak and turn.

The door opens and the girls walk into the room beyond. I follow them in, and see Lorien floating inside. All around me are wooden walls with a mural of cherry blossoms. The walls here have lamps, and the high ceiling is covered with sprays of real cherry blossoms.

But that's not all. Ropes dangle from the ceiling, and these ropes hold up a series of walkways. All the walkways are narrow, connected at the ends to form a square circuit. A rickety path that hangs ten feet off the ground. None of the walkways have railings, and I realize that each walkway is made up of bamboo reeds that have been tied together.

Whoa...

What is this place?

“Ladies,” says Madam Lorien. “It is time for your practice to begin.”

One by one, the girls head to the corner where a bench can be seen. On this bench are two dozen pairs of shoes. All of which are made of glass.

The girls around me take off their satin heels and put them in a corner before heading toward the glass shoes. I watch Nadine pick out a pair for herself. She hands another set to me.

They're close-toed and made of delicate crystal. The front of my pair is decorated with tiny diamonds, and the heels are six inches high.

I swallow an invisible lump.

“You’re kidding me,” I say. I’ve never actually worn a pair of high heels before. Not unless you count trying on mom’s old heels when I was a kid. “Lordy...” I mutter.

Nadine slips hers on and clicks her heels to create a crystal chime. She gives me a nudge and says, “Hurry up, Cinderella. Put them on.”

I turn and find that the other girls have put theirs on.

“I’ll pass,” I say.

“I don’t have time for this nonsense,” says Lorien. “Put them on.”

I put the shoes down and stare at the bamboo. It sways a little, and my eyes widen. No. That path would be hard enough in boots, let alone heels. “No,” I say. Plus, I remember what Nadine said about Lorien taking away possessions—and the last thing I want is to lose my Timberlands.

Lorien cocks an eyebrow. “What did you say?”

The girls stare at me as if I’ve gone mad.

“Apologize,” Nadine whispers. “Now.”

I get the feeling that she’s more afraid of what could happen to the other girls than what could happen to me.

A part of me wants to apologize, but looking ahead and thinking of what’s happened, I feel a spike of anger. “I’d prefer not to,” I reply. What I suppose is a response to not only the request to remove my boots, but also the request to apologize.

Lorien floats closer and it takes all my strength not to look away.

But before I can reconsider, she raises an eyebrow and says, “Fine. As you wish.” A sneer passes over her face before she looks at the others. “Assume your positions. It is time to begin our practice.”

“Yes Madam,” the other girls chorus. They line up behind a ladder that hangs off one of the walkways. That’s when Lorien waves forward the first girl: Heidi.

“Begin, Heidi,” she says.

The girl climbs up the ladder. She stands up on a walkway, and the bamboo path dips a little. For a

moment I wonder if the entire structure will tip to the side and cast her off. But then, everything settles.

Without any prompting, Heidi starts walking across the bamboo path. And though I'd expected some fiery runway strut, all I see is a gentle glide. She might as well be a floating ghost. Each foot barely stirs the bamboo as she moves expertly, balancing the fine heel and point of each shoe on the rounded reeds. All the while, pink petals drift down around her.

The hanging circuit barely sways from side to side. She's amazing. Well, at least that's my opinion.

"Getting rusty," I hear Lorien mutter.

Heidi continues around the path until she comes back to the start. Her face reddens a bit.

"Glide," Lorien urges Heidi. "To perfect your walk, you will need to drift like a thought. Move like a dream given substance."

Heidi does another round and Lorien does more critiquing than instructing. Finally, though, the ghost tells her to come down, and as Heidi does so, I watch

her legs shake. I turn to Nadine and whisper, “What happens when you fall?”

Nadine raises an eyebrow. “You don’t want to know.”

She goes next and the second she touches the ‘runway’, she becomes a different person. She’s no longer some jaded young woman; instead, she’s a vision of grace. A serene beauty, like something from a classical painting. She’s not even looking at the bamboo as she walks over it, and she moves just fast enough to send her skirt rippling.

In a few turns, Nadine is back at the start.

She stands still and stares straight ahead. She smiles faintly, and I wonder if she’s lost in a daydream. What is she thinking about?

“Flawless, as usual,” says Lorien. She floats up to Nadine’s eye level and brushes back the girl’s hair.

“Let’s just hope that the third time’s the charm, eh?”

Nadine’s smile fades. “Yes, Madam Lorien.”

She goes down the ladder, gets to the bottom, and turns to see me watching her. That’s when she shoots

me a glare. The sort of look that says *What the hell are you staring at?*

I look away and muse that my homeschool education with a hermit mother has probably saved me from thousands of these looks. When I look back, I see Nadine move to the back of the room. She takes off her glass slippers. They've left a pink indentation around both her feet. For a brief second, I see the skin of her thighs. They're covered with crisscrosses of scars.

I feel sick when I think of how the scars might've come to be.

I have a theory that isn't pleasant.

I watch the other girls take turns to walk the runway. None of them fall, but several come close to doing so. Still, they never look awkward. Each of them always manages to turn a misstep into a beautiful pose, making me wonder how long they've been doing this. Perhaps they were all ballerinas in a past life.

I wonder if my time on earth has also become a *past life*.

A voice breaks through my thoughts: “Well, Miss Aurora... care to show us your skills?”

I look up to see Madam Lorien staring at me. Something in her tone tells me this isn't a request. “Do show us how it's done,” she adds.

I gulp but do not want to give her the satisfaction of seeing my fear. Alas, I'm unable to hold her stare for as long as I would like. “Just a moment,” I tell her before crouching down. I pretend to adjust my laces, but all I'm doing is stalling.

You can do this, Rory. It's not rocket science.

I head for the ladder and climb up. This part is simple enough. But once I step on the reeds, everything dips a little. I stretch out my arms and the walkways steady. Below me, each walkway is made up of bamboo reeds that have been tied together with raffia. Just like some sort of raft.

I take a step forward and my boots press against multiple reeds. I wonder if it was a good idea to keep my boots on, for the entire structure wobbles.

Well, that's what I tell myself is happening. Walking on the bamboo, I find myself thinking that everything else is wobbling instead. The room seems to sway. I do my best to walk with grace, but my hands rush out to stabilize me.

"Don't stop! Keep moving," says Lorien.

I didn't expect an intro lesson from Lorien, but I'm surprised that she expects me to be at the same skill level as the other girls.

"Keep moving!" she repeats.

Fine. I do as she asks but place my hands on my hips to maintain some balance.

"No, no, no!" she huffs. "Hands off your hips. You're a lady of grace. Your hands should flow. You should feel the reeds under your feet. Learn to balance the weight of your body on the points of your shoes."

Easier said than done. It's hard to have that sensitivity with my Timberlands on.

Still, I try to do as she asks but nearly end up falling.

Heidi snorts, along with some other girls. As I do a pass around the runway, I watch Nadine raise a thumb

in encouragement. Her wince though undermines the effect.

Lorien simply calls out, “No! Don’t stomp. You’re not an elephant. You’re a lady. A young lady who has to be the most radiant, rarefied gem at the Unveiling.”

I pause to get my balance. “I’m trying... I just—”

“Stop trying and just do as you’re told. Walk with grace.”

I glare but do as she asks.

Slowly, I maintain a bit more balance, but the entire path shakes even more. Lorien continues to berate me, but I do my best to keep going. All the while, girls begin to laugh softly. I carry on around the path, but Lorien doesn’t ask me to stop. Soon I feel lightheaded. The petals keep raining down on the walkways, and they become a sappy pulp beneath my boots. The bamboo gets slippery.

I begin to lose focus, and find it hard to hear Lorien.

My foot slides over a bit of sap and my body twists. I crash onto a walkway and cry out. But when I try to stand up, my body rolls off the bamboo... and slams

down against the floor. My hands and knees stretched out automatically to break my fall, and now it feels like they're on fire.

Nadine comes over and says, "Rory? Are you okay?"

Everything passes in a blur as I look down to find my dress stained with sap. Lorien is staring down at me.

I thought she'd be livid, but all she does is shake her head.

"It was pointless bringing in a new girl at this stage. What will be, will be."

She claps her hands and says, "The lesson is over."

With that, she leaves the room.

What will be... will be?

Before I can dwell on this, we girls are ferried aside by a ghost ballerina. We are ushered into a dining hall with a marble floor and redwood walls. The windows here are made of pink glass. In the center of the room are two long tables. Each table is bordered by wooden chairs with backrests carved into the shape of giant leaves.

Nadine sits down on one of the chairs, and I sit beside her. All the girls get settled, and each of us sits before a plate with four tiny sandwiches. Each sandwich has the shape of a rose. The girls start eating, and I notice that we each have a crystal glass filled with a pink drink.

I take a sip of it. It tastes floral.

Rose water, I guess.

I lift a sandwich, then peel off the top bit of bread to see slices of cucumber atop a thin layer of butter. I use my hands to raise this sandwich to my mouth, but before I can take a bite, Nadine clears her throat. I look around me as all the girls come to a halt. All of them are in the middle of using their cutlery to dice up a sandwich. They stare at me in puzzlement.

I put down my sandwich.

“Oh-kaay,” I whisper as I pick up my cutlery. I use them to cut up my lunch.

The girls continue to eat and chatter fills the room. What fills my mouth, however, is the blandest

sandwich I've ever eaten. I'm guessing that this meal has between ten to twenty calories at most.

"Is this model boot camp?" I ask.

"Things could be worse," says Nadine.

"Right," I mutter.

Nadine turns to look at me. "I'm serious. Things could be worse," she adds. "Have you stopped to think that maybe you might actually be interested in—"

"In being a consort to a ghost?" I say with a snort.

"If you're lucky enough to attract one of the kinder lords, you might actually enjoy life in a castle. The wonders, the magic..."

"I'm sorry, but it's not exactly my lifelong dream to be a supernatural hooker."

"Is that what you think this is?" says Nadine.

"You tell me," I say.

"They don't want us for our bodies." She pauses.

"They want us for our minds."

"Oh, well, that's fine then," I reply dryly, foregoing the cutlery to simply pop the rest of a sandwich into my mouth.

“No, it’s not fine,” says another girl. She has glossy dark eyes and burnished skin.

“Rory, this is Lakshmi,” says Nadine. “She’s from Bombay.”

“It hasn’t been called Bombay for years, fool,” says Lakshmi. “It’s—”

“It’s now Mumbai,” I add.

Lakshmi nods approvingly. “Correct. You know more than most girls.” She pauses, then says, “But you know nothing about this place. What the Ruling Lords do is not ‘fine.’ The things they want from us are the things we must never give. Everything that makes us human: our memories, our thoughts...” She looks away before adding, “I hear that they even want our dreams.”

I look to Nadine, but she does not reply.

“What do you mean?” I ask Lakshmi.

Lorien enters and both girls mutter: “Never mind.”

The lunch ends a moment later, but I wonder what Lakshmi meant. How could a ghost steal your dreams?

The hours pass in a blur as I take part in a variety of lessons, from poetry and diction to calligraphy and dance. There's a mini lesson on how to hold a fan. (Yes, there is a wrong way to hold one.) And I start to wonder if there's a lesson devoted to the correct method of fainting on a couch.

I sway on my feet from the lack of proper food. But the most interesting lesson comes last.

In the late afternoon, all of us are ushered to another door. This one is carved with a long squiggle, like a curl of smoke. A ghost ballerina pushes it open and walks off.

What's inside is bizarre. *Really* bizarre.

Madam Hardy

The chamber walls have shelves full of glass bottles and vials, and each vessel holds a different type of colored dust. Lamps and teacups hang from the ceiling via strings and hooks. All the girls sit down on benches behind rectangular tables, and in front of each girl is a steaming kettle.

A woman enters the lamplight.

Her blonde hair is coiffed into a mass of curls. She is wearing a frilly dress full of ruffles and pleats—a dress that could pass for a Marie Antoinette Halloween costume. Her face is pale and a small heart-shaped diamond rests under her right eye. Her lips are white.

When I stare below her, a shiver passes through me. She is floating above the ground.

“What is this place?” I whisper.

“A place of magic,” says Lakshmi.

The ghost before us claps her hands and all the girls straighten up. "Time to begin your daily practice," she says. "Now that we are coming close to the Unveiling, you girls know all that you need to know. With this in mind, you have free reign with ingredients. Dazzle me with your creations."

"Yes, Madam Hardy," the girls chorus.

The girls head to the middle of the room, over to the teacups. Madam Hardy gazes at me, but doesn't say a word. Just like Lorien, Hardy doesn't seem interested in teaching newcomers the basics. I guess I'll have to catch up on my own.

I follow Nadine and ask her what's going on. She tells me to follow her and do what she does. She grabs a ceramic teacup with a rose print. I find a similar cup, one with a motif of carnations. Nadine goes over to the shelves, picks a few bottles and vials, and heads back.

At the table, she opens a bottle, reaches in to take a pinch of pink powder, and sprinkles it into her cup. She opens another one and does the same, this time adding

a green powder. I open a vial and give a red powder a sniff. It's odorless.

“Nadine?”

She takes some of the red powder and puts it in her teacup. She uses a silver spoon to stir the ingredients into a cinnamon-colored mix. “This looks good,” she whispers. She dips her pinkie finger into the mix, then touches her finger to her tongue. She closes her eyes for a moment, then adds, “Yes, it's a good mix.”

I look around and discover that all the girls are mixing colored powder in their own cups, all of them creating something different.

“I don't get it,” I say. “What is this?”

Nadine doesn't reply but adds a bit more red powder. She lifts a kettle by its wooden handle. I expected to see a heating element under it, but there isn't one. It must be magic that keeps the water hot. Nadine pours the water into her cup, and her mix dissolves into a brown tea. She gives it a sniff, then shakes her head.

“Nadine, you are brilliant,” she whispers.

I raise an eyebrow, and she hands me the cup. I lift the cup, ready to drink its tea, until Nadine practically shrieks. "Wait!" All the girls look at us, and Nadine says. "You never drink a Dust Tea! You merely inhale its vapors. Otherwise, you could be totally... well, you don't want to know what happens. Trust me."

I look up to see Madam Hardy sneer at me.

I frown, but give the tea a sniff.

It smells like nothing I've ever encountered. In fact, it doesn't really have a smell. Instead, it's as if the tea holds a feeling inside it. An emotion. Or rather, something that draws out an emotion in me. I can't describe it properly, but I feel delirious.

And not just any sort of delirium... I feel a kind of happiness that's tinged with nervousness and anxiety. I'm literally sick to my stomach with happiness.

A moment later, something odd happens...

In my mind, I jump back to a memory.

I'm sixteen again.

I'm standing next to my bedroom window, peering through my gauzy curtains, and looking into the house next door. Specifically, through a window at a boy my age. He's lying on his bed, and he's wearing jeans and a scruffy tee. His hair is dark brown and unruly, and he's using a large pair of headphones. His eyes are closed, and I have no idea what he's singing along to.

But he seems lost in his own world.

His desk has schoolbooks, a computer, and this miniature Riverside trolley bus. The sort of souvenir that tourists get before leaving Avondale.

I wonder what his life is like.

His family moved here only a few weeks ago, but he's probably made lots of friends. Guys who like that he's not afraid to make jokes about himself. Girls who like his easy-going charm, and out of them, a girlfriend who leaves him cute notes in his jacket. I've seen his second-hand Kombi van. It's got a surfboard strapped above it, so he's probably a sports nut. Maybe he's got a job at a surf store in Jacksonville Beach. I guess he goes there after school.

He looks like someone with a J name. Maybe a Jackson or a James.

I lean forward.

Suddenly, he stares out of his window. He slides the headphones off, and they hang around his neck. That's when he looks at me and says, "You know, if you like spying on me, you should probably get curtains that aren't so see-through."

I freeze. Part of me wants to duck and never show my face here again. But as I watch him cross his arms and smirk, I feel a bit ticked off.

"What makes you think I was staring at you?" I call out.

"Well..." he begins.

I pull open the curtains to look at him. "I was actually looking at my sunflowers."

"What were you looking for?" he asks.

"I..." My mind goes blank. Then, something I read in a book gets spun around in my head, mixed in with nerves, and I reply, "I was uh, looking for the... time."

"Pardon?"

“Sunflowers will twist around in search of light, and if you grow them in the right place, they can serve as accurate sundials.”

After I say those words, I find myself reddening.

Oh, geez. Could you possibly have thought of something dumber to say, Rory?

“That’s...” he begins.

“That’s science,” I reply.

Oh dear God, I think to myself. Shut up, Rory.

Please... stop talking.

The guy chuckles.

I frown. “What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing... it’s just odd. You’re a botanist, but clearly not an environmentalist.”

“Excuse me?”

He leans out his window and I know he’s staring at my mom’s Christmas lights. “You leave your lights on from night to morning. Now that’s wasteful. Have you ever wondered how many trees get burnt to generate the electricity you waste?”

I feel my nerves vanish.

“They don’t burn trees in Jacksonville. We use fossil fuels, dumbo.”

“Same thing,” he says.

“No, it’s not.”

My eyes drift to the miniature trolley bus on his desk. It’s modeled after the trolley buses here, which are themselves made to look like cable cars. That’s when I add, “It’s not the same thing at all. It’s just like how a trolley bus shaped like a cable car... will never be a cable car. No matter how many fools think so.”

He shakes his head with a laugh. “You really don’t...”

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing,” he says.

“Don’t ‘nothing’ me,” I tell him. “What were you going to ask?”

He pauses. “I wasn’t going to ask anything. I just wanted to share an observation.”

“And that observation is...?”

He shrugs. “That you don’t like Jacksonville, do you?”

“What makes you say that?” I ask.

“Well, you don’t seem to be settling in very well.”

How would you know? You just got here, I muse.

That makes me snort. “I’ve been living here since I was nine.”

“*Living* is not the same as *settling*,” he says. “In fact, on a scale of settledness, you’d probably fall into the category of *highly unsettled*.” He gestures at the plastic reindeer and chuckles.

I blush as I look up at the reindeer. “You don’t know me.”

You don’t know the half of it.

“No,” he tells me. “But you always look like you want to be somewhere else.”

He actually sounds serious, and that gives me pause. But he’s wrong. I don’t wish to be somewhere else. Sometimes, I feel like I want to be *someone* else.

I look at him and wonder what he’d say if I said that. Would he understand those words? Do I really understand them? But a moment later, it hits me that he said the word ‘always.’

You always look like you want to be somewhere else.

Has he been watching me?

I shake my head and say, "I thought *I* was the one doing the watching?"

He smiles. "So you *were* watching me."

I redden some more, but before I can reply, he says, "How about I show you the sights in Avondale?"

"Seen them all," I reply.

"All of them?" he asks. "The King Street District? The angel in Memorial Park? ...The crazy guy down the street who taxidermies roadkill?"

"That crazy guy is Mister McClennan," I tell him.

"And he used to be my babysitter."

"Seriously?"

"He gave me a stuffed animal for my tenth birthday. And by stuffed animal, I really mean a *stuffed animal*."

Trolley boy smiles, and for some reason, I find myself smiling back. Just a little.

I don't know why though. Part of me thinks that he's just trying to get under my skin. And yet, another

part of me just wants to keep talking to him. And for a moment everything feels kind of... nice.

That's when I get a sick feeling that I'm going to ruin it all. "Thanks for the offer... but maybe another time," I tell him. All I want is to turn away and close my window before I do something to spoil it all.

But before I can do that, he says, "I'm Jai, by the way."

A J name. I wasn't far off.

"Rory," I reply.

"Nice to meet you, Rory."

We wait in silence, before I nod back and say.

"Goodnight, Jai."

"Goodnight," he says. But before he closes his window, he adds, "Hey... if you ever change your mind, let me know. I'd be happy to show you around town. In fact, I'd like that very much."

He smiles and I get a fuzzy feeling in my chest. Like it's full of warm air.

"All right," I reply.

With that, I turn away from the window, close the curtains, and crash onto my bed.

Just like that, I feel like I'm floating.



I lower the teacup and shudder. Everyone is staring at me, and I feel embarrassed that what I felt that day is now plastered on my face for everyone to see. I try to feign indifference, but I know that no one believes it. “Neat,” I mumble and the others go back to their brewing. “What’s this tea for?”

Nadine says, “The Ruling Lords. When they buy a human companion, we are expected to entertain them... and remind them of what it felt like to be alive.”

“When they buy a human?” I repeat.

Nadine ignores that and says, “Many of the Ruling Lords have forgotten what it means to really *feel*. We remind them.”

“With tea?”

“Among other things.”

Madam Hardy floats by and stares at us. “Dust Alchemy is a fine art. Focus!”

I nod and focus back on my teacup. “Yes, Madam Hardy.”

I’m about to open another bottle when Madam Hardy looms over me. “I have heard some colorful stories about you, Aurora. But I’ll have you know that I brook no disobedience in my class.” She pauses and all I do is stare up, my face expressionless.

“I know all about girls like you. You think you’re tough because you don’t care about anything or anyone, but deep down, all you are is a naïve brat. One who probably got exactly what she wanted at every stage in her life. But now, all of that is gone.” She tips her head to the side. “And if there’s one thing I can

smell, it's the stench of entitlement. You reek of it, my dear.”

I feel my cheeks go warm.

You don't know anything about me, I want to shout out. But as she turns, I take in a deep breath. It's not worth causing a scene, I tell myself. Let her think what she wants. I have to focus on surviving. I have to find a way to escape. No matter what the demon told me, there *has* to be a way out.

At last I reply, “Of course, Madam Hardy.”

She heads to the front. I do my best to mimic Nadine's recipe, taking a pinch from all the bottles she used. I follow what she did, and then give my tea a sniff. Somehow, it's not as potent as hers is, but it seems good enough. I decide to try something else and I head back to the teacup area. I choose a white cup.

I go to the shelves and Nadine shows me how to find out which flavor is which. She pokes a finger into one of the bottles and dabs some dust onto her finger. She rubs off most of it, until only a trace of it lingers on her skin. After this, she lifts her finger to her tongue to

taste the powder. I do the same thing, and I taste something different from each bottle I examine. Each bottle's powder holds a different emotion, from anger to anxiety, and fear to happiness.

The smaller the bottle or vial, the more specific an emotion I find. For example, a bottle with white dust contains a feeling of nervous optimism. The buzz you get when you're opening a report card.

I grab some bottles and head back to the table.

For a while I lose track of all that's going on around me. I forget about the danger and wrongness of Palladino as I examine each powder. "What are we supposed to make? What are we supposed to go for?" I ask.

Nadine says, "Real emotions."

I frown. "Aren't the powders already emotions?"

She shakes her head. "They can make you feel emotions, but the powders are merely raw ingredients. Real emotions are highly detailed mixes. In order to make something realistic, you're going to have to use a variety of powders. You're going to have to mix and

blend your ingredients to give your tea realism and shading.”

“So it’s like painting a picture?” I ask.

Her eyes light up. “Correct. Think of a memory that meant something to you, and do your best to replicate how you felt during that moment.” She pauses before adding, “Just remember: the only thing that Hardy requires from each student is genuine emotion. It doesn’t matter what you try to capture, as long as it’s authentic.”

I pause as I struggle to think of something that I’d like to see again.

Something good.

It takes me a moment, but I remember something...

In my mind’s eye, I think back to a memory from when I was sixteen.

Jai and I are wandering around Downtown Jacksonville when it starts to rain. A moment later, Jai suggests that we catch a Riverside trolley bus. (The ones dressed up

to look like retro cable cars.) As usual, he says that they remind him of his childhood in San Francisco.

“The ones here are just buses,” I tease him. “Heck, they’re not even real trolley buses.”

“So?” he says with a smile. “They’re whatever you want them to be.”

I chuckle. “You’re odd, you know that?”

However, when we reach a bus stop, both of us realize we’re out of coins. I feel frazzled, but Jai merely laughs and heads for a crowd of tourists.

“Hey, where are you going?” I ask.

“I have an idea that might help us snag some coins,” he says.

I watch him slip through the crowd, and I get the impression that he’s about to do something crazy. For if there’s one thing that I’ve learnt about him, it’s that Jai likes to think that he can get away with anything. And maybe he can. Some people are just like that.

“Tell me this isn’t something illegal,” I call out.

He doesn’t reply, but we break through the crowd to find ourselves in a large park. Amid the greenery, a

ring of palm trees encircles a tiled area. We enter this area to see a circular fountain with jets of water.

Sprays that arc everywhere.

The Friendship Fountain.

“Sightseeing?” I ask.

The rain starts to intensify, and the sun becomes a blur.

Jai takes off his jacket and shoes, then climbs up the metal rail.

“Hey! What are you doing?” I call out. “This isn’t a swimming pool.”

He halts and sits upon the rail. He smiles at me, and that smile makes me forget about the cold. It’s the sort of smile that makes him look unpredictable. Up for anything. “Do you know anything about this fountain?” he asks.

I shrug. “Yeah. It was made in the sixties. I think it used to be the world’s tallest fountain several decades ago... back when it would spout a hundred feet of water.”

Jai laughs. “No, Miss Britannica. I wasn’t looking for the bookworm version.”

I fold my arms. “I’m not a bookworm—”

“They say it’s magical. You throw a coin in and make a wish, and whatever you wish for happens while you’re near the fountain.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You’re not thinking about stealing coins from a fountain, are you?”

“Why not?”

Jai climbs over the rail and stands in the fountain. The water comes up to his knees, and I shake my head. “You’re crazy!” I tell him. “You’ll be soaked.”

He waves around him and says, “Hey, can’t be more wet than right now.”

He watches me, and I find myself laughing with him.

A moment later, I take off my shoes. I’m wearing a t-shirt and jeans but I climb in after him. The water is icy cold, but I manage to get my footing. Just like that, Jai grabs my hand and pulls me further into the fountain. We get sprayed by the jets, and the water smells of

chlorine. But he doesn't take his eyes off me. He doesn't let go.

"I thought we were looking for coins?" I tell him.

"Already found some," he replies, holding out his other hand. There are four coins in his palm, and I wonder if they've been in his pocket all along. All we need is two dollars to get back to Avondale, so he pockets two coins and hands me one of the remaining ones. "Make a wish," he says.

I'm about to reply when he throws his coin into the center of the fountain, where it disappears into a giant hill of water. Jai turns to look at me, and suddenly, I wish time would stand still, so we could stay here forever. I squeeze my coin, then throw it into the water.

Neither of us says a word, but I step closer to him.

My foot slips, and for a moment, I think I'm going to gash my head on one of the sharp spouts in the fountain. But then, Jai reaches out and pulls me back. We both stagger to our knees, and he laughs.

He kisses me.



I leave this memory and find myself wishing that I had a dollar coin. For a moment, I still believe in wishes. But then, my eyes adjust to the dimness of Madam Hardy's chamber, and I'm reminded of reality. I get up and sigh.

A few minutes pass as I go to the shelves and pick out ingredients. I use a wooden board shaped like a waffle; it has all sorts of tiny depressions and I load each of these with different powders. I head back to my table and Madam Hardy sees my 'palette' and snorts, "Are you planning on conjuring up an Opera?"

She fans herself with her stubby fingers. Her head is held so high that I wonder if she can even see me.

"No, Madam," I reply.

She wanders off and I tell myself to focus.

I know almost nothing about Dust Alchemy, but if there's one thing I excel in, it's detail work. I'm the sort of girl who loves to piece together details into a whole, and in some ways, this doesn't seem too different from cake decorating.

I focus on that moment with Jai. I think of all that was buzzing through my head while I was in that fountain. As I do this, I put different powders in my teacup. Powders that shimmer.

No girl pours hot water into her cup, but each girl stirs a silver spoon in her mixture before tasting the back of her spoon. I do this from time to time to check what I've made, and slowly, the flavor I've created begins to dovetail with the emotions I felt.

At last, I'm finished.

I sit back and pour hot water into my cup.

When I do so, the scent I encounter takes me back to the fountain.

When I leave the world of memory, my cheeks feel warm. I look down to find that I've bent the handle of

my spoon. I swallow. Right now, all I want is to jump back into that memory.

Alas, Madam Hardy says, “All right, girls. Bring forward your mixes and let me see what you’ve been up to.”

The girls nod and pour hot water into their cups. They head forward, and the odors from the different teas create this miasma of longing, euphoria, and more often than not, sadness. It’s a psychotic perfume that I try not to breathe in. I try to get some space, but I end up in the middle of the queue.

I’m taller than most of the girls, so I can just peer over their heads to see Hardy at the front. She nods at a girl. This girl does a curtsy, before giving her cup to Hardy. The ghost gives it a sniff, then nods. “Good work,” she says.

Other girls present their mixes, and Madam Hardy compliments most of them. Occasionally, she pours a girl’s tea into a drain below her, and offers a terse two-word answer: “Too saccharine” or “Too unrealistic” or “Too overblown.”

I begin to feel nervous.

Yet, sniffing my tea, I am sort of confident too. My tea isn't some Hollywood love story. Heck, it isn't even a love story. It's just the memory of a girl who falls for a boy. It's nothing amazing, but it's my life. So it's the realest thing I can come up with.

When it's my turn, she raises an eyebrow at the simple white cup.

I give it to her. She sniffs it and goes quiet. Longer than she did with the other girls.

I feel dizzy as different scents mingle in the air.

At last, Hardy scoffs and pours my tea down the drain. In my head, I see the image of Jai and me slip down the same drain. She doesn't say a word and waves me off. I feel my cheeks redden, but I begin to walk off. Yet, before I get a few steps away, something inside me makes me turn. I bow my head, then look at her. I say softly, "Excuse me, Madam Hardy..."

She looks up and frowns, not expecting me to still be here.

"May I ask what was wrong with my mix?"

She pauses, then says. "What were you going for?"

"I..."

"You obviously had something in mind," she says.

"So what was it? Come on, spit it out."

I look around me and feel mortified about discussing my feelings in front of these strangers. I want to tell Madam Hardy that I was trying to express what it felt like... to connect with someone for the first time in my life. To want to be around someone.

But before anything else, Hardy says, "You wanted to express young love, didn't you?"

My cheeks burn.

She smirks, but I shrug. "Something like that."

She nods. "I thought so." She pauses as she looks into my cup. She dabs a finger into the leftover liquid, then holds this finger to her lower lip. "But do you know what I got, my dear?"

I shake my head.

"Clichés."

I freeze. Of all the things she could have said, this wasn't what I had expected.

“Not just clichés. But the worst sort of Hollywood drivel that young people mistake for love. It makes me feel nauseated,” she tells me. “Methinks you enjoyed far too many love stories back on Earth.”

I frown and she tips her head to the side. “You disagree, young lady?”

“I didn’t base this on a story... or a movie,” I tell her. She raises an eyebrow.

“So, it’s built from a memory?”

I nod.

She hands me the cup and says, “Can you honestly tell me that your memory resembles what’s in this cup?”

I take the cup and sniff what remains. In my mind, I can see no difference between the memory and this magic flavor. I nod.

Her eyes narrow. “Then there’s only one reason why your mix was so dreadful.” She pauses as she floats closer to me. “You’ve never truly been in love.”

My embarrassment turns to anger. A burning anger because I know how I felt, and I know how I still feel.

And I'm angry too that someone could drag me here and then think to know me in a span of seconds.

"Thank you for your time, Madam," I mutter.

I turn around before she says, "Let me guess. There was a boy in that memory. A boy who was around your age. Funny. Sweet. A boy who you never thought would even notice you. Then one day, he did. And the whole world felt different. You felt untouchable, and everything made sense."

I freeze.

"You don't know me," I tell her quietly. And though I'm not shouting, my voice sounds so loud in this chamber.

"Excuse me?"

"You don't know *anything* about me. And none of your magic gifts will ever give you any insight."

"I don't need insights into you," she replies. "I need quality material. Stick to mixing what you truly know. Because you, my dear, wouldn't know love if it hit you on the head."

"Would you?" I ask her.

She stiffens and my heart starts racing. I know I shouldn't have said that, but the words just slipped out. And now, all I can do is stare back.

Hardy clutches her skirt and the velvet crumples. "Enough," she mutters.

All at once, I know I'm right: she has never been in love. Or if she has, it's been a long time since she remembered what it felt like. And suddenly, my anger turns to pity. She's as dry as the powders around her. Just a mix of dust that can never be made real.

It's not worth causing a scene, I remind myself.

I take in a deep breath and tell her quietly, "Apologies, Madam Hardy."

She pauses, then continues to examine the other teas. As she does, I head to the back. And as the other girls take turns to present their work, I gaze upon the shelves. I see a large, dark bottle—one that Nadine told me contained a distillation of fear.

I fantasize about pouring that powder over Madam Hardy just to see how she'd react. Yes, I do pity her. But there's an anger in me that far outweighs that pity.

Without thinking it over, I sneak to the shelves and grab the fear bottle. It's heavy. I pop it open and then pause. "What are you doing?" I whisper to myself, knowing that this will not end well.

Put it back, I tell myself.

Yet, a moment later, I hear Madam Hardy insult Lakshmi, and that's it... I've had enough. Now, all I want is to fight back. I watch Hardy pour Lakshmi's tea into the drain, and this gives me an idea.

There are drain grates all throughout the room, and I have a feeling that they all flow into a shared pool. I head toward a grate near the back of the room. I carefully tip the contents of the black bottle into this grate. I look around, but no one's seen me.

I head back to the queue and everything is fine for a while.

But slowly, Madam Hardy starts behaving strangely. Nadine stares at me. "What?" I mouth at her.

Madam Hardy has stopped sniffing teas. She starts spinning around and whispering to herself. Her eyes go wide and the girls back away from her. I smell the fear

powder as it mingles with water, but like the teas, it's not as potent to a human nose. Still, some of the girls start shaking, and I'm sure the powder is having some effect on them. I hadn't stopped to consider this, and I begin to feel awful. Who knows how strong it is on Hardy?

What will happen to me if Hardy uncovers what I did?

I start to feel uneasy, but I can't tell whether it's the fear powder or the situation.

"No! Stay back!" Hardy whispers to no one. "You are not real! Stay back or I'll... I'll..."

I start to wonder who she's seeing, before she bursts into a banshee shriek.

Madam Hardy rushes to the ceiling and crashes into the hanging teacups. Girls shriek as the cups shatter. All of us hurry out of the room to avoid the debris. And a moment later, Hardy comes shooting out, screaming like a little girl. A second later, she flies off down a corridor.

Around me, some of the girls are panting. Others are weeping.

Inside, I feel bad about what I've done. The other girls are totally freaked, and the room is a mess. What did I just do? Yet, when I think of Madam Hardy spinning around in terror, I feel a tiny spark of something childish. I feel pleased that she got a taste of her own medicine.

I chuckle on the inside.



Lorien rushes over and asks what happened. No one replies, so she floats into the chamber, and presses a switch on the wall. I hear a brief roar, as if a huge stream is passing below the floor. I figure that this must be a system for flushing the 'tea drains.' Soon, Lorien tells us to get inside and clear the mess.

The ghost shouts out orders and girls groan. It's hard work clearing broken cups and putting bottles back on the shelves. And all the while, I start to wonder if all the mess was worth it.

An hour later, the chamber is finally clean. A ghost ballerina ushers us out and we have some free time. Some of the girls use the bathroom, others chat in a corner. But eventually, we're brought back to the dining room for another round of rose water and rose-shaped sandwiches. Girls talk quietly, but Nadine is silent. She stares into the distance.

I keep waiting for her to say something. But she doesn't. I guess she's exhausted, but somehow I get the feeling that something else is on her mind.

Beyond the stained-glass windows, day is setting. Only now do I realize that the windows have illustrations etched into them, all of them inked in pink, red, and gold. I view scenes full of beautiful princesses, girls who could have been Cinderellas or Sleeping Beauties. Yet, there's something eerie about

them. They've all got bows tied around their hands and ribbons around their mouths. All of them are walking over more ribbons. Some of them have their eyes closed. Above them are demons who circle the sky. And oddly enough, I see a demon without wings. He's fallen to the ground.

I turn to Nadine. She's still not talking. In fact, neither is Lakshmi. The latter won't even look at me.

"That was pretty dramatic, wasn't it?" I tell them. Nadine doesn't answer but nods.

I wonder if mood swings are part of her makeup. It occurs to me that my life as a shut-in has made it hard for me to understand girls my age.

Suddenly, she turns around and says, "This is all a joke to you, isn't it?"

"What?"

"Back in the chamber, I watched you dump that stuff in the drain."

I quiet, then shrug. "Fine. So what?"

"So what? You think this is all beneath you, isn't it?"

"I never said that."

“Whatever.”

“Nadine—”

“You cut short an incredibly important lesson... all because you couldn’t take some criticism. Do you know how important that lesson was?” she asks. “We are only days away from the Unveiling, and all of us need to be as prepared as possible for what awaits.”

I pause and feel a knot in my stomach. Never once in that chamber did I even think of the other girls.

“Nadine, I... didn’t think that—”

“Right, you didn’t think. That’s what happened,” she replies, before she picks up her plate and heads over to the other end of the table. Lakshmi joins her, and I’m left sitting on my own.

Nadine was right. I wasn’t thinking.

All I want is to get out. I feel so driven to escape that I don’t stop to think about the other girls. Or for that matter, the possibility that I may not get out.

My eyes settle on the stained glass full of lost girls.



Sometime later, Lorien comes in and tells us that it's time to retire. The girls are ushered back to the holding chamber. This time, there are nightgowns laid out on each bed. The girls take turns to use a nearby bathroom, before they get changed into their nightgowns. Well, except for me.

I simply lie down in bed. I watch as the windows turn black. Without even testing them, I have a feeling that we're locked in. The doors have now shut. The lights go dim as the girls, changed and ready for bed, curl up amid the silk. Some girls whisper among themselves. One girl is shivering, and all I can think of is how damaged they all seem.

That, and how dark it is.

It's been years since I've slept in the dark.

I used to insist on turning off the lights before I went to bed. But mom would always come into my

room and put on a nightlight when she thought I was asleep. She kept doing that, right up until I was seventeen, and it used to drive me nuts.

Still, I always put up with her nuttiness. I could've flaunted her rules, just like any ordinary teenager might've done. Yet, a part of me was always scared that she'd fall apart if I did that. After dad left us, there was no one to look after mom but me, and so I did my best to follow her rules. I did my best to protect her.

I didn't want to see her snap.

But now, everything has changed. Now I understand that it was *she* who was protecting me with her lights and her rules. She was always looking out for me, even when I kicked up a fuss.

I miss the way she looked after me.

Now, she's not anywhere near. Maybe she's not even in her own mind.

And here I am, in the dark.

You'll get out, I tell myself. Tomorrow is a new day, and a new chance to figure things out.

I pull up my sheets and sleep in bed with my boots on. My thoughts circle around mom, then Hardy, and I wonder if the ghost was right. Do I really know what love is? Even that seems uncertain now. But above all these nighttime thoughts, all I want right now is to bake. That's what I do when I can't sleep.

I start imagining that I'm mixing the batter for a cake. An orange torte that I'm going to bake, cool, and then decorate with swirls of frosting. I imagine myself dusting chocolate powder over each creamy peak.

That is, until a hand pokes my shoulder.

I turn to see Nadine looking down at me. Her face is hard to read, but her hair is a dark, beautiful wave. (And it sickens me that even her bed hair is amazing.) "Come here," she tells me, dragging me out of bed.

"Nadine?"

She doesn't reply but turns and shushes me. She pulls me into a wardrobe, and I'm lost in a sea of silk and satin. A moment later, she lifts an oil lamp. She goes to the back of the wardrobe. There, she sets down the lamp, and then lifts away part of the wardrobe's

backing. Behind this lies a dark crevice. She grabs the lamp.

“Follow me,” she says.

She guides me into this crevice and I find myself at the base of a spiral staircase. Everything around me is made of stone. Nadine goes up and I follow her. The air here is musky, and it’s like being in a tomb. “Watch your step,” she says.

I follow her. We go higher and higher and I lose track of time. But abruptly, she stops and I crash into her back. “Shh!” she says before we slow down. She pops open a panel and we tumble out onto a marble floor. I look behind me to see her slide a panel back into place.

Nadine holds up her lamp, and we look around us to see a room full of dollhouses. Above us, the ceiling has a stained-glass window shaped like a rose.

“We’re in Elsa’s chamber,” I whisper.

Nadine says, “I’m sorry for snapping earlier. I forget what it’s like to be new here.”

“How long have you been here?” I ask. She’s never struck me as being much older than the other girls.

“A few years,” she replies. “Longer than most girls.”

I remember what Lorien said to her about the ‘third time being the charm’, and I presume that Nadine has been through two Unveilings.

“You must try harder, Rory,” she adds.

I’m about to reply when she says, “I know what you’re thinking, but you’ll never get out.”

“We’ll see about that,” I reply with a smile.

My smile doesn’t shift her expression. Nadine grabs my hand and leads me to the opposite side of the room. Over there is a door. She opens it and we enter a closet. All it has is a mound of dolls covered in dust. “What are these?” I ask.

“Elsa makes a doll of each girl who enters her castle. The dollhouses outside contain two types of ‘girls’: those who are training to be companions; and those who were bought by a Ruling Lord.”

I think of the hundreds of dolls outside, then look at the ones on the floor.

“And these?” I ask.

“These are the dolls of the girls who never made it,” she says. “The girls who were never good enough.”

“Where did they go?” I ask.

“No one knows,” she replies. “But one thing’s for sure... they never left the castle.”

I hesitate and shake my head. “Then why don’t all the girls band together and figure something out? Maybe we could—”

“What? You mean... like... kill a ghost?” she asks.

I was going to say *overpower them*, but I don’t correct her.

Nadine however goes pale. At last, she looks away and says, “Although it’s possible to kill a ghost in Palladino... there are darker things at play here. You have no idea what would happen to a human if she were to kill a ghost.”

I frown. “What do you mean by that?”

“Never mind,” she says.

“But Nadine—”

“Just drop it,” she snaps. “*Please.*”

Something in her tone unnerves me. For a brief second, she sounds terrified, as if she can picture things that I can't. Making me wonder what exactly she knows.

Still, I don't back down.

"Well, I'm going to find a way out," I tell her. But this time, even I can hear a note of doubt in my voice.

"You don't get it, do you?" says Nadine.

I want to reply, but I look up and notice a skylight above me. A window that's been left open. Nadine starts talking about the other girls who tried to escape Palladino, but I see a blur of motion as a demon passes overhead. Somehow, I have a feeling that this creature was the one who carried me here.

A sound echoes down the hallway. Someone is approaching. I look down, and Nadine rushes out of the doll closet. "Come on," she says. "Let's go."

I look up again at the closet's skylight.

"You go ahead. I'll be along shortly," I tell her.

"Rory!"

"Go," I tell her. "Don't worry."

With that, I gently shove her outside and shut the closet door.

I look around me, and see a chair next to the wall. I push it against the wall and stand on its seat. I see large cracks in the wall that I could use as handholds. Perfect. I'm about to climb when I stop.

I hear Madam Lorien and Lady Cavendish talking.

"She's a waste of time," says Lorien. "I doubt she'll be good enough for the lineup. There's no way she can be ready in a matter of days."

"People will surprise you," says Elsa.

The women are talking about me.

"Bah... the distraction she poses is enough to derail the other girls. I say we do away with her now."

The conversation fades off as they head to another room.

My eyes lower to the dolls below me. I wonder how close my doll is to being put in the reject pile. I have to get out. *Right now.* I climb up the chair, put my feet on its backrest, and grab hold of one of the cracks in the wall. The chair wobbles, but I climb my way up.

I reach the open skylight and pull myself through it.

I taste fresh air as I roll outside and stand up. I'm on a balcony rimmed with neatly trimmed rosebushes. I look around, then freeze when I see a demon floating before me. Just as I thought, he's the same being who brought me to Palladino. I can tell by the predominance of green in his multicolored wings.

He doesn't say a word, so I move over to the edge. I realize the railing here is made from the roses themselves. To lean out too far would cause me to fall from the tower. I gulp but go as close as I can. I call out clearly, "I will do anything to get back. Tell me what I have to do in order for you to take me back."

The demon remains silent.

"Tell me!"

He floats closer. "There is nothing you can say or offer," he says. "It is impossible for me to take you back."

"I don't believe that," I tell him.

He pauses then says, "Then perhaps I have no choice... but to show you."

He lands on the balcony and says, "Hold on to me."

I do as he asks and grab on to his shoulders. We rush toward the sky, and for a moment, the wind almost pulls me back. I hold on tighter. Only when we're thousands of feet above the ground does he halt. He floats in the air and whispers, "Reach up."

"What?"

"Reach up."

I do just that... and my fingers touch a solid barrier. In the sky.

"What you are touching... is the barrier that encircles the entire city of Palladino," he says. "And this barrier separates Palladino from the world of man and the worlds of the afterlife..."

I shiver but slam my hands against the barrier above. It feels like cold steel. I cry out in panic. "No! This can't be right. This can't be real." A border around an entire city?

"Believe what you can feel, human," he says.

"But you..."

“But I am neither a human nor a ghost. My kind may travel in and out of this city. But you are not like me...”

I stop moving, and my head feels heavy. I squeeze my eyes shut, and it's all I can do to block out the city around me. “No,” I whisper to myself again and again. But through it all, I hear him whisper back softly: “I am sorry for bringing you here.”

I hush and look up at him. Though he has no face, I see his head sag.

He lowers me to the balcony above the doll chamber, and I don't know what to say.

I'm trapped...

I push him away and stagger to the side. I crouch and throw up my dinner. For the longest time, all I do is rest on my knees. I start to feel numb inside, as if I've also coughed up all feeling and sensation inside me. I feel drained and hollow. But at last, a hand rests on my shoulder.

I look up to see the demon crouch beside me.

My head spins as I try to figure out what to make of this creature. For a moment, he seems kind and gentle,

and I wonder if he was trying to spare me earlier by hiding the truth about the barrier. And yet, he's the one who brought me here. "Why did you bring me here?" I ask. "Why me? Of all the young women out there... why me?"

I should be angry. But I still feel numb.

"It was my duty," he tells me. "I was given an order by Lady Cavendish to retrieve a girl with a specific aura." He holds out a hand and his palm glows with colors: greens, golds, and dark blues. "A girl with these colors inside her."

"Is that... my aura?"

He nods. "Yes. I was asked to find a girl with this aura. And after I found you... I was compelled by my orders to bring you here."

"You make it sound like you had no choice," I snap, turning away from his touch.

"I don't," he replies. "My kind has served the Ruling Lords and Ruling Ladies for centuries. We do as they say... even if what they ask is wrong."

I look at him. Surprisingly, he does seem remorseful.

He says, "All my life, this has been my purpose: to serve. My kind cannot disobey them. Or else..." He goes quiet as he stares off into the distance.

"Or what?"

He shakes his head, then says, "One of my kind did something wrong ages ago and Lady Cavendish told him to remove his wings. She told him that he could not use anything but his bare hands." He pauses and I feel a shiver. "He spent two days tearing off his wings."

"I..."

"Even if I wanted to help you, I can't," he says.

"Then what am I supposed to do now?" I ask.

"You do what you must," he says. "You stay alive, human. You stay alive, for things can always get worse in this place."

He stands up and extends a hand. As I stare into the distance, I feel less numb and I know that he's right. For now, escaping is not an option. All I can do is try to survive. And to do so, I must work harder. I must become the very thing that I don't want to be:

A companion to a ghost.

I close my eyes and feel sick. Can I even do this? It's been a whole day here and all I've done is throw every challenge. Heck, for a girl who hates princess mythology, I certainly behaved like a princess, didn't I?

"I don't know if I can do this."

"You will," he says, his hand still outstretched.

"How do you know that?"

He shrugs. "Because like me, you too have no choice."

I take his hand and he pulls me to my feet.

He gestures for me to go back below, but I freeze. I look at my outfit: my dress is now covered in dirt, and my belt is missing. But the things that look the most jarring are my boots. They make a mockery of my outfit. I sigh and squat down to untie my boots. I now understand that I have to try harder. And I have to be like the other girls.

"What are you doing?" he asks as I step out of my boots.

"Here," I say, extending my boots to him. "I need you to hide them for me."

He rears back with what I assume is surprise, but I don't relent. "You owe me that much. Make sure Lorien doesn't find them."

He hesitates, then nods and takes them. "I shall take care of them, Aurora."

I wonder when it was that he overheard my name. And more than that, I wonder if *he* has a name. For so long, he's just been a demon. A nameless evil that mom warned me about. But now, for the first time, he becomes more in my eyes.

"Do you have a name?" I ask.

He pauses. "My kind calls me the Winged One with Many Greens," he says, pointing at his wings. "But sometimes, they just call me Manny."

I nod. "Goodnight Manny."

He helps me down the skylight. Shortly afterwards, I dart out of Elsa's chamber and back into the passageway. Soon, I'm back in the holding room. I sneak off to the bathroom and take a shower. The pipes sing loudly, and I know that I'm going to wake up some

of the girls, but I don't care. Amid the rushing water, I find myself thinking of all that's happened.

The shower sounds drown out the noises I make as tears stream down my face.

After I'm finished, I turn off the faucets, change into a nightgown, and look at myself in a mirror. And what I see surprises me. In the mirror, I see a girl who looks calm. In fact, you'd never know that my life has started to fall apart. What I see is a young woman who could be anything.

A young woman who must be something new tomorrow.

I creep back into the holding room. If the girls are awake, they don't let it show. I crawl into bed and notice that the straps from earlier today are gone. Yet, I don't need straps to imprison me here. I'm already trapped.

I close my eyes and try to sleep. But before I drift away, I think of mom's plastic reindeer flashing away in the night. I wonder then, how I'll ever find a

Christmas day miracle in a place like Palladino. A place of such darkness...

That night, I dream that I'm in a chamber made of gold. All the girls from today are also waiting here. All of us are wearing our peach dresses, but this time, instead of a belt, gold ribbons are tied around our waists. We're all connected by these strands.

I turn to see Nadine standing beside me. She starts to dance and the other girls join her. The gold ribbons shimmer as the girls move. Yet, because I'm not in sync, and because I'm not moving at all, the ribbons tangle around me. They twist and knot. I cry out as they tighten around my waist, threatening to crush me.

“Wait!” I cry out. “Hold on!”

Somewhere far away, Elsa calls out to me, “Dance, Rory. It's the only way you'll ever find freedom. Dance! Dance, my dear...”

I scream as the ribbons tighten.

Day Two

The next day, I awake before the others and find myself staring around me. Each bed has a fresh peach-colored dress draped over its bedhead. Satin heels wait beside our beds. Here goes nothing, I tell myself as I try to find a moment of peace. A few minutes later, bells ring from within the castle, and the other girls wake up. No one says a word as they get changed into fresh dresses and proceed to get made up.

There's a mirror attached to a wardrobe door, and I stare at myself in my dress and heels.

I frown.

The dress looks like something that Grace Kelly would have worn. Mom loves Grace Kelly, and she used to call her 'America's first princess,' as if the actress was the first in a long line. I however was always quick to correct mom and tell her that Grace was only a princess of Monaco. That was me and mom. She was

always able to avoid reality. But me? I was always happy to bring things back to Earth.

I wonder what my mom would think of my dress. Or me, for that matter, all dolled up.

I shift around, trying to find an angle in the mirror that makes me look Grace Kelly-ish. Or ladylike. Alas, I can't find one. Fancy dresses, elegant moves—they're not meant for me.

Still, I spend some time watching the other girls. Specifically, the way they move, walk, and sit when they think that no one's watching. I try to do as they do, behave as they do.

I could be just like them. I could look the part... and find a way to survive.

At least, that's what I tell myself.

I try to walk back to my bed and nearly topple over. The cream heels are one size too large, and it takes me a while to find my balance. I shuffle at first, then adjust to walking slowly. My hands sway out to my sides, and I wonder why I feel like I'm on a tightrope.

I hear a snort and look up to see Heidi sneer at me. She leans over to whisper to a dark-haired girl. Both of them chuckle, but I tell myself to ignore them. I have to practice my walk.

Minutes later, a ghost ballerina escorts us all to the dining room where we each have a rose petal salad and a bowl of almonds. Rose water too. I finish it all in the span of minutes, and I regret scoffing it down so fast. I'm famished. I wonder though if I'll get used to it. I must be thinking out loud, for Lakshmi says, "In a few days' time, you won't mind the feeling of constant hunger. It reminds you that you're still alive."

"Just barely," says Nadine.

Around me, all the girls are sitting straight. They look so poised, and I find it hard to believe that they still feel alive. They seem like dolls.

A while later, a ghost ballerina leads us to our first lesson for the day: fan choreography. All the girls spin around inside a mirror room, twirling fans with ribbons. The goal is to look effortless, and we're instructed to do a complex routine. I try hard but my

ribbons tangle around me, knotting and bunching around my legs. The gold strands bring back memories of the dream I had, and I struggle to focus.

Some of the girls laugh quietly, but I keep going. An hour or so later, I'm dizzy and fatigued, but the lesson comes to an end.

However, this was nothing.

The next class is another walking lesson.



The minute I step into the bamboo room, I feel shaky. I knew when I took off my boots that I was doing so in order to fit in and take things seriously. But it's still a shock to see the rows of glass shoes.

I take in a deep breath while the other girls swap their satin heels for glass ones. At last, Nadine gives me a poke and says, "What are you waiting for? You don't want to get ones that are too small."

I feel a chill and know that she's right. Alas, by the time I get to the bench, the very thing she warns me about happens. I find myself standing before the last pair of heels. I know without even putting them on that they're too small. I pause, then reach out to grab them.

They're so cold. And sharp.

I hold a stiletto point against my palm, and it leaves a dimple in my flesh.

I waver, then turn to find Lorien staring at me.

"Problem, Princess Aurora?" she asks.

I feel a spike of anger, but lock it away, and put the shoes on the ground. I take off the satin ones, before I stand inside the glass heels. The glass fills me with a chill. It's like touching ice. Yet, I look up and stare at Lorien. I have a feeling that she'll pick me to go first; however, she raises an eyebrow and looks over at the others.

"Oksana," she says, pointing at one of the girls. "You will go first. Everyone else is to wait by the side."

All of us head to the side, except for Oksana.

She moves to the ladder. Her hair is long and dark, and she has a beautiful heart-shaped face. I think I may have met her earlier, but it's hard to tell. So many faces have passed before me in the last few hours.

Oksana gets on the bamboo and begins walking. My eyes are riveted on her shoes. I feel sick at the thought of doing what she does. She gets up so smoothly, that I wonder what she was like on planet earth.

Lakshmi heads over to me. She gazes at Lorien who's just out of earshot, then whispers, "Oksana used to be a ballet dancer in Prague."

Right. So that answers my question.

I pause to look at Lakshmi. She too has incredible posture. "You too, right?" I ask.

She smiles but shakes her head. "Gymnast. But that was a good guess," she replies. "What's your special talent though?"

"Pardon?" I ask.

Nadine sidles closer and says, "All the girls have a special talent for something. A special skill or ability that we used to display back on Earth. Elsa calls this

talent a 'Grace.' ” We watch as Oksana heads down from the walkways.

A girl with auburn hair steps forward and tackles the runway. Nadine whispers that this girl, Alina, used to be a model in Milan. Another girl comes after her, and I'm introduced to Michelle, the aspiring actress from Juilliard. Lorien continues to critique the girls, but Nadine quietly gives me the rundown on everyone. And from what she describes, they all possess gifts of beauty, grace, poise or rhythm: actresses, models, dancers, musicians...

Lakshmi is called up next, and I turn to Nadine. “What about you?” I ask.

“Soprano,” she says.

I raise an eyebrow and she tells me that she sang with Andrea Bocelli when she was nine. I'm a little taken aback, but she merely shrugs. “Another life,” she says quietly. Although, judging by the way her eyes light up, I get the feeling that she's quite proud of her former career.

I wonder what it must be like to have lived a life full of experiences. All these girls are around my age, but what they've done—performing around the world, strutting down runways—it's all a million miles away from my odd little life. They're all so accomplished.

I should be feeling envious. Yet, all I feel is embarrassment.

“What about you?” asks Nadine.

I pause. My gaze passes over the other girls, and I'm reminded of how different I am from them. I'm no beauty queen. No actress, model, singer, or musician. I'm just some girl with a head full of bookish knowledge. A girl who's lived in a goldfish bowl for most of her life.

“I... dunno,” I mutter.

Alina wanders toward me. She too seems curious.

“What is your talent? What did you do on Earth?”

I pause as I think back to my cakes. It seems ridiculous to mention them in the face of all this talent, but I shrug and say, “I... decorate cakes.” No one says a word, but I get some weird looks, so I add, “It's also my

job. There's a cake store near where I live and they drop off cakes to be decorated. They always come with instructions, and I do my best to fulfill each brief."

"Ah?" says Alina with a frown.

Nadine raises an eyebrow. "Ah hah," she mutters. "That's... well, that's different."

Maybe I should have made something up. All these girls—their works and their performances were seen in concert halls, runways, and magazines. But me? My cakes were on sale in a tiny bakery.

"That's hilarious," says another voice. I turn to see Heidi next to me. "You decorate cakes?" She laughs and everyone turns to look at her.

"Quiet!" shouts Lorien.

We all turn to look at her, and she summons Nadine to the runway. I watch Lorien's eyes settle on me, and somehow, I get the feeling that she's in no rush to call me out. She points at me as I lean against a wall. Lorien says, "Straighten up, Aurora. If I see you slouching you'll be wearing those shoes all week."

I grit my teeth but straighten off the wall. My feet are killing me. Even if the shoes weren't too small, the pressure of holding my balance in them is exhausting. Right now, even the thought of doing the runway doesn't seem so bad. At least that would mean I could sit down with the girls on the other side.

The longer I wait, the more I'm convinced that I'm already being tested. Lorien's waiting to see me complain or falter. She thinks I'll find a way out of this. But all I do is stand straight and remain still. My legs are starting to go numb, but I stare ahead, off at a distant point. I do my best to let her think that I'm going through anything *but* a world of pain.

Alas, when she calls me up, I realize that I don't know what pain is.

"On the runway, Aurora," says Lorien.

When I start to move, my legs nearly buckle. I'd been stuck in the same position for so long that it feels like my legs are going to fall apart. I stagger and Oksana and Heidi giggle. I stare to the side at them, and

they may as well be twins. I want to give them the finger, but hey, that's not very ladylike, is it?

I take in a deep breath and head up the ladder. The heels of my shoes hook over the rungs, and I worry that the glass will crack. The words '*fairytale disaster*' flash through my head. But still, I climb up and find myself on a walkway.

I was wrong. Boots are *not* harder to walk in on this runway.

As much as it was hard to walk in boots, it's just diabolical to use heels on this runway. I struggle for a while to get my balance. The way in which the bamboo poles are tied together means that there are dips between the rounded reeds. It's a precariously uneven surface.

I take a few steps and I hold my hands out to the side. It's hard not to step in the dips between the reeds, but it's also hard to avoid the frayed raffia that holds it all together. The tip of my right shoe hooks onto a piece of raffia, and I nearly fall off.

To my surprise, Lorien is silent. For a while, it seems as if she's trying to give me a chance. Yet, that's not something that lasts for long.

I'm about to turn a corner when she says, "Look up. Keep your eyes up!"

I turn the corner and do as she asks, careful not to snag my shoes on the raffia and careful to walk straight. I estimate that I have fifteen steps on each walkway section, before I need to look down and turn onto the next section. I head off and fifteen steps later, I turn and continue. My legs are shaking, and every so often, I stagger as my foot slips into a dip between the reeds. Still, I don't stop.

Lorien tells me to move my arms.

"I am!" I tell her. My voice sounds sharp, so I swallow before telling her, "I mean, yes, Madam."

I do as she asks and make another turn. I keep counting in my head, and soon my shoes start to pinch, and I feel dizzy. But somehow, I begin to think that this could work. Somehow... I might just pull this off.

Yet this optimism is short-lived. I'm about to turn a corner, when my left heel spears a knot of raffia. I slow down and try to free my shoe. But without looking down, it's harder than it seems. And when I do get free, I have no choice but to gaze down—and I see the bamboo sway.

“Keep going!” says Lorien.

I clench my jaw but take a step forward. And another. But on the next step, my left foot slips into a dip between the reeds, and my left heel cracks. I panic, fearing that this broken heel is going to spear my foot. And just like that, I rest too much pressure forward.

I become unbalanced. Unsteady.

A moment later, I'm in the air.

My body tumbles and I cry out. The floor rushes toward me and I try to use my hands to break my fall. Alas, I'm too slow, and I fall on my side. I hear a crack and know that my glass shoes have shattered. *Oh my God*, I cry out in my head, freaked out that tiny glass shards might be swimming around in my veins.

I close my eyes and pain flares over me. My body aches and my feet... well, I squeeze my eyes shut, for I don't want to even look at them. However, I feel a hand on my shoulder. I know it's one of the girls, but for a moment, I pretend that it's my mom.

"It's okay, Aurora," says a voice.

I look up to see Oksana, and curiously, she looks concerned. Nadine and Lakshmi tell me that things are okay. I look down and they seem to be right: the glass shoes have split neatly. My feet are covered in cuts, but no shards of glass are sticking out of them. I pull myself up, and my body doesn't feel that bad.

I'm okay...

I blink and look up to see Lorien gaze down.

I expected her to be livid. Yet, she merely looks exhausted. It's curious, but she almost looks defeated, and I wonder why. I'm just an ordinary girl to her, right?

"You may go now," she tells me.

I get up slowly and head for the door, until she says, “You will no longer be required to partake in the daily walking lessons. You are finished here.”

A part of me knows that she’s referring to the walking class, and yet, another part of me knows that she’s not. And as painful as my fall was, suddenly there’s a tighter feeling in my chest. I know then that things won’t end well if I leave the room.

If I take a step outside, I could very well be stepping toward the end of my time in Palladino.

I hear Lorien tell Lakshmi to get into position, and I turn quickly.

“Wait,” I call out. “I... I’m not done yet.”

Everyone freezes. Lorien does not move. I look around me, and before I can think of what to say, Oksana takes off her shoes and holds them out. Her face is stiff, but not mean.

“What are you doing?” hisses Heidi.

Oksana doesn’t respond, and I muse that she isn’t so bad after all. I take the shoes from her and nod my thanks. I put them on. The blood from my cuts stains

the inside of the shoes and turns them a pale pink. Still, I head for the ladder. My feet alternate between a tingling numbness and a throbbing pain, but I get up onto the runway. I take a moment to close my eyes.

It's going to be okay.

I open my eyes again... and I walk.

I walk with my head held high. I walk straight and move my arms as gracefully as I can. I don't stop to check my place. I merely rely on my sense of timing. And whenever I get to the end of a walkway, I gaze down for a split-second, check my position, then turn and keep going.

During a brief pause, I notice that more blood has spread inside the shoes, which are now a darker pink. I stiffen but don't say a word.

Not as my feet go numb.

Not as my head feels light.

I do almost one complete lap, but as I head to the finish, I know that I can't walk another round. Not if I want to walk again. But I don't say a word. *Please, I think. Someone please tell me to stop. Please!*

I reach the end and begin to despair, until Lorien says, “Enough.”

I pause and stare below at her. My hands are shaking so much that I have no choice but to rest them on my waist. I do my best to make it look natural, but I have no idea what my face looks like. I'd like to think that I look driven. But I have a feeling that I look like a girl on a wire. Someone about to fall apart.

“That... was not entirely wretched,” says Lorien.

Translation: *a pass.*

Curiously, she looks relieved.

She waves me down, and Lakshmi and Nadine help me descend.

They take off my shoes, but my feet are still numb. Someone comes over with a towel to wipe blood from my skin. I want to thank this person, but I can't even look up to see who it is.

I wince as I limp over to the other side. Not because I'm in pain (for honestly, I can't feel anything now) but because I know that the numbness is going to fade. And

when it does, *that* is when things are really going to be horrid.

Nadine and Lakshmi help me stagger to the next class: Madam Hardy's dust alchemy. At first they're completely silent, but as we approach Hardy's doorway, Nadine says quietly, "What the hell were you trying to do?"

"I was trying to survive," I tell her.

"Could have fooled me," she says.



We enter Madam Hardy's chamber, and I sit between Nadine and Lakshmi. Oksana and Heidi sit by a table to our left. I get the feeling that my walk of pain has changed their impression of me, but neither girl says a word.

I look up to see Madam Hardy stare at me. Does she know it was me who spiked the drain water? I have no

idea. I lower my eyes and hear her call out through the chamber. “Someone thought it would be funny to play a prank on me yesterday,” she begins. “Well, let me tell you... that was not very *funny*.” Her voice turns shrill, as if she’s trying to tell a joke that she doesn’t find amusing.

“But now, you’re all going to deal with the consequences,” she says, before heading toward a shelf.

Hardy runs a hand over a black bottle.

I know then that what will happen next is unfair. Madam Hardy is going to make everyone suffer for what I did. With this in mind, I find myself standing on my pulped feet. But the minute I get up, Lakshmi and Nadine pull me back down.

“What the hell are you doing?” says Nadine in a whisper.

“She’s not going to make you suffer if I own up,” I reply.

“Bah!” says Oksana. “How stupid are you? Don’t you think she knows it was you?”

I pause. "Then why isn't she singling me out?"

"Why? Because she's a sadist. She doesn't care who did it. She just wants us all to suffer. So sit down and shut up," says Nadine. "You'll only make things worse now."

I look to the side and even Heidi is gesturing for me to sit down.

I see Madam Hardy turn. "Is there a problem, Aurora?"

I shake my head. "No, Madam Hardy."

She smirks, then heads to the front.

All right, I realize. She knows it was me.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to the others. "About what I did yesterday."

"Whatever," says Heidi.

But a moment later, Oksana says, "It was fun to watch though."

Nadine and Lakshmi smile for a moment.

But when that moment is over, Hardy raises a hand and several ghost ballerinas come in with a series of trays, one for each table. Each tray has several dishes

and spoons. The tray on my table has three spoons: one for Nadine, Lakshmi, and me.

Hardy says, “None of you girls truly understand the darker aspects of dust alchemy. So today, it is time to test your limits... and introduce you to some new flavors.”

With that, she instructs all the girls to test a random flavor. At the same time, a ghost ballerina hovers around each table, causing the humans to shiver.

I lift one of the spoons and dip it into the powder. I lick the back of the spoon, but oddly, I can't taste anything.

Hardy comes over and says, “Try a *whole* teaspoon, Aurora.”

I stare at her and feel dizzy. Yet, I do as she asks and eat a whole teaspoon of powder. It's like eating flavorless ash—and I wonder what emotion is held inside the powder. The fact that nothing major has happened yet is freaking me out.

I look around me, and all the other girls are affected by their powder. Some of the girls are shaking. Others

are shrieking or trying to run away. But me? I'm just sitting still.

That is, until everything changes.

The pain returns to my feet... and spreads. It rises up my body, first in the form of invisible needles, then in the form of horrid stings. It feels like I've fallen off the bamboo all over again. And this time, the pain pierces through my skull.

The feelings wash over me in tiny waves. Waves that grow larger and larger, until the pain becomes a tide. And soon, all I can do is cling to the table. For I get the idea that if I let go, I'll lose my mind amid the pain.

"Ah, I see you've tried the pain powder," says Hardy. "Exquisite, isn't it? All the sparkling, twisting feelings that tumble about like a sea of broken glass..."

I want to beg Hardy to stop.

Yet, the words won't leave my lips. Thoughts scatter in my mind, unable to come together amid the pain. But abruptly, through it all, I hear a voice shout out: "*Enough!*"

I look up to see Lady Cavendish enter the room. She floats towards Madam Hardy and says something. Hardy goes pale—yes, pale for a ghost—and quickly departs. Elsa opens a vial and throws its contents into the air. I see purple dust fly everywhere, and I smell lavender.

Just like that, the pain in me clears up, and I gaze up to see Elsa. She's kneeling beside me, and my head is lying in her lap. "Aurora? Are you all right, my dear?"

She looks flushed and her expression surprises me. I saw the same look on my mom's face before I ran off into the darkness. And for a moment, I imagine that mom really is here, watching over me. I'm so delirious that my mind superimposes mom's face over Elsa's.

"Mom?" I ask.

The vision of my mother fades, and I watch Elsa rear back.

She lets go of me and my head bumps against the floor. She stands up so fast that I wonder if I imagined the last few moments.

Elsa looks down at me and says in a calm voice:
“Lesson’s over.”



Sometime later, me and the girls are sitting in the dining room, but I have no idea how we got here. Perhaps we were carried here like living dolls.

I start to wonder if the room around me is a large replica of the dining room I’d seen in one of Elsa’s dollhouses. Then, I shake my head and remind myself that it’s the other way around. The fact that I’m thinking this worries me. Right now my brain seems cooked.

I stare at a rose-shaped sandwich.

All the girls start eating. My dinner has no taste and I wonder if I’m still alive. Then, I check my pulse and calm down. My feet feel numb again, and I know this isn’t a good sign. But for now, no one’s trying to

torture me, so I tell myself to make the most of this lull.

No one says a word.

Halfway through the meal, I hear a scream echo below us, and several girls drop their cutlery. I look to Nadine and see her recoil.

“What was that?” I ask.

“Nothing,” she replies.

Some of the girls start talking softly, as though to bury the sound of that scream. Other girls pick up their cutlery and fill the room with exaggerated sounds of silver on porcelain plates. But through it all, I can just hear a second scream, softer this time, as far below us, someone cries out in agony.

A young woman, I realize.

“Nothing,” says Nadine as she finishes off her dinner.

I finish my last sandwich, and the fog in my head clears up. I watch Nadine lift a dinner knife toward her face. She stares at her reflection in the knife and

frowns slightly. I wonder why she seems unsettled. She's gorgeous.

I'm slightly peeved off by her vanity. Below us, someone's possibly getting tortured, and yet, Nadine still has the time to check herself out.

"You look fine," I tell her.

She doesn't look at me but says, "How old do I look?"

"Nadine, you're barely in your twenties," I scoff.

She tucks her knife under a napkin. "Of course," she says even softer.

Her eyes go distant, and I frown. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she repeats.

Before I can say more, Lorien enters the room. She proceeds to escort us back to the sleeping chamber.



That night, the pain in my feet makes me feel delirious. I wake up and turn and twist. The pain keeps me from falling asleep, but I'm so drained and fatigued that I slip in and out of visions. I see Madam Hardy looming over me. I see girls wandering around the castle with their eyes closed, surrounded by blades that they barely manage to avoid. I see my mother tied down in the psych ward. She's shouting.

"Stay away from him!" says mom.

"Who?" I ask her.

"The Hunter... the Hunter Lord."

Over and over, the visions bleed into one another.

Until, halfway into the night, I feel a bit of relief.

The pain in my feet fades as someone applies a cool gel to my feet. The feeling is soothing and I feel the pain drain away. But when I open my eyes, I see Lady Cavendish sitting at the foot of my bed. She's applying the gel and talking softly.

"You are quite a dramatic young woman, Aurora."

I freeze, but don't reply.

A moment later, she's finished with the cream. She stares at me. I see her smile in the dim lamplight, and she seems to find my predicament amusing. Yet, there's also a coldness to her, as though her face cannot truly convey emotion. As if it's all a practiced dance. A choreographed expression.

I sit up in bed. And as creepy as she is, I soon find myself overcome by curiosity.

"What were you?" I ask her. "Back on earth, I mean."

"Unhappy," she replies.

"Is that why you chose to come here?"

"I didn't come here to be happy," she says. "I came here to make things perfect." She gestures around the room and says, "Everything around here was once broken. From the ghosts who come to my castle, to the girls that my demons bring me. They were all broken on the inside..." She stands up and looks at Lakshmi who is sleeping in the next bed. Elsa strokes Lakshmi's arm, and the young woman's skin flickers with purple bruises.

Before I can look closer, the bruises fade. Elsa says, “But I fixed them. All of them.”

Fixed them?

I can't help being snarky. “How generous of you, milady,” I mumble.

She turns around and kneels beside my bed. In the flickering light, she almost looks human. She leans in to whisper, “Let me help you, my dear. Let me make you the most beautiful gem in Palladino. Let me show you what it means to be adored by others.”

“I don't want to be perfect,” I tell her. “I don't want to be a beautiful dancing doll.”

“Then what do you want?” she asks.

“I want to be free.”

“Free?” she asks, tipping her head to the side.

“That's funny. I don't think you were very free back on earth.”

“What would you know about that?”

She hands me one of my mom's drawings. This one shows a young woman with dark hair; a girl surrounded by monsters. I gasp.

“Where did you find this?”

When I look up, Elsa is gone.

In fact, so is the paper.

“Lady Cavendish?”

Was that all a dream? I wonder.

“Go to sleep, Rory,” I tell myself.



The next day, my feet are sore but not unbearably so. Instead of a numbing pain, what I feel is a dull ache. It feels like my feet are covered in blisters, but all I see are pink, healthy looking soles. Well, appearances are all that matter here, right? So I guess I'm okay. Things could be worse. And I'm surprised that they're not. Did I really see Lady Cavendish last night doing some weird Florence Nightingale routine?

I have no idea, but I tell myself to focus.

This new day passes in a blur, but things are a little easier for me.

First off, I find a pair of satin heels that actually fit. And like Dorothy with her red slippers, I grow creepily attached to them. I refuse to let them out of my sight, paranoid that another girl will swap mine for a larger or smaller pair. I carry them under my arm whenever I'm on a break between lessons.

Madam Hardy is more restrained after what Elsa told her. She continues to test us, but I keep my mouth shut whenever she critiques me. Slowly, I begin to understand dust alchemy. Although my feet ache, they don't fail me during the walking lessons. And this time, I don't fall.

Lorien is her usual charming self. One insult that sticks in my head is particularly colorful: "Straighten up, Aurora! You look like a tipsy wench on a pirate ship." It makes me wonder what era she came from. It's anyone's guess, considering that ghosts probably don't age.

I'm now doing ballet too, and this seems bizarre. When I was five years old, I wanted to do ballet after reading the Angelina Ballerina books. But mom and dad couldn't afford the lessons, and I remember whining like a snotty little brat. "It's not fair!" I'd told them. "Why can't I dance like that little mouse?"

Yet, now that I'm in a city of ghosts, I'm finally getting what I wanted.

And nothing is what it seems.

The ballet room is rectangular. It's got mirror walls and a floor covered in red satin. Each girl is required to stand on an individual disk the size of a dinner plate, and we're not allowed to leave our disks. All we do for hours is spin, twirl, and pirouette. We're like dolls in a music box. And maybe that's what we are, for I can hear a music-box version of *Close To You* by the Carpenters.

Our ballet teacher is a spindly ghost. She croaks out commands, and the girls around me all move in sync. I look in the mirrors to see these girls lose themselves in a perfect dance. On the other hand, my reflection

shows a gangly girl who can't stay in sync. I keep slipping off my disk.

At last, the teacher ignores me. She must think I'm a lost cause.

Frankly, so do I.

"Ballet lessons, huh?" I whisper to myself. "Careful what you wish for."

Fatigue sets in as the other lessons pass in a blur.

There's a poetry lesson where we're taught works by Oscar Wilde, Charles Baudelaire, and William Blake; a singing lesson where I embarrass myself with what my instructor refers to as my 'nasal irregularities'; and a diction lesson where a ghost informs me that I must remember to 'open my mouth when I speak,' as if it were a new concept to me.

Still, throughout the madness, I do my best to focus and practice.

Dinnertime comes and I don't remember walking to the dining room. I'm having a hard time focusing as I eat. Some girls talk about their 'past lives,' and I hear

snippets of stories: Lakshmi tells us about how gymnastics took her from a poor neighborhood in Mumbai... all the way to competitions around the world; Oksana tells us about the majesty of Prague. But nothing really sinks in as I struggle to stay alert. One of the girls asks me where I'm from, but I'm so tired that all I can say is, "Earth. Third rock from the sun."

I've never felt so exhausted in my life. And it's not due to the physical work. That's not an issue. It's the fact that I'm concentrating so hard during every moment. I'm trying so hard to be perfect but people are constantly watching me. And judging me.

All I want now is to go to sleep. To pull the sheets over my head and pretend that I'm back in Avondale.

I'm almost finished with dinner when Madam Lorien returns. All the girls hush and Lorien nods to herself.

"Attention ladies," she says. "The time has come to see what you have learned. Tomorrow, all of you will partake in the Culling." I look around me to see the girls straighten up.

“That is all,” says Lorien.

The Culling? Okay, that sounds biblically bad.

Lorien leaves, and the room fills with conversation.

I look to the others. “The Culling?”

Lakshmi nods. “Each year, Lady Cavendish unveils a lineup of young ladies to the Ruling Lords. But in order to figure out who she wants in this lineup, Elsa requires us to enter a series of tests... known as the Culling.”

Alina pipes in to say, “It’s like an exam period.”

I think of her words, and an obvious question comes to mind: “What happens to the girls who fail?”

No one says a word for a while. But at last, Nadine shrugs. She says, “Girls who do not pass the Culling may be allowed to keep training for another year. But more often than not, those who fail... go missing.”

I think of the screams I heard a few days ago. My eyes settle back on the windows etched with images of trapped young women.

I know I should be worried, but right now I’m too tired.

We head back to our rooms, and I crash atop my bed and go to sleep in my fancy dress.



I stay in a dreamless slumber for a few hours. But sometime in the middle of the night, I wake up and feel restless. I'm no longer so tired, but I feel trapped. I look around me at the other girls. In the near darkness, our beds seem so closely packed together. We're like sardines.

I have to get some air.

I sneak into Nadine's hidden passage, then make my way to Elsa's doll chamber. I see an oil lamp lying on the floor. I grab it and head to the doll closet. There, I climb up the wall and push myself through the open skylight. Once I'm on the balcony, I gaze above me. As far as I can tell, Palladino has no moon or stars. But

who needs those when the sky is always full of glowing hot-air balloons?

I see motion above me. Several hundred yards up, a group of demons is flying in circles. It's a beautiful sight. Their colored wings look psychedelic in the night light.

Eventually, a demon floats toward me.

It's Manny. I can tell by his colors.

We stare at each other, and I'm surprised to find that I no longer want to punch him. I know I should be angry with him, but I'm oddly glad to see him. Glad to be able to talk to someone who doesn't exist in a realm of powder puffs and crazed trainers. "Hey," I tell him. "How's it going?"

He doesn't say a thing and an awkward pause fills the air. I wonder if he can feel it too.

"Were you able to hide my boots?" I ask.

He nods. "Yes, Aurora. Neither the ghosts nor humans will find them."

"Thank you," I tell him.

He rubs his forehead. "Is there a reason why you will not stay indoors?"

"I needed some air," I tell him.

"Well, enjoy your air," he tells me.

Manny is about to leave when he pauses. He lets out a quiet sigh and says, "The air is cooler atop the far wall." He points at the high wall of stone, then adds, "I guess I could take you there if you'd like that."

I nod. "Okay."

He waves me forward and says, "Hold on to my back."

I climb onto him and wrap my arms around his shoulders. I hold my oil lamp in my right hand. Manny's body is so rough, that I wonder if he's made of tar. He rises up and lifts me into the air. He heads over to the wall, and we land gently. I climb off his back and stare beyond the stone wall. That's when I notice an outer wall made of rosebushes. More than that, there's a gap between the stone wall and the rose one.

Curious...

I gaze beyond the roses. The city around the castle is a place of glittering lights, and I wonder what awaits me there. No matter what happens to me, I get the feeling that I'll be seeing a lot more of Palladino. Strangely, as much as that thought frightens me, a tiny part of me feels excited.

Is this normal?

I turn to Manny and find him watching me.

I realize that his left arm has a new mark above his wrist. A mark meant to represent a new girl brought to Palladino. *Me.*

I feel a chill.

We sit down on the wall's edge. It's only a few feet thick. It's so smooth that I'm worried I'll slip over the edge and fall into the space between the stone wall and the rose wall. But then, I turn to the side and I'm distracted by Manny. He looks so odd with his legs dangling over the edge. So human. Was he once a human? "So..." I begin. "What exactly do you do for fun, Manny? Besides kidnapping eligible young *ladies*?" I place my lamp between us.

He turns to look at me, and I wish he had a face so I could read him.

“Joke,” I mutter. “Let me start again: what does your kind do for fun?”

“Skines don’t have fun,” he tells my dryly.

Skines?

“At all?” I ask.

He shrugs. “You think I’m lying?”

“You’ve never had fun?”

“Never. Skines live to serve their specific Ruling Lord or Ruling Lady. We procure things for them, and we do their bidding.”

I think back to all he’s said. And for the first time, I start to feel sorry for him. “So you weren’t kidding. You really don’t have a choice.”

He is quiet for a long time before he says, “I think I had a choice once... but...”

He shakes his head. “I can’t remember. Maybe that was another life.”

I frown as I look at him. “I thought you were born here?”

“No skine knows where they came from. As far back as we can remember, we have always existed here,” he replies. “I have always lived in the Cavendish castle.”

“Do all skines fetch young women?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Each Ruling Lord or Ruling Lady can only ask his or her skines to procure certain types of things. Lady Cavendish is the only one with skines that can take human women.”

I lower my eyes and my gaze takes in the lamp between us. I say, “You’re not scared of light, are you? Only back on earth.”

He nods. “Back on earth, we do our best to stay hidden. Over there, we only come out at night and we avoid the light. Those are the rules.”

“But we’re in Palladino now,” I whisper, more to myself than him. “And the rules here... they’re all different.” Here, demons fly in the day. Here, ghosts have power.

He goes quiet for a time, then stands up. “Have your fresh air, Aurora. I shall pick you up in a few minutes.”

Did I say something wrong?

“Thanks,” I tell him.

With that, he shoots off into the air.

I watch him go, then turn to look around me. I get up and walk atop the stone wall. My feet no longer hurt, and I wonder if I’ve become more agile. But a few steps in, I hear a soft breathing sound. I come to a halt, and look down to see a shorthaired cat staring up at me.

It meows and I smile.

“Hey there,” I tell it.

I start to crouch until the cat turns around. It runs off along the wall, and I’m amazed that it can stay centered within the narrow path. “Wait up!” I call out.

I grab my lamp before I follow the cat. I do my best to keep up, but the pain in my feet starts to return. At the same time, a gust of wind rushes toward me, and in a flash, I’m knocked off my feet...

I start falling into the gap between the stone wall and the rose wall, and I know that I’m going to hit the ground. I try to scream. Yet, before I can do so, my

body crashes into a giant mound of leaves. I cough as dry leaves spiral around me.

“What the...”

I stare up in shock when I realize I'm okay. It's so dark here, but I look to my left to see my lamp. It's lying upright and I gulp. Had the lamp shattered, the dry leaves would have caught fire. And just like that, I would've been trapped.

I rush over and grab the lamp.

In its light, I see the rose wall for what it is: a dense wall made of rosebushes. Each flower is the size of a dinner plate, and each thorn resembles a dagger.

I hear a meow and look down to see the cat.

“You!” I call out. “Geez! I could have been killed.”

The cat shakes its head and makes a wheezing sound. What might be a laugh. It's strange but the cat lifts a paw to its face to stifle the sound.

I frown. I didn't know cats could do that.

I head closer and trip in the leaves. I end up on my knees, and the cat sidles over and rubs its head against

my belly. I run a hand over its back and feel a curly, soft coat. It's like touching velvet.

It's a Cornish Rex.

I've always thought that they were a beautiful breed. In fact, I've always wanted a cat, but mom's allergies made that impossible.

The Rex crawls into my lap and purrs. Its eyes are yellow gems that drink up the light. Its ears are bat-like and its whiskers are stubby. The animal has a white coat with patches of brown, making me think of 'Cookies-and-Cream.'

I pet the cat.

Its body is cold, but its fur is as soft as a teddy bear, and I feel oddly comforted. For the first time in days, I find myself crying. "What's wrong with you?" I whisper to myself. "Pull it together, Rory."

I have no idea why I'm getting so emotional, but the cat looks up at me and places a paw on my chin. The tears stop rolling down my cheeks.

"Where did you come from?" I ask the cat.

The animal makes that laughing sound again, then zips off into the dark.

“Hey! Wait up!” I shout.

I wipe my face and chase the cat to the right. Soon, I end up standing before a hole in the briar. A hole that appears to be the entrance of a hidden tunnel. Faint light spills out.

I head inside and find myself standing in a tunnel made of rose branches. All the thorns have been cut away. Lanterns hang from the ceiling, and each one is pale pink and rose-shaped. I head deeper inside and the cat turns to look at me. It meows and I ask it, “Where have you brought me?”

The cat turns and darts ahead, deeper into the corridor. I follow it to the left, right, and all over, until we come to an opening. I step through it and find myself outside the castle.

The first thing I notice is the sound. The whole city rumbles softly, as though it's secretly on fire deep

down below the street level. I can smell ash, oil, burnt paper, and above all else, incense.

I peer outside the briar. The entire rose wall is bordered by a slate sidewalk, but beyond this is one of the orange streets that I'd seen from above.

Surprisingly, it's actually made of amber pebbles. I step onto it, and it feels as if my bare feet have touched heated asphalt. I crouch down and it seems as if there's a fire pit below the path. A fire that's keeping each pebble lit. The street flickers, and I can see tiny things inside each piece of amber: flies, mosquitos, and spiders. Things that are trapped.

Just like me...

I stand up. The street is painfully warm and my feet heat up, so I run back to the slate. The air here reminds me of a summer night in Jacksonville, when the day's heat is trapped among the buildings. But unlike Jacksonville, the heat here is drier. It's like sitting in front of an oven.

Streetlights line the other side of the street. And instead of lamps, each pole is capped at the top by a

golden bowl. And instead of flames or electricity, each streetlight has dragonflies. Glowing dragonflies that come in all sorts of colors. Things that move about like the glitter in a kaleidoscope.

I wait for my feet to cool before I run toward a streetlamp. And that's when I realize that honey is dripping from each bowl. I can smell its sweetness. Soon, I discover that the dragonflies are taking turns to feast on this honey. I move even closer and the dragonflies dance around me. They brush my neck, and their wings feel like tiny leaves.

I dart back to the briar, and the creatures go back to their feast.

"Incredible," I whisper.

I hear a meow, and turn to see the cat peeking out from the briar. It stares at the street, but won't set foot on the amber. "It's too hot for your little paws, isn't it?" I ask as I squat before the animal.

The cat climbs into my arms.

I chuckle as I hold it carefully. "Okay, then," I tell the animal as I stand up.

Together, we stare out into the street. On the other side of the path is a plaza made from gemstones arranged in a mosaic. Each gem is glowing. To the left and right of the plaza are towers of adobe, wood, and brick. They each have windows of colored glass and shiny roofs made of terracotta. The architecture here is a mishmash of styles, and I find myself thinking that in some ways, Palladino isn't too different from Avondale.

I look at the cat in my arms and rub its nose.

"It's so strange," I whisper, more to myself than to the animal. "I would have thought that a ghost city would be dark, cold, and gray... but this place is anything but these things."

I hear a rumble and look to the far right. There, the dome of a small tower begins to shake. At least, that's what I think at first, until I realize that this dome is actually a hot-air balloon rising off a flat roof. At the same time, birds fly past me. Each carries a gold cord in its beak, and each cord holds up a lantern. The cat paws at the air.

I want to follow the birds, thinking that I could wander the city by carefully stepping on and off the heated streets.

“Follow the amber road, Dorothy,” I whisper to myself.

That is, before I see a shape approach.

A man is walking toward me.

At first, all I can see of him is a silhouette. Someone tall with broad shoulders. But as he gets closer, I glimpse more details: shoulder-length hair that's a syrupy blonde, swept back behind him; light skin with a faint gold hue; and eyes that are ocean blue. Soon, he crosses an incredible amount of space and halts opposite me, on the other side of the street.

Dragonflies dance above him, like a halo. In their light, he's the most beautiful man that I've ever seen.

A man who is looking back at me.

The stranger is merely a yard away. He's wearing brown trousers, a white shirt, and a cream-colored

blazer. An outfit that seems neither modern nor olden. He raises a hand and brushes his fingers over his chin, over the golden hairs of a light beard.

His eyes glimmer. His mouth twitches into a smile.

“Evening,” he says in a melodic voice. He slides his hands into his pockets. His blazer looks like corduroy, and I find myself wondering which would be softer: the blazer or his beard. The minute I think that, I find myself frowning.

Geez... what is wrong with you, Rory?

The cat in my arms squirms and presses its head against my neck. It starts shaking.

The man’s smile widens. “It seems that I owe you some thanks, young lady.”

“Pardon?” I ask.

“You found my cat,” he says. “I’ve been looking all over for him.”

His accent is hard to place. European, I guess.

He looks like he’s in his thirties.

The cat hisses and I can feel its claws dig into my arms. I look at the man and frown. “Are you sure he’s

your cat?" I ask. "He doesn't seem to like you very much."

The man chuckles and shakes his head. "Ah, Fusco's always been a handful. But nonetheless, I own him, my dear." He runs a hand through his hair, before he gestures at the rose wall. "...just like Lady Cavendish owns you."

I feel my face redden.

"No one owns me. I do as I please."

He frowns slightly, as though he didn't expect me to respond so glibly. "Really?" he asks with a snort. "And would you care to explain how that works?"

I glare at him. "Not particularly," I reply.

He continues to smile, but his eyes take on a strange sharpness. He walks closer to me, and I freeze. Yet, before he can leave the street and head toward me, he halts. His eyes lower to the sidewalk surrounding the rose wall, and my gaze follows his.

Rose symbols have been carved upon the slate.

He exhales, and I get the feeling that there's something about these symbols that is holding him

back. I look up. "Is something wrong?" I ask him. He doesn't reply, and I still feel a little angry over what he'd said. My next words pop out without much thought: "You want your cat back? Then come and get him."

He looks at the symbols, then at me.

His eyes shine. "You don't know who I am, do you?"
"Should I?"

I take a few steps back, until I'm just within the hole in the briar. The cat hops to the ground and hides in the tunnel. "Oops," I whisper, and I don't bother to hide a smirk.

I look behind me to see the cat flee.

I turn back to the stranger. "Well, I'd love to chat... but I really should get some beauty sleep," I tell him.

"Wait," he tells me. He holds out a hand and says, "I apologize if I caused offense. Maybe you are free to do as you please." He does look genuinely sorry, so I hesitate. He looks at my bare feet and shakes his head. "I've certainly never seen one of Elsa's ladies leave her realm through the briar."

“Well, there’s a first time for everything.”

“Clearly,” he says with a smile.

A breeze passes by and I fold my arms. I know I should head back, but I find myself lingering. My gaze lowers to his shirt, which has a small gold pin shaped like a wolf.

“My name is Hervé,” he says.

He bows before me. I hold my arms tighter around my chest.

“Hi Hervé,” I tell him. “Nice to meet you.”

He straightens up and smiles. “I believe that this is where you tell me your name.”

“Is it?” I ask.

I see motion as other ghosts travel the street. Suddenly, I worry that I might get in trouble if people see me. More than that, I might get Manny in trouble for bringing me here. I look up at the stranger and he tips his head to the side. He’s studying me.

“Good night, Hervé,” I tell him before I slip back into the wall.

I run off into the rose tunnel, and feel myself blush. For as I go, I realize that in that last stare, part of me was trying to memorize his features...

I walk through the tunnel and on the other side, I come to a halt when I see Manny. His arms are crossed, and his body language seems to have changed. Suddenly I'm not sure how friendly he is. "Manny?"

"You did something very dangerous, Aurora."

"Look, I won't go outside the wall again," I tell him. *Not without a plan.*

"I wasn't talking about your escape," he says.

I realize that he's referring to Hervé, but why is he so upset that I talked to the stranger?

Before I can do anything, he says, "Climb onto my back."

I do as he asks and he carries me back to safety. He doesn't say a word, and I wonder what exactly is going through his mind. He lowers me beside the skylight, then looks at me and says, "Don't ever talk to him again."

Before I can reply, he shoves me toward the skylight.

I feel angry as I look at him. But then, I see him holding his head in his hands. And I get the feeling that he's more upset than I am.

“Manny?”

“You must stay clear of him, Aurora,” he says, quieter this time.

“I’ll speak to whoever I want to,” I whisper before I lower myself through the skylight.

I head back to my bed. And only when I pull up my sheets does it hit me: Manny sounded scared. Not just angry or frustrated... but scared.

In my dreams, I see that gold wolf pin. And just like that, I watch the pin morph into a real animal. A smiling wolf...

The Culling

The next morning, I awake to find myself covered in crushed paper. I push the materials off my bed, and look around me to see a huge mess of tissue, brown paper, and string. Beyond this, all the other girls are already awake. Each of them is dressed in a shoulderless velvet gown, and each dress comes in a different color.

“What’s going on?” I mutter.

Heidi turns to look at me. “Oh, sorry about the mess,” she says, raising a brow. “I forgot you were still there.”

I give her the finger and she smirks.

Heidi wanders off, and I see a huge train connected to her red dress. I watch her go and realize that the floor is covered in fabric as each girl’s train overlaps with that of another girl. It all looks like a quilt of gemlike colors.

I get up and notice a parcel lying at the foot of my bed. It's an oval bundle, and when I untie it, dark blue velvet tumbles out. I hold it up and find myself staring at another shoulder-less gown. I run my hands over the velvet, and I feel as if I'm touching the wings of a giant butterfly.

“Like it?” says Lakshmi.

I look up to see her in a white gown. It's as if she's dressed in fine snow.

My gaze passes to my dress and I shake my head.

“The dress. It's so...”

“Beautiful?” she says.

“Un-me,” I reply.

She chuckles and wanders off.

I wonder if this is what girls wear to the prom. Back when I finished my homeschool studies, some of the nearby schools invited homeschool kids to join their proms. But I didn't go. Didn't know what on earth I'd do there. And of course, that was long after Jai had moved away.

Nadine appears. She's wearing a lavender-colored gown, and she seems much taller in this dress. "Sorry I didn't wake you up early," she says. "It's been hectic today."

I ask her if I have time to use the bathroom, and she tells me that she doubts it. With that, I begin to get changed into the blue gown. "Need help?" she says.

"Yeah, I could use help with the back," I tell her.

She helps me zip it up and I look in a mirror. I look so weird, dressed in blue velvet. Like someone else. The train behind my dress is huge, and the outfit is super heavy. I take a few steps forward and stumble.

Heidi laughs, along with some of the other girls. I'm about to flip them the finger, until, outside the window, a gathering of ballerinas floats past. The room goes quiet. There's a stillness in the air as girls look away. Conversation is muted, but I turn to look at Nadine.

"What's going to happen today?" I ask.

“Three tests,” says Nadine. “It’s completely random as to which tests we’ll get. But the tests will be based on something that we’ve been taught.”

I hope that they’re not including lessons that occurred before my arrival.

At that moment, a window opens up, and Madam Lorien floats into the room. All the girls head to the back wall and line up in a row. They all seem to be finished with their makeup. I didn’t have time to apply blush, but I think I’m okay.

Lorien doesn’t say a word, but walks over to us. She examines each of us, and frowns when she gets to me. I know my hair is a mess and I redden, but she lifts my left hand and stares at my nails. There is dirt beneath them—dirt from when I fell into the pit last night. I redden some more, but all she says is, “Hmm.”

At last, she floats away and says, “Come along, girls.”

She leads us to the dining room, and the girls and I sit down by the tables. Breakfast is the same as yesterday. And as usual, no ghosts linger while we eat.

The conversation though is muted and Nadine and Lakshmi seem anxious.

Once we're finished, Lorien returns and says, "All right, ladies. Follow me. The Culling shall begin soon..."

With that, she leads us off on a familiar path.



We head to Madam Hardy's chamber, and I let out a quiet sigh. You've got to be kidding me...

We all file in, and it seems weird to be entering this place in such beautiful gowns. It's like wearing haute couture in a science lab. We each move slowly to avoid stepping on another girl's train. I feel glad that my dress isn't white like Lakshmi's. I sit next to Nadine, and Madam Hardy floats to the front. She says, "Welcome girls. It has been decided by Lady Cavendish that the first of your Culling challenges shall be a test of Dust Alchemy." She gestures at the shelves and says,

“You may use any ingredients, and you are allowed to make anything you wish.”

The other girls head for the shelves, and all of them seem highly prepared. But what should I make? I want to talk to Nadine, but there are dozens of ballerinas floating around us, watching. Soon, I notice an hourglass at the front of the room.

You can do this, I tell myself. Just stay calm.

I head to the teacups, and I spot a yellow cup covered in pink flowers. Just like that, I'm reminded of the last cake that I made for mom.

It occurs to me then that maybe I'm not such a newbie at translating emotions and messages. Maybe I've been doing that for years with my cake decorating.

I grab the cup.

“What would you do if you were making a cake?” I ask myself quietly. “What would you say and who would you say it to?”

Instantly, I know the answer: I want to say *sorry* to my mom.

I hurry over to the shelves and pick out ingredients for my palette. Soon, I'm back at my desk. I take a moment to think about my mom. All that she's said. And suddenly, all I want is to go back home and tell her about what I've seen here. I don't know quite what I'm doing, but I start mixing ingredients.

My hands shake, and this seems odd. I'm a girl who can pipe a hundred tiny roses without blinking, but now, I can't hold a bottle without shaking.

I think of mom, and I pretend that I'm talking to her.

"You were right, mom," I whisper. "You were *always* right. There really are things that defy logic. Things that I can barely believe. And now, I'm in their kingdom."

"But I promise you I will find a way out. I promise you I will make it back."

No one can hear me above the clinking of spoons, bottles, and cups, but I lower my voice some more. "I'm sorry for not believing you, mom," I whisper. "But I will come back."

At that moment, I realize that maybe the only way I can wake mom from her mental prison is by showing her that I am strong enough to beat these ghosts. Maybe the only way I can wake her up is by coming back in one piece and showing her that I am brave. And that the city of Palladino can be beaten.

Soon, I find my mix changing.

It's not just a mix that asks for forgiveness. It's also a promise.

I will get out of here, mom.

You'll be fine again, and we'll fix up grandma's house. We'll paint it apple green and we'll take down the reindeer and Christmas lights. We'll be this normal family.

That will be our Christmas day miracle.

In a blur, I find myself staring down at my mix. I dip my finger into the mix, then taste it. It's bittersweet but powerful. It is all that I'm feeling. What I've made is a sparkling powder full of strange colors. And just like that, I'm finished.

Madam Hardy claps her hands and we all stop. One by one, all the girls head to the front, and that's when I

realize that I'm missing one thing. In my haste, I forgot to fill my cup with hot water. It's just a mix of powder.

I try heading back but the queue forces me ahead. At the front, Madam Hardy doesn't say a word as a girl gives her a cup. Hardy sniffs it, then nods. She goes through cup after cup and smiles. It is clear that most of the girls have pulled out their A-game. But when it's my turn to stand before her, she stares at my cup and raises a brow. I quickly say, "Madam Hardy, pardon me, but in my haste I forgot to—"

"Thank you, Aurora," she says. "You may go now."

I look at a nearby kettle and say, "But if I could just—"

She takes my cup and blows into it. Powder scatters.

"Oops," she whispers.

I go stiff. "But I..."

My eyes sting when some of the powder gets in my face. But through it all, I see Hardy smile. I stare at her for a moment before turning away and heading back. The other girls pass in a blur as I struggle to deal with what's just happened. I don't know whether it's the

dust or the shock of what's happened, but there's a bitter taste in my mouth.

No... this can't be happening.

It's not fair, I want to shout out. In my head, I picture myself taking a teacup and clubbing Hardy with it. I picture the cup smashing against her forehead and sending her sprawling back.

Yet, I keep walking.

The first test is over... and I failed it.

"Pull it together, Rory," I tell myself. "Come on."



I'm not sure how long we spent in Hardy's chamber, but it must have been quite some time, for when we emerge, Lorien takes us to the dining room. The girls and I have an early lunch. After we're finished, Lorien guides us toward a stairwell. One by one, the girls are asked to go down. We walk slowly as each girl and her

train goes down. I can't get close enough to Nadine or Lakshmi to ask where we're going. But I look behind me, and Nadine seems paler than normal. She looks like a lost little girl.

She's been here before.

We walk for ages and the air gets warm. Clammy too. I feel dizzy and wonder if *this* is the challenge: walking toward the bowels of the earth. Yet, it's not until we get to the bottom that I truly understand what the challenge is. At the bottom level, we see a bench full of shoes. Glass shoes.

"Oh geez," I whisper.

Whoever made these shoes needs to die a painful death.

Lorien waves us out, and we each grab a pair of shoes. We put them on and no one says a word. I can't see much in the dark, but I do my best to find my footing.

Lorien claps her hands and the area illuminates.

Suddenly, I see where we are. We're in a cavern, and there are red lanterns hanging above us. These flicker

dimly. Directly ahead of us is a giant hole in the ground. Bamboo bridges stretch across it from all sides. Each bridge is super long, but only a few feet wide. All of them overlap and intersect near the center. None of them have railings, so to fall from one would mean falling into darkness.

Oh my...

What is this place?

Lorien floats above us and says, “Ladies, your challenge is about to begin, so pay attention. To pass this test, you must cross to the other side of the obstacle.” She points to a wooden platform on the other side of the web. “But beware: the longer you spend in the web, the harder it shall be for you.”

I take a moment to study the obstacle. Only the ten bridges directly before us are accessible. The others are roped off.

Lorien says, “Chose a bridge.”

We do as she asks, and each of us picks one of the open bridges. The best path would seem to be the middle bridge that leads straight to the finish; all the

other paths require a challenger to change ‘lanes’ at the web’s center. However, the middle bridge has a short queue of girls behind it. And the first girl in that lane is Heidi.

No, I tell myself. I don’t want to be sandwiched among the girls, or trapped behind a crowd. So instead, I head to the leftmost bridge, allowing me to be the first and only girl there.

“Begin!” says Lorien.

The girls and I take a step forward, and everything seems fine. The bamboo closest to the edge is taut. Alas, everything starts to wobble as we go deeper into the web. Our footsteps begin to shake the structure...

The other girls don’t hesitate as things get rough. I try to follow their pace but find it hard to stay upright. And soon, I begin slowing down. The holes between the bridges are huge; and staring through them, I see water far below me.

“Don’t look down,” I tell myself. “Focus, Rory!”

I go further...

The bridges get narrower.

Soon my train becomes an issue. I'm forced to reach behind and grab some of it, so that it doesn't spill over my bridge and pull me off-balance. But that's not all: halfway toward the web's center, some of the girls start running.

How do they do that? I wonder. They're racing!

The motion they create causes havoc. I have to halt because the web is shaking too much. I start freaking out because it's taking too much effort just to stay aloft. I realize then that I have only two options: either I go full bolt and hope that I can stay aloft, or I hang on until things calm down.

I think about doing the latter, until I look up.

To the right, one of the lanterns starts to shake. It grows brighter, and a moment later, it explodes in a cloud of ash and embers. The girl beneath it shrieks. She slips and dangles off a bridge. "Help!" she cries out.

A ghost ballerina floats over to lift her away.

A lantern above me begins shaking, and I scurry ahead. Heat rushes behind me as this lantern explodes. Still, I don't stop. Many of the girls are far, far ahead of

me. But as more lanterns start to shake, I realize that I have to keep going.

I start running.

I let go of my train in order to hurl myself forward. Soon, I begin passing some of the girls on different 'lanes.' I'm doing it. I'm getting closer!

I see Heidi up ahead. She's on a nearby path and I realize that we'll soon intersect at the center of the web. Crap. She looks at me and says, "I'm going first, Rory. Stay out of my way."

I look to her side, but see no lanterns shaking above her; my side is another story. "I can't slow down," I tell her. "I don't have a choice."

"Too bad," she tells me.

She doesn't stop running, but pulls out barrettes from her hair and tosses them at me. I raise a hand to block them from my face, and I nearly lose my balance. She speeds up and I gasp. I wonder how fast I can go before my shoes crack. Soon I don't care. I gun my way forward and pull away from her.

Our bridges connect.

It's a race and I get ahead of Heidi. Yet, before I'm able to extend my lead, I'm suddenly ripped back as something pins my train. I sprawl to the side and land across another bridge. At the center of the web, the gaps in the net are smaller and this is why I don't fall through. But when I look up, I realize that Heidi is standing on my train.

She smirks before she continues ahead.

I redden but quickly get up. Behind me, the lanterns explode and fill the air with ash. I cough and choke but do my best to stay balanced. Soon, things clear up and I watch the other girls approach the far end. Come on, I tell myself. Keep going!

Seconds later, the other lanterns start shaking.

Oh, no...

I hear a crackling from the lanterns, but I keep running. I run so fast that I'm practically flying. I can barely see the bridges below me, and for a while, I delude myself into thinking that I've learnt to fly *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*-style.

Then, as I get to the wider parts of the web, my feet stumble.

Soon I'm no longer walking.

I'm falling.

I crash into a pool of water. I scream out underwater when my body is wrapped in darkness. I try to stay upright and swim up, but my wet dress pulls me down like an anchor. I sink faster and faster...

At last, I try to undo my zipper and free myself from the wet fabric. Yet, when I yank on the zipper, it jams. I try harder but keep sinking. Soon, my feet rest on a sand bed and I can't see anything. I pull some more at the zipper, and it snaps off.

My head goes light. My body cries out for air.

Help!

Suddenly, currents move around me. Hands grab my arms, and they pull me toward a light. I must be hallucinating, for these lights look like flickers of red and green—just like those on my mom's roof. But before I can get to the top, I black out...

When I wake up, I find myself gasping for air. The cavern looks blurry and distorted, as though I'm still underwater. Then, things clear up and I see girls gathered around me. I rise to my elbows to find that my dress is a mess and my shoes are missing.

On the other hand, all the girls around me are perfectly groomed. No one was burned by the lantern ash. Even the girl who fell off a bridge looks great, as if she's had the time to touch up her makeup while I was...

Wait. Where was I? Did I drown?

I check my wrist. My pulse is still there.

Okay...

Calm down.

I stumble to my feet and stare around me.

No one moves, until Lorien says, "You all have a few minutes to get ready for the final test." She hushes and says directly to me, "And if I were you, I'd make sure to look presentable for this last one."

When her eyes meet mine, what I see is a look of exhaustion. She can already see me failing, and this makes me feel queasy. She looks at her ghost ballerinas and says, "Take her back to the holding room."

The ballerinas lift me away.

They carry me up so fast that things pass in a blur.

Eventually, the ghosts take me to the girls' bedroom, and only then do they leave me. Once I'm alone, I sit on my bed and my body shakes. Not from the cold, but from my nerves. What am I doing here? I just blew it. Two out of three tests, and I'm failing. I look below me as the colors of my dress seep into the white sheets. My arms are stained too.

In my head, I hear an echo of what Nadine said:

"...more often than not, those who fail... go missing."

I close my eyes and sink back onto my bed.

"Come on... pull it together, Rory."

I find myself shaking some more, until I hear a meow.

I get up to see a cat waiting outside the window, sitting on the balcony. The same Cornish Rex from last night. I calm down as I stare outside. I open the window and climb out onto the balcony. The cat climbs up my dress, creating tiny holes with his claws before he sits on my shoulders.

He bops his head on my cheek, and I feel myself calm down. "Where did you come from?" I ask. I rub his back and he makes that strange laughing sound again.

"What do you think?" I ask him. "Am I doing terribly today, little guy?"

A shadow pools over me, and the cat darts into the room. I look up to see Manny floating above me. Before I can say hello, he says, "You must get ready, Rory. It is time for your presentation."

"What presentation?"

"Each girl must present herself and show off a skill in front of Lady Cavendish."

I shake my head. "What's the use?" I mumble. "I'll probably just blow that too."

“No, you won’t,” he says.

I look up and he clasps his hands together. “Now get inside.”

“What?”

“Just do it. Quickly!”

I do as I’m told, and more skins enter the room. I count at least thirteen. Manny and his friends form a circle around me, and stretch out their wings.

Although I no longer fear Manny, I still shiver when I see the others. They stare at Manny, and they don’t seem pleased to be here. Their arms are crossed.

“Hold still and close your eyes,” he says.

“Manny?”

“Trust me, Rory.”

I shut my eyes and feel a powerful gust of wind. Through my half-closed eyes, I see the skins flap their wings like hummingbirds. The entire room is thrown into disarray. Sheets are scattered; makeup bottles are smashed. But in the center of this vortex, my dress begins to dry. I feel lighter.

I open my eyes a little wider. The butterfly jar falls to the ground and breaks in half. The dead butterflies are reanimated. They dance in the air. They rush toward my face and I squeeze my eyes shut.

A few more seconds pass before the skines stop.

When I open my eyes, only Manny remains. He nods.

“Better,” he says.

I look down and though my dress is ruined, I can walk without sloshing.

“You have to go now,” he says.

At that moment, I hear a door open. Lorien walks in, and I fear that Manny will get in trouble. Yet, when I turn around, he is nowhere to be seen. The Cornish Rex has also vanished. Lorien examines the mess, and says, “What in the nine hells...?”

She pauses when she sees that I’m no longer wet.

“Hmm,” she mutters, raising a brow. “Come along now. Almost all of the girls are finished with their presentations.”

She waves me forward and we head down a hallway. I brush my hair back. Soon, I'm right before an open door that leads into a large hall. Inside, I see Elsa Cavendish waiting on a podium at the far end. She's seated on a chair beside a table with cakes. Ghost ballerinas lean against the walls, their bodies resting in ballet poses. Human girls are standing to the left and right, but I can see one more girl ahead of me.

It's Lakshmi. She heads forward with her best walk, then stops before the podium and curtsies. She gets up and says, "Good day, Lady Cavendish."

Elsa doesn't say a word, but Lakshmi begins to spin on the spot in a perfect ballet routine. She moves so fluidly that it seems like invisible hands are spinning her. She's dancing to music that only she can hear. Lorien leans toward me to say, "Make the most of your presentation time. Use it to show Lady Cavendish your skills."

"Skills?"

I wonder what I could show.

Lorien says, “Dancing, dust alchemy, singing, poetry...” She points to a shelf near the door. It’s loaded with equipment: fans, shoes, and flutes.

I don’t know what to say, but soon Lakshmi is finished. She bows, then heads to the side. Everyone turns to look at me. Lorien gives me a push and I walk toward Elsa. I move closer before I trip on my skirt, and tumble to the floor. I hear giggles from the girls, but I get up to see Elsa lower her teacup. Everyone quiets and I head closer.

I curtsy before Elsa and say, “Good day, Lady Cavendish. Today I...” My mind races as I try to figure out what I could show.

The only thing that really pops out to me is poetry. But before I can say that, Elsa speaks.

“Tell me why I should make you a part of this year’s lineup, Aurora.”

Why? I wonder. It seems ridiculous that I’m being asked this. I didn’t ask to be brought here. In fact, all I want is to escape. And yet, here in the moment, what I need to do is convince everyone that I can play nice.

“Why?” I repeat. “Well, because... well, I’d be honored.”

Elsa looks stony, and I know she doesn’t believe me. Heck, even I didn’t buy that. So I pause for a moment, then add quietly, “You should include me... because I’m not what you expected. I’m different.”

That last bit was the truth.

She pauses, then nods. “And what do you wish to show us today?”

“I wish to recite a poem.”

Elsa leans forward in her chair.

“And what poem would that be?” she asks.

I think of William Wordsworth’s cloud poem and take in a breath. “Wordsworth, milady.”

I open my mouth and all that comes out is a long silence. Then, I manage to stammer out the first few words of the poem, “I wandered as lonely as a cloud... and...”

I repeat those words, then fall silent.

The words lodge in my throat. My mind goes blank and I wonder why I chose poetry. I mean, seriously...
poetry?

Elsa leans back and says, “Thank you, Aurora. That is all.”

Her words echo in the chamber and I feel numb. I look away from Elsa and find myself staring at the table beside her. It’s got a four-tiered cake stand made of glass. Each tier has a different treat. I see cakes, profiteroles, éclairs, and parfaits. They’re all beautifully arranged, but nothing has been eaten. I notice that the table itself is a circular disk of black marble.

An idea hits me.

“Aurora,” says Elsa. “Your time is up.”

I look at her and say, “Wait.”

The room goes still.

“Wait... I... am not finished. If you wouldn’t mind, Lady Cavendish, there is something else I wish to show you.”

Lorien floats beside Elsa and says, “This is most unconventional, milady. She already had her—”

“She may perform,” says Elsa.

I nod, then move closer to her. No one says a word as I go right up to the table and pick up the cake stand. It’s so heavy that I worry I’ll drop it. But I manage to wobble down the podium and over to the floor. I set down the cake stand and it fills the hall with a loud thump.

Everyone is silent. I look up to see Nadine raise an eyebrow. Her face reads, *What the hell are you doing, Rory?* I head over to the podium, lift the marble disk from the table, and balance this disk on its side. I look over at Elsa, but she doesn’t say a word, merely watching me with a cold gaze. I gulp, but roll the disk over the steps of the podium and onto the floor. I lower it to the ground, topside facing up, and it settles with a thud.

I look at the cake stand and see paper napkins under the éclairs. I pull out one of the napkins and roll it up into a cone.

“Yep,” I whisper to myself. “This’ll work.”

I put down the napkin, then head over to the cake stand. I use my hands to open up a couple of éclairs and profiteroles. Next, I scoop out the cream from these, and put the filling into a napkin. I fold this napkin into a makeshift pastry bag, then tear a small hole at the tip.

I give the ‘bag’ a squeeze and pipe out a spiral on the edge of the cake stand. I haven’t got my piping nibs, but the spiral looks neat.

I take in a deep breath, and I can sense everyone watching me.

Here goes nothing, I tell myself.

I head to the marble tabletop on the floor. Kneeling beside it, I hold my pastry bag in front of me and start piping out shapes on the black marble. I start by lining its edge with roses made of cream.

I hear whispering as girls gather around me.

I’ve always been fast and precise with my piping, and it doesn’t take me long to fringe the tabletop. Then, I head back to the table and fill my bag with

more dessert filling. My hands get covered in cream, but I wipe them on my dress. I rush back to the tabletop to add more details. And just like that, time flies. I don't think too much about what I'm doing, and my hands seem to move on their own.

Show everyone what you've got, Rory.

Every so often, I have to start a new napkin when the old one becomes pulp. But I don't stop. Everyone gathers closer to me. The girls. The ghosts. Even Elsa. I only pause when I come to my last batch of cream. Only then do I study what I've drawn. And even though it's my work, it's as if I'm seeing it for the first time: I see mermaids, skines, a cat, flowers, shoes, towers, and roses...

It's a portrait of the Cavendish castle.

A snapshot of my time here.

There's only one section of the marble that hasn't been covered. This empty spot is the size of a teacup, and my mind goes blank. What could I show on this last spot? I'm no longer on autopilot and my nerves start to set in. Everyone is watching. I close my eyes and think

of the rose briar... and the man outside. With that, I pipe on the wolf symbol from Hervé's pin.

A gasp fills the room.

I look up and Elsa's eyes flash.

"Enough," she whispers.

"But Lady Cavendish—" I begin.

"Get rid of it. Now!" she calls out.

Lorien pushes me aside and uses a knife to rub out the wolf symbol.

I remember what Manny told me about Hervé, and I freeze, knowing that for some reason, I've just done something horrible. Elsa storms off and Lorien waves out the girls. I start to rise when Lorien says, "Never invoke the symbol of Moreno."

With that, I'm left alone in the hall, staring at the mess.

What just happened?

I wander outside. Nadine grabs my arm and leads me down a hallway. "Come on, Rory," she says.

"What happened in there?" I ask. "The wolf symbol..."

“Lady Cavendish has never gotten along with Lord Moreno. That is his mark.”

“Lord Moreno?” I ask. “Lord *Hervé* Moreno?”

She nods, then pauses. “What’s going on, Aurora?”

“I met him last night.”

She pales but leads me back to our bedroom.

We enter the room and the ghosts lock us inside. The windows go dark as night falls and I feel trapped. The other girls look at the mess and cry out in horror. I don’t say a word as they hurry off to tidy things. I sit on my bed, and I don’t bother to take off my dress as I lie back. I’ve got bits of *éclair* chocolate on me, but I don’t care. My hands smell of cream.

I’m drained, tired, and hungry.

But it’s no ordinary hunger that I’m feeling. I remember reading that if you starve yourself for long enough, your stomach starts eating its own lining. Well, I start to feel as if the hunger in me is eating everything inside me. My thoughts, dreams, and hopes. But it’s not just the hunger that affects me—it’s as if

the castle and its magic are hollowing me into nothing but an empty shell.

Will I lose all trace of who I am if I stay in this city?

All the girls stay away from me, except for Nadine. She goes over and lies next to me on the bed. “Where did you meet Lord Moreno?”

I don’t answer her question, but pose one of my own: “I’m cooked, right?”

“Rory...”

“I blew it.”

She places her head on my shoulder. “It’ll be all right, Rory.”

I don’t say anything. I try not to think of what might happen if I’m rejected.

A few minutes later, the door opens and Lorien tells us to go to the dining hall. We get there to find a rose-tinged meal waiting for us. No one says a word. Dinner passes, and Lorien returns to lead us back to the presentation hall.

I file in with the other girls, and Elsa floats before us. She’s wearing another chiffon gown, just like the

one from the other day. Only this one's made of iridescent layers.

She eyes us all before she says. "It has been quite a year for many of you in my castle. And it was not easy compiling the lineup for this year's Unveiling. You all performed admirably... but I only present the finest girls to the Ruling Lords. When I call your name, step forward."

She calls out Oksana, Nadine, Lakshmi and a bunch of other names. But my mind is just zapped and I lose track of time as girls step forward. I pray that Elsa will give me another shot. Maybe I'll get another year to train with the remaining girls. Maybe I'll be okay.

When I look up, eleven girls are standing before me. But that's not all: everyone is staring at me, including Elsa. She just said the twelfth name, but who was it?

Elsa clears her throat and repeats herself:

"Aurora."

I freeze as I stare back.

"Me?" I ask.

She doesn't say a word, and I continue to stare ahead. Wait... me? I gaze down at my ruined dress with its bits of dirt and cream. I look up and watch Elsa nod, and a glint of a smile passes over her. I sway as I head to the front.

A moment later, there I am, standing with the chosen girls. I follow their example and face the remaining students. I gaze ahead at the rejected girls, and they stare back with wide eyes. Heidi is directly opposite me. Her jaw slackens, and so does mine.

I'm in the lineup.

Me. Aurora, the cake decorator from Jacksonville.

In spite of all my failures today, I made it into the lineup. This has to be some kind of joke, right? Yet, as I look around me, I realize that the joke seems to be on all these perfect, beautiful girls.

A second later, the rejected girls are ushered out.

Elsa floats before us. She says, "Well, here you are. The best of the best." Her gaze rests on me, and she smiles coldly before she wanders off.

All of us stare numbly at one another. But soon, some of the girls start smiling. Oksana in particular looks as if she's won the lottery, and I wonder how she could be happy. How long has she been here? Yet, Nadine looks at me with a strange look. I thought she'd be pleased, but she seems taken aback. And more than that, she looks disappointed.

That tiny look strikes me harder than any fall. And only then do I realize it: she didn't want me here.

I look away.



The girls in 'the lineup' are guided to a new room, which is much like our old one, only larger. This room has exactly twelve beds. Some of the girls talk for a while, but Nadine wanders over to the far end to sit on a bed. She couldn't be any further from me. Yet after a

while, I decide to go over and clear the air with her. I sit beside her and say, “Hi there.”

She turns to smile faintly at me. “Hi Rory.”

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

She nods. “You better get some sleep. Tomorrow’s the big day. The Unveiling before the Ruling Lords.”

She gets out a nightgown, and I start to move off until she says, “Congrats.”

Nadine sounds happy, but her eyes don’t meet mine.

“You too,” I whisper.

Soon, the room goes dark. I go to sleep and dream that I’m back in the bamboo web. And this time, I’m tied to the center of it. Girls in black dresses walk toward me, and I see Nadine, Alina, and Lakshmi. But as they get closer, they all come to a halt. I ask for help, but they don’t respond.

The light fades for a moment. When it returns, I realize that my friends are no longer girls, but mounds of spiders arranged into silhouettes.

I shriek as the spiders tumble over me. Their legs form hundreds of needle pricks...



In the middle of the night, a scream pierces its way through my dreams. At first, I think it's my own as I shake off the nightmare. But as I sit up in bed, the sound grows louder. It's the loudest, most ear-piercing scream I've ever heard. I get out of bed and wonder how the other girls can remain asleep. But before I can plug my ears, there's an enormous thudding below the floor.

After this, everything goes silent.

I feel queasy. Who was screaming? Was she a student I'd seen before?

I wander around the room and find the doors locked. I kneel on the ground and catch sight of a loose wall panel. I give it a jiggle, and it opens up like the panel in the other room's wardrobe. I peer inside to see a dim passage. I crawl into it and walk ahead...

A minute later, I pop out another panel and enter a dim room. Elsa's dollhouse chamber. The room's empty, so I head over to the doll closet. When I open it, I discover that new dolls have been added to the reject pile. One of them looks just like Heidi.

"What happened to you?" I whisper as I pick up the doll.

A thudding sound can be heard beneath the floor, and I hear a faint echo of the earlier scream. With that, I feel shaken and hurry back to my bed.

About the author

Ciye Cho lives in Australia and works as a graphic designer. He writes YA novels in his free time—and his head is often lost in the clouds or some place far from reality...

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