



blue veit

THE ENDLESS SKY PLAYLIST

SIDE A & B

LOVE BRAIN

BLUE VEIL

The Endless Sky Playlist

Side A

by LoveBrain

Blue Veil: The Endless Sky Playlist, Side A

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Chapters 1 to 5 of the novel.

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Content advisory. Rated R. Strong language, drug and alcohol use, addiction, trauma and abuse, sexual content, themes of suicide and death, and frequent bloody violence. Blue Veil is intended for mature audiences and is not suitable for younger readers.

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CHAPTER 1

Radio Ga Ga

My body was starting to ache. My hands were shaking. Not a lot, but enough to tell me I was gonna break soon if I didn't get a fix. They didn't care though. This was the game they liked to play.

When you were at the mercy of NEST, they liked to dig the knife in and wiggle it around.

This was my seventy-first interview since I started to remember more than just glimpses. I was a late bloomer. Most Re-Cars got their memories back around puberty. I didn't get them all back until I was almost twenty and when I did, they were all jumbled bits of mental throw up.

Up until then, most normal people just thought I was crazy. A bad seed.

And I was.

God, I was a horrible girl. Sometimes I think back on those times and I feel sorry for my mom and stepdad. I feel like such a horrible person for what I did.

For Sam.

"You're wandering," he said to me, sitting across the stainless steel table.

I looked around the small interrogation room. Smelled the old plastic from the foam on the walls. Looked at the dead ashes in our

ashtray. Four or five butts had already been put out in it and most of them were mine. I could feel little beads of sweat working their way onto my forehead. Not just from the lights overhead either.

I couldn't look him in the eyes though. I couldn't look anyone in the eyes. Never was able, really. They used to think I was autistic, but that's not it. Something about it just kills me. It feels too personal. Too real. Something about people looking at me like that just makes me feel smaller. I just want to shrink into the floor.

"No. No, I'm here." I said, taking a long breath.

I glanced up at his handsome, dark-skinned face. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, maybe in his late forties. Looked like he could handle himself alright, but he and I both knew what he really was. At a moment's notice he could snap me in half.

He was a celestial. Or, a lesser celestial if he was here on earth.

I guess if I thought about getting snapped in half that wasn't particularly hard though. At five foot and ninety-two pounds with my pockets full, I'm guessing most anybody could break me in two. I remember reading somewhere that my ideal weight was like almost one-hundred and ten. I suppose I might be able to pull that off.

Y'know.

If not for crushing poverty.

"Your processing interview wasn't the greatest this month. How are you adjusting?"

He tilted his head to catch my eyes and for a moment I looked back. It wasn't long before my eyes retreated and I heard him cough out a sound that was probably a chuckle.

"I'm doin' okay," my knee started to bounce.

"Are you?"

"Yeah," I said, nodding my head.

Too fast.

I wince.

"Are you back on drugs?" He asked, his dark eyes weighing on me.

“No.”

“Are you back on drugs?” He asked again, exactly the same way he had before.

“No.” I shifted in my seat.

“Are you back on drugs?” He repeated for the third time.

“Yes.”

He leaned back in his chair.

Fuck.

I was almost out of here.

“Look,” I said, “we’ve been at this for a while. I’ll tell you whatever you want to hear, I just,” my breath caught in my chest and I exhaled.

I tried to lift my hands to brush my frizzy hair back but one of my wrists caught on the handcuff they had me in. The metal clicked as I accidentally pulled it taut. I dropped my hands back on the table.

“You’re right. It’s been eight hours. And from the looks of your hands, I’d say it’s about time for you to fix. Isn’t that right, Charlotte?” The smug look on his face sickened me.

“Fuck you.”

I turned my head to look at the wall as he chuckled. The sound made me want to throw things at him.

I started to say something but instead forced myself to look at him.

“I’m sorry, Agent Atherton.” I lied with as much conviction as I could.

Seconds later my eyes retreated to the table.

“No you’re not, but I’ll accept it,” he opened his notepad again and fetched his pen from his jacket pocket.

“What are you taking, Charlie?”

“Vicodin.” I lied.

“What are you taking, Charlie?” His pen didn’t move.

“Vicodin.” I tried to lie again. His pen still showed no sign of movement.

I rolled my eyes and blew a heavy sigh.

“I take a pill cocktail in the morning before breakfast. Percocet, Vicodin, Adderall.”

I hesitated. He knew there was more. I could feel him judging me.

“I like ‘em together,” I added, trying to hide my hesitation.

There was a long, pregnant silence. I heard him take a slow breath of his own.

“That’s all. I swear.” I looked down at my hands, wishing I’d spoken up louder.

“Pull up your sleeve, Charlotte.”

“Fuck.” I kicked the table leg. “Just lemme go home, alright?” I begged, disrespecting my New York roots.

“Pull up your sleeve.” He repeated and I just wanted to yell at him.

“Just- why a-,” I couldn’t get my words together. “God.”

“He doesn’t exist. Pull up your sleeve.”

I reached over to my shackled wrist, grabbed the sleeve of my sweater and yanked it up. I knew what was there. I was too ashamed to look down at it with him. I just sat there staring at the padded wall.

“And I guess those are all just bee stings. Right?” He said.

Tears started rolling down my cheeks. I was so mad at myself I was trembling. I held my sleeve up though. Defiance my last defense.

“Back on heroin,” he said in confirmation and I finally hear his pen scratching away at that notepad. The sound made me clench my jaw tighter.

“How much are you taking?” He asked.

“Two... maybe three bags a day.” If I didn’t sound defeated before, now I just sounded like a kicked dog. I shoved my sleeve back down and wiped my face.

“What do you get outta this?” I stared daggers at him for a moment.

Only a moment.

“Out of what?” He asked, genuinely curious, sitting back in his chair and looking at me.

I saw one of his eyebrows lift a little.

“Outta beatin’ me down all the time.” I said back, my free hand sweeping across the table, smacking his notepad to the floor, “like my life’s not hard enough without this shit. You guys drag me up here once a month, ask me the same questions for hours, make me feel bad about myself. Then I get to sit in here with you afterwards so you can make me feel worse.”

“I’m just-”

“Doin’ your job,” I cut him off, “yeah. Whatever. Look, I’m not proud of what I am. People in my position don’t get luxuries like pride. That’s for people like you that get to judge people like me.”

There was another long silence.

He picked his notepad up from the floor and started writing something else. I sat back in my chair. By then the need was really eating at me. All I could think about was shooting up. I just needed to get to my kit. If I could just get out of here and catch a bus home.

“Last question, Charlie. Where is it?” He asked, and I nodded my head.

It’s what came at the end of every one of my follow-ups.

The question.

“I don’t know.”

“Where is the Heart Fire, Charlie?” He asked again.

“I don’t know.”

“Where is it?” He scribbled a few lines on his pad then looked up at me. His eyes were squinting at me like he was trying to read into my head.

“Look, you gotta know if I knew where it was, I’d have told you by now.” I said, but he didn’t seem convinced. He just sat up in his chair and sighed.

“You don’t believe me. Right.” I blew a resigned breath of my own, “Am I going on ice?”

“No, I believe you.” He lifted both hands in a non confrontational way. The gesture was comforting. “I don’t think putting you on ice is going to do any good.”

I exhaled pure relief.

Nobody wanted the ice. That’s when they lock you up in a mental ward and tell your family you had a psychotic break. Not that they’d have to tell my family anything.

They all hated me.

On ice you’re on twenty-four seven lockdown. You don’t have any contact with the outside world. It’s just you and a couple other reincarnates bitching about not getting pudding on Fridays. You get process interviews every day, get force fed medication and have to stick out your tongue to prove you swallowed it. They humiliate you, treat you like a child, use sleep deprivation techniques to make you snap.

When you snap, you get what I always get.

When I get mad, I break shit.

When I break shit, an orderly beats my ass.

After they beat my ass, I get a zombie shot in the neck and a straitjacket to drool on.

NEST keeps a pretty tight hold on the lives of any reincarnated god. You act up and they’ll put your ass on ice so long you’ll forget your name. And for a Re-Car, that’s a big deal.

We live a really long time.

It’s hard to fit two lives in one brain. You end up losing touch with what’s real. Some people are stronger than others, but for the most part, NEST doesn’t have too hard a job finding us. You just check every behavioral program, nuthouse, county jail, lockup, rehab or ghetto and you’ll usually find one of us.

We can’t cope.

We can’t function in society.

My entire race was defined by being screw-ups, rejects, alcoholics and addicts.

We get born here no more powerful than anyone else. Only thing we get is a guaranteed hard life and when we turn sixteen we get handlers. Mine were agents Paul Lyons and Levy Atherton.

Apollyon and Leviathan.

There were other agents too. Like Lilly Little. Lilith. She was a real bitch. One of the Triumvirate. Paul Lyons, he was one of the Triumvirate as well. I didn't see him much though. Mostly Levy here. Paul was far too busy coordinating NEST countrywide.

Most Re-Cars get moved to the States after they're discovered. The one country that had a track record for locking up people they were embarrassed of.

Bring me your tired, poor and wretched masses yearning to get marginalized.

Problem solved I guess.

Lastly, there was William Lisle, the head of the Triumvirate. I won't spell that one out, it's too obvious. He was a cold son of a bitch. I met him one time by accident. Levy had me handcuffed outside in the hallway because me and my temper had decided to show my ass again. I started kicking shit over and throwing a tantrum.

He put me into the wall hard and sat me down right when good ol' Billy was walking by. He looked down at me and said one word.

Icebox.

Off I went. Gone for three months to the land of drool and withheld pudding. But not before his right-hand lady Lilly got a piece of me.

She liked to hurt me.

Levy was staring holes into the side of my head but I didn't look at him.

"Look at me." He said, like he was reading my mind.

My face twisted and I gave a defeated whimper. I mustered defiance on my face and forced my eyes up.

“Good. Don’t look away.”

It was murder.

The only way I could keep staring him in the eyes was not to blink. My eyes started to burn.

“Now smile.”

Agent Atherton knew exactly what he was doing.

I felt exposed.

“C’mon, man.”

“Charlie, a handler is supposed to challenge you. My job is to remind you that you have no power. You are completely out of control.” He let a long silence creep between us again.

“Smile.” He said. It wasn’t a request.

I forced the world’s most cringe-worthy smile.

Levy stared right through me.

“Go home, Charlie.” He stood up and the cuff on my wrist released on its own.

I rubbed at the red ring on my flesh.

“Really? No foolin’?” I asked, afraid to stand up. Afraid it was another trick.

“Really,” Levy replied from the door, holding it open.

I stood up and quickly made my way to it. He tapped me with his notepad on my way out and I stopped.

“What’s up?” I asked, real worry in my eyes as I looked back, afraid agents were about to swarm me from the doorways in the hall. Afraid of a needle in my neck and a trip to the box.

“You talk to your family lately?”

“C’mon. You know they don’t talk to me.” I said. “Scept maybe Max.”

“That’s who I mean. You told her about any of this?”

“No,” I shook my head, “I wouldn’t do that to her. And yeah... we talk off and on. I can tell she forces herself to speak to me, but it’s still kinda nice. Y’know. Like, I dunno. Like we’re still sisters.” I said, shrugging.

“Yeah.” He nodded, “She know you’re back on the needle?” He asked.

I felt my eyebrows twitch at what sounded like a touch of concern in his voice.

“No.”

“You should tell her.”

He tucked his notepad under his arm and started away down the pristine metal hallway.

Everybody was always trying to stick me somewhere they thought would help. NEST was always threatening the icebox, the cops were always threatening jail time. Max wanted me to go to rehab.

All I wanted to do was go home, get high and forget about all of them.

I even smiled a little at the thought. Not of Max, not about finally getting out of here. No, what excited me the most was the thought of being able to get back home to my love. My peace-giver. Just thinking about the prick of a needle gave me a wave of excitement and joy.

I hurried out to the lobby to check myself out. I stood in line, smiling to myself like someone had told me a funny joke a moment ago. I scribbled my sloppy signature on the line at the bottom of my out paperwork and confirmed my next appointment in thirty days.

“Charlie S. Ryan,” I said, giving the paperwork back to the woman sitting opposite the intake window.

“Ms. Ryan, your next appointment will be on the nineteenth at 5:00 AM. If you miss this appointment your NEST Agent will collect you by force. If you resist you will be detained and immediately processed for isolation pending an assessment by the Triumvirate. Any and all unpermitted travel is restricted. If you intend to travel

outside of your geo-fence you are to report immediately to agents Paul Lyons or Levy Atherton. Furthermore, you are in no way permitted to raise your hands in any form of aggression, assault or self-defense for the betterment and safety of non-reincarnates. Any violation of your BTP or Borrowed Time Policy will result in immediate arrest and possible time spent in a NEST isolation and rehabilitation center. Your freedom is a privilege, not a right. Do you understand?”

It was the same speech everyone got when leaving but I didn't hear any of it. My mind was on getting rid of this ache in my body. The soreness in my bones that could only be cured by one thing.

“I understand.” I nodded.

She slid my personal items under the glass window in a NEST bag. Inside it, right beneath the Naturalization Enforcement and Securities Triumvirate logo was my small wallet, a half-empty box of cigarettes and a cheap lighter with a gas station logo on it. They slid me my backpack and cellphone through the two-way drawer under the counter.

I had a habit of carrying a guy's wallet. Not because I didn't like girl wallets, but because when you spend half your life running or in one-sided street fights, dainty little magnet clip foldovers just didn't quite make sense. That and I couldn't afford a real wallet so I Googled a video on how to make one out of duct tape. One trip down to the maintenance closet in my building and I had a sturdy bifold job I could cram all my personals in.

I rifled through my cell phone out of habit. I don't know why I bothered checking it. Nobody ever called. It wasn't the most lavish thing in the world, the screen was cracked and my dollar store case had seen better days but it did its job. I had seven contacts saved: Mom, Dad, Max, Bobby, Andy, Sam and Tambourine Man.

Only two of them ever spoke to me.

Max and my dealer.

I put my earbuds in, shuffled my playlist, signed my acceptance of the terms of my temporary freedom and headed towards the big glass front doors. Several other Re-Cars sat in the lobby waiting their turn to be heckled, poked, prodded and made fun of. I recognized a few faces from being here previously, but I didn't want a conversation. I didn't want to say hi to someone I'd likely never see again if they gave the wrong answer in there and ended up getting sent up the river.

I just left.

It took almost an hour to get home. I missed my bus and had to wait for another. Then someone had a fender bender on the overpass so the bus driver had to take an alternate route. I sat at the back of the bus chewing my fingernails and dreaming about escaping reality on a needle ride. Every now and then I'd catch some bozo staring back at me with that look.

Some girls liked being pretty.

I didn't.

Just meant half the people you meet were gonna be dishonest. Or make you promises they weren't gonna keep. I wasn't trying to be another biracial hoodrat with five kids I couldn't afford, nor somebody's trophy booty. Whenever they gave me the look, I acted like a stuck up bitch or ignored them entirely.

Sometimes I would get the insistent ones that stepped up with a ridiculous, 'Hey, yo, ma! Ma!', pants sagging halfway down their ass like a male prison yard slut. Or those preppy white guys with jungle fever hoping to impress me in the front seat of their daddy's Porsche.

Get the fuck outta here.

I switched over to the radio.

Normally I listened to jazz. Right now, I just turned on the FM on my phone and listened to anything. Radio chatter, some political talk show on NPR. Radio blah-blah I could give two shits about.

I got off the bus at the corner of the street to the blaring sound of the train going by overhead. The familiar smell of urine and old beer

hitting my nose from the underpass. I'd walked this street so many times I knew where every broken piece of concrete was, every chunk of unmown grass.

I had a cigarette fired up the moment fresh air touched my face.

I didn't know a single one of my neighbors. All I remembered was one building after another, packed to bursting with tiny, low-income apartments and truly destitute people. Somewhere among them, I found my own broken down old building.

In my neighborhood all of the windows had bars.

By then my skin was practically on fire. I was sweating on a sixty-degree day.

Fuck, I needed to get these clothes off.

Hopping up the three stairs on the stoop, I punched in the door code fast and shoved it open. I smashed my cigarette butt out on the brick window sill outside, half listening to some radio interview playing in my ears.

Blowing a smokey sigh, I stopped and pulled an earbud out, turning to look at the tiny little office to the left of the front door. Inside, Jack was moving stacks of paperwork around and writing things on the big calendar I knew was in front of him.

"Charlie, my dad wants to know when you're paying rent." He tried to sound tough and authoritative. If I had a spine it probably wouldn't have worked.

But I don't.

My shoulders sank.

"I- yeah..." I looked at the floor in his direction. "I'll get it."

"Yeah?" He said, and my top lip curled on its own.

Here we go.

"I mean," He gave me a toothy smile, "I can cover you if you want."

"Can you, Jack?" I said more than asked. "And why would you be that generous?"

He sauntered over to me. He was tall, sandy-haired. Kind of guy who probably got lots of attention in high school. I wouldn't lie to him if he asked me. He was attractive.

"I've been trying to take you out forever. I mean, if you're not the dating kinda girl, we can always just be buddies. I kinda got a thing for mixed girls, y'know?"

"Do you." I said, "What kinda mixed girls?"

"Your kind." He replied and my eyes rolled.

"And what kind is that?" I asked, intentionally leaning my weight on one hip. I saw his eyes dip down.

Every guy's eyes dipped down.

I was short and lean, but broad in the hips and thighs where most of my weight sat. My family's genetic blessing. Or curse, I guess. Mom and all my sisters were coke bottles.

I was the only pear.

"Short, cute, pouty lips, great hips." He said, confidence radiating from him.

This kid didn't hear no very often.

I gave a short laugh, "What's that got to do with being mixed?"

"Everything, my soft, sweet, mulato princess. Don't be cruel. I'm just an honest man on a mission."

"Princess? Yeah right. More like peasant. And what mission is that, Jacky?" I balked, tilting my chin down, throwing my coffee brown eyes up.

I didn't want to look him in the eyes. I looked him in the mouth. He was looking me in mine, I figured it was fair game.

"C'mon. That booty's calling my name."

"No, it's really not." I smiled, shaking my head.

Jack was barely twenty years old. I'd be twenty-seven by the end of next summer. He was still full of youth and hopeful determination. He had that late-night soap opera, White Knight complex. Every time he talked to me I could tell he envisioned some stupid future with the

two of us laughing, cuddled up on the couch. He'd have some hot shit job, I'd be his pretty little half-white, half-black wife he would brag to his friends about. Give him two little mixed babies. Wrap my pouty lips around his dick and suck him stupid after work while he watched the game. Let him blow his balls in my throat before I bring him dinner. A dime store porn story mixed with fantasy.

One day he would grow up and know better. I didn't want to be the one to teach him about girls like me.

"Tell your dad I'll get it to him as soon as I can. I'm just... kinda havin' a little trouble findin' a gig."

"Yeah, it's cool. I'll try to keep him off your back. Just get it as fast as you can, alright? You're cool. I don't wanna have to get used to somebody else moving in." I nodded at him.

He hesitated awkwardly and I knew why. He was searching my face. I finally gave him what he wanted. I forced my eyes up to meet his. He smiled that pretty, appreciative smile at me.

"I gotta get goin'," I said, turning for the stairs.

I was positive he was staring at my booty. I didn't wear skinny jeans and yoga pants to show off. They were only ninety-nine cents at the thrift store.

I made sure to give him a little extra swing in my hips during my short walk to the stairs. When I rounded the first landing, I glanced down and confirmed my suspicion. He had a goofy grin on his face.

I really should stop teasing him.

Anybody that said they didn't like attention once in a while was just lying to themselves. The messed up part is, even though you say you don't want it from anyone, what it comes down to is whose attention you're getting. Most of the attention I get from men is all the wrong kind. Most of them see me as a piece of ass or a quick booty call they can pick up, fuck and drop back off in the ghetto. And that's exactly why I'd rather go home and fingerfuck myself before bed.

Jack wasn't like them though. He tried to act like a player, but I could see through it. I could read his eyes. I didn't know how to deal with the way he looked at me. Like he saw me the way I could be instead of how I am. I could tell he saw me like I was somebody worthy of his affection.

If I could be that for him we'd both be the happiest people alive.

But that's not me.

I made it to my apartment just as a wave of nausea hit me. I cursed myself for taking too long. I'd almost forgotten about my real lover. The one that rocked me to sleep at night and made all my tension go away.

Jack thought the world of me.

My body reminded me what I really was.

I forced my key into the lock of my narrow door, disgusted at myself, and pushed it open to step into my tiny little studio apartment.

It was two-hundred square feet of nothing, but it was mine. The door opened right up into my subatomic living room space. A little threadbare loveseat stood in for a couch. Across from it, my rain-bleached TV stand sat against the wall holding up a twenty-nine-inch television my sister Max gave me. My dresser separated my living room from my bedroom. On the opposite side of it, a twin sized bed sat with old but comfortable sheets on it. The blanket was a quilt I managed to scoop up at a garage sale for a few dollars and pillows purchased in a two pack from the local department store with a sales coupon.

My bed sat facing the tiniest kitchenette a landlord's money could buy and to top it all off, the counter was hidden under a collection of whiskey and beer bottles. A few dirty spoons and forks were in the sink and the little garbage can next to it was spilling over with microwave dinner packages, popcorn wrappers, chip bags and the

remains of last night's five-star dinner. A half eaten box of donuts lifted from the concession table of my AA Meeting the night before.

I went to AA almost every week after I got out of prison.

I've only ever had the light blue token.

Twenty-four hours was as far as I'd ever made it. After a while I was so ashamed of myself I just stopped going. Once in a while, I'd come by to steal free snacks. I'd stand out in the hallway listening sometimes, but I couldn't make myself go in.

Like last night.

I didn't stop to take off my shoes. I dropped my bag by the door, made sure it was locked, then hurried my way to the bathroom. I threw on the light and looked up at the medicine cabinet above the sink.

The mirror was blacked out with electrical tape.

I stared at it and felt thankful I didn't have to look at myself. I remembered it wasn't just my own eyes I was blocking. Thinking about that I hesitated, imagining eyes on me. I felt myself cringing at the thought but pushed it to the back of my mind as I opened the medicine cabinet behind it.

I took out the little tin box inside next to all the stolen prescription bottles.

Popping it open, I breathed a sigh of relief to see it still there.

I knew it hadn't gone anywhere. That no one had taken it; and yet still it was a huge comfort.

My needle, my old, burnt up little spoon and shoelace. My three little blue, square bags.

Moments later I was sitting on the loveseat, watching the evening news while I heated that nugget of white powder and liquid with a lighter under the head of my kit spoon.

I promised myself that I'd only do a little. Just to knock the edge off. Just to feel good again. My body was in so much pain by the time I was loading that needle, I could barely think straight.

I was excited.

I was already getting a little rush just thinking about it.

Nobody understood me the way that this did. The way my needle did. It was my friend. It was my counselor. When your head is full of thoughts you don't want and you're in so much pain you want to dig out the parts that hurt with a knife. When your muscles are cramping up like they hate you, your stomach is doing flips and all you want to do is find a corner, lay in it and die just to make the pain go away.

When you just felt bad.

You would do anything to feel better.

I felt the familiar sting. It didn't hurt. It felt wonderful.

I felt the pins and needles start at the crown of my head. I felt the wave of peace wash all through me.

Then the high. Oh, god the high.

I was floating up, but at the same time, there was a weight on my chest. A familiar press that felt both good and bad. Like a scolding hand from heaven, willing me to lay down on my little couch. My eyelids betrayed me. They weighed six hundred pounds and I didn't want to fight them. They loved me.

Everyone loved me.

The whole world just wanted me to feel better.

I did feel better.

This is what true love feels like. I've never been kissed like this; never been held like this.

I'm complete.

* * *

I woke up hard.

Nothing made sense. My mouth tasted like an ashtray, dry and foul, like whiskey and cigarettes. I looked around with one eye open. Light from my only window was blinding even through my cheap dollar store curtains. My body was sore from the position I slept in,

my neck on the arm of the couch, my back curled like a question mark all night.

I looked down at the floor beside me. My ashtray sat there next to my now empty box of smokes, stuffed to spilling over with butts from the last three nights. A half empty bottle of whiskey was sitting next to one of my shoes, the other one was still on my foot.

I could have sworn I had one cigarette left, but I couldn't be sure.

Dried drool had crusted up at either side of my mouth and that's when I noticed it. I looked down to see dry vomit on my chest and I dropped my head back on the armrest.

"You did it again, Charlie," I whispered out loud, my voice dry and cracking.

I climbed off the couch and found my feet.

Sorta.

The moment I got up, blood rushed from my head and I got an instant migraine. I fell to the floor in front of the tin can that housed my hype kit. Getting to hands and knees, I looked into it to see all three bags were gone.

"Fuck... I shot it all."

I looked around for my needle, only to find it swinging from my arm. It was still in. I didn't even notice the pain when I pulled it out, but the dried scab that was holding it in place tore and my arm leaked a fresh dot of dark red blood.

"You stupid bitch. Can't afford this shit."

I peeled my disgusting shirt off and tossed it to the floor, sitting back against the couch, looking down at my small breasts to check and make sure I didn't get puke on my sports bra.

"I can't keep doing this. I'm gonna die. You gotta stop, Charlie. That's it. No more. You're gonna accidentally kill yourself." I rubbed my face.

Would that really be so bad? Shouldn't I just die?

“Yeah. Keep telling yourself that. I’m sure it’ll help,” said an unfamiliar baritone voice from the corner of my place.

I snapped up, skittering across the living room in my panties and a single shoe.

Somewhere in my mind, I registered the fact that I managed to get skinny jeans off with one shoe still on. However the fuck I managed that is beyond me and my drug-addled, sleepy brain.

I stumbled and bumped my way across the room and hid behind my dresser.

“Holy shit. Holy shit! Who the fuck are you? How the fuck did you get in my place? This is my house!”

“Charlie, relax.” The baritone voice said.

“Fuck you, relax.” I peeked out from behind the dresser.

A young man stood in the corner of my apartment, leaning into the wall. He wore a white disheveled tie around his neck over an unbuttoned collar. His dark green button up was untucked above dark pants and sneakers with a long dark peacoat over top. He had a face full of youthful, male beauty. An accidental kind of handsome. His hair was a stylish brown, wavy bed-head that seemed like he gave a shit and didn’t at the same time.

I watched him light my last cigarette before I tucked myself back behind my dresser.

“Who are you?” I asked, trying to calm myself.

If he was going to hurt me, he certainly had every opportunity while I was laying on the couch in my own sweat and puke.

“Stag.” He said, “I’m not gonna hurt you.”

I peeked again to see him blow smoke out of the corner of his mouth.

“Said every serial killer ever,” I bit back sarcastically.

He gave a genuine laugh. One that was easy to like.

“What’s that accent, Bed Stuy?” He asked.

“Bed Stuy? Get your hearin’ checked. Flatbush.”

“Damn. So close.” He said.

“Close? Four miles makes a difference, Fucko. What kinda name is Stag, anyway?”

“It’s a short name.”

“Really?” I said, sarcasm dripping from my tone.

“Yeah. Y’know. A short name. Small form of a longer name given at birth.”

“Funny,” I responded, my tone flat. “What do you want, Stag?”

“Nothing in particular,” I heard him blow more smoke. “Just figured I should stay to see if you were gonna make it or not.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Means you overdosed last night. Hope you don’t mind me using your Narcan. I found you choking on your own vomit.”

A sudden wave of embarrassment threatened to shove me into the floor.

“Yeah, thanks. If you were smart you’d have just left.”

“I said my name is Stag,” he replied, I could hear him talking through a smile, “not Walter White.”

I laughed a little. “Nice. S’a good show.”

“Yeah, it is.” I could smell my cheap tobacco in the air.

“So listen. You gonna come out from behind the dresser, Brooklyn? It’s kinda hard having a conversation with somebody like this.”

“Not till you tell me how the fuck you got in here, Stag.”

“Oh, you know. Little magic trick. Full disclosure, you’re not supposed to see me.”

“Fuck. I knew it was a trick. I KNEW It!”

I stood up from behind the dresser and started opening drawers, getting out a fresh change of clothes.

“Look. Tell Levy I’m not resisting, okay? Just let me take a shower and get changed, I’ll come quiet. He doesn’t have to send Lilly. I’ll be good, I won’t break anything. Let’s just get it over with.”

“What?” Stag said.

The look on his face was genuinely confused.

I stood there with a shirt in one hand and a fresh pair of panties in the other.

“The box, right? How long this time? I swear, I’m really close to gettin’ a job, I just... fuck. I’m gonna lose my place.”

I dropped my hands to my sides and could feel them coming. I was gonna cry again like a fucking baby.

“I’m not-...”

“Shit. I ju-... I’m tryin’ so hard, I.. fuck!”

“Charlie! Charlie... j- relax!” He said.

“This is bullshit, I didn’t even do anything this time!”

He stood up, lifting both hands his eyes wide like he’d just seen a murder.

“I’m not taking you anywhere, kiddo.”

“You’re not?” I said.

“No.” He started walking towards me and I backed up.

“You promise?” I dried my eyes with the heel of my hands, “I don’t wanna go back there. I’ll go to rehab, I’ll stop using. I’ll get better.”

“I’m not a NEST agent, Charlie.”

“I don’t believe you. It’s always tricks with you guys. Always games.” I said, “Promise me.”

“Alright, I promise. I’m not one of Midvalley’s knuckleheads.”

“Okay... Okay, but either way... like, you know. About us.”

“Yeah, I do. Blue Veil isn’t completely controlled by The Lightning Emperor, you know? We don’t all agree with his world view.”

Stag took another step.

“Stop.”

“I’m coming to you slowly, okay?”

I backed up another half step, but something in his face put me at ease.

He put his cigarette out in the ashtray I left on the floor and kept his word, slowly walking towards me. He reached into his pocket and I stepped back again, bumping into my bed.

“Stop!”

“Charlie, hang on. It’s not a weapon, it’s not a needle, it’s just a scarf.” He said, pulling a neatly folded, long white scarf from his inside jacket pocket.

I looked at it, curious. It was knitted to perfection. It looked so soft, so stark white against the stained, scarred surface of my dresser where he sat it.

“This was yours,” he said, his tone reverent.

I looked at it again. I noticed the beautifully made patterns in its fabric. I noticed the tassels at the end of it. Things that were immediately familiar to me. I retraced my half step back to get closer, my small hand reaching out for it. That’s when I placed it in my mind. Something from a long, long time ago.

From before.

“That’s not mine anymore,” I said, and my hand dropped to my side.

Stag looked at me.

“You’re with the Republic?” I asked him.

“Kinda. Really, I stand with Chroma God... Which means I stand with you.”

“Stand with me for what?” I asked, shaking my head. “If you think I’m goin’ back to Blue Veil, you’re out of your mind. Look, I don’t know what part of the Endless Sky you came from, but you’re better off goin’ back there before NEST finds you here. They’ll hurt you real bad and then they’ll go to work on me.”

“Yeah, I know. But that’s not gonna happen.”

“And why wouldn’t it?” I scoffed.

“Are you gonna tell on me?” He asked, the playful smile on his face almost soothing.

I looked him in his hazel eyes and regretted it as soon as I did.

They fucking were beautiful.

My eyes darted away.

“What’s Stag short for?” I asked him.

“Stagger.” He said, “Lee. Stagger Lee.”

He offered a hand to shake.

“I need a shower.”

“Yep. You smell pretty terrible.” Stagger nodded and I shoved his chest.

We both chuckled.

“Like vomit, cigarettes, and booze-sweat. Basically like a dive bar. You smell like a dive bar.”

“I am a dive bar,” I groaned and scratched my head through my big poof of frizzy hair.

“Make yourself at home, Stag.”

I grabbed up my things and headed towards the bathroom, stopping to look back.

“And thanks for saving my life. I guess I kinda owe you one.”

“Not the first time,” Stagger shot back, his back respectfully turned to me.

I felt my eyebrows fidget, unsure if they wanted to frown or lift in surprise. He wasn’t trying to look at my ass. Then again, I looked and smelled like a dumpster fire at the moment.

Maybe that was why.

“I’ll expect you to explain that sentence when I get back.”

“Yup.” He said, walking over to lean against the side of my window. He pulled the curtains back just far enough to see out of them.

I lingered, staring at him a little longer, wondering why after all this time someone from Blue Veil showed up in my shitty little life, in my shitty little apartment. It wasn’t completely unusual. Breachers who came across to Earth with gate keys not given out by NEST or

Orcus were usually dealt with quickly. Locked up in a prison on Earth or Blue Veil; sometimes even killed. Either way, they just disappeared.

The real question was where they got their gate key from.

I tried to wrap my mind around it all while I washed the sweat, stink and the vomit residue off my body. I was so embarrassed someone had seen me like that. At my absolute worst. This wasn't the first morning I'd woken up in this condition, but usually, I was alone. I never could handle heroin well, but the high was so powerful.

At least at first.

That's how it traps you.

The high wasn't as good anymore, but now I needed it. I chased after that first high so long my body was reliant on the chemical. I couldn't function without it. It made me feel normal. Even now with a stranger in my living room from another world, all I was thinking about was how I was going to come up with the money to get my fix before the body aches set in. Or how I was gonna feed myself. My fridge was empty. I had about two dollars in my checking account and about three dollars in change in my backpack.

I slid down the wall of my shower and sat down under the hot rain. I liked to turn it up until it was almost scalding. Let it massage my muscles into jelly and get my mind off of the day I knew was coming. Every day was something to endure instead of enjoy. How I was going to get through it without shooting up, I didn't know.

My big, bushy head full of black, loose curls soaked up the water like a sponge and grew heavy. It spilled over me, down my back, over my face and I just let it. I massaged shampoo through it and felt the bottle was getting a little light. I'd have to find money to replace that soon too. Conditioner followed, and by the time I had gotten to my frizzy hair care treatments, my hands were already tired of scrubbing and my arms hurt from holding them up.

Not having a job, a haircut was out of the question.

I forced my way through it, finishing the chore that my hair had become. Climbing out of the shower, I dried myself off and got dressed.

I was too lazy to mate my socks so I never wore two that matched. Today it was skinny jeans, knee high converse all-stars I'd stolen from the women's locker room at the Community Center and an untucked, short sleeve button up from the clearance shelf in the boy's section of a department store.

I made sure I hid my track marks with a long-sleeved undershirt.

I figured my best bet today would be to hustle at one of the local High Schools. I hadn't been to Southside in a few months. Could probably sneak in there, blend in with the crowd and get a meal in. Maybe steal some shit off faculty I could flip for cash.

Maybe after that, I could ride the train for a few hours. Pick some pockets while married men grabbed my ass in the tight crowds.

I put my hair up into two big, frizzy balls high on either side of the back of my head and stepped out of the bathroom to find Stagger still standing at the window.

He looked back at me with a smile.

I paid him no mind, walking over to my dresser.

In my top right-hand drawer, I kept all kinds of accessories. Most of it stolen from arcades, department stores, fairs, people's backpacks, you name it. Things I'd collected that people left on various kinds of public transportation, too. I pulled on a multi-colored, chunky plastic bracelet, slipped a black novelty store ring on my right middle finger, another thumb ring on my left hand and looked up to see Stagger staring at me.

His smile had grown.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing." He shrugged.

My shoulders dropped.

"What?" My voice was flat.

“Gonna go pretend to be in High School again?”

“Okay, what the fuck. Have you been watchin’ me? Are you stalkin’ me?” I asked, suddenly fearful.

“No. I mean, yes. But no.”

“What, you ain’t got a TV back home? A hobby, maybe?”

“Charlie, Chroma God sent me here a long time ago to keep an eye on you. I wasn’t supposed to get directly involved, I wasn’t supposed to ever let you see me, hear me... we aren’t even supposed to be talking.”

“So why did you?”

“Because things in Blue Veil are only getting worse.” He turned from the window to face me fully, “There’s another war coming. One big enough to rival the War of the Old Gods, and it’s not looking good for those of us trying to find Brahma God.”

“That’s not my problem.”

“Yes, it is,” He shot back. “Somewhere lost in your head is the location of the Heart Fire.”

“I don’t know where it is and I’m really sick and tired of people askin’ me about it. I don’t know where the Heart Fire is, I don’t know where Brahma is. I used to give a shit, I tried lookin’ for him. He’s nowhere. He could be in a NEST lock up for all we know. Perun killed him. It’s over. The Old Gods had their shot and lost. We all did. This is the life I got landed with and this is the only one I care about now.”

I slammed my dresser drawer shut and headed over to my backpack.

“Where’s my phone?”

“It’s over there,” Stagger pointed at the couch arm.

I walked over and snatched it up, swiping it open. I went to my messages, hoping, praying dad said something back to me.

Still nothing. Just a long line of text messages I’d sent him over the years.

Me:

Hey, Daddy.

Me:

Hi.

Me:

I'm out of jail now. Wanna get breakfast? I really need to talk to you...

Me:

I know it was my fault. I'm so sorry. If I could take it back, I would.

Me:

Please talk to me.

Me:

Hello?

It went on for pages. Not a single response back.

"He didn't respond." Stagger said. He was looking out the window again.

"Don't be here when I get back," I fired back at him, glaring at the back of his head.

I snatched my backpack up and stood at my door, suddenly hating him. How dare he even mention my daddy.

"I gotta go try to save my roof. Unless you happen to have four-hundred dollars to pay on it, consider your stay here now revoked, alright?"

"Doesn't work that way."

"Yes, it does." I frowned. He didn't even turn from the window to look at me.

"No, it doesn't."

The door slamming was the only response he got back. I carried that frown on my face all the way down the stairs, rifling through my phone to see if I'd gotten any other messages.

I had one.

Tambourine Man:

Hey got sum new shit u n need?

I texted back.

Me:

Ya but no \$ rite now

Tambourine Man:

We can work sum out ;)

Me:

Lik wat?

Tambourine Man:

Bring me that round a\$\$\$. Ben tryna hit it 4 a min :P~

Me:

U want me 2 fuk u??!!

Tambourine Man:

Yuuuuup

Me:

No thx

Tambourine Man:

Watev. Lemme no wen u got the \$

Me:

Kk

I locked my phone and shoved it in my back pocket.

“Fuckin’ figures.” I took the last set of creaky steps as quietly as I could, trying to slip past the office and to the front door without disturbing anyone in it.

“Where’s my rent, Charlie?”

Fuck.

The old man.

“I’m on my way to get it now, Mr. J,” I called back nervously.

“You’re twenty days late.”

“I know. I know... I’m,” I blew a sigh and walked over to the office, leaning against the door frame. “I’m having a hard time gettin’ a job. Bein’ a felon ain’t helpin’ either.”

“That’s not my problem, Cutie Pie,” he said and there was no flirt in his voice.

He didn’t care. That’s one thing I liked about Mr. Jenkins. Unlike his young son, loaded to spilling over with hormones and post-teenage angst, Mr. Jenkins was older, probably had all the pussy he cared to in life and just wanted his money. I could respect a man like that. Plus, both our families moved here from New York years ago and we shared the unmistakable attitude and accent of someone from Brooklyn.

“You either pay your rent or you move out. It’s that simple.”

“I know. Just... gimme some more time, alright?” I asked, my eyes looking down at his desk calendar instead of at him.

“You should look people in the eyes when you talk to ’em. Yeah?” He said, waiting.

It took me a moment. I tried to keep my face from twisting up. I looked him in his smokey grey eyes and he nodded.

“Good girl. That’s much better, don’t you think? Young people these days don’t do it enough.”

“Y- yeah...” I said, forcing myself not to blink.

“Look, in a few more days, you’re gonna be two months behind. I can’t have that. Sets a bad example. Then I got Ms. Thompson up on the fourth sayin’ I’m going sweet on you. Trent down the hall there sayin’ I play favorites. It’s bad for business.”

“I know, Mr. J. I’m really sorry. I’ll... I’ll have it in a few days, I promise.”

“I thought you were on the way to get it?” He sounded exasperated.

“I am. Part of it. Just... I’ll pay both months. Just give me a few days. I’ll have this month and next for you by the twenty-seventh, I swear,” I lied.

He gave a heavy sigh and nodded his head.

“Alright, kid. The twenty-seventh. No later.”

“No later,” I confirmed with a nod.

“Alright. Get outta here,” he chuckled, waving me on my way.

I blinked my eyes a few times and skittered out the door, checking the time on my phone.

“Fuck,” I broke out into a full sprint down my block, seeing the tail lights of my bus up ahead.

“Shit!”

I was small, and not exactly the strongest, and even if I was allowed to fight back I probably couldn’t hold my own very well in a fist fight.

But I was fast.

Forrest Gump fast.

I saw the rear lights flash as the driver pumped the brakes. My feet pounded the pavement like they had a vendetta against concrete. The bus started to pull away as I made it to the end of the two blocks between us. My hand slammed against the glass door as I ran beside it,

“Wait, wait, wait! Wait!” The driver looked over to see me and the bus lurched to a stop. Panting, I waited for the door to pull open and bounced up the three steps, scanning my bus pass.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” I said to the elderly man at the wheel with his graying hair and frail face.

“Alright, Charlie. Almost missed you.”

“You’re the best.”

“I know it. My wife says the same thing.”

“I’ll bet she does, Handsome.”

“Alright, don’t start flirting. I’m too old to get divorced.”

We shared a laugh as I made my way to my usual seat all the way in the back.

My earbuds were in moments later and as the bus started away, I sat back there cracking my knuckles and listening to jazz.

I loved jazz. It was my life... a beautiful mess. Behind the melody, a little offbeat. Chaos that figured itself out as it went along.

Just like me.

Southside High School was twenty-eight minutes and a four block walk from my house. I rode the whole way to my stop with my head against the window, letting the sun warm my olive-yellow skin. Jazz spoke to me in playful piano keys and gently rolling trumpets, but nothing seemed to override the lump of worry in my stomach. I told my landlord a lie just to buy time. I didn't have a clue how I was gonna come up with two months rent. Four-hundred dollars didn't seem like a lot of money until you didn't have it. But now I promised twice that and hadn't the faintest idea how I intended to come up with it.

I dug my phone out of my backpack beside me and swiped the screen to unlock it. No messages. I tapped over to my dad's thread like I did every morning.

Me:

Good morning, Daddy.

No response.

Like always.

I went out of my way to type out every word carefully, to punctuate the best way I knew how. Foolish hope. Maybe it was my spelling or my grammar? Maybe if I did better he would talk to me. Maybe it was just a lesson.

But I knew better.

He was my stepdad, but still the best dad a girl could ask for. My birth dad was out in the world somewhere.

Major S. Lawson was his name.

I didn't know where he was. I tried to reach out to him a time or two after I got out of jail but I didn't get very far. My grandmother on his side gave me a call once to check on me. She said Major was off being Major. Whatever that meant. Mom always said he wasn't the

father type. Said he disappeared when he found out she was pregnant with me.

He wasn't missing much.

My stepdad raised me though. He was the one I thought about when my feelings were hurt. When I was way low. God, I wished he was there if only to say something encouraging. Maybe hitting rock bottom wouldn't have hurt so bad.

It couldn't be helped now.

The bus made it to my stop and I thanked Jimmy again for stopping before hopping down the three steps to the ground.

"Aww, Jimmy, you're too good to me. Sure you don't wanna leave your wife?"

"Oh, no. I'm too old to go chasing young tail, even if it's on a fox. Besides, you'll have me worrying about my ticker."

"They make pills for that." I smiled.

"I'd be too busy taking pills for other things."

"Dirty old man."

We both laughed and I waved as he closed the doors.

With my backpack over one shoulder, I walked the four blocks to the High School, my broken phone in hand, idly scrolling through news updates that I really didn't care about. Something about some blue chip stock plummeting because of some scandal involving prototype tech and the youngest female billionaire in the world. A new Starbucks opening across town. Housing market crashing. I stopped to read a short article about Robin Rampage, the mixed martial artist who was about to go up against her greatest challenge to date. Some six-foot tall German girl who apparently had a death wish. Robin was going to tear her apart. I didn't follow mixed martial arts much, but what I knew about Rampage, she'd gone almost completely undefeated for two years. And she had what fight promoters called a 'Goodnight Right'.

Fuckin' right she did.

By the time I got to the really boring stuff, something about Higgs Bosons and Spaghetti Recipes from the Food Network, I'd gotten to the campus. I didn't want to read the recipe, or even look at the pictures.

I had Whiskey for dinner last night.

I was able to ignore the headache thumping at the back of my head out of shock and necessity. Buying pain meds wasn't something that was in the budget, and Stagger showing up in my living room seemed to supply my body with all the adrenaline and endorphins I needed to make it this far, but it was starting to wear thin. I could feel the beginnings of a migraine coming on.

Walking over the dead grass and bits of snack wrappers left on the ground by inner-city kids that didn't give a shit, I walked up to the old, rectangular building made out of red brick and dirty windows.

Southside was old.

I think I remember somebody mentioning it got built in the 1930s or something. It was supposed to be some equal opportunity Wonder School where the smartest people in America graduated from. What it turned into was another ghetto shithole that turned out a sixty percent year one drop out rate, a bunch of pant-sagging hooligans and the occasional success story of someone destined for greatness no matter what school they went to. The literacy rate was falling, the pay for the teachers was likely a joke and the school was far enough removed not to have cops stomping in and out of it all the time.

My kind of place.

Too many kids, not enough staff and a low chance of getting caught.

Shoving the front door open I took in the immediate smell of plastic, shoe rubber, old wood, and the collision of smells that come from too many people being indoors. It wasn't a bad smell, but it was definitely a school smell. A kind of tame version of a woodshop mixed with a bit of sterilized hospital.

There was a big case of trophies to one side, mostly talking about what every predominantly black school ever touted.

Sports trophies.

I don't know if being half black entitled me to be half offended, but I couldn't help but notice the fact that the only time large groups of white people ever approved of black people was when they were playing sports.

Or maybe singing.

Whatever. I wasn't even from this place. It's not like I had grounds to complain about anything. People in this world seemed to define themselves by the shit they owned. How much money they had. Or what color their genes said they got to be.

Being as how I was the darkest face in my family, I saw that first hand.

When I was a kid, if I went anywhere on my own, I got disapproving looks or shop owners watching me to make sure I didn't take anything. My skin tone and curly, Negro League Hermione Granger hairdo told them everything they needed to know about me.

When I was with my stringy haired white sisters who were two shades paler and a collection of blondes and redheads, I got free reign to walk around like I owned most places.

I'm not really sure if it's that or poverty that made me steal more. Sometimes I took shit just to do it. I knew it was bad, I just couldn't help it. It's like when people expect you to do or be something, after a while that's just what you become.

I made my way past the big, hand-painted mural of historically significant black people on the wall and already I could smell the food from the cafeteria. The lunch bell would be ringing any time now. It'd be the first good meal I had in days. No, it wasn't a restaurant, but when most of your meals came frozen, in a sealed bag or in day-old form, any hot food felt like a hundred dollar masterpiece.

The lockers weren't far off. I skirted them, extending my arm with my hand out to smack the combination locks as I walked by. Hearing the clank of them thunk against those thin, sheet metal doors reminded me of back when I was actually in High School.

Before I ruined my whole life.

God, I was such a little bitch. Thought the world revolved around me and my stupid, nothing problems. My daddy gave me anything I wanted and all I ever gave him back was lip and hell. I got in trouble every day.

Every day.

I was thirteen and didn't even realize what I had.

Thirteen years later and it's all gone. The only thing I had left was a huge amount of respect for life, and how it managed to humble everyone eventually. Back then I was a wild child, an angry upstart that thought her problems were more important than everyone else's. I don't know if tamed is quite the word for it.

But it fits.

I found a locker without a lock in the latch and popped it open, tossing my backpack inside. Nobody else would be holding one. Helped to fit in.

Right when I did, the bell rang. I slammed the locker shut, looked up at the number, then up and down the hall, memorizing where I was.

Students flooded into the hallway faster than I thought they would. Whooping and hollering filled the air from teenage boys horseplaying. Chitter chatter from girls complaining, the sound of a hundred conversations bursting to life at once. A constant soundboard of cell phone ringtones, camera clicks and text messages being sent. The cyber conversations almost outnumbered the actual ones. Kids were posing for pictures. Boyfriends and girlfriends were holding hands.

I just kept my head down and followed the crowd towards the smell of food.

The way this usually worked is everyone had a lunch number. Four or five digits, no more. But usually most of these inner-city kids were poor; especially in the black schools. Over half of them would have free lunch, the other half would have it reduced. I had about a buck eighty in my pocket which meant I could cover it if I guessed the wrong number and didn't hit a freebie. It was like the Mystery Meat Lottery and the way my stomach was aching for food, I didn't give a shit which meat it was.

It was protein. I'd take it.

No one seemed to notice me at all. They never did. I was short, young looking and most importantly pretty. As much as I hated it, that seemed to count for a lot in these kinds of environments. My mom used to call it 'untouchable beauty'. Not that you were actually too good for people, just most people assumed you were. Or that you were stuck up.

So that's what I did. I kept my eyes on my phone, scrolling through nothing in particular.

I just walked.

"Hey, what up, Beautiful?" I heard someone say in my left ear.

Twisting my lips, I glanced up at him but not to his eyes. I looked him in the chin.

"Hey," I said back.

"What's your name? I ain't seen you around here."

He was a cute kid. Already coming into his own. He was tall and solid with smooth, tanned skin and a killer smile. I looked him up and down, looked over his trendy clothing and expensive sneakers, and my Fucc Boi Alarm went off immediately. On top of that, this walking monument to misappropriation clearly wished his parents were a different color.

I couldn't quite figure out what people saw in this type. How girls fell for this Pussy Hound bullshit was beyond me. Guys like this didn't give a shit about who I was or where I was from. He didn't come sit next to me in the cafeteria. He came walking up behind me to talk. Guys like this saw booty first, face second, tits third and nothing else. He'd probably already fantasized about fucking me and telling his friends about it afterward.

Or remaking Malibu's Most Wanted.

I couldn't decide which.

"Andy," I lied, giving him one of my sister's names.

"Oh, alright. I'm Kyle."

Of course his name was Kyle.

Let's be honest. Does anybody know a Kyle they actually like? Not an actor or a writer or something. I mean a person they've met. You ever meet a Kyle that wasn't a big fucking douchebag?

"What's up, Kyle?" I asked, disinterest dripping in my tone as my eyes dropped back down to my phone.

"Not a lot. I just ain't seen you around here. Trust me, I'd know. You kinda stand out." He said as we made our way through the almost oppressive hallway with its drab taupe color and school spirit tags on the wall.

Go Wildcats.

I heard somewhere that taupe was very soothing.

Whatever.

The throng turned into two lines spilling out of the lunchroom. I put my phone in my back pocket and crossed my arms over my chest.

"I'm new." I answered, "just moved here."

"Oh, for real? From where?"

"Indiana." I lied again, throwing out the first state in the midwest that came to my mind.

"Oh, cool. I got family up in Indiana. That's where I wanna go to college. What part?"

Shit. I didn't know a fucking thing about geography, let alone Indiana. I spent my entire time in high school high off my ass.

I remembered an Indy Five-hundred commercial and blurted that out quickly.

"Indianapolis."

"For real? You sound more like you from New York. Got that sexy li'l accent. But Indy, I been there a few times."

Course he had.

This is why I hated small talk.

"We moved around a lot. Look, Kevin," I said, getting his name wrong on purpose.

"Kyle." He corrected me.

"Kyle-"

"Before you kick me the rejection, how bout we just sit together and rap a little bit? Conversation ain't hurtin' nobody. I think between the two of us we can come up with a scenario that's most pleasurable for the both of us. Let me expand your mind a little bit."

If he only knew. I'd been expanding my mind since I was twelve. Usually on any drug I could get my hands on.

My first boyfriend was just like Kyle. Cute, had a way with words. Liked to lie to me. Liked to make me take different drugs, too.

And I was stupid enough to let him.

"I appreciate it. I really do, but listen. I don't wanna say this too loud cus I... know you probably got your friends watchin' you mac on the new girl." I looked around, careful not to meet the eyes of any of his friends.

Not four people back, three more boys were leaning out looking at the two of us. Thankfully the roar of conversations around us was loud enough to stop my words from carrying too far.

"Trust me, you don't want anything to do with me," I said.

"That's for me to decide, ain't it?"

"Is it?"

He was a senior. Definitely a senior.

It took 3 years of rejection and identity crafting to get this good at dancing around. This kid was the fucking Muhammad Ali of sidestepping obstacles.

“In a world where everybody’s different, the one thing that’s always the same is we all wanna talk to somebody, Baby. And I’m trying to let you know you have my full and undivided attention. That’s a rare thing, wouldn’t you say?”

“Kyle, I might look pretty on the outside, but on the inside... I’m a train wreck. Look, I won’t make you look stupid, I promise. We can walk together, even sit together if you want, but after that just... tell your buddies I’m full of shit or somethin’.”

“Damn, Shorty. That’s some real shit. I mean, I’m not here to stress you or anything. It’s all good. I just thought you was kinda fly, figured we could hang out, but if it’s like that...”

“It’s definitely like that.”

God, I wished he would stop talking like that. Pretty sure ebonics lowers your credit score whether you’re white, black, or doing everything you could to pretend to be black.

Y’know. Like this guy.

“Respect. I won’t press.”

Holy shit, did I just meet a Kyle that wasn’t a douchebag?

“Thank you,” I said back, my eyebrows riding high.

“Bitch! Fuck you think you talkin’ to? ’Ey, that bitch played out,” Kyle laughed, walking back to his friends in line who then hooted with laughter and fist bumped each other.

“We don’t want no played out ho’s! Cut ’Em Gang!” he shouted, copying some ridiculous rap video.

My eyes rolled as the smile fell from my face.

I stand corrected. A little rejection and the defensive fuck goes right to defending his dick.

Of course, it was me that was the problem.

Right.

That's why his fucking name is Kyle.

It took nearly ten minutes to get to the food services line. The conversation about my dismissal had died out already. The fickle High School mob had moved on to other topics. Mostly whatever carefully curated horseshit was circulating under the trending tab on social media.

Once again I was a face in the crowd.

My line split off into two going to either side of the metal food counters. I grabbed a tray and sat it on the three rounded metal beams that served as a serving station. Sliding my tray down with everyone else in front of me, I was practically drooling at all the food selections. The kids around me were bitching and complaining about it being country fried steak day. I asked for two. And extra helpings of gravy. I got two pieces of bread, broccoli, and cauliflower. I got a brownie, double mac and cheese and french fries with chili and cheese on them. My tray was stacked to nearly spilling over and I didn't care who was looking at me.

"Oh my god!" I heard a girl laugh from where the line had u-turned behind me. "Somebody's a fat kid!"

Yes, I am, random girl. Yes, I am.

She and her friends were tittering behind me like the basic bitches they were. Every now and again they broke into some lame retelling of whatever drama was going on with the famous-for-no-reason reality show barbie-bots. I was actually kind of happy to see that the school wasn't entirely made of poor black kids. Those three girls were as white as my sisters.

Like the Starbucks line got lost in the ghetto.

When I made it up to the top of the line near the register, an elderly woman rang me up.

"That'll be seven dollars."

I quickly spat out a number, "4454."

She typed it in.

“Antonio Brown?”

“I’m sorry. 4544.”

“Rosaria Delgado?”

“Yeah,” I said.

The conversation behind me changed.

The lunch lady punched a button.

“Dollar seventy-five.”

“What?” One girl hissed quietly to her friends as they started talking amongst themselves.

I paid with my pocket full of change, grabbed my tray and headed for a table.

Looking down at all of the food on it, I couldn’t believe my fortune. If it wasn’t for the negligence of the public school system, I’d still be hungry. I made my way to an empty table, grabbed my fork and started shoveling food into my mouth.

It was obscene.

People stared and I didn’t care. My jaws were swollen with food and I couldn’t swallow it fast enough. I dabbed my lips with a napkin as I polished off one of my country fried steaks.

I was cutting into the second when the girls from the line headed towards my table. One of them had positioned herself in front of the others as they marched towards me.

She wasn’t small. She also wasn’t happy.

Fuck.

They came over and took seats all around me. I was in the eye of the storm and I knew it. I took another bite of my Mac and Cheese.

“What’s up, Rosaria.” The hostile, sarcastic tone wasn’t lost on me.

Her voice sounded like she had dreams of moving to Southern California one day.

I didn’t say anything. Instead, I stabbed chili and cheese fries and stuffed them into my mouth, staining my cheeks in red sauce.

Reaching for my milk container, I opened and poured it down my throat, gulping desperately as they stared daggers at me from all around.

“Hey.” The girl beside me said, shoving me hard in the ribs with her elbow.

“You look different.” One of the other girls said and I nodded but again I didn’t say anything.

I grabbed my fork and started stacking mac and cheese onto a piece of bread. I shoveled some cauliflower on top of that before one of the girls slapped my fork out of my hand.

“I’m talking to you, Bitch.”

My shoulders dropped. I put my second steak on top of the cauliflower and topped it off with my last piece of bread, looking up at her chin as I sucked gravy off my fingers.

“You stole my friend’s lunch number. She’s out sick today.”

“My fault. I get confused sometimes.” I said.

“Yeah?” The bigger girl leaned in.

Great. Boujee, mean girl hoodrats. Just what I needed today.

I met her eyes by accident. We held the stare across the table from one another for a brief moment before my eyes retreated.

She read me instantly.

I was a coward.

I got up from the table with my sandwich and started walking towards the door, taking big bites along the way.

I knew they got up right after. Neither of us could afford to make a scene. I’d go to jail and they’d lose their opportunity to beat my ass into cookie dough.

I looked back at their murderous expressions as I made it out into the now vacant hallway. All the other students were in the lunchroom either in line or eating. I fast-walked towards the locker I’d stored my bag in, now almost halfway done with my sandwich when I heard them. They were walking just as fast as I was.

“Rosaria, where you going?” One of the three said.

Goddamnit.

I wasn’t even in school anymore and I was about to get beat up. Panic hit my heart with a flutter and I broke into a sprint. I was still stuffing that sandwich into my mouth, desperate to finish it. Swallowing so hard I almost got the hiccups.

My sneakers gave a loud squeak as I hit the corner, almost falling, cramming that last bite into my mouth.

“Get back here, Bitch!”

No ma’am, I will not.

With my hand free, my arms churned, my legs sent my feet practically slamming through the floor as I turned on the gas. I had to get a head start to get my bag.

“Fuck she’s fast!”

Now I could care less. Where were the teachers? Anybody? Jail be damned.

I hadn’t planned on getting spotted this soon. I thought maybe I could check for half-closed lockers and steal some cell phones, maybe jack some cash from wallets. This had turned all bad.

I made it to my locker and cracked it open with a loud metallic pop, grabbing my bag, but by then, they were close.

I hustled out past that mural and made it to the door. My speed had given me a little bit of a head start again, but when I threw my body into it, aiming my hip at the long horizontal latch, it knocked the air right out of me, dropping me to the floor.

They’d locked one side.

Aching, I tried to recover, picking myself up, pushing the other door frantically. It blew open with the force I ran into it with, sunlight hitting me in the face as I took to the yard, but it was too late.

A hand grabbed one of my puffballs atop my head and it felt like my neck would snap,

“Aah!”

“Gotcha, Bitch!”

I tugged my head trying to get free while we were all panting for air but I couldn’t get away. I knew where this was going.

They forced me to walk with them to the back lot. The whole way I had to listen to them talking shit about what they were gonna do to me. All I could think about was if I hit any one of them back, NEST would have my ass.

They held me one on each of my arms. All but one of them was taller and bigger than me. I couldn’t believe this was happening. It felt like the 9th grade all over again. Back then it was my sister Bobby and her friends trashing me.

This time I was about to get my ass kicked by a bunch of teenage soon-to-be dropouts. Two years from now half of these girls would probably be well on the road to failure and I was about to supply the story they’d tell their friends about how they fucked up some chick who dared to cross one of their pack.

They took me around to the faculty parking lot and put the big stone dumpster barricade between us and the school’s windows.

“Who the fuck are you?” The big girl demanded, shoving me into the brick wall, blasting the air out of my lungs.

I dropped my bag.

“I don’t even recognize this slut,” one of the other girls said.

“I’m nobody.” I shrugged.

“Fucking right you are,” the big girl shoved me again. Harder.

“Must be some new bitch. You think you’re cute, stealing from my friend?”

“No. It’s not like that, I-” she shut me up with an open-handed slap across my face that dropped me to the ground.

“Shut up.”

She hoisted me back up by one of my puffballs.

I wanted to cry.

I knew better though. High School didn't give people compassion. Life did. They would just see tears as a weakness.

I let them take turns kicking the shit out of me and calling me names. I let them punch me, slap me, dump my shit out of my backpack onto the ground.

One of them even stomped on my phone.

"My turn, my turn!" One of them said as I got to my feet again.

She pummeled me back down into the dirt while her friends whooped with laughter.

When they were done with me, they left me there on the ground. Discarded like the garbage on the other side of the barricade.

The big one shoved her dirty shoe against my face and pinned me down.

"Stay the fuck away from us," She said while her friends kicked my things all over.

"If you tell anybody about this, I'll come fuck you up again. I mean it."

And then she was gone.

All things considered, it wasn't the worst I'd ever gotten. Kid strength is a little different than adult strength.

I sat up, coughing from the body shots the big girl gave me, refusing to lose my lunch on the ground.

I just got jumped for that meal. I refused to puke it up in vain.

I leaned my back against the brick barrier.

Pain gave me a brief inventory of what kind of shape I was in.

Busted nose, split lip. Sore ribs. Nothing that wouldn't heal in a few days.

I tasted blood on my teeth and swallowed the coppery taste down.

What little pride I had left hurt the most. I made sure they were long gone before I let the tears fall out of my eyes.

"Fuck my life..."

CHAPTER 2

Who Wants to Live Forever

I managed to pick myself up, dust myself off and try to forget about what happened back at Southside. I hopped the bus to the mall and stole some concealer from a makeup kiosk while the attendant's back was turned giving somebody's pinky nail a free buff job. I also took the time to lift a few cell phones in the food court from some spoiled brats that thought they were perfectly safe in their manicured world. One of them had a train pass in the case.

Number one rule of jacking phones: Always take it out of the case.

For one, most people stashed cards, cash and all kinds of valuables in there. Two, without the case they couldn't identify the phone from a distance. Most times you could just walk away like you're texting somebody on it and they wouldn't even know.

I decided to take the train home that day using Priscilla Mabry's train pass. Any time I was on the train, I tried to get into the tightest crowds possible. I really hated crowds, but your odds of finding some handsy fucker were pretty high downtown.

You hunt for the pervs.

They're usually buttoned down, married looking types with horn-rimmed glasses acting like they're too good to stare at their phone in a crowded place. You get in close and before you know it, they're getting off on the fact that you're pretending you don't notice their

dick grinding into you. Then the inevitable game of grab ass while you bite your lip and look away.

They don't even notice you taking their shit. Most of them think you're just playing along like all the girls in their fantasies.

That leads me to my second rule. Never steal near where you live. I learned that lesson the hard way.

Getting tuned up behind a pizza joint by a full grown man isn't exactly what I'd call therapeutic. You steal shit from people, they take it really personal. It's the kind of violation that makes a man that's never hit a woman in his life forget about chivalry and put your ass in the hospital.

I wasn't a stranger to pain. I could always tell the people that wanted to take it there before it happened. A person gets a different look in their eyes when they want to do you harm. It's one I've come to know well. All you can do is try to run. If you can't get away, then you figure out if they're the kind that just wants to humiliate you or the kind that wants to hurt you.

I figured out the difference between the two in prison.

I managed to swipe enough money to get my fix. And thank God, my body was aching like crazy by the time I hit up the Tambourine Man. I didn't even make it home. I found a bathroom that didn't have a mirror in it, locked myself in a stall and used my backpack strap to find a vein.

I didn't even realize how much time I lost. By the time I woke up and walked out of that bathroom the sun was going down.

I walked eight blocks to the repair shop on eleventh. I still had a bit of cash left over, so I picked up a few essentials.

"Hey, Charlie." The Asian man standing at the front counter said as I walked in.

"Hey, Mikey. How's your Ma?" I asked, walking down one of the isles over to the small tool kits hanging on shelf pegs.

“She’s good. She’s real good. Been up to much?” He asked, leaning on the glass counter.

Mike was sweet on me back in high school. Back when I was a different person. Nothing was happening there though. He had a gorgeous wife, two pudgy little kids, and three repair shops. Plus his wife led my addiction meetings and on more than one occasion the two of them had to come help me out of a jam.

Even if I wanted to, it’s kinda hard to steal a man that knows you drink half a bottle of whiskey and shoot heroin to go to sleep at night.

He wasn’t rolling in dough, but he was certainly doing better than a lot of people we went to school with. Hell, I didn’t even graduate. I got kicked out of school my junior year for doing what I do best.

Fucking up.

“I’m as good as I get.”

“Right, right. I hear that.” He smiled.

“What time you closing up?” God, I was terrible at small talk.

“Bout an hour. I’m calling it early tonight. Wife wants to go see a show. Mom’s got the kids tonight, so y’know. Date night. Been a while.” He replied, busying himself with straightening stuff on the front counter.

“Oh, I see where that’s goin’. You breakin’ out the Get Some Nookie Playlist?”

Mike laughed, “You know it! See if the wife wants to go half on another baby.”

“Alright. Keep that up and number 3 might turn out like me.”

“I’m not that unlucky,” we both laughed a little.

I found what I was looking for. A toolkit for phone repair. It had all the essential tiny bits, two small screwdrivers, and a magnetic screw mat. I headed up to the front and sat it down on the counter.

“You don’t wanna just borrow mine?” He asked and I shook my head.

“Nah. I got a little extra cash. Might as well just buy one. You still buying parts?”

He nodded, “Yeah. Should I ask where they’re coming from?”

“No,” I looked up.

I saw his eyes dart down to the toolkit as he rang me out.

Mike and I would never be friends. We came from two different worlds. He was always good at reading people though. We looked each other in the eyes one time and the whole thing just got really awkward. I’m just thankful he understood without me having to say a thing.

“Yeah. That’s fine. Just don’t expect top dollar for ’em. I gotta strip usable chips off the board and dump the rest. Then it’s just charging ports, LCDs, screws and buttons.”

“I know. Thanks.”

I took out a man’s wallet to pay for it and not my usual duct tape one.

“Cash, right?” He confirmed, not wanting to take a stolen credit card.

“Yeah, yeah. Can you get rid of some shit for me?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, and I took the time to strip the wallets out.

He never wanted to deal with cards or IDs. I took those and gave him the three leather wallets I’d lifted. I knew before the day was over they’d be in the incinerator. The IDs and Cards I’d melt down myself in the barrel behind my building back home.

“Hey. You got a computer I can get off you? Doesn’t have to be fancy. Just something to get on the internet.”

“I mean, most everything I got’s gonna cost you something. I got an old laptop in the back I can’t do anything with, though. It works but let me tell you... it’s held together with duct tape, hopes, and dreams. Some guy brought it in for our recycle program.”

“How much?”

“Nothin’,” he shrugged. “Like I said, I can’t do anything with it. Not worth my time recycling, can’t rebuild it and sell it, it’s too old. We checked it out though, it goes okay.”

“Cool,” I nodded. “Hey, tell Juli I’ll be at the next meeting, alright?”

“I was gonna ask you about that.” He said, concern in his voice. “She said she hadn’t seen you in a while, but she figured you stopped by.”

“Yeah? What gave me away?” I asked.

“Your favorite food is always missing.” He smiled.

“Oh... yeah, tell her, sorry.” I said, embarrassment burning on my cheeks.

“No, no. It’s cool. She’s just happy you’re eating. She makes me go to Fatty’s Bakery over on Bleaker for ’em.”

“Yeah... I love Fatty’s. Can’t always afford ’em.”

“I figured. Butterscotch glazed and cannolis, right?”

“Yeah,” I nodded, feeling guilty.

“Nothing to feel bad about. She figures you’ll come in when you’re ready.”

“I just didn’t have the heart to tell her I... Anyway, you didn’t tell her I’m selling you hot parts, did you?” I asked, changing the subject.

We both know what happened.

I relapsed.

Again.

“No, nothing like that. Just I’m seeing you a little more frequently and she’s not seeing you at all... She’s worried about you.”

“I’m good,” I nodded and he mirrored the gesture.

The silence was deafening. He knew I was lying.

Around this time last year, I called Mikey from a street corner after my ex-boyfriend got done kicking the shit out of me. We broke up because he swore I shot up his stash. He put his cigarette out on my neck and threw me out.

Max wouldn't answer.

Mikey and Juli were the ones that took me to the hospital.

"Cool." He said finally. "Well, hey. Lemme get that laptop for you."

"Yeah, thanks," I said, suddenly self-conscious about the way I looked. I almost forgot I had gotten high just a couple hours ago. And that concealer was clumsily hiding bruises on my face.

When he stepped into the back, I preened at my bushy hair and straightened my clothes a little.

He came out and held the laptop out to me.

It was definitely not the slim, sleek looking machines you usually see in electronics ads in the Sunday circular. It looked its age and had a strip of gray duct tape across the back of it, holding the lid on the LCD.

"It's not much, but... like I said, it works." He said and I took it.

"No, it's good. Look, thanks, Mikey. Tell Juli I said hi, alright?"

I pushed the toolkit and laptop with its charger into my bag and uncrumpled a bunch of balled up bills from my pocket to add to what came out of the stolen wallets.

"Yeah, I will. Are you sure you're alright?" He asked.

I saw his eyes searching my face. Looking at my bruises.

"Take care of those kids," I offered a weak smile and turned to head out.

"Yeah, alright. Be safe, Charlie. If you need us, you know where we are."

The jingling bell above the door rattled as I left.

* * *

The next few days I spent scrambling.

I found a folding chair outside and brought it home to make a makeshift desk out of my dresser. I had the laptop propped open so I could watch teardown videos online for all the phones I stole. I couldn't afford anti-static bags, but a tip about a roll of Kapton tape

and regular Ziploc sandwich baggies I found in a web search did the trick.

Even after I took all the parts back to Mikey's shop I was still short two-hundred dollars. Let alone my phone bill and the lights. I still needed another three-hundred to cover everything. Not including food. And not including next month's rent that'd be due a few days after I paid this month.

Worry sat in my stomach like I was pregnant with a baby made out of stone. I tried calling my family again, but that was no use. Every call went straight to voicemail.

Except Max.

She was nice enough to answer.

"Yes, Charlie?"

She never answered the phone for me like I heard her answer it for everyone else. We weren't personal friends. We were barely sisters. She tolerated me and it was clear in her motherly tone.

"Hey, Maxie... how ya doin'?"

"I'm good," she said.

I could hear a man's voice in the background.

"Just hang up the phone, Max. C'mon." He bitched in a tired whisper. "It's six in the morning."

"Why are you up so early?" Max asked me, genuine concern in her voice, ignoring the man in the background.

"You two are on sleep-over status now, huh? I'm sorry, I didn't-"

"It's fine," she cut me off. I could hear her moving around. Likely going into another room.

"It doesn't sound fine. I can call back if you want," I knew she didn't want me to.

"No, it's alright. What's going on?" She asked in her proper, suburban voice. I bet her new boo probably had no idea we were from New York the way she managed to swallow her accent and forget all about it. She sounded like a different person to me.

“Nothin’. Can I come over later?”

“If you want. After seven though, please. It’s my last day off and Marc and I are going to dinner.”

“Oh, yeah, no problem. Is he gonna be there?” I didn’t want anybody else around when I begged my sister for money. I figured the fewer people around to help her tell me no, the better.

“No. He’s headed back home after dinner. He lives upstate.”

“Oh, okay. Well, maybe we could watch a movie or somethin’?”

She sighed, “are you in jail?”

“No. I mean, not yet,” I forced a laugh. “How could I come over if I’m locked up?”

“Charlie.”

Here we go. She was going to preach at me.

“Every time you come over, it’s never to just hang out with your big Sis. I’m either patching you up or holding your hair back while you puke in my toilet and lie to me about how it’s the last time. You obviously want something.”

“It’s not like that, I promise.”

“It’s not? Well, let me remind you. I’m a psychologist, not a psychiatrist. I can’t write you prescriptions for drugs.”

“Not that either. Would you just hear me-,”

“I will not, Charlie. Look, I love you. I really do. And unlike the rest of our family, while my knee jerk reaction is to hate, I understand that emotion is directed at what you did. Not who you are. That said, I’m not going to let you lie to me either. It isn’t healthy. Now, again, what do you want?”

I was afraid to say it. Hesitation was clear in my voice.

“My rent’s due tomorrow and I don’t have anybody else to turn to. I’ve been tryin’ really hard to make it, I swear.”

“I gave you the number to the employment office.”

“I’m a felon.”

“Half the people they employ are felons. They just aren’t practicing addicts who can’t pass a drug screen. There’s a difference.”

“I’m clean,” I argued back.

“No you’re not, Charlie,” she said.

Her voice was soft then. Disappointed.

It hurt my heart to hear it. A feeling that only got worse the longer the silence on the line carried on. I seemed to spend my life disappointing people.

“I’m not giving you any money.” She said, finally breaking the silence.

“But-”

“But nothing, Charlotte.”

She used my real name.

Fuck.

“Max, I really need this. I know I lied to you before. I’m sorry. I’m not gonna spend it on drugs again. I swear, trust me. I won’t mess up.”

“You always swear. I can’t trust you.”

“Yes you can, just give me a chance!”

“I did give you a chance. Multiple. You and I both know you’re a liar. You’ll say anything to get what you want.”

“This time I’m not ly-”

“I refuse to be responsible for your death.”

“I-”

“Go back to bed, Charlotte. You sound tired.”

The line went dead.

“Hello? Max!?”

I stared at my busted up phone. The screen had black spots all over it from the girl that stomped it at Southside High but I could clearly see the two words that said the call ended. It was cracked before but now it was worse. I tried to call Max back but she sent me straight to voicemail three times.

I threw my phone into the bedsheets beside me.

A baritone voice startled me and I nearly fell out of bed.

“You really do look tired.”

“Fuck!” I yelled, balling up my blankets to try to hide.

“Hey, kiddo.” He chuckled.

“Jesus, Stag!” I said, throwing my blankets off of me.

I knew I was a sight for sore eyes in sweat pants and ironically enough a faded Southside High School t-shirt.

Stagger Lee had appeared from nowhere in the corner of my room just as he had last time. His mouth was pulled into a boyish smile as he laughed.

I threw him a baleful look as he shrugged off his dark peacoat and slung it over the arm of my loveseat.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. I brought you some coffee though.”

He pulled two trendy looking coffee cups from a drink holder positioned on the arm of the loveseat next to his coat. He walked over to my window and took a sip from his, holding the other cup out for me.

“Thanks. I don’t drink coffee.” I said, perturbed.

“Why do you lie so much?” He asked and I went quiet, thinking about that.

I walked over to him and took the cup.

“I’m not lyin’.”

“Charlie, there’s a coffee cup in your garbage can.” He said in a sarcastic monotone.

“Get out.”

“Make me.”

“Fine. I’ll leave.” I barked back and stomped barefoot towards the door.

“You should probably put on some shoes.”

I growled at him and headed for the bathroom, twisting my face up, mocking his words with sarcastic bitterness.

“Oh, way to be childish.”

“Fuck you.”

“There’s her favorite word.” He laughed as I slammed the door.

I heard him walk closer and leaned against my side of the door for good measure.

Stagger gave the door a soft knock.

“Are you mad?”

I looked at the cup of coffee in my hand. I could feel it’s warmth through the cup and I couldn’t deny that I really wanted it.

But screw him, I burst the cup in the tub.

“Guess so. Let’s see if your stomach feels the same way. You hungry?”

My stomach gave a plaintive groan at the thought of food.

My last good meal got me beat up by teenagers a week ago. After that, every other meal was whatever I managed to grab at a gas station. Last night’s dinner was a microwavable mac and cheese bowl from the dollar store. It’d be nice to sit down and eat real food.

“No,” I said after a long, telling pause.

I heard his contagious laugh again and smiled a little.

“Alright. Well, I’m gonna go get a short stack of pancakes and bacon. You stay here and pout.”

I yanked the bathroom door open.

He looked back at me.

“Lemme get my shit.”

“Take your time,” He sipped his coffee and went back to the window.

Stagger didn’t look back once while I got dressed. While that was surprising, I was more surprised at the fact that I was angry about it. He made me feel self-conscious. Like maybe there was something wrong with me. If he was some kind of gentleman I’d never know. I

didn't have much basis for comparison. My last few boyfriends weren't the nice kind.

They kept me high though.

Back then I used to eat enough pills in the morning to get full.

Looking over at him standing in that window though, he made me think of my dad. Looking out the window like a vigilant protector.

I remember my dad standing at the window in my room back when I had nightmares, sipping his usual late night coffee, letting me know nothing was gonna hurt me.

I shook the thought out of my head and took a quick shower.

I pulled on some freshly washed baggy sweatpants and I tried not to think about the fact that they had the word love on the ass. I got them from the flea market. They were gray with blue writing and white piping down the flanks. The kind of thing you'd expect to see someone wearing on laundry day.

I pulled a blue cut off shirt over my head, tugged some high-top sneakers on my feet and wrangled my hair up with dark hair pins into a big, curly, 1980s mohawk.

I yanked a black, rubber wrist band around my right wrist and pushed a couple of cheap thumb rings onto my fingers, then pulled a sports sleeve over my left arm to hide the track marks.

Stagger finally turned around and looked me over. His mouth shrugged down as if he was surprised I cleaned up alright.

I opened one of my dresser drawers and pulled out a bottle of prescription pills.

"Klonopin?" He asked.

"Yeah... so?" I said, staring at him, waiting for him to judge me.

He didn't say anything right away, so I took two pills and shotgunned them without a drink. I didn't have anything to put in my veins. Klonopin was the next best thing to stave off the cravings. The body aches.

"Nothing." He said, and I heard the disappointment in his voice.

I hated that sound.

You'd think at some point I'd stop making it come out of people.

A few minutes later I was on my way down the stairs.

Jack looked up from his seat at the desk in that tiny office. He had a hopeful smile for me and I offered him a wave on my way by.

"Hey, Charlie." He called, and I stopped.

Stagger leaned against the door but didn't say a word.

"You headed out already?"

My eyes didn't meet his but I could feel him searching my face. I nodded.

"Yeah. My friend here's taking me to breakfast."

Jack looked around.

"You meeting them there?"

I glanced over at Stagger and it only then became clear to me that Jack couldn't see him.

"Yeah," I said.

"Mind a tagalong?" He asked, "I can wrap up here and go with you."

"No," I said, maybe too quickly, "we're gonna be talking about some personal shit. It's not that kinda party."

"Oh," he nodded, "Okay. Well, maybe another time."

There was that disappointed sound again.

"Yeah. Maybe." I pushed my way out of the door to escape. Stagger closed it behind us and trotted down the short steps ahead of me.

"That kid likes the shit out of you."

"Yeah, I know." I blew a sigh.

The morning was chilly, but not uncomfortable. It was gonna be freezing cold soon. Probably in another month and a half.

"He's not that much younger than you," Stag said and I laughed.

"Yeah, right. You and I both know I'd ruin that kid's life."

"If you say so. I think you're a little too hard on yourself."

"Don't give me a pep talk, Stagger," I lit a cigarette.

“He’s a damn sight better than your last boyfriend.”

“Sounding stalkerish, Stag. Not helpin’,”

I blew smoke out of my nose as we headed to the bus stop.

“Right,” he said through a laugh.

“Why are you always laughin’? You walk around grinnin’ like a damn idiot all the time like life is some great big fuckin’ joke.”

“It is most of the time. ‘Specially here,” he said, still smiling.

I looked up at his chin.

Or I tried to.

He dipped his head down to look me right in the eyes and I almost snapped my neck trying to look away.

“Stop it!” I said, rebuke strong in my voice.

“Sorry,” he replied, his tone soft.

Neither one of us said a thing while we waited for the bus. Or even after it arrived and we got on.

For my part, I was more afraid I’d look like a crazy person talking to myself. For his, I suspected he felt a little awkward for forcing me to look him in the eyes. Every guy that got close to me always tried it. They always wanted to try and Meet Cute me like a fucking Hollywood movie.

We sat in silence almost the whole time at that diner. Stagger was afraid to find my eyes. He kept finding other things to look at as he sawed away at his pancakes. I just sat there feeling bad for yelling at him. I watched him dip bacon in his syrup and avoided doing the same thing.

I wanted to so bad.

It’d been a long time since I sat down and had a real breakfast. I wasn’t much of a cook so most times I tried eggs at home I ended up eating shells and too much pepper. The eggs on my plate were perfect though. They were light and fluffy and the cook mixed milk in with them just like I asked. My pancakes were moist and fat, the sausage

on my plate sat there like three well-sizzled fingers, right next to the bacon I'd asked them to fry almost black.

We ate for twenty minutes before either of us said a word.

"So you're invisible most of the time... but you're visible for food?" I asked, trying to break the quiet between us.

"No, I'm visible for bacon."

"Fat kid."

"Hey, I'm a growing boy. Besides, I doubt NEST is hanging out at a random breakfast house twenty minutes from the projects."

"That's fair," I said, shrugging with my eyebrows.

Silence followed again.

"So do you have any good memories?" He asked.

My fork stopped for a moment.

"Y'mean lately?"

"Yeah," he nodded, stuffing another forkful of pancakes into his mouth.

"Yeah," I said, continuing to eat.

He wanted me to describe them.

I didn't.

"Okay." He said with a resigned shrug.

I smiled.

"Oh. I think that's one of three whole smiles I've seen total. Careful, I think your face might start bleeding." He pointed his syrupy knife at me.

"Shut up," my smile got bigger all on its own.

He tore another piece of bacon off and dipped it in syrup, smiling back at me.

I finally broke off a piece of bacon and did the same, nibbling at the syrupy bit of fried meat.

Stagger lifted his hands and clasped his fingers in front of his face. All I could see was his mischievous hazel eyed squint behind them. His expressive eyebrows were talking for him.

“What?” I asked with a mouthful of eggs.

“So when you were locked up. Did you have a prison wife?”

“Really?” I lowered my fork.

“What? Inquiring minds wanna know. I’ve seen those women’s prison movies,” his eyebrows waggled salaciously.

“There’s something wrong with your head.”

“Oh, tons. I’ve accepted it. So?”

“No, not really. I mean, I guess that kinda shit happens at some prisons, but... it was more like this really fucked up sisterhood, y’know? There were rules and stuff, but we all kinda looked out for each other after a while. New Booty had it the worst.”

“New Booty?” He asked, thinking he’d found a dirty nugget of truth in my words.

“That’s just what new girls were called. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

I finished off my bacon and sausage and started on my hashbrowns. I was trying to take my time and eat. The pressure of having someone eating with me made me civil. Normally I’d have shoveled all of it into my mouth in three or four minutes out of habit. Prison taught me to eat fast if I intended to eat at all.

“Okay, so what’s being New Booty like?” He asked, constructing a bacon half sandwich with his toast.

“Rough,” I said back after a thoughtful pause.

He looked at me.

“Yeah? What about you? You were New Booty once.”

I twisted my lips.

“Look at me. You see how small I am? How do you think it went?”

“Oh... Sorry.”

“I went straight from the hospital to jail and from jail to prison after... that night. With my wrap sheet, the judge buried me. Not that I blame her.”

I stared at the rest of my food.

He didn't press me.

"The first night I was so scared I couldn't eat. Girls were cat-calling at me all day. Shoving me around, taking my food. Practically everybody in there said they were gonna fuck me. Told me pretty girls like me get raped or shanked if we don't wanna fuck. I mean, I found out it was all scare tactics for newbies, but that first day I didn't know. All I knew is they were about to throw me in a cell with a homicidal animal with my jaw wired shut and no way to call for help."

"Fuck," Stagger said.

"Yeah. Fuckin' right. All I wanted to do was climb into bed and hope to god I woke up from a nightmare. That night my celly makes me take the top bunk. Obviously, I don't argue. I just got my little ass up there and shut up."

I stabbed at my pancake before going on.

"Lights go out, she yanks me off it onto the concrete floor. Tells me to get up and put my hands on my head. So I do. She asks a question."

"A question?"

"Yeah. Face or gut."

"Oh." He nodded, looking away from me.

"Yeah. Like I said, my jaw was wired shut. I broke it in the car accid-... I broke it."

I blew a short sigh.

"So I said gut." I poked at my food some more, "I said gut every time."

Stagger stirred his coffee to avoid looking at me.

"You don't have to tell me anymore if you don't want," he said.

"It's fine." I shrugged, "We played twenty questions til I puked up my protein shake through my nose pretty much every night."

"Jesus. Don't they have like guards or something?"

“None that cared. Let the animals kill the animals. It didn’t go on long though. After a couple weeks of taking my New Booty medicine, gettin’ tuned up, sleeping on the floor, giving her my snacks and shit, it just stopped. It was all about learning my place is all. Bottom of the food chain. After that, we were pretty tight. I rolled with her crew and nobody fucked with me. I did my time.”

“That’s pretty fucked up, Charlie.”

“It’s the world. Nobody said it had to be nice.”

“True Life, The Charlie Ryan Story.” Stagger said.

I laughed and threw a wedge of toast at him.

“Let’s get the fuck outta here. I got a big day ahead of me.”

“Yeah? What’s on the agenda?” He asked.

“I gotta come up with enough money to take care of the rest of this month’s rent, next month’s rent, my phone bill, and the light bill.”

“And get high,” Stagger added.

I opened my mouth to say something, my eyes moved from the table to the window and I felt my shoulders drop on their own.

“You takin’ shots at me now?”

“No.” He replied, his voice soft.

“Yeah, whatever. Look, thanks for breakfast. I gotta catch the train.”

“Hey, don’t do that.”

“Do what, Stagger?” I said, trying to hide the fact that he’d hurt my feelings.

“That thing where you shut down and try to play tough. I wasn’t trying to bust your balls.”

“Yeah, well you did. Okay?” I looked him right in the eyes.

For a second.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Yeah,” I said, but the word was hollow. “I gotta see if I can catch my sister at work.”

“Max? I thought she already said no.”

“No. Andy.”

“Oh. Yeah, good luck with that.” He said, his eyes widening sarcastically.

“Yeah, you’re tellin’ me. You think I’m a bitch, wait til you meet her.”

“Wait, you want me to come?” He asked.

“I obviously can’t stop you.”

“Yes you can, Charlie.” He watched me stand up from the booth, his eyes burning the side of my face.

“Uh-huh,” I said.

He looked down and laughed at the covert middle-finger I’d raised below his vision.

“Nice.”

“Stop starin’ so hard.”

“You’re easy to look at.”

I felt my cheeks warm and I lowered my hand. I opened my mouth a few times to say something but instead, I just started walking towards the door.

“Pay the bill.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Stagger chuckled.

* * *

It was 10:00 AM when we got to the law offices of Horowitz & Greene. Standing outside of it, both of us looked up at the building, tracing its windows up until the building narrowed in our vision. Even the big, gaudy push bars on the door looked expensive. It was a tall, narrow building that sat in the middle of the financial district. It used to be the headquarters of the Tribune years ago but after the internet publication boom, it ended up getting renovated and repurposed. Now it stood in contrast, it’s outside one of classic architecture, it’s inside likely stuffed to bursting with Ivy League employees and state of the art everything.

“Your sister works here?” Stagger asked, sounding impressed.
“Jesus. I really need to consider changing careers.”

“What? Chroma God doesn’t offer 401k?”

“Not at all. I get a pretty modest budget for these little trips to come keep an eye on you.”

“Ohh, Big Daddy’s got a company card, too?” I teased.

“That’s why they pay me the moderate bucks,” Stagger said.
He reached up and tugged a strand of my curly mohawk.

“Ow.”

“C’mon.” He nudged his head towards the doors and we both headed in.

Stagger followed me inside as I pushed one of those massive swinging doors open, it’s frosted glass hiding the opulent inside of the lobby from the both of us.

Smooth, polished wooden floors bounced light from the expensive looking fixtures back upward. Golden light bounced all around the huge space and shined from minimalistic sconces on the wall. A wide, curving desk rested in the middle of the room, and behind it, a large statue of Blind Justice stood looming, her promise of fair and balanced law held aloft.

If only justice were just as blind for Re-Cars.

We crossed the lobby, walking towards the curving reception desk and already I could see the look on the man’s face that sat there. He was shaking his head, his lips twisted to one side. His security uniform was just as crisp and clean as the rest of the lobby he watched over. His hair was smoothed back, well groomed, as was his face.

“Hey, Travis.”

“Charlie,” he sighed, “What are you doin’ here?”

“Just stoppin’ by. Can I see her?” I asked.

“That depends. You gonna break anything this time?” He tilted his head, looking up at me. The look on his face suggested he wouldn’t

believe me no matter what I said.

“C’mon, man. That was a really long time ago. I haven’t been back here since, gimme a break.” I rolled my eyes.

“Yeah, well, I’m not supposed to let you in the building.”

“Really?” I sighed, “Just tell her I need to see her, please?”

“No.”

“Please! Look, it’s a matter of life or death here, alright?” I placed my hands on the counter.

I couldn’t look at him. It was much more comfortable to look at the back of his computer screen.

“Whatever. You act stupid in my building again, I don’t care who you’re related to. I’m gonna send a couple guys up there with batons and they’re gonna thump ya. Understood?”

“Yeah. I’ll be good,” I nodded. “I swear.”

Travis picked up the phone and pressed a few buttons.

“Your sister is here to see you.”

I looked over to see Stagger looking around the lobby like a teenage girl walking into Neiman Marcus for the first time. He walked over to the wall and looked up at one of the minimal sconces.

“Oh, this is beautiful. This is just beautiful. Do you see these things? Fuck, that’s gotta cost a fortune.”

“Shh-shut up.” I hissed.

Travis shrugged his shoulders at me.

“Charlie Ryan,” he covered the mouthpiece on the phone, “Sorry, I gotta tell her.”

I let him think I was talking to him.

“He can’t hear me either,” Stagger said.

“So I gathered,” I said to the both of them, looking around the lobby.

Travis hung up the phone after a long silence and nudged his head towards the etched metal doors of the elevators.

“Someone’s coming down to escort you up.”

“Thanks, Trav.”

“Yup.”

Stagger and I walked towards the elevators with the H&G emblem carved into them and waited.

“What’s up with you and cops?” Stagger asked, his voice a whisper.

“Travis is a security guard.” I corrected him, whispering back.

“Security guards too.”

“I dunno. They piss me off. Always showing up acting like I’m the problem.”

“You’d get hurt a lot less if you stopped resisting arrest.”

“How would you know?”

“I dunno,” Stagger shrugged, “Every time I see you get arrested you always try to run or fight the police like it’s gonna get you anywhere.”

“Wait, so you watched cops beat my ass and didn’t do anything?” I looked over at him.

“I’m supposed to be invisible, remember.” Stagger smiled.

“You’re sick.”

“Am not.”

“No, you’re sick. You’re fuckin’ sick. I can’t believe you.”

“Am not.”

“You gotta be kiddin’ me. What good are you?”

“More good than you realize. You’re still alive aren’t you?”

“Depends on your definition of livi-” the elevator doors rolled open and I went quiet.

Inside a manicured woman stood, waiting for me. I recognized her face right away.

Candice Miller was an Ivy League princess who went to school with me and Bobby. She was a stuck up, paid up little trollop whose parents moved her swiftly through the High School circuit with the best tutors money could buy. Perfect ACT and SAT scores, hell she even took all the best extracurriculars both in school and out.

Her graduation present was Equestrian classes and a horse. Naturally, Harvard was her next stop and standing in front of me now in her expensive suit, perfect lipstick and that look on her face that said she was better than me, she looked it.

We stepped onto the elevator, Stagger moving to one side, leaning quietly in the corner. I did my best to avoid looking her in the eyes, instead opting to look down as she pressed the button for Andy's floor.

She stepped inside of my personal space just as I felt the odd shift in my stomach from the elevator beginning to rise.

"Ms. Ryan." She said in greeting.

"Hey, Candy," I said, looking everywhere but at her.

"Candice." She corrected me.

"Yeah, that too. Sorry."

"You smell like cigarettes and outside." She said, her face screwed up in disgust.

My eyebrows gave a quirk, my lips tightening. I forced myself not to ball up my fists.

"What? Does that make you mad?"

I finally looked up at her and she gave me a smug smile.

She took a step closer. I examined her face, looked her up and down, my dark eyes still avoiding hers.

She got even closer. Right in my face.

She was only a few inches taller than me but somehow, intimidation crept into my bones and my eyes retreated.

"You want to hit me, don't you?" Acid was in her tone.

"No." I lied.

"Sure you do. Don't worry. You can." she lifted her hands, straightening my shirt and brushing my shoulders off.

I felt my top lip twitch.

"Do it." She said, her voice tight. Threatening.

I snapped my gaze back up to her, but only for a moment.

“Don’t, Charlie. She’s fucking with you.” Stagger said.

Candice smiled at me in her smart little jacket and pencil skirt.

“Just what I thought. The little hoodrat is all bark and no bite.”

She lifted a finger and tapped the end of my nose.

My head flinched back and she let out a little chuckle, stepping back away from me just as the doors rolled open. I dropped my stare to the floor and stepped out of the elevator into that mahogany hallway.

I wanted to deck that bitch so bad my hands were trembling, but I didn’t dare. I was scared of the result and by proxy scared of her. I was terrified of everyone. Years of being at the mercy of other people’s abuses taught me to be scared. I didn’t know how to be anything other than a coward. If I reacted I’d go to jail or worse, to a NEST isolation center.

“Sometimes I just...” I whispered.

“I know you do, Kiddo.” I felt Stagger’s massaging hand on the back of my neck.

The upper floor looked more like a resort than a law office. Live trees in pots all over the place. The placid sound of phones gently ringing. The smell of freshly polished wood and newly waxed floors. I made my way all the way to the end of the hall to the corner office with the frosted windows. The door was equally impressive with its expensive inlay reading the name Andrea A. Ryan. I slowly turned the door handle, peeking my head in.

The floor was hardwood like the rest of this place, accented by the light of a massive floor to ceiling window that made up the outside facing walls, meeting at the corner where a huge modern desk was placed.

Behind it sat one of the most intimidating women I’d ever known.

My sister Andy was a quiet powerhouse. She was tall and a redhead like Maxine. She had a brief few freckles on her face that spoke to how young she was, the second of mom’s daughters. Her suit

looked like it weighed nothing, sitting on her lean, buxom body like a pair of well-made pajamas and yet deadly smart. It was a subdued blue color with a stark white undershirt. She wore a bolo tie around her neck in lieu of a business one. The emblem the cords ran through looked almost like the crest of some warrior knight of olde. Her hair was done up in huge ringlets, beautiful and professional. She looked like a classic movie star. Like Lana Turner brought back to life. Of all of my sisters, she was probably the prettiest, followed by Max. She was the kind of woman that liked to make other women feel bad about themselves and could pull it off.

“Hey, Andy,” I said, stepping inside of her office door.

I crossed my hands in front of me. I didn’t know what else to do. I looked around and felt somehow diminished. This place was worth more money than I’d ever seen. I was probably standing on a forty-thousand dollar floor, smelling her burn three-hundred dollar incense, looking at her wearing a five-thousand dollar suit.

Everything on my entire body was worth about fifteen bucks at the thrift store.

“Charlotte.” She said in lieu of a greeting. She used my actual name and I knew why.

She was setting the tone.

This wasn’t gonna go my way.

Even her voice was scary. Andy had a direct way of speaking to people. Like she already knew she was better than them. Her voice was husky and rich.

I envied her.

As I looked around her office, I wasn’t just intimidated. I was jealous.

“I... thanks for seein’ me. I know you’re probably really busy,” My voice sounded tiny. I fought the urge to shrink back out the door.

“Sit down.” She said and I realized it wasn’t a request.

I walked closer to her desk, my nerves on edge, and slipped into one of the stylish chairs in front of it. The memory foam padding was probably the most comfortable thing I had the pleasure of sitting on in my entire life. It cradled my body like some kind of cloud turned into furniture.

I knew Andy. She hated people that didn't look her in the eyes. More importantly, she hated people full of weakness.

Everything I was.

I forced myself to look up to her candy green eyes. They were just as beautiful as she was. And they were scorching the back of my eye sockets. She hadn't said a word, hadn't moved a muscle. She hadn't even frowned at me and already I could feel how much she hated me. My eyes didn't just retreat. They ran to stare at her hands.

Andy looked down and kept scribbling notes on a legal pad making a little sound that suggested I'd made a no-no.

"What?" I asked, my heart practically beating in my neck as I examined her perfectly manicured red nails.

She didn't respond but I knew why. I had looked away and she was irritated.

"How are you?" I asked.

She set her pen down, clasped her fingers together on her legal pad and stared at me.

I fought hard to stare back.

"I'm good, Charlie. I'm really good. I also know you hate small talk the same way that I do, so if you'll forgive me. You have two minutes."

"I-" I opened my mouth to speak, but she stopped me with a raised hand.

"Two minutes, and I start billing. And do be careful, I have an eight-hundred dollar an hour minimum." She went back to writing on her legal pad, glancing over at her computer screen every few moments.

Jealousy crept into the corners of my head like knives digging into my skull. Sitting across that desk from me was everything I wished I had. She made in minutes what I couldn't make all month. For me, her giving me the tiniest loan would be life-changing. For her it was inconsequential. She probably spent my rent on that bolo. I tried not to show it on my face.

I took a deep, sobering breath and looked down at my hands. They were starting to shake. I didn't have much time. Already I could feel soreness starting in my joints. I wet my lips and nodded.

Two minutes. Less now.

"Andy, I wouldn't be here unless it was absolutely crucial." She stared right through me.

My eyes bolted again. I'd fall apart if I looked at those green irises any longer.

"I know you don't have any love for me." I said, "I know we aren't even on speaking terms. What I did was unforgivable. I hate myself every day for it. I can't even look at myself in the mirror," I felt myself choking up.

Fuck.

I couldn't show weakness. I had to eat it and let her know I wasn't spineless.

Tears started falling out of my eyes.

"I got nothing left, Andy. I'm a wreck and I know it. I've done everything I can to come up with my rent, but if I don't pull it out of my ass by tomorrow, I'm gonna lose my roof."

I dared to look back up at her.

The look in her eyes nearly stopped my heart.

"I just... thought you'd help." I wiped my eyes with the heel of my palm.

I could feel Stagger standing behind me. He put his hands on my sunken shoulders. I swear in that moment the only thing keeping me upright was him.

“Charlie,” my heart fluttered when she said my name. “We did everything we could for you. We really did.”

“I know, but-” she shut me up with a look.

“I talk now. You listen. Nod your head.”

I nodded my head like an obedient puppy.

“Say you understand, because I won’t repeat myself.”

“I understand.” I practically recited the words.

“You did everything you could to break up our family. Dad did nothing but clean up behind and chase after you. He begged us to give you chance after chance after chance.”

My left knee was jumping. I knew where this was going. I didn’t dare stop her though. I didn’t dare get up and walk out. I knew she’d been waiting to say what she was about to say to me for years.

I earned it.

The last time I came here, almost eleven months ago, she wouldn’t even see me. I broke a bunch of glass in the lobby and got arrested out front.

“Mom was the one who decided she’d had enough. Of what? I don’t know. Dad took care of her like he took care of you. But she left anyway. Went running into the arms of that useless sperm donor of yours. But people make mistakes, right?” Andy said.

Her face was unchanging. I just wanted her to shout at me. I could deal with people shouting at me. This was far, far worse. I reached a hand up and played with a loose strand of hair at the back of my neck.

“She walked out and right into the arms of some boy that talked a big game and worked in the mailroom of all places. The mailroom. And what did dad do? He came home to his family every evening and hoped. Kept believing her lies that she was just figuring things out. Just needed space. And who knows, right? Maybe she just wanted to feel young again. Maybe she just wanted a younger man to tell her she was still sexy.”

I didn't want to hear anymore but Andy was my only hope.

"Until she came back home knocked up with a little fuck trophy and expected my dad to take care of your dad's mistakes."

I felt my lip tremble and bit it to stop it.

"Do you know what pisses me off the most...? None of this would have even happened if a mailroom clerk had pulled out four seconds sooner and left you drying on a bedsheet."

I looked at the floor. The squeeze of Stagger's reassuring hands comforted me.

"Stop crying," Stagger whispered and I rubbed my eyes.

I opened my mouth like I wanted to say something, but I remembered what Andy said.

She talks. I listen.

"And your whole life you walk around fucking up everything you touch. Being the biggest nuisance you know how to be. Mom and Dad put our family back together despite everything else somehow... and the one good thing that came out of it you managed to..."

She couldn't talk about it any more than I could. I just nodded, trying to keep myself from breaking down.

"So forgive me for being crass when I say, Charlotte," she leaned forward at her desk, opened those perfectly painted red lips and spat her next words at me like acid.

"Get the fuck out of my office."

I sprang out of that chair. I couldn't let her see me break. I wouldn't. I almost ran for the door.

"By the way. You're one minute over. I'll send the bill."

I slammed the door and tears spilled out of my eyes faster than I could wipe them away.

My face felt hot. My head felt hot.

"Jesus, Charlie," Stagger said, jogging behind me, "are you alright?"

He stepped in front of me and I stopped at the elevator door. I didn't want to respond to him there. Nobody could see him or hear him but me. I rapidly tapped the down button on the elevator just as Candice came swishing her hips past me, a smug look on her face.

I straightened myself and wiped my eyes, refusing to let her see me falling apart.

"I hope your visit today was productive," she said as the elevator doors rolled open.

"Yup," I said back, letting my lips pop on the last letter.

"Good. I'm sure you got everything you deserve." She smiled that fake smile at me.

"I'm sure you'll be the first to know." I stepped into the elevator and Stagger followed.

"Are you alright?" He asked again. I could feel his eyes on me.

Candice stopped near the end of the hall to stare back at me until the elevator doors rolled closed.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Alright," he lifted his hands, "not a word, I promise."

"Thank you."

I blew past the front desk ignoring Travis' concerned eyes as they followed me from the elevator to the front door. As soon as we were out of the building I walked as fast as I could without running.

"Where are you headed?"

I kept walking. My sadness had turned to anger and bitterness somewhere along the way. Not just at what Andy said, but at my life. At everything.

"Charlie," he called to me again, but my feet moved faster. I heard him call my name again, but I didn't care.

I ran.

I didn't know where, I just wanted to run. I wanted to scream. I wanted to break things and yell and cry. I just wanted to hit something and hit it and hit it until it felt as bad as I did. I wanted to

punch the face of everybody that acted like I somehow wanted to be unwanted. I wanted to take a baseball bat to my life and not stop until I couldn't lift my arms.

I ran until my cigarette abused lungs burned. I ran until my legs were on fire and my thighs felt like useless bundles of tissue weighing me down.

Then I ran more.

I didn't stop until my thundering heart and aching lungs made me. My hands found my hips and my shoulders heaved up and down.

"Hey," I heard Stagger's voice again, from above.

I tilted my head up to see him coming to rest beside me from the sky. One long, black wing out at his side, its ethereal feathers fluttering.

"Look, let's just... let's head back to your place and figure this thing out, okay?"

I looked across the street. There was a liquor store there advertising the cheapest vodka in town. A couple boozehounds sat on the curb outside of it drinking bottles hidden in brown paper bags.

Stagger's eyes followed mine to the little shop.

"Don't." He said, snapping back to me.

I didn't hear him.

His wing disappeared as I walked right out into traffic. Cars slammed on their brakes, horns blared out at me. I didn't even look at them, I just kept walking.

"Charlie! Fuck." Stagger's footsteps were behind me, "Stop, just stop!"

I didn't.

I walked right into the liquor store, shoving the door so hard it knocked the doorbells down and made the cashier jump. I marched back to the cooler and yanked one of the doors open, snatching a thirty-two-ounce sports drink from it. Slamming the door shut, I made my way over to the advertised cheapest vodka in town and

grabbed a bottle. Stagger was pleading with me. I couldn't stop myself even if I wanted to.

I slammed money down on the counter, none of the cashier's words registering to me. As I stormed out of the store, the sports drink was open, half of its contents getting poured out on the sidewalk as I walked towards the street.

"Charlie! If a cop sees you, you're gonna violate your parole."

I opened the vodka.

"Please!"

I sat right on the curb next to those smelly boozehounds and turned the vodka bottle upside down in the sports drink, staring balefully up at Stagger as we both listened to the two liquids splashing together.

He was shaking his head.

I didn't care.

I threw the vodka bottle aside and in seconds dumped the disgusting mixture of lemon-lime, electrolytes, and alcohol down my throat.

"I'm not watching this." Stagger said.

"Then leave!" I shouted, the boozehounds quickly hurrying away. "Just go, Stagger. I don't need you, I don't need anyone!"

"You need your fucking head examined!" He shouted back at me.

"Fuck you!"

"Oh, there she goes again! Fuck me. Fuck this. Fuck that. Fuck everybody!"

"You're goddamn right," I muttered, dropping the bottle in the street.

"Whatever," Stagger was pacing back and forth in front of me. "Whatever. You're just-- whatever. Every time. Every fucking time. I can't..." He was so mad he couldn't get his words together.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Nothing." He hissed.

“Yeah, whatever.”

Stagger’s pacing kept up, his eyes boring down on me.

“I don’t get you.”

“Just go.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“You’re gonna leave anyway. Everybody leaves.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, shaking my head.

I started to feel slow and stupid. My head was beginning to swim.

“I can’t even begin to keep up with your issues.”

“Only issue I got is you,” I said, getting to my feet.

Already the alcohol was hitting me. I stumbled a few steps off the curb.

“Jesus. Look at you. You’re fucking wasted already.” He said, stepping up to catch me.

I shoved his hands off.

“Who cares.” I must have looked plenty crazy in that street yelling at no one. Tussling with no one.

“You don’t care. Nobody does. Nobody has to,” I mumbled. My words were getting harder to say as I headed for the bus stop.

“Where are you going now?” He asked from somewhere behind me.

My feet felt heavy. Maybe I overdid it a little with the vodka.

“Only one place left to go, Stag.”

I got to the bus stop just as the 31 pulled up. I hopped on, not without stumbling on the bottom two steps. Climbing up, I made my way to the back of the bus and took a seat. Stagger was right there beside me. We rode in silence for the half hour or so it took for me to get to my next stop downtown. Swirling lights and empty-headed thoughts bounced around my head.

I stumbled off the bus, feeling the world spin. My brain felt like a cotton ball between my ears.

“Charlie,” I heard him say. His voice seemed far away even though he was right beside me. I felt slow and heavy all over.

I stopped and looked at him, staring into his chest.

“What, man?” I asked, my mouth feeling thick, my head buzzing.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m gonna go ask Bob,” I said, shrugging.

“Bob? Who the fuck is Bob?” Stagger asked, genuinely confused.

“Bobby.”

“Yeah. Right. Who the fuck is Bobby?”

“Y’know. Rob.” I said, shrugging like he was supposed to figure it out.

Rounding the corner at the end of the block, I hopped down from the curb, stumbling and falling to my knees in the street. An expensive looking car almost creamed my ass and honked its horn at me. I used the hood of it to climb back up and flipped the driver off.

Stagger rasped out a hard sigh and looked around.

“Why are we downtown, Charlie?” I could tell from his voice that he was genuinely lost as I made my way to the opposite curb, stumbling towards a large sports gym.

“I told you already,” I said, my voice a drunken whine, “I’m gonna go ask Rob. She’s the only one left that hasn’t said no to me yet.”

“She?” Stagger asked, grabbing my arm.

I stopped and turned to face him, right in the middle of the sidewalk.

A couple walked right by us, steering well clear of the nutty girl talking to herself in the street.

“Yeah,” I said at almost a whisper. That’s when he looked over my shoulder.

On the wall outside the double doors was a massive poster with an athletic, blond woman on the front of it. She was all solid abs and tight muscle with an elegant shape. Both of her hands had cherry red boxing gloves on them, her blue eyes blazing with special effects. She

had a confident stare on her face. The kind of expression winning gave you. In big bold letters across the top, it said Robin ‘Rampage’ Ryan, Mixed Martial Arts World Champion.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Stagger said, pointing at the poster. Both of his eyebrows shot up. “That’s Rob?”

“Yeah.”

“Bobby.”

“Yeah.”

“Bob.”

“Yeah, Stag.”

“One of your sisters is fucking Rockin’ Robin Rampage?”

“Yup.” I made the last letter of the word pop.

“Look. I don’t think this is a good idea.” He said, turning to walk away, snapping his fingers and beckoning me with a wave. “Let’s just get you home. We’ll think of something else.”

“I got nothing else. And I’m not losing my place.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Yup.” The last letter popped out of my mouth again.

Stagger stared at me for a long moment.

“You’re serious.”

“Can’t do it sober.” I shrugged.

“No, I mean you’re serious about doing this. About going in there.”

“If you don’t wanna watch, you don’t have to. Just leave. I’ll be fine.”

“You’ll be dead!” He yelled at me. “Why don’t you just go home, Charlotte?!” He pleaded with me.

“I won’t have a home to go to if I don’t get this money,” I said with a dopey smile. All my woes temporarily gone on alcohol.

“That’s not what I’m talkin’ about,” Stagger hissed at me. “Blue Veil. Your real home. None of this is gonna matter if Perun gets to the Heart Fire before we do.”

“That ain’t my home!” I screamed at him. “I got nothin’ there, Stagger. Nothin’!”

“You don’t have anything here, either!” He roared right back at me.

“Bullshit. That’s bullshit! I got a family here.”

“No, you hav-” I cut him off.

“Say it. Say it, motherfucker! I can’t hit anybody here but I can damn sure hit you!” I stepped right up to him sobered by rage and shoved him.

“You don’t have any power here, Charlie,” Stagger said, his voice soft then.

He lifted both of his hands and placed them on my shoulders.

“They hate you. And I don’t know if there’s anything you can do to change that. Do you know how hard it is to see you-”

“Then don’t. Watch.” I glared at him, staring him in the eyes until I couldn’t anymore.

I turned around and headed for the double doors of the gym. I felt his eyes on the back of my head.

“You’re nothing like her.” He said, “Siobhan. You have her name but you don’t have her heart. Siobhan would do anything to make sure Perun never won. She gave her life for something you don’t even care about.”

“I’m not her anymore, Stagger,” I said over my shoulder. “I can’t be who you want me to be. I’m not a hero.” I looked back at him, “I’m just a girl that wants her daddy back.”

I marched right through those doors, still numb from the vodka. The drunk I had on was the only thing that kept me from running out of that place. From noticing the ache in my muscles. I kept thinking about going home, hiding in the bathroom and shooting up instead of this. But then I remembered tomorrow I wouldn’t have a bathroom to hide in if I didn’t do what I came to do.

The gym smelled like old, stale sweat and air fresheners. I could hear the sound of feet hopping on mats and ropes whipping at the floor as people nearby skipped them. Feet were pounding on treadmills and someone was tenderizing a speedball with a tremendous rhythm.

The gym was primarily men, but a couple of women who no doubt were there to soak up the limelight of the champion were present.

There was obviously one hell of a membership fee. There weren't any fans here, just genuine athletes wanting to be the best. Metal slapped metal as people lifted weights and an attendant walked around offering people water. Compared to these people, I was a short slice of soft bread.

In the boxing ring in the middle of the gym, I saw her. I watched her signature footwork. Watched her dance in and out with her sparring partner. Her lightning fast fists whirled in front of her, catching her partner's target gloves with blinding execution. A work of love and repetition. I could feel ice running down my back and butterflies trying to get out of my stomach.

Andy was frightening but Robin was something else.

Robin was pure terror.

This was the woman that bullied me all through school. She was the one who waited for our parents to leave just to trap me in the garage and repeatedly beat me up. Her and all of her friends used to tease me so bad at school I'd just ditch and go smoke cigarettes or snort coke with the washouts.

She was the reason I spent most of my teenage years drunk before noon. Course it didn't help that she thought I was crazy. Everyone did. You walk around spouting off about angel wings, gods and other worlds and the only people who'll ever hang out with you are the ones that like to take hallucinogens.

I almost hated Stagger for not showing up sooner in my life and telling me it was all real. Telling me to just keep my mouth shut about

it so I didn't alienate myself from my family and friends.

It was too late now.

That first step towards the ring was the hardest step of my entire life.

I took another. And another. Before I knew it, I was standing right next to it, my hands sliding into the pockets of my sweatpants.

"Rob," I said, not nearly loud enough.

She didn't hear me.

"Bob!"

I saw her blue eyes flash my way. Her face tightened and I felt a thrill of fear. But she kept at her rhythm. Kept hitting those target gloves.

"Robin!" I called again, "C'mon. I know you can hear me."

She ignored me still.

Finally, I took a step closer and called out louder.

"Bobby!"

"What!?" She shot back at me, turning to stare me in the face.

My eyes shot wide. The power in her voice froze my blood.

"Why the fuck are you here?"

Everyone went quiet. All eyes were on me.

"I... I need to talk to you." My voice was a ghost again. Tiny and lost in my mouth.

"No, you don't." She shot back through heavy breaths.

"You know I wouldn't be here if it wasn't important." God, I wanted to run away.

She walked towards the edge of the ring and I took a reflexive step back. She climbed down and towered almost a foot taller than me, taking off her boxing gloves.

"I told you to stay the fuck away from me."

"I know," I whispered and my eyes dropped.

"But you didn't listen, clearly cus I see you. Don't I?" Her anger was building.

Robin's emotions weren't hard to read. They never were. Her eyebrows gave her away. Not that I dared look up at them.

I tried to hang my head but her hand came up, shoving my chin up with a curled finger.

I kept my eyes off her.

She wasn't like Andy. Andy hated weakness first and foremost, me second. Bobby just hated me. I kept staring a hole in the side of a punching bag near the wall.

"I need some help." I couldn't force my voice over the defeated whisper it came out as.

"What?" She said as if she couldn't hear me clearly. I knew she could.

"I said I need some help," a little louder this time.

Robin laughed.

"You really have the nerve to walk into my gym stinkin' like booze and ask me for a fuckin' favor?"

I heard her repressed New York accent slip out.

"I wouldn't have if I had any other option. Look, I know how bad I messed up, Bobby."

"Robin." She said, revoking my right to even use the name I'd called her since childhood.

I nodded.

"Robin." I paused. "I think about it every day. Every day, Bob."

I said it out of habit and she shoved me so hard and so suddenly that my teeth clacked together. I fell back several steps and opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

"Whoa," I heard her coach say, "We're not doing this, Rampage. I dunno who this girl is, but I can't have it. We got a fight to prep for."

She looked back at her coach, then marched closer to me.

"What do you want, Charlie?"

"I-, fuck, the words wouldn't come out of my mouth.

"What?!" She yelled at me and I jumped.

"I haven't... I mean, it's been hard finding a job after I got out."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Look," I tried to whisper, "I'm a couple months behind on my rent. I'm about to lose my place. I'm not askin' you to care, just... if you could loan me five or six hundred dollars. I swear I'll give it back."

"You're asking me for money?" Her eyes were wide and incredulous then.

"Y-yeah, but not for anything dumb. I--"

"You swear. Yeah, you swear. Fuck your swear. You always swear. Max told me what you did the last time she gave you anything."

"I made a mistake."

"A mistake? You overdosed and almost killed yourself with money you told her was to go to rehab."

"Bob," Her arms burst forward and shoved me to the floor.

"Robin." I correct myself.

"Whoa! Okay, that's enough. Ladies, break it up," her coach came down from the ring to stand beside us as I got to my feet.

"Robby, who is this girl?" He said, gesturing a hand in my direction.

"This pretty little piece of work is my sister," Robin said.

Every head turned to look at me.

"And she's the perfect example of what happens when you mix equal parts drugs with equal parts empty fuckin' head."

She lifted her hand and shoved my forehead with a finger.

I felt my lips twitch. A small sign of anger that I couldn't control.

"Oh, does that piss you off? Does that bother you?"

"No." I lied.

"Uh-huh."

"Look, back when that happened, I was-- I'm clean now, alright? I'm not usin'." I lied again.

"Are you?" She scoffed.

I looked her in the eyes. Hate was boiling behind those blue irises. It was hard to believe someone so pretty could harbor such an ugly emotion.

“Show me your arm.”

I winced and looked away again. I started to lift out my right arm.

“Your other arm.” She demanded, shoving my arm back down to my side.

I blew a sigh and reached over to my sports sleeve. I opened my mouth to say something but decided it wouldn’t make a difference. I rolled my sleeve downward and the deafening silence that followed let me know everyone in earshot had taken a breath and held it.

The crook of my left arm looked like a topographical map of a bombing site. All the failed attempts at finding a vein while high. All the successful attempts at tapping one and shooting up. All the scars from when I had blacked out and gone to sleep with a needle hanging out of me. It was all there. And most of them weren’t a week old.

“That’s what I thought. You’re fuckin’ pathetic.”

I didn’t say anything back to her.

I looked around the room at all the faces looking back at me in disgust. They were all on her side. I was the filthy druggie sister now. I’d never be anything else to them.

“Robin, I didn’t come here for you to judge me,” I said, yanking up my sports sleeve.

“I don’t have to judge you. Anybody that’s known you for two seconds knows what you are.”

“Yeah? And what’s that, Robin?” I asked, waiting for what I knew was coming.

“A junkie. A piece of shit. And a murderer.” She shoved my forehead with her finger with each indictment.

I felt tears threatening to rim my eyes. My vision distorted from the moisture trapped in them. I gave a fake smile and wiped one of my eyes before the tear could escape. I didn’t want her to see it.

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "You got me."

"Say it." She hissed, her face tight. Burning with rage.

"Can I have the money or not, Robin?" I asked.

"Say it." She repeated.

I looked around at all the eyes on me. I felt a pained expression pull at my face and I swallowed.

"I'm a junkie." I managed to get out without my voice cracking.

"And?"

"I'm a piece of shit..." I blinked and a tear fell down my right cheek.

"And a murderer."

"And a..."

"A murderer." Her eyes dared me not to comply.

"And a murderer." I swallowed the words down, my bottom lip trembling as more tears rolled down my face.

Robin stared at me and I couldn't look back. I just stood there and felt the weight of every eye on me.

"Robby, look," Her coach said, "Why don't we take five?"

She suddenly shoved past me and I nearly fell over again. I guessed it meant she was done with me.

Fuck.

"C'mon." She said as she marched on.

My eyebrows lifted.

Did she want me to follow her? I looked up and caught the eyes of her coach. The middle-aged man with his graying sideburns gave me the same look he might give gum stuck to his shoe. A kind of quiet disdain you give to the neighbor's cat prancing across your yard.

Brushing myself off, I turned and followed after Robin.

I was kind of proud of myself for asking for more than I really needed. If she actually gave me six-hundred, combined with the couple hundred from those phone parts, that would put me right at

my budget. I could probably figure out the phone bill. The light bill I was positive I could come up with in another couple of days.

She led me around the corner, passed the bathrooms and towards the gym's office door. Pushing it open, we both walked in and I looked around.

It seemed like a nice enough spot. Nothing like Andy's office, but functional. She had her own desk. I could tell by the trophies around it and the pictures of our family. I walked over to it and looked over the framed photos.

One was of mom and dad holding each other. Seeing it made me smile. Next to that one, a picture of Robin holding up her first Karate trophy. Another of Dad teaching her how to drive. There was a landscape shot of all of us girls that year we went to Texas to see dad's hometown in Uvalde. All of us were lined up against a barn wall in tight cowgirl jeans, looking over our shoulders, pulling ridiculous, exaggerated model faces. The Ryan Family Curse on display.

Mom with her five girls and each of us held most of our weight in our ass and thighs. Three redheads, two blondes and my black, frizzy hair sticking out like a sore thumb.

That was one of the few days Robin and I didn't fight. That was back when Sam was still alive. I could see her little frame right beside mine, last one on the left. She was thirteen in that picture.

I wished I could jump into that photo. Go back in time and yell at myself. Or at least tell Sam to stay away from me. If I only I knew she'd soon be gone.

I heard something click behind me and it brought me out of my reminiscing. I turned around to see Robin locking the door.

"B-... Robin?"

The fear that gripped my body in that moment was absolute. Icy fingers tightened around my ribcage.

"Robin, please."

I backed up and bumped into her desk as she turned around, marching towards me. She didn't say a word.

"Bobby, we're not kids anymore. You could really, seriously hurt-"

"Shut up, Bitch," she snarled.

I took a step wide left.

She mirrored me.

I tried to step wide right.

She mirrored me again.

I didn't have anywhere to go but to shrink back around her desk. She pursued me like an animal, the look in her eyes promising me a future I didn't want. I backed up more, holding my hands up defensively.

"Please. I don't want- ggh!" Her fingers snapped around my throat.

I swallowed and it hurt. It felt like the pressure in my head was going to make it explode. Blood flow was cut off from my brain. My top lip curled in desperation.

My hands came up to grab at her wrists, trying to pry her hands free. My vision started to fade as I squirmed and writhed at the end of her powerful hands. I didn't realize only the tips of my toes were touching the floor until she let me go.

I coughed out a hard breath. Used air bursting from my lungs as they desperately tried to suck in more. Years of smoking only made the whole thing hurt worse as a horrible gasping, wheezing sound came out of me with every harsh cough.

I stumbled back around the desk, sliding against the wall to find the door, my arm bending behind me to try and grab the handle. I was afraid to turn my back on her. Pain splashed across my face as her fist rammed into my jaw. My head snapped to the side and cracked the door window.

Blood spilled down the back of my throat and over my lips as another punch rammed into my nose. I pressed my back flat to the

door, using it to help keep me upright as my head swam. My head rocked left then right from two fast hooks, stumbling me to the floor.

“Get up.” I heard her spit the words out like venom.

My head throbbed. My skin burned. All I tasted was blood. I watched it pool down under my face on the floor while I got to my hands and knees.

“Shit...” I groaned out.

Her fingers grabbed a handful of my frizzy mohawk and hoisted my head up to look at her.

“Get up.” She said again, and I nodded.

I got to my feet with my roots as an escort and again she punched me into the door.

I crumbled.

“Get up.”

“Fuck... Bobby,” I swallowed my own blood, starting to cry.

“Bobby, please. Pleas- nggh!”

Her fingers found my throat again and yanked me off the floor, pulling a desperate, pathetic whine out of me. She was shaking the life out of me then, slamming me against the door over and over again, using my neck as a handle. I desperately grabbed at her shirt, her arms, anything. My eyes rolled back in my head as she blasted my frizzy head against the window until the glass spiderwebbed.

This was it. This was how I was gonna die. She was gonna beat my brains out right here against this door until I stopped moving.

And I deserved it.

Oh well.

Who really wanted to live forever anyway?

She stopped long enough to let me catch my breath, dropping me onto my feet. I coughed splatters of blood from the two red rivers running from my nose.

“Bobby,” I tried to reason with her. Or at least I wanted to.

My head smacked off the glass again and it broke.

This time she busted my lip.

I crumpled to the floor in a heap and she made me stand up again.
Stop crying, Charlie.

I can't. All I could do was try to put my mind somewhere else.

Most people take minutes for granted.

They go by fast.

You have a coffee, read a book. Maybe watch a quick video online.
And then they're gone.

Minutes.

The average fist fight only lasts 3 to 8 seconds. I read it in some school violence handout a while ago. Always thought it was useful information. I figured if I could just count to 8 in my head, they'll be tired and leave me alone with the pain.

But Bobby was a professional fighter.

She wasn't gonna get tired.

She spent the next two minutes of my life throwing me around her office, fucking me up.

I tried to beg. I tried to crawl away. To run.

She punished me for it.

I managed to crawl around her desk, kicking and flailing, but she yanked me off the floor by my torn shirt and threw me over it.

I rolled across her floor to a stop and watched her clamber over her desk after me. Before I could get to my feet she had me, tugging me up. My bloody hands came up to protect my face.

"Put your fucking hands down, Bitch!" She roared at me, speckles of my blood on her face.

Maybe it was all the time I spent in lockup. Or in suffocating, controlling relationships with people that didn't mean me any good. Maybe it was my immense daddy issues. I dunno. But when people yell at me I buckle. I just do what I'm told.

I put my hands down and let her have my face until she bounced me off her office door to land in a sobbing heap on the floor.

Then she kicked me like a dog in the street.

She snatched up a handful of my bushy, frizzy hair and made me look at her. She stared into the face she'd just battered into a bloody mess.

"Get the fuck out. Lose my address. Lose our family's address. Lose our numbers, or I swear to god... I'll beat you to death, Charlotte."

I stared her in the eyes when she made me that promise. I nodded as best I could before my bloodshot eyes retreated from her hateful stare.

Down on my knees, bleeding out while the weight of my body rested on my neck and roots, my arms hanging at my sides like two weights, I looked at the floor. Equal parts fear and exhaustion made my shoulders heave for breath.

She knew she whipped more than just my ass.

Robin slammed my head against the door again for good measure, then yanked me to my feet to open it. She marched me out in front of everyone by the arm like some kid she'd caught stealing and threw me down to bleed on the floor.

I collapsed, streaking blood across the smooth concrete. I kept my head down, too ashamed to meet the faces in the gym that were staring at my beaten frame as I managed to sit up on my heels, crying.

Her coach started to walk over to try and help me.

"Leave her," Bobby snapped in a tone that nobody wanted to question.

I flinched when she walked past me to the bathroom thinking she was coming back for seconds, but no. She was going to wash my blood off her knuckles.

I finally managed to get up off the floor. I felt all those eyes on me. Felt fresh tears run down my bruised and bloodied cheeks, cutting

clear paths through the red. Her coach helped me the rest of the way while I hiccupped and sobbed.

“C’mon, kid.” He said, helping me stumble to the door. “Lemme get you an ambulance or something.”

“I’m fine,” I said through a mouth full of blood.

“Is there at least somebody I can call? Family?” He asked.

“No... I just wanna go home.”

“Alright, kid. If you say so,” he said, “Here.”

He reached into his back pocket, taking out his wallet.

I watched him peel off seven crisp hundreds and hold them out to me.

I looked down at the money, then up at his face. He’d probably seen faces just as bad as mine before. He was a boxing coach. But something about the way he looked at me let me know it wasn’t just the big blood bib I had staining my shirt. It wasn’t the bruise developing under one of my eyes. Or the finger-shaped ones around my neck half smeared in blood and beaming an angry color soon to be purple.

What hurt worse than the severe beating I took was the fact that this grizzled old man felt sorry for me.

And he was giving me a shut up payment.

He didn’t want me to ruin the reputation of somebody who had more value than me.

More than that.

The look in his eyes said he’d already seen my future in a gutter somewhere. Another pretty little junkie on the 9 o’clock news overdosed on smack.

He was telling me to go kill myself.

“This is for whatever you might want or... need.” He said, shrugging his shoulders.

I looked at the bills again and nodded my head, silently accepting the deal.

Take the money. Shut my mouth. Go die so I'm nobody's problem anymore.

The most humiliating moment of my life was taking that wad of money in my bloody hand and walking out.

You'd be surprised how little people say to you on the train with your face covered in dry blood.

I took my busted cell phone and sent a selfie to my dad.

Me:

I give up.

At 4:45 PM that evening I walked into Mr. Jenkins little office.

He turned to look up at my bloodstained face. I handed him a wad of equally stained bills and he took them. We didn't have to say anything to each other.

He got it.

Tonight wasn't the night for a chat.

"Hope it gets better, kid."

I made my way up the stairs, dragged my tired body to my door.

My paid for door.

And opened it.

Stagger was standing there, looking out my window. I closed the door and walked to him.

He turned around and looked me over.

"Are you okay?"

"No," My voice broke and I buried my head in his chest. He hugged me to him. "I'm not well, Stag."

"I know, Kiddo."

There in his arms, hurting from the top of my head to the soles of my feet, I cried.

I cried for a long time.

CHAPTER 3

One Vision

A week had gone by since I came home destroyed inside and out. Stagger never left me. He took care of me. My black eye had swollen shut by the end of that night. My face was a mess and so was my self-esteem.

Stagger even did what I knew was hard for him.

He helped me shoot up.

I could see it in his face. It killed him every time he pushed the needle into my arm, but without it, I'd get sick.

Real sick.

I could also tell that he was keeping it from me. Pretty sure he thought I'd use too much on purpose. He kept my hype kit in his pocket and insisted on being the one to prep it.

He was right to.

He tended to my wounds every day. Fed me, made me get my tired, depressed bones out of bed and shower. He even helped me clean up my little apartment. He kept the curtains on his favorite window closed all week. The light from outside made my healing eye hurt so bad I screamed.

I was having nightmares.

I kept dreaming about it. Reliving my beating over and over. I'd wake up scared, out of breath. But he was right there. It wasn't the

pain. I was just so scared of her face. She was so mad. I could still feel her hate. The scary part about it was I felt like I had felt it once before. She reminded me a lot of someone else. So much so that I dreamed of Robin's face on her body.

Gozen Morrow. The Mother of Owls. The memory of her came back to me so suddenly it took my breath away.

Back when I was Siobhan.

I woke up in the middle of the night. Stagger was at the window, but I didn't disturb him. He was standing there looking out while the street light from outside splashed a slice of amber across his face. He kept the curtains narrow so the light didn't hurt my eye. I laid there in the dark, watching him. Thinking.

Gozen Morrow was a celestial and the leader of the Valkyrie at Demonhead; a group of female warriors that were some of the strongest in Blue Veil. A fighting force that helped Perun take over the world. A single Valkyrie was worth forty warriors, they would say.

And it was true. Demonhead was atop the Titan's Teeth, the biggest mountain face in the wide world. Titan's Teeth sat on the continent of Valhalla at the top of the world. That didn't make sense to think about, but the more I thought about it, the more it did.

Blue Veil used to be a whole planet, but after the War of the Old Gods, a battle called Ragnarok, the world was shattered into pieces. The howl of the great wolf Fenris who killed Brahma. The roar of the winds created by Midvalley Broken Crowns. The two of them broke it.

Now Blue Veil's many continents floated in the sky, orbiting the Hellmouth, where Fenris slept. An inky black spot at the center of the planet. A sphere of perfect darkness that absorbed all light.

I was born after Ragnarok, I think. The first time I was born I mean. When I was the girl I got my middle name from.

When I was a little girl Perun's generals swept countries, conquering everything they saw. Every town, every road, every

sanctuary. Driving their enemies further down to the cold lands near the Hellmouth.

Gozen Morrow's Valkyrie destroyed my homeland with Midvalley's NEST Army. Back then I was strong. Stronger than I am now. I didn't cry. Not even when my village burned in a flash of light. The whirling white fire and lightning from Perun's great war hammer, Mjolnir.

Not that he needed it. He could scorch the earth with the snap of his fingers. Summon fat fingers of lightning from the heavens to obliterate his enemies. That's why they called him The Lightning Emperor.

Gozen took me as a little girl to Demonhead. She gave me power. Made me a lesser celestial like the rest of the valkyrie sisterhood. But unlike them, I was small. The fight in me wasn't as big as the fight in them and because of that, I became a slave.

And it was a hard life.

Slave's tended to Demonhead. They cleaned, they cooked, and dedicated their lives to the upkeep of their keepers. Some of them even lived in the arena. Destined to help stronger women perfect their technique by having it used on them over and over again. A lot of young women died there. Died as an Owlet Feronia, the title of a slave.

Gozen hated weakness. But for some reason, she always hated me more. From the day she found me as a little girl.

She was almost mad that I didn't cry. That I never cried. No matter how hard she made my life. I could take a lot back then. My multi-tool and I. It's sad I'm such a cry baby now. Any and everything had water coming out of my eyes like a little kid.

Every valkyrie elite had their own slave. Someone that did for them, cleaned their armor, prepped their weapons, their meals, tended to their quarters. They even answered their mail and delivered their packages.

I was Gozen's.

Collared and kept.

But I couldn't remember her face. I thought hard about it. Focused on it. Gozen's face never became clear in my mind through the haze.

No surprise my brain put Robin's face on her body.

Five more days had gone by when Stagger's strong hands took me by the middle and hoisted me up onto my dresser. I sat there as I had twice a day every day for a week while he looked at me with those hazel eyes.

I'd stare back.

Not long. Just long enough to know he wasn't judging me.

The swelling had finally gone down. Now I just had healing cuts and bruises to deal with.

Robin took it easy on me. As bad as it was, she showed me mercy.

My left eye had a mean purple bruise under it that extended down over my cheek. My bottom lip was split in the corner and blood had scabbed over it. Miraculously she hadn't broken my nose. It was a shade of chapped red from how many times she'd pounded my head into the door with it.

My right eyebrow was cut and still bleeding whenever it felt like. Probably from the amount of alcohol in my system, thinning my blood. Blotchy, light bruises colored my right cheek but they were fading.

The worst was her handprints around my neck. He gently tilted my head up and I winced, setting the bottle of whiskey down beside me.

"Sorry," he said.

"No, it's okay." He dabbed a cloth at my raw nose.

"She worked you over pretty good." He said, "You're a tough cookie."

"Don't call me that." I laughed a little, but the sound stopped when I breathed out a sound of pain.

Smiling hurt. It stretched my scabbing skin, pulled at my sore face.

“Why? What’s wrong with being a tough cookie?” He asked, grabbing the antibiotic cream out of the little first aid kit he’d bought for me.

He dabbed some on the end of his finger and tipped my head back again to tend to my wounds.

“Cus,” I said, going quiet while he applied it. When he finished, I finished explaining, “Robin and her friends used to call me an oreo all the time.”

“Oreos are awesome,” He said.

We both laughed a little and I playfully punched his chest.

“Stop.”

“What?” He said, smiling that smile of his.

“Don’t make me laugh, it hurts.”

He breathed a little chuckle.

“Yeah, I know. I can see. You look awful.”

“I’d ask to see but I’m afraid to look.”

“I thought you didn’t much like mirrors.”

He was so close to me I could smell his skin. A kind of oak and chestnut smell mixed with men’s body wash. A hint of vanilla shampoo, maybe.

“I don’t.” I shook my head, again finding his eyes.

“Why?” He asked and my eyes retreated again.

“Hey,” he tipped my chin up with a curled finger.

“What?” I whispered back.

“You don’t have to say anything you don’t want to. We’re moving at your speed, Kiddo. Charlie Speed.”

We shared a smile. My face reminded me how bad it had been abused as the healing scab at my lip broke open.

“Ahh,” I complained and he dabbed my lip again with the cloth, catching the little dot of blood that formed.

“Turtles move faster.” He added.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he confirmed.

“Listen. Stag...” I took a deep breath and my coffee brown eyes finally came back to look at him.

“Charlie?” He said.

“You’re not gettin’ sweet on me, are you?”

“No, ma’am.” He said after a telling pause.

“Liar.”

“Jerk.”

“Just don’t, okay?” I asked him. There was a plea in my voice.

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded.

“M’serious. You deserve better than damaged goods, Stag. And even if I stop using... I’m never gonna not want it.”

He tilted his head to make me look him in the eye.

“People can’t always be fixed... but they can get back to good, Charlie.” I felt his stare and it scared me, so I looked away again.

“You didn’t have to do what you did,” I said, changing the subject.

“What?” He asked, playing dumb.

“Don’t do that,” I placed my hand on his chest. “You know what I mean.”

An hour ago, he helped me put heroin in my veins again.

That first night I could barely move. My hands were numb from protecting my face. From getting bounced off of every piece of furniture in Robin’s office. My body was aching with need. The withdrawal was setting in and I was a mess of dried blood and tears. I knew he didn’t want to feed me my poison.

“You were in pain.”

“I’m always in pain, Stag. It’s part of my charm.”

“Listen. Before we get too far, there’s something I need to tell you.” Stagger said and I frowned.

“I can’t take any bad news. Whatever it is, do me a favor.”

“What’s that?” He asked.

“No matter how bad it is, just save it.”

He looked me in the face so sternly I had to look back. Even though it hurt to do. I looked him right in the eyes. Something that was happening more often these days.

With him at least.

“Some secrets you shouldn’t keep,” he said. I could tell how serious he was.

“Just save it. I have a habit of running people off before we get to secrets. And besides, whatever this is? We can’t.” I dropped my head.

I felt his lips on my skin as he kissed my forehead.

“I know.” His breath was warm. Comforting.

Both of my hands were on his chest then. I could feel his warmth through his shirt. Feel his hard body beneath. My small fingers curled against him and I took a deep inhale of his scent as I sat upright, reluctantly pulling away.

Snatching up the bottle of whiskey beside me, I turned it up to my lips and took a swallow. It burned going down and my throat was still sore from Robin wringing my neck. Stagger pulled it from my hand and took a pull himself.

“So what next?” He asked me and I shrugged.

“I dunno,” I watched him grab my box of cigarettes, taking one out.

I let him place it between my lips and light the tip. I took one from the box and did the same for him.

He stepped back and sat on the edge of my bed and we both just looked at each other for a long time.

I wasn’t really sure if it was the kind words or the care he’d taken putting me back together, but I know he rescued me. I wasn’t really sure what I was going to do when I got home that night.

I know what I was thinking about doing.

I shook the thought out of my head.

“You ever have something happen that’s so bad it just... makes everything else clear?” I asked.

The first time I’d ever seen his eyes avoid mine was just then.

He looked wounded. Convicted. I knew what that was like so I didn’t press him. Wasn’t hard to figure out. A guy like him spending all his time with a loser like me.

He was trying to make up for something or someone he lost.

“Yeah, I know what that’s like.” He answered with a short nod, pulling a drag off his cigarette.

“For the first time in my life I just...” I shrugged. “I dunno. I feel different.”

He nodded and we both smoked in silence. I wanted to tell him everything. Not just because of what happened last week, but because it felt like it was time. Like everything that had been sitting on my shoulders just fell off. As masochistic as it sounded, my life changed while Robin was beating me half to death.

I looked at Stagger and recounted the entire event to him.

He sat silent, watching me while I talked him through the details of Robin disassembling me.

“She wouldn’t even let me lay there to catch my breath. She made me stand up and take it, y’know? Like I owed it to her.” I shook my head, dabbing my cigarette butt out in the ashtray.

“Then this,” I pointed at my neck, lifting my chin. “I could tell. I never been that scared in my life. I knew I was dead, Stag. She was gonna kill me.”

“Why did you follow her into that office?”

“I dunno. Part of me knew it was gonna happen.” I lit another cigarette.

“That’s pretty messed up, kiddo.”

“y’know what’s even more sick?”

“What’s that?”

“The last time she got her hands around my throat I just accepted it. She slammed my head against that door so many times I almost blacked out. I thought that was it and I just let go. I felt like I deserved it. To die, right there.”

I stared at the floor. I didn’t want to see his face. I was scared of what he would think of me.

“Hey.” He said and my head bounced up to look at him, “Nobody deserves that.”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

“You don’t deserve that.” He said again, his hazel eyes boring into me.

“You say that now. You haven’t heard it all yet.”

Stagger stood up and walked over to my window to look out of it. The light didn’t hurt so much anymore.

I started leaving my curtains open for him. Part of me always hoped he’d be there when I woke up.

And there he was.

My guardian angel.

I frowned at that thought. At myself for thinking it. Like I had to remind myself that I wasn’t worth saving.

“Storytime, Stag,” I said with a joyless smile on my face, hopping down off the dresser. I walked over to my little loveseat in front of the TV and sat down slowly. My body still ached. My bruised ribs screamed at me and I grunted like an old lady.

“I was twenty and I still didn’t have my license. Dad tried a bunch of times to get me drivin’ but I kept gettin’ in trouble. I got pulled over drunk one time in his car and they revoked my right to get my license altogether,” I blew a cloud of smoke.

“I was a horrible kid. I’d steal from my parents all the time. Hang out with washouts, get drunk and high. Everybody in my family hated me except two people. Sometimes three when mom was in a good mood.”

Stagger didn't say anything. He just listened.

I appreciated him for that.

"I could always rely on Sam and Dad though. No matter how bad I was, they never turned their backs on me. One day I had this nightmare, I woke up screamin' and delirious. I dreamed about fallin' from a really high place. Fallin' to my death, y'know? And it was so real. So fuckin' real. Anyway... that night dad finally had enough. He thought I was on drugs again."

I looked at the back of Stagger's head. He still hadn't moved.

If he didn't hate me yet, he certainly would in a moment.

I took a quivering breath, afraid to say more, but knowing I had to. He had to know what I really was.

"I wasn't though. I was really tryin' not to relapse. I wanted to be the daughter he wanted me to be for once. I was actually tired of bein' a bad person. Fighting with my family all the time. Boozin', staying out late, stealin' and lyin'. It was too late though. The damage was done. He tells me to get out. To be gone when him and mom got back from work. He really hurt my feelings that day. I never thought he'd lose faith in me like that."

I tapped the ash off my cigarette into the ashtray by the couch.

"So, like the bitch I was, I decide I'll teach him a lesson. I pack my backpack and grab the keys to the spare car. Samantha tried to stop me."

"Charlie," Stag said.

"No. Stagger... just listen. I need to say it out loud." I glanced up to see him nod his head.

"She tried to stop me." I continued, "She tried to tell me to just stay, just talk it out. But I got in the car anyway. She was so full of spirit," my voice was breaking.

"My memory's a little fuzzy here. I don't know exactly if I took a handful of pills, I don't know if I snorted somethin', or whatever. I

don't know. But Sammy got in that car with me. All she wanted to do was keep her big sister at home." Tears were rolling down my face.

"I keep telling myself there were two other cars on the road that mornin'. The police report says we were all by ourselves. My stupid brain tries to tell me I couldn't have done it all by myself. Tries to make up a lie, but I finally accepted the truth."

"I got high." My mouth was dry as I forced myself to keep talking.

"I was going too fast and I lost control. We spun out and my car door flew open. I wasn't wearin' my seatbelt so I got thrown out. That's how I broke my jaw. But I remember, Stag. Right when I was losing consciousness, the last thing I remember was hearing my dad's car go through that guard rail. I remember hearin' Sammy scream."

My shoulders jerked through my sobs. I felt my face get hot and my stomach clench in a knot. I felt my world break all over again reliving it in my mind. I cried for Sammy, I cried for my daddy, my sisters, my momma.

"I find out later the car did a nose dive into oncomin' traffic. Sammy's neck snapped on impact. Two other people died in that pile-up. A little boy and some sweet old lady on her way to get groceries. They all died and it was all my fault."

"Holy God," Stagger's voice faltered.

I looked up to see him looking back at me. There were tears in his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Charlie."

"Not as sorry as I am." He came to me, placed his hand on the back of my neck. His warm touch comforted me as my shoulders shook through tears.

"I lost Sammy, I lost my family... I even lost my freedom. I got charged with three counts of vehicular manslaughter. I spent two years in prison thinkin' about what a horrible piece of shit I am. Every day inside havin' the same vision. One vision in my head over and over again. Imaginin' the terror on Sammy's face."

Stagger let out a long breath, “Damn.”

“I deserve everything I got. Everything that’s happened to me is my fault. Sammy was the best thing my parents ever did. She made them happy again. She made us a family again. Daddy was so proud of her and I took her away from him.”

“You made a mistake, Charlie.” Stagger said, his voice soft.

“I am a mistake.”

“No more,” Stagger said, getting to a knee. He lifted my chin with a finger.

“It happened, Charlie. Some things we do we can’t ever take back. We don’t have a choice but to wear them, to learn from them. But we always have to find a way to move on. We are not the sum of our mistakes, Charlotte.”

He placed his hands on his chest. Guilt was in his eyes from our shared losses.

We had the same kind of wounds.

He took both of my hands in his and rubbed them with his thumbs.

We mourned together in silence.

We didn’t really talk anymore that night. There was nothing else to say. We traded the whiskey bottle back and forth. Finished a box of cigarettes. Watched infomercials on TV for the noise.

Sitting there on my little loveseat, we were each other’s therapist.

It was just me, Stagger and time.

* * *

When I woke up the next morning, Stagger was gone. I didn’t know where but out of nowhere he was out of my life. I didn’t leave my apartment for another two days, just hoping he would come back. I didn’t have a choice though. I needed to get out and try to find a job. The rent wasn’t going to pay itself and I’d already been down for over two weeks.

I dug through my clothes and found the nicest thing I had. Comfortable jeans and a trendy t-shirt I managed to score for cheap in the young women's section at a discount clothing store. It was a little bit of a snug fit but nothing scandalous. It was a chilly September day so I grabbed my jacket out of the closet and threw it over my shoulders.

I had spent over an hour with a hot straightener in my unruly hair, flattening it out by feel earlier. I was used to it by now. I refused to take that electrical tape off my mirror so I learned to get it right without needing to see what I was doing. The only reason I even bothered to wrangle my hair was to cover up the left side of my face that hadn't quite healed completely. I still had some bruising right under my eye that had faded to an odd greenish purple color.

I made sure I got up really early. I didn't want to risk running into Jack. I knew his dad probably told him about the last time he saw me. The last thing I needed was him asking me questions I didn't feel like answering.

I heard my phone buzz.

That never happened.

Ever.

I ran full speed from the bathroom, tripping over my clothes from yesterday, slamming into the ground and crawling the last few feet, my heart pounding in my chest. I grabbed up my broken phone and held it to my chest.

"Please, Daddy. Please, please, please." I prayed, my eyes closed before I looked down and pulled the phone away from me. The name I saw on the screen surprised me.

Bobby:

Why are you doing this to me?

Then below that message, another one from Max.

Max:

What did you do?!

I was confused. I stared at the two messages. Then another one came in.

Bobby:

You can't leave well enough alone, can you? Now you're after my career!?

My eyes went wide. I managed to navigate past the breaks in my screen to call max.

"Well, you've really done it now, haven't you?" She said.

"Done what?" I said back, confused.

"I'm not saying what Rob did to you was right. She asked me if you were okay and I told her I didn't know."

"You're not saying what Rob did to me was wrong either."

"You know better than that." She replied.

"I still don't know what's goin' on. What is it I'm supposed to have done now?"

Another message buzzed on my phone. Then another. And another. I looked at the screen. Robin was texting me hateful messages.

"Why is Robin cussing at me through text?"

"You really don't know or are you lying?"

"I'm not lyin'. I don't know what's happening! She's talkin' about her career. All I did was ask her for a loan and she beat the shit outta me." I insisted, pacing the floor.

"Pictures got out."

My stomach hit the floor.

I leaned against the wall by the bathroom door and slid down it. Fear gripped my entire body.

"I'm dead. I'm fuckin' dead..." I whined, my chest heaving in fear as I started to hyperventilate.

"Breathe," Max said. "Getting to you isn't going to be that easy."

"What? Why?" I asked, feeling a small moment of relief.

"Have you looked outside?" She asked. My eyebrows tightened.

“No, why?”

“Your apartment is on TV.”

Air just left the room.

“Oh my God... Oh my God. Max, I... I swear!”

“You always swear.” She sighed, “Look, what Robin did was terrible, but going after her career is a little much.”

“What?! Max, c’mon! Why would I do that?! She fucked me up just for asking her for money, what do you think she’s gonna do to me now that she thinks I released pictures?”

“Did you send pictures to anybody?” She asked me and I shook my head as if she could see me.

“No. No one. I didn’t-... I mean, to Dad?”

“Daddy wouldn’t have done this. Look, I’ve got to go, I need to get to Robin before she gets to you. Best advice, just stay away from her. And don’t talk to the press until we figure this thing out.”

“O-okay. Okay, I... shit. Shit!”

“Are you alright, by the way?” Max asked finally and I nodded.

“Yeah, I--... I’ve been home for a few weeks. I didn’t go anywhere. I just stayed here.”

“Listen. They won’t make it easy on you. Robin’s celebrity is sometimes overwhelming and this scandal is going to bring you a lot of attention.”

That last word rang in my head like a funeral dirge. NEST didn’t like Re-Cars in the spotlight. They would make Robin and me disappear.

I had to get to her.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I said, panic rich in my voice.

“Alright. I’ll try to talk to her. Maybe I can calm her down before she actually does kill you,” she replied.

“Thanks, Maxie,” I said before hanging up.

I stood up from the floor and paced around my shitty apartment hyperventilating. I walked over to my window.

Stagger's window.

Where was he?

I rushed over to my TV and turned it on, flipping a few channels to find the news. I saw the unmistakable dirty bricks of my building and the reality of what was happening set in.

"It's over. I'm gonna get locked up again." I covered my mouth with my hand, staving off tears. I was such a fucking cry baby.

Walking over to my curtains, I pulled them open to peek outside.

There were thirty people standing in front of my broken down, ghetto apartment building. All of them had cameras. Lenses aimed right up at my window the second the curtains cracked open. I snatched them closed again.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!" I screamed, smacking my phone repeatedly against my head. I had to find a way to make this right. I had to get things back to normal.

My phone rang in my hand.

I looked down at it and recognized the number immediately.

Agent Paul Lyons was calling.

I couldn't stop them anymore. Tears spilled out of my eyes and I wanted to hide.

"H-hello...?"

"You know you just fucked up. Right?"

"Yes, sir." My voice was tiny again.

"What are you gonna do about it?" His raspy voice asked.

"I don't know."

"What the fuck does that mean!?" He shouted.

"How did... how!?" I asked, my voice a whine.

"Some asshole at Robin's gym took pictures of her office after you left. The same asshole sent the photos to some Paparazzi fuck. Some other asshole took pictures of you on the train with your face kicked in, looking like you just got out of a noose. Y'know you're listed as one of Robin's siblings on Wikipedia? That's news to me."

I swallowed hard.

“Please help me.” I pleaded, not knowing what else to say.

“It’s out of my hands. I and the rest of the Triumvirate have ruled.”

“I c-” I started to say, but he interrupted me.

“This isn’t an icebox situation, Charlie. It’s a you and Robin disappearing kind of situation.”

I hung up on him.

Terror gripped me as my phone rang again in my hand.

It was him.

NEST would never interfere in the lives of regular people. That wasn’t part of the agreement they had with the governing bodies from Earth to get the influence and the power they had. Whether he was bluffing or not though, I couldn’t take the chance.

My family was safe at least. They wouldn’t risk boxing us all.

But Robin and I? Totally different story. They’d make it look like she killed me and fled the country or something. Either way, we were both disappearing.

I scrambled to my dresser and yanked it open, frantically throwing clothes out onto the floor.

“Where is it?”

I rummaged through my accessories, tossing rings and bracelets and phone screens I’d accidentally broken on top of my dresser until I found it. Still pristine white. Still beautifully knitted.

That white scarf.

I wrapped it around my neck, it’s warm, comforting fibers seeming to snuggle up to me like an old friend. The half of it that hung down billowed once on its own.

A blinding light suddenly filled my vision and I stepped back from the source.

I heard a faint humming in my ear. Like a chorus of voices miles away on a perfectly still, quiet night. The singing faded, the light in

my vision coalescing in the middle of my living room, forming the shape of a person.

I scrambled back onto my bed, eyes wide as that figure came into better focus.

She looked exactly like me.

Her hair was shorter and neat, not wild like mine. She had a permanent scar around her neck that looked like the remains of where a collar sat, hugging tight to her throat. She had a single, brilliant, tawny brown owl wing that swept out behind her. As the light faded from her body I saw her little frame shrouded in armor.

Shoulder pauldrons, a shimmering breastplate with the emblem of a shield on it, and below that a battle skirt made of a material I couldn't quite identify. At her side was a curving sword that looked like a katana with the last five inches of the blade missing. It had a tassel hanging from the pommel, the grip checkered white and black. The sheath was white and black with gold inlaid at its accents.

She smiled at me from a face identical to my own.

"You found your multi-tool."

"Yeah..." I nodded, climbing off of the bed. My pace was slow as I walked over to her.

"I can see your thoughts, Charlie. You don't have to explain."

Her accent was different from mine. I couldn't place where from. Maybe someplace in Scotland or Ireland. If I had stayed in school I might have been able to answer my own question.

"Life has been hard." She said, hurt on her face as she regarded me.

"Yeah." I nodded, fighting tears.

"I know you don't know what to do. And I can't help much. All I can tell you is that I set this plan in motion a very long time ago. And I intentionally wiped it from my mind so the workings of it couldn't be extracted from me or you."

"What am I supposed to do?"

“Fight, Charlie. You have to fight.”

“Where is the Heart Fire? Where is the Creator God, Brahma? They’re comin’ for me and I don’t know what to do.”

“All good questions, and if I could answer them, I promise I would.”

She stepped closer to me and her small arms pulled me into an embrace against her breastplate.

“But you have to follow your heart. Keep your wits. Think.”

“I can’t do this. I’m not strong like you.”

“You are me, Love.” She whispered into my ear with all the tenderness of a mother.

“You just have to find me inside.”

I nodded, pulling away to look her in her green eyes. The only thing about us that was different.

“You’ve got Sammy’s eyes,” I said.

“More that she’s got mine,” she smiled. “You haven’t got long. What you seek I would have put where only you or I would go.”

“What does that mean? Where would only we go?”

“It’s so strange... It’s like when a word is on the tip of your tongue, but you can’t quite...” Siobhan shook her head. “I don’t know, Love. I’m sorry. This little piece of me is all I had time to make for you. Trust your heart, keep your multi-tool close. It’ll see you through.”

“I can’t fight them here,” I said, steeling myself.

“Aye, no you can’t. But you remember how to fight,” she said.

“I do.”

“And you can fight them there. Where you have power.”

“I can,” I nodded, more to convince myself than her.

She unslung that sword at her side and lifted it out to me.

“Remember the way of Blood and Blade. Just because you’re a Valkyrie doesn’t mean you’ve got to be evil like the wicked heart of the Mad Queen. Take your power back and it’s yours wherever you go. Here on Earth or in the Endless Sky.”

I took the blade from her without another thought, turning it over between my hands before it disappeared completely.

“Fly, Love.” And with that, she broke apart into hundreds of sparkling points of light.

I looked down at that scarf. I watched it pull back over my shoulder and sprout into a five-foot owl wing made of tawny feathers at my right. One and only one wing, just like Siobhan’s.

I thought of Stagger then and his big, black hawk wing.

The mark of a multi-tool powered by a celestial.

It only created more questions than it answered. I lifted my right hand and that beautiful sword reappeared in it. I took its handle and pulled four inches of the blade free. Its edge was blunt, not sharp.

An Atma Sword. The chosen weapon of the Valkyrie. Women that were strong enough to use its blunt edge to tear through their enemies. To bash them into submission or death. In the hands of a Valkyrie, that blunt edge was a flaunted threat. They could make it cut like a razor.

Siobhan had stolen this weapon from Gozen Morrow herself.

I willed the wing away, the scarf returning to hang across my chest. Zipping my jacket, that sword disappeared soon after and I rushed out of my apartment.

I ran down the three flights of stairs towards the front door.

Jack hurriedly came out of the office, looking up at me.

“Charlie! What the hell is going on? There’s so many cameras outside I could barely get in here! They kept asking me if I knew Robin Rampage was your sister,” He looked confused, searching my face to see if the claim was true.

I looked at him and said, “Is there another way out of here?”

“What the hell is happening, Charlie? There’s news vans out there!”

It took everything in my power to get Jack to calm down and show me another way out of the building. He led me down to the basement

where the building conjoined with the shitty apartment building behind it through the shared storage room. He kept asking me what was going on, why so many cameras were outside looking for me.

In the end, I had to shout at him to shut him up and even that only resulted in changing the subject. He gushed over me for the six minutes it took me to get out of the other building's front door.

"Look, Jack. I don't have a whole lot of time here, alright? I gotta go."

"But... holy shit, this is crazy. At least give me something, my dad's gonna be pissed all those cameras are on our front lawn."

I sighed, "What do you wanna know, Jack?"

"Rockin' Robin is your sister?"

"Yes."

"What!? How did I not know this...? What the hell are you doing living down here? She's loaded!"

"Yeah, well. Clearly, she's not that fond of me. Look, can we do this later? I'll get you an autograph or somethin'. Right now I got shit to do. Just do me a favor and don't believe what you hear and don't tell the fuckin' press anything, alright? You didn't see me this morning."

"Was she really the one that did that to you? My dad said he saw you that night. He said you looked really bad."

I blew another sigh, "Jackie, look... shit's more complicated than that, alright? My sister would never do somethin' like that to me, alright? Just... believe it."

"Yeah," Jack said, but he didn't sound convinced.

"Don't give those assholes any information. When I get back we can... I dunno, catch a movie or somethin'."

"Alright, I get it. Bribery is nice and everything but... I'd rather you wanna go out with me cus you like me, not cus you need me to keep my mouth shut. I ain't a rat."

"Right... sorry. Look, thanks. You're a good guy Jack," I said, turning to step away.

Jack stopped me with a hand on my stomach and I looked back, locking eyes with him.

“I dunno what’s going on. Just be careful.”

“Tell your dad I said thanks for everything.”

With that, I bolted. I ran like my life depended on it. I had about twenty dollars on me and a bus pass in my wallet and by now I knew NEST would be on the bus stops to make sure I wasn’t trying to run.

I yanked my phone out of my pocket and spun mid-step, chucking it over a fence as far and as hard as I could, not missing a beat as I pounded my small, sneakered feet on the sidewalk. I couldn’t have them tracking me.

I had to get to Robin before they did.

I ran until I was almost sick and then I ran some more. I got all the way into Midtown taking the side streets. Cutting across someone’s yard, I took the long, rocky hill down from the dirty backroads of the ghetto onto one of the main roads.

I used to come this way when I was walking to the dollar theater to see a second run flick. Me and one of my old boyfriends used to go there a lot. The staff didn’t care that we were doing Whip-Its in the near-empty theater and smoking huge bowls of weed. I’d let him snort coke off my neck before we got frisky and fucked like zoo animals in the backseat of his old school car.

That life seemed forever away now.

I didn’t exactly know how to take all this. Jogging out of breath down the street, I thought about how fifteen years ago I thought I was going crazy. Seven years ago I knew for a fact I wasn’t. Two weeks ago, I swore I’d never go to Blue Veil again.

And thirty minutes ago I agreed to do the opposite.

I saw a taxi cab and waved it down, hopping up and down but it passed me. Not that I blamed them. I cheated nearly every taxi driver in the city out of at least two rides before they got wise to me.

The next one I waved down pulled up to the curb. I opened the backseat and looked at the driver.

“Can you take me to Vista Pointe?,” I said, panting.

The driver was an Indian man with a smooth, well-manicured beard and a handsome face that was hard to forget. I recognized him and he recognized me.

“Money first. You stiffed me last time.”

Fucked up part was I really liked Indian people and kinda felt bad stiffing him. Always thought they had a really cool culture. It went without saying when you were from a world full of gods. Indians believed in over thirty-three million of them. Assuming he was Hindu anyway. Guess that was kind of a reach to assume in this city. Fucker could believe in the Flying Spaghetti Monster or Cthulhu for all I knew.

I let out a hard sigh and got in the car, tossing my crumpled up ball of money from my sock into the front seat. I learned my lesson about keeping cash in my wallet.

He actually sat there and counted it.

“C’mon, man,” I bitched.

“You shut up,” he said, turning around to look back at me, pointing hard.

“Just shut up. Last time you got in my cab, I took you all the way downtown. You get out, tell me to fuck my dear, sweet, ailing mother and run off without paying. You have NO right to rush me. I will sit here and count this money until I am happy. Understand?”

I was a deer in headlights.

He shouted at me and I shut my mouth and listened, nodding my head.

“Good,” he added for good measure and turned around to count.

I waited patiently, looking around the cab. My hands nervously tapped at my thighs, beating a little rhythm that’d been stuck in my head for a few days.

The cab was surprisingly clean. Even the nameplate and information on the seat back was spotless. The seats had been cleaned, the windows didn't have any fingerprints on them, even the air freshener on the rearview mirror was new. Apparently his name was Saeed Anwar.

Sitting on his dash where most cabbies had a hula girl or bobblehead toy, he had one of those annoying desk trinkets. Y'know, the magnetic thing that had the perfect sphere floating on it and served no real purpose? That one. I rolled my eyes at it.

He was carefully uncrumpling all of the bills I balled up around four quarters.

"It's all here," he said, putting the car in gear.

"Good," I nodded, trying not to make the moment any more awkward than it already was.

"I'm really sorry?" I added, my lip curling sheepishly.

He stared at me through the rearview mirror.

"You're lucky I'm Buddhist and believe in forgiveness," He pulled the car back out into traffic. "I started to run your ass over."

I avoided his eyes, looking out the window.

"I get that a lot from Cabbies. That a Union response?"

"Blow me," he shot back.

"Would it get you to drive any faster?" I said, returning his stare through the mirror.

He stepped on the gas so hard my head smacked the seat.

"No, thank you. I don't know where you've been."

"Funny."

"Not joking."

"Alright. We're good here." I threw my hands up in resignation and went back to looking out the window.

"How did you get the black eye?" He asked after a few blocks. My hair must have moved enough for him to see the slight discoloration of my skin.

“Got in a fight.” I lied, watching the city go.

“You had a black eye the last time you got in my cab.”

“I stole some shit,” I said and shrugged.

“And this time?” He asked.

“I steal a lotta shit.”

“You’re a pretty girl. You shouldn’t be out in the streets fighting people.”

I snorted, “The fuck does what I look like have to do with what I do?”

“A woman should be-”

“What? Mild-mannered and in the kitchen?” I glared at him.

“Better than spending her life bitter and angry.” He stared back, “But not what I was going to say.”

“Whatever.” I rolled my eyes and he looked back at the road.

“A woman should be wise enough to know how to make good choices. This is what distinguishes a good woman from a foolish girl. The same too of a man.”

“Yeah, well, when you sprout a pair of tits and a vagina let me know what both sides of the fence are like.”

He shook his head and didn’t say anything back, and thank god. Everybody was trying to give me life lessons these days and I was getting sick of hearing them.

Forty-five minutes later, thanks to a good bit of traffic, we made it to the Hillridge Building in Vista Pointe. It was a lavish, multi-unit estate that was clearly made for people whose salaries were in excess of half a million plus. Robin and Andy were the richest people I knew of personally, Robin probably edging Andy out by a hundred grand or so, but this place was bonkers. It had a massive water wall fountain outside and there were huge sculptures all around the building with expensive looking, well-manicured lawn work all over the place.

Gold and silver accents ran up the corners of the building with its reflective windows and it extended up so high I had to tilt my head

down in the car to see the crest of it.

Thankfully the mirrored glass wasn't on the bottom most floor. White and brushed aluminum accents held the place up with a drive-up underpass by those elaborate, black and glass doors with the fat pearl colored push rails.

I reached for the knob of the car door and looked down at the fare meter. It read \$21.20.

"Listen, Saeed, right? I don't want to open the door, run off and tell you to fuck your mother... But, full disclosure... I don't have that dollar twenty."

"Get out." He glared at me through the rearview mirror.

"Just thought I should-,"

"Get. Out."

I curled my top lip sheepishly again and said, "I'm really sorry?"

"Out!"

I climbed out of the backseat and was barely able to close the door before he sped off, burning rubber in my face.

"Yeah. Great customer service, Asshole." I said, fast walking towards the building's entrance.

I pushed the front doors open to the sound of a deep voice.

"Nope!" said the attendant at the front counter, coming round it to head my way.

"Huh?" I said, confused, looking up at him.

Way up at him. Fucker must have been six-five.

"No. Leave, Charlie."

"What!?" I stared at him, "Are you fucking ki- .."

His strong hands grabbed me by my little shoulders and started turning me around.

"No. You don't understand, I-... Fuck." My shoulders sank in his hands and he shoved me back outside.

The big rhino almost sent me tumbling onto the ground.

“I don’t even fuckin’ know you!” I turned around and shouted at him.

He pointed at the street.

“I know you!” He yelled back.

I flipped him off.

“Oh, fuck you, Doorman! Why don’t you shove somebody’s luggage up y-”

He bucked his chest towards me, clenching his fists and I flinched backward a few steps, almost falling over again. I tried to hold my ground after the fact but my eyes were downcast.

“Leave,” he barked.

“Fine.”

“Now!” He yelled.

“I will!” I roared back.

He took a step out of the door and all my bluster melted.

“Okay, okay, okay!” I said quickly, lifting my hands and backing up, a thrill of fear running through me.

I had ten feet of temper in a five-foot body and enough mouth on me to piss off the Pope. Unfortunately, I was also a coward. Max used to say I walked around with a chip on my shoulder like I wanted people to kick my ass.

Getting punked out by a fucker that huge was only natural. It wouldn’t be the first time I got slapped up by a grown man, but I’d be an idiot to let someone this guy’s size at me.

Like an unwanted pregnancy, I needed a plan B.

Looking around, I blew a sigh and started towards the street.

“Fuck.” I didn’t grab any cigarettes and I gave that cabby my last twenty bucks.

I took a very long walk down the street and around the block to the back side of that wide plot of land Robin’s building sat on. Hopping the fence, I jogged across the tennis court, past the pool towards the parking garage out back. I waited by the back door until I saw an

expensive, exotic looking sports car pull up and park a few spaces away.

An elderly man with a spry step hopped out of the car and I smiled. He walked around to the passenger side of his wildly expensive automobile and opened the door to help his wife out and the two headed my way.

I stood up, pushed my hands into my jacket pockets and walked up to them. I felt kinda bad lying to old people, but I still put on my best lost lamb expression.

“Hey, guys. I came down to get my mom’s keys out of the car and forgot to get my key card. I’ve been down here a while.”

“Oh, sure, Sweetheart. Come on in with us,” the woman said, smiling at me. “Aren’t you just a pretty little thing. I just love all that hair. Are you in college, dear?”

I just sorta nodded and walked along with them.

“Oh, George. Don’t you remember that girl who used to stay in my dorm hall?” She said to her husband.

“With the... the-- she had the,” he said, trying to remember as he swiped his card and opened the door for us.

Then they both said together, “Different color eyes.”

I smiled as I walked beside them down the lavish hallway, listening as they reminisced on their college days.

“Yeah. She was a real cutie-pie. Not as cute as you, of course, dear,” he chuckled warmly and gave me a wink.

I wasn’t a blusher, but getting a wink from a warm, adorable old man like him put color in my cheeks.

“Thanks.”

“Yes, Art History class, Melba Grayson,” The wife said.

“Yeah, they do kind of favor,” Her husband agreed.

“What’s your name, Hon?” She asked me.

“Charlie,” I admitted, still smiling.

“Oh! Isn’t that cute? What’s that short for? Charlene?”

“Charlotte,” I said, my whole name feeling alien in my mouth. But I was happy to tell them. They made me feel good.

“That’s a gorgeous name,” Her husband said. “I always liked the name Charlotte. Your mom’s got a good head on her shoulders.”

“Thank you. And thanks again for getting the door for me.”

“No problem, Sweetheart.” the wife said.

“Any time. You be good, Kiddo.” her husband replied.
Kiddo.

That word reminded me of Stagger. If I needed anyone right then it was him. I nodded and offered the old man another smile and they headed towards the bar in front where the big doorman was. Least that’s what the arrows on the walls said.

I waited until they were around the corner before I burst through the stairwell door. I took them two at a time, hopping, jumping and running my way up.

I made it to the third floor before I popped back out and jogged for the elevator. I didn’t want to take the chance of getting stopped by a doorman down in the bottom floors. That and all the running I’d done had my smoker’s lungs aching so bad I wanted to puke.

This place looked like a study in excess. Everything was the most expensive version of itself like some lavish episode of Twilight Zone where neither sense, reason nor a reasonable budget ever escaped.

I was winded when I finally got on that elevator and rode it all the way to the penthouse suites where Robin lived. The doors rolled open and I jogged down the long hallway, the balls of my feet burning from bouncing on the tips of my toes in a full sprint almost since I left home. I found her door and came to a stop.

Breathing heavily, I felt my heart give a thrill.

Here I was. About to knock on her door, the warning she had given me playing back in my thoughts.

“I’ll beat you to death, Charlotte.”

I believed her.

“Charlie, just open the door. Open the door, open the door, open the door,” I said to myself, trying to force courage where there wasn’t any.

I shook my hands off like I was working nerves out before disarming a bomb. My hand lifted and extended a finger to her doorbell.

No response.

I did it again.

I heard the door click and my heart skipped a beat. It swung open an inch.

I reached for the doorknob and pushed it inward with a tap of my finger.

I didn’t trust her. I didn’t trust that she wasn’t on the other side of that door, waiting to get her hands around my throat and crush it. I remembered the pain in my neck and my hand went up reflexively to rub at it. This time she would squeeze until she heard my neck pop.

I inched forward a step at a time, every step bringing with it the mental image of her fucking me up in her living room where no one could stop her.

Of blacking out for the last time.

I pushed the door a little wider, then looked around into her gorgeous home.

The entire back wall was glass, looking out over the city. Every inch of the flat was modern, the ceilings extending upward for ages. A waterfall spilled water down from the ceiling, creating a wall between her living room and that wide open bar with the orange and white stools. The sound of the water was a constant, relaxing, burbling sound.

I loved the color orange. It was my favorite. Her kitchen looked like a mix between a Retro 1950s movie and an episode of The Jetsons with those orange accents that made me jealous. Those wide, white countertops. The Robin’s Egg Blue walls.

Robin's Egg Blue.

Cute.

I walked further in, felt how plush her carpets were under my feet, accenting hardwood. Turning to see the wall by the fireplace opposite the glass, above it she had at least thirty pairs of boxing gloves hanging there. All autographed by legends of the past. I was in awe of it.

Turning, I walked around the bar and looked at the cobblestone wall that separated the kitchen from her living room space. The size of her television was obscene. Elegant speakers built into the wall, that oddly shaped couch an egg white color with orange pillows and Robin's Egg Blue accessories on her modern end tables.

"So this is how the ten percent live, huh?" I said, dwarfed by the scale of her home.

I couldn't afford half of her door handles, let alone the rent here.

I felt her before I heard her. Like when you know someone is looking at you. By the time I could register what direction she was coming from, sparks flew in my vision and my feet left the floor.

I hit her carpet in a roll and slammed into one of her end tables.

"What the fuck are you doing here!?" She roared.

"Bobby!" I said, sitting up, my jaw aching and my right ear ringing.

"I didn't rat you out. I swear! I s-" I really had to stop swearing.

It didn't fucking work.

She was on top of me in an instant. Her hands were reaching for my throat. I knew I couldn't let that happen.

I couldn't.

I'd never get my words out. I had to make her listen.

She was stronger than me by far. The best I could do was clutch her thumbs with my smaller hands and try to drive them back towards her wrists.

"I'll break 'em! I'll break 'em, I swear to God!" I yelled up at her.

I wasn't gonna break shit. That woman's daily gym training shredded through my soft ass like garden shears through a gelatin snack.

She tugged one of her hands back out of my grip and grabbed my throat anyway.

"Ggnk!" I kicked. I kicked and squirmed under her, pleading with my eyes. I let go of her other thumb and regretted it instantly.

She balled up her fist. I saw it coming. My head wrenched to the side as she slammed it into my face, forcing my lip against my tooth, cutting it.

I reached out with my free hand and grabbed her end table, yanking it down onto the top of her head. She howled in pain and I skittered, kicking and squirming away from her. Crawling to get behind her couch and curl into a ball.

She was on me, grabbing my kicking ankle before I could get too far. She pulled me right back, nearly yanking my shoe off completely.

"Robin, I di- AHH!" Her elbow dropped into my kidney. "I didn't. They're coming!"

She grabbed me by my hair and stood up. I tried to get to my feet but she dragged me across her soft carpet by the roots, screaming.

I screamed hysterically. I'd lost my mind with fear. I kicked and screamed, losing my shoe, exposing one of my threadbare socks with a hole in the toe. I wailed, hoping somebody would hear me. If she was going to kill me, I was going to make sure there would be witnesses.

I wished I was six feet tall. I wanted to rage at her. I wanted to be able to fight back and show her what it felt like to be this scared.

She threw me into the corner of her living room so hard my jacket ripped off in her hands. I hit the wall sideways and tumbled onto my shoulder blades. I was panting like a marathon runner as she threw the remains of my cheap jacket aside.

She prowled towards me like a hunting cat. I couldn't even speak, I was so exhausted from screaming. I crawled over to her expensive armchair, clambering my way to my feet.

"Is this what you want? You fucking junkie!" She grabbed me by my shirt and launched me across her coffee table. I slammed into her television stand and brought the big flat screen down on top of me, curling up to avoid it hitting me in the face.

She threw the television aside and yanked me up again, ramming me into her wall, blasting the air out of me with a fist in my stomach. I hung by the collar of my shirt in her hand as I coughed and dry heaved. My face scrunched up, prepared to take another beating.

"You come to my house?" She growled. "You come to MY HOUSE!?"

My legs gave out. I dropped to my knees and wrapped my arms around her, trapping her arms at her sides, hugging her to me. The blood leaking from my face soaked into the waist of her white pajama pants. I felt her looking down at me, but I didn't have anything left. I was using the last of my strength just to hold on.

"Bobby," I huffed and heaved, "I'm sorry. Please don't hit me anymore. I-... I can't." My lungs were burning.

All I could do was cling to her, my arms wrapped around hers, holding them to her body. She could break the embrace whenever she wanted. Maybe the sight of me down there hugging her, begging her not to hit me anymore, begging her for my life, finally got through to her.

I was no match for her. I'd never win no matter how many times we fought. I never had and I never would. Maybe the champion in her finally realized there was no victory in beating on someone weaker than you.

"You win, Bobby." I swallowed hard, "Okay? You win. No more... Please. Please."

"Let go of me you little cry baby," she said.

She sounded irritated, but not enraged. Her voice was soft.

“No,” I was so tired. “You want me to beg? I’ll beg. I’ll say whatever you want me to say, just for once in your goddamn life listen.”

There was silence and then she sighed.

“Fine. Talk.”

It was her turn to back away screaming. She broke free of my arms and fell back, crawling backward across her carpet, her eyes wide.

A five foot, tawny owl wing sprang out of my back.

“I’ve been tryin’ to tell you all along,” I said, sitting back on my heels.

I wiped the blood from my nose and mouth with the back of my hand.

“I’m not crazy, Bobby,” It felt so good to finally say it out loud. “I’m sorry I made everything so hard but,” I swallowed, “I was goin’ through a really difficult time in my life.”

Robin stared at that tawny wing. She pointed.

“You... that-- wh... what the fuck is th... Holy shi-..” Her face was a mask of fear and confusion. A look I’d never seen on it before.

“Yeah. Holy shit is right.” I pushed myself up to my feet. “... We gotta go. Right now.”

Just then we heard her front door burst open.

I spun round to see it fly wide and tumble into the fountain.

Six tall, broad-shouldered men stepped into view from around the bar. Each of them was armored in black tactical gear that looked like it had been blended with a kind of sleek knight’s armor from out of the future. And each of them had a massive black wing at their backs, unfurling into the room, filling up the spaces behind them.

And all too suddenly long, five foot, black iron rods crackled into existence with white glowing prods at the ends, brandished in their hands.

“Fuck.”

Robin crawled to my side.

“Charlie, what the fuck did you do! What’s going on, what the fuck are you!?”

I reached down to help her up. She took my hand and stood as the men slowly approached us.

They stopped several feet away and parted their ranks to let a beautiful Asian woman in armor step through them. It was Lillian Little.

Lilith herself.

She was only an inch or so taller than me and had a dangerous look in her lavender eyes. A wide swath of purple in her black hair. Her lean body armor was similar to the broad men she’d come with. A perversion of the Valkyrie armor Siobhan was wearing earlier, only darker and much more compact. More modern. The NEST logo on her chest had a purple glow.

She didn’t carry an Atma Sword but produced from thin air a thick, black ring with a tapered, purple edge. She whirled it around her wrist and smiled at me.

“Charlotte. I’m so happy you decided to misbehave. I kept begging Belisle to let me hurt you. I told him I could break that spirit of yours and have you sitting, laying and rolling over like a good little bitch. Just like I used to. He always turned me down... Until today.”

The memory of the time I’d spent in her hands sickened me. She was trained by Gozen but decided not to follow the way of Blood and Blade. Instead, she became an interrogator for NEST.

“What can I say. I’m a squirmer,” I shrugged, fresh blood leaking from my nose.

“That you are. And the sounds you make are,” she groaned with erotic satisfaction.

“You’re twisted,” I said back, fighting the urge to throw something at her.

“Will you be a dear and come along nice and quiet? I want to take you home and hurt you. Not here where it lacks occasion. I promise I’ll make it special this time.”

“Hard pass.” I shrugged my small shoulders, wiping my nose again.

Lilith looked at my sister and gasped.

“Did you kick my puppy?” She lifted a finger and shook it, “Tsk tsk.”

“Lilly, I think we need to talk about our relationship. It’s really not healthy,” I said, trying to get her attention back on me instead of Robin.

“You should feel honored that I love giving you so much of my attention,” she licked her purple painted lips slowly and my top lip curled in disgust.

“I’m sure that’s what you say to all of your victims, Mr. Cosby.”

I felt Robin looking at the side of my face.

The rods in the hands of the men behind Lilith suddenly crackled to life with white-hot electricity, hiding my words as I whispered to Robin.

“Robin, just do what I say. Throw me out the window and jump.”

“What?” She hissed at me.

I turned to look at her.

“Throw me out the fuckin’ window and jump. DO IT!”

She grabbed me by my shoulders and spun hard. Her well-trained body responded so quickly I felt my back crack. She whirled us both towards the window as those men came rushing on.

I felt her launch my body through the air as hard as she could. I flew away from her for a moment, but she leaned forward into a full sprint right after, the illusion in our movement making it seem as if the world were shifting around us and we were sitting still.

I hit the glass so hard the wind exploded from my lungs. My head rocked back to hit the double paned surface. My little frame collapsed

against the window, jarring my insides before I felt the glass give way behind me.

It wasn't like the movies.

Glass went tearing through my clothes. It cut into my skin in several places. White hot pain was driven into me as gravity grabbed me and started throwing me towards the earth, shimmering glass orbiting my body as I fell.

Robin dove right out behind me, her body a spear. Moving in slow motion in my mind as my wing caught the air, my plan was to catch her up in my arms. To slam into her in the air and with luck, clutch each other for a hard landing.

But I forgot the building had mirrored glass.

A burning red light lanced out behind my fall. It plumed into a wide sphere in the air and swallowed my sister whole. My mouth opened to scream. I knew what it was. I turned my body to look at my reflection in the mirrored windows as I fell.

All I saw was the burning eyes of Chroma God looking back at me.

From the sockets of Orcus, the celestial of the underworld. The Punisher of Broken Oaths.

His face was hidden behind a helm, his wide shoulders bare. Thorns, brambles, and arrows protruded from him as if pierced ages ago in a long-dead war. Power coursed through his arms and chest, his image was blown up to cover the entire side of the reflective building. The eyes of Chroma God sent beams from his sockets through the eye slits in his helm. They were wide and blaring beautiful light from within.

"Oh my God!" I screamed out as his red light encircled me. I felt it pull at my belly button. I felt it rip me inside out. I felt like I was falling into that reflective glass until the world burst around me.

I fell forever.

I screamed soundlessly until the world spat me back out.

My arms and legs flailed as I fell through the air. My wing flapped frantically but could claim no purchase on the wind. I hit the ground hard, wide blue squares of concrete beneath me as I rolled to a stop.

I laid there for a long moment, unable to move. Pins and needles prickled my entire body. My back felt like I'd been whipped. My shirt was barely hanging on to me and blood was dripping out of my wounds from the glass window.

"Fuck..." It took me an even longer moment to get to my feet. I stumbled a bit as my vision started to clear.

"Shit."

In front of me was a huge structure of coiling, pearlescent stone. It looked like it was constructed from hundreds upon thousands of giant seashells. Vast spires shot up into the darkening blue sky.

Up and up I looked, the sky bleeding into brilliant purples, pinks, and whites. A spiraling and beautiful Galaxy drew a sparkling disk above.

I recognized it right away.

"No. No, no, no..."

It was a temple. The temple. The last stand of the Valkyrie slave, Siobhan.

My last stand.

I was looking at The Lightly Perch.

I turned around and realized my feet were on an edge. I stumbled back and fell over, crawling away from it. My wing disappeared as I looked out at the great blue sky that I was standing at the very edge of.

The temple behind me, it's entirety sat on a massive stone plate that sat just outside of the biggest, bluest bubble I'd ever seen. And I didn't know it was a bubble from just looking. It stretched on so far I couldn't see the curve in it. I knew it was a bubble because of the great explorers of old that drew the first maps of the world.

I was looking at a planet that sat in a universe created entirely by the ancestor power. The Creator God, Brahma.

The surface of the planet was broken. Disjointed. It looked as if a ball had been shattered into hundreds of smaller, jagged pieces and each of those pieces still floated around its center. Only the center was so far down I couldn't see it. The sky seemed to go on forever down and in every direction. Great, green chunks of earth were so big and vast that continents back home seemed small by comparison.

It was a view I hadn't seen in a long, long time.

I was standing at the platform at the end of the world.

And below me was Blue Veil.

My left palm was burning like I'd touched a white-hot brand. I looked at it and saw the celestial markings on my skin. Orcus had branded me with a one-way gate key. I closed my palm tightly, letting the marking sink in and vanish.

It was there forever now. I couldn't go home without his permission.

Just then I realized what I did. My eyes shot wide and I turned around to face The Lightly Perch. I searched its grounds, my eyes squinting as my head turned left and right.

"Robin!" I started running towards the temple, the sock on my foot sliding loose as I ran with only one shoe on.

"Robin!"

I couldn't live with the thought of losing another sister.

Even if she hated me.

CHAPTER 4

A Kind of Magic

The tall, pearlescent spirals of The Lightly Perch loomed over me like beautiful fingers digging at the sky. Each building and spire stacked like several fat snail shells sitting atop one another. Great, darkened windows sat in the high towers above, connected by long and wide dark blue walls of the same pearlescent material. The whole thing looked like a fantastic castle sitting on that round, floating, blue stone disk in the sky above Blue Veil. The light from the purple and pink spiraling galaxy above illuminated the ground as if it were a moon hanging crooked in the sky, twinkling in the night.

I had no idea what time it was. I'd been walking around the grounds of the temple for hours calling out to Robin in the hopes that I would find her. I listened hard to see if I could hear her calling back from the distance. All I heard was the wind blowing gently through the grounds, whistling through the tunnels below and the parapets above.

I inhaled a slow breath and let it out fast, attempting to steady my nerves. I could guess it was a little after lunch back home from the feeling in my stomach. And from the fact that my hands were starting to shake. I hadn't fixed since Stagger gave me my dose last night. That thought alone put an uneasy feeling in my gut.

“Shit...” I said out loud, quickly walking towards the blue stone road leading up to those wide, intricate double doors at the castle’s face.

I had walked around its entire perimeter a few times hoping to find my sister. Now that I realized that wasn’t happening, I decided inside might be my only chance of finding her.

I was a little frightened. The last time I was here was so long ago. Back then The Lightly Perch was where Perun had hidden the Heart Fire. I remembered that much. I had found it by accident. That night, tired and sore from Gozen practicing her deadly skill on me, I decided I was through being the floor she walked on.

I wandered for hours in the Labyrinthian halls of Valhalla. It was pure dumb luck that I found that fountain. Even dumber luck that it happened to be connected to the fountain here. Thousands of miles between them and yet, somehow they managed to...

“Wait a minute,” my brain was trying to work something out.

I squinted, thinking about that again. If the fountain in Valhalla was connected to the one here, does that mean it worked the same way in reverse? I couldn’t think clearly. Partly because of the stress and worry about my sister, and partly because I could feel the sickness creeping in.

I raced for the door.

Hopping up the wide and shallow steps, practically running for that brilliant handle of pearlescent blue, my hands wrapped around it. I stepped back wide and pulled but the door didn’t budge.

Anchoring one of my feet against the opposite door I pulled again, this time harder than before. I pulled until my elbows and shoulders ached but the door didn’t move. I stumbled back, letting go, falling onto my ass with a huff.

I didn’t know what else to do. Sitting there looking down at the one shoe I still had on after Robin tore into me, I frowned with concern. I couldn’t help but think that none of this would have

happened if just one time in her life Robin had just been my sister and helped me instead of finding a reason to hate me. It had been that way since we were kids though, I don't know why I expected anything different.

On the other hand, I did something that I don't think I would have ever been able to forgive someone for.

I killed my baby sister.

I was on the verge of tears when something tapped at a place in my mind. I felt a memory awaken inside, something ever so familiar about this place. Not just the memory of being here or seeing the temple against the spiraling galaxy in the sky above, but something specific.

Something...

I looked up at the door again. Then higher still at the opulent shell sitting above it, that seemed to glimmer with a quiet fire inside. If I wasn't staring at it directly I would have missed it. A word came to mind. Like I had said it once before.

"Bokk. I'm ... I'm here to see the brothers Bokk."

There was only silence as wind swept across the Lightly Perch, whistling through the great stone arches shimmering in starlight.

My shoulders sank.

Turning around, I walked to the edge of the first step and sat down on it, wincing from the pain in my back, feeling my head start to throb as the beginnings of a migraine began. I thought about where I was again and worry traveled through my stomach like a kind of nausea. I was a long way away from the Tambourine Man.

"Well, Charlie... I guess you had to quit sometime," I said to myself, suddenly regretting every decision I made to skip out on rehab.

I thought about every opportunity I had to stop. The many days I spent begging myself to quit.

And being too weak to.

“I should have listened, Juli,” I whispered.

She was right. I should have kept going to my meetings.

The wind whipped harder at my body and I realized only then just how chilly I was. I hugged my knees to my chest.

“What am I gonna do?”

A light splashed down around me, throwing my shadow down the stairs. My head lifted, eyes wide, turning around to face the door. That shell was glowing like a porch light. I heard the mechanisms in a series of locks start to move and I looked around for someplace to hide. All I could find were those grand arches almost a football field away. I stood, facing the doorway, realizing if something was going to hurt me, I didn’t have any way to get away from it.

I felt my pulse quicken, my shoulders moving up and down faster as fear trapped my feet in place. The door opened wide and comforting amber light spilled out, casting a lean figure into silhouette.

“Who calls on the brothers Bokk, eldest of the Sons of Ivaldi?” His deep, gravelly voice said.

I could feel his eyes on me even though I couldn’t see them through the shadows cast over his face.

“Uh-... I do. I’m uh,” I didn’t really know what to say. “I need help. I don’t know where I am. I mean, I know, but... I can’t find my sister and I’m really scared.”

I put my hands on my sides for a moment, trying to project the confidence that I didn’t have. My hands ended up getting tucked under my arms as the chilly air got to my fingers, making me shiver.

“I know your face,” the man said, opening the door wider.

“Yeah... it seems like a lot of people do. Can I please come in?”

I could see his head nod in the darkness.

“You are always welcome here, Siobhan Aoibheann.”

“I’m not her. Trust me... me and her are worlds apart.”

“I know, child. You’re not the first to return. Come inside.”

His voice was slow and comforting. I didn't feel so bad being the first cat he had to drag in from outside. I thought for a moment he might be talking about my sister.

"You brought someone else in?" I asked, walking through the door as he stepped aside.

"A few over the years." He said, as I got a good look at his face.

It was so familiar. He was bald except for his deep brown beard. It had strands of gray in it and was braided into two tassels on his chin. His lean frame in the light clothing he wore seemed solid, sturdy and spoke to the age in his voice.

"Anyone else today? I came here with my sister." He shook his head.

"Only you, I'm afraid," My stomach sank.

"I've got to find her fast. I know she's alone and scared. She won't understand what's happening."

He nodded in understanding, "Who brought you here from the other world?"

"It's that obvious, huh?" I said as he closed the door.

The warmth inside washed over me. I turned to look around, my eyes cast up at the vaulted ceilings inside of the gargantuan shell-like building.

It was pearlescent on the inside as well, though much more white. Ornamental carvings were in the ceiling depicting the great war of man. The many ages from the Golden Age to the Bronze Age. The Age of Blood. The pictures told stories of great weapons and powerful gods breaking the world apart. I saw the picture that detailed the day that Midvalley Broken Crowns and Fenris shattered Blue Veil. In it, the great wolf howled a great, burning howl that whirled into Midvalley's great typhoon, the two forces crashing into the heart of what I knew to be Old Settler's Place. The original birthplace of man.

In front of me was a long, wide hallway. Carved wooden pillars held up the beautiful structure inside of the strangely shaped castle.

Shined wooden floors extended out in front of me down that hall and another crossing it where I stood going in the opposite direction in a wide T. The entire place looked old and rich with history, yet comfortable, cozy and warm. The kind of place I could lay down on the floor anywhere and go to sleep.

Just then I remembered what supplied the heat in this place. The forges of Ivaldi deep in the heart of the Lightly Perch.

“Yes. As I said, you are not the first. Come. Let’s get you warmed up by the fire. Are you alright? You appear injured.”

He led me down one of those brilliant halls and I followed, still rubbing my hands together. The hallways had sky blue walls to the left and right of me. On those walls like a fat pinstripe running parallel to the floor was a seemingly never-ending stained glass painting depicting the history of the forgefolk.

“I’m okay. I mean, as okay as I get. I got beat up and thrown out a window, so...” I said, trailing off as I looked around.

He stopped and looked back at me, nodding.

“I don’t think we’ve ever met any other way. You seem to have always known pain.”

“Yeah... from what I can remember, her life wasn’t any better than mine. Worse actually.”

“Any slave of Gozen Morrow is bound to have a hard life. Of all the slaves at Demonhead, you were by far the one that suffered the most.”

We continued down the hallway until we came to a set of large double doors. My guide pushed the wooden doors open into a grand hall with row after row of thick, ornate wooden tables with pearlescent accents and reliefs throughout them. On one side of the hall, one of the biggest fireplaces I had ever seen crackled and billowed. It filled the vast chamber with warming light and my body seemed to release every knot of tension in it when it fell over me.

Great white paper lights sat overhead lending the room a peaceful dayglow.

“I will get someone to tend to your wounds.” He said and I nodded, walking over to one of those long tables.

I slid into the bench seat on the end, resting my arms on the table and dropped my sore face into my palms. I rubbed my eyes groaning at the pain, remembering how Robin had used me to redecorate her living room. No matter how often it happened I couldn’t shake the feeling of helplessness. It was demoralizing being at the mercy of another person. Thanks to NEST and my poor decision making skills, it was a position I was often in.

Sitting there with the fire warming me, I was embarrassed about my wounds. The soreness in my upper cheek let me know I’d probably have a black eye again come tomorrow. A badge signifying to anyone that looked at me that someone got the best of me.

“Thank you,” I said, lifting my head to look over at the lean man.

He stopped on his way back through those double doors to look back at me.

“You are most welcome, Siobhan.”

“I’m Charlotte, by the way,” I said as politely as I could, “Charlie.”

“Charlie,” he nodded. “I am Sindri Bokk. Head Forgemaster of the Lightly Perch.”

My voice was a little hoarse from screaming for my life in Robin’s apartment.

“Hello, Sindri. It’s so strange. I feel like I recognize your face. I know you’re a friend. But I...”

“I know, child. Reincarnation is never easy. Especially after the lengths Siobhan went through to make sure you are here today.” With that, he was gone.

An hour later a woman from the Elder Library had come to help me get my clothes off and doctor my back. She brought me a light blue gown to cover myself with while she doctored my wounds. She

was kind enough to understand and not ask me what happened to my face. My guess was that she thought I didn't want to talk about it because I was avoiding her eyes. What she didn't know was that I avoided everyone's eyes.

"Alright, you'll be right as rain in a few days." She kept looking at my hands.

They were trembling as I pulled my gown back down. My head was pounding.

"Thank you. Is there someplace I can lay down?" I asked.

"Are you cold, Love? In front of this great big fire?" She asked, smiling.

I looked up at her and nodded.

"Yeah... but not because of the temperature." I said and she nodded knowingly.

She studied me without a word between us before she reached down and took up my left arm, extending it to look at the crook of my elbow. Shame dropped my shoulders and tied my stomach in knots. I glanced up at her face and looked away.

"Oh my days," she said, and I felt her gentle hand find my cheek. "How long?"

I hesitated and she got to her knees, her eyes searching my bruised face.

"It's alright. I understand. How long has it been, Love?"

I winced. My eyes started to burn as moisture rimmed them. I didn't want to tell her. I didn't want to say it out loud. To confirm what kind of a burden I was about to become.

"About half a day," I sniffed, trying to stop the tears, "and I'm gettin' real sick," I said, swallowing back disgust at myself.

"Alright. That's okay."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is," both of her hands took my face and she made me look at her. "Listen to me. It's hard enough getting through life the way

you are. Reincarnation is never easy. It takes its toll in different ways on everyone, but don't you think for a second you're the only one. We'll help you get better."

I nodded, "Thank you."

"Do you prefer a bed or the bathroom?"

I didn't want to say.

"There's no shame in it. I'm here to take care of you, but you have to be honest with me."

"Bathroom." My stomach was turning.

"Alright. Come on. I'll get you some nice warm blankets and some pillows."

She took my hand and led me through those gorgeous wooden halls. We went up a flight of stairs that I struggled to navigate. I could barely see them as I moved. Muscle memory carried me upward, my head was throbbing so heavily it felt like my brain was swelling. My joints hurt, my muscles hurt. Cramps were starting to grab at my thighs by the time we made it to that small bathroom.

A young man in a white long sleeve shirt and pants walked towards the two of us. He had a white cloth hat on his dark-haired head with a red cross on it.

"Chanticleer. Do me a favor and get some blankets from the Medici's. Pillows, some water, and tonic." My guide said as she turned to face him.

Chanticleer kept looking at me. I turned my head away from him, my face tearing up as I started to sob. I could tell he recognized me. Recognized her. It hurt inside to destroy Siobhan's memory in the minds of the people that loved her by being what I was.

She hugged me to her as my shoulders trembled.

"I'm sorry." Is all I could manage.

"It's okay, Love. What's your name, Dear?"

"Charlie," I choked out.

“Well, Charlie, my name is Starland, or Star if you like. I’m a Medici, a librarian, and a friend. This is Chanticleer. He’s training to one day help people as well.”

Starland pushed the bathroom door open with her shoulder and helped me in. I felt my stomach lurch as I crumpled to the floor in front of the toilet, leaning on it as my stomach muscles slammed tight and my back arched upward. I threw up harder than I ever had in my life. I wretched so hard it hurt. Liquid filth spewed out of me as my stomach evacuated itself through my mouth and nose.

“Oh-- ... god... God,” I wretched again. Starland rubbed my back as my muscles struggled to settle. I gasped and huffed on my knees like a wet cat. I fell away from the toilet on my side, gagging.

“Chanticleer, go. Fetch me my things.” Starland said and the young man rushed off.

“I-,” I coughed hard, throat slime and puke leaking from my face. I must have looked awful. “Can’t breathe... can’t-”

Starland helped me back up to the toilet but not before I’d puked down my front. The second bout made it into the bowl and it hurt so bad I started sobbing again.

“It’s going to be a very long week for you, Love, I’m sorry to say. Your body is needing for something you can’t give it.”

Moments later and two more violent episodes in the bowl, Chanticleer came back. I wiped my face on a towel, my hands starting to tremble so hard I could barely control them. He handed Starland something that looked very out of place. It was a small device with buttons on the face and a small screen right above it.

I definitely didn’t remember technology like that when I left. Of course, I was in no state to ask what it was when she pulled from its side a clear piece of what looked like square plastic. She placed it on my forehead and it felt sticky and adhesive. With nothing connected to the pad, she looked at its face, reading it’s screen.

“You’ve got a bit of a fever, Dear. I suspect it’s from the exertion,” she said, looking back at Chanticleer “Quickly now, make her a place to lie down.”

All I could give her was a nod. I couldn’t speak. She helped me clean the vomit off my face and chest and I sat back against the side of the bathtub taking steady breaths. My head felt like it had been split open. The light hurt my eyes. I squinted up and Chanticleer tapped a pad on the wall, putting out the sconces I thought were gas powered.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice hoarse.

“Sure,” he replied, his voice gentle as a breeze. “Are you really Siobhan Aoibheann?”

“Chanti! Not right now you starstruck fool.” Starland swatted at his arm.

“Sorry,” He said.

“Forgive him. The whole place is in a bit of a titter at the moment. News of your being here has spread like fire in a cane field.”

I looked over at Chanticleer, my eyes were sunken, my face pale.

“I used to be.”

“You still are, Love. Don’t quit on yourself so soon.” She smiled at me and I nodded. I looked over at the pallet Chanticleer made for me and crawled towards it.

“Oh, right. You’ll probably want to lie down now.” Starland moved out of my way as I crawled to the soft, thick, dark green blankets on the floor.

I fell face first into those cool, fat pillows. At that moment, nothing felt better in my life. The cool of the pillows against my aching and bruised face soothing my skin, the soft blankets under my nauseated stomach. I wanted to lay there in that moment until I died. I let out a long, deep sigh, enjoying the temporary contentment.

I knew I wouldn’t get any sleep that night.

“I’ll bring you something light to eat in a little bit. I don’t imagine that’ll be the last time you throw up. Trust me when I say you’ll want to force something down. It’s a lot worse on an empty stomach.”

I nodded as best I could against the pillows as Starland stepped out into the hall.

Chanticleer came further into my little space. He squatted down and I turned to face him. In his hand was a rubber bite plate.

“You’ll want this. Seizures aren’t uncommon. We’ll stay with you through the night to make sure you don’t hurt yourself.”

My eyes wandered for a moment, looking around at this strange bathroom so far from home. I looked at Chanticleer, then Starland, and like a baby bird, I opened my mouth.

He fitted the rubber bite plate and I bit down on it.

I’d never had a seizure before. I found myself wondering if they hurt or if they just felt like I lost time. It scared me to think that I might find out.

* * *

The next three days blended together into one long nightmare. My body rejected everything. I even threw up water. I had to force myself to keep the chicken broth Starland brought me down, but I eventually lost the fight against it as well. My stomach muscles felt like a car ran over them. Every time they tightened up on me I screamed from the cramps and curled into a crying ball.

By the second day I’d torn all of my clothing off and sat crumpled in the corner of the tub and the wall in my underwear. That little spot had become my home. The place I tried to hide from the misery of my situation. Starland held me through one body rocking seizure after the next, my jaw clenching, eyes rolling back in my head, foaming at the mouth. When I was able to speak, I would sit in my little corner deliriously talking to people who weren’t there.

Like my Daddy.

I needed my Daddy so bad.

What little sleep I got was plagued by nightmares. In my head, my memories and my fears clashed together into one. I'd see Gozen Morrow, the Owl Queen, again with Robin's face in some strange amalgam of the two people that hated me most. They would laugh at me, mock me, beat me. I dreamed of being in the ring with Robin and absolutely at her mercy, my little frame in boxing shorts and gloves getting battered around while she tore me apart and called me names. Telling me to suck it up and stop being a crybaby. To take what I deserved.

They always ended the same way. She would punch me out of the ring and I would fall through the floor like it was made of liquid. I'd float there bleeding as I sank to the bottom and died.

Beaten to death just like she promised.

In other dreams, Gozen would be standing over me, stabbing me and laughing. Over and over again, Robin's face within her white hair, ramming that vicious Atma Sword into me while I screamed and begged. I would wake up screaming, fighting, thrashing. Starland would always be there to hold me down. I must have hit her too many times to count but she was always the bright, gentle center of my harsh universe.

Memories would come back to me when I was awake. Of Gozen's cruelty. I remember how she liked to hurt and humiliate me. She always wanted Siobhan to cry.

She never did though.

She would strip me down naked and make me sit on my knees by her throne with a leash around my neck and act like I wasn't there. Pat my head, choke me with my leash and tell me to bark like a dog.

I refused and she would starve me.

I remember the feeling of shame when I, so desperate for food that I'd do anything, opened my mouth and barked like she wanted me to.

It went on for years this way until I learned my place. Until I learned to put my pride away.

She never broke me to tears. I don't know if she got tired of trying or was satisfied with knowing she had beaten the heart out of me, but I never stepped a toe out of line.

I remember being in awe of her power. Her speed. I would see it first hand as she perfected her battle technique.

On me.

The only thing keeping me alive was fear. Fear of dying. Not knowing what happened when your soul left your body. If souls even existed. Like all those people that died in my home town in the frozen lower lands that her Valkyrie laid waste to. I was deathly afraid of the Underworld.

The first time I ever disobeyed her was the only time. I stole her sword and left Demonhead. Down the mountain, Titan's Teeth. The one that used to be called Mount Olympus, right into the labyrinthian palace at the heart of Valhalla. I remember finding The Heart Fire and then nothing.

Nothing until that night when I emerged from the blank spot in my memory, standing at The Lightly Perch as Gozen's Valkyrie came for me. The elite guard wasn't there; her strongest who defended the Bright Throne, but many Valkyrie soldiers, the Corsairs, were. I fought them for two days here.

Until Gozen arrived.

With Midvalley.

Gozen did everything in her power to get me to tell her where I moved the Heart Fire. I wouldn't cry. She hurt me until the pain was all that I knew. When she realized I wouldn't talk she assumed I didn't know anything, but I did. Somewhere in my head was the answer.

I suddenly remembered that dream I had about falling from a really high place. I fell from here. She ran a spear through me and

threw me from the edge of this place like garbage.

It made sense that I didn't remember her face. I never wanted to see it again.

By my fourth day, I was managing to hold little things down. I dared not push myself too hard. Bread mostly, and soup. I asked Starland to start locking me in the bathroom. I wasn't having seizures anymore, but I was definitely craving. I was having thoughts of escaping, going in search of drugs or alcohol.

Sindri would come down now and again to talk to me through the door. I'd hear him set his chair down in the hall and it made me smile.

We talked for hours. About anything really. I remembered his brother, Brokkr. I asked him why he and his brother had different accents. He said he was much older than Brokkr and grew up in a different part of the world.

He liked to ask me what Earth was like. He seemed to really like the concept of baseball. He said they had a similar sport here but the object wasn't to run around bases, but to catch the runner. I told him it sounded like football and baseball mixed.

That started a whole new conversation about football.

I didn't know as much about that one though.

"My memory is fuzzy about a lot of things here," I said.

"That's only natural," He said, "Siobhan told me she managed to hide her memories."

"Did you know her long?"

"No. She came here in search of answers. She had a lot of questions about death. I think she knew what was coming. She put on a brave face but I could tell she was very scared."

"She was?" I asked, feeling somewhat comforted by the thought of the great Siobhan being scared.

The shadow she left behind for me to live in was almost suffocating sometimes.

“Yes. I could see it in her eyes. I think that’s what made her powerful though. Her power came from her fear.”

“How does that work?”

“Fear is the body’s way of warning us of danger. Siobhan’s senses were made keener by it. And I suspect yours as well. When you are scared, are your actions automatic or reactionary?”

I thought about that question for a while.

“I guess... automatic.”

I looked down, lifting one of my hands, watching it tremble. I still hadn’t gotten past the shaking. Sometimes I’d climb into the tub and just let the water crash down on me to clear my head. To stop it from racing through every scenario I could think of for how to break out of here, get back to earth and score some more heroin. To make myself feel good again.

My mouth was so dry.

“Mm... I think you share that with her.” He intoned.

“So did you guys make all of the weapons the gods and celestials use?”

“Most... not all,” Sindri said.

“Which ones are you most proud of?”

Sindri groaned in thought.

“There’s a question,” He laughed.

“What?”

“Well, I’ve never been asked it before.” There was a long silence from him. I could hear a light crackling sound like fingers scratching at a bristly old beard.

“Probably the Wolves Bane,” he said with his deep growl of a voice.

“Wolves Bane? What’s that?” I asked.

Groaning, I crawled for the sink, pulling myself up on it to fill my little wooden cup with water. I drank from it slowly, my throat aching

from screaming and throwing up. My neck felt fat on the inside, scarred and torn. It hurt to swallow but I forced it down.

“Not what’s that. More like what are they, to say more accurately.”

I gasped a plaintiff sound of pain after getting the last sip down.

“Oh. What are they?”

“They are three.”

I filled my little cup again and crawled back over to lean against the door on my blankets.

“Three weapons?”

“Sort of. Three tools, really. One a weapon. A great hammer, Mjolnir.”

“You made Mjolnir?”

“Yes.”

“Shit. What were the other two?”

“Gungnir. A spear that has the power to grow to a tremendous size at will. And when thrown can never miss its target.” Sindri said, chuckling as if he’d just enjoyed a fond memory.

“Gungnir... yeah. I remember seeing that spear. At the first uprising. The Minute War.”

“Mm, yes. And lastly Gjallarhorn.” He said with finality.

“Gjallarhorn.” I nodded, the word familiar. “The horn that broke the world.”

“That’s what they call it. A little dramatic if I’m asked to be honest,” he chuckled.

“Well,” I said, “it can summon the beast.”

“Fenris isn’t summoned by the horn. He’s agitated by it. It’s the only thing that can both wake him up and put him to sleep.”

I took a small sip of my water and I felt my stomach start to turn again.

“Why are they called Wolves Bane?” I asked, crawling towards the toilet, feeling my insides churning.

“Because the three tools were made from one of the very claws of Fenris himself. And are the only things capable of killing him.”

“Is that true?”

“I don’t know, child. No one has put them to the task. As it stands all three of them are in the possession of Perun’s Valkyrie elite guard.”

My back snapped upward like a cat’s hackles, spitting up my water into the bowl. My sore stomach, swollen throat tissue and aching eye sockets throbbed with pain from the pressure I exerted on them over the past week.

“I’ll fetch Star, child,” Sindri said.

“Wait...” I gasped, coughing into the toilet.

“Mm?” I heard him grunt.

“Did you ever see it? Perun’s wolf.”

“Fenris?” Sindri asked. I could almost hear him thinking.

“Is he really the size of a mountain?”

“It depends,” Sindri said after a long pause.

“On?” I slumped over next to the toilet, laying on my back on the floor, trying to catch my breath.

“Fenris grows with Perun’s rage. It consumes all, growing with each life that it takes. Its howl builds power from what it eats. The great wolf bellows great breaths of green fire from its maw that burns all that it touches. It wields the power of Perun’s jealousy for Creator God Brahma. That is where it gets its name. Fenris of the Covetous Jealous Fire. Lord of Wolves. I saw the wolf when it first ate the heart of Brahma. It stood nearly 22 arms high. I suppose that’s around 40 feet.” He reasoned, and I heard him drag his chair away, “By the time the sun set and rose again, it was the size of Mount Olympus.”

“Oh my God... Sindri?”

“Yes, child?”

“I have to find my sister. Every day that goes by she could be out there being eaten alive by this world.”

“It is a fool’s errand going after your sister. Blue Veil has her now.”

“I have to try.”

“Perun is the real threat. If you want this world and earth to be safe, you’d do well to start with him.”

I heard his footsteps as he walked away.

I managed to crawl over to my blankets and fall into them. Starland had been kind enough to bring me fresh linens and clean underwear. She helped me bathe, sometimes even helped me eat when my hands shook too badly to do it myself.

I found myself wondering if I would ever be strong enough to make the decisions Siobhan did. Or to fight a wolf the size of a mountain. What would my story be when I died? Would I still be the coward I am, or would I live up to everyone’s belief in me?

* * *

By my eighth day in the bathroom, I was eating whole meals. I graduated to a bit more chicken in my soup. I even managed to keep down half a sandwich. I wasn’t out of the woods yet, but Starland had decided I had enough with the bathroom.

“How are you feeling, Love?” She always had such a kind voice.

“I’m okay. Better.” I nodded. She was never afraid to sit with me on the floor by my favorite little corner.

“Are you ready to come out and see the day? It’s really beautiful outside.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“Why do you say that?”

“If I’m honest with myself, I’m afraid to. If I go out there and see a sky I don’t recognize over a planet I only vaguely remember, I’ll have to accept the fact that this isn’t a dream.”

“Why would that be so bad?”

“Because what if it is? A dream I mean. If I wake up in my apartment and this never happened... Then that means I’m still...”

I felt my eyes start to water.

"I don't wanna live like that anymore."

"Oh, Dearheart. Come here," she said, hugging me to her. "You're past it. You've beaten it."

"I hope so, Star. I'm tired of people treating me like a piece of garbage."

She held me while my tears wet her shoulder.

"You have to understand. It never goes away," she said, rubbing my back. "You have to find something else to fill the hole, Love. It won't be easy, but you've got to. You've just got to for your own sake. You're not a piece of garbage, Charlie. Treat yourself better."

I sniffed and she pulled away, cupping my face in her hands, looking me in the eyes.

"Let's get you dressed and go see the sun."

It only occurred to me then that Starland's voice was familiar. She had the same accent as Siobhan.

"Starland... where are you from?"

"Me? Oh," she looked at me and smiled. "I'm from the Icy Moor. Actually, most of the forgefolk are. I'm the only one from a place called Khione Valley though. My family, like just about every family there, were farmers."

"Oh... why did you leave?"

"The same reason everyone does. I didn't want to be a farmer and I hated the cold. A tenure here promised me a great education, a career in medicine and an opportunity to become one of the noble forgefolk."

"I remember Khione Valley. I just never knew what it was called. Did you lose your family there too?"

"Aye, Love. My grandmother, before I was born. I never got to meet her. We all lost someone when the Valkyrie came."

"I'm sorry."

“Nothing to be sorry for. You didn’t do it. I owe my life to the ones who survived. The Valkyrie came at the command of the Lightning Emperor.” She said.

“Is Khione Valley gone?”

“Mm, no. It’s been rebuilt. Tyranny will never stifle strong hearts. Now come on. Up you get.”

It was hard but I found my feet. I was so thankful there wasn’t a mirror in my little safe haven. I wouldn’t have lasted the week having to live with myself. Or with Orcus’ all-seeing eyes. He had been haunting me since I was a child. Looking at me with those accusatory eyes. Mouthing words to me from the other side of the glass from that iron helm.

Starland brought me some clothes to wear and after a quick shower I put them on. I pulled on the gray shirt and pants from the Medici’s office with the red cross on its breast and followed her through the Lightly Perch. The soft boots she had given me to wear were comfortable and I couldn’t help but wonder if they were Perch craftsmanship as well. There was a spring in her step that I wished I could match. I was still a little uneasy.

We made it to the door I came through eight days ago and she smiled at me.

“Are you ready?”

I nodded. She gave my shoulder a reassuring rub and pushed the front door open wide.

Sunlight splashed into my face, blinding me. I squinted and lifted a hand against it. She walked me outside onto the porch and down the steps into that brilliant blue sky. I thought the night I got here that we were at the edge of it, but I was so wrong. Blue went up high, high above. Two moons were still in the sky beside the telltale remnant of that galaxy swirling high above in purple and pink. The sun felt good on my face. My skin felt alive.

I felt like the world was pouring into me. Nausea subsided as I heard Starland walk over to the panel beside the door in that pearlescent blue coral wall. I hadn't seen it in the night time when I got here, but there were odd buttons on it, like little oval pieces of candy. She tapped one of them and the square of concrete I was standing on lifted ten inches.

"Whoa!" I said, nearly stumbling.

She stepped on top of it with me and it lifted all the more. Our concrete square started to move and I braced myself against the gold and white pearl railing that lifted up in front of us. Then the section of concrete was off. Racing towards the edge of that large disk, my curly head of damp hair was whipping about, puffing out atop my head as it dried.

I could see the landmasses of Blue Veil start to peek up over the edge of the disk as we neared its edge. By the time we got there, I was looking down into the spectacular view of the planet I once called home. My eyes could see farther in the sunlight.

Large islands had running through them an interwoven, sparkling band that wound its way in and out; a river floating in the air. Sparkling like a stream of silver as the rolling surface of that tube of water danced in the sunlight.

Its name came to me from a memory.

"The Silver Ribbon."

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"The most amazing thing I ever saw," I whispered.

I felt an itch on my ear. I reached up to scratch it only to find an earring where the sensation was. Right in the cartilage of the shell of my right ear about halfway up.

"Did you pierce my ear?" I asked, my lip curling as I looked at her.

"No, Love," She said, staring at me as I scratched at the earring.
"That's your multi-tool."

"Wait, I thought it was a scarf."

“It can be whatever you want it to be. As long as it has a programmed set of parameters anyway.” She answered back.

“Programmed... what? How do-.”

“Oh, right. You won’t know, will you? The power of the Heart Fire that lives in this world, the very blood of Blue Veil. We’ve been harnessing it for years now. Well, almost a century, really. Funny how magic and technology end up feeling like the same thing. Heart Fire is a fuel source. It’s what powers the forge,” she gestured at the Lightly Perch, “It powers your multi-tool. It powers you. And every other God for that matter.”

“God?” I asked, the word sounding alien.

“Only Gods can be reincarnated, Charlie. Whatever Siobhan managed to get her hands on... it made her what she was before she fell from the Perch. She found the source of Heart Fire.”

“I know,” I nodded, “it’s just so hard to think about. I haven’t felt exactly god-like. Unless I’m the god of getting my face kicked in.”

“Actually, I don’t think Siobhan was alive long enough to figure out what her gifts were. She was a god for only a few days and in that little bit of time she did more good than any other before her.”

“By dying?” I asked, almost sarcastic.

“Sometimes that’s what it takes.” She rubbed my back as we looked down at the Silver Ribbon. “She’s what the people of this world needed. A hero. A martyr... in the end they’re both the same thing. She taught us all to fight back against tyrants. Here on the Perch, she fought back Valkyrie Corsair’s for two days until Gozen bested her. She’s why we chose to light the fires of our forges here instead of Mount Olympus where we used to be. This place was just a temple of thought and reflection for the forgefolk back then.”

“She lit a fire,” I said, nodding my head down at the great expanse below.

“That she did.” She tapped a button on the railing and the concrete turned, taking us back towards the Perch.

“What if I’m nothin’ like her, Starland?”

“And so what if you’re not?” She smiled.

“Bein’ brave ain’t exactly what I’m built for,” I shook my head. “I spent my life gettin’ by, not gettin’ ahead. I can’t think of one thing I’m good at.”

“You’re good at losing,” she said, getting the first chuckle out of me in days.

“Yeah... definitely good at that.”

“I heard you talking about sports from earth with Sindri. I like what you said about golf. I think it’s a lot like you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sometimes par is good enough to win, Love.”

I stepped off of the lowering platform with her as we headed back towards the front doors.

She opened them and I stopped, taking another look back at that beautiful sky.

“I hope so, Star,” I said, concern on my face. “I really hope so.”

CHAPTER 5

Under Pressure

Getting better was a slow process. The physical part I had largely overcome, but the mental aspects of addiction remained. Every second of every day I was thinking about ways to get high. I just wanted that feeling back. Walking away from the needle was like breaking up with someone that I loved with all my heart. Someone bad for me.

But that's how it worked. Heroin was a fast chemical to pick up but a slow chemical to put down.

In the days that followed, I came to realize the forgefolk of the Lightly Perch saved my life. Especially their medici and senior librarian, Starland. She helped me get out of bed every morning and gave me things to busy myself throughout the day with. Sindri and Brokkr would take me down to the forges below and show me how to smith the roaring Heart Fire. They told me that Heart Fire had a source and that's what I was supposed to find. They told me that the fires of their forges were sparked from Radiant Stones. hardened Heart Fire deposits harvested from the frozen lands near the center of the world.

The flames burned with a kind of heat that permeated my body. It made me feel good to stand in the light of it. I felt like my body was feeding on it. Growing stronger day by day as I worked and shaped

metal along with the sons of Ivaldi, using the tiny little hammer they made for my small hands.

I actually took to it well. It made me feel good inside to be good at something.

In a month's time, I was making small things. I asked Starland if she could help me imbue an object with the Heart Fire's uncanny power and she told me no. I knew it wasn't anything to play with, but the temptation was still there.

I mentioned more than a few times that I should be out looking for Robin, but between Starland, Sindri and Brokk, they made me realize I was no good to her in the state I was in.

Brokk was a peculiar sort. He talked with his hands, gestured a lot and was much more lively than his brother. He also liked to tell jokes that weren't exactly funny. A few days ago he walked up to me with blood on his shirt.

"What do ya call a burglar without a hand?" He said.

"I dunno?" I said back, my eyes wide, looking at him.

"It doesn't matter. He's dead now."

He stared at me and I stared back, but then he just walked away.

Suddenly I was all too aware of the fact that Brokk was only half kidding, whether that was an actual burglar's blood or not. It wasn't until a handful of days later that Sindri let me know he was joking. He'd been down in the kitchens helping butcher meat as one of the kitchen hands had retired early that day. More likely a hangover from the days before.

The forgemasters and mistresses loved their drink.

To be honest, I loved being around them. To be in the presence of people who were so disciplined and yet unafraid to be themselves. To laugh loud, smack pints of beer and sing. It was inspiring. They woke up every morning before the sun came up, dedicated their lives to perfection, and when the day's chores were done they enjoyed each other's company like a family.

Sitting at their tables smiling and laughing along, I felt at home. They drank beer and I drank water. I felt like I belonged for the first time in my life. Everyone here adored me because of the legacy Siobhan left behind. Some nights I would sit up and think about her from my room. I would stare into that brilliant galaxy turning in the sky so slowly that I'd never see a full rotation in my lifetime, and let the weight of her life sit heavy on my chest.

Then I'd think about Robin. Out there, lost in the world somewhere. And there was nothing I could do about it.

The feeling of powerlessness would come back to me then, but I would push it down by remembering what Starland said.

"It will be hard, Love. What makes the drug so hypnotic is it gives you an escape from the pain. From the helplessness of your situation. You can't let it seduce you with lies of unearned happiness. You have to find happiness all on your own."

And she was so right.

Wherever Robin was, I could only hope and pray that she was okay.

For Siobhan, I felt the weight of responsibility. She was probably the sweetest person I had ever met with the only near comparison being Starland. I remembered her green eyes and how genuine they were. How she hugged me to her like a mother, knowing she was setting her child on a cruel and unforgiving path.

For someone who wasn't meant for either of these worlds, I was having a hard time ignoring my place in them. Sitting in my window, looking at that beautiful disk in the sky, my face painted in its light, I nodded at the realization of what I had to do.

"Time to find a spine, Charlie." I swallowed hard at the realization. "Wonder if I can make one in the forge." I smiled humorlessly at my own joke before the depth of my task dropped my shoulders.

God, I wanted to get high. Or drunk.

Both, really.

I got low a couple of days ago and Starland caught me sneaking into the kitchen stealing beer. My lips were inches from the edge of that mug before she turned the light on and I dropped it in surprise. I couldn't look her in the eyes. I just dropped my head and went back to my room without a word.

I've been through a lot in my life, but sobriety was the hardest thing I ever had to do. Every day was a struggle. The hardest part was knowing that every morning for the rest of my life I'd have to force myself to ignore the monkey on my back. Even though my first instinct was to let it win.

I would dream of finding a gutter to crawl into and drown my problems in pills, a needle, and alcohol. Nobody wanted anything the way that I wanted that dream to be real. Most people wanted a dream car, a dream job or house. The problem with being a junkie is the drug trains your brain to rewrite your pleasure and reward response. You crave to flush your life down the toilet just to forget what you're running from.

Two mornings later my curtains were thrown open wide, my coffee brown eyes burning from the sunlight. I groaned and rolled over, pulling my green blankets over my head. They were the same ones from the bathroom.

After they had been cleaned I insisted on having them back.

There, rolled up inside of them, they were my safe place.

"Get out of bed, ya lazy lump," Brokkr said, walking over to my bed and yanking my blankets off of me.

I was in pajamas two sizes too big with my face buried in my pillows, my ass in the air like a toddler whose arms had gone to sleep.

"No." I groaned through the pillow my face was buried in.

"Yes! I've got somethin' for ya." I felt his hands smack a drum beat on my ass. "Let's go. Up, up, up!"

I kicked and flailed my way onto my back and threw a pillow at him.

“Miss!”

I threw another.

“Miss again, and now you’ve got nothing else to th- OW!” My boot bounced off of his forehead. “Alright, Missy. Enough of that. Let’s go. You slept right through breakfast. Shame too, Sindri made rag steaks.”

“Aw...” I moaned, “Fuck! I love Sindri’s rag steaks!”

“Yeah, well. You’ve missed that ship, she sailed. Up you get.”

I sat up in a huff and mumbled something under my breath.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that. My left ear’s the complaint department and it’s a trifle deaf.”

I just stared at him. I’d been up late in the forges sweating away over my attempt at making my first weapon.

It was dreadful.

The handle was crooked, the end of it was a little lopsided and no one could tell if I was making a spatula or a sword.

“Besides, you’ve got to finish your pancake flipper.”

“It’s a sword!”

I kicked blankets in his general direction.

“It’s a pancake flipper! Let’s go.” He yelled back at me with a hoop of laughter, headed to the door.

“I don’t like you!”

“I don’t either before 9 o’clock. Thankfully you slept well past that.” The door shut before I could yell something back but I smiled in spite of myself.

I had learned to understand Brokkr’s odd ways and his humor. Once you got it, you just kinda got him. I got out of bed and made my way to the bathroom I lived in when I first got here. It was just down the hall.

I chose to stay close to it. It was the only bathroom in the Perch, save for the one by the observatory, that didn’t have a mirror. I wasn’t ready to look at Orcus. Part of me was afraid he would send me to

wherever he sent Robin. The other part of me was afraid to acknowledge that he might have my sister.

After I got done cleaning myself up and taking a shower, I pulled on what had become my everyday clothing.

A forgemaster's suit.

For some reason I really liked it. It reminded me of the armor I saw Lilith wearing and was reminiscent of what Siobhan herself had on the day she appeared to me through my multi-tool. It wasn't nearly as bulky though.

Siobhan was a lot stronger than me even though we were the same size. She could wear those big pauldrons and gloves. Lilith's armor was a little closer if only because Siobhan's armor spoke to an age that had passed prior to advances in technology no doubt. Having seen the range of things that a forgemaster could make, I figured out pretty quickly that they had designed the armor for the Valkyrie at Demonhead.

Most Valkyrie warriors were tall and powerful. Most of their slaves, the Owlet Feronia, they were like me. Smaller by comparison. The occasional small framed woman would succeed in becoming a Valkyrie Corsair, but not many. Most of us just got chewed up and spit out by Gozen Morrow's cruel program that refused to suffer weakness. She could care less about the least of us.

Forgemaster armor obviously wasn't quite as protective. It was mostly built for staving off the searing hot flames and embers that flew from grindstones or hot metal. Because of its light construction though, it didn't weigh down my small shoulders. It had hard leather hidden in the knees for crawling around under forge stack doors. The fingerless gloves had a plate of thin, molded, hard metal over the knuckles to protect them against accidental hammer strikes.

I zipped up my suit and tugged my hammer straps over my shoulders as I made my way towards the stairs.

Starland was standing there at the big cabinet by the first landing, waiting with a smile on her face. I returned it.

“Good morning, Love. You’ll be wanting your hammer I suppose?” She said.

“Morning, Star! Yep!” I beamed.

She kept my hammer locked up. I knew why. She was still worried I might do something foolish like finding a way off the Perch to go sell it for drugs. To be honest, I still didn’t trust myself either.

“Any idea what Brokkr’s so excited about?”

“Oh, no telling with him,” she turned and unlocked the cabinet, fetching out my small gilded hammer.

I took it in my hands and squeezed it fondly. It would never be a weapon. If anything it looked like something I might hammer nails with at home, only with a much larger head and striking surface. Up against a celestial, I might be able to irritate them really badly in a fight, but I’d do nothing more than get myself killed. It was nothing compared to the great hammers Brokkr and Sindri used.

I didn’t care.

Holstering it under my right shoulder I smiled a little, “I’m betting he just wants to make fun of my sword some more.”

“Is that what it is? I thought you were making kitchen tools.”

I blew a sigh, my shoulders sinking as I looked at her.

“No, it’s a sword,” I whined.

“Sorry, Dear!” She rubbed my back and we headed down the stairs together. “If it makes you feel any better, I started in the forges making bedpans for practice. We use them in the Medici wing.”

“You’re a forgemaster too?”

“Mistress, and yes. Everyone here is to some degree. We may have other roles but our primary lot in life, our primary source of income is down in the forges. It’s part of our culture.”

“Oh,” I said, my eyes opening to a whole new level of admiration for Starland. Here I was happy I had gotten one thing sort of right in

my life and she was the master of three.

“You’re well on your way to joining us, I’d say.”

“Yeah, right. Maybe if you need somebody to keep the kitchen stocked in cookware.” I frowned a little and she laughed at me, swatting my arm.

“Oh, stop it, Love. You’ll get it right.”

We talked for a little while longer about nothing really. I never was good at small talk but the time I’d spent here in the halls of the Lightly Perch had really done me some good. I could chit chat with just about any of the forgefolk. Even hold my own in conversations beyond my depth. I still wasn’t the best at looking anyone in the eyes but no one here pressed me to.

They let me be myself.

“I meant to ask you... what did your family farm? In Khione Valley.” I asked as we made it down to the main floor.

“Oh, that was forever ago, wasn’t it?” Starland laughed. “We, like most of the farmers in the Valley, grew Albino Laikas and kept Rompi.”

“Albino Laikas and Rompi?” I curled my lip, “What’s that?”

“Albino Laikas are a fruit that grows underground in very cold places. They kind of look like an earth orange, only white. The skin isn’t as tough though, they peel very easy, actually.”

“What do they taste like?”

“The rind is very bitter but the meat inside is very sweet. Sure if I think it tastes like custard.”

“Oh. That’s weird.”

“I rather think an orange is weird, but that goes to show where we come from, doesn’t it?”

I laughed, “I guess that’s true. What about Rompi?”

We had a long time to talk as we headed for the forges. Starland caught me up on Khione Valley culture after the Celestial Uprising.

We even briefly talked about our shared memories of the Minute War.

We continued making small talk and exchanging stories as we descended the spiral staircase to the elevators that lowered us to the massive, pearl and gold forge doors below. When those great double doors opened, I stepped inside. They were so well balanced that they swung almost effortlessly forward, letting the hot air of the forges rush out from inside, the fires washing me in their amber glow.

The forge ceilings were as high as the main foyer. Higher perhaps. Deep under the ground of that floating platform in the sky, the Heart Fire flames roared through the fifty open stacks that forgefolk were diligently working in front of. Echoing sounds of hammers striking in practiced order filled the air. Fifty round grinding wheels sat ten or so yards from each set of forge doors. Each grindstone had beside it an intricately made wooden and brass table with various polishing, shaping and cutting tools atop them. Big wooden carts were used to ferry all kinds of metals from the chain lifts that brought them down from above, no doubt delivered from all over Blue Veil. The smell of burning embers and sweat were rich in the air.

I loved it.

“Be safe, Love,” Starland said and I turned to wave with a smile on my face.

“Always am.”

She rolled her eyes and laughed, heading away as I turned to trot inside.

Brokk was standing about with five or six other forgemasters and mistresses, all positioned around what looked to be a very large and very out of place object in the forge.

It was a pocket watch. A big one. And from the size of the cracks in the ground, it looked as if it had fallen from a very high place.

It couldn't have been held by anybody but a giant. Coming to a stop, my hand came up to wipe the sweat from my brow. I rummaged

in one of the pockets of my dark suit, pulling free a bandana. Wrapping it around the base of my wild, curly hair, I tied it off at the forehead to keep my sweat in check.

“What the hell is that?” I asked, all of them talking amongst themselves, making jokes about the size of the pocket watch and how it would have crushed anyone to hold. I looked down at the strange timepiece. Its clasp had broken and the big, round cover hung open, exposing the ticking face inside.

“Well, it’s obviously a pocket watch,” Brokkr said, twisting his mouth sarcastically.

“Oh, is it? I thought it was a ticking picnic table. Maybe we’d have some sandwiches on it, sit around and talk about good times.”

“Shut your hole,” he laughed and I joined him.

“It’s big.”

“Yeah. Too right it is. It fell from up there,” he pointed and my head craned up to look at the ceiling of the forge. There, nestled into the dark corner of the room above his forge was an indentation in the stone where the timepiece had been prior.

“Lucky no one lost their life,” one of the other forgemasters said and a few more joined in.

“Yeah, jeez. This thing must weigh a ton. What the fuck was it doing up there?” I asked.

My foul mouth and accent had long been a stand out in the forges. No one was even surprised by it anymore.

“I’m not sure, Wee Lass,” he stepped in closer, unclasping his broad-faced hammer from his side, swinging it into the open cover of the watch. He’d struck it with all of his might, the metal giving off an impossible, reverberating gonging sound.

People around him, including me, slapped our hands to our ears. The sound rang in the forge loud enough to echo back a hundred times in an instant.

“Brokkr! What in the burning fire is wrong with you? Hit it with your head next time, you great lump!” One of the forgefolk bitched and everyone gave a hearty laugh.

“You are so stupid,” I said and he waved his hammer at me.

“Least I’m not a tiny little girl with an even tinier hammer!”

All of the forgemasters and mistresses gave a goading ‘oohhh’.

“Yeah, my hammer’s small,” I said, shrugging and unclasping it from under my right arm. I strolled over to Brokkr and waved it at him.

“A mere toothpick with a bit of rag steak at the end!” He teased, a series of chuckles following all around.

“It’s not the size of the hammer, Brokkr. It’s how you swing it.” I added as laughter broke out around us.

“Brokkr wouldn’t know a thing about that!” A woman called from her forge and the laughter grew as forgefolk recognized the voice of his wife.

“Silence your tongue before your husband comes and gives you a lesson in how well he swings his hammer!” Brokkr shouted back.

“Gladly!” His wife called back to clapping and laughter.

“You’d better stop before she beats you with your own hammer,” I waved my little hammer at him again to the continued ribbing of Brokkr by the forgefolk.

“Alright, alright. Now that we’ve all taken shots at my expense. Hope you’re all drunk and happy,” he holstered his hammer.

“Question is what are we gonna do with this thing?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “It’s pretty cool though,” I nodded, walking over to it and squatting down to look over its intricate metal closely.

The open clasp of the pocket watch was indeed broken. Looking on the inside of that face cover, I could almost completely hide behind it if I wanted to. My eyes moved over to the face of the watch, hearing the loud thunk of its inner workings clicking.

The time was incorrect.

But only then did I notice that the clock counted to seventeen, not twelve.

“Hey, Brokkr. I don’t think this is a timepiece. At least not for counting hours in a day.”

He came over to my side and looked down.

“Yeah, I know. I think it’s what they used to use to time the hammer strikes of the forge a long time ago. During the War of the Old Gods. Back when my brother made the Wolves Bane.”

Everyone grew silent in reverence to those times. And to those great weapons.

“You see, the claws of the great wolf were worked in time to preserve the quality of the Wolf Metal. Fenris’ claws are like knives that cut into the earth, digging great trenches as he prowls.”

“This doesn’t look like Heart Fire forged Boreas metal,” I said, rubbing my hand over the face.

“No, that’s because it’s not. I’m guessing the timepiece was forged with the Wolf Metal first. It’s not unusual for a forgemaster to test their metal before they begin a masterpiece. Course, Sindri’s a lot older than me. I wasn’t a Forgemaster back then.”

“Did you ask your brother?”

“Sindri? No, why would I?” Brokkr asked, genuinely puzzled.

“To find out if that’s what-..” I stared at him.

Brokkr shook his head.

“Nope. Don’t care.” He shrugged, kicking the timepiece. “Just thought you’d want to have a look at it. Nothing I can do with it. I’m not going through the trouble to heat Wolf Metal. Takes ages.”

“Can... I have it?” I asked, not wanting to look up at him. I felt him staring at the back of my head.

“And what are you gonna do with Wolf Metal, Little Hammer?”

“I dunno. Yet,” I said, frowning.

“Sure, you can have it. Just don’t make the world’s toughest spatula out of it. I don’t think any of us would survive the laughter,” Brokkr said, marching off.

“I don’t like you!” I shouted over my shoulder through a laugh. Brokkr was howling with laughter.

I stood up from behind the timepiece, looking over at one of the other forge mistresses.

“So... how-” I started to ask, but she interrupted me.

“Hot.” Her arms crossed, lips twisting to one side as she sauntered off.

Turning, she shook an encouraging fist at me.

“Really hot.”

I looked over at my forge nearly a football field away from where the heavy watch sat.

“Fuck.”

* * *

Later that night I found Sindri sitting on a stone bench in the observatory, his eyes looking up, reflecting the light of the spiral galaxy back at the sky. He was dressed in evening robes. I was still in my forgemaster’s armor, no doubt stinking to high heaven from sweating so profusely. My face was smudged and my fingers, peeking out of my fingerless gloves, were just as dirty.

“We found somethin’ of yours today,” I said, my voice tiny, not wanting to disturb him.

“I heard,” his slow, gravelly voice answered back in the dim light from above.

“Was it really a timekeeper for your hammer?”

“That it was, child.” He gave a slow nod.

“Why did you hide it way up there?”

“It wasn’t hiding,” he answered, “it was placed there for safekeeping.”

I nodded, "Oh. Lucky it didn't kill anyone."

"Lucky indeed. I hear it's yours now."

"I mean. No, not... I-... if you want it back, I understand." I said, looking at the side of his old, familiar face.

"I'm an old man now. I haven't the time to work metal like that anymore. Wolf Metal is hard. It requires a lot of time. A lot of heat. You have to push the fires ever hotter. Until they go from orange to white."

"Wow," I nodded again, "how do you stand it? Sometimes the forge is suffocating by itself. I can't imagine the heat getting that bad."

"You don't. You endure it," he said, leaning back against the bench. "You endure it in the hope of preserving a better tomorrow."

A better tomorrow. Those words stirred in me the memory of my thoughts earlier. Of sitting in my room looking out of the window, thinking about the path that I had to take.

"About that," I said.

"It's almost time for you to go, isn't it, Charlie?" He said and it gave me pause.

"How do you always know what I'm thinking?"

"I don't. Age and wisdom tell me. I know well the road you must go. And that you are the only one that can."

"I keep wondering if this is some kinda destiny. Or like I'm some kind of Chosen One. I don't think that's really true, but still." I shook my head.

"It isn't. There are no chosen ones. No prophecies or legends of old like children's story books. This is a thing that has happened before and will happen again. It is yours by unhappy chance."

"Yeah... I keep thinking I'm somebody special. Then I realize I'm not. I'm just a girl in a pretty shitty situation."

"You are not special, and that is exactly why this fight is yours. This world needs to know that it doesn't take someone special. It only

takes the will.” He crossed his legs, clasping his fingers over one knee.

“Charlie, your kind bare a power that most of us cannot fathom. A power created at the dawn of a new world. The power of Brahma. And by rights, it is a power that your kind wield like a toy. Irresponsible in all but a few hands.”

“Why did Brahma create so many gods?” I asked, leaning forward to rest my elbows on my knees.

“Do you know the creation story?” He asked and I shook my head.

“I mean... I think Siobhan knew it, so I kinda know but... not really.”

“Before Blue Veil there was nothing. From nothing came Brahma. So they say.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I believe a great many things. That, however, is not one of them. The evidence doesn’t support the statement. A single creator god from nowhere begets mysticism and foolishness. As does the belief in a god that always is and was. We learned hundreds of years ago that Heart Fire can be harnessed into the very technology we use today. Imagine what we will know a hundred years hence?”

“That opens a can of worms that makes my head spin, Sindri.”

“It doesn’t matter. For now.”

“Yeah,” I nodded, looking over at him.

“Brahma then created four other gods. Each of them symbolized by the sacred geometry. The language of the universe. The Maestro, Creator God, Brahma is the sphere, space, universe, aether. Followed by Ignis, The Burning Lady, Empress of Fire, the tetrahedron. Nidus, the Emperor of Tides, Warrior in the Still Water, the Icosahedron. Huayra, Eye of the Storm, Power of the Air, symbolized by the Octahedron and finally Lotus. Empress of the Breaking Dawn, Lady of the Moving Mountain, the earth God symbolized by the cube.”

“They were the old Gods.”

“That is correct. The Old Gods were supposed to help Brahma build a perfect world. One without hardships or hurt. Loss or pain. Together they built Blue Veil and it’s said that it was beautiful. The writings of the first era of men say this anyway. The Golden Age.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad. Why couldn’t things just stay like that?” I asked.

“Because perfection is not a parameter most people are willing to accept. Because wherever there is sentience there is opinion. And wherever there is opinion there are world views. Gods began to see the world differently. To decide their view was better than Brahma’s. With that came the division of men. Whenever men are divided, there comes the need to conquer.”

“Seems like that happens on every world.”

“That it does. Though consider our sample size is only the two.”

“What about the Heart Fire?” I sat back, shifting on the bench to face him better.

“Therein lies the thing that makes no sense. The reason I have more questions instead of answers when it comes to the creation story. If there was nothing and then there was Brahma, how then is the Heart Fire a thing that can be separated from him?”

My mouth slowly fell open, “Holy shit...”

I’d never thought about that before.

“Mm,” he grunted, lifting a finger to accentuate the point he had made. “Curious, is it not?”

“Fuckin’ right it is. Where does Perun come in?”

“After the descent of man into war, Brahma did nothing. He continued to create, to build while other gods fought one another. And then he disappeared... Some say that he went there.” Sindri pointed up at the spiral galaxy in the sky, “to start another world. And when he came back, this one was so destroyed he tried to start over. He made a new pantheon of gods to help the old. To better

answer the prayers of men, thinking they were simply dissatisfied and unhappy.”

“You can’t make everybody happy,” I shook my head, “I know that all too well.”

“As you can imagine, more gods weren’t the answer. It was only a matter of time before one of them figured something out. That one was Perun. What he figured out, no one knows. What we do know is that he disappeared. For years. Decades.”

“Until Brahma disappeared again,” I said, “I know this part. The beginning of Ragnarok.”

Sindri nodded. “The day Fenris was summoned into this world by Perun using Brahma’s power. The day the wolf ate the heart of the Creator God and spewed onto the world his Covetous Jealous Fire. Perun wasn’t interested in creating gods. He killed them. Almost all of them save for a very few. That’s when he created the Celestials, and they, in turn, created the Lesser Celestials. Perun wouldn’t make the same mistakes as his father.”

“And then came me.” I dropped my head and massaged at my temples.

“And then came you, child.”

“Do you know where the Heart Fire is?” I looked up and asked him, smiling.

“No, I do not,” he smiled back.

“Just checkin’.” We shared a quiet laugh.

“I don’t even know where to begin,” I said.

“The same place that everyone does,” He replied, standing from the bench and starting away.

“Where’s that?”

“The start.”

I nodded more to myself than to him.

“Sindri.”

“Child?” He said, stopping.

“Nothin’.”

I looked at him standing in the archway of the observatory, his back to me. He waited for me to say what was on my mind. When nothing came out, he nodded his head once and was gone.

* * *

I spent most of the rest of that day down in the forge trying to figure out just how hot I would have to get the fire for it to go from orange to white. I tried just about everything I knew without wasting too many Radiant Stones. It didn’t go my way but I refused to ask Brokkr. I didn’t feel like hearing any of his jokes about my failure. I wanted to do it all on my own, to prove to him I could handle myself without a babysitter.

Five hours later the only thing I managed to do was swath myself in overwhelming heat and have to retreat for a while. I had been down there working so diligently that I forgot to get fluids in my system. It was easy to blackout in that sweltering heat, I knew. I had done it once before. The fire felt different this time though. Like adding those extra Radiant Stones, releasing the bits of Heart Fire trapped within them, made the fire my ally. It threatened to burn me alive and yet I still felt my body feeding off of it. It made me feel stronger and so I kept at it until I wasn’t able to ignore my thirst.

I made my way through the Perch, up the elevator, up the stone steps from the forges and into the main hall. Looking down at the well-shined wooden floors, I pushed my hands into my pockets, little bits of forge fodder falling out of my hair.

The shimmering of the ruby flaking in the handles of the drinking fountains in the main hall brought me over to one. I grabbed one of the small wooden cups sitting upsidedown by the fountain and pumped myself a generous amount of cool water. It was refreshing washing over my tongue and down my dried out throat. It had a hint of sweetness that made it ever so satisfying. Starland told me they

filtered the water through cucumber peelings in the highest towers of the Perch and that gravity supplied the water pressure.

“I need a shower,” I groaned, reaching up to pluck bits of wood shavings and cold brimstone from my curls.

The lights above me flickered amber and my head popped up, eyebrows frowning at the sudden shift in hue. Then I remembered what it was for.

“Oh, the door!” I smiled.

It was my turn to return the favor. Some poor traveler or maybe somebody here to see Sindri and Brokkr was outside knocking. I had never once opened the door. Hell, just a month ago I would have never had the courage to. Meeting new people scared me. The expectation, the eye contact. Those were difficult for me.

Even now the thought of eye contact bothered me, but I could avoid that at least. It would be nice to do something for the people who brought me back from a very bad place. Even if it was something as simple as greeting their guests.

I took another big swallow of water and put my cup down, rushing down the great hall to the foyer looking at those double doors ahead of me. I would have to apologize for the way I smelled. Somewhere in between burning stone and sweat thanks to the forges.

“My hammer. I knew I forgot something,” I said, noticing the lack of extra weight on my left side.

I turned the latches and knobs on the door, carefully working the complex locking mechanism from memory. I had always hidden nearby when Starland answered the door. I didn’t want to feel the judgment in the eyes of strangers.

I pulled the door open wide.

“Welcome to the Light...” My mouth dropped open.

My left hand clenched the doorknob. I could feel my eyebrows moving, unsure if they wanted to frown in anger or lift in fear and

surprise. My bottom lip trembled. I could practically taste the words that had gotten caught in my throat.

Two women stood on the doorstep in front of me. One of them had brilliant blue eyes, the other stormy gray. Otherwise, the two women were identical. Dark brown hair spilled down their backs, their beautiful features pulling up into a pleasant smile. They were both taller than me by several inches.

I felt four feet tall. My stomach clenched into a knot as old fear came screaming back from my past.

No, further still.

From Siobhan's past.

In that instant, my mind traveled back to another place. To another time.

I remembered Gozen told me about her five Valkyrie elite the day she imbued the power of the Heart Fire in me and made me a Lesser Celestial. This was long before I found the source of the Heart Fire myself and ascended to godhood. I was excited that day. I thought I was finally going to be a part of something. That I had found where I belonged. Never in my wildest nightmares did I think she would instead force me into a life of abuse and hatred. That she would strip me of my dignity and make me ashamed to be alive. It made the bitter wound of forgiving her for killing my family all the harder to endure.

The five sisters of the elite guard were women clothed in immense power. Their prowess in battle almost unrivaled save for Gozen herself. Sigrund, Brunhilde, Isolde, Brigid, and Sinead. Each of these five women guarded the Bright Throne during times of war. They carried out special missions for Perun and his generals Gozen, Orcus and Midvalley. Deadly warriors and assassins all.

Just like the two standing in front of me.

Brunhilde was a tactician and a captain in Midvalley's army, Sigrund was the leader of the Valkyrie elite guard, Isolde was the

kindest of her five sisters and the one most likely to see reason. These two, however, were just butchers. The twins, Brigid and Sinead. I recognized them right away. Brigid was known for strangling her enemies with the lash. Sinead was an executioner without a drop of mercy in her heart.

“Charlie Siobhan Ryan, I presume.” Brigid said in her saccharine voice.

I knew it could turn brutally cold at a moment’s notice. My eyes fell away from hers. Her sister smiled.

“So the great Siobhan Aoibheann has come back to us a coward,” Sinead said, walking closer to me as I leaned against the door, pulling away out of instinct.

“Your bottom lip is shaking, Charlie,” She said, her face inches from my own as I turned my head away from her. Fear sat like a cold lump in my throat.

Just turn off your brain, Charlie. Turn off your brain. It doesn’t hurt if you turn off your brain. The forgefolk won’t suffer if you just let them hurt you. That’s all they want. They just want to hurt you.

My breathing quickened. I faltered back a step.

“She’s going to run,” Brigid said.

She was right.

I turned away from the door, terror fueling my feet as I burst into motion, running into the Perch. My scream echoed throughout the halls, a wild howl.

“Somebody! Somebody!”

My brain didn’t register Sinead laughing in ecstasy.

Before I made it twenty feet, deadly Brigid had me by the neck from behind and my feet flew forward, my scream cut short with a wet choke. She jerked me back and threw me through the front door.

Sinead stepped aside to let me sail by, hitting the top stair hard and rolling down them. Panic slammed me in the chest and I

scrambled, rolling onto my hands and knees, crawling my way back up to my feet to try and get away.

Sinead leapt into the air, I heard the unmistakable sound of her wing unfurling behind her and I knew I couldn't run fast enough. I turned back to see her high above me like the angel of death. I opened my mouth to plead but she came down hard, both of her feet slamming into my chest. My back slammed into the ground with authority, jarring my bones.

She stood atop me, smiling, her eyes gleaming in the evening sun. She and her sister were wearing formal battle skirts. The kind of thing the Valkyrie typically wore for ornament, or during a celebration in Valhalla. They hadn't come here to kill, they came here to intimidate.

Gorgeous Brigid came sauntering along beside her sister who was still standing on my gasping chest, preventing me from breathing. My dark eyes moved over to her as she rocked her hips my way with a smile on her face to match her sister.

Sinead finally hopped off of me like it was a game and I blasted a cough out of my lungs, turning over onto my side.

"We've come to collect you, Siobhan." Brigid brought her foot back and slammed it into my stomach, rolling me a dozen yards across the blue concrete.

Air escaped me again. I coughed violently, my throat burning. I tried to crawl away but she wouldn't let me. She marched over to me, rolled me onto my back with a foot and brought it high. Her formal boot came down to rest on my cheek, grinding my face into the ground. I gripped her ankle, my back arching, the heels of my boots digging in, trying to get out from under her.

"Gh-ng..." was all I could manage.

"What?" Sinead asked, "I'm sorry, I can't understand you."

Just don't fight, Charlie. You won't go to the icebox if you just don't fight. You can take it.

Brigid's boot came off of my face and Sinead quickly moved in to capitalize. She grabbed a handful of my forgemaster's collar, yanking me to sit upright.

"We've been looking for you for over a month. I told my sister to look here first. Your infamous last stand."

I was already winded from fear. I didn't want to look her in the eyes.

Her opposite hand snared my chin and forced me to look at her. My head turned up to face her but my eyes were downcast.

"Look at me, Little Bird," Sinead said.

I opened my mouth to say something. Nothing came out.

"Look at me," she said again, her voice as gentle as the wind.

"I can't," I finally choked out, my vision growing blurry with tears.

"Aw, it's alright." Her battle hardened hand released me, turning over to rub a tear from my cheek. "Do you want us to stop?"

I nodded.

"Say it." She said, and I heard Brigid chuckling behind her.

"Please stop."

She had pushed me back down into my quiet place. My voice was tiny. Ashamed of begging out of fear. My eyes finally moved to hers.

"Beg louder." Brigid said from beside her sister.

My head dropped to try and avoid Sinead's gaze but her hand caught my chin and shoved it back up.

"Beg me to stop hurting you," Sinead said.

Grow a spine, Charlie. It's now or never.

"Fuck you!" I roared at her.

She made me pay for it.

In a flash her fist bashed into my face, sending my head back to slam into the ground.

The world spun.

Don't pass out. Don't pass out.

Brigid laughed at me as I rolled over and began to crawl. The two of them watched me, walking behind my prone body as I left drops of blood from my nose behind, sniffing and coughing.

“This is pathetic, Charlotte.” Sinead’s boot slammed into my ribs, tearing a scream from me. Another boot landed home, rolling me across the ground.

I remembered Siobhan’s green eyes. Her soft voice. I remembered it as clear as my forge hammer striking iron.

“But you can fight them there, Charlie,” She had said.

In terror, I’d forgotten where I was. I’d forgotten myself. I wasn’t on earth desperately trying to stay out of a NEST icebox. I wasn’t bound to never raise my fist in defense or anger. I was in Blue Veil. NEST was coming for me whether I fought or not.

I felt Sinead’s hand grab a handful of my curly hair and yank me up onto my knees.

“We could tell Gozen she died you know,” Sinead said.

“Mm, true... Fell from the Perch again? No. Lady Morrow wants her back at Demonhead where she belongs. In a collar. Like a well-heeled bitch.” Brigid laughed her wicked laugh.

Fight Charlie.

On my knees, coughing from the boots they had put to me, I looked up at Sinead’s waist. At the dagger sheathed there beside her Atma Sword. Faster than I thought possible my left hand snatched the short blade from its scabbard. I whipped it through the ends of my hair, cutting free the strands she held as my legs pushed off of the ground beneath me. I propelled myself right into her, bowling her over.

Leading with the dagger.

I felt it sink into her thigh and we both went down with a scream. Mine in wild determination, hers in pain. Her sister was already in motion as I rolled over her, ripping the dagger up with a twist on my way to my feet.

Brigid's lash was called to her side. She whirled it overhead, sending it whipping out towards me, cracking through the air as I fell back to avoid it. Tumbling onto my back, Sinead wasn't there to land on anymore. She was moving.

My smaller frame continued the motion, rolling over and back onto my feet, just in time to push myself into a low hop as her lash came in again. I threw my arms and legs out wide in the air, letting the whip pass harmlessly beneath me, but as it did, Sinead came from my flank, roaring as she grabbed the back of my neck.

I had no hope of touching the ground again.

She spun around, ripped me higher into the air to the peak of her arm's length, up and over, blasting all of the air out of me as she dropped to a knee and slammed me into the concrete.

The stolen dagger bounced away from my loosening grip.

"You'll die for that!" Sinead yelled.

She stood and threw her left leg high into the air, bringing it back down like a comet crashing to earth, her heel aiming for the back of my neck.

I rolled once, she hopped on her anchoring foot, that same heel high again, crashing down. I rolled, again and again, avoiding her boot as it thunked against the concrete, chasing me.

Shoving my elbow against the ground to push me back up onto my feet, my eyes flashed between the two of them.

What the fuck was I doing? They were going to kill me for sure.

I had fought Valkyrie before. Siobhan had. Multiple. But never an elite guard. And never two of them at the same time. I tried to shut my brain off and just let my ancestor instincts drive.

Let Siobhan drive.

She was all that could save me right now.

My muscles hadn't done this dance before, they weren't trained for this. Her's were. The best I could do was emulate her responses with my weaker body and hope for the best.

Brigid's whip struck like lightning, the lash coiling around my neck, stinging my flesh as she yanked me towards her, pulling my feet off the ground.

I was pulled right into Sinead's whirling punch. She spun into my airborne body and used all of her momentum to send me spinning away like a dervish when her fist struck home.

As I crashed to the ground, the merciless twins were on me. Pain was bursting in blossoms all over my body but I was too scared to try and acknowledge it. I knew if I didn't force myself to my feet right then, they would bury me up here above the clouds.

I was up in an instant, just in time to spin hard right of Sinead's push-kick aimed at my chest. I ducked again, and again under a spinning fist, then another leg coming in from my flank from Brigid. We danced ever closer to the edge of the Lightly Perch, the two keeping me on my heels, unable to attack. I was hard on the defensive, protecting my face as best I could.

Punches and kicks assaulted my body, deflected by my palms and forearms as I whirled, turned and hopped back, moving purely on muscle instinct, not memory. It was a clumsy dance to these well-trained soldiers. More than a dozen punches and kicks hit despite my best efforts to deflect or dodge them.

I was getting torn apart.

When they knocked me down, I popped back up out of desperation. My breaths were ragged, my muscles were screaming at me. I ached from a hundred places but I knew I couldn't stop. I had to push through the acid in my veins and let fear fuel me. My eyes were wide as I whirled with my attackers, turning and ducking. I skittered left, a punch to the face sent me right, away from something more dangerous.

Soon I was feet from the edge of the disk, my hands and elbows flying wildly to avoid their onslaught. I lost track of a movement and it cost me dearly, one of their fists buckling a rib.

I was crying, but tears didn't override fear.

They just kept heckling me, laughing at my efforts to protect myself, laughing at my tears while they beat my ass.

I saw an opening and I took it.

Brigid was winding her hand up overhead to send her lash after me again. Sinead was in close, her knee was rising up to try and strike me in the chest. I spun down to my right, dropping to a knee, my left elbow blasting into her anchored leg. In the same continuous movement, I spun round behind her and blasted that same leg from the opposite side with my right elbow. Following through, I pushed up with my back to her, shoving my weight hard backward to send her tumbling off the edge of the platform.

I fell onto the ground inches from the edge as Sinead went careening over the lip.

Brigid's lash cracked against my chest, my arm coming up to try and deflect it, only getting coiled up in the whip as I cried out. She yanked me up to my feet and beyond, flipping me forward through the air and into her boot. I hit the ground, sliding right over the lip of the platform, clutching the edge by the atoms at the tips of my fingers.

I knew Sinead wasn't gone.

She had a multi-tool.

I looked up to see her coming down from the air with her brilliant white owl wing outstretched. She landed beside Brigid like a butterfly with sore feet, her heels not making a sound as they touched down.

The two of them looked down at me.

"I was going to take it easy on you, Charlie. I really was," said Sinead. "But then you went and stabbed me. Bad dog."

"Looks like we have to tell Gozen you met with an unfortunate accident," Brigid said.

They didn't know I had Siobhan's... my multi-tool.

They didn't know I had an Atma Sword either.

I had almost forgotten myself.

“Crush her fingers,” Sinead said with a wicked grin.

My tawny wing whipped out from my back like a parachute at freefall, the earring in my ear disappearing as it became that five foot brown and white extension behind me. In a flash of steel, the scabbard of Siobhan’s Atma Sword was in my right hand as I ascended. With the sword’s handle in my left, I pulled it from its sheath with such speed that the force of it spun me into my attack. That blunt blade blasted into Brigid’s arm, bringing a howl of pain from her as she fell back.

I brought the scabbard in my right hand up and out hard, the sound of it meeting Sinead’s blade confirming for me that she had drawn her own. I wasn’t even aware that she had.

My arm just reacted.

I spun around her deflected blade to get behind them, splitting their defense, my feet back on the platform. Brigid’s Atma was out in the same instant and the three of us started a deadly, clashing dance back towards the Perch.

Three swords flashed in the setting sunlight. Three women’s desperate growls echoing into the evening sky. We rolled, twirled and clanged metal. I wasn’t as good with the blade as they were. All I could do was defend against the deadliest of their attacks and absorb those blunt blade strikes I bargained wouldn’t kill me.

My little body was more than likely peppered in deep bruises beneath my armor but I pushed on.

Brigid’s foot slammed into my chest and sent me stumbling back several steps. The three of us were stuck motionless, catching our breath.

I was panting for air. They were winded, but not as much as me. Defending and dodging two attackers put me at a disadvantage.

“Looks like Gozen taught you better than she thought,” Brigid said.

I wasn't so sure about that. I had probably been hit, punched, kicked and stung with that lash of hers more times than I was comfortable counting. Not to mention how many times their Atma had glanced off me. I was putting up a good front, but I wanted to collapse.

"You can't keep up this pace forever," Sinead hissed.

The one advantage I had was Sinead's bad hip. She was bleeding from it badly now.

"Little bunnies like me just keep goin' and goin'," God I was terrible at one-liners.

The two women looked at each other, then at me, their faces spelling their confusion.

"It's a...TV commerc-... nothin'." I wobbled on my feet, panting, turning that blunt sword down to hold myself up.

Brigid spun in hard, bringing her Atma whipping towards my throat while her sister Sinead went low. I hopped up onto Sinead's sword, driving it to the ground with my feet while my own Atma batted Brigid's sword wide. Brigid spun away, my sword came back and down, bashing Sinead's wrists with the blunt edge, forcing her to give up her sword or risk me breaking bones if she tried to hold on.

She came up in a rage, shoving into me. Her shoulder pauldron blasted into my ribs and launched me away from her as my wing launched me upward. I burst into the air at an angle backward just as Sinead recovered, following me into the sky. Our blades sent sparks flying as they crashed into each other, the speed and intensity of our attacks sending shockwaves up my arms, aching my muscles.

Before I could properly counter or break the engagement, Brigid had recovered her sword and had pushed into the air, whirling upwards parallel to the ground like a spinning top on its side. Her wing feathers slicing in against my armor, parting the leather along my ankle, only for her sword to come in behind it. I took the cut,

giving me time to bring my sword swinging down from overhead, bashing her sword wide.

Sinead took advantage of the opening and rammed into me, dropping me to the blue concrete.

They descended after me.

I rolled backward in time to save my own skin, first Brigid's sword slammed into the concrete behind me, then Sinead's, then Brigid's again as they gave chase, stabbing their swords down one after the other as my rolling body retreated.

I whirled back up to my feet, Brigid's sword spinning in, missing my chin by inches. Sinead spun and rammed her foot into my stomach, doubling me over in the air and sending me flying away, right into the steps of the Lightly Perch.

My lungs were on fire.

I heard the tittering voices behind me and looked up to see nearly all of the Perch stuffed into the doorway, watching with wide eyes as I lay there beaten bloody.

I had to press the attack.

They were coming.

Fast.

I looked down at my hands, at the forgemaster gloves with those hard plates over my knuckles. Wiping blood from my lip I got myself back up onto my feet just as the twins came in, blades leading.

I threw my Atma Sword right at them, sending the blade tumbling end over end to make Sinead whip her wing and flank hard to my left. Brigid came on still, I stepped left and leaned in the same direction, her sword missing my right shoulder by inches. I punched the back of the blade with my forgemaster glove, forcing it's momentum further, making her expose her right side.

I was on a knee then, my mind flashing back to Robin. Seeing her in the ring with her trainer the day she nearly killed me. My hands whirled in front of me, rapidly peppering Brigid's ribs with punches,

feeling bones break beneath the onslaught of the metal. My last punch landed before I threw my forearm forward and collapsed her knee.

Sinead came in hard and I dropped low as Brigid stumbled and fell back. Throwing myself flat to the ground to get under her low attack, I anchored my left hand against the ground and pushed off with my toes. I threw my body low through the air, using my anchored hand as a pivot point to sling both of my legs out and kick her ankles out from under her.

Sinead fell forward into the steel knuckles of my glove as that anchored hand left the ground and rushed upward, cracking into her jaw with a sickening pop and sending her spinning away from me. I could tell from her scream and the rain of blood on my chest that I had done damage she wouldn't quickly recover from.

Brigid was on her knees, glaring at me. She was coughing blood from shattered ribs, maybe even a collapsed lung. Her sister's jaw was most assuredly broken.

I knew that pain.

I turned over, groaning at the ache in my shoulder from rolling my body over my arm at a weird angle. I lay on my stomach panting so hard my head swam. My body was a throbbing, hot ball of agony.

I had to use my wing to get up. It slapped the air once, hoisting my wobbly body back onto my feet. I must have looked like a marionette. Stumbling over to Brigid, I grabbed her sword from the ground, glaring down at her as she stared daggers up at me.

"Who taught you how to fight like that?" Brigid wheezed the question out as blood spilled over her chin.

"Oh, y'know... Get the shit kicked out of you enough, you pick up stuff."

Heaving for breath, I lifted the sword and screamed as the blunt edge tore through her neck, ripping her head from her body. I swung

so hard I overbalanced, stumbled several steps to my right and collapsed to my knees.

My coffee brown eyes fell on Sinead. Her jaw looked collapsed on one side. Her eyes were open in shock, blood leaking heavily from her mouth, tears for her sister in her eyes.

“Which one of you called me a bitch?” I swallowed through harsh pants for air, clambering to my feet using Brigid’s sword to aid me.

She roared and came on, incensed by her sister’s death. I watched her blade whip, flash and swipe through the air. I couldn’t hope to be fast enough to deflect her. All I could do was sway and dodge. I stumbled right to avoid one swing, and used her sister’s sword to deflect another. The sword flew out of my hands as she spun into me with another, the force of the impact ripping it from my grip.

My left fist clenched and I punched the blunt edge of her blade with metal knuckles, deflecting it as sparks flew in front of us. She came on again with a series of spins and thrusts. Both of my hands worked frantically in front of me without the excess weight of the sword.

I punched her blade around, dancing in and out of her attacks. Sparks fired off with each metallic clang between us and my fists ached from the force of her enraged swings. I finally dropped low to my knees and spun into her. I struck her bleeding thigh first with one fist, then the other, double clutching her wound with my assault.

She fell and I hit the ground beside her.

I managed to get to my feet first, watching Sinead grip at her wounded hip. I was in no fit state to challenge. I took the time to try to catch at least some of my breath, my arm clutching at my middle, trying to will my diaphragm to slow down, silently begging my lungs to stop burning.

Sinead got her second wind and roared back to her feet, rushing me.

I bounced off of my toes into the air, thrusting both of my legs forward to slam my heels into her face, dropping her where she stood.

My back hit the ground so hard it felt like my brain rattled in my skull. I was spent. It took me longer to get to my feet this time. I grabbed for Sinead's sword, practically dragging its weight over to her prone, gasping body. My nose was still bleeding, my lip was busted again and my skin was agitated from everywhere the twins had struck me.

"Oh, shit, Charlie... Did you just get your ass kicked? Yeah... you did." I panted out, "You did just get your ass kicked. You gotta stop doin' that." Looking down at Sinead, I lifted the sword's tip, hovering it over her throat.

I looked down into her smokey gray eyes.

"Am I a good dog now?"

I sank forward.

Her neck gave a sickening crunch.

My wing was dragging by the time I turned around to stumble towards the Perch. The forgefolk's eyes were on me, staring at me in awe. I swallowed hard, a pained expression on my face.

"It was like... lightning, y'know? Just..."

I tried to explain my moment of revelation. When the light came on upstairs and I realized that not only could I fight back, but that I had to. I couldn't catch my breath. I lifted a hand and wiggled it in the air, doing my best to gesture my way through a description of an epiphany but it just ended up looking stupid.

I looked into Starland's face, pushing past some of her kinsmen to get to me, staring wide-eyed. And behind her came Sindri.

"Hey, guys. I'm just gonna..." I pointed at the stairs, lowering myself to crawl up them before I collapsed on the last one. "Just gonna lay down and... don't- don't mind me."

I was gasping as I rolled over and looked up at the sky above. Star stepped into my vision, looking down at me.

“Are you alright, Love?”

“No, ma’am. I don’t think I did it right.”

“What do you mean?” She said, “you did magnificently!”

“It’s,” I swallowed, “it’s too hard. Was way too hard. Hurts so bad.”

I let my eyes drift closed.

Starland knelt down beside me and took my bloody hand.

“Can’t breathe, I can’t-” I coughed.

“Chanti!” Starland called for Chanticleer. I heard him pipe up from inside, pushing his way through the crowd.

“Ma’am?” He said. I didn’t open my eyes.

“Fetch a stretcher, Dear.”

“Ma’am,” I heard him start away.

“I’ll let you have a beer if you like, Love. I think you’ve earned it.”

I thought about it. The temptation. Getting drunk sounded amazing right now.

“No,” I was still winded, “Water. I’ll just have water. Thank you.”

“That’s my girl.”

Two things I was sure of.

One, I never felt stronger in my entire life.

And two, I was positive I’d never smoke another cigarette again.

Prelude to Side B

Charlie has never felt stronger. She has also never been hunted harder.

Sent away from the only place that ever felt like home, she is pulled into the center of a war between gods, with new allies she isn't sure she can trust, a past she can't outrun, and a fight she isn't ready for.

Side B is where the war begins.

Continue the story in *Blue Veil: The Endless Sky Playlist, Side B*, available free on this site.

A Note from LoveBrain

Hey!

Thank you so much for giving my work a chance. If it was a good read, let me know and please, please leave a review. This book needs all the support it can get we're up against a really unfortunately broken market that only respects people who are already famous. Experimental work like this goes nowhere. I wrote this book for the outcasts, the underdogs and all the people everyone called a loser. People like me. Charlie's greatest super power is getting back up. Just like the rest of us.

Thanks,

This one really meant a lot to me.

LoveBrain