



blue veit

THE ENDLESS SKY PLAYLIST

SIDE A & B

LOVE BRAIN

BLUE VEIL

The Endless Sky Playlist

Side B

by LoveBrain

Blue Veil: The Endless Sky Playlist, Side B

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Chapters 6 to 11 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 6

Fat Bottomed Girls

The fires roared in front of me. I had to raise my hand to protect my face from the suffocating heat bursting from the burning orange mouth of my forge. The stack doors were wide open, belching huge tongues of fire up into the air. I stood a ways back with my fire rod jabbing at the flames, the long prod reaching down into the mouth of that fire to churn the coals at the bottom. I remembered what Brokkr taught me about the fire rod. About not leaving it in too long so it didn't melt and leave burning metal in the embers, dulling their power.

Turning my hand over to let the metal plate at the top of my forgemaster's glove touch the underside of the rod, I lifted it out of the fire and walked it back to my cooling trough, dropping the red hot end of it in. The angry sounds of crackling followed. Water popped, fizzled and evaporated upward into the air.

It had been two days since my battle on the blue stone grounds of the Perch and already my wounds had mostly healed. Even Starland was surprised by how quickly I managed to recover. When they brought me to the Medici wing after the fight, I was in a bad way. The twins had all but beaten me senseless, but a day later my cuts had scabbed over, my bruises were less severe. I had done the biggest

portion of my healing right after, then it tapered off to leave me sore. Purple in places but for the most part, very much okay.

My ribs still hurt pretty bad though and taking a deep breath sent sharp pains bursting throughout my sternum, but I could push through it. I was eager to get back to the forges by the time the morning came and Starland, though surprised, had cleared me for light work. Sindri, however, was more concerned. Not so much about me as he was about the fight in general.

He insisted that the forgefolk get rid of the evidence of the coming of the Valkyrie twins. He had gotten a team of Medici together to gather the bodies from the perch and cast them down to free fall into the endless sky. He said the wind would catch them in their fall and send them far off the mark. It would be anyone's guess where they fell from after such a height. They had all the blood scrubbed from the stone and even the very buckets they used to clean were thrown from the edge of the great disk.

The last few days had been interesting, to say the least. Sindri was hard to find, Brokkr was called into long meetings throughout the day with the council and no one was telling me anything.

I could figure it out though.

Two valkyrie elite just disappeared while they were out looking for me. It wouldn't take a whole lot of brain power to figure out that if I was lost somewhere in this world, I would probably go someplace familiar. It's one of the first places anyone would look for me and the Valkyrie at Demonhead would come here looking for their missing sisters.

It really was time to go.

I struck at plate metal, holding the burning hot sheet with grips while my left hand hammered away. My eyebrows were tight on my forehead. I tried to stop my lip from trembling, but I couldn't. I was on the verge of tears with every stroke. I knew eventually I'd have to

leave this wonderful place and these wonderful people. I just didn't want it to be so soon.

Starland and her ever positive smile. Sindri and his wise advice. Brokkr, always managing to make me feel better. I'd never had this kind of support. Never had people like this around me that cared so much about my wellbeing. My heart ached at the thought of leaving.

Ever since my fight, the forgefolk came up to me to congratulate me. More than usual even. They all had words of encouragement, pleasant smiles, and pats on the back. They treated me like a hero. Like they truly believed in me. I couldn't stand the fact that I had to leave, but I knew I couldn't stay.

Gozen would be angry. Probably already was. By now the bodies of those valkyrie had struck down somewhere and what remained of them would have been reported.

My days of hiding were over.

The large doors leading into the forge opened and I looked up at them. From as far away as my forge was, I could barely make out the shape of someone coming down them in robes, walking towards Brokkr's forge. The two had a word with one another and looked in my direction. Looking away, I tried to busy myself with my work. To ignore what I knew was coming.

It wasn't long before I saw him step around me to stand in front of my anvil. I didn't want to acknowledge him. I wanted to pretend like he wasn't there forever so he could never tell me that it was time to leave. My hammer struck harder and harder.

Brokkr waited.

I struck the sheet metal so hard that sparks flew up at my face. I leaned away from them and slammed my hammer down in frustration, letting it and the metal I was working crash to the ground. I looked away from him and put my hands on my hips. I felt my eyes start to burn with sweat and oncoming tears.

"I'll pack my shit."

“I’m sorry, Wee Lass.” He said, his voice soft.

I turned away and headed towards the big forge entrance, yanking my forgemaster gloves off my hands. Tears carved clean lines through the smudges on my cheeks as I shoved my way through the doors and headed for the elevator.

Brokkr was right behind me.

That elevator ride up was quiet, save for the trundling of metal grinding against metal and the creaking and clanking of the chain pulling us upward. It punctuated the silence between us.

He had my hammer in his rough hands. I couldn’t look at it. My days as a forgemistress were over. I would never have that future.

“It was to happen eventually.” He said.

I nodded and crossed my arms over my small chest as those ornate doors rolled open. We walked out together towards the stairs, making our way upwards. Myself for the last time. Brokkr was kind enough to let me have my silence all the way up those spiraling stone stairs. He didn’t say a word until we crested the top of them, stepping onto the soot-blackened hardwood there, following the age-old footprints to the forgemaster’s Gusted Hall.

He pushed the stone door open wide and we both walked in. Warm blasts of air burst through the long stone hallway, blasting soot and rock from our clothing and out of our hair. When we reached the end, we both knocked our forgemasters gloves against one another over the opening in the stone wall that led back down into the forges, freeing them of loose soot and dust. The broad set of doors at the end of the wind fountain had several rolling carts by them, each with a name on them. My short cart had my name etched into it. I ran my thumb over the engraving with a fond smile before peeling out of my forgemasters armor for the last time. I stripped down to my sweaty undershirt and long shorts before putting my boots and gear on the cart.

Brokkr did the same beside me, loading everything into his own.

“You realize,” he started.

I hadn’t the heart to look at him.

“Everyone here will miss you, Lass.”

“I’ll miss all of them,” I said back, pushing my cart through those doors and out to the small lift just outside. It was a series of wooden shelves on a chain system, continually moving upward. They were designed to take gear for washing and then return it to the owner’s room.

Only mine would never come back.

“Sindri wants to see you after you get cleaned up.”

Brokkr pushed his own cart into the lift.

“Where is he?”

“You know him,” Brokkr smiled at me.

“Yeah,” I nodded and returned the smile, though mine was only half-hearted at best.

I got up to my room and pushed my door open. I stopped to look down the hall at the bathroom door. My bathroom door. Somehow the thought of going back in time to that day came to me. I frowned at myself for having such a thought. I would honestly rather be a sick, puking junkie just to stay than to have to leave.

“God you’re fucked up, Charlie,” I shook my head, disappointed at myself.

I got cleaned up, took a shower and shaved my body down with the razors Starland had given me. I didn’t have forgemaster gear to get back into so I put on my old jeans that she had mended and my small Medici shirt she let me keep from my first day out of the bathroom. It was for a junior in training, about the only thing that fit me properly. The shirt was stained in places from one medicine or another being spilled on it over the years, but it wasn’t too noticeable.

My frizzy hair I just left atop my head like a big puffball. I didn’t want to bother with my curls. Being both mulatto and poor, bad hair days weren’t that unusual anyway.

I pulled my soft cloth boots on my feet and headed out of my room. I never bothered to wear them much, but they were very comfortable. They kind of reminded me of those soft, cotton boots I'd see prissy, privileged little debutants wearing at the mall.

I remembered that I promised myself I would never own a pair of these things and rolled my eyes at the irony as I headed up to the observatory to find Sindri.

He was sitting on our bench. The one we always sat at when we had a conversation here. I felt my heart flutter in my chest with fear and doubt. I didn't know what he would say, I didn't even know if he was mad at me for bringing trouble to his doorstep. All I found myself hoping was that he wasn't going to be disappointed in me. Sindri was the closest thing I had to a dad these days. I had already let one dad down in every way a person could.

I didn't want to do it again.

I thought about my Daddy then. I thought about the wreck his daughter had become. About all the days I spent so high I didn't even know my own name. About getting blackout drunk in the street, stealing, lying and vandalizing anything I felt like. Getting habitually scraped off of the street by police officers that knew me by my first name. Even getting into trouble when I wasn't even guilty because nobody believed me.

And how could they? I lied about everything.

"It's not mine, I swear." I'd say.

"Yeah, right it's not. You've never done drugs a day in your life, right? You swear." An officer would mock me.

Roughed up. Thrown in the back of another squad car.

Breaking my daddy's heart over and over again.

All the times I said I swear bounced around in my head at that moment. Every time I said it I was lying. Or about to lie. Or had already lied. So much so that I found myself hating the word. I curled my lip in disgust at myself, shaking my head.

I forced my feet forward. Made myself walk under the light of the sky beaming beautifully overhead. Not a cloud in it. We were well above the cloudline. All of them. All I saw was the light of the sun, the fading shape of the two moons in the sky and the vague outline of that galaxy so far away.

I took a seat right beside him.

“Hey...” I said.

“Morning,” he nodded in greeting, his legs already crossed, his fingers already laced together over his knee.

“Look, I understand if you’re mad at me. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again, I...”

I almost said it.

I almost swore, and a pained expression pulled at my face.

“I’m not mad at you, child,” Sindri replied, his eyes never leaving the blue sky above.

“But you’re gonna kick me out,” I whispered back, hanging my head.

“Kick? No,” he said in that gravelly groan of his tired old voice, almost sing-song.

“Either way, I can’t be here. I figured that much out.”

“No. You cannot.”

“And I know, even if you’re not sayin’ it, you don’t want me around. I’m a burden.”

“Charlie, if you walk away knowing only one thing about my brother and I, it’s that we both count you as a dear, dear friend.” He turned his head to look at me.

I looked back.

“But,” I added the word to his sentence.

“But. Neither of us can afford to be selfish,” he nodded, “they are coming.”

“The Valkyrie?”

“The NEST army. Word has come up from the Midlands. Troops have pulled back from the High Moor, rumblings of conflict. The two bodies we sent through the endless sky have turned up. All eyes point to Valhalla and Valhalla to Demonhead. The Valkyrie have all been called back to the Bright Throne. The search is on.”

“Fuck,” I said, my stomach feeling sick with panic, “how long do I have?”

“As much time as I can give you,” Sindri said, looking back at the sky. “I reached out to Chroma God for assistance in this. The Lightly Perch cannot withstand the coming tide. We must appear neutral.”

“Sindri, I never meant for any of this to happen,” I said, my breath coming faster, “I never meant for anyone to bring trouble here and I can’t stand the thought of anybody hurtin’ the forgefolk.”

“I know, child.”

“What did Chroma God say?”

“He said he’s been looking for you,” Sindri said, his eyebrows lifting. “They all have.”

“They?” I asked.

“Chroma doesn’t act alone. His agents have been searching the skylands for you to no avail. I suppose neither of us thought to ask one another. Chroma is a friend to the forgefolk. Afterall, the travel icon was his brainchild.”

“Travel icon?” I asked, my eyebrows tightening, trying to remember that term.

“After Siobhan’s time in this world,” he said, clearing up my confusion.

He reached into his leisure robes and produced a round, silver sphere. It left his hand and floated in front of me, pulsing a single green light on its surface. In moments it spat out light all around it in tiny points. The points came together to build a three dimensional model of the world and all of it’s floating islands and continents. Then somewhere high atop it, the Lightly Perch.

“Holy shit...” I said, standing up to look at the globe of light in front of me as it became more detailed. The replica of Blue Veil that it created was about the size of a beach ball. I reached out to touch it and the world span.

It was interactive.

“Wow, this is amazing!” I smiled at Sindri through the light globe.

“I thought so too when Chroma first sent its design to us to construct.”

“We make these here!?” I shouted in surprise, louder than I wanted to.

“Oh, yes. The shells at least. They are made in the exhaust heat from the forges at the top of the Perch. From there they go down to the Icy Moor where the inner workings are installed in Meriadne.”

“Oh. I thought we only made, like... springs and cogs and stuff up there.”

“We do. But also these,” he gestured at the sphere and it floated back to his hand. He took it from the air and held it aloft with his thumb and index finger.

“And this one is yours,” Sindri said.

“Really? No foolin’?!” I asked, taking it from him, looking at the round, reflective ball.

“No foolin’,” he repeated, and the words sounded strange coming from his wise voice.

We both laughed.

“Sindri, I don’t deserve this,” I said, holding the tangerine sized sphere in my palms. “I’m bringin’ all kinds of hell down on your head. I’ve been nothin’ but a burden for you guys. I mean, day one all I did was get sick in your bathroom.”

Sindri chuckled, the sound ever so warm.

“The gift is not so special, child.”

“What do you mean? It’s amazing. I don’t even know what it does,” I let it go and it hovered out in front of me, that light blinking rapidly.

It scanned my face and I flinched away.

“What is your name, operator?” A robotic voice asked and I looked at Sindri.

He waved his hand with a nod, urging me to continue.

I looked back at the sphere.

“Charlotte Siobhan Ryan. I... go by Charlie though.”

“Hello, Charlie. I am your travel icon. What name would you like to designate for me?”

“I don’t... fuckin’ know, uh. Shiny?” I said, my top lip curling.

“Shiny. Name parameter set.” I laughed, looking at Sindri.

“Is it just a globe? Like, what does it do?”

The sphere chirped, ““The travel icon feature set is designed to provide it’s operator with worldwide interconnected navigation including terrain mapping, road detection, global positioning guidance, voice navigation, HUD mode, communication technology, and optics once the camera option is activated. Furthermore, simple functions like flash illumination and multi-tool integration are also available as well as a host of Ball Shuttle and Ship navigation assistance, docking routines, auto-pilot, syntax.”

“Holy shit. I don’t know what any of that means but it sounds incredible. So what are you like, my own Google or somethin’?”

“If you’re asking if I come equipped with mathematical parameters, yes.”

“No, like... search for stuff,” I said.

“Search engine parameters. Also yes. But you’ll have to put the knowledge in I’m afraid, I only come loaded with the basics. World History, mathematics, economics, syntax. For anything other than that you’ll have to either download new content from the till or give me new information to scan for myself.”

“Till?”

“Yes. The T, I, I, L to be specific. The Travel Icon Interconnected Library.”

“The Appstore.”

“I’m sorry?” The Icon asked.

“Just call it the Appstore,” I said sarcastically.

“Alright. The Appstore. Would you prefer a male, female or binary voice such as the one I’m currently using.”

“Can you... do a voice like the forgefolk?”

“Male or female?” The binary voice from the sphere asked.

“Surprise me?” I smiled at Sindri.

“That I can do, Wee Lass,” the male voice from the sphere intoned.

“That feels like home,” I felt my smile widen.

Sindri nodded, “The travel icon has become the standard in communication and navigation in the world. While most everyone has one, there are a few that do not. I for one do not care for it.”

“I’m sorry ya don’t like us much. Can I submit a complaint for you?” The sphere asked.

“No. No, that’s quite alright.” Sindri said politely, but I could tell he didn’t like being addressed by the sphere.

“How do I shut you up? No offense, but I don’t think my friend is fond of you,” I said.

“Open your hand,” it said.

I lifted my hand and opened it. The sphere moved into it and went silent.

In my vision, I suddenly saw words.

Would you like to integrate your new Travel Icon with your Multi-Tool? Y/N

“Sure?” I said out loud.

Please look at the Y and confirm with a long stare.

I did. The icon disappeared from my hand.

Integration complete. Inventory report:

SLOT 1: Atma Sword

SLOT 2: Wing Propulsion

SLOT 3: Empty

SLOT 4: Empty

SLOT 5: Empty

Report complete.

Would you like to submit or purchase new items into inventory?

Y/N

I selected no. I wasn't really sure what submitting anything meant.

"What do you mean this gift isn't special, Sindri? This thing is pretty neat."

Sindri smiled, "As I said, child. Many people have them."

"This is the best thing anybody's ever given me. Thank you."

"Use it well. I suspect you will need it."

"I feel like this is kind of a stupid question, but... what all does a multi-tool do?" I asked, sitting back down beside him.

"The multi-tool was also Chroma's invention," Sindri started and I balked.

"Wow. Chroma sounds like a real stand up guy. What, is he some kinda Steve Jobs or somethin'?"

"Who?"

"He was this inventor guy or some shit. I dunno, made a bunch of shit I can't afford. People called him a genius or whatever."

"Oh. From Earth," Sindri confirmed. "You don't remember Chroma God much, I take it."

"Not really. I mean, bits and pieces. It all just kinda feels like memories and dreams. Not exactly clear."

"I see," Sindri said, slowly standing up from the bench. "You will have time to meet him again. In any case. The multi-tool is both a weapon and a storage system. Its original creation was for storing objects in Second Space."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Second Space is the colloquial term for forcing an object into the 4th dimension."

“What?” I stared, my expression flat. “Look, Sindri, I’m... I’m not... I didn’t do so hot in school. I got beat up a lot and quit goin’... Mostly just drank and did a bunch of drugs and stuff, so... I’m not that smart.”

I let my eyes wander away from him, embarrassment sinking my shoulders.

“Quite alright, child. If you can imagine a being that lives in two dimensions, he or she is flat, like a piece of paper. They have no up or down, only forward, back, left and right. To them, an object that is above or below doesn’t exist. They cannot interact with it. Using a very small amount of energy, travel icons push items into a spatial dimension that we cannot perceive.”

I nodded, looking up at him.

“So a multi-tool stuffs shit in an invisible closet.”

“Yes.”

“Just say that,” I shrugged. “A multi-tool stuffs shit in an invisible closet.”

Sindri gave me a big sigh and I laughed a little.

“Alright. A multi-tool stuffs,” I leaned in a little, waiting to hear Sindri curse, “objects... into an invisible closet.”

I sighed, defeated. It was his turn to laugh.

“Though, to be more accurate, multi-tools hide objects in a different spatial dimension. Furthermore, most multi-tools come with some form of propulsion system. Since they were originally designed by Chroma, a god, that propulsion system has become flight. The number of wings a multi-tool has denotes a person’s rank usually. One wing would be a celestial of some kind. Lesser or greater. Two is usually the tool of a god of some description. Wings can be used for both defense and offense as well as flight. The multi-tool can also store up to four additional objects of the user’s choosing.”

“Why only four?”

“All technology has its limits. That’s the best we’ve been able to get it to do. To my understanding, the technicians in Meriadne haven’t found a way to allow it to hold an object much bigger than a chest of drawers.”

I nodded and looked away, thinking.

“If I’m a god... how come I only have one wing?” I asked.

“Your multi-tool was designed for a celestial. Not a god. You became one after you acquired it.”

“Oh.”

“It is time, Charlie.” He said, standing up.

My eyes studied his face before retreating.

“Right,” I whispered.

“I’ve asked Chroma to send an escort. They should be here soon to collect you.”

“Sindri, Listen,” I said, my palms rubbing my thighs, “The time I’ve spent here has meant the world to me. Never in my whole life have I had friends and people that accepted me like family. Not even my family. I don’t know how to thank you for everything you’ve done for me. That Star has done for me. And Brokk, and everyone else here.” I looked up at him again.

“It has been our pleasure, child.”

I jumped from the bench and crashed into him, wrapping my arms around his chest. I felt his hearty laugh against the side of my face as he wrapped his arms around me in return.

“I owe all of you my life.”

“Do us this one favor.”

“Anything.”

“Everyone in both our worlds stands at the precipice of disaster. This world will change and there is nothing that can be done about that. But when the fighting starts... promise me you’ll fight with everything you have.” He rubbed the sides of my shoulders.

I was more resolute than I ever knew I could be. For the first time in my life, I meant it when I said it and it felt good.

“I swear.”

* * *

I spent the better part of the next few hours walking around the Perch talking to as many of the forgefolk as I could. Everyone was so supportive it made me sad to have to say goodbye. I was never much of a hugger, and it was as if the forgefolk could tell because every one of them I spoke to grabbed me up and hugged me goodbye. I must have been hugged a hundred times in the last two hours.

I hadn't seen Starland yet and I was getting anxious. I needed to see her before I left. I had to. I packed the last of my things in my small bag. A feat that was pretty easy as I didn't have much. Hoisting it up over a shoulder, I opened my room door for the last time.

Looking back inside of it at my bed, at my window facing the spiral galaxy, I took a deep, steadying breath. It took everything in me not to go spilling water out of my eyes again. I really wanted to stop crying so much. I couldn't even remember really why I did, or when it started. I wanted to be strong like Siobhan. She endured so much in her life and never once shed a tear that she let anyone see.

She was the version of me that I desperately wanted to be.

I stepped out into the hall and pulled the door closed behind me, hearing it click shut in a scary kind of finality. Walking down that beautiful, hardwood and pearl hall, I came to my bathroom.

My hand hesitated on the door handle before I turned it and peeked inside.

I didn't push the door open all the way, just far enough to look in on my little corner between the wall and the tub. It felt like I was looking at the shadow of the old me. That stupid little girl that ran to anything that would numb the pain so she didn't have to feel. To not have to accept what she was.

I thought back to my AA Meetings with Juli. I never wanted to admit I had a problem back then.

I felt like I had to say it out loud.

To own my mistakes.

“My name is Charlotte Siobhan Ryan and I’m 26 years old. I’m a recovering alcoholic and a recovering drug addict. When I was twenty years old, I made a mistake that ruined my whole life. I killed my sister Samantha in a car accident because I was high. My parents hate me. My sisters hate me... I hate me,” I felt myself choke up.

“And I’m so god damn sorry for it I could die. I spent my whole life letting people down and for once I feel like I got a second chance. I don’t really know how to do what I have to do, but I know a lot of people are depending on me. I refuse to let anybody else down.”

I pulled the door closed on the old me.

“Not ever.”

I turned away from the door with a deep sigh of relief. I felt the pressure of my past slide off my shoulders as I stepped down the stairs. And when I got to the bottom...

I smiled.

Looking up, I saw the face of Starland.

“There’s my girl.” She said, her arms outstretched.

I dropped my bag and hugged her tight.

“Thank you,” I said into her shoulder as she rubbed my back.

When we pulled away, both of us were crying.

“Oh, dear. You’ve got me blubbering. I’ve got to look a mess,” she said, wiping her eyes.

“I’m always blubbering,” I replied, smiling through tears.

“You be careful out there, alright? Protect yourself. Keep your wits and fight like you want to win.”

I nodded, “I will, Star. I promise.”

“We’re counting on you, Lass. Grab your things.”

I got my bag and the two of us walked to the front door, laughing through tears as we remembered our time together in the Perch. Brokkr's jokes, Sindri's delicious food, we even laughed about the time she caught me sneaking beer.

"I felt so terrible!" I laughed.

"I was trying to keep a stern face, but seeing you drop that mug of beer with that pathetic little puppy dog look on your face. Oh! I wanted to burst into laughter. You looked like you'd spotted Fenris himself!"

We both laughed all the more, "I just sorta dropped it and went back upstairs. I thought you were gonna yell at me!"

When we got outside, half of the Perch was out there waiting for us. I looked around at all those familiar faces. All of them smiling, all of them clapping for me. Out in the near distance was a large spherical ship. It looked like a ball with a portion of its surface made into a window. Inside, I saw a woman sitting at the controls whose features I could barely make out. I was a little disappointed not to see him.

I wanted it to be Stagger.

In the back of my mind, I found myself wondering if he was okay. Where was he?

I walked through the crowd of my friends, hearing their words of encouragement.

As we made our way through the hugs, pats on the back and people handing me bags of travel snacks which I gladly took, I stopped in front of Sindri and Brokkr.

"Hey." I waved.

"Hello," Sindri nodded with a smile. "Are you ready?"

"Almost," I said, turning back to Starland who was crying again.

"Oh, dear. I'm sorry. I promise, I'll get it together," she wiped her eyes.

I set my things down and hugged her again.

“Star... I never thought I’d ever get out of where I was. I felt like I was locked in a dark room.” I squeezed her tighter, “Thank you for openin’ the door.”

She rubbed my back for the last time and we stepped back from one another. I turned to face Brokkr.

“Don’t you go givin’ me the weepy eyes,” he said, hoisting my little hammer up and offering it to me. “Ya left somethin’, Wee Lass.”

I looked down at it with a fond smile. I took it up, feeling its craftsmanship once again.

“Thank you, Brokkr.”

“Aw, c’mere.” He snatched me off my feet with a great big hug and spun me around. “Don’t go forgettin’.” He set me down, “You’re a forgemistress at heart.”

I nodded once and knelt down, packing my hammer into my bag along with all the snacks from the forgefolk.

“I won’t.” I stood to look him in the eyes. “Ever.”

I waved as I walked towards the ball-shaped craft, Sindri at my side, seeing all the smiling and waving faces there to see me off.

When we got to the craft, the door on its side irised open, letting out a set of three stairs in a gust of white exhaust.

“Now it is time for Charlie to show her quality,” Sindri smiled.

“Where I come from we say somethin’ else.”

“Oh? And what is that?” Sindri asked.

“Time to punch in.”

“Punch in what?” Sindri asked and I laughed.

“Nothin’. I’ll see you real soon, alright? I expect rag steaks when I come back.”

“And you will have them.”

“Take care of yourself, yeah?”

“As should you, my dear friend,” Sindri replied.

We hugged each other again and I lingered in the embrace.

“I’m gonna miss you,” I sniffed and pulled away. Grabbing my things, I stepped up onto the stairs.

“And I you,” Sindri offered a slight bow.

I looked back one last time at the forgefolk and stepped inside, the door irisling closed behind me. I felt the ship start to lift off as I made my way up the slanted boarding path.

It was a large space, every bit of it smooth and clean. It had two bench seats facing one another in the back and a small bathroom labeled on the far right. There were some storage compartments in the middle of the ship built into the floor. The slanted walkway led up to those seats and left the floor open to walk over the storage compartments to reach the pilot seats. Examining the floor, I could see it was built to move. As if the insides of the Ball Ship could be rearranged depending on necessity.

I stopped to unzip my bag and grab some of the snacks from the forgefolk, taking special care to grab Chanticleer’s cookies. The rest of my things I put away in one of the compartments below the floor.

Heading towards the cockpit of the ship, I finally got a glimpse of the woman operating it.

“Charlie.” She said in greeting.

I couldn’t help but feel like I did that day in Andy’s office.

She was the kind gorgeous that wounded self-confidence. She didn’t have to wear makeup or pretty herself up, she didn’t have to use skincare products or subscribe to beauty magazines. Her lips were a natural shade of peach, her skin pale and blemish free. Long, raven black hair lay perfectly about her head and spilled down her back. It was radiant and caught the light, shining and pristine. The eyes she set on me were almost silver gray and piercing. Her stare felt like she could see all the ugly parts inside of me.

“Hey,” I said back to her, my voice tiny in her presence.

Something about her seemed so powerful. So sure of herself. She swung the ship around hard and I stumbled to my right.

“You’ll want to buckle up,” she said, her eyes still on me while she operated the controls.

I righted myself and looked at her, frowning. Her silvery eyes looked me up and down, burrowing into me like a hawk’s claws. I saw her eyebrows tip down just a tick. Not far, but enough to know what I saw.

“Right,” I said, heading over to the seat beside her, dropping down into it.

I knew when someone disapproved of me. I could tell a judgemental glare when I saw one.

“Great.”

“Excuse me?” She asked, her tone light.

“Nothin’.” I shot back, buckling myself into the seat. I leaned back a bit and lifted my feet to set them on the empty dash in front of me.

“Could you take your feet off my console? Thanks.” She said, without waiting for me to comply.

I frowned and took my feet down, sitting up again.

“Good girl,” she practically purred with superiority.

I almost threw my snacks at her. Instead, I stuffed my hand into the bag and pulled out one of Chanticleer’s cookies. Looking at it with delight, I smiled.

He always made the best sugar cookies. Just a touch of cinnamon, not too heavy on the sugar. And he knew I loved pecans so he put one at the center of every cookie. Biting down into the moist, cakey cookie I gave an audible moan of pleasure.

The woman beside me glared at the side of my face and I looked over at her, crumbs around my mouth.

“Sorry,” I said, my eyes retreating from hers.

I couldn’t look at those silver orbs. Her stare practically hurt.

“Like eating cookies?” She asked, and the question sounded loaded.

“Yeah. So?” I curled my lip up, refusing to look at her.

“I can tell. I guess it’s lucky for you all your weight is going to that fat ass.” She said, as if it were perfectly normal.

“Excuse me!? First of all, I don’t know why people keep telling me my ass is fat. It’s not even that big, it just looks big cus I’m small! Fuck you very much you stup-” She swung the ship down hard again, blasting us over the side of the Perch and heading downward. The inertia slung me back in my seat. “NNGH!”

“Sorry. Did that offend you?” She asked, looking over at me with a wicked grin as she placed sunglasses over those silver eyes.

I looked forward through the window as we went hurtling towards the first of what I knew would be several cloud lines. The ship gave a beeping complaint about our sudden descent.

“What th-..” I looked out wide-eyed through the forward window as clouds rushed past us. The speed was incredible. I could feel my stomach turning a flip. “Are you crazy!? You’re gonna kill us!”

Just then she jerked the controls up hard, making me lurch forward in my seat. My seatbelt flew apart and I crashed into the console. I slammed into the hard surface in front of me, the impact chucking me into a groaning ball between the dashboard and the floor.

“That’s not how the seatbelt works.” She said.

Leveling us out, she finally slowed the ship down as we made it through the first cloudline. I crawled out from under the console and got back to my seat.

“Look,” I tried not to shout, “I don’t know what the fuck your problem is. Whatever you heard about me, listen. I don’t want to fight, alright? I know I don’t got the best reputation.”

I turned around to sit in the seat, fiddling with the seatbelt.

“Charlie, I don’t know anything about you.” She said as we skirted our way towards the Silver Ribbon.

I decided to just stay quiet.

Clearly, she had a problem with me and I refused to feed into it. It stood to reason that a lot of people might not be the happiest with me. Especially if they heard even the smallest bit of information about how I chose to live my life. While most people had only heard about Siobhan, people in Chroma's circle or who ran with NEST probably knew all about me. Even if they, like this woman, said they didn't.

Siobhan was a hero. I was just a junkie.

Up close the Silver Ribbon was much bigger than I thought.

That fat band of water in the sky took us over half an hour to get beyond. The entire time I was staring at it, watching light dance through the shimmering surface. I could see the distorted image of massive turtles, huge fish, and schools of thousands of sea creatures swimming in unison. Our speed made me realize the gravity of how massive this ocean in the sky really was.

It was unsettling seeing a vertical horizon as we descended with that large body of water on our right.

Turning to look back at the woman at the controls, I tried my luck again at conversation.

"So what's your name?" I asked, reaching for my little bag of cookies from Chanticleer.

She looked over at me. I could feel her eyes looking me up and down through her sunglasses. I held the bag out to her, offering one.

"Bijou." She ignored the bag.

I shrugged and put it back in my lap.

"Just Bijou?"

"Bijou Queen." She replied.

"Oh, cool. Like th-,"

"Yeah. Like that."

I looked over and caught her staring at me again. My eyes retreated and I looked back forward, letting her glare. God, I wanted to go back to the Perch.

“So are you just gonna be a bitch to me the whole time or can we skip past the bad vibe and get to the part where we talk like normal people?”

“Oh, we’ll talk.”

She tapped her foot on one of the controls under her console, the Ball Ship bursting forward all the faster as we headed downward at an angle through the endless sky.

I knew what that tone of voice meant and it sent a thrill of fear into my stomach. Every time I heard someone use it I ended up either running, getting bullied or getting my ass beat.

I looked over at her gloved hands.

They didn’t seem at all like a fighter’s hands. They were delicate. Her arms were smooth and ladylike. Everything about her said she was more the marrying kind for some rich guy instead of a fighter. She was wearing a pair of khaki fatigues with pockets up and down the legs, and a black, form-fitting shirt with long sleeves made of a stretchy material that looked more tactical than comfortable.

And her tits were bigger than mine.

I crossed my arms self-consciously over my small A-cups and sat back in my seat hating her stupid, beautiful face.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked and she didn’t answer.

“Look, it’s about a ten hour trip to Old Settler’s Place and I’d be a lot more comfortable if I didn’t have to hear your voice. If it’s alright by you, I’m just gonna put on my headphones and listen out for the next checkpoint. Okay, Pumpkin?” She gave me a fake smile.

I glanced over at her and returned it before glaring at my bag of cookies.

Everywhere I went someone was trying to kick my ankles out from under me or push me around. Looks like that trend would continue even in Blue Veil.

I missed the perch even more.

I didn't think she would actually ignore me for that long but she did. I tried asking her a question or two now and then, but she pretended not to hear me under her headphones. I plucked up the courage to actually throw a caramel treat at her a few hours back. She just smiled and ignored it. Her casual dismissal only pissed me off more.

"Whatever," I whispered.

I knew she heard me. I reasoned I should probably stop poking at her though. As delicate as she looked, this place was full of people who could do extraordinary things. The last thing I needed was to end up living near somebody who would and could kick my face in at a moment's notice.

Watching this strange world go by was both interesting and frightening. It felt like going to a different planet in one of those late night science fiction movies. We take for granted waking up under the same sky every day. Imagine that goes away and it's replaced by a skybox that shouldn't even be physically possible.

The magic of this place was hypnotic though. I watched land masses whip by us. I saw floating continents that it took hours to get around. I saw towns buzzing with life at the edge of some large peninsula with vehicles whizzing by, tiny and far away. Now and again slivers of sunlight would come cutting through the cloudlines, finding their way through the floating islands and spill golden light on things. I would see reflected light from the water above paint wobbling, silvery light over rock faces or illuminate the clouds.

It was both beautiful and unnerving.

By the time we made it to our destination, I had fallen asleep.

I had a terrible dream.

It started off good, though.

In it, I woke up back on earth, back in my lonely little apartment. I was sitting on that dresser while Stagger tended to my wounds.

We didn't just talk. He pressed his lips to mine. I breathed in his scent while we kissed, hungry for more. Our lips touching felt so real. The erotic smack of our mouths and tongues feuding for dominance, mine eventually submitting while our heads moved this way and that. We pawed at each other, pulling and yanking at clothing, desperate and eager.

And then I didn't have a thing.

He was gone.

Everyone was gone.

No friends, no one to call. I picked up my old broken cell phone and tried to call Maxine but she didn't answer. I called Robin for whatever stupid reason and paid the price for it. She called me names and yelled at me, telling me I shouldn't have called. When I hung up with her, I fell onto my bed and tried to crawl into it but my blanket had come to life. It wrapped me up, squeezing me like a boa constrictor. I screamed but couldn't get free. It snaked its way up my body and eventually covered my face. I clawed at it frantically to try and get it off but it wouldn't move. I couldn't breathe. Gasping, I crawled to the edge of my bed and ended up falling out of it, waking myself up.

I woke up in my seat on Bijou's ball ship, my head leaning back far enough to make my neck ache. I still couldn't breathe. As my vision returned, I was looking up into those silvery gray eyes staring down at me. She had a playful smile on her face, her sunglasses above her forehead resting in her hair. One of her hands was over my mouth and nose.

"We're here," she said.

I frantically yanked my face out from under her hand, gasping for air.

"What the ..." I started to yell at her, but something about the way she stared at me shut me up. I wasn't sure if I was afraid or just thought better of it. Maybe somewhere in between.

I sat up and looked outside the window. Even down this far traces of sunlight managed to make it through the multiple canopies of cloud cover. Every now and then when the vast openings in the cloudlines lined up and the moving continents above allowed, bands of yellow blasted down upon the ground, casting evening light all about.

We had set down on a circular landing pad at the heart of what looked like a small city. I could see a range of mountains very nearby in the distance above the tops of the buildings that set jammed together like a postcard from Madrid. Only the architecture didn't look so old. It actually looked like where my family was originally from in New York, mixed with a kind of futuristic perfection I couldn't quite sniff out. Like a facelift on a classic.

We had moved away when I was around 16 and mom and dad went all out trying to turn us into suburbanites. Dad couldn't help his southern drawl. He was from Uvalde, Texas, and no matter where we ended up, he'd be a West Texas boy no matter what.

Mom dropped her Estorian accent as soon as she got around upper-middle-class white people, desperate to grasp the golden ring. Robin kept a little bit of her's but after all those press junkets she ended up going straight up, privileged white girl. Andy wouldn't be caught dead letting anyone know we grew up in Brooklyn, and Max never really had an accent at all.

Sammy was the funniest. She sounded like she was from Baltimore somehow. None of us could quite figure that one out.

All I could guess was that it ended up happening from the mix of accents in our family blending into its own thing when she learned to talk.

Me though, I hung out with all the wrong people in all the wrong places. I lived in the streets. I ate it and spat it back out until the way I walked, talked and even dressed was made of New York pavement. I nearly lost my shit when I found out we were moving to the Midwest

to be closer to the college circuit. Dad was a history professor. She said it was so my dad could have a better time finding a job. Really, I knew it was to try and keep me out of trouble and off drugs.

I was a career fuckup though. Nothing could change that.

Old Settler's Place was a kind of modern beautiful. Everything seemed uniform and chaotic all at the same time as I leaned forward to see more of it. I stood up from my seat and leaned over the console to see far out to the left and right of our ship. I could see we were one of many circular landing pads that other ball ships and shuttles were setting down on.

"Holy shit... how many people live here?"

"C'mon," Was all Bijou said back and I twisted my lip in irritation.

Turning around to glare at her, she was still standing there staring at the back of my head.

She just smiled that smug smile at me and walked towards the ship's door. Huffing an indignant breath I turned and headed that way myself, stopping to grab my things out of her storage compartment. Tossing my bag strap over my shoulder, I made my way to the door and stepped down those three steps into the outside air.

My skin was assaulted by the cold in an instant.

It burned into my flesh, cutting right through my thin shirt and jeans, chilling me to my core. My mouth fell open and I grabbed my arms, rubbing myself furiously as I set out in a jog after Bijou.

"H- holy fuck! It's fuckin' freezing! It doesn't even look that cold out here!" I said. My eyes were watering from the wind hitting me in the face.

"Oh, hey, you should grab a jacket. It's cold," she said sarcastically, zipping up her bomber jacket as she strutted onward.

"Really!?" I called after her, my nipples stabbing at my shirt like they were mad at it.

I hadn't even thought to put on a bra, I figured it'd just be a short jaunt down to see Chroma and then off somewhere else. I didn't know what to expect.

"Yep. The closer you get to the Hellmouth the colder it gets. Blue Veil geography 101. Welcome to it." Bijou said, pushing her hands into her thermal gloves. "It doesn't warm up around here for another two or three months when the sunlight's coming from natural east."

"What's natural east mean? They got an unnatural one or somethin'?" I asked, following her as we made our way down the street.

It bothered me that my memories were so scattered. Whatever Siobhan did with the information in my head managed to scramble the rest of my memory up so bad I could barely tell dreams from reality. It was a constant process of remembering things, questioning what I was remembering and then forgetting it by accident moments later.

Old Settler's Place wasn't the biggest place I had ever been. The tight buildings and streets running to and fro seemed to exist inside of a gigantic bowl. The mountains I noticed, now that I was out of the ship, were all around the city. Like it was inside of an old impact crater.

"Since the planet is broken into pieces and those pieces orbit the Hellmouth, north, south, east and west don't really make much sense anymore. So each continent has its own compass of directions based upon landmarks. Then there's the elevation scale. Then comes the true magnetic directions. So if a person is natural east by west at elevation level five, it means they're at the magnetic east of Blue Veil, on the west side of their continent which sits at the fifth level of elevation. Make sense?" She said, throwing her shimmering silver eyes on me like she was gracing me with their presence.

No, it didn't make sense. And her smug attitude was starting to annoy me.

“No, it doesn’t.” I shook my head, trying to keep up.

“That’s because you’re an airhead,” she said with a laugh.

“Hey!” I yelled and she stopped to look at me. “I’m really trying to be nice here, alright? I know I’m not that smart but you ain’t gotta be such a bitch.”

She glared at me. Her eyes hurt to look at almost as much as Andy’s did. I inevitably lost the staring match.

I always did.

Bijou turned and continued on.

“Where are we going?”

She turned a corner into a narrow alley between what looked like a tailor and an electronics shop. The walls were so close that I started feeling a little claustrophobic. Then my steps slowed down, putting some distance between her and I. My natural instinct to run started to tickle at the back of my neck.

Was she leading me somewhere to have our talk?

“You’ll see,” she said. “Not much further now.”

Between the threat of pain and the chill in the air, I pressed on as well, figuring getting beat up on the way to warmth was a lot better than running away to avoid pain and freezing to death in a place I had never been before.

The little city was quiet. And for the temperature outside, I could see why few people were walking about. Most everyone was in long coats and scarves. It was only then that it occurred to me that my multi-tool was still an earring, and as I thought about that it became a warm, white scarf again. I felt it bundle around my neck, wrapping itself twice to cover my chin, nose, and mouth. I stuffed my hands in my pockets to try to keep them from hurting as cold stung them to the bone.

There weren’t any cars out on the roads. I could see a few ball shuttles pass by up ahead, but for the most part, it seemed most people walked in this town.

“Do people have cars here? Like on earth?” I asked Bijou through chattering teeth.

“Hm? Oh, yeah. I mean, not here. You see them in the capital city and higher elevations. Ball Shuttles are more prevalent down here because they’re manufactured in the Icy Moor. It’s closer.”

We came out of the other side of the alley into a wide open street that had a gated park across from us. Even from here I could see the large statue at the heart of it that was in full color. It was of a woman standing at the park’s center, one hand on her Atma Sword, the other holding what looked like Blue Veil in her palm, spinning peacefully, a single tawny wing extended out behind her. Her face was exactly like mine save for the burning, determined green eyes blazing with courage.

And she was wearing Siobhan’s armor.

“Oh no...” I said, hearing Bijou’s chuckle as she led us right into that park.

It seemed it didn’t matter where I went, I would constantly be crushed by Siobhan’s immense shadow.

“What, you don’t like it?”

“How could I?” I asked.

“I dunno. How could you?” She asked in return.

Following her right up to the statue which turned out not to be a statue at all, I realized it was a convincing hologram that looked solid.

“How would you feel if you had a big sister that was better than you at absolutely everything? One that everyone liked a lot more than they like you, and they all expect you to be just like her.”

“Boo-hoo. My heart bleeds for you,” she said.

I opened my mouth to say something back but I didn’t bother. I just looked away from her and threw my hands up at my sides, letting them slap back down against my thighs in exasperation.

“Look, whatever. Why are we here? This supposed to be your way of takin’ more shots at me?”

“It’s not always about you.” She smiled her pretty smile.

I rolled my eyes again as she stepped towards the plaque with Siobhan Aoi bheann’s name on it. Splashing in front of us was an image of the planet. One similar to what a travel icon would make. She tapped her way through it, zooming in down to our very location, then she tapped another few commands in the air on a smaller window that opened beside the map.

“Where’s your travel icon?” I asked, looking around for another floating sphere.

“There we go,” she said as the holographic image of Siobhan cut an opening at the base.

The statue’s platform seemed to break inward on that cut, building a narrow staircase.

“After you.” She said.

I made my way up the staircase, right into the holographic leg of Siobhan where a port sat on the ground. Bijou came up after me, walked over to the port and knelt down, setting her palm against it. It started to iris open, exposing a ladder beneath which she climbed down with ease.

“Let’s go,” She said and I nervously climbed into the port behind her.

“Look. An eclipse.” She said from beneath me.

She was talking about my ass.

“Oh, shut the fuck up.”

“Make me,” She said as I stepped down into the dark corridor and turned around only to nearly walk right into her.

I stepped back and glanced up at her, our eyes meeting briefly in the dark before mine retreated and I stepped around.

“I don’t wanna fight.”

“You’re gonna have to eventually, aren’t you? Least that’s what everyone keeps telling me.”

“Yeah. Seems that way,” I said back, walking into the darkness.

She waited until I fell forward.

“Wait, there’s a ledge.”

I tumbled forward screaming.

What was once a dark corridor around us suddenly burst into light, as if there was a wall of darkness in front of me that abruptly ended. I fell only a foot to the floor, but at that moment I thought I was falling to my death.

She hopped down right beside me and tittered a laugh.

I got up fuming, marching along behind her towards a set of brilliant white doors that looked like a presidential office.

“Jesus Christ, get off my lady nuts. Fuckin’ sick of these big bitches givin’ me shit. Stupid shampoo commercial lookin’, calorie countin’, soccer mom. Bet you drive an oversized SUV and don’t know how your blinkers work,” I muttered under my breath.

“Say something?” She asked, a playful smile on her face.

She looked like she wanted to laugh.

“Huh? Nope. Nothin’,” I said, looking around the small antechamber, cowardice sending fear tumbling down my throat into my stomach like a bucket of ice.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure,” I said, refusing to look at her.

“Positive?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Absolutely nothing?”

“Yup,” I made the last letter in the word pop.

“Alright,” She said and swung those presidential doors open.

Inside was a small living space about the size of an apartment back home. A roaring fire was blazing in the hearth and a big marble table sat in the middle of the room with comfortable looking chairs all around it. Two armchairs sat facing each other by the fire. Photographs on the wall depicted an aerial photo of the crater,

apparently called Howl Valley back then, as the city developed over time inside of it.

Standing by the fire with his back to us was a familiar silhouette I hadn't seen in months. One that I would have recognized anywhere.

"Stag!" I said, almost out of breath.

He turned around, smiling that youthful smile. I started to run around the table to him, to tackle him with a hug.

Bijou rounded the table first, tossing her voluminous hair over her shoulder as she sashayed over to Stagger and snaked her arms around the back of his neck.

"Stagger Lee. You're back already?" she said, her tone flirtatious as she leaned in and pecked his cheek.

Stagger gave her a fond chuckle, wrapping his arms around her middle.

"Yeah, I ended up having to cut it short. NEST is throwing a fit back on earth. Seems somebody's got 'em all pissed off. Isn't that right, Charlie?" He turned those hazel weapons he called eyes onto me.

My mouth was open in shock. Betrayal was burning in my eyes, heating my cheeks. My face was twisted in an expression I couldn't hide.

"Whoa, you okay?" Stag asked, his embrace with Bijou sliding apart as he walked over to me.

"Yeah, I'm fine. What the fuck is this?" I asked, lifting my hands to gesture at the two of them.

"Is what? What are you-" He tried to ask but I cut him off.

"Nothin'. Nothin', it's none of my business, right? I get it."

I glared into the smug smile on Bijou's face as she cut into me with her silver eyes. I couldn't tell what her hungry stare was enjoying most, the look on my face or the fact that she had put it there.

"She's had a long day, Stag," Bijou said, taking a seat at the table. "I'm so glad you're back, though," she bit her bottom lip and threw

her silvery eyes on me.

I wanted to slap her away from the table.

“How’ve you been?” Stagger asked.

I tore my hateful stare off of Bijou’s face long enough to look up at him. My eyes didn’t meet him. I stared him in his lying, two-timing mouth and wanted to punch him in it.

“Fine,” I said, taking a seat at the foot of the table, farthest away from both of them.

“Charlie,” he looked at me incredulously, “I don’t understand wh-..”

The doors opened again and through them came a man whose face suddenly connected dots in my memory.

Chroma God.

My earliest memories of him had his keen eyes bouncing light back at me like a cat’s eyes in the dark. And at will, those same eyes could pour pure white light from their sockets and see through the fabric of reality. Now, however, he wore dark sunglasses that completely hid his eyes from view.

Because he didn’t have eyes.

Orcus had them now.

He had a brown suit draped over his frame with a dark purple shirt underneath it. A white tie was at his collar not unlike the one Stagger always wore. He was surprisingly young looking, too. I expected him to be much older but he looked like he was in his mid-fifties. Despite his age, his hair was still a rich chestnut brown, his lean, solid frame moving with the grace of a god.

He moved through the room with practiced ease, right to the top of the table and took a seat.

“Charlie,” he said to me, his voice colored with what sounded like a British accent.

“Chroma God,” I replied, surprise in my tone. I hadn’t expected to see him so soon. Or here.

I shot Stagger another hateful look and he frowned at me, confused.

My eyes dropped to the table. I knew it was all over my face. I felt so stupid.

What could I expect? I pushed him away. Not that it would have been any different if I hadn't. A guy like Stagger didn't want me. He wanted Siobhan. Or someone else equally perfect.

I glared daggers at pretty, perfect, gorgeous, silver-eyed, big titty Bijou.

"I can tell from your relative silence that you've had an interesting day. I suppose you can already gather that we have quite a lot to talk about." Chroma said, misinterpreting the hate I had bristling at the back of my neck.

I nodded without a word, staring holes in the table.

"Right. Perhaps we should table this conversation until tomorrow. I'm sure everyone here could do with a little rest. Most of all you, Charlie." Chroma said, somehow picking up on my every gesture without his sight.

I looked up at him.

"This was all kinda short notice, I think I just need to clear my head," I said.

"Short notice indeed. We didn't have time to find you adequate arrangements. You can stay here for the night. There's a small room I sometimes use to get a bit of shuteye when I'm working long into the night. I'd let you stay at my home on the North Landing, but I'm sure you probably don't want the attention you'll get down that way. It's a highly populated area and as I'm sure you've seen from the statue above, Old Settler's Place is rather fond of you." Chroma said.

"Of Siobhan," I muttered, my lip curling, glaring at the side of Stagger's face. I could tell he was trying not to look me in the eyes.

"Of... Siobhan," Chroma looked at me and I could tell he was reading my tone.

“She can stay with me,” Bijou piped up.

I stared at her, wishing my eyes could shoot lasers.

“No, I most certainly can’t.”

“Oh, come on. We could do with a little girl-chat,” She smiled that pretty smile again and I just wanted to leap across the table and start punching her stupid, pretty face into the floor.

I felt like such a petty little girl.

Stagger wasn’t mine. Stagger would never be mine. But all I could think about was those intimate moments we spent in my little apartment. The days he took care of me. I wanted those days back.

“Alright, if it’s alright by you, Bijou. The office isn’t exactly the most comfortable of accommodations,” Chroma said.

I didn’t want to be anywhere near her. I didn’t want to see her face. But I knew she wanted to get me alone and kick me around. She wanted to dig the knife in. I bet Stagger made me sound like a real pathetic case on those late nights, curled up in this silver eyed she-devil’s bed.

Making fun of the poor, destitute junkie whose family couldn’t fucking stand her.

Right before he fucked her silver eyed brains out. Imagining them in bed made my hands ball into fists. Jealousy dug at me and I hated myself for it.

I’d show her.

She probably thought I was the same weakling that crawled and cried in the dirt back on earth. I summoned the sweetest smile I could.

“Thanks so much, Bijou. Long as it’s not goin’ outta your way.”

Stagger’s expression darkened, reading my fake tone.

“Not at all, Charlie,” She said back, smiling that pretty smile that I couldn’t wait to smash my fist into.

“Maybe you should rethink sleeping here, Charlie?” Stagger said.

“Nah. I’m good Stag,” I replied, my eyes never leaving Bijou.

“I don’t think you are.” He said, leaning forward in his seat.

“Oh. Trust me... I’m a-okay. Bucko.” I added, throwing my coffee brown, mischief rich eyes at him.

“I’ll go on ahead and make you a place to crash,” Bijou said, wetting her lips, that playful smile of hers never leaving her face as her silver eyes bounced back and forth between Stagger and me.

Stagger and I stared at each other as Bijou got up and headed out of those white doors.

I was gonna fuck his girlfriend up.

“Whatever,” Stagger sighed, sitting back in his seat, staring up at the ceiling. “I can’t stop you anyway.”

“Damn right.”

“Whatever,” he said again.

“Yeah, whatever-whatever,” I snapped back.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll...” Chroma spoke up, gesturing at me to get my attention, “Run you over to Bijou’s later. Perhaps we should take a drive. Give you a moment to collect yourself. Besides, I think you’d like a small tour of Old Settler’s Place.”

I nodded and again shot Stagger a look.

“I’m gonna take off, Chroma,” Stagger stood up from the table. “Charlie, try to have a better day. If you wanna talk, I’m at the Maxwell Avery on the South End. You got an icon?” He asked, doing me the favor still of not looking me in the eyes. He was looking at the table top.

“Yeah. I do.” my voice was short.

Testy.

“Alright,” He replied, his voice slow. I could tell he was starting to pick up on the fact that I was mad at not just Bijou, but him as well. “If this is about me leaving you back there... I promise you that’s not what happened. I’d never do that to you.”

“It’s not.”

“Well, what i-” he stopped when Chroma lifted a hand. “Alright, kiddo. I’ll talk to you later. You can find me on the icon network. S dot Lee, Com-ID 442.”

Words appeared in my vision.

Would you like to save S. Lee CID 442? Y/N

I selected no.

“Got it. I’ll call you.”

“Good.” He nodded, “I hope you do.”

Chroma had the decency to wait until he was gone before he asked me.

“So what’s really bothering you?”

“Stuff. You got anything to drink here?”

“Charlie. Is that what you really want?”

“Yeah. That’s what I really want. A stiff fuckin’ drink.”

Chroma stood up from his seat, walked over to my side of the table and tapped it two times in front of me.

“Well, you can’t have it.”

“Fuck you!” I roared, bursting up from my chair. “You wanna tell me what I want too, huh?”

“Charlie,” Chroma said, his voice a warning.

“What? What!?” I growled, “What are you gonna do you fuckin’ blind freak?”

I shoved him. Hard.

He stood before me just as solid and resolute as if I’d never stood up. His body didn’t move an inch despite my best effort. My wrists ached and I rubbed them with my tingling hands.

What was I thinking to consider shoving Chroma God of all people?

He didn’t get angry. He tilted his head to examine my face as if he still had eyes behind those lenses.

“Look, I’m sorry,” I said, turning away from him.

“It’s alright. If you need someone to take it out on, I’m here for you. Just don’t get so caught up in anger that you forget who you are.” He placed a hand on my shoulder.

I sighed, “Yeah. I’m the great Siobhan.”

“No, Siobhan is the great Charlotte.” He tapped my shoulder then headed for the door. “Let’s get you home. Are you hungry?”

I pouted a little then nodded

“I’m always hungry.”

* * *

An hour later, Chroma dropped me in front of Bijou’s building with a bag of fast food in one hand and my travel bag in the other. It was in the Residential District. Chroma said he lived in the Entertainment District in the north, full of restaurants, a big casino, food carts and shopping pavilions everywhere. We drove through it in his ball shuttle so he could show me around. There was even a theater across the street from his house.

I was only slightly worried about being driven around by a blind man.

Bijou, however, lived in a much quieter part of town with almost no traffic. There was a little park down the road that we passed that I could barely make out in the dark. The whole city was somewhat drab, subdued and uninteresting. I expected a lot more when Chroma mentioned a tour.

Bijou’s building was clean and tidy. A squat little three story that probably housed eight or nine units at most. I went inside and halfway expected a doorman to put me out like at Robin’s place, but what I got was the person at the front desk looking at me wide-eyed.

“Oh my days,” he said, recognizing my face. “You look just like...”

Chroma God came inside after me moments later and he looked between the two of us.

“Are you?” The doorman asked.

I looked around a little and nodded, trying to avoid his eyes.

“Mikael, we’ve had a very long day. Do you mind getting her a key to Bijou’s apartment?” Chroma asked.

Mikael nodded and started inputting commands on the air above the countertop. At first, the movement confused me but then I remembered my travel icon. I set it free with a gesture of my hand and with it in the air, I could see the little digital screen he was typing on illuminated for me.

“Incoming,” he said, and my travel icon spelled out words in my vision once again.

Information: Room 6, floor 2. Queen residence.

Saving...

Complete!

“Thank you,” Chroma gave the man a nod and offered his hand to me to shake, “rest easy tonight. We’ll see you tomorrow. Let’s say around midday. And Mikael?”

“Sir?” Mikael stood up straight.

“Let’s keep this little visit private, shall we? I’ll expect your discretion in this matter.”

“Absolutely, Chroma God,” He nodded.

I shook Chroma’s hand.

“Midday, gotcha,” I nodded as well, watching Chroma start away.

“Hey, uh... Siobhan?” I heard Mikael say and I turned to face him.

“Yeah?” I said, massaging the bridge of my nose, trying not to seem irritated.

“Can... I have an autog-”

“Go fuck yourself, Mikael.”

“Right. Sorry.”

I clenched my jaw and headed for the interior of the building. I took the stairs two at a time, my pulse quickening. I fast walked for the elegant lift by the potted plants at the back end of the upper floor, smashing the button rapidly with my fingers.

“Think you’re gonna fuckin’ push me around, whore? Oh, I’m gonna beat your ass.”

I was excited. The thought of picking a fight and winning for a change nearly had me aroused. All I could imagine was grabbing her by the throat and bashing her face in...

Like Robin had done to me.

My shoulders sank.

“Fuck.”

Blowing a sigh I realized at that moment exactly what I couldn’t do. I couldn’t be Robin. I couldn’t be anything like her and live up to Siobhan’s memory. I needed to be a person that Starland and Sindri could be proud of.

I remembered Starland’s face as I stepped onto the elevator, smelling the delicious, sweet, and spicy smells coming from the bag in my hand. Chroma had insisted I try the Old Settler; a toasted sandwich on cold stone wheat with some strange meat farm raised in Khione Valley down in the Icy Moor. He said it came from a kind of cow-like creature with a beak called a Rompi. I recognized the name as the creature Starland said her family raised in the Valley where both she and Siobhan were from. Chroma had said it tasted like chicken and beef combined.

I reasoned that I liked chicken and beef and both of them together sounded fantastic. Plus it came with a savory smelling dipping sauce.

By the time I’d gotten off on Bijou’s floor, I knew what I had to do. Lording my power over someone wasn’t right. If Bijou disliked me that much, it didn’t matter. I still had the moral obligation to protect her. Even if it was from my own strength.

I got to her door and held my hand over the knob.

“It’s just pain, Charlie. Been here before.” I could only pray she wasn’t a lesser celestial like her boyfriend Stagger Lee. Or that she didn’t have an uppercut like my sister Rockin’ Robin.

I opened the door after a deep breath, steadying myself. I set my mind to the decision. If she wanted to hurt me, I'd let her. But if I could talk her out of it, I would.

Bijou's apartment wasn't what I expected. I thought it would be full of accolades and trophies on the wall. Pictures of her family and friends. A big homage to being an ordinary basic bitch with everything handed to her in life. Maybe the fresh smell of a Pumpkin Spice Latte.

All basic bitches drank Pumpkin Spice Lattes.

What I got was actually really cool.

Her living room wall was covered in pop culture references from Earth. Bands I'd heard of before, pictures of places I'd seen on TV before, and there was even a big framed discography for the band Queen taking up most of one wall. It even housed a massive poster of Freddie Mercury.

She had her passport in a glass display case on a table by one of her big windows. Every page of it looked stamped from the way she had it splayed open.

I let the door close behind me as I stepped further inside.

She had a big, puffy, cream-colored sectional with a big footrest in the living room. Her carpet was a funky lime green color and she had matching throw pillows on the couch. The walls had coral blue, textured wallpaper on them and as my travel icon lit the long, low table that looked like a TV stand, I saw the digital rectangle of a floating widescreen being projected from a little slit on the TV stand's surface.

Would you like to enter HUD mode? Y/N

I selected yes.

I lifted my hand and took my travel icon, allowing it to disappear into my multi-tool. Then I lifted my hand to my hair, turning my scarf into a white hair tie. I pulled my hair back into a big frizzy ball behind my head and bound it with my multi-tool.

I understood quickly what HUD view meant.

Bijou's entire apartment came to life with light, sound, and color. Music was playing from seemingly everywhere, a high energy frenetic tone from some animated series that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Baubles on her table had little miniature fireworks displays going off above them. A series of snow globes on the shelf to my right all had grand stage shows going on inside of them with singing, dancing, and fanfare. I could hear each one as my eyes moved from one to the next, silencing the ones I looked away from. I could still see her digital screen on the TV stand without my icon out. As I looked around her apartment, lots of things came to life that originally were sitting still.

I almost jumped when I saw a little black cat trot over to me and start rubbing against the side of my soft boots. It rubbed its mouth on me, then slid its body along my ankle, rubbing its scent on me like I was a piece of furniture.

Setting my travel bag down by her door I knelt down and gave the little kitty a scratch under its chin. The jingle of its collar made me tip it up with a finger to read the animated letters sparkling on the tag.

Mercury.

Cute.

The little cat took a seat and watched me as I walked past the cream-colored stools at the bar. They had lime green seats. Looking through the bar window, I saw Bijou in the kitchen.

She was wearing denim short-shorts, her long legs displayed openly. She had muscle in her thick thighs that reminded me of a volleyball player.

I glared at her ass.

It looked about as full as mine if not more so. Only she had the tits to balance her hips.

She really was fucking perfect.

I hated her more.

She had the short sleeves of her t-shirt rolled up and I could make out the image of a tattoo on her right shoulder. She was cutting up what looked like strawberries and little squares of chocolate bar on a cutting board, paying me no attention.

“Hey,” I said.

She turned, those silver eyes attacking me.

My eyes bolted to the floor.

“Hey to you,” She said, her tone tight.

Here we go.

“Nice place.”

“Thanks.”

I came around the bar and set my bag of food down on it, my arms crossing over my chest to grab at my elbows.

“You wanted to talk?” I asked, keeping my eyes down.

Bijou walked away from her kitchen counter to circle me.

My heart raced. I could feel her eyes on the back of my head.

“So is it an act, or what?”

I blinked, my eyebrows twitching as I turned around, “Is what an act?”

“You know what I’m talking about. Don’t play stupid.” Her eyebrows pulled down into a frown.

I blew a sigh and looked away from her face again.

“Look, I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about. And frankly, I’m really gettin’ sick of this bullshit. If you got a problem with me, spit it out, alright? Let’s just clear the air now and get it over with.”

I brought my eyes up to glare at her, challenging her.

“Problem with you?” She asked.

“You wanna smack me around, right? Fine. I won’t stop you. Do whatever makes you happy,” I shrugged my shoulders, twisting my lips to one side, trying to resist the burning in my eyes.

Fuck.

I was gonna cry again.

“I asked you a question,” Bijou said, stepping in closer and I backed up a step. She took another and I fell back two more my arms uncrossing, bumping into her refrigerator.

“Yeah, I heard you,”

She was in my face, glaring.

My voice was tiny. “I dunno what you want me to say.”

“This whole Chicago, Jersey tough girl, walk-it-like-I-talk-it bullshit. Is it an act, or is that how you really are?”

“You got a problem with how I walk and talk now? I can’t do anything about that.”

“Just answer the question.”

“No! Alright? It’s not an act.” I snapped back at her, “and I’m not from Chicago.”

“Yeah? Where from?”

“New York, what’s it m-” Bijou shoved her mouth against mine so hard my head hit the refrigerator. My hands came up to try and push her away, but she was stronger than I thought. She grabbed my wrists, forcing them up behind my head, stealing my mouth more.

She broke that hard, smothering series of kisses and I gasped in surprise.

“Because hearing your accent coming out of that beautiful mouth really does it for me.”

I stared in those silver eyes and replayed every glare she had given me today.

They weren’t glares. They were the look predator gave prey. Bijou wasn’t just asking me to shut up earlier.

She needed me to.

I remembered her asking me if I liked to eat cookies on the shuttle ride down and the thought now only made me feel dense for not seeing it then.

I remembered turning around all day seeing her staring at the back of what I thought was just my head.

Bijou wasn't mad at me.

Bijou wanted me.

"Um... Bijou... I th-" she shut me up again, her mouth pressing against mine, making me submit with the passion of her lips.

"We-" I tried multiple times to speak but every time I did she sealed our lips together, her head moving, taking my lips any way she could get them.

"Shh," she said, and her cool breath hit my bottom lip. My mouth opened, trying to catch mine. "I'm gonna let go of your wrists. Don't move them." Her hands started sliding down my body.

"Okay," was all I could say. I was too shocked to think of anything else.

I had butterflies in my stomach.

I was lightheaded.

I couldn't tell if I wanted her to stop or not. What I did know was that she managed to make the temperature between my thighs rise to a noticeable, burning ache.

One of her hands was at my side, sliding under my shirt, feeling my skin. I felt her fingernails dig in and I winced. She stole the sound of my pain with another kiss, forcing me to breathe it out through my nose. Then I heard the drawer beside me open and the sound of metal click about.

I looked to my left and saw her lifting a pair of wrist straps up above my head. My eyes moved back to look at her, my coffee brown stare searching the silver pools in front of me.

"You keep handcuffs in there with the salad forks?" I asked and she shook her head.

"Mm-mm," She intoned.

"Oh... you put those in there for me."

"Mm-hm," she nodded and I felt her bind my wrists together above my head.

"Bijou, listen... We really need to talk."

“You’re not into girls?” She asked, lifting an eyebrow.

I opened my mouth, but words failed me.

Fuck, she was beautiful.

“I’m... like the unemployment office.”

“Huh?” She scrunched her nose up and tilted her head.

“Equal opportunity.”

Bijou laughed and I kind of chuckled nervously.

“Look, I’m not trying to shoot you down, it’s just... I mean, you and Stagger and,” she lifted a finger to my lips.

“I think you’ve got the wrong idea.” My eyebrows lifted, “my god your lips are so soft.” She said, pressing her mouth to mine again.

“I’m a little confused right now, Bee,” I said, my eyes traveling down to look at her peach lips. Watching her speak.

“Fine. We can talk about it.”

“Oh, good,” I let out a sigh of relief, “I-”

“After.”

My mouth opened a few times to protest, her hands grabbed me by the middle and our lips met again. She turned me to her kitchen island and helped me up onto it.

I watched her step a foot onto the shelf below me to climb up, bringing my cuffed wrists to a hook on the pot organizer above. My cheeks burned as her breasts pressed against my face.

When she stepped down, she turned her back to me, back to those strawberries and chocolate bars she was cutting up earlier.

I got a good look at that tattoo on her right shoulder.

It was of swirling clouds around words.

She’s Like The Wind, the tattoo read.

I sat there on her island, at her mercy with my hands handcuffed above my head, trying to figure out the significance of a 1987 ballad by Patrick Swayze while my eyes drank in her shape.

Maybe she was a Jennifer Grey fan.

Pre-nose job.

Maybe she thought Patrick Swayze was sexy?

Come to think of it, I thought he was sexy too.

Roadhouse sexy. Beating up bad guys and...

Dirty Dancing was a good movie, though.

Where was my mind?

Bijou had me so turned on I couldn't get my thoughts straight.

I pressed my thighs together hoping to god she couldn't tell how wet I was.

"Bijou, I dunno if after is such a good idea. I definitely think we should talk be-"

"Stick out your tongue." She said with that gorgeous smile on her face, turning to me.

Again I tried to protest but she reached behind me and tugged my pony puff hard enough to make me tip my head back. I cried out and her mouth found my throat. Her icy cool breath tickled my skin.

My eyes drifted shut.

I couldn't stop the moan that came out of me as I felt her tongue taste my skin. As I felt her sink her teeth in against my throat.

"Ah-,"

My mouth opened and she pushed a piece of chocolate with a sliver of strawberry into it. I felt her tugging a hickey onto my skin. Her hands were working at the buckle and zipper of my jeans.

I didn't have anymore protest left in me.

I lifted my ass, wiggled right out of my jeans and panties and kicked my boots off. I sat back down on that cool kitchen island chewing the sweet and tart combination in my mouth, feeling the texture of those strawberry seeds as her hands rubbed my thighs, pushing them apart.

"After," she leaned in and whispered in my ear, her hands pushing my shirt up, exposing my nipples to the air.

She pressed her lips to mine again and I kissed back. Our lips desperately brushed and pressed against each other. I felt her bite my

bottom lip and my mouth opened, letting out a pained groan. Her tongue slid between my lips, dancing with mine in my mouth.

We kissed hard, our heads moving, tasting each other until the corners of my mouth ached.

Bijou took a piece of chocolate between her teeth and moved in to kiss me again. I bit my half of the chocolate square and our lips met once more before she started kissing her way down my body. My head tipped back and my eyes closed again, chewing that corner of the chocolate bar. Letting the rich, sweet tang tickle my tongue as her mouth played over my skin. I felt her give my stomach a little nip with her teeth. Her tongue danced in my belly button, thrilling me, making me pull my stomach in to try and run from her. I felt the ache and want between my thighs as she teased me.

She moved further down.

I couldn't stop her.

Bijou's mouth was my personal religion.

And she made me sing its praises.

Loud.

CHAPTER 7

Bijou

Sunlight hit me in the face like a brick.

My stomach ached. My core muscles were fatigued and hot. They felt pinched like they were working on tightening into a cramp. I groaned and opened my eyes, looking out of Bijou's window at the building across the street and it reminded me of what she said about the open view.

"I don't like curtains. I like being watched."

I didn't.

Not that there was a damn thing I could do about it. I wasn't the one in control last night. I could feel the subtle sting of bite marks on my neck and between my breasts.

Especially the one on my ass.

Bijou fucked me all over her apartment. Three hours in and I was trying to crawl away from her tongue, my wrists still cuffed as she found new ways to get me off. I managed to make it a foot away one time, but she just dragged my little ass right back and slammed my eyes to the back of my head with another orgasm.

The bar, the couch, the floor, against the window and finally in her bed. She had the kind of stamina that scared me. I couldn't catch my breath before she had me spasming and screaming again.

The last thing I remember was being face down, ass up on her bed, a deep arch in my back while she stuck her tongue wherever she felt like. She slid two fingers into me and I lost it.

She left me spasming and moaning on her bed, unable to stop myself from jerking through one orgasm after another. She made me beg her to stop and I did. I begged like the desperate, trembling ball of girl-jelly she'd turned me into.

And I loved it.

Sitting up in her bed I looked down at the lime colored sheet partially draped over me. My one leg left uncovered had a fat, purple hickey high on the inside, inches away from the place where pussy met thigh.

"Jesus," I said, looking at the bruise before I dropped my head back down on one of her fluffy pillows. "This is gonna be a problem."

I laid there in her bed until the smell of bacon hit my nose.

Sitting up again, I considered going into the living room, but I knew if I did I'd have to look at her. I'd have to talk to her. I was kind of afraid of what that conversation would look like, but I forced myself out of bed anyway.

Looking around for my clothes or at least my bag, I didn't see anything on my side. Any hope I had of Bijou bringing me something to wear when I finally woke up out of my coma seemed fruitless until I saw my jeans laid out over the back of the armchair by her closet.

I walked over to it and picked them up. Beneath them, I saw my white shirt, even my mismatched colorful socks. Catching the smell of detergent, I brought the cloth to my nose.

"Oh fuck," she washed my clothes.

That was always a bad sign.

Most times if I let somebody talk me into giving it up it was a mutual thing. We just wanted to get off, get high and split. The guys that wanted to stick around and make me food or wash my clothes were the ones I avoided.

I wasn't the type to fuck around too much, but the lessons I learned when I did were harsh ones. Boyfriends that liked to force me to snort coke until my nose bled or eat pills with them until I couldn't see straight were usually the kinds I attracted. Even the first time I shot heroin was because of one of my famously bad relationships.

After that, I swore off sex. It had been almost a year since I last got laid, and it wasn't easy. Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night wanting a swift, hard fucking so bad I'd have to take a cold shower. When that didn't work I'd resort to porn on my phone and jilling myself stupid wishing there was actually a man in this world that would fuck my pussy like he owned it and then magically disappear.

Poof. Never to be heard from again.

But nope. They all turned into clingy, whiny fucking creepers that didn't understand when I told them I didn't want anything else. They all wanted to come save me like they were my own, personal Prince Charming.

Fuck Prince Charming. He sounded like a douchebag anyway.

I'm not saying I was right for wanting to treat men like pleasure factories, but that's also why I shut the cookie shop down. I didn't know how to be any other way.

Until Bijou.

The thought of the things she did to me last night gave me goosebumps. Made my face flush. I had to stop thinking about it.

I searched through my clothes for my panties and found no evidence of them anywhere.

"Fuck."

I knew where they were.

Pulling on my jeans with a plaintive groan as the material slid over the bite mark on my ample left ass cheek, I tugged the Medici shirt Starland had given me on after. I marched out of Bijou's room summoning as much indignation as I could.

Time to give her a piece of my mind.

I stopped though, looking around.

Where the fuck was her cat? I know I saw one last night. Did it just disappear into thin air or become one with her lime green carpet?

Shrugging it off, I continued marching towards the kitchen.

“Where are my fuckin’ panties?” I snapped, glaring at her.

Nevermind I had a bag full of them somewhere in her apartment. She wasn’t allowed to keep trophies. This wasn’t that kind of thing.

“Those are mine now, Cutie.” She sang back, never turning around from the oven to look at me.

“I’m not your cutie. Gimme my goddamn panties.”

“I put your toothbrush in the bathroom.” She said back and I felt my lip curl, my face twisting with irritation. I wanted to yell at her.

“Whatever.”

I stomped into the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth, muttering to myself with a mouthful of toothpaste. It’s only then that I noticed she covered the bathroom mirror with a towel.

She was doing little thoughtful things for me.

She liked me.

A lot.

“Fuck!”

I took a quick shower and tried to rehearse how breakfast was going to go in my head. I hadn’t the foggiest idea what to even say to her so I just gave up. I washed my bushy hair, dried myself off with one of her lime green towels and made my way out of the bathroom in a fresh pair of panties and my Medici shirt. I wasn’t too keen on putting skinny jeans on in the house. Not only was I more comfortable without them, but it wasn’t like Bijou hadn’t already seen me naked anyway.

By the time I made it back to her small dining area, she was setting two plates of food down on her coral blue table. I watched her

slide into a seat, my HUD view outlining the digital newspaper that she had hovering in front of her face.

“You can come sit down. I already know you’re mad at me.”

I flounced over to the table and flopped down in the chair beside her.

My eyes were on that plate of food in front of me, my mouth practically salivating. The smell that hit my nose was intoxicating. She made sausage, scrambled eggs with grilled tomatoes and mushrooms on the side and next to all of it were three perfectly fried pieces of bacon, burnt almost black, just the way I liked them.

“Fuck,” I said, looking at the bacon.

“Wow, Stagger was right. That is your favorite word.”

“Been talkin’ to him a lot about me?” I said back, stuffing a piece of bacon in my mouth and refusing to look up at her.

“Aw, you’re so cute when you’re mad,” She chided me.

“Stop it,” I glared up at her.

She practically assaulted me with those beautiful eyes. I dropped my gaze back into my plate.

Bijou only laughed, sipping her coffee.

“And yes,” She said, “Stagger and I have had a conversation or two. Or six. About you. Honestly, it’s pretty sad.”

“Here we go. Alright, go ahead.” I said, sitting back in my seat, mouth full of eggs, “bust my chops.”

“Chew your food,” She said, wagging her fork at me.

I chewed up the mouthful of fluffy, fucking delicious eggs in my mouth and frowned.

“Fuck.”

“What?” She asked.

“So fuckin’ good,” I whined, my face torn up with dread.

“How is that a bad thing?” She questioned, genuinely confused.

“You put milk in these,” I gestured at my eggs with my fork, my face awash in self-pity.

“Yes. Again, how is that a bad thing?”

“Because. It- y... nothin’.” I stabbed at my food, stuffing grilled tomatoes into my mouth so I didn’t have to talk.

“Oh no. No, no. He said you do that too,” She swallowed and set her coffee down, leaning forward, “Don’t shut down, just talk.”

“Fuck!” I dropped my fork on the plate. “Did he leave anything out while you guys were mockin’ me together in your little... fuckin’ love den or... whatever? Did you bring him back here and fuck his brains out too? Or was it the other way around, huh?”

“Ohh, there it is.”

“There what is?”

“That explosive temper. It’s cute. I like it.”

“Shut th- ..”

“Fuck up?” She finished and I glared at her until I felt the urge to look away.

“What’s your game?”

“Do you want something to drink?” She asked as I stuffed my face and hiccoughed.

I glanced up at her, shoulders jumping every few seconds as my throat tried to reject the big mouthfuls of food I was taking.

“Well?” She smiled.

“Yes,” I finally said, a prominent frown on my face as she got up.

“Water.” I quickly added.

“Water? Not milk, or coffee, or?” She turned to look at me, getting the glass out of her lime green frosted cabinet and filling it from the sink.

“No,” I answered as she set the glass in front of me and sat back down.

I took a big, thankful swallow and ceased my chest aching hiccups.

“When you spend as much time drunk as I did, after a while you don’t care what you mix it with. If you mix it at all.”

“Oh. Everything’s a trigger.” She reasoned.

“Yeah... Anything else and all I want to do is drink until I pass out,” I didn’t want to look at her so I focused on my eggs again. The awkward silence that followed was made all the more apparent by the sound of our utensils against our plates.

“That makes sense.” She finally said.

“So what is it you think you’re doin’ here?” I asked.

“I’m here to break you, Charlie.” She said with a pretty smile.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” I stopped eating.

She stabbed at her over easy eggs, cutting a bit off and lifted it to her mouth, laughing.

“It doesn’t mean anything. I was just saying what you were thinking,” she flipped the page of her digital paper.

“Oh, you know what I’m thinkin’ now? You psychic or somethin’?”

“You’re pretty easy to read, to be fair.” She shrugged.

“Fuck you,” we said at the same time. She pointed at me with her fork.

“Right. See?” She said and ate more of her eggs. “You’re kind of like a sexy little broken record that spits the same catchphrases out over and over again. Or like an angry little wolverine, just snarl-snarl-snarl.”

“Alright. I’m done,” I said, dropping my fork on the plate and standing up from the table.

Bijou’s hand grabbed my arm and yanked me back down into my seat so hard I thought my arm would break.

“Sit.” Her silver eyes burned me with her stare.

I looked down into my plate and started stuffing my face with mushrooms to avoid any more eye contact.

“Whatever,” I said, my mouth full.

I didn’t want to admit she just scared the shit out of me. I didn’t expect her to be that much stronger than me. I couldn’t help but think back to last night when I was sure I was going to bust in here and kick her ass with my new found power.

That would have been a costly mistake.

“So, from the top. Let’s rewind a little bit. And slow down. You’re not in prison anymore. I’m not going to beat you up and take your food.”

I stared at her, my mouth full with sausage and bits of egg. I felt my cheeks flush a little and I chewed what was in my mouth slower.

I started sucking bacon grease off my fingers and Bijou plucked a cloth napkin from the center of the table, handing it to me.

“...Thanks.” I said, wiping my hands on it even though I had already sucked my fingers clean. I didn’t know what else to do.

“From the top. You woke up this morning angry.”

“Well... yeah,” I nodded, “I mean. You washed my clothes.”

“So? I have a washing machine. That’s what they’re for.”

“Yeah, but washing my clothes. That’s like,” I jabbed at the remains of my food.

“It’s affection.” She said and I nodded.

“Yeah. I don’t...” I dropped my fork again and clenched my fists.

“Look, I can’t talk about this. Can we just go or, I mean,” I was getting irritated.

“Finish talking. You said we needed to talk.”

“Yeah, but I meant, like... I talk. You listen.” I said.

Andy’s words coming out of my mouth.

“Because that’s how you keep people at arm’s distance. Right,” she said, taking a mouthful of food and chewing it carefully. She swallowed before she spoke, ever the lady. “And I’m sorry, Charlie. You can’t verbally push me around like you do everyone else, hoping I’ll stop talking to you and go away.”

“Look,” I said, but I stopped when I saw her fork pointing at me.

“You ever notice that every time people with trust issues say the word ‘look’, it means they’re either about to turtle up and get defensive or be an asshole?”

No, I didn't notice. And the embarrassed look on my face gave that away.

"Exactly," she said when I shifted my gaze to her living room window.

"Alright, alright. What do you want me to say?"

"Start with what's on your mind," she shrugged as we continued eating.

"Alright. You washed my clothes... and then the breakfast. And it's good, and,"

"And what's wrong with that?" She asked.

"Can I... just?" I stared at her, my face contorted like I was in pain. "This is hard enough, alright just... lemme..."

She nodded while I shook my hands a few times.

"Nobody makes me breakfast or anything unless they want... and I can't. Okay? I can't. I'm," I took a deep breath, "I'm a fuckup, alright? If anything good comes around I just fuck it up. I ruin people, Bee. I ruin everything, and I don't wanna..."

"Wanna?"

"Now I see why you and Stagger are together. You don't know how to just leave shit alone."

Bijou laughed out loud.

"Stagger? And me!?" She set her fork down, "Is that why you're really mad at me?"

"Yeah. I mean, no. I don't..." I lifted my hand to touch my forehead, then put it back down on the table, then put both hands in my lap, not sure what to do with them.

"Stagger's not mine or anything. It's whatever, I don't care," I blurted out.

"Oh, god. You two are ridiculous." She shook her head.

"What?" I asked.

"You're all he talks about. All the time." She sips her coffee, "It's annoyingly pathetic."

“Yeah, I know. He’s got a hard-on for Siobhan.” I rolled my eyes. “He thinks I can just magically turn into her. I keep tellin’ him that ain’t me.”

“No, that’s not exactly how Stagger works.”

“Yeah it is... I wrote the book on disappointin’ people, I know that tone,” I said, finishing off my plate of food.

She took a deep breath and stared at me.

“Am I missing something?” I asked, accentuating my words with a sarcastic tone.

“Stagger doesn’t want Siobhan. Stagger wants you, you dummy. Just broken little you. And judging by your behavior, I don’t think he’s the only one wanting.”

“Look,”

“Say it,” she said, her voice sweet even though she was squinting at me. “Say something rude.”

I curled my lip.

“This ain’t some stupid reality TV show where you get to play matchmaker by texting the word love to 442. And who do you think you are, anyway? If he likes me so much and you two are such good friends, don’t you think it’s pretty shitty you jumpin’ me last night?” I leaned forward, a smug smile pasted onto my face.

She leaned forward again to mirror me, looking me in my eyes, returning the smug smile.

“Stagger’s not the jealous type. You are. And while you’re trying to call me out... just keep in mind you just quoted his phone number. Okay, Pumpkin?” She tapped the tip of my nose and I flinched.

My smile dropped off my face.

442.

S dot Lee 442.

“Son of a bitch,” I sat back in my chair and shrugged.

“And there’s the shutdown. He knows you so well.” She giggled and I hated it.

“Look, when are we leavin’?” My face was flushed. I could feel it.

“Do you blush?” She asked sarcastically.

I didn’t say anything back, I just stared at the wall while my left knee jumped.

“For the record,” she finally said after she had her fill of staring at me, “Stagger and I have never done a thing. He’s my friend.”

“Yeah. Friend with benefits.” I said just to dig at her somehow.

“No. Stagger found me and got me back home. And I appreciate him for that.”

I turned my eyes back to look at her.

“Home?” I asked, looking her in those silver eyes.

Then my attention darted to that tattoo on her right shoulder.

I leaned forward, my hand reaching out to grip her bicep, looking closer. Down at the bottom of the title of that song, the exclamation point was made of an infinity symbol. Or more appropriately an eight.

Eight. Eight sides. Octahedron. Silver eyes. Something Sindri said about the Old Gods.

My mind struggled to put that together. She’s like the wind. She’s like the wind...

Wait.

She really was like the wind.

She was the wind!

I stood up and backed away from the table, almost stumbling over my chair. Her silver eyes didn’t just hurt to look at. They could see right through me.

My eyes were the size of saucers.

I dropped to my knees, bending forward to place my palms and forehead to the carpet.

“Huayra! Wind God, Eye of the Storm... I... Jesus.”

She let me kneel before her for a long, painful beat, my ass sticking up in nothing but panties, looking ridiculous before I heard her

boisterous laughter burst out above me.

I shot up to sit on my heels.

“Really? You’re just gonna laugh at me? I don’t know how to... bow or do the respect... thing, I,” I looked around her apartment, my cheeks redder still with embarrassment at her laughing at my best efforts. “I mean, fuck. They say you used to blow people to dust if they didn’t say your name right,” I looked worried then, staring up at her.

“I did say your name right, right?”

She laughed harder.

“Other side of okay, Bee.” I frowned, pushing myself up from the floor, a full pout on my face as I started walking back towards her room.

“Charlie! Wait, I’m sorry. Okay, I’ll stop laughing. I promise.”

I turned around to glare at her.

She was poking out her bottom lip.

“I don’t like people making fun of me, alright?”

She straightened her face and stood up, walking towards me.

“You pronounced my name right.” She offered me a crooked smile. “Besides, I like you a lot. I’d never blow you to dust.”

“I’ll be honest with you, Bijou. I always thought the Old Gods were a myth. Not that you never existed. I mean, I didn’t believe you were still out there anywhere. I feel so terrible.” I shook my head, “I gave up looking for Brahma God. I gave up looking for all of you. I thought I was chasing ghosts.”

She took a deep breath and nodded at me.

“You’re forgiven,” I saw her smile and she pointed up at my hair. “And you need a haircut.”

I scratched at my poofy curls and smiled back.

“Yeah. Life’s been kinda tough.”

“It was tough for all of us,” she nodded. “I’ll cut it. How do you want it?”

I shrugged.

“I dunno. It’s been a while since I had my hair done,” I thought back to how often it had gotten me beaten up, or given someone else the advantage in a fight. Right back to the day those High School girls grabbed my puffballs and made me pay for being poorer than them.

“Short,” I finally said.

“I can do short.” She smiled.

“Listen,” I said as she got close to me again. I could smell her scent and it made me tingle. But knowing who she was now, “I’m... I don’t think we can... y’know. Last night was just a fluke. It shouldn’t have happened.”

Stagger’s face flashed in my mind.

“Uh-huh. Feeling guilty?” She asked.

I nodded. I didn’t want to say it out loud.

“Don’t,” She brushed my chin with a finger. “Everybody gets lonely. Promise I won’t tell.” She laughed a little.

“It’s been a while.” I admitted.

“Yeah, me too,” She searched my face and I found something to look at on her shelf of band paraphernalia. “You should tell him how you feel.”

“Don’t.” I said, my tone sharp, lifting a hand to push her fingers away from my chin.

“Fine,” Bijou lifted both hands in submission. “He still says you two are moving at Charlie speed.”

I nodded slowly.

“Turtles move faster,” I whispered, thinking about his grin. I gave a crooked smile.

* * *

Two hours later we were climbing back down the ladder to Chroma God’s office under the Siobhan statue in the middle of what I’d found out was called Brevity Park. With how small Old Settler’s Place was, it

was no wonder it had a name to match. The park was just as small and even though it sat at the center of town, it was easier to walk around it than to walk through it because of the artificial ponds.

Old Settler's Place itself was a piece of history. It was called that because this was apparently the first piece of land that the original men set foot upon during the Golden Age when the five gods ruled.

Huayra being one of them.

She filled me in on some of the history and customs of Blue Veil during the walk over. We avoided the streets that people might be occupying so no one saw my face and prevented our speedy arrival for Chroma's meeting.

When we got inside, I sat across the table from Stagger, avoiding his eyes. Chroma sat beside him across from Bijou.

Stagger kept staring at me.

Bijou had done what I asked when she cut my hair. She buzz cut the sides and back and trimmed the length down at the top to give me a curly, sporty pompadour. A chunky fluff of spunky curls flopped onto my forehead, but I liked them.

I looked at Stagger and lifted my chin a bit, brushing my curls aside. I saw his nod of approval and tried to hide a smile.

When he started tilting his head to look under my chin that's when I realized what had his attention the most. I had forgotten about the blazing purple hickey and bite marks on my neck. I had turned my multi-tool back into an earring when we arrived.

Bijou cleared her throat and he flashed his hazel eyes over at her. I looked over to see her twist her mouth up into a little smile. My mouth dropped open when she gave her lips a lewd lick. I snapped my eyes over to Stagger, panicking.

She outed me. She totally outed me.

He smiled knowingly and shook his head. My eyes bolted for the table top.

“Charlie, I see you’re feeling a bit better today. Well, maybe see is a bit of an overstatement.” Chroma said, tapping the side of his dark lenses.

“Huh? Y- yeah. Yeah, I...” I just kinda nodded for lack of better words.

“She just needed some rest,” Stagger said through a smile.

“Yeah, I just... rest was,” I let out a little sound through my lips like a rocket taking off and exploding. “So good.”

I heard Bijou giggle but I stopped her with a kick under the table. She clapped a hand over her mouth.

Chroma looked around at the three of us sightlessly.

“Yes... well,” he said. “We have a lot of work to do and very little time to do it. Perun’s Valkyrie are moving across the High Moor, NEST across the Midlands. They’re searching every city building by building. Anyone they find with Anti-Valhalla paraphernalia are being rounded up and arrested. They’re putting half of the skylands to the question trying to find your whereabouts. It’s like the celestial uprising all over again.”

I felt my face tighten, “That’s not fair. Those people didn’t do anything.”

“When have tyrants ever been fair?” He replied.

“We’ve gotten word from Sindri and Brokkr,” my ears perked up at the mention of the place I had come to think of as home. “The Valkyrie at Demonhead paid them a visit and while they found nothing, not everyone walked away unharmed.”

“Oh my God. What happened?” I stood up from my seat.

“The Valkyrie decided to leave a message for anyone that doesn’t want to side with the Bright Throne.” He said, lifting his hand to settle me. “Everyone is alright, some a little worse for wear, but they didn’t come to kill. They came to threaten.”

I felt my shoulders falling heavier, my breath coming quicker.

“Who was it?”

“It doesn’t matter. Our focus must remain squarely on the Bright Throne.”

“No, fuck that, who was it?”

I watched Chroma God’s chest expand. He let the breath out slowly.

“Gozen Morrow.” He confirmed.

My fist slammed against the table, “Goddammit, I knew it. I knew it! Who did she hurt?”

“Charlie!” Chroma God’s booming voice silenced me. “I understand where your heart is. But every day our fight grows harder and harder. You don’t understand the size of the Army of Valhalla. They are a force of thousands. And while that may not sound like much in comparison to the armies that run the face of the earth, consider. Midvalley’s army is composed of men from the silver age and lesser celestials alike, supporting a ground force of human beings with some of the most powerful technology our world has to offer. They have Radiant Stones, powerful ones, and we are no closer to finding the Heart Fire than the day we started looking.”

I laced my fingers together on the table, my knuckles turning white.

“Fine. Lay it out.” I said.

Stagger stood up as I sat down, his hands on the table.

“Charlie, when I left you on earth, I was pulled away by our spy in Valhalla. They were in a bad situation and needed help getting out of the High Moor. What with the reporters starting to fill up your front lawn, my best course of action was to leave. I knew NEST wouldn’t be far. I had to go and get them before the Valkyrie did. They confirmed for me the truth of what we already know. Fenris sleeps in the Hellmouth.”

“Not only that,” Bijou piped in, “We’ve got no chance of taking the fight to Perun while he still has that massive dog at his beck and call. Everyone here has either seen or heard the truth for themselves.

Fenris grows with Perun's rage. I watched it tear Odin apart during Ragnarok."

"Odin?" I asked, turning my head to look at Bijou.

"Brahma's first name," She said, her tone heavy.

The weight of her words struck me.

"We have to eliminate the wolf. If we kill the green flame spewing dog, that gives us the breathing room we need to take the fight to the Bright Throne," Chroma said.

"How the hell do we kill the dog?" I asked, but then something tickled the back of my brain. Something I heard Sindri say. "Wait. The tools."

"Wolves Bane," Bijou nodded.

Stagger snapped his fingers, pointing at me.

"That's where you come in," he said, and I stared at him.

"I don't know where they are," I shrugged.

"You don't?" Asked Chroma, his dark lenses turned to me.

That feeling came again. Like something sitting on the tip of my tongue. Siobhan was right it seemed, about how a memory could feel just out of reach.

"No, I- ... The guard."

My eyes widened and I looked at Stagger. An old memory came creeping into my mind. I saw the hammer, the spear and the horn. I saw them held in the hands of three of my sisters. The most powerful of us all. I wasn't sure if Sindri said it to me and my mind made it up or if Siobhan's memories were flooding back, all I knew is that the information in the vision was correct. I could feel it.

"Exactly," Chroma pointed at me, "Valkyrie elite keep safe the Bright Throne. Perun is surrounded by them at all times unless he or Gozen send them after someone. You've killed two of five guards. It stands to reason the only people he would trust with those powerful weapons are the strongest warriors in Valhalla. Your words confirm

exactly what our spy said. The three remaining valkyrie guards have the hammer Mjolnir, the spear Gungnir and the horn, Gjallarhorn.”

“We have our heading,” Chroma said, looking at Bijou. “Charlie, we need to get you close to the sisters. It’s up to you to take them out and retrieve the Wolves Bane weapons.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I frowned, looking around the table, “you’re not just gonna set me out there to get fucked up. Do you know who you’re talkin’ about? The twins were nothin’ compared to Isolde and Brunhilde. I mean, Isolde I might can talk to, maybe get her to see reason. She’s not as vicious as the rest of the valkyrie. But Brunhilde? She’s the leader of Perun’s chosen celestials. Let’s not even talk about Sigrund. Only people stronger than her are also the only two people she reports to.”

“Charlie,” Stagger said, trying to calm me down.

“Gozen Morrow and Perun himself. Sigrund is the Hunt Leader of the Valkyrie elite for fucks sake.”

“Charlie,” Stagger said again.

I ignored him.

“You might as well kill me now, cus that’s what Sigrund is gonna do. And she won’t make it quick.”

Bijou put her hand on my arm, “You’re forgetting something, Charlie.”

“Nope. I’m pretty sure I covered everything,” I shook my head, pulling my arm away, “not doin’ it.”

“They’re only celestials, Charlie.” Stagger said, putting those hazel eyes on me.

“Celestials,” Bijou agreed, “And you’re a god.”

“No, you’re a god. I’m a lesser God. One who died, I might add,” I said, pointing at her, my eyes then pleading with Stagger. “Please tell her I’m not the one you want for this. I couldn’t even stand up to a pack of high school kids who beat me up over a discount chicken fried steak. What do you honestly think I’m gonna do against that?”

Chroma turned his attention to Bijou, “We can’t force her to fight. But we can at least control the controllables. The tools aren’t the only thing.”

Stagger nodded, “Mhm, we’ve also got to make sure your families from earth don’t get drawn into this.”

Bijou and I both pulled concerned expressions, looking at Stagger. We knew what was at stake. The second the lines got drawn in the sand NEST would send troops to earth to hold our families in the balance.

“Orcus,” I said, my features darkening.

“Orcus indeed,” Chroma said.

“He controls the gate and the keys. We have to take him out first and make sure NEST and any of the forces of Valhalla don’t have the ability to get back and forth between earth and Blue Veil. Otherwise, all of this is going to be in vain,” Stagger said.

“The keys are created by the All Sight. The only way for us to control the gate and the keys is to get my eyes back from Orcus,” Chroma added.

“This sounds like one really big job, guys. Are we sure we’re up for this?” I asked, looking around.

Bijou looked at me, “Do we have a choice?”

I stared at her, my mouth agape, “Yeah. We do. We go back to earth, let Perun have Blue Veil and keep our yaps shut.”

Stagger scoffed, “and what about the people that don’t deserve the punishment Perun hands out? What about the forgefolk? Or the people of Old Settler’s Place, or a dozen other cities that chose to stay free of Perun’s rule. Let’s not forget about the Republic down below the Divide. Perun’s army will storm the Icy Moor just as soon as he gets his hands on the Heart Fire and kill every one of them. Don’t say things you don’t mean, Charlie. I’ve seen first hand what valkyrie can do and so have you but that doesn’t mean we don’t try.”

I thought about those words and couldn't fight the fact that Stagger was right. My whole life had become protecting my family. Mostly from me. I couldn't bear the thought of someone hurting them. Or giving someone license to hurt my new family. The forgefolk were everything to me. My daddy was everything to me.

"Shit..." I chewed my lip.

"If you have the ability to help those that can't help themselves, then you have a moral obligation to see it done," Chroma said.

"My family at the Lightly Perch. My family back home... My daddy."

"They all need you, Charlie," Stagger said.

Family.

That word made my eyebrows pull down. My lips drew tight. I felt like I was late for an appointment, or like I left something burning on the oven. I thought about Sindri and Brokkkr wondering if they were okay. Starland's face crossed my mind. Chanticleer too. My mind kept imagining them in varying states of anguish and pain.

I thought about my daddy.

"I don't want them to get hurt," I said.

"Then do something about it," Bijou said, looking at me again.

"Fucking Gozen," I clenched my jaw again. "That bitch gives me the shits."

"Gross," Bijou curled her lip up.

"You know what I mean. She pisses me off. I'm sick of hearing about her. I'm sick of dreaming about her," looking at Chroma I finally said, "I'll take Demonhead. What order do we need to do this in?"

"Orcus first." He set those dark lenses on me.

Orcus.

I felt like I was supposed to find him for some reason. What has he...

Robin.

The thought of her flooded into my mind. The fear I had when I first came here, wondering where she was. I remembered the hate in her eyes for me. Eyes that I felt like I deserved more than ever then. I had let myself forget about her.

“Speaking of Orcus... there’s another problem,” I said, thinking about how scared she must have been trapped down there in the underworld with that monster.

I hated myself for letting my own flesh and blood slip my mind.

“What?” Bijou asked, looking at the concerned expression on my face.

“I got reason to believe Orcus has my sister, Robin,” The room went silent.

“H.. how?” Chroma asked, his face a mask of concern.

“I got pulled here in the first place by him I think. Least I’m pretty sure. The valkyrie showing up when they did pretty much confirms that. I think he was trying to grab me and instead he got her. Both of us were forced through the gate. I ended up at the Lightly Perch. I’m not sure where Robin is, but if I had to guess... People keep sayin’ Perun is the prime concern. That I can’t do her any good right now. What if he has her?” I went quiet. I couldn’t look at anyone.

“Jesus, Charlie. I’m sorry,” Stag leaned forward in his seat to look down the table at me.

“I should have gone looking for her. But I didn’t... because I’m a coward. And an asshole. And a fuckin’ terrible person.” I said, feeling my eyes burn with tears but I blinked them away. “And because... and this is the worst part, I got so caught up in everything. In my life at the Perch... with other things here,” I looked over at Bijou for a moment, then back down to the table.

“I forgot about her. I forgot about my own sister.”

A tear finally won and rolled down my cheek.

“It’s alright, Charlie.” Chroma said.

Bijou rubbed the back of my neck, pulling me in close to kiss the top of my head.

“If he has her... we’ll just have to go and get her.” Stagger said, looking me in the eyes.

I didn’t look away. I felt how genuine his words were.

“Thank you.”

“We don’t know for sure. She could be anywhere in Blue Veil. Let’s keep our wits and find our focus,” Chroma said, standing up and knocking on the table, “Orcus, NEST, the valkyrie, the dog,” He looked around at the three of us, stopping on Stagger, “Then Perun.”

I knew he was right. Torturing myself with thoughts of Robin in torment would only make things worse. I took a deep breath and steadied myself.

Stagger looked back at Chroma.

“What?”

“Is Hymeris still infatuated with you?” Chroma smiled from ear to ear.

“Oh, no,” Stagger shook his head, “that’s not funny.”

“Wait, wait, what’s going on?” Stagger’s reaction put a smile on my face, the heel of my palm wiping my tears away. I could see his cheeks flushing.

“Hymeris has a thing for you?” I asked, remembering the name, my old memories connecting pathways in my mind and dragging up the image of her face.

“Maybe,” He said, frowning.

“Why does the goddess of alcohol, good times and lust fueled madness have a thing for you, Stag?” I leaned forward in my seat, elbows sitting on the table.

Bijou leaned over and whispered something in my ear.

My mouth dropped open.

“Oh! No way!” I said, clapping my hand over my mouth.

“It was a long time ago,” Stag rolled his eyes.

“Oh, no, we need to talk about this,” I said, looking at Bijou, “don’t you think we should talk about this?”

“Definitely should talk about it,” Bijou nodded her head with chiding confidence.

Chroma was laughing.

“We’re not talking about it,” Stagger looked around the table with a stern glare. “That’s it. I’m serious.”

“Oh, fine. Crybaby,” I bitched.

“You calling me a crybaby?” He said, faking incredulity with a smile on his face, pointing at me.

“Pot,” I pointed at myself. “Kettle.” I pointed at him.

“Alright. So what’s the move, C?” He asked Chroma, changing the subject.

“There are only three docks that connect to the river Styx. And the river Styx is the only way into the underworld. One in Valhalla, one at Demonhead and the other inside of Hymeris’ Tunnel of Love in the Bacchus Theater. Obviously, Valhalla and Demonhead are out. Our enemy can’t know we’re moving against them. Which means it’s up to you to bargain with Hymeris to get us a penny for the guy.”

“Where are you going?” Stagger asked as Chroma stood up and marched for the door.

“Penny for the guy?” I whispered to Bijou.

“Yeah, the boatman,” She whispered back.

“To find out where the Bifrost currently rests. We need to know how much time we have. Meanwhile,” Chroma stopped and pointed at me. “You two need to make sure Charlie is ready.”

Stagger nodded, “Right.”

Bijou stood up from the table and put her hand on my shoulder, “well, Charlie.”

I stood up as well, “yeah?”

“Time for you to learn how to fight like a god.”

I felt a thrill in the pit of my stomach at that thought.

The overwhelming feeling that went right to my head was both humbling and intoxicating. I was about to learn how to fight from one of the Old Gods.

And the only thing I could think to say back was, “Sorry I’m not taller.”

“That’s alright. Stagger likes short girls.” She looked over at him and winked.

“Ah-ha... Ha,” He faked a laugh, his middle finger extending.

I avoided his eyes, feeling my cheeks burn as I headed for the door behind Bijou.

* * *

We waited until nightfall to make our way outside of Old Settler’s Place. Stagger drove us by ball shuttle to the top of the main road and out onto the old concrete leading up to the bottom of the crater wall. The only stop we made was at a clothing store to grab a proper pair of boots for me and a hoodie to protect me from the cold. Stomping up rocky terrain would have been a bad idea in what amounted to women’s Uggs.

Stagger grabbed a pack out of one of the storage compartments in his Ball Shuttle. It took us some time to follow the path up the steep rock side. We had to head up by foot, but when we got to the summit, not only had the temperature gotten a bit warmer, we could also see out over the edge into darkness.

The cloudline had diminished in the night and below we saw the lights from the cities of the Icy Moor shining up at us. From where we were, there were only a few more continents down there. And past those like an inkblot in the darkness where no light seemed to escape, I reasoned that the circle of dark there was the Hellmouth. Not that I could rightly see it from here. The lights of civilization on the smaller skylands filled up my vision as far down as I could see.

“Are the Underworld and the Hellmouth the same place?” I asked as Bijou stepped up after me to the wide summit.

“No. The Underworld is someplace else entirely. I don’t even know if we’d call it part of this world. It’s weird, actually. Brahma made it because he felt sorry for the souls of the fallen. It was supposed to be the final meeting place where you could go to properly say goodbye to someone who had passed,” she replied.

“What happened to it?” I asked.

“Times change,” she said after a brief pause.

Stagger was still leading and we followed.

I watched him march on, his dark coat billowing in the wind. I couldn’t help but bite my bottom lip. He looked like a golden age film star. Like Paul Newman or Rock Hudson or something. His shoulders were confident as he sauntered on, hands in his pockets.

I had to put those thoughts away though.

One problem at a time.

By the time we got to a wide, circular clearing in the stone that seemed flat and level enough, Stagger lifted his hand and pointed around us.

“This’ll do. It’s wide enough to take the brakes off,” he said, nudging his head at Bijou.

“Brakes?” I asked, but no one answered.

Stagger opened his pack and took out a handful of thin, cylindrical rods. Tossing the pack aside, he dropped the rods on the ground in a bundle and bent over, picking them up one at a time. Cracking open the pull tabs at their cap, each one sparked to life with brilliant light. Stagger tossed them out at equal intervals around the flat summit and soon the circle was illuminated by dim white light. Those stalks of brilliance didn’t make a sound. It felt like looking at road flares that didn’t work right.

Bijou walked out into the middle of the clearing and started stretching.

I just stood there.

I kinda felt bad I didn't have a warmup routine. Stagger was over there bouncing up and down on his feet, shaking the stiffness out of his hands. I heard all of his knuckles crack as he clenched his fists.

I tried it.

Nothing cracked.

I looked at him with my head tilted.

"Did you make that sound with your mouth?"

Bijou let out that boisterous laugh again and I tossed her a dirty look.

She stopped laughing.

"Sorry," she apologized, twisting at the hip back and forth, then starting to bounce up and down on her feet as well.

Stagger was smiling at me.

"I'm glad I entertain the both of you so much."

My multi-tool was around my neck, holding on to me in the wind. "Fuck, it's still not that much better up here," I said feeling the chill.

I looked over at the edge of the crater nearly two hundred yards to my left and when I looked back at Bijou she had changed clothes.

Her lean body was wrapped in that same material I saw her wearing when she flew up to the Perch to get me. It was a flexible, durable material a dark gray color with textured lines running through it. Only this time there weren't any khaki pants. That same material went all the way down her body, outlining her strong thighs, right down to the boots it disappeared inside of that were laced up to her knees.

"How did..." My eyes went wide as two large falcon wings sprang from her back as silvery as her eyes were. She gave a luxurious stretch, arching her back, her fingers clasped overhead and turned over, cracking her knuckles. I realized then that she likely had that suit in her multi-tool.

I heard another wing unfurl, my head tilting up to see Stagger take to the air. His dark coat billowed in the wind before his hand seemed to draw from nowhere a black, straight-edged sword. It was slim, not unlike my Atma Sword, only it didn't bear the same curve. It was perfectly straight and the only curve in it was a small, wicked little curve at the tip.

When he touched down again, I shrugged and just summoned my Atma Sword to my hand, drawing the curving, blunt blade.

"I don't really have a cool costume or... a flashy coat or anything."

It was just me, my jeans, that sturdy pair of black boots we scored before we left and a dark blue hoodie Bijou got for me. I knelt down, setting my Atma Sword by my feet and laced my boots up tighter.

"It's not a costume," Bijou rolled her eyes at me, "you'll find it helps to pick attire that best supports your abilities. And since every god is different, well," she shrugged, turning her profile to me, shifting her weight to one foot, showing off that snug suit.

And those thighs of hers.

"Gotcha," I said, standing up, taking up my sword. "So what's your strength? Aside from blowing people into dust for havin' bad pronunciation?"

Bijou gave me a side-long look. She leaned forward slightly, hunkering her stance down. One knee slightly bent, the other leg moving back, anchoring itself on the ball of her foot.

"You ready?" She asked me and I nodded, smiling back.

That back foot of hers lifted, then came down on the ground, stomping with the ball of her foot. She did it again. Then again, each time speeding her pace. When the tap of her boot against the ground was as rapid as applause, she was suddenly gone.

I blinked in surprise.

She appeared in front of me, her fist rushing towards my face faster than I was ready for. I felt a strong gust of wind shove my head back so rapidly that my back almost snapped. Blood burst from my

nostrils and the back of my head hit the ground hard enough to shake the world in my vision.

Everything was spinning.

I was down there long enough to think about what happened. I didn't feel my sword in hand, or it's scabbard in my right.

Did she just knock me out of my body?

"Am I dead?" I sat up, droplets of blood falling from my lips and chin onto my hoodie.

Aside from the pain throbbing at the back of my skull, my face felt fine. She'd blunted the impact with that gust of wind. In fact, she hadn't even physically touched me. The sheer force of the air she displaced nearly broke my nose.

"Oh, shit," I heard her say.

From twenty yards away.

"Are you alright? I tried to soften the blow, I forgot about the ground!" And then she was beside me, squatting down to help me up.

"I, yeah. What was that?" I said, coughing and spitting blood onto the ground.

"You asked what her power was," Stagger said, marching over to the two of us, his wing disappearing as he tilted my head back and pinched my nose. "Huayra is faster than everything on this planet."

That explained a lot.

She could probably hold the planet up with those legs of hers.

"Except my son."

"You have a kid?" I asked, my voice stuffy from my pinched off nostrils.

"Mhm," she intoned. "He used to be such a nice kid, too. Y'know... til he made his dog eat his dad so he could sit in his shiny chair," she nodded. "So there's that."

I mentally booked a flight to What-The-Fucksville.

"Perun?" I hissed the name out of my mouth, shoving Stagger's hands away.

She nodded.

“You and Odin?”

“I wanted to name him Zeus. Odin wasn’t having it. I don’t see how Perun was better.” She said, staring off into the distance as if lost in a memory, her lips screwed up as she shook her head.

“How old are you!?” I asked, my lip curling.

“I died, remember. Thanks to my brat. I’m only 32,” She winked and she and Stagger shared a laugh.

“Though I guess to be fair, that’s probably closer to thirty-two hundred,” She added.

“Note to self. Don’t tell Perun I fucked his mom.”

I coughed and wiped my bloody nose on my sleeve.

“Alright, Ladies. Fun and games are over. We don’t have long to get this right,” Stagger said.

Over the next several hours the two of them took me through my paces. Stagger tried to help my abysmal swordplay. We talked about stance, movement speed, footwork. All the classics. I did my best to channel Siobhan but it just wasn’t working out. I couldn’t beat him. Best I could do was stay on the defensive.

Bijou took my Atma Sword and she and Stagger flashed blades at varying speeds while I watched, then she drew a sword of her own. It was more like a claymore than a slim, hard-edged blade like we carried. She took both me and Stagger on and despite our best efforts, we couldn’t break her defense. Whenever we got close, a burst of speed moved her out of danger. We ducked, spun and whirled together. Three blades clashing in the night. I held my own but Stagger was better. Bijou, however, was better still.

Wings burst into the air, propelling us upward, left, right and spiraling down. Stagger and I were working so hard we could barely talk. Bijou was effortlessly slapping our attacks wide, chucking us through the air or dropping us to the ground so hard our teeth rattled. All with a gorgeous smile on her face.

I'd hate to fight her angry. Or with all of her power.

I seemed to be better at absorbing her defense-splitting kicks and punches to let Stag set her back on her heels with his impressive speed and agility.

She told me she couldn't run flat out anymore. After she died, she lost quite a lot of her power and could only make short bursts of speed happen. Not unlike me. I didn't have the full range of a god's strength or speed, but I had enough to beat any celestial. I just needed to learn how to use it. She told me every god lost a large chunk of their power being reincarnated. The only way to get it back was through the consumption of Heart Fire or time spent in the world that was made with it.

A lot of time.

She taught me about my fear. About how it could be used as a natural instinct to help me avoid danger. But she was so fast all I could do was take one painful lesson after the next.

"It's like a muscle, a god's power. You have to flex it to use it. You can't hold it forever, but the more you use it the stronger that muscle gets. You don't reach burnout so fast." She lifted her hand, pointing her sword at me, "Unless it's a passive power. Those are rare. But they're always working."

"Passive? Her?" Stagger asked, out of breath, pointing at me with his sword, "What do you know that I don't?"

"What's a passive power?" I chimed in on his question between heavy breaths.

"You're not bleeding," she said, helping me up again.

"Yeah, it's weird. It doesn't hurt like it usually does."

"No. Your nose. It stopped almost immediately. And now you're not bleeding at all. From any wound," she clarified.

Stag and I were both winded but she was barely breathing harder than normal.

"You think it's the Heart Fire?" He asked Bijou.

“Heart Fire? I haven’t been around any since the Perch,” I said, coughing from my abused smoker’s lungs.

“Yes you have. It’s in everything. It’s what built the world after all. A god feeds off of it, grows stronger because of it. And if you’ve ever been exposed to Radiant Stones, that helps too. Something else though...” She said, looking at me awkwardly as her voice drifted off.

The sparks that flew between us let me know that I brought my sword up in time to stop her blade. She was at me so fast my instinct was the only thing that saved me from taking that sharp edge to the face.

But something didn’t feel right.

“Shit!” Stagger yelled, his wing bursting back out from his body, shoving him towards the two of us. He slammed into Bijou, bowling her over with a roar.

I stumbled forward a step, looking down to see a short dagger protruding from my side.

“Wh... I,” I tried to understand. I looked up at her. At Bijou, the mother of Perun, and felt the sting of betrayal.

“Wait!” She yelled and Stagger, who had his sword up ready to strike

“Wait for what!? What the fuck are you doing!?” He roared.

“Just. Wait.” She snapped at him, her silvery eyes focused on me, “Pull it out, Charlie.” She said, getting to her feet.

“But,” I looked down at it. I didn’t understand what was happening. What I understood less was the fact that it didn’t hurt. Not as much as it should. I gripped the blade’s handle and looked up at her. With an exhale I tugged it from my side and gasped in relief. Looking at the bloody blade, it felt like pulling out a thorn that was bothering me. Like something pressing into my ribs under my shirt that had been nagging me all day.

I yanked my hoodie and shirt up to see the wound.

It was there. It was dripping blood for sure, but it wasn't leaking out of me like a faucet.

"What the fuck is going on?" Stagger asked, his sword hand dropping to his side, his voice hollow, his stare confused and empty.

"Just what I thought," Bijou stated, her expression smug.

I held that dagger in hand and looked up at Stagger, my lip curled, pain on my face but not for the hole in me.

"Oh god..." I said.

"What?" Stag asked, concern on his face.

"She's getting harder to kill by the day," Bijou said, looking at Stagger who turned his head to face her.

"You're serious..." He had a playful, almost boyish expression then.

"She's got stamina," Bijou smiled at him, innuendo coloring her voice.

I dropped the dagger on the ground and let my shoulders sink.

Of all the powers to have in this world.

Bijou could run fast and summon the wind.

Perun could summon lightning.

Hell, Brahma had the power of life and death.

Me?

None of those.

"I really am the god of gettin' my ass kicked."

CHAPTER 8

The Show Must Go On

Six days. That's all we had left. Six days and I was no closer to getting any better with that sword. In my head, I could see the movements Siobhan made. My brain was making the connection between my hand and my thoughts, but for some reason, there was always something off about it. Either my footwork wasn't there or I had a short follow through. Nothing seemed to be going my way.

Me and Bijou went up to that stone clearing day after day and all it resulted in was me being pummeled by her amazing speed. We would spar until she had to head down and meet with Chroma and Stagger, and then Stagger would take up my lessons in the evening. I barely rested. Stagger would have to force me to take breaks, to even drink water. The only thing coming out of my training sessions that we were all aware of was the fact that day by day my ability to soak a beating was increasing.

All I could think about was Gozen harming the forgefolk, or of Orcus doing god knows what to my sister. To make matters worse, I also kept thinking about the fact that I hadn't even the courage to face him in a mirror. Chroma God told me it was all for the best. If Orcus saw where I was it would give our play away too soon.

I was in a perpetual state of exhaustion, but after Chroma got back from the Bacchus Theater, we found out what little time we had left

and it made the pressure that much greater.

We were in Chroma's office again that night. The fireplace was crackling and popping away nearby, staving off the cold of the evening air above us. Chroma was standing by it with his hands in his pockets, outlining exactly what we would be facing at Hymeris' place. Stagger was sitting at the table, his travel icon hovering in front of him as he moved through the map of the world, zooming in on where the Bacchus Theater was located.

His icon was a matte black cube with a red, square light for a scanner. Its rounded corners and red, beaming ambiance moving about as if it were looking all around the room.

He pulled the three-dimensional map open, zooming in to the High Moor that sat a twenty-hour flight above us at the current elevation and rotation of the continents. I watched the concern on his face as Chroma spoke, Bijou sitting beside me chiming in when she had things to add.

That map was so odd to me.

It seemed that as the land masses circled the black core at the center of the planet, true north stayed the same, as did true south, but all the other directions on it changed rapidly. Then there was the host of continents that only recognized true east and true west. That was a whole other layer of confusion to sort. The map kept up with the compass movement, but I saw that up was a relative term to what way your own floating rock was facing. Up could very well end up east or true north depending upon the time of day. I could sympathize with the need to create travel icons in the first place.

All I could do was sit there and feel useless. The last time I had seen this world I was someone else and that someone had managed to punch enough holes in my memory to make sure I was constantly asking myself if what I was remembering was real or not.

"The Bacchus Theater isn't the kind of place to get trapped. Time seems to pass differently in its walls, though most of us can't be sure

if it's the drink or if it's the actual theater itself." Chroma said.

I lifted my eyes from the side of Stagger's face to his sightless lenses.

"Drink?" I asked.

"Yeah," Bijou replied. "Hymeris has this drink she makes in the cellars of the theater called Ambrosia. It flows through the pipes, it flows through the fountains. It even surrounds the theater itself. It was ours. The drink of the original gods, though some would argue she's altered the recipe some. Knowing her, I don't doubt it."

"Has she?" I asked, figuring she'd know for certain.

"Oh, I'm sure of it," Bijou nodded, "It used to be the best thing the tongue could ever taste. Like all the sweet and happy things in the world condensed into every sip. Now it just seems like a potent drug that alters the senses and brings on the madness of pleasure."

"Nectar of the gods, huh?" Stagger said, leaning back in his seat, his travel icon hovering beside him. "More like liquid insanity."

Bijou's black cat hopped up from the floor and onto the table. It looked at me and gave a little meow. I felt my eyebrows tighten a little bit, wondering just where it had come from.

"Why'd you bring your cat?" I asked her.

"My cat? Oh!" She reached out, scooping up Mercury and bringing him to her chest, scratching at his ears. "I'm sorry, do cats bother you?"

"No... no, I just didn't see you bring him. I mean, we walked all the way here and I didn't notice you had him in your arms." I said, feeling a little vacant and confused.

Was she carrying that little black fuzzball this whole way and I just failed to pay attention?

"I didn't."

"What, was he on a fuckin' leash?" I asked, my expression somewhere between puzzled and surprised.

“No, silly.” She laughed, patting my arm. “Mercury’s my travel icon.”

“What!?” I balked, staring at her, “you can turn ’em into animals!?” I quickly summoned mine from my palm and let it hover in the air.

“Aye, Wee Lass. What can I do for ya?” My icon asked.

“Turn into an animal,” I demanded.

“Well, I can’t just magic myself into something you haven’t purchased,” Shiny gave its testy reply.

“It’s an add-on, Charlie,” Stagger said, bringing up a menu of options in front of him with a gesture.

I found myself in HUD mode more often. The world was certainly more interesting that way. I didn’t even know it was possible to have that many options. Even people’s clothes looked different in HUD mode. Everything seemed infinitely customizable.

The outline of clothing beamed with twinkling light, accent colors splashed about, patterns and widgets, emoticons, artwork. A person could decorate themselves in a bunch of ways with Lite Lights, they were called. I quickly reasoned that HUD mode was where people individualized and expressed themselves.

Even Bijou was decked out in silver and blue Lite Light. I remembered her telling me that some cities and even countries had ordinances concerning how bright and animated a person’s personal belongings could be. Visual disturbance laws. It was all so unreal.

She had white and blue lines of light outlining the lapels of her future-perfect bomber jacket, the rolled up sleeves had little animated cherries exploding around them now and again. Around one of her wrists was a digital watch face made entirely of light.

Stagger’s dark coat was wreathed in white light. His white tie glowed brilliantly in HUD mode and every now and then it would darken to the image of a swirling galaxy. A cartoonish skull and

crossbones was on his right shoulder, sticking its tongue out and slathering digital spittle all over.

He pushed his screen over to me and I looked up at it, reading the details spelled out in the Travel Icon Pack submenu.

“Aye, would you like to make a purchase from the T- ... from the Appstore?” The voice of my icon said with a heavy frown in its tone that I could practically hear.

It really didn’t like using the term Appstore.

I looked at Stagger’s screen in front of me, then dropped my brown eyes to the price.

“What the fuck is that symbol next to the buy button?” I asked, pointing at the strange icon next to the price of the item labeled House Cat Behaviors.

It was a cartoonish lightning bolt.

“Boltas,” Chroma said, and his tone suggested if he had eyes he would have rolled them.

“Boltas? The fuck is a Bolta?”

“Money, Charlie,” Stagger sighed.

“Hey, excuse the fuck out of me if I’m bringing the party down. I’ve got questions, alright?” I crossed my arms over my chest and sat back in my chair in a huff.

“That’s not what he’s sighing about,” Chroma said and Bijou chuckled.

“What then?” I snapped, perturbed.

“My boy renamed the currency after Ragnarok,” Bijou pointed out.

“Wait, Boltas as in lightning bolts?” I replied, my eyes squinting in disgust.

“Yup,” Stagger said, his voice dry and humorless, “It’s pretty disgusting.”

“Jesus. Fucker really is in love with himself.”

“Mhm, it seems that way,” Bijou responded, her tone distracted.

I looked over to see her browsing her own digital screen, looking at new icon behavior packs. A snowman, Talking Poodle, Popular Cartoons Pack.

A little jealous, I tapped the buy button on Stagger's screen, forgetting it wasn't mine.

"Hey!" Stagger bitched, his icon turning from a black matte cube into a black cat, sitting on the table in front of him, cleaning itself.

"Oh. Shit, sorry," I apologized as he pulled the digital screen back over to him.

"That cost me thirteen boltas. Thank you. Thanks a lot," he deadpanned back, his hands thrown out to his sides in resignation, staring at me.

"I forgot I was looking at your screen, lemme alone!" I shrugged, "not that I want a black cat or anything, I just figured anything beats this," I tapped at my own basic silver sphere, finding it a little less amazing now that I knew it could look like just about anything else.

"Oh, sure, sure, that makes sense. When did you get paid?" He asked.

"Paid? I don't have a job here. Hell, I don't even have a fuckin' job back home."

"Yeah, exactly. Stop pushing buttons you can't afford," He said, glowering at me.

"Gimme some money." I shot back.

"No."

"Gimme some money, Stag."

"No, Charlie. Would you just focus?" He said, his index and middle fingers pointing at his own eyes then to Chroma, directing where mine should be.

I sighed. My eyes drifted lazily over to Bijou.

"What?" She asked, glancing at me for a moment before going back to icon pack shopping.

"Gimme some money, Bijou."

Bijou blinked.

Slowly.

“Charlie,” She turned to look at me, “you’re adorable, you really are, but I don’t loan money. Besides, I just bought you clothes.”

“Do you want me to beg?” There was a playful smile on my face.

“Later,” Bijou let a smile pull at the corners of her mouth.

“Hey! Don’t be a perv,” I pushed her shoulder, my face screwed up in mock disgust.

“If we’re quite finished, children,” Chroma said, leaning against the mantle of the fireplace.

Bijou was snickering.

Stagger tapped a few buttons on his display, turning his icon back into a black cube.

“That’s alright, Lass. If you wait till Sunday there’s a free icon pack sale,” My icon said in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Thanks,” I whispered back, dropping my chin into my hands as I looked at Chroma.

“Are we ready to get back on task?” Chroma pointed at the map.

I stared at him with a flat expression.

“Gimme some money, Chroma.”

Bijou and Stagger dissolved into wheezing snickers, hiding their mouths as their shoulders jumped.

“I don’t have any,” Chroma replied, his tone dry, flat and lifeless as he summoned his travel icon.

A triangular prism appeared in front of him, casting a rainbow of light out into the air. His display didn’t default to a map, but rather to a fully customized screen with multiple options, all within a rolling, silvery, puffy cloud that manifested all around him.

“Liar,” I muttered.

Chroma’s attention moved to his menus, pulling up a bird’s eye view of a large, sprawling pink and gold estate sitting at the heart of a big body of pink water.

“Looks like an amusement park fucked a mansion and had a Rated R baby,” I said.

“You’re not far off the mark. This is the Bacchus Theater. Two of you have seen it before at least. As a slave, Siobhan was likely never allowed to take part in anything that happens there.”

“She didn’t miss much,” Bijou said, twisting her mouth at the sight of the place.

“No kidding,” Stagger huffed. “You think you had vices before, that place is on a whole nother level of addiction. Gambling, substance abuse, drinking. Just about any debauched thing you can think of. I don’t even think the island that place sits on is governed by law.”

“It isn’t. Unlike Old Settler’s Place, the Bacchus Theater isn’t a neutral zone. Here we have the sanctuary law on our side. A law that thankfully Perun himself enforces to try and keep the favor of the High People. There, however, anything goes,” Chroma replied.

“High People?” I asked.

“Anyone that lives above the 4th elevation. Most of them are Valhallites. Perun keeps their countries rich with commerce and they thank him by-” Bijou started, but I interrupted her.

“Suckin’ his dick. Got it.”

“I was going to say swearing their allegiance to the Bright Throne, but whatever works.”

“Yes, well,” Chroma continued. “Sanctuary makes Perun look like a kind and just god. He shows his enemies respect, honors rules of engagement and has his valkyrie enforce a form of parlay.”

“What’s Parlay?” I asked.

“A deal, essentially. A wartime deal,” Stagger replied.

“Like askin’ favors?”

“Yes,” Chroma said, “similar. Generally, both parties acquiesce to a term and are obligated to make sure that condition is met in the event of a stalemate in battle.”

“Oh, you’re talkin’ about Blood and Blade.” I nodded.

“Exactly,” Chroma pointed at me, “The valkyrie code of honor. Perun respects it and to some extent lives by it and rules by it. The valkyrie may be sadistic and cruel in their methods, but they are at least fair if you can either best one of them or force a stalemate.”

“Stalemate or a stay of execution. Like if they’re ordered to stop before you die. It’s still a draw. And it’s not really called a parlay though,” I explained, finally able to add something helpful. “it’s a Truce Rite. Usually, the underdog in a Truce Rite gets the right to make the request. As long it’s not a fuckin’ stupid request,” I shrugged.

“I’m sure we’d all like to know what qualifies as ‘fuckin’ stupid’,” Bijou said using her fingers to make air quotes while she attempted her best imitation of my New York accent.

“Oh, right. Sorry. I mean, like, as long as you don’t ask somethin’ that gives your side an unfair advantage or takes advantage of the rite.”

Bijou, Chroma, and Stagger all nodded.

“If you haven’t read Gozen Morrow’s Blood and Blade, I suggest you all try it some time,” Chroma looked around at each of us.

“That’s a hard pass,” I scoffed, “Lived it. No thanks.”

Chroma nodded. I didn’t have to say anything for him to know my feelings on it. I had a lifetime worth of memories of Gozen pounding Blood and Blade into my little body one beating at a time.

“So Hymeris and Neverland Ranch, what’s so important about it? I know you said last time it’s our only way into the Underworld. So what, we just roll up to the club, tip the bouncer and get in, or what?”

“It’s not that simple,” Bijou replied.

“Exactly.” Stagger laughed a little, “Hymeris never gives anything away. There’s always a fee. Always something you’ve gotta give up to get what you want. On top of that, odds are we’re gonna have a NEST Army problem when we get there.”

“Yeah,” I nodded, “I figured that part out. If that’s the only place outside of Demonhead and Valhalla that’ll get us where we need to go, it makes sense they’ll be waiting on us to show up.”

“And when we do, we’ll have a fight on our hands,” Chroma added, “The water around it is mixed with Ambrosia. We can’t touch it without being subject to madness. Furthermore, passage to the Underworld sits at the heart of the Estate inside of the Bacchus Theater itself. Hymeris won’t care much for stopping us, she’s a neutral god with no real stake in all of this, but she’s a pragmatist. She’ll sell us out to Perun for the coin or just for the fun of it, and the Bifrost moves in six days time, which means we have to be ready for the fight. The one advantage we have is that they think you’ll be coming alone.”

“And with them not knowing Bijou’s back,” Stagger pointed out, “the opposition won’t be their A-Team. I doubt we’ll see any valkyrie.”

“What’d Hymeris say when you were there?” Bijou asked.

“She asked me if I knew Charlie was in Blue Veil,” Chroma replied, “to which I obviously said no, but we have to assume Orcus told her the truth. She likely knew I was lying from the moment I arrived.”

“Where are the valkyrie right now?” I asked, looking up at Chroma from the table top.

“Still at Demonhead.”

“And the elite guard was ordered back to the Bright Throne when the bodies of the twins turned up,” Stagger pointed at me.

“That’s correct. Their ignorance of the whole truth will be our advantage.” Chroma gave me a reassuring nod and I sat back in my chair.

“Alright,” I stood up from the table, “what about the elephant in the room, guys?”

“Which one?” Chroma said, a rare smile finding his face.

“The fact that me and my sword aren’t exactly gettin’ along.”

Everyone was silent then and I nodded, heading towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Stagger asked, standing up and coming after me, “Charlie.”

I stopped at the door and looked back at him.

“Back up the valley wall,” I said, my tone resolute, “This one’s on me. I gotta figure this shit out or we’re all fucked.”

Chroma lifted his dark lenses to me from the fireplace.

“Charlie,” he said and I looked his way, “I think you’re going about it all wrong. Perhaps it’s not you and the sword that need to agree.”

“Can somebody please just spit out what the fuck they mean for once? This place is like a book of fuckin’ madlibs and riddles sometimes,” I bitched, my lip curling.

“I mean to say,” he continues, “you’re not a valkyrie, Siobhan was. Why do you keep trying to fight like one?”

Bijou and Stagger looked at each other. I turned and looked first to Stag, then to Bijou realizing they had all caught on to something I hadn’t.

“What?” I asked, one of my eyebrows sliding up.

“Way ahead of you,” Bijou said, standing up and heading to the door to meet Stagger and I. “You two head up the valley wall. I’ll be back,” she said, pushing through the white doors.

“Where are you goin’?” I asked her.

“To the Lightly Perch.”

I felt a thrill of excitement and deep longing run through me. I was homesick for the forges.

“I’m comin’ too.”

“You can’t. You and Stagger need to keep at it. I know you miss your family at the Perch, but now’s not the time to lose focus. I’ve got this,” Bijou said and I looked her in those silver eyes.

A long, pregnant pause passed between us before I finally dropped my head and nodded.

“Fine. Tell everybody I said hi.”

Nothing hurt like knowing I couldn't go back there. Back home.

"I will," Bijou took one of my hands in hers, rubbing it with her thumbs, "just remember what you're fighting for."

I nodded again, disappointment on my face.

"Meanwhile," Her cat came trotting over to us, "Stagger, you need to find out as much information as you can. Call me on the icon network and let me know what develops. Looking at the map, the Perch is closer to us now than it's ever going to get. It's practically a straight shot true south with almost no land masses between us. I think I can get there in six hours if I step on it."

"We're on it," he nodded and Bijou left. "Alright, Chroma, we'll be back. Charlie, on the way to the valley wall, I need you to tell me everything you can remember about your fight with the twins. Don't leave anything out."

"A-alright, I..." I looked at Stagger, "how's me givin' you a detailed account of how badly I got my ass kicked supposed to help?"

"You won."

"So?"

"So we need to find out why and how. C'mon." He hurriedly headed out the door and I followed.

* * *

Over the next hour while we got our things together and took Stagger's ball shuttle up to the valley wall I recounted to Stagger the details of how the twins had kicked my ass all over the perch. I explained to him that most of it was me getting lucky. I told him that every swing of my sword felt like it was Siobhan saving my life more so than me actually taking measured strikes. I was on the defensive the entire fight.

"When were you doing the most damage?" He asked, and I had to tell him that I really wasn't.

“I mostly wore them down. There were two of them so there wasn’t a lot I could do,” I said.

“You were on the defensive though. Like, what was that like?” He asked.

“I dunno. I guess I felt the most confidence when my sword wasn’t in my hand. I spent most of that time blocking using my forgemaster gloves and back peddling with my multi-tool.”

The whole time he had his travel icon open and Bijou’s face was painted in the air beside us in tiny dots making up a detailed image of her in full color.

“Charlie,” she asked and I glanced over at her, not wanting to have to endure those piercing eyes of hers, even through the icon network.

“Yeah?” I said, stuffing mini snack cakes in my mouth from the pack Stagger bought me at the corner shop.

“When you had your gloves, you say you were punching their Atma. Like how exactly?”

“Bee, I mean it wasn’t a science or anything. I was just saving my own skin. I keep telling you guys, I wasn’t planning anything.” I sighed, irritated. “You guys just aren’t gettin’ it. It was muscle memory from another life responding using the best things I had on me at the time.”

“Humor me,” Bijou said.

“Alright, alright. So, like, they would swing at me and I knew I wasn’t as fast as them. Only thing I could do I figured was just let ’em hit me, y’know? So I did. I didn’t try to dodge the really hard shit, I stayed inside of the swing and used the heat plates on my gloves to stop ’em.”

“What about your wing? Did you defend much with it?” Stagger asked.

“Yeah, I mean a little. I didn’t really figure out it could block anything until I saw them do it once. My wing’s not as long as

everybody else's I've seen though. It's only about four, maybe five feet long."

"That'll be Siobhan's doing. She was a little woman like you. I imagine it was easier to be mobile with a smaller wingspan," Bijou reasoned.

"Faster flight too," Stagger nodded.

"Faster?" I curled my lip, "How's a smaller wing equal faster flight?"

"Well we're not actually birds, are we? The multi-tool always generates the same lift and thrust. Some are built faster than others by cheating the math a little. Like tuning a stock car. Everyone's wing specs are different. She was doing it to shave weight and decrease the travel path for her wing," Bijou answered and I nodded back.

"Oh. Wish I was that fuckin' smart." I think back to Siobhan and her kind green eyes. I'd give anything to talk to her again. To ask her how to channel her power.

"Technically you are. You're the same person. We just need to figure out how this version of you is comfortable operating." Bijou looked right into her travel icon, catching my eyes studying her face.

My eyes bolted for the window.

I heard her give a little laugh.

"What?" I asked, not looking back.

"You're so cute. Anyway, I think I have an idea."

"What you got?" Stagger asked as we reached the valley wall, both of us hopping out and starting to unload our things.

"Turtle speed," she said. "Gotta go. I need to call Starland."

"Starland?" I asked, turning to look at her face floating beside Stagger. "What's she got to do with this?"

"She patched you up after the fight, right? I think Chanticleer has a travel icon I might be able to reach out to. I know the forgefolk don't really use them, but we might get lucky."

“Smart. That’s really smart,” Stagger gave a little smile and Bijou waved, disappearing.

I looked at Stagger.

“I’m missing somethin’ again, aren’t I?”

“Yup. I’ll explain later, do me a favor,” He said, nudging his chin at me.

“What?”

“Give me your sword. Just pop your wing. Let’s just practice your flight game and defense. Seems like that’s your strong suit.”

“Okay... what do you need my Atma for?”

“Blunt edge. I don’t want to risk cutting you. As it stands, I’m faster than you.”

“Oh, gotcha.” I nodded.

We made our way to the summit once again, that wide, familiar clearing in the stone expanding out in front of me as I walked to its center on Stagger’s heels.

I pulled my sword out of the air and gave it a toss towards him. Stagger turned, snatched it out of the air and broke the blade free of its scabbard, tossing the sheath aside. That long, black wing of his bursts free from his back, my smaller tawny owl wing cresting soon after.

“Alright,” he said, bringing the sword up, bending its tip down to point at me, the blade parallel to the ground beside his face as both of his hands tightened around the grip.

“So what’s the game plan?”

“I’m coming at you with everything I have. I don’t want you to attack.”

“You don’t want me to attack?” I balked, my head tilting like a curious puppy.

“Do the exact opposite.”

I thought Stagger was fast before, but the way he ate the distance between us felt almost instantaneous. He was no Bijou, but the time

between him pushing off of his back foot thirty feet from me and him thrusting the Atma's point at my head just a few feet away was close enough to astound.

I didn't have time to back away so I bent my body to the right. He compensated for it by turning the blunt edge of the Atma, whipping the blade at me. I bent down under it and spun back, my wing curling around me just in time to feel that sword thunk off of its feathers.

The strangest thing to me was the fact that the sound of the impact was metallic. Like two swords clashing together. I didn't have time to put much thought into it. Stagger was pressing me hard.

For some reason, I looked down, watching his feet to predict his next move. I'm not sure why it just came to me to do so. I went with the notion. My eyes glanced about to watch his heels, his toes, and as I stood back up, I was watching his core. Using that information, I was able to dial my movements into his, ducking, turning and bending back away from his blade strikes.

He came on harder and it forced me back several steps, my wing having to whip forward and intercept a sword strike that would have broken my collar. It reacted without me thinking about it.

As if it was reacting to my fear.

"Whoa!" I yelled, surprised as I dropped low to my knees and spun round Stagger's side to avoid a crossing chop of that sword.

"Exactly," He shot back, turning on me to continue the attack.

He followed me with that blade, stabbing at me, cutting that blunt edge my way with every turn and forward step of his body.

"What?" I asked through hurried movements, hearing my wing take strike after strike as he spun into me and I spun back.

He drove me back again and I scuttled to the ground, rolling away. I made it up onto a knee as he came on again, forcing me to turn another revolution on my knees as before, blocking blade strikes with my wing. I was finally able to thrust my palms against the ground at

the peak of another turn to launch me upward into the air. My wing caught me and gave a short, hard flap, shooting me vertical.

“Your multi-tool,” he looked up at me in the air, pointing the Atma at me.

“It’s just doin’ it’s own thing,” I said back.

“No, it’s reacting. Without a sword in your hand, you’re not thinking about a blade to protect you. You’re thinking about how to protect yourself.” He lowered the blade’s tip to the ground, “I used to worry about what my sword was doing so much that I never even considered the fact that the multi-tool could be used as both a weapon and a form of defense. Wasn’t until I saw the valkyrie fight first hand when I was a kid that made me aware of it. Just like you.”

“Yeah?”

My mind flashed back to old memories, seeing Brunhilde use her wing to watch her own back. Seeing Gozen use it and it alone to slaughter scores of men in battle. I descended from the air to touch down on my boots, walking over to Stagger.

“Yeah,” he confirmed. “Course that was a long time ago. A lifetime ago.” he looked me right in the eyes and I held the stare as long as I could.

My eyes retreated. I knew he wanted to tell me something personal. Something I didn’t feel like I deserved to hear.

“It’s the past,” I said, trying to distract him from my weakness.

“What was the best day of your life, Siobhan?” He asked, and I looked back at him with a frown. My wing disappeared.

“I don’t remember. Why are you callin’ me by my middle name? I told you, I’m not her.” I felt my shoulders drop. “And I never will be.”

“Stop it.” He said, jarring me with how abrupt his tone was.

“Stop what?” I said, my voice finding that tiny place it goes to hide when I’m intimidated.

He reached out and slammed me to his chest with a hug that was so sudden my feet didn’t keep up. He held my weight in one strong

arm, the tips of my toes the only thing touching the ground.

We didn't say anything. He just held me. I laid my head against his chest, one of my small hands playing with a button on his coat. I'm not sure how long we stood there in that embrace.

I didn't care either.

"Listen to me," His voice finally broke the silence. His tone was warm. It comforted me. Like everything was going to be just fine.

"Your whole life you've gone around living up to the shadow of a person that you feel like you'll never be. You feel like she has somehow done what Charlie can't." He dropped the Atma and wrapped his other arm around me, rubbing my back. "I called you Siobhan because the only thing that changed when you died was your first name."

I looked up at him and he looked back.

"You are her, Charlie. Every decision she ever made, every fight she ever fought. Death was just a pause in a long life, not a wall between two different ones."

My eyes drifted down and away. I managed to find my feet and his arms slid away from the small of my back, moving upward to cup my face in his hands.

"Stag."

"Yes, ma'am?"

I could feel the tickle of his thumb rubbing at the edge of my bottom lip. I pulled my lip in, my teeth catching it.

"I'm doin' everything I can right now. I know what you want...but I..." I forced myself to meet his yearning look. "I can't."

Burning hope in those eyes turned to a quiet, crushed little ball of sadness and it hurt to see.

I looked away.

"Yes, ma'am."

I could tell he wanted to yell at me. To tell me I was being silly. God, I wanted him to. If he yelled at me I could yell back and stop

this thing from happening. I'd rather fight with him than have to think about how I felt.

He pulled me close and kissed my forehead.

I lifted my hand and gave his chest a weak punch.

"Jerk," I said, my voice trembling.

I could feel tears trying to come out of my eyes.

The silence was filled with everything we probably should have said.

That I should have said.

I felt it like a weight on my chest as he pulled back. I felt empty without him against me. I stared at the ground, pushing my hands into my back pockets.

"Why?" I asked.

"Why what, Charlie?" He said more than asked, disappointment in his voice.

It hurt so bad to hear.

"Why do you..." I didn't have the courage to ask him why he loved me. What if he didn't? And how would I know for sure? The only thing I could be sure of is if he did, he'd be the only one.

I thought about my daddy then. I thought about my mistakes.

He picked up the Atma sword and walked back several paces, turning again to wield it at the ready.

"I dunno, Kiddo," He tilted his wavy-haired head and gave me a crooked smile. "This world is full of very powerful people. I don't think even they have the ability to change how they feel. Or who they feel it for."

"Its complic-..."

"Stop..." He said, "I'm a big boy, Charlie. It's not your job to make me feel better. You have to do what works for you."

If he only knew how badly I wanted to take his love, put it in a locket and keep it. The truth that I had to face was the fact that I couldn't be trusted with it. I was clean but I wasn't better. This

intoxicating world was so overwhelming it tricked me into thinking I would be okay. But I knew deep down, okay for me was still a long way away.

And I still had a monkey on my back.

I couldn't be trusted not to crash or relapse back into the same bullshit that turned my life upside down. Using his love against him to feed my habit. I knew it wasn't something I could have right now.

Maybe not ever.

Besides. People didn't love like that, right? Nobody did. His infatuation would go away one day and he'd realize he made a mistake. I was just a hot little psycho he could tell his friends about one day.

Samantha should have been someone's princess.

Not me.

I'm not supposed to have the things that I want.

I didn't deserve it after the things I had done.

"Mistakes have a funny way of makin' us all prisoners, Stag."

Those tears I tried to stop fell from my eyes then. I saw him take a few concerned steps towards me, but my multi-tool sent my wing bursting out behind me.

"Stop, Stag. Please..."

I couldn't let him come to me then. I would lose. I would fall into his arms and never be able to escape from them again.

One thing was clear.

Stagger Lee was my gravity.

"Charlie," I heard him breathe my name.

I could see his hazel eyes from where I stood, beaming with the clouded sunlight.

"Please." I felt my voice shake. My next breath stuck in my chest.

He nodded his head.

Stagger lifted the Atma Sword. When he came on this time, it was with a new fervor.

I scrambled back, danced away, spun, ducked that blade he sent hurtling towards my foolish head. He didn't want to hurt me, I knew.

But I hurt him.

All I could hear was Robin's voice echoing from the past.

That day mom and dad left town on a business trip and she locked me in the garage. She left me out there for two days, pounding on the door, screaming myself hoarse. She took my phone away from me. Beat me up when I begged for it back. She would come down every now and again and knock on the door.

"You still alive you little piece of shit?"

I knew if I didn't say anything she'd come in.

"I'm fine."

Sammy would sneak downstairs to talk to me through the locked door when she was supposed to be sleeping.

With Stagger raging his feelings at me, sending me rolling across the dirt to get away from the passion of his every swing, I felt like I was alone in that garage again. I shut him out like I did everyone else.

Because it's mercy, right?

He didn't understand that I'm the worst thing that could ever happen to him.

Stagger and I kept our pace for hours, neither of us saying a word. The shortest pause we took was for air, panting before we launched into another brutal dance. He and my Atma Sword kept me scrambling hard. The look in his eyes scared me.

"Stag."

I tried to get his attention but he pushed on. My wing batted the Atma Sword out wide and I spun into him, grabbing him by the lapels of his coat.

"Stag!"

"Ma'am?" He said as if snapping out of a trance. His shoulders heaving, his eyebrows tight. His eyes were glaring at me.

Stagger wasn't the only one who was out of breath. I was probably more worn out than him. Years of smoking didn't help either. I was practically hanging off of his coat, my head dropping as a series of hard coughs came out of me.

"I... I'm done," I wheezed out, "I got nothin' left in the tank."

My body was aching in every muscle, my skin was sore from tumbling and defending myself against that blunt blade. More than that, I was both thirsty and hungry. My stomach gave a plaintive groan.

"I can sympathize," he said, offering a dry swallow as he turned the blade over in his hand and offered me the grip.

I took it, sending the sword back to my multi-tool. Both of our wings disappeared then.

"Any word from Bee?" I glanced up at him, my eyes hopeful.

"Not a peep. C'mon," he said, avoiding the look.

He turned and headed back towards the edge of the stone clearing, back the way we came up. I followed behind him after a few seconds, watching his naturally confident saunter as he pushed his hands into his pockets.

"So you're gonna give me the cold shoulder?" I asked.

He didn't reply.

It was like that the whole way down the valley wall, and the whole drive back towards town. The inside of Stagger's ball shuttle stank of our sweat and effort. Every time I looked over at him he was staring forward, resolute. I twisted my lips and looked down at my hands in my lap.

My palms burned and my fingers felt fat. Not just from the punishing cold outside, but from the many times I had blocked kicks, punches and even that Atma blade. Two months ago the weapon would have broken every bone in my hands.

"How'd I do?"

I didn't really care about the answer, I just didn't want the silence anymore.

"Better. Much better." He said, nodding his head but not looking at me.

"Think I stand a chance against Gozen Morrow?"

I let a crooked smile lift one side of my face. We both knew the answer to that, but I was hoping to get a laugh out of him.

"I've never met her, but from what everyone's telling me? Nope. Not a chance."

He didn't laugh.

"That bad, huh?"

Silence followed.

"Look, about earlier," I started.

The shuttle slammed to a stop, jarring me in my seat.

Stagger yanked his seatbelt off and was gone. Marching through the small shuttle to the door, storming out of it.

Fuck.

I watched him march into the cold towards town from the side of the windshield.

I sighed and unbuckled my belt.

"Great job, Charlie."

I pushed myself out of my seat and hurried to the door, the cold air down in the valley blasting my sweaty skin, chilling me to the bone. I had my hoodie in hand, pulling it on over my sweat-soaked T-shirt.

"Stag," I said, but he just kept walking.

"Stag!" I called again.

Still nothing.

"Stagger Lee, don't you walk away from me!" I planted my feet, holding my breath.

I was so scared he wouldn't care. So scared he wouldn't stop.

He turned and looked at me.

I could breathe again.

I let the air out of my lungs, choking on tears as they started to run down my face.

“I don’t know what you want me to do, Charlie. I can’t keep up with whatever is going on in your head. I don’t expect you to be more than who you are. You don’t want me to help you, you don’t want me to tell you any secrets, you don’t want...” He threw his hands up at his sides in resignation and let them drop.

“You don’t want me.”

“No... you don’t want me, Stag. I’m not a puzzle you can just put back together.”

“Goddammit, Charlie!” Stagger growled, “that’s not how it works! I said it before and I meant it. Broken people don’t get fixed. All you can ever do is find your way back to good, alright? Sometimes life only lets you break even and that’s fine! Not everybody expects you to be perfect. I don’t want perfect! I just...”

I watched him shove his fingers through his wavy hair in frustration.

I bit my lip. He was standing there, staring at me. Like I meant something.

Like I meant everything to him.

“I’m not coming to you,” I said, feigning confidence, shrugging my little shoulders.

Stagger shook his head.

“You gotta be difficult, don’t you?” He smiled and I nodded, smiling back.

“Yup,” I let the last letter of the word pop.

He marched towards me like a cowboy strolling into town. Cool as a midday breeze.

He was feet from me. My heartbeat thundered in my chest, my stomach felt like I’d swallowed a kaleidoscope of butterflies.

When he reached for me, both of our travel icons sent dots of light dancing between us, making us step further apart. They came together to form the face of Chroma.

“Hide. Now!”

Stagger whirled around, his eyes high, looking at the thick cloudline above, darkened by the shadow of the lowest continent in the High Moor above. Several small lights twinkled into existence through the rolling grey.

“We gotta go.”

“What?”

“We gotta go!” He grabbed my arm and started rushing us back to his ball shuttle.

My eyes shot up to those lights as he tugged me stumbling along beside him.

“Come on!” He yelled and we started running. As we approached the side of his shuttle he smashed the door release, shoving me in as it irised open.

“What is it? What’s going on? Stag!” I yelled as Stagger grabbed me by my upper arms.

“NEST!” He yelled back and my eyes shot wide.

We hurried to the front of the small shuttle, hopping into our seats, our travel icons whirling around inside of the cabin. Stagger tapped the air frantically and I turned on HUD mode in my vision to see what he was doing.

He set the ball shuttle to silent running, activated some kind of cloaking mode, and tapped through settings much too quickly for me to follow. Every light in the shuttle turned off, the exterior lights blinking out as well. The ball suddenly shot straight upward as we watched the lights of those NEST ships come into greater focus.

They spiraled down towards the center of Howl Valley, my eyes were wide as I watched them.

“What the fuck is NEST doing here?”

“I dunno. Probably an inspection... maybe a search party. They’ve got no reason to think you’re here.”

“Y’mean other than that big, gaudy fuckin’ statue in the middle of the park?” I said, watching the lights of the convoy of gold and white ball ships coming down in that swirling pattern.

“Oh,” Stagger said, “Nobody told you, huh?”

“Told me what?”

“That’s not the only statue of you out there.”

“In Old Settler’s Place?”

“In the world,” Stagger said, “Kapo, cloak to seven and take us up into the cloudline.”

I looked around.

“Kapo?” But then I saw his travel icon scan the panel in front of me.

“My travel icon,” Stagger confirmed and I nodded.

“That’s a stupid name.”

“Uh-huh, hey Shiny, could you get Charlie a blanket from storage?” he said, staring at me with his lips twisted sarcastically.

My travel icon zipped off to fetch it, likely going to put it in the same place it put my Atma.

I tightened my eyes in irritation.

“Point taken.”

Blanket added to inventory slot 3.

I rolled my eyes as Shiny came back.

“Here you are, Wee Lass.”

“Thanks, Shiny,” I said.

I glared at Stagger as a warm, black blanket materialized above me and fell into my lap. Wrapping the blanket around myself, I curled my lip at him as he smiled back, his face smug.

“Kapo, drop the internal temperature. Take us to 20 degrees.”

My eyes went wide as the internal ventilation systems on the shuttle opened. Gusts of freezing cold air started pouring into the ball

shuttle, washing over me and turning my breath into puffy, vague clouds.

“H-holy fuck!” I hissed, starting to shiver.

“They’ll be using heat scanners,” he said, “Kapo, grab me a blanket too.” His matte black cube with the red, blinking eye headed off to retrieve another blanket.

“Alright, Malcolm. On my way.” Kapo said in a motherly, female voice.

I looked at it, then at Stagger.

He didn’t look back.

“Malcolm?”

“Kapo, HUD only mode,” he said, grabbing his travel icon, making it disappear in his palm after it dropped another black blanket into his lap.

“Shiny, HUD only mode,” I repeated the gesture, figuring it was important.

“They’ll be scanning for any sign of heat or electrical signal. Even connectivity. We’re going to have to go dark,” He said, our speed slowing as we moved upward.

“We’re still moving though.”

“Uh-huh. We’re just trying to crest the gravity well above the cloudline. That way we can cut the engines and ride zero gravity till they’re gone.”

A moment later, I felt us hover, then stop.

Stagger proceeded to cut off all the power, ticking down every switch above him until we sat in perfect, complete silence.

“Not sure how long we’re gonna be here,” he said, tugging his blanket around himself tighter.

“We’re gonna freeze to death up here,” I said, my teeth chattering.

“We’ll be fine. 20 is cold but not life-threatening. We’re just gonna be uncomfortable for a while until we figure out what’s happening downstairs.”

I nodded, my eyes studying him in the late evening light through the heavy cloud bodies that had come rolling in as the sun disappeared. The days seemed to be a lot shorter this far down, but it was mostly because the light from the sun generally didn't make it as far. They called it the early night instead of the early evening.

"So when were you plannin' on telling me your name was Malcolm, Malcolm?"

"Leave it alone, Charlie." He said, leaning back in his seat.

"No, no, no. Everybody wants to tear my life apart and analyze the pieces, it's my turn. What's up with Malcolm, Malcolm?"

"Mal," Stagger corrected me.

"Mal."

"Stop."

"No."

"Stop, please," he said, forcing a kind of saccharine politeness.

"No. Thank you. Mal," I said.

He sighed, "My name is Stagger."

"That's not what Ms. Kapo says, Mal."

"Malcolm Stagger Lee."

"Okay, Malcolm Stagger Lee."

"The third."

"The third," I repeated, then I squinted, "Wait, the third? Christ, nobody could think of anything else?"

"I'm not talking about this. Can we just sit here and enjoy silence? I like silence. Let's do silence," Stagger said, his voice tapering down to a whisper as he brought his legs into his chair, turning sideways to curl up in his blanket. "Wake me up when they take off."

"Really?!" I shouted, reaching over the arm of my chair and yanking the bit of blanket he pulled over his head down.

"Alright!" Stagger said, huffing a breath as he sat back forward again. "Yes. The third. As in the same name as my dad and his dad."

"Why didn't you tell me your real name?"

"I did tell you my real name. Stagger is my name, isn't it?"

"Well, I don't know. All these secrets popping out now, I don't know what to believe."

"You're the one that said you didn't want to hear any secrets."

"Okay," I nodded, "fine. Tell me why you don't go by Malcolm."

"Because my dad went by Malcolm and it would have been confusing. Not only that, I don't like hearing his name much."

"Guess I'm not the only one with daddy issues."

"My parents are dead. Yours hate your guts, there's a difference." He said, bundling back up and curling up in his chair.

"Ouch. You know you just cut me right? It hurts when you do that," I rubbed a fake wound.

"Boo-hoo." He shot back, rolling his eyes.

"Dead or won't talk to you... Not seein' them is the same thing after a while, right? For what it's worth, I'm sorry. You never really told me much about 'em. I just hope you made good memories with 'em instead of bad like the dummy sittin' next to you."

I looked at him again.

He didn't look back.

"I know you're staring at me," Stagger said and I smiled.

"Got anything else to do up here besides look at you?"

Stagger sat up, reached down beside his seat and tossed something at me. I caught it purely out of surprise.

It was a Rubix cube.

"Fine. Be an asshole." I threw it at his face.

Hard.

He leaned his head back and let it smash against the side of the ball shuttle wall. Pieces of it skittered down onto the floor.

"You owe me a Rubix cube."

"Suck my dick."

"Wait, you have a dick?" Stagger asked, sarcasm rich in his voice. He looked over at me, horrified, "Okay, that's a little rough. I don't

know if I can..."

I burst into laughter.

"What, you got a problem with transexuals? What if I'm a chick with a dick who was born a man? Then what?"

"Then I've been improperly using your pronouns?" Stagger asked, covering his mouth with a gasp.

"Shut up." I laughed, "you've been improperly stayin' off my nerves."

Stagger smiled, "Constantly."

"Yeah, no shit."

"Do you really have a dick though?" Stagger asked, his tone serious.

"Wha- No!" I smiled, "why? Would that change anything?"

"I guess if I think about it, not really," Stag shrugged. "How does that even work? Do you paper, scissors, rock it for who's on the pitcher's mound every Saturday?"

"No, I'd just make you my bitch," I said, my tongue slipping out at him.

Stagger laughed again, "See? Why's it gotta be all aggressive?" He pointed at me.

"Alright, fine. I'd go balls deep on you and be really nice about it."

We both laughed hard.

"That's better. You gotta ease me into it, y'know? Wine and dine me a little. Kiss me in the ear or something." Stagger said.

"Oh, alright," I smiled, "Malcolm."

"Jesus!" Stag said, rolling his eyes, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

"You thought I was gonna just forget like that? C'mon! What is it, Stag, Daddy issues? Mommy issues? Did he do things to you?" I said, my eyes wide.

"What!? No! Ew!" Stagger curled his lip at me, his nose wrinkling.

“Do I need to get a teddy bear and ask you to show me on the doll where he touched you?”

“What the hell, Charlie!” Stag said, hiding a smile.

“Maybe we can call that one guy from that news show that goes around catching kid-touchers in the act and outs ’em on TV.”

“Chris Hansen, and no, no, none of that. My parents were freedom fighters in the New Liberty Republic.”

“Those guys from Boreasland?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, “they were some of the first to stand up to NEST during the celestial uprising. You hear people joke about it nowadays but things were really heated back then. See, Perun wasn’t the only god that made celestials, and once they got made the celestials all wanted to make lesser celestials, then the whole thing got out of hand real quick. Everybody was trying to find their little kingdom to rule. Everybody wanted to be a god-king or something. Perun showed the world that even Brahma could die. After that, he ended up having to watch his own back. For a long time, there was just too many gods.”

“Looks like he did a bang-up fuckin’ job. Everybody talks about that guy like they’re afraid to say his name. Who is he, Lord Voldemort?”

“Who?”

“The bad guy fr-... nevermind.”

“Whatever. Look, it’s easy for you to say, you’ve never seen his power first hand.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Worse,” Stagger nodded, “My dad used to tell me back when he had the Heart Fire he would snap his fingers and entire cities would disappear into ash. The heat from the explosion would evaporate the water out of your body if you were too close to the impact zone. Turn you into a pile of salt.”

“Holy shit... Was he who killed your parents?”

“No. A guy named Bill took my parents from me.” Stagger’s eyes went back out the window.

“Bill? Just Bill?” I asked.

“His last name was Lyons. Y’know. Brother of Apollyon.”

“Paul Lyons has a brother!?” I yelled, shooting upright in my chair.

“Had.”

“Holy fuck. You killed Paul’s brother!?”

“Billy Lyons owed me a debt he couldn’t afford to pay. I collected. It’s that simple.”

We sat silently in that dark ball shuttle watching our breath cloud in the air. I pulled my blanket back around me, looking over at Stagger’s hand on his armrest. I wanted to hold it.

“I’m sorry about your parents, Mal.”

“Don’t worry about it. Listen,” Stag said, looking over at me. “I think we should really have that talk now.”

I shook my head, “No. We shouldn’t. I don’t do secrets. Whatever it is, I don’t need to know.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t, Stag. Alright? Look, we’re not together. You don’t owe me shit, just drop it, okay? We start tellin’ secrets and suddenly we start makin’ goo-goo eyes and shit just gets complicated. I can’t take that right now.”

“But you just heard a secret.”

“Your name? C’mon, man. That’s not a secret. It’s a name. So what, show goes on.”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“What was your mom’s name?” I turned to look at him.

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about, Stag.”

“Really?” He asked and I turned away from him.

“Really.”

“Kathrine Poloma Lee.” He said after a while.

“Kapo,” I said back, my voice small, suddenly feeling like a dirtbag.

“Yeah...”

We both let the silence alone for a while.

“I don’t think it’s a stupid name anymore. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed.”

“Thank you. It’s fine.” He said, his voice genuine as another hanging silence took over.

“Do you have anything to eat in here?” I asked.

“Yeah, there’s,” he grunted, turning around and pointing over his seat, “in the storage compartments down there. Bottom ones, in the floor. There’s some military ration kits.”

I thought about sending my icon to go get them but I felt like stretching my legs a little. I got up with my blanket and headed over to the floor compartments, sitting on my heels. Lifting out one of the black plastic boxes from under the floor panels I could see it had the NEST logo on the front of it. I looked up at the back of Stag’s chair.

“Jeez, and I thought I used to steal a lot of shit. You’ve got like six of these things down here.”

“Yep,” he said, turning his chair around.

“What’s the shelf life on this shit?”

“Five years or so.”

“Jesus, what’s in it?”

A few moments later, Stagger and I were making our way through random ready to eat meals, picking out the desserts and grading them for flavor. We were both thankful for the chemical heat in the rations. Warm food made a difference at twenty degrees. I was about halfway through a blackberry cobbler and commenting on how soggy the crust was when he looked over at me.

“So listen, earlier on the road...” He started.

“I don’t know what I was thinking, Stag. Just drop it.”

“Drop it?” He said, staring at me.

“Yeah, drop it.” I refused to meet his eyes.

“I can’t even begin to keep up with you. Even your mixed signals have mixed signals.”

“Look, how many times do you want me to say this, alright? I’m fucked up, Stag!” I frowned at him.

“Everybody’s fucked up, don’t give me that shit. It’s like one minute you pull me in the next minute you push me out. I’m not a god damn yo-yo!”

“Yeah, well, that’s how it is, alright? Sometimes I forget and think for just one little second that I can have the same things everybody else can.”

“And why can’t you?”

“Because the very next second, the first thing that pops into my mind is how I don’t deserve it. And then I get confused. And then I just...”

“You just what?”

“I just wanna get high. Alright? There.” I threw my spoon down.

The silence between us almost hurt. It went on way too long. I opened my mouth to say something, but Stagger just lifted his hand to stop me.

“It’s alright, Charlie.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I wish I could get over my shit and just be normal. I just need you to understand, Stag.” He wouldn’t look at me. “Mal.”

He put those hazel eyes on me and I felt them like a punch. I wanted to shrink away from them.

“It’s okay, Charlie.”

“No, it’s really not. You don’t deserve the way I...”

My life was saved by a message that flashed in my vision via the HUD.

Back in 5 days. - Bijou

Stag must have seen it too, he lifted his head to look at the message as well.

“I guess Chroma told her we can’t take any calls,” Stag said, looking through the clearing clouds at Howl Valley below.

We still hadn’t seen any lights from Ball Ships taking off. We saw plenty of shuttles scuttling about in the streets below. This high up they were hard to make out but since apparently they had shut half the city down, it was made easier by the fact that the entertainment district’s lights were off.

“I noticed some of these things are bigger than others. That intentional or is it just people that want to spend more money?” I asked, indicating the ball shuttle.

“Yeah. ball ships and ball shuttles. The smaller ones like this one are just for local stuff. Maybe a hop to a nearby island, but they’re no good in the distance. Not big enough, not enough speed and the Radiant Stone reserve isn’t as big. They only hold smaller stones. Anyway, the really big ones, the ships. They can go a lot farther, but they tend to be inconvenient around town.”

“Like Bijou’s,” I nodded.

“Yeah. We use Bijou’s ship to travel. We’ll probably be taking her’s to the middle of the High Moor. ball ship, ball shuttle. Easy enough. Then there are Fat Birds.”

“Fat Birds?” I screwed my lip up.

“Yeah, like motorcycles on earth. They’ve only got one big wheel though. They’re round like shuttles. Really fast, good for getting around on an island. They can fly in short bursts too.”

“Oh, cool. I want a Fat Bird,” I said.

“You want everything,” Stag laughed.

“Yeah? So what. How far up are we goin’?”

“Elevation level three, maybe four depending on where the Farfygian Line is now. I’d check the map, but it doesn’t really matter.”

“Farfygian Line?”

“Thickest cloudline. The rough one with all the turbulence. Bijou likes to go speeding through it like a mad woman.”

I thought back to our first trip down here when I thought Bijou wanted to beat my ass instead of bite it.

“Oh, gotcha... five days, huh? I guess they figured out what they’re making for me. Jeez, that’s cutting it close.”

“I guess so. Looks like we’ve just about run out of time. You gonna be ready for this?”

“I’m gonna have to be, Stag. We got no choice. Robin’s life is on the line and I still don’t know what Orcus’ game plan is,” I recovered my spoon and dug it into my cobbler.”God knows he’s certainly not sittin’ down enjoying ziplock cobbler.”

“Probably not.” Stag shook his head, his voice trailing off.

I could feel him staring at me and it made me look up at him from another gloopy mouthful of liquid pie.

“What?” I asked.

“You should prepare yourself for bad news.”

I had been thinking about that since I got here. The fact that I’d probably gotten Robin killed.

“Yeah... God, I don’t know what I’m gonna do if I find out I got another sister killed.”

My eyes started to burn at that thought.

Stagger lifted both hands and rubbed his face.

“I can handle it.” I lied. “Even if I can’t, I don’t have a choice. If he killed my sister...”

I shook my head.

“Orcus is no joke, Charlie. He’s dangerous. The Underworld is probably just as dangerous. Not to mention what we’re about to face at Hymeris’ place.” He looked at me and I looked away.

“I’ll do what I have to. I’m getting my sister back. If I can,” I said.

“He’s more than a notion. He’d have to be to rule the Underworld. He’s not like those two valkyrie you fought.”

“Fought? More like got kicked around by,” I scoffed, “I just slammed into them with style.”

When I looked back he was still staring.

“What did you say?” He asked.

“I said I got my ass handed to me.”

“After that.”

“I was just sayin’ that all I really did was slammed into them a lot. Bout the only time I even hit them, really.”

“I just thought of something.” He said, sitting up, his eyes moving around quickly.

“What?”

“I know how to fix you.”

“Fix me? Look, I told you, I can’t-”

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“What, then?” I asked, my lip curling.

“You ever see a wrecking ball up close?”

I gave him a crooked little smile, catching on.

“Yup,” I said, letting the last letter of the word pop.

CHAPTER 9

Don't Stop Me Now

The next five days went by so fast it frightened me. Time seemed to speed up when there was something on the horizon that you dreaded. Every time the sun went down I would wake up the following morning with a heavier lump in my stomach. Every day it got harder to get to sleep.

Not just because of the impending fight, but because of the aches and pains. My body was recovering much faster than normal. By morning it was like hitting a reset button, but my biggest trouble was getting to sleep in the first place.

Try to sleep after falling down five long staircases, your body a lumpy, purple, aching mess and you can't take a breath without crying. That was the extent of my training with Stagger.

Everything happened in fast forward when it came to pain. The stronger I got, the harder it was to sleep it off. I quickly learned, with Chroma's help, that my mechanism for healing had everything to do with sleep. It was integral to my survival. I didn't just need to sleep, I had to. Even when Stagger and I were up on that valley wall beating the hell out of one another I'd have to stop and take power naps just to stay in the game.

Just to make it until sundown.

Stagger was on to something though. It was like he'd figured out the missing piece in my fight. We weren't practicing attack patterns anymore, we were trying to see just what it would take to get my flesh and bones to break. We'd work on defense routines, whirling and spinning, using my hands to deflect the side of the Atma Weapon. A few times I'd catch the edge and end up howling in pain as he bruised my knuckles. I used the pain to power me. To work harder, to concentrate on hitting the mark.

The edge hurt, the flat didn't. It was a simple philosophy. If I had my forgemaster gloves though, it wouldn't matter.

When we weren't perfecting the dance, we were scouting large boulders. Using my multi-tool to absorb the impact of them. He had me running them down, attempting to hit them with enough force to move them. It hurt, but after a while, I figured out how to hit them with just enough force to make them roll over. He said my best offense was solid defense and I couldn't really call him wrong.

It was day six now.

Day of.

I had so many nerves in my stomach the night before that it took me forever to get to sleep at Bijou's place. I couldn't help but think about her and the forgefolk. I tried to concentrate on the mental image of the roaring fire. Tried to conjure up the feeling of that familiar heat against my skin and the ringing sound of hammers striking metal.

I remembered Sindri and Brokkr. The brothers Bokk.

While Sindri didn't often work down in the forges anymore, Brokkr was there every day overseeing the fires. It was ironic that I lived and worked in a place that produced weapons for my enemies, but I knew the forgefolk had to make a living like everyone else.

It didn't offend me. I even worked on a few things for Valhalla myself. Metal buckles, strap anchors and other small things mostly,

but it put a sadistic smile on my face to know that tomorrow I might very well clash with a weapon I helped build.

I thought about those incredible hammers Brokkr and Sindri used again and it astounded me the kind of strength it must have taken to hoist them. To swing them over and over again. Not like the ones they kept at their sides, no. The massive hammers used to craft Boreas Metal from the Icy Moor. I remember trying to lift one of those things once before Brokkr made me my own little hammer. I couldn't make it budge.

When I finally did get to sleep, it was frightful. I must have tossed and turned all night. In my dream, I had made it to the terrible, awful underworld.

Fire and brimstone were in the air. It burned my lungs and eyes. I was covered in blood from head to toe, dragging myself along through the shattered roads of the Broken City. I couldn't see him, but I knew. Somehow I knew inside of me that Stagger and Bijou were dead.

I crawled on my hands and knees, suddenly feeling the tightening grip of a leash around my throat tethered to the chain that Gozen Morrow was holding as she kicked me through the streets of the damned, laughing at me. She made me crawl all the way to the dark obelisk at the burning center of this mad world, perverted by the evil whim of Orcus.

She showed me mercy and let me mourn beside the broken, bloody body of Robin, laying atop a dark altar. Another sacrifice to my failure. All around me were copies of myself in the midst of all of my shortcomings as Gozen rolled my face in it like a bad dog.

One version of me curled in a corner, crying. A belt was around my arm, I held it tight with bloody teeth while I pushed a needle into my veins. My face was bruised and red.

I remembered that day.

That was the day my ex-boyfriend left me. What was worse, was even though most of my life with him was violence and fighting, I missed him. He was the only one that loved the real me. That destroyed person cowering in her dirty apartment, ruining her veins.

There was another me laying on the ground in the street after being thrown from a moving vehicle. That was the last day I had ever driven a car. And consequently the last day I had ever wanted to. I heard Sammy's scream and it radiated through my body, torturing me as I knelt at Robin's altar.

On and on, all around.

Me.

Filthy, horrible me.

And then the laugh of Gozen Morrow. I didn't have to look back at her to know she was there. I couldn't remember her face. I didn't want to look back to see if I could.

I felt her grab a handful of my hair and yank my head back. Watched her slide her other hand over the red, wet surface of the altar. She then slapped me in the face with her open palm, rubbing Robin's blood all over my face.

I sat up fast, screaming, rubbing my face, rolling out of bed and hitting the floor. My sheets had tangled me up and all I could feel was the clawing hands of my own failures. The hands of Gozen all over me.

"Get off, get off! Get off of me!" My desperate, hysterical scream filled Bijou's guest room as I tore the sheet away, grateful for fresh air. I turned over to sit leaning against the bed, out of breath.

"Shit..." My hands came up, rubbing at my face.

It felt so real. I had never been so glad to be awake in my life. I felt the lump in the pit of my stomach, still feeling Robin's blood on me.

"Shiny," I said, and my travel icon whizzed over to me, emitting that green light.

"Aye, good morning, Wee Lass. Seems you've had a bit of a start."

“Yeah... something like that.”

“Would you like me to start a bath?” I remembered then that Bijou had given my icon permissions in her place.

I nodded my head and water started to run in the tub across the hall.

“Shiny... I think today is the day I die.”

“What makes you say that, Lass?”

“I just kinda know it.” I scratched my head, “and honestly... I’ve been running from it so long, I don’t even care anymore. Living is so goddamn hard. I never was any good at it. Is it sad that... I’m actually not even that scared anymore?”

“It’s natural. Humans have been known to accept death when it’s become an inevitability. But just because you feel like it’s the end... that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t fight for every breath.”

I thought about those words.

“Yeah... I guess if today is my last day... I owe it to the people who gave a shit about me to be the best me that I can.”

“Isn’t that how you’re supposed to live every day?”

“I should’ve.”

* * *

Two hours later I was walking to Chroma’s office. I didn’t bother calling Stagger to come pick me up. I wanted to actually get out and look around. I wanted to enjoy every minute that I could. There was a certain liberation in knowing that by the time the sun went down I would be gone, along with all the pressures of life. What did I care about anything? None of it would matter to me once I bled my last drop.

I thought about Stagger and smiled.

I wasn’t sure what I felt for him, but I know whatever it was, I liked it. I knew if I was going to die, the worst thing I could do was

tell him. Leave him wondering what kind of life we would have had if everything went our way.

That would be selfish. Stagger deserved better. He had a good soul.

I thought about Jack back home. About my sisters, both living, dead and more than likely dead. I thought about every mistake I'd ever made leading up to this day and I exhaled.

"It's all finally over."

Hearing it out loud gave those words a certain truth. I felt a silly smile pull at the corners of my lips. I wasn't even scared by the fact that I almost welcomed the moment when my breath left my body.

I headed towards the same corner store we passed every day to and from the park. Rummaging around in my pockets, I found the leftover change I had from last night's takeout. Stagger had bought of course, but he gave me the money to go to the door and pay.

There wasn't a lot there, just a few boltas. I wasn't really sure what the value of any of it was, but when I walked into the store, I didn't really care.

It was a clean place with smooth white floors. The walls looked pristine and modern, every shelf neatly packed with uniform matte silver packages. There weren't any words on any of it. I kinda frowned a bit and looked over at the teller behind the counter leaning on it. He was staring into the air, moving a finger every now and then as if he was turning a page.

"Fuck. Right," I let my travel icon free, "HUD mode."

The store came alive.

Advertisements were splashed across the walls. Full commercials played, sound flooded my ears from every angle. Even the white floor beneath my feet was alive with dancing colors and shapes. My feet made funny cheering sounds as I walked across it, tiny little fireworks exploding around my shoes.

Smiling, I looked over at the shelves and saw those silver packs now glimmering with delicious looking pictures of food. Cookies rolled off of the packages and spun about in the air, dunking themselves in digital glasses of milk. Energy bars burst upwards like rocket ships off of the packages and bottles of water had beautiful, splashing coastlines on them, sending the mind to gorgeous beaches where the water was crystal clear.

I turned and walked further on, laughing at some of the funnier packages, right before I stopped at a box that had sumptuous looking, flat, iced bread cakes popping out of what looked like a toaster.

My mouth opened wide.

Blue Veil had Pop-Tarts.

“Oh, fuck yeah!”

* * *

By the time I got to Chroma’s office, I was halfway through the box. I stopped at a coffee shop to grab a plastic knife and a few single-serving pads of butter. The cashier at the store I purchased my Pop-Tarts from suggested it. I didn’t even care that people kept stopping to stare at me. Kept saying how much I looked like Siobhan. I just laughed it off.

“Oh, yeah. People say that all the time, no relation.”

The entire way to my destination I was awkwardly smearing thick wads of creamy yellow spread on the backs of my toaster pastries and stuffing them into my mouth.

“Oh my god. Oh my god!” I said, rushing into Chroma’s office. My fingers were a mess, I probably had butter on my cheeks and crumbs around my mouth, but I didn’t care.

Chroma God and Stagger looked up from their seats. Stagger’s eyebrows descended, his eyes widening as he looked at me.

“Good morning, Charlie,” Chroma greeted me with a wave.

“What are you eating?” Stag asked.

“Have you ever put butter on a Pop-Tart?” I asked, my eyes wide as sugar bounced through my veins.

“It’s so frickin’ good,” Stagger said through a smile.

“I know, right!? I had no idea. I’ve just been the worst fat kid the whole way here.”

“How many of those have you eaten?”

“Five?”

“Jesus.”

Chroma was sitting at the table watching me. I looked over at him and I could tell he knew where I was. Not just physically, but mentally. I could see it through the concern on his face.

“Are you alright, Charlie?” He asked.

“Huh? Yeah... I’m okay. I’m good.” I nodded, sitting down at the table with my box of Pop-Tarts and packets of butter.

“Stagger and I have been going over the information we’ve just gotten from our spy at the Bacchus Theater.”

I gave him a sign of acknowledgment but wasn’t really paying attention. I smeared more butter on my last toaster snack.

“Charlie,” Chroma said, his voice gentle.

I kept spreading butter.

“Charlie,” he said again, leaning forward.

I set the knife down.

Looking up at him, then Stagger, I put my snack down on the table.

I wished I could be anything other than myself just then. A chair. A cat. Someone else having a much better life than me.

I wanted to be back home with my daddy sitting at the table waiting for mom to make breakfast. I wanted to be talking to Sammy in my room, chewing bubblegum and watching TV.

I felt tears start to rim my eyes.

“I’m scared.”

“It’s alright, Charlie,” Stagger said.

“I’m sorry I’ve been such a crybaby.”

“You’re fine, it’s okay,” he said.

Chroma got up from his seat and walked over to me, taking a seat in the chair beside mine.

“Charlie... I can’t imagine what you must be going through. I don’t think anyone among us can. You’ve been to places that would kill the heart of most people and endured the kind of hardships no one should ever have to. Especially not shoulders so small. But listen to me, because this is important.”

I looked up at him, wiping tears out of my eyes, accidentally smearing butter on my face.

“Some of the strongest people I’ve ever known faced insurmountable odds with tears in their eyes. There is absolutely nothing wrong with being afraid.” He placed his hand on my wrist and squeezed it reassuringly. “Fighting the good fight is often scary.”

I nodded but didn’t say anything. I didn’t have any words.

“Go boldly, Charlie... and mighty forces will aid your hands.” His hand left my wrist to squeeze my shoulder.

Just then, every travel icon in the room lifted into the air, painting the picture of Bijou’s beautiful face in front of us. Seeing it brought dread into my heart.

“It’s time,” she said, her silver eyes cutting into me.

“I hope you have some good news for us,” I heard Stagger say.

“The best.”

Chroma and Stagger stood. I sat there staring at my cold Pop-Tart.

“Alright. The clock is ticking. The continents have shifted again and Hymeris’ theater is closer than ever,” Bijou said, looking at Chroma God.

“Right. I’ll take my ball ship down into the Icy Moor. When it’s over, we’ll need a place to fall back to if things get ugly, but more importantly, we need to enlist the help of the NLR in Boreasland.

Hopefully, they'll listen to reason and see the wisdom in moving against the Bright Throne as one," Chroma said.

"After today everything changes. Perun is going to take this as an official call to war," Bijou said.

"Had to happen sometime," Stagger stood, moving towards the door.

"Charlie, are you ready?" Bijou asked, her face and her tone as resolute as I'd ever heard.

No more was there teasing and musical sweetness in her voice. It was a husky, powerful and demanding thing that forced my attention.

"Y-... yeah," I said, my voice tiny.

She gave me a reassuring smile, "You're amazing. You can do this, Charlie."

I felt a little blush. Bijou was that friend that always knew what to say. I smiled at her and stood up, shaking my head to shift my curly bangs that were spilling from my pompadour.

"How were the forgefolk?"

"They're good. They're all rooting for you."

I nodded, happy to hear her words.

"So what did they make?" Stagger asked.

"See for yourself, Stag."

* * *

We were out in the cold of Old Settler's Place at the landing docks.

Chroma and Stagger said their farewells, Chroma giving me a reassuring pat on the shoulder. I had my hands stuffed in my pockets to stave off the chill, my hoodie the only thing standing between me and freezing.

"You can do this, Charlie. We stand and fall side by side," he said before marching towards his ball ship.

Behind Bijou's ship, Stagger grabbed his bag and marched towards the side door. It irised open for both of us. Making our way

inside, my eyes widened, looking at the inside of Bijou's ship in HUD mode for the first time.

It was a wash of purple, white and gold tones. Animated banners ran along the upper parts of the walls. The floor was alive with squares of flashing purple and gold light that lit up when we walked on them. I could hear music playing inside and wondered just how my travel icon managed to help me hear it when I couldn't before. I was bored to tears in this thing last time and here I was looking at everything like it was all new to me now.

Screens were on the walls playing poppy cartoons, no doubt features from Blue Veil as I didn't recognize any of them. Games played demo stages waiting for someone to connect to them and enjoy them. Even the seats were rimmed in glimmering bands of gold light all the way up to the front.

"Bijou, are you one of those creepy cartoon show fangirls?"

"Maybe," She said from the pilot's seat, looking back at me with a smile.

"This is... really cool. I want a ball ship." I whined.

"Like I said, you want everything," Stagger said, laughing.

I walked towards the front of the ship moving towards her in the cockpit as I felt the ship start to lift off.

"It's expensive and the fuel is a pain in the ass. Radiant Stones don't come cheap. Trust me, you're better off." Stagger said, unzipping his bag. "I'm suiting up. Bijou, what's our ETA?"

"Three hours if we take the gravity well. Zero-g should give us the momentum we need to get up to speed and punch through when the gravity hits us again. We shouldn't have any trouble powering through Lilith's Run into the High Moor," Bijou said.

"Lilith's Run? Like Lily Little?" I asked, surprised.

"You know her?" Bijou looked back at me with an eyebrow up.

"Yeah... something like that. I'd rather not talk about it," I replied.

“Oh, I get it. She’s one of the best interrogators in NEST. I can only imagine. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. What’s she got to do with where we’re going?”

“She just happens to be one hell of a pilot. Most of the ball ship evasive protocols and maneuverability were designed by her back before the celestial uprising. She’s a valkyrie but was born in Boreasland where most ball ships are made. Even though the continents don’t exactly see eye to eye, Boreasland’s entire industry is built around making ships,” Bijou said as I made it up front and took a seat beside her.

“Why do they call it her run?”

“Because,” Stagger said, “it’s treacherous. It’s a narrow slip between two continents full of falling rock and jagged outcroppings just wide enough to get a ship through. And because of the shifting gravity, falling boulders get tossed back up creating an ever-present obstacle course of deadly debris, turbulence, and wind. On top of that, moisture and intermittent cloud cover end up freezing and unfreezing rain, so you get random lightning storms the entire way up.”

“Yup. It’s dangerous. Very dangerous. The first person to attempt it successfully was Lilly. And unfortunately for us, it’s the fastest way up,” Bijou said.

“How long if we go around?” I asked.

“Thirteen hours around, three hours through,” Bijou replied as she adjusted the ship’s settings above her and then again on the console in front. Looking over the dash in front of me, I thought back to when she asked me to take my feet down.

Springing up from it was several monitors, all tilted to aim at the driver’s seat. Each was a different view of the outside of the ship like digital mirrors. There was also a series of gauges that explained pitch and roll and a couple of other things I didn’t understand. None of this was in Stag’s shuttle.

I realized then the difference between a casual and a professional pilot. Then I just felt like an asshole for putting my feet on her shit because I was too stupid to know HUD mode existed back then.

I looked back at Stagger and saw him peeling out of his coat. I watched him take off his tie and start unbuttoning his shirt before I turned back forward in a hurry. I kinda felt like a pervert, but I peeked back again.

Stagger was waiting for me.

He was standing there with his shirt off, his tight skin looking as if it were poured over tectonic plates of lean muscle. He looked like someone carved him out of wood or marble, paying extra close attention to every delicious trench outlining his pecs and abs. I wanted to bite his solid-looking chest.

My eyes moved all the way down him, stopping at the only imperfection I could see. A slash on his right side that looked like an animal had swatted him with razor sharp claws. Each line was no more than a few inches long. A graze. I couldn't help but wonder what he'd run into that gave him a souvenir like that.

Then his hand lifted from his side and beckoned my eyes upward. I managed to tear my eyes off of his body and get them to move up, meeting his gaze. I could feel the heat in my face.

"You're not getting sweet on me, are you, Charlie?"

"No, sir," I heard my voice crack and I swallowed, turning back around.

Bijou offered me a bottle of water from the bag beside her.

"Thirsty?" She asked, her tone as playful as the grin on her face.

I snatched it and glared at her.

"Shut up," I hissed.

"Sorry, Hon." She was still smiling.

"Stag, most people change in the bathroom," I said, making sure to stare forward.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to break ball ship social rules. Is there a membership fee? Do I get a jacket?” He said from behind us.

“Yep,” Bijou nodded, “It’s pink and has prissy ponies on the pockets.”

“I’d wear it,” Stag called back and I heard him buckling his battle gear.

“You would,” I snapped back.

I heard his footsteps as he walked up behind us, resting his hands on the backs of our seats. I could smell his chestnut scent and had to take a breath to catch myself. If we met under any other circumstances, I would have done anything that man told me to.

Anything.

Then I found myself wondering just what kind of things a guy like Stagger thought about when he was hot and bothered. Was he one of those gentle lovers that wanted babies, or were babies just a consequence of him fucking me into submission? I found myself hoping he was the rough sort.

“Fuck,” I said through a breath.

Anybody that thinks women are delicate flowers that don’t ever have unclean thoughts, think again.

Yes, we burp, yes we fart, and yes.

We do want the dick.

Or pussy.

Or both.

We’re probably thinking about it just as often as guys are, we just multitask well enough to think about it while we’re still being productive members of society. Guys, however, seem to suffer some kind of palsy while they’re looking at the booty. Ogling away like obvious idiots.

My eyes traveled over Stagger, looking at his lean battle gear.

He had a protective vest of some kind on. It was tactical and dark, made out of material that couldn’t have been thicker than an inch, yet

somehow it seemed unbreakable. He had his coat back on and over his dark pants, he had light armor strapped to his knees, shins and the tops of his boots like some kind of urban ninja.

I could only hope what Bijou brought me was half as neat looking. I certainly couldn't go blasting my way through the Bacchus Theater in a hoodie.

Out of the window, I saw the first cloudline looming ahead of us like grey, foreboding smoke. Bijou punched us right into it, cloud vapor whirling behind us creating an upward facing tornado that I could see in one of her rear view monitors as we rose steadily.

"Close. We'll hit zero gravity in twenty seconds. Then it's full burn all the way past the Lighthouse. Lilith's Run in forty minutes."

"Right. Charlie, I think you'd better suit up. Start getting used to your gear," Stag said.

I stood up and tried to slide by him, my pulse quickening when his hands found my middle. I tilted my head up, looking him in the eyes, fighting the urge to push up onto the tips of my toes and attack his mouth.

"I'm good," I said, grabbing his hands and sliding them off of me.

"Sorry, I was just... helping," he offered, squeezing past me. We switched sides and he sat down finally.

"Oh my god," Bijou whispered.

I didn't have to look at her to know she was rolling her eyes.

"What?" Stag asked.

"Nothing, Malcolm," Bijou said in a singsong tone. "Charlie, your stuff is in the storage compartment."

"Stagger," He whined under his breath, "Stagger. Lee. It's not that hard."

"Bottom or side?" I asked, pointing at the floor as I looked back at Bijou.

"Bottom," she called back to me just as we hit zero gravity.

My feet floated off the ground and I fell forward, turning end over end in place.

“Whoa-- what th... shit!”

I had to grab the handle to the storage compartment to stop myself. Pulling my legs down to the ground, I turned my eyes front and saw Bijou’s hair standing up. Stagger’s wavy hair was as well.

Bijou’s mug started lifting out of her cup holder. She grabbed it and took a swallow, jamming it back into place just as she hit the throttle and sent us barreling upward, simulating gravity. The seats at the helm moved upward, rotating along the shape of the ship to face the ceiling, the window panels shifting to allow them to look straight up.

My feet hit the ground and I felt my skin pull on my body. Squatting down, I turned the handle on the compartment and lifted it open, looking down into the storage compartment below.

“That’s weird. How come that didn’t happen on your shuttle the other night, Stag?” I asked, looking straight up at the back of he and Bijou’s heads.

“Stagger paid for gravity stabilizers. I put the extra money into the thrusters and the propulsion array, Sweetheart,” Bijou said and it made perfect sense.

She was the fun kind of reckless.

Looking down I saw the symbol of the Perch sitting on a large trunk. The familiarity brought a smile to my face. I reached down and brushed over the emblem, feeling every textured ridge and groove of its bas-relief. I took a deep breath, remembering that wonderful place. Both of my hands grabbed the big trunk and hauled it out. Sliding back onto my ass, I pulled it up between my legs to look at it in the light. Just seeing it made me comfortable. It set my mind at ease.

I hugged the trunk and smelled its familiar scent. Embers from the forges. I thought of funny Brokkr and his jokes. I thought of Sindri

and his wisdom. I thought of Starland and the hope she gave me.

I thought about my daddy.

“I wish you could see me now, Daddy,” I whispered. “I’m gonna die today... it sucks you won’t get to see me do the best thing I ever did.”

I felt tears threatening my eyes but I blinked them away.

No more crying, Charlie. If this is your last day alive, finish strong. Finish strong.

I got to my knees and tried to open the trunk. The latches wouldn’t budge.

“What the... I think it’s stuck, Bijou.”

“No, it’s not. Put your hand on the top. It’s only supposed to be opened by you.”

“You don’t know what’s in it?”

“Not a clue. Sindri’s orders not to open it or touch anything inside. He shut the forges down for four days while he, Brokkr and Starland worked.”

“Starland worked the forges for me?” I gasped.

“The forgefolk love you, Charlie.”

“What did you guys do...?” I asked the trunk.

I was shocked by the thought of Sindri shutting down the forges so that the three people closest to me could make my armaments. I couldn’t fathom me being worth that. Placing my hand on top of the box, I tried to imagine what that wise old forgemaster might have created that was so important. I felt a warm sensation under my palm as if the box knew me. The latches cracked open and a hiss issued from the opening as the lid unfastened.

I brought both of my hands to the intricate handle on its face and read the inscription.

“Everything within I freely give to you and you alone,” I read aloud.

The way it was worded was strange but I decided to think nothing of it and pulled the trunk open.

Digital confetti sprang out of the box and I laughed a little as three screens popped up from left to right, each with a different face on them.

Brokkr, Starland and Sindri.

I felt my heart swell, a big smile pulling at my face as I pressed the play button on Brokkr's nose. I saw him and a few other forgefolk stumbling around in the halls, smacking frothy beer mugs together and singing.

They were well passed drunk.

"Lookit -- lookit me. I'm a," Brokkr said, waving his hands around in the air trying to pantomime something that no one could make heads or tails of. All of the forgefolk with him burst into laughter. Brokkr was spilling beer all over the floor. "I got myself a big nose, too! I say- I say, wife! Give it a squeeze and POW. Y'know what I mean? Pow... there was a chicken." He then collapsed onto the floor in a heap to uproarious laughter all around him.

I burst into laughter myself.

There was a jump cut. Brokkr was sitting up in bed, his sunken eyes and the ice pouch in his hand letting me know he was completely hungover.

"Ohhh, Wee Lass, I've overdone it. I just can't handle my beer after the tenth or eleventh pint." He put the ice pouch on his head. "Listen, I'm proud of ya. You've got a heart like the Nemean Lion, and that's what I've put in your left. Each of us has made ya something that's to aid you in your fight today. No matter what, Lass, I love ya. Ol' Brokkr's gonna miss ya if things go bad... so fight." He nodded, "fight with all you've got. All the forgefolk are with ya. Good luck."

Stagger climbed down from his seat and came to me. He sat down beside me on the floor and I rested my head on his shoulder. I played

Brokkr's message again and we shared a laugh. Stagger wrapped a reassuring arm around me and I felt him rub my shoulder.

I played Sindri's message next.

He was sitting in the observatory on our bench, looking ever upward at that spiral galaxy in the sky.

"Hello, child." I heard his familiar gravelly voice. "I suppose about now you're feeling a little on edge." He looked down, directly at me with those wise old eyes. "A little fearful. And of course, you would be. What you go to do is an uncertain thing. But you face it out of purpose and out of a desire to do good works and because of this, you will always have my love and respect. But take this thing, this fear... let it harden your resolve and temper your nerves. Fear comes from a lack of understanding and from the uncertainty of mortality. Today is the day you build your legacy. Do not let it be built on fear of the unknown, but rather, build it on the blocks of the work you leave behind. Your body of work tells the story of your legacy. Your story does not have to end this day. Realize you are mighty. Go boldly and powerful forces will aid your hands."

Sindri's words rang in my chest. I felt the swell of burgeoning pride. Not just for myself, but for my home. For the Perch. For my friends and my dad.

I didn't want to die. I didn't want to fall in battle without fulfilling my purpose. I thought about Siobhan's green eyes and the day she hugged me to her breastplate. She was passing me a torch from the past to light the future. Every one of these people that I loved were depending on me.

I leaned forward and pressed Starland's message.

She was smiling. Always smiling. I could see Chanticleer in the background folding sheets in the Medici wing.

"There's my girl. Chanti! Come say hi to Charlie!" She called back behind her, waving him over. Chanticleer trotted over and looked right at me from the past.

“Hey, Charlotte,” He said, smiling, his short black hair capped with the cloth Medici hat, his almond-shaped eyes bright. “I hear you’re doing really good. I’m glad to hear it. We’re proud of you. We’re all really proud. If you can take valkyries, I know this is no problem for you. I can’t wait to see you when you come back home. Be safe and fight hard. I’ll see you soon. Bye!” Chanti smiled and waved, heading back over to his duties.

“You be safe, alright, Love? You make it back home to us. Sindri still owes you some rag steaks and you’ve still got a spatula to finish in the forge!” Starland gave a laugh.

Stagger tilted his head to look at me.

“You make spatulas?” He asked.

“It’s a sword!” I whined, my shoulders dropping.

“I know it’s a sword, Love. I’m only teasing. Don’t get your knickers in a twist.” Starland said with the kind of perfect timing that would have only been better if she were right here with us.

Stagger and I both laughed.

“If you haven’t already, go ahead and open the box inside.” She said, pretending to wait for me, her brilliant eyes shining.

I reached down into the trunk and lifted the lid of the box enclosed. My mouth fell open at what I saw inside. There, neatly folded, was a white battle suit. It had navy blue leather accents throughout and beside it to the left and right was an equally blue set of forgemaster’s gloves. Each one had a different emblem. The one on the left was a silver plated bas-relief of a roaring lion’s head, the one on the right was the symbol of the forgemasters. The silver reliefs were molded into the leather gloves over the thick wrist bracers, accented in white stitching to match the armor.

I pulled the armor itself from between the gloves and brought it close to my face, looking at the high-quality material. I realized then that the white stitching had speckles of silvery metal within. The armor itself wasn’t bulky in the least. In fact, it looked like it was

made to hug my frame. The midriff was a little thicker than the rest, but even it seemed relatively thin and flexible. Each shoulder had a hard protective plate over them. The plates too were slim and unencumbered, yet just as adamant as the rest of the suit.

“Whoa!” Stagger said and I looked over at him, following his eyes down to the box.

I set the armor down in my lap and looked in as well.

“Oh my god...”

A round clock face was looking up at me. Or at least the etching of one. The surface of the metal was painted white with brushed silver accents for the numbers, the second indicators, and the hands. The clock went from one to seventeen. It was the pocket watch cover from the timepiece that fell from the ceiling in the forges at the Perch.

“I wager by now you’ve had your socks knocked off,” Starland said, laughing. “Meet the Perch’s pride and joy. Sindri says that shield is the best thing he’s ever made. Called it The Forgemaster’s Timepiece.”

Wrapping my fingers around the edge of the shield, I remembered just how heavy that stopwatch was back in the forges. I couldn’t lift that thing in a million years. I was a little scared that maybe Sindri had forgotten that it was too heavy for me. That he had gone to all this effort to make something so beautiful that I was too weak to use.

I felt a pang of guilt for being so weak.

I took a sobering breath, clenched my fingers and tried to lift up on the shield from that ornate box. To my surprise, I nearly threw it up over my head.

It didn’t weigh a thing.

My mouth fell open, “How the...”

“It’s the metal,” Starland answered once again like she was here with us. “The shield is empowered by Wolf Metal. He felt it important to make it Wolf Metal because of its special properties. Wolf metal

can't be lifted unless it's owner gives it to you. That's the curse of the Wolves Bane. It has to be given."

I remembered the words written on the outside of the box and smiled.

"Your left glove was made by Brokkr. It's the same power that lets him and Sindri lift those amazing hammers. It'll always amplify your strength as long as you're wearing it. The right glove will always match your endurance. As long as you're still standing your arm will stay steady. That one I made as a reminder, Love. Just like fighting off the drug and the drink... as long as you're willing to fight, our strength of will is with you. You'll always be able to lift your shield."

I was overwhelmed. I hated that the forgefolk didn't use travel icons. I wanted to call her. To call Sindri. To thank them for everything they had done.

We felt the ship jerk hard right and I paused Starland's message.

"We're in the Run. You're running out of time. It's going to get bumpy, guys." Bijou called from up above.

"How long?" I called up to her.

"About another twenty minutes."

Nodding, I tapped Starland's message again and let it play.

"Bijou told me you've discovered your power. It's amazing. I don't know if she's told you what it is, but it doesn't surprise me that it's you."

"My power is endurance. That's what you said," I looked up at Bijou, confused. She didn't say anything back.

"You have the Titan's Strength. Amazing, Love! How does it feel being only the second god to ever wield it? Must be doing your head in to think about," Starland said.

I looked at Stagger and he looked at me. The look on his face was as if he was seeing me for the first time.

"What?" I asked.

“Anyway, Love. It’s time to go, yes? Remember what I said,” I looked back at Starland’s video.

“Fight like you want to win!”

I set the shield aside to uncover the white and navy blue tactical boots that matched the armor the forgefolk had constructed for me.

“Titan’s Strength. Oh my god,” Stagger breathed, “Oh my god,” his voice elevated, “we’re gonna win. We’re gonna fucking win!” He shot up and climbed the railing on the wall to get back up to the co-pilot’s seat. “Perun’s gonna shit the bed when he finds out! When were you gonna say something, Bijou!?”

Bijou was laughing and I was confused.

“Oh, I dunno. I guessed you’d figured it out already,” she shrugged.

“Guys,” I said, concerned. “I’m confused again and you’re talking about me like I’m not here. I really hate it when you do that.”

“Shut your pretty little mouth and get dressed, Cutie.” Bijou said like I was a kid in the backseat of the car, “you’ve got some ass to kick shortly. Head in the game.”

“Okay...” My lip curled as I collected my things. “Hey, Stag?”

He looked down to meet my eyes.

“Yeah?”

“I’m gonna go get dressed,” I said like I was breaking instructions down for the simple minded. “In the bathroom.”

He flipped me off and I returned the gesture with a smile on my face.

I had to hurry though. We were running out of time before the ride became less than comfortable. I made it into the bathroom and stripped down to my underwear, stepping into that snug suit. Pulling it up over my shoulders, I looked for a zipper. Finding none, I pressed the material together where it seemed to conjoin and when I did, it sealed around my body.

Gasping in a panic I pulled at the material, scared that it was about to consume me like my blanket had in my dream. I stopped when I remembered who made it and laughed at myself.

“Shit,” I smiled, glancing up at myself in the...

My heart pounded. My blood felt like it stopped in my veins.

Standing in the bathroom mirror in front of me was the massive head and shoulders of the god of the underworld. I had gotten so excited I forgot about the mirror. Fear crept through my veins like a lethal injection.

His huge body was shot through with arrows, thorns, and brambles circling his arms and neck. Chroma’s glimmering white eyes shot light out from his sockets, permeating me with his stare. The entire bathroom was illuminated by that beautiful, terrifying light.

My bottom lip trembled.

He lifted his arm.

Balled up in his fist was blonde hair. He lifted his hand higher and stepped back. Dangling by her blood-soaked roots was the beaten, savaged body of my sister.

Her hands were twitching.

Her knuckles were raw and torn.

She’d been fighting for her life.

“Robin!” I climbed onto the sink and slammed my hands on the glass. “Robin! Oh my god. Oh my god, you sick, twisted- Let her go!” I slammed my little fist on the mirror. “Let her go you fuckin’ monster!”

The door of the bathroom burst open and Stagger rushed in beside me, grabbing me around the middle. I twisted, kicked and clawed at him.

“Let me go! He’s got my sister! I’m gonna fuckin’ kill you, Orcus. I’m gonna suck those eyes out of your fuckin’ head!”

“Charlie!” Stagger roared, slamming my back against the wall.

I glared at him, then back at the mirror, watching Orcus step backward into darkness, dragging Robin's body with him.

"Did you see it? Did you see what he did to her!?"

"Yes." Stagger said, his tone calm.

"We gotta get to her. Now!" I felt him grab my chin and force me to look at him.

"Charlie. Where do you think we're going?"

My eyes fell away from his. My face twitched. I didn't know what to do. I didn't even know how to cry about it. The memory of Robin, my strong, powerful sister, broken like that.

"I think I'm gonna puke."

I collapsed in front of the toilet and Stagger rubbed my back while I lost my pop-tarts.

"She was alive," he said and I nodded gasping as I retched into the bowl again.

"Barely," I said, my voice weak as I wiped my mouth with the towel hanging beside me. "I knew it. All this time I've been just fine... Robin's been in the fuckin' pit of hell."

I told myself I wasn't going to cry. I felt my eyes burning. I felt my vision cloud up.

"But she's alive," Stagger said again, "we'll get her back. That I swear."

I sat back against the wall feeling him stare at me.

Stagger never swore a day in his life. At least not to me.

"Alright," I nodded.

"We've got work to do."

"Yeah. I'm gonna finish gettin' ready," I said, taking his hand as he stood to help me up.

I saw him looking at me in the mirror, our bare hands touching. He stepped around behind me and wrapped his arms around my middle, resting his chin on top of my head.

“You are mighty,” I felt his arms hug me tighter, squeezing me against him.

“I guess we’ll see won’t we.” God, it felt good in his arms. Like I fit. I lifted my hands to his wrists and rubbed my fingers over his skin.

“There’s nothing you can’t do. You’ve got Titan’s Strength.” He smiled and I twisted my lips.

“I don’t know what that means,” I said, trying to pull away from him.

He pulled me tighter. I didn’t want to resist.

“Charlie,” Stag said. “You eat Heart Fire.”

“What?”

“That’s how you beat the twins,” He nodded.

“Whoa, whoa- wait... I.. what? I don’t...” I remember the forges then. I remember how I felt like the fire was pouring into me. Like it was feeding me. Everybody else just described it as hot. I always described it as comforting. No matter how hot it got. It burned, but it felt good.

Realization dawned on my face.

“Wait, I thought all gods ate Heart Fire.”

“Yeah. Slowly. I mean, it takes almost an age for a god to recover all of their power after reincarnation. For you, you pretty much accomplished that in a few months.”

“What about my endurance?”

“That was the tip-off. There have been a few gods who could soak some damage, but nothing like you can. Another few years and I don’t think anybody’s gonna be able to do anything with you.”

“That’s insane,” I shook my head.

I couldn’t help but think back to all the violence I had come to know first hand in my life. Perhaps I was a little bitter that Titan’s Strength only found me now. Where was it when I was a scared girl running from bullies, or a grown woman suffering life’s many waves of abuse.

“Every celestial you face, every god you fight, every burning ember of Heart Fire you come near will only make you stronger. Only other god alive on this planet that can do that is sitting on the Bright Throne.”

He finally let me go, slipping away from me towards the door.

I watched him through the mirror, feeling the warmth of his body still on mine. The warmth of that hug. I felt the buzzing of the goosebumps running down my back, face and arms not just from him holding me, but from the implications of what Titan’s Strength meant. To everyone I had sworn to protect.

“That’s kind of a big deal,” He said and backed out of the bathroom, closing the door.

It wasn’t just luck on the Perch that saved my life. I drank enough Heart Fire to outlast the twins. And the longer I stayed in this world and around Bijou, Chroma, Stagger and anyone else, my ability to take punishment would only increase. My ability would only grow.

That thought blew my mind as I went to Bijou’s cabinet and found mouthwash.

Taking a big swallow of it, I had to force myself to wash it around in my mouth and actually spit it out. The sting of the alcohol content made my hands shake.

I looked at that bottle and wanted to down it. To turn it up and rummage through the cabinet and find another. And another. Maybe if there was enough in the cabinet I could black out and not have to feel so scared.

I looked at my shaking hands and forced myself to put the cap on the bottle. Somehow I managed to put it back in the cabinet and close it. I leaned against the cabinet door.

“Leave it alone. Leave it alone. Please, please...” I licked my lips, swallowing the taste of the mouthwash that remained in my mouth, savoring the familiar sting.

I pulled on the fingerless gloves that Brokkr and Starland made for me. They fit my small hands perfectly. The hard knuckles of Boreas metal over the gloves shining back at me.

I looked over at the shield by the door.

I felt the presence of that mirror looming in front of me like a shadow from another world. I didn't want to look at it.

But I had to. I had to look at myself.

Pushing off of the cabinet, I turned to face... me.

I looked at the girl staring back at me. My short cropped hair, my white and navy armor outlining my body. She looked clothed in purpose. I hadn't seen myself since I was a little girl. I had been afraid of mirrors my whole life.

I looked myself in the eyes then.

"Hey..." I lifted my hand and waved at myself.

"Long time no see." I didn't even know my own face.

My eyes felt like a stranger's. I never had the experience of watching me grow into my adult face. The last me I saw was thirteen years old. The beautiful woman looking back at me with those sad, dark brown eyes was someone I never met. Like waking up from a coma.

I wanted to look away. I didn't know if it was because I didn't recognize my curly hair, so I lifted it with a hand and blocked it from view.

I still felt the pain of looking at a stranger.

My eyes retreated, looking away, accepting the fact that I would never be able to look me in the eyes again.

Or look in a mirror.

I didn't know me.

"Robin... I'm comin'."

I marched towards the door and lifted my shield, stowing it on my back as I stepped out into the ship, my boots thunking on the floor. I

couldn't help but notice I felt taller from the thick rubber under my feet.

"So this is what five foot two feels like," I grinned and did a little dance.

I made my way out to the middle of the passenger floor, looking upward through the windshield. Ahead all I could see was rock faces. The side of an impossibly jagged and craggy wall. Arching spikes of electricity popped between them. Rolling chunks of cloud wafted all around us as the air turned turbulent. I reached up and tried to grab one of the bracing handles but I was too short.

"Figures," I said just as Bijou hit the accelerator and rolled the ship hard right.

She pasted my little ass to the side wall.

"Ow!" I cried out.

Lightning flashed as we blasted into a thick chunk of a cloud. Thunder roared right after it, shaking the entire ship.

We spun back hard the other way to avoid a jutting stone ledge and I got bounced the other direction, groaning as I met another wall.

"Shit! Charlie!" She called back, "Stagger Lee, why didn't you put the seats back up?!"

"Sorry," Stag said, looking down and watching as I did an impression of a pinball machine.

I managed to roll in the air to land on my feet a few times but I couldn't keep up with Bijou's maneuvers. Stagger didn't seem to care because he started laughing.

"Stag!" I yelled up at him.

"Right, right. Hold your horses boss lady."

He tapped a few controls on the digital face in front of him and I caught one of the passenger seats as the rows extended from the wall behind Bijou, pulling myself into one.

Holding on to the armrests to hold myself in it, I shouted over my shoulder.

“Bijou... how do the seatbelts work!?”

I remembered my first trip in her ship when she suddenly decelerated and sent me under her dash.

“Slide the button from red to green, press it in, then connect the buckle. Release, then slide the button over to red to lock it back.” She said back, grunting as she pitched the ship upward, just avoiding a falling chunk of rock.

“Whoa!” Stagger ducked down in his seat, “Christ. That was on my side. Bijou, that was on my side!”

“Calm down, you big baby,” she said.

I struggled my way through those buckling instructions and sat back. I closed my eyes as we pitched, rolled and skirted our way through Lilith’s Run. Every time the ship pitched hard I thought it would be our last. I kept imagining us hurling into the side of the rock face and blowing up into a great puff of orange fire and smoke.

I was actually thankful to have my new shield on my back. It absorbed me slamming into the seat whenever Bijou sent us tumbling end over end or spiraling upward like a bottle rocket. The ship’s stabilizers were working overtime to keep the vomit inducing inertia to a minimum, but I was still feeling it. I had already thrown up what little I managed to eat for breakfast, so hanging on until the ride became smooth wasn’t really a problem. I just kept my eyes closed and rocked about in my seat hoping my complicated seatbelt was buckled properly.

Stagger had eventually hit his stride. Somewhere between losing his mind and enjoying the ride, he had grown confident in Bijou’s abilities as a pilot.

Thirty minutes later and he was laughing like a schoolboy on an amusement park ride.

Our path had grown a little less hectic, a little less bumpy and the turbulence let up as we broke through the cloud cover into a fairly

straight portion of Lilith's Run. My fingers loosened on the armrests of my chair and I allowed myself to breathe freely.

My mind wandered back to the image of Robin at the mercy of Orcus.

Bijou and Stagger were talking about me like I wasn't there again. I ignored their chatter for the most part. I was thankful for their company though. As much as I was angry and scared for my sister's condition, I was also worried about what we would be facing. The cat was clearly out of the bag. Orcus knew we were coming. He probably had reported what he'd seen in the mirror.

Me in this armor.

The Bifrost would be at the dock in under two hours. I looked at the digital screen in front of me that gave me a view from the front of the ship. My back was to Bijou and Stagger's seats so this was the best I was going to get. The sky was so far away in this dark chasm. I could only see brief glimpses of it miles above like a grey lightning bolt standing still in the sky when a particular curve in Lilith's Run allowed us to see all the way up. Brief little places where the walls were relatively flat and the falling rocks and pockets of cloud parted just enough.

I tried to focus on what Stagger and I had been drilling the last few days. Defense. Defensive offense. Using my body as a weapon instead of a weapon. I still had my Atma Sword in my inventory though, just in case.

I then thought about the new things I'd acquired and smiled.

"Shiny," I said, my travel icon hovering out in front of me.

"Aye?" It said back.

"Can I add to my multi-tool inventory?"

"Would you like to add your present armaments, Lass?"

"Yes."

Multi-tool Inventory:

SLOT 1: Wing Propulsion

SLOT 2: Atma Sword

SLOT 3: Forgemaster's Timepiece

SLOT 4: Forgemaster's Armor (modified)

SLOT 5: EMPTY

"Would you like to make any other changes, Love?"

"No. What's today?"

"Sunday, Wee Lass."

"Oh. Hey, can you open the Appstore?"

A second digital screen burst to life in front of me.

THIL MARKETPLACE / Free Sunday Event!

Shop now!

"Oh, awesome," I said, trying to find anything to distract myself from what was coming.

I browsed through the marketplace for several minutes looking at different wing propulsion styles that all had a cost. There were also a few ornamental weapon downloads. It seemed they didn't sell actual usable weapons this way, just ways to decorate one presently owned. Which made sense. I took an incidental search out for the word 'Gun' and what came back was a pop-up warning.

Firearms are outlawed in the Skylands. Please check your search and try a different parameter. Order of the Bright Throne. Any illegal downloads or multi-tool assimilation of firearm technology will result in immediate arrest by NEST officials. Punishable by twenty years imprisonment and up to a two-hundred thousand bolta fine.

For some reason that wasn't surprising to me. Scrolling back through accessories and cosmetics I found something that had zero cost during the sale.

1x Wing Propulsion Cosmetic Color Kit.

I downloaded it with a tap of my finger, reading the instructions as it added itself to my empty slot. Opening it, it took me a few minutes to figure out how things worked. It brought up a scaled down, digital version of my wing and it's full tawny color. I felt a little guilty

changing the color parameters Siobhan had set, but I pushed forward anyway. I loved her and what she meant to me but I wasn't Siobhan. I was Charlie Ryan.

I altered the tawny shade to white and navy like my armor. I hesitated for a moment more in thought before I clicked the confirm button.

Wing Propulsion color successfully modified.

"Goodbye, Siobhan. And thank you so much," I whispered.

I went back into the Appstore and rummaged around for a little bit longer. I made my way over to Travel Icon Behavior Packs and scrolled through. All of the good stuff was expensive. At least I assumed. I still wasn't sure what a bolta was in dollars and cents. I saw an interesting skull and crossbones one but it cost money, not to mention the section labeled Battle Behaviors. Those started at thousands of boltas.

When I finally got to the free items, the only things available were silly ice cream cone behaviors, a trash-talking trash can, an invisible behavior, and a golden metal owl. Curling my lip at it, I read it's name out loud.

"Bubo the golden, clockwork owl that communicates through a simple pattern of beeps. Let Bubo warm your heart and help you through your day. Guaranteed to clash with titans. What?" Blowing a hard sigh, I tapped the download button and rolled my eyes.

"Whatever."

My travel icon whirled around once and disappeared. When it faded back in, it was a short, stout mechanical owl whose head whirled about. Its wings flapped up and down mechanically, it's lifeless eyes flashing in the reflective light from the inner cabin of Bijou's ship.

It beeped at me a few times and I just waved my hand, going back into HUD only mode.

I downloaded the invisible behavior as well, just because it was free.

“Hang on!” I heard Bijou yell, snapping me to attention.

My hands wrapped around the grips on my armrest, my digital screen disappearing.

“What’s going on?” I asked, looking at the windshield display.

“We’re cresting. Five minutes to the surface,” she said and my stomach felt like worms had come alive in it.

“There it is. There’s the Lighthouse, hold your shit!” Stagger shouted just as the ship whipped hard to the left.

Everyone on board gave a groan as we lurched back upright in our seats.

“Ahh! Fuck!” I yelled, staring at my display, watching us barely make it around the thick jutting tower of the Lighthouse sticking out sideways from the rock wall. It had a massive bulb whirling about at its very tip, splashing light into my field of view.

“Sorry!” Bijou said, “The updrafts are kicking our asses right now, Stagger, aft stabilizers!”

“On it!” He called back.

“Get ready to prime us. Radiant Stone wide open in three, two, go!”

I could feel my breath picking up as she threw us this way and that in the ship, avoiding the last vestiges of huge boulders caught in the updraft with us. Launched from the zero gravity pockets below, those boulders flew up high above us, then came falling back down. I slammed my eyes shut and just tried to focus. To breathe.

“Are you okay?” Stagger called back to me.

“Yeah,” I rattled my head up and down.

“It’s okay, Charlie. We’ll be fine,” Stag said, gripping the handle above his head.

I blew a number of heavy breaths like I was about to have a baby. My eyes were darting around the cabin. I needed air. I felt myself

swallow hard and then the words of my friends came back to me while the ball ship waded to and fro.

“Go boldly and mighty forces will aid your hands,” Chroma and Sindri had said.

“Fight like you want to win!” Starland’s voice rang in my head.

I took a last deep breath as the ship rolled back upright, rattling us so hard I thought the entire ship would fall apart. We burst into the light of a brilliant blue eastern sky. The hard turbulence suddenly stopped. Looking at it through my display, my mouth fell open at its majesty and for one peaceful moment, everything seemed to stop.

“We’re through,” Stagger said, “Good shit, Bijou.”

“It’s what I do,” she said, adjusting settings on the ship’s digital consoles above.

I set my travel icon out and it beeped and clicked, producing a map of the world in front of me.

We were at an elevation level of three, almost four. But the weather box in the bottom of the map said that from elevation level three and up, there were no cloudlines today. More importantly, the sun was sitting at true east. The light was hitting the side of the planet and pouring over all the upper lands. I looked up to see high above the blotting shadow of a huge land mass, making the sky look like a blue band between the rock above and the horizon below.

“Level horizon,” Bijou said.

“Yeah, I see that, Bee. Can I unclench my asscheeks now?” Stagger said.

“Yes, Stagger. You can unclench your asscheeks, you have my permission.” She replied.

I unbuckled my overly complicated seatbelt as the ship leveled, bringing the windshield and all of our seats back down to level with the floor below. As I did, I was able to walk without falling toward the front of the ship with Stagger and Bijou. I saw sprawling out in front of me probably one of the prettiest things I had ever laid eyes on. A

golden and white city with buildings sprouting up high above it. Thousands of ball shuttles flew in lines through the sky and on the ground.

Bijou slowed our path, merging into the traffic of the larger ball ship lanes, following them into the heart of the city. From high above, at the center of the city, a large waterfall fell from the landmass above. It's contents dropped at free fall speed, filling a massive pink lake surrounding the Bacchus Theater estate.

"Welcome to Sodom & Gomorrah. The Sister Cities," Stagger said, pointing out through the windshield. "To the east of that miasmic pink lake is Sodom, to the west, Gomorrah. One city claims to be the city of hedonism, the other claims to be the city of excess. Frankly, I can't tell the fucking difference. This is where you go when you have too much money and don't care to be told what you can and can't do with it. Outside of basic laws like traffic, civility and a penalty of death by petrification if you murder someone unlawfully, there are very few rules here."

"Sounds like Hollywood. Only people don't get petrified there, they just get attacked on social media by social justice warriors. And usually, for the pettiest, most idiotic, soft-skinned bullshit you've ever heard. Not to mention cancel culture." I replied.

"Cancel culture?" Bee asked.

"Yeah. Y'know, when a bunch of people who aren't even involved in somethin' jump online and rage about firing people or canceling careers like they themselves never stole a cheesecake or fucked a neighbor. Just people wantin' somethin' to bitch about in unison." I said.

"The mob has spoken," Stagger chuckled.

"Yeah, well, you haven't even seen petty until you see this place. Don't trust anyone. Everyone here has an angle. We're here to do one thing and one thing only. Get to the Bifrost. That's all that matters," Bijou said.

Stagger and I both nodded.

“Right.” We agreed.

It felt weird having gravity the right way up again. I caught Bijou’s silver eyes looking at me.

“I finally got my own flashy costume,” My smile turned into a grin as I turned to face her, pulling my shield off my back to strike a pose.

“How do I look?”

“Like a super cute superhero,” She smiled back, “You ready?”

I nodded, “Yeah... I think. Ready as I’m gonna get.” I looked out of the windshield at the unending sprawl of the twin cities.

I squatted down on the balls of my feet, hands resting on my standing shield between Bijou and Stagger’s seats. I took a few sobering breathes and nodded my head again, offering a silent prayer to whatever god was the god of pure, dumb luck.

I felt Bijou pull us out of the flow of traffic and turn her ball ship straight for the Bacchus Theater.

“Stag.”

“Yeah, Charlie?”

“Hold my hand,” I held it out to him.

“Really?” He said, turning his head to look down at me. “You never-..”

“Hold my goddamn hand, man!”

“Okay!” He said, reaching down to squeeze my smaller hand in his.

Bijou set the pod on autopilot and stood up. She walked back to the back of the pod and started her own battle preparations.

“This is it,” Stag said as I stood, watching that pink waterfall draw ever closer.

“I’m coming, Robin... Help is on the way.” I looked back at Bijou standing there in her sleek armor.

She set her black hair free and with a clap of her hands, she pulled them apart in a shower of blue twinkling lights, spawning her broad

claymore into her waiting grip.

“Alright. Let’s go pick a fight,” She said with a grim smile on her face.

Stag released my hand and stood up. He slipped out from behind his chair, pulling that black, straight scabbard from thin air, it’s grip wrapped in pitch black cords.

“War. Good god,” he shook his head, putting his hand on my shoulder, then burst into song, “What is it good for!? Absolutely nothing!”

I gave him a nudge out of the way with my shield.

“There is something wrong with you,” I said, rolling my eyes as I passed.

I slipped my right arm into the forearm straps of the Forgemaster’s Timepiece, pulling the strap tight around my right palm. Sindri and Brokk remembered I was a lefty. I flexed the Nemean Lion glove at my left and took another steadying breath. In my vision, I saw a short phrase and lifted an eyebrow at it.

Nemean Glove: Charging...

“Wherever those powerful forces are... I really hope they’re waiting to come to the aid of my hands.” I said, moving to the door of the ship with Stagger and Bijou, preparing for our landing. “Cus it’s too late to stop me now.”

CHAPTER 10

Keep Yourself Alive

The autopilot on Bijou's ball ship brought us sweeping down over the Bacchus Theater. It did a slow rotation around, spiraling downward from up high, giving me the opportunity to look through the display by the door at the massive waterfall that was plummeting from the land mass above. It was far, far bigger up close than I originally gave it credit. The mass of the great pillar of water was easily as big around as a city block. It spilled into the pink water below and yet the lake remained still like a sheet of glass. The mirror-like reflection of the water was unsettling.

The ship brought us around to the front of the wide open estate giving me a view of how big it was. The Bacchus Theater was easily three times the size of an average shopping mall back home. Tall spires shot up at the four corners of the estate, each one beaming brilliant pink and gold lights, spelling out what enchanting and bewitching promises they offered. Love, Sex, Power, and Greed.

At the very center of all of them sat a sprawling mansion in pink, gold, and white. Extending out in front of the building was a grand driveway and a large pink concrete circle around a smaller fountain. A number of ball shuttles sat parked around it. Out farther from that, a long driveway ran down to a landing pad out on the water.

As our ship spiraled down towards the pad I began to see in better detail. The closer we got the more I could make out, and what I saw down below made my pulse start to rise. That long driveway leading to the landing pad had black armored NEST military standing in a formation of six, waiting for us to touch down.

“Looks like Orcus rolled the red carpet out for you,” Stagger said, looking at the display with me.

“Looks like,” I replied, feeling Bijou’s hand on my shoulder.

“We’re right here with you, Charlie,” She said and I nodded my head.

I felt the ball ship set down with a quiet thunk. I closed my eyes and took a few long breaths, lifting a hand up to ruffle my bangs. Tapping the button by the door, I stepped down that slanted walkway, right down to the round port that led out. It irised open in front of me and I stepped out into that blue eastern sky day.

I practically strutted to the top of the long driveway, the intoxicating smell that came off of that odd, pink water laced with Ambrosia almost brought a moan out of me. It smelled like everything in life I loved, dancing with an erotic, candy-like smell that I couldn’t pinpoint.

It made me hot.

I could feel my temperature threatening to rise. All I could think about was Stagger’s body.

His smell.

“Fuck.”

I had to block out the false notion and focus on the severity of my situation.

The six soldiers that were waiting on me were in side by side formation. From their sides, they pulled six black rods, snapping them out with a jerk of their hands. I heard the electrical crackle from the white-hot channeling forks at the ends of them.

“Siobhan Aoibheann! Stand down! Drop whatever weapons you are carrying and get down on your knees.” One of the six demanded, stepping forward.

A black wing burst from his back, not unlike Stagger’s own.

I squinted at it.

My dark eyes looked up at the man in front of me as he took a number of steps forward.

I did too.

We met face to face right there in front of his small team. I barely came up to his chin.

“Last chance, Siobhan. Do the right thing and let’s all go home safely.”

“Tell me somethin’,” I said, my head dropping, turning my eyes down to the ground. “How long has NEST been using that kinda multi-tool?”

“Standard issue. Long time. Now, do as I say and no one has to get hurt.”

“By long time... y’mean as far back as the celestial uprising?”

“Longer,” He said, his dark eyes boring into my face.

“Y’know... I think my friend stole one of those.”

“Whoever your friend is, it sounds like both of you need to be brought to justice. Down on your knees. Weapons on the ground.”

“I can’t do that.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

“Yes, the fuck I do.”

I spun out wide to his right as he jabbed in at me with his electrical rod. My right arm swung high, feeling the edge of my shield ram into the back of his neck, collapsing him to his knees. Before he could recover, I was completing the turn, hammering him to the ground with the side of my left fist.

His wing moved to try and upright him but I pinned it to the ground and used it as footing to separate him from his multi-tool

with a punt. His body scuttled across the pink concrete and splashed into the Ambrosia.

I turned to face the others as they rushed me.

I leaned forward into a full sprint, rushing right back at them. A yell and a short hop sent me spinning through the air into them, not with my shield but my multi-tool. The navy and white wing burst free behind me, flailing out wide into the five of them.

Men scattered amidst the slicing blades of those feathers and I continued the momentum to the ground, dropping to my knees, swinging my shield out as I continued my spin low. I heard it rapidly thump across their knees, staggering the three men attached to them. Instead of springing up to my feet, I leaned forward, pushing myself like a spear into the fourth, leading with my shield.

Continuous motion was what Stagger taught me.

To slam into them hard, use my short height to stay low, immobilize, crush, go for the joints, go for the face, the eyes; never stop moving. Don't be elegant, fight dirty and brawl.

I could fuckin' brawl.

My shield sent him off of his feet and ramming into one of the lighted pylons to either side of the walkway. I heard him splash into the water as I rolled forward right into the fifth. Coming up onto my feet in a bounce, I turned in the air so my back was to him, blasting the fifth man to the ground with my body. I rolled over him and back up to my feet with my shield arm high, coming down in a harsh chop with its edge. Once, twice, a third time into his chest, blood bursting from his mouth.

By then the three I had staggered were rushing me again. Still, on one knee having ended the fight for the man beneath me, I shoved off of my anchored foot, barreling into them all. They spilled like bowling pins into a heap of arms and legs.

My wing spun me around on the ground and the spray of blood as I sliced through two of them let me know their fight had ended. The

third popped up to his feet to try and back pedal away from me as those two bodies lay bleeding.

I stood as tall as my five feet would let me, marching towards him.

“Back off. Back off!” He roared.

I snatched my shield off of my arm and took it in both hands.

Spinning into him, I bashed him off of his feet with the wolf metal, the force of the impact sending his legs in the air and his back and skull smashing into the ground.

My shield was back on my arm and I was sprinting towards the Bacchus Theater.

I felt a blitz of air whip past my left side.

Bijou was off.

I looked up to see Stagger taking to the air. He called down to me.

“That was amazing!”

Breaking my stride to wave up at him, a silly smile on my face, I called back.

“Oh my god, I know right? I can’t believe I just did that!”

I heard him laughing as he smashed through the window at the top floor of the mansion. Alarms blared in the distance and excited voices called from up ahead.

My feet pounded the pavement as I rushed on, crossing the concrete driveway at speed, long strides rendering me airborne more often than not. I skirted around the fountain on the grounds like a hunting cat, hurdled over the well-trimmed bushes, and slipped between the ball shuttles that were parked in a row out front of the theater.

“Hey, hey!” Two NEST soldiers at the door turned on me, bringing their electric rods to bare.

I looked ahead through the glass doors to see more coming. I remembered what Stagger told me. Don’t try to fight them on their terms. Use my speed and my weight.

Without stopping, my feet left the ground and both of my knees rammed into the closest soldier's chest armor. His electric rod flew out of his hand as his body went smashing into the man moving in behind him. Feet back on the ground, I charged the soldiers coming through the door. I leaned backward, knowing as soon as those doors opened they'd go for my head.

They did.

And they made a mistake.

Rods swung high and I slid low. My left hand hit the ground as an anchor and both of my feet plunged into the ribs of one among them. Pushing off of that hand, my wing burst back out catching the air, and sent me spinning right through the next two, cutting into their armor and setting them back peddling.

My feet touched the ground but only for a moment, vaulting forward, shield leading to bash through bodies. My momentum parted them to the left and right, stumbling them. I dropped low onto my knees again, spinning through the rest, their rods thumping off of my wing and shield as the two created a barrier around me. Sparks flew between us as rods from every direction tried to break my defense.

Between my wing and my shield, the men came on and their attacks fell to nothing. Batted away, swatted aside, or absorbed by the surface of either feathers or metal as I turned this way and that, whirling back and forth like the agitator in an old washing machine, my defense impregnable.

I was a whirling ball that couldn't be broken.

My shield was an immovable object.

I clenched my arm, using the force of popping to my feet to shove it outward. A great gong rang out and four men were shoved off of their feet from my push. I heard them smash into the front glass doors. I heard groans of pain. I heard bodies hit the ground and roll

away. My eyes were back the way I came, standing there like a paragon of my own strength.

I felt infinite.

The NEST soldiers behind me came on in a rush and my wing swatted their attacks aside, giving me time to backspin, shoving my shield into the first of them. He bounced off of the metal and rolled away. I let my shield continue forward off of my arm, its edge rupturing the helmet of another soldier. My fingers grabbed the forearm strap to stop it from going too far as I watched the soldier's head snap back and drop. Yanking my shield back to me, I swung it around to chop another NEST soldier aside, the impact making the shield bounce up into the air. I let it go flying upward, spinning end over end.

The last soldier came on and I dipped my head left, then swayed right to avoid his wild baton swings. My shield came down from the air as I spun to avoid the next attack, rolling around his shoulder to get behind him. I shoved him with my back into my falling shield, smashing his head off of that impossibly heavy metal as it descended. The loud gong let me know he wasn't getting up again.

He collapsed as my shield flipped forward like a giant coin, slamming through the glass front doors and cracking the marble floor inside.

I was through those front doors in a run, yanking my shield up and stowing it onto my back. I let my travel icon out, that beeping, tweeting golden owl flapping its wings as it painted a picture in the air beside me of Stagger and Bijou.

"I'm on the top floor. Working my way down to you," Stagger said.

I could see the vague outline of him slashing his way through NEST armor, holding his sword underhand as he cut a path to the stairs. A whirling, deadly and precise machine designed for nothing more than ending lives.

"You're getting slow, Stag," said Bijou.

Her image flitted in and out of clarity as she zipped around the battlefield.

“I’ve almost scouted the entire Theater. It looks like we’re going to have to push into the tunnels. I don’t see Hymeris.”

“Right,” I nodded, panting as I rushed the hall, “No sign of her here either.”

Paying customers looked wide-eyed at me as I ran past. People ran and scattered left and right having seen me deal with the greeting party out front.

“What the hell is going on? I paid good money to be here!” A white-haired man in an ornate, gaudy coat bitched, slamming his wine glass down on the ground. “This is ridiculous!”

“Sorry!” I replied as I passed.

The pink marble floors of the mansion were gorgeous. Shimmering chandeliers hung overhead and the smell of wine and decadent food was in the air. I could hear the sound of thrumming music coming from the casino floor and the dance hall. I knew exactly where I was from the blueprints Chroma had made us study.

Hymeris wouldn’t be here. Not enough high rollers. I dipped through the open doors on the casino floor, marching through the crowds of people who were staring at me like I was ruining their good time.

A commotion to my right drew my attention. Four soldiers came charging in from the hall leading from the restaurants. Their armor was sleek and lean, not unlike my own. They lifted their left hands and I saw the leather gauntlets on them shimmer with white light.

“Fuck!”

I yanked my shield from my back and brought it down just in time to intercept streaming balls of energy pelting me. People started pouring out of the casino screaming. They shoved and pushed one another, some of them getting pelted in energy fire and igniting in flames.

I got low and fast, tucking myself down behind my shield. Through the rushing, pushing bodies I stepped back with my shield swatting aside or defending against blasts from those gauntlets, making it back to the door I had originally come in from.

The sudden impact of a large bolt slammed me off of my feet and sent me rolling across the floor. Feeling the buzz of the heat from the blast radiating through my body, I forced myself up to sit on my knees. Looking at those soldiers as they fanned out and rushed me, I got to my feet and ran for it, back to the doors before they could box me out of them. I zigzagged through the casino floor, rolling over gambling tables as blasts pelted the ground and blasted wooden furniture around me.

I spun around the slot machines to get back to my path towards the opposite hall. I made it to the door just as I saw one of the soldiers launch another blast, this one much bigger than the ones before it. My eyes went wide. I brought my shield up to intercept it, groaning as the impact fired my little ass down the hall like a white and blue tennis ball.

“Fuck!” The impact hurt. My arm was aching.

I managed to land on my boots, sliding backward until my back slammed cracks into the wall at the end of the hallway intersection.

Lowering my shield, I saw the soldiers advancing.

“Hud only mode!” My owl that was fluttering around somewhere in the casino disappeared and in my vision I could see Bijou’s face.

“What the fuck do I do about energy blasts!?”

“They aren’t energy blasts. They’re channeling Heart Fire through those bracelets.”

“Gotcha. I thought I ate that stuff?”

“It can still hurt you.”

“Piss.”

I looked to my left, then my right down the narrow hallway.

The four soldiers came on and I saw their gauntlets light up. Squinting, I got a closer look at the bracelets they wore.

My feet killed the distance between us.

The first blast came in and my shield batted it down. Another and I spun hard right, slamming myself into the wall. The next blast came in and missed me by inches as I dipped low, crashing into the closest soldier's knee with my shield. He buckled and from my low position, I dropped to a knee and spun into the next. Up I shot, my legs pushing, bringing the Nemean gauntlet crashing into his chin, sprawling him.

My shield stopped a pair of blasts from the third and fourth soldiers as I pushed in, chopping down to end the one I'd just laid out with my fist. I flung my shield out hard at the remaining two. One dropped low, ducking the spinning disc, the other taking it's impossible weight in the chest, collapsing under it.

Standing back up from the ground, the remaining guard leveled his gauntlet at me. I lifted both hands in surrender, knowing I didn't stand a chance of dodging it and didn't have my shield to block it.

"Don't move," He snarled, marching towards me.

"Hadn't planned on it?" I said.

He spun me to the ground with a punch.

Surprised he hadn't shot me I rolled over and looked up at him.

His jaw clenched, his eyes alive with a grim hunger.

I knew that look. He wanted to humiliate me.

"Fuck," I groaned, trying to crawl up to my knees. He snagged me by the throat and hauled me from the ground. I let out a gurgle as he squeezed.

"Time's up little girl." I clung to his hand looking into his helmet visor.

"If you want me to get off, you gotta squeeze harder."

"What the f-"

My Nemean glove beeped at my side.

He looked down at it.

Two words dominated my vision.

Charging Complete!

My glove gave a loud roar that radiated through my entire body as my knuckles blasted right through the bottom of his helmet. Metal and glass shattered in a spray of blood as his neck gave a crisp pop, both of us tumbling to the ground.

“Son of a...”

I coughed, kicking his body away from me as I crawled to the side of the narrow hall. Swallowing hard, one hand pressed against the wall to support me as I sat up. I looked at that glove on my hand and only then noticed the blinking little red light. Then I looked up at the words at the top corner of my HUD. I recognized them from earlier on Bijou’s ship.

Nemean Glove: Charging...

I panted, looking at the lion emblem on the back of my wrist. I looked around at the bodies I’d left in my wake, turning over to sit on my ass.

“This shit- ..” I dry heaved, my eyes watering hard, “is not like the movies.”

Forcing myself up I blew a hard breath and shuffled over to collect my shield.

“Fuck me. Get it together, Charlie.”

I swallowed a few breaths of air and pushed myself on, running down the right fork of the T shaped hall. I slammed my hip into the opulent doors to pop the latch and open them, but jogged to a stop as I was met with three large white staircases. They each led up to the second deck above. Trickling pink water fell down the side of a rock waterfall into a little pond to my left. The sweet smell of Ambrosia wafted my way as I breathed it in, biting my bottom lip, my eyes drifting closed.

Fuck I was thirsty.

Blowing my breath out hard, I looked under the stairs to see a brilliantly lit hall leading to the back of the building where two double doors read Exit to Love Tunnel.

I looked at that pond again and took several slow steps towards it. The smell was intoxicating. I looked around nervously before I got down on my knees and crawled closer, licking my lips.

“Charlie, I’ve got fuck-all up here,” Bijou said through the icon network.

Her voice snapped me out of my trance so hard I snapped back up to my feet, looking frantically around.

“What? Yeah! No,” I said, shaking my head. “I mean, I got nothing. Haven’t seen her.”

“Me either,” Bijou answered. “Have you heard from Stag?”

“Not a word. You think he’s okay?” I asked, embarrassment coloring my cheeks.

I heard Bijou’s musical laugh in my ear.

“Oh, trust me. Stagger’s okay. He’d let us know if he wasn’t.”

“What makes you so sure?” I asked, walking towards those double doors, forcing myself not to look back at that pond.

“Because Stagger hates NEST. If ever you don’t see him, it means he’s off killing entire platoons for fun. Your boyfriend’s a badass.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I whined, but the thought of Stagger out destroying NEST platoons with his sword, throwing grown men this way and that. I’d have to store that image in my Jill Junk for later.

Wish he’d throw me around.

I shook the thought out of my head, realizing the scent of that pink water was still affecting my thoughts.

“Can we focus, please?” Stagger’s voice interrupted, “I’m trying to concentrate.” I heard the struggle in his voice and I imagined him slashing through scores of soldiers as he spoke to us. I could hear his sword clanging against metal, hear screams, panic.

I wanted to open my view of his HUD and watch.

As I got to the double doors, they opened on their own. Five tall NEST agents, each of them wearing the same paladin style armor I had seen in Robin's apartment months ago, marched in.

They had purple rank braids on their arms. I knew them right away. Not only were they Earth Guard, looking at those purple sashes, they were Lilith's.

"I gotta go," I said, closing my comm.

I felt the fear Lilly made me live in every day come creeping back. I felt tiny and marginalized like a Re-Car all over again. A member of an unfortunate group of people that didn't choose their circumstances, but suffered all the same because of them.

I backed away from the door, looking at those black helmets, those purple bands. Fear had me by the throat but I swallowed my bitter pill and pulled my shield from my back.

"Aren't you boys a little far from your turf?" I asked, feigning confidence.

"I'm gonna enjoy dragging your little ass back to Lilith," A familiar voice said, marching out in front of the others.

This one used to like smacking me up pretty good before he dropped me off at Lilly's interrogation room.

"Been a long time since I beat your ass, Charlie. Where've you been?"

"Oh, you know. Getting a life... Sorta like your wife did when she started fuckin' your friends," I shrugged.

"Still got that mouth on you," He smirked, his four buddies lining up behind him.

"I don't think I like how much attention you're paying to my mouth, Donahue. Somethin' you wanna tell me?"

"If you're offering. Lilith was the only thing keeping your mouth off my dick anyway." His electrical rod crackled to life as it extended at his side.

“Hey, Donahue... soundin’ a little rapey.” I lifted my hand, my thumb and index finger a small space apart. “Do I need a whistle and a twitter hashtag? Y’know there’s nothin’ wrong with just asking us if we’ll suck your dick.” I made a show of licking my lips.

He pulled his helmet off. Short, sandy blond hair cut in military fashion sat atop his head, his face wide and thick like a professional juicer. His green eyes glared at me as he tossed his helmet aside.

“Hey, Charlie? Suck my dick.” his gruff voice barked, his men circling around me.

“Was that so hard?”

I launched myself to the right, planting my shield in the chest of one of them. He blasted out a loud cough as my wing burst free from my back in anticipation of the sizzling electrical rods I heard behind me. Batons crackled off its feathered surface.

I hopped up, yanking my shield off my arm and brought it down. Both feet landed on it, stomping down onto the chest of the downed guardsman with a final gagging sound from beneath me.

I stepped off of my shield with one foot and slung it back with the other, my shield whipping out to knock the feet out from under one of the four remaining as those electrical rods came whipping in. My right hand swung out to my side, batting away Donahue’s baton. Another slammed right into my chest and my jaw clenched, feeling the surging current rattle my bones.

I crumpled to the ground as they fell over me.

Rods smacked down across my body. I tried to curl into a ball to defend myself but my small frame jerked, spasmed and thrashed on the ground from jolts of electricity.

“Yeah, you remember gettin’ fried don’t you?” Donahue growled down at me as I flopped about, screaming.

I could practically hear his grin. They ceased the beating long enough for me to roll over onto my back, panting.

“Fuck...” I coughed and Donahue grabbed me by my curly hair, hoisting me up onto my knees. I groaned as he stressed my roots, “shit!”

“Where’s that smart mouth now, huh?”

I looked away from him and down at the ground.

“This is the best the great Siobhan Aoibheann has to offer?” He shook me hard, rattling my skull with my bangs.

“Fuck you!” I snarled back at him before his fist split my lip.

“Shut up.”

I shut my mouth and glared up at him, blood dripping down my chin.

“I can’t wait to hear you scream. When she breaks you... and she will. She’ll break you.”

My eyes retreated from his.

“That’s the little coward we all know.” He said.

My HUD flashed.

Charging Complete!

My Nemean glove roared into the hall as it smashed through the armored pad of his knee, buckling it backward.

He howled, stumbling back, my bangs slipping through his fingers save for a few strands he tore free. I hit the ground rolling away from the electric batons slamming down towards me, grabbing my shield that was still sitting feet from the first guard’s dead body.

I scrambled off the ground, my wing whipping out and throwing me upward. Rolling over backward in the air to touch down on the low ceiling, my shield sliding down onto my arm in the same instant, I launched myself back down.

I roared as my shield blasted into Donahue’s face as he tried to swing his baton upward, dropping him beneath me to the ground. I whipped my wing and turned back just in time to deflect a swing aimed for my back with my shield surface. I used the energy from his baton slamming into my shield to sling my arm back, bashing my

shield into another guard, sending him to the floor and out of the fight.

Turning full around to bat another attack aside from the guard behind me, I punched a second attack away with my glove then barreled into him, my feet finally touching down on Donahue's body. I slammed into him, using Donahue for traction as I ran. With my whole body, I bashed him to the floor, snarling as I took him down.

I crawled over him like a wild animal, straddling his middle as my shield came up. I bashed down into his neck once, twice before I slung my arm back behind me, releasing my shield to send it whirling through the air as Donahue managed to sit up. It smashed into his throat, driving him onto his back where the weight of it nearly removed his head.

I fell back onto my back, desperately trying to slow my breathing, to stop the ache in my chest, my legs still laying over the guard I ended prior to Donahue.

"Shit... Fuckin' shit," I forced myself over onto my stomach but it took me much longer to find my feet.

I stumbled over to my shield and picked it up, glaring down at Donahue's body. Exhaustion was burning into my muscles. Swallowing hard, I shoved my shield back onto my right arm and pushed myself into a jog towards the exit doors.

Blasting my way out of them I came to a stop in a small room across from another set of doors. My lungs were burning and I couldn't catch my breath fast enough. To my right was another single door labeled stairs. I walked over to the double doors opposite me that led out and pushed them.

Nothing.

I brought my shield back and bashed it into them.

They didn't budge.

"Back door's locked. I'm comin' up," I panted out, activating my comm by looking at the little yellow dot in the top right corner of my

vision.

I was still winded when I turned for the stairwell door.

Hip bumping the door open, I jogged inside and forced myself up to the first landing, sweat running down my face.

I looked up to the next set of stairs and my shoulders dropped.

“Aw c’mon, man!”

There were ten NEST guards trundling down the steps towards me. I looked around the landing, analyzing my space. Too tight for my wing. Likely too tight for my shield in a full-on fight. I stowed it on my back looking over the railing to see how far down the stairs went.

All the way to the basement.

Then up. Seven, maybe eight floors.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my glove I watched them crowd the stairs and come to a stop, waiting to see what I was going to do.

Too many of them, one of me.

Still winded, I put my hands on my hips and started pacing back and forth.

“How’s it gonna be, Siobhan?” The guard with the captain rank on her helmet asked.

Batons crackled to life all the way up the stairs.

“Yeah. I’m thinkin’.” I nodded as I stopped in front of the stairs.

I tilted my head, resigning myself to it.

I threw my coffee brown eyes up at the men waiting on me to surrender. For some reason, I hated the fact that they thought I would quit.

“Yep... We’re doin’ this,” I waved them on and sighed, “C’mon.”

Squaring my shoulders, I balled my little hands into fists.

The group of them fell over me like a black armored wave.

I dipped down under a baton and rapidly churned my fists into a set of ribs, shoving my feet against the ground to ram my shoulder

into another, driving him up the stairs to knock over a few of the men behind him. I leapt from the ground, growling, clambering over them, my metal armored fists pounding, shoving and blasting into helmets, shoulders, anything I could get my hands on.

They threw me around.

Getting punched and kicked, shoved and smacked with batons, I went at them all the harder. I punched and kicked back.

Whirling into them, I sent my elbow blasting a guard's helmet off. My spin continued, giving me the momentum to punch another with such ferocity I heard his back buckle. His head hit the stairs and another guard fell over him. Right into my rising knee.

"Fuck you!"

Like a little wolverine. Snarl-snarl-snarl.

I couldn't let them electrocute me. That was my plan.

My only plan.

Every time I saw a baton come up, I whirled and punched it wide, my elbow snapping back to subdue a fresh helmet. If one did hit me, I only resigned myself to blows from its side, avoiding the end of it, dancing away from the electrical prod. Every time I turned I sent a helmet popping off of a head. Wading into the press of bodies, using my tiny size to my advantage as I ducked under arms and avoided punches, I went on the attack.

I roared in, buckling the sides of knees, kicking out ankles, punching thigh joints. My shield at my back, I shoved myself backward and pressed full grown men against the wall with the shield's immense weight, knowing they'd push me back, knowing they'd aid me with their strength.

As a group they would shove that heavy shield off of them, throwing me forward. I shoved a man over the banister to fall to the basement steps below using their push to my advantage.

There was nothing elegant here. Nothing beautiful or seamless. It was dirty, tactless and desperate.

It was what I was good at.

I ducked and weaved my frame in and out of bodies, pushing up the stairs. My fists whirled amongst them, peppering faces with those metal bands. I busted noses, lips, anything I could get to that wasn't protected by a helmet. I punched ears, kicked ribs, bashed knee joints and elbows. I dropped low and let my Nemean glove roar through a pair of testicles.

I even launched myself at a helmetless guard and bit his fucking face.

Elbows and punches were assaulting me from every side. I caught them in the ribs, the stomach, the thighs and chest, my shield absorbing what it could from behind. One among them even stuffed two fingers into my mouth and nearly fish hooked me in the melee. I reached up and grabbed his pinky finger, snapping it at the second knuckle.

As I started to thin the crowd, the movement became easier. I caught a fist in my small hand that was intended for my face and tugged back, stumbling him into another punch destined for me from another attacker.

I ducked a baton, slipped my head past a punch, took another to my jaw that stumbled me into two men who grabbed me by my arms.

I took a few shots to the gut, blasting the air out of me before my feet came up to shove him down the stairs, ending his fight on the concrete below. I then let my legs go weak under me, crumbling down to a sitting position that forced the men holding my arms to fall down the stairs behind him.

Once enough of them were clear, my wing burst to life behind me, shredding through the rest, sending a spray of blood against the wall. I spun hard left, then right, sawing through anyone near me, coming up roaring and punching.

I grabbed the guard at the top of the landing by the collar and repeatedly pumped my left fist into his face plate, again and again,

making him stumble backward as I pummeled his helmet into a mess of spiderwebbed glass. I punched and punched and punched until the face behind the helmet was a mask of red, continually pushing him backward until his body slid down the wall behind him.

My arms fell to my sides, my chest heaving as three more guards came running from the door of the landing above. They stared down at me, then the raspberry jam that was their colleague's face, his body slumped against the wall, crumpled on the floor.

I wobbled on my feet, exhaustion slumping my shoulders and making my head feel like a chore to lift.

But I lifted my little fists anyway.

"Knuckle up, Fucksticks," I panted out in defiance.

They rushed me. My shield was off my back in an instant. I charged one of them and bashed them right over the banister. My left foot came up and shoved off of the railing, throwing myself with my shield arm leading, back to slam the second soldier into the wall. I felt his ribs give out under his armor.

The third guard cracked his baton across the back of my neck.

My left arm came up to absorb most of the impact, but it hurt. Sparks flew in my vision. I shoved off of the NEST soldier I had almost buried in the drywall and slammed the last one standing into the railing.

I heard him groan. My right arm brought my shield up.

I brought it down fast and in three hard, vicious slams, he stopped moving.

I shoved his body aside and stumbled back onto my ass.

Every part of me hurt. I could feel my skin bruising under my armor. My face felt hot and tight. I tasted my own blood and the tickle on my top lip let me know my nose was bleeding.

Swallowing hard, the back of my throat dry, I wiped the blood off my face and forced myself up. My legs churned as I forced myself on, coughing hard, painful gasps of air from my abused lungs. I took the

stairs two at a time, my thighs complaining with every flex of my muscles.

“Fuck. Maybe my ass is too big,” I groaned, pushing through the burning sensation in my seizing hips.

When I got to the eighth-floor landing, I rammed the door open and spilled out onto the carpet, collapsing onto my back.

I was a mess.

My armor was dirty and smudged with burn marks from electrical batons all over, dots and splotches of blood here and there.

But I coughed out a laugh.

I had only gotten my lip split and a bloody nose.

I would have a thousand bruises tomorrow, but for now, I could only revel in the fact that I made it this far.

They didn’t break me.

“S... Stag... f- fuck,” Coughs blasted from my lungs. “Did you find her?”

I didn’t hear a response.

I let my travel icon out. The golden owl tweeted and beeped, casting light into the air.

“Stag? Bijou!?” I called.

“I’m fine,” Bijou said. Her voice was nearby.

I looked up and around. She was standing by the elevator, the doors rolling closed behind her, her regal frame in her sleek armor with that large sword of hers resting on a shoulder.

“Did you just take the elevator?!” I yelled.

“Well... yeah. Why’d you take the stairs?” She asked, coming over and helping me get me to my feet.

I probably wouldn’t have managed it on my own. My body was weak and sore and more importantly, I turtled myself on my shield.

“I didn’t see the fuckin’ elevator!” The words tumbled out of my mouth, exasperated.

“Is that your blood?”

“What? No- no. It... I mean, yeah. Some of it. I just won my first fist fight.” I pointed over my shoulder with a thumb at the stairway door.

“Right. Well, I still haven’t seen Hymeris,” Bijou said, bringing her bloody sword down from her shoulder to set the tip on the floor.

“Yeah, me either. I will say though,” I said, catching my breath a little, “This is a really nice place. I like the pink marble downstairs. I mean, little much, but... I like it.” I nodded, looking around.

“Hon, are you alright?”

“Did you know,” I swallowed hard, “fighting was so goddamn hard?”

“Uh-huh,” Bijou said, looking at me. “Are you alright?”

“I uh... yeah. Yeah.” I decided, nodding.

“Right,” Bijou smiled, brushing my hair out of my face. “You look exhausted.”

“I got my ass beat down there.”

Bijou put her hand on the back of my neck and started leading us down the opulent pink and golden hallway.

“So many batons. Sooo many. They just kept,” I gestured like I was clubbing the air, “just... over and over.”

“Uh-huh. Sweetie, you’re rambling. Just breathe.” Bijou said, serenity in her voice as we rounded the corner, walking past seashell sconces on the walls illuminated with almost divine golden light.

“Okay,” I said, trying to catch the rest of my breath.

We walked on in silence but we both smelled it at the same time. I looked at Bijou and she looked at me. The unmistakable metallic smell of blood like wet iron in a hot rain. We hurried our footsteps, moving to the next corner. She brought her sword down from her shoulder, I brought my shield from my back.

Blood was spattering the walls. Bodies were stacked on the floor in little piles left and right, all the way down the hall. Bijou and I just stared at the carnage. We walked over puddles of blood leading to

deceased NEST soldiers. Some were missing limbs, their hands, arm or leg nearby. Some were surgically cut and left to spray blood all about the floor and walls.

Blood was everywhere.

Whoever had been through here went for arteries and let their enemies bleed out.

Nobody had a quick death.

“Looks like a fuckin’ Joan Mitchell painting in here,” I whispered.

“Shh,” Bijou hissed and I went quiet.

We heard voices coming from the other side of the doors sitting slightly ajar at the end of the hall. One of them was definitely Stagger.

“That’ll be him. I think he’s found her,” Bijou whispered.

As we marched towards the doors, Bijou pushed them open and stepped inside.

I found myself looking around a gorgeous manilla office that looked like something my sister Andy would have paid top dollar for. The only exception would be the fact that cushions were all over the floor and paintings of people in all manner of sexual positions littered the walls. Over by the wide window, actual people stood naked and unmoving despite the slaughter that had just taken place outside of those double doors.

Their eyes were moving around frantically but their bodies were stuck in place.

They’d been petrified. Made into statues. Their skin was painted solid gold.

Stagger stood in the middle of the room across from a woman that looked like she was my size. She was dressed in pink and gold robes, her skin a rich shade of cinnamon yellow. Her almond eyes were painted with deep gold mascara and eyeshadow.

She looked like a living doll, really. So pretty and perfect I wanted to punch her to see if she would actually bruise.

“Meris... come on, be reasonable. Look, we played your game. You had your fun, just give us what we want, okay? Let us on the boat and we’re out of your hair.” Stagger said, exasperation rich in his tone.

“That’s not how this works, Stagger Lee,” Hymeris replied, glancing at Bijou and I as we entered.

We both lifted a hand and spoke together.

“Hello.”

“Wow, you really are short,” I said.

“Told you Stagger likes short girls,” Bijou smiled.

“Ohh, I get it now. Cus we’re both short.” I nodded, stating the obvious while I offered a weak, tired chuckle.

“It’s not funny if you have to explain it, Charlie,” Bijou said, pulling me closer to place a motherly kiss on the top of my head.

“Meris,” She greeted the woman in pink and gold.

“Huayra God. Lovely to see you made it back,” Hymeris returned the greeting.

“No, it isn’t. You don’t have to lie to make me feel better.”

“Alright,” Hymeris said, “I hate you and I hope you end up dead again.”

“That’s the spirit,” Bijou smiled, but there was nothing joyful in her eyes.

“So that’s her, hm?” Hymeris asked, looking right at me. “Come here, Siobhan.”

“Nope,” I shook my head.

“It’s fine, Charlie,” Stagger said, waving me over, his hazel eyes reassuring.

I took a few nervous steps closer.

“It’s fine,” Stagger said again, nodding his head.

“I got beat up,” I said, nodding conversationally at Hymeris, “Like two or three times since I got here. I really like your marble floors. I tried not to bleed on ’em too much.”

Hymeris offered me a smile and beckoned me again with one of her small hands. The pained expression on my face only contorted more when I stepped closer and she took my chin in her grasp.

I avoided her eyes.

“Ow.”

“I’m sorry, Darling.” She turned my face left then right, inspecting me, “my word. Aren’t you fetching.”

“I’m not fetchin’ you shit,” I frowned.

“I mean, you-” She started, but I cut her off.

“I know what it means. I’m fuckin’ with you. Look, forgive me for not exactly bein’ happy right now. You ratted us out and now I got full-grown men fuckin’ me up like I divorced ’em without a prenup. I’m in a pretty shitty mood and I just wanna get this shit done. My sister’s in a lot of trouble right now.”

I heard Bijou breathe a heavy sigh.

Stagger glared wide-eyed at me as he mouthed the very clear words:

Shut. The fuck. UP!

Hymeris smiled at me, “is that really the way you talk?”

“Yeah, why, you wanna kiss me? That seems to be a trend around here.”

Hymeris’ eyes flicked to Bijou.

“Guilty,” Bijou lifted her hand, wiggling fingers at our host.

“Focus. Please.” Stagger bitched.

“Penny for the guy,” Bijou said, walking over to stand beside me and Stagger. “That’s what we need.”

Hymeris turned and walked around her desk to sit in her beautiful clamshell chair. She sat back and regarded all of us with her pensive, exotic stare.

“Stagger, was that your mess?” I asked, looking at him.

“What, the guys in the hallway?”

“Yeah,” I said, my lip curling. “Looks like a fuckin’ late night Slap Chop infomercial out there.”

“You’re gonna love my nuts,” Bijou and I said together, quoting the commercial.

“Jinx. You owe me a rootbeer,” I pointed at her.

“Shit,” Bijou cursed, looking over at Stagger and lifting an index finger, “She was one second faster.”

“Excuse me!” Hymeris yelled and all three of us turned to face her.

“What?” I asked, my tone sharp. “I mean- sorry. I keep forgetting we broke in. Look, can we get the change or not?”

“Change?” Stagger asked, confused.

“Yeah, you guys keep asking for money for some guy. What are we buyin’, a bus pass or somethin’? I don’t have all day. Robin’s in trouble. Can we speed this shit up?”

“No,” said Bijou, “A penny for the guy. It’s not money. It’s a specific type of coin that only one person in the world takes.”

“The Boatman,” I said, nodding.

“Ding-ding-ding,” Stagger said, mocking a game show host as he pointed at me. “What do we have for her, Johnny?”

“Enough!” Hymeris roared.

We all snapped to attention. Suddenly that little woman wasn’t so innocent looking anymore. Her voice scared the hell out of me. My bottom lip trembled and I closed my mouth to stop it. She was looking right at me. I turned my eyes to one of the paintings on the wall.

My eyebrows tightened as I studied it.

I didn’t hear any of the negotiations happening around me. The sound of their voices fell into the background like when the adults talk in a Peanuts cartoon. Random noises from a trumpet as I stared.

I snapped my head over to Stagger, then back to the painting, then to Stagger again.

My mouth fell open.

In the painting, Stagger Lee was standing at its center in leather pants with his shirt off, his hard body oiled up and shining. He had a cowboy hat on his head. Three women to his left, three men to his right, all of them dressed in some sexual parody of old spaghetti western fiction. They all had revolvers on their hips. The title card above read:

The Magnificent Seven: A Bacchus Theater Production. Rated XXX, directed by Hymeris the Duchess of Ambrosia, Goddess of Pleasure. Starring Big Stack O' Lee.

I thought Bijou was kidding.

I thought we were just winding Stagger up a bit, having a bit of fun. I figured when she whispered in my ear back at Chroma's place that she was having a bit of a laugh at both of our expenses. I thought maybe he used to date Hymeris or something.

"Wait, you really are a pornstar!?" I shouted and everyone looked at me.

"Was. Was a pornstar. Not by choice and not the point," he snapped, then turned back to Hymeris to continue negotiating.

"Wait, you're not just gonna run that stop sign like I didn't already see it." I yanked his arm, "how many big titty bimbos have you been bangin' on camera, Stag?"

He blinked at me slowly.

"Can we... not do this right now?"

"Are you fuckin' kiddin' me? This is-"

"HELP ME... CHARLIE!" He shouted, eyes wide, hands gesturing furiously at Hymeris.

I jumped and nodded.

"Y-yeah.. Yeah, sure. J- ... bu," Bijou glared at me. "We're talkin' about this later, Stag."

"Fine!" Turning his head back to Hymeris he huffed. "As I was saying."

“How have you come to bargain.” She cut him off. “You walk in with your pockets turned out and you come wanting. What do I stand to gain?”

“What do you want?” Stagger asked, twisting his lips.

Hymeris smiled back.

“Uh-uh,” Stagger shook his head. “I’m not your property anymore. I paid my debt, leave it alone.”

“Property?” I asked.

“Oh, Charlie. Stagger here is a real case,” Hymeris waved a hand at me, sitting forward in her seat, “after his parents died he thought he would get back at their killers by infiltrating the NEST Army. Little Malcolm had dreams of destroying them from the inside to avenge his mommy and daddy.”

It was Stagger’s turn to look away.

“Yeah, yeah. Here we go,” he muttered.

“After his intentions were made clear and he murdered the commandant of the NEST Army, he was dishonorably discharged and extradited from the High Moor, branded a traitor. He’s not allowed this far up. Are you, Stagger?” Hymeris said through her wicked grin.

Stagger just blew a scoff and shook his head.

“But before his extradition, he was ordered to serve hard time in the worst prison in the realm.” She wiggled a finger at him in a chastising wave.

“Muspelheim,” Bijou said, her voice grim.

“The valkyrie jail?” I asked her.

“It’s the land of fire, yeah. You’ve been there before.” She said back.

I recalled my dream.

The place I thought was the Underworld.

I sighed at the realization that I had been on a leash there before. My mind had an interesting way of throwing all the things that scarred me into the same pot with all the things that scared me.

I felt the pain of my leash back then, biting into my neck. I felt the pain of the Mad Queen's boot kicking me along the cobbled, red stones of Muspelheim, on her way to torment a fresh captive. I felt the sting of humiliation as I remembered being dragged by my leash when my strength gave out.

"But I showed him mercy."

"I don't wanna hear this again. It wasn't mercy, Hymeris. Please stop kidding yourself." Stagger said.

"Whatever you want to call it. I saw what I wanted and I took it. At great cost, I'll note. Midvalley wouldn't let him go for any amount less than six-hundred thousand boltas."

"Fuck me! Six-hundred thousand!?" I blurted out.

"Yes," Hymeris nodded, "Has anyone ever told you that you have a foul mouth, Darling?"

"Uh-huh," I nodded my head as we stared at one another, her point missing me.

Hymeris sighed, "I've decided what I want."

"And what's that?" Stagger asks.

"A little birdie told me..." She started, standing up from her seat and walking around that beautiful desk.

I watched her reflection in its pearl surface, turning my coffee brown stare on her when she set her predatory gaze on me. Her travel icon came out with a gesture of her hand. It was a small moon with its surface sprinkled with diamond dust.

"That you," she pointed directly at me, then scrolled through her digital menu to select a file. With the whip of a finger, she threw it my way. "Dance."

"What?" I curled my lip. Then I got a quick look at the picture she threw at me before I snatched my hand up and tore it down. "Who the fuck told you that?"

"Don't you worry about the source."

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about,” I lied, my eyes drifting away from her, balling up that digital file, summoning the glowing outline of a trash can in which I threw it.

A swooshing sound signaled it’s deletion.

“I’m talking about the Sugar Shack. I think you went by Mello Yellow?” My cheeks burned.

“Sugar Shack?” Bijou asked.

I sighed, “It’s a club.”

Bijou and Stagger turned their heads to face me.

“You were a stripper?!” Stag shouted.

“Was. Was a stripper,” I glared at him and mocked his words from earlier, “not by choice and not the point.”

My middle finger extended.

“That’s so petty,” Bijou whispered.

“Shut it,” I pointed at her, my expression flat.

Stagger rolled his eyes.

“So what, you want me to dance for you or somethin’? Look, I don’t do that kinda shit. I did it a couple times to pay the rent, that’s all. I got my ass slapped so many times I felt like I was sittin’ on poprocks the next day. Not only that, y’know what they don’t talk about in those places? Fuckin’ papercuts.”

“Papercuts?” Stagger asked, his face wrinkling.

“Papercuts,” I confirmed. “In very personal areas. Lemme shove dollar bills in your ass for four hours and see how you feel after.”

“I don’t want you to dance for me,” Hymeris said.

“What then?”

“I want you to dance in my theater. I have a wonderful cabaret. One that I’d love to feature the beautiful Siobhan Aoibheann in.”

“Not doin’ it. Pick somethin’ else. I don’t have time and I’m not gonna let you pimp me out.”

Hymeris squinted at me with dangerous promise as she glided towards me and I clenched my fists. She looked down at my hands

and laughed.

“I don’t fight, Darling.”

“Yeah, well I do. I’ll box the shit outta you, bitch.”

Bijou stepped over to me and put a hand on my shoulder.

“Charlie.”

“What?”

“Charlie...”

“What, Bee?!” I snapped, glaring at her. “I’ve had about enough of this shit. Robin’s in trouble, this bitch is insane. I’m not shakin’ my ass in your fuckin’ theater!”

Hymeris hit the ground before I even realized I shoved her.

Everyone in the room went quiet.

Even me.

Hymeris was glaring daggers up at me.

I fucked up and I knew it.

“I’m ... I’m sorry, I..”

I reached out to offer my hand, realizing who I just pushed. Not only was she a god, she was also the person who had access to the one thing we needed most in this world.

She slapped my hand away.

I felt a stone in the pit of my stomach. I just sealed Robin’s fate.

“I’m sorry, alright?”

“Get out,” she hissed, getting to her feet.

“I’m-”

“Get out!”

“Please!” I begged, stepping closer.

She took a step back, fear in her eyes. I recognized the expression. I had it on my face many, many times before.

“I’m so... so sorry.”

Bijou was rubbing her forehead.

Stagger was already walking towards the door.

“Well, this shit’s over,” he said, disappointment coloring his voice.

I turned to watch him walk away.

“Stag...” I called after him.

“I’m ... I can’t, Charlie. Just-” he lifted his hand and walked out.

“Bee?” I turned to look at her.

“We could have negotiated for something else, Charlie.” She shook her head.

“Get. Out!” Hymeris roared.

I felt myself jump.

“I... I’ll do it,” I said, dropping my head.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do,” Bijou said.

“Let’s just go. We’ll figure something else out.”

“It’s for Robin. I’ll do it.” I turned to face Hymeris. “I’ll do whatever you want.”

Hymeris glared at me for a moment, then walked around to sit at her desk. She looked at me with a smug expression on her face. She knew she had me over a barrel.

I blew a sigh and walked over to her desk, sitting down in the chair across from her.

“Just no porn and no weird costumes.” I didn’t meet her eyes, I stared at her desk and clasped my fingers together in front of me.

“Why should I help you? You’ve come to my beautiful theater, you’ve broken my things and you’ve assaulted me.”

“I’m-...” I shrugged. “Look, I... I’m really sorry, alright?”

She looked at me and my eyes still refused to make it to hers.

“Look at me, Siobhan.”

“I...” I brought my hands up to my temples. “I don’t work that way.”

“I know. Look at me.” She said, her tone threatening.

I felt Bijou’s hand on my shoulder, comforting me.

It felt like it took forever to get my eyes to move up Hymeris’ face to meet her punishing stare.

“I’m going to draw up a contract. Whatever it says, you’re going to do.”

“I’m not doin’ porn.”

“Did I ask you to do porn?”

“No... I just...”

“You just... are loud, uncivilized, unladylike, vulgar... But thankfully beautiful and popular among the people. I’m a businesswoman.”

I frowned at my scolding, my eyes retreating from hers.

“Yeah. I get it. You got me.”

“What did I ask you to do?”

“Dance.”

She opened a drawer in her desk and pulled out a piece of parchment paper. From the inkwell beside her, she pulled a broad, pink feather quill free and sat it’s tip on the paper’s surface. I watched ink bleed out of the pen and start spilling over the paper in the form of words. The letters were a brilliant pink, flecked with gold.

“And what are you going to do?” She asked, turning the contract around to face me.

I twisted my lips.

“Dance.”

I looked down at the contract and read over it.

“Good girl.”

“Fuck you. Gimme the goddamn pen.” I snatched it from her and she laughed as I scribbled my messy signature down on the line provided.

“I can’t wait to see you in my cabaret.”

I stood up from the chair and glared back at her.

She returned my stare, both of us measuring one another until I couldn’t stand to do it anymore. My eyes retreated. I heard her titter and it sickened me.

She reached into a drawer of that opulent desk and procured a gold and pink handbag. From it, she pulled a single, shimmering coin, flicking it towards me. Its metallic surface sang in the air as it turned end over end.

“Penny for the guy,” she said and I caught it.

“Yeah, whatever. Just make sure you got stilettos.” I headed for the door, muttering. “Try to at least save some dignity in this shit show and pretend to be taller.”

I stopped at the door when I realized Bijou wasn’t beside me.

She actually hadn’t moved. She was standing there glaring at Hymeris.

“We’re not done yet,” she said, sliding into the chair I just got out of. “Go on without me, Charlie. Meris and I need to have a little talk about my son.” The two women were glaring at each other, the tension between them palpable.

“What about the Boatman?” I asked.

“This is where we part ways, Charlie. I wish you the best of luck, Cutie. I’ll be very disappointed if I don’t see you at home soon.”

I wanted to say something. To say goodbye. To thank her.

She looked back at me and our eyes met.

In the short period of time I had known her, Bijou had become something I relied on. She was constant like the wind she represented.

I knew I wasn’t the easiest person to like. I knew I had problems that most people didn’t want anything to do with, even if they acted like they did. I never had any friends, but Bijou had become mine. She liked me for me.

If I died today, I would regret not being able to live long enough to be a better friend to her in return.

“Thanks for bein’ my friend.”

She smiled, “Go on.”

I hesitated, my eyes burning as I felt tears coming.

“Don’t cry, Cutie. The fellas don’t go for that at all.”

She waved at me with a single finger.

I nodded and forced myself out of the door.

Stagger Lee was standing there fuming. He turned to look at me and shook his head.

“Why do you always have to blow up?”

“I don’t know.”

“Fuck that. You killed us in there. What were you thinking!?”

“I don’t know!” I shouted back, looking away from him. “I just get so mad.”

“I know,” He said, his voice soft as he pulled me to him, his hand on the back of my neck. “I know, kiddo. What are we gonna do?”

“Catch a boat,” I said, holding up the coin.

“Holy shit! How did you get this?” Stagger laughed, plucking it from my hand.

“I just signed a contract to star in Hymeris’ cabaret. Six nights. Next summer. Not exactly how I planned on things goin’ but.. Y’know. Not like we got a lotta choices here.”

The two of us started making our way down the hallway avoiding puddles of blood.

“It’s not so bad,” he shrugged, “I did it.”

“You did a lot of things, Stack O’ Lee,” I said, sarcasm dripping from my voice as we rounded the corner at the end of the hall.

Stagger started leading us towards the elevators Bijou had come out of.

“I’m proud of most of it,” he laughed.

“You would be. That picture back there’s kinda hot though.”

“You liked that?” He grinned.

“Yeah, those guys beside you were really somethin’ else. Way better lookin’ than that mugger in the middle.”

“Fuck you,” we laughed together and he gave me a little push.

“You’re kinda dangerous, Stag.”

“What, that back there? I was just playin’ around.” That statement made me look at him sidelong.

“Christ.” I shook my head.

“Where’s Bijou?”

“She stayed to have a conversation with Hymeris. She’s not comin’.”

“She couldn’t come anyway, Charlie.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s not supposed to be here. Last thing we need is Huayra God stepping into the underworld. It’s gonna accelerate our timetable in ways we can’t handle right now.”

“I mean how would it be any different later? Hymeris knows. She’ll definitely rat us out.”

“Maybe. I don’t think so though.”

“Why?”

“Leverage.” Stagger said. “She’d rather hold the threat over our heads.”

“Right.” I nodded, “Well then... Let’s go get my sister.”

“You got it. Wanna ride on the Tunnel of Love with me?”

“We get out of here alive, I’ll give you season passes.”

“Mm. Bijou was right.”

“What?” I asked, looking at him.

“Everything sounds dirtier coming out of your mouth. C’mon.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Stagger sauntered towards the elevator, tapping the button multiple times.

“Nothing.”

“No, it means somethin’. What are you tryin’ to say?”

“Nothing, Charlie.”

“Stag.”

“Nothing.”

CHAPTER 11

Killer Queen

“Charlie,” His voice was different.

Stagger Lee had a lot of tones when he spoke to me. Most of them were related to my nature of being a hard one to deal with. But this one was different.

It made me look at him.

“I think you should...”

“Yeah,” I nodded. I knew what he wanted to say.

I felt him reach out and take my hand. We stood on that elevator waiting for the ground floor, the thin material of each of our gloves holding our skin apart. He interlaced his fingers with mine.

“She’s dead,” I whispered.

Neither of us said anything then. We listened to the sound of the elevator trundling downward. We heard the sound of each other breathing.

I could feel his eyes on me but I didn’t look back. He closed his other hand over mine and rubbed at my fingers, his touch gentle and reassuring.

When the elevator came to a stop and the doors rolled open, I pulled my hand away from his, marching out onto the pink marble floors. I heard my steps but I didn’t hear his. I stopped and turned

back to look at him. He was standing in the elevator looking at me with those hazel eyes.

I couldn't take it.

"Goddamnit." I looked away, "Stop looking at me like that, Stagger."

"I don't know how to look at you any other way."

"Look," I glanced back at him for a second then looked down at the pink floor. One of my hands came up to brush my hair aside before I rested my fingertips on my forehead. "Just... I need to know for sure."

He stepped out of the elevator and came to me. I lifted a hand to stop him, pressing it to his chest. He lifted my chin with a curled finger and I looked him in the eyes.

"Know what for sure?"

"If she's really gone," I said and he nodded.

"I understand," His thumb brushed my bottom lip.

"Let's just get through this. After that... I'm done fightin' you." I said, and he took a deep breath. I could hear frustration disappear with that sigh. I felt his muscles relax under my fingertips

"That's all it takes to make you feel better?" I asked.

He just smiled at me.

I shook my head and started heading down that pink hall.

My skin felt hot. I felt goosebumps all over. I lifted both of my hands to my face and rubbed my cheeks.

If this is what feeling special to someone was like, I was completely out of my depth. I wasn't prepared for the way Stagger made me feel.

If I wasn't so worried about my sister I might even have giggled.

I turned around and walked backward so I could look at him as he followed behind.

"I just thought about somethin'," I said and he lifted an eyebrow.

"What's that, Charlotte?"

Hearing him use my whole name gave me such a buzz.

"If Orcus kills us... we won't get a tomorrow."

"Yeah. That's a possibility." Stagger replied, his arms swinging at his sides, sauntering like a hero out of the old west like he did.

"Kay," I said, "Sooo... ask me anything."

I kept walking backward through the empty halls of the Bacchus Theater. Our fight had sent the patronage of the establishment running for their lives. The casino floor was empty, the dance floor was empty, the bar and the buffet were cleared out. The only people left were Stagger and I. Our footsteps echoed from those beautiful walls like the soundtrack to our lives.

"Alright," he grinned, "What's your favorite movie?"

"I like a lot of classics. I can't afford cable, so I watch a lot of old movies on antenna, y'know? So really anything with James Cagney, Clark Gable. Especially Paul Newman."

"Yeah? I didn't expect that. Got a favorite though?"

"Two. The Long Hot Summer and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."

"Paul Newman really is your guy, huh?"

"Yeah. He's fuckin' sexy as hell. To me, he's immortal," I smiled, sticking the tip of my tongue out.

"Cool. Favorite color."

"Orange."

"Orange? Really? It would be the color that rhymes with nothing. You rebel."

I laughed.

"Shut up."

"Never," he gave a playful chortle. "Favorite food."

"Donuts."

"Donuts?!"

"Yep."

"What do you weigh, like ninety-five, a hundred? How the hell does donuts work?"

“Ninety-two actually, and I usually don’t get a lot of choices when it comes to food. Most times it was whatever I could afford and still have enough left to get high.”

“Oh, hey. It’s cool. You don’t have to explain.”

“No, it’s good. I don’t mind. When you get court ordered AA as many times as I have, you learn to love what’s on the concession table. So... donuts. When it’s free, you’ve always got change left over to backslide.”

I forced a little laugh, but I could feel the weight of his stare.

“Ask me somethin’ else.”

“Can I kiss you?” I stopped.

“Um-... I,” my cheeks burned red, “Maybe.”

“Maybe?” He asked, moving in close to me.

“Uh-huh,” I felt his hands on my middle.

“I dunno what maybe means, Charlotte.” He looked me right in the eyes.

“How about later? I don’t want it to be a mistake,” I whispered, slipping out of his grip.

I started walking back again and he followed sighing playfully.

“Ask me somethin’ else,” I smiled back.

“First three things on your bucket list.”

“Umm.”

“Nope. Without thinking about it,” He urged me on with a wave of his hand, “Just go. Fast.”

“Fuck, okay, here we go.” I ticked things off on my fingers, “Learn how to cook, ride one of those Fat Bird things and...” My voice drifted off.

“What?” Stagger asked.

I looked back up at him.

“Learn how to be a better woman,” I turned around and sped up, walking

towards the doors at the end of the hall.

“Whoa, whoa, hey.” He said, catching up with me.

“New subject,” I said, turning to head through the player’s lounge and towards the doors at the back.

“I like this subject,”

I felt him grab my arm and I snatched away.

“Yeah, well I don’t. Alright? Just... Fuck.”

“What?”

“This is what I don’t want, alright? This. Everything- ... you,” I stopped, my hands flailing in front of me for a moment. “This! You just,” I turned to stare at him.

“You get in my head, Stagger. You make me think about things I don’t wanna think about. About shit I can’t have, okay? Every time. You do it every fuckin’ time. I don’t...” I pushed the heels of my hands against my head for a second and dropped them to my thighs. “I can’t defend myself against you.”

“You don’t have to,” He said, smiling.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about. That right there.” I looked up at him. “You fuckin’ look at me and I just... tell you everything. You and that stupid smile.”

“Charlie.”

“No!” I shoved open the doors leading outside. “Just leave it alone, St-... Stag.” My voice flattened as I looked up.

“Alright, Charlie. Alright. I’ll just shut my mouth and stop talking to you. How about that? I’ll close my mouth and we’ll just never sp-...”

NEST Soldiers lined the courtyard between us and the tunnel. There had to be twenty or more.

“Alright, I’ve had just about enough of this shit,” Stagger ripped his black sword from nowhere. He rushed forward, that big black wing of his bursting out from his back.

My shield came off my back as I pushed my aching muscles to move once more. I ran at his side, pushing my shield onto my arm.

He shoved me hard to the left as a blast from one of those heart fire bracelets slammed the ground between us. I hit the ground at a roll and bounced back up, pushing off of my feet into the air. I brought my shield up high, roaring as Stagger and I waded into the swarm.

Metal clashed, balls of energy rushed through the crowd. I slammed a blast aside and spun into two soldiers, bashing the sides of their helmets into one another with a hard swing. My hand followed, boring another to the ground with my Nemean glove. I ran forward and lifted my foot, shoving my boot into the chest of another, sending him careening back into the pack.

Stagger whirled around behind me, severing arms. His coat fanned out around him, that black blade whipping like a lightning strike, dropping bodies into two pieces. He turned, spinning his wing into another three. His sword whipped up and cut through a burning bolt of energy, sending it back at the soldier that fired it, blasting them off of their feet.

I saw three advancing on his back and buried them under a shove of my shield, spearing into them and rolling over their bodies just as Stagger turned, swinging his blade low, a flash of black and streams of red ending all three of them behind me.

I couldn't help but remember our sessions on the valley wall. The two of us dancing our practiced dance, moving around one another, complimenting each other's weaknesses like we knew them by heart. My shield clanked and gonged against armor. His blade tore through flesh and severed limbs.

My wing came free and propelled me forward, spinning in the air to cut the arm from a soldier. I landed, planting my feet, flexing every muscle in my body as my shield rammed into his chest, sending him rolling through the air.

I brought that shield up, deflecting a bolt of energy. It flew out wild to my right. Stagger, without missing a step, spun and batted it back at the sender with his sword, spinning right into another vicious

slash, cutting a man down just as that bolt slammed the armor from the chest plate of the soldier that fired it.

My shield spun through the air and bashed that soldier to the ground, collapsing his unarmored chest, the impossible weight of the wolf metal dropping him and crushing his core.

We marched side by side down to meet the rest of the NEST platoon. I yanked my shield up from the body it sat atop and the rest of the swarm rushed up at us.

“Havin’ fun yet, Princess?” I asked, grinning.

“Oh, best first date ever,” Stag said, taking the lead.

We mowed them down like grass.

I brawled, he slashed. I growled like an animal, turning, spinning like a top as my wing and shield cut through flesh and rattled bone. My fist pummeled anything that came near me, that Nemean glove roaring at my side as the lion ate.

When the last man fell the two of us stood panting, staring at one another.

“Fuckin’ hard, isn’t it?” I said.

He laughed. “Bet you’re regretting those two packs a day now, huh?”

Righting himself, he sheathed his sword into the scabbard in his off hand, releasing it into his multi-tool.

“Every. Fuckin’. Second.”

I pulled my shield off of my arm and placed it onto my back. It held fast there and a moment later disappeared into my multi-tool as we jogged towards the tunnel of love. I couldn’t help but think back on all the times I’d forgotten to put my shield in my multi-tool. Or that I even could.

“I keep forgettin’ I can do that...”

“Do what?” Stagger asked.

“Nothin’.”

“If you say so.”

“Changed my mind. One more thing on my bucket list.”

“What’s that?”

“A lung transplant.”

Stagger burst into laughter.

“Let’s get inside before anything else happens. I gotta save some juice for Orcus.” Stag said as we made it to the dark pink carpet running between those gold torches outside of the tunnel.

We slowed our march, looking up at that big, gaudy entrance. It was a giant heart that sat half submerged in the ground, it’s center open to admit people inside. The tower that shot high into the air went up for probably twelve or more stories, but we weren’t going up.

“Every floor is dedicated to a new kind of debauchery. Starts out really tame at the bottom, but by the time you get to the top? That’s some fucked up shit you don’t wanna see.”

Stagger shook his head.

“Gross,” I said, curling my lip as we walked into the tower.

The floor was made up of gold and pink squares and as we stepped down onto them, our footsteps were amplified far beyond anything normal.

“What the fuck?” I took another soft step.

It boomed.

“Yeah,” Stag said.

The two of us made our way across that odd floor. We headed for the chained off path ahead, our footsteps booming away. Stagger led us to the tunnel ride entrance and I looked around, almost expecting NEST soldiers to come popping out on us at any minute. My hands were sore, nervousness was swirling about in my stomach as he unclipped the chain and we stepped off of that noisy flooring onto the concrete landing that led down to the water’s edge.

As we stepped into the darkness, Stagger grabbed my hand.

I wanted to pull away but I couldn’t. I laced my fingers with his and we walked along the path, following the curve in it down to that

pinkish purple light that illuminated the dock.

Even from here I could see that the water wasn't normal. It didn't move like waves, it moved like odd, square fractals, catching the light and bouncing it off in strange ways. I stared at its hypnotic movement as we made our way down. I looked at how far the water seemed to stretch on. It reached into an unknowable horizon with a vague purple hue in a sky I couldn't properly imagine.

It looked like dying light at the end of an endless tunnel.

"You have to be careful here." Stagger said, "The water changes when the Bifrost is coming. The river Styx washes up into our world. Try not to look at it too long."

Too late.

As we neared the dock with its pink and purple striped lamp post, I stared at that water.

I let Stagger's hand go and kept walking.

The concrete path ended in deep, pinkish purple sand. My boots smashed down in it with every step as I walked to the purple wooden slats of the dock.

"Charlie." He whispered, but I didn't hear him.

"So pretty." I said.

It wasn't.

It was cold and lifeless.

The water moved like an unnatural thing. Like it didn't belong. But I kept walking towards it. I moved to the very edge of the dock before I felt Stagger's strong arms wrap around my middle and yank me off my feet.

"Alright. Okay. You're right, the water is nice. Let's let it be, okay?" He sat me down back on the purple sand shore by that little lamp post and turned me around to look at him.

"I like the water," I said and he nodded at me.

"Yeah? I like the water too." I tried to look at it again but he took my face in his hands.

"No, don't look at it. Look at me."

"Why? I wanna look at the water."

"Just look at me, Charlie." He said, his tone calm and reassuring. He reminded me of my daddy so much sometimes it was scary.

"O-... okay." I nodded.

"You don't wanna look at the water too much. It makes you want to keep looking. Then you want to go for a swim. That's a bad, bad thing. Okay?"

"Okay," I nodded again.

We stared into each other's eyes for a long time. For some reason, it didn't bother me so much. His hazel eyes were so kind.

"Your eyes are really pretty," I whispered.

"So are yours." He replied.

"Thanks..." I could feel him leaning closer.

Moving in.

"Charlie?"

"Yeah?"

"You're standing on your tiptoes."

Stagger wasn't moving closer. I was.

"Oh."

Then he was moving closer.

I could feel his breath on my lips. My hands came up to grip the lapels of his jacket, tugging him towards me.

Our lips were so close.

A crackling sound from far away shattered the peace around us like thunder rolling in the distance. I blinked a number of times and fell back onto my heels, trying to move my head.

Stagger stopped me.

"Not yet." He said, the crackling sound getting closer.

I felt it then, rumbling inside of me.

"What is that?" I asked, my voice trembling, suddenly fearful.

"What the fuck is that?"

“It’s okay. It’s the Bifrost. It comes for anybody standing on the shore.”

The crackling sound started to condense like it was coming through a long tube. The sound warped and changed. My eyes got wider.

“We need to go. Stagger. Please. I’m scared.” I tugged at his hands, frantic.

“I know, Charlie,” he said, his voice still so calm. “Just look at me. Trust me.”

I clung to his wrists and nodded my head, blinking rapidly as I tried to fight the urge to cry. I could feel the moisture building, distorting my vision.

“Don’t cry, Charlie. Everybody has the same reaction the first time. Here it comes... cover your ears.”

He let me go and lifted his hands to his ears, nudging his head at me to do the same. I brought my palms to my ears and pressed hard, just as an absolutely terrifying sound ruptured the crackling hiss. It sounded like a thousand infants screaming in anguish over shattering glass, mingled with what could only be the sound of an implosion. Like a star being born in a small room.

My eyes were wide as I stared at Stagger.

When the sound rolled away to silence Stagger lowered his hands from his ears, still looking at me. I was afraid to look anywhere else. I lowered my hands, trembling.

“Are you alright?” He asked.

I shook my head.

“No.”

He nodded, “Yeah. I know.”

“I don’t ever wanna hear that sound again.”

I turned my head to look out at that strange water again, but what I saw set me back a step. My entire scope of vision was taken up by the multi-colored sails of a large pirate ship. Its entire body was

constructed of aged and distressed multi-colored slats of wood. Even the large ramp that was laying down on the dock was colored in multiple shades of the rainbow. Its sails were old, ripped, and weather-worn. The number twelve was on its flag waving in a nonexistent wind.

From the top of that ramp, I heard the thunk and drag of movement. I tried to take another step back but Stagger's hand was there, stopping me.

"It's alright," He started marching forward and I followed far behind.

I saw a tricorn captain's hat pop into view as a man dressed in ancient naval officer's garb climbed up to the edge of the boat and stepped down the plank, his one pegged leg dragging with every other step. One of his arms were ripped off at the elbow where a long metal shaft jutted out, a trident at its end. One of his eyes were covered with a patch, the other was a milky, deathly white. All of his clothing was aged and moth-eaten, his skin like that of a rotting, rubbery fleshed sea creature.

He stomped to the bottom of the ramp and stepped aside, opening the path for us.

"Who seeks passage aboard the Rainbow Bridge?" His ghostly voice hissed just above a slow whisper.

Even though he was twenty yards away I heard his voice like his lips were pressed to my ear, whispering just to me.

"Two by the black river, Boatman," Stagger said.

Metal chimed through the air as he flipped that coin Hymeris had given us towards the old, undead captain.

The wraith snapped its hand up with unnatural speed, snatching the coin from the air. Holding it up, his one milky eye examined its face. We stood there, feet away from him for what seemed like an eternity.

“The Boatman finds you wanting. But the Boatman will provide safe passage on board the Bifrost.”

He snapped his old, decaying hand closed around the coin and dropped it into one of his pockets as he turned to walk back up the ramp. Again I could hear that peg leg thump and drag its way over the wood and into the schooner.

Stagger led the way ahead of me and I followed. We marched together up onto the boat, our boots thumping over its multi-colored deck. Stagger grabbed my hand and led me up a set of stairs, headed towards the front of the ship.

I could smell the old wood, the semi-mossy smell of ferment and decay. The steps creaked beneath our boots, the wood warping and shifting slightly as we walked past the mast. Stagger led me to some stacked up barrels to one side where he took a seat on one of the old, broken rum casks. I sat down on the one beside it, looking over the ghostly boat, feeling a thrill run up my body as the smell of that odd water hit my nose.

It smelled like lantern oil.

The ship captain dragged himself over to the helm, taking two of its spokes in hand and trident before he spun it hard right. The boat pulled away from the dock and started to turn.

“Straight on through the piercing dark,” The wraith’s ghostly voice rang in my ears. “Straight on to the cold hills of judgment. To the court of the fallen. Into the mouth of the abyss. Be you worthy of the dying light or wanting of its good grace. Be you powerful beyond measure or meek as a lamb. I come for you all.” The Boatman said, carrying the last word long into my ears.

I leaned into Stagger, not wanting to hear his chilly voice anymore.

Stagger put his arm around me as the boat suddenly lurched forward hard.

“Hang on,” he said, reaching out with his free hand, grabbing the rope beside us that was bound to the ship.

He clutched me tight to him as the boat lurched forward again, harder. Then it lurched again.

Soon it was racing across the water, it's multi-colored sails full of wind that didn't exist. Chilly air blasted over me, digging into my skin through my armor. I felt the inertia of the boat threatening to throw me off of the cask. There was no water, no splashing, just the loud, rattling, clicking sounds of that odd water being shoved out of the way. It sounded like the boat was pushing its way through a sea of tiny crystal cubes.

I looked up into the sky to see nothing but the fading purple light of the horizon stretching upward.

I hated this place.

I felt the boat lurch one more time and the sky around us exploded into chalky, blue-green vapor. The black sky was gone. I shut my eyes and screamed. Stagger held me tighter. The icy pull of the air around us was moving so fast and so hard I thought my skin would rip.

The Boatman's cackle shattered the vapor, hitting my ears like he was standing over me, rattling that loud chortle right into my skull.

I was at the edge of madness when I heard that crackling sound again. It was coming toward us much faster. Stagger clapped his hand over my ear and held my head tight against his chest. He buried his ear against my head and I instinctively reached up to protect the one left uncovered. That horrible sound rang out in my head again as the boat ripped its way out of that ghostly vapor world.

We drifted to a slow stop.

"I want off," I said, standing up, frantic. "I want off. I want off now!"

I got up and tried to climb over the edge of the boat but Stagger again grabbed me. He hoisted me up like a suitcase under his arm and carried my flailing body down the steps to set me on the deck.

"Charlie!" I jumped as he yelled at me. Looking him in the face, his eyes were dire. His face was grim. "We're here."

I turned my head to look out at the dock we arrived at.

A white sand shore stretched out for miles in either direction against the black dark of that strange, fractal water. My eyes slowly panned upwards from the shoreline, following the sand. White pearl steps lead up to tall, golden, twinkling gates sitting open a crack at their very center. I heard the hum in the air like an angelic chorus singing an unending note at the very edges of my ability to hear, urging me to listen harder. Outside of the boat, the rainbow ramp was extended, sitting beside a massive pearl white seashell.

"It's... beautiful," I said, the confusion in my voice clear.

"This place was built by Brahma God. You expected it not to be?" Stagger replied, taking my hand and leading me towards the ramp.

The boatman was already shambling down it to stand beside the shell, waiting. I heard his voice speak to no one.

"Who seeks passage onboard the Rainbow Bridge?" His voice still sounded like it was right next to my ears.

I shook my head and followed Stagger down to the white shores.

I trudged into the white sand at the bottom of the ramp, not realizing Stagger had stopped in front of the Boatman and offered him a nod. I turned and walked back to stand beside him.

"I'm sorry." He said to the old captain.

A single, milky tear ran down from his dead eye. I looked him in his rotting face, my eyes moving down to the strange necklace he wore. An odd, lumpy sphere with numbers on each of its flat sides. The one facing out read twelve. I looked back at the Bifrost, my head craning up to look at that large sail with the same number emblazoned upon it, my mind struggling with something.

Twelve.

The Boatman finally shambled back up the ramp and a moment later he was gone. The boat was lurching away, growing ever faster. It disappeared from our vision, but we still heard the telltale, quiet roar of that horrible sound as it disappeared into the vapor world.

“Stagger,” I asked, pulling his hand, making him turn to face me before he started walking. “Who was that man?”

“That was the Icosahedron. Or what’s left of him. The Emperor of Tides... Warrior in the Still Water. The water god, Nidus. Or as he was known during the silver age of men,” Stagger looked at me, “Poseidon.”

“Oh my god...” Hearing his name weighed heavy on me, “What happened to him?”

“The same thing that happened to everyone else. Bijou’s son. The Lightning Emperor.” Stagger started up the beach and I let his hand go, walking beside him.

“But Nidus was Brahma God’s strongest. He’s the only God whose original job was to fight. How in the hell did Perun beat him?”

“By using the thing you stole. The Heart Fire’s source is unfathomable power, Charlie. That’s why it’s so imperative that we find it before Perun does. If he gets his hands on it, it means the end of everything.”

I shook my head as we trudged up through the white sands. I felt Stagger looking at me. I couldn’t stop thinking about Poseidon. About the ruin he had become. The sadness in his dead, milky eye. I thought about what a wreck I was and how somehow every one of us was connected to the same series of events.

And none of us came out of it okay.

The thought made me sick to my stomach. I swallowed hard as we made it to those beautiful, pearl stairs and started up them. The first one we touched gave a gentle, musical hum, matching the sound in the air.

We stepped up another stair and this one created a new octave. And then another. And another. By the time we reached the top, a full chorus of keys was singing to us. The music dug itself into me. All I could think about was Sammy. Her pretty green eyes. Her silly little laugh.

“Jesus,” I said, choking up.

I fought the tears as we got to that doorway, looking inside. The beautiful hymn of the Underworld was pulling out of me every ounce of everything bad I had ever done. I felt like it was trying to purify me.

Me, a person that was all bad from the inside out.

I collapsed right there at the door. I couldn’t walk another step.

“Charlie!” Stagger caught me and helped me down. He squatted down beside me and massaged the back of my neck.

I looked up at him and saw tears in his eyes.

“I’ve never been this far, the boat’s as far as I ever got.” He swallowed back his tears, “I always turn back.”

“Why?”

“Because I feel so goddamn guilty my feet don’t want to move.”

I nodded.

That’s right where I was. Trapped in my own guilt.

“Does it ever go away?” I breathed the words out.

“No,” he said, breaking down, collapsing to his knees. He brought his arm up to hide his face in the crook of his elbow as he sobbed.

“It never does. It never does.”

I blinked hard, feeling tears rimming the bottoms of my eyelids. Watching a man as strong as Stagger Lee cry like a child scared me. It hurt me to see.

I tried to hold on to my promise not to cry anymore.

Don’t. Charlie don’t. Don’t.

Tears spilled from my eyes. I didn’t know how to comfort anyone. Most times I could barely comfort myself. I slid closer to him. I reached out for him but I didn’t know what I was supposed to do to make him feel better. I placed my hand at the back of his neck like he always did for me. I rubbed his skin with my thumb, my fingers gentle in his wavy locks.

He eventually turned over to sit on the ground, pushing his back against the golden wall. I sat there beside him as we both struggled to push down the guilty feeling inside. Hurt, self-loathing and pain were all we knew. Every horrible thing we'd ever done laid before us, playing over and over again in our minds.

We wept until we couldn't anymore.

Then we sat there with our heads against each other, staring out over the white sands. The sky was black but the world was illuminated like it was the brightest sunny day.

We looked up at the black sky.

A single star twinkled into existence. The world gave a gentle ring like a triangle was struck.

Another star blinked in and another note rang out.

"Do you see that?" I asked.

"Yeah... what is that?" Stagger whispered, but moments later the two lights disappeared.

"Weird."

More silence followed. Stagger spoke after that long beat and it almost made me jump.

"Charlie."

"Yeah?"

"I love you." I was struck dumb.

"You-... wha?"

"I always have." He said, finding my hand and lacing his fingers into mine.

I felt my cheeks burn.

"Stag... I..." I looked around those white shores.

If he only knew how much he just broke my world. My head was hot, I couldn't think. Butterflies were whirling about inside of my stomach.

"You don't have to say anything." He said and his tone was genuine. "I just don't know what's about to happen. And I don't want

to die with it on my chest. I know how you are about secrets, so... I thought I'd at least start with something you already know." He looked at me then and I looked back.

"You really mean it, don't you?" I asked, looking him in the eyes.

"Yeah." He whispered back, nodding his head. "C'mon, kiddo."

He stood and helped me up. Hand in hand we walked through the gap in those impossibly thick doors and stepped into the light at the other side.

A large marble fountain sat at the center of a wide open, circular room. Great pillars outlined it that stretched high overhead and held up a marble and stained glass ceiling. Light splashed through various greens, reds and amber tones as if a sun was shining on the other side. It painted the room in beautiful blotches and bands of colorful light. The fountain had fat tubes of water swirling about, creating an impossible shape before us. A sphere inside of a sphere inside of another sphere.

The water spiraled impossibly inward. As we walked around it, it seemed to always be showing us the same side. The bottom of the fountain fed water into the top and the top fed water into the bottom.

It made my head hurt to try and make sense of it.

Around the opposite side of the fountain, sitting between two of those broad white pillars was a door, and as I stepped out farther and looked into the black depths of nothingness through the pillars on our left, I screamed and fell backward.

The massive, helmeted head and shoulders of Orcus stared back at me. His eyes weren't glowing. They were dead and lifeless. His shoulders, still shot through with arrows and wrapped in brambles, looked pale and ashen gray, not the vibrant red his skin normally was. He looked defeated somehow. He was far away in the black water, but his immense size made him seem as if he was right beside us.

The size of him was impossible.

Stagger came along beside me and looked out at the face of Orcus, his own face twisted in confusion.

“What the fuck is going on?” He said.

I got to my feet just as a chant began. The door opened and Stagger and I fell back. He pulled his sword scabbard from nowhere and unsheathed that deadly black blade.

My shield snapped to my wrist in an instant, it's shimmering silver and white clock face marred with dry blood.

The chant grew louder as that door rolled open. Valkyrie stepped through in full dress. Their battle skirts and slim, ornate armor shimmering, their pauldrons polished, their single owl wings already out at their backs and Atma Swords sheathed at their hip. They looked like samurai from a forgotten future. There were ten of them, five going to one side of us, five to the other.

They continued to chant, the valkyrie song slow and beautiful. They sang of the fall of Mount Olympus. They sang of clashing swords at Demonhead. They sang praises to the Bright Throne.

“Fuck,” I cursed.

“Yup. We are.” Stagger said.

A tall figure stepped out of that open door next, hiding the inside of the brightly lit, marble room beyond. Her head was down, wreathed in long white locks of hair. Her athletic body wore slim, golden armor over her chest and shoulders. Her midriff was left exposed and below her belly button, she wore an armored skirt with owl feathers sewn into the fabric like they were fluttering in the wind.

She wore ornate sleeves on her wrists, her dextrous, slim and dainty fingers baring manicured nails in alternating gold and black paint. Her knuckles bore long since healed scars.

I knew who it was right away and fear nearly stopped my heart.

The Mother of Owls. The Mad Queen, Gozen Morrow.

As she stepped out beyond the valkyrie corsairs, she set her wing free and the room lit brilliant orange as the scorching heat of a wing

made entirely of Heart Fire burst from her back. Stagger and I fell back a step, lifting a hand to protect ourselves from the burning blaze.

“I burn with the brightness of the life-giving light in the sky,” her voice, low and powerful, rang out clear and familiar. “And you would dare come here with your stones.”

Her head snapped up and suddenly her face slammed into my memory, filling in all the empty spaces.

“I sit high above you!” Her voice was regal. Made powerful by decades on the throne.

But her face... I looked into the face of Robin Colleen Ryan.

“Don’t you ever throw rocks at the sun. It’s beyond your reach!” Her voice boomed throughout the marble room, the flames grew hotter.

My head spun as burning orange tracers shot from her back and painted hot, swirling vortexes across the ground.

“How is this possible!?” Stagger roared over the sound of those angry flames.

Robin Ryan was the Mad Queen. The woman who tortured me my whole life. The woman who killed me. Who ran a spear through my body and threw me from the Lightly Perch to my death.

She was also the girl who beat me, humiliated me, tormented me endlessly as children.

“Robin!?” I said, my entire body trembling. “Robin! Robin, how!? How!?”

My shield disappeared and I ran to her. I couldn’t believe it.

Gozen’s hand snatched tight around my throat and lifted me from the ground.

“Ghhgh! R-Robin!” I choked.

She burst forward, a blazing trail of fire behind her as she rammed my back into the fountain. The stone broke, crumbling under me as

water poured out over my head. She held me down under the torrent as I kicked and flailed, gurgling desperately.

She yanked me out of the water, hoisted me high overhead and slammed me down onto the wet ground.

“Stop!” Stagger roared, rushing her.

The Mad Queen spun on him faster than my eyes could keep up with. Her leg blasted him in the side, buckling him. Powerful hands moved to yank him upright by his throat, only to pepper his body with a series of punches. A hard kick shoved into his chest and sent him sprawling across the marble.

I lay there sputtering, gasping, my hair wet and matted to my face.

Gozen reached down and grabbed my wet bangs, repeatedly bashing my head against the ground until the room spun.

She prowled beside me.

Pacing slowly back and forth, her hateful blue eyes never once leaving me.

Stagger got to his feet, coughing hard. He rushed her again, blade flashing.

Gozen’s hand snapped out and blasted his black blade to dust, her strong hand grabbing him by the face. She hoisted him from the ground.

Up and over he went. Slammed down beside me.

Flames burst out wide behind her as she turned her blazing blue eyes on me.

“Robin... Please. What did Orcus do to you?”

“Orcus?” She laughed, “Orcus played but a small part in my grandeur. My beauty.” Her wing blasted a gust of fire into the air, water evaporating around us into a spinning whirlwind of steam.

“I have you to thank for what you see before you.” She waved a hand and her wing disappeared, leaving water steaming around us as it continued to pour from the fountain.

The Valkyrie continued to sing.

I crawled over to what was left of the side of the fountain and clambered my way up to my feet.

“Stag. Stagger, are you alright!?”

He groaned, turning over onto his hands and knees.

“And this one,” Gozen said, looking at Stagger. “This pathetic thing.”

She punted Stagger away from me, sending him slamming into one of the pillars at the outer edge of the room. I watched him crumple to the ground.

“Stop it!” I roared, rushing her, slamming into her side.

Her feet slid on the ground but her frame didn’t move.

She grabbed me by the back of my neck and shoved me down to the ground. My nose slammed into the marble and I cried out.

I felt her then throw me upward into the air like I weighed nothing.

As I fell, she snapped her fingers and a hail of heart fire peppered me in the air, sending me sprawling onto the ground in front of her.

I fell to the ground hard, tasting my own blood.

I remembered my dream. The dream where she punched me out of the ring and I splashed into cold water. In that dream, I sank to the bottom and died.

Robin grabbed me by the hair and forced me to stand up. I got to my feet, trembling as I looked her in the eyes.

“Bobby, please... I came all this way for you. I’m so sorry for what I did. For what happened, I-..”

Robin Ryan was long gone.

The Mad Queen, Gozen Morrow was what stood in her place. And with her bare hands, she began to pummel me.

My small body was thrown around by her fists. This way and that as she tore into me. I cried, I yelled, I screamed and she didn’t care. She fed me more pain, she made me drink from the cup of her rage

until her boot rammed into my chest and sent me splashing into the water of the fountain.

I felt my armor dragging me to the bottom. My head felt heavy, my eyelids weighed six hundred pounds. I let the air in my lungs out in a great bubble.

I accepted my fate.

In the darkening light of my life, when I felt more pain than I ever had before, I realized not even tears would do my life justice. The pathetic, tragic story of Charlie Siobhan Ryan would end, beaten and bloodied at the bottom of a fountain. Everything she'd ever done laid before her, playing back in still frames at the edge of her memory.

Like a museum of failure.

As the light started to fade, I saw a hand plunge in after me from the surface. I felt her fingers find my hair and hoist me out of the water. I gasped and sputtered. She dragged me to the edge of the fountain and brought her fist back, driving it into my face again before she slung me out onto the marble to lay there and bleed.

"Bring me a leash." She held her hand out and one of the valkyrie stepped forward, never breaking their song, bringing with her a chained leash fit for the hounds of Demonhead.

I gasped and managed to sit up onto the heels of my boots.

Gozen snapped that leash around my throat so tightly I whined. It bit into my flesh. She jerked it hard and I cried out, gagging as tears fell from my eyes.

"Back where you belong, Siobhan." She jerked the chain again. "Apologize to your sisters for your wayward behavior."

"I-..." I gasped, "I'm sorry fo--GHHK!" She wound her hand around it and jerked the leash upward into the air, hanging me from it.

I kicked and flailed, my toes scraping the ground. My eyes turned to Stagger, crumpled and broken against the pillar. Gozen swung me around overhead by my throat and slammed me down onto the

marble. I was no match for her strength. I clawed at my collar, desperate to breathe.

She mercifully loosened my tether.

“Stand and face your better.” Her regal voice commanded.

I was a little girl in the garage again. I coughed blood onto the marble. I was embarrassed by my wounds. I didn’t want anyone to look at me. I got to my feet, hanging my head, blood spilling down the front of my armor from my nose.

“Ask me the question,” Gozen said, shoving my chin up, making me look at her.

“H-” I hiccoughed, “How?”

She smiled at me and for a moment I saw my sister’s beautiful face.

“I’ve been waiting a long time to see you cry.” She slapped me and I crumbled.

“Up!” I climbed to my feet.

“Chin up,” I lifted my chin.

She rewarded me with another stinging slap to the other side of my face. This one was hard enough to spin me to the ground.

“Up!”

She made me get up five more times. Five more times she battered me to the ground.

Every time I fell in line just like I did when I was Siobhan.

Because I was her.

And now we both had a cut around our necks to prove it.

“Ohh,” Gozen gave a motherly coo, “Tsk, ts, ts. You’ve gotten blood on your collar.”

“Stop it,” I heard Stagger’s hard tone.

The white glimmer of hope in my chest sang.

He marched towards the Mad Queen, clenching his fist.

“If you hit her again, I’ll beat you to death.”

I looked up to see the fearsome dark promise in his eyes.

“Stagger, no,” I said through a mouthful of blood. “Leave it alone.”

Gozen looked at him, her lip curling, then she looked at me.

I saw her smile.

I knew that smile.

She was going to kill him in front of me.

I bolted to Stagger, slipping and falling in the water in front of him.

I got to my knees and lifted my hands in surrender.

“Not him! I’ll do whatever you want. Take me back to Demonhead, I don’t care. But don’t hurt him. If you ever had an ounce of love for me, please. PLEASE!”

Gozen looked me in my eyes.

Her brilliant wing burst to life behind her. The heat in the room reminded me of the forges back home, only this wasn’t just Heart Fire. This was tainted by something else.

I still felt it feed me. I felt my muscles loosen. I felt the cuts in my mouth starting to heal.

It didn’t matter. In minutes, Stagger and I would be dead.

“Ask me the question.” She said again, raising her hand.

The Valkyrie chant stopped.

“How is this happening?” I asked, my dark eyes glaring into the inferno in front of me.

“Before I was your sister... I was your owner, Little One.”

Stagger stepped beside me and helped me to my feet.

I stumbled into him. Like always, his strength held me up.

“Robin, that doesn’t make sense. We both came here at the same time. We’ve been missing for months! They’ve probably got cops looking for us.”

“No. You’ve been missing for months.” She smiled at my confusion.

“What?” I hissed.

“In fact, I just had dinner with our family not six hours ago.” Her voice was a cold promise.

“What!?” My head was spinning. I didn’t understand any of this.

“Make this make sense.” Stagger said as I stared at her.

“The gate.” She said, her hand lifting and pointing above us. “The black sky above. All of it is the gate. Every twinkling light above is the mark of someone passing through it. It doesn’t matter where in this world they activate it, they all come through this one, singular point.” Gozen opened her palm then, showing it to me. All I saw was her flesh until the burning symbol of the old world appeared in it.

A gate key, made by Orcus.

“Every one of these symbols is created from the All Sight. A power that Chroma once had before Orcus took it from him. You have one too. One that only goes one way. To Blue Veil.”

I lifted my left palm and looked at it, remembering the familiar burn the day we were pulled through.

“Yeah. I remember... but we both got branded when Orcus grabbed us.”

“No. He was aiming for you. I was a consequence. Thrown through the gate without a key. Without a destination. I arrived in this world almost one hundred and thirty years ago.”

My mouth fell open. My sister was trapped in Blue Veil for a hundred and thirty years.

“I’m so sorry. Robin, I... oh my god. I did this to you.”

Gozen laughed.

“No, Little One. You liberated me. For that I owe you... and I’ll spare this one’s life. But consider our ledger completely even.”

“But I saw you,” I turned and pointed at Orcus, the massive creature in the black water.

“I saw him hurting you.”

“No. You saw the middle of a fight that went on in the pit of Muspelheim for three years. The Gate launched me into the

labyrinth. Lost in the halls of light, I found Orcus and fought for my freedom. You were looking at an image from the far, far distant past. That,” she pointed at the creature in the water. “Is the beast that I destroyed with my bare hands.”

“And this...”

A voice came from beside us.

From the door, the valkyrie had come from. Stepping out, draped in a crimson coat was a handsome man with short white hair. His eyes beamed a brilliant white light. The eyes of Chroma. He brought his hand up, gesturing at himself. A shimmering golden ring rested on one of his fingers, twinkling like starlight.

“Is the face of what she created.” He looked at Gozen.

“I don’t... I don’t understand,” I said.

“That’s enough, Gozen. These two confused young people are guests in the Underworld and thus under my protection. Furthermore, until our little Owlet remembers where the Heart Fire is, death isn’t an option.” Orcus said.

Gozen gave him a foul look and nodded her understanding.

“Saved by Orcus. The Punisher of Broken Oaths,” she said, turning her blue eyes on me.

“Valkyrie!” Gozen roared. “Recover!”

All of the Valkyrie snapped to attention. They rushed into formation and Gozen’s wing burst back to life in a whirl of fire. She leapt into the air, that wing sending a hot gust downward, pushing her high above.

Stagger looked at the crimson-coated man, then up at Gozen as the valkyrie took flight after her.

“Alright, can somebody give us something resembling an answer?” Stag asked.

The Crimson coated man nodded his head.

“Your questions will all be answered momentarily. You have my word.” He turned on his heels and headed back towards the door.

“Alright,” Stag said, squinting at the man.

My mind snapped back to Blood and Blade.

“Robin, wait!” I called up to her.

Gozen glared down at me from above. “What, Little One?”

“Truce Rite!” I shouted and Gozen’s eyes tightened.

She dropped from the sky like a burning comet, setting the ground on fire around us.

Stagger tried to step in front of me but I pushed him aside.

“No, it’s good.”

“Fuck that, she’s not hurting you anymore.”

I stepped in front of him and looked him in the eyes, my face bloody but resolute.

“I’m a big girl. I know what I’m doing.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Stag. Trust me?” He looked me in my eyes and nodded.

“Fine.”

I turned back around to face Gozen.

My sister.

My burden.

“You heard what I said, Gozen.”

She grabbed me by my hair and I groaned. Shoving me down to my knees, her blue eyes bore into me as I looked up at her.

“Go ahead.” I nodded, “Smack me around. Fuck me up all you want. You still gotta gimme my Truce Rite.”

Gozen’s jaw tightened, “You will address me on your knees, Owlet.” She spat the title out, the title of a valkyrie slave, like it disgusted her.

I winced as she tugged my bangs, jerking me forward. I bent all the way to the ground, bowing my forehead to the floor.

“That’s better, Feronia,” She released my hair and stood up, lording her power over me.

“What is your request?”

“I want the other Owlet Feronia.”

“What?” I flinched at the sound of Gozen’s sharp word.

I sat up onto the heels of my feet, glaring up at her.

“You heard what I said. Free the slaves at Demonhead and give them to me. I want my real sisters. The ones you just kick in the dirt.”

Gozen’s hand found my throat again, but this time she was gentle.

I flinched anyway.

She unbuckled the collar she put around my neck.

Feeling it peel off of my skin, I gritted my teeth at the pain. Fresh blood leaked from my collar scar. A wound Siobhan and I would now forever share.

She then held it out above my head.

I reached for it and she tugged it out of my reach.

“Use your teeth, dog.”

I curled my lip, my eyes falling away from her, anger in my face.

“Do you want your Truce Rite or not?”

“Don’t, Charlie.” Stagger said, “We’re not playing these fucking mind games anymore.”

I tilted my head and took the collar with my teeth.

My dark eyes burned with hate.

Gozen rubbed my head like a puppy, then shoved it, laughing.

I tipped back onto my ass, holding the collar in my mouth.

“I’ll see to it the rest of the dogs make it out of the pen.” She extended her hand as if to receive something.

“And for my part... I’ll have my Atma back.”

I spit the collar out into my hand and looked up at her.

She grinned that smug grin down at me and I nodded.

My Atma Sword...

Her Atma Sword... appeared in her waiting grasp.

I watched her curl her fingers around it, exposing the only scars on her perfect body. The ones on her knuckles from fighting for her life for three years in the pit of Muspelheim.

She ascended into the air slowly, that burning wing blazing her path upward to meet her valkyrie above.

“Send them all to neutral ground. The Bacchus Theater. And see to it Hymeris doesn’t try to pimp ’em out.” I glared up at her.

Gozen hovered in the air, glaring back.

“You’re starting a fire you can’t put out, Little One. I hope you’re prepared to get burned.”

“Fuckin’ right I am, Morrow!”

Gozen’s laugh echoed around us as she and her sisters moved through the stained glass ceiling as if it were nothing more than an illusion.

“Charlie,” Stagger said, helping me up. “This whole thing is doing my head in. What’s going on?”

“I dunno, Stag.” I looked over at that door, “But I think the answers are in there.”

I walked over to the fountain and dropped to my knees, reaching inside of it to wash the blood from my face. I saw the water run red in my palms, my skin burning, my nose on fire with soreness. Stagger came to my side and sat on the edge of the fountain, helping me clean myself up.

“Are you okay?” He asked.

“Yeah- ow...” I complained as he brushed blood from my bottom lip with his thumb.

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay.”

When we were done, Stagger and I walked together for that opulent archway.

Looking inside, I saw a brilliant white room, the marble floors reflecting an equally marble ceiling. The walls were silver and pearl with reliefs of crying faces and images telling stories of the long dead. At the head of the room was a large throne atop a high set of silver stairs and in it sat that crimson coated man that called himself Orcus.

I heard Stagger walking up behind me and Orcus leaned over on his throne, resting his chin in his palm, his elbow propped on the armrest.

“Leave.” He said, looking at Stagger from across the room.

“Fuck you, I’m not leaving her.”

Stagger stepped up beside me and puffed his chest out.

“I’m not going to hurt her.”

“Yeah. I believe you.” Stagger replied sarcastically, staying put.

“Then I guess we’re going to sit here and stare at one another because I only intend to speak with Siobhan.”

“Ooh, staring contest. I’m good at those.” Stagger’s resolute face didn’t match his childish words.

I almost laughed.

“Stag, just wait outside.”

“What? Really!?” Stagger balked, pointing at the throne Orcus sat in.

“Yeah. Really.” I nodded.

“This is the guy, Charlie. This is who we came here for. We’re just gonna talk it out?” Stagger threw his stare up at Orcus, “Fuck you. Fight me.”

I smiled despite our grim situation. Stagger was starting to sound like me.

Orcus only laughed.

“Oh, it’s funny now?” Stagger took a step forward.

“You have my word, Stagger Lee. I won’t hurt her. I’ll only talk. And if she’s not satisfied with what I have to say, then I give you both my permission to leave at any time you wish.”

Stagger’s stare practically scorched Orcus.

“Fine, but for the record, Charlie? This is fucked up.” He turned and stormed out, casting me one last look before yanking the door closed behind him.

“So what’s this about, Dude?” I said, my voice just as tired as I was.

He smiled.

“Can I sit down? I’m really fuckin’ tired. I got my ass handed to me just now. My sister is... I dunno. That shit’s all fucked up.”

“Sure. I’ll join you.” Orcus said, standing up from his throne and walking down the stairs to meet me in the middle of the room.

I backed up a step when he came close. He lifted both hands peacefully.

“No tricks.” He sat down on the floor, pulling his ankles in to cross his legs.

I looked down at him as he beckoned me down with a wave of his hand.

I sat down in front of him and took a deep, steadying breath.

“What’s happenin’ to my life?” I asked.

“I need your help,” Orcus said and my head tilted.

“Huh?”

“I have become painfully aware of the problem in this world. And unfortunately, I am in no position to fix it because,” he gestured around with a hand, “I’m bound to this place. This is my home and my prison.”

“You’re stuck here?”

“I was imprisoned here.”

“By who?”

“By whom. It’s whom.”

I rolled my eyes, “You gonna give me an English lesson or answer my question?”

“I should answer another one first. Your sister.” He looked me in the eyes.

“Yeah...” I looked away, “let’s start there. I saw you kill her. In the mirror.”

“No, what you saw, as she said, took place over a century ago. Almost a century and a half. I was born into this world as a destroyer. A thoughtless, careless creature that Perun hid at the center of the maze. I lived my life in the labyrinth, defending the original resting place of the Heart Fire, monstrous and deformed.” Orcus took a deep breath. “One day someone came to take it. I assumed. But in actuality, your sister appeared in my labyrinth by chance. I tried to kill her. I hadn’t the wit to reason out that she was just a lost woman needing aid, thrust into a new world outside of her understanding.”

“Shit...” I blew a heavy sigh, guilt hitting me all over again.

“Mm, well. Don’t pity her too much. She was mighty. And that close to the Heart Fire, its power found her worthy. We fought in the maze until we broke down its walls. Until blood became our bond. When Perun discovered my inability to kill her, he threw me into Muspelheim and she with me. There, in the burning pit of hell, we fought. For three years. Her power eventually wore me down. Broke my body. Forced me to evolve from the chrysalis form you see in the black water.”

I looked into those glowing white eyes of his and nodded my understanding.

“After that, Perun was intrigued by her power. He freed us but banished me to the Underworld. Repurposing me to help him keep other gods from coming back to this world. I became the keeper of the gate above, and the watcher of god-kin souls. This beautiful place that Brahma once used to help loved ones mourn has become the court of judgment that rules all gods killed by the Bright Throne. We send them to earth where Midvalley’s cruelty destroys their lives. Forcing them to go from one form of pathetic existence to another as they live out immortality without power. Without ever feeling the light of their home sun warming their faces again.”

“What about my sister... what happened to her?”

“Perun was intrigued by her power, as I said. Why do you think she’s called the Mad Queen?”

My eyes go wide.

“My sister, Robin Ryan... Gozen Morrow... is the queen of Valhalla?”

“Correct. And her cruelty knows no bounds. Blood and Blade is the only order. The vaalkyrie code rules the land now. Their twisted and self-righteous self-worship destroys the very fabric of what made this world what it is.”

“And why the hell do you need my help?”

“Because I need you to bring me the Heart Fire.”

“Oh, please. Buddy, get in line. You want it, Perun wants it, Brahma needs it back. I don’t even know where the fuck it is. Or where to start with any of you.”

“You do. Buried in your mind is the key. It is the reason you are still alive. It has bought Perun’s mercy. I tell you, Charlie, this world is plagued by one problem and one problem alone. It has too. Many. Gods.”

“Yeah? And how do you suppose you’re gonna change that?”

“By becoming the one true God. One of order.”

“Yeah, heard that before on Earth. It’s not going so well for anybody involved.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Why should I give it to you? Why should I do anything for you?” I squinted at him.

“You don’t have to. But consider your position... be it Brahma, Perun or me. Someone will sit on the Bright Throne. You cannot change the order of power in this world. There will always be those with it and those without. It’s up to you to decide who rules. And unlike your sister... I think you are what this world needs in its queen.”

“Whoa, whoa. I thought you said you wanted the Heart Fire. Now you want the Bright Throne?”

“They are one and the same,” He shrugged.

“And I’m supposed to rule with you? Buddy, I can’t even pay my rent on time. What makes you think I’m any better at makin’ decisions?”

“You have the favor of the people. The Vallhalites have become fat and happy with their prosperity. They care not for the struggles of the people beneath them. Once they are gone, there still live those that hold high the banner of Brahma God. Those that believe in you. With you as my queen, we effectively unite the people. We bring real order. Real prosperity.”

“What makes you better than Brahma? He created this world. He loves it enough to take care of it.”

“What makes you think Brahma and I are different in our love for this world?”

“I dunno.” I shook my head and shrugged, “You’re tryin’ to take over. I never heard of anything good comin’ from that.”

“You’re a child if you believe the motivations of men are as clear cut as good and evil. Did you really think there were good guys and bad guys?”

“Yeah? No? I don’t know. Right now I don’t know what decision is right.” I shrugged again, “What makes what you want better, Orcus? How do you keep little girls like me from gettin’ chewed up and spit out before we’re old enough to decide what we even want outta life?”

Orcus closed those brilliant, stolen eyes.

“Brahma was a careless child with power. Instead of watching over the men and women of Blue Veil, he stuck his head in the sandbox and played. Brahma is a dreamer, not a ruler.”

His eyes opened then, “That’s why he made other gods to do it for him. So he didn’t have to dispense law or order, and what did those gods do? They divided the people based upon ridiculous belief in

their empty world views. I say again, there are too many gods.” His voice was alive with disgust.

“What should I do then, Orcus? The problem with worldview is that everyone has one. Who’s right? You? Perun? Don’t talk to me about choices like I’m the fortunate one for being saddled with the burden!” I curled my lip at him, “I live in and deal with poverty every day back home. If I’m eatin’ it’s because I scrapped for it. There’s nothin’ fortunate about me.”

“Charlotte, the problem is that you ask other people that question too often and never yourself. What should you do? The future is in your hands. Just don’t replace a tyrant with a careless child.”

“Or one tyrant for another?” My eyebrows rose with my swift reply.

“Tyranny and dispassionate order are not the same things. This isn’t about rich or poor, powerful or powerless. It’s about giving people the ability to live in a world that doesn’t come with hard choices. A wise man said that in this life a person will either build or destroy, Charlie. I need to build. To do that... I need you to destroy.”

“You can’t ask me to make that kind of choice. You’re talking about war.”

“Yes. I am. And be it me, or Perun, or Brahma, someone will reshape the future. You’re the one who has to decide who sits on the Bright Throne. Only you.”

“I can’t do this.” I rubbed my hand over my forehead, then pushed my fingers through my still damp hair, “Don’t ask me to do this.”

“You don’t have a choice. The Heart Fire is your responsibility. Your burden. It can’t be destroyed, only harnessed. It doesn’t matter which one of us you pick, the fight is still coming.”

“I can’t just push Perun off the throne. He’ll push back. I’m not strong enough to fight him.”

“No. Not yet. All you can do is walk the path in front of you. Cry all you like, Charlie... it’s you that brings war to the endless sky.”

Silence followed as those words lingered, replaying in my head.

He wasn't wrong. No matter how I rolled it around in my head it came up the same way. People were going to fight and die for power.

I took a deep, sobering breath.

It couldn't be avoided. The moment the Heart Fire turned back up, it was going to be in someone's hands. War at this point was inevitable. The one thing I knew is that Perun was far from the person that should be in that chair.

Especially not with Gozen Morrow at his side.

"I need you to do something for me,"

"Name it."

"NEST."

"What about them?"

"When it starts," I said. "And people start dyin'... they'll go after my family. I know they will. Midvalley controls what NEST does, but I know you have a say in it. And Robin's completely lost her fuckin' mind. She'll leverage the people I love in a heartbeat. I saw it in her eyes. She loves power now."

"You're asking me to keep your family safe?"

"No. I'm askin' you to give Chroma back his sight. I'll keep my family safe."

"You want the Gate," Orcus reasoned. "You ask a high price."

My eyebrows tipped down.

"You ask for the Bright Throne."

Orcus stood up, walking back towards his throne.

He stopped halfway there and looked back at me.

"I will share the sight with Chroma God. We will each have one eye. And the ability to make Gate Keys. But neither of us will be able to see the future anymore."

"That's only half of what I asked for."

"I'm only asking for half of the Bright Throne," Orcus smiled.

"What if I don't want my half?"

“Do you want it?” He asked.

I thought about it. The Bright Throne. Sitting on top of the world, able to call the shots in my own life for once. Not having to take abuse from people that barely knew me. To be in control.

I did want it.

But that’s exactly why I shouldn’t have it.

“No.”

“Lies.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe a lie?”

“Maybe a lot of things.”

“I’ll see to it your family is safe. And I’ll make sure NEST doesn’t see you coming. It’s up to you to diminish their stranglehold on earth. You’ll need to take out the Triumvirate to remove Midvalley’s control. After that, the earth will become neutral territory that no one will want to tread on too freely.”

“Why don’t you just take their Gate Keys?” I asked.

“We all have a part to play. Mine is to make sure Perun believes we still fight together.”

“Why did you agree to help him in the first place?”

“Son’s do that.”

“Perun’s your dad!?”

“And Hymeris is my mother.”

“Son of a bitch! She set me up. You set me up!” I got to my feet.

“I play the long game, Charlie. Everything that’s happened up to this point has all been to get you here without Perun knowing my true intentions. My mother has hated him ever since he replaced her with your sister. The Mad Queen thinks I acted on her behalf to ensure her creation. It took a very long time to help her formulate what she thought was her idea.”

“What?”

My head hurt at that notion. I thought back on everything that had happened, everything I went through to get here. “Robin did all of this?”

“Charlie, understand. One-hundred and thirty years is a long time to hate. Gozen Morrow is imprisoned by it now. Her hatred for you has gone far beyond what you did. It is her dogma. All I had to do was give her direction.”

I shook my head at that. Imagining Robin hating me for that long. Her hate festering and growing for over a century.

Orcus ascended the rest of those ornate steps. He sat in his opulent throne and looked down at me.

“Wait,” I said thinking back to something he said, “If Hymeris and Perun are your parents, then you’re not a celestial, you’re a god. I thought you wanted a world without those.”

“I said I wanted a world with only one.” He rested his chin on his knuckles, his elbow propped on that beautiful armrest again.

“You know what’s really fucked up about gods?” I turned my head to look at the bas reliefs on the wall.

“What’s that, Charlotte?”

“Every time one of you comes around you’re never satisfied until you tear people’s lives apart and create more reasons for people to hate each other.”

“Apropos.” He nodded.

“I don’t know what that fuckin’ word means. Look, can you really make sure earth is neutral?”

“Every war has rules. Even Ragnarok had them. The war of the New Gods will be no different. Perun and the Mad Queen will follow them, rest assured. We just have to make the rules seem like they came from them not you. Earth will be granted sanctuary.” He sat up in his chair and pointed at me.

“Know this though, Charlotte. If you cross me, I will destroy everything you hold dear.”

“Are you forcing me to choose you?” I asked, turning my head back to him.

“No. I’m forcing you to be impartial.”

“Then there’s something you should know,” I replied, my voice a deadly promise.

“Which is?”

“If you hurt my family, there is no limit to how fast and how hard I will bring the world crashing down on your head.”

“My word is my bond.”

Orcus opened his hand and from it he pulled that brilliant golden ring he wore, releasing it into the air. It floated the distance between us, my hand opening to accept it.

I looked down at it. It was a man’s ring, twinkling rich with tiny stones in its beautiful and heavy gold band. As I moved it around in my hand, the band shrank down into something less masculine, but every bit as heavy.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Draupnir... The ring of Odin. Consider it an early engagement ring.” He said with a smile.

“I’d rather not. Little early for proposals, don’t you think?”

“Consider it my word then.” He gave his armrest a sharp knock with his knuckle. The sound echoed around me.

“It allows the wearer to freely travel between here and earth once every nine days. Every ninth night it duplicates itself eight times. The duplicates are powerless, but you’re a resourceful woman. I’m sure you’ll figure something out with them. For now, it serves me no purpose. Its power doesn’t work here.”

“I can’t take this from you. Like I said, I don’t know you. I don’t love you. I don’t know anything about you.” I turned the ring over again and looked at it.

“I’m not asking you to love me, I’m asking you to help me. Just make sure that you make the right choice when the time comes.”

“Yeah,” I said, turning around and heading back towards the door.

“Charlie?”

I stopped at the door, my hand on its intricately designed surface.

“I will send one eye to Chroma God. But I leave you one warning. Stagger Lee has something to tell you.”

I felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“How do I get outta here, Orcus?” I said without looking back.

“The fountain. Or the stained glass ceiling. Your choice.”

I turned the knob and headed out of the door.

It closed behind me, leaving me to stand in the fountain room looking at the destruction left behind by Gozen. Water was still pooling on the floor and Stagger Lee was sitting on the fountain’s edge beside the break in the stone.

He stood and looked at me.

“Charlie... Is everything alright?”

His tone sounded worried. Like he was afraid I would disapprove of him. Like he was afraid Orcus told me his secret.

“Yeah. Yeah, everything’s cool.” I said.

We met one another halfway and he hugged me to his chest, wrapping his arms around my middle. My arms wrapped around his neck and I rested my sore face against his chest.

“You gonna fill me in?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Later.” I looked up at him.

He looked down into my eyes.

I felt the red marks on my face where Gozen hit me.

“So what are you gonna do with those slaves Gozen’s setting free?”

“They’ve all been through the same things I’ve been through, Stag.”

“Yeah, I know. I can’t imagine.” He shook his head.

“Not just that. The ones that are still alive have survived the arena. They’ve seen the valkyrie fight first hand.”

“So what’s the move?”

"You and Bijou are gonna help me teach 'em how to fight."

"That's my girl." Stag said, gently rocking us left to right.

"Stag?"

"Yeah?"

"This isn't over." I hugged him tighter.

I felt him inhale a big breath and nod.

"No, it's not."

"I gotta make sure my family's okay."

"Oh. Back to earth." He confirmed.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's okay, kiddo."

There was disappointment in his voice, but I could tell he meant what he said.

"I don't know what Robin's been up to while I was trapped here, but you heard what she said. I can't trust her to keep our family out of this. Orcus saved my ass, but there's no tellin' what she'd do to get her hands around my neck again."

"What is it you think she's gonna do if you go back to earth?"

"It doesn't matter. If she has me she doesn't need my family. Not only that, I gotta get rid of the NEST problem back home, just like Chroma said. And after talkin' to Orcus, I think I've got a pretty good chance of doin' it."

"Can you really even trust him?"

I clenched my jaw, remembering the last few things Orcus said to me.

"Maybe. I dunno. I know I won't be able to live with myself if somethin' happens to them and I didn't even try." I looked up at him again.

"Well," Stagger smiled, "if you gotta go pick a fight," he shrugged.

"Kinda don't have a choice," I said, resting my forehead against his chest.

"Guess I'm coming with you," he said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah...”

“Then I think you should tell me your secret now.”

I felt him squeeze me like he was afraid it was the last time.

“Are you sure?”

“I have to be,” I said.

“Are you sure?” He asked again, his voice a trembling whisper.

“I have to be,” I whispered back.

“I killed Samantha.”

A breath caught in my chest.

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