BREATHE: A NOVEL

A thesis submitted to the
Kent State University Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for University Honors

by

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May, 2016
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A lot of people guided this novel into its current state, but I owe my greatest thanks to my committee.

Dr. Robert Sturr’s constant guidance kept me and the book on track. From misplaced modifiers to the greater context of young adult literature to understandable fight scenes, his suggestions and encouragement were key in making the book what it is today.

Dr. Susan Sainato has been there for me since the first day of my freshman year. She values the love of learning, and she passed a great deal of that on to me. Her classes were not only enjoyable but inspirational, and she has always validated the presence of creativity in the academic world. Her coaxing kept my creative streak alive and thriving.

Dr. Sarah Harvey’s classes in the Classics enlightened me on an astounding tradition upon which Breathe is built. The artwork and architecture she presented provided me with endless visual inspiration for this book, and her suggestions on literary sources played an integral role in the framework of the Otherlands.

Finally, Dr. Kimberly Winebrenner was there from the start to support my desire to revisit Breathe. Her suggestions both at in the preliminary stages of the thesis and at my defense were invaluable, and her encouragement helped get me through the editing doldrums.

Thank you all for your wisdom and your kindness.
Of all the students in Master O’Hara’s class, I was the best at pretending to like free sparring.

Puzzle-piece floor mats squeaked as we all lined up, facing each other, and waited to be rearranged. Smiling pleasantly, I placed myself across from Timothy, whose eyes I could realistically meet, and whose uniform was neat and ironed and crisp from taking it easy on himself. He avoided my gaze. I knew that, on the one in a million chance that I actually sparred him, it would be an easy fight.

Master O’Hara did not enjoy watching easy fights.

He paced the line slowly, nodding to students and telling them, “Switch with Kendra, go across from Mike, end of the line” in his typical ‘we don’t have time for me to draw out my vowels’ voice. We replied with well-trained yes sirs. Timothy was plucked from his place in line. I did not glance around to see who would take his place.

I was first. The rest of the class trotted to the back of the room, some of them hiding amongst the punching bag forest, others sitting eagerly at the edge of the mats.

Feet together, arms at my sides, I bowed.

Six-foot-eight Viking-bearded Dan Myers bowed back. Five-foot-three me slid one foot back on the puzzle-piece floor, and he mirrored my movement, hopping as he did. Somehow, it made him look bigger.
It didn’t matter how much bigger he was, I firmly reminded myself; we were evenly matched, according to the black belts on our waists.

Someone of his size had to build up to a kick, because, duh, physics, and I saw it coming a mile away. I hopped back, relaxed, letting it swing past me. It took half a second to recover and then I was placing my own kick, nice and neat, on his hip (because that was the highest I could reach, which had always bothered me, but there were always heels. Just not here).

He actually stumbled a bit, much to my delight, and I battered him with a series of smaller kicks, forcing him back. We came so close to the mirror that I could make out the beads of sweat on the back of his neck, possibly there because of the thirty push-ups a minute ago, but more likely because he was about to be taken out by a small woman. My next kick landed square on his stomach, and he stumbled back with a cough. His heel was inches from the boundary. I twisted, setting up a roundhouse, throwing all my weight into it.

His eyes widened. Clear, dark, haunting gray. And the world lurched to the side, and I went off-balance.

He sidestepped.

I promptly fell on my face. Not literally on my face, but that was what it felt like. I spun back to my feet, flustered, and he was advancing. His foot caught my shoulder and I knew he was holding back because I wasn’t knocked all the way over.

I danced backwards, quickly as I could, my heart racing. There was a very distinct possibility that, no, we weren’t evenly matched. But I refused to believe it. I lurched up
and back to put as much space between us as possible, and in doing so, I put my head
directly in the path of Dan Myers’ telephone-pole-sized ankle bone.

The sound it made when it connected with my skull was somewhere between a
thunderclap and a car crash.

I was very annoyed indeed when I was back in my head, staring at the way-too-bright
fluorescents in the ceiling. Why were those even there? We didn’t need light. And Master
O’Hara was definitely yelling through a bullhorn at Dan Myers. I tried to lift my head.

“Nope.” Kendra gave me a gentle tap on the forehead and repositioned an ice pack
that I could just make out at the edge of my vision.

“Uuuugh.”

“You’ll need more than that to convince me.” Her smile was gentle, which I found
annoying. I could hold an ice pack to my own forehead. I tried.

It didn’t work.

Someone lifted my head for me, slipping a jacket between me and the mat as a pillow.
I caught sight of Master O’Hara and Dan and was surprised to see that the bullhorn was,
indeed, imagined. The rest of the dojang was in a state of relative chaos, as well; there
were about six bottles of Gatorade lying as offerings by my feet, and the box fan sat next
to me puttering away. Someone was pulling Deanna, the desk girl, in by the hand because
there were rumors that Deanna knew first aid. She seemed to be of the opinion that
calling a professional was the better option, because she was dialing something on her
phone with the other hand.

“I’m fine,” I insisted, but it came out sounding more like “Ahmbluuuuuh.”

“That’s nice, honey.” Kendra patiently nodded to me.

“Rrrgh.”

“I see.”

By that time, Master O’Hara had finished yelling and was telling Deanna not to call an ambulance (I wasn’t sure how to take that), and he came over and knelt by me. I pressed my hand against my forehead, taking a slow breath.

“What just happened, Isobel?” he asked, frowning. I didn’t think I’d ever seen him not frowning, so that was a nonissue, really.

“I was hit in the head with a tree, sir.” Finally, that was intelligible.

“Really?” His frown lines got deeper.

“A tree that was attached to Dan Myers.” I pointed at said tree. “Called his leg.”

“That’s more like it.” His frown turned less frowny. “And are you feeling dizzy at all? Nauseous?”

“A bit dizzy, sir. Not sick.” I tried to sit up. Kendra prevented it again with a well-placed poke in my shoulder. I shot her a look. “I’m sure I’m fine, my head just hurts because an ankle hit it at warp speed. Can I go home?”

“That’s fine. I’ll call your mother.” He turned on his heel towards Deanna.

That was what healed me. I pushed myself upright, ignoring Kendra’s look of extreme distaste. “Sir. Please don’t call my mother.” I would never, ever, ever hear the end of it. I’d spend the next month in the hospital. The next three years in counseling to
make sure I was ‘coming to terms with what had happened.’ And then she would have to
do the same thing to get herself back on track. “I can drive myself home. I feel fine.”

“I’m not sure I believe that.” He reached for Deanna’s phone.

I jumped to my feet and lurched forward and put my hand between them before he
could touch it. “Please, you have no clue what that’ll do to my mom. She’s already
worried all the time; this’ll put her over the edge.”

He frowned very hard at me.

“I’m fine, sir. Please, just let me drive myself home.” Since I was standing up and
making real words, I was hopefully making up for what the past few minutes had
suggested. I’d been hit in the head, yes, but I did not have a concussion.

Master O’Hara didn’t really stop frowning, but he did sigh and say, “Go sit down in
the lounge. Give it an hour, have Deanna watch you. If you’re still fine, you can drive
yourself home.”

I snatched my bag and one of the sacrificial Gatorades and bolted before he could
change his mind.

One couch was devoid of waiting parents, and I sank into it with a sigh. The weather
channel played on an old boxy TV hung by the ceiling, showing a monstrous green blob
making its way over Ginsberg, Ohio. It was certifiably gross outside, and I hoped that by
the time my hour was up the skies would be clear and blue and beautiful again. The
town’s temperamental weather made it entirely possible.
I opened the Gatorade with a quiet crack, sipping on it as I dug my phone out of my bag. My head still hurt, but I was coherent and the spinning had passed. Both good signs. I just had to burn an hour before I could go, which was simple enough on the thousand social media sites Dad was always complaining about.

It was five full minutes after the hour ended when Master O’Hara made his curmudgeonly way into the lounge.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, leaning over and examining my pupils as if I was going to blink out ‘concussed’ in Morse code.

“Fine, sir. I’m not dizzy.”

“Sick?”

“No.” A little, but that was because I was full of Gatorade.

“Can you stand?”

I did, just to prove it.

He sighed. “Okay. Drive home, but take it slow. Call the desk when you get there or I’ll have Deanna call your parents.”

“Thank you, sir.” I bowed and grabbed my bag and ran for it.

It was a nightmare worthy of Kansas outside. The wind whipped the studio door out of my hand, and it would have carried me away if I had been a bit more willowy. I leaned into it, one hand up to shield my face, and after a far-too-long struggle with my keys made it into my car. I wrestled my bag into the passenger seat and finally exhaled the breath I had been holding, bracing my hands on the wheel.

Rain pounded the windshield. The brick wall in front of my car was melted into an
Impressionist painting. Distant thunder made the windows buzz.

The dizziness had passed. My head throbbed, but I was no longer chasing thoughts and words the way I had been. I was fine. I was totally fine. I put the key in the ignition.

Before I turned it, I leaned over and fumbled through the front pocket of my bag. Pulling out my phone, I muttered to it, “Search for ‘concussion symptoms.’”

Ginsberg, Ohio was exactly what you would expect from a place called Ginsberg, Ohio. The brick-faced stores along Main Street had, in several cases, literal corn fields in their backyards. The corn took up all our parking. I stopped at one of the three lights along the road, hearing the siren song of a coffee at Mocha Snow’s, but I anticipated too much of a headache-exacerbating fight for a space and decided against it. Home was within walking distance, anyway, and I could always come back when it wasn’t pouring rain. Although, considering where we lived, that was likely never to happen. October 12th was usually a rainy day; it had been almost every year, with the exception of four and six years prior. And that one. October 12th of ten years ago.

That day, I remembered, had been sunny. Golden. The leaves in Caspar’s backyard, a few bright red ones amongst the brown, were crunchy and dry and warm to fall into. Everything left on the trees looked like fire.

The light changed. I punched it a little too hard and my tires squealed. A lucky Mocha Snow’s-carrying pedestrian cheered on the tan Corolla that was pretending to drag race.

Maplewood Drive was a branch off the trunk that was Main Street. I followed it,
counting down 1920s Craftsman houses until I finally reached the right one. Small and green and far enough off the road to make getting the mail a pain. The fiery trees that it hid between were dulled by the clouds and the driving rain. I pulled as close to the house as I could and counted down—three, two, one—then bolted through the rain so fast I nearly hit the wall under the porch.

Comfortable warmth greeted me inside. I leaned against the wall, working off my shoes, staring out the window at the street. The rain had doubled up in intensity since I left the dojang, and it was now so dark outside that I wondered what time it was.

“Isobel!”

I spun around, nearly falling as I did. “Mom.”

“Hey, sweetie.” She didn’t wait for me to stand up to hug me, wrapping her arms around my head. “You’re home late.”

“Yeah.” Her arm bumped my growing goose egg and I squeezed my eyes shut. “I got hit.”

“Hit?” She stepped back to evaluate. “Where?”

“Heads.”

“Oh, no. I’ll get you some ice.” She did, leaving me to pull off my other shoe, and she returned with a colorful floral beanbag full of frozen corn. “Are you okay? Was it bad?”

“…Yeah, it was bad.” She passed me the corn sack and I pressed it against my head. Too hard. Mistake number twenty today. “I, um…” Better not to mention the blackout; that would be mistake twenty-one. “It knocked me right over.”

She frowned deeply, and the resemblance to Master O’Hara was striking. “Did he pit
“You against some lumberjack again?”

“N… yes.” I tried to escape to the living room, hoping she would drop it, but that was obviously not an option.

“I’m going to call him. This mix-and-match he keeps pulling isn’t safe. I don’t care how real he’s trying to make it, breaking a leg in class isn’t going to get you anywhere…”

She was full-on angry suburban white mom at that point, and I tried to tune it out as I lowered myself onto a couch. Every time I got home with a bruise. Every. Time.

“Andrea told me the same thing happened to Timothy last week…”

After making the required call to Deanna, I switched on the TV. Weather channel again. It looked like the storm was supposed to clear up by this evening, which I appreciated. Not that I had any outdoorsy plans. October 12th called for a night in.

“Do you need anything?” A different storm had blown over. “Anything to eat?”

“I’m okay.” I watched the green line march across Ohio. Little pockets of red fizzled out as it went.

“All right. Let me know if you do.” She stood by my head a little too long, frowning, and then left. I hope that would be the end of that, and I could just get to tomorrow without anything else going wrong. The weather wasn’t interesting enough, so I clicked through until I found a lemur documentary. Lemurs would do. Lemurs were fun.

The lemurs took up the two hours before Dad got home with all associated bear hugs and fanfare. Then it was time for dinner, and we all sat around the table and mom talked about how selling antique vases with Linda had gone and Dad talked about how the
forestry office had gone and I heard less and less of it as the evening progressed. I pushed
my food around my plate, my eyes unfocused.

They tried to ignore it at first. Dad said that Toby was learning the ropes of forestry
PR just fine, and he glanced at me. Mom said that that was wonderful, and she glanced at
me. Mom said that she had acquired a nice glass pitcher. Dad said that was wonderful,
and his mouth turned into a thin, worried line.

“Isobel,” Mom said softly.

“Yeah.” I stared at my pork chop.

“Are you hanging in there?”

“I’m okay.” I had gotten out of bed. I had even gone to taekwondo. They didn’t
understand how much of an accomplishment that was. I hadn’t gotten out of bed until
year five’s October 12th, and I hadn’t left the house until seven’s.

“We miss him too, sweetie.” She put a hand on my arm.

“I know.” My voice was too flat for them to take that seriously.

“You’re not the only one.”

“No, I’m not.” I leaned on my elbows, the too-familiar cold, weightless feeling
creeping up my chest. “I know I’m not. I can’t imagine what it’s like for Mr. and Mrs.
Bruniere. They lost a kid.” I knew better than to argue about that. I had tried.

“And you lost your best friend.” Dad’s voice was soft and gentle. “It’s okay to miss
him.”

“But I’m the only one who’s been told a million times that I’m not crazy in that voice
that means ‘yeah, honey, you’re crazy.’ The Brunieres haven’t had to hear that.”
I had said too much. Mom’s eyes grew shiny and Dad stared at his plate. I bit my lip and stood, pushing my chair out from behind me. “Can I take my food upstairs?”

“Of course,” Mom told me.

I snatched up my plate and ran for it.

Something about staring at ceilings makes things worse.

Even lying in a pile of stuffed animals, my favorite blanket over me, the sound of rain coming through my barely-open window, I felt like I was made of lead. October 12th brought all my carefully buried messes right back to the surface, and it took days and days to cover them up again.

Ten years of replaying must have distorted the memory. The violent reds and oranges of the trees, I was sure about. Caspar’s blue-and-green striped sweater, about six sizes too big. The dog barking at us next door. The leaves crunching underfoot.

I would have staked my life on those things. The rest I had spent so long examining that I was never sure anymore.

The man, the gray-skinned man with short, black hair, dressed in robes like a priest. He came out of nowhere and said Caspar’s name. I told him not to go. He laughed at me and took his hand and they were just gone.

Or maybe it had been a man in a gray mask, and maybe he had dragged Caspar off by his wrist, and maybe the laugh had been a cry. No one else had seen, and no one listened to the testimony of a seven-year-old who saw her friend vanish holding hands with a
ghost.

I pressed my hands against my closed eyes until colors washed over the darkness. It didn’t matter. They had never found him, and they never would, and now I just had to get on with my life.

Rain pounded on the roof. Lightning flashed through my lace curtains. It all made my head spin, and I wished I had chosen to stay in bed today, because I would have at least gotten out of a potential concussion. Grumbling, I got up and searched my bookshelf for the sappiest romance novel I owned and cracked it open to a random page. The ceiling wasn’t distracting enough, and there were no more lemurs on TV, so this would have to do.

The rain stopped, as promised, within an hour. I let the book drop down against my legs when I noticed the last dregs of evening sunlight peeking through the window. Between the remaining clouds, the sky was almost rudely pink.

Well, fine, then.

I put down the book and abandoned my somewhat-nibbled pork chops. My head swam as I stood, and I groaned, vowing to tell my mom later so she could panic and take me to the hospital, just in case. I crept down the stairs, keeping out of sight, and slipped out the back door.

Our humble yard was dazzling. The raindrops that clung to everything sparkled, and a sea of red and orange leaves from our border of maples had been knocked to the ground.
In my socks, I swished my feet through them, leaving a trail to the old swing set. The wood creaked as I sat down, but it didn’t give. One of these days it would break and the thing would finally have to go.

Just not yet.

I leaned my head against the damp chain, which would leave an orange smear on my cheek, but if I didn’t care about wet socks I didn’t care about that. It was so quiet, and the air was so cold that I could feel it swirl around in my lungs after each breath. It smelled clean.

That was what I needed.

I let my eyes close, warding off another dizzy spell. I could hear my own breath, and I slowed it down as much as I could without making myself want to fall over even more.

In two years, I would go to college. Somewhere out of state, as far from Ginsberg, Ohio as I could go. A new start.

I took a long, slow breath in.

I didn’t know what I would study. That was something I could worry about.

A slow breath out.

I would graduate and buy a house and have a dog and one of those little blue birds with the black ring around its neck. I would teach it to answer the phone. YouTube had told me it was possible.

*Breathing in.*

I would leave this mess behind.

*Breathing out.*
The dizziness hit me in a wave, sucking me under. I opened my eyes and doubled over. The chains dug into my hands as I clutched them, fighting for breath, praying for it to subside.

It did, slowly, and when the yard stopped spinning completely I was staring at a pair of feet halfway across the yard. Someone must have heard me wheezing, but those weren’t shoes anyone in my house owned. They were pointy and had laces. We didn’t do laces, as a general rule.

We also didn’t do long robes.

When my eyes landed on the face, I fell backwards off the swing. Gray; gray skin, gray eyes.

The gray man.

I tried to scream, but I was too dizzy. I would have run if my leg hadn’t been caught in the chain. I would have thrown a rock if one had been in reach.

As it was, I lay there and stared and dug my hands under the leaves.

The man took a step forward, and I flinched. I could see his gray hands; he held nothing threatening, but that wasn’t much comfort.

“Isobel Lenore Renthroe,” he said. His voice sounded more like a high schooler’s than a kidnapper’s. And he said my first name like it started with two e’s, and my last name like ‘th’ was impossible to work around.

“Get,” I gasped, struggling to free my leg. “Get out. Get away. Get…”
He held up a hand, taking a step back. I wanted to look anywhere but at that face, but doing so was impossible. Against the blue sky, against the subtle green of my house, he looked so wrong.

But that was just it. He looked wrong. He looked so wrong that he could not possibly be real.

“You are stuck,” he observed. His words ran together into one, his pronunciation just slightly more Dracula-esque than I preferred to hear from grayscale strangers in my backyard.

“Yes,” I blurted, reaching up to free my leg. The hem of my jeans tore as I pulled them loose from the chain. I scooted away, plowing through the wet leaves. “Stay back.”

“All right.” He took another step away from me, both his hands up in front of him, like I had him at gunpoint.

I stared.

All gray, just like my… memory, or hallucination, or whatever it had been. But there were differences. His hair was longer, for starters; he had far too much of it, inky black, falling in heaps onto his shoulders. It needed a good combing. In my memory, he had never had that much hair. I sat there, staring at it and at the rest of him between the chains. He stood very still and allowed it.

“Who the hell are you?” I blurted. If Mom had heard that word, she would have swatted me. I was addled indeed.

“Cephas,” he said.

“That tells me nothing.” I grabbed the frame of the swing set and used it to haul
myself to my feet.

He shrugged. “It is my name.”

“What are you?”

“I am a person.”

“What kind of person is gray?”

“Some.”

He was just telling me everything I wanted to know. “You’re the gray man.”

“I am a gray man.” He was growing too confident in my ability to decipher what he was saying, and the string of words that came out of his mouth sounded vaguely like, “There are many, gray men and gray women…” More words I didn’t understand. “…Just like here.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and opened them again. He was still there, still watching me with dull gray eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“I want to talk about Caspar.”

Ah.

Very cautiously, I straightened. My head kindly did not spin, which didn’t make up for what it was doing to me right now. “Look, it’s very nice of my subconscious to give me an outlet like this, but I really don’t need to talk about it. I’ve done a lot of talking about it.”

He tilted his head to the side. “Sub…?”

“There are so many nice, healthy ways for me to process what happened. I’m working really hard on using them, I promise.” I brushed damp leaves off my backside. “I don’t
think talking to you is gonna fix it, so if you could kindly go away…”

“I am not a vision,” he said, tipping his head the other way. “I am here.”

Nice try. “See, that’s exactly what a hallucination would say.” I was onto him, and I chuckled and shook my head at my own cleverness. So I was nuts; at least I was self-aware. One more thing to get over.

The hallucination kicked the leaves aside with his hallucination-shoe. His hallucination-shadow was turning the grass funny colors.

Funny brown colors.

I frowned, a cold lump settling in my stomach. The grass under his feet was dry and dead. It hadn’t been dead earlier; I would have noticed. My shuffle to the swings had carved a path through that spot. “When did…?”

“I am not a vision,” he repeated.

“I could have hallucinated that.” I put the leg of the swing set between us. “It doesn’t have to be real.”

He just shrugged.

It didn’t have to be fake, either, a small part of me reasoned. The small, panicking part that was now convinced I was going to be kidnapped. I didn’t know which was worse—that I had made up a gray man for the second time in my life, or that the original gray man was back for me.

I glanced at the window in the back of my house. The living room couches were empty. Would my parents hear me if I called? Dad had locked himself out once and yelled for ten minutes and no one had heard. Could I get past him and get through the
door? Knock on the window before he dragged me off? Go to the neighbors? They had no idea I was crazy, they would probably believe me… If I was hallucinating, however, it would make everything all kinds of awkward.

“Isobel?”

His voice snapped me back to the present. Whether or not I could deal with this myself was irrelevant. I was going to. I had to.

The gray man was here for me to talk about Caspar. So maybe I would just have to cooperate. Maybe I would have some major cathartic moment and cry on his hallucination shoulder, and he would say ‘my work here is done’ and vanish in a puff of smoke.

Because that was how minds worked.

I stepped around to the front of the swing and sat back down in it, crossing my arms and fixing him with a firm stare. He looked back, bringing up his eyebrows in a way that made him look uncomfortable with being watched. Spectacular.

“Fine,” I said, nodding. “Let’s talk about Caspar.”

“Good.”

We stared at each other in awkward silence, each waiting for the other to speak first. He finally did. “What did you see?”

“Oh, no, no.” I held up my hands. “I’ve had that question a billion times. ‘Tell me what you think happened.’ ‘Tell me—’”

He shook his head. “No. Tell me what you saw.”

“I saw Caspar get kidnapped.”
“That is what happened.”

“Yes, it is.”

“That is not what you saw.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t even know what I saw anymore. I’ve been over it so many times that I don’t know what’s memory and what’s made up.”

“You know what should be memory,” he said, his voice gentle. “And you know what should be false.”

“Yeah, but—”

“So what is memory?”

“Look, this isn’t really fun for me to relive, and you’re going to think I’m out of my mind.”

He raised an eyebrow. Oh, right. He was probably a figment of my imagination.

“What did you see?” he asked again.

I stared at a point over his shoulder, taking a slow breath. “A gray man.” It was the last thing I wanted to recall. “I saw a gray man take his hand and disappear. They didn’t even… walk anywhere. They just took one step forward and poof, gone.”

He nodded. Just nodded. As if this was all perfectly reasonable.

“You must have something to say about that,” I blurted.

He shrugged. “It is fine.”

“It’s. Not. Real.” I stood, taking a step towards him before I could think better of it.

The crunch of the leaves startled me. “I made it up. I made up everything that happened, and I don’t remember what I really saw. This is a way of coping. You are a way of
“I am not a vision, Isobel. I promise.” He looked oddly sad.

“I don’t believe you.” If he wasn’t real, he couldn’t hurt me, so I took another step towards him. He did not move back. “You’re here to tell me what I want to hear. So I can pretend to be a reasonably sane human being. I know that isn’t true, so stop taunting me.”

“I am not taunting.”

“So why are you here?”

“Because I need to talk to you.”

“Why would you need to talk to me?”

“I need help.”

I rolled my eyes. My subconscious needed help. Surprise.

“You can get him back.”

At least a full minute passed before I was aware of leaning against the damp wood frame of the swings.

The air felt cold again. My head spun. Everything was too bright; the sky was too pink, the leaves were too orange.

This wasn’t real.

“You’re taunting me,” I repeated, my voice rough.

He shook his head, looking utterly serious. “I am not.”

“You are not real.”
“I am.”

“You’re a hallucination.”

“I am not.”

I pounded my fist against the wood. I should have run, but I didn’t know where to go.

“This isn’t real. Just go away. Leave me alone.”

“Isobel.” His voice was level. “He is alive.”

“He is gone!” I swung my arm at him, as if it would do any good, and he took half a step back. “He isn’t coming back. Whatever happened to him, there is no undoing it.”

“No. But you can bring him back.”

“Will you stop screwing with me?” I pushed off of the frame. “I want him to be back. I really do. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be tripping about someone telling me he’s fine. But he is gone.”

“He is asleep.”

Whatever snippy reply I had been planning fell apart before I could say it. I stood a little straighter. How did he know? “What’s he doing right now?”

“Sleeping.”

Stupid question. “Where is he?”

“The cloisters.”

“Where are those?”

“An island.”

“Where?”

“The sea.”
“You’re going to have to be more specific.” I crossed my arms.

“There is one sea, and there is one island in it.” He indicated a large circle with his hands and pointed to the middle, like he was explaining it to a baby, but at least he was speaking slowly enough to make sense. “That is where he is.”

“Um, no. There are loads of seas.”

“Where I live, there is just one.”

Well, then. “And he’s on an island.”

“Yes.”

“In the cloisters.”

“Yes.”

“Great, then go get him.”

“I cannot go in.”

There was the catch. There was always a catch. This was the crazy-person version of the timeshare information session within the free cruise. “And you need me to.”

“Yes.”

I put my face in my hands. “Go away, okay? Just leave.”

“May I come back tomorrow?”

I stood like that, my face hidden, hearing a record screech. The hallucination—or kidnapper—was scheduling an appointment. Was that possible? If I could just tell him to come back later, that gave me time to get to a hospital and think this over from the safety of a padded room. “Tomorrow?”

“Yes.”
My face still in my hands, I added, “I have classes.”

“I can come after classes.”

“I’ll be free after five.”

“I will come at six.”

This was insane. I looked up to give him one more good stare, and he was, of course, gone. No trace of him left, except for the shifted patch of leaves and the dry, brittle grass where he had been standing.

I didn’t hear a single word that was said in any of my classes the next day.

My head, at least, felt a lot better, and I wasn’t dizzy at any point during the day, except during a few minutes over lunch. The feeling faded when I stared out a window at the horizon for a moment. But I couldn’t tune back in to the conversation, no matter how interesting it was to whine about Hamlet being the quintessential emo kid. I probably shouldn’t have sat down with the AP Lit people. Because now I was slightly offended by how much of an idiot they thought the Dane was for hearing out his father’s ghost instead of running for his life.

When we were finally freed, I bolted to my car with much more enthusiasm than I ever did. Hoping to beat the traffic, I threw it into reverse and nearly knocked over two cheerleaders as I backed out. The fact that smooshing them would make me late for my appointment with my hallucination made me slightly more cautious working my way out of the parking lot. All eight lights on the way home turned red as I approached. The
Mocha Snow’s-toting pedestrians crossed the streets so slowly they made me want to lean on my horn. Every intersection was blocked by one obnoxious soccer mom or another.

Dinner that evening was even worse than school, because I was expected to be cheery and make conversation. I sat down and took one look at the macaroni and cheese and knew this was the first plate of it that I would not finish.

“How was school, sweetie?” Mom asked.

“Fine,” I said, stabbing a noodle. “Dad, how was work?”

“Great.” Then the floodgates of forestry opened, and I prided myself on asking the right question at the right time. He went on about tree-related things that I would never hope to understand and I downed half my plate of food before he could finish. He was merciful enough to then ask Mom how vase acquisitions had fared, buying me still more time before the inevitable question:

“Learn anything interesting?”

It had been a dinner tradition since I started school. “Hamlet was the quintessential emo kid,” I declared, and I dove back into my food.

I ran upstairs immediately after dinner, staring at my phone. The clock read 5:47. Thirteen minutes to think about this. My bed startled me by creaking as I sat on it, and I pulled a blanket over my legs.

If he showed up, what did that prove? That I had lost it, or that he was real? Even after extensive Googling, I had found nothing about scheduled hallucinations. The dead grass was certainly real, as I had touched it and pulled up a handful and crumbled it
between my fingers. Mom had even remarked about such a large patch being so dead. But that could be something else. The neighbor’s dog. A dramatic long-distance chemical spill, perhaps from a helicopter. Lightning. So many possibilities.

Assuming he did show up, I had no clue what I was going to say. If he really was the gray man, it would be monumentally stupid to follow him to wherever there was one island in one sea, simply on his word that he could bring me to Caspar. This could be an elaborate kidnapping plot. Though if that had been his goal, he’d had plenty of opportunities yesterday to grab me and toss me in a van. I had half-passed out twice in front of him.

But on the off chance that this was all real, that he was telling the truth, that Caspar was alive…

5:56. I jumped up and bolted down the stairs.

I had to cling desperately to the swing to keep from falling out of it.

With my other hand, I clutched my phone. 5:59. This couldn’t be real. This couldn’t be happening. I stared at the dead patch, wondering what it was going to look like. Would he materialize? Flicker? Step out of a sudden blanket of fog?

I didn’t move. I didn’t blink. I did remember to breathe, though, and I counted down from sixty.

Nothing. I counted down again, then glanced at my watch. 6:01. My hallucination was tardy. Then I looked back up and my heart stopped because, of freaking course, he
was there. Brushing a leaf off his black-robed arm. That robe made him hard to see in the last little bit of sunlight, and his hair wasn’t helping, either.

“Sorry,” he said, turning his eyes to me. “Time zones.”

Clutching the chain was the only thing that saved me from falling backwards again. I took a slow, wheezing breath. “You have got to be joking.”

“No.” He dropped his arms to his sides in a gesture that was almost awkward. “What did you choose?”

“I’m not even sure.” The fact that he was here probably just proved that I was nuts. “I need, uh, I need more information.”

“Yes.” He nodded, in that manner he had of making everything seem reasonable. “Go on.”

Okay. He was possibly going to answer my questions; possibly in more detail than he had yesterday, possibly not. I straightened my back and squared my shoulders. This was fine. “Why was Caspar taken?”

“Ah. It is, ah…” He looked up at the dim blue sky, snapping his fingers. “It is complicated.”

“Look, you’re not scoring lots of points for yourself here.”

“Time stole him.”

I pressed my hand against my eyes. Why? Why me? “‘Time’ as in the… thing?”

“Time is a man. And also the thing.”

I gave him a withering look.

“He is safe and you can find him,” he said, as if that would fix everything.
“Why should I trust you?” I dropped my hand to stare at him. “Why?”

“Because I believe you.”

Of course he believed me. He was probably a figment of my imagination. But the fact that no one had ever said that to me before definitely counted for something.

The wind brushed aside the leaves at his feet, and I saw he was leaving another dead patch in the grass.

“Let’s assume,” I said, “just for a second, that you are real.”

He nodded.

“What would it take for me to get him back?”

“You come with me. We go to the cloisters. We find him. We take him back.” He said it so quickly that I got the impression it wouldn’t take long.

“It’s that easy?”

“It should be safe.” He shrugged.

“Should.”

“I have friends who will help.”

So there were more involved. I wasn’t sure if that was comforting or not. “Are they gray men, too?”

“Gray people.” He nodded. “Good people.”

“Are there bad people there?”

“There are bad people everywhere. Here, there.” He shrugged.

I raised an eyebrow. “Am I talking to one now?”

“No.”
I squinted at him as intensely as one could squint, and he leaned back a fraction of an inch. Obviously, there were things he wasn’t telling me, but I got the distinct impression that it was more because of the limits of his English than a desire to hide anything.

“All right,” I said, examining him. “Let’s assume, hypothetically, that I would go with you.”

He nodded eagerly.

“What would I hypothetically do?”

He didn’t say anything. He just held out one thin hand.

What was I supposed to do with that? I looked at it, then at his face, then at it, then at his face again. He just looked back expectantly. I stood up, wondering how bad of an idea this was. But what harm could it do? After all, he wasn’t real.

Was I convinced of that?

I placed my hand in his, and it felt real. Cool skin, bony fingers. But before I could make any judgments based on that, pure cold shot up my arm. I couldn’t move my hand. I couldn’t feel my fingertips. Panic flooded me and I tried to step back, but his grip was tight, and he stepped with me.

The sensation that slammed into me was the strangest I had ever felt.

It was like I was falling straight down; the world around me blurred, then everything shifted back and sideways and I closed my eyes to shut it out.

There was a deep sound, a thrum that reverberated in my ribs.

Then I was actually falling over. I landed on soft grass; soft, dry, leaf-free grass.

Slowly, the air came back into my lungs, and I opened my eyes to a soft gray sky. I
squinted. It was definitely clear; a sun, too bright to look at, hung halfway to the horizon, but it was gray.

The gray man’s head appeared in the periphery of my vision.

I sat up, cold settling into my belly, though it was nothing like what taking his hand had done to me. I sat in a circle of the only green grass in sight. Ten feet out, it faded into a silvery gray. Not dead grass brown, but gray. Like it had been painted, very painstakingly, blade by blade.

It grew taller further away from my circle of green. The meadow in which I sat was surrounded by trees, and their trunks were ashy white, their leaves black. The only color, aside from the grass right under me, was the sky; gray at the top, tinged with purple at the horizon.

I hauled myself to my feet, struck with the perfectly understandable urge to run, but everywhere I turned the scene was the same. Gray grass, black leaves, purple sky.

Gray man.

“I told you ‘hypothetically,’” I blurted.

He blinked. “I should ask. What does ‘hypothetically’ m—?”

“You know what? You just… you…” I kept turning until my feet got tangled up and I stumbled. Okay, so I had been drugged now. There were drugs in his hand. That was what the feeling had been; though it also meant that he had been real all along, which presented a simply astounding plethora of problems. Like the fact that my best friend’s ghost-kidnapper (or someone in cahoots) had marched into my backyard and I hadn’t made even one 911 call. I had rolled with it. Oh, god, I was Hamlet. “You just go
somewhere. Else.”

He tilted his head. “And leave you?”

“I’ll wake up in my backyard in, like, three hours.” I put my hands out to steady myself, anticipating dizziness that wasn’t there. “Or however long it takes the drugs to wear off. I don’t want you anywhere near me in the meantime.”

“Drugs?”

“Just leave, okay?”

He took a few polite steps back, but he still faced me.

“Go away.”

He took another two steps back. I wasn’t sure he was getting the point, and I sank back down into the grass and put my head in my hands. The crisp smell of leaves was gone from the air, replaced by something vaguely acrid that burned the back of my throat. What kind of drugs did that? I hadn’t come out of Health class with any more knowledge than ‘don’t do them.’

The grass was soft, at least, and dry. I could be comfortable until I came to.

“He is that way.”

I raised my head. He was standing in the same place, his whole arm raised to point. I sighed. “Look, I…”

“Caspar. He is that way.”

I wrapped my hands up in the long grass, anchoring myself, determined not to be swayed by any more ridiculous promises he made. “You’re really bad at leaving things alone.”
“But you are here.” Something in his voice sounded a little like desperation. He held up his hands in front of him, shaking them like he was shaking me. “You are close. You are so close.”

“I am tweaked out of my mind on some drug, and you need to leave me alone.”

“If it is a drug, would I be here?”

It seemed perfectly reasonable that he would be. Though that he was also in whatever fantasy world I was dreaming up seemed… less reasonable. “What color is the grass?” I demanded, pointing.

“Gray.”

“What about the leaves?” I pointed again.

“Black.”

“How about the sky?”

“Violet.”

Groaning, I flopped onto my back.

It was clear. So clear. I held up my hand to the purple horizon, to the black trees. It just looked real; I could see individual leaves, flashing as the sun hit them. Vines clung to several of the outermost trunks. The grass swayed gently in what little breeze there was.

“I want to help,” he said softly.

“I don’t believe you yet.” I stared off at the trees.

“How will you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Please.”
I reached into my pocket for my phone, wondering what I would find if I googled ‘hallucinations.’ Zero bars. Of course. It did tell me that only a few minutes had passed since our meeting in the backyard, which was a small comfort. “Can you take me back?”

“Yes.”

That got my attention. I hadn’t expected an answer, but there it was. “Back home?”

“Yes.” He shifted from foot to foot, pulling on his sleeves like he was debating whether or not to roll them up. “You will fall down again.”

I scrambled to my feet. “I don’t care.” Hallucinations probably didn’t switch off when you told them to. I had watched enough TV to think I knew that. “Take me back.”

“Then, will you come here again?”

“Sure, sure.” I started to reach for his hand, hesitating when I remembered how much it had hurt to touch him. “Will it… be the same?”

He frowned. “Yes.”

“Oh.” My fingers were sore from it. “Does it have to?”

“I am not supposed to touch you. So it will.” He held up his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “Or you can stay.”

I reached for his hand.

Very gently, as if he were grasping a hummingbird, he took it.

The pain was immediate. It was like I had poked an electrical socket; quickly as it moved, I could still track the jolt as it worked its way up my arm and into my shoulder and down my spine. My muscles seized. Then I was in an elevator going up too quickly. I closed my eyes against it.
And I was home.

I opened my eyes to too much color. Ripe-peach sky, tree-frog grass, Vegas-neon trees. A clear, crisp breeze pushed dry leaves against my feet as I watched. Birds sang and a distant trash truck engine growled its way down the street.

The only thing that wasn’t too bright was him, and he still stood an arm’s length away from me, his hand waiting where I had left it.

“This is real,” I whispered.

“Yes,” he said with a sympathetic smile.

“You’re real.” I pressed a hand to the back of my neck. “That place is real.”

He nodded. “And Caspar…”

“Caspar is alive.”

I sat in the swing, staring at the second dead patch in the grass without really seeing it. This was real.

This was real.

He had told me to think about it. To call him when I was ready. He said he would come back.

There was no longer any point in trying to pretend it was a hallucination; maybe it was, but I couldn’t act like it any more. If this was a lead, an actual chance to bring Caspar home, I had to take it. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I let it slip by.

I could hear the TV inside now, a sign that life was still going on and that no one else
had any idea what had just happened to me. I wondered if anything had; if only my mind
had made the jump with him, or if both of us solid, tangible people had simply
disappeared from the backyard.

The back of my throat still burned from the air. My arm ached. The hand that I had
used to blindly grasp his was almost numb. Something had happened; I could not deny it
without traveling into ‘extreme denial’ territory.

I got, shakily, to my feet. Stumbled inside. Deflected the, “Is it nice out there?”
questions with, “Yes, it’s warm.”

They were watching a comedy I didn’t like. I curled up against the arm of a couch
and laughed at the right times anyway.

In the cloisters, on an island, in the sea. I was picturing a monastery on a gray
Bermuda. Caspar would stand out in that sort of place; he was blonder than I was. Unless
the world had turned his little head gray.

When he woke up, what did he do there? Did he have caretakers? Did they keep him
occupied? Or was it more like a prison? My mental image made a rapid change to a long
row of barred cells, cold and dark and damp, and I took a deep breath to clear my head.

I hoped he had books, at least. He’d loved to read. Scooby-doo was his favorite.

“Isobel?”

I jumped. Mom was staring at me. “What?”

“Sweetie, what’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

Oops. “Uh…” I pulled my sleeve over my wrist and dried my cheeks. “I’m okay. I
don’t feel great.” I stood before she could investigate further. “I’m going to bed.”
“Isobel—”

“Goodnight.” I ran for it, taking the stairs to my room two at a time. I wasn’t okay. But for the first time, I felt like I could do something about it.

In the morning, I rolled over and turned off my alarm and immediately went back to sleep. I was going to need lots of energy to walk to the sea with one island in it, likely as not. An hour later, a knock on my door woke me up, and Mom’s face peeked in.

“Breakfast is ready,” she whispered. Mom for ‘why aren’t you awake?’

I put on my most fearsome gravelly voice and replied, “I’m sick.”

“Oh, sweeeetie.” She leaned further in the door. “Do you need anything?”

“No.”

“Okay. I’ll let you sleep.”

And I was free for the rest of the day. No questions. Being that child who got to class on time even in a blizzard had its merits. I heard the front door close as my parents left for work and that was it.

I had my doubts that I could get there, find Caspar, and get home before five o’ clock, but I could try. When I couldn’t lie still any longer, I flung myself out of bed and dumped all my schoolbooks out of my backpack. It hadn’t looked like the kind of place that would have an Applebee’s every few miles, so I had some packing to do.

I filled the backpack to the brim with bottled water and granola bars, and I could definitely lift it when I was through. I hadn’t taken note of the temperature when I was
dazed and confused and staring at a gray sky, so I zipped on a hoodie to be safe. Then I ate all the leftover bacon and eggs that I could stomach.

I didn’t know what else I could do to get ready, so I stuffed my phone in my pocket (in case I needed an exotic clock, since it didn’t work there) and stepped out the back door before I could reconsider what a bad idea this was.

The dead grass was still very comfortingly dead. I wobbled to the swing set, adjusting the backpack, and leaned against one of the beams.

So I was supposed to call him.

I hadn’t gotten his phone number. He didn’t even look like the sort of person who would have a phone. I sighed, the cold air reminding me that it wasn’t prime hiking weather at the moment. The fallen leaves were edged with frost this morning. I didn’t want to wait for long.

Maybe he meant for me to call him by name. Out loud.

It would certainly draw the neighbors’ attention, and I had no earthly idea how he could hear me, wherever he was. Maybe he was here, in the yard, behind one of the trees. Or invisible. Invisibility was as easy to believe in as oxygen at this point.

So I just had to yell. It would be a lot easier if I could remember his name.

“Gray man?” I called, not loudly enough. Either he didn’t get the message or he was offended, because the backyard stayed perfectly silent and gray man-less. He had a name; of course he had a name. He had even told me. Sometime.

I pushed off the beam and dropped the backpack and started pacing. Why had I panicked? Why hadn’t I just calmly written down the name of a potential kidnapper who
had materialized in my backyard? I was so irrational sometimes.

It started with an S. That much I remembered. And it had sounded vaguely Latin.


I blinked and he was there.

“Hello,” he greeted.

I fell back into the beam, closing my eyes. He was too good at that. “Cephas.”

“Yes?”

“It’s a C. I thought it was an ‘S.’” I squinted at him.

“It is an ‘S.’” He cocked his head. “A ‘C’ would be ‘chey-fas.’”

It was his name, so I didn’t fight him. “I’m, uh… I’m ready.”

“Ready to go?”

“Yes.” I hoisted up the backpack with a grunt. My arm was already hurting in anticipation. I reached out a hand for his, but he was frowning at me.

“What is in the bag?” he asked.

“Food and water.” I dumped it on the ground again and unzipped it to show him.

“No, no.” He shook his head. “You don’t need that much. Take, eh, one.”

“One?” I blinked. “I take two of each for a hike. Are we going to be back by this evening?”

“No. Just take one of each.”

He stood over me with his arms crossed until I finally gave an exasperated sigh and dumped most of the extras out in the leaves. Three water bottles, three granola bars. That
was as much as I would compromise “There. Happy?”

“Good.” He held out a hand. I took it without thinking, and the lack of anticipation just made the nasty jolt all the worse. At least this time I was already on the ground, and I didn’t have that far to fall before I was flat on my back.

The morning sky in the gray world was white at the edges instead of purple.
I wanted to spring right up and charge ahead and find Caspar, but my body insisted on lying there for a moment.

Sephas was patient with me. He stood there with his hands folded neatly behind his back, looking off into the distant trees, not tapping his foot or glancing down at me or doing anything that would tell me to hurry up. Maybe now that he had me firmly in his clutches, he felt he could let me take a breather.

I got up slowly and put the backpack over my shoulders, which was big enough to feel like massive overkill for what was in it. But Caspar was welcome to make fun of me for that.

“Okay,” I said. “We’re here.”

“Yes.” He glanced at me, then at the woods. I took that as a ‘let’s go,’ and when I moved in that direction he set off a few steps ahead.

The color leeched out of the grass as I moved away from the center of the clearing. Soon it was all silver, no hint of green remaining, and it rolled in the breeze like a sea of mercury. Colorless sunlight made it shimmer. The air felt thick and humid, heavy, but the temperature was only slightly warmer than it had been at home. I slowed as I grew dizzy.

Ahead of me, Sephas stopped. “Isobel?”

I swayed. Black spots flickered at the edges of my vision. The white sky was too bright, and my head ached when I looked at it.
“Isobel, breathe.”

I sucked in a lungful of air. Finally, I noted a smell, something like ammonia that stung my eyes and throat. It hit me as he said those words that I had not taken a breath since the color had gone out of the grass.

The black spots faded. I regained my balance.

“Remember,” he said, tapping a finger against his forehead.

“Remember to breathe?” I was fairly hyperventilating now, but the fumey air wasn’t helping me much. I fought the urge to cough. “Why did I forget?”

“It’s just… here.” He shrugged. “Because you should not be here.”

“But you brought me here.”

“You should not live here. You are not gray.” He laughed, a quiet sound.

“Remember, if you feel bad, breathe.”

Well, that was going to throw a wrench in the works.

I made an absurd amount of noise as I followed along behind him, gasping every time I was threatened by dizziness. If I grew complacent, I forgot again. Then I got a violent reminder when the world rocked back and forth.

In the five minutes it took us to cross the meadow, I came dangerously close to passing out four times. It had to get better eventually; my body would relearn or the effect would wear off or I would turn into a gray girl who didn’t need to breathe. I hoped.

Ahead of me, Sephas had reached the trees, and he paused to let me catch up. The black leaves were like a blanket; the ground in front of me was midnight-dark, punctuated by the occasional star of white light that fought through a break in the canopy.
high above. It extended as far as I could see, the bright spots swirling like galaxies, winking out and reappearing.

Sephas pointed into it. “This is the Wild.”

“The Wild?”

“Yes.” He nodded gravely, as if that would mean something significant to me, so I nodded to make him feel better. “Stay close.”

“Is it safe?”

“If you stay close.” He turned and walked brazenly into it, and the blackness swallowed him and his black hair and his black robe. I realized I should have brought a high-visibility jacket for him. It would both be functional and look absolutely ridiculous.

I was starting to want to bring that kind of suffering down upon my guide.

So I took a deep breath (good for me) and forced myself to step in after him. The darkness was almost palpable; I could hear leaves crunching under my feet, smell what must have been a gray-world version of autumn that was too much like a heavy-duty cleaning product for comfort. But I saw nothing except the vague shapes of what might have been tree trunks, a darker shade of black against the rest. The spots of light that survived on their way to the forest floor didn’t spread past the leaf or two they landed on. Shadow covered up the rest.

Including him.

“I’m not sure I like this,” I called, my pounding heart reminding me to take a breath.

“Stay close.” His pale face, floating, came dimly into view as he turned. I used it as a beacon to catch up with him, then he calmly walked on.
I followed him closely enough that I could have grabbed a handful of his hair if I had needed to. The air was so still that there were no rustling leaves to cover up the sound of his footsteps. Having to remember my own need for air made my vision swim, and it only added to the illusion that everything in the shadows was moving, slithering around and waiting for me to look away.

We went on that way, nearly blind, for what felt like hours. I made myself breathe; eventually I settled into a routine of counting to seven, breathing in, counting to three, breathing out.

The spots of light played tricks. Sometimes they illuminated piles of dead black leaves; sometimes one caught on the edge of a stone. But occasionally they gave me a view of what was clearly two or three stones, stacked purposefully on top of each other, and sometimes they might have looked like the corner of a house. I received no explanation until a ray directly in our path beamed down on something unmistakably manmade.

The stones were flat, as if from a river, and carefully arranged in a wall that leaned inward. Gray mosses and lichens grew in thick patches between them. What the wall was part of, I couldn’t tell, but Sephas altered his course to take us around it.

“What is that?” I blurted.

“It is broken.” He kept walking even when I slowed for a better look.

“Was it a house?”

“Maybe.”

His footsteps grew farther and farther away, and I forced myself to go after him,
staring at the wall over my shoulder. “Do people live here?”

“Not now.”

“Did people live here?” I tripped over a root and stumbled. My mind was reeling. How many people were in this world? “Are there still… st…” My voice wasn’t working.

“Breathe, Isobel.”

I did. The rush of air stung my throat, and I coughed, and then I had to do it all over again before I managed to get the words out. “Are there still people around?”

“Not here.”

“I know, but…” Breathing and talking and keeping up with him in the dark was too much to handle. For now, I was just going to have to wonder how alone we actually were. I picked up my feet too high, stepping over the rough patches of ground below, and I bumped into him.

The weird electric pain I was sure would come never hit. All I felt was the worn fabric of his robe.

“Isobel?”

“Sorry,” I blurted, stepping back. Maybe his clothes couldn’t hurt me.

“There is an edge here. We will go around.” He shuffled to the side, dragging his feet through the leaves. That motion made enough noise that I could follow without too much trouble. The ground along whatever path we had been following was just noticeably darker, as if a log lay across it. A really, really big log. And it kept going as we walked.

Five minutes passed (I had to force a stinging breath into myself every seven seconds) before we reached the end of it. He skirted around the end, a very narrow, jagged point of
blacker-than-black, and I took a chance and poked at the point with my foot.

The toe of my shoe vanished. It wasn’t a tree. It was nothing. A void. A rift in the earth that went straight down.

I scooted up to keep within arm’s reach of Sephas. He was polite enough not to complain when I bumped into him again as a result.

“Will there be more of those?” I peeped after some time.

“Yes. Stay close.”

“How deep are they?”

“I don’t know.”

That was a first. Maybe Sephas wasn’t as omniscient as I thought. Hoped. But at least he could see them, even if I couldn’t. I followed in silence, counting to remember to breathe, and my mind made up all kinds of creative things that could possibly be in those rifts in the ground. Spiders. Snakes. Silver rats with pointy teeth. Bugs.

If there was even a bottom to them for them to live on. For me to hit if I fell in. The leaves were black here, so why not? Were bottomless pits that far-fetched?

I should have thrown a flashlight in my bag.

As we kept walking, my eyes refused to adjust to the darkness, but the forest itself changed. The crunch of leaves underfoot quieted, replaced by the gentle swish of evergreen needles. The smell changed to Pine-Sol and bleach. More bleach than Pine-Sol, but I wasn’t going to be that picky. Especially now that just a touch more light broke through the canopy when velvet-black leaves weren’t absorbing it. I still tripped over everything, but the tree trunks were more clearly outlined, and I didn’t have to follow so
close to Sephas.

I still did, though, because even here I got the impression that the shadows were swirling around, waiting to swallow me up.

Without the crunching leaves, the woods were even more silent. I wondered what kind of birds lived here, what their squirrels looked like (more gray? Black? Pointy teeth?). But I hadn’t heard birdsong, or the tattletale squirrel-rustle, since we left my backyard.

Maybe it wasn’t a bad thing, but it felt like one.

The first not-me-created sound that I heard was water. A pleasant babbling-brook kind of water. It sounded like something that couldn’t kill me, and it alleviated the heavy silence. I drifted back from Sephas a few steps, looking around, trying to spot it. The trees were growing further apart, letting in more light, so I could see what was around me; scattered stones, little hills that should have been easy to climb but just knocked me out. Almost literally.

We rounded the next hill and I saw it; a narrow stream, the water crystal-clear in the shallows and a shocking teal-blue where it grew deeper. Sephas stopped at the banks, and I stood beside him, peering into the pools. Tiny fish, the size of dimes, flashed as they darted from one to the next. Living things. Amazing.

I leaned a little too far and put out a foot to stop myself from falling.

Sephas threw his arms around my shoulders and heaved me back. I cried out. We both fell into the pine needles, and I rolled away from him, staring. He was looking rapidly between me and the water.
“Do not,” he panted, pointing. “Do not touch it. It’s, ah…”

“Dangerous?” I guessed drily.

“You like both feet?”

I blinked. “Yes.”

“Then don’t touch it.” He scrambled up, brushing pine needles off his robe. Cassock. Vestments. Whatever you called that thing. “It has color. Don’t touch color.”

“Ah.”

“We should find a place to jump.”

“Over it?” Without landing in the middle and splashing what was evidently acid water up my leg? Great.

He nodded to me and started walking. I followed behind, watching the water. It didn’t look dangerous. I kicked in a bunch of pine needles. They floated away unharmed. Then I dug through my pocket and came up with a little ball of lint, which I dropped in.

There was a hiss, a sizzle, a flash of bluish flame when it hit the water. And a sulfurous, burning smell, like I had just torched off my ponytail.

Sephas whirled around. I held up my hands. He took a sharp breath, frowned, and kept walking.

Right, so the water just didn’t like me. Fine. Just another sign that this forest didn’t want me in it.

The stream showed no sign of getting narrower. But the hills around us grew rockier, and it wasn’t long before Sephas halted at a stretch of water peppered with stones. The tops were dry, tempting. A promising bridge.
“Wait,” he said, putting a hand out towards me. He tested the first rock before he left the bank, and when it didn’t move, he carefully stepped onto it. He picked his way across so carefully that I wondered if I was really the only one in danger of evaporating.

Only the last rock shifted at all. He was close enough then to hop to the other bank with no trouble. Then he turned around and beckoned to me.

Everything was fine, I reminded myself. I stepped onto the rocks. I didn’t hop; I transferred my weight carefully. Over the water, the bleachy fumes stung my eyes, and I blinked away tears. It was making me dizzy.

I swayed.

“I’m sorry!” Sephas barked, stepping forward.

I sucked in a lungful of air, holding out my arms to steady myself. My vision was speckled with purple. My throat burned.

I made the next step.

Coughing only made it worse. I keep breathing steadily.

Little fish streaked by under me. The water swirled around the rocks, leaving frosty blue whirlpools behind them.

The last stone lurched sideways as I put my weight on it, and I flung myself forward to the pine needles. I landed with a thump.

There was a quiet sizzle behind me and I jerked the toe of my shoe out of the water.

_Breathe, Isobel._

I looked up. Sephas was standing over me, one hand hovering in the air, like he had been about to drag me away from the stream. His eyes were wide, his mouth a thin line.
“Are you all right?” he croaked.

“Peachy.” I hauled myself to my feet, testing the assaulted shoe; the water hadn’t made it through the rubber sole. Thank heaven.

“…A peach?”

“Let’s go.”

That firmly ruled out the idea of drinking from clear mountain streams once my own supply of water was gone. I resolved to be very, very careful with how much I drank, but I had been in Gray-land for hours now, and I still wasn’t thirsty. Even as the hills grew steeper and I made myself pant to avoid toppling over, my throat stung, but it didn’t feel dry. And my breakfast was tiding me over remarkably well.

I got to see the sky go from white to lavender as the day went on, but it wasn’t long before it was completely hidden behind more thick trees. The evergreens got bigger in all directions; they were so large around that Sephas and I together couldn’t have encircled one with our arms, and they reached so high I lost track of which was which.

That darkness terrified me.

It was just as bad as it had been at the beginning. I longed for the light that had broken through near the stream. I could have sworn things were moving every time I glanced away, and it was all too easy to lose track of Sephas. At least the woods were still silent enough to hear his footsteps.

“We are close,” he said.
His voice startled me. I took a quick step to close the distance between us. “Close to Caspar?”

“No, close to a friend.”

Another gray man. I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing. “Is he nice?”

“Yes. He speaks English.”

“So do you,” I said, trying to be encouraging.

His pale face appeared, giving me a sour look. When he turned away again, his footsteps stopped abruptly; I didn’t register the fact quickly enough to stop before I passed him.

My next step was into nothing.

The ground just ended. Darkness sucked me straight down. My backpack scraped against a wall behind me, and I tried and failed to catch myself on it, skidding along. I was going to fall forever. I thought so, anyway, before my feet hit something solid. Hard. It cut me off mid-scream, and my knees buckled under me.

“Isobel!”

Wailing, I scooted back, pressing against the wall behind me. The skin on my hands ached and burned. The stone was like sandpaper. I stretched out my legs in front of me, trying to ease the pain in my ankles, and I found there was an end to this supposed bottom of the gorge.

“You are there!” I heard rustling overhead. “There was a… a place… a step?”

A ledge. I could hook my foot around the edge of the stone I sat on. And then nothing for who knew how long. I tucked my legs back under me, ignoring the pain. “Yes,” I
called, closing my eyes, as if it made a difference in what I could see. “Yes, a ledge.”

“Can you touch my hands?”

I didn’t want to touch his hands. I would be electrocuted. Pressed against the wall, I forced myself shakily to my feet and reached over my head. “Where are you?” I called, my voice weak.

“Here.”

Directly above me. I waved my arms around in empty space, praying for the shock of brushing against his skin, but I wasn’t so lucky. “I can’t reach.”

“Do you have a light?”

“N…” My phone. Of course I had a light. I was a freaking Millennial. I dug it out of my pocket, clinging to the thing for dear life and hoping it wouldn’t slip out of my bloodied hands.

I pushed the button to turn it on, flipping it upside down so I wouldn’t blind myself. The light barely reached to the end of the ledge. The darkness was like a fog, swirling, swallowing it up.

I closed my eyes for a moment, breathing slowly. I was alive. I was going to get out. My hands hurt. My ankles hurt. I had no idea how deep this tear in the earth was. But I was going to get out. Then I held the phone over my head, and two orange circles shone back at me.

The phone slipped out of my hands and clattered onto the stone. The light went out.

“There’s something up there!” I shrieked.

“Where?”
“Up there!”
“What?”
“Over you!”
“What is it?”
“Eyes! I saw eyes!” Something was going to eat me. My bones would be left on this ledge. “It’s right there! Right above you!”
“There is nothing.”
I cowered there, holding one hand over my head, shaking. “I saw eyes glowing!”
“Isobel, it is only me.”
“Glowing.”
“Isobel.”
I was curled in such a tight ball that I could barely suck in a breath when I tried.
“It is only me.”
I hugged my knees tighter.
“Do the light again.”
All I could hear was him. No sinister rustling in the trees.
“Please?”
I felt around for my phone. It turned on, despite a large crack across the screen. The light hurt my eyes.
I held it above my head, took a deep breath, and looked.
The same wide orange circles stared down at me from overhead. But they were in a pale face made paler by the blue light, framed by messy black hair.
“It’s you,” I breathed.

“Yes. So I can see.” He held out a hand again, and I tried in vain to reach it, my eyes still fixed on his. Orange. Like some kind of animal.

“I can’t,” I croaked, trying to make myself four inches taller. I jumped, missed and tottered too close to the edge.

“I will look for something.” The glowing circles vanished. I dropped my arms, my phone still pointed up the wall.

What was I doing?

He was gone for a solid three minutes. I heard rustling, followed by a very regular scraping and one hissed exclamation in a language I didn’t understand.

His voice announced his return a moment later. “Here.” I pointed the phone at him again; he dangled a thick branch towards me, and the middle of it was thick with three-inch-long needles, razor-sharp. A mutant pine branch.

“I cleaned the ends,” he said proudly.

“…Great.” I wrapped my hands around the offered end after I stowed my phone again, wincing as my palms stung in protest. He had at least done a good job clearing it off.

“I will pull up. On three.”

“Okay.”

“One, two…”

I gripped it tighter.

“Three.”
The branch snapped cleanly in half.

I fell back with a yell and let my knees give out, landing on my back, rather than try to catch myself and fall into an abyss. It knocked the hard-earned air out of me. A thump overhead told me he had gone straight backwards. The stick sailed down into the ravine behind me, and I didn’t hear it land.

A moment later his voice called “Isobel?” and I answered with a prolonged groan.

“All right. All right, stay.” I heard pacing. “I will find Howl. Stay.”

“You’re not leaving me here!” My voice was desperate.


His footsteps got more distant. I let out a wail and curled into my ball again, covering the back of my neck, praying he was the only thing out there with eyes that glowed.

Everything hurt.

My ankles weren’t likely to carry me anywhere without protesting for days. The same went for my knees, and for my hips. My back ached. My hands stung so badly it brought tears to my eyes, and I cradled them against my chest as I sat there.

A lot went through my head.

I considered wishing I had never left home. I didn’t actually wish; I just thought about it. Weighed my options very scientifically.

I was not going to get myself out of the hole by wishing, so I didn’t.

And I also did not want to be the kind of person who set off on a grand quest to save
her best friend and then abandoned that quest upon falling into her first ravine. Granted, it was a very deep one, and very dark, and my traveling companion was seeming less human with each passing moment. But I was going to have to tell Caspar what had happened, when he inevitably asked. He love hearing stories, no matter how mundane. “Tell me about the library, Isobel.” “Tell me about the grocery store, Isobel.” “Tell me about the park.”

And I always had. He broke his arm falling out of a tree one September, and because the bone had poked through his skin he’d had to stay in the hospital for a few days. I had gone to see him every evening because he asked, over and over, “Tell me about school, Isobel.” I perched on the edge of his bed and dumped a pile of books on his legs and showed him my math homework, making him do the problems for himself.

“The caterpillar is two inches long,” he had told me.

“It’s not.” I had pointed at the paper ruler. “You have to put the end by its head, not in the middle.”

He moved the ruler, and then he got it right, so I gave him a gummy bear.

I leaned my head back against the cool stone. None of my bones were broken. I could move. I could stand.

I didn’t want to tell him that I had resolved to turn around before I even found him when he said, “Tell me about the gray place, Isobel.”

So I pulled a bottle of water out of my backpack, drank a few sips of it, and poured some more over my hands. It stung at first, but then the coolness soothed the pain. I put the bottle back and held my hands out, palms-up, to let them dry.
It wasn’t long before the pine needles rustled overhead. I carefully stood and turned on my phone and looked up, wondering what variations there were in gray people.

The eyes that stared down at me glowed stoplight red above a set of sharp teeth.

I screamed loudly enough that even the creature flinched. Its features, outlined in the dim light, were vaguely canine. They might have been at one time, at least. When the thing was alive. Because there was no way it still was, with great patches of mangy fur falling its face, exposing gleaming bone underneath.

What remained of its lips drew back in a snarl.

I shrank down as close to the edge as I dared. It snapped at me, lunging, then scrambled backwards with a whine as it nearly toppled down to me.

I had nothing. The stick half was long gone. I whipped my backpack over my shoulder in case the thing fell and I had to whack it with something that wasn’t my arm. But I had nowhere to go.

An even larger head appeared beside it, slobbering curiously.

I swung my phone at them as if it might blind them, and their eyes followed it. One snapped at my hand. I screamed again.

The big one threw back its head and let out a sound between a shriek and a yell, not nearly animal enough for my comfort. My heel was on the edge of the stone, as far from the wall as I could go. I sank down to my knees. The smaller one opened its jaws and leaned; its teeth were broken and jagged, and it had about two thirds of a tongue. Its breath was rancid. I gagged, clapping my hand over my mouth.

Then it abruptly vanished back into the dark. Someone let out a fearsome bellow,
deep and loud, that I knew couldn’t have come from Sephas.

The other monster looked away from me, closing its jaws, and was knocked sideways with a whine. I could just see Sephas’s half of the stick come down towards the spot where it must have landed. Their ghostly shrieks hurt my ears, and I crouched down and pressed my hands over them, waiting.

They grew more distant until, finally, they were gone. I straightened, looking up.

“You left her alone!?” A man’s rumbling voice demanded.

“I could not help.” That was definitely Sephas.

“You could have lit a fire so I could find you.”

“Then there would be more. A pack.”

“You could take them.” A dark shape appeared over me. “You okay down there?”

I shone the light on him. His skin was dark gray, his hair cut close to his head. His eyes shone a pleasant teal.

“Yeah,” I squeaked.

“Good.” He reached down for me, and I was more hopeful about the gap this time.

Replacing my backpack, I jumped and grabbed his hand. Electricity shot up my arm and I squealed. My phone slipped out of my other hand and vanished into the dark.

The Millennial in me started to cry.

He wasted no time hoisting me out of the gorge. I collapsed in the pine needles with a whimper.

“Sorry,” he said. I heard him move back, and then cool, flickering light spilled onto the ground. I made myself sit up, glancing around.
The light came from the thorny stick, burning a color that would have been yellow if it had just believed a little harder. The man—Howl, presumably—held it; he was a good half a foot taller than Sephas, which was an impressive feat in itself. He wore a loose cloak with a big, draped cowl over a surprisingly normal-looking shirt and pants. He was also grinning at me.

“You are blonde,” he said.

“Y…yes.” I grabbed a strand of my own hair to make sure. It was still sufficiently yellow. I probably looked like a signal beacon out here; blond hair, pink hoodie, blue jeans… At least it was too dark to really see.

“I’m used to Otherlands blonde. Kind of dull, ashy…” He held out his hand to help me up, then decided against it. “I’m Howl.”

“Isobel.” I got to my feet. My ankles screamed at me. I silently told them to shut up. His grin turned into something a little sadder. “You’re her. The Renthroe girl.”

I shook out my arm. It still tingled. And my palm was now sufficiently on fire.

“…Yes?”

“Who saw—”

“Yes,” Sephas said. I glanced back at him, confused, then returned my gaze to Howl as he went on.

“Nasty stuff. But you’re here now. We’re going to fix it.” He gave me an encouraging smile, and I returned it, still confused. But happy to hear someone who could explain my predicament in a way I could understand. He had no strange accent. He sounded rather like me, in fact. A little more drawl.
“Are you American?” I asked.

“From Chicago.”

I must have lit up, because he laughed and said, “Far removed from your Chicago, but I still get to spend some time there on occasion.”

“I went there on a school trip last year. Saw the Bean and everything.”

“If you stare too long into the Bean, you end up here.” He waited while I gingerly brushed pine needles off myself.

I paused. “Wait, really?” Come to think of it, I had gotten dizzy walking around the thing.

“I’d think it would take an hour or two, but…”

Sephias crossed his arms, looking anxious. “We should go. It’s getting dark.”

“Seriously?” I turned my stare to him. It couldn’t get much darker.

Howl nodded. “He’s right. You don’t want to be out here at night.” He set off in the lead, the torch throwing the rift in the ground into sharp contrast with the rest of the forest floor. At least I didn’t have to worry about falling into another.

“Why not?” I made the poor decision to ask.


I took a long, slow breath.

Howl set a pace that was just at the edge of my pained tolerance level, even though he himself walked with a distinct limp. The gray pinpricks of light started, too quickly, to
fade. Soon, the only light in the forest came from Howl’s torch. But that torch was miles better than what we had been dealing with before. I wondered why we hadn’t made one in the first place, when we first entered the Wild, then I remembered what Sephas had said about a pack of zombie-dogs and decided it was better late than never.

I just had to trust that he and Howl actually could fight off whatever else was interested in us. Maybe those were the only things out here; I hadn’t exactly heard anything else barking or chirping or hissing off in the trees.

I broke the silence by asking, “What were those dog things?”

“Flu bugs,” Howl answered.

All right, more straightforward than a Sephas-answer, but it didn’t make much more sense. “Is that a nickname for them?”

“No, they are flus. They represent them.”

“Represent?”

“Lots of things Above—what we call where you live—have counterparts in the Otherlands.” He kept on walking. “Whatever Time can assign you.”

He was making less sense. “Um…?”

“I did not tell her,” Sephas murmured.

“Didn’t tell her how much?”

“Eh… most.”

He stopped, his frown evident in the flickering light. “How much of most?”

“I told her where Caspar is.”

Howl glanced back at me for confirmation. I nodded. “On the island, in the sea, in the
“Did he tell you why?”

“No.”

“Did he tell you who’s holding him there?”

“He said Time took him.”

“All right.” He rubbed his brow with the hand not holding the torch. “Did he at least tell you what this place is called?”

“Um…”

He held out his hand to Sephas. “Really, Seph?”

“Seph.” His answer sounded automatic. “And I could not.”

“Sure you could.”

“I did not explain because I waited for you. So you can explain.”

“You could have at least…”

“No, I could not.” His hands snapped up in frustration. “You can use the right words. Say the ‘t-h.’” His ‘the’ coming out as ‘za’ drove the point home.

“You could have given her the basics.”

“Does she speak Romanian? No. You give the basics.” He shoved his hands in his pockets.

Well, now I felt bad. Howl probably did, too, because he was quiet for a minute before he started talking again. “From the beginning, then. You’re in the Otherlands. That’s what we call this place.”

“Not Grayville?”
“Er... no.” He shifted the torch to his other hand, flexing his fingers. “Things here correspond to things in your world. In flu season, those dogs start multiplying. There are creatures that are storms, creatures that are earthquakes. Volcanoes and tsunamis and weather patterns. Every living thing means something.”

“Every living thing?” I looked at the back of his head.

“Yes.”

All the zombie dogs? All the little fish in the stream? All the... really, I hadn’t seen much of anything alive, except... “You, too, then?”

“Yes, of course.” He glanced back at me, eyes flashing blue-green. “But we’re not always natural phenomena; we’re usually more complicated than that. Things that have to do with people.”

“What counts as more complicated?” I blinked at him. “Are you... clones? Clones of people?”

“All kinds of things. We’re our own people, though.” Something caught his attention off to the left, and his fixed his eyes on it, but he didn’t slow down. I saw nothing.

Sephas continued for him. “We are born Above. Then we come here.”

“And live here?” It seemed logical, since I didn’t exactly see gray people at the grocery store.

“Yes,” Sephas answered.

“Are you gray when you’re born?”

“A little.” Howl chuckled, evidently longer concerned with whatever he had been eyeballing. “We lose the rest of our color when we come here. A slightly gray baby is a
bit of a shock to the family, but not enough to raise a stir. We don’t usually make the newspapers, at least, so word rarely gets out.”

“Time decides,” Sephas muttered.

“Yes, that does have a lot to do with it. We’re born when and where the world has bigger things to worry about. Which is fine, because we’re not supposed to fit into it. We’re extras. We’re…” He stopped in his tracks, waving the torch towards the brush. A whimper and a rustle told me he had been on to something after all.

I clung to my backpack for dear life. They started walking again as if nothing had happened.

“You keep men… mention…” I took a breath before my lungs could collapse. “You keep mentioning Time.”

“Yes. He’s the one in charge. But he does a poor job of it.”

“What do you mean?”

They were both quiet. Finally Sephas said, “Not yet.” When Howl didn’t elaborate, I decided I would have to be content with that answer for now. But there was so much I didn’t understand, and I wondered how much I would have to know to find Caspar and get back out safely. “So… what are you two? If you represent things.”

Howl laughed. “Not that you’ll use this, but we think it’s rude to ask. It can be sensitive, so people tell you once you’ve earned their trust. That being said, I’m a nightmare.”

I blinked. “About… being rude?”

“No, I am a nightmare. I bring them.”
I stopped in my tracks. “You do what?”

“Not the nastiest ones.” He stopped and turned around to look at me, his gaze sympathetic. “Going to school in your underwear, being attacked by Pomeranians, things like that. My finest work is the kind they laugh about later.”

I couldn’t help but take a step back. My ankle protested. “Have you… have you ever given me one?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I operate in Chicago. When I do my job at all. Things can be a little… unstructured around here.”

That made him somewhat less threatening. “So no one has bad dreams when you’re playing hooky?”

He started walking again, and I followed. “They do, I just don’t cause them.”

“Do other people—,” rattling gasp, “—cause them?”

“Sometimes. Not everything has to be done by someone over here, though. Some things just happen. The world keeps on turning without our help. For the most part.”

“Ah.” I let my eyes drift to the side, and I swore something was moving in the darkness. Stifling a whimper, I jogged to put less space between me and the others. Nightmares or not, I preferred them to whatever was out there. Maybe Sephas was more pleasant of a… thing. But if it was rude to ask, I would keep my mouth shut.

I studied the back of his head, his large mound of hair, instead. A nightmare? What else was there?

I couldn’t wonder about it for long, because shifting my concentration made it difficult to remember to breathe. This place was miserable; the Pine-Sol air had graduated
from burning my throat to making my chest hurt, my head throb, my nose run. I longed for a breath of fresh air. Maybe I should have bottled that instead of water, as I still wasn’t thirsty.

We trekked over hill after hill. The trees only grew larger; the ground rockier. I was weary, but all I wanted was to sit down and give my aching legs a break; trying to sleep seemed completely out of the question. Howl’s torch had burned down almost to a nub when I gave up. I stopped, wheezing, at the top of a hill peppered with large stone formations. “I need to rest.”

“We could stop for the night.” Howl turned to face me, looking around. “It’s as good a place as any.”

“For the night?” Sephas’s eyes widened. “She cannot sleep.”

“She won’t need to sleep. Time distortion.” He pushed pine needles around with his foot, clearing a patch of ground. “But we will, and we won’t be any use to her exhausted.”

To me. Bless him. “My knights in shining armor,” I sighed, sinking to the ground and leaning against one of the stones.

Sephas looked down at his robe, confused.

Howl cleared a large patch of dirt, then made a pile of needles and twigs and dropped the remainder of the torch onto it. It went up in purplish flames, spewing white smoke. Sephas frowned at the plume, but didn’t complain as he sat across the clearing from me. “I will watch first,” he said, and Howl nodded in agreement and flopped over onto the ground, pulling his cowl up over his head like a hood.
It didn’t take long before his annoyingly effortless breathing evened out and he relaxed into a Howl-puddle.

Sephias leaned back against a smaller stone, his knees drawn up to his chest. He looked more teenagerish than ever like that. I wondered for the first time how old he was; the robe and the long hair made me think he was older than me, but now that I was getting a good look at his face, I wasn’t so sure.

He glanced up and I looked away hastily.

“Breathe,” he murmured.

I hadn’t in a while.

When I looked at him again, his chin was tucked into his folded arms, and he was looking at Howl. “He should be careful,” he said, his voice just loud enough to hear.

“About what?”

“He is proud. Yes, he is strong, but Time is not the flu dogs.”

I shifted, starting to tuck my legs under me, then deciding against it. “What does that mean?”

“He takes too long. We rest for the night; we lose the night. He lights a fire; smoke.”

He gestured towards the white column that was just starting to thin out. “Time must not find us. This says, ‘Hello, find me here.’”

I looked up to where the smoke disappeared into the trees. “It’s so dark. Could he really see it?”

“I don’t know.”

I took a deep, slow breath. The smell of the fire was less acrid and more warm; the
closest thing to a lungful of fresh air I had smelled so far. Still more campfire-scented-candle than a real campfire, but it was filtering out the heavy duty floor cleaner nicely.

“I’m really not supposed to be here.”

“No.”

“Then is Caspar? Is he safe?”

“He is safe in the cloisters. It is like Above; good air.” He turned his head back towards the fire. “Time took him here. But he should be home.”

“I know.” I believed that more firmly than anyone here. He didn’t deserve to be stuck here… but it was a relief that he wasn’t suffering the same way I was right now, in a constant state of dizziness because remembering the whole air thing was just so much work.

Sephas leaned back against the rock again, stretching out one leg.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

He looked up at me, almost startled. “Why?”

“I just wondered.”

“But… why?”

I sighed. “I was curious. You don’t have to tell me.” I had known Howl for all of a few hours, but I already had a better idea of his background. “Is that considered invasive here, too?”

“Ah…”

Probably, then. “Sorry.” I turned sideways, as cuddled up to the rock as one could get. I should have brought a blanket.
“Do you know where Moldova is?”

I looked at him, surprised, and shook my head. He hauled himself off the ground and rounded the fire and sat next to me, a polite distance away. Then he drew a wobbly, roughly round shape in the dirt. “This is Romania,” he said, tapping the middle of it. “And this is Moldova.” He sectioned off the top right corner and shaded it in.

That explained the accent. “Was it nice there?”

“Yes. We had a farm.” He leaned back. “Hot summers, cold winters. But beautiful.” His eyes rested on the map, but he seemed to be looking through it. “I miss home.”

“Can you visit?”

“Yes, but I cannot be seen. Ke— Time says we must stay here for a long time, then we can go Above again. I obeyed. It took too long.”

“How long?”

“Many years.” He drew his knees up again. “My family is gone.”

“What happened?” I sat up a little straighter. That must have been many many years.

“Were they all very old?”

“No.”

“Then what…?”

“Not now. Ask Howl.”

All right, then. I turned, putting my back to the rock again, stretching my feet out towards the warm fire. That seemed a more reasonable thing to avoid talking about.

Next to me, he was resting his chin on his knees again, his eyes half closed. No, he didn’t look much older than me.
“If you need to sleep, I can keep watch,” I said.

He lifted his head. “No, I…”

“I can scream really loudly. Don’t worry.”

He gave a quiet laugh. “I know.”

“Really. It’s fine.”

He frowned at me for a moment, but didn’t have the resolve. He lay on his side, pressed against the stone, and crossed his arms in front of him.

He fell asleep just as quickly as Howl had. Then it was just me, my thoughts, and a funny-colored fire. The smoke rose straight up in a solid column, disappearing into the dark. The only sound was the crackling of the wood; there was no wind to rustle through the trees.

I took the silence as a good thing, because it meant I would be able to hear nasty things coming miles away. Probably.

Hopefully.

Both of them were still right there, though, if anything bad happened. Sephas was now in arm’s reach. They would help. I settled back and rested my hands, palms up, on my knees. And I hummed.

I had pulled three all-nighters in my life. The first was when I was four and I had the stomach flu and I sat awake in the bathtub. The second was when Caspar ‘slept’ over and we dared each other to do it, and we both greeted the morning sun bleary-eyed and triumphant, and we high-fived each other and immediately fell backwards and passed out. The third was October 12th of year six; I had a test the next day and figured I wouldn’t be
sleeping anyway.

All-nighters felt much shorter when there was something to do.

I sat still and hummed for about an hour. Then I paced around the fire, trying to work out the stiffness in my legs.

Looking anywhere but the center of the flames convinced me that the darkness was swirling closer and closer, so I squinted at the bright patch until my eyes watered.

And then, somewhere far off, I heard a yip.

The dogs were out there. I fell to my knees by the fire, searching for a stick long enough to pull out. But reaching out to grab one was a bad idea. Slightly violet Otherlands flames were just as hot as the ones back home. I hissed through my teeth, snatching back my hand to clutch it against my chest.

“You all right?”

I looked back to find Howl watching me, propped up on one arm.

“Howl!” I shook my hand again, blinking back tears.

“Sorry. I should have… made a noise.”

“I heard flus.”

“I did, too. They’re far off. Nothing to worry about.” He sat up fully, casting a glance at Sephas. “He makes a poor watchman.”

“I told him to sleep. He couldn’t keep his head up.” I sat back, trying to comfortably fold my legs. “I can scream loud.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

I finally settled into a semi-comfortable position. The fire hissed; white embers
streaked up from the pit like shooting stars.

“He didn’t want to stop at all,” I reminded him.

“I know.” Howl sighed. “But it’s going to take time to reach your friend, and we’ll degrade faster than you will. If we’re not careful, it won’t matter how fast we go.”

“How long is this going to take, exactly?” I looked towards him. “Sephas didn’t tell me.”

“If all goes well, about a week.”

The ground dropped out from under me. A week. I couldn’t be gone a week. My parents would lose their minds. “W-what?”

“That’s assuming we go through the safe territory, and we don’t run into trouble along the way.”

“I thought I would be back… this evening.”

“It… is evening.”

“Tomorrow, then. Not in a week.” I pressed a hand to my forehead. “I need to call home. My mom… no, I lost my phone.” The world spun. I breathed. “I need to go back and tell them.”

“You’ll have to go all the way back to the center. You can only come and go from there.” He hunched forward, his brow furrowed with concern. “I know you’re not very far in, but it would be best to press on.”

I rubbed my eyes. “How can I tell them I’m safe, then?”

“They’ll have to figure it out.”

“I left nothing.” Not even a note. Just a pile of granola bars and water bottles in the
back yard. I buried my face in my hands. “There must be something… Could you go back? Deliver a message, and then catch up?”

“I would be leaving you and Sephas alone.”

I groaned, falling back in the dirt. Mom would be in a psychiatric hospital by the end of the week. It didn’t matter if I came back with Caspar or not, that wasn’t something I could undo.

“He…” Howl shifted, glancing over at the man’s sleeping form. “He really didn’t tell you how long you would be gone?”

“No. I had two days’ worth of food and water and he made me leave most of it. I assumed a day and a half.” How were my supplies going to last that long? Never mind that I’d barely touched them.

“Oh.”

“He really wanted me to come.”

He blinked, as if it was obvious. “Of course he did.”

“Why?” I narrowed my eyes. What else hadn’t I been told?

Something changed in his expression. His eyes focused past me. “The case is very important to him. He knows… something is wrong, and he wants to put it right again.”

“But he couldn’t do it himself.”

“Only someone from Above can go into the cloisters, where he’s being held. The atmosphere is the same for us as this is for you.” He settled down onto one elbow. “But you’ll survive. That’s the idea, anyway.”

“The idea?” I swayed.
“We’ll be right there if there’s any trouble.”

How encouraging that was.

We both stared at the fire for a while, his expression unreadable, as I tried to figure out what questions to ask. I picked up some stray pine needles and set about breaking them into smaller pieces. Their edges were jagged, almost like sawgrass, and I only made the mistake of sliding my fingers along them once.

“So a week,” I repeated.

“Mm-hmm.”

I tossed a needle into the fire. It popped, flaring blue. “Three days there, three days going back?”

“Give or take. But that’s the plan.”

“Is it all going to be like this?” I gestured around at the woods. “Trees and rocks and bad air?”

He chuckled. “Bad air, yes. Trees and rocks, no. We’ll reach the end of the Wild by tomorrow. That puts us in the Ashfens, which should take two days or so to cross. After that, we just have the sea to contend with, but I have… contacts that will get us through.”

“Sounds simple enough.” The way he said it, anyway.

He shrugged. “It’s more roundabout than it sounds. There’s a direct route that would be faster, but that takes us by Southwall, and neither of us wants you anywhere near Southwall.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s where Time has his seat. And he has a security team worth avoiding.”
“Oh.” I closed my eyes, picturing a grandfather clock surrounded by pocket watches. Snapping pocket watches with billy clubs. “How worth avoiding?”

“If we thought it wasn’t, we would not be taking four days to get to the sea when you have to fight for a breath of air.”

That reminded me to do so.

He passed the next few hours with stories of being invisible in Chicago. Evidently, the gray people could walk around unnoticed, it just took effort not to be seen. And you could still bump into anyone who got too close.

But Howl had still skipped a lot of lines “in his day,” as he put it. He’d watched practices at Wrigley Field. The arrangement of paintings in the new wing of the DuSable. A few pre-campaign-speech pep talks from presidents.

Then he would tap a few foreheads to grant bad dreams about being late to work the next day. When I asked him how that went unnoticed, he just said, “You would be amazed what people can decide was a bug.”

The whole business was rather unnerving. But it did make the time go by faster than sitting and humming.

He woke Sephas to trade off for the last few hours before dawn, and the other man was a little less interested in conversation.
When morning broke, it was a complete relief. The forest floor looked like a little galaxy again, spotted with light that grew and spread as the sun came up. Sephas nudged Howl’s shoulder to wake him, and they covered the remains of the fire with dirt after lighting a second torch. I took a few bites of granola bar despite not feeling hungry, and I ended up overfull.

Then we were off, weaving through a maze of stones that become narrow gorges as we went on.

This was even more unnerving than before. I expected something to be around every corner, and there was no lack of corners to round. The stones were jagged-edged, and I only made the mistake of brushing against two of them; they left me with some impressive holes in my hoodie.

Avoiding them, though, made the pace agonizingly slow, and my throat was so raw from Otherlands air that I was starting to wonder if I was going to last a week at this point.

And then Howl stopped in his tracks, holding the torch out in front of him.

“Howl?” Sephas whispered, and he responded with a shushing sound.

I didn’t hear anything.

“Back to me,” he murmured, “and move slowly.”

Sephas followed his instructions, and he slipped his arm around mine as I did the same.

We kept walking, and from an offshoot of the main gorge slunk a flu dog. The torchlight flickered across a mangy coat, a patch of gleaming ribs exposed by a missing
chunk of flesh, a set of broken teeth. Skeletal as it was, the thing was mastiff-sized. A line of fur, mostly intact, along its spine stood on end, and a low growl split the quiet.

Another one followed it. Then another. Then another.

I pressed against Howl’s back. I was a beacon with all my color. A walking target. Twelve of them crept out of the crack.

“Keep moving,” Howl urged. “Nice and steady.”

The lead dog, the largest one, trotted right up to me. It was close enough for me to feel its hot breath on my hand as it sniffed me. The smell of it was nearly unbearable; a subtle wet dog smell under a wallop of rotting meat.

Its lips drew back from its teeth in a snarl.

Sephas snapped, “Run,” and nearly pulled my arm out of its socket as he took off. I stumbled as I turned, hearing teeth snap too close to my ankle, the baying of the rest of the pack joining with the yelp of the leader. We dashed through the pine needles, trying not to brush against the sandpaper stones that pressed in on either side of us. Howl’s speed, combined with his uneven gait, blew the torch down to almost nothing.

“Jacket!” he barked.

Sephas jerked my backpack off my shoulders even as we ran, and I obediently pulled off my hoodie. Howl took it without slowing the pace.

“Jump,” Sephas said, grabbing my arm again and shoving my backpack at me.

There was a ledge up ahead. I had no idea how he planned on reaching it, but he vaulted and grabbed my hand as he did. I smashed into the rock and he hauled me up the rest of the way, running along the ledge, dragging me. It was long, gaining height as it
went.

Below, the light of the fire danced on the walls.

Ahead of me, Sephas disappeared, still holding my arm. I didn’t have time to be confused before he pulled me after him into a crevice, a crack in the rock just wide enough for two of us. It was dark, and the torchlight outside faded as Howl kept running along the ground.

The barking grew more distant.

I could hardly see Sephas’s face, but I could tell he was looking out into the gorge, panting, his eyes wide.

Right, panting.

He fumbled around for a pocket and pulled a small object out of it. A blade flashed into view with a flick of his wrist. He clutched it so tightly his hand shook, and I pressed as far back into the crevice as I could, trying not to whimper.

The baying was almost gone when two sharp cracks echoed through the canyon. I could still hear the coordinating shrieks.

Sephas shifted his grip on the knife. He looked at me. I stared back.

A chill bit my arms.

_Breathe._

The barking turned to whining as it faded completely from earshot. Sephas stepped out of the crevice first. The knife gleamed in a speck of sun as he folded it and slipped it
back into his pocket.

He picked his way back the way we had come. I took my time finding each step, since I was now without the benefit of torchlight, however faint. Where was Howl? Had the dogs gotten him?

What was Sephas going to do if his friend had gotten himself torn to pieces trying to draw the pack away from us?

That was, I had realized, his goal. My t-shirt was dark purple and blended in better with Otherlands-ness than a pink hoodie. And the torch drew just as much attention as the color. The dogs might not have even noticed us taking a different path—or they just hadn’t cared enough to follow.

Sephas vanished, then a thump told me he was back on the ground. “Jump,” he instructed.

I sat on the edge of the ledge and scooted out as far as possible before I hopped down. It was still a further drop than I expected, and the air whooshed out of me as my feet hit the ground. My knees and ankles filed a formal complaint.

He waited for me to stand tall again, then he took off in the direction Howl had gone, his robes swishing around his legs. I did my best to keep up.

We walked for a minute and rounded a corner and there it was, a torch bobbing along the gorge towards us. Sephas breathed an audible sigh.

Howl, I quickly realized, was grinning. My hoodie was draped over his arm.

“They had me cornered,” he panted as he drew closer.

Sephas didn’t sound as amused. “You are all right?”
“Yes. But I only have four rounds left, so no more mortal danger until I can pilfer another magazine.” He patted his belt, beneath the voluminous cloak, and I realized he had been carrying a gun. That greatly improved my impression of his competence in protecting us.

“You said cornered,” Sephas pressed.

“It’s a dead end that way. We have to go the way they came.” He brushed past us both, handing my hoodie to me. “But there won’t be more. I’m Big Boom Nightmare Man now.”

Just who I wanted to be traveling the Big Gray Nightmare World with.

On schedule, we emerged from the gorge. The walls on either side sloped down as we went, and once I noticed it, only a few minutes passed before we were walking on flat land again, only trees surrounding us. I stretched out my arms to either side, relieved. Howl was right about nothing else bothering us, but walking where we could probably see potential danger was much more comforting. I followed the torch, settling into a rhythm again with the whole air thing.

It was late afternoon when I saw the glow up ahead—a band of light close to the ground, bright white. My eyes hurt looking at it, so I kept them down, stepping over roots that jumped around in the torchlight. Soon we wouldn’t need the fire anymore.

The band got taller and taller. I had to squint, relying on the sound of their footsteps to know which way to go. And then we stepped into it.
Sunlight had never felt so harsh. It had none of the warm glow of Earth-sunlight filtered through Ginsberg trees; it was just cold and gray, and far too bright. I forced my eyes to open, blinking.

The trees were behind us. Ahead was a very flat expanse of land, a patchwork of murky-gray water and short grasses shifting in a barely-present breeze. That breeze tickled my face, and I stepped back, gasping. Fumes stung my eyes and scorched my throat; I coughed, but that only made me breathe in more. I pressed my jacket over my nose and mouth, squeezing my eyes shut.

“Isobel?”

I opened one eye. Sephas and Howl were looking at me with something resembling horror.

“Can you breathe?” Howl asked.

I tried, pressing through another coughing fit, until I could manage a few rattling breaths. Whatever the fumes were, they passed through the fabric just as easily as air. Perhaps it was the air.

My guides exchanged a glance.

“How long?” Sephas murmured.

“Two days for the Ashfens.”

I blinked away tears. I wasn’t going to make it an hour here.

“The river?”

“That takes us too close to Southwall.”

“But…”
“We’ve got to try.” Howl looked at me. “Can you, Isobel?”

Breathe? No. Pretend to try to breathe? “I guess.”

“All right. Let’s go.” He tossed the torch aside, setting off, his steps small and halting.

I put one shoe off the pine needles, onto a seemingly dry patch of marshy ground. Milky water pooled around it.

The rubber smoked and sizzled. I jumped back with a yelp.

Sephas gave me a “you have got to be kidding” look, but Howl was gracious enough to come to me and kneel, flipping up his hood. “On my back.”

I gave him a “you have got to be kidding me” look.

“Come on.”

Screw it. Caspar was across the marsh, and I didn’t have to walk. I climbed up, very cautiously wrapping my arms around his neck so I wouldn’t brush against his skin and get shocked. He wobbled to his feet, hoisting me higher with a little jump.

Sephas looked impressed.

Howl obviously couldn’t move as fast carrying a person on his back as he could without. His limp was far more pronounced. And the added weight also made the ground much more keen to swallow up his feet. I could feel him sink with each step, but the water didn’t scorch him as it scorched me. I pressed my face into my jacket again, closing my eyes. The back of my neck stung. My hands stung. My ankles stung.

This place was trying to spit me out.
I tried to distract myself, running through lines of Shakespeare in my head (“To be or not to be” and “now is the winter of our discontent” was about all I could muster), listing facts about emperor penguins, pondering cellular anatomy (the mitochondria was the powerhouse of the cell). It wasn’t enough to take my mind off the fact that the air itself was digesting me. I made a tiny, miserable noise so I wouldn’t actually whine aloud.

“Tell me about Caspar,” Howl’s voice rumbled.

I twitched, startled. “What about him?”

“I don’t know. Give us a memory.”

A memory. I had plenty of those. “We got married when we were seven.”

Sephas blinked at me.

“Fake married,” I assured him. “We had watched some movie and they got married in the end, and we wanted to try it. So he made me a ring out of a clover blossom, and I made him one out of some grass.”

Howl chuckled.

“Our stuffed animals officiated. We made up our vows; didn’t kiss because it was icky. And we nagged our parents into letting us sleep in the hammock in his backyard. In the morning, he started bragging about his thirteen bug bites, but I beat him. I had seventeen.” Now my stinging eyes had less to do with the air. I shut them and tried to breathe.

“You were close,” Sephas said quietly.

“He was my best friend.”

It hurt too much to talk anymore. I replayed the memory in my head, picturing the
willow trees in his backyard, the plush rabbit missing half an ear, the neighbor’s Bernese mountain dog barking in congratulations.

I missed him. I had spent years pretending I didn’t, years turning down invitations and letting text messages sit because I didn’t want to get hurt again.

We went on for twenty minutes before I couldn’t take it anymore. I wanted to take my brain out of my head. My lungs burned. My eyes were probably shriveling up, for all I could tell. Howl’s lurching back and forth was making me still more nauseous. I clutched a handful of his cape. “I feel sick.”

“You’ll be all right. Hold on.”

“I…” I pressed my forehead against his shoulder, grimacing.

He swayed.

Or maybe it was just me. Or the world. I was losing track of everything at this point.

“Isobel?” I felt a hand on my back. Sephas. “Can you hear…?”

My head was underwater. Everything was dark. Their voices, turning to shouts, were muffled.

The world tilted faster. It hurt to breathe. I decided to stop for a while.

The next breath I took was not under my control.

I squirmed. My hoodie was over my face, and when I brushed it away, Howl was sitting next to me, watching.

At least he’d been kind enough not to add shock therapy to CPR.
I sat up, groaning. Soft pine needles made a bed where I lay, a healthy distance from where the trees ended and the swamp began. Sephas stood a few steps away, his arms crossed and his brow furrowed with concern.

Howl fell back onto the ground. “She’s alive.”

Sephas frowned. “If we had not—”

“You want to go within shouting distance of Kel-Sim?”

“I do not.”

“What choice do we have?” His head popped up; the rest of him stayed put. “We can’t go around the other way; it’d take weeks.”

“She will not survive the Ashfens.”

“We will not survive Southwall.”

I raised my hand. That got their attention hilariously fast. “Is there really no faster way to get there?”

Sephas shot a pointed look at Howl.

He sat up, his expression grave. “I don’t want to involve her,” he muttered back.

“He would not know.”

“But he could find out.”

“He did not find you.”

Howl shook his head. “It’s still too close to the city.”

“It is fast.”

“And very visible.”

“But better than days.”
Howl looked at me. I nodded enthusiastically despite still being totally lost. With Pine-Sol air back in my lungs, I felt quite sure I could survive anything, if it meant never setting foot in the ash place again.

“All right,” he said.

I smiled weakly.

We traveled at the edge of the woods, far enough from the swamp that the wind died down before it made its way to us, but close enough that there was no need for torchlight.

There was something different about Howl’s gait. His steps were more brisk. Determined. He looked excited.

Or nervous.

We walked for a solid few hours before I noticed the curve in the boundary between forest and swamp. The distant trees that marked the far edge of the Ashfens were growing closer. Soon we left the edge behind, venturing back into the trees.

But the forest was different here. It looked more like a city park than the wilderness; the trees, a mix of pines and black maples, grew far apart from one another. Silvery grass carpeted the ground. The air here wasn’t as heavy as it had been at first. Or maybe I’d had a taste of what ‘really bad’ felt like. When I got home, I was never complaining about funky-smelling locker rooms again.

Howl walked on some path he must have known by heart, going faster as we went. I had to jog to keep up after a while, though Sephas had no trouble.
We crested a hill, and I saw what we were heading for. A lake, glittering silver, against a backdrop of a sheer cliff that was split in two by a river. Little waves lapped at a pebbly beach.

Howl took off at a run and Sephas trailed behind him. I wasn’t sure who to follow, and I ended up somewhere between them at an awkward jog.

I slowed to a halt on the beach even as Howl charged ahead into the water, sloshing in up to his waist.

Something exploded from the lake.

I backpedaled, tripping and landing on my backside. But it was a person, not a lake monster. Someone small, with tightly braided hair that was tied up and flinging water everywhere as she ran for Howl.

They crashed into each other. He could have folded himself around her tiny frame, and she nearly picked herself up as she flung her arms around his shoulders.

They stood waist-deep in the lake, clinging to each other.

“Hollowdeep,” Sephas murmured, closer to me than I had noticed.

I picked myself up and tried to reclaim my dignity. “What?”

“Hollowdeep,” he repeated.

I assumed it was a name. Howl let go and took her face in his hands, smoothing his thumbs over her cheeks.

“Are they together?” I asked, as if it wasn’t completely obvious.

“Yes.”

It occurred to me that I wasn’t concerned about the fact that she had just burst forth
from the depths of the lake, or that I hadn’t seen her jump in; I was just interested in the
fact that she and the nightmare were an item. I was getting far too complacent.

Howl kissed the small woman, and Sephas looked up at the sky.

When they finally separated, they slogged through the water, arm in arm, towards the
shore. Howl’s face was flushed darker gray. The woman looked perfectly unruffled.

“Isobel, this is Hollowdeep,” he called, looking to me. “Hollow, this is Isobel.”

She regarded me with her head tilted to the side, as if curious. “Renthroe.” Her voice
was deeper than I expected.

“Yes.” How did everyone here know my name? “Nice to meet you.”

She granted me a faint smile. She looked smaller out of the water, clad in a wetsuit of
sorts made of supple leather. But the way she stood, her feet planted firmly on the
ground, belied her size.

“Let’s go talk,” Howl said, giving her hand a tug. “We have a lot to plan.”

Hollowdeep led us to the scattered stones by the cliffside, disappearing into what I
realized was a cave. I followed reluctantly, but the narrow entrance opened into a room
nearly large enough for me to stand in. Sephas had to bend at the waist, and Howl was
nearly folded, but Hollowdeep stood straight as she lit a torch attached to one of the rocks
that formed the walls. Furs were thrown over flat stones that made up the floor, and logs
around the outside of the room served as benches. A gap at the back wall told me the
cave went on.
I didn’t know what to do when invited into someone’s cave-home, but Hollowdeep sat on a log, so I followed her lead. Howl settled delicately next to her, and Sephas chose a third one.

“We’re finding the boy,” Howl said.

Hollowdeep replied with a curt nod.

“We tried to go through the Ashfens. It didn’t work.”

She scoffed. It reminded me of the whole air issue, and I found out that the cave smelled pleasantly earthy, not fake-earthy.

“We think we have to take the river.”

“Too close.” Her voice caught on the ‘c.’

“If we don’t, she doesn’t stand a chance. We have to set this right.”

“This is why…” Her frown deepened.

“It’s a step towards fixing it.”

“But not enough.”

“It’ll hit him hard.” He took both of her hands. “I’m not asking you to take us all the way there. Just as far as you can. They won’t know.”

Her expression didn’t change. “You’ll keep going.”

“We’ll pass by Southwall on the way to the sea. Then—”

“Torra.”

“She’s agreed.”

“You c-can’t involve Torra.” She stood, pulling her hands away. “He…”

“He won’t find her, Hollow. She can hide in the middle of the sea.” He reached after
her. “This is the first step to getting him out. We return the boy; the break is gone. It’ll be a huge blow.”

“Why you?” She grabbed a handful of her ponytail, twisting the braids around her fingers.

“It has to be us.”

“Why?”

He cast a pointed look at Sephas, whose eyes went right to the floor. She gave him, then me, a long searching look. “To the patrols,” she murmured, her eyes still on me. “No further.”

“Thank you, Hollowdeep,” Sephas said.

She shook her head and darted through the gap in the back wall.

I tried not to look over at Sephas, as if the reason it had to be him would be projected in neon across his robe.

“The patrols?” I repeated quietly.

“They guard Southwall. We shouldn’t run into them.” Howl leaned his head back against the stone, exhaling slowly. “She’s right,” he whispered. “They can’t find her.”

“She will not go close,” Sephas reminded him.

“I know.” He didn’t look comforted.

Hollowdeep reappeared clutching a wooden box, out of which she offered Howl and Sephas what looked like fish jerky. I turned her down as politely as I could. She sat next to Howl, and despite still looking miffed she tuck herself against him as she gnawed on the fish.
It was dark by the time they finished eating. If I had stuck with it, we would be halfway through the Ashfens by now. I was probably being too hard on myself, but now this tiny woman was apparently at risk. She looked almost like a child, worrying at the meat with her teeth.

When she finished, she got up to slide a heavy slab of wood in front of the doorway, and I felt safe for the first time since I had come here.

Sephas took the fur of his log as a blanket and curled up on the floor. I followed suit. Howl looked like he was about to do the same, but Hollowdeep tugged on his hand and he followed her into the back room, contorting himself an impressive amount to fit through the gap.

Sephas looked less impressed and more worried, but he didn’t say anything.

I curled up under my blanket, forcing my breathing into a rhythm. The sound of waves stirring up the pebble beach outside drowned out the sound of it. I figured I was in for another long night, but the warmth of the cave and the comforting scent of earth and the presence of a door put me right into what I came to know as Otherlands-sleep. A kind of meditative state that was the ‘shrug, I’ll take it’ form of a nap.

I watched a band of white light from below the door creep along the floor as the sun rose.

Asleep or not, I didn’t want to move. My body ached; my lungs still burned from the episode at the Ashfens.
And I was dreading what the day was going to bring.

The band of light became a column very suddenly. I blinked back into full awareness, half-sure of where I was, and saw a small figure slip out the door.

Maybe I’d been more asleep than I had thought. I sat up, rubbing my face, stretching out the soreness in my limbs. While I wasn’t exactly refreshed, the rhythm of breathing consistently had left me feeling more… alive than usual.

A stubborn cramp lingered in my back. I stood up to try to work it out. But I couldn’t straighten my spine in the cave, so I tried not to let too much light beam onto Sephas as I crept out the front door. It was spotlight-bright outside. The sky was perfectly clear, white, cold. Clinical.

But the lake was less so. The water was clear enough to look drinkable, without the milky-teal cast I had come to recognize as dangerous. The cliffs at the far end continued right down into the water, and it was hard to tell where they ended and the reflection began. If it even was a reflection.

Hollowdeep stood up to her knees in the water, her arms crossed, her face downturned. I walked up to the edge of the lake, casting a smile in her direction, but she seemed uninterested in conversation. I looked at the water, instead—those rocks at the bottom, barely wavering, could have been six feet down or fifty. I couldn’t tell how sharp the slope in front of me was.

“Morning,” a quiet, low voice said.

I tried not to look too startled. “Good morning.”

“S…sleep okay?”
“I don’t really sleep here, but... yeah, I guess. I meditated well. Breathed lots.”

Without looking up from the water, she smiled.

“Howl seemed really happy to see you,” I went on.

Her smile fell a little. “It’s been too long. I miss him.”

“You don’t see each other often?”

She shook her head. “I told him to stay away from Time. Let it go. He can’t.” She paused on the ‘c’ again, and her expression was pained. “He stays away now. I want him home.”

“It must be hard, being apart from your...” Boyfriend?

“Husband.”

I blinked, taken aback. “You’re married?”

“Mm-hmm.” The smile was back. “Many years.”

“Where did you meet? Are you from Chicago, too?”

She shook her head. “Here. I’m from Samoa.”

“Samoa...” I only had a vague idea of where the islands were, but I pictured beaches.

“Was it nice there?”

“Yes.” She stepped back towards the edge, the water swirling around her slim ankles.

“Beautiful.”

“Did you live on a beach?”

“Near it.” She shook off her feet. “I learned to sail there.”

“To sail?”

She looked at me and flashed a grin. “Let me show you the boat.”
It was hidden away under an outcrop in the cliff. She jumped into the water next to the sheer wall, vanished underneath it, and returned with a boat in tow.

It was long, wide, and shallow; the gray wood that made it would have looked weathered at first glance if not for the sheen on the smooth surface. Rods that extended from the left side were attached to a pontoon.

She hauled it to shore and gave it such a look of pride that I wondered if she had made it herself.

“Fits four,” she told me.

I walked around it, looking for nails or joints and finding none. “Are there oars?”

“No.” She held out a hand towards it. Saying a silent prayer that this water didn’t want to kill me, I climbed in and wobbled my way to the middle, kneeling.

She braced her hands against the back and threw all her weight against it. Crunching on the gravel, it slid into the water, and she jumped in as it drifted away from the beach.

Crouching got old fast, and I settled down on my knees, resting one arm on the same side as the pontoon. It didn’t have the unsettling rock of a kayak or canoe, which took a load off my mind. Behind me, Hollowdeep lounged in the crook where the two sides joined, dangling one arm over the side. Her fingers trailed along the water’s surface.

We slipped along the water like it was ice. The boulders far below wobbled in the ripples.

Maybe this place wasn’t so bad.

I thought we would lose speed after a while, but we didn’t—in fact, we seemed to be
gaining it, and the front of the boat aligned itself further and further to the right. Soon we were clipping along at a brisk pace. Clear droplets sprayed up along the sides of the boat, and I tucked my arm inside, nervous. There must have been a motor, but the lake was silent except for the waves behind us. Currents, then?

I glanced back at Hollowdeep. Her hand was still dipped into the water, and she angled her fingertips further as I watched.

The boat curved right.

“Are you steering?” I blurted. All I got in response was a smile, and she pushed her hand forward and the nose tilted up as we gained speed.

Right. She could move the boat with telekinesis. After the zombie dogs, I accepted it and decided to move on with my life.

We curved along in a wide circle, and when we were pointed straight towards the cliff, a little wave rose up in front of us. A bank. The boat followed it, correcting its path directly towards shore.

I didn’t want to stare at her, so I stared straight ahead instead. It wasn’t the boat she was pushing, it was the water.

Sephas and Howl stood on the shore, watching us. I waved. Howl waved back enthusiastically and Sephas timidly raised his hand.

Soon we were grinding to a halt on the beach. I clung to the side of the boat, wobbling to my feet and hopping out onto the pebbles. I looked back at Hollowdeep as she followed. “Are you… um…”

She paused, looking back.
“Howl said it was rude to ask, but…?”

She laughed. “The tides,” she said, and she hopped out of the boat and made for the cave-house.

A nightmare was a little creepy. I didn’t even know what Sephas was. But the tides? Maybe not everything in this world was gloom and doom.

Howl was positively glowing, and once we had gathered everything he helped me back into the boat. Hollowdeep had assembled a bag—food, I assumed—and coaxed Sephas and Howl in before casting off and reassuming her spot at the back.

We sped up to a good clip immediately. The water rose on either side of the boat, and we coasted silently down. Now and then we would bank against another wave, and the nose of the boat soon pointed itself towards the rift in the wall at the back of the lake. We slowed as it approached, and then before I knew it we had slipped inside.

The sound of the boat carving through the water echoed off the walls. They nearly blocked out the sun, and the gentle curve of the gorge made it impossible to tell how long we would be down here. I shivered in the cold, hunkering down and clinging to my backpack.

No one else seemed concerned. Sephas was folded against the side of the boat behind me, his eyes closed. Howl sat close to Hollowdeep, smiling. And she lounged in the back, shifting the curve of her hand in the water to match the movement of the near-tunnel.

I half-closed my eyes and focused on breathing, thinking it probably wouldn’t be this easy for a while.

Minutes passed. We slid around one final curve and there was a light up ahead.
Hollowdeep pressed the boat faster; the walls sped by, and water sprayed up dangerously close to me. Then, just as suddenly as we had entered, we burst free of the walls.

We were on a river, narrow but deep, that meandered through gigantic, misshapen trees with leaves of silver. It seemed to glow in the path of light it left between them. Fish darted by beneath us.

It was beautiful.

I uncurled a bit, resting my arm on the side again.

No one spoke. I thought that if I said anything, it would destroy something sacred. At least startle the school of fish that started to follow us, or the occasional dapple-gray deer on the shore. The fact that all the deer had visible fangs didn’t even disturb me too much; nor did the fact that I spotted a rabbit or two with what appeared to be six legs.

When I glanced behind me, Sephas looked more serene than I had ever seen him.

After what had to have been hours, I saw the first tree stump, neatly sawn off. But more and more started to replace the lumpy trees as we went, and soon they outnumbered them. I squinted against the bright light.

Hollowdeep turned the boat to the shore.

Howl hopped out this time, dragging us up onto the bank. Sephas and I clambered out behind him. Hollowdeep stayed behind.

This must have been as far as she could safely go.

Howl leaned over to kiss her before he pushed the boat back into the water. She watched us over her shoulder, raising a hand, as the boat drifted away.

We stayed to watch her go. Howl nudged me when I grew distracted and said,
“Look.”

A wave grew behind the boat, sucking the river behind it nearly dry, and her boat coasted along like a surfboard.

Soon, she was out of sight, but Howl kept watching the point where she had disappeared.

“We should go,” Sephas said quietly.

Howl turned away and started walking. His gait was purposeful again, but not like it had been. Sephas motioned to me to go in front of him, and we were off, a little caravan.

Ahead, there wasn’t a whole tree in sight, as far as I could see. The harsh sun lit up a haze that hung over the land. The grass underfoot was short and sparse. I felt exposed, especially with the lingering threat of whatever Time actually was. But there was nothing to hide behind; small hills, but no rocks, no bushes.

Neither of my companions said a word for a very long time.

I got into a rhythm again. Step, step, step, inhale, step, step, step, exhale. I made a game of counting fish in the river, but soon there were no fish to count. So then I started making a list of things I would name a lemur, should one be bestowed upon me by the lemur gods. Ragamuffin. His Royal Highness the King of Djibouti (where was Djibouti, anyway?). Beano.

And then Howl stopped short and held out one arm to stop me.

Behind me, Sephas muttered, “Mines.”

My stomach promptly sank into the ground. Maybe I had misheard him. Maybe he didn’t know what he was saying. His English wasn’t perfect.
“Lots,” Howl muttered.

“Oh, fantastic.” I closed my eyes and pretended I was in a room full of lemurs.

“You can tell where they are. Just step on the grass, not the bare patches.” Howl demonstrated, moving slowly ahead, shifting his weight forward before he picked up his other foot.

The ground was mostly bare.

Just to be safe, I stepped on exactly the same spots as Howl—which wasn’t easy, because his legs were probably a foot longer than mine, so I had to stretch and still tread lightly and pray.

“It doesn’t look any different than the rest,” I muttered. “How do you know?”

“The skeleton.”

God in heaven.

I turned my head very slowly in the direction he pointed. And there they were; bones, tossed around like Lincoln logs. They had looked like branches.

I put all my energy into trying not to barf.

I had to stretch too far to the next one, and I ended up nearly in a split, tipping dangerously forward. I shrieked.

Sephas lunged out to catch me, and he just managed to snag my hood and drag me back upright. I half-fell onto the safe place, my heart pounding.

If I blew up here, my parents would have no idea.

It had been almost three days since I had seen them. It didn’t matter if I blew up; they were already losing their minds.
My eyes stung.

“Isobel.” Sephas was standing over me on the same grass. “What is it?”

“Nothing.” I got up, put out my arms for balance, and stepped over to the next island of not-death.

I still had no idea how he knew where it started and ended, but four cautious steps later, Howl announced, “We’re out of it.”

I made the final hop to safety, sighing in relief. Now we were home free. Caspar was right around the corner and we had absolutely nothing else to worry about.

So I pretended while we trudged along in the gray sun, trying to forget a femur that had been much too far away from the rest of the bones.

That sun was beginning its descent when something far off on the horizon across the river caught my eye. It was hard to see in the haze, but I could make out buildings. A wall, mostly crumbling, ran along the edge.

“Southwall,” Howl informed me, noticing my staring.

“Is that where, um, Time is?” I squinted, shading my eyes against the sun.

“Mm-hmm.”

“I expected something more…” Palace-like.

“It is old,” Sephas said.

“How old?”

He nudged me in the back when I tried to stop. “Very.”

I tried to walk and stare at the same time, but it proved too difficult to balance with my breathing.
The ground grew rougher as we went. The hills here were topped with pointy rock formations, a bit like worn sand castles. It gave us more to hide behind, to my relief, and soon I was only catching glimpses of Southwall when I tried to look. I realized I had been almost tiptoeing while it was within view. As if the city itself could hear me. I let my feet crunch-crunch on the dirt again.

“Wait.”

I froze. That wasn’t Howl’s voice, or Sephas’s.

They turned around to look at me because it sounded exactly like mine.

I held up my hands. “I didn’t…”

Three people stepped out from behind the rocks up ahead. Sephas whipped the knife out of his pocket. Howl’s hand went to his gun.

All three wore shirts with no sleeves, revealing heavy tattoos on their arms; geometric shapes punctuated by thick black bands. Each had some pointy thing or another slung over their backs—a spear, a bow, and a sword. Two were men; the third (and the tallest) was a woman. She was what Howl must have been referring to when he said “Otherlands blond,” with a shocking river of pure silver flowing over her shoulder. I tried not to stare, because she looked like she was going to kill me, the way she was staring at me.

Freaking pink jacket. I was a neon sign worthy of Las Vegas out here.

“They’re not ours,” one of the men said.

“Obviously.” The woman gestured to me. I made a mental note to roll in some gray dirt. “What’s a redblood doing here?”

“Enjoying the scenery,” I blurted, ever sassy in the face of mortal peril. Or maybe that
was a panic reflex; I hadn’t been in mortal peril much until this week.

Sephas took a step back towards me, the blade of his knife flicking out. One of the men looked at him and squinted. “Wait…”

He grabbed my arm and bolted.

I nearly fell over, but I ran with him, pelting across the ground and skidding around the rocks. Howl caught up quickly and took the lead, turning us, and an arrow whizzed by my ear. I heard footsteps, then I tried not to listen too closely.

There was a flat, clear space up ahead; I made to run right across it, but Howl skidded to the side, circling the edge. We followed him, and farther behind us, I heard the three pelt right into the middle.

An explosion knocked me off my feet, smacking me into a rock tower, and the world went dim.
I could only hear my breathing, and it was deafening.

In retrospect, it was a good thing that I wasn’t knocked out completely, because my body wouldn’t have taken care of the air issue on its own. But the way everything hurt, the ringing in my ears, the ache in my bones where I had smacked into the ground… I wouldn’t have minded being unconscious.

But I couldn’t pass out. I couldn’t let that happen. I had a kid to save.

And myself. I had myself to save, too.

I tested my hands. They moved; my fingers wiggled when I told them to. My arms did the same, as did my feet, my legs. I could lift my head.

I drew my hands under me and pushed off the ground.

Every inch of my body screamed at me. I stifled a wail, hissing through my teeth, and held myself there on my hands and knees until it subsided. Which it didn’t, really, but I felt good enough to give it another shot. That time, I got onto my feet, and I kept my eyes on the ground beneath me for fear of what I would see if I looked up.

My hands were a mess. Blood dripped slowly from my palms. The knees of my pants were almost ripped through, and the fabric was damp with red.

Redblood. The silver-haired woman had called me redblood. As opposed to what, exactly?

The explosion had left marks on the ground. Little trails where stones had skipped
away. I followed them away from the center, telling my knees to shut up, because they would have plenty of time to complain later. I could do barely more than shuffle, but I shuffled fast, and soon I was able to pick up my feet again. So I got the hell out of there.

I half hobbled, half jogged past as many hills as I could. I found a little alcove in the rock that peeked out the top of one such hill, and I scrambled up the dirt and pressed myself into it.

Water. I wriggled free of my backpack and unzipped it. One of the bottles was cracked, and the inside of the pack was soaked. I pulled it out and sucked half the remaining water through the crack, then dripped some on my hand.

That time, I couldn’t keep back a cry.

But I kept going. I drizzled water over my palm, brushed bits of dirt and dust out of the scrapes, and rinsed it off. Once it looked clean, I did the same for the other hand, and that used up the rest of the bottle. I had one and a half left.

If I ever saw Sephas again, I was going to throttle him for making me leave the rest at home.

I then set about taking stock of injuries. My knees were a mess, but they had stopped bleeding. Nothing seemed broken. Something was wrong with my ears; they hurt, of course, and everything sounded like it was underwater.

I wondered how the others had fared.

I hadn’t seen them. I hadn’t been looking. If I had made it, presumably the boys had, too. I needed to go back, to find them, but that was just it—I was afraid of what I would find.
I was shaking. I ate the rest of the granola bar I had opened earlier, hoping I could attribute it to hunger rather than shock.

And then I heard a voice. Muffled, but there.

“Isobel?”

No accent. Not Sephas. Not deep enough for Howl; not deep enough for either of them, really. It sounded a lot like…

“Isobel?”

I took a risk. Casting my backpack aside, I crawled from the niche and pulled myself to my feet. “Hello?”

Footsteps rounded the rock. I clenched my fists, not sure what else to do. If they were hostile, I had nothing but myself to defend myself. And I hadn’t had nearly enough practice fighting back lately.

And then I walked around the corner.

I let my fists fall to my sides, my mouth dropping open. It was like looking in a mirror; there was my face, my eyes, my ponytail, my hoodie and shoes and my ripped jeans.

Me, in perfect grayscale.

“Hello,” she-me said.

I couldn’t form words. Her hair was made of silver, tied back. Her skin was ashy gray. A near-black t-shirt peeked out from under the hem of a very much not pink hoodie.

“Are you all right?” she asked, glancing at my knees. “You’re hurt.” Her voice was mine, as far as I could tell.
“Yeah,” I said, answering both at once.

“I don’t have a first aid kit. Howl usually carries gauze.” She approached, and I stepped back, holding up my hands. She held still. “Did you hear me call?”

“When? Before?” The voice, telling us to wait…

“Yeah, then.”

“I… guess I did.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t warn you sooner. I knew the patrols were out, but you being here is throwing me off.”

“Where are Howl and Sephas?” I needed an explanation. And it needed to not come from my clone. Not that she didn’t have a very trustworthy, earnest kind of face.

“I don’t know where Howl is. I think he got blown back.”

“Not up?”

“I haven’t seen any signs of him. Which doesn’t hold true for most of that patrol.”

Her eyebrows drew together, her nose wrinkling with disgust. “If he hadn’t made it, I would know.”

“And Sephas?”

“That’s the thing.” She looked back at me, crossing her arms, though she looked more like she was holding herself together than trying to appear commanding. “I…”

“What?” A cold weight settled into my stomach.

“I know where he is.”

“And that is?”

She pointed over my shoulder.
Though I wasn’t keen on taking my eyes off her, I turned and looked past the standing stones, the gray hills, the far-off river. From the distant haze rose the broken outline of Southwall.

I turned back to her and put my hands on my hips and planted my feet. Because I thought I would have found that intimidating, and I was who I was dealing with.

Screw this place.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

“I go by Elspeth.” Her arms were still tucked around her.

“Go by?”

“I don’t have a name. I didn’t want to be called Isobel.” She shrugged.

But Isobel was a great name. “And what are you?”

“I’m your shadow.”

I blinked very slowly. She was still there when I opened my eyes. I was disappointed.

“You don’t look like a shadow.” She was far more three-dimensional. And she was moving. “You look like a person.”

“Thanks.”

“Why thanks?”

“Because that’s how shadows work.” She shrugged, looking away in a way that said she was trying not to roll her eyes. “There aren’t many of us that get to walk and talk on our own, but when we do, we just look like our person.”

“Us?”

“Shadows.”
“I’m gonna need more information.”

She threw up her hands, exasperated. “Can this wait until later? There’s a mushroom cloud behind us.”

As it turned out, she was right. Though it hadn’t quite achieved mushroom status, behind me rose a thick plume of dust and smoke kicked up by the mines. The top of it had started drifting away, but there was still the matter of Southwall being within mushroom-cloud-detecting range, and if that didn’t attract attention, I didn’t know what would.

But I didn’t trust her enough yet.

“No.” I shifted my feet further apart.

She sighed, pressing a hand to her forehead. “Okay. Normally, shadows just… float around in actual shadows. We’re not distinguishable, and we don’t feel much.”

“Am I going to see everyone I know bopping around in the dark?” I blinked.

“No.” She shook her head. “You can’t tell them apart from… regular darkness.”

“I can tell you apart.”

“Because you have a link to the Otherlands, I got to be a real girl. No more strings. Well, some strings, because I feel everything you feel—physically, just about everything, and emotionally, the majority.”

“Define everything. And majority.”

She gave me a look just short of a glare. “If you’re sobbing over a lemur documentary, I start sobbing here.”

Oops.
“But it’s… it’s more about the big things.”

I had made a mountain out of many a documentary-molehill. Darn March of the Penguins. “Can you still feel things yourself?”

“Yes. It’s just… it’s beneath whatever you’re feeling.” She held one hand over the other to illustrate. “If you’re depressed, and I find a… a cute flower, or a squirrel, or whatever, I can be happy about it. But it doesn’t last long. The trends are heaviest.” She covered her lower hand with the other.

“Trends how?”

“Emotional trends. I first started to feel things when Caspar happened.” Her expression shifted into something sympathetic.

I dropped my hands to my sides.

“That was our link. When you saw him disappear.” She hugged herself again.

“So you just… moped around for a few years?” Stayed in her Otherlands-room for a few days at a time? Ate food off of trays left outside the door? Refused to talk to the therapist for the first three appointments, then started crying violently for the whole hour in protest because it was easier to lie in bed and distract, distract, forget, remember, distract…

“For a lot of years.” Her voice was quiet. “The tae kwon do was nice, though. Thanks for that.”

“No problem.” She was right.

We were quiet for a moment. I studied her. There was the little scar on her forehead from the ill-fated game of blind man’s bluff at one of the three birthday parties I had
attended. There were the four moles on the side of her neck.

“It was a good thing, though, the moping. Because Sephas found me.”

I blinked. “He… wait, you know him?”

“We’ve been friends for years. He’s a good man, Isobel. Not perfect, but good. And I can’t leave him there.”

Right. Southwall. She was giving me this interview to get me to Southwall. “If you know where he is, can’t you go get him?”

“If you’re not in sight, I’m not solid.”

“…What?” I squinted at her.

She shrugged. “Shadow thing. I can’t touch stuff. No one else can touch me. It comes in handy, I guess, because I’m practically invincible, but I also can’t whack anyone in the head, and I can’t open whatever is holding Sephas in that place.”

“But… when I’m here…?”

“I ran into my first rock.” She flushed. “And that’s when I figured it out; if you’re around, I’m more real.”

I tried another slow blink. It didn’t work. “Forgive me if I’m kind of skeptical, but…”

She rolled her eyes. “You’ve believed every word out of Howl’s mouth. I can feel it. But as soon as I come along, it’s woooo, scary.” She wiggled her fingers.

“Well, can you blame me?” It was my turn to cross my arms. “This is straight out of some… some Disney movie.”

“It’s not like they’re telling you everything.”

I frowned.
She rolled her eyes. “Unimportant things first. Do you know where they’re from?”

“Yeah. Chicago and M… Mold… something.”

“Moldova.”

“Yeah, there.”

“Do you know when?”

My frown turned into a scowl. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Yeah? Well, when Howl said, ‘far removed from your Chicago,’ he meant in time.

He came here in 1892.’

Oh, right, sure. “How did you know he said that?”

“I hear snippets.”

Fantastic. “And Sephas?”

“His family farm was active in the sixties. Nineteen sixties, but still.”

I looked up at the sky. “You know, this would be a lot easier to believe coming from

them.”

“They’re trying not to dump a bunch of less-than-credible bull—um, stuff on you at

once.”

“Why’d you just correct yourself?”

“I felt those smacks and I knew what they were for.”

Did my nose really wrinkle like that when I scowled? I rearranged my face.

Her eyes drifted up to the cloud that I was trying very hard to ignore.

“Do you believe me?” she asked quietly.

“I really can’t answer that.”
“Do you believe me enough to help Sephas? Because I don’t know how much of a chance he has.”

I gave her a long, hard look. She held out her hands toward me, pleading.

Her palms were scraped. Dark scabs dotted the angry gray skin.

And I said, “Okay,” to what I was ninety-six percent sure was a suicide mission.

She took off, walking almost more briskly than I could, but we were limping exactly the same way. I tried not to match her stride. It wasn’t easy.

“The one that survived the explosion dragged Sephas off. They sent a huge patrol back.” She jumped over a rock, landed hard, and made a face that screamed ‘regret.’

“Most… most of their number is back where the explosion was now. I hope Howl got himself good and far.”

“And left me behind.”

“He wouldn’t. Not if he had a choice. If he didn’t take you with him, it’s because he couldn’t find you.” She skidded down a patch of gravel, and I followed before I could slow down. “Now, Southwall is mostly ruins, except for a little compound in the middle. We’ll have plenty of places to hide until we get there. I have a pretty good idea of where they’re keeping him, so we’ll go straight there. I don’t know how many people will be guarding him.”

“Guarding?” Oh, great.

“We’re both black belts, and I can hit things now. Just remember.” Her limp (my
limp) wasn’t encouraging.

“I’m not exactly cool enough to actually use it under pressure, in case you haven’t noticed.” All the zombie dogs I could have kicked…

“You’re gonna have to be.”

Well, then.

Another steep hill put us on the riverbank. She charged right in, but I stopped myself.

“I can’t touch it.”

“This stuff shouldn’t be bad.” She looked back at me, knee deep. “And it’s shallow here.”

“I don’t know…”

“Test it.”

I put the tip of my wounded shoe in the water. Nothing cataclysmic happened. A first. I closed my eyes and charged.

The water stung my scraped knees. It felt heavier than it should have, and slogging through took effort. When I got out the other side, I looked down and found that my pants were about three shades lighter.

My shadow—Elspeth—was staring. “Uh… sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I muttered. I was more concerned about the fact that my legs now felt slightly sunburned in addition to everything else, but we didn’t have time to ponder that now.

She ran ahead. The dark gray of her jeans lightened.

The walls of the city loomed.
If I was going to hazard a guess about which part of the city came first, I would have put my money on the wall.

It wound around the whole city, from what I could see, but the biggest part of it was indeed to the south. And it was massive; stones nearly taller than me were stacked on top of each other far over my head, and I wondered how they had managed to build it.

But the wall changed as it rounded the corner Elspeth and I followed. The adjoining section was made of smaller stones, half of which were on the ground. Without slowing down, my shadow leapt onto a pile of those rocks and vaulted over the top.

Grimacing as my legs told me to stop that, I followed her. And the city that greeted me made me pause, blinking, trying to take it in.

I found myself staring down a three-story house made of brick, with a widow’s walk at the top and a porch around the outside. Half the roof was missing and one corner looked like it had been blasted off, revealing peeling wallpaper that still had just a hint of powder blue to it and moldy furniture haphazardly scattered around.

Directly behind it was a blocky building, bricks half-faced with marble. An opening in the center revealed a passageway straight through into a central garden, surrounded by crumbling columns. A tiny statue of a faun danced in the center of a fountain.

I veered off course to look at it more closely, hearing Elspeth hiss at me from up ahead. The walls were painted with once-upon-a-time red.

And black, but that went away when I remembered to breathe.

“Isobel.” Elspeth grabbed my sleeve and gave me a tug.
“What is this place?” I whispered.

“Southwall. Come on.” She started running again, and I complied, but my head swiveled around like an owl’s to take it in. A modern warehouse down the street, walls of corrugated fiberglass, half the windows broken. A beehive-shaped hut of flat stones to the right. A mudbrick rectangle to the left. A trailer straight ahead, broken right down the middle. They were packed in like puzzle pieces, making narrow alleyways between them, but the occasional courtyard outlined with modern and ancient made the place extremely unnerving.

Not a window was intact. Not a roof was whole. I croaked, “Why is it…?”

“They come from sinkholes,” she said. “All that stuff goes somewh…” She skidded to a halt and dragged me through the doorway of a wooden shack. I was gearing up to protest when I heard footsteps.

Someone yelled; I couldn’t make out the words. But I heard more than one set of feet—five? Ten?—crunching on the crumbling stone walkways.

I held my breath, my heart pounding in my ears.

They faded as quickly as they had appeared, and Elspeth dragged me out the front door again. She must not have been only a reflection of me, because I would not have had the energy to keep up this pace on my own.

As we neared the center of the city—more of a town, really, densely packed as it was—the condition of the buildings deteriorated. Half of them were nothing more than piles of brick, the occasional couch or refrigerator or column standing proudly above a sea of wreckage.
And then we rounded a crumbling brick corner and I stared directly at the front of a little Craftsman that looked too much like my own house for comfort.

Half of the roof was caved in. The front porch sagged. A bush grew where I left my rain boots in the spring.

“Isobel, it’s not yours.” Elspeth stopped when I did, looking at me pleadingly. “We have to go before they start coming back.”

“It… it looks like…” Through the broken windows, I could see peeling wallpaper. Nothing like ours. Completely different. Except that the furniture, half of it pushed over, was the same blocky mission-style.

“Isobel!”

I wrenched my eyes away and kept running.

I half expected to see my high school next, but I didn’t. The house had been one of the last standing buildings before complete decimation took over. Some walls remained, enough that we could duck behind them for cover, but I felt too exposed. Trying to climb piles of rubble at Elspeth’s pace was straining my already unhappy lungs.

The ruins were soon low enough for me to realize the smashed part was in a rough circle. And right in the middle of it were six rectangular buildings, unassumng, made of the same kind of gigantic stones as the wall. They were roofed mostly with dark tiles (though some had patches of tin or wood or fiberglass that must have come from the ruins), and the three largest curled around a central courtyard, paved with light stone and
nicely maintained. It looked… civilized. Functional. In a slightly communistic sort of way.

Elspeth ducked as low to the ground as she could and darted from the rubble to the walls of the closest building. I saw no one around, and the only windows in the thick walls were high off the ground, far over our heads. But clearly marching up was a risk she wasn’t willing to take, so I followed suit. Crouching made my knees ache, and when I was next to her again, I leaned against the wall of the building.

She gave me approximately two seconds to rest before she crept off again.

I followed her, stifling a groan.

Pausing at the corner of the wall, she glanced over her shoulder at me. “I think he’ll be in the central one. I don’t know about guards. If he isn’t there, we just kill everyone we see and move on to the next place.”

I made a choking sound. “Really? You think we could manage that?”

“No, that’s just how I’m imagining it.” She peeked around the corner, waited a moment, and bolted.

I skidded around after her, crossing the courtyard to the middle block in a few too-long steps. She left a heavy wooden door swinging in the front wall, and I ducked through it.

Inside was a dark central hallway. The stone walls were carved in shallow relief; rows and rows of men, some leading horses and cattle, some carrying huge sheaves of grain, marched towards the end of the hall. The occasional door interrupted the symmetry, splitting some of the carvings in half, as if they had been hastily added later. Elspeth
charged straight ahead to the large, imposing one at the end of the hall. This door was made of cracked black wood, and the image of a man was carved into it; he towered over my head, and he held a rod in each clenched fist. His long hair and beard might have been made of snail shells; they were precisely carved in a pattern of repeating spirals.

Not Egyptian. Something else. “What are these?” I whispered.

Elspeth wasn’t as interested in the art history lesson. She fumbled with the archaic equivalent of a doorknob until a mechanism clunked into place, and she threw her weight against the door.

It swung inward.

From a chair in the center of the room, Sephas looked up at us.

When his eyes flicked over me, he looked rather shocked and appalled; I couldn’t blame him, because I had just marched into the nest of people who wanted to kill me, and I was feeling roughly the same. But then he saw Elspeth, and his eyes widened, and he looked almost like he was going to cry.

“Elsie.”

She held perfectly still for a moment, looking back. Then she turned and pulled me the rest of the way through the door, slamming it shut behind us. Sephas squirmed in his chair; his arms were pulled through the back of it, fixed at an uncomfortable angle.

She darted around behind him and knelt. “Does he know?” she asked, her voice low.

“I don’t know.”
“How long do we have before he does?”

“He was working. They sent word, but he is…”

“In the caves?”

“Yes.”

“We don’t have much longer, then.” She hissed through her teeth, struggling with his restraints.


Elspeth nodded in confirmation. I knelt beside her, wondering how I could help, and my stomach turned.

His hands were cuffed. At first, I thought it was oil dripping down from his wrists, then she gave another tug against the restraints and it ran faster. He let out a grunt, his knuckles turning white.

Blood. It was black blood.

“My knife,” he said, his voice strained. “They took…”

“I’ll find it.” I jumped up, desperate to look at anything but the growing puddle of not-oil on the stone floor. It explained the ‘redblood’ epithet, at least.

The front and side walls were covered in reliefs like the ones in the hallway; men carrying grain and urns and chests, leading sheep and cattle towards the back of the room. A stone throne sat there, a yard from the wall, a silver-gilded image of the sun carved where the sitter’s head would rest. Behind it, in the center of the back wall, was a massive stone door. This one was carved with winged creatures; men’s heads atop bull’s bodies. Horns sprouted from their temples, and cylindrical hats covered their heads, but the snail-
shell beard still prevailed.

On either side of the doors, shelves were carved into the wall, stuffed both with books and stone tablets. I ran to them, scanning for anything that looked remotely like Sephas’s knife.

Her voice shaking, Elspeth told him, “I tried to warn you. I saw them ahead…”

“I know. I did not know it was you.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It will be all right.”

I refused to look back, running my fingers along the top shelf and praying nothing multi-legged was up there. Then I felt something long and narrow and I snatched it, taking a step back towards them.

The latch on the door clacked.

Clutching the knife, I dove behind the throne. I didn’t see where Elspeth went, if she went anywhere at all.

The door hinges creaked. It slammed closed again. Someone’s shoes tap-tapped on the stone.

“And here I thought they were shitting me.”

It was a woman’s voice. I pressed against the smooth back of the throne, staring at the wings of the creatures on the doors.

“Saying it was you just to… you know, be them.”

“Manni.” Sephas’s voice didn’t sound nearly as terrified as I expected.

“They like watching me squirm at the mention of ‘Nicolae.’”
“Why are you still here?” He sounded… confused. Not scared, just confused.

“Shut it.”

“You should be—”

“I said shut. It.” The legs of his chair squeaked along the ground. “I’m asking the questions.”

Silence.

“Why are you here?”

“They caught me.”

“Obvious. I want to know why.”

“Scouts.”

“Why were you close enough for the scouts to hear you?”

He didn’t answer that one. ‘The person hiding behind the throne couldn’t survive the death swamp’ probably wasn’t an answer he wanted to give her.

The chair squeaked again. “Why?”

“I can’t say.”

“Did they send you? Howl and the others?”

Silence.

“Look, you’re not in a good place. If you spill it, I can probably make them throw you in the river without putting too many holes in you first. I have clout.”

“Come with me.”

I stiffened, not sure I had heard right.

“I like not getting shot,” she scoffed.
“You can get away.”

“Nicolae.”

“If you come, Howl can—”

There was a soft, low whoosh. Light flickered across the reliefs. “Stop it.”

Silence again. The light died down. I took a slow, shaky breath.

“Just tell me.”

“No.”

“Tell me where Howl is.”

“No.”

The light flared to life again, and I realized it had to be fire. She was going to burn him. So I, in my infinite wisdom, flicked the switchblade open and scrambled out from behind the chair.

I hardly saw her move before her hand was around my throat. Then I was staring into an angular face framed by short, curly hair. Thick black bands were inked into her wrists. I pointed the knife at her with one hand and tried to pry her fingers off my neck with the other, but her grip was strong.

“Who is this?” she snapped, her pale eyes flicking from me to him.

Sephias tried to wrench his chair around. “Let her go.” Now, of course, his voice sounded adequately afraid.

“She’s a redblood.”

“People keep saying that like it’s a bad thing,” I croaked, bringing the knife up toward her arm. She knocked it out of my hand.
Then she raised her free arm, a little too close to my face for comfort. I squealed as hot, pale flames engulfed her fingers, climbing up towards her shoulder.

“Manni, let her go,” Sephas blurted.

“Give me a reason.” Her eyes stayed on me.

I struggled to lean my head away, heat searing my cheek. My eyes watered.

“Howl.”

The flames winked out.

“The plains. South from the Wild.” His chair creaked. “There is a house, it is built in a hill. In the side. Grass for the roof.”

She looked at him.

I ducked, forcing myself towards her. In the same motion, I brought my forearm up into her wrist, and her grip broke. She hissed, fire sparking to life in both of her hands, but I spun and brought my ankle hard into her knees.

She stumbled sideways. I looked up just in time to see my shadow materialize out of the dark corner of the room.

Elspeth tackled the woman and clamped her hands around her throat. The flames went out, and she opened her mouth like a fish, grabbing Elspeth’s wrists.

“Don’t kill her, Elsie,” Sephas’s voice came, desperate, from the chair.

Seconds passed. Her head lolled back and Elspeth waited a brief moment before she jumped off of her.

“Duck,” she told Sephas, and he barely had time to do it before she kicked the back of the chair and snapped it neatly in half. She grabbed his arm, helping him up, and made
for the door.

I snatched his knife off the floor before I ran after them. The hallway was deserted, but I darted ahead and peeked out the front door. A man’s face stared back at me.

It was too late to run. I kicked the door open and plowed into him, placing a fist on his nose and a foot in his gut before he knew what was happening. Then I turned back to grab Sephas’s other arm, and we moved at an agonizing pace towards the cover of the rubble beyond the compound.

Another shout rang out behind us. I looked over my shoulder, and a woman was standing in front of the door to the main building, staring at the man’s prone form. Elspeth and I dragged Sephas along as fast as we could, his feet scraping along the stone.

By the time she turned and noticed us, we were in an alleyway between a trailer and a barn.

Elspeth let go, dashing off behind us as I kept Sephas moving. Shuffling noises echoed off the walls, followed by a cry. The footsteps that rejoined us were hers.

“They were all in the patrol,” she gasped. “There can’t be more than four or five left. If we keep moving, we’ll lose them.”

Elspeth and I half dragged him through the city. He hardly seemed able to stand, and it was hard to support him when pulling on his arms dug the metal handcuffs deeper into his skin. Being scarcely able to hold myself upright didn’t help, either. It wasn’t long before shouts seemed to be coming from around every corner, and Elspeth pulled us into smaller and smaller alleyways until we dead-ended at a wall.

“I hate this city,” Elspeth hissed, dragging us along it. I went along in silence, looking
for a hole big enough to jump through.

She was lucky that the city was the biggest thing she had to worry about, I thought as I remembered a rattling breath.

The wall caught sounds; funneled them down to me. We were a group of twelve, it seemed. Or maybe that was just the sounds of all of the compound chasing after us, just around the corner. I wanted to close my eyes and wake up at home, in my bed. It was all too much. It had to be a dream. It hurt to walk. It hurt to breathe.

Then I heard something that was undeniably footsteps. I let go of Sephas with one hand and pulled his knife out of my pocket, ready to at least go down fighting and crying.

The figure that stepped out around that corner was dark-skinned and taller than any of us. A hood covered his face.

“Howl,” Elspeth cried. I breathed out a lungful of air I hadn’t realized I was holding.

He pushed back the hood. Oil-blood ran down his forehead, flaked off his cheek. “It is you. I thought I heard you, but I didn’t believe it.”

“Yeah.”

“You all got out.” He moved around behind Sephas. “You actually…”

“He was the only one who got caught. We went in after him.” She stepped back to give him room to work on the handcuffs.

Howl froze. “You both went in?”

“Yes.”

He looked at me.

“I’m alive,” I said, in case it wasn’t clear.
“You shouldn’t have done that.” He returned his gaze to Elspeth, his expression firm.

“All three of you could have—”

“Don’t go dad on me.” She frowned.

“I am two hundred years older than you, kid. I am going great-granddad on you.”

“We’re all alive.”

Sephas jerked his arms and yelped in pain.

“Right, right. Later.” Howl dropped Sephas’s hands, moved in front of him, and hoisted him up onto his back in one smooth motion. But his own face contorted in a grimace.

Without Sephas dragging his feet, we could move much faster, which my body didn’t like but the rest of me did. Elspeth and Howl started babbling on about what had happened, and I couldn’t join in because I was placing not falling over in the highest priority.

“They have him in the office?”

“Yes. Su—”

“Wait, office?” I slowed, turning my head to look at them.

“Time’s. Keep moving.” Elspeth poked me in the back, so I did. “Sulemanni was on her way there—”

Howl stumbled. Whether it was because of his now-much-worse limp or because of the name, I wasn’t sure. “Sulemanni? The Sulemanni?”

“There aren’t a lot of Sulemannis here.”

“Why her?”
“She can shoot fire from her hands. They wanted information. It works.”

“But he has to be alive to give them information. She’s a loose cannon.”

“She would not…” Sephas’s voice trailed off before he could finish.

Howl shook his head. “I wouldn’t put anything past her.”

“Well, she’s out cold on the floor right now, so we don’t have to worry about her.”

Elspeth’s tone was too innocent. “We need to get out of the city.”

So we turned our attention to the wall. Elspeth ran ahead, looking for holes; I stayed in the middle, and Howl stumbled along at the rear. Sephas’s head lolled forward onto his shoulders, and I prayed they hadn’t done anything to him that we hadn’t noticed yet.

Finally, we came to the gap we had entered through. I wasn’t going to complain; I hopped over the pile of stones, extending a hand towards Howl as he shakily hauled himself and Sephas over it. Ahead of us was nothing but empty plain, the rocks and the plume of dust and smoke off to the east.

Howl put his head down and charged.

Running after him was agony.

The mines had done a number on my body. I knew that. But trying to keep pace with him was impossible as it was, and my aching legs were made of pain, and my arms were made of pain, and my back was made of pain. I trailed behind, tears streaming down my cheeks, but I refused to make a sound. I was in too deep to consider complaining about it anymore.
Beside me, Elspeth looked paler than her normal pale. But she matched my stride step for step. All of us plunged across the river without slowing, and soon the standing stones hid us from the eye of Southwall.

Howl slowed then. Keeping up without fighting through a heart attack seemed relatively plausible.

Beside me, Elspeth gasped, “I have to go.”

I spared a glance at her. “What?”

“I’ll be around.”

When I looked over again, she was gone.

I skidded to a halt, spinning around, trying to see where she could have gone. There was no sign of her; the footprints she had left in the dust simply vanished.

Ahead of me, Howl’s voice called, “Keep up!”

“Elspeth!” I hollered back.

“She’s a shadow. Don’t worry.” He stumbled, and I lunged forward to try to help, but he recovered and kept going before I could catch him.

Our pace slowed as time passed, but we didn’t stop moving until the sun was perched on the horizon. The land around us was all smooth hills, covered with tall grasses that rippled like waves in the occasional gust of wind. The sporadic trees were bent in the middle, dragged into bizarre shapes. Howl wobbled into the dip between two hills and his knees caved under him.

I cried out, startled. Sephas rolled away like a pill bug. But Howl faceplanted in the grass and moaned dramatically enough that I decided he would live.
I collapsed next to them, numb. After moving for that long in my current state, I wasn’t sure the feeling in my legs would come back. My throat was dry; my lungs burned. Breathing slowly did nothing for my spinning head. I reached for my backpack, longing for a sip of water, and found that it was gone.

It was still lying in the nook in the rock where I had left it.

Tears spilled over my cheeks out of sheer frustration and I wiped them away. I had places to go. There was no going back now.

Howl turned onto his back, his chest still heaving. Sephas rolled up onto his knees, pulling at the handcuffs and wincing as he did.

That was something I could work on. I shuffled over to him on my knees, suppressing the urge to gag at the sight of the solid black liquid dripping off his fingers. As my thumb brushed his skin, pain shot up my arm and I snatched my hand back.

“My knife,” he said, his voice weak.

It was still in my pocket. I couldn’t hand it to him, so I flicked the blade out and waited for him to tell me what to do. If it happened to be “cut off my hands” then I probably would throw in the towel and just barf everywhere.

Luckily, he said, “It will cut the metal.”

I frowned. “It… really?” But I wedged the blade into the chain, careful not to touch him, and gave it a good wrench.

It slid through the link like it was butter. Cold butter, but butter.

I only took a moment to stare at it before I went back to work, severing one link completely. The pieces fell into the grass, and he folded his arms in front of him with a
groan.

I very carefully set the knife down next to him and scooted away.

With a quiet, “Thank you,” he picked it up and set about freeing his wrists. I looked pointedly away.

That woman had known him. He had known her. They had called each other by name… well, he had known hers, at least. What had she called him? “Nicolae,” I murmured.

Sephas jumped, his head whipping around to stare at me.

I blinked at him, startled. “She called you Nicolae,” I said. “Who’s that?”

He switched his focus to the cuffs. One popped off under the knife. “Nicolae is… eh…”

“Tell her,” Howl’s voice coaxed from the grass.

He frowned at the other ring of metal, prying at it with the knife. I looked away again.

“Do you want me to tell her instead?”

“No.” I heard the ring land in the grass. He sighed. “My name is Nicolae.”

I braced my arm against the ground. “Sephas isn’t your real name?” I held still. “At home, I was Nicolae.”

“It is now. I chose it.” He pulled up a handful of grass and tried to wipe away the blood on his wrists, which did little more than smear it. “At home, I was Nicolae.”

“Sephas isn’t your real name?” I held still. “Wait, how did she…”

He pushed his sleeve up and revealed a thick black band inked into his skin.

I jumped up.

Sephas twisted around to look at me. Howl sat up.
“You’re one of them,” I blurted. I hadn’t put it together. How had I not realized?

“I was.” He seemed to shrink, pushing his sleeve back down.

“You’re one of the people who wants to…” No, he didn’t want to kill me. They had dragged him back to the compound and tied him to a chair. I caught my fingers in my hair, trying to breathe.

“Isobel. We all were.”

I looked at Howl.

“You start out there because Time takes you.” He held out a hand like he was trying to calm a wild animal. “Everyone was one of them. Sephas was, I was, Hollowdeep was. Unless you were born here, you started under Time.”

“You don’t have the tattoos.”

“I left earlier.”

I lowered myself back into the grass. Not because I was fine with this, but because it hurt too much to stand. Or to follow my instinct to run, as fast as I could, as far away from these people as possible. “I want answers,” I said. “All of them this time.”

They had important things to do first. Like stop Sephas from bleeding. Howl trampled down a circle of grass for us to sit in, and he managed to start a warm little fire despite the wind making every attempt to stop him. Then he pulled a roll of gauze out of a knapsack hidden beneath his cloak.

I tried to look patient, sitting cross-legged and splitting blades of grass into dozens of
tiny strands.

Unrolling the cloth, Howl finally told me, “All right.”

“Who is this Time guy?”

“The same sort of thing we are.” He gave the end of the strip to Sephas to hold. “I am a nightmare. Hollowdeep is the tides. He is time.”

“Does he make time move, then?”

“He keeps track of things that move through it. It ensures that they come into being.”

He looked in the knapsack for something else, dug around for a moment, and gave up empty handed.

“So why did he take Caspar?” I blurted.

“To create a distortion.” He tore off a long strip of gauze. “Time has a set term—not that anyone knows how long—and if things don’t go the way they’re supposed to, he has to stay longer to make up for it.”

I frowned. “Has to?”

“It’s not pleasant. He spends most of his time making those records. But he likes the power.” Howl pushed the sleeve back up, and Sephas looked away as the tattoo was revealed again.

“Is that why you’re all here, too? Because of the distortion?”

“Not entirely. We’re supposed to be here. There aren’t terms for what we do. But we’re born this way as the result of a similar distortions.”

So everyone had to suffer because of this guy. “Go on.”

“The kidnapping is new. A certain number of people have to pass through the world
for his time to be up.” He wound the gauze around the cut on Sephas’s wrists. “He used
to make deals. Give people more time when they were supposed to die. A few
generations later, funny-colored babies start popping up. But it didn’t add enough to his
term, so he took Caspar. Since the boy didn’t pass out of the world… the normal way, the
records won’t show that he left, and the timeline therefore becomes more of a mess.”

I let my eyes drop to the grass. It made… some sense. If I could just bring myself to
believe it. “What happens when you come here?” I asked. “You just… show up and Time
tells you what to do?”

“Essentially.” He tore off another strip of gauze. “He picks us up when he thinks
we’re ready, and we do… errands for him. What kind of errands depends on lots of
things, but most of them focus on keeping him from getting his throat cut.”

“Is that a possibility?”

“There are a lot of people here who think he’s doing a bad job.” He started working
on the other arm. “More people are outside than in.”

“Outside what?”

“His gang.”

I shifted where I was sitting, pulling up another handful of grass. His use of the word
‘gang’ made it sound a lot less threatening than what I had imagined. I wondered how
full those buildings actually were. “Is he really in charge, then?”

“Yes. Trouble is, most people don’t like the idea of trying to fix things. What he does
won’t always affect them, so they’re content to stay out of it.” He tied the strip tight, and
Sephas winced. “Once they get out from under his thumb, they keep quiet.”
“Is that what happened to you? You got out?”

“Yes,” Sephas answered.

“And the people still there are just the ones who haven’t gotten out yet?” Maybe they didn’t actually want to kill us.

Howl frowned. “Yes and no. Some of them don’t want to. There are a lot of ways he can keep you there. Most of them aren’t nice, but some people don’t have a solid enough sense of right and wrong to protest.”

I stared at one dark gray blade of grass, running it between my fingers. Sephas had offered that woman a chance to escape, but she hadn’t sounded ready to take it. If she was the kind of person he trusted, the kind with morals, why wouldn’t she have jumped at the opportunity?

Or maybe I was believing the wrong person. Because, apparently, Sephas’s name was Nicolae.

And he had told her where Howl lived.

My stomach twisted itself into a knot when I remembered that. He had sold him out. Just like that. I had to find a way to tell Howl, but I had no idea when I was going to speak to him alone, or even out of earshot of Sephas.

“Isobel?”

I looked up, startled.

“Any more questions?” Howl nodded to me encouragingly. Sephas’s gaze lifted to me.

_The plains. South from the Wild._
He looked away.

_There is a house. It is built in a hill._

“When did you both come here?” I asked to fill the silence.

“Oh.” Howl grimaced. “I said something, didn’t I?”

“Elspeth told me it was a long time ago.” I shifted in the grass. “I wasn’t sure I believed her, but you said…”

“Great-granddad,” Sephas muttered.

Howl groaned.

“When?” I pressed. Nothing would surprise me now. I didn’t care enough.

“Eighteen ninety-two.”

I looked at Sephas.

“Sixty-four,” he said.

“Oh, great.” I flopped back in the grass, my hands over my head. “Not only am I traveling across the underworld, but I’m traveling across the underworld with a couple of old men.”

“We do not get old,” Sephas said, as if that fixed everything.

Worse things had happened. Even in the past few hours.

I waited.

Sephas had to fall asleep eventually. He always dropped first. But Howl had just carried him across half the Otherlands, and I tried not to groan when I heard the duty of
the first watch go to Sephas.

Or Nicolae.

I rolled onto my side, watching the fire through half-closed eyes. The grass burned almost-green, even if it wasn’t green itself. It put off a thick white smoke, which I feared would make a nice, clear “find us here.”

But the wind made quick work of the white column.

I curled up, grateful for Elspeth’s hoodie. A funny smell hung over it, like it had been soaked in bleach, but it was better than being cold. I wondered if she had gone back and picked up mine, and maybe recovered my backpack.

I would not get a drink for at least three more days. Based on my experience, I thought I would probably survive it, but I didn’t want to have to try.

Sephas shifted in the grass, pulling his knees up to his chest. Howl was already out cold. The green flames shrank in a gust of wind.

If only I could sleep.

“I am sorry,” his quiet voice said.

I wanted to pretend not to hear, but I twitched at the sound.

“I did not want…”

“To do what? Get caught?” I propped myself up on my elbow, immediately regretting how bitter my voice sounded.

“I did not want you to be hurt,” he said.

I huffed, looking away. I couldn’t let him know what I had heard. But I didn’t want him to get away with betraying his friend, either.
“Why did you and Elsie come?”

“She wanted to find you.” I stared at the fire. “Get you out.”

“It was not safe.”

“Yeah, I got that.” Too bitter, Isobel.

He rested his chin on his knees.

I stared up at the sky, the bright moon. There were no clouds to obscure it, but the swath of white stars looked almost like fog.

“Why do you keep calling her Elsie?”

He turned his head to look at me, blinking.

“You and Howl, I guess.”

“We are friends.” He shrugged.

“For how long?”

“Since Caspar.” He hugged his knees tighter as a gust of wind flattened the grass around us. “After… after Time took him, I found her. She was crying.”

I had done a lot of crying. “You just found her?”

He nodded. “In the woods.”

“And you became friends?”

“Yes.” As if it was the most natural thing in the world to befriend sad shadow children in the forest.

I glanced at the fire as it flickered back to life. “Should… should I be calling you Nicolae?”

He shook his head violently. “No.”
All right, then. “Because you’re Sephas now?”

“Yes. Nicolae means… It was my name at home, but then it was my name here. With Kel-Sim—with Time.”

I sat up fully. “Is Kel-Sim his name?”

“Yes.”

He had a name. A real human name. Not like anything I had ever heard, but… still.

“Has he always been here?”

“No.” This head-shake was less angry. “There were many before. He has been here too long.”

“How long?”

“Since… eh…” He waved a hand. “I don’t know the year.”

I remembered the carvings in the hallway, in the room where we had found him.

Almost Egyptian, but not quite.

“He is old.” Sephas stretched out his legs. “He looks old.”

Looks… “You’ve seen him?”

He gave me a lingering glance, then turned his eyes towards the fire.

I breathed. There was a bit of dizziness now that wouldn’t go away, no matter what I did. The burning in my throat lingered.

Three days. Three-ish, anyway. Maybe if we tried we could make it in less. I was willing to take drastic measures.

I stayed very quiet, lying on my side, eyes on the fire, as Sephas woke Howl to trade off. And as soon as his head hit the grass, I started watching for his breathing to even out.
It took an eternity, but it did. And then I sat upright so fast that Howl jumped.

“Isobel?”

“He told them,” I hissed.

He squinted, leaning forward as if he was trying to hear me better. “Told them what?”

I got to my feet, scrambled across the circle to him. “When we were in the… Southwall, he was talking to that fire girl.”

“Sulemanni?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“He told them where you live.”

Howl’s eyes widened for a faction of a second, but he held very still. “Can you remember exactly what he said?”

Thanks to the fireball in my face, I had a flashbulb memory of it. “The plains south of the Wild. In a house built into the side of a hill. He said it had grass for the roof.”

Howl’s eyebrows drew together.

And then he let out a snort of laughter.

I pressed my lips together in a frown.

“She took it?” he asked, grinning. “Really?”

I blinked. “…Yes?”

“That man is a gift.” He shook his head, casting a glance at Sephas. “Isobel, I’ve never set foot in those plains in my life. There’s nothing there worth seeing. Especially not a house.”
“He lied?” I stared at his sleeping form.

“They’re going to be searching every hill in the plains. This is the best thing he could have said.”

“He said it…” I looked back at Howl. “He sounded…”

“Isobel, when Sephas needs to be, he is a very good liar.”

I let my shoulders drop. “So he didn’t sell you out.”

“Of course not. I’d trust him with my life.” He leaned back on his arms.

A gust of wind bit into my neck. I zipped up the hoodie as far as it would go. “Are you sure?”

He looked me dead in the eye. “Yes.”

That was good for him, but I still couldn’t, and now I knew I would probably believe whatever lies happened to come out of his mouth.

I stared into the fire until the sky was violet with the morning sun.

They took turns on the watch three times. As soon as it was light, Sephas woke Howl and we wordlessly extinguished the fire and set on our way.

No one spoke for the whole morning. We wove over and around hills, bracing ourselves against gusts of wind that threatened to knock us into the quicksilver grass. When we reached another line of gnarled trees, we only stopped to climb over the occasional fallen log.

Something had changed. I didn’t feel afraid the way I had my first day here; maybe I
didn’t think anything was hiding in the grass.

Maybe I was just going numb.

There were moments when it slipped my mind completely why I was there. Why I was following these two gray people across this plain.

Caspar had ceased to be real. He was back in his place, a distant memory.

It was growing to be the same way with my family. My mother probably hadn’t stopped pacing. But now there was really nothing I could do to reassure her or dad. After making it so far, I couldn’t turn back just to leave them a note.

I just prayed she would be all right.

And then I saw something glittering up ahead. A brilliant shade of blue-green, so bright it hurt to look at it through the muted leaves on the ancient trees.

I slowed, squinted at it. Sephas looked over his shoulder.

“The sea,” he said.

Without thinking, I bolted. I tore through the woods, leaping over vines and branches, my heart pounding. A low branch whipped my cheek. I didn’t slow down.

And then I burst out onto pure white sand, and the sky of home was at my feet.

It stretched as far as I could see. A vibrant aqua, like the inside of a gel pen. In the shallows, under gently lapping waves, it was crystal clear, and shells in the sand beneath shone pink and gold.

And far ahead, just visible, a patch of green rose from the calm surface, appearing to bend the horizon around it.

Caspar.
I laughed, which reminded me to breathe, and the smell nearly knocked me over backwards.

Choking, I backed away towards the trees again. I had just inhaled a lungful of pure bleach. My eyes watered, and I didn’t dare to take another breath until I was in the trees again, my back to the water. The pungent smell remained, but not as strong.

It was the Ashfens all over again.

In front of me, the boys caught up. Sephas looked almost hopeful; Howl’s expression was grim.

“We are here,” Sephas said.

“Almost,” Howl warned. “We can celebrate when we get to the cloisters.”


“You’ll be fine on the island. The air will be like home for you.” He reached out a hand to lead me further back into the woods. Sephas stayed at the edge, staring at the beach.

“But how long?”

“If all goes well, you won’t have to worry about it for very long.”

“What does that mean?”

“I made arrangements.”

“Just tell me.” I rubbed my eyes, trying to get rid of the sting. Caspar was right there. He took a deep breath. “A boat.”

I gave him a blank stare. Like I wanted to try to breathe in a boat. “Are you for real?”

“Very for real,” he said.
“Where are we going to find this boat, then?”

“Along the coast. It’s not far.”

I had no reason to argue with that.

I didn’t want to walk along the beach, for obvious reasons, so we picked our way through the forest a safe distance from the edge. The trees made a barrier against the fumes, because I could breathe as easily as was possible in the Otherlands.

Well, almost as easily. The burn that had been lingering in my throat even before I inhaled the ocean air had gotten slightly worse after that, and I was doing my best to ignore it.

It was hard to keep my eyes ahead of me. Through the gaps in the trees, I caught glimpses of the island. It was no bigger than a thumbnail from here, but the sight of it—the proof that it actually existed—made me think that maybe this whole ordeal might be worth it after all.

The sun was high in the sky Howl pointed.

I slowed, squinting through the trees, trying to determine what he wanted me to see. Then I caught sight of two pieces of wood standing out sharply against the sand, too perfectly aligned to be fallen branches. They ran from the tree line to the water, disappearing under the surface.

Where they ended in the trees sat a dark shape, as tall as me and twice as long, tucked between two gigantic, gnarled trunks.
Howl’s limp changed to the brisk half-jog it had been when we found Hollowdeep’s lake. This time, I didn’t try too hard to keep up, and Sephas followed my lead. As we grew close, I saw that the shape consisted of two dark tarps thrown over something big and vaguely capsule-shaped, and I had an idea of what it was.

Hopping over one last fallen tree, he reached out to the thing and knocked on it.

Where the two sheets overlapped, a port sprang open.

A young woman’s dark eyes peeked over the edge.

“Torra!” Howl called.

“Dad!” came the reply.

Dad?

She hauled herself onto the top of the boat. Her small frame was clothed in a pair of cargo pants and an overlapping shirt that might have been poached from a kimono, but most peculiar was the scarf that was draped around her neck and pulled up over her nose. It hid most of her face, but she still had Hollowdeep’s hooded eyes and Howl’s dark complexion. One side of her black hair was braided in tight rows, pulled back from her face.

She jumped off the roof of the thing, taking most of the tarp with her. It revealed a side of wood planks, tightly overlapping, with a row of scratched glass windows near the top. Several oars were tucked up under the side.

Howl ran up to try to catch her, but she landed on her feet and sprinted to him. He picked her up in one swoop.

I could just hear her voice say, “I missed you.”
“I missed you, too.”

Which was all very nice, but she looked a year or two younger than him, at the most. Maybe Hollowdeep’s age.

When they finally let go of each other, he rubbed the end of her scarf between his fingers. Something sad came into his expression. “You’re doing this again?”

“You said there’d be people.” Her voice was muffled through the fabric. She looked over at us and fixed her gaze on me, eyes wide. Right, I was blonde.

“Your uncle,” Howl protested.

Beside me, Sephas waved.

She was still looking at me. “Is this the—”

“Renthoe girl,” I said, more weary than I wanted to sound.

“Cool.” There was a smile in her eyes as she approached. A slim scar ran over her eye on the side of her face opposite the braids, half-obscured by hair. “I’m Torra.” She held out a hand.

“Isobel.” I shook it without thinking and immediately jerked my arm back with a squeal.

She looked horrified, pressing her hands to where her nose was under the scarf. “I’m so sorry, I completely forgot, I don’t meet many…”

“It’s okay,” I wheezed, shaking the needles out of my hand. That, at least, hadn’t changed. I could hold out hope that this place wasn’t slowly absorbing me into it.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” she said, sheepish.

“You, too.”
Then she moved over to Sephas and gave him a hug that he awkwardly returned.

“I’m… still not quite…” I looked at Howl, pointing at her, then at him, then back to her. “How does this work.”

He tilted his head. “She’s my daughter.”

“Okay, but… how?”

He folded his arms and crouched down to my level. “Isobel, are you asking me where babies come from?”

Sephas made a small noise of distress.

“Why don’t you look older?” I blurted.

“Oh.” He rose back to his full height. “Time distortion.”

Why did I even ask anymore?

Torra nudged between us. “Briggs is back inside,” she said, pointing over her shoulder at the boat.

“Can we all fit?” Howl frowned.

“It’ll be a bit of a squeeze, but we’ll survive.” She reached up to her nose to adjust the scarf. “And a seven-year-old won’t take up much room.”

A seven year old. We were that close. I felt myself sway a little, but no one seemed to notice. Torra ran back to the boat and knocked on it, calling “Briggs,” and in a moment another woman’s head appeared through the port.

This one was strikingly Otherlands-blond, pure silver hair pulled back in a neat ponytail. She wore a crisp white shirt buttoned all the way up.

“The chart’s nearly done.” She sounded English. The posh kind.
“C’mon, Briggsy, it’s a straight shot.”

“There are currents around the island. And the reef.”

“Nothing we can’t handle.” Torra hoisted herself back on top, using the planks as a ladder. “Dad can row.”

“Need I remind you of last week’s incident?” Briggs frowned, craning her neck so she could keep frowning right at Torra.

“No, you needn’t. Literally nothing bad happened.”

“You couldn’t lift your arms for three da—”

Torra gave Briggs a shove, and the blonde head disappeared back into the port. Then she turned to Howl. “Are we ready?”

“Ready.” He looked at me and Sephas, nodding towards the boat.

I was already anticipating a great time.
It took an embarrassing amount of scrambling to get into the boat itself, the opening being on the top. It was dark, but once my feet hit the floor, Howl and Sephas pulled the tarps off of the boat and light flooded in through the row of windows.

Four sets of holes in the sides of the boat lined up with rows of benches. Each was wide enough for one person; woven blankets were thrown on top of them for padding.

As I watched, the beam of an oar poked through one of the holes. Briggs slipped past me to pull it through, and she slotted a rod through a hole in the beam to keep it from sliding back through.

“It’s a rowboat,” I murmured, sitting down on a bench.

“Indeed it is.” Briggs looked like she was trying to hide a smile. “You’re Isobel, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Very nice to meet you.” Thankfully, she did not attempt a handshake. She reached for another oar, her movements quick, practiced. “We’ll be to the island by the afternoon. Best not to go exploring Kel-Sim’s private island in the dark.” She caught another oar, locked it into place.

“Is that what it is? His private island?” She made it sound like a vacation home… not encouraging.

She laughed. “Not really, but it has the atmosphere. I’ve sailed past it a few times.”
I sat up straighter. “Have you seen anyone on it?”

She shook her head. “There are trees. It’s impossible to see past them. The place is bigger than it looks from here.” She handed me a rod, and I took it, confused. Then I noticed the oar poking in beside me, and I repeated what I had seen her do.

I wilted. Was I going to have to search for him? Could I get that close and never find the exact spot where he was hidden?

Once all the oars were in place, Torra and Sephas came in through the roof, and I started to understand Howl’s concern about us all fitting. Torra pulled one of the blankets off of a bench and handed it to me, pointing towards the back of the boat. “Wrap up in this,” she said, “and stay there.”

“Is it going to be cold?” I asked, climbing over the benches towards the little nook.

She shook her head. “No, you just don’t want to get splashed.”

I cast a nervous glance at the holes in the sides. They didn’t look large enough for splashing, but she knew better than I did.

I wrapped myself into a careful burrito, only my eyes visible, and hunkered down.

When Howl dropped in, taking up the rest of the available space in the boat, he caught sight of me and barely choked back a snort of laughter.

The blankets weren’t just for sitting. Torra sat in the bench in front of me, and she wrapped the ends around her hands before she took the oars and pulled them as far into the boat as they could go.
“Isobel,” she said, “There’s a flap on the floor in front of you. Can you lift that up?”

I wriggled one arm free of the blanket and pried up the small panel. It was the size of a book, and a rubber seal ran around it. Inside was a round handle, made of metal.

“Pull up on that and then close it,” she said. “Fast.”

I gave it a tug, then a harder tug, then a slightly desperate tug. There was a clunk beneath the boat, and we lurched forward. I slammed the flat shut with a squeak and withdrew my arm, pressing back into the corner.

The boat rolled down the tracks, gaining speed, and then lurched nearly to a halt when the bow crashed into the water. A wave splashed up onto the windows, twisting the sunlight on the floor into bright dots.

At the front of the boat, Sephas yelped, shaking his hand.

“Blanket!” Torra called, twisting around to look over her shoulder.

I pulled mine more tightly around me as he frantically brushed his hand off on a corner. He wrapped his hands more carefully in the thick wool before he took hold of the oars again.

Torra turned back around, shaking her head, and started rowing. The others followed her lead, and I felt useless as I watched.

“I told him to keep his hands covered,” she murmured, looking through the window over my head.

“It’s dangerous to you, too?” Except for the stream in that forest four score and seven years ago, none of the others had ever made a big deal about touching the water. I had begun to think it couldn’t hurt them.
“This stuff is.” She glanced down at me for a moment. “You don’t want it on you. And you really don’t want to be in it.”

“What do we do when we get to the island?” I frowned.

“We’ll pull up as close as we can. If there’s a tree, we can test the grappling hook.” Her eyes crinkled at the corners with a grin. “If there isn’t a tree, I guess we’ll jump.”

“There’s a grappling hook?”

“Hell yeah, there’s a grappling hook.”

“Torra!”

She twisted around to roll her eyes at Howl.

I was starting to believe the whole dad thing. Not that it made a lot of sense. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.” She looked at me again, still rowing.

“If no one here gets older, how did you get older?”

“Ooh, good one.” She looked up at the ceiling, thoughtful. “See, we don’t really know. Not a lot of people are born here. My mom was pregnant for, like, two years and I was still premature—”

“Two years?” I shook my head out of the blanket burrito.

“I dunno. It was a long time. They don’t like to talk about it.” She shrugged. “But I did grow up, and I think it’s because I really, really belong here—more than my parents, even; the air where you’re from would probably kill me—and I have to eat and sleep more often and all that. But I am slowing down. Thank god.”

She barely looked twenty.
“I still think I saw a gray hair the other day,” Briggs called, her tone teasing.
Torra rolled her eyes. “You did not. It was in my hairbrush after you used it.”
“It was there before.”
“You’re fired.”
“Oh, time number three today.”
I pulled the blanket back up to hide a laugh.
Torra twisted around again, somehow managing to keep a perfect pace with the oars.
“For real this time.”
“Yes, just pop down the street and find another navigator.” Briggs’s expression was pleasant.
“There’s got to be one in the Otherlands.”
“Good, good. Do let me know when you find one, I’d love to meet her.”
Torra whirled around to look at me again. “How about you?”
“Me?” I blinked.
“Yeah. You’d make a good navigator.”
“I… can’t read a map.”
“It’s not hard. And the pay is good. Great benefits.”
Briggs snorted. “If by ‘benefits,’ you mean your cooking—”
“You’re fired again.”
Briggs smiled up at the ceiling. They were all quiet for a while, intent on the rowing.
A short while later Briggs called, “To the left,” and they adjusted, easing up on that side, until she said, “That’s enough.”
It was around that time that the acrid smell of the water started creeping noticeably through the holes in the hull. I shifted higher, as if I could get above the smell. It didn’t work.

Torra seemed to notice, and her eyes on me were sympathetic.

Something like an hour passed. I was curled up in my blanket, my eyes half closed. The stench was making them water. And it wasn’t helping that five people in a small, enclosed boat, most of whom were exerting a lot of energy, made the boat very hot.

Torra, who appeared to be setting the pace, allowed it to slow a little. Beads of sweat ran down her forehead.

“So,” she said, out of the blue. “You live above, right?”

“In Ohio,” I said.

She nodded knowingly. “That’s not far from Chicago.”

“Right.”

“Have you been to Chicago?”

“Yes.” One of two class trips I had actually made myself go on. I had enjoyed it. “I liked the Bean.”

“Dad says the Bean is an opening to here.” She glanced over her shoulder at him. “I don’t think I believe him.”

“Well, there would probably be more mysterious disappearances if it was.”

“True.” She grinned; her eyes were narrow at the corners again. “What’s Ohio like?”

“Lots of corn. Everywhere.” Ginsberg… I missed Ginsberg. I missed home. I missed my bed. It had only been four days, but it felt like so much longer. Probably a side effect
of the mortal peril. “I live in a small town. Old brick buildings along Main Street.”

“Do you live in an old brick building?”

“No, a little house in the ’burbs.”

“What’s it look like?” She faltered a little in her rowing, but picked it back up.

“It’s a Craftsman. Kind of green. There’s a front porch.” She looked like she was struggling to put that together, so I went on, “Small and cute.”

“It sounds nice.” Her gaze was distant.

I hadn’t seen a house outside of Southwall, and I had to wonder. Had she been forced to move around? Had she grown up in the little cave with Howl and Hollowdeep? “Do you…” She couldn’t miss where I was from if she’d never been there. “Do you like it here?”

“I do. I just… a real roof would be nice. I grew up here; everyone makes it sound wonderful.”

It was.

“Don’t get me wrong. It’s beautiful here. But it’s dangerous.”

“Yeah.” Didn’t I know it.

She pulled the oars further inside, resting them on her knees as she readjusted the blankets on her hands to be somewhat cooler. Her hair was slicked to her forehead.

“Torra,” Briggs said quietly.

She picked up the oars again. “I’m fine.”

“Take off the scarf. You’ve got to be miserable.”

“No, really.” She tried to give her a reassuring look. “I’m okay.”
“Torra.”

She stubbornly rowed for a moment longer before she paused again, reaching up to wipe away a bead of sweat.

“Who’s going to operate the grappling hook if you faint?”

“Oh, shut up.” She shook her head, blinking, but she now looked resigned. With a glance towards me, she untied the knot at the back of her neck and unwound the scarf.

The skin under it, from her neck up to her nose, was a mottled mess of scars. It pulled her thin mouth into a twisted line, stained her skin darker. The bottom of her nose was misshapen.

I quickly looked away, but she noticed, and she kept her face tilted down and away from me. “If you need any more reason not to touch the water, look no further,” she said, laughing weakly.

“I’m so sorry,” I murmured.

She shrugged, dropping her scarf on the floor. “We get hailstorms out here, on the coast. Big ones. I was out in the middle of one, a window broke, I hit a wave. Perfect timing.”

I looked at her again. “How did you get out?”

“Put a board over the window and rowed back to shore. It hurt a lot. I was pretty badass.” Her smile was crooked. “It took its good old time healing, though. And there’s still a long way to go, if it’s planning on getting better at all.”

There had to be a doctor who could help her. But I knew they probably had nothing of the sort here, and if she really couldn’t survive where I was from, I had no business
mentioning it. “I’m sorry,” I said again.

“I don’t need a pretty face to build boats. You learn to deal with it.”

“And you kept doing it? Building boats?”

“Yeah.” She stared out the window over my head. “That island Kel-Sim built isn’t right. I don’t know what he’s planning, but someone has to do something about it.”

Over her shoulder, I saw Howl watching us, a sad smile on his face. An aura of ‘that’s my girl’ was pouring off of him in waves.

It only grew hotter. I let the top of my blanket fall open, because I didn’t seem to be in too much danger from splashes; Torra immediately rowed more gently nonetheless.

“How can we open the port?” I muttered.

“It’ll let in the smell,” Torra warned.

“Never mind, then.” The smell was bad enough. I pressed the blanket over my face, trying to breathe through it. My eyes wouldn’t stop watering.

Briggs corrected our course every now and then, urging us further and further to the east. We must have been going parallel to the island by then, but soon after, she directed us the other way. We were circling it; approaching from the far side. It seemed like a waste of time, but for all I knew there was a giant man-eating fish lurking on the other side, so I decided not to argue.

I was hours away from Caspar, anyway.

We kept going around. The shadows on the floor drifted further and further to the
side.

My heart pounded. My throat burned. I pressed myself into the corned and closed my eyes.

“There it is,” Howl called.

I sprang to my feet to look out the back window.

Sand rose out of the sparkling water. It was wide; miles across, and the thick treeline sprouted twenty feet back from the shore.

And they were green.

I let out a wild laugh, startling the rest of the cabin. Pine trees. Just like home. Maybe a little taller and thinner than Ginsberg-home. I wasn’t going to be picky. I leaned forward to get at better look at the tops of them, and I swayed.

The sky reached down to the center of the island. As I moved around, the shape of it distorted, but it looked like the base of a glass funnel; the bright white of the middle of the sky cut through the purple of the horizon on its way down, shimmering around the edges. At the treetops, it turned blue.

Howl looked similarly concerned; the rest were actually focused on rowing. “That looks… against the laws of nature.”

“Is the sky falling?” I squinted. “Right there?”

“I don’t know.”

Then, of course, everyone had to stand up and see, and the boat coasted nearly to a halt. I didn’t even whine while they all stared along with me.

Howl was right. It didn’t look natural. Even for here. This must have been that dip I’d
seen in the horizon; from the beach, it had only looked like an illusion.

“It’s gotten worse,” Torra murmured.

Howl looked at her. “You’ve seen this before?”

“It was… like a string last time. Just a little bit of sky poking down. It’s wider now.”

“How close did you get?”

“A few miles off shore. Not this close.” She sat back down and picked up her oars.

I sank back into my own corner. So the world was turning inside out. Big deal. The water wanted to eat me.

“Is it safe to land?” Briggs asked softly.

“I think so.” Torra started rowing again. “If it’s been there this long, I don’t think it’s going to… suck us in or anything.”

“Lovely.” Briggs matched her pace, and Howl followed suit.

It was another minute before Sephas tore his eyes away and took his seat.

I wished there was another set of oars for me. All I could do was sit there, tapping my foot, wringing my hands. Because I had a sneaking suspicion that at the end of the sky-funnel, I would find who I was looking for.

“We need a running start,” Torra said, startling me out of my daydream. “I want us as close to dry sand as possible. And I don’t think I saw a reef, so we probably won’t die.”

“Thanks, kiddo,” Howl said.

“Ready? One, two, three, four…”

She counted faster and faster. The tops of the trees, the sky-funnel crept towards us accordingly. Then we grounded to a halt so fast I toppled forward.
Torra leapt from her seat and threw open the port, stepping on Briggs’s bench to climb out onto the roof. I heard a creak, two snaps, and then footsteps. Then I saw Torra out the front windows, hopping down onto the part of the boat that poked out beneath them. She laid a long, wide plank from the nose of the boat down.

They all looked at me.

I stood, letting the blanket fall, and I followed Torra out much less gracefully. Like a seal, I wriggled my way onto the roof.

The smell of bleach was gone. For the first time, the air smelled fresh. Tinged with saltwater and pine.

I laughed, taking huge gulps of the air like I had just come up from a dive. It soothed my burning throat.

“Over here!” Torra waved to me, and I crawled along the top of the boat. The water probably still wanted me dead, judging by the color. I found Torra perched on the bow, holding the plank in place.

“We’ll catch up,” she told me, patting me carefully on my fabric-covered shoulder.

I grinned at her and crawled out onto the plank.

The end was buried in white sand. When I reached it, my hands sank into what felt like warm sugar. The sunlight was different here. As I pushed myself to my feet, I pulled off Elspeth’s hoodie and tossed it aside on the sand, vowing to pick it up when I came back.

The warmth of the sunlight on my arms was like a hug. And when I went to take a breath, I realized I hadn’t forgotten to in the first place.
Howl joined me in another minute, Sephas not far behind. “Torra and Briggs are staying behind,” I thought I heard him say. I made a noise of acknowledgment with my face turned toward the sun, eyes closed.

But when I opened them to look at him and Sephas, I frowned. Howl’s eyebrows were drawn together, and his nose was wrinkled, as if he were smelling something rotten. Sephas’s eyes were rimmed with darker gray.

I clenched my fists at my sides. “Don’t tell me…”

“It’s a little hard to breathe.” Howl coughed, took a few brave steps inland, and faltered.

“Welcome to my world,” I said, more than a little bitter.

“I know, I know.” He put his hands on his hips, his neck bent forward.

Sephas strode past him.

I watched, blinking, and jogged to catch up. “Are you…?”

“Let’s go,” he said. “Howl can stay.”

I glanced back at Howl, and after a moment, he waved his surrender.

I looked to Sephas as we approached the tree. “Are you sure?”

“We must hurry. He will know.” He glanced back at me with bloodshot eyes, but he didn’t slow down.

“Remember to breathe,” I said quietly.

His shoulders tensed as he did.
I could breathe.

The air was sweet. Real. Gone were the chemical fumes that hung over the water, the trees, and everything else in this place. The crisp odor of pine, the warm earth underfoot, and a hint of sea air was all I smelled now.

My throat still burned from all the time I had spent here. But as the minutes passed, and we wove through taller and taller pines, even that pain started to fade.

Sephas, meanwhile, was suffering.

I tried my best to stay behind him, no longer to make him feel in charge, but just so I could keep an eye on him. He stumbled every third step. He coughed like an old dog with bronchitis. He kept putting out his hand to catch himself on the trees.

As the ground sloped up, he seemed to lose control of his legs.

“Sephas.” I jumped forward to catch him by the elbow before he could fall.

Staring up at me, he wheezed, “I have to come.”

“You’re doing worse than I was.” I pulled him back to his feet. “Go wait on the beach.”

“Isobel. I have to come.” He shrugged me off and straightened his back, taking deep, rattling breaths. Each one seemed to pain him. But he forced another step forward, and I had no choice but to keep moving, too.

The ground kept sloping upward. Soon the angle was so extreme that, even though the trees thinned out as we walked, I realized I couldn’t see the top of the hill. Rocks poked out from the side, covered in vines.

That was when I noticed a path of ground running up the side that looked different. I
followed it down to our level and when I kicked aside the pine needles, I found marble stairs.

“Sephas,” I murmured.

He wordlessly hauled himself to them and started climbing.

“Breathe,” I told him. The responding gasp sounded so painful I was tempted not to remind him again.

But I did, every five steps. I told him, “Breathe.” And I heard him do it.

It wasn’t long before I could see where the steps leveled off. I took the stairs two at a time. He moved aside to let me pass him, and I felt a little guilty, but it didn’t stop me.

The ground leveled off at the top. The path led through a freestanding archway carved with bulls, half-concealed by vines. Not ten feet past it was a building; a porch, supported by columns, hung over walls carved in the same manner as the room where we had found Sephas. In the center of that front wall was a wooden door.

It stood open a crack, a sliver of light escaping into the covered porch.

I whirled around, my heart pounding, looking for Sephas. He was hauling himself up onto the last step, using the stones to the side for support.

When he reached the archway, he stumbled back with a groan.

“Sephas!” I ran back, glancing at the door to make sure it stayed open, as if it would close as soon as I walked away. “What’s wrong?”

“The…” He waved at the building.

“It’s okay. You can wait here.”

He shook his head, pressed forward, but it was as if something was pushing back. He
couldn’t pass the archway, and when he got close to doing it, the expression on his face scared me.

“Stay,” I told him.

“I have to come.” He panted, staring at me. “I came…”

“I’ll get him out. You wait here.” I pointed to the rock he had just been leaning on.

He gave me a long, agonized stare before he complied, half-collapsing onto the stone.

I waited until he was steady. Then I spun on my heel and slipped through the door to the cloisters.

The door opened into a garden.

With the surrounding trees gone, I could see the funnel shape that distorted the sky. It looked nearly transparent here; far subtler than it had been. And the color blue that it turned reminded me so much of home that it hurt. So I stopped looking at the sky.

Any smaller plants on the ground had been long overgrown with vines, but narrow trees lined the walls. A dry pool took up the middle of the open square. There was a door in each wall, flanked by trees. Following the sky, I went straight for the one in the back.

The next garden was nearly identical to the first. I groaned, darting straight to the back. The door in the back wall of this square was stuck, and I stood back and kicked it until it flew open, revealing yet another garden.

In its center stood a stone creature like those I had seen on the door to Time’s room, back at Southwall; the body of a bull, winged. Horns curled up around a cylindrical
crown perched on its human head. The beard was manicured into a square. This one was painted; its body glossy black, wings tinged with blue, thick black around its eyes.

I stuck to the wall of the garden, feeling uneasily like it was looking at me with unusually large eyes. The vines growing up its legs assured me it wasn’t coming after me, but I didn’t want to take any chances.

I broke into a run.

This time, the door was locked. The knob refused to budge under my hand. I backed up, craning my neck to see the warp in the sky; it seemed to be coming straight down now. This had to be it. He was in this one.

I stood sideways, planted my feet, and kicked it. It rattled on its hinges, but didn’t budge. The next time, I spun; my foot slammed into the wood, and I thought I heard a crack. I spun again.

The crack got bigger.

Then I paused.

All the years. All the waiting. Every day I had woken up without answers, I had kept going, and a part of me had refused to let go of Caspar. When everyone else had moved on for the sake of their sanity, I had clung to that memory of the gray man.

I put all of my weight into that next kick, and all of my breath into the cry that went with it.

The door fractured right down the middle, and I shoved my way through.
The garden behind that door was four times the size of the others.

I stood my ground, expecting people to come running. Guards. Him, even. But it was quiet; water babbled in a stream that ran down from a hill in the center. Wind rustled through gnarled trees that were heavy with fruit.

I picked my way across the vine-covered ground, following the sound of the water. The warm air smelled sweet. The sky above my head wasn’t unnaturally distorted, but blue spotted with fluffy white clouds.

A brighter blue than home.

Marble stepping stones peeked out through the vines. I stuck to them, and as I rounded the hill, I found the waterfall. It tumbled down a bare rock face into a pool outlined with marble stones. A natural fountain.

In front of the fountain was a row of altars. Huge bricks of marble, white shot through with gray. They stretched all the way to the far wall, their faces inviting.

And on the one closest to me, there slept a young man with white-blond hair.

He wore a linen robe that came to his ankles, tied closed with a black sash. A pair of tiny shoes rested neatly at the base of the altar, nearly overgrown with vines, and one toe poked through a hole in the blue socks he still wore.

I came closer, holding my breath. This couldn’t be him. This boy—almost-man—had blond scruff on his chin. Bony knuckles tucked to his chest.

But the white eyelashes that brushed the pale cheeks were the same. The parted lips, curling up at the edges of their own accord, were the same. The small birthmark on the left ankle was his.
I reached out without fully realizing what I was doing. Rested my hand on his shoulder. He stirred, andCaspar’s eyes, Caspar’s nearly-orange eyes opened.

He squinted at me. Blinked against the light.

“Caspar?” I whispered.

He took a deep breath, stirring.

“Caspar, it’s me. It’s Isobel.” I drew my hand back, holding it close to my chest.

“You don’t look like Isobel.”

His voice startled me. It was a young man’s. He looked equally confused, pressing his long fingers clumsily to his mouth. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s… nothing’s wrong.” I knelt by the altar, folding my hands in my lap so I wouldn’t press them against his cheeks and start crying.

He coughed. “I sound wrong.”

“It’s all right. You’re… you’re older.” Hearing it out loud made my head spin. Of course he was older. It had been ten years.

“I sounded normal yesterday. At school.” He coughed again, bringing his legs in close to his chest. “What happened?”

“You were asleep.” I reached for his hand, thought better of it, reeled myself back in.

“For a long time.”

“No, I was at school.” He squinted at me. “We learned mulpiti… mulptipil… Things with numbers.”

He must have been dreaming. “Okay. That’s good. But you need to get up now, so we can go home.”
As if annoyed, he squeezed his eyes shut. “I’m too sleepy.”

“Come on.” I stood up, hoping it would inspire him. “Let’s go.”

He put his hands over his face.

My shoulders drooped forward. How was I supposed to handle this? He was a child. No matter what he looked like. And I wasn’t any longer. I had no idea how to interact with my best friend.

“Come on, Caspar. Get up and then you can come to my house and play.”

He peeked at me through his fingers.

“I’m Isobel. I promise.”

“Prove it.” That orange eye stayed fixed on me.

All right, then. I was up for this challenge. I knelt down again, getting on his level.

“Ask me a question only Isobel would know.”

“What’s my favorite color?”

“You like green. But you also like orange. But only the leaf orange, not the traffic-cone kind, because that hurts your eyes.”

The eye narrowed. “What is my dog’s name?”

That dog had died years ago. Sent me into another month-long spiral. “Buffy.”

“Hm…”

“We got married in the backyard.” I blinked fast. “And all our stuffed animals watched, and you gave me a little ring with a clover flower on it.” My voice shook. “And then we slept outside, and—”

“Isobel got more bug bites than me.” He let his hands fall. “And Mom yelled at us
because we forgot bug spray.”

I brushed a tear off of my cheek before he could see it.

It was him. He had proven it as much as I had proven my own identity. “Your mom and dad miss you, Caspar. I missed you a lot, too.”

“But I saw you.” He stretched his legs back out, and his ankles hung over the edge of the marble block. “And mom, too.”

“It was a dream, Caspar,” I told him. I reached for his hand again, and this time, I touched it. He didn’t move. “But now you’re awake, and it’s time to really go home. Okay?”

He looked at my hand. Up at me. He blinked slowly, as if he was trying to process it in that child’s mind that didn’t fit the body any longer. “Can I sleep for five more minutes?”

I laughed. “No, Caspar, you need to get up now.”

“Okay.”

He sat upright, swinging his legs off the side of the altar, and he looked confused when his feet hit the ground. “Can I have breakfast?”

“Um… we don’t have anything…”

“You can eat the fruit.” He pointed at one of the trees that stood between us and the too-blue sky. “The man said so.”

“The man?” I frowned, taking a step back.

“Uh huh.” He nodded, tried to stand up, and plopped right back down again. “Wow, my legs feel funny.”
“Tell me about the man, Caspar.”

“He has a beard. It’s really long.” He held his hand out from his face to demonstrate, trying and failing again to get up. “And he’s nice. But he wears makeup.”

“Did he… did he hurt you?”

He shook his head, and on this attempt he got all the way upright.

I had to crane my neck to look him in the eye.

He squinted at me. “Are you really sure you’re Isobel?”

“I am really sure,” I muttered, standing up straighter.

“Okay, ‘cause you’re pretty short.”

“I’m not that short.” I was tempted to give him a shove, but that would undo his progress in standing. I held out my hand for him. “Let’s go.”

“Breakfast first.” He reached up, wobbling dangerously, and picked two apples off the tree above us.

Fantastic. Caspar was a giraffe.

But I was hungry. Actually hungry. And my throat was still dry from the journey here. I took a cautious nibble of the apple and juice ran down my chin. I stifled a sigh.

Caspar finished his in 1.7 bites. Then he wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his robe.

“Okay, water,” he said, and as he turned he immediately tripped over his own feet. Dropping the apple, I lunged forward to catch him before he could hit his head on something, and he looked very confused. “My legs feel really weird.”

“I know. It might feel that way for a while.” I helped him back upright, holding his arm tightly as he hobbled back to the pool. He half-knelt, half-fell in front of it and
started scooping it up into his mouth. I was reluctant to do that based on previous experience. But my dry mouth won out, and I tried a careful sip. Cool and completely tasteless.

Knowing this might be my last chance at a drink for three days, I slurped up my fill.

When I finished, I found him standing up. He had his hands out in front of him, as if prepared to catch himself, and there was a look of intense concentration on his face. He took a few steps back from the pool, handling his own legs like stilts. If Time had come to wake him up, it had been a few years, at least.

“We’re going to go down a hill,” I said, taking his hand. He allowed it. “And we’ll meet my friends on the beach.”

“Oh, the beach.” He grinned.

“But we can’t play in the water, okay? The water is… The water is lava.” I was going to have to watch him carefully. If he decided to charge in and play, he would end up like poor Torra. “When we get to the beach, my friends have a boat. We’ll go on the boat, and when we get to the other beach, we’ll have to walk for a long time.”

He nodded, looking at me intently.

“While we’re walking, you’re going to feel funny.” I took a deep breath, savoring the air that didn’t hurt. “You won’t breathe on your own, so you’ll have to remember. And you might get dizzy. There are lots of bad smells.”

“Oh.” He frowned.

“But at the end, we’ll go home.” I looked him right back in the eye. “To your mom and dad, and my mom and dad. It’ll all be okay. We just have to get there.”
“Are you sure we can’t stay here?”

He looked at the water tumbling down the rock. I licked my lips, still tasting the apple. And I tried not to think about how sweet the air was, how warm the sun. I would have all of it back in a few short days.

We just had to get there. “I’m sure, Caspar,” I told him, squeezing his hand. “We need to go. Can you be brave?”

“Yes.” He nodded emphatically.

“Can you remember to breathe?”

He smiled, like that was a silly question. “Yes!”

“Can you remember to never, ever, ever touch the water?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” I tugged on his hand. “Let’s go.”

We walked towards the broken door together. What Time would do when he found his garden broken into and his prize missing, I didn’t know. I hoped he would come and take him back, because if he did, there was nothing I could do. I could come back, find him again, but there was no way Caspar would be left unguarded twice. I had to keep him close.

I looked back at the marble slab where he had lay, his too-small shoes still at the foot of it. And then I looked at the row of altars that stood behind it.

Caspar was the first of many.
Something was conspicuously missing from the next garden.

With Caspar’s hand in mine, I didn’t notice until we had crossed most of the open space. The square had lost its sentinel. The winged bull creature was gone.

Then my heart started pounding, because if it was gone, it could move. I pulled Caspar along behind me, trying to keep a pace he could manage without stumbling. He was making a valiant effort, lifting his feet in exaggeratedly tall, but clipped steps.

“Come on, Caspar. Let’s go fast.” I looked over my shoulder, finding the garden behind us empty, as well. “We don’t want anyone to find us.”

“Why not?”

“It’s… It’s like hide and seek tag.” Frightening him wouldn’t make it easier for him to walk upright. “We’ll lose the game if they catch us.”

“Okay.” He tried a little jog to keep up with me and nearly toppled over.

I stopped at the next door, peeking through the crack.

The wood exploded.

I fell backwards, pulling Caspar with me. In front of us, a massive bull-creature stalked back and forth, wings flaring, human lips pulled back to reveal a set of too-sharp teeth.

I screamed. Or maybe it was him.

The beast backed up, lowering its head until all I saw was the gleaming horns. I summoned my strength and rolled, taking Caspar with me, just in time to evade hooves that pounded past where I had been.

I scrambled to my feet, clinging to his arm. He was crying. I got a good enough look
at him to know that. “Stay with me!” I yelled, pulling him through the door. Behind us, the creature turned around again. We ducked around the corner of the doorway just in time for it to charge through again.

I had to get us through that far door. Then across one more garden. The thing was huge and front-heavy; it couldn’t run downhill. Fly, maybe, but then it would overshoot us.

I pulled Caspar into the narrow aisle between the line of trees and the wall, hoping that would afford us some cover. He was tripping over everything; vines, roots, sticks, his own feet. I heard a hoof scrape the ground and a bellow that was half-human, half animal.

A tree slammed into the wall the moment we were past it. The beast was slow, at least. Physically slow or mentally, it didn’t matter. “Come on, Caspar,” I cried, squeezing his hand as encouragingly as possible as we rounded the corner.

Horns sank into the wall directly in front of us, spewing bits of stone in every direction. Caspar screamed again. I dragged him around the back of it as the creature struggled to free itself, and as we skidded through the door, I pulled it shut behind us.

We ran straight for the door. I could just see columns outside, wild trees. “Come on!” I called again, pulling him along.

He fell with a shriek.

I nearly followed him, trying to stop myself. Vines were wrapped around his ankles. I dashed back, pulling at them. The woody stalks were tough, and he kept trying to crawl forward, tightening the knots further. “Hold still!” I cried, pulling back on his legs.

I heard stamping behind us, felt the ground shake, but I refused to acknowledge what
was there.

And then the front door flew open.

Still pulling, I looked up. Sephas charged in, crouched low, clutching a staff with a long, curved, wickedly sharp blade at the end. His face was drained of all not-color, and his legs shook under him, but he still ran.

Hooves ground against the dirt behind us as the creature stopped itself. I freed one of Caspar’s legs, still watching. As Sephas approached it, he spun, and the blade whipped around and sliced neatly through the flesh on the back of the bull’s leg.

The scream that came out of it was too human. I spun back around and jerked the rest of the vines off Caspar’s leg, pulling him to his feet along with me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sephas stumble.

“Go!” I yelled to Caspar. He didn’t have to be told twice; he ran for the front door, and when he was out of it I turned back to Sephas.

He was in the middle of another spin, and this time the sickle-blade sank in between the beast’s ribs.

I called out to him. He jerked the blade free, and the beast stumbled. Then he retreated on wobbly legs, and I ran back to grab him and drag him like I had dragged Caspar.

“Scoate-ma de aici,” he croaked, and I didn’t need to ask him what that meant. The scythe dragged behind him as we ran, and as I slammed the door shut behind us, the ground shook.

Caspar was hiding behind a pillar, shaking.
I kept dragging Sephas until he was beyond the archway, and there he went completely limp, sucking in a breath. I stumbled to the piled stones by the stairs.

We were out.

Everyone looked whole. I checked myself over, finding no more damage than the Otherlands had already left on me, then I went to Caspar.

He stayed behind the pillar, tears running down his cheeks. “It’s okay, bud,” I said, as much to soothe myself as him. “You’re okay. You got out.”

“What was that thing?” he whispered, shrinking away.

“I don’t know.”

I looked to Sephas. He rolled himself onto his back, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he tried to catch his breath. Blood spattered his face, but it was dark red; not his. Beside his hand, the blade of the scythe folded itself into the handle, and then it started to shrink. Little sections slid into each other. And then it was the shape of his switchblade.


I hobbled over, knelt next to him. “What?”

“Lamassu.” He wiped the thing’s blood away with his sleeve, which was too close to his gauze-bound wrist for comfort. “It’s a… Time’s servant.”

“Is it dead? Did you kill it?”

“Maybe.” He tried to sit up, grunted, and flopped back down.

“You… we would have…” I didn’t want to think about it. I looked back at Caspar. I didn’t like the way he was looking at Sephas from his spot behind the pillar. He was
hiding, crouched down, making himself smaller.

“Caspar, it’s okay.” I started to stand up. “He’s my friend. His name is—”

“Nicolae,” Caspar said.

I froze where I was. “

“What did you say?”

“Nicolae. That’s Nicolae.” He made himself smaller. “He made me come.”

I looked back at Sephas. His face was contorted with pain, his eyes shining. He looked back at me for a moment, then turned his head the other direction.

“You… You…” I sank back to the ground. “Caspar, he was…?”

“I told him to let go. He didn’t.” He clutched the pillar like it was an anchor to the earth.

I stared at the side of Sephas’s head.

“You,” I whispered.

He looked back at me, still too limp to move anything but his head. “Kel-Sim made me.”

“You.” I tried to stand. It didn’t work, and I stumbled back instead. “You took him. It was always you.”

“I did not want to!” He pushed himself onto his side, propped himself up on a wobbly arm. “He made me kill people. Then he made me do this. But he said there was no death, no pain for him. Dreams only.” He was crying now, and he dashed the tears away with a bloody sleeve. “After I killed people, I thought this was… was less bad.”

“You took him.” My own arms shook, braced against the ground. The word ‘killed’
barely registered with me. “Everything we all went through. Everything Caspar went through.”

“Elsie and Howl told me.” He swallowed. “And I knew. I wanted to fix it. And it took a long time, because it was not safe, but I found you.”


“I cannot go inside.” He let himself collapse again. “It stops… it stops everything. I cannot breathe. My…” He thumped on his chest with a fist, rolling onto his back. His heart?

“But you can go in. So I found you.”

“And you think this makes it okay. That this fixes everything.” I leaned forward, trying to push myself to my feet, but it was still useless.

“No.” He shot me a look, his eyes welling up. “I cannot fix it. But I can… I can give him back. I cannot give you the years, but I can give him back.”

I looked back at Caspar. He was leaning around the column now, watching us both with a wary curiosity.

“I am sorry,” Sephas breathed, and he let out a sob.

“It’s okay,” Caspar said.

I looked back at Sephas. Back at Caspar.

“You should forgive him,” he said. “He told you sorry.”

“It isn’t that easy, Caspar,” I whispered.

“But he told you sorry.”

He didn’t understand. He didn’t know what everyone had gone through. As far as he
knew, he had been at home yesterday.

Sephas was right. He couldn’t give me back the years.

“I can’t yet,” I said.

“Okay. But you need to.”

Sephas moved an arm, and Caspar flinched behind the pillar again.

I made myself stand up. Gathered my feet beneath me and pushed myself unceremoniously off the ground. Felt the earth beneath me.

“Let’s go home,” I said.

I could still breathe. So could Caspar. Sephas was another story, but out of spite, I wished he could have a harder time.

The whole time, I had been with the gray man. The gray man, not a, as I had thought. Literally the cause of all my misery.

Of all the things I’d heard of.

Of Mrs. Bruniere, collapsed on a church pew overnight, found by her desperate and exhausted husband in the morning.

Of Mr. Bruniere, his hair going from dark brown to gray in a matter of months. How he never, ever stopped moving; a foot was always tapping, fingers always drumming.

Of my own mother, caught in the middle of a panic attack when I came through the door half an hour later than usual my third week back to school.

Of my father, his face bleached white by a computer screen, search results for
“childhood trauma” reflected in his glasses.

The things that made their way back to me had affirmed my own pain, made me understand that it was okay to feel the way I felt. But nothing could fix having seen it.

Having seen him.

I stayed behind him on our way down the hill so I wouldn’t feel his eyes burning into the back of my head. Caspar took the stairs almost sitting down, trailing behind me and clinging to my hand.

Had Howl known? Had Hollowdeep? Torra and Briggs?

Howl. Yes, Howl had. Howl had made him come get me, made him try to fix it.

And Elspeth.

But no one had thought to tell me. Maybe it was wise. Maybe they knew I would have drop-kicked him into next week and run unless I had Caspar in my arms. And I did now.

I had Caspar’s hand in mine. His skin felt cold. His knuckles stuck out.

“Is the beach down the hill?” Caspar asked me.

“Yes. Down the hill and through the trees.” I pointed, not that it was possible to see the turquoise water past half a mile of pines.

“Are you sure I can’t touch the water?”

“Yes. I’m very sure.” Torra… I had to make sure he didn’t say anything hurtful to Torra. He wouldn’t mean it, but… “It will burn you, like fire. Okay? So don’t touch it.”

“Can I touch the sand?”

“You can touch the sand.” Most things, I supposed. “Oh, you can’t touch the people.
My friends.”

“Huh?”

“It’s like a static shock.”

He made a little annoyed sound. “This place is weird.”

“Yeah, I know. Super weird.”

We took it slow until the ground leveled out beneath us. Caspar seemed to be getting the hang of his new legs, and I led us a little faster. Ahead, Sephas kept his distance.

He swayed, and I barked, “Breathe.”

This was so satisfying.

The trees thinned as we approached the shore, and I heard the gentle waves, saw the turquoise peeking through. Caspar started walking faster, tugging on my hand, but I kept him reined in. After everything that had happened, I didn’t want him out of my sight.

Soon we broke through the treeline, and the sand squished under my feet, and Caspar jumped next to me with a whoop.

The boat was—thank heaven—still there. Briggs was inside it, Torra perched on the bow, and Howl had worn a deep track in the sand pacing back and forth.

He looked up at Caspar’s yell, and his smile looked close to tears.

I tugged on the boy’s hand, whispering to him conspiratorially. “Remember. No handshakes. Sometimes they forget.”

“Okay,” he whispered back, nodding.

Howl approached then, looking him up and down, the same thoughts as mine clearly going through his mind. Bigger than we’d expected. “My name is Howl,” he said. “You
must be Caspar.”

“Uh-huh.” He rocked back and forth on his feet, digging his socks down into the sand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Over there,” he pointed, “is my daughter Torra. And the lady in the boat is Briggs.”

Caspar waved. They waved back. Something in Torra’s expression wasn’t entirely reassuring; she kept looking at us, then back at the boat.

Sephias, standing off to the side, slunk up the gangplank and through the port without another word. I tried to keep my expression neutral, but Howl raised an eyebrow at me, and then it dawned on him.

“You found out,” he said quietly.

“I sure did.” I couldn’t make my voice anything but bitter.

“He was the one who did the legwork, Isobel. For getting him back.”

“But none of this would have happened if he hadn’t taken him in the first place.” I squeezed Caspar’s hand too hard, eliciting an ‘ow.’ “This is his fault. Everything.”

“I know.” He gestured towards the boat. Caspar moved, but I didn’t. I wasn’t ready.

“He tried to make excuses. He said he killed people, Howl.”

“A lot of us did.” He turned back towards us, folding his arms wearily. “I didn’t, but I wasn’t there as long. And, besides that, it wasn’t as easy for him to use me that way.”

My eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“He’s—oh.” He put a hand over his mouth.

“If he’s keeping something else from us, Howl, I swear to—”

“It’s really for him to tell this time.” He dropped his arms. “You need to ask him what
he is.”

“What? As in nightmare or tides or…” Whatever Torra and Briggs were.

“Yes.”

“I’m not sure I want to know.”

“Then there’s no harm done.” He made another attempt to lead us to the boat, and I followed this time. “Just understand, Isobel, that people do things under Kel-Sim that they wouldn’t normally think of doing.”

Encouraging.

When we reached the boat, Howl climbed on, then Torra stood up on the bow. I had a feeling something was coming. “What is it?” I asked.

“I’m… not sure we can all fit.” She frowned. “He’s bigger than we thought.”

“I’m bigger than I was yesterday,” Caspar added helpfully, indicating roughly on the level his head would have been at age seven.

I tightened my grip on his hand. “I can sit in the front. I’ll sit on top if I have to.”

“It’s not the space, it’s the weight.” She gestured down at the oars. “More chance of splashing.”

Her scarf was pulled back up, hiding the evidence for why we didn’t want that to happen.

“Will we sink?” I asked.

“I don’t think so.”
“Can we make two trips?”

She shook her head. “Dad’s already worried about how long we’ve been here.”

“So what do we do?”

She backed up, giving us room. “We’ll put one of you on each side. If water comes in, you’ll have to stand on the edges of the benches. If a lot of water comes in, we’ll hold a prayer circle.”

“…Ah.” I tried not to think about that. I focused on coaxing Caspar in front of me up the plank, trying to keep from lunging forward when he wobbled, and Torra grabbed his upper arm through his robe when he was close enough. Then, snatching Elspeth’s hoodie from the sand, I followed, and I helped him down through the port.

It was too small without Torra. I wrapped Caspar up in a blanket and put him at the back of the boat, then made my way to the front, flinching violently when I brushed against Sephas’s hand.

Torra shoved us off the shore with the plank, secured it back on top of the vessel, then dropped in and closed the door.

She took a seat facing Caspar, who looked very happy about it, and I tried not to stare too many daggers into Sephas’s too-near back.

I could hear the water. It sloshed close to the holes for the oars, the occasional drop flying in and sizzling on someone’s blanket. When the first waves started to lap at the sides, I watched a drip run down the inside wall and pool on the floor, too close.

Caspar started chattering.

It was the strangest thing I had ever heard, his words carried by that deep voice. The
transposed syllables in words that were a little too long for him to handle. The way his
tone danced around the end of a question.

“What is the boat called?” he asked Torra, orange eyes fixed, mystified, on her.

“It’s the Cormorant.” She didn’t sound annoyed in the least. “That’s a bird. A really
big bird.”

“What’s a cormorant look like?”

“It’s big and black and has a loooong beak. It likes to dive into the water and catch
fish.”

“Can the boat catch fish?”

“No. But I want it to go underwater someday. I have to fix it first.”

“You have to fix the holes.” He pointed to one, and I had to bite my lip to keep from
yelling at him to put his arm back in the blanket.

Torra just laughed. “Exactly.”

“You could use a motor. Then you wouldn’t have to paddle.”

“Well, I can’t find a motor. They don’t make them here.”


“That’s right.” She stopped rowing just long enough to flex a bicep for him. The boat
leaned to the right. Briggs snapped, “Oy.”

“I like your scarf,” Caspar went on.

“Thank you. I like it, too.”

“Can I wear it?”

She lost her rhythm for a moment, and I thought she would turn him down, but she
just unwound it (with the other arm, correcting the direction) and held it out to him.

He took it, watching her face curiously. “What happened?”

“I had an accident.” She gripped the oars again. “The water splashed my face.”

“Oh, okay.” He put the scarf over his own nose, the way she had had it. “I like your hair.”

“Thank you.”

He was little-kid flirting with her. This was so strange. And she clearly had no problem with it because she went right along chatting. The sound was comforting; their calm voices made me feel like I really didn’t have much to worry about, even though drips of water kept running down the oar holes, and I kept pushing myself further into the nose of the boat to avoid them.

Everything was fine.

Until we got far enough from the shore for waves.

I could hear them lapping at the sides of the boat. A moment later, water poured in the two frontmost holes, close to Sephas’s hands. He yelped and pulled his arms in close.

“Torra?” I called, my voice shaking.

She looked back, and her expression set into something serious. “All right. Faster. Everyone together, row, row, row…”

I could feel us pick up speed, but as we cut through the waves faster, more and more water slopped in.

I stood up as it started to pool in front of me, bracing my legs against the sides.

Sephas and Howl had to do the same thing sitting down in order to keep paddling. It
smelled like bleach, burning my throat, and I struggled to keep my breathing even.

I was going to have to remind Caspar of that.

A pool formed in the bottom of the boat. Torra made Caspar stand up, brace himself like I had braced myself. She tucked her legs around the bench, rowing doggedly, and she took up the call again as soon as my friend was away from the stuff.

My eyes watered, so I closed them.

It was better not to see anyway, because I caught a glimpse of the island shore out the window, and we were still far too close.

“We have to cut through the reef,” Torra blurted.

Briggs shook her head, faltering. “It’ll destroy the hull.”

“We need to go fast.”

“Torra—”

“I’m not sinking us!”

So we altered our course. The arc back to the beach narrowed, and we stopped drifting away from the island. The water calmed under us, but it was tinted a strange color, a pinkish-red cast overpowering the teal.

“Torra.” Briggs’s voice was a warning.

“Hold the course.” She kept her gaze forward and Caspar watched her.

The water stopped spilling in.

Then I heard a quiet scraping sound under my feet.

I climbed higher, breathing. Closed my eyes again.

A louder scrape. A clunk. The boat tipped, water sloshed. I stifled a whimper.
We kept moving.

“Easy now,” Torra said, soothing.

The boat crept along the surface. My heart pounded in my ears, almost drowning out the soft scratching.

Then the boat jumped forward, as if we had popped free of something, and we started picking up speed again. I opened my eyes, looking over my shoulder, and the shore was getting closer.

I kept looking over my shoulder, refusing to acknowledge the sound of the water that was now sloshing around the bottom of the boat, the smell that made my lungs ache. At Torra’s orders, we sped up again, motoring up towards the beach.

We hit the sand and lurched to a halt, and all the water sloshed towards me, splashing up to speckle my ankles. I squealed as a faint burn made its way through the fabric of my pants.

Torra leapt to her feet, stepping along the benches as people made room for her. Then she braced herself nearly against me, reached to the wall behind me, and I heard something snap open.

Another something made a shunk noise, followed by the sound of cranking, and the boat was pulled up the shore. I looked over my shoulder and there it was. Her beloved grappling hook, wrapped around a tree.

She backed away from me, a crooked smile on her face. “And I didn’t even zap you.”

“Wonderful,” I said weakly, resisting the urge to brush the drops of water off my pants.
She hopped back away from me and opened the port. Otherlands air flooded in. I groaned, taking slow, deep breaths to get me used to the sting that was always right there, and I waited for the rest of the party to climb out before making my way to Caspar.

“How are you, buddy?” I asked.

“It smells weird,” he said. His eyes were red, and he sniffed as he looked at me.

“I know. You’ll have to remember to breathe here, okay? If you get dizzy, take a breath.”

“I don’t like this place.”

“Yeah. Neither do I.” I unwound him from his burrito, helping him jump across the benches and climb out the door. I followed him, squinting in the cold sunlight, holding back a sigh as I took in the sight of the gray pines along the coastline.

I didn’t like this place.

But we carried on. Howl caught Caspar under the arms and lowered him gently to the sand. He immediately dropped and started digging in it, pushing it up into a mound.

Howl reached out to do the same for me, but I held up a hand and jumped myself. My knees screamed. I ignored them.

All I wanted was to get home. We had him now.

Torra went back in the boat, and I heard clunking, then a pop, then the sound of water dripping out the back of the boat.

Briggs anchored a rope to the bow, stringing it along the tracks.

Howl wandered over to Sephas and started murmuring to him too quietly to hear.

I just wanted to go. We were wasting time. Whatever they were talking about was
wasting time. “Can’t we talk on the way?” I called over to them, standing by Caspar’s developing sand castle.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Howl responded as Sephas looked away. “We’ll be ready soon. We just have to determine the route back.”

I sat on the ground next to Caspar and watched him sprinkle a handful of sand on the mound.

“It’s a hill,” he told me.

“Good job.”

“I wanted to make a castle but I can’t touch the water.”

“You’re right. Good thinking.” I watched his big, clumsy hand scoop up more of the sand, deposit it on top of the mound. It felt wrong.

Had I really been expecting the same little boy who had been stolen away? What would our parents have thought if I had brought him back in that state? They would have known it was him, but there was no way they could have believed it.

He wobbled.

I reached out to him. “Did you breathe?”

He took an exaggerated breath. “Yes.”

“Okay.”

Howl and Sephas’s hissed conversation was getting more animated. Sephas’s hands appeared to be doing most of the talking. I caught the word “Ashfens” and understood.

If we went back the way we had come, we were going to get caught by Time and… melted. Or something. But if we went by way of the Ashfens, we would get vaporized.
Vaporized or melted. Appealing options.

“Did you know that some mammals lay eggs?” Caspar asked me.

That pulled me from my trance. “What kinds of mammals lay eggs?”

“Things like paddle-puses.”

“Platypuses?”

“Uh-huh. And sometimes birds don’t fly.”

I was starting to wonder if he was just still a little kid or slightly… scrambled.

“And a lizard can run on the water. But I don’t remember what it’s called.” He pushed a pile of sand up the mound, bull-dozer like.

“I don’t remember, either.”

“When we get home we can go to the zoo.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“You can see the lemurs.”

He remembered the lemurs. I smiled, blinking rapidly. “I’m gonna go talk to the boys, okay? You stay here. Make me a sand donut.”

“Okay.” He shoveled the middle out of the mound.

Howl and Sephas stopped talking when I approached, both watching me suspiciously.

“I want a say in which way we go,” I said quietly. “I’m not just blindly following you anymore.”

They exchanged a glance, and Howl sighed. “All right.”

“Ashfens or Southwall, right?”

“Right.”
I took a slow breath. “I don’t want to risk Caspar’s life.”

Sephas violently nodded his agreement.

“If we go by Southwall, what are the chances that we run into bad people?”

“Almost certain.” Howl folded his arms.

“And can we take them?”

“With just us, maybe. Especially if Elspeth stays with us.”

Of course. Because she was somehow much better at kicking in faces than I was. Or maybe I just had unrealized potential. I put my hands on my hips. “We can’t take Caspar through the Ashfens. He’s not going to—”

Howl lunged past me. I whirled around to see the boy fall over backwards, his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Caspar!”

Howl caught him. I leapt forward, and without thinking, I held his nose and breathed into his mouth.

With Caspar resuscitated, they believed me.

I felt a little smug, but the prospect of facing whoever we were going to face in Southwall gave me hives. Before we left, I walked off into the trees and was suddenly refreshed by how… not-chemical the air smelled.

Perhaps it could get better from here.

“Elspeth,” I awkwardly called into the woods.
I looked to my left, then to my right, and she was there. I jumped backward, smacking into a tree.

“H-hi.”

“Hi, yourself.” She twisted her mouth around and I realized she was trying not to smile. “I heard what Howl said.”

“Is that okay?” I put my hands in my pockets. Well, her pockets, as it was her hoodie.

“Can you come?”

“Of course.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” She looked over my shoulder to the beach, a little crease forming between her eyebrows. “You, um… you’re not happy about Sephas.”

My hands curled into fists in my pockets. “No.”

“I understand. I just want you to know… he is a good man, okay? I promise he’s a good man. He’s been through a lot, too. Like us.”

I tried not to roll my eyes. “I wouldn’t say like us.”

“He’s told me everything, Isobel. Trust me, he would take your place if he could.”

I frowned at her, but it was like frowning at my own reflection and therefore too strange to keep up.

“Just… bear with him. He’s going to do everything he can to get you home.”

“What’s this sinister thing Howl mentioned?” I glanced back at the beach. Caspar’s pile was getting ridiculously big, and Sephas was nodding at it approvingly. But Caspar had placed the sand between him and Sephas. “The thing he… is.”
“Don’t worry about that. It’s nothing he can help.”

“What do you mean by that?” I looked back at her, wondering if he was the bubonic plague.

“He didn’t choose it. Kel-Sim chose it for him.”

Now I was worried. “What is he, Elspeth?”

“He needs to tell you.”

“But I don’t want to ask him.”

She held up her hands in defeat.

Caspar was incredibly confused by the other Isobel.

He kept squinting at her, then squinting at me, then squinting at her, then nearly toppling over before we both barked at him to remember air existed.

Howl had made Torra and Briggs go to Hollowdeep’s house another way, down the shore to the east and then through the Ashfens. It was safer for them, at least, and it made our group less likely to be spotted on the way past Southwall.

I had a bad feeling about this. About facing the goons, at the least, and seeing Time filled me with so much dread I just looped back to thinking about the goons.

When we got out of the trees, I said, half to myself, “What do we do if he finds us?”

“He is old,” Sephas said from up ahead.
“He doesn’t look it, from what I’ve heard, but he’s probably feeling it.” Elspeth dragged her feet through the tall grass, making a trail behind her. “He’s ancient.”

“How ancient are we talking, here?” I checked to make sure Caspar was keeping up; he had a handful of grass and was splitting it into thinner sections. And tripping over nothing, but staying upright.

“What is he, boys?” she called. “Babylonian?”

“Su…” Sephas looked at Howl.

“Sumerian,” the man called back. “We think.”

I stared at her. “That’s… what all the carvings are.”

“Yup. And the thing that went after you.”

“…Okay.” I poked Caspar in the side, our new sign for ‘air.’ He grabbed my hand.

“So he’s an old man? An old, slow man?”

“Apparently. I’ve never seen him. I’ve just heard a lot.” She shoved her own hands in her pockets. “Not that the people who have seen him really want to talk about it.”

Shooting a look at the back of the boys’ heads, she sighed. “Here’s what I know: he’s old, he’s mean, and he has some… thing he can do with time. He can move through it faster. Can’t make it go backwards, but it can still do damage.”

“Will I know him when I see him?” If, I reminded myself.

“Everyone else will probably start screaming, so yes.”

Encouraging.

The sun was low by that point, and soon it was too dark to see. For me and Caspar to see, anyway. We were the only people I heard tripping. Howl stopped between two hills,
a similar place to where we had stayed just last night. This time, though, he called for everyone to huddle in close.

“We can’t start a fire,” he said. “The risk is too high at this point. And I don’t think we should stay here too long tonight.”

I didn’t have to occupy a 7-year-old insomniac for the whole night. Good. “So we’re going to travel at night?”

Howl nodded. “The less visible we are, the better. Three hours here, maybe, and then we keep moving.”

I could deal with that.

We all settled down in a circle. Sephas laid down as far away from me as possible. Elspeth put herself between us. I sank into the grass, sighing, and all of a sudden Caspar rested his head on my stomach. My breath whooshed out of me with an oof.

He curled up to make himself more comfortable.

I sighed, watching his head bob up and down as I did. But if this was something that made him a little less frightened, I could deal with it, too.

I saw signs of everyone else falling asleep quickly. Sephas stopped fidgeting. Howl started snoring. Elspeth… got slightly transparent around the edges, the white of her skin fading to show the hill behind her.

I made myself stop looking.

Then Caspar rolled over, steamrolling across my midsection, so he could look at my face. His eyes looked brown-gray in the light of the half moon.

“Was I really asleep?” he whispered.
I tried to find the words to tell him. Maybe it was better not to; just to let him believe everything was fine, and there was no danger, and nothing sinister had happened at all.

But I knew that would only make it harder once we got home.

“Yes,” I said. “You were asleep for ten years.”

“Ten…” He looked down at his hands, spreading out his fingers, pondering the bony knuckles. “I grew up.”

“Yes, you did.” A lot.

“That’s why I feel funny.”

A gust of chemical wind swept through the field, making a wave. “That’s probably part of it.”

“My voice is my real voice.”

“It is.”

He rolled off of me, propping his head up on his elbows. “Are you really sure this isn’t a dream?”

I dearly hoped not. “Yes, Caspar, I’m sure.”

“But everything looks funny.” He pulled up a silver blade of grass. “And the air smells weird, and the sky looks wrong.”

“I know it does. But it’s real. We have to get out of this place to go home.”

“But home still looks the same?” He looked up at me again. “It’s not missing colors?”

“It looks perfectly normal.” I rolled onto my side to make it easier to look at him.

“Your parents still live in your house. It’s painted a different color, though.”

“What color?”
“The porch is blue.”

“Ooh. Okay.” He pulled two other stalks and started twisting them all together.

What else had changed? It probably wasn’t the best time to tell him about the dog. “I live in the same house.”

“Okay.” He was very focused on the grass, and I had a feeling he wasn’t listening. I contented myself with watching him.

Once he had finished the little rope, he pulled my hand in front of him and tied it around my wrist.

I woke everyone up after I felt like three hours had passed. Then we started walking again.

My eyes were more used to the darkness, but I still clung to Caspar as we went, and he clung back to me. I poked him every ten seconds to make sure he kept breathing. Not an ideal arrangement, but it would get us home safe.

Then I wondered if home really was safe because Time had grabbed him right from a normal Earth backyard.

I pushed the thought from my mind, concentrating on my steps. Under my feet, the grass grew patchier and patchier, until all that was left was dirt and stones. We were getting close to Southwall.

By some form of telepathy, our three escorts moved protectively around us. Howl walked in front, Elspeth to the side. Sephas followed up behind. I tried not to think too hard, to jump at every tiny sound.
Off in the distance, I could see the low buildings outlines against the night sky.

I stared straight ahead, putting the city out of sight. It marched along steadily, getting closer and closer, the brokenness of the buildings getting clearer every time I glanced up.

The stony hills rose up around us, blocking it from view. Then I heard something just behind a nearby hill.

I froze. So did the rest of the group, but they just stared at me. I shrank back from the stones, looking frantically around.

I heard it again. Something scraped against the rock; a pebble rolled away. The others heard it, too. Howl’s hand went to his belt. I pushed Caspar behind me; Elspeth stood in front of us, and Sephas stood in front of her.

Someone came pelting over the ridge. Howl raised his gun. Sephas whipped the knife out of his pocket. And then the someone’s hand caught fire, throwing light onto a face full of angles.

Sulemanni lunged at Sephas.

The fire at her hand went out when it came too close to him. He pulled his knife away, nearly stumbling in his attempt to avoid hitting her.

Three more people came over the hill. These were all men, all as wide as two of me. Seeing Caspar and me, they closed in, and Elspeth spun at the nearest one. Her foot smacked against his head and he reeled.

There was a bang and another man went down. The one that still stood threw Elspeth aside, reached for me. I jumped and landed a kick over his stomach that made him double
over, but he jumped forward, mowing me down with him.

Howl called out, and I knew he wouldn’t take the shot. His weight alone was crushing me, and I fought for a breath, unable to move when a knife flashed in the moonlight.

Someone else’s weight dropped onto him, pushing the remainder of the air out of my lungs. Then the man rolled off, groaning. I scooted away, dragging myself to my feet, and saw Elspeth holding the man in an armbar.

Sephas and the woman still danced around each other. There was a fine cut in one of her arms, and his left sleeve was half burned off. But both were still standing.

Elspeth put her foot on the back of the man’s neck, and Howl ran over, and I looked away for the bang that ensued.

Sulemanni abruptly stepped back from Sephas, the last of the fire winking out.

I barely had time to register that the man Elspeth had knocked out was stirring before he was on his feet again, and then he had an arm around me. Cold metal pressed against my throat.

“Put the gun down!” he bellowed, snarling at Howl. He dropped it, holding his hands in the air.

The others stood frozen, staring at us.

“Sulemanni, stay with me,” he barked, letting up the pressure on my throat enough to shove me forward. Obedient, she came up next to him, sparks falling from her hands.

“Any of you tries something, she dies,” he said. “Kel-Sim needs one alive. She will not be harmed.” He put pressure against the small of my back, forcing me forward again, and we walked slowly to the hill they had come over.
No one followed. I didn’t dare turn my head, but I caught sight of a horrified expression on Sephas’s face.

“If she’s hurt, he’ll kill you,” Sulemanni spat as we rounded the hill. “Let her walk.”

He dropped his arm from around my shoulders, and the knife moved from my throat to the spot between my shoulder blades. I walked on, my heart pounding, testing each step on the rocky ground.

Someone’s shoes scuffled on the rock behind us.

And then the knife was gone. I spun around, putting another two steps between me and the man.

His head was tilted back, his glazed eyes catching the moonlight, shining green. Sephas was behind him. His hand pressed against the man’s chest, over his heart.

As I watched, a tendril of black worked its way up the man’s neck. It spread out, spiderwebbing across his face, and he swayed.

Sephas let go and jumped out of the way as he toppled backwards, slid down the hill, and rolled to a stop at Howl’s feet.

Howl was looking up at us, his mouth a thin line. Elspeth stood back with Caspar, and she had turned him away and placed a comforting hand on his back.

Sephas looked up at me as if I was going to hit him.

As I stared, Elspeth left Caspar’s side and crept up behind Sulemanni. She had done nothing to stop Sephas from… from that, and she hadn’t moved since the man dropped.

But she let out a throaty tell when Elspeth tackled her from behind, forcing her to the ground the same way she had restrained the man earlier. “Howl!” Elspeth cried, and he
trained the gun on the woman. Which meant it was also on my shadow, but it was threatening enough.

Sephas half-fell down the hillside to them, aghast.

“Get off!” Sulemanni croaked.

“What are you doing here?” Elspeth tightened her grip on Sulemanni’s arm.

The woman swore. “What do you think?”

“Dragging us back to Southwall once we have our guard down?” Elspeth pressed down on her neck, and her mouth opened like a fish.


When she could breathe again, Sulemanni turned her eyes to Sephas, who was looking on helplessly.

“You gonna… let them…?” She hissed through her teeth as Elspeth gave her arm a good jerk.

“Why are you here?” Sephas pressed.

“To try and help you not die!” She squirmed, heels grating on the gravel. “Way to make me regret it.”

Sephas stepped forward. “Elsie, let her go.”

She looked to Howl. Howl nodded. When Sulemanni’s arm was released, she went limp, groaning. Elspeth struggled to her feet, but she stayed close, fists clenched.

Sulemanni’s eyes followed her up. “What I wouldn’t give to nuke your ass.”

“Kneecap her,” Elspeth told Howl, her voice flat.

“No!” Sephas grabbed the woman’s arm to help her up, to the obvious disapproval of
the rest of the party. I took the opportunity to edge down the hill and around their circle
to Caspar. He hadn’t moved.

“You okay?” I whispered.

“I’m okay,” he whimpered back, but his hands were shaking when I took them.

“We’re gonna be all right. They’ll protect us.”

“We almost got hurt. Those men wanted to hurt us.” A tremor rattled through his body.

I pressed his hand between mine, willing a feeling of comfort and safety into him. But I kept watching the others.

The woman was refusing to look at anyone except Sephas, standing with her feet planted far apart. “I wanted to help.” She cradled the arm Elspeth had wrenched. “Clearly that was a mistake, but you’re alive, so you’re welcome.”

“Why?” Howl growled.

“I’m a human being. I’m mad about that.” She pointed an accusatory finger at Caspar, who stepped behind my back as if he could hide there. “But I had to fight to get Kel-Sim to let me join the patrols. He knows I’m ooey-gooey on the inside.”

“He allowed it?” Sephas blinked.

“It might be a test. Doesn’t matter. I’m… I’m not going back.” She looked away for a moment, her gaze drifting downwards.

Sefhas took a step forward. “You’re running?”

“I’m running.”

Howl and Elspeth exchanged a glance, and I could almost hear what they were
thinking. This was a very easy way for him to get someone close to us, and Sephas had a
soft spot for this girl that Time probably knew about, omniscient as he seemed to be.

He was smiling.

Howl still had the gun pointed at her. “I’m still not convinced you won’t kill us in our
sleep.”

“I could have helped them kill you.” She gestured vaguely at the dark shapes lying on
the ground. “But I didn’t.”

“You’d have an easier time catching us off-guard.”

“One of me against a scythe, a gun, and whatever the hell that kicking thing is?” She
pointed at Elspeth.

“You’re a flamethrower,” Elspeth spat. “I’m not convinced.”

“Fine. Tie me to a tree while you sleep. I’m not picky.” She shrugged emphatically.

Howl’s frown was evident even in the dark. “You want us to let you tag along for
protection.”

“I know things.”

“Examples?”

“I know how often the patrols leave, and where he sends them. I know most of them
are in the Ashfens because he thought you wouldn’t be stupid enough to come within a
day’s walk of Southwall.”

Howl’s back stiffened, and I knew he was thinking of Torra.

“I know that he’s probably got guards on the center, because he knows they can’t get
out anywhere else. I know who he’ll send. I know one of those people leaves his left side
open because he got hit in the head three years ago and a patch of vision never came back.”

Howl looked more convinced.

Elspeth clearly still wanted to kneecap her.

Sephas might have been about to kneel and beg.

And then they all looked at me.

I stared back, startled. I wasn’t the one leading this group. As far as I was concerned, I was following them. But Howl still asked, “Isobel, what do you think?”

I blinked slowly. “Is this really up to me?”

“You’re risking the most,” he said.

I looked up at Caspar, who was gripping my hand so tightly I thought my fingers would pop off. If we got caught, I would lose all this. No questions asked. I might not make it home.

“Sephas, can we trust her?” I asked.

He nodded without hesitation.

I took a deep breath. “Then I don’t think we can afford to leave her behind.” As long as I could trust his judgment. As long as I could trust him. I looked down at the man sprawled at the base of the hill, at the spiderweb veins up the side of his neck, contrasted sharply with the moonlit white of his skin.

Howl put his gun away. Elspeth folded her arms, scowling at the ground. Sulemanni, keeping stride with Sephas, took the lead.

I stayed rooted to the spot, still looking at the body. “Sephas,” I said.
He stood still, turning to look at me. It was the first I had allowed myself to examine him closely since I had found Caspar. His burned sleeve revealed the black armband inked into his skin; there was a dim bruise on his chin from his fight with the lamassu.

“What are you?” I asked.

It took him a moment to force out the word, his expression pained. “Death,” he said, and he followed Sulemanni away.

I was left standing there, feeling as if I had already known.
By the time we lost the cover of night, Southwall was far behind us.

I refused to look back as the sun rose to see if it was in view. I could just pretend it wasn’t there if I tried hard enough. And half-running behind the gray people, clutching Caspar’s hand as he tottered along, I was determined to try.

I recognized the trees that replaced the barren ground as the ones we had passed on the way in. The river trickled along, pleasantly gurgling. That meant there were probably fanged deer hanging around, and six-legged rabbits, but I never saw anything alive. And soon we left the riverside, weaving through thicker forest where we would be less likely to be spotted. The turn, I realized, would also cause us to leave a large margin around Hollowdeep’s place. With the trouble we seemed to attract, I didn’t mind going the extra distance if it meant keeping Howl’s family safe.

But I was tired. Bone tired. And I knew Caspar was, too, the way he lagged along behind us. I was pushing him too hard, I told myself as our shadows grew longer. But, though he started to fall far more often, he never complained.

I just wanted to fall against a tree and breathe. Or not breathe. The dizziness was back, made worse by the fact that I just couldn’t get enough air to compensate for what I was doing.

When the sun finally set, I had no idea how much closer we were to the center of the Otherlands, and I felt close to expiring. But, finally, Howl called for a rest from behind
us, and Sephas slowed to a halt a little more readily than Sulemanni.

Elspeth looked at the back of her head. Then she looked at Howl. Then she gave Sephas something close to a glare. “What are we supposed to do with her?” she asked.

Sulemanni turned on her heel. “Bury me up to my neck. Hang me from a tree.” I hadn’t known someone’s eyes could roll that far. “Whatever makes you feel better.”

She could probably burn her way out of either of those somehow, so that didn’t help me. “Just watch her,” I sighed.

Sephas slid down a tree and closed his eyes, effectively eliminating himself from the running. Killing that man must have worn him out, I realized, and I looked to Howl. He sighed. “Elspeth and I can go first.”

Elspeth looked happy about that.

We didn’t start a fire, as easy as it would have been that night. But we still made a little circle, with me and Caspar opposite Sulemanni. Howl and Elspeth sat on either side of her, and Elspeth stared her down, unblinking.

Before long, I found myself doing the same thing.

Her haughty air wore off after a few minutes sitting down. She was slumped against a tree with her arms crossed over her chest, her legs half-tucked under her. Her eyes, unfocused, were fixed on the ground, and she chewed anxiously on her lip.

She didn’t look sulky. She looked ashamed.

I still wasn’t ready to give her my pity. She had held a fireball much too close to my face for that. But Howl and Elspeth were so focused on her that I felt safe enough to close my eyes as I leaned against my own tree.
Then Caspar’s remarkably weighty head dropped into my lap and I grunted.

My legs were completely numb by the time they changed the guard. But instead of just trading off, Sephas and Howl sat in front of us.

“We should talk about getting you home,” Howl said softly.

Home. I was actually going there. It wasn’t a myth; this was actually happening. I shifted, sitting up straighter against the tree. Caspar stirred, so I knew he was awake, but he didn’t sit up. I decided not to fight him on that.

“As you know, we’re going back to the center, where you arrived,” Howl began. “It’s the only place you can get out.”

“Yeah.” I had known that. I crossed my legs, giving Caspar a remember-air-poke. He grumbled at me.

“It’s guarded. Sulemanni gave us that.” Howl looked to Sephas.

“Five people,” he provided.

“We’re assuming we can trust that information—”

“She is not lying.” Sephas frowned.

“Sephas, forgive me for not putting her on a pedestal, but I don’t have the experience to prove she’s a nice person.”

“She thought you wanted to hurt me.” Sephas looked away.

“Great excuse.”

I leaned forward a bit more. “Excuse for what?”

Howl glanced back at me, then moved his bad leg out in front of him, rolling up his pants up to his knee. There was a patch of light, shiny skin there; a dent above his
anklebone. “She shot me.”

I blinked. “Oh.”

“It could have been worse.” He wriggled back into his cross-legged position. “She could have incinerated me instead.”

“She cannot shoot straight,” Sephas muttered.

“But it still hurts.” He shook his head. “Anyway. At least five people. So we’ll keep them busy while Sephas takes you both home.”

I nodded slowly, hoping none of them had guns. Or worse abilities. I tried not to look too long at Sephas as I thought about that.

A gentle breeze rustled the leaves on the misshapen trees. One of them, dark as black velvet, broke off and drifted down beside me.

“When you get there,” Howl went on once I met his eyes again, “you’ll have to run. All right? Gather anyone who needs to know and run.”

“Run?” I shifted, sitting up straighter. “Run where? We’ll be home.”

Sephas said quietly, “He will try again.”

The forest floor seemed to rock under me. “Time will.”

“Yes.”

Howl nodded in confirmation. “He’s not going to be happy about this. If he took Caspar once, I have no doubt that he’ll try it again.”

“Why us?” I blurted. “Why not anyone else?” Selfish of me, but I had earned it.

“He’s mad.” Howl leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “That’s my best guess. He went through enough trouble with Caspar that this will make him angry.”
I fell back against the wall. Everything we had done still wasn’t enough.

As long as Time was around, we could never stop running.

Howl went to sleep then. Sephas took his place. Sulemanni had stopped staring at the leaves and closed her eyes, and her arms weren’t folded quite as tightly. That was enough to persuade Elspeth to sleep, too.

I idly stroked the fluffy blond hair that was so conveniently in reach. Caspar didn’t protest. It threw me right back to the good old days, when we used to pull dandelion seeds out of each other’s hair before our parents dragged us back indoors after a long day outside. When he buried all my butterfly clips in his curls and thought it was hilarious until he couldn’t get them out.

I could pretend we weren’t in the Otherlands. That it was a cool fall night in the Metropark across town, and there was a warm tent behind us with sleeping bags and snacks and citronella candles ready to be lit.

I closed my eyes and willed it to be real.

Then leaves rustled across the circle, and I opened them again. Sulemanni was getting to her feet, one hand over her mouth. Sephas leapt up after her.

“Manni, what—”

“Leave me,” she grunted through her fingers, and she stumbled off into the woods.

Sephas chased after her. I slipped out from under Caspar and followed.

Footsteps up ahead told me she was moving quite far away from our makeshift camp.
Sephas was keeping up, from what I could see. Then all the footsteps stopped and I heard
the unmistakable sound of someone being sick.

I paused, blinking.

“Great,” she gasped, “that’s just absolutely fu—” she retched again, and I could make
out the outline of her body, bent in two against a tree. The dark shape of Sephas reached
her, placed a hand on her back.

She started to shrug him off, but he didn’t move, and she gave up. Slowly, she caught
her breath again, still leaned against the tree.

“She shouldn’t have eaten,” she panted. “…Before I left, I thought… I thought I would
need…”

Sephas’s pale hand made circles on her back.

“It usually helps.” She sat up a little straighter. “Guess my luck ran out.”

“Are… are you sick?” Sephas’s hand stopped moving.

She looked up at him. Her eyes caught the moonlight, shining green.

I took a step forward, curious, but the movement caught their attention. Their eyes
snapped to me, too much like the flu dogs’ for comfort.

“Isobel.” I could hear the frown in Sephas’s voice.

“Let her listen.” And the eye roll in Sulemanni’s. “She’ll be gone tomorrow.”

Ideally. I put my hands in my pockets, glancing between them. “What… what’s
wrong?”

She braced her back against the trunk of the tree, sliding down to the ground. She
looked so tired. I came closer, forgetting to be afraid of her, because she didn’t look like
she could hurt me if she tried. Then a little white flame sparked to life between her hands, casting her face into sharp relief, and I decided to keep my distance.

“All the fabric of time to keep together,” she muttered, “but he still leaves room for the wives.”

The night was very cold all of a sudden.

Sephas sank down next to her, one hand on her arm. I’d never seen him reach out to anyone like that. “Manni…”

“I don’t want pity.” She stared at the flame, eyes glowing.

“How long?”

“Months. But it’s slower here.”

“I know. Howl’s wife—”

Her gaze snapped up to him. “Wife? He has a wife?”

“Yes. And a daughter.”

The flame went out. I had to strain to see them again. “Kel-Sim doesn’t know.”

Sephas nodded. “He—”

“Don’t tell me any more.” Her voice was tight. “Too much risk.”

“All right.”

I knew what he’d been about to tell her. That Hollowdeep had been pregnant with Torra for years. And I didn’t know if I wanted to tell her that so she knew what to expect or to run back to the circle and curl up next to Caspar and pretend I hadn’t heard any of this.

“Howl’s wife—” Sephas’s voice was soft.
“What?”

“Are you sure that it is his?”

Even in the darkness, I could see her nod.

I went back to the circle alone.

Caspar was sprawled where I had left him, his eyes closed. Panic seized me, and I darted to his side, but he cracked a smile and wriggled away when I shook his shoulder.

At least I didn’t have to remember to breathe for both of us anymore. I sat beside him, and he rolled against my leg, still feigning sleep.

Then I looked up to find Elspeth watching me, her brow furrowed, her mouth a thin line. I knew she had heard even before I asked her.

“I didn’t know,” she whispered. “You can’t tell.”

“Yes.” I patted Caspar’s head, Sephas’s question lingering in my mind. “I think that explains…”

“Her sudden change in heart.” She finished my sentence for me. Taking a deep breath, she tucked her arms around herself. “I trust that reason more than I trust the last one.”

“What was the last one?” I scooted sideways as Caspar elbowed my leg.

“Her latent, inherent goodness.”

“You don’t think there is any?”

She was quiet for a moment, pondering. A breeze caught the leaves overhead. Spots
of moonlight danced on the forest floor.

“I don’t know. But I trust a self-preservation instinct more than that.”

“So do you think she really wants to help us?”

“I think that she wants to get away from him, and we’re the only chance she has to do that.”

After all I had seen, the walk through the Wild seemed like a stroll through the park. We had a creek to jump across, a few hills to climb. The occasional fallen tree trunk to jump over while avoiding the spines up its length. I gave Caspar’s side a poke every minute, now, just to be sure.

I let myself believe as we walked that there was nothing waiting for us in the meadow. That we could just hop though, and then the hard part—staying away from Time forever—could begin. I knew that believing it didn’t make it true, but it made me feel better. And there was something peaceful about the gray morning light filtering through black pine needles. They absorbed all of the sound that we made, and they made for a comfortable walk. Maybe I was used to the eerie lack of color by now.

Then we made it to the gorges.

The sandstone walls rising up on either side of us threatened to funnel me into the waiting mouths of a pack of flu bugs. Elspeth and Howl kept behind us, Sulemanni and Sephas in front. Plenty of protection. Unless there were, say, six of them. Or more than six.
I kept my eyes down, because it was easier to be in denial. Then I bumped into Sephas’s back and I knew the worst had come, so I gave up and looked.

Sulemanni stood between us and three of them. Thick drool hung in strings off their broken teeth, their lips rotted away. Ribs and anklebones gleamed. Red eyes shone.

Sulemanni let out a roar that startled me into stumbling backwards.

Her whole body let off flames, blindingly bright, and the dogs shrieked and went darting the opposite direction. And we kept walking as if nothing had happened.

So there were a few advantages to having bigger things to worry about.

Everyone stayed close until we were out of the rocks, and then we spread out again. We kept our pace the same until it started to get dark.

I had forgotten what the darkness in the Otherlands was like. Almost tangible, swirling, predatory. It was cold under the black canopy of the tall trees, and soon I was shivering. I held Caspar’s hand tighter, refusing to keep pace with the others until they slowed down for us.

Sulemanni kept her torch-arm high, but the shadows swallowed it up before the light could make it far away enough for comfort. I kept my eyes on the ground immediately in front of us, watching for holes.

We were close.

I paid no attention to the piles of stones we passed. The portions of broken houses.

So close.

I saw the line of bright light up ahead where the trees ended. As we grew closer, it
stretched taller, speckled with leaves from the vines and undergrowth.

Home.

Ahead, Sulemanni slowed almost to a halt at the edge of the forest, the fire on her arm winking out. I frowned, doing the same.

“There’s more of them,” she said, her voice low. “More than he said.”

Howl brushed forward to stand by her. “How many more?”

“Ten.”

The ground swayed beneath me.

“This is wrong.” She took a step back. “I heard him talking. I know how many he was going to send. He can’t afford this. Especially after the patrols.”

“You think you could have been wrong?” Elspeth growled.

Sulemanni twisted around to snarl at her. “I know what he said.”

“Is there a chance,” Howl asked, his voice low, “that he knew you were listening?”

She was silent, her hands shaking at her sides.

Sephas stepped between them, holding out his arms as if he was dealing with two wild animals. “We cannot wait. They will stay for days.”

“And ours won’t last that long.” Elspeth glanced back at me and Caspar.

Sulemanni stepped back into the woods, letting her hand go alight again. “I can make a wall. We all charge behind it. When we hit the center, Sephas takes the kids. And then we run back.”

“Do we have another option?” Elspeth muttered.

I asked, “Howl, how many shots do you have left.”
His hand went to his belt. “Two.”

Sulemanni looked back out at the meadow. I moved closer, squinting, and I could see them too; small dots surrounding a patch of emerald green. “If I torch ‘em, we could…”

“It’ll destroy whatever they’re carrying.” Elspeth crossed her arms, stepping back further into the darkness.

“Elsie.” Sephas’s voice was gentle. “We do not have choices.”

“I’d like all of us to get out of this alive. Not just Caspar and Isobel.”

“And I’m going to make sure that happens.” Sulemanni glared at her.

“Are you, though?”

Sulemanni took a threatening step towards her. Howl forced himself between them, knocking her back. “Let it go. Elsie, this is our best bet. We don’t have another way to mow ten people down before they have a chance to hit us.”

She looked pointedly at Sephas. He shook his head. “One by one,” he said quietly.

No one said anything for a minute. Caspar stepped closer to me.

Then Howl looked at Sulemanni and nodded.

We burst out of the trees and a ball of fire formed in front of us.

I couldn’t tell where it came from or what was fueling it. But as we ran, it spread out, stretching in a half-circle around us. The heat was nearly unbearable, clawing at every inch of my exposed skin, and Caspar’s cringing proved he was even worse off in his thin linen robe.
I heard a bang. A second later, a small blob of liquid metal splashed through the wall and dripped harmlessly to the ground.

It was taking a toll on Sulemanni, because her gait grew more uneven as we charged through the meadow. Her arms, held over her head, were shaking. But the wall held strong.

Soon I could make out the shapes of people behind it. The gobs of metal came too close for comfort, but all they could do to me was burn.

And then they noticed that there was no fire behind us.

Three men circled around. Howl and Elspeth moved back to cover the opening; Elspeth took one of them down quickly, and Howl wrestled with fending off the other two.

Sulemanni heard the struggle, looked over her shoulder, and pushed her arms back. The opening sealed itself, like water sloshing to the back of a glass.

But then the sides of the wall weakened.

The grass underfoot was green even as it wilted. Sephas fell back next to me, taking my hand, and electricity coursed up through me.

I held tight to Caspar.

Sephas took one purposeful step forward. Up ahead, Sulemanni stumbled. The wall flickered, and two more men darted in on each side.

I felt Caspar’s hand slipping as the world fell away around me.
Flame-orange leaves crunched under my feet.

I gasped, pulling my hand away from Sephas. The leaves contrasted violently with the green grass underneath. It was painful to look at.

The trees were too red, too yellow. My house was too green. And the sky was a sea crashing down to drown me.

I fell to my knees, covering my eyes. The air, at least, was sweet. I took in gulps of it, my head spinning, my stomach churning.

I waited for everything to sit still.

Then I looked up, and Sephas stood over me. He was still gray, his black eyes wide, his pale face drawn in horror.

“Isobel.”

I looked behind me.

Maple trees swaying in a soft breeze. A tall white fence.

Ahead. A swing set, chains bright with too-red rust.

No blond head. No orange eyes.

Caspar was gone.

I dragged myself to my feet. They had taken him from me. They had snatched him away again. After everything we had been through, all the miles I had dragged him across, they had taken him away again.

“I had him,” I croaked, whipping around as if he would appear when I wasn’t looking. “I had his hand.”

“I know.” Sephas raked a shaking hand through his hair. “I saw.”
“He slipped, but I had him. I swear I had him.”

“I will go back.” He stood up straighter, dropping his arms to his sides, pulling the knife out of his pocket.

I grabbed his hand and dug my fingers into his skin, ignoring the pain.

“Isobel.” He tried to pull away.

“Take me with you,” I snarled.

He stared at me, his gaze hard. And then he stepped forward.

Movement in the window caught my eye. I glanced towards it, and just as the world fell away again, I met the eyes of my mother.
It was silent.

I was expecting gunshots and explosions and yelling. I heard none of that.

When I opened my eyes, I found the meadow nearly empty. Much of the grass was scorched black, smoking. Two of Time’s tattooed men lay motionless on the ground. The rest were nowhere to be seen.

There was no sign of Caspar.

Behind me, Sephas cried, “Howl!” I spun around to find Sulemanni crouched over him, two hands pressed over a smear of blood on his bare chest. Elspeth stood over them both, a gun aimed at the other woman’s head.

Elspeth looked over at us, her eyes widening. “You’re back!”

Sephas ran to them, and I followed, trying not to look too closely at Howl. But he raised an arm and pressed his hand over his eyes and groaned.

“What happened?” I was dazed. “Where’s Caspar?”

“Is he all right?” Sephas asked, dropping to his knees at Howl’s other side.

“I’m fine. Barely stabbed.” He grimaced, flinching as Sulemanni pressed harder.

Elspeth barked, “Fix it.”

“I used all my fire saving your sorry ass!” Sulemanni’s arms shook, and her voice was weak. “Give me a minute.”
“He doesn’t have a minute.”

“I have a minute!” Howl waved his arm at Elspeth, but his face was contorted in pain.

“It glanced off. The blood is for show.”

“Where’s Caspar?” I demanded, and my voice rose to a half-shriek.

All three of them exchanged a glance that I didn’t like at all.

“He’s okay, Isobel,” Elspeth finally said. “He’s not hurt.”

“Then where is he?”

“After you left…” Her hand shook, and Sulemanni leaned further away from the gun.

“It was Time, Isobel. He came and took him back, along with the rest of his men.”

I felt sick, and it took effort to stay upright. “How long were we gone?”

“Minutes.” Howl dropped his arm to the ground. “He bent time to get here and back. We barely saw him.”

I fell on my knees.

“He took the rest?” Sephas asked, gesturing at the two bodies.

“Yes.”

My voice, when I spoke, was steadier than I had expected. “Do you know where he is?”

They exchanged another glance. A cold lump formed in my stomach. “He’s not all the way back on that island, is he?”

“He’ll be in Southwall,” Sulemanni muttered. When all that earned was a puzzled group stare, she elaborated. “If he screwed up his own timeline—which he did in order to come here—it knocks that much time off his term. He would have spent a day, so he’ll
throw something off Above before he wastes more time taking the kid to the island.”

“How long will that take?” I pressed.

“Couple of days, I think.”

That gave us time. “I have to get there.”

“If he kills you, it’ll give him the time he wants.”

“I don’t care.”

“Good.” She leaned onto her hands, and smoke rose from under them, and Howl cried out.

Nothing in the Otherlands scared me anymore.

I stomped through the black leaves in the Wild as easily as the rest of them. I casually hopped over the narrow end of a rift. I didn’t flinch when a pack of flus came to investigate us and ran off again immediately.

What did scare me was the image of my mother, burned into my mind. She had looked like she hadn’t slept in days; her eyes were sunken and her hair was limp. She had looked insubstantial.

And her expression wouldn’t have been much different if I was a ghost.

It had been six days. They were probably through searching Ginsberg. I didn’t know where else they would go, because I never left town for much of anything. Would my picture be on every screen in the Midwest, the way Caspar’s had been?

I remembered being excited for one glorious second when I saw him, because I
wanted to tell him that he had been on TV, and then I remembered and it threw me into spiral number 25.

But I was going to bring him back. And when I did, they were going to find me, too. So I pressed on.

I didn’t grow tired, even when the sun dropped, even when the rest of the group was tripping over their own feet. When they did have to stop, I stood in the middle of a circle of sleeping gray people like a sentinel, holding the torch Sulemanni had lit. Three hours later I woke them all and we were off again.

We took the same route to Southwall we had taken on the way to the center. When the sun rose, I could see up ahead where the trees thinned. And when we finally made it out of the woods, I only paused for a second to take in the broken skyline.

The sight of that crumbling wall made my blood boil.

We kept walking.

It was easy enough to get into the city. Since we were approaching from the opposite side from my first visit, we had a new stretch of wall to navigate, but it was in even worse repair.

What Sulemanni had said about Time not being able to afford ten men stuck with me. I had little concept of how many people there were in this world, but we had apparently put a dent in his number. Between the bomb, Sulemanni’s patrol, and the guards at the center… maybe there weren’t that many left to fight through.

Even if I was deluding myself, it was an encouraging thought.

My theory was supported when we neither saw nor heard anyone wandering the
alleyways as we worked our way towards the compound. I kept my head down, refusing to look at the bungalows and stone cottages and mobile homes and portions of cars that we passed. I wanted to see nothing that reminded me of home.

Only one thing was important right now, and I had to stay focused.

Soon, all around us were crumbling brick foundations. I stayed low, hiding behind the remaining walls, keeping an eye on my companions. Elspeth stuck to the shadows, flitting in and out of view. Sephas half-crawled. It was harder for Howl; bending over made him grimace, and he kept his hand pressed over the wound on his side. I didn’t think Sulemanni’s hasty cauterization was going to hold if this fight was all it promised to be.

She, on the other hand, was darting through the ruined buildings almost recklessly. I realized that she was used to this place; she must have lived here up until recently.

Her reason for leaving Time made me sick to think about, so I brought myself back to the present, picking my way around loose piles of bricks and wishing for some thick clouds to cover the blazing sun.

Somewhere, in that simply-constructed compound of buildings, was Caspar.

And Time was holding him captive far more directly this time.

Sulemanni led us right to the building where we had found Sephas last time. We all crowded in the hallway as she waited by the door, and when she closed it behind us, the knob glowed red under her hand. That was one way of making sure no one followed us, I
The dim hall was quiet. We made our way to the massive door at the end, following the march of the carved people on the walls. To my surprise, we weren’t even locked out.

The room was exactly as we had found it last time; warm and empty, books still carefully arranged on the shelves at the back wall. If there had been a struggle, someone had cleaned up well.

The only change was that the stone doors at the back were open.

I crept up to them, skirting around the throne. The eyes of the lamassus carved into the stone bored into me, but I didn’t think they could move the way the one at the cloisters had.

The doors opened to a flight of stairs leading down into shadow. A torch was fixed to the wall, casting pale light against the stone. The carvings continued, men bearing grain baskets and bulls and sheep and goats, all marching down into the dark.

It was too dark to see where the stairs ended, but I took the first step anyway. It was quiet behind me, and I looked over my shoulder to make sure everyone was still there.

Elspeth stood closest to me. Howl and Sephas hung back, both peering apprehensively into the dark.

Sulemanni had her back pressed against the door, and her hands shook at her sides.

“Are you all coming?” I asked, feeling wary all of a sudden.

Howl caved first, skirting carefully around me into the stairwell. Then Sephas followed. Sulemanni, though, stayed put.

“I can’t,” she croaked.
“Why?” Elspeth asked, her voice flat.

“He’s in there.” She looked away, staring out one of the high windows. “I can’t… I can’t.”

“Fine. Stay here, then.” Elspeth pushed past me.

I hung back, still watching Sulemanni. “Can you… guard this, or something?”

“I won’t let them in. I just…”

“It’s okay.”

She nodded, finally looking back at me. “I’m sorry.”

“I understand.”

I followed them down into the cave.

The air was cold and damp, heavy with a smell I couldn’t put my finger on. The stairs spilled out into a room so big I could hardly see the walls; the only indication of where they were came from the torches flickering in their holders. Close to the torches, I could make out shelves; as my eyes adjusted to the dark, I realized they were full of scrolls.

I wasn’t sure what I had been expecting—weapons, maybe, or plunder from who knows where—but the scrolls were a surprise.

Howl set off straight ahead. Before I followed him, I peered in at the huge rolls of paper, trying to make out what was written on them, but the tiny flag-shaped marks made no sense to me.

Ahead of me, Howl vanished into the dark.
I followed with Sephas and Elspeth, squinting. Soon I could make out a passage cut into the back wall. Far ahead, another dim torch told me it went on. There were no shelves in the hallway, just more carvings in the walls.

I picked my way along carefully, running my hand over the cool stone, my fingers brushing over little marching men. As we pressed forward, the ground started to slope down beneath my feet, and the air grew colder.

Then the tunnel ended, opening into another room, the corners lit by torches as they had been before. In this one, rows and rows of shelves rose almost to the low ceiling, completely packed with rolls of paper.

We found another passageway at the back. This time, the slope was steeper. The ground under my feet grew less even; the light thrown on the wall by the single torch showed roughly hewn stone rather than carvings.

Ahead of me, Howl slowed. I nearly fell over trying to stop, and Sephas bumped into my back.

Howl looked over his shoulder, and I could just see him mouth, “Careful.”

“What is it?” I breathed back.

“Listen.”

I strained my ears. All I could hear was my own heartbeat, then Elspeth’s shoes scuffing on the floor as she caught up.

But then a low growl, barely perceptible, rumbled through the air. A chill shot through me, and I prayed it wasn’t what I thought it was. We crept forward into the next chamber, saw the torchlight flicker on piles and piles of stone tablets stacked on the
uneven floor.

In the center of the room, the light played on the black fur and the shining horns and the glossy feathers of a bull-creature.

It was sprawled on its side, its hoofed feet kicked out towards us. Its side rose and fell in even breaths. It was asleep.

I knew why it was there. I had learned the hard way what those beasts were used for. Caspar was in the next chamber.

Howl was the first to set off. He picked his way through the maze of tablets, his footfalls so light I couldn’t hear them. Sephas followed him, then Elspeth and I kept identical pace with each other. Ahead, Howl disappeared into the next corridor. Sephas was close behind him.

My foot caught on a pile of tablets. They crashed to the floor, shattering into pieces, and instantly something knocked me over.

My head smacked into the floor so hard I was surprised my skull didn’t smash like the slabs. It took me five full seconds to get air back in my lungs, and by that time, I could feel the lamassus’s hot breath on my face.

I couldn’t move. I just prayed it would step on something that killed me quickly.

Someone let out a war cry. I realized it was Sephas when a long blade flashed in the torchlight. Hot blood spattered across my face, and the beast roared.

I rolled away, unceremoniously scrambling to my feet, sending piles and piles of stones flying. Elspeth’s arms came around me and dragged me away from the fight. I could hardly see what was happening; Sephas’s form blended in to the darkness, but the
scythe blade shone as he whipped it around in long arcs toward the creature.

This one was smaller than the one in the garden, and it danced out of the way, its hooves shaking the ground each time it landed.

Howl skidded around it, grabbed one of the horns that sprouted from its human head. He picked up his feet and hung from it, throwing the creature off balance. It stumbled in a circle, pawing at Howl, but unable to reach him.

Elspeth pulled me towards the passageway.

Howl’s hand slipped. The beast fixed its black eyes on me. Head down, sharp horns pointed directly at me, it charged.

And then someone shoved me, hard, in the shoulder, and I fell out of the way.

I was too shocked to process the sound. But I couldn’t look away from Elspeth, as she held the horn at its base, as the other end of it poked out of her back.

I barely registered the fact that Sephas was running for it, that the blade of the scythe sank in between the creature’s ribs and it stumbled. That the anguished cry came from him.

I did see Howl shove him towards me, and I felt him grab my arm and pull me toward the passageway. And I did see the outline of Elspeth flicker and fade into smoke.

I forced my steps to slow, my fists clenched at my sides. Sparks lit up the corners of my vision, and I breathed slowly and deeply to ward them off.

It wasn’t real. She would reform. Gather up all that shadowy smoke and solidify back
That nauseating sound hadn’t been real.

I took a slightly deeper breath. Beside me, Sephas followed my lead.

The tunnel grew narrower. When it became too dark to see, Sephas took my arm in one hand. And as much as I wanted to swat him away, to run up ahead and put the normal, comfortable amount of distance between us, I allowed it.

Having another human being there was comforting.

The ground under our feet grew damp and slippery. My shoulder collided with the wall, and I moved just behind Sephas, my free hand out to feel my way along. The walls pressed in on us, and the sandstone scraped against my fingers, and the moisture burned.

Then, up ahead, the end of the tunnel flickered with soft, warm candlelight.

Sephas slowed. I brushed past him, impossibly drawn, my heart pounding. This was the end. Somehow, I knew that even before I emerged into the chamber.

It was small, compared to the rooms far behind us. Roughly circular. Though the air felt moist, the sand underfoot was dry.

Drawings covered the walls. They were of the same animals that had been in all the carvings; bulls and sheep and goats, dancing across the room, but no people led them in these images. On the back wall, every available space was filled with an orange-red handprint. They were overlaid with minuscule tally marks of charcoal; small parallel lines that stacked on top of each other like a million crawling ants.

In the center of the room, there was a table roughly hewn from the sandstone. The candle, more a pillar of half-melted wax, threw light on an angelic, sleeping face.
He was curled around a pile of writing tablets, and leaning over those was a figure silhouetted in the candlelight.

He must have heard the coarse sand crunch under my feet; my gasp when I realized it couldn’t possibly be anyone else. But he didn’t rush, scratching something in charcoal over the tiny marks in the tablet before he turned to look at me.

He had a mop of curly black hair, a well-manicured beard. Black paint around his eyes. The robe he wore, tied at the waist with a sash that was too red for this place, almost brushed the ground.

He was shorter than I had expected, slimmer.

“You have made it a long way.”

There was an accent to his words, a sharpness I couldn’t attach to any language I had ever heard. But his voice was quiet, deep. And it shook, a hint of age creeping in when I saw none in the rest of him.

“Must be hard to breathe now.”

“It is,” I whispered. But the air in here didn’t burn my lungs. As I stepped further in, unexplainably drawn to the warmth of the candle, the dizziness that had hung over me started to fade.

“For the boy,” he explained, as if he understood. He gestured back to Caspar’s sleeping face. The candle’s flame flickered in his breath. “He should not taste the air of this place.”

I moved forward again, just slightly, to get a better look. He looked peaceful. There was not a mark on him that I could see.
“Neither should you.”

I looked back at Time. He had taken a step back, giving me space. Then I looked back to the doorway, seeing Sephas with his hands braced against the walls, clearly trying to control the shakes that rippled through his body.

I remembered whose fault it all was.

It wasn’t Sephas. Sephas had carried out the orders of the man before me. All of my hurt, every second I had missed him was this man’s fault.

The scared look in Caspar’s eyes when he looked around at this gray world was his fault.

Time folded his hands behind his back, watching me patiently. Candlelight caught in his dark eyes. There were frown lines between his brows.

He looked altogether human.

“Why did you do this?” I whispered.

He spoke like he was explaining the World Wars to a four-year-old. “The records must be kept. And it is best if one person keeps them. There is a continuity to time; it should be maintained.”

Caspar stirred, drawing his legs up to his chest.

My voice shook. “Who are you to decide that?”

“I am Kel-Sim.” He tilted his head, a sympathetic smile on his face. It was maddening.

“Who gave you the right?” My hands curled into fists.

“Bengani came before. She gave me the right.”
“I know you’re not supposed to still be here.” I took a step back, my arms shaking. “I know why you took him.”

“He paid a very small price.” He looked to Caspar again, and there was almost a streak of pride in his expression, like a father looking at his son. “A hundred years more, because he came. If something were lost… the consequences would be far worse.”

I kept my eyes fixed on him, resisting the urge to watch the sleeping boy. “What is there to lose?”

“People come into the world.” He held his hands in front of him, bringing his left in closer. “People leave.” He moved his right hand away. “I watch. I record them.”

“And what happens if you don’t?”

“Nothing that you understand.”

“Then it can’t be that bad.”

He laughed, a cold, hollow sound that was too loud for the little chamber. “Little one, you—”

“It worked before,” I forced in. “They said there were many before you, and the world is still here. Still turning. I know it doesn’t have to be you.”

His smile slipped. The look that replaced it was just slightly displeased, but it sent a chill down my spine. I remembered what Sephas had admitted to doing under this man, what had happened to Sulemanni, and the tiniest part of me wanted to throw up my hands and surrender.

But I would not.

“All I know,” I pressed on, “is that it’s not supposed to work this way. You had to rip
him away from his family, from me, so you could stay.” My voice shook. “It’s wrong. And I want him back.”

That sympathetic look was back again, and he shook his head at me. Denying something to a child. “It is done.”

“Then I’ll take him.” I turned to Caspar, took a step forward despite my growing sense of dread.

“You want to be with him, yes?”

I looked back at Kel-Sim.

“You can be with him.” He tipped his head towards Caspar. “In the garden. You will dream together. No fear, no pain. Only peace.”

The look on my mother’s face flashed through my mind. I shook my head. “No.”

“You would be home. Nothing to miss.”

“My family would miss me.” And I knew exactly what that looked like.

“The boy’s parents forgot. Yours will, in time.”

He was wrong. Caspar’s parents remembered just fine. “No.”

Kel-Sim frowned, but he didn’t stop me as I moved toward Caspar, reaching out to him. He stirred again when I touched his shoulder, opening one orange-brown eye to stare at me.

“Isobel.” He smiled, squirming, and stretched one arm over his head.

I crouched by the table, lowering myself to his level. “Hey, Caspar,” I whispered. “I’m here. We’re gonna go home.”

“I thought we got home.” He rubbed his eyes, then blinked sleepily at the ceiling.
“What’s the paintings for?”

“We’re in a cave.”

“Oh.”

I turned to look at Kel-Sim, and he was standing between me and the door.

Sephas was gone.

I rose back to my feet, the dread coming back in full force.

“You will not leave,” he told me, his expression serene.

A cold weight settled in my stomach.

“Isobel?” Caspar whispered.

“Hang in there,” I murmured back, reaching out to him. He took my hand; his skin was ice cold. I would not let this happen again.

I didn’t care who I had to fight through.

Something flashed orange over Kel-Sim’s shoulder.

“I’d rather be awake,” I said, squeezing Caspar’s hand.

Sephas’s arm slipped around Kel-Sim’s chest. His pale face seemed to float in the darkness behind him, the candlelight catching in his eyes. He pressed his hand against the man’s chest.

Black crept up a vein in Kel-Sim’s neck. His mouth opened in a silent gasp, and his eyes widened, the whites frighteningly large against the black paint around them.

I moved in front of Caspar so he couldn’t see.

And then Kel-Sim clapped his hand over Sephas’s, and he sucked in a lungful of air. Behind him, Sephas cried out. The black faded from Kel-Sim’s neck, and it crept up
Sephas’s arm, blending with the band of black inked into his skin.

Kel-Sim spun around, dragging Sephas with him, and threw him on the ground.

I pressed against the table, my heart pounding. Sephas curled into a ball on the floor, and he clutched his chest, his face contorted with pain.

The other man took a step toward him, snarling.

“Leave him alone!” I blurted, pushing off from the table. He froze to stare at me, and his brow furrowed.

Then he reached for me.

I stepped back again, almost tripping over the table. Curing his lip, he skirted around Sephas’s form, his arm reaching for my forehead. I backpedaled around the table, and he followed me. With each step, the snarl deepened.

He got too close, and I knocked his hand away with my forearm. A wave of dizziness came over me, but I stayed upright, and I dodged when he reached for me with the other hand. Caspar was still on the table, curled up with his hands over his ears.

Just like the rest of them, I knew I couldn’t let him touch my skin. The consequences this time, though, were much worse than a shock.

He lunged for me again, and I vaulted over the table, landing clumsily on the sand by Sephas. I couldn’t lead him in this circle forever. I had to get Caspar up, and we had to run fast enough that he wouldn’t catch up and so much as brush against an errant hand.

Sephas tried to push himself back up, falling back into the sand.

I danced out of the way as Kel-Sim tried again to catch up, and I spun in a kick that landed on his side, just below the sash. He stumbled to the side, and when he righted
himself, he was spitting with fury.

Then he was too close, too fast.

I didn’t see him move. I just saw his hand hovering an inch from my face. I flung myself back to avoid it, and I collided with the rock behind me, knocking the air out of my lungs. Then I rolled to the side and his hand landed on the stone, square in the middle of a painted bull’s black body.

I stepped back, anticipating the trick again, and I looked towards the door and twitched as if I was going to run for it. In the blink of an eye, he was across the room, and I ran behind the table to Caspar and shook him.

Kel-Sim turned back around and bellowed in anger. When he moved towards us again, he nearly toppled forward. I looked down to see Sephas clutching his ankle.

The man kicked him savagely in the stomach and advanced. Pulling Caspar with me, I tried another feint, but he saw it coming this time, and we nearly crashed into each other as I dashed back around the table.

His fingertips hovered in front of my eyes, as if in slow motion, but when they touched my skin and cold rushed through me, I swore I heard footsteps in the hallway.

The sand was soft under me.

Caspar’s hand was warm in mine. The air smelled sweet, and my body was loose and relaxed, like I’d just woken up on a Saturday at noon.

In forcing myself to breathe for the last week, I hadn’t felt that way in a while.
Someone cried out, then, and I forced myself to open my eyes. The candle flickered, throwing jumping shadows on the wall, two figures dancing around the shapes of the painted bulls.

Sand, kicked up from the ground, sprinkled on my face. I shook my head, forcing myself onto my hands and knees, shaking Caspar’s hand to wake him up.

Across the room, Kel-Sim and Howl grappled with each other.

Howl’s movements were clumsy, but unpredictable where Kel-Sim’s were practiced. Time aimed a jab at his face; he fell over backwards to avoid it, and in the process knocked one leg out from under him. Kel-Sim fell, rolled to absorb the impact. Howl scrambled up and gave him a shove that interrupted the movement. Then they both went behind the table, and I lost sight of them.

Sephas lay motionless on the floor.

I pulled Caspar to his feet with me, and I saw them wrestling behind the table. Howl had Kel-Sim’s hands pinned, safe from whatever havoc the touch of his skin could wreak, but the other man brought his knee up into Howl’s stomach and he yelped in pain.

I dropped back to the floor, again taking Caspar with me. We had to stay unnoticed. Leaving him there, I scrambled across the sand to Sephas’s motionless form.

He was breathing. Barely. I braced a hand on his arm, whispered, “I’m sorry” in his ear. Then I reached into his pocket and pulled out the knife.

If Howl lost this fight, I still couldn’t touch his skin, and I had nothing else with which to defend myself.

Crawling back to Caspar, I flicked it open, wondering when it had shrunk back to this
form. And how I could make it into a scythe again. The blade caught the candlelight, gleaming unnaturally, and I remembered how easily it had slid through the metal handcuffs on Sephas’s wrists. Skin, muscle, bone would be nothing. I gripped it carefully, holding it in front of myself, waiting.

There was a grunt; I couldn’t tell who it belonged to. Then the two men scrambled back to their feet.

Kel-Sim looked over to find us both upright, and he lunged. Howl intercepted. He crashed into Kel-Sim, taking him back to the floor, and I grabbed Caspar’s hand and pulled him towards the door.

Then Kel-Sim was there.

I brandished the knife in front of me. When he caught sight of it, he slowed, pulling back the hand that was reaching for me. His wide eyes told me he knew that blade. Or he had a basic idea of what it could do.

That gave Howl just enough time to jump over the table and clamp his arms around the other man, wrenching him away from us. I pushed Caspar ahead, into the tunnel, hissing, “Go ahead, I’ll be right behind you.”

There was terror in his eyes as he looked back at me.

I said, “I promise.”

He ran.

As I turned, Howl landed a punch in Kel-Sim’s stomach. The man doubled over, and as he did, he wrapped his fingers around Howl’s forearm.

Howl bellowed in pain. I jumped, wincing as the sound echoed around the chamber.
Howl stumbled away, cradling his arm against his chest.

Kel-Sim turned to me. Before I could stop him, he had wrapped his fingers around my wrist, and he squeezed so tightly I dropped the knife with a wail. He forced me back into the wall, pressing his other hand against my chest to hold me there.

“You should have slept,” he snarled.

He let go of my wrist and clamped his hand around my throat.

Heat sank into my skin, spreading out down my spine, into my arms and my legs. It felt like something was pulling everything out of me; sucking, pulling at my limbs. The room blurred; the bulls on the wall danced, and the marks at the back of the room marched up to the ceiling.

There was a light there, a light I hadn’t seen before, and it was blinding me. The heat bloomed into pain. Every nerve was on fire.

I was tired. So tired.

Then it stopped.

The light was gone. The animals were still. Kel-Sim’s eyes were wide.

He looked down. Something poked at his shirt. Then red bloomed out from the spot, and he fell against me. Slid down to the ground.

His blood was red.

Sephas stood behind him, one hand still holding his chest. Sephas’s knife protruded from Kel-Sim’s back, square in his spine.

Time slowed. Sephas looked over his shoulder at Howl, who was pushing off the table. He took long, slow steps across the room. Dust motes floated through the air.
Blood roared in my ears. When I blinked, the room went dark for seconds at a time.

“How?” Sephas asked, the sound almost comically slow.

“The blood,” came the reply a minute later.

Howl fell on his knees by Kel-Sim’s prone form.

He pulled out the knife. Blood poured out of the wound. Slowly seeped into the ground beneath, spreading out one grain at a time.

Howl grasped the blade of the knife.

And time started again.

I gasped, filling my lungs with air. Sephas lurched forward. I caught him, guiding him back up to his feet.

Howl stood, let out a grunt of pain. The knife fell blade-down in the sand where Kel-Sim’s blood was spilled. Black dripped from Howl’s hand, mingling with it.

“There… there are…” He pressed his other hand to his face, grimacing.

“Howl?” Sephas murmured.

“Can…” He opened his eyes again, staring at us. Past us. All around the room. “Can you see them? All of them? There are so many.”

“Howl, there is nothing.” Sephas swayed again, and I grabbed his arm and pulled it over my shoulder.

“They’ll…” His eyes widened in recognition. He ran to the table, where the pile of tables and charcoal were scattered from the fight. He flipped one over to a blank side and started scrawling.

I squinted. Names. They looked like names.
He looked around again. Scratched out more marks, frantic. “Better… that’s better…”

Sephas and I exchanged a glance.

He kept writing for a full minute. As he did, blood smeared from his hand onto the tablet.

Red blood.

His palm was shifting color. Warmth swirled up from the cut, jumping with his heartbeat. It worked its way up his arm, turning his dark gray skin to brown.

“Sephas,” he murmured, pausing for a second. “Take the sash.”

He let go of me, stooped down where Kel-Sim lay. I looked away, and then his arm was around my shoulder again, and I caught a glimpse of bright red out of the corner of my eye.

“Sephas, can you take her back?”

“I can take her back,” he whispered.

Howl sat on the table. He stopped for a moment, looking around the chamber, and his eyes were filled with tears.

Caspar was waiting for me at the end of the tunnel.

My heart nearly stopped as he jumped out of the shadows and wrapped his arms around me in a hug.

I hugged him back, one-armed. Sephas tried to move away, but didn’t let go entirely, and I adjusted his arm once Caspar let me go.
“There’s a big thing in the corner,” he whispered. “Like the thing that chased us.”

“I know,” I murmured back. A lump rose in my throat as I remembered what it had taken to get past that big thing in the corner.

A shake in Sephas’s arm told me he remembered, too.

“Let’s get out,” I said. “Let’s go home.”

The rise back into the light was almost unbearable. My eyes watered, but I forced them to stay open.

Sulemanni stood at the top of the stairs, waiting for us. The throne was against the door, scorch marks covering the bottom half of it.

Sephas held out the belt, and she thrust her fist in the air and gave a savage whoop of triumph. Then she pressed her hands against the throne, and flames shot out from underneath it as the massive thing skimmed along the floor. The door flew open.

Six people nearly fell in. I recognized several of them as the ones who had confronted us at the center. One of them moved threateningly towards us, then his eyes fell on the strip of red cloth and he faltered.

“Howl is Time now,” he said, and the first man’s eyes widened at the name.

Sulemanni murmured, “He really did it.”
“He did,” I said, shifting my arm around Sephas’s waist as he sagged. “Will you let us go?”

They thought about it for a moment, passed another conversation in looks amongst themselves. Then they stepped aside, and we passed through.

And as we moved out into the courtyard, five other people did the same. I didn’t know if this was the last remnant of them, all who were left after those we had taken out, but no one else so much as spoke to us. Sephas held the cloth aloft like a banner, and we left the city untouched.

I held Caspar’s hand. Sephas leaned on me, his breathing heavy.

And we headed home.

We walked for the whole day, our progress slow due to Caspar’s tripping and Sephas’s near-inability to lift his feet. I didn’t know what Kel-Sim had done to him, but it had not been good. After the sun went down, I decided to allow us a rest, and Sephas stumbled away and fell against a tree.

Caspar curled up in the pine needles and closed his eyes, his chest rising and falling slowly. I took a place between them, drawing my legs up to me chest, tucking my hands in the pockets of Elspeth’s hoodie.

Elspeth.

A lump rose in my throat, and I blinked away tears. She wasn’t coming back, and I knew it. Had she meant to take that hit for me? She wasn’t even used to being solid; had
she expected it to pass harmlessly through her?

But she suffered all my wounds. It would have killed us both.

I tucked my head against my knees, trying not to sob out loud.

“Isobel?”

Hastily wiping my cheeks, I looked up. Sephas was watching me, his eyes half-closed. His hand was still pressed over his chest, and his breaths were shallow but more even than they had been. “Sorry.” I sniffed.

He shook his head. “Are you all right?”

“I…” I wrapped my arms around my knees.

He knew. I could tell. He looked away for a moment, swallowing, his eyes suddenly rimmed with darker gray. He had known her better than I had. I almost wished he would let me hug him, but that was doubtful.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“I am, too,” he said.

Caspar stirred, curling up tight against the cool night breeze.

“Thank you,” I breathed, watching the boy.

“What?”

I looked back at Sephas. “Thank you. For bringing me here.”

He looked away, a little gray around his cheeks.

The meadow was empty that time.
Sulemanni’s scorch marks remained. The grass that had once been green was mostly black. It made it hard to distinguish where the center of the Otherlands actually was.

But Sephas knew, and he led us there. I held Caspar’s hand tight, and he followed along closely behind me.

He was not slipping away this time.

Sephas stopped purposefully over a spot, peering down at the little blades of grass that had survived the firestorm. I had never seen anything so green in my life. I focused on them, trying to prepare myself for the assault of color that was about to come.

Then he reached out his hand. As I took it, I looked into his gray eyes.

Cold crept up my arm. My fingers went numb.

I blinked, and the sky behind his head was blue, peppered with sparse leaves the color of fire.

Caspar’s hand slipped out of mine. For a moment, I panicked, spinning around to make sure he was there. But his golden head was bobbing towards the rickety swing set.

I took a step forward. “Caspar…” The wood was rotten. He was too big. The beam would snap and hit his head.

I heard the sliding door fly open, my mother’s voice cry, “Isobel.” And I looked over my shoulder as she plunged down the stairs, one hand pressed over her mouth, the other reaching for me.

And Sephas was gone, a gray patch in the grass where his shadow had been.
Afterword

*Breathe* is heavily inspired by the literary tradition of the *katabasis*. The motif of a descent into and a return from the Underworld occurs many times in myth, perhaps most memorably within the stories of Orpheus and Heracles in the Greek tradition. During my research, Dr. Harvey brought the katabasis portions of the epic of Gilgamesh to my attention. Tablets nine through eleven were particularly useful to me; in these chapters, Gilgamesh travels through complete darkness and across the Waters of Death in search of the secret to immortality. This epic played a large role in my decision to portray a Sumerian representation of time. Several other elements of Sumerian culture, such as their usage of sexagesimal units of time and their development of one of the earliest writing (and therefore record-keeping) systems, also contributed to this decision and the characterization of Kel-Sim.

I leaned most heavily on the Orpheus myth in writing this story. Isobel echoes Orpheus’s protestations that his loved one was taken before their time was up; Ann Woodlief quotes from one of several editions, “But I seek one who came to you too soon./ The bud was plucked before the flower bloomed./ I tried to bear my loss. I could not bear it.” The sudden disappearance of a perfectly healthy child mirrors Eurydice’s untimely death, and my protagonist had a similar reaction when presented with the opportunity to recover her friend. However, I chose to deviate from the myth in several respects. In Dr. Sturr’s Young Adult Literature course, the general rule of hope was often
reiterated. Characters in this genre nearly always have the opportunity to better their circumstances or escape hardship through their own initiative. If Caspar was not recovered in the end, as with Eurydice, I feel that the book would not have been true to that message of hope that is so common in the genre. I did, though, choose to provide indications that the exact version of Caspar who was lost is not the same version who was recovered. He is portrayed as bewildered and uncomfortable with the time he lost during his sleep (not to mention excruciatingly uncomfortable in a suddenly-adult body, which Dr. Sturr pointed out is an interesting metaphor for adolescence). Isobel considers on several occasions whether he would have been better off being allowed to stay asleep. Another theme I noticed in the class on Young Adult literature was the emphasis on personal autonomy; the decision to take control over one’s own circumstances, rather than simply watching events take place, is critical to the genre, and this theme is summarized with Isobel’s line, “I’d rather be awake.”

With regard to the setting, I maintained several Classically-inspired ideas of what an Underworld should contain. The river Styx and Gilgamesh’s Waters of Death are reflected in the dangerous sea; characters refer to our world as “above,” and darkness plays an important role in giving an unsettling feeling to the setting. The absence of color also lends to the unearthly feel of the Otherlands, and it makes Isobel extremely conspicuous—a feeling with which many young adults can identify.

The other characters draw from both classical and young adult literature in several ways. Each resident of the Otherlands represents a concept of varying degrees of abstraction (death, the tides, a nightmare, and time). My decision to include this theme
came from the long list of such personifications in Hesiod’s *Theogony*. The two most prominent secondary characters, Sephas and Howl, are vehicles for the theme of personal autonomy.

This book has been in the works since my high school days, and many of my readings over the years have influenced the story. My favorite books placed relatable characters in fantastic settings, and even now I rarely read books without at least some elements of the supernatural. Perhaps the largest influences on *Breathe* were Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* and Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, and Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* books inspired me to be more deliberate with my classical allusions. I also loved books that took girls on adventures, and thus Isobel rescues her own version of a damsel in distress.

As a manuscript, *Breathe* first came into being during the National Novel Writing Month program my junior year of high school, and I remember scrawling down inspiring lines from *Paradise Lost* to keep myself going (Hollowdeep’s name comes directly from a line in Book 1). The manuscript I produced for my thesis only vaguely resembles that first edition, and comparing the two brings to my attention a very satisfying improvement in my writing.

The title of *Breathe* has been an integral part of the story since its first incarnation. Survival in the Otherlands requires a higher level of self-awareness, a more intentional focus than our own world. Isobel sets off on a grand quest, but she often neglects some basic (and vital) elements of her well-being. More than anything, then, *Breathe* is a reminder to myself: go on whatever great adventure happens to call my name, but don’t forget to breathe.
Cited in Afterword:

http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/

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Readings for Breathe:


