

APPREHENSION
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January 10th, 2017, Morning

Some people are destined for greatness. It is in their blood, they have no choice in the matter. Others have to claw their way to the top; they have to work for the destinies of their choosing. Mine has been chosen for me because of what is in my blood--a mixture of the two. I am resigned to the life fate has chosen for me. I am submissive to the path, unguarded and weak. I am an anomaly that must be rectified. Fortunately they want to fix me. Others are not as lucky.

I stare out my bedroom window. The sun is no more. I only know it existed because of stories my mother tells. Darkness envelops the world like a mask, hiding everything it once was. Spells keep the planet alive now. It will ice over without them.

The steel bars on my window obstruct my view but make me feel safe. Creatures hide in the dark, too. My eyes adjust to the dark and hone in on several hulking figures lumbering through the field by my home. The creatures want me. They cannot have me though, I'm eighteen now and my fate is here. The correction needs to be made.

"Emmalina, time for breakfast," my mother peeks around the doorframe. I turn and smile at her. She is all I have. She is also the one who made the mistake.

"Okay," I tell her before returning my gaze to the creatures. They visibly sneer and hiss. I let my eyes glow, a snow white reflection of my eyes reflects back at me in the window. I warn the creatures but they know I am weak.

"They are back," I tell her while backing away from the window. They don't bother her because she is human.

"I know, honey." She strokes the back of my hair and gently pulls me out of my room.

"I have to talk to you about something, Em. It's important," she lets her sentence hang as she always tends to do. My mother is erratic and unpredictable; it makes me uncomfortable. I sit down at the plain wooden table, cross my ankles and wait for her to finish.

"You're eighteen now so that means they'll be coming for you." I know this fact. It's the only way to right her mistake. She looks shaken, nervous. She continues,

"I may have left out some details about what exactly you can expect," My eyes shine white in annoyance and fear. We never speak of the correction in detail.

"What do you mean?" I ask. She turns her face away from me. My eyes unnerve her, reminds her I'm not what she pretends I am. She hesitates, turns to the stove and stirs the contents of a pot. It is the basic soup we eat every day. We are fortunate enough to have a bountiful garden to harvest from.

"Tell me now," I push for her to explain quicker.

“I never told you how they planned on fixing you, honey. It’s not a simple procedure or a magical potion,” she bangs the cooking spoon down and turns to me. She has tears in her eyes. The unknown terrifies me; my mother in this state terrifies me. Fear is the only thing I can feel. All of my other emotions dissipated as I grew.

“You are to be wed to a dark magic user, Em. They aren’t fixing *you*, they are fixing *my* mistake. You are to purify the lineage by having children with a dark witch...to remove the human—my human DNA from the genetic line.” My eyes are not flickering ivory, they are glowing constantly; I know my human color of blue is nowhere in sight. She has kept this secret for a long time and I don’t know why. I can’t be fixed. I am broken forever. She comes to cradle my face in her hands. It is a human gesture. I feel few human qualities. Most have already disappeared.

“Calm down, baby,” She whispers. I tremble in my seat, unable to keep the magic at bay. I clench my fists and release them slowly and close my eyes. When they open I make sure they are blue.

“When will they come, then?” This is my fate. I have no choice. My mother is sobbing hot, wet tears in my lap. If I could feel, I would be sorry she is anguished. I raise my hand awkwardly and touch her head gently. It seems appropriate.

“Soon. They are coming soon. Oh my, God. This is all my fault! I can’t let this happen to you. They only let you live if I agreed to this at your birth. I thanked God you were a girl!” Half human boys were killed immediately after birth. She holds both my wrists and looks me in my eye.

“You’re still in there, Em. I can see it.” This emotion is too much. I think it is why they want to purify the lineage. I turn my face away.

“I do what is asked of me. I am lucky to be here,” I say trying to put depth into my words. I want to convince her I am myself, but I am unsure how. I am to be a breeder. I will be the bride of a dark witch; I will finally be protected from the creatures. I rise to get a wooden bowl from the clean rack and ladle soup in. Her eyes watch my every step.

“There is another way,” she says when I return to the table. I spoon a carrot into my mouth and look at her blankly. I know there is only one way.

“What way?” I ask.

“I’ve been doing research for years, Emmalina. There are others like you that have escaped their fate.” I drop my spoon and cock my head to the side. I am unsure why, but I am interested in this.

“How do you know this?” I will my eyes to stay blue. I want her to tell this story.

“You have to hang on to the human part of yourself...there has to be some will left inside to want a different path. Do you understand, honey?” I cringe when she

calls me the pet name but something inside of me lurches. It wants to come to the surface but it is buried too deep.

“There is only one fate, mother,” I tell her. The world has ended; we are lucky to even get one chance. I hear a creature snarl outside and shake with fear. They can’t get inside because of the wards, but their noises are unsettling.

“I’ve met them myself, Em. They are half dark and half human...just like you. They have lives of their own out in the forest. Don’t you want that? Somewhere inside, you have to want that, right?” She speaks with conviction, trying to draw something out of me as she always does. I don’t understand why, she knows her mistake has to be corrected. I don’t answer her. I smile and leave the room. I hear her sobs from my bedroom and realize I have to wait for her to leave before I can finish my breakfast.

I sit down at my desk and pull a large broken piece of mirror close to my face. I like my appearance. It comforts me. My blonde hair is long and if I will my eyes to stay blue, I look beautiful. I hear a creature rasp at my window. My eyes glow white. I shut them. I am not fond of them either. My husband will want them white. My human side needs to vanish. It is only a hindrance. I throw the mirror at the window and watch as it shatters into a million pieces. My mother appears in my room. Her face is red from crying though her features yield to shock. Looking at the mess I created I tell her,

“I’m sorry. I’ll clean it. The creatures won’t leave me alone.” I am tired of them. I can’t leave the house. When I was a child I would play in the fields, now I am trapped inside. They sense my otherness and wish to destroy me. My mother watches as I sweep the mess, tossing the scraps of our only reflective glass into the trash. She looks wistful as she grabs the brown sack of trash out of my hands to dump it in the trash ditch. I liked the mirror; its absence almost makes me feel...something.

I grab the only book I own and lie back on my bed. It’s from the old world. I’m not sure how it survived the magic war that destroyed the earth but it contents me. The words are as familiar as the back of my eyelids. The book holds a child’s fable about a sleeping princess and a gallant prince. My mother was made to read it multiple times a day until I was able to read it myself. Now, I do not understand the words *once upon a time*. There is only one time. I read the empty words until my mother comes back.

She is panting and distraught when she returns from the ditch. Lately she goes there to get away from me. My magic disturbs her. The ditch is a half-mile away from our home. It’s close to the forests of nothingness--a place I’ve never been. I tell her again,

“I’m sorry.” I stand to face her, as that is respectful.

“Why did you break the mirror?” She asks through exasperated breaths. I’m not sure how to answer.

“I don’t know. The creatures.” It is the only explanation I can come up with.

“What did the creatures make you *feel*, Emmalina Weaver?” She says my name to enforce my humanness. Dark witches don’t have traditional names.

“I felt fear,” I answer automatically knowing it’s all I am capable of.

“No, you didn’t feel fear. You felt *anger*,” she says while approaching quietly. Perhaps it was an emotion similar to fear, but she is probably wrong. She hugs me and I wrap my arms around her body. Hugs are comfortable and constant. She takes a deep breath in and speaks through choked sobs,

“They’re already here.” I pull back and look at her widened eyes. She is fearful so I am fearful. I take a step back from her as I hear the creatures baying outside.

“It’s finally time to correct it,” I state out loud as my eyes glow white. She shakes her head and is unable to control her features. It lurches again, something deep inside. It gets further up this time and I almost sense a reaction to her despair. My eyes are blue.

“Feel, Emmalina...feel. Live, love, be vulnerable, and make mistakes. That is the true meaning of life. Being human is a gift to cherish. You can have whatever you want in the world, darling girl. Don’t let them take that from you.” She lightly grazes the side of my face and I know she sees the child she raised from birth not the glitch in my poor breeding. Her words are nothing more than silly notions. She is human. Her kind is almost extinct.

“Okay, mother. I will try.” I grab her hand on my face and lean into it. I am relieved at the lack of howling until the new unfamiliar sound of our door banging commences. The dark witches are here for me. I wonder if my husband has come himself. My eyes glisten ivory at the thought. The terror rises at the unknown but I have read the records about the palaces and grandiose witch cities. I am ready. I open the door and tread back a few paces.

There are five dark witches; three men and two women. Their eyes glow multiple shades of white. I am entranced, as I’ve never seen another witch before. In eighteen years I have only seen my mother and the creatures. The witches barge in and my mother takes me by the arm and pulls me to her. I want to go to them. The witches are like me. I grab my ponytail when I realize that my silken blonde hair is unlike their jet-black manes. I look different. They scrutinize me. The males ravage my body with their eyes and the women look at me curiously.

“Well, well, well. This darkling was definitely worth the wait,” A male says through gritted teeth. I smile because I think this means they are happy with me. I will fit in where I’m going. Maybe he is my husband.

“Her eyes,” the females say in unison. I forget they are blue and urge the white glow to return. All five of the witches smile. I smile. My mother wails in pain. When I turn to look she is writhing on the floor in shocked torment. I kneel next to her because I am uncertain what is happening.

“What is wrong?” I ask. A male witch has his fingers poised like daggers at my mother. Magic streams are punishing her body. Her frail human body. I feel fear for her life. I choke back a scream.

“Em,” mother whispers through her pain, “I am paying for my mistake,” She closes her eyes as another stream of killing magic courses through her body. “Live your life, baby. Make mine worth it.” My breaths come fast as comprehension dawns. I watch her sputter and gasp for air and my heart races faster than I ever thought possible. Terror escalates into something larger than myself.

“Say goodbye, darkling,” a female witch screeches behind me. I know what goodbye means so I clutch her small hand in mine. I lean my face down close to hers and stroke an errant tear from her temple. I press a kiss to her cheek as I recall her doing to me as a child. When I’m near enough she murmurs something softly.

“They will kill you when they’re done with you. The final correction.” A shiver runs down my spine at her words. I stand tall and back away from her slowly, carefully. The five have their eyes on my mother; my everything. The witches light the room with a burst of hot magic so bright I shield my eyes. She just paid for her grave mistake—my life.

I run.

I don’t think about anything other than my mother’s dead body lying still on the floor. I run far and fast and hope they don’t catch me. I run for the nothingness; it is my plan to get lost in it. For the first time in my life I have no concern for the creatures—I have something more powerful to dread. I pump my arms and breathe rapidly as I speed toward a new goal. Sudden realization hits and along with fear I feel a new emotion pumping through my veins like scalding water. My mother was wrong about what I felt when I broke the mirror because I feel it now,

I feel *anger*. My eyes are blue.

January 10th, Midday

My body is tired. Running is something I haven't done since childhood. The dark part of my body can go on, the human part wants to rest. Nothingness is even darker than I imagined it. The grey hazy light that can be seen in the sky is completely covered by thick, black trees. The creatures aren't here. I don't know why but I am glad. The air smells different, my skin feels odd, and my anger is still tepid. I wait for it to leave because it makes me feel awkward. I have never been able to control my fear and now I wonder if anger will be laced in every waking moment. On its own, I prefer it to fear. It is more bearable and it drives a response from somewhere new.

My worn out boots crunch leaves as I walk. The noise makes me angrier. They will give away my location when the dark witches find where I've gone. I know they *will* come to fix the mistake. I take off my boots, strip off my socks and continue to tread lighter on the cold ground. For a moment I forget why I don't want them to find me. Then I remember her dead body and the words she said. They were not empty words as so many of the words she spoke throughout my lifetime. *They will kill you when they are done with you.* Just like they killed her after her job was completed.

Anger.

I will remind myself of these words when I want to return to my fate. In the nothingness I do not exist—it satisfies me. I urge my feet to move faster through the forest. I let my eyes glow white to cast additional light on my trail. I hear something moving in the distance. I stop. The black trees look icy but it is just an illusion—they are very much alive and thriving. Perhaps it is a tree making noise. No...there is a growl. The creatures are here. I shut my eyes to hide the light and the growling immediately ceases. I walk a few paces to a large clump of trees and slump against a trunk. I am quiet as I lace my boots back on. After, I dig my fingers into the murky, ashen dirt by my sides to keep my magic quelled. I have been wandering aimlessly, without a stopping point, and my magic is urging me to use it as a solution.

I vibrate. My body hums as the magic courses through me as vital as blood. I can't keep it away like I used to. I am eighteen and the transition is complete. My humanness is gone. I would pretend for my mother but now there is no point. I can be what I was born to become. My stomach growls; reminding me of the human parts that will never disappear, I clutch my middle and think about my book. I want to go back for it but know that I cannot without being caught by the witches. My memory knows the story by heart so I begin to recite it in my head. The familiar, hollow words calm me.

I hear movement again and know without a doubt it is coming from the trees. I look up and gaze at the static branches and the still leaves. I feel the anger leaving as I take in my surroundings. I like it in nothingness. I am blanketed by nature, an entity that has long forgotten my name. Another rustle. My eyes spark white.

“Turn it off!” A voice hisses from above. My eyes glow brighter in fear.

“I’m serious, bitch. The savages are here.” The creatures have a different name in nothingness, as do I. I know they are one of the same. I still can’t urge my blue eyes to come. The terror and anger are back and stronger than ever. Rasping hot, stinking breath is so close I can feel it. I hear her sigh in the trees and flick something. A primitive arrow shoots, hits and kills the savage. It falls toward me as I deftly move away from its hulking corpse.

I look up warily. She drops down from the trees, lithe and graceful. I stare at her—committing every feature to memory. The girl is my savior. She wears worn plaid and torn blue jeans. Her bow and arrow are swung on her back like a warrior and her eyes are not glowing. Her eye color is silver. She is one of whom my mother spoke of. I know she is not a dark witch. She is a darkling.

She yells, “I said turn it off! You freak!” I step back from her. I don’t understand her words and her tone is unfamiliar. She bends over the savage and rips the head off. My eyes widen in shock. I’ve never seen such savageness.

“Savages?” I say. She tosses the head several feet away and meets my gaze.

“Yes, freak. Savages...and more will be here soon if you don’t turn that shit off!” She kicks the corpse away and readies her bow to shoot again. I introduce myself.

“I’m Emmalina Weaver.” My eyes are blue. I look at her from the back. She is strong yet small. Her hair is black like the dark witches. She pulls the string back, locks her sights on something and holds her breath. I hold my breath. She doesn’t let the bow go. She lowers it and looks at me curiously.

“Well, well, Emma. Finally pulled your act together. Took you long enough. Nice eyes by the way,” She squints in the darkness to look at my face.

“I am hungry,” I say quickly.

“Oh, Jesus. You are really far-gone, aren’t you? Fuck. I should just put you out of your misery now...just say the word.” She places her hands on her hips and raises one eyebrow. She has asked a question I don’t understand. I smile. She raises her bow up, readying to shoot--in my direction.

“No, please don’t. I’m frightened!” The girl smiles.

“Okay, not all the way gone, then.” I passed a test. I smile back at her. She shakes her head.

“They are going to fucking kill me for this.” Her words confuse me. I want to ask if she knows where I can find food but she wasn’t happy when I told her of my hunger.

“Who? The creatures will kill you?” It seems she is prepared to take on the creatures. I would be dead if not for her shooting abilities.

“No. Not the creatures,” she closes her eyes and takes in a deep breath.

“The dark witches killed my mother this morning. I ran from them. I will hide in the nothingness from them,” I tell her hoping to portray humanness by sharing a story.

“Today? They came for you today?” Her forehead wrinkles and she has fear in her voice. I sense it.

“Yes. Today,” I tell her. She scans the woods while asking,

“And you ran? Why?” I’m hesitant to tell her—I think she won’t comprehend. I look down to the ground and answer her honestly.

“Because I felt.” Her head snaps back to look at me. She looks me up and down twice more before grabbing my hand and leading me away.

“Then let’s get you the fuck out of here before the next thing you feel is death.”

“Okay,” I say while wrapping my hand around hers. I know what death means and it frightens me. I will trust the girl. She can protect me from the savages. She beheads another creature with one hard jerk using only one hand. She throws the head to the side and says,

“I’m Lana.”

The girl is a savage herself.

January 10th, Night

All my senses are on overload as we trudge through nothingness. The girl, Lana is at ease here. She tells me if I keep my magic subdued the savages won't attack. Knowing this a long time ago would have made me less fearful. I wonder why my mother didn't tell me. Perhaps she didn't know. I feel a pang of something at the thought of her.

"Why did they kill her?" I ask. I walk behind her and I step in the exact same spots she does. Our feet are almost the same size. She looks at me warily over her shoulder, turns back with her bow and answers.

"You know why. They are assholes. They want to rid the planet of darklings," She abruptly stops. I stand behind her as still as possible and shut my eyes tightly. I don't want any more savages to come. I also shut them because I do not want to see another gruesome kill. Lana laughs. My eyes fly open at the sound.

"I about shot you in the head, bitch," Lana says to another girl around the same age. The other girl laughs out loud and they embrace each other in a friendly way. I feel another twinge of emotion drive through my body, but it is gone just as quickly. The other girl notices me for the first time and does not look pleased.

"Lana, you're kidding right?" They both look at me oddly. Like something is wrong with me. I realize I am very different from them. The girl's eyes are also matte and a stagnant silver color. Lana shakes her head and tells the girl,

"Afraid not, Bec. These freaks find me like I'm the leader at the lost animal shelter." They laugh at me and I feel anger return. My face feels hot and although I don't understand the words she says I know the attitude is harsh. I fold my arms over my chest. The girl cocks her head and looks at my quizzically.

Lana speaks, "look at her. She feels, she isn't gone yet. I couldn't just leave her out there. A savage practically ate her alive...but she knows to turn the freak switch off to stay safe. I've already made progress." I am furious as her words echo off the trees and resonate within me.

"I am standing right here. Don't talk about me like I can't hear you," I say loudly surprised at my voice. It sounds different—punctuated with a foreign note. I know good manners and respect are to be upheld. The girl raises her eyebrows and approaches slowly.

"You're right, Lana. This one still has fire. She looks weird though. You know the others will be mad, right? Finn will probably cut off your head and feed it to the savages for bringing another one back."

"No!" I scream at the girl. I don't want Lana to die. I don't want another head removed from a body. My heart pumps with a new terror. Lana walks over and puts her arm around my shoulders. I don't relax. My breathing is erratic. I've almost reached my limit and the magic wants out.

“It’s a figure of speech, Emma. Finn is a friend,” Lana says to me. She looks at the other girl, Bec and spins her pointer finger in circles by her temple. These darklings are confusing.

“I figure Finn will shit tacks for a couple days, shoot me dirty looks for a few more and then life will move on. What would make me the bigger asshole? Leaving her in the forest with savages eating her brains or subjecting her to the circle?” Bec looks away. She does not know which alternative would be preferable. I am glad Lana left the dark witches out of the options. They make me angry.

“I hate the creatures. I prefer the circle.” It cannot be worse than the stinking savages. I notice we are at the edge of nothingness. I see houses through the brush. The glow of lights captures my attention. I can’t look away. The girls are talking but I can’t hear them. My focus is on the new unknown before me. The houses are all very similar and they form a large circle. My eyes glow white.

“That is the circle?” I ask as I point off in the distance. Bec punches me in the arm. I grab my bicep in pain, but my eyes stop glowing. She smiles.

“Uh...yeah. That’s the circle,” Lana says. She takes my hand and yanks me to a walk. Bec hands me a small brown bag with a drawstring. There are small potatoes inside. My stomach growls. I smile.

“Thank you. I am very hungry,” I tell them as we walk forward. They are silent as I eat. I notice Bec’s walking stick is actually a sword. It still has wet blood dripping from it. I shiver briefly but continue eating.

Bec says, “I’m gonna hang back here while you two go in first. If heads roll I don’t want any part of this mess.” I want them to be safe. I don’t want to cause them harm. I know what I must do.

“I will keep my eyes blue.” I can pretend for them. To keep them safe I would do anything. I need protectors. I put the last potato in my mouth and hand the empty bag back to Bec. She shakes her head and sighs loudly.

“And she eats a lot. Oh, yeah...Finn will shit knives; not tacks,” Both girls laugh. I force a smile on my face.

“No, don’t smile, Emma. That’s freaking scary,” Lana tells me. Her forehead is crinkled and she is chewing her lip. “Just keep your eyes blue. Even though your human color is fucking weird, too.” I drop my smile. I am too different for even my own kind.

“Why are we different? You are darklings, no?” I ask hesitantly. I don’t ask very many questions. Fate holds all the answers. But now, I’ve eluded it for the time being.

“We aren’t the same, sugar cakes. Look at you. Look at us. If your mother was human I want to know who your dark daddy was. Your eyes are light, your hair is blonde...you look like a cartoon character.” I stop walking.

"We aren't the same then. I don't belong." Lana and Bec gaze off in the distance and back to me. They are deciding if I should know something.

"We are more human than witch. Our magic has been suppressed for so long that it isn't a part of us anymore. It's how we have survived out here since the end of the old world. You have to be able to feel to make rational decisions. It's why I didn't kill you like others I've found. You still feel things...right?" I want to tell her I feel all the things I used to. When I was a child I could feel everything.

"I feel fear...and now anger," I tell her honestly. Bec rolls her eyes and says,

"She's as good as dead."

"I am not! I need the correction," I say even though I know it means my death. *The final correction.* They both roll their eyes again. Lana looks forlorn, like she made a mistake in taking me from nothingness.

"Go ahead, Lana. Correct her now. Save us all a lot of time and energy. You know it's what will be done anyways. Fear and anger is what she feels. What's next? Loathing? Greed? She thinks something's wrong with her...it's too late. How old are you Emma?" Bec asks after she finishes saying horrible things.

"I just had my birthday. I am eighteen," I hold my chin higher. Lana raises her bow. She aims at my heart. It is pumping rapidly. Bec takes her sword from her side and targets my neck. I feel the cold metal against my skin and my eyes glow white. The terror is too much.

"No!" A burst of magic explodes out of my body. It is heated and grey and electrified with undercurrents of wrath. It is the first time I have used dark magic and it feels...right. Lana and Bec are sprawled on the ground several paces away. Their faces are dirty, angry and hold more darkness than my magic. They stand and stalk toward me. I did not want to hurt them. I'm suddenly angry at myself.

"I don't want to die. I don't want to die like her," I sit on the ground, weary. Lana puts an arm across Bec's chest to stop her. They lower their weapons.

"Strike one, darkling," Lana hisses. Bec's gaze is furious. "The dark witches will know where you're at now that you've used magic. My bow won't kill you tonight but I can't say what they'll do to you."

"What dark witches?" Bec asks, looking at Lana.

"She escaped them. They came for her today and she ran," Lana explains. My eyes are blue again. I tell them,

"I do not want that fate. My mother did not want that fate for me. Please protect me." I bow my head and hope I look remorseful.

"You just tried to kill us," Lana says, "two more strikes...maybe one more, and my bow will deliver a *fate* of a different kind." She throws the bow back over her shoulder and walks toward the circle of houses. I follow them quietly.

The houses look different up close. They are made out of black wood from trees. The structures don't look as sturdy as my house. There are no bars on the windows and I wonder if the circle is warded to keep the savages out.

"Is it safe here?" I ask because fear is all I have known. Containment is safe and anxiety creeps into my awareness. The open fields surround the circle. Nothingness surrounds the fields. Creatures stalk the nothingness and the witches are intermingled throughout.

"As safe as you make it. Keep your eyes blue, freak. You're about to meet some people," Bec says. I stay behind Lana when I see more darklings surround us. Their silver eyes analyze me. I grab the back of her tattered plaid shirt and keep my face down. I don't trust my magic. There are children here. Children are hurt easily.

"You are so naughty, Lana," a girl sneers. Lana laughs. I relax a little. She isn't worried they'll hurt me. I want to trust her I want to trust all of these darklings. I need to trust myself first. I used magic and I didn't mean to.

"You know me. Always shaking things up," she looks around the crowd, searching for a particular person. "And pissing off Finn," Lana laughs enthusiastically, "Is he around?"

"No he's out right now," the girl tells her. I raise my face to finally look at those around me. They gasp and gawk when they see my eyes.

"Yeah, yeah. She's a little freakish looking. The hair. The eyes. I know. But she's not gone yet," Lana tells them. I will the corners of my mouth up even though I don't feel the emotion connected to it. I have the need to be accepted here.

"I am Emmalina Weaver. I like your circle," I gesture to their residences. I don't know why they laugh, but I smile. The anger and fear ease to something more manageable and I feel numb. I am content.

They invite me to their fire and I sit with them. I perch on a tree trunk and gaze at unfamiliar faces through the red, crackling fire. I listen to their stories like the words in my book. They are hollow words but unlike my book these words are paired with faces. The darklings smile and laugh a lot. Lana leans over and touches another's leg while bursting into a fit of giggles. I watch them with a detached sense of longing. I remember moments from my childhood that were full of life and sprinkled with feeling. The emotions are now muted but I can almost picture my facial expressions...and my mother's laugh. I close my eyes to will the memory to resurface but something else happens instead.

I feel the energy of the fire, of the darklings, of everything surrounding me. I feel like I can soak it into my skin and absorb it into my being. I want to take this new

power I feel and release it into the world...because I am furious and terrified. I am feeling all the undercurrents of the emotions I have to my name. Spite, dread, shock, scorn, disgust, but most of all I feel *envy*. I am overwhelmed by it and in this weakened moment my magic slips—my eyes glow white and my body shakes with the electric current that preludes an outburst.

A fist connects with the side of my face and all I am left with is a metallic taste and a subtle throb of pain. Surprisingly the feelings are gone, including the anger. Blood trickles out of my mouth and the warm feeling as it slides down my face is comforting.

“That’s strike two, freak,” Lana hisses. Her face is full of malice and her silver eyes alarm me. “It’s one thing if you blast me with your perpetual lightning storm but quite another if you fuck with my friends.”

“I cannot control it,” I mutter. “I was just remembering something and it took over my body,” I wipe my lip with the cuff of my shirt and stand up.

“Don’t think you can use *feeling or remembering* as an excuse just because it worked in the forest. I know of your kind, remember? You’re shrewd. You’ll use our feelings against us.” Lana says as she grabs the back of my shirt and leads me away from the group. She leads me to one of the houses in the circle and holds the door open for me. I walk in and examine everything. I take in every single detail I can notice from where I stand. To determine the weakness of the structure and to take into account every single point of entry in the house.

“Four windows and one door,” I say out loud after my study is complete. Lana looks at me sideways as she takes off her bow and arrows and places them by a bed.

“Yeah, nice counting, Ace,” She replies. “You can sleep on the bed on that side of the room.” She picks up a knife and starts sharpening it. I sit on the thread-bare bed she indicates, yet I worry because it is underneath one of the windows. She slides the blade down a stone, and then looks at me.

“If you’re telling the truth and you really were remembering something when the freak show started out there...then tell me. You can start finding yourself quicker if you are able to pull up memories from when you actually felt something—other than being an asshole.” I cross my arms over my chest when I realize all the names she calls me are derogatory.

“My name is Emmalina. Please don’t call me other names as that is disrespectful.” Lana laughs loudly but doesn’t miss a beat as she skims the large blade over the rock one more time. She silences and waits for me to speak.

“I was remembering when I was a child. My mother was laughing as she ran after me in our yard. It was from a time before I knew creatures...or savages as you call them, even existed. I felt no fear. It is the only memory I have that doesn’t have

fear involved. I had all my emotions then and fear was absent.” I bring my fingers up to the corner of the mouth and they come away bloody.

“I have a similar memory except I know what I was feeling. Our caretakers never let us forget...” She hands me a damp cloth, the knife still in her hand. I press it to my lip and speak through it.

“My mother did not let me forget. I am as I should be, as I’m meant to be. She was readying me for my fate.” As the words leave my mouth I start to worry. There was another way and my mother decided against it. I trusted her judgment implicitly, but now I know her hand was forced by another source. Lana grabs my hand and lays it palm up in her hand. She takes the knife, now sharp as a razor blade and slowly drags it across my hand. I wince but I don’t remove my hand. Her silver eyes are locked on mine and I feel compelled to stay in this moment. Blood drips from my hand and I hear it drumming on the wooden floor in rhythmic taps. The pain is searing but there is nothing else inside me.

“She *did* let you forget. But the pain will help you remember,” She says, and my mind is on the border of something, or perhaps I am about to burst with magic again. I feel different.

Lana smiles with approval.

“Your eyes are blue.”

January 11th, Morning

I sleep without fear for the first time since childhood. All it takes is pain to remove the thing that is embedded so deeply that it breathes on its own, without my permission. I ball up my fist and cringe when I feel the small wound that resides on my palm. I heal quicker than a human, but without use of my magic I know it will be days before I heal completely. I welcome the challenge.

My eyes pop open, adjust to the dark and take in my surroundings. Lana is sitting on a bench by the large front window. Her head propped on her hands, her bow on the windowsill in front of her. She has slept at the window all night, I'm sure of it. When she hears me stir she turns her head to look at me, silent thought etched on her features.

"You were there all night?" I ask. My attempt at making the bed is futile as there is one worn blanket and nothing else. I feel a twinge of something when I think of my bed back at home. My home. I miss it. I miss her. *Anger*.

"No, why would I do that?" She turns back to the window, but I sense she is lying.

"Because you are afraid of the creatures." I tell her, sure she is just as afraid of them as I am. I make a fist to repress my anger.

"The savages? I could kill those buffoons in my sleep. The truth of the matter is I'm afraid of what he'll do to you...and me when he gets back." She says something odd.

"You said *he*. You mean *she*. There are no male darklings." Lana spins around on the bench to face me. She looks worn and weary.

"Oh, I definitely meant *he*." She smiles oddly and it confuses me further. If male darklings actually exist it goes against everything I've learned in my studies of dark witches. To purify the bloodline all half human males should be eradicated.

"There is one that wasn't killed? How is that possible? To cleanse the bloodline only half human females are permitted to live to see their fate." I quote from my studies. It was only yesterday that I realized how exactly they planned on *cleansing* the bloodline. Lana rubs the sleep out of her eyes and rummages through a cabinet. I hope she is finding food for us.

As she shuffles containers about she says, "Finn isn't the only male who lives, oh, sheltered one," she coughs to cover a laugh and resumes shaking packages and sniffing bags. "In the other circles there are more than one male. Here, it's only Finn."

I am irritated when I see her close the cabinet empty handed, "One male and all these females?" I saw at least thirty the night before.

"It's not at all what you're thinking. He gathers and trades for us at other circles every once in a while, but there are decrees prohibiting him from...how should I

phrase it? Doing anything that might chance procreating. Your mother made a deal to spare your life and Finn made his own deal to spare his.” She shoots me a smug smile before lacing up her boots and signaling for me to follow her. I’m intrigued about the idea of a male darkling, but suddenly uneasy about the mention of my mother’s sacrifice.

“We’re headed to the lagoon. You reek, darkling. “ I sniff my long sleeved tee and wrinkle my nose. It has blood, sweat and ash from nothingness coating it, as do my pants. A bath is a good idea. “Remember, no funny business unless you want a repeat slicing.” Lana says as she mimics a knife dragging across her palm. She leads me out the door.

All the little houses are quiet and black. There are no breezes, season changes or inclement weather on earth. My mother used to speak of rain, tornados and other fantastic variances in nature, but I wonder if they too were lies to occupy a young mind--something for me to grasp onto in the absence of feeling. I don’t need her stories any longer; just being outdoors without fear of the savages is monumental. I glance at Lana’s hand to make sure she carries her bow and I am relieved further.

“Lesson on staying alive numeral uno, the savages can’t sense you if you aren’t being a super freak--a la glowing eyes and vibrating body. Keep your magic in check and your heart keeps beating...and you make my job a little easier. We have to go into the forest to get to the lagoon.” She pauses, turns around to make sure I have heard her. I nod my head in agreement because I am unsure if I have control over my magic and a verbal yes would seem a lie. I don’t want to lie to Lana. I ball up my fist to make sure the wound is still open and pain radiates up my arm.

“My mother never told me that,” I say quietly. Lana takes my hand and drags me to walk next to her. She swings up her bow to ready for the forest and tells me,

“Emma, I’m willing to bet your mother didn’t tell you a lot of things.” A shiver rises up my back forcing my neck hairs to stand on end. The mere mention of the only person I have ever trusted omitting truths spurs fear.

Lana notices she has upset me and changes the subject. “Tell me about the dark witches that came to your house.”

I clutch my palm forcing it open to bleed and answer her. “There were five witches. They were almost identical. I was different compared to them, too.” I admit. She grabs my bleeding hand and shakes her head.

“This isn’t a good habit to get into,” she smiles widely, pleased at my new trick. “I cut you last night to make a point.”

“What was the point?” I ask.

“Isn’t it obvious? You have control over yourself. You have control over your emotions still. The magic doesn’t. I cut you to hurt you...and to make you angry,” I stop walking, furious at what she points out.

“Emma, you are basically a dark witch at this point, I’m the only person on the entire planet that will help you.” She places her hands on her hips and stares me down. I want my eyes to glow white out of defiance but can’t force myself to do it. *I don’t want the magic to overtake me.*

“Do you want my help?” I take three deep breaths. My heart is pounding and anger is blistering my soul, but I know I do want her help. Lana gauges me for my response. She doesn’t know how I’ll respond. I stay silent. “I’ll take you to the Dark Citadel right now if that’s what you want. You’ll meet your new husband and he’ll be forcing his clean DNA into your body by eve. I mean fuck, who wouldn’t want that fate? He might even visit your bed *first* before the hundred other mindless darklings he’s married to. You’re so lucky, Emma.” Her words are callous and only stoke the ever-growing fire of rage inside my body. I want to kill her, I want to rearrange her delicate features into something befitting a monster. My anger is now fury.

“It may not be a fate that you find appealing, but it is the fate that my mother bought for me with her life.” I say through gritted teeth. “She also said the dark witches will kill me when they are finished with me and no, I do not wish *that* fate. I need your help.” I notice the blood dripping from my hand and relax my hand by my side. My magic doesn’t surface.

“Smart move, darkling. We’re almost to the lagoon. Try to keep that hand wrapped up.” She tosses a brown satchel to me. It contains more vegetables. I see her smile before she turns and stalks off. She has angered me on purpose again.

I reevaluate Lana. She is a *brutal* savage.

January 11th, Afternoon

"I promise there are absolutely, zero savages in this water." Lana is completely naked. She is thrashing about in the water like a person mad. She laughs as she watches me shake my head in refusal. The lagoon as she calls it, is a lake, entirely surrounded by nothingness. Likely, savages are peering at us from all angles. I whip my head around sure an attack is eminent.

A tree branch snaps.

Her clothes hanging from it fall down to the ground and I am immediately suspicious. Her voice forces my attention again.

"You stink, you're dirty. Your magic freak switch is off. Get in the water and clean yourself, Emma," She says before ducking below the murky water. She told me it was a lake that actually survived from the old world. Not very much survived the magical blast that encompassed the globe. It fascinates me now that I am able to see such things up close. My mother's stories did not do them justice. Knowing Lana is right, I remove my socks and boots and stroll closer to the water. I put my feet in and realize the water is quite warm, if not hot. I slowly remove the rest of my clothing and wade into the water. Panic sets in when I look down and notice the water filled with ash conceals my feet. I hear something move behind me and make the rash decision to dive in without looking back.

"I'm surprised you can swim," Lana says as I rush toward her for protection. The water is waist deep. I can't swim.

"There are things in nothingness, I keep hearing noises."

"Nothingness? I guess that's what she'd want you to think. The forest is full of awful freaks of nature...even worse than you," Lana says. "They are here to protect the Dark Citadel from us."

"How do the dark magic users control them?" I ask genuinely interested.

"Spells, casts...all the dark voo doo they are so perfect at. I'm sure you know how powerful they are, though. As long as we don't use our magic...like we even *want* to, the savages leave us alone. We coexist sort of peacefully. That is until untamed witches come barreling into our community with creepy eyes and witch husbands hunting them." She washes her hair with both hands as she speaks. She dips her head, and then comes back up to continue her scrubbing. I follow her lead and carefully dip my head back to wet it and mimic her movements.

"Hey, when your hair is wet it looks darker...like a normal darkling," Lana states, and then splashes me with a stream of black water. Her nature is playful.

"They will come for me." I say because I know the mistake has to be corrected even though I fear it is not something I want anymore.

“That’s why I’ve been waiting for Finn to come back. He’ll know what to do with you. I’m not sure how long it will take...” Lana lets her sentence trail off.

“How long what will take?” I wring my hair out and watch the dark water drip off my ponytail. My blonde hair does indeed look several shades darker from the ash. I smile. When I look up she is scrutinizing my face.

“To fix you, Emmalina. I don’t know how long it will take. We’ve only been successful in saving a darkling from turning completely dark once...and she was a year younger than you are—she felt more.” I feel the gruesome hollowness as she speaks these words. I am broken.

“Go get our clothes. We’ll wash them next.” Like a robot I exit the water, completely nude, and pick up my clothes first and then walk to where Lana’s lay in a pile on the ground. A quick glance proves nothing threatening at the border of nothingness, but I feel like the forest is full of everything, now. There is a hum of silence and I know something is there; watching me, stalking me. I scoop up Lana’s pile and run back into the water as quickly as I can manage. I feel the dark magic spiking in my system and it angers me that Lana is right.

The walk back to the circle makes me less uneasy. My body is clean and I feel refreshed. My stomach is quite empty but Lana assures me I will get used to it with time. When we break free of the forest and I see the houses I notice there is a large gathering of darklings in the center, where the fire was the night before.

“What’s going on?” I ask hopeful she doesn’t sense my panic. She grabs my hand and it feels warm and comfortable. She looks me over once and then again before she speaks.

“He’s back, Emma. For the love of all that is holy...keep your magic off. I know you don’t care, because that would mean that you feel something other than what you’re currently capable of, but if you enjoy my company at all—do this for me.” She raises her eyebrows in question. Her silver eyes pierce me. The thing, the pang I can’t control lurches in my stomach. I know what it means. It means I almost feel something else. It is connected to the fact that I *do* want Lana to be safe from this male darkling. I am terrified what he will do to her because of me. I don’t want someone else to pay for caring about my well-being.

“I will do this for you.” I tell her. I smile. I decide I will use my dark magic against the male darkling if he tries to harm her. She pulls my muted hair into a ponytail and secures it in place with a strip of cloth. We walk slowly toward the darklings and I the apprehension I sense has less to do with the unknown as it does for the safety of Lana.

“You’re lucky you can’t feel anything,” Lana says as she surveys the circle from our distance.

“That does not make me lucky,” I scoff. Either way I need to be fixed. The dark witches would wish to erase the anger and fear from my body and the darklings would have me gain all of my emotions back. I do not feel lucky.

“Just wait. It’s in times like this I wish I was more like you.” Lana says darkly. Her words mystify me.

“How could you wish that?” The crowd of darkling women part and I see him for the first time. He towers over all the others who look utterly enthralled by him. He spies us for the first time and Lana breathes out loudly. The male darkling starts toward us with ferocity.

“Pull your shit together, Lana. Why does he pick today to not wear a shirt?” She says. I notice his apparel for the first time. He is indeed shirtless. I look at Lana, her mouth slightly open and a bead of sweat rolls down the side of her face.

“Pull your shit together, Lana.” I repeat what she tells herself because I sense her nervousness and think it may help. She beams at me and shakes her head.

“Get ready to meet your worst nightmare and your wildest dream, Emma. The unobtainable Finnegan White.”

I study the man to find what Lana finds so obviously appealing. He causes an immediate reaction just by being present. His hair is lighter than the other darklings and it falls into his eyes. It is a dark brown opposed to the standard black. His eyes are darker silver, bordering on a brownish color. He has a muscular build, which is probably required. His skin is tanned genetically as there is no sun. I look him over many times committing every part of him to memory to catalog him. Lana’s breathing becomes sporadic and finally stops completely when he stops to stand in front of us.

“What the fuck did you do now, Lana?” His tone is acidic but his gaze is like molten fire as he takes me in. His eyes are locked on mine. I stand shock still in fear. He must sense my otherness and I make a bold move.

I extend my hand and let my voice take on a pleasing note,

“I’m Emma, Finn. I’m pleased to meet you.” I let a huge grin spread across my face, my favorite trick. I giggle exactly how Lana does. I feel Lana’s hand on my arm, holding me back or telling me to stop. Finn runs a hand over his mouth, then looks behind him to the other darklings. I drop my extended hand. He turns back and looks over my body once more. I realize then he has not even glanced Lana’s way once. Lana starts breathing and finally answers him.

“She isn’t gone yet, Finn.” I am offended she already ousts me as different to the male darkling. For reasons unbeknownst, I want to know what he thinks of me without the prejudices I now know come along with my flawed being. Finn staggers back a few steps but doesn’t speak. Lana, sensing Finn’s unease continues,

“She is in control...she still feels.” I like that she omits the emotions I feel. I focus my gaze on his stomach. His muscles flex as he breathes in and out. It pleases me. He watches me watching him...I feel his eyes on me. I study his face and notice his jaw clenching

“You’re wrong about one thing, Lana. She is *gone*. She’s not staying here. There isn’t enough room in this circle for her. If you want her to live, ready her to be sent to the next circle over. I don’t want to see her again,” Finn says with finality in his voice. I look to Lana to gauge her reaction to see what my reaction should be. She is shocked with his words. I let my mouth gape open.

“What’s your deal, Finn?” Lana barks. He finally tears his gaze from me and looks at Lana for the first time. He shakes his head subtly and his forehead wrinkles in confusion. He peeks at me once more out of the corner of his eye.

He looks back at Lana but speaks to me, “I said get out of my sight.” I shrug my shoulders, a very human gesture, and leave them behind as I meander down to the crowd to find Bec.

I hear Finn and Lana’s voices rise when I walk away. I tune them out as is respectful, but I hear a snippet of Lana’s words,

“...she’s not going anywhere. I saw how you looked at her and that is *your* problem. Not mine and definitely not hers.”

Although I do not understand the undercurrent of her words I know that Lana is my very first friend.

January 11, Night

"You should have seen it, Bec. He was all hot and bothered—looking at Emma like she was the only woman left on earth. It was ridiculously weird. I've never seen him like that." Bec and Lana sit on a bed with their legs crossed beneath them chattering away. I sit in front of a mirrored piece of glass pulling a brush through my hair. With each stroke my blonde color is exposed further, the ash floating away.

"What did she say to him?" Bec asks.

"She introduced herself in that robotic way...except she laughed. It almost sounded real, too. Good job with that, Emma. It may have saved your life." I smile at her when I see her glance at my reflection. "It gives me an idea. We should give her acting lessons! We could have her drive Finn absolutely mad with a few lessons on seductive glances." Both girls laugh so loudly that it causes me to turn and smile at them. My humanness may almost be gone but I have lived with a human for the last eighteen years. I know of human notions, but I want to learn more.

"Lessons are a good idea," I tell them hopeful I can glean any information that will help me blend in better. Lana crosses the room and kneels in front of me. She pulls my hair over my shoulders and admires it between her fingers.

"I bet it's the hair," Lana says. I hate that my hair makes me different. "Do this," she places her pointer finger on her bottom lip to draw it down. She raises her eyebrows waiting for me to comply. I do as I'm told although it feels awkward. "Then lower your lashes like this," she casts her eyes downward. "Then say, 'can you help me with something?'" She pushes her lips out more and looks up coyly. I do what she says and she claps her hands together in praise.

"I do not wish to anger the male darkling. He is letting me stay at this circle. I am thankful." I do not say I am fearful that the dark witches and my husband are looking for me but I sense that something big is coming. Bec is now standing behind Lana as they both look down at me.

They eye me speculatively then Bec speaks, "Trust us he will not be *angry*. Now practice laughing and lip biting. Then after we need to teach you to hunt."

Lana laughs then says, "Bec, duh. We *are* teaching her to hunt." If lip chewing and gilded laughter keep me here and in their protection, I will do it. Every second that passes that distances myself from my fate makes me more content. I need to stay here with these darklings. I realize I want to feel more.

"How can I feel more?" As I ask I fist my palm and realize the wound has closed completely. I frown.

"Try to pull up memories from when you were a child. Like the one you told me about. Try to associate feelings with them. When I play," Lana grabs a rock off a table and chucks it at Bec. Bec shrewdly ducks and grabs it off the ground. When

she stands I see a sparkle of something in her eye. Lana continues, "I feel happy. Or joyful..." Bec interrupts, "Or conniving." She throws the rock back and pelts Lana in the arm.

"Ow. Jerk. I knew I wouldn't hit you. You're too quick." Lana squeezes her bicep and pulls up her sleeve to caress the red mark. "You didn't have to throw it so hard. I just wanted to make a point."

"And now you feel anger?" I ask, confused how happiness or joy could turn into anger so quickly.

"No, I'm not mad at her. Well maybe a little," Lana squints her eyes at Bec and shows her teeth in a pretend growl. "My arm just hurts. Emotions are all connected. If you feel anger and fear making the leap to happiness won't be hard, especially if you want it." I comprehend what she says but I do not think it will be easy to feel something more.

"What if they come for me?" I let the fear escape as I ask them the question that clouds my mind.

Lana shrugs her shoulders, "then they come for you. We don't fight the dark witches, Emma. We'd lose. We don't use magic. They get whatever they want. We can only hope that by the time they come for you, you can feel. If you can feel more emotions then you have a defense against them."

"Why can't you use magic?"

Bec says, "We've never used our magic. Our bodies never embraced that side, we were taught to fight it off when we were young and now it never surfaces. At all. We couldn't use it even if we wanted to without a *lot* of practicing." I let her words float around in my mind. It is comforting to know that they are able to control themselves. It gives me hope that I too, will be able to keep it at bay. Even as I feel it surfacing in this very moment I want to will it. I want to control it. I want to own it.

The vibrating starts and I know that my eyes are glowing white, but unlike the night before when it took over my body completely, this time I force it back down. I am unaware of my surroundings. I know Bec and Lana are close by but they don't interrupt me. This is my inner turmoil that I have to deal with alone. They have already fought their battles.

I stand and say, "no." It comes out more loudly than I intend it. I shut my eyes and grab my pants to control my hands. The humming electricity leaves my body and I open my eyes. I know they are blue because I forced the dark from my system. My emotions are boiling but I realize it is okay because they are the tiny parts of me that are still human.

"There is hope for you yet," Lana says. A knock sounds at the door. Walking to stand next to Bec I ready myself for a visitor or an enemy alike. I am still buzzing with something after controlling my dark side. Another emotion is on the border

of recognition. Lana opens the door and Finn walks in. The feeling immediately dissipates. He goes to great lengths not to look at me. He is angry. He closes the door, and then faces Lana.

“You’re doing a great job, Lana. The darklings are out there in an uproar because they sense dark magic.” He looks at me, but then away very quickly as if he wishes he hadn’t turned his head in the first place. The male’s reactions and gestures perplex me. I know he is pleased with my appearance because of the way his eyes grow larger when he looks at me. He also looks at me with contempt. I silently wonder if all males bewilder in this fashion.

“She controlled it herself, Finn. How else do you expect her to learn?” Lana takes a step back. I see his presence affecting her. Her breathing is more rapid and her cheeks flush a crimson color. I look at Bec who also has the same reaction. I step forward to speak because it is puzzling these strong females lose themselves so easily.

“I am sorry. It won’t happen again, Finn.” I smile and bite my lip. Finn’s eyes widen, his chest stills and his full lips part slightly. I see Lana’s half grin out of the corner of my eye and know my actions have had the intended affect. Finn balls his fists at his sides a few times and then finally responds without unlocking his fierce gaze from my face.

“I’ll teach her myself, then.” Bec coughs loudly and Lana giggles.

“You’ll teach her what, Finn?” Lana asks with a hint of humor still in her voice.

“I’ll teach her how to survive, Lana.” His tone holds malice as he says her name. “The dark witches are looking for a darkling two circles over as we speak. Now, do you want to go to the Dark Citadel with them?” He lowers his chin and his eyebrows rise in question as he stares at me.

“I want to learn how to survive,” I look at Lana. I want her to be pleased with my answer.

“So you’ll take her in the forest and teach her how to kill savages. Then what? Leave the rest of us here to face a visit from the dark witches alone?” A lump forms in the back of my throat. The dark witches coming to this circle is unacceptable.

“Like you’re so defenseless. Really? I’d say you’ve taken quite a liking to your new toy.” Finn says.

“I am not anyone’s toy,” I hiss. No one will speak about me like I am not around anymore. Everyone looks at me after my outburst. They are shocked.

“What?” I ask. I throw my arms out in question. I saw my mother do this all the time, “I am not a toy. I do not want the dark witches to come to this circle, but I do want to learn to defend myself.” Bec runs a hand through her dark hair, Lana

folds her arms across her chest and they both look to Finn. His answer is obvious. I see it in his body language. My show of humanness has worked.

“You heard her, Finn. She’s not a fucking toy. Remember that,” Lana walks out of the house and the wooden door bounces behind her. I suck in a breath. I have not realized how much comfort her presence gives until she is gone. Bec turns to me, blocking Finn’s view and whispers into my ear. “Remember what we said, Emma,” she pulls back and smiles at me widely. I smile back. As Bec exits she says,

“Good luck, Finn.” The door slams and Finn and I are alone. He swallows audibly.

“I’ll need it.” He whispers so lowly I am sure I am not meant to hear. He bites his lip.

January 11th, Night

“Try to keep up a little better,” Finn says. But he has given me a large pack that contains foodstuffs and knives. It is heavy and my body is unused to carrying such things. I try to bury the uneasy feelings that come along with leaving Lana. She assured me that I could trust Finn, so I left with him—into the forest.

“I am unaccustomed to being outdoors,” I tell him honestly. He laughs bitterly but doesn’t slow down. “I was restricted to my home for many years because of the creatures.” Something I say makes him stop.

“How long have you been confined to a house?”

“Most of my life,” I have to shout because he is so far ahead. I hope I do not disturb the savages. He turns around and glowers at me. I see comprehension dawn as he walks back.

“No, it can’t be,” He says in a hushed whisper.

“What?” He doesn’t respond. He does something I don’t expect; he grabs a lock of my hair that rests on my shoulder. He rubs it in between his fingers. I clear my throat. He drops his hand as if startled by my presence and takes the backpack off my back. He throws it over one shoulder.

“Come on, then?” He prods. Even through the darkest haze I can see his brownish silver eyes and the fondness that resides there. The male darkling is fond of me. I smile. The corner of his mouth quirks up, he shuts his eyes and shakes his head. I walk behind him stepping in his large ashy footprints.

“What are you going to do with me?” I ask out of curiosity after we’ve reached a small campsite in nothingness. Finn laughs heartily. I like his laugh. The fear of the unknown erases a touch when I hear it.

He answers while unpacking a bag, “What I want to do to you and what I’m going to do with you are two different things, darkling. You have to learn to defend yourself against the savages. They are your biggest threat. Assuming you aren’t caught by the dark witches, that is.” A shiver runs up my spine.

“I know they will come for me. Will they be kind like you and the darklings?” Finn gives me a look that cuts like a razor. He looms over me and grabs my wrist to drag me to a standing position. I wince at the sharp pain. He does not know I like pain; it grounds me to my humanness.

“Do not ever mistake me for a kind person. That will be your first and last mistake and let’s just say the dark witches are even less kind.” He realizes how tightly he is gripping me and lets go. He takes a step back. I step toward him. He holds his breath.

I grab his wrist gently, “Fine,” I urge my voice to take on a newly taught tone, “will you help me with something?” Finn doesn’t move, doesn’t breathe.

“Depends on what you need help with,” he grates. He takes a step in my direction. I step backward. He does it again--then again. My back is now against a black, cold tree. I forget the next step in the acting lessons Bec and Lana taught me. Finn trips me up. I panic. I bite my lip in a last ditch effort to gain control. He watches my mouth hungrily, greedily, and *savagely*.

“I need my book, it is in my house. Can you help me get it back?” I say, proud I come up with something I actually need help with. My book is the one thing that connects me to my mother. The memories are fading, but her voice lulling me to sleep with the familiar words forces me to remember her face.

“I need to remember her,” I say. His intense gaze is broken at the mention of my book. He backs up a pace and I can no longer feel his warm body heat. He tilts his head to the side.

“Why do you want a book? Out of all the things you had, you want a book back?”

“I realize it is silly. It is the only tale I have ever had.” He pulls a knife out of one of his cargo pockets on his pants. He shakes his head and mutters something quietly. Then he speaks loudly,

“It’s not silly. It’s human. I’m surprised you want for it, that’s all. Here,” he hands me the knife with the handle first. I take it and am shocked by the weight of it in my hand.

“That it may be. You heard Lana. I can still feel. You should not be surprised,” I test the knife by stabbing it in the air to my side. He watches with amusement.

“What do you feel though? If I had to guess you don’t feel anything more than the occasional blip of fear or anger.” He is right. He smiles widely exposing gleaming teeth. He knows it, too.

“You think for one second I bought the seduction act? To be capable of real seduction you need to feel...lust and lust is coupled with love.” He turns away from me to finish assembling our campsite. He works deftly with his hands assembling a tiny stove that will boil water.

“How can I feel lust?” His whole body stills. He doesn’t turn around when he speaks,

“You’ll know it when you feel it,” I can tell he is smiling even though I cannot see his face. “It won’t be with me, I can tell you that.” He starts working again. For the first time I know I want to feel this sensation because it is one I have never been exposed to.

“Why not? It is because of the decree with the dark witches...” Finn stands up and wipes his hands on the sides of his pants.

“Oh, lets not get it twisted, darkling. There is a pact I’ve sworn to that forbids me from bringing darkling children into the world, but no where in the fine print

does it prohibit me from making you feel lust.” He pauses as he lets his words sink in. I swallow, and my body begins buzzing with a new sensation. His eyes are hooded as he shakes his head subtly in warning. He knows my magic is flaring in response to him. When he is sure I have control, he stalks forward a few more steps, “I choose not to inflict lust on you because if I ever did, I wouldn’t be able to control myself. I’d end up breaking the decree.” Finn is so close that his body heat envelops me wholly. I have urges I have never had before in my life.

“Oh,” I say. My words are shaky and the smile on Finn’s face is victorious.

He is not just my protector. Finn is a man. I am suddenly acutely aware of the difference.

January 12th, Morning

He has trapped me in the wooden hut. It is made of the same wood as the houses in the circle, but it is much smaller. It holds one person lying down with little room to roll over on either side. Finn slept elsewhere. But not before downing two massive trees that now block my only way out. I smell faint traces of a fire, but hear nothing. I call out,

“Hello? Finn, are you there?” I cannot fathom why he traps me. I am completely obedient. I *almost* feel things around Finn. Throughout the night my mind conjured images of him shirtless. My dreams are almost always black so the interruption was jarring, but welcome. I smile thinking of his laughter. There is no way I will leave him intentionally. I hear no response to my shout. The roof is so low I am unable to stand so; I root around on the ground until I find a pack of food next to the scrap of cloth I was using as a pillow. I pinch the dingy material and bring it closer to inspect it. I realize it is Finn’s shirt. The same shirt he wore the night before. Feeling slightly chilly I jam my arms through the long sleeves and button it over my chest. I eat the potatoes quickly to staunch the hunger pains and begin pushing on the trees.

“Let me out!” I yell, willing anger to lace my tone. Finn needs to know I will not be caged. Still I hear no response. I push on the downed trees harder; they don’t budge. I realize then that Finn is ultimately strong. He may not have the use of magic but he willed two enormous trees down. Given no option as Finn has forced my hand in the matter, I conjure dark magic. I find it sitting at the surface of my mind begging to be used. The electricity zings through my body more fiercely than the times before.

I shake. My eyes glow white. I slam my palms into the trees and they splinter as they break under my power. I sink my fingers in and tear pieces of the tree trunk loose until I am free. I shake myself off, and then discard wood chips I pick from my hair.

Finn comes crashing through the forest moments later. He stops when he sees me in front of the hut. I am not sure why but I smile at him. He glowers back at me.

“I was coming to let you out, darkling,” he says as he surveys the downed trees.

“I will not be caged,” I say. I intone the syllables oddly and I know that my eyes are still glowing white. I am more dark than human in this moment. I close them tightly.

“I’m glad I didn’t make it in time though, I needed to see this,” he gestures to the trees, the hut, and then me. His gaze roves my body one extra time. “The savages were out and I needed to sleep. Those poor trees were keeping you safe while you slumbered.” Finn says gruffly. I realize my boots are back in the hut so I return for them without saying another word. As I lace them back on I try to think of a human gesture or conversation that will win me back into his graces. I pull the

backpack on as I step out of the hut. I feel heated, wet breath on every inch of exposed skin on my body.

Savage.

I shriek loudly as terror sets in. Finn is nowhere in sight. My protector has abandoned me. I scramble for the knife in the side pocket of the backpack but am unsuccessful. The pack is cumbersome and I cannot maneuver well. The savage gets so close I can see it's misshapen body. It has sharp claws and a smell that penetrates every available oxygen element. I do not scream again because I am afraid to breathe anymore of the smell in. I grab for the knife again and come away with it tightly in my grasp. I wave it in front of the creature. It rasps something unintelligible. Dark magic wells up--threatening to burst out of my body. I push it down for the sake of controlling something...anything in this moment. A magical outburst would only draw more attention.

"Come on, savage. You want me, come and get me." With anger and fear bleating through my body I stab the savage through the neck. The claws come down on my arm, tearing through the shirt, causing thick blood to well. I feel the clarity of pain. I remember exactly how Lana does it. My teeth are gritted as I zone in on the creatures neck and slash it deeply, ferociously. The savage collapses to the ground with a loud roaring growl. The skin is hissing as steam rises off the corpse. One last step,

"Stop scaring me," I boom as I reach down and tear the creature's head from its neck. It comes away effortlessly as my knife wound is deep. I back away from the dismembered body, clutching the knife to my chest trying to catch my breath. I fall to the ground, numb. I wait to feel something.

"You don't even need me, you were made for this." Finn says. He approaches slowly from the outskirts of the trees. I do not look at him. I am concentrated on the two large gouge marks on my arm from which blood is flowing. Finn notices what I am fixated on.

"Ah, the pain? It helps." He sits next to me on the ground as he asks. I feel angry I need pain to keep the dark at bay. With a wound as large as this I should not feel emotions for days, but I do.

"You were not here for me. You are supposed to protect me," Finn turns his face a second after he looks me in the eye. He stays silent.

"It's hard to protect someone like you."

"Someone like me?" I do not keep the anger out of my words. I want him to know my feelings. I want to know his feelings. I want *feeling*.

"Yes, darkling. Someone like you; someone who has the ability to destroy me." He stands and starts collecting the pieces of the creature. He drags them to the forests edge and stays away. When he comes back he has decided something.

“I will try to keep you hidden from the dark witches. In return, you can’t use dark magic again. I don’t give a shit if you can control it or not. That’s the deal. Take it or leave it.” His offer has one large hole.

“What do you get out of it?” He doesn’t bring his eyes up to meet mine when he finally answers,

“Absolutely nothing and more than you know.” He walks over to the large trees and muscles one out of the way with the utmost ease. I speak loudly so he can hear me,

“I will never destroy you, Finn.” I smile at him and realize he wears no shirt. I look down when I remember I have it on. He notices my comprehension and a rage filled look crosses his face as he hulks another tree deep into the forest.

“You already have, darkling. You already have.”

January 12th, Midday

"I've only been to the Dark Citadel once. It's a very large city where all the dark magic users live. Only dark witches can come and go. All the darklings you've met, are unable to travel there because our dark magic is dormant, we are *feeling*. It makes us safe in a sense. They have no use for us. There are very few darklings now that laws have been passed forbidding dark witches to have relationships with humans and darklings." Finn is answering all the questions I have about the dark witches and the Dark Citadel. Some of the things I know but all the things that deal with darklings I do not. He agrees to tell me anything I want to know. He says it will help me understand my feelings.

"Is there any way to escape once you are there?" I ask because even with Finn's protection I know I cannot escape my fate.

"No, not that I know of. There is so much magic guarding the palace that the only way in or out would be by using a spell." The terror rises. I now know why they call it a fate. It is the last place I will ever go. I won't be able to stay hidden forever.

"If I were like you and have all my emotions back, I could be free of the fate," I say, knowing it is the only option I have.

"It's not that easy, darkling. Some emotions are easy...such as the bad ones. The better ones, the ones that make life actually worth it take a lot of time and..." I do not like that he lets his sentence hang; I want to know everything about feeling again.

"What has to happen?" Finn keeps his distance, as he has since we made our deal, but I can see that he wants to approach me. He swallows hard and clasps his hands over his head.

"You will have to actually fall in love to feel it. The other darklings grew up knowing what love was from caretakers and each other. A loving environment was enforced. You...lost that emotion as a child and have never felt it again. It will be the hardest riddle to solve. Especially given your non-existent romantic options." The mention of my childhood and my mother makes me fearful I will forget her forever.

"My mother did love me," I tell him. I get angry when I defend her.

"Of course, but can you remember loving her back?" I cannot--a horrible pit in my stomach surfaces, so I lie.

"Yes," I think of the memory of her chasing me around the yard. Her laugh, her bouncing brown hair...I remember it to keep it alive in my mind. Finn is correct, my mother's love is what is all encompassing. I have never loved. He shakes his head at my outright lie.

"It's the last thing to worry about as it will probably be the very last thing you feel...if you even get that far."

“Why would I not get that far?”

“Because it will probably take years and I don’t know if even I can hide you for that long,” He sighs in defeat. I grab my arm to feel the pain. He closes his eyes as if he aches to see me doing it. The anger ebbs. My eyes are blue.

“Help me feel quicker,” I say. My time is limited. If the dark witches will come to me I want to feel everything before then. I do not tell Finn this. He unclasps his hands from behind his head and puts his hands into his pockets. I notice the blood stains on the shredded arm of his shirt. I am reminded of empty words from a passage in my lost book.

He wears his heart on his sleeve.

“I’ll take you to a circle not far from ours. You’ll be safe there, darkling. You may not understand it now, but I can’t be...with you for long periods of time,” He just made a promise to protect me and he is already passing me off to another circle.

“Don’t get angry. You’ll be protected,” he smiles, “I’ll send Lana with you and Bec, too if you want, but I need to get away for a bit.” His jaw works at the mention of getting away.

“I feel safer with *you*.” I walk to stand in front of him. I like it when we are close. I can see his eyes better. I notice new things every time I study him. His dark eyebrows slant inward; his pink lips are never completely closed, the way his straight nose is angled perfectly between his eyes and mouth. I have no comparison, but I think Finn is probably a flawless specimen of a male darkling.

“Don’t look at me like that...or say things like that. It just makes our...arrangement even more difficult.” I know it has to do with the decree but I do not understand something.

“You cannot have sex, but can you not love?” He exhales loudly. I am afraid I have used the wrong words. He grabs my chin between his thumb and forefinger. I close my eyes when I feel his touch on my skin. It is gentle but firm; it is seamlessly catastrophic to the world as I currently know it.

“Open your eyes, darkling,” he says. I obey.

“The words sex and love are interchangeable with you...for me. You must erase these thoughts from your mind. Not me.” I want to do as he tells me, but I cannot. The something that lurches inside me when I am around Finn stays there. It does not go away like all the times before. I know it has been there since I first saw him. He repeats himself one more time,

“Not me.” When he releases my face I feel an emotion consistent with anger...disappointment.

“Let’s head to the other circle,” Finn says while picking up both backpacks. I follow behind him not giving away the swirling feelings that threaten to blossom

in my chest. Because he said it isn't him. I grip my knife tightly and hope I am wrong—because I think it is Finn.

January 12th, Night

The landscape is barren of trees. We are far from nothingness and I realize it makes me uneasy; we are far from the other circle...Finn's circle. The desert landscape causes my skin to dry and my eyes to burn. Even without the sun's touch this circle is withering. I fear the savages less than I fear Finn leaving me with these new darklings. They look at me oddly, which I am now used to. They look at the way Finn stands protectively in front of me with even more curiosity. They do not like that he has chosen to protect me and I dread when he leaves me alone with them. They will try to rip me limb from limb because I am different.

"Are you sure I am safe here?" I ask quietly. Finn has worry etched on his face as he gazes at me but it transforms into something powerful when he looks out at the faces. He emanates control and his voice is unwavering as he speaks to the throng of darklings,

"This darkling will be staying here for a short time. She is to be protected from everyone and everything at all costs. Is that understood? If a hair on her head is so much as touched you will have to answer to me." Finn affects these darklings just as he affects Bec and Lana. They all nod understanding without pausing. I am relieved he says I will only be here for a short time. He promises that Lana is on her way and he will not leave until she arrives. On the outskirts of the group I see another male darkling. He is older and the way he leers at me sends shivers up my spine. Finn notices him watching me and his face darkens.

"Come on, then?" He whispers. Finn takes a step back, careful not to touch my skin and starts for a hut that is in desperate need of repair. When we enter it occurs to me it is a store of sorts. Knives line the walls, a bow and arrow not nearly as nice as Lana's dangles off a rusty nail in the wall.

"What are those?" I point in the direction of black foreign looking objects. Finn peers down at me, amused at my question.

"Those are guns from the old world. I'm sure they don't work anymore but you'd be surprised how much death and destruction one of those could cause." It looks innate and harmless. A spell could cause more damage than the object, I am sure of it. Finn strides up to the makeshift counter and pounds his fist down on it a few times. In response, a gaggle of darkling women come to stand on the other side of the counter. I don't see their faces as Finn stands in front of me, but I know they react to him in the same manner all women do. Her voice shakes as she asks,

"Mr. White. What can we help you with today?"

"How are the cotton fields doing? Is Trudy sewing garments this week?" I chance a glance at them. They gasp when they see my blue eyes. I close them tightly.

“What is that?” Another darkling asks Finn. I grab a handful of the back of his shirt as the fear wells in my chest. He steps away to break my grasp.

“No one of consequence. She is from my circle and she will be staying here for a time while I tend to business. Your desert circle has far more protection than I can offer at the moment.”

“I’m Emma,” I tell them. I make sure to smile and tilt my head. Finn rolls up the sleeves of his shirt.

“We need some clothing if you have any to sell.” Finn says to break the silence that stretches on. The women stare at me with their jaws open. “I need a shirt or two and the darkling needs a change of outfit as well.” I notice my clothing is serious need of washing and repairing.

The older male darkling enters and looks at Finn and I. He squints his eyes as if suspecting something, but does not say a word.

“Louis,” Finn says as he eyes the man warily. With Finn distracted, the darklings come around the counter to look at me more closely. Their silver eyes are bright and their jet-black hair forces me to cringe when they touch my golden locks. Our differences are great.

“Finnegan. Playing with fire, are you?” The man says. I glance at him curiously and watch as Finn’s back visibly tenses.

“Protecting the people from my circle. You should know me better by now, I never get burned.” Louis answers with a forced smile. It crinkles around his eyes. I sense Louis is dangerous.

“What exactly are you protecting this one from?” He asks. His boots are heavy on the weak planked floor; his gaze predatory. I let the darkling women lead me to the back of the store because I do not like the way the man looks at me. I sense anger in him and my anger flares in response. I walk backward because I refuse to turn my back on the man.

“Don’t even think about it Louis. She is off limits,” Finn says. Louis laughs bitterly.

“Off limits how? We both know how far we can safely go with a female. I want a shot. It’s only fair to share. You owe me anyways...” Finn doesn’t let him finish. He looks back at the female darklings and they have immediate understanding. They whisk me into a back room and start measuring my body with strips of cloth. I let them remove my clothing. I lift my arms over my head so they can remove my shirt. I hear scuffling on the floor outside of the room--one loud thud and then silence.

“I’ll wait for you outside, darkling,” Finn roars through the door, his breathing labored.

“What are you to Mr. White?” A female asks while dressing me in a new long sleeved shirt.

“He is my protector,” I say, confused why they would ask such a question. The girls giggle. They pull on a pair of black woven pants that are tight around my body.

“Ah, I understand.” She winks at me. I smile because it is what I do when I do not know what to do. I catalog the wink to use in the future.

“He does not love me, cannot love me,” I tell them. They look at each other and back to me.

“She’s unfeeling.” One says. I step back as my irritation grows. I have said something that gives it away. I want to know what it is.

“I feel,” I lie. I know anger and fear are not really feeling. I know this because of what I *almost* feel when I hear Finn’s laugh.

“How many of the six do you have, darkling?” Eyes wide they wait for me to respond without breathing. I let out a long breath in exasperation. *Six*. There are six emotions. I stay silent. I put on my new socks, lace up my boots and accept the shirt that one holds out to me. I walk out of the room and find him waiting for me, pacing. There is a spot of blood on the floor. His eyes widen as he rakes his gaze over my body. He runs a hand over his mouth and shakes his head. He puts a satchel on the counter and tilts his head toward the exit. I do not move.

“Tell me the six,” I order. The dimple in the center of his chin juts forward as his jaw clenches. My breath is coming faster and I realize I need to know this and part of me is angry with Finn for not telling me. All emotions that stem from anger lace my body. I am spiteful I hear of this from the darklings, I worry that six is far too many to feel. I am panicked I will never feel them before I am whisked to my fate.

“What am I to you? Tell me the six and what did the other male darkling mean when he said ‘share me’?” My fists clench by my sides and worry creases Finn’s forehead. He is worried I will have a magical outburst. He looks behind me and then out the door behind him. I hear feet shuffling so I know the darkling women are there.

“Come.” He orders.

“Tell me,” I raise my chin. His confidence doesn’t waver.

“I will,” Finn finally mutters quietly. I walk past him and out the door, stepping astride the blood pile in my way.

“What did the seamstresses tell you?” Finn asks as he cleans out a house much smaller than the ones in our circle.

“They accused me of being unfeeling. They wanted to know what I was to you, Finn. Why does it matter to everyone that you protect me?” I sit on a pallet on the floor barefoot, watching him.

“Our arrangement isn’t familiar. Male darklings usually distance themselves from females because of the decree we abide by. You understand that most think you are...keeping me company.” He does not meet my eyes when he speaks and I think he is omitting something.

“Explain,” I say. He exhales loudly and rakes his hands through his hair. It falls back into his eyes. I smile.

“There are things that I have to do to relieve my issues. Living primarily with women and the fact that they are off limits makes it utterly unbearable. It partly has to do with the dark that is inside me, dormant as it may be. Some urges are harder to control than others. I have to...” My mouth parts in surprise when I realize what he means. My education on sex is scant. I now know my mother glossed over it because of my fate. That particular knowledge was never needed or intended to be used. I know what Finn is trying to say.

“You use female darklings to relieve yourself without having sex,” I say. His jaw works and his eyes lower. He bites his lip. His silence is the answer.

“What is wrong with me?” He gaze locks with mine in warning. He is shocked but it soon yields to laughter.

“The only female on the face of the planet that wants to know why I won’t *use* her and it has to be the one I will never touch in my long, immortal life. Of all the cruel jokes...” He shakes his head and begins pacing again. I think he is leaving me because he needs to “relieve his issues”, but I want him to stay.

“I understand why you do not want me.” I say because I know I am damaged. I am truly unfeeling. “Please tell me of the six, Finn.”

“You don’t understand, darkling. Which is why I can’t be around you. The six? Alright. Fear, anger, sadness, surprise, joy...and love. I’ve told you this before—they’ll probably come quickly. It will be getting you to feel something other than anger or fear that will be the biggest challenge.” I let his words sink in. I try to let the feelings sink in. I want them in my body now more than ever.

“What if you could make me feel?” Finn turns and punches the wall so hard that blood drips down his knuckles. I flinch back and scoot to the other end of the pallet. He has no self-control. I see him clutching his bleeding hand and I am envious of his pain. I want it for myself.

“Don’t you think I’ve thought about that? If I could just use you or your mouth and relish every second of it that maybe you would feel something, too? Unfortunately, it’s not that easy, darkling. Just looking at you makes me crazed and draws out the dark that is supposedly non-existent.” His eyes are wild. He breathes out deeply and continues, “Lana is here but I have to go. I’ll check on

you in a few days.” He pulls off his shirt over his head and wraps it around his hand. His tanned chest rises and falls and I cannot control myself, I do not want to control myself. I stand and walk to stand in front of him. He watches me apprehensively, his eyes slit. I do not understand why I want to, but I reach out my hand and lay it on the middle of his chest. I watch my fingers rise and fall as he breathes in and out. I close my eyes and tilt my chin up as warm sensations fill my stomach. I open my eyes when I realize Finn has stopped breathing. He grabs my wrist but does not remove my hand from his body. His pupils are dilated wide and my lips part when I see his relax open. I want to taste his mouth, I want to know what his lips feel like when they melt with mine. I want to *feel* them on me. He leans his face down and it is almost an automatic response. Leaning forward, I tilt my chin up further until our lips almost brush. My breaths come short and shallow, almost a pant. He brings his hand to cradle the nape of my neck and feel it coming. I lick my lips in anticipation and close my eyes.

The door bangs open. Lana is here.

“Well, shit on a fucking shingle, Finn. So, this is what you’ve been doing? I knew it was getting close to time, but didn’t figure you’d take advantage of poor ole’ Emma.” I back away from Finn quickly. He does not let go of my wrist. He glowers at Lana. I think I imagine it, but it seems his eyes flicker white.

“And you?” Lana says to me. Her eyes widen and a huge smile spreads across her face, “you sluttly little robot. I didn’t know you had it in you!” Finn lets my hand drop and I take a step away from him. Lana stares at Finn’s body in obvious appreciation. He notices so he grabs the new shirt off the table and buttons it up. I feel rage that Lana has interrupted the moment. Distress soon follows when Finn picks up his backpack. Lana swings her bow off her back and wipes the sweat from her forehead with the back of her sleeve.

“I can’t believe you picked this circle, Finn. It’s gross here and there isn’t a lake for miles,” Lana breathes out, all traces of her previous emotions erased.

“It’s safest here,” Finn says. He squats next to his pack to rearrange some items and I feel the fear come. Every branch that stems from fear surfaces because Finn is departing. I feel nervousness, alarm, shock, dread, worry—I am terrified to be away from him. It is comforting to have Lana here but I remember the way the other male darkling looks at me and it sends a cold chill through my body.

“Finn, the other male darkling...he will hurt me,” I say.

“He won’t so much as look at you. I made sure of that earlier,” Finn says gruffly. I want to be close to him. The floor creaks as I approach and he stands swiftly and moves for the door.

“Oh, fuck. Louis was already being a creepy bastard?” Lana scoffs. Finn chuckles under his breath. His hand is on the door handle for a moment but he turns back. I know I look wide-eyed and panicked but I do my best to keep my feelings at bay.

“Goodbye, Finn,” I say. Lana is over in the corner stripping off her boots to ready for bed. I smile weakly. He smiles back. I wink and then bite my bottom lip.

I know he is going to be with another female darkling, but I want him to remember me. He takes a deep breath, shakes his head once and escapes into the darkness. I’m heartened to realize that the sensation in my body that is attached to Finn doesn’t disappear when he does.

“Alright, freak. I want details. You are the luckiest bitch alive and you don’t even know it yet.” Lana shouts the second we are alone.

I have been alive for eighteen years and in two days Finn has changed so much. I do not tell her, but I think *I do know* I am lucky.

January 16th, Morning

Finn has been gone for three whole days. The distress I feel with his absence is worse in the mornings after I have dreamed about him all night. He has not sent a messenger and I can tell that Lana is ready to go back to our circle. Her boredom is why we are in this field.

“Shoot anything that moves, Emma,” Lana says. We are in the closest farming crop--almost a day’s walk from the desert circle. The landscape is just as bleak, but Lana says there are different crops here. She wants to pillage them and I am her *lookout* person. I do not agree with her plans, but she is giddy at the prospect of eating something other than potatoes. Admittedly, I am too.

“I will not shoot any darklings, Lana,” I say through gritted teeth. She taught me how to use her bow. It feels awkward and very heavy in my hands—I am certain I would not be able to hit anything. Lana’s teaching is more like showing. I place the bow and the leather quiver on the ground carefully. The black ash that shrouds the earth is thick in this area. The large open area had nothing to protect it from the years of ash rain. I look up to the sky, thankful it has stopped and the gray haze has replaced it. Without the haze the world would be pitch black constantly.

Lana pulls a few vegetables from the ground, smiles, places them in her brown sack and continues. I hope she doesn’t get in trouble, although I cannot help the smile that crosses my face as I watch her break out in an obscene celebratory dance. The emotions I watch her express weary me. They are so deep, profound and *full* I am not sure my mind can handle such things. I want them though. Every night Lana sits and talks to me about my childhood, about my mother. The feelings of anger always slay me when we speak of her death. Lana says it is a good thing. The greater the anger the closer I am to the other four.

“Did you hear that?” I ask Lana. I pick up the bow and select a bow from the quiver. My eyes scan the open fields at all angles as Lana jogs up to stand beside me.

“I did,” Lana says warily. She takes the bow from me. “Get your knife out, Emma.” I pull out the larger knife I have been carrying since Finn left. Lana says I am good with it. We practice killing savages every night and I am much better at it. I have not been clawed again.

“It’s a dark witch...” Lana says as she draws the bowstring back to touch her cheek. I look where she aims and see a group of darklings. Sure enough, the white glowing eyes of a dark witch show themselves. It is a female witch. I stagger back and close my eyes to keep my dark side at bay. Lana holds her breath, a signal she will release an arrow very soon. I hold my breath, too. The hiss of the arrow cutting through the air comforts me.

The dark witch screeches loudly. Lana has hit her in the arm. She rarely misses a kill shot. Lana has spared the witch for some reason.

The female darklings that surround the dark witch crowd around her, but they continue to walk in our direction. Lana shakes her head and loads another arrow. Darklings have sharp eyesight and at this fractionally closer distance I see that the dark witch's eyes flicker.

"Wait. Did you see her eyes?" I ask Lana. Lana lowers her bow as she notices.

"Yeah, she's a freak like you." She huffs, upset she does not get to send off another arrow. "Woah, doggy. They are gonna be pissed off." Lana swings her bow behind her back and slams the bow back into the quiver.

"It was an accident. We should go talk to them." It is another unfeeling darkling like myself. I cannot help but be curious. I want to talk to her. I want to know what she feels. I want to know if she wants to be corrected. She is clutching her bleeding arm. I recognize the look on her face. She likes the pain. Like me, she is trying to overcome the dark. Unlike me, she looks like the other darklings. Brief irritation courses through me at the realization. I walk forward and she steps forward as she recognizes something in me. We are standing face to face now.

"You are like me," I say automatically. Her eyes flicker snowy white. I back away. The disconnection I feel at her show of dark startles me. Lana grabs me by my shoulder. The girl does not respond.

"Sorry about the arrow. All I saw was witchy eyes," Lana wipes her palms on her pants nervously. "I didn't send a kill shot because I wasn't certain." She says as her defense. The darkling's glowing white eyes remind me of my mother's death. My stomach hurts—my chest grows tight, my breathing speeds. The other darklings, the one that escort her, finally speak,

"You could have saved us some trouble if you released a kill shot," one said. Lana's eyes widen in shock. I swallow hard when I realize what the other darklings mean.

"This one is too far gone. We brought her out here to dispose of her." I suppress the urge to scream. The darkling that is too far gone does not speak; she does not move to go against what has been said about her. Lana looks at her quizzically and then back to me. She raises her eyebrows and bites her lip jokingly.

"Don't let us interrupt then," Lana says, grabbing my hand to lead me away from the impending massacre. I have things I want to know.

"Wait," I say. "What does she feel? How do you know she is lost?" My mother always said she could see me inside. How do these darklings know she is not inside? The darkling finally responds.

"I need the correction," I ball up my fists as her words hit home. The other darklings answer my question for her,

"She feels fear. We've had her for over a year and she shows no sign of anything else. We've done all we can do. We'll dispatch her into the forest and let the

savages take care of her. If she stumbles into a dark witch first perhaps they will take pity on her and escort her to the Dark Citadel.” Her voice is icy and I think she does not feel all six yet. I am angry she is the one making the decision.

“Save her, Lana,” I say. I want her to be saved as she saved me. I think she has a chance. Lana shakes her head the second the words leave my lips.

“She can’t even speak for herself, sweet cakes. This,” Lana points to her glowing eyes and blank stare, “is what happens to most darklings that escape. There is no way to fix those who don’t want to be fixed. She would have had a better life with the dark witches breeding for perfection.” Lana’s words drip with contempt. “Plus, what do you think will happen when Finn comes back and I have two of you?” At the mention of Finn I feel my stomach lurch. “You got lucky, Emma. You have a male darkling willing to die for your protection. Had you not, you’d be in those woods getting gnashed to pieces by stinking savages.” I shudder. I take one last look at the girl and walk away with Lana. When we distance ourselves from their murderous group I ask,

“Finn would die protecting me?” She peeks at me sideways and smiles.

“Yes, and he nearly killed Louis for merely stating his attraction to you.” I remember the pile of blood in the store. I don’t know why he feels strongly about me, but I am glad. I hear a blood-curdling scream come from behind us. Neither Lana nor I turn around to look. We trudge forward, but I see how the scream affects Lana. She is disturbed by it. I try to comfort her by talking over the death,

“Why do you help me, Lana? Why did you come here to this desert circle that you dislike so much?” She exhales. Either relieved the darkling’s screams have stopped or because of my questions.

“I may be a badass but I still feel. You are different from the others I’ve found in the past. Maybe it was morbid curiosity about your freaky eyes and light hair that stopped me from killing you when we first met, but I keep you around now because I like you.” It pleases me to hear Lana profess this. I stop walking. She turns to look at me.

“I like you too, Lana.” I wrap my arms around her in a hug. It is not acting, but something else that forces the action. She hesitantly reciprocates by wrapping her arms around me. I inhale her scent and melt a little further into her warm embrace. The emotion that triggered this suddenly turns to something raw when I remember my mother hugging me in the same manner.

“What do you feel, Emma?” Lana asks quietly, as if sensing a momentous breakthrough.

“I feel anger.” I say omitting the feelings that triggered the hug in the first place. Lana exhales deeply and pulls me away, keeping her hands on my shoulders. She gives me a half smile.

“And that’s why you’re not like the other darkling.” She knows I almost feel something else. I smile back at her thankful she has given me the chance that was denied the other darkling just moments before. Perhaps my appearance is what has kept me alive this far. I also realize it is my biggest liability when I see the male darkling, Louis leering at me in the distance. Instead of grabbing Lana’s hand as I would have usually done I clutch my knife a little tighter.

“When will Finn return?” I ask.

“He obviously had a lot of *things* to work out of his system if he’s stayed away this long,” Lana says. She laughs a little and I think I understand what she means because I feel envious of the female darklings he spends time with. “Bec is probably going bat-shit crazy with boredom without me around.” I giggle. Now I can tell when she uses humor. I glance over my shoulder to see if Louis is still there, but he is gone.

“I hope he comes back soon,” I say. There is a different hollow feeling that encompasses me when I think of Finn and his protection.

“His good looks aside he is very handy to have around. He probably got held up fixing something or another. Don’t worry for him. He always comes back more swoon worthy than when he left.” She fans herself with her hands and feigns fainting.

I do not worry for Finn. I worry for myself.

January 16th, Night

Although Finn said that Louis would not even look at me, he has been staring at me all day. It is from afar so as no one else notices his haunting gaze. We are in the center of the desert circle amidst other darklings when I see him again. He is leaning against a hut with his eyes trained on me, hunger permeating his features. Lana is going on a hunting trip with a few of the other darklings that enjoy killing sprees as much as her. Louis is going with them so I tell Lana that I will stay back here in case Finn returns. I do not say it is because being anywhere around Louis makes the hairs on my neck stand up. Her worry is not something I want.

Later back in our hut she asks, "Are you sure you're okay here by yourself?" She is vibrating with excitement to get into the forests and kill.

"I will be fine. I want to be here just in case." It is not a lie. "I can protect myself." It is a lie. Though, with Louis going with the hunting party I will not need to worry about protecting myself. I pick up my knife and toss it into the air. I catch the handle and smile. Lana smiles back at me.

"You are such a freak," She says sweetly as she exits our hut and lets the door slam behind her. I walk behind her and latch the wobbly lock without putting down my knife. I do not put it down when I eat some of the new vegetables out of Lana's sack either. I do not let go of the knife when I lay down on the floor pallet and fall asleep.

An unusual noise jolts me from a deep sleep. I see Louis kneeling at the foot of my pallet dangling Lana's sack of vegetables from his hand.

"Do you know what the punishment for stealing is in our circle?" I quickly sit up. My knife is no longer in my grasp and I realize I have released it in my sleep. I pat around the pallet for it and am unable to locate it. Louis' smile transforms into a sneer as he brings my knife from around his back to hold up in his other hand. It is not until I realize I am defenseless against the male darkling that I start to feel terror. I know why he is here. I know what he wants.

"Where is Lana?" I ask, knowing she is out hunting.

"She is deep in the forest killing. She won't be back for some hours. It gives us plenty of time to do everything I've been fantasizing about doing." He drops the brown sack to the ground and I watch as the carrots bounce across the dusty floor.

"Because you stole from me and my circle Finn's order of protection means nothing," Louis sheathes my knife in his leg holster and pulls his shirt over his head. I scoot back further, but the wall stops me. My gaze takes his whole body in. He is the second male darkling I have ever seen. The curiosity to know what he looks like wars with the feelings of dread that roil my stomach. Though his appearance is somewhat pleasing I am not interested in him at all. I want to disappear from this place. I want Lana. I want Finn more.

“We can do this the easy way or we can do it the hard way. Take off your clothes, darkling or I’ll cut them off with your own blade. I won’t cut gently either—I like a little blood.” His evil smile reaches high, crinkling his eyes. It has been days since I feel my dark magic and in this moment when I call on it, it is absent. I cannot will my eyes to turn white and forcing my magic to well up is useless. The human part of me is here right now and humans are *weak*. I am suddenly angry at the darklings for making me helpless, I am livid that they have broken their promise to protect me. I can lie back and give in to the male darklings’ wishes or I can fight.

The human in me wants a fight.

I scoot forward on the pallet; closer to him and will my blue eyes to appear soft and my expression submissive. I smile at him. I bite my lip. I *pretend*. His wolfish smile is predacious. I shudder. I am unsure how far I can take this without exposing my intentions. I pull my shirt and camisole over my head and toss them away, completely baring my chest. His gaze is ravenous. His chest rises and falls at a more harried pace.

“I want to do this the easy way. I want you,” I say, imitating the purr I hear so often from the other female darklings. He firmly rubs his hand down the front of his pants, over the bulge there. I turn my head to hide the violent fear and loathing I know is streaking across my face. I try to will my magic up one more time as he creeps toward me unbuttoning his pants, but it eludes me again. I need to reach my knife—it is the only way to escape this.

“Wait,” I say. He pauses, but he slits his eyes warily and cocks his head in question, “I want to take them off.” I stretch my hand out toward his pants. My arm visibly shakes. I edge closer—he does not speak nor stop me. I touch the top of his jeans where the button resides and his breathing stops altogether. He brings his hands up to touch my breasts and I wince away, unable to withstand his disgusting hands on my bare body. I grasp once in a futile attempt to release my knife from his holster and fail. It is firmly snapped into place.

“I knew it, you fucking bitch.” Louis grates. He grabs my hands and pins them over my head with one of his. I kick as hard as I can as he tries to remove my pants. One of my kicks lands squarely on his stomach and he is shaken enough to release my hands. There are no emotions in this moment and I think it is because I am numb. Like pain, this incident numbs me. I do not want to be numb any longer.

“Get the hell away from me!” I yell loudly into the dark room. I scream so loudly I am sure it penetrates the sky and reaches the Dark Citadel. I stand and grab a wooden chair and throw it in between us. His eyes are feral and angry, though I am surely angrier than he. I kick the chair toward him, daring him to approach me. He lunges at me and his fist connects with my face. Warm blood drips from my lip. *Pain*. My dark side is buried even deeper. I cannot reach it and I know this is probably the end, but I am okay with it because my eyes are blue.

My head hits the floor with a loud crack and my eyelids close. He is on top of me, I feel his heated breath on my collarbone and his muttered words are full of hate and wrath. He struggles with my tight pants and I smile, thankful for the seamstresses' forethought. Dizzy sensations flood my head as I will the pain to take me under.

I hear a loud crash followed by the fiercest war cry I can ever imagine. It is not until I will my eyes open do I know it is Finn. Or someone who looks very similar to Finn--I cannot distinguish his features as they are twisted in rage. He pulls the male darkling off me so quickly I am unsure if he was ever on me to begin with. Finn hurls the man across the room like he is light as air. My head lolls to the side and I see the door has been busted open. Lana stands in the frame with her mouth agape. She is speechless as she takes in the scene. She loads her bow and points it into the hut. My head is pounding but I sit up. My underwear are still on, but my other clothing items are nowhere in sight. I bring my hand up to my mouth and relish in the stinging pain. Finn does not look at me when he drags the unconscious body of Louis out of the hut. Lana follows Finn out. I hear one violent *snap* and know that Louis is no more. Removing the head is the only way to kill a darkling.

I shut my eyes and scream.

When I open them Finn is kneeling in front of me. His breathing is heavy—erratic. His breath and my heart hammering in my ears are the only things I am aware of. Finn's gaze is trained on my eyes as he unbuttons his shirt with blood soaked fingers. I want to tell him how angry I am that he left me. I want to tell him how fearful I am about *everything* when he is away, instead I leap at him wrapping my arms around his neck so tightly I think I may harm him. I bury my face in his neck. He shrugs out of his shirt and drapes it across my lower back. His hands are hesitant as he rubs my bare back in small circles. I never want to let go. I cannot let go.

“Do not ever leave me again,” I say without breaking our embrace. I feel his heart beating against my nude skin. We are connected. Through my tight grip he exhales deeply. Finn turns his head and presses a soft kiss against my temple.

Finn never leaves me for more than six hours again.

July 16th, Midday

6 months later

I *almost feel*. Every day, every hour, and every second I pretend less and feel more. Lana is correct in that acting lessons are good. Just not for the reasons she initially started them. I copy the darkling girls' smiles and laughs. I imitate their gestures and pick up on jokes—I may not feel the other four yet, but I feel alive. Finn still has to leave every few weeks. Lana and Finn do not think I know when he leaves, but I do. Even if I could not see the crazed look in his eyes when it is almost time, I would know because Lana sits by the window all night long when he is gone. She is guarding, watching, making sure nothing happens to me. Bec usually spends the night in our house on the nights Finn leaves, too. I tell them stories of my childhood and try to recite the words from my fairy tale. The words are less familiar now and as unimportant as they once seemed, I know they are not. Those words are my mother. They are all I have left besides the snippets of memories and her last dying words.

Finn is always back before I wake up.

It is customary that male darklings stay in a house on the outside of the circle to protect the female darklings and because it is inappropriate for males to intermingle too much. Finn now stays in a house directly next to Lana and I's. Sometimes, at night after we part, I go to the window in our house and I watch him in his. Some nights he paces the small space for hours and other times he actually sleeps. Watching Finn is my favorite pastime. Lana gives me a hard time when she sees me staring, but I catch her standing over my shoulder every now and again to watch, too. I wonder what Finn frets about, I wonder where his mind wanders. I know that with Louis' death, repercussions stemmed. Neither Lana nor Finn would discuss it in front of me and when I bring up the subject they both grow angry.

The witches have come to our circle twice. They search for me. They do not give up on me like the other darklings that escape their fate. They want me. Finn knows when they plan to visit so we are ready when they do. Turning my blonde hair black with ash will not work forever. My blue eyes have taken on a silver sheen and without a second look no one would doubt I am more human than witch. Bec and Lana say this is a promising sign, but I grow weary of waiting for emotions.

"I am so fucking excited for the scavenger hunt tonight," Lana chirps from behind me. I am staring out the window—my window, again. Finn is shirtless in his house, I know he will need to leave again soon. He looks at me fiercer, his voice is more rigid. He restrains himself around me more. I have asked, but Lana refuses to tell me where he goes or who he goes to. It annoys me. He tells me we are friends like Lana and I, but I feel enough to know a blatant lie when it is told. Finn stretches his strong, tanned arms over his head. I forcibly turn my head to respond to Lana,

“I am excited, too. You better be on my team...” I say. Lana’s eyes light up.

“Of course! I need your freakish good looks to shock our opponents. Plus, if you’re on my team that means we get to use Finn as an Ace card. It’s almost like cheating...really.” Lana throws her bow over her shoulder excitedly while shaking her head. She is already planning her victory dance in her mind. I am sure of it. I laugh out loud. Lana peers at me over her shoulder, her white teeth blazing in a wide smile. She likes my laugh; I like her smile.

“Bye,” I say, because I know the house cannot contain her energy any longer.

“I have some planning to do for tonight. I’ll leave you to your...” she rubs her chin, and then finally decides on her word choice, “meat gazing.” The wooden door now reinforced with scraps of metal slams behind her--effectively erasing her cackle from the air. The smile that Lana causes is still on my face when I glance back out the window and startle. Finn is watching me, his eyes hungry. He only looks at me like *this*. I let my smile drop, my lips part in shock. My eyesight is perfect. I can see every perfect crease and angular slant of his face and body. His lips, the lips I dream about constantly are parted. I bring two fingers up to my own mouth and trace my lips back in forth, imagining my fingers are his lips. The way he watches me causes warm tingles to rise up my spine. It is not a product of magic and I know that Finn is *not* my friend. His face becomes tortured. He closes his mouth fully, something he rarely does, and his lips form a hard line. He leaves his window. It angers me that he ruins another of our secret moments. I know that Finn is the key to unlocking the other four but he refuses to admit it.

I pick up my knife and decide to see if Lana has gotten far. My body is still humming and I need a distraction, anything that will pull my focus from Finn’s lips and body. Anything. I pull open the door with a creak and the reason I need to be distracted looms large. Finn is breathless, panting from running. The first thing I notice is that his shirt is still absent. I look both ways making sure the other darklings are not watching him enter my house half dressed. They are jealous of his protective nature; this would be an entirely different problem. Finn swallows hard.

“Why did you do that?” He demands. I step back and let him walk in before answering. The door shuts and I lean my back against it.

“I did not do a thing. You were the one who ruined it,” I say calmly, feeling my heart pick up just from listening to him say five words. My eyes dart to the band of his underwear peeking from beneath his low-slung jeans. He takes a step back.

“Emma, please. Don’t do this to me,” Finn is begging—he is breaking. He calls me my name instead of darkling.

“You do not want me to feel the other four. It is obvious,” I say. I cross my arms over my chest and turn my head away from him. I prop one foot back on the door.

“How can you possibly say that? We are *friends*, Emma. I can’t be more than that to you.” Finns voice shatters. Curiosity forces me to meet his gaze.

“Whatever. Everyone gets a piece of the Finn pie except me,” I intone sarcasm perfectly.

“So that’s what you want then? You want a go at me? One time and then never again, that’s how it works you know? Once I touch a darkling I don’t touch her again. Come on, Emma. That’s what you want? Take it. God knows that’s what I want—all I can think about constantly. You drive me fucking crazy...” Finn says. I am not sure if I am offended by his words or if something else makes my heart leap. I want Finn. I want him badly. I do not want him only once. He rakes a hand through his long brown hair and his eyelids fall to half-mast. His breathing slows, his lips part further and he comes toward me. He rests his hands on the door beside my head. I stand shock still. His lips are so near mine that if I swallow I think they will touch.

“Do you know what I think about when I’m with the other darklings?” He asks. I shake my head ever so slightly.

“This,” he trails a finger over my bottom lip. I sigh. Finn swallows loudly. “Your face,” he brings up a finger and lightly drags it across my cheekbone and down my neck. “Your body,” Finn’s fingers brush across my collarbone and then down my bare arm. “You are there, not the insignificant bodies I have to use to fix myself.” His words resonate, stoking a growing fire—inside a part of me only Finn can own.

“I want you to always use me to fix yourself,” I whisper into the electrified atmosphere surrounding us. He shakes his head sadly and continues to caress my skin.

“It would get too complicated, Emma. I won’t be able to stop.” He watches his fingers as he brings them back up to trace my lips.

“Can we not have this, then?” I ask as I close my eyes and surrender to the shock waves hitting my system. “I feel so much with this,” I lay my hands on his chest and let them slide down slowly. He sucks in a breath and holds it as my hands stop by his navel. “I want to feel, Finn. I want to feel you,” I say. I see a flash of white light his eyes. Just as quickly the warm silvery brown replaces the glow.

“Kiss me,” I order. “If I can have nothing else at least let your lips be only mine.” I wrap my arms around his strong shoulders and press my body to his. He pulls away from me gently. He leans down with a precise control and kisses me on the corner of my mouth. I close my eyes at the brief exquisite contact. I feel more in this fleeting moment than anything that came before it. Then he speaks again,

“Don’t you understand, Emma? You already have my entire heart.”

You already have my entire heart. His admission blazes into my soul.

He has said more words from my book. Words that are no longer hollow.

July 16th, Night

Finn leaves before we even start our scavenger hunt. Lana is furious with his departure—her Ace card has vanished. I told her we would be able to get the objects hidden in the forests without him, but true to form she continues to sulk. Before he left, Finn says he will be as fast as possible and might make the tail end of our hunt. I do not tell Lana this just in case he does not make it—it will only disappoint her further. My disappointment is heavy enough for both of us. I loathe that he is with another darkling. My stomach twists and knots as images of his mouth on another swirl through my thoughts. I feel murderous. I try to focus on the fact he will be laid back and completely carefree tomorrow. Our relationship is easier the days following his absence. *After he is with another.*

“What’s our strategy?” Lana asks as she streaks some sort of black oil underneath her eyes. She turns to face me, abandoning her mirror, stone faced and serious.

“It is a game, Lana. Do we really need a strategy? We find the objects the other circle has hidden for us and try to avoid their traps. It will be *fun*.” I giggle when I realize she is perfectly serious. Lana is not a good loser.

“Put some of that on my face, teammate,” I motion to my face with my fingers. Lana tries to hide a grin as she approaches. Unlike the perfectly sculpted lines under her eyes, she smears it all over my face. It does not just look like oil; it is oil.

“I hate you. This better wash off,” I say when she is finished sully my skin and laughing so heartily that she is unable to speak clearly. In her moment of breathless weakness I wipe some of it from my face and lunge forward to smear it across her forehead. I am successful. I pick up my knife, slam it into my holster and run out the door with Lana hot on my heels.

“Now that we look like dirty children the others might go lenient on us,” she says. I look at her with a huge smile. She rolls her eyes and stalks forward into the forest. I am not afraid of the nothingness anymore. It represents the circle that has accepted me. It protects *my* circle. The savages that inhabit the forests are merely a nuisance. Lana says we are able to kill them without retribution from the dark witches only if they threaten us, as they are guardians. *Weak* guardians, I think. She kills them for looking at her a mile away, but I like that about Lana. I like everything about Lana. I know that nothingness is not empty; it is full—of promise.

“Wait up,” I shout as I enter the edge of the trees. Lana is looking at a piece of dark parchment paper trying to decide where we should go first. The darklings are paired up and their laughter is infectious. When the others glimpse our faces they laugh even louder.

“Two ball shaped baskets that hang from a branch...one hundred paces to the west...” Lana taps the side of her head, visibly amused by something. “Well if that’s not a euphemism then I don’t know what is,” she says.

“They are *baskets*. You are going to make this impossible,” I tell her gruffly. I snatch the map from her hands and examine it carefully.

“It’s not my fault the innuendo is so glaring. I didn’t make the maps,” She puts her hands on her hips and finally explains, “each pair of darklings have a different map directing them toward the same objects. There are enough objects for all the teams. The first one back here with all of their objects wins. We have to work down the list and stay in order, we can’t take something that is meant for another team even if it’s right under our nose,” Lana huffs, perturbed she cannot cheat.

“Good, someone should keep you honest,” I tease. She grabs the map back from me and shoves it in her back pocket. She eyes me warily as if she suspects something, but doesn’t bring it up. She presses her lips into a firm curved line before she says,

“Let’s go find some fucking dangly balls, shall we?”

After multiple hours of walking and getting sprayed by a disgusting smelling powder I have had enough *fun*. My hair nearly caught fire, Lana’s clothes are in shreds and I only wear one boot. The laughter died the same time Lana almost fell out of a tree.

“One last thing,” Lana breathes out in exasperation. She eyes the map closely holding it up to let more of the gray haze light the page. Morning is upon us.

“Go dig at the base of that tree, Emma.” I look at her defiantly although I know it is my turn. “It says you are the one that has to dig.” She slams her finger at the last line of text and shoves it in my face. None of the other objects specified who had to preform the task.

“Why me?”

“I don’t even care. Do it with your teeth if you have to. I’m so tired I just want to go back and sleep for days.” She sits down with a loud thud then lies back and closes her eyes. I look around us as a precaution as I would never rest here, we are deep in the forest. I walk unevenly over to the tree Lana indicated and start digging with my fingers. The black ash coats my hands and I feel grit building beneath my nails. After a few minutes without success I stop. I sit next to my hole and just breathe.

“How bad did you want to win this, Lana?” I shout so she hears me. I hear a loud snap above my head and immediately back away from the tree. A net containing a savage hits the ground and opens in front of me like a present of the worst kind. My bare foot almost forces a trip as I back away reaching for my knife. The savage’s vacant stare moves over to Lana.

“Over here,” I snarl. I do not like that it looks at her. I free my knife and hold it in front of me.

“The creature moves around me and starts for Lana,” I glance back and realize she is still on the ground, eyes closed. Magic is at work. My dark side is buried deep, but I can still sense a spell zinging through the air with malevolent intent. Lana’s eyes are closed and she looks to be in a peaceful slumber. I panic when she does not move as the savage approaches. This is a trick of the cruelest kind, I cannot fathom why I am to be tested in such a manner. I see the pale, sickly skin of the savage and do not think about anything else. I leap through the air and attack it from the back. My skin burns where it touches its skin. I bury my knife deep into the back. As I pull my blade out thick congealed blood splatters my face. The savage’s knees hit the ground, and then it falls forward, mere inches from Lana’s body.

“Wake up, Lana!” I scream. She stirs briefly. I grab the savage by the head and slice it from the body. Blood spurts onto Lana’s clothing. Her eyes flutter open, the spell vanishes with the savage’s death. Lana sits up wide eyed as she looks at me and then the savage.

“What the fuck just happened?” Lana asks.

“I just saved your fucking life,” I say, letting an ironic smile inch across my face. She laughs loudly.

“And I think someone hates me...or you...or both of us,” I say when I realize this is a trap set specifically for us. Lana shakes her head, to clear her thoughts and I set back to digging in the hole. I do not want the person who set this trap to win. I will get what it is that they did not think I would obtain. It is important. I want to win just as much as Lana.

“We’re even then, Freak.” Lana says when I hold up the black wooden box in the air. “Let’s see what someone found so important that they wanted to test your loyalty. Inside the box was a small coin used for trading. There is also a black bag with a scrap of paper with my name on it. The bag contains a necklace with a black stone—an onyx and a small red heart-shaped gemstone dangling from it. I have never seen something so beautiful. It reminds me of something. I look at Lana’s neck and see her small black stone pendant. As comprehension dawns I remember all the darklings wear the black stone; I never noticed before.

“It helps keep our dark side repressed. We all have one. I’ve had mine since I was a baby,” she says as she watches me examine it more carefully. I feel more human than ever before. I do not need the black stone, still I lace the chain through my fingers as if it were easily broken. It is precious.

“I didn’t think there were anymore left. Especially like this,” I let her take it from my hands to look at it. She unclasps the golden chain and clips it around my neck.

“I have never had anything so beautiful before,” I tell her in a soft whisper. I twist the pendants between my fingers and think it is one of the best feelings in the world—to have something so precious you could not bear to lose it. Lana shakes

her head and raises her eyebrows. She is confused. She points to the tiny scrap of paper with my name printed on it.

“Emma...that is Finn’s handwriting.” *And I thought the necklace was precious before.*

July 17th, Midday

The weight of the pendant at my throat keeps me awake—I pulsate with a warm, tingling sensation. I cannot stop smiling. The stone is meant to dull my dark side, but I do not expect it to cause such a surge of longing for Finn. This was a gift from him. A *very considerate* gift from him. Lana looked worried as we walked back to the circle hours before. She would not tell me why, though her mood was sullen mine soars high in the hazy, perfect sky. I throw the blanket off my body and walk to my window. Sleep will not come and the need to speak with Finn is all encompassing. I want to know what the necklace means. I want to see his lazy smile. I want the rigidity of his shoulders gone. I want the female darkling that eases this to release him.

I quickly peek at Lana, snoring loudly without a care in the world. I smile as emotions flood my body. I feel the emptiness filling, the void being bridged, and the fluttering of my heart connecting the mangled pieces that form Emmalina Weaver.

I run to the lagoon. I relish in the feeling of the pendants bouncing off my chest in rhythm with my feet pounding ashy ground. Clothing still on, I run directly into the water, sink below the inky liquid and open my senses. Noise is gone and I only hear my heart hammering in my chest. When I surface, I behold the sight I so desperately crave.

It is Finn.

His gaze is fixated on my chest. He is staring at my pendants. When Finn meets my eyes I see so many things. I am sure he has always looked at me like this, but I never had the ability to see the emotions behind it. He looks at me with approval, with desire, pride and honesty--I almost combust with emotion. I smile. He smiles. I push forward to close the distance between us.

“You are back. I missed you,” I say. Finn just stares at me as if he has never seen me before. His eyes trace every curve of my body and study my face. I grab my necklace and tilt my head to the side, “I got a gift. I am not sure who it is from and I had to battle a savage for it,” He moves closer to me in the water as I speak.

“That is a pretty impressive gift. Someone must really care a lot about you,” he says while rubbing the back of his head with one hand. His eyes are purposefully averted sideways.

“That or someone wants to kill me,” I point out. He grins.

“How does it make you feel?” Finn takes another step in my direction and brushes the side of my face with the back of his fingertips. I do not feel anything except his touch. It is so soft, so purposeful, and so *full* of feeling. I lean into his hand and press it against the side of my neck. He brings his other hand over and twirls my necklace in between his fingers.

“All I feel is you, Finn,” I tell him honestly. Anticipating his words, I watch his lips unwilling to miss their movement. He drops his hands and the absence of his touch brings me back to his question.

“Now, tell me what you feel,” I can think clearly when he is not touching me.

“I feel things I remember feeling when I was younger,” I say twining my fingers into the chain of my necklace. Finn watches my fingers with proud affection. I remember my mother’s face. She is cradling me in her lap telling me stories from the old world. Her face is happy and animated. I think she looks prettiest when she tells these stories. I want to be inside her stories. I want to dance in the phenomenon called rain. I want to chase fireflies on a hot summer night. I long for a pretty summer dress that wisps at my ankles while I walk barefoot on grass. She tells me of ice cream cones that hold sweetness so bold it stings your tongue. It all comes coursing through me at once. I see the memories flash before my eyes. Tender kisses, dancing in the kitchen, frolicking in the large open field. Then, I see the specific memory—the one that haunts me. The memory that consumes my being with longing because I have been unable to attach an emotion to it. I feel as if I am in that memory at this moment.

“I’m going to get you Emmalina,” my mother says. I run so fast that my tiny heart is thumping rapidly. Sticky sweat surrounds my face and mats my hair at my hairline. My feet are bare and the gray haze is the lightest I ever remember it being. I look over my shoulder and laugh as I see her running after me. She has her hands stretched out toward me and her brown hair bounces as she runs. It is a dream in slow motion that I get to relive. The moment is perfect. Her smile is electric. Her voice is more sweet than any treat from the old world.

“You can’t catch me, Mommy!” My singsong child’s voice rings back at her. I want her to catch me. I want her hands tickling me. She grabs me and lifts me under my arms, and up over her head. I can touch the sky. I am flying. She spins around in a circle, but I do not look around. I look at her smiling face. It is so cheerful, it is so perfect; it holds the same emotion that I feel in this moment.

We are complete. I am not empty.

“I feel *joy*,” I tell Finn as I throw my head back laughing at the sky. The emotion tears through me more powerful than anything else. I am elated, delighted, I feel contentment and relief. Excitement courses through my veins more powerful than dark magic. It is incomparable. I splash the water around us and giggle when it hits Finn. I am so happy I remember her—thankful Finn has forced this from me in his own way. I jump toward him and he catches me under my arms.

He lifts me above his head and I feel like I am floating on a cloud in an alternate universe. He spins in one slow circle. I gaze down at him knowing this is what my mother wants for me. I vow to make her sacrifice worth it.

Finn laughs loudly--a hearty, meaningful laugh. We are reveling in this perfect moment together; Finn and I and our joyful laughter.

I know then, that his laugh is the only sound I like more than my own heartbeat.

July 17th, Night

Everything holds new meaning with my feeling of joy. Of the three emotions to my name, joy is the strongest and for that I am thankful and elated. With my newfound happiness comes crushing guilt. I have all these people in my life who have done so much for me and ask nothing in return...other than their desire for me to *feel*. My joy is mine, not theirs. They have been selfless to the selfish. I am forever in their debt for giving me the gift of a life free of my fate. Though surprise, sadness and love are missing I know they are there just waiting to breakthrough. Finn says he knew I was on the cusp of happiness—he sensed it in every word I spoke. Lana is excited for my new feeling if only for the reason she is able to tell Finn, “I told you so.”

I watch Lana twisting her black hair into a ponytail. She, along with a few of the other lethal darklings are going to another circle tonight. The circle that organized our scavenger hunt. Lana is angry about her ruined clothing, but not as angry as Bec who was nearly decapitated by a savage. Horrible as Bec’s situation I am happy to know I am not the only one who got brutally attacked. They exacted punishment on our entire circle.

“I wish I could stay here with you tonight. I want to hear more stories,” Lana says. I have been telling her every story about the old world I can pull from memory.

“No you do not. You need to go have words with the lower circle,” I say, although I wish she would stay. There are so many things I want to tell her. She puts her hand out, reaching for me, and claws at the air. I laugh. She snarls through gritted teeth.

“If by words you mean knock heads together, then yeah,” she says with a smile on her face. “I am so happy for you, Emma. I really am. I knew you could do it. I am so glad I didn’t kill you.” Coming from anyone else these words would be highly offensive.

“I am happy to be alive. I hope the other emotions come quickly,” I say, feeling remorseful for wanting more so soon. Lana swings her bow over her shoulder and puts her hands on her hips. I watch as she raises her eyebrows, her forehead crinkles.

“I have a feeling a lot of things will be *coming* quickly...” Lana says. I throw a pillow across the room and pelt her in the head. She stumbles back but her mocking smile does not leave her face.

“You know it is not like that,” I say, hoping her crude sexual innuendo is finished for the night. Images of Finn kissing me shirtless fog my mind at any mention of sex.

“It *wasn’t* like that. I think things may be a touch different now that he knows you feel happiness. I’m not telling you to do anything,” Lana bites her lip and tilts her

chin down, “but maybe you should try attacking him with your clothes off. Or maybe you shouldn’t.” Lana laughs loudly as she watches my shocked expression.

“I’m joking, Emma. Calm down. I just think the fact that you have his heart dangling around your neck means you’re more than friends.” She holds both hands out in front her, “Or maybe you’re not.” I roll the pendants between my fingers knowing Lana is right. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other.

“Go ahead and go, Lana. Try not to get yourself killed,” I say. “Plus I obviously have a lot to talk to Finn about.”

“Talk? You have a lot to *talk* about? Yeah, whatever you say, Emma.” She throws the pillow back at me.

“Wait,” I tell her as I stand from my bed. She looks at me with mock irritation.

“I have to tell you something. You have done so much for me, Lana,” I say. Lana starts shaking her head in protest.

“Do not do this. I will punch you in the face...seriously,” she says, her silvery eyes stern. I hold up one finger and press it against her lips.

“Quiet,” I say. She stops shaking her head and just watches me. She wants to hear what I have to say, her aggressive front is automatic—part of her nature.

“Thank you, Lana. Thank you for saving me from the savages. I can never repay you for what you have given me...” I let my finger slide down when I am sure she will not interrupt me. Her eyes glisten with moisture. I hug her tightly.

“You give me happiness. Thank you for saving me from myself.” She folds me into her arms and I delight in our full friendship that will now be two-sided. The reckless girl with emotions so deep she has to hide them was my friend when I was empty.

“I do not deserve you, Lana.” I run my hand over the top of her head. She breaks our embrace. Her face is tearstained and she sniffles loudly.

“You’re probably right...” She snorts as she brings her sleeve up to erase the last traces of her emotion. I smile. She grabs her backpack and heads for the door. She turns before she opens it and says,

“I love you, Emma.” She does not wait for me to respond. She steals into the night. I stare at the door knowing she understands if I could feel love I would love her—for everything she is and for everything she is not. Instead of my eyes, my heart glows.

I make my way outside when I notice Finn is sitting by the fire. The circle is quiet—we are alone. He hears me approach and turns to smile. It is a wistful

smile and butterflies take residence in my stomach as I remember Lana's words. I take a seat next to him and train my eyes on his fire-lit profile.

"Thank you for everything," I say because Finn has done as much as Lana to get me to this point.

"I've had the necklace for a while," Finn says ignoring me as he looks down to the ground guiltily. "You were right, Emma. I figured that I could make you feel something. It just couldn't be in the way that you were asking for," He turns his head away, no doubt remembering my pleas for his body.

"It had to be honest and real. I wanted it to stem from your past—it would be stronger that way. I wanted you to feel happiness, first. I saw it in your eyes when..." He pushes his brown hair out of his eyes, and exhales deeply. I finish his sentence,

"When you told me your heart was mine," I say. My hand automatically reaches for the red gemstone at my throat. *His heart.*

"Yes," he says simply. "You are more important to me than anything else, Emma. You are worth far more to me than anything else. It's why I need you to trust me," Finn's words are sweet, but there is an underlying sense of alarm.

"Of course I trust you. I will always trust you." I clasp his hand in mine. Contact unsettles him, but I think with his recent *dose of darkling* he may welcome it.

"No matter what happens. Trust that I always have your best interest at heart." *Because I have his.*

"Okay. You are scaring me. What is going to happen, Finn?" My happiness is waning as it yields to fear. Finn clutches my hand tighter, something he never does.

"The dark witches knew you were here when they came looking for you the last time. I begged and they were lenient. They gave me a month, Emma. They saw it as a challenge. If you felt all six emotions in a months time you would be free to live out your life here in the circle," Finn says. He brings up his hands and runs them down his face. He looks like a man tortured.

"What does that mean? I do not feel all six...what will happen?" I ask. My previous happiness is invisible.

"It means the dark witches like to play games; they *never* turn down a challenge. It's how they entertain themselves in their long, unfeeling lives. They like to play with our emotions to show us how they weaken us." He brings his hands down and finally looks me in the eye.

"And they won." His voice breaks.

“No...no...” I stand up. I sit back down. I know what this means--my other alternative.

“My fate,” I swallow deeply and feel the horror pushing my heart at a frantic pace. Finn puts his hands behind his head and looks up into the sky.

“It has been a month today,” he says. “I sent Lana away tonight so she wouldn’t get herself killed...” The truth in his words rings out causing equal parts despair and thankfulness. The dark witches are coming for me and Lana would die to protect me. I drop to my knees. We cannot win against the dark witches.

“What will they do to me?” I whisper. As I gaze into Finn’s warm brown eyes another emotion threatens. I am on the border of feeling everything. Finn flexes his fists that rest on his knees, but he does not respond.

“I almost feel everything. I feel it. I want it, Finn. Can we leave? Lets get away from here...I just need more time.” I throw myself into his arms. He pulls me back and looks into my eyes.

“Emma, a deal is a deal. I made a poor one stemming from the selfish need to be around you. I should have let them take you a month ago. It would have spared you the heartache.” I shake my head unable to stomach the way of my future. Not after what I have learned and *felt*. I am shaking with fear, an uncontrollable reverberating that begins in my toes and shoots through my body.

“Please, Emma...” Finn puts emotion in my name when it passes his lips. It is a praise and a question.

“I trust you,” I say. He presses his parted lips onto the corner of my mouth. It is a kiss, but not really. I close my eyes and lean into him. The shaking ceases for a moment. Then he breaks the kiss and I open my eyes.

I feel the dark magic in the air and know they are here. My fate is here. A fate I do not want.

He unclasps my necklace and folds it into the palm of my hand. Finn whispers, “Your emotions are in my heart.”

He pushes me away from him and stands up. I try to approach him but he takes another step away from me.

“Finn, please,” I plead, but everything I want to say is forgotten when I see the haunting white glow of their eyes. Three male dark witches are headed for us, marching out of the forest. I watch them with detached dread. I will soon be like them. My life in the circle, with Finn and Lana will be completely forgotten. I clench the necklace tightly in my hand.

“It looks as if you were unsuccessful, male darkling,” a dark witch intones robotically. I look at Finn and his face is proud even in this horrible moment. I want to know how they know I do not feel all six.

“You win, she’s yours. We’ve enough mouths to feed around here anyways,” Finns says nonchalantly. My heart is crushing—tearing into two. The dark witches glower at me. It has been so long since my appearance is treated as different, that I am uncomfortable with their curious stares. Finn pulls my backpack from behind the log we were sitting on. He hands it to me, careful not to touch my skin or meet my gaze as he does so.

“Finn...” I say. His eyebrows scrunch together. His lips close completely.

“You’re lovely. But you will never mean anything to me. Goodbye, darkling,” Finn says, though I do not take his words for their intended meaning they sting my soul. I want to be positive in light of my fate because I think Finn might have a plan to help me. I remember the awful things Finn has said about the Dark Citadel and know I will be as good as trapped when I enter it. Fear grips me, anger ties me to this moment and happiness is absent. As I walk away with the dark witches I glance over my shoulder. Finn’s face is indifferent, but I see his perfect lips twitch; his fists jerk by his side. I will him to hear my thoughts.

I trust you.

As we walk into nothingness the witches speak as if I am not present.

“The male darkling made a wise choice,” one witch says.

“Handing her over was his only choice if he wanted her to live,” the other responds mechanically.

Finn has saved my life and taken it away at the same time.

July 18th, Morning

The Dark Citadel, The Enchanted Palace

The dark witches do not speak to me. They treat me as if I am unintelligent property. I soon understand that is exactly what they think I am. They blind me with magic, rendering me fully reliant on the guards that lead the way. The only thing that keeps my emotions from spinning wildly out of control is the fact that they have not been rough. Because I do not feel all six yet, my dark side is strong enough to allow me access to the Dark Citadel. I have heard them say we are going to the enchanted palace. I cannot stop my mind from conjuring the crystalline white castle from my book. I want to see it, yet an abhorrent feeling threatens because it will be the last thing I ever see. *The final correction.*

“Take her to her room,” I hear one say. I know we are inside now. My skin senses the temperature change and the scent of food wafts close by causing my stomach to growl. I feel a smaller hand grab my wrist and continue to lead me on. My skin prickles as my new surroundings envelop me. I sense the magic thick in the air as something inside of me awakens. That something is dark and this place captivates and controls it fully.

“I will drop the spell now, miss,” a small, high voice says. She releases me and I brace for something, tensing every muscle in my body. No sensations come. The fact she calls me *miss* strikes as odd. “You can open your eyes when you please,” the same girl says. I let my eyes flutter open. We stand in a stark white hallway. It is a rich white that glistens, untainted by anything from nature. Holographic images I do not understand are shimmering, barely translucent on the surface of the walls. My mouth hangs open in awe. I do not comprehend anything I see and I do not want to comprehend, I want to lose myself in the falsity of them. Because the second my blindness abates my emotions return. They cripple me all at once. The two weigh on me heavily and the absence of the cherished one forces me to inhale sharply as if stabbed in the chest.

The girl comes to stand in front of me, but I cannot peel my gaze from the dancing images. They are beautiful, enchanting—they numb me.

“Are you hungry, miss?” When I do not answer she gently grabs my hand and leads to the end of the hallway. When she stops in front of a door I finally look at her. Her clothing is unlike anything I have ever seen. She wears a floor length dress that looks as if it is spun from fine fabric in every color imaginable. Every time she moves it changes color. Like the holographs on the wall, she does not seem real. I am not sure if I am real. When her glowing white eyes meet mine I know this is my fate. It clicks. I do not pretend otherwise.

“I am hungry,” I tell the girl. She looks at me warily, and then holds a door open for me to walk through first. The room is white and empty like the hallway, but the second I enter it begins transforming. My bed from home appears. The

wooden desk and the scrap of reflective glass rests on top. I turn in a circle as other familiar pieces start forming. The walls are now the same, familiar warm taupe color of my mother's kitchen.

"I will return with a meal, miss," the girl says before vanishing into the hallway. I run my hand over the nightstand to make sure it is visceral. My entire past life rests between four walls. It is exactly how I remember it--how it appeared before the awful night my mother was killed by the very people who now give me everything I once had.

I jam my hand into my pocket and pull out my necklace. I think of Finn. I think of Lana. The magic in the room finally wanes. The last object to materialize is the window—my window, from the house I shared with Lana in the circle.

I walk over to it and rest my forehead against the very real glass. I do not see outside the palace as I expect; I see Finn's house.

But it is empty.

I am on the verge of another emotion, but I know that is forbidden here. They will want me to be empty, vacant...pliable. I wonder how long I will be able to hold on to myself and my memories. I wonder how long I will *want* to hold onto myself. Finn is right, it would have been easier to not feel anything at all. I would be able to embrace my fate with open arms. I would not be longing for anything or anyone.

When the girl returns she looks around my room curiously, studying my life on display. She sets the gilded tray on the wooden table. I watch as her black hair falls over her shoulders and her white eyes light my food. My stomach growls in desire.

"Thank you," I tell the girl, remembering proper etiquette. Now that my room has formed and the swirling hallway is a thing of the past, I try to avoid looking at her dizzying dress. I fear I know not what reality is.

"You will get used to it," the girl says taking a seat at the other side of the table as I sit down. I eat a meal so extravagant I have never seen the likes. It is a far cry from the ground dwelling vegetables I am accustomed to. "It is a lot to take in at first, I am sure. The quicker you let your dark magic take over the less dizzying the palace will become. Knowing what circle they found you in I am sure you will enjoy life at the palace quickly." Her voice is robotic. I nod my understanding and she tells me of the meats and sweet fruits that I am eating. The large golden goblet contains a deep red juice that is equal parts sweet as it is tangy. It warms my stomach.

"I see why they continued looking for you for so long," she says. I finish a bite of food and meet her calculating gaze.

"If I was the same as the others they would have left me be?" I ask genuinely curious.

“Yes. They forget about fated darklings all the time. Once darklings start feeling they find it prudent to leave them to their life in the circles. The dark witches have better things to do with their time.” She tilts her head and squints her eyes.

“You are feeling and the prince still wants you.” As she says this I know she sees my blue eyes and blonde hair so unlike every other witch or darkling I have laid eyes on. I look at her empty eyes and feel repulsed.

“I wish they would have killed me instead,” I say, ignoring the fact she calls him a prince; it makes no difference the cast he comes from, a witch is a witch. Her eyes widen in shock. She rises from my table uneasily and grabs the tray. She opens her mouth, and then shuts it. I want her to say something, anything comforting, but I know she will not. She is a dark witch, born of empty heart and nothingness.

“There is a shower in the bathroom, miss...and dresses in the closet,” she points to a large, round opening in the wall. It is swathed in glittering fabric and was not there before.

“If you need anything further I am to be your factotum. You may call me Zeda. Call if you need anything,” she finishes her mechanical speech. My stomach lurches, from either the rich foods or her unfeeling demeanor, or both. I feel anger. She has ignored my words so I say them again with more conviction.

“Thank you, Zeda,” I smile. Her lips press into a firm line. “Perhaps you did not hear me. I said I would rather die than be here.” I stalk toward her willing my eyes to be as blue as the sky of the old world.

I yell, “because I would rather die with happiness than live blankly.” She scuttles back, obviously unused to emotion. “Tell my betrothed that.” I rub Finn’s heart between my fingers in my pocket.

“Tell him yourself, miss. He will be up to meet you this eve.” Zeda closes the door behind her as she leaves. My stomach full, I have no urge to shower or to look in the closet. I pull a dark wooden chair from my table and set it by my window.

I stare so long that my mind conjures Finn, even though I know he is not there. He is gone.

I will soon be gone, too.

July 18th, Night

I see things in my enchanted room that I never noticed when they were in my reality. My wooden headboard has small figures etched into the wood. Small hearts and stars are painstakingly carved into the sides. I know my mother has done this for me. I run my fingers over the wood and smile, glad happiness has not left yet. I prepare for the worst as I wait to meet the witch that will bring my death. I remove the onyx pendant from my necklace and zip it into my backpack. I will be expected to show my dark nature and that pendant quells it. I clasp the necklace, with the red gemstone back on. Finn's heart will not leave me.

I cannot bring myself to look in my pack for fear of emotion stemming. Finn has filled it and I am not ready to see what he has selected as my final items. The thought makes me scared. I tuck my bag gently under my bed, and then sit at my desk to gaze into the broken mirror. A strong emotion takes root in my core when I remember the night that I broke the same mirror into a million pieces. My life broke into a million pieces at the very same time. Now the mirror holds the image of a different woman. My blue eyes are tinged with silver. I am more human than dark. My hair is shining brightly under the glimmer of my room's lights. It casts an unnatural brilliance on my things, my past and myself.

I hear my door opening, a defining moment in my life. I shut my eyes and find my mother's hug, Lana's smile and Finn's laugh. I think of the circle. I remember my house. I picture the words of my book dancing through my mind. I say the words out loud because they now make sense, "once upon a time," I whisper, "there was a girl and she was happy." I open my eyes as the dark witch from my unhappily ever after enters my world.

"Emmalina Weaver...you are far more beautiful than the others have admitted," he says, his voice gravelly, his bright eyes trained on my body. I have not changed out of my clothes. I refuse to present myself as a gift to anyone, princes included.

"And you are...just as I suspected you would be." I say, intoning my words carefully. I do not wish to upset him nor give him reason to favor me. I want his indifference in this existence. He approaches me carefully and I cannot stop my heart from pounding against my chest in fear. It reminds me of when I could only feel fear. With my onyx gone I know it will not be long before I am vibrating with the dark magic that is expected of me. I want to keep it down, to keep myself, but this place with magic ablaze calls to it.

I notice his fine clothing, made of the same rich materials Zeda wears. Deep, dark colors that compliment his medium complexion...and his light blonde hair. I gasp.

He casts me a baleful look then introduces himself, "I am Iliam Aithe. The prince of this palace," he gestures around my room, then thinks better of it when he sees my plain furnishings. It angers me. I ball up my fists at my sides.

"I know you are unused to our names so you may call me Liam," he says. I take a step backward. He notices. He shuts his eyes tightly for a brief second then opens them. They are now blue--an exacting shade of my eye color. His display of magic does not ease my nerves, it serves to show me what he is capable of...a *small thing* he is capable of. Soon he will be forcing himself on me and eventually he will be killing me.

"I want you to be comfortable here, Emmalina," Liam says. I notice he does not say he wants me to be *happy* here.

"We will have a long life together. I want to please you any way that I can. As you are to be my princess, your wish is my command." My stomach roils. Not only am I fated to be a mother to this man's children, but also he infers I will be forced into his company for a long time. I cannot contain my emotions anymore. Horror, torment, worry, loathing and disgust pulse in my veins. I feel it happening and am naught to control it. My body vibrates, the electricity buzzes in my form. I see Liam smiling. It is not Finn's smile, but Louis'. It is calculating and predatory. I shiver the same time my eyes glow white. Dark magic courses through me so quickly that it pains my limbs after being absent for so long.

"You will be a fine princess," Liam hisses, obviously aroused by my eyes and my magic. I cannot consider him anything but a dark witch. I look at him hollowly. This witch empties me without trying because he is not Finn.

"What if I do not wish to be anyone's princess?" I say, regaining my wits and blue eyes.

"I am afraid there is not a choice, Emmalina," Liam responds. I expect his answer, though I push on.

"Am I to keep my emotions, then?"

"Do you crave to keep your emotions?" Liam asks while leaning around me to gaze at my window. "I would assume they only bring you pain. It is time for you to be corrected." I sense Liam's presence taking over my body, and my room—my realm.

"If I wish to die instead? That was my option before I left the circle." It seems a simple request. He narrows his eyebrows and looks pained by my request. He takes off his rich purple velvet jacket and hangs it over my wooden chair. The jacket looks out of place, foreign...it is a trespasser.

"I am afraid I can't oblige that request. You see," Liam pauses when he is right in front of me. His eyes blue by spell, warm and endlessly full of something, "we are the same, you and I. It rests on my shoulders to bring more like us into the world." He grasps a strand of my hair. It reminds me of when Finn would do the same. I swallow deeply.

"All of this because of the color of my hair and eyes?" The insignificance of this infuriates me. When Liam starts shaking his head I know there is more.

“While those things add to your beauty and make you desirable by all, it has little to do with why you are here. Your human mother’s sordid affair was with the monarch of the Dark Citadel. His fall from grace and ultimate demise was unfortunate, but as his only heir, even only half dark, you can remedy his name. Our children will rule the Dark Citadel, Emmalina. The new monarchy is upon us...it starts with you.” Eyes wide, I let his words sink in. One thing I cannot fathom is my mother with the king of this unfeeling world. She was a woman full of life and humming with the six. It is incomprehensible that she would choose to be with something so dark and sinister. Somewhere deep inside I already know with verity, she was forced to be with the monarch. Probably in the same manner that I am now being forced to be with Liam. It is why she never questioned my fate because something similar was part of her past.

“What does that make you to me?” I ask. I look at his blonde hair glowing in the untrue light. The shape of his nose, the slant of his chin—I know the truth.

“Fear not, *cousin*. Our DNA is perfectly compatible. There have been many generations between us. When the old world fell, spells began passing years far quicker than you can imagine. Even the few remaining humans are unaffected by our time processes. Our magic makes it seem as if a year has passed when actually fifty have gone by unnoticed. Your human DNA makes you a stranger to my genetics. We will procreate successfully, bearing children with unmerciful beauty and strong minds.” My human stomach forces me to run into the bathroom. I double over the futuristic toilet and watch as the finest meal I have ever eaten splashes into the water. His words cause riots in my body. Liam is still standing in the same spot when I exit. He is looking out my window.

“You say you will give me whatever I want?” I ask. He looks at me warily, but proud.

“What can I offer you?” I know what I am about to ask for is selfish, unkind, and lethal, but I do not care.

“I want a different factotum. I want a darkling from my circle. Lana. I want her here with me safe, emotions untouched. I will not be comfortable here without her. I also want to keep my emotions. I do not want any relationship with you other than what is forced for the correction,” I tell him as I raise my chin and straighten my shoulders. I know I wear my worn clothing, but he looks at me like I am regal—awe sparkles in his eyes. He silently nods his consent and rubs his hands together, deep in thought.

“A *feeling* princess. I like that. I think the people will like that. It is a dawn of a new age. I am also quite certain you will end up begging me to make you unfeeling,” Liam says robotically. I know that I will not, so I ignore him and ask my final question,

“When an heir is born, will I be released?” Maybe my mother was wrong, perhaps they will not kill me if he speaks the truth of my lineage. Liam smiles widely and my fear returns.

“Yes, you will be *released*...” I do not take his words for face value. His smile is corrupt and uneasy; I already know not to trust his false expressions. He pretends the way I used to.

“Please be ready for your coronation tomorrow morning. Our agreement about your correction will also commence tomorrow night.” I see through his words like the holographs in the hallway. They are translucent, yet firm. His blue eyes flash white with excitement. On a second thought, I ask for one more thing.

“I want my window to work,” I tell him. He shrugs one shoulder and tilts his head to the side. It is a very human gesture. He steadily leers, and then winks.

“As you wish, darkling.” When Liam leaves my room I realize what he has done. Instead of showing me outside the palace as I intended, he has made the window into Finn’s house a reality. Finn is there, in his house, darkly staring out his window.

He is not looking at me. His eyes shine with unshed tears.

I scream as the terror of my reality takes root in my heart.

July 19th, Morning

"I will not wear anything from that closet," I tell Zeda. I want nothing to do with the fancy clothing with colors that make my head spin. I did remove a large dress from the closet to cover my window. Finn's face haunts me. He just stares—unblinking into the house that used to be mine. He looks empty. I will ask Liam to fix the window because Finn's pain is unbearable, but I am sure it is Liam's intent to prove my emotions are weakening me.

I did accept the breakfast that Zeda brought to my room early in the morning. I have no problems ordering her around, as she feels nothing. Nothing I say offends her. As a test I told her I requested a new factotum because she was a freak and she smiled and continued cleaning. Everything her hands touch sparkles a little more than it did before. Her magic is masking my things in tiny increments—making them newer, forcing me to forget.

"You must put on a dress for the coronation, miss," Zeda says. I glance at the closet with distaste, knowing she is right. I have no desire to anger Liam or the dark witches. For a slight moment, after taking a hot shower, I think I am glad to be in this place. After my skin cools I remember why I am here and what I will have to do tonight. No warm water will take the cold shiver from my spine when I think of sex with Liam.

I walk over to my window and run my fingers over the dark pink fabric of the dress, "I will wear this one," I say. I pull the dress down and look out the window. Finn's house is vacant. I sigh with relief tinged with disappointment. Zeda has a large palette full of shimmering face paint sitting on my wooden table. I sit down and she paints my face as if I am a portrait. I keep my eyes shut and wait for her to finish. I do not look in the mirror she hands when she is complete. I walk over to my wooden desk and pick up my broken piece of mirrored glass.

"I look..." I stutter, unable to find proper words.

"You look beautiful," she says. The muted colors make my blue eyes stand out and my dark pink lips glisten in invitation--Liam's invitation. Zeda has waved my blonde hair and it swings past my bared shoulder blades.

She steeples her fingertips together and then she draws them out toward the walls. A large mirror appears between her arms. It shines with a glow signifying magical properties.

"You do not have one in here," she explains. My reflection shows the pink strapless dress and my unfamiliar face. I am relieved my eyes are my own.

"They will not be for long," I whisper wistfully. I turn my face to break my line of vision.

"I am ready. Can we leave now?" I ask. I am anxious to see outside of the walls of my room though I am hesitant to leave the comfort of the known of my room. The dynamics of the palace are foreign and I feel unease with the unknown.

“Or am I to be contained in here for the rest of my life?” Zeda does not flinch at my harsh tone. She merely brings her hands together with a soft clap; the mirror vanishes.

“Let us go, then, miss.” I follow her to the doorway.

“Tell me of the palace, Zeda. How many darklings are here?” I ask. The holographs are fainter in the hallway. My eyes know not to focus on one point. They skim over everything, taking in the entire picture. There is no dizziness and I think perhaps I am already adjusting to this world.

“It is unlike anything you have seen or felt. There are many darklings that reside in the enchanted palace, but unlike the princes from other lineages, Iliam has awaited his one true bride. He has not taken another before you as most princes do. Most of the darklings are only here because they want to be. Their correction isn’t necessary for our monarchy,” she says. I hate that she calls me his bride.

“How has your monarchy run before? Why the need for an heir now?”

“Because you are finally eighteen,” Zeda says simply.

“According to Liam, the world moves along in a furious pace. Would that not make me eighteen long ago?” Zeda glides down the hallway dragging her hand through images as she goes. I try not to watch the quivering ripples it causes.

“It would, but you needed to mature in body and mind. You are half human so your body matured as a human’s would. You were not capable of carrying heirs until now. It is simple—the monarchy desires a change. They are bored with the status quo. You have been awaited.” My mother was slain because the monarchy became bored. Fury emanates from me. I want nothing more than to bring this castle down with my own two hands. Zeda glances back at me, “your children with Iliam will be so beautiful.”

Her vapid words cause my fury to boil over. My eyes glow white.

“You forget the last part of the story. Then I will be put to death. Hopefully my hair is as beautiful in death as it is in life,” I nearly spit. My fingers are out, pointed at Zeda. I want to electrify her.

She turns and notices my dark magic pooling and smiles. I smile. “Get away from me!” Bright gray lightening that originates in my core leaves my fingers and throws Zeda down the hallway. She hits the wall and slides down, clutching her stomach as she goes. My body shakes as I hurry down the hallway to unleash more fury on her. There are no emotions in my body just the need for her destruction.

Liam opens a door to my left and it blocks my view of Zeda. He looks at me first with irritation and then his features soften into something more appreciative. Liam’s eyes are blue but mine shine bright white. I take several deep breaths, but calmness does not come. Liam watches me speculatively but says not a word.

“Get this insolate factotum out of my face,” I finally say, forgetting why I even wished her demise to begin with. Liam peers at the girl then back to me. He lowers his brows and his lips press into a small smile.

“As you wish, my dark princess,” Liam says. My hands automatically ball into fists at my side. The small movement reminds me of *control*. Reminds me that I need to control myself. I do not want magic to control my mind. I want to control it. I look down at Zeda’s body as a few others with glowing eyes drag her down the hall and I feel horrified. I have hurt her--I worry for Zeda. My magic is gone and I am left with regret.

“She is quite fine. You have a mob of factotums that will gladly take her position. That is, until I fetch the darkling of your choosing,” Liam says. I want to tell him I do not wish Lana to come anymore, but the words do not come. I think it is because I know that if I have any hope of keeping small pieces of myself I *need* her. Liam laces his arm through mine as we exit through the door in which he came.

“You look magnificent, Emmalina. Breathtaking, ravishing and wearing your true nature, you look a perfect fit,” he says as we walk down another corridor adorned with more holographic photos and shifting images. Extravagant gowns line the hallway; it is upon closer inspection I realize dark witches wear these gowns. Their eyes curious, their black hair waved in uniformed perfection. They do not speak, they only watch me with empty expressions.

I see a hologram and at first, do not recognize that it is of myself. I appear as a dark witch, my human qualities are indistinguishable. The image soon undulates and then vanishes. I ease at Liam’s side as if relieved the dark witch buried deep inside my body is gone. He presses his hand into the crook of my elbow. There are glowing doors before us. Shining bright, blinding light streaks through the glass panes.

“Are you ready?” Liam asks. I do not know what I should be ready for.

“I do not know what to expect,” I tell him. He squeezes my hand in a warm gesture, but my body does not respond to him or his touch.

“Expect perfection. This is for you, Emmalina. This is all for you,” he says. His words are not filled with any emotion, so they do not calm me. I reach for my necklace and feel the small red gemstone by my throat. Finn’s heart. *That is perfection*, I think to myself.

I walk out onto the grandiose balcony overlooking a crowd of bright eyes all trained on me. I do not see faces, or particular buildings in the distance. I notice a sun glowing fiercely in the sky. I know it is not real, but a glamorous cast to impress their false city. I feel no heat as my mother described in her stories, but a smile spreads across my face regardless.

Liam glances at me with a look of fondness and pride. I am glad he cannot read my mind because he would know my smile has nothing to do with him or his palace, it is caused by my sweet memories.

I think how magnificent the rays of light would look bouncing off Finn's hair. And when I watch the light dance on my skin, I know the exact shade of light brown my mother's eyes would have looked with her head tilted toward the sky.

A peal of laughter escapes me. I expect hostility from Liam at my outburst of emotion, but he stares at me quietly, as if trying to decipher a strange code. He clenches my hand a little tighter in his and one corner of his mouth wedges up.

A witch with gray magic encasing his body addresses the crowd of beings below us, but I do not hear his words. I study Liam's face. With his eyes blue and affection transforming his features I wonder for the first time, if he truly cannot ever feel.

And if he can—if my acting is on point, perhaps I am strong enough to save my own life.

July 19th, Midday

Liam's palace is large. It is hard to tell what is spell induced and what is solid and I suppose that is the point. I learned in my studies as a girl, that all monarchies in the old world were built upon facades and falsities. The Enchanted Palace is no different. Unlike royalty I am familiar with, I am bestowed with a necklace that chokes me instead of a crown. The collar is comprised of precious gemstones. I smiled when Liam wrapped it around my neck during the coronation ceremony. I am happy it hides Finn's heart. Now I will never have to take it off.

Images of me in witch form are littered throughout the palace. The holograms are familiarizing the witches with my presence. I fear the images.

"Can I be projected with blue eyes instead?" I whisper to Liam. We are sitting on simple chairs in the front of a large rectangular room. The witches in their fine clothing, adorned with colors I cannot describe just stare at us. I notice a pair of eyes in the back of the room that flicker from white to a matte color. I know she is a darkling. I yearn to know her, to talk to her.

"Is that what you wish, Emmalina?" Liam's question confuses me.

"What?" I ask.

"Do you want the holograms to portray you with blue eyes?" I glance around at several of my images and shiver.

"Yes, for the time being I would prefer them to be blue," I tell him without turning my gaze from the darkling.

Liam raises one hand into the air, palm up and a black orb of spinning magic rises. He briskly snaps his fingers and the orb transforms into multiple gray beams of magic that dart to my holograms changing the eye color to blue. His magic is impressive.

"Thank you," I mutter quietly. No one else notices the holograms have changed; no one else cares.

"You are most welcome, my princess," Liam says. He looks at me hungrily, his gaze roving the curve of my chest and then dips down to my waist. I know he is picturing me naked. I know he is thinking of tonight, when my fated correction is to begin. His leer makes me uneasy, fearful and disgusted. I must pretend I want him, I must seduce him like Lana and Bec taught me. Liam must care for me if I am to make it out of these walls alive. I see the darkling in the back of the room as a potential ally in my quickly forming plan.

"May I speak with anyone I wish?" I ask Liam. He has told me of no rules so I ask before I do anything.

"Of course you may. I trust you will use your best judgment when discussing matters with our subjects." Liam says.

“I do not know what I am not to speak of, sir,” I say, hoping the show of submission will garner affection. Liam’s eyes glow white, he pulls the center of his lip in between his teeth. He likes when I say *sir*. “But I will be brief with my conversing. I have a big night to ready for.” I let my voice take on a high, pleasing tone. It holds promise. Liam is stunned—he merely nods. His eyes are still glowing white when I begin to walk away from him. I feel his eyes on my back; I know he is staring at me as I leave. I pull my hair over one shoulder to expose my bare back and turn my head to look back at him.

“I look forward to tonight...sir,” I say. Liam’s hollow expression makes my heart leap into my throat with alarm, but I know my words have had their intended effect. I use all my focus to pull from my dark side to make my eyes glow white to match his. He smiles. I turn from him and close my eyes tightly, willing myself to return.

I spot the group of darklings and realize they look alarmed as they see me approach. The shoes with high soles clack on the polished rock floor. Eyes turn to look at me as I cut a path through the throng of white eyes.

“Come with me, darklings,” I say when I stand in front of them. I want to talk to them in private.

“Yes, miss,” all three of the darklings say in unison. My stomach churns when I hear it. *They are probably unfeeling*. Like the one I heard killed in the desert circle. The girl’s death scream rings in my ears. I am relieved the dining hall I saw earlier is still in the same place; no spells have moved it...yet. It is empty but for us four.

“Why are you here?” I ask, while looking them in the eyes one at a time.

“Because you told us, miss,” one says. Her eyes flicker brown.

“Where did you come from?” I ask under my breath. The one with the brown eyes answers me again,

“The woodland circle,” she says under her breath. The other two look at her and speak at the same time,

“Do not speak of the circles. That is not allowed.” I want to tell them that it is allowed, that I need to hear everything she knows of this place because I know she is different. She feels unlike the other two, whose eyes remain stark white. I look at them,

“You both are dismissed,” I tell them, using the voice I hear Liam use with the others. The remaining darkling is visibly upset I have sent them away. She knows I know she is different.

“What is your name, darkling?” I ask. She looks both to the left and right, ostensibly making sure no one can hear before she answers.

“My name is Lily, miss,” she says, telling me her human name. I smile.

“Lily, why did you leave your circle?” I ask, realizing she is still shaking, fearful of me. “I ask you this as a fellow darkling not as Iliam’s princess.” Iliam’s name spoken makes my stomach lurch with dreaded anticipation.

Her eyes are brown when she speaks, “I was...curious,” she says. “I wanted to know what else was out there. Circle life is hard,” she pins my gaze then finishes, “I am sure you know what I mean.” I do not know what she means.

“How many of the six do you feel?”

“I feel fear,” she says. I swallow hard, feeling sympathy for her. She knows nothing else. It is better this way.

“Is there any way out of the Dark Citadel?” I ask, urging my voice to be nonchalant. I know beyond this palace lies a vast abandoned city followed by other palaces and other cities. She shakes her head.

“I know of only one who has gotten away. She challenged a prince from another palace. They never refuse a challenge and she was able to get free. She was an unimportant darkling though,” she says. She knows I ask for my own benefit and she is warning me against it. I urge my eyes white to dissuade her notions.

“What was the challenge?”

“It was the only challenge the witches cannot resist. They will *never* resist. If she was able to feel all six emotions she was free to live where she pleased,” Lily says. Finn’s face comes to mind the day as he told me of the deal he made with the dark witches. He knew it was the only challenge they would accept. Lily squints her eyes as she appraises me.

“Can I ask you a question, miss?”

“Yes,” I say, knowing what she will ask.

“How many do you feel?”

I lie, “Just one. I will give it up tonight, though.” Dark witches are within earshot now, as is Liam. I see him looking at us quizzically. Lily nods imperceptibly, she understands it is not a truth.

“I have found my stand-in factotum,” I tell Liam with a smile on my face. Lily lets her eyes glow bright white as she turns and curtsies to Liam. I will not underestimate her shrewdness.

“Whatever you wish,” Liam says.

Liam conjures a spinning magic laced orb on his palm again. This time his magic is laced with a sweet sounding melody. He closes his hand. When it opens he holds a long stemmed flower. He hands it to me and nods curtly at Lily to dismiss

her from my presence. I let my fingertips trace the soft red petals trying to remember words from my story.

The sleeping princess holds a solitary rose.

I walk arm in arm with Liam through more, extravagant corridors. Though my mind is at ease remembering my story, my heart is bounding at a frantic pace.

“Liam, why can’t you just rule yourself? Why the need for heirs? It seems you are equipped to lead,” I say. I peer at him sideways and he shrugs.

“I’ve wanted you since the day you were born, Emmalina. I knew on that day that I would wait for you. To make the wait worth it I declared to the citizens of my palace I would produce offspring to rule in my name.” I remind myself of the offbeat magical time. Liam looks to be my age, but I know he has been around for much longer than I.

“If you have wanted me since I was born, why leave me in the circle as long as you did. Why let me feel emotions, Liam? Why didn’t the witches chase me into the forest the night they killed my mother to bring me back to your bed?” My anger has reared and I regret it. Liam just grins in amusement.

“I wanted something different. Something that felt,” he explains. I am that *something*. “Dark witches like challenges. I wanted you to be feeling, so when you were in my stead, I could make you beg to rid your body of emotions.” I unclasp my hand from his. I am his game—his property. He touches my waist lightly as he ushers me into a large door. My body vibrates with hatred for Liam and his palace. For taking me from my circle. I turn to face him, noses inches apart.

“I have a challenge for you Liam,” I say, my teeth gritted, my eyes still blue. His eyes widen in delight. He is truly unable to refuse a challenge. I laugh.

“Anything,” he says, his voice gravelly, serious.

“I challenge you to fall in love with me.” I say. I know enough about the six to know that love is the hardest to feel and only takes root in the best circumstance. It is an unwitting challenge I know he will fail—not only because he is a dark witch and emotions are ever absent, but because I do not feel it and know not how to invoke it in others. His lips part, but he stays silent.

So I can watch the look on your face when I tell you I despise you with every ounce of my being.

Liam stares at me for moments uncountable because the room has gone silent—the hum of magic is absent. As he considers my challenge I think how vulnerable this quality makes him and the dark witches. If they could *feel* they would know how weak their defenses truly are. Finn and the other male darklings are only alive because of the dark witch’s love of challenges. The decree to abstain from procreating is a temptation I am sure the witches assume is impossible. This nature will be the witch’s downfall.

He finally speaks, "There are some challenges that even I am incapable of accepting, dear princess," I do not let my face belie any trace of emotion. I roll my eyes, an irritating trait of Lana's, and turn my shoulder to him. I will not let him see his refusal has disappointed me. He leans forward and brushes a languid kiss on my bare shoulder.

"Though, if you are willing to love me it may be ever prudent for me to try to *feel* love myself," Liam says, eyes glowing brightly. He has twisted my challenge and made it one of his own. My challenge is unlike anything he has been offered; I know this is why it intrigues him so.

"If you are unable to feel love, what then? What is my prize?" I ask, trying to trap him with words. Liam takes off his jacket and rests it on a gilded rack then raises one arm and unfastens a clip at his wrist. As he undresses he says,

"You are cunning, darkling. More so than I gave you credit for. What do *you* want for a prize?" I feel my breath hitch.

"You know what I want," I say much too quietly.

He stalks toward me and whispers just as low, "You think if I put in the effort to *feel* and fall in love with you and fail, I will let you go free? Since you are so keen to challenge me, here are my terms..." He chucks one finger under my chin and raises it up. I hold my breath, fear bleating through me. This is a face of Liam I have not seen. He is dangerous. He wants so much more than Louis did.

His eyes glow so brightly I am almost blinded. I feel his dark magic wrapping my body in warning, "If you *are* successful in making me feel *love*," he smiles, but it does not touch his eyes—he knows I will fail. Liam continues, "then I won't tear your perfect head from your faultless body when I have no more use for you."

Liam's spoken words are not empty, I sense their fullness and truth.

July 19th, Night

Liam sends me to my room after he promises certain death. I am not sure if I even feel joy anymore. Every single second I spend in this false world wears on me. Even my furniture gleams differently. I stare out my window, heart pounding, with hopes of a glimpse of Finn. He is not there. I want to see him because of what I am preparing for—my first night with Liam. If I can commit Finn's features to memory I could pretend it is him. The pit in my stomach does not leave.

I strip off the elaborate pink gown and sit on the floor next to my bed. I pull out my backpack, deciding to see what is in it. I see extra clothing changes, ones I never had before. I pull out a pair of pants and my hand touches something familiar. The leather bound book from my house. My book. My heart wells with joy.

Finn has given me my story back. I hug it tightly to my chest knowing these words that were once so empty, will be the words that get me through this night. I crack open the book and run my fingers across the faded pages. Sentiments crash over me in waves.

Lily does not knock before she enters my room. Magic wisps into my room as she closes the door behind her. She wills her eyes brown.

"Miss, are you ready for tonight?" She asks. I sit in my white camisole and underwear clutching a book from the old world. I look as far from ready as possible. I know this. I wish Lana would come. She would know how to handle Liam, she would have tricks and acting tips. All the sub-emotions that branch from fear thrum through me—they overpower me.

"I do not know if I can do this," I say. Lily looks around my room, and then sits on the bed next to me.

"This reminds me of my room in the circle. I recognize fear in you. Let the prince take it away," Lily responds quietly. Though, her words do not hold emotion I think they are wise words. I nod my head in thoughtful agreement. This is my fate. If I am to endure the correction, the absence of fear will make it more bearable. Another set of glowing eyes enters my room. Hers do not flicker and the trail of magic in her wake signals she is a witch. I stand and face her.

"Hello, miss. I am here to test you," she says mechanically. Lily takes my hand and ushers me toward her. My whole body shakes.

"Test me for what?" I ask. The witch kneels in front of me and places her hands on my lower stomach. Lily just nods when she sees my eyes widen in shock. The witch closes her eyes and my body begins vibrating at my core. When she pulls her hands away my limbs feel numb. I want my whole body to feel numb.

“You cannot conceive an heir in this month,” she states. I am thankful and enraged. I will be forced to have sex with Liam multiple times without the possibility of giving him what he desires. Though, as soon as I do, he will kill me.

“Prince Iliam awaits your arrival. Lillithia will bring you to his rooms when you are ready,” the dark witch says as she exits. I am vaguely aware that Lily is combing my hair and applying paint on my face. She selects a long white gown that is far too tight. It is also cut too low, and my small breasts spill over the top. I am being packaged.

“It is time to go, miss,” Lily says. Her eyes are brown. I am thankful she has not used magic to ready me for this night. I remove my collar but keep Finn’s heart on. I slip my arms through the sleeves of a rich purple overcoat. Lily buttons it up to my chin then waits for me by the door. I open the battered book to a random page and look at the words. I set it back on my bed and glance out my window to look for Finn one last time. When I find his window dark and empty I will my magic to rise to the surface. When my eyes reflect white in the window I turn and leave my world.

Liam is lounging on a chair by a window when I enter. Lily leaves without saying a word. She cannot make things better or fix things for me so I am glad for her silence. He remains silent as I walk toward him. I look out of his large window and see stars for the first time. They twinkle with an unexpected glow and shine bright against the blackest onyx sky.

“That is so...” I struggle for words. My mother has never told me of how perfect night was in the old world.

“Beautiful,” Liam says. When I turn to him, he is gazing at me...not the starry sky. His eyes are blue, but I know the wrath he is capable of. I do not trust his outward appearance. I take another step closer to the glass window and take in everything. If I look left or right I see sections of the expansive palace. A downward glance shows lit gardens. Bugs that light up fly through the small bushes and trees. I cannot help the gasp that escapes because I know this palace, and Liam’s territory has been modeled after the old world.

“This is what the old world looked like, isn’t it?” I ask.

“Yes, of course. Do you like it?” Liam responds while grabbing my hand in his.

“It is better than her stories. I want to see everything up close.” I tighten my hand around his. With the beautiful imagery my eyes feast on, my fear has abated, but I know it will return. He brings his hand to my overcoat and begins to unbutton it.

While his hands briskly move down he speaks, “I want you to have and see all these things. All I ask for is loyalty during our time together. I do not want you to plot against me nor do I want to harm you,” Liam says. My coat drops to the floor. His eyes shine an unrelenting white as he rakes my body, finally resting on my chest.

“I may have been too brash earlier. My apologies, princess.” Liam’s split personalities confound me. I know I will never understand him. I swallow audibly and my chest slightly heaves. He brushes one finger lightly over the top swell of my breast. I shiver as my fear returns. Liam leans his blonde head down and traces three light kisses where his fingers just touched, just below where Finn’s heart resides. With my eyes trained straight ahead and my breathing increasing at a harried pace I tell him,

“I apologize for being fearful, Liam. I do not know what to do,” my voice shakes. He leans up from my breast and smiles wickedly.

“I do not know what to do either. I will let my instincts guide me, as you should as well,” he says. My instincts tell me to slice his head off and I surely cannot do that so I close my eyes to gain courage. I feel his wet lips on my neck, trailing up to my ear and back down again. He repeats this many times. Liam’s breath is warm and the shiver of thrill I experience shocks me. I feel his mouth, through my nightgown; move along the side of my body, he dips his lips to my waist, then my hip, and then over to my belly button. When I open my eyes I know they are flickering wildly, uncontrollably.

“Now,” Liam stands and pins me with his gaze as he removes his shirt, “your turn, darkling.” He takes several steps forward causing me to move back and sit at the edge of his enormous bed. He towers in front of me, shaking with dark magic, with feral excitement, with intent. I clutch the blankets underneath me as hard as I can. I know I cannot go any further.

“Take away my fear,” I yell. Liam startles at my tone. He grabs the sides of my face, tighter than Finn ever would.

“I told you so,” he says, his tone robotic. My anger flares because he knows I am fearful of him and what he wants me to do, but he does not care. He expects me to ask him to erase my mind of emotion.

“Please,” I beg. He lets go of my face and I wrap my arms around myself. He grabs the shoulders of my gown and slides them down until my breasts are exposed completely.

“I will never deny you when you beg, Emmalina,” he grates. He motions with his head, and I scramble back on the bed. He kneels in front of me, eyes trained on my body.

“Take it all the way off.” With trembling hands I slide the gown off and expose my naked body to him. He smiles.

“Please take my fear, Liam...sir,” I ask again. Even as I say these words I know I am on the verge of feeling another emotion. He kicks off his slacks and slides toward me on the bed. Now his body is completely bare. With one hand on his erection he trails the other up to cup the side of my face.

“I would have liked it better if you were scared, but you begged for me. Perhaps I will enjoy it more if you do as well.” I see his other hand moving on himself and I feel disgusted and used. It has not even begun yet. He glares at me with an emotion I do not understand, I cannot understand.

“I will take it away now,” Liam hisses, before his magic pools encompassing both our bodies. He sits back on his knees and I watch the orb of dark magic as it retreats from my body to rest in his palm. He inspects it closely and I see my fears spinning wilding in front of us. I see the savages, I see my mother’s dead body, and I see Louis’ face leering at me. Finally, I see Finn walking away from me into the forest. I quake as Liam tosses the orb against the wall and my fears are no more. The only emotion I have known my entire life has left my body and in its place is numbness. Beautiful nothingness.

I lie back on the bed and stare at the golden ceiling with holograms flashing like stars in the sky. Liam rests his hands on each side of my head, and his face cuts my view of the ceiling. His eyes are white, fierce and extremely bright. He brings his lips down to meet mine. As his tongue swirls in my mouth, I shut my eyes and let Finn’s face cloud my mind. I imagine his slightly parted lips, with gleaming white teeth showing in the middle. Finn’s tongue pries my mouth open wider. Finn’s sweaty hand rolls my breast in his hand and trails down the side of my body. Finn’s mouth places soft kisses on the inside of my thighs. I imagine it is Finn’s deft fingers that stroke me purposefully between my legs. I am detached. I am in Finn’s room, in his bed. I reach down and grab his hair as his tongue finally licks small circles at my core. I let my knees fall wide open.

“Finn,” I breathe out hoarsely when quivering pleasure has me on edge. His tongue stops, forcing me out of my trance. His heavy breathing is suddenly right at my ear.

“I am *not* Finn, darkling,” Liam’s voice says. My eyes fly open and meet his. His lips shine wet, his face is all wrong. Fear does not come as I suspect it should. Liam reaches down and places his erection at my center. “But you should already know that, because Finn can *never* do this,” He slides his length into my body. *Pain*. I cry out once. This pain does not ease my mind. Liam growls in delight as he thrusts in further, filling me.

“Ahhh. *This* was worth the wait,” Liam rasps. He does not wait for me to adjust. He ruts between my legs as if I am not there. Which is because I am not. Liam is so preoccupied he does not notice when I rip Finn’s heart from my neck and ball it in my fist. I stretch my hand out, feeling for the edge of the bed. I turn my head to the side and look out the window. I see the gardens, the perfect palace, and the fated life that is now mine. The words of my fairy tale float through my mind as I open my fist.

As I watch Finn’s heart slip through my fingers, tears pool in the sides of my blue eyes and blur my vision. Liam plunges into me deeply then stills. He grunts one final time before he collapses upon my body. Tears quietly streak down my face.

I lose fear but feel another that threatens something worse. I recognize it as one of the six. It overwhelms me, crushing me like impending death—I feel *sadness*.

July 26th, Midday

Days pass the same. I wake with the false sun and close my eyes against dishonest stars at night. I crave the gray of the circle sky, and the forest filled with creatures whose purpose is known. The sadness that fills me is unrelenting. Sorrow for my wasted life in the circle haunts my heart like an evil plague. But what overwhelms me so completely is the death of my mother. I am finally able to grieve for the loss that wasn't profound until I *felt* it was so. My tears do not stop and the tightening of my chest is always present. No one at the palace is of any comfort to me. Liam offers to take my sadness away, but I do not accept. Accepting her death has made her life real. Liam cannot have that—he will not take that from me, too.

The only relief from the sinking feeling is *turning it off*. Forcing myself into the background to make room for my dark side. I let my eyes glow white because it stops the sobbing. I can catch my breath. The hum of magic lends a new sensation other than what consumes me. I can just *be*. Lily comes daily with food and forces me to shower, but she speaks not about my morose demeanor. She does not look at me oddly. She has not taken me to Liam's rooms again since the first night. I know he will want me again soon. She enters my room without glancing at me and sets a tray of food down. I want to taste it and enjoy the delicious flavors I know are there, but I taste nothing. It is merely something I must do to survive—something I am not sure I want to do.

"I am taking you to the gardens today, miss," Lily says as she walks over to uncover my window. It has been covered for almost a week. I do not want to see out of it, I cannot see Finn. I am shamed, ruined...horrificed at what Liam has taken. I close my eyes to avoid even a small glance when I see the exposed window.

"Yes," I say. I walk into the closet and select a dress without looking at it.

"What is the occasion?" Lily, brown eyes shining, looks at me with approval when I exit the closet dressed in a dress of dizzying confection.

"You need to get out of this room," she remarks dryly. I sit in front of a new large mirror that appeared within the last few days. I let Lily work on my appearance for the palace's sake.

"I will have to go to him tonight." It is not a question, but Lily nods quickly not meeting my eyes in the mirror. I suck in a deep breath. Not because I am scared, it is the opposite. I am relieved I cannot feel fear. This night will be easy. I think if I were to know that this is what my fated life was I would have questioned my mother more often when she spoke of the correction. She was protecting me from the horrible truth for as long as she could.

We exit into the hallway, but Lily is right. When my dark side is forward the holograms are less confusing. I see them for what they are. I see a few large portraits on the wall. Several spinning decorations—nothing more. I hold my chin high as I pass other witches and darklings. I hide from them what their prince has

done, knowing that I am the only one who cares. When we break free from the palace I see the gardens before us beckoning me. It is empty but for us, and I am sure it was planned to be so.

“It is quite beautiful. I wish I could have seen the old world myself,” Lily says behind me. I turn and realize her eyes are brown and tinged with a wistful notion. I wonder if she will want to hear my mother’s stories of the old world.

I reach my hand up to touch a red apple and the leaves that surround it. The smooth feeling and the fact that it is actually concrete surprise me. I pluck the apple from the tree and hold it between my hands. Magic has created everything here, yet it seems so real.

“This is amazing. I have never seen trees such as this before. The bark is brown and the leaves are green,” I explain, though Lily knows. The forests by the circle hold only black trees that appear lifeless. Here in this illusion, the colorful flowers flourish and nature thrums with life. The irony is not lost on me. My eyes flash back to blue. I want to see this as myself—to know that I behold these amazing things with my *own* eyes. I sit on a bench in the middle of the garden. I feel a light breeze, something I have never felt before. It blows a strand of hair across my face, tickling my nose. When I glance up at the palace beside me I catch sight of movement in a window high above. I let my sharp senses focus and see Liam. He is peering out his window. A smile bows his lips when he knows I see him. I force a smile and tilt my wrist to give a small wave. He disappears from view.

“Lily,” I say her name quietly, “do you ever wish you could go back to your circle?” I know she will answer truthfully because I see how she looks at this place. She looks at it like I look at it.

“That is an impossibility, miss,” Lily responds. She comes to sit next to me.

“What if it were possible? What if you challenged him for your freedom? What if you could feel?” I ask leaning in. She raises her eyebrows.

“You feel. Look at you. Why would I want that?” I frown. Lily looks worried she has spoken these words. I smile to reassure her.

“Having joy is the most wonderful feeling in the world. Better than this,” I wave my hand to gesture to the gardens. I raise my face toward the heatless sun and then look at Lily.

“Of course when you are sad,” I pause as a small wave of pain flows through my chest and ripples up to my throat, “you are so low that you can barely function.” A few tears trickle down my face. I wipe them away. I look down to the apple I have sitting in my lap. Another tear slides down my cheek and lands on the shiny surface and balls there.

“Do you know how dangerous the abandoned city is, miss?” I look at her and cannot help a small sniffle. She will tell me what is outside of the palace walls. I wait, enthralled by the possibility of learning something new.

“It is an expansive soot covered city—so large that you can be lost in one neighborhood for days, weeks. None of the palaces claim the territory so it remains as it did when the old world fell. It is as the ancient humans left it. There are palaces with other monarchies on every other side of it. It is directly in the middle. Without a spell, that only a dark witch can preform, there is no way back to the circles. The savages in the forests are nothing compared to the species that reside in the abandoned city. They are brutal and cannot be killed quickly,” Lily says, her eyes glass over. She is remembering something horrible.

“A darkling escaped from the abandoned city. She was obviously tough, but the witches ended up destroying her because her mind was so rapt with fear. They could not take it away. That girl spoke of horned monsters and other winged creatures that breathed fury with their fire. She escaped into the palace by the use of a sorceress who makes these creatures her pets.” I swallow hard. If I could feel fear I know I would feel it hearing Lily’s story. Glad I am not fearful because I need to know more, I question her further,

“There is only one sorceress? Where is she located?” I urge my voice lower still. The breeze that blows will only serve to uncover secrets I do not want anyone else to know. Lily swivels her head to look directly at me.

“You are going to try. Are you not?” I do not answer. I turn my face to the distance, toward the abandoned city.

“This will be your death, miss,” Lily hisses. “The darkling was raving mad when she was brought here. I can not even say for sure her words were truth.” *They have to be*, I think.

“What will you do if you happen to survive and make it back to your circle? You think the prince will let you go free after you have run? After everything he has given to you? You will be put to death.” I smile widely.

“He cannot kill me until I give him an heir, remember? It would go against his word. He promised his people. He will not go back on that. I plan to challenge him,” I say, though I know it will be much more difficult than that. I will need much help.

Lily looks around us warily before she turns back to me, “Miss, I think he wants *you* more than he wants an heir. He never promised the citizens that your heir would rule. He will not accept any challenge that has the propensity to lose you. I am sure of it.” I know Lily is right, I can tell Liam’s words are only half-truths, but I am shocked she has told me this. I know of one challenge he will accept. The only challenge they *always* accept—though no one is brave enough to offer.

“What if I feel all six?” I say. Lily shakes her head as soon as I speak.

“Everyone knows that is impossible. Even if you feel five; love is all but gone the second you lose it as a child. It is why humans are put to death when their darklings are fully raised. They feel love. Their love is the death of them.” My

chest tightens as I think of my mother. It is because of her love that I feel. My eyes glow white to mask my sorrow. It becomes too unbearable.

“What if I could?” I ask again, more disheartened this time. She breathes out a long sigh and says so lowly I barely hear her,

“He would probably let you go free...” Lily shakes her head in frustration, “though someone would pay the price for his loss.” We break from our hushed conversation when we hear scuffling in the distance. I stand and squint my eyes in the direction of the noise. Lily shields her eyes from the sun to survey the outskirts of the garden as well.

At least a dozen female and male dark witches are surrounding a flailing woman. Their eyes glow as they all keep one arm locked on their hostage. When they walk closer Lily smiles,

“A new darkling,” she says. I see the jet-black hair shorn to her chin and ripped, unwashed clothing. When she turns her head and her silver eyes pin mine I smirk. I should have known the second I saw her thrashing about.

“That is my new factotum,” I say, letting happiness lace my voice. When the witches get closer I hear her screaming profanities, they carry on the wind like a vulgar yet very welcome gift.

Lana screeches, “I said get your mothafuckin’ hands off me. I swear to the savages I will kill you, your mothers, and your babies while you sleep...” She punches out when her hand gets free. Though I am laughing, I am irritated, as I do not want her to be hurt by the guards.

“Emma,” Lana wails when she catches sight of me, “call these damn creepers off me,” She kicks out a booted foot and it connects with a male witches stomach. The twelve guards glare at me, obviously stunned I have chosen the violent darkling as my factotum. They look at me as if they have made a mistake and have collected a feral beast instead. I raise my hand up and they release her.

“She is in your care now, princess,” the lead guard intones.

Lana yanks her shirt down, dusts off her pants, and blows her bangs out of her face, “That’s right, you assholes. I don’t forget, either. Especially you, Mr. blind-me-when-my-back-is-turned. I got your number, buddy,” she screams. The witches walk away without a backward glance. Lana raises both middle fingers and wildly moves them up and down in the air while mouthing the words *fuck you* to their retreating backs. Then she turns to me, the witches all but forgotten, and smiles a huge Lana smile.

“You freakish little witch princess,” she puts her hands on her hips while she eyes me down. I try to laugh, but with my dark magic humming it sounds like a high pitch musical note. “You seriously drag me to this horrible, awful place,” she glances at the lush gardens and continues talking when her eyes land on the sun, “and you’re already a dark fucking witch. How fair is that, freak?”

Lily touches my arm and says, “Good luck, miss.” I think she means good luck taming my factotum, but one glance at her brown eyes tells me more. She is wishing me luck with Liam tonight and with the challenge I must make with him. She is certain I will fail. Good luck also means good-bye. I smile. Lily leaves. I glance up at Liam’s window to find it empty before I approach Lana.

I ball my fists at my side and the quivering magic that hums through my body dissipates. My eyes eventually turn blue. The tears come immediately. It is the first time happiness tempers my sadness. Lana notices.

“What did they do to you, Emma?” Lana asks, voice jeering. Her familiar silver eyes hold concern.

“You are not mad I sent for you?” I ask, ignoring her question. She scrunches her forehead.

She knocks on the side of my head lightly, “Duh, I was coming here after you anyways...when your guard showed up it just proved easy transportation to this horrible place.” Lana’s eyes dance over the gardens. She turns her face into the breeze. “How do you stand it here? It’s utterly tragic.” She laughs. I laugh. She pulls me into a hug. It is so comforting that I cry. She pulls away when my jagged crying makes my body heave. She unfolds her sleeve and wipes underneath my eyes.

“Which goddamned fucker made you feel sadness?” Lana asks. I want to tell her everything, but I do not trust the wind.

“I made myself feel it,” I say. “We should go into the palace now.” I grab her hand and start for the wide doors in the distance.

“Good, this garden is hideous. It makes me want to kill something,” Lana smarts. I pull the apple from my pocket and hand it to her. She rolls it around in her hand, then throws it into the air and punts it into the distance when it lands on her boot. When it shatters a palace window I know I have to tame Lana if we are to survive long enough to escape this place.

The absence of her bow and quiver actually relieves me.

July 26th, Night

"The food is always available," I tell Lana. Knowing Lana will not serve me in my room like a factotum is expected, I take her to the dining hall. I glance around warily as anyone who passes by watches Lana annihilate the buffet table. She shows the food no mercy. I press my lips together to stifle a giggle when I see her eyes light up when she takes a bite of a sweet cake.

"Emma, you're kidding right? I'm not leaving this place until the food is gone," she says. She has not noticed that food is mystically replaced as she soon as takes it. She has been unaffected by most of the magical qualities of the enchanted castle. She thinks the holograms are "trippy," and is more amazed than scared by the flowing streams of magic that course through the hallways and corridors. When multiple dark witches gather to watch her like she is the entertainment I jerk her from her seat and lead her to my room.

"Do not give these witches any reason not to trust you," I say as we walk. Lana is distracted by the large, ornate dresses worn by all. I keep my dark side at the surface to prevent dizziness. Lana does not have that same luxury.

"I was just eating," she pauses, looks at me then says, "You should've taken some for the road." A burst of gray, warm magic rages between our heads. I shiver then push Lana into my room and slam the door.

I take a few ragged breaths to quell my dark magic, "They will kill us if they hear such comments," I say. Lana observes everything in my room. She picks up my lone book, turns to me and smiles.

She holds up the worn leather book, "He had to kill a ton of savages for this, you know?" I close my eyes and bring my hand up to my throat. Finn's heart is no longer there. I buried it deep in my backpack, unable to leave it alone on Liam's floor.

"I do not wish to talk about Finn," I tell her. My sadness eats me like a disease when I think of him. Lana walks over to the large sheet covering my window and rips it down.

"Well, blow me over, captain. They really do believe in torture, don't they?" Lana sniggers. I walk over to look out the window with her. Finn's house is empty.

"What a bunch of assholes," Lana says then wraps her arm around my shoulder, "Finn wouldn't be in his house anyway." Her smile is conspiring.

"Why not?" I ask.

"Did you really think overprotective-Emma-is-mine, Finn was going to let you sit in this gilded cage for long?" I exhale a pent up breath, then my ugly truth surfaces.

“He will not want me when he finds me. I am damaged. I am Liam’s princess. He will never get passed that. Do you know what I had to do?” I ask. Lana nods, understanding everything without requesting details. I tell her of the dark witches inability to refuse a challenge. She seems impressed I have been able to gather so many details about this twisted, false place. I tell her of my plan to challenge Liam to let me feel all six emotions to garner my freedom. And of Lily’s story about the darkling.

Lana goes into my closet, and then exits wearing one of the gowns. It is a deep purple, her silver eyes capture my attention. She looks stunning.

“Okay, fine. You’re a dirty hooker,” she laughs, “but remember I’m here now, too. Finn would never leave us here without at least trying *something* to break us free.”

“He will get himself killed. He knows not what he toys with. Because the witches are completely unfeeling they have no reserves about executing for slight offenses.” A wave of rage whips through me at the thought of Finn harmed.

“Never underestimate an irate man. Finn has taken care of himself for a long time.” Lana sits on my bed and opens the book. Her eyes dance over the words. I cannot remember the first time I read the same words myself. I let her ignore me completely for a few minutes.

“Prince Iliam expects me in his chambers tonight,” I say when she flips a page. She sets the book down and inspects me closely. “I am unable to conceive an heir this month, but he still wishes to...use me,” I choke out. Lana’s face is unreadable as she walks over to my table and runs her hand over a clear, decorative vase. Lily likes flowers so she put two small arrangements in my room. A few yellow blooms rise out of the pink bubbling liquid. A tiny gray mouse swims in and out of the stalks of the stems—whirring around with no escape. She watches it swim and I see her mind working.

“Call in the darkling I saw you with today,” she spins the vase around, “she is more dark than human, isn’t she?” I nod, still not sure what she wants with Lily. I turn my palm up, calling to my magic. Lana leans away, but watches with interest. A small wisp of magic circles, hovering over my palm faster and faster until a charmed sphere is formed.

“Send Lilithia,” I say. I close my palm into a tight fist and the magic vanishes. It is a tiring feat. Liam tells me if I sacrifice more emotions my magic will come more easily. It is a sacrifice I am not willing to make.

“Holy shit, that is a pretty rad trick,” Lana says, eyes wide with excitement. Lily walks in, eyes shining white.

“How much dark magic are you capable of?” Lana asks Lily. I know Lily is capable of much more than I and definitely much more than a *feeling* Lana. Lily does not speak so Lana continues. “I know you need a live animal and some

liquid to concoct a potion. We need a potion, freakling,” Lana sniggers. She jabs a finger at the vase.

“What type of potion do you need?” Lily asks. Her eyes flicker brown when she glances at me. “I am not as strong as a witch...I feel fear.” I can see fear in Lily’s eyes now. She is scared of Lana just as I feared Lana when I first met her.

Lana pulls up the skirts of the billowy dress and paces toward her. “I need my face to match this dress,” Lana says. I realize then, what Lana intends—a cloaking potion. It will make her resemble me in all ways. The darklings in the circle joke about such things. Lana adds, “I suppose I’ll also need my body to match as well.” She turns around and waggles her eyebrows at me.

“I cannot let you do that,” I say, my voice firm. Shame fills me. Liam is my burden, not hers. Lily blankly looks at me, waiting for permission from her princess.

Lana picks up the vase and hands it to Lily, “Here you go, make some magic. I have some balls to make blue,” Lana says, her eyes dance conspiringly. To me she says, “give me some credit. I’ve more than enough practice with male darklings from other circles. I can hold my own without giving away the cow. Trust me.” I know nothing will sway Lana, so I nod my consent.

Lily takes the vase from Lana and removes the flowers so only the pink liquid and the gray mouse remain. She wraps both of her hands around the base and dark magic rises in every corner of my room.

Lily’s white eyes lock on mine, “I need a lock of your hair, miss,” she intones robotically. Lana bounds over to me and plucks multiple hairs from my head in a quick jerk. “That hurt, Lana,” I grab my head in pain. Lana dances over to Lily and hands the hair over. The blonde strands are immersed in the vase and begin to glow. The mouse swims quicker and more frantically. My hairs wrap around its tiny body and he with a quick jerk the mouse stops moving. The hairs and the mouse disappear. The liquid is now dark blue in color and sweet of odor. Lily sets the vase down on the table in front of Lana.

“This potion will only work for three hours. You will gradually transform back into your true body. Obviously I have to tell you that fooling the prince is a horrible idea,” Lily looks at me, “one that is most definitely punishable by death, but I wish you luck.” Lana is hopping back and forth on her feet, barely able to contain her excitement. I shake my head. Lana snaps her fingers while she says, “oh, I know! While you’re at it can you turn the other one into a blinding potion?” Lana points to the other arrangement on the vanity table. Lily looks nervous and distressed. “I need it to work on darklings and witches alike.”

Lily leaves after the other vase is bubbling a dark black shade. Lana places a cork in the top of the bud vase and slips it into a pocket in the folds of her dress. Lily will come to escort Lana to Liam’s rooms in one hour.

“Why will you do this for me?” I ask.

Lana scrunches her eyebrows together. "I'm not doing this for you, I'm doing this for me. I live for adventure. This is adventure in epic proportions. Plus, I get to be the golden haired princess for a few hours. I get to feel what it's like to be you," Lana says. She glances out my window.

"It is not some amazing thing to be me," I say. She turns her head back to me, "if we are going to escape we need to be low key about it," I say. Lana is anything but low key. I know subtlety it is the only way. I flop on my bed and throw my arm over my face. The tears come. Sadness hits. I am disabled.

"Emma, you need to pull yourself together. We're getting the fuck out of here tonight. Pack your bags. Have some slave fetch us some food, but we got somewhere to be..." I prop myself up on my elbows and look at her. Tears blur my vision.

"Tonight? How is it possible you have a plan?" I watch her as she picks up the vase and examines the liquid. A fearless look is emblazoned on her face. She tips it back and swallows the contents. I watch in complete amazement as her body transforms into mine. She stalks toward me and when she speaks the words leave my lips, not Lana's.

"Never underestimate the power of feelings, Emma." I shake my head, not understanding. My crying is ceaseless; I feel powerless. Lana reaches out her hand, my hand, and smacks me across the face. The force is so great my head snaps to stare at the wall on the other side of the room. I cradle the side of my face and turn to look into my own angry blue eyes.

"They didn't take everything from you, Emma. Don't forget that. You still have yourself." Her nostrils flare as she sucks in determined breaths. "Time to get fucking angry." Lana says. It has worked. My breathing matches hers, my chest rises, my blood boils. I may not feel fear, surprise or love but I feel anger. Lana superimposed as me backs away.

"Are you angry?" Lana asks.

"Yes," I say through gritted teeth.

"Good. I'm going to go take care of *business* with the prince and you'll get ready to run. Do you understand?" She sits at my mirror and runs her hands through my blonde hair. She traces the planes of my face with her fingertips.

"I understand. Why are you so sure this will work?" I stumble through the words because I am so engrossed in watching Lana look at the mirror. She whips her head toward me and smiles.

"Because I'm fearless, of course." My stomach knots as I remember Finn's words from so long ago. Lana reads my expression and nods her head.

“I had to sacrifice an emotion to be able to travel to the dark citadel.” My mouth gapes open. Lana giggles and it sounds like my own. She stands and pushes her gown down and perks her breasts up.

“You always seem fearless to me,” I tell Lana as she crosses to the door. Her giggle turns into unabashed laughter.

“I made the guards think I was fearful. They chose my fearfulness as my biggest liability so they took it as toll into the dark citadel. You are stripped of what disadvantages you most. They didn’t know I’m just a lying bitch.” I breathe out a sigh; thankful she still has joy and love. I hear a slight knock on my door and know Lily is here to take me to Liam. Lana crosses to the door and lays her hand on the knob.

“The reason we have to leave *tonight* is because Finn is waiting for us in the abandoned city.” I see sympathy reflecting in her eyes. She leaves me before I can ask what Finn had to sacrifice to enter the dark citadel.

My heart lurches.

July 26th, Late night

I pace back and forth after I collect everything my backpack can hold. I wear *my* clothing and mindlessly eat a tart without tasting. Luckily, nervousness is a sub-emotion of fear and I thank Liam for taking that from me. I know I should be worried for Lana, but I am not. My eyes ghost over as I think of what Liam is trying to make her do. I pull my necklace from my backpack and look at it, willing myself to think of Finn. *He is waiting for me*, I think as I watch the red heart swing back and forth, calming me. Though I am sure he will not want me when he realizes how damaged I am. I tuck the necklace into the pocket of my tight black pants. I hear a disturbance in the hallway. I leap off the bed with my backpack on and throw open my door. Lana, half dressed and still in my body bounds into my room and closes the door.

Her face is blushed. She chews the corner of her lip and taps her chin. "Time to go, Joe. I'd fathom a guess we have less than ten minutes to escape the confines of this palace before the almighty prince and his guards go apeshit on our asses," Lana breathes out while stripping out of the dress and stabbing her legs into a pair of pants.

"What did you do?" I ask. She does not meet my eyes.

"Oh you know, just a little..." she forces her tongue to poke out her cheek and raises her eyebrows. "He was pretty surprised in *your* change in demeanor," Lana laughs while speaking. "I could've asked for the entire planetary system and I don't doubt he would be trying to figure out how to lasso it for me this very night." My stomach feels sick. Saliva fills my mouth. I shake my head at Lana and close my eyes. When I open them I see her black hair flickering into focus—Lana returning to her body.

"Oh, please. It's not that big of a deal. He wasn't as lecherous as Louis," She jogs to the door and waits for me. "Plus he gave you a ten minute head start before he sends the guards out." My mouth drops open. I am unwilling to believe he is letting me go free for even a slight amount of time. We walk through the crystalline hallways together. I know the way out so I lead the way and Lana rambles next to me.

"It's a good thing I went instead of you. I don't think there is any way you could have made the deal I did," Lana says, obviously pleased with herself. I do not doubt she is right. The hallways are never as empty as they are right now. Not one scurrying darkling or palace guard in sight. It has been cleared for us...for me. I peer at Lana sideways unsure how to ask what I want to know. We break free into the courtyard and begin a comfortable jog out to the walls.

She sees me looking at her and grins widely. "If you can feel all six in a week you are free, Emma. He admitted he never wanted an heir...just you at his disposal. His confidence is his downfall, damn cocky asshole. He doubts you will be able to feel love in that short amount of time. Especially in the abandoned city, which I guess is supposedly pretty horrible. He's worried you'll get killed there which is

why he is sending his guards to collect you. It's another part of the deal I made." Lana stops speaking when she begins to breathe heavily from running.

"What?" I ask exasperated.

"If his guards catch you, deal is off..." Lana says. We run through the garden and I see it for what it really is. The palace is not the only thing that is enchanted—this whole territory is. All the wards are down to allow us to leave. The dark magic is almost completely absent. The stars have vanished from the sky and the trees are dark black. It no longer smells of sweet apples and ripe flowers. It reeks of falsities and deceit. I belong here in my fated home, just as much as I belong in the circle. My mind is spinning with unease as I am split in half. The wall that surrounds the palace hums with magic. It glitters in the air all around the barrier. Like dust motes in the circle, but not.

As we climb the fence wrapped in old, black vines I feel excitement to be free. Joy rises at the prospect of never having to endure Liam's affections; never having to look out my treacherous window into emptiness again. Lana and I are perched on the top of the thick fence, our backs to the palace. What we glimpse in front of us has frozen us to this spot.

"What the fuck is that?" Lana whispers. It is the abandoned city. Black smoke still rises from the cracked streets. Tall buildings with their tops demolished litter the skyline. Up close it looks more tormented than from the balcony at the palace. Creatures I am unable to distinguish control the gray atmosphere in every direction I look. Their wings cut through the air as easily as a knife through skin. Small fires rage throughout. I know life has forsaken this city long ago. My life has been split into two categories at this moment. Before and after. I force my gaze back to the palace and squint my eyes through the smoke and mist. I hone in on Liam's window. He is standing there, his hands pressed against the pane, frozen with an emotion. Very slowly, a smile creeps to his lips. Then, it transforms into a laugh I imagine I can hear from miles away. It holds malice and disdain. Liam knows what I am seeing and he thinks I will turn back to the comfort of his false world. A shiver runs down my spine. It comes easily this time, throttling my body. I let out a shriek and it encompasses me with ease.

I feel fear. Again. It is not because of what lies before me, it is caused by what is behind me. Horror and dread edge their way into my body. Without a second glance behind us I grab Lana's hand and jump down from the wall to land in the abandoned city. We are immediately enveloped in a thick cloud of heat that forces labored breathing.

"Way to give me warning, you bitch. Why are you breathing like that?" Lana asks while waving her hand in front of her face in a futile attempt to get rid of the smoke. I realize I am gasping, panting my eyes are glowing white.

"I...I...I am scared," I say out loud. Lana grabs my hand and raises it into the air. She says, "folks, we have a winner!" She releases me and smacks my bottom. "Let's hope Finn is up to the challenge. Only two more to go," Lana says. I think

surprise and love will be impossible to feel in only a week's time. I tilt my chin up to scrutinize the tall buildings surrounding us. Glass windows are broken and the heat and smoke cause them to shatter further, causing glass shards to rain from above us.

"I see why this shithole is abandoned. Magic probably can't even help this place," she says. She brings her hood up to cover her head and begins trudging through the streets. I precariously leap from one side of a road to the other. It is split down the middle in a jagged zigzag pattern—as if something streaked along it underground. I hear the palace alarms.

"The redcoats are coming, the redcoats are coming," Lana screams into the abysmal city. Her laughter is foreign as it echoes.

I start running haphazardly in a panic. "Where are we supposed to go? I look left and right but not up. I hear the soft waft of wings. The noise alone disconcerts me. Lana is running on the other side of the crack. I look over to her and catch glimpses of her through the smoke and fire that occasionally rise up from the ground below. When her silver gaze meets mine she smiles.

"You are insane, Lana," I yell as loudly as I can to drown out the alarms that mark my escape and the hissing of the steaming, angry crack between us.

Lana turns back to running forward and pumps her arms quicker as she picks up her pace. "We all go a little mad sometimes. It's how you feel alive, Emma." She is right. With my four emotions blasting through me I do feel alive. The heat pricks my face and the smoke burns my lungs, but I feel limitless. The next clearing without smoke and fire I hop over a zag in the road and fall in step with Lana's pace. Her excitement is contagious.

"It's not about where you end up...it's about the ride, it's about how you get there. That's what life is," Lana says, her speech labored. "We all end up at the same place. Whether you are a human, darkling or a witch. What are you going to do before that? How will you make your go round worth it?" Darklings and witches are immortal and live forever unless a hapless accident cleaves their head off. Humans die. My mother died. I know what I want to do with my life. I want to *know* I am alive. In this abandoned city with uncertainty looming over my head like death I feel alive.

"I just want this," I open my arms up and slow my pace until I come to a halted stop. I turn in a circle and shut my eyes. *Joy. Sadness. Anger. Fear.* Soot and glass rain down and I smell the rubber from the soles of my boots melting. Lana puts her hands on my shoulders.

I open my eyes. "I was hoping you'd want a little more than this," Lana scrunches her forehead and looks up at the sky sideways. My laughter sounds maniacal. "Oh and PS your boots are burning." She grabs my hand and we enter a building. The glass door that once resided there is no more. My boots stick to the slick, cooler floor. Now that fear has returned I worry for Finn.

July 26th, Late, late night

“How long has Finn been here, Lana?” I ask, unable to conceal my nervousness. She merely shrugs her shoulders, signaling she does not care or does not know. She pulls open a heavy door. I cover my ears as it lurches and creaks. A stairwell resides behind it. She nods her head and I start going upstairs. I notice she takes great care to pull the door shut behind us.

“Where are we going?”

“Just go up as quickly as you can, Emma. I don’t want you to piss your pants or anything, but the guard is the least of our worries while we’re here. If anything the savages and winged fuckers will take care of them for us,” she states matter-of-factly. I stumble on a stair.

“This building looked most central from the palace wall. He said he’d be in the center...” Lana trails off as she starts taking the stairs three at a time. My legs are tired. They are tired from running and now they are tired from climbing. The walls are white painted brick, but unlike the enchanted palace they are stagnant, they are real. I let my fingers graze it as I hop up as quickly as my thighs let me.

“Finn is here?” I ask, mollified I will have to confront him without gathering my wits first.

“If I’m lucky he’s here,” she says. Lana is distracted as she spouts off numbers in no apparent order. I think her insane. Alive, beautiful and insane.

She busts through one of the doors. A large red sign that says *exit* is above it. I find it odd we are going into a door that says exit. My pack weighs heavy on my back. I swing it to one shoulder to relieve some of the pressure as we stalk through a hallway. The gray haze that permeates the broken glass windows is the only light. The eerie smoke wisps in, but it is quiet on this higher level, away from the sizzling, popping ground. Carpet with wild swirling patterns lines a plain hallway with many doors.

“What is this place?” I ask while switching my backpack to the other shoulder; barely stifling a groan.

“It’s called a ho-tel,” Lana announces the word oddly. “We learned that humans stayed in places like this when they traveled the old world.” My mother never mentioned anything about hotel’s when she told me stories. Lana peeks her head in one room then looks back at me with a wrinkled nose. “They look more like torture chambers now.” I notice a bed when she peeks in another room and I sway on my feet. I am exhausted.

“Is it safe to sleep here? I am so tired,” I breathe out.

“You’re tired? You’re tired? First I had to turn into you, then I had to pleasure your darkly douchey husband prince while making wicked deals, and then I had to make a mad dash to this glass encased building that I am sure will blow to

smithereens any moment. I want to sleep too, but we have to find Finn first. If he made it in this twisted fuck of a place.” I shudder. Lana laughs. “Just joking. We do have to find Finn first, though.” She turns and starts checking rooms again. “He’d be pretty pissed if we fell asleep while he was off battling nasty savages by himself.” We enter a room and find supplies littering the ground. Lana whoops, “BINGO!” Though, the room is empty but for Finn’s things.

“He’ll be back, don’t worry,” Lana says. She unzips her jacket and shakes a large amount of ash from it. I sit down on the floor amidst Finn’s things. I pick up a canteen and imagine his lips wrapping around it.

“Lana?” My tone pitches higher than normal.

“Yeah, freakling?”

“What *exactly* did you do with your tongue?” Lana laughs so loudly that I wince. She shakes her head.

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want to hear the answers to, Emma.” I cross my arms over my chest; angry she treats me so childish. I leave Lana laughing and enter a bathing chamber. The water no longer works, but there is a large mirror. I slam the door. I wipe the black from my face and hair.

I hear the front door creak open and the rumblings of a very male voice. My heart thundering in my chest, I throw open the door.

I stop breathing. “Finn,” I say. He stares at me, his mouth parted in perfection. Neither of us move a muscle--we just study each other. My eyes trail over his body and back up to his face. His gaze sweeps left and right and up and down as if taking inventory of every inch of my body. Lana cross between us and the momentary spell is broken. I blink my eyes to clear my head.

“Finn, glad to see you’re alive. I’ll be in the next room over while you two get reacquainted with each other, or stare at each other or whatever it is that you do...” Lana opens the door to leave. I feel panicked at being left alone with him. It is all I have dreamed about and my largest fear rolled into one. I am damaged. Lana winks at me. To Finn she says, “Emma was just inquiring about using her tongue properly. Maybe you could give her a play-by-play tutorial? It may help with the two...who knows?” With a sinister cackle she leaves the room. I feel my cheeks heat. Finn does not look at me. I see his face redden slightly. Lana has embarrassed us both.

I train my eyes on my boots. “Lana bought me a week to feel the remaining emotions,” I say, my voice is weak, but my spirits high. With Finn safe and in front of me, happiness courses through me. I peek up at him just in time to see his jaw work. His fists clench by his sides. Finn pins me with his gaze, immobilizing any thoughts except for him. He rocks forward on his feet, but then leans away from me as if to hold himself back. He opens his mouth to speak then shuts it again. Everything about his body language confuses me.

He lays both his hands on the doorframe on either side. “Which don’t you feel, Em?” Finn asks quietly, using the nickname my mother always used. He breathes out deeply as he waits for me to respond. The silence is deafening as my thoughts scramble. I do not know if I want to tell him I feel sadness because he will want to know what caused it.

“I do not feel surprise. I think you know the other,” I say. “Thank you for my book, Finn.” My voice cracks when I say his name. He leans forward as much as his arms will let him without letting go of the frame and then back again. He is restraining himself. His lips press into a thin line.

“I don’t know, Emma. They are witches. How do I know they can’t make you feel something? You’re going to have to be a little more open with me,” he grates. He ignores my thanks. His steely brown eyes dart down to my throat. I feel my necklace burning a hole in my pocket. I know it is what he is looking for.

“They could never make me feel *love*,” I bite back. The word feels funny as I say it. Finn looks crestfallen as I say this. I see the dark circles under his eyes—the blood spattering his clothing.

“What is wrong with you?” I ask. Finn stabs his fingers through his brown hair clearing it from his eyes. I approach cautiously. He backs away from the doorframe and lets me pass through. I sit on the edge of the bed and pat the seat next to me. Finn looms large over me, already shaking his head in refusal.

I throw my hands out to the sides. “Talk to me, Finn. Nothing more.” A loud bang sounds on the wall next to us. Both of our heads whip in that direction. Then we hear Lana’s muffled, breathy voice, “Oh, Finn. Do that again...Oh yeah, baby! Give it to me! You want my tongue on what?” She bangs the wall a couple more times and then falls silent. Finn closes his eyes and shakes his head. I laugh. Lana has broken the awkward tension by being awkward. A feat only she is capable of. Finn crosses the rest of the room and sits next to me with a flourish. I feel the heat radiating from his body.

“I’ve been so worried about you,” he says. I know he means he worried about what would be left of me after my time at the palace. He gently touches my wrist. I shiver.

“You should have known that with Lana there I would be more than fine,” I say frowning when I remember she has tricked Liam. And with the thought of Liam my sadness returns. I turn toward the wall, shielding Finn from my pain. I rest my head on his shoulder. Finn stops breathing, he stiffens.

“Tell me about when you felt sadness,” Finn says quietly. He knows. I turn my head to meet his gaze. Finn closes his eyes tightly as if my tears physically pain him. His eyebrows slant inward and he has to make an effort to right his face when he says, “Tell me.” I sob once and I tell him. I leave out nothing. I tell him how I pictured his face and hands instead of Liam’s. I watch Finn’s mouth when I tell him I envisioned his mouth instead of the prince’s. Finn blanches and

clenches his fists when I speak of the words Liam mutters before he ruins me, but he nods and asks that I continue. When I tell Finn that I ripped his heart from my chest and finally felt sadness, he closes his eyes. I sniffle, tuck my hair behind my ears and wait. His breathing is rapid, I sense that in this quiet moment with my most horrible memory laid before him he is making a decision.

“We have to fix your memory of that night, Emma. It *will* be me. Not him. That’s what you wanted. Do you still want that?” I exhale loudly in relief. Contentment fills my heart. I bring my hand up and wrap it around his neck. His eyes briefly widen then take on a hooded look.

“You are all I have ever wanted since I knew I could want,” I say. I clasp my other hand around his neck. He swings me under him to lay me down on the bed. He cradles my head in his hands. His bodyweight pressing on me makes my head swim. His expression is different from the last time I saw him. He looks at me with more tenderness. I understand then that sex with the dark prince makes no difference to Finn, because I wanted it to be him.

Without removing his hand, he slowly inches his face down to kiss one corner of my mouth. I am mortified when a small moan passes my lips. I feel more with a kiss-but-not-really with Finn than all the overtly sexual things I did with Liam. Finn is smiling when he creeps down once more to press his soft lips to the other corner of my mouth. I feel his teeth on my lips. I grab his face between my hands.

“I have never desired anything more than I do your kiss,” I say alternating my gaze from his mouth to his lighted, zestful eyes. When I pull his face, his lips toward mine, he does not resist. His mouth is finally *mine*. Our lips melt together. His tongue meets with mine and I hear him groan. It only stokes the fire I feel growing. My hands trail over his shoulders and down his thick, strong arms. I pull on his shirt without stopping our moving lips. He breaks free from our kiss as he leans up on his knees to pull his shirt over his head. I look at him and know with certainty that this is the man who is made for me.

Finn is devastating.

He claims my lips once more. He runs his hands down my neck and shoulders, careful where his hands graze my body. I want more. I want all of him. I pull the hem of my shirt and camisole over my head and press our naked chests together. I remember the last time we were this exposed to each other. Louis. Now it is out of emotion that we come together. When Finn trails his lips down the front of my neck I repress a shudder. Liam did the same thing. This is not Liam, though. Finn’s lips are softer. I lean up and watch as he brushes light kisses over my breast, his brown hair falling into his eyes. I start fumbling with the button on my pants. His eyes dart up to mine. He looks startled. He shakes his head softly before licking his lips and pressing them to mine again.

“I want all of you, Finn,” I say. It sounds like a plea. He shakes his head, his wet lips brushing my lips as he tells me *no*.

“Not yet,” he says. I think it is because of the decree and it angers me. Liam has stolen something else from me. I want to break all the laws. I want to feel alive. I want to be with Finn in all ways. Finn sighs, presses a languid kiss on my lips letting his tongue twirl with mine briefly.

“I want to be in love with you when we have sex, Emma,” he says.

“Oh,” I say. I am hurt. My heart crumbles a tiny bit. I should not expect him to love me after what Liam has done to me.

“It’s not like that,” Finn says cupping my face in his hands, “I want to...very badly, but I had to...” his eyes go distant. He is far away from here. I lean up and put my lips to his. He finally looks at me again.

“I had to sacrifice an emotion to enter the dark citadel,” he says quietly. Now I feel like I am the one who is far away. His brown eyes glow a wicked white as he says it,

“Love.”

