



The Shadow Myth – A Novel

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**Hero's Bias: Developing Fantasy Villains Outside of the
Perspective of the Protagonist**

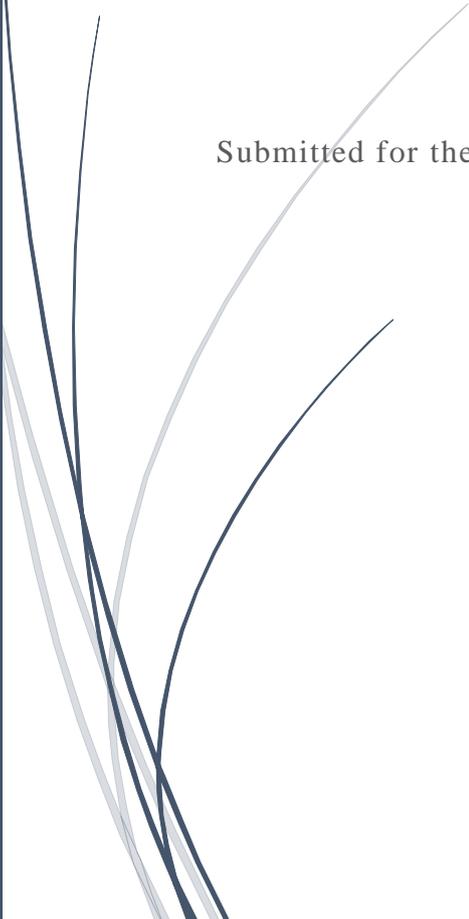
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PROLOGUE

A shout in the distance, deep, and demanding. The fragrance of a storm filled the air. A young girl inhaled, the scent of her mother and the misty fog filling her nostrils as she clung closer to the woman's neck. She felt the panic in her mother's heartbeat – the wild rhythm did nothing to put her at ease. Darkness surrounded them, the light of the moon covered by thick clouds rolling in across the sky, and every snapping tree branch or crunching old leaf beneath their feet set them on edge.

It was strange, the young girl thought to herself, she had never seen her father so determined. In all the time she had played hide and seek with him before, he had never chased after her with such fervour. Now he was running to catch up to them, his calls clear and familiar despite the sound of her mother's heavy breathing and the rustling of the trees in the wind. She wondered why she had been woken up so suddenly; they usually played games during the daytime. Nevertheless, it was exciting – she wasn't allowed out after nightfall.

Another shout. Her mother kept running, arms clinging closer to her daughter as they made their way further into the heart of the wilderness. Branches tickled the girl from every side, but she enjoyed the feeling of the heavy leaves brushing against her skin. It was unexpected then, when a thorn suddenly scraped against her forearm, a yelp of pain escaping her mouth before her mother had the chance to shush her. They stumbled to a halt, her mother putting a finger to her daughter's lips, indicating that she was to remain as quiet as possible. She obeyed, knowing that her father had far more sensitive ears than most. That was usually how he wound up finding her, no matter how far she had buried herself beneath the bushes close to their house.

"I can always hear you," he would say, before pulling her out of the dirt and into his arms. *"I will always be able to find you that way."* The words had never failed to comfort

her, and she would hug him fiercely. She was enjoying this particular game; her mother generally refused to join in. Hide and seek had never been so exhilarating.

Her mother gently carried her over behind one of the thick oak trees, sliding down its trunk, squeezing her daughter so close to her side that taking a breath had become nearly impossible. They sat there for a few minutes while the young girl listened for the sounds of her father coming closer. She hadn't heard him shout in a while, and she was worried that they had run too far away from him.

"Mama, let's go back! I don't think he will be able to find us here," she whispered, having clawed her mother's hand away from her face. "We need to find papa. He'll be worried about us by now."

Her mother didn't respond, clamping her hand against her daughter's mouth once again. Silence fell between them, but the girl was getting anxious, nerves on fire because of her mother's unwillingness to go back home.

What was happening? Why had they needed to run that far? Would they end up running even further?

They sat there for a long time, harsh bark digging into the skin on their backs. The girl noticed that the trees had become almost inaudible, their leaves no longer swaying in the breeze, and yet, she felt wisps of wind around her ankles, her wrists, and her neck. She moved her hands through the tendrils of wind, allowing them to slip and curl around her fingers, enjoying their soft caresses against her dirt-covered fingernails.

Finally, her mother spoke, breaking the trance the young girl had been in as she watched the wisps slowly curl around her arms. They were not made of wind, she realized, but composed of shadow, a slight glow making them faintly visible against the dark night.

"We need to go further, Adana, but I don't think I can carry you anymore. Do you think you can run? The same way you do when you try to hide from papa when you play?"

her mother asked, and she was using the same sweet tone as always, but there was a sense of urgency behind her words that did not go unnoticed. Adana nodded, not wanting to give her mother a reason to become upset with her. Standing up carefully, she brushed the dirt and twigs off her legs, and as she did so, noticed that the coils of shadow followed her every movement.

As soon as the pair regained their footing, they heard another shout, her father's deep voice echoing through the air. Her mother grabbed her hand instantly, squeezing it in reassurance before taking off once more. They were much faster this way, and Adana could sense the distance they were putting between themselves and the man who was chasing them. His shouts became fainter, even as they became more frequent.

Her mother was allowing Adana to keep pace with her, all the while glancing at the woods behind them. It was clear that few people ventured this far into the forest, not even the lone families that had situated themselves between the trees: no stone was turned, no branches were broken and no leaves had been trodden on. The air was growing headier, making it harder to run, and Adana's mother slowed to a steady walking pace. They seemed to have left her father behind, for now.

Adana had been mulling things over in her mind, wondering what her mother's hurry was. Never before had she seen her mother run so swiftly, nor had she ever noticed the strong muscles in her mother's arms and legs that had carried her through half the forest. There were slight purple and black splotches on her mother's upper arm, the kind a person could get from walking into something, and Adana had to wonder where those bruises came from. She'd never even seen her mother trip before.

She missed her father. Wished that he was by their side as they explored the wilderness further. Not even the comforting presence of the trees could keep her calm now.

Adana was about to ask her mother where they were going just as they fought their way through a thick wall of bushes. Stepping through to the other side, they were engulfed in silence. No sound could be heard but their breathing. The trees were so thick and close together that it was nearly impossible to navigate through them, the leaves so big and dark that the pair was incapable of seeing between them.

Her father's shouts had become imperceptible. With a jolt, Adana looked around her, hoping that the shadows had followed her into this soundless pit of the forest, feeling more at ease as she detected their presence around her wrists.

Despite the inescapable silence, the forest had become increasingly brighter, though the dense canopy of leaves above them blocked out the faint rays of moonlight that had guided them before. Once her eyes had adjusted to the new darkness, Adana could spot cheerful colours lurking around every corner: lush green leaves dangling on low branches, bright yellow moss climbing its way up tree trunks and fiery red mushrooms covering the ground they walked on. Her curiosity was growing, no longer focused on the reason for her mother's haste but rather on the spectacular beauty she saw spread out in front of her. She could hardly believe such a place existed – it was just as breath-taking as her mother's stories had always said the forest could be. Such magnificence could only be the result of magic, Adana reasoned. The shadows were becoming excited too, their twists and turns increasing as she stepped further into the tapestry of colour before her.

“Do you think papa will be able to find us here?” she asked, something in the back of her mind telling her that it was important to know. She could feel a smile creeping its way onto her lips, momentarily remembering their rather surreal game of hide-and-seek as she took in the sights and scents that surrounded her.

“Do you like it here?” her mother asked, avoiding her daughter's question. Adana paid no mind though, having already forgotten that she had asked it. Instead, she began

twirling around on the soft blanket of grass beneath her feet, closing her eyes as she laughed whole-heartedly.

“Oh mama, it’s beautiful! This is the place you told me about, isn’t it? In your stories? You’ve been here before!” she exclaimed, running back to her mother to jump into her arms. She felt free here, enjoying the company of her mother and her new friends the shadows, which now circled her ankles. “We should live here instead of our boring old house.”

Her mother laughed for the first time that day, and Adana could sense that she too, was starting to relax.

“I think we might just have to,” her mother said, smiling down at her daughter’s happiness.

“Really? Do you think papa will like it here too?” Adana asked. Her mother’s smile became sadder in response, eyes losing a bit of the sparkle that had been in them previously. Setting her daughter down on the ground, Samira crouched in front of her so that they could be at eye level.

“I don’t think your father would enjoy living here very much. You know how he is, he’s set in his ways! But you and I, my sweet Adana, we could have our very own adventures here. Explore this part of the forest forever, our vision filled with beautiful colours that we could never hope to find anywhere else.”

“Won’t you miss him?” Adana asked, looking at her mother with wide eyes. Samira was evading her gaze. “Won’t he find us anyway?”

“He won’t find us here, my love, not if we don’t want him to,” her mother replied, looking anywhere but into her daughter’s eyes. Adana moved her head, trying to catch her mother’s gaze, sensing something was amiss. Her father may be relentless, yes, and stubborn too – but Adana truly believed that he would do anything for both her and her mother.

Moving somewhere new wouldn’t be a big sacrifice. Not if his family wanted it to happen.

“But I want him to find us! I miss him already, don’t you?” Adana asked, having noticed her mother’s avoidance of her earlier question. “He can help us make a new home.”

“We might have to build our own home, Adana, and we may have to protect ourselves. I know we can, as long as you and I are together.”

Adana pulled away from Samira. She wished her father was there with them. She was tempted to call out his name, to run towards where she knew he would be looking for them.

He could always find her. She just had to make sure he could hear her.

Impulsively, Adana sprinted back towards the thicket of leaves she and her mother had passed through only minutes before, preparing herself to yell as loud as she could. Her mother was starting to upset her, but her father always knew what to do, always knew what was best for them.

She was about to step through the bushes when her mother’s hand forcefully grabbed her wrist. Adana shouted her father’s name in the hope that he would hear her before her mother pulled her back into the enclosure. He needed to be able to find her.

“Adana! What do you think you’re doing? We’re going to stay here and you are not to go back to look for your father!” her mother yelled, making Adana back away a little.

Tears started to form in her eyes, unable to understand why her mother was so distressed. It was just a game of hide-and-seek, that was all it was.

“Why don’t you want papa to find us, mama? I don’t understand! Please tell me. Did you make him angry?”

Samira looked taken aback at her daughter’s choice of words. After a brief moment of surprise, the woman sighed, apparently recognizing the frightened look in Adana’s eyes.

“No, sweetheart, I did no such thing. Your father becomes angry when he wants to become angry. It’s just in his nature. You may not understand this yet, but you will, someday. I just want you to feel safe here with me. We can stay here until your father is no longer

angry. Will you do that for me? Will you keep me company here?" Samira asked, tentatively holding her hand out for Adana to take.

Nodding slowly, Adana walked towards her mother, laughing unexpectedly as she felt the threads of shadow tickle the toes of her bare feet. Her mother raised an eyebrow, perhaps wondering what had made her daughter emit such a happy sound.

"Yes, mama. I'll stay here with you."

A small smile snuck its way back onto Samira's face as Adana grabbed her offered hand. They walked around the enclosure until it dawned on them just how massive this place truly was. An endless expanse of secluded forest, just for them.

After a while, they found the perfect tree to sleep against; comfortable and sturdy roots had clawed their way out of the ground, creating a secure embrace as mother and daughter rested between them.

"I need you to remember something, Adana," Samira said, "I need you to remember that your father loves you very much. He loves you so much, in fact, that he will do anything to get to you. I know that you love him too – and there was a time when he deserved that love, and I am glad you were able to give it to him. I just... I need you to remember that you must always do what is right for *you*. Do you understand me?"

Adana did not understand but nodded anyway.

"When we find papa again, we should make some new rules for hide-and-seek. I think we may have a run a bit too far from him this time!" Adana laughed, and her mother squeezed her closer to her side, pausing for a moment before responding.

"Someday, yes. When he finds you again."

CHAPTER 1

Adana felt the sun warming her skin as she lay on the brightly coloured blanket of leaves. Today marked another year as her shadows woke up around her, tickling her face as she laughed at their excitement. When the sun went down today, she would have more shadows than she had started with. When she and her mother had first entered the forest, there had only been six. They had been fuller then, a matte shade of grey that reminded her of the pebbles she used to collect at their cottage. Now, they had become thinner, splintering themselves into smaller fractions, their colour reminiscent of the charcoal her father used to throw onto the fire. Now there were nineteen. She sat up, watching them curl around her, nearly fusing with her fingers and toes, following her movements exactly.

One of the tendrils of shadow loosened itself from Adana's fingers, curling and uncurling in front of her face, trying to get her attention. She felt a light sheen of sweat coating her skin and a shiver run up her spine – it was a sensation that was all too familiar and yet still confusing, as though it was her that was doing the arduous job of splitting in two.

Soon she would have another shadow to befriend. She had become so used to their company that the prospect of any other friends or family seemed foreign to her now, as though from a different lifetime. The shadows, she thought wistfully, were all she needed.

One of the shadows began to tear itself in two now, colour changing in tandem with the shifting of its shape. Matte grey became thinner, fainter, as the charcoal colour set in from one end to the other.

“Welcome to the family,” Adana said, still smiling as the two newly formed tendrils began to weave themselves through her thick, dark hair, almost braiding it in the process.

“I remember this one time, where my mother was trying to braid my hair too. She became angry with me, saying that I didn't take care of it, that I shouldn't have let it grow so

wild. I think she hated it. My hair is – was - so much like hers, but she could take better care of it than I ever did,” Adana mumbled to herself.

“I’m glad you all are here, with me,” she said, louder now, getting up from her spot between her tree’s roots, beginning to wander around the small bedding of leaves she called home. She knew that the enclosure stretched further than she could see – she had tried to climb up the tree’s trunk recently, reaching the lowest levels of branches before her foot had slipped, her ankle had twisted and her shadows had to make sure she returned to the ground as safely as possible.

She had not dared try the climb again since – her shadows kept warning her away from it. Their frantic movements showed that they were worried for her, as they always were. That was the only thing she needed to know.

The shrubbery and thickets had become denser over the years, the moist soil no doubt contributing immensely to their growth. They were almost impossible to traverse through now. Not in the same way she and her mother had done years earlier. She had stopped trying to fight her way through them as soon as her mother had left. What was the point in trying, in walking around a forest she knew no better than she had truly known her own home? He would find her, should he need to.

Should he want to, a cruel version of her voice said inside. Adana shook her head. No. She remembered enough of him to know that he would find a way to get back to her.

The only future Adana needed was here, she thought, surrounded by colourful beauty and a simple breeze, dirt under her toes and fingers that hid some of her pale skin. She had water from a translucent stream; berries of reds and blues and purples that popped in her mouth with delicious sweet juice. It was never cold here - the leaves on which she slept were soft and the trees above her head shielded her from any rain that may have come her way.

This was a shelter; she thought to herself, this was a home. Why her mother had ever wanted to leave was a question that Adana could never answer.

Adana had loved her mother, but they had fought often. As Adana grew older, the tension between them thickened. Days, where they had simply counted the leaves on branches together and enjoyed each other's company had become less frequent, less pleasant. When her shadows made her laugh, Adana's mother could not fathom why. Adana had never tried to explain.

Samira had remained the woman who had taken her away from her father – and while Adana had tried overlooking that fact for many years, hoping that her mother would one day come to her senses again, she never did. Her mother had forced a life upon her daughter that had never been desired. A life devoid of two parents, a family.

There were a few positive memories that Adana still possessed of her mother – her stories, and her love of colour, which Adana shared. Those attributes, those qualities that redeemed her mother, were stolen from Adana when Samira had decided to leave, and Adana was left in the care of nature and the only true friends she had ever really known; her shadows.

“Will you find me some food for today?” she asked of them now. Her ankle was still swollen from her attempted climb up the tree's trunk. There was no way she would be able to sneak up on any animal, and it would not be the first time that her shadows found her something to eat.

She stood up, allowing her shadows to readjust themselves along the entire length of her body. They wound around her gangly legs, threaded themselves through her bony fingers, aligned themselves along the sun-burned length of her arms, even circled her slender neck.

Adana had always interpreted this as a gesture of comfort and an addition of strength.

Whenever they surrounded her like this, she felt re-energized. She would wait for the rest of

her shadows on the outer edges of the clearing as they hunted for food – her mother had long ago taught her how to skin and cook the animals they could find and catch within their little corner of the forest.

While half of her shadows were gone, she occupied herself with carrying water from the stream in one of the large leaves that surrounded her and set to watering the shrubs and flowers that looked to be hanging a little limp. While she worked, the sun shifted, casting the whole of the clearing in a warm glow. Adana squinted her eyes to see if any other plants needed care before she realized that her shadows were taking longer than usual to get back to her.

She limped back to the edge of the clearing, peering out over the distant path that followed the bank of the stream to see if she could glimpse her shadows in the distance. It was darker out there, the thick leaves blocking out the sun. There was no sign of them. Shivering slightly, she walked forward, using the walking staff her mother had fashioned years ago to keep some of the weight off her bruised ankle. The staff was perfectly smooth, with thin edges carved into each end. She knew there was nothing to worry about for her own safety, but she was quick to worry about her shadows being too far away from her. Without them, she would be completely isolated. That, to Adana, was terrifying.

As she walked further along the water, the stream became shallower, the bottom rising towards the surface of the water. The path darkened and grew narrower. The thick hedges that protected her clearing and this part of the forest grew taller and moved closer. She was further out than she had ever been by herself – the last time she had ventured this far was with her mother.

After walking far enough for her ankle to start throbbing, she finally spotted a white clump of fur on the ground a few steps away – her shadows circling it, as if they were waiting for something.

“What’s wrong? Why don’t you come back?” Adana said, relief flooding through her. They did nothing to respond, keeping up with their circular movement instead. The few shadows that had stayed with her joined the rest. She was startled at their reaction; she had expected them all to surround her as soon as she found them. Sitting down on the ground to give her foot some reprieve, she looked at the furry animal they had killed –it was a rabbit. Mostly, she stuck to the vegetation she could find within her clearing, but every once in a while, an unspeakable hunger took over and she knew she needed something more substantial. There was no scratch to be seen, no puncture, no bite marks from other predators. Her shadows had done all of the work for her.

Out of nowhere, her shadows suspended themselves in mid-air, floating above the lifeless rabbit right in Adana’s line of sight. She watched them, mesmerized, as their dark mist clouded the air in front of her, their tips glowing slightly in the sunless clearing. Slowly, they started merging in formation, creating a shield. Their colour became even darker than before, as black as anything she had ever seen, an unending depth of obscurity.

“Is something wrong?”

Naively, she hoped they were just teasing her, playing a new game. Instead, they floated a few steps away from her, as if they were gaging which direction they should move in. The forest around her was silent. Her shadows left a small trail of dark air in their wake, and against her better judgement, Adana stood up clumsily, grabbing the walking stick in one hand to steady herself. Following them, wincing as her weight once again landed on her ankle, she looked around warily, focusing only on her shadows and what they were doing. She had never seen them act like this before.

Their movements became quicker, and as she struggled to keep up she wondered whether she would be able to find her way back to her clearing, to her comforting bed of leaves, to the bright colours of her enclosure and the reassuring embrace of her favourite

tree's roots. The colours were duller here somehow, gloomier. She found herself wanting to care for these plants, admonishing herself for not paying as much attention to the rest of the forest as she did her own home. Bright red mushrooms had grimed into a dull coppery brown. It made her sad. Dry air surrounded her, causing a prickling sensation in her throat. The bark on the trees looked as fragile as she felt at that moment.

Her shadows snapped apart.

They circled each other wildly, moving in every direction possible. There was nothing Adana could see that should make them so restless. She listened carefully, thinking maybe they had heard something that she had not. There was nothing save for the same peaceful sounds of the forest as always.

Her shout of surprise pierced the air as her shadows moved faster than she had ever seen them do before. They moved around her, circling her until they formed a new shield behind her back. Slowly, she turned around, truly frightened for the first time since her mother had taken her away from her childhood home. One hand clenched into a fist, the other gripped the walking stick tighter.

Finally, she heard it.

She heard his breathing before he even spoke.

After a moment frozen in time, Adana caught her first glimpse of the intruder. Her first glance at another person since her mother had left. Half-heartedly she imagined Samira would be standing there. Whole-heartedly she hoped it was her father.

Instead, he was neither.

Pale was not the right word to describe him. His skin looked stretched and weak over his sharp cheekbones, and his eyes were a strange shade of blue, the kind she had come to recognize as diseased spots on the leaves of her favourite plants. His hair was just one shade

darker than his skin, straw-like and dry. She could see the shape of his bones in his long arms.

The intruder was taking just as long to study her. He had taken a step closer to her, but not said a word. Adana could not decide what to say to him. She did not want to antagonize him, but she did not want to scare him away either. All she wanted at that moment was to hear a voice that was not her own.

He glanced at the walking stick in her hand. Her fingers had gone numb from gripping it so hard.

“What are you?” he asked. She was so caught up in the sound of his voice that his question barely registered with her. It was scratchy, like his throat was as dry as his hair.

She could not bring herself to answer.

“Well?” he asked. She could tell he was straining to raise his voice. He took a step away from her.

Her shadows floated a bit higher now, blocking the stranger’s face from view. She felt inexplicably annoyed with them then, as she strained to see around them. Didn’t they understand that she needed to keep an eye on him? Didn’t they understand that she wanted to see someone else, someone other than her own reflection, more than she had ever wanted anything in her life?

Maybe they thought, as she had once done, that they should be enough.

Adana tried to step around her shadows and crane her neck to get another look at him. It had not dawned on her yet that he might not be able to see her shadows, just as her mother had never been able to see them. All logical thought had disappeared. She was terrified and exhilarated at the same time.

She could hear his voice from behind her shadows. “I asked you a question.”

Her frustration with her shadows died down as she heard the underlying threat in his words.

“I just – I just want to see you!” she exclaimed, desperately.

He said nothing. It was quiet except for the weak rush of the shallow stream that ran behind him. Adana was almost afraid that he had left.

“We’ll be coming back for you,” he said. She heard leaves crunch under his footsteps as he walked away from her.

Her shadows did not break their shield until the soft tread of his footsteps had completely disappeared.

CHAPTER 2

Now that the initial surprise had worn off, the young man's return was what she dreaded the most. If he had come from a village, who was to say that the people there would be willing to ignore her? Could he see her shadows? Is that why he had sounded so threatening?

Was she capable of defending her home? She'd never had to do that before. Even before Samira had stolen her away from their life, their family had always managed to stay away from the smaller settlements that littered the world – the remnants of greater civilisations and societies that had come to this land for prosperity, hope. Her father had come from one of those settlements, decades ago. He would say that the people had been small-minded, and fearful. All Adana ever thought was that those people had come to build a new home and subsequently protect it. All Adana wanted now was to do was the same.

This forest was her home. Her shadows were her friends. If only she did not need to rely on them for protection so much. The stick was still firm in her grasp. Her ankle still throbbed. She wished she knew how to fight. She had never considered the possibility that her shadows might leave her, yet today they seemed to have a mind of their own.

“Let's head back towards the tree. We can only hope for the best now,” she mumbled, more to herself than to her shadows.

Walking slowly, Adana could hardly lift her feet from the forest floor, leaves sticking to her bare feet like glue. It was the first time she noticed just how much foliage covered the ground; leaves loose from their host trees, berries broken away from their branches. The trees and bushes looked lifeless to her in this part of the forest – and in that moment, all she could think was that she had failed them, that she had somehow led a poisonous stranger into their midst, and that they had decided to punish her for it. She could not remember the last time her enclosure had looked so miserable. Perhaps that was because it never had.

Her steps led her back towards her favourite tree. Time seemed to have sped up since she'd gone to find her shadows. They followed her placidly now, no longer circling Adana but trailing behind her.

"I'm sorry I let this happen," she whispered to them, suddenly afraid to use the full volume of her voice. She felt like she was being watched. There was a chance the stranger had never even left. Maybe he was observing her, waiting for a weak moment. Trying to find out how to hurt her. Paranoia had set in.

She finally reached the giant tree, allowing her back to gently slide down the sturdiness of its trunk. Sinking to the floor, she pulled her knees up to her chest, hugging herself tightly. She felt cold, colder than usual in the comfort of the tree's embrace and Adana briefly imagined that its roots felt further apart than usual, no longer fitting exactly to her body. The tree had realized her treachery too, it seemed.

"I never thought anyone would find us here. Even after mama left. No one had ever found us here. Not even papa."

The shadows hung in front of her, listening. Adana wondered how well they understood her – did they truly know the meaning of every word she said, or could they simply hear the remorse in her tone of voice? She had always imagined they were a kind of reflection of herself, a being she had manifested into existence at a time when she needed them most.

"I always thought that the first person to find us here would be him."

Some of her shadows drifted away from the rest of the group, gliding along her face, allowing Adana to feel the softness of their dark mist across her cheek. "I guess that dream is gone."

She wanted to fall asleep, but couldn't. Darkness had fallen over the forest, and while she normally did not mind the black of night, this was different. It would give the stranger

even more places to hide away from her. Every leaf that rustled startled her. Every whistle of wind worried her. She was tense, and cold, and missed the tight embrace of her tree's roots.

“Will you help me stay awake and watch over everything?” she asked her shadows, thankful she could still see them, even in the darkness. Their luminescent quality only revealed itself once the sun had gone down – they glowed around the edges, the tips a bit brighter. It was a beautiful thing to see. They moved around now, signalling their agreement.

“Thank you,” she whispered, glad to not be completely alone.

Adana sat there, staring at the path that led to the stream. She tried to ignore the dead leaves that lined the track, concentrating on the threat at hand instead. She half-expected the stranger to jump out at her any second, brandishing a weapon of his own – a bow and arrow perhaps, like her father used to have. Or a sword, like the great warriors in the tales her mother had told her about.

The walking stick now lay next to her. Adana wished she could teach herself how to use it defensively. What if her shadows weren't as capable of protecting her as she thought they would be? It was unfair of her to rely on them for everything.

As she absent-mindedly rolled the stick along the ground, a few of her shadows threaded themselves between her fingers. Adana let out a sigh of relief, glad to have them acting like themselves again; so relieved, that she failed to hear the crunch of twigs behind her. Her head only snapped up in surprise once the crunch was accompanied by the footfall of a boot.

She looked up, terrified, expecting to see the stranger's pale white skin like a beacon in the darkness. Instead, she was greeted by kind eyes and smooth dark skin, a threadbare, dusty cream-coloured shirt contrasting sharply in the pale moonlight.

Adana froze. In fear or admiration, she could not be sure.

“He told me you’d be here,” the young man said, slowly taking a step towards her. She flinched, surprised by the forwardness of his gesture.

“Sorry. My name is Lukas. Deacon said – he said I was probably the better person to greet you. Bring you back to camp.”

Adana said nothing, mesmerized by the colours in the irises of his eyes. One was dark brown, and the other a light hazel. She had no idea how to respond to this young man. The term stranger no longer suited him. She knew his name now, after all.

“Deacon told me that he had found you here, and that you might need help. Said that he was worried you might be frightened and lost. He can be intimidating though, I know. I bet he frightened you.”

Adana looked up at Lukas curiously, wondering who Deacon was. The name was unfamiliar to her. Her fingers itched out to touch the young man in front of her. It had been so long since someone had been this close to her. She could see every small imperfection on his face; sunken cheeks and dry cracked lips, features that only made his kind eyes stand out all the brighter. Her hands stretched up, eager – she was surprised when he pulled away from her. She curled back from him, the bark digging further into her back. A splinter stung her skin.

“Oh – sorry, he didn’t introduce himself to you. Predictable, really. He doesn’t trust a lot of people.” His tone was curious, neither playful nor condescending, and Adana was surprised to find herself wanting to know more about him, even more so than she had when the stranger – Deacon – had confronted her.

Adana watched his gaze pan along her arm to her hand, which still gripped the now slick walking stick.

“How long have you been here?” Lukas asked.

“Long,” she answered, her voice low. He looked pleasantly surprised that she had responded to his question.

“How long?”

Why was that important?

“Longer than I thought.”

He looked at her expectantly, as though waiting for further explanation. “I don’t think he was worried about me,” she said, knowing this to be true. The fear and malice in the stranger’s – Deacon’s – words had been real.

“I know he can be frightening,” Lukas said, echoing his sentiment from before.

“He didn’t trust me,” Adana replied.

Lukas seemed to ponder this, and Adana found herself feeling very small, there, in the lost comfort of her favourite tree’s roots, once again stared down by a young man she had just met yet.

“Should he have?” Lukas asked.

Adana wondered the same thing about him. Her shadows had not replicated their shield formation though, not even when Lukas had just arrived. It was as though they knew that he was not a threat to her – not in the same way Deacon had been. Their calmness inspired her to trust him. The kind and inquisitive nature of his words made her believe that he wanted to get to know her.

“I don’t know,” she finally answered.

“Well, I might – trust you – that is if you decide to come with me.”

“What will they do to me there?” she asked, remembering how Deacon had threatened her.

“Help you, I hope. Make sure you don’t have to be alone anymore.”

“Will I come back here?” she asked.

“I can’t – I can’t promise you that.”

“Why not?”

He sighed, bending his knees until he was looking straight into her eyes. She briefly wondered what he thought of the colour of her own irises.

“Listen to me, please – Deacon was terrified of you. Not because you were holding a stick, or because you were out here all alone, but because of something else. He wouldn’t tell anyone what he had seen. He wanted to send our fighters to come fetch you – said you were a liability so close to the camp. Personally, I think anyone who can survive this long in the forest by themselves and not succumb to loneliness isn’t out to hurt anyone, just prefers to be on their own. If that’s what you are, I understand. But he wanted to force you, and so I volunteered to come ask you.”

She didn’t recognize the threat behind the word *fighter*. She didn’t know what liability meant, either; but there was an urgency in his gaze and in his words that made her believe him. Adana appreciated his honesty. She decided to grant him the same. “I don’t want to leave.”

“What’s left for you here?”

“I wait.”

He took some time before answering. “Aren’t you lonely?”

“I think so.”

“You don’t have to be if you come with me.”

Her encounter with Deacon had made her realise something. She had longed to observe him and get to know a person that wasn’t herself, or her mother, or her shadows. The feeling had only grown stronger now, with Lukas. She was lonely, yet scared. How was her father ever going to find her if she left the one place she had always been?

Adana knew Lukas was trying to convince her by playing to her weakness. Her shadows still floated between them, watchful but not hostile. She should be able to count on them to protect her if she went with him. Going peacefully seemed a better option than being taken. It would also keep the enclosure safe – what more reason would anyone have to come traipsing in here if she left it alone?

“I’ll come with you,” she said, and the lines of tension around his eyes relaxed, “But if I want to come back, I will.”

He didn’t ask her how.

Adana stood up right after he did, ignoring his outstretched hand. She wanted her shadows to cover her fingers so that she would have a steadier grip on the walking stick. She may not know how to wield it as a weapon, but she could give the impression that she did. She was pleased to see that her shadows seemed to echo her thoughts, a few wrapping themselves around the smooth wood, creating a blanket of security between it and her calloused skin.

“Why would you need to come back?” Lukas asked.

She looked around before she answered, and allowed her hand to rest on the tree’s trunk a moment longer, silently thanking it for watching out for her. She wondered how far she would have to walk. Her ankle still hurt.

“This is my home,’ she replied, ‘and somebody is looking for me.’”

CHAPTER 3

“Do you mind me asking how you ended up here?” Lukas asked.

They just passed the part of the stream where Adana first encountered Deacon. She was worried about seeing him again, paranoia building him up to be a bigger threat than he really was. A part of her wanted to stay within the enclosure, sheltered from the outside world. That, however, was now a fantasy – her presence had been exposed, and so had her home. For once, she wished her mother were still with her. Samira would have known what to do.

“I was taken from home when I was young.”

“How young?” he asked.

She was surprised by his question. “I thought you were going to ask who took me.”

He shrugged and looked away from her, concentrating on the path. Adana had not been this far away from her favourite tree since she and her mother had first explored the enclosure after their initial arrival. She recognized a few of the colours – she remembered that the moss in this corner was not the same neon yellow as it was around the giant tree, but rather a softer and richer tone, akin to a bumblebee’s stripes. Adana was shocked to see that the colour had now been stripped down to a dull brown, clumps and patches that looked mismatched. She wondered how long it would have taken her to notice these changes in the enclosure if Deacon had not startled her. She wondered if she was too self-absorbed in her own life and that of her shadows to have cared.

“That seemed like too much of a personal question,” Lukas said.

There was something about him that made her want to tell him everything. She chose the safer option. “Yes. It is,” she replied. She couldn’t be sure if he’d heard her.

The shadows that were not clinging to the stick hung between her and Lukas, as though they were conflicted between staying with Adana or keeping a watchful eye on him. Adana flexed her fingers, beckoning them to her. They listened. She felt better when her shadows were closer to her. Stronger.

Adana found herself jogging to catch up with Lukas's pace. She winced at the pain that now shot up her leg but refused to show any weakness. His legs were not long, but they were strong. He was walking so fast he was almost running.

"I can slow down if you want," he said. Adana detected a hint of playfulness in his voice. She wanted to laugh, to sprint past him. She wanted to feel like she had a true friend. Instead, she slowed down, opting to walk further behind him, allowing him to lead the way. She wanted Lukas to be the barrier between her and whatever it was that was waiting for her at his home.

She had no idea where they were going. Adana had always assumed that the thickets and bushes had grown so close over the years that they were impossible to pass through. She noticed they were following the stream. Her source of water stretched much further than she had originally thought.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

"Just followed the water," Lukas said. He stepped over the stream, using the bigger stones to keep his feet from getting wet. His boots looked rough and worn and Adana was sure that even the smallest drop of water would soak the insides. He held out his hand to help her across the water, but she ignored his kind gesture once again.

The stream gently licked at her bare feet, cold and invigorating. The water was crystalline, reflecting the moonlight. Adana allowed herself a moment to enjoy it. She thought that Lukas might try to hurry her, but he gave her this moment as he stepped away from the water's edge, keeping so quiet it was almost as though she was alone again.

Her shadows skimmed the top of the water, polluting it with their darkness, and Adana imagined them sinking deeper into the current, blanketing the bottom with their black mist, making their mark on the enclosure once and for all. Their luminescent tips brought her back to reality as she saw small prisms of light created by her shadows as they drifted on top of the stream. She barely stopped herself from asking Lukas if he could see the same formation of light. He was still silent. It was like he had disappeared.

“I don’t want to force you to come with me,” he said unexpectedly, directly behind her. His voice made her jump, even though he spoke softly.

“You’re not.”

“Are you sure?”

“The stranger – Deacon – he’s the one making me.”

“Am I not a stranger to you then?”

She could not tell him that the reason she trusted him was that her shadows seemed to trust him. What if he suddenly became as frightened as Deacon?

“You talked to me like you knew me. He asked me what I was – I am.”

She did not know if that was enough clarification for him, but Lukas did not press her any further.

Silence surrounded them as they continued walking. It frightened her less now that she truly was not alone. Her shadows wrapped themselves around her again, feeling colder than usual, vapour clinging to them as they encircled her. Lukas, on the other hand, had grown tenser. Adana hoped it was not because they were getting closer to the camp. If he was nervous about coming home, she could only imagine how she should be feeling. Much more anxious than she already was, Adana suspected. She noted a few droplets of sweat on the back of his neck. He shivered as he kept walking.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yes, yes – I’m fine.”

“Should I be not fine?” she asked, searching for the right words. It was confusing, talking to someone else. She wasn’t used to having her thoughts answered.

“Yes, No - I hope not,” he said.

The further along the stream they walked, the darker the water became. She wondered if her shadows had changed the colour of the water somehow, before she saw dead foliage floating along the top, murky brown water cradled within the rotting leaves.

Lukas stopped walking so abruptly that she smacked straight into him. He almost lost his balance, and he looked back at her, confusion etched across the furrowed brows on his young face as he glanced at her lanky frame and bruised ankle.

“It’s just through here,” he said, voice cracking.

She nodded, words now failing her. She gripped the walking stick fiercely, hoping her shadows would tighten their clutch around her.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and before Adana could conclude that perhaps he had been lying to her all along, he pushed one of the thicker branches to the side, stepping out of the way to allow her through first.

Four of them stood in a line. Deacon was nowhere to be seen, but before Adana could let her shoulders slump in relief, she noticed their poised stances. Two men and two women, eyes trained solely on her, ready to fight at a moment’s notice. The stick felt clunky and useless in her hand. Her shadows, however, knew exactly what to do.

The ones protecting her hand squirmed their way out from under her palm, and the ones that had coiled around her torso released themselves. Instead of reacting with unknown

speed as they had done when they had first detected Deacon, they now formed with slow, determined precision. This was not the same as one person stumbling his way into her home.

She couldn't tell if Lukas had entered the clearing behind her. Turning around to confront him about his possible betrayal seemed foolish. She hugged her arms closer to her chest, trying to fold in on herself.

Her shadows formed a dark X, floating in front of her. The women flanked the two men in the middle, looking at Adana with pure revulsion. Their eyes narrowed at her, just as mother's had often done. The men, however, looked weirdly entranced, as though they could hardly believe what they were seeing.

Adana felt her fingers press hard into her upper arms as she averted her gaze, the pole of the stick prodding her shin as she clutched it tightly to her.

"What have you done with Lukas?" the woman on the right asked. Adana refused to respond. She still had a faint hope that Lukas would protect her. Adana's silence agitated the woman further, and she stepped out of the line, advancing toward Adana. The glint of a silver dagger was now visible. Adana stumbled back before she felt a hand on her shoulder to steady her.

"I'm right here," Lukas said. His voice sounded uncertain.

The woman who had stepped forward relaxed visibly, and stopped. "Well done, son," she said.

"The threat isn't over, Mea. Stay focused," the man next to Lukas's mother said. He was less subtle with his weapon, brandishing his dagger with pride. Even in the dim light of the stars, Adana could tell it was rusted – a sickening feeling danced around in the pit of her stomach as she imagined the corroded edges of that blade piercing her flesh. She felt her ankle throb.

“She’s not a threat!” Lukas said. He stepped in front of Adana and her shadows, and she could see him shudder as he felt their tendrils ghosting along his neck. A few of the shadow’s vines had reached out towards him, ready to constrict themselves if necessary. The rest stayed in the formation of the cross.

“Lukas, please. I’m sure you mean well, but it’s pointless. She comes from the forest. That place is sick, and twisted, defies all logic. We’ve all been desperate for water and that place somehow still has an entire stream that hasn’t dried up? You’re telling me you don’t think she’s the one responsible for that?” the second man said. He was younger, bolder. Thick, black eyebrows framed his large eyes, with dark hair falling to his neck. He looked unkempt, but it suited him. The large round shield he carried looked as though it had seen plenty of use, dents in the metal catching glimpses of lax moonlight.

“She’s not a threat, Raveer. She doesn’t have magic,” Lukas repeated. He turned, managing to catch Adana’s gaze, no doubt asking her if this was true.

She remained silent.

“See? Nothing in defence of herself. I need evidence, Lukas. Your word isn’t good enough for me,” Raveer said. The second woman remained quiet. Adana couldn’t tell if she was carrying a weapon.

“Someone should get Deacon,” the man wielding the rusted knife said. “He’ll be able to straighten it all out. Said he could prove it.”

“He’ll come,” the second woman finally spoke. Her voice was thick and oddly soothing. Strangely, she kept her right arm hidden behind her back.

Lukas still stood in front of Adana. She watched as her shadows passed through him, reforming their cross in front of him. She’d never seen them do that before. Lukas gasped at the feeling. Even though she felt betrayed, Adana felt a strange urge to reassure him.

“I’m already here.” Deacon’s grating voice came from somewhere in the dark void of the field. Adana’s skin crawled, but she wanted to see him. He finally stepped close enough to the fighter’s line for her to catch a glimpse: his face looked soft in the moon- and starlight, pale as the petals of the white flowers she had often cared for in the forest. If he hadn’t been so intimidating, she would have thought of him as delicate. His ugly sneer shattered the illusion.

“Prove your point, Deacon. Show me why you were so afraid of her,” Raveer said.

“Patience, Raveer. You’ll get your evidence,” Deacon said.

Deacon stepped around from behind the quiet woman, and she finally turned her gaze away from Adana. There was something odd about their interaction – he flinched away from her, and yet she ignored his obvious discomfort at her touch as she grabbed his shoulder to hold him back.

Deacon nodded forcefully at the woman. Adana’s shadows suspended themselves in mid-air, their trailing mist no longer producing the same fog. Thick silence stretched across the field.

An overextended second later, the quiet woman ran.

She ran straight at Lukas, straight for Adana. Straight at her shadows.

The female fighter brandished her right arm, and Adana finally understood why she had been hiding the limb. It was cast in iron, covered from her elbow to the tips of her fingers. The metal looked heavy and sturdy. Sharp spikes protruded from the sides, catching glints of moonlight. Adana now knew who she should have been most fearful of. This woman was not afraid of a fight.

She kept running, her increasing speed only making the charge more aggressive. Adana stopped breathing, eyes twitching as she fought to keep them open while her instincts

told her to brace for the worst. Lukas stood his ground, spreading his arms in a futile attempt to protect Adana. The distance in the clearing felt much smaller now.

The woman screamed.

What Adana had assumed was some sort of battle cry was instead an indication of the woman's pain. Adana's eyes flew open at the sound, no longer fighting her fear but allowing her curiosity to take over. The fighter collided with Adana's shadows violently as they deflected the attack of the weaponised arm. The spikes shred through them, and for one ignorant moment, Adana truly believed that was the end of her shadows.

They disintegrated and immediately reformed.

Adana's shadows pushed back against the woman's brutal attack, and Adana could see her arm was now dangling at a strange angle, the weight of the iron prosthetic pulling her to the ground. Further and further they pushed her, back towards her line of followers, back towards Deacon. She staggered as she tried desperately to hold her ground, but each time she regained her footing Adana's shadows forced her down again. A few of them had twisted themselves around the weaponized arm, pulling at it aggressively. Each time there was another tug at the arm, a howl of agony followed. Adana felt her shoulder twinge at the sight. With each push of her shadows, the woman looked weaker. Adana felt stronger, bolstered by the power she now knew her shadows to have.

The other fighters seemed at a loss, unsure of whether to run to their fallen leader or hold their positions. This was a threat they could not see. Deacon, who should have looked terrified, looked oddly smug. Lukas had visibly relaxed, apparently relieved that the woman had not reached him or Adana. He seemed unable to pull his gaze away from the violent spectacle in front of him. The woman had now been reduced to a pitiful heap. Adana could just make out her legs curled uncomfortably underneath her as she cradled her injured arm.

Adana sank to the ground. Where she thought the mud would be soft and moist, it was instead hard, cracked, and dry. She imagined what it must have been like to watch all this without being able to see her shadows, thinking it must have looked rather comical. If she had not still been at the mercy of her slowly ebbing dread, she might have smiled.

The gleams of the daggers, the glow of her shadows, and the shield Raveer was holding marked where everyone remained frozen in place, the only sounds left in the clearing were the angry and pained growls of the fallen warrior.

CHAPTER 4

The woman finally managed to retain her sobs, now only whimpering inwardly, shoulders heaving with the effort of keeping her pain concealed. Adana dug her fingernails into the dusty ground. Lukas finally turned around to look at her.

“Enough!” a voice boomed out from across the field. Adana could not see whose person the voice belonged to, but she noted the reactions of everyone else on the field. Heads dropped in shame; weapons were concealed. Lukas’s shoulders tensed. Deacon’s smug smile was wiped completely from his face. The female fighter was completely still, probably passed out from the pain.

“I do not remember ordering any of you to ambush Lukas and our newest guest. Is there something you would like to tell me, Raveer?”

“I’m sorry, sir – Deacon told us of the threat and we thought it best to confront her head-on,” Raveer said.

“Threat? What threat? All I see here is a young girl who is able to defend herself when someone comes charging at her.”

The clearing was silent. Adana thought Deacon may have been just proud enough to confront this man himself, but even he seemed at a loss for words. She wondered what it was that Deacon had said to the soldiers to convince them to come here and go against clear orders.

“Are you alright, Sanna?”

The fallen woman didn’t respond. The man gave Raveer the order to bring her back to camp. The others followed.

“And you, Lukas. What is your hand in all of this? I thought I told you not to fetch her until I could come with you,” the man said.

Lukas turned towards him. Adana missed the comfort of his gaze as she hugged her knees closer to her chest.

“I – I wanted to see her for myself. I didn’t know if you were ever going to actually look for her,” Lukas said.

“Of course, I was going to look for her. Do you honestly believe that I am incapable of recognizing the possible danger, or benefit,’ the man had finally stepped close enough for Adana to see him as he gestured towards her, ‘of someone so young, someone who is more than capable of fending for themselves for so long, to join our people?’”

“I – of course, you do. I just – the way Deacon spoke about her, I didn’t know how you would react to the knowledge of her being there,” Lukas said. His hand was clenching repeatedly behind his back.

The man sighed; the deep lines Adana could make out upon his brow un-creasing as he allowed his face to relax. She wondered if he and Lukas knew each other personally.

“Go to your mother, Lukas. I will walk our guest back myself.”

Lukas spared one last glance at Adana, and she could feel her hands itching to reach out to him to keep him there.

“He means well. Too curious for his own good,” the older man said.

Adana looked up at the man who now towered over her, suddenly feeling very small. It was only when her shadows returned to her and twisted themselves around her again that she felt less dazed.

“I presume you understand that I cannot see it. Nor can any of the others,” he said.

Adana found her voice as she looked at his greying hair and the crooked scar that pulled at his upper lip. “But you know them?”

“Them?”

“They – them. My friends,” Adana said.

“Oh, are they your friends?” he asked.

Adana awkwardly stood up using the stick as a crutch, willing him to contradict her. She was a head shorter than he was. “Yes, they are friends.”

“Interesting,” the man said.

The shadows kept encircling her, giving Adana the chance to breathe. She noticed that the colour of his skin was similar to Lukas’s.

“Will you walk back with me?” he asked. Adana nodded. There was nothing else for her to do now. They had found her once. They would find her again. She made sure to put some distance between them as they walked, enough for her shadows to block him. His stride wasn’t nearly as fast or as strong as Lukas’s had been.

“Do you know how Deacon found you?” he asked.

Adana shook her head.

“We are running out of water here, out in the open. We’ve been trying to find a source close enough to our camp so that we do not have to task anyone with the labour of getting provisions. The stream that runs through the forest is the only source we have been able to find. It’s shallow, and the water is murky – but it will do, for now. Deacon was following its course to see how far it ran when he found you there.”

“My water is not dirty,” Adana said. She felt weirdly insulted.

“Your water?” A smile tugged at the scar above his lip.

“Yes. It’s never been dirty. You have done something. You did that. Not me,” she said.

“What makes you say it’s your water?” he asked. Their pace was slowing down, though neither of them seemed to notice. It was pitch black but for the faint glow of her shadows. Clouds had blocked out the natural light of the moon and the stars. Adana briefly wondered how the old man could see anything without their light’s guidance.

“It’s my home. My water,” she said.

“Do you not think you could share if it meant helping other people?” he asked.

“I don’t know any others,” Adana said.

“But you do now. You know me, and Lukas. You’ve seen others. There are more of us. Do you not think you can share your water with any of them?”

Adana thought about her answer. “I share my water with the plants.”

His smile became even wider. “I see.”

She flexed her fingers, feeling a few of the shadows surround her knuckles. Her grip on the stick had slackened, her left hand feeling a little cramped. She shifted her stance, trying and failing to keep the weight off her ankle.

His gaze shifted to the walking stick in her hand. “It’s beautiful,” he said.

“My mama made it a long time ago,” she said.

“So, you do know other people,” he said.

The way he kept matching her pace was unnerving. She paused her steps to break the rhythm. “No, not anymore,” she said.

Adana thought she could see the outline of Lukas’s figure in the distance. They were walking towards a source of light, dim in the mist of the night.

“What will you do?” Adana asked.

“About what?”

“Me.”

The man stopped walking, and she followed suit, keeping at least three strides of space between them, but he ignored the distance and stepped toward her.

“I hope to get to know you. Know your name, and know who you are. How you ended up in the forest, sharing your water with the plants. I want to know about your friends,

and who they are, how you became friends. I do not want to pressure you, and I do not want to scare you unless you give me a reason to do so. Is that okay?"

It had been so long since she'd spoken with other people that she had a hard time remembering what sincerity sounded like.

"Okay. I have my friends." She hoped he understood what she meant.

"Yes, you have your friends. Now let us go forward. I'm sure Lukas is awaiting your arrival anxiously."

The camp was not as grand as Adana had expected, but it was impressive to her nonetheless, something she would be quicker to attribute to the sheer number of people she saw than the actual view of the campsite. Tents in all different shapes and sizes spread out wide across the field, covered in animal hides – smaller pelts such as that of rabbit were used to cover up holes to stop cold air from blowing in, and larger hides, such as those of the wolves her mother had once told her roamed throughout the country, made up the larger part of the coverings. The ground they walked on looked worn, and dusty. People whispered and cowered together throughout the encampment, immediately quietening as Adana passed. She tried not to notice, keeping her distance, hand sweating as she gripped her stick and focused on the feel of her shadows instead.

Adana was looking for the signs of magic her mother had told her about in her stories, like shelters fashioned impossible to pierce dragon skin that would keep the villagers warm. Instead, she was greeted by small patches of fire around which people huddled, and animals she had seen plenty of in her forest.

“It must be quite a lot for you to take in,” the old man said. He looked out around his people, smiling softly to himself. “Our camp is one of the bigger ones in the area. Some have completely fragmented or hidden away. Last count here was 106 people.”

Adana had trouble believing that there were this many people out here, let alone more encampments like it. It was hard to understand how so many people lived so close to her, yet had never before found her. The forest she had lived in was practically on their threshold.

The vast number of people was threatening to overwhelm her. Everywhere she looked, eyes followed – blue eyes, green eyes, brown eyes, grey eyes; eyes that looked old and wise and eyes that looked young and naïve. She could see people trying to walk towards her, children running up to touch her. Her instinct was to flinch, to run, to ask her shadows to shield her once more. Certainly, they had started doing so already; they were cocooning her in a cylinder of their own making, giving her just enough room to keep moving forward.

“I think the children especially are curious to befriend you. They’ve never had a chance to meet anyone such as yourself before,” the old man said.

Adana looked at him questioningly.

“It might help if I could introduce you by name,” he said.

She was not sure she should tell him. She hadn’t even properly introduced herself to Lukas yet. Thinking about him made her search for his two different coloured eyes in the crowd. He was nowhere to be seen.

“Why would it help?” she asked.

“Because it would mean you came from somewhere. Right now, all we know is that you lived in the forest by yourself, for who knows how long. A name indicates a past.”

Adana understood where he was coming from. Her father had made sure to mark her as his own.

“Adana.”

“An interesting name. Thank you for sharing it with me. I’m Quinton.”

At that precise moment, Adana could see a horde of children running toward them. It was easy enough to tell them apart – no two people in this encampment looked the same, as opposite to each other as Deacon and Lukas were. At the front of the group was a small boy, with brown skin glowing in the light of the small fire, and a face sprinkled with dust across his nose and cheeks. Adana stepped back wildly. The boy was clearly excited to see his leader.

“Is this her? Is this the girl Deacon found in the forest? She doesn’t look scary, Quinton!” He could not have been much older than Adana was when her mother had run off with her.

“Don’t come too close, Petyr – this is all new to her.”

But the boy did not heed Quinton’s warning, instead reaching out a small hand to grab her arm. Before Adana could prevent what was about to happen, her shadows forcefully expanded their protective cocoon, preventing the boy from coming any closer and pushing him to the ground. A few of the children that had been running behind the boy shouted while others looked positively awestruck, silenced by their own shock.

The encampment grew eerily quiet for a second before commotion erupted. Adana finally saw Lukas out of the corner of her eye. She curled her nails into her palm, fearing the worst. The altercation in the field had been against an adult, someone who was plainly trying to hurt her. No matter how overwhelmed Adana felt there, amid hundreds of other people for the first time in her life, she knew, on some level, that the boy had meant her no harm. Yet her shadows had protected her, as they had done against Sanna. She had to trust their judgement.

A few of the older women came running towards them then, and Adana could feel another wave of fresh panic taking over, a burning sensation in her throat. Her shadow’s

cocoon grew ever more in size, pushing Quinton away from her as well, albeit with less force than they had pushed the boy. A part of Adana wanted them to stop, but she was also grateful for the distance they were putting between her and these strangers, heat consuming her as she pictured being trampled beneath the people who were yelling at her. She could now see both Lukas and Deacon running towards the scene, Lukas's kind eyes wide with surprise while Deacon's narrowed with disgust.

“Get her away from my son!”

Mothers grabbed their children by the hand, taking numerous strides backward to keep their distance from Adana. If only they knew she wanted to do the same.

More heated protest filled the cold night air. Adana screwed her eyes shut, trying to block out the angry shouts of everyone that surrounded her. Instinctively, she knew she hated the sound of people fighting, but she could not remember why.

“Quinton, how could you bring her here? We have no idea what she is. Her actions here tonight should be enough for you to make sure she never hurts anyone again!”

Shouts of agreement echoed across the camp. Adana wanted to run, but her legs felt like they were being pulled into the ground.

In contrast to the raving mothers, Quinton's tone was calm. “You're right, we don't know who she is, or what she can do. We should not make a judgement before we have heard her story.”

“Her story? What story? She's a loner living in the woods, surviving longer than should be possible. What more do you need to know? Are you forgetting what happened to your own father, Quinton?”

He stepped towards the woman, whose chest was heaving with the effort of her protests. He placed a hand on her shoulder and Adana could see his fingers gripping the woman tightly, a reminder of who was in charge.

“You know very well that there are few at this camp who know more about the dangers and sorrows that we have faced over the years. However, as I mentioned before, we do not know her full story. How did she end up in the forest? How did she survive all this time? How did she not succumb to loneliness, as many of our own have, even surrounded by hundreds of people in this settlement? These are all questions we need answered before we can even begin to think of what to do with her. So please, dear Francesca, remain calm as I handle this situation to the best of my abilities. I am your leader precisely because I know what this can do to people.”

“But it hurt my son, and it’ll hurt others,” another voice spoke. Her hands were on her son’s shoulders. The boy with the dust-speckled face looked back at Adana. There were no tears in his eyes, no cuts on his hands. He just continued to stare at her.

Everyone around them fell silent. Lukas stepped towards her, his hands reaching out to what many would presume to be thin air, but Adana could tell that he was trying to feel out her shadows. His eyes snapped up to meet hers as soon as his fingers made contact with them, a barrier that separated him from her. She wished the shadows would shrink down. They were making her feel hostile, as they pulsed with every erratic beat of her heart.

“Do you have a name?” Lukas asked, staring directly at Adana through her shadows. Deacon stood behind him, bony arms crossed in front of his chest.

“Yes, she does. Her name is Adana, and we will discuss what to think of her as soon as you have all calmed down.” Quinton said.

CHAPTER 5

After Quinton's final words, Lukas had led her to one of the tents, telling her that he would return quickly. She was suddenly scared of being alone, a sensation she never thought she would experience. Her shadows had released their cocoon, floating around her sedately once more. She wedged herself into a corner of the tent, sitting on a worn straw mattress, facing the entrance.

The front flap of the tent opened, and Adana shrunk back into the bed further before she saw Lukas had returned. He looked at her, silently asking if he could come in. Adana nodded – but her body tensed once more as she saw that Mea, his mother, followed him in. Adana lunged uselessly for her walking staff, which she had placed at the end of the shoddy bed she was sitting on, but Mea stopped her by placing a foot on the wooden pole. Adana watched frozen as Lukas placed a hand on his mother's arm.

“When we were walking back to camp, I noticed you limping a little. I thought my mother could take a look at your ankle. She won't hurt you; I promise. Not that she could, I reckon,” he said, trying to make Adana feel more at ease.

“She'll help you, I swear,” Lukas said.

Mea said nothing.

“I'll be back soon,” Lukas said, “Quinton needs my support trying to compose people. Deacon isn't helping. Neither is his sister. Just stay here for now, okay?”

Adana had no response. She wanted to be alone with Mea even less than she wanted to be by herself. She stretched her fingers, indicating her shadows to surround her and take up their usual positions. More of them twisted themselves around her arms than usual; they encircled her entirely and she immediately felt she had the upper hand. Mea's silver dagger was no match for her shadows.

“My son asked me to help you, so I will,” Mea said. Her voice was no longer commanding. It was tired.

Adana simply nodded again. She wanted to ask Mea about Lukas, but it seemed unwise to do so. There was no knowing what Mea thought of her, or if she had even seen what just transpired because of her shadows. Indignant protests were still loud and clear outside the thin skin of the tent that hid her away.

Mea sighed, and took her foot off the staff. Her dagger was nowhere to be seen, but Adana could not be sure that it was not hidden on her person, or if another one was hidden somewhere in the tent. After all, she had failed to notice Sanna’s iron cast arm until it was almost too late. Adana tried to push herself further into the corner of the tent and it sagged slightly beneath her weight. Her shadow’s tendrils were reaching out towards Mea, sensing another threat – but the last thing Adana wanted was to ruin anybody’s shelter and home with another one of their outbursts. She silently pleaded with them to retreat, motioning with her fingers once more. They responded, but Adana thought she could sense a reluctance in their movements. Mea watched Adana’s fingers move.

Sitting down, Lukas’s mother turned towards Adana. “I only wanted to know that my son was okay. Lukas is – he’s one of the few things I have left. You have to understand – actually, I don’t know if you would – but he goes off into the woods, looking for someone that we’ve never met before, Deacon is worried about you. I just – I just needed to know that he was okay.”

Adana said nothing, waiting for Mea to continue.

“I didn’t want you to hurt my son.”

“Many think I will,” Adana said. Her voice sounded too loud for the tent. Everything outside had become quiet.

“Hurt Lukas?” Mea said.

“Hurt their sons,” Adana replied.

“Yes, they do. Surely you understand why.”

“No, I don’t,” Adana said.

Mea looked at Adana then, truly studying her, and for the first time Adana could see the resemblance to Lukas – they had the same shape eyes, the same sunken cheeks. The same look of constant curiosity.

“Let me take a look at that ankle of yours,” Mea said, breaking her own trance.

Mea slowly inched a bit closer to Adana, allowing herself to look at Adana’s swollen ankle by the light of the small lantern strung up in the far corner of the tent. As Lukas’s mother gently touched it, Adana winced – her shadows had shifted away from her ankle, choosing to merely surround her upper body, and Adana found herself missing the numbing sensation they usually granted her whenever she was in pain.

“It’s swollen, but not broken – might be sprained,” Mea finally stated, after having turned Adana’s foot gently to look at it from every angle.

“I tried to climb a tree.”

“Haven’t we all,” Mea said.

They fell silent, but Adana could finally allow herself to relax a little. Lukas trusted his mother to help her, and it wasn’t like she could run very quickly. Mea ripped a thick strip of cloth from underneath the mattress, and started wrapping Adana’s foot and ankle gently, but firmly.

“Do you truly not understand why people are afraid of you?” Mea asked as she worked.

Adana shook her head.

“Whatever it is you can do, that thing you have that none of us can see, it scares people. It brings back memories of a time that we would have preferred to be long ago. A few

of the children here never witnessed any of it, bless them – all they hear is the stories of warning. Most of us though, we still know what it was like. The constant fear, and pain,” Mea said.

Adana looked at Lukas’s mother suspiciously. She had no idea what Mea was talking about. Before she could ask her to continue the tent flap opened again. Instead of Lukas, as Adana had been hoping, it was an unfamiliar face. A girl, who could be no older than Adana. She was very pale – but her skin missed that sickly shade of grey that Deacon’s had, and her eyes were a dark shade of green, reminding Adana of the leaves of her favourite tree in the spring.

“Mea – Quinton wants us all to gather as soon as the sun rises. No one will be sleeping tonight anyway,’ the girl looked at Adana then, an indignant look on her slightly swollen features, ‘we’re putting all the younger children in his tent together to get them to have some rest. He doesn’t think they need to hear the discussion.”

“He’s right,” Mea said.

As they had been talking, Lukas’s mother had finished wrapping Adana’s ankle. Now, in the presence of somebody else, Mea immediately abandoned all physical contact. The appearance of this girl must have brought her back to reality.

“I’ll bring her myself, Corina. Thank you for coming to tell me,” Mea said.

The girl turned her attention to Adana. “Deacon was right,’ Corina finally spoke again, ‘you do look breakable.”

With those words, she let the flap fall closed again, and Adana listened for the sound of retreating footsteps, hearing a strange, uneven thudding across the ground instead.

She looked down at her hands where her fingers were being circled by her shadows. She felt overwhelmingly lonely all of a sudden – nobody in this encampment trusted her, and her shadows had somehow become the root of all her problems. She had never been

anybody's enemy before. She was a threat to their children, even though she knew herself not to be one. She was an invasion in their home, even though she had never wanted to be one.

She felt her eyes become wet. Adana did not want Mea to see her cry.

"I don't think they will try to hurt you," Mea said, rather awkwardly.

"I do," Adana whispered. She felt how true the words were as they hung heavy in the tent.

"Will you – will you hurt anyone, if they try to hurt you?" Mea asked. Adana looked at Lukas's mother then; her wide eyes indicating fear. Adana admonished herself for thinking she needed to be the fearful one in this situation. She may be lonely, yes, but she was stronger than any of them, and she had her shadows to defend herself should the need arise.

"I don't want to," Adana said. She wondered if she was lying to herself.

The shapes of people moving outside the tent were starting to fade, the light from the lantern dimming as the sun started to rise outside. Adana watched as Mea quickly stood up from her seat on the mattress.

"It's first light. I should take you to the meeting," Mea said, forcing her voice to sound more authoritative than it was.

"I'll come," Adana said. While she felt like she had nothing to fear, that did not mean she needed to make these people any more hostile towards her than they already were. She refused to provoke anyone.

They stepped out of the tent, one behind the other, and Adana saw the camp bathed in the soft glow of early morning light. It looked even more miserable and dry in the cruel and truthful light of day – animal hides that had looked soft by the fire now looked old and worn, weeds sprouted fruitlessly out of the ground, trying to push their way out of mealy soil. Seeing it this way, Adana understood that people could become overly hostile, living in a place like this. There was no colour, no life. No flowers, no bees. Everything she had been

privileged to live among was foreign to these people. But if they were going to be violent towards her, she wondered if they perhaps deserved to live in such squalor. She shook her head, trying to rid herself of the thought.

“Will you just promise me one thing?” Mea asked.

“Just, whatever you do – do not hurt my son. Don’t hurt Lukas.”

Adana found herself thinking that Lukas was the one person she could never hurt anyway.

“I’m going to ask you a few questions, Adana. Is that okay?” Quinton asked.

Adana nodded. She sat on the ground, next to the dying embers of the fire, surrounded by more people than she had ever seen in her life. Quinton stood over her, watching closely. She could smell the dried wood burning in the flames. It smelled old, and mouldy, just like the rest of the camp.

“Ask her how long she’s been hiding from us!” someone shouted behind her.

Others shouted in agreement. Adana merely looked around her, taking in all the surrounding people. Again, she noticed the differences per person. Light skinned, dark-skinned, long hair, short hair – strong and sturdy, lean and graceful. The only similarity she saw between anyone was the dryness of their lips and the bruises under their eyes.

“Adana, have you been hiding from us?” Quinton asked.

She shook her head.

“How long have you lived in the forest?” he continued.

Thirteen years, she guessed. She thought she could count the time by the number of shadows that surrounded her, but this was not a detail she thought necessary to share with anyone else. She shrugged in reply.

“Is it beautiful there?” he pressed on. Murmurs and whispers spread through the crowd, surrounding Adana like a cage of distrust.

“What does it matter if it’s beautiful? We need to know what she was doing there!” Someone else, a woman this time, shouted to Adana’s left. She turned her head to catch a glimpse of who had uttered the protest. A small woman with a bumpy nose stood behind her, wrinkled brown skin surrounding glazed eyes staring up at their leader defiantly.

“I promise, there is a point to my question. Now, Adana – can you describe what it was like there?”

Adana took a moment to collect herself, trying to find the right words to describe her home. It was beautiful, certainly – full of life, fresh air, softness and sun. It was nothing like it was there, but that was their home, and she didn’t want to offend anyone. She watched her shadows dance around the fire, their shape camouflaging perfectly within the figures of the flames as they almost disappeared within the weak orange light.

She nodded. “It has life, and colour.”

Quinton turned away from Adana to address his citizens. “You see, I ask her this because the only reason we found her in the first place is by following a water source. A small water source, dirty and brown, which strangely only became clearer and cleaner the deeper into the forest Deacon and Lukas walked, and the closer they got to Adana’s home.”

Everyone remained silent. Adana felt as clueless as ever. She had not been able to spot Lukas in the crowd, but she knew he must be there.

“Now, I understand why you are all worried. You’re worried that the plague that we worked so long to get rid of, and put ourselves through so much pain to fight, has returned in the form of this girl,” Quinton said.

Shouts of agreement filled the air. The sound was deafening.

“And I promise, if that turns out to be true, I will take every measure necessary to protect ourselves, and our children. However, there is another option.”

The crowd grew silent again. Adana wished she was standing. She wished she was holding her staff. She wished that the people could see her shadows so that they wouldn't have to be afraid of some invisible threat anymore.

“We know that the plague of darkness we faced as a community was not the only form of magic that once existed. I know it's been a long time since we've seen it used as a force for good that it may as well have become myth or legend – but it existed, and it might exist again.”

Before she knew what she was doing, Adana stood up, her ankle hurting marginally less due to the bandage that Mea had wrapped around it earlier. Everyone fell silent, hundreds of different coloured eyes watching her every move.

“My shadows are not darkness! They are my friends; they have always helped. Please – I swear. They are good.” While her voice had started her proclamation at a powerful volume, it had died down to a whisper by the time she was finished. She just wanted people to believe her. The shadows left the flames and joined her once again around her arms.

“Prove it,” a voice she recognized challenged her. It was slimy, tainted with revulsion. Deacon had pushed his way to the front of the crowd, Corina right behind him.

“Do you have any suggestions, Deacon?” Quinton asked, calmly.

“Take her to the Coastal Barricades. Have her examined, get her far away from us all,” Deacon said.

Quinton was silent for a beat, then nodded. “I believe Adana's form of magic is responsible for keeping a small corner of the forest protected from our drought. However, we cannot know for sure without having her examined – it would be too long a wait to see if

Adana's absence will affect the forest negatively. By that time, her presence here could have affected us in numerous ways."

Adana looked around only to see the rest of the people nodding in agreement. She had heard of the Coastal Barricades before from her mother – but she had no intention of just leaving, following them blindly only to prove that she wasn't a threat. She had done nothing wrong. She was not going to just leave her home.

"Why does she need to go all the way to the Coastal Barricades? Why can't we just test her here? Who knows how many more like her are out there? We should be prepared sooner, rather than later." Raveer, the man from the ambush, had pushed himself to the front of the circle. The people behind him retreated a few steps away, leaving some space, a buffer of safety.

"I found her alone. There was nobody else there," Lukas's soft voice finally allowed Adana to catch sight of him.

"If there had been more of her living there, Raveer, there is a good chance that we would have heard of the numbers by now, the same way the Scavengers came to be known to us," Quinton said.

"Doesn't matter. We need to know. Besides just killing her now to make sure whatever she's carrying doesn't spread again, the Barricades are our only option and frankly, I'm fine with either," Deacon said. Quinton was watching him closely.

Adana's blood ran cold. Her shadows had started to form another dense shield in front of her, their colour darkening menacingly.

"She's not diseased, Deacon," Lukas said. He had stepped into the ring.

"She might as well be if she's truly plagued – just like your grandfather," Corina retorted.

Pockets of argument broke out across the crowd. They were making so much noise, Adana was surprised the children had not come to see what all the fuss was about.

“Why don’t we ask our guest?” Quinton said, turning his attention back to Adana. She recognized his question as a gesture of kindness, a way to give her some say in the matter, but she doubted her opinion would be well received, and she had a feeling Quinton was well aware. She curled her toes into the dry ground beneath her.

“I want to go home,” she said, softly so as not to provoke anyone. Quinton smiled at her.

“Not an option,” Deacon said, one of the few who had managed to hear her.

“Why not?” Lukas asked, closing the distance between him and Deacon, ‘she’s not done us any harm.”

“She attacked my mother!” Deacon yelled. Adana breathed sharply. Sanna.

“Your mother charged at her, Deacon,” Lukas reminded him. They glared at each other.

“Because she sensed a threat,” Deacon said.

Lukas looked like he was about to respond before Quinton interrupted him.

“This kind of arguing will get us nowhere. Are we all in agreement that she should be sent to the Coastal Barricades? If their examination of her comes back as a positive, she can join us, here – it will only make our way of life better.”

“And if they deem her to be a threat?” Corina asked, still standing behind Deacon. She seemed to follow him wherever he went.

“Then we can rest with the knowledge that we made sure the consequences of having her here would have been dangerous, instead of wondering whether we took the life of an innocent because we did not have the patience to wait for certainty,” Quinton said, finality in his words.

“I don’t want to go,” Adana said. She trusted her shadows. She did not need to be examined to know that she needed them and that they had done her no harm.

“I’m afraid, Adana, that you might not have a choice in the matter,” Quinton said.

“You mean she doesn’t have a choice in the matter,” Lukas said, looking at Adana expectantly. Was that guilt she could see flitting across his face? She couldn’t bring herself to look at everyone else. Everyone else was afraid of her.

“No, Lukas, she doesn’t. Not about this,” Quinton said.

Adana wondered what it had been about the old man that had made her trust him so easily when she first met him. He would protect his people, and she was not one of them. There was no autonomy for her to be found here, no way to get them to listen to her – but she did not want to go to the Coastal Barricades, and she did not want to follow their orders. She would have to run away.

CHAPTER 6

Adana would need to grab her staff and head into the forest on the opposite side of the clearing. There was no way she could go home right now – it would be the first place they searched for her. She felt a pang of regret as she thought about her soft bed of leaves underneath her giant tree, but she promised herself that she would see it again one day. Maybe she could figure out how to have her shadows create a permanent shield surrounding her home, something that nobody could penetrate. A shield that would hide her away from the rest of the world, forever.

A part of her was frightened. Not just because she would be leaving her home. She was frightened of the idea of being completely alone. Seeing so many people, hearing so many voices, and seeing Lukas's kind, intriguing eyes had given her a glimpse into what it was like to live among others.

It made Adana miss her mother and father in a way she hadn't for years.

Her walking stick was in the tent Mea had bandaged her ankle in. Adana reasoned she would have to wait until nightfall to attempt to leave. It was a sad stroke of luck that she knew that the fires they were capable of building here would not be large enough to illuminate the whole settlement, much less the darkened nooks and crannies between the shabby tents and huts. She would be able to sneak through them easily.

She could pretend her father was chasing her in a game of hide-and-seek, just as they used to. The thought brought a small smile to her face. It was the first time she had smiled in what felt like days.

She was so caught up in the memory of her father that she hadn't even realized the gathering had dispersed. Lukas stood in front of her, trying to catch her attention. She noted

once again that his lips were dry and cracked, too. Adana wished she could offer him some water.

“I’m sorry you had to hear all that,” Lukas said.

She looked around at the people retreating to their tents. Deacon was arguing with Quinton a few steps away from where the ring had been. They were too far away for her to hear what they were saying.

“Did you know?” she asked.

“Did I know what?” Lukas said.

“Did you know that they were going to send me away,” she said, hoping that he would say no. Perhaps he would read her mind, and offer to run away with her. At least then she would not be alone.

“No, Adana – I promise,” he reached for her hand, and while she wondered what it would be like to feel the lines of someone’s palm beneath her fingertips, she pulled away from him.

“I swear I didn’t know they were going to send you to the Coastal Barricades. I wouldn’t have – I wouldn’t have convinced you to come with me if I had,” Lukas said. He hung his head in shame.

“Why not? What happens?” she asked.

“What happens there, you mean?” he said.

Adana nodded.

“They’ll examine your magic. They’ve done so for many, especially during the tougher years. If your Shadows are as harmless as you say they are, it won’t be a problem, I promise,” Lukas said.

Adana’s heartbeat quickened. “I don’t want my shadows stolen,” she said. Her throat felt scratchy with fear. Lukas looked at her with sympathy.

“No, no – they won’t steal them. Just try and understand them,” he said. He looked like he wanted to say more, so Adana waited for him to continue. She could feel her shadows feather-light against her cold arms.

“So they look like shadows?” Lukas asked, practically whispering. He was changing the subject, Adana could tell.

“Yes,” she said.

“Will you describe them to me?” he asked.

What she really wanted in that moment was to go back to the tent, hold her staff tight in her hand, and not let it go until she was well out of reach of the people who were afraid of her. Whenever she thought about their angry shouts, their narrowed eyes, their malicious words, Adana felt she would suffocate with the weight of their fear. Being feared was not something she had ever wanted. Having it thrust upon her was a difficult burden to bear.

She kept quiet. When Lukas asked her if she wanted him to bring her back to the tent, she just nodded. She worried that if she continued talking to him, to indulge him in his wishes to get to know her better, running away would only be that much harder. She had to remember that there was no good reason for her to stay here.

Adana shivered as she looked at the flayed patches on the wolf’s hide that covered her now allocated tent. She felt as raw and bare as it looked.

“You should rest if you want. I can leave you alone for now and come back to see you later,” Lukas said as he hovered around outside the entrance of the tent. Adana desperately wanted to go in, to seclude herself away from everyone until the time was right to make her escape. She hoped he could not guess her intentions by the strained look she felt on her face. She nodded again.

“Alright,” he said, before turning away. She thought that she could hear regret in his voice. She made herself believe she had imagined it.

Standing inside the tent, head bowed so as not to hurt herself, her eyes searched frantically for her staff, locating its wooden handle half tucked away under the straw mattress she had been sitting on before. She rolled it forward so that she could see it at all times, and grab it quickly when the time came for her to run. What she had not expected was for Lukas to return only moments later.

“I thought I’d come bring you some food, if you’d like –” Lukas began, halting his words as he noticed Adana’s hold on the staff.

“I saw you carrying that before, you know,” he said, eyeing her mother’s craftsmanship. She curled her fingers tighter around the staff, her shadows aligning themselves along the length of the handle.

“It’s beautiful,” Lukas continued.

“Quinton said the same thing,” she said.

“He and I agree on a lot of things, but not all of them,” Lukas said.

It was silent for a moment, until Adana could hear her stomach growling, and she realized his mention of food had set off a chain reaction within her. She was hungry – starving. She had not eaten since the evening before Deacon had found her in the forest. She looked at the bowl he was carrying, silently willing him to give it to her.

Lukas smiled. “Here, eat up, though it’s not much.”

He handed her the broth. It was saltier than anything she was used to. It was delicious.

“I could teach you how to use that if you like,” Lukas said, causing Adana to pause in her ravenous digestion of the food. She lowered the bowl from her chin to look at him. She had wished many times for her mother to teach her how to use it as something other than a walking stick, if only so that she would not have to rely on her shadows so much when it came to hunting. Now though, with her plan to run away, it seemed only logical that she

should be able to defend herself properly. She should be able to stand alongside her shadows, not cower behind them.

“Okay,” Adan said.

“Now?” Lukas asked

“Now.”

She followed Lukas to the opposite side of the clearing, right at the entrance of the forest she was planning to escape to. It was no wonder he had brought her there, really; if he had taken her to the other side, she would have done everything in her power to run away from him right then and there, back to the comfort of her own home.

Over the course of a few hours, he tried to teach her everything he knew. He taught her how to hold the staff properly in her hands so that she would not be knocked off-balance; he taught her how to block, jab, and switch it to her other side by twisting it around her neck. She still faltered, often. He was stronger than her and caught her by surprise numerous times, but she was learning. Her shadows had taught themselves to mimic and follow her movements in no time.

Adana had never felt so in control of her own body as she did in that moment. She had never felt so physically connected to her shadows before. Tired and aching though Adana was, she could feel something had awoken inside of her. A need to move, a need to be more. The only way to do that was to run.

“Are you finished for today or would you like to go for one more round?” Lukas asked, playfully. She gave him the smallest hint of a smile.

“I think I’m done,” Adana said. She wanted to spare her energy, and her ankle was killing her.

“You’re a quick learner,” Lukas said.

“So are my shadows,” she said.

Adana sat down on the ground, facing the camp. She watched as the people who had decided her fate milled around, crying, soothing one another, laughing, and talking to each other. She was glad to have Lukas by her side, even if it was only for a little while longer.

“So, your shadows, they follow you? Are they attached to you?” Lukas asked, rather tentatively. He was fishing for answers. Perhaps he thought answers would convince the others to let her stay. If only she had the courage to tell him she had already decided to leave of her own accord.

“Yes. They follow me, they protect me,” she said.

“Yes, that was something I had noticed,” he said. She couldn’t tell if he was teasing her or not.

“What do they look like? I wish I could see them,” he said. Out of all the hostility she’d had directed towards her today, this was the first time anyone had seemed genuinely curious about what her shadows were. If only he could see them, indeed.

“They’re everywhere,” Adana said.

He gestured for her to continue.

“They’re everywhere, and they change colour. Sometimes they’re black, completely black, and sometimes they’re grey? They’re grey when they’re far apart from each other. They’re soft. They’re really soft. They feel like feathers, or soft soil. And they’re always there. Everywhere,” she finished, taking a deep breath. They were there now, like moving snakes around her wrists, bracelets that felt familiar and comforting.

“They sound...fascinating,” he said.

A moment of silence passed between them. Adana felt some small stones digging into the skin of her legs, but she didn’t mind the additional pain. It was keeping her alert. She

hoped it would keep her vigilant enough around Lukas. Why she trusted him so much was hard for her to say. Maybe she would never know.

“What do you see here?” Lukas said, breaking the quiet.

She didn’t know what he meant, so she stayed quiet, continuing to watch the people in front of her live their lives as best they could.

“What do you see when you look at us?” he continued.

She dug her feet further into the ground. She could feel the indents the small pebbles were creating as they dug further into the soft skin of her legs. The further she could feel them digging, the harsher the pain became, until it pinched her so hard, she winced and a few tears formed in her eyes. She didn’t know what to tell him.

“I see you trying to live,” Adana said. It was the only way she could think of to describe the way his people wandered around.

“Oh,” was all he said. Adana hoped she hadn’t insulted him.

He stood up suddenly. With his legs so close to her line of sight, she could see the stark outline of a jagged scar that ran from his right knee and wrapped around his calf down to his ankle bone. Before she had the time to consider what could have made such a cruel and lasting impression, he turned to look at her.

“I’ll take you back to the tent, and then I’ll come to bring you some more food when it’s time for supper,” he said. His voice had lost all inflection.

Adana said nothing in return, picking up her staff as she stood. The pain in her foot had worsened due to their arduous practice, and it helped to use the walking stick as a crutch once more. This was something she hadn’t anticipated. She hoped it wouldn’t hinder her escape.

The walk back to the tent felt further this time. She counted the steps she would need to get to the edge of the forest – 519. Since she was trying to take most of the weight off her

foot, Lukas was again the faster walker. She looked at the scar on his leg. It must have been a deep cut. The scar tissue looked strangely vulnerable, like the slightest tension would tear it apart, consuming Lukas with pain. Adana could feel the back of her own legs prickling with sympathy. A few of her shadows had disengaged from their snakelike formation around her wrists, wrapping themselves around her legs instead. The itchy feeling was immediately soothed, her sympathy nearly forgotten.

By the time they reached the tent, she was practically hopping on one leg.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. She didn’t want him to send Mea in here with her again. If there was a chance for her to run, she needed to be able to take it.

“Okay,” he said. Regretfully, this would be the last time she saw him. There was a small part of her that hoped it wouldn’t be.

“I’ll come back, later – for now, just try and get some sleep,” Lukas said, and he studied her face one more time before turning around and leaving her alone outside the tent. Adana went in, situating herself on the ground just near the opening, hoping she would be able to see enough of what was happening outside to grab the first proper opportunity to run. She clutched the staff tight in her lap, feeling more confident now she held it now.

Hours went by. Her legs started to cramp, and her ankle continued to ache. Numerous men and women passed by the tent. She saw their tattered boots and their dry skin, but the wave of sympathy she had come to expect of herself never came; she was too tense.

More hours went by. Her shadows made shapes around her, the only form of entertainment she had. Adana was worried she would fall asleep soon. Practice with Lukas had been more exhausting than she’d anticipated.

Unexpectedly, someone passed too close to the tent, and Adana scrambled backward, staff held out in front of her. Fleeting, her hands were not her own as they positioned

themselves along the staff's handle – but the moment passed, and she attributed it to the ceaseless hours of waiting and hardly moving. Her shadows were around her wrists again.

The person stopped. Their legs were shorter than she had grown used to seeing during her wait, and the boots they wore were smaller, less scruffy. Numerous shallow cuts and bruises scattered across their knees, stretching as the person kneeled in front of the opening flap. Adana's shoulders felt locked in place. She held her breath.

Two eyes, both an ashy grey, peeked at her. She had seen those eyes before, and that small, sloping nose – the dust scattered across his cheeks. This was the boy her shadows had wanted to protect her from, the one that had tried to come at her. His small fingers inched into the tent, propping himself up as he leaned inside.

“I'm sorry I made you push me,” the young boy – Petyr, she remembered hearing – said.

Adana was taken aback. She could feel her throat tighten

“I'm so – I'm sorry that I pushed you,” Adana said. The words came out in a choke, hard for her to admit.

“Are you going to stay here?” Petyr asked.

“I don't want to,” Adana said.

“I understand. I wouldn't want to stay here neither,” he said.

“Why not?” Adana heard herself asking.

“Everyone's scared always,” Petyr replied.

“Oh,” she said.

He moved so that he was sitting cross-legged in the opening of the tent, more of him inside than outside of it. Strangely, Adana didn't mind him being here. It was nice to talk to another person that refused to view her as a threat. Even if he was just a child.

“Are you bad?” Petyr asked.

“I don’t think so,” Adana said.

“I don’t think you are, neither,” he said.

Her grip on the staff slackened.

“Maybe I could be, sometimes,” Adana said. How could she possibly know? She had never been in a situation before that would allow her to explore that side of herself.

“You only pushed me. It didn’t hurt,” Petyr said.

“I’m – I’m glad...that’s good,” Adana said. Again, the words felt like they were choking her.

They sat in silence together for a while, Petyr drawing shapes in the sand, and Adana smiling as her shadows tried to mimic his strange lines and patterns.

A forceful hand shoved its way into the tent without warning. It clamped down on the back of Petyr’s neck, and Adana could feel her shoulders lock in position again, staff aimed and ready. The hand moved to grab the back of Petyr’s thin sweater, dragging him out of the tent across the ground. Adana couldn’t decide if she should stay inside or help the boy. He had been nothing but nice to her. She got up from her sitting position, stiff legs protesting as she crouched down low, ready to stand quickly if necessary.

“You are not to go near her ever again, do you hear?” Adana heard the frantic voice of a woman, each word enunciated ever so clearly. She imagined the spittle flying out of the mouth the words belonged to.

“Yes, mama,” Petyr said. He sounded defeated. She recognized his tone of voice. It was one she had used with her own mother time and time again. Adana decided to stay inside, not willing to be confronted.

“It’s time for bed. Your father’s been waiting for you to get back for ages. Come on, go!” the woman said. Her voice was less loud now, but no less angry.

Adana could see their outlines on the side of the tent as the woman forcefully pushed her son away from Adana's hideaway. It was the first time she noticed the sky had finally fallen into darkness.

"Don't stay here!" Adana heard Petyr's faint shout echoing through the camp. She waited until she could no longer hear their footsteps before taking a look outside the tent. The settlement was deserted. Everyone must have been in their respective shelters, eating a late dinner or getting some rest before trying to warm up by the communal fires again.

Petyr was right. She couldn't stay here. This was the time to run.

She ducked into the tent again, to see if there was anything that would be useful for her to take with her. She grabbed the blanket off the straw mattress, wrapping it around herself before tying it around her neck to secure it in place. The remaining contents of the tent were useless to her, as she suspected they were useless to its usual residents as well. A few chipped clay bowls and cups, a wooden spoon, some dried flowers, and leaves; objects merely there to give the appearance that they owned something worth having.

Poking her head out of the tent to check her path was still clear, she steadied herself with a few deep breaths before heading out across the encampment. She was careful not to pass too close to the other tents. Dim lanterns marked the spots where all the shelters stood. The camp looked a lot less dreary this way, by the warmth of firelight.

She had counted 46 steps so far. The coast was still clear. Her ankle still hurt. 73.

She tried her best to avoid the crunch of dried leaves and twigs, but they were everywhere, the entire encampment having been heavily affected by the drought. Even the dust underneath her bare feet seemed to crackle, calling out for a lick of moisture. The soft thump of her staff caused a few lonely specks of sand to float into the air.

213 steps. She was almost at the edge of the forest. The darkness had never looked so inviting.

Her ankle twisted in an uneven part of the ground, and Adana bit her lip to keep from crying out. She wondered if Lukas had returned to her tent yet. Her shadows floated in front of her and behind her, lighting the way dimly with their glow. Their iridescent hue almost matched the light of the moon.

289. So close to being free.

370. Even closer now.

There it was. The first line of trees. 426.

A glint of reflection in the corner of her eye. Adana shook her head, convincing herself she had imagined it.

509. She was here. She was free. No one had followed her. 516.

Adana heard sliding across the ground. Something heavy hit her pained ankle, sweeping her off her feet. She landed harshly on the dry soil and heard one of her bones cracking in tandem with the crunch of leaves beneath her. She cried out. The pain was unbearable. She could feel a large bruise forming where the heavy object had hit the bottom of her calf. The staff had fallen out of her grasp and rolled away a few steps further into the forest, teasing her.

Adana tried to catch her breath. Tears were forming in her eyes. Her shadows aligned themselves along the length of her body. Adana frantically wondered why they weren't doing anything to help her, but she couldn't form a coherent enough thought to ask them to.

A face stood over her, leering. Pale and plump, dry strands of blonde hair hanging down towards the ground. Corina.

"That was for my mother and my brother," Corina said. She grabbed Adana by the wrist, dragging her back towards the encampment, freedom fading away with every stride. The only sound Adana could hear was a weirdly heavy footfall, and Adana focused on it to count the steps that were taking her back to the camp.

She counted 67 before she blacked out.

CHAPTER 7

“Adana? Adana, wake up, please,” a voice said. Adana’s head hurt too much, the sharp pain in her ankle making it hard for her to focus. The voice sounded concerned.

“What were you doing? What were you thinking?” the voice became clearer now. Adana could almost recognize it.

“You shouldn’t have tried to run off,” the voice said again. Lukas. There was a dry crack in his voice. She groaned, trying to turn away from him. She had never felt so weak in her life. Her shadows were frantically circling her head, buzzing like flies trying to get her attention. For once, she wanted nothing to do with them.

“How did this happen? Why didn’t – why didn’t your *friends* protect you this time?” His voice was a whisper now. Adana ignored his question. She didn’t know the answer and she didn’t want to admit it.

A second voice floated through the tent. “Quinton would like to see her,”

“I don’t think she’s ready for that yet,” Lukas said.

“Doesn’t matter. Won’t be like she’ll get the chance to say anything anyway,” a second voice said. It sounded harsh. Raveer.

“Look at her, Raveer – she’s in no state to leave this tent, let alone try and defend her actions,” Lukas said.

“Who said she was going to get the chance to defend herself? Girl ran away. Now why did she do that?” Raveer said.

“Because we’ve forced her from her home!” Lukas said, at a volume too loud for the tiny tent.

Adana turned to face him again. She felt like she could finally open her eyes, slowly – the lantern in the tent had thankfully been extinguished, leaving them in darkness. Only her shadows gave off a faint glow. She could only see the two men in outline.

Without thinking, Adana let her fingers curl around Lukas's wrist. It was the only way she knew how to say thank you for sticking up for her. She instinctively knew she would probably be in a much worse position had it not been for Lukas. She could feel his wrist turn in her hand. There was a vein that stuck out prominently.

Adana heard Raveer sigh. "I know, I know. But I don't make the rules around here – I just do what I'm told. And right now, I've been told to have you bring her to Quinton. There's nothing you or me or her can do about that right now," he said.

She let go of Lukas's wrist. He sighed.

"Come on, I'll help you up. I'm sorry about this. We both are," Lukas said. Raveer nodded at him before leaving the tent.

The walk towards the central fire was long. Every bone in Adana's body ached. Every step she took toward Quinton was a step closer to sealing her fate. How had it all come to this? Lukas's hand was holding her steady.

Finally reaching the fire, Adana was confronted with all the people she least wanted to see. Quinton, Mea, Deacon, Corina. Even Sanna, the fighter so brutally beaten down by Adana's shadows, was there. Her shadows seemed to recognize Sanna, immediately taking on the same cross formation as they had during the ambush. Adana felt her blood boil as she looked at Corina, wondering what she could have possibly done to make the girl despise her so much.

"You have to understand, Adana," Quinton began, "that every decision I make here is to keep my people safe." Adana felt her teeth grinding into one another, distracting her from the pain in her legs. Lukas was still holding her up.

“The decision to send you to the Coastal Barricades is not one that I took lightly – nor do I hope that you view it as such,” Quinton said. All Adana wanted to do was sit down.

“I understand why you wanted to run. We took you from your safe place, and have thrown you into the unknown. You, however, Adana, have also thrown us into the unknown. Whatever magic it is that surrounds you is something we had not anticipated, and naively hoped to avoid for the rest of our time here,” he continued. Adana watched as her shadows turned to face Quinton instead. She wondered again why they had not been this vigilant when she had been attacked by Corina.

“I wanted you to stay here for a few weeks before sending you away so that you could get used to the idea of being amongst others – to trust and gain the trust of some of my people so that we could appropriately choose who would escort you down to the coast,” Quinton said. Adana felt Lukas’s hand curl into a fist behind her back.

“In light of recent events, however, I think it is important for us to send you on your way immediately. You will be escorted by Lukas,’ Adana could feel her shoulders relax somewhat – maybe Lukas would allow her to run away of her own volition, ‘Deacon, and his sister Corina,” Quinton finished.

Adana felt her entire body go rigid. She wished she was holding her staff, but it was lost in the forest. She could feel the ghost of its smooth wood against her palm.

“But – father, I’m sorry, there’s no need for Corina and Deacon to come. I can take her there myself,” Lukas said.

“Nonsense,” Sanna spoke. She was sitting on a flat rock, cradling her injured arm. Even though she was still in pain, the fire in her eyes refused to diminish. “You would just let her run off; you’ve become too sympathetic towards her. My children will know how to keep her in check and get all of you there safely. I trained Corina as a fighter myself and Deacon is a skilled tracker. You will only benefit from their company,” Sanna finished.

“Has anyone asked them if they even want to come?” Lukas pleaded with Quinton, looking him straight in the eye. Adana knew it was hopeless, but the thought of travelling with both Corina and Deacon, whom she now realized to be siblings, worried her to no end. There was no way Lukas could protect her from those two should anything go wrong; and there was no chance they were going to let her run away again.

“No need. I volunteered them,” Sanna said.

Corina’s arms were crossed in front of her, her eyes narrowed in a glare toward Adana. Deacon was twirling his thumbs in front of him, staring out to nowhere with vacant eyes.

“I do not take such measures lightly, Adana,” Quinton said. Adana barely heard him. ‘However, this is not the first time someone has come into our camp unexpectedly from that forest. We cannot make the same mistakes we did last time; we were foolish enough to let her run away. It was a blessing that she never returned. But I sincerely hope that it will be a blessing for all of us if you *do* return; there is a chance you can bring nothing but good to our encampment.” Quinton finished.

“Doubtful,” Deacon whispered. His voice grated on Adana’s nerves. Her shadows turned their attention towards him now.

“We will not judge her until we know more,” Quinton said. The words should have soothed Adana. Instead, they made her angry. What harm could she possibly do to them if she ran away? With the way she had been treated, there was no chance of her wanting to return.

“Then it’s settled. You will leave at first light tomorrow.” Quinton said. Adana finally forced herself to look him in the eye but was instead caught off guard by the questioning look that Mea was giving her. Adana shook her head and looked between Lukas and Quinton

instead, seeing the similarities not only in the arch of their noses but also in Lukas's eyes.

One had his mother's colour and the other his father's.

First light wouldn't give her enough time to run away again.

Sanna steered Deacon and Corina away from the fire with a stiff grip on their shoulders. She might have volunteered her children, but Adana doubted they wanted to go. Before she could dwell on it any further, however, she was confronted with Mea standing in front of her.

"My son will take good care of you," Mea said. "I hope you do the same for him."

Adana nodded. "I'll try." She meant it. Mea hummed to herself in response, studying Adana's face closely.

"How is that you came to be in the forest by yourself?" Mea asked, catching Adana by surprise.

"I wasn't always alone," Adana said.

"Who was with you?" Mea said.

"My mama," Adana answered.

"For how long?" Mea asked.

"A while," Adana said. She had no idea what this had to do with anything.

A pause. Another hum in reply.

"Why did she leave?" Mea asked, voice quieter this time.

"She never said," Adana replied. "She just left."

"I didn't see it before," Mea mumbled to herself, but Adana heard.

"See what? Adana asked. Thoughts were racing through her head. Her shadows were racing around it. *She must have been here*, Adana thought in desperation.

"You've seen her," Adana said.

"Yes," Mea said.

“My mama. My mama came here – she ran away,” Adana said.

“Six years ago, yes,” Mea said, softly. “You have the same hair. The same eyes.”

“She always said my hair wasn’t nice enough,” Adana mumbled. Her shadows threaded themselves through it now, possibly tangling it up even more. She didn’t care. It felt reassuring.

“She never mentioned she had a daughter. I’m sure she was trying to protect you,” Mea said. She looked over at Lukas, who was arguing with his father. Adana felt an unexpected twinge of jealousy.

“Why did she come here?” Adana asked.

“I...,” Mea started, seemingly unable to find her words. Adana felt impatient, hopelessly desperate. This was the first she had heard of her mother in a long time.

Her shadows stopped playing with Adana’s hair, letting it fall down her back in a tangle of knots. It was only appropriate. She felt as distressed and rattled as her hair must have looked.

“So why was she here?” Adana asked again, knowing that Mea had purposely avoided her earlier question.

“She never said what it was she wanted to do. She only asked me for directions,” Mea said.

“Directions where?” Adana asked. Maybe she could follow her mother. Maybe she could finally find her.

“The Coastal Barricades,” Mea said.

“The Coastal Barricades,” Adana repeated, whispering. The rest of the world seemed to fall silent around her.

It would be hard to wait for first light now.

CHAPTER 8

“We’ll need to pack enough supplies to take with us on the journey,” Lukas said, frantically walking from tent to tent. He was already carrying a full load of blankets and clothes. Adana had offered to help him carry some of the provisions, but he’d refused. He had, however, given her some of the clothes he had picked up along the way, and while they were still quite drab and dreary, they were a much better fit, and she was grateful. No longer having to walk around in the old tunic and skirt that she had worn since the night her mother had dragged her away from their forest cottage was a blessing. As much as she had tried to elongate and fix it with leaves and small vines, it had never been very comfortable. The itchy fabric was a small price to pay for additional warmth.

“I’m sorry you need to come with me,” Adana said, as Lukas was busy asking a few people if they could borrow some cups and plates. They all looked apprehensive when they saw her standing behind him, some even flat out refusing at first. She understood, in a way – but their respect for their leader’s son outweighed their distrust of her, and by the time they had done a full round of the camp Lukas was finally satisfied that they had enough to take with them. Tying everything together to be able to carry their supplies comfortably was proving to be a difficult task.

“I’m not leaving you alone with Deacon and Corina,” Lukas said.

“Why not?”

“I just don’t trust them around you,” he said.

Her shadows were now around her ankles, a soothing comfort to the spiking pain she still felt there every time she moved. Adana still couldn’t believe that Corina had attacked her in that way; it made Adana’s hands clench into fists unwittingly every time she thought about it. The idea that she would have to travel with this young woman, who seemed to hate Adana

just as much as her brother did, unnerved her. On the other hand, if it hadn't been for Corina's foiling of Adana's chance to escape, she would have never known her mother had passed through the encampment on her way to the Coastal Barricades. The uneasy thought that Adana should be grateful to Corina crossed her mind, but she decided it wasn't worth dwelling on.

"How long will it take us to get there?" Adana asked.

"A while. I can't say for certain," Lukas said.

"Why? Hasn't anyone ever gone before?"

"Sure, they have. It's just taken longer for some people than others. Depends on the route you take, which settlements you have to cross, that sort of thing."

Lukas stood up from his packing job, turning towards her with a serious look on his face. "Listen, I know that I haven't given you all that much reason to trust me either – I'm the one that led you into an ambush after promising that we would help. I'm sorry, and I want you to know that I honestly had no idea that was going to happen. But, just – try not to antagonize Deacon and Corina too much. Deacon especially," Lukas said.

"Oh – okay," Adana said. She felt tears stinging her eyes at the sincerity in his words.

"Okay," he said.

First light was fast approaching, and the excitement that she would be following her mother's footsteps almost made Adana forget about the long journey ahead of her.

Resentment was overcome with curiosity. She had her shadows, she had Lukas. What more could she possibly need?

"I almost forgot," Lukas said, as he ran towards the tent Adana had hidden in before. He came out a few seconds later, carrying an all too familiar object, and Adana sighed in relief as she saw that he was carrying her staff. Lukas handed it to her and the wood felt smooth in her hands, fitting exactly to the shape of her calloused palm and fingers. At least

she would have something to lean on while her ankle was still healing. Her shadows moved from her ankles and surrounded the hand holding the staff, and there was a sudden feeling of completeness that washed over Adana before the moment was gone and she felt the pain in her ankle again.

“Thank you, Lu - Lukas,” Adana said. It was the first time she had used his name out loud. It felt all together strange yet familiar.

He looked like he wanted to say something more, but the unwelcome interruption of a heavy footstep stopped him from speaking. Adana recognized the sound. It was the same footfall Adana had heard while Corina dragged her back to the camp. Turning around to locate the source of the noise, Adana saw a glint of metal in the corner of her eye again, and instead of ignoring it this time as she had so foolishly done upon trying to enter the forest, she allowed herself to focus on it. Goosebumps rose across her arms as she watched Corina’s right leg stomp unevenly across the ground, weighed down by a heavy metal cast that encompassed the entirety of her leg from right below the knee to the tip of her toes. Her gait was mismatched like her left leg was in a hurry and the right just couldn’t keep up. Deacon was walking behind his sister, his pale and skinny legs looking utterly weak in comparison.

Adana half-expected to see spikes protruding from Corina’s leg, the same as Sanna’s cast-iron arm, but thankfully, that wasn’t the case. She knew that if Corina’s prosthetic had been as weaponized as her mother’s was, her legs would have been ripped to shreds. The thought reminded her of the rough scar that encircled Lukas’s right calf.

Her shadows let themselves go from the staff, forming a perfect ring in front of her. The perfect constrictor, if necessary. Adana grabbed the walking stick with two hands instinctively.

The siblings were both carrying their own pack of goods, looped under their arms with frayed ropes that Adana thought could snap at any moment if any more weight were

added. The sudden temptation to make their make-shift bags fall apart was oddly enticing, but Adana shook her head as her shadows floated towards the siblings, trying to heed Lukas's warning that she should do as little to antagonize them as possible.

Her shadows, however, did not seem keen to listen to Lukas's words of advice, and as they surrounded the siblings without Adana's urging, looking ready to squeeze, if necessary, there was a small part of Adana that wanted her to let them do it – to watch them writhe in fear of a threat they could not see, something pressing them and forcing them into submission without being able to fully comprehend what was happening. The thoughts came so easily to Adana, the image so clear in her mind that it shocked her, and she dropped the staff in surprise and the moment was gone. Her shadows floated back towards her, still holding their shape, only reluctantly breaking apart as Adana whispered to herself that she would like them to surround her again.

Deacon was looking at her angrily as they approached, and Adana knew that he had been able to feel her Shadows surrounding him and his sister just moments ago. Their touch would have been feather-light, faint enough to possibly be confused for a small gust of wind, but Adana knew that he knew. His eyes flashed, and his mouth sneered.

“We figured there was no reason to wait for first light. Better get this parasite away from our people now before she tries to harm anyone else,” Deacon said.

“Then we go now,” Adana said, challenging him. She didn't know what a parasite was, but the word sounded foul enough.

A surprised look of disdain passed Deacon's face, and Adana knew that she was getting under his skin. Neither of the siblings had any idea that she was now anticipating following in her mother's footsteps, and she hoped Lukas wouldn't tell them either.

“This is how this will work,’ Corina spoke, ‘Deacon will walk out in front, seeing as he's the best tracker. The parasite will walk in the middle, with me and Lukas behind. If you

try to run or hurt any of us while we're walking, then you'll get a worse repeat of what happened the first time. Understand?" she finished.

She spoke with an air of such self-importance that Adana thought Corina must have been training for this her whole life. Considering who her mother was, that wouldn't be surprising. Corina couldn't have been much older than Adana herself, and the thought made her oddly sad.

There was that word again, though. Parasite. Adana could feel her nails digging into her palm before she remembered to bend down to pick up her staff again. As she straightened, she pointed it towards Corina, a non-verbal challenge of her order. The fact that Adana wanted to go was not something Deacon or Corina needed to know.

"Lukas should say something to his mama first, say goodbye" Adana said, looking at Lukas for confirmation. Instead, he just shook his head, dismissing the idea completely. Adana opened her mouth to say something more, but was cut off by Corina.

"Apparently, there's no need. We go now," she said, harshly, annoyed that Adana had dared to suggest such a thing.

Thinking it best not to question Lukas now, she waited for the others to begin the journey. She, at least, had the dim glow of her shadows to light the way. None of her companions seemed to have been thorough enough in their preparation to think to bring a lantern, but it was a comfort knowing that she had this extra advantage.

They started their walk across the field, back towards the mouth of the forest she had been so close to losing herself in only a short while ago. As they reached the gaping darkness, Deacon looked back at his sister, who nodded in confirmation. He squared his shoulders, and marched over-confidently into the wilderness, his pale figure making a lasting impression within the dark before they lost sight of him completely.

Adana felt frozen on the spot, infinitely glad to see the back of him. She was brought back to reality by a well-aimed kick from Corina's armoured leg, landing right on the bone of her ankle. Biting her tongue to keep from letting out a cry of pain, Adana slowly stepped into the forest, following the track Deacon's large feet had left in the dusty soil.

They walked for hours; every step Adana took was another reminder of the uselessness of her left foot. She wanted to look back at Lukas, to have him understand that she needed to rest – but a look back at him was a sign of weakness, and it was not one she was willing to admit to the angry siblings that walked with her.

Light was starting to filter through the trees, and Adana was hoping to catch sight of familiar bursts of colour, the ones she had grown so used to within her own home. Instead, she was greeted by rotting bark on tree trunks that looked as black as her shadows and saw brown age spots on every single leaf she allowed herself a moment to inspect. She saw mushrooms that should have been a bright shade of red had somehow turned a dull shade of grey. Shrubs were no longer shrubbery, now empty balls of twigs covered in dust and cobwebs instead. Every tree branch hung towards the ground as though gravity alone was too much weight for them to bear. All of it was even worse than what she had seen during her walk with Lukas back to the camp, and she could feel tears forming in her eyes as she took in the vulgar smell of decay that surrounded them.

“We'll be walking all day. No resting until its nightfall again,” Corina said from behind her.

Deacon was still way ahead of them, clearly believing he knew exactly where he was going. Adana could see his meagre muscles working hard to keep his legs moving – he increased his speed every time they were close to catching up to him. He swung his arms violently, as though that would propel him forward even more. It looked helpless and manic.

The further they walked, the thinner the forest became until Adana could see Deacon stepping out of the final line of trees and into a brilliant ray of sunshine, a sorely missed sight that Adana nearly believed she would never see again. She had the sudden urge to run, to feel the warmth of the sun on her skin once more after the hours of grey lacklustre sky that imitated the colour of the ground they walked on. Resisting the temptation, she walked as calmly as she could, each step making her wince in pain.

The group caught up to Deacon for the first time since they had started walking. Adana could tell that he was having trouble breathing, rooted to the spot he stood on.

Then she saw what had made him freeze.

Not even the giant tree she had rested against so many times in her enclosure could compare.

Adana had never seen anything so enormous in her entire life.

CHAPTER 9

There should have been a stench. The rotting odour of the mouldy mushrooms was forgotten. Instead, there was an aroma of sweet tea that surrounded them, and where Adana would have expected to see a field of flowers, it was something else entirely.

She saw an enormous amount of decomposing flesh in front of her, so wide and so large, that the edges of the field were blocked from view. Trees were crushed underneath the massive body.

She heard Lukas's and Corina's footsteps arrive behind her, Deacon still unmoving. Her shadows were flitting about wildly, unable to focus. She understood their confusion. Adana had no idea where to begin to look.

The scales were as black as she imagined the bottom of the ocean to be, an unending and mesmerizing depth devoid of colour. The sun was shining brighter than she had seen in days, but it was as though the creature's organic armour sucked in any source of light, unwilling to give up its right to decisive darkness. Greyish-pink flesh peeked out from underneath the scales that had begun to slide off, sticking to the skin with complete resistance to leaving the host. It was a gruesome sight.

Adana had never seen anything so utterly dead before.

"Serpent," Lukas whispered, like he believed that even the smallest amount of noise would awaken the carcass in front of them.

It was fascinating, completely terrifying, and hard to imagine something so large capable of moving around. When had it died? Were there more like this one?

Without being able to stop herself, Adana stepped forward, wanting to feel the scales that still managed to coat the immense yet fragile body. With every step, the smell became sweeter. Her shadows continued to act as if they had lost all sense of themselves. Adana

stepped towards the body, blocking out the protests she heard from her travelling companions.

It was slicker than she had imagined. Where the flesh underneath was completely dried out, the outermost layer of protective shell and skin had retained a strange damp quality. When she pulled her hands away, she could see the exact outline of her fingertips just where she had touched them before the darkness of the scales seemed to pull her hand's impression back into itself. Her shadows threaded themselves around her fingers, stroking the shell along with her.

She wanted to know more.

Breaking whatever trance she'd managed to put herself under, Adana turned to her fellow companions. They looked aghast, and while Adana first thought they were still in shock at the sheer size of the Serpent that lay dead in front of them, she noticed that their eyes were not focused on its body. They were focused on her.

"Why did you – why would you touch that?" Corina asked. Her look was one of sheer disgust. Lukas was fidgeting behind her.

"Don't you want to know more? Don't you want to see it more closely?" Adana replied, the only one brave enough not to whisper. She didn't even look at them as she spoke, her gaze once more transfixed on the behemoth in front of her.

"We don't touch the dead," Deacon said. He and his sister had moved to stand closer to one another. There was something in his look though, far deeper than disgust. Hatred, pure and simple. Aimed at Adana, aimed at the Serpent. It was hard to tell.

Deciding to ignore them, she turned left, placing her hand again upon the body of the Serpent. There were certain parts where the scales had completely slid off, and there was only the feeling of dry, raw flesh underneath her hands, quite similar to the way a rabbit felt after she had skinned and cooked it.

Her shadows had formed into one large, hovering mass, leading the way, gliding along the scales as if they belonged there. In terms of colour, Adana thought, they certainly did. Without their nightly glow, she could barely distinguish them from the Serpent itself.

She was counting her steps as she followed its body's natural curve. She thought it may have curled in on itself, as she had seen some of the harmless snakes in the forest do. She finally reached a place where the sun had beat down onto the carcass for so long that even the putrid flesh had completely melted away, leaving only a neatly ordered row of perfectly circular bones. Adana was finally able to look over to the other end of the field. She was heading towards the head. Its tail was far out on the other side of the clearing.

Just getting from where she had first touched it to where she was now had taken 623 steps. Time was slowing down for her and her shadows. She barely remembered the others were even there. It was her, and it was her shadows, and it was the Serpent.

Calm.

That was what she was feeling.

No awe.

No shock.

She was meant to meet it.

She took another deep breath to inhale the sweet scent, almost sugary now.

The skeletal remains transitioned back into a fleshy corpse as she continued to walk alongside it, her hand gliding easily along its body. Finally, she reached its head.

1359 steps. And that was only half of its full size.

For some reason, Adana thought its eyes would have been shut, giving the Serpent the appearance that it was merely sleeping. Instead, she was greeted by the sight of one of its massive eyes staring back at her lifelessly. The colour was fading from its iris, but it was

obvious that it had once been a pure and bright shade of orange, now diminished to a tint of rust.

Her shadows, still in formation, gently nudged Adana closer to its head, and she couldn't stop herself from reaching up to stroke her hand along the curve of its enormous jaw. A few of the teeth had collapsed, impaled on the surprisingly green carpet of grass beneath her feet. Some were missing, however. She counted the empty spaces in its mouth and counted the teeth that had fallen out. Six were absent. Adana finally realized that the smell reminded her of honey.

Faintly, she heard footsteps behind her. Turning around, she saw Lukas in the lead, Deacon and Corina following him closely. They had their hands covering their noses and mouths, and their eyes were watery, their breathing uneasy. They had taken a wide berth away from the Serpent, away from its magnificence, and Adana felt a little gleeful that she was, at this moment, the bravest of the four. They were at least a good ten paces behind her, sticking closer to the line of the trees.

"Adana, we should keep going," Lukas said, taking his hand off his face only long enough to utter the words.

"Did you know this?" Adana asked, ignoring Lukas's plea. There was no way she was leaving now.

"No. No one ever said anything about this being here," Corina said, shooting her brother an accusatory glance.

"Because it isn't important," Deacon said. His mouth was almost curled into a snarl. "It's dead, they're all dead, and anyone that has anything to do with these vile beasts should be dead too," he said. He looked straight at Adana. She was tempted to turn away from him.

“How did they used to live?” Adana asked, desperate for any sort of concrete fact she could hold on to. She looked to Lukas for help, but he just shook his head, a warning not to ask any further questions.

She hadn't even realized her hand was still on the Serpent's face. As soon as she took it off, she could feel her ankle start to crumble under her weight again, and she was glad that she hadn't dropped her staff during her entranced state, leaning on it immediately. Corina looked positively triumphant at Adana's show of weakness. Her shadows became restless again, wildly flailing around.

“Who cares? They died. Turns out they were unworthy of living after all,” Deacon said. The three of them were still cowering behind their covered faces, and Adana was growing increasingly annoyed.

“Let's go, we need to move on. We've wasted enough time here as it is,” Corina said. She was trying to be authoritative. Adana almost pitied her attempt.

“Lukas, please – tell me more about them,” Adana said. He just shook his head again.

“Dea – Deacon, you've been here before. I can tell. Please, just tell me more. I've never seen anything like it. I've never seen anything like anything,” Adana said. She hated that she had just given up her weakness to him, and his name had felt wrong in her mouth somehow, a poison. But it was the truth: what had she ever really seen of the world in comparison to the three people that now stared blankly back at her?

“Yes, I've been here before. Which is why I know there is no point in staying any longer,” Deacon said, looking pointedly at his sister. She may be the better fighter, but her brother was still in charge.

They took to their formation again, Deacon at the front, Adana in the middle, Lukas and Corina at the back. Adana didn't want to follow them, but she had no other choice. Even the slightest possibility of seeing her mother again was enough reason to move forward.

Perhaps her mother could even tell her more about the Serpents and what they were like at their full potential, not when they were left to rot in some field.

Footsteps fell in time with hers, and Adana tore her gaze away from the inky blackness of the scales to be confronted with Lukas's worrying gaze upon her.

"Did you kill it? Your people?" Adana asked. For some reason, she felt it was vital to know. It was vital to the glimmer of trust she had in Lukas. In all of them.

"I don't – maybe. I don't know. There used to be a lot more of them. I've never been very far outside the campsite, Adana. I didn't know this was here. But I've heard stories," he said. He looked apprehensive.

"Tell me, please," Adana said. She wanted the images of the Serpent to be burned into her memories forever.

"I can't do that, Adana," Lukas said.

"Why not?" Adana asked. She noticed the group was walking quicker now, her three companions eager to get as far away from the Serpent as possible. Her shadows started flaying about even wilder. They were moving so wildly that she could see Lukas flinch once or twice as their ends came into contact with his face. She didn't understand why he flinched, though. They were as soft as a feather.

They were getting closer to the other side of the field, the line of trees becoming thicker as they approached the edge of the forest.

"Adana, what can you smell?" Lukas asked suddenly.

"Same as you," she said.

"Adana, just – just tell me what you can smell," Lukas said.

She took another deep breath, relishing in the sugary scent. "Honey. It smells like honey," she said.

Lukas just looked at her, his eyes wide. They were nearing the end of the clearing now as they reached the part of the beast where it was getting slimmer towards the tail. The flesh there seemed to be completely ripped out, dry strands of skin and organs hanging off of smaller circular bones. Adana could feel a strange tickle in the back of her throat. She wanted to cry out for it. Whatever had been done to this creature was horrible and spiteful. The idea that Lukas's people, his father, his mother, Sanna, or any other person she had met at the campsite could have done this to it made her feel rage.

They reached the edge of the clearing, Deacon already stepping back into the shade of the trees. Adana stopped, taking another look around, finally catching a glimpse of its tail, which was adorned with poisonous spikes that looked as menacing as its teeth. She wished it would have been enough to defend itself.

Corina was tapping her heavy foot impatiently behind them.

“Adana, why do you think we were covering our noses and mouths the entire time we were here?” Lukas asked, whispering again.

“Fear,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

“Death, Adana – it smelled like death,” Lukas said.

CHAPTER 10

“Just don’t tell the other two,” Lukas had pleaded with her before they followed Deacon back into the belly of the forest. It was much colder there, the sun barely able to penetrate through the thick roof of branches the old trees had fashioned above them. They had been walking for hours. Adana was getting thirsty. She could tell Lukas was too. Darkness was starting to set in.

Her shadows had become listless after their meeting with the Serpent. Adana felt a sense of loss, too – she would have loved to have seen the beast in full glory, towering out over the trees, no doubt a protector of the forest, just as she had once thought of herself.

Every step made her wince. She was thankful for the boots that Lukas had given her before they left. She didn’t think she would have been able to handle a few splinters in her feet now as well.

“We need to stop, Cor,” Lukas said. The nickname surprised Adana. He was trailing behind Corina now, even with her heavy foot. The pale fighter was keeping a close eye on Adana, and she felt weary with the effort of trying to ignore it. Adana looked ahead of her to where Deacon had finally slowed down his pace. Adana thought she could almost see his legs trembling. Corina looked towards her brother, seemingly coming to the same conclusion, and agreed that they should finally make camp.

Adana collapsed with relief. Lukas came to sit beside her. Corina started an attempt to build a fire, and Deacon slid down the trunk of a tree, shivering. He kept glancing around him, purposefully avoiding Adana whichever way he looked. She didn’t mind in the slightest.

“We need to keep watch,” Corina said.

“Why?” Adana asked. She had slept by herself in a forest for years without anything happening to her, and she knew that they all needed to rest. She might not like everyone, but that didn’t mean she wanted to watch as they all slowly crumbled with exhaustion.

“Scavengers,” Corina simply said. Adana had heard that word before, during one of the gatherings back at the campsite.

“What are they?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never seen one,” Corina said.

“No, never,” Adana said, looking to Lukas for guidance. He had already closed his eyes.

“They’re loners,” Deacon said. His voice was still hoarse from his heavy breathing. “Just like you.”

“Is that bad?” Adana asked. If he was equating these Scavengers to her, she already knew that he considered them to be his enemy, but she didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing that he was already getting under her skin.

“Yes, it is. They’re untrustworthy and strange, just like you,” Deacon said, finally looking right at her.

“Stop, Deacon – you’ve never even seen one,” Lukas interjected, his eyes still closed.

“I have, and we’ve heard enough stories of people who have as well,” Corina said, coming to her brother’s defence. “They’re no good and you know it, Lukas.”

Adana felt a cramp build up in her legs. She could feel fatigue and cold settling in her bones, and she was grateful when her shadows wrapped themselves around her, an illusion of warmth spreading through her as the threadbare blanket she had covered herself with allowed the cold night air to blow straight through.

“What do they do that makes them so bad?” Adana asked.

“They broke off from the rest of the population after the Migration. Thought that everyone should be able to live their lives exactly as they had always imagined and hoped for. No rules, no ownership, nothing. Some people thought it was a good idea. Most didn’t,” Lukas said. His eyes were open now, just a smidge, staring out in front of him.

“Exactly. Untrustworthy,” Corina said, as she finally sat down close to her brother.

“Just like me,” Adana whispered to herself, hoping no one would hear. Lukas, however, bumped his elbow kindly with hers and shook his head. She smiled.

He passed her his water pouch and she took a few big gulps, coughing a little at the debris that floated around within. It was soothing though, her throat raw from exertion. She saw Deacon and Corina each had their own set of supplies, not sharing water but sharing food instead. Adana felt her stomach rumble, and Lukas held out a few pieces of the dried meat he had packed. She took them, nodding at him in thanks, and chewed on them slowly, relishing in the feeling of being able to eat something solid and surprisingly full of flavour.

After they had all finished eating and Lukas once again closed his eyes, Adana watched Deacon help his sister with her leg. Adana could tell it was stiff, as Corina winced when she stretched out the metallic prosthetic in front of her, twisting it until it came off and she dropped it gently beside her. The leg itself was longer than Adana had imagined, ending in a harsh and uneven stump just below the knee. She could hardly tear her eyes away as she watched Deacon gently help Corina stretch her leg as he offered to take first watch. Adana only averted her gaze when Deacon caught her watching, a strange surge of jealousy coursing through her as she watched the siblings take care of each other.

Deacon stood up shakily, looking for a better vantage point to take watch, covering his sister in one of the blankets they had taken with them. Corina’s eyes were already closed. Adana could feel her eyelids become heavy with sleep as well. She took off her boots to make herself more comfortable, the feeling of them still foreign to her feet.

It was a while before she felt the ultimate pull of unconsciousness, and as she closed her eyes, she could have sworn she saw the flash of a bright orange eye hovering above her, watching over her as she finally fell into a deep sleep.

Adana woke, suddenly. Her eyes felt like they had been glued shut, but there was a ringing in her ears even her tired mind could not ignore, and as she finally managed to pry her own eyes open she saw what had pulled her from sleep.

Fire. A bright line of orange fire, straight from the small burning embers Corina had attempted to engage. A perfect line that led from where they were all resting deeper into the depth of the forest. No one else had woken from the sight, and before Adana could panic, she saw that nothing else had caught even the slightest spark, and the air and forestry around them was unharmed. Her shadows frantically whiskered around her, trying to catch her attention with their gentle touch. She acknowledged them by holding her hands up, signalling them to surround her wrists and fingers as she stood up to inspect the fire closer.

Deacon had fallen asleep on his watch. By the light of the flames and her shadows, she could see the hairs on his arms standing on end and sweat across his brow. He must have been having a nightmare. Lukas and Corina were exactly where she had last seen them.

As she stepped closer to the fire, the warmth she expected from it was nowhere to be found. The colour was not as orange as she had thought, but rather a deep red, tinged with sparks of yellow. The shapes the flames made were mesmerizing. She wanted to follow their trail.

She allowed her hand to dangle just above the tips of the fire. In the back of her mind, she wished the trail was sending her back towards the Serpent, but she followed the line of

fire anyway, her curiosity getting the best of her. The pain in her ankle was forgotten. She had even left the staff back where Lukas still lay sleeping.

Her eyes could only bring themselves to focus on the flames she was following. There was no need to count steps, no need to call out to the others. She could feel herself relax more by the second. She was still following a straight line; she was sure of it. It would be no trouble to find her way back.

The dry ground Adana had been walking on all day turned into moist soil, and she sighed with the relief it gave her weary feet. A reminder of home, she thought, as she almost felt a laugh bubbling up in her throat. It was a feeling from home. She pushed her toes further into the soil. It was cool, and Adana closed her eyes as she walked along, her hand still hovering above the flames.

She heard a cry in the distance. One of the others must have finally woken up, Adana theorized, and she hoped they would follow the fire's trail just as she was doing. They would catch up to her, and then they could journey on to wherever her mother had been hiding all these years, right after Adana got to the end of the fire line.

She pushed her left foot forward again, and the soil was so soft and light it was like walking through a stream.

The contrast of the heavy slab of stone her toes jammed into suddenly was an unwelcome surprise, and she cried out in pain as the world around her went dark. The minor glow of her shadows was no match for the brilliant light of the fire she had been following and her eyes needed more time to adjust to the night than ever before as the flames suddenly sputtered out.

CHAPTER 11

There was no fire. The hard stone she had fallen onto bruised her arms as she sat up carefully. She looked for any sign of the flames she had been following, any at all, but there were no embers to be found. Even her shadows weren't wound around her hands as she had thought they were. She must have been dreaming.

She shook her head, trying to rid herself of all feeling of the dream – the flames that licked at her skin, the smooth stone she was lying on. But the more she shook her head, the more real everything became, until eventually, she had to concede that she was not, in fact, still together with Lukas and the siblings, but had wandered away from them. In her sleep.

Her shadows meandered along her body. Adana sighed. She stood up, hoping that the flames in her dream had indeed been leading her in a straight line, and she looked for an imprint of her feet in the soft soil she had been walking on so she could follow it back to the others.

The soil turned out to be cracked mud, as dry as everything else within the wretched forest, and Adana sank again, hoping that Lukas would wake soon and try to find her. She was never going to be able to find her mother without them, as much as she hated to admit it.

She hadn't even noticed being covered in sweat, hair sticking to the back of her neck in thick knotted strands. She listened for Corina's angry shouts as they tried to find her, the worried questioning of Lukas's voice. Nothing. She listened for the snap of a branch or step of a foot in case there were any of those Scavengers lurking nearby. Nothing.

It was dead silent. She moved her feet across the stone, and couldn't even hear the shuffle her bare feet made across the light layer of dust that covered the slabs. She couldn't hear herself breathing. She couldn't hear the words she tried to say to her shadows, who still idly surrounded her body with no realization that something was wrong.

Adana had stepped onto the beginning of a path. The large tiles would lead away even further from the others. Her body was telling her to move, to follow the walkway. If Deacon was as good of a tracker as he thought himself to be, he should be able to follow her movements anywhere. Common sense would tell them that she followed the path.

She tried to whisper to her shadows again, but her voice was still inaudible, and so was the sigh that followed. Adana's shadows twisted around her lazily, as if they hadn't realized she was no longer sleepwalking – but she trusted them to be alert if any sudden danger befell her, and so she kept on walking, slowly placing one foot in front of the other. It was strange not to be able to hear her footsteps. It almost made her lose her balance.

She continued up the path, her eyes never having been so watchful now that her hearing was dampened. Adana noticed every single crack in the pavements she walked on, the dainty weeds that grew out of the space between each tile, and the line of ants trying to find their way back home. She could hardly tear her eyes away from the stone path, but once she finally did, she gasped soundlessly at the archway of trees she now found herself beneath.

It was completely dark. The trees had curved towards each other so perfectly, shutting out the light like keys fitting into their locks, the complete opposite of the fractured stones she walked on. The branches above her head had braided together, curving around each other, using each other's bark to create the perfect illusion of a roof. This was the craftsmanship of nature itself, she thought. Even the leaves she had been expecting to see had been expelled from the web of branches, cast away like unwanted blemishes.

She continued walking. Her ankle still hurt, and she could feel it swell up beneath her, an unrelenting reminder of the pain she felt, and she missed the comfort of her staff in her hand. She wondered if Lukas and the others were closing in on her yet. Maybe they hadn't even noticed she was gone.

The path became narrow, but the stones newer, and cracks in the pavement were being replaced with beautiful painted designs, swirls, and shapes that looked like a language. Her eyes, still intensely focused, followed the designs with interest. As she walked on, the designs became ever grander, the colours used ever richer. Adana even spotted a few glass tiles embedded into the stone, sharply cutting through the designs but adding value to them too.

The pathway stopped abruptly, and Adana shook her head, trying to pull herself back to reality when she noticed that the path had ended because she had come to a gate built with the same brownstone stiles. It looked immensely solid, the curve of the arch perfectly in line with the symmetrical line of the trees. The stones used for the gate were much thicker and wider and looked as though they had been there for centuries, yellow moss growing out of the clay that held them together. The stones encircled a mess of black iron bars which crossed through one another randomly, a menacing view that was in complete chaotic contrast to the rest of the meticulously built natural roof of the trees and the path she had been following.

Her shadows aligned themselves along her arms as she tried to push the gate open. It wouldn't budge. The iron bars were heavy in her hands, flakes of chipped black paint sticking to her fingertips, the disordered pattern of the metal bars confusing all her senses. The patterns she had seen on the walkway swirled in front of her vision, a mess of bright colours and lies and lessons and language to be learned, and Adana could feel her throat scream in an effort to get someone to help her, but once again, no sound came out, and all Adana could do was push against an iron gate that was not going to dislodge any time soon.

Adana was still pushing. Hours had passed, but the gate had not budged. She needed to know if the path continued, so Adana pushed even harder, her shadows pushing with her, but the gate didn't move, and neither did Adana.

She was straining herself so hard that she failed to notice the slow approach of the people climbing over the gate, gazing down at her as she desperately threw her entire weight against the bars in a futile effort to get them to yield. Even her shadows had failed to notice the intruders as they helped Adana push against the iron bars to no avail. *Please, please open*, she thought, willing them to dislodge.

By the time Adana finally exerted all her physical effort, one of the men that had been watching jumped off the gate to land gracefully behind her. She still hadn't noticed, but her shadows finally had, forming their shield once more behind her back to avoid any more surprises.

There was still no sound as the man quickly jumped towards her, Adana turning to see what her shadows were doing. She shouted inaudibly at her attacker, her shadows violently pushing him away from her, but they were so concentrated on the man in front that they failed to notice the man behind, who now twisted her arms behind her back, his heavy breathing on her neck. Her shadows became frantic, wildly trying to pursue both attackers, but the man that held Adana's wrists was able to keep a tight grip, despite the constant lashings by her shadows. She imagined the angry red lines that splayed across his cheeks, and that made Adana smile.

Her shadows' wild attack was beginning to work – Adana could feel her captor's grip on her wrists slipping as he watched his partner being attacked by her shadows against the frail skin beneath his eyes. The lashes were becoming darker, and the other half of her shadows that had concentrated on the man behind her focused on his neck, constricting around it, deep scratches from his fingernails forming on his skin as he tried to fight off an

attack he could not see. She wished she had her staff so that she could help her shadows in the fight – but she remembered some of the training that Lukas had given her and she kicked out with her left leg, hitting the man behind her right in the knee, and her captor’s legs buckled and his grip on her wrists finally slipped. She was about to set her shadows on him, permitting them to hurt his entire body, when her smile faded.

Dozens more men jumped onto the gate, surrounding the fight, clubs at the ready. They all wore the same armour, made from packed mud and grey clay, the beautiful designs from the pathway decorating their chest plates. There were too many of them to fight off, even for her shadows. She could feel the anger rising in her throat, blocking her airways – all she had wanted to do was follow the path. Her fingers dug into her palms, drawing blood, as she felt the constricting bandages that Mea had wrapped around her foot begin to strain against the swelling of her ankle. Everything hurt, and in that moment all she wanted was to see Lukas’s kind face and have his eyes tell her everything was alright.

She nearly got her wish. As Adana’s eyes were drawn to movement in the bushes, a few new men stepped out, wearing the same armour as the ones who had attacked her, and she saw familiar pale skin on the left and right, held by two men each, and right in front of her was Lukas; a knife to his throat, his kind eyes screwed shut in fear, and Adana wanted to shout to him, ask him if he was alright, but no sound came out.

The world was silent.

CHAPTER 12

The bars of the gate opened individually, pulling back slowly into the stone archway that supported the structure as one of the men turned a wheel on the side. After Adana, Lukas, Corina, and Deacon had been escorted through, the bars slammed back into place so quick they all flinched at the expected clang of metal.

But it never came.

The men that had merely witnessed the fight slunk back into the surrounding forest, their mud and clay armour blending perfectly within the trees. Adana managed to look back down at the pathway again, but the designs had stopped at the gate.

Lukas's eyes were still tightly shut, though Adana suspected it was no longer in fear of the knife that had been held to his throat. She could see Lukas's ears twitching, and she realized he was concentrating on trying to hear something, anything, but knew he would fail.

Corina was staring ahead defiantly, refusing to lock gazes with Adana. Clearly mad at her for walking away, angry with her for letting them all get captured. Adana dropped her head in shame, but her own irritation resurfaced when she saw that Corina had allowed one of the guards to take her staff.

Deacon's reaction, at this point, interested Adana the most. He was staring ahead as well, just like his sister – but his eyes were not focussed on the path ahead. They looked glassy and unaware. Sweat had curled the hair at the nape of his neck, and he appeared to be forcing himself not to shake, the effort only making him tremble all the more.

They marched on for a good while, the line of trees around them becoming thinner, and the ground underneath their feet turning from dust into small, jagged stones. Finally, they stopped, and Adana sucked in a breath at what she was seeing in front of her.

They were right at the edge of an enormous ravine, the drop from their position deeper than the eye could see. The walls of the ravine were all sharp rock, greys and reds and browns, each point and crevice looking as painful and deadly as the next. Deep within, right at the centre on a raised platform, stood a massive clay structure. It looked as sturdy as a fortress, yet as elegant as the archway of trees Adana had walked under, shining brilliantly in the far too bright sun that now beat down on them.

Lukas stepped closer to the edge, his captor still holding on to his wrists, eager to get a better look at the structure in front of them. Corina and Deacon stood behind, unwilling to come closer to the edge of such a sheer drop.

The closer they looked, the more the details came alive. From this distance, Adana thought she could see the same designs and symbols carved into the sides of the structure as had been on the pathway. She itched to get closer to inspect. Lukas did too, his feet shuffling forward even further, pulling his guard along with him.

On the other edge of the ravine stood a small settlement that had developed around the castle, each building made with deep grey clay, a different colour than the one used for the fortress. The buildings were organized in a perfect triangle, pointing towards the ravine, and Adana wondered about the kind of people that lived there. She had always found her home to be rife with natural beauty, but she was suddenly jealous of the people that got to live in this town, a white-hot and angry jealousy, as she imagined her mother taking her here instead of to a secluded clearing in the forest, a place where she could have been surrounded by others her entire life. Lukas took another step forward.

It was one too far.

The gravel edge spontaneously crumbled under the weight of his boot, and his entire leg slipped down, dangling in the ravine before the rest of him crumpled beneath the sudden shift in balance. The guard that had been holding him was so shocked he let go, leaving

Lukas without something steady to grab onto. His fingers had just managed to catch a sharp point of rock, and Adana could see blood trickle from his hands and down the sleek grey stone.

She ripped her arms out of her own guard's hands, panic giving her extra momentum as she shoved her hands towards Lukas to catch him, balancing on her knees. She could see he was trying to scream, an outlet for his fear, but still no sound came out. His fingers tried to wrap themselves around Adana's wrist but slipped, and Adana threw herself fully onto the ground, lowering her arms further so that he could try to catch her grip again.

He succeeded, but only just, fingers pressing into Adana's arm so hard she knew there would be bruises the next day. She held out her other hand so that he could reach for that one too, but she could feel her own body shifting across the gravel as Lukas's entire weight threatened to drag her down with him.

A pain so intense she almost let Lukas drop ripped through her leg abruptly, and she sucked in such an enormous gasp of air that she could feel her chest swell with the size of it.

Corina and Deacon had each grabbed hold of a leg to keep her steady. Corina gripped Adana's hurt ankle tightly, the swelling being forcefully pushed down by Corina's fingers, and Adana had to remind herself to keep breathing or she'd let Lukas go.

She kept breathing.

The other guards had by now all come to their senses, reaching towards Lukas to help pull him up. Adana felt her left leg slipping through Deacon's sweaty grip.

Throughout all of this, her shadows only served to hold Adana in place, and while she was grateful for their keeping her safe, she wished they would just help Lukas instead, and briefly wondered why they weren't as in sync with her as they normally were.

Thankfully, before the situation became any direr, the guards were able to grab Lukas underneath his arms, hoisting him up far enough for Adana to be able to lock hers around his

chest and have Deacon and Corina drag them both back over the edge. Stones and pebbles scratched at her face, arms and legs, but the pain only registered once they were far enough away from the danger of the ravine.

They were all breathing heavily. Adana's shadows were uncharacteristically relaxed as they surrounded her once again, but her focus was on Lukas and the crazed and terrified look in his eye. Before she understood what was happening, he had pulled her tightly into his arms, and for a brief moment, she thought he was trying to suffocate her, a punishment for running away.

He was hugging her. She couldn't even remember the last time she had been hugged.

His grip was tight across her shoulders, his hands holding her against him in fists across her back. She could feel him shaking, felt the dryness of his hair scratch her cheek as he refused to let go. Adana was so shocked, she only just remembered that she was supposed to put her own arms around him as well. As soon as she did, she felt him hugging her even tighter.

They reluctantly pulled apart as he felt the salty water of her tears fall on his shoulder, and she could feel the warm liquid of his blood drip down the threadbare shirt on her back. Once they broke apart, they laughed silently, the weight of the moment dissipating as Adana wiped her eyes and allowed herself to stand up again. Her foot still throbbed, but she hardly cared anymore. It seemed insignificant now.

"I'm glad you're okay," she tried to say, but no sound came. Lukas smiled softly anyway, tipping his head as if to say he understood.

Deacon and Corina had been watching them the entire time. Deacon's hand was gripping his sister's arm tightly, leaning on her for support. Adana wanted to thank them for holding her down, for helping her save Lukas, but they wouldn't hear the words anyway, so she just smiled at them instead, hoping they understood.

Corina nodded guardedly. Deacon merely looked at the ground.

After the initial shock wore off, the guards once again held each of their hands behind their backs, walking along the crater towards the town. Adana was full of adrenaline, and her shadows were too, struggling to stay around her hands, flitting about all along her body. Droplets of Lukas's blood littered their trail, staining the dry gravel beneath their feet. The stones should have crunched, but they didn't; instead, their jagged edges poked their feet through their worn boots, and she winced at the pain often, each step making her hobble more.

The walk around the crater's edge was longer than she expected. Adana was tired, and hungry, and the longer they walked in the burning sun, the more spots and swirls she started to see in her vision. The pain in her foot was becoming unbearable. By the time they finally got to the edge of the village, Adana's excitement had completely worn off and was instead replaced with enormous exhaustion.

A few of the townspeople stood in front of their doors, watching the group as they were marched past by the guards. Many of them suffered age marks, their faces and arms tanned, their skin wrinkled and dry, dehydration likely getting the best of them. Where the town had looked positively mesmerizing from far away, Adana could now see it was as dusty as Lukas's home camp had been, the clay crumbling along the edges, straw roofs littered with burn marks and holes.

Everywhere she looked, she could see the beautiful designs and patterns she had read on her way toward the gate. They lined the walls of the homes, the walkways. They were carved into the clay of the windowsills and cut into the collapsing brick of the well. The sharp smell of salt water forced its way inside her nose as they approached it, and no matter how thirsty she was, Adana almost retched at the thought of drinking it. If that was all these people had, they were in worse condition than back at the encampment.

People stared at them as they went past, a few even following in their footsteps on their way to the fortress within the ravine. By the time they finally reached the crater's edge again, Adana could see Lukas tense up in front of her, and she wanted to reach out and grab his arm and let him know that she would catch him again if necessary. But they had no words, they had no sound. Adana wondered if the people that were surrounding them now were able to hear or say anything.

A narrow stone footbridge stood between them and the fortress. Corina was accompanied across first, her footing steady, her pace sure. Deacon went next, his guard gripping him tightly by the shoulders, and Adana saw his feet slip every few steps while his guard held him up. Lukas went next, shaking visibly, but his strides were long and he was there quicker than any of the others had been. Adana crossed last, looking around her in awe. Her stomach flipped as she looked down the side of the bridge, the crater even deeper than originally presumed, the bottom invisible beneath the darkness. Once she got to the end, her guard twisted her arms behind her back again and pushed her forward, and Adana could not shake the feeling that something was watching her. She screwed her eyes shut, trying to clear her thoughts, but all she saw were bright orange circles dancing across her eyelids.

When she opened her eyes again, she was greeted by the sight of a woman standing before them, arms stretched wide, a smile on her face, head nodding in a gesture that Adana hoped was one of welcome.

CHAPTER 13

“Welcome,” the woman gestured again, and somehow Adana now knew exactly what she meant without having heard a single word.

She looked nothing like the women at Lukas’s encampment, nor the women in the village behind them. Her skin was pale, flawless, ageless. There was nothing to suggest she had to contend with the same struggles as her people. Long sleek black hair shone almost blue in the light that filtered through the wooden slats in the fortresses’ entry, and it looked so soft that Adana felt embarrassed at how haggard and dry her own hair undoubtedly was.

The woman never stopped smiling. It was unnerving.

“Emory,” Adana once again understood.

“My name,” she could somehow read.

It wasn’t until she fully watched the woman, Emory, gesture her arms again that Adana realized why the movements looked so familiar. They were akin to the drawings on the pathway, the beautiful swirling designs she had seen and studied so carefully. The patterns were the language. Reading the path had made it easier for Adana to understand what was being said.

Lukas, Deacon, and Corina looked as confused as ever.

Adana wanted to gesture her name, explain their purpose here somehow, but her recognition of certain patterns did nothing to help her translate her own words. She tried to say them out loud, *“My name is Adana, I’m sorry we are here, thank you for teaching me your language,”* and she could feel her mouth moving and her throat straining but still no sound came out.

“You’re welcome,” Adana read again, and she wondered if her words were somehow coming across anyway, that Emory could hear them while they could not. Adana could see

Lukas's mouth moving too, his hands gesticulating wildly, nowhere near the grace of Emory's movements, but there was no sound from him either. It felt like she was being cut off from her thoughts.

Maybe that was the point.

The guards behind them bowed to Emory, handing Adana's staff back to Corina and backing out of the room. Deacon and Corina looked surprised; they had not expected a leader to be left unguarded. Adana could see Corina's hands curl around the staff, planting her metallic left leg forward. Deacon finally met Emory's gaze. Lukas stepped in front of Adana a little, wary of the fact that Emory was placing all her attention on her. Four against one; but Adana did not want it to come to that.

"Beautiful," Emory's movements said, and it wasn't until her head tipped straight towards her shadows that Adana realized Emory could see them too. There were so many questions she wanted to shout suddenly, scream at the top of her lungs, and she could feel her throat itching to do so, the need almost choking her as she stepped towards this strange silent woman that stood in front of her. Emory could see them too.

They were real for somebody else as well.

Emory took a few steps back before directing the foursome's attention to the floor. There, they saw what she was pointing at; a drawing, of men hunting with wooden weapons, as Emory regarded them with a questioning look on her face. Adana had no idea how to respond, but the other three did.

Lukas, Deacon, and Corina all shook their heads vigorously. Deacon's face was especially painted with disgust.

"Certain?" Adana read.

Lukas stepped forward, words on the tip of his tongue, but none came. He looked to Adana for help, having noticed that Adana could understand some of what Emory was saying

to them, but Adana didn't comprehend what her companions were gesticulating about anyway, and so remained motionless. Her shadows were following the patterns on the floor and she was watching them with fascination.

Adana was snapped out of her reverie by Corina stepping forward angrily, her grip on the staff almost threatening to break it in two. She stomped towards the painting Emory had just pointed at, and spit on it. Adana stopped following her Shadows' movements in shock. Deacon had the smallest of smiles on his face, a strangely proud glint in his eyes.

Emory tipped her head. "*Good,*" Adana read in her movements.

"*Follow,*" Adana understood as Emory began to walk away, too fast for Adana to be able to study the rest of the image, but she managed to catch a glimpse of a brilliant red in the corner of her eye. Corina and Deacon followed as well, a little less anxious now that Emory had agreed with Corina's condemnation of the scene in the painting. Lukas walked behind Adana, close enough for the tips of his boots to brush against her ankles.

Emory led them down a long, oddly bare hallway to a balcony overlooking the ravine, the scenery stretching across to the forest and beyond. Lukas stopped halfway through the door opening, his near-fall still too much for him. Emory pointed at the roof for their eyes to follow, in a straight sweeping line until ending up at a small statue of a Serpent at the corner of the fortress that Adana had failed to notice before. She then swept her hands out across the ravine, clearly trying to make them understand something.

"*Serpent,*" Adana read. "*From here,*" Emory gestured, her hand reaching out across the gaping nothingness.

"*Seen?*" Adana read. She nodded enthusiastically in response. Emory's ever-present smile grew even wider.

"*Understand?*" Emory asked. Adana shook her head. The smile was still there, now radiant. She pointed towards the statue of the serpent again, then towards her ear, a gesture so

simple that even Adana's companions understood. The Serpent had something to do with their loss of hearing. Deacon was now leaning against the low stone wall of the balcony, watching Emory with interest. Lukas was mouthing a question towards Emory in a desperate bid to understand more.

"Not for always," Adana read from Emory's hand gestures, seemingly as a response to Lukas's question. His face relaxed immediately as Emory shook her head and he caught Adana's gaze. He smiled meekly at her as if embarrassed by his desperate need to speak.

The rest of the day was spent in splendid comfort. They were given hot, filling food, and clean drinking water. They were given seats upon cushions so soft Adana could have fallen asleep right then, but the silence was always there, surrounding them like a bubble, and Adana felt oddly at ease with it, much less worried about the loss of sense than her three chaperones seemed to be. What could frighten her in a world where there was no sound? Her shadows seemed equally as comfortable, tracing the patterns of every design they could see within the castle walls.

Emory couldn't keep her eyes off of them.

Guards came and went, and Emory's movements as she spoke with them were so quick and elegant that Adana felt self-conscious now that she could tell Emory was simplifying her speech for her. She had been catching glimpses of other paintings and images throughout the fortress. Most of them were of the Serpent, as it turned out – depicting its importance to the village and Emory. Everything seemed so ancient here, filled with history and a hint of something magical. Instinctively, Adana knew the paintings were of the same Serpent they had encountered dead in the woods – the black paint used to portray its magnificent scales was almost as tantalizingly dark as the real thing had been.

Emory joined Adana on the floor as she was studying a particular image. *"A sweet smell,"* Emory gestured, her eyes focused on the painting of the Serpent. Adana nodded.

Emory suddenly took Adana's chin in her hands, forcing them to lock eyes. Emory's were the same colour as her hair when the sunlight reflected off of it, a deep indigo that Adana could find herself drowning in. Letting Adana's face go, Emory started to gesture again, more urgently, more frequently, but still slow enough for Adana to understand what was being said to her.

“Do not let them take you.”

CHAPTER 14

“What do you mean?” Adana felt herself mouthing, unable to understand the warning that Emory was trying to impress upon her. “Who? Who shouldn’t take me? Why?” Each question more pronounced and desperate than the last. Lukas, having sensed Adana’s flustered state, came to sit beside her, unknowingly bringing her comfort even though she hadn’t asked him to.

Emory pointed once again towards the painting Corina had previously condemned, closing her eyes as she did so. Nothing would truly make sense to Adana unless they could have a proper conversation, and now, suddenly, the silence was becoming unbearable, an itch against her skin that she couldn’t scratch. Where she had found comfort and serenity before, there was only irritation and fear now. Her shadows sensed it too, abandoning their discovery of the tiles to surround Adana, covering her shaking hands.

She stood up, having enough of the plush cushions, wishing instead that it was earth underneath their feet and not the hardness of stone. It was time to go, even if her chaperones disagreed. Lukas scrambled up next to her, looking at her intently, asking a question with his expression that he couldn’t ask with his words. *What’s wrong?*

She couldn’t answer. Everything was wrong, even if this was the first place that she could find some answers. How was she supposed to protect herself from a group of people she had no knowledge of, who Corina hated even more than her? Was that supposed to make her feel better, or worse? Why did her eye keep being drawn to that sliver of red in the painting?

Do not let them take you. What if that meant Corina, Deacon – even Lukas? Adana felt in no way equipped to handle this situation. She had been alone for so long, that everyone was too much. Even Lukas. Even Emory, who could see her shadows.

“I want to leave!” Adana silently shouted, more for the feeling of release than anything else. She looked at Emory one last time, who looked at her with something like pity, overwhelming and patronizing all at the same time.

She needed to run.

Making her way out of the great hall, her shadows had no trouble keeping up with her. As Adana stumbled every few steps in an effort to lessen the pain, her shadows were there to catch her. She had no idea if anyone was following her, footsteps strangely silent on the smooth slabs of stone beneath her feet. Did she care? Yes, she wanted Lukas to follow, but she also knew she shouldn't want him to. If he was one of the people that Emory was trying to warn her about, she needed to get away from all of them.

The heat hit Adana like a slap in the face as she made her way outside. The cool protection of the clay castle was no more; instead, her dark tousled hair was being baked in the strong afternoon sun.

She jumped out of her skin as she felt a tight hand wrap around her wrist, pulling her backward. She could feel her ankle nearly twisting again, scrunching her eyes in pain as she turned to see who had grabbed her. Emory, with a sharper grip than her thin face should allow, refused to let go as she allowed the others to catch up to them. “*Come with me*”, she gestured.

They turned the opposite way they had come before, their tracks curving around the back of the fortress, deeper into the ravine that surrounded them on a path they hadn't spotted before. Adana felt her pulse quicken, beckoning her shadows to wrap themselves around Emory's arm should she try anything. The others seemed to be close behind – gravel fell around Adana's feet from their footsteps.

The path kept twisting, deeper down, the air become steadily warmer trapped in between the walls of rock that now surrounded them from all sides. A bead of sweat dripped

down Adana's forehead, falling into her eye. There was a faint trace of that wonderfully sweet smell in the air, and she tried to focus on it, forgetting about the world around her. Perhaps Emory was the one she should have been afraid of.

Winding down further, Adana noted that the path was getting more precarious by the step, bigger bits of rock tumbling down around her, falling into the nothingness below. Emory's grip on her arm was still bruising, but it was the least of her worries. Any chance she had of making a safe escape had now vanished. There was nowhere to run.

They turned a sharp corner, the path shifting upwards on a steep incline. They kept on track, the heat and the uphill trek taking its toll. Adana could feel her breathing get heavier, more of the sweet scent coming in, but less air coming out. Her lungs were starting to burn.

It went on for ages, winding and twisting; a path Emory seemed to know by heart. Adana turned her head occasionally, checking that the others were still behind them.

The incline stopped. Where the sun had been beating down on them before, it was quickly setting, leaving a nicer, dry, and cool air around them. The rest of the path was flat, and Adana caught her breath, the sweet scent fading with each step upwards.

Clambering over the edge of the ravine, Adana sighed when Emory finally let go of her arm, pressure points from her fingertips leaving welts on her skin. She felt her ears pop painfully, and she yelped, the sound echoing around the clearing they found themselves in.

"Oh, finally," she heard Lukas say behind her, the sound of his voice immensely comforting. There was the sound of rustling trees, the wind. Pebbles being kicked up underneath their feet, the sound of laboured breathing next to her on the right. Following the sound, she saw Deacon collapsed on the ground, Corina crouched next to him, rubbing his back as she tried to get him to imitate her breathing pattern. He looked even paler than usual, sweat dripping down his forehead and pasting his thin hair to his skin. She might have felt

sorry for him, had he been anyone else. She checked up on Lukas, who looked overheated, but strong.

“I needed you to listen to me,” an unfamiliar voice said. It was harsh yet soft at the same time, a lilting accent adorning the words, and Adana turned to Emory with surprise. She had assumed she couldn’t speak at all.

“There is comfort in silence,” Emory said, clearly picking up on Adana’s train of thought. Deacon and Corina had managed to pull themselves up from the ground, looking equally as confused at Emory’s sudden ability to communicate with them.

“How come you can see my shadows?” Adana asked, the question having plagued her since Emory had indicated she found them beautiful. “No one else can.”

Corina seemed particularly interested in the answer.

“My silence is my shadows,” Emory said.

“I’m not sure I understand,” Lukas said.

“My silence is my shadows. My silence does what I want. What it wants. Some of my people couldn’t hear. Others can. My silence makes it so that everyone can be the same,” she replied.

Adana let the words sink in. She wasn’t alone.

“So, you’ve taken people’s choices from them?” Lukas asked, his tone more cynical.

“Life is easier when everyone can communicate in the same way. I gave them language, safety from others. We ran here from others’ fear. We will not do the same now,” Emory said, her tone of voice now matching the dark colour of her eyes. She turned to Adana. “Our magic is the same, but not. Others think we do not exist anymore; they are wrong. Magic never truly dies. It finds ways to survive.”

“Have you seen Scavengers around here?” Corina interrupted.

“She is around, yes,” Emory said.

“She?” Adana asked.

“Scavengers, savages, whatever you want to call them. They loot other people’s settlements. Not even out of necessity, but for sport. They believe they were here before the rest of us, and so have more rights to the land. All lies, if you ask me. No proof,” Deacon said, his voice strained. “Did they come here for you as well?”

“You must hurry. If the Scavengers see you, they will try and claim you. They have tried with me, yet failed. They may not make the same mistake twice,” Emory said, rolling down the shoulder of her vest, showing them a faded, grey-tinged slash, the rest of her pale skin desperately trying to claw its way over it. Emory turned to leave, walking back towards the path they had just escaped from. As she lowered herself down with ease, Adana felt the overwhelming urge to stop her, keep her with them. She could teach her, tell her about what she is, why her shadows are hers, perhaps even what she can do with them. Jumping down and grabbing Emory’s wrist the same way she had with Lukas before, she ignored the pain in her ankle as she stopped Emory from leaving.

“You need to tell me more,” Adana said.

“I have told you all that I can. My silence is my shadows, yes, but the silence is not the shadows. They do not work the same. There is nothing else I can tell you.”

“You lie to me,” Adana said, her grip tightening as she slightly twists the skin around Emory’s pulse.

“No, I do not,” Emory said, ripping her arm from Adana’s grasp. Adana could see red crescents where her nails had dug into the skin, and she felt a glimmer of guilt pass through her, vaporizing just as quickly as it came. She needed help. Why was nobody willing to give it to her? Emory took off, setting a much quicker pace than they had when they had all walked down the path together. Adana turned around just as Lukas was stretching out his hand to help her up onto the clearing once more. She felt her gaze soften, but Lukas’s was

harder than she was used to, studying her face intently. Looking away, she took his offered assistance as her shadows twisted themselves around her torso.

There they were, as always. She would never let anyone take them from her.

CHAPTER 15

Darkness settled itself snugly around them. It had taken a while to get back on course; Deacon's usual sneer long gone from his face – the circles under his eyes more pronounced than before. Yet he was the only one who had ever been to the Coastal Barricades, and so he was the only one who knew the way. Adana and the others had to wait while he got some strength back. Corina kept a close eye on him, occasionally wiping the sweat from his brow, brushing the hair out of his eyes. Adana could tell she was hurting too. She winced whenever she stood up from her place next to Deacon, twisting her metal-encased foot as though that would somehow soften the heaviness of its material. The hike through the ravine had taken its toll on all of them.

Slowly, they moved forward. Corina supported Deacon behind Adana and Lukas, the large trees surrounding them comforting as they continued their trek through the forest. It reminded Adana of home, as ever; but occasionally, she would pick up a leaf, and it would crumble to dust as soon as she touched it. She wanted to feel sad, responsible, and guilty, yet there was a strange feeling of nothingness in her mind. She shrugged it off the same way she had Lukas's gaze earlier.

She looked behind her for a moment, catching a glimpse of Deacon and Corina struggling to walk. She felt the corner of her mouth turn upwards in a smile. Her shadows weaved themselves around her fingers.

"We should make camp," Lukas said, pulling Adana out of her thoughts. He had caught sight of the sibling's struggle as well. The two practically dropped to the ground, their ritual of taking care of each other commencing slowly. Lukas sat down too, his back resting against an old tree, looking at Adana expectantly as he waited for her to sit next to him.

"Are you alright?" Lukas asked, whispering once she'd taken a seat.

Adana nodded, continuing to watch Corina and Deacon. Her fingers twitched as she watched Corina take off her prosthetic, shadows dancing rather excitedly.

“Are you sure? You seemed quite... angry there, for a moment.”

Adana nodded again. She wasn't much in the mood for talking. She hoped he would be silent now, but no such luck.

“So your parents never told you about... about your shadows?”

She shook her head.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

She turned to look at him, catching the remorse in his eyes, the kindness with which he looked at her. Perhaps she had mistaken his gaze before, but his compassion made her feel guilty, like being mad at him would be a sin, somehow.

“She didn't know. I never told her,” Adana replied.

“Your mother? What about your father? You haven't – you haven't mentioned him before,” Lukas said.

“I haven't seen him for a long time. But he's looking for me. Mother made us hide,” Adana said.

“Why would she make you hide?” he asked.

“I don't know.”

“Was he – do you miss him?”

“Was he what?”

“Was he a good father? Is that why you think he is looking for you?”

“Yes. He is good. He could always find me, so I know that he will, someday,” Adana said, her voice lowering as images of her and her father playing hide and seek flooded through her mind.

It was silent for a beat. She could hear the faint sound of birds singing in the distance.

“Do you want your mother to find you too?” Lukas asked after a moment. Deacon and Corina had grown quiet. Adana could tell they were listening in.

“I don’t know.”

“She must have left for a reason,” Lukas said.

“But I was not enough reason to come back,” Adana said.

“You don’t know that, she might not have been able to,” Lukas said.

“So you think she died?” Adana asked, anger simmering in her veins.

“No – that’s not what I’m saying. But there must have been a reason that she didn’t come back to you. You say your father is looking for you, but you stayed in the same place for years. So why couldn’t he find you? Haven’t you wondered?”

“I’ll bet she knew about you and your horrible shadows and ran for her life,” Corina said.

Adana jumped up, a rush of anger running through her. She felt Lukas’s hand curl around her fingers, failing to hold her back as she stalked towards the siblings.

“You do not know anything about me or my mother,” Adana said, her voice cold. She could feel her shadows wrapping themselves around her wrists.

“Don’t I? Both parents abandoned you, leaving you to live in the forest like a savage. You might as well be a Scavenger, there’s no way to tell the difference.”

Hands curling into fists, Adana felt herself trembling with rage.

“That’s not fair, Corina,” Lukas spoke, coming to stand behind Adana. He put a hand on her shoulder, to steady her or to hold her back, she couldn’t tell.

“It isn’t fair? None of this is fair. Why have we been tasked with bringing her to the Coastal Barricades? Why do we care what happens to her? They can ‘test’ her powers as much as they like, but in the meantime, we’re stuck taking care of her when we don’t even

know her. You can ask her questions all you want, Lukas – who says she’s telling the truth?”

“You can leave,” Adana said, voice cold.

“No – we can’t,” Deacon said, his voice weaker, tone stark in contrast.

“We leave, and we have no home. There are obligations, promises we have to keep. Answers that we need, and you are the one that is getting in the way,” Corina said.

“Is this because your brother is ill?” Adana said.

“Excuse me?” Corina said.

“Don’t, Adana – now’s not the time,” Lukas warned.

“I’ve noticed,” Adana said, turning around, back to her previous seat.

The conversation stopped, but the tension was still there, both sides ignoring each other for the rest of the evening. Lukas had come back to sit beside Adana, offering a handful of dried meat and some water, the two of them eating in uncomfortable silence; a silence that grew until the birds had simmered down and Adana couldn’t stand it anymore.

“What about you?” she asked, not knowing where her question was leading her.

“What about me?” Lukas asked back.

“I want to know about you,” Adana said.

“There isn’t much to know. You’ve met my mother. She cares, in her way. My father – it’s complicated. He lost both his parents, my grandparents, when he was young.”

Adana nodded in understanding. “How did you get the scar?” She looked down at his crossed legs, raising her eyebrow.

“It’s a long story,” he said. She prompted him to continue with her silence.

“There was a time when I wanted to run away from home. My mother was... in a dark place. At all times. It’s better now, but not all the time. Father was the same. They spent a lot of time apart. All I knew of the outside world was that our people had migrated a

few generations earlier because there wasn't anything left where they came from. I'd never left the settlement. I just wanted to see what it would be like. Maybe find a place that wasn't constantly dry. So I left. Convinced nobody would miss me for the day. Walked for hours. Found a lake that was nearly empty. I stayed there for a while, imaging what it would be like to see the lake full. And then I stayed too long. I – I ran into some Scavengers. They thought I might have something of value to them, but I didn't, of course, and they didn't like that. As I was running away from them one sliced my leg to slow me down. It was painful, but I knew that I would need to keep going, and so I did," Lukas said, taking a deep breath as he finished his story.

"How did you get away?" Adana asked, intrigued.

"I thought one of the Scavengers was coming after me, but another stopped them. She was younger, I think. Smaller than the rest of them. She convinced them I had nothing of value and somehow stopped them long enough to let me go," he said.

"I see," Adana said.

"That wasn't you, was it?" Lukas said.

She looked up in confusion. "No, of course not?"

"No, I – I know. Sorry. It was just a joke," he said.

"Oh," Adana mumbled, allowing herself to smile just a little. "Do they scare you?"

"Who, the Scavengers?"

She nodded.

"No, not really. I think I have more reason to resent them than most. Certainly more than those two,' he pointed towards Corina and Deacon, who had fallen asleep a few minutes earlier, 'as far as the stories go, most of the people who settled on this land, no matter where they were coming from, came here to be safe. To have a life. Who am I to say they aren't just trying to do the same?"

“That makes sense,” Adana said. Lying down, she could feel her eyes growing heavy. She heard Lukas shifting next to her, trying to get comfortable for the night. It had been a strange two days, she realized. “Is that how you see me also?”

He was silent, and for a moment Adana thought he may have already fallen asleep.

“Yes, I suppose so,” Lukas said, right before Adana sunk into sleep herself.

CHAPTER 16

Waking up the next morning was like emerging from a coma. Ears ringing, Adana sat up slowly, taking in deep breaths as she tried to remember where she was and why she was there. Flashes of violet and red danced through her mind, dirt and silence blocking her ears. Opening her eyes, she felt better as she saw the forest around her, even as she noticed Lukas, Corina, and Deacon lying haphazardly around her. Memories of arguments resurfaced; Emory, her soldiers, her warning. Adana's shadows weaved themselves through her hair, around her fingers, neck, toes, and ankles. Their soft edges felt rougher somehow, but in a way that was comforting: a stark reminder that they were always there, no matter what.

Standing up, stretching, joints cracked along the way. Stiffness ached in her bones and she wished more than anything that they wouldn't have to walk that day. Corina and Deacon were stubborn enough to push through their pain, though. Adana wasn't about to be beaten by them.

Taking Lukas's water canteen, she walked away from the campsite, hoping to find a flower, a plant, a tree that could use some help. She spotted a patch of wilting red lilies and made her way over to them, shadows slithering ahead of her. It was quite the beautiful sight, their dark mist hanging over the blood-red petals, and she could enjoy the colours as she bent down to pour some water on the dry ground that surrounded them. She wished she could will the sun to come out, bring some life back to what should have been greenery all around them.

"Could I have some water?" she suddenly heard from behind her, jumping at the sound of Lukas's voice.

"Oh – of course. I'm sorry... I just wanted to..."

"To help, I understand. Must be quite strange to see the world like this when you were so used to the beauty of your home," he said, making his way towards her.

“The world doesn’t deserve to look like this.”

“No, I agree. But the world is also responsible for it looking like this,” he said.

“Not people?” Adana asked, an accusatory tone in her voice.

“No – no, not people. Although I can understand why you might think that. It’s just been like this, for as long as I can remember, but it has been spreading. That lake I mentioned yesterday, that’s always been like that. It’s why we were so surprised to find you, and the stream. We hadn’t seen anything like it in years. It was like a veil had just suddenly lifted.”

Adana remained quiet, absorbing what Lukas had said. She heard the faint sounds of Corina and Deacon waking up in the background, so she kept her eyes fixated on the flowers, hoping that if she just kept watching she’d see them grow taller and stronger right before her very eyes.

No such luck.

“Do you want something to eat?” Lukas asks.

Adana shook her head, her sight still focused on the flower. She felt tempted to pick one and take it with her as a reminder of home, and even as she had the thought her shadows wrapped around one of the stems as though they were about to snap it in half for her. Stretching her fingers out to beckon them back towards her before they could do any real damage to the plant, she sighed at the comforting feeling of them being close to her again. Distance, even for a few minutes, threw her off balance.

Reluctantly, she turned back to the others, hoping that their journey would at least allow them to keep travelling under the cover of the trees. Another day of dry heat and the scorching sun sounded unbearable.

“We need to keep going,” she heard Deacon say, his voice getting louder as she stepped closer. He sounded a bit stronger now, more rested. The dark circles under his eyes

were still prominent as ever and Adana could tell that Corina was worried as she hovered beside her brother.

“Are you sure you can?” Lukas asked, using the same kind voice he always used when he spoke to Adana.

“Of course I am,” Deacon spat back, and Adana felt the smile slip off her face.

“Brother, please – I’m worried about you too. One day of rest isn’t going to hurt anyone. There’s no deadline to get there,” Corina pleaded.

“No!” Deacon shouted, stumbling away from his sister. She looked equally shocked and hurt, and Adana would have had sympathy for her had she not been so cruel to her just the night before.

“No,” he said again, quieter this time, ‘we need to keep going. I – We need to get rid of her as soon as possible. We’ve already wasted enough time because of her as it is,” Deacon finished, looking directly at Adana. Before she could retort, he started to cough, a vicious sound cutting through the tranquillity of the forest.

“Alright, if you’re sure. What’s the best way to go?” Lukas said, trying to diffuse the tension.

Deacon glared at Adana as he spoke, and she felt her hands curling into fists by her side, shadows wrapping around them like gloves. “We should stay within the trees. Need to lessen our exposure to the heat. If we head straight West for a while, we should be able to find our way back to the path we were following when we found that grotesque carcass on the track. From there, it should be a relatively easy journey to continue. Keep watch for outsiders, but not many trek between settlements. Trade isn’t as important as it used to be,” he finished, trying to catch his breath. Corina handed him some water, and he took it gratefully, smiling sheepishly at his sister.

“Scavengers?” Adana asked.

“Keep watch for those as well,” Corina replied darkly.

Adana nodded, her hands relaxing by her side.

The pain had returned to Adana’s ankle, a slow throbbing that matched the quick pace of her heartbeat. The air around them was thankfully dry, and Adana was almost ashamed that she was thankful for the lack of humidity. It had been the only complaint she’d had about her home; constantly sweating, even when it was dark. Enough to drive anyone mad, until you knew what you were missing.

The group stayed silent as they walked, and it was making her nervous. She’d had enough of silence for a while. She listened intently for the sounds of wilderness that surrounded them. Rationally, she knew it was just the animals looking for some kind of sustenance, but after everything that had happened to them so far, she was right to feel a little paranoid.

Every time she blinked, red light seemed to hide behind her eyelids, reminding her of the colour of the lilies she had helped only that morning, or the colour she had spotted in Emory’s paintings. How could anyone be wary of such a colour, a pleasant sliver of beauty in this dreary and brown world?

She had asked her shadows to stay in their defence formation nonetheless. The journey had made her increasingly more agitated throughout.

“Haven’t you wondered why he couldn’t find you?”

The silence made Lukas’s previous questions cut through her mind on an endless loop.

“Do you think there was a reason your mother couldn’t come back for you?”

“No, no, no,” she whispered to herself. None of it made any sense. Her father would come for her when he could. He wasn’t given a choice in leaving her. Her mother was. And if Mea was right, and her mother had gone to the Coastal Barricades, wouldn’t that have meant that she knew about her shadows? That Samira wanted to go there for the very same reasons Adana was being taken there now? Why not come back for her when she knew what was possible? Her mother made that choice. Her mother made the choice not to come get her. Her father made the choice to chase them through the woods. That was the difference.

The longer they walked, the more the scents around them rode on the breeze and shifted. Rotting leaves degraded into toxic moss, which morphed into dry pine, with the occasional hint of cracked bark and foul grass. Once, as they were crossing through another clearing, that particular sweet scent overwhelmed her senses again and she inhaled deeply as the others retched around her. Adana could have pretended she found it uncomfortable as well, but what would be the point? Deacon and Corina wouldn’t have believed her anyway.

As they found their footing back on the track, the sudden movement of branches behind them made them all turn on the spot. There, they saw a few of Emory’s men make their way back into the forest.

“She probably sent them after us to make sure we left her precious settlement,” Corina said, clearly irritated.

“Why does it matter? They didn’t harm us. We’d probably be safer if they followed us all the way,” Lukas said, ever the pragmatist.

“It matters because we don’t need to be escorted like we’re a bunch of thieves,” Deacon said, agreeing with his sister.

“Maybe if you had noticed them before you wouldn’t be so angry about it now,” Adana said.

“I’d just as soon have let them take you,” Corina said, seething.

“And then you wouldn’t be fulfilling your obligation to your family,” Lukas said, ‘none of this matters. Let’s just keep going until one of us collapses and call it a day. Standing around and yelling at each other isn’t going to help anything and right now, I want to get away from this dreadful smell,” he finished, looking pointedly at Deacon, who was starting to look a little worse for wear again, his cough becoming more persistent.

“If you hate me so much, why are you taking me? I don’t believe in a sense of duty. There is a reason you want to go. Don’t be angry at me because of another reason,” Adana said, taking a step closer to Corina, who looked towards her brother. Adana noticed him shaking his head slightly, telling his sister to back down. It made her even more curious, especially when she noticed the way his chest deflated when he tried to breathe. She was sure she was right about their ulterior motive. She’d get them to tell her, at some point.

“Stop,” Lukas said, with more force in his voice than Adana had witnessed so far. Everyone fell silent once again, the clearing becoming another refuge for the sounds of the forest.

“Deacon, how much longer do you think you can walk?”

“I’ll let you know,” he said, grimacing.

“Fine. Let’s just leave before we all lose our meagre breakfasts. There’s no sense in fighting every few minutes.”

They kept going, but it was getting increasingly harder for each of them. Adana could feel stiffness settling into her ankle, making her gait uneven, the pain travelling through her leg up to her hip. Lukas kept massaging the back of his calf, trying to ease the tension in his muscles. Deacon was having a hard time breathing, the rattling of his lungs heard even from a few paces behind him. Corina was walking with heavy footsteps, calculatingly placing one foot in front of the other, using Adana’s walking staff as a crutch. They were all in pain. None of them were used to walking this long for so many days in a row. If Quinton had

wanted her to feel tortured before the true examination began, he chose a good way of ensuring just that.

Would answers about her mother be enough to justify the constant pain, fear, confusion, and anger? She wasn't so sure.

Shadows floating behind her, she dragged her feet forward once more.

"Should we make camp?" Lukas finally asked, allowing Adana to breathe a sigh of relief.

"No," Deacon said, much to everyone's surprise, even Corina's.

"Why not? Deacon, I know you don't want to let anything slow you down, but we'll never reach the Barricades if we've all collapsed from exhaustion before then," Lukas said.

"That's not why," Deacon responded, his voice dropping to a whisper. Adana had to take a step closer to hear him.

"Then why?" Corina asked, lowering her volume as well.

"I think we're being followed," he said, his head gesturing to the canopy of trees behind them. It had grown dark, the black between the trees indistinguishable from the night sky. The only light they still had emanated from the moon, growing dimmer by the moment as clouds threatened to overwhelm its power.

"Emory?" Adana asked, heeding the urgency in Deacon's voice.

He shrugged. "Maybe."

"How can you be sure?" Lukas asked, a sharp edge to his question.

"I keep hearing noises in a specific rhythm. At first, I thought it was probably just animals, but now I'm not sure. It's a sort of... swish, and then a light footfall. The only reason I caught on is that none of us were speaking the whole time. Now that we've stopped, I don't hear it anymore either. Whoever or whatever it is, I don't think it's a good idea to stop. It'll leave us too vulnerable," said Deacon.

Adana was impressed. She had regarded the noises as those of the forest. Rhythm hadn't even occurred to her.

"None of us are exactly in any condition to fight, let alone walk through the night," Lukas said.

Corina's hand balled into a fist by her side. "I can," she said, defiantly.

"My shadows can," Adana whispered, interjecting. They all stared at her, Lukas with sympathy in his eyes.

"My shadows will protect me. You get behind me, they will protect you too," Adana said again, her voice a little more forceful.

"If we walk, it won't come to that," Deacon said, looking her straight in the eye for the first time in a while.

"You don't know," Adana replied.

"At this point, I'd say let's be thankful that they're there. We've seen what they can do. If we're truly being followed, it's a good thing we have some type of defence, any type of defence," Lukas said, "Your daggers won't be enough, Deacon and Corina. I know we weren't expecting an ambush, we have nothing to offer – but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be careful and use every tool we have at our disposal."

"So we keep moving?" Corina asked, looking at her brother. It was his decision. He was in worse shape than the rest of them. He sighed deeply, air rattling around in his throat.

"Yes, we keep moving."

CHAPTER 17

Adana could feel the swelling in her feet. Hours upon hours spent painfully walking with deliberate, paranoid and hungry steps. She'd taken to counting them again. So far, she'd reached 7,423. Adana was sure she'd missed a couple of hundred those few instances she felt as though she was about to collapse.

8,588. Their pace was excruciating. Her shadows had even taken to floating in front of the group now. Still in their defence formation, a few stragglers floating beside Adana. Days seemed to have passed, but it was still dark outside. The moon had lost its battle against the clouds, and they had all had a few painful falls towards the ground, made all the more severe by the dry solid dirt beneath them.

The steady rhythm of sounds that Deacon had described seemed to have ceased, but the fear was still there; a paranoid belief that the people that were following them were hiding in the darkness, perfect cover provided by Adana's beloved trees. What could they do but keep going? They could barely see a few dozen steps in front of them. The faint glow of her shadows illuminated nothing but themselves. It was them against the dark.

The sound of Corina's heavy metal boot broke the frightful silence every time she took a step. Adana was beginning to feel sorry for her, for both her and her brother. She could tell they were in pain. Resentment was nearly forgotten as she watched how the two tried to hold each other up, dragging their tired legs along the beaten track.

"It shouldn't be much longer until the sun comes up," Deacon whispered, low tone hiding the cracks in his voice.

"I hope so," Lukas said, now limping as well. Adana tried to imagine how the Serpent could slither by, allowing them to ride on its back to their final destination, the sweet, warming scent enveloping her in the deepest parts of her mind's eye.

More darkness. 11,562. Cramp in her thigh, swallowing the sudden needle of pain. The first sliver of light could be detected over the tops of the trees. There was no beautiful sunrise to speak of, however. The clouds had completely overshadowed the normally twinkling sky, and where there should have been brilliant shades of pink, yellow and red, there were instead dull stripes of light grey, slightly darker grey, dark grey, and near black. The hood of darkness rose slowly, disappearing into nothing until light finally filtered through the trees and the group could release their anxiety.

The build-up of expectation quickly dissipated as they found themselves alone. They keenly explored each corner of their immediate surroundings, eyes straining in the new light to spot anything out of the ordinary, Adana's shadows jumped around, breaking their formation at inhuman speed to assess the danger that they had all feared.

Nothing. They had walked all night for nothing.

"Deacon – are you sure you heard something last night? That your imagination wasn't playing tricks on you because we had spotted Emory's men before?" Lukas asked, breaking the simmering tension.

"What are you saying, Lukas? I believe my brother, that should be enough for you," Corina said before Deacon could try to defend himself. Adana watched his face fall, as he desperately looked around for any sign of being watched, a cracked branch in the wrong place, an oddly ripped leaf. He was visibly shaking, hair plastered to his forehead, abnormally pale skin even sicklier than usual. Something was wrong.

"Are you – are you okay?" Adana whispered, taking a step closer to him in the process. She could hardly believe the words had just come out of her mouth, but something was definitely amiss.

Lukas seemed to notice it too. "Deacon, it's okay. No one is around. We're safe. Maybe we should all rest for a while," he said.

Deacon almost collapsed on the spot, Corina getting to him just in time to break his fall.

“Could you go find us a small pond or something? Anywhere we can at least find a little water?” Adana quietly asked her shadows, while she took care sliding down the trunk of a tree to sit down. Pins and needles pricked the soles of her feet, and she couldn’t even bring herself to care about the hard bark digging into her shoulders. She wanted to help, even in a little way; but she didn’t have the energy to scout right now, even with her shadows surrounding her, so she thought it best if they went out looking on their own. If there was anything there, they would find it. A few snuck around her ankles as the rest floated on into the woods.

None of them said a word to each other. Lukas had come to sit against the tree next to her but closed his eyes after having stretched out his leg. Deacon had fallen asleep immediately after refusing some of the meagre food that Corina had offered to him. Corina had taken off her metal boot, but stayed awake, sharpening her knives against each other, keeping a watchful eye out on the forest. Adana was mesmerized by the sound of metal against metal, the intricate detail of the blades’ handles. She tried to imagine how sharp they would be, how easily they could pierce someone’s skin, how much it would hurt.

They sat like that for hours, trying to recharge their energy. Her shadows had returned, indicating that there was a water source along the path, so at least Adana knew they could refill their provisions tomorrow. She felt too stiff to move anyway. Her eyelids kept drooping with exhaustion but she couldn’t allow herself to sleep.

Corina had taken to playing tricks with her knives, twisting them around her hands, in between her fingers. Adana wished she knew how to handle them as well as her, a tight feeling of jealousy winding through her gut.

“Do you... do you think you could teach me?” Adana asked, breaking the silence for the first time in hours.

Corina’s head snapped up, clearly surprised by the question. “I thought Lukas had given you some pointers on how to use your staff,” Corina said, looking down at where it lay beside her.

Adana smiled as she remembered. “He did, yes. But I don’t think he was as good as you,” she said, truthfully.

One corner of Corina’s mouth turned up slightly. “He isn’t.”

After a moment of consideration, Corina slid one of the knives toward Adana over the dusty ground. She stopped it with her hand, flinching when she felt the knife nick her palm.

“Careful, they’re sharp,” Corina said, grinning.

Inspecting the knife, Adana had expected to see her reflection in the metal, but it was dull, a flat grey colour, and she looked up in surprise at Corina.

“Don’t get a lot of opportunities to clean our weapons when there’s hardly any water around,” she said, shrugging.

Adana nodded.

“Okay, now grip the knife in your dominant hand,” Corina instructed, pointing towards the dagger. Adana clenched it between her fingers in her left hand, feeling a strange surge of energy as she did. Her shadows covered her fist and surrounded her forearm, making her grip on the weapon even tighter, more secure.

“How does that feel?” Corina asked.

Adana nodded. “Strong,” she said.

“Good. Now show me how you would cut someone,”

Adana made a slow, deliberate arching motion through the air.

“Not bad, but try not to make too big of an arch. That would give your attacker more time to respond, possibly block.”

Adana nodded again, making a straighter slash in the air this time.

“Right. Like that,” Corina said, “try quickly switching it to your other hand, then make the same motion. Sometimes you’ll have to attack from a different angle than you normally would.”

Adana uncurled her fingers, tossing the knife to her other hand, trying not to get nicked again. Another flinch as she felt the blade catch on the bottom of her finger, but she managed to catch it nonetheless, biting through the sting. Quickly making another cutting motion, she felt quite proud of herself as her shadows surrounded her other hand, pain quickly forgotten.

“That needs some work,” Corina said.

Adana managed a small smile, hoping she’d get the chance to practice more. “Why did you let me hold this?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“It’s not like you could beat me anyway. Even without my leg,” Corina said.

“My shadows could,” Adana retorted.

“I know. But I also know that you don’t want to upset Lukas. I’m assuming he’s the only one who’s ever been this nice to you. If you use those things against me for no reason, he won’t trust you anymore.”

Adana didn’t respond. Instead, she slid the knife back towards Corina, who deftly anticipated where its handle would land so she could catch it without hurting herself. Adana was bothered by what Corina had said – was she that dependent on Lukas’s kindness? She hadn’t felt the need for anyone’s approval since she last saw her father. Why Lukas? Was his friendship making her weak?

She didn't ask any of those questions out loud. Instead, she opted to watch the sunset, hoping to see some brilliant colours in the sky, once again disappointed as all it could offer her was a lacklustre shade of blue slowly diminishing into depthless black.

"We should get moving again," Adana heard Corina say as she tried to shake her brother awake. Lukas woke with a start, orienting himself as he looked around frantically, calming down once he saw Adana sitting next to him.

"My shadows found some water on the path," she said to him, and he nodded, a slight smile gracing his face. Adana looked away, trying not to get too wrapped up in his unyielding gentleness.

With a lot of help and a bit of pain, Corina had managed to get her prosthetic on again, standing up with the support of Adana's staff, while Deacon tried to regain his balance by leaning against his sister. He looked a bit better – the dark circles under his eyes were less pronounced, but Adana could tell he was still shaky.

"We keep going again until it is light. We'll be safer on the move in the dark, anyway. Watch your step and don't fall behind," he said, sighing. Adana thought he might have been trying to convince himself more than them.

As they made their way around a bush to keep following the trail, Adana thought she saw a flash of red in the corner of her eye. Her head snapped in that direction, but then she was sure she could see it on the other side, her shadows snapping into formation as she looked around in confusion.

"Did you see something?" Lukas asked.

"I – I'm not sure. It might have just been a fox..." she trailed off, trying to catch another glimpse. The colour was so bright, that it was hard to miss. Maybe she was right, and the creature had slunk back into the shadows.

"Or Deacon was right," Lukas said, eyes widening.

“Maybe,” Adana responded, trying not to alert the others as she saw another flash of red diagonally across from her.

That red though...she mused – it was hardly human. And it was moving fast.

CHAPTER 18

That red colour kept following them all night. Adana could spot it from the corner of her eyes, then it was directly in front of them – sometimes she missed it when it was right behind the group, and Adana would have expected to turn around to find whatever it was that was following them pressed up against her back.

She could feel Lukas watching her too, examining her every move, trying to follow her line of sight. Why whatever or whoever it was hadn't shown themselves yet was a mystery. The group was easy prey. Lacking in energy, and slow; someone who didn't know any better would look at them and see a simple target.

Instead of counting steps, Adana had taken up counting how many times the colour flashed in her field of vision. So far, 23. And they must have only been walking for an hour or so.

“Have you been able to get a closer look?” Lukas would ask her every so often. She'd shake her head no, and they'd keep walking, their paranoid head movements making their necks feel stiff. Deacon and Corina were struggling along, Corina's metal boot starting to drag along the forest floor, a slow but steady rhythm to match Adana's heartbeat. She was paranoid, but not scared. She still had her shadows, after all. What could possibly hurt them?

Thirty-seven flashes of red, now. Time was moving slower, it seemed.

“Why do you think they're not showing us?” Adana asked Lukas.

“Showing us who or what they are, you mean? I don't know. Maybe that's not what they're after. If they were Scavengers, I have a feeling we'd have already been attacked five times over by now. Maybe whatever this is just isn't used to seeing other people on this trail. Trade between camps isn't what it used to be and hardly anyone makes the journey to the

Coastal Barricades anymore because it's so far away," he said, his eyes turned towards the sky, deep in thought.

"Your papa?" Adana asked.

"You think he sent whatever this is? I mean, it's possible....and I wouldn't put it past him, but at the moment I don't think he can spare anyone else," Lukas replied.

Adana nodded; another flash of red spotted diagonally across from them. 38.

A hacking cough interrupted their train of thought, Deacon having halted his slow shuffle along the path to get his breath back. The sound was agonizing to hear, cutting hard and deep, like his lungs were ripping open, and Lukas looked at Adana in alarm before sprinting over to the siblings to offer Deacon some water. He was getting worse. Sleep alone couldn't help whatever this was anymore. She tried to remember if he'd been this bad when she'd first encountered him, but she had probably been so blinded by sheer rage and panic and curiosity that she wouldn't have noticed anyway. Now, she was worried. He was their best navigator, and while he still hadn't shown anything more than contempt for her, she could only imagine the amount of pain he was in.

While a strange wave of sympathy overcame her, there was nagging doubt as well. They had stopped in the middle of the path, all eyes on Deacon, trees surrounding them from all sides. Whatever they had been limping away from for the past two nights, if it was ever going to strike under cover of darkness, this would be the moment to do it. She kept a watchful eye out, her shadows surrounding her, shrouding her in a dark mist only she could see.

Another cough, a gasp for air. There hadn't been a recent flash of red. They were stuck on 38. Adana wished she was holding one of Corina's knives. She could see where they were strapped to Corina's hip and leg, and she felt an urge to reach out and rip one from its sheath and use it on the next person to antagonize her.

Her shadows clung tighter to her body, slithering up and down her skin.

Lukas looked over then, studying the surrounding area, and she could feel his eyes boring into her as her shadows tightened their grip on her even more. Something was coming. She just knew.

A twig snapped. Corina checked to see if she had stepped on anything as she did her best to hold her brother up, but there was nothing beneath her feet. The forest was as quiet as it had ever been. No footsteps, Deacon had finally stopped coughing, and Adana's shadows had wrapped themselves around her like armour. Still no new flash of red.

Everyone was holding their breath. Deacon looked as though he was about to faint.

And there it was: pressure against her back, shoulders, and neck. Whoever was watching them had come out of hiding.

A red strand of hair had fallen over Adana's shoulder, and she looked at it with curiosity – it was not the brilliant red of flowers or a sunset, not the inhuman colour she had seen tracking them through the forest all night. Rather it was a dull copper, tinted with hints of brown, dry and messy, frizzy curls. She wondered how it was possible to have misjudged the colour so badly, but she didn't have time to dwell on those thoughts as the pressure on her shoulders was getting worse.

“Can't run – or, well – limp from us for too long, can you?” The pressure behind her whispered; a lighter voice than Adana had been expecting, melodious with a hint of scorn.

Fingertips were pressing hard into her shoulders, and Adana felt a few of her shadows slither upwards, wrapping themselves around the hands that held her back. They were ready to fight. So was she. But she hesitated as she saw the looks on Deacon's and Corina's faces, pure horror, frantically turning every which way as more figures emerged from the obscurity

of the trees. Corina quickly pulled both daggers from their sheaths, nearly dropping Deacon on the ground in her effort to defend him, remorse flickering across her features as she heard her brother gasp in pain.

Lukas, however, looked surprisingly relieved, like he was happy to finally know what threat they were up against.

Four people in terrible shape against 25 armed fighters. The odds weren't in their favour.

Adana's shadows tightened their grip on her captor's hands. She could feel a body flinch behind her.

"Interesting," whispered the voice, this time with a hint of amusement.

Adana was getting angry. All this paranoia, pain, walking, and straggling, only to be amusing to someone who wasn't even brave enough to show them their face? Her shadows started to shudder in time with the pulses of her anger, their grip on her aggressor getting stronger and spreading themselves across their body, leaving Adana half unprotected, but giving her the chance to turn away and finally see that red colour head-on.

What she saw was not what she had been expecting. While her initial assessment of the hair had been correct, she wasn't prepared for the tan skin, dotted with thousands of freckles, or the armour, seemingly made of wood, bark, and moss, cut into a jagged puzzle, covering the bits of skin that weren't covered in blue bruises. What Adana most definitely hadn't been prepared for was the eyes – an attempt had been made at covering them up with shorter strands of flaky red hair, which had failed.

One eye shifted between honey and dark brown, and the other simply wasn't there. The left eyelid had been sewn shut, ragged stitches crisscrossing over one another in an indiscernible pattern.

Adana couldn't look away. Neither could her assailant, it seemed.

“Scavengers,” she heard Corina spit out, deep disgust evident in her tone of voice.

Adana’s head snapped towards her, somehow surprised. This wasn’t what she’d been imagining at all. Confused, she looked around, noticing that the others surrounding them were wearing similar armour, darker and lighter patches of wood and bark covering different parts of their bodies. They had crooked branches sharpened into spears and bare feet, making them appear as though they had been born of the forest and the trees. Adana weirdly envied them, thinking back to her beautiful home, her beautiful flowers and trees and shrubs and soil, disheartened once again by the dry rot she saw surrounding her now.

As her shadows covered Adana from neck to toe, she stood her ground, waiting for an explanation, a question, something that would allow this confrontation to move forward. She was getting antsy, uncomfortable at the amount of attention she was getting from the woman in front of her, one honey-coloured eye studying her closely. Her shadows were frantic too, but she couldn’t tell if the woman could see them or not. Lukas seemed too shell-shocked to fight and Corina couldn’t take them all out on her own. Adana had her shadows and had the upper hand. That was the most important thing.

“Why have you been following us?” Lukas asked, his voice much stronger than Adana would have anticipated. The woman finally looked away from Adana to search for Lukas, and she could feel herself breathe a sigh of relief.

“You’ve found yourself on our territory,” the woman said with a shrug.

“We haven’t done anything to antagonize you, though,” Lukas said.

“Who says this was my idea?”

“You’re clearly the leader,” Lukas said, an unexpected look of recognition flickering across his face.

“That doesn’t necessarily mean it was my idea,” she said, slyly.

Conversation stopped then, as the woman's followers took a step closer to Corina and Deacon when he finally regained his balance and was able to stand at his sister's side, albeit shakily.

"Why did I see a red that looked like a flower?" Adana asked, and everyone looked at her with a puzzled expression, including Lukas. The young woman laughed, a true and honest laugh, a strange calming sensation overcoming Adana at the sound.

"You see what I want you to see," the leader replied simply. That didn't answer Adana's question.

"Are you not attacking because you know I can win?" Adana asked, continuing the conversation. A few of the followers looked up at that statement, looking to their leader, confused expressions peeking out from under their strange armour.

"You'd still only see what I want you to see."

Adana remained silent then, not knowing what the woman meant. She allowed her shadows to move towards the leader, and a strange look of fear crossed the woman's eyes as she felt them against her skin. Adana had the oddest feeling that she should call her shadows back to her, but she couldn't make herself do it, not even to figure out whether or not her shadows could be seen.

"So, if this wasn't your idea then how come you've got us surrounded? We don't have anything of value for you to steal," Corina said, voice dripping with venom.

"Who says we're here to steal anything?"

"That's all you do," Deacon said, finally letting his voice be heard again.

"Did your lot not steal from us in the first place?" The woman said, clearly bored with this line of inquiry. Her gaze had turned back to Adana and her shadows, the latter of which were now crawling up the woman's legs while they held each other's stare. Adana could see that she was flinching, at the cold or pain, she wasn't sure.

“Then what do you want from us?” Lukas asked.

“Where are you going?” she countered.

“The Coastal Barricades,” Adana offered, enduring withering glares from her group for her answer.

“Why?”

“That’s none of your concern,” Corina said.

“I could make it my concern,” the young woman said. Her followers were now clearly confused, fidgeting in place as they looked toward their leader.

“We don’t want your concern,” Deacon said.

“And yet I’ll provide you with it anyway,” she said, “the route you’re taking will be cut off in about 3 days walk by a sink-hole that has recently appeared in the path. Going around it will take you a few extra days as the hills and forests on either side are hard enough to traverse for people in perfect condition, let alone yourselves,” she said, clearly nodding at Corina and Deacon, whose faces became the definition of fury.

“I can take you through an easier route. A few settlements further on and you’ll be much closer and less weary than you are right at this moment.”

“We don’t want to go through the other settlements,” Deacon said.

“Because you don’t want people to question your presence there? They won’t if I come with you.”

“We don’t listen to liars and thieves like you,” Corina said.

“Why would you help us?” Adana asked. There was that penetrating gaze again.

“Contrary to the prevalent myth we don’t steal from and murder every person we come across,” the woman said, giving Lukas a pointed look.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” Lukas said, “you’re the one who stopped them from hurting me back then.”

The woman said nothing.

“Delilah, what are you doing?” one of her followers asked, clearly frustrated at where this conversation was going. “We can’t all go with you if you lead them towards the shore. We have our families to take care of. You know that.”

The woman, Delilah, slowly walked toward the follower that had posed the question. Adana’s shadows trailed her diligently, never letting up on their aggression, and Adana could see Delilah flinch every time she took a step.

“I need to lead them away from our territory. It’s the best way to keep you all safe. The longer they stay here, the higher the chance that someone else will follow them,” Delilah said.

“No one else is following, just you,” Adana said. Delilah gave her a small smile, doubt lacing her eyes. She turned back to her followers, now clearly addressing them all.

“I promise you, they will only see what I want them to see,’ she said, louder than necessary, as though more followers were waiting in the cover of the trees, ‘do you trust me?’”

“We trust you,” they all chorused back, making Adana flinch at the sudden volume.

Delilah seemed to give her current predicament some thought, eyebrows scrunched together, regarding each person carefully. Stitches stretched along the line of her left eyelid as she raised an eyebrow.

“Take them with us,” she finally said.

CHAPTER 19

There had been sculptures on the way in. Placed with careful precision between the trees, there were sculptures that mimicked the fighter's armour perfectly – bark and twig and moss, all beautifully constructed to create the illusion of threat. If it had been dark, and they had run into those pieces of art without knowing it, Adana would have been terrified – she imagined they looked like monsters in the moonlight.

It was strange, Adana thought. While she had always regarded trees as beautiful and important, she had never realized their many uses. Shelter – obviously. But also, armour, tools, weaponry, utensils, toys, and furniture. That was what surrounded her now as they were led into the Scavenger's camp. Everything that was theirs, everything that they had made, camouflaged perfectly within the surrounding setting, easy to miss if you didn't know what you were looking for. Beautiful, and useful. Her trees.

The fighters were the only ones wearing the armour, while their families, friends, and children wore simple clothing, parts made from leaves and moss. It reminded her of Lukas's small settlement, and she briefly wondered if the three of them missed home. They had been forced to escort her on this journey, after all. She thankfully had her own ulterior motive for allowing herself to be dragged towards the Coastal Barricades, but still. Lukas, especially, seemed to care about his people.

She felt Delilah looking at her every so often as she admired the Scavenger's camp. Unsettling wasn't the right word. Deacon catching her that first time, staring at her with that wild look in his eyes; that had been unsettling. Same with Corina, coupled with fear. When Lukas had studied her the first time they met, she'd felt a strange sense of calm, and security. What she felt now? Nerves.

The nerves only increased with following eyes. Everywhere she went, eyes followed. When she had first been brought to Lukas's home, Emory's people, and now the Scavengers. Eyes followed her everywhere, Delilah's one included, and she finally understood Deacon's desperation not to go through other settlements during their trek.

Delilah led them to a hut on the far side of the field, raised a bit higher than any of the other shelters. That way, Adana reasoned, it was easier for Delilah to keep an eye on her people. The hut was small, but full of personality – different coloured leaves filled in the gaps between thick and thin branches, vines twisting around clumps of sticks to give them more stability. There was a thick branch in each corner, impaled far into the muddy ground, holding up the weaker four walls. A slightly crooked roof covered the top of the structure, branches woven into a criss-cross pattern that Adana noticed matched the stitches over Delilah's eye. The doorway was free and open, easy to get in and out of.

The other shacks around the settlement were similar in construction, but some were made in different shapes. A few had a circular build, and some had taken less care to take the bark off their branches, giving them a darker appearance. Some had stuffed moss into the cracks between branches to be able to keep the warmth in better. In some ways, the homes resembled the house she'd kept in her memory – a small log cabin she and her parents used to live in, also hidden deep within the trees. The construction of that had been sturdier than these homes, and there had been a fireplace, but the idea was the same, and Adana allowed herself a small smile.

“There are more of you than I would have expected,” Lukas said, as Delilah turned around to face their group. Adana wouldn't have known, as she hadn't heard about the Scavengers until Corina's enraged rant about them, but according to the looks on their faces, they agreed with Lukas. They scanned the grounds with an equal measure of trepidation in their eyes.

“Strength in numbers, and all that,” Delilah responded.

“You’re one of the younger women here, how come you’re their leader?” Corina asked, a hint of jealousy in her voice. Corina was one of their camp’s prized fighters, Adana knew, but she had no leadership role to speak of.

“Your people entrusted you to take her to the Coastal Barricades, did they not? I see no difference in responsibility,” Delilah said, nodding towards Adana.

“Why do you care that we’re taking her there?” Lukas asked, genuinely curious.

“She doesn’t speak like you. Her words and sentences are slightly stilted and she has a different accent. She’s travelling with three people, two of whom have no respect or positive feeling towards her and the other that’s constantly checking how she’ll react to something she sees and if she’s alright. Not to mention, it’s quite obvious she has some form of magic, although I’m not entirely sure what it is yet, and most ordinary people don’t take well to that sort of thing. The Coastal Barricades can “sort her out” as some people would call it, rather too kindly, for my liking. She may have magic but she doesn’t deserve to be shepherded like a dog somewhere that she doesn’t want to go,” Delilah finished, looking pointedly towards Adana as she finished her observations.

“I – wow. That’s quite observant of you,” Lukas said.

“Yes, well. When you get put in charge of this many people it’s important to be observant.”

“So you see them?” Adana asked.

Delilah paused. “See what? As I said, I don’t know what you have, but I know you have something.”

Corina scoffed. “Why are we here? We could just leave. Why do you care if we stumble upon some sinkhole? Who, besides you, would be following us anyway?”

“There are more people out there than just Scavengers, you know,” Delilah replied simply.

“We’ve already met Emory,” Deacon said, rather darkly. Adana could tell that he desperately wanted to sit down, but she suspected his pride wouldn’t let him. Not in front of these people he believed to hate so much.

“Emory should be the least of your worries. And I suspect she told you to keep away from me too – as I would have warned you to stay away from her, had you been going the other way. I think the isolation she’s put herself and her people under have made her rather irritable,”

“Irritable?” Adana asked, not knowing what the word meant.

“Angry,” Lukas answered for her.

“Oh,” Adana said.

“She did warn you about me, didn’t she? Or Scavengers in general,” Delilah asked, once more focusing all her attention on Adana. There were those nerves again.

“She said to not let you take me,” Adana whispered, feeling suddenly ashamed of that advice and wanting to forget she’d ever heard it.

“Well, we haven’t taken you, have we? You came voluntarily,” Delilah said, clapping her hands once, hard. It made Adana flinch and her shadows jump. She turned away to look back at the rest of the campsite.

“It is in my and my people’s best interest to guide you away from here as safely and as quickly as possible. I promise, that if you let me come with you, none of the other settlements on the road will bother you. We’ve got an understanding with one another. Your journey will be much shorter and less painful, and once we reach the other side of the hills, I will let you go to continue your journey in peace, or whatever kind of animosity you all held towards each other before we found you,” Delilah said.

“We don’t need your help!” Corina shouted, so loudly that the other sounds from the camp simmered down.

“And yet I’m giving it to you,’ Delilah said, looking only at Adana once again. Her right eye seemed a little darker than it had when they had first encountered one another, honey now turned into soil. ‘You can either accept my help, or we keep you here. It’s four against 137, or it could be four against one. Your choice.”

Adana’s shadows were still flitting about the whole camp, restless since the Scavengers had revealed themselves. She missed their comforting chill and silently beckoned them towards her again. A few answered the call, but the rest continued to explore.

“I –” Lukas began, but Corina cut him off.

“No. No, you do not get to make our decisions for us, Lukas. How can we possibly trust these people? We need to keep moving. We are not staying here.”

“I understand why you don’t trust them, Corina. You think I do? But if they had wanted to hurt us, they could have easily done so already – Adana might have her magic, but we’re no match for well over a hundred people, and look at your brother, Corina. He can barely stand. He needs to rest and so do we. It’s probably safer here than to make camp out on the trail,” Lukas said, trying to reason with her.

“You think I don’t know what state my brother is in? If I could carry him, I would,” Corina said with a hitch in her voice, and Adana was surprised to see her eyes become glassier.

“I know you would,” Lukas said, as understanding as ever.

“Cor... I need to stay. I can’t walk anymore. And neither should you. Your leg has been stiff for hours,’ Deacon mumbled, grabbing hold of his sister’s hand. ‘It doesn’t matter if we sleep here or on the trail. They could find us and bring us back anyway.”

“But I –” Corina started.

“I know,” Deacon said. “Me too,” he shot Delilah a withering glare. She smiled in return.

“It’s just for a night, and then we’ll keep heading out on our own,” Lukas said, ever the mediator.

Corina nodded in defeat. “Fine. But we leave first thing in the morning. I’m not staying in this camp a moment longer than necessary.”

Adana sighed in relief, sneaking a small glance at Delilah as she did so, whose gaze caught hers with something that strangely resembled sorrow.

CHAPTER 20

“It’s weird, isn’t it? So much sound surrounding us again. We’ve been sleeping in the silence of the woods for so long I nearly forgot what it was like to sleep in a larger camp,” Lukas whispered to Adana as they lay side by side a few meters away from Delilah’s hut. Adana had been watching the orange light filter through the cracks in the branches, wondering what Delilah was doing inside.

“I don’t like this much noise,” Adana said.

“No... you wouldn’t, would you? I’ve been sleeping in our settlement my entire life. That first night we were on the road... I don’t think I’d ever felt so isolated before,”

“Isolated?” Adana asked.

“Alone,” Lukas answered.

Forcing her gaze away from Delilah’s hut, Adana opted instead to look up at the stars. Smoke from the camp’s fires was clouding her vision of the sky, coupled with the dim light her shadows gave off as they twisted themselves around her – but a few stars were still visible.

“Did you see her eye become dark?” Adana asked.

“Who’s eye?”

“Delilah.”

They both turned to look at each other, confusion clear across Lukas’s face as he furrowed his brows.

“I don’t know,”

“Oh.” The fire cracked next to them.

“Yours do though, sometimes,”

Adana’s eyes widened curiously. “What do you mean?”

“Well, sometimes, when Deacon or Corina are bothering you, or when you were looking for the source of what was following us in the woods... your eyes become darker as well. I thought it was a trick of the light the first few times I noticed it, but... I don’t know. Light golden-brown turns into... the colour of your shadows, I suppose.”

“So it changes. Like Delilah,” Adana mused.

“Yeah... I suppose so,” Lukas said, turning his gaze back to the sky.

“Her hair changed too,” Adana said.

“What do you mean?”

“When they were following, it was like the red from one of my flowers... so clear through the trees. But it’s not. Not really,” Adana said, mumbling to herself.

“I wonder...” Lukas said, trailing off.

“Wonder what?”

“Well maybe... maybe the change in eye colour means something. Maybe it means you’re not the only one here with magic,” he said.

Adana sat up suddenly. “So, you think she lies about seeing my shadows?”

Lukas gazed up at her. “I’m not sure it’s lying... maybe she really can’t see them. Not all magic is the same, at least that’s what my father used to say. So maybe the fact that Emory could see them doesn’t mean that Delilah can. I guess it would answer Corina’s question about why they made her their leader.”

Adana turned her focus back to Delilah’s shack, neck tingling with the feeling that someone was watching her.

“Will you tell them?” Adana asked, nodding her head back towards where Deacon and Corina slept next to each other.

“Don’t you think they deserve to know?”

Adana kept still, her focus on Delilah’s hut.

“I know they still don’t like you, and they don’t treat you with any sort of measurable kindness. But they haven’t had it easy in their lives. Their outright suspicion and anger towards these people might not always be justified but they deserve to know who it is their travelling with,” Lukas said.

Adana briefly thought back to her interaction with Corina when she had taught her a few lessons on wielding a knife. It was a nice memory, in actuality. Deacon was harder to crack.

Lukas winced as he sat up to face her, trying to gage her expression. He was massaging his lower leg, grimacing every time he dug his fingers into his skin.

“Are you okay?” Adana asked.

He offered her a small smile. “Yeah, I’m okay. It’s just a little sore, that’s all.”

“Maybe my shadows can help. They help me,” she offered.

“You think they can?”

Adana nodded.

“Alright then,” Lukas said.

She beckoned them towards her, the full pack of shadows finally surrounding her again for the first time since they had entered the camp. As she enjoyed the feeling of them threading themselves through her fingers, she motioned for a few to wind themselves around Lukas’s legs, hoping their cooling effect would help alleviate some of his pain. His eyes darted all around, wondering where they were going to come from, and he stifled a small yelp of surprise when his leg was lifted slightly into the air. Adana smiled.

They wrapped themselves around his leg, creating a blanket over his jagged scar. Adana hoped that he was feeling better already, the same way she did every time her shadows surrounded her, but instead of a look of relief crossing his face, it was pain, a flinch or two, his eyelids squeezing shut.

“Is it okay?” Adana asked, concerned, watching as her shadows tightened their grip on him.

Lukas shook his head. “Maybe... maybe the pain is worse than I thought. I think I just need to let it rest for a while,” he said, shaking his leg, trying to get them off.

“But I... I don’t understand,” Adana said, panicked.

“It’s okay, it’s not your fault. Maybe they just can’t do the same for other people as they can for you. They are yours, after all,” he said, always trying to make her feel better, even when she was the one causing him pain. She willed her shadows to come back to her and got nervous when it took them longer to respond than usual. Lukas flinched again, his leg falling back hard on the ground when they finally released him. She couldn’t understand what had just happened. They felt so soft to the touch surrounding her now.

There was sweat on his brow, and she looked at him anxiously as his eyes finally found hers.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s not your fault,” he repeated. He moved to lie back down again. Adana followed suit.

“Should we sleep?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, his voice becoming softer.

She closed her eyes, trying to block out the random shouts, laughter, and cracks coming from the camp, breathing in deeply through her nose in an attempt to smell the forest around her.

“Your eyes turned dark again,” Lukas whispered before he rolled over.

It had been a dreadful night. Adana had trouble falling asleep with all the noise, and now she was awoken abruptly by the feeling of children accidentally stepping on her hand as they raced past. She grunted in annoyance, shadows immediately standing to attention – but a small smile graced her face as she saw how happy the children were to play together. It had been so long since she'd felt that happy herself. Not since the last time she had seen her father, she thought.

Lukas was still asleep beside her. Deacon and Corina had been woken up as well, tending to each other as always. Deacon's appearance hadn't improved since last night. Corina was trying to feed him some broth while he helped her put on her prosthetic. He refused, shaking his head profusely, jaw clenching as he took in the smell of the hot liquid. Adana suddenly felt her stomach rumbling, but before she could stand up to try and find some food, a bowl was being held out in front of her by a slender, tanned and freckled hand.

"Here. You must be hungry. I think we forgot to feed you last night," Delilah's melodic voice rang out, and Adana had to remind herself to grab the bowl before she could find herself staring at Delilah's eye once again. It was still as dark as soil, and she wondered if Lukas had been right about it being a trick of the light or if there was something more going on there.

Adana inhaled the scent of the broth, allowing the warmth of the bowl to melt into her body through her hands. Relaxing, she took a sip, pleasantly surprised at the taste of herbs and vegetables. Delilah was about to move to sit down next to Adana, and she could feel herself move aside to make more room before Lukas was woken from his sleep and interrupted the moment.

"I thought I smelled something," he mumbled, voice hoarse with sleep.

Delilah looked at Adana as she spoke. "I'll go get you something." Lukas sat up slowly, carefully straightening out his leg.

“Are you okay?” Adana felt compelled to ask again.

“Yes, I’ll be fine. I’m not in anywhere near as much pain as Corina is right now, so I can’t allow myself to complain too much,” Lukas said. Adana wanted to know what he meant by that, but before she could ask her question Delilah had returned with his breakfast.

“Where do you get your water?” Lukas asked as he gratefully accepted the bowl. Adana finally felt like she could allow her attention to divert back to Delilah as she waited for her to answer.

“There’s a small pond not far from here. It’s not a lot, and the water is dirty, so we’ve had to make do. We’ve found a way to get most of the dirt and leaves out, and we use the water mostly to cook broths in this way, so that it doubles as hydration and food at the same time,” Delilah said, looking toward her people.

“How long will it last?” Lukas continued.

“I’m not sure,” Delilah answered, ‘I’ve been hoping for rain for months now. Supply is diminishing quickly.’”

“Yes, I know what you mean. We encountered the same problem. Most of this country probably has, by now. When we found Adana, we were following a water source and came across her instead.”

“Is that so?” Delilah asked, turning her attention back to Adana.

“I never knew,” Adana whispered, suddenly feeling very vulnerable. Her shadows had started circling Delilah again.

“I see,” Delilah said simply.

Adana took a sip of the broth, feeling its warmth spread inside her, washing her helplessness away. She wasn’t responsible for their water, after all.

“Drink up. I think your companions want to leave soon. I’m nearly packed and then I have to inform my people,” Delilah said, sounding much more authoritative than a minute ago.

Lukas nodded, and Adana followed suit, trying to savour the taste while drinking as quickly as she could. Once they finished, Adana offered to take Lukas’s bowl from him, but she wasn’t sure where to place them. Opting to bring them back to Delilah’s hut, where she assumed they had originated from, she took a few tentative steps to the open doorway before taking a deep breath and allowing herself to step inside.

There was a small fire pit in the middle, rocks surrounding an ashy pile of twigs. A thin hay mattress lay on the ground on the far wall, a wooden spear and sword resting right behind where a soft pillow lay. There wasn’t much else, except a few collected specially-dried leaves in a variety of colours. Upon closer inspection, Adana saw that a few of them had drawings on them, sketched with ash and coal. They were wonderful, Adana thought to herself, so much life depicted on such a small surface – portraits of the children in the camp, the shape of the flames, a small rendering of her shack. Adana smiled as she looked at each one, becoming especially entranced by a close-up drawing of a pair of eyes, oddly familiar and yet so obscure.

“Sometimes it’s important to let your mind wander off to other places, don’t you think?” A voice said behind her, and Adana dropped the bowls in surprise.

“Oh – I’m, I’m sorry. I wanted to give them back…” she stumbled out, tripping over her words. The hut seemed a lot smaller with two people in it, and Adana was finding it hard to catch her breath.

Delilah laughed. “That’s okay,” she said, picking up the bowls and placing them outside the doorway. “I’ve got nothing to hide.” She looked a lot younger now than she had last night – the lack of armour making her seem less severe.

Adana smiled, willing herself not to study the other woman's eye again. Looking down at the pictures one more time, she stepped outside, eyes blinking rapidly at the bright light of the sun. Delilah stepped out behind her a few seconds later, a little closer than Adana was expecting, and she could feel Delilah's hair brushing against the back of her shoulders as she side-stepped around her to address the others.

“Ready to go?”

CHAPTER 21

Delilah hadn't started at the front of the group. Corina and Deacon had defiantly taken the lead at first, refusing to give up their control of the journey. They'd only turned when Delilah whispered where to go, and even then, the hesitation in their steps was discernible. After a while though, both of them had started to slow down. Corina was favouring her right leg, trying to put as little pressure on her metal foot as possible, staff still in hand. Deacon had slowed down to a small shuffle, his energy waning by the minute.

Delilah had allowed them to keep pace with her when she'd taken up her position at the front of the group, but Adana knew she was purposely walking slowly. Her footsteps were measured and controlled. She skipped over tree roots and large rocks without even looking at the ground, turning her head back every once in a while, to make sure that they were all still following. Sometimes, Delilah would catch her gaze, and Adana had to force herself to look at the ground so that she could avoid tripping over those same roots and rocks.

After only a few hours of walking, they had reached the first settlement. Delilah held her hand on the handle of her wooden dagger, motioning for their group to close ranks as they went through. The camp was eerily silent. Much smaller than either Lukas's or Delilah's, and dirtier too. A few tents were lined up against the side of a small cave, flapping listlessly in the breeze. Delilah gestured for them to stay quiet, tip-toeing past the tents. Some light snores could be heard coming from the inside, and Adana's shadows circled the entrance to each tent, comforting her with their vigilance.

More camps, even dirtier and drier, followed. Some didn't even consist of shelter, merely utilizing the empty tree branches as roofing, small fires, and mattresses desperately put together with mud and leaves strewn haphazardly across the ground. These people could not have been living comfortably, even though Adana was used to sleeping without a roof

over her head. She'd never experienced heavy weather in her enclosure; only mist and light drizzles, gentle breezes and rays of sunshine, shadows there to keep her warm when she shivered. She wondered if any of these people remembered what it was like to be warm. The air was considerably cooler here than it had been back home.

“Why do more people not live with each other? Like your families, or your friends?” Adana asked, nodding both towards Lukas and Delilah. Each turned to look at her, Corina scoffing off to the side as she took another limping step.

“Most people find it hard to trust strangers,” Delilah replied, kindness in her voice, though her words spoke otherwise.

“You didn't, did you? When you first met us,” Lukas offered, looking at Adana from the corner of his eye.

“I trust you,” she said.

“But you didn't then, not really.”

“I trusted you said you were kinder than Deacon,” Adana replied, looking at Lukas steadfastly. He smiled a shy smile.

“Do you trust us?” Adana asked Delilah.

“I trust you,” Delilah said.

“Why?” Corina interrupted.

“I just do,” Delilah said, shrugging her shoulders and propelling her feet forward. Adana looked after her, slightly dazed.

Once the Scavenger was far enough in front of the rest of the group again, scouting the path ahead, Corina turned towards the rest of them while allowing her brother to wrap his arm around her shoulders as she held him steady.

“There's something not right about her,” Corina said.

“We’ve already established that if she’d wanted to hurt us, she could have done so at any time. What reason does she have to lie?” Lukas asked, unusually exasperated.

“It’s too easy. Her helping us like this. Even if she wasn’t a Scavenger – yes, Lukas, even if she wasn’t a Scavenger, let alone the leader, for pity’s sake – I wouldn’t trust her. Why is she leading us around? If they hadn’t made themselves known we’d have never even realized who they were. A few more days of walking and we would have probably convinced ourselves that we’d imagined the whole thing.”

“And we’d be a lot more exhausted,” Lukas added for good measure.

“That doesn’t matter. There’s no logical reason for her to help us. This story she’s spewing about it being safer if we’re not close to their camp is nonsense. They’d be safer if they hadn’t shown us where their camp is at all. For all they know, we could go home and tell our elders and suddenly there’s a war over territory. The Scavengers don’t seem to be doing too badly considering the circumstances. They’ve got more water than any of these people we’ve passed so far. Why do they have an understanding? None of this adds up,” Corina finished.

“You trust too many people for your own good, Lukas,” Deacon said, rather surprisingly. He looked as though he was about to vomit.

“Maybe you two aren’t trusting enough,” Lukas said.

“Listen, she’s not saying we’re not going to follow her. We don’t have any other choice, Lukas. We’re just saying that we should keep an eye out. Something doesn’t sit right with me. Adana’s magic won’t be any help if she becomes too friendly towards this woman.”

“What does that mean?” Adana asked.

“Figure it out,” Corina spat.

Their conversation had slowed down their pace even more than their weariness had, and Delilah was now a smaller version of herself over the crest of the hill, waving at them.

Scrambling to regain some sense of normalcy, the group trundled upwards, Deacon's words ringing in Adana's head.

Their legs gave out and they were forced to make camp for the night. Delilah somehow looked even more invigorated than she had when they'd left in the morning, staring up at the clear starry sky, breathing in deeply – slowly relenting to rest when she saw the state her travel companions were in. Deacon had indeed vomited a few times during the journey, sweat evident on his brow, limbs shaking every so often. As soon as Corina had sat down, she'd taken off her boot, a clear sigh of relief leaving her at the feeling of her leg being freed from its metal confines. She quickly took on her favourite pastime of practicing tricks with her knives, and Adana watched with interest before she felt herself getting sleepy. Lying down, counting the stars, she started to drift off – the fire dying slowly beside them as everyone lay down for the night.

After counting her 112th star, Adana's eyes finally fell shut. Before she could fully allow herself to fall into the darkness of sleep, she heard a soft thud beside her, a warming presence lying down next to her. Her eyes shot open, head turning to the side, where Delilah was getting comfortable, shadows suddenly frenzied above them. Adana saw them whip Delilah a few times, and she flinched here and there, as though she was being shocked, but she still smiled, and Adana grew more confused.

“You know,” Delilah whispered, careful not to wake the others, “my mum always told me that magic is a reflection of who you are. I'm not sure she was right.”

Adana stayed silent, taking to counting the stars again to calm down her heartbeat as Deacon's and Corina's conspiracies crawled back into her mind.

“She also said people are born with it. I don't think that's true either.”

Curiosity got the better of her. “What do you mean?” Adana asked.

“I think the magic chooses the person.”

“How?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Oh,” Adana said, allowing herself a look at Delilah. Straggly red hair was splayed out across the ground in all directions, and only the very corners of the stitches across her eye were visible. Delilah turned to face Adana too, and she snuck a glance at her eye before turning her head back to look at the sky.

“Your eye is lighter now,” she said.

“Oh?” Delilah said.

“Yes,” Adana answered, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

It was silent for a moment before Delilah whispered again. “I think the magic chooses the person because I didn’t get mine until I lost my eye. It wasn’t there before that, I’m sure of it. So how could I have been born with it?”

“You have magic?” Adana asked, her voice steadier than she’d thought it have been.

Delilah hummed in confirmation.

“What does it look like?”

“I’ll show you someday.”

“Okay,” Adana whispered.

A pause. “Don’t tell the others I have magic, alright?”

“Lukas would understand,” Adana said.

“I trust you. I don’t trust them,” Delilah said.

“Okay,” Adana said again, a twinge of guilt seeping in. Adana watched rather sadly as her shadows lashed at Delilah again, a few shocks here and there. Adana made no effort to

stop them, confusion, fear, guilt, and something she couldn't quite identify overriding any sense of logic.

She closed her eyes again, praying for sleep to come so she could, for at least a while, forget about the warm person sleeping next to her.

“Yours is beautiful,” Delilah whispered, and Adana smiled at those words, finally feeling herself drift off to sleep.

CHAPTER 22

Every day they walked the hours seemed to slow down. Time was weighing heavily on them all – Deacon looked worse every day, eyes lifeless, sleeping the second his back hit the ground, barely eating, and violently coughing. Corina was clearly worried about her brother, brows constantly furrowed with stress. Lukas seemed helpless, doing anything in his power to make Deacon feel better, and Adana, as guilty as it made her feel, missed him because of it. She was doing fine, relatively speaking, her ankle still hurt, but the swelling had gone down and it was easier to walk on it again. She didn't need his help, but that didn't mean she didn't want it.

Delilah was spending time with her instead. They talked a lot, more words than Adana had uttered throughout her entire lifetime – but it felt freeing, talking to someone who understood. She told her about the first time she'd met her shadows, how her mother had made her run away. She talked about how much she'd missed her father over the years, and Delilah had put a comforting hand on her shoulder, indicating that she understood. Small smiles and brushed arms were exchanged between the two often, drawing the attention of Corina's suspicious gaze – but Adana ignored it, because she was feeling something she didn't quite know how to explain, and any feeling was better than loneliness and fear.

More camps had come and gone, and true to Delilah's word, no one had bothered them. People regarded them with curious looks, but there was no reaching of weapons, no verbal abuse. Adana admired how respected Delilah seemed to be – how many of these people had she reached out to over the years?

“We've nearly reached the town,” Delilah said one day, just as the sun was starting to set in a blaze of orange and red.

“Town? You never said anything about going through a town,” Corina argued.

“A town should hardly be surprising. The closer you get to the coast the more people there are. It may be salt water, and it’s not good for drinking, but it’s good enough for everything else. Why do you think there are so many small camps along this road? People want to stay with who they know, but they also don’t want to be completely alone.”

“So why don’t you all live in town?” Lukas asked.

“Because we don’t want to strain the people who are already there. We’ve got enough people to search for natural resources. We don’t need to be taking anyone else’s.”

“Except that’s what you’ve done, for years.” Deacon mumbled quietly.

“Except it’s not,” Delilah said, a wry smile twisting her features.

“The stories have to come from somewhere,” Corina said.

“But none of those stories originated under my lead,” Delilah said.

Adana had tuned out their conversation, opting instead to walk forwards over the crest of the hill and enjoy the dazzling display of colour the sun was showing her. The sun, however, was soon outshone by a sight she’d never seen in all her life.

A town.

Rows upon rows of buildings rose out over the ground in the middle of a sunken valley. Building in all shapes and sizes and colours, some roofs were made from twigs, and some roofs were even made from stone. Windows were open and clothes hung on lines between the alleys, trees with no leaves winding themselves between the people that littered the streets. Dust, suspended in the air, presided over the town, and in the distance, far in the distance, she could see a line where brown and green turned into a strange blue and grey and Adana thought she had never seen a sight so welcome, so magnificent, ever.

The others had joined her side, now all staring over the outlook towards what looked to be a different world below them. “We can stay here for a few nights. Get some rest and some proper food. Maybe even find some medicine for Deacon,” Delilah said, and Lukas

nodded in urgent agreement. Corina had looked sceptical until she'd heard the word medicine, after which she'd squeezed her brother closer to her side and nodded affirmatively. Adana smiled. She couldn't believe she'd be able to stay here, lose herself amongst these people – had her mother ever been here? Lost herself the way Adana wanted to now? Did they help her get to the Coastal Barricades?

What if she was still here, and she'd just decided to never come back?

Adana shook her head, ridding herself of the thought. She already knew her mother had left her; she didn't need to dwell on the how and the where. Her shadows curled around her hands protectively, squeezing her fingers in reassurance.

The first thing Adana noticed as they got closer to the town was the noise. There had been noise at Delilah's camp, of course – wood knocking on wood, low hushed whispers, and the crackle of fire, but this – this was a roar. A roar of voices and shouting and footsteps and wheels and wind and knocking and metal, everything Adana had heard in her life and more rolled into one continuous note. While she was in awe at the amount of sound that could be made just from humans being human, she had to cover her ears before it could overwhelm her. Lukas nudged her, looking at her with sympathetic eyes, and she thought it was nice that he was thinking of her when he must be feeling nearly as out of place as she was. She nodded at him, hinting that she was alright, and even smiled when she felt her shadows coming up over her head, looping themselves through her hair and around her ears until the sound that had bombarded her senses before became nothing but muffled background noise.

The town was even bigger when stood right in it, street after street after street that they could follow, turning all corners. The houses looked to be slightly crumbling, a few slanted, a few still upright, grey brickwork dusty, and in need of some help. Some houses were painted red, others yellow, or blue, some left their original colour, and some were painted white. Different types of faces surrounded Adana, black hair and red hair, brown and

yellow, dark eyes and light eyes, pale skin, dark skin, and everything in between. Different types of clothing as well – some women wore trousers; others wore dresses and skirts. Heavy boots, freeing sandals and bare feet walked along the road. Some people’s clothes were colourful, intricate designs in reds and yellows that reminded her of Emory, others wore all white, some muted greys. There were more people than Adana had ever imagined could live in this country. She felt someone grab her hand, and instinctively pulled away until she saw Delilah’s one darkened eye staring back at her. Heat creeping up her neck, Adana allowed her to wind their fingers together, grounding her and leading her around as though she owned the place. Nobody looked at them strangely, nobody gave them any attention.

“Medicine,” Corina’s muffled voice demanded from behind them, eyes looking sterner than Adana had ever seen them. Delilah nodded slightly, letting go of Adana’s hand. She tried to shake the warm feeling off her fingers, palm clammy and neck still flushed.

“Follow me,” Delilah said, taking off through the crowd. Lukas nudged Adana forward, motioning for her to keep moving. They pushed through hundreds of people, children, even a few stray mutts until Delilah finally stopped and let herself enter one of the many houses that lined the streets. Cautiously following, her shadows left their place around Adana’s ears, but thankfully the door shut behind them before the cacophony of life could overwhelm her again.

The group piled into a small room, only slightly bigger than Delilah’s hut had been. Creaky floorboards covered the dirt ground underneath them, grimy windows only letting in the faintest bit of light. Still, it was strangely homely – candles lined the walls in sconces, rickety chairs filled most of the room around a large round table and there were scraps of cloth everywhere, different colours and patterns strewn haphazardly across the floor. Corina slowly lowered Deacon into one of the chairs, where he dropped his head to the table and covered his head with his arms. The rest of them stood around awkwardly as Adana took in

the tiny staircase tucked into the back corner, wondering where it could possibly lead in a house so small.

“What are we doing here?” Corina asked, stomping over to Delilah. Delilah didn’t flinch or take a step back, choosing instead to stand eye to eye with her aggressor.

“This is where we get the medicine – the woman who lives here will know what to do. She’ll probably also let us stay here for a few nights. She doesn’t get as many patrons as she did once.”

“Hardly surprising,” Corina whispered, looking pointedly at Lukas for help. He shrugged, the look on his face one of fascination and confusion. “Is she even here?” he asked.

“She’ll be back soon,” Delilah said. She took a step closer to Adana, who felt a smile spread on her face unwillingly until she heard Corina’s scoff and quickly stepped back into a corner. Somehow, she just knew Delilah was watching her, and she quickly averted her eyes, focusing instead on Lukas and Deacon, now sitting side by side. Adana had never noticed it before, but there was something familial about the way that Lukas treated Deacon. She couldn’t remember hearing them agree on anything, but there was care there, and it made that strange surge of jealousy rise in her throat once more, shadows flickering in the dark room as she tried to push these strange feelings aside.

After listening to Corina’s particular pacing pattern for well over an hour, the door to the house slammed open. Adana felt her eyes burn at the sudden burst of light entering the small room, and Delilah quickly stepped in front of everyone, greeting the woman who had just set foot over the threshold like they were old friends.

“And what have you brought me today, Delilah? Another coughing child? Children do cough, you know. It’s nothing to get so worked up over,” the woman spoke, voice harsh and croaky but with an air of playfulness. Her hair was grey and tangled, much too long for it to be well kept, bare feet and a simple grey tunic and skirt covered her frail shape. Delilah

smiled, placing a hand on her arm and leading her towards the table, where Deacon had finally raised his head from its sleeping position. He looked disoriented.

“It’s a bit worse this time, I’m afraid, Reselda. These are my friends, Corina, her brother Deacon, your patient – Lukas, and Adana,” she finished. A strange sensation crept up Adana’s neck at the way Delilah said her name – so familiar in the most fascinating way.

“Can you help him?” Corina asked, all sense of toughness and decorum out the window as she held onto her brother’s shoulders, looking at Reselda with all the anguish she could muster. For a dark, ignorant second, Adana thought Corina might be putting on an act, her vision of the conversation clouded by her shadows twisting around in the candlelight, thinking she saw Corina pinching the nerves in his neck much harder than necessary. Shaking her head, she tried to clear her mind, all these feelings that she couldn’t put a name to messing with her sense of normalcy.

“Let’s get him upstairs, lying down. It’s a bit lighter up there and I’ll be able to get a closer look,” Reselda ordered, shooing them upstairs. Lukas helped Corina practically push Deacon up the stairs, every step forcing a shaky breath out of his body. Adana watched, unsure whether she should follow or stay behind until Delilah bounded up the stairs behind them rather happily and asked her if she was coming too.

Reselda hadn’t been lying about the light; it was like they had entered a completely different building, all whites, and brightness, and fresh air. No candles were needed to light up the room – the roof was made from dented glass, its casing peeling paint and curving inwards, but sturdy nonetheless. Adana watched as the clouds overhead rolled past her vantage point, wondering if they were ever going to let loose the precious commodity they held in their shape.

Adana followed the grunts of exertion into the room at the front of the house, just behind the staircase. It was strangely larger up here, as though it covered the ground of two

houses rather than just the small room downstairs. Smiling to herself and shaking her head, she watched as Deacon finally laid down in the small but plush bed laid out for him, Reselda fussing over sheets and Corina looking on helplessly. Lukas stood behind Corina with his hand on her shoulder, in what Adana knew was a comforting gesture, suppressing down her feelings once again as there was no one around who wanted to hear them. Delilah stepped in behind her, a little too close for comfort, reminding her of when they had met, and Adana's shadows slithered between them, creating a barrier for which Adana was grateful.

“Now, do you lot want to tell me how long this has been going on?”

“He's been a bit weaker for quite a few weeks now – I thought it was just a cold and it would go away. But it got worse and worse as we were travelling and now – I – I don't know.” Corina said, her voice shakier than Adana has ever heard it.

“And what are his symptoms?”

Lukas stepped forward. “Fever, shaking, coughing, he's tired all the time, and he's bruising quite easily too. Cold sweats. He was alright when we set out but the more we walked the worse it became.”

“Hygiene?” Reselda asked. No one answered. “Cleanliness,” Reselda asked again.

“Not really. There aren't exactly many places where it's easy to properly bathe on the trail,” Lukas said.

“I see. The thing is, I don't think this is some kind of shared illness that he picked up wherever it is you're from. From what you've described it sounds like something that has been building up over time, probably starting from one central point. I need to know, boy, do you have any wounds that haven't been properly taken care of?”

“I would know. He hasn't had to fight in months,” Corina interjected. Deacon grabbed her hand, pale and twitching, and she looked down at him with concern as he shook his head. Slowly, he pulled up his shirt and turned the top of his trousers over, revealing a sharp gash

discoloured in shades that Adana had never even seen before. Corina stepped back, dropping her brother's hand, betrayed and horrified in equal measure.

"I see," Reselda mumbled to herself, stepping in Corina's place to get a closer look. The gash looked much angrier than Lukas's leg scar did, red and blistered, peeling, orange and yellow and blue and brown bruises surrounding it. It had discoloured his trousers, a sickly green-coloured stickiness that coated the top layer of the wound, and Adana had to force herself not to look away. Her shadows went to inspect it closer, and she nearly forgot about their tendency to sting other people until they whipped him a few times right around where it hurt. Reselda's prodding was hurting him just the same, but Adana screamed in her mind at her shadows to come back, and it took slightly longer than she would have liked for them to listen to her.

"Deacon – I – I don't understand. How.... When? Who did this to you?" Corina said, each word causing her voice to become more unhinged.

"I –" he flinched in pain as Reselda inspected the wound closer, gritting his teeth as he continued to speak. "It happened when I was...I was out looking for a water source. It was before we found her," his fingers pointed lazily at Adana, "I went further into the forest than I was planning and I, I thought I'd found a well. Turned out that it was an old hunting trap that we'd forgotten to mark on our maps...I stepped into it before I could realize and the hook came and swung at me and caught me," he finished, his voice weakening with every word.

"Deacon.... Why didn't you tell anyone? We could have helped you! That's why we all live together the way we do," Lukas said, tone laced with concern. Corina nodded her head vigorously, unable to tear her eyes away from the gash on her brother's stomach.

"I did...I told mother. She tried to clean it as best she could, and we thought it was fine until a few days before I went to look for water again and found... her," Deacon said, now turning his gaze fully to Adana, "Mother went back and tried to use some of the water

from the small stream I found to clean it out some more, but it wasn't enough, I guess. She...she wanted us to come to the...the Barricades because she thought someone there might be able to help me," Deacon finished, now completely out of breath.

Reselda scoffed at his last remark but allowed them to continue their conversation anyway, shuffling out of the room.

"You should have told me," Corina whispered. Heartbreak was clear in her eyes. Adana recognized it well.

"Mother told me not to...she needed you to be on guard, not worrying about me."

"And yet I was worried about you anyway," Corina said.

"What about Adana? Why is she here?" Lukas asked, catching her eye.

"Mother needed a reason for me to go there without worrying the rest. Infection sets in at our camp and it all falls apart. Finding her... was... a stroke of luck, in a strange way. She... could be the reason for us to go there without anyone being suspicious. Mother convinced your father, Lukas."

"So this whole trip has been a lie? Adana doesn't even need to be here? We took her from her home against her will because of some made-up excuse and yet you still treated her like dirt?" Lukas asked, letting go of Corina's shoulder.

"It's not entirely a lie, Lukas! She could still be dangerous. She does still have magic that we can't even see and you more than anyone should know what kind of disaster that can cause," Corina said, standing in front of her brother protectively and staring him down.

"She hasn't given us any reason to be afraid of her!"

"What about what she did to my mother that day we took her into our camp?"

"You mean when she acted in self-defence because your mother was charging at her like someone on a rampage?"

“That’s – that’s not the point. You know what our rules are. They started with your grandfather and they aren’t just going to end with her. Besides, she followed. You’re right. She followed. Which means she has another motive for allowing us to take her and no matter how much you want to believe you are friends with her you don’t know her as well as you’d like.” Corina finished, flinching when she watched her brother cover his ears at the shouting.

“Come downstairs with me,” Delilah whispered behind Adana, “we should let them have a moment. Reselda will come back any moment to start treatment anyway.” Adana nodded ever so slightly, catching Lukas’s gaze as she turned to go back to the darkness downstairs. He gave her a small smile, which for once, she didn’t feel compelled to return.

As they slowly descended back into the room of candles, Adana felt her shoulders slump in defeat, falling into one of the rickety chairs by the table.

“So why *did* you go with them?” Delilah asked, curiosity peaked.

“I...I thought they all knew. Lukas’s mother knows. She told me...”

“Told you what?”

“Samira...”

“Who?”

“My mama,” Adana said, unable to look Delilah in the eye for some reason.

“She’s there? At the Barricades?”

“I don’t know,”

“So why are you looking for her?”

“I – I want to know – I want to know why she left me,”

“In my experience, Adana,” Delilah put a hand on top of hers, and Adana shivered, fighting the instinct to pull away, “people who leave us rarely do so for noble reasons. Your mother left you because she wanted to leave you. Nothing more, nothing less. Why would you want to find someone like that?”

“I want to know about my papa,” she said, voice barely more than a whisper.

Delilah moved her hands to Adana’s chin, gently turning her to face her. Adana noticed that Delilah’s eye was as clear and light as she had ever seen it at that moment, and so she focused on the stitches instead, because there was that feeling again, that feeling she couldn’t identify.

“Why don’t we go out looking for him instead?”

CHAPTER 23

“You...you want to help me find my papa?”

“Why not? Adana, listen to me. If your father is the one you really want to find, why spend any time looking for your mother? Why not look for the real thing?”

“But they’re upstairs...Lukas, I can’t – he’s my friend,” Adana said, mind racing.

“Is he though? You didn’t tell him the real reason you went with him. It wasn’t fear, because why should you have any fear? You have your shadows. None of them have anything. So, if you truly trusted him, why wouldn’t you tell him that you went along to look for your mother? Do you think he would understand? His parents are both safe at home, aren’t they?”

Adana shook her head, shooting up from the chair as it clattered backward. She flinched at the sudden noise. She needed to put distance between herself and Delilah. This was wrong, all wrong. Her father was meant to find her, not the other way around.

“Do *you* understand?” Adana asked, afraid to catch Delilah’s eye.

“More than you’d think,” Delilah whispered, stitches creasing as she looked at Adana thoughtfully.

Just then, Lukas came stumbling down the stairs. “Reselda’s just starting to try and clean the wound. She’s worried about the infection though, it may have spread farther than he can handle...’ Lukas stepped towards Adana, keeping his gaze on Delilah the whole time, ‘Are you okay?’ he asked, letting his eyes land on Adana again. He placed his hand on her forearm, and it wasn’t the same. Not the same as when Delilah touched her face or brushed her fingers, but it was a feeling nonetheless, comforting and familiar, and Adana was having a hard time understanding how she could doubt Lukas. But even then, with him smiling at her

the way he somehow always did, she asked herself why she hadn't told him in the first place.

Why didn't he know?

She took too long to answer. "Adana?"

"Yes. Deacon?"

"Reselda says we should stay here for a few days. By then, we'll know what's wrong with him and what to do to fix it. Corina, well, she's hanging in there. She's adamant her brother will get better so I believe her."

"Okay," Adana said. A strange surge of relief flooding through her. A few days, time to make a decision. Time with Lukas, time with Delilah. Time to think.

Her father was out there. Her shadows frantically danced in her face, unable to calm her nerves. A violent cough from upstairs. Lukas flinched.

"I'll go and get some more salt water from the ground reservoir. Reselda may need it later," Delilah suddenly said, voice much louder and clearer than when she had been speaking to Adana before. Lukas nodded his thanks at her, and she grabbed a bucket from the corner and was out the door, letting in a blinding ray of daylight before the door shut behind her and the house fell silent and dark again.

"Adana – are you, are you sure you're alright? I don't mean to pry I just – well your eyes are a bit darker than usual and you turn to your shadows when you're feeling defensive..." Lukas trailed off.

"I do?"

He chuckled, nodding. "Yes, you do."

"I don't mean to," she said.

"Why not? Your friends are there to defend and help you, and you see the shadows as your friends."

"You don't see them as my friends?"

Lukas sighed, sinking into one of the chairs that hadn't been toppled over, rubbing his hands over his face as he sighed, loudly. "I can only know what you tell me." She didn't ask him to clarify further. They sat in silence for a while, Lukas looking frantically at the stairs every few minutes. She noticed she scratched at his scarred leg a lot more than usual, a nervous tic of his.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

He didn't have to think about his answer for long. "I don't know. But thank you for asking." He smiled at her again. Friends? Like her shadows? She told her shadows everything. She'd told Delilah more than Lukas by this point. She ran her hands through her matted hair, pulling angrily at the knots there. Her shadows had stilled somewhat, taking to lazily floating around the room and her person. They didn't hit Lukas this time, for which she was grateful.

"He's your friend," she said after a pause.

"Yes. In a strange way. We grew up together. Rarely agree on anything of importance. But yes, he's my friend. And I hope I'm his as well. Although lately, I'm not so sure anymore."

"Why?"

"Because the disagreement about you might be the biggest one we've ever had," Lukas said, shrugging. She didn't want to ruin a friendship that Lukas had had for so long just because she was lonely and didn't know what it was like to have one of her own. Besides, she had Delilah now. Maybe she could leave Lukas alone, Deacon would get better and the three of them could go on with their lives. Corina could forget all the fear and doubt she'd felt, something Adana was sure the warrior would rather forget. And Adana could go with Delilah, find her father, live the life she'd dreamed of every day she was in her enclosure, waiting for her father to fight his way through the trees and leaves and branches

and find his way back to her. She could get up and leave right now, search for Delilah in the frantic streets and none of them would be able to stop her. Not as long as she had her shadows.

But she didn't.

"You know, you don't have to come with us to the Barricades if you don't want to," Lukas said. She stared at him. Two different coloured eyes regarded her closely.

"No – no, I want to," she said, meekly.

"I'm just saying that we – we might not have to go there anymore. With Deacon being the real reason for the journey. You might have felt compelled to join us in the first place, for whatever reason. But if you don't want to stay, none of us can force you to," he said, looking back down at the table. "Adana, are you looking for something? Or someone?"

She gripped the table with her fingers, skin stretching over her knuckles. She answered truthfully. "I don't know anymore."

"That's alright. Just know – I'd never force you to stay."

"But they would," Adana said, gesturing to the stairs behind them.

"Don't be so sure."

It was a long night. Lukas, Delilah, and Adana all slept downstairs, the many coloured scarves and blankets scattered around Reselda's floor being used as makeshift beds. Every few hours, they would wake, hearing Deacon coughing or moaning in his sleep, his pain a stark reminder of why they were there in the first place. Corina had stayed upstairs with him, falling asleep in a chair with her head on his bed, holding his hand. Reselda had done the best she could, cleaning the wound and feeding him different herbal remedies. The only thing they could do was wait to see if anything changed.

At a certain point, when the candles had dripped their last wax onto the floor and the house was eerily silent, Adana couldn't take it anymore. She tiptoed up the stairs, a strange curiosity overtaking her, needing to see that Deacon was still breathing, that he was still there. Creeping along the landing towards the room he was in, she noticed the door was wide open, Corina sat straight up in her chair, hugging herself tightly, prosthetic discarded haphazardly in the corner of the room. She looked up at Adana as soon as she heard a floorboard creak, and while Adana had come to expect Corina to pull out her knife and threaten her with it as she had done back when they were still walking in the forest, instead she looked defeated – dark circles under reddened eyes.

“He’s only just fallen asleep,” Corina whispered as Adana hovered in the doorway.

“He has pain,” Adana replied. Corina nodded. She couldn't take her gaze off her brother, watching as his eyes moved frantically under his eyelids as he slept. His hair was sticking to his forehead, sweat making his skin glow in a sickly way.

“Is there anything your shadows can do?” Corina whispered again, desperation in her voice.

Adana shook her head slowly. “I think they would hurt him more,” she said, voice hushed, bracing herself for Corina's reaction. The other girl merely nodded.

“You know.... I don't care why you're here. You're the reason my brother has a chance to get – to get better. We made it this far because you gave my mother a reason to send us this way. I think she knew that if it came down to it, you'd be able to protect us and make sure we got to where we needed to go. That's why you're here for me. I don't care about your shadows, or whatever testing it is that Lukas's father claims they can do for you at the Barricades. That is why you're here. I don't care about anything else. You can do what you want. Whatever reason it is that you agreed to come with us, outside of me dragging you along, you can go look for it.”

Adana was taken aback. “Lukas said the same.”

Corina smiled slightly. It made her eyes crinkle at their sides. “Well, I’m sure he said it in a nicer way than I did.” Adana smiled back.

“We’ll take you to the barricades if that’s what you really want. When Deacon’s better, we can take you there, for whatever reasons you may have. Just promise me one thing,” Corina said, grabbing her brother’s hand in again, “Promise me that if you really want to leave, you tell us first. If you want to run off with Delilah, just tell us first. We deserve to know, and we need to know that it was your choice to go with her.”

“Why?”

“There’s something not right about her, Adana. I don’t think she has magic, or she’d have used it against us by now, but something’s not right. And I realize you don’t have much reason to trust my judgement, as it’s been angry with you since the moment we met. Just be careful with what you’re feeling.”

“I don’t know what I’m feeling,” Adana admitted, suddenly guilty that she hadn’t told her companions about Delilah’s magic yet – even if Adana herself wasn’t sure what it was.

“I know. That’s why I’m telling you to be careful.”

CHAPTER 24

It was day three in the town that Adana had now learned didn't even have a name. As Delilah had described it, why give a place a name that could never fully encompass everyone who lived and resided there? It was the only and last town on the way to the Coastal Barricades. That's all anyone needed to know. In fact, Adana realized, the Coastal Barricades seemed to be the only place with a name around here. Emory had never mentioned what her settlement was called – the Scavengers referred to their home as their camp, and Lukas had always just referred to home as home.

Day three and Deacon, miraculously, seemed to be doing a little better. The herbal remedies Reselda had given him had brought his fever down, the strange, murky colour of his eyes becoming a little brighter in the process. His wound still looked as violent and discoloured as the first day she saw it, but Corina had pointedly decided to ignore that fact as she fussed over her brother much in the same way they had done on the road. The way those two cared for each other was the thing Adana respected most about each of them.

Day three and Adana was no closer to understanding what it was she wanted to do. Delilah hadn't brought up running away a second time, just as Lukas and Corina hadn't talked about it again either. She had realized something else though, a pattern in her shadows' behaviour. Around Delilah they were calm, collected, floating around her gently, their luminescent quality somewhat dimmed, but calm nonetheless. Around the other three, they were violent, volatile, bouncing around the room, lashing them every once in a while. Strangely, nobody flinched when they did so, and Adana didn't know what to make of it. She thought they were telling her something, but for once in her life with them, she couldn't figure out what it might be. The simplest explanation confused her the most: *go with Delilah. Find your father. That's what we want for you.*

She just wasn't sure if that's also what she wanted for herself.

She'd taken to wandering the streets during sunset, watching the enormous amount of dust swirling in the air in front of her as she lost herself in the maze of the town. Adana had gotten used to the sounds of so many other people by now, no longer regarding it as a threat to her sanity but rather as a reminder that the world wasn't hers alone. Yesterday, just as today, she'd felt as though someone was watching her, following her through the alleys, but she pushed her doubts away, merely relating it to her unease around bigger crowds.

Still, the longer she walked, the faster she walked. She could feel her worn boots slapping against the dirt road beneath her feet, as she jumped to avoid crushing the small weeds that fought to sprout up in the middle of the road.

"Adana, wait!" she heard her name being called, turning around just as her shadows shot forward protectively to the source of the voice. It was Delilah. It took them a second, but once her shadows seemed to recognize the one-eyed woman, they relaxed, floating lazily between them, some of their mist less pronounced than it had been before.

"You scared me," Adana said.

"I'm sorry. I'd never mean to," Delilah said, coming up closer to her than was necessary for a conversation, but refraining from touching her. "I just wanted to talk to you away from the others."

"You want to know if I'll go with you," Adana said, plainly.

Delilah sighed, shoulders relaxing as she moved to lean against one of the cracked walls that lined the streets. "Yes."

"What about your people?"

"My people are plenty capable without me there for a while. One of the things that's so wonderful about being part of the Scavengers, no matter what false ideas others may have about us, is that we can follow our desires without worrying that we'll be turned away when

we return. Besides, once we find your father, you could come back and live with us. Both of you,” Delilah said. The tone of her voice was more pleading than Adana was used to from her, taking the place of its usual confidence.

“I don’t know if I should leave them,” Adana said.

“I understand. You feel responsible for them now – out of all of you, you are the most powerful, and the only one who can protect them. It’s a burden that was unfairly placed upon you and one you have no duty to complete.”

“I don’t think that’s true...”

“Isn’t it? They lied to you about their reason for bringing you here. They tried to make you believe that because you have magic you were too different from anyone else, something to be feared, and yet they used your innocence to fulfil their own needs. That’s wrong, Adana. And not fair to you,” Delilah finished, now having stepped towards Adana again from her place against the wall.

“But I lied to them too.”

“To protect yourself.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Delilah’s fingers found Adana’s, holding them lightly in hers as they regarded one another.

“They really used me?” Adana said, tasting the words on her tongue, wondering if they could be true. Corina and Deacon, believable – but they cared so much for one another she could understand their reasoning. Deacon was Lukas’s friend, but would he really betray her like that?

“Did they say something to you?” Delilah asked, now having threaded their fingers together. Adana locked eyes on their intertwined hands, a weird sensation settling in the pit of her stomach.

“They told me I could leave, but I had to tell them when I did.”

“Why should you have to tell them? You don’t owe them anything, Adana,” Delilah said.

“But they... he helped me. What if this place we travel to can help me too? I want to know more. Is that bad?”

“Of course not. It’s natural you want to know more. But the Barricades aren’t going to tell you anything that will help you. They’re only going to take your magic away.”

“They can take my shadows?” Adana whispered, horrified by the thought.

“Do you remember when I told you that I thought the magic chooses the person?”

Adana nodded, now gripping Delilah’s hand tighter in her own. The thought of losing her shadows; a sense of panic was creeping in.

“There used to be many people who didn’t agree with this idea. Magic couldn’t possibly be sentient; it’s controlled by the people who carry it. Right?”

“Sentient?” Adana asked, confused by the word.

“It means to think and feel on your own. So, people who didn’t have magic didn’t understand it, and they thought it wasn’t fair that some people had it and others didn’t. So, if they couldn’t find ways of controlling the magic itself, they could find ways to control the people that carried it. There aren’t a lot of us left, Adana, because they couldn’t always find a way to control the people that controlled the magic. Killing or stealing it was the only way to make it fair to those who couldn’t have it.”

Rage inducing. Her shadows surrounded her, veiling her in their black mist at the thought of losing them. Someone forcefully taking a part of her, something that was hers? It was unthinkable.

“Do they still do this?” Adana asked.

“Sometimes. If they know. A lot of the magic is just lost now – kill the host and you kill the magic. They always thought of it as some kind of sickness. But it isn’t, is it? It’s a gift. Most of us with magic remain in hiding, or have amassed enough protection to not fear being taken anymore.”

“Like Emory.”

“Like Emory. Exactly.”

“And you?”

“And me, in a way.”

Adana looked at Delilah then, really looked – trying to see if she could see the magic surrounding her, the way Delilah seemed to be able to spot her shadows. Was there a shimmer, a shield?

“You still haven’t shown me what you do,” Adana said.

“It isn’t always the right time,” Delilah replied.

“I don’t know what that means,” Adana said.

“I just mean that... it doesn’t always work the way I intend it to. But it should, because I don’t want to hurt anyone, so I only use it when I’m sure that it’s the right thing to do.”

Adana understood, to an extent. She never really tried to ask her shadows for anything unless she absolutely needed them. But she had to admit, her curiosity was slowly starting to get the better of her, and she wondered if the others were right, even Corina, and Delilah was hiding something from her. But why should she? She’d never done anything to try and hurt them. Just the same as Adana had never done anything to hurt the others either.

“I’m telling you, Adana. The Coastal Barricades aren’t the place to go. But if you really want to, at least let me go with you.” Delilah said.

Adana nodded, considering. “We should go back,” she said, turning on her heel, allowing herself to keep hold of Delilah’s hand as they walked. She could feel Delilah watching her, imagined her stitches furrowed along with her brow, and she smiled in spite of herself. There was that feeling again.

“He wants to leave today,” Corina said, her voice sounding as surprised and happy as Adana had ever heard it. Deacon was standing in the corner of his room looking out the grimy window, as strong as Adana had ever seen him. His legs had stopped shaking, his hair was even combed, and there was a bit of colour in his cheeks that she’d never noticed before.

“Are we sure that’s a good idea? I’m happy you’re feeling better, Deacon, really, I am – but a few more days of rest won’t kill anyone. We’ve barely been here a week. Especially since you’re not even planning on returning home yet.” Lukas said, clamping his hand around Deacon’s shoulder.

“You’re not?” Delilah asked, hovering in the doorway, Adana just behind her.

“No, we’re not. We were taking her to the Barricades so that’s what we’re going to do. Besides, you don’t hear her saying no, so we won’t take her silence as one. And I don’t see how that’s any of your business. You brought us here, you showed us where to get medicine – thank you. But we don’t need your guiding hand anymore.” Deacon said. The strength in his voice had returned as well. Adana wondered how his wound was looking now.

“You didn’t exactly ask her.”

“Do we need to? Let’s all face it, she could come and go as she damn well pleases. There’s nothing any of us could do to stop her. So, she wants to go – for whatever reason –

fine. At least let us complete our duty to our home at the same time. After that, she can do what she wants.”

Reselda pushed through into the room, carrying a few spare blankets and small glass bottles with various herbs in them.

“I know you’re feeling better Deacon, so I won’t tell you what to do – but at least let me get you and your friends some extra provisions before you set out. The Barricades are still a way away and you need to keep your strength up, all right?” she said, voice stern.

“I’ll keep him here, don’t worry,” Lukas said. Deacon even smiled at him.

Reselda turned towards Adana. “Would you come with me, dear? It would help to have someone who could carry the load,” she said, grabbing her arm and dragging her down the stairs before she could say no. The sudden changes in light – bright – dark – overly bright again made Adana blink her eyes rapidly as Reselda hauled her along the dusty footpath. Soon, Adana regained her footing, mind racing as she realised that her time to make a decision was coming to an end. Perhaps this was the solution she had been looking for all along – everyone she knew coming with her to where she really wanted to go. She could decide on a different life later.

They stopped at one market stall after the other, the frail woven basket Reselda had made Adana carry becoming heavier as they went on. Bread, cheeses, and dried meats lined the bottom, extra clothing and bandages thrown on top. Reselda didn’t have to pay for anything, the people giving it to her happily as she greeted them, and Adana thought it was nice to see people helping each other so easily, even if it did induce a twinge of jealousy in her stomach. Her shadows hovered close by, slowly collecting a fine layer of dust upon their mist.

Reselda even stopped to ask Adana’s opinion on things once in a while – did she like that type of bread, had she ever seen a scarf like this one, did she like the smell of cinnamon?

And while Adana was touched that someone would ask her these things, as she couldn't remember the last time anyone had asked her opinion about things that were so mundane, she shrugged, because she didn't know the answer. The afternoon went on, and soon it was sunset, and Adana marvelled at the colour of the sky and the patterns that the dust created before she felt Reselda's arm on hers turning her around.

"Listen - we've stayed out much longer than we needed to because I wanted to give your friend Deacon an extra night of proper rest. I can't do anything more for him. There's a small chance he is indeed better, and if that's true, then I thank whatever allowed for that to happen – but there's also a good chance that he isn't any better, and that he's only better for the moment – does that make sense?" Reselda asked, her voice more alarmed than usual.

Adana nodded.

"I've told him that if anything goes wrong again, he needs to make it to the Barricades. You have to make sure he gets there. He doesn't want to tell his sister because she's so happy he's doing better – but I'm not sure that the infection is completely gone and if it comes back, he's going to be in a lot more pain than he was before. I don't know what you'll find there – I've never been myself, and I've heard some stories – but he doesn't have any other option. Do you understand me?"

Adana nodded again, this time squeezing Reselda's arm in reassurance. "I'll get him there," she said, her shadows dancing around her as soon as the words left her mouth.

CHAPTER 25

Adana studied Deacon closely. Each step he took was careful and calculated, his eyes trained on the ground, willing himself not to trip and fall over a loose branch, a cracked rock. His legs were surer of themselves, less shaky, long strides, but she could tell that he was fighting to keep his balance, hands and arms slightly outstretched. Not like before, when he kept one hand on the hilt of his dagger at all times. It was the walk of a man who refused to betray his pain. They'd been walking again for two days.

In those two days, Delilah had stayed close to Adana, merely walking ahead when they needed to scout which route they would take. They had decided to head to the shore and walk along the beach due East, straight towards the Barricades. The sun was harsh on the trek, unyielding in its heat, but when Corina had proposed they head back towards the forest to try and find shade and shelter there, Delilah had flat out refused, filling their heads with stories of treacherous ravines and blocked roads, all things Deacon certainly wouldn't be able to handle. Out of concern for her brother, Corina conceded, and so they kept close to the coastline.

Adana found the ocean to be terrifying. Endless – dark – where was the life inside? She kept a close eye on Deacon, because that was what she had promised Reselda, and she kept a close eye on Delilah, because that feeling was always there, tingling in her toes and scratching at her throat. She could tell Lukas was keeping a close watch on Delilah too, studying her eye meticulously. Delilah had commented on it once or twice, playing it off as passive interest, but Adana knew better. He was checking to see if her eye would darken again.

He had asked Adana about it once, if she'd ever noticed it more when Delilah and Adana were alone. She'd shrugged, because she hadn't, and because she tried to avoid

Delilah's gaze quite a lot because it made her feel scrutinized. He'd smiled his kind smile, walked beside her in companionable silence after that – but she'd noticed him looking over at Delilah again during their dinner break.

She had trouble sleeping because of the roar of the ocean, the strangely soft sand beneath her instead of hard and cracked mud. Questions about Delilah's magic rolled around in her mind, unable to comprehend that she'd get her answers much sooner than she was anticipating.

That morning felt like any other; they woke up, one by one, each grabbing their share of the food and cold herbal tea that Reselda had provided them with. Corina would check her brother's bandage, frown when she saw how sticky and discoloured it was, shaking her head as she buried it in the sand before plastering a big smile on her face as she turned back towards him. Normally, Delilah would be first to get up, walking further along the path to scout ahead, leaving the others to their breakfast in peace. Not that morning, though. When Adana had woken, Delilah was still sleeping soundly next to her – straggly red hair had fallen in her face, covering the stitches of her eye, one hand underneath her head the other splayed out in the sand. Adana decided to let her sleep a little longer, considering she was usually the first one up.

Corina took the opportunity to be the scout for the rest of their journey that day. She promised Deacon she'd check for any obstacles in their path, nodding at Lukas and Adana before holstering her knife and setting out down the beach. After a few minutes, she was out of sight, having turned the corner along the cliff side. The rest of them ate in silence, as Adana pushed the hair out of Delilah's face. Her eye was as light as she'd ever seen it as Delilah blinked sleepily, the movement of the ocean's waves reflected in them clearly.

That's when they heard a scream. Corina had come back around the corner again, waving her arms wildly, knife in hand, distress clear in her body language. Delilah shot up next to Adana.

“Lukas! I need your help! Now!” Corina shouted.

He scrambled to his feet as fast as he could, but Delilah was faster. She shot past all of them, running through the sand with more strength than her thin legs should have been able to muster. Lukas went after her, trailing behind, shouting back at Corina that he was on his way. The two of them were nearly out of sight by the time Adana had helped Deacon to his feet, for which he nodded in gratitude, and she allowed him to lean on her shoulder on one side and Adana's staff on the other, as they hobbled along after the rest.

Delilah had sprinted past Corina, who made sure her brother and Lukas were following before giving chase to the red-head, a hard feat in the sand with a metal prosthetic. By the time Adana and Deacon had reached the others, they were all panting with exhaustion. Delilah's back was turned and Corina was brandishing her knife right behind her, only a few steps away from making a fatal move. Adana felt her breathing stop. Deacon let go of her shoulder and collapsed on the sand beside her, the staff breaking his fall.

“Corina, what are you doing?” Lukas asked, voice as calming and gentle as ever.

“Why did you call us out here?”

Adana was asking herself the same question. There was nothing out of the ordinary, save for the stand-off between Corina and Delilah. More sand stretched out in front of them, a few large boulders along the cliff's edge to her right. Shells littered the ground beneath their feet, pricking at their bare skin. A few caught Adana's eye, shimmering in the blinding sunlight. The urge to pick a few up overcame her before she settled her sights once again on the altercation in front of her.

“You have to believe me. It was here,” Corina said. There was something strange about the way she spoke, trembling and fragile. Nothing like the Corina that Adana had come to know.

“What was here?” Lukas continued, moving slowly closer to her.

“All of them. Bodies...burned. Fire. It was here. I know it was here. There was fire... blood. They were all here!” Corina said, taking a wild step forward. Lukas pulled her back, and Delilah finally turned around to face them. Adana gasped. Her eye was now black where moments ago it had been as near translucent as an eye could be.

“You don’t know what you saw, Corina,” Delilah said, voice uneven, out of breath just like the rest of them.

“You’re lying. She’s lying! She’s lying to you, Adana,” Corina said, turning desperately towards where Adana stood, all the while holding her knife steadily towards her target.

“I don’t understand,” Adana whispered, looking to Delilah for any sort of answer. There was sweat on Delilah’s brow, a small droplet dripping down the side of her cheek. Fists shaking, she shook her head.

“There’s nothing to see,” Delilah said, eye trained solely on Adana. Corina wrestled herself away from Lukas’s grip, stepping closer toward Delilah. “Don’t you dare make a liar out of me,” she said, voice low.

Deacon was trying to get up again, movements clumsy and misguided where the sand shifted beneath him. When he nearly regained his footing, he yelped out in pain, landing on his back once more as he gripped his hand closer to his chest.

“Deacon - what’s wrong?” Lukas said, running to his side. Corina only turned her head towards her brother for a moment, making sure he was being looked after before turning her attention back to Delilah.

“It stings. Like a burn. I – no! Don’t touch it,” he said, pulling his hand away from Lukas just after he caught sight of Deacon’s palm. His eyes were wide, confusion clear on his kind features.

“His hand is blistering,” Lukas said, wiping the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. It was warmer than usual with the sun, which hadn’t even fully risen yet. Adana could feel the heat clinging to her too – she’d even shaken her shadows off her, allowing them to form a protective barrier with a little breathing room instead. It was too hot. Abnormally so.

“That’s because there’s fire here,” Corina said, “Can’t you smell it?”

The harder Adana concentrated, the more she could, indeed, find the faintest trace of smoke in the air, overpowered by the smell of the sea, but there, nonetheless. She could tell that Lukas had found it too, his head turning around wildly for the source of the scent.

“Delilah - what is happening?” Adana said, taking slow, deliberate steps towards the young woman. That feeling was there again, overpowering her senses, her idea of right and wrong. A flipped sensation in her stomach, a worrying anxiety in her throat.

“Adana, please. Don’t come closer,” Delilah said, completely out of breath now, usual confidence forgotten, replaced with exertion.

“Tell her,” Corina said, taking another step towards Delilah as well, whose eye was now darker than ever. Adana’s shadows danced around wildly, flinging themselves back and forth between the five of them, unable to rest.

“I can’t,” Delilah said. She’d now sunken down to her knees.

“Yes, you can. You’ve been manipulating her all this time. She deserves to know the truth about you,” Corina said.

“What truth?” Adana asked. She’d stopped in her tracks. The darkness of that one eye was filling Adana with a sense of dread she couldn’t quite place. It looked right at her.

“This,” Delilah finally said. Before Adana could comprehend what was happening, her world had turned red.

CHAPTER 26

The first thing that hit her was the smoke. She choked on it as it constricted itself around her airways until her eyes teared up, nostrils flaring as she coughed until she couldn't cough anymore. That was when the heat hit her, even harder than before, shadows shuddering in the air around her, trying their best to hold their protective cocoon. Then it was the burning in her eyes, as the stench of rot attacked her senses, making her gag as she tried to catch her breath. Lastly, it was the way the air around them had turned red, angry and orange, flames licking at the beach that surrounded them, devouring the corpses that were scattered around them.

How had she ended up in this hell? Whose voice was screaming at her? Where was Delilah, Corina? She could see Deacon and Lukas in her line of sight, both struggling with their breathing the same way she had, but recovering less quickly without her shadows. Lukas had begun to drag Deacon further away from the flames, towards the ocean, and as soon as Adana knew that they were safely out of harm's way, she charged into the flames, Shadows protecting her the way only they could.

Every which way she turned, there were bodies. Blackened and burning but unmistakable, arms and legs and hands and feet and hair and faces staring back at her, lifeless and scarred. Adana fought the urge to vomit. She had to find Delilah, Corina.

She could hear the crunch of bones underneath her feet sometimes, the squelching of flesh. There was no time to think about who could have done such a thing, or guess these people's names, their friends, their lives. She turned her head at every step, nearly screaming in relief or anguish, she wasn't quite sure, when she saw Corina standing over Delilah, knife now discarded onto the soot-covered sand.

Adana tried to concentrate, tried to send some of her shadows over to them, wanting them to be wrapped in the same protective mist until they could get out of this carnage. She

needed to get them close to the ocean, safely by the water, which Adana now understood had never been her enemy but rather her possible saviour. She stepped towards them, eyes still burning, blisters forming on her arms even with her shadows surrounding her. When she finally reached the others, she grabbed them both by the arm, hauling them to their feet and dragging them towards the ocean the same way Lukas had done for Deacon. They all needed to breathe. Breathe, and cool down. Everything was starting to hurt.

Once Corina had snapped out of her trance, she ran towards her brother, flinging herself onto the sand beside him, pulling off her boot. It was hot to the touch, as she had to pull her fingers away from it each time she dragged it an inch off her leg. Delilah had collapsed outside the rest of the group, hands digging into the sand, crouched over as sobs wracked through her body. Adana couldn't tear her eyes away from the disaster, her further vantage point allowing her to see it was a perfect circle of fire, spreading no further than the last line of bodies. The flames reminded her of the sunset, and she closed her eyes, willing herself to remember how happy those colours can be, rather than ruinous. She'd never known fire to be so destructive. Only warming, and kind. She shivered.

Corina started dragging herself across the sand, arms working harder than they'd normally have to, her good leg pushing her further along towards where Delilah crouched and cried. Once she'd reached her, she lifted Delilah's head by her hair, forcing her to look right at her. Adana turned, yearning to reach out for Delilah while at the same time shocked to see that her eye had returned to its normal colour. Her face was ashen, stitches somehow even more hauntingly striking now than they had been before.

"Explain yourself," Corina growled.

"Did you do this?" Lukas shouted, and it was the first time Adana could remember hearing his voice lose control. Desperate. Angry. Sad. All at once. Deacon's expression reflected the same sentiment.

“Answer me!” Corina shouted, pulling Delilah up by her hair further. Adana almost made the move to stop her, but she couldn’t bring herself to. She needed the same answers the others did. If this destruction was her magic – Adana shivered, watching as Corina twisted her hand further into Delilah’s hair.

“She couldn’t have done it,” Deacon whispered, voice hoarse. Delilah looked at him, pleading. His face couldn’t have contained less emotion, protecting himself from his own despair. “Tell us what did.”

“I don’t know,” Delilah whispered, voice hoarse.

“Don’t lie to us now,” Corina said, twisting her hand further into Delilah’s hair. Adana saw a wince of pain. Eye still bright.

“I swear – I don’t know who did this,” Delilah said, voice more forceful now. She’d cast her eye upon Corina, matching her steely gaze. Adana couldn’t stop herself from looking back at the carnage every once in a while.

“Then why did you run there so fast? Why did you try to make everyone believe that I was hysterical?” Corina said, venom drenching her every word.

Everyone was silent. The only sounds were the crashes of the waves on one side, the crackle of the fire on the other. Tears were starting to dry on Delilah’s face. Adana’s had just started falling.

“Is that your magic?” Adana whispered, breaking the group’s silence. All heads snapped towards her. Adana’s focus remained on Delilah.

A pause. “Yes.”

“You make people believe they’ve lost their minds?” Corina said again, her grip starting to loosen with the weight of what they had all witnessed.

“They’ll only see what I want them to see...” Lukas muttered to himself, shifting the attention towards him. “That’s what she said to her followers the day she took us back to

camp. They'll only see what I want them to see. That's what you can do, isn't it? You change what people see," he said, pacing as he tried to unravel the mystery further.

"So you tried to make us believe that this – this carnage wasn't happening? Why?" Deacon asked.

"How much have you hidden from us?"

"What have we been missing?"

"Why would you do this? You want Adana all to yourself, is that it?"

Delilah hesitated at that last one, finally catching Adana's eye. She couldn't force herself to look away if she tried.

"What else have you been hiding from us?" Corina roared, throwing Delilah back down onto the sandy beach, collapsing backward herself.

"There was never any obstruction on the path through the forest, was there?" Lukas asked.

"How many of you are there really, how many Scavengers?"

"Was the town even real? Was Reselda?"

"Is that the reason no one questioned us walking through their camps?"

"How long had you been following us?"

Too many questions. Not enough answers. Adana's head was spinning, torn three ways. Delilah was ignoring the others now, her focus solely on Adana.

"I promise. I only did the things I did to protect you."

"From who? From us? Seems to me you're much worse for her than any of us have ever been," Corina scoffed.

"Protecting me?" Adana asked.

"Yes, I swear. I was only trying to protect you. Protect you from people that would seek to steal what you have. Your shadows, your friends."

“You wanted me to leave them,” Adana said, gesturing towards the other three.

“I wanted you to leave them because they can’t protect you the way I can.”

“They make your magic more difficult?” Adana asked, trying to understand.

“Yes, yes they do. The more people I have to focus on, the more energy it takes. You can still come with me, Adana. We can still head off together, I can still get you to the Barricades if that’s really what you want. I can make sure you never have to see anything like that,’ she gestured towards the mass of burning bodies, ‘again. You can come live with me, and I can protect you from anyone who wishes you harm. We can do that together! Please, just, please. Believe me,” Delilah said. Her voice had never sounded so weak before.

“You lied to her,” Lukas said, stepping behind Adana. “You can’t protect someone by lying to them.”

“Who is trying to take my shadows?” Adana said, moving her fingers to allow them to thread themselves around her hands.

A pause. “No one. Everyone. People like them,” Delilah said, gesturing towards Corina and Deacon. “It’s just like I said before – people want what they can’t have.”

“Who says you aren’t the one trying to steal them?” Corina said, pushing herself up forcefully, hopping over to where Adana stood, and balancing herself by grasping Adana’s arm.

“I have no reason to.”

“We didn’t believe you had any reason to lie to us and yet here we are, confronting you. So why did you do it? There must be a reason that you tried to hide this from us – the same reason you deceived us however many other times, I’d suspect,” Deacon said, struggling to get up too, but standing beside his sister nonetheless.

“I can’t tell you anything I don’t know,” Delilah said, gritting her teeth, standing up to her full height.

“He’s not asking if you know who did this. He’s asking why you tried to conceal it from us,” Lukas said, clasping a hand around Deacon’s shoulder, keeping him steady.

“It might not be exactly what your powers do – but you were trying to make me look like I was losing my mind. Weren’t you? You were doing it so that Adana would want to leave with you. You saw your chance, and you tried to take it,” Corina said, gripping Adana’s arm tighter.

For once, Delilah didn’t have a reply. Her eye began to shine a little brighter, even now.

Behind her, Deacon collapsed. A cry of agony shot out into the air, mixing with the crashing waves and roaring fire, the true sounds of fear and pain. Corina tore her attention away from Delilah, immediately tending to her brother. He was pushing down on his wound, breathing heavy, reminiscent of the first night they had stayed at Reselda’s. Adana couldn’t tear her eyes away from Delilah, watching her watching Deacon, but she focused her attention on Lukas as he crouched down by his friend, slowly trying to take the bandage off to see what was happening underneath.

It was nauseating. Where first it had been an angry red colour, it had now turned nearly black, sticky and oozing, reeking of illness. Adana could feel bile rising in her throat, her body trembling, shadows along with her. Corina had fallen silent, while Lukas was trying to get Deacon to control his breathing. They all turned to look back at Delilah, and before any of them knew what was happening, Corina had lunged herself across the sand toward Delilah, trying to sweep her legs out from under her by grabbing onto her ankles. Delilah jumped away easily, cautiously avoiding Corina’s wild swings. She’d started screaming, tears streaming down her face. Deacon was still groaning in pain, and Adana could tell that Lukas was unsure if he should stay with Deacon or try and calm Corina down. Adana decided for him.

“You did this! You lied to us about this too? How could you? My brother was getting better! You let us believe he was getting better! And for what? So you could have Adana all for yourself? What is wrong with you? You lying, thieving -” Corina’s angered words were cut off when Adana stepped in front of her, facing down Delilah herself.

“Answer her,” Adana said, eerily calm. Her shadows had stilled as well, floating serenely in the air between them. Waiting to pounce.

“I’m sorry. I thought that if you knew that he was going to be okay you wouldn’t feel obligated to protect them anymore.”

“You lied.”

“I only ever lied to protect you,” Delilah said trying to reach for Adana’s hand, but she was lashed by one of the shadows, flinching back this time.

“You made my shadows seem different too,” Adana spoke, voice still strangely calm. She could feel heat behind her eyes. Her connection to her shadows had never been so strong. “You made it look like they were calm around you and hated the others. But it’s the other way, right? I can feel it. They don’t trust you.”

“They’ll never understand who you are, or what you can do, or what those shadows mean to you. I can,” Delilah said, backing away further from Adana’s shadows. They had started lashing out at her repeatedly, her stitched eye now permanently furrowed in pain. Adana almost smiled.

“Can you change how I feel? Is that what you did?” Adana asked, voice now uncomfortably menacing, shadows still advancing.

“No. Never. The only person or thing that can control how you feel is you, Adana. Remember that,” Delilah said. Eyes pleading, voice unsteady. Adana took another step forward.

“But you made me doubt them. You made me doubt my friends!” Adana spoke, and she suddenly and forcefully knew she didn’t just mean her shadows, but the three people that were sat behind her as well – those that were full of pain and sorrow and fear, just as she was. She would be the one to power through those feelings, for them.

“I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you,” Delilah said.

“But you did. Me and them. My shadows. You lied to all of us! You’re just like mama. She lied too. She left me. And now you’re going to leave too,” Adana said.

“I don’t have to leave if you don’t want me to, Adana. I can still show you the way, please,” Delilah said. It seemed that she had gotten some of her courage back because she took a tentative step toward Adana, slowly but surely folding their hands together. Adana’s shadows became wild, lashing out even more, but Delilah stood her ground, wincing at each hit, looking Adana straight in the eye. Her eye was as light as Adana had ever seen it. There were no tricks now.

Just blood, fire, pain, and anger.

“You don’t want to leave. But we’ll make you,” Adana finally said, twitching her head sideways. Her shadows sprang into action even before she made her gesture, wrapping themselves tightly around Delilah’s entire body. She was invisible to them now, coppery red hair gone in favour of black mist, soft cries of pain heard from somewhere inside the shell. They constricted, tighter and tighter, and choking sounds joined the sobs of pain, and Adana almost relented, almost wanted it to stop – but she knew she couldn’t. She couldn’t have another person like this in her life. She had Lukas, perhaps even Deacon and Corina on her side now – she had her shadows.

“Take her away,” she whispered, and her shadows deformed their cocoon, a form that Adana had only ever used as protection, now being used as a weapon. Delilah’s skin was angry, and red, much like Deacon’s wound had once been. Small drops of blood seeped from

the stitches over her eye, and it was clear that she had nearly been knocked unconscious, breathing but shakily. Before Adana could say anything or think to check on her, she was being thrown through the air, landing harshly on the beach yards away from all of them. It happened again and again, her shadows taking no precaution in missing any larger rocks that were scattered around the beach, before she vanished from sight, banished.

The group remained silent, save for Deacon who was still trying to breathe through his pain. They watched the ocean waves, which reflected the colour of the fire behind them, but none could bear to look at the massacre again. There was nothing to be done about it now anyway.

When Adana finally felt a few of her shadows return to her, she allowed her eyes to tear their gaze away from the water, finding the exact spot in which Delilah had pleaded with her. Delilah's words echoed in her ear, but all that was left was Delilah's intricately carved wooden dagger, which she had dropped in her struggle with Adana's shadows. It had been stained with ash and a few drops of Delilah's blood, and after Adana had bent down to pick it up, she tied it to her waist using one of Reselda's extra scarves. She stood for a moment, her hand holding it against her hip, before she broke – collapsing onto the sand, tears streaming down her face, throat raw, closing her eyes when she felt Lukas's warm hand around her arm as she shut herself off from the world.

At least for a little while.

CHAPTER 27

Adana lost track of time as they sat on the beach, staring at the crashing waves. Deacon's breathing was still laboured, and he was sweating profusely, a small smile on his face to appease his sister's worry. Corina had announced some time ago that they would head straight for the Barricades as soon as Deacon could bring himself to walk a little again. They'd fix him, she'd said. Adana wondered if he'd even be able to make it off this beach.

Her surge of anger towards Delilah was still coursing through her – she felt powerful. Weirdly, strangely powerful, as though nothing could ever hurt her again. Powerful in her own right, not just because of her shadows. She'd never been able to confront a betrayal like that before. It felt good.

Once Lukas had let go of Adana's arm and returned to tending to Deacon's wound, she watched him. He was so calm, collected, the only current sign of distress the furrow between his brows, and she'd never appreciated more how kind and concerned his eyes could be – the polar opposite of the poison Adana had seen in Delilah. She'd sometimes worried about her own, how Lukas had mentioned her eyes sometimes grew darker too, but she shook off the thought, realizing now she'd only ever used her shadows to protect herself and her friends, and she sighed, expelling out the horrid smell that came from the still burning travesty behind them. With their backs turned, they could almost convince themselves it wasn't there. Almost.

Hours passed. The only reason they knew this to be true was because the smell of smoke became overly familiar to them, the burning in their lungs becoming milder as the salty tang of the sea finally made its mark in the air again. It seemed to calm Deacon down too, his breathing had become slightly steadier, but Lukas suggested that they sleep there

anyway. He needed more time to rest, they all did – and hopefully, in the morning, they could start their journey anew.

After nibbling at a few scraps of food, Deacon and Corina fell asleep side-by-side, their faces turned towards the beach, Deacon’s breathing shaky. Lukas came to sit beside Adana, as comforting a presence as ever. No unknown feelings, no resentment, no lies, just comfort.

“I wonder if Reselda knew,” he whispered, careful not to wake the siblings.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I know Delilah was at the house with us a lot, but she also left often to follow after you – how could she have kept up the pretence with Reselda there for so long? Corina and I never looked at his wound once she’d dressed it. So how do we know she wasn’t aware of what Delilah was doing?”

Adana thought about it for a moment – the white-hot sting of betrayal threatened to overwhelm her again before she remembered Reselda’s final words to her during their run for supplies. “She might have. But she also told me she wasn’t sure if he was better, and she told me that we needed to get him to the Barricades.”

“So maybe she did know, and she was trying to give him a fighting chance. Smart. That way, Delilah wouldn’t have to know that someone was on to her,” Lukas nodded, turning to face Adana.

She turned to face him too. He was tired, she could tell. His brow line hung low over his eyes, which blinked slowly with exhaustion.

“You should sleep,’ she said, ‘I can keep watch.”

“You shouldn't have to by yourself.”

“But I can,” she said, feeling that same heat burn behind her eyes again as her shadows surrounded them all.

He looked at her, really looked at her, and nodded. Falling back against the sand, Adana waited until his breathing changed to a slower rhythm before she turned to face the ugly truth that had sat behind them all this time. No danger would come from the ocean. She could keep her back turned to it just fine.

Had a new day started already? Adana was surprised when the sun began to rise. Deacon could barely make it 20 steps before he'd collapse on one knee on the sand, Corina hoisting him up under his arm to keep walking. He'd said that the Barricades shouldn't be more than two days walk from the beach they were at now, and Corina had looked positively relieved at the idea that it seemed to be so close. They'd been on the road for days, weeks, after all. Two days was nothing to someone in relatively good health. But that wasn't Deacon, and he had never looked so ill before. Adana almost felt the urge to put him out of his misery, if only for his sake.

Almost.

By early afternoon, Adana had only counted 1,567 steps. It was slow, too slow – Adana had tried to get her shadows to carry him so that he could rest as they journeyed, but they hadn't understood her desire, instead taking to scouting out their path through the forest. Perhaps they could still sense Delilah's presence. After all, Adana had banished her in much the same direction.

The trees provided little shade from the sun, dried and withered leaves rotting in the heat. It wasn't fair, Adana thought to herself. Surrounded by an ocean of water and somehow, no rain ever came, trees and bushes and leaves and flowers died and there wasn't anything anybody could do about it. Nature looked as ill as Deacon.

She felt Delilah's dagger bounce against her hip as she took another slow step. There was that feeling again, the one that refused to identify itself, the one that made Adana's head spin and eyes water. Now mixed with betrayal, it was even more overwhelming, angering, energizing, and uplifting all at once. She'd never felt so much before in her life. For the first time, she thought she knew more about who she was, about how she could feel, the things she could believe and think and understand about herself, the people with her, and the people that had left her behind. She didn't want to see any more pain, yet it accompanied her all the time in the form of Deacon, and she thought she was finally able to handle it. Pain in other people wasn't the same as pain that affected herself. Other people's misery was merely an obstacle – Deacon's illness was an obstacle in getting to the Barricades. The Barricades, where Deacon could get better.

The Barricades where she might see her mother.

Another feeling. Longing, and anger. The heat behind her eyes.

It was getting frustrating now. The pace was so slow Adana could feel herself losing more energy than if they had been running. She caught Lukas's eye, and she could see the same sentiment in his shrug and smile. *What can you do?* He seemed to say. She didn't bother to answer. Instead, she picked up the pace, Delilah's dagger hitting her thigh with each lengthened stride as she passed by the siblings and made her way through the trees. If she was going in the wrong direction, they could always tell her where to go. But there was a path through the trees, obscured, yet there. The groove in the dirt from many footfalls, broken and cut branches that seemed to provide just enough clear space for a person to pass through. This was the way; she could feel it. The others would just have to catch up to her.

Strong strides. Her mother. She was there. She had to be. Otherwise, what had it all been for? The confusion, the pain, the anger, the betrayal, the feelings she couldn't describe?

Was her friendship with Lukas enough to justify all that if her mother wasn't there? If she couldn't get the answers she had been seeking for so long?

Her shadows helped her push on, the heat behind her eyes nearly searing now as she thought about all the things she would say to her mother, all the things she would yell, all the questions she'd force out an answer for. It was what she deserved, after all this time. The sound of birds and cracking twigs and crunching leaves long since forgotten, just a rushing in her ears as every step took her nearer to what she had been searching for. The others had fallen far behind. They could catch up in their own time.

There was that rush of power again. She could feel it surrounding her, shadows excited and fluttering, as she took control of her own life again. She'd lost count of the steps. She had somewhere to be.

“ADANA!”

CHAPTER 28

Her name broke through her haze. She tripped over the loss of speed, landing hard on her knees on the cracked dirt ground. She even felt her ankle twinge, something she hadn't taken note of in a long while, groaning as she righted herself and turned to look towards the source of the shout.

Lukas was off in the distance, a long way back from where Adana stood, waving at her frantically with both arms. Sighing, she started the trek back towards him, feeling herself lose stamina and energy the closer she got to the others. Resolve slipping, impatience overwhelming her. She tried to remember how kind and decent Lukas's smile could be and mustered up the courage not to yell at him for breaking her trance.

"What's wrong?" She asked once he was close enough to hear her.

"Deacon collapsed. Corina is beside herself. He's still breathing, but it's worse than before. I took a look at the wound under the bandages and it's just... completely black now. Smells as terrible as...as the bodies we saw back on the beach," he finished, taking in a lungful of fresh air.

Adana felt her gaze softening as she heard his words and looked at him, really looked at him. He looked exhausted and broken. She didn't know how to comfort him.

"I'm sorry," she said. Flatter than she had intended it to be. Lukas just nodded.

"Corina still believes we can get him to the Barricades. I do too. But we're going to need your help, Adana. Please," he pleaded. She couldn't tell if he had expected her to say no for some reason, so she just smiled at him, the smallest of smiles, and he took that as confirmation.

It took a few minutes to get back to Corina and Deacon. Lukas must have sprinted to catch up to her, Adana thought. She wondered if his leg was doing alright.

Corina looked up at the sound of their approaching footsteps. Her cheeks were wet but she quickly wiped them dry with the back of her hand.

“Please, Adana. You have to – you have to help me. Help him. We need to get him there – but I can’t carry him. Not by myself. Have your shadows help me? Please,” Corina whispered, afraid to wake her brother. It was a sad sight. Deacon was trembling with fever, sweat making his clothes stick to his frail figure. Bruises under his eyes, no sign of awareness. None of that disgust or anger that he had directed towards her when they’d first met. Only pain. Only misery.

Adana nodded. She could try, at least. Focusing on her shadows once again, she willed them to wrap themselves around his frail body, at least so the load would be lighter for any of them to carry him. She tried clearing her mind, forcing her gaze on Deacon, guilt seeping in a little after she had run so far away from them. She tried to picture the action in her mind, thinking how her shadows would look if they wrapped themselves around him like a blanket, edges glowing and carrying him gently in the air. But they wouldn’t respond. Instead, they wrapped themselves tighter around Adana’s wrists and arms. She tried to lift him herself with their additional strength around her limbs, but it wasn’t enough. A dead weight, limp and heavy in her arms. She tried to put him down gently. She could see the dried blood through his bandages.

“Well?” Corina asked, voice shaking as she pushed back the hair on her brother’s forehead.

“I’m sorry. They can’t help,” Adana said.

“Can’t, or won’t?” Corina asked as she straightened herself, coming dangerously close to Adana, standing protectively in front of her brother.

“Can’t,” Adana said fiercely.

“Listen to me. I know my brother hasn’t always been kind to you, tried to understand who you are or where you come from – I know he hasn’t given you much reason to trust him, not since the moment you met him. But a few days, or hours ago, you defended him, and me, and Lukas, from someone much worse, who had lied and deceived and made us all look like fools. You defended him for a reason. I need you to help him for that same reason, *now*. I don’t care how. If he gets carried on someone’s back, in someone’s arms, if you can miraculously make him carry his own weight. But he needs to get to the Barricades, and I need to get him there. And you need to help me,” Corina said, skin flushed. There was a sheen to her eyes again, tears threatening to spill over. Corina was so close Adana could see them swimming from side to side on the rims of her eyes, red veins reaching outwards from the iris.

“I’ll try,” Adana whispered.

“Try harder,” Corina said, ‘please.’ Adana didn’t bother to nod.

She crouched down in front of Deacon again. She reached her hands out to the ground, steadying herself as she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to get her shadows to listen to her. She heard Corina pacing in the background, she felt Lukas watching her from the corner of her eye. She felt the dryness of the ground and the heat in the air, and she tried to get her shadows to sense and see and feel the same things, but they still wouldn’t listen. Instead, they intertwined themselves between her fingers now, curling around each one as she curled her hands into fists and tried to ignore their actions. They needed to listen to her. They needed to help her get to the Barricades sooner.

There was a slight breeze, the steady thump of Corina’s boot. Deacon’s breathing had become even shallower, if that was possible, but without her realizing it he had opened his eyes and was staring right at her.

She dug her fingers into the ground until she felt the dirt catch under her fingernails. That's when she opened her eyes. His were so pale. So milky. That diseased blue colour finally matching the state he was in. He looked sad. Defeated. Tired. But he didn't break his gaze with her, and neither did she. This was the closest she'd ever really been to him, she realized. She'd never noticed the faint scar next to his right eye, or the few small moles he had on his nose. She tried to close her eyes again, tried to will her shadows away from her own body and towards his, but she could feel Deacon's eyes on her the entire time. Somehow, he had the energy to stare at her. No doubt he was noticing things about her face for the first time too. The length of her eyelashes, or the freckle in the dimple of her chin. There was something peaceful about being this close to someone with no expectation of conversation. They could both just be there. Tired, and broken, and there. This young man she'd spent so much time with over the last few days, weeks, the one she didn't really know. The one looking at her like he wanted to say something but couldn't find the energy to utter the words. Adana realized she did want to help him.

Before she could comprehend what was happening, the dagger had been pulled from its holder. A sickening squelch. Burning behind her eyes. The thumping behind her stopped.

CHAPTER 29

“Thank you,” Deacon whispered, so softly only Adana could hear. She couldn’t force herself to blink. There was wood, in her hand. And blood on it too. She was even closer to him now. The last remnant of his breath on her cheek. Warm blood. More of it. Dripping onto his still leg. The world stopped. Shadows moved, now behind her back.

Had they made her do this?

She looked down, unblinking. Hand still around the handle of the dagger, Delilah’s dagger, one more betrayal. It was still inside him, embedded into his stomach, blood pouring out around the wooden blade. She tried to press her other hand to it, stop it. She needed to stop the bleeding. Panic, drip. Panic, drip. It was so warm, soft to the touch. All that life draining out of him. The young man with the small moles on his nose and a scar under his eye.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. The words wouldn’t leave her ears.

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!” Corina shouted from behind Adana. She shoved Adana away from her brother, who gasped, screaming that she needed to stop the bleeding.

“You’re the one that caused it!” Corina screamed back, frantically pushing her hands against the wound, taking Adana’s place in trying to stop the bleeding.

“You said you would help him. I asked you to help him! How could you... You... You’re just as bad as she is – Deacon, stay with me. Look at me, please, please look at me,” Corina said, voice jarring and soft all at the same time. His eyes had closed. He didn’t have the energy to look at his sister anymore. “No, Deacon, please. Please. We can make it. Come on, we can make it,” Corina said, leaving the dagger in his side as she tried to scoop him up from behind. He was even limper than before. A true dead weight. Yet Corina managed it, with all the strength she could muster, pain evident upon her face as she took slow, heavy

steps, her brother in her arms, trying so hard to get even one step closer to the Barricades. The one place that could save him. At one point, she dropped his legs, and she let out a blood-curdling sob, one that wracked her whole body as she heaved his legs back into her grasp and took another few leaden steps towards her destination.

Adana watched the horrifying scene unfold; eyes still unblinking, worried that if she closed them, she would see herself plunging the dagger into him again. Blood was starting to dry on her hands, but it had stained her clothes too, soaked the ground on which she stood. She looked towards Lukas – he always knew what to do; but he was just as frozen, watching in desperation as Corina pushed herself forward, dead brother in her arms. Lukas’s dead friend. Would he ever look at her the same way again?

No, no, no, no, no. This couldn’t be happening. She couldn’t have done this.

Her shadows had now taken to surrounding her in their cocoon form once again, and she felt the inexplicable urge to punch her way through them, run towards Deacon and undo what had happened. None of it felt real. Everything felt wrong.

Lukas had eventually snapped out of his daze, stumbling towards Corina, grabbing her from behind to steady her, to finally make her stop walking. The three of them stood in the forest motionless. Deacon was dead.

Adana had never wished so hard that they were back in Emory’s territory. Corina’s wailing sobs were unbearable. Undeniable. Deacon was dead.

Lukas’s silent tears were almost worse. He was trying to hold back his own pain. For her sake, for Corina’s sake, for Deacon’s sake. But it was hurting him, Adana could tell. Deacon was dead.

“Help me put him down,” Corina whispered to Lukas, and he nodded as he supported her weight as she slowly stepped back to lay her brother down. She did it with the same gentle touch that Adana had seen her use to tend to her brother all these weeks, and it dawned

on her that she had taken that caring side away from Corina now, perhaps forever – because how could Corina be expected to become a caregiver to anyone else when her own flesh and blood had been ripped away from her? Adana stumbled backward, falling onto the ground, hands catching her but wrists bending painfully with the impact. Everything was worse now. Everything was terrible.

Everything had been terrible since the moment they had left town. Ambushed with the site of a massacre, Delilah had betrayed them, and now – Adana hardly dared think about it – she had betrayed them too. She was worse than Delilah. She was worse. Maybe that’s who she’d always been.

Oh, oh no – what if that was who she’d always been but just never known? Growing up in isolation, never realizing that she was a betrayer, just like her own mother had been?

No, no, no, no. He had thanked her. Why had he thanked her?

After Corina’s cries had simmered down, and without Deacon’s pained breathing, their world had become uncomfortably quiet. How much time had passed? Suddenly, it was dark. Adana’s hands now felt crusty, the layer of dried blood thicker than originally thought. What she wouldn’t give to be by the ocean again, with her back turned to a pile of bodies that wasn’t her fault.

“Why did you do it?” Corina’s hoarse voice broke the silence with the question Adana had been dreading. She couldn’t say anything. There wasn’t anything to say. She didn’t know.

“She deserves to know, Adana,” Lukas said. He looked straight at her for the first time since it had happened, but his gaze was different. Harder. Angry. He’d never looked at her that way before.

“We both do,” Corina spoke for him, and he nodded at her gratefully.

“I don’t know,” Adana finally mumbled. It was the truth. She could barely remember deciding to do it, or the actual act of plunging the knife –

“No, that’s not good enough. You murdered my brother,” – Adana flinched – “and I deserve to know why,” Corina said, more forcefully this time.

“Adana, please,” Lukas begged, also wanting to understand. She’d never wanted to be able to tell anyone anything as badly – but how could she answer when she didn’t even know?

Another stretch of silence. Who cared how much time they wasted? It didn’t matter anyway; Deacon would still be dead, no matter where the sun was in the sky.

“He thanked me,” Adana said, surprising even herself. That was the only explanation she could think of. He thanked her. After the deed was done, once the blood was already dripping onto the ground and watering the dirt, he had thanked her.

“What?” Lukas asked.

“He thanked me,” Adana spoke again, letting the words hang in the air between them. It had to mean something. It had to make something right.

“Why would he do that?” Corina whispered.

“I don’t know,” Adana said, once again speaking the truth.

“He thanked you,” Lukas said, repeating it to himself, like he’d never heard the words before and didn’t understand their meaning. She supposed he hadn’t; not in this context, anyway.

“But you murdered him,” Corina said, refusing to believe.

“I - I don’t...” Adana trailed off, realizing that no amount of explanation would help. Reality would still be real. Adana would still have killed him, no matter the circumstances.

Lukas sighed like he was trying to physically push the pain out of his body, standing up and turning his back to them both. “I saw your eyes Adana,” he said after a minute of

contemplation, unwilling to turn back to catch her gaze. “They were black. Lifeless and dark, just like what happened.”

Adana shivered as her shadows snuck closer to her body, that usual comforting, cooling feeling replaced with an ache she couldn’t quite identify. Just as confusing as the way she felt about Delilah.

“But I don’t know what that means!” she finally yelled at him. She couldn’t take it anymore.

“I don’t think they’re your friends, Adana,” he said. He looked like he was going to say more, but then his gaze fell on Corina and the words died in his mouth. She was stroking the hair off her brother’s forehead, silent tears having returned and falling on his face where the sweat on his brow had now dried. He almost looked healthier now than he did earlier that day, more peaceful. Maybe that’s why she’d done it. To put him out of his misery.

“I want her to leave,” Corina spoke, still staring at her brother. It was clear she was talking to Lukas. Adana had known this was coming. She had just hoped it would take a little longer.

“I want her to leave, now,” Corina said again, voice rising with anger and pain. Adana was ready to leave, ready to forget about what had happened that day. What she’d done. She’d go to the Barricades, allow herself to confront her mother, and then push everything and everyone she’d met from her mind – even kind Lukas, who now would never be able to look at her the same way. She’d find another secluded spot, she’d live on her own and care for the plants and trees as best she could and be with her shadows and that would be that. That would be her life once again, allowing her the chance to forget this horrifying chapter of her existence. Right now, that was all she wanted. That was all she could bring herself to want.

“Corina -” Lukas began, clearly conflicted.

She cut him off. “No. No – we need to bury my brother. I want him to be buried properly. We – we can’t even take him back home to mother... I don’t want her to be there. I don’t want her to be there when we bury him,” she finished, resolve betrayed by the slight crack in her voice. “I want to bury him by the sea. He liked it there. We can go back to the beach. Stay close to the edge of the trees, away from... from the others. He deserves that. I need to give him that. He always wanted a proper warrior's burial. I need to give him that. That’s what he needs. That’s what – that's what I need. But she can’t be there. No. She can’t be there,” Corina said, rambling now. Adana was frozen in place. Her earlier resolve to leave waning by the minute.

Finally, Lukas nodded. He looked at Adana properly for the first time since it had happened then, and all the kindness and sympathy that he had ever shown her had been wiped clean off his face. Betrayal, guilt, and confusion now riddled his features, and that was what finally broke her. Adana allowed her tears to drip down her face as she gathered the strength to take a step forward, shadows lazily floating around her. She was jealous of their complacency, their lack of feeling towards everything that had just transpired, but at least she still had them as she faced another existence where she was truly alone. Straightening out her clothes, wiping the tears away, she looked at Lukas one more time, a small glimmer of hope somewhere inside of her that he would beg her to stay. But it was a foolish hope. He had no words of comfort left to give her.

“He was supposed to get better,” Corina said, making sure to look Adana straight in the eye as she said it. “You took that away from him.”

Clenching her jaw, Adana took one last look at Deacon. He could almost be sleeping, she supposed, and she decided to remember him that way, delicate and peaceful. Without another look back at either of her travelling companions, she headed straight onto the path, leaving everything else behind her as she did the only thing she could think to do. She ran.

CHAPTER 30

Nausea hit her much later than expected. She had run until her lungs began to protest and her feet began to blister. As soon as she stopped running, that was when it overwhelmed her. She gagged hard; the sight of his blood still caked on her hands became too much for her stomach to handle. But there was nothing to lose – no food, hardly any water. Just acid and air, too much air. It was getting harder to breathe.

She stood there, all alone in the middle of the forest, trying so hard to get oxygen into her lungs. Her shadows were there, as they always were – but she knew there was nothing they could do for her just now. This was a feeling she needed to work through herself. At least she still had them. At least they were still hers.

For so much of her life, they had been the only things she could count on. There was that burning behind her eyes again – no, she couldn't lose them. Not after all they had done for her. They made her powerful, capable of being alone. They were the reason she was still here, all these years later, all the disappointments and heartaches and pain and failed friendships and violence later. They were still here. Nobody else was. Not her father, mother, not Delilah, not Deacon, Corina, and even Lukas. The burning wouldn't stop, but it was now a pleasant distraction, her sore throat nearly forgotten as she watched them lazily dance around her. Yes, they were hers.

And she was theirs.

With that realization came the ability to breathe once again. She was never alone. Not in the way other people were. She allowed her shadows to surround her, arming her much the same way Delilah's people used wood to fashion armour for themselves. They wound themselves along her legs from the tips of her toes, encircled her waist, claimed her arms and fists and fingers, fastened themselves around her neck, and wove themselves into her hair.

This was the way it was always supposed to be. She and her shadows, one. She could do anything.

She would get to the Barricades. Nothing could hold her back now. Not Deacon's illness, not Lukas's immovable kindness, not Corina's desperate attempts to keep her brother in good health. Not Delilah and her lies and confusing feelings. Adana could claim anything she wanted. She just knew.

The path was still in front of her. She had no idea if she'd meet people along the way, stumble upon another settlement, but none of that mattered. She'd get there. Her mother deserved the reckoning coming her way. Her shadows were going to get her to where she needed to be.

Adana began to run again, strides longer than ever before, ignoring her body's protests and revelling in the way her shadows looked and felt surrounding her like this. Her very own personal body armour. Impossible to pierce through. Eyes still burning, she never wanted this feeling to end. Free! She felt free. She had forgotten what it was like to rely only on herself. Perhaps Lukas was just as manipulative as Delilah was. Who knew? It didn't matter anymore. None of them did.

Flashes of red, of burning bodies, wooden daggers and faint scars passed through her mind's eye. But the burning behind her eyes was enough to shake the images loose. The more pain she felt while running, the easier her guilt became to ignore. They shouldn't have dragged her from her home. It was their fault in the first place.

Her shadows' mist swirled around her vision, their tips brightening as the moon hid behind the canopy of trees. They were showing her the way. She didn't feel lost. They all knew exactly where they were going.

She kept running until the path ended.

Adana had hoped that the edge of the forest would reveal her destination. Instead, she was confronted with more bodies – but strangely, the sight of these was comforting and familiar, a call back to the first time she'd truly felt connected to something other than her shadows

Another giant serpent, even larger than the last one she had seen, body twisted and piled together high into the sky.

No, Adana realised, it wasn't just one. She counted five, all differing in size and colour and length, coiled around one another in a protective heap. But it hadn't been enough; whatever monster passed by here and had taken it upon themselves to slay these creatures had been thorough – most of them had their eyes gouged out before decay could make them slip out of their sockets, and it was clear the scales had been torn off rather than succumbing to rot. The sight should have made her sick to her stomach, and while Adana certainly felt anger on behalf of these creatures, she also felt that sense of connection again. But this time it was stronger. It was no longer her shadows showing her that there was nothing to be afraid of, she knew it by herself. Shadow armour giving her the confidence she needed to know that these creatures were part of a world that she was now connected to. A part of the world that other people feared.

There was that smell again. Sickly sweet, like honey and flowers, enveloping her senses and allowing her to believe that the serpents were still there in some capacity, experiencing another way of existence. A sliver of sunlight had begun to peek its way over the horizon, the soft glow revealing not only remains in black, but also a deep navy, a rich red, a striking green, and a golden yellow. There was so much to learn about these creatures, so much she wanted to do for them. Just like her forest, her nature, her plants and trees, she was too late. She wasn't enough. The burning behind her eyes was so insistent by now it was starting to become a solidified part of her, shadows' mist more pronounced.

There was nothing else she could do here.

After the dense and dry forest, the open landscape was a welcome change. Rocks littered the ground, making the path harder to navigate. Once or twice, her legs were about to give out as she took a wrong step, but Adana's armour, her shadows, righted her each time. She couldn't believe she'd spent so much time not being connected to them like this. Why hadn't she let them in before?

The sweet scent of the serpents' decay carried on the wind and followed her the further she walked. She wished she could find out who had done this to them. She knew she and her shadows could make them see sense.

Another flash of a pale face. She shook the thoughts away. If only she could wash the blood off her hands somewhere. The constant reminder was unwelcome.

Adana continued the trek. She had to be getting close to the Barricades, she figured. She'd reached the coastline once again, only this time she hadn't been led to a sandy beach, but rather a high-reaching cliff range, the ocean spreading out into the far distance below her. She couldn't remember ever standing so high up before, but instead of vertigo overwhelming her, she felt even freer. A strong wind caused her shadows to move along with the waves of her matted hair, and the urge to overthink anything and everything washed away as they wound themselves tighter around her, so much mist it was starting to obscure her vision. She had so much faith in them. They would lead her way. They always had done, they always would. Blood and burning and friendship and feelings be damned. All she wanted was to feel free, and invincible.

The roar of the wind made her miss the approaching footsteps.

Before realizing what was happening, her shadows had her turn her back on the ocean. It took Adana a while to understand that someone was standing in front of her, and they weren't a figment of her imagination.

She ignored the pain in the pit of her stomach when she realized the person standing in front of her wasn't someone she knew.

“Who are you?” Adana asked, wary of the stranger. They looked frail, too frail to have made it such a long way from any settlement. Outlines of their bones could be seen peeking through their weathered skin. Colour too red and burnt to resemble anything healthy. Their hair, a knotted grey mess on the top of their head; wrinkles surrounding their dull grey eyes, brows scrunched and unruly. Adana took a step back.

“Are you headed towards the Barricades?” the stranger asked in reply. Adana nodded.

“I can – I could lead you there,” he said. Voice reflecting his physical infirmity. Shaky and thin.

“Why would you do that?”

“It's a long way. Many people have gotten lost around here.”

“The path? It leads them wrong?”

“The path goes to many places. The Barricades are only one of them.”

Adana nodded again. Where had he come from? Her shadows seemed wary too – their mist growing outwards, reaching towards the man who flinched when one tendril made its way down his exposed arm. She looked down to the ground, and with a start, she realized she'd lost the path. Its direction was no longer clear to her – all the rocks looked the same, and none had been pushed aside in places where many feet had tread. Weeds sprouted everywhere. The trail was gone.

She looked down at the old man again, wondering if he'd had anything to do with the track's sudden disappearance. But there was nothing she could do now – she needed to get to the Barricades, no matter the cost. If needs be, she could view this old stranger as another obstacle she had to overcome – someone she could use until their usefulness had run out. Until she reached her final destination.

The truth.

She nodded at the man, stretching out an arm, indicating that he should start leading the way. His steps were small and shaky, but she was on her way again, and that was all that mattered. Her shadows were keeping an eye on him. Her body was secure within their armour. The sun was rising overhead and nothing could slow her down now. She knew what she needed to do.

CHAPTER 31

For the stranger's sake, Adana hoped he was leading her the right way. Where she had expected to just follow the cliff's edge and eventually reach her destination, the old man had instead led her back towards the forest, taking a long route through prickly shrubs and dense trees until once again emerging from the hedges and back onto the open expanse of the cliffs. She wondered if he was trying to stop her from seeing something. Delilah had pretended to do much the same thing once upon a time. She supposed she couldn't blame him for wanting to protect whatever he felt merited protecting.

He even shared his water with her. A few slices of apple. She accepted, secretly thrilled to be reminded of the sour taste of fruit. She did notice that she hadn't been as hungry since she'd left the others. She didn't know which emotion was helping keep her appetite in check, but she was grateful. Going hungry now would only be a waste of time.

The fresh air here was undeniable. After all the bodies, the blood, the fire, and the almost sickeningly sweet smell of the decomposing serpents, it was a pleasure to breathe in something so invigorating once again. If the old man hadn't been with her, it would have been a perfect afternoon. Isolation, her shadows, and fresh air. There was nothing more she could ask for.

The further they walked, the more exhausted the old man became. Once or twice, as the landscape changed and their trek began to crest a hill, he'd had to stop, taking an age to catch his breath. Adana had run in front of him, wanting to see where the path was leading her. She couldn't see the other destinations that he'd been talking about, but she could see hers: off in the far distance, a speck of black that rose higher than the cliff's edge. She could see it. No more than half a day's walk, she was sure of it. Now she just needed to lose the old man.

“I think I’ll be able to find my way from here,” Adana said, turning back to face him. He’d finally managed to get his breathing under control, and he nodded his head vigorously.

“Thank you for not making me take you all the way,” he said, sentiment very different from when he had offered to escort her on the journey in the first place.

“Why would you not want to be there?” Adana asked, curiosity choosing her words for her.

“There is nothing for me there,” he said, finding his balance shakily.

“Will there be something for me?” Adana asked.

“I hope so. But I am unsure.”

“Unsure of what?”

“That, I cannot tell you. I merely needed to make certain you could find the Barricades.”

“Did someone send you?” Adana asked, taking a step closer toward him, shadows spreading their mist towards him threateningly. He shivered as they surrounded him.

“Did someone tell you to take me the long way?” Adana asked, rather more forcefully this time.

“Please. Go and find whatever it is you must find. People do not come here lightly,” he said. He looked like he wanted to say more, a desperate look in his older eyes, but instead, he turned around, leaving Adana to fend for herself once more.

She’d started running again. Now that the old stranger had left her alone, she could pick up the pace, the speck of the barricades becoming larger with every few hundred steps she took.

A blurry shape could now be made out in the distance. Its size seemed impressive. She kept running.

Adana had looked behind her a few times, nearly expecting to see Lukas or Corina or even Delilah running to catch up with her. Red sometimes flashed in front of her eyes. Whether it was Deacon's blood or Delilah's hair, she wasn't sure. Her shadow armour, in any case, was there to protect her. Every time she thought about the others it tightened its grip around her arms, legs, and waist.

The shape of the building was becoming clearer now. A few towers rose out above the rest of the structure, heading impressively towards the sky. Adana could make out the backdrop of the ocean, the different levels of the building, a staircase leading up to it. She was so close now, that she could feel her shadows buzzing with anticipation. She could feel it in her own heart too.

How many more steps would she need to take before finally satisfying her need for answers? She started counting again, as she often did: 1, 2, 3.... 57, 58....354, on and on it went. Her expectations were now so high, and her shadows' mist had become so dark that she wondered if there was anybody who could see her between them, regardless of whether or not they carried magic of their own.

3,678. She was standing at the bottom of the stairs. Relief washed through her. Another flash of red. More mist, more buzzing. Her shadows were practically vibrating by now, and Adana felt her whole body shaking along with them. This was it. This was what she'd gone through all that torture for – the ruined friendships, the betrayals, the lies, the violence, the hunger, and the pain. All for this moment. All to see her mother again.

All to get her answers.

But the Barricades were eerily silent.

She couldn't make out any sounds other than the crashing of the waves at the bottom of the cliff. No running footsteps, no people shouting at one another. No tinkering tools or rustling clothes. Nothing. The complete opposite of the town in the valley. While the Barricades' smooth white stone walls and sharp edges were intimidating enough on their own, its silence was even more so. If not for the ocean below her, she would have almost believed Emory to be standing beside her once more.

Adana felt a drain on her nervous excitement, replaced with frustration, and anger. How could this be? After everything that she'd been through, after everything that her shadows had done for her, this is where she ended up? At an abandoned fortress, nothing there to satiate her hunger for answers, all to be back where she started once more?

She felt her breathing quicken. No. It was unacceptable.

She took a few steps back, taking in the full shape of the Barricades. It was made up of three different levels, stacked unevenly on top of each other, with twin towers situated diagonally across from one another: one overlooking the ocean, the other overlooking the landscape. Only a few windows had been carved into the surface of the stone, all evenly spaced. She expected the halls would be dark. There was only one way in and one way out. Massive, double, solid wood doors were all that stood between Adana and her entry into the fortress. She needed to know what was in there. It was clawing at her gut, making her shake from the inside out, shadows energetic along with her anticipation.

Adana headed up the steps two at a time. Once at the doors, she pushed at them with all her strength, and all the strength that her shadows possessed, and with much less resistance than she had been expecting, the doors slowly scratched open along the flagstone floor. The sound was horrific, screeching and wailing, but she barely heard it. She was inside. Now to find some answers.

Left or right. Her assumption that the corridors would be dark had been an understatement. The windows that they had carved were so small only a few measly squares of light bounced off the inner walls, leaving the rest in darkness. She saw a few old sconces aligned on both walls, but with nothing to light them, they were useless to her. Sensing her hesitation, her shadows allowed their edges to glow a little brighter, cocooning Adana in their faint glow and bathing the hallway in their dim light. Still fully armed with them from head to toe, she decided to start down the left side of the Barricades. She could always double back.

She passed room after room, many of them empty. She'd been right about it being abandoned – there wasn't another soul in sight. Much of the compound seemed completely useless. Where many rooms were empty, there were just as many littered with junk – straw patches in the corners of rooms, chunks of old rotten food, and scraps of metal scattered around the floors. A lot of the doors on the inside seemed to have been ripped off their hinges, scratched up and worn down. A shiver ran down Adana's spine.

"They've helped people with magic there before. Just to understand what it is, and how you can use it. It's easier to be less afraid of something if everyone is allowed to know how it works," Lukas had said to her once. She felt bile rising in her throat. This place left the distinct impression that they weren't in the business of helping anyone. Most of the rooms didn't even have windows to let in a bit of the natural world.

She didn't know how much time had gone by, but she did realize she'd walked in a circle by the time she reached the large open doors again. She'd seen a staircase a few hundred meters back on her right. Doubling back that way, she once again took the stairs two at a time, entering another dark hallway, this one even narrower than the last.

Opening the first door she found, she was practically blinded by the amount of light that flooded into her eyes. This room had an enormous window situated on its far wall. The room itself was furnished much less sparsely; there was a desk, a few chairs, a small bed, and

a rug covered in a thick layer of dust. Having now adjusted to the light, Adana walked over to the windows, looking out on what appeared to be a courtyard built on top of the first level.

Backing out of the room and closing the door behind her, she made her way further down the corridor. The slap of her bare feet against the cold stone floor bounced around the hallway, echoing all around her. The doors here weren't made of wood. They were made of some sort of metal.

Each room she went into, the light was the same, but the furniture was different. She could feel personalities in each room, people's comforts and tastes. It finally dawned on her what the difference was between this floor and the one below.

She would have been held in the rooms downstairs.

Yet, she kept checking each room, rifling through all the books and papers that she could find, hoping for some mention of the name Samira, of her mother. Was she working here? Was she helping them to dissect people with magic like hers? Is that why she had fled? So she could drag her daughter here once the answers had been found?

Adana's anger was boiling now, her shadow's mist deepening all around her. She hated this place. It was cold and full of hatred, fear, and desperation. So many of the words she skimmed along the pages meant nothing to her – too big, too complicated, words her mother never taught her. But she could extract the names, understand the feelings that were being described, the scenes of pain and brutality. It was hard, so hard to believe that her mother might have come here, all to take something away from Adana that was a part of her.

The anger was now reflected in her shadows. She could feel their fury as they cocooned themselves tighter around her.

Each room on the second level mirrored the last. Comforts and dust, useless documents. Adana decided to try her luck on the third floor before heading to both towers, her hope that she would find some actual answers waning by the minute.

The third floor had no rooms. Instead, it was a corridor, with windows on both sides, its only purpose to provide a path between the two watch towers. She headed to the one that faced the ocean first, expecting to find nothing and hoping to find everything.

It was the former. Just more dust, which swirled around in the light of the sun, the movement reminding her much of the way her shadows used to dance before they'd fused with her as her armour. Her energy had taken an enormous hit. The red behind her eyes was showing up more frequently. She was tired. So tired. All of this, for nothing. She slid down the rough stone wall, landing on the cold floor, and she cried. Tears had never flooded so heavily from her eyes, all the frustration and sadness that had built up during her exploration of the Barricades screaming at her to be released.

The only saving grace was that it didn't matter what she had done. Deacon still wouldn't have made it, even if they'd managed to get him here. She looked down at her hands, still red, but now also covered in dust, a few splinters embedded into the skin of her palm. She hadn't even realized. The pain was so minor compared to everything else.

Maybe that's why he said thank you. Maybe he knew.

But she hadn't known. She'd still killed him.

No. She shook her head. Those doubts were the product of this place, this horrid place her mother had decided to join, the place that had left Adana isolated for so long. The burning behind her eyes was growing stronger again. Deacon would have only slowed her down. She knew that. The others should have known that too.

She needed to get up. She had one more tower to go. One more room in this wretched place, and then she could go home, where it was safe, and she was happy. Protected.

She slowed her pace and enjoyed listening to the sounds of the ocean crashing against the cliffs below her, the feel of the burning sun on her face and the warmth in the air that surrounded her. The Barricades had proven to be cold, damp, musty, and horrid. How glad

she was that she'd lived most of her life outside – but she could hardly compare the Barricades to her old family home, that small cabin situated in the forest where her parents were happy too and they were together. Where she'd still had a father as well as a mother. She hadn't thought about that place in a long time.

But she didn't have her shadows back then. She wouldn't trade them in for the world. Slowly climbing the steps to the lookout, she thought the only sound she could hear was her feet shuffling over the steps.

But she was wrong.

Someone was gasping for air.

CHAPTER 32

Resisting the temptation to storm her way up the rest of the stairs, Adana forced herself to walk slowly. Each step was softer than the next, completely opposite to the eagerness she could feel deep within her bones. The slow climb brought her closer to the top, the unmistakable sound of someone crying waiting for her at the end.

Adana curled her fingers into fists. The wailing was grating on her nerves, everything about this place testing her patience. Her shadows expanded their mist, vibrating in mirrored anticipation. There was the top of the stairs. This was it.

A woman sat in front of her, but it wasn't her mother. It wasn't Samira.

Instead, it was an older woman, grey hairs framing a wrinkled face – equally grey eyes set far back inside her skull, skin nearly translucent it was so pale. Adana stopped herself from rushing to judgement, knowing that it was more than possible this woman had been a victim of the Barricades rather than a volunteer – but why was she still here, when it was obvious this place had been abandoned months ago if not years?

“Who are you?” Adana asked, trying to keep her voice soft.

The woman was startled, jumping up and falling back down again just as quickly in fright. There was a loud crack, and the woman grabbed her knee, gasping in pain, new tears forming in her eyes and still gasping for air.

No answer. The stranger merely shook her head.

“What are you doing here?” Adana asked.

Not even a shake of the head now. The woman merely rocked back and forth, still grasping her knee. Adana's nails were digging into the palm of her hand.

“I need you to tell me who you are,” Adana said, more forcefully.

Nothing.

“Now!” Adana shouted, towering over the cowering woman. Trembling with frailty, the woman pushed herself back against the wall as far as she could, making herself small, but

Adana was having none of it. Grabbing the woman’s arm, she dragged her away from the wall, throwing her in the middle of the tower floor. Crouching down to eye level with her, she looked at the woman, really looked at her, much the same way she’d looked at Deacon before he’d died: where Deacon had a scar just next to his eye, this woman had deep wrinkles.

“Please tell me something,” Adana said, voice a little softer, but no less threatening.

“Why are you here?” the woman asked, the tone of her voice surprising Adana. It was a little hoarse, but deep and hypnotizing nonetheless.

“I am here for my mother,” Adana said.

“Your mother?”

“Samira.”

The woman’s eyes widened before she realized her mistake. It was clear that she recognized the name – Adana saw that flicker of knowledge in her eyes, the way the woman’s gaze shifted away from her.

“You know her,” Adana said, accusingly.

The woman shook her head with more vigour than her frail frame should have allowed.

“You’re lying.”

Adana grabbed the woman by the chin, forcing their eyes to meet.

“Where is my mother?” Adana asked.

The stranger didn’t answer. Increasing the pressure on the woman’s chin, Adana watched her flinch at the pain, scrunching her eyes and mouth shut as shadows started to lash out at her infirm skin. More tears. Adana didn’t care.

“Where is she?!”

“She’s gone!” The woman finally shouted back. Adana let her go, pushing her towards the ground for good measure. Red welts were evident on her face from where Adana had held her.

“Gone where? From here?”

“Gone. Just.... gone.”

No. No, no, no, no, no. Not another one. Not when she still needed her answers. Not when she needed to *see* her mother, get the answers straight from her, understand why she left her daughter to fend for herself, why she ripped her away from her father. God, she needed to see her. She’d never been so desperate to see her mother’s beautiful brown eyes, her curly hair, her bumpy nose.

“Who was she here?” Adana asked.

“She came here for help.”

“Help for what?”

“Help for you, I’m assuming,” the woman said.

“What help?”

“She told us all about you. Told us that she thought you had magic. She was afraid for you. That her husband had it, and she didn’t want the same thing to happen to you –”

“My father?” Adana asked, voice hopeful, so hopeful, she almost sounded like she was right there with him again, full of childish faith and happiness.

“She wouldn’t tell us more about him. Seemed like she was afraid of him. For good reason, I expect. If he had magic. Poor defenceless woman. How is she meant to stay safe with something like that in her own house?”

There was that anger again. White hot and boiling in her blood, shadows so deep and black they were sucking the light out of the tower. This woman didn’t know anything about

her father. The burning behind Adana's eyes was so intense she could barely keep them open. But she did, and she directed her rage towards the frail woman sat in front of her.

"You don't know anything about my papa," Adana said, stepping forwards. The woman scrambled back.

"Tell me what happened here. Tell me what happened to my mother." Tendrils of shadows had unwound themselves from Adana's armour, slithering their way through the air towards the woman's neck. It was clear the moment she realized they were there, this invisible threat wrapping itself around her airways. There was that gasping for air again.

The woman's voice was now straining against the strength of Adana's shadows. She could feel the corner of her mouth pulling upwards slightly.

"She came here to see if we could help you manage your magic. Stayed here for a while, volunteered to help. But she became angry when she realized what we were doing to the subjects that we had here – the people we were testing on. Said we weren't treating them with care, that they deserved respect. I suspect she was worried that we would have treated you the same way – hard to understand why she'd care so much. Look at you – you can barely contain whatever it is you have. But it didn't matter to her. Once she found out how we were treating our patients she left. I don't know where she went," the woman finished.

Adana's shadows let go a little, but the threat was far from over. She still wanted to know where her mother was. Where was she going to get her answer now?

"What happened to this place?" Adana asked, taking another step forward.

The woman shivered.

"I - I don't really know. Everything was working as usual. Research, treatment, colleagues. One night, we all go to sleep, and then I heard a scream. Someone was shouting that our captives had been released from their rooms. Someone was yelling in the room next to me and then it was silent. Completely silent. No one was shouting, or crying. No footsteps.

I thought I was alone. The door flies open. This man steps in, tells me to stay here, no matter what, or he would know. He would know and he'd do to me what he did to all my other colleagues. He told me I needed to stay here so that I could tell anyone who came by what happened here. I didn't know what he was talking about. I didn't know what he had done, not until he led me into the hallway and I saw the bodies of all my friends and colleagues on the floor. I had never seen so much blood – and I had seen a lot of blood. I ran away from him, into the tower to watch what was happening from above. Saw that some of our captives were carrying the bodies away from the Barricades, back towards the forest. I don't know what they did with them – I don't know...," the woman fell silent.

It was hard for Adana to stop the sympathy creeping in. It was there, in imagining what this woman must have seen, heard, smelled. She knew what death smelt like. She could still sense it in her own nose sometimes. Deacon's blood, those bodies on the beach...

Those bodies on the beach.

"I think I saw them," Adana said, quietly.

"Were they..."

"Burning."

The woman gagged. Shadows clutched her tighter. Adana took a step back.

"I'm sorry," Adana whispered.

The woman sighed. "You should be. He was one of your kind."

Just as quickly, that sympathy was gone. The rage that had simmered down boiled up again, this time manifesting itself. Before either of them knew what was happening, Adana's shadows had expanded so quickly and so densely that it blew the far wall of the tower to pieces. A thundering clap, then the sound of stone raining down all across the courtyard below them. Dust swirled menacingly in the air, threatening their airways and eyesight, but Adana felt lighter, freer.

A flash of red. Deacon's blood or the woman's, she wasn't sure.

"You swear you don't know where my mother is?"

"I swear, I swear! If she didn't return to you, there must have been a reason. She was only here because she cared for you. Nothing more, nothing less. I swear – let me go, please, please, let me go..."

"You can go," Adana said, voice devoid of emotion. Burning behind her eyes. Her shadows stretched themselves out once more, slowly forcing the woman closer to the edge of the tower. Adana watched, motionless, unresponsive. Finally, her shadows thrust themselves towards the stranger, tipping her over the edge before retracting themselves just as quickly, fully forming Adana's shadow armour once again.

There was a ringing in her ears as she made her way down the stairs. The dust from the outburst made her cough a few times, burning behind her eyes now so consistent she hardly even noticed it anymore.

Adana made her way outside once again. It was strange, she thought, as she stared back at the abandoned Barricades – she would have thought that the damage to the tower would have been visible, even from the ground.

CHAPTER 33

At least the ocean air was able to wipe the scent of death off her clothes. Adana felt lighter than she had in a long time, finally having expelled some of her rage. And at least she knew her mother could still be out there. Somewhere. There was no real reason to believe that Samira was truly gone.

She was also tired. So tired. Felt as though she could sleep for weeks, hoped that she would be able to fall into a black pit of unconsciousness and not wake until the images of Deacon and Delilah, Lukas and Corina, her mother, those vile rooms, and the Barricades were safely tucked into the back of her mind, unable to conjure random flashes of red, of death's scent, of burning bodies and ruined towers. She was tired.

Her hands were still red too.

She needed to get down to the ocean. She needed to finally wipe the dried blood off her hands, wash the dust out of her hair, and scrub the dirt out of her skin. She reeked of decay, she could sense it, and it wafted in the air around her, making her gag. She needed to get down to the ocean. Now.

Catching sight of a track that led away from the Barricades and further down the steep cliffs, Adana got up from her place on the ground, limbs heavy, and ran once again. She'd done more running in the past few days than she'd ever done in her entire lifetime. At least she'd constantly been running towards something. Now she wasn't sure where to go.

The track was slippery and dangerous, soft dry grass giving way to sharp rocks and pebbles. She felt them digging into the soles of her bare feet, a few drops of blood trailing behind her as she made her way down to the shoreline. The beach was different here as well. Not sandy soft like the other one had been but covered in broken seashells. The pain was immense by now, a few drops of blood having turned into a full streak. But she didn't care.

She could wash it off, the same way she'd finally wash off Deacon's blood, and that would be the end of this horrific sequence of events, and she could rest.

The salty ocean water made the pain even worse. She screamed. It wouldn't subside. Throbbing, stinging pain, and Adana was gasping for breath, wondering, wondering why her shadows weren't taking her pain away like they normally did. Why were they letting her suffer? Perhaps they needed their rest too.

Taking in a lungful of air, she decided to just wade into the water completely, the only way to make sure that she'd feel like all the memories could be washed away. The water was cold, something she hadn't expected, and she shivered. Her shadows squeezed her tighter as she submerged herself further. Each step made her senses feel clearer, her body cleaner. She looked down at her hands once more, the last reminder she had of Deacon and what she'd done to him. Given him peace? Or ended his life before it was meant to? She didn't know. She'd probably never know.

Adana scrubbed her hands so hard the skin started to peel off. But at least the blood was gone.

She plunged herself further into the sea. The dust from her hair was swirling in the water around her, and she pulled her fingers through it, trying desperately to work out the knots that had made themselves at home there.

The dirt off her skin was washing away with each crash of waves too. It was like she was being reborn, the throbbing in her feet now nearly forgotten. The sharpness of the ocean floor now familiar rather than painful. Her clothes were heavy, the stains unfortunately permanent, but at least she'd be rid of the smell of Deacon's blood.

She waded even further in, each step making it harder for her feet to make contact. By now, Adana was standing on the tips of her toes, hair spread out behind her in a halo, dirt and blood circling the water around her. She took another step, and her feet left the ground.

She floated. She didn't know she could do that, but there she was, arms outstretched, legs spread, hair a tangled mess behind her, scrubbed hands clenched. She floated until her hands unclenched themselves, letting her shadows and her fingers feel the water that surrounded them. The water turned darker, shadows' mist turning it their same shade of black, but it didn't frighten her. Adana had never felt so tranquil. Not since the day she'd left her enclosure and said goodbye to her favourite tree.

Closing her eyes, she felt the warmth of the sun beating down on her face, she felt the cool water surrounding her, and all she could hear were the waves crashing around her ears, the blood rushing in her head. Submerged like this, Adana felt peace had finally found her, here, of all places. Imagining herself drifting away, with nothing but her shadows to keep her company, gave her an immeasurable sense of closure. Minutes or months went by, she didn't know, but the peace was not to last, and that was something she should have seen coming.

Before she could understand what was happening, a harsh wave crashed over her, water lodging itself in her lungs. She coughed and spluttered, trying to force herself upright, but the waves kept coming and her feet couldn't find the ground. The water was still in her airways, burning just as much as her eyes now always did, salty and threatening.

Another wave. This one pulled her under. Adana couldn't tell if the burning in her eyes was coming from the salt water, but it was bad enough for her to screw her eyes shut. The ocean was making it almost impossible for her to feel her shadows surrounding her, and it was starting to make her panic. More water flooded into her lungs. Her energy was diminishing by the second.

Maybe this was the ending she deserved, Adana thought. She couldn't tell up from down. Right from wrong. Everything was twisted.

But there, finally, she could feel something solid wrapping itself around one of her arms, and she knew that her shadows had saved her once again.

“They’ve armoured you I see.” The voice was a muffled whisper; like she wasn’t meant to hear the words. She almost hadn’t. Water was lodged in her ears, nostrils, and throat. She coughed violently, trying to get some fresh air back into her lungs, but she just heaved instead, her insides complaining at the force. She was warmer than she thought she’d be. She had her shadows to thank for that, she supposed. They’d kept her armour intact throughout the entire ordeal. Her eyes still burned, no longer due to the salty water but now because of the harsh light of the sun. Trying to sit herself up slowly, she saw the blurry outline of the person who had spoken.

The first thing she sensed was familiarity.

The second thing she thought was that he could see her shadows.

“Ah, you’re awake! Thank the heavens, I was so worried about you,” the voice spoke, still detached from the person she saw sitting in front of her. Adana shook her head, trying to get the water dislodged from her ears.

“How are you feeling?” the voice asked, concern evident.

Adana shrugged, not trusting herself to speak just yet. Blinking a few times, pushing the haziness from her sight, she noticed that the ground beneath her was no longer the sharp edges of the sea shells but rather the comforting softness of grass. Whoever this person was, they’d carried her a long way back up the cliffs.

“That’s alright, take it slow. I’m still trying to take it in. You’re really here, in front of me. I thought this day would never come,” the person said. The voice was clearer now. Deep and soothing, smooth like glass. Familiar too. It certainly wasn’t Lukas. His voice was much more melodic, lighter.

Finally, her vision cleared, and she concentrated all her senses on the man sitting in front of her, trying to figure out where it was she knew him from. He was pale, though nowhere near as pale as Deacon had been – this man’s skin was fairer, without the sickly tinge. His eyes were so familiar, with long lashes under thick eyebrows. The irises were an amber colour, like wood, or syrup, and Adana knew she had seen them somewhere recently. His build was strong, lean, much what was needed to drag someone back up a cliff side. His hair, dark brown and wavy, tousled in the wind, looked unusually soft. Her eyes were starting to burn again. She knew she knew him from somewhere.

“Take your time, Adana. Recognition will come.”

Adana was startled by the sound of her name, so comforting in this man’s voice.

She saw a drawing. A drawing in Delilah’s hut, so clear and vivid in her mind’s eye it was almost like she was there, studying it once more, Delilah stood behind her, watching. Adana felt a pang in her gut at the memory. But she knew his eyes matched that drawing.

“Look at me, Adana. Really look at me,” the man said.

She did. Feeling oddly at ease, she crawled closer to him.

She saw a scar in his right eyebrow, a thin vertical line dividing the feature in two. She saw a light trace of stubble coating the bottom half of his face, and she briefly wondered what he would look like with a beard. It was clear he was much older than her, a few wrinkles situated on his forehead and around the corners of his mouth, but nothing that took away from the overall youthfulness of his face. There was a birthmark on his cheek next to his left ear, in the shape of -

Adana threw her arms around the man’s neck, suddenly convinced. His birthmark was in the shape of a half-moon.

“I told you I would always find you. I’m just sorry it took so long.”

CHAPTER 34

“Am I dreaming?” Adana asked, certain that this amount of happiness couldn’t be real. He was here. In front of her. Older, but it was him. She’d never been so sure of anything in her entire life.

“Thankfully, no. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be experiencing this either,” her father said.

Adana’s arms were still wrapped tightly around his neck. She was afraid that if she let go, even for just a second, he would disappear again. He didn’t smell the same. He used to smell like firewood and smoke – now, it was grass, and something faintly sweet. Oh, how happy she was to see him. She’d been waiting for this moment her entire life.

He carefully released himself from her grip, forcing Adana to sit backward. But it was all right, because he was still there, looking at her with an enormous smile on his face.

“Look how you’ve grown,” he said. Adana laughed, the sound pure joy. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed like that.

“It’s been a long time,” Adana said, breathily. She still couldn’t quite believe it.

“I just want you to know, Adana. I never meant to leave your side. Your mother – your mother stole you away from me for reasons I can’t even begin to imagine. I want you to know that I looked for you, for so long, years, but the two of you had just disappeared. I’m so sorry, Adana. I never meant to leave you,” he said.

“I know,” Adana assured him. She knew. She’d always known he was looking for her. “I tried to stay home. In the forest. I thought if I stayed there you would find me one day.”

“It’s strange. I spent weeks tracing every path and track I could in that forest. I was never able to find any sign of you,” he said.

“We found a place. When we went in, I couldn’t hear you anymore. I tried shouting but mama wouldn’t let me,” Adana said, hanging her head in shame. If only she’d tried

harder, fought her mother more, she wouldn't have been separated from her father for so long.

Clearly sensing her hesitation, he picked up his daughter's hands, looking her straight in the eye.

"Our separation was never your fault; do you understand me?" Adrien said, rather forcefully. He squeezed her hands tightly.

"I know," Adana said again. He nodded, dropping her hands where they fell in her lap.

"I think your mother must have hidden you from me using magic," Adrien said, staring up at the sky now.

Adana looked at him, shocked by the accusation. "You think mama had magic?"

"I believe it's possible. Perhaps she didn't even know herself. How else could she have kept you away from me for so long?"

Adana considered his answer. There was a possibility, of course. But that would mean that Samira would have easily understood Adana's shadows, and there would have been no reason for her to go to the Barricades to find out more about Adana's magic.

But it was her father, sitting in front of her, telling her this. He would know. He knew Samira better than anyone.

"Maybe," Adana said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I don't mean to cast your mother in a darker light for you. I'm just – I cannot believe you're here, and I've never been more pleased, but I can't help but be angry at her for all the years she kept us apart," he said.

"Me too," Adana replied.

"I suppose you're too old to play hide and seek now?" her father said jokingly.

Adana smiled. "I don't want to hide from you now."

“No, no you wouldn’t,’ he chuckled, ‘let’s get you inside, and warm. And you can tell me all about your life while I make us some food,” he said. Standing up, he held out his hand for her to take. Hoisting her to her feet, Adana could hardly believe how familiar the feel of his hand was in hers. Hers had grown, of course – but his were just the same.

It was only a half-hour walk back to his cabin. When she saw it, Adana couldn’t help but marvel at the similarities with her old childhood home. It looked brand new, logs unaffected by the sun, a thatched roof in perfect condition. No door, just an entry, but there was a window to let in more light, and a stack of firewood against the left side of the house. A few plants, some flowers, some holding berries, surrounded the property.

She knew instantly she was home. Her shadows started trembling around her.

“You built this? Just like our old house?”

He smiled. “Yes, I did. I needed something to remind me of the old days, of you and your mother, but our old cabin held too many memories. So, I decided to start fresh.”

“It’s perfect,” Adana said.

“I always hoped I might get to show it to you someday,” Adrien said wistfully. “Go on, head inside. I’ll just get some more wood for the fire.”

Slowly stepping foot into the cabin, she felt like she’d been transported back to an earlier life. The fireplace was in the same position, as were the table and chairs for eating. The only difference being that there were two chairs present instead of three. A small straw mattress was hidden away in the opposite corner. Throughout the one room, there was a lot of workspace, rickety tables housing tools and metals and woods and rocks. She was keen to find out what it was he’d been working on. The sweet smell she’d noticed on him had clearly come from here, as it was present in every inch of the room. Incense perhaps, or the flowers he was growing outside. Adana sighed, a happy sigh, a feeling of warmth spreading throughout her every limb.

“What do you think?” Adrien said from behind as he entered the room.

Adana couldn't help herself, throwing her arms around his neck once again in a tight embrace. “It's perfect,” she said again. “Can I stay here with you?”

“Adana, love, you don't even have to ask. I want you to stay here, more than anything.”

Adana couldn't stop smiling all afternoon and evening. He regaled her with stories of his endless search for her, the people he'd met along the way, the work he'd achieved. He told her of building this cabin, of finding the right wood and the right materials, his first trip into the last town before the coast. That was a story she could share with him too, and she'd never felt so free to speak to anyone before. Hours went by, they ate, and drank a sweet tea that he had brewed. He'd found a water source only a few miles walk from the house. That was why he'd settled here. Adana found him endlessly fascinating. He even told her stories of her mother, and while the sinking feeling in Adana's stomach returned the moment he mentioned her, another question she needed answered popped into her head.

“Papa - can you see my shadows?” she asked, rather bluntly. He looked surprised at the question.

“Your shadows?”

“My magic.”

“Ah, I see. Well, yes – I can see that something surrounds you. Your shadows, you call them?” Adana nodded, ‘are beautiful, to say the least. What do they do for you?’

“They're my friends. They protect me.”

“Do they?”

“Always.”

“Interesting,” he said. Adrien reached out his hand towards his daughter, allowing his fingers to stroke a few of the loose tendrils of shadow that surrounded Adana. The burning

behind her eyes returned, this time three-fold as he pinched one of the tendrils to inspect it closer.

“How can you see them? Do you have magic too?” Adana asked, voice betraying her excitement.

“I used to, yes. But I’m afraid mine has long since left me,” he said. Adana thought she saw his eyes turn darker than their natural colour, but the change was gone in the same instant. Imagining it was just a trick of the light, she asked him more.

“They can leave?” Adana asked, terrified at the thought. She might have gotten her father back but that didn’t mean she wanted to lose her shadows.

“Sometimes it happens with age, I suppose.”

Adana hummed to herself in thought.

“Yes?”

“It’s just – I know someone who told me that magic chooses the person,” Adana said, hearing Delilah’s voice echoing in her ear.

“And you believe this to be true?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe they can choose someone else? Maybe that’s what happened to you!”

Adrien considered this for a moment. “Perhaps that’s possible. Although I doubt it. If that were true, it wouldn’t have been so easy for regular folk to have destroyed so much of the magic. It would just be able to jump from person to person as soon as it recognized there was any danger, yes? If it is wise enough to choose someone, it is also wise enough to know when to leave.”

Adana’s hope deflated. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“What for?” her father asked.

“I thought maybe if what she said was true that we could get yours back.”

Adrien laughed. “Oh, Adana. I have missed you. I promise, if it ever turns out to be true, you will be the only person I allow to help me get it back. Alright?”

“Okay,” Adana said, smiling.

“You should get some sleep, love. You’ve had a rough day,” he said, standing up from the table. It wasn’t until that moment that Adana truly felt how exhausted she was. And he didn’t even know half of what she’d been through.

“Alright,” Adana said, yawning as she did so.

“Take the mattress. I will sleep on the floor. Tomorrow we’ll go out and find some more material for bedding, alright? If you’re going to stay with me, we’ll both need to be able to sleep well.”

Adana didn’t feel comfortable taking the mattress. It was his house, after all, she said to him. She was merely his guest.

“Nonsense,” he said sternly. He walked over to her, gripping her wrist in his hand. “You are not my guest. You are my daughter. Don’t ever let anyone convince you otherwise. We’ve been kept from each other for far too long.”

Adana nodded, but she flinched as he gripped her wrist tighter. Her shadows were by now practically vibrating with pent-up energy, and she hoped that they would calm down enough so that she could get some sleep. She needed her energy too.

Making her way to the bed, breathing in the sweet scent of the cabin one more time, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d fallen asleep so easily. She didn’t even notice her father was watching her, unblinking in his stare.

CHAPTER 35

Weeks went by, and Adana had never felt so content. She helped her father around the house, fixing food, fetching water, and tending to his garden. Oh, she was so happy – she had her father, and there were plants that needed her help again. All was well with the world. She was home, and no one was going to take that away from her.

But her shadows had been restless the entire time they'd been there. They'd kept their armoured form, but it was tighter now, more restrictive, and Adana found herself increasingly annoyed with them. Why were they reacting this way now, now that she'd finally found the life she wanted? It frustrated her to no end. She'd stopped speaking to them, too. The only person she spoke to now was her father.

Sometimes, if she was working outside, she'd still see a flash of red in the forest, buried in the darkness of the trees. It was her mind playing tricks on her, she knew, guilt trying to seep its way into her thoughts, but she wouldn't let it. Deacon's blood or Delilah's hair, it didn't matter. Adana had found her happiness. The others didn't matter anymore. Not Corina, or Lukas. Not even her mother. What was the point in looking for a woman she had no way to trace when the one parent she'd truly always wanted stood right next to her?

"The flowers look beautiful," Adrien would say in passing as he brought in more chopped wood to the cabin.

"I used to look after my plants back home – I mean, in the forest, too," Adana had replied. Whenever she talked about her old home - the overgrown trees, the shrubs, and the berries, the flowers and the crystal-clear stream - she'd notice that his face would twist itself into something unrecognisable and angry. She understood, of course. It was the home he hadn't been allowed into. So, she decided not to mention it again, but sometimes it couldn't be helped, and it would slip out. How could it not? She'd spent most of her life there. She

wanted to talk to him about it, but he refused to listen. He'd simply walk away or begin another chore. She wanted to share her life with him more than anything, but she also wanted to keep their relationship the way it was now, happy, and simple, content in each other's company. The memories, guilt, and feelings, Adana buried them all deep. Anything to keep him from becoming upset.

Once or twice, when she'd been out to fetch more water, she'd had the sudden and deep urge to go exploring throughout the forest. She couldn't explain it, except for the fact that her father's sweet smell still followed her even when she'd left the house. There had been a time when she thought she could follow the scent throughout the trees. It was so strong, the wind blowing it right into her path, and she'd run back to her father to ask if she could go out for a walk. But the minute she'd asked, he'd grabbed her by the shoulders, forcing her to look at him and listen to his words of urgency. He told her it was unsafe to wander by herself; they didn't know what could be out beyond the border of his land – Scavengers, thieves, all sorts. Adana had asked him to come with her – they could spend time together outside the confines of the cabin, too. But he'd merely gripped her shoulders harder, his fingers denting her skin, and told her in no uncertain terms that she was forbidden from leaving the house alone. She had nodded, understanding his uncertainty. They'd been apart for so long, and he couldn't let it happen again.

But the urge to explore was always there. Whenever she thought about it, she could feel her shadows pressuring her to go.

She stayed. For him.

It was getting harder to sleep at night. Once or twice, she'd caught him watching her, his face a canvas devoid of emotion. Other thoughts were trying to intrude on her happiness as well, guilt, anger, confusion, and longing all trying to burrow their way to the surface. Sometimes, if she pictured Delilah, she could feel that unfamiliar feeling in the pit of her

stomach, and she'd turn on her side and squeeze her eyes shut, a futile hope that that would somehow push the feelings back down. She needed to ignore them. For his sake. She didn't want to make him angry. He didn't deserve to be disappointed in her. He'd searched for her for so long.

The more tired she became, the more her shadows would react. She'd had to start keeping her distance from her father as their movements became erratic. Sometimes, being too close to him would set them off – they'd lash out. The first time it happened, he'd flinched, turning his angry eyes on her, his brows furrowing with fury. She'd mumbled an apology, and ran back outside to her flowers, anything to keep her shadows from hurting him. She wanted to give him more hugs, sit closer to him during dinner, but she couldn't. She needed to keep her shadows under control. Adana couldn't let them be the cause of a fraught relationship with her father. They needed to understand that she wanted this, wanted to be with him. She needed them to be able to co-exist.

She was happy. She wanted to remain that way.

Another few days went by. Adana had lost more sleep. Her shadows had become even more restless. She'd had dreams, horrible dreams, of what she'd done to Deacon. The images were so real, restored from her memories that she'd woken up screaming once, convinced her hands were covered in his blood again. She'd woken Adrien with her shouting. He'd had to shake her out of her anguish, and gripped her face to force her to look at him. She'd apologized. He needed his sleep too. Adana wanted so badly to share with him what she had been dreaming about, the anger she felt about being put in that position, and her guilt-ridden conclusion that she'd done the right thing for Deacon. But she couldn't disappoint him,

couldn't bear the inevitable look of horror on his face when he'd hear that his little girl had killed someone, no matter how justified she forced herself to believe it was.

She kept quiet instead. They mostly talked about the work that needed doing. Sometimes Adrien would share angry memories of Samira, and Adana would nod furiously in agreement. She was still mad at her mother, too. At least they had that in common.

One day, Adana couldn't take it anymore. She'd spotted another flash of red between the trees, and while she'd later discovered it was a bird that had flown by, the images of Delilah that Adana had tried so hard to push from her mind had resurfaced. The way it felt when Delilah had gently grabbed Adana's hand, her soft voice when they'd talked about their shared magic. The lighter colour of her eye, the absolute betrayal she felt when they'd found out Delilah had lied to them. Heavens, she couldn't get her out of her mind, no matter how hard she tried.

"Papa, can I ask you something?" Adana asked that same night over dinner. They'd taken to eating in silence for the past week. He looked surprised when she interrupted it.

He simply nodded, continuing to eat.

"What was it like when you met mama?"

Adrien's hand froze in mid-air as he slowly turned to look at his daughter. "Why?"

"I just – I don't know," Adana said, trying to find the words.

"Well - your mother was beautiful, Adana. I can't fault her for that. She was easy to talk to, a good listener. She gave me you. There was love there, certainly in the beginning," Adrien said.

Love. "What did love feel like?"

He looked at her questioningly. "Unidentifiable," he said.

"What does that mean?" Adana asked. She'd never heard the word before.

“It means that you can’t really understand what you’re feeling, but you know it’s important, and you know it’s strong, and you know it’s different.”

Oh. Maybe.

“Why?” Adrien asked again, looking at his daughter curiously.

Adana shrugged.

“Is there someone who makes you feel like this?”

Adana simply looked down at her food. She couldn’t find the words to tell him.

“You know, Adana. That kind of love is very different from the kind of love I have for you. I love you because you are my daughter. There was a time I loved your mother for reasons unknown. That’s why there are different kinds of love. But you know what? That type of love that you’re trying to define? It doesn’t last. It didn’t last for your mother and me. She betrayed me. She left me to fend for myself, she left me without a daughter. That kind of love may feel exciting at first, and new, but it’s not built to last. It doesn’t exist because of an already established bond. That’s why it cannot survive. Eventually, one will always betray the other. You might not have experienced that yet, but you would. You’re safer, here, with me. Your love for me, Adana, is something that cannot be broken. Your love for others is destined to fail.”

She felt tears welling up in her eyes. She looked away from him, down at her food, but he’d already noticed her weakness. She shook her head.

“But it looks like you’ve already been betrayed, yes?”

Adana slowly nodded.

“Then forget that feeling. You and me, Adana. That’s built to last. Remember that. I’m not going anywhere. And neither are you.” He squeezed Adana’s hand, harder than he most likely intended, but she felt comforted anyway. A shadow lashed out. This time, he didn’t flinch.

Adrien was right. Delilah was already gone. So was everyone else. But he had returned. He was still there.

CHAPTER 36

Adrien had started to notice the distance she was putting between them. He'd taken to getting closer to Adana, holding her hand more, shuffling closer to her chair. She liked the proximity, the affection, she did – but every time, without fail, at least one of her shadows would lash out at him. He'd stopped flinching, though. Maybe it didn't hurt him anymore. Or maybe, she hoped, he loved her enough to work through the pain. She knew she would do the same for him.

“Papa, do you miss your magic?” Adana asked one day over breakfast. They were eating some of the fruit she'd picked on the edges of his land, the sweet taste complimenting the scent of the room.

“Always. But I'm glad to know that you have your own. It's a great privilege, you know,” he'd said.

“I know,” Adana said. She hesitated with her next spoonful.

“Is there something wrong?”

“I just – did your magic ever do anything you didn't want it to?”

“Like what?”

“Like hurt someone you didn't want them to hurt.”

“Ah, I see,” Adrien responded, leaning back in his chair after pushing back his plate.

“You know I don't mean them too, right? Papa, please, you have to know,” Adana said, squeezing his fingers a little to let him know how sorry she was.

“I know, Adana. I know,” he said.

“Do they still hurt you? I see you don't flinch anymore,” she said.

“No - not as much as the first few times. Maybe they're not putting as much effort into it as before.”

“I just want them to stop,” Adana said.

He looked thoughtful. “You know, it takes a while, years, even, to be able to truly tell your magic what you want it to do.”

“It does?”

“Yes. It took me years as well. Yes, it can communicate with you, sense what you want, and how you’re feeling. But as your friend said, the magic chooses the person. Which means that the magic must have some of its own feelings, its own thoughts, no?”

Adana shrugged. She’d never thought of it like that before.

“So, it takes a while to train it the way you’d like. The same way you’d do with a dog.”

“But they’re my friends,” Adana said, looking down at the way they surrounded her now.

“Yes, and dogs can be friends too, no?”

She nodded. She was starting to understand. “Show me, papa? Please?”

“I don’t know, Adana. It’s been a long time.”

“But you can show me. You’re the only one I know! Please,” Adana said again, practically begging by now.

He chuckled. “All right, all right. Tomorrow, when we have fewer chores to do and after you’ve gone to pick up more water, we can try a little practice then. Okay?”

Adana jumped up with glee, throwing herself at her father who was still sat at the table. Her shadows lashed out a few more times, but he didn’t twitch beneath her, and she took that as a good sign. Besides, soon enough, she’d be able to tell them to stop. And then the armour would be hers to control, completely.

“Come on, Adana, again!” Her father shouted through heavy breaths.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she said, tears forming in her eyes. Adrien had asked her to concentrate on forcing her shadows to go to him, lash out at him and retreat when she wanted, not when they did. It was hard – they still acted of their own accord most of the time, and even in moments when she thought she was getting the hang of it, she’d cower back in fear. She didn’t want to hurt him.

“They’ll hurt me more if you don’t learn this, Adana. Come on.”

“Why does it have to be you? I can practice against something else. The house, maybe. Or the trees.”

“I know you don’t want to hurt the trees either, Adana. And I’d like to keep the house in a good state. Besides, I’m your best incentive to learn. You don’t want them to hurt me? Then only make them do so when you want them to. Don’t let them control you!”

Adana shook her head, forcing herself to concentrate. She tried to pull them back a few times, and once or twice, she’d managed to get the loose tendrils to fall back into the armour again. She’d cheered, and looked to her father for approval. But he merely nodded and told her to continue.

“Now, have them come for me again,” Adrien said.

Adana nodded again. She could do this. She had to do this, for him.

The burning behind her eyes was so intense that the pain made its way down to her spine, but she wouldn’t stop. She could do this.

Or she thought she could, until a whole swarm of shadows released themselves from their armoured hold and charged towards her father. She tried so hard to pull them back, screamed with the effort, vision blurring, throat burning; but her efforts were futile, and her shadows had never acted this way before. This wasn’t just lashing out, this was rage, harsh

whips hitting at him from all sides. Adana ran backward, hoping that the distance would force them to pull back towards her and the rest of her armour.

She needed them to stop. Adrien was now on the ground, his eyes scrunched in pain, drops of his blood mixing in with her shadows' mist. She concentrated harder than she ever had, until there was a throbbing in her head and her whole body was shaking, but finally, finally she was able to pull them back before she collapsed to the ground and looked towards her father with worry.

“Papa! Are you okay?” she shouted, still wanting to keep her distance. She didn't know how her shadows would react if they were near him again. It was taking everything in her not to go running towards him to see if he was alright.

“I'm okay, Adana. Don't worry about me. You did it. See? You did it,” he said. His voice was weak. She could see he was still hurt.

“But you're bleeding,” Adana said, tears forming in her eyes. At least the burning sensation was starting to fade.

“It's alright, Adana. They're just scratches, nothing more. We both just need a few minutes to catch our breath. Then we'll head into the house and you can help me clean the cuts,” he said.

Adana nodded again, not trusting her voice to speak. How could she have allowed her shadows to hurt him like that? And why would they? After everything they had done for her? She was getting angry. This was unacceptable.

They'd betrayed her. Just like everyone else had done.

But it was strange. She'd panicked when her father was getting hurt, couldn't stand the sight of it, but it was breath-taking to see how ruthless her shadows could be, and she was simultaneously envious of their determination and furious at their inability to listen to her.

Slowly getting to her feet, watching from a distance as her father did the same, they both hobbled back inside the house, exhausted by the day's practice. He sat down at the table, and while she was still hesitant to get closer to him, he beckoned her to come forward anyway. Grabbing a wash cloth and a bowl of water she sat down next to him, nervously anticipating the moment her shadows would lash out once more, but it never came. Sighing in relief, she got to work cleaning her father's cuts. He was right, they weren't deep, but there were many of them, far more than she had anticipated. She looked at him with regret, but no words of comfort came from him. He merely shook his head as they sat in silence. He was inspecting his cuts with a strange smile on his face. Almost like he was grinning.

"I'm sorry," Adana whispered, standing up to wash out the bowl. The water had turned red with his blood. The cloth was now unusable.

"Don't be," he said. She looked at him in surprise.

"Let me ask you a question," Adrien continued, 'have your shadows always been in this formation?"

Adana shook her head. "No. They were loose strands before."

"When did this happen?"

There were those memories again. She looked down at the blood in the water, and immediately it looked thicker, more reminiscent of Deacon's as it was pouring out of him and over her hands. Over Delilah's dagger. She felt bile rise in her throat.

"Adana? Answer me," Adrien said.

"I - I hurt someone," Adana confessed.

"Someone you didn't want to hurt? Like me?" She nodded.

"What did they make you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"What did your shadows make you do?"

“No.... it wasn’t them,” she said, doubting her own words.

“Of course it was them. You wouldn’t hurt a fly, not without their influence. So, tell me. What did they make you do?”

“I hurt... I hurt Deacon.”

“Hurt him how?”

Adana turned away from him. “Please don’t make me tell you.”

“Well, in that case, you just have.”

“I didn’t mean to! I swear, I didn’t mean to. But it suddenly happened and I didn’t know. And he was already sick... and he wouldn’t have made it, he said thank you. He said thank you! I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to... I’m sorry. I’m sorry I disappoint you,” Adana’s voice trailed off; eyes squeezed shut to hold in the tears. She could feel Deacon’s blood on her hands again.

“Adana, look at me.”

She couldn’t bring herself to meet his gaze.

“I don’t care,” he said.

She looked up.

“I don’t care that you hurt someone. You’re not alone in this,” he said. There was a cold tone to his voice, but Adana elected to ignore it. He wasn’t disappointed in her. That was something she’d been dreading for so long. It felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Deacon’s blood suddenly no longer lingered on her hands. The one person’s opinion in the world that she cared about was okay with what she had done.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Thank you,” she said. She wanted to hug him, but couldn’t force her feet to bring her closer.

“Can I ask you another question?”

Adana nodded. She'd give him anything he wanted.

“Do you really think they are your friends?”

Adana heard Lukas's voice echo her father's. He had wondered the same thing; a few times, to be fair. And every time she had been so sure of her answer, she just knew that the shadows were her friends, her protectors, her everything. They always had been. They always would be. But now, with her father asking the question, she wasn't sure. Were they?

“Adana. If you didn't want to hurt this boy, but you did anyway, and you never want to hurt me, but they do anyway; do you really think they are your friends?”

“But they have to be. They always have been,” she said.

“People lie. Magic can lie. It's all about who you trust, Adana. Do you trust your shadows?”

She didn't have an answer for him.

“Do you trust me?”

She nodded her head, no doubt in her mind.

“Then think about what I said, alright?”

“Yes,” Adana said.

That night, as Adana tried to sleep, she felt colder than usual and grabbed an extra blanket. The warmth of her shadows just didn't seem to be enough anymore.

CHAPTER 37

A few days later, Adana found herself with the urge to explore again. It had never left, really. However, between taking care of her father, ignoring the shadows, and her household work, there wasn't much time left to think of anything else.

But there was now. Adrien had left to go into a nearby settlement to make some trades. She'd been given strict instructions not to leave the house, but this was the first moment of freedom – no, not freedom – spare time she'd had, and she wanted to use it the way she loved. Wandering the forest and exploring the terrain.

She'd waited a good hour after Adrien had left to even set foot outside the door. He'd headed out early – she'd gotten up to make him breakfast, and he promised he'd be back by dinner. There were a lot of hours remaining in the day. And Adana had made sure to finish all her chores before even thinking about taking one step into the forest.

She took her usual route down to the water source, not wanting to disobey her father. She didn't want to lie to him too much by pretending that she'd stayed inside all day, so she wanted to stick to somewhat familiar ground. She had to be able to find her way back, after all.

The weather was perfect. Sunny, dry air, warm enough not to wear a shawl. Adana had decided to go barefoot, and she relished the feel of dry grass and soil on the soles of her feet. She was starting to feel like herself again.

Except for the shadows which felt like strangers.

Were they still *her* shadows? She couldn't be sure. Her father's and even Lukas's words echoed in her ears at all times. Adana had lost so much sleep to the idea that she was surrounded by enemies that she now just pretended to be asleep. She tried to ignore them now, but their armoured formation weighed on her heavily, their mist coating every inch of

bare skin. Gritting her teeth, she took a deep breath, trying to remember that they had never done anything to actively harm her.

Yet.

There was a breeze, and there was that same sweet smell from her father's cabin. Adana decided that now was as good a time as any to find the source. Maybe she'd bring some of whatever flower or plant it was back to the house as a surprise for her father. Maybe then she wouldn't have to lie, and he wouldn't be so angry, because she'd brought him a gift. The idea formed a small smile on Adana's face.

She took to counting her steps again. 1,456, and the smell was getting sweeter by the minute. It was also becoming more familiar.

There was a sinking feeling in her stomach by now. She'd walked much further than she had originally planned to, but she couldn't force herself to stop. She thought his house was in the middle of nowhere, but now she was starting to recognize the area; the types of trees, the feel of the ground. The scent. It was so strong; she knew exactly where it was coming from.

It only took a few hundred more steps for her sight to catch up with her sense of smell.

The Serpents. She should have recognized it.

She took to inspecting them, hoping terribly that her suspicions wouldn't be confirmed. But they were. More scales had been ripped off the sides, another pair of eyes gouged out. The smell was the same as back home, exactly the same. The shadows reacted to the sight as well, a few breaking armour formation to slither along one of the serpents' corpses. Tears forming, again. Emotion brimming over every day.

Her father couldn't have done this. She couldn't find it in herself to believe that he could have done this.

“He did,” a voice behind Adana said, and she froze. She’d know that voice anywhere. More tears. The burning behind her eyes appeared so suddenly that she had to squeeze them shut.

Delilah.

“Adana, please. Let me explain. I promise, I won’t come near you,” she said.

Adana couldn’t find the strength to turn around. “Are you making me see this?”

“No, I swear. Look in my eye Adana and you’ll know that I’m not using any magic right now.”

She still couldn’t turn. “Why are you here?”

“I’ve been waiting for you. I need to explain, and I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist the urge to go wandering for long. That’s just who you are. And I hoped that the scent would lead you here, to them, so that you can see that what I’m about to tell you is the truth.”

“And what if I don’t want to hear the truth?” Adana said, and she concentrated as hard as she could to make the shadows threaten Delilah once again; but the attempt was half-hearted. Delilah’s voice sounded even better in real life than it did in her dreams.

“You need to know, Adana. I can’t let you live like this anymore.”

“Like what?”

“Believing in a man that has no real affection for you.”

That made Adana turn around. Anger flared in her veins. “You don’t know anything about my father,” she said, voice cold but catching in her throat as she finally looked at Delilah for the first time in weeks.

Bruised. Broken, and bloodied, and bruised. Cuts all up and down her arms, stitched eye swollen to the point where some of the threads had snapped. Her coppery red hair was an even more tangled mess than usual, freckles and tan skin stained with streaks of blood.

Wooden armour tarnished and hacked to pieces, some of the branches hanging limply off her body. No dagger. Delilah looked utterly crushed.

“Did I... did the shadows do this to you?”

Delilah took a step towards Adana, reaching out her hands before she thought better of it and retracted them again. “No, Adana. I swear. This was not your doing. I healed from those injuries pretty quickly, they were minor. I don’t believe you’d ever hurt me like this. You’re not capable of it.”

Deacon’s blood running over her hands. “You don’t know me,” Adana said.

Delilah looked at her with such affection Adana nearly sunk to her knees. “Your shadows look different,” she finally said.

Adana couldn’t find it in herself to react. She couldn’t stop staring at the young woman in front of her – the one who always looked so sure of herself, so strong, wooden armour robust and unbreakable. She was a shell of herself now. Tired and pained.

“Did they make you do something?” Delilah asked quietly, ‘after I left?’

“I made you leave,” Adana said, correcting her.

“Only a part of you,” Delilah replied.

Adana felt her skin crawl a little as the shadows slithered further up her neck. She shivered. It didn’t go unnoticed.

“Are they not your friends anymore?”

“I don’t know,” Adana said truthfully.

Delilah took another step closer. “Will you let me explain?”

Adana felt herself take a step back. “You don’t know my father. You can’t tell me anything about him.”

“Except I do, Adana. And you know I do. I know you recognized that picture I drew, the one you found in my hut. I didn’t say anything then because I didn’t want you to go

looking for him before I knew for certain that I could keep you safe. And now here we are, and I've made a mess out of everything – but I never stopped trying to protect you. I hope you believe me.”

“I don't need protecting. Not from him,” Adana said forcefully. The burning behind her eyes had grown stronger again, shadows growing frantic in tandem with Adana's heartbeat.

Delilah sighed. “Why do you think he's been stealing the scales off of the Serpents? Their eyes?”

Adana felt queasy at the thought. “You don't know he did,” she said. But she wasn't so sure herself.

“Yes, I do! And so do you!” Delilah said, frustration evident in her voice. Adana took another step backward, back now flush against the largest Serpent, and watched as Delilah shook her head.

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have started yelling. I know how this works. I know you don't want to believe a single bad thing about your father. How could you? You've been waiting for him for so long. So long. And I know, I know how you used to feel about him – you told me. You told me Adana, and you trusted me with those feelings and I'm sorry that I'm the one who has to break your heart this way. But he mangled these Serpents. Killed them himself. How do I know? Because he told me. But the smell in your cabin and the reaction you had when you saw them means that deep down in your heart you know he did this too,” Delilah said, running a hand over her face in defeat. It made her wince. Adana flinched.

It was quiet for a moment. The breeze between the trees was the only sound heard for miles.

“Why?” Adana finally whispered.

“The Serpents carry magic, Adana. You feel the same connection to them as I do. The reason they’re almost extinct now is because people without magic realized that they could use them to make themselves more powerful against people like us.”

“Extinct?”

“They barely exist anymore. This was one of the last known nests.”

Adana’s eyes burned. “Why does he need them?”

“Because it gave him back magic. Not his, not the same. Temporary. But something.”

“Oh,” Adana said. In a strange, twisted way, Adana understood why he would do such a thing. Up until a few days ago, Adana couldn’t imagine a life that didn’t have the shadows in it, and she knew deep in her heart that she would have done anything to get them back too.

Looking at the mangled state of the Serpents though, Adana felt an anger in her heart at never having seen one alive, only dead, devoid of power and thriving beauty. She didn’t want to believe that her father could do such a thing – kill something so innocent. But then she remembered the way he had reacted when she’d confessed to killing Deacon, the way he’d been so calm about the whole situation, that it suddenly made sense. Of course, he had been at peace with it. He was a killer himself.

In the ugliest way possible, she felt more connected to him now than before. She wasn’t alone. But there was anger still there, simmering underneath the surface, making the shadows erratic.

“Is this what you want to protect me from?”

“No, there are other things. But I don’t think I’ll ever be able to convince you. You’ll have to ask him yourself. You can take care of yourself better now than before, I know he’s been training you.”

“You’ve been watching?” All those flashes of red. Adana thought she’d been losing her mind.

“From a distance. Where he can’t see me,” she said.

Another silent moment. There was that feeling again, creeping into Adana’s thoughts.

Oh. Maybe.

“Has he hurt you?” Delilah asked, and Adana felt offended at the question.

“No,” she lied. She still had bruises on her arm from where he’d grabbed her a few days earlier. But that was nothing compared to the pain she and the shadows have put him through, so it didn’t matter.

“I’ll be here if you ever need to talk to me again. You can find me here.”

“I won’t,” Adana said. She didn’t need anyone but her father.

“You will,” Delilah said, and with one last longing look, she turned away and walked back into the forest.

CHAPTER 38

So many voices, too many voices, resided in Adana's head. Her father's, Lukas's, Corina's screams of accusation, and now, more recently, Delilah's voice, that soothing honeyed tone that Adana had come to cherish. So many voices and she was none the wiser.

Who was she going to believe? A woman who had lied to her the entire time they'd known each other? Or her father, the man who had looked for her for half her life? The man she longed for her whole life just the same?

Too many voices. She needed them to stop.

By the time her father came back from his excursion, Adana had laid supper out on the table for him. He didn't say a word, merely acknowledged her presence by nodding, digging right into the dinner she had prepared for him. She hadn't picked any flowers - she didn't want to give him any indication that she'd been outside their home. Did she want to ask? The voices were telling her to ask. Delilah's and Lukas's. Delilah's was especially clear.

She had, however, looked for evidence. As soon as Delilah had disappeared back into the trees Adana had made a run for her home. Her bare feet had been stung with nettles and branches, but she didn't care. She needed to get away from the scent. Away from everything that was making her feel confused.

But the scent followed her everywhere. There was no getting away from it.

So, she'd searched. She'd searched under his mattress, seen if something was stuck to the bottom of the table, of the chairs. If eyes and scales were hidden in the boxes in his workspace, if he'd hidden it under her mattress, buried beneath the shrubs next to the entrance. She couldn't find them, but she could still smell them. Nostrils running, pleasant scents now tainted with uncertainty.

"How was your day, papa?" Adana asked, voice unsteady.

He noticed. "Is something wrong?"

"No, there's nothing," she said.

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you, Adana?" Adrien said, finally looking at her properly over his dinner plate.

She shook her head.

"Then tell me what's wrong."

Taking a deep breath, Adana steeled herself for his fury. "Where does the smell come from?"

"What smell?"

"The smell. The sweetness. In here, outside."

"Does it matter?"

"I think so. It's not from the flowers," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

"Isn't it?"

"No."

"I take it you already know where the scent is coming from?"

Adana chose silence.

"I see. What do you think I'm using them for?"

"Are they giving you magic?" Adana blurted out before she could stop herself.

"Would it matter if they were? I would have thought that if anyone could understand, Adana, it would be you," Adrien said.

Adana started fidgeting with her fingers, shadows threading themselves through her hands. A few had crept their way back towards him, and she took a step back. The last thing she needed now was for them to hurt him.

"But..."

"But what?"

“But you killed them!” Adana cried out. She felt her eyes burning again, hands clenching into fists. Shadows buzzed around her.

“So? Did you not confess to me just a few days ago that you killed someone too? Are you trying to convince yourself that you’re better than I am?”

Adana had no answer.

“Well?” By now, Adrien had gotten up from his seat, and turned to face her fully.

“No...” Adana whispered.

“No? That’s right, no. Understand, Adana. I may have killed those Serpents. But I needed the magic, I need my magic to protect you. Look at you! You can’t even control your own magic, and I see you at night, tossing and turning. You’re weak, Adana. You need me to take care of you. But I can’t do that if I don’t have magic. Don’t you see the difference? I killed those Serpents in defence of someone I love. You killed that boy for no reason. These are not the same. But I still love you, and I still care for you, despite what you’ve done. And you come in here, indignant, trying to accuse me of being worse than you are? Don’t you see how wrong that is?”

All those voices again. Shadows hissing along. Delilah’s voice. Delilah’s voice. *No, there are other things.* What other things? And would they make her feel as guilty as she does now?

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, papa. I’m sorry. Please, don’t stop teaching me. I want to be strong like you. I want to be able to protect you too!”

“Do you?”

“Yes!” Adana pleaded, hardly recognizing the sound of her own voice.

Adrien sighed, and sat down in his chair again, motioning for Adana to come closer. She hardly dared, shadows still on the warpath towards her father, but she couldn’t stand the sight of him so defeated, all because of her. So she sat next to him and accepted his outstretched

hand. The cuts from their previous practice session still looked angry and swollen. Adana swallowed her tears.

“You know, Adana. This would be so much easier if all of this had been the other way around,” Adrien said, gently rubbing his thumb over the back of her hand.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if I had your magic. We wouldn’t be in this mess. I wouldn’t have needed to steal from the Serpents and you’d be safe, and your life would be so much simpler. Perhaps I would have even found you sooner.” He sighed again.

“You think?”

“Well, we’ll never know, will we? Those shadows are yours. Doesn’t matter if we’d like it to be any different.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Not right now, no,” he said.

It was quiet for a moment. Adana was trying to regain control of her senses.

“What kind of magic does it give you?” Adana asked, quietly.

“Oh, it’s only a lesser version of what I used to have, and it’s only fleeting. But it’s enough when it needs to be.”

“If I could give you the shadows I would,” Adana said, the words feeling foreign in her mouth. She didn’t know where they’d come from, shadows becoming frantic.

Adrien closed his hand over hers. “I know, Adana. I know.” He smiled.

She didn’t.

It hadn’t gotten any easier to sleep. Adana felt like her senses were being attacked from all sides. Shadows slithered along her skin, voices rang in her ear, the sweet smell was beginning

to rot in her memory and she couldn't close her eyes without seeing her father's fury reflected at her. She couldn't believe that she'd disappointed him so badly. She desperately wanted to make it up to him.

So, she was diligent. She worked hard, hardly spoke about her magic, and refused to accuse him of anything else. Delilah's words be damned. Adana needed this to work. She couldn't lose him. Not now. This was all she'd ever wanted.

They hadn't spoken much since that night, but Adana had sensed him close by whenever she was working. At the very least, it meant he wasn't afraid of her, but the shadows took every opportunity to lash out at him, and she was worried. Worried that one cut would be too far and he would kick her out, leaving her on her own, forever.

Sometimes, before she could stop herself, she looked for a flash of red between the trees. But as soon as regret and disappointment threatened to overwhelm her at not seeing Delilah, she would look at her father and remind herself to breathe. He was there to protect her. Not Delilah. But the sight of her so damaged had been burned into Adana's brain, and she was worried. Worried that she'd never see her again. Worried that she wouldn't remember what it felt like to hold her hand.

Adana had considered sneaking out at night when her father was finally asleep, rushing towards the Serpents, hoping beyond hope that Delilah would keep her word and would be there waiting for her. But she was too scared. She couldn't allow her father to worry about her too much if he woke up and she wasn't there. So instead, she just laid there, tired, eyes burning, shadows buzzing, voices shouting. She wasn't sure how much more of this she could take. Once, she'd even needed to get up in the middle of the night to scrub her hands, her exhaustion managing to convince her that Deacon's blood was there again, impossible to get rid of. Her father had noticed her raw skin in the morning but hadn't said a word. What more was there to say to a killer? He'd been right about her guilt.

A few days later and her energy was starting to wane thin. But her father had asked her to get water and then help with the digging of a small well, so that's what she did. It was unbearably hot that day, sweat balancing on her brow, ratty clothes clinging to her skin just as badly as the shadows. She hadn't eaten much either, appetite lost within emotional turmoil. Each step made her more fatigued, and carrying the water back from the well was more demanding than usual. Water sloshed over the sides of the pail, and she had to keep going back for more so that she could be sure her father had enough. After the third trip back and forth, she'd finally managed to haul the bucket into both arms, each step heavier and slower than the last. But she'd made it, and so she could start digging.

They stood next to each other as they worked. Once in a while, Adrien would reprimand Adana for working too slowly, so she called on the shadows to help her against her better judgement. At least that was getting easier, and it made the load a bit lighter, but many of them were soon distracted by her father's presence and the sun was becoming too much for her to bear. She felt her arms shaking as she stuck the shovel back into the ground. Her breathing was becoming ragged. The voices in her ear were replaced with a constant ringing, and the burning behind her eyes was now due to the unbearable light of the sun.

One more shovel full, she counted. And another. 5. 8. 12. 23. Just like her steps. 35. Just like her steps.

36 was one too many. Adana's vision went black and she didn't even register the shovel catching on her leg as she collapsed onto the ground.

CHAPTER 39

By the time Adana woke up, it was dark out. She was still lying on the ground outside, aware of the shovel that had nicked her skin. It stung fiercely; the blood had dried on her leg while she was unconscious. She could tell the wound hadn't been cleaned. Some of the shovel's dirt still rested on the edge of the cut.

“Papa?”

No answer.

She repeated her call, a little louder this time. Why hadn't he heard her?

Still no answer.

Now she was getting worried. She knew that he would have taken care of her had he been able to. So where was he? It was too dark to see any tracks on the ground. Even the shadows' faint glow couldn't help her see properly. Her head was still spinning, and her stomach felt lighter than air, screaming with hunger. But she had to ignore her urges. Her father was missing. She needed to find him. Just like he would always find her.

Slow, careful steps, still getting used to the dark. Her eyes were tired, and she could feel dried sweat coating her skin like a second type of armour. The Serpent's scent was duller now, but still there, and she figured that was the first place she should go and look. Perhaps he'd gone to get more of their parts to help her heal. But she didn't want him to worry for a second longer than necessary, so off she went.

After what seemed like a week but was in reality only an hour, the smell of the Serpents was getting stronger. Her footsteps became faster but clumsier. He had to be there. He had to. He wouldn't leave her. He would always find her.

She could hear his voice in the distance. Relief flooded through her before she heard another familiar voice as well. Adana stopped her stumbling sprint and hid behind one of the trees, listening in.

“You think you can fill my daughter’s head with lies and I’m just going to let that slide?” Adrien said. Adana couldn’t see them from where she was standing, so she shuffled a few trees over, eyes growing wide at the sight in front of her.

Delilah was down on her knees, Adrien forcing her to look at him by holding up her tangled hair. There were new cuts on Delilah’s face, Adana was sure of it. She could see that Delilah was shaking, but there was a defiant look in her eye, and Adana felt her gut twist at the sight.

“I didn’t tell her anything that wasn’t the truth,” Delilah spat at him. He twisted his hand further into her hair, and she flinched. He smiled in satisfaction.

“What’s the matter? Are you in too much pain to make me see an illusion? Adana would never believe you, Delilah. You’ve lost her trust. And I’ve gained it.”

“You don’t deserve it,” she said, so quietly that Adana almost didn’t hear.

There was that angry snarl Adana had come to know. And there, out of nowhere, was his temporary magic.

It enveloped them both, a murky grey sphere growing in size. Suddenly, a scream. Delilah’s scream. Adana covered her ears, trying to drown out the sound, but it echoed through the silent night and broke through the barrier of her hands. There was a sizzling too, the smell of something burning, and Adana was utterly confused until she saw that a few of the scales on the closest Serpent had begun to spark. He was burning her.

Just as soon as it began, it stopped. Delilah was still on her knees, Adana noticed with a sigh of relief, but she was scorched, useless armour singed, much of the skin on her arms

now blistering red. Adana felt bile rise in her throat. How could her father be doing this? This was how he was protecting her?

“She won’t leave with you, Delilah. You may have deluded her into thinking that she has feelings for you, but we both know that’s another one of your fabrications. I’m the man she’s been looking for her whole life. You won’t be the one that separates us now.”

Adana could have sworn she saw Delilah’s eyes flicker over to her.

“The only person who separated you before was you,” Delilah said, voice like venom.

Adrien smiled. “You know, the moment Samira died, I knew -”

That was the last straw.

“Mama’s dead?” Adana shouted, running towards the pair in the clearing, every bone in her body burning with exhaustion.

“Adana, don’t come closer,” Delilah said. As soon as Adrien had caught sight of Adana, he’d dropped Delilah to the ground, expression changing in an instant. There was the father she knew. Cruelty gone – replaced by fondness and sadness.

“I’m sorry, Adana. I’m sorry you had to find out this way. I wanted to tell you – I just didn’t know how,” Adrien said.

“But how do you know? She went out on her own. She left me... she left for the Barricades. No – no – that woman said she could be anywhere. Mama’s not dead. I can still find her. Like I found you!” She didn’t know who to stand closer to. Everything in her body was screaming at her to go to Delilah, make sure she was alright, and make sure she could feel a gentle touch, a loving touch.

But there was her father. She knew him. He was protecting her. That’s why he had the magic. That’s why he used it against Delilah.

The shadows were inching out in both directions.

“Your mother was a troubled woman, Adana. We both know this to be true! Why else would she have taken you away from me, when you were so young? We missed so much of our lives together because of her, and now you mourn her death? I thought you felt the same way I do,” Adrien said, a look of regret in his eyes. Adana felt like her throat was closing up. She didn’t know what to say to him.

“Don’t listen to him, please,” Delilah begged, and out of the corner of her eye, Adana watched as she got up slowly, staggering clumsily, each movement making her wince with pain.

“You know, it’s strange,’ Adrien said, taking a few steps toward Adana in the process, ‘when I asked Delilah to find you, I truly believed you could be friends. She knows these lands better than I do, bled them dry with her Scavenger friends, but I knew you had something in common and I wanted you to have someone you could confide in until we were finally reunited. But she turned on me, Adana, she turned on both of us. Saw an opportunity with you – saw your magic as a means to an end. Can’t you see? All the lies, everything she’s ever told you has just been a way for her to keep you away from me. Even though she knew that’s not what you wanted,” he said, reaching Adana and cupping her face gently. She closed her eyes at his touch. “And now she asks you to trust her? It’s unforgiveable, wouldn’t you agree?”

Adana had to force herself not to nod in practiced agreement, sparing a look at Delilah instead.

“She tried to keep us apart even after you’d discovered the ruins of the Barricades. She tried to hide all traces of you from me – even made it look as though you hadn’t destroyed one of the watchtowers there, all so that I wouldn’t know how close you were to me. Doesn’t that seem cruel? Look at me, Adana,’ and she caught her father’s gaze, ‘You know all I’ve ever done is look for you, right?’”

Adana nodded.

“Will you repay me the favour and cut off all ties with this one?” he pointed at Delilah, ‘if I had known what kind of distress she would bring into our lives I never would have asked her to look for you, and I’m sorry I put you through that. I’m sorry I made you feel like you’d found some type of love with her only to have it ripped away.”

“Why did she say yes?” Adana said.

“What do you mean?” Adrien asked, narrowing his eyes in confusion.

“Why did she say she would help me? She has her Scavengers. Why would she leave them? Did you do something for her?”

Adrien nodded. Adana turned to see Delilah’s reaction, whose face had now turned a ghastly shade of pale.

“I assume you understand what was really going on in the Barricades?”

Adana confirmed with a deliberate nod. Even just the thought of those dark rooms and dank hallways had her blood boiling again.

“I saved her from their clutches, Adana. Delilah here was just another one of their puppets, someone they’d hoped to be able to control. I saved them all! I saved them because I knew they were like me, and they deserved to be liberated. It was just after I’d learned how to harness the Serpent’s temporary powers, and I wanted to make sure I’d use them for good. And I did. Delilah offered her services to me in exchange. That’s when I knew she could help me look for you.”

Adana spared another glance at Delilah, who shook her head. Something wasn’t right with this story – but Adana didn’t know what it could be. Anyone who liberated people from such a cruel fate must be a hero.

“You saved them?”

“Yes. Just like I saved you.” Adrien smiled.

“And you call me the liar?” Delilah said, voice raspy.

“There’s more?” Adana asked, directing her question at Delilah.

“Think, Adana. Think about what you’ve seen. What you’ve seen on the way to this moment, the woman you met at the Barricades. I want you to trust what you know. Not what either of us can tell you. What do you know?” Delilah said.

“She knows nothing,” Adrien said calmly, taking another menacing step towards Delilah, but Adana stepped between them this time. She couldn’t let her father hurt her more, not while she hadn’t gotten to the truth yet.

“But everything I saw until you left was a lie,” Adana spoke softly.

“Not everything. Not all the time,” Delilah said.

Adana tried to think, but there were the voices again, everyone’s voices, her father’s included, and she didn’t know who to trust, and she didn’t know what to remember. Everything before she’d found her father seemed like part of a different life now. Here she was, her senses being assaulted from all sides, and Delilah wanted her to try and remember? Remember what? The smell, Heavens, the smell of the Serpents, the singed hair and skin and flesh...

Burnt flesh.

The bodies. The beach.

Those had been real. Delilah’s eye had been as clear then as it was now.

“The beach...” Adana turned her back on her father, looking at Delilah from up close for the first time in ages, and all she could see were the wounds, the pain, the swelling and the stitches, but her eye was clear, so light and beautiful and real, a beacon of truth. This was Delilah’s truth. Now she just had to find out if it was her father’s as well.

“What did you do?” she said, back still turned to him.

“I protected people like you, Adana. From scum like them.”

“You burned them? All of them?”

Adrien laughed. It was a hollow sound, one that made a shiver crawl all over Adana’s skin. “You think I did that alone?”

“Didn’t you?” Adana looked at Delilah once more, but the tears in Delilah’s eyes were all she needed to know.

“You helped him?”

“He made us.”

“How?”

“By threatening to expose us to those who would still wish to hurt us. By threatening to kill us too. By threatening to hurt the people we love. What more do you need to hear?”

“No... He wouldn’t...” Adana said, trying so hard to process the information that the burning behind her own eyes was getting worse yet again. The shadows had now stretched themselves further from their armoured base, wrapping around both Adrien and Delilah. Waiting for Adana to decide. Decide what, she didn’t know.

“No, I wouldn’t. Not unless it was necessary,” Adrien said.

“Please... stop. I don’t know – I don’t know what to think. Who to listen to? Please...”

Adana couldn’t concentrate, the burning behind her eyes now travelling to the base of her skull and down her spine. She felt trapped, paralyzed in the knowledge that she somehow needed to choose between these two people, but how could she decide when both of them had lied to her? Had hurt others, had hurt her? Was she any better than them?

The burning was now so bad it was attacking her whole body, shadows desperate to hurt someone, anyone, even if it was Adana herself, and she could feel that desire brewing within her now too. It was too much, all of it. They were too much. They needed to stop. She needed them to stop.

“Adana, let’s go home. Forget about this. Forget about what you’ve heard.”

“Please don’t go with him,” Delilah whispered.

“Stop. Stop. Stop! STOP!” Adana shouted, and there was the release.

A moment of absolute silence, and then an explosion of black mist that covered every inch of the Serpent’s grave. Total darkness, impenetrable, surrounded them, and Adana couldn’t remember the last time she had felt so free, totally devoid of emotion except for hunger, the desire to release and decimate.

By the time the shadows retracted back into the armour, Delilah and Adrien had been thrown clear of the grave site. The shadows had cut a perfect circle through the forest, the clearing had grown three times its original size, trees and bushes and grass blasted to an ashen pulp.

Adana felt tears spring into her eyes at the destruction she’d caused her beloved forest, innocent nature that didn’t deserve this fate, destroyed by her own selfish desires. She didn’t think she’d ever hated herself so much. She couldn’t choose between Delilah and Adrien, and so she’d decided the only way out was to hurt them. What kind of person did that make her?

CHAPTER 40

She'd collapsed somewhere around dawn. The weak light of the sun filtered in through the barren canopy of the trees, and as it chased away the last darkness it chased away the last of her energy too. She'd never gotten around to cleaning the cut, and her leg had begun to throb before Adana had lost her footing and passed out on the cold hard ground once again.

She dreamed. More vividly than she ever had before. Dreams of Samira, and how she might have died. Dozens of different scenarios, all worse than the last, and each time her dream self was too late to save her.

She dreamed of Deacon's blood, of Lukas's shock, Corina's rage.

She dreamed of her father's words, his insistence that she come home. She dreamed of how he'd saved Delilah and then turned around and hurt others. She imagined him standing by the circle of bodies, that cruel grin on his face, flames reflected in his sunken eyes. She dreamed she could have stopped him.

She also dreamed of the shadows. Their power, their hunger, and the hunger she shared with them.

She woke up with the knowledge that it was so much easier to hurt people than to care for them.

She also woke with a leg that had been bandaged.

Scrambling to sit up straight, she took in her surroundings. No different than the rest of the forest, but the scent of the ocean was clearer here and she breathed deeply. She was still armoured by the shadows.

Had her father found her here?

She heard a branch snap behind her, and she quickly turned around. The strangest feeling of familiarity washed over her because she knew she'd been in this situation before.

Because there was Lukas, stepping out from behind the bushes, a toothy grin on his face when he saw that she was awake.

Adana was sure she was still dreaming. Right up until he touched her leg.

“Are you real?” she asked, because who knew anymore? Delilah could have easily followed her too. She hadn’t bothered to check where either Delilah or Adrien had landed after the shadows’, or her, outburst. She hadn’t bothered to check if they were even okay. Guilt suddenly made her stomach turn, and then burning desire chased that feeling away. She had needed them to stop. So she had made them.

“Yes, I’m real,” Lukas said carefully, voice soft. Just like he’d spoken to her the first time they met.

“How are you here?”

“Delilah asked us to track you.”

“Us?”

Lukas said nothing.

“Oh. She won’t want to see me.”

“And yet she’s here. She’s been patrolling all night, making sure that no one followed you.”

“And you’re here,”

“And I’m here,” Lukas said. No other words had ever brought so much relief. Without thinking, Adana threw her arms around his shoulders and squeezed, because it felt so good to see him again, and his kind smile, and she thought she could hug him forever until she realized the shadows were hurting him. He flinched beneath her. She let him go, crawling quickly backward and away from him, but not before she caught the sad look in his eyes.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” Adana whispered.

“I know,” Lukas said.

After a few moments of solemn silence, Adana heard a light step and a heavy footfall make its way towards them. Corina was coming. Adana clasped her arms closer to her chest, ready for the oncoming onslaught of guilt, the sorrow, the anger, and the pain. But it never came.

“Are you alright?” Corina asked. Adana nodded, not wanting to ruin the moment. She noticed that Delilah’s dagger was now strapped to Corina’s leg, swallowing at the blood stains that highlighted the wooden carvings.

“Why are you here?” Adana asked. If it was for revenge, she’d understand.

“Lukas must’ve told you by now. Delilah asked us to track you.”

“But why?”

Corina sighed, bringing herself to crouch down while keeping her distance from Adana.

“We went to the Barricades,’ Corina said, voice soft and shaking, ‘after we...after we said goodbye to Deacon on the beach,’ she cleared her throat before continuing. ‘I needed to know if they could have helped him. I needed to know if I should hate you forever. So we went to the Barricades. Or what was left of it, anyway. Watchtower crumbled to pieces. Abandoned. Disgusting. But at least I knew. At least I knew they wouldn’t have been able to save him.’”

Lukas reached out for her hand, which Corina took gladly, before turning back to Adana.

“We didn’t know what to do after that,’ Lukas continued, ‘we couldn’t quite face making the trip home just yet. How were we going to tell everyone what had happened? And then there was Delilah. She and Corina fought, at first. Corina had her pinned down by the time she realized her eye wasn’t black and she wasn’t making it look like the Barricades had

been abandoned. We were worried – we were worried that she might have been putting up an illusion just to make it seem like what you’d done hadn’t...”

“Ruined the chance to save his life?” Corina finished for him.

Lukas nodded.

“She told us the truth. Finally. She told us about your father and how he’d forced her into searching for you. Told us that she really was trying to protect you, that she really had grown to care for you, and that she’d decided to let us see the bodies in the end because hopefully, it would help you realize who your father was later down the road. Told us she knew she couldn’t stop him from finding you but maybe she could help you figure out the truth. And she told us she was sorry for lying. That helped,” Corina said.

“We didn’t understand at first. We knew that you’d been waiting for your father nearly your whole life, so how bad could it be if he found you? She wasn’t sure at first, either. But she knew there was something wrong with him. So she decided to keep watch over you, make sure that you were alright. And she asked if we would be willing to stick by her for the time being, make sure that if you ever ran off by yourself, you’d end up in the hands of someone you could trust,” Lukas said.

“And that’s you?”

“We think so, yes,” Lukas said.

Adana looked toward Corina.

“Lukas explained to me about your eyes. How they grow darker when you’re using your shadows. Or when your shadows are using you, which Lukas seems to think is what happened when... when Deacon died,’ Adana wanted to counter this point, but she was cut off by Corina, ‘all I know is what Lukas has told me. Now, I’m not here to fight you. I’m tired. But I need to ask you one thing. Do you regret it? Does it affect you, what you did? I need to know. I can’t...I just have to know.”

Adana remained motionless, worried that so much as an involuntary twitch would set Corina off, so she forced herself to make eye contact, and spoke her truth.

“Sometimes I still feel the blood. His blood on my hands. I tried to wash it off so much that my hands hurt.”

Corina nodded. “Did you plan to do it?”

“No,” Adana said firmly. She knew that much was true.

“Do you – do you think it helped him?” Corina’s voice caught in her throat.

“I hope so,” Adana replied softly.

Corina nodded again. What more was there to say?

“Adana, have your shadows made you do anything else you didn’t want to do? Have they acted on their own since we last saw you?”

She wasn’t sure she could tell the difference anymore. Even her father’s training hadn’t made that any clearer.

“They hurt my papa sometimes. When I don’t want them to. When I haven’t asked them to. But they listen more. He trained me to use them. I... I don’t know. Sometimes I can’t tell.”

“So, they hurt your father? From what Delilah told us that can’t be such a bad thing,” Corina said with a shrug.

“No! I don’t deserve to hurt him. He kept looking for me, yes? He doesn’t deserve to be hurt by me. He’s trained me. He gave me a home.”

“Has he hurt you?”

There was that question again. Adana shook her head.

“Then why did you run here?” Corina asked.

“I hurt them... not the other way around.”

“Did he do something to set you off?” Lukas asked.

“No. No. No! He wouldn’t. He loves me.”

“What happened before you attacked them?”

“He - he killed the Serpents. And then I woke up and he wasn’t there and I went to find him. He was there, with Delilah. She – she told me not to listen to him but how can I not listen to him? He’s my father. I need him. But they were both talking so much... so many words... lies? I don’t know. But I needed them to stop. And then the shadows made them stop because I wanted them to. I’m sure.”

Lukas gave Adana a tense smile before casting an urgent look toward Corina.

“What do we do now?” Lukas asked.

“We have to wait for Delilah to come back. See what she says,” Corina said.

“Alright,” Lukas said, before turning to Adana, ‘can I get you some food?’

Her stomach felt like a bottomless pit. “Yes! I mean, yes. Please. Thank you.”

Lukas chuckled. Adana didn’t realize how much she’d missed the sound of laughter until just now. Adrien certainly never laughed. And he never truly gave her a reason to, either.

Deacon’s absence weighed heavily on Adana as they ate. If only he’d been there, it would have been like old times – but everything was different. Deacon was gone, the shadows were strange but more a part of her than ever – and she had her father.

But her mother was dead. The memory of that knowledge hit her like a punch to the stomach.

“I think my mama is gone,” Adana whispered after they’d finished eating. Lukas didn’t say anything, waiting for her to continue but came to sit beside her all the same. Corina looked up from her lap, following the conversation.

“You think?” Lukas asked.

“Papa said so. To Delilah. But I don’t think he wanted me to hear it,” Adana said.

“He hadn’t told you before? With all the time you’d spent together?”

Adana shook her head. She’d told them about her reunion with her father while they ate. Both Lukas and Corina had looked equally sceptical. She knew it was hard for them to understand. She’d never felt as happy as when she’d realized she was speaking to Adrien for the first time. No one could understand that.

“Is he the same way you remember him?” Corina asked, joining in the conversation.

“What do you mean?”

“Well - you say you’ve been waiting for this man for most of your life. That your mother took you away from him. That she shouldn’t have done that, he didn’t deserve to be away from you. Don’t you think there must have been a reason for her to do so? Is he the same, gentle father you remember from then? Or does he seem different?”

“I think – I think he treats me more like he treated mama.”

“And how did he treat your mother?” Corina asked.

“Made her work. Told her how much she needed him. I could hear them arguing sometimes, from outside. I didn’t remember that until he got angry with me the first time. But he’d always come play with me afterward, hide and seek. That was our favourite game! He said he’d always be able to find me. And he did.”

“Do you think he ever hurt your mother?” Lukas asked.

“No! Why would he do that?”

“You don’t think that could be why she ran away with you?”

“I... but I never saw,” Adana replied.

“He didn’t want you to see,” Corina said.

“You must have talked about her. What does he say?”

“That he’s angry with her. For taking me. But I was angry with her too!”

“Adana... I think there are some things that he hasn’t told you. Things you probably deserve to know.”

“No, I won’t listen to this. You think he hurt my mother? Then why hasn’t he hurt me?”

“Hasn’t he? Adana, come on. Think.”

She didn’t have to. She absentmindedly rubbed up and down her arm, wincing each time she touched one of her bruises. Corina noticed, crawled over and pushed Adana’s hand away, shoving the shirtsleeve up to her shoulder. Adana heard Lukas gasp behind her.

“Did he do this to you?” Lukas said, raising his voice.

“I - I deserved it. The shadows hurt him first. He just needed to make sure I could control them.”

“Adana... Heavens. No one deserves this. You didn’t do anything wrong. Your shadows did. He did!” Corina said.

“No,” Adana said, getting up from her seat next to Lukas. She could feel the shadows buzzing with anticipation once more. “No. He’s mine. I need him. I found him!” The burning behind her eyes had started again, a potent mixture of anger and tears.

“Adana, listen to me, please. I know that we’ve had our share of differences and hatred in the past, but you don’t deserve this. Someone who is supposed to love you is supposed to make sure you don’t get hurt, is supposed to make sure you have no pain, that you’re...that you’re safe,” Corina said, tears clear in her eyes, ‘I couldn’t do that for Deacon, not forever, and not even because of what you did, but because of how sick I let him get, how late I was to notice how bad it really was. I should have cared for him more; I should have asked him how he was doing more. I should have done all of those things, but at no point did I purposely add to his pain. Because that’s not what you do when you really love someone.

Does your father treat you like that Adana? Can you tell how much he cares for you when you're together?"

Adana thought back to all the times she had watched Corina and Deacon together – how carefully he'd always helped his sister remove her prosthetic, how Corina always made sure that Deacon had enough to drink and eat. How she'd stayed by his side at Reselda's house, and how Deacon had always given his sister words of comfort. Adana knew she had always been jealous of them, to some degree. And she knew, deep in her heart, that her father didn't treat her that way. The only real things they had in common were their dependence on magic and how they had both killed someone. Was that enough?

It had to be. Adana had been waiting her entire life for this. And who else was going to understand? Who else did she know that was a killer?

Delilah. Delilah would understand. It was a different type of love, but still there, all the same. Adana knew it every time she looked at her.

The shadows were trembling in anticipation, and Adana could feel that build-up again, that insatiable hunger for chaos and anger rising within her – but she also knew Lukas and Corina didn't deserve the shadows' wrath, that they had only tried to help her; but she couldn't control herself. They were accusing her father of something horrible, something she couldn't bear to hear. So many voices again. Only now, two of them were standing right in front of her.

"Adana... your eyes. They're black again. Can you feel it? Are they trying to do something to you?" Lukas said.

She'd started shaking by now. It was getting harder to hold the onslaught back. Shadows were expanding from within the armour, mist blackening, reach widening.

"Don't let them, win, Adana. Your shadows are just a sickness that you have to overcome. Don't let them win," Lukas said.

Something came crashing through the trees then and grabbed Adana's hand before she could blink. Startled, she let herself be dragged away before her mind could even register whose hand it was that was holding hers.

"Run!" Delilah shouted, tugging Adana along with her. Lukas and Corina followed along shortly after, crashing through the trees, branches scratching them from all sides. Adana could still feel the burning behind her eyes, but she knew instinctively that the shadows had morphed into a more defensive position. They kept running.

That's when she heard his shouts. His voice, crying out the same way that he'd always had in her recollections of that night, that night her mother ran away with her, and the memory was suddenly so strong that she lost her footing and stumbled towards the ground, pulling Delilah down with her. The others stopped, trying desperately to help them up, but they weren't fast enough. There was Adrien, shoving branches aside, his temporary magic clearly less potent but still capable of damage as dry leaves fell away as ashes to the ground. The sight was precisely what Adana had hoped for when she had been little, her father making his way through the thickets to save her that she couldn't stop herself. She scrambled up and threw herself at him. Shadows whipped him, but she didn't care. In that moment, all she needed him to know was that she was sorry.

"It's alright, Adana. I told you I'd never lose you again. So here I am."

CHAPTER 41

“I’m sorry, papa. I’m so sorry,” Adana repeated, unable to stop.

She didn’t notice at first, but the other three couldn’t move. Adrien had used his magic to block their path with a line of fire. She could smell the smoke, but all she needed now was for him to forgive her, and she would do anything to hear him say those words.

“It’s alright, Adana. It’s alright.” He wouldn’t let go either. She knew the shadows were hurting him, and yet he squeezed her even tighter, each flinch making his breath catch.

“It is?”

“It will be,” he said, and she felt oddly reassured.

“How?”

“Just stay here, with me.”

“Of course, papa,” she said, relief flooding through her. The burning in her eyes was slowly diminishing, but her headache was getting worse.

She could hear faint shouts in the background, Lukas’s and Delilah’s voices cutting through the crackling of the fire, but she couldn’t force herself to turn around and look at them. Her focus was on her father.

“You know, Adana – I think I’ve figured out a way to solve all of our problems,” he said, after another few moments of embrace.

“You have?”

“Yes, I think so. Do you remember when we were at home, Adana, and you told me that you would give me your shadows if you could?”

Her headache was getting worse. The shadows becoming more frantic. She nodded.

“I think I know how to do that,” Adrien said, his voice eerily calm. It was like he had been practicing for this moment, like he had known this was coming all along. Adana was

trembling by now, the shadows making her feel cold, armoured form stretching to a cocoon around both of them.

“But... how? They’re mine. I can’t just give them to you,”

“Wouldn’t you, though? For me? That way, I can protect you forever, Adana. You’d never have to be scared again.”

“But I don’t know how. They’re tied to me. I don’t know how to stop them.”

“I do though, Adana. I know, because they were mine first. Because you stole them from me.”

His words made her take a step back, but his grip tightened on her arms and she could feel his nails leaving welts on her skin. She flinched, his words making her stomach churn. She would never have stolen from him. Not on purpose.

“No... They’re - they’re mine. My friends!”

“Adana, please. You know as well as I do, they haven’t been your friends for a long time. You can’t control their actions, not even now. They made you kill someone, Adana. How could you ever forgive them for that? Do you really want to live with something like that, always with you?”

She felt sick. The few scraps of food Lukas had given her rose in her throat. This couldn’t be happening. The anger was there again, but she didn’t know who it was directed to anymore. It was just – it was just *always* there. And she didn’t know how to get rid of it. He was right. She didn’t know if they were still her friends. They had made her kill someone, she was sure of it now. She’d let them in. Maybe it was time to let them out.

“I can see it in your eyes, Adana. You don’t want them anymore. But I know how to control them, I’ve done it before. You feel angry now, but you won’t anymore. We can have our life together. The one that’s right, and well-balanced. The one that always should have

been. The one we could have had before your mother took you from me and the shadows preyed upon you.”

She nodded, eyes misting at the prospect. She didn’t know a life without the shadows. They’d always been there. She didn’t know who she’d be without them. But if it meant that she would stop hurting other people; if it meant that she would stop being so *angry* all the time – if it meant that she could give her father back what she’d taken from him, then she could do it. She had to.

She looked him right in the eye. Adrien smiled.

“How?” she asked again.

His grip on her tightened. A few spots of blood appeared on her thin sleeve. “Did you know that all magic leaves a mark? Physical contact, there’s always a trace. One strike isn’t enough to change anything. Ten strikes neither. Even a hundred strikes wouldn’t do the job. But the more magic inflicts its damage on you, the more it leaves behind. Enough to control. Just as I tried to teach you. Enough to have it come back to me.”

Her mind was racing. She didn’t know what she wanted. She only knew what he wanted, and that should be good enough for her. Right? After everything she had put him through? After what her mother had done to him?

“But I... I don’t understand. Why did they leave you? If they were your friends too?”

“Stop being so naïve,” Adrien spat, the smile on his face slipping into a mask of aggravation. “You think they want to be controlled? They chose you, Adana, because you’re weak. Because you don’t know how to think for yourself, because you let others lead you. You let total strangers drag you to the Barricades. You let Delilah worm her way into your feelings, and she was lying to you the whole time. And you let your shadows control you until they made you kill someone, just because you weren’t strong enough to do what was

necessary. Don't you see? You were an easy target. An easy host to infect. That's all you ever were to them. Ever will be."

"DON'T LISTEN TO HIM!" Delilah's voice cut through the roar of the fire, which had doubled in size, not by Adrien's magic but because of the dry landscape that now surrounded them.

"If you listen to her, Adana, all you will be proving is your weakness."

"No... Please, stop. I need to think. Let me think about this."

"No, Adana. I've waited for this for too long. If you want to be my daughter, you will do this for me," he said. Adana felt the smoke worm its way into her lungs, and that's when the shadows lashed out. Whether it was in reaction to her anger, or theirs, she didn't know, but she was happy for the reprieve as her father's grasp was ripped from her arms, leaving behind deep scratches before he was thrown against the trunk of a nearby tree. She could tell he was in pain. It took him a moment before regaining his footing, his breathing hard and his eyes narrowed in anger.

"Is this what you want for me, Adana? Do you want to see me in pain?"

She shook her head before she could stop herself. Of course she didn't.

"Then you'll let this happen," he said, and he closed his eyes, and she watched with morbid fascination as small tendrils of shadow, the lighter colour reminding her of when she had first discovered them drifted out from the cuts on his arms and legs and face. His whole body was now covered in a fine mist, much less ominous and threatening than hers, but unmistakable, and she suddenly knew that she had let this happen weeks before this moment even arrived.

He'd been planning for this. Every time the shadows had lashed out, and he'd let it happen. When he'd had her practice against him until he was bleeding. It had all been leading

to this. The shadows hadn't been able to see it, their clear desire for chaos and pain dwarfing any rational thought. And Adana hadn't been able to see it either.

She didn't know if she could give him this. But she knew he'd never forgive her if she didn't.

Then suddenly, the decision didn't matter. Adana wasn't in the forest anymore. She was by the cliffs.

CHAPTER 42

“Mama?” Adana whispered, so quiet, because she was worried that her voice would disturb the image in front of her. There she was, clear as day. Samira, her mother, same beauty but a few years older, more tired, hair tangled, but there. She was there.

“Mama!” Adana couldn’t stop herself from shouting. She’d thought of this moment for so long, no matter how much she wanted to deny it to herself. There had always been that curiosity, that bubbling resentment underneath the surface. As much as she wanted her father to find her, she wanted her mother to return to her as well, and now it had finally happened.

Adana didn’t understand how, but she was here, and she’d imagined this scenario thousands of times in her mind. What she’d say, how she’d act. What her mother would feed her as an explanation.

But this didn’t coincide with any of Adana’s scenarios. Because her mother couldn’t hear her.

No matter how many times Adana shouted at her, screamed her name, ran closer to her, even touched her shoulder, Samira wouldn’t respond. Instead, she continued to pack her belongings into a makeshift carrier, her actions frantic and confused. Adana felt tears spring into her eyes. She hadn’t seen this woman in so long, and now, she couldn’t even speak to her.

Adana’s breath caught in her throat when Samira finally turned around, facing her daughter. There were bruised circles under her eyes, her usually sharp gaze darkened by her exhaustion. Adana looked around, and she finally realized that they were by the Barricades – only they didn’t look abandoned at all. There were multiple people up in both watch towers, and a guard emerged from the large wooden doors at the front. When she listened closely,

Adana could hear the sounds of shouts and screaming coming through the stone walls, and she clenched her fists by her side, shadows oddly calm.

Then, Samira was on the move. Adana recognized the direction she was heading in, back towards the shore, and Adana hoped that this was her mother deciding to return to her. Maybe this was a glimpse of the future – what if her father had lied to her? In her heart, Adana knew it couldn't be. The Barricades wouldn't have looked so alive.

Adana followed her mother along the cliff's edge, back into the forest. She was still strong; long, fast strides taking her back towards the path that would lead her to the beach, a sack of supplies bouncing on her back with each steadfast step. Adana had to pick up the pace to keep up. She couldn't lose sight of her mother. Not now.

They walked together for an age; Samira still oblivious to her daughter's presence. By the time Samira decided to stop for the night, Adana should have felt exhausted, but there was no raggedness to her breathing, no sweat on her skin. She didn't understand, but she didn't have to. Instead, she just watched as her mother sat in silence, a piercing vigilance to her gaze. Once or twice, Samira's sight landed right where Adana was sitting, and she felt her stomach twist before the moment was gone and her mother had shifted her gaze somewhere else. Continuing to watch her mother in this moment was the most connection she was going to get, Adana realized. But it was still more than she'd had in 10 years.

The forest was now becoming darker, Samira's eyes starting to droop with sleep.

"I'll keep watch," Adana whispered, a desperate hope brewing inside of her that her mother would hear. Nothing. By now, Samira had lain down on the cold ground, sleep coming to her quickly. Adana realized that her mother hadn't even started a fire. Maybe she didn't want to be followed. Maybe the Barricades hadn't given her permission to leave. She could feel that anger growing inside her again, but this time, the shadows didn't react. It was like they had been immobilized, a witness just the same as Adana was. She missed their

frantic movements, even now. The night was dark and the sounds of the forest ominous. Her mother would never hear her scream. It was almost like being back in Emory's territory.

There it was. A snap of a branch. "Mama!" Adana shouted, hoping to warn her mother, but Samira woke by herself, eyes keen and searching as she quickly gathered up her supplies and prepared to run.

Too late. Someone was approaching through the trees. Samira cursed, trying to find somewhere to hide, but it was no use. The figure had emerged from the darkness of the forest's void and grabbed her mother by the arm.

"Let her go!" Adana yelled, hoping somehow that someone would hear her. No reaction from either party, but Samira had frozen in fear.

The figure was still shrouded in darkness, and Adana had a hard time making out any features. She couldn't recognize who the person was, but her mother was scared, that much was certain, and Adana's heart rate quickened as she watched the scene in front of her unfold.

"How long did you think you could run from me?" The voice spoke, and Adana's blood ran cold. She'd recognize that voice anywhere. Adrien.

"I don't think I've done too badly, considering it took you thirteen years to find me," Samira said, and Adana let out a sob at the sound of her mother's voice. So melodious, even with the harsh edge to her words.

"And yet here we are."

"And yet you still haven't been able to find the person you're really looking for," Samira said. Adana heard her mother hiss in pain as her father tightened his grip on her wrist. Instinctively, Adana rubbed at the welts on her own arm.

"You took her away from me. You forced our daughter into a life she didn't want. How can you live with yourself, Samira? Knowing our daughter most likely hates you?"

"I'd rather she hates me than have her live a life with you."

The words stung. Adana had longed for her father for so long, and the confirmation that her mother had kept her away from him on purpose felt like a knife in the back. But there was something about what her mother said, something about her father's tone of voice, the way he was holding her mother still that made doubt seep in. Guilt too. Especially as she watched Adrien twist Samira's arm. Adana's mother yelled out in pain, and Adana ran to her, unable to stop herself, placing an invisible hand on her mother's leg. Samira was now on the ground, each breath laced with pain. Adana felt tears welling up in her eyes once again.

"Where is Adana?" Adrien asked, his tone menacing.

"I'll never tell you," Samira said, through heavy breaths.

He twisted her arm further.

"You think that's going to make me tell you where our daughter is? You taught me what pain is more than anyone in this world. Your damned shadows saw to that," Samira said.

Her father had been telling the truth. The shadows had been his. Adana moved her fingers through their armour, but they were still unresponsive. Wherever she was, their ferocity hadn't followed her here.

"You know I'll find her, someday. You might as well give her to me now."

"The longer she stays away from you, the stronger she'll be."

"Don't be so sure."

"What, because you think you were able to control your magic? Your control wasn't what you so strongly believe it was, Adrien. You think you forced them to bend to your will? All they've done is make you their own puppet. Their carrier of chaos, hatred, violence and anger. You've no control. They still control you now. All this anger you have for me. All because of them. They changed who you are. Unrecognisable."

Adrien struck out at Samira, hard. Instead of falling further to the ground, Samira held her position, staring defiantly up into her husband's eyes. "You're nothing but a shell of who you once were. Your magic saw to that. Infected every inch of our lives. You were just too blind to see it. The only reason you don't have your daughter by your side is because you are weak, Adrien. Weak to your magic's most sordid desires."

Now he threw Samira to the ground. She scrambled backward, hitting a tree trunk and using it to slide up again. It was clear she was trying to find a way out, but Adrien was blocking the quickest way out of the forest, and she'd need a stronger blade to cut her way through the other trees. That would take too much time. Adana saw it, and she could see in her mother's eyes that Samira saw it too. Adana's heart rate quickened. She didn't want to know where this was going.

Adrien smiled. That same smile he'd given Adana only moments before. A smile devoid of joy.

"There's nowhere to run, my love," Adrien said. There was something about his words that made Adana's skin crawl. Samira shivered.

"I've made my peace with that," Samira said, "have you?"

Adrien's face changed in an instant. There it was. That look of infuriation at the person who dared question him. Adana had seen it before. She knew his anger would follow.

He struck out at her again. This time, Samira dodged. She tried to hit him back, but it was clear her left arm was still in a lot of pain – and her right arm wasn't her dominant one. She kicked him instead, sending him tumbling to the ground, a howl of outrage released from within him. It gave Samira a moment to lunge for her possessions, pulling out a small knife that glinted in the moonlight. Adana watched her parents fight, trapped in a nightmare. Adrien grabbed Samira from behind, curling his arm around her neck, and Samira struggled

to loosen his grip. It was getting harder for her to breathe, but she still had the knife in her hand.

She sunk it into his leg, and his grip faltered just enough for Samira to break free. She was breathing heavily, Adrien's blood dripping from the knife onto the dry ground. He was getting angrier by the second.

He lunged for Samira again, tackling her to the ground. His eyes were wild, outraged, and Adana, panicked, tried to pry him off of her mother, but her efforts were futile. He had Samira pinned to the ground, and she had dropped the knife too far away to reach during the struggle. Adana tried to kick it towards her mother, but it wouldn't move. All she could do was watch the scene unfold, horror making her throat close up.

"You shouldn't have taken them away from me," Adrien said, voice eerily calm. He had Samira's hands pinned to the ground. Her kicks didn't have enough strength from this angle.

"See? This was never about Adana. This is all about your shadows. I'll never tell you where to find them. And she will see the truth, one day," Samira said. Her voice was strained.

"I'll make sure that she doesn't," Adrien said.

"You won't be able to stop it. She's stronger than you ever were, Adrien. You're just as lost now without the shadows as you were when they had a hold over you. Pathetic," Samira spat.

Wrong choice of words.

Adrien's rage boiled over. He grabbed Samira's face, forcing her to look at him one last time. Then he heaved his arms, a snap. Samira's head was turned. Lifeless eyes pointed straight towards Adana.

She heaved, but nothing would come. Adana crawled towards her mother as Adrien quickly hoisted himself off of Samira's body.

“You shouldn’t have made me do that,” he whispered. He walked away without another word, back into the dark void of the forest.

Adana felt like she couldn’t breathe. Then, all at once, the shadows came back to life, smoky air filled her lungs, and there was Adrien, standing right in front of her.

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Adana looked down at the shadows, unable to comprehend what had just happened. They were there, still in armoured form, full of movement once again, but they were thinner, less densely packed. Their mist more delicate. It took Adana a few more seconds before she realized what was happening. While Adana had been away, however that had happened, Adrien had started stealing the shadows back. A thin sheen of mist was enveloping him now, a lighter grey than that which surrounded Adana, but recognisable nonetheless. The shadows were being ripped away from her by the same man that had ripped her mother away from her.

She didn't know a person could hold this much anger inside of them, but there it was, festering inside of her, shaking her to her core, primal and instinctive. The shadows that still surrounded her suddenly expanded in size, lashing out at Adrien, pushing him back towards the trees. Adana couldn't stop herself, anger rolling through her in crashing waves. She didn't care if it was amplified by the shadow's presence. All she cared about was that Adrien had murdered her mother. And he had lied to her all this time.

He looked livid at her sudden attack. She couldn't believe she hadn't seen it, noticed it in his behaviour. She was embarrassed by her desperate need for his approval, the way she'd changed herself for him. Waited for him, all these years. That she had been angry at her mother when all she wanted to do was protect her daughter. Adana's fury exploded. As did the shadows.

Darkness enveloped their world. There was no light, no trees, no nothing – only Delilah, Lukas, and Corina somewhere behind her, and her father somewhere in front of her. Rage so strong her whole body trembled with its impact. But Adrien kept going, determined in his quest to retrieve his power, and Adana wasn't about to let it go without a fight. She

lunged at him, the same way he'd lunged at her mother. She couldn't see him, the darkness constant and overpowering, but she could sense him.

Shadows surrounded her entirely now. Not an inch of skin left. They were part of her, as much as ever before, and the small number of shadows he'd pulled back towards him was nothing in comparison to what she had. She wanted to hurt him, the same way he had hurt her. She struck out, blow after blow, whip after whip, slash after slash. He now had to be as broken and bruised as Delilah was, and in that moment, Adana knew that he had been the one to hurt her, too. Everyone she cared about, attacked by her father. It had to end. Now.

Adana was going in for a harsh push when she felt a hand on either shoulder. One was Delilah's, soft yet bony, the other was clearly Lukas's, grip firm and assuring. They were holding her back. She couldn't figure out why.

"Stop, Adana. This isn't the moment," Delilah's voice whispered in her ear.

"He murdered my mother," Adana said, angrily, and she heard Lukas sigh next to her as he squeezed her shoulder in reassurance.

"I know. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry that all he's done is try to destroy who you are. But Adana, listen to me. He'll never stop. Neither will your shadows. They won't stop until they've turned you into a shell of what you used to be, just like they've done to your father. But you can beat them. You can get rid of them, once and for all." Delilah said, other hand now holding Adana's.

"Kill the host. Kill the magic," Lukas said, and Adana closed her eyes at his voice and words.

"I don't know who I am without them," Adana said, voice breaking along with her heart.

"We'll help you find out," Lukas whispered.

“You have to let them go, Adana. You have to let him go.” Adana heard Corina’s voice cut through the darkness behind her.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to set her mind straight. There were all the voices again, except this time, they were really with her, not just in her head. And they were trying to help. They were on her side.

She could feel the shadows getting thinner. The overpowering darkness was becoming less potent. Adrien was taking them back, one at a time. Each lost shadow left a hole in Adana’s heart. She dropped to her knees, the burning behind her eyes lessening with each passing second. The shadows were leaving her. Her life-long friends no longer hers. No longer what they used to be. Delilah, Lukas, and Corina stood behind her, comforting her with their presence. She hadn’t had a moment to mourn her mother. She hoped she’d have the chance to mourn the shadows.

Total silence as Adrien worked. The effort was a strain on him, Adana could tell. As the darkness lifted, he came back into view, face red, body trembling, and sweat on his neck. The shadows weren’t going back to him without a fight. They were hurting him. Adana smiled for what felt like the first time in days. It was what he deserved.

There it was, the final shadow tendril. It was frantically moving around Adana’s body, trying to hold on, but Adrien wouldn’t let it, and slowly, it was being pulled towards him, joining the now much darker mist that Adana used to inhabit. That was it. She was empty. She was alone. Her headache was gone. As was the burning behind her eyes. She felt like a void, a vessel for something that she no longer had, and all she could do was watch as her father faced the shadows’ wrath, as they inflicted their pain on him as he tried to regain control once more.

She couldn’t move. Guilt, shame, anger, and grief overwhelmed her. Body lifeless and frail without her armour. Delilah had come to crouch on the ground beside her, no words

said, but a comforting hand still on her shoulder. Lukas and Corina moved to stand in front of Adana, a protective force that she knew she didn't deserve.

Everything Adana saw felt far away, just like watching her mother's death. Like she wasn't truly there, no way to influence what was happening. A shell of who she once was. She was that now, already, without her shadows. Without her mother. Without the father she thought she knew.

It was far away when she saw Corina reach for Delilah's dagger. It was far away as Corina advanced on Adrien, leaping towards him, knife in hand, ready to strike. It was far away when Adrien, aided by the shadows, his shadows, easily threw her to the side. It was far away as Lukas ran to her, to see if she was okay. It was all far away.

Corina was in pain. She clutched at her collarbone, gasping for air. Lukas was clearly worried, and angered by the hurt his friends were experiencing. He jumped towards Adrien too, who was still struggling with the shadows. Lukas got in a few hits to his stomach before Adrien was able to get rid of him, and the more Adana watched unfold, the more involved she felt. She was watching her friends get hurt, again. All because of her. In her worry about Lukas, she nearly failed to see that Corina had managed to regain her footing, and had now moved behind Adrien. She was holding the dagger behind her back, using Adrien's distracted state to move against him. Adana watched in horror as Corina raised the knife, poised right above his spine. Where she hadn't been able to change her mother's murder, she knew she could change this.

"STOP!" she shouted, and both Corina and Adrien were so surprised by the sudden outburst that Adrien temporarily lost his control of the shadows, and Corina dropped the dagger to the ground. Adana jumped up, feeling weak in the knees but still able to hold her weight, running towards Corina. Adana gently grabbed Corina's hand in hers, both stooping down to retrieve the dagger that lay beneath them.

“I can’t let you do this,” Adana said.

“Adana - you can’t trust him. He doesn’t care about you. He deserves to die!”

Adana knew this. Deep in her heart, she knew this. She knew Adrien didn’t deserve her love or admiration, and she knew the shadows couldn’t keep unleashing their anger on the world. But they were still hers: her father, her shadows. It was hard, acknowledging that something you used to care for had to die. She didn’t know if she was capable of handling so much grief in one flood. It was too much.

“We can still have our life together, Adana. You gave me what I deserved. What was mine. And now, I can protect you. From these fools who abandoned and lied to you.” Adrien said.

For so much of her life, she would have given anything to hear him say these things, to hear that he wanted to be her father. To hear that he had searched for her, that he had missed her, that he loved her. She had shifted the blame onto her mother for years. How could one night change everything she had ever known, ever felt?

She closed her eyes and breathed. Grief was threatening to consume her. She needed to be able to focus.

“Please don’t do this. Please don’t listen to him,” Corina whispered. Broken.

Adana had already caused Corina so much pain, she couldn’t bear to cause her anymore.

There was Adrien’s hand, clutching Adana’s upper arm tightly, trying to pull her away from Corina, but Adana held on tight too, moving one of her hands under her friend’s and curling her fingers around the hilt of the dagger.

“Please let me kill the thing that killed my brother,” Corina begged.

Adana couldn’t bear to cause Corina any more pain, but she couldn’t let Corina kill her father either. He was hers. Her family.

Her responsibility.

“I can’t let you become what I already am,” Adana whispered.

Adrien’s shadows were now wrapping themselves around Adana, pulling her back towards her him. Before she let them, she ripped the dagger from Corina’s grasp, and she had never been more aware of every move her body made.

The shadows pulled her back, stumbling against her father’s chest. She was gripping the handle of the dagger so tightly; that its carvings temporarily imprinted on her skin. She couldn’t drop it now. She had to do this.

She could feel the shadows surrounding her, but it was a foreign feeling – cold and lifeless, not soft and comforting. Now she knew what it had been like all those times they had lashed out at Lukas, when they had thrown Delilah away from her, any time they cut her mother or slashed at her father. She was their victim now. Her shadows, her friends, had turned against her.

So she would turn against them.

Lowering the dagger, she turned around in the shadow’s grasp, facing her father one last time. His eyes were closed, clearly concentrating on his control of the shadows, and she knew she only had a few seconds to make her decision. The shadows were frantic, her father’s armour not fully formed yet. She didn’t understand why she could still see them, but for now, it was a gift, because she knew exactly where to leave her mark.

She thrust the dagger upwards. She felt the way it punctured Adrien’s skin, the sucking sound it made as she pushed it in further. There was the blood, bubbling up around the blade, and the feeling was so familiar that Adana nearly closed her eyes at the sight. Her father opened his, looked down to where the dagger had been impaled into his chest, eyes wide and raging, black as the night sky. He collapsed to his knees. Adana went down with him, hand still on the hilt of the dagger, the other on his shoulder to steady him.

Complete silence. Adana couldn't even bring herself to breathe. She stared at her father, the darkness of his eyes contrasting sharply with the sallowness of his skin, and she couldn't believe she had been so late to see how much he had changed since she'd known him.

She felt none of the agitated panic she had after she had thrust the knife into Deacon. Oddly calm, because she knew, in her heart, that this was the right thing to do. She didn't leave the knife in this time either, didn't try to stop the bleeding. She pulled the dagger out, watched as more and more blood pooled at the surface of her father's wound. Adrien put his own hands on his chest, his own attempt to stop the bleeding, but he was already beginning to weaken, the exhaustion from his newly acquired shadows starting to take its toll. His hands shook, and he winced in pain.

"Why?" he asked, voice weaker than she'd ever heard it. Sad, even. Distraught.

Adana didn't answer for a minute, watching as the life drained out of her father. "You shouldn't have killed mama."

His eyes widened in recognition as they slowly reverted to their original colour, darkness draining out of them with every meagre breath he took.

There was nothing else to be said. Adana let go of his shoulder, and he crumpled to the ground in a heap. His head fell sideways, dead eyes staring at Adana the same way her mother's lifeless eyes had caught her gaze just moments before.

Adana couldn't bring herself to move as she watched the shadows dance around her father's body. Their energy was waning – their movements became slower with each second, sluggish and weak. Their shape was fading, thinning out like the morning mist always did in her home enclosure, and she watched until the final speck of darkness had faded into the air, no trace the shadows had ever been there in the first place.

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She cried until her eyes stung and her head ached, and she cried much longer after that. The tears wouldn't stop, her grief wouldn't leave. For the life she could have had, for the life she always wanted, for her shadows and her mother, her father, the man she used to know.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Adana kept repeating like a mantra, hoping that anyone who could hear would bestow her with forgiveness, and she could move on with her life, leaving this all behind.

Corina, Delilah, and Lukas had all come to surround her as she sat next to Adrien's lifeless body. Delilah hugged her from behind, Corina had laid a hand on Adana's arm, and Lukas had folded their hands together. There they sat, Adana crying, the others silent, until they watched the sun rise over the trees and the world came back to life again.

When her tears had finally dried out and the sun beat down on them from above, Adana spoke.

"I want to bury them. Both."

Corina squeezed her arm. "I understand," she said.

They got to work. Slow, painstaking digging, with their hands as their only tools, they buried Adrien's body, marking his grave with a few of the same stones that he had kept in his cabin. There were no words to say about him. Adana's actions had spoken louder than words ever could.

Samira's grave was easier. They had no body to bury. But Adana wanted to mark her mother's passing somehow, so she searched the nearby woods for any flowers she could find. Finally, after searching for nearly an hour, she found a small patch of wildflowers under a large oak, and she knew her mother would have loved it. Kneeling in front of the tree, Adana dug her hands into the soil again, the brown of the dirt mixing with the red blood still on her

hands. She buried a few small seeds she had found, hoping that the roots of the oak tree would help them to grow, and patted the dirt gently as she covered the seeds once more.

“I’m sorry, mama,” Adana whispered. Her three friends stood a few steps behind her, silent. “I’m sorry I never understood why you ran away with me. I’m sorry I was mad at you. I’m sorry papa did what he did. I’m sorry that the shadows followed me. I’m sorry that this is all I can give you. I’m sorry I didn’t trust you.” A few fresh tears moistened the recently upturned dirt.

They let the rest of the day drift by. They were all exhausted, and in pain, no energy left to think, even to eat. They watched the clear blue sky, they slept, they grieved. What else was there to do?

Adana was glad for the company of her friends. She didn’t know why they were still there, and she knew she didn’t deserve their forgiveness, but she was grateful nonetheless, and she would never let them forget it. She hoped that would be enough to repay them. She didn’t have anything else to give.

“We’ll have to head home soon,” Lukas finally spoke as they watched the sun set once again.

“I have to get back to my people,” Delilah said, reaching out her fingers for Adana’s, who smiled as she felt a hand brush against hers.

“How am I going to tell mother what happened? Deacon was... she’ll never forgive me for not protecting him. Never,” Corina said, voice shaky.

“I can tell her what happened,” Adana said, eyes never leaving the sky above her. “She can know it’s my fault.”

“No,” Corina said, “what happened with Deacon was always going to happen. Whether it was your shadows, his illness, the journey...I know that now. But mother won’t

understand. She sent me with him to make sure he got better. She never doubted me. Now she'll never be able to look at me the same way again. I lost her only son."

"And I will be there with you to tell her that it wasn't your fault. There was nothing more you could have done, Cor. You loved your brother, and you took care of him as best you could. That's what your mother needs to know. If she blames you, I'll support you. You know that, right?" Lukas said.

"Yes, I know," Corina said, and Adana thought she could hear the hint of a smile in her voice.

"Home," Delilah said, "it feels so far away."

"Like a different life," Lukas said.

"Where will you go, Adana?" Corina asked.

Adana didn't know. Did she want to go back to her enclosure, her beloved plants and flowers and trees? Did she want to be haunted by the memories of her mother, of her shadows? Of all the awful things she'd ever thought about Samira, the things she'd wished would happen to her? All the time she spent pining after a man that didn't really want her as a daughter anymore?

Did she want to live in her father's cabin, a tainted memory of a falsely happier time?

She didn't know if she still had a home. The people that now surrounded her, they felt like home. But she couldn't follow them. Not if they didn't want her to.

"I don't know," Adana said.

"You can come with me," Delilah said.

"Or with us," Lukas responded.

Adana sighed deeply, overwhelmed by their kindness. After all that she had put them through. For nothing. No rewards, no joy. One person less. It was unthinkable that they should still show her such goodwill, and yet she knew that they were sincere.

“Thank you,” Adana said. There was nothing more to say. Delilah squeezed her hand.

“Emory warned me about you,” Adana said to Delilah. The four of them had set out on their journey home the next day, planning to pass through the last town before the coast to stock up on supplies. Corina wanted to break the news to Reselda, the woman who had helped them so, and while Adana didn’t want to cause anyone else more grief, she knew it was the right thing to do.

“She was right to. If we had never met it wouldn’t have been so easy for your father to play on your weaknesses, the betrayals you’ve faced. I had to lie to you for so long. I’m sorry,” Delilah said, resting her forehead against Adana’s shoulder as they walked.

“I’m happy we met,” Adana said. No lies, no deception, just the truth.

Delilah looked up at Adana and smiled. “So am I.”

They walked a bit longer in silence. Corina and Lukas walked a few paces ahead of them, turning around every so often to check they were still there. Delilah had told them of a slightly longer track back to the town that would allow them to avoid the pile of bodies left behind by Adrien on the beach. Adana didn’t want to be confronted by any more death. Neither did the others.

“I wouldn’t know what happened to my mama if it wasn’t for you,” Adana said a few hundred steps later.

Delilah sighed. “I’m sorry I had to show you that. But I knew it was the only thing that would get you to see who your father really was. I wouldn’t wish that sight on my worst enemy. And you are far from my enemy.”

“How did you do it?”

“When I make people see things, I have to make my mark on their minds. It sounds more ominous than it is, I promise. It’s a lot like what your father explained about the shadows. The more they’re used against someone, the more they leave behind. The mark fades, after a while. I need to do it a lot if I wish to be able to see who they are more clearly. I had to hide a lot from your father – my people, our home, it took its toll. He didn’t even realize. But I saw it once, clear as day. Something triggered the memory in him, I don’t know what. Suddenly it was like I was there but I couldn’t do anything. If I could have saved your mother somehow, I would have. But it was just a memory, his own version of it, but it happened. It was the truth. I can’t imagine what it was like for you to see that, Adana. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“At least I know,” Adana said. Delilah threaded their fingers together. “No more lies. No more guessing.”

“Will you come home with me?” Delilah asked. “You can be one of us. You can become a Scavenger. I know you’re used to wearing some sort of armour now, we can make you some. We can live together. You’ll be safe. And happy, I hope. Surrounded by friends and allies. No need to be alone.”

It sounded wonderful. A new family, a new home. Away from horrific memories and unhappy times. Adana looked towards Lukas and Corina, only a little way up ahead on the road, and she knew she would miss them terribly. Would that be worth it? Adana wasn’t sure. It felt so right, walking alongside Delilah like this, everything out in the open, being with someone who knew every part of her, no judgement, no fear; but the same could be said for her other friends. Did she have to choose?

“They are more than welcome to stay with us too,” Delilah said, having noticed Adana’s gaze.

“Really?” Adana said, voice hopeful.

“Of course, if that’s what they want. But we can’t force them to leave their own home, Adana. And it doesn’t mean you’ll never see them again if they decide they don’t want to come.”

Adana nodded. She knew that was true. She felt guilt, however, at having shunned them in favour of her father’s company, for having convinced herself that they didn’t care for her, that they hated her. That she didn’t need them, because she did. Just like Delilah, they would understand her in a way that no one else ever would. She needed Lukas’s kindness and Corina’s bluntness to keep her on the right path, to stop herself from spiralling in despair. Just as she needed Delilah’s affection to do the same. As selfish as it was, she didn’t want things to change.

So, she told them exactly that, later that night. They had decided to stay at Reselda’s, who had welcomed them with open arms. It was clear Corina was having a hard time adjusting to being there without her brother. She refused to sleep upstairs, folding herself into a corner of the dark, messy room, but it didn’t matter. They were there, together. It was just for one night.

“I don’t want to say goodbye,” Adana said, quietly, just after they had finished eating dinner. They’d been ravenous, all of them. Their plates had been cleared within minutes.

“We don’t want to say goodbye either,” Lukas said. Corina nodded.

“So do we have to?” Adana asked.

“Of course not. Like we said – you can come stay with us,” Lukas said.

Adana shook her head. She’d thought about it, a lot. It just didn’t feel right. Not without Deacon. Not after everything that had happened.

“I trust you with my life. Both. And I take the blame for what happened to Deacon, if you need. But your families...I can’t...” Adana said.

“You’re worried they won’t accept you,” Lukas said.

Adana nodded.

“You know we’ll stand up for you, right? You shouldn’t have any reason to fear them.”

“No - I know. But it’s not the same. And I don’t want to lose you, but I think... I think I’m going to go with Delilah,” Adana said.

“You won’t lose us, Adana. Doesn’t matter where you live,” Lukas said. Corina nodded again.

“You’re welcome to come stay with us too,” Delilah said. Lukas and Corina both shook their heads. Adana felt her hope deflate at the gesture.

“That’s very kind, but we can’t. Our families are there. Our friends. It’s all we’ve ever known, our whole lives. We can’t just leave that behind. I’m sorry. But that doesn’t mean we won’t see each other. In fact, I think it might be beneficial for both our homes to let go of this stupid feud between ourselves and the Scavengers. Maybe trade. I can convince them. I’m sure of it,” Lukas said.

“If you think you’ll be happy there, then that’s where you should go,” Corina said, rather quietly. Adana shot her a grateful smile.

“Besides, the journey isn’t over yet. We’ve got a few more weeks’ worth of walking to do,” Lukas said.

They set out on the way home the very next day, bags full of supplies and canteens full of precious water. Lukas hadn’t been lying, it did take them a few weeks. The journey felt longer on the way back, fewer distractions and distrust to break up the monotony of walking. By the time they got to the clearing where they had first met Delilah, the air was beginning to get colder, the sun less harsh. A new season was coming. Adana couldn’t wait for the change in colour of the trees.

She would have been happy to stall their farewell, though.

Adana hugged Corina first. She felt Corina's hesitance, at first. The only person she'd ever shown real physical affection to before was her brother. Adana was happy that this was their first embrace, with no shadows to hurt her in any way, and she smiled when she felt Corina's arms squeeze her shoulders tightly to her. They didn't need to say anything to each other. They both knew what they'd been through together.

Lukas was next. Adana felt tears form in her eyes. From the moment they met, he'd shown her kindness, stood up for her, watched out for her, listened to her. He knew what was happening to her before anyone else did, before she even knew herself. Throwing her arms around him, he hugged her back easily, their friendship now solidified. This was the first time she'd been able to embrace him without hurting him at the same time. Adana sighed in relief.

When they reluctantly let go, Lukas caught her gaze, and Adana couldn't stop herself from sharing her thoughts. He always had that effect on her.

"What if it's not really over? What if I become like my father? What if my sadness is just pushing down more anger?" she whispered, so quietly only Lukas could hear. He shook his head forcefully, squeezing both of her hands in his.

"You are not your father. He was obsessed with the shadows. He didn't want to get rid of them, he wanted them all to himself. You sacrificed yourself to grief and sadness to destroy them, to make sure they couldn't hurt anyone else. You are not just a victim of their manipulation, Adana. You are also a saviour. You saved me, you saved Delilah, you saved Corina. Think of what he could have done, had he gained full control of them in time? You've felt guilt at what they forced you into doing since the moment it happened. That's the difference. You are stronger than he ever was. Remember that."

Just like her mother had said. Adana smiled at him. Lukas smiled back before letting go of her hands.

As she watched them walk away, waving each time they turned around, Delilah came to stand next to her, holding her steady as her new life truly began. Once they'd disappeared back into the trees, Delilah kissed her lightly on the temple, and it was a gesture so affectionate, that Adana immediately knew she had made the right decision.

She was going home.

EPILOGUE

It had taken a few months to get used to her new surroundings. Waking up next to someone every day, no threat of violence, anger, or pain, was unsettling at first. Adana was so used to being on her guard that each little sound from the camp used to wake her up in a fit of restlessness. She was getting more familiar with her new home now. She'd found her place, she did her work, she made new friends, and had a life with Delilah. She was happy. She was content.

Lukas and Corina would drop by every so often, or Adana and a few of the other Scavengers would trek to their camp to leave some new supplies. They saw less of each other than Adana would have liked, but it was better than nothing at all, and she could tell that both Lukas and Corina were happy to be home. Corina's guilt was still there, it was obvious, but it was fading with each passing day, and every once in a while, she'd even share a new memory of Deacon that Adana hadn't heard before. A lot of them made her laugh. She wished she could have seen that side of him.

One day, a while after their company had first parted ways, Adana decided to make the journey towards Lukas's and Corina's home by herself. Delilah had offered to send some of the other Scavengers with her, but Adana had an additional destination in mind, and refused their company. Delilah had nodded in understanding. Adana was going to see her enclosure.

It took her a long time to find it. She now understood why her father had never been able to locate them. Every inch of the forest looked the same, the trees all blending into one another, none of the glorious colour and life that so defined her old home visible from the outside. Adana went around in circles, about to give up, when the scent suddenly hit her.

Something sweet, and distinct. A smell she knew well.

She followed its trail, and it led her towards a place she recognized. The last time she had been here, her mother had pulled her through. Now, Adana had to fight her way in by herself, pushing branches and leaves and vines out of the way until she finally emerged on the other side.

The sight that greeted her was not the same. The scent was still there, warm and inviting, but her enclosure looked sadder, more barren, less colourful. Some of the plants had been ripped up at the roots, dry leaves and rotten berries littering the ground. Her tree was still there, proud and tall, but its bark looked a little frailer, its branches hanging lower. Adana felt tears well up in her eyes. She'd left, and look what happened. That which had made it so special was no more.

She walked around, following the small trails she knew so well, trying to find where the scent was coming from. Finally, after a few hundred steps, she found her mark, and a smile broke through her sadness. It was a nest, small and well-hidden, but unmistakable. Thin, long tracks led away from the shelter and into the trees. Serpents. Perhaps she'd get to see them someday. For now, it was enough to simply know they existed. Her enclosure was once again a protector of magic. Now, just in a different form.

Adana wandered some more, allowing the memories to return. Some good, some bad. She remembered laughing with her mother, picking berries, and taking care of her plants. Watching her shadows dance and play, speaking to them. She refused to believe that they were always bad. Adana had thought about it a lot, and she wondered whether her shadows had come to manipulate her because her pain made it easy for them. She'd never held a lot of love and kindness in her heart, not until recently. Perhaps her father never did either.

She'd arrived at the stream, relieved to find that its water was as clear as ever. She knew Corina and Lukas were taking good care of it, making sure it stayed safe, that their people were using it to survive. She knelt down, suddenly feeling her thirst, cupping some

water in her hand before taking a sip. She sighed at its freshness; the crisp air reflected in the temperature of the water. Splashing some on her face, she watched as the ripples faded into nothing, the slow movement of the stream once again undisturbed. That's when she saw it.

A reflection. Faint, but there. A small sliver, translucently grey, circling her neck. Adana slowly reached her hand up, watching her movements in the water, hand shaking as she pinched the sliver between her fingers. Undeniable. A shadow. As small as she had ever seen one.

Adana smiled. A second chance.

**Hero's Bias: Developing Fantasy Villains Outside of the
Perspective of the Protagonist**

Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy – Creative Writing

By

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ABSTRACT

Hero's Bias: Developing Fantasy Villains Outside of the Perspective of the Protagonist – this research seeks to understand which techniques fantasy authors across the genre have used to develop their villains in ways that aren't influenced by the hero character's subjective role in the narrative. In order to do so, this research considers the building blocks of the fantasy genre as a whole, Joseph Campbell's theory of the Hero's Journey, the role of the narrator in literature, point of view, and character archetypes. This thesis presents seven case studies of fantasy literature, ranging from classic to contemporary in order to see whether the role of villains and their development in the genre has changed over time and to provide a more balanced perspective of the genre as a whole. After analysing these case studies, it was concluded that the most important factor in developing villains outside of the protagonist's perspective was history and world-building, as it allows authors to create backgrounds for characters that cannot be influenced or changed by the present narrative. By completing this study, the researcher was also able to devise her own definitions of the terms "villain" and "antagonist" in relation to the fantasy genre.

This thesis is part of a practice-based PhD for which the researcher has written an original fantasy novel. This novel is also studied within the confines of this thesis in order to understand how the research question has helped the writer better understand their own characters and their role within the narrative.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Introducing the Topic

1.1 What is Fantasy?

In technical terms, fantasy can be defined as any story that takes place in a world that is not wholly our own, differentiating itself from the real world through its unique systems of religion, class, race, time, biology, magic, and anything else the creator deems necessary. The characters are contained within these worlds, and their journeys are affected by the fantastical aspects which the writer explores within the fantasy world. High Fantasy – the most well-known example of which is arguably Tolkien’s extensive works on his Middle-Earth – is often populated with the makings of legend; magic and mythical creatures are usually in abundance. The subsequent novels and short stories that emerge from these worlds are rooted in fictional histories of the author’s own making. In short, fantasy is an agreement between writer and reader in which the supposed impossible becomes possible within the constructed story world (Ekman, 2013).

Brian Attebery (1992) posits that there are two distinct manners in which to regard fantasy. Fantasy can be considered a formula, a type of storytelling that combines certain tropes, stock characters, and narrative devices into a predictable plot that provides escapism for its readers, as explained above. On the other hand, fantasy can also be considered a mode of storytelling: it is not simply the same story rehashed over and over again, but rather a stylistic reinvention and “subversive treatment of established orders of society and thought.”

Whichever way a person chooses to interpret the fantasy genre, it is impossible to ignore that it is one of the oldest genres in existence, due to its foundation in myths and legends. Fantasy, in any form, revisits and reimagines the ideas of stories that existed even before literature itself became a concept (Stableford, 2009). Stories of gods, monsters,

magical spells, curses, valiant heroes, and sinister villains still exist in fantasy today. Though the genre has evolved beyond the most simplistic version of good versus evil, elements of its mythical roots can usually be found in works that carry the fantasy label, not just when analysing the types of plots that are told in fantasy stories, but more importantly (for the purposes of this dissertation), studying the character archetypes that commonly exist within fantasy narratives and how these characters function and develop within the story.

1.2 Characters in Fantasy

According to Joseph Campbell (2004), a hero's journey is worth writing about because it is about someone who has gone beyond the average experience to achieve something great. A hero, as such, can be someone who has given their life to something bigger than themselves. In fantasy, the hero's journey is set into motion by overcoming obstacles and eventually confronting their enemy, the narrative's villain (Faria, 2008). Jung outlined various archetypes, which he defined as the model image of different people and their roles in stories and societies that we can all recognize (Ewen, 2014). These have been adopted in many types of storytelling, as Jung believed that mythology and story-telling are an undeniable impulse in human culture (Waude, 2016). These archetypes include but are not limited to Hero, Mentor, Threshold Guardians, Shadow, Herald, Trickster, Shapeshifter, and Ally. In relation to the villainous characters, the archetypes of interest are Shadow (the threat, primary obstacle, the darkest parts of ourselves), Trickster (mischief, agent of change), and the Shapeshifter (two-faced, question of loyalty). These archetypes can be applied to the primary and secondary villains in a story: as long as they are averse to the hero's journey, they may be classified as a villain.

When it comes to villains in fiction, and particularly, fantasy fiction, it is often agreed that they are underdeveloped, specifically in comparison to the hero (Faria, 2008). We are able to recognize them as villains because of their resemblance to specific archetypes, and because they are the main instigator of the hero's development. But is that their main reason for being? They are there to provide obstacles for the hero to overcome, but a character, by definition, needs to have a motivation, a reason to exist (Chester, 2016). In fantasy, it is often the job of the protagonist to foil the villain's plan. Thus, the question is, where does this plan come from? If villains are underdeveloped, and are there mainly so that the hero has an adversary, what constitutes their motivation? What can we learn about them outside of the main storyline, outside of the hero's journey? This is what this research will try to understand.

2. Problem Definition

In writing fiction, there are many possible points of view (POV) to be considered. An author will choose their POV dependent on what works best for the type of story being told.

Choosing the POV is an important decision: it can determine how well the reader will understand and engage with the narrative (NY Book Editors, 2016). The point of view is the reflection of a character or characters' thoughts, feelings, motivations, and experiences. Each point of view will therefore have advantages and disadvantages: First-person perspective, for instance, in which readers experience the story vicariously through the character, limits the writer to one single point of view. Using I, me, and myself pronouns, it becomes clear that the thoughts, opinions and actions of the character are theirs, and theirs alone. This begs the question: how reliable is their information? Is it based on facts that the protagonist has discovered during their journey, or is it biased, based on what another character may have

said? If the perspective is influenced by personal bias, how much of what we understand and know through that character's perspective can be trusted? Is it enough to foster an understanding of who other characters truly are?

3. Research Objective

As villains play such a large role in the fantasy genre, it is important to understand what information the reader is being given about them, what influences that information, and if there are other ways to learn more about these characters outside of the perspective that is being used in these novels. As established previously, a fantasy hero's journey is set into motion by overcoming obstacles and eventually confronting their enemy (Faria, 2008). So, the question remains: if the hero's perspective is being followed, how can more be understood about the villain in ways that aren't borne from character bias? What facts can be found within the text, using the other elements of fantasy and of narrative fiction itself, in order to better understand these villains?

As such, the research question became:

How are villains in fantasy series developed outside of the perspective of the protagonist?

4. Relevance

The fantasy genre has been around for longer than can be remembered – its predecessors include myths, fairy tales, fables and legends (Timmerman, 1983). However, it has had a surge in popularity since the 1970s (Stephan, 2016), aided not only by numerous film

adaptations of popular fantasy novels but also by increased critical attention (Timmerman, 1983).

An understanding of the fantasy genre, what it means to people, and how it is best constructed is important in knowing why the genre has stayed successful over time. This includes an understanding of which characters connect with readers, how they do so, and the most effective methods for character development within the genre. Many critical works have focused on individual successful pieces of fantasy literature, trying to understand those specific instances of popularity. This is a worthwhile endeavour, but it does little to understand more about the genre as a whole – one successful novel does not indicate how the rest of the genre could be constructed. However, in identifying the common factors and constructs in multiple series across the genre, patterns could be identified, and new lessons learned about the best and most basic way to approach character development and world-building within such a broad category. If the villain is a central aspect of the genre, it is essential to understand the most effective ways of bringing these characters to life.

Besides this, villains are having a moment within popular culture – there is a surge in stories and products centred on the villains within different franchises: take Disney’s origin story movies about different villains for example, such as *Maleficent* (2014), or *Cruella* (2021). Marvel’s *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) focused on the villain’s successful quest for power. The *Star Wars* prequels (1999-2005) focused on Darth Vader’s rise to power and how he became one of the most iconic villains in popular culture to this day. Even the recent *Joker* (2019) wanted to create a narrative in which the average audience could understand and empathize with the Joker’s downfall into one of DC’s most vicious and murderous villains of all time.

This thesis will have an impact on the practice-based aspect of this research as well. Within the creative work, multiple characters exhibit villainous traits and force the

protagonist to stray from their objective. This research will aid in a better understanding of how to develop these characters and their motivations, outside of the protagonist's biased view of them.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Elements of Fantasy

Cultivating an understanding of the basic building blocks of contemporary fantasy narratives will provide a better overview of the worlds the characters inhabit and their roles within the story that have been chosen to be studied. The characters move within the world an author has created, and their stories and motivations are undoubtedly affected by what is possible within these worlds. Worldbuilding, an imagined world's history, the geography of the story world, and the languages used within the story world, these factors all affect how characters function within a fantasy narrative.

Additionally, a basic understanding of the different types of plots that can be found in storytelling, as well as a grasp on the different types of characters within literature as a whole will provide an invaluable basis for understanding the roles these characters play within fantasy literature, and how their point of view and motivations can affect the plot and their character development.

1.1 Worldbuilding

“Fantasy, in short, is fiction acknowledged by reader and writer to contain ‘impossible’ elements that are accepted as possible in the story and treated in an internally consistent manner,” (Ekman, 2013). John Clute (2004) defines fantasy as a self-coherent narrative: when set in our world, it tells a story that is impossible in the world as we know it, and when set in another world, the other world becomes impossible, but the stories told there will be possible within its own terms.

Worldbuilding is an important part of any fantasy novel. Beginning with the definition of ‘world’, Audrey Taylor (2016) describes a world as “a physical place, as well as

everything it contains, whether that is corporeal (plants, animals, characters) or not (myths, legends, time, history).” Matthias Stephan (2016) states that fantasy is “the genre which leaves the most scope for imagination”. Tolkien, in his essay *On Fairy Stories* (1964) spoke about the way in which a fantasy story is constructed: he used the concept of ‘enchantment’ to describe different levels of narrative construction, with magic being the element of differentiation. In his words, “Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside.” This concept of enchantment is a manner in which to describe the suspension of disbelief required to lose oneself in the narrative. This means that there is room for key differences between our Primary World and the Secondary World as Tolkien describes. This is where a magic system comes into play.

As Tolkien (1964) put it, “magic produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World.” The introduction of magic creates the Secondary World. In using magic to create the Secondary World, an author is free to use realistic and well-known elements from our own Primary World, in order to create a fantasy landscape that is both new and familiar. This means that the writer does not have to create everything from scratch – elements of geography or modes of transportation can be similar to what we know in reality (Stephan, 2016). This can give an author more room to expand on their Magic systems without losing the reader’s trust or suspension of disbelief.

Worldbuilding is also where the differentiation between High Fantasy and Low Fantasy becomes clearer. These are known as sub-genres of the fantasy genre as a whole. These sub-genres merely allude to what kind of world the narrative takes place in. If a fantasy story takes place completely within our world or even in just part of it, it is considered Low Fantasy – J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* is an example of this. High Fantasy, therefore, is a

work that takes place in a world completely separate from our own, as defined before, the Secondary World. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is a prime example (Vike, 2009).

Philip Athans (2010) describes a few standard world varieties for fantasy writers to consider:

- Created Worlds - these are the settings and universes created entirely by the author. Every city, mountain range, belief system and monster has never existed elsewhere before.
- Fantasized Worlds – These occur when an author is inspired by a culture or nation out of the history of our real primary world and uses it as a basis for the fantasy world. The author can take broad liberties with the source culture and history, unlike historical fantasy.
- Historical Fantasy – These are fantasy novels that are set in a real historical period, but intentionally introduce fantastical or other anachronistic elements. This type of world-building requires meticulous research, as even the slightest wrong detail could garner criticism. An excellent example of Historical Fantasy is Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*.
- Contemporary (Urban) Fantasy – These are stories that are set in today's world where the supernatural elements come from magic, such as a character's ability to manipulate it.

1.2 Fictional History or Mythology

Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* may arguably be the most well-known example of a Secondary World having its own complete mythology and history. In this collection of stories and essays Tolkien describes the creation of Eä, the universe, and Arda, the world within it, which we

know from *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* as Middle-Earth. As has been explained in the introduction and further along within this literature review, the fantasy genre can be considered a product of myths and legends of old. World myths are stereotypically (Donovan, 2014):

- 1) Regarded as accounts of a distant past in relation to the primary story
- 2) Contain an explanation of the origins of life in this fantastical world by means of logic and specific design
- 3) Evolve from the actions of the supernatural and superhuman figures
- 4) Establish the existence of social and cultural structures
- 5) Reflect human behaviour such as morals and attitudes
- 6) Evoke the sacred and important institutions within the world

In combination with these common conventions, most world mythologies are further organized in relation to clear and distinct hierarches. For instance, a hierarchy can be vertical: starting with one Supreme Being, or God, and the structure of power works its way down from there. This is especially prevalent in Tolkien's work: Ilùvatar is the Supreme Being, and beneath him are the Ainur, the Valar, and the Maiar. There are Kings and leaders and those beneath them, and the Dwarves hold a lesser ranking than Elves and Men in the eyes of the higher beings (Donovan, 2014).

A horizontal timeline is just as important as a vertical hierarchy. It can explain the co-operation between different groups within the hierarchy, as well as cultural divisions and behavioural patterns of the social groups that inhabit the fantasy world. This part of the mythology should explain how the world as it is known in the fantasy work came to be: its rise, and fall, scrambles for power, mass migrations and reasons for differences in cultural heritage. For instance, the Elves in Tolkien are of the same race: but they have divided

themselves across Middle-Earth, each sub-group preferring different environments and engaging in different cultural customs (Donovan, 2014).

An important aspect of (fictional) mythology is layering: by layering the fictional world's past and present, narrative depth is created. These layers connect events from the distant past directly with current circumstances. These layers can become clear through a character's heritage and events that can be directly linked to one another (Donovan, 2014). Layering is an important tool in regards to character development: different motivations can become clearer the more is known about the past in relation to the present.

1.3 Geography and Maps

The world and the setting that an author has created is there to serve the story and the characters, not the other way around. The difference between world and setting is simple: the setting is the basic approach to the world, the places your characters find themselves in. The world, or world- building, as discussed above in section 1.1 of this literature review, is the result of layers of detail being added onto that primary setting (Athans, 2010). The setting is important not only as a place for a character's story to take place in but also as a source of inspiration to further the plot or backstory.

“The balance of reality and fantasy, realism and plausibility, in your geography is entirely up to you,” Athans (2010) writes. However, he states that a bigger and more bizarre world is not equal to good writing. In fact, a truly strange world can overwhelm even the strongest of stories. This is why plausibility plays a key role in both world-building and the finer points of the landscape of a fantasy setting. While the elements of a fantasy setting may be bizarre in nature, they should still be coherent (Stableford, 2012).

As most fantasy worlds are different from the world with which the reader is familiar, maps play an important role in bringing the imaginary world to life, and ensuring that the story makes sense geographically. Ekman (2018) states that “a fantasy map argues that there is an imaginary place such as it describes, regardless of the fact that it has no basis in ‘geographical reality’ and does not represent anything in the real world”. This is not only important to the understanding of the story but the understanding of the fantasy world as a whole. The map suggests what the imaginary world is like, how it came to be that way, and what is important enough to be mapped out (Ekman, 2018).

1.4 Fictional Languages

In some fantasy and science-fiction novels, authors have created, or have commissioned, new languages to be used in their work. This is in order to make the imaginary worlds seem more authentic and plausible (Fiedler, 2019). As opposed to languages that are planned and constructed in order to facilitate and improve communication, fictional languages in fantasy are often created with more of an aesthetic purpose in mind, in order to depict their users as exotic, alien, or magical (Fiedler, 2019).

Some authors choose to invent entire languages, as Tolkien did – some choose to create new words to describe and name certain elements of their world. If an author chooses the latter, it is important to keep certain rules in mind. Athans (2010) explains, that in essence, what many fantasy writers are doing is translating the narrative from the language that their characters speak to the language that we know – in this case, English. That means that while using imaginative terms and names is interesting for world-building, it is important not to add too much: too many new words integrated within the “translation” can feel out of place, and become confusing without context to explain their meaning.

However, language is an important tool; not only in order to describe the imaginative world but also in order to describe and define who the characters are. The way in which characters speak and the words they use can tell readers a lot about who they are, where they come from, and what they want. If an invented language is in play, differences in terms used by certain characters can denote where they stand in the story.

1.5 Plot

Put simply, the plot is what happens in a story – but it is not the sequence of events. A plot is usually centred around one moment, which acts as a disruption and raises a question that needs to be answered over the course of the story. Every element of the narrative is there in service of answering that question (MasterClass, 2019) in order to give the reader some form of pay-off at the end of the narrative (Roberts, 2014).

“Plot is born out of conflict.” (Athans, 2010). Plots are not entirely limited to one hero and one villain, but they are the principal drivers of the narrative. These characters can be anyone, with any goal in mind – they don’t even need to be characters, they can be immutable forces or ideals. They can also be after the same goal, but each for absolutely different reasons and with opposite intended results; or they can have completely separate objectives and their paths happen to cross. This is where the story starts. That is the plot.

There are several different types of plot, informed by the genre and the question raised by the plot itself. These types of plot are as follows (MasterClass, 2019):

- Tragedy: The main character experiences a major change in fortune. These characters suffer, going from happy to sad or good to bad.

- Comedy: Characters in comedy generally make it out unscathed, as any defects they may have do not end up being destructive or painful.
- Hero's Journey: This type of plot is the most frequent within the fantasy genre. Something happens from the outside that inspires the hero to take action, and they undergo recognition and a reversal of fortune. Joseph Campbell wrote extensively on the subject of the Hero's Journey, which will be explored in further detail in the next section of this literature review.
- Rags to Riches: The main character is downtrodden, and through a series of events (usually magical, in the case of fantasy) achieves success, and finishes the story with a happy ending.
- Rebirth: This type of plot follows a character's development and transformation from bad to good. A tragic past will often have informed their negative view on life and a series of events will help them change their mind.
- Overcoming the Monster: Basically, good vs evil. This is prevalent in many types of fantasy – a protagonist fights an antagonist through a series of obstacles until the final battle. The original *Star Wars* trilogy is perhaps one of the most literal examples of this type of plot.
- Voyage and Return: A protagonist sets off on a journey, and returns to their starting point having grown and gained new wisdom and knowledge. In fantasy, this type of plot is often combined with another; either overcoming the monster or the hero's journey.

1.6 Characters

Characters are at the heart of story-telling: they allow readers to connect with the narrative and empathize with people different from themselves. Characters can be categorized in different ways (MasterClass, 2019): according to the role they play within the narrative, the way in which they change (or don't) over the course of a story, and finally, the archetypes that they portray, which will be explained in further detail in section 5 of this literature review.

THE ROLE THEY PLAY:

- 1) Protagonist: The main character of the story. The protagonist is the character the audience should be most invested in. This means they should have a clear motivation, logical backstory, and a character arc over the course of the narrative.
- 2) Antagonist: The villain of the story, the main obstacle in the story. An antagonist is not the same as an anti-hero; anti-heroes are characters with villainous traits but who function as a protagonist.
- 3) Love Interest: The object of the protagonist's desire; they should be compelling and three-dimensional – the reader needs to understand why they are the love interest.
- 4) Confidant: The best friend or side-kick. The protagonist's ambitions may flow through this character, but they aren't necessary for every story.
- 5) Deuteragonists: These characters can often overlap with confidants. Deuteragonists are close to the protagonist, but their own arcs don't necessarily coincide with the main storyline.

- 6) Tertiary: Tertiary characters populate the narrative's world. They may not have a link to the main story, but they help make the world feel more real. Their development can differ depending on their relation to the protagonist.
- 7) Foil: A foil character is basically the opposite of a protagonist – they exist in order to emphasize the protagonist's characteristics.

CHARACTER DEPTH AND DEVELOPMENT:

- 1) Dynamic: Dynamic characters change over the course of the story, and as such they make the best protagonists.
- 2) Round: A round character is closely related to a dynamic character; round characters are fluid and show the capacity for change as soon as they are introduced.
- 3) Static: These characters do not change notably over the course of the story. Sometimes, they are referred to as flat characters, and can have a tertiary role in the story. Villains can be static characters – their motivations and personality don't change – they were evil at the beginning and they'll be evil at the end.
- 4) Stock: A stock character is an archetypal character, who has a fixed set of personality traits. Archetypes and their meanings will be discussed later in this literature review.
- 5) Symbolic: These characters represent themes and concepts bigger than themselves. They are there to steer an audience towards broader concepts. They may have dynamic qualities, but most are supporting characters.

2. Narrative Structures and Tropes in Fantasy

As clarified in the introduction of this report, the fantasy genre both relies on and reinvents ancient storytelling conventions. Theorists like Joseph Campbell, Charles Vogler, and Farah Mendlesohn have outlined several of these fantastical storytelling conventions, concerning narrative structures and plot tropes that are prevalent throughout the rich history of the fantasy genre. Understanding these theories provides both a better understanding of what Brian Attebery meant when defining fantasy as both a formula and a mode of storytelling, as well as how certain characters, especially villainous ones, might become victims of these structural conventions and have their character development stalled, especially when compared to the development that a hero in a fantasy story might experience.

2.1 Joseph Campbell

Joseph Campbell (2004) outlined that all storytelling, whether consciously or not, follows the same general pattern, a structure which he coined as The Hero's Journey. While each story can be written with many variations in mind, the basic structure remains the same. This, as Vogler (2007) states, runs parallel with Swiss psychologist Carl Jung's theories on archetypes – characters that constantly repeat themselves in different stories. This will be explained in more detail in section 5 of this literature review. Campbell argues that stories, especially myths, contain 3 main acts, each of which contain different stages of the hero's journey. These acts are outlined as follows:

Act 1 – Departure: this is the beginning of the hero's journey. The first act in which the reader becomes familiar with the story world and the characters. Campbell divided Act I into

5 distinct stages:

- World of Common Day: This is simply the audience's introduction to the story world, their protagonist, and how the hero lives their life at the current moment in time.
- The Call to Adventure: this is the first stage of a mythological journey, where the hero is called upon, or as Campbell (2004) wrote "destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual centre of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown." The hero can choose to heed the call of destiny of their own volition, or they can be sent on their way by an outside force. The call to adventure can be purposeful or accidental. This depends on the story being told.
- Refusal of the Call: Campbell described this stage as the "dull case of the unanswerd", where a character refuses to fulfil their destiny or continue on their journey because their interests may lie elsewhere at the time, or they are experiencing fear of the unknown. Some outside influence will be needed to push them past the turning point.
- Supernatural Aid: For those characters that have not refused the call, the first encounter of their journey will often be with a protective figure, or a Mentor, as Vogler calls this person. This character prepares the hero to face the unknown, either by lending aid against the supernatural or giving advice that prepares the hero for the journey ahead. The importance of this character within the narrative is not permanent: eventually, the hero will face the journey alone.
- Crossing the First Threshold: By now, the hero has heeded the call of destiny, and this is where the story really begins. The threshold, personified or not, is where the hero finally starts their journey into the unknown. There is no turning back after this point:

the boat sets sail or the train leaves the station.

- The Belly of the Whale: Once the hero has crossed the threshold, they find themselves in the Belly of the Whale: darkness, unknown. The hero enters the belly in order to be reborn at the end of the journey

Act 2 – Initiation: After crossing the threshold, the hero now finds themselves in “(...) dream landscape of curiously fluid ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials.” (Campbell, 2004). While they can be aided by their Mentor’s advice or the supernatural aid provided to them in the first act, this is where the hero discovers their power, the secrets of their world, and has to overcome a selection of trials and hurdles in order to reach their final destination. Act 2 contains the following stages:

- The Road of Trials: The hero will face a slew of tests and trials, and overcoming them is an important part of their journey. They will make allies and encounter enemies, all of which serve as development not only for the plot but also for the character.
- The Meeting with the Goddess: The hero comes at last to their ultimate adventure, the pinnacle of all their trials – all other barriers have been overcome and this meeting is where the object of the quest is hidden. This is the second major threshold.
- Woman as the Temptress: the hero is at the lowest point of their journey – their ultimate adventure has come to a standstill and they are at a tipping point. They might be tempted to turn back; they might face the possibility of death – all things that will make the hero’s “rebirth” or success all the more satisfying. The audience here is held in suspense.
- Atonement with the father: The hero confronts their fears and faces their temptress

head on: this is where the hero begins the journey of clawing their way back to the surface from their lowest point, atoning with themselves in order to complete the journey.

- Apotheosis: The climax, or the highest point. Having survived the temptress and atoned, the hero finds themselves at the climax. This is where they complete their destiny, seizing the prize or defeating the ultimate enemy.
- The Ultimate Boon: After seizing their destiny, the hero is given the ultimate award. This may be the prize that they have won, or the completion of their character development, or the rightfully earned title of “hero”. The journey is complete.

Act 3 – Return: The resolution of the hero’s journey. How do they cope with what has happened to them? How do they return to their starting point, and can they ever truly be the same? What does their life look like now? Act 3 has been divided into the following stages:

- Refusal of the Return: When the quest has been accomplished, how well has the hero been able to reconcile with what happened? Can they go back to where they came from, do they even want to? The hero may question the usefulness of bringing back the “boon” to where their journey started.
- The Magic Flight: If the hero has decided to return home, The Magic Flight deals with how they make the final leg of this journey. They may be helped by any of the characters, mentors or supernatural aids they have come across on their journey – but their return may also be the result of being chased by parties unhappy with the hero’s ultimate performance.
- Rescue from Without: The hero may have to be brought back from their journey with

assistance – society will most likely find their way to the hero, even if the hero doesn't desire to be a part of society. 'Without' refers to the following: "the world may have to come and get him," (Campbell, 2004).

- The Crossing of the Return Threshold: the hero returns to the world known before they left for their adventure. The hero ventures from the world of darkness and the unknown back into the "ordinary world".
- Master of Two Worlds: The hero is aware of two worlds and as such has earned the ability to master crossing between the two of them. The ordinary world and the magical world, just to simplify, now both belong to him – he can cross freely between them without contaminating one or the other.
- Freedom to Live: What does the hero's life look like after fulfilling their destiny? How do they choose to use their new found freedom to live life as they please?

2.2 Charles Vogler

Vogler (2007), in keeping with Campbell's structure, illustrates the hero's journey as follows:

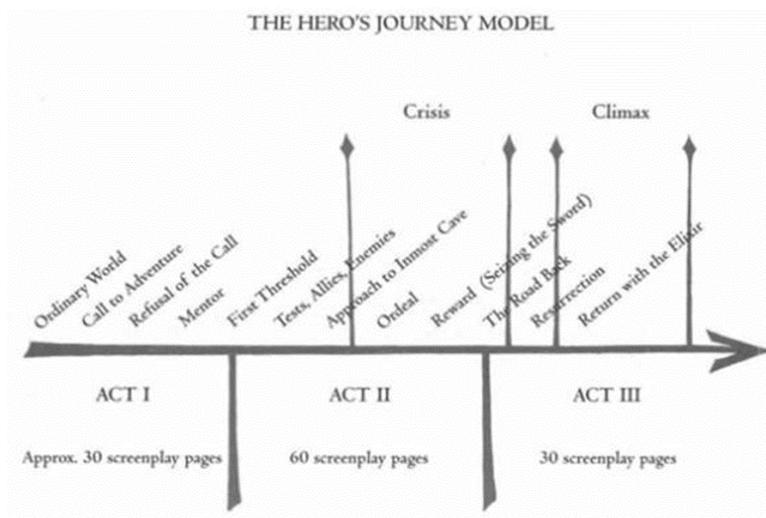


FIG 1: THE HERO'S JOURNEY (VOGLER, 2007)

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

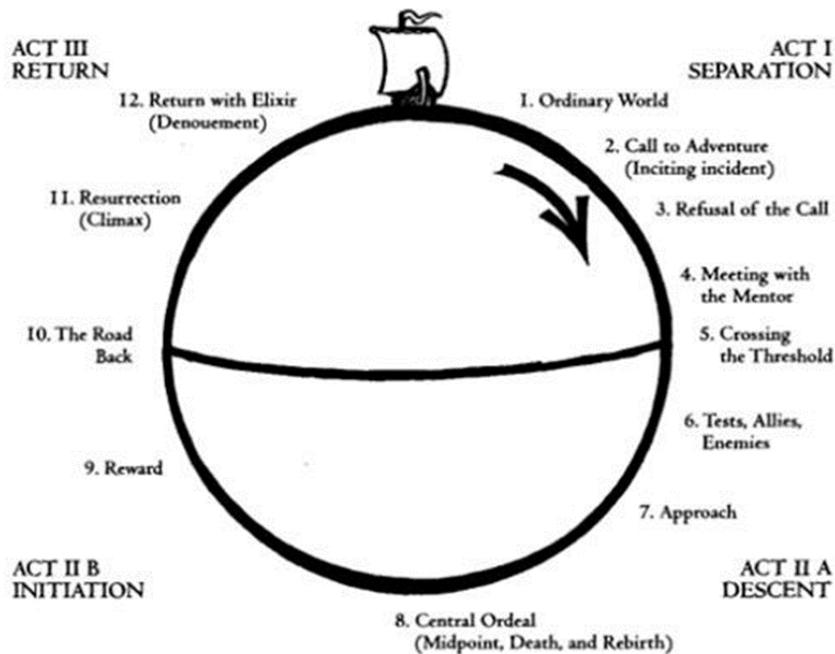


FIG 2: THE HERO'S JOURNEY (VOGLER, 2007)

As can be seen, Vogler has changed the names and definitions of a few of the stages of the hero's journey. His version, simplified, is as follows:

ACT 1: SEPARATION

1. Ordinary World - heroes are introduced in their current or "ordinary" story world
2. Call to Adventure – the inciting incident
3. Refusal of the Call – the hero is reluctant to start the journey
4. Meeting with the Mentor – the mentor encourages them to answer the call
5. Crossing the Threshold – crossing the point of no return

ACT 2: DESCENT AND INITIATION

6. Tests, Allies, Enemies – the hero is confronted by different obstacles and hurdles on their way to fulfil their destiny
7. Approach – they approach and cross the second threshold; this is where they find the innermost “cave”, the place where they will fulfil their destiny
8. Ordeal – the ultimate test

ACT 3: RETURN

9. Reward (Seizing the Sword) - they fulfil their destiny and take their reward
10. The Road Back – the journey home, where the hero is often pursued
11. Resurrection – the climax, as the hero is reborn after a final ordeal
12. Returning with the Elixir – denouement, they cross back into the ordinary world, their prize with them. They can live life as they choose to.

Both Campbell and Vogler believe that the Hero’s Journey structure is proof of the way the human psyche craves certain narratives over and over again, as long as the variations are enough to remain interesting. That’s why this structure has stood the test of time, and why writers are able to enrich their work while using it. The findings as pioneered by Campbell are based on hero myths from around the world throughout time. As established in the introduction of this report, myths can be interpreted as the basis of the fantasy genre – hence why it is important to understand their possible narrative structure, in order to understand the development of certain characters and the journeys they endure.¹

¹ A side-by-side comparison of both Campbell’s and Vogler’s structures can be found in Appendix A.

2.3 Farah Mendlesohn

Farah Mendlesohn, in her book *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), identified four common types of fantasy, describing how the reader is inserted into the framework of certain fantasy narratives. These four categories are as follows:

- The Portal Quest Fantasy: Mendlesohn identifies this as the classic and simple structure where the fantastical world is entered through a portal. This means that the fantasy world is on ‘the other side’ and the elements of magic and world-building belonging solely to the fantasy world do not cross over to the primary world. An obvious example of this is Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*. Mendlesohn stresses that many fantasy novels that utilise portals as an entry point to the fantastic follow quest structures: they are linear in fashion and end with a goal being met. Portal Quest Fantasy is about transition: from one world to another or from one state of being to another.
- Immersive Fantasy: Mendlesohn states that Immersive Fantasy invites the reader to not only share a world with its inhabitants, but also a set of assumptions. Immersive Fantasy presents the imagined world as fact and norm, without comment. There is no explanation of the world, as the reader is assumed to be sitting on the protagonist’s shoulders, granted access to their eyes and ears. The audience is part of the story. In contradiction with portal fantasies, the protagonist, and thus the audience, is aware of all the elements of the fantasy world; there is no sense of discovery – the world just is.
- Intrusion Fantasy: This is where the fantastic becomes the instigator of chaos within the narrative. Mendlesohn writes that the fantasy and reality in this type of fantastic narrative are often separated, meaning that the elements of fantasy within the story disrupt the ‘norm’ of the real world. Escalation is key to this type of fantasy – each

new discovery needs to renew the sense of horror, awe or amazement that both the protagonist and reader experience throughout the exploration of the narrative.

Surprise is difficult to maintain if the characters and audience have become accustomed to the level at which the fantasy elements disrupt the 'real' world.

Intrusion Fantasy, while normally stood on its own, can also be used within Immersive Fantasy, according to Mendlesohn. This would mean that the immersive world has a clear set of rules and customs, and the new fantasy elements are as surprising for the characters as they are for the reader.

- The Liminal Fantasy: According to Mendlesohn, this is the rarest type of fantasy.

Liminal Fantasy is where fantastic elements leak into the 'real' world. The resulting fantastical elements can be intrusive to the story or the protagonist's journey, but their origin isn't. The question isn't how the fantasy found its place within the story, but rather what it's doing there, whereas Intrusive Fantasy often relies on the surprise factor of suddenly introducing elements that feel wrong within the story world.

Liminal Fantasy elements just are.

It is important to note that Mendlesohn also states that many novels within the fantasy genre do not fit into one of these four categories: these are called irregulars. Rather than understanding these outliers as "hybrids" of these four categories, she prefers to view them as "folding, twisting and reweaving", producing texts that depend on the reader's understanding of these four previously outlined forms, but do something "other" with them as well. Tropes and patterns, while important in understanding genre and analysing texts, may be too much of a constructed imposition on the literary landscape.

3. The Role of the Narrator

Walton (1976) defines the narrator as a (fictional) person who speaks or writes the narrative text of a literary work. The narrator can be a central character with a name and be part of the action, or they can be barely noticed and sit on the side looking in. According to Walton, “narrators are frequently very important.” Their personalities can be carefully developed throughout the narration, even if there is no full description of them within the literary work.

Walton also states that the narrator holds an important position in regards to the reader – they control the reader’s access to the rest of the fictional world, as the reader can only know about something if the narrator tells them about it. The narrator’s reports on the fictional world can be influenced by their personality, interests, attitude and prejudices. This means that the view the readers get of the fictional world is not so much objective and “raw”, but rather only includes the way it is perceived and understood by the narrator and the narrator alone. Their perspective on the events in a novel can therefore sometimes be more significant than the actual events themselves.

This leads to another point – how trustworthy is a narrator? If a reader can only infer the fictional truth from what the narrator tells them, how reliable is the narrator’s telling of the story? They may be deceived or confused; their personality is crucial to deciding whether or not they are to be believed. This all comes down to fictional truths: the narrator gives us their view of the events of the narrative, and the reader must decide on the basis of that view what the narrator is really like, what truth there is to the story, what truth there is to the descriptions of the story world and what may or may not be true about the characters that inhabit the story. Rigney and Wurth agree, saying that a subjective element to the perception of the story is introduced dependent on the narrator’s use of words and other narrative techniques (2019).

Rigney and Wurth (2019) also speak about focalization: this refers to the relationship, as it is established within the narrative, between the story world and the centre of consciousness from which it is perceived. This centre of consciousness is the narrator – they are the focaliser, and the events of the story world are filtered through subjectivity. Related to this is ‘point of view’ or POV, which will be described in more detail in the following section of the literature review.

An understanding of how a story’s narrator can influence a reader’s perception of both the story and the characters that inhabit the story is critical to understanding how certain characters may end up more or less developed than other characters. A narrator’s influence on a narrative cannot be overstated: the narrator can be forced to focus and develop just one character, or it can be manipulated to focus on all characters equally, but, considering that, as outlined in the previous chapter of this dissertation, certain narrative conventions occur again and again within fantasy, the narrator’s perception is most often skewed towards the hero/protagonist. This can lead to a villain’s motivations feeling shallow and underexplained.

4. Point of View

Point of view, or POV, refers to the voice that narrates the story. There are multiple types of points of view, each with their own advantages and disadvantages relating to how well a reader will understand the story and their grasp on the characters. A writer's choice of point of view affects the reader's experience of the story entirely. Point of view can push a reader away from the action, or bring them in so close that they will feel more connected to one character than any others.

4.1 First Person

First-person point of view means that the story is narrated using I, me and myself pronouns. The reader is placed into the head of the narrating character and sees the plot unfold and the world around them through that character's eyes. A narrative can have more than one first-person POV. Using multiple first-person POV's gives writers the opportunity to expand the narrative and explore different character's ways of interpreting the world they inhabit. However, multiple first-person POV's can be hard to master: it is imperative that each POV has its own distinct style and voice, and the pacing of the story can falter if there are too many voices that need to be heard (Runyan, 2016).

- **ADVANTAGES**

Author Seb Reilly says that the biggest and most obvious advantage of writing in first-person perspective is that the reader is immediately placed inside the narrator's head, which "allows for an intimate portrayal of thoughts and emotions," (2016). Each sensation can be effectively communicated; fears, hopes, dreams and reactions can be imparted directly to the reader. It is never not clear what the narrator is

thinking or feeling, and as such, all that information can be treated and absorbed with the maximum emotional impact.

- **DISADVANTAGES**

Characters cannot be all-knowing, and in the need for a realistic character depiction, they cannot have access to the world-view of other characters. First-person narration therefore limits how much a reader can know about a story world and the other characters that inhabit it. They are tied to one character, or a few, dependent on how many different first-person points of view a writer chooses to utilize to tell their story. Each first-person point of view is biased, based simply on the fact that these narrator characters cannot know and experience everything that surrounds them (Rigney and Wurth, 2019).

Reilly (2016) also points out that First-Person perspective limits how well you can describe the narrator, without the often used and cliched method of having them look at themselves in the mirror and describing what they see. Not knowing what the narrator looks like can have an impact on the understanding of how other characters react and interact with the narrator.

4.2 Second Person

Second-person perspectives means that the author is writing from the POV of talking to the reader. This means that the personal pronoun “you” is used to describe the character and that the reader plays a central role in the story, dropping them in the middle of the action. This

view-point can be singular or directed towards a group.

- **ADVANTAGES**

If done correctly, second-person POV can drop and fully submerge a reader into the narrative. In other words, the author tells the reader how to think and feel, and what they are experiencing throughout the narrative. This builds a stronger level of interaction than with other POVs: the reader is given the space to fill in gaps in the story by themselves and it creates a strong sense of empathy within the reader as they are an essential part of the story themselves (Reilly, 2016).

- **DISADVANTAGES**

Second-person POV is tricky to master: since the reader is being used as part of the story, there is the possibility of the narrative coming across as more of a “choose your own adventure” sort of story than a definitive narrative (Reilly, 2016). According to Reilly, it is the most limiting point of view: there is no room for unreliable narration and a delicate balance needs to be struck between too much description and detail of the character and too little. They need to be engaging, but the reader can’t be told too much for fear of fighting back against the concept.

4.3 Third Person

Writing in the third-person means writing from a perspective completely outside of the central narrative. A third-person narrator can therefore be all-knowing, but they can also be limited to looking over the shoulder of one character, so to speak. Within this POV, the pronouns “he”, “she”, and “they” are used. There are three types of third-person perspective: omniscient, which is where the narrator knows everything related to the story and can move

between characters and time; the second is limited omniscient, which refers to narrators that stick closely to one character but still remain in the third person. Last, there is the objective third-person POV, which entails the narrator being completely neutral and more observational than anything: they are not privy to the characters feelings and just tell the story as it happens (MasterClass, 2019).

OMNISCIENT

- ADVANTAGES

In principle, the omniscient narrator can “see into closed rooms, and into the hearts and minds of characters” (Rigney and Wurth, 2019). This point of view will give a reader the most fleshed out and objective view of a story world. It is clear for the reader what is fact and what is opinion within the story world, simply because they have access to all the information the story can provide. The narrator is authoritative and trustworthy (MasterClass, 2019).

- DISADVANTAGES

The more characters are focused on, the more diluted a reader’s connection with certain characters may be (Reilly, 2016). It is hard to have the reader empathize with each character in a story, simply because there are so many of them. It is also harder to build a relationship between character and reader the more time is left between each appearance. The more characters there are to balance, the harder it becomes to create that relationship.

LIMITED OMNISCIENT

- ADVANTAGES

Limited Omniscient is used to build interest and heighten suspense by limiting a reader's perspective and controlling what they know about the narrative (MasterClass, 2019). They stick closely to their one character, but this perspective can also be used with multiple characters, giving a broader world-view and enriching the reader's understanding of the narrative as a whole, while still being able to withhold key points of information from the reader.

- DISADVANTAGES

This type of narration still keeps the characters at arms-length. The reader, therefore, is further detached from the characters than even the writer is, which can prevent empathy on the part of the reader (Reilly, 2016).

OBJECTIVE

- ADVANTAGES

There is no bias with an objective third-person narrator. All they do is relay the information about what is happening to the reader, whether that be dialogue between two characters or the route they use to walk home. (MasterClass, 2019). There is no telling what will happen to characters, which can be used to build suspense, just as with the limited omniscient point of view (Reilly, 2016).

- DISADVANTAGES

It is incredibly difficult to create any kind of empathy with the reader for a character while using this objective point of view. That is because this type of narrator does not have access to what the characters in a story are thinking or feeling. The reader needs

to infer all this themselves, using only the objective truth about what is happening right in front of them.

5. Characters and Archetypes

Just as fantasy often draws its plots and structures from myths and fairy tales, leading to the idea of fantasy both as a formula and a mode of storytelling, so too do types of characters recur within the genre. Archetypes are crucial to understanding a character's role within the plot and their base motivations. A villain is an obstacle for the hero to overcome, yes, but what types of villains are there, and what can these archetypes tell us about their reason for being so integral to the plot, and who they are, beyond what the hero sees and feels?

5.1 Characters and their role in the story

According to Rigney and Wurth (2019) "characters in novels are, like drawings, always schematic: certain traits are defined, while others are left open." The level of detail with which these characters are described is usually dependent on their importance within the story. Main characters will receive a much more detailed description than minor characters. In order to characterize these characters, Rigney and Wurth identify two strategies: telling, and showing. Telling involves the narrator explicitly telling the reader about a certain character. Showing is implicit rather than explicit; readers are left to draw their own conclusions based on the information given, rather than being told exactly who they are reading about.

Bergstrand and Jasper (2018) theorize that the power of characters lies in an audience's emotional connection to them. People can pity characters, hate them, trust and even admire them, depending on their qualities and where they stand in the story.

5.2 The Archetypes

According to Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, aspects of the collective unconscious and human personalities can be repeatedly found across myths and humanity throughout time (McLeod, 2018). Jung stated that the human mind has certain innate characteristics imprinted on it due to evolution, and that this is the reason why myths and cultural imagery are similar in different cultures and different times. He called these repeated images and characterizations “archetypes” (Vogler, 2007). In short, archetypes are ancient personality patterns shared through the heritage of the human race. Archetypes are an important tool in any sort of storytelling because they make stories and characters universally recognizable and relatable. They can help a writer determine how important a certain character may be for a story and if they are pulling their weight in moving the plot forward.

Vogler (2007) writes that he began with the belief that characters and archetypes are fixed: if a character starts out as one archetype, they wouldn't be able to evolve into another. However, he found more that archetypes can be used to serve certain functions within the story, and that characters can move between archetypes the further they are developed along the way. Archetypes, in other words, do not need to be rigid. They can be fluid and change along with the character's journey as they develop. In order to recognize these archetypes, Vogler says that any writer or reader should ask themselves the following questions:

- 1) What part of the personality does it represent?
- 2) What is its dramatic function in the narrative?

Vogler (2007) identified eight of Jung's archetypes as the most common and useful in storytelling. These archetypes and their functions both psychologically and dramatically, are outlined below.

HERO

- **Psychological Function:** The Hero represents the “ego” - the part of our personalities that considers ourselves distinct from others and makes decisions. The Hero goes on a journey to fulfil the ego’s need for identity and wholeness. Throughout their lives, Heroes will change and integrate all parts of themselves to truly understand their nature. In doing so, they face many obstacles and hurdles, some personal.
- **Dramatic Function:** The dramatic function of the Hero archetype explores several different aspects. This, in part, is because the Hero character within narratives is often our protagonist; the most well-rounded and fully realized of the characters within a novel. These different aspects include Audience Identification, which means that the Hero gives the audience a window into the story, and a character to identify with. People want to see themselves in the hero – watch as they overcome their flaws and save the day. The second dramatic function of the hero is the representation of Growth – we want to see characters grow and develop over time, learning new skills, and growing as people. The third function of the hero in narrative is Action: they are usually the most active person in a story and therefore drive the plot forward. The Hero’s will and desire is what sets the plot into motion. Vogler states that writers should ensure that their heroes are active at the moment it most counts within the narrative – that's where we see them shine. The final two dramatic functions of the Hero include Sacrifice and Dealing with Death. Sacrifice refers to the Hero’s willingness to give up something that is important to them, something of value, on behalf of an ideal or moral. Dealing with Death is where the Hero can show their true heroism – they might evade death, they might be reborn, or they might die tragically and heroically, showing that there’s nothing to be afraid of. This ties in with Sacrifice.

Dealing with Death may require sacrifice on the part of the Hero – but that’s what heroes do.

It is important to note that Vogler writes about many different types of Heroes. While the dramatic functions as listed above will be found in most examples of the archetype, heroic characteristics can also be found in other archetypes. Heroes should also be flawed, in order to have the audience better relate to them; they can be willing or unwilling heroes, shoved into the spotlight, they can be an anti-hero; a hero who might be an outlaw in the eyes of the world they inhabit but garners sympathy from the audience for other reasons. Heroes can be tragic, positive, or loners. Heroes can be flexible both in function, and personality.

MENTOR

- **Psychological Function:** Mentors represent the Self: they act as guide, they can represent our conscience, and stand for the Hero’s highest aspirations. The psychological function of the Mentor can closely represent that of a parent, passing on their gifts of knowledge and wisdom.
- **Dramatic Function:** There are several dramatic functions that Mentor archetypes can serve within a narrative. Their role in the story can be one, or a combination of all of them. These roles include Teaching and/or Training – a Hero is there to learn; a Mentor is there to teach. Any type of teacher or trainer can fall within this archetype; they help the Heroes become better versions of themselves. Gift-giving is the second dramatic function of the Mentor. The gifts Mentors provide can be seen as donations – either of useful (magical) tools, such as swords or other weapons, or it can be a piece of advice, medicine, a clue or food. These gifts help the heroes along their journey. Another function of the Mentor is Planting. What this entails is that the

Mentor plants information that propels the narrative forward, or plants an object that will be important to the story later on. Finally, a Mentor can be a Motivator, and act as the Hero's conscience. A mentor might help motivate the Hero to overcome their fears, or they might remind Heroes of their morality and how to follow it.

Vogler mentions that there are a few different types of Mentors, and that these types are linked to their dramatic functions within the story. Just like Heroes, they might be willing or unwilling, and can have positive sides to them as well as negative. Mentors can be 'Dark Mentors', meaning they are used to mislead both the audience and the Hero – they can be used as a decoy to lure a protagonist into danger. Mentors can be 'Fallen Mentors', meaning they might still be on a journey of their own, finding their own identity while at the same time helping the Hero forward. Mentors can be recurring, which entails being used more than once, perhaps in multiple instalments of the same franchise, such as Alfred Pennyworth in *Batman*, or M in *James Bond*. Mentors can be comical and multiple – they, just like Heroes, are a flexible archetype. No one single type or function has to be rigid for the duration of a narrative.

THRESHOLD GUARDIAN

- **Psychological Function:** Threshold Guardians can represent the (ordinary) obstacles anyone can come across in life: bad luck, oppression, hostility or prejudice, even something as simple as bad weather. However, when looking more closely, they can also represent people's own internal demons, such as emotional scars, dependencies, addictions or self-limitations that hinder the ability to grow and change. They function as tests: how determined is a person to change?
- **Dramatic Function:** Threshold Guardians often have a close relationship with the

villain in a story. They may not be the main antagonist, but they can aid villains in their quests and act as an obstacle for the Hero. Threshold Guardians can also be neutral however, simply a part of the fantasy landscape, or even be placed in the Hero's path as a helper. Usually, a Threshold Guardian's function within narrative is to Test the Hero. When a Hero comes across a figure such as this, they will usually need to solve a puzzle or pass some sort of test. The question that remains is how Heroes overcome these obstacles. Can they see a way to turn the Threshold Guardians to their side? What is the purpose of the test, how does it help the Hero grow? Threshold Guardians can also act as a signal of "new power": this is the idea that overcoming the test the Guardian has set for the Hero will empower them with some new skill – this may be obvious physically or more of an emotional growth.

Threshold Guardians can present themselves in a huge array of forms: any person whose purpose it is to test the strength of the Hero. This can mean knights, border guards, lookouts, bodyguards, doormen and even bouncers. Threshold Guardians don't even necessarily need to be a character: these boundaries can also come in the form of props, animals or some force of nature.

HERALD

- **Psychological Function:** Heralds announce the need for change. This is when someone recognizes that they are ready to become something more, something different, almost like a calling. This calling can come in the shape of someone in a dream, it can be a person in real life, or even just a new idea. In any case, once the Herald appears, it's hard to ignore the call.
- **Dramatic Function:** Heralds, like Mentors, are there to provide motivation. They

may offer the Hero a challenge, and thus set the story in motion; this might be the Call to Adventure as mentioned in section 2 of this literature review. Heralds are there to alert both the Hero and the audience of coming change. Heralds don't necessarily need to be a person: they may also be an outside force, such as a natural disaster or a declaration of war.

There are different types of Heralds. As mentioned, they do not necessarily need to be a person, and they can hold any type of position in the story: positive, negative or neutral. The Herald may be an emissary for the villain, but they may also be calling the Hero for a positive adventure, something that will help the Hero grow over time. Heralds can often be found as an extra side to a different archetype. Mentors can easily be Heralds, but Heralds are needed in almost any story to set it in motion.

SHAPESHIFTER

- **Psychological Function:** The Shapeshifter may be the most elusive of Carl Jung's archetypes, as it deals with his theories of the anima and animus. The animus relates to the male element in the female unconscious, and the anima relates to the female element in the male unconscious. Shapeshifter therefore alludes to the changes with males and females as they try to reclaim these elements and change who they are based on these repressed qualities, and are thus, shapeshifters.
- **Dramatic Function:** Within narrative, the function of the Shapeshifter is just as elusive and unstable. They are difficult for the audience and the hero to pin down, and can change their mood or appearance or personality at whim. This may lead to them misleading the Hero, or having their loyalty questioned. Shapeshifters are important to bringing doubt and suspense to the narrative. Their presence frequently ensures

questions of loyalty and betrayal are being asked, as well as whether these characters are allies or enemies.

A Shapeshifter is likely to be the most flexible of the archetypes – they can be anyone and become anything that serves the story well. Femme Fatales are Shapeshifters, for instance. Temptresses and destroyers all in one. Shapeshifting doesn't merely pertain to personalities, however. Change in appearance can play a large role in the story too, or changes in speech patterns or behaviour. Shapeshifting can be an attribute used by other archetypes too – even the Hero.

SHADOW

- **Psychological Function:** The Shadow archetype represents the power of repressed feelings. Guilt, trauma and other emotions may fester and turn into something that may destroy the person holding on to them. Shadows can represent themselves in our dreams as anything from monsters, demons or other fearsome enemies. The energy of the Shadow archetype can be especially destructive.
- **Dramatic Function:** The Shadow archetype represents the dark side. Secrets, things people don't like about themselves, all suppressed within. The negative side of the Shadow archetype often presents itself in the form of antagonists and villains. Villains are usually after death, destruction and the defeat of the hero. Antagonists are usually less severe: they may have a goal in common with the Hero but disagree on how to achieve it. Villains and Heroes are colliding head-on, while Antagonists and Heroes are trying to pull the same cart in different directions. The main function of the Shadow, therefore, is to challenge the Hero. The difficulty of this challenge depends on the Shadow character and their own goals.

The Shadow archetype, while it can manifest in one single character, can also be a function or mask worn by other archetypes within the story. They can combine with Mentor, Shapeshifters, Heralds, Tricksters and even Threshold Guardians. The Shadow mask can be worn throughout the whole story or only for a limited amount of time. What might be most important to note is that Shadows will not think of themselves as villains or enemies. They view themselves as the Hero and the Hero is the enemy in their story.

A Shadow can also be humanized: this is the act of making them less severe with a touch of goodness – an admirable quality. They do not need to be completely wicked or evil. Many memorable villains have qualities such as elegance, beauty, or power. Sometimes, this serves to make them even more sinister. How can a Hero identify a Shadow if they are also humanized? Another way to humanize a Shadow is by making them vulnerable. An indestructible shadow, both physically and emotionally, is less compelling. This also makes their defeat a harder choice for the Hero. Someone who has human qualities is harder to kill or get rid of.

ALLY

- **Psychological Function:** Allies can represent powerful internal forces that may come to aid in a crisis; it can also represent the unexpressed or unused parts of the personality. These unused aspects may be helpful in completing certain jobs or continuing on our journeys of self-discovery.
- **Dramatic Function:** An Ally is usually someone who travels with the Hero, and acts as a confidante, companion, conscience, sparring partner or even as comic relief. They are someone for the Hero to talk to, and have a way of bringing out the Hero's feelings and thoughts that feels natural within the narrative. Allies are there to fulfil

mundane tasks, but can also be the ones to challenge the Hero to be more open-minded, bringing forth their personalities and generally humanizing them.

A Hero can have multiple Allies within a narrative; they may form a team, each Ally representing or fulfilling a different role and utilizing different skills. Allies do not need to be human; they can be animals, or some sort of spiritual guide and protector.

TRICKSTER

- **Psychological Function:** Tricksters are the natural enemies of the status quo. They serve several important psychological functions, including cutting down big egos, bringing someone back down to Earth, and most importantly, they bring about change and transformation by drawing attention to absurd imbalances and hypocrisy.
- **Dramatic Function:** As mentioned, the Trickster embodies the need for change and the desire for mischief. Characters who are primarily comic relief are often tricksters; but they serve an important function – Tricksters are often catalyst characters who affect the lives of others in the story but remain unchanged themselves. The most arguably famous Trickster character known is Loki, the Norse God of mischief.

Tricksters can be Heroes within comedy, as they subvert the status quo and make the audience laugh at themselves. In other genres, Heroes sometimes need to adopt the Trickster mask in order to outwit the Shadow archetype or get around a Threshold Guardian. The Trickster, therefore, is another flexible archetype.

5.3 Heroes and Villains and their Relationship to One Another

Allison and Goethals (2015) claim that there are parallels between the lives of heroes and villains. They refer to Christopher Vogler, stating his quote “villains are the heroes of their own journeys”. Allison and Goethals state that they do not disagree with the notion that both heroes and villains adhere to a certain general structure, but they observed that many narratives portray villains following the hero’s life stages in reverse. Thus, if this is to be believed, and they state a few examples which support their sentiments (The Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, the shark in *Jaws*, and Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs*) the villain’s story is then one of declining power while the hero’s story is one of rising power. Before this pattern is clear within the narrative, there should be one or more clashes between both characters. These confrontations are then where the audience sees the hero embodying society’s greatest virtues, and the villain embodying selfishness and evil.

In a rather simplified version of the archetypes discussed in the section above, Bergstrand and Jasper (2018) code most heroes to be strong and well-intentioned, even if their motivation is somewhat slow at the onset. They are the characters who will set things right and save others. Popular heroic traits are physical strength, bravery, intelligence, moral purity, wealth, and in the case of the fantasy genre, supernatural abilities. On the other hand, there are villains: Bergstrand and Jasper explain that villains are malevolent and strong enough to menace others – an urgent sense of fear and hatred can happen when villains in narrative (and in real life) are given enough power. However, the important thing to note about Bergstrand and Jasper’s character theory is that they postulate that the villain’s attributes are like two sides of the same coin with the hero’s - the hero's intelligence becomes the villain’s wily cunning, wealth and nobility become corrupting forces instead of used for

good, and physical strength is brutish instead of a useful tool. Bravery is the one trait that the villain does not exhibit in any form – they are rarely self-sacrificing.

5.4 The Audience's Connection to Villains

According to Krause and Rucker (2020), people are always striving to maintain a positive self-image. The clamour for more in-depth exploration of villains and their origins is therefore slightly puzzling. If audiences usually refuse to taint their optimistic self-view, then how come these stories are currently so popular? Kraus and Rucker's research explored the idea that people are attracted to villains within stories because it allows them to explore darker sides of themselves without comparisons to real life situations. Story-telling, in this case, provides a "safe-haven from self-threat" since these characters are fictional and have no bearing on our lives in the real world. They use an example from *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*, in which Riddle tries to convince Harry of the similarities between himself and Lord Voldemort – this idea is obviously repulsive to Harry, but interesting to the audience. If the audience is put in Harry's shoes however, and receives a comparison with real-life villains, a serial killer, for instance, their self-view is attacked uncomfortably. Kraus and Rucker also found that people are more drawn to fictional villains that share similar personality traits as themselves. This makes it easier for audiences to empathize with these villains as they're more likely to understand where they are coming from.

III. METHOD

1. Data Collection Method

How are villains in fantasy series developed outside of the perspective of the protagonist?

In order to better answer the main research question, a number of sub-questions need to be answered. These sub-questions are:

- Who are the villains? Is there more than one?
- Which point of view is the story written from?
- What is the villain's role in the story? What is their archetype?
- How are they viewed by other characters?
- What is the villain's relationship to the protagonist?
- Is the villain the instigator for the plot?
- Which narrative devices are used to describe the villain? Dialogue, exposition?
- What are the limits of the villain? Their powers, their effect on the plot?

These sub-questions bring up the subject of methodology for this research. In order to better understand the patterns that arise from answering these questions, all information and occurrences need to be collected and compared to one another. The most effective way to do this is through a qualitative content analysis, using literary analysis as the tool to evaluate the collected information. Qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to highlight the different possibilities and connotations in a work, and allows the findings to be exploratory (Kohlbacher, 2006). Qualitative content analysis allows for the showcasing of different levels of content: not just what can be seen on the surface, but also the themes, main ideas and contexts found within the studied narrative (Mayring, 2000).

2. Research Design

The design of this research will consist of multiple case studies. Case studies are the most commonly used method when “how” or “why” questions are being asked, as they allow the answers to these questions to be explanatory (Kohlbacher, 2006). As the focus of this research will be to develop a deeper understanding of the genre, multiple cases are necessary. Each individual fantasy series chosen for this research will be regarded as one case.

In order to collect and organize the data found in these case studies, a coding tool will be used. Mayring (2000) states that the best way in which to develop a coding tool is by following the process of inductive category development. The idea behind this process is to formulate categories as a result of the literature review and the research question, so that there is a solid foundation for the relevance of the data that is found. In this case, the categories developed are the sub-research questions.

In order to then analyse the data that has been collected, Riessman’s (2005) structural mode of narrative analysis will be followed. This focuses on the way the story is told, and which literary devices are used to do so.

3. Material

The following fantasy series will be included as part of this research:

- J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*
- C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*
- Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* Trilogy
- J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*
- George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*
- V.E. Schwab’s *Shades of Magic* Trilogy

- Tomi Adeyemi's *Legacy of Orisha* Series

These series have been chosen as representatives of the fantasy genre as whole for multiple reasons: their relative commercial successes both within the genre and the wider literary canon, their ability to withstand the test of time, and their influence on the fantasy genre as a whole, in literary form but also in other media. Tomi Adeyemi's series, for instance, became a sensation in the YA fantasy world due to its diversity and original use of west-African mythology as the basis for world- building, as opposed to what is often used in the genre, like medieval Europe. These series represent classic and new fantasy, adult and YA, and as such will provide a broader and more varied range of villains to be studied for the purposes of this research.

4. Ethical Considerations

The key ethical considerations to take into account when conducting qualitative content analysis concern validity and reliability. This type of research can be subjective in nature – the results are dependent on what the researcher finds and sees in the text. This is why Mayring's process of inductive category development will be applied: pre-determined categories that are based on the literature review increase the systematic approach of the analysis, and ensure that there is less room for the researcher's subjective opinions to affect how the collected data is viewed. Macnamara (2005) explained it this way: the work is being matched to a category. The categories, once determined by the literature review, cannot be altered to conform to any pre-conceived conclusions the researcher may have held.

5. Possible Limitations

The possible limitation of this study is the number of works studied. It is impossible to include all popular and lesser-known fantasy series. Only then would the research truly be indicative of the entirety of the genre. Were there more time available, this list would also include more children's and young adult fantasy literature, such as Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series, Leigh Bardugo's Grishaverse, or Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, and it would also include more adult fantasy literature, such as the works of Brandon Sanderson or Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*. In choosing the above, this research has tried to find a wide scope across all facets of the genre, including gender of the author, target audience, type of fantasy and when it was written. This will ensure that the research is indicative of what is true for most of the fantasy canon, not just niche sections of it.

IV. OBSERVATIONS AND RESULTS

1. Tolkien – The Lord of the Rings

1.1 Identifying the Villain

The main villain of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is Sauron, otherwise known as the Dark Lord. However, the story is mostly about what he represents: losing your realm to darkness, death and desolation, a loss of hope. Sauron is a villain who controls the enemy from within the shadows – his minions and followers carry out his will. In this case, the Orcs, and characters like Saruman are representatives of Sauron's will, as are the Nine Ring-Wraiths.

Then, there are the secondary villains that the story's heroes come into direct contact with, such as Gollum and Denethor (Saruman belongs to this category as well). Each battle their own demons, but each stand in the way of the heroes' (not just Frodo's) personal journeys of development and growth. They are the characters that interact with the heroes within the novels, whereas Sauron only lingers in the shadows. Even the One Ring is a representative of Sauron's will, as it is always looking to go back to its master, and influences the present story both directly and indirectly. The ring, in essence, is the instigator for the plot in *The Lord of the Rings*. While Sauron was amassing his forces before the ring passed to Frodo, it is the ring that sets Frodo off on his journey, the ring which forms the Fellowship, and the destruction of the ring is what defeats Sauron once and for all.

1.2 Point of View and Other Narrative Elements

The whole of the story is told by an anonymous, third-person narrator. This narrator works as a spectator to everything that happens, which means that the narration is mostly objective in terms of storytelling. Everything we hear about the villain is based on the dialogue and action

as it happens. However, this does not mean that the protagonist's perspective doesn't cloud the information concerning the villain – much of the stories told about Sauron and his dominion over Middle-Earth come from a heroic character, a member of the fellowship or a member of Elrond's council. Frodo, the main protagonist of the novels, as he is given the task of ring-bearer, learns all there is to know through the voices of those he trusts. He has very little of his own information to fall back on (whisperings and legends in the Shire do not provide him with much context) – he must heed the advice of Aragorn, Gandalf and Elrond, listen to their accounts of histories past. Based on his relationships with them (and his own selfless nature), he agrees to take on the task of bringing the ring to Mordor. An example of dialogue in which we learn more about Sauron's role as the villain is the following:

“I believe that hitherto – hitherto, mark you – he has entirely overlooked the existence of hobbits. You should be thankful. But your safety has passed. He does not need you – he has many more useful servants – but he won't forget you again. And hobbits as miserable slaves would please him far more than hobbits happy and free. There is such a thing as malice and revenge.”

(The Fellowship of the Ring, p. 49)

What also plays an obvious role in understanding the villain in *The Lord of the Rings* is the history of Middle-Earth itself. The entirety of Sauron's threat to Frodo's homeland in the present is based on his evil deeds witnessed in the past – Tolkien writes first-hand accounts from characters such as Isildur, and he writes poetry and songs that tell tales of heroic deeds of ages long gone. The following is an example of one such historical account:

“I deem it to be a tongue of the Black Land, since it is foul and uncouth. What evil it saith I do not know; but I trace here a copy of it, lest it fade beyond recall. The Ring misseth, maybe, the heat of Sauron’s hand, which was black and yet burned like fire, and so Gil-galad was destroyed; and maybe were the gold made hot again, the writing would be refreshed. But for my part I will risk no hurt to this thing: of all the works of Sauron the only fair. It is precious to me, though I buy it with great pain.”

(The Fellowship of the Ring, p. 253)

This quote informs the reader of the relationship between Sauron and the One Ring, while simultaneously informing Frodo of the Ring’s peril and evil influence. This account is told to Frodo by Gandalf, who Frodo trusts as a friend and as a mentor. In fact, it is other members of the council of Elrond that bring a more balanced point of view to the discussion at hand – Boromir, for instance, a representative of Gondor, wants to claim the Ring for Gondor as they have been keeping Sauron’s forces at bay for centuries. His argument is that the Ring could finally give them the edge they need to defeat Sauron – and while Boromir later becomes a member of the Fellowship, his longing for the Ring is ever present, thus demonstrating a different perspective to that of Frodo.

What this quote also demonstrates is the way in which fictional languages can denote where certain characters come from and what traits they may hold. “(...) A tongue of the black land” as was used to inscribe the Ring refers to the language of Mordor, spoken solely by those who dwell there and serve Sauron.

It is interesting to note that Tolkien is also blatantly obvious in his use of setting to separate the heroes from the villains within his narrative. No place is as cold or unpleasant, dark and despairing as Mordor – light only dies there. Consider the following quote:

“The passage seemed to go on for miles, and always the chill air flowed over them, rising as they went on to a bitter wind. The mountains seemed to be trying with their deadly breath to daunt them, to turn them back from the secrets of the high places, or to blow them away into the darkness behind.”

(The Two Towers, p. 709)

The Shire is the antithesis of everything that Mordor represents – Mordor is cold, desolate, a place of waste and ruin. The Shire is a place of friendship, love, growth and harmony. We learn this both from the description of the narrator as he describes The Shire (which in this case, could be construed as a biased opinion) and through the melancholy the four hobbits endure throughout the story as they experience homesickness and delve further into the heart of darkness slowly spreading across the land.

1.3 Villain Archetypes

❖ **Sauron: Shadow**

Sauron is, in fact, an overtly one-dimensional villain, a true static character, especially when looking solely at *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. However, one could argue that isn't an issue within this series of books – the focus is on how to beat the darkness, what there is to fight for and the hope that can be built from friendship and love, “even in the darkest of times.” In this case, Sauron is the perfect villain to better present these ideals. As stated in the literature review, The Shadow is there to challenge the hero(es). Every step towards defeating Sauron takes its toll, especially as the Ring's hold on Frodo becomes more severe. This idea was also discussed in the literature review: the way the villain and heroes' journey can mirror each other. Throughout the trilogy Sauron is amassing his forces, preparing to strike all throughout Middle-Earth. Frodo, meanwhile, feels himself stretched thin the longer he wears the Ring,

his stamina and belief waning the closer they get to Mount Doom, until eventually, Sam has to carry him up the mountain on his back.

Shadow Archetypes do not view themselves as villains. In fact, Frodo is the villain in Sauron's story – the unnoticeable threat that slips through the darkness in order to finally destroy him. Given a Shadow's penchant for believing themselves to be their own hero, the relationships they have with other characters in the story can tell the audience much about their background. However, since Sauron's role within *The Lord of the Rings* is both physically and mentally so far removed from our protagonists, there aren't any real relationships to contend with. Aragorn's clear lineage as heir to the throne of Gondor is, in as far as it can be, a personal vendetta for Sauron; as it was Aragorn's ancestor that helped defeat Sauron in the last war for Middle-Earth. Gandalf, and even more minor characters like Elrond and Galadriel could be argued to also have relationships with Sauron, as they all witnessed his first fall from power.

❖ **Saruman:** Shadow, Trickster, Shape-Shifter

The reason Saruman can be categorized as a Trickster and/or Shape-Shifter as well as a Shadow character is due to his betrayal towards not only Gandalf but all of Middle-Earth. Saruman bends to Sauron's will, regardless of the consequences, believing that the only way to come through the war is to choose the side of presumed ultimate power. Gandalf is unaware of this betrayal until it is literally used against him. As Saruman is a secondary Shadow character, it is interesting to note that Gandalf (a secondary Mentor/Ally character) is later revealed to be the exact opposite of Saruman; willing to fight for what's right and unwilling to bend to such darkness and hatred. Another mirror image of one another. One rises to power through duty and honour, and the other falls from power due to cowardice and menace. This means that Gandalf also possesses traits of a Hero character, though he is not the main hero of the narrative itself.

❖ Denethor and Gollum

As mentioned above, Denethor and Gollum could also be classed as villains, as they both stand in the way of the heroes' journeys and provide obstacles within the narrative path. However, it might be more prudent to classify them as antagonists, rather than as villains. As learned from the literature review, antagonists and protagonists try to pull the same cart in different directions, or have similar goals but disagree on how to achieve them. Denethor, for instance, never fully fell to the darkness – he became desperate, his grief over his eldest son Boromir clouding his judgement, but even while Sauron attempted to sway Denethor's position through the Palantir, he never truly fell. His disregard for Gandalf's council hindered the heroes, and his near burning alive of his other son Faramir was reckless, but it was driven by grief and hopelessness, rather than a true desire for evil and power. Classifying Denethor as a Shadow archetype would still make sense, but perhaps more in the way of the psychological function of this archetype rather than purely the dramatic one: the idea of repressed feelings of futility and grief hindering both the character that harbours these feelings and hindering those who surround them.

Gollum provides a vision of Frodo's future if he holds on to the Ring for too long – their shared bond is their shared trauma due to the power of the Ring. While Gollum creates sinister plans to kill Frodo and retake the Ring, it is his counterpart, Smeagol, who showcases a strange form of kindness, recognizing a kinship with Frodo as a Ring-bearer. Gollum's own plans have nothing to do with Sauron; it is all about regaining the Ring for himself, and in the end, it is this powerful desire that allows the Ring to be destroyed once and for all as he falls into the pits of Mount Doom after finally physically winning it back from Frodo. Gollum's is more a story of tragedy than of true evil. A mind easily swayed by corruption and greed, but not one that started out that way. Gollum is most straightforwardly classified as a Trickster archetype – a constant desire for mischief, his plans and games a way to get the Ring back for

himself. Manipulation is his strongest power – both Gollum’s manipulation of the Smeagol personality, and Gollum’s manipulation of Frodo.

2. Lewis – The Chronicles of Narnia

2.1 Identifying the Villain

The villain in the *Chronicles of Narnia* is dependent on which volume is being read: sometimes, the villain is overarching. In the first novel², *The Magician's Nephew*, the villain is the Witch (Jadis): she travels back with Digory and Polly to London as an escape from the world she's been trapped in, through the magic rings that Digory's uncle designed. This Witch is later revealed to be the White Witch in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. This is interesting for many reasons, as it means she is as old, if not older, than the creator of Narnia himself. The White Witch has enchanted Narnia in such a way that it is always cold, always winter, but Christmas never comes. There is no deeper motivation to her actions – she wants control, more power than Aslan, and she will stop at nothing to prevent summer from coming back.

The Horse and His Boy is a story which takes place during the reign of the Pevensie family. The villain is clear in the form of Rabadash, a leader of the conquering and ruthless Calormen people, who wants to marry Queen Susan against her will.

In *Prince Caspian*, the villain is the Telmarines, specifically King Miraz, the false king of the Telmarines who is trying to rid Narnia of all that made it magical in the first place and conquer it. This is similar to the type of villain created in *The Horse and His Boy*.

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, there is no central villain – this is more a tale of adventure than anything else, and the heroes encounter characters who would be better classed as antagonists: those who slow down and thwart the Heroes on their way to achieving their goal to find the seven lost Lords of Narnia.

² First novel when looking at the chronological order of Narnia's narrative.

In *The Silver Chair*, the villain is clear once more: The Green Lady is the one who kidnapped Caspian's son in her efforts to conquer Narnia.

In *The Last Battle*, the instinctive villain is Shift: a greedy and persuasive ape who convinces Narnians to believe in a false and vengeful version of Aslan. Shift's actions damage the purity of Narnia to such an extent that the true Aslan feels he has no choice but to end Narnia as the reader and its inhabitants know it.

2.2 Point of View and Other Narrative Elements

Most of the *Chronicles of Narnia* are written with an omniscient POV (some sections are written from the POV of particular characters, but these do not make up the majority of the novels, and their inherent bias is clear). Much like in *The Lord of the Rings*, this allows for large amounts of information to be specified about the narrative at any given time. However, unlike in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is clearer throughout the *Chronicles of Narnia* that the narrator is actually speaking to the reader as they narrate. Consider the following quote:

“You mustn't think that even now Edmund was quite so bad that he actually wanted his brother and sisters to be turned into stone. He did want Turkish Delight and to be a Prince (and later a King) and to pay Peter back for calling him a beast.”

(The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, p. 151)

There is something distinct about the manner with which the narrator speaks about the villains. It is obvious that the Pevensie children and their other family members and friends are the heroes, not just because most of the Narnia tales are straight-forward 'Overcoming the Monster' stories as defined in section 1.6 of the literature review, and these characters'

actions would suggest so, but because the narrator explicitly tells the reader to side with them:

“He remembered that he was, after all, a Telmarine, one of the race who cut down trees wherever they could and were at war with all wild things; and though he himself might be unlike other Telmarines, the trees could not be expected to know this.”

(Prince Caspian, p. 345)

Taking all of this into account, it means that the treatment of the villains within the *Chronicles of Narnia* is inherently biased, not just due to the heroes’ relationships with Aslan and their own morals and values but because the narrator is literally telling the reader what to think of these villains as the story moves along. How Lewis then chooses to develop these villains further outside of the perspective of the narrator and the protagonists themselves is interesting, yet the results are sparse.

The identification of the villains within the *Chronicles of Narnia* highlights one big reoccurring theme: all the villains are conquerors of some kind. They wish to rule Narnia, they wish to defeat Aslan, and they wish to wipe out magic and talking creatures. There is no villain here who has any kind of deeper motive; conquering, it seems, is all they know how to do. The interesting thing about the villains in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, then, is how they set about achieving their nefarious goals. Each has their own unique set of strengths and powers, especially those imbued with a magical ability of some kind. The White Witch uses her icy powers to “lay waste” to Narnia and keep its inhabitants locked under a cold blanket of snow, Shift uses its cunning mind to trick Narnians into believing in a false figurehead. Their powers and strategies are the most unbiased thing we learn about these characters throughout the novels: regardless of what the heroes think of these villains, the tactics employed are

indisputable. It is their expression of who they are, outside of what the narrator thinks of them as foils for the Heroes.

2.3 Villain Archetypes

❖ **Jadis AKA The White Witch:** Shadow, Trickster, Shape-Shifter

Her obvious role as the Shadow archetype is clear: she holds Narnia in her cold grip, motivated solely by power and her desire to defeat Aslan. Her roles as Trickster and Shape-Shifter are more nefarious: the way she tricks Edmund into trusting her by using confectionary, her evil persona that she switches on and off. She knows how to use people's weaknesses against them in order to fulfil her purpose: she uses similar tricks in *The Magician's Nephew*, attempting to trick Digory into taking her with them when they go back to London. Her means of operating stay very similar in both of her appearances within the *Chronicles*, regardless of setting or goal.

❖ **Rabadash:** Shadow

Rabadash is a clear Shadow archetype due to his sole need to conquer Narnia and his perverse coveting of Queen Susan as his future bride. His methods are fairly straightforward, as is his downfall. His methods are brute force over cunning, darkness over negotiation.

❖ **King Miraz:** Shadow

King Miraz's role as the Shadow archetype is certainly even more wicked than Rabadash's, simply due to his betrayal of his own flesh and blood. Because of this aspect of his narrative, it could be argued that Miraz might be classified as a Shape-Shifter; his loyalty shifted dramatically the moment his own path to the throne became clear, devotion to family unable to stand between Miraz and his ultimate goal for power.

❖ **The Lady of Green Kirtle:** Shadow, Trickster, Shape-Shifter

Another very clear-cut Shadow archetype, trying to conquer Narnia; however, she is much less obvious about it, taking a more “underground” approach to her tactics. It is her tactics, however, that make her a very obvious candidate for the other two Archetypes as well. She attempts to trick Eustace and his companions into the lair of flesh-eating Giants, and when that doesn’t work, she quite literally shape-shifts into a gigantic green serpent in order to kill them before they can free Prince Rilian.

❖ **Shift:** Shadow, Trickster

Another conquering villain. This time however, there’s more cunning involved than the other villains – Shift is much more prone to manipulating others to do his bidding, making his Trickster archetype almost more prominent than his Shadow archetype. He uses his friend Puzzle to force the inhabitants of Narnia to believe in a false version of Aslan, and from there, tricks even the Caloremen to invade Narnia based on another false version of a deity character. His nefariousness isn’t solely his will to conquer but his enjoyment of the scheming and the illusion – and he manages to succeed where even Jadis couldn’t – his evil is so wide-spread throughout Narnia that Aslan feels he has no choice but to destroy Narnia and start over somewhere else.

What is interesting to note here is the number of archetypes some of these characters have: the more suspension of disbelief is needed for a reader to believe these characters can exist, the more archetypal roles they take on as characters within the story. Both Rabadash and Miraz are without magical powers, nor are they animals with large intellect. They are first and foremost, human, conquerors without remorse, and therefore, only Shadow. Jadis, The Green Lady and Shift all have more talents at their disposal, and as such, can take on additional archetypal roles that tell us more about who they are as characters outside of the

perspective of the protagonists or the narrator. Conversely, the human villains have more relationships that can tell us about who they are: the way Rabadash views Queen Susan as a prize to be won tells us much about his character's personality, and Miraz's treatment of his nephew, the rightful King of Narnia, tells us much about his character's general disposition as well. The other three villains do not exhibit these types of personal relationships within the story, with the exception of perhaps Shift, who convinces his "friend" Puzzle to impersonate Aslan.

3. Le Guin – Earthsea

3.1 Identifying the Villain

Each book within the *Earthsea* trilogy has its own self-contained villain, but none of them are straightforward. Book 1, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, has a villain of the protagonist's, Ged's, own making, a shadow version of himself that he has conjured from a different realm and threatens his world with darkness. This shadow has scarred Ged and hunts him, and he must hunt it down and name it to gain control over it. There is also Jasper, but he is more of an antagonistic character – while Ged is young and naïve, certainly, he is the villain in his eyes, and while Jasper's influence on Ged is what leads to the shadow-demon to reveal itself in the world, he is more of a foil than a true villain. Jasper merely wants to prove himself as better than – the shadow demon seeks to spread darkness wherever it goes.

Book 2, *The Tombs of Atuan*, is interesting in that the villain is a different character in the first half then it is by the second half of the book. The main character, Arha, later known as Tenar, is indoctrinated into the religion of the Nameless Ones at a very early age, with the knowledge that she is a High Priestess re-incarnated. She regards all who would harm her domain or order as villains, which includes the wizards she has heard tales of that came to her tombs to steal artefacts and gold that were left there for their Gods. Ged, who she later finds within her tomb trying to steal the lost ring of Erreth-Akbe, convinces her that there is more to life than the tombs and service that she has been forced into, and helps her discover that many of the stories that were told to her were lies. Now, the religion she serves seems to be the villain, and Ged her rescuer, who brings her to a new land to start a new life, where she can choose who she wants to be and reclaim her birth name, Tenar.

In book 3, *The Farthest Shore*, the villain is all around: while an old adversary of Ged's is responsible for creating havoc across Earthsea due to their fear of death and the

unknown, the real villainy lies in what happens to Earthsea as a result of that fear: magic is slowly being drained from the world. Wizards and Witches are forgetting their spells, the people are forgetting and losing themselves in a haze of nothingness, and Dragons, the beasts created of Magic themselves, are being struck dumb.

3.2 Point of View and Other Narrative Elements

The *Earthsea* trilogy is written in third person, both over the shoulder and omniscient, depending on the chapter. The reader learns about Ged's life throughout all three novels; however, the narration is only over his shoulder in the first book, and in the second and third we are learning Ged's story through Tenar's eyes, and then Arren's, the young prince Ged takes with him on his journey to discover what is happening to magic in Earthsea.

The interesting thing about that is, when looking at the *Earthsea* trilogy as a whole, Ged would clearly be the main protagonist – the use of other points of view does not necessarily mean those speaking are the main characters. In making Ged the main character but utilizing different POV's, Le Guin manages to give a more well-rounded account of the villains in each novel; that quite objective perspective of Ged, who looks at the world through his mage's training and wisdom, and the less wise, less experienced perspectives of both Tenar and Arren, which allow for more emotion, fear, and wonder to seep in to observations of the villain, and their own personal relationships to them.

Take the following quote, for example:

“Does it make sense, what he told you? Arren asked, for he did not look forward to going back to that dim room above the stinking river. ‘All that

fibblefabble about being alive and dead and coming back with his head cut off?’

‘I don’t know if it makes sense. I wanted to talk with a wizard who has lost his power. He says that he hasn’t lost it but given it – traded it. For what? Life for life, he said. Power for power. No, I don’t understand him, but he is worth listening to.’

Sparrowhawk’s steady reasonableness shamed Arren further. He felt himself petulant and nervous, like a child. Hare had fascinated him, but now that fascination was broken he felt a sick disgust, as if he had eaten something vile. He resolved not to speak again until he had controlled his temper. Next moment he missed his step on the worn, slick stairs, slipped, recovering himself scraping his hands on the stones. ‘Oh curse this filthy town!’ he broke out in rage. And the mage replied dryly, ‘No need to, I think.’”

(The Farthest Shore, p. 346)

This quote demonstrates the different positions of both Ged AKA Sparrowhawk and Arren in relation to the problem at hand and the villain that is causing it. All of this is new for Arren; he has no experience in magic, in potions and spells, he is naïve, and young, and merely along for the ride. Sparrowhawk’s calm and wise demeanour here provides a completely different perspective on the issue at hand.

What can be seen here is that Le Guin has foregone the use of the traditional, conquering and end-of-the-world-seeking villain (with the exception of the 3rd novel, perhaps) to highlight instead her characters’ journeys and their relationship to magic, rather than their quest to defeat evil at all costs. Ged learns the true cost of hubris as it brings forth a

darker version of himself, Tenar learns to break free of indoctrination and make her own decisions, and Arren learns there is more to the world than his own position of power as prince, and learns to appreciate what magic can mean. The villains in these novels are important because they are the reason these developmental journeys can take place, not because they are the sole driving force behind the plot.

What Le Guin also makes use of, especially in *The Tomb of Atuan*, is the role cultural differences can play in how both a hero and a villain is viewed. Teran's story takes place in the Kargish Empire, a place, which in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, was described as being full of conquerors and raiders, a sentiment which mirrors how the Kargish Empire refers to Ged's people as thieves and looters. Storytelling and legends thus play an important role in how each side views the other – making Ged and Teran's final acceptance of each other and friendship with one another all the more poignant.

3.3 Villain Archetypes

❖ **Book 1: Shadow-Demon - Shadow, Shape-Shifter**

A fairly straight-forward archetype, both literal and metaphorical. It has no real agency other than to spread chaos and discord, harming Ged in the process, until Ged is able to finally hunt it down and name the creature for himself.

❖ **Book 2:**

Naming an archetype for the villain in the *Tombs of Atuan* is a bit more difficult – there is no real straightforward villain, since we know that even though Teran views Ged as a thief at first, the reader is aware of his status as hero and protagonist. If we want to look at the religion of the Nameless Ones and their indoctrination of their followers and the forced servitude that they use to hold control, we could name that entity as a Shape-Shifter

archetype, following the definition of its dramatic function as explained in the literature review:

*Within narrative, the function of the Shapeshifter is just as elusive and unstable. They are difficult for the audience and the hero to pin down, and can change their mood or appearance or personality at whim. This may lead to them misleading the Hero, or having their loyalty questioned.

Through Teran's perspective, it is not always clear how she views her forced role as priestess – she enjoys having dominion over the tombs, enjoys the power it gives her over her tormentors. That is where the religion's function as a shape-shifter comes in; its role in the story is elusive and unstable. If we want to name a more straightforward antagonist in Teran's story, we would name Kossil, one of the other priestesses of the order who is hateful towards Teran, suspicious and jealous of her growing power. Kossil could be classified as a Trickster, as she tries to force Teran's hand in deciding Ged's fate while remaining unchanged herself, but she could even be classified as a Herald – it is her ultimatum which finally sets Teran on her path to self-discovery and liberation.

❖ **Book 3: Shadow**

In *The Farthest Sea*, the villain is once again a Shadow Archetype. Bringing chaos, strife and doom across all of Earthsea, this villain's pursuit of everlasting life (no matter how strained or waning) is the catalyst for Ged's and Arren's adventure, providing the plot with a straightforward villain to defeat.

4. Rowling – Harry Potter

4.1 Identifying the Villain

The obvious and main villain of the *Harry Potter* Saga is Lord Voldemort. Voldemort is after total domination of the Wizarding World, as he believes himself to be the most powerful wizard of all time, and believes the “muggle” world inferior – why should wizards have to cower and hide from beings less powerful than he is?

There are a number of other antagonists within each novel as well – some working directly for Voldemort (others indirectly) – affecting both Harry’s choices in his role as “The Chosen One” and his personal life. These secondary antagonists include:

- **Severus Snape:** from the moment Harry and Snape meet, there is animosity between the two. Snape bullies Harry in class, and in return, Harry suspects Snape as being a greater threat than he truly is. His role in Dumbledore’s murder, for instance, obviously cements him as a true villain in Harry’s and his friends’ eyes, and this illusion isn’t shattered until he learns the truth through Snape’s own memories.

Professor Snape is a complicated character – through Harry’s POV, he is a villain, up until the moment that he dies – but through Dumbledore’s eyes, as the reader later learns, he is working to right the wrongs he committed in his younger years out of a twisted sense of duty and love to Harry’s late mother. Snape, much like Denethor and Gollum as discussed in regards to *The Lord of the Rings*, takes on more of an antagonistic capacity in this narrative, as opposed to pure villain.

- **Bellatrix Lestrange:** Bellatrix Lestrange is one of Voldemort’s most loyal followers, and directly affects Harry’s personal life, almost as much as Voldemort did by murdering Harry’s parents. Lestrange is the one who murders Harry’s godfather, Sirius Black, the one family member Harry had left, taking away his only chance to

leave the Dursleys during the summer months and severing a personal and deep connection to his parents that is lacking elsewhere. LeStrange is particularly vindictive in this instance, as Sirius was her own cousin as well.

- **Draco Malfoy:** the school bully, and Harry's personal nemesis. Draco's family are embroiled within Voldemort's inner circle, so aside from Draco's constant harassment and prejudicial behaviour towards his friends, this provides another layer to Harry's distrust of his classmate. Another more antagonistic character than a true villain – how can someone so young, born into a family that supports the darkness, be expected to make choices other than the ones thrust upon him?
- **Professor Umbridge:** While Voldemort's return is a big theme of the 5th novel, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, perhaps the bigger villain in this novel is Professor Umbridge; the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher and another of Harry's personal torturers (both physically and mentally, as it turns out). Umbridge represents all those in the wizarding world who refuse to take Harry at his word and believe that Voldemort has returned, using her power as a representative of the Ministry of Magic and interim headmistress of Hogwarts to introduce strict, authoritarian measures at school, to the detriment of their education but the empowerment of the protagonist's rebellious nature.
- **The Dursleys:** While their taking Harry in after his parents are both murdered seems like an act of kindness in and of itself, their clear hatred of him and the world his family came from manifests in abuse, both physically and mentally. Harry is not given a proper space to live, they use him in a servant-like capacity, ignore him in favour of their own son and try to stop him from learning who he really is and where he comes from.

4.2 Point of View and Other Narrative Elements

The books follow Harry Potter's POV, the protagonist, who is Voldemort's main enemy. What is crucial about this POV is that Harry didn't grow up in the Wizarding World, meaning that until the age of 11 his parents' death isn't tainted with the knowledge of who they were murdered by, and Harry has to learn as he goes along who Voldemort is and what he stands for. However, his parents' murder will always taint Harry's perception of Voldemort and make it subjective (rightly so, morally speaking) but it does mean that the reader will never get a fully clear and objective picture of who Voldemort is, why he becomes that way, and what he stands for. It is much more personal for Harry than it is for say, Hermione, who while only learning about the Wizarding World at the same time as Harry, doesn't have as much of a personal connection to the villain.

This is addressed by Rowling somewhat in the sixth book, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, where both the reader and Harry are shown different memories about Voldemort's past through the eyes of select minor characters, some that have never even been introduced before. The reader learns that Voldemort comes from a broken home, and that he was a bully from a young age. This allows for a clearer and more objective picture to be given about how Voldemort came to be who he is, and also means that Voldemort is now not so much a static character, but more of a rounded one – readers know the changes he went through to get to where he is today. However, these memories are still subjective due to their older nature and the perspectives of the characters they come from. The readers also watch the memories through Harry's eyes, which means that Harry's perspective once again taints these observations of the villain. There is even a clear example of how memories can be manipulated with Professor Slughorn's subplot, so how is the audience to know how objective and truthful all these memories really are?

"(...) 'From this point forth, we shall be leaving the firm foundation of fact and journeying together through the murky marshes of memory into thickets of wildest guesswork. From hereon in, Harry, I may be as woefully wrong as Humphrey Belcher, who believed the time was ripe for a cheese cauldron.'"

(Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, p.187)

Considering the importance of these memories, it is also prudent to consider the connection between Harry and Voldemort through the scar on Harry's forehead. Both Harry and Voldemort use this connection to try and manipulate the other throughout the story. Voldemort uses it to lure Harry and his friends to the Ministry of Magic in *Order of the Phoenix*, and Harry has used it in the past to save Mr. Weasley's life. However, it is clearly stated by the narrative that this connection is also subjective – given the right training, certain thoughts and feelings can be blocked and the images seen changed for the benefit of the user.

"'I told you to empty yourself of emotion!'

'Yeah? Well, I'm finding that hard at the moment,' Harry snarled.

'Then you will find yourself easy prey for the Dark Lord!' said Snape savagely. 'Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions, who wallow in sad memories and allow themselves to be provoked so easily — weak people, in other words — they stand no chance against his powers! He will penetrate your mind with absurd ease, Potter!'"

(Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, p.473)

Interestingly, *Half-Blood Prince* starts with a different perspective – we watch as three of Voldemort's followers, Snape, Bellatrix and Narcissa Malfoy, discuss the Dark

Lord's wishes and perform an Unbreakable Vow – their fear and awe is palpable as well, but it comes from a different place than Harry's – Narcissa is afraid of what Voldemort will do to her son should he fail in his quest, Bellatrix is so devoted to Voldemort that one could call it an obsession, and Snape is playing both sides of the war – any action both for and against Voldemort could mean his doom.

One last noticeable play on perspective is in the second novel, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, where Harry hears and interacts with Voldemort's voice as it was when he was younger through the diary of Tom Riddle. His malice is obvious; however, his manipulative nature is more palpable here, less use of brute force and wizarding power, and instead, using his persuasion and charm to lure Ginny and subsequently Harry into his trap. This aspect of Riddle's personality is brought back to light in *Half-Blood Prince*, where we see how he uses this charm into getting Professor Slughorn to tell him about Horcruxes and gets Hagrid expelled from Hogwarts. Memories, in essence, are as essential to establishing the villain in the Harry Potter universe as Harry's own POV. Even Tom Riddle's diary is a fragment of memory and soul made tangible.

In taking a closer look at the relationships between the characters, it becomes clear that Harry and Voldemort's relationship is arguably the most crucial, as it drives the narrative forward. However, there is also Voldemort's relationship with Dumbledore to consider. Dumbledore, like Harry, is the only wizard who can instil some type of fear within Voldemort – the only one that Voldemort considers to match his power. This also taints Harry's relationship with Dumbledore – Dumbledore instils trust in Harry and is as such able to groom him to become the "hero" (sacrificial lamb) that he needs to become in order to win the war.

Dumbledore's perspective on Voldemort is also important, even though we never hear from his POV directly, because he knew Tom Riddle as a younger child and watched him

grow into the man he is in the present. What differences in tuition or moral support could have been made in order to halt Riddle's development into what he is now?

4.3 Villain Archetypes

❖ **Lord Voldemort:** Shadow, Trickster, Shape-Shifter

Clear and straight to the point, Voldemort is obviously a Shadow Archetype. Above all else, Voldemort desires both power and immortality, and will stop at nothing to get it. He is a conqueror – his main goal is dominion over not only the Wizarding World but all of the world, his belief that he is better than Muggles and all other living creatures clear in his mind. His role as a Trickster and as a Shape-Shifter are straightforward as well: he uses his considerable power to not only trick people into believing his cause, but even for a while to believe that he has been completely decimated from the world, his return nothing but a young boy's manifested trauma.

❖ **Severus Snape:** Shape-Shifter

While Harry is continuously under the impression that Snape is perhaps the second worst person in the world after Voldemort, we know by the end of the novels that Snape's true role in the story is Shape-Shifter; he convinces both sides, except for a few characters in the story, that he is either on the side of the light or on the side of darkness. His ability to shape-shift in this case is metaphorical.

❖ **Bellatrix Lestrange:** Shadow

Bellatrix's role as a Shadow archetype is clear; her only desire is to see her Master gain power, and to create chaos and strife in the world. Her killing Harry's godfather is just the tip of the iceberg of what she has done in Voldemort's name – torturing other members of the resistance and causing destruction is what she lives for.

❖ **Draco Malfoy:** Trickster

The class bully, Malfoy, hates Harry due to the company he keeps and his status as “the golden boy”. Before Malfoy is about to be indoctrinated as a Death Eater, he is constantly trying to undermine Harry in school, using cheap shots and bullying tactics to make Harry’s life miserable any chance he gets.

❖ **Professor Umbridge:** Shadow, Shape-Shifter

The territory that Umbridge seeks control over isn’t the entire world, but rather a microcosm of the Wizarding World: Hogwarts. She desires order over chaos, restriction over liberty, and would rather physically torture her students than try and listen to their actual concerns. She is not who she presents herself to be – however, a sickly-sweet demeanour does very little to hide her true nature underneath. Her loyalty to the ministry is her greatest weakness: she is unwilling to hear what Harry has to say, thinking children beneath her, and it leads to her eventual inevitable fate: to be taken by those she deems unworthy.

❖ **The Dursleys:** Threshold Guardians

Interestingly, The Dursleys are quite hard to classify in their antagonistic roles: sure, they play a Shadow-like role in Harry’s life in trying to make it as miserable as possible, but they mainly act as a barrier to Harry finding out his true heritage and place in the world. They refuse to let Harry read his Hogwarts letter, nearly kidnap him to an island in the middle of the sea hoping that the letters won’t be able to reach him there, lock him in his room with bars on the windows to stop him from going back to Hogwarts after the summer, and constantly try to taunt him to use his magic while he’s underage so that Harry will get expelled.

5. Martin – A Song of Ice and Fire

5.1 Identifying the Villain

Different protagonists view different characters as their own personal villains, and vice versa. What makes Martin's work so interesting in this regard is that most of the villains, save for the overarching threat of the White Walkers (and the Frey's, who regard everyone as their own personal enemies and are regarded in an equal way in return), are very personal to each individual character (or group of characters) that views them that way. Arya, for instance, has an entire list of enemies, all fuelled by the need for revenge for what they've done to tear her family apart.

On the other hand, there are characters like Cersei, who, while having incredibly personal villains to contend with as well for the way they treated her in the past, also view certain characters as villains as they stand in the way of her quest for power and the Iron Throne. Ned Stark, in contradiction to Cersei, is quite a neutral character. As long as he can take care of Winterfell and his family is safe, he is willing to play along in the feuds of others so long as he believes whichever side he takes is the morally upstanding one. Petyr Baelish, AKA Littlefinger, sees everyone as a potential enemy in his quest for power. Jon Snow, for much of the series, and some of his brothers in the Night's Watch, are the only ones who take the looming threat of both winter and the White Walkers seriously.

Then, of course, there is Daenerys Targaryen. She is seen as an enemy by many who live in Westeros, as the last surviving heir of the Targaryen line after her father, King Aerys, was killed by Robert Baratheon to take the throne. In the first book, Ned is one of the few who sees her as she is at that time: a mere child. Those who follow her later on see her as something different: a liberator, a queen, a woman worth following into battle – the last of the dragons.

5.2 Point of View and Other Narrative Elements

A Song of Ice and Fire uses multiple perspectives, written in 3rd person over the shoulder. At any one time, the reader will only know what one character is seeing and experiencing, but these alternate between chapters. As the series goes along the POV's used change depending on who has died and which new characters have been introduced along the way. The perspectives in the first novel, *A Game of Thrones*, are dominated by the Starks – not just Eddard, but also his wife Catelyn, Arya, Sansa, and Bran. Jon, being Eddard's bastard, is also a part of this family tree. The remaining perspectives belong to Tyrion Lannister, and Daenerys Targaryen. Interestingly enough, the opening chapter of this first novel is in the perspective of a total minor character – Will, a ranger of the Night's Watch, the reader's first real encounter with the possible threat the White Walkers could pose to Westeros.

Skipping over to the third novel in the series, *A Storm of Swords*, the list of perspective characters has shifted quite dramatically. While most of the same Stark characters are still present (save for Eddard) other names are now of similar importance as well. Not just Tyrion Lannister, but his brother Jaime, too. Daenerys might still be the only Targaryen but she is no longer the only singular representative of a family: Samwell Tarly and Davos Seaworthy have joined the list of POV characters. This shift in character rosters is interesting for numerous reasons: it indicates changing allegiances, but it also indicates each character's development and importance to the story. Why is Jaime Lannister suddenly given his own point of view? Because his character now warrants it: he is playing a larger role besides A Knight of the Kings Guard and Cersei's brother and lover; his hand has been cut off, his status is brought into question and he develops a grudgingly respectful relationship with Brienne of Tarth.

Aside from the different perspectives that Martin uses in his *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels, the history between each family and the general history of Westeros plays a large part in understanding why certain characters view others as their enemies. Cersei's relationship to Joffrey as a mother prevents her from seeing who he really is as a person (arguably also because she is just as vindictive as him, if not more so) – but Arya's hatred of him is clear due to her personal circumstances. His presence in her sister's life has caused an even bigger rift between Arya and Sansa. Sansa is so enamoured with him (throughout most of the first novel, at least) she cannot see who he truly is either, until he orders the public execution of her father. Suddenly, both Arya and Sansa have a shared enemy, not just Joffrey but Cersei as well, although Sansa is less keen on physical violence than Arya at the time. Since Arya and Sansa are both so young when the story starts, the history of Westeros doesn't have much of an impact on them, save for their Stark lineage and thus their loyalty to Winterfell. This is the opposite of Daenerys, who, while being of a similar age, has had her entire life dictated by history: her father's actions as King led to his downfall, and she has been cast out ever since; sold into a marriage by her brother in order to take back the throne. This is the true start of her journey.

Robert Baratheon, while not being a perspective character in the first novel, is so blinded by his fear of losing the throne and his pride at winning over King Aerys that he is incapable of viewing Daenerys as anything other than a threat. The idea of "The Mad King" is brought up a lot, Robert using this as justification for why he has to take the throne, and why he intends to kill Daenerys before she can become a true threat to him.

"Robert, I beg of you," Ned pleaded, "hear what you are saying. You are talking of murdering a child."

"The whore is pregnant!" The king's fist slammed down on the council table

loud as a thunderclap. 'I warned you this would happen, Ned. Back in the barrowlands, I warned you, but you did not care to hear it. Well, you'll hear it now. I want them dead, mother and child both, and that fool Viserys as well. Is that plain enough for you? I want them dead.'

(...)

'You will dishonour yourself forever if you do this.'

'Then let it be on my head, so long as it is done. I am not so blind that I cannot see the shadow of the axe when it is hanging over my own neck.'

'There is no axe,' Ned told his king. 'Only the shadow of a shadow, twenty years removed... if it exists at all.'"

(A Game of Thrones, p. 351)

Catelyn is wholly devoted to her children and her husband – everything she does up until the moment she is murdered in the third novel is for them. For Catelyn, anyone who poses a threat to her family's safety is a villain – she has no other motives. She lets the history books dictate who she views as a friend and who she views as an enemy, at times, to her own detriment.

Tyrion, in regards to the history that has dictated his family's existence, is interesting in the fact that he doesn't let it dictate his own existence. He is smart, and resourceful; he knows his family, except for his brother, despise him for what he is, and his loyalty is thus wavering. He is not out for absolute power but can be swayed by it. He is a character that makes his own choices, regardless of what's come before. He only cares about what may come after.

5.3 Villain Archetypes

❖ **The Others/The White Walkers:** Shadow

The White Walkers are the overarching threat to Westeros. Their numbers are large, they are hard to kill, and they are after one thing and one thing only: to spread their kind beyond the Wall. The interesting thing about their role in the story is though their power is arguably great, their threat is not believed by many of the series' main characters. They are viewed as myth, legend – the reader knows more about them at times than the perspective characters do.

As mentioned in the literature review, most villainous characters see themselves as the heroes of their own story: this is truer in *A Song of Ice and Fire* than in any of the other series considered in this research. The easiest example: **Daenerys'** existence is a Shadow to Robert Baratheon, to Cersei's plans to take the throne. Daenerys, on the other hand, sees herself as a liberator, not a conqueror.

The way the reader views certain characters is an important factor in determining which archetype these characters embody. **Cersei**, for example, has many admirable qualities: her love for her children, or her ambition in the face of misogyny and violence against women. However, she is a perpetrator of that same violence, and will stop at nothing to assert her dominance and rule in Westeros, whether it be through her children or on her own. She embodies many archetypes: the Trickster, the Shape-Shifter, even Threshold Guardian at times. Jon Snow's virtue as a hero is clear, but his threat to Cersei makes him an antagonist to her plans. Character's roles in this story are ever changing – as do their archetypes. Essentially, this means that almost all the villainous characters within *A Song of Ice and Fire* are developed through subjective perspectives; there is very little objectivity throughout this narrative. The reader, in essence, is asked to choose sides.

6. Schwab – Shades of Magic

6.1 Identifying the Villain

The darkness within the shadows is an ongoing theme for the overarching villain in Schwab's *Shades of Magic* trilogy – the Shadow King, Osaron, in all its forms – trapped in a stone capable of corruption, then as an entity capable of possession, and then as a corporeal entity all on its own, with its own perspective and powers. Its motivations are always the same however: chaos and corruption. It is seeking a world to conquer and create anew in its own image.

There are a few minor antagonists in this trilogy as well:

- **The Dane Twins:** Athos and Astrid are the rulers of White London during the entirety of the first novel, *A Darker Shade of Magic*. In order to ascend to the throne, they murdered the previous King. Both siblings are cruel, sadistic and power-hungry, utilizing possession and other magical gifts in order to enslave more characters to do their bidding, including Holland, Rhy and Kell, three of the main characters in the novels.
- **Holland:** Holland is an interesting character in that he is both antagonist and anti-hero. His work under the Dane Twins is violent and cruel, but his intentions aren't his own. He is possessed by Astrid Dane, and later by Osaron itself, all because Holland desires the power to restore his home to previous beauty and prosperity. He lets himself be led astray by his arguably good intentions, and people and entire worlds are hurt in the process.

6.2 Point of View and Other Narrative Elements

The *Shades of Magic* Trilogy has multiple points of view (even some minor characters are given their own POV chapters), all told from third person over the shoulder. Schwab uses POV as her main development tool for the villain, in fact: In the first book, the Shadow King acts through a magical stone, imparting a desire for power on those who use it. Both Lila and Kell understand and can sense the risk in using the stone and so only use it when it is completely necessary. In this case, the villain's POV is only shown through the feelings of those who come into contact with the stone, their change in demeanour and their actions while under the influence. In the second novel, the villain's POV is much clearer – it is looking for someone to control, a way to gain more autonomy. When Holland is possessed by the demon inside, it is two wills fighting with one another – Holland only wants to see his world reborn, and the demon knows how to make that happen. We hear its thoughts within Holland's POV chapters. In the third book, the Shadow King, Osaron, finally has its own form, and thus, its own POV. We understand its powers through its perspective and see the way in which it views Red London – an enemy to be conquered, a world to recreate in its own image.

Holland is given his own point of view as well. It is here we learn of his relatively good intentions – his desire to see prosperity and beauty restored in White London. His ambition is his downfall, but the audience can forgive him as we learn more of his past through flashbacks and his narration. His help in defeating the villain is crucial to his character development, and it is how he goes from antagonist to anti-hero throughout the series. The following quotes are from a flashback sequence in which Holland is remembering the moment his friend was murdered and he was chained to the Dane Twins' will.

“I would do anything if I thought it would truly help my world,’ snapped Vortalis, ‘and so would you. That is why you’re here beside me. Not because you are my sword, not because you are my shield, not because you are my friend. You are here with me because we will both do whatever we can to keep our world alive.’”

(...)

“The chains of the spell were stiff, articulated things. They coiled through his head, weighed heavy as iron around every limb.

Obey, they said, not to his mind, his heart – only his hands, his lips.

The command was written on his skin, threaded through his bones.

Athos cocked his head and gestured absently.

‘Kneel.’

‘When Holland made no motion to obey, a block of stone struck him in the shoulders, a sudden, vicious, invisible weight forcing him forward.’”

(A Conjuring of Light, p. 375, 381-382)

Holland knows what it’s like to be possessed, to have your actions not be of your own volition. His allowing Osaron to enter makes much more sense then: he knows what it’s like, and yet he’s willing to pay the price if it means saving his own London.

From Kell, Lila and Rhy’s points of view, their vision of the villain is much more two-dimensional. All they know is that the Shadow and Holland (for a time) pose both a threat to their London and their friends and family as well. Their perspectives aren’t so much used to develop the villain but rather to move the plot forward and forge deeper relationship between the protagonists.

Objects play an important role in understanding the villain's powers throughout the *Shades of Magic* trilogy. Astrid Dane has a necklace that she uses to trap Holland's will within her own, and Osaron's chaos and strife is spread through the stones throughout the first novel. Before Osaron has its own physical form, the only thing we know about it is the power that he exerts through the stone. Terrifying, yet breakable.

“Kell’s hand closed protectively around the talisman in his pocket. It hummed against his palm, and Kell realized as he held it that even if he could give it away – which he couldn’t, he wouldn’t, not without knowing what it was for and who was after it – he didn’t want to let go. Couldn’t bear the thought of parting with it. Which was absurd. And yet, something in him ached to keep it.”

(A Darker Shade of Magic, p. 124)

There's very little nuance within this story: evil is straightforward and good is straightforward. There is no reason not to root for Kell, Lila and Rhy because they want to save their people, go on adventures, have meaningful relationships and discover who they are. Even though Lila has done some questionable things in her past, most were just a way for her to survive, so there's no doubting her role as a hero.

Holland, on the other hand, has the most interesting dynamic, shifting often between hero and villain, protagonist and antagonist. His most interesting relationship is with Osaron, really. Letting Osaron in was a big mistake, regardless of his intentions. Since Holland himself was already a powerful Antari, does letting Osaron in really making him any better than his possessors, as a person constantly looking for more power?

6.3 Villain Archetypes

❖ **Osaron:** Shadow, Trickster, Shape-Shifter

Throughout the first novel, the only thing we really know about Osaron is its ability to sway people's minds in order to enact his will. This is where its role as a Trickster comes in, a powerful manipulator. Once it gains its own physical form, it is Shadow, both figuratively and literally. Its darkness spreads all across Red London, changing people from the inside out, enacting not only its desire for carnage but also its ability to change shape as a literal Shape-Shifter. The audience only know what Osaron willingly shows, both through other people and later through its own point of view. The reader doesn't know where it comes from, except that it is a being of pure, chaotic magic, and thus there is no emotional tether to this villain, no reason to empathize with it. We know its ability to manipulate and possess people is its most powerful weapon, its actual killing method, as it were.

❖ **The Dane Twins:** Shadow, Trickster

Power-hungry and manipulative, the Dane Twins are a simple and perfect embodiment of both the Shadow and the Trickster archetype. They too, however, are puppets for Osaron to play with.

❖ **Holland:** Trickster, Shape-Shifter, Ally

Holland is the character who is the most difficult to pin down. He can't be classified as a Shadow archetype, as his goal isn't dominion but rather resurgence; however, he uses morally questionable methods to get there, and his role in the story is often changing, hence resulting in his trickster and shape-shifter archetypes. His role as an Ally is clear in the climax of the novel. They couldn't have defeated Osaron without him, without his power as an Antari.

7. Adeyemi – Legacy of Orisha

7.1 Identifying the Villain

The main villain in this narrative³ is the throne of Orisha and anyone who sits upon it, serves it, or desires it. The King is (it seems) mostly responsible for the current conflict in his country – he ordered the slaughter of all Maji, as he deems them to be a threat to his power and the safety of his people, and those actions are the driving force behind the protagonists' story, which is what we follow within the novel.

Then, there are the servants of the King who enforce these genocidal orders of his – his son Inan, and his wife the Queen, who becomes the main villain herself in the second novel of the series.

7.2 Point of View and Other Narrative Elements

Adeyemi utilizes three different points of view, where nearly each chapter is told from a different perspective. These three POV's belong to Zélie, arguably the main protagonist, Amari, princess of Orisha, and her brother Inan, future King of Orisha. Each POV is written in first person perspective, meaning that we get a close look at each of these characters and how they are experiencing the narrative, including their inner monologues. Their thoughts and feelings about the actions of other characters are therefore very clear, including their opinions of the villain(s).

Zélie is arguably the main protagonist, regardless of the other two POVs, because her 'destiny' is the driving force behind the narrative, especially in the first novel, *Children of Blood and Bone*. Zélie becomes responsible for bringing magic back to Orisha and is aided

³ Incomplete at the time of writing this research: third novel has yet to be released

by Amari along the journey, though the two are forced together. They essentially experience the same events consistently throughout the novel, but their views on the villain have completely different contexts, which is where their different chapters become interesting in regards to the development of the villain.

Zélie's perspective on the villain, is, in this case (at least in the beginning of the novel) focused on Inan as a stand-in for what his family has done to hers and all other families like hers. Her hatred of him is singular and subjective due to the violence she has encountered in the past and the persecution she faces to this day.

Amari's perspective on her brother, and her entire family in general, has an entirely different context. She regards both her parents as villains in their own right, but initially, for different reasons than Zélie. Amari only joins the fight against them when she witnesses her father murder her closest friend, and her mother has always been emotionally abusive towards her, regarding her as lesser than Inan. Amari feels that Inan's role in his family's legacy is due to the abusive nature of their upbringing at the hands of their father, which gives a richer context to Inan as a villain character and also serves to provide a better understanding of Zélie's developing romantic interest towards him.

Inan, in this case, plays a central role in understanding the overarching villain. Throughout most of both novels, he is the messenger of the villain – his father, the king and the throne that rules Orīsha. While Amari is clearly at odds with her father's wishes after he murdered her best friend, Inan struggles between relying on his upbringing and listening to his heart and own morals. His feelings on the matter switch quite often, however, making it hard to pin down his exact stance within the conflict. This becomes especially clear when he starts to fall in love with Zélie. He realizes his judgement of the Maji are askew yet he can't bring himself to leave his violent tendencies behind.

There is no escaping character bias in this novel. The story is so steeped in violence and history that each character has their valid reasons for feeling one way or the other, and the first-person perspectives used mean that these opinions and feelings are thrust on the reader and the reader is compelled to side with each of these characters.

“He doesn’t even realize we’ve already lost. The scroll means nothing without someone to read it. But I can’t let him know that.

They’ll slaughter us all if they find out, erasing every man, woman and child. They won’t stop until we’re gone, until they’ve wiped our existence from this world with their hate.”

(Children of Blood and Bone, (Zélie) – p. 410)

Once Zélie rejects him after his father tortures her, Inan’s opinion on the entire subject becomes even more convoluted. In the second novel, he has a hard time believing his mother to be the orchestrator behind the war; even when from context the reader can understand that he must’ve realized his mother’s abusive disposition towards his sister, whom he consistently wants to protect at all costs (even though, it could be argued, he’s done the same to her when he physically assaulted her at the behest of his father, scarring her for life).

The throne incites the conflict that is the driving force behind the narrative. Without the throne and the specific family that sits upon it, there would be no war, and there would be no narrative. Every action of the King, the Queen, and Inan serves that conflict and thus keeps the villain alive for Zélie, Amari, and all the other Maji to fight. They orchestrated the conflict. This is confirmed in the second novel, *Children of Vengeance and Virtue*, when the Queen takes credit for inciting the attack that led the King to commit genocide against his own subjects. We know that this family doesn’t believe they have magic, and are so less powerful against the Maji unless they have a distinct advantage.

The characters that encompass the main villain, namely the throne of Orisha, are limited in the fact that, besides Inan, who could be viewed more as a morally grey character, are quite one-dimensional in their views, strategies and personalities. All the audience really knows about both the King and the Queen is that they have been abusive towards their children, and have an (unjustified) hatred of the Maji. There is nothing else really to them – even their concern for Inan (they both routinely ignore Amari) is entirely predicated on his future role as King and what he can do to continue their violent legacy.

Both the King and Queen's relationship with Inan and Amari are quite simple; as previously stated, they were abusive towards both, physically and emotionally, and their upbringing of their children had everything to do with their role within the royal family and less about their love for them purely as their children.

Inan's relationship with his sister is more complicated – it is clear from his own inner monologues that he loves her (and vice versa) but he was a perpetrator of their father's abuse towards her and for most of both novels he is still doing their father's bidding, whether willingly or not. She is completely on the other side now, which makes their relationship strained, though both of them are still willing to trust each other.

Inan's relationship with Zélie is central to the understanding of Inan as an agent of the villain. It allows the reader to see his much softer side – it is clear that he cares for her, and at some point, even wants to help her with her cause. Inan is the most interesting character on the side of the villain – he switches sides often because of his dubious relationship with both his family and Zélie, and in the process of trying to placate both sides, wrecks his relationship with both as well. Inan is not just an antagonist, but also a love-interest character, and a foil all at the same time. By far, Inan is the most dynamic villainous character within these novels, especially when compared to his parents, who are both static characters.

7.3 Villain Archetypes

❖ **King of Orïsha:** Shadow

There's very little manipulation on his part; the only thing the King wants is vengeance for his family and he will stop at nothing to get it: genocide and eradication of an entire subset of his nation's culture mean nothing to him as long as he gets what he wants.

❖ **Queen of Orïsha:** Shadow, Trickster

From the second book, it is clear that the Queen was the driving force behind her husband's sudden lust for vengeance and violence. She is a manipulative force; wanting not only to rule over Orïsha but also to eradicate those she knows have more power than her. Her constant emotional abuse towards both her children only solidifies her as a trickster archetype: manipulation is in her very nature.

❖ **Inan:** Shadow, Shape-Shifter, Ally

Inan embodies all these roles within the novels: his archetype of Shape-Shifter comes from his warring allegiance – one minute, he is in love with Zelié and wants to stop the eradication of her people, and the next he is pleading with his father for acceptance, willing to do his bidding no matter the stakes. He is both Shadow and Ally, depending on the situation. He is not a Trickster, not like his mother: he wears his heart on his sleeve, no matter which side he is currently fighting for.

8. Original Work – The Shadow Myth

8.1 Identifying the Villain

The obvious “true villain” of this novel doesn’t reveal themselves until fairly late in the story— Adana’s father has been searching for her since her mother took her away from him, not because he truly loves her, but because he wants his magic back. He believes that Adana stole his magic from him, and throughout the last third of the novel it becomes clear that he is a manipulator, violent and abusive, and Samira’s reasons for escaping with her daughter become clear.

Far more present throughout the novel is Delilah – her role as a character within the novel is ambiguous. Adana trusts her for reasons she can’t explain, romantic feelings clouding her judgement, while Lukas, Deacon and Corina are all wary of Delilah’s sudden appearance and her willingness to help. Her role in the story is complicated; she both works for and against Adana’s father at any one time. She is not a true villain, more of an antagonist, defined in the literature review as “pulling the cart in a different direction than the hero.” In this case, she does that out of a need to protect Adana, rather than serve her own needs, but it also puts a strain on Adana’s relationship with her other companions.

8.2 Point of View and Other Narrative Elements

The story is first and foremost about Adana: her first journey into unexplored territory, her first relationships and friendships outside of those she had with her parents, her connection with her shadows, who she decides to trust, and her desire for answers. The story is told from third person over the shoulder, Adana’s point of view. This does mean that her bias is always present – she refuses to believe Lukas’ warnings about her shadows, her willingness to

believe Deacon's and Corina's warnings about the Scavengers is clouded by their hostile treatment towards her throughout most of the first half of the novel, and her shadows are slowly exerting their will on her without her knowledge. This means that not only are we seeing the world through Adana's eyes, but also indirectly, her shadows. Her shadows feelings are reflected in their own actions and in the actions that they force Adana to perform, such as killing Deacon or her banishment of Delilah. The shadows are after one thing only: the more they turn Adana towards violence and distrust, the stronger their grip on her becomes.

Delilah's powers of illusion and forced memory are used both to hide the truth and to reveal it. This is one way in which Adana's perspective can be circumvented – Delilah's own experiences and relationship with Adrien, Adana's father, force her to reveal the truth multiple times, in order to get Adana to understand that her relationship with her father is toxic and that he is only after one thing: the shadows. Delilah's power is the reason Adana ends up defying her father once and for all – she is the only one who was willing and able to reveal the truth about what happened to Samira and Adrien's role in the destruction of the Coastal Barricades.

“I know. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry that all he's done is try to destroy who you are. But Adana, listen to me. He'll never stop. Neither will your shadows. They won't stop until they've turned you into a shell of what you used to be, just like they've done to your father. But you can beat them. You can get rid of them, once and for all,” Delilah said, hand now holding Adana's as well.”

(The Shadow Myth, p.332)

The different dynamics in Adana's relationship with each of her companions highlights the bias of Adana's point of view: Lukas wants to be her friend – his demeanour is always gentle and he only wants what's best for her in the end. Adana wants to be able to reciprocate this kindness more than anything but often finds she is incapable of it. Both Corina's and Deacon's initial hatred towards Adana highlight Adana's naïve place in the world – she knows nothing of Scavengers, of the hardship these people have faced; and while Adana hasn't done anything to warrant such animosity, they represent Adana's new place in the world. Her relationship with Delilah is the most influential of them all, even over Adrien. While manipulation happens often, it is Delilah's insistence of the truth that finally sets Adana free of her misguided love for her father.

8.3 Villain Archetypes

❖ **Adrien:** Trickster, Shape-Shifter, Shadow

Adrien's role in the story as a Trickster and Shape-Shifter is far more important than his role as a Shadow. Yes, he is after power and he believes the shadows are the way to get it back, but his most villainous and obvious trait is his role as a Trickster: his abuse towards both his wife and his daughter, his manipulation of Delilah into doing his bidding, blackmailing her into bringing Adana to him. Adrien is a very personal villain – as far as can be understood within this single novel, his motives come from addiction, not lust for dominion, but that threat is ever looming as well.

❖ **Delilah:** Trickster, Threshold Guardian, Ally

Delilah's role in the story is complicated – yes, for a while she acts in forced service of the “true villain”, and her power alone makes her capable of being a Trickster; but this also plays into her role as being a Threshold Guardian – she withholds the truth from Adana and her

companions, forcing the narrative in a particular direction. In the end, she becomes an Ally, cementing her status more as an anti-hero than a true cruel villain.

Despite the fantasy genre's foundation in reimagining myths and legends, and despite all the rich, diverse, and complex stories that I have read to answer this critical essay's research question, I soon realised I wanted my writing to be more subversive of fantasy's usual conventions. George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* was a big influence in this regard in particular. The idea that a fantasy story doesn't necessarily need to have one clear-cut, all-conquering villain is something that interested me early on in the writing process. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the characters not only become their own worst enemies but become other characters' enemies simply because of who they are, the lands they inhabit, and the history that follows them. This, I believe, is reflected in my work as well, especially when considering Deacon's and Corina's initial distrust and hostility toward Adana, as well as their disdain for the Scavengers.

Yet, I still wanted to take it one step further. Though the world-conquering villains of the past have delighted me greatly, especially in stories such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, where Sauron and his henchmen drive the characters to love one another more fiercely, I felt that a villain doesn't necessarily need to threaten the world on such a massive scale, which is something that happens even in Martin's subversive narrative. Those characters that hate each other so much are all driven by a lust for power over Westeros, a desire to sit on the Iron Throne. It is still a story of trying to conquer the world, though it is fractured across multiple characters.

There was one main train of thought that wouldn't leave me alone. A fantasy story exists in a fantasy world, and those worlds are inhabited by all types of characters – not just the ultimate hero, or the most ruthless villains, but ordinary people, with extraordinary lives,

whose journeys may impact them within their own small bubble without influencing the entire imagined story world as a whole. I wanted to write a story that was much smaller, much more intimate, yet still with a hint of that overarching threat that permeates the fantasy genre to such a massive extent. Though the easiest conflict to point to is Adana vs. Adrien, which makes it seem as though Adrien is the narrative's "true villain", just as stated in the analysis above, I wanted it to be more complex than that.

In remembering Charles Vogler's definition of an antagonist – a character who pulls the same cart in a different direction to the protagonist – I realised that that was the definition of a "villain" that I had adopted in my work. Adrien wants the shadows for himself, and so does Adana – that creates a conflict, it makes them each other's antagonists. Delilah initially works for Adana's father, though against her will, and her history with him permeates every inch of her blossoming relationship with Adana. The lies, and the manipulation, create an obstacle for Adana to overcome in her quest to understand what happened to her mother, but her feelings for Delilah and vice versa keep pulling them back together. Deacon's refusal to tell the truth hurts the entire group – Adana and Lukas feel betrayed, Corina most of all, and it leads to his ultimate downfall, Corina's grief, as well as progressing Adana's descent into the darkness being orchestrated by her shadows.

Each character, despite their good intentions, despite their search for friendship and understanding, becomes an antagonist, not just in relation to the other characters, but themselves as well. In a sense, the overarching "true villain" isn't Adrien at all. It isn't a person at all – it is the shadows, and the chaos they instigate, the distrust they ignite, and the madness they create, which permeates all of these characters' lives to such an extent that they each become an antagonist with a different role to play in the story. This is more relatable to the first *Earthsea* novel, or Holland's obsession with power in V.E. Schwab's work.

Despite the personal history that is infused within this story, and the relatively small scale on which it all plays out, that sense of an overarching threat is still there. What if Adrien did get the shadows back? What kind of violence could he inflict upon the world? What if the shadows hadn't been "destroyed?" Which poor soul would they infect next, and what would the consequence of that infection be? It is a small story with big stakes, and I hope that this is reflected in these characters, their relationships with one another, and their development overall.

V. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

1. Development of Villains

Interestingly, there is a trend that emerges when we look at the progression of time in which these novels were published. Tolkien and Lewis, both published in the mid-1950s, have villains that are very far removed from their protagonists – Tolkien more so than Lewis, arguably, but in both instances the protagonists only have any interaction with the main villain because of the hero role that was thrust upon them. Frodo and the other Hobbits have no inclination of the powers that be in Mordor, no personal history of evil in the Shire until the first ring-wraith comes to find them once Frodo's quest has begun.

The same stands true for the Pevensie children. While they have more immediate contact with the villains in several of the stories, namely *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* with the White Witch, and the Telmarines in *Prince Caspian*, it is only in the Narnian world in which these villains exist for them. They have no concept of them outside their King and Queen roles which are given to them when they enter Narnia, and they have no bearing on their lives outside of this, due to the story's structure as a portal quest fantasy. Motive remains quite simple and straightforward too: conquest and power. What kind of hero, no matter their personal relationship to the villain, wouldn't want to stop that from happening? It is overtly black-and-white, dark vs. light.

Next, there is Ursula K. LeGuin's original *Earthsea* trilogy, published between 1968 and 1972, already breaking with that trend. While *Earthsea* is also widely considered classic fantasy, there is already a significant change in the role the villain plays in the story. In the first novel, the villain is quite literally a villain of the hero's own making – a shadow version of himself that Ged conjured forth, who shares the same name. Its motivation is still closely linked to that of Tolkien's and Lewis's villains, namely, to spread chaos and discord, gain

power and dominion. The personal relationship to Ged continues within the next novel— Teran views Ged as her villain until he frees her into the wider world, where the protagonist knows he is a hero. The final novel leans back more into the abstract idea of evil that Tolkien presented in his work as well – a faceless threat who only wishes to harm the world in a quest for immortality.

Then, we skip to the late 1990s, where two separate cultural phenomena are published for the first time: George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones*, and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. This is where fantasy villains start to become more personally related to our heroes – in *Harry Potter*, Harry's life is directly affected by Voldemort's actions; he becomes an orphan, his true heritage is hidden from him for over a decade and the murder of his parents forces him to be the Chosen One. In Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the personal relationships are the real crux of the story; the villain changes depending on the POV and even who the reader themselves empathizes with. History is really important here; many of the rivalries and truces are built within the fictional history of the series – Baratheon vs. Targaryen, Lannister vs. Stark. The personal connection between the hero and the villain plays an important aspect in both these series – creating more emotional depth to the story and shifting the focus to the dynamic between characters, as opposed to mostly being on the journey, which we see in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Earthsea*.

Next, in 2015, came V.E. Schwab's *Shades of Magic* series. It holds many classic elements of the fantasy genre, but what is interesting in this particular trilogy is that it uses a combination of different staples of the fantasy genre in order to utilize the villain in the story. It hangs as a sort of stepping stone, it might be said, between *Harry Potter* and *Legacy of Orisha*, where it employs the abstract, far away ideas of villainy from *The Lord of the Rings*, where the darkness is literally locked up in another world that cannot be entered, to the villain

having their own POV, their own voice, but their main motivation still being power over the world, regardless of the consequences. Schwab builds this progression up throughout the novels using point of view and other literary devices, but it is interesting to note this balance if we look at trends within this genre.

Harry Potter was a game changer for the YA fantasy genre – while other successful series such as *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* certainly also contributed to its success, *Harry Potter* threw the genre into the spotlight first. Many fantasy series that came after carried on some of the ideas that Rowling presented in her narrative. This relates not only to world-building but also to the relationships between heroes and villains. If we take a look at Adeyemi's novels for instance, first published in 2018, clear similarities can be drawn between Lord Voldemort's quest for power, his desire for "purity of blood", and the same desire mirrored in the royal family from Adeyemi's *Legacy of Orisha* novels; where their main wish is to wipe out those with magic so they can rule with absolute power and impunity. Here, Adeyemi creates the personal connection between Zelié, the hero, and the villains, in this case the royal family, through another character, their son, Inan. That personal connection to the villain is still there, but through a third person. Adeyemi, much like Rowling, allows for personal confrontation to happen between protagonist and villain, as opposed to constantly being a far-away threat as it is in *The Lord of the Rings*.

It is clear from this progression that while motives of the villain remain quite steady throughout the development of the fantasy genre, their roles within the story have greatly changed. Going from a faceless evil to personal clashes and vendettas between protagonist and antagonist is now a vital part of the genre. In the creative work that accompanies this thesis, there was a reason to take that idea one step further: if an author has created a realistic fantasy world, there are people that inhabit this world with their own personal demons and villains, outside of the larger "conquering" force that is a staple of the genre. What if a

fantasy story focused on the personal relationship between two characters, one that has significant consequences for the protagonist and her close relations, but is otherwise mostly unknown to the outside world? What would that kind of villain look like in the fantasy genre? How do you develop this kind of character? By making the villain the protagonist's own father, the protagonist's inherited bias is much more relatable, and thus allows for more truthful character development outside of the consequences for the fantasy realm.

Archetypes, as demonstrated in these case studies, can tell us a lot about certain characters' attributes within a narrative. However, as the attributes of these archetypes are (usually) fixed, aside from their ability to merge with other archetypes, they don't lend a hand in the actual development of villainous characters. They do, however, make these villains easily recognisable as such within the story, and can provide the audience with factual personality traits in order to build a better understanding of a character's current state of mind within the narrative.

2. The Importance of Point of View

What becomes most obvious from the various case studies presented within this work is that the point of view used by the author imbues much of the nuance in the villains themselves. Third person omniscient, for instance, as used in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, ensures that the reader is aware of what is going on at every point in the story, but it also struggles to convey a sense of urgency and fear on the part of any of the characters, especially in relation to the villain. They are more abstract this way – what this achieves is a sense of greater menace for the entirety of the fantasy world the story takes place in, but less of an emotional menace for the characters that the audience are rooting for.

First person perspective, on the other hand, means that there is no room for the reader's opinion on the situation: we are forced to understand why the hero is at odds with the villain, and while their reasoning is often correct and morally upstanding, there is no room for nuance. The inherent bias of the protagonist will always be present, and it also means that there is less room for the writer to build the villain in any meaningful way outside of the protagonist's perspective – which is where the main research question resurfaces. What can we learn about a villain if the hero's perspective is dominant in the story? Very little. Zelié's POV, for instance, is so tainted by the memory of her mother's death that she finds it hard to see beyond her hate. Inan and Amari's POV are there to serve as a counter balance to Zelié's dominating voice, but even there, the bias still wins out. How can Zelié not hate the royal family, who took almost everyone she loved away from her, and decided genocide of her people was the way forward? This is an understandable perspective, but it also creates a very one-dimensional villain, and means the fight between good and evil is less dynamic.

Schwab's use of POV, where not only the heroes have a perspective but the villain develops one as well, creates a different kind of bias; the villain's POV is so straightforwardly 'evil' that there is no choice but to root for the heroes. We understand more about the villain's powers, its voice and its desires, certainly – but there is little there that would change our view of the hero's perspective. Holland, as a character, is the interesting aspect of the story – both hero and villain, he serves as a vessel for the fight between the darkness and Red London. We understand the pull of the darkness from him, the nuance between fighting for what is right and wanting to fulfil your own desires. His perspective is where the villain truly becomes interesting. An entity that not only wants dominion over the world, but can also corrupt the purest souls that we know.

3. Overcoming Bias

So how do these particular authors overcome this obstacle of inherit bias on the part of the protagonist, or even the narrator? The answer is not straightforward; there are many literary techniques an author can apply to answer this question. However, given the evidence within these case studies, there is something that becomes quite apparent.

As discussed in the literature review, fantasy is a genre which cannot exist without worldbuilding. Where literary fiction exists in the world as we know it and therefore doesn't need any additional explanation, almost every aspect of a fantasy story is rooted in a world that is unfamiliar to the reader. There are no limits, and thus, the historical background of a fantasy novel is entirely up to the author. History is what makes a world and a character come to life: understanding who they are and where they come from is vital to understanding their motivations and where they want to go. *A Song of Ice and Fire* would not exist without the centuries of family feuds that came before it – what would be the significance of playing the game of thrones when there is no reason to play it in the first place? Why would the Wall have needed to be built if there were no tales of threats from the North?

Why would Frodo need to destroy a Ring if there weren't songs and tales of old that speak of a power in Mordor that wants dominion over all of Middle-Earth? Why would anyone feel the need for heroes if it wasn't clear that major sacrifices were made in the last war to stop him all together?

Why would the King of Orïsha suddenly decide that genocide was the only way forward, if there hadn't been some inciting incident along the way, something to make him hate the Maji enough to cause all that pain and suffering?

Why should Rowling give us a book that almost focuses entirely on Voldemort's history within the Wizarding World, if not to give us an understanding of the forces at play

here? Why would Dumbledore and Grindelwald's relationship matter if it didn't have some bearing on Voldemort's own rise to power?

The answers to all these questions lie within the novels; the reader just has to find them. Creating an entirely unbiased perspective on the villain seems almost impossible when the characters' subjectivity, the narrators' opinions and the even the moral judgements of the reader themselves will play a role in how villains operate within the story being told.

However, the goal of this research was not to understand how to create an unbiased villain, the goal was to understand how authors within the fantasy genre could and do create villains that are not just solely there to be hated by the reader and the protagonist, but have their own motivations, ideas and background outside of what the protagonist knows and thinks and feels. This is where it becomes apparent that the fictional history, the worldbuilding that has been established before the primary narrative even starts plays the most important part in ensuring that is possible: history that the characters in the present storyline weren't involved in themselves has a different bearing on the story as a whole. That history is fact; the battles, the feuds, the relationships – the protagonist themselves cannot deny these things happened, and so their bias cannot influence the significance of these things in regards to the villain's overall development within the story.

The importance of fictional histories and worldbuilding in relation to character development in the fantasy genre may, as such, illuminate a shift in how writers and audiences alike experience and interpret the narrative structures of 'Overcoming the Monster' and 'The Hero's Journey'. Good vs. evil is no longer a simple case of black and white, but rather relies on the context provided by horizontal timelines, vertical hierarchies and personal relationships between characters that predate the present storyline.

4. Critical Reflection & Contribution to Knowledge

As explained in the introduction of this report, Brian Attebery posits that there are two manners in which to regard fantasy. The first is a formula, an equation of pre-determined tropes, archetypes, structures, and plots that come together to create an enjoyable escapist narrative. The second is that fantasy is simply a mode of storytelling: it is not the same myths and legends of old rehashed over and over with different components, but rather they are stories reimagined and re-interpreted. In doing this research, I have found that my definition of fantasy combines those two explanations. Some fantasy does include easily recognizable characters, structures, and plots, but that is not all that fantasy is. It is both formula and wild imagination. It can be whatever the author needs it to be, and trying to define fantasy by a set of strict theories is nearly impossible.

Older concepts, such as Joseph Campbell's theory of the 'Hero's Journey' and Carl Jung's archetypes – both later modernized, in a sense, by Charles Vogler – felt restrictive to my understanding of the narratives I was reading. Vogler himself admits that characters can encompass more than one archetype and that those archetypes can be fluid to suit the character's position within the story, but then why are archetypes needed at all? His definition of an antagonist provides a more complex idea of what a 'villain', especially, can be – but it seems that even with that definition in mind, Vogler's idea of an antagonist is still a *directly* opposite force to the protagonist. There is still a hero and a villain, which often leads to a straightforward good vs. evil, 'Overcoming the Monster' narrative. In modernizing Campbell's 'Hero's Journey' and Jung's archetypes, even Vogler still pushes most fantasy narratives into a specific corner.

This is not to say that these theories have no merit. It is the opposite, in fact: they provide building blocks for authors who can then continue to reinvent and reimagine them to

suit the stories they are trying to write. This is the same for Farah Mendelsohn's explanations of different fantasy structures, for example. Fantasy, by its very nature, cannot be restricted or defined by certain theories and trends: it is an ever-changing, ever-fluid genre, one that is only limited by an author's imagination. While a basic understanding of the genre's most prominent features is important for studying, understanding, and building upon it, I now wholly understand why there has never been one defining definition of the fantasy genre. It simply cannot be defined.

The analysis in the previous sections of this conclusion, as well as the findings and observations that I describe in Chapter IV of this dissertation, are all in line with the theories and definitions that I detailed in the literature review. These theories have pushed my observations and understanding of these novels in a very particular direction – a direction that may seem true on the surface but could be deconstructed when studied more closely with a looser interpretation of these theories as a whole.

What I *can* articulate in response to my findings is my new and personal understanding of what the term 'antagonist' truly means. Often, not just in fantasy but in literature in general, the word 'antagonist' is simply used as another term for 'villain' (such as the description provided in section 1.6 of the literature review). I would argue, however, that a 'villain' and an 'antagonist' have two very distinct roles within a narrative, without necessarily being the same character at all. Vogler touches on this idea as well, but his definition of an antagonist – a character who pulls the same cart in a different direction than the protagonist – still encompasses the generic definition of a villain. If two people each pull on a cart from different sides, they will break it into equal yet directly opposite parts. A villain, in general, is understood to be the direct opposite of a hero – as expounded in section 5.2 of the literature review, Bergstrand and Jasper posit that a villain's character traits are usually the exact reverse of a hero's character traits. Bravery becomes cowardice, genius

intuition becomes devious cunning, and so forth. There is no reason that this should always be the case, nor is it, even in the novels that I have studied for this research.

The clearest example that portrays what I want to express within the works studied exists in Ursula K. Le Guin's original *Earthsea* trilogy, particularly the first novel, *A Wizard of Earthsea*. In this work, I would define Ged's shadow-self to be the 'villain' – it is causing havoc and wreaking destruction across the lands, a very general and unsubstantiated focus on power and menace. I would classify Ged himself, in this instance, to be the 'antagonist.' Ged's hubris brought forth this shadow demon. His pitfalls as a character have directly created the very thing that he is supposed to protect the world from. In this case, though they are closely related, the 'villain' and the 'antagonist' are two very different characters with different roles in the story.

This idea is reflected in my original work. Though on the surface, it would seem that Adana's father Adrien is the true 'villain' of the piece, considering his motivations and the fact that he orchestrated Adana's journey to suit his own needs, he is not truly the villain. As I mentioned in my observations of my novel, the real true 'villain' of the novel is the shadows. They are simply there to create discord and chaos; their motivations are unknown but their methods are horrifying. Adrien, Adana herself, Delilah, and even Corina and Deacon all act as each other's antagonists and become their own. The shadows are the villains – they are the root cause of this mess, but Adana's unwillingness to part with them or believe that her father's horrific actions did indeed happen of his own accord makes her an antagonist – pulling the cart, not necessarily in the opposite direction of another character, but in so many directions at once that she can't see the truth. She loves her father and wants to believe in him, she trusts her shadows and thus cannot see how they have been manipulating her, she's been angry with her mother for so long that she can't see the truth about her father. Each decision that Adana makes, each thought that she has, gets in the way of understanding the

truth. She's her own worst obstacle, and the story doesn't end until she's confronted all of these truths and thus developed as a character.

What I hoped to achieve with this research was to demonstrate that there are ways for villains in fantasy narratives to be developed without the hero's subjective bias getting in the way of understanding their motivations and their backgrounds. I do feel that this objective has been accomplished. Older theories about narratives as a whole and the fantasy genre, in general, can provide ways in which to develop characters outside of the hero's biased perspective. Giving villainous characters their own POVs, for example, or detailing the historical significance of their moral positioning within the fantasy world lends depth to these characters' motivations and actions without being subject to the hero's own ethical ideas.

What I was not expecting, however, was to cultivate an entirely new understanding of antagonism and its role in fantasy narratives. An antagonist is not automatically a villain – an antagonist is much more complex than that. Villains, as I understand them now, are much more one-dimensional. Those all-conquering forces of evil, like Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*, Jadis in *Narnia*, or the Queen in *Orïsha*, are all villains. Villains provide the plot. It is the presence of the shadows that drives the plot forward in my novel, it is Sauron's presence that forces Frodo to take the One Ring to Mordor. The shadow demon in *A Wizard of Earthsea* jumpstarts Ged's travels. Osaron's coveting of Red London leads to Kell and Lila's meeting.

Antagonists, on the other hand, drive character development. Not just for themselves, but the characters they interact with as well. Delilah's fear of Adrien and her love for Adana cause her to lie and manipulate those she cares about, and she causes Adana's further descent into the shadows' darkness. Gollum's manic desire for the One Ring drives a wedge between Frodo and Sam, and leads to his destruction.

Character development is essential in any narrative. Characters need to not just go on a journey filled with monsters and magic, but they need to learn something about themselves along the way. Villains present the opportunity for that journey, and antagonists allow the character development during that journey to take place.

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VII. APPENDIX

Appendix A

THE WRITER'S JOURNEY ~ THIRD EDITION

Christopher Vogler

TABLE ONE

COMPARISON OF OUTLINES AND TERMINOLOGY

<i>The Writer's Journey</i>	<i>The Hero with a Thousand Faces</i>
ACT ONE	DEPARTURE, SEPARATION
Ordinary World	World of Common Day
Call to Adventure	Call to Adventure
Refusal of the Call	Refusal of the Call
Meeting with the Mentor	Supernatural Aid
Crossing the First Threshold	Crossing the First Threshold
	Belly of the Whale
ACT TWO	DESCENT, INITIATION, PENETRATION
Tests, Allies, Enemies	Road of Trials
Approach to the Inmost Cave	
Ordeal	Meeting with the Goddess
	Woman as Temptress
	Atonement with the Father
	Apotheosis
Reward	The Ultimate Boon
ACT THREE	RETURN
The Road Back	Refusal of the Return
	The Magic Flight
	Rescue from Within
	Crossing the Threshold
	Return
Resurrection	Master of the Two Worlds
Return with the Elixir	Freedom to Live