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The Colour Red

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

THE COLOUR RED

Submitted by

MICA BLANKINSHIP

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

The Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2018

Director: Ciaran Berry

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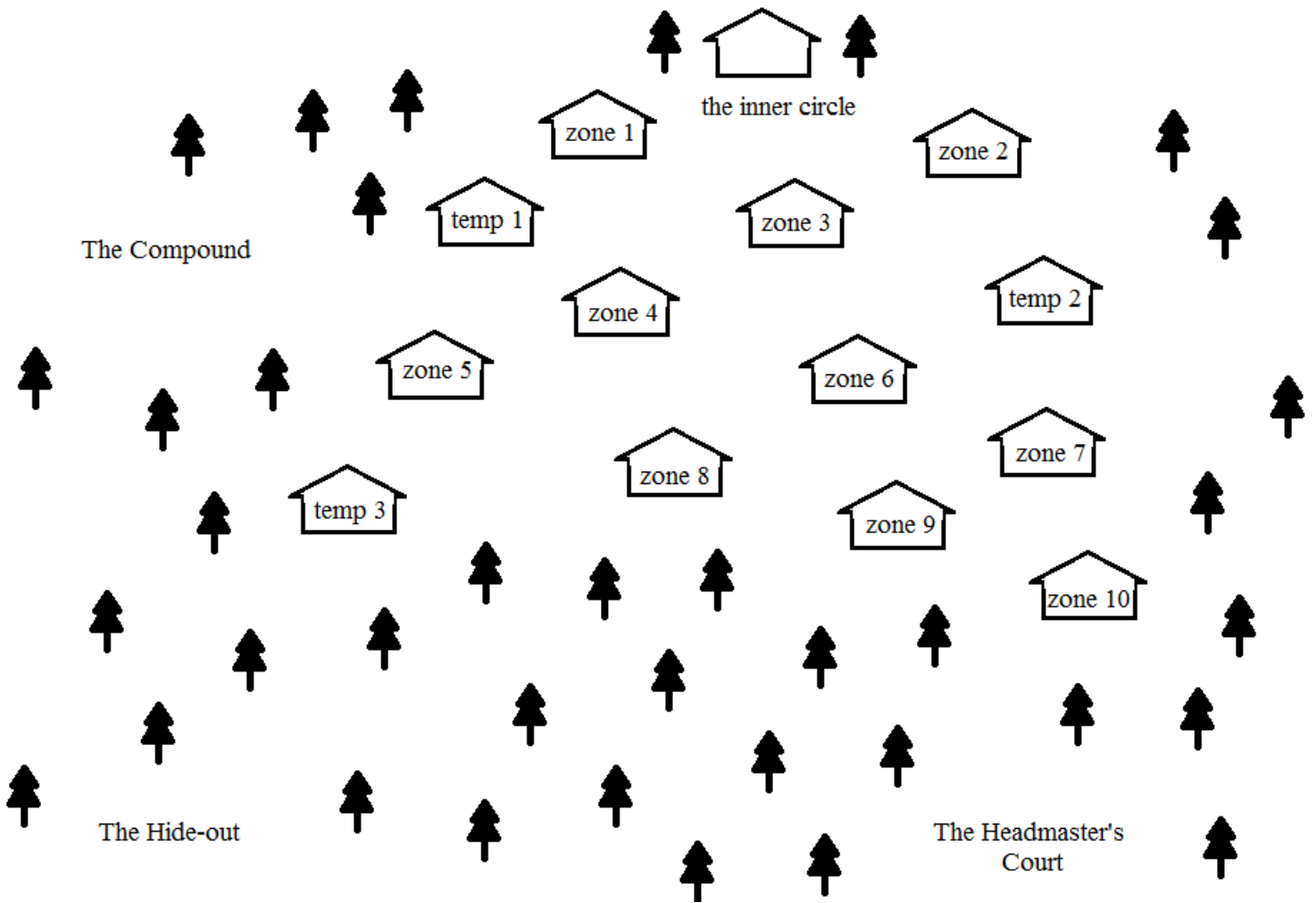
“A red rose is not selfish because it wants to be a red rose. It would be horribly selfish if it wanted all the other flowers in the garden to be both red and roses.”

Oscar Wilde

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Map of REGION



Dear Readers,

This project started two years ago, spurred by an event in late September of 2015 that would forever change my life—the death of a friend who took his own life on account of being abused for his “otherness.” So unfolded the development of a character who would have to cope with such a magnificent loss, a story of pain and heartache and recovery. That story was one that grew out of a painful place, raw with emotion and a grief that had been foreign to me, and it, over time, came to be something else. It was originally submitted as a piece for workshop in class, totaling seventy-five pages, and was still just a shadow I could not quite make shape or sense of, something that only hinted at the full magnitude of what it would become.

After its initial completion, the story was put on hold for more than a year. It had started and ended as the narrative of someone who simply needed to grieve—the characters and the plot had served their purpose and naturally it went cold. Eventually though, the embers within the depths began to stir.

It wasn't until the presidential election of 2016 that the story I had started telling nearly a year before began to flicker back to life. The voices of the characters once again began to speak to me urgently, and it wasn't long before I took up writing for them again. Their story began evolving, expanding to more than just an homage to my friend, but to the struggle of many more as well. It began crafting itself into something I could never have predicted, and ultimately it became a way of trying to tell my own story.

Somehow I began weaving pieces of myself into the fabric—the bitter anger I felt towards those who had bullied my friend to the point of his death merged with something else. As a mixed-race kid who grew up in the still racially charged atmosphere of the southern U.S., my story began to turn into one that dealt with those issues and those stereotypes as well. The reality of my world always being split between white and black, with not a lot of space to contemplate that “both” is also a credible possibility, the project began to shift towards that idea of “one or the other.” The story became a way to release my intense frustrations towards a society that creates a divide between two options—and by extension, a society that allows privilege for some and hardship and oppression for the rest based off of a factor that one can literally not control.

However, as I continued to write, and as I continued to relay my frustrations, I became increasingly tired with the whole concept of hate and pitting the two sides against one another. It is not how I actually feel, nor how I wanted things to be, and I was straying too far from *my* story—it was not delivering the message I wanted to be sending. Hate is never the answer, as I like to believe, and even in my fictional world where war might be the only possible outcome, I didn’t want it to end that way. I wanted to create a world where maybe a happy solution really *could* be achieved. It *is* fiction after all. It’s perhaps the only place a “happily ever after” is possible, so I decided to chase it all the way.

This excerpt that I’ve submitted is only a tiny fragment of the work that I completed over the course of the academic year. Since this past September, the seventy-five page story I once submitted for a workshop has now become a full and completed novel resting at approximately two-hundred-fifty pages. What is submitted as my thesis is merely the introduction to a much

longer story, one that follows Nora through many self-discoveries and revelations about how she actually views the world. She goes from being a privileged member of society whose sister commits suicide because she can't cope with the apathy of her peers (spoiler alert, she didn't actually kill herself), to being perhaps the most resentful person of that very society she was born into. By the end of the novel, she comes to terms with the fact that nobody can determine for themselves the status they are granted at birth, and she realizes that people can only be what society *allows* them to believe that they are. More simply: it's not the people one should despise, but the system.

This story, although initially written for my friend who was ultimately killed for his sexual orientation, has somehow also become a commentary on racial pressures and oppression against minorities at large. It is about hate, but also more importantly, about the incredibly fatal repercussions that result from that toxic emotion.

While I was working on this project, it became a constant question for me whether or not I wanted to include, within the plot, a love story. It would have been extremely simple to create a love interest out of the two main characters, or even, to add a little extra drama, a love triangle. In its phase of being workshopped, I received plenty of feedback encouraging me to include that additional element (that's all people seem to read for these days), but ultimately I realized that that was not what I wanted. So many books contain powerful stories and wonderful narratives and yet almost all of them seem to mindlessly (and needlessly) take a leap in that direction—it's as though they *have* to include a romantic subplot and can't let the story itself stand on its own.

Personally, I didn't want to take that route. That wasn't the purpose of my story, and it wasn't relevant to my intentions. My novel is *all* about love—it's just not *that* kind of love story.

The world of my story revolves around a society that is cleaved between two entities. Citizens are either labeled as Primary or Secondary at birth, those who are Primary being the first-born child of any registered couple and therefore Marked with a symbol of the Government that allows them access to a life of luxury. The tensions within the novel are generated from members of the Secondary population that have banded together into various rebellious groups, the most prominent one being the Stand, and from recent uprisings of discontent. The rebels (and many Secondaries in general) are fighting for a world in which they have all the same rights to well-being and protection by the Government as Primaries—as they are, they live in run-down, overcrowded zones prone to violent outbreaks and petty crimes that have no official regulation.

The novel starts off with Nora wanting a war. Born as a Primary, she casts off that life after the death of her sister and chooses to live as an undocumented “in-betweeners,” essentially off the grid. She (privately at first) craves justice for the oppressed, even if it means bloodshed on every side. But by the end, what she fights for drastically changes. She begins to fight to *avoid* a war at all costs. It becomes her mission to stop the hatred, to shed light on the lies that spur resentment to such a physical degree. In a way, she both succeeds and fails in that mission. However, she does manage to bring attention to the issue and, in a way, topples the system (so one might say that she does actually succeed). The justice she had always wanted, she realizes, isn't going to come through bloodshed.

The colour red, as hinted at by the title, plays an enormous role in the story (something I didn't discover until the very last chapter). As a literary tool, red represents an enormous array of symbolisms: it is the colour of anger, the colour of blood, of violence, of passion, of love. It represents the progression of emotions that Nora discovers within herself throughout the novel's arc and, by the end (the colour which she sees in a fiery sunset), it represents a hope that her future might dawn in colours she's never seen before. It's her hope for a better life.

This book, as I only came to realize during this spring semester, and upon reading the memoir of Trevor Noah (who grew up in South Africa during apartheid), is about that same kind of intense separation—it took me a while to realize that it is about a divide possibly deeper than segregation. It is about the emotional effects of persecution which surpasses that of what I had intended, and it is about an injustice that I had never planned to expose or represent.

The moral has augmented to tremendous scope, and it represents a great many tender blemishes that are existing within America even—especially—today. Whether the two ranks are interpreted as social classes or races or genders or any kind of binary that may exist, this story is about imbalance. It is not a tale of war. It is not meant to revolve around anger, nor bitterness. It is not a story of revenge. It *is* a story about forgiveness. It is a story about love. It is a story about redemption. It is written for, and on behalf of, the overcomer. And also for those who could not make it.

I

They came in with flashlights. Through the thin veil of sleep, I could hear voices, the voices of men, low and rough and full of urgent breath. I sat up, chest heaving, to find the shadows of two hulking figures looming in my doorway. Little beams of light crisscrossed through my room, illuminating tiny points in colour, searching, until at last they landed upon me. I threw up a hand to shield my eyes, still unadjusted to the light, and I scrambled to move, to rip the sheets off of me so I could get up, but my limbs were heavy and slow. It was impossible to move quickly.

Hands were suddenly lifting me, pulling me out of bed, out of my room towards the stairs. In the dark, the smooth form of my bow huddled in a shadowed corner of my room, and it slipped beyond my reach—even as disheveled as I was, I immediately craved to have the familiar comfort of its protection in my hands, and at the same time, I prayed they had not noticed it there.

Immediately, two thoughts came into my head. The first was, if these men were Primaries, if they worked for the Government, then I was in no imminent danger. Violence of

any kind was strictly forbidden, as were weapons, so I would be taken to somewhere discreet and dealt with there, most likely never to return. Nobody ever did. I would have to break free from them before that could happen. My second thought was, these could be Secondaries. In which case, violence was entirely possible in this scenario. Though not as likely. There were far fewer Secondaries who wanted me dead.

As a flash of light crossed in front of my eyes, an image cut sharply into my vision. For a moment I thought I was in another house, not unlike this one—nice, uncrumbled, fresh, and new, one that still carried in it the scent of drying white paint. My mind was brought back to an airy room, bathed in the soft glow-light of dawn, lying in a large double bed made of cotton and clouds, asleep beside my sister. I could have sworn by my own breath that it wasn't my body being dragged from the bed, but hers, lifted up into the arms of strange men with pristine, stainless suits, men with the Mark of Government approval showing like a bright red bruise over the skin of their left wrists. Primary men. And my sister's body.

Just as quickly as the light passed over my eyes, the image was gone. I blinked, repeatedly. I wasn't in that house. There was no sun seeping through wide glass windows, no white paint on these walls, no still body in the shambled bed beside me. Strong hands were holding me, and as I strained to free my wrists from their tight grasp, they pinned my arms to my sides and simply lifted me. As a young woman, not quite to my second decade, I was by nature significantly smaller than them—and by circumstance I wasn't very heavy. I was breathing hard, as much as they were, but I sucked down a full breath and held it there. *Get a hold of yourself, Nora*, I thought. *You knew this would happen eventually.* I bit back the urge to cry out. I couldn't argue with fate.

Even in the dark I could see that these men weren't wearing white, and as this computed in my mind, it was an instant relief. There was no chance they were with the Government. They had to be Secondaries, a far less dangerous threat long term, and yet I still tensed myself against their grip. Their urgency unsettled me.

The hot pant of hurried breath crawled against my skin, the smell of man sweat was rancid in the thick air, darkness showed between the wood slats that covered the broken, glassless windows. It was night still, that much I could gather. And we were in my house, making unsteady progress down the stairs through the dark, yet I still could not gather how these men had managed to intrude so easily.

Another thought struck me: where was everyone else? There were many people who shared this house with me, and yet it was as deserted as our entire street outside appeared to be. The thought shook me as I realized I'd not heard the whistle. No alarm bell, no warning in the silence before they'd entered my room. Even through my squinted, straining eyes I could see these men carrying me off into the unknown were not being opposed. Perhaps it was meant to be. Maybe I had stolen too much. Angered a past employer. Perhaps I stole from the wrong person. All of the possibilities flashed through my mind. The time for my penance had come. That's how it seemed.

Outside the ancient house, I was roughly dumped into the back seat of a transport vehicle. My heart leapt. Whether they wore white or not, only Primaries had transports. I glanced around, suddenly more afraid than before. If these men truly were Primaries, I had lost my best moment for escape the moment the transport door had been shut behind me. I was stuffed between the two large men that settled themselves on either side, and without a word they nodded to the driver. The quick throbbing of my heart made my hands flutter like butterfly wings, like opaque

parchment that could be bent by a gentle whisper of wind. Weak. I sucked in deep gulps of air, nauseated by the feeling. If only I'd had my bow, if I hadn't been caught so off guard. If only I'd never fallen asleep, they wouldn't have taken me by surprise. My hands clenched into fists. I trembled, and it sickened me.

Beneath me, the engine of the vehicle rumbled to life. I blinked, then quickly sat up. I had to pull myself together.

Outside the darkly tinted windows I could see nothing but the empty streets of Temporary 3 in the midnight hours—quiet, dilapidated and seemingly abandoned havens that housed other outsiders like myself—and in the front seat nothing but the back of a man's head, whose eyes in the rearview mirror told me nothing. Those eyes flicked towards me when he noticed me stirring, then back to the road. Was he a Primary? A law-enforcer, one of the Coders who was destined to hold me accountable for every Government Code I had broken? I glanced at his left wrist, searching for his Mark, but I got the feeling he wasn't one of them. A sensation trickled down my spine that told me these men didn't mean to kill me. They hadn't injured me, not really, or tied my hands even. I wasn't the only fugitive living on this street, and they hadn't searched for any of my comrades who had failed to make an appearance—I wouldn't be the only captive if this was an outlaw cleansing raid. But then, I wondered why these men had come here specifically for me.

My head throbbed. I put a hand to my temple to steady myself. I tried to remember my growing list of enemies, people I had stolen from or maybe cheated in a bad deal, but all I could think of was the off-putting way that my clenched fists still shook and the way my mind was in such a useless state of confusion. I didn't want to be taken like this. If I was going to be captured

by the Government I wanted to at least go down with a fight. If this was the way that I went out, I had wanted it to be more beautiful.

The contents of my stomach were swimming up my throat, and suddenly I felt the wave of nausea stronger even than before.

“Could you... pull over? I don’t feel so well.”

The words cracked out of me in a hoarse whisper. The way my own voice sounded watery and thin in my ears was pathetic. My fists tightened more, veins expanding, and I let the darkened crescents of my fingernails dig into my palms. I pulled in another breath.

The driver looked at me again in the mirror, then the vehicle angled to the side of the road, slowed to a stop. The man to my right pushed open the door, and as I crawled for the opening, I felt his hand on the back of my shirt collar. I’d barely leaned across him as the insides of my stomach upheaved themselves onto the run-down curb of the sidewalk.

Finally, some relief. In a puddle of rainwater from the night before, I could see my dark eyes staring back at me. They were hard and glassy, the whole expression rather wordless. My watery reflection looked pale and maybe a bit too gaunt, but it was me. I didn’t *look* afraid—it was a miniscule comfort.

In a slight breeze, my image wavered, rippling uncertainly. I froze for a moment, contemplating my two options. One, I could jump from the transport right now. It would be so easy, push the door open further, roll from the vehicle and vanish into the night. Even in the ruffled state I was in, I knew I could hide well enough to get away, I could blend in with these familiar shadows like falling into the arms of a friend. Judging by the fact I’d never seen these men before, I doubted they could know this neighborhood as well as I did. No, I was certain. No one knew Temporary 3 better than me.

My other option was to sit still and let the events play out. This didn't strike me as the best idea, but I had an overwhelming curiosity to know what would happen. They hadn't slit my throat yet. They pulled over the transport so that I could vomit on the curb. All of these things were strange. I wasn't the type to shy away from a risky situation—even if my life was at stake. Gulping air, I sat back, pulling the door closed again and we were once more speeding off into the night.

As I reasoned with myself and felt my heart begin to slow to normal, I let my eyes strain in the darkness, searching for some sort of sign to tell me about who this captor could be. My eyes flickered again towards the driver's wrist. His left hand came up to the wheel, reached for the top so that he could pull it downwards as he turned the vehicle, and as he stretched, there—the pale skin exposed, the sleeve pulled just far enough down to reveal those life-filled, ghostly veins.

There was nothing, no Mark. So the Coders hadn't come. Not for me, not yet. I felt all panic ease out of me then, in one extended silent breath. He must have been a Secondary, or an in-between even, like me—someone without rank. In either case, he would have little reason to be after my life. Perhaps I was being hired for another reconnaissance job. Maybe more theft work. Although I'd never been kidnapped from my bed by a possible employer before. That part was entirely irregular.

I leaned my head back against the seat, feeling somewhat relieved that I wasn't headed toward the Government building, my eyes sinking closed against the dimly lit flashes of the street lamps that occasionally trailed by in a blur. Outside, the moon that had watched over and judged me all these years hung as lifeless and silent as ever. Before us, the city of Region sprawled like a crowded black landscape.

We drove through the sagging gates of Temporary 3 towards the lower Zones where the Secondaries lived. Away from the inner neighborhoods and the Government building—away from what was a certain end for me.

There was still time, then. I wasn't sure if I should feel relieved or disappointed, slightly flustered that I'd have to live like this still more—always on edge, always expecting them to catch up to me. I was still a nobody for now. I lived outside the law—the Government didn't know about me or where I was, and to them, I still did not exist. But for how much longer? That was always the question.

After a long while I felt the transport vehicle glide smoothly to a stop, felt the life of the engine cut off as the key was pulled from the ignition. A gruff voice pulled me all the way back to the present. There was no one around. No buildings either, in fact. I hadn't noticed us veer off from the road, but when I glanced up, we were far from Region's edge.

“Get out.”

I obliged cautiously, climbing from the back seat slowly, teetering out into the open air. The vehicle was parked outside of what could have been a bunker—above ground there was nothing but a solid wooden door set into a slanted block of concrete, obviously the entrance to some sort of underground facility. We were in the middle of a forest, dense trees packed all around and in every direction, the bulky vehicle resting in the only open space for what seemed like miles in any direction. I felt small and insignificant surrounded by those giants of trees, and a shudder crawled down my spine with a chill that raised bumps to my skin. I should have been paying more attention to how we had gotten to this place. It was unfamiliar to me entirely.

The driver of the vehicle gave me a shove towards the door of the bunker-building.

“Down the stairs. Keep straight. He's waiting for you.”

Waiting for *me*? I gave the driver a curious look over my shoulder, wondering who this *he* could be, but the look on his face was as impassive as the rock surface of the concrete, as unrevealing as the woods that crowded around us. I shouldered a shrug, both to push away the chills down my spine as to feign nonchalance, and I moved towards the bunker.

The door creaked on ancient hinges when I pushed, squealing in protest in the silence of the wood, resounding with chilling echoes off the trees. A gaping darkness stretched down into the earth, smelling of damp mildew and stones untouched by sun. I held my breath, hesitating. Even if these men weren't working for the Government, there was a chance I could still be walking into a trap. Something about the air felt ominous—and yet, I felt a worm of curiosity still squirming inside me. I sighed softly. I was tired of hiding, anyway.

I cast the driver one more glance, but he simply angled his head toward the stairs, the set to his shoulders unchanging. I took in one more full breath, turned again toward that bleak darkness and reminded myself of the decision that I had made. Then without another thought I plunged down into the reek of the shadowed unknown.

As collected as I was now, I was spurred by my growing sense of interest—and indifference. I crept downward with nothing but a thin streak of moonlight leading the way from overhead and my hand against the cool, mossy stone to guide me.

By the time my feet reached the cold bottom of those stairs, the open doorway at the top was nothing but an illuminated pinpoint of light, and any panic or fear that I had felt had melted into a cold callous of a guarded anxiousness. I wasn't in Primary captivity, not yet. Anything other than that I was content to handle with my shoulders squared or my hands raised in surrender.

The passage that stretched before me was dimly lit, torches burning on the wall every odd pace or so, showing me what seemed to be a hallway that lead to a single door. I approached and raised my hand to knock, but it simultaneously swung open, as of its own accord. I lifted my eyebrow in surprise.

A man stood there on the other side, and from what I could glimpse of his left wrist, he too was Unmarked. When he saw me standing there, one hand still lingering in the air to knock, eyes tracing his arm, his lips curled upward in a rude snarl. I looked back at him evenly, smirking a little to myself. He definitely didn't look clever or particularly bright—certainly not a threat I should be worried about. I suddenly felt far more confident in this situation, especially because I knew how to defend myself and I was now both alert and on guard. I was a trained criminal, and a skilled one. If I had to fight or flee, I could trust myself to find a way. This man didn't look like he could run faster than a Primary schoolchild.

“Stop standin' there an' hurry up. He's waitin' for you.”

He grabbed my arm none too gently and pulled me through the door, closing it with a gruff *slam* behind us. With his iron clasp still bound around my arm he steered me through a maze of a complex.

This new hallway was surprisingly clean, glowing and bright with well-lit overhead lamps and industrial white walls. Looking around, it was extremely unlike how I would imagine an underground hideout to look, especially if this was a Secondary operation. But I liked it much better than the moldy passage of the stairway. This was sanitized and open, like a hospital.

The man guided me down more hallways, around more corners, and finally down a few more stairs until we reached an enormous pair of double doors. With a fist he banged on one of them, rattling it on its giant hinges and making the whole structure reverberate with the sound. I

gritted my teeth against the unearthly *clanging*, then braced for whatever kind of response we might get from the other side. We waited a few moments in a tense and expectant silence, then finally a voice seeped through from beyond, distant and soft.

“Come in, please.”

The majestic doors swung inward, opened by men attending them from the other side, and we strolled in, my arm still in the tight grasp of my escort. With a firm push, he shoved me towards the center of the room, and I tripped forward, off balance. I threw a nasty glance at him over my shoulder while brushing myself off, but as I straightened up, my lips parted slightly, my eyes stretching a bit wider, and for a moment I forgot my irritation.

The room we stood in was cavernous. Overhead the most enormous and elegant chandelier I had ever seen hung gently from the rafters. On the walls, tapestries hung like beautiful waterfalls, flowing from ceiling to floor, depicting wordless scenes of battles, of peace, of beauty. Around the hall were suits of armor, weapons on display, artifacts of ancient importance—along either side were swords in flashy sheaths. A hauberk here. A longbow there. Near the door, a table of knives gleamed temptingly. And there at the end of the great hall, on a throne-like dais that occupied a large portion of the room, sat a man whose countenance could not have seemed more out of place.

The man looked like he belonged to a time that was not this one—or at least in a room not as kingly as this. He wore clothes of the forest, a tunic and leggings that were muted in colour, and boots that rose to his knees. Around his powerful shoulders he wore a cloak so majestic and mysterious that he could have crawled from one of my childhood storybooks. And there was his face. His face so common and plain, strong yet quiet, but with eyes that grabbed one’s attention. Those eyes could have commanded anyone.

“Come in, please,” he said again, but only this time did I realize his voice was not actually distant, but just low, and also soft, which did not match his appearance in the least. I stepped a bit further into the room, trying to take in all of the grandeur around me without altering my expression or letting this stranger catch on to my awe.

Eventually I was only a few paces from the throne-chair where the man sat. I gave a low whistle, and a tiny nod, honestly impressed and feeling emboldened by the fact that there were only a handful of people in the room. My eyes swept the far corners, catching a glimpse of a door to the left behind the dais.

“This is a nice place,” I said, my tone just as guarded and indifferent as I’d hoped it would be. “Seems a bit much, though.”

The forest man’s eyes never left my face, tracing something there that I wasn’t aware of. The corners of his lips rose, if only slightly, but there was a friendly look in that impressive gaze.

“I would agree,” he said after a moment, pausing to take a sweeping glance of the massive chamber, focusing on the chandelier before looking back at me. “Welcome to the Headmaster’s Court. This would be the Hall for all grand festivities and political arrangements. I am M, leader of the Headmaster’s military division.”

The way that he was sitting in the throne-chair seemed unacceptable by what I imagined were a Court’s standards. He sat deeply, his legs stretched out with a great casualness that put an air of ease into the room. I looked him over again, trying to gauge the amount of authority this man held.

“What’s the M stand for?” I asked, taking the opportunity to walk slowly over to examine a sword that rested on a table for display.

I bent to peer at it more closely, hoping it might tell me what kind of place this was. With a finger I traced the tip of the blade, noticing its fine edge. It'd been sharpened recently. I couldn't help but to let out an impressed breath, turning to take in a few other blades that hung nearby. The craftsmanship was extraordinary, and based off of the delicate balance and detail of each hilt I could guess that these weapons were handmade, most likely by a master during the Third Era. These were antiques, unseen by the public for quite a few centuries, and if I hadn't spent so much time in studying their history from my stolen books I might not have even known the use for such ancient beauties. Something so outdated as a sword, or even weapons in general, hadn't been mentioned in a history book for at least fifty years—no, the Government would not promote the knowledge of violence in any form, even one so basic as a blade.

Being as I did recognize these artifacts, I knew that their value was without compare, and I took extra care to maintain that my expressions did not reveal the extent of my awe or my knowledge. My lips were a grim line, my eyes half-closed in an expression of calm and collected ignorance—although, I could not entirely suppress the brightness of my gaze behind those eyelids. I glanced sidelong at the stranger on the dais, trying to evaluate him more carefully. The sheer number of weapons in this room was extraordinary, and I wondered how—and why—they'd all been gathered in this one place. The Government would have been beside itself to know such a room like this existed.

The man named M watched me, quietly for a moment. He nodded to the man who had brought me into the room as well as to the attendants, and they all saluted him then bowed out quickly. As the doors closed, he stood up slowly and pulled his hands up into a long stretch, cracking more than just a few stiff joints. The movement was somehow feline.

“Mouse,” he said. Then with the same fluid grace with which he had stretched, he moved down the few short steps to join me by the blade.

I turned to him, holding back a chuckle.

“Mouse?” I repeated.

An eyebrow shot up on his quiet face, but I saw the same soft lift come to the corners of his lips.

“Yes. The M stands for Mouse. But please,” he said. “Call me M.”

I rolled a shoulder in an indifferent shrug, hiding the smirk that curled my own lips.

“Sure,” I said, turning back to study the tarnished hilt on the sword. I ran my hand over the molding, feeling the age and the creases and the craft. It wasn’t exactly a name someone was born with, and I wondered what kind of name he had left behind to adopt something like Mouse—but it wasn’t my place to wonder about something like that. People decided whatever they wanted.

“So, Mouse,” I said, my voice without any particular tone. “Why is it you’ve been waiting for me all this long time? You need something?”

Mouse, or I guess M as he would have called himself, was silent, studying me with a strange look on his face. After a moment, he gave a tiny shake of his head.

“You know,” he said. “For a woman you’re not exactly what I would expect. But then, I guess everything they’ve said about you certainly seems to be true.”

I didn’t bother to straighten up, but I shot him a look from where I was still bent over the sword. I squinted my eyes a bit, trying to gauge his character. Was that supposed to be a joke? I scoffed quietly to myself and closed my eyes for a moment. What did he think he knew about me?

“‘For a woman’?” I repeated. “By that statement I’m going to assume you haven’t had much exposure to women.”

Finally I straightened up, met his full gaze though he stood nearly half of a head taller than me, if not more.

“And based off of what I *hear* people say about me, then yeah I’d say most of it’s true. Not all of it. But most. I take my job very seriously as it can, at times, be.... dangerous.”

I looked at him pointedly and turned away, not liking the proximity of this confrontation. It was just he and I in the room now, and I wasn’t sure whether I should be comforted by that, or wary that he believed he could defend himself against me alone should I decide to attack him. He *had* introduced himself as the leader of some type of organized military. I let that fact sit in the back of my mind as I moved further away.

I strolled over to where an immense longbow was mounted on the wall, unstrung and hanging beside a quiver stocked with arrows of a fine, grey fletching. My eyes followed the ridge of the bow limbs, the elegant and simple design, yet also noting the care in the carve and the craft of its riser. I ran a finger over the wood where the fibers had been expertly seared together.

“This bow is young,” I said softly, as much as a thought aloud to myself as to divert the conversation. “It couldn’t have been made twenty years ago.”

There was an elegant strength in the gentle curve of the limbs, the kind of power that I hadn’t seen in any bow before. I was familiar, especially, with bows, but the bow that I used—the bow left behind, I noted with a grimace, still nestled in the corner of my room—was made by an acquaintance of mine, and was by no means a work of art such as this.

From directly over my shoulder I could hear the man called M exhale in a sigh as he joined me by the weapon. The sound was mixed with an air of weariness and fondness, by the

weight of it. Reaching around me, he lifted the bow from where it hung, handling it with such a gentle touch that again I felt a twinge of confusion—what kind of military man was this? There was a tiny smile on his face, one that lit his eyes with a gentle warmth.

“You have a good eye for weaponry,” he said, sounding impressed. I scowled as I recognized my major slip, quickly recovering my expression, but his eyes were on the bow anyway. I bit my lip sharply.

“This bow is actually fifteen years old, but it has indeed been used a lot in that time. Maybe too much.”

With one long motion, he strung the bow, with such ease and practice that I knew he was an accomplished archer. He held it up, tested the draw, then offered it to me almost shyly.

Surprised, I took it carefully, letting the weight fall against my arm and relishing in the feel of the worn grip. It was a bow with extraordinary power, a thing to be respected. When I looked back at M, his eyes were on the weapon, watching me closely.

“This is your bow,” I said, noticing the glowing, and somehow proud, gleam in his gaze.

He nodded, glancing at me.

“Yes. It was a gift.”

I did not question him further, but offered it back to him, and waited while he unstrung it and returned it to its post on the wall.

“You need my help?” I asked. I looked again at the bow, hanging in its place, resonating silent power, the gift that was clearly meaningful to him in some significant way.

“Yes,” M said after a moment, and his soft voice was quiet.

For a long moment, he too looked at the bow, perhaps reliving some old and unforgotten memory. At last those eyes flicked back to me, searching questioningly for something I wasn't sure that they would find.

“You must be familiar with the political movements that have been going on lately,” he said, the statement being intoned more as a question than not.

I nodded absently, moving away from the bow because it was calling to me quietly, almost a silent scream.

Everybody knew about the political movements. Primary citizens, those first-born, were blessed with the Mark of the Government at birth, as well as with all the benefits that came with that Marking. They sat in the lap of luxury, while those who were Second-born were contained in unregulated neighborhoods that were oftentimes radical and dangerous, outside the same protection that Primary neighborhoods received. There was plenty of hardship in the Secondary Zones, and lately they were becoming increasingly belligerent about it. It was hard *not* to hear about what was occurring these days. All of Region was simmering on some unspoken brink.

“There have been upsets,” I murmured. “Discontent from the Secondaries. Finally.”

We turned to walk around the Hall, taking slow, undeliberate steps. Walking just to move, not to travel. M gave a thoughtful hum.

“Yes, the people are unhappy with the way their Government has been ignoring them,” he offered, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with my tone. “There has been one undercurrent that has connected these displays of unrest. Tell me,” and I felt his eyes flicker to me briefly, “are you familiar with an organization called the Stand?”

His eyes were deeply inquisitive, piercing, probing. I threw an indifferent glance back towards him, sure not to give him the satisfaction of a reaction. I steadily met his eyes, raised an

eyebrow. Inside, I smirked. I had no idea what he was talking about, but as we walked we were slowly approaching the table that stood by the door.

On the table sat the display of exquisitely decorated knives, blades that glittered with such brilliance that they looked soft. Such beauty I had never seen in a blade and already my fingers itched to reach out for them. As we passed, while our eyes were locked in silent search, I could not resist, allowing my hand of its own action to glide over a beautiful seven inch blade, slide it silently away into the secret folds of my huge coat. I never blinked. But I did hum thoughtfully.

“Hmm, can’t say it sounds familiar,” I said, and then that moment was broken.

M’s eyes searched into my soul for only a moment longer, seemed to give up with a sigh, and returned to linger on the tapestries that flowed from the walls.

I let out a quick, triumphant breath, disguised within a quiet scoff. I felt my skin tingle with pleasure at the touch of the cold steel. A fantastic prize. M went on, unaware and in his own sort of trance.

“Hmm, yes not many have heard about the Stand. It’s still a very underground organization,” and he smiled because we must have been several meters under the surface of the earth, “that was created by Secondaries to try to equalize between the ranks. It’s a young project, but even so it’s been fairly successful in the outer Zones. There are members all over the country and the support is only strengthening. Over time it might be large enough to come above ground, or—and this is the ultimate hope—be able to topple the hierarchy of Primaries and Secondaries altogether.”

I stole a quick glance in his direction. He'd adopted a dreamy and distant look, as if he were dreaming of a future full of justice and equality and peace. I scoffed again, but aloud this time. There was a tight, bitter knot tying itself around my heart. Such naiveté.

“All over the country?” I repeated in disbelief. I allowed a mirthless laugh. “What country? You surely can't mean this depressing assortment of districts do you? We barely constitute as a state, at most. We'd have to be a 'politically unified people' to fit the definition of a 'country,' and I just don't think we have the freedom to call ourselves that.”

I shot him a sidelong look to see if he got my point, and he gave a sad sort of smile with a tiny nod of his head.

“No,” he agreed. “I don't think we're able to say that.”

My stomach churned with a vile toss and for a moment I thought I might either vomit for the second time or watch a gaping hole burn through my gut. Instead I spat on the ground, trying to rid my mouth of the horrid taste of disgust.

M was looking at me with that curious look on his face again, as if trying to read me the way one tries to read a book that isn't in one's native tongue. As blunt as I was, there was nothing straightforward about me.

I caressed the elegant hilt of the stolen knife nestled in my coat, and I felt a sigh ease down my spine. There was something so calming, so peacefully familiar about the feel of the reassuring weapon, so close at hand, and so ready. I turned my level eyes back toward M, or Mouse, or whoever this stranger was. I raised an eyebrow, not really in question, more in faint amusement at something I didn't find funny.

“So, you need my help for something, is that it? Are you looking to hire me? Who's your target?”

It wasn't really surprising, if that was the purpose behind all of this. I had had quite a few employers lately, mostly Secondaries looking for intel, sometimes the occasional prison break from a local holding cell. An assassination, though that had only ever happened once, and that was a very out-of-the-ordinary case. I hadn't even killed the man, but let him loose in the forest outside of the city. My employer didn't need to know the difference.

The work that I did helped. Even I needed money to live on, whether my existence was less than acknowledged by the so-called "better half" of society or not. But those employers were people I knew—or at least people who knew the people that I knew. We were a strong network of strangers and that made us familiars. I didn't know who this Mouse person was, or this organization, and I was willing to bet that they didn't know me. Just my thieving name. But it seemed so many people knew my name these days.

I closed my eyes with a sigh. So perhaps these people had already done their research on me. Did they know my reputation so well? I wondered if they knew anything about me, really.

M kept his eyes carefully trained on me, seeming quiet and hopeful and still with that incredible sense of influence and command. Such strange eyes he had.

"We need your help," is what he told me. "Will you help us?"

This sounded like it might be more than an ordinary job request. I pondered for a moment, more to humour him than anything else. It wasn't like I refused many jobs. Income was income, and I knew better than to refuse good pay.

"You had me kidnapped from my bed," I reminded him, reflecting with a dull sort of amusement. It was a rather bizarre way of making a first impression.

He raised one eyebrow, and when he looked at me, a tiny smile was lurking on his lips.

“My apologies,” he returned, his tone warm and sincere. “However... Would you have come here any other way?”

I gave him a look that I imagined as indifferent. Strangely enough, he was right.

“It’s a bit of a strange method. But no, I probably would not have. There are simpler jobs that are much closer to where I live.”

He smiled again, faintly.

“But,” he went on. “You seem to be interested, at least a bit, in this one. Can we count on you then? To work with us?”

I hesitated, my mind still turning over the past hour or so in my head. It was all very unusual. Definitely intriguing, though. At the very least, my interest *had* been piqued.

I might as well accept this as any other offer. I lifted a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug.

“Can’t hurt,” I replied, and he smiled.

“Well then,” he said, sounding more than a little relieved.

“Welcome to the Stand.”

II

The driver pulled the big vehicle up to the curb a few hundred paces away from my building. We would only be here for a moment, just long enough for me to collect my things so I could bring them to the Court, but the sight of the old street was somehow comforting. In the rear view mirror I could see the dim reflection of a streetlamp off of the driver's sunglasses. I was curious as to why he was wearing them, as there was still an hour or so before dawn. Somehow I got the feeling that his eyes were trained on me in the backseat, through the mirror and the shades and the darkness. I shifted forward a bit and draped my arm over the back of the passenger seat so that I could talk next to his ear.

“Hey, guy,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder in a far too familiar way. “Next time you drive at night, remember that you’re breaking seven different Codes by wearing those shades while it’s dark out. Wouldn’t want those Primary idiots hauling you in for something as stupid as that, would we? Then you’d really never see the light of day again.”

And I patted his arm with a mirthless chuckle before I climbed out of the back seat and closed the door with a muffled *thud* that echoed down the empty streets of Temporary 3. I was

both grateful to and irritated with the Stand for offering me a room to sleep in while I helped them with their upcoming assignment—it would be nice to have a more fortified place to hunker down for a few weeks, where I might actually be able to get a real night’s rest, but at the same time, I didn’t like the idea that they were doing me a favour.

I let out a cloud of breath. In any case, it was nice to be back here, even if it was just to say farewell for the time being.

A quick scan relieved me that my street was not just empty. It was deserted. The way the wind whistled through the boarded up houses and down the cinderblock chimneys was eerie enough to make one’s hair stand on end. But not to me. It was lovely. That was exactly how this area was supposed to be—“uninhabitable,” labelled as such by the Primaries who found its status not condoning with the standards of “acceptable” living. This district was simply too poor to maintain such expectations, and therefore those that had been living in these shambles had been relocated into the overcrowded lower Zones that were already on the verge of collapse.

That was what made these kinds of neighborhoods “temporary.” They were scheduled to be destroyed, but over the last few decades, the Government had never prioritized actually seeing the demolitions through. Entire districts were left unattended, and my whole neighborhood was now out of mind and forgotten by the officials who had once sought its destruction. It was now home to a group of in-betweeners, like myself, those who didn’t identify with any rank, neither Primary nor Secondary, and who lived more as ghosts in the city than as actual citizens. As far as the Government was concerned, we were just as forgotten as the crumbling houses we lived in.

My house was a two-story building with faded red paint, the boarded up door standing slightly ajar to welcome in any wanderers searching for a night’s shelter, and as I jumped lightly up the rotted front steps I heard the soft whistle that spread throughout the house. There were

about twenty others I shared the building with: a few families, a couple here and there, small groups of friends, and of course the odd loner. The whistle was our signal that someone was entering, a sound so faint only those who were listening for it could catch it, and if it was long and low the house knew it meant trouble. The whistle that I entered by, a short series of even chirps, was a welcoming melody to my ears.

I'd barely let the door shudder closed behind me before bodies seemed to emerge from the shadowy cobwebs that dripped from every corner of the house. My name was whispered through the darkness, almost in disbelief, "Nora..." like I could have been a phantom returned from the dead. I shivered and breathed out a contented sigh, reaching out to lean on the handrail that had once elegantly decorated the now decaying front stairwell. The tiniest of pleased smiles curled my lips and I laughed—a tight, heartless sound, even to me.

"Surprised to see me?" I said.

The group of bodies shivered as a single figure pushed its way forward. I turned, catching sight of the one face that I'd hoped most to see.

"Penny," I breathed, taking her wrinkled, outstretched hands in my own. "Didn't think I'd be back, did you?"

I teased, but I saw that her eyes glowed with a glossy sheen when she smiled.

"I knew you'd be alright," she told me. "But I wasn't sure we'd see you again so soon."

I was the only one who ever called her Penny. It wasn't uncommon for people to change their names after deciding to adopt a new way of life. Most people who knew me, knew me as Leona—but it was an identity I was more than ready to run from. I insisted on Nora, a nickname I'd just taken a liking to, but as for Penny, her name had simply drifted from her.

Everyone in our house called her Phoenix. She was the oldest in-betweener on this street and probably the only one of us who had been around before any of these uprisings had begun. I could only remember vague rebellions that had occurred during my childhood, but those memories were gilded in a different, golden light.

“It was the Stand that came for you, wasn’t it?” she asked me, and there was something melancholic in her tone, wistful. When I nodded, she let out her breath in a slow, shaky sigh.

“I was really hoping it wouldn’t come to this,” she whispered. “There’s too much discontent these days. I’m afraid something drastic will happen. Something we’ll regret.”

I squeezed her hand in my own, gently, but with a bit of urgency that surprised us both.

“How do you know about the Stand, Penny?” I asked.

I frowned, wondering that she had never mentioned it to me before. We spoke about almost everything. We were each other’s closest confidants, despite our hesitance to form attachments. Having allies—having friends—it was a dangerous game.

In the darkness, her old, blue eyes shone like silver crescents in the moonglow, reflecting the shallow light in a strange and beautiful way. It reminded me of the way that spiders’ silk looked under a full moon, soft and ethereal, as if it were a thread from another world that had landed here by mistake. Penny blinked those eyes at me; she patted my hand.

“Come, I’ll tell you what I know of it as you gather your things. I know they could not have granted you much time.”

I had only come to gather my few belongings, but how she could have known that I didn’t know. I felt apprehension rise at the base of my neck like a cold warning. There was something serious about this whole situation that I was not aware of, something greater that I could not detect but that lurked, ever-present, just beyond what we could speak about.

Taking Penny's leathery hand in my own, we climbed the slanting staircase, each stair groaning and protesting under our weight as we ascended. In the foyer, the rest of the house dispersed, curious whispers floating up to us and drifting through the tense, solemn air. Everyone returned to their watches, to their brief rests, to their distractions. So was life in the house—always on guard.

Penny and I stepped through the door-less entrance of my room, into the tiny closet of a space, my blankets and sheets spread and rumpled across the sparse floorboards as they had been left just hours before—everything was just as it had been dropped. I breathed in the familiar musk of age and chill and cobwebs thick with dust. I flicked on the single electric lamp that stood on the floor beside the pile of quilts and sheets that was the bed, bending to straighten the rumpled mess.

Penny shuffled quietly further into the room, sank slowly and carefully into a splitting wicker chair that sat stiffly and unused in the corner. For a moment I looked at her, took in the years that creased her face so profoundly, noticed that unmistakable glow of age and wisdom in her colourless, fantastic eyes. Then I darted my glance away and I pulled a battered bag from the tiny alcove that might have once been a closet.

“What is it, Penny?” I said, my tone flat. “You seem on edge. There's something you've known for a while now, isn't there? But you haven't told me.”

A sigh as heavy as stone rolled into the room, sounding very much like the last breath of someone dying of asphyxiation. Without air. My own breath halted.

I glanced at her again, quick, forcing the sudden furrow from my brow. Her eyes were closed so she didn't notice my stricken look, and I returned to the bag that I was beginning to fill with things. This wasn't the time to be remembering *that* night. As she sighed, I drew a deep

breath, fighting the upsurge of memories, rancid and sweet, of lying in that wide, pristine bed, carelessly and obliviously sound asleep beside another whose breath was already slowing, ceasing because there was just no air. Another shirt was stuffed roughly into the bag. Another scarf, a pair of loose-fitting jeans. This wasn't the time to be remembering. In the corner, Penny didn't notice the set to my shoulders, she couldn't see that my face was drawn and pale. I focused only on my movements. I had to pack.

"They came for me too, once, many years ago," she said finally, breaking the silence that crowded in.

Her voice was a tiny sound, a whisper that blew around the room with the draft that seeped from the boarded-up window. From the corner of my eyes, I saw she shook her head, almost unperceivably.

"That was before they were a big organization, before they had any power, really. It was just a small band of rebels, desperate and fed up fighters who wanted change and thought they could make a difference."

I felt her ice-blue eyes fix on me, shimmer a bit as they pooled water softly in the moonlight.

"We all think we can make a difference. Some of us just don't take that chance."

My hands hesitated in wrestling still more socks into the sack. I turned to her this time, to take her in fully over my shoulder.

"You didn't go with them?" I asked, and even I could hear the disbelief slip into my tone. I cleared my throat, focused on what my hands were doing. "Well, why not? You seem to have always had this fighting spirit in you."

A small smile cracked her ancient lips, pulling the wrinkles of her face into pleasant lines of something resembling happiness. A rumbling laugh choked out of her, but it was somber and overcast with remorse.

“I did, I turned them away. I wouldn’t go. Even now, it’s one of my life’s biggest and only regrets. They came asking for my help because they knew I had something that I could have offered them, and out of my own personal fear I refused. There was just too much risk involved. What they were doing was extremely illegal—I mean, overthrow the Government?”

Again, an almost unseen shake of her head. I heard her scoff.

“Is it even possible? I didn’t think so. I was afraid to think so, but more than that I think I was afraid to consider what would happen to me if the Government discovered I was part of it. What if we failed? Which seemed the more likely outcome, if you’d asked me. They would find me out, take me away, bury me in their wretched Compound. I couldn’t think of being in that darkness, I just wasn’t ready.”

We were both sitting very still, and in that moment we were both afraid of moving. Our breath was caught up in our throats so that the room was intensely, savagely silent. Only the pounding of our hearts and the coursing of hot and fearful blood could be felt, resounding with limitless echoes off the peeling walls. Her eyes wavered in the uncertain light of the dim lamp, ever trained on my face, eager to discern something there, desperate to discover something. She fought to find what she had feared to believe was lost forever, and I felt my heart lurch in fright that she might never find it.

“My biggest pride, my life’s sole accomplishment, is all in you. Everything that I could have ever been now is in you.”

She let those words rest heavily in the stagnant air for a moment, she let us breathe them in because they were the only things left to breathe. When I looked back at her, I wondered if my eyes wavered too. I couldn't be sure, but I hoped not.

“Leona,” she said, and I felt my hands hesitate at the use of that name. “I have trained you and taught you and tutored you until the sky has gone black, and now it's time for you to finally live up to everything that I know and believe you are capable of. The Stand has come for you. They see something in you and they have a hope that you can do something for them. It's not every day they come asking for someone's help. That's why I let them in the door when they asked for you. You can *do* something, and now you *get* to do it. But there's only one thing that you have to promise me you won't forget.”

She leaned forward in the creaking wooden chair, earnest now and so serious that I could suddenly see the hours, the days, the years that we had spent in working together in such close proximity, saw the patient and the stern edge to that wise, steely gaze. She took my calloused hands into her own, clasped them in a desperate grip. She locked her gaze deep into mine, commanding that I take these words as if my very life depended on it.

“You are allowed to be afraid,” she said. “Just never, *never* back down when you know you need to stand up. It's all a matter of will.”

The look that she gave me was imploring, so grave and grim that I could only nod. I felt my mouth open, as if I could have possibly responded to that expression on her face, but suddenly the door was filled with a body and someone was standing there, tall and out of breath, eyes sweeping the dim room until they alighted on us. A hand shot out and grabbed mine from Penny's, pulling me roughly to my feet so quickly that I swiveled almost off balance.

Instinctively, and before I could ask my brain to think, my free hand had sunken into my coat and pulled the stolen knife from my pocket so fast that even I blinked. I had the seven-inch knife, blade edge to his throat, and we stood eye to eye, one looking at the other in a moment of panicked uncertainty and terror. At last he, whoever he was, seemed to recover, not paying any mind to the cold steel pressed up against his bobbing pulse. His voice was low, hasty and urgent.

“Quickly, it’s time to leave.”

Penny and I were both on our feet now, staring at this stranger that stood before us. Neither of us had heard the whistle. I felt both of our eyes move instinctively toward his wrist. He stared back at us, less intrigued by our scrutiny than clearly fraught with worry, more so for my sake than his, not caring to push away the blade that I eventually and hesitantly lowered from his throat.

“Hurry!” he said again, gesturing that I gather my things.

I grabbed up my pack, swung it onto my back, and grabbed my bow from the corner, pulling the half-full quiver with it. I turned to Penny with alarm and a question in my eyes. She looked back at me, but there was a surprising calmness to her expression, a softness to her features that hadn’t been there since I’d returned to the house.

“It’s okay Nora. You need to go now. Just remember what I’ve told you, and remember—just remember me.”

She embraced me tightly, breathing out another one of her ancient sighs that brushed against my ear so lightly that it tickled, like a spider in my hair. She pushed me away from her, rather roughly, towards the door and the man waiting anxiously with an outstretched hand.

“Be free, my dear. Go be free for all of us. For Leah.”

And as I was rushing out of the door and down the teetering back stairs, I felt my heart constrict at the mention of that name. I felt my breath tie up, tight and useless against the flood of nameless emotions that were rising up inside me. But then the stranger was whipping around the corner and out the back door, pulling me all the while with him, and my brain had no time to think of anything other than our feet pounding hard and quick on the cold, frigid earth, out and farther away from the life I had come to know and love, out into the brisk and heartless unknown.

As we tore down the empty streets, I noticed the vehicle was gone from the curb, leaving the dilapidated cobbled path as vacant as the decrepit houses seemed. We slipped down dark and abandoned side-alleys, weaving through masses of garbage that had been left to rot years ago, and we didn't stop running until we had reached the cover of the trees on the other side of Temporary 3's western gate. Ahead of us was the forest that surrounded Region, stretching both north and south and further west into whatever world lay beyond.

"This way," the stranger said, keeping his voice down to a whisper although we were outside and, as far as I could tell, alone. We covered a bit more distance still, slipping through the trees that stood like ever-watchful guardians over us, standing in silent vigil over our safety. Before long we came across a tiny clearing, more a gap in the trees than a real open space, and resting in that space were two large animals, with manes and flowing tails and soft expressions, beasts that greeted us with low whinnies.

I raised my eyebrows.

"Horses?" I asked. "Really?"

The stranger didn't respond, simply beckoned me closer and hoisted me up onto the back of one of the creatures and swung himself up onto the other with ease.

“Can you ride?” he asked, frowning with sudden concern.

Now that we seemed to be out of immediate danger, there was something lighter about his nature, something more relaxed.

“Anyone can hold onto a horse’s back,” I muttered through gritted teeth, trying to steady myself while the horse beneath me dipped with magnified movement.

As I adjusted my seat in the saddle, I caught the stranger’s eyes glance over my hands as I fumbled with the reins. My eyes darted quickly to my wrists, and I noticed my sleeves were slipping up, pulling back... I tugged them down roughly, swallowing my heart out of my throat. I looked at the stranger, but he was turned away already, angling his horse toward a path that I couldn’t quite detect through the trees. He said nothing, and with one click of his tongue he urged his horse off into the brush.

My own animal lingered for a moment, caught off guard, then, not wanting to be left behind and with no gesture from me, followed after the other horse in quick pursuit. I muttered a silent curse under my breath. I’d never ridden a horse before, but I knew all I would have to do is somehow hold on.

“Indecent bastard,” I swore to the stranger’s back.

He could have afforded to go a bit slower. But the horse was a simple enough animal to control and willing enough to be led that I found the hardest part wasn’t in staying on its back, but in following the stranger’s erratic path through the tangle of trees. What he was avoiding when he led us sharply to the left then back again to the right, first around a bush then through others, I could not detect.

It all seemed to me that we followed an invisible trail whose existence I most seriously questioned, but the stranger was bent with such confidence on his directions that I silently and

begrudgingly followed after. If I lived through this ridiculous trek, there would be time to complain later.

By the time he reined his horse to a halt, pausing for me to pull up beside him, the sky was soft with dawn. A pale gray veil had been wrapped over the velvet expanse of night, shutting out the stars and dimming all to a hazy film of half-light. An uncertain mist rose from the dewy earth, covering the ground with an edge of mystery and filling the air with a hint of secrecy.

The stranger squinted up into the sky, searching for something, and I noticed they were a strange colour. His irises were a bright gold, not a brown, but light, and pure, like the yellow of sunlight. In the strange mist they stood out like beacons, two lighthouses standing up above a roiling sea, and they shifted with ambiguity. He turned to look at me, and I blinked, strangely self-conscious about studying him.

“We can rest here for a moment,” he said, offering me a warm and pleasant smile.

In a fluid swing, he stepped down from his horse’s back and came around to offer me a hand in dismounting. I scoffed, audibly, and took my own foot from the stirrups, landing none too gracefully on my feet with an awkward and cumbersome scramble. Even if I couldn’t do it perfectly, I would do it on my own.

My look stared daggers, insulted after his incredibly frustrating race through the forest. To my surprise, he didn’t roll his eyes at my stubbornness. He just smiled at me, teeth showing, and his eyes crinkled in a warm way at their drooping outer corners. He reached over and took my horse’s reins from me, turning and tying the reins of both animals expertly to a low-lying tree limb.

“We should have an hour or two before anyone could think to come looking for us, probably more because I doubt any Primary Coder will venture out of city limits unless he has to. Make yourself comfortable, if you can. It’ll be good to catch our breath.”

He offered me a flask of something chilled, something that left a nice, stinging burn as it went down. I drank more than was probably welcome, then handed the canteen to him with a scowl. He received it with a one-shouldered shrug, downed a large swig himself, and returned it almost empty to the pack that was tied to his saddle.

He rolled the action off his shoulder, took my intentional rudeness in the nature of his stride, and then sat on a fallen log that lay against two slender trees. He leaned back, making himself comfortable enough to fall asleep, and let out an enormous exhale. He closed his golden eyes, tilting his head back slightly the way one might when trying to catch a few sunrays, but there was barely a stream of light to pierce the fog.

I sat beside him hesitantly, unsure of whether we could really afford to be taking a rest. For the first time since our breakaway, I questioned the nature of our sudden departure. I glanced at him, wondering if I should ask about our haste and our so-called “escape,” but something restrained me. I wasn’t certain that I wanted to know.

We sat like that for a few minutes, and soon enough I heard that his breathing had leveled out, slowed to a pace I recognized as belonging to someone asleep. I started in surprise, felt a hard knot of disbelief that quickly evaporated into anger. Before I stop myself, I kicked him in the leg and I grabbed hold of his shirt, pulling his face towards mine. He flinched awake with a quick inhale, startled to an upright position. He ripped my hand away and scrambled a bit back from me, eyes round.

“What exactly is going on here?” I demanded. “How can you suspect we’re being followed by Primaries and not only stop to ‘take a rest,’ but then go and fall asleep?”

My voice was low and gruff with intensity, and even I could feel the heated bite in my tone. I furrowed my brow and glowered at him, making sure that he could feel my anger through my dark, burning gaze. His own expression eased up, unconcerned, a little unsettled if anything else. He sat up, moved in a slow, lazy stretch with a yawn, and blinked at me a few times before allowing a tiny, solemn smile.

“Relax,” he said. “We’re headed back to the bunker. The horses are just tired after that rough terrain, and so at the current moment we’re resting them. Like I said, we’ve got a bit of time, so there’s nothing to be concerned about.”

Suddenly his eyes took on a shadowed look, all the carefree light drifted out of them with such suddenness that for a moment the hair on my neck stood on end. It was an odd look, and he raised an eyebrow.

“It would be wise,” he said, his light tone suddenly somber and laced with warning, “if you would take a rest, too.”

There was a charged tension in the air as we held our gaze. Finally he broke the contact and closed his eyes again, leaning back against the trunk of a tree, and once again I could gather the sense of ease returning to the pattern of his breath. After a moment he was asleep again, though perhaps less fitfully, and I marveled at him in my silent disapproval.

I continued to sit in rigid tension, unable to find the simplicity with which he could be so relaxed. No matter how far away they were, or how much time we had, if we were being followed I found that it was no time to be at ease.

I glanced around at the silhouettes of the trees, tall, dark bodies outlined as black forms in the blinding white chaos of the morning fog. It was difficult to perceive anything in this clearing. My eyes struggled to decipher what it was they were actually taking in, and I felt my heart beating at a rate that made me swallow with unnatural frequency. I felt alone. I glanced at the gold-eyed stranger, peacefully and blissfully unaware beside me, carelessly unconscious. Useless.

A few paces off, the two horses nickered to one another, lowly, and I suddenly remembered them. I could barely make out their large forms, two hulking shadows, just there in front of me. I took notice of their ears, standing still and forward, alert but unconcerned. So long as they were unconcerned, I would be okay.

I allowed myself a deep breath, leaned back against the tree, fighting to slow my heart. It would be a dangerous and foolish thing to let my mind wander, so instead I consented to study the shapes of the trees. Maybe I could make a game out of it. I tilted my head back, tracing the tapering claws of the tree limbs that stretched toward an unknown heaven, outlined against a sheet of hazy gray.

A huge sigh swelled up in my lungs, one that I couldn't hold back. I couldn't help it—I couldn't but help to let just a single thought through, to punch through my mental barricade and for a moment tear a hole through all of my carefully enforced walls. So weak, how very weak I was. Why did Penny have to go and mention *her* name? Why stir up the cause of all this—the root, the pain, the reeking horror of such an inescapable nightmare? The mist, the secrecy, the uncertainty, the loneliness: none of it was helping the bombardment of sour memories.

Again, another sigh, but this one I let out on purpose; I allowed it. I had to let it out or else I felt the threat of a torrent of unwelcome emotions gathering up inside me, filling up my lungs and my gut and pushing hard against the insides of my eyes.

“Oh Leah,” I whispered to the silent, staring trees. They said nothing back to me, just gawked in quiet awe. “Why? Why’d you have to go and leave me like this?”

But still, no answer. No answer, after all these years. Nothing but the returning sigh of the wind, blown back to me like my own breath, as hushed and as unrelenting as ever. I might have cried in the emptiness, but the sun was creeping hesitantly over the edge of the earth and I stopped myself. This wouldn’t be the time. Not as the sun was rising. That was, without question, not allowed.

III

In the underground bunker that was referred to as “the Court,” I was given my own quarters. It was a bland room, without much furnishing other than a metal-frame bed, a bedside table, a simple wooden desk and chair, and a good-sized chest of drawers. I unloaded my things, not even filling up the few drawers that I had, and I took it upon myself to remove the curtains from the tiny window that barely peeped above ground. I had rather forcefully requested a room with a window. This was the best that they could do. I folded the heavy curtains and put them in the empty bottom drawer. They would not be needed.

The days were passing slowly, and I was more than a little surprised that anyone had yet to come find me and tell me directly what my job would be within this organization. Apprehension was beginning to follow me like a second shadow.

I spent my free time wandering the bleached white halls, discovering nothing other than an expanse of closed doors and a few secret libraries that would have been incredibly illegal in most of the city outside. Plenty of my hours were spent in the company of those books, and I drank in their knowledge greedily, having been cut from such lavish privilege for far too long.

It was almost as if every human being in the complex was avoiding me by design, until at last, on the third day of being settled into my tiny cage of a room, a soft knock came to my door. I rose to answer it, pausing suddenly as a horribly unexpected thought came to me, a quick tingle of alarm down my spine—one I pushed away.

I opened the door cautiously, greeted by a rosy-faced man, a soft blush spread across his high cheeks. It was the same stranger who had pulled me from my house the second time, the horse-riding, non-existent-trail-following, rest-loving man with the easygoing smile and the warm, golden eyes.

But as he stood there, he wasn't smiling, and his gold eyes were not glowing. They were darkened by something grave, and immediately the hair on my neck rose in warning. The feeling of uneasiness flew back up from my gut. I felt my throat clench but I swallowed, working the muscles in my mouth to keep my tongue from going dry. I kept all emotion from my face, and with a level gaze, I lifted my chin and looked at him squarely. I raised an eyebrow in question.

“Ahh, the horseman,” I said, a lilt of forced amusement catching in my tone.

I could tell that something was immensely wrong. There was something tense that lingered in the air. I searched his face expectantly.

There it was, just a flicker in his eyes.

His mouth twitched, barely perceptible. He slid a hand into the pocket of his trousers, took it out again, put it back. He wouldn't meet my eyes. My eyebrows sank slowly in a concerned scowl. Suddenly I recognized this stance, realized why it was vaguely familiar to me somehow. I hated that I could say it was familiar.

I could hear the change in my tone, caught the light gasp of breath that I took before I asked, in a terse, softened voice:

“Who died?”

But even as the words slipped unwelcome from my lips, I didn’t need an answer. There was only one person whose death might matter to me.

“What happened?” I asked.

My breath was short, shallow draws at nothing. Empty lungs.

The man’s image was swimming before me, dipping uncertainly in my unsteady sight. Suddenly I wasn’t sure that the earth wasn’t pitching violently. My knuckles were white as they clutched the doorframe.

The man’s eyes continued to study the floor, the tips of his shoes magnificently interesting to him. Those eyes flickered to me, just once, then down again.

“No, it isn’t that,” he said. Every word was a hesitant sigh. “I mean, I don’t know.”

He paused, his expression sinking into a frown. He opened his mouth, hesitated, then closed it again. Finally, he gave up and raised his eyes to meet my hard, steely ones.

“I’m just the messenger,” he said to me. Then softly, “It’s Temporary 3. It’s been destroyed.”

My blood felt cold in my veins. The whole neighborhood? Demolished? I shook my head, not comprehending. That wasn’t possible. We’d just been there a few days ago.

“And also,” the man was still talking, so quietly I almost didn’t catch his words. “Many people were killed in the process. They didn’t have any warning—there wasn’t much time to evacuate.”

We stood there in silence, his golden eyes staring into mine without any kind of exchange happening between them.

If the people on that street hadn't know the demolition was going to happen, then none of them would have been prepared to leave. They would have been caught in those old, collapsing houses, completely unaware until the moment they didn't exist.

I didn't move.

"What about my house?"

The words were whispers, shadows of words.

The man looked at me, a hint of sadness in his expression. He shook his head with a sigh.

"We don't know. The house was completely obliterated with the rest of the district. As for the residents, no one from the neighborhood has been found yet."

His breath shook as he released another wavering exhale.

"We just don't know. The demolition was so sudden. None of us expected it."

My fingernails were buried to the quick in the wood of the door. I could feel the splinters separating my nails from the skin. That answer wasn't definite. It wasn't a yes or a no, but it was very clear—there was little chance that anyone could have survived.

"I see," I said. "Thank you for telling me. If you'll excuse me."

The man nodded slowly and turned away, shoulders still drooped; I shut the door quietly.

I stood there for a moment, in front of the closed door, and I stared at the pattern of the interwoven grains. My vision was soon pulsing with a rhythmic black throb. I put a hand to my head, but it was internal, intangible, unsoothable. There was no way this could have happened. It was too extreme. I moved to sit on the bed and sank slowly onto the comforter, onto the upright strong metal frame. I was stuck here, in my very own room, with my very own bed—and for what? My house was gone.

I ran a rough hand over my face, trying to comprehend, but my mind was blank.

The wall was being stubborn. It was silently staring back at me, just like the trees had done in the mist. Silent, stupid, dumb. It stared and stared, mocking me.

“Why can’t you tell me *why*?”

My voice was hoarse and choked with tears and I slid to the floor, finally, in a pile of useless agony. We had known the dangers of the game. We had known the risks of being defiant, but it was a cold dawn to wake to. Or to never wake to again.

For a long time I stayed like that. Long enough for the sun to come up and set again. Long enough to watch the shadows stretch far across the room, touch the door, and then retreat shyly again, back out the tiny window. Long enough for the onslaught of sobs to subside quietly into a horrible period of snotty sniffing and silent shudders, into nothing but quiet, voiceless breaths of grief and pleading.

I sat there long enough for the pain to harden itself into a cold stone that encapsulated my heart, that allowed me to regain some sense of composure and to wipe my eyes dry, even though they had long-since been dried out, overused. I sat there until I was completely spent, an empty husk.

And then I slept.

I must have slept for days. Time had passed, and yet my mind was unaware. What was time anyway? The passage of time? A fickle thing—but how important? Did it matter if time passed at all? And if it did, how much did it matter? What could possibly change? *How* could anything possibly change? In the six years that I had lived in that house, nothing had ever varied—day to day, life had been the same. Rough, and full of anxious caution, but never any different. So why now? Why the moment when I left did everything have to suddenly spin beyond my wildest fears?

It didn't seem possible that anything would change with time. It didn't seem as though anything ever had. We were still in the same hopeless world, the same world where people were excavated from their homes, drawn into the streets and arrested, where the rules were made by the few, followed by the mob, and where those rules were treated as the Codes of life itself. Broken, and that life was no more. Taken. Extracted. Or given up on.

My mind was in torment.

My world: my house, my tattered collection of comrades—Penny. The only place and the only life I'd ever really loved. It was hard to understand how it could be ripped from me so easily, so quickly. A single moment.

This was our reality. If this was it, then what was the use of going on? I shuddered at these thoughts. I didn't want to accept them, but they rushed at me. I pushed them away, fought them from my mind. I'd fought them off before. I could do it again—I had to.

I turned my face to the window, left slightly ajar in the faint morning light. The sky was gray with dawn again, a rosy blush seeping from below the earth's cold horizon, spreading outward and upward into the colourless canvas of the heavens. I breathed it in, drew in the rusty colour of the sunrise as if I could breathe in the light and it would sustain me. How would I face the world now, utterly and truly alone this time? The only company I had in this tiny room of mine was the light that dragged itself to me across the floor.

Leah was in the sunrise, I thought, in the soft clouds of early morning. And now Penny too, it seemed. What did it mean to live?

It's all a matter of will.

Penny's words came back to me, suddenly vibrant and clear, a tangible tickle of lips brushed against my ear. Spiders in my hair.

I shuddered and breathed out, a deep and heavy sigh that the breeze came and snatched from my weary lungs. It was a breath that the wind drew out into the world of the living. I submitted myself to the wind, to its gentle encouragement, reminded of the promise I had made. There was no way to escape the memory of them. They would never die. I couldn't forget.

"Alright then, Penny," I said, feeling somewhat resigned and at ease in knowing she was there, waiting, expectant and present in the breeze that drifted in with urgency around me. In knowing that Leah was watching through the window, hopeful, in the sun that was rising still, slowly from the earth.

"For you, then. And for Leah. I'll have to carry on just a bit more, somehow."

It wasn't enough to do it for myself—there just wasn't enough *will* there. But for them, I could muster the strength. At least I liked to believe I could.

There was something that had to be done. There was something I could do to change all of this—there had to be. Doing nothing was no longer an option.

I felt my heart quicken, liven from its deadened state of despair. I would have to rise, stand my ground. I would have to fight this, whether it killed me or not, regardless of what I might feel.

What I actually felt was nothing. Nothing but a sense of cold obligation to live. If it was the only thing—if it was the last thing—I did, I would do what Penny had asked. I would simply try my best to make things better, and I would not give up. This was too dangerous a game to give up. It had to be played to the end.

IV

The next few days slipped by in a strange fog that slurred the passage of time. I was given an incredible amount of space and distance and greeted with an overall air of caution and respect—something I couldn't tell if I liked or was enormously annoyed by. I was at once both desperate for the warmth of human company, to know that I was not alone and behind the cold shoulder of isolation, and simultaneously in a constant state of impatience with human interaction. I was unlike myself. Unstable.

After a few days of this, reeling in first one direction and then the other, M finally approached me as I sat alone, reading in a shadowed, stony alcove, attempting to quiet my reckless thoughts with mind-numbingly eloquent prose. He stepped silently up to me, with such slowness as though he thought I might bolt from him if he moved at normal speed. He cleared his throat politely to gather my attention.

I watched him from the corner of my eyes, not bothering to turn my nose from the page that I had been hopelessly re-reading, but at his second quiet cough I turned to him with a look

that might have killed a small child's dreams. He returned my look with an indecipherable lack of expression.

"Yes?" I said, letting my subtle irritation snake out on the s.

I looked up at him with a hybrid of patience and frustration as he stared at me quietly.

"I don't mean to disturb you," he said, his soft voice a low rumble, like water over stones.

"If you're busy," he added, casting a dubious glance at my book as he raised his eyebrows in question.

I snapped the novel closed and tucked it under my leg, out of sight.

"What is it you want?" I asked, no mask to the hiss in my words this time.

He offered a slight smile, one that curved only one side of his crescent lips, and I saw his eyes soften the smallest bit.

"What I want," he said, repeating my words, "is to know whether or not you would be willing to spare perhaps a half hour to accompany me. I am on my way to the range to get in some practice, and I thought having a bow in your hands might do you some good."

He let the offer sink slowly in the rigid air. As what he was saying dawned on me, I saw his smile spread warmly, until his teeth showed. He stretched out his slender hand towards me, raised an eyebrow, and gave a slight and gentlemanly bow.

"Care to accompany me?"

I chewed my lip in thought. Go shooting? It had been ages since I'd last shot my bow... but I suddenly remembered that my bow had been left tied to the horse's saddle all those nights ago and I'd not kept track of its whereabouts. A wince stabbed at my heart, a quick pain that sliced through the arteries, here and gone. I began to shake my head, uncertain.

“Just for a bit,” he pleaded, before I could complete my refusal. “I think it would be a good thing for you. Not for too long.”

I hadn’t remembered him to be so boyish, and there was some kind of secret excitement on his face, like he was plotting something but couldn’t exactly conceal his intentions. I shrugged a shoulder indifferently, agreeing, whether to humour him or to fulfill my own need I could not be sure. Ignoring his offered hand, I stood up into a tall stretch, leaving my book in the alcove.

“I guess I can spare a few minutes,” I said, my voice flat from the struggle between two emotions that fought to surge to the surface. “There’s nothing quite as therapeutic as training to kill something that disgusts you.”

M raised his eyebrows at me, not in amusement this time, and I saw a curious, calculating look buried in his spectacular eyes. He turned away from me, too soon for me to read into whatever I might find in his expression.

I followed him down brightly lit corridors and hallways decorated with the same kind of enormous, flowing tapestries that hung in the Headmaster’s Court. After a few moments of twisting and turning, strolling down one endlessly long hall after the other, M stopped beside a door that I might have mistaken for a public restroom.

His face was lit again, glowing with childish enthusiasm. With a theatrical flourish, he pulled the door open, standing back and making a gesture that encouraged me to enter first.

My mouth hung rudely agape, but I couldn’t help it—there, within the room, an entire mimicry of the outdoors was concealed within the four walls of horridly bland concrete. There was a forest of trees, tropical and intensely exotic, leafy, green, and lush. Plants sprouted from an earthen carpet of moss and dirt. There was the aroma of rain in the air. The walls themselves

could not be seen they were so covered and obscured by the growth of incredible vegetation. The ceiling was vaulted, painted a magnificent blue.

“What is this?” I breathed. I could not comprehend what I was seeing.

Behind me, I heard M offer a pleased and quiet laugh.

“This is our archery range,” he explained, stepping forward to peer in beside me. “Our ‘secret garden’ of sorts. This is the best kept secret of the entire facility.”

M made a face, scrunching his brow in thought.

“Come to think of it, I’m not sure everyone here even knows of its existence. To be honest, I’m probably the only one who really uses it much.”

He stepped into the plant-filled enclosure, beckoned me in with a wave over his shoulder.

“But there’s still the best part. Come on.”

He led me to the right of the door, where a small shed was fixed to the wall of the room’s spacy interior. As he opened the shed’s doors wide, I could see a collection of bows and a wall hanging full of quivers, each overflowing with black-fletched arrows.

“Don’t mind all those,” he said, following my eyes to the bows that lined the far walls.

“Those are just practice weapons. Crude design really. Not good for much else than target practice.”

He disappeared into the shed, re-emerged a moment later. In his hands he held a bow, long and gently curved at the tips of the limbs. My heart leapt, so violently tossing that I could feel the echoing pulse in the spaces of my chest, a feeling that lapped around my stomach in waves of disbelief and delight.

“This is for you,” M was saying. “It was brought in from the stables after you arrived and I suppose I forgot to mention that it’d been handed off to me. Your quiver is here, too, all arrows accounted for.”

His words were a faint blur of sounds that I could barely hear. It was my bow. Alive, unscathed. Mine. I ran my fingers over the worn yew wood, feeling the smooth coolness of the bow that was so familiar. The bow that Penny had crafted for me so many years ago.

My hand found the grip and I took it, slowly, relishing the weight of my old weapon as it came back to me.

“My bow,” I said.

I could not determine what kind of emotions were lost in those two words. M smiled.

“Shall we shoot?” he offered, and then I noticed he had picked up his own beautiful recurve, along with his array of grey-fletched arrows, all tucked neatly into their leather case.

I wordlessly collected my own quiver from him, touched the soft goose feathers of my arrows, pulled the strap over my shoulder comfortingly. Like a familiar embrace.

M moved down through the trees, ducking beneath an overhanging branch, and as I followed speechlessly behind, he pointed to where a target was hung up in the canopy. Only then did I notice that all around targets were strung, some blending in with the flora, others painted onto the chests of dummies that stood among the trees like the petrified ghosts of the lost.

“This is a ranger’s ultimate playground,” M said, his voice a breath of awe and ease. He let out a sigh of contentment. “I could spend days in here and never want to come out.”

He fell silent for a long moment, thoughtful. Then he seemed to come back to the present and smiled at me, one ranger to another. For a split moment, I truly felt that we were equals.

“It’s all yours. Feel free to shoot until either your fingers bleed or your forearm is bruised black and blue.”

I offered a grimace that was meant to be a smile. The experience of a true ranger—the pain at the cost of gain. Truly, there was nothing without a price.

Unable to resist the itch to draw, I pulled an arrow clean from the quiver, fit it to the string as I felt my breath tremble in nervous anticipation. I pulled the arrow back, drew it to the corner of my lips as my lungs pulled in air, held my breath as I held the arrow and aimed. My target was sighted, marked. My fingers slipped the string, my breath simultaneously released. The arrow cleared the bow, shooting from my hands in quick escape.

From the painted dummy I’d chosen as my enemy, nothing but pale gray and white feathers protruded from the center of its hollow, wooden chest. The shot was clean—but not quite a kill.

I lowered my bow, examined my shot with a critical eye. It wasn’t a bull’s eye, but it lingered near the center mark of the painted target face. Two inches too far left. I heard a low whistle.

“What a shot,” M observed.

His eyebrows were raised in surprise as he appraised my work. I glanced at him, wondering if he was actually impressed with my imperfect shot or if he had expected me to miss the dummy altogether.

“It’s too far left,” I returned, my voice a low murmur as I recalculated where my aim had been wrong. He was silent for a moment, also studying where my arrow landed.

“Too far left...” he repeated, his words trailing with the odd intonation of a question. “But, it’s almost dead center. And that target is twenty yards away.”

I turned to him, scrutinizing his expression. I gathered a look of disbelief, but at *what* I couldn't gather.

“Two inches is enough distance from someone's heart to someone's shoulder. That's the difference between someone's life and someone's death. ‘Almost’ isn't good enough. It's enough of a difference to be a complete miss. That shot may as well have hit a tree.”

If it were possible, his eyes grew wider, then a bit shadowed.

“The distance of that shot alone should have been enough of an obstacle in hitting the target at all,” he said, and now his voice was low and full of solemn sincerity. “The fact that you were off center by two inches doesn't affect the damage of your shot—look at the force of the blow.”

We both turned to take in the state of the poor wooden victim. My arrow was buried up to its feathers, a deep wound. Had it been a real attack, there was no way that it could have been removed without causing incredible blood loss. He was right in that the damage would have been devastating.

I shrugged one shoulder loosely, trying to be nonchalant, and yet I couldn't help but feel the smallest burn of satisfaction. I tried to imagine that the pain and the fatality of that wound would have been far worse than an immediate death from a perfect and square kill. It was an odd comfort.

“It's alright, I guess,” I finally agreed. I went to collect my arrow.

For the next half hour, we roved in silence through the enclosure, aiming for and shooting whichever painted targets our careful eyes happened to catch in their camouflaged hideaways. I noticed that M's shots were slow and calculatingly beautiful. He never rushed a shot, never aimed while he drew—like most archers—in order to spare a few seconds. He never jumped his

release. And he never missed. He was a clean shooter and a precise predator, the kind of hunter whose bow I would bet money on.

I found his company enjoyable enough as a practice companion, especially in the sense that I was not in competition with him—no, I would not have wanted to be against him, given that he were on the other end of that elegant bow. Were we contenders, he would have been a dangerously threatening opponent, and I was slightly afraid to discover that the thought itself disturbed me.

We collected our arrows after a while, our left forearms already sporting the dark purple shadows that were the rewards of a ranger. The slap of bowstring on skin was an immense pain, not only a revolt from the weapon against its master, but also the weight of the bow's own draw being fired against its firer. I found the pain ironic.

I brought my bow with me to my room, offered another soft thank you to M as he departed from me there, and I hung it on the wall from a nail that was wedged within the mortar between two bricks by the door. I hung my quiver up beside it, stepping back to take both of them in. It was like being returned to a part of myself, and I couldn't help but feel my heart begin to beat a bit, to pulse with a kind of enthusiasm I had almost forgotten. I stroked the old bow again, feeling the smoothness return my affectionate touch.

This was my bow. All those long hours and days and months of practice, those years of training under Penny's patient tutelage, all those moments and precious memories came drifting back at the feel of my most treasured possession. They resided within this one object, embodied there. I breathed in a soft sigh.

At least I had those things, those memories, those moments—this bow. At least these things had survived. I would make sure to keep them alive, forever. At the very least, I had to.

V

I was waking up to a bird outside the window. It was singing. Or crying. A soft breeze came through and rustled the thin, transparent lace that filtered the sun into the room. There was a glow in the atmosphere, pleasant. I breathed in, filling my lungs with that warm, sun-filled air. It must have been July.

The air smelled like honey, thick and sweet. Almost too much so. It was suffocating, like trying to breathe through silk. Strangely, it was a fond smell.

I rolled in bed onto my side, buried my face in the pillow filled with down, pulled the covers up to my nose. Her body was beside me, under the covers, her face turned away. I thought nothing of it.

I awoke to the sound of gentle voices. Time had passed. The sunlight streaming into the room was suddenly harsh, the angles of light crisp and solid, patterns drawn like flat-lined hearts along the walls. The bird outside the window had gone quiet.

My eyes cracked open at the stirring of the sheets beside me. The blankets were pulled back—Leah was being picked up.

“Hey, leave her alone,” I mumbled, but I was drowsy and I sounded faint. I blinked at them, men dressed in white. They looked at me, blank faces, empty eyes. The man holding Leah stared at me, then turned away. Leah’s arm fell out of his grip, it swung back and forth, an arm on a clock that had lost track of the time. She didn’t move, or cry out, or speak. She did not say anything to me. I wondered why she did not struggle.

“Come back,” I called, but no one listened.

My parents stood quietly beside the door, watching.

“Where are they taking her?” I cried to them. “Do something!”

“Hush,” my mother said. “Stop your screaming before they take you too.”

I wiped my eyes, wishing that I was more awake. I didn’t understand what was going on. I cried quietly, afraid of making too much noise. Why wasn’t she stopping them?

“But they’re taking her,” I said.

I whimpered and curled into the cold sheets. My parents looked blankly at me, far too calm, their eyes dry and empty.

“Such a shame,” my father said. “I’m sure they’ll send us a replacement soon.”

I awoke to the depressing grey of cinderblock walls. The light in the room was cold and feeble—colourless. I closed my eyes and sighed, draping one arm across my face to block out the lingering image of that dream. Or memory. It had been a while since it had come to me so vividly. My heart was beating quickly in my chest, and I let it race, uncomfortably. I remembered this feeling far too well, and the ache it created inside me made me swallow back

something bitter. All of it was in the past. I had to leave it there. Today was the only reality I could afford to bear.

There was suddenly a gentle tap at my door. I blinked open my eyes, but before I could move it was swinging inward. M was standing there, fully dressed and alert as though he'd been awake for hours. He wore a look of disbelief when he saw I was still in my bed.

"You were summoned to the Headmaster's Court twenty minutes ago," he stated, clearly repressing irritation from his level voice. I rolled onto my side to look at him, raising my eyebrows and not recollecting ever having been summoned.

"You know, M," I said groggily, pulling a hand through my tangled morning hair. "It's really not protocol to enter a woman's room uninvited. If you're going to knock you should at least wait for a response."

Having lived for so many years in a room that didn't have a door, and in a house with at least seventeen roommates at any given time, I wasn't bothered by a lack of privacy. But I felt the opportunity to tease him, as well as to make him leave, was invaluable to pass up.

A look flashed over his face, as if he was only then made aware of his mistake, but already I was climbing out of bed in my night clothes and moving to find a proper outfit for the day. He averted his eyes, whether out of respect or embarrassment or both, I couldn't tell.

"If you could tell the Headmaster I'm en route, I would appreciate it. I only need a few minutes."

He nodded, backed from the room, and closed the door so softly I might not have heard the gentle *click* of the lock. I chose an old sweater from the simple chest of drawers, pulling it deftly over my head. Along with the sweater, I selected a pair of simple, dark pants, and then I wandered from my room, down the maze of hallways until I found myself once more in the

cavernous throne-room, as I had dubbed it, that was the Headmaster's Court. I pushed all thoughts of the dream from my mind, determined not to let it distract me—although I noticed that the faint scent of summer still persisted, even in this large, drafty chamber.

There were a few people in the throne room. On the great chair sat a stiff-backed man with wire-rimmed glasses and a moustache. His hair was combed to one side, and he reminded me strangely of a psychiatrist. Or a dentist.

Gathered at the bottom of the steps was a small group of people, a half dozen or so at most, all speaking in hushed tones amongst themselves, and, as I looked more closely, I noted that all of them were men.

As I approached, none of them seemed to notice me, so I stood there for a moment, wondering somewhat uncomfortably what I should do. After a pause, and as my patience began to wear thin, I politely coughed, causing half of the men to jump. M turned, not in surprise, but rather in relief. The man on the throne exclaimed, as though startled by my sudden appearance, and then proceeded to look immediately pleased about something.

“Ahh, Leona! Your stealth and your reputation precede you! I hope you have become acquainted with and made yourself at home here in my halls.”

I looked him over, taking in his thin form and extravagant clothing. I noticed that his shoes were highly polished, my own reflection staring back at me in their gleaming black depth.

“It's *Nora*,” I said. “And yes, thank you.”

It had been almost two full weeks of my being in the bunker and this was my first interaction with the Headmaster. In fact, it was the first time I'd ever seen him. I wasn't entirely impressed.

The man on the throne with the glasses and the shoes and the moustache gave such a jolly laugh that it reverberated throughout the great hall.

“Well then! Now that *Nora* has accompanied us, let us discuss this mission so that we may move forward with its preparation. Time is of the essence.”

I scoffed under my breath, too soft for anyone to hear. I’d been sitting in my room and wandering the halls all this time. I hadn’t once felt an urgency of any kind since coming here. I felt M turn a swift glance my way, then back. Perhaps he had caught my disdain.

The men gathered at the base of the stairs turned and straightened more to attention, their chatter completely silenced in anticipation of the Headmaster’s next words. The Headmaster gestured that I should stand with the men, rather than isolated to the side as I had been. I took a half-step closer in compliance, and then he cleared his throat with a dramatic and regal flourish.

“Nora, as I know you’ve been introduced to M the other day, you should meet the rest of the unit that you will be working with. There is Alba, who will serve as a lookout, Juniper and Dmitri as backup should it be needed, and Crow, your second in command—oh, actually I do believe you’ve met.”

His words trailed off, hanging in an open question at the end, and his raised eyebrows asked for my confirmation. The man in question, Crow, made himself known to me with a nod of greeting. Golden eyes crinkled at their drooping corners, accompanied by the faintest traces of a melancholy smile. I dipped my head in a quick nod, looking away sharply. He was just the messenger.

“We have been acquainted,” was all I said to the Headmaster, who flashed an eccentric grin, pleased.

“Ah, very good! Then of course, we will be with the addition of your own valuable skills—master in long-range weaponry, stealth, and disguise. You will be the key member in this operation. We need someone behind the scenes to gather information in order to succeed. That’s where you will come in.”

“Well, you’ve certainly done your research,” I said, letting out a slightly disappointed sigh. The Stand had obviously been studying me—and quite closely—for some time if they knew so much about my abilities. If it was so easy to track me, I couldn’t help but to feel a spark of fear in my gut that the Government could easily do the same.

“But why do you need *me*, exactly? Surely an organization as large and successful as yours has an accomplished reconnaissance artist of its own. Is it that you need a woman?”

I couldn’t hide the cynically amused and highly sarcastic edge that sharpened my final words.

Every man in the room had turned to look at me. One of them—I thought it was Crow—stifled a laugh, to no effect. When I glanced at him, his eyes danced merrily and glittered in a kind way. I tried to smile at him, although the expression felt stiff and cheerless on my face. The expression of every other man apart from him was one of absolute horror.

Up on the throne chair, the Headmaster cleared his throat after a moment. When he spoke, his tone wavered, slightly uncertain, the smallest bit caught off guard by my brazenness. The fact that I was right perhaps cut through the silence a bit deeper.

The Headmaster eyed me, almost warily, but then he offered a hesitant and charismatic grin.

“Perhaps it’s hard to admit, but you wouldn’t be far from the truth. Our organization is very sparse in terms of female members, especially ones with your capabilities. In order to be discreet, we need a woman to accompany our lead observer in this mission.”

His eyes flicked over the few of us, settling at last on the leader of his military division. He studied M for a moment longer, then turned once more toward me before continuing.

“As you know,” he began, his tone less grand and cheery than before, “there is the people’s gala being held in a few nights’ time, and you might be surprised to know that you will be attending. You will be escorted by M, who will be posing as a high-ranking Primary official invited, with his wife, to the gala. Being granted close access to the Presiding Party’s main table at the dinner, you, being adept at stealth and observation, are charged with the task of obtaining information. Both you and M will be responsible for discovering what the Primaries’ next move is.”

It was my turn to raise an eyebrow.

“And how exactly do you suggest that that happens?” I asked.

The people’s gala, I knew, was where only the highest-ranking citizens of the Government and Primary society were invited. It would be under heavy security and by extension incredibly dangerous.

The Headmaster’s expression did not waver.

“The Leader of the Government, Javier, will be there. This may be the only chance that we have to be close to him. Follow him, mark his words, figure out what kind of move he’s plotting against the rebels and those associated with the outbreaks. Is all of that okay with you?”

He seemed to be testing me, his gaze direct and searching. There was a pause.

Again, six pairs of eyes on me. I gave the Headmaster a sidelong look. The hair on the back of my neck rose in apprehension. Something about this mission seemed strange, out of line—no, it seemed impossible.

“So basically you’re asking me to uncover possible battle plans from the Leader of the Government by simply attending a dinner? I just want to be clear.”

If this was their plan, I was a bit concerned about the logistics. As much as I wanted to believe that it was gutsy and bold, it also felt completely idiotic. Was there no safer way to determine the Primaries’ plans other than to surround two drops of water with an entire vat of oil?

This definitely wasn’t an organization that took *small* steps. I sighed, shook my head, and I held up a hand again to prevent any more nonsense from slipping through the Headmaster’s lips.

“Before you answer that, is this part of your plot to overthrow the Government? Is this how you plan to beat them at their own game—sacrifice two of your own to find out which piece they move next?”

The Headmaster leaned back into the throne-seat and folded his hands together regally. His eyes were narrowed as he studied me over his interwoven fingers.

“You have quite the way with words, Leona. You make it sound as though I forfeit your lives on your behalf, and as though I could care less about it. Hear me, know that your assumptions could not be farther from the truth.”

He gazed off into the back of the great hall with a look in his eyes that suggested his thoughts were not entirely present in the room.

“The reason we have sought you so diligently is that we believe quite strongly in your abilities. The goal is for you to survive—that is always the goal. We don’t want to take risks that are unnecessary. We’ve been tracking the Government for years. Do you think that we would ask this of you, or put any of our own men at risk, if we didn’t think it was the only path that offered the highest probability for survival—and success?”

His eyes broke contact with whatever dreamy world he had been looking at. He turned to me again, taking me in with a sharp look.

“We aren’t like the Primaries who only seek power and who make subtle moves of aggression. We want to act as peacefully as we can—by all means, especially if we can overthrow them before igniting a full-blown war, even though that may very well be how all of this ends. You understand the possibilities of this?” he asked, reinforcing the inquiry his eyebrows were also posing.

I could understand that as well as I possibly could. The main concern of any Primary citizen was the obtaining of power. It was the pursuit of that power and blind allegiance to authority that was their greatest vice. I felt a cruel bile rise up in my throat at the thought of that horrible motivator, their lack of concern for things of more importance than mere recognition, authority, and wealth: their indifference towards things—towards people—that should have mattered, people they disregarded in the presence of *greatness*. But it was too late. Too late for them to care when they should have. That page had already been turned. That chapter was lost. The light was no longer golden.

I was about to open my mouth to spit out how well I understood his words, when the Headmaster straightened a bit in his throne.

“Speaking of power,” he said suddenly, cutting me off and practically interrupting his own thoughts. “If any of you has any clue as to where the blade of Karifel, the fourth Ruler of Government, has miraculously disappeared to, please be sure to notify me at once. That artifact is extremely irreplaceable and I’ve gotten myself into a panic wondering how it could have disappeared so suddenly from this very hall. It’s a relic from the Second Era of time, worth more than most blades half its age, mind you all. It’s quite strange considering I’ve been certain to always have this room under constant surveillance.”

The Headmaster let his thoughts trail off as he blanched at the thought of an infiltration by an outsider, or worse, a traitor in their midst.

I froze, unable to help the sudden lock to every muscle in my body, my retort still frozen on my lips. The blade of Karifel, fourth Ruler of the Government.

My eyes sank closed in disbelief. The blade I had taken had belonged to *her*, of all people? Had I truly swiped such a relic? The punishment for such a crime was unthinkable. Perhaps I had come to meet my end here after all—and by my own untamable hand. I almost thought it fitting.

From amidst our tense silence, a polite cough broke the quiet, shattering the tension.

“Master,” a voice said, soft and uncertain.

I allowed my eyes to open slightly, and I squinted through my eyelashes to see who had spoken. My breath flew out of me when I recognized it as belonging to Crow, the golden eyed man—the man who I also happened to have pulled a knife against in my startled terror. A knife that apparently belonged to the Second Era of time.

It was over, I had been discovered. My sly work had been sloppily exposed in a moment of panic. Just one moment, and everything was over. I closed my eyes again, defeated.

“I can account for the blade,” he went on. “If I may, allow me to reassure you that it is in a secure place. Indeed, you may sleep knowing that it rests in the most capable of hands. It will not fall to harm, nor be lost. My life may depend on these words.”

My eyes opened slowly in disbelief. I fought every urge to snap my head in his direction. I watched the Headmaster, unmoving, my muscles still locked in tense anticipation. He had his eyes squinted, taking Crow in under intense scrutiny as if sizing him up for a traitor. After a long pause, he opened his eyes fully, allowing a warm smile to return to his rather comedic face.

“I trust you, Crow. You are one of my most loyal fighters, and I will have to take you at your words. If I could not believe in you, I could believe in no one.”

He paused in thought, then added with a rather sharp edge of warning, “But you had better be confident in your answer, or I will hold you to your final words.”

Crow accepted the statement with a graceful bow, never once turning towards me or glancing in my direction to betray my identity. He would not give me away. I felt some of the fear sweep off my shoulders as I pulled in a deep inhale. He had earned the smallest shred of my trust, and my gratitude. My heart was still slowing to normal when the Headmaster turned back toward me, raising his eyebrows.

“To the matter at hand,” he said. “Will you accept the task, Nora? The mission, I mean. Will you assist us in this endeavor? Of course, there isn’t much time to consider the stakes, but something must be done.”

Before he could let the question hang in the air, I accepted the request.

“I’ll do it,” I said, fighting the waver in my voice, my breath still far too uneven for my comfort.

“Seems easy enough,” I added with only slight sarcasm, testing my voice again and noticing that it was steadier this time.

I would do anything, so long as it was *something*. I would do all that I could—even if it did seem somewhat ridiculous, even impossible. Even if I had to die. I couldn’t back down. Not when I had the ability to do something. For Penny, for Leah. For everyone else living under the hierarchy of the Party and the Government. For myself, even, if I survived this mess that I had somehow become a part of.

The Headmaster was watching me closely, reading my face for something I couldn’t determine. His eyes narrowed the tiniest bit, and he issued a low hum.

“Hmm,” he said, softly. “Yes, we have heard about your extraordinary skills,” he agreed. “And also about your reputation, which brings me to one extra point. For this mission, I humbly request one thing of you, although I understand that on your own terms you don’t care much for this.”

I waited for him to continue, catching the shift in his position on the throne, as if he were sitting on something that was rather uncomfortable.

“Do you fear death, Leona?”

I grimaced at the use of my birth-given name. The question came a bit from nowhere, I couldn’t help but observe, but I knew where his question was leading. Perhaps he had read my thoughts.

“No,” I said in a soft growl, narrowing my eyes at him suspiciously, feeling my pulse jump a bit quicker.

He nodded because he already knew the answer.

“Yes, well. For this mission, I would ask that you care about whether you live or you die, just this once. You need to care about living, because in order for you to succeed, for all of us to succeed, we’re going to need you alive. So, just stay alive and, for once, want to. Make it a priority that you survive.”

I considered his command, let the idea roll through my mind. As much as it didn’t appeal to me, I rolled another shrug off my shoulder. I didn’t like taking orders from anyone, especially from someone who had no right to interfere with the way that I lived my life. But I didn’t want to cause trouble here—I needed to be a part of this. My body stiffened in irritation, yet I tried my best to offer a smile.

“For your sake, I can pretend,” I said, feigning nonchalance. “Just don’t hope for much else.”

The Headmaster’s mouth curved into a small smile, one that didn’t look either happy or entirely convinced. He nodded his head, just slightly, in agreement.

“I suppose for the time being,” he said quietly, “that will have to be enough.”

[to be *CONTINUED*]