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DREAM'S END
A YOUNG ADULT URBAN FANTASY
WITH CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

By

Elizabeth Leavitt

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

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2015

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ABSTRACT

DREAM'S END

A YOUNG ADULT URBAN FANTASY

WITH CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

by

Elizabeth Leavitt, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2015

Major Professor: Dr. Joyce Kinkead
Department: English

This two-section thesis explores the subjective nature of villainy. The larger section, "Dream's End," is an urban-fantasy young-adult fiction piece I've written in epistolary form. I preface the fiction with a critical introduction in which I briefly examine existing definitional scholarship on 1) epistolary fiction, 2) the urban fantasy genre, and 3) the young adult genre. Epistolary fiction may be letters, diaries, or journal entries. Following this exploration, I examine the subjective nature of villains and antagonists in narratives. While "Dream's End" does not specifically discuss or critique feminist theory, it considers criticism of existing female tropes in its portrayal of both the characters and their roles in relation to one another.

The second section of the thesis is comprised of a collection of journal entries, divided into six chapters, wherein protagonist Emma keeps a record of the experiences she has while traveling to another world in her dreams. In this alternate dream world,

Emma finds community and purpose absent from her waking life, but must ultimately come to terms with a perceived betrayal and various moral quandaries when her two worlds begin to bleed together. The journal entries will eventually be incorporated into a novel as backstory, and so are presented with a brief explanation as to their significance to the larger narrative. Through the various characters in these journal entries, I explore the complex nature of protagonists and antagonists, and discuss how the classification of each is relative to the experience and perceptions of the characters within the narrative, as well as the readers outside it.

(136 pages)

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

"Villainy . . . is often a significant part of the construction of loss, whether it is loss of innocence, loss of loved ones, loss of power, or loss of self and/or identity" (vii). This quote from Anna Fahraeus and Diemen Yakalı-Çamoğlu, editors of *Villains and Villainy: Embodiments of Evil in Literature, Popular Culture and Media*, serves to define not only a function of villainy, but to highlight its relevance to young adult literature. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is itself a form of loss. Because the catalyst for that transition is not necessarily age so much as the types of experiences (and losses) that generally come with age, a young adult may view those responsible for, or connected to, loss as being especially villainous. It is these types of definitional complications, both of self and others, which I will explore in the literature review and fiction that follow.

In this critical introduction to "Dream's End," the young-adult urban-fantasy fiction piece that I have authored, I will explore existing commentary on the subjective nature of villainy as it relates to young adults, particularly young-adult women. Prior to my discussion of villainy, I will give a brief definitional overview of existing scholarship on three genre classifications that are reflected in "Dream's End." First, I will discuss epistolary fiction, specifically fictitious diary entries, as this storytelling technique loosely dictates the structure of my fiction. Second, I will review current literature as relates to the urban fantasy genre, and demonstrate the importance of *setting* across the genre's varied definitions, as well as how that discussion then relates to "Dream's End." Third, I will explain the difficulty of defining *young adult literature* and touch on common points of agreement as to what a coming-of-age novel should accomplish.

Epistolary Fiction

"Dream's End" is written as a series of dream journal entries. Consequently, for the purposes of this literature review, I will be focusing specifically on diary fiction, which is generally included as a subcategory of epistolary fiction. I extend this exploration into my fiction preface, where I will discuss the ways in which intent can reshape diary entry definitions.

The Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms defines *epistolary fiction* as, "a kind of fiction that actualizes the letter's potential to create narrative, figurative, and other kinds of meaning." Such a definition could be argued as applying to all forms of fiction, except for the specific mention of letters, which are the defining feature of epistolary fiction. While the term *epistolary fiction* is often used to encompass any form of fiction that is presented through letters, diaries, or, more recently, emails, texts, and blog posts (Scott), the aforementioned *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* draws a distinction between epistolary fiction and diary fiction: "A desire for exchange, directionality, and narrative sequentiality of letters, inherent in the epistolary contract distinguishes epistolary fiction from the diary novel, memoir novel, and theatrical dialogue. . . ." While seventeen-year-old Emma, the protagonist writing the entries in "Dream's End," later repurposes the entries to function more as letters to Lucy, Emma initially pens the dream journal entries for her own enjoyment, catharsis, and recollection.

While "Dream's End" draws only loosely on the conventions of the diary novel, it is still useful to review those conventions in order to create a definitional baseline. In his

book, *Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, author Kim Brindle explains that diary fiction draws heavily on the norms and expectations associated with nonfiction diaries. While diary form "aims to generate an aura of authenticity and self-reflexive honesty," there is a degree to which the reader must suspend disbelief, as the fictional diary may never be able to realistically emulate the nonfiction diary (Brindle 34).

However willing the reader may be to overlook differences between the fictional and nonfictional diary, this willingness operates on the assumption that the nonfiction diary can be defined at all. Hassam Andrew raises this point in his book, *Writing and Reality: A Study of Modern British Diary Fiction*. He discusses how any attempt at defining the nonfiction diary must necessarily draw on existing suppositions about what a nonfiction diary consists of, and those assumptions are likely to be subjectively and culturally determined, and, therefore, inadequate in generating a universal definition. Hassam goes on to say that even once the writer has settled on a working definition, it is unlikely he or she will be able to fully emulate the form for several reasons: 1) fictional diaries are typically written all at once, while nonfiction diaries are written over time, which means the former will not be able to account for shifts in diary conventions; 2) "the development of diary fiction does not necessarily parallel developments in the nonfiction diary"; and 3) fiction-diary writers are likely to be subject to trends in fiction writing in a way that a nonfiction diary writers may not be (15). These issues demonstrate not only the inherent difficulty of emulating the nonfiction diary form, but the necessity of identifying a cultural definition of "nonfiction diary" before the attempt can even be made.

When confronting the aforementioned challenges, it is important to consider the artistry of the writing as much as the accuracy. Fiction readers are often willing to forgive discrepancies between their definition of a nonfiction diary and the author's representation of one, if the story unfolding through the diary is engaging.

In order to generate this sort of reader-based authenticity, author Bernard Duyfhuizen suggests the following components be present in diary fiction: "an immediacy of writing; a secret, self-addressed text; an awareness of the writing act; a 'written to the moment', reflexive drama; and a 'solipsistic characterized act of reading' (qtd. in Brindle 34).

"Dream's End" draws upon diary fiction conventions in a broader sense. While it captures an immediacy of writing and alludes to an awareness of the writing act, the piece more closely complies with one of the working definitions of diary fiction as provided by Professor of Comparative Literature, Lorna Martens in her book *The Diary Novel*. In this text, she defines diary fiction in general as " . . . a first-person narrative that the narrator writes at periodic intervals and essentially for himself" (4). University of Pennsylvania scholar Gerald Prince reiterates this basic definition in "The Diary Novel." As quoted in Hassam's book, Prince classifies the diary novel using four basic criteria: 1) it's written in first-person and "the narrator is the protagonist," 2) the sections are identified by "a more or less specific date," 3) "the narration is fragmented," and 4) "the diarist writes only for himself or herself" (Hassam 17).

"Dream's End" lacks many of the characteristics commonly associated with the diary novel; for example, stream-of-consciousness-style language, frequent narrative reference to the journal in which the protagonist is writing, sparse dialogue, past tense

language, etc. I still classify it as diary fiction. Protagonist Emma, writes the entries as first-person recollections. Even before Emma pulls specific entries to give to Lucy, the narration is fragmented by Emma's waking. And at the time the entries are created, Emma writes them only for herself. Additionally, though not designated by specific dates, the entries are numbered to denote the passage of time. I chose to write the narrative in present tense rather than the more common past tense to demonstrate the importance and immediacy of these experiences in Emma's mind, and to suggest that her dream reality is surpassing her waking reality in terms of her interest and investment.

Emma's journal entries deviate from what one would expect to see in an actual dream journal in several ways, 1) the amount of detail with which Emma describes her surroundings, 2) the presence of dialogue and the specificity with which Emma remembers what was said, and 3) the relative continuity of the dream recollection. These deviations are largely due to the narrative function the entries will eventually serve within the novel. However, the paranormal nature of Emma's eventual dream experience, the importance she places upon those experiences, and the fact that Emma begins recording her dreams at the behest of her Creative Writing teacher, also helps justify the detail with which she writes her recollections.

Urban Fantasy Genre

While almost the entirety of "Dream's End" takes place in an alternate dream reality, the protagonist, and her perception of that dream reality, is still grounded in our world. This is true in the sense that protagonist Emma's physical body never actually leaves her world, and Emma makes a record of her experiences, through the journal

entries mentioned in the previous section, only upon waking. This distinction is in keeping with the most common requirement of the genre. While there is some disagreement in the literature over the definitional limits of *urban fantasy*, the point upon which most sources agree is that the genre's definitions are founded in *setting*.

In the section on fantasy in her book *Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*, Joyce Saricks tells us, "[Urban Fantasy] tends to be darker, despite the fact that it is sometimes characterized as elves on motorcycles! The emphasis on societal issues, power or its absence, and general urban blight contributes to the bleaker nature of these stories" (268). While Saricks mentions several defining features of the genre, she also specifically mentions the "general urban blight." In contrast, author Peter Beagle takes exception to the "urban" in urban fantasy in his introduction to *The Urban Fantasy Anthology*, where he defines the genre more broadly by comparing urban fantasy to high fantasy: " . . . it isn't *The Lord of the Rings*: that is, it doesn't happen in a comfortable, rural, pre-industrial setting where people still ride horses, swing swords, quaff ale in variously sinister pubs, and head off apocalypses . . ." (9). He also suggests that because this rapidly evolving genre means "different things to different generations of readers," we need to better define it by further sub-dividing it: "There have, in fact, been three distinct subgenres of urban fantasy: mythic fiction, paranormal romance, and noir fantasy" (9).

Beagle's "mythic fiction" definition (a term he credits to Charles de Lint and Terri Winding) is best suited to my purposes, as it describes supernatural stories that are set in our world, but not necessarily in urban centers. That said, according to *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy's* entry for *Urban Fantasy*, the genre has roots nearly four centuries old and

includes a complex chain of subcategories. For instance, the text argues that "UFs derive primarily from the notion of the edifice [*sic*], and edifices came into true literary existence only with *The Castle of Otranto*" (Clute 975). As a result, criteria used to anatomize Gothic fantasy also work well for urban fantasy:

Claustrophobic containment, subterranean pursuit, supernatural encroachment, extraordinary positions and lethal predicaments; abeyance of rationality; possible victory of evil, supernatural gadgetry, contraptions, machinery, and demonic appliances [*sic*] (Clute 975).

The Encyclopedia of Fantasy may also offer an explanation for the wide variation in genre definition: "A city is a *place*; urban fantasy is a *mode*" (Clute 975). As the genre name implies, there is an expectation that urban fantasy takes place in a city, and in general, a city *does* factor into an urban fantasy story. However, this definition does not always sufficiently capture the complexity of the genre. The encyclopedia goes on to say, "A city may be an icon or a geography; the UF recounts an experience . . . UFs are normally texts where fantasy and the mundane world intersect and interweave throughout a tale which is significantly *about* a real city" (Clute 975). Though the text goes on to acknowledge that there are exceptions, the general principle holds that most urban fantasy consists of a combining of the mundane and the fantastic, with a city, rather integral or iconic, involved in the tale.

The idea of urban fantasy as a mode rather than a place helps explain why the genre so often crosses definitional paths with other fantasy subgenres. For example, *Young Adult Fantasy Fiction*'s chapter on magic realism opens with the following line:

"Uncovering magic in our everyday world, magic realism fantasies explore the inexplicable lurking beneath the surface. In its most simple form, magic realism happens right here on earth" (MacRae 172). *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* makes little mention of magical realism in relation to traditional fantasy tropes, but does say, "MR is a technique of interpretation, and in fictions it is almost invariably tied to story" (Clute 619). It would seem then, that even in the case of subgenre crossover, the definitional pivot point for urban fantasy comes down to setting.

The opportunity to combine the imaginative aspects of another world with the mundane aspects of the known world makes this genre particularly interesting to me, and particularly well-suited to both "Dream's End" and the novel into which it will eventually be incorporated. For example, were the story written as a high fantasy rather than an urban fantasy, it would be necessary to extensively contextualize not only the baseline realities of the dream world, but those of the waking world. In this sense, "Dream's End" adheres most closely to urban fantasy in its distinction from high fantasy. It may be argued that the story doesn't fit into either subgenre, but of the two, urban fantasy is the closer fit. While several city complexes are mentioned in "Dream's End," cities themselves are not the central focus of the story; however the political organization of these complexes is reminiscent of a city. Additionally, the structure and amenities present in these metropolitan areas suggest technology and construction far more typical of the cities found in urban fantasy than the rural or primitive settings found in high fantasy.

Young Adult Literature

As I will demonstrate below, definitions of *young adult literature* (YA literature) are often tied to age of its readership. "Dream's End" works within this definition: the overall narrative is geared toward adolescent readers, Emma's journal entries are written when she is herself a teenager, and the entries are ultimately given over to Lucy, also an adolescent, in the hopes that she will read and gain understanding from their message.

This said, providing a straightforward definition of the young adult genre¹ is still a challenge. In his book, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, former president of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), Michael Cart, points out that giving a conclusive summation of what *young adult literature* means "is about as easy as nailing Jell-O to a wall. Why? Because the term, like the gelatin, is inherently slippery and amorphous" (4). Still, in the same way that *urban fantasy* is defined largely by setting, *young adult literature* (also *adolescent literature*, *teenage books*, or *teenage fiction*,) is defined by the age of its readers, who typically fall between twelve and eighteen (Nilsen 3). In an interview about her book, *Campbell's Scoop: Reflections on Young Adult Literature*, librarian and columnist Patty Campbell echoes Cart's sentiments regarding the inherent difficulties of YA genre classification, but does make an attempt at classification when she says:

The central theme of most YA fiction is becoming an adult, finding the answer to the internal and external question, 'Who am I and what am I going to do about it?' No matter what events are going on in the book,

¹ There is some debate among scholars as to whether *young adult literature* qualifies as a genre. While acknowledging that this conflict merits discussion in its own right, I do classify *young adult literature* as a genre for the purposes of this thesis.

accomplishing that task is really what the book is about, and in the climactic moment the resolution of the external conflict is linked to a realization for the protagonist that moves toward shaping an adult identity (Sutton 110-111).

If young adult literature is about becoming an adult—coming of age—it, follows that much of the genre must by necessity also be *about* young adults and told from the perspective of young adults, even though the genre definitions are often based on the age of a book's readership, not the age of its characters.

This is not, however, to say that only 12-18-year-olds read young adult literature. The success of books like *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *Percy Jackson*, and *The Hunger Games* attest to adult interest in young adult books, and suggests that their appeal, if not their content, often transcends age. Alison Waller, lecturer in Children's Literature, identifies this phenomenon as another factor that complicates attempts at genre clarification, but points out that it also demonstrates that adolescence is "a less stable and more fluid concept, defined by its 'in-between-ness', its transitory position between childhood and adulthood . . ." (6).

In addition to its fluidity between ages, young adult literature lends itself to a wide variety of subgenres. As novelist John Green states in his article, "Does YA Mean Anything Anymore?: Genre in a Digitized World," one of young adult literature's greatest strengths is its breadth: "we publish thousands of books a year . . . We've got poetry and sci-fi and romance and so-called literary fiction; we've got standalones and series and graphic novels and every subgenre imaginable" (23). While publishers and

sellers will always be eager to assign a concrete label to a given work of fiction, the variety of subgenres within the young adult genre provides opportunities for experimentation. A *young adult urban fantasy novel*, for example, might feature anything from supernatural creatures, to magic, to time travel, to possessed surfboards.

The Subjective Nature of Villainy

In this section, I will briefly examine the complexity of heroes and villains relative to genre, the impact of gender on that complexity, and the ways in which complexity results in subjectivity. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the terms "villain" as well as "antagonist," the former referring to a more traditional, folkloric construct, the latter to the complicated, Byronic heroes and villains commonly found in modern fiction. "Dream's End," while working within the genre definitions outlined above, explores the complex and subjective nature of villainy through the interactions of several characters. One of the reasons Emma eventually shares these journal entries with Lucy is that Lucy perceives Emma as a villain. Emma wishes to offer Lucy perspective by outlining her own experiences with and perceptions of villainy and betrayal when she was Lucy's age, as perception can change with time and experience. Perceived villainy is explored through several of the other characters as well: for example, Sol's conflict with Avyanna, Millie's conflict with her mother, Millie's internal conflict with herself, and Avyanna's conflict with Bo.

Heroes and villains have evolved as storytelling has evolved. We need look no further than fairy tales for examples of heroes and villains whose function is fairly basic. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Propp demonstrates the formulaic nature of these

stories and characters by breaking the entire genre down into its component functions.

"Morphologically, a tale may be termed any development proceeding from villainy or a lack, through intermediary functions to marriage, or to other functions employed as a dénouement" [*sic*] (92). This definition is significant both for its simplistic approach to villainy, as well as for its equating villainy with "a lack."

Grimm's Fairy Tales provide specific examples of the simplicity defined by Propp. Not only do they all follow a set structure, but the characters themselves are actually secondary to that structure. In many cases, the characters are not even given actual names, they're simply defined by their appearance, social function, or occupation. For example, in the well-known "Little Red-Cap" (Little Red Riding Hood), the titular character is described by her clothing, the villainous wolf by his appearance, the huntsman by occupation, and the grandmother by her social role (95). There are, of course, exceptions to this no-name rule (e.g., "Hansel and Gretel," "Rapunzel,"), but the point still holds that readers (or hearers) of fairy tale were not meant to concern themselves with the motivations, individuality, or complex moral quandaries of these characters. Indeed, these characters could be anyone. The simplicity with which they are portrayed leaves the reader to focus on the consequences that result from each character's actions, and, by extension, the consequences that may befall the reader.

These folk-narrative-as-cautionary-tales are particularly critical of women, who are often explicitly or implicitly cast as villains. In his book, *Grimm Language:*

Grammar, Gender and Genuineness in the Fairy Tales, Stanford professor Orrin W.

Robinson performs a detailed lingual analysis of the original Grimm texts. Through this

analysis, Robinson demonstrates that the Grimm brothers, who selected and edited the tales, convey, "their conscious or unconscious prejudices concerning proper gender roles, especially those for young girls and women" (171). Given that the tales were published in the 19th century, this is not particularly surprising. In ascribing desired social behaviors to the heroes of these tales and undesirable social behaviors to the villains, the readers are likely to reach conclusions (whether conscious or unconscious) about how "good" men and women and "bad" men and women behave. The ramifications of this are troubling.

Discussion of feminist theory in relation to fairy tales arose in the 1970s, and as folklorist and editor Donald Haase sums up in *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, " . . . early feminist criticism of fairy tales . . . was principally concerned with the genre's representation of females and the effects of these representations on the gender identity and behavior of children in particular" (3). Within a story structure that makes good and evil, wise and foolish, right and wrong so polarized, it is inevitable that many women will be portrayed as villainous simply for defying expected gender roles or rebelling against those who would enforce them.

The presence of these implicit messages is further highlighted by recent adaptations and retellings of fairy tales, which challenge the hidden assumptions of these stories. For example, the popular novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* by Gregory Maguire retells the story of Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*, purposefully complicating how the reader has traditionally perceived the "good" and "evil" players in the narrative, and showing that it's not so straightforward as Elphaba being "bad" and Glinda being "good." Hundreds of other

modern fairy tale retellings take a similar approach in complicating the original structure of the fairy tale, be it through offering additional dimension to the original villain, as in the above example, or playing off of established gender expectations as in the case of Gail Carson Levine's *Ella Enchanted* and Marissa Meyer's *Cinder*, both retellings of Cinderella.

Wicked and *Ella Enchanted* are excellent examples of traditional fairy tales intersecting with modern fiction, which is not without its own history of character oversimplification and the vilifying of women. In the same way that many traditional fairy tales dictate female behavior, so too does fiction highlight the roles and expectations placed upon women. Professors Carolyn G. Helibrun and Margaret R. Higonnet explore these issues in the introduction to *The Representations of Women in Fiction*. In this introduction, they discuss the frequency with which dichotomous versions of womanhood are portrayed within the same text, in order for those texts to demonstrate the heroism of the woman who embraces culture, versus the villainy of the woman who embraces her natural impulses (Helibrun xviii). While fiction concerns itself with character motivation in a way much folk narrative does not, these sort of dichotomous depictions of womanhood are little different than the pointed stereotypes presented in fairy tales. Helibrun and Higonnet further conclude that fiction that silenced women, and even fiction that attempted to capture her plight didn't generally comprehend the pain that accompanied it:

The social exclusion of rebellious women, their relegation to the margins of society, that we find recorded in such fiction reminds us how central in

our lives are the patriarchal, hierarchic values and structures; the silencing and absence of those women bespeaks a presence (Helibrun xix).

While we'd like to believe that portraying the silent woman as a heroine and the outspoken woman as a villainess are relics of the past, we still see evidence that young women are being socialized this way. In their book *Meeting at the Crossroads*, researchers Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan describe the frequency with which young girls choose to silence themselves as they move into adolescence:

Listening to girls' voices, we heard the degree to which morality, in a male-voiced culture and a male-governed society, justifies certain psychologically debilitating moves which girls and women are encouraged to make in relationships and creates internal as well as external barriers to girls' ability to speak in relationships and move freely in the world (21).

To speak is to challenge and to complicate. Society's push to silence women is a step toward the kind of oversimplification observed in fairy tales, in which women do not serve as a force unto themselves, but as a platform for the expression of others. With no voice of her own, a woman can be forced into the role of hero, villain, or something in between, regardless of the innate complexity that comes with being human.

Much has been written in both academic and non-academic publications (the blogosphere, literature, television and movie message boards, etc.) about the problems with setting out to write *a female character* (a discourse in which I include "female villains/antagonists"), rather than just a character who happens to be female. In his article, "On the Subject of the 'Strong Female Character,'" novelist and blogger Chuck

Wendig suggests that interesting characters are interesting characters regardless of their gender. He also acknowledges, however, that in the same way women in the "real world" are impacted by imbalances, so too may characters in fiction be impacted by similar forces: "the glass ceiling, the rape culture put forth by male oppression, a general lesser but no less significant culture of dismissal."

Still, to assume that the female characters in a feminist world need now be portrayed as more strong than weak implies that female characters are already in a strength-deficit that must be compensated for by imbuing them with stereotypically masculine characteristics (for example upper body strength, an affinity for weapons and war, etc.). To suggest that the strengths of either men or women are so superficial is to do a disservice to believable characters in general. In her article, "I Hate Strong Female Characters," author Sophia McDougall posits that it's not enough to write "strong" female characters, as this is just an extension of the flat character development that has occurred so often in the past. She says, "Sherlock Holmes gets to be brilliant, solitary, abrasive, Bohemian, whimsical, brave, sad, manipulative, neurotic, vain, untidy, fastidious, artistic, courteous, rude, a polymath genius. Female characters get to be Strong."

If we wish to write complex characters, we need to move away from singular definitions and allow both men and women to represent the good, bad, ugly, and otherwise without being strictly categorized as hero or villain. Author Douglas Bauer touches on this point when he says,

What's vital for the fiction writer to remember is that the wicked, the violent, and the stupid do also love, in their way. Just as humble and loving and thoughtful people also hate. Hate humbly, hate lovingly, hate thoughtfully . . . (qtd. in Burroway 118).

When we move away from characters as lessons and move toward characters as people, it can send a new message about the value of actual individuals beyond whatever assumptions we make based on their triumphs and mistakes.

This level of character complexity raises questions of relative value and subjectivity. In a world where heroes are neither all good nor all bad, their heroism and villainy becomes a complicated matter. It raises questions: Does everyone consider this character a hero/villain? Is the reader meant to be undecided on who is a villain and who is a hero? Are the readers meant to disagree with the other characters on this score? How does life experience alter perceptions of villainy? Is a person still a villain if only one person sees them as such?

In her essay, "Saints, Heroes, Sages, and Villains," Professor of Philosophy Julia Markovitz explores the relative morality of those four titular groups and how perception influences their value. For my thesis, I am interested particularly in the latter. In regards to the sort of amoral behavior we've come to expect from villains, Markovitz says,

. . . our condemnation of wrong actions tracks not just the strength of the wrong-making reasons or whether the agent acted for those wrong-making reasons but also whether the agent acted wrongly in circumstances where most of us, doing the judging, would have acted rightly (309).

It is this kind of moral relativism that makes villainy so subjective, and this kind of subjective villainy that I will be exploring in the fiction piece.

"Confronting a monster is much easier and safer when it takes place in a story" (Bodart 26). Fiction is a wonderful place to explore the monsters, both literal and figurative, that shape adolescent perception of self and others. Urban fantasy is a genre well suited to the coming-of-age stories discussed above because they allow for layered heroes and villains who can be both monstrous and saintly, both literally and metaphorically, and can, therefore, help readers explore the inherent complexity, horror, and beauty of being human.

The uniqueness of my thesis is directly tied to the specificity of my genre. While there is a solid foundation of young adult epistolary fiction (including popular novels like *The Princess Diaries* series by Meg Cabot, and *Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging* by Louise Rennison) as well as a plethora of young adult urban fantasy novels (for example, those novels listed in the above YA section of my Introduction), there is a relatively small library comprised of *young adult epistolary urban fantasy fiction*. I did come across a few examples in my literature review, including *The Moth Diaries* by Rachel Klein, a narrative of journal entries (disseminated thirty years after they're written, which is a similar technique to that which I will ultimately employ in my novel) that combines boarding school growing pains with vampire lore; *The Vampires Diaries* by L.J. Smith, which include journal entries about a teenage girl caught in a love triangle between two vampire brothers; and *Witch Child* by Celia Rees, which is the story of a real witch attempting to survive the witch trials of the 1600s.

My specific contribution to the fiction canon is further narrowed by the fact that my protagonist is writing journal entries, not about her waking life, and not about her dreams in the metaphorical sense, but about a second life experienced through the medium of dreams. Numerous novels deal with the idea of an alternate dream reality (for example, *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadeth* by H.P. Lovecraft and *Dream Weaver* by Su Williams), and others explore what happens when a dream reality and a waking reality combine (*The Lathe of Heaven* by Ursula K. Le Guin, and *Wake* by Lisa McMann). I even came across a novel (*Dream Journal* by T.D. Dewmer) in which the protagonist is keeping a dream journal about a real-life girl whom he later meets. The specific focus of "Dream's End," however, is a relatively new one. The incorporation of the above genre elements (epistolary, urban fantasy, young adult) combined with an alternate dream world *as told through* dream journal entries is a fresh contribution to the existing canon.

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"Dream's End" Preface

The framing of this narrative presents unique challenges, largely because it is a backstory narrative, told through journal entries that will later be incorporated into a full novel. While it would be impractical to outline the scope of the novel here, it is necessary to provide some basic information in order for this narrative to make sense.

Emma, the girl writing the journal entries, begins keeping a dream journal at the behest of her creative writing instructor, because Emma finds her dreams more interesting to write about than her real life. She's a seventeen-year-old girl as the narrative opens, and though she writes the entries for herself at the suggestion of her instructor, she later repurposes the journal entries, giving a select few (the ones included here) to Lucy, the novel's protagonist.

Lucy encounters Emma several decades after these entries are written. Lucy learns that Emma was responsible for an event that pulls Lucy into the happenings of this alternate world and separates her from her family. Therefore, Lucy views Emma as an enemy and antagonist. In the novel, an older and wiser Emma assures Lucy that she can reverse the effects of the event by completing a series of tasks. Many of the nuances of character and setting will have greater significance within the larger context of the novel. For example, the reader will already be familiar with many of the characters in the journal entries, because Lucy will have previously encountered those characters by the time she reads those entries.

I chose to tell Emma's narrative through journal entries rather than letters because I wanted the Emma who writes the entries and the Lucy who reads them to be around the

same age. Were I to have an older version of Emma writing about her younger self, she would have had a difficult time separating older-Emma's intent from younger-Emma's voice. Emma wants Lucy to know her as she was when she was a teenager. There's a degree to which Emma seeks absolution and understanding from Lucy, and helping Lucy to see Emma's humanity and the parallels between their young lives is one way she hopes to do that.

This story lends itself well to the young adult genre because both Lucy and Emma are asked to make adult decisions before they've actually reached adulthood. Those decisions shape their lives, and in many ways push them to grow up, to look beyond themselves, and to sacrifice for the good of others. They're both convinced they know more than they do until proven otherwise, and as such they're both resistant to what they perceive as intrusive adult authority.

The urban fantasy genre also helped facilitate the coming-of-age commentary. The literal "in-betweenness" of Lucy and Emma negotiating two separate worlds ties in with the metaphorical "in-betweenness" that happens as individuals transition from adolescence to adulthood. Urban fantasy worked particularly well for this purpose because it allows both women to have one foot in a familiar world (for better or worse) while they try to negotiate the challenges and expectations of a foreign reality.

As to villainy, my fiction piece tries to address it in both subtle and direct ways. The climax of the piece in particular implicates several potential antagonists, whose behavior can be quite easily tied to several of Propp's functions of a villain. For example, "The villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or of his

belongings," "the villain receives information about his victim," and "the victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy" (29-30). That said, the behaviors of these maybe-villains are not without justification; from certain perspectives their behavior might even be deemed heroic. Particularly in the case of Emma, what she perceives as a betrayal closely emulates her future betrayal of Lucy, and so while convinced of her perpetrator's guilt in the moment, Emma's perception is likely to shift with time, perspective, and additional experience. Through this story, I hope to demonstrate that the nature of heroism and villainy is rarely as straightforward as we'd like to believe.

DREAM'S END

Emma's Dream Journal

Mrs. Offerman told me to start keeping a dream journal. I think she only said it because I told her I didn't want to write about anything in my own life, even after she told me that I should.

"There's a story in the good and in the bad," she said.

"Not if the good and the bad are both boring," I replied. "In ninth grade they made us read this book about a boy who runs away from home and goes to live underground with a badger. And it was supposed to have really happened. And it was boring. And I got nothing on the badger boy, so . . ."

"What's the most interesting thing that happened to you this week?" she asked, tipping her chin against her folded hands as she watched me.

I pondered the question for a moment, then said, "I had a dream last night that there was a woogie living in my locket."

Her eyebrows hopped and she said, "So write about that."

I came home that day and discovered that Mom had forgotten to do the shopping again. She left a note to say she was actually off shopping with Mr. Bryerson, but I doubted she'd bring any food back with her. I ate ketchup on crackers until something happened to the television to make it sort of blow up, and then I lay there staring up until the nighttime shadows turned the water stains back into ceiling.

Then I had a dream.

VIOLET

Dream #1 – The Louvre

In the dream I'm riding a hippopotamus around the Louvre, and the curator is yelling at me because the sparklers in my hair are singeing sparks into the bottoms of naked marble statues. And I hold my arms high and laugh on and on and on.

And I wake.

Dream #57 – The Sprinklers

In the dream I'm in the hallway at school with Angie and a bunch of other kids I sort of know. I think they're on the swim team. I stand in the open doorway of a tall, white cabinet that's built into a long line of mustard-yellow lockers. Angie and I pull out tear-shaped glass bottles filled with lotion meant to make one's skin glow, and we hold the bottles above our heads as we pour it out, watching it fall down into our palms in skinny, pale pink streams.

I put the bottle back and gaze into the cabinet. Before I can officially register at the school, I have to get clearance for the transparent blue piggy bank I bought at the grocery store last week.

"You haven't gotten that thing approved yet?" Angie asks.

I shake my head, and reach inside the cabinet for the piggy bank, but miss.

Suddenly my friend, Andrew, who I like, grabs my arm and tells me to run. I fumble for the piggy bank, but can't seem to get a hold on it.

"Hurry," Andrew hisses. "They're coming!"

Finally my fingers close around the cool plastic, and I run after him, looking back to see the silhouette of a man emerge at the other end of the hall, a giant fire hose trailing behind him as he paints the walls and carpets with water.

We've just reached the front doors of the school when the building sprinklers splutter on, though the water doesn't come from the ceiling, but rather from sprinkler heads that spring up from the corners and floors like the ones we used to have in our lawn before they all broke.

Andrew, Angie, and I fall to the floor as though under attack, covering our heads with wet hands as the water cascades over our prone bodies. I clutch my backpack underneath me as a short little bald man, who appears to be the disciplinarian of the school (though I've never seen him before) glowers down at us. He wears a blue blazer with too-short sleeves, and it makes him look like a tiny, human scarecrow with a shiny forehead and black necktie.

I begin to laugh. "You know, apart from the worry that my books might get wet I'm actually quite enjoying myself," I tell my friends.

And I wake.

Dream #125 – Uncle Tax Man

In the dream, the whole world is made of gelatin. At least it looks that way. I wrinkle my nose when the ground slurps in response to my steps, and glance behind me to see yawning holes where my feet once stood. I'm transfixed by the jiggling step-cratered expanse, shiny red ground, cartoonish trees globbed with wiggling green foliage, and a shuddering yellow sun in the Claymation sky above me. I'm so transfixed, in fact,

that I don't watch where I'm going, and suddenly I'm tumbling down a squishy mountainside and into a gelatin sea. I sink to the bottom and just lie there for a while, watching the big yellow sun move in the sky, though I know I really shouldn't be able to see it from so far beneath the surface.

Something catches my attention, and I look over to see Uncle Melbo dressed like a 1920s reporter swimming toward me, one hand clutching a white notepad as he strokes through the water, the other hand keeping his hat in place. When he reaches me, he lifts his hat in greeting, and I frown as his motions briefly displace the gelatin, only for more to fall in its place from the vast ocean of blue above us.

"Morning," he says.

"Is it?" I say.

"Looks to be," he says, pointing one finger up at the sun before bringing it back down to riffle through the little notepad, punching more holes in the gelatin as he moves.

"I'm glad I found you here, I have some questions for you."

"What kind of questions?"

"Tax questions," he replies.

"But I don't have any taxes," I argue.

"Exactly the problem," he says.

"No, Mom claims me as a dependent."

"That's not what it says here," he says, waving the notepad like he just found out something naughty about me and is glad to gloat over it.

I snatch the pad away from him and he blusters his outrage. I look down and find a picture of a cat riding a toaster around like a toboggan.

"You can't prove this was me," I say, then turn to run away.

He chases me for a long time. Slinky, sucking steps that follow mine.

And I wake.

Dream #315 - The Clearing

Tonight's dream felt different somehow . . .

In the dream the wind stirs up my hair and when a pale auburn curl flits across my face, I snatch at it, pulling the strand taut, surprised at the color. I trace the ringlet down to where it meets long, elegant fingers tipped with perfectly rounded nails. Neither the hair nor the hand is my own. I lift both hands and stare at pearl-pale skin, smooth and glowing in the evening lights.

I want to know what the rest of me looks like, and suddenly I notice strange, floating mirrors near the trees on the other side of the platform. The mirrors are thin as aluminum foil, billowing out in the breeze before settling to hang flat again, anchored to the stars with invisible thread. I advance toward the mirrors as though summoned, and when I stop in front of one, I'm staring at the loveliest woman I've ever seen. My caramel-brown eyes are enormous in a perfectly delicate, symmetrical face framed by thickly curled tresses. My body is taller than I'm used to, curved and flat in all the places I always wished it would be, and I carry myself with a foreign grace. I'm so busy staring in dazzled wonder that I don't notice when a man walks up behind me.

"Whoa," he says. I turn to look and find he's staring at his own reflection like I

was staring at mine. And, like me he's exquisitely beautiful. He's tall, taller than I am even in heels, broad, and lean. Hair so thick it defies parting tops a wonderfully sculpted face: Asian features, large, coal-colored eyes and straight, white teeth. He's dressed in a black, three-piece suit, a pocket square and lapel flower blooming emerald green from the dark fabric of his suit jacket.

"This is new . . ." He mutters. His deep voice is colored by a slight accent, but one I've not heard before.

"You look different?" I ask.

He glances over, then does a double take when he gets a good look at me. He stares for several seconds before remembering himself and turning back to the mirror.

"Yeah," he says, the word drawn out with uncertainty. "Much different."

"Me too," I say, giving a spin and watching my skirt rise and settle around my ankles.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Even in my dreams I don't look this good," he says, turning around to check out his back.

I snort. "I once spent an entire dream hitting on people and no one would give me the time of day. Even once I realized I was dreaming, it didn't help."

He stops preening and looks at me. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. I mean, shouldn't that be my prerogative as the dreamer?"

"You'd think so," he mutters thoughtfully. "Huh."

"I'm Emma, by the way."

He smiles his perfect smile, and I return it. "Mat."

"Hi, Mat."

"Hi, Emma."

Not sure what to say next, I shuffle my feet a bit and look behind us. We're standing in a clearing filled with attractive couples dressed in grey formal wear that contrasts sharply to Mat's black and green and my own blood-red gown. Behind us, the clearing arches sharply up into a hillside of gleaming obsidian rock from which a platform has been carved. The contours and glassy angles wink beneath the light of a dozen towering claw torches that lick at the air with white and purple flame. Lilac trees frame the platform where an imposing woman with amber eyes and smooth olive skin paces. Whatever she's wearing is hidden behind the thick fabric of her charcoal-grey cloak, the hood all but disappearing beneath a riotous mane of hair the same color as the lilac petals that scuttle around her feet. Through the tresses she's snaked a thick waterfall braid and interwoven the pleats with silver and amethyst threads that shudder their luster as she walks. The woman's gaze travels across the clearing, flitting from person to person, occasionally pausing on a certain individual in the crowd before moving on to the next.

As she paces she ignores a handsome, meticulously coiffed gentleman who also watches the crowd from just behind her, his back pressed against the metal of the towering torch. He wears the same style of three-piece suit as Mat, well-fitted, rich black silk that bleeds down into shiny black dress shoes. An indigo pocket square that matches

the man's ebony-streaked hair peeks out from the black, and winks on a fold as the man crosses his arms. His attention occasionally shifts from the clearing to sweep over the pacing woman. Though his expression is more assessing than anything else, I get the distinct impression he doesn't like her and I wonder why that might be.

I'm about to mention this to Mat when the woman on the platform stops pacing. I glance back at her and find her cat eyes locked on the both of us. I step back under the power of her notice, and I hear my new friend draw in a sharp breath. The corner of the woman's mouth twitches up.

And I wake.

ORANGE

Dream #316 - The Ballroom

In the dream I'm standing beside an enormous fireplace in a high-ceilinged ballroom. Six antique lounge chairs the shade of salmon flesh domino out from the enormous hearth where white and purple flames burn low and easy. At the foot of the circled furniture, someone has buried a squat table beneath a tower of food.

A short, wiry young man with unkempt blond hair and elegant hands has draped himself backwards across one of the chairs. His short legs are crossed at the ankle, his elevated feet swaying merrily back and forth so the two large, decorative buckles on his shoes nip at each other as they clip at the edges. Over his billowy long-sleeved shirt, he wears a form-fitting black vest embroidered through with twinkling threads the color of orange rind and copper. His black pants are tucked into tight white socks at the knee, and his puffy hat, embellished with the same lovely thread as his vest has slipped from his head to idle lazily on the floor beneath his chair.

His hair riots, his nose slants a bit long and crooked. He's rather ordinary-looking. Without bothering to sit up, the man devours a fistful of pomegranate seeds before chasing them down with an enormous slice of cake.

"How can you eat like that?" I ask.

The man pauses in his chewing, cheeks food-swollen, and sits up on his elbows. He works his jaw as he studies me and then, with a chocolate smile, says, "Nice . . . bodice."

I glance down at my corseted chest. He's not wrong, but I can hardly tell him that

when it was a rude thing to say in the first place. Instead I return his perusal and say,

"Nice tights."

His grin widens as he raises a leg into the air and pivots his ankle to admire the shiny buckles on his shoes. "They are nice, aren't they?" he agrees. "No chilly calves for me."

He stretches an arm back for more food as I wrestle my massive red dress through the small gap formed by two empty settees. By the time I settle into a seat, concerned for a moment that the mass of petticoats will push me right back onto my feet, the man is reclining once more, popping grapes and peach-swirled divinity into his mouth. I watch him for the span of five candies before returning to my original line of inquiry.

"Aren't you afraid you'll choke?"

He lolls his head in my direction, contorting his mouth like he's trying to reach some errant divinity on a back molar.

"What kind of dream would this be if I choked on divinity?" he asks.

I shrug. "Poetic?"

His face sours. "I hate irony."

"Besides," I continue, heaving myself sideways without actually standing so I can snatch some dice-sized chocolates topped with red iced roses from a gilded platter on the table, "People choke in dreams all the time."

"They do? What people?"

"I don't know," I bite into a candy and pause. "Wow. These are really good."

"I know." He rises long enough to fill a hand with the dice chocolates before

reposing once more.

"People talk about falling off cliffs and buildings all the time," I go on, "which would definitely kill you. How's choking any different?"

"What people?"

"I don't know." I nip off half a chocolate and peer at the strawberry paste inside.

"Haven't you ever fallen to your death in a dream?"

"Sure, I've fallen."

"If you can fall to death in a dream, you can choke to death in a dream."

"You don't do anything to death in a dream; you just wake up." As though to prove it, the man is now tossing the treats high into the air and catching them with his mouth. I wonder if one will lodge itself in his windpipe and end our conversation with the sort of irony he so despises.

"Well waking up is a sort of death, isn't it?"

"Dunno," he holds his hand above his face, loosely bouncing a candy around his palm. "If I choke to death on this next chocolate I guess we'll find out?"

I think for a moment and say. "I guess it depends on whose dream it is."

The man drops his hand to his chest and squints at me. "So who do you think's dreaming right now? You or me?"

I shrug. "I kind of have to assume it's me."

"Me too." He says, resuming his toss-catch-repeat regiment. "If it's your dream, I'll choke for sure."

With a roll of my eyes, I shift on the chair, my back and ribs aching under the

savage squeeze of the corset. "I don't *want* you to choke, it just seems likely. Besides, if this were my dream I wouldn't be wearing *this*."

"What would you be wearing?"

I shrug. "Pajamas?"

"Huh." My new friend tucks his hands behind his head, and, after a beat, says, "Who do you think this guy is?"

"Which guy?"

"This one on the ceiling."

I strain my neck back. In the fresco high above my head, a jovial man is playing croquet, but the wickets have been replaced with women, their bloomers peeping out from beneath long skirts. Every painting features the same rotund man in various states of frivolity— in one illustration, he's cavorting naked with a harem of inexplicably delighted women, in another he's lounging roundly upon a rickshaw as it's hefted on the shoulders of nude angels, another shows him lounging in a garden of mauve and lime, devouring fistfuls of grapes and . . . chicken wings?

"I gotta say," my new friend says, "even in a dream some of these scenarios seem . . . unlikely."

I snicker. "Which one are you looking at?"

He gestures and says, "See the one with him pushing the boulder out of the path of the carriage? Or the one next to it of him looming over that lady with purple hair?" I follow the line of his finger to a particularly large fresco. In it a woman kneels before the man, her hands raised in supplication. Her tear-filled, mournful eyes notwithstanding, I

still remember her face.

"See, I know that lady," the blond man continues.

I snap my eyes back to him. "You do?"

"Well I've seen her. In a dream. In this field. Now I didn't talk to her or anything, but she didn't strike me as the sort of person to beg for anything."

I think back to the cloaked woman pacing the platform, sharp eyes flitting from person to person. No, she really didn't seem the begging sort.

"I've seen her, too," I say.

"Where?"

"Also in a field. Except she was pacing up on this shiny black stage.

"I guess this must be his party?" I say, watching the many lovely faces bob along in waves of grey fabric and steel-colored gems and cufflinks.

"Given the décor, I hope to sweet hell it's at least his house."

"Except if this is one of our dreams, doesn't that make us responsible for this place?"

He considers this as his crooked teeth rip half the meat from a chicken leg, then says, "It would make you wonder about me, wouldn't it? Weird medieval fetish castle covered in paintings of some sad, pervy little man. Ballroom filled with a bunch of hot girls who ignore me."

"I'm not ignoring you."

"I wasn't talking about you."

"Hey."

He spares me a glance and rolls his eyes. "I mean them," he says, nodding his chin toward the many wandering party guests, all dressed in varying shades of grey. "Not one of 'em has made eyes at me. And they've got fans so you know they could." He brushes crumbs from his vest and mutters, "Talk about unlikely."

I'm studiously ignoring his last comment when a monotone voice behind me says, "Excuse me." The blond man elbow-sits again, and I turn to see a thin man peering down at us. He reminds me of a test tube: short, bald, and long-faced.

"The Augurs will see you now." He says this with a bow, sweeping one arm out to his right and letting it hover there as he lifts himself straight again. "Please follow me."

I exchange a look with the blond man as I struggle to get up. The many layers of my gown repeatedly wrestle me back onto the lounge chair before I can finally totter onto my slippered feet. Meanwhile, my dinner companion hovers over the buffet, stuffing fistfuls of candy into the hat he's retrieved from the floor.

"Hey," I say, deciding I'm tired of thinking of him as the blond man, "I never caught your name."

"Why yes, I'd love to follow you into the depths of your suspicious castle," he mutters, ignoring me and grabbing an overflowing handful of pecan clusters. "You bowed at me so everything checks out."

"Hey," I repeat.

"Who are these Augurs anyway? Maybe they own this place, and he's the guy in all the gross paintings. Like Mr. and Mrs. Augur? Bet she's not too happy about this room."

"Hey. Blondie." I grab his elbow, and he finally seems to realize I've been talking to him. "What?" Frowning, he holds the hat out. "Did you want some?"

"No," I smile. "I was just asking your name?"

"Oh," he blinks long, as though startled this didn't occur to him until now. "It's Paco. Yours?"

"Emma."

I ask the test tube man his name, but he responds with silence. And then he's conveying us across the ballroom to a set of ornately carved double doors glazed in gold and amethyst. A bow of stain glass windows featuring the man from the ceiling frescoes has been installed into the exit archway, and white lights from the candles beyond the room sway around the painted images like crystalline shadow puppets. Above the stained glass, the letters "D.E." have been inscribed in elaborate cursive script.

"I bet this would be a hard palace to sell," Paco murmurs to me, and I laugh. If our escort hears, he gives no sign of it, merely nodding to two posted attendants who synchronously draw open the thick doors and close them once we've passed.

For a time, Paco and I chat as we walk. We walk and walk, and soon I realize the escort is no longer with us. And then Paco is gone, and I trudge an unending corridor that's outfitted in knight's armor and broken, rabbit-eared television sets, moving toward a large window I'm too short to see out of once I get to it.

Sucking in a shallow breath, I haul myself onto a long table that sits beneath the window and strain on tip-toe to peer through it. When I succeed, I'm looking into a long corridor tossed with armor and television sets. At the end of the hallway, a small-waisted

woman with beautifully curled hair the color of rose honey stands on her toes on a table, straining to see beyond it.

And I wake.

Dream #322 - The Mapping

In the dream I pinch my eyes closed against daylight so bright it throbs. Hushed conversations and the clipping noises of hard-soled shoes echoing off high walls and ceilings fill the space around me. I'm sitting on a soft cushion covered in what feels like velvet, my back against a wall, and the smell of cedar reminds me of the camping trip Grandpa took me on when I was seven.

"See, the thing about these candies is that you don't have to unwrap them with your hands," a familiar male says, his voice winking.

"Sorry?" a female voice responds.

"Yeah, see, if you watch carefully I'm gonna unwrap it with my tongue."

"I can't even see it now, how am I supposed to watch carefully?" she asks dryly.

His response is garbled, like he's talking around something. "No see, you'll know because it'll be unwrapped in just a second."

"Is this how you eat all your candy?"

As they continue to bicker over the issue, I slowly squint my eyes open again, now seeing only the vaguest splotchy outline of the window across from me when I blink. I'm seated in another massively domed hall, images of the portly, Henry VIII look-alike mercifully absent in this one, and I think that if opulence had legs it would be strutting through this room. Both sides of the hall are symmetrically banked in tall, widely arched

windows. Legless window seats encased in deep violet velvet, like the one I'm sitting on, hug the sides of each alcove, and the whole room is awash in rainbows cast from dozens of gently rotating crystal chandeliers and their candles that blaze white like tiny suns.

I glance in the direction of the voices and discover Paco arguing with a young woman at least four inches taller than him. Not surprisingly, the girl is beautiful. Her shapely figure has been wrapped into a voluminous gown like mine but hers is yellow—vivid daffodil flaring brilliant against dark cocoa skin that glows lovely in the blinding sunlight and dancing rainbows. I notice that the fabric beneath her over-skirt is themed not in brocade fleur-de-lis, but lemons; bright, sequined lemons that shine and wink as she moves. A peek at my dress confirms that in place of my own fleur-de-lis fabric I now have delectable, green-stemmed strawberries.

"Emma!" I look back up to see Paco hurrying over to me, trailed after by the lemon girl. "Geez it's about time. We've been waiting for you for days."

Paco, who I imagine would rejoice at food-themed clothing, looks just as he did the last time I saw him. "What do you mean?" I ask, struggling to get up. This time, Paco reaches out to help me, and in moments, I'm on my feet, skirts bellling against my legs.

"How could you be waiting for me?"

"I don't know; this place is weird. When you disappeared last time, I figured it must have been my dream after all, right? But then I got back here the next night, and the attendant folks were freaking out. They've been real hush-hush about it all, but this place really echoes so we've heard most of it anyway, and apparently that butler guy took you and me down the wrong hallway or something, and so we got lost. And sometimes when

they lose one of us, they don't get us back again, which is what they were starting to figure must have happened to you. Oh, this is Joan."

I gape at this new, babbling Paco for long moment. "Wait, what?" I say.

Joan interjects, "A Traveler has never returned from a seven-day absence, and you were at six. They had begun to worry."

"Who's they?"

She shrugs her shoulders and looks the hall over. "Whoever runs this place. I imagine we'll be finding out soon enough."

Paco cackles. "They rush in here every ten minutes and look under furniture and crap. Like maybe you just got stuck under something and they've been freaking out for nothing."

I tug at my skirts. "As if I could hide under anything wearing this. Have you ever worn a corset before?" I ask Joan, attempting a deep breath and failing. "I'm tempted to just rip the thing off."

"Hey, you ladies know I'm here to help you any way I can," Paco chimes in. Joan throws him a dirty look and replies,

"No. Not in my dreams or otherwise. I've been here several nights in a row though, and it's always the same. Perhaps they have a dress code."

"Well then, they need to change their policy," I grumble, pulling at the gown bodice as though I can claw the corset open with the force of my thoughts. "What do you mean when you say 'travelers?'"

"That seems to be what they call us. The dreamers The entire situation is absurd,

but it's a dream still so I suppose it's allowed to be."

"Hey guys. Emma! You finally made it."

I turn to see a smiling, breathtaking Mat striding toward us. Behind him, a tall, guy with wild, blue-streaked black hair, wolf eyes, and facial piercings, follows. He's also exquisite, in a tall, dark, and serious kind of way. Mat's and Wolf-Eye's clothing is identical to Paco's except the vest, cloak, and hat are embroidered with glittering green and blue thread, respectively. The ensemble looks particularly out of place on the new guy, with his lanky limbs and pierced eyebrow.

I return Mat's smile as he throws one arm around my shoulders and gives me a squeeze. "Apparently I did." I reply. "Have you all been here this whole time?"

"Yeah," Mat says. "Well. The last few nights, anyway. I was bummed to hear you'd disappeared."

I shift attention to Wolf-Eyes who's now gazing out a window, arms crossed over his chest.

"Hi." I say, holding out my hand. "We've not met."

"Hey," he says. Belatedly noticing my hand, he hurriedly steps forward to shake it.

"I'm Emma."

"Noe."

I'm startled enough to pause. "Sorry?"

"Why?"

"No, I—I didn't catch your name."

"No. N-O-E."

"Oh." I blink. "Really?"

He nods. "Yup."

"Why did your parents name you Noe?"

He shrugs. "Why did your parents name you Emma?"

"My great-grandmother's name was Emma."

"Oh."

I wait for him to elaborate, but he's already scowling out the window again. I shoot a look at Mat, but he just shrugs with a "what are you gonna do?" expression.

"Okay," I say enthusiastically, "Well, fair enough." Turning back to the others, I ask, "What are we supposed to do now?"

"I don't know," Mat replies. "All we've done so far is wait."

"I'm thinking banquet and belly-dancing," Paco chimes in.

"Why would they give us a banquet?" Joan asks with a frown. "There's already enough food for a banquet laid out in the corner."

"Fine. Then just belly dancers." He grins at her so wide his cheeks must hurt, and wider still when she goes on frowning.

"Won't you feel silly belly-dancing with that hat on?" she asks.

His reply comes quickly. "You'll feel silly about how much you like it."

She's just opened her mouth to respond when a sound like lit twirlers zings through the air and layered satin drapes dotted with hundreds of colorful gems unfurl from the window arches and twirl down to kiss the shiny hardwood floors. The light

streaming in on either side of us blinks out first, followed immediately by the next set of windows, then the next, like dominoes falling one after the other, until the room is only center-lit by the gently rotating chandeliers that begin to spin faster and faster, the searing white flames trailing long and licking at the teardrop crystals as they jerk and sway.

And then the chandeliers are moving from their chains, ghosting slowly through the room as they top-spin, faster and faster until the air above us is filled with a writhing circle of light that glitters brighter and brighter as it closes in on itself. Closer and closer, climbing higher and higher toward the ceiling until the spinning circle is just a ball of light that explodes into a shower of sparks so dazzling I'm forced to close my eyes again. When I open them a single, tremendous chandelier fills the center of the ceiling, and as I watch, it begins to inch downward, its rotations a lazy spin, like a slow-motion slinky falling from above. When it nears the floor, a stout man dressed in familiar clothing launches himself to the floor in front of us.

"Welcome to my palace!" He exclaims, arms thrust out, legs braced wide.

It's the Henry VIII wannabe from the paintings.

He takes in the expressions of his still, startled guests. "This is a very typical reaction to so much splendor before you, no?" his voice leers, as he shuttles his little body about. If he's talking about the chandeliers, then I'll own my amazement; but somehow I don't think that's what he meant. "My name is Solforino," he continues, stretching his arms out as though he wishes to embrace the whole world, "and all that you see before you is mine."

"It's so embarrassing to show up to a party wearing the same outfit as your host,"

Paco murmurs as we take in Henry's purple-embroidered formal wear. Tufts of grey-purple hair poke out from beneath his hat, and amethyst rings festoon his chubby fingers.

"You don't think these are actually his pants we're wearing, do you?" an alarmed Mat asks.

"If they are how did he get them *on* you?"

Henry forms chatty beaks with his fingers. "Whisper, whisper, whisper," he says, then chuckles. "No need to have secrets from me, little friends. We are all family here. I hope you have enjoyed your time in my home so far; you are always welcome, of course."

Paco whispers, watching Henry swagger toward us. "I guess a creepy uncle still technically counts as family?"

"What kind of creepy-ass uncle dresses you in tights?" Mat hisses back.

"I think your answer is in your question," Joan says.

Noe just watches Henry's approach with his wary animal eyes.

"And you ladies?" Henry sidles up to Joan and me. "How do you like your gowns? Did you enjoy the little adjustments I made for today?" He asks this with a half smirk that tells me he's already decided what our answers will be.

I don't want to know what he means by "adjustments," but I certainly have thoughts about his dresses. "I think they're ridiculous. And uncomfortable. And impractical," I say, to which Joan murmurs her agreement.

"Yes, I knew you would appreciate the new fabric," he steamrolls on, and Joan and I exchange a look. "I think to myself 'What should such beautiful ladies wear if not

succulent fruit?' Good enough to eat."

His words spark my revulsion, which sparks my temper, and though some small voice inside of me echoes a tiny warning that I'd best let it go and keep my mouth shut, my new body and this new world and my new friends make me forget, and before I know it I hear myself say, "Looks to me like you've had plenty to eat."

Henry blinks at me in total bewilderment, as though suddenly realizing that not only is there a large porpoise in his living room, but that this porpoise can speak.

"What was that, my sweet?"

My heart pounds. "You should stop eating sweets."

He stares in silence for several beats more and then a slow, lecherous smile crawls its way up one side of his mouth. "Mmm. You have sass in you, don't you little one?"

"I have *ass* standing in front of me; we know that at least."

"Do you keep donkeys, sir?" Paco asks conversationally.

I can't seem to stop myself now, and it feels good. Grow-two-feet-in-a-second good, alive-in-sunshine-for-the-first-time good, weary-spine-exploding-in-blossom good. I think of all the times I've been shushed at home, all the times Mom's skeezy boyfriends have told me my place, and I want to slap Henry for good measure. Because he deserves it and because I can. Because here I'm free. "Have you ever heard the term 'overcompensation?'" I rant on. "Because when you have to enter your glorified den riding a giant chandelier, people are going to talk."

"Rest assured, people already do." I see a storm break across Henry's face, and though that same familiar voice whispers at me not to turn my back on him, I ignore it,

and spin around in time to see the pacing woman from the platform stride into the room. She is as I remember her, if a bit shorter and curvier, and she's missing her cloak. She wears knee-high combat boots over practical black pants and a cap-sleeved black top that looks decidedly couture. Her riot of wavy hair is held from her face in another partial waterfall braid, and the only other hint of purple on her person is an intricate, snaking ring worn on her pointer finger. Her face is quite plain, but between her hair and the way she carries herself, one would hardly notice. She looks to be in her early '30s, moves with straight-backed purpose and grace, and when she speaks again her voice has the quality of a bell— not in its tone, but its intensity.

"What are you doing here?" Henry grits out. "I told you we would meet in the Gathering Place, did I not?"

"Why yes you did, and yet here we all are in your little mansion," the woman replies, lifting herself up onto a long side table and crossing her legs. "Why is that, Sol? Surely an augur of your standing is capable of delivering Travelers to where they're supposed to go. Or was that another 'oops' on your part?"

Henry pulls himself taller, jutting out his chest. "Don't you dare mock me in *my* home. This is *my* land. Do well to remember it."

"If you don't bullshit me, I won't mock you, how's that? Because you're either incompetent or a liar. Which is it?"

"This is *my* home," he seethes. "It's not yours to dictate what I do in it."

"We have had a total of twelve Travelers never come back because of your behavior, Sol," she continues, her inflection suggesting that twelve is a lot, and that she

took the hit very personally. "*Twelve*. We cannot afford any losses this cycle. Do you grasp my meaning, or do you want me to spell it out in front of our new friends?"

The woman takes a large crystal from her pocket and begins tracing shapes into the air. Sol takes a step toward her, his upper lip shiny with sweat and his body tense with rage. He raises a shaking finger at her and says, "Let me tell you one thing. All of this?" He gestures around the room. "That table you're sitting on? The chandelier? Rugs." He points out the window to the green, carefully crafted landscape. "All that you see out there? Right out there? Look at what I'm saying when I point to something."

"I've seen it, Sol," she says, continuing the draw.

"It's all mine, little girl. Do *you* understand *that*?"

The woman finishes what she's doing with a sigh and returns the crystal to her pocket. Whatever she scribbled out flashes lavender, like a trail of lit gunpowder, and then disappears. She levels her gaze on her cohort, whose face, like a coin flipped, has switched from jovial host to tantrum Ming child.

"Yeah, all this is yours, Sol. Except for me and except for them. We're not yours, and we are going to *keep* it that way this time. I mean it, Sol. You screw this batch up, and I will make you exceptionally sorry. Do we understand one another?"

Sol snaps his head towards us and barks, "You *stop* listening to her. You will do just as I say." Henry turns back to the woman. "You cannot touch me. Do you know who I am? What I own? You have no right," Sol spits the words at her.

"I have every right," she replies, and though she says the words calm and slow, she suddenly speaks with such power that I can actually feel it vibrate through my blood.

Like she's opened a vein and poured the words into me, and with the words, the knowledge that she owns them, and despite what Henry says, if she wanted to, she could own the table, and the chandeliers. Rugs. All that grand expanse of green outside the window. If she wanted to.

I've never before seen a man so red with anger, and I briefly wonder if Henry's head will actually rupture down the middle. "Get off my land," he growls.

"If you want me off, you'll have to throw me off," she says, moving to a plush round couch in the middle of the room.

"You think I won't?"

"I think you would," she says. "Except if you do, they'll snag out with me. You'll have a hell of a time explaining that to the council."

His eyes bug out. "You wouldn't dare do such a thing," he says.

"I would. I leave them here with you and they're as good as gone anyway."

Footsteps echo from the hallway behind us and before Henry has the chance to actually explode, a tall, purple-braided, bronze-skinned demigod, and a skinny, pale teenager with fuchsia-streaked hair enter the room.

"Where's Bo?" the woman asks.

"He is coming," the man answers in a deep voice that rumbles over my skin.

She doesn't respond because she's staring at us now in much the same way she was watching people in the clearing, her gaze flicking efficiently from head tops to toe tips. When she gets to Joan she stops. Leans forward like she's waiting for something. Curses.

"How long have you been here?" she asks, vaulting up off the couch and rushing over.

"I've had no way to track the time," Joan replies.

"Your hand, gimme your hand," she orders, grabbing for it. The woman whips a different crystal out this time, one shaped like a pen, and begins hastily tracing patterns along Joan's hand and wrist. "Were you the first to arrive?" she asks, flipping Joan's hand over as she vines an invisible line from Joan's wrist bone up along her inner forearm.

"I was the first of us to arrive in this room, yes."

Yellow markings begin to hum and glitter on Joan's skin, and the air buzzes with something that makes my ears itch. The woman's face creases in concentration as she etches at Joan as though fire chases her hand.

"Avyanna?" the demigod asks.

"Almost there."

"What's happening?" Joan asks.

The woman replies without stopping. "You're about to wake up."

"So?"

"If you blink out again before I finish, we might not get you back again," Avyanna explains. "We thought we'd have more time to get this done." Here she actually looks up long enough to shoot a blistering look at Henry.

But Henry has flipped the good-humor switch back on again. He spreads his hands and chuckles. "We were all getting on very well. Perhaps next time, you will waste

less time talking and let me lead as was intended."

"Hmm," Avyanna acknowledges his comment. "You would never lead anywhere worth going, Sol."

The lines on Joan's arm hum strong. The demigod very slowly paces; even anxious, his movements are controlled. Gentle. He alternates his gaze between Avyanna's work and the floor in front of him. Henry just glares at Avyanna. The girl stares out a window.

"Come on, come on," Avyanna mutters, and I swallow as Joan begins to flicker. I don't know why I care, yet I just *feel* like it makes a difference, that Avyanna must finish. She does, pulling the crystal from Joan's skin with a sigh of relief just moments before Joan, the markings on her arm flaring flower-bright and lovely, fades from view.

Silence. I can hear the ticking of a giant bear-shaped clock in the corner. Avyanna exhales sharply again, looking up at the ceiling as though gathering strength from it, before turning back to us.

"What were you drawing?" Mat asks.

"A map. It ensures she can find her way back here again."

"How?" I ask.

"Next time she falls asleep, her mind will follow the outlined path here. We'll need to map all of you for the same reason. It's only temporary for now, and if, after you've been here a few weeks, you still want to strip the map and be rid of us, we won't stop you. But make no mistake, you won't make it back here again without a map. Especially you," she says, flitting a glance in my direction. "Considering how long you

took to get here, it's a small miracle you made it back at all."

We all contemplate in silence. Henry notwithstanding, I like this new world. I like these new people, and my new body and my new freedom. And even if I don't understand how it all works or why it's all happening, I'd be glad to come back. I hold my arm out. "Well, map me up then, baby," I say.

Noe stares at her. "We can have it removed whenever we want?" he asks.

"For now, yes."

"Until when?"

"Until you decide to stay permanently and we tattoo the map into your skin."

"And that choice is ours?" Noe asks.

"Of course."

An uncomfortable silence follows. More moody wolf eyes from Noe and a cool answering gaze from Avyanna.

"You know," Paco says, leaning close to whisper to me and Mat. "This exact same thing happened to me once at an all-you-can-eat buffet." We ignore him.

Finally, Noe dips his head in assent.

"Is that a yes, Noe?" Paco asks cheekily.

Noe says nothing in reply but I have the distinct impression he's trying not to roll his eyes.

Avyanna nods to Noe, before turning back to me. "As a red you're likely to be the most volatile, so even though you arrived last, we'll get you mapped first. Millie?"

Avyanna calls over to the fuchsia-haired girl, who still stands at the window.

"Millie?"

The girl glances over, looking lost.

"We need to map them now; you up for it?"

"Yes," the girl responds, shifting away from the window. "Yes, of course."

I'm a bit nervous about having the spacey girl carve lines into me arm, but once she gently takes hold of my wrist her gaze sharpens. She pushes my belled sleeve aside and stares at my arm, tilting it back and forth as if already seeing something there, before reaching for a string around her neck and detaching a pen-shaped crystal from its "*D.E.*" monographed lid.

"Millie's the best mapper we have," Avyanna murmurs as she clasps hold of Noe's wrist and pushes up his shirtsleeves. Noe barely seems to notice. His gaze is locked on Millie. He crinkles his brow as though puzzled by the sight of her, and doesn't look away even as Avyanna begins to trace his wrist.

Millie smiles, warm and pretty, at Avyanna's words, though her smile quickly fades as she gives me a final perusal and raises the crystal pen to my wrist. I watch her work for a few moments before glancing over at the others. The demigod is working over Mat, which leaves a dubious-looking Paco to deal with Henry. Avyanna's focused on Noe, and Noe still watches Millie.

My own arm starts to glitter red, and I feel the tickle of the pen slowly build into a hum that sings through my blood as lines and circles build on squiggles and exes until the map glows so brightly I have to squint. Avyanna does a double take when she sees the blinding maze of markings that decorate my arm, and gives me a measuring look. I can't

think why except that my map appears three times as busy as anyone else's. Maybe Millie's not such a great mapper after all.

It's not long after she finishes that I feel a tug from my real body. Avyanna nods as I begin to flicker. "As I thought," she says.

"Why is it so important to you guys that we all find our way back here anyway?" I ask, the rushing sounds of waking beginning to fill my ears. "I mean, it's just a dream, right?"

"Because," Avyanna replies, ignoring the second half of my question. "You're special."

And I wake.

YELLOW

Dream #323 - The Orientation

In the dream I'm sitting at a long, spoon-shaped conference table that mirrors the white lights bobbing and dangling above me, their reflection stretched long like taffy on the silver surface. Noe sits in the chair to my left while Mat and Joan stand halfway across the room, listening to Paco tell some elaborate story that requires him to wiggle both hands and one of his feet. Beyond them, I spy Henry drinking something orange from a crystal goblet, and several feet beyond him, the demigod, who chats quietly with a seated man distinct for electric-socket hair the same purple as seashell heart. Avyanna paces, occasionally pausing to sketch and slash at the air with her crystal. The three-piece-suit man from the clearing is surrounded by a small circle of people, all of whom are grinning at a tiny animated woman whose too-long sleeves keep falling over her hands. An agitated Millie shifts around in her chair and speaks to no one. I watch Noe watching her for several minutes, then finally lean over to him. "I bet you wish you could take a picture so it would last longer," I say.

He blinks like someone who's forgotten himself. "What?"

Meeting his gaze has a strange, discordant effect on me. It's like some force deep inside myself is soothed by it, drawn to it, yet every twitch and blink coming from Noe screams for me to leave him alone.

"Why don't you just go talk to her?" I ask.

"To who?"

"Uhh, to Millie?"

He blinks at me again and his frown deepens. "Why would I go talk to Millie?"

My eyebrows stretch for my hairline. "Seriously?" I laugh. "I know I'm always the last one to get here, but in the little time I've been around, I've caught you staring at Millie more than once. Just go talk to her."

"It's not like that," he murmurs, going back to watching her like he just can't help it.

"Then what's it like?" I ask.

"None of your damn business is what it's like."

I snicker and follow his gaze. Millie mutters to herself, alternately glaring at a regal couple who converse quietly in the corner, then wincing and tugging savagely on a strand of her fuchsia hair, her muttering turning desperate and her body rocking back and forth for several beats before she settles down and starts the process all over again.

"Right," I say. "Nothing going on there."

Other murmuring men and women cluster around the large, orderly room, all with hair in varying shades of violet, all dressed in the same charcoal grey wrap-around cloaks as me and my companions. The clothing swirls their torsos in an ecstasy of fabric before winding down their middles and hemming at their thighs. Beneath the cloaks, they wear trousers of the same color and sturdy-looking black boots. I inhale deeply just because I can, and relish every corset-free breath.

Beyond Noe's shoulder, I note a tidy line of long, oval windows. We're high up, and the yawning landscape below is scattered with beautiful vine-hugged buildings and lush greenery that reminds me of the clearing. The sky is a pale lilac, the light gentle,

such that if I could reach out and stroke the whole earth, I'm sure every lilac-brushed inch would feel soft under my hands.

"Ahem. I believe it's time we got started." An enormous man with closely-cropped heliotrope hair and kind eyes is now standing at the front of the room. The cliques break up, some members stealing away quickly to their assigned seats, others reluctant to end their conversations. For a moment, I feel like I'm trapped in a hill of confused, charcoal-colored ants.

"Why, hello again," Mat says, settling into the seat beside Noe and eyeing the chair to my right, where Joan now sits. I wonder if he would have sat there had he reached the table first and find myself hoping.

The man begins to speak again, and the room falls quiet. I recognize everyone sitting at the table, with the exception of the three women and two men seated near the head, and the man who's speaking. "Welcome to Dream's End, new Travelers," he says. "My name is Lanond. I see we have all our council members here." He nods to the mystery group. "Our Travel Companions are also present." A tip of his head to Avyanna's group, who sit between us and the council members—Avyanna, Millie, and the demigod on the right side, Henry and the suit guy to the left.

"As you are aware, today is orientation for our new Travelers." He gestures to the five of us. "We will brief you on the basics of what we do here and, of course, answer your questions." As he speaks, a hula-hoop sized portion of the shiny conference table detaches and slowly levers up until it stands perpendicular to the surface below. The round lights above us blink out in asynchronous little flares until only the lilac light from

the windows illuminates the room.

One of the councilwomen slides her hand forward into the vacated table space and suddenly, like a projector whirring on, there are images glinting across the sleek silver surface. I feel like I'd be more impressed if I didn't have a big box at home that does basically the same thing.

Scene after scene of lovely people dressed in grey flickers across the screen. Click. Click. The crowds look just like those that I saw in the clearing and at Henry's palace, though the people fill different spaces and wear different clothing in each of the clips. Grey bikinis and trunks at the beach, grey hiking boots and sweaters on densely forested hiking trails, grey cocktail dresses and slacks at parties in towering glass buildings and glittering rooftop gardens.

"To understand your value to us, you must first understand that the world you come from is unique," Lanond tells us as the images play, "Unlike the inhabitants of most worlds, when your people sleep, you visit other places." Images of strange, foreign planets now play across the screen. "From what we've been able to gather in speaking to our Travelers, you visit millions of other worlds. Some are pleasant places, like this one. Some worlds are ugly and terrible, and the inhabitants there would do you harm. Some worlds dedicate themselves to gluttony, lust, kindness, or art. There are fractured worlds that seep madness, and echo worlds that reflect your own madness back at you. There are even worlds filled with seers who whisper your future. What impact your people have on these other worlds we cannot know, though it's safe to say that those who populate these places are often able to interact with you in a way that we are not."

"Except you're interacting with us right now," Joan points out..

Lanond nods. "We'll come to that." As he continues, the projections flick back to grey crowds, but their behavior has shifted from innocuous to destructive: stomping through parks, razing homes, breaking windows in houses and cityscapes, burning down forests, fracturing pavement, and bringing down bridges. It's nothing I haven't seen on the news, but to watch it unfold in such a serene and lovely world makes the perpetrators seem that much more senseless and ugly.

"I've not visited your world," Lanond says. "Obviously. But judging from the behavior of your dreamers I can't imagine it's a terribly pleasant place. I suspect you each know this already; Travelers don't tend to find their way here unless they're seeking an escape. I think of my shoebox bedroom back home, of Mom's vacant gaze, of the gloomy monotony of school. I think of the dry walk home each day and of my red hair frizzing and my matchstick legs stained with freckles and dust and sweat. My gaze settles again on the big oval windows and the paradise beyond. Yes, I think. I'd run here any day. "Refuge," Lanond continues, "is one thing we offer you here."

"Why?" I ask, without even meaning to. Everyone looks at me. "I mean, it sounds like we do nothing but cause problems for you guys. Why offer us anything?"

Lanond smiles. "We offer your dreamers nothing; we would banish them were we able. But you Travelers can do us a great service, and for that reason you are not only welcomed here, but venerated. We cannot manage your people on our own. They are able to interact fully with our world but we are not able to interact with them; it renders us completely vulnerable to their carelessness. As far as we've been able to determine,

dreamers can only interact with each other. Like to like. This is where you come in."

"For most of my world's history, we've had no choice but to tolerate these dreamers. Work around them. Clean up after them. Until one day, many years ago, an augur noticed that every now and then a dreamer would appear who behaved differently than the others. When the augur approached one such dreamer, he was astonished to discover the dreamer could see us. Speak to us. Help us." The image of a lovely girl dressed all in blue flashes across the screen. The first Traveler, it would seem. "After that, we watched the masses carefully for signs of you. We found that you always appeared in groups of five, though never predictably, never all at once, and never in the same place. It makes it very difficult to find you."

"Is it really that hard to spot us though?" Mat asks. "These people are all wearing grey. The first time I saw Emma she looked like a frickin' stop sign."

"Hey!" I say.

"But like a really pretty stop sign," he backpedals.

Lanond is shaking his head. "You look the same as everyone else to us until we recognize you."

"And how do you recognize us?" Joan asks.

"I'm not sure how to explain it," Lanond says. "Dreamers all have the same look about them. A bit vacant. Half-present even when they're being destructive. Travelers, in contrast, are *awake*, if you'll pardon the expression. Aware. Even reverent about the beauty of our world. We recognize you for what you are immediately if we can get a good look at you, but that's not always possible."

"Why not?" I ask.

"We scout you in groups," he says. "Whenever there's a particularly large hoard of dreamers gathered, we send in a division of augurs to watch for Travelers."

"It seems to me hunting us in groups that big would make it very difficult to get a good look at anyone," Joan reasons.

"That's true," Lanond concedes. "Attempting eye contact with each dreamer would make it a near impossible task. Luckily, our more powerful augurs are more sensitive to Travelers. The grey of a Traveler gives off a slight aura of color. It's subtle, and difficult to spot even when we're looking for it, but it's there. Once we make eye contact, we are able to fully see you as you are. This has the unfortunate side effect of waking you up. When one appears, four more will always follow, and we commit as many augurs as possible to the task of finding the rest of you. Fortunately, the second time you show up, you bear your color so you're much easier to spot. Still, we have to rush to convey you all to the same place together as soon as possible, or it's unlikely you'll all find your way back again. And if we lose one of the five, we eventually lose you all."

"Why?" Joan asks.

"We're uncertain. That you appear in groups at all suggests there's something in that unity that provides you with initial stability, and then lends additional strength once your maps are tattooed. It would explain why we have to tattoo you all together for it to work properly. But as I said, that's only a guess. As it stands, you've all been temporarily mapped. Should you behave yourselves appropriately, you may all be invited to receive a

permanent tattoo. But we'll discuss that more later."

"Why five?" Noe asks. "What difference should it make if we're all together or not?"

"Again, we can't be certain of anything, but given how our world functions, we suspect it has more to do with color than with number," Lanond says. "Light is vital to life here, as it is in your world, but our unfiltered sun burns too hot for any life to survive beneath it. The landscape of our planet contains hubs that break the light down into its component parts, softening it and filtering it by color. Whatever force brings you here also marks you with a color: red, orange, yellow, green, or blue. An augur rounds out the spectrum with purple and stabilizes the grouping so you can function fully in our world."

"Okay, so, different than dreamers," I count the points on my fingers, "have to be in groups, get assigned a color, etcetera. So what? What is it that you need us for?"

The screen flickers again. "We can't communicate with the dreamers, but we can communicate with you. And for whatever reason, the dreamers seem compelled to listen to you."

We watch scenes of Travelers interacting with the grey dreamers, who then disappear. Touching dreamers on the arms, shoulders, and heads before they disappear. Leaning in to whisper in their ears and laughing as they disappear. Pushing them over until they disappear. Decking them in the face and they disappear.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Paco interjects. He leans forward and squints at Lanond. "We can punch them? Like whenever we want, or . . .?"

Lanond's mouth twitches, but he doesn't quite smile. "No one will stop you if

things become combative, I assure you. Though it's usually not necessary. In most cases a simple touch or spoken instruction should suffice."

"What do we tell them?" I ask.

"To wake up."

"So do we punch them before we tell them? Or is that better to do after?" Paco chimes in again. "I'm just really trying to pin down the logistics here." He cranes his neck, peering around the room. "Does anyone have a pen?"

"What are you going to do with a pen, dumbass?" Mat laughs.

"Uh, take notes?" He shoots the demigod, who's sitting next to him, a look that says, *This guy*.

"And how will you get the notes home?"

Paco blinks, realizing the flaw in his plan, but then looks at Mat and replies in a solemn, almost choked tone, "By inscribing them on my heart."

"With a *pen*?"

"To answer your question," Lanond interjects, "Some dreamers are more difficult to evict than others. Plus, on occasion, we do have what the Travelers call 'repeat offenders.' The more times dreamers find their way back here, the more resistant they are to leaving."

"Wait a minute. I bumped into all kinds of dreamers my first two days here, and they didn't disappear," I say. "Why does pushing them over work, while bumping into them doesn't?"

Lanond shakes his head. "You hadn't yet been mapped," he explains. "And you

weren't with the other five at the time. You can only evict dreamers as a group. Until you're tattooed, your original group members are interchangeable with other Travelers besides those with whom you arrived. In some cases, original groups don't get on well, and we're forced to switch out members before permanent tattoos are given, though we try to avoid it because you're never quite as strong."

"So that's all we do?" I ask. "Kick out these dreamers? Because, all due respect, I can appreciate why you want them gone, but much as I like it here, that doesn't necessarily sound like the greatest way to spend all my evenings."

Lanond tips his head in understanding, "Eviction duties comprise a relatively small amount of your time here. We've learned to ignore the small groups of dreamers, unless they grow destructive or invasive. It's when we have a sudden, large influx to our heavily populated areas that we send you in."

"Why are there no dreamers here?" Joan asks.

"Sorry?"

"There are no dreamers in here. I can see a lot of land out the windows, and there are no dreamers out there either so far as I can tell."

"Ah. An observant question. In simplest terms, dreamers cannot enter augur land."

"What does that mean?" Mat asks.

"Augurs comprise a very small percentage of our population," Lanond explains. "We have various gifts and associated duties as augurs; but just as importantly, we're able to control land. Controlled land can be protected from dreamers."

Paco points to Henry. "How come this guy had all those dreamers in his house then?"

Judging from Henry's expression, he's not at all pleased that Paco shared this information with the room, and judging by Lanond's expression, he's working very hard not to sigh.

"If Solforino had dreamers on his land, it's because he wished them to be there." He goes on, "The more powerful the augur, the greater the abilities that augur will possess, and the more land he or she controls. While on augur land, you see what they wish you to see."

"Or what they can't help but show you," a councilwoman with shiny mauve hair mutters, casting a glance at Millie. The glance is subtle enough to go unmentioned, but not so subtle as to go unnoticed. Millie stares at the table and says nothing.

"As I was saying," Lanond continues, "One augur from each of our world's six regions is invited to serve on the Augur Council. At present the council is comprised of myself and my five colleagues. Council members integrate their land for the duration of their tenure, and it's that land that we are presently meeting on. You'll encounter no dreamers while within these borders."

"So who here has the most land of anyone?" Mat asks, and there's an awkward silence in the room. Lanond opens his mouth to respond, but no words come out.

"That's like asking someone in your world who makes the most money," Avyanna says, tapping the tip of her crystal pen against the tabletop with a smirk.

"Ooooh," Mat says. "Never mind . . ."

"We need to be moving along anyway," Lanond interjects. "Another thing to be aware of is that most of you, during your time here, will manifest unusual talents. One of our Travelers, Jade, for example, can draw up power from the earth and repurpose it the same way we draw down power from the sky. Scarlet can spin colored thread from a prism spindle. Cyan can make the intangible tangible. Discovering and using these Talents tends to be very rewarding for our Travelers and very helpful to us. We look forward to seeing what each of you will contribute to our world."

The orientation continues, Lanond going over basic information on everything from how to stabilize one's self in the dream realm so we have time to tie up loose ends before we're roused back on our side, to the ways in which our assigned augur decides where in their world we will appear each evening, to what clothes we'll be wearing. Then he announces he'll be showing us each to our rooms.

"We get rooms?" I exclaim.

"Yes," he says. "While you obviously can't take things home with you, you'll be spending most of your dream time here, and you each need a space of your own in which to store things you acquire from visit to visit."

"Yeah, like *notes*," Paco says with a smug glance at Mat.

"I thought that's what your heart was for?" Mat counters.

"Before we conclude here, however, we do need to assign each of you names," Lanond announces. "While you're decidedly not *from* our world, we wish to honor your presence in it by determining your color name."

"What does that mean?" Joan asks.

"Your name is laced into your map," he says. "We read your map, we find your name."

Here he gestures to two of his fellow council members, who rise from their seats and approach us. One stops at Paco, the other at Mat. Each presents his arm, and the augurs tap at the skin until the tattoo lights up.

"Moss," the woman standing over Mat declares after several minutes of studying his arm. She moves on to Noe.

"Copper," announces Paco's guy.

"Right-o govna'," Paco says, and I can tell he's trying to affect a British accent, but it comes out in the same strange, unplaceable accent that everyone speaks with here, so he sounds twice as ridiculous. His Augur moves on to Joan.

"Hey, I have a question," I say.

Lanond nods. "Please."

"So, are we all from the same part of our world? Like, do we all live near each other? The Travelers, I mean. Is that why we're all here at the same time?"

"Not necessarily. Your presence here together merely demonstrates that you all tend to sleep at the same time.

"Huh. So if we're potentially from all over the place, how come we can all still understand each other?"

Lanond shrugs. "Do you generally have difficulty understanding what people say when you dream?"

"Well no . . ." I concede. "But this is sort of different."

"It would seem not. There's a language of dreams, and you all speak it so long as you're here." He rubs his hand across his jaw and squints his eyes in thought. "We have encountered one exception: we sometimes run into communication problems when a Traveler from your world is learning another language."

"Really?" I ask, scratching my cheek. "Why?"

"Because they sometimes dream they can't understand people."

"Huh. So how do you fix it?"

Another shrug. "We don't. Either the Traveler forfeits his or her language studies on your side, or we make do until they gain proficiency in the new language."

The woman finishes with Noe and announces his name, "Azure." Then she comes to me.

"Saffron," Joan's augur guy announces as the woman taps my arm.

I hear her sharp intake of breath just as the man finishes speaking, and I don't have to wonder at why. I'd vaguely remembered my tattoo being brighter than the others, but not to what extent. My whole arm glows, covered from wrist to elbow in curving patterns and strange, cluttering symbols that bleed down into my hand. "Good mercy," the woman exclaims. "Who mapped this?"

"Millie did," Avyanna casually responds.

I watch the man and woman exchange a look. "I see," she says carefully. "Perhaps it would not be amiss to reevaluate the complexity—"

"You cannot *possibly* be serious, Neela," Avyanna snaps, her gaze so sharp I can almost feel the edges. "On what grounds?"

"I'm certain I don't need to explain to you the complications that may arise from too complex a map, Avyanna. I'm frankly surprised—"

"And I'm certain that I don't need to remind you that an incorrect map, however simple or complicated the design, will still strand a Traveler elsewhere." Judging by the look on the woman's face, I take it she's not used to being interrupted. Nor does she appreciate it. "And yet here Emma sits. Here she arrived safely and far more quickly than on any previous occasion. I will hasten to add that though dealing with a map three times more complex than any of the others, Millie still managed to finish it before any other augur was done. If anything, I'd say it was very lucky that Millie traced out the map and not someone else."

Silence reigns. Avyanna's implication is clear. That not only is teenaged Millie better at mapping than this powerful councilwoman, but that if Neela chooses to amend Millie's map and they lose me, the blame will fall to her. On the other hand, if the map stands and they lose me, it'll be Avyanna's problem to deal with. The possibility of the latter seems to appease Neela, so she smiles tightly at Avyanna, and says, "Of course," before turning back to my map.

Finding my name takes her a bit longer than with the others. I half wonder if Neela is inflating the time frame for dramatic effect, but she eventually steps back and announces, "Cerise." She pauses and gives me a final perusal. "Yes, it's Cerise."

The tension breaks, and, after officially welcoming us into their ranks, Lanond is quick to stand and announce that he will now see us to our rooms. He walks toward an exit in the corner and gestures that we follow him. Only the five Travel Companions

accompany us.

Lanond leads us through wide, tidy corridors of varied hues, their corners filled with strange and lovely flowers, their walls covered in mosaics and paintings whose edges lie flush with the walls. The Companions mingle with us as we walk, and I peer over my shoulder and watch enviously as the demigod (seriously, what is his name?) shakes hands with Joan.

"Hello there." Someone taps my shoulder, and I turn to find that the suit man has fallen into step beside me. He holds his hand out to me and says, "We've not met." I'm Bo."

I smile and clasp hands with him. "Emma. Well, Cerise, now I guess?"

He chuckles. "Either one will do."

"Sounds good," I say, as we continue down the hall. There's the murmur of voices and shifting of sun as we walk, strips of light from the windows and skylights playing over the small party as it moves down the hall "So. Do you enjoy being an augur?" I ask, after several beats of silence.

He tips his head. "Enjoyment has little to do with it. Not yet anyway. You know, my mother was an augur."

"Oh really? Is it a hereditary thing? I didn't realize."

"It's not, actually. It's quite rare for a parent and child to both manifest as augurs, but it happened that way for us."

"That sounds nice," I reply. "It seems like she would have been able to teach you a lot about it in a way that other parents can't."

"Mmm," he says. "Very true. Above all else, she taught me that we'll never reach our full potential so long as we live under the thumb of this useless council."

Um. Ooo-kaaay. Unsure what to say to that, I glance up at him to gauge his tone and almost miss a step. His eyes simmer with something dark and angry, and his face is pulled tense in a way it wasn't before. I feel even less sure what to say now, and so I keep quiet.

"Soon things will be different. Soon there won't be a council to meddle at all."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

He grabs my arm with a rough squeeze, and I'm so surprised, I stumble back into the wall, reaching for purchase and sending a beautiful crystal vase filled with a kaleidoscope of blossoms to the ground, where the glass shatters. His eyes boil black and his dark-streaked hair falls across his eyes as he spits words in my face and tightens his hand around me. "Can you imagine it, Cerise? Can you see it as I see it?" Images I don't understand flash through my mind almost too quickly to process. Ash-grey bodies crumpled and strewn two-deep on an endless plain. A searing, silver sun. Flaky clay earth. Miles of shattered stained glass. Shiny clouds. Missing sky. Metal. His voice, low and ugly, grates like gravel. "I'm going to change *everything*."

I wrench myself away from him and stumble again, slapping my hand against the wall in a bid for stability, and then Bo's right back in front of me, crouching down to see my face, the hand on my shoulder suddenly gentle and steadying.

"Are you all right?" he asks with concern. I shoot a glance at him, and his face is back to normal, his hair neatly combed, eyes a pleasant brown. Confused, I just blink at

him.

"Emma, are you well?" Joan asks

I look over to see her and the demigod hovering, and notice the vase of flowers I just knocked over sitting pristine on its shiny glass table.

"Yeah," I say on reflex. "Fine. I . . . Um. Just got dizzy for second."

"Are you blinking out?" Bo asks, his gaze tracing my face.

"Uh . . I don't think so. I don't know."

"Do you need me to carry you?" Bo asks, gesturing down the hall where the others are disappearing around a corner. "We're almost to the rooms."

"No!" I say, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. I try to cover my aversion by acting embarrassed. "No," I repeat more softly. "I'm really okay now."

"All right," he replies, his face still creased with concern. "We'll hurry and get you settled."

When he offers me his arm, I seriously consider refusing it. But since I still don't know what's going on, I resolve to behave as I would have before and wrap my hand around the hook of his arm with a smile.

When we reach our rooms I break from the group, ignore Mat's surprised eyes and hurry inside as soon as I am able. Closing myself in and flicking the lock vertical, I slump back against the door and find myself in a lovely space, toned in whites and greys and dolloped from corner to corner in cheerfully colored accessories. An enormous picture window dominates the wall across from me, and I push off and move toward it, trailing my fingers along the red polka-dot bedspread on my way to a plush white

armchair that overlooks a magnificent view.

I can't decide if what just happened with Bo is another weird quirk of this dream world, but somehow I don't think so. That exchange in the hallways felt not just foreign or unexpected, but *off* somehow. I stuff the fuzzy red throw pillow over my face in a bid to forget all the terrible things I saw in his eyes when he grabbed me; but it doesn't help, and I eventually fling the pillow to the floor instead.

I stare out the window for a long time. The lilac sky bleeds into blue far off in the distance, and a lake bellied with a rainbow of coral shimmies happily in the gentle light.

And I wake.

GREEN

Dream #345 - The Hill

In the dream we finally get to visit Tyrian's place.

It's like something out of a fairy tale. His home, a massive, emerald-grassed hill, looms tall in the center of his land. The sloping roof-walls are studded with crystalline windows and knobby doors woven through with thick willow-tree vines and lavender blooms. Dirt walking paths spiral the hill in brown and black lines. Attached to the main hill by dozens of rope-swing arms and clattering wood-beam bridges tower a dozen tree houses, their foliage roofs long as football fields. Each tree clasps long-branched arms with its neighbor, forming a full-circle cocoon around the hill that bursts at its seams with flowers and clear streams and ladybugs.

Now I stare up into a large room within the hill, the ceiling and roof so densely dotted with white-bright skylights I feel as though I've flown too close to the stars. Snooda, a short woman with a pinched mouth and too-tight bun is trying to lecture us about our dream bodies. We all exchange looks. I already had this lesson once during sixth grade health class, when the teacher seemed to think that she could disguise her discomfort about having to discuss penises by saying the word extra loudly.

Joan, Mat, and I all sit together on a padded window seat that smells like pine needles. Paco is stretched out on the bench opposite us, and Noe sits on the floor, arms resting on the knees of his bent legs. Snooda starts a stack of pamphlets around our little half-circle. Mat hands the pile off to me, and I take one before passing them along to Paco.

"What the *hell* is this?" Paco demands, voicing my thoughts as he waves the pamphlet at Snooda. "*My Changing Body?*" He bites out the words, his disgust evident in his tone.

Snooda pats Paco's foot as she collects the extras (why does she have extras? Like someone's going to want two?) and says, "Just read it, dear."

"I hate to break it to you, lady," he say, levering onto his elbows, "but you're a little late to the puberty party with this thing."

"It's not about puberty. When you read it you'll see," Snooda says, her tone a bit snippy.

"Why don't you just tell me what it says?"

"Because it's in the pamphlet."

"It's just talking about how we have different bodies here," Mat says, skimming through it.

"Different bodies? Of course we have different bodies! We're asleep! Technically we don't have bodies here at all." Paco throws his pamphlet down in disgust, and while Snooda blusters her outrage, I lean over and give Paco's arm a hard pinch.

"Ow!" he bolts up, slapping his hand over the offended skin. "What the hell, Emma?"

"What?" I grin innocently. "It's not real!" Paco is not amused.

"You wanna play that game?" he threatens.

"Stop it!" Snooda snaps, shoving Paco's pamphlet against his chest until he reaches up and takes it, and ordering me to keep my hands to myself.

"Look, lady," Paco says, pointing at her with said pamphlet, "all due respect or whatever, but I'm not reading this thing. How is this even a training? Last week, we got to talk about magical Traveler powers and find out that Noe can fix people's crazy, and today this?" Noe shifts uncomfortably at the reminder that he can heal mental wounds here. It's probably why we're all drawn to him despite his old-man-crotchety disposition. You'd think he would have been excited about helping people, but he's been twice as grumpy since finding out.

Paco turns and looks at Tyrian, who sits in a nearby armchair, reposing in godly splendor. "Are we being punished for something?" Paco asks.

Tyrian raises an eyebrow, though there's humor in his gaze, but says nothing.

I read over the front fold as Paco continues to grumble.

You may have noticed that you suddenly look and feel a little differently. Don't panic! This is perfectly normal. Your new body is a reflection of your innermost self. And that's okay! Finally! You get to live a life of beauty you've only ever dreamed of! (And not just in your dreams!)

"Exclamation marks have lost all meaning . . ." I mutter.

"Mat's right," Joan says, skimming through her own pamphlet. "This just explains why we look different here." She glances up at Snooda. "I have to agree with Paco; I don't understand why a training's necessary on this topic. The information might have been useful our first day or two here, but we've long since come to terms with it."

Snooda harrumphs and pulls her snug jacket down over her hips. "Well," she huffs. "I couldn't come then."

"So basically," Noe says, curling and uncurling the pamphlet with his arms still braced on his knees, "we show up here looking like we always secretly wished we looked?"

"Here your physical self is a manifestation of your innermost concept of true beauty, yes. It's all in the pamphlet, dear."

"We *hate* the pamphlet, okay?" Paco says. "Besides what the hell are you guys talking about? The only difference between here and there is that here we have clothes on."

We all turn to stare at Paco now.

"Dude," Mat says.

"Is this your weird way of working nudity into the conversation again?" I ask.

"Well, how else would a person sleep?" he cries.

"Paco," Joan says, and instantly she has his full attention. "Do you mean to say that what you see in the mirror here, is the same as what you see in the mirror when you wake?"

"Apart from the pants, yeah."

"Apart from the— what so you just *never* wear pants?" I exclaim. "Why even bother having a mirror if you never get dressed?"

"Well—" he says, leering.

"Nope!" Mat interjects, then. "So you just look the same? All the time?"

"Yes!"

"Really?" Noe says.

"Yeah! What, you guys don't?"

"No."

"Nope."

"I don't."

"Me neither."

"Well that's . . . Weird," I say.

Mat calls over to Tyrian, "Why's Paco weird?"

"I don't know that even he can answer that one," I mutter.

Tyrian just smiles his sage smile and says, "If he looks the same here as there, it's because there's nothing he would change about himself. It's unusual. It happens."

Paco straightens his t-shirt over his wiry little body with a cocky grin. "I mean, seriously. You don't trade in a Porsche for a tricycle, you know what I'm saying?" He freezes. "So you guys look different here? Like *different* different?" he asks.

"Uh, *yeah*," I say.

"If I like ran into you at the grocery store back home, I wouldn't know it was you?"

"Well we'd know it was you apparently, but yeah," I say.

"That's crazy!" he exclaims, picking up the pamphlet with new appreciation.

"Didn't you think it was weird that we were all so good-looking?" I ask.

"Didn't *you*?" he counters. "I just figured I'd won the hot friend jackpot." He says

the latter with a wink to Joan, who looks as though she's seeing him for the first time.

Snooda glowers. Tyrian smiles.

. . .

Mat and I lie sprawled on the top of Tyrian's hill house. We had to hike round and round and round to get here, but it was worth it. The air feels soft on my skin. Joan, Noe, and Paco blinked out a little while ago, and now Mat and I lounge in comfortable silence waiting for the same.

I can't remember a time in all my life when I felt happy and free like this. I sigh with a contentment so deep it's soaked through to my marrow, and say, "I like it here."

"Mmm," Mat says, opening his eyes. "Me too."

I turn over onto my stomach and rest my chin on top of my hands so I can see him better. He stays on his back but turns his face to look at me. He's so stunning. I keep thinking the novelty of his perfect face will wear off, but it never does. Neither does mine, for that matter. I know it shouldn't matter that I'm so pretty here; back home I always tell myself it doesn't matter. But I can't help but enjoy being beautiful now that I am. I think back to Paco, strutting around with twice the arrogance after learning how "damn secure" he is, and I wonder what brings someone like him to a place like this.

"Do you remember during orientation when Lanond said that Travelers end up here because they're running away from something?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Is that true for you?"

He exhales deeply and looks back toward the sky. "I guess so."

"So what are you trying to escape?" I ask.

He huffs out a laugh, but not the good kind. "Look at where we are." I do. I take in feather-soft grass and flowered clover patches beneath our bodies. I see the lime and lemon trees that dot Tyrian's land in the plains beyond his tree houses, the violet-tinted river branching apart and stretching long fingers toward clay-roofed settlements and little hill-houses like Tyrian's. The air is perfumed with roses, and the breeze never chills. "Do you really want to talk about all that crap here?" he asks. "Why drag reality into this place?"

"I guess not. I just . . . I don't know." I just want to know him a little better. All we ever talk about is this world, and that's great except we haven't been coming here all that long and there are only so many times you can marvel at the beauty or complain about the dreamers before you start to wonder what's underneath it all.

"How about this?" I suggest. "You tell me in a word, just one word, what you're running from?"

He sighs again. "Why does it matter?"

"I don't know," I say. "Because we're friends, you know? 'Cause you matter, I guess." I laugh at myself and pick at the grass, embarrassed. "That sounds so cheesy."

Cheesy or not, he looks at me for a long time, then says, "Drugs."

I swallow and prop my head on my hand. "You're on drugs?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Aren't drugs their own escape?"

"Yeah, that's the point," he says. "What fills the void once they're gone, you

know?"

"So you're clean since you started coming here?" I ask.

"So far." The way he smiles reminds me more of Noe than of Mat, and I don't like it. I begin to see why he didn't want to talk about this: it changes him. I open my mouth to discuss something else, but then he asks, "What about you? In a word."

Fair is fair. I think about it for a moment and then reply, "Nothing."

He sits up on his elbows. "You can't say 'nothing.'"

I imagine how that must have sounded to him and shake my head. "No, I don't mean nothing, I mean *nothing*. *Nothingness*, I guess. There's nothing there worth staying for. It's like . . . That world's flat, and this one's round."

We fall back into silence. A breeze kicks up to tickle the grass, and the trees sing like the ocean swells.

"You know, that first night we met?" he says. "I looked at you and I thought, 'I've never seen anyone this beautiful.'"

My breath catches.

"But then," he continues, "I turned back to the mirror and saw myself standing there, and thought, 'Until now.'"

I burst out laughing. "You're such a jerk."

He's grinning, looking pleased with himself. "No, in all seriousness—"

He stops talking and doesn't start again. I sit up to ask what's wrong, and find him staring at a little scrap of paper that he holds in his hand. The scrap is hot pink and white with black lettering, though I can't make out what it says.

"What is that?" I ask.

He swallows twice before answering and even then his voice is rough. "It's a movie stub."

"A movie stub?" I repeat, craning to see it better. "Where did you find a movie stub?"

"In my pocket," he murmurs. "It was in my pocket."

"Okay," I say slowly.

"No," he swallows again, his forehead creased in wary confusion. "I mean it was in my pocket when I fell asleep."

"But," we stare at the stub. "How's that possible?"

"I don't know."

Slowly I reach out for it, wanting a closer look. I pinch it with my fingers.

And I wake.

Dream #347 - The Talents

In the dream we've been at it for hours. At least it feels like hours.

"Keep trying," Avyanna barks at Tyrian.

He levels a long stare at her, then lowers my arm back to the tabletop with a gentle pat.

"We have tried enough for one day, Avyanna," he says, rising. He towers over the tiny augur, though I doubt she's ever noticed.

"If that were true, then we would know what her Talent is," she snaps. "Try again."

My other four friends lie draped across the pine furniture in Tyrian's office. Since learning that Mat can transport small items between the two worlds by storing them in his pockets (an unheard of Talent, apparently), Avyanna has been chomping at the bit to learn what the rest of us can do.

"We've exhausted every method I know of learning it. Today is not the day."

"Why should today not be the day? I don't see why it should take you fifteen minutes to get a read on the others and four hours to *not* get a read on Emma. Try. Again."

She's not wrong. Within just a few minutes of them plopping down into the chair I now occupy, Tyrian had determined that Paco can "hide things in plain sight" (whatever that means), and Joan can "tie endings together."

Tyrian ignores her, returning the crystal magnifying gem and lavender oil to the little bamboo box he retrieved them from when we first arrived here. He's spent hours squinting at my map arm, tracing the gem along the lines, poking at the veins.

"It is not a science. You know that as well as I. If my methods fail to yield answers on first try, a second or third attempt will prove no different."

"Trying once more isn't going to hurt anything!"

Tyrian turns and responds with as sharp a look and as sharp a tone as I've ever seen or heard from him before. "Do I tell you how to See?" He asks her. There's tense silence as the two glare at each other. I glance over at Paco who's making an "Uh-oh" face. Finally Avyanna inhales a shaky breath, and, in a softer tone, says, "I'm just saying I think it warrants another look."

"Sometimes you must accept things as they are, Avyanna," he says. "You can control my Gifts no more than I can control yours. I may one day be able to identify Ms. Cerise's Talent, but that day is not today."

Avyanna's body is rigid, and I can almost see her brain and body fighting against the respect she has for Tyrian.

"Fine," she finally bites out. "At least tell me why."

"Why what?" he asks, his tone calm and soothing again.

"Why you can't get a read on her."

"It is unclear."

"Is it because her map's so complicated?" Avyanna asks.

"Perhaps. Her connections feel different to those of other Travelers."

"Different how?"

Tyrian squints at my arm, as though reliving whatever he was feeling over the past few hours. "They are slippery."

"Slippery?" she says. "What does that mean?"

"It means what it means."

Avyanna's exhalation is so loud and rough I wonder if it rasped her lungs getting out. "I think we're done for the day," she says, turning to leave.

And I wake.

BLUE

Dream #353 - The Unraveling

In the dream I'm sitting at a table in a colorful kitchen. The dilapidated cupboards-- some with doors half-off hinges, others with knobs or handles missing, another two splintered straight down the middle—gleam in a brilliant keyboard of colors. Sunlight lazes in through spotless shards of glass as they jut like grinning fangs from the windowpane. The light washes over an eclectic collection of feathered cuckoo clocks that tick seconds in the corner, and two dozen exquisite hummingbird light fixtures dangle from a beautifully purple, flaking ceiling. Though only five of the bulbs are lit, what light there is bounces off each multi-hued, metallic body until I imagine the whole charm of birds humming.

My group sits around a perfectly waxed and polished kitchen table that, judging from the deep gouges and scratches, narrowly survived a bombing in the last world war. An awkward tension clogs the air. Mat, seated beside me and Joan across from me, stare resolutely into half-full glasses of lemonade that totter atop the table's scarred surface. Noe stares at Millie, who stands hiss-whispering with a tall woman in the kitchen entryway, while an oblivious Paco has commandeered what I assume was once a communal bowl of nuts and candy.

"About time," Mat murmurs.

"What is going on?" I ask.

"Avyanna shanghaied us and brought us here because she wants to talk to Millie about your tattoo."

"My tattoo? What for?" I whisper back, eyeing Millie and the woman as their conversation grows heated. The woman gestures with precision and anger, pointing at us, at Millie, at the hallway behind her, though she ignores Avyanna, who sits in a bright, tie-dyed sofa chair, new-looking but for the clumps of stuffing that pop out of its arms and cushions. Avyanna observes the escalating fight with an unreadable expression on her face.

"She didn't say why specifically she wants to talk about your tattoo, only that she does," Mat says.

"Why do the rest of you need to be here?"

"Don't ask me. It didn't occur to me to argue semantics when the terrifying augur showed up and told us we were leaving."

I tip my head in acquiescence. Fair enough.

"Oh! But we were talking to some of the other Travelers before she came for us...." Mat trails off, as though to tempt me with this new information.

"And?" I ask, and Mat's whispers grow so soft I have to practically press my ear to his mouth to understand him. Each word bothers the little hairs that curl at my nape, and I pretend it doesn't feel as nice as it does.

"Apparently," he says, "Avyanna used to be head of the council."

"Seriously?" I hiss.

"Yeah. From what they said, she was this augur prodigy who joined the council really young and ran it for years. And then one day, she just up and quit. Apparently her leaving cut the council's land holdings by like a third, and a lot of people are still really

mad about it. Meanwhile, she moved up into the middle of nowhere and hardly comes out for anything but recruiting anymore." I glance over at Avyanna as he says this, but her attention is firmly fixed on Millie.

I turn and press my mouth to Mat's ear, and his whole body tenses up when I do.

"Why did she quit?" I ask.

"They didn't know," he answers. "That's why they were talking about it. I guess she won't tell anyone who asks, and it's not like anyone can make her, you know?"

"How did the Travelers even know all this? I doubt she'd tell them."

He shrugs. "They overheard some other augurs talking about it."

"So it could all be total hearsay," I point out.

"I guess. Wouldn't really surprise me if it were true though."

The argument gets louder, and I pull away from Mat to see Joan shifting uncomfortably, pushing her lemonade around as best she can without tipping it over. Noe cracks his knuckles and jiggles a leg in clear agitation, and even Paco has turned around to look. The woman, though still technically whispering, does so loudly enough that we can now pick up snippets of their conversation, and what there is of it doesn't sound good.

"Your father and I . . . augur at your age . . . get yourself sorted out . . . reflects on this family . . ."

Millie says nothing, just stares at the wall like she's already checked out. Her mother keeps at her for several more awkward minutes before Millie suddenly jerks away from her and walks stiff-limbed into the kitchen. Her mother directs a sharp, livid gaze at

the back of Millie's head, and makes no acknowledgment of the rest of us as she follows after her daughter. Joan and I exchange a wary frown, while Noe plants his elbows on the table, buries his fists in his thick hair, and pulls.

Millie's mother intercepts her at the refrigerator, grabs her elbow, and says, "*Stop it*, Mildred. You've had enough of your tantrums for one day. It's time you started honoring this family's legacy."

"I do my job," Millie replies, shaking off her mother's arm and reaching for the door.

The woman gets right up in Millie's face again. "Do you?" she barks. "Do your job? This *job* is much more than showing up for meetings and pandering to the hired help," she snaps her head in our direction.

"Is that us?" Paco stage-whispers, leaning forward in his chair.

"Do you think your great-great-grandfather would have been able to accomplish all that he did if he comported himself the way you do? Hmm? And what would have happened then Millie? What would have happened if his people had no confidence in him?"

Millie faces her mother with a blank face and tired eyes.

"Answer me."

"People would have died," comes Millie's rote response.

"That's right. Do you want blood on your hands, Millie? Looking the way you look, living the way you do. You're a joke to all the other augurs. Do you realize that? And maybe I can't stop you from being a joke, but I'll be damned if you make a joke of this

family." The woman turns to leave. "I'll be back tonight with Wren's daughter. She wants a land allotment in this area, and you're going to see to it that she gets one." Millie's left standing in the cold light of the refrigerator as the woman stalks away. "And try to look half decent for once in your life," she barks over her shoulder. She's almost to the door when she spots Avyanna sitting in the corner and freezes.

Millie lets go of the door and slowly totters her way across the kitchen, not noticing that she's left the refrigerator open. She walks past the stove, the counter with the shiny red toaster, the dishwasher. She taps her forehead against the wall when she reaches it, rests for a moment, and then turns around again. She's gnawing on her thumbnail and tugging at the hem of her worn t-shirt as she walks.

"Augur Avyanna?" Millie's mother says, sharp tone changing to surprised awe so abruptly the entire room gets whiplash. She takes a step toward the augur and smiles. "What an honor. Please forgive my daughter for her poor etiquette; had I known you would be here—" she shoots a glare at Millie, who's still pacing, growing more agitated with each pass. "We would have made the estate more presentable."

Avyanna hums a noise of acknowledgment, her face still unreadable, then says. "Please, don't trouble yourself for the oversight. In actuality, this is not the first time our visits have overlapped." The woman's face pales a bit. "But rest assured your daughter has always conducted herself with the utmost decorum in my presence."

Millie's mother gives a mechanical nod and forces another smile. "How nice to hear." She steps away. "Well. If you'll excuse me, I have an evening to prepare for."

"Of course."

She leaves. We sit around the table, our warming lemonade sweating spots into the wood and listen to the tick of the cuckoo clocks and Millie's incoherent muttering.

"We are alone. We are all. Things. Trapped and nothings. All things. I am all things. We are nothing."

Noe's grown so twitchy and agitated I half expect him to shed his skin. I look back at Avyanna to see if Millie's breakdown is worrying her as much as it is me, but she just watches the young augur sadly, like she's not surprised. Like she's seen it before. Then her gaze slides to Noe.

Meanwhile Millie's murmuring grows louder; she's pacing and pushing her hands through her hair and ignoring tears that spill onto her shirt and onto the floor, and then she's throwing open a one-hinged cupboard door with such force the other hinge gives out and she hurls the door against the wall as she jerks out a kettle and slams it down onto the stove top. And all the while she's murmuring, and then she's banging a hand on the counter, "We are alone. We are all. Trapped and nothings. Things. All things. I am all things. We are nothing."

And then she stops murmuring, and she stops banging and she stops moving, until suddenly she's shaking. Her whole body vibrating in a rage of anguish and madness and Noe's staggering back from the table and his chair clatters against the floor, and with a splintering of bone, Millie's head lurches all the way back, hair snapping around her face as her neck jerks and her body convulses. I gasp, slamming back into Mat in my surprise, and grabbing his arm on reflex. And then Millie's howling and trembling, her hands scrambling and scratching at her throat as the back of her skull meets her shoulder blades

and her neck bulges and strains, the skin finally rupturing open as tendons snap, and arteries spurt red, and bone compresses and shudders and splinters, jagging at muscle until it's cut through and all that remains is a thin clinging of skin to skin.

Millie's face contorts in sorrow and agony as her skull continues to sink into the flesh of her upper back, hair splaying around the sides of her head, then into her face as her skull sinks deeper and deeper. Each ear disappears with a sound like stirred oatmeal, then her cheeks and hairline and chin, until only empty-filled eyes can be seen, guppying lips, the tip of a nose. I grip Mat's arm harder, and he slides his other hand on top of mine and squeezes right back.

And now Millie's headless body is stomping around the kitchen, throwing the kettle into the sink and jerking on the taps, leaving it to fountain over as she collects mugs from the same cupboard where she got the kettle, and dropping them onto our table before returning to the stove, where she flips on the gas, snatches up matches—

And *whoosh*.

The flare of the match sets the whole kitchen to melting, flamed cellophane that wrinkles and liquefies to reveal a perfect new layer underneath. Gone are the broken cupboards, the peeling countertops, the shattered window and holey floors, replaced by whitewash and chrome. The hummingbirds shrivel up into small, clear bulbs, and the cuckoo clocks crumple and melt to form a large, silver-framed timepiece; and suddenly our chairs have cushions and our glasses have coasters and our hands hold little plates that hold little cheesecakes, and Millie, with a perfectly pressed black and white dress and perfectly shiny black heels, and a perfectly glossy low ponytail that loops thick and lush

around her perfectly perfect collarbones, is holding a delicate crystal bowl filled with lumpy red sauce.

"Strawberries?" she asks, her lovely face bright and flushed.

All is silence. I don't dare move. The clock ticks. I hear Mat draw breath. My heart beats.

Then with a decided clunk, Noe, whose chair has been neatly righted though he's no longer in it, tosses his plate on the table and storms Millie in three steps. He grabs her face between his hands, mussing her hair in his haste, and blue light flares where his fingertips meet her skin. Millie gasps and stumbles back, the little crystal bowl shattering under the force of her power, and sticky red glop splatters across their clothes. She takes panicked breaths, her eyes flitting around, one hand reaching up to rake at his forearm, the other clawing desperately at the front of her dress, which only smears the stain more.

"Hey. Hey!" Noe barks, and Millie meets his eyes. The blue glows brighter, and his voice gentles. "It doesn't matter, Millie. Okay?" He holds her gaze and strokes her face. "It doesn't matter." Her eyes stay locked on his and slowly her breathing calms, and instead of pulling at his arm, she latches on to it. Still, her hand pulls at the bodice of her dress, and noticing it, Noe releases one side of her face to clasp her wrist still.

"It's just sauce, Millie," he says. He tugs her arm away from the dress and then uses her hand to purposefully smear the red across his own shirt, before pushing it back against her stomach and doing the same to her. Millie starts, her breath hitching, but she doesn't stop him. "It doesn't matter worth shit, Millie. It's all just sauce. You understand?" Noe's blue light hums on and eventually Millie nods.

Slowly, Noe releases her, and she sags back against the counter.

"Besides," Noe says, pushing one hand into his pocket and gesturing at Millie's ruined dress with the other, as a dimpled smile so boyish and charming I briefly wonder who he even is, breaks across his face. "Messy looks good on you."

"What did you do to me?" Millie asks, still staring at him in wonder.

His smile fades. "I just undid some things is all."

"Well," Avyanna says, standing from her chair. I'd completely forgotten she was even there. "We should be going then."

"Wha—" Mat starts to protest, confused, "I thought we came about the tattoo?"

"Oh that's right," Avyanna says, approaching the table. We did, didn't we?" She grabs my arm as she passes behind me, and pulls me from my chair.

"I have a question about the map, Millie."

Millie blinks at her, still a bit dazed.

"When I was a child, she says, stretching my arm toward Millie, "there was talk of a waterfall, far, far into the hills behind my house. It took days to get there, and the only way to find it was to follow this incredibly cryptic, complicated map that one of the local kids had inherited from his grandfather. We all hated the map, but we all eventually realized it was complicated because it had to be. It wasn't excess, it was necessity. And I suspect the same is true of Emma's map, yes?"

Slowly, Millie nods. "Yes."

"Why did you map her the way you did?" There's no accusation in Avyanna's tone, only curiosity.

Millie shakes her head a bit and steps away from the counter. "Uhh," she exhales loudly, rubbing her forehead, " I couldn't see any other way to do it. I've never mapped an arm like hers before." Her voice sounds scratchy and tired. "She has to pass through hundreds of conduits to get here, so her map reflects that."

"*Hundreds?*" Avyanna's face scrunches into a frown. "Why?"

Millie asks permission with her eyes, and I nod, turning my arm over. She lights up my map and gestures to a particularly complex-looking symbol on my inner forearm. "I linked on to the strongest conduit in her map, but once that was done five others sprang up. Then ten." She shrugs. "If I'd known before I started, I could have maybe mapped out a slightly faster route. But regardless, she still has to pass through all of these conduits, and since every conduit automatically links up to the next closest one anyway, I don't think the order makes much difference in this case."

"No wonder she's always the last to arrive . . ." Avyanna's lost in thought for a moment, then murmurs, "Why would she need to pass through so many conduits?" I can't tell if she's speaking to herself, or to Millie, but since neither knows the answer, I don't suppose it really matters.

"What's a conduit?" I ask. Joan and Mat have gathered around to examine my arm, but they look up to hear Avyanna's answer.

"It's like a . . ." Avyanna fishes for the right comparison. "Like a trail marker. We can map out the route here, but your mind can't follow it unless there are markers along the way. Imagine having to lay out a path through a massive mine field, and all you had to do it with was string. You could walk the right path and drag the string behind you, but

without anything to attach it to—trees, stones, stakes, whatever— when you have to double back or change directions, the string you just laid will get pulled out of place and you'll wind up with a jumbled mess. The conduits are like the trees and the stones. They ground the map. Now, usually a Traveler will have about ten conduits. *Maybe* twenty. But to have a hundred is unheard of, let alone multiple hundreds. I can't imagine what purpose it serves."

"What are the conduits made of?" Joan asks, peering down at my arm once again.

"There aren't any set, specific conduit points. It's just any stable structure within our world. Rock outcroppings. Very old trees. Stable buildings. That sort of thing."

"So what happens if one of your conduits gets chopped down? Or knocked down? Or . . . rolled away?" Mat asks.

"Like Millie said, your map compensates by linking you to the next closest conduit."

"Fascinating," Joan murmurs.

They go on talking about maps and markers and augur land, while Millie stares over at Noe, who's pretending to read her refrigerator magnets, and I want to ask Noe how he did what he did, but I can't seem to quite hear them as I listen to the clock. I think how it sounds so much like the clock I have at home. Same tick. Tick. Tick.

And I wake.

Dream #370 - The Tattoos

In the dream my group and I are back at the council complex, lined up in a row, map arms resting top-side-down on a long glass table underlit by soft, colored lights.

Lanond, dressed in a thick charcoal robe stands before us, the council seated at a long table to our left, the Travel Companions to the right, tables all lined up to form a square "U" shape.

"Your group is spoken of very highly amongst the augurs," Lanond says. "Your evictions are efficient and plentiful, four of the five of you have manifested Talents, and you rarely squabble. The council session held to determine your suitability for permanent tattooing was brief, and the voting unanimous."

Lanond turns to the council member seated nearest us and the woman places a sharp pen and a vial of dark violet liquid into Lanond's hand. "Now," he says, "majority recruiter in this case was Avyanna, who identified three of the five of you. As such, she has first claim to the group." He turns to look at her. "Are they to be yours, Avyanna?" he asks.

"Yes," she says.

"Have we confirmed that?" Bo interrupts, and everyone turns to look at him.

Lanond blinks in surprise. "Do you wish to dispute?"

Bo replies with a shrug. "Trust but verify," he says.

With a tip of his head, Lanond says, "Very well," and turns back to us. "Who was the first augur with whom you recall making eye contact?" he asks.

Mat, Paco, and I confirm Avyanna, while Joan and Noe identify Bo, who appears unsurprised by this information. I wonder why he'd bother going through the motions. Avyanna's face is carefully blank.

"Let the record show that majority claim was confirmed," Lanond says to a male council member, then returns to face Avyanna, placing the little vial and pen onto the table in front of her with a decisive *clink*.

"You've all been briefed on what this tattooing entails? The expectations and privileges that accompany it?"

We nod.

"You'll never again dream of another world, though I trust we've made a pleasing impression, so that should be good news. No more visits to nightmare worlds. You'll be bound together as a group, and bound to Avyanna. In emergencies, you may be summoned here. This can have complicating effects in your world. You may fall asleep with little warning, and at times, you may be difficult to rouse. That said, you'll enjoy great freedom and happiness here. You will never age. Never be ill. You may go where you like, you may explore. You may use your Talents as you choose and build friendships with those you meet here. You'll also be privy to many of our world's secrets, as we'll ask you to use your Talents to help the people here. So long as you do not betray our world, or injure our people, we consider you one of our own until you die, hopefully many years from now. Do you understand all this?"

Again, we nod.

"Very well. Then let us proceed." He bows to Avyanna, who snatches up the vial and pen before moving to our table. She settles down onto the stool across from Noe, who's seated at the opposite end of the table from me.

"Your map will be inked in purple, to bind you to Avyanna, but will still glow in your own color. The ink is comprised of captured violet light, distilled in silver, and bonded to liquefied crystal. It seems fair to warn you that the application process will sting."

"Is that like when doctors tell you you'll feel some pressure?" Paco asks.

We all crane our necks to watch Noe as Avyanna dips the sharp pen tip into the ink while activating his map with her other hand, then lifts the point to his skin. He winces and jumps a bit when she presses it to his skin, but overall seems to get through it all right. Mat comes next, followed by Joan, and then Paco, until Avyanna finally sits down in front of me. She gives me an apologetic wince as she dips the pen into the ink.

"Emma, yours is going to more than sting, I'm afraid."

I blink. "What? Why?"

"Because there's so much of it. It hurts most when there's line or symbol overlap, and your map crosses over on itself four or five deep in some places."

"What kind of sting are we talking?" I ask, my gaze fixed to the stained pen tip as she dabs excess ink on the lip of the vial.

She gives me a serious look. "It's going to burn. I'll move as quickly as I can, lest the pain wake you up."

I glance over at my group, who is now watching me with some combination of worry, pity, and I'm-glad-it's-not-me-ness. The first few passes sting just as Lanond warned it would, but just as Avyanna promises, the longer she tattoos, the more places

the pen passes over again and again, and the more it burns. I jump as she traces over the same spot for the third time.

"Can you let off that spot?" I snap, but Avyanna just keeps tracing.

It takes forever. I swear it didn't take Millie this long and wish she could have been the tattoo artist and not Avyanna. I finally lay my head down on the table and focus on taking deep, even breaths to distract from the pain.

"Hang in there, Emma. I'm almost done," she says, a short eternity later. "You're looking to blink out. Stay with me just a few more minutes, or I'll have to start over again next time."

Like hell.

"How am I supposed to keep from waking up?" I bark. "It's not like I have any control over it."

"Just try to ground yourself in this moment."

I choke out a laugh. "Seriously? If I were any more grounded in this moment, I'd be buried."

"Think of the things you actually like about Dream's End."

So I do. I think of all the reasons I decided to stay here in the first place. The beautiful scenery and kind people and delicious freedom. Freedom to look how I want, and go where I please, and say what I think. It is a beautiful prospect. To stay here forever.

The pen lifts, my skin burns red in its pain, and I imagine that even if my color weren't red to begin with, it'd end up there now.

And I wake.

Dream #390 - The Secrets

In the dream, the first thing Paco says to me is that we don't have to go evicting today.

"Ugh," I exhale in relief. "I could kiss you." The high flux of dreamers has quickly grown tiresome, not because it's hard work but because it's so *boring*. It's best to stick close to Paco because he tends to get into fights a lot, but even that gets dull after awhile.

"Emma," he says loudly. "For the very last time, I will *not* make sweet love to you. Again."

I roll my eyes and flop down onto a fluffy grey sofa. The fabric is so soft I almost can't feel it, and I'm half tempted to strip naked and just roll back and forth on it until it's time to wake up again. I have the good sense not to mention this to Paco.

I sign in contentment, but then frown, opening my eyes to stare at the high wooden rafters. I push up onto my elbows.

"Where are we anyway?" I ask.

Paco's eyes glint like the devil got in him and he says, "Avyanna's."

"Whoa!" I sit up all the way. "Seriously? I thought she didn't let people up here."

He shrugs and even his hair looks smug. "I guess we're just special."

"Huh. It's nice."

I stand up and wander over to the long thick-paned window. As on all augur land, the sky is tinted a lovely, pale purple, and the thick forest surrounding Avyanna's home is

one of the prettiest I've seen yet. As far as I can see, trees of every possible size and shade of green (and even some mauve and navy) are huddled happily in thick copses. I can hear a river rushing somewhere nearby, and when I pop open the window latch, air so crisp I want to gnaw on it breezes in through the crack.

"Hey, Paco, come out here!" Mat calls. "Is Emma here yet?"

"Yeah," he shouts back. "Propositioning me, per usual."

"Well tell her to do it outside!"

We follow the sound of rushing water and Joan's laugh, which, I've learned, is a *loud* laugh when she chooses to use it properly. The white-washed screen door bangs closed behind us, and we walk out toward a lush stretch of grass. Beside it a glittering waterfall sparks diamonds as it hits the pool, and colorful birds twitter songs from their tree nests overhead. I plop down into the tree swing next to Avyanna's. She stares into the roaring falls and rocks herself with one foot. Paco slides head-first into the grass beside Joan, who looks pleased to see him. Mat, Noe, and Millie swim in the pond, both Millie and Noe smiling.

"Hey!" Mat calls. "You should join us!"

"You know I would, but I don't have a bathing suit," I reply.

"So have Avyanna conjure you up one!" he calls.

"Or not!" Paco offers.

I roll my eyes and toe myself backward on the swing.

Avyanna and I sit in companionable silence, listening to nature sounds so soothing I'd nod off were I not already sleeping. As we watch, Mat hefts himself up onto

a boulder just beyond the falls, his shirt off and jeans rolled up to his knees. I endeavor not to look directly at him for self-respect reasons, but mostly fail.

"I like your land," I say.

"Me, too," Avyanna agrees.

"So some of the other Travelers were saying that when you quit the council, you moved all your land up into the middle of nowhere. Is that true? Are we in the middle of nowhere?"

Avyanna smirks. "You Travelers are a gossipy bunch," she says. "But, yes, I did move, and we are even now sitting on the very edge of nowhere."

"Is this that waterfall you said was up behind your old house that was so hard to get to?" I ask, reaching my toe tips for the long grass just beyond reach.

Avyanna goes so still so quickly that I stop swinging, too. She's staring at me in total astonishment.

"What did you say?" she asks.

Her reaction puzzles me. "I said is this that waterfall you told Millie and me about?"

She gapes at me for ten full heartbeats. I know because my pulse picks up pace at the way she's staring at me—half angry, half disbelieving-- and I find myself counting in the silence. I see the emotions playing behind her eyes, pulling her first in one direction and then the other, like she can't decide which to come at me with.

At last she simply demands, "How the hell did you know that?"

I return her frown. "What do you mean?"

"How the hell did you know about the waterfall behind my house?"

I blink in surprise, opening my mouth three times to respond, as I try to gauge her mood.

"Because you told me," I say haltingly. "Well, I guess you technically told Millie, but I was standing right there."

"I never told Mil—" her eyes flicker madly, like an army of a thousand ideas is waging war inside her skull. Then, softly, she asks, "When? When did I tell you?"

"At Millie's," I say, feeling like we are walking in opposing circles, bumping into each other. "Right before we talked about maps."

Avyanna looks down, though her eyes keep dancing around.

"Noe healed Millie," she recounts, "then I stood up, walked around to take your arm, pulled you over to Millie, and asked her why she mapped your arm the way that she did."

"Yeah. But before you asked her that, you told us the story about the map to the waterfall and how you could never find it until you became an augur, but even that map was less complicated than mine."

Avyanna lurches to her feet and begins to pace. Back and forth, she goes. The others don't seem to notice. Paco is trying to lure Joan into the water, and Mat is stretched across the boulder like a happy walrus. I don't know where Millie and Noe have gotten.

Seeming to decide something, Avyanna stops pacing, takes two rushed steps toward me and grabs my hand. "I've been sleeping with Ty since I was fourteen."

Uhhhh. Okay?

"Who's Ty?" is all I can think to say.

"Why do you ask?"

" . . . What?"

"Why are you asking about Ty? What did I tell you?"

"What? About you and Ty? . . . Wait, do you mean *Tyrian*?"

"What about me and Ty?"

"That you've been sleeping with him since you were fourteen," I say absently.

"Wow. Tyrian. *Nice.*"

But Avyanna's not listening. Her lungs hitch on her next breath, and she takes a staggering step back from me.

"Holy shit," she curses softly, but the way she says it, it sounds like a prayer, and even though she's staring at me, what she whispers next she whispers to herself. "You can see secrets," she says. "You can see *auger* secrets." A giddy soul fire, like I've never seen in her, never seen in anyone, flares behind her eyes. She starts pacing again, muttering her prayer-curses with her hands held to her head.

After a few minutes of this, she drops her arms, but her eyes keep right on ticking back and forth. Tick, tick, tick, tick. "Of course," she breathes. "Of *course*. *That's* why you have so many conduits. You don't conduit in through topography, you conduit in through *augurs*. I've never heard of such a thing . . ." She's back to muttering to herself.

"Emma," she says suddenly. She leans down so we're at eye level, watching me tensely. "I need you to think carefully. Has this ever happened with anyone else? Any

other augurs? At any point did someone tell you something strange, give a reaction that seemed inappropriate? Did you lose time?"

I swallow. "Yeah, there was one time something weird happened."

"When, Emma?"

"At the council complex. Right after orientation."

"Tell me. Who was it?"

"Bo."

I'm watching closely for her reaction, but I shouldn't have bothered. She closes her eyes and clenches her fists in giddy triumph, then says. "What did he say, Emma?"

I recount the tale as best I can. "I don't remember word for word. I mean, I wrote it down in my journal, but—"

"You keep a journal?" she interrupts, "Of your dreams?"

"Yeah."

"And you wrote down what Bo said to you back when it happened?"

"Yeah."

She wraps her hand around my map arm. "I'm going to send you home, Lucy."

"What?" I say, officially rattled now.

"I'm going to send you home. I need you to find the entry, memorize every word of that encounter and then go back to sleep. Can you do that?"

"Yeah, I—"

And I wake.

RED

Dream #391- The Gazebo

When I get back, I'm standing in a large gazebo of floor-to-ceiling glass. Through the windows, I see only darkness and reflections. I blink at the teardrop lights that float in the air above. I see myself, and I see my friends speaking intently in a huddled group behind me. Only when I turn does the movement draw their notice.

"Emma, what the hell is going on?" Paco exclaims.

"Where are we?"

"I don't know! One minute we're all frolicking in the forest, and the next you're gone, and Avyanna's freaking out and teleporting us in here."

"Why?" I ask.

"I don't know. It's not like we can follow her to ask, either," he spins, gesturing around the room.

I glance around. No doors.

"What happened?" Joan asks.

Before I can answer, Avyanna reappears in a spiral of violet smoke-light that unfurls around her before being snagged back up into the glowing teardrops. Millie and Tyrian soon follow.

"Wow. Hi," Paco says. "Abandon guests in your weird greenhouse much?"

Ignoring him, Avyanna pulls a crystal pen from her pocket and asks, "Did you memorize the entry?"

I nod. "Yeah."

She gestures for me to follow as she moves to one of the large glass walls and lifts her pen to its surface. A spot of violet drips from the tip and into the darkness beyond the glass, floating down, down, like a drop of food coloring in a glass of water, bleeding purple light as it falls, until it reaches the bottom, and the light molds itself into writhing shapes that lurch up into the dark, struggling for form.

"Tell me," she says.

So I do. I repeat my entry back to her, word for word, and as I speak she scribbles each word into the glass, the letters disappearing as soon as they're inked and swirling in a mess of color and light until they begin to form coherent shadow forms, then faces, then scenes. She writes and writes, and the scenes sway and flicker and change and erase themselves to start over again until they're coming quick and chaotic, and it's like a dance with different steps for everyone.

I finish my recitation, and Avyanna stops writing but keeps watching as the images keep flashing, sometimes falling apart halfway through, sometimes filled with black shadows and blurred faces. The dancing lights spread, seeping out into neighboring window panes until the whole of the room is awash in images and light and shadow.

When the stained glass wasteland I saw in Bo's mind appears in the pane closest to Avyanna, she taps it with her fingertips. The image palpitates brightly and then echoes out through all the windows, one by one, and as images move Avyanna grabs my map arm. A burning pain snakes through my arm as she does it, and I instinctively try to pull away, watching in mystified wonder as isolated marks and symbols appear all along my wrist and hand and forearm and glow crimson for a painful instant before fading away

again. Except six of the marks don't fade; they begin to hum and throb a blinding, blood-red.

The glass still writhes. Unknown faces and buildings, shots of the sky and stretches of grass fields, clay-roofed settlements, and beautiful cities that remind me of the council complex. And then there are other scenes. Calcified vegetation, lakes of ash, the dark innards of metal cities. And bodies, so many bodies, skin a mummified white, covering miles and miles of pale earth, lying as they fell.

And suddenly I see this room and all of us in it, projected against the windows, standing there as we're standing right now, not in reflection but in vision. And then we're gone, and moments later I see my face, my real face from back home, flash across the ceiling, and I stumble back from Avyanna in surprise. Mat raises a hand to steady me, but I'm too rattled to care. Over and over again, I see my face, sometimes popping out of nothing, sometimes forming from some other face, some foreign landscape, or unfurling slowly from inky light. So many places and faces I don't know or recognize, and then my own, again and again, until it's everywhere.

It goes on and on. Avyanna has stopped her pacing and now merely watches. Millie and Tyrian stand unmoving with us in the center of the room as Avyanna slowly raises her hand to touch the frizzy-haired, freckle-stained face in the glass. Again the image echoes out to the other windows, but this time it stays, and hums, and pulses brighter and brighter, until at last I must close my eyes against the burn of it. A high-pitched screech, like a tea kettle screaming, fills our ears, followed by the sound of glass shattering with such force and power that for a moment I wonder if I, too, am made of glass, and if I, too,

am broken. And though I wait for the cutting shower to fall, it never does.

When I open my eyes, I'm standing in the ruins of a glass gazebo. Beyond its splintered pillars, I can just make out the dark-kissed green of nature, can hear the sounds of rushing water and crickets, the quiet of birds asleep in their tree nests. Within the gazebo, there is only breath. No one moves except to draw air into their lungs and to watch as the lilac-haired augur with the waterfall braid sinks to her knees and weeps.

And I wake.

Dream #422 - The Telling

I'm reclining back on the heels of my hands in a field of long, sweet-smelling grass and bobbing tulips. My face is turned toward a pale pink sky dolloped with marshmallow clouds, and I watch them ooze sideways as I draw in belly-deep lungfuls of perfumed air. In the near distance white crystals the size of tree trunks shoot up from the earth to form an unbroken line from horizon to horizon. The crystals spread and crisscross as they push toward the sky, splaying like pens dropped in a cup. The stretch of sky right above them is deepest crimson, bleeding to rose with distance. I can hear them hum as they throb from white to red. I let my eyes droop closed for long minutes, lulled by the warm lights and soothing pulse of the earth.

"You know, just every now and then, I wish they'd send us somewhere really ugly," says Paco's disembodied voice. I crane my neck around trying to see him and spot his knees peeking out from the grass a few feet away.

"You don't mean that," says Joan who's sitting cross-legged beside Paco, poking at tulip blossoms. They bow their heads and then rear back up to look at her. "There's

enough of that back home."

"Baby, you'd make a wasteland bloom."

Mat and I groan. Joan rolls her eyes, but smiles affectionately down at Paco.

"So what are we doing here?" I ask, tilting my face into the sunlight.

"Dunno," Mat replies. "Avyanna sent us here and said to wait."

"You saw Avyanna?" I ask.

"Yeah," he replies, tugging at a particularly long blade of grass. It's been weeks since we've seen the augur. Not since that night at the gazebo.

"How was she?"

"She seemed kind of . . . strung out," he replies.

We lounge in the grass for what feels like a long time before we finally hear footsteps approaching from behind.,

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Avyanna says. We turn to find her peering out at the expanse of tulip tips.

"You guys don't seem to have much ugly here," Mat says

The augur doesn't look well. Her face is pale and gaunt, her hair pulled back into a messy bun, her eyes tired and bloodshot. I swallow, thinking back to what we saw that night in the gazebo, the strange scenes and faces. I think of my own face plastered across the windows, and my insides twist. "I'm glad you think so," she replies. "We all work very hard to keep this world what it is. It's not to say we don't run into our share of roadblocks, however." She nods toward the crystal. "Have you been here before?"

"Nah, I'd remember this place," Paco says.

"Yeah it's amazing," I say. "What is it?"

"You remember Lanond mentioned the hubs? The structures that break the raw light up into its colors?"

We nod.

"This is our world's largest hub. It stretches for many miles and runs through all the colors as it goes. We're obviously sitting at the red end of the spectrum. I bring you here because you'll become very familiar with the hubs over the course of your lives. In the beginning because of their power over life, and then, many years from now, because their destruction will bring death."

I blink at the abrupt shift in tone, and look over at Mat who wears an equally startled expression.

"What do you mean?" Noe asks. He regulates his emotions very carefully, but I can see the confusion in even his eyes.

Avyanna sighs deeply. "Before you can understand what I mean, you must first understand something about me. As you may recall from orientation, all augurs have gifts. Tyrian, as you know, can read Talents. I'm a seer. There was a time when all augurs were seers, hence the name, but it's a rare thing anymore. Seeing isn't about the minutia. I don't know what you'll wear tomorrow or how many children you'll have. As a seer, I'm shown things that will impact the greatest number of people. And as a seer, I've known for many years that something is coming."

"I knew it had to involve an augur, though I didn't know who it was or what they'd do, because in the same way I can't just walk onto well-protected augur land, I

also can't steal into their future. There's a method to Seeing. It's like putting together a puzzle. I'm not just handed answers, I'm given pieces, and if I have all the pieces then I know what will happen. I'm never wrong. That said, I can't know what's coming if I'm missing pieces, and that only happens when another augur is involved."

"Most augurs feel no need to hide. Those who want what's best for our world lay their secrets bare to the seers, so we can anticipate the worst of what might come and find ways to alter the picture before it ever forms. There are generally dozens of alternate futures. It's just a matter of finding pieces to all the different puzzles, putting them together, then manipulating players so the best picture is the one we actually end up with."

"I had terrible visions, more and more frequently, but even more than the visions I was troubled by the number of missing pieces. It meant that some augur— some very powerful augur— was purposefully hiding a great deal, and the devastation that would result from those secrets was significant."

"My Sight showed me that Travelers would be somehow involved in whatever was going to happen. I kept watching incompetent Travel Companions lose you, tattoo your maps wrong, fail to orient you. I watched Sol harass group after group, and every time I prayed that *that* group wasn't the one I needed. Eventually, I called in some favors and got appointed head of the Travel Committee. And then I watched Bo. Competing fiercely to claim as many Travelers as possible; it's when I first began to suspect him."

"Even once you all arrived, I still wasn't sure you were the group I needed. I was missing too many pieces to say. But then, that day on my property, I spoke to Emma,"

Avyanna's eyes spark, remembering that moment of realization, though the light behind them is not nearly so bright now as it was then. "I knew. So I invited you into my Seeing room. Because Emma conduits in through all the augurs, she's inherently privy to all their secrets, though I'll only be able to See those secrets relevant to visions I've already received. In the Seeing room, I accessed Emma's map, and the secrets along with it. . . ."

Avyanna pauses in her story, staring out at the crystals as though her own heart keeps them pumping, and that heart is breaking.

"All the pieces," she says. "I finally have all the pieces, and it comes out that there's only one picture. One future." She turns to look at us now, her expression desperate. "I can't stop Bo," she says. "I don't know how he's done it. I don't know how he's planned it out so well. But no matter what I try, no matter what anyone does, we will fail. And all that I've seen . . . will come to pass. Bo's going to level this world in an attempt to gain access to yours."

"Whoa, what?" Paco says. "What does that mean? I thought our world was like a zillion miles away from yours?"

Avyanna shakes her head. "Our worlds share a planet. Our planes of existence are separated by a sort of fabric, and the fabric between our two worlds is very thin. We believe it's why so many of your dreamers show up here, and why they have so much power when they do. Bo means to tear through that fabric."

"To what end?" Joan demands.

"I can't be sure. There's talk that Bo lost someone important to him in a dreamer attack."

"I thought dreamers couldn't interact with you guys?" Mat replies.

"They can't, but they can interact with our environment just fine, and we are then subject to that environment. Lanond painted a fairly tame picture of what life was like here before the Travelers came. Dreamers can do a lot of damage."

"Who did Bo lose?" Noe asks.

"I don't know."

"Can't you see that in your puzzles or whatever? That seems like a pretty epic kind of detail if he's going to break the world because of it," Paco chimes in.

"Yes, I agree." Avyanna says, then shakes her head. "But it doesn't work that way. I don't decide what I see, I can only form pictures with the pieces I'm given."

"And who gives you the pieces?" Mat asks.

She shrugs. "I don't know. Who made it so Noe can heal people, or Emma see secrets, or Sol ride his chandelier around like a giant pony?"

"If you're only given little pieces of what's going to happen, I don't get how you think you can predict the future," Paco says. "I mean especially over something like this. A few visions and you decide that not only is some guy going to destroy the world, but that there's nothing you can do to stop it?"

Avyanna rubs at her forehead like she has a headache. "I'm not going to argue semantics over something you don't fully understand, Paco. I'll explain it like this: Something terrible could be coming tomorrow, and if I'm not given pieces of that future, I'll never know what's about to happen. By extension, I'll be unable to stop it. If, however, I'm given any pieces at all, it falls to me to put them together, and hunt down

what's missing. Once I have all the pieces, I know with total certainty what will happen, just like putting a puzzle together. If you have all the pieces, and all those pieces are in the right place, there's one set picture that results. Most visions provide me with dozens, if not hundreds, of alternatives to the future we're presently headed for. The fact that I'm shown so many alternate pictures in the first place implies there's something I can do to determine which future actually plays out, and once I know the future I want, I do what must be done to make it happen."

"But you couldn't possibly account for every variable," Joan says. "There are innumerable potential outcomes to a scenario like this. You can't account for all of them, let alone predict the outcome."

Again, Avyanna shakes her head. "That's not how seer magic works. Whatever magic gives me the visions in the first place has already accounted for all that. The only variable left is what I can do about it."

"Okay, but just because you can't do anything to stop Bo doesn't necessarily mean no one else can," Joan points out. "That's a whole other slew of variables you can't anticipate that you seem to be ignoring."

"No. If someone else could stop Bo, then that would show up as one of my alternate futures, at which point I would hunt that person down and do whatever needed doing to make them stop him." There's a dark intensity to Avyanna as she says this. I've never seen her this way before, and though I've always been aware that Avyanna was powerful, it's the first time I truly understand why a senior augur like Henry would yield to her even on his own land.

"But you said you were only ever given visions when there's something you can do to change the outcome," Joan plows on. "If there's nothing you can do to change Bo's plan, then why send you the vision in the first place?"

Avyanna actually smiles, the darkness fading from her as quickly as it came.

"Now *that*," she says, "is the question I've spent the last three weeks answering."

"And did you?" I ask.

"I did. It's why I brought you here. To understand what's going to happen, you need to first understand what Bo's going to do."

"And what's that?" Joan asks.

Avyanna nods toward the expanse of pulsing red crystal. "He's going to destroy the hubs. Starting with this one," she says.

"And you said this is the largest one?" Mat asks.

"It powers our world. It's not the only hub, but it's the most important one; taking it out will set in motion a very slow, but very definite chain of death in this world. The hubs are fundamental to everything we do and are. If they aren't filtering the light from above and recasting it by color, then everything below the raw sky will bleach and mummify. With no light being filtered from above, the reserves that power the smaller provinces will eventually dry up, and they too will succumb."

"And what does this have to do with our world?" Paco asks.

"The amount of power required to destroy the hub is significant. The backlash will tear tiny holes into the fabric. Were the hubs operational, their magic would mend the tears, but without them, the breaches will slowly grow until the one world begins to

bleed into the other. There are echoes between our worlds all the time, but the two were never meant to meld."

"So how does he do it? Is he really that powerful? I didn't get that impression the few times we've worked with him." Mat asks.

"No. No augur has that kind of power. He's somehow accumulating light. I've seen the moment he destroys the hub, but I've not yet seen the preparation leading up to. That may come with time," she says, giving my map arm a squeeze. "In the meanwhile, I've determined that in addition to whatever he's doing to build up light reserves, he's also claimed several Travelers with very unusual gifts. Do you remember Lanond mentioning an augur who can make the intangible tangible?"

"Vaguely," I say.

"No," says Paco.

"Cyan. He's one of the Travelers bound to Bo now and will have a direct hand in destroying the hub. He also, however, has a direct hand in the one countermeasure we have available to us."

"I thought you said there was nothing you could do to stop Bo," Joan says.

"There's not," Avyanna replies. "But there's something we can do afterward. Immediately following the surge that breaks the hub, Cyan solidifies the light. It will clog the crystals, prevent them from regenerating, and the colored light already in the sky will shatter." I think of the images I saw in Bo's mind: the grey ground covered in broken stained-glass. "Like I said, there's nothing we can do to stop any of that," Avyanna continues. "But we can stop what comes next."

"How?" Mat asks.

"When the hub blows, it will tear small holes in the fabric around it. That means when the sky shatters, a piece of that light will slip from this world into yours. It will land on a little girl there."

"Won't that kill her?" Joan asks.

"It would kill someone here," Avyanna says. "But that's what makes her special. People in your world are less sensitive to light, which means the initial impact won't kill her. It will merely change her. She'll be a child touched by two worlds. While her dual identity will give her the capacity to exist in either world, it will also make life difficult. She'll live in physical pain and isolation growing up. She'll struggle and suffer. But she'll also have the unique capacity to save both this world and yours."

"Wow. Sounds great," Mat mutters.

"And she just happens to be standing in the right place at the right time?" I ask.

"More like the wrong place," Paco mutters.

"It's complicated. I do need you all to understand that in order to preserve our two worlds this child will, by necessity, suffer. Considering the alternative, it seems . . . a necessary sacrifice. What's more, you'll all have a part to play in it."

"In using this girl?" Noe snaps.

"In stopping Bo."

"Does she even get a choice in the matter?" Noe asks.

"No," is Avyanna's response.

We mull this over. What's there to say? Save the world, and ruin a girl's life? Or

give up the world for the sake of one girl, who will probably get caught in the crossfire when it all goes wrong anyway? It's an ugly choice, but a whole world is at stake, after all. Two whole worlds.

"I need a promise from each of you," she says. "That you'll help me stop Bo. That you'll do what it takes to keep these two words you love safe."

What else is there to say? We all give her our word. And she takes it.

And I wake.

Dream #1186 – The Truth

I'm walking through Avyanna's gazebo. It's twice as big as the last, and the spotless glass gleams. I watch my reflection as I meander past the tall panes, my slim form moving with an ease and grace foreign to my other body.

I gaze at the images as I wait for Avyanna to arrive. She's asked me to meet her here. Said she has something to tell me. I run my fingers along a tall window that shows a boy holding a crystal up to the sky. I can never make sense of Avyanna's visions, but then according to her, I don't need to. My group's experience at the gazebo that night three years ago was far from the norm. Unlike the rapid-fire assault of images as hundreds of new secrets filtered in through her magic, the images usually appear slowly, linger lazily. The scenes and images also migrate off the glass walls, twirling into the room where they hover and sway, or spin from one corner to the other like stringless kites before dissolving into some other vision, or rolling closed like scrolls and popping out of sight.

I wander past a wide translucent canvas in which a boat is bucking beneath the

force of a raging squall. Beside that, a girl with pigtails lies petrified in sooty soil. I look away from that one quickly. A large windowless room with a large round light glowing on the ceiling and haggard people gathered around it. A couple kissing. Blue penguins. A hundred crystal wind chimes dangling down from a low ceiling.

"Emma," Avyanna says from behind me, and I spin to face her. "Thank you for coming."

"Of course," I say. It's unusual for Avyanna to summon one of us without the others, and I'm curious about what she wants to discuss. And, seeing her face, apprehensive. "What's up?"

She leans back against the glass and crosses her arms. "Do you remember years back when I asked you all to promise you'd do what was needed to be done in order to stop Bo?"

My apprehension swells. "Yeah," I say cautiously.

"I knew I was asking more of you than the others, Emma."

"Why?" I ask. "Because of all the map reading? Because I don't mind coming here for that."

"No," she says. "Because I know who the little girl is." She lays her hand flat against the glass behind her, and all the windows fill with my other face, the one I saw in the gazebo glass three years ago. I swallow.

"I don't understand," I say. "Are you trying to say that I'm the girl? Cause . . . I'm not really a little girl anymore."

"No," Avyanna responds. "You're not the girl in the picture."

"Well not here. I mean, that's actually what I look like back home."

"You're not the girl in the picture, Emma. Look closer."

So I do. I take a shaky step up to the glass and examine the face looking back at me. Avyanna's right. The eyes are a slightly darker blue, the freckles a little less dense across her nose, her mouth just a touch fuller. The girl in the picture *could* be me. But she's not. I turn back to face the augur.

"I don't understand," I say.

Avyanna taps the glass again and another image fills the windows. A little girl in a bright red raincoat and boots stares up toward the sky, her blue eyes wide in complete wonder. Her frizzy red hair peeks out from beneath a shiny red hat. Several steps behind her stands an elderly woman with greying hair and a grey coat. She watches the girl with a look of deep anguish on her face.

My heart just stops before stuttering back in force. I know that face.

"Who is this woman?" I ask.

Avyanna's quiet for a moment, then says, "You know who she is, Emma," her voice is soft.

"No," I say. "No, that doesn't make any sense. I don't look like this," I insist.

"She's old. I'm—I don't look like this."

"You'll be old someday, will you not?" She never does come right out and say it's me in the image, but she doesn't have to. She was right when she said I knew. Before she said anything, I knew.

"Then who is she?" I ask, gesturing at the little girl beside me.

"Who do you think she is?"

My breath shakes as I look back at the image. The little girl looks just like I did when I was her age: frizzy red hair, freckles, knobby knees poking out from underneath her shiny little coat.

"You mean to tell me that this kid is the little girl you spoke of? The one who gets hit by the light? The one you said just happens to be standing there when the hubs break?"

"I said it's complicated."

"Or not," I snap. "Tell me who she is, Avyanna. I'm too old here to be her mother."

"Yes, you are."

"So who is she?"

"Do you not know?"

"Stop answering me with questions!" I yell. "Who is she?"

"I was very clear with all of you. I told you in no uncertain terms that you would have a part to play in stopping Bo. And that a little girl from your world was the key to saving it."

"And that she would suffer," I echo her words from three years ago.

"Yes," Avyanna replies. "She will suffer."

"And you're telling me that that little girl, who's going to suffer and save the world is my g—" I stop and draw in a shaky breath. I can't say it. "That this is the girl?" I say, pointing to the image.

"Yes."

I nod. "'A little girl' is what you said that day. Just some random little girl. Did you know? Did you know who she would be?"

Avyanna stares at me a long time before answering.

"Yes," she finally says. "I knew."

I take another step back, further from the image, further from Avyanna. Sick. I feel sick.

"I don't look like that here. How did you know it was me?"

"Because of other things I've Seen."

I absorb this, rattled and angry and nauseous.

"How could you not tell me who she was before I bound myself to this place?" I whisper. "I trusted you. We all trusted you. How could you let me agree to this commitment, to this life, without telling me first?"

"I've betrayed no one's trust but yours. And I didn't tell you because you might have said no," Avyanna replies, her face as stone, her eyes intense. Focused. Unapologetic.

"And you had no qualms about asking me to condemn my own granddaughter to a hellish, lonely life?"

"None," she bites out. "I would condemn her to far worse if it meant saving my world." She takes a step toward me, and I take another step back.

"Perhaps I've not been clear enough on that point," she continues. "Millie's mother spoke of honoring the augur legacy. Well *this* is what it looks like. It's not about

dressing well or sucking up or pissing away land to people who pretend like they deserve it. It's about protecting what's ours. Protecting all that makes this world the extraordinary place it is. And it is indeed an *extraordinary* place. How quick you were to recognize that, how eager to stay. So captivated by the beauty and the freedom of a new world and your new face that you never stopped to consider the price we pay to keep it that way. It would chill you the things I've had to do to ensure our finest future. But I'd do it again, and I'd do it to you. And I'll sure as hell do it to your granddaughter."

"And the ends justify the means?"

"It often happens that the greater the ends, the viler the means," she replies.

I shake my head, turning away from her.

"I told you what you were signing up for. I told you what would happen to that little girl," she says.

I let out a sharp, disbelieving breath. "You never told me *I'd* be expected to do this to her! And you certainly never said she was mine!"

"Stop playing the victim. You were willing to sacrifice someone else's granddaughter for the greater good, but not your own? What does that say about you?"

I have no response to that. She's right. I would have cared far less about some other child. And if I had the chance in this moment to trade in someone else's family for the task, and save my own? I would do it. Which, I realize, is exactly how Avyanna sees it. Except this world is her baby, and she'll step on mine to save it.

"I won't do it," I murmur, turning back to face her. "I won't. In the end it's my choice, isn't it? It's my choice to take her to where she needs to be when the hub breaks.

And I won't do it. You can't make me lead her into hell."

Avyanna shrugs. "You're right. I can't follow you home and make you do this. If I could, I'd just go take care of it myself. But do keep in mind that however much you may protect your girl, by protecting her, you condemn her all the same. Bo will destroy the hubs. And without her here to stop it, he will rip through the fabric separating our worlds and leave them both in ruin. In the end, your girl will fare no better. At least this way she gets to be a hero."

"Don't for even a second pretend this is about what's best for her," I snap.

"Saving the world is what's best for her, even if she has to suffer in order to do it. It's for the greater good of two worlds, Emma. There is no choice."

I exhale in disgust and give her my back.

"I'll give you some time," she says, turning to leave, "You have several decades to mull it over, Emma. It appears that with time, you'll see reason."

I let her leave without comment. Stare out into the lush, glittering landscape beyond the windows. Thousands of morning dew drops cluster on grass blades and tree leaves and kaleidoscope flower tips. They catch the lilac sunshine that pours down over them and shoot it back out so the entire garden vibrates with diamond light. I watch it shimmer and mourn the extraordinary.

Dream #17,991 – The Girl

Mat wraps his arm around my chest and tugs me back against his body. He rests his chin atop my shoulder and from a far away mountaintop, we watch the workers, swarming like ants into the gaping mouth of the silver mine. The sky over Bo's land has

faded to the sickly green-grey of cyclones. "It's getting worse, isn't it?" he murmurs into my hair.

I nod.

"Do you remember that first time we visited Ty's place?" he asks. "How we just lay there staring out into paradise, thinking it would go on like that forever?"

I sigh deeply, watching this work of death unfolding. Knowing there's nothing I can do to stop it, and only one hope of deterring it. I've spent so many years trying not to think about it, pretending it wouldn't come down to this, or that if it did, it would somehow be easier with age. When in reality it's only gotten harder. To give her up. Give her over. Walk away.

"Yeah," I say. "What a dream that was."

"I spent most of that day dreaming about seeing down your shirt"

"That day at Ty's?"

"Yeah, that day. All the days."

I chuckle and wrap my hand around his arm with a squeeze, appreciating his attempt to lighten the mood. But the laughter doesn't linger.

After a long silence, he quietly asks, "Did you meet her?" Mat always seems to know what I'm thinking. He's good at that.

My next breath hurts, actually hurts, like there's glass lodged in my lungs.

"Yeah," I say.

"What's she like?"

I smile at the memory, and that hurts too. Tiny freckled face, bald little head,

pinched blue eyes. "Tiny," I say. "And beautiful."

"What did they name her?"

Lightning snakes through the far-off sky, and tiny raindrops speckle the earth. I wonder if the workers down below will dash out into the rain, if they'll let the clean wash off the grime and darken the dust caking their skin.

"Lucy," I say. "Her name is Lucy."