

**The Psychology of Realistic Characters:
Utilizing Psychological Theory in the Character Creation Process**

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences
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Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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Abstract

When creating characters for a story, authors should seek to make them as realistic and relatable as possible to their respective audiences. In order to achieve that, authors need to understand humanity and why humans behave the way they do. Psychology offers insight into the human mind, and covers all aspects of personality, socialization, and development within humanity. These same three areas can be used when crafting characters for a story. By utilizing personality tests, social backgrounds, and developmental life stages, authors gain an understanding of how and why people may act the way they do. This knowledge can in turn be used toward the creation and development of characters throughout a story's plot. While writing, authors can continue to utilize psychological theories to maintain realism and relatability for their target audience.

Keywords: character creation, psychology, personality, social, development, realism, relatability

Dedication

In memory of my Grandpa and Grandma.

I can hear you both cheering me on from Heaven.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those who got me to where I am today.

First, to my mom and dad for their unwavering love and support in every aspect of my life. Thank you for believing in what I could accomplish. And yes, you can finally read what I have been writing for all these years.

To my brothers, James and Michael, and my sister-in-law, Elayna, for their presence in my life. Thank you for being there for me whenever I need you. You three inspire me more than you will ever know.

Thank you to my Creative Writing and English teachers throughout the years. Without your classes, I would not have been inspired to pursue writing as a career. I will forever be grateful for your dedication.

Thank you to the Creative Writing and Fiction Club at Liberty University for bringing me so much joy during my undergraduate and graduate years. I don't think I would have made it without you crazy kids.

I would also like to thank my thesis chair, Karen Dodson, and my reader, Andrew Smith. This wouldn't have been possible without your advice and guidance.

Finally, thank you to my Heavenly Father, for giving me this life. I wouldn't trade it for the world.

Artist Statement

Background

The Journey

Ever since I was young, I have loved to create fantastical stories in my head. Through my active imagination, I could transport myself into any fictional world that I wanted. In those worlds, I could act out any plot from the comfort of my own bedroom. Fourth grade marks the first time I started writing these stories down. My teacher always encouraged creativity, giving my class interesting writing prompts to help stimulate our creativity and feed our imaginations, while still teaching us fundamental English skills. I fell in love with writing immediately, entranced by how the words I wrote could transform into any story I wanted. There was always an idea circling around in my head — those ideas were poured out into notebooks and onto the computer. I wrote for the sheer joy it brought me as I created something to call my own.

I hardly shared what I wrote with others unless it was a school assignment. Writing was not something I thought could be pursued further; it was simply a way for me to elevate my imagination, solidifying my thoughts and memories into something more concrete. In middle school, I thought up an idea for a book. My excitement to create something that could one day sit on bookshelves in stores prompted me to begin sharing my writing with my peers. The story was called *Through the Fire* and was mostly a culmination of any piece of media I had consumed up until that point. While it was far from the next bestseller, I loved it all the same. Throughout middle school, I dedicated myself to writing various scenes for this book, going out of order, getting ahead of myself, and creating too many main characters to know what to do with. I

shared my work with my friends, who encouraged me and praised my very amateur writing skills.

I was constantly thinking up new book ideas in my middle and high school years. Once again, my creativity was fueled by a teacher, who taught my Junior and Senior year writing classes. With these classes, I was formally taught creative writing for the first time. Here, I learned the importance of story structure and how to write realistic dialogue. I experimented with different genres, enjoying the challenges that came with each one. This class was where I also learned how to look at my work critically. I could identify where a story was weak as well as where it excelled. With this knowledge, I took to editing my old work, focusing on that first book I had ever attempted. *Through the Fire* was trashed and rewritten countless times until I eventually abandoned it altogether.

As I began college, most of my writing was left on the back burner and I turned my focus toward the degree I had decided to pursue. Unsure of what career field I wanted to end up in, I decided to study Psychology. The subject itself seemed interesting enough to keep me engaged and I felt like it was a good foundation for any profession I might decide to pursue in the future. I found Psychology fascinating. With each class I took, I learned more about myself and the people around me. However, this new-found interest did not bring me closer to figuring out what I wanted to do with my life. The idea of continuing my education in Psychology did not appeal to me. Though I loved what I was learning, it was not a field I could see myself working in one day. I also did not feel involved with the community within the degree program, and I began to look into ways I could utilize my knowledge in psychology in other careers where I would feel involved and needed.

As I struggled to find a career path that would suit me, I decided to join the Creative Writing and Fiction Club at Liberty University. There, I found myself surrounded by other students who loved to write despite being in an array of different majors. It was in this club that my writing journey truly took off. In 2019, a few members expressed interest in participating in National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo). This challenge takes place every November, when writers around the world attempt to write 50,000 words over the course of 30 days. Writers must choose one piece of work to focus on and tend to utilize the months leading up to November to plan out their books. I had never heard of this challenge, but on the first day with finals fast approaching, I decided to give it a whirl with no planning whatsoever.

The first step of my NaNoWriMo journey was to pick a story to write. I had gathered a fair collection of unfinished book ideas, so I presented some options to friends, and they chose the first book I had ever attempted to write: *Through the Fire*. In what felt like a gift to my younger self, I spent the next 30 days working tirelessly on this book. By the 30th day, I had completed my first full draft. There was just one problem. While I was proud of the accomplishment, I no longer liked the story I had been so keen to write in middle school. This was not a total loss, however, because NaNoWriMo had helped me prove to myself that I was capable of writing a book.

This revelation rejuvenated my desire to write on a more professional and serious level. I added Creative Writing as a minor, spending the last two years of my undergraduate career taking writing classes in which I was truly invested. When I graduated, I applied for Liberty's Creative Writing Master's program. That decision leads me to the present as I come to a close on my graduate career.

The Process

Most writers will be familiar with the terms planner and pantsers. Whether a writer is one or the other is a constant divide within the writing community. A planner does just as the name suggests — they plan. When a planner gets an idea for a story, they tend to outline the plot, create the characters, and understand the direction of their story before ever starting that first draft. Pantsers are the complete opposite. They jump straight into a story without much more thought past what point of view they want to write in. Neither way is absolutely right or wrong, but they both have their fair share of benefits and drawbacks.

I have always been a pantsers, which reflects my writing journey as a whole. I didn't want to sit down before college and plan out exactly what I wanted to do with my life and instead, I simply discovered what I wanted along the way. Just like my writing. I hardly outline a story more than deciding on character names and settings. I jump straight into the story, letting it lead me along. With every word, the plot reveals itself to me. That is one of the things that I find most enjoyable about writing. I love being surprised by my own stories.

This mentality, however, has definitely had a negative impact on my writing. I will often end up writing myself into a dead end. Unable to move forward and too stubborn to go backward, I abandoned the story altogether. I surround myself with unfinished drafts, unsure of how to continue. Recently, I have had to be more intentional about planning. The classes that I have taken throughout this program have forced me to examine my planning process (or lack thereof) and improve upon it. With the way classes are structured, I am often required to submit detailed outlines and substantial revisions of anything I work on. One of my biggest improvements has been how I go about creating characters. Characters have the potential to make or break a story. No matter how fantastic the plot is or how colorful the imagery is, if the

characters do not measure up, the story's potential is lost on me. On the flip side, if a plot is not in the best shape or the imagery is lacking, an amazing character can elevate an otherwise lackluster story. There are plenty of books and other media that I did not enjoy the plot of, but I stuck around until the end because I cared about the fates of the characters. For any panster out there wanting to learn how to plan out a story, I would recommend focusing on characters first and foremost.

The Reason

Whenever someone asks me why I write, I usually answer with “because I like it.” That is the simple answer. I have always written for myself, whether to feed my imagination, to escape reality for a little while, or just to pass the time. It has always been for myself.

As I have improved my writing and transitioned into writing to make a career out of it, I have been faced with the question: “what can my writing do for others?” I think my writing can do for others what is already done for me throughout my entire life. I want to give people something to feed their imaginations. I want to give people a place to escape from reality for a little while. I want to see the same joy I feel when writing reflected in those who read my words.

I write because I genuinely believe this is my gift. This is what I was meant to do.

Literary Context

The Stories

When deciding on which pieces I wanted to present in my thesis alongside my critical paper, I was first drawn to the idea of using one story to encapsulate the aspects of character creation and utilizing psychological theories throughout one character's development. However,

after conducting my research and reviewing stories that I have written in the past, I have decided to make use of a selection of my work in order to give a broader scope of how psychology can be used across multiple genres. The following titles are stories that feature characters who are integral pieces in their plots development.

Catalyst (previously titled *Through the Fire*) is a fantasy story that centers around a war between two people groups. The plot delves into the hatred each side holds toward each other as well as the dream for peace. At the heart of this war is a protagonist, who is trapped between either side.

Have You Seen It is a short suspense story that follows a young girl as she navigates spending a week at her dad's house. The relationship of the girl and her dad appears to be the main force driving the story forward, but something more sinister lurks in the background as the girl discovers that the house is alive with supernatural activity.

A Dream Come True is a short story about a bride and groom on the day of their wedding. Overcome with nerves, the bride must figure out if she really wants this wedding to happen and whether or not she is ready to be married.

She Used to Love Fireflies is a short story about a successful woman living in the city coming back to her hometown to visit her family. While there, she is bombarded with a family that she feels distant from and must come face to face with what has been driving a wedge between them for years.

The Glass Dagger is a fantasy story that is a twist on the classic fairytale, *Cinderella*. The conflict initiates when the prince becomes the target of a ruthless assassin on the night of the

royal ball. When the assassin fails, she is banished from her homeland until she can succeed in her mission.

In this selection of work, I have multiple genres and a number of unique characters. With each character, I have utilized several aspects of psychology during their creation that have assisted with making them feel and act realistically within their respective stories.

Writing as a Christian

Faith Reflected

Christians should seek to glorify the Lord in all that they do (1 Corinthians 10:31). My love for writing is something that God created me to have, and I am still discovering its purpose and how it aligns with His plan for my life. Though each of my stories are not outwardly telling any specific Christian story or message, I think my own beliefs and morals can be reflected through each of the plots. Take J. R. R. Tolkien, for example, who went on record saying he did not intentionally include any allegory within his works. However, characters like Aragorn and Gandalf can be aligned with Christ and the battle for Middle-Earth could be equated to a battle between Heaven and Hell. Tolkien may not have purposefully created this Christian meaning behind his work, but his beliefs definitely leaked over into his writing. Any Christian can look at *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* and pull biblical truths from the plot and the characters. I think the same could be said for my writing. I do not intentionally include allegory for my readers to pick out and derive meaning from. I want readers to pull their own meanings from a story that I write. For me, I can see where my faith is reflected in my writing, but someone may see their own faith reflected in a unique way.

Many of my writings are about staying true to oneself and one's beliefs. They are about fighting against hypocrisy, seeing good in people, and understanding and accepting differences. There are themes of forgiveness and love weaved throughout a character's development and interactions. Redemption also tends to play a huge role in how my characters move through a story, showing how they grow and change as the plot progresses. These themes are all displayed constantly throughout the Bible.

Utilizing psychology into my creative works opens up a myriad of opportunities to integrate very real emotions and actions into an otherwise unrealistic and fantastical plot. The way my characters behave and interact with others throughout a story are able to mirror how a real person with similar experiences may behave. My characters each go through their own tragedies and trauma that they must work through in order to come out on the other side stronger than before. Christians are taught that God is their refuge in the storm (Psalm 46:1-3). Similarly, psychology shows that things like faith and religion are powerful tools that can be utilized when someone is going through a rough time. Within these chosen stories, there are no explicit religious figures that my characters believe in, but rather their faith tends to come from their hopes and dreams for brighter tomorrows and better futures. This hope is a reflection of my own faith in God: through my own trials, I lean on the hope I have that God will see me through to the other side. I want readers to see that same faith reflected in my writing.

It is my desire for anyone who reads my work to see themselves reflected in any one of the characters that I create. Everyone deserves to have a representation of themselves within any piece of media. The more people who are represented within a story, the more that story will reach across the world. Relating to a story is important to keep readers engaged and coming back

for more. As a result, my readers are able to relate to me through the characters that I write. My faith is able to shine through my writing and reveal itself to anyone who reads it.

Critical Paper

The Psychology of Realistic Characters

Introduction

Coherent and Consistent

Establishing a main character is the first step toward writing a compelling book. The plot cannot propel forward without a protagonist to drive it. In fantasy, where magic tends to run wild and characters are inhuman, it can be difficult to not only create a character that is consistent with the world they are surrounded by, but also be coherent to the reader. Consistency in a story means that the “events of the story (including properties of characters) do not include any explicit or apparent internal contradictions” (Lebowitz 177). Even within fantasy, there are rules — usually by the author’s own creation — that must be followed. A character should stay aligned with what the world says they should be. In *Harry Potter*, Harry and his fellow classmates do not become all powerful wizards and witches overnight but rather must study and perfect their magic at a school (Rowling). J.K. Rowling remains consistent by developing and staying true to this rule within the world she has created. Consistency creates something for the reader to grasp as they traverse a new story, creating believability even in the most unrealistic stories.

Coherence in a story is associated directly with what the reader finds “logically explainable” (Lebowitz 177). No matter how unrealistic a setting or character is, a reader should be able to see how these things make sense within the story. A character should feel real to the reader no matter how unrealistic the circumstances might be. In *Narnia*, the Pevensie siblings access the world of Narnia through a magical wardrobe (Lewis). C.S. Lewis develops reasoning

within the context of the story that does not break a reader's suspension of disbelief and keeps the story coherent.

Consistency and coherence work hand in hand to maintain a realistic environment for readers to perceive and for characters to grow and develop within.

Character Realism

Writing a realistic character that readers find relatable is a difficult undertaking. It is easy for an author to get lost in world building and end up stuck with a flat or underdeveloped character. In Weiland's *Creating Character Arcs*, the process of character development can be broken down into three simple steps: "The protagonist starts one way. The protagonist learns some lessons throughout the story. The protagonist ends in a (probably) better place" (Weiland 15). Following these simple steps, the process of creating characters becomes easier. However, these steps do not solve the realism issue. Any character can follow this arc throughout a story, but still remain unrelatable to the reader and too flat to seem real. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn begins the story running from his destiny — that he is the King of Gondor. Throughout the story, he learns what it means to be a leader and in the end is able to face his destiny (Tolkien). His growth throughout the story is believable and aligns well with the plot, but that is not what makes him realistic and relatable to readers. Aragorn's realism comes from his internal struggles with what it means to be the heir of Gondor. In the movie adaptation when speaking about his ancestor, Isildur, Aragorn states "the same blood flows in my veins. The same weakness" (Jackson and Mortensen). This fear of failing like his ancestors is what elevates Aragorn's character from a well written character who goes through an arc in the story to a realistic character that the reader can relate to. Incorporating fears and anxieties into a character's development gives writers the ability to create something real for a reader to grasp.

Throughout this critical paper, I will be outlining key details that are needed to make a character realistic to the reader. Well-rounded characters need to be three-dimensional. These dimensions, as defined by Lagos Ergi in *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, are physiological, sociological, and psychological (Egri). Using these three dimensions as a foundation, I will identify areas in personality, social, and developmental psychology that can be implemented in the process of creating realistic characters.

Personality Psychology

Overview

When drafting up new characters, the author must understand their personalities and how they influence plot. The personality of an individual can be defined as one's "thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" (Friedman 14). To understand a character's personality, the author must first figure out how the character should be influenced and affected by the plot of the story. In turn, personality can go on to affect how a character progresses through a storyline. Personality psychology — "the scientific study of the psychological forces that make people uniquely themselves" — can be utilized in discovering a deeper level of a character's own behaviors (Friedman 14). This method can elevate an otherwise flat character to a more rounded and realistic character.

Personality Tests

Creating a character from scratch is a complex task. An author must first understand human nature and the reasoning behind a person's actions. Characters should feel as alive as any physical being, with "great passions and strong emotions" (Frey 5-6). Using tools such as

personality tests can offer insight into what sort of character is perfect for the world and plot that an author is building. In a 2011 study done regarding the personality of characters from Victorian novels, the Big Five personality traits of these characters similarly reflected the traits found in real people (Johnson et al.). The Big Five test (also referred to as CANOE or OCEAN) consists of five factors: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (*see Table 1*). These factors are each rated on a broad spectrum of high scores to low scores on which an individual can fall anywhere on (Ackerman). The statements put forth by the Big Five personality test can be used by authors to gain a better understanding of their characters. Each statement is simple and can offer an overview of one's personality. The results can function as a baseline for which an author can begin to develop and grow a character's personality.

Table 1. The Big Five Factors and Results

Factors	High Score	Low Score
Openness (vs. Closedness)	Tries new things, imaginative, unconventional	Likes routine, traditional, unimaginative
Conscientiousness (vs. Lack of Direction)	Competent, meticulous, thoughtful	Careless, impulsive, procrastinator
Extraversion (vs. Introversion)	Energized by social interactions, center of attention, outgoing	Worn out by social interactions, prefers being alone, reserved
Agreeableness (vs. Antagonism)	Straightforward, altruistic, modest	Demanding, callous, show-off
Neuroticism (vs. Emotional Stability)	Anxious, mood swings, self-conscious	Confident, calm, self-satisfied

Source: Lim, Annabelle G.Y. "Big 5 Personality Traits: The 5-Factor Model of Personality." *Simply Psychology*, 20 Dec. 2023, www.simplypsychology.org/big-five-personality.html#.

Another test that authors can utilize when creating characters is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) which is based on Carl Jung's theories and divides up people's behavior into sixteen personality types (Pelican 32). Similar to the Big Five, there are dimensions that individuals are perceived with. MBTI uses four dimensions: extraversion/introversion, sensing/intuition, thinking/feeling, and judging/perceiving (Simkus). These factors are not rated

on a flexible scale like the Big Five, but rather individuals fall into one of the two options for each dimension. This personality test is helpful in identifying key factors in one's personality. Each of the sixteen personality types have corresponding names that summarize each type (*see Table 2*). While MBTI leans into stereotypes and is not nearly as specific as the Big Five, these categories can help authors narrow down the type of person they want their character to be. The *16 Personalities* website is particularly useful because it offers examples of real-life people as well as fictional characters that fit into each personality type.

Table 2. The Myers-Briggs Personality Types

Type	Name	Qualities	Characters
ISTJ	Logistician	Straightforward, responsible, structured	Hermione Granger (<i>Harry Potter</i>), Geralt of Rivia (<i>The Witcher</i>), Thorin Oakenshield (<i>The Hobbit</i>)
ISFJ	Defender	Hardworking, attentive, reserved	John Watson (<i>Sherlock Holmes</i>), Will Turner (<i>Pirates of the Caribbean</i>), Pam Beesley (<i>The Office</i>)
INFJ	Advocate	Perfectionist, insightful, moral	James Wilson (<i>House M.D.</i>), Galadriel (<i>The Lord of the Rings</i>), Aramis (<i>The Three Musketeers</i>)
INTJ	Architect	Combative, determined, curious	Katniss Everdeen (<i>The Hunger Games</i>), Walter White (<i>Breaking Bad</i>), Jay Gatsby (<i>The Great Gatsby</i>)
ISTP	Virtuoso	Resourceful, authentic, insensitive	Jack Bauer (<i>24</i>), Hawkeye (<i>Avengers</i>), Arya Stark (<i>Game of Thrones</i>)
ISFP	Adventurer	Charming, exploratory, unpredictable	Edith Crawley (<i>Downton Abbey</i>), Kate Austen (<i>Lost</i>), Éowyn (<i>The Lord of the Rings</i>)
INFP	Mediator	Creative, self-critical, thoughtful	Anne Shirley (<i>Anne of Green Gables</i>), Fox Mulder (<i>X-Files</i>), Frodo Baggins (<i>The Lord of the Rings</i>)
INTP	Logician	Analytical, open-minded, overthinker	Neo (<i>The Matrix</i>), Abed Nadir (<i>Community</i>), Bruce Banner (<i>Avengers</i>)
ESTP	Entrepreneur	Impulsive, sociable, observant	D'Artagnan (<i>The Three Musketeers</i>), Seth Grayson (<i>House of Cards</i>), Jaime Lannister (<i>Game of Thrones</i>)
ESFP	Entertainer	Witty, bold, unfocused	Peregrin Took (<i>The Lord of the Rings</i>), Jaskier (<i>The Witcher</i>), Jake Dawson (<i>Titanic</i>)
ENFP	Campaigner	Warmhearted, disorganized, easygoing	Willy Wonka (<i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i>), Peeta Mellark (<i>The Hunger Games</i>), Phil Dunphy (<i>Modern Family</i>)
ENTP	Debater	Argumentative, enthusiastic, original	Jack Sparrow (<i>Pirates of the Caribbean</i>), The Joker

			(<i>Batman</i>), Emmett Brown (<i>Back to the Future</i>)
ESTJ	Executive	Organized, judgmental, honest	Violet Crawley (<i>Downton Abbey</i>), Boromir (<i>The Lord of the Rings</i>), Dwight Schrute (<i>The Office</i>)
ESFJ	Consul	Loyal, sensitive, social	Dean Winchester (<i>Supernatural</i>), Monica (<i>Friends</i>), Jack Shephard (<i>Lost</i>)
ENFJ	Protagonist	Resolute, intense, sincere	Elizabeth Bennet (<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>), Morpheus (<i>The Matrix</i>), Laurel Lance (<i>Arrow</i>)
ENTJ	Commander	Confident, charismatic, stubborn	Miranda Priestly (<i>The Devil Wears Prada</i>), Doctor Strange (<i>Doctor Strange</i>), River Tam (<i>Firefly</i>)

Source: "Personality Types." *16Personalities*, www.16personalities.com/personality-types. Accessed 7 Feb. 2024.

Personality In Storytelling

Identifying a character's personality is not just for an author's benefit while planning out a story. A character's personality should be weaved naturally throughout the plot in order to give the reader something to relate to. In any piece of media, "characters must...be interesting enough to hold [the audience's] attention for the duration of the story" (Maslej et al. 487). Giving a character a realistic personality modeled after real world personality tests is one way to engage readers in the life and fate of that specific character. Settling onto specific personality traits and reflecting those traits into the story allows for the reader to understand the character on a deeper level. Relating to a character is made easier if the character has a familiar personality to readers, whether it is modeled after their own or someone they know. Personality creates believability within a character's actions and behaviors. Furthermore, personality feeds into how a character socializes with other characters throughout the story.

Social Psychology

Overview

The next building block in writing realistic characters is understanding how characters interact with the world around them. An author cannot simply compile a list of personality traits that correspond with each character and then never utilize them within the story. A reader can be told that a character is charismatic or intense or sensitive, but in order to make the character more real, these traits should be shown through social interactions. Social psychology can be defined as “the study of the way in which people’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the real or imagined presence of other people” (Aronson et al. 3). Personality can directly affect one’s socialization and vice versa.

Origins of a Character

In order to understand characters fully, authors need “to trace the source of [their] traits to their roots” (Frey 5). Things like social class, education, political alignment, and discipline are all important points to be thinking of when initially forming a character. A rich and well-educated politician is going to interact differently with society than a high school dropout working in food service. Backgrounds establish opinions and beliefs that act as a foundation for characters to stack their motivations on to. Character motivations in turn generate the conflicts that propel a plot forward. Conflict in a story can be defined as “the collision of characters’ desires with resistance.” Through this conflict, the reader is able to see “who the characters are by the way they respond to such resistance” (Frey 30). Characters discovering who they are through conflict results in the development of themselves and the discovery of their arcs within the story.

Developmental Psychology

Overview

Much like real people, characters must go through life stages within their story. The age of a character often reflects the audience for the book. Children like to read books about children, adolescents about adolescents, adults about adults. However, characters' ages are also an important detail for their development throughout the plot. Erik Erikson developed eight life stages that people will experience and overcome as they grow and mature. These eight stages are trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and integrity vs. despair (Erikson). Each stage involves a conflict that an individual must face before moving onto the next stage. These stages can be overcome or failed depending on the life experiences of each person (Cherry). For the purposes of this research, the first three stages will be omitted since they cover infancy to about five years old, and these are not ages typically given to prominent characters in a story. The remaining life stages can be utilized in character creation as the author develops a character arc.

Childhood

Industry vs. inferiority (typically ranging from ages 6 to 12) deals with children beginning to experience the world outside of their family for the first time. Overcoming this stage means “they are able to develop a meaningful social role to give back to society” (Issawi and Dauphin 1). A child’s main goal is “to become competent” as an individual (Pelican 84). For authors wanting to tell a story in which characters begin to discover a world outside of their family, a believable life stage for those characters to be in would be industry vs. inferiority.

Table 3 lists some child characters who have experienced this stage throughout their character arcs.

Table 3. Character arcs of children

Title	Character	Conflict and Outcome
<i>Once Upon A Time</i> - seasons 1 - 4 (2011 - 2015)	Henry Mills	Must understand what makes him different from everyone he has grown up around. Discovers his purpose through his true heart and belief.
<i>Wonder</i> (2012)	August Pullman	Must face the world as someone who is different from everyone else. Finds acceptance in new friends and helps others find compassion.
<i>Star Wars: The Phantom Menace</i> (1999)	Anakin Skywalker	Must escape the life that he has always known. Leaves behind his only family to learn about his gifts and power.

Adolescence

The next stage is identity vs. confusion (typically ranging from ages 13 to 19) and can be defined by discovering one's identity (Pelican 84). This stage marks someone's potential into adulthood and the confusion that can accompany discovering that potential. Adolescents can experience a feeling of being lost or make impulsive decisions as they wrestle with the nagging question of what they are going to do with their life (Kitchens and Abell 1255-1256). Childhood was about discovering one's place in the world while adolescence is all about discovering the individual. This coming-of-age story is well known in media. Characters in this stage desire to feel comfortable with who they are. Being unable to understand themselves can lead to a downward spiral where they seek to find meaning in other things other than in themselves. Table 4 lists characters who exist in this stage of life within their own stories.

Table 4. Character arcs of adolescents

Title	Character	Conflict and Outcome
<i>Turning Red</i> (2022)	Ming Lee	Struggles with the expectations of her mother and coming to terms with who she wants to be. Learns that she can exist separately from her mother and live freely as herself.

<i>The Maze Runner</i> (2009)	Thomas	Struggles with not knowing who he is or what his purpose is. Learns his potential and finds a place amongst his friends as their leader.
<i>True Beauty</i> (2020)	Lim Joo-Kung	Struggles with her self-image and confidence. Learns to see her inner beauty and how she can share her new found confidence with others.

Early Adulthood

Following the adolescence stage comes intimacy vs. isolation (typically ranging from ages 20 to 39) and focuses on an individual's capacity to build meaningful relationships (Erikson 55). Failure in this stage results in not being able to develop strong relationships and having to be alone without the support that relationships bring (Elkind 16). Individuals in this stage are out of the shadow of their parents, who would have had a strong influence over the previous stages of life. This stage of life is seen commonly in romantic comedies and career-driven films. These characters are “driven by the desire for power and freedom and are trying to make gains in their life” and “may also be dealing with serious responsibility for the first time” (Pelican 85). Table 5 lists some examples of characters experiencing this life stage.

Table 5. Character arcs of early adults

Title	Character	Conflict and Outcome
<i>Legally Blonde</i> (2001)	Elle Woods	Desires to prove herself as a smart and successful woman in order to impress her ex-boyfriend. Develops better self-esteem and learns how to build real meaningful relationships and be successful.
<i>Merlin</i> (2008 - 2012)	Arthur Pendragon	Desires to make his father proud. Learns the importance of existing outside of his father's shadow and understands the importance of staying true to himself and his friends.
<i>The Duke and I</i> (2000)	Simon Bassett	Desires to remain alone for the rest of his life. Learns the importance of love through his wife and discovers his desire for a family.

Midlife

Generativity vs. stagnation (typically ranging from ages 40 to 64) is the next stage and is usually “a time of turmoil and transition” (Pelican 85). Individuals in this stage experience a lot

of change as they move into more responsibility. These adults usually begin having children of their own, are deep within their career, and are looking for ways to make their lives interesting and different (Slater 57). Feelings of stagnation or a fear of sameness often results in the well-known midlife crisis. Characters in this stage seek to make “more meaningful connections” and desire to create “some kind of legacy that they will leave behind” (Pelican 86). Table 6 contains some characters who are in the midst of this stage.

Table 6. Character arcs of middle adults

Title	Character	Conflict and Outcome
<i>Hook</i> (1991)	Peter Banning	Struggles to maintain control over his family life and work life. Remembers the importance of childlike joy and adventure.
<i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i> (1960)	Atticus Finch	Must maintain his morals and beliefs while surrounded by hate and judgment. Remains true to himself and his morals, setting an example for his children.
<i>Breaking Bad</i>	Walter White	Wants to make sure his family is supported once he is gone. Falls into a moral decline as he gets caught up in criminal activity and lies.

Later Life

The final stage is known as integrity vs. despair (typically ranging from ages 65 to death) and deals with the acceptance of the direction one’s life has taken (Dezutter et al. 147). Individuals in this stage are not focused on change, but rather on wanting consistency in their final years. Despair happens when individuals are unhappy with how their life turned out and may seek to mend relationships, resolve conflicts, and achieve unfulfilled goals before it is too late (Dezutter et al. 147). Character arcs that take place in this stage are often focused on atoning for past failures, deciding to make up for wrong choices made in life, and finding comfort in their success. Table 7 contains characters who are in this last stage of life.

Table 7. Character arcs of late adults

Title	Character	Conflict and Outcome
<i>A Christmas Carol</i> (1843)	Ebenezer Scrooge	Has lived a life of greed and hatred. Through seeing the path his life took and the consequences of his actions, he changes his ways and embraces love and charity.
<i>Overcomer</i> (2019)	Thomas Hill	Has lived a life of selfishness and loneliness. Through losing his eyesight and getting sick, he seeks to fix his mistakes and be a father to his daughter before he passes.
<i>Avatar: The Last Airbender</i>	General Iroh	Has lived a life full of war and bloodshed. Through the death of his own son, he seeks to atone for his past mistakes and pass his wisdom on to his nephew.

Utilizing Life Stages

Deciding on what age a character should be within a story is as important as developing the character's arc. A coming-of-age type story does not work with someone who is middle aged because it is not realistic to the reader. While characters should be complex and be somewhat unpredictable in order to engage readers, if they "act too unpredictably they run the risk of becoming incoherent or unbelievable" (Maslej et al. 488). Characters should act their age and the effect the plot has on them should reflect whatever life stage they are in.

Life stages should also be considered when deciding on the desired audience of a story. Adolescents can relate to a coming-of-age story because they are in the same stage of life as the characters they are watching or reading about. Children do not want to read or watch a story of a man experiencing a midlife crisis because they simply do not understand the conflicts that come with that life stage yet. People want to read stories that they can see themselves in and that includes seeing characters their own age. While each of these life stages can be used to decide when a character's development should happen, an author also needs to decide why it happens.

Trauma

Character development is often jump-started using trauma, which is defined by the American Psychological Association as “an emotional response to a terrible event.” Individuals can be affected by trauma in different ways and depends on the “characteristics of the individual, the type and characteristics of the event(s), developmental processes, the meaning of the trauma, and sociocultural factors” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration). Determining whether characters overcome their trauma in a healthy or unhealthy way is the responsibility of the author.

Low points can shape how a character turns out by the end of the story. These events can turn into “useful learning experiences” (Pelican 88). Depending on their own personality and background, as well as relationships with others, these low points can affect characters in different ways. Characters with a supportive family or a strong group of friends are able to lean on them for support, much like real people. Characters with this type of help can become resilient to their trauma and find healthy coping mechanisms. Real people often experience resilience through strengthening their bonds with their family, finding a new sense of purpose, increasing their dedication to their own goals and desires, and participating in giving and other acts of service (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration). Authors can use these signs of resilience in how their character responds to their trauma.

In addition to making a character resilient to trauma, an author can also decide to include the negative effects of trauma to ultimately create a deeper and more realistic character. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be defined as a “disorder that results from being exposed to real or threatened” trauma (Mann). The DSM-5 uses the following symptoms to diagnose PTSD in an individual: experience of intrusion symptoms (such as distressing

memories, dissociative reactions, recurring nightmares of the traumatic event, etc.), avoiding things related to the traumatic event, negative changes to one's emotions and feelings, and negative changes to one's actions and reactions (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US)). Some other disorders that are commonly associated with PTSD are "mood disorders, anxiety and panic disorders, neurological disorders... [and] substance abuse disorders" (Mann). All of these disorders can be a result of experiencing trauma. Authors wanting to show the negative effects of trauma through their characters should research them in order to ascertain which disorder makes the most sense alongside a character's experiences.

Blending the negative effects of trauma with positive character growth has the capability to create resilient and inspiring characters that readers can understand and relate to. In *The Hunger Games* series, Katniss Everdeen is forced to compete to the death twice in a battle royale type game known as the Hunger Games, for the entertainment of the Capitol. Her show of defiance toward those in power during these games inspires a rebellion with her as the face. Katniss is then tasked with being a leading force to the rebellion in order to end the Capitol's reign over the country of Panem (Collins). Katniss is the subject of multiple traumatic experiences in this series that ultimately cause her to experience many of the symptoms of PTSD and other disorders induced by her trauma. She suffers from nightmares and dissociation as she tries to cope with her experiences and becomes more anxious as she tries to navigate her way through life. However, she also gains resilience to the trauma through friends and allies. Her trauma motivates her, and the rebellion gives her a sense of purpose. In the end, she is able to overcome her trauma and is able to live a life that she had never imagined she could have before. Suzanne Collins successfully depicted the positive and negative effects of trauma through Katniss, using trauma to push Katniss' development forward to a complete arc.

Trauma has the power to draw a conflict out past the initial event. Characters are forever changed by whatever conflict they experienced, and incorporating trauma is a realistic way to show this change to readers as the characters move forward. Trauma also allows the author to call back to the conflict in a natural way, reminding the readers what the character went through without having to repeat verbatim what it was.

Conclusion

The creation of realistic characters in fiction requires authors to observe the actions of real people and discern reasons for those actions. By utilizing the personality, social, and developmental aspects of psychology, that task is made all the easier. Characters should be treated as complex beings with likes, dislikes, desires, needs, beliefs, morals, etc. Their personality should breathe authenticity into their actions as they move through and interact with a story's plot and conflicts. The social aspects of a character should make sense with relation to this personality. Building up a background for a character can reveal how they navigate the world around them, including the relationships and expectations of others. The life stages and development through them can influence a character's arc and purpose within a story. Finally, utilizing trauma can assist an author in how a character manages the effects of traumatic experiences and they can use those effects to develop a realistic character arc. Psychology has the capability to breathe life into otherwise flat characters. Understanding the essence of human behavior allows authors to grab the attention of readers and captivate them with characters with whom they can resonate.

Creative Manuscript

Catalyst

Since life was first breathed into these lands, the Elementals have existed. Feeding off the energy of the world around them, they were able to harness elements into a power they could control. Those born without this power were deemed the Ordinary. Hatred sprouted from their differences and ever since, a war has threatened to tear these lands apart.

A war between chaos and order. And only a great catalyst can bring about its end.

The week of Adelie's crowning began soaked in blood. A mere five days before her twenty-first birthday — and the day Queen Clarita would name her the heiress of Estrea — Adelie stood on a balcony overlooking the courtyard. Knights dueled below, their clashing blades and the cheers of onlookers drawing Adelie's attention to her pounding headache. It throbbed just behind her eyes, blurring her vision slightly each time she moved. She brought her hands up to her face, shielding the light from her eyes. The cool silk of her gloves on her forehead brought her some sense of calm.

Adelie tuned out the noise of metal against metal and focused instead on the joy on the people's faces. Wooden stands had been set up last night just for the commoners that were now filing into the courtyard. Everyone was dressed in their finest clothes — brightly dyed fabrics that had been hidden away in dark wardrobes and cupboards to preserve their colors, waiting with anticipation for such an event as this one. Women wore jewels and piled their hair on their heads to mimic the Queen's popular coiffure. Many men wore polished armor, trying to stand a little taller as they found a place to sit. Despite dueling, the knights were friendly with each other, laughing as they competed. Then Adelie laid eyes on the children. They sprinted through

the stands, weaving their way through the crowd. All attempts by their parents to scold them fell on deaf ears, their excitement contagious to everyone in the vicinity.

“Why have they let children come watch?” Adelle murmured. She squeezed her eyes shut as the throbbing in her eyes intensified for a moment before ebbing back to a dull ache. Behind her, the door opened.

“Good morning, my dear,” a smooth voice sang. Adelle opened her eyes and turned to see an elderly woman in the doorway. She was dressed in the finest white satin, stitched with gold that shimmered in the sunlight. An array of pearls wrapped around her neck and a golden crown nestled amongst intricate braids of graying black hair that outshined the peasant women's attempts.

“Good morning, grandmother.” Adelle curtsied slightly to the Queen. Clarita joined her at the edge of the balcony, surveying the scene below. A smile crept onto her face as she watched the knights, her expert eyes taking notice of their skill.

“Who’s winning?” She whispered. Adelle had hardly been paying attention enough to come up with any sort of knowledgeable answer, but a quick glance down was enough to see an obvious champion.

“Merrick,” she stated as she set her sights on the young knight. His blond hair was tied back neatly, though a few strands had fallen loose from dueling with his comrades. Despite his young age, his presence commanded authority, and each knight he faced stood no chance against his blade.

“As expected,” Clarita nodded with satisfaction. “I would be worried if the Captain lost against his own knights.” As though he could feel Adelle’s gaze, Merrick looked up to the balcony. A smile grew on his lips, and he turned to face her fully, crossing an arm over his chest

before bowing his head. Adelle felt her face flush and she waved a gloved hand. Their silent exchange slowly caught the attention of everyone else below and one by one, all eyes were on the Queen and the Princess.

Despite the week's first ceremony not being scheduled to start for another hour or so, a hush fell over the courtyard as people found their seats. Queen Clarita straightened her shoulders and began to speak.

"Welcome my lords and ladies to this auspicious occasion!" Her voice echoed against the stone walls of the surrounding castle. Adelle, aware of the hundreds of people now looking at her, kept a smile on her face despite her heart pounding against her chest. "In just five days' time, my granddaughter turns twenty-one. On that day, she will inherit her right to rule and be known across this land as the Crown Princess of Estrea." She paused, allowing for the crowd to clap and cheer before silence fell again. "The events of this week are to honor Adelle and to respect our ancient traditions that will ensure she has a long and prosperous rule when it is her time to take the throne." Clarita turned toward Adelle now, smiling gently. Her hand came to rest on Adelle's, which gripped the railing of the balcony.

"Adelle, I have raised you up as my heir ever since your mother's passing. I see her now, reflected in you. Though it should have been her standing with you today, I can feel her smiling down from the stars above as I speak this blessing to you. Long has our family ruled Estrea and long will we rule through our descendants. It is my hope that you will fill the pages of history with your rule, that songs will be sung of your triumphs, and should our kingdom fade into myth, your name will be left as a testament of who we were. May the stars guide you today and forever."

Adelie felt her smile waver — whether from the fact that she had never seen such a public show of affection from the hardened Queen or because she knew she was destined to fail to live up to such expectations, she wasn't quite sure. Feeling tears welling up in her eyes, Adelie quickly brushed a gloved fingertip across her lower lashes and took a breath.

“Thank you, your majesty.” She curtsied before facing the crowd below. “And thank you all for your constant love and support as I have prepared myself to one day be your Queen. I hope to make each and every one of you proud.” Her words were met with thunderous applause, but they felt empty on her lips. A hollow promise to a people who only loved her at a surface level. Not one soul in this courtyard knew her completely. Which was perhaps why no one paid any mind to her wavering tone or shaking hands. As the courtyard fell silent once again, Clarita spoke.

“We shall begin today with our oldest and most treasured tradition — an execution of Elementals.” At the Queen's words, iron gates on the far end of the courtyard swung open. Ten Estrean knights emerged, each dragging a prisoner bound in chains. Adelie let her smile fall completely as she laid eyes on them.

Nine of them looked relatively normal, albeit filthy from spending who knows how many nights in lonely cells. Their clothes were worn rags, hanging loosely on their thin frames. Their gaunt faces and hollow eyes stared straight ahead. To any outsider, there was nothing particularly extraordinary about them. One might question why they were chosen for such an anticipated ceremony. But Adelie knew of the power they housed inside. She knew how hard they tried to suppress it and hide it from the outside world. Because she felt that same power deep within her, blazing like a fire within her chest.

The tenth and final prisoner, however, had given himself to the elements. A boy, no older than Adelle herself. Most of his body was soft and human, save for his left hand. Deep grooves etched deep into his skin, which was hardened like wood, and where hair should have been instead grew bright specks of green moss. Like he was becoming the very ground he walked on. Unlike the others, he did not bow his head nor avert his gaze in shame. No. He started up at Adelle, meeting her eyes in a show of defiance.

The chains that bound all nine were wound tightly around their necks, wrists, and ankles. The iron shimmered an array of colors in the sunlight, betraying its purpose. It was the only thing capable of stopping these unique criminals — these *monsters* who could bend nature herself to their will. The smallest touch of the iron on skin had the ability of halting the otherworldly powers that Elementals clung to so desperately. Adelle could see blisters forming on their skin wherever the chains made contact, searing scars into their flesh. She tugged her gloves further up her forearms, remembering the feeling when she had first touched that same iron. How she had worn gloves every day since to avoid ever experiencing that pain again.

There were many names for the iron that Adelle had heard before. Stardust, after the belief that it was carried down from the sky as a gift from ancestors' past. Demir, after the ancient king who first discovered the ore burning deep within the earth. But Adelle knew it by another name — one spoken in hushed tones by Elementals living every day in fear — they knew it simply as *bane*.

“Come, my dear. Let us sit.” Adelle turned to see her grandmother offering her a hand. She took it and they departed from the edge of the balcony. Three gold brushed chairs with velvet cushions had been set up. Adelle took the middle one, grateful to get off her feet, knowing

the next minutes would only make her legs weak and her stomach turn. Clarita took the seat to her right, the third seat remaining empty.

“Is my father not joining us?” Adelie asked.

“He’s not feeling well this morning.” The Queen’s tone was dismissive as she unfurled her paper fan and began fanning her face. Adelie pursed her lips. Ever since her mother’s death, her father’s spirit had withered. But Adelie had held out hope that on this day, when she needed his comfort the most, his mind would clear, and he would be by her side to help her through it. But instead, she had an empty chair that only served as a reminder of how alone she truly was.

Down in the courtyard, the knights prepared the Elementals for their final moments. Merrick joined the group, standing in the front, looking up to the Queen and Princess.

“In honor of her highness, we Estrean knights offer up our blades.” He drew a dagger from his belt. It glistened in the sunlight, shining with the same iridescent colors as the chains. The knights behind him drew theirs as well. “May they serve the Crown today, tomorrow, and forevermore.” Merrick turned around to face the prisoners. He nodded his head, and the first knight came forward, dragging a blonde woman along.

“To your highness, Princess Adelie, I make this sacrifice.” He pressed his blade against the woman’s neck. The scream she let out as the metal burned against her skin rang in Adelie’s ears and she fought the urge to cover them. “To a long and prosperous rule.” Her eyes snapped shut before she could see the blood. The woman’s screams gave way to silence.

“To your highness, Princess Adelie, I make this sacrifice.” Another knight spoke and Adelie dared to open one eye. Blood pooled onto the stone, staining the boots of the second knight who had already stepped forward, blade pressed against the neck of an older man. Unlike

the woman, he sat quiet and solemn in the face of death. “To a happy and peaceful reign.” His death was silent, his body smacking into the ground as the knight released him.

The knight bowed and stepped back to let another take his place. One after another, they dragged forth their prisoners — their sacrifices — reciting that this was all in Adelle’s name. The stench of blood hung in the air and tears burned in Adelle’s eyes.

Nine sacrifices went by, nine toasts to the future of Estrea. Nine nameless Elementals who had been unfortunate enough to not only be caught, but to be killed publicly, surrounded only by those who hated them most. Doomed to be forgotten to time. Adelle wondered if it would have been better to know their names, their history, their crimes. Perhaps that would make watching them die one after another a little easier — knowing that whatever they did called for such brutality. But in her heart, she knew — they were no different than herself, born into a fate they didn’t deserve.

One last Elemental still stood, surrounded by his now dead allies. The boy who was turning into nature itself. The knight holding his chains did not step forward. Instead, Merrick came forward again and took the chains for himself. He dragged the boy through the blood drenched stone. The boy's eyes were red as he stared at the bodies around him. He looked up as Merrick pulled him to a stop, his gaze locking onto Adelle. His jaw clenched.

“To her highness, Princess Adelle, I make this final sacrifice,” Merrick called out. The boy let out a loud, guttural scream, throwing his head back into Merrick’s chest. The Captain recoiled at the sudden force, his grip loosening just enough for the boy to wriggle free. His chains rattled together as he stepped forward. Clarita stood instinctively and guarded Adelle with her arm.

“Do something!” the boy cried; his eyes still fixed on Adelle. “You can stop this! You have the power to end this!” Merrick regained his footing and grabbed hold of the boy, dragging him back into place with his blade pressed against his throat.

“To a wise and fearless Queen,” Merrick said, struggling to hold the boy still. Adelle looked away and the boy shrieked.

“Look at me! My name is Tiron! Look at us! Our blood is on your hands!” Then there was silence. Blood dripped from Merrick’s blade as the boy fell forward.

Tiron. Adelle stood up, pushing away her grandmother’s hand as she peered down at the scene. He stared up at Adelle, with the same defiant gaze as before, but as lifeless as the other Elementals he laid amongst. Their screams echoed in Adelle’s mind, but it was his name, his eyes, which were doomed to haunt her forever.

The bell tower rang, signifying midday, and Adelle’s head pounded.

As blood was scrubbed from the cobblestone and the crowd dispersed back to their homes, Adelle wandered the halls of the castle, trying to calm her racing heart and still her shaking hands. Servants shuffled to stops as she passed, dipping into deep bows. She hardly acknowledged them, a stark contrast to the usual kindness she showed them.

She could not see the walls or floor before her as she walked. Only Tiron’s eyes, boring into her, filled with fury and pain. Guilt wound its way into every corner of her body, coiling around her heart and slithering into her mind.

I could have stopped this, she thought to herself. She looked down at her hands, her gloves the same scarlet color as the blood on the stones outside. *I have this power for a reason.* Since the moment she tapped into that blazing fire within her chest, Adelle had told herself that

she would be the change in this cursed war. That once she was crowned, once she had a say in court, things would be different. But now here she was, just as frightened as the day she realized she was the very enemy her people fought so hard to eradicate.

Hurried footsteps echoed on the stone floor behind her, coming right up next to her before slowing down to match her pace. Adelle didn't need to look up from the bloodstained boots to know it was the Captain.

"You didn't wait for me," Merrick said, catching his breath. Adelle glanced up to see his cheeks were flushed red and he gave her a boyish smile that for a moment made her forget about the blood-soaked morning.

"Did you run here?" she asked.

"You were supposed to wait," he pointed out. Adelle tore her gaze away.

"I didn't know you were escorting me," she replied simply. "I figured you'd be too preoccupied with cleaning the courtyard."

"I left the mess for some of the new recruits and put Felix in charge — you know he likes the power." Merrick chuckled slightly. "Besides, you're my first priority." He bent to press a kiss into Adelle's cheek and her face flushed red.

"Merrick," she scolded. He rolled his eyes.

"We're to be married, I think it's time we made shows of public affection."

"An engagement that has yet to be announced," Adelle whispered, shooting him a glare as a few servants looked in their direction.

"As if the entire land doesn't already know, my love." Merrick nodded to the servants as they passed, a wide smile on his face. "Now let me escort you."

“As much as I appreciate the sentiment, I am only going to my chambers.” Merrick held his right arm out, his sword arm. Blood stained his sleeve scarlet and somehow, he still smiled.

“I won’t take no for an answer.”

“In five days, you’ll have to take orders from me.”

“I know,” Merrick whined. “So let me relish in these last few precious days of freedom.”

The screams of Elementals and Tirion’s defiant eyes still haunted Adelie’s mind, the Captain’s disinterest in it all putting her on edge more than she already was — yet she couldn’t stop the laugh from bubbling in her throat at his childishness. Merrick had changed so much in the last years, when he was first selected to replace his father as Captain of the Royal Guard, but it was moments like this where she was reminded of the boy she had fallen in love with. A boy who was now hidden behind a rough exterior. She took his outstretched arm and let him lead her through the castle.

“I won’t ask for anything too outrageous,” she reassured him. *Except to stop this war.*

“I’ll hold you to that promise,” he said. “Though for you, I’d do anything.” Their conversation went silent, and Adelie was glad for it. In the silence she could pretend they were just two lovesick children without a care in the world. Back to when she believed herself to be as Ordinary as him.

They reached the door to her chambers, and Adelie left Merrick’s side without a word, eager to finally be alone with her thoughts. Her hand wrapped around the door handle.

“Is everything okay, Addie?” Merrick asked. She quickly plastered a smile on her face and looked at him.

“Of course. I’m just a bit tired from all the excitement.”

“I know you better than anyone else. Something’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Adelie pressed, her grip tightening on the handle.

“Adelie—”

“I’m fine, Merrick.” She opened the door and stepped inside. “I’ll see you tonight for dinner.”

“Until then.” Merrick bowed slightly, a flicker of worry still present in his eyes. Adelie shut the door on him and the world.

Leaning against the door, she listened as his footsteps retreated down the corridor. Only then did she let the sob in the back of her throat escape. She clasped a hand over her mouth in an effort to quiet it, but the sound still echoed through her empty room. Her knees gave out and she sunk to the floor, hot tears running down her face. She cried for the Elementals and their families. But she also selfishly cried for her own life. For the lie she was living.

The day she discovered she was an Elemental was the day she forfeited ever making it to her next birthday, let alone to the next sixteen. Even back then as a child without any care in the world, she had been taught to hate the Elementals and all they stood for. And inadvertently, she had learned to hate herself. She was never meant to make it to today. She was never meant to be crowned as the sole heir to the Ordinary throne. She should be dead, a martyr for her own flesh and blood to mock.

The sun was still high in the sky when Adelie finally lifted her head. She stood on shaky legs and stumbled to her vanity. Glancing at herself in the mirror, she cringed. Tear stains ran down her red cheeks and her eyes were puffy. She picked up the pitcher that sat there, pouring water into the basin next to it, before removing her gloves and washing her face. Patting her face dry with a soft towel, she opened her eyes and practiced a smile.

“Good enough,” she said with a nod. Then she got to work getting out of her dress.

The lavish ball gown had been difficult enough to get into with a second pair of hands, but nearly impossible to get out of with only one. She blindly undid the ties in the back, tangling her fingers with the silk string. Resisting the urge to call for help, knowing she wasn't in any state to talk to anyone, Adelle pulled herself free. The corset loosened and she could breathe easily again. Letting the bodice and skirt fall to the floor, she pulled a dressing gown over her chemise. Adelle crawled on top of her freshly made bed and lay with her eyes closed — counting the minutes until she had to be someone she wasn't.

Dinner thankfully came and went without incident. It had been a small affair with only Adelle herself, the Queen, Merrick, and a few select members of court. Adelle was grateful for the simplicity, knowing the following days would be filled with much more extravagant events.

As the castle settled down for the night, Adelle walked to her father's chambers. The corridors were empty, and her heels echoed against the stone floor. When she reached his door, she knocked twice before opening it.

"Papa?" she called out. The room was dark, and there was a chill in the air. A shiver ran through her body, and she stepped fully inside. She spotted his silhouette sitting in a chair right by the open window. Quickly, she approached him, shutting the window tightly. Then she grabbed a blanket from his bed and wrapped it around his shoulders. He lifted his head and laid his sad eyes onto his daughter.

"Genavie?" he murmured. Adelle knelt down and clasped his cold hands in her own.

"It's Adelle, Papa. It's your daughter." She saw the smallest twinkle in his eyes as he recognized her.

“Adelie...” he repeated with a small smile. “Where... where is Genavie?” He slowly looked around the room.

“Mama can’t be here right now. But she sends her love.” Adelie lost count of how many times she had said those words to her father.

The former prince consort’s mind was deteriorating more and more with every passing day, and physicians had advised against reminding him that his beloved wife was long dead and gone. Adelie hated lying to her father, so she settled on half-truths. And that seemed to be enough for him. He shivered, and Adelie stood up.

“Here, I’ll get a fire going.” She walked over to the fireplace, removing her gloves. With her back to her father, she took a deep breath, tapping into the power lying dormant in her chest. It almost came too easily to her. Sparkes danced across her fingertips and a fire roared to life in her palm. She placed her hand beneath the stack of logs in the fireplace, letting the flame travel onto the wood. Once it had all left her hand completely, she stood up and pulled her gloves back on, taking notice of her blackened fingertips. An image of Tiron’s moss-covered arm flashed in her mind, how the earth had begun to creep into his very skin and root in his bones. How long would it be before fire consumed her the same way — before she crumbled to ash?

The room soon filled with warmth. Adelie sat back at her father’s feet, resting her head in his lap. His hand absentmindedly brushed through her hair. For only a moment, things felt normal.

“Your birthday is soon,” he stated.

“Yes, in five days. Grandmother has planned a grand banquet. Will you be there?”

“Of course, I could never miss my baby girl’s birthday.”

Adelie wished more than anything that he was right. She had lost count of how many events he had missed, but she knew he had missed her last twelve birthdays. She lifted her head.

“I missed you today,” she said. A look of confusion passed across his face.

“I’m here,” was all he said.

“I know,” Adelie whispered. “I know.” Her father tilted his head.

“What’s wrong, my dearest?”

“Do you think I can change things when I am Queen? I always wanted to believe I could, but after today... I just felt so powerless against everyone’s hate.” Speaking her concerns to her father helped to lift some weight off her chest, especially since he hardly ever remembered their conversations. He was the only one she could truly speak freely around.

“You’ll be an amazing Queen one day,” he murmured. “Your mother and I are so proud.”

“Thank you, Papa.” Adelie laid her head back down and closed her eyes, wishing she could sit there forever.

An hour ticked by before Adelie stood up. Her father sat half asleep, so she helped him to stand and gently guided him to his bed. Once he was tucked in, she pressed a kiss to his forehead. She stoked the dying flames in the fireplace before silently slipping out into the corridor.

The castle had long been asleep as she reached her room. Her lady’s maid had come by at some point and turned down her bed covers, laying out a nightgown at the foot. Adelie wrestled herself out of her gown for a second time, laying it neatly over her vanity chair. She placed her gloves on her nightstand and crawled into her bed, her fingertips like ashes staining the sheets.

Have You Seen It?

My dad's house refused to fall. Though the walls withered, and the foundation crumbled, it still stood proud and defiant against time. From the front seat of my mom's beat up old Sedan, I watched as the property came into full view — just as neglected as ever. I swallowed, my throat still raw from the screaming match my mom and I had just this morning.

It was my dad's week, and I didn't want to go. An argument I was always fated to lose.

Whether I liked it or not, the court dictated that my dad deserved to spend at least some time with me — despite him never wanting anything to do with me back when my parents were still married. Weekends were easy for me to get out of: A sleepover with a friend, studying for an important exam, the twenty-four-hour flu. Anything to keep me busy long enough for the weekend to come and go without having to see my dad and his decrepit house. But there was no getting out of that doomed week in the Summer. Even if I managed to formulate the perfect excuse, the week would always be rescheduled. Just like this week had been... twice.

"It's better to just get it over with as soon as possible, then you're free the rest of the Summer." That's always what my mom would repeat over and over again as I just got angrier and angrier. At her for not fighting harder to get sole custody. At the court for thinking my dad was capable of taking care of anyone other than himself. And of course, at my dad.

I didn't *hate* my dad. In fact, I felt nothing for him. Every day I had ever spent in his house felt like I was sharing the space with a complete stranger. A stranger who took no interest in me or anyone else for that matter. We lived our lives separately in that big old house until my mom came back for me. And it made me furious that I still couldn't find in my heart to hate him.

But that house. Now, I did *hate* that house. I despised everything about it. From the rotten wood of the deck to the mice in the walls. Under my dad's care, it had fallen into disrepair — much like everything in his supposed care. I wondered when it would be my turn.

My mom pulled the car to a stop at the end of the long winding driveway, not even bothering to put it in park.

“Alright, well I’ll see you on Sunday,” she said with a bright smile.

“Yeah, whatever,” I murmured, opening the door. I grabbed my duffle bag and pillow that had been sitting at my feet before slamming the door. My mom waved a hand in my direction before turning the car around and heading back down the driveway.

I turned to face the decrepit house. Three stories tall, it cast a large, looming shadow over me. Vines crawled up the brick and siding, creeping into a number of broken windows. In the shadows of the house, it almost looked like there were faces staring back at me from the other side of the glass, mouthing silent words of warning for me to go away and to never look back.

Perhaps if I were a little smarter and a little braver, I would have listened to those silent warnings. But instead, I pulled my gaze from the wailing faces and walked up the sagging steps of the porch. I rang the doorbell, hearing the haunting tone echo through the halls inside. The door swung open, and I was staring at my dad.

When my parents were still married, pretending to be in a happy relationship, people would always tell me how much I looked like my dad. From our crooked noses and deep brown eyes to our gangly frames and tightly coiled hair. But from the moment my mom filed for divorce, I spent every breath trying to change my appearance. I dyed my hair bright green. I wore baggy clothing and hunched my shoulders to look smaller. I hid my eyes behind wire frames and colorful eyeshadow. All so my mom didn't need to look at the face of my dad for the rest of her

life. But standing face to face with him now made it clear that I would never escape the fact that I was clearly his daughter.

I looked up at him now, taking notice of his unusually brushed and styled hair and his neatly trimmed beard. He still had that tired look in his eyes as though he hadn't slept for decades, but he offered me a yellowed, crooked smile.

"Emmer." His chest rattled from years of smoking, and he hacked out a cough.

"Hey Dad."

"You gonna stand there all day?" he huffed, opening the door wider for me to step inside.

As soon as my feet crossed the threshold, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Something cold whispered across my shoulders. I glanced back, just as my mom's car reached the end of the driveway and turned onto the main road.

Turning my attention back to the entry hall, my gaze traveled up the grand staircase, following the cracked wallpaper up to the high ceilings. Cobwebs decorated the corners of the ceiling, stretching toward the single light fixture in the center that gave off a dim yellow glow. I focused on a black spider with long spindly legs running across one of the long threads to the center, where a fly had gotten caught. The spider swirled it around and around, wrapping it in silk until its frantic buzzing stopped. My dad followed my gaze.

"Don't bother them, they won't bother you," he huffed.

"Okay," was all I said.

"Had to move your room upstairs. Having some work done in your old one, and it's taking longer than I thought. Hurry and put your stuff away."

"Okay," I repeated, securing my duffle bag on my shoulder a little better and walking up the creaky old staircase. It was a beautiful feature of the house, with detailed wood carvings

decorating the railing and an ornate runner covering the stairs. But over the years, the dark stain had worn away and moisture had begun to rot the wood. The runner was frayed along the edge, and the color had faded. Pieces of wallpaper had flaked off the walls and littered the stairs. My feet kicked up dust as I ascended. It lingered in the air, tickling my nose. I sneezed, the sound echoing through the large house.

Part of me wondered why my dad didn't give more detailed instructions as to which room upstairs was meant to be mine. I hardly ever came up here in the past. As my feet stopped on the second-floor landing, I realized why. Full boxes, furniture, and just random *stuff* blocked a majority of the hallway and the stairs leading up to the third floor. Two doors remained easily accessible: a bathroom and a bedroom. I ventured into the bedroom.

To my surprise, it looked like it had been cleaned in the last week. A twin bed was squished into the corner made with a floral bedspread and two pillows propped against the headboard. A nightstand sat next to it with a matching dresser on the opposite wall. A vase of half dead flowers sat on the top. There was no ceiling light, but a floor lamp sat in the far corner. I left it off, making the only source of light the window. It filled the room with the glow of the setting sun. Tossing my bag onto the bed, I looked out the window. The backyard was littered with stuff much like the inside. A wooden fence bordered the property and beyond the yard was a sea of trees.

A man dressed in an old soldier's uniform stood in the shadows of the trees, motionless. He stared, unblinking, with such intensity at the yard that he had to be looking at something. I lifted a hand to wave and get his attention, but his concentration remained unbroken.

"Hungry?" I jumped at my dad's gruff voice and turned to see him standing in the doorway.

“Umm, yeah. I could eat.” I glanced back out the window. The man was gone, leaving no sign that he was there in the first place. A whisper of cold air brushed across my shoulders again and I shivered.

“You okay?” My dad approached, following my gaze out the window.

“I thought... There was someone standing out there,” I said.

“Oh, it’s probably just one of the neighbors.” He shrugged. “Thai House sound good?” I blinked as the name of my favorite restaurant left his mouth. Normally, he would just order pizza or microwave a couple freezer burnt TV dinners.

“Yeah sure.”

“Let’s go then,” he said, checking his watch. “We’ll beat the dinner rush.”

As he turned to walk out, he caught sight of the half dead flowers on the dresser.

“Damn. I figured this room got good enough sun...” he murmured, inspecting them closely. “Oh well, I’ll pick some fresh ones tomorrow.” I stared at him; one brow raised.

“You picked these?” I asked. From under his beard, his cheeks flushed in embarrassment.

“Just some wildflowers from out back. Weeds basically, but I thought you might appreciate them.” My dad grabbed the vase and quickly left the room. I shook my head, glancing out the window again.

The man was back, his gaze now fixed up at me. His eyes were gray and dull. What looked like blood dripped down his face, but he made no move to wipe it away.

“You coming down?” my dad called from downstairs.

“Yeah! Be right there!” I tore my gaze away from the man and rushed down to meet my dad in the entry way. He stood, twirling his keys in one hand, the vase of flowers nowhere to be seen.

“Ready?” He asked. I nodded, and we headed out the front door.

“Your neighbors do Civil War reenactments or something?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“The man.” I waved my hand in the direction of the backyard. “I just saw him again. He was wearing an old soldier’s uniform and looked like he was covered in blood or something.”

“Oh, who knows. Weirdos, the lot of them. I get a bunch of them knocking on my door. Them and the historical society have been trying to get their hands on this place for years. Guess this was a battlefield or something.” We reached his truck, and he unlocked it. I plopped down in the front seat as he started up the engine.

“I didn’t know that,” I said. “That’s actually kinda cool.”

“You think so?” I felt his gaze on me as he began driving down the driveway. “There’s an old graveyard not too far from here if you wanna check it out sometime this week.”

“Yeah, sure... That’d be cool.”

He nodded, seeming satisfied with how the conversation had panned out. It felt off for my dad to say more than a dozen words to me, let alone hold a conversation about something I showed slight interest in. I should have known it wouldn’t last as we fell silent for the rest of the drive and didn’t say a word to each other over dinner. Part of that was my fault, I suppose, for shoveling rice and chicken into my mouth faster than I could breathe.

It wasn’t until the sun was nearly set and we were back in the car that the silence finally broke. We were nearly back to my dad’s house when the radio, which had been quiet the entire time, crackled to life. I jumped at the sudden sound as the radio clicked through stations on its own, numbers flashing across the digital display. At first it was a jumbled mess. Garbled sounds

molded together as different songs and talk radio fought for a second on air. My dad whacked the dash a few times in a futile attempt to get one station to stick.

Then I could start to make out words, pieced together by different voices to form a coherent sentence.

“Have,” sang a man’s voice in a low and drawn-out note.

“You,” another man’s voice spoke clearly.

“Seen,” a woman’s voice cut through.

“It,” sang out a different woman before the radio clicked off.

“Damn thing’s never worked properly,” my dad grunted to himself. The silence that had seemed only a little awkward before now hung heavy between us.

“Did you hear that?” I whispered, my voice feeling loud against the sudden silence.

“The whole neighborhood probably did.”

“No, I mean... it was like... it spoke...” I instantly knew how crazy I sounded as the final word left my lips and my dad looked over at me, his brows scrunched in confusion.

“What are you talking about?” he asked. I fidgeted in my seat, an uneasy feeling washing over me.

“Nothing... Nevermind.” I shook my head, looking up. My eyes locked onto the figure of a man standing in the middle of the road. “Dad, look out!” I screamed.

The car jerked as my dad turned the steering wheel roughly. I covered my face with my hands as we headed straight for the man, preparing for impact.

It never came.

Instead, my dad pulled the car to a stop on the side of the road and turned fully to me.

“Emmer, what the hell was that? I almost drove off the road with you screaming in my ear!” My hands fell away from my face, and I turned my head frantically looking out each of the windows for any sign of the man. “What’s wrong with you?”

“There was a man in the middle of the road!” I snapped back at him, my face hot with anger. “You almost hit him!”

“There wasn’t anyone.”

“Yes, there was!” I unbuckled my seatbelt, opened the car door, and jumped out. “He probably hurt himself jumping out of the way.”

“Emmer, get back here!” my dad shouted after me.

“He was right here! I swear!” I walked to the middle, squinting in the growing darkness, scanning the empty street. I heard my dad get out of the car, his loud footsteps stomping over to me. His hands grabbed my shoulders and spun me around. I expected anger on his face, but instead I was met with concern that was illuminated by the car headlights. He leaned down until his face was level with mine.

“There’s no one here,” he said, as gently as his gruff voice would allow.

“I know what I saw.”

“Just get back in the car, please,” he said. When I didn’t move, he added in a warning tone, “Emmer.”

“Alright, alright.” I shrugged his hands off of me. He straightened and nodded, turning back toward the car. I cast one last glance at the empty road as something knocked against my foot. Looking down, I spotted a brass button that glinted in the light. Quickly scooping it up and stuffing it into my pocket, I followed my dad back to the car.

We rode the rest of the way in silence.

The second my dad pulled to a stop in front of the house, I jumped out and rushed inside. “Emmer!” he called after me.

“I’m going to bed,” I said over my shoulder as I ascended the stairs to my room. Once I had shut myself inside, I pulled the button from my pocket and examined it under the dim lamp light. It was the size of a quarter and rounded into a dome shape. Carved onto the face was an eagle, though most of the detail had been worn away and mud was caked into the crevices.

I couldn’t help but think it looked familiar.

Hours later, I laid awake in bed, staring at the ceiling. My eyes traced the swirling brushstrokes made with thick paint, finding shapes and patterns in the randomness. The moon illuminated my room, bathing it in gray light. I could hear a movie playing. The sound of gunfire and explosions mixed with my dad’s snoring crept up the stairs from the living room. I swore he fell asleep the moment the movie started.

He could probably sleep soundly in a real war, I thought, closing my eyes, and rolling onto my side. Flipping my pillow over, I nestled against the cool pillowcase. I kicked the sheet off my legs, rolling again onto my other side. Another explosion echoed through the house, and I groaned.

My eyes opened. In front of me, on my nightstand, sat the brass button. The gunfire raged on downstairs. I groaned and sat up, grabbing the button. I had cleaned it off as best as I could, but age seemed to have worn away most of the shine. I traced the eagle design with my thumb, shuffling through memories as I tried to place where I had seen it before.

The gunfire ceased; my dad’s snores left to echo the house alone. I climbed out of bed, stuffing the button in my pocket, and walked out into the hall. The stairs creaked beneath my

bare feet as I descended to the first floor and turned into the living room. The TV lit up the room as the credits for the movie scrolled up the screen, accompanied by quiet music. My dad was lying in his recliner, his mouth hanging open as snores rattled his chest. A half empty bottle of beer hung loosely in his fingers, and he gripped the remote in his other hand.

I gently pulled the bottle from his grasp, setting it on the coffee table, then reached over and grabbed the remote. My thumb hovered over the “off” button as black and white pictures began flashing across the screen. Most were of a well-dressed man, some with who I assumed was his family, all standing stiff and serious for the pictures. More credits rolled and then a final picture appeared with the same man now dressed in a civil war uniform. White text appeared below the picture, a name along with a birth date and a death date. The man looked to be highly decorated, his coat pinned with several metals, but I was drawn to the buttons that fastened his coat closed. I pulled the button out of my pocket, stepping closer to the screen as I inspected the button, then the picture then the button.

“It’s the same...” I whispered. I couldn’t quite grasp what exactly brought me to that conclusion. The photo was blurred and grainy — becoming more pixilated by the TV — and the buttons were no more than white dots on a gray jacket, but I couldn’t help but feel like the button in my hand matched. My dad grunted and coughed. I whipped around to see him settle more comfortably in his chair; his eyes still closed. He began to snore again. I pocketed the button and switched the TV off, tossing the remote onto the couch. Grabbing a blanket from the floor, I laid it over my dad, being careful not to wake him.

Then I began wandering the house, using one hand on the wall to feel my way through the dark hallways. I grabbed a glass of water from the kitchen, drinking it down before refilling

it. I dug around the pantry, ending up with a handful of potato chips. I crunched on them as I made my way back upstairs.

I made it six steps, when I heard the front door creek open. I whirled around, the water splashing over the rim of my cup and spilling onto my feet. The door was shut tight. Walking back down, I checked the lock, finding it was dead bolted. The floor creaked from somewhere in the house. My dad's snores echoed against the walls.

"It's just the house settling," I said aloud, running a hand over my eyes as I headed back up to my room. I set the water down on the night stand and climbed into bed. In the moonlight, I saw the soles of my feet were covered in dirt that had now rubbed off onto the sheets. I sighed at the mess.

That's a 'tomorrow me' problem, I thought as a yawn overtook me. I snuggled into my pillow, my eyes slipping closed. The button in my pocket pressed against my hip, but I made no move to take it out. Just as I was drifting off, I heard the door of my room open and footsteps creak against the floorboards.

"Have you seen it?" a raspy voice echoed in my ear.

I woke up with a start. It felt like only seconds had passed, and I expected to be met with the owner of the raspy voice, but instead the morning light filtering into the room from the window. I blinked rapidly, getting used to the light, as I sat up in bed. There was a sore spot on my hip. I remembered the button in my pocket.

Have you seen it?

The words echoed in my head, the same ones from the radio and the faceless voice in my ear. I pulled the button out. I remembered the soldier standing outside, surveying the backyard.

Had he been missing a button? I shook away not only the thought of this mysterious man speaking through a radio, but the idea of him breaking in just to receive a simple button.

Over the years I had been coming here, there had always been strange happenings. I chalked it all up to it just being a strange, old house. Curtains fluttering in front of a closed window; the house was just drafty. Things not being where I left them; I just misremembered where I put them. Or creaking floorboards, like last night; the old wood was just settling. But I had never heard intelligible words before, I had never *seen* someone who wasn't really there.

I thought back to the shadows in the windows when I arrived last night. How they almost looked like faces. Maybe they were actually there, desperately trying to warn me of some terrible fate.

"It's just this damn house messing with my head," I muttered, setting the button back on the nightstand. Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I planted my feet on solid ground. Downstairs, I could hear my dad moving around. I remembered my dirty feet and now grimy sheets. The laundry room was downstairs, so I grabbed a change of clothes and headed to the bathroom to shower.

Once clean and in fresh clothes, including a pair of shoes, I stripped down my bed and headed downstairs. I found my dad in the kitchen, leaning against the counter with a bowl of cereal in his hands.

"Morning," he said, around a mouthful of Cheerios.

"Morning," I replied. He eyed the bundle of sheets in my arms.

"What've you got there?" He scooped up another heaping spoon of cereal.

"My sheets got dirty."

My dad nodded over to the doorway across from me.

“Laundry room is through there. You need help?”

“I know how to do laundry.”

“Okay.”

I skirted around him and made my way to the washer. Laying the sheets over the top, I quickly sprayed stain remover over the dirty spots, before tossing them into the washer with detergent. I set the cycle and headed back into the kitchen.

My dad had filled another bowl with Cheerios, passing it to me wordlessly. I looked down at the cereal, noticing a light dusting of sugar crystals over the top. My dad noticed my confused look as I stirred the sugar into the bowl and took a bite.

“Remember, I used to always put sugar on your Cheerios ‘cause you didn’t think they were sweet enough.”

“Right.” I took another bite, liking the sweetness that the sugar gave the milk. “Thanks.”

“So, what do you want to do today?” He placed his empty bowl in the sink. I looked at him curiously. Normally on the days I spent at my dad’s house, we lived as two entirely separate beings. Other than meals, I hardly ever saw or talked to him. I’d find a quiet corner of the property to read or explore or do school work while my dad watched TV or worked from his office. And neither one of us had ever bothered with what the other was doing. My dad waited patiently for my response. I replied with a silent shrug, taking another bite of cereal.

“I know we talked about going to the graveyard. We could do that,” he suggested.

“We?” I repeated without really thinking.

“Yeah, unless you had something else you needed to do.” He paused. “Or you can go without me. I mean, I’ve seen it before so it’s not really something I need to see again, just thought that might be something you’d be up for.” His awkward ramblings caught me off guard.

“I just... I didn’t think you’d want to...” I was the one to pause this time, thinking through my words. “We usually do our own thing when I’m here. I didn’t think you’d want to hang out all of a sudden. You never do.”

“I’ve been thinking about that a lot lately,” he murmured, before clearing his throat and speaking normally. “I thought maybe it was time to change that.”

“Just like that? What? You thought you could just snap your fingers and be a good dad?” I set my bowl down on the counter, the cereal only half finished. The taste was suddenly too sweet for me. “I’ve grown up now. And you took a backseat to all of that, didn’t you? Left mom to raise me. Avoided me in your own home. It’s a mystery to me why you ever bothered to get partial custody. You could have easily just bowed out completely and paid child support like every other deadbeat dad.”

“I’m just... I’m just *trying* here, Emmer. Can’t you give me a second chance?”

“Why should I?” Before my dad could say another word, I left the room. He called after me, but I ignored him. He didn’t come after me as I escaped out into the fresh air.

My heart rammed against my chest as I stomped through the backyard. Anger fueled my feet, guiding me past the gate. I didn’t stop until I was a few feet into the trees that lined the property, out of my dad’s sight if he were to look out the window. There, I collapsed against a tree, drawing my knees to my chest, and cried.

For years, I had wondered what it would be like to have parents who were still married, still in love. Ones who didn’t have to share me like I was nothing more than a piece of property. The divorce made me feel no more important than the countless things my parents had to fight over before they could settle. I was just another piece of paper they signed, another thing to win.

When I had lost all hope that they'd ever get back together, I instead hoped for two active parents, who each made a place for me in their homes. Instead, I got a mom who tried her best, but didn't have the energy to keep up with my ever growing and maturing self. And I got a dad who didn't try at all, who was only a dad in the most technical sense. A dad who had years to prove himself as capable and loving. A dad who had failed to do any of that.

Until now.

Now he was trying. Attempting to at least. And I couldn't tell if it was sincere or not. I didn't like not knowing.

Nearly an hour passed by before I pushed myself to my feet, drying my tears. I spotted a worn-down footpath next to me that delved deeper into the woods. There was a pair of fresh prints, belonging to heavy boots, which formed two trails. One heading back toward the house. The other trail ventured further down the path. I followed the latter.

The footprints led me to a clearing overgrown with weeds. Whoever had made the prints had stomped straight through the tall weeds, all the way to the middle. I pushed my way through the overgrowth until I came to a stop at a gravestone. I glanced around, spotting several other headstones placed haphazardly in the clearing, barely seen over the weeds.

This must be the graveyard. The prints stopped abruptly before the headstone I stood in front of. I knelt down, reaching out to brush some of the dirt off the stone. The name had long since faded, but I could still make out the epitaph.

No grave may hold me.

An icy breath brushed against my neck, and I jumped up, whirling around. No one was there. I shivered, rubbing my hands over my arms. I turned away from the grave, following the footprints all the way back to the house.

When I walked through the back door, my dad was nowhere to be seen. Our breakfast dishes had been washed and placed on the drying rack. I peeked into the laundry room to see he had already switched over my sheets to the dryer. The TV turned on in the living room, and I heard my dad begin to switch through channels.

So much for trying, I thought as I headed up to my room. There I was met with a bed made with clean sheets and a new vase of flowers on the dresser with a book sitting next to it. A flicker of guilt started to grow inside me. He did try, and I only shut him down. I grabbed the book, seeing the title read “History of the Civil War.” It was just a simple coffee table book, only really used for display, and as a result it was probably in better condition than anything else in this house. Kicking off my shoes, I curled up on my bed and cracked it open. A piece of paper fell out onto my lap. I picked it up and read it.

Emmer,

I'm sorry for earlier. I've really been working hard this year to try and be a better person, but I guess I forgot that I can't do that until I understand how my actions affected you. I know I'm not a great dad — or even a good one for that matter — but all I ask is you find it in your heart to forgive me. Or at the very least, let me show you that I'm trying to change.

Anyways, I remembered I had this book, and I thought you might like to read it. I don't even know if you're actually interested in any of this, but it's all I really have to go on. Feel free to tell me what actually interests you, and I can get you a better book.

And whenever you're ready to talk, I'm here.

Dad

I stared down at the note, reading it over again and again. Tears burned my eyes and I blinked hard to stop them from falling. Part of me wanted to rip the note up right there and

pretend I had never read it while the other part begged me to run downstairs and hear my dad out. I had never known what it was like to have a dad I could depend on.

And it felt like it was too late to have one.

I sat in a frozen state on my bed, debating my next move. My dad seemed to be doing everything right for once: spending time with me, showing interest in what I liked, taking a step back when it all felt like too much for me, trying a softer approach through flowers, a book, and a letter, giving me the choice of what to do next.

And that choice was to wait. I set the letter to the side and started to read the book. I wasn't overly interested in the contents, but it was something to fill my brain and pass the time. I needed to sleep on it, I had decided.

I'll talk to him tomorrow, I thought to myself. A new day. A second chance, just like he said.

I stayed confined to my room for the rest of the day, reading every word the book had to offer until the words blended together, and my head spun. It was dark outside when I finally closed it and got up from my bed.

Just like last night, I could hear my dad's snoring echo through the house. I crept downstairs to the kitchen, digging out a frozen dinner from the freezer and popping it in the microwave. Setting the timer, I let it cook until one second remained then I quickly opened the door to stop it from beeping. I ate quietly before heading back up to bed.

Just as I got situated under the covers, my eyes slipping closed, the floorboards creaked under heavy footsteps outside my room. My eyes shot open, and I twisted my head to look at the door.

The door swung on its hinges as if someone had thrown it open. I tried to jump up, but something weighed heavy on my chest.

“Have you seen it?” My eyes darted toward the foot of my bed, looking for the voice. There stood that man. The very same one I had seen in the trees outside. The same one in the middle of the road. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out. I couldn't move. I could barely breathe. All I could do was stare.

His face was covered in blood, which dripped onto my bed as he leaned forward, his soulless eyes staring at me intently.

“Have you seen it?” he repeated. I looked down and noticed one of the brass buttons missing from his jacket. Gaining control of my arm, I reach for the button on the nightstand. Holding it out to him, I hoped he would just take it and leave.

“I..I'm sorry I took it...” I whispered. My hand shook as he peered at the button. His breath was icy cold on my fingertips.

“Have you seen it?” Was all he said. My hand dropped.

“Seen what?” my voice squeaked out. He didn't answer, only turned his head to the side. There, right where an ear should have been, was a large gaping hole. I gasped, covering my mouth with my hand. Tears burned the corners of my eyes as I sat in fear of what the man might do next.

“Have you seen it?” His boots shuffled against the wood floor as he turned away. He walked out the door, his steps now echoing down the hall. Seconds ticked by and I crept out of my bed, tiptoeing to the door. I spotted the man shuffling toward the stairs. He began his descent, each step creaking loudly.

“Have you seen it?” he murmured again. I stayed at the top, peering over the banister as he wandered around the entry hall, before walking into the living room where my dad’s snores could still be heard. I watched from behind the banister, waiting to hear my dad wake up and start shouting at the man to leave, but there was nothing.

Instead, there was an eerie silence as I realized I could no longer hear my dad snoring.

The man emerged from the darkness. His glassy eyes looked up to the second floor and locked onto me. A smile crept onto his face, his teeth glistening in the dim moonlight that poured into the entry hall.

Gripped tightly between his pointer finger and his thumb was a bloody ear.

“I found it,” he hummed, before turning toward the front door.

I watched as the door swung open all on its own, slamming against the wall. He shuffled outside, and as he stepped off the porch, he faded completely from sight. A trail of blood was the only sign he had been there at all.

“Dad...” I croaked out, finding my voice, pulling myself to my feet and stumbling down the stairs. “Dad!”

There was no answer.

A Dream Come True

The room was a mess. Open makeup pallets were strewn across the vanity, discarded clothes were tossed over chairs, and flower petals were strewn across the floor. But none of that mattered, because everyone who had filed out of the room just moments ago all made sure they looked their best. Not one hair was out of place on each of my bridesmaids' heads, and every wrinkle had been steamed out of their dresses. Their bouquets matched mine, which still sat on the vanity in a heap. I hadn't gotten up the courage to pick it up yet.

The ring on my finger burned my skin as I twisted it around and around. My reflection stared back at me, dressed in a champagne-colored gown with a lace overlay. My dream dress. For my dream wedding. With my dream man. Though now as I stared at the woman before me, I couldn't help but think that the dress didn't look quite right on me.

I didn't look quite right.

Tears threatened to spill down my cheeks, and I quickly used my palms to pat underneath my eyes and avoid ruining my perfectly applied makeup. The diamond of my ring glinted in the light, and I lowered my hand to look at it. Like everything else, it was my dream. Then why was my heart pounding against my chest? Why did this morning's breakfast threaten to come back up my throat every time I thought about leaving the safety of this room?

If this was my dream, why did it feel like I was trapped in a nightmare?

A knock on the door jerked me out of my worries.

"Come in!" I called out, letting out a shaking breath.

"It's nearly time, Miah! The girls are already lined up outside." The door swung open with the sound of Mom's voice. I spotted her through the mirror frozen in the threshold — dressed in an outfit that screamed 'mother of the bride' — with a hand over her heart. "You look

beautiful..." Her words came out as a whisper. I turned to look at her fully, fluffing the skirt out slightly. It weighed heavy on my shoulders, and I didn't remember it feeling that way during the fitting.

"Why do you look so surprised? You were at the store when I bought it."

"Well, it's different now, isn't it? I mean, all the alterations are finished, your hair is done up, your makeup is stunning. And that veil..." She stepped fully into the room and closed the door. She walked up to me and placed her hands on my shoulders, spinning me back around to face the mirror.

"If only your grandma could see you in her veil." A tear slipped out and rested on her cheek, but she made no move to wipe it away. I grasped her hand, leaning my head against hers.

"Thanks, Mom." I looked over my reflection again. She still didn't look like me, but with my mom standing there, I felt sure that this was right.

"Daniel is such a lucky man." For some reason, those words felt like a gut punch, and I had to stop myself from keeling over. My bottom lip quivered, and I took a deep breath.

"Yes... he is," I forced out. "Have... have you seen him at all today?" Mom straightened the veil on my head slightly and tucked a piece of hair behind my head.

"I did, he cleaned up quite nicely. I just left your dad over there to give his little lecture. Don't worry, he promised not to scare Daniel too bad."

I wish he would, I thought. Maybe he would turn tail and run. Then I could be done with all this.

Mom glanced at the clock on the wall and then squeezed me into a tight hug.

“It’s time!” She sang out. “Come on, soon-to-be Mrs. Jacobs.” She looped her arm with mine, pulling me toward the door. But my feet remained glued to the floor, and I yanked her back.

“I need a minute,” I said.

“We don’t have a minute, Miah. You’ve been alone in here for—” She looked at the clock. “Good lord, 20 minutes.”

“I just...I’m not ready yet,” I pressed.

“What do you mean ‘not ready?’” Mom said, looking me over again. “Are you missing something? Oh! Flowers!” She turned to the vanity, scooping up the bouquet and beginning to fluff up some of the flattened petals.

“No, Mom. I mean... I don’t think I’m ready for *this*.” I motioned vaguely to myself and my surroundings. Mom sighed, gently laying the bouquet down again. She reached up to cup my face with her hands.

“Look at me, Miah. You are ready. Every minute of planning, every purchase, every invitation, every last detail. This is what *you* want. This is what you’ve always dreamed of.”

There was that word again. Dream. This was my dream, wasn’t it? Then why did it feel all wrong?

“I need to talk to Daniel,” I blurted out. Mom dropped her hands to her side, her eyes searching mine for some sort of answer. “*Please*, Mom. I just need to ask him something. Then I’ll be ready.”

“Okay.” Mom raised her hands in surrender. “I’ll go get him.” She left in a hurry, and I was left to stare at my reflection again. I twisted the ring around my finger a few times until the skin turned red. Then I decided that pacing back and forth would be better. Sweat beaded across

my forehead and the back of my neck. I swiped a tissue from the box on the vanity and dabbed away the sweat carefully. The room felt cold and dark, despite the plush carpet under my feet, the ornate chandelier above me, and the window overlooking the grassy hills that stretched out toward the horizon where the sun climbed into the sky.

Ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to get married here. It felt like such a fantasy land, a stone castle in the country where princesses fell in love with princes. The moment Daniel and I decided on our wedding date, I called and booked the venue. Every piece of today was meticulously planned out by me, just like Mom had said. The food, the wine, the music, the flowers. Everything was perfect, except for the thoughts in my head.

A knock on the door stopped me in my tracks.

“Miah? Your mom said you needed to ask me something. Is everything okay?” Daniel’s muffled voice did nothing to quell my churning stomach.

“You can come in.” There was a pause.

“I’m not allowed to see you until the ceremony,” he said quietly.

“We can’t talk very well through a closed door,” I said. “It’s not that big of a deal, just get in here please.” Another pause.

“I’ll come in backwards. Turn around so you can’t see me.” Despite the turmoil my mind was in, I laughed and turned around, facing the rising sun.

“Okay, come in.”

“You’re turned around?”

“Yes, now get in here please. Before my mom drags you off to the altar.”

The door creaked open, and footsteps shuffled in. I heard the door shut and the latch click before the footsteps continued. Then Daniel's back was pressed up against mine. His hand appeared in my peripheral vision, and I took it.

"Now, what's so important that you're delaying our wedding to ask?" He laughed, but his voice wavered slightly.

"Are you crying?" His grip on my hand grew tighter.

"Of course not," he sniffed. "Was that your question or are you stalling now?" I let out a breathy laugh and looked down at my feet.

"I guess I'm stalling."

"What's wrong, Mi?"

"I... I don't think I'm ready."

"Okay, what else do you need to do to be ready?" That was just like him. Methodical, direct, trying to solve a problem straight on, overlooking the real issue. I shook my head.

"No...Daniel... I mean..." I let out a heavy sigh, speaking my next words in quick succession. "I don't think I'm ready to get married." He blindly reached for my other hand, squeezing it just as tight as the other one.

"What do you mean? We've been talking about this for years. You said you wanted to marry me. You told me you were ready." His words tumbled out of his mouth, panic evident in his voice.

"I — I know. I know... I just... I don't know. I was so caught up in the planning and the excitement. I haven't been alone with my own thoughts in so long. And then today... it just all hit me. We're getting married." Hot tears streamed down my cheeks, and I made no move to stop

them this time, holding Daniel's hands tighter. "And deep down, I know I don't want to. Not yet at least."

"But we love each other..." His voice was barely above a whisper and his grip on my hands loosened. "You love me..."

"I do...I do. I know that I do but...God, I'm so scared. I can't do this. I know people are supposed to want to get married, but the more I think about it the more I hate the idea. I mean, we're so young, I barely know what kind of person I want to be, let alone what kind of wife." I let out a sob and pulled one of my hands away to cover my mouth. I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping this was all just a bad dream. "I'm sorry..."

Daniel pulled his hand from my grasp and stepped away. I shivered at the cool air that brushed across my shoulders, and I waited for the door to open and for him to leave me here alone. Instead, I felt his arms wrap tight around my shoulders. One hand cupped the back of my head, holding me tight against his chest.

"It's okay," he murmured. Something dripped onto my head, and I looked up to see his eyes were puffy and tears dripped down his face. "We don't have to get married."

"Are you sure?" I asked. He looked down at me and smiled.

"If getting married isn't going to make you happy, then I don't want to do it. Who needs a wedding anyway? We were doing just fine before. We have our whole lives ahead of us, and in a few years, we'll be ready. And then we can come back here, or anywhere else for that matter. As long as it's what we both want."

"I really do love you," I whispered, hugging him tightly.

"I know," he said, burying his face against my neck. "I love you too."

I pulled away and looked him over for the first time. He wore a dark navy suit with a matching tie and a white shirt. His normally messy brown hair was combed back, and he wore contacts instead of his glasses.

“You don’t look like yourself,” I murmured, ruffling his hair slightly. He laughed, ducking away from my hand.

“Neither do you,” he said before wiping my face free of tears and pressing a kiss to my forehead. My eyes flickered shut, a wave of calmness washing over me for the first time in months.

Perhaps my dream wasn’t a fairytale wedding with a perfect dress and a perfect ring. Perhaps it was right here, in this moment.

With Me and Daniel, as ourselves.

She Used To Love Fireflies

Sierra cursed as the front tire of her car hit another pothole. Her hands clenched the steering wheel, her body rigid as she continued her journey along the endless expanse of open road. Six long hours had passed since she locked up her studio in New York City and made the trek to the parking garage where her car spent the majority of its life. There was no point in her driving to work when it was a ten-minute walk that took her past her favorite coffee shop and avoided the Manhattan traffic. Plus, Sierra hated driving anywhere, opting to take the Subway over braving the open road behind the wheel. If she had it her way, she wouldn't even own a car — it would save her having to pay extra just to park in the garage — but the Subway didn't stretch all the way to her small hometown, located smack dab in Middle-of-Nowhere, USA. So now Sierra sat stiffly in the driver's seat, her teeth clenched and her knuckles white.

Her radio blared loudly, reverberating off her windows and pounding in her ears. It wouldn't be long now before the signal dropped off completely and she'd be alone with her own thoughts, regretting not shelling out for a car with Bluetooth connectivity or filling her center console with CDs. It would just be her and her thoughts. So, she savored the noise and its welcome distraction while it lasted.

The flat horizon wavered in front of her, betraying the heat that she knew was just outside her car. She turned the AC a few degrees colder, relishing the feeling of the frigid air as she remembered the text she got from her mom a week prior.

The AC's been out for three days now.

It was one thing to be stuck in a town where the most interesting thing to happen is the traffic light changing from red to green, but it was another to be stuck there in the peak of summer — meteorologists called it the hottest one yet — without AC.

Have you gotten the AC fixed yet?

Not yet.

*I asked Caleb to take a look when he
and Eliza come down with the twins.*

Her mom's reply had made Sierra roll her eyes earlier this morning before she left. She only ever saw Eliza and her husband as often as she saw her mom, which was once a year against her own will. Eliza was her older sister — by only ten months — and Sierra thanked whatever higher power was responsible for not ending up just like her. Like their mom, Eliza dropped out of school to marry the first guy who ever showed the slightest bit of interest in her. Thirteen months later, Eliza had Tommy and Tessa. They had to be six or seven now. Sierra counted backward in her head and settled on seven.

Sierra, on the other hand, graduated with honors, landing a good paying job in her field immediately. She never spared a second glance at anyone who showed her interest, not wanting to risk the distraction as she moved as far from home as she could. And she couldn't help but judge her sister. Since they were girls, they had dreamed of living in the city, sharing an apartment, and the being only person each other needed. Now it seemed Sierra was the only one who had made good on that dream. Maybe she could forgive Eliza for deciding to get married instead if she had married anyone other than Caleb.

That man was about as interesting as a rock and twice as dull. He was a truck driver, choosing to spend more time on the road than with his family — though Sierra supposed she couldn't fault him for that when she was guilty of the same. Caleb hardly ever made it to their "family reunions" though, his busiest season always fell on the exact week that Sierra took off from work. She suspected he just didn't want to be around her, not that she minded — she

couldn't stand the man. Especially when her mom asked him to fix things around the house. He took being the only "man of the house" very seriously, but only in the sense that he thought that meant he could pretend he knew everything and belittle any woman — usually Sierra — who tried to tell him any differently. With his hands on the AC, it would never get fixed.

Her front tire hit another pothole and the radio station cut out, jolting Sierra out of her negative thoughts and into the silence of her car. She cycled through the empty stations, receiving only their white noise blaring back at her, before she finally flicked it off. Her neck ached from hours of sitting up straight and she slumped back in her seat. Her hands slipped from ten and two down to eight and four. The sun was beginning to set, and she glanced at the time.

Only an hour had passed, and Sierra still had a way to go.

The sun had long since set when Sierra finally turned onto the gravel path through the dense trees that led to her mom's house. In the darkness, she could see a warm light glowing from the front window, and she couldn't help but sigh heavily. Her mom had waited up for her. Her car jolted down the driveway, kicking up dust and rocks that pinged against the paint job. Sierra winced, knowing every single one would leave its mark. She pulled up next to her mom's adolescent minivan that had definitely seen better days and parked, turning the car off.

Despite spending the last few hours in silence, Sierra sat for a moment longer and relished the lack of sound. Then, she took a deep breath and opened the door. The forest was alive with crickets, cicadas, and frogs, buzzing in her ears as she grabbed her bags from the trunk. Fireflies danced around her head in greeting before being swatted away by her hand. The fresh air tickled her nose and she sneezed, the noise echoing into the night sky.

"Sierra? Is that you?" A voice called from the front porch.

“Yeah,” Sierra called back, slinging her backpack over her shoulder. She pulled up the handle of her rolling suitcase and shut the trunk. Looking up, she spotted her mom, Mildred, standing in a fluffy robe and matching slippers. She pressed the button on her key fob, her car beeping as the doors locked.

“How was your drive?” Mildred asked as Sierra approached.

“Long. I told you not to wait up,” she replied, stepping onto the porch. Her free arm opened, letting Mildred swoop in for a quick hug. Her hold on Sierra tightened for a moment before she stepped back and looked over her youngest daughter.

“I haven’t seen you in a year, Sissy. There’s no way I’d miss you getting here.”

Sierra fought to keep her eyes from rolling at the old nickname as Mildred turned to open the door. The strong smell of lavender and lemon Pledge hit Sierra as she stepped inside the old ranch style home.

It was decorated just the same as the last time Sierra was here, the same it had been for her entire life. They had stepped right into the living room, where a brown leather sectional took up most of the space. A TV on a rickety old wooden dresser sat opposite the couch. Decades of footsteps had worn down a path from the front door to a hallway that veered off to the right. Mildred faithfully followed the path and Sierra followed.

“I’ve got you set up in yours and Lizzy’s old room, as usual.” Mildred said as she led the way down the hall. Sierra walked slowly, glancing at the pictures that lined the walls. The first one was a crooked wedding photo of a younger Mildred standing next to a man that Sierra hardly remembered. Though, her lack of memory didn’t stop people from telling her that she had his eyes and his smile.

“Hey Dad,” Sierra murmured, rubbing off the dust that had collected on the frame with her shirt sleeve. After that, a series of pictures of Eliza and herself cluttered the wall. Their whole lives chronicled in a dozen pictures. The last picture of Sierra being from her college graduation.

Then came Eliza’s wedding photos. Mildred had hung them up in a neat collage, a large picture of Eliza and Caleb being the focal point. Tommy and Tessa followed soon after, not so different from real life. Sierra straightened a photo of them dancing amongst a swarm of fireflies.

At the end of the hallway, Mildred opened a door painted pink with purple flowers. She flipped the switch, flooding the room in yellow light. Sierra peered inside to see that to her disappointment, it was just how she had left it the year before. The walls were painted to match the door and posters were taped up haphazardly to cover the bright colors. Bunk beds were crammed into the far corner, right next to the window. The top bunk remained unmade while the bottom was covered in a purple bedspread. Sierra stepped inside fully, leaving her suitcase by the door.

“I thought you said you were going to repaint.” She commented, watching Mildred bustle over to the window and open it. A gentle breeze fluttered the curtains, blowing in the smell of honeysuckle.

“I was, but there’s just... so many memories.” Mildred stared at the pink walls fondly before her eyes trailed to the beds. “I remember when the two of you begged me to get you bunk beds. And every night, you’d switch beds to stay fair.”

The corner of Sierra’s lip tugged into a smile briefly before she spotted a firefly climbing up one of the bed posts. She quickly walked over to the window and shut it.

“I don’t know why you insist on opening all the windows. You’ll get an infestation,” Sierra muttered, pulling the curtains closed. The firefly flew back into the air, drifting toward Sierra. She swatted it away.

“You used to love fireflies, you know,” Mildred said, catching the bug in her hand. “It was always you who opened the windows to let them in.” She opened the window slightly to set it free.

“Yeah, when I was what? Four? I grew out of that.” Sierra sighed. “Listen Mom, as much as I would... love to reminisce, I’m pretty tired from the drive—”

“Right, of course. Good night, Sissy. Love you.” Mildred shut the window and pulled Sierra into another tight hug that Sierra halfheartedly returned. “See you in the morning.”

“Night, Mom.”

Mildred shut the door behind her, leaving Sierra to stand alone in her old bedroom. She closed her eyes, gathering herself before grabbing her suitcase. She changed into cotton shorts and an old t-shirt. Not bothering to walk out to the hall bathroom to brush her teeth, she shut off the light and climbed into bed. The dim glow of a firefly lurked outside the window as she drifted to sleep.

The AC was still out.

Sierra woke up the next morning, drenched in sweat. The air around her was still, and the house was silent. She had been so tired last night that she hadn't even noticed the lack of cold air. Now she was wide awake, her clothes sticking to her skin and her quilt bunched up at her feet.

The morning sun filtered through the curtains, lighting up a square of carpet. Sierra watched the patch of light move slowly across the floor as she gathered the will to get up and

move around. As hot as she was lying in her bed, she knew as soon as she stood up, she would be even hotter. The patch of sun hit the baseboard of the wall opposite the window and signs of life could be heard from down the hall behind her closed door. The wood floor creaked and the familiar footsteps of Mildred padded in the direction Sierra knew to be the kitchen. The coffee machine whirring to life and the clinking of two mugs on the counter were what urged Sierra to her feet.

She wiped her hand over her face and through her tangled hair. Grabbing a change of clothes and her toiletries from her suitcase, she opened her bedroom door and stepped out as quietly as possible. The floor creaked beneath her.

“Good morning, Sissy!” Mildred sang from the kitchen.

“Morning.” Sierra hurried to the bathroom before her mom could come racing down the hall and locked the door. Sure enough, there was a light knock as soon as Sierra’s hand left the doorknob.

“What do you want for breakfast?” Mildred’s muffled voice asked.

“Just coffee is fine.”

“Cream and sugar?”

“No thanks.” Sierra set her clothes on the counter, leaning into the shower to turn the water on.

“I’ll make you some eggs and toast too.

“I said coffee is fine!” Sierra called over the water, but there was no answer, Mildred likely already bustling around the kitchen. She shook her head and pulled her sweat soaked clothes off before jumping in the shower. The water was freezing, leaving Sierra with chattering teeth as she stood under the shower head.

This is going to be a long week, she thought as she massaged shampoo into her hair. Eliza, Caleb, and their kids would get here sometime today. And Sierra would be forced to listen to them drone on and on about their quaint life in the town just one hour north of here. There was nothing wrong with quaint, and Sierra had to admit that sometimes she wished her life in the city wasn't so busy. That she could have moments of silence without the constant car horns and shouting from the busy streets or the loud music from her neighbors. But with that silence came the unbearable weight of being alone with it. With that pause came her overwhelming anxiety telling her to never stop moving — not even for one second — so her thoughts didn't have the chance to catch up with her.

Maybe that's why she hated coming home so much, but still made time for it every year. Her hunger to *just stop* constantly fighting with her thirst to *keep going*.

Sierra turned the water off and stepped out of the shower. Drying off, she pulled on her chosen outfit for the day and wrapped her damp hair up in a bun to keep it off her neck. The coolness of the shower was short lived as she opened the door to be blasted in the face with hot air that smelled like bacon and eggs.

Rounding the corner, she spotted Mildred cooking at the stove. There was a place set for her at the dining table. A plate of over easy eggs with two pieces of toast and three slices of bacon were arranged neatly on one of Mildred's white Corelle plates. A glass of orange juice and a mug of coffee were placed next to it.

"Thanks for cooking, Mom, but I told you I was fine with just a cup of coffee." Sierra's stomach grumbled in protest. Mildred turned away with her own full plate.

"Nonsense! Breakfast is the most important meal of the day." Mildred plopped down at the head of the table, next to Sierra's place. After placing a napkin neatly in her lap, she looked

up to where Sierra still stood in the doorway. “Come sit with me. I want to hear all about what you’ve been up to.”

Sierra’s stomach grumbled at her again and she surrendered, walking over to sit with Mildred. She grabbed the coffee first, sipping it as Mildred began eating.

In spite of Mildred’s apparent love of chatter, the two sat in complete silence, the only sound being Mildred’s fork scraping against the plate. Sierra looked around at the room, taking in the familiar sight, now bathed in daylight. The table was set for six with Mildred at the head and Sierra next to her. When Eliza got here, she would have a place on the other side of Mildred. Next to her would be Caleb with Tommy at the foot and Tessa next to Sierra.

“When’s Eliza getting here?” Sierra asked. Mildred looked at her wristwatch.

“Any minute now. Caleb was able to trade out his shift, so they got on the road early this morning.”

“Okay.” Sierra finished off her coffee and picked up a fork. She stabbed an egg, breaking it open. The yolk was perfectly runny, pooling down into the empty spaces on her plate, soaking into the toast. She got a fork full of egg in her mouth, letting the flavor melt on her tongue. Mildred had always been an amazing cook, even making something as simple as eggs and toast taste like heaven on earth.

“Thanks, Mom,” Sierra said, feeling her stress begin to melt away as she kept eating.

“How’s work going, Sissy?”

“It’s fine. Boss says I could be looking at a promotion at my annual review.”

“That’s amazing!” Mildred squeezed Sierra’s shoulder, a bright smile on her face. “I’m so proud of you!”

“Yeah, thanks.” Sierra ducked her head slightly in embarrassment, pulling out of her mom’s grasp as she reached for her orange juice. “It’s actually a pretty good pay increase, and I’d be kind of like a supervisor, I guess. I’m really excited about it actually. And my boss says that if I continue to prove myself in that position I could even—”

The slam of a car door outside made Mildred jump out of her seat.

“They’re here!” she sang, abandoning Sierra at the table as she raced for the door.

“Good talk,” Sierra murmured, listening as the door swung open.

“Nana!” Tommy and Tessa’s voices harmonized.

“Hey Mom,” came Eliza’s tired voice that Sierra knew a car ride with the twins must have caused.

“Come in, come in! I’ve just started breakfast. Are y’all hungry? Anyone want coffee?”

Mildred’s questions were met with a cacophony of answers and Sierra could hardly make out the individual orders as five pairs of footsteps pounded up the steps and inside. She sat still, hoping that no one would notice her, and she could keep eating in peace. That plan lasted all of two seconds.

“Aunt Sissy!” Two pairs of hands grabbed her arms, and Sierra was met with the toothy grins of her niece and nephew. They effectively yanked her to her feet, jumping up and down.

“Aunt Sissy! Aunt Sissy!”

The two had grown since the last time Sierra saw them, with Tessa standing an inch taller than Tommy. They looked just like Eliza, curly dark brown hair and green eyes, and Sierra couldn’t help but smile.

“Now hold on a minute, the only ones who call me Aunt Sissy are Tommy and Tessa. You two can’t possibly be them, you’re way too tall.”

“It is us, Aunt Sissy!” Tessa laughed, letting go of Sierra and spinning around. Tommy, however, kept a firm hold on to Sierra’s hand.

“Sup, kiddo,” Sierra said to him, and he grinned.

“Sup, kiddo,” he mimicked.

“Kids, go take your things to your room and let your Aunt breathe!” Caleb said as he entered the kitchen, heading straight for the fridge. Tessa latched onto Sierra’s waist for a moment before dragging her brother from the room. Sierra heard their laughter echo down the hallway as she turned her attention to her brother-in-law.

“Morning,” she said coolly, as she crossed her arms. Caleb looked up from the fridge, a carton of eggs and a gallon of milk in his hands.

“Morning,” he said with just as much enthusiasm, setting the milk and eggs on the counter. “Babe, you want coffee?” he called into the living room.

“No, I’m good. I will take some toast though.” Eliza rounded the corner, stopping at the doorway as soon as she laid eyes on Sierra.

Sierra stood frozen, taking in her sister and her swollen belly.

“You’re pregnant,” she said, dumbfounded.

“Surprise!” Eliza raced forward, as fast as she could, and hugged Sierra tightly. “I missed you so much!”

“You’re pregnant,” Sierra repeated, pulling away. “How could you not tell me you’re pregnant?”

“Well, I wanted to tell you in person. And the timing was never right for me to come see you, so I thought I’d wait.”

“But you’re like... Super pregnant. When are you due?” Sierra reached out to touch her sister’s stomach, but decided against it, crossing her arms again.

“Doctor says any day now. We’re having a girl, isn’t that so exciting? And guess the name we picked out.”

“*You* picked it out,” Caleb called from where he stood in front of the toaster. Eliza rolled her eyes, but her smile didn’t waver.

“Whatever. Go on, guess!”

Sierra blinked. She looked past Eliza to see Mildred standing in the doorway, smiling excitedly. She remembered when Eliza found out she was pregnant with twins. Sierra had been in her last year of college, busy with finals, but she had been the one to go out and buy a box of pregnancy tests, the one to hold Eliza’s hand as they waited for the two pink lines to show up. She was there at a handful of appointments when Caleb couldn’t make it. She was even the one Eliza chose to be in the delivery room. The third person to hold Tommy and Tessa after the doctor and Eliza herself.

Now it seemed like she was the last to know.

“Any day now?” Sierra murmured. “So, what would you have done if you had it before this week? Popped in and said, ‘hey Sierra, here’s a new baby I kept secret from you for nine months?’”

“Now that’s not fair.” Eliza crossed her arms, taking a step back. “It’s not my fault you’ve made yourself the most impossible person to see. You only come around here once a year.”

“I can’t just drop everything and drive out here every weekend like you do. Just text me next time, I don’t need to be present for everything.”

“But I want you to be. I want my kids to know their aunt.”

Sierra scoffed at her sister's words.

“Did you miss what happened when they saw me?” Sierra motioned in the direction the twins had run. “Tommy and Tessa know me just fine. So will this one.”

“No, they don't. You moved away right after they were born. Do you know what they said when I asked if they were excited to see you? ‘Who's Aunt Sissy?’ And that broke my heart. You're so far removed from this family, and every year I feel like I know you less and less. I'm scared for the day you decide to stop visiting altogether. Hell, Caleb's parents forgot I had a sister. So, forgive me for not telling you I'm pregnant, I assumed you wouldn't care! It definitely wouldn't have gotten you to visit sooner, it might drive you further away for all I know!” With every word, Eliza's voice rose until she was outright yelling, her face red and her eyes full of tears. She opened her mouth to say more, but decided against it, biting down on her lip.

Silence hung in the hot air as Sierra tried to form words to say. Everyone watched her, and she squirmed under their scrutinizing stares. Eliza was right, she knew that, but that didn't stop her from wanting to fight back. To defend herself for leaving and trying not to look back.

“I'm not going to apologize for going out and living my life,” she finally said, her voice steady. “I've always been in the shadows here. Always Eliza's little sister, always Milly's youngest daughter. Never just Sierra, never doing anything important enough around here to be thought about. Do you know how suffocating it is to be trapped in someplace that you'll never thrive in? And it was made even worse when you had to go get married and start popping out kids. So, what if Caleb's parents don't know me? So, what if the twins need to be reminded of who I am? It's not like you actually care to involve me. I might have moved away, but guess what Eliza? Maybe I wouldn't have if I actually felt like you wanted me around.” She swallowed

the lump in her throat and sighed. “Congratulations, Eliza. I really am excited for you. Sorry if I made you feel like I didn’t care, but you made me feel that way first.”

With those words, she turned away from her sister, letting her feet take her back to her room where she could escape any more conflict. She thought about leaving right then and there, but it would only prove Eliza’s point.

“Sierra,” Eliza said.

“What?” Sierra stopped, keeping her eyes fixed on the purple flowers painted on the door at the end of the hallway — her salvation out of this mess.

“That’s the name I picked out.”

Sierra bit her lip and tears burned her eyes, fighting to spill down her cheeks. She nodded and kept walking, opening her door, and stepping inside. She locked the door behind her, leaning against the wood for a moment as she tried to collect herself. Her legs felt weak, and her head was spinning. She stumbled away from the door, making her way to the window which she forced open.

A breeze blew against her face, warm but not nearly as hot as the air inside. She took a deep breath. Something brushed against her hand, and she looked down to see a firefly resting on one of her knuckles.

Sierra’s first instinct was to smash it, but as she readied her free hand the firefly glowed slightly. It was a faint light, Sierra could hardly see it in the sunlight, but it was there, nonetheless. It began to slowly crawl down her index finger, and she lifted her hand to watch. Her skin itched where its tiny legs stepped.

“I used to love fireflies, you know,” she whispered. The firefly paid her no mind as it rounded her fingernail. She rotated her hand. The firefly changed its path so it could stay upright.

Sierra waited until it reached her palm before cupping her hands together and stepping away from the window. She sat down on her bed and opened her hands back up. The firefly fluttered for a moment before landing back in her hand.

“They remind me of home... I guess that’s why I don’t really like them anymore...” In the next room, Sierra could hear Tessa and Tommy giggling, their footsteps shaking the floor as they ran around their room. She glanced at her suitcase by the door. “Maybe I should go...”

She looked back down at the firefly, who was thoroughly investigating every crease in her hand.

“So, what’s your story then? Avoiding your problems or is that just me?” A knock on the door answered her.

“Sierra? Can I come in?” Came Mildred’s voice. Sierra pursed her lips, letting the silence hang before the doorknob wiggled slightly.

“Why ask if you’re just gonna try to come in anyways?” She called back. The doorknob wiggled in response. Closing her fingers slightly over the firefly, Sierra stood up and unlocked the door, sitting back down as Mildred entered. She shut the door behind her and sat down next to Sierra. The bed frame groaned, and the mattress sagged slightly.

“So... want to talk about what just happened out there?” Mildred asked.

“Not really.”

“Okay.”

For once, Mildred didn’t try to fill the silence with her constant chatter. The silence hung around them, pressing in from all sides, suffocating Sierra. She felt like she was drowning with a weight on her chest that got heavier and heavier with each passing second. She held her breath, clawing for the surface.

“I stopped visiting home when I was twenty-one,” Mildred finally said. “I always felt like I had been born to the wrong parents, we were so different. *I* was so different. From my mom, my dad, my brother... Everyone. When my brother got married, his wife just clicked into place like she was the piece they were missing. And I was the piece that didn’t belong.”

“I... I thought you were an only child...” Sierra said, looking over at her mom. Mildred laughed slightly.

“I know. And why would you think any different? I never talked about my family, and they stopped reaching out. We just... went in different directions. I was always running, never looking back. And I regret never turning around.”

Sierra was silent as she realized how similar a path her own life had begun to take.

“My parents are long gone now, and my brother passed away a few years ago. His wife got in contact with me, inviting me to his funeral... I didn’t go. I mean, what place did I have there? In a family of strangers.” Sierra bit her lip, sniffing as tears trailed down her face. A whole side of her family she didn’t even know about, gone just like that.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured.

“That’s why I hold you and Eliza so close. Because I’m scared you’ll take after me, you’ll disappear, and I won’t live long enough to see you come back. And that same regret I’ve lived with every day will pass to you.”

Sierra didn’t say anything, and Mildred patted her leg.

“Just something to think about, Sierra. You might feel like you don’t belong here, but I sure can’t imagine having anyone else but you and Eliza as my daughters. I need you to know that.”

Something nudged against Sierra's hand, and she remembered the firefly trapped under her fingers. She opened her hand, letting the firefly flutter into the air. It glowed a little brighter now circling around the room lazily.

"You and your fireflies." Mildred shook her head with a smile. "I think they missed you, if nothing else gets you to visit, come back for them. They wouldn't understand if you disappeared." Sierra thought of the twins, how Eliza had to remind them of who she was. She had a feeling her mom wasn't talking about the fireflies.

"Well... I can't let them down, can I?" Sierra's mouth twitched into a smile.

"That's my girl." Mildred pulled Sierra into a hug. Sierra wrapped her arms around her mom tightly, breathing in the familiar smell of her perfume. "I'll leave you to think things over, but don't take too long. There is a very distraught pregnant woman out in the kitchen, and you and I both know that Caleb is no good at diffusing her anger."

Sierra laughed. Mildred rose, leaving the room. As the door closed, Sierra laid back in her bed, her legs dangling over the side. The firefly had come to rest on the underside of the top bunk, right in Sierra's line of sight. It circled around a few times before flying off again. Sierra sat up and watched it flutter back outside.

With a deep sigh, she stood up from the bed and walked back to the kitchen.

Eliza sat at the dining table, sadly eating a piece of toast. Mildred and Caleb were nowhere to be seen. Eliza looked up at Sierra, her eyes red with tears. Sierra didn't waste a second, taking long strides to get to her sister's side and hugging her tightly. Eliza immediately hugged her back.

"I'm so sorry," they both said in unison before laughing. Just like that, their anger melted away and they sat content in each other's embrace.

“I love you, Sissy,” Eliza murmured.

“I love you, too, Lizzy.” Sierra tightened her hold on her sister before they pulled away from each other, Eliza drying her eyes. She reached for her purse that was slung across the back of her chair.

“I have something for you.” She pulled out three photos, passing them to Sierra. She realized they were sonograms from what looked like every ultrasound Eliza had had throughout the pregnancy. Sierra watched her newest niece grow before her eyes. She blinked rapidly as she felt tears forming.

“Are you really naming her after me?” she murmured, tracing the shape of the baby’s head on the most recent scan.

“Of course,” Eliza said, laying a hand on her shoulder. “I wanted to name her after the best person I know.”

Sierra dropped the pictures on the table and hugged her sister again. For the first time in a long time, she felt at home.

The Glass Dagger

The candles on the chandelier flickered over the ballroom, reflecting against the marble floor. Lively music echoed around the room as the masked guests danced together. Cheerful but polite conversation filled the room, intricately decorated masks preventing anyone from distinguishing friends from strangers, peasants from nobles.

Prince Cassian was happy for this required disguise. While he had spent most of the ball dancing with numerous women, none were any wiser to the fact that they danced with the future king. They were just women who were excited for even the chance to step foot inside the castle walls, let alone have the chance to attend such an auspicious occasion. Unfortunately for Cassian, every woman he found himself with was quite dull. It seemed they'd all replaced any hope for a personality with expensive silks and shining jewels — all bought with that month's wage — meant to impress any eligible man they might meet at the royal ball. The woman he currently danced with prattled on and on about her numerous younger sisters — who had all been beside themselves with jealousy ever since they first read her invitation.

Cassian hated to admit it, but he had long forgotten her name, losing it with the dozen names she had spouted out. Was it Beatrice? Or perhaps Bethany?

“All of us have names beginning with ‘B,’” she had said with she first listed off her family tree, unprompted. “My father likes things to be the same, he'd give us all the same name if he could.” The prince had begun to wish her father had done just that.

The music paused, signaling a change in partners. Cassian fought back a sigh of relief as the woman curtsied and flashed him a smile, barely visible under the mask that nearly covered her entire face. She did have a nice smile, he admitted to himself. He had lost track of how many

women he had danced with since the start of the ball, and they were all beginning to blur together.

At first, he tried to remember names, but that idea was quickly scrapped after he met three Elizabeth's in the span of thirty minutes. Then he focused on remembering masks. Bethany-Beatrice-Belle or whatever her name was wore a silver mask with blue designs painted on it. It had been the sixth of its kind he had seen. In fact, most of the women had matching masks. He imagined they all went to the same modiste the moment they received their invitation to the ball.

Cassian then settled on remembering different qualities about each woman.

"It was a pleasure dancing with you, sir," the B-named woman, who had a nice smile and talked too much, said.

"You as well," he replied, bowing. Before he could even straighten completely, a different woman stood in front of him. She wore a mask he hadn't seen before, the patchy paint work on the plaster and fraying lace lining the edges telling him it was homemade. The music started back up, and they began to dance. This woman was much quieter than the previous one, keeping her focus on her feet as she struggled to follow Cassian's lead. He was happy to just listen to the music. As he spun the two of them around, someone caught his eye, standing at the top of the stairs. He froze, the woman in his arms stumbling to a stop.

Emerald green, that's what Cassian saw first. His vision filled with the bold color that no other woman had dared to wear, letting it haze his mind. Then he saw her. A woman with honey-colored hair stood alone at the top of the stairs, dressed in a green gown that glittered in the candlelight. Her face was covered with a golden mask that had green and purple accents. A curtain of beads hung over the lower half of her face, making only her eyes visible.

And Cassian couldn't take his eyes off them. Even with the distance they were standing away from each other, he could see they shined the deepest shade of blue, staring straight at him with hypnotic intensity. Without a word, the prince abandoned the quiet woman he had been dancing with, pushing his way through the guests. The mysterious woman descended the stairs to meet him.

"My lady," he greeted with a deep bow, holding out his hand. "Will you do me the honor of having your first dance?" Her gloved hand slipped into his.

"The honor is all mine, my lord."

Cassian led her to the center. He placed his other hand on the woman's waist and pulled her closer. They began to sway gently to the music, their eyes never leaving each other.

"Tell me, what's your name?" he whispered.

"My name doesn't deserve to be spoken in such grand halls," she said, her voice smooth and steady.

"I'm not asking for you to announce it to the court, merely whisper it in my ear." Cassian caught the faintest trace of a smile behind the swaying beads of her mask.

"Perhaps you'd tell me yours first."

"Cassian," he said without a moment's hesitation, the draw he felt toward the woman growing even stronger. The woman didn't seem shocked by his admission, but attempted to pull away to curtsy, nonetheless. The prince tightened his hold. "I believe you owe me a name, my lady."

"Alia," she murmured, her voice nearly lost in the music as she bowed her head ever so slightly. "Your highness."

“But that’s where you’re wrong, Alia. I am no royal tonight. In this moment, you and I are one in the same.”

Alia lifted her head and met Cassian’s gaze again. She felt her face grow hot, whether from the mask or her closeness to the crown prince, she couldn’t quite tell. Everything had gone just as the Godmothers had predicted. Down to every step.

Her body felt heavy, weighed down with the gifts they had adorned her with before she departed for the castle earlier that night.

A spell on her dress had ensured Cassian’s instant infatuation.

A charm on her mask shifted her eyes from brown to a hypnotizing blue that he couldn’t tear his gaze from.

An enchantment over his name that granted her control of his mind.

And finally, a curse on a glass dagger, hidden under the layers of her skirt.

Even as Alia danced, she could feel the dagger against her thigh, beating with the very last of the Fae magic. The music swelled and Cassian spun her around, pulling her into his arms so her back was pressed against his chest. His lips were inches from her ear.

“You’re a marvelous dancer,” he noted. Alia turned her head slightly, their lips just a breath away.

“Thank you,” she said. “I suppose you could say I’ve practiced for this moment.” The room spun again, and they faced each other.

“Is that so?”

“It’s not every day a girl gets the chance to dance with a prince,” she explained. Cassian’s mouth twitched into a smile.

“Is it everything you dreamed of?” he asked. Alia took her eyes off the prince for a moment to survey the crowd as they spun around her. This was the closest she had ever been to any of her targets the Godmothers had given her.

“It’s overwhelming,” she decided, bringing her gaze back to the prince. The song slowed to a stop along with the two of them. As the room stilled, the hall filled with applause for the musicians. Alia’s hands fell away from Cassian’s as they joined in. All around them, people changed partners, but Cassian and Alia remained in front of each other. The music began again.

“Shall we venture outside?” The prince raised his voice slightly over the lively tune. Alia merely nodded, letting the prince take her hand and pull her from the center of the ballroom. They made their way to a large double door that led outside. Cassian spoke quietly with a guard posted at the door. Alia didn’t focus on what they said to each other, her hand fluffing the skirt of her dress as she discreetly searched for the pocket that was expertly hidden amongst the pleats. The dagger sat impatiently, tempting her to wrap her fingers around its hilt.

“Thank you.” Cassian’s voice pulled her back as the guard opened the door for them and he pulled her out into the cool night air.

He took her straight to the gardens, hedges towering over them, the smell of roses tickling their noses. The music from the ballroom faded into silence as they drew further and further away. They passed a number of guards standing watch, but Cassian merely nodded in their direction, taking Alia through the maze of hedges. He expertly navigated the winding path, before slowing to a stop as they came to a courtyard that sat at the center of it all.

A fountain stood as a tall centerpiece, a pool of water surrounding it. Lanterns were lit along the perimeter and crisscrossed above their heads, looking like bright stars against the night

sky. On the other side of the maze, Alia could see a bell tower stretching up to cover the moon, casting a large shadow over them.

“My mother oversaw the planting of this garden,” Cassian mused. “Down to every last detail.

“It’s beautiful,” Alia murmured. She had never seen any human made thing quite compare to the beauty that the Fae crafted, but she found this courtyard came close enough. She cast a glance at the prince, who eyed the garden with a sudden sadness in his eyes. “You must miss her.” Cassian nodded stiffly, squaring his shoulders.

“With her sudden passing, the pressure for me to continue her rule has become all the more dire. My father cannot be king, but—”

“But you cannot ascend to the throne without a wife,” Alia finished for him. Cassian nodded, stepping away from her to sit on the edge of the fountain. He pulled his mask off and wiped his hand over his face.

“That’s what this ball is for... To find me a wife.” He paused and stared at Alia, who still stood at the threshold of the courtyard. “I realize this might seem sudden to you, but there’s something about you Alia... You’re unlike any woman in there.” Alia approached the fountain, eyeing his face carefully. He looked just as the Godmothers described. He shared the same strong jaw and complexion as his father, but his green eyes and dark hair mirrored his mother.

“Are you asking me what I think you’re asking?” Alia searched his face further, spotting a small white scar underneath his left eye, solidifying what she already knew. He was her target. She sat down next to him.

“I am, and if you deny me, I pity the woman I do end up with, for I fear I could never feel for her the same way.”

Alia raised one hand to his face, keeping their eyes locked while her other hand disappeared into the folds of her dress, finally grasping the hilt of the dagger. She felt its magic pulse through her hand, up her arm, and to her heart. Its power tugged at her, egging her on.

Now was her moment.

Cassian brushed the beading over her face away and then his lips were on hers. Alia froze as she felt each spell, charm, and enchantment melt away from the prince's mind. All that was left was the curse still beating in her hand. It took everything in Alia not to push him away. Instead, she drew the dagger out and drove it toward Cassian's heart.

Cassian's eyes opened; his mind cleared of magic. Where Alia should have been met with flesh, there was instead iron as Cassian drew his sword in defense. The dagger flew from Alia's hand, clattering a few feet away. Both of them leapt to their feet.

"You," Cassian growled. Alia eyed the dagger, but Cassian stepped in front of it. "You'll die for that." His eyes glowed with anger as he pointed his sword at Alia's chest.

"Only if you can find me," she hissed.

The bells in the tower sounded out their midnight chimes, and Alia fled.

Cassian stood frozen in place as he lost sight of the woman in the darkness. Whatever magic she placed on him was still at work, his mind clouded in confusion.

"Guards! Guards!" he shouted out. The two guards who had been standing at the maze entrance came running into the courtyard.

"What is it, sire?" one of them asked.

"Find that woman, she fled that way." He pointed in the direction of the bell tower and the guards followed his order. Cassian turned his attention to the peculiar dagger he had knocked

from the woman's hand. Though glass, it remained intact on the stone floor. He bent to pick it up when a hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"I wouldn't do that, son." Cassian looked up to meet the face of the Prince Consort Lucian, his father.

"Why not?"

"It's glass," Lucian said simply, as though the answer was obvious. "Come, let's get you inside. There may be more of them out here." Cassian let his father lead him back into the castle. They walked in the opposite direction of the ball that still carried on — the guests unaware of the danger their beloved prince had been in.

"How did you know I was out there?" Cassian asked. "Or better yet, how did you know something happened?"

Lucian was silent, pulling Cassian into an empty sitting room. Once locking the door, he allowed himself to speak freely.

"A guard alerted Captain Rolan that you had gone outside with someone. Rolan then informed me."

"That doesn't answer my second question."

"You know better than to seek private company with strangers, no matter how beautiful they appear to be," Lucian gently scolded his son. "I knew something wasn't right, and it seems my concerns were valid."

"I know, I know." Cassian sat down in a chair. Lucian sat across from him. "It's the strangest thing... I don't even know how I got out there..." His voice was distant as he tried to remember.

“What do you mean?” Lucian sat forward, staring at his son intently. Cassian attempted to piece together the events of that night.

“I was dancing with another woman; she had a handmade mask and didn’t speak a word... Then I saw green.”

“Green?” his father inquired.

“Yes... a green dress. That woman was in a green dress. And then, we were dancing together.”

“Did she say anything to you?”

“I don’t remember.” Cassian shook his head, trying to get the fractured pieces of his memory to fall into place. “Why can’t I remember? It just happened...”

“I’ve only heard of Fae magic being able to affect someone like this,” Lucian mused. “I feared the Fae would try something once your mother died. Though I never thought they would attempt something so foolish.”

“You’re telling me that woman was a Faery?” Cassian’s lips curled in disgust as he remembered the drawings he had seen of Fae in old story books. Monsters with scaly skin or fur. Forked tongues and tails. Cat-like eyes and razor-sharp teeth.

“It’s a possibility.” Lucian paused to look at his son’s face. “They may not look much different from human you know.”

“Tell that to my old tutor,” he retorted. “Why are the Fae after me? We’ve done them no harm.”

“Faeries are ancient beings, many of them have been around this kingdom for centuries. Whatever they despise us for, you can be sure our ancestors are to blame.” Lucian’s mouth hung open for an extra moment more as if he had more to say, but then decided against it. “Anyhow,

they are dangerous. I advise you remain indoors for the remainder of the night while we arrange searches for the girl.”

“Yes, Father.”

The morning sun peered into Alia’s room the next morning, illuminating where she lay collapsed on her bed, still dressed in her ballgown with her mask pressed crookedly over her face. Her eyes flickered open and a groan escaped her lips, her mind flashing with memories of last night.

Her feet ached. Upon sitting up, she saw that she had lost a shoe at some point. With a quick kick, the other flew off and thumped to the ground. She pulled herself from her bed and shuffled to her vanity, pulling off the jewels that weighed down her person. Her fingers struggled with the ribbons holding her mask in place, but soon they loosened enough for her to pull it off. In the mirror, the blue of her irises shifted back to brown. She pulled at her hair, all of it coming off in one piece to reveal her head shaved with intricate designs. Leaving the wig on her vanity, she started on the unenviable task of unlacing the back of her gown.

It was about halfway undone when the door swung open with a bolt of magic. The three Godmothers crept into her room, surrounding Alia.

“What happened?” Hana spat, her cat-like pupils narrowing as Alia froze in place.

“The prince lives,” she said. A sharp jab to her ribs made her flinch and she turned to be met with Sera, who clicked her clawed hands together.

“The obvious,” she hissed. “It’s how the wretched being still draws breath that we fail to understand.”

“He saw the attack coming. I had to flee, or risk being killed,” Alia explained.

“Better dead than a failure,” Toria whispered in her ear. Alia whirled around to face the third Godmother, whose scales shined in the morning light.

“We must entrust the task to another.” Hana said.

“There is no other.” Toria argued.

“There are plenty.” Came Hana’s response.

“Give me another chance.” Alia begged, turning her head to look each Godmother in the eyes.

“We’ll deal out your punishment later!” Sera snapped, holding out her hand. “The dagger,” she ordered. Alia paled.

“I..”

“Give us the dagger, you stupid girl. Are you so incompetent that you cannot follow the simplest order?”

“It’s gone,” Alia confessed, her words barely audible.

“Gone?” Sera’s voice shook with tethered anger. Her open palm swung forward and slapped across Alia’s cheek. The contact stung and burned, her face growing hot. Hana and Toria laid hands on their sister’s shoulders in an attempt to calm her, but Alia could see the same rage behind their eyes. She quickly fell to her knees, bowing her head to the three Fae.

“I can right this wrong. Do not sacrifice others for my missteps. I will not fail.”

“You have failed us already. Nothing you can say will change that,” Sera said. Alia dared to look her in the eyes.

“Let me take an oath, then.”

Cassian stood at the open window in his chambers eyeing the darkened forest in the distance, barely visible over the horizon. Behind him, Captain Rolan gave his testimony of last night's events.

"We followed her trail passed the castle town and toward the Fae Forest. Then her footsteps vanish without a trace."

"And not one of you ventured further?" Cassian whirled around.

"The forest would not allow us entry, sire. Every opening in the thicket was closed as soon as we dared to step beyond the Fae boundary." Cassian refrained from rolling his eyes, noticing something clutched in the Captain's hands.

"What is that?" he asked. Rolan looked down, suddenly remembering the object in his hands.

"One of our men found it, I thought it might be useful." He placed it on the prince's desk. Cassian raised a brow.

"A shoe?"

"The lady's shoe, I believe," Rolan explained. Cassian leaned forward, resting his hands on the desk.

"And how do you suppose a shoe could help me hunt down this otherworldly creature?" Rolan opened his mouth, but no words came out. "Just as I thought. Tell me, how does someone so half-witted become the Captain of my Guard?" Cassian slammed his hand down hard on the table, knocking over the delicately placed shoe.

"My apologies—" Cassian held up a hand to silence Rolan.

"Get out of my sight, before I find someone better to replace you."

“Yes, sire.” The Captain quickly bowed and exited the room, a luxury not currently allowed to the Crown Prince. Cassian grabbed the shoe and threw it across the room, hearing it crash against his armor stand. He let out a strangled scream, itching to go out and hunt for the Faery himself, despite his father’s wishes to stay within the castle walls. He turned back to the window.

The dark Fae Forest taunted him in the distance.

In the middle of Alia’s room, Godmother Sera took hold of Alia’s wrist as Hana read out the ancient Oath in Faespeech. In all her years living in the Godmothers coven, Alia had never had the privilege of learning the ancient language fluently, but she gathered the gist of what she had promised to.

There were three oaths in Fae lore. The Service Oath was as simple as it sounded, a mere barter between Fae and Humankind to make both lives easier. Such an Oath was far too easy for Alia to repay what she owed the Godmothers.

They instead chose the Life Oath for her. In short, her life or the prince’s. Should she fail a second time, her life was forfeited to the will of the Fae ancestors. And they were not known to be forgiving.

Hana chanted out the Oath, Toria’s voice echoing it back to her. Alia’s small room filled with bodiless voices. Sera’s nails dug into her wrist.

“Do you, Alia, swear on your life that this will be done?” she shouted over the many voices. Shadows crowded around Alia, weighing down on her shoulders.

“To this oath, I swear my life,” she responded, having heard the same words spoken by countless others who had tricked themselves into such a deal. The voices faded and the shadows lifted. Sera released her arm, indents of her nails left on her skin.

“Retrieve the dagger and kill the prince. Then we will all be free,” Sera ordered. Alia merely bowed her head.

Free. That had always been the Godmothers goal ever since Alia was young. The third and final Fae Oath had long since been banned from the halls of their coven — centuries doing nothing to weaken their desire to break the Oath they found themselves trapped in.

The Bloodline Oath had been promised only once, and the Fae would not allow themselves to be so easily tricked by humans ever again.

No matter how hard Cassian tried, he still couldn't remember the night of the ball. Two days had passed and there had been no sign of the Faery. The court was on edge. His mother's grave had not yet settled, his bloodline not yet secured. His death would mean an end to his family's monarchy.

So, Cassian had not stepped foot outside since that night. The night he couldn't remember. The moment he saw that woman, his mind went blank. Only blurred images of them dancing, talking, and walking littered his thoughts.

The moment his lips met hers, however, everything snapped back into place. He remembered confusion — when had they walked out to the garden? He remembered her tense at his touch. She smelled of the forest — had she always smelled like that, or was it just the garden around them? He remembered opening his eyes and being thankful that he did when he saw the glint of a dagger held tightly in her hands.

His father had thought it improper for Cassian to attend a ball with his sword, that there was no need for him to have a weapon when the event was so closely guarded. Cassian remembered the overwhelming sense that something was wrong with this woman in his arms. How had she gotten passed the guards? How had she lured him to such a secluded place?

The next moments were a blur for the prince, and the woman was gone before he could get his bearings. In the next days, the only thing Cassian could find in his muddled memory was her name. Alia. There was a power behind names, perhaps that's why he could recall it so clearly. Since he was young, he had been taught the trickster ways of the Fae and how they stole the names of their enemies. And he had given his away so easily. Despite the other spells she had placed over him melting away with a kiss, his name still felt tethered by an invisible force, slowly being tugged away from him with every day that passed. What would happen when his name was no longer his own? What use did the Fae have for it?

Two days had passed and there was still no sign of her. He doubted she would try and kill him again so soon after the failed attempt, but he was under strict orders by his father to not leave the castle grounds.

His boredom had him pacing the halls in a haze. And today, that pacing led him to the gallery and straight to the portrait of his mother, a black veil still hung over the frame. Cassian studied her face; she was much younger in the painting than he had ever remembered her being. It was painted on the day after her wedding to his father, the day before she was crowned queen. He was due to have a similar painting done by the end of the season — pending he had found himself a wife by then.

“Rolan told me you shouted at him.” Cassian jumped at the sound of his father’s voice.

“The coward deserved it,” he replied curtly.

“I believed you two to be friends. That is why your mother appointed him to be Captain,” Lucian mused, gazing at the portrait of his wife.

“Perhaps he should have earned it.”

Lucian hummed in response, letting the conversation go. Cassian thought he would welcome the silence, but his fractured thoughts got the best of him.

“How could a Fae slip past all our guards and get to me without any struggle? Were you not in charge of the guard that night? Do you realize how many people you put in danger?” Cassian said, his voice growing louder and louder with every word. His face felt hot, his blood boiling as he locked the blame meant for the Fae onto his father.

“Cassian—”

“You’ll speak when I tell you to. You have no power; you have no crown. You’re just a widower, leeching off your dead wife’s fortune.”

“Cassian!” Lucian’s voice boomed and echoed through the silent gallery. “Your mother and I raised you better than to equate power with respect. I may not be king, but I am your father. You will not speak to me in such a tone.” The prince’s eyes went wide, his father had always been soft spoken and avoided conflict like the plague. “Your mother entrusted me to look after the throne and ensure it was kept stable and secure until you could sit upon it. The events at the ball were the fault of no one’s. The Fae are tricksters, they’ve had centuries to perfect their trade.”

“I understand, Father...” Cassian fixed his gaze back on his mother. “I’m sorry... I’m just so... overwhelmed.”

“That’s okay, Cassian. An assassination attempt is nothing to take lightly. You have a right to be angry, just remember who the anger should be directed toward. Not at me and surely

not at your friends.” Lucian laid a hand on his son’s shoulder as they both looked up at the late Queen. “She would be proud of you, Cassian.”

“She’d be proud of you too, father.”

That afternoon, Cassian found himself in the royal library, pulling down every book that listed Fae in the title. He ended with a stack at the end of the table he sat at, flipping through the first book on the pile, simply titled *Fae Magic*. It was large and old, covered in a layer of dust.

The glass dagger sat in front of him on a piece of linen, which it had been previously wrapped in to avoid anyone touching it directly. Cassian scanned each page for the word glass or weapon carefully, reaching the midpoint of the book when he came to a chapter called “The Art of Imbuing.”

The heading under it read “Fae Weaponry.”

“The most common use for Fae magic is imbuing everyday items with charms, spells, or curses,” he read aloud to himself. “While simple charms and most spells can be imbued to nearly any object, curses require a delicate imbuing process. Wood and fabric disintegrate the moment a curse touches them, and iron cannot hold any sort of Fae magic. Thus, Fae have turned to glass in order to house their otherworldly curses.”

Cassian glanced at the dagger with dread. Intricate designs were carved into the transparent blade and hilt. It was a perfect cut of glass without a single blemish or crack, glittering in the afternoon sun that shined through the window. In the silence of the library, he thought he heard a beat that did not fall in line with his own heart. He turned his attention back to the book, skimming through the page.

“Fae weapons cannot physically be used by the Fae, though the reasons why have been lost to time. They instead are entrusted to human allies.” The prince blinked and read the sentence over again, then once more.

“Human allies?” he echoed.

The door to the library swung open and Rolan entered, bowing slightly.

“The Prince Consort said you wished to speak with me,” he explained.

“Yes, Rolan.” Cassian turned his attention away from the book and stood up. “I wanted to apologize for my outburst yesterday.” Rolan lifted his head.

“Sire?”

“It was wrong of me to call you half-witted and a coward.”

“You didn’t call me a coward,” he pointed out.

“I did to my father, and it was out of line. I’m sorry.”

“You’re forgiven, Cassian, but you were also right. As Captain, I should put my own fears aside. As should my knights.”

“Perhaps you would be happy to hear that your fear may be unneeded.”

“What do you mean?”

Cassian waved Rolan further into the room and took his seat again. As Rolan peered over the prince’s shoulder, he read out the sentence again.

“She’s human,” Rolan murmured.

“Exactly, and if she’s human, she’ll be easy to kill.”

“Perhaps, but to be an ally with the Fae... She has immense power backing her.”

“But she is human all the same.” Cassian flipped the book closed and retrieved another from the pile. “Tell the guard we will be patrolling the Fae Forest border tomorrow at first light. If she can enter, so can we.”

“Yes, sire.” Rolan bowed and left the room with haste.

Cassian flipped open the next book, reading all he could as the sun began to set. The pile grew smaller and smaller until there was none left. But the remaining books said nothing more about the human allies the first book touched on. He let out a sigh as he closed the final book, the sky outside now dark and the room illuminated by candlelight.

As he began putting the books away one by one, something caught his eye behind the books already on the shelf. He pulled out a stack and reached into the shadows to pull out a thin paperback book with glittering gold letters and faded pages. His heart skipped a beat as he read the title.

The Fae Assassins Guild.

Abandoning the remaining books he had left to put away, the prince sat back down in his chair and opened the threadbare book. The pages nearly crumbled between his fingers as he flipped through them, realizing the words were not in the same uniformed print as the other books in the royal collection, all of which came from the same printing press. These words were handwritten, the ink sloppy and smudged across each page. Cassian read the words carefully.

Fae Assassins are raised like any other Fae child in the Forest, with one drawback — they are human. Their mortality makes them useless after their prime years have long passed, making them easily replaceable.

The Fae Godmothers personally oversee training themselves, giving them access to Fae history, language, and magic. Fae Assassins are bred to kill and once given a target, they will not rest until the job is done. Glass is their weapon of choice, imbued with the worst curses the Fae have ever dared to create.

Cassian looked back up at the dagger, hearing the beating again, only this time it was louder, pounding in his ears. Voices whispered around him in a language he didn't recognize. Alia's face appeared next to his in the reflection of the dagger and he swore he heard her voice in his ear.

"Cassian..." He jumped up, sending his chair clattering to the floor as he looked behind him.

There was nothing but the endless bookcases, glowing candlelight, and the beating of the glass dagger.

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