

“Character: The Flame of Writing,”

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## INTRODUCTION

*Working Title: The Keeper: A Ring's Promise*

*Abstract:*

*The Keeper: A Ring's Promiser* follows three parallel plots; two reside in the present, the other in the past. The knowledge revealed in one increases the precariousness of the other. While in the very beginning, these three perspectives were intended to volley within one book, the course has evolved. Due to this becoming a series, the plots will intertwine slower than intended. The introduction of the others will be woven later than intended. In this first novel, the reader will follow the dynamic journey of a young Amara Knightfall. The soon-to-be queen, Elaraina Wastereon, will be tied into the plot towards the middle. Malin Baxter, the keeper before Amara, will star in book two, as the long-lost terrible king comes into play.

These three characters' fates are forever merged by the one thing they share: a bloodline. Each borne to keep watch over a ring and a kingdom. When the ring is lost, the fate of their world as they know it hangs by an ever-thinning thread. My goal for this piece is to become a character-focused series for teenagers and young adults. I aim to mature the text from its birth when I was a young high schooler. My goal is to include more conflict and action within the story to propel the development of the protagonists.

*Writer's Philosophy:*

Writing is one of the only times in our lives we get close to experiencing the wonder of creation from all sides: the world, the people, the language, the timeline. It is the forging of iron in a burning flame; all decisions are ours, but the heat of the flame may add its own inspiration.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

### *Impact of Writing:*

Writing can be the most compelling and illustrative muse of self-expression, parallel to the essences of music and art but deeper. It is more intimate and wildly more moving. It is not a painting or song that stays with a person for years on end. No, it is a piece of literature that takes root with people. It is the written language that lays claim to the heart, and to the mind, refusing to release its grip. Its mark left behind like a tender caress to the cheek, a warm hand upon the shoulder. Readers are moved, propelled, understood, and engaged for years beyond the first encounter.

What an honor that is, to have such an opportunity to connect to and traverse not only cultures and languages but time itself. To cultivate an experience so impactful that for decades, centuries, possibly even millennia, it is that piece of writing that continues to imprint upon a soul? That is what makes it unique in its medium. The severity with which writing brings people through a threshold towards broadening their horizons, understanding more of their purpose, or a sense of belonging. Those brutally beautiful aspects are what brought me towards writing because before I picked up that pen and placed it on paper, I was a reader.

Reading is what introduced me to writing. I was nearly eleven when I decided to pick up a book of my choosing and dive in. It had been library day, and I had finally been tasked to pick a book for myself. Scouring the low wooden shelves, I feverishly looked for something that wasn't *boring*. Every book my English teacher read droned on and on about things irrelevant to me. Not one text had anyone my age. Not one text bestowed me, or my classmates, with adventure and suspense, but now. Now was the time to find that *one book* that might not be the bane of my existence for a book report.

Thumbing my way through various hardcovers and paperbacks, the smell of old paper and glue wafting as I drifted past, a title caught my eye. On the cover were two young children, a boy, and a girl, precariously perched in a boat on a river, a crocodile snapping at its edge. My finger snatched it from the shelves. Turning in over to skim the back, a spark of interest ignited. This was it. This was the book. I flipped it back over, reading the title. *The Magic Treehouse: Afternoon on the Amazon*. Confidently sauntering towards the check-out desk, my English teacher eyeballed my selection. I did my best to look down my nose at her, though being a whole head shorter made that hard. I had picked my book, and *she* could stuff it. I placed it on the counter. As that clear tone sounded, a wildfire started.

*Alight with Sparks*

Love at first novel, my passion for reading grew and grew. Nearly every month, I was not a fast reader, I devoured a book like a flame does paper. My tastes grew and developed the older I got. By the time I reached tenth grade, more than one hundred novels were read. What might this have to do with my writing? Everything. My English teacher, Mrs. Brady, my sophomore year, challenged us to compose a fictional narrative that followed the journey of one unique character. With the plots I had consumed at my back, I dove pen-first into an assignment that altered how I read forever. Growing up in a protestant church, my pastor always spoke about the Word being a living, breathing thing. It never quite made sense to me. Yes, I absorbed fiction like oxygen, yet the Word of God never jumped out of the Bible for me. At least, not until I was tasked to create a work of my own that I understood: a text is a living organism, a breathing creation.

My hands cramped as I neared the last of my story. Pride swelled in my lungs, expanding my chest. I wrote a whole story. I implemented the elements of literature that Mrs. Brady taught

us about. I pulled from the texts I'd read to orchestrate a tale befitting of the fictional character I made. When I submitted the assignment, I prayed to the Lord. I asked Him to please not let this attempt fail. Mrs. Brady returned the story a week later. Across the top of the paper, she'd written in red the following words that pushed a gear into place: "Madison, this could be the beginnings of a wonderful children's novel! Wow!" At that moment, a veil lifted. I *knew* what I wanted to do with my life. I *knew* my prayers had been answered. I *knew* what gift the Lord had embraced me with because the joy I'd felt while writing was incomparable to anything else I'd ever experienced. My gift dwelled in my ability to write, and not simply write, but to tell stories of journeys, of warriors, of places far away. And through those tales, I could show the stories of redemption, love, and faith.

*Faith, Love, and Flames*

My faith has always played a role in the fictional pieces that I write. Moreover, faith and trust in the Lord have guided me through all instances of my writing. From the necessary pieces for class assignments throughout my academic years to the curriculum that I manifest for my classroom, faith in God has granted me the capability to put forth the talents that were gifted to me to create. Writing, or any form of creation, is the closest we can get to experiencing the wonder and love of God. When we mimic the practice of turning what seems to be nothing into a beautiful work of art, we perform the highest form of flattery: imitation. When challenging myself to sit before my computer and strum the keys to the rhythm of the story, I focus on who it is for and from whom it came. The embers lying in my heart burst into flames. There is something so captivating and enthralling about creating when it becomes clear that the practice demonstrates how spectacular and wondrous God's creation is.

As I matured in my faith and my writing, I noticed the subtle inclination I had towards themes that fueled the concrete thematic truths of Christianity. I found that I listened and related more to the gospel songs that dealt with trials and shortcomings that lead to redemption and salvation. Sermons that held feet to fires and shook with the brimstone that might scare others, moved me to see the miracle that is Jesus Christ and how great the love of our Lord spans. This, in turn, translated to the plots I found more mesmerizing. Yes, black and white characters are *good* and moving. Yet it is the character that wrestles with what it means to be alive, what it means to be human, that sunk its claws into me. Morally gray characters who struggle with the evil parts of themselves, and who persist in resisting those tendencies, who strive for goodness regardless of their history, drew me in. My writing began altering to encompass these arcs and demonstrations of forgiveness, redemption, and imperfection. The mercy of the Lord, the understanding of our God, wove itself way into what I levitated toward.

### *The Kindling*

When I reach for my writing, I find the encouragement that these tales bring. I find reassurance from Jesus that he *knows* me. He understands what it means to be human, to struggle, to battle the lures of the world. He sees me for what I truly am, and still... He offers me salvation. He offers a hand extended across the narrow parapet, aiding me forward. It is preached so often that we *must* have faith in the Lord, we *must* place our trust in Him and Him alone. When I write, when I read, when I listen, the question I have for this is: How could I not? God places so much faith in us, so much mercy, so much love, how could I not aim to demonstrate my faith in Him in all things that I do? Placing myself in my writing grants me the opportunity to show the Lord a work of my faith. It is not my gift that propels and pours the story from me, but the Lord who provides it. I was asked, "What fuels your writing? What ties your faith to your

writing?” It is faith the Lord has in me, so much so that he gifted me the ability to knit words, lines, and sentences together. That is what fuels me.

As I grew in my ability and interest in writing, the connection between it and my relationship with God grew. I saw these two elements overlapping consistently. I began to notice how the threads woven into each of them pulled tighter. The closer I paid attention to my approach to creativity, the clearer it became that my writing acted as the kindling to the spark of God’s gift to me. Creativity and writing and Christianity are systematically welded together. There can be no separating these two elements. Creativity is an act of faith. When I sit to write, paint, or draw, there is no logistical plan for what I intend to do outside of a generic and basic idea. This is especially true for my writing. Why, you might ask? Let me put it simply: Because the characters and their purpose take charge. I come practically empty-handed, knowing that no matter how well I believe I have organized, dreamt, or prepared, and as I begin writing, those plans practically pounce out the window. The majority of the time, I am there for the ride. It is compelling to feel a presence beyond myself that pushes the strokes of my fingers onto the pages. My hold on control is relinquished freely because I am placing my faith in the gift itself; I am placing my faith in God’s will. With every word and keystroke I make, I breathe oxygen into the blooming embers of those sprouting flames of fiction. My philosophy of writing, of creativity, has always been the fire within. A flame that burns brightly due to the faith I have in Him. Gaining strength especially when the plans that are drafted become thwarted by whispered plot twists that flicker from *nowhere*.

It is said, “If you ever want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.” How true that statement becomes when we look at it through the lens of writing. It is true that when we rely too heavily –or solely– on ourselves for what our selfish hearts want out of life, not leaning on the



one who can make it possible, often enough, we fall short. Therefore I do my best to approach my creative outlets, and much else in my life, in the same manner that I do my writing— with some outline but never a full-fledged plan. I give a general idea of where, of how, and of what I am doing, but I release my grip on the wheel. I place my faith in God, and I feel His presence guide me. When I invite God to help me, He gently encourages, pushes, and advises my choices. The heat of His warmth surrounds me and I can see the lights guiding His direction. God aids me in finding words, finding themes, and cultivating character. In the most Fatherly-like manner, God assists me in the passions that I have, not as an overbearing dad bent on *only one right way* to do it, but as a loving father who's proud of the steps I'm taking, giving a helping hand when I need it (which is often).

When approaching creativity, writing, drawing, and painting as a loose idea that is open to the guidance of Christ, a greater sense of how God wishes to be involved in every part of our lives, big or small, develops. Creativity, as stated before, is our highest form of flattery to the Lord. It requires no elaborate plan, no confining measures to ensnare or trip up the process. It simply requires a mustard seed of faith and an openness to the influence of God.

Balanced tightly with faith in the Lord is the other, equal part of writing: the knowledge, understanding, and implementation of literary devices used in writing. While emotion, faith, and influence are all vital, necessary pieces that provoke the creation of a whole work, it is the craft that sinks its hooks into the heart of the reader, that knots and ties a string of connection, leaving them forever united with a novel that has moved them. In my capstone, I aim to approach my novel with the utmost seriousness, utilizing literary practice and elements to ignite the fire in my audience to pick up their packs and follow the story. To do so, and do so compellingly, I have

decided to lean heavily on the one element of literary skill that truly envelops the reader and supports the plot: Character.

## CRITICAL ESSAY: CHARACTER

Writing is a craft like any other, and it needs necessary parts that must be placed together in a manner that brings the reader into and through an experience unlike any other. These pieces that are undeniably vital and necessary are called literary elements. Literary elements, while all important, hinge upon a few key players in the arsenal. One of which, is character. Character determines the strength of the plot. No matter the complexity that resides in the twists and turns of a character's journey, it may all fall flat if the arc of the protagonist does not withstand and support the conflicts. In my critical element paper, I will explore the dynamic evolutions and the superior fructification of spotlight-worthy protagonists to culminate their importance and significance in page-turning novels. I will explore the contrasts that reside within specific characters that create compelling and believable stories, focusing on the illumination that the authors place on the representation of humanity's tendency to be both good and bad.

Character drives the plot, and a character that displays both problematic behavioral habits combated with good characteristics is the pinnacle of a novel that resonates with readers. Readers adore being able to see themselves within the protagonists and side characters. Stunning characters such as Amy March, John Grady Cole, Mare Barrow, and Manon Blackbeak dynamically demonstrate the importance of captivating character in the literary wheelhouse.

Character is a powerful weapon wielded by authors, no matter the genre to accurately represent the fickle and foreboding act of living. Even in the *living* world, character represents a subjective judgment of another. It is a window into an individual, perceived by either themselves or others. In literature, it is funneled through the lens of the author, which can be similar or dissimilar to the acquirement of character to a person; it is a perception. In Terry Eagleton's

*Character*, he speaks of the dynamic qualities and the reflectiveness it has on everyday life, the influence it carries over those with whom it interacts. "... [C]haracter, like a character reference today, was a sign, portrait or description of what a man or woman was like.

... it came to mean the man or woman as such..." (Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*). While the power of character in literature, to some, may be limited to the black markings on the pages they read, many claim the influence it carries goes farther beyond those simple pages. Character is the backbone of plot, and the mirror to the world.

In Eagleton's *How to Read Literature*, Eagleton encourages the significance of organic, distinct, and diverse characters. He claims these qualities invite interest in the plot. It is the unique behavioral mannerisms, the relatable quirks, and the inimitable traits that drive the personalities that truly envelope the reader. Without these, the plot would fall short, and become indistinguishable. "Individuals are... defined by what is peculiar to them, such as their signature or inimitable personality. What distinguishes us from each other is more important than what we have in common. What makes Tom Sawyer Tom Sawyer is all those attributes he does not share with Huck Finn. Lady Macbeth is what she is because of her ferocious will and thrusting ambition, not because she suffers, laughs, grieves and sneezes," (Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*). It is their fiery remarks, insatiable desires, and impassable stubbornness that ignite the story, that ensnares the reader. Take, for instance, Louisa Alcott's *Little Women*. The lead protagonist makes for a compelling and believable candidate for the necessity of character for plot development. However, the true propellant for the beauty, decisiveness, and inflammable breath of life in character is found in that of Amy March.

Amy March is the youngest sister of the March family, and she poses as the most dynamic of the sisters throughout the novel. From the moment her traits are introduced to the

instance where the woven tapestry is finished, there is a spellbinding shift in the values and forces that move this character. In the novel, Amy begins as a somewhat whiny, witty, weasely child who strong-arms her way through twists, trists, and troubles.

Remaining true to the archetype of the youngest child, Amy embodies the stigmatized attributes of the youngest children; she is impulsive, selfish, loveable, intelligent, and pugnacious. The reader cannot help but fall in love with the twelve-year-old who irrevocably reminds them of *that one kid*. Within the first several chapters, the instantaneous charm delivered by Amy March conveys the subtleties of life readers love to love and love to hate. For instance, in Chapter Seven, the reader finds Amy in a precarious position of debt as a child. She owes pickled limes! Given the money by her older sister to purchase these pickled limes, Amy returns to school with her bounty in tow.

Over the course of the day, it is discovered by Mr. Davic that she holds these limes contraband in the classroom. If it were not endearing enough, a young school girl sneaking pickled limes to pay this juvenile debt, the audience is drawn in further through empathy to her cause when she is punished. Amy entices the reader to side with her throughout her punishment (Alcott *Little Women*):

“Your hand, Miss March!” was the only answer her mute appeal received, and too proud to cry or beseech, Amy set her teeth, threw back her head defiantly, and bore without flinching several tingling blows on her little palm. They were neither many nor heavy, but that made no difference to her. For the first time in her life she had been struck, and the disgrace, in her eyes, was as deep as if he had knocked her down.”

It is through the defiance seen in this moment that the arc for Amy begins. Yes, she has been whimsically childish and charmingly combative, it is at this moment the reader can detect

Amy's true values and traits. It is the knowledge that this scene could be tiresome, boring, and indignant that supports the strength of character in the story. The compelling orchestration of this lovable little bratty child is powerful. Amy is strong-willed, stubborn, combusive, intelligent, and funny. As the story unfolds, Amy matures in herself as these qualities enrich the plot.

The reader can witness the growth that this character embarks on through the fire, anger, and retribution Amy feels repeatedly throughout *Little Women*. Take for instance, when Laurie Lawrence and Amy March meet again in Europe (Alcott *Little Women*).

“It cost him no effort to be generous, and he would have given Amy all the trinkets in Nice if she would have taken them, but at the same time he felt that he could not change the opinion she was forming of him, and he rather dreaded the keen blue eyes that seemed to watch him with such half-sorrowful, half-scornful surprise./ ‘All the rest have gone to Monaco for the day. I preferred to stay at home and write letters. They are done now, and I am going to Valrosa to sketch, will you come?’ said Amy, as she joined Laurie one lovely day when he lounged in as usual about noon./ ‘Well, yes, but isn't it rather warm for such a long walk?’ he answered slowly, for the shaded salon looked inviting after the glare without./ ‘I'm going to have the little carriage, and Baptiste can drive, so you'll have nothing to do but hold your umbrella, and keep your gloves nice,’ returned Amy, with a sarcastic glance at the immaculate kids, which were a weak point with Laurie./ ‘Then I'll go with pleasure.’ And he put out his hand for her sketchbook. But she tucked it under her arm with a sharp.../ ‘Don't trouble yourself. It's no exertion to me, but you don't look equal to it.’ /...”

Their interactions and dialogue demonstrate the growth Amy has done across the novel, and it highlights how her character development has supported the arc of the plot. Amy still

maintains her wit, her spark, and her spice, yet it is mingled with the mellowness and maturation of the young woman she has become. Her values have shifted from the desires of youth to the appreciation of stability and responsibility. Jo March, the assumed protagonist of the novel, drags and dampens the plot with each encounter she has with the reader. Yet, it is the strategic writing of Amy March's fire-bird personality that pushes the novel to greater lengths. Amy is a character cultivated with the idea that others may see themselves in her. The essence of these dynamic characters weaves incredible maneuvers for the plot.

Anger, retribution, motivation for a better life, and justice are excellent attributes of page-altering characters that push the plot to new lengths. Characters that live and breathe forge the conflicts. In James Phelan's *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*, he explores the ever-present battle between plot and character. "Characters... resemble possible people, they are artificial constructs that perform various functions in the progression, and they can function to convey the political, philosophical, or ethical issues being taken up by the narrative," (Phelan, *Narrative Theory*). Plot without palpable, authentic character fails not only the conflict created within it but also the people who read it. In Victoria Aveyard's *Red Queen Series*, the lead protagonist shatters the stage with not only the ability to associate and assimilate into the mind of the character, thrusting forward to represent humanity in all its aspects, but through the murky, gray waters that compose the moral compass of Mare Barrow. In any great novel, the literary device of character needs authenticity woven tightly within the structure of the character itself, or else, it is impossible to win the reader. Character needs grit, truth, and honesty. A character who is all good or all bad is not *all* that believable. Aveyard introduces the concept of a young adult fiction protagonist who treads the line between choices that give pause.

In the first book, *Red Queen*, Mare Barrow is introduced as a hapless red-blooded human who lives in squalor. A young teenage girl who dreams of survival only, and any way to escape conscription. Aveyard's ability to create a youthfully determined, mouthy, and motivated character from the first few pages, enthralls the reader, enticing them into the narrative (*Aveyard Red Queen*):

“I hate First Friday. It makes the village crowded, and now, in the heat of high summer, that’s the last thing anyone wants. From my place in the shade it isn’t so bad, but the stink of bodies, all sweating with the morning work, is enough to make milk curdle. The air shimmers with heat and humidity, and even the puddles from yesterday’s storm are hot, swirling with rainbow streaks of oil and grease. / The market deflates, with everyone closing up their stalls for the day. The merchants are distracted, careless, and it’s easy for me to take whatever I want from their wares. By the time I’m done, my pockets bulge with trinkets and I’ve got an apple for the road. Not bad for a few minutes’ work. As the throng of people moves, I let myself be taken away by the human current. My hands dart in and out, always in fleeting touches. Some paper bills from a man’s pocket, a bracelet from a woman’s wrist—nothing too big. Villagers are too busy shuffling along to notice a pickpocket in their midst. When the opportunity is dropped in her lap, she is dropped into the arena of the Queenstrial.”

Sprinting from the gate, Mare Barrow’s character charismatically charms the reader through her intellect, deft handiwork, and satirical observation of the world she is surrounded by. The reader, through careful manipulation of Barrow’s character, cannot help to smirk and nod at the arrogance displayed. The arrogance that somehow feels endearing or comradery-like. This female protagonist is powerful, not just in her mannerisms, attitude, and inability to toe the line



between right and wrong, but in the representation of power in gender perception. Phelan's *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* outlines the significance specific characteristics have within gender. "Characters, then, are creatures of the discourse of gender in Persuasion, the discourse most interesting to me as a feminist narratologist... While dialogue about gender can mark a novel as explicitly feminist,... the construction of gender in the creation of the characters themselves is more subtle and probably more effective in both reflecting and influencing the culture's beliefs about masculinity and femininity," (Phelan, *Narrative Theory*).

Across the first several chapters, many instances arise that create moments where the conflict is supported through Mare Barrow's sharp tongue and attitude. Take, for instance, Chapter Four (*Aveyard Red Queen*):

"His hand closes around my wrist, his grip firm and strangely hot as he pulls me forward out of the shadows. I try to resist, to slip away and run, but he's too strong. When he spins, the fire in his eyes puts a fear in me, the same fear I felt this morning. But I welcome any punishment he might summon. I deserve it all. /"Thief," he says, a strange surprise in his voice./ I blink at him, fighting the urge to laugh. I don't even have the strength to protest. "Obviously."/ He stares at me, scrutinizing everything from my face to my worn boots. It makes me squirm. After a long moment, he heaves a breath and lets me go..."

Victoria Aveyard emulates the necessity of strong character in nearly every book in the series through her surgical-like construction of a complex and intertwining plot. If this plot were to be settled on the shoulders of a character without the conflict of good and bad qualities, the plot would feel contrived, underwhelming, and redundant. However, through Aveyard's Mare Barrow, the storyline is given life. The plot leaps from the page and places a world that

surrounds the reader in every present moment. Once again, a character who has their feet in both pools of good and bad becomes the character that readers adore. They become the characters that readers can see themselves within. Mare Barrow wobbles on the tethered line of right and wrong, allowing her emotions to rule the majority of her decisions. This *weakness* that she possesses only works in favor of the novel itself. It provides strength to the plot only by the rapidness with which the plot moves. There is no time for the conflict to drag when the main character is not relishing the process of decision-making. For example, when Mare Barrow is captured after a rather unfair accident, she does not sulk or cower. Her temper and attitude flare to life, making for an intriguing advancement in the plot.

“A crown glitters on her head./ ‘I’d bow, but I might fall over,’ I say to Queen Elara, and immediately I wish I could call back the words. She’s a Silver, I can’t talk to her that way. She could put me in the stocks, take away my rations, punish me, punish my family. / No, I realize in my growing horror. She’s the queen. She could just kill me. She could kill us all. But she doesn’t look offended. / Instead, she smirks. A wave of nausea washes over me when I meet her eyes, and I double over again. ‘That looks like a bow to me,’ she purrs, enjoying my pain./ I fight the urge to vomit and reach out to grab the bars. My fist clenches around cold steel. ‘What are you doing to me?’/ ‘Not much of anything anymore. But this—’ She reaches through the bars to touch my temple. The pain triples beneath her finger, and I fall against the bars, barely conscious enough to hold on. ‘This is to keep you from doing anything silly.’ / Tears sting my eyes, but I shake them away. / ‘Like stand on my own two feet?’ I manage to spit out. I can hardly think through the pain, let alone be polite, but still I manage to hold back a stream of curses. *For heaven’s sake, Mare Barrow, hold your tongue.*”

In this scene, if Aveyard had constructed Mare Barrow to be a protagonist who sits with her decisions, slowly contemplating her responses and surroundings, the interaction between the queen and Barrow would have lacked luster. In fact, the entire premise of the novel, the red versus silver blood, would fall flat. Consider the protagonist Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* or Bella Swan from *Twilight*. While these characters were entertaining in some regards, they were boring, translucent, and mediocre at propelling the plot forward. Too much time went into convincing the reader that these protagonists were worthy of attention, versus forging a character through craft that showed their worth and value. Everdeen and Swan spend pages and chapters rummaging through their feelings or resisting their instincts to act, dulling their vibrancy on the page and snoozifying the plot.

However dull and dim Katniss Everdeen and Bella Swan are, that is how enticing and thrilling Manon Blackbeak is. Manon Blackbeak is a secondary protagonist in the *Throne of Glass Series* by Sara J. Maas. Her character and own unique plot function as a reprieve and accent from the plot and character of the lead protagonist Aelin Galathynius. Throughout the series, there is a distinguishing spark and enthrallment that occurs with how Blackbeak's character changes. The change does not occur because Blackbeak wishes to better herself into a *good person*. No. Instead, it happens against her own better judgment.

From the first interaction with Manon Blackbeak, her character and neon-bright attributes shine through to paint a detailed picture of who she is. This occurs in Chapter Four of Maas' *Heir of Fire*, book three of the eight-book series (Maas *Throne of Glass - book 3: Heir of Fire*).

“Silent as death, Manon slid up behind him. The fool didn't even know she was there until she brought her mouth close to his ear and whispered, “Wrong kind of witch.”

The man whirled, slamming into the closet door. He raised the dagger between them, his

chest heaving. Manon merely smiled, her silver-white hair glinting in the moonlight. He noticed the shut door then, drawing in breath to shout. But Manon smiled broader, and a row of dagger-sharp iron teeth pushed from the slits high in her gums, snapping down like armor. The man started, hitting the door behind him again, eyes so wide that white shone all around them. His dagger clattered on the floorboards. And then, just to really make him soil his pants, she flicked her wrists in the air between them. The iron claws shot over her nails in a stinging, gleaming flash. The man began whispering a plea to his soft-hearted gods as Manon let him back toward the lone window. Let him think he stood a chance while she stalked toward him, still smiling. The man didn't even scream before she ripped out his throat. When she was done with him, she slipped through the bedroom door."

Manon Blackbeak introduces herself as intelligent, ruthless, and sadistic. She is the heir to her coven and holds the position of authority in her specially trained thirteen-witch unit. The cutthroat attitude that swarms Manon Blackbeak forces the plot of her particular story - which ultimately overlaps with Aelin Galathynius - to remain suspenseful. Her choices, her quips, and her intelligence weave together to create a character who begins to view the world differently against her better judgment. In *Heir of Fire*, the king of Adarlan, the main antagonist of the series in book three, hires the Blackbeak coven to ride a creation of his: Wyverns, a dragonlike creature. Manon Blackbeak is chosen by the matron of the Blackbeak Coven to compete for the position of Wingleader. As Manon and her thirteen train with the wyverns they have selected, Manon begins to shift her ideals.

While we have seen her no-bull-crap, business is a brutal necessity persona for the majority of our encounters, Manon connects with her wyvern and something in her chest cracks

open. The stone-like shell surrounding Manon, cocooning her in character that evokes chaos, erupts. This construction and careful deconstruction of Manon's character elevates the plot that surrounds her. It would have become less believable. The suspension of disbelief is a powerful tool for authors, and if the character nullifies the attraction to suspend that disbelief for the reader, the story becomes contrived, boring, and *just another story*. Maas refuses to allow this to happen. Manon Blackbeak's character refuses to allow this to happen. The dynamic arc of Manon demonstrates, repetitiously, the appeal of morally gray characters. It can be seen in her dramatic and heroic action in Chapter Sixty-One (Maas *Throne of Glass - book 3: Heir of Fire*).

“There was a second scream then, from the mountain. From the Blue-blood Matron, screaming for her daughter as she plummeted down to the rocks below. The other Bluebloods whirled, but they were too far away, their wyverns too slow to stop that fatal plunge. But Abraxos was not. And Manon didn't know if she gave the command or thought it, but that scream, that mother's scream she'd never heard before, made her lean in. Abraxos dove, a shooting star with his glistening wings. They dove and dove, for the broken wyvern and the still-living witch upon it. Keelie was still breathing, Manon realized as they neared, the wind tearing at her face and clothes. Keelie was still breathing, and fighting like hell to keep steady. Not to survive. Keelie knew she would be dead any moment. She was fighting for the witch on her back...Manon hit Keelie and the beast screamed, but held on as Manon hauled herself against the wind and into the saddle where Petrah dangled. Her hands were stiff, her gloves making her even clumsier as she sliced with a blade through the leathers, one after another. Abraxos roared his warning. The canyon mouth loomed closer. Darkness have mercy on her. Then Manon had Petrah

free, the Blueblood heir a dead weight in her arms, her hair whipping Manon's face like a thousand small knives. She lashed a length of leather around herself and Petrah."

Manon begins as someone who values evil, ruthlessness, and savagery. Yet, as that crack widens in her heart, she splinters, falling into a character type that battles herself. The war that occurs between her mind and her heart fuels our reader's connection to her and their interest in her plot. As stated before, any character *all good* or *all bad* is not *all* that *interesting*. Manon's character becomes one that releases the same oxytocin as an underdog coming out on top. Even though this character begins her dynamic arc as gruesome, grueling, and gigantically nightmarish, Manon Blackbeak evolves through the bond she has with her wyvern and her coven. She separates herself from the extreme and chooses, instead, to be somewhere nearer the middle.

The power granted to the plot by the implementation of impactful, purposeful, and artful character is without bounds. The ability to manipulate the telling of a story through the orchestration of the people living and breathing within the pages is inspiring. In each of these three novels, the characters represent more than good and more than bad. They represent the difficulty of what it means to be human. They represent that archaic battle between choices people must make. They represent the consequences of doing what was thought to be right, only to find out it had been wrong. These qualities embodied allow readers to escape, unify, align, forgive, forget, and accept themselves for who they are. Any author who cannot see this and utilizes character in a manner that is flat, or too far one way or the other, loses a tool unlike any other in their arsenal of powerful, life-altering writing.

CREATIVE WORK: *THE KEEPER: A RING'S PROMISE*

*The Keeper: A Ring's Promise*

## Chapter One

Clouds roiled in the sky, tumbling across the horizon in arcs of grey, black, and lavender. The rumbling thunder was reminiscent of the crackling embers awaiting Luriel Mazzie in her small cottage. The icy rain pelted her cloak, worming its way into her fur, and soaking her bones. She thought of the heat soon to come, of the fire burning in the hearth. Her fingers stretched and curled, anxious for the warmth. Pulling her hood further over her face, she quickened her steps. Two more blocks. She had always felt the unease of traveling so close to dusk through the streets of Zephyria, but usually, it was abated by the presence of the other townsanimals. As her eyes traveled the empty cobbled streets, the ridiculous fear pooled in her stomach. She shook her head. *Don't be a fool, it is simply a walk home.*

Thunder sounded again as chills spider-walked up her spine. The fur on her back rose with the pebbling of her skin.

She was no longer alone.

A small percussion of beats, faint at first, and growing louder, pounded under the cracking of the sky. Luriel turned her head, risking a glance towards the wickedly churning sky. Her soft brown eyes strained to find the source of the rhythmic beats. There was nothing.

Her pulse quickened as she hurried for a shadowed alcove along the streets. Her breathing came in pants as she clutched the cloak tighter around her shoulders. She listened for the wing beats to fade, but they only grew louder. Possibly, it was an owl. Caught in the storm on its return from delivering the mail. Possibly, it would race over her and disappear in the distance, taking the fear flooding her with it.



Owls were no issue. Owls had long ago decided to stop the hunt, taking up meals from other prey who had not developed such as the ones of Zephyria. They had decreed it nonfaunal. This news, Luriel had agreed, was news of evolution. She had never understood hunting animals whose consciousness rivaled that of the humans. Whose pain could be voiced, whose thoughts and feelings understood and expanded upon... no, she had made it clear in her classroom that the creatures of Zephyria were different. Her students were challenged to understand that natural order no longer applied to them, thanks to the magic that flowed from their bloodlines, making them creatures of thought, desires, and creation.

The only predator that held fast to the belief that the brutal natural order remained intact was the Falcons.

Luriel shivered as her breathing hitched, the wing beats had stopped. A breath loosed itself from her lungs and she shook her head. She felt silly. What had she thought? That a Falcon, who hadn't been seen in nearly one hundred years had come back? That one would find itself in Zephyria and of all creatures hunt her?

A small laugh bubbled in her throat, as she again stepped into the cold, early autumn rain.

“Going somewhere so close to dark, little one?”

An amused, cruel voice froze Luriel in her tracks. The rain like ice on her cloak. Her blood froze. *Do not turn around.*

“Isn't it too close to dusk to be traveling in weather such as this? Are you not afraid to catch fever?” The voice purred from behind her. The slight lilt of his rough, gravelly voice hitched the words in an unfamiliar accent. Her pulse beat rapidly in her veins, as sweat bloomed

on under her palms. She patted her sides within the shield of her cloak. *Damn it!* She'd left her dagger, albeit useless in her paws, on the nightstand this morning. She'd thought to bring it, though she did not know how to use it, to the workday today. It had been a battle in her mind, the weather had been clear, the sky blue with the sun, when she left. The rational side of her had won out. Who would need a dagger in the daylight? She had not even anticipated Mr. Hawthorne asking her to stay late. He'd looked at her with that sad, manipulating look all administrators get when asking their instructors to stay after hours for the benefit of the students. Who wouldn't agree to stay overtime if it meant that the children could have a special return to their academics?

Silently, she steeled her nerves. Her gaze rose from its place on the cobbled street below her booted feet. It was only a block and a half to her cottage. If she ran fast enough, she might be able to outrun whatever stood behind her. Her spine straightened as she leaned onto the balls of her feet. She could do this. She inhaled deeply, preparing to countdown.

"Mm, mm, mm...Running would not be wise, small one." He tutted. "I am far faster than you might think. Turn for me, let me see those terror-filled eyes."

Luriel sprang from her stance, propelling her legs forward. Her heart felt near bursting as she pumped her arms, her lungs already burning. Behind her, she heard his throaty laugh and the boom of his wings.

She did not dare look over her shoulder. One block. One block between her and the cottage door, she needed only to keep the distance between—

Sharp talons encompassed her torso. The comforting feel of the ground ripped away as she was lifted and then thrown forward. The rain whipped at her face, thrashing her whiskers before the bit of stone slammed into her. She heard the crack of her knees and wrists before she

felt the explosive pain of bones snapping. Agony tore through her as a scream, harmonized with the roll of thunder, sounded from her lips. Her head slapped against the street as her vision danced with black.

“That was not wise, small one.” Chided the voice.

As her eyes focused, she rolled onto her back. Her broken bones protested with sharp, white-hot pain. Tears welled and spilled over her cheeks as her labored breathing stopped.

*No, no, no, no!*

It couldn't be.

Stalking toward her was a thing of nightmares. Eyes of onyx black, his charcoal feathers peppered with muted, muddled cream. The yellow of his beak and legs faded and crusted with faded mud the color of rusted iron. A Falcon.

Luriel gasped as she tried and failed to push herself back. The shattered bones in her wrists greyhound together tearing another scream from her. It was swallowed up by the clap of thunder.

She grunted as she used her boots to inch backward, the rain falling in sheets upon her. “Wh-what do you want?” Her voice shook with the adrenaline pulsing in her veins, the pain lancing with every small inch of distance she managed to gain.

Another deep laugh lumbered through the dimming light. “I want what is ours. Your creatures of Zephyria took what is ours, and I wish to take it back.”

Luriel combed through her memory, of every textbook, scroll, and novel she'd read in her pursuit of becoming an instructor. What could any creature of Zephyria have taken from the Falcons?

"There is nothing!" She spat, her body shaking as he drew closer.

"That is a lie!" He yelled, his voice rattling her ears. He closed the distance, his taloned foot slamming her to the ground, whacking her head against the stone once more. It took all her will not to succumb to the blackness that spotted her vision once more. She blinked as best she could, the rain splattering her face. His face was now a breath away, the tip of his beak dropping crystalline drops of water onto her tight-lipped mouth. He leaned his weight into her, her ribs groaning under the pressure.

She gasped, "I don't— I don't know—"

"Liar!" He roared, tightening her talons around her. She felt that piercing sting of his claws tore through her cloak, her tunic, and her skin. A cry of pain ripped from her as she fought against the anguish in her wrists. Fighting the pain, she grasped at his claws trying to free herself. "Where is it!"

She whimpered as his talons did not move. Her eyes squeezed shut. His rancid breath churned her stomach. "Tell me!"

Her heart beat frantically. Her mind afloat with the daze of fear and instinct. *Lie to him. Buy yourself time, and lie to him.*

"Okay!" She rasped, "Okay."

His obsidian eyes darkened as a cruel smile lifted the edges of his mouth. "Where. Is. It."

Luriel's mouth twisted as she gasped once more, trying to fill her lungs. What would he do with any lie she twisted? Who would be the next target if she spun a tale of another who held what he desired? Anger simmered in her blood, growing more violent with each passing second. No. She would not lie. She would not spare herself.

Eyes clearing, she fixed her stare on the beady glare above her. Each word a battle as her chest caved inward. "Go. To. Hell!"

"Not before you."

Luriel felt the pressure on her chest build before hearing the snaps of her ribs. Blissful darkness curled around her as the faintest memory of pain swept her into the peaceful nothingness of death.

## Chapter Two

The sun cascaded the horizon in burning tangerines, corals, and vermilion, painting the foliage in a gilded glow. The trees stood ablaze with the fires of approaching dusk, one last war of light before the crest of night. These were the times when thoughts long pressed into the shadowy alcoves of my mind wrestled their way to the forefront. Often enough, I could beat them back with dreams of stories once told to me as a child. Stories of magic, wonder, and shadow-wielding princesses who fought against the threatening light of a king possessed with the draw of power. Yet, there were occasions where the thoughts wriggled their way past the barricade of these tales I spun for myself.

This was one of them.

I had known from a young age that I was not of my family's heritage. I had figured as much when my younger brother had been born. His fur had been as brown as a toasted chestnut and his ears a charming blush. As he grew, the difference became more obvious. His eyes were much like my mother and father's: Honey flecked chocolate. Peeling my paws from beneath my cloak, I tugged the sleeves of my dress up, revealing champagne fur. The coloring could be a fluke. I had seen it happen with friends of mine from Zephyrcrest Academy. Marlowe Tallegstan had white fur, her ears a pale pink, yet her eyes had the same shimmering cerulean as her father's. Harlin Gambrole's fur portrayed the blackest of nights, yet his ears maintained the umber of his mother's ears and his eyes held the same onyx hue as his father's. Each offspring in the mice quarter resembled in some way their heritage. Whether it be their fur, their ears, their eyes.

I resembled neither. If the champagne fur was not enough to separate me from my parents whose fur ran walnut, my eyes were telltale on their own. Creatures of Zephyria knew of no others that suffered from Heterochromia, yet here I sat with eyes of different colors. My left was a subtle sangria speckled with grape chips. My right was the color of ash, flecked with abalone.

A breeze kissed with autumn's beginning and summer's end wrapped around my shoulders. Tomorrow classes would begin again. Tomorrow, my last year at Zephycrest Academy will begin. A chill trickled down the column of my spine. The year would be the toughest, and not because of the courses and training. Each year, the board felt it necessary to educate the youth on methods of protecting themselves. Mainly defensive tactics that prevented capture or injury. Those lessons had always felt heavily tiresome. There is only so much that can be learned in the manner of self-preservation. Eyes rolling, I knew this year would be no different. Possibly, we might learn how to disarm and recover the weapons wielded against us, but what use would that be if we were not taught to use them? A sigh left my lips as I shook the thought from my head.

Yes, this year would be more challenging but it would also be the same. The elders would pile more emphasis on the paths laid out before us. Soon, the decision of skill would fall before me. The division of skill ceremony was useless. Every young animal must decide by their twentieth year the division by which they mean to make their life. When I was young, this had seemed exciting, but every youth knew the field they would inherit. It belonged to the field in which they were birthed. Unfortunately, in Zephyria, the path of the mice ran in throngs of agriculture. My parents, though not by blood, were simple, hard-working mice of the wheat fields. My eyes scanned the proof of their effort in the flowing blades below me as a faint wind whispered in my ear.

They had dedicated their life to cultivating a profit out of these amber waves of gold. Each time the breeze swayed the blades danced in the dwindling light.

Evelynn, my mother, and Aleric, my father, did their best to encourage my interest, taking nearly every opportunity to discuss the elements that were woven into a successful and profitable crop. I couldn't bring myself to deter their efforts, yet the mere thought of living the rest of my life captured within the foothills of Zephyria terrified me. Every word uttered about sowing the seeds and watering the pastures pressed in like dampened cloth around my head, squashing the breaths I took. The pressure of fulfilling their dreams and the guilt of wanting more settled in my stomach like balls of ice.

No, this year would be the hardest because of the choices laid before me. One, settling like shackles on my wrists and ankles, chaining me to a life of dirt, fertilizer, and wheat. The other, spread before me like a chasm between two cliffs, daunting and exhilarating. If I chose the former, I knew disappointed looks would haunt my dreams and the weight of everything they'd given up to take care of me would cripple an adventure I took. I could not turn my back on all they had sacrificed to bring up a child of another.

I knew which I had to choose.

Sighing, I pulled the garnet cloak tighter around my shoulders.

“Amara Knightfall!”

A smile played at the corners of my lips, the somber, self-pity dissolving as I pictured the one whose voice rose above the wind. I shifted from my place on the limb and began my climb down.



“Amara, dear, hurry. Curfew is mere minutes away! The sun is setting, you must make haste.” A pause. “I know you’re off daydreaming before the fall of night, but some of us worry, you know.” Though her words were full of worry, an air of amusement lifted the heaviness. My eyes rolled as my boots hit the grass.

“Oh yes, those terrible flame flies will be taking to the sky to hunt me soon enough! I don’t want to be entranced by their brilliant light and then devoured by those tiny pinchers.” I bellowed, straightening my tunic. My feet turned south, and the short walk to our cottage began.

“Yes, yes. Those pesky insects are truly troublesome. However, I do fear that while they are the majority of our concern, there is another winged creature keeping to the shadows of night.” The urgency in her picking increased. I quickened my pace.

“I’m nearly there,” I assured her.

She was right. There was a creature more sinister than a harmless flame fly. A shiver rolled through me as I thought of the warnings pasted all over Zephyria. Large, feathered bodies, three times the size of a hawk. Talons trimmed to a razor's edge. Intelligence matching that of the owls. Yes, there was a creature far more threatening than the fuzzy flame flies.

Falcons.

Aleric claims that the attacks had begun not long after they had taken me in. Vicious, brutal murders left open for all to see plagued the streets of Zephyria. No animal was safe. Measures were taken to keep the town animals safe, and while that had worked to some extent, no precautions were totally secure. A chilling, familiar ache tugged at my chest.

The sun's light had faded entirely as I breached the last of the wheat pasture. Evelyn stood in the warmth of the porch's lamps. Her apron swaddled in her fists as she kneaded the worn fabric between her fingers.

"I'm here," I said, my boot cresting the first step.

"That you are," she murmured, pulling me in. Muscles I hadn't realized were tense relaxed in her embrace. My arms wrapped tightly around her. As I pulled back, silver lined her bright honey-hued eyes. Everything she didn't say was left in them. The ache grew sharper as I hugged her again. "Alright, in with you. Come, come."

Memories threatened to crack my chest open, but I pushed them down. I would not think of that now. I would not remember in this moment. Stepping into the living room, the waft of broccoli-cheddar stew eased the ice frosted around my heart.

Our cottage was nothing special, but it did not need to be.

Fashioned out of dry-aged pumpkin, the home sat low to the ground. At the birth of Charlie, Aleric had built an addition atop it out of cherrywood. The steps to the right of the entry led up to the second floor, where both my and my brother's rooms sat across from one another. Moving to the kitchen, the I scooped a bowl from the counter and laddled a portion of the steamy goodness into it. Charlie sat at the old farm table, patiently waiting for everyone to be seated. His ears perked as I sat across him.

"Hey squish," I said.

"Hey," he chirped, whiskers twitching. That was a dead giveaway that he was '*starving*,' as he liked to put it.

“Father, you’d better hurry. Charlie might die of hunger.” I teased, smiling at the back of Aleric, who was hunched before the wood stove behind Charlie. Aleric turned on his hunches and winked at me.

“A growing young boy should learn patience. What better tool to develop that skill than awaiting a meal?” Aleric said turning back to the fire. The clunk of the iron door closing then locking made Charlie’s whiskers twitch faster. Standing, Aleric turned around and wiped his hands on his jacket. He was tall for a mouse, standing nearly twenty inches from toe to ear.

“Daaaad,” Charlie whined, fingers gripping his spoon.

Aleric opened his mouth, but Evelynnn swooped through the kitchen, cutting him off, “Charlie, darling. Let me pull the rolls from the oven, then you can dig in.”

She kissed the top of his head as she passed behind him.

“You’ll spoil that boy before he learns how to be patient,” Aleric said. He rubbed his swollen belly, “You don’t get a belly like this eating whenever you wish. You must be willing to wait for the good things.”

A small laugh shook my shoulders, “Yes, we can all tell how disciplined you are, Father.”

A feigned gasp popped Aleric’s mouth open as both his hands held his stomach. He shook it gently, “What are you trying to say, Amara? Are you... Are you calling me fat? Impatient?”

“No, honey,” Evelynnn chimed in as she laid the rolls on an oven mitt in the center of the table, “Amara is simply commenting on how...determined you were in waiting for a female who could cook properly enough for you to *develop* such a figure.”

My lips wobbled with the effort to hold in my giggle. “Exactly,” I nodded.

“Oh,” he laughed, rubbing his stomach once more. “Well she is right there.”

Charlie rolled his eyes so violently I thought they might get stuck.

“Alright, eat up everyone. Amara, Charlie, help yourselves to the rolls. Aleric, sweetie. Stop... whatever it is you’re doing and sit to eat.” Evelynn smiled, swatting his arm as she moved to her seat.

“This looks delicious, Mom. Thank you,” I murmured, curling my fingers around a soft, fluffy roll. The buttery, yeasty aroma filled my nose. I tore into the flesh of the bread, sighing as it hit my tongue.

“Hey! You’re supposed to wait for grace!” Charlie whined. I ripped another piece from the bread, rolled it and flung it at him. It found its mark. “Amara!”

“What?” I mumbled around another bite.

“Amara, you’re much too old to play with your food,” Aleric chided. “But good aim.”

I smiled as he grinned at me.

“Let’s bow our heads. Charlie, since you were so keen to call out your sister, please, say grace.” Aleric commanded, taking his seat at the head of the table.

Charlie sighed, said grace, and we all dug in. The broccoli and cheddar soup warmed my bones. Each mouthful blissfully spiced to perfection, adding to the mouth-wateringly nutty flavor. Playful conversation danced around the table. Evelynn and Aleric’s eyes crinkled as Charlie told of his adventure into the forest. He had a lovable talent for exaggerating that

smallest of tales. Shaking my head, I listened eagerly to every word that fell from his lips. Apparently, he had seen the largest furry worm today. It had been seven feet long. Its fuzz had looked as if it had been painted by an artist, bright crimson lines swirling with purple. My gaze found Evelyn's and we shook our heads. When dinner was done, I aided my parents in cleaning up the kitchen.

Warmth flooded my chest, flowing through my veins as I watched them gathered in the living room. I grinned at them, though it didn't reach my eyes. The familiar ache wouldn't let it. I was happy for them, and grateful for their love... yet seeing them interact so naturally drummed up the coldness of abandonment. The frost-like sting of rejection.

While Evelyn and Aleric loved me, provided for me, I envied the closeness that seemed effortless between them and Charlie. That envy like spindrels of ice spearing every inch of my frame and distorting the memories I have of my youth.

It was never like that for us.

Aleric and Evelyn had never done anything to make me feel like an outsider, but seeing them raise Charlie rubbed against the raw nerve of knowing who I was to them. That never ceased to go away. I had become accustomed to shoving that feeling down, training myself to live with the knowledge of where I'd come from. However, in moments like these, it crawled out of the catacombs, whispering its destructive questions in my ear. *Why hadn't I been wanted?*

From the moment I knew, I had always wondered that. I appreciated my parents' honesty with me from a young age, but it set in place a barrier between us I couldn't climb over. Even to this day, a sense of distance and withdrawal lingered.

“I’m going to turn in,” I said, headed toward the stairs. “Big day tomorrow.”

Goodnights followed me as I ascended the steps.

Knowing that I was not their blooded daughter was not something that could have been hidden, I look too different. It was that truth that made the love and respect I feel for them stronger, they hadn’t wanted to lie to me. Yet, in the same breath, it sat with me, heavy upon my frame, chilling any sparks of belonging, pushing me away. The constant battle waged within me day and night. The persistent warring emotions becoming a state of osmosis. Happy voices echoed up the stairs. I stood before the mirror, squeezing the brushing paste onto my bristled brush. As I watched my face in the glass, thoughts that I usually kept at bay latched onto the crack splintered in my chest, forcing it open.

*Effortless...They were effortless.*

My lips trembled, tears stinging the backs of my eyes.

Chapter Three

*“No!” a voice belted from the shadows, cracking with a brokenness I could not face. I slammed the doors shut, using a fractured piece of wood to bar it shut. I could not save myself, but I could save him. Fists pounded on the door as I turned away from it.*

*I had to do this.*

*Squeezing my eyes, I stood in the gigantic throne room and drew in a deep breath. Releasing it, I opened my eyes to the storm before me.*

*The wind screamed as it billowing around my head, howling like the cries of wolves. Forcing unbalanced feet to walk, my gaze snapped to her. Her eyes blazed like flames of indigo. The wind whipped her pale hair around her as she levitated in the middle of the mayhem. The dress clinging to her frame was torn. Blood crusted her arms, legs, and face.*

*Glass shattered from the windows. Pain erupted from all over me, but I continued pressing toward her. Sweat bloomed in my palms, slickening my hold on the only thing that could save her now... if it wasn't too late already. I gripped it tighter. The cold metal of the ring did nothing to settle the fear thrumming through my veins. The scent of iron grew stronger with each steps I took, whether it was my own or hers, I could not tell.*

*Fire flared across my cheek, my lungs seized against the pull of the wind, swallowing my cry of pain. Don't stop, she needs you. I pushed forward.*

*“Elaraina!” I screamed.*

*Piercing, soulless eyes cut to mine. My heart slammed in my chest, threatening to give out. My hands shielded my eyes as I continued toward her. Elaraina's arms lifted to her sides,*

*moving to cast her shadows. If she hit me, I was dead. "Elaraina," my voice no louder than a whisper in my ears, "You can stop this! You can stop all of this!"*

*My legs buckled against the roaring winds. I slipped, crashing to the tiled floor. Knee caps barking as white-hot lightning flared up thighs. I fought to raise the ring.*

*"I have it!" I gasped, "Take it!"*

*A cruel smile tugged up the corners of her mouth.*

My eyelids flew open with the first grey light of dawn. Sweat soaked my nightgown, my lungs frantically worked to gulp down air. Glancing toward the clock on the wall, it read seven-thirty. I flung the cotton quilt off my body.

A dream... Just a dream.

I stood from the bed and tredged to the bathroom. My hands shook as I scrubbed the visions away. The heat of the running water abating the fear that lingered in my bones as I showered. When the water began to cool, I turned the knob, shutting it off. I wrapped the towel around myself and swiped the steam from the mirror. *It was just a dream.* I held my hand out, small tremors still shook it. Deep breaths, Amara. Deep breaths.

Sounds of waking filtered through the floorboards from the kitchen. Charlie's small voice trickled up the loudest. Today was the first day of his first year at Zephyria Academy and it was the first day of my last year. It was the first day towards the rest of my life. The decision of skill loomed over me as I stared at the clock hand ticking the seconds away.

My heart thudded uneasily in my chest, throwing itself violently against my ribs. I had yet to tell Evelynn or Aleric that I would not be following in their footsteps.



Grabbing one of the freshly baked muffins from the stovetop, I glanced out the kitchen window. Rain. Perfect.

“Today is your last first day, honey! Are you ready to select your decision of skill. You know we would love to have you follow in our footsteps,” Evelynn stated, sighing. “But, if you choose to do something else, that would be fine with us as well.”

My eyes bulged from their sockets. *What?* I swallowed the blueberry bite I’d been chewing and gulped down as much of my surprise as I could.

“What do you mean?” I managed to sound slightly unbothered. I turned to face her. Evelynn was standing at the counter, fussing with a worn rag. It must have been the most interested piece of cloth she’d ever seen.

Another heavy breath pushed past her lips, and her eyes flitted up to meet my gaze. “I know you don’t want to be a wheat farmer – just like I also know that you despise the thought of never leaving Zephyria. We have,” she ran a paw through her fur, “always figured that maybe someday you might change your mind, but each time we bring it up, the panic that flashes in your eyes lets us know that is the last path you wish to walk.”

I took another tentative bite, the sweet tang of the muffin-like sand on my tongue.

“Anyways, I wanted to talk to you this morning and let you know, we won’t be disappointed. Nor would be upset if you select a different decision of skill. We’ve known since you were little that you were special. As you grew that became more evident, and,” she sniffled, “we want you to be happy, honey. That is all we have—”

I burst from my place at the stove and wrapped my arms tightly around her, burying my face in her neck. Hearing these words release a swell of emotions from me, my eyes stung as I squeezed them shut. Evelynn stiffened then relaxed her arms around me. Kissing the top of my head, she pulled away. How could she have known? I had made sure to hide how I felt. Measured responses, plastered smiles, and careful nods. Had it really been that obvious? Though I was not a master at deception, I knew I hadn't been outright in my discomfort in what they expected from me. Yet in all my trying, they had known. More than that, they had made the choice to let me choose for myself. That might have been the pinnacle of it all. Choice had been something that I feared I would never get, especially when they had given up so much to care for me. Their freedom after first marrying. Having a child of their own first. Having the money to travel or live more comfortably. It would have been no leap of logic to assume that I would should step into the place of farming to return on the transaction of taking care of me. It had been a pressure I felt from a young age.

They hadn't wanted me.

They had been forced by good morales to care for an orphan.

The least I could do would be selecting wheat farming as my decision of skill, and they were giving me an out.

"I love you," I whispered. Evelynn sucked in a sharp breath, holding me tighter.

"I love you more than you will ever know, Amara." She pulled away, wiping tears from her face. "Okay, now. You and Charlie need to get going. Finish that muffin on your way." She turned from me and busied herself with wiping the clean counter.

I smiled at her, and moved toward the stairs.

“Charlie! We need to go!”

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“Is Zephycrest Academy huge?” Charlie asked his millionth question as we walked down Bayer’s Creek Road.

I sighed and shook my head. “We’ve been over this a thousand times, Charlie. Yes. It is huge. No, you will not be locked in the toilet chambers by upper classmen. They won’t even know you are there. Yes, there will be plenty of girls to look at. No, your teachers don’t want to eat you. And lastly, yes. Your homework days are over.”

Charlie eyed me, then scrunched up his nose. “Girls are... gross. I don’t want to think about girls.”

“Liar,” I said, poking him in the side. “I saw you googling over Mary Hallverstin. That cute little chipmunk in your grade? Yeah, I think she’s going to be in Mrs. Mazzie’s homeroom.” I gasped, for dramatic affect. “*Wait*, isn’t that your homeroom, Charlie?”

“Shut up!” He yelled, moving to jab me with his elbow. I twisted out of the way and flicked the back of his head.

“Nice try. You’re too slow.”

He huffed and walked ahead a few paces. I laughed, trotting up to his side. “I’m just messing with you. I know you’re nervous, but everything is going to be fine.”

Charlie stopped dead in his tracks.

“What?” My steps slowed, but I kept moving forward.

He stayed still.

“Charlie, c’mon. We’re almost there and we don’t want to be late.” I looked over my shoulder, “Mary will be—.”

Chills raced up my spine.

Charlie’s face had lost its color. His eyes were wide, pupils dilated. Small tremors shook his small frame, and his fists kept clenching open and closed. I rushed to him, gripping his shoulders. “What’s wrong? Are you okay? Do you feel—”

“L-look...” He whispered.

Searching his eyes, confused. I slowly twisted my neck to peer down the road. My eyes scanned the horizon, seeing first the mountains that stretched into the sky. Pulling my gaze lower, my own eyes widened at the sight of police light flashing blue and red. Patrol Shephards maneuvered about the flashing lights, tails hanging low, ears pinned back. Subtle growls echoed off the pavement, as teeth peeled over sharp teeth, giving orders to the bystanders standing with mouths hanging open.

“W-what hap-happened?” Charlie stuttered behind me.

Swallowing my panic, I swiveled my head back to my younger brother. Sweat coated his chestnut fur, his chocolate eyes searching mine for comfort and direction. My heart threw itself against my ribs, threatening to break out of its cage in my chest. Ice coated my veins as I drew in a ragged breath. This was not good. Only the worst of crimes pulled in the Patrol Shephards, and there were at least half a dozens of those dogs prowling in front of the school. Glancing back over

my shoulder, a shudder rippled through me. I had to get him out of here. Charlie couldn't see whatever was happening at Zephycrest. He needed to get home.

A few other students had stopped around us. I gripped Charlie's shoulders and touched my brow to his, "I'm going to get you home, okay? You're going to go home."

My voice sounded a lot steadier than I felt.

Twisting my gaze left, I spotted Marlowe Tallegstan with her little sister, Leisl. I waved them over.

"Do you know what's going on?" Marlowe asked, stopping only a foot away.

"No, but I plan to find out." I pushed Charlie towards Leisl. "Could you drop him off on your way home? I don't think we'll be having classes today."

"But, what about you?" Charlie protested.

"Yeah, I can do that," Marlowe said, reaching out for Charlie's jacket. He twisted out of the way and gripped my arm. My gaze swivelled back to the dogs at the horizon.

"I'm going to go find a friend of mine..." I lied.

"Liar!" Charlie bellowed, "I'm not going with them, I'm coming with you—"

"Hell and high water," My eyes snapped back to his. I bent down into his face, hating having to be firm with him. But I couldn't risk his safety or innocence. "Mom and Dad will have my hide if I bring you with me, so you are going to walk your happy little hiny back to the house." When his lips popped open, I pushed furry finger over them. "I don't want to hear it. You

are going with Marlowe, and that's the end of story. Understood? I love you way too much to let you anywhere near that." I threw that finger from his lips to the horizon.

Marlowe cupped Charlie's shoulder, pulling him back the way we'd come. Tears brimmed his eyes as he twisted out of her grip, thankfully turning back the way we'd come.

"Thank you," I murmured, already walking toward Zephycrest Academy.

## Chapter Four

My footsteps slowed as I crested the small hill of Baver's Creek Road. The cobbled stones under my feet were spotted with the first few drops of rain from the thickening clouds above. The sun had not returned since yesterday, and the terrible, cold wind that lifted the collar of my jacket felt like an omen. I knew that I should be hightailing it home with Charlie, especially with the dozen of Patrol Shephards circling the end corner of the street, but I needed to know what had happened. It was much too close to Zephycrest Academy. Hell, it was on the front porch of Zephycrest. Scenarios bolted through my mind, each more horrifying than the last. Faces ricocheted in my mind, blending and forging fear in my bones. I needed to see what had happened. Did someone get run over? Did a rogue from the continent find its way here? A shiver raced up my spine. Rogues were... they were nightmares brought to life. Animals that had no sense of self, lost to the survival instinct that overtook their consciousness, senselessly hunting for their next meal. Evelynn and Aleric always claimed they'd died out, that those abominations were lost to time, fading out of existence hundreds of years ago. But, what if?

What if they hadn't? What if they'd survived and somehow found their way to the Island of Ithcantia? I shook my head, ridding the thoughts. No, this was reality, and the reality was that *this* was not a fable born of zombie-like animals whose only instinct was blood. Could it be tied to the attacks I'd read about in the papers? Goosebumps pimpled my flesh as awareness washed over me. This could be tied to the murders around the island.

I quickened my pace, pulling the hood of my jacket over my ears.

Patrol Shephards were serious, called in only for brutal and mysterious crimes. I needed to know what was going on. It could be one of my classmates. It could be one of the instructors.

It could be Erik Blackthorne... No. I shook the thought from my head. It was *not* him. He wasn't careless enough to be subject to a fate like this. He was cautious, untrusting, and too skilled in defense to be the victim of whatever had taken place here.

Moving closer to the flashing squad carts, I crouched down. Slowly, stepping around the corner. My lungs seized. The breath I took went nowhere.

The fur on my neck stood on end as I took in the pooled blood soaking into the white sheet spread over top of a small, lifeless body. Was that... a mouse from school?

A small tail poked out from the cotton sheet along with a small paw. Forcing a breath out, I carefully took a few more steps towards the crime scene. Murder? Accidental homicide? What had happened? From the amount of blood covering the cobblestone, this looked like no accident. Nor did it seem like an unplanned attack. Voices came from behind me, and I stilled, willing breathing to be silent.

“What do you think Jansen?” A gruff voice asked, fatigue lazing his words. How long had they been out here? How long had this mouse been lying here? My mind raced to piece together some sort of explanation. All the attacks prior had been out toward Casin's Cove at the foothills of Geldors Mountains. Or they'd been occurring at Eagle's Landing at Marrisalia Bay. We knew they were getting close, but here? In Zephyria? This had never happened. This place was a haven for all, everyone had their own place in the town. Each creature their own carved-out place of serenity. What had changed? Why were the attacks here... why now?

“I've seen this before. The same style of death at Eagle's Landing just a week ago. It seems they have specific profile they like.”



“Yeah, I’d say. And a manner of death they prefer.”

“Did you I.D. her?”

My pulse pounded in my head, drowning out the sounds around me. I strained against it, needing to know who this was.

“Yeah, a, uh... Mrs. Luriel Mazzie.”

My jaw dropped and I backed up. The world spun around me as her name echoed in my mind. Luriel Mazzie. Luriel Mazzie. *Luriel Mazzie*.

My head began shaking. No, no, no, *no*.

I bumped into a warm, hard leg. Wheeling around, my vision blurred as a large amber head snapped to meet my gaze. Lips moved, and ears perked, but I couldn’t hear or focus on anything. Luriel Mazzie... She had been my first instructor. A first instructor to many students. She was the ninth-level homeroom instructor, chosen specifically for her mannerisms. She made the adjustment from junior academy to senior at Zepyrcrest bearable.

A bloodied paw flashed in my mind. Tears burned behind my eyes.

She had been the warm face that greeted the students at the door every day. Her cheerful smile had made the difference between a rough morning and a better day. Students had loved her, seeking to talk to her about any of their problems, whether at home or the academy. Gentle and kind... she had always been gentle and *kind*. Who would want to hurt Mrs. Mazzie?

More figures surrounded me, but I had to get out here. I could not spend one more minute stuck in this place. Stumbling past tan and black fur, I forced my numb legs into an unstable run.

Call followed me, but I could barely hear them over the sound of blood thundering in my ears. Tears swelled and fell from my eyes, blurring the approaching forest before me.

The rain had started, I could hear its soft pellets plinking off the leaves above me as I breached the trees. I didn't slow. Why, of all places, was Zepyria targeted? Whatever nonsense compelled these murders had stayed at bay, leaving the valley range of this town alone. It had struck Geldor's mountains, Marrisalia Bay, and Eagle's Landing, yes. But it had stayed far from the western region. Geldor's was more than a few days ride east, Eagle's Landing at Marrisalia further than that. It had seemed so distant, so removed. Almost as if it were one of the bedtime stories whispered to me over midnight snacks. The horrors of a shadow wielder caught between the armies of the sun-swept king. Evelynn had made sure to leave the most gruesome of details out, but my imagination had filled in the rest. Battle and war were ugly creatures, pillaging and wrecking the lives of innocents. The difference between the murders taking place now and the stories she'd spin was obvious. The stories had a reason behind the killings... these frivolous slaughters did not. At least, not one that was told in the daily news.

Mud slapped against my legs as my feet continued to pound the earth, propelling me deeper into the cover of the looming trees. Their leaves were a little ways from falling, but their colors were a mirage of emeralds, auburn, apricot, and pumpkin. Autumn was coming faster than I knew. My lungs screamed in my chest and my legs grew strained with lactic acid, begging me to relax my pace. I slowed to a walk, gulping down air.

Each footstep felt like dragging lead boots, and I threw my gaze around me. A fallen trunk of large maple sat fifty yards to my right.

Trudging over, I saw atop the moss-covered bark, resting my elbows on my knees. Still trying to catch my breath, images replayed over in my mind.

The Patrol Shepards wagons.

The white sheet turning pink at the edges.

A dirty paw exposed on the street.

The memory of who that paw belonged to...

A shuddering breath escaped my lips as I squeezed my eyes shut. I needed these pictures out. I needed Luriel Mazzie to be okay... not dead— no, murdered. I needed life to resume how it was. I needed Charlie to have a normal first day. I needed—

The sharp crack of a branch caught my attention. I stiffened.

My spine rigid, I listened closely, smothering my still ragged breathing to silence.

Nothing.

I heard *nothing*.

The heart in my chest, only having just begun to slow, burst into a new war against my ribs. It pounded in my ears. I carefully patted the pockets on my pants, my jacket, but nothing filled them. I had no way to protect myself besides defensive hand-to-hand. What if whatever killed Mrs. Mazzie lurked around still? What if it hadn't left? If it was the same creature that plagued Marissalia Bay and Geldor's Mountain then it had a taste for brutality for one animal and one animal only: Mice.

*Shit.*

Gingerly sliding down the front of the trunk, I crouched behind its mass. I strained, listening to all the sounds around me. Tuning out the regular sounds of life in the forest, I waited for another giveaway. Minutes passed, but no other noise followed. A breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding quietly pushed out of me.

"I could kill you, right now" A deep, warm voice purred. A cold blade pushed against my neck. My heart stilled its frantic rhythm.

Chapter Five

A smirk twisted the corners of my mouth as I stood and turned. Relief and irritation swept through me as I found a familiar tall figure standing in the falling rain.

“You know the rain might mess up that pretty little hairdo of yours, Erik.” Friendly venom dripped from each word, coaxing a smile from his lips. He pulled the dagger away, sheathing it on his belt.

“Mm, well, at least it won’t look as bad as yours.” Erik’s grin was genuine as he stepped back, resting his now empty hands on his hips.

“That is debatable,” I grumbled, pushing past him.

“I’m good at debate,” He offered, falling into step behind me. “What’re you doing out here, and why were you crouched like an idiot out in the open?”

My irritation spiked, evaporating the amusement I’d felt. How did he not know? He was supposed to be going to Zephycrest this morning, too. Usually, Erik was one of the first to arrive. It’d been that way from the very beginning. On the first day of Junior Academy, he’d been the first at the gate, standing with his books cradled in his arms, a worn cloak hanging from his shoulders. He had to have seen her. Did he not care? I wrestled my rising anger and took a steadying breath. “I didn’t want to see it anymore. I couldn’t bring myself to walk past her.” I stated, “They won’t have classes now anyway, not until it’s clear.”

“What are you talking about? Why wouldn’t they have classes, Amara?”

“What are *you* talking about, *Erik*?” I turned on the balls of my feet, causing him to skid to a stop right before me. “Are you that insensitive?”

Confusion and concern furrowed his brows, “What. Are. You. Talking. About.” He reached out, gripping both of my shoulders. “Did something happen?”

I moved to pull out of his grip, but he only strengthened his hold. Narrowing my eyes, I kept my mouth closed.

“Amara, what the hell happened? Talk to me. I was just on my way to the Academy when I saw you stop running and sit there. You looked angry, or sad. It was hard to tell with the hood.” He smiled, reaching to tug gently on the hood. I swatted his hand away. “I decided to stop and try to talk to you... but then you acted all spazzy when I accidentally cracked the branch. I thought you knew it was me.” He released my shoulders and ran a hand through his tawny-hued head. “You always brag about knowing me ‘by my heavy horse steps’.”

Understanding flared, causing my cheeks to burn.

He didn’t know.

He *hadn’t* seen.

Emotion clogged my throat as I stumbled a few steps back. Erik began to step towards me but stopped. His voice was barely above a whisper, “Amara... what happened?”

“Luriel Mazzie. She’s—,” I pushed past the threat of tears and pulled my gaze from where it had fallen to the forest floor, meeting his cobalt eyes. “She’s dead.”

The color drained from Erik’s face. His tawny fur turned ashen in the filtered, grey light. Rain bounced off him as ice frosted his features. Knees buckling beneath me, her face flashed in my memory once more. The ground bit at impact, but the pain lancing through my chest was sharper. Words rushed out of me, “Charlie and I were walking to the Academy. We were almost

there, not even a block away when he pointed to the Shepards.” I looked up at him, “The *Shepards* were there! She was covered in a sheet, but there was so much blood, Erik. It had to have been whatever was killing those mice in Geldors and Marisallia.”

Warm hands encircled my wrists, “Come.”

I stood on shaky legs as he led me deeper into the forest. The rain backed off with each minute that passed, the air chilling as it welcomed the changing season. I shivered as I looked up. The trees grew denser as more pines began filling the gaps. I pushed the remaining swell of grief down, promising myself I would not shed another tear. Mrs. Mazzie had been a light to all the youths of Zephyria, she would not want to be mourned.

*Sadness is a necessary tool for growth, cruel and unyielding, but it cannot be the muse of life.* She’d said, *Do not forget that it is better to live with the memory of what was than to perish with what was lost.*

Stepping into an opening in the trees, Erik walked to a weathered stump. Hovering his hands above the greyish, aged wood, he whispered too silently for me to hear.

A loud crack sounded from the earth. The stump vibrated before it erupted with light. In the span of a breath, the stump was gone and in its place was a...a door? Disbelief flooded me. What the hell just happened?

“Did you just—?”

“Shh.”

My eyes bulged from my head. *Did he just shush me?*

Feeling quite juvenile, I crossed my arms with a huff and followed Erik into the passageway. Awe and wonder rippled throughout my body. I had stepped into a home.

Warm, oak floors filled a large living room furnished with a plush, worn couch that sat before a stone fireplace. Tables bordered each end of the couch and lamps flooded the space with ambient candle-like light. A rug sat before the olive-toned chaise which sat adjacent to the roaring fire. Craning my neck, to peer towards the left, the living room opened into a small, modest kitchenette. My mouth hung open, and my head whipped right. A cracked door hinted at a bedroom, but it was too dark to see.

The door shut with a soft click, and a large oof of a figure blocked my view, “You might wanna...”

My eyes trailed up to meet twin pools of water, a smirk crinkling their edges. His finger moved up and down in front of his mouth. Why was he... *oh*.

My mouth snapped shut as the question floodgate wrenched open. “What is this place?” I squealed, forgetting everything except the cozy, cabinique home splayed out before me.

Erik chuckled, and my eyes grew wider. “This is where I live.”

“You?” I laughed. “You live here?”

He nodded.

I opened and closed my mouth, not sure what to say. I had always known he was independent. A stereotypical brood-by-yourself kind of male but I had always thought he still lived at home. He always spoke about his parents, telling stories of their times together and



meals shared at a table. Was this where they lived as well? I quickly scanned the small living space again, searching for any sign of his parents.

No shoes were left by the door, no jackets other than his cloak hung from the hooks. Books sat on the small coffee table in front of the couch, yet each title looked like the summer reading assignments. I walked into the living room, the smell of burning wood filling my nose. There was no hint of a mother's touch. No beautiful, flowery, or stylish cushions on the plush, oyster-colored couch. No blankets hung from the back of the chaise. There were no signs of his father either. From the stories Erik told, his father had been a big weapons fanatic, collecting all manners of swords, daggers, and bows. Yet, there was only one dagger hung on the wall. I studied the blade as it glinted in the light. The length of it was the darkest sable, and the hilt was fashioned with violet gems. I turned on my heels and walked into the kitchen, forgetting my manners. Bare minimum would be to describe the kitchen kindly. I shook my head, confused, and rounded on the balls of my feet, angling for what I guessed to be the bedroom.

"Amara," Erik called after me, stepping into the living room and plopping on the couch.

"Hmm?" I hummed, nearly to the bedroom door. My paw outstretched towards the handle.

"What are you doing?"

I worried my bottom lip with my teeth, embarrassment heating my cheeks once more. *Being nosy*, I wanted to say. "Searching?"

"For?"

“Signs of life... I guess?” I turned toward him, my embarrassments cranking up a notch at his lopsided grin.

“Come, sit with me.” He patted the seat beside him, “I have questions.”

I let out a bark of a laugh. *He* had questions. Resisting the urge to continue into that bedroom and see if more than one bed existed, I slowly, begrudgingly walked to the couch. With no amount of grace, I plopped onto the cushion and blinked at him.

“I want to know absolutely everything you saw. What you heard, what they said, how she was found—”

“Where is all their stuff?” I blurted.

His brows furrowed, creasing in the center as his lip curled in confusion. I stared at him. Why did he look confused? The question seemed obvious enough to answer. I’d heard stories of his parents many times. His father bandaging a scraped knee. His mother’s famous mushroom soup. I shifted my weight a little, nuzzling down into the cushions of the couch as my eyes traveled the room once more, scanning for any signs I might have missed when I arrived. No signs of them seemed evident.

“Did they go on a vacation?” I asked, meeting his gaze.

Shadows shaped the lines of his face as an emotion I didn’t quite recognize blinked in and out of his features. It happened so quickly, I wasn’t sure I saw it. Erik clenched his jaw and studied his paws. His voice sounded gruff as he whispered, “Who are you talking about?”

“Your parents?” Unease settled in my stomach. “Are your parents on vacation? I don’t see their stuff around here... is this not your home?”

Erik stood and walked to the mantle, “This is my home.”

“Okay, glad that’s established. I mean, the furniture was sort of a dead giveaway.” A small laugh escaped my lips as a sense of nervousness fluttered in my chest. “But where are your parents?”

As he watched me, it dawned on me how silly that question was. It was a *Mundae*. *Duh. They’re at work.* “Oh!” I sighed, “They’re not here because they’re in the fields. You said they were pea farmers, right?” I laughed, “I’m sorry. I’m out of it. Here I was thinking that maybe you didn’t—”

“No.” A heavy breath shook his shoulders. “They’re not at work. At least, I don’t know if they are. I don’t even know where they are anymore” A dark chuckle shook his frame. “I know this is not the time to be telling you this, not after what you’ve seen today.”

If I wasn’t nervous already, that set me over the edge. Sweat bloomed on my paws, and the fur on my neck stood as I watched him stand there, so still that he looked like a statue. Tell me what? What had he not told me? Why was this a bad time? I shifted in my seat, folding my hands over one another. A habit I’d created when I was young. Had his parents known that Mrs. Mazzie was going to be targeted? That she was going to be killed? No. That wouldn’t make any sense. This was a shock to all of Zephyria, even the Patrol Shepards seemed at a loss and caught off guard. Images flashed again in my mind of a white sheet and still slick blood pooling from underneath it. My eyes burned as I stared at his back, fighting to stay present. *Stay in this moment, do not slip.* I held my breath and counted to ten, slowly releasing the breath. Feeling better, I refocused on Erik. What was he talking about? Did his parents leave? If they were gone on travels, it wouldn’t be that big of a deal – especially not one that deserved an ominous

warning. *I know this is not the time to be telling you this.* Parents go on trips without their children all the time. Evelyn and Aleric go once a winter to Marissalia Bay for a few days, leaving me to watch over the house. Well, they *had*. Since these murders have started, they've stopped those trips. A shudder ran down my spine. I tucked my legs under me as I waited for him to continue.

“Amara, my parents...” He turned suddenly, whipping to face me. I jumped, eyes widening at the anger simmering in his eyes. “Gods, I didn't want to tell anyone this.” He ran a hand through his hair, tawny fur ruffling in its wake. “I don't want your sympathy when you hear this. I don't want any ‘I'm sorry’ or ‘That's awful.’ I don't need pity. I've been okay with everything for a long time, for longer than I can remember.”

My mouth parted as the hot coals transformed in my stomach, becoming butterflies amped up on the caffeine drink served in the instructor lounge.

Studying towards the couch, Erik sat on the edge, placing his elbows on his knees. “I don't have parents. Everything I told you about them was a lie... a wish.” My mouth dropped open as something inside of my cracked for him. “When I was four, that thing I did to open change the stump? Well it's magic, okay? Don't look at me like that. It's magic. I don't know how or why or where it came from but it started when I was four. My parents saw me do it, and I thought,” A dry, humorless laugh left him, “I thought they'd be happy or proud... or gods, anything. Instead? They were *scared*. Of *me*. They packed my suitcase that night, walked me into Delieseum Forest, and left me there.”

Left him there? Alone?

“I thought they’d come back. I thought it was a game. They told me to count to one hundred with my eyes closed. That we were going to play a game of hide and seek. I sat on my suitcase, closed my eyes and counted. When I went to find them, they were gone. I searched for hours. *Days*. I never found them, but I found this place... there was food in the pantry, so I stayed.”

“Erik,” I whispered, reaching out for his paw.

He pulled his arm away, “It's fine. Really, it's okay.”

Unsure of what to say I bit the inside of my lip, turning it over my teeth. Thoughts raced in my head, but none made any sense of what he had just told me. I knew what being abandoned felt like, but the sting of that betrayal had always seemed dampened by the presence of Evelyn and Aleric. I hadn't even known who my birth parents were, but I had known what stability and love felt like from mice who became like parents. Guilt and shame ripped through me. I always felt pushed away from them, yet they had been there for me. They had welcomed me into their lives, wanted or not. Tears stung my eyes, and I bit down on the flesh I chewed between my teeth. I would not cry again today. Erik didn't want that from me, nor would Mrs. Mazzie. Stitching my emotions up, I timidly reached out once more for Erik. This time, he let my fingers clasp his forearm.

“I do not pity you, Erik, but I am sorry they did this to you. However, I am so grateful that they did. You are one of the strongest males I know. Gods, you are one of the strongest animals I know, and what they did? That was inexcusable, but it made you who you are, and for that, I am grateful. Because of what they did, I found my friend.” My voice broke, but I kept control over myself.

Erik's cobalt eyes met mine, and the fire burning within them lessened. Erik nodded, placing his hand over mine. "Thank you, Amara." Squeezing my paw, he said, "Now tell me everything."

## Chapter Six

The afternoon faded as I painfully filled in Erik on all that I had witnessed. He had listened intently, nodding and making inferences on what he believes to have happened. Ultimately, we were on the same page. We knew that it had to be tied to the murders that had taken place in Geldor's Mountains and Marisallia Bay. The only thing that we didn't know was *why* these murders were taking place, or *who* was truly doing the dirty work of bloodying their hands. No matter what tangented path we started down, the conversation came back to the only creatures we knew could and *would* kill for the sport of it. Gods, I had thought possibly it could've been a fluke, but I had paid too much attention in the history lectures at Zephycrest Acadmeny.

"I think it had to be the Falcons. There's no other explanation." I sighed, picking at what was left of the small lunch Erik had made for us. It was some variation of noodles with cheese. It had been the perfect meal to warm the chill in my body. Plus, anything with cheese is checked off as good meal in my book.

"It makes sense to me, honestly. I know that they're some sort of fable now, given how long it had been since any townsanimal has laid eyes on one, but the descriptions from this paper matches what we've read in our classes. The brutality of it all fits." Erik scratched his chin, snapping my eyes to his jaw. He was handsome, but not in the traditional sense. His blue-flame eyes were luminous in the lamplight and his fawn colored fur highlighted the chips of ice that dwelled in the their embers. When I had first met him, it had been love at first sight. We were young, but something clicked inside me when I first bumped into him. As we grew up alongside

each other, I realized that he would never feel the same towards me. It had taken until our ninth-year, starting at Zephycrest for it to truly sink in. He had started dating Harlin Gambroles.

She was beautiful. White fur, the color of snow with honeydew eyes. The pain of that day still lingered as I watched him now, studying the newspapers he'd collected. I sucked my bottom lips between my teeth and took a deep breath. "Yeah," I said, "That's what I've saying. It's the only logical explanation. Two-hundred years ago, the humans on the continent had taken to war. Some battle between the Ragient Warlocks and the Nitemore Witches. They had fought over... Gods, what did they fight over?"

My brows knit together as I filtered through the history we'd been forced to read in our eleventh-year world studies course. The war, I knew, had been brutal. Two forces of unsettling power fought for control of the human continent. One side aided by their control of the sun's gifts: fire, wind, and light. They were called the Ragients. The other by the gifts of the moon: shadow, starfall, and ice. The Nitemores. It was a massacre of innocents and soldiers alike, dwindling the population to the thousands.

"They fought to control the continent. The Ragients wanted a dictatorial-type of control over the humans while the Nitemore wanted to rule in a more democratic essence." Erik chimed in, filling in the gaps. I looked at him and nodded, a little creeped out. Sometimes I feared he might be able to read my mind. Wait— "Can you read minds? You know, with that magical thing you got going on?" I asked, anxiety slamming into my ribs.

"No, Amara," He laughed, "I cannot read your mind, though sometimes it would be quite helpful. Especially when you get those squirrely looks on your face. Like the one you got right now."



Erik winked at me and I relaxed. *Thank gods.*

“Good, because magic powers, I can get behind. It’s cool... very, very weird and I have lots of questions about it, but cool.” Erik rolled his eyes and I banked the million questions into a box for later. He hadn’t wanted to discuss anything after his big reveal, and I couldn’t blame him. Any talk about his powers brought memories of what they caused, and while he claimed to be over what had happened between him and his parents... it was obvious that those scars had yet to heal fully. I shifted the subject back to focus. “Okay, then we agree that it is the Ragient’s Falcons?”

“I don’t see what else it could be.” He stood from the kitchen table and walked to the cabinet. Grabbing a glass, he turned the faucet at the sink and filled the glass. “Water?”

“No, thank you.” I murmured, pulling last years textbook across the table to me. “In Chapter three, it discussed the methods that the Ragients trained the Falcons to interrogate and kill.” My finger trailed down the page, “Here, it says: *‘The Ragients valued harsh and brutal strategies in their interrogation and war tactics. When the union between the Falcons and the Ragients was forged, the Ragients insisted on training the large birds of prey in the specifics. First, cornering. A strategy that got the victim alone. Second, torture.’*” I cringed, but continued quoting Mr. Barnes’ history textbook. “*‘They were taught to tear, claw, and pierce the flesh in specified areas to elicit the most pain. Thus causing the truth to be drawn out. Last, once the information was acquired, they were to kill their lead. If the victim did not crack, they were killed anyways.’*” I shut the book.

Erik finished his water and found his seat once more. “What I don’t get is how no one else has come to the same conclusion. Wouldn’t you think this would be on their radar? I mean, how else— better yet, *why else* would these murders be happening if not because of the Falcons?”

I thought it over. Perhaps they refuse to acknowledge that these creatures are still breathing? It had been over two-hundred year since the last Falcon was seen. The last one, according to the history texts, was seen flying off into the Bloodborne Mountains. The Bloodborne Mountains sat on the northern most point of Ithcantia, the island Zephyria nestled in. It was the one of the closer spans of land to the continent where the humans resided. It was called the Bloodborne Mountains due to the Red Ruin Maples that covered them, their ruby-hued leaves bathing the ridges of the mountain the color of freshly spilled blood. I took a deep breath and rested my forehead on my crossed arms. Closing my eyes, I said, “It’s the only explanation that makes plausible sense, no matter how ridiculous it is.”

“I agree, one-hundred percent, my only question is *how?*” The screech of his chair sliding back made me lift my head. He’d pushed away from the table and reclined back, the picture of nonchalance. “I remember Mr. Barnes saying that the last known living Falcon had been male. There’s no way that they could’ve survived.”

“Unless the Ragient’s had kept some females on the continent, I don’t know.” I stood slowly, and stretched. Glancing at the clock, it read four past noon. “I have to get going, I’m sure Evelynn and Aleric are worried sick, especially since Charlie probably got back around nine this morning.”

Erik nodded, “You can leave through the same door we came in. Head south then east, that’ll dump you on Baver’s Creek near the academy. No more than a fifteen minute walk.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, placing my paw on the knob. I looked over my shoulder at him. He’d followed me into the living room, and now sat perched on the arm of the couch, “Be safe out there, I’ll come back by tomorrow.”

“You as well, Amara. Get back before dusk.”

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Erik had been spot on, the walk to Baver’s Creek Road had only taken fifteen minutes, and with the rain subsiding, it had been a much needed opportunity to decompress and organize the thoughts and feeling I had racing through me. The grief I felt for Mrs. Mazzie stayed tucked in the box I’d locked it in, but the fear gathering with the knowledge that the Falcons could be coming back once more broke free. I ran through any other scenarios that could explain the death of my former instructor, but none matched the evidence before me. If the nightmarish Rogues were truly a real phenomenon, then the probability of a bodies left to discover was low. According to the folklore, those creatures were scavengers to the bone. They left little for finding besides bones, and depending on what kind of Rogue it was, even that may be eaten. No, it could not be Rogues. If it had been a townsanimal, the common criminal would be afraid of being caught. Thus, the body would have been dragged off scene, hidden in some makeshift grave, sewer, or river. Whoever killed her wanted the body to be found. The profile matched the murders in Geldor’s and Marrisalia.

Rounding the corner, I turned onto the street of our house and felt a wave of relief as a shudder rolled through me. The porch lamps were on, and I jogged the remaining block.

Kicking off my boots, I stepped inside.

“Amara?” Evelynn’s voice sound worried as she barreled from the kitchen. “Amara! Thank the Gods, where were you?”

Her concern throttled me, and guilt rumbled in my stomach like thunder before a storm. “I’m sorry—”

“Honey, we were worried sick!” Aleric’s voice drew my attention to where he stood at the base of the steps. “Next time, please find some way to let us know you are okay. We checked Zephycrest Academy, and gods, they wouldn’t let us within fifty feet.” Aleric pulled me into a hug, squeezing tight. I wrapped my arms around him, nuzzling into his chest. “We saw what happened, and,” A shudder shook his large frame, “We thought it was you!”

Evelynn pushed in behind me, and I released one arm to wrap around her thin body. “I’m sorry, I will do better next time. I,” I sighed, “I saw her, and I had to get away. I didn’t even stop to think.”

“It’s okay,” Evelynn murmured onto the top of my head, “We’re just glad you’re safe.”

Pulling away, I looked at them. Silver lined their eyes as they stood holding eachother watching me with an amotion I couldn’t place. I had seen the same one shaping their features as they looked at Charlie sometimes. My throat burned.

I opened my mouth, wanting to tell them that I loved them, but Evelynn wiped nonexistent dirt from her apron as Aleric cleared his throat. “Okay, well, dinner will be ready shortly. Go wash up.

“Yeah, I got to go continue the work on the shop.” Aleric mumbled, walking for the kitchen door to the backyard.

As they both walked off, the warmth I'd felt gathering faded. The coolness of their casual dismissal. Had I mistaken that emotion that lined their faces? It was clear they were relieved to see me, and grateful I was alive, but maybe I hadn't read that entirely accurate. Happy I had kept my mouth shut, I walked upstairs to find Charlie.

Cracking the door to his bedroom open, I peeked my head in. "Anyone home?"

"Amara!" Charlie yelped, jumping nearly to the ceiling.

"Hey buddy," I chuckled. Charlie collected himself, and threw himself at me. He wrapped me in a tight hug, his head barely reaching my chest. I kissed the top of his head. "Thank you for listening to me today."

"You owe me a sweet," He looked up at me. "*Two* sweets, actually."

"*Two* sweets?" I pretended to be appalled. "That's a steep charge. I'm not sure I can come up with that on such short notice."

"Amara," He laughed, dragging out my name, making it sound like *Ah-marrrrrr-ruhyyyy*.

I patted his head. "Okay, okay. Two sweets it is."

Charlie relinquished his viper-hold and began bouncing on his toes, excitement painting his features and brightening his honey-chocolate eyes. Crossing the narrow hallway to my room, I knelt beside my bed and fished out a secret stash of candies I had been collecting over the summer. With little to do over the off-season from academics, window shopping had filled majority of my days. While I never got much of anything with the limited money I had, I had made it a point to stop once a week at the confectionaires store for Charlie. I saved them in a box

beneath my bed, usually surprising him on days he felt under the weather or left out by the other youths on our street.

Charlie had a hard time making friends. He was quiet around other youths, and they typically picked on him for it. I reminded him that wise mice talk when they have something to say, and foolish mice talk because they must say something. He always smiled at that, then even bigger when he saw the candy in my paw.

I handed him two pieces of the caramel delights, and sent him off to help Evelyn in the kitchen. I needed a shower, and a nap. He bounded down the steps after popping both of them in his mouth, cheek puffed out with the size of them.

Smiling to myself, I entered the bathroom and turned the faucet on. Ithcantia may not be as advanced as what I've heard of the continent, but we had running water and electricity. As the hot water fell like rain for the shower head, I had never felt more grateful for that than I did now. The hot pellets pummelled over me as I stepped into the stream, relaxing muscles I didn't know were tight.

After dinner, I climbed into bed and was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

## Chapter Seven

Zephycrest Academy pushed classes for another two weeks. During which, I spent nearly every hour at Erik's. Together, we devoured the history texts we'd collected from our studies of the historical continental war, creating a pinboard for the known murders in Ithcantia. It was makeshift and mediocre but it gave us a chance to see where the details of each killing aligned.

The victims were consistent, each one being a mouse. Both of us shivered as we gathered the styles of death, sometimes needing to run to the bathroom to lose our breakfasts. Each victim had been discovered sprawled on their backs, deep, bloody grooves of talons ripped through their bodies. It rubbed me the wrong way how close to attention the journalists paid when describing the state of the bodies. In retrospect, it seemed callous and cold, insensitive to the fact that these were animals who deserved dignity in their deaths. Instead, they were brutalized all over again with the retellings of what they must have suffered. Perhaps it was an effort to aid the Patrol Shepherds in their hunt for the culprits, but the tactlessness was chilling.

When classes started, the air buzzed with nervous energy. Mrs. Mazzie's death hung in the atmosphere of each class. The instructors seemed distracted and on edge. The students even more so, especially the mice. Murmurs carried over the awkward silences as instructors divvied out their syllabi, the hours flying by in a haze. As the last bell rang, releasing the students for the day, I bolted from arithmetics, racing for the woods.

Erik found me in the courtyard, and we both hightailed it towards the woods.

"Honestly, I don't think it's that big of a deal," Lacey Highburn chattered, filing her nails near the gate. Anger simmered as I paused my rushed walk. I turned on my heel and marched

over to her. Erik reached for my arm but I shrugged out his reach. I faintly heard him grumble something that would've made Evelyn blush as I continued towards the air-headed rabbit.

“Not a big deal?” My blood boiled in my veins. Lacey's dull brown eyes landed on me, rolling up and down my frame. Shifting her weight to one hip, she crossed her arms and lifted her chin.

“Yeah, Mrs. Mazzie was annoying. Always smiling and talking.” Lacey stated, arrogance painting her unimpressive features.

Lacey was a Hare. Typically, Hares were diligent and considerate townanimals, but Lacey had missed that gene. Instead, she was rude, snide, and her face was stuck in constant sneer. Honestly, it could've been a defensive mechanism for how ugly she was. The beauty gene had missed her, too. Her mother and father were weavers, and both of them were absolutely breathtaking. Lean and lithe figures, golden-brown fur, and blush-hued noses. Lacey had the same fur color, but their artistically designed features had been over-exaggerated in their daughter. Lacey's ears were way too long, her eyes way too small, and her nose pointed towards the sky. I grimaced, coming to a stop nearly a foot in front of her.

“If I were you, Lacey, I'd watch my mouth,” I growled.

“What are you going to do about it?” She purred, her friends giggling around her. “We already have too many mice in Zephyria, better to be rid of one.” She flicked a nonexistent fleck of dust from her uniform. “Come on, Amara, you know this... that's why your parents—.”

My pulse hammered in my head as I launched myself at her. Erik cursed under his breath. My fists collided with her face two good times, blood splattering my knuckles, before strong



arms wrapped around my waist, hauling me off her larger frame. Lacey was a good ten inches taller than me, but I was faster than she was. That had been obvious from Junior Academy.

Kicking out and screaming, Lacey watched me be taken away with wide eyes. Blood trickled out of her mouth and the sight of it brought an alarming amount of satisfaction. Erik placed me on the ground but kept his hands on my shoulders. Tugging my hood up over my head, he guided me, not so gently, past the gate. I could hear instructors rushing to Lacey. Her shrill, whiny voice wobbled as she lied about what happened, claiming I attacked her without reason. I moved to turn around. There was no way she was going—

“No,” Erik growled in my ear. “If you go back there now, you’ll only incriminate yourself more. You know the punishment for fighting. What’s worse is you chose Lacey to hit. Don’t get me wrong, she deserved that wicked right hook, but the Highburns are up there in the status of merchants. They could press charges.”

“I don’t care,” I grumbled, breached the first row of trees. Erik spun me around, his face mere inches from mine. My breath caught.

“You may not care, but you know the hierarchy of the Zephyria.” His face was as stern as his voice. “If I hadn’t pulled you off her, you would’ve done serious damage. Lacey’s a coward and her parents are protective. A busted lip is better to defend against than a pummeled face.”

I stared at him, the anger still broiling inside me. I clenched my fists, ignoring the brewing soreness in my knuckles. I’d hit her again. And again. And again, if I could. Lacey ran her mouth often, and no one took a stand to it. Everyone usually feared the wrath of her well-off parents and typically allowed her tarnished opinion to flow freely. Even the Fox and the Coyote did. They knew the power money held in Zephyria, but she had taken it too far.

Erik shook his head, a grin spreading “Violent little thing.”

“Shut up,” I spat, walking deeper into the woods. I flexed my fingers, wiping them on my leggings. “Let’s just go.”

Erik followed after me, and soon we reached the house. Stepping inside, I marveled again at his use of his powers, the entrancement waded off most of the anger I still felt. Who did she think she was, talking about mice that way? Talking so coldly of the murders that had been happening? “... *too many mice... better to be rid of one.*” I fought against the re-emerging fury and focused on the movements of his hands, the door appearing out of thin air. Envy bloomed as I thought of the mayhem I might cause if I had those abilities. Lacey would’ve crapped herself if I had his magic... a shameful amount of joy filled my chest as I pictured her face going slack with surprise if I had been able to wield magic against her. A silent laugh shook my shoulders as I set my backpack on his kitchen table.

Erik pulled newspapers from his own pack as he grabbed a seat at the table.

“There’s been two more deaths in Casin’s Cove. Not even five days between them.” He sighed. “It’s getting worse.”

“What could be the reason?” I asked, taking a seat.

Erik didn’t answer for a long time. “I don’t know. It’s not like there is much to go off of. It seems pointless, killing for the sake of killing.”

I thought immediately of the Rogues and goosebumps pimpled my flesh. I stood, my chair scraping across the wooden floor with a scrawl and walked aimlessly to the fireplace, placing my hand on one of the stones. Leaning into the support of it, the stone shifted, pushing in

as a loud crack sounded. Startled, a shriek left my lips. I jumped back, watching in amazement as the wall to the left of the fireplace swung back, opening.

“What was that—” Erik started. “What the hell?”

He came closer, but my eyes were glued on the darkened entryway. A small draft blew from the crevice. I blinked, looking back to the stone I’d unknowingly pushed. It stayed pressed into the fireplace. I left my hand to my face, looking with no small amount of shock at my paw.

“You didn’t know this was here?” I looked at him quizzically.

“No idea,” He murmured, eyes wide.

Erik’s shoulder brushed mine as we both looked disbelievingly at the dark portal.

“Do you feel the breeze?” I whispered.

“Yeah,” He answered, “How did you...”

His voice trailed off as I pointed to the stone stuck in the mantle. “Oh.”

“Well,” I began.

“Let’s, uh, go check it out... I guess.” Erik took a step toward the obsidian opening.

“Wait!” I yelped, rushing to the blade hanging from the wall. I gripped its onyx handle, the violet gems cool to my paw. Erik eyed me, one brow arcing in question. “What? Better safe than sorry.”

He shrugged, “Makes sense.”

Pushing the door farther open, I slowly stepped into the dark passageway.

“I should go first,” Erik started.

“What because you're male?” I arched my brow, looking back over my shoulder.

“Well—”

I stepped forward, and Erik cursed under his breath. A small smile played at the corners of my lips as an eerie fear slid over my skin, taking that smile away. Had Erik known this was here? His surprised face flashed in my mind again as I crept deeper into the tunnel, batting away suspicion. There's no way, Erik hadn't been the most forthcoming person, come to find out, but he wasn't a liar, and he was an even worse actor. No, this was just as shocking to him as it was to me, leaving that crawling, oily feeling of dread. The temperature of the air dropped, chilling my already cold body. The draft grew stronger the farther in we traveled, a damp, musky scent clinging permeating around us. Whatever this was, it hadn't been disturbed in a long time. The smell grew stronger, more pungent. I blinked and squinted, but no light emerged from the lengthening span of darkness before us. Minutes passed, the only sounds were that of our breathing, echoed back to us off the stone. The ground began to angle down, and I was grateful for the boots I'd worn this morning. We were descending.

“How long is this thing?” I grumbled, stretching my arms and splaying my fingers. There was not a snowball's chance in hell that I was going to run face-first into something. Especially with Erik behind me. The embarrassment would be second to his large figure smashing against mine, making whatever damage I might take more painful and obvious.

As if he could read my thoughts, Erik softly huffed a laugh, the sound light and teasing. I grimaced, thankful that he couldn't see my face.

It had seemed like forever when dim light began to break up the black surrounding us. The ground flattened out under our boots. As the light grew prouder, colors began blooming. The walls weren't jagged and sharp as expected, but masoned with stone. Large, purplish-grey stone. A faint flickering made them pulse on either side of us. I lowered my paws, no longer needing protection from blunt, protruding, random turns or walls. Seconds later, warm, orange light poured before us and the tunnel suddenly opened up into a room. Sconces, lit with some sort of flame, lined the walls of the room. My ears hummed with the roar of my heart. My feet stopped. Erik bumped into my back, but I could only focus on the room before us.

“A little warning—” Erik growled before, “What in the gods is this?”

“I don't know,” I murmured, darting my eyes around.

Tables with scrolls lined the back right wall, their edges warped and curling from the moisture. Why was it so damp down here? Ink wells sat next to quills, and maps hung from the wall above them. In the ambient lighting provided by the sconces, I noticed two dust-covered chairs sat before an empty fireplace. The mantle made of solid, plated wood. On the far left wall, a makeshift half-kitchen spanned the length, its white marbled countertop in sharp contrast to the dark gloom of the room. Stepping forward, the hollow clunk of a wooden floor drew my attention. When had the stone transitioned? Following my step backward, I saw the threshold. It was a doorframe. What had happened to the door? Erik pushed past me in an effort to explore the scrolls.

“Be careful,” I whispered, whipping my head back around. “What if it's booby-trapped?”

“I don’t think I’ve heard the word ‘booby-trapped’ since we were seven years old, Amara.” The smile he flashed me made my heart give a little flip. I looked down at my chest frowning. *I’ll have a discussion with you later.*

Shaking my head and flexing my fingers, I followed after his lead, gingerly placing my steps. I moved towards the two chairs. There was a dirty, maroon rug spread in the center of the floor, beneath a low, large, wooden table. Atop the table was a bolted, iron box. The lock hanging heavy from the latch. Crouching, I cringed as I placed my knees on the, apparently, damp rug. The box was tattered and cold against the pads of my fingers, the iron biting. I pulled on the lock hoping that maybe, just *maybe* it might give.

It didn’t.

Beggars can’t be choosers.

“Amara, you should see this,” Erik called from the tables. Standing I carefully walked over to him. “A little faster please? This place isn’t *booby-trapped*.”

I glared at him and stomped the last remaining steps.

“So violent.” He chided, clucking his tongue.

Swatting out at him, he easily dodged what I felt would’ve been a nice blow. Sighing, I looked down at the aged paper spread carelessly across the tables.

“What do you think this place was?” Erik asked. He had moved closer, his shoulder brushing mine. The warmth rippling off him was a welcome treat in this room, which was cold and dank.

“I don’t know,” I said, sending a scouring look across the room once more. “The maps on the wall make me think it could’ve been some sort of meeting place, or maybe the person was a geography buff.”

“Doubtful,” he countered, “If they were only interested in history, it wouldn’t explain these scrolls. They don’t make any sense either.” Erik thumbed through a few sheets, lifting their edges only to let them fall back down. “Plus, if this was a room for a history buff to doddle in, wouldn’t you think it’d have more than just the bare necessities? A make-shift kitchen is helpful but those chairs seem anything but comfortable.”

My gaze fell back to the chairs. The bones of the wooden frames popped against the taut leather. The seats were not amply cushioned, nor were they lounged. The back of the chairs were straight, even if the legs were short. It made sense to have the legs of the chairs be shorter, the table before it was not one for sitting beneath. I shook my head and found Erik’s eyes. The crystalline blue blazed with curiosity. “Okay, so you think a history buff would want more creature comforts then?”

He nodded and pointed to the papers once more. “Look at these, it’s not just names of places, Amara. It’s names of people too.”

Following the finger pointed out, I looked at the scrolls. The yellowing papers were organized in a haphazardish mayhem. Piles containing names, some containing locations with x’s and circles, and ones that held names of items or places I’d never seen. On one sheet, the phrase ‘Nyx’s Lament,’ was scribbled over and over again. Reaching out, I traced the script. Nyx’s lament? Was that a forgotten testimony or some sort of treasure lost to time? It could be a moment in history left behind and out of the textbooks we’d read in the academy. My own

curiosity bubbled, and I gathered the scrolls in my hands. Picking them up, I clutched them to my chest, readying to bring them to the low table before the fireplace. Erik's hand shot across the now naked portion of the table, wrapping around a spool of thread. The once red color now muddled and brown. My eyebrows furrowed as I watched him carefully.

“Why would there be a spool of thread here?” Erik plucked it from its resting place, holding it up to scan it more closely.

“I don't know— They could've liked to knit?” I said.

“Doubtful,” Erik said, pulling the end and stretching it. The spool spinning against his forefinger and thumb.

“I'm beginning to think Mr. Jaxton's vocabulary lessons are starting to pay off. You've found a new favorite word.” I grinned at him and batted my eyelashes.

Erik stuck out his tongue. “What male, assuming its a male because the lack of decor here, knits in his free time?”

“One in touch with his—Wait. ” My eyes flashed to the maps. I strained my eyes hard in the bright enough but not bright enough light. Tiny punctures marked specific places in the map. “Look. Look on the map.”

“He didn't knit,” Erik stated, holding the extended thread out in front of him, placing it along the map between two small holes punched into the map.

“No,” I said, “He made connections.”

“But what between?” I whispered.



“I don’t know...” Erik sighed, pulling the thread away.

## Chapter Eight

Dinner was ready by the time I made it home. Aleric and Evelyn had been waiting for me. Before my backpack even hit the floor they had read me the riot act about my tussle with Lacey. This was not our first tango over my actions. There had been the time in Junior Academy when I'd smoked Perry Giovanni for pulling on my tail. There was also the time I'd tackled Jillian Greska for cutting in line at lunch. I was always serious about food. And one of the other times, I had threatened Brock Barnes for cutting my ponytail off in reading class with the strangulation. I hadn't really meant it then, he was my best Junior Academy friend. I still got in trouble.

So instead of listening dutifully, I focused on my energy on not rolling my eyes. Nodded along solemnly, and ultimately, tuned out most of it.

It wasn't that I didn't care, or didn't want to take their advice. I had just heard it all before. The anger melted into disappointment. The "*I didn't raise you like that,*" into "*I'm concerned for you.*"

I understood, wholly and completely, that pelting her face with my fists was not the "*responsible way to handle an altercation,*" but I still felt lingering satisfaction for drawing blood. What she'd said, how she'd said it, and the sniggering of her bunny-buddies had been a final crack in my shattering patience. A culmination of all the events leading up to her snide remark.

The Patrol Shepherds were gone, seemingly finished with their work finding nothing but dead leads and cold trails. The Academy had halted all training due to the chaos Zephyria was thrown in over Mrs. Mazzie's death. Students weren't allowed outside of the building aside from

entering and exiting. The murders were running rampant, circling around the area, closer and closer. The next attack could be here, in Zephyria, again, at any moment.

When they'd finished, Evelynn was teary-eyed, wrapping her arms around me. Her words wobbled and her I love you's garbled. Aleric was dejected, distant. I know they don't think they reached me, and they were right to a certain extent. I did not feel remorse, even though I probably should have. I would gladly sink my fists into her thick skull again. Maybe that made me a bad animal, I didn't know.

Evelynn gave me a plate and I took it upstairs.

Fiddling with the steamed broccoli, I sat at my desk and stared blankly at the planner I'd pulled from my backpack. Mr. Jaxton wanted an essay by the end of the week about the dangers of not practicing your sentence structures. Groaning loudly, I stuffed the broccoli into my mouth and chewed. The savory, buttery flavor did little to ease the annoyance I felt brewing. Of all the things to write an essay about, he truly believed that the significance of a sentence merited one? Literary elements I could understand. Character, plot, conflict, maybe even setting, but sentence structures? I marked an x over the assignment and resided to be okay with an F. Being a strong student was important to me, but constructing a paper on something as dumb as this was not important to me. Other, more pressing matters, were what I needed to focus on, like how to defend myself.

No, how to attack.

Would Luriel Mazzie have had better odds if she'd been able to not only defend herself but been able to deliver her attacks of her own? Flip to the offense? It wasn't likely, given that

Falcons are the size of buildings, but wishful thinking says she could have. I devoured the rest of my dinner, eagerly placing the empty plate onto my bed.

Fishing for my backpack once more I dove my hand into its darkened pocket, reaching for the cool spine of the book I'd taken from Mr. Guanley's bookshelves. Mr. Guanley was our defensive arts instructor. He was placed in charge of overseeing that students were equipped each year with methods and techniques on how to defend themselves, no matter their size. Each year at Zephycrest Academy the levels progress with more challenging routines and harder practices of them until sweat laden your training clothes. The training my first year had made muscles I did not even know existed sore. The second year, I got stronger. The third year, I got faster. Mr. Guanley didn't have us solely focus on defense either. He prided himself on making sure none of us "jiggled" while we walked by the end of our third year. That meant conditioning training.

I had loved that the most.

We were tasked with obstacle courses, distance runs, and sprint pyramids to hone our bodies into the perfect flight animal. He'd always say, "*If protecting yourself isn't a viable option, you must be able to get away. Stay smart, stay alive.*" While that hadn't really made much sense to me then, the murders being to separate from Zephyria, it made perfect sense now. Especially with the creeping suspicion that these murders were caused by one of the deadliest apex predators Ithcantia has ever seen. Especially, being the prey they sought the most.

Heaving the heavy volume onto the desk, I threw open the cover. Turning to the table of contents, I found the chapters that detailed offensive maneuvers. Hand-to-hand combat, Katāri, and swordsmanship were broken down into six different chapters, two per topic. Pulling out a notebook, I created opened a blank page and began constructing my own workout routines that

practiced moves I felt were the most effective for my stature. I needed moves and techniques befitting of a smaller creature. I focused on ways to utilize the opponent's weight and height against them. By the time a knock came on the door, I had seven workouts drafted, one for each day of the week. I closed the notebook and the book, filing them away into the catacomb of my pack.

“Yeah?” I called over my shoulder.

The knob of the twisted, and I turned to face it. Charlie’s chocolate head poked through.

“Hi,” he whispered.

“Hi,” I smiled, wagging my fingers at him.

“Is it safe to come in?” He asked, eyebrows stretching up his small forehead.

“Yeah, bud. It’s safe.” I waved him in, moving to sit on my bed.

Pushing the plate out of the way, I made room for him to sit with me. Charlie held his hands behind his back, and sheepishly trodded over. I arched a brow and angled my chin.

“What you got there, Small Fry?” I asked, poking his stomach gently.

Charlie giggled and pulled two cookies from behind his back. “I snuck you dessert.” His chest puffed up with pride as a warm, tingling sensation filled mine. Charlie’s blush ear reddened. “Don’t tell mom!”

I snatched a cookie from his paw, and shoved the peanut buttery goodness into my mouth. Speaking around the crumbled, warm bite, I ruffled his hair and said, “Yur sthe-cret isth sthafa wiff me.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full!” Charlie chided, laughing as he took a bite of his own. He sat on the bed next to me and leaned into my side. His little frame was warm as I chewed the cookie. Swallowing I wrapped my arm around his shoulders.

“Sorry, I know it’s not lady-like, but you know I can’t resist peanut butter cookies.”

“I know,” he said, his voice still holding a smile. “Mara?”

“Hmm?” I grunted, sucking the last of the gooeyness from my teeth.

“Is Zephyria safe?” Worry clogged his voice, spiraling a new crack in my heart. I tightened my grip on his shoulders and leaned down to look in his eyes.

“Charlie,” I said softly, but firmly, “nothing is going to happen to you while I am here. Zephyria hasn’t had a crime like that in hundreds of years.”

His eyes grew as big as saucers, “*Hundreds?*”

He drew out the word hundreds. I nodded, widening my eyes like his. “You are more than safe, especially with me as a big sister. I am not going to let anything happen to you.”

“But what if—” He started, panic obvious behind his dilated pupils.

“No what if’s.” I stopped him. “What if’s is not a fun game. It’s not even a fair game. The odds are always stacked in its favor because our imagination is better at fantasy than we are. You are safe, Charlie. I will not let anything happen to you.”

Tears pricked at my eyes but I fought them. I could not let him see the fear I felt, too. Cupping his chin, I leaned my forehead against his. “Promise?” He murmured, closing his eyes.

“I promise.”

And I meant it.

Charlie nodded against my head, and I pulled back. The terror I’d felt pulling around him dissipated, and mischief replaced it. Charlie cracked a lopsided grin. “Is there any way you could also protect me from Mr. Foundry? He’s *insane*.”

I burst out laughing, “Mr. Foundry? Your sciences instructor?”

Charlie’s laugh joined mine, “What? He’s *scary!*”

I looked at the clock on the wall as I wiped the water from my eyes. “You got to get to bed, Small Fry. So do I. Mr. Foundry isn’t scary, he’s... unique.” Doubt clouded his eyes, “He is! I promise.”

“Two promises now.” Charlie let out a breath. “That’s a tall order, Mara.”

“Mhm, and I mean both of ‘em. Now go brush your teeth so I can have the bathroom after.” I kissed the top of his head and Charlie faked being grossed out. He gave me a quick hug and trotted out of the bedroom, taking any lingering warmth with him.

~

The next day at the academy was... uncomfortable, to say the least. Lacey’s bunny-buddies had apparently gotten to the rest of the youths. Whatever way they twisted the truth, it was evident it wasn’t in my favor. Curled lips and raised hackles surrounded me as I walked through the main corridor.

“Tough crowd,” a familiar voice came from behind me. I turned to find Elaina Aldridge. I couldn’t help but grin.

“I’ve been wondering where you’ve been,” I laughed, sidling up to her. Elaina Aldridge was one of the few friends I kept at Zephycrest. She was about a foot taller than me, but that was a given. She was a fox. Her fur was vibrant tangerine with forrest brown paws, muzzle, and ring around her tail. The white under her chin and on her chest was always stained with the yolk of her vegetarian eggs. Bumping her with my elbow, I said, “You missed all the action yesterday.”

“I may have missed the live-action, but I caught the review.” Her eyes crinkled down at me. “I for one, am so happy someone finally knocked the bunny bitch on her back. Lacey had it comin’.”

“You and I are on the same page then.”

“What did she even say?” Elaina asked, hushing her voice. “Not that I think you’d really need a reason. Her preppy, prissy face is enough, honestly.” Elaina faked a one-two punch.

I shook my head and slowed to a stop. Meeting her eyes, I told her about how it all went down.

“That slimy little weasel!” Elaina fumed, “Where does she get off? I mean, what stone does she have to throw? Rabbits are worse! If any species needs a new hobby, its them.”

“Hare,” I said.

“Same difference.” Elaina shrugged. “Hare, shmare, rabbit, babbit.”

The warning bell rang throughout the halls, and my eyes rolled. “Duty calls.”



Elaina smirked, "I'll see you after class."

The day dragged on, painfully. The last bell signaled and I found myself in the last course of the day, Mr. Guanley's defensive class. I filtered in with the rest of the youths, taking a seat next to Marlston Hellinger. He was easy to sit beside because he never spoke.

Mr. Guanley stood at the front of the auditorium, leaning against the wall beside his office, his hands in his pants pockets. Mr. Guanley was what our biology instructor called a lynx. His deconstructed camouflage fur a collage of salts, peppers, creams, and black. When I met him my first year, I had been enthralled by the tufts of hair jutting from the tips of his pointy ears. I learned quickly not to ask about those tufts.

"Today we will discuss a topic that has been barred from you and others for many decades. After recent events, the instructors' board has cleared my request for offensive tactic study, given that you youths are accordingly with the utmost respect and maturity." His piercing green eyes pelted the students before him. He sifted through, meeting the gaze of each and every one of us. "Now, I realize that this must be an exciting endeavor. It is not often that the curriculum is changed, but in light of the shift we've seen in the patterns of crime, it is necessary change."

Sweat bloomed, heating my back. Did he notice his book missing from his office? Crap, crap, crap, crap—

"With that being said, If I catch one whiff of immaturity, negligence, or foul behavior, I will cut you from the program and you can sign up for art or choir. I do not have the time nor the patience for this to not be taken as seriously as the murders happening in Ithcantia."

Hushed, rushed whispers filled the auditorium. When Mr. Guanley's eyes met mine, a small glint of warning flashed through them. What the—? “I will be ending our class early, allowing you to exit the school building to go prepare the materials you will need to proceed with our course from here on out. I have printed a list of the required items and placed the print offs for you to grab on your way out on my podium. Class will look very different come the beginning of the week. You are dismissed.”

Youths stood and shuffled to the front of the auditorium, the whispers now a steady hum. Slinging my pack onto my shoulders, I walked, head down to the podium.

My heart pounded in my ears. If he's been able to change the curriculum, then he must have tried to plan out a lesson for today? Is that why we *really* weren't having class? Because he saw that he was missing the book?

Trying not to make eye contact, I wiped my paws on my jacket, trying to rid myself of the dampness collecting in them.

“Miss Knightfall? A word?”

Mr. Guanley called as my finger lifted my itemized list from the podium. Anxiety shook my fingers and followed like a shadow behind me as I walked over to him. I tried my best to keep my voice steady and my face innocently blank as I stopped to stand before him.

“Yes sir?” My voice cracked. *Crap.*

Mr. Guanley ducked his chin and lowered his brows, “My book?”

“Your book?” I fumbled the words, sweat dripping down my back, “I don't know—”

“I don’t care that you *borrowed* it,” He said, brow lifting as he nodded, “but I *would* like it back.”

“Y-yes sir,” I said. Unslinging my pack, I unlatched the top and reached in. Pulling the book out, I begrudgingly handed it back, placing it in his open paw. “Sorry.”

“No worries.” He purred, “I know you like to study ahead.”

Mr. Guanley winked before he turned sharply on the balls of his feet and strode into his office. Taking that as my dismissal, I hightailed it out of the auditorium and back home.

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