

The background of the cover is a complex, abstract fractal pattern in shades of green and teal. It features a central point from which numerous fine, branching lines radiate outwards, creating a starburst or floral-like appearance. The lines are more densely packed and brighter in the center, fading into a darker green towards the edges. The overall effect is organic and intricate, resembling a microscopic view of a plant or a complex mathematical structure.

# WILLOWBANE

JAMES TONKIN





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# **Willowbane**

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# 1

The familiar, dusty scent of books drifts through the air between the tightly packed bookshelves. I let the smell fill my nostrils as I lower myself down onto a worn leather armchair, propped against the bare wall at the end of the shelved passage.

With a sigh, I gaze upon my surroundings with great intent. Small lamps and candles are dotted around the shelves, producing a warm light throughout the passage. The scratchy carpet beneath my feet is browning and a little tattered, filth ingrained in its every crevice. Despite the library's derelict state, I've spent countless hours in these halls. Reading and resting, laughing and crying.

I don't know how long it'll be until I return to this place. Tomorrow, everything changes.

I should be excited, really. I've waited for this day my entire life. Instead, I just feel empty. I desperately take everything in. Every corner of this place is bursting with memories to the point that it seems like it's glowing.

For a split second, I believe it actually is. It isn't, of course, although I do see something that glows. A trail of golden light resembling a flame, hovering seamlessly in the air. The light approaches me, as if cautiously, and the trail behind it slowly fades away as the light moves onwards.

It's a wisp, an Aspen spell, released to send messages over long distances. The wisp repeats the words of the sender, although only the intended receiver can hear or see it. I can't help but smile when I hear the familiar voice that this particular one emits. There's a murmuring sound, saying "the mound, six o'clock" repeatedly. The sound echoes throughout the room until the wisp dissipates, concluding its brief existence without leaving a trace.

*Of course*, I think, lifting myself and my small satchel up. I check my watch hastily. Its delicate hands read that it's around five, so I've got more than enough time if I walk quickly enough. I take a glass bottle out of my bag. It's small enough to fit inside my palm, and it has a hardened clay stopper to keep the powerful substance inside. Through the clear glass, I can see a murky, bronze liquid, as dense as mud, with a peculiar, shifting form.

I have learnt the procedure to cast a wisp so meticulously, it feels natural, despite the sheer amazement that fills my heart every time that I do it. I begin to rub the bottle's cool glass sides, and a golden spark rises out of the dirty mass. It pounds on the sides of the bottle like a living being, begging to escape. "I'm coming," I say, and I picture Connor's face in my mind. Then I pull the clay out of the bottleneck and the wisp immediately flies away, making meandering movements like a small, cheerful bird.

I know why my friend is asking me to come to the mound, and I feel an eccentric sense of anticipation for it as I make my way out of the building. Six o'clock is sunset, and this will be the last one we witness in both our childhoods.

\* \* \*

I trudge along a small footpath that winds in between empty fields, silently making my way towards the mound. Cotton clouds populate the dull coloured sky above, and a cool wind flows across the land, gently touching the sparse and patchy grass. The crunch of snow and slush beneath my feet remains in recent memory, but for the last few

weeks we've received rain rather than snow, so the landscape has become barren. The world is in an eerie limbo state now, not thriving and full of life, but not coated in that blinding white blanket either. The ground around me is left with nothing; there is only the bare soil and the occasional, solitary rock.

The trickle of blazing orange light that will soon paint the world around me marks a new beginning, the start of spring. Any other year, I would be at home, celebrating the return of power and colour and life and light. No celebration for me, though, not this year. For children my age, New Year isn't the beginning any more. It's the end.

"Hey, Elias!" I hear Connor shout, prompting me to speed up and begin to run towards him. When I finally reach the mound, one of the few hills left for miles around, I'm exhausted. "Hi," I say in return as I bound up the slope.

Connor has dark brown eyes and hair, as well as sharp features and a certain, unmistakable glint in his eyes. Now, though, his eyes remain focused on the distance, which is odd. He seems a lot more distant than usual. *No wonder*, though.

I join him silently, staring towards the west, awaiting the sun's departure. I can see my entire home from here, almost everything I've ever known. The town, now ornate with banners and lanterns, is nestled amongst large, rolling fields, in which the four orchards also lie. They're bursting with lifeless wooden structures—the corpses of trees that were once green with leaves. The mound sits beyond the eastern orchard, and it imposes a sense of superiority and greatness over the uniform surfaces all around. Of course, the Haven, the grand community in which we live, is much larger than what we can see. There are villages, and more towns, most of which I have never even visited, sprinkled across the vast tracts of farming land. The central town of the Haven is where I live, though, and it is home to the most important sites in the whole community.

A flicker of movement suddenly catches my eye, and I see a small black streak emerge from the closest orchard's knobbly fence. It's a cat, slipping away as quickly as it appeared. I can't help but smile,

and with that Connor looks at me and grins too.

“What’re you smiling about?” he asks lightly.

“Just a cat,” I explain.

“Oh,” he laughs, before momentarily pausing. “Not worried about tomorrow?”

I don’t know what I feel or what to feel. I don’t feel worried, not exactly. There’s something inside of me, something grasping for my childhood, resentful of the fleeting nature of my old life. *But for tomorrow?* I can’t tell, I hardly feel any emotion, not how I should. It’s all too difficult to explain.

“I am. Sort of.” I reply curtly.

He nods solemnly, showing his understanding.

“We shouldn’t be, though,” I add. “What is it they say... the tree *chooses* us.”

I put on a mocking voice for the last part, because it sounds ridiculous. Of course, the trees aren’t alive, they don’t *think*, but a handful of adults say that they choose us anyway, because they just *know*, although I’m not so sure about that. Clearly, there is something more to it, with the trees themselves acting as a medium.

Connor rolls his eyes. “So I’ve heard,” he says, and we both laugh. “Which do you think I’ll get,” he asks me. I consider the question for a few seconds, but the most reasonable answer is clear. He’s said before how he’d love to be in each. “Elm or Ash,” I say. “At least, one on the physical side of things.”

Connor has always been the stark opposite of me, which is why no one else can comprehend our friendship, and admittedly, oftentimes we can’t either. Connor is active, full of energy and quick on his feet. Moreover, he is powerfully built for someone our age, with defined muscles that match his temperament. I share none of these attributes, but I like to think that that’s why we complement each other so well. Nevertheless, it means we have no chance of being chosen by the same tree, because they supposedly make the choice based on a person’s nature. Elm is related to agility and nimbleness, and Ash trees are related to power and strength. Connor could live

being aided by either tree with satisfaction. I couldn't live with either, as Connor also understands.

“For you,” he says. “Holly or Aspen. Or Willow.”

Before I can reply, I notice the first few orange rays of light as they hit my eyes. Without the need for any more communication, we both agree to remain silent as the sun's orange pigment seeps into the sky around it. We watch as the ethereal sphere of light begins to descend, eventually slipping out of sight, underneath the land ahead. The transient remains of light soon follow, fading away and leaving us in an all-encompassing darkness.

*And with that, I think, my old life is over.*

## 2

My consciousness returns to me, but it feels like a heavy burden, so I desperately try to return to sleep. A long, long day is ahead of me.

“Elias,” a voice whispers. “It’s time to get up.” The voice belongs to my father, who I hear open my curtains and take off my sheet.

Using all of my strength, I force myself to stand up, but my eyes feel dry and desperate to be closed. Last night, I was awake until at least midnight, at the annual Spring Feast and the following celebrations. To my parents, attending such events is mandatory, even though most of my classmates skipped it this year in favour of a good night’s sleep.

I loitered around the far side of the tables for the majority of the evening, away from the commotion and the town’s central tree, the Great Willow, which is known to be tremendously old. In the absence of Connor, who had been among those skipping the event, I didn’t utter a single word throughout the entire night, and how much I depend on him had been clearly demonstrated.

Aside from standing around, I did occasionally dig into the abundance of food available, all so rich and delicious, like fruit, nuts, seasoned bread, and so much cheese. It was a huge upgrade from the usual rations of plain bread and vegetables, so much so that I always wondered why they didn’t just space out the allowance of fine food

more, rather than saving a large portion of it for a single meal. It could certainly make people feel better during the bitter winter months.

The adults, in particular, grow irritable and downcast in winter, coinciding with the dormant state of most of the trees. I've always preferred winter, along with summer, because during planting season and harvest, everyone has to work, including the children. By contrast, in the off months, we get to go to school a lot more, which I find so much better than the mindless, arduous labour. Nonetheless, I make sure not to look too cheerful, because the adults most certainly are not. The trees are everything to them. *And very soon, I know, they'll be everything to me.*

"Hurry!" my mother shouts through the floor, so I gather myself and begin to get changed. Once I'm done, I burst out of my room and run down the stairs without as much as a second thought. My mind has taken control over my weary body, and I don't want to be late for my Awakening. As I rush through the already open front door, my sister seems to be filled with excitement on my behalf, as she's standing eagerly, outside, with a smile across her face.

"Ready?" she asks me.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I reply.

"Then let's go!" my mother says, and we both laugh as our parents join us outside the door.

\* \* \*

It's not long until we arrive at the Grove, a place close in location to town but so distant in atmosphere. Tall trees circle a small clearing, which itself is coated in thick, untamed grass and small dandelions, pure in colour and reflective of light. The place is startlingly alive, in contrast to the landscape outside. The trees are Yew, which manifest resistance and protection with their broad trunks and rough bark. The trees form a formidable wall around the clearing, as if protecting it from the cold.

A woman sits in the middle with her legs crossed and eyes closed. Her plain, white tunic identifies her as a member of the Council, the nine leaders of the Haven, one for each tree.

All the approaching people sit down around this woman, so I do the same, lowering myself down onto the ground.

I don't have to wait long until the woman stands up and starts to count everyone, pointing with one of her fingers. She has dark brown hair, cut short, and an aged face, emblazoned with small wrinkles and scars. Her expression is calm and impassive, but the corners of her mouth soon turn up to form a smile.

"Good," she exclaims. "Everyone's here,"

At her words, I look around inconspicuously, to see the large number of children and their families that accumulated around me. Connor, who was glancing my way, lifts his hand as if to wave.

"My name is Chief Clementine," the woman declares, drawing back my attention. "And I have to go through a few things before we begin."

There's a noticeable feeling of impatience that swoops over the crowd, all eager to be finished with this. I've been told that the Awakening takes several hours at the very least, and that once it took an entire day, so I'm prepared to wait.

"First, I'd like to thank our children's families for attending this event, but of course, the children themselves need acclaim too for their many years of handwork that led up to this day."

A round of applause breaks out from the older members of the crowd, so Chief Clementine has to gesture for everyone to be quiet. After that, she continues with her speech.

"They have been trained to attain proficiency in utilising energy in its tangible form, creating concoctions and releasing them as spells."

All spells, such as wisps, can be used by anyone if they have the right ingredients, and everyone *does* use them, because of their functionality, despite their limits.

"The knowledge they now possess has been passed down through the generations, cumulated over hundreds of years of innovation and

invention. They have a deep and fresh knowledge and understanding, and they have the practical skills to use this. Our children are rooted in the past, connected to our ancestors, and at the same time, they are the future of the Haven.”

The crowd produces another round of applause, but this time, it is less enthusiastic, the crowd almost writhing in their restlessness. Chief Clementine laughs, clearly noticing their eagerness to get on with things.

“Today,” she says, putting heavy emphasis on the word. “Our children will begin to access energy in a way new to them, in a more mysterious and formidable way.” She pauses. She seems to be relishing the words, stretching them out, but I’m desperate to hear them, hungry to hear what is coming overtly spoken aloud.

“Today,” she repeats. “Our children gain their abilities!”

This time, the response is thunderous and wild, with a genuine sense of celebration attached to it. Cheers and shouts rise up like soaring birds above the sea of claps, and I feel my mother’s arm wrap around my shoulder in an expression of pride. Connor and I meet eyes once more, sharing a look of giddy, childish excitement. His older sister, Edith, has her arms around him, and she mutters something into his ear, which makes him chuckle. She’s already undertaken her Awakening. *What was her tree again? Yew.*

“Let us begin,” the Chief says, and everyone quiets down at her behest. “Annabella, daughter of Leah and Theodore,” she announces, and a trembling girl makes her way towards the woman. Even though I positioned myself near Chief Clementine, I need to crane my neck to see over various people who arrived after me. The girl sits down on the ground in front of the woman’s knees.

“Place your hands on the ground,” she instructs her. “You must connect yourself to nature, and thus the trees.” Annabella follows the instructions.

“I believe you know what to do,” the Council member states. “Do it.”

She places her hands on Annabella’s temples, and the girl closes

her eyes tightly, so tightly that her face is scrunched up, compressed in a furrowed grimace. The Council member's eyes instantly change from brown to gold, and they dimly glow. Something else about them changes too... you can tell that she is looking at something else, something distant. I know what is happening, but only because I have been told. It's Aspen, but much stronger than any spell I have used related to the tree. She enters the child's mind to see what she sees and to find out for herself which type of ability she will earn.

She must have succeeded, because her hands reflexively jerk backwards and her eyes return to their normal shade. The child herself looks bewildered but delighted, and she walks back towards her family without her nervous gait. The Council member etches something onto a large tablet retrieved from her pocket then calls the next person up with no remarks or explanation.

This process repeats, carrying on for a long while. One at a time, a child comes to the centre and spends an indefinite amount of time trying to find *it* within themselves. Many of them are quick at it, like Annabelle, but a few people take several minutes attempting to make a connection. By the time it's my turn, Connor has, of course, already gone up, but I am clueless as to more than his thrilled reaction.

When the word 'Elias' is announced to the group, my heart pounds rapidly in my chest, and I'm not even sure exactly why. I stumble around until I reach the Chief, and it feels strange descending to the ground in front of her, laying my legs down by her boots.

I immediately close my eyes and place my hands down, feeling the crumbly soil beneath my palms. Even without my vision, I can still sense everyone's attention, and it's all directed towards me—they're looking at *me*. Abruptly, I panic. *What if I'm here for minutes or even hours?* I have no control over how long it'll take to make the connection, to become awakened...

An impending sense of fear dawns upon me, but before it overwhelms me, cold, soft skin clutches my temples, reminding me of what I need to do. Within seconds of concentration, the darkness

of my eyelids is replaced with a blinding flash of light.

Then I see myself. I see my serene appearance and my closed eyes beneath me. I ascend, further and further and faster and faster into the sky above, without a second to truly comprehend what is happening. There's no stopping my extreme velocity, I simply hurtle away from my home like an arrow, piercing the icy cold air. Next, darkness returns, and I feel a sharp pain as I am forcibly squeezed through a tight, black tunnel, like a contorted, boneless substance, twisting and turning with every moment.

It ultimately ends, and I emerge through a solid material, as if being expelled out. My motion stops, only for a second, and with immense relief, I see it, *the tree!*

A thick trunk with greyish bark arises from a riverbank, eventually diverging into many branches. The tree's hanging branches are long and slender, forming an encompassing bright green shelter, swaying gently in the wind. Deep turquoise light flows out of all the parts of the tree, in every direction. I understand that I'm actually seeing it. *Coed*, or 'koyd' phonetically, the energy of the trees, the invisible force of nature. What a few call magic.

When I least expect it, the fleeting experience comes to an end, before I'm ready. I want to stay with the tree for longer, I want it back.

But I descend. Back, down, through the roots, and down, through the layer of soft white clouds, towards the Haven and the Grove and my body. I slow, now, and as I get closer, and a gloom gently surrounds me until it is all that I can see.

My body is back with me, although it feels momentarily heavy and stiff. I realise that my eyes are closed, so I open them up. After only a few moments of orientation, I don't feel the daze that I'd expect, but a certain sense of energy and life. Everything is clear, sharp and bright, as if I'm seeing it all for the very first time. By the time I'm back in my place, I realise that I don't want to be sat down; I want to be up and moving and jumping. I can hardly constrain myself until I realise I haven't even given a thought to my ability. *My tree!* I

remember the distinctive, hanging leaves and I don't need to ponder it.

"Willow," I mutter under my breath. "*Willow!*"

The rest of the Awakening is truly tedious to me now, and I find it hard to enjoy each child's reaction like I was before. *How can I*, after my own powers have been laid before me? Willow, the tree of wisdom, knowledge and insight. Most likely, I will now receive visions of the future or gain an enhanced memory or sagemess. The only thing that keeps me going throughout the event is indulging my mind in considering what is to come for me, although once the last child, Zoey, is finally awakened, I am quick to move on from my meditations and find Connor, quickly waving goodbye to my family. They already heard my whisper, so I have nothing to inform them of.

"Elias!" Connor cheers, racing towards me. "Guess what? I'm an Elm!"

Using a tree as a noun to describe oneself isn't exactly official, and it's unapproved by the Council since it's deemed to be divisive, but everyone, like Connor, says it anyway. I don't correct or remind him, though, because it's certainly not what I'm thinking about.

"I knew it!" I exclaim. "I assume you're ready to dash around or something,"

"Course! But tell me—"

"Willow," I say.

"Cool," he remarks, and his eyes light up. "Bet you're pleased too."

I nod in agreement. I couldn't be more pleased.

"I'm glad we're both happy... but I guess now we won't get to see each other so much," he discerns, and a pang of sadness rises up inside of me, but a little anxiety does too, which I know Connor doesn't share.

"You'll be fine on your own," I reassure him as we follow the hordes through the thick wall of trees. "I'm just not so sure about myself," I reply, making a self-deprecating joke. He smiles, but he looks a little concerned as well.

"The worst part is," Connor tells me. "You may not be wrong."

My attention is dragged away from his words because I see something moving, something bright, in the corner of my eye. I don't recognise it. I have never heard of it. It's a vivid red flare, and it vanishes before my eyes.

The powerful feeling of life that came with my Awakening has been sapped away. Now, I feel only emptiness. I feel dead.

### 3

I approach the training centre with a renewed sense of nervousness. It is grand in size and almost intimidating compared to the usual housing in the village, with three floors and an unusually large length and width. What's more, its walls are purely made of solid stone, rather than the clay mixture which is typical for regular buildings, and its tiled roof is grand and tall, decorated with a line of dormers. I enter the building through the wooden door, using the large metal ring to pull it open.

Wood is the only resource we use which isn't collected inside the Haven's boundaries. I have been told that it is traded for, but not where it comes from. It still seems wrong to me that wood is used at all, but I cannot think of a single material that could be used in its place. I try to think of one now, but it's always futile.

"Boo!" a voice shouts, making me jump, which triggers a laugh in the unknown person. The person is a girl, who is standing next to me. I've never seen her before, but I still pull back in embarrassment at having been so surprised. I'm a little annoyed at her, too, but to be fair, I *was* blocking the doorway.

The girl, who comes face to face with me, has red hair swept to the sides of her fairly wide face. She has soft features and alluring green eyes, which, along with her hair, make her attire look jarringly plain

in comparison. She is wearing a grey tunic, like mine, but it's a few shades lighter and much more worn out.

"I'm Dawn," she tells me. Then she gives me her hand to shake, but I freeze, not used to such a greeting. I remain in awkward silence, which apparently causes her to smile.

"See you around," she says, before leaving me standing baffled in the corridor, alone.

Not wanting to be more distracted than I was before the encounter, I swiftly make my way towards the stairs, trying to find the door labelled "W3".

The new adults with Elm and Ash abilities train in special facilities near the Haven's border, and those who possess Birch abilities train at the healing centre because of their regenerative powers. Some Oak users, who can balance environments and conflicts, go to the border's training area too, along with some of those who use Yew. However, most people, and everyone belonging to the other four trees, come here to learn their powers, and since nothing much is needed to do so, bare rooms work adequately.

I see a lot of doors to these rooms, labelled "A", "Y", and "O", but it doesn't take long to find my destination, and I'm still in a rush to get in. It could've been easier if they used the Sylvan Triad or something to arrange the rooms, although I suppose that doesn't work when there are multiple trees missing.

I burst through the door before I remember my nervousness, so I must look feral to the man sitting in the corner. He is sitting on a wooden stool, scrutinising me.

The room is small and quiet, with two tall, pointed windows on the far wall. They have metal frames and bars and are indented into the wall. A windowsill underneath holds an unlit candle. The little light that seeps through the scratched, unclear glass illuminates the room, but no more, leaving the deep crannies and crevices in between the rough stone bricks dingy and black.

The two small wooden stools look old and broken, but who'd go out of their way to replace something made of wood? I find them to

be uncomfortable too, as I sit down next to the man who will be my mentor.

I am no longer a child and I no longer go to *school*, but new adults must attend training until they have enough skills to take up a job and begin working. A job, of course, is strongly affected by one's ability. Those who use Birch energy become Healers and alike, those who use Elm and Ash often become guards, and many others become farmers. There are choices, of course, but the Haven needs certain amounts of certain tasks completed, and these needs take priority. It's why the Awakening is so structured. Children are taught to be able to access their abilities all the way until the final winter, by which point all powers go dormant with the trees. When spring comes and the energy returns, it's the perfect time to awaken children, creating a new group of workers and allowing the oldest group to retire.

The man before me is relatively old but certainly not retirement age yet. Although there is no way to tell, I know that he is like me, able to use the energy of Willow trees. He has a pleasantly plain appearance and attire, but his expression is cold and dull, like he's perpetually unamused.

"Hello, Elias," he says in greeting. "My name is Mason. Usually, Willow bearers take less time to train than others, so with luck, we'll be finished within six months or so" He retrieves a small, spherical object from the drawers next to him. "First, we need to determine what your ability *exactly* is. The tree it belongs to certainly narrows it down a lot, but before we do anything else, we need to know what you can specifically do."

He hands me the object, which is translucent, seemingly made of glass, and filled with water. Potions, spells, and similar items all have something in common, which is the water. It traps and stores the energy very well, making it practical for use. Our own blood is said to retain energy inside of it, but it is constantly refilled anyway as coed flows throughout the environment.

I make a confused face, trying to prompt Mason to explain it, as I

only have a vague idea of what the item could be.

“It’s called an orb. Uses energy from Holly trees. Similar to a scope, helps you focus.”

I *do* know what a scope is. They’re small lenses, filled with water too, stuck onto handles. They use them in healing centres to focus and magnify energy onto a direct spot. Orbs must be the same thing, so I know that they affect the mind rather than anything else since Holly energy manifests as increased willpower and focus. Holly is often highly underestimated, but I believe it’s just as highly useful, and this orb is a good demonstration of that.

“Touch it,” Mason tells me. “And look at it. That should set off your ability.”

Following his instructions, I look at the orb’s reflective surface and watch the water gently move inside it. I touch it, too, and it feels rigid but smooth. I try to focus, the same way I did to get awakened, by connecting myself to my surroundings, but it doesn’t work.

I look up at Mason and prepare myself to speak.

“Can we go outside,” I ask him, a little too quietly.

“No,” he replies, and he mentions what I was thinking about. “The *coed* runs through your blood. You have it with you. Just focus on the orb.”

I accept his words dutifully, and I keep staring at the orb, watching and waiting. A couple of minutes pass, and I begin to feel stupid, self-conscious. I look up at my mentor, and he begins to speak.

“It takes some time, Elias. Be patient. Think about what you’re trying to do, too. That helps.”

I was, of course, trying to *use* the energy, but what he says does make me try a different approach. I try to receive something in my mind. An image, or wisdom, or *anything* else. Again, a few minutes pass, and my unease only grows.

“Has anything happened to you?” my mentor asks. “I mean, since yesterday morning. Anything that could be a sign of your ability.”

I shake my head. It’s not like I suddenly gained some great insight, or had a peek into the future, or remembered something in abnormal

detail. Nothing remotely “Willow” has happened to me, so I begin to wonder whether I have attained an ability at all.

*Is that even possible?* I know that people have failed to be awakened before, but in those cases, they would just have to go back to the Grove and go about the Awakening with no audience but with additional guidance. No one could become awakened then *not* gain an ability, could they? For the umpteenth time, I look up at Mason again, who sighs heavily.

“It usually takes hours for anything to happen. Just focus and wait.” That admittedly calms me, and I internally scold myself for such neurosis, but I soon find myself instead questioning the logic of this method.

I continue to stare down at the orb, but my mind wanders a little and I lose focus. It’s hard to silence my thoughts, so instead, I direct them to think about my powers and what I want to do, what they could be. That’s when I remember the flash of red from yesterday. I begin to question whether its draining power could somehow be connected to my ability, when it happens again, and the feeling returns.

There’s another flash of light, a pale violet, and I see a *person* in it. An actual person, or a body, and it seems to smoothly glide past the window, made of the light, just a transparent, faded shape, yet so human, with arms and a torso and a neck and a head. That sense of lifelessness returns, albeit weaker than before.

“What? What is it?” Mason asks me, and I’m not sure what to tell him, as I don’t know what just happened myself.

“I saw... I saw something.”

“You had a vision?” he asks me.

“No. No. I saw someone.”

His mouth opens very slightly. His stern expression transforms into one of fear, with his dark brown eyes bulging. He then seems to quickly dismiss whatever fear he was feeling, and his old, emotionless expression returns.

“You saw someone in your mind?” he queries. “That would be a

vision. Who did you see? What was it like?”

“No!” I insist, raising my voice. “I saw someone outside, outside the window.”

His eyes widen again, and he talks quietly now. “Were they... solid?”

My heart jumps. He knows what I saw, and it’s too late to turn back. What worries me is the frightened, shaky tone of his voice. *Why would he be afraid of.. an ability, if that’s what this is?* I want to hide it now, but it’s far too late.

“No,” I mumble. Then I repeat myself, filling my voice with fake confidence. “No.”

Mason leaves the room without a word, closing the door behind him. The quiet slam reverberates around the room, slowly decreasing in volume until I am left in an empty silence. An indescribable feeling tries to overwhelm me, but I refuse to let it get to my head. I refuse to think about it, acknowledge it.

I’ll need to leave training early today. I don’t know what I’ll do, but I’ll go. *Now.*

\* \* \*

Once I leave the training centre, I realise that I can’t go home. As a Purifier, my mother possesses the Birch ability to remove toxins. She works at the healing centre, so she can sometimes work for entire days without returning home. My father works on farming, so he won’t be home soon either, especially with the beginning of planting season just around the corner.

Of course, my home is locked during the day and I don’t have the keys, so it isn’t an option. I eventually decide that the best thing to do is to walk around, manually passing the excess of time at my disposal. I wish I could go back to the library, but during the day it is restricted to students and academic staff only, a group that I no longer belong to. I am out of choices.

I wander down the town’s wide tracks, heading towards the west.

The town has an uncanny quality to it now, shrouded in silence. Everyone is indoors or away, leaving me alone with my thoughts, and the disturbing, brief flashes of light. I catch glimpses of figures carved into this light, or this *energy*, but they vanish in an instant, leaving me with only a sinking feeling.

The buildings around me are tall, with flimsy structures made of timber and a hardened mixture built on top of more solid brick foundations. The top layers of these buildings are larger and jutting out, so the higher one looks, the more cluttered everything becomes. The buildings do eventually diminish though, many of them having sharp, pointed roofs, rather than sloped ones, creating an impression of the pricking the sky with a fine blade or needle. The sky itself is grey and dull now, which only makes the unsettling things I'm seeing all the creepier.

After a few turns and the crossing of a bridge, the buildings around me become less tall and more spread out, being people's homes now. Mine is on the exact opposite side of the town, but going so far away was an intentional move to kill more time. The town *is* only an hour's walking distance across from its two most distant points, but I'm dawdling and pausing everywhere, because I have an afternoon to waste.

At long last, I reach the true outskirts, with the western orchard and the agricultural fields around.

The fields are mostly barren and empty, but I know that seeds are being planted around this time, as I believe I see a small group of farmers doing now... or so I thought. There seems to be a disturbance, and I can't quite figure out why until I see that small black streak again, of which this time I can just about make out two dots of gold. *A cat. The same one.*

The farmers are trying to usher it away, one of them swiping at it with a heavy, weaponised rake. It doesn't get hit, but I still frown. It's nothing new, though. My mother and I share a love of the creatures, but many people don't, calling them pests or worse. The black ones, in particular, are disliked a lot.

I wish I could go over to help it, but the fact that I'm here seems strange enough that I can't even begin to think about what those farmers would think.

A little glumly, I start the trek back to my home, but I glance over my shoulder and see the small feline creature dashing away unharmed, just slightly ruffled.

\* \* \*

"So, Elias. How was *your* day?" is the question that sends discomfort through my mind. After remaining in deep thought for the majority of the meal, I suddenly snap back to reality at the sound of my name being spoken.

My father speaks it ardently, but because of the troubling experience at the training centre, I try to shrug it off and do so convincingly enough.

"It was fine," I respond, in between bites of my food. Today's meal is ordinary, thick bread topped with a thin slice of cheese, accompanied by an assortment of vegetables and beans. I chew on the bread, acting natural, because it was fine. Overall.

"Give us more than that!" my mother demands predictably.

"I just went to the room," I explain. "It was small, and I was given an orb to try and concentrate on doing something."

"Same as it's always been," my father remarks. He smiles at me, and I smile back. "You'll discover your ability soon enough. I started to experience mine on the second day of training," he continues. My mother chimes in too now, and so my sister Penny and I share a knowing look.

"Are you excited for tomorrow?" my mother asks me.

*No.*

## 4

I again walk down the dimly lit corridor on the second floor of the training centre. It feels forced to be standing here after yesterday's events, only a single day later, and not at all more prepared. Of course, it is forced. Being absent during training is sure to be punishable. For me, certainly. Apparently, not for my mentor.

Today, I knock on the door. Dread builds up inside of me, increasing in severity as more time passes with no response. I don't know what I'd do if Mason is still missing today.

Thankfully, Mason reveals himself and he ushers me inside. That stunned look is no longer present on his face, which I take as a good sign. He doesn't seem concerned at my absence either, which gives me some hope.

"Elias," he says, addressing me intently. "I apologise for my early departure yesterday."

I nod in response, making a sign of comprehension and acceptance.

"Rest assured that your ability is *not* unheard of. Just... rather *uncommon*."

"Well... what is it?" I ask him with a sense of urgency.

He closes his eyes for a second, as if overcome by exhaustion. Then he opens them again and stares straight at me.

“The ability,” he tells me, “to speak to... and to see... the dead.”

Everything falls into place, and I almost feel relief. It’s like I’m given a resolution, plain and simple certainty, despite what a vile thing it is. I now understand what those peculiar flares of light were, assuming what Mason says is true. In the woods, out of the window, on the streets. *They were faded humans. Traces of life.* I am almost afraid of the word, for it is something from stories and myths that parents tell their children, not something real or apparent.

*Spirits.* It seems so fitting, with that horrible wave of death that I feel every time I see one. But how could that be my ability, something so dark and unpleasant? I had been so pleased at awakening as a Willow, but now... it seems so outrageously unfair. *What kind of wicked trick is this?*

It *must* be some kind of trick because what does that have to do with Willow or wisdom?

“I don’t understand,” I tell him in all honesty. “Wouldn’t that be... Aspen?”

“No. Aspen energy manifests as mental communication and control. Willow energy oftentimes manifests as seeing into the future, like I do, but *also* into the past.”

I think I can accept that. *But why would my power be connected to the past when the other Willows’ abilities are solely connected to the future?* Maybe I can extract wisdom from the past, instead of the future, and gain insight from the spirits’ lives.

My mind all still feels a blur, though, because how can spirits be real? Clearly, blatantly real.

“I understand that it’s a lot to take in,” he reassures me. Then I see him smile for the first time. “It was a lot for me to take in, and it’s not my ability.”

“Why is it uncommon?” I ask him, digging for as many answers as I can get.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “Some abilities simply are, and others aren’t.”

Of course, it was a foolish question. Although the distribution of

people to each tree has always seemed to be close to perfectly even, I know that different kinds of abilities crop up with no evident evenness or sense.

“Thank you, Mason.” I blurt out, and I mean it wholeheartedly.

“Well,” he responds, almost dismissively. “It is what mentors are for.”

He sighs now, leaning back so that his back hits the stone behind him, protected only by a thin layer of brown cloth.

“I suppose you need to decide now. Are you going to use *it* or not?”

The question breaks me. *How could I not use my ability? What are you even suggesting?* It somehow drives me out of my quietness, adding volume to my voice because of the pure absurdity of it.

“W-what?” I ask him in horror.

“It will be dangerous. I don’t think that they can touch you, but mentally, you will be traumatised at the least.”

“What... else can I do?” I ask.

“Become a farmer, help out on the fields. Do something with no special requirements.”

“Why?”

“I’ve been doing some *research*. The last person with this... ability... became twisted, so to speak.”

“One person?” I question him.

“Well, yes,” he says. “But—”

“No. I’m using my ability, thanks. What jobs could I use this for?”

My mentor looks distressed, fidgeting with his fingers erratically, with them placed on his lap. He makes a grimace.

“Elias, I’m not sure you—”

“Answer the question, Mason.” I interrupt him, out of patience and sick of being nice. He narrows his eyes.

“Most of us predict disasters and inform others of them, or give advice with our wisdom. In fact, last week, I and a couple of others warned the Council of troubles with planting, so they directed people to investigate it and even more people to help with the planting itself. We can help them, but many of us have other jobs,

too, like teaching, mentoring, or farming. We need to do something to fill out the empty days. It would be against the Haven's values for us to lie around and wait."

"Then I'll do that," I inform him.

"You can't predict anything, though," he says, evidently ignoring the fact that he suggested it to me as a job.

"I can ask spirits for guidance, listen to their wisdom."

"What wisdom?" he questions me, raising his voice. "Wisdom that the Haven doesn't already have? You know that our society is founded on what our ancestors set before us, built from millennia of trial and error. What could we possibly be missing?"

He's right, and I know he is. If I were to try and list all of the flaws in the Haven, legitimate, major flaws, they would be countable on one hand at most. The Willows are a part of that, allowing us to solve and prepare for problems that don't even exist yet, but in that sense, I don't meet the criteria of being a Willow since my ability is practically redundant.

"Now. Listen to me, Elias."

This time, I decide to be reasonable. I listen.

"People... don't like, or rather, *won't* like your ability."

I'm not entirely sure that I like it, either, but what choice do I have? *I can't change it; I can't complain to the trees and convince them to give me another one.* I'm left with a single choice: to hide it despite the risks. I will just have to lie to the public, pretending that I have visions, and they won't know the difference.

"I'll hide it then. Of course I will," I apprise him.

"Good," he replies. "And despite the circumstances, I will honour my duty to train you, without revealing your true power. If you accept."

"I do."

"Then heed my warning. It's going to be hard."

\* \* \*

I find, in the following days, that Mason couldn't have been more right. By the time that Friday arrives, with two more sessions and days gone by, I feel as if a month has passed, troubled by not just work and discomfort but also a little torment.

For my entire life, controlling energy has been about precision and memorisation. The exact number of ingredients is needed, as well as the exact number of each and the exact method to combine them into a spell. It was extremely important too. If one put, say, a few extra thalberries into a cauldron of water and corsroot, the entire mixture will froth up and overflow, and the resulting liquid wouldn't grant Hazel water-breathing powers.

Or if one stirred a premature Birch salve to reduce pain for a few seconds too long, it would make the pain worse instead. Yet as it was all so methodical, I had always found it easy since you just had to follow instructions. This is a whole new territory, so different from the comfort of potions and spells. It's unpredictable, and requires skill and luck rather than knowledge and execution.

The objective of my second session onward was to be able to command my ability, since it had already been discovered. I can't tell if my mentor's warning was about this or not, but trying to *see* them solely on purpose proved to be a tiring ordeal. Many hours were spent in silence, staring at the now stale orb, or gazing out of the window in the hopes of catching a glimpse of another spirit.

I haven't even dreamt of speaking to them, since I have only been able to discern them intentionally on a few occasions. Even then, I'm not sure that succeeding after twenty minutes of trying should count as *intentional*.

I think that Mason struggles with teaching control, because most people who can use Willow energy can't control it, and aren't able to use it on demand. Whilst there are people he calls Foreseers who can take a glance into the near future at any time they desire, Seers, like Mason himself, have visions which are unpredictable and uncontrollable. Echoes and Sages, on the other hand, have nothing to control, because their enhanced mental attributes are a constant

thing. He tells me that he was trained to help Willows specifically, and since so few of them have the capability to control anything at all, it wasn't at all the focus of his training.

I began to wonder whether my power *was* just recalcitrant, but Mason seems so sure that it is controllable that I don't bother asking him. I am probably just being paranoid again, as it is supposed to take a long time.

Ironically, I regularly see them when I'm not trying to, which tends to be the worst times possible for doing so, like at the table during tea, scared to death by a passing spirit, or in the middle of the night, jolted awake by snide cackling. And yet, still, I've never been able to get a proper look at them. Just blurred quick glimpses that leave me looking haunted and feeling more empty than ever.

I've started to discover that the spirits come in many different colours. In blues, and purples, and reds, and everything in between. Most of them are coloured in desaturated and greyish tones of those, but they're all faded, see-through.

The variety of their hues reminds me of each tree's colours, which people's eyes display when they use the energy. I know that mine go turquoise, like they must do now, as I walk out of the centre, on the very last day of the week.

I step out of the building, relieved that the weekend has finally arrived, when it happens. Of course it happens when I least want it.

A spectral face appears before me, pale red in colour, and I am so surprised, and fearful too, that I lurch backwards. Then it all happens so fast...

I find myself on the ground, my back stinging with pain, but the spirit in front of me doesn't vanish, or go away. It stands there, still and unmoving, then I hear that *awful* sound again, the cackling, so comical that I would be laughing if it wasn't coming from the abominable thing before me.

She resembles a human, but she lacks all the colours that a living human has, replaced with the toned-down red all over. Her features,

her sides, are all outlined with darker, more vibrant, thick lines, so that she resembles a drawing. Her eyes are unblinking, too, as if frozen in time, which only strengthens the similarity.

The woman herself looks stout and ugly, if not for her hostile demeanour, then for that inhumane, callous look in her staring eyes. Her hair is cut short and she wears a ragged tunic, but most noticeably, a large knife pierces her upper body, directly slicing into the heart. Blood is dripping down from her, but it too is ceaselessly frozen, made of the same red nothingness as her and the knife.

It is then I hear a spirit speak for the very first time, and it seems impossible, which it probably is.

"Little Willow is afraid of the ghost," she mocks me, then begins another round of despicable laughter.

"Ah," she adds abruptly, as she looks into my eyes. "I heard that your *friend's* sister needs to go to some place called Trail's End. Not sure where that is." She laughs about it like it's somehow funny.

"Why..." I murmur, and she interrupts me before I can even begin to question her.

"I told you," she insists, the irritation clear in her voice. "I'm *just* here to help."

Why the spirit would tell me that, and how it could benefit her in any way, is unbeknownst to me, but it doesn't look like I'm going to have a chance to find that out.

She starts walking towards me, her feet appearing to touch the ground, so I pull myself upward, coming eye to eye with her.

"What do you want from me?" I ask her, whispering out of self-consciousness, with other students leaving the centre in my peripheral vision. She cackles again, and it's now searingly loud.

"How about some *fun*?" she responds, and I realise something.

I shut my eyes tight, in order to minimise the unpleasantness of my experience, then I run straight through the woman, and I feel nothing.

*She... no, it, can't hurt you,* I tell myself. *It barely exists; no one else can even see it.* Then I turn around, and to my amazement, the spirit is

gone. I am looking at a plain wall and a window, on a street with just a few regular people walking by. I willed it out of existence, or at least out of sight.

“Have your fun alone, spirit,” I whisper. I’m unable to think of anything better to say, but it still gives me a little extra satisfaction.

I don’t think anyone saw me fall over, either, which only adds to my overall sense of delight in the whole series of events. I will have to try and explain my grazed skin to my family, which will be tough, but I *was* able to control my ability, just a little bit, which is all that currently matters to me. All the tedium and fear could be over.

On this note, I begin to return home, and I begin to dissect what just happened to me. It called me “Willow”, which makes me uncomfortable. *How would it know that I could see it, for starters?* My eyes would be an obvious hint, but those could have been because of anything, and she was laughing directly at me... that awful guttural sound, it was...

*No.* The sound returns, but not before the feeling of emptiness, and just as I made her disappear with my thoughts, the very image of her flashing through my mind makes her now reappear.

“Oh, look who’s back,” she says with a snort.

I know how to do it now, I just need to do it again. So, I close my eyes, and with a sense of determination, I try to focus.

*It’s not real. Well, it is. But it’s your ability. You can control it,* I tell myself.

I open my eyes to see if it worked, and I jump. Her face is right in front of mine, and we’d be breathing the same air if she actually breathed at all. She bursts into a deep giggling fit, and I can’t get it to stop. The noise won’t go away.

People, so many people, are walking past, and there’s a small corner of my mind constantly thinking about what this looks like to them. I go over what I’ve done, what I’m doing. I jumped, out of nowhere, and some of the mentees could have seen that, but after that, I’ve only closed my eyes, and I certainly haven’t shown my

distress otherwise.

The most logical thing to do is to try and ignore the spirit and, of course, keep a calm exterior. So I keep walking, going towards my home and focusing on the sound of my tapping footsteps, something other than my mind, which is accountable for seeing the apparition.

I keep listening to the rhythm of my lightweight boots, hitting against the ground, and then I'm suddenly jumping. *Again!*

Another spirit, a few shades redder than the other, jolts from the ground beneath me, a sickening smile crossing his wrinkled face. My heart becomes heavy in my chest, and I feel each beat, each powerful sensation sending adrenaline around my body.

I charge forward, this time not even bothering to close my eyes, and I run straight through the man, and in just a blink, he is behind me. I keep running, escaping these spirits physically, but a strange darkness begins to seep into my vision, making my surroundings fuzzy.

It isn't long until I need to stop and catch my breath, with the lack of energy that the spirits bring, so I slump down by the side of a building... *somewhere*.

The laughing returns again. My head starts to ache, filling my temples with a dull pain. I don't need to move to see the spirits approach me, many of them seemingly unbound by the rules of reality, simply hovering along. Some of their feet are unmoving in the air, and others are making movements reminiscent of footsteps. It makes no difference either way.

Then there are more of them, appearing out of the ground, out of the sky, out of buildings, from behind me, and they're *everywhere*. I see knives and axes and daggers and blood, men and women, young and old, all circling, walking around me, and all I hear is laughter and words, spiralling together into an abhorrent cacophony of sounds that only I can hear. I can only find a single thought of what to do in my silent mind.

"*Why?*" I ask, sounding far too polite for what is happening to me, although that's probably a good way to act since if I am afraid, they'll

surely relish it and continue to harass me.

A gruff voice gives me an answer.

“No human’s seen us in hundreds of years! Let us enjoy it!”

They all cheer, howling deliriously as this statement as if it’s inspiring or has any substance at all. But since they *are* trying to have some warped version of fun, I do know how to act.

I’m sure my face didn’t look very disturbed before, but now I try to remove any traces of disapproval and unpleasantness, and I make a point of keeping my eyes wide open. It’s better to look this way for the actual living people, too, and despite the fact that I can’t see anything but a wall of spirits, I still think about maintaining some kind of dignity.

Throughout this time, I keep trying to rationalise with myself, explaining to myself that I have the power to remove them from my vision. But perhaps I just got lucky earlier, because it doesn’t work any more, and I realise I’m stuck with them, forced to deal with this situation using alternative methods.

I pick a spot to stare at, and I do exactly that. Somewhat amusingly, I’ve used this strategy before on numerous occasions, but, of course, never against a horde of dead people. I can ignore the boots and backs and faces that all appear around me, but the ludicrous, raspy chortling that still pervades the street is what I have difficulty in blocking out. In a moment of near-empathy, I try to imagine myself “living” for thousands of years, with no connection to reality in any physical way. Perhaps my sanity would be as far gone as these spirits’.

“Look at me, boy,” one of them whispers into my ear and, naturally, I ignore it. It works, because the spirits can’t do anything to me. I cautiously start to think that everything is going brilliantly, as far as everything in this situation can be, when everything begins to get a whole lot worse.

That darkness that was creeping up on me before, starts to spread more and more, seeming to consume the little of my actual surroundings that remains.

Then I feel the energy drain from my body some more. I felt a loss of energy whenever I had been in the presence of the dead and had begun to see it as normal, a part of my new life. But the darkness brings a new depth to this sensation, one that I could have never imagined at the start of the week when I was sat outside the Grove.

Time begins to slow down, literally. I feel every beat of my heart, and every sound around me seems to be stretched out and slurred, forming a dizzying, inseparable mass of noise. Even my thoughts begin to slow down a little...

... and then the pain begins. By the time that there is nothing left to my surroundings, just a sea of red in a black, soulless void... a real, physical, tingling pain runs through every part of my body, and I don't understand where it comes from or why it's there... and... and... it takes my energy faster than anything else...

I wonder if I'm dying. Sleep is like this, dark and slow. I could drop down now, never to wake up... and the first thought that crosses my mind is *what a waste it would be*.

*What a waste.*

*I'm not ready... I'm not...*

"Why..." my croaky voice utters, completely gone from my control, repeating the very same word. The constant laughter, which is now reduced to a quiet, echoing noise, spreads further across the crowd, but I don't care, it just doesn't matter. I feel cold tears run down my face, and I gently place one into my mouth with my finger, holding on to something substantial in this nightmare.

Despite what I thought, I don't die, don't slip away. With a touch of humour, I wonder if I will get used to this sensation too, like I did with the initial one. I don't want to, though. I don't want this, or my power, if it can even be called that. Some power it is, when it's so wrong, so awful. A curse is the right word. *I'm cursed*.

"Stop!" my mouth says, again going off on its own accord. "Help me! Help me!"

To my surprise, someone actually comes to my aid. Not a real, living person, no, but a spirit, unlike the others. Blue.

A vibrant cerulean presence emerges, in between the abundance of red, and the blue light slowly begins to resemble a figure as it gets closer and closer to me. It becomes human, and truly human. All the other spirits lack something in them, something in their eyes that marks the line between righteous and corrupt. However, I can see the humanity in this spirit despite his dead, non-human state. I instinctively trust him, though he hasn't spoken a word to me.

He has messy hair, which I presume is stuck in that state, but an otherwise plain and average appearance like mine, if you ignore the fact that he's glowing and transparent. The only other thing that really stands out to me is the relaxed and youthful smile that also seems to be stuck to him. It reminds me of Connor's.

"Looks like you need some help," he says, looking down at me.

I nod, pathetically.

Then he commands the hoard of cruel spirits to leave, and for a reason unbeknown to me, they obey. With their retreat, the darkness also begins to slowly vanish, along with my rescuer.

I am left unharmed on a now empty street, and I stand up then begin to walk home. I feel a small smile appear on my face. *As if nothing ever happened.*

## 5

I wake up in my bed, soothed by the nurturing warmth of my home. Surprisingly, I had a dreamless night, and since I'm not slightly tired, I can say that I slept well too.

I recall coming home last night, a *lot* later than usual, half-asleep and confused. My parents had sent me straight to my room and into bed, with no questions asked, but they will undoubtedly interrogate me now, likely giving me a scolding too.

I sit up in my bed, but before getting up, I take a second to breathe today, enjoying the serenity of the silence and my bedroom's delicate atmosphere. The room is covered in shelves filled with books and other items, a collection obtained over many years, and now a memorial to my school life and childhood. Textbooks and notebooks make up a large portion of the books, and many colourful bottles line the walls too, filled with spells I made that I no longer remember.

There are lanterns and candles that hang from the ceiling and also rest on the shelves, supplementing the few cracks of light that trickle out of the window behind me, which is cloaked in a deep blue veil with a golden-coloured underside. My room in its entirety shares this colour scheme too, with my luxurious blue and crimson sheets and blue-painted walls, emerging over the shelves and resembling the vast night sky. And the entire room is glowing with the golden

light of the lanterns and candles, which are somehow enchanted with Yew energy, to both grant the flames resistance against burning out and to protect the wooden surfaces nearby.

It gives me a true sense of peace staying here, but I remember something which seems more compelling than remaining inside all day. *It's the weekend.* I jump out of bed and walk over to the opposite side of my room where my small wooden wardrobe lies. Then I pick out a black tunic and a matching belt, as well as some grey trousers, which I hastily put on before grabbing my satchel from the floor where I dropped it last night.

I have faith that Connor will already be heading to our usual spot, which is where I'll be going, too. Now I just need to manage to escape my parents because I'm not sure I'm very ready to explain yesterday's events to them.

I open my door and enter the corridor, which is more or less bare, and pale in comparison with my room. I silently tiptoe down the stairs, but to get to the front door, I need to walk through the large front room, which we use for dining. I can hear them in it at this very instant, chatting and chewing, so when I slip into the room, I'm lucky enough that no one is looking my way.

I slide across the far wall, keeping a close eye on all three of them, sat at the table in the middle of the room. My feet move silently, and I don't make a noise until I twist around the corner to the entrance of our home, hiding behind a corner of the wall and a wooden beam.

I pause for a second, halted in my tracks, as I listen to them talking.

"No, nothing's working," my father says. "We've done all the usual fertilising and tilling, and we even tried putting all kinds of Yew plants into the soil, to no avail."

The trees don't just provide people with the energy, with coed; plants can absorb it, too. It's how spells and concoctions are made, with the special kinds of plants that contain the energy. Usually, they're put into water because it traps it and stores it.

Energy can only be transmitted through the air, and it can't even

go through solid things. However, the liquid state of water allows it to enter, although after that, it gets stuck, bound within the substance unless the water's heated up, allowing it to escape.

Spells are produced by letting the accumulated energy out, whilst potions are made for drinking, and the energy is only released once the liquid is heated up by one's insides. However, the plants and herbs that use this energy *can* just be used as they are, since the energy escapes slowly through tiny holes in their surfaces. This means that the Yew energy from these plants is released into the soil and reabsorbed by the crops, to empower them with resistance against the elements.

This news is frightening to me, though. If the Haven has no food growing, we will slowly run out. A huge supply is stored underneath the Great Willow in the centre of town, but it will slowly diminish if it isn't stocked up by harvest this year.

"It's happened before, in our history," my mother comforts him. "I think it happened once when our parents were children."

"I'm not so sure," he replies, and my concern intensifies. After all, my father *is* a farmer and has been since he became an adult, so I trust him the most about this. "Some people are saying there's a curse." My stomach drops at hearing him speak that word, but of course, whatever is happening is completely unrelated to my troubles.

"And..." he continues, "it does seem like something has just wandered around, causing all of the land to suddenly go infertile."

That suddenly reminds me of what I saw after my first day of training. That small black cat *was* wandering around, and the farmers who were virtually attacking it must have thought that it caused the soil's infertility! Otherwise, they might have thought it was a "bad omen", as some people did, meaning that the crops must have already started quickly dying out by then. Though, *I don't believe for a second that it was that cat's fault, and how could it have been?* There is no logical evidence, only superstition, to prove it was.

It doesn't matter though, because *those who are feared are blamed*

*for everything, whether it makes sense or not.*

I hear a cough from close beside me, which startles me. Penny is standing a decent way back, but she can see me and is staring with a little smile. I lift my finger to my mouth to signal for her to stay quiet or, rather, not tell our parents I am there.

“Mama! Papa!” she shouts, and I roll my eyes in sheer exasperation, but she isn’t finished. “Can I go meet my friends in town now?”

“Sure, that’s okay,” my mother coos, and she steps closer to me. I turn around and open the door, not worrying about the loud sound it makes, and I leave it open for Penny to step out, and she pulls it shut behind her.

The first thing she says to me is, “You’ve gone insane!” and she’s not far off from the truth. “You know that, right?” she asks me, and bursts out giggling.

“Hey, what’s so funny?” I ask her as we start to walk along the street.

“You know where mother and father think you went last night?”

“No...” I reply, an anticipatory smile appearing on my face.

“They think you went to the tavern!” she explains, and I laugh, almost hysterically, along with her.

I am now legally an adult since I have been awakened, but *drinking* is strictly for those over the age of eighteen, which I am not.

“You’re joking!” I cry, because I can’t believe what I’m hearing is true.

“No,” she insists. “I’m being serious. A bunch of people your age bunk off training and stay up late to try and pretend they’re over eighteen.”

I scoff. My parents should know that I’d never do that. It sounds like something Connor might do though, as well as something I hope he hasn’t done. *But me?*

“I think our parents have gone insane,” I tell her, which results in another laugh.

“Sure,” she asks me. “Where *were* you then?”

“I was... on the street,” I explain as best as I can without sharing my secret. “Making a fool of myself, really,” I continue with a pang of hilarious misery. “It was just my ability; it went off. And it wasn’t nice, I guess.”

“Oh,” she replies. “You had a vision?”

“Something like that,” I say.

“What was it about?” she asks. “The planting stuff? I heard some of the Willows already knew about that...”

“Just leave it, okay, Penny?”

We walk in silence for a few seconds before she starts talking again.

“So why don’t you just tell this to mother and father?” she questions me, rightfully so. Heading straight out without talking to them was a childish, naive thing to do, but I did it for all the right reasons. I did it because I wanted to see Connor, so he wouldn’t have to wait, and also because I have this feeling, deep down inside of me, that other people are the true purpose of existing. The more I think about it, it seems as if there are two people inside of me. A small child and an old man, one foolish but fun and the other wise but depressed.

“I should,” is all that I can muster saying. She tilts her head sideways, expressing her confusion. “I’ll send them a wisp,” I tell her, and I do right there, pulling the small bottle out of my satchel and rubbing it, watching the golden substance evaporate upwards and hit itself against the glass sides. “I went to see Connor, see you later,” I whisper to it, then I pull out the stopper and watch the starlike sphere frantically skirt behind me, heading back towards my home. It can’t appear to both mother and father, but it will show itself to one of them.

They’ve always let me have independence, so this *would* usually be okay, but I do feel quite guilty since this is on top of my absence yesterday. I’ll make sure to sort things out this evening. I also want to thank that spirit for saving me from *whatever* was happening yesterday. Come to think of it, I didn’t even get his name before my

ability removed him from my senses. I try to imagine what I'll say to him, but I have no clue, because *how do you thank someone for potentially saving your sanity or... life?*

"You really *should* be punished for this," she claims, and it takes me a second to remember what she's talking about. "But you never know, they might go easy on you," she says to me.

"Ha!" I cry. "As if!"

"They might if you play up the same sob story as you did to me. 'My ability, it went off! It wasn't nice, I—'"

I elbow her gently in the side, laughing at the same time.

"Seriously though, all they're talking about now is what a 'hard period in your life it is.'"

"Lucky you then," I say to turn it around. "They won't be paying attention to *you*, so you can do anything you want!"

"Fair point," she admits.

"So, where are you going?" I ask her, while trying not to let myself get distracted from my plans.

"Meeting up with my friends, like I said," she informs me.

Not long later, her path splits from mine to do exactly that, whilst I continue on past the eastern orchard to get the mound.

I pass by a few fields on the way, and they lay as barren and empty as they were a week or two ago. I try to give myself logical reassurance by reminding myself what my mother said about them, that this kind of thing has happened before. We *did* learn about it at school, in History lessons. But I find myself repeating what my father said, too, and his words stand out more than any of my other thoughts. Because I am, truly...

*Not so sure.*

\* \* \*

I see him in the distance, sitting peacefully on top of the mound, some of whose verdant colour has returned since my last visit. This place remains a little slice of paradise beyond the bustling town and

artificial fields. *It's a haven within the Haven*, I think, with an internal grin, as I stride forward and up the gentle slope.

Connor is sat down with his legs stretched out and his heavy satchel by his side. He's wearing a much shorter tunic than usual, with a bulkier belt too, and a white, rectangular pattern sewn onto the bottom rim.

"I don't think you need to wear that on the weekend," I tease him in greeting. It's the tunic of a warrior, with the belt made for carrying a blade and the shorter length to improve the wearer's mobility. What I say is true though, because although guards, like the doctors, have varying schedules so that some of them are always working, they aren't meant to wear their special attire on days off.

"I know," he says with a soft laugh. "Where've you been?" he then asks. "I was beginning to think you weren't gonna show up."

He was expecting me, like I *expected*. It's just another example of the near telepathy that we have with each other, with no need for Aspen spells or abilities.

"I was sleeping, mostly," I admit. "Had a rough night, that's all."

"Training that hard, huh?" he replies. "Well... yeah," I admit. "How about you?"

"Hard, definitely, but also fun. Very fun. You know, they haven't let me into battle yet, but they said we could watch next time. And I'll see an *actual* dragon."

The very notion seems bizarre to me, that such a creature I've only heard about from others could be real. I've never gone near the border, where the guards fight off all kinds of hostile beings to keep the Haven safe. I have just been seeing spirits, though, so I don't have difficulty believing in the existence of such creatures, only accurately picturing one.

"That's cool," I remark. "So, how long do you need to train for? I know that it's more firm for you."

"Yeah. Half a year, maybe? We need to be trained in combat, and it's way harder for the people who aren't Ash." He leans backwards before continuing. "Oh, there are more people with us who are

neither Ash nor Elm than I imagined. One girl, a Hazel Augment, found out that she could literally turn her arms into wings, so she got transferred straight to us.”

I feel something strange, a small pang of jealousy on hearing of this ability. I guess it must be because of how awful mine turned out to be... I nod, not knowing what else to say.

“You?”

“Huh?” I reply distantly.

“Your training? How was it?” he clarifies, and a look of empathy and concern crosses his face. “Scrap that,” he abruptly adds. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” I pretend. I hope convincingly. “It’s fine.”

“You can tell me, Elias.”

“Seriously, it’s nothing. I just... training is tiring, that’s all.” It’s not quite a lie since my training has been so, but it’s still deceptive, and it fills me with guilt.

“Did you find out what your ability is?” he asks me.

I... shake my head. *A lie. To Connor. A full, whole lie.* I suddenly question why I’m doing this, why I’m tricking my best and only friend, and Mason’s voice is all that echoes back to me, so vividly that it seems off. *“People... don’t like, or rather, won’t like your ability.”* Would Connor really dislike me, or judge me, or fear me, just because of my ability?

*Of course not,* I know, but I also know how he can be. He would tell someone, even by accident, and word would spread everywhere. And that, surely, is what Mason was warning me about, the whole Haven knowing? I can’t even bear imagining them looking down on me... thinking I’m broken or that there’s something wrong with me...

*Stop. Go back to the moment. Reality.*

“You?” I ask him, returning his question about my ability.

“Yeah... just the typical Elm enhanced speed, but I can’t say I’m upset!”

“That’s great!” I respond. “No wonder you got here first! Can you... show me?”

I knew he'd want to show me, and I wanted to see it as well.

He stands up, whilst telling me that he'll try. And he does. His eyes turn a vivid azure, and he darts off, becoming a blurred streak and causing heaps of dirt to fly into the air behind him. I feel a gust of wind, and I blink, and just like that, he's back where he started, dropping himself back onto the ground with skilful precision. I look at the twisted trail of piled dirt and bent grass before me, and I'm lost for words for a second, impressed with Connor's seemingly instant mastery of his ability.

"Wow..." I let out. I wish I could use my ability as easily as he did, totally carefree and simply enjoying it.

"I'm sure you'll figure yours out soon," he tells me. "And besides, a Willow ability is *probably* harder to figure out than an Elm one. And maybe you have a super rare one or something! So your trainer, I mean, mentor, can't help you out!"

I hate how he's right about it. Even though I lied and know what it is, he still manages to be right. I wish I could tell him, but instead...

"I'm just really impressed," I tell him.

"Thanks!" He chuckles a little. "I've been practising every night, but you should see the others. I've still got a lot to learn."

We both go silent now, and while I don't know or try to figure out why he does, I know why I do. I smile and lie back, hoping I don't need to talk, just for a little bit. I simply enjoy his presence, that knowledge that he is beside me as I gaze up into the sky, a blue expanse, timeless and endless. I'm so still that I see the clouds move. A leisurely motion that is always there, yet so rarely noticed or viewed.

"I missed you," I say, the words caused by something I don't understand. It feels like I just spilt a profound secret, more important to keep hidden than my ability or anything else. Yet I said it, because I wanted to, and that in itself feels so awkward and new to me. It makes me look soft, and sad and stupid. I don't know why Connor doesn't hate me already.

"I missed you too," he replies, but more out of courtesy than

anything, because I know he doesn't feel it, not in the same way. I can see him in my mind, laughing and smiling and making friends at the border, and suddenly I feel like a massive liability because this is a one-way dependence.

I sit myself up, having shamed myself enough already. "So, have you started learning how to fight yet?"

"No," he replies. "But I've been assigned a blade, which I couldn't bring."

I laugh a little at that before he carries on. "It's really long. And sharp. Perfect for slicing dragon's heads off, I suppose."

I try not to wince at the thought of it, even though it seems like a ridiculous thing to do for a beast. We've been told repeatedly what they'd do if they got inside the Haven. Burn the trees down with their flaming breath, if not destroying *everything* in a predatory reign of terror.

Outside the Haven is a destroyed wasteland that is overrun by unimaginable creatures, including dragons. Many, many years ago, the Haven didn't exist, and this place was like that, too. But a band of people joined together, fought together, and slowly expanded as the population grew, converting the wasteland into lush farmland, abundant in food. Then, they slowly regrew the trees, so energy and abilities returned, forming the well-named Haven in an otherwise desolate world...

"*And*, they also hand out free potions for us," he says with a grin, and I think I know where this is going, remembering how his satchel looked before.

"Oh, no."

He lifts his stuffed satchel, and he opens it up to pull out a small bottle, only slightly larger than one of a wisp. The contents are a fiery orange. "What is it?" I ask him.

"Strength serum," he explains. "It's very potent. A single sip, and... why don't you try it out?"

"Connor, are you sure you're supposed to be hoarding these?" I question him.

“No, but they give them out for *free*. So, what happens to them doesn’t make a difference.” He hands me the vial. “Take a sip.”

I look into the bottle. Bubbles rise to the surface of the thin liquid, popping as they reach the tiny slip of air at the top. Its colouring seems a little odd, since the colour of Ash is more of a purple, but I suppose it’s the ingredients that count. I can only imagine the odd-looking red berries, or orange-coloured nectar, that has gone into this. It seems strange that I’m about to swallow some of it, as I impulsively decide to do.

“Fine,” I say resignedly. “But *no one* finds out about this, okay?”

I pull out the stopper, and with a little apprehension, I lift it up to my mouth and let a single tiny drop fall into it.

Suddenly, a rush of energy swoops over me, and I feel the urge to run about or hit something. I flinch as the veins on my arms begin to bulge out, and a wave of heat fills my body. I can literally see my flimsy arms expanding in size, my muscles expanding before my very eyes. My heartbeat, too, changes, beating rapidly in my chest.

“Wow,” I mutter. “I can see how you fend off all those creatures.”

“Then you should see actual Ash abilities,” he tells me. “None of the veins or inflating or heat. Just unbridled strength.”

“That makes sense,” I agree. “Do they have Elm serums too?”

He nods, and I hand the vial back to him.

“No,” he refuses. “I’ve got like twenty of them in there. I roll my eyes, but I keep his present, stashing it away in one of the pockets of my own satchel.

The rest of the day goes by fast, faster than I’d like. We end up strolling down to the eastern orchard, circling the perimeter, not to mention messing around on and about the fence. In the light of the spring day, with Connor by my side, it becomes very easy to forget all my troubles.

That being said, I do remember *one* thing, just very briefly, that that despicable spirit told me. “Oh, Connor,” I exclaim in remembrance. “Edith needs to go somewhere called Trail’s End.” It could’ve been a trick made by that spirit to lure her into some kind of

trap. But spirits *can't* touch anything or hurt anyone, so it's worth her knowing. The worst it can be is a practical joke with nothing there at all. There's not a single dangerous place within the Haven's bounds.

"Who told you that?" he asks me. I shrug.

"Don't know her name."

"Alright. I'll tell her when I see 'er."

Other than that, however, I don't give a single thought to the likes of spirits. I don't once worry about my ability or the strange, blue, spirit man. Neither do I concern myself with the failure with the planting or the strange occurrences that are claimed to be happening all over the Haven.

What I do begin to ponder, as Connor leaves to catch a carriage to the border and I begin my walk home, is that maybe my childhood, my friendship, isn't over, or at least, not *as* over as I expected. Maybe, the sun has not set on my old life after all. Considering the state of things today, I feel I may have a great deal of time left.

## 6

I hear my bedroom door close as my mother leaves the room. I lie in bed, unmoving, and my eyelids rest over my eyes. However, once the sound melts away, they flutter open. I am awake.

I silently get up and sit down on the floor. The wooden boards creak beneath me, and I cross my legs, unsure of what to do next. I still want to thank the young spirit who helped me. Normally, I wouldn't go out of my way to speak to someone like this, but after what happened, it seems insolent to let it pass.

So, I planned to stay awake after tea, so that I could wake up. *But now?* I am left puzzled about what to do and how to find him. *Maybe without being terrorised by other spirits,* I joke to myself.

With no better ideas, I try to focus every corner of my mind, and every inch of my body, on the spirits, thinking of nothing but them, of their colours and actions and the reality of it all.

Then I see a flash from outside of my room, but it is short-lived and too grey, not blue. "Spirit?" I whisper, unsure of how to address, or call to, the right one. "Um..." I sigh because this was a terrible idea, not thought out in the slightest.

"You... helped me out last night, and I just wanted to say..." My words are quiet, but in the dead silence they sound louder than thunder.

I settle my head onto the floor, uncomfortably hitting the solid wood. I wait, for a couple of minutes, before I get up and try to call to the spirit again.

“Blue spirit?” I decide to call, but again, I hear no response. The worst part is that the spirit could be right before me, with my ability acting up so much that I can’t see him.

I’m about to get back into bed when I hear laughing... laughing that makes me stop dead in my tracks. It isn’t the cruel laughing of those tormenting spirits, though; it sounds human and genuine.

Then I *see* him. He appears in front of me, sitting on the small wooden chair in the corner of my room. That cerulean colour illuminates my entire room, and I can see that my hands and arms, too, are bathing in the eerie light.

“I’m guessing you want to speak to me, Elias?” he asks, a vague smile crossing his face. He knows my name. He must have heard it before, without me seeing him.

“Th-thank. Thank you,” I mutter, even more incapable of coherent speech than normal under these surreal circumstances. I couldn’t even answer his question.

“It’s alright,” he tells me. “I apologise on behalf of... *my friends*. They can be pretty nasty sometimes.”

I nod quietly, acting as if he didn’t just trivialise the disturbing events his *friends* put me through.

“I’m guessing you’d like to know who I am?” he asks. That wasn’t my first thought, but I’m not going to turn the information down. I nod again.

“I’m Rowan,” he tells me. “It’s the name of a tree,” he explains. “A special one, though. They don’t have them in the Haven.”

I didn’t know other trees existed outside of the Haven or that there even were more than the nine. They must be rare, at least, since the destruction outside of our walls would have eradicated most of them.

“We’re special too, though,” he informs me with a smile, which startles me. *Could he be... the one Mason was talking about?*

“I had your ability,” he says, confirming what I thought. It makes no sense, though. Mason said the last one became twisted. *Was that a lie in the history books, made because people were so averse to his power?* Mason did warn me, reminding me on several occasions to keep my power a secret, too. I can’t tell Rowan any of this, though.

“Had?” I just ask.

“Oh, yeah. Had. Spirits can’t use energy,” he explains. “Right. You know nothing about spirits, really. I can give you an explanation of it all, if you like. It’ll save you from all the hassle I went through. I *am* kind of an expert on the topic.”

“Yes,” I let out, still whispering. My parents cannot hear Rowan; only I can, so it’s fine, and more convenient, that he is speaking loudly. I need to remain quiet, though, or I’ll risk waking the entire town up.

To begin with, I have a burning question, so I push myself to ask it, then and there. “Not everyone... becomes a spirit, right?”

I feel certain that the answer is no, but I still want to know what exactly causes one to hover around aimlessly after death.

“No,” he tells me. “There are lots of reasons, but usually, it’s because of revenge. Which is why it’s very rare for a spirit to have a trace of decency. When they’re dying, they harbour so much of a desire for revenge that they become bound here until they get it. But it’s like a joke, as getting that as a spirit is almost impossible.”

What he says sounds familiar. I begin to remember further the tales that my parents told me about the dead. They were stories that had been passed down through generations but were taken as myths, all pretend. This is practically what all the old stories about spirits say, word for word. It seems bizarre that such a thing *could* be true at all, and it begins to make me question my sanity. It feels like I’ve been whisked into a fairy tale. Could it possibly be true, with how outlandish it seems? I’m not entirely sure... but I want to trust Rowan. I have many more questions I need answers for.

I’m about to ask him why all these spirits can’t do anything to seek ‘revenge’, but he explains without the need for my question. “We

can't touch anything. We can't use the tree's energy, no *coed*."

I try to process this further than I do initially, but my mind is already shooting out the next question, desperate to understand all of it. Despite the part of me that is struggling to come to terms with the new information I just heard, I give in to my curiosity. "Can't spirits possess people?" I blurt out. I have heard of spirits doing countless wicked things through the bodies of the living, taking control over them and bending them to do as they please.

"They can," he says, inflicting fear in me. His eyes look down to the ground. "But it's extremely rare and difficult. Only a spirit with pure malevolence could even be able to try."

I am, admittedly, terrified. But if such a spirit existed, I tell myself that they would have already possessed someone, so it's nothing to be concerned about now. That being said, the stories had to have come from somewhere...

"I only know of one spirit like that," he adds quickly. "And he's trapped, so rest assured that he won't be possessing people anytime soon."

I nod, and I force myself not to question it. I think this is the kind of situation where it *might* just be better to accept things for what they are. Rowan continues to talk.

"Spirits, they use something called *valdre*. That's how they possess people. It's energy, like *coed*." Figuratively, my jaw drops. How can there be energy other than *coed*?

"What?" I exclaim, raising my voice a little too high, because I need him to go on.

"You know *coed* is emitted from trees. *Valdre* comes from certain creatures. And spirits are made of it."

"Oh," is all that I manage to say.

"It's why people despise us," he continues. "They relate the dead to *valdre* and *valdre* to evil. It's as simple as that."

It makes sense. I hate that it makes sense. Seeing how wicked most of the spirits are, and knowing that they can actually possess people, everything about them would instil fear inside of me, too. But *I know*

*that my ability was given to me, through the trees.* It does truly feel that something is wrong with it, but it isn't evil, surely.

"If I can offer you one piece of advice, Elias..." he begins. I know what's coming; I've heard it from Mason before, but with my deeper understanding, and coming out of Rowan's mouth, its impact is deepened. I fear it. I hate it. I have to live with it.

"Don't let *anyone* find out."

"I know!" I tell him sharply, because I've heard it enough times already.

"Good," he says. "I can't say that *I'm* busy, but you might want to get some rest!"

I feel my face getting a little warm. He's not my parent, but he is here telling me to go to bed.

"Wait," I say, trying to cover up my face by looking behind me, as if to check something.

"Yeah?" he asks, casually. His demeanour makes me want to laugh because I wouldn't expect dead people to be so laid back. Having already spent enough time thinking, I scramble through my mind to find a way to phrase my question.

"How did you get the sp— your, *your friends* to leave me alone?" I ask.

"Think about the colours," he tells me and waits, apparently enjoying giving me a riddle to solve. *Red, blue*, I think. Some violet, too. Paler colours, less pale ones... does any of it add up? What I'm thinking seems a little farfetched.

"I'll just tell you why," Rowan admits with an infectious smile. "It may not always seem like it, but..." he begins before pausing. His eyes flicker up to the ceiling before he speaks, and there's a strange and powerful feeling that comes with hearing his voice.

"A *single* good... triumphs over a thousand evils."

## 7

I'm walking through the training centre's hallway when I hear her again. It's the girl with the red hair... what was her name? *Dawn*.

"Hey, are you okay?" she asks me. *Oh no*, I think. I don't turn around to look at her. I just become stationary for a second.

"Yes," I reply nonchalantly, brimming with shame on the inside. I have no doubt that she saw me on Friday evening. I recall how I must have appeared, with tears running down my face at one point, my glowing turquoise eyes wild in bewilderment. Me, crying out for help, while there was apparently nothing wrong.

With no way to remedy the situation crossing my mind, I start walking again, a little hastily. I try to tell myself that I don't care what this girl thinks, that her opinion doesn't matter.

"I'm sorry!" she calls as I continue to walk away. "I didn't mean to —" Her voice stops, as I'm almost gone. I feel a strange sympathy for her, as she hardly did anything wrong, and despite that, I walk away. More so, however, it's a certain sense of curiosity that fills my mind, allowing me to wonder, for a short moment, *what if she genuinely cares?* I stop myself, though, before I get carried away. *She was mocking me*, I insist, *but I don't care. I don't care.*

It doesn't work. I know that others saw me, too. They all saw me in that pitiful state. In this moment, I wish I could leave this place and

get a new life where no one knows me, but I can't. My only means of escape is in the small room, W3, which I once again burst into now, closing the door behind me.

"Good morning," I greet Mason, almost comically.

He sits on his stool unsteadily and it takes a moment for him to greet me back. "Hello, Elias," he responds, and there's something off and unsettling about his voice. As if this day couldn't get any worse, now my mentor is in some kind of mood.

"Sit," he commands me. I do so, placing my satchel on the floor beside me. I wonder what we'll be doing today. I guess I still need to learn how to control my ability, since... *does Mason even know what happened to me?* My question is answered abruptly.

"I heard about your little scene," he spits. I shift in my seat, uncomfortably, and I find myself looking up at the man before me, checking that it is, in fact, my mentor. It is. Mason is sat there, but something is severely different, something is horribly wrong.

"Funny to see *you* look so weak, so scared," he mocks me, and his emphasis on "you" startles me.

Mason was never a compassionate, benevolent person, but it didn't matter, he was just, and fair, and kind. Was it all an act? How could I have seen through something like that?

"What?" I exclaim in confusion.

"Funny for someone like you," he apparently clarifies, and I can't make sense of it. I've just run from one uncomfortable situation to another.

I can't talk to him any more. I'm speechless, and my mouth feels like it's been stitched shut. I begin to sweat, which is ridiculous, because I didn't do a thing, and nothing has changed since our last meeting. But everything has been thrown out of control...

"What're we doing today?" I ask, trying to change the subject. Whatever the "subject" is.

"Well, it seems like you need some help controlling your powers, doesn't it?" he asks me. He's mocking me. Still mocking.

"Yes," I agree, despite the very obvious undertones.

“Then...” I shuffle backwards on his stool, until he is away from the table and his back is brushing against the stone wall. “Tell me. Why should I help you?”

“Honour,” I tell him, recollecting his words from the other day. “Honouring your duty.” He narrows his eyes.

“I have no duty to train you,” he claims. “Not someone like you.”

I eye the door to my left. I want to leave. I can walk around town again, then go back home after a while. I can avoid this; I want to avoid this. But I also want to know what has happened to Mason. And when something crosses my mind, my heart skips a beat.

*Possession.* It would be ridiculous for it to happen the day after I learnt about it. Unless it was some kind of freak coincidence, but no, it would have to be targeted at me. Could it be Rowan? He didn’t seem, as he said, *malevolent*, but couldn’t a malevolent person make you think exactly that? What other explanation is there? Mason could have found out too much about the spirits in his research, so they possessed him. It doesn’t seem very plausible, but it’s worth a shot.

I gather all of my courage to utter my next words.

“Mason. Listen to me, this isn’t you. You’re being—”

“*Silence!*” he roars. He stands up, pushing his stool aside with his thigh and looking down at me, not just literally.

He’s doing that thing again, where his eyes bulge out of fear. They did that on our very first meeting, when he *was* afraid of my ability. But he apologised for it, and he vowed to train me, to keep my ability a secret.

“You,” he states. “Are a monster.” I feel anger boiling up inside of me, but I don’t, can’t, do anything about it.

“If it were up to me, you would be thrown into a cell already,” he declares.

*Why? Why is it that everything goes wrong for me?* But I can stop this. I can’t change my ability, but I can change this situation because I believe in my innocence. I know I’ve done nothing to deserve this. I calculate my next move, and then put it into action.

“Why?” I ask him, and I make my voice sound stern. I decide to stand up too. “You can’t make these ridiculous claims without evidence.”

“You’re a murderer!” he growls. “What other evidence do I need?”

This is wrong. This is wrong. He’s got it all wrong. Me, a *murderer*? Who told him that?

“I’m not,” I respond, appearing calm. “This is some kind of misunderstanding.”

“No, it’s not, Elias,” he states, his eyes intently looking at mine. I can almost feel the connection it creates between us, and it tears me apart.

“I’m not a murderer,” I repeat, lacing as much confidence into my voice as I can. I *should* be confident, but he somehow induces doubt into my mind, even though it is entirely illogical.

“Fine,” he snaps, which confuses me more. Why would he agree with me after all that? “You’re not a murderer yet.”

“You think I’m planning to kill someone?” I ask him.

“No,” he states. “You *will* kill someone. Unless someone stops you.”

I’ve had enough of him. I’ll have to file a complaint or something, to get a new, less deranged, mentor, because I cannot take this. I decide to leave. I bend down to pick up my satchel and then turn towards the door.

“No!” Mason screams. He charges towards me, and uses all his body weight to crush me against the solid stone. The impact sends pain throughout my back, but I can see from the angry look in his eyes that it isn’t over.

He seizes my neck with his hand, which is thick and sturdy. Instantly, the pain in my back is made minor by the sensation that occurs in my throat. The panic settles in when I try to breathe, and I can’t. A few last traces of air enter my lungs, and after that, nothing enters and nothing escapes, blocked by my mentor’s iron grasp. Saliva is stuck in my mouth, and I can’t swallow it. My head feels severed from my body and all its vital support. My vision blurs now,

too. His eyes, his face, that is all I see, but it's foggy and obscured so that it doesn't seem real. I make weak, raspy groaning noises, but the sound is distorted by a ringing that begins to cloud up my ears.

I don't know how long it's been when I drop to the ground, feeling shattered. And now breathing, breathing hurts. Everything is wrong. I have just been accused of murder, then mercilessly attacked. I am at my mentor's mercy. I can see him still, and I look up at his face, an expression of guilt all over it.

"Why would I kill someone?" I ask, trying to trigger some pity in him.

"I don't know, Elias," he says, his voice shaking. "But I saw it... in a *vision*."

*No. No, no, no!* Could it be an accident? Certainly, now, I will be able to stop it, if only I know what it will be, what I need not to do.

"How?"

"There was darkness," he whispers, only increasing the number of questions running through my mind.

"And?"

"No," he snarls. "You just need to be locked up. The Haven does not accept people like you."

I think about *darkness*, and that deep, pitch black void which formed around me in the presence of so many spirits. This must have something to do with them; *I know it*.

"It... it won't be me! My ability, it—"

"I don't care whether it's because of your ability or not! I have already spoken with the Council, and I tried to get you imprisoned already!"

"*Tried*, huh?" I ridicule him a little. "Let me guess, they thought you were a lunatic!"

"Maybe," he spits.

"And why would they do that because of a stupid vision?"

"Visions don't lie," he states. I'm fully involved in this dispute now.

"But they can be prevented. And they can be misleading," I

counter, grateful for my knowledge in the subject, which came from many hours of reading.

“Which is *why* I need to prevent this!”

“I can prevent it!” I claim.

“Who knows if you’ll even have control!” he shouts. “It could very well be your ability!”

I do have a feeling that it could have something to do with this, because my powers certainly are erratic and uncontrollable, but the way that he says it infuriates me.

“My ability isn’t evil!” I declare.

“But you just said that—”

“So? It *doesn’t* mean that—”

Our shouts can probably be heard throughout the entire training centre now, but I’m too caught up in my rage to care. Let them know the truth. That Mason attacked me and blamed me for murder. I’m silent for a few seconds...

“Let’s just see what the Council thinks about that, huh?”

...then his words sink in. And I run. As quick as I can, I bolt out of the door, and I’m too quick for him to stop me this time. I don’t have my satchel, having dropped it after being strangled. I don’t care; I don’t have the time to care any more.

Mason has told the Council about my ability. My secret is on the brink of discovery, and my only hope? Not letting *anyone* else find out!

I dart down the hallway, then rush down the stairs, the arch of my foot colliding with the edge of each step. My heart beats fast, and I can sense Mason behind me, but I don’t look back. It’s not long until I come crashing out of the building’s front door.

The streets are empty, again, so I have an easy time running. I twist and turn through the worn-out pathways. In between small, cosy homes with tiled roofs, larger shops and stalls with flamboyant banners, past a solid stone blacksmith’s, a towering church.

I thrust my body to the side to manoeuvre every turn, and I feel the

air around me, and it's almost a barrier, blocking me from getting where I need to go.

Then, the running becomes painful, and it's not long until I can't take it any more, so my sprint softens into a brisk walk, but I debate in my mind whether I should be slowing down at all. I look over my shoulder, and I can see that Mason isn't behind me. But the Council has found out...

*The Council knows about my ability*, I repeat to myself several times to muster the energy to start speeding onward again. They could tell *everyone*, and both the old Mason's and Rowan's words are persisting in my mind. I can't let it happen. I can't let them tell another soul.

And so, I keep going. My feet burn, each step driving them into my solid boots, and my legs are stumbling by the time that I reach the Council building. I'm destroyed, and I can barely push myself to head towards the large double doors of the building.

It has three storeys, and although it is made with the typical wattle and daub, it has a certain prominence in town as it wraps around a square courtyard on all sides except for the front. The building has a brick foundation, made out of the same material as the solid ground, and the windows on all of these walls have thick bushes on top of their windowsills.

I don't give a glance to any of it, however, instead running towards the wooden doors. I pull at the wrought iron handles, which are the shape of large rings. I wrap my fingers around the dark metal, and I thrust my body backwards with all my might in an attempt at opening the doors.

*Of course, how could I be so stupid?* They're locked. It's the Council; of course they're locked. I keep tugging, keep trying, but undoubtedly, my efforts are in vain.

I instead use the same iron rings and let them hit the door's surface, producing a loud knocking sound. After doing so, I resign myself to a long wait and I slump down against the wall. Uncomfortably, I sit there in silence, reflecting on my imminent doom.

*The Council always makes the right decision*, is what they say. There are nine of them in total, and although the system is closed, with only a member's child allowed to become one of them, it certainly seems to work well. The Council members, really, are no different from ordinary people, which helps, and each of them stands for a tree, to represent the whole Haven, working in the best interests of everyone. The large number of them creates balance too, so that none of them can make one reckless decision and throw us all into disaster.

Technically, anyone can request something, and the Council is required to discuss it, acting as arbiters. Only, I have never known anyone to do so, because what should be changed? *Could I request for them to keep my secret?* Or would they do so anyway, if they truly work in people's interest?

Faster than I expected, I receive a response which prompts me to get up, pushing my thoughts a little to the side. A woman answers the door, but she has no white robe; she is not part of the Council. "Hello, lad," she greets me. "What is it that you would like?"

"I need to see the Council," I murmur.

"Pardon?"

"I need to see the Council!" I repeat at a normal volume.

She chuckles politely. "You can't just see the Council," she tells me.

"It's an emergency," I state, and it certainly is for me.

She looks a little sceptical, but she doesn't say anything. "Alright," she says. "Come on in."

She opens the door wide enough for me to enter, and I step inside. Next, I follow her on her request, and although I feel myself walking, I look at the floor, not bothering to even try and look around as usual, although this walking time is very brief.

Despite my previous attitude, I do give my environment some thought when I enter the Council hall, an enormous room, which I guess takes up at least two floors. We come through a door in the middle of the room, and I continue to follow her to the front, where eight people sit on an elevated platform.

“Elias,” one of them says. It’s the woman who held my Awakening; the one who used Aspen and whose eyes turned a golden colour. I can’t remember her name, but she wears the same long, white tunic that she did on that occasion. The other seven Council members wear them too... *Wait. Seven?*

I count them all again, sitting behind a wide table. *Eight.* Eight people. One of them must be sick, or busy, or something.

“We’ve been half expecting you,” she tells me. Then she grimaces. “I assume you’ve come to plead your case.” Suddenly, all eyes are on me, and the person who led me here briskly walks away. I listen to her clacking footsteps grow quieter and quieter, leaving me to the wolves.

“I...” *Didn’t even think about that!* I was so focused on keeping my secret, I forgot that the Council may believe that I’ll be a murderer.

“We know what you’re capable of, Elias,” a man next to the Aspen Chief warns me. “Your mentor told us of your power.”

“And we have good enough reason to lock you up,” someone else adds. All of their words are blending together; I can no longer tell them apart.

“But—” someone blurts.

“Plead your case, Elias.”

“No, we will not—” that voice repeats.

“I suggest you quiet down, Chief Clementine!” the other voice demands.

That was her name, Chief Clementine. And I think she’s trying to defend me. The Council continues their descent into childish squabbling, and I can’t help feeling amused as the situation develops.

“Elias is a child. We will ensure he stays in line, and there will be nothing else for it.”

“Mason’s vision said that—”

“Visions can be unreliable!”

“We will ensure he remains in order, and no harm will come to anyone!”

“How can you be sure? There was darkness; he could sneak out in the night and kill someone!”

“Do you really think he would!”

“Yes! This Mason seems like a lunatic, and he ought to be controlled.”

“You are trusting a child over one of our greatest advisors?”

“And this child! Plagued with *Willowbane*, we cannot trust him!”

“That’s a myth! The last one with his ability could have just—”

“We do not speak of them!”

“Council! *Behave* yourselves!” someone booms above the rest. Silence is restored. “Elias is right here,” the voice states, and it comes from a man in the corner, standing up from his seat.

“Elias, child,” he addresses me. “Why did you come to us?”

*To tell you to all keep it quiet? Not tell anyone?* It seems stupid, ridiculous, now, because here they are debating whether I should be locked up. I don’t know any more. Why am I here, before the leaders of the entire population?

I don’t speak; I remain in silence.

“Elias?” someone repeats. I must speak, my hands damp with sweat and shaking at my sides.

“Please,” I say, and my voice sounds weak and high-pitched. “Don’t tell anyone.”

The man standing up seems to eye the others.

“Please,” I repeat, as if it helps. If I could properly speak, I could give so many reasons to follow out my request. But all I do is beg.

“We’re sorry,” Clementine asserts. All her following words seem pointless to me. Because it’s clear to me what her apology means.

*It’s over. My secret is out.*

## 8

I can't open the door to my home.

I am standing outside, not a metre from the front door, cool air all around me. I delay my entry by staring off into the distance, though not looking at anything at all. They *know*. The Council alerted them, apparently. I don't know when or how. They know I'm cursed. They'll think it, at least. They may even know, *think*, that I'm a soon-to-be murderer.

I know that the past is over. All the events that have led up to this moment are unchangeable, set in stone. I don't care that my secret is out, not really, not any more. But I still can't open that door.

There is an ordeal waiting for me, much greater than any trouble I could be in. Or... *they could be okay with it*. They could have the sense to know that an ability granted by a tree is not a curse.

Whatever happens, tonight, I will be asleep. Alone, in bed. In the warmth. It is my only comfort because whatever happens, whatever they think, it will end, and I will rest. They won't kick me out of the house, certainly.

So, I open the door. I walk in. I sit down at the knobbly, old table, facing my sister, my family.

"Hi," Penny greets me, which is followed by a concerning look from my mother, given to her. She places two plates of food on the

table, then my father does the same. My sister lifts them up and puts them in place. The table isn't smooth enough to drag them across its surface.

I look at the plate placed in front of me. Dry bread, with crushed-up plant matter on the side. I recognise the leaves, though. *Adferwr*. A Birch plant that restores the energy of whoever consumes it. It's no alternative to real food because it doesn't provide all that you need from food, only making you feel fuller. It doesn't help the body grow or repair itself, help it stay working, or anything else. And even then, Restorers, who are a group of Birch people, do the same thing, but to a much greater extent. Some of them can relieve people from sleepiness too, not just physical exhaustion and hunger. This stuff is only really useful when on long walks, which is why it seems ridiculous to see it on a plate.

"What?" I blurt out, without thinking.

"Rations," my father says. "Because of the problems with planting." It's an uncomfortably short reply, but from what little I've heard, it's ridiculous. Only eating this for a week and we'll all be sick and malnourished. I suppose that's why it's sided with bread, but what good will this do? We could spread out the actual food we have stored over a longer period than until next harvest, but it still helps nothing, as we can't do that indefinitely.

"No luck today, then, I'm guessing?" my mother asks him. Father shakes his head.

"Not a great day then?" she continues.

"No," he says. "Yours?"

"A little busier than usual," she explains. "A poor child broke one of the bones in his leg, and he's only six. Causes chaos in the centre when there's a drastic injury, but he's getting better."

"Penny?" my father turns to.

"School," she states, her tone initially bored, before perking up. "Oh. Well, next week anyway, some Oaks are coming in for a demonstration!"

I smile faintly. Demonstrations were always a nice break from

schoolwork for children, who would watch in amazement at adults coming in to show their abilities being used. Sometimes for useful purposes, other times just for entertainment. I can remember one time when some adults using Oak energy came to my school, and they had vast cauldrons of water. They would touch the surface of the water with their hands, and the water would suddenly rise up out of its containment until it spread over such a great distance that the water was perfectly mixed in with the air.

I can still feel the awe that came to me watching the thousands of tiny particles of water fill the room, ignoring the forces of gravity they ought to have been restrained by. They could do that because Oak energy brings balance, in this case, meaning that there could be no region in the environment with more water than the other.

I can see how Penny is excited. Mother shares her enthusiasm too. "That's nice!" And then there's silence. Now is the point in the conversation when I should be questioned about *my* day, but it reminds me how things are different now. In the blink of an eye, everything has changed.

The silence becomes so prevalent that I can hear Penny chewing on the bread, each motion of her chin breaking it into smaller pieces. It seems atrocious that my parents should even be able to do this to me, so I form a sentence in my head to combat this.

"Am I not entitled to conversation with my family now that I have the dead blocking up my ears?" Penny laughs at my comment, but the food inside her mouth stops it from properly coming out. She lifts her hand up to prevent the soggy crumbs from falling out of her mouth.

"How was your day, Elias?" Mother asks me. I go out of my way to make my day sound as pleasant and busy as possible, which proves to be hard since I was accused of murder, strangled, argued about by the Council in front of my face, and now finally disregarded by my parents out of either fear or disgust.

"Engaging," I say. "My mentor and I had a really *interesting* discussion, and I was even able to get in some exercise in town."

“That sounds lovely,” father chimes in, but his utterance feels forced. Silence, again. Just for a few seconds.

“We... heard about your ability,” he tells me. *I know that!* What I really want to know is whether they were told about my apparent future slaughtering.

“Is that it?” I ask her, trying not to give away too much.

“That it?” my father almost shouts. “We were *only* told that our son is cursed with Willowbane?”

That word again! Someone in the Council said it, and after hearing it twice, I already despise it. Every time it is spoken it is stuffed full of hatred.

“He is not *cursed*,” my mother defends me.

“Yes, he is,” he fights back. *Déjà vu*. This is the second time today that I have become a subject for debate, as if my fight with Mason wasn’t enough.

“Well, he may be cursed, but he’s still our son!”

“Of course he is! You think that I would—”

“No!”

Penny slips away, quietly pulling her chair backwards and walking out after slipping the leaves into her trouser pockets. I’d love to make a quick escape too, but I feel obligated to stay here, since it is all about me.

“I think it’s our responsibility to *sort* him out!” he contends.

“Sort out how?” she asks.

“Well for starters, he shouldn’t be allowed to use his ability!” My mother nods, which irritates me.

“No!” I shout, and I stand up. “It’s *mine!*”

This seems to outrage my mother. “Yours? Would you like to end up like the last ... Willowbane!”

Again, with Rowan! Didn’t Mason talk about how “twisted” he was, too? I met him, though, and if anything, he gave the opposite impression. Could the Haven have just hated him for his ability, and he actually didn’t do anything bad? If so, there’s no reason to assume that there’s something wrong with me.

“The last... one like *me* wasn’t bad!” I reply boldly.

“He nearly destroyed the Haven!” my mother shouts. “Any closer than *nearly* and none of us would be alive right now!”

“You’re wrong,” I declare, my voice calm and quiet.

“Elias, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” my mother tells me.

“Yes, I do! I met him! I’d know!” *Too much.* My mother gasps.

“Don’t you ever use your ability again!” my father shouts.

“Why?” I shout, driven by nothing but fiery rage. “*Why* can’t you let me?”

“We’re protecting you!” my mother literally screams, her voice hoarse and dry. “We’re your parents! We need to protect you!”

“I can protect *myself!*” I yell, and I find myself walking, walking away - through the door, into the fresh night’s cold embrace.

I fall down onto the ground. There’s only a slim strip of land between the house and the path, but I sit down on that strip. The ground is dry and hard, uncomfortable to sit on. But I sit on it anyway, and I rest my head down too, on the solid stone.

*I am cursed.* I have no ability, not really. Not one that my parents, or the Haven, will let me use. They’ll probably ban me from using it, and I’ll live the rest of my life as a *child*. Weak, and useless. I will work on the farms, probably. I will be used as additional labour, nothing more than an extra set of legs and arms.

Would it be that bad? I trace out this life in my head, creating the details, using nothing but realism. I could still have a family, a life outside of work... but *no*. As if it wouldn’t have already been hard enough, I will never find a spouse, not with a curse, or without an ability. So I’ll be alone, childless, purposeless. I will wake up every day to go to work, to do hard labour. Then I will return home to sleep and eat alone. My life will continue on like this, and then, eventually, I will *die*.

Then, perhaps, I will become a spirit myself. Stuck in this town for eternity, waiting for revenge, on Mason, or the Council, or someone

else for spilling my secret, for ruining my life. So then I'd have to watch, and wait, forever. *Torture*, I realise it is.

Maybe, though, I'll be able to save the next one cursed like me. Like how Rowan tried to help me, but I could try to tell them not to let their mentor find out, not to let anyone find out. Then the child could stage as a Seer, or better yet, a Sage.

And then that child would die. And I'd be left alone again. And the cycle would go on, perhaps, but *nothing*, nothing will be good after today. My old life, now, truly is over. The sun has set on it tonight.

All I can think is, *what did I do to deserve this?* The trees choose us, they say, like there's some kind of rhyme or reason behind the ability we are given. And it *does* seem to be true, too, now that I look back. Connor and I were both awakened by trees we felt we'd like. My parents both have abilities perfectly suited to their favoured work. And even as I think of other grown-ups, like my teachers, my mentor, it's as if the trees did *decide*, that they knew what to do. I have no idea what they were like as children, but it certainly seemed to work out for them, work out for all of them.

Except for me. The trees cursed me. And I can argue that it's not a curse, like I thought. And *maybe*, I'd be right. But my true curse is this loneliness. All my life, I have been alone. Surrounded by people, by friends, by family. But I have remained alone, the whole time, whether on my own or not. So maybe the trees chose me wisely. An isolating ability for an isolated boy. A boy who will now always be alone, no matter how he acts, or how much he tries.

Then, finally, my mind wanders back to the past. I look at memories, good and bad, of normal life. Of Connor, and my old friends, of school and lessons and homework, and of my old life. Each one is like a present, filling me with warmth that makes me hold each one tight and never let go. But I must, because they are only remains of reality, now nothing more than figments of my imagination. The details, the faces, are all hard to reach and obscure, and I despise it. I despise how the present leaves you with nothing but a shadow when it becomes the past, making one long for the

time to come back in full clarity. I'm begging for more, but receiving nothing. I only want to go back, because now, I feel that it is all that is important, but I can't. It's gone. Taken from my hands by the wind, blown a thousand miles away, inaccessible, behind an indestructible wall. And still, none of it describes how distant it is, or how much I want it, need it.

My eyes swell with tears, and I let them drop down my face. I welcome them. Finally, some real, substantial emotion to strike my heart. But *it's still not real*. I can go to the back of my mind and plainly see. There's nothing there at all.

## 9

*Locked.* I am outside the training centre, but not in the usual spot. Having taken an *alternative* route through town this morning, I find myself with no way to get into the building. I'll need to go around and head through the main entrance, but I don't think I can handle it. I'd rather sit in this damp alleyway all day. I can't take another day with Mason, anyway. I'm not stuck with him, am I? I realise that the Council doesn't even know that he strangled me... or even... *oh, no.*

Maybe it would just be better to stay here, but that could just as easily land me in trouble as it could benefit me. What makes the most sense is attending my sessions, appearing normal to everyone else. I know they all know or will soon. Chief Clementine explained to me that she told only a few people in important positions, except for my family. But I know that rumours spread like wildfires. I never normally found out about them until Connor told me, but the sum of the people in town would spread anything of interest with ease, and most people, like Connor, would quickly find out.

Everyone believes such things without question too. I remember hearing that some girl in our year was half-dragon, of all things, and everyone believed it until a teacher shut the rumour down. Even some adults started avoiding her and her family, and to think that it probably all started as a joke. So, no doubt, they'll all know. I can't

bear to imagine what Connor must think, but even picturing how my mere acquaintances must see me is unpleasant. And so, I took a more inconspicuous route to the centre today, through tight spaces and quiet streets, just to avoid facing the shame.

I decide now, however, that I *must* act normal, like everything is fine. That will look better than suddenly vanishing. If that doesn't convince them that I'm not cursed, I may be able to own it.

I walk around the side of the building and slip through the front whilst no one is watching. Then I slowly make my way into the building through the familiar stone hallway, walking all the way to the stairs and eventually to my mentoring room.

I pull open the door to see that my old mentor is gone, but the person I see is not unfamiliar. *Chief Clementine?* I don't know how to respond... is she my new mentor or has she come for something else?

"Hello, Elias," she greets me. Her voice is calm and welcoming, which admittedly makes me feel a little better. "It's good to see you again," she adds.

I sit down on my normal stool and wait for her to explain herself.

"I'm your new mentor," she tells me. It doesn't make any sense though. *Why would the Aspen Council member mentor a Willow trainee?* Chief Clementine does seem to be involved with the new adults, as she did hold the Awakening and all, although I assumed that was because of her ability to see into minds, so she could know and record the tree each child belonged to.

"Why?" I urge myself to utter.

"Well... we deduced that your former mentor was unfit for teaching you. Since he came to us begging us to put you in a cell."

I avert my eyes, looking at the bare table.

"Will you?" I ask her.

"I don't know," she admits. "But I'm on your side. I want to help you." I keep my eyes looking downward, unsure of how to respond to that. "We won't arrest you for your ability, just to clarify," she continues. "A few members of the Council want to, but a few is not enough. We will, of course, lock you up if you do in fact murder

someone. But I'd advise you to stay out of *any* kind of trouble, too."

I come to the realisation now, that if I were in her place, I wouldn't believe myself. How could Mason be wrong, after all. I'd think that I would murder someone. I had forgotten about it, yesterday, but it seems more important than anything else. I will be a murderer, if I am unable to stop myself, and yet here Chief Clementine is. Not afraid, or angry at me. Not everyone will be like her, I know, so I'm grateful for it. Then again, feeling frustration at myself, I question whether I should actually be locked up after all.

*Why does everything have to be so complicated?* I could save a life, because if I change so much as to *kill* someone, how will I be able to stop it? Would that change be because of my ability, my *curse*, or could I actually—

*Focus.* "I promise, Chief Clementine," I tell her. I *will* do my best to, as she advises, stay out of anything that could be considered as trouble.

"Thank you," she says, seemingly satisfied. "Consider yourself lucky that no one except for Mason outside of Council knows about his vision, or any details of *that*. Make yourself deserve that luck. Now, let's put your ability to some use, rather than anything else."

*What?* She wants me to use it? My parents were talking about banning me from using it, and now she wants me to? I don't even know what I want! When my parents *didn't* want me to use it, I wanted to, but now, it feels wrong. What if I do actually get twisted by it. Well, *Rowan didn't*.

I want to ask her if she's being serious, but words aren't forming in my mouth right now.

"Let's use the planting issues as an example, shall we? It's definitely relevant as of now," the Chief carries on, whilst I remain silent. "I don't know how it works, so unfortunately I can't help you very much, but please try to speak with one of them. Ask for advice, okay?"

"Okay," I mutter. So, I follow her command. Somehow, it comes to me instantly this time. I don't see any of them, but I feel it, and feel

their presence all around me.

“Well done!” she praises me, no doubt seeing the turquoise colour of my irises. Now, however, I do not know what to do. How can I get a spirit to come to me? And then, what if it is one of the more *sinister* ones, who would never help. The best option would be to find Rowan, but... how would I get him here? I did the other night, but I assumed that was pure luck. Maybe it wasn't though, so I try thinking of him, urging him to come to me in my mind. Nothing happens. I turn to look at Chief Clementine, awkwardly. *I don't know how to do this.*

I decide that the best thing to do is find one... physically, so I stand up and look out of the window. A man is walking along, his whole body coloured red, so I look away, pretending not to see him until he passes on. However, in his absence, another spirit comes wandering past, and this one is *blue*. It's terrifying how many of them there are, but in this case, at least, it proves to be useful. I knock on the window, hitting my fingers on the thick glass. “Hey!” I call out, with full knowledge of how stupid I would look if anyone was here other than Clementine. *Oh wait.* They all know I can speak to the dead now. I guess maybe they'd think I'd be inviting her to destroy the Haven with me or something.

She looks up at me, then looks around her as if to see who I'm talking to. She can see there's no one else around, however, so she replies. “Me?” she asks.

“Yes, you!” I reply. It seems so easy to speak to spirits, because it just feels so different and detached from the real world, real people. I smile openly at the look of astonishment that crosses her face. Her body floats upward towards me, even though she doesn't move a single body part. “You—you can see me?” she asks, her voice is high pitched and excited, but it then trails off, sounding weak but delighted. “It's been so long, I...”

“Yes,” I tell her. “I can see you!”

“Wow,” she murmurs, and it feels like a dream, and not just

because of the literal dead person I'm talking too, but because I'm being so assertive.

"Come on in!" I say, and I step back to let her morph through the wall. "Can I ask you a favour?" I request. "Just to tell me about something."

"Anything," she tells me.

"Well— first," I backtrack. "I'm Elias."

"My name is Joan," she informs me.

"Nice to meet you, Joan," I say with a smile. "The favour... have you, in your lifetime I mean... or actually, any time. Have you ever been through, or seen, a famine. Some sort of time with no crop growth, uh, or failure with planting."

She looks thoughtful, and I'd imagine her closing her eyes if she could, and a few seconds pass before she responds.

"There was something I saw, once," she tells me. Apparently my luck has suddenly changed for the better. "Corruption," she murmurs.

"What?" I ask, perplexed. I've never heard of the word before. She shrugs, her thick robe creasing slightly with the movement. "I was only a young girl, then," she recalls. "That was what they all called it, at least."

I nod, and I turn to Chief Clementine, who is intently watching me talk to a wall. "Chief," I address her, and a little worry rises up, that I'll say something wrong, with all this amassed confidence. "Do you know what corruption is?" I ask her, and she seems a little startled.

"I have a vague idea..." she responds.

"So, Joan. *We*, the living, are having a problem with this year's planting, and we'd like to know how it was solved previously."

"I see," she states. "The Birch, they *healed* the corrupt earth."

Not all Birch are able to mend people, like Healers. Some, called Revivers, have an ability to heal things like wilted plants. They often use their abilities to heal dying crops, or sometimes even trees, in the Haven. I'm sure they would have tried healing the *plants*, but from what I've heard, they aren't leaving the seed at all, so it wouldn't be

any help.

“But the earth... it’s not alive, or broken.”

“Oh, but it was broken, somehow. Cursed one way or another, or at least damaged.”

I nod, even though I’m currently trying to piece together what she means as I do so. I don’t manage to fully understand it, but it’s worth a shot. I retell the information to my new mentor, and she looks incredibly pleased with the information.

Time goes on... and it’s the end of the session a lot sooner than I expected. It seems like my days of dreading the hardships of training are over. I spent a great deal of the session talking to Joan, as she was so delighted to speak to a living human, although I had to cut it somewhat short because I didn’t want to feel I was wasting a member of the Council’s time. There was small but nagging part of my mind reminding me of her presence every second of the conversation, so I made sure it sounded useful. Clementine was watching me carefully the whole time, and although she didn’t appear to mind, I thought it was best to bring things to a close. I promised Joan that I would speak to her again, and bid her farewell on her departure. After that, I discussed the information I had gathered in more detail with Chief Clementine. It just felt natural to talk to her after my lively conversation with the spirit in front of her. That being said, I never forgot that it was a member of the Council that I was speaking too, and even now, I make sure I maintain a certain level of respect as I leave.

“Thank you, madam,” I say courteously as I open the door to leave, returning home. I feel a rush and a kind of urgency as I bound down the stairs. I feel as if I need to tell everyone about what I found out, or at least my family, so I quickly make my way to the door, dodging others in the corridor until I reach the front door. It’s only when I hear the muttered word “Willowbane” that I am brought to my senses, and it drags me into reality, suddenly aware of everyone around me.

As I step out of the door, I feel every eye on me, like a heavy weight,

a burden thrown upon me. *Why? How could I have been so stupid?* Again, I feel I become distracted, and let myself completely forget about what's right in front of my face. The watching, the whispering, making me want to disappear. I can't hear what they're saying, only their voices, their hive mind of whispers, spreading rumours, indenting them into each and every person's mind.

I want my blissful unawareness back, my mental goal, charging forward with no concern for what's around me, but *it* has disappeared, and no matter how hard I try, I can't get it back.

I can't run; *no*, that would make a scene. I need to keep going slowly, like a soldier, ignoring the stares as if they don't matter, as if they don't bother me. But they *do*. As if being right there, as the centre of attention, isn't bad enough, I know they think there's something wrong with me, and I can't imagine how this could be any worse.

I feel like I'm going to be sick, when I see *her*. In the midst of all these judging looks, cruel whispers, and so much hatred, disgust and fear, I see her, Dawn, and it's so abrupt and odd that I question whether I'm imagining it.

She *smiles*, a little sadly, with that kind of look of pity for someone else's misfortune, except this one is without the patronising twist. It *simply* expresses "I'm sorry", on others' behalf, in a way that wishes me well, hopes I'm okay, out of sheer kindness and goodwill and a universal, undiscriminating care. Her lips are soft, the colour of roses, but it's her eyes that catch my attention. An emerald green, lit up with a warm joy, a changing that comes from no ability, no tree, but from deep within the soul, emerging together with the genuine smile.

And then it's gone. She looks away and, astonishingly, begins to physically transform. Her face is stretched out to become wider, and her whole body shrinks until she lands down on the ground, catching herself with her hands, which become delicate paws on top of slender legs. As all of this happens, the hair on her head begins to shrink, and it turns a lighter shade of orange, and that colour of hair,

rather *fur*, grows onto her entire body, and before I know it, she's no longer a human, not on the outside, anyway. She's a fox, and her clothes, her satchel, and her smile are no more. The whole transformation, which, had I somehow imagined before, I would have guessed to be somewhat disturbing, was instead elegant.

She stands before me with pointed black ears, a soft, white undercoat, and a bushy, black speckled tail for a split second before she slinks off, making an escape that I wish I could. But the effect doesn't leave.

I walk home, and just for this one brief time, I don't care about the others. I don't care about what they think, because Dawn's opinion is the only one that matters. And she knew about my curse, because her smile was purposeful and sympathetic. But she didn't care, because she knew I wasn't broken. She *knew* what she believed. And I know, too.

## 10

This time around, the weekend doesn't seem so appealing. There's no doubt in my mind that Connor has already heard about the *news*, and I don't want to lose my best friend, at least not in front of my face. I'd rather not speak to him or see him in case he is afraid of me like everyone else is.

So I sit in bed, picking up old books from my shelves and reading them, distracting myself from the real world. My parents don't come up to distract me either, so I'm left in peace, blocking out anything and everything undesirable in my life.

I suppose the week went by relatively quickly, after Tuesday, since training is no longer so hard.

I did talk to Joan again, as well as a few *other* spirits, but they were not as pleasant. One was purple, which I presume shows that a spirit is in between good and evil, but that spirit certainly wasn't kind, with an obnoxious attitude too. We were trying to get more methods for helping the planting, but we've not got any further than we did on the first day with Joan, so it's been rather ineffectual.

I've got myself stuck in a habit of going to training, then returning to my room for the remainder of the day. Penny has been bringing me food, snacks and such things, placing them by my bedroom door like I'm ill or something, and maybe I am. I appreciate what she's

doing for me, though, and although I haven't said a thing to her either, I'm grateful to have her.

Other than all of the rumours and glances, it's been a decent week, primarily due to how I've been able to pretend that nothing but my simple routine exists. And so, since my mentoring has come to a temporary halt for the weekend, the only thing I feel I can do is continue to stay in my room. I miss talking to people, I suppose, but between my mentor and all the spirits, it's just about enough to keep me going. It has been, anyway, but maybe that'll change now I have two full days to burn by myself.

I scour my shelves for an interesting book to read when I'm surprised by an orb of light that passes through my bedroom wall. For a second, I think it's a spirit, having become so used to them, but no, it's golden in colour and small and round. A wisp. *Connor?*

The wisp approaches me, confidently, and I hear his voice fill the room. "Where are you?" Could he mean...? It takes a second for me to register my stupidity. Or maybe, the rumours haven't spread to the border yet, but I'm willing to risk that particular scenario proving to be true. I gather myself and plan to make the same escape that I did last week, but I decide against it. I'll just walk out, casually, as it only seems natural for me to see Connor, especially after I did last week.

I eventually make my way downstairs, and leave the house through the door. I audibly sigh as I step out into the fresh air. *Just two journeys*, I tell myself. *To see your friend*. And I begin to make my way to the Mound, like I have done so countless times. But now, I must face the whispers in the dark, the quick glances and the hard stares. And again and again, the murmuring of the word "Willowbane".

\* \* \*

He's there. Sitting on the top of the Mound, he's there. I'm unsure of whether it's surprising or predictable, but I don't really care. It's whether he's *heard* or not that matters. Because if he's oblivious, this

*could* be the last time we have together, despite what I thought last week, and it'd be the true sunset, the true end.

"Connor," I say, because he can't see me from my place behind him. He turns his head around sharply.

"You're really testing my patience!" he reprimands me, but his tone isn't serious, and there's a small smile on his face. "Sleeping again?" he suggests with a laugh.

"Not exactly," I admit as I sit down on the grass next to him.

"Right," he says, stretching out the word, but he doesn't push me any further than that. What he does say, however, makes me flinch.

"How's my little cursed friend doing?" he asks me, and I probably should be angry, but the way that he says it sounds so harmless and funny that it doesn't produce even the slightest irritation in me. I don't laugh, either, though, because I'm too shocked, and baffled at his casual mention of it.

"Sorry," he blurts out. An expression of concern then crosses his face. "...I guess that wasn't the nicest of me. I only meant it as a—"

"No! Well, it's fine. Seriously."

"Sure? You looked a little... dazed," he tells me.

"I wasn't sure you knew... and if you did, I thought you might... oh, never mind."

"You thought *I* would abandon you, huh? For someone so smart, you really can be stupid."

His mission today seems to be leaving me as dazed as possible, because I don't know how to respond to that. I try to decide in my head whether it was a compliment or an insult. Both, probably. I just nod.

"Remember, Elias," he says. "You can't lose me. Whatever what you do, you're stuck with me."

He makes it sound like a threat, which makes it hard not to laugh. Then his tone softens, and he whispers.

"I'll always be your friend."

And I smile, but I don't feel happy, as I hardly ever do.

Something just doesn't feel *right*.

## 11

I hold Penny's hand as we walk into the Council building. I hate that the first thought that enters my mind is that someone will see us, making me look more human. It's like I can never escape considering every single minor detail, thinking about how people will view it. It infuriates me.

She is a little scared about coming here, but me? It doesn't seem like much of a major event after running here by myself and pleading for mercy. We file into one of the rows of seats near the back, followed by our parents. We're just in time because in front of us is a sea of people, almost everyone in the town. An array of hair colours and skin tones makes up the crowd, and there's a variety of fabric colours seen on people's tunics too, dyed with all kinds of pigments to create a rainbow of hues. And yet, this isn't even everyone. By the time the whole town is assembled, the room will be brimming with people, sitting and standing in every corner of the room. There will also be some people from outlying towns, but they will each have their own separate meetings to be reported back to the Council at the Haven's centre.

Looking around me, I can see a few familiar faces, but no Connor. If he's already gone back to the border, they'll hold a meeting there, though at least half of the guards will have to stay on patrol to keep

us all safe. I picture him in one of the buildings in a border camp. It'll definitely be in a room much smaller than this, with a smaller crowd. Ironically, I would probably prefer to be where he is now, especially now that more people have come in, tightening the spaces between everyone.

Today, we have a town meeting. They're only called when there is something of utmost importance to discuss, when the Council alone cannot solve a problem. Everyone is called upon to help. Children, elderly people, even every town and village, although not physically. When I heard about it on Saturday morning, I couldn't have been more worried. Thankfully however, *no*, Mason told me that it's being held to discuss the land's infertility, and the Haven's famine, I presume.

It means things are getting out of hand, which is, of course, a major reason to worry, but Joan's advice acts as a comfort to me. That land was, black, and dry and scorched. *I believe it was cursed, or corrupted.* So surely what she spoke of will work? The only problem is letting everyone else figure it out themselves. Only Chief Clementine and I know, and I cannot tell them. Still, how couldn't others have noticed the colour of the infertile soil?

Time goes on, tediously, until I have difficulty breathing in between all of the people who have arrived in the hall. Some of them are standing in front of us, in between the rows of seats. We have little hope of seeing without standing up now, but I'd rather remain down here. It's more comfortable, I guess.

Once the Council members start speaking, people are getting up and craning their necks to hear what is going on, but I stay put, and I can hear the booming voices perfectly well as I am.

"People of the town," one of them greets us, and I think it is Chief Clementine, my new mentor. "I assume that word has spread about the purpose of our gathering, but we shall repeat our point of discussion. Chief Augustus, may you?"

Another voice takes over from the first one, explaining in detail the gravity of the situation. "The crops are not growing. We have had

seeds planted for some time now with no results. Wheat and barley, most of our crops, should have emerged from the soil by now, and they would have on a normal year. The soil is infertile; it has been seen to be soot black. Even trees and bushes are producing nothing. No fruit or berries have begun to grow. If things don't get better soon, the entire year will be delayed... and we will eventually run out of food."

The Council member's words are clear, making my questions about this disaster evaporate. Yet, they are concise, perhaps too much so, causing the room to be filled with shock and a fresh, acute horror. I hear murmurs of discontent and even some gasps. I realise that some people may not have even known about these happenings, at least not in all their severity. Having a farmer as a parent seems useful for staying updated in this situation. They *must* be surprised because, after a few seconds, a trembling sob comes from one or two people around me.

Even with all of this, the greatest fear is unspoken. It sweeps over us and remains there, like a plague, spreading throughout every part of us before we have any chance to stop it.

"Does anyone have any suggestions for our course of action?" one of them asks us all, and it takes a few moments for anyone to speak.

"Give us the bare minimum amount of food needed for survival!" a townspeople shouts. "It will take as long as it takes, and we need to prepare!"

"We will take that into consideration," someone on the Council states. Another few moments pass before *everyone* suddenly bursts out into a fully-fledged panic, following the lead of a few individuals as a sign that it is allowed. It is not.

"Hush!" a man on the Council shouts. "Please maintain order! We must have a civilised discussion!"

Only just thinking about it, I stand up awkwardly behind someone else and strain my body to be able to get a view of the people at the front. There are three of them, draped in the usual white, unblemished cloth. I remember what my mother said this morning,

that the Council never holds a meeting all together. It seems like I was lucky to be able to see eight out of nine of them all at once.

“Can’t we just fertilise the soil?” someone, clearly not a farmer, asks.

“Tried,” is all that the Council has to say. The discussion continues on exactly like this, with possible ideas, ideas that have already been tried, and momentary outbreaks of panic. That is, until, Chief Clementine, my *mentor*, speaks out. “I received a suggestion from someone, which I believe is worth bringing up.”

There is a pause. “There is reason to believe that the land has been corrupted. Chief Augustus mentioned how it looked black.”

I feel a little relieved that she is sharing this vital information, and I have trouble waiting for her to go on. “We can utilise Birch’s power to regenerate the land, if we get enough people to put enough effort into it.”

The crowd seems thoughtful at first and then ecstatic about this idea. Some people even clap, applauding it. However, the crowd throws around a few questions like arrows directed at my skull.

“Who gave you this suggestion?” someone asks, and it sounds only like a mere murmur from where I am. *Please don’t tell them, Clementine*, I think, wishing I was an Aspen for this situation.

“Joan,” she states, and I’m relieved from my tension. But this only makes the crowd confused, and she has to explain.

“Joan is not with us, not any more,” Chief Clementine explains, and the majority of people are now unsettled whilst I, *solitarily*, cower my head.

“May I correct myself? It was Joan’s idea; however, I did not receive it from her. Elias gave me this suggestion on her behalf.”

Then I hear people begin to jeer at it and at *me*, despite being in favour of this plan mere moments ago.

Strangely, this experience feels familiar, although not with me as the target, but with someone smaller, wilder. For a split second, it’s not difficult to imagine myself with gleaming yellow eyes, and...

*Deep, black fur.*

## 12

All eyes are on me, and it's like I can feel every single one. My face is red with heat but my mind is detached from my more emotional body. I feel no embarrassment, just a shallow annoyance at Chief Clementine. I still want the eyes to look away, though, and they do, sooner than I expected.

I hear the door of the room swing open, and I hear panting. This person is presumably fatigued from sprinting. They *wouldn't be the only one to run to the Council building*. I try to catch a glimpse of them through the shroud of people to my side, and I just about see a certain kind of tunic, this one a deep crimson. Guard uniform.

"Theo," one of the Council members addresses this person.

"Chief Hortencia," the man responds.

"Has our Head of the Defence Force come to join our meeting, or to disrupt us for another reason?" the Council member asks.

A lot of people chuckle, but it dies down once they hear what Theo has to say. "I have some serious news to bring you," he explains quickly.

"Go on," Hortencia says, a hint of worry showing in her voice.

"One of the guards in training has gone missing."

The crowd reacts with shock, even more of it than when the purpose of this meeting was announced. "We can't find them," Theo

adds. “We’ve searched everywhere, too.”

“Who has gone missing?” Chief Clementine asks. “Name?”

“His name... is Connor,” he replies, and my world falls apart.

Connor is missing. Of course he would go missing, though. He probably got distracted by something and went off, or discovered something, got lost... there are a multitude of possible explanations. But do I really believe that Connor would be so irresponsible as to do one of those things? Maybe when he was younger, but I can’t underestimate him enough to think that he would now. Well, he could have got lost, but alone? He would rarely even leave a building without someone to accompany him, so no, his getting lost would make no sense. Since it is *just* him missing, according to Theo. But what else...

There’s a deep, sinking feeling inside me. Because I know there is a very real chance that something terrible has happened. *He could be alive and well or flat out dead right now*, and I have no way of knowing which he is. Logically, he could be either. But surely it is more probable that he is alive, given the safe place that our home is.

“How long has he been missing?” Chief Augustus asks. “There may be no reason for alarm,” he adds, more to the audience, which is riddled with commotion.

“A day and a half?” he guesses.

“Right,” Augustus says, showing concern now. “Gone all night?”

“Yes, Chief Augustus.”

“What do you believe is the cause of this?” Chief Hortencia takes over.

“I- I don’t *know*, ma’am. He was with us one second, gone the next. His friend, Addison, saw him last, I think. Or was it his s—”

I’m hit with a stab of pain when I hear this outlandish name referred to as *his* friend. Betrayal, I decide, is what this is.

Theo is interrupted by the Chief. I can understand that there isn’t time for pointless words.

“Let us have a moment to think,” she requests. I still cannot see

them, and now I don't hear a word. I know what they are doing, though. Speaking with each other, deciding what to do. Maybe they'll decide to hold a new meeting about this, I joke to myself, wryly.

Now, though, I feel eyes on me, so I turn to my right. Penny's. I can tell she is worried, from her furrowed brow, downturned mouth, and wide eyes. A stray hair, coloured golden blonde, hangs down over her contorted red face, and she brushes it out of the way before putting her hand in mine.

"It's okay," I reassure her. "People go missing often." I know it's true. I've had my fair share of getting lost in town, so I can't imagine trying to traverse a place like the border.

"Not for this long," she whines softly.

"Well, you know how Connor is," I reply, adding a touch of humour to her face. "He'll turn up."

I wrap my arm around her, and she comes in close so I can see her flickering eyelids closing over her pale blue eyes. My mother smiles softly to me, now that she can see me from under Penny, and I return one, reaffirming my decision to disregard what transpired between us two and our father.

By comforting my sister, I've comforted myself too. *Connor may be lost somewhere, but I'm going to find him.*

\* \* \*

"Attention, people of the town and beyond, we have made a decision on the action to take," Chief Augustus declares. "To prevent anyone else from going *missing*, we have decided to initiate a full lockdown starting now. Please make your way to your homes and stay there until further notice. Please welcome those who are visiting the town into your homes. They will be escorted to their homes in the morning."

Immediately, hordes of people burst out of their rows in the hall, flowing through the middle of the room like a rapid, running river.

My family and I can't even get out, not between the shoves and pushes, skipping and cutting, charging and running. Shouts break out soon enough, because apparently there needs to be a debate about who gets out first.

"In an orderly manner!" two Council members shout in unison, causing everyone to *slightly* calm down, and allowing us to gradually make our way out, into the forceful current. I hate the tightness of the crowd, but I am able to compose myself and maintain some level of tranquillity until I can breathe as I step out of the building.

The town is shrouded in darkness this Sunday night, leaving only shapes in place of buildings. Small traces of light shine like stars, coming from inside windows, high and low, and from lanterns hoisted above the street by thick poles. I follow my family through the streets, and although I don't see anyone looking at me, I can feel their eyes on me, probably because of the consistency of finding them on me once I step outside of a door.

I hear voices too, and they're louder than ever, hammering into my ears. "Willowbane", "*willowbane*", "willowbane", again and again and again. They all think I've cursed the Haven, made it corrupt, and they're not afraid to say so. It just becomes the default, repeated into normality, and hearing this word no longer evokes any emotion within me. It almost makes me want to join along, *Willowbane, Willowbane*, a malicious chant which has lost all meaning to me. So it almost seems odd when it is directed at me, no longer in a whisper but a shout.

"You—! *Willowbane* scum!" a man says, stumbling in front of me. "Tell us what you did to him," he demands. I don't speak. "Leave him alone!" Penny shouts at him, and I feel a sense of joy, surprise and pride at her reaction.

"Just tell us what you did to him!" the man snarls. A few other people join in, giving shouts of approval like a pack of dogs.

"Nothing," I mutter under my breath, and I try to keep walking. My parents have stopped and turned around, but they only stand there, dumbfounded. I walk around them and go past them, and I

don't know where I'm going or what I'm doing. Then the man steps in front of me again, and now his bald head and face are illuminated by a hanging lantern. I recognise him, and I don't like it. Connor's *father*.

“You tell me where he is, or I *will* kill you, and I will not *rest* until —”

And then I run.

I make a loop, practically kicking the ground to push myself forward, momentarily being propelled into the air. I'm running back, back towards the Council building. But most importantly, away, away from my friend's father, away from the blame and hatred. *Away*.

I'm moving on and on, through the pitch-black darkness, and I feel a jolt of fear as it reminds me of Mason's words. His mention of darkness, *my murder*, in the darkness. Could I kill someone, now? No. *I wouldn't*, I tell myself, and I know it to be true. I theorised that my power could drive me insane, and maybe then I would do such a thing, but now? It wouldn't make any sense.

I then panic, after realising... Connor! The Council will think I murdered him, and although no one else knows about the vision, what else are they supposed to expect? A cursed person *and* a missing person, both so close together. They'll tell *everyone*, and suddenly, I'll become the culprit of killing my friend. I want to run, and hide, or escape this place entirely, yet...

Still, my more recent mentor's words take effect on me now. I need to stay out of any kind of trouble, so the best thing to do is go directly to them.

I sprint forward through the dark, and I find the Council building, now with a glowing courtyard, lit up by the flames on all sides.

I look behind my shoulder to see a vague glimpse of a figure coming closer, so I head inside the building easily, with the door still unlocked, and I close it behind me, panting and exhausted. I collapse into a heap on the floor, and my body feels cold and numb.

I hear the faded voices of the Council from the other room, and I

hear my name, which prompts me to stand up and walk towards the door. *They won't see me, after all.*

I place my ear up against a wall, and I can hear them clearly now.

“...we can't.”

“You know there's a very large possibility, Clementine, that it *was* him who made the boy—”

“Have you seen him?” she asks. “The missing boy is Elias' friend!” There's silence for a moment, which gives me time to lament over what they're saying. My suspicions were true. Prison for life, I'm sure.

“The curse could be affecting him, taking hold of him! Don't you agree that no one else needs to die?” There is silence again. Until the other Council member speaks.

“I'm with Augustus,” Chief Hortencia states. “We exile him.”

## 13

The knocking on the door wakes me up. The sound is loud and rapid, hitting the surface of the door to create a violent sound which ripples throughout our home. I hide under my covers like a coward, pretending the situation isn't real.

I ran back alone last night. My family was standing outside in the dark, awaiting my postponed arrival. Seeing them waiting in the cold made me regret the events that occurred that night, but I don't know whether I'd do things any differently if I had the chance. Because since I heard the Council's *discussion*, I know who is at the door, and I know what they want.

The "it's for you, Elias," is expected, but answering that call is like receiving my ticket to the *outside*. And ergo to the wasteland and to my death.

I don't move. I stay still and wait. I am repeatedly called. "Elias!" I ignore the shouts and pleas. Maybe if I stay still long enough, the Council will go away. But they are the leaders, and they do what they like, so when I hear the next cry from my parents, I am not surprised, only panicked.

"They're coming inside!" my mother informs me. I jump out of bed, and without any better ideas, I grab my wooden chair and shove it against the door, in the same way that a child does to try to stop

anyone from entering. I stand on top of the chair, my knees bent, and I push against the door in an attempt to stop anyone from pushing it open. Meanwhile, I calculate my next move, scanning the room behind me for something, anything, that I can do to avoid my exile.

Then I feel pressure on the door, and I push on it harder. It becomes ajar, so I put my legs down, realising this isn't working. They slide to each side of the chair, and I place one leg behind it to push it back in place. All my weight is on the door, and it's a fight of strength between me and the outsider.

"Open it!" an unfamiliar man shouts.

"Elias," Chief Clementine tries to plead with me.

"No!" I grunt. A drop of sweat runs down my forehead, a result of the effort I'm putting into my defence.

"This is the Council!" the man screams. "You will open this door, or—"

"Chief Tiberius, please let me speak," Clementine requests. I hear the other Council member, Tiberius, retreat from the door and shuffle around Chief Clementine, so I know that now is my chance to do something. I run towards a window on the near side of my room next to the chair, away from my bed and bookshelves, and I try to open it while my so-called mentor speaks.

"I understand that you are afraid, and believe me, we don't want to, and aren't going to hurt you. We just need you to..."

I run to my bed and leap on top of it, the soft mattress beneath my bare feet. Reaching up, I find a small metal key with my fingers, and I grasp it, jumping down off my bed to continue with my plan. I also scoop my satchel up, realising it could come in handy.

"...cooperate, okay?"

I need a way to buy more time, so I reply. "Fine. But please tell me what you're going to do."

"Alright, Elias."

I put the small object into the tiny keyhole in my window and turn it. I am able to pull the two panels apart, leaving a big enough gap to slide through. But then, I hesitate, even though everything is going

according to my hastily formed plan. Clementine's voice continues in the background, but I'm too absorbed to pay any attention. I feel a little regret about what I'm about to do. I *should* stay here and follow up with my punishment or find a logical, lawful way out of the exile being inflicted upon me.

But I'm tired of submitting myself to authority and the wills of other people. I'm tired of gritting my teeth and withstanding whatever comes my way because I don't do anything else. I'm tired of counting on luck, and dreaming, hoping, that everything will be okay. And as the door to my room opens up, and I am almost out of time, I realise that I am tired of thinking, and debating, and *waiting*.

So I take action. I wedge my body, legs first, into the small hole in the wall, and I push myself through, enduring the pain of my body scraping against the window's frame. For a little while, most of my body is outside in the cool morning air, dangling from the building, with only my head and upper torso left inside. I push myself out, though, in the end stretching my arms out up above my head as if I'm diving, and wiggle through as most of my body already uncomfortably hangs towards the ground. Eventually, I break free and my body plummets down from the second floor of the building, and although I don't land on two feet, I catch myself, after rotating wildly in the air. I only receive grazed palms and stinging feet from the perilous endeavour. And then, without a second thought, I pick myself up, and I run.

*I escape!*

\* \* \*

The empty fields below. The sun, the sky, the clouds above my head. I don't know where I am, but I am safe, bathing in the sun's growing warmth, alone and free. It's here where I really know I don't want to leave my home, the Haven, and it has nothing to do with shame, or people, or the creatures outside. It's just this place in itself. Serene and beautiful.

I don't know how long I stay here. Staring up at the sky, watching time pass by. After jumping through the window, I was able to lose them, thanks to my decent head start... I know I can't stay here for very long, though, because they'll be looking for me, even tracking me down. I'll have to move again, but I have been doing so for hours, at least. I need a rest.

Staring up at the sky, I can only wonder what I can possibly do next. I *need* to find Connor. I need to clear my name and make people see me normally. And I need to know that my friend is safe. *What can I do*, though? It seems impossible for me to help, to do anything at all. I could send him a wisp. But Theo would have already done that, and if not, others are certainly going to try to find the Haven's missing boy. If only I could find him. If only I had Connor by my side, helping me through this, helping me find him. But Connor is the one who is missing, and I am useless without him in this situation. I wish I had someone else to help me, but who would even dare speak to me?

I try to forget about that. I need to find him on my own, and *then* I can worry about the others. If he were here, how would he handle this situation?

He'd solve the problem logically. He'd go to the last place he was seen and search from there. Simple, so far. The problem is, how can I get to the border? I can't walk, that's for sure. It's much too far to get there on foot, and I need to be as quick as possible, whatever I do. Every option seems impossible. I can't just turn up and get a ride like Connor can, as a trainee guard. Like Connor *could*.

I give up eventually and lie back down in the barren field. I am resting underneath a large tree, outside a small thicket in the corner of this small area. I know that even if I can't figure out what to do yet, I need to move or properly hide. However, I just lie here in my exhaustion, staying here for as long as possible.

Then I hear footsteps. In an instant, I'm on my feet and my eyes dart around, desperate to find somewhere to hide. But nowhere seems suitable, and I can't climb trees. I run a little, heading towards a row of bushes separating the fields. The footsteps are getting

louder, and although it's far from inconspicuous or ideal, I lie down and hide myself inside the bush. The branches scratch my skin, and it's now that I regret leaving home in nothing but thin linen undergarments. My thin, blue nightshirt and shorts are nothing against the sharp sticks and twigs that scrape at me, and although my skin is irritated more, I won't be surprised if my clothes are torn once I remove myself from this mess. My satchel, too, is getting in the way, making this attempt at hiding even more infuriating. The person approaching walks loudly, each footstep carelessly crushing sticks or crashing onto the solid ground. I assume it's a farmer, because the odds that it is someone on the Council are exceedingly low.

However, I will surely be reported, no matter who it is.

"Elias," a female voice calls, and I'm shocked. It could be a farmer, but the voice is too high-pitched, young, and... a little familiar? For a second, remembering her smile before, I hope that the girl is Dawn, but by the next time she speaks, I know that it's not her. The voice *is* familiar, but it's someone else's.

"Elias!" she calls out again. A few seconds pass. "It's Edith."

I decide she's trustworthy enough, so I slip out of the overgrowth and stand up. There are gaping holes in the fabric. "Oh!" she exclaims. "There you are."

I turn around to see her. Although she's Connor's sister, I barely speak to her, so much so that the thing I think of when I see her is what I told Connor to tell her. To go to Trail's End, or something, whatever it was the spirit told me.

I don't understand what she's doing here or how she's found me. I stay silent, waiting for anything to happen that makes more sense than this.

The girl that I am looking at has dark brown hair, darker than Connor's, and it is arranged behind her head, flowing down her back. Her eyes, too, are dark and brown, but they have a certain unsteadiness and *coldness*, which my friend's eyes do not possess. Maybe it's her tunic, though, light blue and highlighting her eyes'

coldness. She surveys me, carefully, moving her pupils up and down before facing mine. I notice, as well, that she is taller than me, as she looks down into my eyes.

“We need to find him,” she tells me. I decide not to question her stance on *me*, because making her question my loyalty to her brother, or my stability entirely, doesn’t seem like a great idea.

“I... know,” I reply. “I know.”

Hopefully, she, unlike I, has thought of any way we can *actually* find Connor, rather than just setting her mind on the idea of it.

“I know how we can go look for him,” she tells me, answering my question straight away. I wait, staring in anticipation of her idea. She doesn’t tell me anything, but an eager smile appears on her face. “Just follow me.”

## 14

I'm up in an instant, doing as I'm told. I begin to follow Edith, but looking down at myself, I'm not sure how much longer I will be able to keep walking. I ignored the variety of sharp and dull pains inflicted on my bare feet as I ran here, but now my attire is causing more problems, as it is literally falling apart.

"Edith?" I ask her, swallowing deeply. She spins around and looks at me, realising.

"Don't worry," she says. She comes closer and pulls something out of her satchel, which seems bulkier than the usual kind and also stuffed to the brim like Connor's was. Maybe it runs in the family.

She takes out two pieces of clothing, neatly wrapped together like a parcel, and hands them to me.

"How did you know—" I begin to ask.

"I'll go ahead, and you can get changed."

I let out a small sigh as she walks away, leaving me confused. Again. I slip back amongst the trees, and change into the baggy grey tunic and trousers that she provided me with, finding the belt between the two.

Someone is certainly organised, which makes me question, *what does she need me for?* Especially since at least half of the town thinks I killed him, and they don't even know that I've been predicted to

murder someone apparently. I feel I am a liability, since she's already had to come to my aid by providing me with clothes. I decide, again, to go along with it, not questioning her about whatever she is thinking, but as I run after her, I can't help trying privately to figure it out.

I follow her silently through many trailing paths, for who knows how long, and I realise with a jolt of fear that she's taking me back to town. I wonder if she could be turning me in, and in that case, oh, how stupid I have been. But she doesn't go any further than the outskirts, although I still pull my hood up as a precaution.

We enter a busy area on the edge of town, bustling with activity, although it lacks buildings. A wide track stretches out into the distance, weaving its way in between the endless farmland, which is *still* desolate and empty. No crops or snow.

There are several wooden carts and large, groaning animals called horses. They are elegant, with tawny-coloured coats and long, flowing manes, but up close, especially, they seem intimidating because of their large, bulging muscles and hooves as hard as iron. They make strange noises, too, much louder than the murmurs and footsteps of people.

I keep my head down as much as I can, so I see very little, but I follow Edith, matching her silent footsteps as we sneak around a cart full of something. I understand what she's thinking now. She wants us to get inside a cart full of food to get to the border. *Risky. But possibly ingenious.*

Then, still crouched behind a cart with my hood obscuring my face, I hear a voice and I turn to Edith in desperation.

"I need to get to the border," this person says, and a tiny flash of white from above the food cart only confirms what I thought. Someone on the Council. Maybe not one of the ones I've recently come to know, but the tone, the demanding statement, makes it all too clear.

I pause stiffly in place for a few long seconds, with my view being the large, wooden wheel of the vehicle in front of me. Next, Edith

suddenly clambers up her wheel, and in an instant, she's gone, hidden beneath the unordered pile of rations.

I follow her as fast as I can, but I'm worried I'll mistime it, and someone will spot me as I dump myself into the pile and try to conceal myself within it. No one *seems* to have noticed, but with the number of people here... I just hope that this cart is leaving soon. For now, I stay as still as possible, restricting each breath to nothing more than a muffled inhale and exhale. I can hear myself breathing though, and it feels so loud, within the constraints of the pile above me.

It's bread, amongst many other things, mostly wrapped together to form large clumps, ready for transport, straight from storage. I close my eyes, letting the moment pass by, carrying the stress with it.

We start moving. *It's working!* I almost find it hard not to exclaim my joy and excitement at it all. The ridiculous plan is working, and I'm headed to the border.

\* \* \*

Unsurprisingly, it isn't long until my happiness about the plan came to an end. The journey to the border is long, excruciatingly long, and the tracks we cover feel tremendously bumpy, leaving us shaking around in the cart like the rest of the supplies.

As we reach our journey's end, and as if the whole thing wasn't *her* idea, Edith begins panicking, shaking, and I can do nothing. I can't even try and urge her to be quiet, in the presence of the operator, so we're lucky we aren't noticed, her sounds probably stifled underneath the heaps of food.

Then again, I think I was actually slipping into sleep, despite the discomfort, so being woken by her panic may have saved us, because when the food is removed, we could've been found, fast asleep, ready to be sent straight to the authorities. I don't know how to handle the situation awake, either, though, and as the removal of food from the vehicle begins, I am stunned. They're going to see us, as soon as they

take a few more packages of food out, and they're not showing any signs of going away. I scramble around, to find Edith, and I find a shoulder behind a large chunk of bread. I tap her, and she whispers something that I can't hear, all the while the food continued to be unloaded and I have no way of knowing how close I am to being found.

Then, out of nowhere, the supplies seem to explode, and I feel some land on me, as if sprinkled over my body. Then, I can see plain wood, half of the cart empty. *Edith is gone!*

"Hey!" someone shouts in a gruff, angry voice, and I can hear two sets of footsteps, one is Edith escaping, and the other is the man running after her. I wasn't at all ready for this... *insanity*, although I can presume that that is what she whispered to me. I can escape easily now, though, with that person going after Edith. It makes me feel a little guilty.

I pop my head out of the pile, the way one would when emerging from water, and I see *someone*. Clearly, not everyone went after her.

There's a woman, and her face is indescribably shocked, as if she just witnessed a bizarre yet wonderful miracle. Her jaw physically drops, leaving her mouth gaping open, her eyes wide, and even a trace of humour, as well as incredulousness, on her frozen face.

"Hi," I greet her, and I can't believe what I'm doing. *No consequences. There's no possible way that people can think I'm even worse than they already do.*

I look up to the sky and see dark grey clouds covering the pale blue sky. "Nice weather today," I remark, and then swing my body over the side of the cart, sprinting in the direction Edith went, chasing after the man chasing her, forming a chain. Wind brushes against my face as I run easily across the flat terrain, and I smile. The reason for this reaction is beyond my understanding.

I become exhausted from the running, but the man seems to be slowing down, giving up. With a quick look behind me, rotating my neck to the side, I can see that the other woman is nowhere to be seen, and guess she is probably still as motionless as a statue.

I end up going past the man, who's now slowed to a walk, and catch up with Edith. We continue on until we finally collapse in a laughing heap in the middle of a random field, our bodies strewn on the ground, our hearts still pumping rapidly, the rush of the escape and the chase still surging through us.

"That was insane," she lets out. "I- I can't believe I did that!"

I smile back at her, making an effort to put my feelings of detachment aside. This is Connor's sister, after all, so I try hard to engage with her.

"Yeah," I say. "I can't believe I did either." This is my *second* escape of the day, but I'm telling the absolute truth. I cannot believe that I did something so drastic, again! It's thrilling. I think she's about to respond when she looks past me, behind me.

"What?" I ask her.

"Someone's there," she tells me. "Behind you."

Before I turn around, I hear a yell. "*Elias!*" I would be concerned, but the voice is young. I almost hope it's Connor, but no, it definitely belongs to someone female, a girl.

When I turn around, all I see is a blazing streak of reddish orange, charging towards me. The colour, of course, is no spell, but hair, and the person that approaches us is Dawn, her face glowing in the sunlight. She looks like she's on fire, except for her tunic, which is a dark green.

Her feet jolt to a stop, suddenly, before us, and I notice someone else behind her, a boy.

"Hello!" Edith greets them, and I suddenly feel a strange sense of confusion and even annoyance at her, or maybe, at them? It hits me, and it seems obvious. What are they doing here, particularly at the same time we are? I knew that Dawn didn't seem to mind my curse, but this feels a step too far, too outlandish an occurrence. It also occurs to me that I never told Dawn my name, but of course she knows it now, after my recent surge in notoriety.

I look back at Edith, and she doesn't seem bothered, so I try to make her be, giving her a look. She shrugs, either not understanding

me or not seeing the problem.

“What’re you two doing here?” Edith asks, and she makes it sound curious, even polite.

“What do you think?” Dawn asks. “We’ve come to find Connor!”

## 15

The sun setting over the land is only a reminder of how long we've been searching. We skipped over the actual camp because it seemed pointless to look there, so we've been trudging around in the fields all day, probably gaining undesirable attention, and finding nothing. We've all begun to run out of patience. Edith especially, it seems, because she is leading us straight in one direction, probably out of frustration because she has no idea where we're going.

"Edith?" the boy, who I have discovered is named Oliver, asks. He has dark, silky black hair cut short—almost too short—hardly hiding a single patch of his forehead. His eyes are dark too, a deep brown.

"Yes, Olly?" Edith replies.

"Don't call me that," he snaps, which I can tell wasn't what he intended to say.

"Sorry. I meant, yes, Oliver. What is it?" she asks.

"Do you know where we're going?" he asks. "Like I've been trying to explain, it'd be easier if we searched systematically, rather than... walking in a straight line."

"Shut up," she demands, which surprises me. She seemed so calm and amiable only a moment ago. "Searching *systematically* doesn't even make sense! What system?"

The boy goes silent, and I consider giving him a condoling look.

No. I should be siding with Edith, not this stranger.

“Why are you even here?” Edith asks him. Maybe she’s realised what I’ve been thinking, which would explain her sudden hostility.

“Dawn wanted help finding the missing boy,” he explains. “But didn’t you suggest that we join up?”

She did. To my dismay, Edith proposed that we look for Connor as a team, and although I didn’t like the idea immediately, having these two with us has probably made things less boring. That being said, we have been silent for *most* of the afternoon, saving our energy for walking instead.

“Yeah, I did,” Edith admits. “I still think it’s a good— sorry, for lashing out at you.” I realise she’s probably just stressed now, and I don’t blame her.

After that, we continue on in silence, but it’s not long until something very interesting happens. We cross over a small lump in the land, a rare occurrence even here, which seems to be separating one field from the next, with a small path in between. Once we cross over, we see a large hole, a crevice in this mound, which is *actually* faintly glowing, warm with orange light. At first it feels like seeing a hole in reality, leading into another, stranger realm. Then I can see the stone and realise it’s a small cave, apparently lit up.

“Do you think...” Dawn asks, before immediately crouching down and sliding into the small hollow. The rest of her words fade away with her body, gradually becoming vaguely quieter as she climbs further down into the hole.

“...he went down here?” I find myself exchanging looks with the other two, but we all know we’re following her down there. I don’t want to get distracted, but this is near the guard’s camp, so even if there’s a slim chance that he could be here, it’s worth a try.

I volunteer myself, crouching down and slowly wriggling my body into the tunnel, curled up into a ball. I place my hands on the sides of the cave, and the stone surface is freezing cold. It sends me back to the training centre, with those cold walls, but no, these are *colder*, naturally cool, so that my hands recoil, before I force them onto the

solid stone. I walk down, using my hands to keep me steady, so I don't slip, until at long last, the cave widens out, and I let myself slide down the last slope to the large opening before me. But opening is the wrong word. It's a hallway, literally. It's definitely man-made, carved out of the ground. Sparsely along the walls there are lit torches, made of wrought iron and stuck to the stone.

I urgently step out of the way as Oliver comes tumbling down ungracefully. He doesn't get hurt, instead catching himself and standing up, seemingly a little shaken, although it is hard to fully see his expression in the dim light.

After him, Edith emerges, slowly and carefully edging her way out. "Woah," she exclaims with a gasp. "What is this place?"

"I don't know," Dawn responds plainly. I nod in agreement.

"But the torches, they're *lit*," Oliver points out. "Someone must've been here recently to light them!"

"Connor!" Edith and Dawn cry in unison, and it feels a little strange that I'm not shouting along with them. It does light up my heart however, and for a moment, there is hope. I can find my friend. I can prove that I'm not cursed, that I would never have hurt my friend.

*This* would make sense. If Connor stumbled across this weird tunnel, he would have almost certainly explored it. It could be dangerous, though. He *could* be dead, already, but he could also be lost, or trapped. There's enough of an incentive to make me want to keep going and search in this place.

"We should keep going," Dawn declares. She looks around at everyone, and a smile forms on her face. I don't like it. How this is some adventure to her. A fun one, with no stakes. Everyone agrees, though, so we continue on into the tunnel. And into the dark.

Our footsteps become the only thing anchoring me to reality, keeping me sane now. There is darkness all around, and each step echoes around the ginormous space, filling my ears, only to drift off slowly. The darkness tries to consume me, or my mind at least, but I

don't let it, and I keep walking, one hand on the wall, the other at my side. I collide with the others several times, and I hear them bump into each other more, but we dismiss it each time and continue walking.

As I walk, I wonder what this place is, or what it was, what it used to be. I realise I don't even know if it is old or unused, because it could be in use to this day. And that could mean that Connor didn't come down here, but it still seems probable. And besides, there's no point going back now, not until we reach the end.

*What if these are tunnels used for going places, like we are now?* I imagine different entrances, scattered all across the Haven, for important people to use when they need to travel quickly, or secretly, or silently. Like when they need to hunt someone down, such as me.

Or, what if, I think with fear, this is a tunnel to the outside. I could be walking there right now, into the dangerous world beyond the Haven. But no. I remember the direction. I feel that we are going back into the Haven rather than out.

Whatever this place is, the fact remains: Connor could have gone down here, and it'll be more useful to search here since I assume that everyone else is looking on the surface, around where we were.

So, I keep going, dragging my feet through the tunnel, trudging through the everlasting darkness, seemingly heading nowhere but at the same time, moving, moving, moving.

"We should take a break," Edith decides.

"Next lamp," suggests Oliver.

Finally, we come to a stop, and collapse onto the ground. Edith takes something out of her bag, and I wonder why she didn't get it out a long time ago. *Water*. A bottle, large and clear, filled with a liquid tinted by the corridor's light. We are sitting in a rectangular arrangement, Oliver and I facing the two girls, so the water is passed around in a circle, each of us taking a few small sips from it before passing it on. The trickle of water flows down my throat, and it's a little warm, leaving me desperate for more but I give it to Oliver, nonetheless.

I'm tempted to close my eyes, because there is so little to see anyway, but I'd look foolish. Then Dawn does so anyway, so I join in.

"How is everyone?" Edith asks, leaving a momentary silence upon us.

"A bit tired," Dawn admits. "*But...* we're much better now, thanks to you, Edith! We'll find him soon, wherever we are..." Her voice trails off. "Where do you think we are?" she asks.

"A mine," Oliver deduces. "Or an entrance to one. The Haven used to have many of them to find iron, get stone and minerals. Not so much any more because there's less need for new materials, but *some* are still in use."

I should have thought of that. Instead of... what, a secret passageway for the Council? I try to imagine this place being a mine, and Connor getting lost here. It wouldn't be the craziest thing he's done. I could recall in fine detail many anecdotes of his mischief in my presence. Climbing up trees and getting stuck. Running off and hiding among the crops to jump out and scare people. And that one time... he snuck into the headteacher of our school's office, dragging me along with him! He even... *okay, so maybe this is more drastic*. But it's conceivable, plausible. Imaginable. And it makes me hopeful.

"Dawn?" Oliver asks, and I remember where I am. The red-haired girl looks thoughtful for a moment. "It's obviously some kind of secret tunnel. Going from that camp to those two's big town at the centre of the Haven."

"Where are you and Oliver from?" Edith asks.

"Outskirts," Dawn answers. "A village called Afon, in the wetlands." I had never seen her before my training, so it makes sense that she's not from town. All Hazel trainees like her need to go to the same training centre as those born in town, and the same Awakening, but patently not the same school.

"But..." Dawn continues. "I think this tunnel is for spying on people in the Haven!"

"I'm not... *sure* about—" Edith begins.

"Fine, then what do you think this place is?" Dawn asks.

“I don’t know. Oliver’s probably right, though. Any other ideas, Elias?”

I shake my head. As ridiculous as she made it sound, I think I’m with Dawn. This tunnel doesn’t really look like a mine, with its clearly carved walls and singular direction. A secret it is.

\* \* \*

Seven, maybe eight, or even more, hours later, we reach the end of the corridor, finding a solid wall at the end as it comes to a close. It’s no dead end, however, because cut into it is a thick door, made of stone, left ajar. It has no handle, only a circular marking where one should be.

“Oh, finally,” Dawn says with a sigh of relief. I think we all feel that relief, glad this nightmare has come to an end.

“Looks like we’re here!” Edith comments. “Let’s go.”

“Already?” Oliver asks. “We should take a break.”

“Oka... okay— wait, no. We need to go,” demands Edith, with a strange stutter at the start of her sentence. She turns to me. “Connor could be in danger, starving, right now. We need to go fast, right?”

“Yeah,” I mutter, since she’s clearly directing this to me.

“You two?” Edith asks.

“Fine,” Dawn agrees. Oliver nods to show he too agrees. So, without having sat down, I follow the others through the doorway, Edith going in first.

“Uh... Dawn,” murmurs Oliver, making us all freeze. “Look at this.” He gestures towards the indent on the door, where there should be a handle. She looks puzzled, but reaches inside her tunic from the top and pulls a string from around her neck. There’s a little thing attached to it, and I can tell it’s a necklace, and the pendant is fairly large and made of fine metal. If not gold, then bronze or copper. I can’t see it very well, but there’s a small piece of glass in a hole in its centre, the shape of a bead and filled with water. Then, on the outside of the circular pendant, there are some segments that stick

out more than others, forming a unique shape around the circle.

Dawn places her necklace's pendant onto the door, into the indent. I don't expect much, but what I see isn't what I expected.

The pendant fits, like a key to its keyhole. I realise that my suspicions may not have been ill-founded. Dawn has a connection to this place; she is here for a purpose—something *more* than finding my friend.

## 16

“How did you get that?” Edith asks, with conviction in her voice.

“Why?” Dawn responds defiantly, stashing the gold-coloured pendant back around her neck.

“You—you can’t come with us!” Edith seemingly decides. “Get out of here! Go away!”

“Edith, what?” Dawn exclaims, in due confusion. Edith doesn’t like the pendant? She must be thinking what I am, that something’s going on, that she *knew* what this place was before we even got here. And then, if she knew about this place, why would she come here, with us, even... so eager to go down into this place? So maybe Edith’s right, but it feels a little off for her to act this way. As if I’ve truly known her for very long, though, so I’m not quite in a place to deem her behaviour strange.

“She stays,” Oliver interjects, narrowing his eyes and defending his friend. “And so do I.”

“She *has* to go,” hisses Edith, her volume lowered.

“Let’s make it fair,” Oliver asserts. “We vote on it.”

Edith seems to consider this for a few moments. “N—okay!” *No, or okay?* What is going on with everyone?

“You say she stays,” she continues. “I say she goes, and Dawn shouldn’t be able to vote, so, Elias. Up to you.” She stares at me

intensely, so I want to agree with her, but something stops me.

Ironically, the roles have reversed. When she arrived, I wanted her out, but Edith let her in. Now she is desperate to have her sent away, and I... am not sure any more. The way that Edith is attacking her because of a single thing, it reminds me of my own life, and how they all look down on me. How I can't step outside any more without worrying about how I look, how I seem, how I will be perceived.

And although I *am* suspicious, and wasn't sure of her previously, now that I have to say it out loud, I've changed my mind. I'll still keep an eye on her, because something doesn't seem right. Still. When I respond, I think of the girl who smiled at me, despite everyone else. She didn't care what things seemed like, or what people said, so neither will I, just this once.

"I'm with Oliver."

*I'm with Oliver. Dawn stays.*

Edith's face is lit up with an expression of ferocity, but it's only transient, fading away in a second.

"We should listen to Elias," Dawn proclaims. "After all," she jokes with a laugh. "He's Willow. The *wise* one!"

Edith can't help smiling, and my face gets a little hot at how this is humorous. *Who's to say that I'm not actually wise?* No ability required.

Oliver looks disapproving, which almost makes me want to laugh. "Technically," he says, "his ability isn't wisdom or insight, he—"

"Leave it, Olz," Dawn tells him, slinging her arm around his shoulder. "Now, like we said, let's go already!"

"Right," Edith agrees. "Just remember," she adds, glaring maliciously. "I'll be *watching* you."

Then we all step through the door, one by one.

*Wow* is the first word that pops into my head when I see the place. A vast room, open and grand, stretches out before me. It's so bright, although probably only because I've become so used to the dark. The room is the shape of a slice of a circle, with two menacing diagonal walls on either side of the room, which become closer together as

they get further from the door.

At the end of the “slice”, the tip is cut off, and no wall covers it up. We walk towards it in unison, as if called by it, taken into a trance by the darkness, ignoring everything else. I reach the edge of the room, and my heart skips a beat. My feet come to an immediate halt and I go stiff with fear. I’m half a metre away from an immediate drop. The floor ceases to exist at that point, leaving nothing but a void, a great, deep hole in reality.

There’s water, I see it now, still, at the bottom of the drop, in the grim darkness. It looks like a gigantic cauldron, storing an enormous spell, and then I realise that it could be exactly that, the water securing the energy inside. What spell could it be with such a need for size? It could be dangerous, destructive, overly powerful, or none of the three.

But this isn’t the only slice wedging into the watery void. Many others wrap around in a circle, each one slightly lower so as to form a spiral staircase, descending into the depths below.

Could Connor be here? If he found this place, would he go further into its depths to explore? The fact that even I have an urge to look around and uncover this place’s secrets makes me think it is a definite *yes*. Yes, he would. Yes, he could be here.

I see the other three in my peripheral vision, stepping back, so I join them, turning around to look into the bright room around us. It’s only now that I see how busy the room is, cluttered with a wide variety of objects that fill up the sides of the room.

Clocks, papers, bits of wood and porcelain. Hourglasses, orbs, musical instruments, drums and violins. Easels, mirrors, cloths and clothes. Many bottles. Dozens of books, a scope, a sewing machine. They form massive piles, almost every item on top of another, reaching my knees, at least, at the sides of the room. A large portion of it is destroyed or partially broken, however. Other bits just look scuffed.

However, none of it detracts from the most impressive part of the room. To the right of the door, there is a large stone statue of a birch

tree.

It has a slender, gentle trunk, marked with lines and dotted with darker coloured knots. It has an impressive and fearsome elegance, with its flimsy supports holding up the larger mass of modelled leaves, which are intricately shaped metal. The leaves still share the grey, cold colour, the one that makes the tree look dead or old. A relic from the past, retaining its beauty in a somewhat lesser form, as a solid statue, turned to stone to wait forevermore. Except, of course, it was cut out or sculpted, created for some purpose which is simply beyond me as of now.

What catches my attention next are some markings on the wall, roughly scratched into the stone. They're in another language, an ancient-looking one. Next to this writing, there is a neat, inscription, like a diagram, with nine columns, consisting of squares, connected by lines, going down towards the floor, with writing in each one. Each square is tiny, and there are so many. It's like a family tree, with *nine* separate bloodlines. While most of them continue on, the fifth column stops abruptly, many generations before the rest. Strange.

"*Hensiaric*," Oliver states, causing me to realise what it is. He's standing beside me now, tracing the inscriptions with his fingers. I've read about this in the library, a language still in rare use, but only by a few individuals, including the Council. Theoretically, anyone could pick up a few books and learn it, but although I have heard of it, I never thought learning a nearly unused language would be worth the effort.

I *need* to know. "Can you read any of it?" I ask him.

"Uh, no. Sorry," he responds.

"It's okay."

I turn around now, finished with this place. I search with my eyes for an exit, but there are none, so I head back towards the drop. Around the diagonal wall, I can see a slip of the next room across, but it's much too far to reach. What if Connor tried to reach it, and instead fell into the...

"Hi."

I nearly jump due to my surprise, but I suppress it. The voice is Dawn's. I turn around. She is next to me, and the other two are far away from us, observing the other side of the room, Edith looking at the tree, and Oliver staring into space, probably thinking about the Hensiaric.

Dawn is whispering to me. Just me. I stay silent, waiting for her to continue. If she does. If I learnt anything from my previous encounters with her, it's that she's unpredictable, which doesn't really help.

"I just wanted to tell you that I, um, appreciate you letting me stay."

I'm silent, waiting for her to leave, but she doesn't. Instead, she stares at me, smiling, clearly awaiting a response.

"Only returning a favour," I let out, my voice coming out too quietly.

"I guess I am pretty scary," she replies, then walks away, leaving me in comical bewilderment, just like our first meeting, which she was referring to. I need to remind myself that I can't trust her, not any more. I'm relieved she's gone, but at the same time, I wish she'd come back and talk to me more.

I wait a dozen or so seconds before following her back inside the room.

"How are you all?" Edith asks us. I can't tell if she is trying to be the leader of our little group, or whether she is just genuinely like this, but I guess the latter. She's definitely outgoing and friendly, ignoring the more angry blips.

"We're alive," Dawn responds. "But is it just me who is super hungry?"

"No. I have a little food," Edith announces.

"We should ration it," Oliver says. "We don't know how long we'll be here."

Dawn sighs, but then she speaks up. "Oliver's right."

Suddenly, I remember something, and the thought of being useful to the others makes it worth it. I lift my satchel from my side and

open it up. Inside, other than a few potions, I have some *adferwr*, the Birch plant that restores energy, in a small, sealed, glass tub.

I got it from school, a while ago, like most of the miscellaneous potions in my satchel, made or gathered as an educational activity. I also have my hat, for the cold, in there, but I bring most of it around on the off chance that it could be useful, since the tiny bottles and small amounts of liquid weigh so little.

I can see that this *is* the off chance, but it'll only be helpful if it's still usable. I don't believe that *adferwr* actually goes off, because its properties come from the water stored inside. It must have been winter when I got it, just before the final exams, so I doubt it's been hot enough for it to evaporate.

I take it out, and when I take a pinch of it, I can feel it isn't dry. I put it into my mouth and begin to chew it, somehow *immediately* feeling better. I think it's much more helpful for times like now than as an actual meal.

By now, all eyes are on me, so I thankfully just need to pass it to Dawn, who's still closest to me. She makes an audible sound of relief as she starts chewing, and soon it has been passed all around, coming in full circle back to me.

"Thank you, Elias!" Edith says, and it makes me feel a lot better about the grey clothing on my skin that she lent me.

"Yeah," Dawn chimes in, and Oliver nods his head. He then glances at Dawn, who looks back at him, confused. He sighs, deflated. "How do we get further in?" he asks, addressing our situation's primary issue. There's no way out to the next room, no way deeper down into the... *ruins*.

Edith moves towards the tree, placing her palm on its trunk.

"See this?" she asks us. "A birch tree, right."

Dawn's eyes light up. Instantly, the thought enters my head. I know it too, what she's about to say.

"Birch! What if all the rooms have a tree? So we need to go through them all!"

"There are only six rooms, though," Oliver mutters.

“Pardon?” Edith asks.

“I saw from the ledge. There were only six levels. Including this one.”

*Some of them could be submerged.* The volume of water was massive; if there used to be any lower levels, they could have somehow been covered in water.

Oliver seems to have a realisation. “I’ve heard about old prisons, underground. This could be one.”

“With rooms dedicated to trees?”

Edith shrugs. “The trees *are* important.”

I immediately feel that something is wrong with the idea that this is a prison. I need to say something this time.

“*We’re* being kept out.”

A prison is designed to keep someone in, but with the door with the indent on the *outside* and the tree-based rooms, with no way out, it almost seems like they could be tests or something, designed to keep us away from the bottom of the ruins. So, it seems like something is being kept inside for its safety, not ours.

Now I’m the one who has to clarify what I mean. It turns out I don’t need to, though.

“We can’t get in. In a prison, *they* can’t get out,” Dawn explains, precisely understanding my thoughts.

“Good point,” Edith says. “So, if we’re being kept out by different, maybe, trials in each room, then what’s at the bottom?”

“Hopefully we’ll find Connor before we get that deep,” I reply.

“How will we get anywhere, though?” Oliver asks. Edith sits down, so I move closer and sit down too, because this is a heavy conversation. The other two join us, and it’s like we’ve formed a small meeting in these random ruins underground.

“We get through each room,” Edith suggests.

“Right,” Oliver remarks with a sigh. “Rooms, defending this place, based on the trees. And we have only *one* fully-trained adult and three trainees, one of whom is cursed.”

“Oliver!” Edith rebukes him.

“What?” he asks.

“That was really impolite. Apologise to Elias.”

“Oh,” he responds, realising his bluntness. He pauses. “Sorry, El  
—”

“No,” I interrupt him. “It’s okay, you’re right.”

I have come to the conclusion that I am cursed. The curse *may* be the fact that everyone despises me, and not my actual ability, or maybe my ability is a scourge too. But *this* is an example of the curse, although I don’t mind. Oliver wasn’t using it as an insult, only a fact, something objective and indisputable. He isn’t looking down on me or anything, so I accept it.

Dawn splutters briefly and quietly. “Anyway, we’ll be great at it!” she decides. *Whatever it is*. “We have four out of nine trees, right? How much is that?”

He doesn’t hesitate when answering. “Around forty-four per cent.”

“Exactly! That’s nearly half of them!” Dawn cries. Her optimism is inspiring, especially in contrast to Oliver’s realistic approach, and it coaxes me into joining in.

“That’s only assuming that the rooms *need* someone of their tree.”

“They might,” Oliver contends, and he coughs abruptly. “Then only the Council could get it in.”

“Well,” Edith throws in. “What *is* everyone’s tree?”

“I’m a Hazel! Well, I’m a Shifter,” Dawn blurts out.

“What’s that?” asks Edith, sounding intrigued.

“Shifters transform their whole body,” she explains. “Augments change part of their body. Then there are Mimics, who change into people, not animals... oh, and Adaptors get traits based on the situation. Shadows do too, but from people or animals nearby.”

Oliver and I show a little more reluctance in sharing, so Edith explains her own.

“I’m a Yew,” she says, and I remember that now. “I’m a Protector,” she continues, smiling at Dawn. “So, I can create shields out of energy.”

“Wow,” Dawn replies in awe. “Show us!”

“But, well—”

“Please? Oliver, Elias, we want her to, right?”

“Well,” Oliver mutters. “It would be interesting, if Edith doesn’t mind.”

“Why not?” Edith asks, rubbing her hands against each other.

Her eyes change instantaneously, turning into a deep green, darker and more vibrant than the natural kind which Dawn has. The radiant light seeps from her palms, too, as she holds them up, but it doesn’t spread like a wisp or the energy I once saw around that Willow tree. Instead, I blink, and it smoothly spreads out as if pouring over an invisible surface, forming a transparent shield, a circular shape, stuck to Edith’s hand. It stays there, a wall of green light, brighter than anything in the room, until I blink, and it disappears, gone.

The similarity in appearance of this shield compared with the spirits makes me think my ability is natural like the rest.

“My ability comes from the Holly tree,” Oliver tells us after we recover from the awe of Edith’s ability.

“He’s a Holly,” Dawn repeats, like she’s translating him. “A Stabiliser, specifically, so he can basically keep people from freaking out. Not very fun.”

Oliver gives Dawn a look.

“Joking!” she practically shouts. She’s funny, a jokester, or she certainly acts like it, but I also see something else in her. How she turned up here with the necklace, it seemed *calculated*, which is far from how she usually acts. A sickening feeling fills me... but it’s not because of what I’m thinking about. I can’t breathe. I start to cough now.

“Elias, were those plants out of date?” Edith asks, uneasily.

“No,” Oliver replies. “I don’t think this is from the adferwr.”

## 17

“*Poison.*” Oliver states, his tone neutral. It takes a few seconds for it to sink in for all of us, and then we’re immediately on our feet, panic induced within.

“We need to find its source, right?” Edith trembles. “To block it up.”

Oliver nods, so we all look at the room. If there’s one place for airborne *poison* to be coming from, it’s from under the heaps of stuff around us, which was always just a distraction, hiding the true purpose of this room.

I immediately begin kicking the clutter of objects, striding through them, grabbing, pushing, scooping, getting them out of the way. I see now why most of them are broken, and hopefully that means that Connor did too, and survived. But then, how would the room revert to its original state? Unless, the objects are a *distraction* and the poison is coming from something else. Or worse yet, it is designed to be impossible to survive, and we’ll all end up swept into the water, dead, in a watery grave with Connor. *All missing.* And me? *Known as cursed, forever.*

No. There’ll be something under here—a vent, a gap, for the poison to seep out of. I just wish I had my mother. *Oh, Mother.* As a Purifier, she’d be able to clear all our bodies of the poison.

But, as Oliver said, we have only one fully-trained adult, and three trainees, one of whom is cursed. No Purifiers, no mother, no safety or survival guarantee.

This fuels me, so I move to the side, spreading the objects across the floor so that nowhere is bare. The others join in too, a couple of screams emerging from their panicked frenzies.

My head begins to throb, and I know it's only going to get worse. Whatever this poison is, it's either weak or slow-acting, since I assume it has already entered our numerous bodily systems. I think we're all going to die before I hear Dawn's voice.

"Guys! Found it," she shouts, her voice harsh and wheezy.

I twist my whole body around to my left, and sure enough, there is a rectangular metal vent on the floor there. You can even see a faint, green substance seeping from between the bars. I crouch by the hole and start jamming as many small items as possible inside the vent.

Notebooks, a violin bow, small bottles, a jar, clocks and pots. Some items slip right through, falling into the vent and hitting a surface with a crash. Most of it gets stuck inside, though, but it's not working. I can feel the air leaving me, slipping away. There's a horrible feeling in my throat, with no way to breathe, like that day I was strangled in the training centre. Now, though, my airway isn't blocked, and *stupidly*, I'm still trying to breathe the toxic air.

Each breath inflicts more poison on me, bringing a higher chance of death, but still I keep breathing it, because my body is broken, desperate for air but getting only toxic fumes instead. Now that I am bending over it, it reeks of decay and bittersweet sickness. I feel like I'm going to be sick. My head is spinning, and I'm slipping. There are voices around me, but I can't or don't hear them, and haven't for a long time. Desperately, I push myself upwards, but I think it makes things worse, until I dive backwards, away from the smell.

"*Elias!*"

I find myself on the floor, but only a little confused, so get up quickly. The gas is everywhere, green and sinister, hanging over us. I look back, and I find the door to this place. I tell myself that if this

situation gets any worse, we'll run.

"It's not working!" Edith cries, trying to fit as many things as possible into the vent, like I was, seconds... maybe longer... before. "It goes through everything."

Oliver is standing further back, observing. "Don't!" he shouts.

"Help us!" Edith shouts. Dawn is trembling, and she can't grab hold of anything. I charge back then and carry on, trying to fill in the gaps, but it's already filled, except for tiny holes between each item from which the now very visible gas is pouring out. I try to shove an old shoe inside, but no, there's no room, nothing will budge, and it's still no use.

"Listen to me!" Oliver shouts, but no one does. It's like I can feel each of our hearts racing, and I can see the fear, the sweat, the tears, and the effort, all in vain, because we're going to *die*.

Then there's a vague, pale red light, a sense of energy, shooting inside me, and there's a calmness that absorbs and destroys all my fear and panic. I feel I could even laugh at this whole situation, if it weren't for the fact that we need to hurry, to solve this as soon as possible, if we don't want to give up or die trying.

"Don't use solid objects," a soothing voice tells us. "Use cloths and things, they're more flexible and compressible so that we can fill every gap."

I follow the voice's command because it makes perfect sense. Why *weren't* we doing that before? This whole process would've been much more efficient if... wait, what?

I rapidly pull the objects out of the vent, until there's a large proportion left open, then I start finding cloths, small sheets, even a handkerchief, and start to fill the gaps. Oliver comes before me and helps out, so this section is completely filled up. The girls have filled the other side too, so only the middle remains full of other junk, and it's only a matter of time before that is sorted out too. My head still hurts, and my throat feels clogged up, but since the gas is no longer visible, it's safe enough to assume that the flow is stopping. Oliver lays a thick towel over all of it and then starts placing the solid items

on top. We all join in until there's a whole pile of things on top of the vent, but arranged neatly compared with how we found the room initially.

We step back and sit back down on the solid floor, exhausted. Little scraps of worry and panic trickle back to me, but I easily toss them aside now that the threat has subsided.

"Is my ability fun now?" Oliver asks. Of course. He used his Holly ability on us. He calmed us down, and there's a decent chance he saved us.

"Yes," Dawn, Edith, and I say, with only a split-second difference in timing. I think *vital* would be a more accurate description, though.

Suddenly, I hear stone shifting in place, and when I turn my head to my side, I see a doorway, not at the back, but on the wall to my right from here, welcoming us to the next room, the next tree, the next challenge.

"Should we go through?" Edith asks.

"Do we *want* to? After what happened in here?" Dawn asks, although her tone isn't as concerned as it is questioning.

"We could've escaped through the door," Edith points out. "We could leave at any time if we went through, too."

"Still!" Oliver insists. "We don't even know for sure if Connor is in here, and we'll be risking our lives just by trying to get through and keeping going like we did here!"

"Well," Edith stutters. "Elias? Do you think we should go back?"

I could say no just because of the need to find Connor, but when I picture returning to the surface, I realise something else, something I've kept hidden, kept a secret. Not even Edith fully knows my current circumstances, I think.

I can see it. Stepping outside, the Council looking for both me and Connor. Then my capture and my exile from the Haven. I don't like keeping this inside me any more.

"I can't," I tell them all. *I can't leave this place.* "I'm on the run."

## 18

Eventually, the matter is settled. The consensus is that we need to find Connor, no matter what, which I mentally note down as strange. Wrong. Dawn and Oliver have never met Connor, not once. So, why do they insist on staying, even after it was suggested that we split up? Even after Oliver doubted the entire operation, all it took was some optimistic coaxing from Dawn, and a reminder of our collective goal here, which was to find my friend.

We all get up, determined, and go through the doorway. The unknown is terrifying. A glimpse is all I have seen before now, only a bare wall and a drop.

“Uh,” Edith stops abruptly at the doorway.

“What is it?” I ask her.

“Come see,” she tells me, and the three of us do. Beyond the short stretch of slightly turning hallway, there’s a large drop. Higher than each of our heights, from the looks of it. And there are two of them, two steps down to the next room. The difference in elevation between the rooms looked so small from the centre, where you could see the enormous full drop to the water. Now, with no point of reference but ourselves, it looks a little more intimidating.

“Two metres, ish,” Oliver assesses. “Survivable.”

“Oh, I know!” Dawn exclaims. “Edith, move!”

Edith steps aside for Dawn to step in her place, but she isn't stepping, or standing, for long. She squats down, places her hands behind her, and then slips her legs off the ledge so that she is sitting down. She then shuffles forward until she's at the edge of her *seat*, after which she lets herself drop off the edge, disappearing out of sight.

"Woah!" she shouts. "Guess what?"

"What?" Edith asks.

"It's Hazel!"

Edith follows Dawn's technique, first sitting down and then letting herself drop onto her feet. Next, it's my turn, and now that my legs are dangling down, the drop doesn't look even half as bad as it did, so I let myself fall and land smoothly on my feet, then repeating the process for the second and final step, dropping down into the room itself.

It's the same triangular shape, triangular, and I come out of the side wall on the side this time, so I'm facing the other wall instead of the still-present drop. This room, however, is not cluttered with objects like the last, and doesn't even have a model tree; only a representation of one carved into the wall in front of me.

It is, however, undeniably Hazel, with so many branches shooting out from the base in many directions, making it understandable that such a tree could provide the powers of transformation with its energy.

The room is empty, too, but all surfaces in it are divided into squares, like a grid, with the mural taking up four of them. They're each large enough to stand upon, but if I sat down my legs would probably stretch to the next one.

Moreover, the blocks don't seem merely etched on, but carved into the place, and it feels so bizarre. A grid of blocks, underground, in a slice-shaped room, above a huge lake-like mass of water. It's unreal, and literally, I feel like I am in another world. At this point, I feel I am starting to lose my grasp on the real world. It would be easy to forget about it entirely, to get lost within the ruin's *games*, set only on

completing them.

But no, my only mission is to find Connor, get out of here as soon as possible, clear my name of any crime or suspicion, and continue on life as sweet, old normal, with my friend at my side. This is merely a step on that way, nothing but a part of my objective, no matter how much the mysteries of the prison draw me in and try to catch me in their web.

But of course, I don't know whether Connor is here. Still, I know he'll live for at least a month if he has no food, but only a week or less if he's got no water either. Hopefully, if he's down here, he can access the water at the bottom. And it'd need to be fresh, but he wouldn't die before we find him, so going carefully to ensure we survive should be a greater priority.

Of course, if Connor is not actually down here, there'd be no point dying with him on the surface. Then I realise.

Connor could already be found, and *we*, the four of us, would be the missing persons. Connor himself would have a missing sister and friend, and *oh!* My mother, father, and sister, they don't know where I am either. I feel stricken with guilt at the fact that I haven't considered my absence from them once since I left, so determined to find my friend that I brushed them aside, ever since I escaped through the window, and I left them to go on the *run*.

They may think that I'm dead. I could send them a wisp, but no. I'd either have to tell them where I am, *or lie*, and if I did tell the truth, they'd probably alert the Council. My family wouldn't seek to betray me, but they wouldn't keep my secret safe the way a friend would. They'd tell the Council, because who wouldn't? We've been trained our whole lives to listen to authority, and they're older than I am and more more likely to adhere strictly to the rules. I could send a wisp to Penny, but she'd definitely tell our parents, no matter what. So, I'm out of options, as usual. And I'm wasting time thinking about it.

"Elias?" Oliver says from behind me. I step out of the way so that he can drop down the second step, making all of us officially inside the next room. The Hazel room.

“So,” Edith begins. “How do you think we’ll complete this one?”

“It’ll be something Hazel-related,” Dawn reminds us. “So hopefully it’ll be easier with an actual Hazel this time.

“We didn’t need a Birch last time, though,” Edith points out. “I don’t think you need a person of each tree, it’s just... symbolic?”

The vent in the floor emitted poison, which is quite literally the opposite of Birch, but the way that we filled up the vent, it’s almost as if we mended a hole in the floor, healed the room in the process of saving ourselves. Of course, it would’ve been easier if we had someone who could use Birch energy, particularly someone with the ability to...

“We could’ve survived longer if we had a Purifier,” I tell them, my mother’s face appearing in my mind again, with her soft expression and long hair. This makes me think of my father, too, and before I know it I’m back to wishing they knew I was okay, which doesn’t help at all.

“We still managed,” Edith responds. “And we’ll manage again.”

“It *can’t* get worse than that last room. I agree with Edith, it’ll be fine!” Dawn says.

Won’t it get worse in every room? Or at the very least, stay the same. Never mind, I suppose. I’ll just pretend it’ll be better than it was previously. What Dawn said before made sense. It’ll probably be easier with an actual Hazel.

“You’re both too optimistic,” Oliver remarks, and I suppress a laugh. I’m definitely not counted as “you” in this situation. Hopeful, maybe, but optimism is something entirely different. I’d rather think that I’m realistic. Because we may live. We may die. Connor may be dead. He may be alive. I feel Oliver and I are similar in that respect.

“Not too,” Dawn disagrees. “Because what could go wrong?”

At that moment, a large block in the wall directly behind her moves forward suddenly, hitting her in the back and pushing her forward, causing her to fall and land on the solid floor on her exposed knees.

“Dawn!” Oliver shouts, and he practically dives towards her. Edith

offers her hand to her, and she takes it, using it to stand back up.

“How has it started already?” she questions, her now quieter voice expressing a hint of confusion. “Last time... well, it started so much later.”

Oliver shrugs. I’m stood watching them like a bystander, so I go towards the three of them, congregated in front of the large stone block. It stopped almost as soon as it started, but it sticks a decent way out of the wall. The entire scene before me feels bizarre. The empty room has transformed into a peculiar place because of this single thing. The displaced block, makes the whole wall seem strange and unnatural, like a perfect set, with one piece off, moved—not incomplete, just giving the sense that something is wrong.

“It could’ve started a while before we noticed,” Oliver tells Dawn. “Seems like things are starting slowly and gradually becoming more intense.”

She nods. “I guess we just dodge the walls until the door to the next room comes along.” Then, suddenly, the next movement occurs: We hear a grinding from above, and I look up to see a block dropping down from the ceiling.

“Great,” I mutter, mostly to myself. “The ceiling moves too.”

A minute passes, another block moves, and thirty seconds after that, the block that came out first retreats back to its place in the wall. It’s as if we’re watching the room warm up, prepare itself for the chaos that is sure to ensue once all the blocks become active. We give each other small grimaces and wait in anticipation, trying to be alert. If there’s one thing about Hazel energy, it’s that it’s unpredictable. I’m almost waiting for a huge chunk of the wall to fall on top of me, and since I’d prefer not to be flattened, I prepare myself to act quickly in response to any and every movement.

Then the grinding starts again, and my preparation was in vain, because I jump. I turn to my side as fast as I can and see the block directly by the entrance of the room hastily retreating back into the ground, which is strange, because I never saw it pop out. Oddly, once this block fits in place, it doesn’t stop moving. It comes straight back

up, and once it is up, it goes back down again. It starts moving more and more furiously, until the sound of stone grinding is exceedingly intense.

“What...?” Oliver whispers.

“Think it’s broken?” Edith suggests.

Dawn darts around us, and she inspects the shaking block. Following a thought process I cannot comprehend, she jumps onto the block, which is most certainly still moving. When her feet collide with the stone, the block is pushed down as if trampled by her weight. But that cannot be the case, because how could she stop its ferocious, incessant motion with that? It isn’t aligned with the other blocks making up the floor, however, it’s slightly pushed down. Just when I think it’s about to fling her into the air, I see more movement, but it’s not from the block she’s on. The two on either side of it, and another on the left, begin to do the strange, jittery movement, going up and down and up again.

I grasp an idea of what the room *wants* us to do, so I obediently follow its demand, walking over to Dawn and leaping onto the block beside her. It does the same as hers did, so I glance over to the others who are quick to cooperate. One, two, three, four of us are standing beside each other on the stone blocks, and I wonder how it knows there are four of us. The very notion of the ruins having some kind of intelligence, or even *sentience*, makes me uncomfortable... but it’s clearly just design. It must detect our weights somehow.

As soon as Oliver, who, again, is last, jumps upon the other block next to Dawn, there’s *another* grinding noise, and we all watch in astonishment as four blocks at the end of the hallway retreat and move to the side, opening into a clear entrance to the next room.

None of us move. “Do you think...?” Edith asks, but she trails off, which is unusual for her.

“It’s definitely going to move if we take a step,” Dawn answers her silent question. “I’ll go first. I’m Hazel.”

“No, it’s okay, Dawn,” objects Edith. “I’ll go. I’m the oldest, plus, I can use a barrier.”

“Thanks,” Dawn says. “You’re so kind.”

Edith steps off her block, and the world goes haywire. She’s instantly shot into the air, but I don’t have much time to watch *her* because the block I’m standing on also rockets upward, with such speed that my body is thrust into the air.

Just as my feet return to the elevated block, I feel myself being pushed forward, a force from behind doing the pushing, my back writhing with pain from the brutal shove of the stone. I land on the ground in front of me, which immediately pushes me upwards. The scene around me is one of disorder. Everything is moving, nothing is still. An indiscernible blur of grey, and I am a part of it, and I have nothing to protect me. I can’t transform or create barriers; I am weak and defenceless. I leap off the block and onto the floor, and I only have one direction to go, because the blocks near me become towering pillars, ascending from the ground and descending from the ceiling to limit my movements, trying to control me. I try to stay in one place, but I find myself being sent towards the end of the room.

*Towards the water.* I jump, I dodge, I turn, but every time something is blocking my path towards the exit, or if not, I am hit so viciously that I am flung into the air, to the point that I feel certain my bones will be shattered.

All the while, I see Dawn, far away from me. Her movements are swift and elegant, and as she dives between the blocks and pillars, she shifts to and from her fox form, skilfully manoeuvring all of the obstacles that come in her way. I notice, now, her eyes, which are an amber colour. I don’t think it’s the colour of the fox’s eyes, but rather the colour of Hazel energy.

I decide that I should stay still, because I have jumped dangerously close to the water. So, with all my strength I try to stay in the same place. The block beneath goes up and down wildly, making me feel sick, and dizzy. Then I see the block *above* me begin to move down, and I duck, just in time, because otherwise my skull would be crushed.

Pillars, all around me, except to my right, where it wants me to go. But this is Hazel's room, and Hazel's defence, and if there's one thing about transformation that can help me now, it's that it's not robust or stable. In essence, *it changes. Or moves.* So, when I watch the pillars beside me, I see that they very briefly drop back down to the ground, leaving an open space, but only until the pillar from the ceiling comes down to fill it up. There is, however, a brief moment when the coast *is* clear, but I won't know what will be ahead of me, and I'll somehow have to react before being demolished by the descending block.

I study the pattern meticulously. Both pillars, the ones from the floor and the ceiling, linger for a while as a full, solid pillar, before retreating back, only for the opposite one to repeat the cycle again.

So, when the floor pillar reaches the ground, I plan to step onto it, but at that moment, the block I'm on is headed upward, so I copy Dawn's movements and dive onto it. I'm close to falling, but the block catches me, so I don't, only that I'm on my stomach and being lifted up to the ceiling, to form a complete pillar filling the height of the room and to be completely... I brace myself for the pain.

But it never comes. My back comes to a stop, but there is no pressure or force on it. I am not able to move, but I'm also not being squashed. A large stretch of green light, pure power and energy is stretching out from Edith's fingertips, forming something alike to an oversized fin than a shield. It stretches out over my back, protecting me until the pillar starts its descent towards the floor, and I jump out onto the adjacent block. Now that I have a little time to observe my surroundings, I see Oliver behind me, Edith in front, and Dawn to my right, already at the exit, standing in her animal form. She transforms, the green of her eyes emerging from the glowing Hazel-orange, and she begins to head *back* into the room, probably coming back to help us all after witnessing my bones nearly get pulverised.

"Imagine you're doing parkour!" Dawn shouts. "It's hard, I know, but you just need to keep moving!"

She turns back into the nimble mammal, and I have a very strong suspicion that is what gives her such ease. Any Hazel with an ability like hers would probably find this easy. Adaptors could gain better reaction time, temporarily, and most Shifters, like Dawn, could turn into something useful. I suppose Augments, like that wing girl Connor mentioned, wouldn't have much of an advantage. Neither would the ones who change into people, so really, the rooms aren't even suited to everyone with an ability from the same tree. Nothing about these rooms, or challenges, seems very fair.

“Edith, try to wait there so you can shield people,” Dawn adds, temporarily regaining her human form. “You c—”

She turns back into a fox, and as she darts around, her tail gets jammed between two blocks. As I jump forward to avoid my own damage from an oncoming ceiling, I wince at the injury.

She groans a little, but she continues on with what she was saying, seeming relatively unbothered. “You can shield your own body to get across afterwards.”

Dawn makes her way over to Oliver, and I take her advice, jumping from block to block as fast as I can. I get sent in the wrong direction a lot, but I slowly make progress. The movements like the one that I had to be shielded on, become easier with practice.

It's all about timing, jumping onto a new square as the right ones align, defeating pillars by speedily passing through when the time is right. I check back once, and Edith is watching me, ensuring my safety, whilst Dawn is helping Oliver slowly make his way over. I feel safe, and I feel victorious.

Then my successes come to an end as I become completely cornered on all sides. The four pillars around me start to rise up, encasing me within them, probably to be crushed by the ceiling or floor, which I am standing on now, with no escape. Reacting quickly, I wedge my feet against the walls to push myself up, and slip over the top of a pillar, *just* before it hits the ceiling. From there, I hurl myself onto a descending pillar, hastily regaining my feet whilst it is still high up. Finally, I make a daring, thrilling leap to the end, over two

entire blocks, landing with a bang on the solid, still floor of the tunnel.

I collapse on the ground, waiting for the others' arrival, but I change my mind and stand up, because it seems rude to casually wait for people to finish a life-threatening obstacle course.

Oliver arrives first, with Dawn entering the space for the second time shortly after him. As planned, Edith turns up last, two large energy shields formed on both of her hands. Suddenly, the room falls into slumber, each piece falling back into place and returning to its bare, plain appearance. Cohesion returns, and so does clarity. We have completed the second room and are standing in the doorway to the next.

“Good work, everyone,” Edith says, like a teacher congratulating her students for completing a particularly *difficult* piece of homework. Oliver steps back into the room, and for a second, I think it's about to go wild again, but it doesn't, and he walks over to something on the floor... wedged in between two blocks. He tugs at it until it rips, but part of it comes out, which he holds up. It's a piece of fabric. At first, I think it's soaked in blood, but no, the fabric is just crimson in colour. Like a guard's uniform.

To me, the meaning of this is so blatantly obvious that there may as well be large, clear letters emblazoned on the wall. *Connor. Was. Here.*

## 19

Before long, we're all sat down again, still in the Hazel room, which is left serene. Edith knew immediately, but I explained to the others about the guard uniform, and that Connor is Elm. Now that I know that he's here, I no longer have the same sense of worry, because we're coming for him.

There is always the possibility that another guard came down here, and who knows how long ago the fabric got stuck there, but... forget it. I know that he's here because of this, just, somehow.

Only one thing has the power to awaken me from my joy right now, but that thing is pulled out of Edith's bag, in the centre of my vision.

*Food.* A warm, dry aroma enters my nostrils, vaguely musty but rich and pleasant. Edith is holding a small loaf of bread in her hands, and she begins to divide it into four chunks before stopping.

"All? How much?"

Dawn looks thoughtful for a moment. "Ask the responsible one. Olz?"

He processes the different factors in his head before he answers. He looks at Dawn when he speaks. It must be more comfortable for him.

"We're two out of six rooms down, but that was probably one of

the most physically exerting rooms. It depends on whether there's Elm or Ash left, though."

"Oh. I forgot there were six," Dawn says. "Wait, how?"

"Three could be underwater," I decide to say this time.

"Yes! The water could be rising from rain getting in, maybe! So then... is there any order the rooms could be in? So we can figure out which we won't have to do?"

Birch, Hazel... *Yew?* I know what that order is, it's...

"The Sylvan Triad!" Oliver exclaims, but he quickly draws back after expressing so much excitement.

"What's that?" Edith asks.

"It—it's hard to explain, sort of a..." Oliver stutters, his face becoming flushed. I feel a strong sense of empathy towards him, so I take the explanation into my own hands.

"It's... a way to group the trees. There's the corporeal group related to the body, so Birch, and, um, Hazel and Yew. Then there are the mental ones: Aspen, Willow and Holly. Last is the physical group. The powers in that group are more about interaction with the environment than the body. Like strength opposed to resistance. That's Elm, Oak and Ash."

Oliver has something to start off of, now. "Within the groups they're ordered by... I guess, intensity. The gentler powers are Birch, Aspen and Elm. Because healing, telepathy and agility are less intense than resistance, willpower, and strength; Yew, Holly and Ash."

"The other ones are in between, neutral and balanced," I add for explicitness.

"Do you two share a secret language or something?" Dawn asks with a smile. Edith laughs.

Oliver considers this for a moment. "Yes. It's called reading."

He's right. Now the rest of us all start laughing loudly, even though Oliver didn't utter it as if it were meant to be funny.

"Well," Edith starts. "It's good we won't have to go through a single physical room, since none of us have abilities from those

trees.”

We all nod or speak words of agreement. “I think that settles it,” she says. She breaks the bread into four, releasing even more of its glorious smell, and hands a piece to each of us, leaving one for herself.

“Hey! None of us have those 'gentle' abilities, either,” Dawn points out, returning to our conversation about the Triad. “No wonder we’re surviving! We’re all *so* tough!” she adds, a little wryly. We all laugh once again, and I can’t tell whether it’s actually funny or whether my long non-exposure to sunlight has driven me insane, but I don’t care. This is how I’m supposed to feel as a new adult. Laughing and joking around with friends about our newfound abilities. And getting that warm, indescribably precious feeling that comes with it.

For a moment, I am able to forget that I am in a treacherous ruin underground, and that my friend is missing, and that the world is against me. And I don’t try to stop the feeling now, because I know that Connor is nearby, and with his courage and skill, he is definitely alive. For a moment, I’m a normal person with a normal life. I like it, and I hope that it never ends. I hope that instead of coming out of the ruins with one friend, I come out with *four*.

\* \* \*

I don’t sleep.

After Edith passed around the bread, and we all had another few swigs of water, we decided to sleep, or at least try to get some rest. It feels like it has been at least an hour, but who knows? We don’t even know what time it is down here. It could be the middle of the day, and that’s probably why I’m finding it so hard to sleep. Well, I’ve never got to sleep very easily, but this is even worse than usual. The waiting eventually becomes so tedious that I stop trying. I open my eyes, and I see that Dawn is already standing, awake. I stand up too.

“Yes, I’m so bored!” she almost shouts. I drag my hand up to my

face and signal for her to be quiet by placing my index finger on my cold lips.

“Can’t sleep?” I ask, and it still seems strange talking to her on her own. I feel sure that I never spoke a word to her at training, so that could be why.

“Yeah,” she tells me. “Clearly, you too. Want to talk?”

“Well, I...” I begin, trailing off. *Do I want to talk?*

“It wasn’t a request,” she responds, a smile showing up on her face. The lights in the room, or rather, the lanterns in the doorways on either side of the room, mean that I can see everything as easily as I could before. The fact that, out of exhaustion, we decided to sleep didn’t change that.

“Let’s talk,” she demands, rephrasing the original sentence.

“Okay,” I respond, giving in. “Is your... tail okay?”

“Yeah,” she replies, turning around and back again to briefly reveal blood smeared over the deep green fabric above her waist. “It transferred to *this* on my human body, but injuries like that when I’m in animal form don’t carry over to the next transformation. It’s the same animal, but because people don’t have tails, it grows back every time, since...” She shrugs. “Well, that’s what I’ve been told anyway.”

“It seems kind of, well, Birch.”

“I guess it’s like in your Triad thingy. Birch and Hazel are related.”

I don’t say anything, but she doesn’t seem bothered. “Enough about my ability, anyway, I still don’t know... well, uh, what’s Willowbane?”

“You don’t know?” I ask her, complete confusion swooping over me.

“Well, I know you’re supposed to be cursed, but no one tells me why.”

Didn’t Chief Clementine literally say that Joan was no longer with us? Anyone applying logic could guess that that meant I spoke to a...

“Wait... oh.”

“What is it?” she asks.

“You weren’t at the town meeting. In the main town?” Of course

not, I know she comes from a village.

She shakes her head. "No. Explain."

"I can talk to spirits," I tell her curtly.

"Spirits?" she asks with an uncontrolled laugh. Her tone of voice very clearly indicates that she finds the concept of their existence purely absurd. I did too, until I saw them with my very own eyes.

"Yes. They're real, okay?"

"Fine," she accepts it. "Is that it?"

"Well. I can see them too."

"Huh... so why is that a *curse*?"

I am silent for a moment, and she sits down, leaning back against the wall. Rowan tried to explain it to me once, and he said it had something to do with *valdre*, but *I* think it's simpler than that.

"It reminds them of death."

She seems to consider this for a second, and then she nods. "Them."

"Yeah," I agree. "Why? Why not you?"

She shrugs, casually, which for some reason infuriates me. I keep talking. "I know you're not just shallow, Dawn. You can tell me."

Then she suddenly lets everything out.

"I take it back. Maybe... maybe it does. Remind me of death. But death's not so bad. And you aren't, either, I mean... sorry. It's hard to explain. Maybe I just don't think judging people based on... all these... *ideas* is right. That's all. And just so you know, I *really* don't believe you're cursed. I have evidence, now."

"Thanks," is all that I can say, my heart feeling strange in my chest. I sit down next to her. All I hear is silence, an uncomfortable silence.

"Since you told me *that*, a secret. I'll tell you one too."

"You don't need to," I reply. "Mine wasn't really a secret, because, well—"

"No. I need to. That's fair. And I'll tell you... that I'm not here to find Connor, not really."

"I knew," I tell her, as if it wasn't obvious. "So why are you here?"

Silence. Awful, awful silence. And then, the words I hear next feel

like a stab in the stomach.  
“I can’t tell you.”

## 20

Birch, Hazel and Yew. These are the trees of the body in the Sylvan Triad, but also the rooms, the chambers, and the challenges we have to face. After a *long* rest, in which I did finally fall asleep, we all wake up. Feeling a little better, we decide to get up and move on to our next ordeal, which, according to our theory, should be the Yew room. This time, Edith's tree. We go through a similar-looking hallway to the one before, and again have to drop down twice. I go first this time, and I quickly observe this next room.

Most strikingly, there's a statue of a tree in the centre of the room, placed upon a small, carved stone pillar. However, this statue is smaller than the last one and is made out of metal, which is tainted by deep orange rust. The tree is thick, with both sturdy roots and branches. It is instantly recognisable, sending me briefly back to that day in the Grove. Clearly, our theory has proven to be correct because this is most definitely the Yew room. Other than the central ornament, there are a few other things, unlike the last room, including on the walls, which makes it a *lot* brighter in here, which also feels safer, after the revelation, shall we call it, in the relative dark last night. I haven't forgotten what she said.

There are two wooden tables, on either side of the room, and due to the non-rectangular shape of the room, I suppose, one is larger

than the other, making what would've otherwise been neat, asymmetrical. The tables have rickety chairs, too.

"They look like the ones from my house," Edith comments after she enters the room with a thud.

"Mine too," I reply, as I realise so.

"Do you think we need to sit down? For it to start?" she asks.

"Maybe," I respond. "We did seem to activate the last room."

Oliver is the next inside the room, followed by Dawn. I scour the room for anything that could be the defence, or trial, while the two of them come in. I spot holes in the wall I'm facing. Circular ones, in addition to the outline of a door which will eventually open up. The door reminds me of how none of the previous ones seem to be closing after we leave. We could leave the ruins now if we wanted to, but that would be ridiculous. We have pretty decent proof that Connor is just around the corner. In the room after this one, or the next, or the one after that. That's it. Unless there's somewhere at the bottom, other than the water. What if there is treasure? If this place is like in the old tales, then there could be. I did discover spirits to be real, after all.

I distinctly remember an idealised story about two brave, perfect heroes, climbing a huge tower that stretched up into the clouds. At the top, there was a huge stash of gold, silver, and riches beyond recognition, guarded by a fearsome dragon. The two brave warriors won, slew the dragon, and became rich. I think expecting something like that would be far too naïve though. I still don't know whether we'll survive. It depends on how difficult this and the next few rooms are.

A loud crash comes from beside me, and I turn to see Dawn standing beside a table, pushed onto its side.

"Dawn?" Edith asks. "What are you doing?"

"Resistance," she simply says. "Shields."

She drags the table by one of its legs and pulls on it to turn it the right way up again. Then, she crouches down, gets on all fours, and crawls underneath it.

“Sorry, I don’t think that’s going to work,” Edith admits.

“Why?” Dawn asks.

“Look,” Edith says, pointing at the wall on the other side of the room.

“So?” she again questions.

“The holes. Something will probably come out that we’ll have to resist.”

Dawn turns the table back onto its side so that she is between the four legs, and the tabletop faces the menacing wall ahead of us.

“Perfect,” Edith says. Oliver walks over to the other table and drags it over to the other three of us, then Edith gets behind the table with him.

“Do you think there’ll be... arrows?” Edith asks.

“Sounds about right,” I remark, not wanting to be left behind in the conversation. “It’ll probably be like the last room. Getting across to the open door.”

“Uh...” Oliver hesitates. He is behind the table to my left with Edith, but he is raising his hand into the air. He looks like he’s raising his hand to ask to speak, but no, he begins to talk. “I don’t think it’s arrows.”

“Why not?” Edith asks.

“Feel,” he commands, and the other two raise their hands, but I, still standing up, already feel it now that it has been brought to my attention. Wind. A gentle brushing, like an early morning breeze, has crept up on us, but the underground air makes it less cold than normal wind and less noticeable.

This is going to function the way the first room did, slowly becoming more and more intense, that’s for sure.

“Elias, get behind the table, please,” Edith requests. I follow, thinking it may be a good idea, but I don’t particularly like that I have to crouch down next to Dawn. Something is going on with her, that’s confirmed now, and I need to know what it is. The fact that she couldn’t tell me is an obvious sign that it is something *very* bad. I suppose I shouldn’t trust Oliver, either, as Dawn’s friend, though he

seems to be more... dragged along, unhappy to be here. He may not even know what Dawn is up to, but asking him may be worth it, regardless.

So, we find ourselves waiting again. Waiting for the wind to get stronger, which it does, but mostly waiting for the door to open, so we can walk through.

“Hold on,” Dawn suddenly says. “Why are we waiting here?”

She gets up and walks forward. The force on our bodies is intense now, clearly felt on every inch of our bodies, but it doesn’t inhibit movement—not yet, anyway.

“Elias, c’mon.”

I stand up, and she once again begins pulling the table, this time by the edge of its surface. “We can wait at the door until it opens.”

“It probably won’t open if we’re there,” Oliver argues. “Last time it only opened after we all went to the back.”

“There are no blocks to sense we’re standing there,” Dawn argues back.

“Well, it’s worth a try, isn’t it?” Edith says, and she pushes her table, with Oliver, towards the door. We all end up in front of it, and standing up too, waiting for it to open, with the tables beside us. I’m almost certain this isn’t going to work, but like Edith said, it’s worth a try.

Before long, the force on our bodies becomes far too strong for comfort, and it actually becomes hard to stay standing up, as if we’re about to take off and fly away with the wind. I think we would if it weren’t for the controlled conditions in the room and the fact that we soon crouch down and hide behind the tables, seeking solace from the aggressive wind bursting from the holes.

*Resistance.* So we will need to persevere, heading towards the open door, going against the winds, I assume. But it seems a little too... *tame?* It may be excruciating, infuriating, or even impossible, but both previous challenges had something else. Poison, being crushed, falling off the edge. A chance of death, a perilous aspect. I can only wonder and worry about what this room’s one will be.

“This is stupid,” Dawn comments with an exasperated sigh. “I wish the doors would open already so we could get on with this.”  
*With this? Get on with what exactly, Dawn?*

“I’m sure it’ll open soon,” Edith consoles her. I agree with Edith; however, it’s not long until we find out that the wind isn’t done yet. Before long, the force has become so strong that it starts *pushing* the tables. They begin to move, and our entire bodies move with it. I hear a loud scrape, wood against stone, and I turn to see Edith and Oliver, metres behind us, suddenly propelled by a powerful gust of wind. “Push it!” Edith shouts, crawling forwards with Oliver, trying to regain distance. It doesn’t work, and we’re next to lose control and get sent backwards. Within a moment, we’ve lost stability, and Dawn and I find ourselves shoved against the wall. The table is shaking, the tabletop coming loose from the legs. So, despite the smart idea, we’re going to have to survive this on our own.

Then the door opens, as all four of us are pressed against the opposite wall. It’s almost a joke, mocking us, opening up as soon as it isn’t possible for us to get in. Then the legs of our table *do* come loose, and the wooden board slams onto us, making me groan a little at the abrupt pain.

I hear the other ones break too and the parts don’t go away, making our situation far worse. The only thing that stays put is the statue of the Yew tree, defiant and strong in the centre of the room. It truly embodies its power.

Right now, it feels like I’m lying on the floor because the force is so strong, pushing me onto the wall. If it were the floor, I could stand up, but no. It is wind, and I am on a wall, so if I tried that, I would fall flat on my face.

“What can we do?” I say to myself, but my frustration makes my words audible, and Edith provides an answer.

“This represents Yew. So, there’s very little we can do to make this easier. We just need to walk, and resist.”

Dawn and I push the pieces of the table aside, and so do the other two. Edith, as if she weren’t already our automatic, altruistic leader,

is the most qualified to handle this situation, so we all act in unison under her authority. We all begin walking, the way anyone would, except each movement is an exhausting trial, like walking through thick mud. It drains our energy, maybe even faster than our countless jumps in the previous room. Maybe we *should* have saved some of that bread.

I lose my balance, and the wind pushes me back onto the wall, and I lose all my progress. *Great.* I try again, and again, but every time, I trip or slip, and the sheer, unnatural force of the wind pushes me back. I'm losing my patience, which is probably by design. The others aren't doing any better than I am.

"Can't you use your shields?" I ask Edith after far too long deciding whether to say it or not. Edith would've already if it would work, she's not stupid, but I can't find a reason for why it wouldn't work.

"Well... again, it's worth a try." I move across the wall, Dawn still next to me, until we're all crammed together, with Edith forming a shield with us behind it. The light forms a thin barrier, the shape of an oval, and her hands, fingers open, glow with an outline of brighter, more potent light. I notice now the way the light ripples, a soft, repeating pattern going out, away from her hands. You can only see it when you look *very* closely, which I do now out of awe, seeing the barrier of energy directly in front of my eyes. It seems impossible that such a thing can withstand anything, but somehow, it does, making the force upon my body vanish and easing the pressure upon my limbs. The shield stretches from above our heads to beyond our ankles, so all I feel now is a gentle sensation on my feet. It even bends back a bit, making a shallow dome to keep us still.

"Stay near me," Edith says, and she starts walking forward, slowly enough. We all follow her movement, and it works, so we're on the other side of the room before I know it. We all look at each other, because now that we're here, we have no idea what to do. The enormous barrier in front of us makes it impossible to get through the door.

"We can run into the doorway," Dawn suggests. "As soon as you

bring the shield down.”

So, Edith pulls the energy back, and the shield begins to shrink in size. I’m not able to see her completely absorb it, though, because the second it is withdrawn, the full force of the room’s wind is back on us, and we stagger backwards helplessly until we’re toppling backwards at full speed, and we don’t stop... “Put your hands— Catch your—” I yell. *Self*. I swing my arms backwards at the last second, catching myself. My palms sting now, but that’s it, so I’ve saved myself from any further pain, as have the others.

“Sorry about that idea,” I apologise, my voice greatly dropping in volume from my last sentence.

“It’s okay,” Edith says. “None of us are hurt.”

“So, then. How are we going to get across?” Dawn asks.

“Original plan?” proposes Oliver.

“Yeah, I don’t think it can—”

A scream of pain unexpectedly enters my ears.

I turn my head to see an arrow, long and thin, made of wood, with a piercing, metal tip, and a finely crafted fletching. The arrow is stuck inside Edith’s shoulder. Red blood oozes from the wound, the metal point having torn through Edith’s tunic and into her pink, damaged flesh. I can’t bear to look at it, so I avert my eyes.

Edith was right about the arrows. And she is the one who is paying the price. She makes a series of unrecognisable noises, whines, howls, shrieks, and cries. There are only a couple of words that make sense to me, which are “help”, “hurt”, and “why”. *Why?* My mind begins to spiral, and I feel like I’m falling through it.

“Let’s go back,” I blurt out. We need to get her to safety, save her from this suffering, but for some reason... she stops. The sounds stop, reduced to a quiet sniff and heavy breathing.

“No,” she says, her voice cold and stern. “I can get healed later. We need to find Connor. He could be dying right now.”

“But, you...” I start to respond, before she interrupts.

“Please. For my *brother*, Elias.”

That's enough to change my mind. He's not just my friend; this is and has never just been about me. Connor is a brother, too, and I couldn't agree more with what she's saying. It still seems strange, though, and although resisting pain seems very Yew, that's *not* her ability. Did Oliver use *his* ability on her? To make her see the situation clearly, like we did, so that now she sees logic, and what she wants and needs. It's not important right now, regardless.

"Okay. Shield."

Edith creates the barrier again, and she forms it into the same shape as before. Within seconds, another arrow shoots out of the wall, heading towards us, about to hit me, before it stops as it comes into contact with Edith's Yew shield. We have safety.

"I have an idea," Dawn says, her voice soft and calm. "Let's do what we did before."

So we walk forward, against the horde of arrows that starts to fly at us. It's harder, now, with these, and even though they can't touch us, each one inflicts fear on us, a rush of panic, because, well, that's only a natural response to an arrow flying towards you. They seem to slow down, though, spiking and then reducing in numbers as we make our way to the centre of the room. We have only moved a feeble distance in the fear, stress, and for Edith, pain. I count our steps as we walk across. *One, two, three. Four... five, six. Seven...* It goes on and on, until we find ourselves in the same position as we were in before, clueless. But Dawn said she had an idea.

She seems to begin to follow it, getting down from her upright position to lie down, I think she's about to be pushed back, but she grabs the edge of Edith's shield before she does. It almost startles me, seeing someone touch it. It doesn't seem like it should be tangible, even though it evidently is. She pulls her body under the shield, and soon she has made it. She's through the doorway, completely inside the passageway beyond.

"You guys go!" she says, and I quickly copy her movement, sliding underneath the shield and emerging on the other side. Oliver does the same, and soon the three of us are now separated from Edith by a

green wall of light.

“Now, make a smaller shield—even if you get pushed back—so it can fit through,” Dawn commands, taking control of the situation. She does, and lurches backwards, and is almost shot by *another* arrow, flying less than an inch away from her thigh, but she forms a new barrier, taller and thinner than the last, and she finally reaches the end, stepping into the hallway.

Just like last time, the wind and arrows stop, leaving only a wall massacred by arrows and Edith’s injury as evidence of the bleak events. We all sit down and remain in silence. I’m beginning to get sick of this place. Hate it. At this exact moment, a feeling I recognise fills my mind. However, it seems unrelated to my previous thoughts.

It’s the feeling I once described as death. Now, it is only a dull sensation, but it works in the same way. It alerts me to the presence of the dead. I focus on the feeling, and before long, I can see him. Rowan, looking as he did before, a magnificent blue. He stands before me as if he has been waiting. How long has he been here? Have I let him go unnoticed?

“Rowan,” I whisper.

“Finally, Elias! Listen! The Council is coming.”

“What?” I ask, panic filling my voice.

“You just need to hurry! They’re here, right now, in the tunnel, and it won’t be long before they get to this room. But, oh, Elias, you should never have come here in the *first* place, it’s dangerous! Far more dangerous than you can even imagine.”

“How’d they even find us?” I ask him, unsure of how any of this makes sense.

“Chief Tiberius, the Hazel Council member. He tracked your scent.”

“Oh.” I didn’t expect to be found because of my smell, out of all things.

“Just go! I’ll guide you after I check back on the Council. B-but, Elias, if I can warn you of one thing... don’t trust *them*, your friends. There’s someone here, up to something beyond both of our control,

something that will be the end of you, and it's... it's not what you think. Or *who* you think.”

But, I realise, as his words sink in, that it may very, very well be *exactly* who I think.

## 21

“Elias, who are you talking to?” Edith asks me, and she speaks casually and calmly, which is the opposite of how I feel.

“You—come!” I tell her and slide down the first step into the next room, which should be the Aspen one.

“Just me?” Edith calls out to me.

“Yes! Just for a minute or so!”

I slip down off the next step, and fear temporarily rises up inside of me. I see nothing, nothing at all. Pure darkness, only a trickle of light shining onto a section of the floor. I step out of the way, and Edith jumps down beside me.

“What is it?” Edith asks me, her voice calm. She doesn’t seem bothered about the blood dripping onto the fabric on her arm. I whisper to her when I speak, my heart still racing from the encounter with Rowan. I find it hard to digest all that he said to me, so I find myself repeating the facts again and again. *The Council is here. I’ve been found. I don’t have long left. And if anything adds up... Dawn will be the end of me.*

It all makes sense, does it not? She clearly has a connection to this place, because of her pendant, whatever that is. She came here for a reason... but could that reason *really* be to kill me? I find myself losing confidence in my suspicion now. After everything we have both been

through, after how she has treated me like anyone else, is that really possible? I can't see any other possibility, because the situation here is what it is.

Dawn is not here, to find Connor, as she said herself, and as was evident from the start due to her non-existent relationship with him. Instead, she is here to do something she cannot tell me. *And*, someone is doing something uncontrollable which will cause my death—one of my friends—as Rowan put it. Then, the pendant? That must be connected somehow. And the Council is right behind me. So, there's an undesirable outcome in both directions, forwards and back, unless... unless, I do something. We do something. So I try and explain it all to Edith.

"I spoke to a spirit. The Council is nearby. And we can't trust Dawn."

"We should get to the bottom, as soon as possible," Edith quickly states. "We can lose the others, reach the bottom and find Connor. Then you'll be innocent, and the Council won't be a problem."

"Let's go, then," I say, agreeing with her surprisingly thorough, immediate course of action. I am about to begin making my way into the darkness of the Aspen room, even though Rowan said he'd guide me, until Dawn jumps down, landing right next to Edith.

"What're you two conspiring about?" Dawn asks us, possibly with no idea that we are, in fact, plotting against her. So she stays, for now. But something in my mind tells me we must get rid of her, as soon as we can.

\* \* \*

It seems to me that this room starts its challenge immediately. There is no light, but after seconds of stumbling around, we feel walls, and they are everywhere, twisting and turning wherever they can. I feel I know a word for it, from somewhere in my mind, remembering the long, summer days of my childhood, playing in between piles of straw. The word was "maze". This room, however,

turns out to be a darker, more unpleasant kind of maze.

Knowing that my spirit friend will soon come to show me the way, I hesitate before going in, and Dawn goes ahead. She doesn't go far, however, without looking back, questioning why I'm not following her. So I do, and we walk into the dark maze together. Edith and Oliver follow too, but we somehow lose them inside the maze. It's an unpleasant feeling to have them gone, vanishing without a trace and leaving me with her. And it's probably my fault, too, walking too quickly and making them lose track of me, or something along those lines.

So, I am left with Dawn, I can hear her hands tracing along the walls, feeling where to go. I have no evidence that this is the Aspen room, but it seems very Aspen, depriving you of sight so you must rely on your mind to make your way through the winding network of hallways. It has one similar element to the Hazel room, because at one point, Dawn feels *nothing* in one direction, and says she thinks it is the edge.

Then, we start hearing the noises. At first, Dawn says it must be the other two. I don't say a word in response, but it isn't just footsteps. Shuffling, *growling*, heavy breathing, disturbing, sudden bursts of many steps. There is something *alive* in the maze, which makes sense because it being safe is too good to be true. Every second, I am waiting for a monstrous creature to pounce on me, tear me to shreds, but it hasn't happened. Not yet.

It has only been a couple of minutes, but should be enough to get through a dark room. But the maze is designed so that it feels like it goes on forever, and it seems much larger than the other rooms. By now, we have probably walked in circles a few times. Still, it won't be a problem any more, because a faint blue glow creeps up behind me, until a levitating human figure of the same colour swoops round, and lights up the passageway, though only for me. I can see the cold stone floor and walls, which turn out to be tame, bare and lifeless.

The glow is minimal, though, and tints everything a blue light, which doesn't help, but Rowan himself is blindingly bright in this

environment, so all I need to do is follow him.

“Good, you’ve started. I’ll find the way, and you can... I guess you can explain to *her*,” Rowan tells me. The least I can do for his help is do what he says. The spirit phases through the walls, searching around, leaving me back in the dark with the girl who will kill me.

“Dawn. We’ve got a spirit helping us now.”

“Really, wow!” I hate how genuine her voice is. I hate how I almost befriended her, liked her. But most of all, I hate the thought, the idea, that suddenly appears in my head, even though... *it’s necessary*.

“Yeah. He can— walk through walls, and stuff, so... so he’ll tell me and I’ll tell you where to go.”

“Good,” she replies. “I *really* don’t want to come into contact with that creature. And, hopefully the spirit can bring us to the others first.”

I think Rowan’s just planning on getting me as far away from the Council as he can. I have no clue how he thinks we can deal with Dawn. I’m not very worried about Edith and Oliver, though, because of Edith’s ability. She saved me, and possibly the others in the Hazel room, and she single-handedly led us through the Yew one. I can’t even imagine being here now if it weren’t for her, so I trust that the two of them will be safe and will make their way into the next room. It’s easier this way, anyway, for what I’m going to do next.

When Rowan gets back, he starts walking ahead of Dawn slowly feeding me the route. Every time he turns, I whisper “left” or “right” to Dawn, and she goes in that direction. Then the growling returns, getting louder, and under the spirit’s dim light, which only I can see, I see two red eyes, around the corner, on a monstrous, deformed, and *gruesome* face, resembling a mammal’s, that will surely haunt my dreams for years. And when Rowan turns right, I give a direction to Dawn.

I spit out, “R—*left*.”

And after doing so, I swiftly turn to the right in a violent, powerful

motion, following Rowan, who hasn't even noticed a thing, slowly gliding onward like a silent, unwavering soldier, leaving me to taste the fresh guilt that plagues my mind. What on earth made me do this? I don't understand... and my legs feel stiff. I'm unable to turn back, unable to head running back to my friend who needs *my* help. My mouth tries to call out to her, I want to scream and cry. But just as my legs trudge onwards, my mouth is forced tightly shut. I cannot do anything. Bitter tears come streaming from my eyes, but I cannot act according to the pain that I feel. I am simply left with a fire that rages on in my mind.

Even after all this time, since the fateful day at the training centre, it seems too soon, and nothing like what I ever imagined. No blood, no weapon, no attack. Just pure betrayal, and full control over the situation. And I know that she is dead, because my mentor saw it. Mason, the Council, and all of them were *right*. Maybe I am cursed. But I hardly think that this has anything to do with such minor things like my ability. Because the vision was right, and it seems like it had nothing to do with Willowbane. Because I was twisted to begin with.

Because *I* killed someone.

\* \* \*

I emerge from the Aspen room before I know it, and I'm already jumping down the next set of huge steps that separate each room from the next, following Rowan, still ahead of me, not even bothering to glance back. My mind simply can't process what's happened. It's frozen, but it seems to have shifted its focus to what is in front of me instead. A voice inside of me tells me to forget, makes me move on quickly to the matters at hand.

A huge statue of a Willow tree is in the centre of the room, and all my eyes can look at is the multitude of thin copper chains, each about the width of a necklace and a soothing blue-green in colour.

There's a stark contrast between this room and the last; this one is peaceful and bright, whilst the last was horrifically grim. Especially because of the great speed with which I traversed the previous room, thanks to Rowan, this whole experience feels like a rush from bad to good, from dangerous to safe.

But safety isn't the only feeling that this room invokes in me. There's disappointment, too, because, *still*, Connor isn't here. I'm beginning to honestly believe that he's fallen into the water and is dead; otherwise, well, he's in the room after this, the Holly room, the last one left.

Following Rowan directly, I walk through the fake leaves of the willow tree, the cool copper tracing my skin and sliding over me until I'm fully inside. There's a small, round table, only big enough for two, by the side of the Willow tree's twisting, carved trunk.

"Sit," Rowan commands me, and I do, pulling out a stool, not unlike the one in my training room. It's strange how they can be made just the same way now as they were hundreds of years ago. I realise that Rowan could know about this place, this prison, and what if... maybe it was a prison for him? I did think the water looked like a huge cauldron, ready to release a spell, but there probably wasn't water to begin with; after all, it has definitely risen. What if he was a prisoner? Or even, this prison could have been made specifically for him, for *us*, with our Willow ability? Well, *ugh*, *Willowbane*.

"Elias."

I look up, and where I expect to see Rowan, I see a *red* spirit, sat in front of me. I physically jump. It was Rowan's voice, though, and I realise he's still here, appearing now at my side.

Slowly, a realisation starts to dawn. Is the Willow room not about wisdom, or the future, but... spirits? Or rather, our ability, the one that everyone calls a curse? Could this even be possible? Is this evil spirit part of the room?

"Elias! Focus."

Right. I did it again. "Look at this," he says, his transparent hand

gesturing to, and phasing through, a strange-looking board on the table. It's a wooden square, but it is divided into smaller squares, following a checkered pattern, some black and some white. There are peculiar-looking carved white figures on my side of the board, and on the spirit's... well, the spirit's pieces are red and translucent, as if all of them are spirits themselves.

"How are those...?" I ask, unable to finish my sentence.

"Items come with us, well, at least, the illusion of them. It's why all of us spirits aren't just naked."

I'm desperate to ask more questions, because nothing makes sense. Here Rowan is, acting like he knows everything. I think he *does*. He wanted to guide me, so he knew the Aspen room was a maze, and he seems to know about this room, this spirit, too. He does know about this place, certainly, because he said that it was dangerous. He did basically warn me that *everything* was horribly wrong, though. This place, my secrecy, and my friends. Nothing has gone right for me, not since I became cursed. The brief period of normality, camaraderie and joy is all gone now. Even that, it's almost as if I was teased with it, given something to hang onto before it was snatched away. So much for the trees *wisely* assigning abilities. It seems to me that the trees are cruel tormentors, but I know really that they're just plants—unthinking, but *good*, beautiful and serene.

"Boy," the red spirit spits, and I realise it's the third time I've needed to be awakened from my countless, constant thoughts. I don't want to look up and I don't. I don't look the despicable spirit in the eye, instead staring at the chequered board. The spirit doesn't seem to mind, but points a gnarled finger at one of my pieces. There's a row of identical, smaller ones in front of a row of taller, differently shaped ones.

He keeps pointing at one of the smaller ones, and I genuinely have no idea what he's doing.

"It's a game," the spirit tells me. His voice is unpleasant, sounding like he has a sore throat and a blocked nose, on top of a voice which is deep and gravelly to begin with. He wheezes with every breath and

snorts violently every couple of seconds. It's so putrid that I begin to feel bad for him having to live like this. Well. Not *live*.

"Alright, enough of this!" Rowan suddenly bursts out. "What do you want? I'll do anything you want, just let the boy through! There are people after him, and—"

"No need for that," the spirit says. "I'm trying to tell him what to do, anyway. The door only opens once you get checkmate. Move that pawn two squares forward," he demands, hovering his finger over one of the smaller pieces, one at the centre of the row.

"No," I reply. "This is the *Willow* room; I'm not going to be that stupid."

I know nothing about this *game*, having never seen it before, or even read about it, and so obviously I have no experience with it, but my judgment is good enough to guess that he's trying to trick me. Having met red spirits before, it's predictable to me.

"Elias..." Rowan mutters. "That isn't a bad move. Do it."

"Why would *he* help me?" I ask him incredulously.

"I don't know," he admits with a sigh. "Just go with it."

*Brilliant*. I do what I'm told, anyway, and move the pawn forward as the evil spirit said. He does the same, moving a spectral pawn forward so that it's facing mine.

"Now get your queen," he says, pointing to a tall piece with what looks like a round, bowl-like crown on the top with a small sphere in the middle bulging out. He traces his hand diagonally from my queen to the edge of the board, and without questioning, I place my queen where his finger stops. It seems like this piece has more moving capability than the pawn. It makes sense, when thinking about their names.

There is now only a single square gap between my queen and a red pawn, so for a second, I think I've been dragged into a trap, Rowan literally pushing me in, because I think that the pawn will go two squares forward again. I don't even know what happens if two pieces go onto the same square, but I'm sure it's not favourable to me. And because of that, I'm relieved when the spirit moves one of his other

pawns instead of the one facing my queen. He moves the one next to the one he moved before, so his two tallest pieces are completely exposed.

Next, he signals to one of the pieces on either side of the middle two. "Bishop over here," he commands gruffly, making me move it diagonally to the same row as my queen. Then he places a horse-headed piece in front of his queen, which is still in its starting position. Then he makes me move my pawn diagonally onto one of his, and he takes his pawn and thrusts it aside, so mine is in the place of his.

"Hurry up!" Rowan shouts. "You could be done by now!"

"Not going down without a bit of a fight," the spirit states.

"You said you'd help him!" Rowan shouts.

"I am," the spirit shouts, his laugh maniacal.

I get up from the stupid stool, and I turn to Rowan.

"I can jump into the water! It's close, there's only a room left!"

"No," Rowan mutters. "You mustn't go in there..."

Then he repeats the first word, and so does the evil spirit, both of them screaming it.

"*No!*" they shout, as a dark creature approaches us. At first, I think it's the monstrous thing from the Hazel room, and it is certainly a mammal, but it's much larger than that. In a way, it looks like a gigantic dog, with a chunky, colossal body and thick brown fur. For how big it is, it moves surprisingly fast, and before I know it, its face is near mine, panting heavily, and growling, revealing a row of gleaming, sharp teeth. It has a deep, black nose at the end of a large, protruding muzzle of a lighter colour. Its beady eyes are coloured amber, and it has small, round ears on the side of its head. It's a bear, the kind of wild beast so elusive that you normally only hear of them rather than see them.

But I know this is no beast. A beast wouldn't come charging in and attack me unprompted. It also wouldn't place its huge paw on me gently to avoid crushing me, and it wouldn't be followed by an unrecognisable woman, whose face is obscured. This bear is a

Council member; it is Chief Tiberius. Which means that it's over. All of it is.

A warm hand touches my forehead, and a drop of cold liquid is forced down my throat, and then I can feel my consciousness being sapped away, my mind becoming slower and slower. The last thought that crosses my mind as I drift off, and as my adventure ends, is how ironic it is. I'm being captured a wall away from where Connor must be.

But worst of all, I was captured in the Willow room. By the *Hazel* chief.

## 22

I wake up in darkness, the same way I left. But I can feel everything now, including the hard, cold stone of the floor. I can feel the air, too; hot air around my body, and I can *really* feel the damp puddle of sweat that I have been left in.

Because there is no point getting up, I lie here for so long that I get used to the rhythm of water dripping from the ceiling. But eventually I feel I can't stay like this for any longer; I begin to get restless and it feels like I'm going to die in here if I don't move. Maybe that's their goal. I stand up, eventually. To be fair, even after thinking that, it takes me a while to urge my broken body to get up. Maybe the past few days or so have finally caught up to me. Sleeplessness, exertion, exhaustion, it all lands on me now, so my body feels stiff, like a rotting mess on the ground.

I indulge my mind for a second. The bear was just another test, and I woke up, so I passed it, and now, I am in the Holly room. Connor is here. Injured, yes, but delighted to see me, waiting for the moment I get up so he can speak to me.

With the power of these thoughts, I pull myself up, manually, limb by limb, until I can stand up properly, and I am, unsurprisingly, not in the ruins, not in the presence of my friend. I am in a small cell, one of the town's ones, which is moist and unexpectedly humid, carved

into pure stone, underneath the town. My cell is tight and constraining, so much so that I can only just lie down without touching the walls. If I was an inch or so taller, my feet and head would be touching the walls. I can only just stand up, too, which perfectly demonstrates the bare minimum conditions of this cell. Across one wall, there is a small, locked, metal door with bars made out of degrading wrought iron. There is nowhere that I can go, nothing that I can do, and right out of the corner of my eye, I notice a guard. Well, a prison guard. Not like the noble people who guard the Haven.

*Hang on.* Wasn't I supposed to be banished from the Haven? Instead, I'm locked up in this miserable place, and frankly, I'd prefer it if I were kicked out. Trying to avoid being eaten alive by dragons at least seems a little more stimulating than waiting to starve in a cell.

Maybe they're just waiting to bring me to the border, though. It isn't every day that someone's kicked out, so they probably need to prepare. However they punish me, at least my mind can be at rest, assured that I deserve it. Mason's insane, bulging eyes make sense to me now, after seeing that *thing* in the Aspen maze. Even thinking about it instils fear in me, my mind half expecting it to creep up behind me. It doesn't, but someone does, and I jump.

"Relax, Elias," a voice says, and it belongs to my supposed mentor, Chief Clementine. Both of them have failed me. "It's good to see you again," she claims. "I bet you're wondering what's going on."

Well, maybe. *I suppose so.*

"I have some good news; you are *not* going to be banished from the Haven."

A rush of relief floods over me, but it's only temporary. Running off could've made things worse, and now, I may very well be sentenced to death. It's never happened before in my lifetime, and it doesn't seem like something that would happen in the perfect Haven, but it still feels like she's about to tell me it, because otherwise, am I just going to be imprisoned, the standard punishment?

"You won't be imprisoned, either." There we go. Execution for

sure. "Tell me," she begins, "have you ever heard of severance?"

"I know what it means," I reply. Isn't it, like... cutting something off from something else?

"As a word? Or a process?" she asks me.

"A word."

"Well," she responds, her tone grim. "It is the punishment that the Council has chosen for you." All I can do is wait for her to speak again, even though I'm desperate for an explanation. However, I'm not ready for when the words do start pouring out, too fast for me to process them, and too fast for me to feel anything about them; they just flow from her mouth, and I find myself struggling to keep track of all that she's saying.

"Severance is the process of removing one's ability. And it's not like the Awakening, either. Before the Awakening, children already have a connection to the energy. Severance removes the *coed* from you entirely, and it, well, it transfers it into an object instead. Once that happens, your ability will be gone. You're lucky that you're young, mind you. You *will* survive. Older people become so dependent on the energy that they can't live without it, but you will, which is why I agreed to this punishment. Consider yourself very fortunate, Elias. You'll stay here, and you'll live."

So, I will live. But I will be powerless. I will be a leftover human, probably working on the farms, doing labour, because I can do nothing else. I will be ridiculed, and things may even be worse than they are now. I'll go from cursed to powerless, and I will die with no ability. I will live with no ability, too, but I will never truly live, not really.

"I'm not going, anyway," I spit.

"You aren't. Not until the end of this week, at least. That is when your severance is scheduled."

"I did nothing wrong," I plead with her. After all this time, after everything that has happened, after the death of Dawn, too. I don't know how I find a place in my mind that lets me say that, but I do. I somehow do.

“We both know what they think you’re guilty of. As long as the crop failure doesn’t stop, and as long as Connor doesn’t show up, the people and the rest of the Council will think that you are cursed, and are corrupting the Haven, too.”

She sighs, and it is a long, heavy sigh. “Do I even need to explain this?” she asks, and she doesn’t, but I want her to explain it anyway. I want a voice to fill the silence, to distract me from the piling dread. “You aren’t even receiving the full prisoner treatment,” she tells me. “You still have your regular clothes, your satchel. You’ll be having three meals a... Elias.”

“What?”

“You don’t need to be so... upset. This may all look bleak, but trust me when I say that things will get better; they always do.”

But I don’t want things to get better, I don’t want any possible future I can see at all. I want everything to return to the way it was. Good for the most part, but most importantly, right. The way that things should be and had always been. But I have reached a dead end in life and, in this maze, there is no going back.

So, I look away from this woman who I do not even really know, I turn to the corner of my cell, and I cry.

\* \* \*

Chief Clementine is gone. I am alone, in the presence of another person, the guard, but still completely and utterly alone. My back is against the wall, and my legs are sprawled across the floor, and this is all that there is: me and the cell. Time passes by at an achingly slow pace and I almost begin to wish that it would be my severance already; but I don’t know how long it’s been, or how long it will be until then.

Seconds, minutes, hours, days, they all merge into one, until I’ve thought for so long that I can’t think any more, and I just want something to happen. I just want an event or experience or sensation to fill the empty time, but nothing happens. And there is nothing I

can do to make something, anything happen. In frustration, I hit the floor with my hand, and the floor returns the gesture by inflicting a tingling feeling on it. Pain.

I like it, in a strange way, because it feels like something different, something to end the nothingness. As much as it hurts my body, it entertains my mind, freeing it from the chains of boredom.

I do it again, swinging my hand backwards to get the feeling, to get the buzz. Again and again, I slam my arm against the stone, until my skin starts bleeding. Do I pull enough *sense* together not to hurt it any more? What am I thinking? Such stupidity, I can't risk my *life*, it's essential, essential for... *what am I thinking?* What does it matter?

I stand up, and I throw my entire body against the wall, not only to feel searing pain, but to hear something too.

It's a sound that, once I realise what it is, changes everything. A flash of warmth fills me, and before I know it, a small smile appears on my face.

I've been saved.

## 23

The sound that I hear is the sound of glass clinking. I have my bottles, I have my satchel, and best of all—*no!*

A liquid is pouring out of my satchel, and in the darkness of the prison cell, I can't tell what it is.

I feel a sudden panic. If the potion I need is currently dripping down my leg, I may as well go back to hitting my body against the cell's walls.

I take my satchel in one hand, and I begin to dig around in it with my other, feeling multiple bottles, and I realise there aren't actually *that* many shards. I just need one of them; I only need one. *Please don't be broken. Please.*

Crouching down, I take the bottles out one by one, counting four of them. There were five a couple of minutes ago. I turn to the bars of the prison to get as much light as I can, and I look inside each of them, trying to discern which is the one that I need.

First, I recognise the wisp spell, the murky brown liquid looking pitch black in the dim light. Then, a pale green liquid. It's a Birch remedy for headaches. I would have given it to Edith, but it *only* works for headaches, nothing else. I don't think anything could've helped her but an actual Healer. At least she had the sense to keep the arrow inside her, though— things could be worse if she pulled it

out and started bleeding everywhere.

I check another bottle, and again, it's not the one I want. It's a Hazel spell, a blurring. A fog comes out of the bottle when you heat it, turning everything hazy and obscured for a couple of minutes. The one we brewed at school is weak, and not very useful, anyway.

I put it aside, and I look inside the final bottle, or rather vial. It is the best of all. I have my questionably obtained strength serum! The orange-red liquid is encased inside, and I take the stopper out, ecstatically. I try to calm down,

I don't drink it yet; I need to formulate a plan. All I can think, though, is how glad I am that Connor insisted that I took it, and that he *took* them in the first place. I can still remember what he said that day. *They give them out for free. So what happens to them doesn't make a difference.*

His unusual logic and irresponsibility may have just saved my future. And his, because I know what I'm doing when I get out of this place—of course, finding Connor. And... I hesitate momentarily. *Dawn. Dawn.* I may be foolish to hang onto a sense of hope that she may still be alive, but no matter how slim the chance, it would be worth it to at least *try* to save her. I tremble. What came over me in the maze?

*It's too late, though. It's too late, it's too late, it's too late...*

But maybe... I begin to think, in a desperate search for a silver lining, since that creature was the Aspen room... what if the monster was a trick, an illusion? Was the Aspen aspect of the room just navigating through the dark, without vision, or could the creature have been part of it too? Surely it could have been.

But if it wasn't, which is just as likely...

I shake again, feeling a powerful physical reaction to my horrifying dread. My insides feel like they're being crushed under the weight of my thoughts, with a stinging feeling of pain bubbling up inside of me, and my heart beats faster and faster as tears begin to stream down my face. It all happens so fast... hazily bleeding together into an unreal stream of consciousness, so that I hardly know that is

happening. All the while, my thoughts drone on and on torturously.

*Oh, help me! There's something so wrong with me, how could I...*

*But... forget it! I just need to go to the ruins, down into the water... I mean, uh, to where Connor is.*

So, now to do exactly that. The obvious option would be to bust open the metal door, but I can *still* see a guard standing there. It's definitely a plan B, but it's risky. The Council would be alerted immediately, and everyone within a mile radius would be after me. I think I'm in town, in the prison there, so it's conveniently close to many, many people. Someone could easily pour that potion into my mouth again, the one that made me fall into some kind of sleep. It's probably Aspen, pausing my mind somehow.

So, since I can't escape through the front door, I'll have to use the serum to get out of here more discreetly. Could I dig through the stone? It would require an enormous amount of strength, which I don't quite believe that a measly bottle of the serum can give me... and it just wouldn't make sense. Maybe if there was something *behind* the prison, I could smash through it, like a wall, but if I just want to dig down and then up to break out somewhere else, I'm going to need tools, and a lot of time, neither of which I have. I'm going to try, anyway, and if it doesn't work, the door it is.

I lift the vial up to my mouth and pour its contents past my lips. As the inside of my mouth encounters such a large mouthful of the liquid, it burns, like I'm drinking fire. I keep going, though, until not a drop of it remains inside the bottle, and there's a stream of the stuff gushing down inside of me. Then, the sensation of heat suddenly intensifies, and I splutter, in a bodily attempt to remove the vile substance from my body. I try to keep my mouth closed, whilst my eyes water heavily. I won't let the stuff leave me, swallowing what's not already down my throat with a powerful, unpleasant gulp.

Instantly, the same effects I felt with Connor return; my veins popping out, my muscles expanding, and my heart rate increasing, but these effects are amplified a hundredfold. I can see my veins, green and bulging, and every part of my body starts inflating; it feels

like I'm going to burst. All the while, my eyes are watering, and my mouth still feels awfully red-hot. My heartbeat begins to sound less like a rhythm and more like a long sound, each beat, each moment sending jolts through my body. I'm going to explode, and I can't help but lament on how stupid I've been. *You're supposed to take a single drop for a reason.* But what good would that have done? None at all.

I wait, in horrific discomfort, for I don't know what else to do. However, within a couple of minutes the unpleasant sensations subside; my mouth feeling cooler, and my muscles finally stopping growing. A new feeling appears, a tightness inside of my torso, but most of the side-effects are now weak enough for me to ignore them.

I still feel them, no doubt, but I'm able to orchestrate myself amidst the agony. I pick myself up, and I look down at my body. It looks revolting, my limbs replaced with huge, tight bags of flesh, at least double their normal size, making the bonier parts of my body, like my fingers, look tiny, meagre in comparison. And the veins, *oh*, the veins. It's like I can almost feel my blood rushing through them, a pale but sickly colour spreading over my skin, twisting and turning in every direction to form a huge conglomeration of veins that look like they're about to pop. I ignore all of it, though, because of this primal, bestial instinct that now enters my mind; one urging me not to *use* my strength like last time, but a desire to destroy, to damage, to smash.

I drive this *feeling* into what is in front of me; the wall. I take one of my legs and I swing it backwards. I blink, and it's at the wall already, my boot colliding with the also solid stone, and within another instant, I'm drawing it back, leaving a mark resembling the front of my foot, driven into the wall. Flecks of stone drop down to the floor. Cracks spread out from this single dent, this single kick wounding the wall severely, and all it took was a swift hit, a bang.

*A bang.* I can hear the guard outside my cell moving, shuffling, to see what the noise is, and I realise that I never thought this through. My massive arms, and legs! How can I even try to hide them? I shove my hands in front of my chest, and I face the wall to hide the crack,

but my legs are huge and very visible, tightening at my knee in a way that'll make the guard know it's not *normal*. There are shards of glass shattered on the floor, too, and I don't think I ever picked up those bottles, either.

I feel eyes on me, and in the corner of my eye, I see someone peek inside, but all the person does is glance at me, see my face. "Keep it down in there," he growls, and then, I'm alone again.

I scoop up my things, put them inside my satchel, and kick at the wall again, harder this time, to see what happens when I try. Large chunks of stone come off now, and it's *very* noticeable. If the guard comes back again it's over, at least it is if I can't dig out in time. So, I take this as an incentive to hurry, slamming my foot into the wall again and again and again, and before I have time to process it all, the entire wall is coming down, but there's more stone behind it.

I was right, this place is carved into the stone underground. *Just* like the ruins. And didn't we think they were a prison, too? An old, abandoned one. Except all the defences there still work perfectly fine, and again, they seem to be designed for keeping people *out*.

It doesn't matter, not right now. I continue on, and multiple chunks of rock hit me. I didn't drink a Yew potion which would have protected me from pain, so it does hurt, but maybe not as much as it should. The rocks falling on me feel light, probably because of my strength, but that doesn't stop my trousers from tearing and bruising appearing, between the rips, on my legs. It isn't even working, and the guard's voice from the other room makes me more concerned.

"Keep it down, Willowbane!"

The hole I'm creating is going *down*. I've been kicking into the corner of the room, and I see the narrow hole is slowly descending, and I don't know what else to do, and I can't think straight because of well... let's just say that something's telling me I *really* need to get down. I was going to go up, after a while, to escape at first... but no. Down, down, down, and forward a bit, that's where I need to go! I mean, who actually cares about escaping, or any of that nonsense?

I laugh. After making my way further down into the solid ground,

as intended, an opening, almost filled with *water* is revealed, underneath the stone. For some reason, I laugh maniacally. Because I taste victory, at long last. *Elias is so close to being mine.*

## 24

Without thinking, following some kind of impulse, I dive into the water. The yell of the guard behind me tells me that I made the right choice.

Something feels wrong, or rather, something felt wrong. Off. I don't understand some of the thoughts that were inside my own head. Is this a side effect of the potion, or has everything that's happened to Connor, to Dawn, driven me insane?

I guess I don't have time to think about it right now. Somehow, I've found myself here, down in this water underground, which is surely the same pool of water I saw looking down from the rooms in the ruins. The long passageway that stretched from Trail's End to the ruins must have led all the way back to the town all along, with this place secretly hidden down here for all these years. I need to save Connor from this place. That is, if he's even here. And Dawn, definitely Dawn, if she's somehow still alive. I just can't believe what I did. There's this monster, this pain, eating away at me, hanging over my shoulders, which makes it so hard to carry on. Guilt, like I've never felt it before, like no-one has. I can't believe what I did, sending Dawn the wrong way in the maze. I just wish I did nothing, kept her alive, even if it meant my death, it wouldn't have mattered... it *just*. I wish I were dead, I wish I were dead instead of her. Then I feel

different, disturbing, thoughts emerge: Well, no, that would be irrational. I'm more important, I'm needed. *She?* She was disposable...

Wait, stop! What are these egregious thoughts in my... *ugh!* I need to keep swimming. *Swim, Elias, swim!*

I make my way through the water, without bothering to try to go up to breathe, but I push through the liquid with my strengthened limbs, pushing, pushing, pushing. Then I see someone, just *there*, floating in the water.

The water suddenly feels so much heavier, and pain starts to seep into my body, into my *muscles*. I guess the initial side effects weren't even everything, even though some of them are still with me now. My mouth is still vaguely hot, and my chest feels even tighter, like my insides are about to break through my ribcage, although the swelling in my limbs is gone now, I suppose that's something. But the pain is so much worse, and all I want to do is swim towards her, save her, as the little air in my lungs slowly stops being able to sustain me.

*Edith!*

Her body lies limp in the water, surrounded by a cloud of red blood. An arrow is still wedged inside her shoulder, piercing through the worn fabric of her light blue tunic and staining it a crimson colour. She is facing slightly away from me, towards the side, but I catch a glimpse of her open eyes, wide and fearful. *Good, she's not dead.* I can save her; I just need to keep going, I just need to...

*Edith...*

*Edith...*

I desperately swim towards her, each movement sending a new wave of agonising pain through my body, every second increasing

the speed of my racing, heavy heart. I feel myself falling, descending into the depths of the water. I *feel* every ounce of my blood, its movement, its weight, and I feel so heavy, dropping like a corpse, slowly leaving reality behind.

My body implores me to stop now, to go to the surface, but I don't, and the further I swim, the more impossible it seems. I don't want to go up there, anyway. I want to go to Edith, the altruistic leader, the selfless protector, the faultless, courageous girl: Connor's sister, my friend. I don't have many of them left, but this one is right before my eyes, so I go on, craning my neck to see her, so I stay on track. The motion becomes automatic, leaving only suffering on my mind, the bursting of my lungs, the yearning for air, the serum's side effects, the everlasting afflictions, made worse with every movement I make with my legs and my arms.

After an *eternity* of bitter, loathsome torture, I reach the girl. I want to say her name. "Edith, Edith!" I would shout out if I could, crying out for her survival and her life. But I can't, I can't speak. My voice is imprisoned, forced into silence. So instead, I tap her shoulder weakly, receiving another shot of pain. Her head turns with a twitch, in an unnatural, sudden kind of way. Now her eyes stare into mine. And my stomach drops.

Her irises are a deep red, matching the colour of the liquid gushing out of her mouth. They illuminate the dark water, glowing with a familiar light. She speaks to me. Her voice is deep, cruel, and raspy.

"Hello, *Elias*," she says.

Then I see a flash of red.

## 25

I find myself in the Grove. Surrounded by rich, verdant shades and bright light, it's hard to recall why I'm here. I don't care. I am sat on the ground, and I feel the blades of wet morning grass with my hands, which I gently move around. I smile, and I decide to slowly rest my head on the ground, looking up at the sky. I hear the songs of birds, and I see them gliding around in the vast, blue world above me. *Peace*, I tell myself. *This is what peace feels like.*

A calm, mature voice interrupts my reverie, and I sit up, not wanting to appear impolite. "So, this is the place you chose," it says, and I can see it belongs to a young man, standing in front of me. He has messy brown hair, but an otherwise plain and average appearance like mine, with a standard grey tunic to match. The only thing that really stands out to me is the relaxed and youthful smile that seems to be stuck to his face. His smile reminds me of *Connor's*, something tells me, strangely, but I don't focus on that for long. Instead, I ponder his perplexing words.

I try to understand him, but I somehow reach a standstill, oblivious to the meaning of the drivel that's just poured from his mouth.

"Who..." I mutter. "Who are you?"

"I'm Rowan," he replies snappily, but then he slows down, his tone

becoming fonder. “It’s the name of a tree,” he explains. “A special one, though. They don’t have them in the Haven.”

*Not in the Haven?* I don’t know what he’s talking about, let alone what he wants with me. I can’t remember ever hearing about a so-called “Rowan” tree.

“You’re Elias,” he says, with a laugh, as if he just read my mind. *Did he?* “Don’t worry, you’re just a little disoriented, it won’t last long.”

“Oh.” I stutter. “Okay.” Abruptly, he approaches me, and we become much too close for my liking, although I’m on the ground and he isn’t. Even though I don’t want to get any closer to him, I stand up and stare at him with a suspicious look. I don’t want to be positioned below him.

“We’re special,” he informs me with a smirk, his voice only a whisper. “You know what they called us, don’t you?” And somehow, I do. I know what he’s talking about, and there’s no reason behind it.

“Willowbane,” I say, the word slipping out of my mouth before I can stop it, as if the stream of memories returning to me exits through my mouth. *Willowbane, Willowbane.* I remember the hatred that came from *that* word. I remember the nasty looks, the words of disgust. I remember lying, lying to keep my secret. Because I am cursed. Cursed with Willowbane.

“B-but special?” I question him. “They hated me.”

“Yeah,” he agrees, but I can see through his fake sympathy. “They hated us both,” he adds. “I know what it’s like, Elias. To give up everything for others. To pretend, to act, to be ridiculed just to make them accept you, without even wanting to care if they do.”

Now I can hear truth in his words. Truth, wrapped in layers and layers of pure, unbridled pain. I’m lost for words, now. I feel a surge of anger. Rowan took away my peace.

“We can take revenge now, though,” he tells me. “I have a... proposition. You and me. We work *together*... literally.”

Something feels wrong; I can’t agree with him. Despite everything, the people of the Haven are my family, or at least, they were.

“No, thank you.” I say in a straightforward manner. And meaning to move on, I flinch. A sudden question strikes my mind. “Where are we? ...I mean, why, how, are we here?”

Ignoring my questions, Rowan comes even closer to me, so that we’re breathing the same air. He’s whispering now, quieter than ever.

“I get what I want, *boy*. I always get what I want,” he threatens me, and I see his dark, brown eyes change colour for a split second. They turned red, which makes memories flood back into my head. He’s not Holly, no. Holly users’ eyes turn red when they use their abilities, but it’s a paler, more pleasant red—not a shade like that. They don’t have that unsettling feeling to them either, which I don’t think even has anything to do with tone.

That colour, it doesn’t come from the tree’s energy, but I have witnessed it before. The spirits, the red ones. But Rowan... he was *blue*. Was it somehow a trick all along? Do the colours of *valdre* mean anything at all?

I take two steps back, stumbling a little. “No, ‘Rowan’.” I taunt him, with conviction in my voice. “I’ll ask again,” I continue, and I need to try not to laugh at my own words. “Who are you?” I ask him, going on talking even now. “Who are you, really?”

Rowan’s expression turns stern, but then he lets out a laugh. “Okay, fine. I’m a big, bad spirit. *Happy?* My presence stopped your pitiful plants from growing throughout the Haven, and I took Connor and made him disappear—”

“Connor!” I shout out with a gasp, finally recalling the most important thing: my friend. “He... is he alive?” I ask, and it makes an uncomfortable feeling stir up in the deepest parts of me. Because if Rowan, this evil one, took him, he could easily be gone. Further gone than I am able to reach. I need to know the answer, at any rate.

“Alive... is a stretch.” A wave of sudden and horrifying pain rises up inside me, killing all my life and hope and joy, but it only lasts for a split second, as Rowan goes on, a wicked smile having cropped up on his face. He relishes my fear, my pain.

“But, he’s not dead. Starving, yes. But no physical damage. Yes, he’s alive, so to speak.” The sense of pain I had vanishes, replaced with an aching hope. Then my mind falls into turmoil.

*Dawn, I think. Dawn.* Won’t she too be dead? Not battered and starved like Connor, but truly, truly, gone. Torn apart by a beast, a sinister being hidden in the darkness of the maze. And it’s even worse, now, it’s somehow even worse. *Because I know that she wasn’t the wicked one, since this Rowan is.*

...*Wait, what?* Did Rowan warn me about himself? This doesn’t add up. But Dawn! Still, I surely killed her, as a result of wrongly judging her character and motives. How, how could I have done it? I always imagined my apparent murder as being a result of a mind twisted by Willowbane, but it wasn’t. Not a single part of me understands how I did it, how I killed a girl. And not just any girl, Dawn. *Dawn...*

I once thought my darkness began when I watched that last sunset as a child, the one before my Awakening. I wasn’t far off, either. *It started when my secret got out, when I became known only as cursed with Willowbane.* That was when the night began, and the day, the good times, my childhood, truly came to an end.

But I couldn’t even see the sunrise when it came to me. I couldn’t tell when the light returned, and dawn came. When she met me. When she trusted me, trusted my innocence and didn’t believe that I was ever cursed. When she accepted me, and when, even, I felt she understood me, in a way. That was when the light returned. And I missed it. I destroyed it. *Somehow.* As time goes on, it seems to be sinking in, more and more, making me wonder, *how could I have done it?*

“The same goes for Edith”, Rowan says, but he’s talking about the wrong girl. “She’ll hardly remember what happened, at least not at first.” That forces me to put aside my sorrow out of surprise. I narrow my eyes.

“So what did you do to her?” I ask, with my remaining distance fading away.

“Well, it was quite easy, really. She came right into my grasp, and I possessed her,” he explains mockingly. “I can’t leave this place, I’m trapped in the water, but she was foolish enough to slip into my hands. Terrified the poor thing, but I managed to get her to the right place.”

He’s trapped here. *He* is trapped here, so it was a prison of sorts all along. But why would he be stuck underwater, and why would the defences be backwards? I realise that I was *so* close to the answer all along. My memory has come back in full force, now, and I understand everything. All along, I thought the water could be a spell, with energy encased within. And I was half right, all along! Because the water *was* for energy, but not *coed* for, but *valdre*, the energy that Rowan himself once told me spirits are made from. So, there was no need to design the rooms to contain him, because he was already completely stuck, inside the water! The rooms, maybe they were made to keep people *out* in the first place, to protect them. My mind has gone wild, trying to make sense of his words, but he doesn’t care to give me time. He thrusts something else upon me, something worse.

“Not to discredit *you*, of course.” *Discredit me for getting Edith into Rowan’s hands?*

“What do you mean?” I ask him, my voice trembling. I feel sick.

“Trail’s End? Ring any bells?” he taunts me with a cackle. “My accomplice kindly sent the message from me to you, and you sent it to *her*. Luckily I can talk to the other spirits. They just need to make sure they don’t slip into the water.” A foul snort. His normal, pleasant appearance has vanished in my eyes, deteriorated by his transformation to hostility. Even the way he holds himself has a sickly air to it, and worst of all, the awful, awful laughing... if we’re not counting his words.

“After hearing the message, she arrived at Trail's End and made the journey all the way here, and all the way down to me. Then, of course, I split myself. A piece of me, into her. I could control her, or rather, *override* her, when I had to. It was easier to let her be herself

for the majority of the time.”

My mind reminds me of little snippets of the past, of brief, strange moments that I either didn't have the time or energy to explain. It all comes to me now, although it's all too late.

The time Edith disregarded Oliver's idea, when we were searching in the fields, and she told him to shut up: That was so out of character. And then, she *just* so happened to lead us to the ruins' entrance! That was *Rowan*, and it was no mistake. Just after that, too, she abruptly got enraged with Dawn when she revealed her pendant. It was *him*! That must mean Rowan has something against the pendant, but what? I remember the strange way that she spoke, too! When Oliver suggested voting on whether she could stay, Edith said “N-okay!”, like she couldn't decide which to spit out. All along, there was a struggle inside of her, and that time, saying “okay!”, she won.

I think this is it, but then I realise there were more signs, signs that I completely looked past, completely missed. Like when she got shot with an arrow! Any sane person would want to go back, but she insisted on staying, even though we could've split up so that some of us could go on. The way she suddenly shifted when I said we should go back. She was suffering and crying, but she suddenly recovered after that, dismissing the concept of returning to the surface with a stern “no”.

There's a problem with this whole idea, though. She was so... genuine. I never really knew her before this series of events, but she seemed so real, so caring, the stark opposite of evil. He did just say that he overrode her, but the notion of her being possessed the whole time seems... it *is*...

“Impossible,” I mutter under my breath. Rowan scoffs.

“It's not like in the fairy tales, you know. Possession is quiet. It slips in, unnoticed, and most of the time, the victim doesn't even notice. Not until it's too late, anyway, but they carry on as normal in the meantime.”

Right, so it was her, but her mind was being manipulated by Rowan, who put a piece of himself in her. Rowan, who seemed so

decent, so good. I just took it for granted that he was okay because he was blue; so were the colours arbitrary all along? It really didn't seem like it.

And I was wrong about who he spoke of in the Hazel room too! He told me not to trust the others, and while he was the main one I should've been looking out for, it was Edith, not Dawn, who couldn't be trusted among our group. Everything that I thought was all wrong! And still, none of it makes sense, because what would this spirit even want Edith for, to go through the trouble of getting me to tell her to come here... with her somehow making the full way down, alone?

"Why her?" I ask him. "Why did you need *her*, out of all people?"

"If you let me finish, you'll know! So shut up!"

I remain quiet because, as much as I despise following his words, I want answers, and he doesn't seem averse to giving out his secrets. I listen to him speak, and it all unfolds before me.

"She was only a *pawn* in my master plan. You see, the day that you were awakened, I felt it. Every spirit did. So, I knew it was time to act, because you, *Elias*, oh, well, you changed everything. Finally, a bridge was formed between the living and the dead, so I could get a word out there, to the living. An accomplice of mine spoke to me from above the water, and everything ran smoothly; the word got to the girl. She came here, and *oh*, how brave she was. But I'd call it stupid. Went through every single one of the rooms, hiding behind her pathetic shields, *just* because she thought she was supposed to! Trusted her brother's instructions more than her life, the obedient little brat! Was much quicker than all four of you, too."

Why *would* Edith go down alone? I wouldn't dare call her stupid for it, but I would never dream of descending the full thing, and certainly not alone! If she *was* stupid, she would've died, but somehow, she survived, using only her shields.

"Then, finally, a part of me escaped this place, and all I had to do after that was bring her brother along and do the whole thing again. The ruins hadn't reset yet, though, so they just had to walk through.

Then the *poor* Connor was betrayed by his own sister. Whilst he was fast asleep, the doors began to close! I left with the girl's body, leaving him at the bottom of the ruins and returning *home*. Then, as planned, you and that little gang of misfits, came to play hero and save your friend. I needed her, for him. For *you*."

So, not only did Edith go down here because of me, but I am also the reason that he wanted to do any of this in the first place! Everything falls on me, all of it! Connor's disappearance was because of me! Dawn's death was because of me! Edith's torture was because of me! Everything. Wrong. Is. My. Fault. I am the reason for... all of it.

It's the worst thing that he could have possibly said. Because the Haven, the Council, they were all right. It is all my fault. And still, the spirit goes on, but I can't imagine any purpose in his words any more.

"Of course, I had to get rid of that *Dawn* girl, with her lack of any real comedy and that wretched pendant. It would've been hard to do so as Edith, that is, without losing everyone's trust, so I found an easier method; not through her, but through *you*. Yes, Elias. I... possessed... you."

He laughs again, hysterically, and I know this is supposed to scare me, but it doesn't. It makes my world light up.

Everything changes once again in the light of this truth. Dawn didn't die because of me, not really. It was Rowan, Rowan killed her.

My mind contains an incredibly complex mix of thoughts and emotions. Intense sorrow at the thought she may still be dead, and regret that her last thought was probably against me, against what I thought I did to her. But then there's a new lightness too. Because I am not evil! Of course, of course I would never do something so wrong of my own will. I want to jump up, and laugh, and cry, all at once, because the heaviest of weights has been lifted from my shoulders.

I'm not a murderer, and although you could say so, *I* didn't kill her. Like Rowan said, possession creeps up on you, unnoticed, and I thought it was my doing all along, but it was *him*, overriding my

actions, so that I had no control. It feels right. The way that the idea appeared so suddenly in my mind, so extreme and cruel, along with how I actually did it. How I misguided her, with a single word, that seemed so distant from everything else. How the guilt was instant, and not just a feeling. How I loathed what I did from the second I did it.

I don't even know how he could've done it, possessing me from there, but it doesn't matter. Something has finally gotten *better*, for me, at least.

"And..." the evil spirit continues. "Then, well, everything went horribly wrong. I sent persuasions to the spirit in the Willow room to let you through, but he took longer than he should have, so the Council arrived, and I thought it was all over. But the fools in the Council brought you right back to me."

"They've all been imbeciles since I passed away, but this one's new. Putting the new Willowbane so close to me, all that way underground, instead of at the surface, where you'd be nice and safe! Although again, you were helpful, Elias. Digging, just that tiny bit, made you get close enough for me to possess you again, getting you to dig your way right to me. So now, you're mine, but there's no need to worry, not at all. I already told you; I want to work with you. We can coexist together. Of course, if you don't accept my generous offer, I will take your body by *force*, and I will banish you from it! I *will* be alive again, whether you share or not!"

A chill runs down my spine, and my heart begins to pound violently in my chest, like how it did in the water. But it can't be true. He *has* to be lying. Possession is one thing, but taking my body from me? There is no way that it can be real, no way that I can be banished from my very self.

I'm sensing a pattern here, due to my ability, everyone wants something from me. The Council wants my ability itself; they want it gone. Some people even want my life; they want me dead because of my *curse*. But Rowan, he wants my body, and he claims he can get it *because* of my ability. So, I definitively decide that it *is* in fact a curse.

After all this time.

But he has to be lying, right?

“No,” I tell him. “That’s not possible.”

“Oh... right. I forgot to explain what I was leading up to. Yes, yes, it is, *Willowbane*. It is possible, so very possible. Tell me, what do you feel when you’re seeing spirits?”

I don’t want to tell him, and I really don’t like where this is going, but I tell him anyway. If I can even believe that he had the same ability as I do, then he knows already. There is no point hiding it from him.

“I feel dead,” I tell him flatly, because whenever I’ve seen them, I always do. It faded a little as I got used to it, but that feeling never went away. Not since that carefree day in this very place, as I just began to leave the Grove in all my excitement.

“Exactly,” he spits. “Your soul lies closer to the dead than anyone else’s. So much so that I can practically grasp it. Not like the normal living’s. It’s more easily... displaced, kicked out, because, well, it’s just closer to us. Which is why we all felt it when you first used your ability. We felt you come towards us.”

He pauses for a second, and then he speaks again. “Like I said, you are a *bridge* between the living and the dead. A bridge so strong that it could defy this water’s barrier, letting me reach you, begin to enter you, and control you, even before you arrived. You will be *my* bridge to the real world! Then I will truly control, *dominate*, your body, with no resistance, nothing! And *all* I need to do is act like I’m possessing you. But all of me, everything, goes into you.”

So it’s over.

I will never die.

I will be hijacked.

My voice is trembling, so I can’t form words, only guttural noises.

The fear has reduced me to a primal state, like a wild, vicious animal, too weak to fight back.

“This was inevitable, Elias! I have been waiting for centuries for my moment of escape!” His eyes turn that repulsive red colour, and they bulge out, his entire, hideous face displaying a look of pure insanity. “Yet I am merciful!” he lies, and he grabs my shoulders with his shaking hands. “You can join me!” he says. “Or I will take your body anyway, and I will personally kill Connor, and everyone that you care about! You know, Connor at least is guaranteed, he’s sitting close by to us, as we speak! Or *we* can spare him, spare them!”

So, it’s settled. I have no choice. “Fine, I’ll join you.” I resign, and his eyes return to their normal brown, as if my statement has calmed him down.

“Good,” he smiles. “Thank you, Elias. Let’s get this st—”

“No!” I shout. “Just... please. Let me have one more thing.”

“Whatever you’d like,” he says, and it really seems like he’s become human again.

“Leave me here, just for a while. Please, Rowan.”

He lets out a long sigh, but he agrees. “Okay,” he smirks. “Enjoy your imagined little Grove.”

I do. I sit back down on the grass beneath me, and I intentionally watch everything as Rowan goes to sit down against a different nearby tree. However, the Grove isn’t really the important part. If I’m to spend the rest of my life with evil rooted inside me, controlling everything that I do, just like it did in the maze, then... I want to savour every moment, and stall as long as possible to lengthen my pure, old life for as long as I can.

I can vividly recall this very same occurrence in the library in town. I knew I would enter a new life then, too, only I also knew, to some extent, what that entailed. For the first time ever, I have no concept of what the future holds. I cannot fathom the wicked deeds that Rowan and I will perform. I cannot fathom what his revenge will be. Which means that I only have the present. So, I will hang onto every moment.

With my mind emptied, trying to be present, the thing that comes to me above all else is Dawn. I find myself thinking of her, and no one else, in what I know to be my final moments. It must be because of all the guilt, still lingering, knowing what happened to her.

I consider how in some ways, how everything *was* my fault. Connor disappeared to act as bait for me, and Dawn is only dead because Rowan was able to take advantage of my ability. Edith was only possessed because I directed her here. I realise... as I go through the list, that none of it is *really* my fault, but my ability's. If I didn't have my ability, none of this would have ever happened.

I know there is so much wrong with me, so many flaws... but, that being said, what did I ever do to deserve Willowbane, which caused all of these things in the first place? What could anyone do to deserve this? They will all blame me, now. I will be the second one cursed by Willow, forever, a bringer of destruction, because how will they know that it is Rowan controlling me? They will always despise me. But I've had enough of *them*. This is the end of my life, in a sense anyway. So, this time should be for me. And I live every second for myself, until Rowan approaches me, telling me that my time is up.

I don't know why Rowan doesn't just banish me from my body, anyway. He went through all the trouble of capturing Connor, for what? To convince me to stay in my body with him? It makes no sense, but I don't ask him why. I just need to do what he says, because if I do, I can save Connor, my friends, and my family. If I don't, then... I suppose everyone dies, including them.

"If you want to stay in," Rowan begins, "And if you want your friends and family to live, then you need to allow me inside. Otherwise, you get pushed out when I enter."

Then, suddenly, I freeze. The question that *just* just popped into my head repeats itself. What if he *can't* get in? What if he's deceiving me, to get me to let him inside, because he can't do so otherwise! So, he had to use Connor as a captive so he could trick me into letting him in, but in reality... what if he can only get in if I allow him to? He could have created this elaborate trick to make me. If I *do* allow him

to take control of me, then he likely isn't going to share my body at all. That could be how he kicks me out and probably murders those important to me anyway.

If I follow his instructions, then either I share a body with him and bring about his revenge whilst saving a few, *or* it's how he takes over my body so that I die, and he returns to life.

Then, if I don't do what he says, either I die and he takes my body, or he can do nothing against me, and I truly, wholly live.

The only good outcome results from me saying no, but following either option will be risky. If I make the wrong decision, then Connor, Penny, my parents... even Edith and Oliver won't be spared from Rowan's revenge.

But I trust my theory. And I say, with great satisfaction. "No."

For a moment, he just looks utterly confused, and he stutters. Then his expression quickly changes, and he grasps my shoulders tightly.

"Have it your way," he snarls quietly, and his eyes return to their gleaming red shade. Then I begin to feel his presence close in on me, and red energy bursts from his body, heading inside me.

I was wrong.

## 26

I feel him enter me, and it's excruciating. The smile on his face is the worst part, so cruel and cold as he pushes me out. No. I need to stop him. I'm about to give in and shout out, telling him that I'll share, that I'll let him in. I open my mouth to speak...

But then the world begins to break.

The Grove, Rowan, all of it, is torn from my eyes, quite literally, as it all begins to fall apart before me. I can only watch in confusion as everything starts to be warped, dragged backwards and stretched. The flesh of Rowan's face is pulled back in this way, and soon with it comes every part of his body, his arms, his legs, his *eyes*, all slipping backwards, to a distant point.

"W-what?" Rowan practically gasps, his mouth contorting into a gruesome shape as he is pulled away from me, saving me. Then things begin to fade. The leaves, the branches of trees, already twisted and stretched out of shape, begin to fade, revealing something darker. Even the sky becomes dark, and everything else all seems to coil together, slowly blurring and morphing into one enormous string of matter, being pulled away from me by something I cannot see. Rowan's face soon becomes one with the rest of it, a look of anger and detest being the last thing I see on it, directed at me, but what have I done? I didn't cause this; I couldn't even dream

of *knowing* how I could have!

Then I begin to feel a vague sensation around me, no, only the back of my body. It's water, gentle and cold beneath me, even though I'm standing up, or at least it seemed like I was. Seems like I am.

The coil of matter, which dominates all that I can see, begins turning a brighter colour, more consistent and defined. I blink. Red, it all turns red, and it glows, a glowing red spiral of energy that is being pulled away from me. The water slowly intensifies until I realise that I'm lying down, but there was no process of reclining, not a single movement. To be honest, it feels like I was *never* standing up. Like I've been floating here the entire time, which I probably have.

The coil of energy begins to retract, and I experience a feeling of relief when it is at last drawn from my body, but the pains of reality return. There's an aching in all my limbs, and now, a sagging weakness that overwhelms me. I remember, properly, where I am. I am in the water in the ruins. I was in the water with Rowan, the evil spirit, who is now a tangle rather than a figure, a mass of energy, of *valdre*, which spirals and spirals until it...

All of it is sucked into a single, minute object. It seems to shrink, and yet still it is being dragged into this tiny thing, this... *pendant*, until all of it is gone, held within a small volume of *water*, encased in glass. The pendant is attached to a string, which is slung around a neck. A hand holds it underwater until well after the last drop of energy seeps into the thing. Then the hand finally lets go and the pendant drops down onto the person's chest, to be tucked away, underneath a tunic, coloured a deep green.

Her orange hair is damp. Strands of it shoot off in every direction, making it look messy to the point of unsightliness. There are pale purple bags beneath her eyes, and her face is quite mucky, but she doesn't look injured at all; she looks unscathed. She's alive. Rowan never mentioned her being killed or her being dead. She is alive, and well, and everything is perfect, nothing is wrong, just for a transient moment. There are still so many problems, so many things wrong that need to be faced, but with her here, alive, it doesn't seem so

difficult any more.

“Dawn!” I cry, but it comes out as a splutter, with water spewing out of my mouth. She doesn’t seem to take any notice of this, and starts to swim away, picking up Edith’s limp body from the water in front of me. She twists her body around and slings Edith onto her back in a fluid motion, then starts paddling towards the side. I begin to follow her, and it instantly hurts. With a splash, I move my arm in front of my eyes. It’s frail again, as it was before I drank the potion, but it’s also baggy, like there’s more flesh than there should be for the bones and muscle inside, my skin still stretched out from the expansion before.

It’s only now, when I think about where I am, swimming at the bottom of the ruins, that I truly register the strangeness of appearing here. I dug inside my prison cell, and *well*, Rowan started taking over me and brought me straight here, so he could properly take my body. That means the ruins are underneath the town, and the passageway from the edge of the Haven... it must run about half the length of the entire community! So we’re under the town now, all four of us, and... wait, Connor? The evil spirit said he was in the final room... the Holly room!

I swim behind Dawn, and follow her up to the ledge as fast as I can with my damaged limbs. I pull myself out of the water, onto the ground of the final slice-shaped room above the water. Then I see him. He is lying against the wall, his body still and tired, but his eyes fairly alert. The moment our eyes meet, his light up, and he stands up hastily, placing a hand on the wall to balance himself.

For the first time in many years, he doesn’t say a word. He only comes towards me, as fast as he can, and his arms wrap around me, enclosing me in a warm embrace. It doesn’t feel like something I’d normally do, but I don’t mind. The feel of his is a comfort like no other, because it gives me definitive evidence that he is here, and that he is alive. I keep my eyes open, and I look at him, too. His head, his brown hair, his deep red tunic, his pale, partly rose-tinted skin. It’s stupid, but I keep staring, because I’m in disbelief. Maybe because

Dawn is alive too, it feels like I'm dreaming. To be honest, I wish she'd come join us, too, but I would never dare say it.

It takes a long time for me to finally accept that he is real, and by then, this embrace has been going on for too long, so I start to withdraw, and he does the same. I'm suddenly reminded of how we work almost as one.

I hold his gaze, for just a moment more, to see his warm brown eyes. Then I look away, and I can accept it, of course, joyfully. I've found Connor. He's back, I'm back.

Then I look to the side, and see Edith there, having been put down on the ground, her thin, damp hair spread across the floor, almost as much of a mess as Dawn's. Her arms and legs are sprawled across the uncomfortable surface. Oliver, and Dawn are both looking down upon her unmoving body. Suddenly, the fear returns, and I head towards her immediately.

Crouching down, I place my ear on her, just in the place where her ribcage ends, just close enough to hear the steady beating of her heart inside her chest. The side of my head skims the surface of her tunic, but I get up, relieved.

"Yeah, she's alive," Oliver tells me. "Thankfully."

I nod, and I turn around. Connor himself doesn't look much better than Edith, having gone back to leaning against the wall, but everyone is here; they're all okay. So, did the Council just leave them here? I suppose they didn't even see Connor as they didn't reach the Holly room... and how did the three of them get out of the previous one?

"So... what happened? Not just to her, I mean, to everyone," I ask him, and Dawn suddenly bursts out laughing, but it doesn't feel right. I flinch backwards.

"Says the person who turned up in the water, with, *uh*, no explanation! We should be asking you what happened!" Dawn snaps at me. She hasn't been possessed, has she, not after... well, the spirit did just enter her necklace, could it have...? No.

"I..." I reply, searching for an excuse. "Have a lot to say. So, I should

wait until Edith's awake."

Dawn looks away, her expression cold, but embarrassed.

"Well, I guess we can start with the maze," Oliver mutters, eying Dawn. He's hopeless without her. I get it.

"Olz, just leave it," Dawn demands. "It's not worth it."

"R-right," he, again, mutters, and there's a conflicted look on his face. He looks down.

"Thanks for the update," I remark, standing up to go to the other side of the room, then sitting down next to Connor, sighing. I don't even know what we're doing. Waiting for Edith to wake up, I guess, but I feel useless like this, just sitting against the wall, staring into space. *Well, no. Right.*

"What's their problem?" Connor asks me, and that reminds me that I have him to talk to, which doesn't quite feel as much of a waste of time.

"I am," I reply drily, and he laughs a little, giving me some more warmth. Then he elbows me.

"Well, I can tell you what happened to *me*," he tells me, and I turn my eyes to the other two. Three. It's a small room; they can definitely hear us. This one seems bare, like the majority of them, and the conditions miserable. There's a standard-looking picture of a Holly tree on the wall, but that's it, no grid lines like in the Hazel room. Now that I think about it, the conditions in here seem *worse* than those in the other rooms. Damp floor, cracks everywhere, even old spiders' webs hanging haphazardly from the corners of the ceiling. Of course, Connor had to stay in here, out of any of the various rooms that are still here.

"Yeah," I say, in approval of his words. "Tell me."

Connor sighs, as if in remembrance. "Well, I was at training, as usual. But Edith seemed... off, like, her eyes were all cold, and she was acting strangely—"

He sniffs heavily, momentarily interrupting his story. His voice is hoarse and dry, too, which only makes me more desperate to get out of here. I'm extremely thirsty too... because when was the last time I

had a drink? Edith has some in her bag, but...

“Sorry. So, I thought *something* was off, so I followed her to where she was going, and... well, we ended up here, and it was weird. Really weird. We... walked through all the doors, they were all open then, and, well, we ended up here. I was confused, to say the least, but Edith suggested sleeping; I was exhausted by then, so I did for a bit. When I woke up, she was gone and the door to the room was shut. I was alone, with no way out.”

“Then, after it felt like I was going to starve, these guys came along... We stayed here, until we heard a rock, *like...* smashing, and a splash, so we went in the water to investigate. Even Edith did, but she... well, she didn’t seem good to begin with. She collapsed in the water and started sinking. We were searching but couldn’t find her, until *you* suddenly bobbed up to the surface with her. Both of you looked pretty unconscious, and you were talking to yourself, Elias. Muttering creepy stuff like... ‘I feel dead’, then you were twitching too. And the other girl took out her necklace, and suddenly you were fully awake!”

I can’t help but feel shocked at how trivial it seemed to everyone else. Whilst I was fighting for my life, *and* for theirs, uncovering the inner workings of this whole cascade of events... It appeared I was just acting like someone gone insane, and maybe I was. But I know I couldn’t have imagined that whole thing... could I?

“You?” he asks me. “You don’t need to tell me everything, but... well, I’d like an explanation.”

“Well... Edith came to me, said we had to find you,” I explain.

“Oh,” Connor says. “So, she left me by accident?”

“Not... exactly,” I say. “I’ll get to it.”

I explain everything. I had just said that I’d wait for Edith, but after hearing Connor’s perspective, I felt a need to give him at least a little bit of an explanation. I ended up giving him everything. Meeting up with Dawn and Oliver, going through the rooms, realising that they were in the order of the Triad, and he makes noises of realisation throughout the story, as things begin to make sense. I even tell him

about Dawn, my suspicions of her, how I misled her, everything, *everything*, everything. The bear, the prison, the *strength* serum, to which he almost screams in triumph, and then falls into laughter. I'm surprised he didn't comment on my sagging skin. Then, Edith floating underwater, the arrow, the red eyes, and what she said. And finally, the Grove, the most outlandish, unbelievable part of it all, I explain it to him, hardly skipping a thing, all the while very conscious of Oliver and Dawn, our guests, who, purposely or not, are listening in on the entire monologue.

Then I finish, and I am so sick of talking, even to Connor, that I never want to speak again. I want to curl up in a little ball in my room and stay there, and I genuinely consider it once I start thinking about home. But it's over, my voice now just as hoarse and tired as Connor's, but my mind is put at rest that Connor knows exactly what I do, whether he believes a word of it or not. Then Dawn speaks up.

"Lies," she spits. "That's all just an elaborate *excuse*, Connor, don't believe him."

Then my stomach lurches, not from fear, but from pure anguish. Dawn is gone to me, now, whether she's alive or not. It feels like I'm falling, falling to my grave, because there is nothing but trust that can make them believe this whole mess, until...

"It's true," a voice says, quiet and weak. I turn my head, and Edith is awake, her whole body still except for her flickering eyes, welling with tears, and her lips, shaking. For a moment, I wonder if she's still possessed, but I think the fragment of the spirit left her in the water, which is why the spirit made her get in, so he had his complete self to take over me.

"That— *he*— um, Rowan," she tries to get out. "I didn't feel him for so long, but he was inside me, and... *oh*, just Elias's right, please, he's right."

Then Oliver, fuelled with some kind of courage, stands up, his face fearful, but brave, worried, yet defiant.

"No one needs to prove Elias right," Oliver asserts. "Dawn is just being a *toddler*," he adds confidently, even though his eyes drop to

the floor in shame. “She... she literally ripped the spirit off him with her pendant, so we can see what it had against her, and, well, it all adds up, doesn’t it?”

“Sure, most of it,” Dawn relents. “But he was never possessed.”

“Dawn!” Oliver shouts, and I think all of us jump. There’s a fiery rage in his voice, and he wipes a tear away from his eye with his fidgety hand. He breathes slowly. “No, I’m sorry,” he tells her, his voice back to normal, cool and inexpressive. “But you *did* rip the spirit from him. And we all saw it in him in the water, before that.”

There are a few moments of silence, and Dawn is looking into the distance.

“So,” Oliver says. “I think Elias needs his explanation now. And so does Connor.”

Dawn turns back towards us all, her expression blank. “Okay, fine,” she resigns, and begins to recount their experience after we were split up. “When the Council came, we all hid in the maze. The creature wasn’t real, but a mental illusion. I *literally* walked through it. So, we all hid, me on my own, and we thought you were still with us in the maze until it was too late. The Council came running back through with your body, and we were left there. So we thought you’d want to find Connor, so we went to the next room, and he wasn’t there. We couldn’t figure the Willow room out, so we jumped into the water from there and went round to where we found Connor. Then it’s as he said. We think you need to literally wait in this room to solve it—since that requires willpower, I suppose, but there’s no point continuing onwards, especially underwater.”

Then there is another moment of silence, and this one lasts. As I look to and from each and every person, I can tell that we are all asking the same question. What do we do now? We have found Connor, which also means that we’ve saved me from banishment or severance. Or both. We have taken down the evil spirit, which means we’ve also stopped the corruption in the Haven. We’ve managed to get the spirit out of Edith, too, and throughout all of this, we’ve *survived*. And now, as the conversation closes, and we would

otherwise go on to the next thing or rest and prepare ourselves for it, there is nothing left. Nothing left to do.

But I think of something to do, and I smile. We all do, because we all know it, although Connor, my dear friend, is the one to say it out loud.

“So,” he says. “Let’s go home.”

For the first time in far too long, I see sunlight. It trickles out from the end of the tunnel as the five of us approach it. As we do, I think of how this journey has been made by so many people before, and now... just *one* more time, by the five of us, together.

Or six, if you count Rowan, kept away inside the tiny capsule of Dawn's necklace. I don't know how he can fit in there, but I guess they don't take up space, spirits. I don't think so, not really. And although Rowan was present for all but one of the journeys, it's better now, having him inside a necklace with Dawn, rather than bending Edith's mind from within her. I don't know if I can trust Dawn with the necklace, though. If it's taken him out of the prison below, if the necklace breaks, then he's free. Not alive, obviously, but with him able to roam around... he'd possess everyone, and it'd be horrendously dangerous. A strange confusion takes over me as we get closer to the gleaming light.

It was Rowan himself who told me that *only a spirit with pure malevolence could even attempt* to possess someone. Was he talking about himself? I think I did consider it had happened when Mason suddenly turned against me. It turns out he just saw a vision of me in the maze, leading Dawn away, towards the danger. The vision mustn't have lingered for long enough for him to see her walk

through it, so like I told him, visions can be misleading.

Well. I guess it wasn't *that* misleading, but it wasn't actually me. And she survived. But, regardless, why would Rowan speak to me, help me even, before? He never directed me to go to the ruins, and I don't understand why. He could've done that instead of making *two* people come down before me. I suppose he knew that I'd never do it. I wouldn't go down to the water and go through every single ordeal for no purpose. So he gave me an incentive, getting Connor down there. And he needed him stuck, so why possess *him* and be stuck himself, when he could get someone to bring me there and make sure I got down? That was Edith.

I want to get all of it out of my mind, to continue life as normal, especially now we're climbing out of the narrow cave-like tunnel, but it's impossible to shake off a thing like this. The other thing that is bothering me is whether I was *really* wrong or not, about my suspicion? It doesn't make sense that he'd trap Connor to bribe me into staying with him. Or, no! Was keeping my friend hostage just to bring me down there? And then, once I *was* there, he thought he might as well let the other person with his ability seek revenge together with him?

I pause my thoughts, or try to, as I near the light. It's so close to me now, with only Edith ahead of me. I'm just behind her, eager to escape this awful place as soon as possible. Then Edith gets out, gets up, and nothing is blocking me from it—broad daylight, at last. And also, two Council members and four guards, standing around me, grabbing me.

Taking me away.

“Wait!” a voice screams, and again, and again. I think it’s Edith for a second, and that seems most likely right now, but the voice belongs to Dawn. After rebuking me in the Holly room, she’s suddenly shouting out for my freedom.

And it works, although only temporarily. The guards, maintaining their firm grip on both my arms, turn around, and my body is dragged with them. I’m being dragged across the ground, like the animal they think I am. After everything that I’ve been through, nothing has changed; I am still cursed, still known as plagued with Willowbane. But that changes now.

“Connor, get up here!” she shouts down the hole in the hill. I notice the path here that ends at the cave’s entrance. *Trail’s End*.

Immediately, I can feel the interest and surprise shown by the people around me. Chief Clementine comes into my view.

“I’m sorry... Dawn, yes?” she asks, although she doesn’t wait for a reply. “You don’t need to worry about your friend, he’s not being banished or executed. Remember that the Council is fair.”

“He’s not my friend!” Dawn declares, and although her volume has lowered, there’s a clear desperation in her tone. “But you can’t take him,” she says, looking back into the tunnel. “At least, not until you see this!”

Then, Connor emerges, and although I'm held in a painful, awkward position by the guards, I can see the shock on Chief Clementine's face.

"What?" she exclaims, after gasping loudly. "How?"

"I was lost in there, Chief," Connor tells her, pointing backwards with his thumb. He must've caught onto the fact that there's been a massive search effort to find him, even though no one ever explicitly mentioned it in their recounting.

"Told you they'd be there," a deep, unknown voice says. "Both of them."

"Yes, Tiberius," Clementine replies, deflated. "But the Council agreed to sever him."

"No!" Dawn shouts, and Connor does too. "Just leave it," Dawn pleads. "And everything will go back to normal! Give it a few days, and there'll... right, Elias?"

"There'll be no new corruption, and the land will recover," I tell them. I'm pulled upward and then the iron grip around my arms is loosened. I can see the two guards' glowing purple eyes from the strength serum, which explain how they so easily hold me in a rigid position, with no chance of escape.

"Elias will be taken in for questioning, and from there, we'll see if he's innocent or not."

Her tone is final. So, after another dose of that vile sleeping potion is poured down into my mouth, my mind starts to freeze once more... I realise now that it doesn't matter what you do, or how obvious your innocence seems. Once a black cat.

Always a black cat.

\* \* \*

Just as I got to see daylight, it was taken away from me. I wake up in the Council room, in a temporary chair in front of the aisles, but not right at the front. There are eight pairs of eyes on me, every

member of the Council present, all of them already interrogating me, before I have even woken up. They disgust me, looking down at me from their stage, with their pure white tunics and condescending expressions. They were right about Rowan; they were right all along. *The Council is always right*, but they're not. They're wrong about me and my ability.

I try to turn around, to see if there is anyone else watching, but I can't turn around, and when I try standing, I too find that I can't. A thick rope wraps around me tying every piece of me to the wooden chair, and as I squirm around, the skin on my arms scrapes against the rope, creating a painful burning sensation, forcing me to stop. The Council has the power, and now I am helpless, just as I was before the evil spirit. It feels as if I was just there, and I was; I *just* escaped him, and now I am immediately in the clutches of another unstoppable force of the Haven, though maybe this one is slightly less sinister.

"I'm sorry about that unpleasant journey, Elias," Chief Clementine says, the first to speak.

"I'm not," another Council member remarks, and the rest of them guffaw like lunatics.

"Clearly," Tiberius says, whose voice I recognise from at Trail's End. "Imprisoning you doesn't work. So, we're going to put you on trial, and if you are *cursed*, then we'll sever you immediately."

The other Council members nod in agreement, as if Chief Tiberius' words themselves weren't enough to make me believe them.

"Let's get on," Tiberius says. "Go on, Clementine."

"What?" I mutter as my *mentor* approaches me.

"Remember your Awakening, Elias?"

"Yes."

"I watched, remember. I saw the tree with you, the Willow with that sublime turquoise *coed*."

"I know," I reply.

"Well, I use my ability to enter people's minds in trials too. To uncover the truth, no matter what. I won't see anything, because you

won't experience something as powerful as the Awakening in the courtroom, but I'll hear your thoughts."

"You can mind-read?" I ask her, as more of a delay than a genuine question.

"No," she tells me. "My ability only lets me enter someone's mind when I touch them, but it provides me with more insight than mind-reading. I told you that I'll hear your thoughts, but I'll be able to access some memories, too, although only ones related to what you're thinking."

If I ever had any privacy, it's gone now, and one would have to be insane not to see that, which is why I'm quick to use it as another delay. "This doesn't seem—"

"No more!" one of the Council members shouts. "Get on with it."

Clementine places her hands on either side of my head, on my temples, now behind me. "Just remember, Elias," she whispers. "I'm on your side. You know it."

And to be fair, I do. She supported my ability, didn't she? She let me use it, to speak to Joan and a few others in the training centre, and she is the reason that I am partially able to control it. I have to admit, she may be right, despite the unpleasant visit in the cell and the bad impression that left with me. And that wasn't her fault to begin with.

So I relax. I'm innocent, which means that nothing can go wrong.

Unlike at my Awakening, I can already feel Chief Clementine's presence in my head, probably because I'm not experiencing such a profound hallucination as I was then. It doesn't remind me of being possessed either. Then, I felt nothing at all at first, even though Rowan wasn't just watching, he was bending me. *Coed* is not evil, and the fact that I *can* feel her comforts me, and I just have the feeling that there is an observer, so it's not like when Rowan was trying to push me out, either. There's just a gentle feeling in what is almost like the outskirts of my mind.

"Read the questions." Chief... Hortencia says, and another Council member does so, picking up a tablet and beginning to recite the

questions, leaving me with no time to answer, but enough for Clementine to pick up the answer from me.

“Elias, did you cause the infertility of the soil?” The first question. The answer is *no*, but by intentional design, it triggers me to think about who *did*, and although it’s just a passing notion, it’s enough for the presence in my mind to see it, so I can see why this system works. Then the second question.

“Did you cause the Elm boy to disappear?” *No*. “Do you know in any way if your ability has caused these things?” *It hasn’t*. “Have you conspired with spirits?” *Conspired? No*. “Have you murdered someone?” *No*. “What were you doing in the ruins under town?” *Saving Connor*. “Why did you escape your cell?” *To save Connor*. *And, well...* “Are you guilty?” *No*. “Are you cursed. *No*. “Is there any reason that you should be severed?” *No... except... no*.

And every time, even though there is a louder voice, a final, definite answer given, each and every query made me question myself... or at the very least think about it, causing Clementine to know so much; too much.

She will know about Rowan’s plot, how it *is* technically my fault that Connor went missing. She will know that my ability caused Rowan to cause those occurrences. She will know that I have talked to Rowan, both when he appeared blue and red, and she will know how I thought I killed Dawn, and how, again, *Rowan* misled her, but because of me. She will know how he took control of me to bring me back to the ruins, and how I am to be blamed because my *curse* caused Rowan to create all the problems. And she knows how I should be severed, because of how the Trail’s End message got out, causing Edith to be possessed, and because of how my connection to the dead and Rowan *could* have killed Dawn, and how it brought me to the ruins from my cell.

And now, because I have reiterated this now in my mind, she will know even more; she just had to listen to me figure it all out after the questions ended. She will know how I am considering what I think before I ‘think’ it, telling her. *Sorry, Chief Clementine*. *And, go away,*

*please get out, get out!*

Then she takes her hands off me, and the guilt is instant for saying that to a Council member. but she's on my side, remember? She's on my side.

She goes to sit down in her place, and she looks troubled, confused, and bewildered. I don't think she could've expected to see such danger, so many precarious things, even ones completely separate from the rooms of the ruins. I told it all to my friends, to those that I thought I could trust, and I was right to trust them, but I had no choice but to let her know, and so soon after I thought that I never wanted to speak again. This time, I didn't speak, but still, the deep things got out, too much was shared, and I feel so exposed, because there are too many things out that could be used against me; things that could make people dislike me, hate me, despise me. This is a nightmare, and it's real.

"So, Clementine?" A Council member asks. She's still sitting there, processing things, probably. "We'll catch up later, but you can decide now. Severance, or not?"

She considers this, just for a second, and then I see her gulp. *She's on my side, she's on my side, she's on my side!* Then she begins to speak, and she utters only a single word.

"Severance."

"No!" I shout, and shake the chair I am tied to. "You said—!"

"I say, begin! Start the severance!" she shouts.

And that is that. I have no long unused potion in my satchel, no friend to absorb the situation into their pendant, I have nothing. My satchel, wet and damaged from the water, isn't with me, and I don't know where it could be. My friends? Who knows, but there's no chance they're getting in. I remember pleading, with the person who appeared from the locked Council building door, to let me in when I wanted to make sure that word of my Willowbane didn't get out. That was one thing, but if anything else gets *out*, any of the knowledge that Clementine collected, then... then... I don't know what I'll do. At that point I may as well banish myself from the

Haven, and this severance will make me want to do so, as well.

Honestly though, it doesn't feel as bad hearing this news the second time around. I already thought I'd be severed, it's just been delayed with an encounter with a spirit in between. And an encounter with Connor. At least we had one last time together while we both have abilities. I still need to push myself, purposely trying to be upset, but that helps. My ability will be gone, I won't be cursed, but a laughingstock. And... well, I guess I'll never see Joan again.

And I'll be doing general work, with no special qualifications to offer. Probably manual labour, farm work, like I've always imagined as the worst possible job for me. Harvest all year round. At least I'll have Connor, is the most positive thing I can really think. As well as Edith and Oliver. And *maybe* Dawn. That's one good thing that has come out of my curse.

I reflect that just a few short hours ago, with Rowan in the Grove, I had almost opted for just my friends and family surviving while living with a maniacal spirit in control of my body, and that seemed like the better possibility, so by now... losing my ability—*just* losing my ability—doesn't seem that bad. I won't be known as cursed at least, although for some reason that doesn't seem like the most important thing. I will be safer, less, well, *dead*, feeling so empty. Although no, I've never been one for bursting with emotions, have I? Not mine, anyway. When they're mine, they're easily changeable. Reaching this mindset from screaming at the Council moments earlier is just one example of that. So, I say, with full confidence in my voice, "Let's get this over with."

And I'm ready. It's time to get rid of my Willowbane.

## 29

So, the severance commences. A worker appears and goes round the room dimming all the lights one by one. I can't tell how from my seat in the room, but it doesn't matter. It's just ceremonial, I assume, and has no actual purpose in the process of removing my connection to the trees.

*My connection to the trees!* When I phrase it like that, I suddenly regret going along with this. I want my curse to go away, because, though for different reasons than the public, I have accepted it as that. But when I think of the trees, and my Willow tree—the one I saw at my Awakening, I am suddenly filled with an immense sadness that my connection to them is going to be broken.

But I don't want to be close to the dead, I don't want the same situation, however ridiculously unlikely it is, to happen again. I mean, besides, I don't want cruel spirits constantly whispering into my ears, because something must've gone wrong in Rowan's life... and it was to do with the curse, right? Or is it only called a curse now because of him? There are so many things I still don't know, but I guess I'm setting it all aside.

There's a conflict rising inside of me, unsure of what to think. Every time that I think I've made up my mind, I keep thinking, and it changes, so I want to give up, too. I hate being so inconsistent. I just

want to make up my mind. And I'll accept my severance, because the fact remains, I don't have a choice in this. So what good is it deciding whether I'm happy about it or not?

After the lights of the room are all darkened, a Council member, Chief Hortencia, gets up reluctantly and comes towards me, after a few words of persuasion from another Council member.

She whispers to me, "Stay here." There isn't much point running away from this any more, so I don't get up and start running when she unties the ropes tying me to the chair. I see no future, no way out, beyond those double doors, that involves me keeping my ability. So I don't go chasing after it, like I'm trying to hold onto a fleeting dream. I see reality.

Once the rope around me is untied, it feels like the whole Council is standing around me, and four of them are. They are muttering amongst themselves, and I can only hear snippets because of how quietly they're speaking. And because of how distant I am from them, in my own world of thoughts, still debating my severance, the meaningless dilemma.

I hear "explain", "Clementine", and "knife." Apparently, that's the gist of it, because Clementine comes closer to me to explain something about a knife.

"So, Elias," she tells me. "We need to cut you. Only your wrist, for your blood."

"Right," I say, and I immediately give her my hand. I look away as she slices at my wrist, or someone else does, because there's a hand underneath mine. It stings, yes, but I've felt pain much worse very recently, so it's relatively harmless. My body still droops a little from the potion, but it's unnoticeable compared to before, having gradually squeezed together somehow.

So the slit on my wrist is a minor inconvenience.

"To expose more energy to the air," Chief Clementine explains, as she wraps a thread around my wrist, over the cut itself. The thread is much thinner than the rope that was around me. It's a golden colour, and neatly crafted so that it doesn't feel too harsh over my damaged

skin, unlike the scratchy, rough rope that was painful to move against.

“And that’s to channel it,” Chief Clementine explains, and, after she hands the thread to another Council member, that Council member dips the end of the thread in a tiny vial, which is when I suddenly understand. The energy, *my* energy, will be channelled inside the vial! Not just an object, like I was told in my cell. It’s like what just happened to Rowan, except I’m not made of the energy... the only thing is, why would I not just collect more energy from the tree? Our connection to the trees means that their energy follows us, refills us, even though it stays in our blood under normal circumstances.

Rowan *was* the energy, but I only *use* the Willow tree’s energy, so how will... how *will*...?

Rowan! Standing in front of me is Rowan. The spirit that should be trapped away, inside Dawn’s pendant, but he’s standing here! He’s probably been here for ages, though I’m only *seeing* him now. But how?

“You can’t be here,” I state, in an enraged disbelief. I ignore the Council around me, who are giving me looks of annoyance for using my power, at the very last moment I’ll have it.

“I don’t have much time, but it’s not what you think!” he pleads with me. It seems like nothing has changed since the water, he seems well, still that same blue colour, which still makes no sense. But I’m about to find out how and why.

“I’m not here for revenge, Elias,” he says, desperation showing in his voice. “And I mean... well, I’m not Rowan. I mean, I am... but not *that* Rowan.”

There are two of them then? One blue, one red. One good, one bad. One with me, helping me, guiding me, warning me of the other, and one possessing Edith, both at once? It doesn’t make sense. How can there be two of the same person? It’s infuriating. I still know nothing about this person, how there are two of him, what made him so evil, but not at the same time?

“Elias, stop it,” Clementine scolds me, her voice stern.

“No,” Hortencia interjects. “It’ll make it easier, trust me.

I block their voices out, focusing on my ability, on what whoever Rowan is has to say.

“Just listen. So—”

“No!” I shout, as I feel a sudden shift inside of me, a flow outward, through the thread that is connecting me to the vial. The vial itself is filled with a turquoise glow, and it’s my energy slipping away, and I don’t know how. Rowan’s image flickers, his illuminating presence before me entirely vanishing for a moment. I blink, and he looks fainter now. I’m losing him. “I can’t trust you,” I mumble, but it seems foolish now. I need to give him time to speak.

“You see. I’m not from... well, it’s hard to explain. Remember when I said my name... my name—”

He blips out of my sight, and the golden thread is untied from my wrist, but it’s not over yet, because he comes back a second later, and I yank my wrist away from them, placing my arm on my chest and tainting the grey tunic from Edith with red.

“—Rowan! Rowan! My name, the tree! From the outside—”

A Council member snatches my wrist, with such force that I can’t stop the new thread, which is being tied to me, so I keep staring, using all of my strength to see him, I feel a small surge of power throughout my body, and I see him again, but he’s talking about something else.

“When I died! I was split because they hated me, and my anger grew, the *old* me died, and so there are two of me, except that... you can’t let it happen to—”

“—and his power will only grow! I’m fading, going into him!”

“—this’ll only make things—”

“Leave!”

“How?” I shout, but the spirit is gone, not returning, leaving me in the darkness. In the present, in reality. No, in *their* reality. Not Rowan’s. Or mine. Not mine, not anyway, after everything that I’ve seen.

“Our Oak Council member, Hortencia, balanced the energy within you, but you were touching the thread, which goes into the water,” Chief Tiberius explains, turning to look at me. “Due to the effect that Chief Hortencia's ability has, that energy begins to spread out across the whole contiguous mass of you, the thread, and the water. Then, we cut the thread near your wrist so the energy on one side goes along and becomes trapped the water, leaving less energy inside your body, more in the water. So the process transfers the energy out of you. Next, we did it again, but not with the thread in the water until we brought it into the water afterwards.”

“It’s not exactly elegant,” another Council member adds. “But it makes it so there’s very little energy left in you, eventually. And... just one more time, yes?”

I don’t bother to refuse any more, since Rowan is now gone from me. I feel my energy flow into the thread again, though it’s a very faint sensation now. Hortencia is holding the thread in her hand, apparently creating balance, but using it to take my power entirely.

Then it’s taken off my wrist, put into the vial, and then taken out shortly after. The water’s turquoise colour begins to fade, and they put it into a tiny, chiselled ceramic box.

“Do you think he can have it?” a Council member whispers to another.

“Well, there’s no harm,” the other replies. Chief Augustus, I think he is. “Because there’s one more step.”

“Yes, Elias,” Chief Clementine says. “You just need to do one more thing.”

“Bring him in,” one I don’t know says.

A minute passes, and I sit in the chair, mostly staring at the floor. Then a middle-aged man comes in, dressed in a brown tunic and with greying hair. I vaguely remember him from somewhere, school maybe?

He stands in front of me, and someone passes him an orb. I guess he needs to focus, somehow? He mutters something to a Council member, along the lines of “do I need to do it?” The Council member

nods. In response, he places his hands on my head. He's going to do something to my head, like Chief Clementine did in my trial? Using an Aspen ability, maybe? To do something that Clementine can't?

Time passes, with me sitting in the chair for minutes, but then he lifts his hands away, and it's strange. Because I felt nothing. He did nothing. And yet, Clementine says something, which seems odd. "Elias, thank you for your cooperation. I am pleased to announce that you are free to go!"

But whatever was supposed to happen... I don't *think* it did.

## 30

I break into a sweat, and I push my hair back to cool down my damp forehead. This evening's activity is proving to be harder than I thought. I am in the library, within the safety and serenity of its confines. The welcoming smell of paper and dust still drifts through the air, and the towering bookshelves give me comfort and solace from the traumatic events that dominated my life just a week ago. They still hang over me, which is why I'm here.

Exactly here. Not in my usual cosy armchair, but on a solid wooden chair, tucked underneath a table in the more open area of the library. I stare at the piece of paper before me, going through the list for the umpteenth time. Scrawled across the page in ink is a comprehensive list of Rowan's final words to me, but I still can't make sense of any of it.

*I'm not from...*

*Remember when I said my name*

*Rowan! My name, the tree! from the outside...*

*When I died! I was split because they hated me*

*And my anger grew*

*The old me died, and so there's two of me, except that...*

*You can't let it happen to...*

*And his power will only grow!*

*I'm fading, going into him!*

*This'll only make things*

*Leave!*

Ever since he vanished in the Council room, I haven't seen him. Or any spirits for that matter. They all seemed to just... vanish, and it's out of my control. Did they all just disappear? It would be bizarre, but isn't everything about them exactly that?

Through seeing them, I experienced real, actual 'magic', although that's a word that I've been warned against using. Not me in particular, but it's generally frowned upon when used to describe the tree's energy. It has connotations with the supernatural and the impossible, which is the opposite of what the energy is. It is both natural and possible, so it is viewed as terribly imprecise to describe it as magic. But I think the word matches the peculiar occurrences with the spirits perfectly.

The possessions, the control, the glowing quality, the colours, the two Rowans, even just the fact that they appeared to me in the first place, for no reason at all. It doesn't make sense; it was all *magic*. And not in a good way, if such a way exists.

Now that it's all over, foggy and confusing like a distant dream, I just try to grapple with Rowan's final message to me, what he desperately wanted me to know. I wish he had told me it all that

night in my room, but maybe I wouldn't have understood without having been in the water under the ruins, or maybe he thought I wasn't ready or something, until the moment where it was his only chance, so he spat it out.

No matter how hard I try, I can't make sense of it. In particular the dual presence of Rowan and how that came about, which is what I've been thinking so intensely about. It's hard to wrap my head around. Finally, I accept that I'm going to get nowhere, so I try to gather everything I do know and write it down, filling in the gaps.

Firstly, I dip my quill in the pot of ink to note down where I think Rowan said he is from, or rather, where he is not from. Not from the Haven. Like his name, that tree he was talking about. Then he goes on to warn me not to let something happen. Being split, probably, or... what was happening in the Council building? Warning me not to let it happen to myself? That's what I put down next to it. *Yourself*. And then... *worse*. He was saying that this, whatever it is, will only make things worse.

That's when I'm suddenly interrupted by a voice, my friend's voice, Connor's voice. He's not here, but I can hear his words and see a gentle golden wisp spiralling around.

"Healing centre, now!" are the words that echo repeatedly this time, the soft sound causing me to get up, grab my satchel from the floor beside me, and begin to run. It could sound like an emergency to an outsider, if outsiders could even hear our wisps, but it's not an emergency. It's the very opposite.

\* \* \*

I turn up outside the large building in a hurry. The place is a lot like the Council building, with a large courtyard, except it is just slightly smaller and in a completely different spot. I already see the two of them, Connor and Edith, standing outside of the building in the cool evening air.

I've been waiting for this moment for most of the week, although

Connor's been feeling well for a decent while now.

After they got out of the ruins, instead of being captured by the Council like I was, they were sent to the healing centre, all of them. They were all starving, and Edith still had a bleeding hole in her shoulder, with the arrow remaining inside of it. So the others were only assigned to stay at the centre with plenty of food and rest, while Edith had bigger problems, needing a full procedure with multiple Healers and everything.

When I see her now, in a light tunic just like the one I first saw her in, there is no sign of the wound, or a single ache of tiredness or stress. Connor, having recovered much quicker, has been staying around rather than going to training. I haven't been going to my own, because, well... what do I have to learn?

This will be my first time seeing both of them in about a week. But their condition is not the only thing that's changed, either. The planting has returned to normal, and the corruption has ceased. I guess it really must've been Rowan, walking around inside of Edith, which caused all of that.

I don't like that he is so evil that his presence destroys the soil, but it makes the other Rowan, the blue one, more trustworthy, because he must've been around here for longer, not trapped under the Haven, at least, and the soil never corrupted then. What's more, it didn't in the presence of all of the other cruel spirits that are up here: The ones that tormented me, or the one that gave me the message that I thought would be harmless, to get Edith to go to Trail's End. It must be the pure malevolence that the blue Rowan spoke of, which none of the other spirits possess, that caused the corruption.

"Alive, Elias?" Connor asks, as I stand stiffly in place a few metres away from them, still stuck in my muddled thoughts. He's joking, teasing me for being so distant, but there seems to be more than that underneath his words.

"Yes," I reply, looking up at the two of them. They both have a sparkle in their eyes, a joy at the improving state of our lives. When I take a step forward and see their eyes, Edith's eyes, better, I see no

coldness, not in either of their eyes. Not like when I met Edith, in that random field.

“So, what now?” I ask.

“Well... normally I wouldn't invite my sister along,” Connor says, elbowing Edith lightly. “But I can't think of anywhere more suitable.”

Edith shows a quizzical look, but I know what he's talking about. Of course I do.

\* \* \*

As we begin to trek out of town and into the land outside, I don't pay much attention to the environment, but what I do see cheers me up a little, distracting me from the confusion in all matters regarding the spirits. The world is beginning to look a little better, recovering from the strange time when it was desolate and bleak, completely lacking any hint of life. The corruption is almost completely gone, with the signs of early spring showing. Fresh, pale and vibrant grass coats the landscape, and I even see a few daffodils on the way, a true sign of the new season, the new year, and the end of the strangeness.

I focus on the words of Connor and Edith, and I stare at the ground, for the most part, looking at the tracks and paths of dirt beneath my feet, the small bits of stone crumbling, rolling, or being crushed beneath my feet with a solid crunch.

At first, Connor starts catching me up on the week, on what has happened to the two of them. It's mostly unmemorable, less about the procedures and more about the monotonous daily happenings in the healing centre. However, I do hear about how the arrow wedged in Edith's side was taken out, with the wound wrapped in a bandage before a Healer came to fix it. Cuts can be healed instantly, disappearing from the skin within a second of a Healer's touch, but this kind of injury is normally unthinkable, with the most severe thing usually being a broken bone.

“Oh, I heard,” Connor mentions on that topic. “Some guards get

hurt by accident with the weapons. Except it happens very rarely.” Edith’s case was unusual, which is why it took so much longer.

“They gave me a lot of drinks for the pain,” she explains, though. Her voice seems different, now. Meeker, but unsettled, really. She’ll recover eventually, but I think her mental scars are going to last a lot longer than her physical ones have. I can understand why, too. I imagine the way Rowan took me over, but for Edith it was for so much longer, and to a much greater extent.

The conversation takes an uncomfortable turn from here, however.

“Sorry I told you to go to... where you were possessed,” Connor suddenly says to Edith. “This whole thing wouldn’t’ve started if I didn’t... and you would’ve been okay.”

I hate that he’s brought it up, but I can’t not say anything now. “No, I told you to tell her that. About Trail’s End. So it’s obviously *my* fault.”

“No, both of you are wrong,” Edith states matter-of-factly. “I went down the entire ruins, alone, which couldn’t have been more naive.” Connor laughs wholeheartedly.

“I guess we all contributed to this mess,” he says, as if it’s not very grim.

“Exactly,” his sister agrees. “So we shouldn’t be blaming anyone.”

In some ways, the way that Edith is acting about this makes me feel better, because it’s exactly what she would’ve said in the ruins, and shows she isn’t too damaged. But it annoys me that they’re deflecting the blame from me, when it definitively is my fault.

“What I did started it all,” I mutter, kicking a small rock off the path and watching it roll into the grass away from the path.

“You were tricked,” Edith tells me. “You couldn’t have known. And later you were possessed, too, so...”

“Yeah,” Connor agrees seriously, then a smile appears on his face. “And can both of you agree *not* to get possessed again? It was a pain getting stuck down there.”

“We won’t, I’ll be avoiding hidden ruins and large bodies of

water,” Edith replies, reciprocating the light-heartedness. “And Elias... well, he’s severed, so...” Her voice drops in volume suddenly when she says the last part.

“Severed? Huh?” I ask, my head being swarmed with confusion.

“Isn’t that what it’s called?” Connor asks, his pace quickening. I look up, and the mound is within sight, but it doesn’t help the unnerving feeling inside me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I tell them.

“Y’know, the thing the Council brought you to, to remove your ability?” Connor offers.

“The thing in the Council building?” I ask.

“Yes. It’s not great, and we both feel bad for you, but you told us the spirit controlled you from further away because of it?”

“Because of what?” I ask him, and the mound is just in front of us. I stagger up the side as I hear his reply.

“Your ability, of course!”

“I don’t have one,” I reply, and I sit down on the grass, trying to understand his words. Edith remains quiet, looking perplexed as well. I hope it’s not just me.

“Yes, because you were severed. They took it,” Connor tells me.

“No, I never had—” I admit, honestly.

“What?” Connor exclaims. “Elias, are you feeling okay?” Edith nods in agreement, looking concerned.

“Yeah, of course I am,” I say.

“But...” Edith begins, her voice almost a whisper. “You don’t remember your ability? Why Rowan could get to you from further away... like, when he misled Dawn through you?”

“Yeah, he did that,” I agree. “But I thought it was just... through his power.”

“So you can remember *nothing* of your ability?” Connor asks me incredulously.

“I never had one,” I tell him.

“Why?” Connor asks me. “Everyone has one!”

“I guess I... never thought about it. Which seems strange, to be

fair.”

“Do you not remember... the whole Haven thinks you’re cursed!”

“Yeah,” I respond. “I remember. Willowbane.”

“See!” he says, agitated. “Willow, your tree! Do you... Did they take your memories? Is this severance?”

I shrug uncomfortably. “Can we talk about something else. Like... I don’t know...”

There’s silence, and then Connor collapses onto the ground, as if in frustration. So I look out into the distance, for the full length of the momentary silence. At that moment, I see the same cat I first saw the day before the Awakening, the very same black cat. Skirting vaguely around the orchard, but much closer to me than it was on that first day. We’ve only observed each other from afar, and we do now, with it gazing over at me just as much as I gaze over at it, but it feels like we’re old friends. I notice the cat’s not alone, it’s together, with a small kitten, coloured black and white beside it. It looks away from me and scoops up its kitten. It is unbothered by the events that transpired in the Haven, and it doesn’t care that it was even blamed for the soil’s infertility. It just continues on with its life, with its family, its kitten, and it doesn’t give a thought to the world outside of that, or any of the humans that despise it.

“Elias? What is it?” Connor asks, his voice quiet.

“A very important cat,” I reply, more for myself than for him. I replicate his quiet tone, then I look away, back towards my friends, although they’re all quiet. Right. The *severance* thing. Which I said I didn’t want to talk about. I’m about to give in and let Connor continue about the perceived gap in my memory, even though I don’t like it. I’ll need to think about it, but this isn’t helping. Which is why I’m glad when Edith speaks up, doing what I suggested and changing the topic, although still with a concerned look on her face.

“Have you seen Dawn or Oliver yet?” Edith asks, sounding tentative. My immediate feeling is it’s more of a harmless, meaningless discussion that we can follow through with. I suppose that’s good.

“No,” I say. I haven’t seen them at all since I was taken by the Council, since we were at Trail’s End, since Dawn tried to save me, despite me having been intensely angry at her. I’ve been secluding myself, except for with my family, and the occasional meetings with Connor. I realise I haven’t even thanked her or apologised for what happened.

So suddenly, being here on the mound doesn’t seem so important any more.

## 31

The training centre is the only place I think of going. I may not need training, because of my severance, but the next day, I arrive there as soon as I know that the training ends. I've been at home all day, like I have for all these recent days, since the library is closed during the day for non-students, and it's been incredibly lonely, because Penny has been at school, and my parents at work. I don't even know what I'm supposed to be doing. If my friends are right, and this severance has made me forget a power I once had, then I guess I'll have to learn a non-specific profession. But it just seems so unlikely, no matter how much it makes sense. The spirits, they say I saw them not because I was close to Rowan, but because of my ability. But it's like it never existed, and I can't tell whether it's my friends or me who is wrong.

But the conversation that Edith abruptly started reminded me of something, and it seems tremendously more important than my ability, and why they call it Willowbane. So I stand in the corridor, waiting as people begin to leave their rooms and walk to the door. They stare, and whisper, and even laugh, which reminds me that nothing has changed. It certainly *seems* like I have an ability, the curse.

I stare blankly into space, and a small, fatuous sense of pride wells

up at how I do this, ignoring the watching eyes as they leave through the door; unharmed by the hateful, fearful words that are thrown around. “What’s the Willowbane doing here?” I can hear someone scowl, but I ignore them, letting them walk by and leave through the door.

Then I see her, Dawn, momentarily frozen by the sight of me. What surprises me is how startlingly clean she looks, mended too, and going on with life as usual, unlike the three of us. Nervousness overwhelms me, crashing down on my mind out of nowhere, and my heart beats faster, but I *need* to say the first words.

“I need to speak to you,” I let out, my voice unnatural, and her expression hardens.

“I have a carriage to catch to Afon,” she asserts, expressing her indifference.

“I can come with you. Or you can stay, it’s just important,” I tell her, although I’m not sure how important it actually is.

“Fine,” she submits, too easily to genuinely have been uninterested. “And Oliver?”

“No,” I say, sheepishly. “Just you.”

“I’ll stay then,” she decides. “But you only have an hour. The last carriage leaves half an hour after that.”

I nod, start to walk out of my door, checking behind me to see that she’s still following. There’s nowhere else to go, so... my house.

\* \* \*

“I’ve got a friend over,” I announce, in case anyone is home from work or school already, then I bolt up my stairs. Hopefully anyone who’s home will think it’s Connor, as he’s who would usually turn up at our house. But I don’t check to see, instead I enter my room, let Dawn in, then shut the door.

“I’m not your friend,” Dawn *reminds* me, and the words sting. “And why are we here?”

“I already explained. I need to talk to you.” But it doesn’t look like

it's going to be as easy as it was in the ruins, with both the broad daylight and her bitter feelings.

"Look, I'm sorry I... about what happened in the maze," I explain, my voice quivering. "It *was* Rowan... but I let it happen. I was suspicious of you, and I think that let the spirit find a way in. If it works like that, I mean."

She considers this for a second, her green eyes looking away as she does so. Apparently, this takes a while, leaving me on edge, waiting for a reply.

"Okay," she says, plainly, but beneath the surface it doesn't look that simple. The way that she is composed, how she takes time, looks away, I can tell how she is deep in contemplation.

"And," I tremble, with my heart skipping a beat. "I judged you, Dawn. Based on ideas I had, and again, even if it wasn't me... I did *that*."

Then, suddenly, she speaks. We're both just standing beside the door, so it seems casual, normal, but it's dismissive.

"Is that it? Or do you have anything else to say?" she asks me. I try not to be angry, but I can't stop it, so I just try to keep it inside. I deserve it, maybe, but *two can play at that game*.

"Where'd you get the pendant? What were you *really* doing in the ruins, if you weren't there to find Connor." It's an understandable question, so surely, she can answer.

"Why should I tell you?" she asks. It takes me a second to think of a good enough answer to that, and when I say it out loud, it still sounds weak.

"To give me the truth."

She looks irritated for a second, which means I may have just said the right thing, by coincidence. Dawn has higher moral standards and values than she lets on. She proved it to me when the others were asleep in the ruins.

"Fine," she replies, giving in. "I guess you deserve to know."

I remain silent, in anticipation of what she is about to tell me. She looks down at the floor, and she begins to speak.

“Connor isn’t the only person to ever go missing, you know,” she states, her hands fidgeting nervously. But... isn’t he? I’ve never heard of anyone else going missing, but then again, would I have? It’s undoubtedly true that no one’s barged into the Council meeting before, to announce a missing person of all things, but someone could’ve, must’ve, gone missing before then. Someone related to Dawn?

“My older brother went missing, okay. When I was younger...” She hesitates for a second, and I can see tears welling up in her eyes, so I stand here, anxiously looking around my room, at my bed, my filled bookshelves, the deep blue colour of everything.

“I thought it could be related, and I... even thought he could be living in there, when we found the ruins. So I came along to see if I could find anything, and the pendant... *that thing*, it was in my brother’s room. Well. He found a box of them, from who knows where, and he became... obsessed. I never understood what they were, where they came from, anything. Hardly heard a word from him about it. He was always quiet, but I saw how he studied them day after day. Then, one day, he just took them, and he left, and I never saw him again. He left a few though, scattered across the place, which I kept. So... then I saw that my pendant matched the hole by the entrance to the ruins, and... I got my h—hopes up.”

Right. I recall what happened when we arrived, with the strangely shaped hole in the wall next to the broken-down door. It seemed like it could have functioned as a key to enter the ruins. It makes me wonder more about the ruins’ past. The large number of these pendants could mean that a whole group of people had access to this place. And combined with the pendant’s power, in trapping Rowan inside, I can hardly begin to imagine who these people could have been.

She stops talking, and hides her face in her arms, ducking down and covering her eyes, her face. No.

“Sit,” I muster the energy to say, because I can’t look at her standing up, shaking and vulnerable, hiding behind herself. I go and

sit down on my bed, and to my surprise, she does too, looking down at the ground.

Her stomach moves up and down, her breathing fast and repetitive. Every single part of her body is in a state of anguish, with her hands shaking and her face flushed. It makes me feel like I need to help her, but I can't, due to my lack of experience and current inability to speak.

"I'm sorry," she cries. "Please don't hate me." I shake my head, but she can't see it, as she's still looking into her arms, the green fabric over her eyes.

"No," I say, and I'm replying to both statements. *No, you shouldn't be sorry. No, I won't hate you. No.*

She wipes her eyes with her sleeves, and she finally looks up, her eyes, a little swollen, meeting mine. I need to force myself to break eye contact, because I want to see her eyes, deep and bright. The green colour is highlighted by a golden tint around her iris, which I never noticed before. It makes it hard to look away.

She smiles. "Thank you." She composes herself for a couple of seconds, wiping her eyes once more, and sits up properly, out of her slouch. "He probably went beyond the border," she tells me, regaining some level of composure. "It's not far from Afon. So... he'll be dead now, but I should just try and get over it, I've been meaning to for so long, now..."

I take the chance to say something, seizing the idea before Dawn can move on. "Maybe not. We know it's dangerous out there, but there must be some people who supply us with wood."

"Yeah, that's strange, isn't it? But what if that's a lie, and *they* actually cut the trees down here! But they don't want us to know, because the trees are so important?"

"Then *everyone* will start losing their powers," I counter. "And it's just as likely that the state of the outside world as we're told it is a fabrication. And so perhaps there's lots of timber, and merchants."

She suddenly stands up, out of excitement, I think. "The outside could be so good that he never wanted to leave! Oh, Elias! I should

go, I can find him! And can you come with me?”

She pauses for a moment before speaking again. “Um. I’m sorry. That I got mad at you.”

It takes a few awkward seconds for me to even think of a response to say, but by that point, it doesn’t seem right. She sits back down and before I know it, her arms are around me. She’s hugging me. The warmth is immeasurable, permeating my body from her gentle, light arms. I become stiff and awkward, because I wasn’t expecting this, could never have never expected this. I can’t even get the words out that I was going to say. *No, I deserved it.*

She draws back, and I feel colder; bare without her touch. She looks at me, and laughs, looking at my unnaturally stationary body.

“Sorry about that, too,” she adds, although without solemnity. “So will you come with me?”

It’s a difficult question to answer. “I... wasn’t trying to convince you to go out *there*. It probably is at least quite dangerous, and it’s not the best idea, really. I mean... You haven’t before, and nothing has changed.”

“Actually,” she begins. “A lot has changed. We survived the ruins, remember? All five of us... and we should all go! We’re not children any more.”

I’m not really convinced by her arguments, but a certain word uttered by Rowan comes to mind. *Leave!*

“I mean, if any of us *don’t* want to find out what the pendants really are, that’s insane! The ruins... they have to be connected to the outside, and the spirits too!”

Rowan. *Rowan*. The tree from outside the Haven? What was it he said, as well as telling me to leave? That he’s not from the Haven? And what if he survived, and what if there are different trees out there? Trees that have survived? Dawn couldn’t be more right. The answers to everything are out there. So, I’m left with no choice.

“I’m in.”

I can say with absolute certainty that I never expected it to be so small and insignificant. The barrier, the wall, the boundary, the true edge of the Haven, of my home, is a crumbling old stone wall.

Made out of piles of large rocks, it's hardly taller than I am, and thick moss penetrates the tiny gaps inside it. Really, it looks no different from a wall separating one field from the next, although this one is slightly bigger. Despite this, it is unmistakably the end of the Haven, because beyond, the land is not flat and smooth, but covered in large boulders, with more lumps and mounds than I have ever seen in my entire life.

A few solitary trees stand outside, and the lack of leaves on their branches makes the whole scene even eerier, despite being just a remnant of the fading winter.

The wall, as a whole, seems like no kind of defence. Anyone could leave if they wanted to, so I think what keeps us contained is more the stories of dragons, and the very real fights that occur between them and the guards. The danger keeps us in, not the wall, which is a normal, unobtrusive thing.

Today, however, it has something interesting and definitely unusual, about it. Treading up to it are five children. No, *adults*, walking over the grassless ground, which is sprinkled with remnants

of dried leaves from autumn, from so long ago. This place is like a crossing of times, of seasons, and, of course, of worlds. I need to question myself, once more, if I really have what it takes to leave my entire life, my world behind, in favour of what is likely a wasteland.

Everything has led up to what is behind that wall. Rowan, who isn't native to the Haven, started the soil's infertility and caused Connor's disappearance. Despite the fact that I struggle to remember my ability in any way, he shared what it was, Willowbane. He may have even made it become known as a curse. And then he got trapped inside a certain pendant, one around Dawn's neck at this very moment. A pendant part of a kind of necklace that drove her brother insane, to the point that he disappeared, leaving the Haven entirely, probably searching for answers.

And then, what kind of life do I have behind me anyway? Too many times, I have thought about a powerless life, or a life with a curse, anything out of the usual, everything I have ever received. And the Council? The people who severed me in the first place, apparently made me *forget* I ever had an ability at all. They gave me that object, a ceramic box with a vial inside, so we have both Rowan's spirit, the first one with Willowbane *and* my Willowbane, contained in water, with us. Of course, that's how I saw all of the spirits, but I still don't know whether it is actually gone. I can't see them now, but maybe I just forget how to.

And so, we're leaving it all behind. The Haven, the Council, my tormentors, both spirit and human, hating me for my curse. The suffering, the hatred. The ruins, the division, the expectations, the rules.

But also, my family. Penny, my sweet little sister. My mother, careful and gentle, and my father, reliable and strong. I frown, thinking of how well their abilities matched them. A Healer and a farmer. I'm sure Penny's will be perfect for her too, which gives me comfort.

Mine never did, did it? I don't think I would've wanted such an ability, ever. But maybe it was given to me for another reason, rather

than appealing to me. Everything went wrong at first. At the time, for certain, nothing was right; it was all horrible. The possessions, the disappearance, the evil spirit, the blame. But it all led to this, and although I will miss so many things, this, for the first time in a long time, feels perfectly, completely right. And without my ability, I wouldn't be here today, with four friends instead of one, with a sense of excitement and adventure that I don't recall ever feeling before.

I still remain decided that the trees don't choose us; they are inanimate, whether they grant us abilities or not. But there *is* something, which decides more than just abilities. Which affects everyone's lives and guides them toward a future made for them. I should have been trustful all along.

Because no matter how hard things got, I came through it. We all did, in an even better place than where we started. So, I decide that I am grateful for what they all called my curse, my Willowbane. And now that daybreak *has* arrived, I choose to live.

"So, here we are," Edith says, a smile on her face. It wasn't hard to convince her to come, because she knew she deserved to know the secrets behind her possessor.

"Are we sure we should be doing this?" Oliver asks, the apprehension clear in his voice. He came for Dawn, because she was set on going, because of an unbreakable bond. Although he's rightly terrified.

"I'm sure," Connor says, and he has three reasons for coming along. His sister and best friend are, so it makes sense, but I think he'd also like to uncover more about what caused him to nearly starve. Also convincing him is the fiery desire for adventure in his heart, which he *clearly* shows in his confident statement.

"I am not," Dawn states, which gets a laugh out of us all. "But it's not about *should*, because I *need* to do this." Because, of course, she needs to find her lost brother, which was what caused her to join us in the ruins all along.

My main incentive, on the other hand, is Rowan's final word to me. "Then let's go," I say, and despite this, I think I have more reason

to stay in the Haven than the rest of them.

Because everyone back in the Haven still thinks I'm cursed. They weren't even told about my severance, so I remain as cursed as I ever was, in their judging, assuming eyes.

I will become a legend because of my swift departure. Maybe I kidnapped four other people, or maybe I hypnotised them, tricking them into coming along. Or perhaps I just killed them and then disappeared to who knows where. The possibilities are endless, because as usual, I am in the role of the black cat, who is the blame for the world's dark events.

However, I have decided to be the black cat wholeheartedly. Instead of dwelling on what they think of me, I join my friends, who are already jumping over the wall after hearing my command. I don't take a single thing about the Haven's perception of me.

I clamber onto the wall and put a leg across. Then I slide down, and I look at the horizon. Together, we begin the journey.

We go *beyond*.





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# In a community that celebrates power, ELIAS IS TOLD TO HIDE HIS.

Elias has waited his whole life to discover his ability, granted through one of the nine trees. But when the day of his Awakening finally comes, something goes wrong—horribly wrong.

However, after the Haven is faced with a series of strange events, Elias learns his ability is connected to something far greater than himself. He has the choice to rise up and save his friend and the very community that turned against him, or he can watch as his world falls apart.

Embarking on a dangerous quest, the boy discovers:

Mysterious ruins, hidden beneath his home all along.

Dark forces, seemingly outside of his control.

An uneasy friendship, filled with secrecy.

The taste of betrayal.

And truths that may be hard to take.

He can only wonder: is his ability a gift? Or is it the key to his foretold descent into darkness, and the destruction of all he holds dear?