Constellation Eyes

Möbius Molly, Volume 3

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CONSTELLATION EYES

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Dedication

For my father,
I imagine it
Another universe
Where the rift between us
Never formed, never existed
Where you loved me
Your son
I choose to live there now
Rest in peace.

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Cover art by Rachel Huth
No AI was used in the creation of this book.



Chapter 1: Taurus

The night sky loomed large in Molly's emerald eyes, carved by shadows into her pupils and irises. She shivered at the brutal cold, six inches of snow coating the ground in all directions, save for the gleaming mirror pond frozen solid by the depths of winter.

So...cold. Why am I outside in this? Where am I?

The stars burned hotter, shining like diamonds in the depths of the emptiness. The Mother Moon, white and watchful, traversed the quiet firmament. Molly leaned into the hypnotic trance, swaying in the moonlight of a dream world.

Look closer, child...

Molly jumped, gooseflesh rippled down her arms and back as the voice of an elderly woman broke the dream. Two footprints formed in the snow as she watched in terror; warm breath hit the air with each word, yet no one stood there beside her.

"Wait...who are you? I...I don't know your voice. Why can't I see you?"

Does it matter? Look to the skies, little one.

Molly brushed off the itching questions and looked intently at the stars. As she gazed, a group of stars moved as one, dashing across the visage in proud splendor. The stars formed the shape of a mighty bull, snorting and stamping with displeasure. Charging headlong, it leapt across space, across time, galloping with fire in its veins and smoke at its nostrils.

Behold, Taurus is with us tonight, the voice said, as more steam filled the air from nothing.

Molly held her breath as Taurus charged another group of stars, a great hunter armed with sword and bow. They clashed, the hunter striking metal against horn and sword against hoof. The budding sky blossomed in their dance of arrow and steel.

"Lady, who is the hunter?"

Oh, you will find out in due time, dear one.

Even as those words hung in the winter air, the Moon grew proud and full, mounting closer until she filled the night sky with her glory. Molly rocketed skywards, her body snatched away like the last glimpse of dusk, cold air whistling through her hair as she flew directly towards the ancient light.

"I can't...can't breathe...what's happening?"

Watch and wait. Find the music. Let it wash over you and all will be revealed.

Instead of fear, wonder overcame Molly. Flying headlong in nighttime splendor, her lungs filled with precious confidence, the darkness of space reverberating magnificent and free.

"I...I feel...alive!!"

Fleeting laughter drifted about her, hovering within her heart.

Yes, Molly...alive in all this beauty! Tell me, can you feel it? Can you feel the...?

"Can I feel what? Hello?"

The Moon drew close now; Molly flew faster than sound.

"Hey, Lady, don't leave me here! Where are you?"

She landed with a mighty crash, cratering the dusty lunarscape, casting a haze into the sky that blocked the silent Earth.

The Moon? What...why am I here?

Before another question could rise in her confused head, she spied a docked spacecraft emblazoned with the word *NASA* on its shining side. The hatch down, a lone astronaut figure stumbled and bounced towards the shadows, towards the dark side of the Moon.

Molly caught a glimpse of his helmeted face.

Absalom?

Molly could hear Absalom's crew, like she was in the vessel itself, as they begged him to turn back, to stay on mission. But still he walked, still he floated towards the darkness.

Molly followed.

Over the ridge and out of sight, they bounded into the depths of the unknown. But hidden inside the inky blackness, something shone golden and bright.

Molly gasped. *It's so...so beautiful!*

Absalom walked with conviction towards a sparkling temple of gold and diamond, built into the side of a crater. Its pillars towered higher than tree trunks, its gates rose regal and mighty. Up the gallant stairs he walked, and Molly followed.

She entered the vestibule, ceilings impossibly high above her, stars and nebulas floating like clouds in its belfry. Rivers of crystal framed the mighty hall that greeted her, the sound of secret waterfalls roared down distant hallways, gardens of the Moon spread their flowers and vines across the space, up the walls and columns of elegant pride. Molly saw strange and impossible fruits growing like gems in the hovering mist that watered their roots.

This is Paradise...

Absalom stopped, unclasping mechanisms on his suit one by one, taking off the helmet with a gulp of fresh air. He tossed it aside, then strode defiantly towards the far end of the room where the light shone brightest.

As they reached the far side of the great hall, seven glowing figures, distinctly human in shape, sat upon thrones etched with a language Molly had never seen.

Then Absalom spoke.

"Fateful ones, I am here. I have answered your call. Give me what was promised."

The lights murmured and seemed to look at each other.

"Lightkeeper human, what is thy name? How did'st thou hear our call?"

"Does it really matter? I was taught your ways from birth. I've earned your reward."

"Earned, sayest thou? How can one earn the deepest treasure? How can one deserve a gift meant for the whole world?"

"Listen to me. I'm only going to ask once more. Where is this gift? Those other humans down there...they're nothing. I'm the man for the job."

The beings shifted nervously, huddling together, speaking in ancient riddles. Then the center figure stood up.

"Dear one, I think you are greatly confused. What we have to give is not for one human, one person. This gift is for all. And by thy clouded face, we can see thou art...*treacherous*. Ye cannot know the location of the Ark. It is not for thy hands to touch."

Absalom stamped his feet, his rage staining his face bright red.

"I didn't come all this way for rejection!" he said, stepping forward.

"Unfortunately, ye are not the one we seek."

"How...why? I can't...I just can't..." he stuttered, stepping forward two more times.

The center being, lit as with the stars themselves, raised its hand in caution.

"Rage only brings regret, my friend."

Muttering to himself, Absalom leapt forward and grasped the being by its neck.

"I don't regret anything."

As Molly moved closer to watch, a surge of color and light poured from the being into Absalom's hands, up his arms, pooling and swirling in purple and red and green inside his chest. His eyes burst into flames; his body floated free of the ground.

"You wouldn't give it to me? But see, I have taken what's rightfully mine."

Absalom squeezed and tore, ripping the being asunder. Sapphire blood floated in the air as he dove zealously at the others, a gust of wind rushing from their mouths.

"See, I know everything now...*everything*!"

Absalom? How could you? Molly screamed inside her own head.

He struck them down, breaking their bodies against the stairs one by one. They did not fight back. Their blood ran as one, streaming towards the twin rivers, flowers and fruits growing from the stone wherever it flowed.

Molly choked, her voice cracking in pure shock at the scene.

What...my God, what have you done, Absalom?

Her squeak echoed off the high pillars and dark corners of the temple.

Absalom rested on his hands and knees in pools of blood, panting like a rabid beast. As Molly's voice echoed around him, he shot a glance in her direction, eyes darting back and forth, searching for the source.

Molly froze.

He...he can't see me...right?

Absalom smiled a most uncomfortable, shrewd smile.

"Until we meet again, witch. Until we meet again."

Molly hurtled backwards from the chamber, across the lunar surface, and back home, stars streaming like lightning.



Chapter 2: Margie's Magic

"Molly? Molly dear? *Egad*, are you even listening to me?"

Molly sat up with a squeal and looked around madly. She was sitting in a salon chair in a rundown but lovingly cleaned beauty parlor, the walls yellowed and peeling. Familiar faces hovered around her, leaning forward in their faded blue chairs. Margie stood beside her, puzzled, scissors and a brush in her hands. Molly looked around and saw Novalee stifling a laugh, Sunny casting a cynical look, Cinnamon gently smiling.

"Where'd you go, hun? 'Twas like you were a thousand miles away!" Novalee rattled on.

Molly blushed hard.

"I'm sorry, everyone, I know you're here to help me. I guess I was daydreaming."

"Well, stop that!" Novalee bounced with laughter. "Do you even remember my question?"

"Sorry...no."

"I was talking about me and Jasper. You know how damned depressed he is about not being able to have kids. I've told him a thousand times I don't care, but he brings it up all the time 'cause he thinks that's *all* I care about."

Margie broke in as she snipped at Molly's hair, "Dear, do you think *you* might make him feel that way, somehow?"

"Well, I mean, I talk about kids still, yeah. What I would have named them, stuff like that."

Sunny slammed her face into her palm as Cinnamon threw her a scolding look.

"Well, dearest, I think that might be your problem. You keep talking about something he can never give you," Margie offered.

"But couldn't Molly just heal him? I mean, since the Mother Tree, her healing powers have..."

"No," Molly said sharply.

"No, what? No, you won't? No, you can't? Work with me here."

"No...I better not say, I..."

"Out with it, Molly!"

Molly sighed. "Jasper...I already asked him. It's not exactly a secret you want kids. I offered to help. He said...he said..."

"C'mon, he said *what*?"

"Look, Nova, he doesn't want that. He wants to be loved for who he is, not for who someone else wishes him to be."

Novalee stuttered then stopped. Her luster faded one shade.

"But he knows the shit I'm dealing with inside, right? *Right*? It's not like I didn't just lose a child. It's not like I don't have this big empty space in my soul, a honkin' neon sign screaming, 'A piece of me is gone,' right?"

"I...I...really hadn't thought of that. I'm not sure..."

"Well, ladies," Cinnamon broke in, "we're all dealing with some deep stuff. We all have trauma. People shouldn't have to go through these things, especially alone. Nova, maybe he just needs..."

"Oh, I know what he needs!" Novalee said angrily. "I know. I wish he'd just say these things to me directly than to some other lady."

"I can understand that," Margie hummed as she braided Molly's hair.

"I think we all can," Molly said. "I mean, since...Jacinthe...I haven't been able to think of anything else. I miss her so much. I can hardly bear it."

"And how are you coping, Molly? Maybe you have some tips to help Jasper," Cinnamon soothed.

"Well, this scarf has helped..."

"Oh, honey, I wondered why you were wearing that thing everywhere!" Margie laughed.

"It's Jacinthe's favorite shade of purple. It reminds me of her, and she feels close when I wear it. I just needed something...tangible."

"Well, I don't know how a scarf 'll help my Jasper, but maybe a good hug every day would do the trick. Or maybe a good ass-kick..."

"Exactly," Cinnamon interrupted, putting her finger over Sunny's lips, who looked ready to pop. "*You* can be that tangible thing for him. He needs love right now. Maybe he'll have a change of heart after he gets the chance to heal inside."

"Well, right now, he's so damned busy at that radio he fixed, talking it up with resistance groups all over the state. He feels important, I guess."

"Then let him be busy. Just let him know you're there for him."

Sunny pushed Cinnamon's hand out of the way and burst wide open. "And what he's doing is so important! You shouldn't bother him so much. Let him be!"

"Well, I mean, *I love him*. I can't just let him be!" Novalee snickered.

"And you've told him that?" Molly asked.

"Again, let him be, I say," Sunny rattled on. "We need all the help we can get cleaning up every monster and grommet in the area. The more people, the better."

"There, that ought to do it, Molly," Margie spoke above the rest. "Tell me what you think!"

She spun Molly around to face the amber mirror. Molly stared at the unfamiliar face peeking out at her. Her pale skin now flushed scarlet with burns from the sun and wind. Her freckles had multiplied. And her red hair, now down to her mid-back, parted down the middle in

flowing waves. Margie had shaved the right side of her head and tied twin braids from the center-front, running up and over her head, hanging with her carefully-brushed locks behind her.

"I...I love it, Margie. I look...grown up."

"Well, it's the least I could do. After all that's happened, I think you needed a little change, a little somethin' new. You deserve to look nice. Do you like the eyeliner I slapped on there?"

Can that really be...me?

"Thank you, Margie," Molly said, hopping out of the chair to hug her.

"If you need to talk, Molly, I'm always here. We all are!" Margie said, sweeping her arm towards the friendly faces in the room.

Novalee perked up at the mention, "It's good to see you smile a smidge."

"Yes, Molly, Sunny and I...we're forever in your debt, and in Jacinthe's. I wish we could have gotten to know her before..." Cinnamon trailed off.

"It's okay. You don't have to pretend like nothing happened," Molly sighed. "I think I need..."

"Let's have a ladies night soon!" Novalee interrupted. "We can make some good food, get something special to drink, chat about whatever we want. No men allowed! What do you say?"

Sunny frowned and picked up an old magazine while the rest talked excitedly about the possibilities.

"Oh, c'mon, Sunny, you know you love the idea! Don't be such a party pooper." Novalee laughed.

"No thanks. I'm perfectly fine with an evening to myself."

Molly snickered.

"You know what, gals?" Margie said. "Because of Jasper's efforts, we've been getting all sorts of new supplies brought in. Someone brought a dusty bag of Pepsi syrup on the last trip. It should work with

my old pop machine in the restaurant! It's ancient, but maybe it'll be okay!"

"Pepsi? What's that?" Molly asked.

"A super sweet, fizzy pop from the old times! You'll love it, honey."

"Pop? I haven't had one of those in forever!"

"Oh, my goodness, I can't wait to see your face light up. I'll get to work on it..."

Margie's words vanished as Jasper burst in the salon door, sweat beading on his brow.

"Oh, hey, ladies, I'm sorry to interrupt. I...I..."

"Just say it, love!" Novalee joked.

"Radio chatter: you know how I monitor that thing. I'm hearing from our friends at the Blue Place in Canton right now. One of their scouts spotted a garrison of Reapers headed their way. They need our help!"

"Reapers? The old sweep teams got an upgrade, eh?" Sunny rejoined.

"Indeed, they did. From what I'm hearing, they were the last thing Absalom commissioned before he shut himself up in his Keep. They're something...something more dangerous, they say. I don't want to underestimate them. We need to leave now!"

As the rest of the women chattered and rushed through the door with Jasper, Margie grabbed hold of Molly's hand.

"Dearest, will you never get a break?"

"I suspect not."

"I hope for a day when you can just exist, just be happy. You deserve it more than anyone I know."

Molly held back tears as she leapt into Margie's arms.

"Thank you so much for my...what's it called again?"

"Makeover?"

"Yes, my makeover. I don't think anyone's ever styled my hair before."

Should I tell her she's been like a mother to me?

Margie's face wrinkled into a smile. "Never could have a girl of my own. It's been such a treat for me. Just...you hurry back, ya hear? I'll have that Pepsi waiting for you, something special for your victory."

Molly nodded and ran out the door.



THE JANUARY MORNING air stabbed Molly's nose as she sprinted to her apartment to gather gear. She huffed and puffed, her breathy steam wafting towards the clouds as she approached a group bent on their new mission. She could hear Jasper's cautious voice crawl with urgency as he squeaked guidance to his team. He looked up as Molly rushed by, giving her a little nod for good measure.

He's been such a godsend for this place.

She rushed through the front door of her apartment. Brushing the red hairs from her shirt, she slithered into the big black coat Margie had given her for the winter freeze. She added thick gloves and a black beanie, plus an extra pair of socks to fit inside her boots with the silvery clasps. She looked at herself in the mirror for a moment.

Feels like I've aged years in the last ten months.

She smoothed down her river of hair, admiring how it looked under the winter hat. With a quick smile, she flew out the door to the sound of rumbling engines as Jasper corralled three vans of volunteers together. Molly saw Novalee, Sunny, and Cinnamon jump into one rusty Chevy as other familiar faces leapt into the others and slammed the sliding doors.

"Can I go, Jasper?" Molly heard Sasha ask politely, his tentacles shivering in the cold.

Jasper planted his knee and put his hands on Sasha's shoulders.

"Oh, you know I'd love that, buddy. I'm just not sure what we're up against. Next time...I promise!"

Sasha nodded, "I trust you! Next time is okay with me. I'll just...just get on the radio while you're away."

"That's perfect. Thank you so much for helping me out!"

Molly smiled as she slid into the front passenger seat of the Chevy.

It always makes me happy to see those two together.

"They're, like, best friends now, those two," Novalee was saying. "Sometimes I'm not sure if I should be jealous or not."

Sunny rolled her eyes, "Will you stop? Guys need man-friends, too."

"Gives me a little hope seeing a friendship like that, you know?" Cinnamon said. "Like the world isn't such a bad place after all."

Molly turned around and nodded, "I love it. They're the perfect pair. No offense, Nova."

Just then, Jasper squeezed into the driver's seat and revved the engine.

"Are you ladies ready for this?"

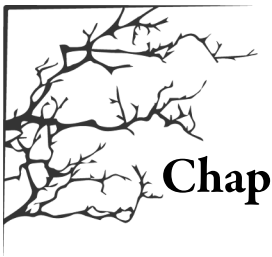
They nodded in unison.

"We're doing this the...the *nonviolent* way, right?" Molly asked.

Sunny huffed in the back as Cinnamon put a hand on her leg.

"Sure thing, Molly," Jasper assured her. "No unnecessary violence. We're going to check it out and let you do your thing. We're all just backup, really."

With that, he pulled the gearshift and hit the gas.



Chapter 3: Reaper Bridge

The frozen landscape whizzed by them as Molly took time to breathe. She watched the hoar frost on the window slowly wither and melt as the Chevy's clogged heater core finally started flowing. She watched long-abandoned shops, warehouses, and Amish restaurants come and go, fields of snow and ice spreading out behind them for miles. Her mind wandered as she blocked out Novalee's chatter from the back seat.

"Should be there in about thirty minutes, as long as 77's clear enough. God, I hope it is. It's been so nice connecting with other groups of survivors. We can't let them down," Jasper declared.

"You said they're based out of the Blue Place?" Molly asked.

"Oh, yeah, they holed up there pretty good. Great building, though maybe difficult to secure since it's so large. Their numbers have been growing. Cindra told me they're up to 60 people there now. I suspect that's why Absalom's Reapers have taken notice."

"Cindra?"

"Oh, yes, Cindra Rainbolt, she calls herself. I doubt that's her real name. Anyways, she's the leader up there. She's from another state up north. Came here to find her brother, she said, but ended up with some followers and decided to stay for now."

They turned onto 77 just then; the road was buried in snow, not a set of tire tracks in sight.

"Well, looks like we'll have to be careful. I'll go as fast as I can," Jasper sighed.

"Are you doing alright, Molly?" Cinnamon put a hand on her shoulder.

"Yeah, I think so."

"You seem a little lost right now. Where'd you go back there in the salon? Your eyes were pure white. Margie was about to call the medic!"

"Oh, yeah, I almost forgot about that. I'm...I'm fine. Just a little dream. That happens sometimes."

"First thing in the morning, right in the middle of a conversation?"

"Well, no, not usually."

"Should you be going with us?" Jasper interjected. "Are you up for this?"

"Yes, everyone, stop worrying about me. I'm *fine*."

The van descended into silence as everyone sensed the bristling thorns within her.

"Well," Novalee ventured, "at least your new hair cut looks damn good, thanks to Margie."

Molly smiled, "Just the thing I needed!"



THEY SPED ALONG THE highway as it twisted and turned like a serpent through hospitals, exit ramps, and churches, a sudden snow flurry hitting with unexpected ferocity. In the distance, Molly saw a red arch bridge, worn yet still bright, as it crossed over the highway. A group of figures stood at each end, braced and wary. Molly could feel the hostility even from a distance.

"I always love driving by this bridge. Such a nice color and shape. Brother Mast told me it was called the Hall of Fame bridge," Jasper said.

"Well, it looks like that's where we're going!" Sunny said in the back. "Trouble's brewing!"

Jasper flew underneath the bridge and took the next exit ramp. Veering back and forth, he kept the gas to the floor as he burned past a

strip of empty stores and restaurants; the Blue Place emerged from the snowfall on the right, the red bridge full of angry crowds on the left.

"I...I can try this on my own, Jasper," Molly whispered.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, let me try to resolve the situation."

Waving for the other vans to stay back, Jasper took a left turn and the group of survivors parted to let him through. He drove to the center of the bridge and stopped the engine. The jangle of the keys tapped in rhythm with Molly's anxious soul.

For real...can I do this?

In front of them stood a menacing horde, big grommets painted a ghastly green, covered in black armor studded with steel shards. On their backs, they wore black clubs lined with gleaming diamonds.

"Absalom's Reapers. They're no joke, Molly. I don't want to annoy you, but are you *sure* about this?" Jasper asked.

"I'm sure."

Molly stepped out of the van. The icy pavement crunched beneath her boot. Snowflakes collided with her face, stinging her cheeks.

Good. I needed that.

The Reapers snarled and snapped at her, jeering in some unholy language as she approached.

"I'm not here to hurt any of you," Molly started. "I think we can be friends."

"Friends, say you?" a familiar voice cackled from behind the eager horde. "I didn't expect you to be so naïve."

Molly squinted as a figure made its way through the crowd, caressing and wooing the Reapers as it approached.

"Kassandra? Kassandra Snapp?" Molly belted.

"Yes, dear, one and the same."

As Kassandra broke the front of the horde, Molly gasped. The woman before her was not the same she'd seen in the Citadel three months prior. Kassandra limped heavily, laden with machinations and

tubes, gears and pumping pistons. Her body was imprisoned by a pulsating machine, one arm completely replaced by a lifeless metal apparatus. She choked and sputtered, scratching at the gaping glands set into her face, engorged and flaring as oil and goo ran from them, splattering on the ground with each step. Smoking in the frigid air, she struggled forward under the weight.

"Kassandra...what happened to you?" Molly bellowed, covering her mouth with her hands.

Keep it together.

"Happened to me? Absalom finally gave me my due. I was such a diligent follower, such a valuable asset. He finally recognized that in me."

"*Kassie*," Molly whispered, "what have you become?"

"I'm not here about me, little witch. I'm not even here about *you*. I'm here for Absalom's Great Harvest, when all the loyal will be rewarded and all the sinners shall be thrown into the outer darkness."

"Wha...what are you even saying? I just...I feel..."

"Behold, his Reapers are skilled and ready, waiting to gather in the wheat and throw the chaff into the fire," Kassandra continued, muck seeping from her mouth with each word.

"Do you really believe that? I feel...I feel like you can't really..."

"I don't care what you feel," Kassandra hammered as she rubbed the shoulder of a Reaper standing beside her. "I've never cared."

Molly shuddered at her coldness, even as she heard Jasper and Cinnamon calling to her from the van. She twisted her head to listen, but her brain processed only mush.

"See, your *own* friends don't believe in you, Molly."

"Oh, I think they do, actually. *That's what I'm afraid of.*"

Kassandra smiled. "You don't have to be afraid anymore. Absalom will still take you back. He still needs...still *wants* you on his side."

"Was that before or after he locked himself in his Keep? He's the scared one!"

The blood drained from Kassandra's face. "Absalom fears nothing. He's done so much for this country, so much for this world! It's just you and your awful band of miscreants that keep causing problems, keeping eliminating his creatures. You need to get right with Absalom. You need to turn your heart to him, before it's too late."

"That's not what I've heard. They say people are turning against him, that citizens even in his big cities have had enough—they can't support his filth any longer!"

"Filth?" Kassandra laughed, her mechanisms creaking. "He's made this world a livable place again. Made us wealthier than ever!"

"Again, that's not what I've heard." Molly smirked.

"Listen, bitch, you can't believe everything you hear. You're lost over there in your little Dark Zone, completely unaware of the outside world. It's like you haven't tried real resistance. It's pathetic. You're hiding, but that won't stop what's coming for you."

"I...I don't like violence, Kassie. We do fight back, though. And what we've done, we've done out of necessity."

"And that goes for poor Weech? Tree roots bursting from his eye sockets? Right here and right now, he's more powerful than ever. He's inside me, Molly. I'm...I'm channeling his spirit. He's still Absalom's man, and now I'm Absalom's woman."

"Your brain, Kassie...it's not working anymore! Can you hear yourself?"

"I am Weech reborn. And I won't fail like he did."

"How can you say that after all the...*the atrocities* Weech committed? He was a horrible human being."

"No, you're just angry at Absalom, Molly. It's like a disease with you, isn't it? All these false reports, but you want to believe them, don't you? Me? I don't believe a word!"

"No, *you're* just projecting because you still blame yourself for those poor children you didn't save."

Kassandra stepped back a pace and rubbed her neck. Tears trickled from her eyes, as if in response.

"What would Jacinthe think of you now?" she spat. "She gave her life to save you."

"I think about that every day..."

"But don't you understand? She saved you to give you another chance with Absalom."

Molly fought back tears. "No, she'd never want me to join him. Never!"

"Ah, but she willingly sacrificed herself for you to appease his anger. See? She was smart. *She knew*."

Molly felt her body stiffen, her arms and legs at first, then her chest as her blood ran cold. Blue veins popped to the surface, webbing all over her body.

What's...happening...so cold...

Then thoughts filled her mind, images of Jacinthe bleeding out on an altar, dreams of Papaw lying in a pool of blood on a bridge, searing pictures of Seth impaled on the spikes of a blithering troll. She fell to her knees and gasped for air.

So much...so much pain...just breathe.

Cinnamon and Jasper rushed to hold her shoulders steady.

"What's happening in there, Molly? Are you okay?" Cinnamon whispered even as Kassandra watched with grinning pleasure.

"I...I can't...my mind is so full of sadness, just like...just like *my father* said it would be."

"There's time to grieve, Molly," Jasper said, "but don't let her manipulate you. She's good at that."

Molly stood up slowly to face her foe once again.

"I don't know what you just did to me, but...it won't work. I won't give in."

Kassandra sneered, rubbing her neck for tears once again.

"I didn't do anything to you. Like me, you have buried sorrow. Don't fight it! Absalom is the answer. He always has been."

"No, *never*!"

"Then this conversation is over."

Before Kassandra's steaming exhaust floated away, three Reapers bolted forward, brandishing their spiked clubs.

Here we go...

Molly focused with all her might as two purple whips of vibrating energy descended from her arms and curled onto the frozen roadway. She pushed Jasper and Cinnamon back towards the van.

The wind blew cold and harsh, whistling eerily as the Reapers approached.

The first Reaper swung quickly, Molly only just barely dodging the blow. The second and third rammed right into her with their shoulders, to the jubilation of the horde behind them. Molly hit the ground hard with Reapers on top; their fangs, browned and bloodied, bared inches from her face.

"We could have been friends, you know, Kassie." Molly winced.

"Shut yer mouth, woman!" one of the foul creatures vomited.

With a covert smile, Molly held her blue-veined hands to their steely helmets, the purple energy sizzled with fire now, her gloves burned off as the color grew. The Reapers seized hard, shaking and rattling in their armor as they lurched to their feet and fell backwards. Tremors claiming their bodies, they shrank and collapsed upon all fours. Within seconds, two golden retriever puppies stood in their place, licking and wrestling each other in the snow.

The third Reaper balked, unsure of himself, as Molly smirked.

"Like I said, we could have been friends, Kassie. We're going to be friends one way or another," Molly said, her breath leaving a haze in the sky.

"Enough, all of you, *get her*!" Kassandra screeched.

Dozens of Reapers charged the bridge, a surging wave, violence in their eyes. Molly sprinted at them, lashing with her whips in vivid confidence. Even as she changed them to flowering fruit trees and lowing cows, she met Kassandra's gaze once again.

And the sadness surged harder than before.

She stumbled to her knees, ripping bloody holes in her jeans on the unforgiving asphalt. Looking up, the wave of Reapers poured towards her; one particularly ugly brute with bulky arms raised his club high in the air, ready for the strike.

This is going to hurt...

The brute's arm disappeared in a splatter of blood and mucus. The creature reeled in disbelief as a shining spear severed his arm from his body. Molly swiveled to see a tall, muscular Japanese woman in a fur-trimmed jumpsuit, spears strapped to her back, pigtails bobbing as she ran. Her sinews flexed as she grabbed another javelin and swung, slicing the head clean off another Reaper.

"Who...who are you?" Molly called out as the rest of the survivors rushed into the fray.

The resistance fighters clashed with the Reaper horde, slashing and stabbing, some shooting precious ammo. Reapers were cut to pieces, dropping from the bridge as the fighters blasted their way through the wall of flesh. Still, the creature wave continued pouring across the bridge as Kassandra stood back to watch.

Jasper helped Molly to her feet in the commotion. "That's Cindra Rainbolt, the leader. She's quite...formidable."

Molly watched in horror as Cindra, covered in blood, mauled and speared Reapers with sheer glee. With a beaming smile on her face, she hacked her way through the mass. Kassandra's radiating grin turned to a scowl within seconds as she watched the turning of the tide.

Molly's spirit quivered at the sight, the violence dealing damage to her soul.

"You call this peaceful? I thought you were only violent out of necessity?" Kassandra hurled.

Molly shrugged helplessly.

"Well, then *this* is necessary: a parting gift from Absalom..."

Kassandra twisted and contorted her body, summoning some inner incantation. Her eyes burned red, her machine body pumped and smoked. Two Reapers next to her floated powerlessly into the air, shaking like banshees.

"...while I deal with your friends back home."

Back home? What is she doing?

The first Reaper's body trembled then exploded, chunks of flesh and viscera splattered onto the pavement. The second Reaper yelped as it quaked even harder; its head erupted into a gelatinous river streaming from its neck stump. The tangled mess heaped itself into a great mountain of quivering mucus, cracking the cold roadway under its weight. The pink monstrosity heaved forward, drowning Reapers and survivors alike, washing over them like a tidal wave frozen in time.

God, I hate that sour smell...

"Jasper, she's done something to Wing's Reach, we've got to get outta here!"

The creature grew hairy stalks, tiny mouths grabbing and biting as it rolled its mass towards Molly.

"Are you sure she's not bluffing?"

Molly turned to see Kassandra limping away.

"I'm sure."

Cindra speared the pink monster as she fought against the quivering wall of slime, now waist-deep. Her weapon disappeared into the ooze with no effect.

"What're we supposed to do about this one?" she called back, her voice a trumpet that hurt Molly's ears.

"Jasper, only *I* can stop this thing," Molly said.

The creature swept over the survivors, reaching their chests and necks rapidly, each of them swimming for their lives in a jelly state. Molly winced, elbowing the beast as the stalk mouths nipped at her ears and neck.

"Are you sure you can?" Sunny yelled above the roar of the creature, the glop reaching the van, dragging it effortlessly, suspending it above the ground. "Right now, would be great!"

Molly held her chest, breathed in and out, as her friends screamed.

1...2...3...4...

"We don't have time for her counting!" Cindra coughed, pink gunk flooding her mouth.

The abomination rolled over the red bridge, building higher and higher, solidifying slowly, slime trails dripping from the sides onto the expressway below.

5...6...7...8...9...

"Get everyone back!" Jasper yelled. "Out of the way!"

The creature reeled itself into the air, hammering the bridge beams, bending them in the middle; the entire structure shuddered under its mounting weight. Molly saw Cindra struggling for air as the flood grew; other fighters thrashed deep inside it, suffocating within the depths of beast.

10...

Molly's meditation burned in her eyes, purple fire leapt from her braided hair. In a harrowing sweep of her arms, a purple tsunami exploded from Molly's chest, rushing outwards in all directions. The stalk mouths screeched as the creature's body burned, melting down, shrinking swiftly into a brown spot on the ice as Cindra and her friends fell heavily to the pavement. The bridgeway dried out like a July summer day, the heat boiling and searing the creature's flesh into a mere stain.

"Thanks for nothing!" Cindra yelled, slapping out purple flames on her jumpsuit.

But Molly didn't respond. She collapsed to the ground as her veins ran blue and frigid once more.

"Get me to the van! We need to get home!"



Chapter 4: The Wall

Don't you see, Molly? I will always wait for you. Come to the mercy seat of my goodness. Destiny binds us together, ever since that day in the lunar temple.

And what of the fabled angel feet? Weren't you this famously innocent explorer who just happened to find something extraordinary? I saw you march in there deliberately.

Fibs for the masses, darling. Humans don't know what's good for them, and sometimes a few well-placed lies are necessary to give them a push. Politics. All politics.

You don't think much of people, do you?

Tools to an end. That's what they are. But you and me? We're meant to rule this place...justly and righteously, of course.

I saw what you did, Absalom. Those...beings of light...you killed them.

They refused to honor their ancient promise. I made the pilgrimage. I did the work. I was the Chosen One. Me! And they spat in my face.

What if they had a point? What if you aren't chosen?

Er, just what an unbeliever would ask. It's nothing but faithlessness with you, isn't it? I knew from the moment I saw you...you're a doubter. A troublemaker. And I knew I'd see you again.

I...I don't understand any of this.

That's why you need me! Let me be your teacher.

I'd rather kiss a grommet.

The voice faded from Molly's head.



MOLLY SHOOK HER EYES awake. She was in the back of the Chevy; the scenery flew past as Jasper held the gas pedal to the floor. Crowded in the van were Sunny, Cinnamon, Novalee, and their new friend Cindra, and they were arguing in hushed voices.

"It's not practical. It just isn't!" Cindra hissed.

"It's the way she does things, though," Cinnamon replied. "She's been through a lot, Cindra. She feels that nonviolent resistance is best."

Cindra snorted. "Did it work back there? She bested a couple Reapers but was overwhelmed so fast. If I hadn't stepped in...what was wrong with her anyways? Why are all her veins sticking out like that?"

"I'm not sure. Something Kassandra said froze her stiff. She's an empath...something struck her heart."

"And that's who you all want to follow? This...this goofball who believes in weakness, who fails so easily?"

Molly sat up abruptly. She eyed the countryside flowing past with icy grace, her wits barely clinging to her brain cells.

"We're almost home already?"

"You were out for a spell," Jasper said, glancing at her in the rearview mirror.

The van fell into uncomfortable silence. Everyone held their breath.

"Cindra, it's good to meet you. Jasper told me..." Molly offered.

"Yeah, well, I've heard and seen enough."

"Enough?"

"You endangered my people back there! You put your friends in harm's way, too. Your little nonviolent crusade is going to get people killed!"

Molly took two gulps of air.

"I...I know it's not popular. Even the Wing's Reach people want more weapons. It just doesn't feel right to me."

Cindra laughed, her breath fogging the window.

"Are you serious? Maybe that Kassandra lady was right! We shouldn't care how you feel! We're up against some serious shit here. We don't have the time to hug trees or plant flowers. We need to fight back, hard and swift, strike first and strike hard!"

"I...I think I might agree with Cindra..." Sunny said, clearing her throat.

"What, how could you?" Cinnamon whispered.

"It might not be a bad idea. We need to have a meeting about it...right, Jasper?" Novalee said, flipping her blonde hair.

"A meeting? What's there to discuss?" Cindra roared. "Your Molly is an idealogue. All she cares about is her feelings. And her pungent personality is going to accomplish exactly nothing."

"Now, Cindra..." Jasper began.

Maybe she's right...I'm worthless. I'm just going to get people killed.

The blue veins rose to the surface again, Molly's fingers tingled as the tips turned frostbite black.

"I...I know my ways aren't..."

"Don't you listen, Carrot Top? I don't care! Your own friends disagree with you!"

Molly shuddered as the cold set in again. She lay back on the seat, shivering as the sadness spread across her chest, numbness of body and soul.

"Look what you're doing! Stop! Stop being so...so cruel to her!" Cinnamon yelled, her voice louder than Molly had ever heard.

"No! I won't stop! You know why? I care about people. I want to protect them. Molly here doesn't. I wouldn't be surprised if her friend, what's her name? *Jacinthe*! I bet she would still be alive if Molly would've just kicked a little ass!"

Molly thundered back up, standing on the seat. Her eyes brimmed with fire, though her body glowed with pale sadness. A million stream-

ing thoughts flooded her brain, riveting shades of sorrow and madness pulling her apart at the seams.

I...I can't handle this anymore...

She lashed out, striking Cindra in the back of the head.

"Oh, no, you didn't! Things're about to go down!"

"Ladies, please! We're almost home!" Jasper pleaded as he slammed on the brakes, the Wing's Reach sign not a mile in the distance. "Can we just..."

"Shut up!" Cindra and Molly yelled together.

They poured out of the van, knocking Cinnamon to the ground in their hurry.

Cindra took a swing, Molly blocked it with her frigid arm. She pummeled Cindra full force in the stomach, tackling her to the ground. They rolled together in the snow, pulling hair and kicking hard.

"C'mon, guys! What's gotten into you both?" Jasper begged.

They faced each other, breathing plumes of steam into the winter air. Molly held out her hand, offering to shake. Cindra judged her closely, gritting her teeth.

"We can be...*friends*...I know we can," Molly said, struggling.

"Friends?" Cindra laughed.

Before the word left her mouth, she punched Molly right in the nose, a squib of blood spurting into the snow. Molly sat down hard. She wiped the blood with her sleeve and stared at the red stain.

"Who...*who the hell*...do you think you are?" Molly screamed.

The purple raged in her crimson hair again, twisting and knotting. A blast of energy shot from her crown, launching into the low, dark clouds above like a rocket ship. The ground shuddered. Electricity hovered around them. Everyone's hair stood on end.

"What did she do?" Cindra howled as a great vibration shook the air.

High above, a dark circle appeared, a flurry of shadows, wreathed in mist and hoar frost. It fell like a stone from the sky.

"What is that, Molly?" Jasper turned to her.

"I...I don't know!"

As it fell, it surrounded them, growing larger as it grew closer. Within seconds and with a mighty earthquake, a towering purple wall slammed to the ground with immense force; wilted grass and frozen earth flung into the air as it came to rest. Miles in diameter and a hundred feet high, the wall surged with energy deep within its blackened halls, like peering into the cosmos, like a portal to distant worlds.

"Wait...are we...trapped?" Cindra screamed. "My people! I came here to help you, and now you've cut me off?"

Jasper paced around in disarray, pulling his hair.

"I think this wall is...yes...it's caged in Wing's Reach and who knows what else? Molly, this was you?"

Molly didn't answer. She ran to the wall and gave it a kick. The wall reverberated with color and sound. Pain shot up her leg.

"Ahhh, okay. Um, let me try this..."

Molly summoned her fire, weak though it seemed. She blasted the wall, yet not a scratch appeared. She bent over in pain, reaching deep within herself for something greater.

"Molly, stop, dammit! We don't have time for this!" Novalee rushed over, Cinnamon hot on her heels. "What if Kassandra really did something to Wing's Reach?"

The light died in Molly's eyes as reality returned.

"Wing's Reach? The people? They need us!"



Chapter 5: Poison Well

Molly raced as fast as her short legs would carry her. Huffing and puffing, heart pounding in her ears, she didn't hear Jasper yell for her to jump in the Chevy, or the squealing of tires on ice as the caravan sped ahead of her.

But she needed this. She needed the exertion.

So wrapped up in myself, I forgot what I was doing.

So, she ran. The old town sign with the little Dutch man bounced closer with each step. She blew by it and into town, rows of shops, old gas stations, and factories streaming by her periphery. She could see the vans ahead as everyone poured out of them, scattering and searching.

Please, no...please be okay.

Molly bit her tongue as a shadow dodged between two buildings on her right, between Margie's Place and the newly rebuilt town center. Without hesitation, she booked after it.

The alley seemed to last forever. Dread punished every breath as she imagined a thousand different horrors lying just around the corner, waiting in the snow.

No, no, no...

As she rounded the corner, she saw it. Dirt mounded up against the back of the buildings, holes burrowed all over the place.

What the...?

Then she saw the shadow shape: a gutter creature, slimy and stealthy as a grave robber. Its front half was buried in a giant hole dug directly behind the town center. Its rough skin bore a muddy brown hue, and its tail arched like a bent branch, embedding itself into the frozen ground like a ship anchor.

"Hey, there...what are you?"

The creature's head shot up at the sound. Scales covered its freakish body in a thick armor crust: its back legs long as stilts, its front legs terminating into sharp claws, curved for digging. Out of its mouth ran a pulsating tube which snaked down into the fresh hole.

A million thoughts burned through Molly's skull as she put two and two together. The tube throbbed with filth and, as she watched, the creature vomited an abominable mass into the pit.

"What...what did you just do?" Molly screamed, jumping on the creature's back. It lurched and fought like a tethered bronco, kicking her off into a snowdrift.

"MOLLY!!" Jasper's voice bellowed from the front of the building. "We need you!"

Nerves frazzled, Molly cautiously approached the scaly creature again.

"It's okay. What do you have there?"

Molly looked down into the hollow. The creature had burrowed to the water main, breaking through the metal with careful precision. The grimy tube jutting from the creature's mouth disappeared down the pipe like a serpent. And before her eyes, more filth pumped into the pipeline, into the clear water running to the building itself.

"You're...you're poisoning our water?"

The creature tucked itself into a ball shape as Molly ran to the other dirt mounds and found more waste, more poison seeping into the water supply.

Molly's throat dried up as she felt panic settle on her heart.

My God, what has it done?

She hurried towards the front of Margie's Place. Cindra silently sped around the corner the opposite way, eyes rolling at the sight of her. As Molly glanced back, she saw Cindra spear the creature through its dreadful face.

"MOLLY! Get in here!" Jasper cried again.

Molly blasted through the front door of Margie's restaurant. Strewn across the floor, she saw friends, familiar faces. In the corner sat a soda fountain lined with slots for ice and drinks.

That's...Pepsi? Margie said she'd...

"Molly, they're dying! You've got to save them!" Novalee grabbed her shoulder.

Jasper, Sunny, Cinnamon, and the other team members crouched over their fallen friends. Puddles of a dark drink pooled everywhere, spilled across tables, dribbling onto the floor, onto their prostrate bodies.

Molly ran up to one. It was Brother Mast.

"He's dying, Molly! Do something!" Sunny said, holding his head in her lap as she tried to revive him.

Molly forgot her problems in that moment. Violet fire flared within her palms. Laying hands on Brother Mast, his face glowed as she poured healing energy into his body. His eyes fluttered open. Soon, he sat up.

Coughing, he spoke, " Sunny? I...I didn't think you liked me..."

Sunny scowled, though her eyes betrayed her emotion.

"Like you? No. Would I save your life? Absolutely. Maybe now you'll leave me and Cinnamon be?"

Molly felt the struggle inside his heart, his pious convictions peeling like paint as experience formed a new picture.

"I...well..." he stuttered. "But...Molly! Margie! You need to help Margie!"

"Go on...git! I've got him now." Sunny shooed her.

Molly wasted no more time. She rushed from person to person, healing and soothing. Ten people she healed, ten who had tasted the sweet drink made to celebrate Molly.

"Where's Margie, though? Where is she?" Molly panicked.

They skirted the room, searching.

"Is she in the back? Maybe?" Sunny croaked.

"Yes, she's in the kitchen!" Brother Mast wheezed, his head still in her lap.

Reality snapped on Molly like a jackknife. She hurtled through the back door, the 'Employees Only' sign still hanging there from decades past. Exploding through the door, she found her.

Margie lay in a disheveled heap on the kitchen floor, a glass of pop pooling about her. On the counter above, a cake stood, colorful and proud.

The words on it read, "We appreciate you, Molly Shadowen!"

She rushed to Margie's fallen form. Frantically, she felt her neck and listened to her chest. With each moment, fire and fury rose in Molly, tears stung her eyes until they brimmed, pouring down her cheeks, blurring her vision.

"Margie! *Margie*? Are you still in there? C'mon, Margie, please don't leave me..."

Molly's hands blazed purple as she focused. She pushed on Margie's chest, channeling every bit of energy she could. Margie's body shook as the healing energy flowed in and right back out, the resounding emptiness echoing off the cluttered countertops.

No, no, no...this is your place, Margie. This is your favorite place. You can't...

Molly collapsed on the floor beside her. She held Margie's head close as the truth dawned on her mind. Alone in the raspberry stillness, she wept for her friend.

"No, Margie...no."

Jasper and Novalee burst in the door just then. They found Molly sobbing bitterly, her tears covering Margie's face as she lay in death's embrace.



THE NEXT TWO DAYS WERE a shot of anesthesia to Molly's heart. Friends asked how she was doing, how she felt since she had been growing close to Margie. Their faces jumbled in Molly's mind, became a static, a scourge of her soul. She could not think. She could not even breathe. She just wanted everyone to leave her be.

On the second day, Molly stood in front of her bathroom mirror as she readied herself for Margie's memorial. It felt weird to plan such an event. So many had died along the way, and they rarely had the time or place to bury their friends. But with the wall surrounding the town, they could put Margie to rest like she deserved.

So much loss in this horrid life, she thought as she scrubbed her dirty neck.

Am I some sort of...I dunno...bad luck? There's only one person in the middle of all this suffering and death, and that's me! Why does everyone close to me get hurt? Why do they go away?

She pondered her face in the mirror a bit longer. Her face was aging. Tiny wrinkles had risen to the surface recently, betraying the decades. Margie's handiwork on her hair livened things up, made her finally feel more like a woman than a girl. She touched the shaved side of her head, grazed the intertwined red braids that flowed down her back.

Margie should still be alive. Maybe...maybe I'm the one who needs to go away for a change. Maybe I'm the problem.

An hour later, she sat in the front row of Brother Mast's church as he eulogized Margie, her body lying in an open, roughhewn casket behind him. Friends around Molly wept and passed scraps of cloth to blot their tears.

Molly did not notice Brother Mast's concerned face.

She barely heard Novalee whisper, "Shed a tear for her, Molly."

The memorial was a blur, a dark pit of emotions that choked the pores of her heart, jammed the electric flow from her spine, dried the tear ducts in her sullen face. She couldn't cry. She could only stare at

Margie's lifeless body; study the pale skin, the blue lips, the frigid unmoving chest. She could almost smell death lingering in the air.

"She was a pillar of this community. She fed us. She made us laugh. She loved each and every one of us," Brother Mast was saying, raising an eyebrow in Molly's direction. "She was...she was like a mother to us all. Or a grandmother. Or even just...even just a friend. I know it's going to be difficult to move on. It's going to be strange to see her empty restaurant. But she would want us to be bold. And we can be strong...for her. Amen?"

Molly sat stiff as a tree trunk, clutching the pew.

"Some of us were closer than others. I know Molly here had grown quite fond of Margie," Brother Mast continued. "Would you like to say a word, Molly?"

He stepped back from the podium and waited.

Why is everyone looking at me? Why can't they just leave me alone?

Molly's heart stopped beating, her pulse slowed, her mouth dried up like a desert. The blue veins in her neck flexed, asserting control.

Two minutes hovered like an eternity. On bated breath, Molly chose to outlast everyone. She watched Brother Mast awkwardly return to the podium to finish the service. She saw the line of mourners as they shuffled past Margie's casket, as they wept openly over her. Soon enough, the crowd dispersed and still Molly sat in unblinking dissociation.

She liked the lack of feeling for a change. She savored the detachment.

"It's okay, Molly," Brother Mast broke into her voided mind.

The elder sat down on the pew beside Molly and put his hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay if you can't cry right now. I've seen you weep rivers, but grief is a son of a bitch...excuse the language," he said, grinning at his own profanity. "You...I don't know, Molly...you just need to heal in your own time over this. Go home and rest, okay? For me?"

Molly's face melted a little, her thousand-yard stare cleared.

"I...I..."

"It's okay, Molly. It really is. You don't have to..."

Molly cried a torrent into Brother Mast's shoulder. The two of them sat there, mourning for their friend together, even as the empty building, the dusty corners, the distant echoes, lamented with them.



Chapter 6: Ursa Major

Molly crouched alone in the cold dead of night. The Citadel towered before her, smoke still rising from the Mother Tree atop its bleeding peak. The wind blew from the east, the scent of the deathless sea coated the air while the barren trees rattled their skeleton song. Red snow lay in callous heaps all around her.

Mom...I need you so much right now.

The starry sky unfurled like a scroll, a tapestry of faraway worlds and eternal beacons. As she watched the familiar sparkle of the Big Dipper, it poured out like water, lighting star by star into a mighty silhouette. Ursa Major, the great bear of the North, beamed bright as heaven, glittering in sea beams of icy light. The Bear reared up on her hind legs and roared, shattering planets and shaking the very Earth.

At the sound of a ghostly wail, the great Mother Bear galloped across the indigo, leaping over the Moon. She searched desperately, knocking asteroids and comets from their perches. At last, she found the source: a small constellation like a lost cub, weeping for her touch. The Great Bear snuggled close, comforting it, loving it, enveloping her young in the warmth of quasars.

Molly wept.

And even as the tears filled her eyes, her body surged into the skies once again, passing through the Great Bear. Stars flew by her with impossible velocity, great burning bodies of gas and fire, protons whirling furiously in their cores.

Molly closed her eyes to savor the journey, and as she accelerated to the speed of light, she smiled at the sheer freedom.

It's like nothing I've ever known...

Opening her eyes, her irises burned with purple flames as she spread her arms wide and surrendered herself to the interstellar dream, gave herself to the empyrean call.

Ahead, bright signal in the night, the Carina Nebula cast its celestial shadow. The high cliffs loomed over Molly as she rushed up their precipice, as she glided over their rolling hills of red, orange, and green.

Can you see it, Molly?

A familiar voice wavered on the wind.

Can you see the music?

"Lady, is that you again?"

In reply, spectral calls of the purest crystalline shattered the calm. As Molly flew along the nebula sky, she saw creatures of light, like spiraling anchors and ions, calling to each other as they played. They sang the song of the stars, wake angels of the deep, starseeds finding their way home.

Hundreds of them flew with Molly as she careened up and down, over and under. Through the nebulous mist she played with them, catching light, reaching out to touch one of their radiant, white forms. Her hand passed through it as the creature seemed to smile, seemed to manifest pure joy. They swam the skies together, breaking through clouds of hydrogen, spinning oxygen and sulfur into mighty mountains of color.

This...this is bliss...

And all at once, the celestial beings disappeared and Molly sat in a restaurant, she did not know when or where. To her left sat a couple dining in elegance, the lady clearly not very impressed.

Mom? Dad?

"Is this your first blind date?" he asked.

"This is...well...this is my first date, period."

"Oh, so you're like a date virgin, then?" he chuckled.

Aisling was not amused.

"Sorry about that. I make bad jokes when I'm nervous," Donnie offered.

"You're nervous? Aren't you...I mean, you're of the most important scientists in your field. I feel privileged just to meet you."

"Oh, well, that's very kind of you to say. What do *you* do, may I ask?"

"Well, I'm a crystallographer. I study the atomic structure of..."

"I know what that is, honey. You don't have to explain everything to me."

Sheesh, Dad was a bit of an ass.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Donnie. I didn't mean to belittle you. I'm just excited! I graduated with my PhD last month and I'm looking to break into the field."

"Why are you on a date, then?" Donnie said, smugly.

"Um, why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, if you're dating, I assume you want to get married. The degree seems like a waste when you're just going to stay home, care for the house, raise children..."

Aisling grimaced openly at his words.

"I mean, don't get me wrong, Aisling, I know how that sounds. But that's what I'm personally looking for. I want a family. Kids. The works."

"Children? This is our first date!"

"I don't mess around. And if Absalom Kaine gets elected this year, he's already recruiting scientists for some special federal project. It's going to be very...lucrative. I'm willing to share that life with you. I...I just need someone faithful and..."

"And what?"

"Well, Kaine has been teaching us about...submission."

"Submission to what exactly?"

"Oh, I know our society hates that word. But Absalom says women used to submit to their husbands, used to let the man be the head of the household. That sounds right to me."

Mom, don't do it! Get outta there!

"Oh, that's quite fascinating," Aisling said, trying to ignore the lingering black haze in Donnie's eyes.

"I mean, if you aren't interested in that, then we can just leave right now. I know...I know it means giving up your career, but that's just how things are. He says that's the role women serve."

MOM!!! No!!

Aisling looked around in confusion as she rubbed her ear.

Don't do it, Mom. Even if I never exist, I don't care. I just want you to be happy. I want you to follow your dreams.

Aisling snapped her head, looking directly into Molly's shining face. She smiled, her eyes misting over, acknowledging the redhaired presence with the slightest nod of her head.

"I, um, I think that I could do that, Donnie. I have a good feeling...I think...I think we were meant to meet. Meant for each other."

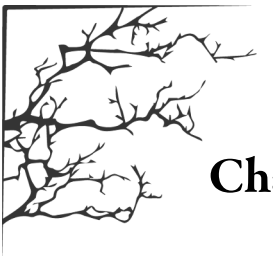
"Oh, wow, that went better than..." he stammered.

Aisling placed her hands on her proverbial hips, her face morphing into a vacant stare.

"I mean...the things we'll accomplish together, my dear..." Donnie crooned.

No, Mom!!

The scene faded to black as Molly shot up in her bed, sweating bullets in the deep of winter.



Chapter 7: Assembly

"Tell me again how you got through the wall?" Molly asked as she strolled down a dusty hallway in the old brick factory. The people of Wing's Reach had called an assembly, and she was desperately happy to see her friend, Mika, who rolled gently along beside her.

"You've seen all I can do and don't think I can get myself through a simple wall?"

"I tried. I couldn't."

"Walls are funny things, Moonflower. We erect them, blocking out all others, but the ones who know us best will still find a way through."

"Always with the idioms," Molly smiled.

"I can't help it. And I'm surprised you're smiling. That's good! After what people have been saying about Margie's memorial service..."

"I don't want to talk about that!"

Molly scrunched her freckled face as they entered the main hall together.

"Feels like I'm on trial today. And I deserve it. Margie's death is *my* fault."

"Now, there's nothing you could have done, dearest. Margie loved you like a daughter. She only wanted your happiness."

"Yes, but my behavior at the bridge, on the route home, something's not right."

"I haven't heard about all that, but your ways are evolving, your thoughts are far beyond most people here. Don't stoop to their level just because you're afraid."

"But it's more than..."

"Let's talk about this later. And...take my advice...maybe sit quietly during this meeting. There'll be plenty of people here to defend you."

Mika wheeled up the ramp to the makeshift stage as the townspeople found seats to the dull drone of conversation.

"Quiet! Quiet, everyone!" Mika hammered the podium with her favorite black gavel. "We need to get started. Now, you called me here to help with this remarkable wall Molly's constructed. I'm not sure any of us understand exactly what we're dealing with, so who wants to go first?"

Even as Mika spoke, the shadow of a black cat trotted out of the hallway. With a midnight meow, Doom jumped up in her lap. Molly stifled a laugh.

"We're trapped like rats in this town!" one voice called.

"No, no, it's a gift from the skies! Absalom and his Reapers can't reach us here anymore!" another voice said.

Molly scanned the room, nodding as she saw Jasper, Novalee, and Sasha sitting together, Sunny and Cinnamon in the corner, Cindra glaring at her from the front row.

"What do *you* think, Mika?" Jasper asked above the din. "You're the wisest person here."

Mika smoothed down her Johnny Cash T-shirt as she pondered for a moment.

"Much as I love all of you, this isn't my town. You've grown—tripled—in population the last few months. You all banded together when Absalom surged back into the area. You worked together to bring down countless creatures and grommets. You stood with Molly when he labeled her a heretic and called your precious home *The Dark Zone*. You even rejected his rewards because you saw right through his offer."

Mika took a drink from the podium water glass.

"My point is that you've seen many tough times together, and you stood by one another. And I'll tell you what, that's happenin' all over

the country! People are banding together. More groups are connecting with you through Jasper's radio. There're more people than ever who're waiting for Kaine's reign to end! And the more he thinks he's winning, the more towns and resistance clusters are going to slip between his filthy fingers."

The drone returned as people murmured among themselves. Molly watched Mika twist her grey hair in knots.

I've never seen her so nervous...

"Look, you stood by Molly, right? Just as she stood by you and saved your lives many times! This wall is connected with our dear Molly somehow, someway, and I'm going to find out how. But there's no use in getting upset about it. Step back. Take a breath."

"Why don't we talk about the real issue?" Cindra stood up suddenly, a head taller than anyone else there.

"And what would that be, dear..." Mika fluttered.

"My name's Cindra Rainbolt. I'm the leader of a local resistance group. From what I've seen, *Molly* is the problem, not the solution."

Molly fidgeted in her seat, blue veins clenching softly on the back of her neck.

"Now, listen here..." Mika huffed.

"Her policy of nonviolence is killing the resistance in this town. It's putting more people in harm's way. If she really cared about people's lives, she would support a strike-first strategy. She would let people, *like me*, lead our forces to wipe out every enemy in the territory."

Molly's heart played tug of war as the unrest grew. Her hands quivered.

"Where would we be right now if Molly hadn't gotten in the way with her tree-hugging ideas? Where would poor Margie be? She'd be alive and well, that's where!"

God, she's right!

Molly shot up from her seat; a flash of sickly blue energy sizzled from cracks in her face, blasting a crater in the roof above her. Molly

coughed as dust and plaster plummeted from the glaring hole. The crowd went dormouse-silent in shocked wonder.

"I, um...I don't know what to say..." Molly whimpered.

The audience whirled into an uproar, some shouting agreement, some declaring Molly as dangerous, precious few defending her. Mika slammed the gavel down over and over again to no avail.

Cinnamon rose gracefully from her chair and rubbed Molly's shoulder.

"Sit down," she whispered. "Let me see what I can do."

Everyone watched as Cinnamon strode to the front, floating on elegant air. Molly admired her swinging dreadlocks, her smooth Black skin.

"Molly is our friend. Does anyone here deny that?" Cinnamon asked.

"I do!" Cindra shouted.

Cinnamon smiled. "We've heard quite enough from you, I think, Cindra. Is there anyone else here that has an opinion? Anyone else we trust? Anyone who's seen Molly's heart the way I have?"

The crowd quieted, looking around the room.

"I know, why don't we get Brother Mast's input?" Cinnamon continued. "In my short time here, he has shown himself to be a leader you respect. He hasn't always...*approved*...of me. But he's tough. I like that. Why not ask him?"

Molly saw Brother Mast sitting in the back of the room, his face red and tear-stained.

"Yes, come up here, Brother Mast!" Mika said. "Why have you been so quiet?"

Mast stood up slowly and walked with slumped shoulders to the stage.

"I don't feel much like a leader right now, Cinnamon. I appreciate your words, I do. But I'm feeling out of sorts after Margie..."

He paused to collect himself. The audience watched like owls in a fading evening.

"And after the way I've judged you and your partner..." he glanced sheepishly in Sunny's direction. "Look, I've been evolving. I, too, was against Molly's views...at first."

"At first?" Cindra scowled, sitting down directly in front of him.

"Look at me! I've been of the Mennonite persuasion my entire life! Shouldn't I be the first to advocate for pacifism? But, Cindra, we've seen more than our fair share of war and death here. I responded...*in kind*, I guess. I broke my own vows. But now I'm not eager to see that again. No matter how much we push back, it just doesn't solve our problems."

Cindra crossed her arms, annoyed. Brother Mast took a breath and continued.

"So, if I have anything to say about this, it's that...that my heart...oh my Heavens, *our dear Margie*, I can't stop thinking about her pale face and lifeless eyes. She was the cornerstone of this town!"

"Your heart *what*?" Cindra demanded.

Brother Mast composed himself, adjusting his little spectacles with nervous precision.

"My heart tells me violence isn't the answer."

"You have to be kidding me right now!" Cindra roared. "Violence would have saved Margie!"

Brother Mast coughed into his hand. "Can you really say for every grommet, every creature you've killed, that inside they weren't still people? Humans? Maybe even our friends? That's been bothering me lately. Can these grommets be brought back?"

"No!" Sunny stood warily, hands balled into fists. "I think I...I agree with Cindra."

Cinnamon frowned, tears welling in her eyes, but she said nothing.

Sunny continued. "Those grommets? Those vile monstrosities? They aren't people anymore. I've seen what they can do. I've heard of their death camps and what they do there."

"Death camps?" Brother Mast gasped.

"Yes, camps full of tortured souls, grommets doing whatever they like to them. No, Mast, they *aren't* people. They're pure evil. We can't feel sorry for them, not one bit."

Sasha raised all eight of his tentacles in the air. A rush of exclamation surged through the crowd.

"And what about me? If you found me in the wild, what would you do? Call me a mutant? A monster?"

Sunny stammered. "Why, I...Sasha, you're different..."

"He's no different!" Jasper rose to his feet beside Sasha. "What if you end up killing someone you love?"

Molly saw Novalee smile proudly as if she were going to interrupt Jasper, but she seemed to think better of it and kept her lips closed.

They're really getting to know each other...

Jasper hammered on, his light brown hair wavy and bobbing. "What if there's a way to reverse Absalom's spell? What if we can heal them?"

Cindra jolted up again, high above the crowd, fearsome in the pale lights. A pang of fear crept down Molly's chest at the sight of her warrior form.

"All that matters is our people here in this town, and in our network. We don't have time to worry about philosophy right now. Do you really want to put your children and loved ones in harm's way based on a *what-if*? Do you?"

The crowd sulked and pondered.

Are they really wrestling with this?

"And about this wall," Cindra took advantage of the silence. "I'm cut off from my people, which doesn't make me happy, but they're strong. I've already sent a radio message saying I might be away for a

bit. This wall, some kind of anomaly, some kind of witchy spell cast by Molly...it might surprise you that I think it's a good thing right now. We have problems to solve. Let's take some time and solve them within this temporary safety! Then, let's strike!"

"Absalom has flying machines," a random voice said. "He can fly right over the wall."

"Yes, but he's locked away in his Keep, and we haven't seen one of his machines in months."

"Cindra! Cindra for leader!" one voice said, then others joined.

"Now, that's not something we're deciding at this particular meeting!" Mika brandished her gavel.

"Cindra! Cindra! Cindra!"

Maybe the people are right...

Molly glanced over at Brother Mast, who nodded kindly in her direction. She made eye contact with Mika, relaying the nod to her.

"Okay, okay, everyone!" Mika shouted. "You want Cindra? Then you've got her. We're a democracy, after all. And if she says to keep away from the wall, that's what we'll do. If she wants to cancel Molly's policies, that's fine. But my heart does not agree."

"Oh, don't worry," Cindra beamed as she strutted to the stage. "Your heart doesn't matter in the slightest."



Chapter 8: Shroud of Sorrow

"Drink it, child. Stop stalling," Mika scolded.

"This isn't going to make me have crazy dreams again, is it?" Molly balked.

"No, this is just regular ol' tea. You need to relax. You've done nothing but mope since assembly. Then you came all the way out here to Spinemore, all by yourself? Tsk tsk."

"I needed some time away, and it's only been four days, Mika."

"Four days of self-pity! And besides, those blue veins look terrible. You need the healing qualities of these herbs."

Molly pouted some more before gingerly lifting the teacup to her lips. She looked around Spinemore's ramshackle kitchen, imagining the hollow, messy space as the herb-laden forest of Mika's treehouse home.

It does taste amazing.

"Now, we need to talk. I promised Jasper and Cinnamon we would."

"About what?"

"You know exactly what. Moonflower, there's a darkness in your eyes of late, a coldness of heart. People told me you snapped at them, said cruel things. You actually took a swing at Cindra? That doesn't sound like you."

Molly slunk down in her chair.

"I...I..."

"Before you say another word, let me just say I *understand*."

"You do?"

"Yes, Honeysuckle, I do. You're dealing with a very heavy load. You're experiencing grief. Before, it came out as anger; now, it's emerging as sadness, a dark cloud hovering over your soul, a burden upon your shoulders, a never-ending ache in your heart. Does that sound about right?"

Molly wiped her running nose and stared blankly out the frost-wreathed window.

"Look, sadness can change us, Molly. It can transform us. There are times we think we've made it through the pain, anger, and sorrow. We think we're done. But in reality, we're still on that arduous journey toward self-acceptance, towards healing."

Molly glanced quickly at Mika's face, afraid to make eye contact.

"And it's not just Margie's death. You're dealing with the passing of your mother, your grandfather—rest in peace dear Eddie—and something even deeper."

You have no idea...

"Deeper?" Molly finally said something.

"Your disconnection with your father. You told me he reached out to you. Your heart knows he's out there somewhere."

Molly shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

"Do you still feel him? Are you still hearing the voices?" Mika slurped her tea.

"No, just some dreams, and pretty much stone-cold silence, except from...*him*."

"Him? Absalom Kaine?"

"Yes, he won't let me be."

Mika furrowed her brow. "That's even more of a burden for you, love. No one should have to carry this load! No wonder your body is shutting down from the sheer weight of the sadness."

"He told me this would happen, you know."

"Who, Absalom?"

Molly sat forward. "No, my father. He told me sadness would invade my heart. He was right!"

"Well, that's the natural course of things, unfortunately. We can't do anything about the friends we've lost. I believe they are with us, Molly, hovering in the waves of light and particles all around us. They are still here, reaching out to you, I'm sure of it. Your heart simply can't hear them right now."

"So, what can I do?"

"You can confront your father. That's what this is all about, isn't it? The wall, the outbursts, everything?"

"I can *what*?"

"You need to find him, connect with him, find some resolution."

Ha! She says that like it'd be easy.

Molly took a stubborn drink of the hot tea, savoring the burn in her chest.

"Don't brush it off so quickly, Molly. This is one part of your sadness we can do something about."

"I'm afraid it will get worse if I find out the truth about him."

"But at least you'll know where you stand!"

Molly walked to the kitchen window and drew flowers in the frost.

"Okay, I'll do it. But how do I find him?"

"I'm so proud of you," Mika shadow-whispered. "You're growing stronger even if you don't see it."

I definitely don't...

"Now, did your father say where he is? Anything that might be a clue?"

"It was all so weird and cryptic. He just kept saying, 'Down, down into the depths of darkness' like some maniac; kept saying I need to look for him in the deep, in the darkest place."

Mika poured herself more tea as she pondered.

"Does that mean anything to you? Maybe Eddie said something similar?"

Molly wracked her brain. "I mean, Papaw used to talk about his hometown, I think somewhere in West Virginia."

"And it was the darkest place?"

"Well, no, he loved his hometown. But what I remember is how he spoke about the coal mine there. He said the mine was dangerous, and many people died there over the years. I remember him saying that coal mine was the deepest, darkest place he'd ever seen. His dad, I guess my great-grandfather, worked there and died of a lung disease."

"Oh, that's...that's so awful, Molly."

"Papaw didn't like to talk about it. I could feel the hurt in his chest whenever he mentioned his father. I could sense hopelessness and fear inside him."

A thought like a lightbulb lit within Molly's mind.

"Maybe...maybe that's exactly where dad is. Maybe he's there, trapped forever because Papaw was trapped there, too, at least in his heart."

"Go on, Molly, go on."

"Papaw used to tell me about the little boys they sent to their deaths deep in the older coal mines: crushed by cave-ins, choked to death by coal dust. I don't know if those mines in his hometown—Philippi, I think it was called—did those awful things, but my heart...oh my heart...is telling me that Dad is stuck there, like the canaries Papaw used to talk about, crying in the darkness, warning of danger."

Molly leaned against the counter, tears falling like rain.

"Maybe he's there forever because Papaw never really left."

Mika wheeled over and held her close.

"He's not trapped there *forever* because you're going to free him. You will descend into that rift and find him."

"And what about Wing's Reach? What about Absalom?"

"Don't you worry about us. Cindra, as much as you dislike her, knows how to lead. We'll be fine until you get back. And Absalom..."

"He's locked himself in his castle way up north, right?"

"He has, but his minions are still doing his bidding. He has many layers of bureaucracy, many cities that pay homage. But I'll tell you a secret, one the universe has whispered in my ear."

Molly moved in closer.

"Absalom cannot join the crystals. He is festering, hiding, because he's realized he can't truly access their full power. And he doesn't want anyone to know this."

"Wait, so he can't use them even if he finds them all?"

"Oh, he can use them, but only rot and ruin will come of it. You see, Molly, there's a reason why the beings of light hid the Nebula Crystal and its healing powers here on Earth. And there's a reason they sent the Wanderstar separately."

"Why? It just seems like it complicated things."

"No, Moonflower, the power to remake the world, the very essence of the Wanderstar, is of no use unless one also possesses empathy, unless one also desires to heal."

"Kaine certainly has no desire for that."

"Indeed, Molly. Absalom craves power without accountability. He desires riches without true worth. He wants to bend the world to his whim simply because he likes the way it makes him feel. Ultimately, he has no real beliefs or values. He bows to power only. And without the desire to heal the world, he can only remake it into a nightmare. But you..."

Mika smiled and hugged Molly close.

"But you, child...you want nothing, consume nothing. *And nothing is free indeed*! You want the world to be at peace. You want people to thrive and care about each other. You desire healing for all, for every inch of ground on this planet we call home. In your hands, healing will remake the world."

They wept together as Molly felt a full circle moment jabbing between her ribs. All this pain. All the sorrow. Her fate was drawing near, and like a relentless barb in her throat, it scraped her insides raw.

"Now, Molly, Absalom has the Nebula Crystal and the final shard of the Wanderstar. Your quest to confront your father can only ever lead you to Kaine's door, I am sure of it. Steele yourself. Fight against the sadness in your heart; and, believe me, even if business seems good for Absalom Kaine, even if he owns the world right now, he certainly knows it's all built on sand. It will fall one way or another. And that is why he hides from you."

"I'll try, Mika. For you. But...but what about the wall?" Molly asked.

"Leave that to me. As luck would have it, I have a friend who was trapped inside when it fell. I think he has exactly what we need to break through it. Give me two days. Get some rest, take some winter walks around Spinemore, heal your spirit. I will prepare everything. And Molly..."

"Yes, Mika?"

"Apologize to your friends. You're going to need their help."



Chapter 9: Möbius Strip

Molly rose the next morning with a glimmer of hope in her chest. She wandered around the house, images of Papaw sitting in his favorite chair, working his gadgets, and cooking in the kitchen streamed through her mind like a television broadcast.

So many memories...so much pain.

She opened the creaking door to his old workshop behind the kitchen, little more than a sunroom with a workbench. She let her fingers run over his well-worn Craftsmen tools, sighing as she swirled pictures in the cold dust coating the table.

Then she saw it. A small white envelope tacked to the backdrop of his work bench. As she snatched it free, she saw the remains of his final project: upgraded wrist bows, a gift for her.

Molly broke down, tears spilled down her face in the frigid air.

"Papaw...I..."

She sliced open the envelope in one try and hurriedly unfolded the note.



TO MY MOLLY,

I know you'll come back to Spinemore someday. I suspect I won't be with you, and I'm okay with that. As I was gathering things for our journey today, I realized I'd never finished these new bows for you. They aren't done. They never will be. But do you know what I realized?

"No, Papaw, what did you realize?" Molly said to the rafters.

I realized you don't need these anymore. There's a power inside of you I don't understand. And it's not just the fire that comes out from time to time. No, it's a good heart. Oh, I wish I had one of those, but it's been a privilege to raise you and see your goodness grow, watch it blossom.

You are going to change the world the same way you changed me.

Don't be afraid.

With love, Papaw



MOLLY'S TEARS STOPPED abruptly. The tiniest hint of confidence stroked her heart, coated her spine, as Papaw's love embraced her.

"I can do this. I can face Dad. I can face Absalom," she promised the morning sunlight. "And...dammit...I can remake this world at last."

She rushed to the living room where her backpack sat ready for action, strapped it on and headed for the door. After a second thought, she zipped it open and pulled out Papaw's battle vest. It hung in her hands, a banner of yesteryear, a cracked and faded tribute to memories both painful and joyous. Some of its patches were missing. Stains of diverse colors adorned it like metals clustered in heroic array.

She smelled it, took in Papaw's aroma that somehow still clung to it, appreciated every crack, every wrinkle, every wound.

Without a word, she hung it on Papaw's favorite chair and pondered it in the dim light.

Then she walked out the door forever.



"I CAN'T GO, MOLLY. I just can't," Jasper said. "Cindra won't like it."

Molly visited her friends around town that morning. Following Mika's advice, she asked forgiveness, first begging Cinnamon and Novalee to come on her impending journey. They were ecstatic to go. But now she was in Jasper's radio hut inside the rundown gas station; he was listening to the frequencies with Sasha by his side.

"Why not? I need you! And who cares what Cindra thinks?"

"I sincerely doubt that. And, whether you like it or not, Cindra's in charge right now. You've been completely AWOL for an entire week!"

"Oh, poppycock, Cindra..."

Jasper gave her a look.

"Okay, but you bring a certain...a certain..."

"Smartness?" Sasha broke in. "Jasper's so smart. He's been teaching me all about radios and frequencies."

"Yes, thank you, Sasha! Smartness! Intelligence! Maybe even balance? We need you because..."

"Because you're afraid you'll have another episode like you did back there?" Jasper said, adjusting dials through channels of static.

A tiny dagger pierced Molly's spleen at those words.

"Yes. I don't know what's happening, and you seem to have the most patience with me."

"Well, I'll think about it, Molly, I can't be sure..."

The radio burst to life as a voice streamed over the waves. "Hello, are you there? Jasper? Can you hear me?"

"Darius, is that you? God, I'm happy to hear your voice!" Jasper returned.

"Darius? As in *our* Darius, the whale herder?" Molly asked.

"One and the same," the voice on the line said. "It's only been a few months, but it feels like ages. How're you all doing up there?"

"We're doing great, Mr. Darius! Jasper's been teaching me radio things and..."

"We've been busy," Jasper interrupted Sasha. "I know you don't have much time on your hands. Just wanted to touch base with you, once per week like we promised?"

"Yeah, all's well here. Not so much inland, though. Absalom doesn't dare approach the pod anymore, but things are substantially busier up near Richmond."

"Richmond?" Molly squeaked. "When Jacinthe..."

She took a moment to compose herself.

"When we were near that city, I felt something...*dark*...something evil lived there."

"Well, Molly, there's definitely something happening. Some sort of camp that keeps growing. More people, more screams, more blood in the river. I can see it all the way from the clouds!"

"People are being hurt, Mr. Darius?"

"I'm afraid so, Sasha. I'm not sure what to do about it right now."

Even as Darius continued, Molly felt a spectral hand slip around her throat, squeezing and strangling until her mind went white. The room slipped away, fading into the distance as she was pulled into the cosmic night.



MOLLY FLEW THROUGH dimensions and waves. All around her, reality dissolved into color and light, particles and atoms, faraway galaxies and infinite oceans. Her hair blustered in the wind as the Moon reigned over her again; with a flash she saw Absalom on his hands and knees, covered in luminous blood.

He's so vile. How could he do such a thing?

With another flash, she was in the ether again, the cathedral standing tall and haughty. Molly watched as Absalom, adorned in his lavish white robes, hammered red shards into her palms and stabbed a great

fiery spear into her side, surrounded by the dead eyes of swaying worshippers.

The Orb...it saved me then...

The floor opened to swallow her into inky nothingness. With a beam of moonlight, she landed heavily onto the cathedral floor. Absalom towered over her, his naked form covered in seeping fissures. As she watched, his white robes returned and he cut the throat of a poor young boy, the blood sprayed as Absalom gloried in its mist. The roars of the audience sliced through Molly's heart.

Molly tried to hold her vomit.

Thousands of hands groped her from behind, digging their nails into her skin; they pulled her into a dim corridor, walls rushing past in a blur. Molly tried not to scream as a glint of light appeared ahead, and the cathedral burst into view once again. Absalom stood above an altar, his white head-covering gone, his cracked skin open to the air. With a sinister grin, Molly saw him raise a knife on high, cutting deeply into a prostrate form upon the altar.

Jacinthe...no...my Jacinthe...

Molly wept.

The chandeliers above burned bright, spinning and shaking. Molly whirled into the ceiling as it opened its haunted mouth to accept her. She crawled through dark forms and unseen bodies, pushing and shoving against porous flesh, until the cathedral slid into sight once more. She rose from the floor as from quicksand, the sanctuary now broken and ruined. Splintered beams and ruined chandeliers cluttered the once mighty room; echoes of wonder and opulence reverberated off the collapsing walls.

And sitting before the severed altar was Absalom Kaine.

"My dear, I won't lie and say it's good to see you."

Molly stumbled over a pile of stone on the shattered ground. Absalom sat amongst the ruins with his back to her, a lone figure in a broken wooden chair, his form twisted and monstrous. His head was de-

formed, laden with a tumor that leaked profound fluids onto the floor. His skin fissures yawned wide, blood and muscle rotting inside them. He wore his white robes, but they were torn, shredded by the bulk of his failing body.

"What...what happened to you?" Molly coughed, the stench of rotting meat hovering in the air.

"How can you ask that?" he bemoaned, his body moving in rhythm with something blocked from Molly's view. "How can I rebuild what you have taken from me? How can I save the world when you fight me at every breath?"

"What I've taken from *you*?" Molly gritted her teeth, taking two steps forward. "You took *everything* from me! Everyone I love! Jacinthe, poor Jacinthe, killed in cold blood, right here! In this room!"

"That was your doing."

"No, it was not!" she choked on the pain, circling Absalom's form slowly.

Absalom sat at a potter's wheel, his leg pumping the pedal steadily, his hands forming clay.

"I...I didn't know you were..."

"An artist? There's much you don't know about me."

She watched as he masterfully shaped the clay into a curvaceous vessel, beautifully wrought. He placed it with reverence upon a rack for curing, moving with craftsman's grace.

"Who will save my sanctuary?" he said. "Who will restore the worshippers to their place?"

"Why do you need worshippers at all?"

"It is necessary...for them, not me. They are mere animals. It is their natural state."

"What could be greater worship than people simply living their lives, happy and free? Why is that not enough for you?"

"Why do you always question the way of things?" he snarled.

"Who will bring back my Jacinthe?" she growled back.

Absalom leapt from his chair and rushed upon Molly, his bleeding hand gripped her chin.

"I will restore this place. *I* will be the one. Like this vessel I've thrown upon the potter's wheel, I will form the future. I don't need you anymore."

Absalom twisted her head to look at a grey pile in the far corner.

"And like these vessels I've tossed to the trash heap, I will create creatures destined for destruction. It's all in my power, all at my discretion. Everything I plan will be good simply because I have planned it. The world will be remade in my image."

Molly wrestled from his grasp and fell to the ground.

"I don't care," she screamed. "I'm...I'm coming for you! There's no place you can hide. I won't allow you to lock yourself away into the shadows. I will find you and make you pay!"

"Oh, but this isn't like you at all! What about this nonviolence I hear you preach? Where did that go?"

"Shut your mouth, snake. You've become the disgusting monster you chose to be."

"Snake? Even now, I see your veins coursing with blue sadness. You are no match for me."

"That won't keep me from trying."

"Oh, try all you like. The future lies in *my* hands."

"You're a liar."

"Tell yourself what you must. I don't need you, little Molly. I have a plan that will help me remake the world on my own terms, my own machine to end all machines. Even your pathetic powers are no match."

Absalom's skin crackled with demented energy, zapping and shooting in all directions. Molly cringed in cloyed horror as the electricity formed a crown above his sickly head. He smiled, bile dripping down his lips, worms wriggling down his chin.

"When will you see how sick you are, Absalom? Don't do this. Whatever machine this is, it will kill you...before I even get the chance. You're losing your mind locked up in your fortress."

"It matters not. You are irrelevant now, Molly Shadowen. You can stay there in your little crystal world, and the rest of the planet will finally move on. People worship me. Obey me. No matter what I say or do, I simply cannot fail."

"That's not what I'm hearing. You're losing your grip on more people every day. Your kingdom has already failed."

"Lies!! And the machine will ensure that! Now..."

He raised his hands and yellow electricity leapt from his fingers, tearing into Molly's chest.

"...begone from my presence. We will not speak again."

Molly surged heavenwards, blasting through the fractured roof into the cosmic rain. As the cathedral faded into the darkness, she was thrust into the light of the radio room once again, directly into the face of an angry, scolding Cindra.



Chapter 10: Birch Robbins

Winter chill sweeping from the top of the snow, Molly stood in the middle of nowhere, dawn coloring the sky with ancient blood over the fields once ripe with corn. She wore her black coat, hood up, gloves and boots and purple scarf keeping her extra warm. Her traveling companions shivered around her, puffing great clouds of steam into the air.

"I hope she doesn't make it," Molly muttered.

"Now, Moonflower, you two need to get along. Give her another chance," Mika said, removing ice from her chair wheels.

"She's not the nicest person. You heard what she said to me yesterday, didn't you?"

"I suppose I didn't."

"She said that this..."

"She said it was the most drive she'd ever seen from Molly, but she'd only let her go if she could come, too!" Sasha beamed, his tentacles hidden beneath a blanket.

"Thanks, Sasha," Molly whispered, rolling her eyes.

"Well, maybe she's right! Can you look at your friends' faces and say you've been lively, active, or devoted recently?" Mika asked.

Molly turned to them. Jasper, his cracked glasses frozen on his face, huddled close to Novalee, bright and happy in the morning air. Sasha sat quivering in a ball at their feet. Beside them stood Sunny, Cinnamon whispering calming spells into her ear.

They deserve better than me.

"I...I guess not. But does she have to be so...so mean all the time?"

"Who's mean?" a voice shot from behind Molly.

Cindra strolled up in a green winter jumpsuit, spears strapped to her back and a beanie over her wavy black hair.

Why does she always look so damn cute? Molly frowned.

"Oh, no one, dearest," Mika sang. "My friend Birch ought to be here any moment. I'm sure we'll hear him coming long before he arrives, though."

Molly peered down the rusted train tracks to the west. At first a slight vibration, then a radiant rattle, something in the distance glinted in the early sun. The rattle became a chug, and the ground shook as a gleaming black train approached, its rims painted bright yellow, ten cars hooked to its rear. It smoked and squealed as everyone stepped aside to let it stop on the tracks before them.

"A train? This is how we're traveling, Molly?" Sunny scolded.

"It's my friend's locomotive, Sunny dear," Mika reassured. "He found himself trapped by this crystal wall of ours. And he's doing me a *huge favor* by helping."

"And what? You think we're just gonna ram this creaky train into the wall?" Novalee said.

"That's precisely what we're gonna do, Hollywood," a spangled voice announced itself.

Standing upon the enormous cow-catcher at the front of the train, a slender man in flannel, jeans, and suspenders waved hello. His winter hat was rolled upwards until it covered only the tip of his crown. His sideburns flourished mightily from his cheeks. His skin betrayed a life spent under the sun.

"Mika, you didn't tell me all yer friends were so pretty!" he said, winking. "Even you," he said to Jasper with a kiss.

"Come now, Birch, stop being such a chauvinist. Be respectful!"

Birch strolled up, long legs taking two strides at a time. He chewed a toothpick hard as he looked over the company with skeptical eyes.

"They ever been on a journey before? Ever been on a train?"

No one answered, hoping Mika would save them.

"And where do ya'll need to go, anyhow?"

"Philippi, Birch," Mika whispered. "They need to go..."

"Philippi? The dead town? What fer? Only someone dumber than a sack of hammers would go there."

Molly blushed hard. "Why...why do you say that, Birch?"

"On account of *the shadow*, that's why! That town's dead for a reason. A dark spirit lives there. And it's not just that; Philippi lies on the doorstep of Chestnut Ridge. The people there? They were a ramshackle bunch who'd seen more than their fair share of pain and sorrow. I always thought I could feel and hear them there."

"A shadow? Ghosts? You aren't just trying to scare us, are you, Birch?"

"No, hun. I know people who've seen the shadow walking amongst the buildings, who've heard the screams and cries. Goin' there is a terrible idea!"

"Well, I know it's a scary place. That's exactly why I need to go there," Molly said, hands on her hips.

"Oooh, a little sass? I like that. Ya know, they say the shadow can mess with your mind. Are you ready for somethin' like that?"

Molly looked around at her friends.

Should I be putting them in danger?

Jasper and Novalee gave her a nod, Cinnamon and Sunny smiled and held hands, Cindra took a spear from her back and pounded it into the snow.

"We might not be ready, but we're good for it," Molly said.

"Alright, then, I can take ya where you need to go. And look, kids, this here is my home. She's a special engine. Don't be touching anything and everything. Sit tight, and I'll get you through this damned wall in no time."

Molly approached him cautiously and took his hand.

"I appreciate your help."

Birch eyed her up and down, one eyebrow arched.

"There's something' special about you, isn't there? I can see it in those eyes of yours."

Mika interrupted, rolling through the snow with Sasha pushing behind her. She held out her arms to bring Birch in for a hug but planted a huge kiss on his cheek instead.

"You glorious man, you. What route will you be taking?"

"Oh, there're so many obstructed lines out there nowadays. Yer lucky ol' Birch is here to help. I'll be taking the CUOH line south then east into West Virginia, home sweet home. We'll turn south through Wheeling and take the little spur into Philippi. Haven't been down that way in years, I must say."

"See?" Mika said. "Birch has it all figured. Thank you for helping my friends."

Birch spit out his toothpick and dug a wad of tobacco out of a little can. Molly watched as he stuck it in the corner of his mouth.

Yikes...that can't taste good...

"They're going my way, what can I say? You're welcome, Mika darling. Now, everyone, let's get ya onboard, pronto!"



"CAN I RIDE UP FRONT?"

Molly and her friends had loaded their packs into the lone passenger car when the idea hit her.

"Ride up front with me? Ain't I scary?" Birch laughed.

"Nah, and it's what my friend...my friend Jacinthe...would have wanted to do. This is for her."

Birch squinted at the unfamiliar name but said nothing. Instead, he walked around the train, checking the wheelsets. He disappeared into the bursts of steam that hissed from the sides.

I'll take that as a yes...

Molly jumped into the cab. It was a strange and wonderful place. She took in the gangling gauges, the protruding tubes, the tempting valves stuccoing the controls.

I wanna pull one so bad...

In the center, below all the crazy contraptions, the boiler door stood open, orange embers burning deep in its recesses.

Deep underground, into the darkest depths, you will find me.

Molly shook the memory from her head as Birch climbed into the cab.

"You ready to bake a cake, Molly gal?"

"Bake a cake?'

"Well, we've got to build up steam to go, don't we?" he said, tossing a few shovelfuls of coal into the hungry boiler.

"I don't know anything about trains. I guess it's like a new language."

"You bet your ass it is. People took us for granted in the old days. Didn't think about all we did for them."

Birch threw the throttle level and the train growled to life. Steam hissed into the air and flooded the pipes as the cylinders ground to a start. Pistons pumping and valves sliding, the wheels turned slowly at first, gaining momentum with each puff of smoke from the giant stack atop the train.

"This is amazing!" Molly yelled above the noise.

"Woooohoooo!" Birch howled. "Never gets old!"

The old engine cab sported twin windows facing the front, and Molly watched as the tracks came and went beneath her. Hanging out her side door, she waved to Mika as they got underway.

"Be safe, Sunrise!" Mika yelled through cupped hands. "Don't be afraid!"

"I won't be. I promise!" Molly beamed as the train picked up speed.

"Get in here, hun, or I'll send ya back with yer friends," Birch scolded with a smile. "We've only got a few miles to gain speed before we reach the wall. *Let's do this*!"

Molly held on as the engine moved faster and faster. The valves sputtered and whistled; the wheels crunched on the frosted tracks.

"More coal, Molly. More coal in the firebox, please!"

Molly grabbed the shovel and dug into the pile of coal in the car directly behind them. One, two, three shovelfuls disappeared into the fierce orange glow of the boiler.

"We're movin' now! I think forty miles per hour will be sufficient, don't you?"

"I really don't know."

Birch cackled, "Of course not! No worries, the boss will take care of the rest. She'll burst right through that crystal like nothing."

Molly watched the distant purple wall move closer.

This had better work.

The train flew along the tracks, puffing and smoking with deep-seated power. Crossings blew by them as Birch opened the throttle wider.

"Almost there, Molly. Your friends have seat belts on back there, but we have none. You'd best hold on."

Molly gripped a metal handle as the trees and old buildings whipped by in a white blur. Her heart slumped into her dry throat as the wall approached.

"You sure about this, Birch?"

"Don't question me, lass. I know what I'm doing!"

Time screeched to a halt as the train met the wall at breakneck velocity. Every hormone in her body, every ounce of sense, every drip of

anxiety screamed louder than the train itself. But as cow-catcher collided with crystal, a surge of serenity washed over her mind.

You know what? I trust him, Molly thought as her heart let go.

The train rammed the wall at forty-five miles per hour. The hefty engine shuddered and shrieked as the crystal shattered, cracks coursing in all directions as the locomotive burst through it like a wild stallion.

"Yeees! That's right, baby! You've never let me down!" Birch howled as the train blasted through the wall and into the countryside.



Chapter 11: The Forest of Fantastical Things

Molly enjoyed every minute in the cab. She worked hard, shoveling coal and learning the controls, her hands and face covered in soot and grease. The train sped along the main line out of Wing's Reach due east. She watched as small towns blew by, Birch ever at the controls, watching like a sweaty hawk.

Birch announced each town as they arrived. Old Coshocton into Uhrichsville into Wintersville; even though their signs were faded or gone, he knew them all by heart. On into the Northern Panhandle they chugged, passing out of Molly's beloved home state and into the strange wild of another.

"Now we're in my neck of the woods. It's a fierce place, West Virginia, not to be taken lightly."

Molly watched in wonder as they turned south, blasting into a big city, black smoke pouring from smokestacks all around her.

"Wheeling," Birch said, opening the throttle. "There are some strange folks in these parts. They love their factories...I don't like it here."

The train burned through the city at sixty miles per hour as Molly held on for dear life. The smoke passed and the buildings disappeared, but Birch did not flinch, did not slow.

"Time to show you the place I call home," Birch said, his face aglow.

"And all the dreams that live there."



THE CITY EBBED INTO the distance. In front of them lay a dark forest full of knotty trees and twisted branches. The line ran straight through it.

"Old Wetzel County: not much here anymore. It's all down river from the deserted chemical plants. But somehow, this forest remains, thrives." Birch whispered, almost to himself.

"You live here?" Molly asked.

"I don't live anywhere. But this is where my dreams came alive."

"*Alive*?"

They passed into the forest, evergreens towering overhead.

"This whole forest lives, Molly, it breathes. There are ancient secrets here."

Birch closed the throttle and the train coasted slowly through the watchful trees. The cold vanished and a humid darkness descended upon the train.

"The winter...where did it go?" Molly shouted too loudly. "I don't see snow anywhere. And the trees have leaves in January!"

"Hush, lass, keep your voice down. The cold has no power here, not with my dreams."

"And the sun?"

"It's glorious night here, always."

Molly hung out the side of the cab, taking in the warm summer night that swiftly sprang upon them. It was sticky and hot beneath the canopy, fireflies hung in the air all around them. Molly strained to hear the chirping crickets, the quacking wood frogs, the shuddering thickets as creatures of the night billowed through their branches.

"It's so quiet and wonderful here, Birch."

"Keep watching. Behold the people on the edge of the veil."

The sounds of night hummed about Molly. An owl hooted in the distance, a lazy river trickled and washed out of sight. Then in the darkness of the shadows, Molly saw a brilliant light.

Standing aloof in the dark forest was a resplendent white deer, the elusive stag of legend. It turned its head with spiritual grace, its light illuminating the leaves. Molly made eye contact with the white stag and, in that moment, the universe came to a delicious standstill.

"What an amazing beast, Birch!"

"'Tis a messenger from another world."

The stag raised its head high, laughter leaping in its beautiful eyes, and exploded into a ball of orange firelight, a great blaze burning towards the stars.

"A bonfire? Here?"

Birch smiled. "Where else?"

Around the roaring fire, creatures danced and swayed. Molly gasped as skeletons clacked and clattered, bones in a tangle. Fauns twirled and sang, clicking their hoofs together, raising mugs of ale. Elves crept from their hollows, radiating with ethereal light. Enchantment hung in the air like smoke as they ate and drank, danced and laughed.

"I...I don't believe it. Who are they? Are they safe?"

"Safe?" Birch said. "They're safe alright. You can't always count on appearance in this world, little lady. Your eyes can betray you. But what does your heart see?"

Molly reached out with her whole chest, breathed in the incense of the forest. It came to life as electricity clambered up her spine.

Orc packs hopscotched through the berry bushes as shadows and sprites swayed among the red maples. Gremlins skittered in the undergrowth with glee, teeth gleaming in the firelight, as ghouls and spirits hovered in eternal embrace.

"They're...happy here. It's so beautiful, Birch."

The hypnotic fire grew and the crowd around it did, too. A griffin pounced through the poplars and oaks, lifting its eagle head to let out a piercing cry. The dryads of the woods, the tree nymphs at home in the darkness, swung down on vines, elegant in their fervent, earthy essence.

As the train entered an even thicker mist, the trees themselves moved with magic, twisting legs passed through the forest with lumbering grace.

"What are those?"

"Ents, Molly...I do love the ents."

A colony of bats swept through the treetops, giant spiders crept from suspicious places; they encircled the firebrand gathering, moving in a midnight waltz. Molly watched as a crowd of dwarves, pickaxes on their shoulders, moved and sang their way down hidden paths towards the soirée.

The train shuddered in a mysterious wind; Molly held herself close, chilled to the bone.

"Where is that coming from?"

"Watch the skies, my dear."

Snaking through the darkened clouds, a serpent winged its way into the forest. Its dragon scales blazed maroon in the orange light as it swept by overhead, passing in front of the quivering train to spew a magnificent plume of fire into the night air.

"Showoff!" Birch yelled in pleasure out the cab door.

Then Molly felt a deep magic take hold of her heart. She clutched her chest as a haze filled the cabin.

"Something's close, Birch. I can feel it in my skin."

"You *are* special. Look out your door," he said with a nod.

Alongside the crawling locomotive, two brilliant steads galloped, their white coats shining in the shadows. Each creature bore a single breathtaking horn, proudly pointing towards heaven.

"Unicorns? Oh, they aren't just beautiful...they're...they're..."

"Dazzling?"

"Yes, dazzling, ravishing, gorgeous," Molly whispered.

"They want to meet you."

Molly hung out the cab door as the unicorns rushed closer. Then inside her head she heard a musical voice.

Come ride with us, Molly Lightkeeper.

Tears pouring down her face, Molly vaulted onto the mare's muscular back. She could feel the sinews pushing and pulling as the creature picked up speed; she lost herself in the surge of warm air on her face. They dashed back into the dogwoods and sycamores, leaping and flowing in a magical wind. They romped around the bonfire, creatures both familiar and unnamed cheering and singing in ancient tongues.

But though she could not understand them, she wept freely as she deciphered one glorious word.

Her name.

The jubilant gathering called to her, emoting color and comfort into the clearing. Spirits and specters swelled to fill the scene, stars and planets like phantoms were cast as stones into the black forest canopy, rotating with faraway beauty like jewels. The unicorns circled the fire, romped around the many-fanged creatures, honoring their secret presence, manifesting light under the cosmic sky.

And Molly, at last, felt at home somewhere.

Her chest rose with power. Her skin crawled with hope. She breathed deeply, taking in every whiff of splendor and magic she could muster.

I...I don't want to leave...

But leave we must, was the harmonious reply.

They bid farewell as the unicorns hastened back into the darkness of the living trees.

They ran alongside the passenger car. Through the windows, she saw Sunny's jaw drop as Cinnamon nodded in mindful joy. Jasper and Novalee pressed their faces against the glass as Sasha hollered happy

tidings. Cindra watched silently, a tiny smile cracking the corner of her mouth.

Molly waved and brandished her first smile in months.

Into the night the unicorns ran. They never tired, never slowed. Hours and miles into the woodland they wandered, the unicorns singing their own enchanting tunes, ancient melodies in forgotten refrains, whale songs of the forest, communing with Molly as they became one.



Chapter 12: Insatiable

Molly woke, finding herself slumped in the corner of the engine cab, the boiler still smoldering red. The night sky was black as ink; stars twinkled cheerfully from their heavenly homes.

"Oh, my head...Birch...*Birch*, are you here?"

Following an odd sound with her eyes, she saw Birch standing with his back to her, a stream of urine spraying into the wind as the train flew through the forest.

"Ope, sorry, hun, I had to take a quick piss," he said with a small rush of panic, zipping up his trousers.

Molly blushed.

"I, um, sorry about that. Are we still in the magical place with your dreams?" she ventured.

"Nope, it's dark and cold here, this is true night, I'm afraid. It comes early this time o' year. You've been out awhile."

Molly stood slowly and peered out the cab window. The woods slumbered, devoid of life again, no leaves or dancing creatures in sight.

I wish more than anything I could go back there. She sighed.

"Well, we're approaching the next city on our route, Clarksburg. I'll be gunning it through there again, not a nice place. But we're practically to your destination, little one. Once we're through the city, it ain't far to the branch line that'll take us to Philippi, direct-like."

Molly gazed out the front glass of the cab as a small city approached. Even in the dark, she could sense the broken factories pumping out smoke and the skeletal buildings ready to fall. Birch cranked the throttle wide open, exploding into the city without a care in the world.

"Shouldn't we warn someone we're here?" Molly asked.

"These aren't exactly the type of people you want to announce yourself to, but we can if you'd like. Pull this!"

For the first time, Molly noticed an ornate cord hanging in the cab, braided yellow and red.

"Do it, don't be afraid."

Molly pulled the cord hard; the train whistled high and loud, so she pulled it again two more times eagerly.

"I like seeing a smile on that face of yours! Good job!" Birch smirked.

Molly went to yank it again, but Birch stopped her hand.

"Hold up, something's not right."

As they reached the other side of the city, the cab windows froze; frost crawled up the glass. Even with the boiler cooking the air, Molly could see Birch's breath steaming in shallow puffs.

"What is it, Birch? Is it the shadow?"

"No, we're too far out fer that. This is something...something else," he shot back, his eyes flitting between windows.

"What are you afraid of?"

"I hope you won't find out."

The train struggled against the cold, chugging slowly as it squealed and sputtered gray smoke into the midnight calm.

Then Molly glimpsed something in the dead trees. Another firelight, a bonfire that blazed high and rash, out of control. In the orange light, Molly saw it: a towering creature bearing enormous antlers, squatting on its hoofed hind legs. Its grey skin was pulled tight against the bone, its deer head was massive and dreadful, its spiny forelegs ending in razor claws that shot shivers up Molly's back. A great white fur tuft adorned its chest, stained crimson with blood.

"It's *him*...it's the wendigo," Birch choked.

"What's a wendigo?"

"Oh, child, it's a creature of famine and ruin. It eats and eats but can never fill its belly. It doesn't belong in this forest, or *any* forest. It...it has to be one of *his*."

"His?"

"Absalom Kaine, of course."

Molly looked closer, and in the sick glare of the fire, she saw the wendigo eating an immense pile of bodies. Soaked in the blood, it ripped and tore at carcasses of deer and human alike, splitting flesh from bone, severing ligaments and muscles.

"And it will never be full?!"

"Never!"

"Then we've got to free this place of it."

"Dear Molly, I admire your courage, but it just ain't that simple. There are always insatiable creatures like the wendigo. Men make them. Even if we destroy this one, another will appear. I just...I just haven't seen it in these parts before. It's the sworn enemy of the white stag."

A pang of fear gripped Molly's sternum as Birch shivered in the cold.

If Birch is afraid of this foul creature...

"We've got to get outta here, and fast!"

The train struggled still. It rumbled slower by the second as they inched past the roaring bonfire.

"Maybe it won't notice..." Birch gulped hard.

Even as the words trickled from his mouth, the wendigo lurched its mighty head sideways and looked directly into Molly's eyes, into the gutter of her soul. Its face was little more than a deer skull, skin stretched taut. It stood frantically to its full height at the sight of her, its antlers clacking against branches in the tallest trees.

"Too late, lass! Too late!"

The bonfire exploded into sparks and pigments, the trees catching fire all around the wendigo. It reared back its deathly head and bellowed into the night, rippling gooseflesh down Molly's arms.

"Hurry, Birch, hurry!"

The flames spread like water, leaping from pine to oak as the creature charged headlong at the train.

"Coal! More coal, Molly!"

Molly dug furiously at the pile, shoveling into the boiler as fast as she could. The train pulled forward, gaining speed inch by inch.

The wendigo crashed out of the forest, knocking trees aside like twigs as it screeched, its breath burning into the frosted air.

The creature rammed itself into the side of the train; Molly held on for dear life as the engine tilted on its side before slamming back onto the tracks.

"Holy shit, hun. This train weighs a hundred tons!"

The wendigo shrieked and charged again, jumping atop the train. Molly shrank into the corner, blue veins swelling to the surface as her heart froze. The creature stuck its wiry arms into the cab, scratching and clawing at her. She kicked its long finger, but it only dug harder.

"It wants you somethin' fierce! Why...why does it know you?"

As its hand surged into the cab again, Molly rushed to open the boiler. The wendigo's fingers plunged into the furnace, searing the skin black as the creature reeled and fell to the ground in angry pain.

Burned yourself? Molly laughed.

"Good thinking! You've gotta get back to the passenger car. Unhook it and I'll draw the creature away somehow."

"But what about you, Birch?"

"I...I'll try to deal with it. Get your folks to safety. We're nearly to the branch that heads south into Philippi. Follow the line; you can't miss it."

"But..."

"And remember the shadow! Don't underestimate it!"

"I'll try..."

"Meet me back here when you're ready. I'll be waiting. *I promise*."

Molly rushed to Birch and gave him a hug; he patted her head fondly.

"Now...go! I'll hit the emergency brakes and that should give you enough slack to pull the pin!"

"Pin? I don't know how..."

"You'll figure out. Go!"

A painful roar in the distance jolted Molly's limbs to life. She leapt aboard the coal pile and scampered up the car. She pulled her hood up in the freezing wind, running down low towards the back of the rolling stock. The wendigo towered nearby in the forest, pushing down maples in a fit of rage.

Ten cars in the open with that thing around?

Molly ran and jumped, sprinted and bounded across the cars, the train still fighting to gain speed. One, two, five cars she crossed, the passenger box and caboose in sight.

Almost there!

The wendigo blasted through the hibernating forest with terrifying speed, slamming into the train again, the line of cars rocking on their sides.

We aren't going to survive another one of those!

The beast ran into the woods and circled back, lowering its head for another charge.

I've got to do something!

The blue veins in Molly's skin pulsed and ached at the thought, flexing and writhing through her skin like worms. She focused with all her might, sweating bullets even in the haughty cold air. The creature lunged forward, antlers first, aimed directly at the passenger car, now only two cars away from Molly.

Purple fire, save my friends!

Swirls of fire, weak and flickering, leapt from her palms, coursing like streams up her arms, across her chest, pooling in her neck. She

reached out, straining her synapses as a violet cyclone burst from her body, a ghostly maelstrom sucking in everything around it.

Well...that's new!

The raging whirlwind collided with the wendigo as it charged, deflecting the creature towards the front of the train. But the wendigo's momentum would not be stopped; its head connected with a railcar, smashing through the wooden side and out the other, trapping it as the train accelerated. The creature thrashed and wrestled, kicking its legs in the air, but it was stuck fast.

Molly ran to the passenger car as quickly as she could, even as the train rocked hard under the wendigo's foaming temper.

"I'm dumping the air, Molly! Be ready!" Birch shouted into the wind. Molly could see his face sticking out the side of the cab.

Dumping the what?

"Hitting the brakes, are you ready?" Birch hollered, as if reading her mind.

She gave him a thumbs up and went to work.

"Okay, there's a big metal rod thingy here that keeps it all together," she said to herself.

She dropped down between the cars, right into the face of a seething Cindra.

"What the hell is going on out here? What is that monstrous thing? Everyone's scared..." she screamed, whipping her black locks to the side.

"I'll tell you later, right now I need your help!"

Cindra huffed but stepped out into the rushing wind.

"I need your help pulling this pin once Birch hits the brakes!" Molly yelled above the wind.

Just then, the train, still rocking from the imprisoned beast, squealed as Birch dumped the air from the pneumatic lines. Every car in the rolling stock braked in unison. Molly saw everyone in the passen-

ger car lurch forward, flying out of their seats as the momentum carried them.

"We have to do it now!"

Cindra's face furrowed into stone determination. Grabbing a spear, she wedged it under the pin and pulled down hard.

"Make yourself useful—help!" she growled.

Molly and Cindra wrenched together as hard as possible, the pin blasting upwards from their efforts. The front of the train pulled away as Birch recharged the pipe. They shot each other a quick smile.

"We did it!" Molly shouted, hugging Cindra without thinking.

"Hey, did I say..." Cindra stuttered.

With a sickening thud, the train gap stopped growing.

"What's wrong?" Cindra roared.

"Something's still holding them together! Look at these lines right here! I think they carry steam?"

"I've got this!" Cindra said, pushing Molly into the passenger car where she fell to the floor.

Cindra pinned her feet against the doorway jambs for leverage; sweeping and spinning her spear with expert precision, she sliced the lines on either side into hissing snakes.

Molly sighed in relief as the front of the train sped into the cold distance with the trapped wendigo still fighting.

Birch leaned out his window and grinned ear to ear, bidding farewell.



Chapter 13: Leo

Snow filtered slowly from the nighttime sky as they trudged along the branch line due south. It was right where Birch had promised, so they hoped to get to Philippi by morning.

"All I'm saying is, how do we even know this is the way? How do we know this is where Molly's father will be?" Cindra said.

"Molly has a feeling about it," Cinnamon offered quietly.

"Really? Do we always go by her *feelings*?"

"They haven't failed us yet!" Sasha laughed, his tentacles wrapped into shivering bundles.

"Well, I don't like it, not one bit..."

Cindra's voice faded into the background as Molly looked to the celestial sphere. The sky was black as pitch; the stars shone like diamonds in the eternal tapestry of time. As she looked, a new set of stars burned ever brighter, Leo the mighty Lion pranced proudly in the North. He roared, shaking his starry mane as he crouched, ready to pounce.

He's hunting something.

Leo dashed across the well of space, leaping high onto the back of Ursa Major, the mother bear. They struggled, lashing and biting and clawing. But Leo was too powerful; he sank his giant teeth into the mother bear's leg and wrenched her backwards, towards his abode.

No, leave her alone!

As Molly watched, the mother bear morphed, changing into the sparkling visage of her mother. Aisling wept in comfortless pain as blood gushed in heavenly clusters down her leg.

Mom! Get away from him. Don't give up!

Leo dragged her into a thicket of stars, and they both disappeared. Molly's heart sprang into her throat as the old devil itself, her anger, grew and quivered in her breast.

Why? She didn't deserve the life you forced on her! You selfish jerk! I can't...I can't believe I'm your daughter. I want nothing to do with you!

Even as she ranted to the open skies, her burning anger became a furnace of sorrow inside her soul. She blasted like a comet to the stars, blowing by the moon and planets, launching into the interstellar wilderness, even as her hair and skin flapped in the cosmic breeze.

You're back.

Molly gasped, choking in pure momentum.

"Lady, is that you? Why do you keep leaving me?"

Straight ahead, a lonely star turned, agitated, sparking with energy and plasma. Unstable and mounting, helium running low, the star swirled ever faster, approaching supernova as heaven watched in horror. Sunspots and flares poured from its surface as it grew uncontrollably hotter.

Molly was close now. She could almost touch it; could almost reach out and comfort the struggling star.

Don't lose yourself in the past, Molly. Remember who you are.

The star exploded in a mighty outburst that shook the heavens. Molly closed her eyes as heavy metals and base elements burned past her in a shockwave that tore apart asteroids and severed planets, cast to the wind as seeds for infant worlds and new life. The hovering remnant haze billowed around her, full of wonder as the star resurrected: reborn into something beautiful and true.

Molly, can you touch the music?

Molly closed her eyes, shielding herself from the light of the newborn star.

"Touch it? What do you mean?"

When Molly opened her eyes, she was in an unfamiliar house, a small boy padding down a dark hallway towards a flickering light. The

boy hauled behind him his special teddy bear, a hole in its chest spilled white stuffing with each step.

"Lady, who is that? Lady...?"

The light glowed from a television set crowned with rabbit ears. Before its luminous blue, a man with a ponytail sat on a couch, staring lifelessly into the black box. The boy sat beside him, hope in his eyes.

Papaw?! That must be...that must be my dad as a little...

"Can we play a game, Daddy?"

Papaw, his hair black instead of gray, did not turn. "Sorry, Donnie, my friends are going to be here any moment."

"Are...are you going away again?"

"Yeah. I have another tour. The band needs me, you know."

"But can't you stay just this one time?"

"Who else is going to lug around their equipment? No, Donnie, I have to go. And besides...I can't take it here anymore. This town, this place...too many bad memories."

Tears streamed down Donnie's little face. "You mean Mommy? Don't you?"

Anger flashed in Papaw's eyes.

Don't leave him, Papaw. You're a good father. I know you are.

"Yeah, your mom's health, your grandpa's sickness from the mine, this accursed place is full of darkness for me. Why can't you understand that?"

He's just a little boy, Papaw...

Through the front door poured five of Papaw's friends, covered in band shirts, chains, and leather. Papaw stood up, a smile on his face now, and embraced them. He grabbed a packed bag nearby and headed for the door.

"Donnie, you know the drill. The babysitter will be here any moment. Go back to bed. I'll see you in a couple months."

"Dad, do you have to..."

"*Yes, damn it*! I have to go. These people need me. Go to bed!"

The door slammed and Donnie was left alone in the unsteady light, his tears dripping like a forgotten faucet. He slipped off the couch, dragging his bear behind him, and plodded back down the eternal corridor to his room.

Dad...I didn't know...

He wrapped himself in his covers, hoping to keep the monsters at bay.

"I wish Mommy was here, Molly."

The words rang off the lonely walls of the bedroom as Molly stifled her surprise.

Donnie hugged his teddy bear tight. "You're always here for me, Molly. Always."

Oh, his bear was named...

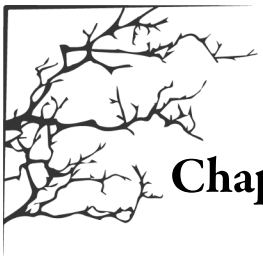
"I wish Daddy wasn't so sad all the time. He wasn't always this way, you know. We used to play and laugh sometimes. He wasn't always gone."

He slumped down into his bed and tried to get comfortable.

"I just hate this. I hate feeling so...*alone*."

Then shooting up in his bed, he stared straight into Molly's watching eyes.

"You're getting close. *Find me*."



Chapter 14: The Shadow

"Where did you go, Molly?"

Jasper's voice sliced through the trance like razor wire. Molly shook her head and realized she was still walking. The sun burned high into the day, warming the morning air. All her friends were gathered around her; worry stained their faces.

"Your eyes were white again, you were like, I dunno, an automaton or something. Your body was working, but you just weren't...*there*."

"I'm sorry. I've just been having these..."

Keep walking, daughter. You're close.

Her father's words seared the back of her head, overloaded her neurons, frazzled nerves at the end of their ropes.

"...I've just been having these daydreams I don't understand."

"Well, no matter," Jasper assured her. "We're here."

He swept his arm to show off the little town they'd discovered.

"Philippi, my father's hometown. My Papaw's hometown," Molly muttered.

"I guess it's your homestead, then, Molly," Cinnamon whispered as she walked by.

"Your roots!" Jasper added. "Whatever's blazing in your heart will find answers here, I know it."

Novalee and Sasha gave her a big hug, Cinnamon joined in as Sunny gave her a look. Cindra sneered, but patted Molly on the shoulder.

The group sauntered into the abandoned town. Blocky, drab buildings lined the streets. Signs touting historic Civil War battles grew like weeds. A wide river ran through town, the railroad tracks following its

lead. The mountainside swept up and away to their left as they entered the potent stillness.

"It ain't much," Sunny mumbled.

"Yeah, just the kind of place for darkness to dwell, I think," Molly said, mostly to herself.

"Well, after walking all night, I think everyone needs rest," Cindra declared.

Everyone looked at Molly, who shrugged.

"I'm in charge, remember?" Cindra stammered. "We're setting up camp!"

They took their rest in an open area alongside the half-frozen river.

Follow this road, Molly. That'll lead you here.

"We've got to go...I'm sorry, everyone," Molly blurted.

"Now*, I am in charge*, Molly. We just talked about this."

"I know where to find my father."

"We can wait..." Cindra growled.

"No, this is what we came here for. Let's go!" Jasper said.

They immediately gathered their things and walked north on potholed Main Street with signs that read *Route 250*. Within minutes, the river turned and passed directly in front of them; a double-wide covered bridge with faded white paint stood in their path.

"It's a cute little bridge, isn't it?" Cinnamon asked.

"Reminds me of home, for some reason," Novalee said.

No one else answered as they entered the creaking bridge to cross the river. Time slipped, stumbled into a suspended mist for Molly; she took a moment to appreciate the old bridge, admire its joints and construction, smell the yellow poplar wood, appreciate the shade and shadow that lingered under its roof.

"What was that?" Sasha's voice rang out, garbled by the hovering sensation.

"What was what?" Novalee laughed.

"That dark thing...it just ran across the bridge in front of us!"

Molly strained her eyes, squinting into the narrow hallway of the covered bridge. The air felt suffocating and surreal, as if something watched them.

"I don't see a damn thing, Sasha," Novalee said.

"I believe you!" Molly bumped into the conversation. "Where was it, Sasha?"

"Right there! Passed from right to left in front of those big beams. I...I saw it. I promise."

As Novalee and Jasper interrogated him further, Molly watched his quivering lips and shuddering tentacles.

"I believe you," Jasper was saying, "whatever it was is gone now..."

"We need to go back!" Molly cried.

"You, too?" Cindra said, rolling her eyes.

"It's just a feeling. I...I can't explain it. Something is blocking our way. We need to go back into town and find a different route over the water."

The group huddled together to discuss, but Molly and Sasha could not keep their eyes off the far side of the bridge.

"Okay, we'll go back into town and rest, like I said to do *in the first place*!" Cindra grinned. "Maybe listen to the person in charge next time?"

"Yeah, yeah, Cindra, you were right, we were wrong. We get it," Novalee said with a casual loop of her finger.

They retreated back into the ghost town. As they moved further from the bridge, the coiled snake in Molly's chest only pulled tighter. Her skin paled and faded to green. Her hands trembled. Dark rings appeared around her eyes.

Daughter, look out!

Molly jumped at her father's voice just as they walked past a dusty abandoned restaurant, the word *Medallion* adorning the archway.

"Wait, everyone. It's a trick! Something's not ri..."

The restaurant door swung open. A thick, black mass moved from the interior, hovering menacingly. Molly looked closer and saw two red eyes piercing the darkness.

"The shadow!" Sasha screamed. "Just like Mr. Birch said!"

Molly turned to speak to Cinnamon and bit her tongue. The entire group was frozen, each of them stuck in time and motion.

Why are you here, Lightkeeper? A voice rang inside her skull.

Molly did not answer. She shook Cinnamon hard, hoping she would wake up. She ran to Sasha, his words still clinging to his fixed lips.

"Someone, anyone, wake up!" she shouted.

They cannot hear you, Lightkeeper.

"Get out of my head!"

Molly glanced back at her foe. Out of the murk, a figure stepped. It was a blotch, a suspended figment like a tall, slender man, black as coal. It was dressed in a three-piece suit with shining shoes. From its back, a waving pair of moth wings jutted into the air, and its round head sat upon its shoulders, hidden and featureless save for the burning red eyes.

Oh, you have no idea how deeply I can delve.

As Molly watched in a daze, black flecks fell from the sky, drifting and fluttering, light as snowflakes. Within minutes, the ashen snow clouded the town, coating the buildings and street, a morbid incense from a deeper world.

"What do you want from me?" Molly screamed, turning to find all her friends plastered to the ground as if great weights had been set upon them.

Only Sunny still stood, her face beet-red from some inner battle.

A piercing horn cried out from the mountain. It moaned, crushing Molly's heart, heavy and mournful. Echoes and ghostly screams ricocheted between buildings, wails of the long dead, the poverty stricken, the diseased. The oppressed inhabitants of the land, the Chestnut

Ridge folk, raised their voices into an impassioned song of protest, demanding to be heard.

"Stop!" she begged as the chorus loomed larger, the consuming timbre filling Molly's ears, her mind, her heart, the town, the sky, everything.

The creature sniffed and snuffed, breathing in the fear emanating from Molly's body.

Ah, yes, that's perfect. So...so...intoxicating...

Fire sprang from the restaurant windows, melting glass, shrieking to be set free. The whole town burned behind the approaching shadow. Molly's eyes stung with soot as she scrambled away from the dark being. Tears ran down her face, her vision blurred and flickering as the fires grew, engulfing building after building. The creature rose up into the air, laughing maniacally, muttering spells as its ritual increased.

Is this your strength, Lightkeeper? How do you expect to join the shards with a heart so beset by sorrow?

Molly curled up in the snow, covering her eyes. She wept as the creature floated above her.

Now, Lightkeeper, this is your...

The creature cried out in pain, jolting Molly to her senses. Opening her eyes, she saw a rock smash into the creature's wing as it howled again. Standing behind it, huffing and puffing, Sunny reeled back her arm to throw another.

"Get away from her, filth!"

"Sunny, I'm so happy you're here with me!"

"Shush, you, let's take care of this...thing!"

The shadow clenched its fists and the fires around them flared; raging infernos in their periphery, smoke and ash flooded the sky.

This is the end for both of you.

Sunny collided with the creature in midair. She tackled it, driving it into the pavement, punching and kicking in her rage. Molly leapt onto it, her palms burning violet, her eyes closed as she focused.

There is nothing for you here anymore, she thought loudly.

The shadow seethed in pain, pinned to the ground, Molly's liquid fire shackling its arms and legs.

"You can get up now, Sunny. I have it."

The rest of the group woke abruptly, woozy as they tried to stand. Cindra recovered quickly and rushed over with her spear in hand. With a great thrust, she stabbed downwards. Molly nudged her arm, pushing the spear into the ground instead.

"What're you doing?" Cindra roared.

"I...I don't know. I feel sorry for it, somehow."

"What, why?"

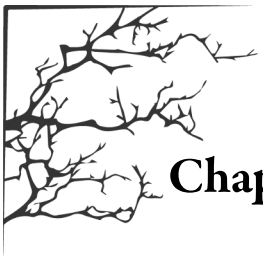
"It really shouldn't exist. I think...I think it's just a vision dreamt by someone full of fear, someone who wants everyone to share that terror."

Molly focused harder until her whole body glowed. The blue veins spread across her skin, but the empathy within her heart resisted their constricting power.

"Love should always cast out fear," Molly said, her voice an otherworldly wind, an incantation of light.

The ash falling from the sky changed, turned white slowly and steadily. The creature writhed under her power then froze, its red eyes big as saucers. As the white snow reached it, the shadow's form burst into a million exquisite snowflakes, sweeping away with the incoming squall.

And sailing heavenwards upon a solar wind, thousands of souls emerged from the mountains, screams turning to songs; men, women, and children floating in peace, free at last.



Chapter 15: Into the Rift

The group hunched in the snow, breathing hard, as they tried to recover from the phantom assault. Molly watched as Cinnamon nuzzled noses with Sunny, silent praise for her bravery. Jasper and Novalee hugged Sasha together, his tentacles wrapped around them both. Cindra paced in the background, still visibly angry, muttering about Molly's methods.

Molly felt a new emotion rising in her belly, knotting her intestines into a labyrinth of uneasy doubt.

This isn't sadness. No, this is...

Molly took a breath and watched everyone as they shined and healed together.

Am I...lonely? Oh, Jacinthe, I miss you so much!

"I don't want to stick around here any longer than we have to. Everyone up!" Cindra declared, marching back. "Up! Everyone! Let's get going."

Cinnamon gave Molly an empathetic look as they gathered their things and trudged back to the covered bridge and beyond. The road turned sharply to the right and they followed. They walked the road for over an hour, the signs turning from 250 into 119 as the town gave way to barren winter country. Sasha complained about his feet and tentacles. Sunny and Cinnamon held hands. Novalee and Jasper argued once or twice. Cindra glared at Molly the whole time.

Just as everyone considered mutiny, a beige building with pipe towers sprouted from the mountains in front of them. The train tracks came back to meet them there, like an old friend.

That's it, daughter. Come find me.

"Should we make camp here?" Molly asked. "I need some time to think before I go in there."

"Inside that yucky building?" Sasha laughed. "Your dad's in *there*?"

"I think so. Only one way to find out, I guess."

"Well, it's definitely not safe!" Cindra stood firm. "I'm going to check it out and unpack my climbing gear."

"Climbing gear?" Molly squinted.

"How else do you think we're getting down inside the mine? It definitely doesn't have power. Look at it! I'm no amateur. Leave this to me."

The group finally made camp with tattered tents and bent poles, shelter from the cold, though the sun was shining still.



JASPER MADE A FIRE and some of them slept. Molly couldn't. She sat staring into the flames for what seemed like hours until Novalee sat down beside her. Together they watched Jasper and Sasha explore the premises.

"They make a great pair, don't they?" Novalee said.

"Yeah, I've never seen Sasha so happy."

"He told me about his parents, you know, or, well, his lack of parents," Novalee began. "I...I can't help but wonder about the way some things have happened..."

"What is it, Nova?"

"I lost the baby. Jasper can't have any. Instead of fretting over those things, maybe it's our...maybe it's our destiny to be parents to someone who needs them."

Molly smiled as she watched Sasha climb onto Jasper's shoulders.

"I think Sasha would be thrilled if you asked him. But...if I know what Mika would say...don't ever forget those things from your past.

They make you who you are. Maybe they helped form you into a person who can recognize someone else's needs."

"Welp, that's probably a good way to think about it."

"Think about what?" Cinnamon said as she sat down with Sunny at the fire.

"Oh, just learning to help people. Not letting our past control us, but also not forgetting where we came from. I've been thinking about it a lot lately," Molly said.

"What if you don't have a past? What then?" Sunny said, clearly struggling, though she'd never admit it.

"Sunny, we do have a past. We have each other," Cinnamon said.

"Yeah? Well, we still don't have any memories from before the Citadel. We still don't know our real names, and that's...that's been bothering me."

Molly breathed slowly, pondering.

"I made a promise to someone...special...that I would help you discover your names," Molly said. "I intend to keep that promise. It might not be today, but when this is all over, I will make it my mission to the day I die."

"Who did you make the promise to?" Cinnamon asked.

"I...can't say that right now. Hopefully you'll understand one day."

The group went back to fire-gazing as sparks drifted upwards.



MOLLY BARELY WAITED for the sun to rise before getting ready. Novalee and Sasha had cooked some bacon on the fire to eat with hunks of sourdough bread, which put everyone in a good mood, while Jasper rambled about the coffee he'd made with his special press. Cindra rushed about the camp, hauling colorful ropes and climbing gear, swearing under her breath as she worked out some knots.

"Can I help with anything?" Molly asked, sheepishly.

Cindra sighed. "I can take care of it, don't worry."

Now's as good a time as any...

"Did I *do something* to you? It doesn't seem like we got off on the right foot."

"Well, you punched me in the damn head, does that count?"

"I'm sorry about that. I just...I mean before then."

"I don't particularly like your methods, and I don't trust you."

Molly blushed in the cold air. "Oh, is that it? Anything else?"

"What were you thinking back there? A monstrous cryptid attacks us in a ghost town, and you wanted to spare its life? Are you out of your ever-loving mind?"

"I...I just felt like its darkness was all a façade. Once I saw that, I knew it would disappear on its own."

"But your people are more important, Molly. What if it had broken free? What if it had killed one of your friends? Do you ever think before you act?"

Molly chewed her lips. "I guess you're right. I should..."

"Never mind. It's over," Cindra huffed. "Look, I shouldn't even be here. It's not just you that's upsetting me."

Molly coaxed her forward with a listening nod.

"See, I came down from the north to find my brother. The little jerk rushed out, left his whole family in shambles. Mom's worried sick."

"What made you stay put with us?"

"Because I sense real hope here. Back in New York, the world is pretty ordinary again, but everyone feels lost, empty, on edge. They know about the bad things happening in the world; they know about people disappearing. But Absalom Kaine threw everyone's hearts and heads into his cynical blender. His people unleashed propaganda in relentless torrents every single day. He cut away at us until the horrible things seemed normal, until people just didn't care anymore. They were numb. They were tired of hearing about it. God forbid they *do anything*

to fight back. Everyone feels like they have to ignore all the bad news just to keep their sanity, you know?"

"People have tried doing that here, too," Molly said. "It just doesn't work. It ate away at my Papaw and all the good people in Wing's Reach. Even when Absalom accomplished some good things, helped some people thrive again, there was always a sour taste in our mouths."

Molly could feel the conflict inside Cindra as her gaze softened.

"Look, I know these people have faith in you, Molly, but I'm not one to believe something so quickly."

"That's okay with me. I don't really believe in myself, either." Molly laughed.

Cindra's face relaxed even more, and she smiled.

"Well, here I thought you were a stuck-up brat. Maybe you're not so bad. We'll see."

Just then, a howling wind rushed from the mine entrance, drowning the group in echoes and confusion.

Come find me, daughter.

Molly's neck hair stood on end. "I think we need to go. He's waiting for me." And turning to Cindra again, she said, "I'm glad we had this talk. This brother of yours? I don't know who he is, but we'll find him. I promise."

"You make a lot of promises, Molly Shadowen."

Molly nodded and picked up her backpack.

Leaving Sasha and Novalee to tend the camp, the rest made their way into the mine. The outer shell resembled a business office, drab and full of ancient computers, but soon they found the main elevator shaft that ran deep into the earth. The elevator cage was nowhere to be found; an empty space stood where the door should be.

"It must be at the bottom?" Molly wondered.

"Like you said, only one way to find out," Cindra said.

She unpacked her ropes and anchors, and Jasper helped as they tied off the lead rope to a support beam in the room. Molly peered over the

edge into the abyss. Only black nothingness awaited them below. She could hear faint sounds, clicking and dripping from the netherworld locked beneath shadow and stone.

"You sure you want to do this, Molly?" Cinnamon said, putting her arm around her.

"I *have* to do this. Down there is the key to my past, and I think the key to my future, too."

"We're with you all the way," Sunny said, giving her a good slap on the back.

Cindra finished her preparations and tossed a pebble down the mineshaft, listening.

"Has to be at least 500 feet deep. I'll go first, I think. Stay here and let me do my thing. Once I have my gear in place, you should be able to follow, no problem."

Without another word, Cindra threw herself over the ledge, climbing into the darkness with blind speed. They heard pounding and hammering, then Cindra's distant voice.

"Alright, everyone, it's dark as hell down here, so bring the flashlights!"

Molly went first, carefully rappelling with small leaps. Sunny went next, then Cinnamon, with Jasper taking up the rear. Just as his foot slapped loudly on the stone floor, a rustling commotion exploded around them. A colony of bats, disturbed in their hibernation, swirled about the cave, flapping and squeaking in annoyance.

"Shit! I hate these things!" Sunny roared. Molly tried not to laugh.

The bats swooped upwards through the frozen mineshaft, blasting out of the abandoned building and into the winter morning to the delight of Sasha and Novalee above.

"Can we just get going now?" Sunny said, clearly unsettled.

"Wait..." Molly held up her hand. "Do you hear that?"

Down the dark tunnel, into the innards of the mine, a scratching noise reverberated off the walls.

"You hear that, right?" Molly said, her voice echoing.

"Ssssh, yes, I do," Cindra said.

The scratching moved closer, accompanied by a slapping, padding sound as something moved through water and debris.

Molly clicked on her flashlight and in the beam sat a large bat. It twisted its fox face at them as it held up its four-foot wingspan, saying hello.

"Argh, get that thing away!" Sunny railed.

"No, no, I think it's cute. I...*I love it*," Molly whispered, walking closer.

The poor creature scratched along the ground, its wing rent in two places. Its loaf-like body was roundish and chubby, chunky in the most charming way possible.

"Aw, buddy, did you get hurt?"

Molly lifted the bat to the protest of Cindra and Sunny, and it clung to her. She scooted it onto her back, dusted herself off, and motioned for the others to follow her into the shadows.

"You're seriously keeping that thing?" Sunny said.

"I absolutely am. And I've already thought of a name. I'll call her Poppy."

Sunny rolled her eyes, but Cinnamon smiled. She liked seeing Molly happy.

The group journeyed down the tunnel for thirty minutes. They clambered through partially collapsed sections, climbed boulders and rocks, crammed their aching bodies into tight areas. Old mining equipment and inoperable lights lined the walls. Wooden support beams, cracked and antique, shuddered at their footsteps.

Keep going, Molly.

Again and again, Molly heard her father's voice in her head, guiding them down distant branches and through dusty tunnels. At last, their flashlight beams illuminated a grand collapse, beams and boulders fallen into a massive heap of broken ruin.

"How do we get around this? And how much further should we go?" Cindra said out loud.

Underneath the ruin, daughter.

"My father...he's saying we need to clear this, somehow. There's a hole beneath it," Molly said.

"Clear this? How the hell do you think we can do that?" Sunny said.

"Molly...I think you can move them," Jasper said, his calculating face lost in thought.

"Me? We're here because I'm having so much trouble, right?"

"Try something, warm up your inner fire," he said.

"How so?"

"Heal your bat friend. Heal Poppy's wing."

The bat shivered close to Molly as she reached back to pet her big-eared head.

"What will that do?"

"There is power in helping others, especially for you."

Molly set Poppy on the ground. She whined a little as Molly closed her eyes and grasped the torn wing in her hands. The tunnel beamed, abruptly awash in purple light, streaming and glittering in subterranean glory.

Cindra watched in astonishment as Poppy's wing healed, sewn up as with a needle until no scar remained.

"I don't believe it," she whispered, though everyone heard it.

Poppy leaped back into Molly's arms, purring and nuzzling her face. In that moment, Molly felt deeper love than she had in weeks. Something inside her heart settled itself. Molly felt as confident and powerful as she had during Birch's forest gathering.

Swinging Poppy on her back, Molly rose boldly before the collapsed tunnel.

"I can do this," she said, clenching her jaw and balling her fists.

The purple fire sprang from her palms, racing up her arms until her entire head burned with lavender passion. She opened her eyes and out of them poured a scorching inferno. The energy spiraled like liquid, washing around and through the boulders, forcing them back. As she walked forward, her fire incinerated stone and pillar, blasting through the pile.

As the boulders and stones rolled to a stop, the blue veins webbed across Molly's skin again, her heart becoming cold as frost.

"Molly?! Are you okay..." Jasper stuttered, reaching for her arm.

She staggered and stumbled forward.

"Grab her!" Cindra cried.

Molly fainted headfirst into the waiting void.



Chapter 16: Voices in the Deep

Flapping wings and worried squeaks woke Molly. She opened her eyes, but only thick darkness greeted her senses; she could feel Poppy crawling over her, could feel the anxiety emanating from her little brain. Choking on the dust, Molly rolled over and immediately winced hard.

Dammit, my arm!

"Molly!! Molly, are you okay? Please answer us!"

Molly recognized Cinnamon's urgent voice wafting down from overhead. She peered upwards and the tiniest pinprick of light danced in the distance, like a star in the eternal darkness of the underground.

"Yeah, I'm...I'm okay!" Molly shouted, her voice echoing the several seconds it took to reach the group.

"I'm coming down, Molly, stay right where you are!" Cindra yelled.

"No! I don't want to put anyone else in danger. It has to be..."

Cindra's voice echoed down before she could finish. "Has to be at least a mile down, Molly. My God, how are you alive?"

In swirls of violet and blue, Molly's broken arm flamed in the inky blackness, illuminating the chasm as it healed, as it knitted itself whole.

She gasped. In the dim light, she saw motionless figures.

"Skeletons! There're skeletons all around me!"

"Shit, Molly, we need to get you outta there!" Sunny screamed.

Even Sunny's worried about me? Molly smiled softly.

"No...this is the way my father's voice told me to go. I have to continue."

She groped in the dark for her backpack and the flashlight stuffed in its side pouch. Clicking on the bright beam, she took in her surroundings. She was standing in a cavern, a crack in the earth. Far overhead, stalactites hung like tyrannosaurus teeth from the ceiling; spikes thrust up from the belly of the earth all around her, too. Five skeletons, some impaled long ago, cluttered the space beside her.

In the gleam of the flashlight, she saw Poppy's black beady eyes.

"I'm glad you're down here with me, girl," she said, petting her head.

"Molly, what do you want us to do?" Jasper's quiet voice floated down.

"Stay put or go back to camp. I'm going to see what I can find down here. If I'm not back by dusk, don't come looking for me."

"Now..."

"I said what I said, Jasper!!"

The flickers of light above seemed to nod in agreement, so Molly picked herself up, sat Poppy on her shoulders, and focused on the way forward.

This path will not be easy, dear daughter.

She hesitated, then gritted her teeth and marched into the pregnant darkness.

The cavern narrowed as she walked. Soon it became a tunnel, rounded and hewn with claustrophobic magic. The walls on either side closed in, creaking in nightmarish laughter. The floor and ceiling closed together, taunting her with each step. Soon, she was on her hands and knees.

"It's like...like the Spire, Poppy," Molly whimpered.

The weight of the gloom grew on her chest, crushed her spine, clutched at her arms and back. Each hesitant step sparked heavy friction deep within her mind. Her throat closed. Her breathing labored. Her legs wobbled. The walls seemed to press from all sides, squeezing

her, chanting rituals into her eardrums, leaving her as dust and ash in the fathomless pit.

Can't...take this...

She closed her eyes to the illusion, covered her ears, and screamed. The reverberation rattled her teeth but made her feel better.

"You know, I said I'd never go into a place like this again, Poppy."

Poppy purred and clung tighter.

Molly held out her arms against the collapsing walls, ready to push back against their dark assault. Yet she felt nothing but air. Opening her eyes, the walls were back in their original positions.

"This place...it's playing with me, isn't it?"

As if in response, a spectral rhythm drifted in upon the shadows.

"You hear that, right? It's not just me?"

Poppy's ears perked up to answer her question. Molly trudged on, shining her flashlight into the mysterious beyond. Gradually, like ghosts from the pit, tiny flaming torches floated in her periphery, marching and dancing to the music that haunted her soul.

Who are they?

A panther of dread pounced upon Molly's heart, weighing down her shoulders; pounding filled her temples. She stumbled, each step more laborious than the last. Her neck ached oppressively. The flames bobbed in the blackness of the tunnel like evening fireflies, waiting.

Her ears were clogged now, pressure sat on her sternum like a throne, her nerves tingled with secret energy. The music grew louder and more chaotic. The pounding drums matched her racing heartbeat. Blaring car horns and arguing voices darted about the rocky canopy overhead.

The tunnel turned sharply once, then twice, then many more times. It became a maze, a labyrinth, a place of lost souls. Around each corner, more distant torches appeared, thousands and millions, marching towards her from the deepest corridors. The voices grew louder, their number increased; Molly's nerves frayed at the edges.

Then she heard the weeping. As she turned the next corner, a pale white boy stood shirtless, his face tear-stained and filthy, a teddy bear hanging from his hand.

"Dad...*Donnie*? Is that you?"

She approached the boy as his cries swelled. Kneeling down in front of him, she put her hand on his shoulder.

"Donnie, it's me, Molly!"

"Help me, Molly. I can't...I can't get free..." the boy said.

"It's okay, I'm here..."

Even as she comforted him, his eyes went white and his mouth flashed savage teeth. He bit Molly's arm hard, blood leaking onto the floor. The lingering torches swooped in and grabbed him by his legs, dragging him screaming into the void.

"Donnie! No...let him go!"

The walls closed in again, pushing and shoving Molly from side to side. The tunnel quaked, rocking to and fro as the little boy's distant screams reached a piercing frequency.

"Where are you?!" Molly shouted, covering her ears.

She ran as the walls struck her, bruising her sides and bloodying her face. Deeper into the darkness she strove, torches mustering like a vast army in the night.

"What is this place, Poppy? And how do we get out?" Molly hissed as she rushed down the corridor, the shrill screams unseating pebbles from the roof.

The tunnel tilted forward as she ran, her legs straining to keep up. All around her the torches burst into visions, a landslide of overwhelming images of Donnie and Papaw, and faces she did not know. On the ceiling, flickering like a television screen, her vivid dream flashed: Papaw slamming the door as he left poor Donnie alone. She looked to the left and saw another vision: Papaw bending Donnie over his knee, a great wooden paddle in his hand. With each blow, Donnie cried in pain.

She looked to her right and saw Donnie as a teenager, arguing ferociously with Papaw. They pushed each other, stood in each other's faces with saliva flying as they yelled. Papaw stomped his foot and demanded respect, dominating Donnie with size and ferocity.

Dad never knew the Papaw I did.

Molly wept.

Behind her a flame burst into life, a scene of Donnie and Aisling, Molly's beloved parents, arguing in much the same way. Donnie stomped his foot and stood nose to nose with her, dominating Aisling in the ways he so loathed from his youth.

Molly heard little Donnie weeping in the darkness.

The tunnel tilted forward even more, a colossal throat seeking to swallow her whole. Her legs could not keep pace; she held Poppy close as she tripped and slid into the nothingness.

"I've got you, Poppy!"

Then straight ahead she saw a crib, her own infant face asleep, yet pale and sickly. Beside the crib, her father wept into his shirt sleeve, helpless and hopeless.

Donnie...Dad...

Molly reached for the vision, a wave of pity washing over her.

But the tunnel disappeared beneath her feet. She fell to the center of the earth. Deeper and deeper. Darker and darker. To the heart of the planet. To the molten core. To the nucleus of grief. Pictures and faces swirled around her like a hurricane, tearing and stabbing her poor body. She grabbed at the walls, breaking her fingernails as she was dragged to the depths, into the ancient rift.

Help! Papaw? Mom? Anybody?

Images rushed by her, scenes from Donnie's life as he struggled with social norms, doubted himself as he researched, vomited before important presentations. His self-loathing bristled like a porcupine fist, punching Molly in the gut as she twisted and fell, freefalling into the abyss.

The drums pounded louder than ever. Molly's temples still pulsed. Whispers swept in her right ear and out her left. Hours passed as Molly fell, immersed in an endless river of memory.

Too much...it's all too much...

At last, something caught her. Molly's body froze stiff, stuck in midair, her blue veins flexing out of control beneath her skin. Something invisible held her aloft, an oozing energy that seeped over her body and sucked her into its liminal embrace.

No, I can't let this place win. Donnie...Dad...he just wanted to be known, just like anyone else. He was afraid, like I am, too. He tried to be proud and strong, tried to find certainty about everything in his life, but that just wasn't who he was. Hold onto that. Hold onto that little boy crying with his teddy bear. Hold onto that man sobbing at my sick bed. Hold on...

Then a light signaled through the haze. Donnie sat in a hospital room, Aisling lying in a bed next to him. They smiled at each other, happy for the first time in the haunting visions.

Tears welled in Molly's spirit, a fountain of knowing released within her mind.

"Poppy...do you see? That's me!"

Donnie held baby Molly in his arms. He caressed her cheek. Kissed her forehead. Gazed into her green eyes with a hypnotized stare.

"...Aisling...I just haven't felt this way in my *whole* life. It's like...like, as soon as I laid eyes on her, I loved her. Like I've always loved her. Like she's always been here. Part of me. Part of you. She...you...you're my *everything*."

Floods of tears washed from Molly's eyes, her crooked smile deepening as she watched.

Is it possible? Did he really love me?

The invisible energy trap broke free and Molly fell to her hands and knees, splashing into water on the floor of a primordial room. Ahead in

the faint unearthly light, there stood a door, set into the rock of another world.



Chapter 17: A Door in the Dark

The door towered ahead in the mist: a menacing monolith in the darkness of the deep. The stench of the grave lingered in the air, sacred in its stillness. Molly flinched as she reached for the handle. There was no lock. It needed no key. Yet fast it was closed and dust sat upon its oaken visage as if it had not been opened for an age.

"What do you think, Poppy? What will we find in there?"

With a storm of resolve, Molly opened the door. Out poured a chilling sensation, a howling wind of specters and ghouls, voices of angry gods and feeble men. Beyond the threshold, a chamber sat in sullen silence: a rock-hewn sanctuary with walls of ancient words carved into stone. Molly could not read the words, but she could feel the powerful spell and hatred they wielded.

"Dad, are you in here?" Molly whispered, her voice echoing back to her.

Then a soft, low light burned inside her chest, not purple or blue or red, but a delicate white. It emerged from her breast and climbed to the top of the cave, lighting the room in magic splendor.

In the center of the massive chamber, a man crouched naked, dejected, afraid. In terror, he crawled upon a stone island in an underground sea. In the midst of the murky waters, he covered his face and wept.

"Dad, I'm here."

She stepped in the water as if to swim to meet him, but a shadow beneath the waves surged and writhed from the unknown depths. Mol-

ly yelped and stepped back to shore. Then she noticed a most curious thing: a steely chain running from the naked man to the lurksome creature deep beneath the surface.

"What's in here with you, Dad? I...I can't reach you."

Her father didn't answer. He only cowered lower and wept louder.

"Dad...I'm here with you now. You...you don't have to believe Absalom's lies anymore. Look what he's done to you! You don't have to trust what he taught. You don't have to let it rule you any longer. You can be free!"

Donnie squirmed as a profound burden rested upon him, an invisible weight of desire and regret. Great beads of sweat poured down his face as he struggled to be free of it.

"Dad..."

Molly stepped into the lake again and the shadow surged. It roared out of the water, a mighty engine of spite and shame, and as the creature surfaced, a shrieking wail split the air. It was a siren of old, a mermaid as some call them. Her scaly, naked body curved into a quivering fish tail, muscular and powerful. Her seaweed hair tangled itself into knots and corals. A great chain wrapped around her body, enslaving her to the frail man on the island. And as she rose to a fearsome height, Molly saw her face.

"It...it can't be! *Mom*?"

The Aisling siren bellowed, freezing Molly's blood cold with uncontrollable sorrow. Molly fell headfirst into the dark water, even as Poppy launched herself into the air. Beneath the haunted waves, a thousand spirits swam around Molly as she pushed towards the surface. The water churned and boiled with lost souls and accusing voices, primal passions suppressed forever.

As Molly's head burst through the waves, the siren latched onto her leg, pulling her downwards to an eternal sleep.

"Help! Dad!" Molly screamed as she choked down seawater.

Donnie looked up, straining against the pressure of his self-made prison. His face stretched, grimacing with untold wounds, shaking as he let out a silent scream. Black clouds fomenting in his eyes, burgeoning and burrowing, they burst from his pupils, fuming towards Molly's white light, choking it as a stormfront blots out a summer day. The tempest fumed and frothed, raging in the vault of the hidden rift.

Before Molly's head was pulled under once more, Poppy winged into action. She dove into the siren's face, biting deeply into her neck, feasting upon her ancient blood. Molly kicked and paddled as the siren fought off Poppy's lethal attack.

Swimming as fast as she could muster, Molly rolled onto the stone island. She pushed herself to her feet, and stumbling through her exhaustion, she knelt down at her father's side, his face buried in his grieving hands.

"Dad, wake up! Stop this!"

Donnie trembled, vibrated, shook with wild tremors.

"I...I can't leave Aisling," he howled. "My wife. My helpmeet."

"Helpmeet? Dad..."

"And, oh, how she fought me. But now look at her! So beautiful, yet so...hideous?" He shuddered.

"That's not..."

"We did everything the right way. She was my greatest possession! Yet she's become something monstrous. I...I don't understand."

Wailing into his palms, the man before Molly had broken loose, had severed himself from reality, from all that grounded him.

"Dad, that *isn't* Mom. That isn't your Aisling. You loved a woman who never existed because you forced her to become someone she wasn't! She was never, ever your *possession*!"

Donnie lifted his head slowly.

"It's time to accept the blame, Dad. Admit you were wrong. Admit what you did to Mom. It's the only way out! It's the only way you can finally be free."

With those words, Molly gently grazed her father's ailing skin.

"I don't know how you'll make amends to the dead, Dad, but I know you can't do it here, chained to that monster."

"The dead?" Donnie whispered.

Molly's palm glimmered in shades of the richest purple; the color spread across Donnie's body, mending scars both inside and out.

"The real Aisling is gone. She's gone, Dad! I...I saw her. I held her close. And she saved me, and...I think I saved her, too. Free yourself from this...this *deception*!"

Donnie saw Poppy fighting the siren in the midst of the sea, and the darkness faded from his eyes. He lifted one knee, ready to stand. Molly wept as his face grew healthy and full; scales fell from his eyes onto the cold rock as his skin burned with new life.

"Dad, I don't want to lose you, too."

Her father stood upright at her words, confident as someone who had been to the brink, as someone who was almost gone. He balled his hands into fists and confessed to the darkness.

"Oh, Aisling, my dearest, what have I done? What kind of monster did I make of you? Begone! You aren't the woman I loved."

The siren squealed as Poppy devoured her jugular; the chain that held her fast broke into a thousand pieces, exploding into a cloud of dust and debris. The creature sank beneath the waves as Poppy took to the air once again.

Donnie fell to his knees, tears pouring from his eyes as the great burden rolled from his back. Molly hugged him furiously, never wanting to let go again.

"Dad, it's you! It's really you!"

They embraced for what could have been days. As Molly buried her face into his chest, the snaking blue veins faded and the captive sadness rushed from her heart, escaping through pinpricks and hollows into the skies far above them.

They held each other until Donnie at last pushed her away and looked deeply into her eyes.

"We have no time to lose, Molly. There's so much you need to know!"



Chapter 18: Hope in Sight

"The Great Harvest is almost upon us, Molly! It's nearly here! He's a mad man, I tell you! He'll kill us all!"

Molly could feel the turbulence in her father's shivering chest. And in that moment, Absalom was a million miles away. Instead, she stepped back and, after giving him a blanket from her pack, she looked at her father, really looked at him for the very first time.

His wiry, pale frame coursed with cold sweat. His broken glasses perched on an ashen face scarred with past traumas. His unkempt beard ran with dust and grime. His black hair flowed with gray.

This was Donnie. This was father. After all these years.

"Aren't you listening, Molly? We have no time to waste!"

Molly shook her head from the daydream. "Never mind that, how did you get down here? Why did you abandon me as a child? *Where have you been*?"

"So many questions? I can answer them later!"

"No! *Now*!"

Donnie's face slumped, downcast. "Absalom banished me here, to my deepest and darkest fears. I guess he thought the old mine that killed my grandfather was the scariest place on earth for me. And he was right, not because of the darkness of the mine itself, but because of how this place drove a wedge between my father and me. Dad...your Papaw...he had to get away from here, and that included getting away from me."

"So, *you* had to get away from *me*? Is this some kind of generational problem?"

"I...I..."

"No excuses! I want the truth!"

Donnie shuffled uneasily as he pulled the blanket tighter.

"Looking back, I didn't value the right things, Molly. I...I was so taken with Kaine and his charisma, his discoveries, his power! Your mother tried to bring me back, she really did, but somewhere along the way, you both became lost in the crowd, lost in the tangle of my brain."

Molly sighed and watched Poppy flying about the chamber.

"Look, you're right. I...I realize now that I never really loved the person I forced your mother to become. I loved the spark in the woman I met earlier, the brilliant scientist..."

He paused to take two breaths.

"But then Kaine and his darkness filled me. I believed his lies. I followed his ways, and your mother...I forced her to follow that path with me."

"You didn't force her, Dad. She loved you. Part of me thinks she believed she could save you."

"It was never going to work because I...I...only..."

"Say it, Dad..."

"I only loved *myself*. Everything became about me and my rights, what I deserved, what role I played and what authority I wielded over your mother. She...she wasn't a person anymore. She was a possession. A subservient. My grotesque creation."

Molly laughed, a bright sunbeam in the dark cave.

"But Mom was never going to let herself become your servant, Dad. She escaped, and you mused over that monster for years as if she were the real thing. She was just too strong to submit to such poison."

Donnie's face radiated with light. His strength grew. The more he confessed, the more he came alive.

"It's true, Molly. But I didn't prioritize my family, even when you needed me the most, even when you fell sick. Neither of you deserved the poor life I gave you. Your mother didn't deserve to be caged up like a pet, like a piece of property. She had a whole career ahead of her and I took that from her!"

Molly turned her back to him. "Were there ever moments you really loved us? That you loved *me*?"

"Well, I..."

"All these years, I just wanted a father who knew me, what I liked and didn't like, what my dreams were. I wanted my father to be proud of me. What kid doesn't want that? I wanted a father who could see me and smile because he was so proud of the person I am. But you were gone. You left me to this empty space, this...this eternal loss of...of closure."

"Honey, I'm so sorry..."

"So, I want to ask you once again. Did you ever love me? Did you ever love Mom?"

"Yes! I did, honey, I really did. But there was some kind of, I don't know, some kind of *darkness* in me. I was obsessed with Absalom Kaine. I believed in him, and I thought he believed in my work when he approached me for research, even when he allowed me access to the Nebula Crystal when you became sick."

"Wait, he *allowed* you? Papaw thought you stole a piece."

"As far as the other scientists knew, I did, but it was secretly at Kaine's permission. I don't think he understood the crystal yet, didn't realize how it would hurt his plans later. At the time, he said healing you with the crystal was absolutely necessary for all things to come to pass."

"Wait, what does that mean?"

"I truly don't know, Molly. You have to believe me!"

"I think I believe you, Dad. Or, at least, I want to, even if you worked for him."

"But I don't anymore. My eyes have been opened in so many ways."

"How so?"

"Well, I...you see...I found myself in this prison. I don't know how long. It could have been a thousand years, or it could have been a day. And I don't mean this underground chamber, this cave. No, I mean the living hell of working hand in hand with Kaine. The more I worked for him, the more detached I became. Absalom joys in suffering and control. He doesn't care about love or people or goodness. He only cares about bending this world into what he wants it to be."

"And the Great Harvest will do that?" Molly asked, the urgency of the situation returning.

"Yes, Absalom is building his ultimate machine. He calls it the Thresher, like some sick joke. He claims he has a great commission to harvest those loyal to him, while separating and burning those who aren't."

So, Absalom wasn't fibbing...

"I don't understand. How exactly can he do that?"

"He talks in abstracts, Molly. I'm not sure. All I know is he used to preach relentlessly about his revelation and how he was about to pour a bowl of wrath upon the earth."

The words stung like sweat in Molly's eyes.

"I mean, Dad, I've heard Kaine shut himself inside his Keep. Is this why? Is that where the machine is?"

"Don't you see, Molly? After you proved to be too much for him to handle, he's gotten more deranged. He talks to himself constantly. He threatens everyone around him. Some loyalists even started defecting! So, yes, he shut himself in the Keep, up north in a mountain near Niagara Falls. That's where the third shard fell. That's where he discovered the Ark and the Nebula Crystal all those years ago!"

"Okay, slow down, Dad, what exactly does this Thresher do?"

"He speaks in riddles about his Great Harvest, but the science behind the machine is far deeper, Molly. So far as I can tell, the Thresh-

er, powered by his remaining shard of the Wanderstar, can extract the spark from human beings directly. And he doesn't even have to feed them into it. No, as soon as he powers up the machine, he will create millions of soulless people around the world. He won't need all the shards! He won't need *you* any longer!"

"But...how is that possible? He doesn't want to join the shards anymore?"

"No, Molly, he's given up on that. You won! But he still has one shard of the Wanderstar, one third of a crystal that can reshape the very world itself. It has plenty of power on its own. And he realized he can simply use a person to boost its power. Someone special. He knows he can't have *you*, but he has someone else in mind. He already has her in custody."

Mika was right...he knows he can't truly wield the shards...

"Who, Dad, who is it?"

"I don't know her name. The grommets call her *the purple woman*. I think they're making fun of her clothes. I'm not sure. But she's being held, right this moment, in one of his death camps!"

"Wait, a woman in purple? I need more, Dad, *more*!"

"Okay, I'll try. She...she's the one he offered as a sacrifice. Everyone who works for Kaine knows about her. Something about the ritual changed her; made her perfect for his plan."

"Jacinthe, oh my God, *Jacinthe*! She's alive?! I...I need to leave right now! Where is this death camp?" Molly shouted, getting up to leave.

"I...I think it's the camp in Richmond, yes, *in Richmond*. One of the first."

Molly staggered away from him, panic and joy settling in together. Donnie grabbed her by the arm.

"I know you carry the first two shards, Molly. If you must go, whatever you do, don't join them with the third shard."

"But that's what I'm destined to do!"

"I know, honey, and that's what I fear."

"But why?"

"You won't survive it, Molly. You have no idea how powerful these forces are. There is no way you can live through the joining of the shards. And I can't lose you now! I just found you! Please don't go. I beg you."

"I'm sorry, Dad, I have to go. Instead of holding me back, why don't you help me?"

Donnie mulled, tugging his hair for a moment. Molly could feel the twisted knots of emotion binding his chest.

"Okay, well, if you have to go, I think I can help, at least with the Keep itself."

"And?"

"It'll take thousands to lay siege to the Keep. But there's a secret entrance right behind the great waterfalls themselves. It'll be dangerous, but it might be the only way. Few know about it. From there, you can access the Keep and the Ark within it."

Molly hugged Donnie, ignoring the sweat and tears.

"So, you're saying I have to go back to where this all began? To the very Ark that started all our pain?"

"No, no, Molly. The Ark is a *beautiful* thing. It was meant for better people than Absalom Kaine. And this pain? It's a cycle of power and ruin that's been happening forever. I...I was sucked into it this time, but so many gallant souls have been lost or transformed through the same forces of evil that rule Kaine's heart now."

"Well, it's time to put an end to it, once and for all."

Donnie smiled warmly, tears building in his eyes. "I'm so proud of you for breaking this cycle I passed on to you. You're...you're so strong. I don't know exactly what will happen when the shards are joined, but something tells me it will ultimately be up to the one who wields them, the Lightkeeper...*you*."

There's that Lightkeeper word again...

"Dad...come with me. You can be there when it happens."

"I...I can't right now, Molly. But I'll be there. I promise. And in case I don't ever get to tell you this..."

"You just said you'd be there..."

"I know, but just in case, I want you to know my greatest regret is losing you and your mother. I wasn't a real man. I can see that now."

"It's okay, Dad, I think Mom is near, she's right here with us. I can feel her presence all the time."

Donnie smiled, confusion written on his face.

"But this time, be a real man, okay? Own your mistakes. Never make excuses. Fight against the very ideas that entrapped you."

"I will. I promise," he whispered as he held up his arms. "Now, let me help you get out of this place."

They hugged one last time and Molly felt herself being pulled into shadow, into misty reverie. Before her clouded eyes, Donnie vanished and she was left alone in the fading rift.



Chapter 19: Pisces

Molly's eyes fluttered open to the sounds of silence. Paralyzed, she could not move an inch as she floated atop a pool of water, an apparition, a revenant of the fourth dimension. The night sky blazed with heavenly bodies above, so black it seemed to swallow her very soul.

She struggled at first, fighting the bond between water and flesh. But as she gave up and observed the stars, another constellation burned brighter than all others. Pisces welcomed her as the two ancient fishes swam and splashed together in their storied escape, rainbow trout as hardy and fierce as any creature could boast. Leaping across space, flashing with brilliant color, they played together, loving each other in perpetual harmony.

So beautiful. So in love.

The trout navigated the skies together, free as the most distant birds. But as Molly watched, some invisible force gripped their vibrant scales and froze their beating fins. With horror, Molly gasped as the fish were torn from each other, pulled away into the eternal darkness of the unknown.

No, leave them be! Molly sobbed.

Before she could take another breath, her body heaved towards space, blasting out of the lingering atmosphere and into the choking vacuum. She soared by Mars, red in its revolution; twisted and turned through the asteroid belt as the mighty rocks collided and exploded into millions of pieces. She rocketed by Jupiter and its mighty moons, swam the rings of Saturn, flew by Uranus, Neptune, and little Pluto.

As she soared, Molly forgot fear, let go of all reservations. The beauty of what she beheld, the cadence of the stars, the sheer might of these distant worlds: they rose like hope within her chest.

Molly, are...you there? The haunting voice whispered in her ear.

"Lady, that's you again?"

Out, out she traveled, faster and further as heavenly bodies burned in forever embrace. She flew into another place, another time, until at last she saw the Milky Way itself spinning in its primordial wonder, smooth as sea glass to her eyes. It swirled inside her eager irises, a great flowing beauteous thing, both utterly alien, yet continually burning within the hearth of Molly's being. In the leering distance, Molly heard the luminous beings again, laughing and playing as they teased their cousin stars, taunted their sister nebulae.

"It's so beautiful, Lady. Do you see?"

A coughing, wheezing sound jolted through Molly's senses in reply.

Can...you hear...the music?

Tears filled Molly's eyes, but she did not know why.

"Is something wrong, Lady? Your voice? What's happening?"

Only the silent turning of the glorious galaxy whispered back. It swirled slowly faster, soon out of control, spinning Molly up and away and into white light.

As her eyes refocused, she found herself in a dim bedroom, a teenage girl crying to herself upon the bed.

It's Cinnamon! I mean...it's Edith...just like in the picture at Jacinthe's home.

Through the creaking door, Molly saw a little child, dressed in a purple nightgown, silent as she sneaked into her sister's space. Her bobbing curls struck a chord deep in Molly's heart.

Oh, Jacinthe, how I miss you...

"What's the matter, Edith? Why are you crying?" the girl whispered.

Edith turned her head and wiped the tears from her eyes. She picked up Jacinthe and placed her on her lap.

"You know, I don't think you'll understand this one."

"Why not?"

"It's just that I'm...I'm *different*. And I feel so alone."

"You mean like my friend, Molly? No one can see her but me. She feels alone, too."

Molly choked on her saliva at the sound of her name.

What in the...

"No, Jackie, not like your invisible friend. This...this is something very real. I...I can't tell you about it, not really, not until you're a little older, okay?"

Jackie? A pet name maybe?

"Molly's real! She really is!"

"Oh, alright, Jackie, have it your way," Edith said, pushing her little sister to the floor and turning back to her tears.

Jacinthe watched as Edith cried softly. Quiet as a mouse, she climbed into bed and wiggled under the covers with her big sister. She cried with her, holding her in that soft moment, wishing with all her might to chase the tears away.

Molly bawled a river at the scene. And through the blur of salty tears, young Jacinthe turned and looked directly into Molly's emerald eyes.

"Help her remember, Molly. Help her."



Chapter 20: Horrors Abound

Molly flew out of the trance with a muffled scream. She sat up, sweating bullets, and found herself back at camp. Sasha rolled into her tent, deeply concerned.

"Are you okay, Molly? We were so worried about you!" he said as Jasper and Novalee joined him.

"I'm fine...but we have to get going right now. Like, yesterday!"

"Woah, Molly, we just found you and that weird bat of yours unconscious, floating in the mineshaft. You might need some rest..."

"No, Nova! We need to set down camp and get moving!" Molly said, rushing out into the cold afternoon.

"Wait, how long has it been?" she muttered.

"We only went into the mine this morning," Jasper assured. "You went off by yourself into that dark hole, but you were only gone a couple hours before we saw your body reappear out of thin air. Cindra rappelled down to fetch you."

Molly shot a glance at Cindra, who stood nearby with her arms crossed.

"*You* saved me?"

"Yes."

"But you hate me!"

Cindra looked confused. "I don't hate you. I just don't trust people when they've given me no reason to. Can you at least tell us what you saw down there?"

Molly braced herself and took a breath. "I saw my father. Only after a great ordeal, but there he was, inside a door in the tunnel depths."

"You actually found him?" Cindra sneered. "He was really down there?"

"Was he really there? I'm not sure," Molly said, grabbing Novalee's hand for comfort. "But he told me *Jacinthe is alive*! So...I think his spirit was there, at least. He said she's been held captive in the Richmond death camp. Absalom wants to use her to power a new machine that will steal the human spark, or what's left of it anyways. People won't have a choice in following him. He won't need the shards anymore!"

Cinnamon and Sunny joined them and Molly's face paled.

"What is it, honey?" Cinnamon said. "Do I have something on my face?"

"Oh...no, it's just that..." Molly stumbled.

"What?"

"I don't think I should be the one to tell you. Besides, we need to get going!"

Everyone moved in rhythm, gathering supplies, dousing the fire, and packing tents. Cindra watched in disbelief and clapped in faux applause.

"Very good, Molly. Nice performance. Very nice."

"You don't believe me?" Molly asked.

"You went down the mineshaft, saw your daddy, and gained secret info about our enemy? I'm seriously supposed to believe that?"

"I don't expect you to believe me."

"And besides, we don't have the power to mount a rescue for this friend of yours."

"Then I'll go by myself."

Cindra balked at Molly's determination. Molly could feel the doubt creeping into her mind.

"Look, I don't really have time for this," Molly said. "Jacinthe needs me. Are you coming or not?"

"Yes...I'm coming."

"Well, I'm glad. We'll need someone with your strength."

Cinda smiled at the corner of her mouth. "Okay, yeah, that's true. So...um...how are we planning to get there anyways?"

"Birch said to meet him back at the track junction."

"That old geezer?"

"Yeah, I believe and trust him. That's how you treat friends."

Cindra blushed but grabbed a sleeping bag to roll up.

They set down the camp in record time and headed north along the tracks. Passing through Philippi, they fell silent before the dead town, the icy river running motionless beside it. Molly could not help but feel like she was leaving something behind.

You're finally free, Dad. I don't know if you're truly here or not. It's all just a blur, like a dream. But I hope you're out there...somewhere.

Within two hours, they found the main line again, and there, waiting with a toothpick in his mouth, sat Birch Robbins. Strapped to the front of his precious locomotive was a giant deer skull; a bulky piece of flesh roasted over a blazing fire nearby.

"About time ya'll showed yer faces. I skinned and prepped this creature hours ago. Who's hungry?"

Molly smiled from ear to ear and ran to give him a hug.

"Ah, yes, that's the stuff," he said. "I love hugs from pretty ladies. Wait, what do we have here?"

Molly blushed and held up Poppy.

"Just the bat friend I made in the mines. Her name's Poppy."

"Isn't that the darndest thing? What a cutie," he chuckled, scratching the bat's chin. The creature basked in his attention, wriggling and cooing.

"So, where're we off to now, Hollywood?"

"Well, we found the mine and when we climbed down the shaft..."

"Naw, Molly, I don't need an entire novel. Just tell me where we're going."

Jasper stepped in. "We need to get to Richmond. Molly's friend is being held there by Kaine's thugs."

"That's the dead friend, then? Not so dead, it seems," he cackled. "I tell you what, though, the line goes straight into the heart of that city, right into downtown. If you need to get there, it's practically a straight shot. Just give me a few minutes to eat my wendigo supper, and we'll be off."

Molly smiled as she watched Birch eat his food, singing and feasting with Jasper and Sasha, feeding nibbles to Poppy as she clung to his shoulder.



WITHOUT FURTHER ADO, they boarded and were off, Molly keeping Birch company in the cab again, Poppy clinging to her back. They chugged along the line to the northeast, skirting the edge of West Virginia before turning south. An hour passed, Birch naming cities and towns as he went. He laughed and jabbered, stroking Poppy's fuzzy head.

As Molly saw signs for a place called Washington D.C., Birch murmured to himself.

"What? You don't like that place?"

"No one does, hun. Still ain't safe to live there on account of the radiation. Kaine never swept it; sometimes I wonder why."

They sped onwards, smoke pouring out of the stack on the waning winter afternoon. They flew by Fredericksburg, as Birch confidently claimed, the trip lasting only three hours.

"We're only a couple miles out from Richmond now, Molly. It's like a runway here, straight into the city. Well, at least, it's straight until that wicked curve in the middle of downtown. The tracks are raised on a bridge there; definitely want to be careful."

The sun hovered near the horizon as Birch closed the throttle; steam poured out of the cylinders as they came to a rolling stop. Molly leapt from the train and met the group streaming from the passenger car.

"We're close! Birch stopped so we can come up with a plan. Do you have one Jasper?" Molly said, frantically.

"Me? I don't know much about Richmond."

"But you're so smart."

"I think we need some scoutin', Molly," Birch said, walking up behind her.

"Scouting?"

"Yes, ma'am. Why not send that bat friend of yours?"

Molly laughed. "What? How would that help?"

"Hollywood, there's much more to you than there appears. And besides, something's changed inside you since your mine experience. Something tells me...something tells me nothing is impossible for you, so long as your mind is in it."

Molly pondered for a moment, looking around at Novalee, Jasper, Sasha, Cinnamon, Sunny, and even Cindra for encouragement. They all seemed to believe Birch.

"Go on, Molly, you can do it. I know it!" Sasha said.

"What do you say, Poppy? Can I use your eyes and ears?" Molly whispered.

Poppy snuggled her head inside Molly's purple scarf in reply. Molly focused and breathed, pacing herself.

No blue veins? Are they gone for good? I guess...I guess I don't feel so...

Within seconds, a white ball of light emerged from her chest, radiant as the sun.

Just like back in the mine...

The orb came to rest on Poppy's head and Molly's eyes immediately turned white, too. With gusty flapping, Poppy flew around, Molly seeing and hearing through her senses.

Let's do this.



QUICK, POPPY, FLY LIKE the wind!

Molly soared through the filtering dusk, a mere flicker in the beaming pink sky. Richmond spread out before her, tall buildings and suburbs, the railroad tracks striking deeply into its heart like an arrow. As they winged closer, Molly's heart plummeted, weighed down as with a thousand dark anvils. With each second, despair clenched her chest tighter.

So much pain here. So much fear.

Much of the city was empty. In the center of the metropolis, she spied a regal white structure comprised of three columned buildings. Running from the large courtyard to its door, stairs stood as eternal marble monuments, a faded many-pointed star adorned their face. Around the courtyard, a ramshackle metal fence swayed in the wind. Surrounded by skeletal apartment towers, the columned buildings stood two blocks from the curved railroad track, as Birch had promised, and beside it ran a surging river fighting the winter ice.

What she saw in the courtyard stayed with her eternally.

From high above, the place teemed with grommets like ants, hundreds of them. They gibbered and fought over corpses littering the snowy ground. They danced around raging fires, fighting over entrails and limbs, as smoke poured into the sky. Their horrid voices mocked the dead. They seized poor women and children, huddled nearly naked in the freezing cold, who screamed as they were forced up the stairs into the shadowy corridors of the white building. The grommets prodded and groped them, gleeful in their plans for tender skin.

Oh my God, the bastards...

But they were not the masters of this place. As Molly watched, a ghastly black train rolled up to the curve. It boasted mounted cannons and sharp spikes, and the fumes that puffed from its stack were green and acidic. Dozens of Reapers poured from the boxcars, their armor gleaming in the light of the bonfires. She watched as the Reapers dominated the grommets, battering and berating them, barking orders. The grommets pushed back, snarling, but the Reapers goaded them into groups with electric probes.

Trouble in paradise, maybe?

The Reapers sorted through the grommets quickly, pushing some towards waiting railroad cars, killing the old, the infirm, and the mutated without care, tossing them into the fire or treading over their mangled bodies. One grommet leader protested, only to have its head lopped off without a second thought. The Reapers crammed the chosen grommets into train cars, sliding the doors shut and slamming locks into place.

Some sort of power struggle? Where are they taking them?

The east side of the city melted into an uproar as the grommets fought back. Reapers bashed in skulls and tore off limbs. Grommets ripped open Reaper throats. Fountains of blood stained the snow.

Is Absalom even in charge anymore?

Molly soared away from the brawl. In the western corner of the courtyard, studded by broken statues, she saw great mounds of bodies, bones and flesh and appendages scattered in red snow. Grommets feasted upon the corpses, away from watchful Reaper eyes. They pulled humans from cluttered cages, women and children gutted and slain to be food for the insatiable lust of the mutant hordes.

How can they...how can they do such things?

Back at camp, Molly cried out, tears pouring from her glossy eyes, her body shaking in shock. Cinnamon held her hand, wary of what the redhead was seeing.

Then Molly saw her.

Locked by herself within a crystal cage, a woman screamed for the grommets to stop. Her purple clothing was bloodied, her curly hair spiraled in all directions, her glasses were cracked and dirty.

Jacinthe! It's her! She is alive!!!

Molly pulled back to the skies. The horrors of the city hovered in her vision like spectral static, bodies floating in the river red, Reapers tossing corpses into the water.



Chapter 21: The Rescue

Molly collapsed in a sweaty heap as Cinnamon and Novalee rushed to catch her.

"Are ya okay in there, Molly? Talk to us!" Novalee said, smacking Molly's cheeks.

Her irises burning green again, Molly surged back to them with a cry.

"Oh my God, so much death!"

"Calm down, hun. What did you see?" Birch said.

"I...I saw bodies, so many bodies. And people dying, people being violated, people being..."

Molly sobbed into Novalee's shoulder.

"Go on, girlie, I know this is hard, but..." Novalee cooed.

"I saw people being eaten, like meat."

The group let out a collective gasp, a pale darkness settling on them as the moon rose.

"There are so many dead, so many bodies. *They're everywhere*! Those alive are being processed mercilessly."

"But the forces present? How many?" Cindra interrupted.

"Well...I think hundreds! Thing is...the Reapers showed up, too. They were killing grommets, especially the old ones, and fighting among themselves. I don't understand what's happening."

"Maybe weeding out the weak?" Cindra asked.

"Maybe. But the ones they chose, they locked into cars on a hideous black train."

"The Leviathan?" Birch broke in. "I've heard tell of that engine. It haunts the forests and they say you can hear screams when its whistle blows. Sounds like they're getting ready to move an army somewhere."

"Maybe north?" Jasper said. "Maybe to the Keep? If Molly's right and Absalom's building a new machine, he'll want protection."

"Makes sense, little man," Birch said.

"But, Molly," Sasha squeaked. "Did you see Jacinthe? Did you see our friend?"

Molly sighed, calming herself. "Yes, Sasha, I saw her locked in a special cage. By herself. I don't know why she's being kept apart..."

"Didn't your father say Absalom is going to use her to power his Thresher? Why her, exactly?" Cindra said.

"I...I really don't know. But the whole place is chaos right now. I bet we could sneak in and save her before anyone noticed."

"I say we burn it to the ground," Cindra said, twirling a spear. "I can't abide the thought of this place existing. If we're going in, I say we do this *right*."

"There are hundreds of grommets, so many Reapers..."

"I don't care. I'm not going in unless we do this my way."

The group looked at each other, unsure.

"Well, the main thing is how to deal with the Leviathan," Birch said. "It's no pushover."

"I can take care of it, if you get me close enough," Molly said. "I'll change it into something beautiful."

"I wouldn't count on getting close."

"I have to try."

"Fine by me, but if you fail, I'll have to take more drastic measures. And I'm taking that cute ass little bat with me."

Sasha and Jasper stifled giggles as Novalee shot them a look.

Molly winced at those words. "Okay, you'll take care of her, right? Don't let anything happen to her."

"Scouts honor," Birch saluted.

"Then let's get ready," Cindra said. "Birch, you need to be our getaway. Move that train of yours into position. That will be our rendezvous."

"Well, I..." Birch fumed.

"Nope! I'm the leader here."

"Cindra, let me just say..." Molly began.

"Molly, after all the shit I've seen, I'm beginning to trust you. So, please, trust *me*."

Molly hesitated then nodded.

"Now, let's split into two teams. I'll take Cinnamon and Sunny. Molly, you take Novalee, Jasper, and Sasha. My team will head for the main complex. I'm going to torch it."

"But Cindra..." Molly protested.

"Mums the word, magic lady. You do your thing and find your friend, and I'll do mine."

Molly smiled secretly.

I'm beginning to like her.



AS THEY APPROACHED the center of the sullen city, a savage squall struck. Grasping and plowing through the sheets of snow, the group huddled for warmth within a grove of trees dotting the perimeter of the courtyard. The stately white building loomed ominously above them, bearing cracks that cast long shadows in the glare of a dozen grommet fires. Smoke rose over the city, a haze hiding wicked deeds.

"Okay, we have to make this fast; in and out, everyone, as fast you can!" Cindra hissed.

They split into their teams, Cindra running with Sunny and Cinnamon to the north, skirting the trees and entering the harrowing dark of the city.

"They're gone," Molly said. "We need to give them time. I'm going to sneak over that flimsy wall and look for Jacinthe. You stay here..."

"We're a damn team, Molly. Cindra said so," Novalee growled.

"Oh, I know. I...I just don't want anyone to get hurt. It's not safe."

"That's exactly why we need to go with you!" Jasper whisper-shouted.

Molly looked at Jasper, then Novalee, then Sasha. Determination set their jaws ready.

"Okay, okay. Let's go."

They ran low and fast, scuttling through the trees. Sasha set his tentacles against the fence, and one by one, he launched each of them over the wall. As they landed on the other side, Molly glimpsed Cindra's team sneaking between shadows, circling the columns of the mansion.

The courtyard burned with fire, snow, and the hot breath of a hundred grommets. The battle still raged. Reapers pushed and prodded grommets down empty streets to the haunted Leviathan. Still others were herded into groups and exterminated with glee. Heaps of mutant corpses littered the yard.

"Okay, let's..."

Before Molly could say another word, a spotlight broke the darkness. It burst from the sky like a sunbeam, finding its source in a hovering monolith, a gigantic shadow floating above the smoke.

"What's that, Molly? You didn't say anything about..." Jasper stammered.

Three more floodlights hit the ground, searching the courtyard. In the ambience, Molly could see the shape of a massive airship; it hulked above the city, boasting four separate envelopes wrapped in gleaming metal cages. The beams swept side to side, drowning the entire area in light.

"What are they lookin' for?" Novalee gulped.

"I'm not sure, but we can't worry about that," Molly said, waving for them to follow.

They crept along the line of trees up against the mounds of bodies and bones.

"She's on the other side of these piles," Molly said. "Be careful."

"You want us to go over the dead bodies?" Novalee grimaced.

"It's the only way."

They climbed through the corpses, steady snowfall covering the mangled remains as they writhed through the deathly heap. Crawling through the blood and viscera, they held their breath as the raging fires and screeching grommets assaulted their senses.

"Careful now," Molly repeated, watching Cindra's shadow as it disappeared inside one of the white building's windows.

Emerging into the center of the carnage, Molly saw the crystal cage.

"It's empty! Where is she?"

"All the cages are empty, Molly. You don't think..." Jasper started.

"No, she's still here. I can feel it. Let's move closer."

She crawled on all fours through the muck, silently apologizing to the fallen. Rounding another large mound of bodies, a sickening stench rose above the smell of death, somehow cruder, sweeter, graver.

"Yes, yes, you love it. You want more. You crave it," a sour voice drifted to their ears.

"Who is that?" Sasha whispered as Novalee put a hand over his mouth. She motioned to Molly to take a look around the bend.

Molly nodded, scooting like a spider over the bodies until a small fire drifted into view, a mere cinder amidst the piles of cadavers.

"Oh, yum, yes. That's delicious, isn't it, Sarah? Do you like the name I gave you? Sarah. That's right," the voiced hummed.

In the radiance of the fire, a creeping grommet, naked and covered in white patches of hair, squatted against a broken statue. Warts and tumors bulging, he sat atop a human woman, buried from the waist down in corpses and flesh.

"Want another, you say? Want more?" he cackled.

Molly held her vomit as she watched the creature wrench a finger off a mutilated body, shoving the digit down the women's throat, moving her jaw with his hand as he forced her to chew.

"Oh, that's crunchy, isn't it? How about something different? What do ya say?"

He tore a big toe from the body, cramming it down the women's throat with fire in his eyes. The women choked, weak from blood loss and torture. As she gagged in desperation, her eyes wandered and settled on Molly hiding amongst the dreadful piles.

Then inside Molly, from the depths of her heart, from the bottom of her stomach, from within the very core of her being, anger flared. Righteous. Sacred. Untamed.

"What have we here, Sarah?" the creeper said. "A new friend?"

Molly struck hard and fast; a flash of violet, an eruption of fire, a welling power pulverizing the creature into ashen dust.

What am I doing? Who am I anymore?

The creeper exploded in blood and powder, spraying upwards in all directions with a grisly thud. Jasper scampered around the corner, alert in his eyes.

"What was that?" he cried.

But Molly paid no heed. Even as sirens and howls filled the air anew, she cradled the dying woman's head in her hands. The woman blinked in gratitude.

"I've got you now. Let me heal your body," Molly whispered.

The woman sighed, feebly shaking her head. There were no words, but the message was clear.

"Please..." Molly sobbed.

The woman's head slumped to the side; the light in her eyes faded.

"Molly..." Jasper said, reaching out to touch Molly's shoulder. "We..."

"We've got to go!" Novalee interrupted, rushing up with Sasha in tow.

The world flooded with daylight. A glaring beam from the airship targeted the team, more alarms screamed in the night.

"Run!" Molly shouted.

The team rushed through the torn bodies, even as the airship produced hefty cannons from secret doors. It scoured the ground with sizzling red rays of light, blackening the snow around them.

"Get them!" a voice called through the chaos.

Down from the airship, an elevator touched into the courtyard. From it stepped Kassandra Snapp, leering and limping, her body succumbing to the machinations embedded in her flesh. She coughed up a black substance as she held her hand on high, open boils oozing fluid onto the ground.

Molly and Kassandra made eye contact through the smoke.

"Get that girl!"

The Reapers and grommets stopped brawling and surged towards them, a wave of teeth and claws. The airship fired again, blasting cages, burning holes in buildings, disintegrating grommets caught in its rays. The Leviathan sat in the distance, and through the mess of buildings, it fired its own payloads, smashing holes through walls and slicing trees in two.

"Get as close to me as possible!" Molly commanded.

Molly set her jaw and stood firm. She flung orbs of blinding purple light into the oncoming hordes, transforming them into gorgeous trees and beautiful beasts. Reaching deep within herself, she summoned a crystalline wall, a mighty shield that blocked the heat rays, deflecting them back into the running Reapers.

"Go!" Molly hissed to her team. "Get outta here!"

"No, we need..." Novalee began.

"Listen to me right this instant! Get the *hell* outta here. Get back to the trees!"

Her team nodded even as the luminous night eyes of the grommets closed in.

Molly shut her eyes and focused with all her might.

The wall was breaking now. The crystal cracking and splintering under the assault. Grommets poured over the crystal wall, Molly slashing them with her blades and coiling them with her whips, leaving harmless sheep and dashing goats in their place. Still the grommets came, racing through the driving snow, tearing apart their transformed comrades, eating them alive.

This wall isn't going to last much longer...

The assault intensified, the airship firing rabidly at her hiding spot. Molly wheezed under the mental pressure, digging deeper, crying out as her spell broke into a thousand pieces. The heat rays fried her raw skin, scorching her hair and spearing holes in her flesh. Covered by the grommet throng, gnawing and biting, she fought for her life.

Then in a blinding flash of blue liquid fire, the grommets melted into blood and bones, and the airship teetered in its aerial perch; knocked backwards by the shock, its cannons melted like icicles.

What the...?

Then through the smoke and haze, through the gore and heat, Molly saw a familiar silhouette. Jacinthe slid beside her, curly hair in chaos, glasses cracked and mangled, her umber skin coursing with sweat even in the cold. She hunched there with arms raised, a bubble of crystalline blue forming above her, shielding them.

"What's...what's going on? Molly cried, millions of emotions surging through her chest, along with the sizzling purple flames healing her body.

"No worries, dearie, I've got this..."

Just then, fire exploded from the windows of the state house, crumbling columns and spraying glass.

"That'll be Cindra, she's gone and made her mess," Molly said.

"Cindra? Who?"

Kassandra fumed on the other side of the courtyard, pouting and stomping. Holding her skin folds together, she barked orders; Reapers streamed towards Molly and Jacinthe as the blue shield held strong.

"That doesn't matter right now. How...how are you alive? I don't believe it."

"Believe it. You're the reason I'm here...but the others..."

"*The others*?"

"I'm the only human left. The rest...processed and killed," Jacinthe said, rage in her eyes.

Cindra's flames leapt to the next building and the next, soon the whole city burned. Still, the hovering airship and the horrid Leviathan assaulted their bubble of safety. Reapers hammered on the outside; cracks coursed along the edges. Molly saw Cindra's team vault through an open window, slashing and cutting through Reapers as they ran, searchlights trained on them like bullseyes.

"This sphere isn't going to last, dearie. Any ideas about getting out of here? What about your friends there?"

The bubble strained under the firepower, chunks broke from the outside and fissures branched like spider webs over the surface. Jacinthe held Molly's hand as they huddled beneath it. The shield flickered between colors like lightning, blue and red and purple, as it absorbed the beating.

"Time to go!" Jacinthe cried.

Then like a punch in the stomach, Molly saw Kassandra again. The wicked woman smiled broadly as she held a figure in her metallic hand.

"Cinnamon! No! How did...?" Molly howled.

Kassandra tossed her into the airship elevator, stepped in, and shot upwards.

"Cinnamon? You mean *my Edith*? They have her?" Jacinthe shouted.

Even as the airship pulled away to the north, the Leviathan increased its onslaught. The city burned around them as the train bom-

barded again and again, breaking pieces of the bubble with each blast. The ghostly conductor blew the train whistle, a deathly knell of a thousand screams rushed over Molly, assaulting her heart.

Drastic measures, hun. It's time.

Birch's words bit Molly's ear even as a different piercing whistle ignited behind them.

Birch? How did you...?

The sounds of chugging wheelsets filled the air, drowning out the snarls and explosions. Birch laid into the whistle even harder, setting the throttle wide open.

No, Birch, don't!

Her heart sinking to her knees, Molly watched as Birch's beloved train roared down the tracks, racing, slamming headlong into the Leviathan. The boiler erupted, blasting a ball of fire high into the night sky. The locomotives folded into each other, train cars whipped off the tracks, sliding into buildings and into the courtyard. Grommets locked inside the cars burned, chattering and screaming in pain.

No, Birch...no...

Another explosion rang out, melting the snow, launching a train car directly at the state house. The stockcar burst through the columns and smashed the walls. The roof collapsed down upon it.

"Now, Molly, it's now or never!" Jacinthe shot.

The sphere melted and the pair sprinted into the trees. Cindra and Sunny hurried in from the north, gasping and out of breath; tear stains flushed their faces. They collapsed on the ground, sobbing.

"Are you okay, Cindra?" Molly rushed to her side.

"Cinnamon! They took her!" Cindra mourned. "And what we saw in that building..."

"I know. We saw Kassandra take her. We'll get her back, don't you worry!" Molly said.

"Molly, we have to talk..."

"I know what it is you saw in that mansion," Jacinthe said. "I've seen it, too."

Everyone looked at her, framed against the burning city.

"Is *this* the lady we came to rescue?" Cindra sneered. "Was it worth losing Cinnamon?"

"That's my sister you're talking about...Cindra, I presume?"

The two faced each other, panting clouds of smoke into the air.

Sunny stood between them and gritted her teeth to concrete. "Things are worse than we thought, Molly. Cinnamon's gone, but that mansion..."

"It was Weech's place," Jacinthe broke in.

"Well, that explains it. Look, Molly, it was a lush place, golden trim and everything; full of cages and bodies right beside parties and decorations," Sunny panted.

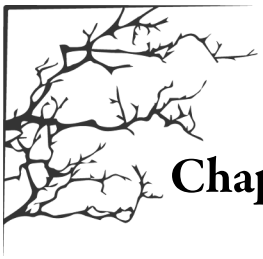
"It was just like his dungeons in Undertow. Remember them? Only here, he sold women and children at his parties," Jacinthe coughed. "He sold them like cattle."

The four of them gawked at each other in stunned silence, backing away from the city. The rest of Molly's team greeted them from the shadow of a towering oak, exchanging hugs and pats on the back. They all stared at the inferno behind them.

"Jacinthe lady! I'm so happy to see you!" Sasha shouted, hugging her with all of his tentacles.

"Good to see you, too, little rascal," she said, forcing a smile as she rustled his hair. "But we need to leave! It's not safe. They won't let this death camp go that easily."

As Molly turned to vanish with her friends, she glanced back. Birch stood in the shadowy trees, smiling as he held Poppy, squirming and happy, in his arms. She took a breath to say something, but he put his finger to his lips and wandered into the night.



Chapter 22: The Harvest Begins

Kaine. Talk to me.

...

Kaine, I know you're listening.

...

Coward.

Why would I possibly want to talk to you again, dear Molly? Our business is said and done. You refused my offer, and now a whole new world awaits me.

Have you seen your creations? Have you seen what horrors are being done in your name?

That doesn't concern me. My work must be finished, even if I'm forced to use these trifling creatures.

So, the ends justify the means with you?

Always.

What about you, then? How you treated my Jacinthe? How you stole her sister from us?

Another means to an end. You saw the passionflower in the mother pod, did you not? This one holds the same power as her sister. Your rescue accomplished nothing.

Feels more like you're losing control. How many cities have you lost so far?

This world is about to change forever, and there's nothing you can do to stop it.

In other words, your empire is failing. People are turning against you.

Humans are irrelevant. Don't you understand that yet? The resources they consume are better used for my greater purpose.

And what is that purpose?

I deserve to be celebrated. I crave worship. I am entitled to glory.

You've lost your mind! You're truly the worst dictator I've ever heard of.

Frenzied breathing filled Molly's mind.

YOU'LL NEVER BE RID OF ME, WITCH. I'LL NEVER LEAVE YOU BE. NEVER!

With mischief on her lips, Molly severed the mental connection.



THE DEATH CAMP BURNED high into the night sky as Molly and her friends huddled together in an abandoned building on the other side of the city. Computer equipment and broken furniture adorned their hiding place.

"What do we do next? Where do we go?" Jasper whispered, ever the cautious one.

"We need to head north, right now, as soon as possible," Jacinthe insisted.

"North?" Cindra asked.

"You saw the airship. You know they took my Edith. That was supposed to be me up there, but now my sister is in grave danger. All of us are."

"Okay, I'm confused, and I don't like it," Cindra rattled. "Who the hell is Edith and where is Cinnamon?"

Molly and Jacinthe looked at each other in hushed understanding.

"And since when did you have Molly's...abilities, Jacinthe? What's going on?" Sunny demanded.

"Look, you didn't see what happened inside the portal, the one in the mother pod. Things...happened," Jacinthe said.

"And?" Sunny said.

"Maybe ask Molly?"

Everyone looked at Molly as she anxiously pulled her red hair.

"I don't know what I did."

"Yes, you do. Your chest wound healed. Something inside of you became whole. Something that..."

Jacinthe stopped as tears welled in her eyes and a blue flame flickered in her palms. Molly rubbed her back and the flames disappeared.

"Something about Molly's final touch transferred her deepest powers to me. I...I can't control it fully. But it's there. It brought me back to life!"

"And this Edith?" Cindra tapped her spear impatiently.

"Edith...Cinnamon, they're the same. Edith is her real name."

"Now wait just one minute!!" Sunny stood up from her dusty chair.

Sasha clung to Novalee as the voices escalated. Novalee smiled and leaned her head on him.

"I've known her for years and..." Sunny continued.

"And you can't remember anything before the mother pod, right?" Jacinthe asked.

"Well, I..."

"You can't. Just say it. There's no shame in it. Cinnamon is Edith, my big sister. And I *swear* I'll slap the next person who uses that abomination of a name Weech gave her."

The group said nothing as they pondered Jacinthe's passion.

"See, Molly told you Absalom had plans for me. But now, I think he's going to use Edith instead. We have to get there as fast as possible. We have to stop this!"

"But how exactly can he use her?" Cindra said.

"I learned one thing while incarcerated: Absalom has no real power himself. That power lies inside people who resist, people who disbelieve, people who push back against him."

"Well, that's Cinna...I mean, that's definitely *Edith*," Sunny said.

"Exactly. It's not about individual power, not Molly's or mine or anyone's. It's about the human spark itself. That's what gives the Nebula Crystal and the Wanderstar real power. Absalom has never possessed the gumption necessary to make them work as they should. Not really."

"If that's true," Molly said, "why does he fight it? Why does he make up lies? If he knows he's wrong...why?"

I'M PLAYING CHESS AND YOU CAN'T KEEP UP!

Molly shook her head, wincing at Absalom's intrusion.

"You okay, Molly?" Jacinthe asked.

"Oh, yeah, just dealing with some...emotions. Please continue."

"Okay, well, I think Mika could give us a good answer to all this. But, for my two cents, some people just want their delusion to be true. They'll do anything, make up every lie, twist every fact to accomplish that. They feel safe there. They feel powerful. And they don't like their long-held beliefs challenged."

The group fell quiet again, contemplating.

"So, let me get this straight," Cindra said, slamming her spear end into the floor, "you want to take a tiny group to Absalom's Keep and save your sister who doesn't even remember you?"

"Yes, that's what I want to do," Jacinthe said.

"Seriously? We would need an entire army to lay siege to that place!"

"Well, if we had some time to plan..."

"I mean, we have friends on the radio. Lots of them. More than any of you even know!" Sasha said, brightening up. "We could ask them!"

"Jasper, is that true?" Cindra said.

"Yeah, I guess. Maybe a few hundred people, and that depends on them agreeing to do this. But they have friends, I don't even know how many. Molly, do you think that's enough?"

Molly barely noticed the question as she chewed her lip.

"I...I have a promise to keep."

"To who?" Cindra demanded. "Not another one of your silly side quests..."

"It's the Afflicted, isn't it?" Jacinthe said, putting her hand on Molly's shoulder. "I know you've been thinking about them constantly."

Can she read my mind now, too?

"Yes, our friends in Norfolk...Aramis and the Afflicted, they call themselves. We're so close, right? I can almost feel their suffering from here. I promised healing once I learned how, and that's exactly what I'm going to do."

"But *Edith*..." Jacinthe trailed off.

"This is *for* Edith. We will need Aramis' help if we want even the slightest chance at winning this. And my heart can't focus until I've kept this promise. Just...just trust me, okay?"

Cindra sighed. The rest of the group considered. But Jacinthe believed.

"Okay, dearie. We'll do it your way. Just remember you have other promises to keep, too."

WON'T BE ENOUGH, BITCH. THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO!

Get out of my head, buffoon!



AN HOUR PASSED AND Molly found herself in the back of a rusty Ford Econoline van, big enough for everyone to fit, and then some. Jacinthe had led them to where the grommets kept their supply vehi-

cles; she even filled the tank with petrol from their fuel depot while the flames burned in the distance.

"I imagine if we take 64 east, we'll hit Norfolk in what? Two hours?" Jacinthe said to Jasper as he drove. "Shouldn't take long."

"This little detour better work," Cindra said from the front passenger seat.

"Don't worry. It will," Molly assured her.

The springs on the van creaked as they drove east along the potholed expressway. Jasper took his time and the rest tried to get some sleep.

"Is this what it's like, dearie?" Jacinthe whispered above Sunny's snoring.

"What do you mean?"

"It's like...the deepest fire...down in the furthest part of my heart. It's a raging furnace that won't die out. It's like...clarity of mind and purpose for the first time in my life."

"You mean the blue flame? It takes some time to get used to it, believe me."

"I feel like I'm going to melt any second. I've never felt...*so much*. I...I don't know if I can handle this. I'm used to black and white facts. I like theories and methods and models. You saw my experiments, right? I remember..."

"Well, one thing about you hasn't changed a bit," Molly beamed.

"I did it again, didn't I? Where was I?"

"You like theories and facts."

"Oh, yes, I like science and falsifiable realities, but this power inside me is a mystery. My brain doesn't know how to use it or why it's here. One moment I'm seething with anger, and the next I'm rushing with compassion like a waterfall. But my heart...it tells me exactly what this power desires."

"And what's that?"

"To change the world. We can remake this place together. I'm not sure it was ever one person's game. It's going to take you and me...and so many more. It'll take countless hearts. But when it happens, it will be beautiful."

They huddled together for fifteen minutes, content to watch darkness slip by the windows.

"I think you're right, Jacinthe," Molly said at last. "Maybe that's why I never felt like...like a hero. It's not just about me. Or you. It's about everyone. I think..."

Molly seized hard suddenly, screaming out in the night. Jasper swerved at the surprise.

"What's happening, Jacinthe? What's wrong with her?" he shouted.

Jacinthe held Molly close. "Hey, dearie, what's going on in there?"

Molly shivered and crumpled into a ball. Deep inside her chest, deep in her innermost being, a firebrand seared her heart.

"Something...something just happened. It's like...it's squeezing every organ in my body. I can feel...darkness...running downing my arms, into my fingers."

"What is it?" Jacinthe asked, panicking.

"It feels like the sadness of the whole world. All at once. Like every human heart crying out!"

"Wait now, what's this?" Cindra demanded upfront.

Peering through the cracked windshield, Molly saw the glint of eyes in the headlights. Thousands of people stumbled and crawled along the roadway. Herding in the same direction, they walked like zombies towards the northern horizon.

"What's going on?" Sunny shouted.

"Do you think it's Absalom's machine?" Jacinthe said what everyone else was thinking. "Do you think my poor Edith is already strapped to his device?"

"I...I hope not," Molly stammered. "But their eyes...their eyes are so dead."

Even as the sun rose into the winter chill, they watched thousands of people trudging mindlessly across the road, climbing through fields and rivers, staggering in front of the van as Jasper desperately tried to steer his way through them. They were a flock, a hypnotized multitude, a mass migration of souls.

"So many of them. How..." Jasper lost his train of thought.

"It has to be the Thresher. It has to be," Cindra said.

"And we weren't ready," Jasper shot back.

They followed the stream of people to its source. The deadeyes roamed together from a small city Molly could see ahead of them.

"The sign said it's called Newport News," Cindra announced.

"Then we're getting close," Jacinthe said. "The bridge-tunnel should only be a couple minutes more. Once we're through, we'll be back in Norfolk and Molly can keep her promise."

"Stephen and Helga's home?" Molly asked, flashbacks of a slimy creature wedged into a tunnel spotted her mind.

"Yes, indeed, dearie. I sort of miss them, you know?"

The deadeyes wandered, cattle goaded by some unseen prod. Molly watched as they tripped over fences, tore great wounds in their skin, walked ever onwards bleeding and disfigured. They stumbled between buildings and along sidewalks. They rubbed at the scales that grew on their eyes. Forward and north, they walked, summoned by some fell ritual.

SEE MY CREATIONS? SEE MY WORDLESS WARRIORS, MY UNQUESTIONING ARMY?

"Then it's started," Molly whispered.

"What has?" Jacinthe squeaked.

"The Great Harvest has begun."



Chapter 23: Dead Eyes

The Econoline groaned as they approached the tunnel. The long dark of the underground lay before them, yawning like an infinite abyss. Jasper stopped the van, letting it idle and squeak as he reconsidered entering the shadowy lair.

"Are we going in or not?" Cindra said.

"Um, yes, we are. I just...a bad feeling just hit me."

Molly squinted down the road to the east. The sky betrayed the first glimmers of dawn, casting a shadow across the tunnel entrance. Two deadeyes wandered up and out of its unfeeling darkness. They ignored the van completely, trudging steadily northwest on their hopeless mission.

"You think it's safe?" Jasper asked no one in particular.

"It looks scary in there, I dunno," Sasha piped up.

"I mean, we can always turn around," Sunny started, brushing back her short hair. "My Cinna...Edith...is the other way."

"No!" Molly yelped. "We need to do this. I need to keep my promise. We'll be safe. I can feel it."

Jasper nodded and eased on the gas softly. The six-cylinder complained as the belt whined and pulleys wobbled. Everyone held their collective breath as the van passed under the roof of the unknown.

The tunnel glowed green from the static lights that ran on either side of the ceiling. Coasting cautiously downhill, Jasper's confidence rose and he opened the throttled wider. Faster they sped, the tunnel alight and stagnant.

"Look, more dead-eyed people!" Sasha whimpered.

Twelve deadeyes stumbled up the hill towards them, their eyes shining red in the van's headlights. Another five walked by them, then seven more. The deeper they drove into the tunnel, the more deadeyes appeared.

"I...I have a very bad feeling about this," Cindra said, showing her first sign of fear.

"No, it'll be okay. You'll see," Molly assured.

Within minutes, the lost souls completely congested the tunnel. They clamored and bumped into one another, unaware of who they were or where they were going. Unthinking, they followed their master's instructions: mindless, apathetic beasts; rotting brains feasting on vacuous thoughts.

A deadeye's fingers scratched across the side glass. Another walked into the passenger door with a thump, falling to the ground in a heap.

"Wait, Jasper...I don't know..." Jacinthe whispered into the hushed silence of the van interior.

Another deadeye turned its eyes directly towards the windshield, fixed like a deer in the headlights. Jasper slammed on the brakes, coming to a complete stop in the crowded space.

WATCH THIS, WITCH!

Molly shuddered at Absalom's voice, then seized backwards against the seat as another shot of unnatural electricity shot up her spine.

"Kaine...he...just did something..." she whimpered.

All as one, the deadeyes snapped their faces into the headlights. Thousands of them stared at the van, baring their teeth like fangs, scowling and hissing.

Gooseflesh rippled down Molly's arms.

"Okay, um, something's definitely different!" Jasper yelled a little too loudly.

For a moment, the world fell into surreal balance: the deadeyes outside staring in, and the friends inside staring out. They met the horde's gaze and all was quiet. Molly studied their leathery faces, the way their

veins webbed to the surface, the open wounds that split the skin. One deadeye woman's body was frozen in howling pain, her fingers arched in rigor mortis.

Are they still people on the inside?

"Go, Jasper! What are you waiting for!" Cindra broke the silence.

Before her words hit, the deadeyes rushed forward, surging like rabid wolves, climbing the van, drowning it with flesh and fury. They bashed the glass as Sasha screamed, pulled at the windows, breaking fingernails in bloody trails. Within seconds, the Ford was overrun by the flood.

"Hit the gas, man! What's your problem?" Cindra roared again.

"No!" Molly shouted. "These are people, right? What if..."

"I don't give two shits!"

Cindra jammed Jasper's leg into the gas pedal and the van squealed to life, spinning the back tires. The smell of burnt gear oil filled the cabin as the van smashed into the dead-eyed horde like a cannonball, crushing skulls and flattening chests.

"No, no, Jasper!" Molly screamed.

With each battered body, Molly's heart hurt, tore, bled.

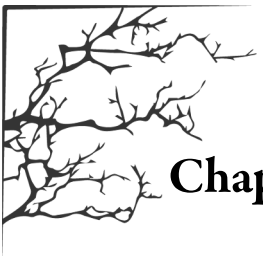
WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR VIRTUE, GIRL? I THOUGHT YOU WERE THE HERO?

They crashed through the crowd, maiming and killing hundreds of deadeyes. The van's hood ran with blood as they bounced and hammered their way into the ravine and up the other side. The horde of deadeyes continued unabated as they fought their way uphill, battering the Ford's metal body into a feast of dents and dings.

Jacinthe held Molly close through it all; Molly could see the agony on Jacinthe's face with each life lost.

She can feel their pain, too, can't she?

The Ford finally cleared the crowd and exploded out the east end of the tunnel, catching air as it flew into the coming sunrise.



Chapter 24: The Healing

The sun blazed on the eastern horizon as they sped into Norfolk. Molly could feel the shuddering chill in everyone's heart as the tunnel disappeared behind them. She looked at her feet to avoid the scowling glare from Cindra in the front passenger seat.

"It's so beautiful outside!" Sasha said, hoping to break the ice.

Molly peered out the window. All around them, a warm snap thawed the world like springtime, the hoar frost melting and the ice cracking. Jasper pulled through the slushy streets at Molly's direction, parking the van amid the ruin and wreckage of the grey city, the scent of sickness hovering upon the air like pollen.

Molly leapt from the van and cried, "Aramis! Aramis, where are you?"

Only the silence of the tomb replied.

"Where are they, Jacinthe? Where are all the women and children?"

Jacinthe pursed her lips. "I don't know, dearie. It's been months since we last saw them..."

"No! They're still here! I know it!"

Molly ran to the nearest house and threw open the door. She called for them. She searched. Slowly, but surely, panic settled upon her mind.

"They can't be gone, Jacinthe. I won't believe it!"

Then on the red horizon, over the city towards the sea, a cluster of shadows appeared.

"We've got company!" Cindra yelled, running up with a spear in hand.

The shapes scuttled closer, looming large as they covered Molly in shadow. Soon, she could make out the gorgeous forms of whales swimming through the sunny skies, Darius perched on the back of Bessy, who had grown into a glorious matriarch.

But what Molly noticed most was Darius' unearthly blue luster, like the radiance of the sea itself.

"It's Darius! Oh, what a sight for sore eyes!" Molly shouted.

But Cindra did not hear her. She was already sprinting down the road, weapons ready, as the whales landed in the city. Cindra reeled back to deliver a mighty thrust, then stopped short, choking hard.

"*Matthew*? Is that you?"

Matthew? Who is...

"Oh my God, Matthew, it *is* you! Where have you been? The whole family is sick with worry over you."

Darius said nothing as he dismounted and walked slowly up to Cindra's towering form.

"Nothing? You have nothing to say to me?" she scolded.

Darius only held out his arms, welcoming her. They embraced, Cindra's spear falling to the ground, forgotten.

After three minutes, Darius finally spoke. "It's good to see you, sis."

"Why did you leave, Matt? Why..."

"I prefer Darius now."

"Oh, don't be silly."

"It's not silly."

"But you've always been Matthew to me..."

Darius snorted. "Like *Cindra Rainbolt* is your real name? Rules for me but not for you?"

Cindra shut her mouth, blushing.

"Look, I...I've changed, Cindra. I'm choosing my own path now, making my own story. My name is Darius. Please respect it."

Cindra stood back. Molly felt the confusion inside of her as she took in the radiant silhouette of this new man before her. His hair was

jet black and messy as ever. His striped shirt was stained and covered with barnacles. The whisper of a beard grew on his chin.

"Darius? Okay. I can do that. You've grown up, little brother."

Cindra wept hard into his shoulder as they hugged once again.

"I hate to break this up, Darius," Molly said. "But where is everyone? Where is Aramis?"

Darius nodded and waved for her to follow. Molly's whole team walked sullenly towards the general hospital by the river. As they approached the door, Darius held up his hand.

"You aren't going to like what you find, Molly. They aren't well."

"That's exactly why I'm here."

Motioning for everyone to stay put, she entered the foreboding structure. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she saw hundreds of people, beds lining the hallways. She saw bodies rotting, limbs hanging uselessly, straining the muscles and fraying the cartilage.

Oh my God, I can't...

Deeper she plunged into the grim depths of the hospital, passing by children coughing as their skin cracked open, boils running with discharge. She saw sickly nurses striving to care for the doomed patients, their own bodies breaking under the stress of the dark pestilence. One of them motioned her towards a room at the end of the first-floor hall.

As she entered, she saw Aramis lying across three beds, his massive form bleeding from every orifice. He raised his head feebly.

"You...you came back, pink. No one ever comes back."

"Sshh, Aramis, I'm here to keep my promise. Rest."

Molly grabbed his muscular forearm, digging her fingers into the contusions. She closed her eyes to focus. In the depths of her mind, an ancient melody emerged, and she hummed a tune from ages past, a song of the stars. Her body shook and shivered. Sweat poured from her forehead.

YOU DON'T HAVE THAT KIND OF POWER. YOU ARE NOTHING.

Leave, Kaine, I don't have time for your poisonous words.

And as she dug deeply within herself, her body glowed a celestial hue. The room flushed purple as Aramis was bathed in the light. Beneath her fingertips, his skin healed. His wounds dried up. His breathing increased. His heart strengthened. As the color surged through his broken body, Aramis was stitched back together, every sinew, every vein.

And then, Aramis laughed; not just a chuckle, but a rolling, mountainous laugh that only large men with hairy chests can muster. He jumped up from the bed, good as new.

"I can't believe it, Molly! I can't believe this!" he shouted as he scooped her up in his arms. Her feet left the ground as he hugged her close. "Thank you, thank you so much, a thousand times *thank you*!"

And in that moment, Molly saw a glint of blue liquid fire swell in his eyes.

Could it be...?

"Now, let's heal the rest of your people," she said.

Molly spent hours in the hospital. She ran from room to room, healing women who wept as their bodies mended. She healed children, who gifted her with toothy smiles in return. She healed the elderly and the young; she healed mighty soldiers and quiet families. And with each healing, the blue glow spread. Every single one of them burned with the ancient fire.

It's true. It's not just me...it's...everyone!

The people were no longer the Afflicted. They were full of life now, and they emerged from the hospital singing and dancing, celebrating and offering thanks. The children laughed and played, skipped and ran. The sounds of happy youth filled the city. Their mothers wept on their knees at the sight of them.

One mother grasped Molly's hand as she walked back outside. "You...you gave me back my little boy, my Charlie. Look at him play!"

She sobbed into Molly's chest.

"I had forgotten the sounds of children playing. All the good things. We had no hope."

Molly hugged her close and continued into the sunlight. Her friends wept together at the sight of the healed. She felt Sunny's thoughts turn to Edith, wondering where her love might be. Molly sensed Jacinthe's thoughts turn towards Edith, too, anxiously waiting to save her. Molly felt Cindra's rising emotions as she marveled at Darius and his growth into a man. She sensed the spread of the blue flame as it jumped from person to person, erupting within the irises of all the healed.

They're changed. But it wasn't me. It was something else, something not of this world.

Her eyes rested on Jasper, Novalee, and Sasha as they laughed and cried with the children at play. Molly perceived Jasper's flickering, nervous heart as it gave way to confidence; could feel the overflow of love inside his soul.

Or...maybe...maybe it's the Earthliest thing that could ever be...

Jasper stood up suddenly and took Sasha by the hands.

"No more waiting! Sasha, can I ask you a question?"

Sasha nodded, tears already welling in his eyes.

"Seeing these kids and, I don't know, how close we've become over the last few months—I've had such a great time with you, teaching you things. But I think you taught *me* even more."

"I did?"

"You sure did. And I wondered, I couldn't help but think..."

"Just say it, Jasper!" Novalee laughed, holding Jasper's arm in hers.

"Can I be your father? I mean...it would be my greatest honor if you'd let me be your father, if you'd let me adopt you..."

"Yes!" Sasha cried, his tears splashing onto Jasper's shirt. "I would love that more than anything!"

The crowd clapped their hands and cheered as Jasper and Sasha embraced.

"And can I be your mother?" Novalee spoke up, holding them both.

"Wait," Jasper said, wiping tears from his face, "are you saying...?"

"I'm saying I found my man. I'm ready to put the past to rest. To start new. I want to be your family, and I want you both to be mine."

Jasper stifled his surprise.

"I mean, you guys are my family already, but...can we make it official?" Novalee grinned.

And as the three embraced, blue liquid fire hovered like haloes above their heads.

It's spreading. Nothing...nothing can stop it.

A large hand landed on Molly's shoulder as Aramis sensed her thoughts.

"It's a beautiful sight, Molly. You've healed us, you've helped them, but I can't help but feel like maybe *you're* the one feeling saved right now."

"You have no idea how true that is."

They watched in silence for a spell before he dared speak again.

"So, what will you do now?"

"The only thing I can do. I have a friend who's being held captive by Absalom. He's using her to power a new machine that..."

"That's robbing people of their souls? I felt it happen, Molly, like a great black hole opening up in the earth."

Molly nodded furiously. "Yes, I felt it and saw the people, thousands of them, walking north. They even attacked us in the tunnel! His machine is calling them to his service, and I have to stop it."

"And how will you do that?"

"I'm going to take the Nebula Crystal from around his slimy neck and claim the final shard of the Wanderstar. And once I have them, I *will* remake this world. This healing? This fire? I think it's only a taste of what the world can truly be."

LIKE HELL YOU ARE!

"Well, my people are with you all the way. Radio us the plans and we will be there. But, if I may, can I offer a thought about all this?"

"Yes, of course."

"All this time, in watching my people succumb to the plague, I've learned one thing."

"What's that?"

"No crystals are going to change the world. It's small acts that do it: renewing people when they need it most, being a tree of life to others, righting wrongs. See, Molly, you aren't fighting with weapons anymore. Or, rather, your weapon is *change*; it's color, it's hope for the future. Like the seasons of this world, you can banish the winter from people's hearts. They've had enough of war and strife. You can bring them goodwill for all people, pure and simple. And I know that isn't easy. I can see the battle in your heart even now."

"Yes...I know it's probably plastered on my face. It's so difficult to meet violence with, I don't know, love? I've tried to advocate for nonviolence in my team, but violence seems to solve things more quickly, you know?"

Aramis laughed. "I do know that. And it did nothing for me. No matter how much we killed and maimed, we were still sick and dying."

"Hm, that's an interesting way to look at it..."

"And Molly...if you really want to save the world, if you want to give people back their spark, it's going to...*it's going to cost you*. I can feel it."



Chapter 25: Cinders in the Night

Molly cracked an egg on the edge of the countertop. Oil, onions, mushrooms, and two thick slices of venison sizzled on the stove as she plopped four eggs into a pan.

"Oh, dammit, another piece of shell in there..."

A delicate meow almost scared the wits out of her as she fished out the shell fragment.

"God, Doom, do you always have to appear unannounced like that? Your momma is going to be here soon, and I promised breakfast."

Doom purred like an engine as she rubbed the legs of the kitchen table.

"Oh...*you*. I can never stay mad."

She ran to the beeping coffee machine just as a knock came at the door.

"Come in, Mika! Food's almost ready!"

Mika deftly opened the door and wheeled into Molly's apartment, sniffing the air.

"Margie taught you well, it seems. Smells delicious!" she said, as Doom jumped onto her lap.

"Yeah, well, I missed you, and I wanted to be the one to feed *you* for a change. It's too bad we have so little time before assembly, though. I feel like I could talk to you for days."

"Oh, there'll be time for that...someday."

Molly plated two heaping helpings onto flowery China plates and served it to Mika with a hot cup of coffee and some crusty bread. She

sat down across from her and dug into her food. They ate in silence for a few minutes, each not sure where to begin.

"This venison is cooked so well..."

"I'm scared, Mika."

NOT SCARED ENOUGH!

Molly's face twisted at Absalom's taunt.

Mika took a moment to swallow her food as she studied Molly's compromised countenance.

"Can I ask you a question? Why don't you wear that old thing anymore?" she said, pointing to Papaw's vest hanging in the corner. "Eddie loved that thing."

"Wha? I...I left that at Spinemore..."

"I know. I brought it here. Why did you leave it there in the first place?"

"I...I don't know. It feels like, somehow, I was wearing it like a mask. It wasn't *me*. Almost like it served its purpose and now I don't...I just don't need it."

Mika munched on a mushroom, eyes narrowing.

"Describe it to me."

"Describe it?" Molly said, walking over to the weathered battle vest. "I mean, some of the patches are missing, there's half a dozen holes in it, the leather's cracked, and I'm pretty sure these stains are blood."

"Seems to me that vest tells more of a story about you than it does about your grandfather."

"What's your point? You want me to wear it again?"

Mika took a big gulp of coffee and let out a satisfied sigh.

"No, Moonflower, I don't care if you wear it. You said you're scared...but look at that thing! You've been through hell and back. Eddie would be incredibly proud of the woman you've become. Your Mother, bless her soul, would be proud, too."

YOUR MOTHER WAS NOT PROUD OF YOU. YOUR FATHER NEVER LOVED YOU.

Molly shook Kaine's voice from her head and plopped down on the chair, fighting the tears stinging her eyes.

"Yeah, well, neither of them is here. How's that fair?"

"Fair? Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean it's shitty that Papaw and Mom died, but..."

Molly took another bite of venison, even though she'd lost her appetite.

"Go on, honey, say it."

"My father is still alive out there, even after all the harm he's done to me, to this place. Something happened to his heart, I could feel it, but...where is he now?"

Mika rolled her chair to Molly's side of the table and took her hand.

"Honeybee, your mother died because her spirit was ready. She finished her work; she reached her zenith and her positive energy spread to the stars. She became one with the universe for you, for herself, for all. Your father? He's been a net negative on the universe, I think. He still has much to answer for."

"I don't get it. What do you mean?"

"We're all waves, Molly. We are energy and light whirling within more energy and light. We are the very universe itself, the music between the spaces, the beginning and end. Yes, you and me, *that's who we are*. That's who everyone who's ever existed is, too."

Molly's ears perked. "Wait, what did you say? *Music*?"

"Is that familiar?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing...just something from a dream I had, I guess."

"That's good, my dear. You see, we all have music inside of us. Sometimes we even inherit it. Different genres, yes. Different complexities, tempos, and notes. But music just the same. And we are all energy, but some people have positive, life-giving energy, and some do not. Some help build a new future every day, a productive and equitable one, and some do not. All are bent towards the Good, or they are bent away from it. Everyone's music affects the world one way or the other."

"And you think Mom and Papaw added goodness to the universe?"

"Indeed, I do. You inherited music from them both. But your father, and others, only take away from this place. They only use, destroy, tear down. They possess an eternal desire to consume, but they never give anything in return."

"That reminds me of something Birch told me..."

"Oh, yes, Birch is wiser than he looks. What did the old bird say?"

"When we were attacked in the forest by the deer creature...oh, what did he call it?"

"A wendigo."

"Yes, a wendigo. Birch told me the wendigo is pure insatiable hunger, ruin, famine, and corruption. It never feels full."

"Well, Moonchild, where do you think such a creature gets its power? It feeds off the people who are never satisfied, who never create anything, who never feed others."

"But...which one am I? Am I my father or my mother? Am I good for the universe? Can people change their energy?"

Mika threw back her head and laughed heartily as she rolled back to her side of the table. Doom looked up from her lap, annoyed.

"This is what scares you? Look, why do you think your body heals so? You are the very definition of someone who gives and creates, expecting nothing in return. The enemy cannot harm you because you're connected to yourself, to the world, to reality itself. Some call it the I AM, some call it the Great Spirit, some label it with scientific words and theories. But the details don't matter because the truth is, whatever it is, it's *you*. And I suspect you know *yourself* better than you think. And, Molly, you don't have to be anything more than just little ol' *you*."

Molly twisted her eyebrows. "If that's the case, why won't you let me heal your legs?"

"Now, look here, child, you can't force healing on someone who doesn't want it. These withered legs of mine have become part of who

I am. I like the reminder of past sins, past triumphs. I like to remember where I've been, so you leave old Mika alone, you hear?"

Molly smiled at the pretend scolding.

"And can people change?" Mika continued. "I believe they can, indeed. Your Papaw changed his music, that's for sure. Your father, from what you've told me, seems like he's changing already. Who knows what he may accomplish! Who knows if he will change the balance of his energy from negative to positive. Anything's possible."

They both took sips of their coffee as they looked into each other's eyes.

"Mika? Wha....what do you really think will happen when I join the shards?"

"I honestly don't know, Molly. It's never been done. All I know is we each have to remake the world in our own way. The kicker is that no one can do it alone, either. We have to contribute to the fullness of all things in our own time, our own place, our own means. But the most important thing is knowing yourself, being proud of who you are in connection with everything else."

Molly rose and Mika held out her hands for another hug. Molly squeezed Mika close as Doom squirmed between them.

"Do you know who you are, dear Moonflower?"

Molly looked at her hands, glanced at Papaw's vest in the corner, beheld Mika's loving face.

"I...I am *Molly Shadowen*, the one and only."

"You're a strong woman. Let's go to assembly and let them know it."



THE BRICK FACTORY TEEMED with life as Jacinthe spoke over the crowd.

"I'm just sayin' we need to get a move on it! It's been four days since we arrived back to Wing's Reach. My sister is suffering somewhere, prisoner to Kaine himself. I need your help to make this happen. We can't just leave her!"

Molly noted with a hidden grin the new set of glasses perched on Jacinthe's nose.

"It's one woman, someone we didn't even know that well," a voice said. "Should we risk it all for one person?"

"Now, you and I have both seen the deadeyes wandering the fields outside town," Jacinthe shot back. "Our team spent an entire day fighting through hordes of them just to get back here. This isn't just about one woman. This is about the whole world whether we like it or not!"

"We're safe here for the time being, though, right?" another person said. "What does Mast think? That's what I wanna know."

Brother Mast took the opening and walked quickly to the podium.

"Brothers and sisters, it doesn't really matter what I think. I've been wrong, so wrong, in the past."

He winked at Molly for good measure.

"But isn't this what it's all about? Isn't this the opportunity we've been craving for so many months? Absalom Kaine, tyrant and murderer, is shut fast in his fortress. Don't we have him right where we want him?"

Jasper stood up, his hand in the air. "Friends, Brother Mast is right! My radio has been lighting up non-stop for days. The world heard about what Molly did for the Afflicted in Norfolk. The news is spreading like wildfire! More and more cities are rebelling. Even New York!"

"I don't believe it!" Cindra called out, smiling. "That city is stubborn as hell!"

"Well, believe it! With the current sentiment moving against Kaine, we will have ample support if we move on the Keep!"

"Thank you, Jasper," Brother Mast resumed. "So, what we really need is a word from Molly herself, don't you think?"

Molly blushed and shook her head. Mika smacked her leg playfully.

"We just talked about this!" she whispered.

Molly stood up, butterflies consuming her stomach. She hated speaking to crowds. She hated crowds, period.

"Get on up here, dear lady," Brother Mast said with a wave. "This time around, whatever you're feeling is what we think is best, too."

The crowd pushed Molly forward until she caught Jacinthe's eye from across the room. With a marble jaw, she set her steps straight and approached the podium.

"You all know I don't love speaking in public. But...I...I just think if we have people on our side, as Jasper says, then we should go for it. Poor Edith is waiting for her sister, waiting for her Sunny. And this machine Absalom built? It's sweeping away anyone who won't push back. It's luring in the people who simply don't care one way or the other. And, unfortunately, there are thousands of people out there exactly like that."

Molly took a big gulp of the podium water glass.

"Do you know what that means? It means *you* think for yourselves. It means you can't be captivated, robbed, or controlled. No, you are strong. You didn't lose all your spark, thank goodness. That says something. I think Absalom is scared of us, he really is. He's losing his empire. And we can make damn sure it ends for good!"

YOUR RAGTAG BAND CANNOT STAND BEFORE MY THRESHER ARMY. I'M WARNING YOU, MOLLY. DON'T TRY IT.

Molly shook her head and smiled. "We can be a revolution! A new way of being!"

Cindra shot up. "And that involves more people dying needlessly? Look, if New Yorkers really are on our side now, they aren't going to play by your rules. And for the record," Cindra looked around at the audience, "that means almost letting us die in the bridge-tunnel, swarmed by these deadeyes. We wouldn't be here if it weren't for me!"

Molly and Cindra stared each other down.

"You want to do this, Cindra? We can do this. Right here. Right now."

"Great!" Cindra said a little too loudly. "What have you got to convince me of a different way?"

"Well," Molly said, sheepishly, "you did almost kill your own brother."

"She what?" Mika called out.

Cindra's face turned red with embarrassment as she glowered at Molly.

"Do you want to tell the story, or should I?" Molly asked.

"I will," Cindra replied, snapping like an alligator. She turned to face the crowd again, reading the expectant faces.

"Look, yes, I almost killed my brother, Matthew...er...Darius. When his whale pod came in for a landing, I didn't know who he was and I almost attacked him with my spear."

"And did you learn anything from that?" Molly asked, sarcastically. Mika gave her a quick scolding look.

Gritting her teeth in obvious pain, Cindra continued. "Yes...yes...I did. I should probably be more careful. That's all."

"So, you can see how my way can also save lives, right?"

"Yes, I guess so. But it's still not *my* way."

"But will you think about giving me another chance? Heaven knows I've truly failed, and you were right to point that out, Cindra. But for a few moments over the last couple weeks, I thought...I dunno...I thought we were connecting."

Molly left the stage and approached a wary Cindra face to face, holding out her hand. Mika smiled proudly from the back of the room.

"Can we start over? If we are going to remake this world, we have to work together."

Cindra hesitated, then took Molly's hand.

"Yes, I'm big enough to admit when I'm wrong. Can you promise to listen to me sometimes? Can we actually work together?"

Molly pondered and looked around the room. The crowd waited with bated breath, the tension rising.

"Yes, Cindra. I can."

Molly and Cindra shook hands as the crowd rose to their feet and clapped, cheering in the confident moment. Molly looked down the front seat row and saw Julia, the small girl who saved her from Weech. Julia smiled at her, admiration in her eyes.

"Follow my lead, Julia," Molly said, winking.

She held hands with Julia and Cindra, who then held Brother Mast's hand, who held another's, who held another's, and so on until the entire room held hands together. Burgundy fire rose from Molly's eyes as she faced the people, all of them connected, holding fast to each other.

"We can do this. With a little humility and cooperation, we can defeat Absalom Kaine, yes, but most of all, we can *change the world*. We are unified. Our eyes are open. Never forget...we are *powerful*!"

As the last word left Molly's mouth, Julia glowed blue, and like a rushing stream of water, the chain of people flowed into a blue haze, bright as midday. Molly could see Brother Mast, skin blue as the sky, along with Mika, Sunny, Jasper, Novalee, Sasha, and even Cindra.

All her friends, and the whole town, burned with the ancient healing fire.



Chapter 26: Pleiades

The vault of heaven hung forever frozen in nocturnal embrace as Molly found herself lying in the snow. She scooped a heap of the cold fluff and tossed it towards the stars. Her green eyes a piercing beacon, she spied seven points of light through the falling snowflakes: the seven sisters of Pleiades as they mourned and wept, locked within an eternal prison inside the great Taurus, the stamping and violent bull of the skies.

Oh, why do they cry?

Grasping her chest, she watched as the seven stars swirled together, holding hands in a heavenly dance. They twirled gracefully, haunted in their beautiful rotation. Faster they spun, agitating the mighty bull, spinning like a celestial top until they burst through Taurus' arched back, blasting to freedom in the wide universe.

They're...free. They can live at last.

In a blink, Molly was there with them. She flew with the seven stars as they surged from their prison towards the infinite horizon. Quicker they flew, dancing around Molly, humming and singing songs of deeper space. One ventured close to her, and immersed within the soft light of the star, Molly deciphered a face.

Mika? What are you doing here?

Mika smiled, a calming spell and an immortal ritual. The other stars moved closer, faces appearing within their mirror gaze. Novalee swept by overhead, energy pouring like comet trails behind her. Sunny and Edith twirled together nearby. Cindra shot by, submerged in roaring fire. Jacinthe's face appeared within the light of another star; she moved with calculated grace between the others.

They're all so...so different. But they are all dancing...together.

The final star faced Molly, keeping pace perfectly as she flew through galaxies and nebulas. Slowly, the star faded to a transparent purple, and a face appeared.

It was her own.

Me? I...I don't understand.

Who are you really, dear? Have you...have you ever wondered?

The old lady's voice sputtered and coughed from the void of space.

In an instant, all was black. When Molly opened her eyes, she hovered above the Milky Way again. It rotated gracefully, wondrously, a mystery at once hidden yet always in sight. The luminous beings laughed and played nearby, glancing off light beams and swirling in effervescence as they performed their cosmic rites.

"I...I guess I don't know who I am. Not yet. I can say the words, but..."

As if in response, the beautiful creatures surged together, flowing like an astral river. They swept over Molly, mending and weaving love and pure light into her skin. They flew away with her, taking her deeper and farther, down everlasting causeways, across the universe, into the outer rings, a billion light years from home.

*"*Where are we going*?"* Molly beamed happily.

You...will see...

Molly gasped in wonder. The mighty Milky Way was nothing but a dim spot now, and other swirling points joined it, galaxies connected through time and space as with an impossibly vast spiderweb, constructs and filaments adorning the space between the spaces.

"What is this? I don't know what I'm seeing."

The time...

The hoarse voice struggled, weaker with each moment.

The time is near, Molly.

"What time? What is near?"

Discover the music, Molly. Find it before it's too late.



Chapter 27: On the Cusp

"Molly, honey, are you listening to me or not?" Mika's voice snapped Molly out of the trance. "You can't just disappear on me in the middle of our conversation."

"What...I...what were we talking about again?"

Mika shifted her wheelchair in the open spot of the Ford Econoline. Trees and buildings zipped by outside as a winter rain fell, freezing in trails along the glass. Molly tuned out the sound of the van wheels splashing through slush as she tried to remember where she was.

"We're headed north, to the Keep, to confront Absalom himself. Don't you recall?"

"Oh, yeah, I guess my mind wandered..."

Squinting out the windows, she saw people trudging along roadways and stumbling through distant fields, thousands of deadeyes drifting towards their destination. The further north they traveled, the more deadeyes crowded the countryside, the highways, everything.

"Another dream, hm, Moonflower? Care to share this one?"

"I'm not sure I can begin to explain it."

"Fine by me, then. I just want you to know I'm going all the way to the Keep, face to face with Absalom Kaine, and there's nothing you do to stop me!"

"At least let me heal your legs," Molly said, suddenly lucid.

"I'm going to say this only one more time, Molly. If you mention my legs again, I'll turn you into a grommet, right on the spot!"

"But I...," Molly started.

Jasper interrupted, fist pumping the air. "Another caravan! All those weeks of monitoring the radio waves are paying off! That's what? Five groups with us already?"

"I told you our people are worth their salt," Cindra asserted from the front passenger seat. "You have no idea how many people out there want to fight back."

Molly looked behind and saw a crowd of trucks and vans loaded with people and supplies, heavy laden in the drab, rainy morning.

"More deadeyes, too, though!" she announced.

"Yeah, well, did you expect Absalom to make it easy for us? I've been dodging them all day. They're moving faster and breathing harder. I just hope they don't rush the van again," Jasper said.

MAYBE I SHOULD...OR MAYBE I'LL WHIP UP A DIFFERENT SURPRISE FOR YOU.

Molly whacked her forehead to banish Kaine's torturous sneer.

"So, we're really doing this? We're really going to march on the Keep?" Novalee asked. "I feel like we didn't give this any damn thought."

"You want to leave Edith to die? Do you want to let Absalom gather every deadeye in the country to his fortress? We have to act, and we have to act now," Jacinthe opined.

"What's the plan again?" Molly asked, her mind still foggy.

"We're meeting Aramis at Peace Bridge!" Jasper cackled.

"Calm down!" Novalee said, poking his back from the seat behind. Molly noted the smile of admiration on her face.

"Oh, alright, I'll try. But, yeah, we're meeting Aramis and his people, and we're both bringing as many fighters as we can round up. So far, the crowd is bigger than we expected!"

Molly grinned as a sense of calm settled on her heart.

"We can do this, guys! I know we can!"

"Oh, and there's one more thing," Jasper said. "Aramis is bringing a guest. He wouldn't say who."

"A guest?"

"A surprise."

A rock-hard thump erased the grin from Molly's face, jolting her into reality. A wave of deadeyes charged the caravan, bashing their bodies against the metal sides of the battered vehicles. The van swerved back and forth, smashing through walls of zombies, throwing deadeyes from the roof. Jasper pressed the gas to the floor as he sped through the cold rain.

"I'm trying to miss as many as I can, Molly, I promise!" he shouted as she held her chest and kept her mouth shut.

Gonna be a long trip if this keeps up.



THEY DROVE THROUGH the hordes for hours, finally passing into Buffalo. The city spread out on their right, Lake Erie coming to a point on their left. They flew down the expressway, signs bearing the number 190 shimmering in Molly's vision. The deadeyes roamed the city, scampering through an abandoned fort, chasing the caravan, now dozens of vehicles strong; their distant screams lingered like a haunting tide behind the travelers.

Then, without warning, the deadeyes stopped. Like birds before a storm, the screams went quiet and the mindless runners disappeared. The clamoring footsteps ceased. The wall of bodies vanished.

No one said a word for fear they would return. Huddled together, Molly holding Jacinthe's hand, they passed the headwaters of a foaming river that turned directly into their path. Soon, a green bridge loomed ahead in the fog. Peering out the windows, Molly saw unfamiliar faces as they approached within a menagerie of vehicles from all directions. With each new group, her heart swelled with hope.

"There it is! Peace Bridge! There's quite a gathering already!" Jasper said.

"Beautiful work of architecture, you know," Jacinthe said. "It's almost two kilometers long and over thirty meters high."

Oh, how I've missed her. Molly smiled.

"Thanks for the lesson," Sunny grouched. "How's that info going to help save Cinnamon..."

Catching Jacinthe's eye, she folded her arms. "I mean, *Edith*...I guess."

Jasper pulled the van into the throng of vehicles and people, soaking wet in the steaming rain.

"I...I don't see Aramis..." Molly said, searching.

"He'll be here, don't worry," Jasper whispered.

Molly faded away from the crowd as she saw regional leaders meet and shake hands, Jasper hugging people like he had known them for years. There was laughing and crying, people devising plans and readying supplies. Molly saw weapons that made her bite her bottom lip, from fearsome firearms all the way down to rakes and shovels. The crowd grew by the minute.

Do they even need me? What am I doing here? How is this going to remake the world?

The ground shuddered under Molly's feet as she searched her heart.

"What was that?" she asked, but no one heard her.

"I've been collecting ammo for years for just this moment," a burly, bald-headed man said to Jasper. "Do you know how valuable all this stuff is?"

Oh, c'mon...

"Are you in charge?" a small lady asked Cindra, who showed off her razor-sharp spears.

The ground rumbled again, shaking Molly's heart in her chest.

Am I the only one hearing this?

Molly covered her eyes from the rain, squinting towards Peace Bridge, wreathed in smog.

Did the bridge just move?

Swaying, twisting with clandestine energy, the bridge rushed upon Molly. It opened gaping jaws, yawning, ready to swallow her forever. The crowd's voices blurred into radio static, assaulting her senses. She held her heart and fought to control her breathing.

"You okay, dearie?" Jacinthe said with a gentle touch, walking up behind her with gear.

"Something's *here*," Molly coughed.

SURPRISE, WITCH!

As the roadway trembled harder than before, the bridge snaked and moved. Through the metal arches, a massive entity writhed, a hundred feet long and thick as a redwood tree. Piercing through the fog, a monstrous worm emerged, its face ghastly, its body green as spring leaves; six sharp legs near its head spread wide for the kill like a cobra hood.

"Watch out!" the burly man screamed, higher pitched than Molly expected.

Panic spread like fire, thousands of people moved in a chaotic throng of bodies and gear. The worm lunged off the bridge into the roadway, crushing poor souls and snatching bodies to eat. It crunched on their corpses, blood running down its segmented form.

"Quick, Molly, come with me!" Jacinthe said, turning to run.

"No! This is where I prove my worth."

"I don't think that's a great idea, dearie, not right now."

"Go! I've got this! Get Sasha and Mika to safety."

Jacinthe hesitated then nodded, wheeling Mika away with Sasha trailing behind her.

Molly stood in the road, set her jaw, and lower her gaze. The worm crashed through a horde of vehicles, throwing them into the air, tossing them aside into fiery plumes. Seeing Molly, it stopped abruptly and reared up on its lower body, stretching its spiny legs wide open.

"I see you, creep. I see you," Molly whispered.

"I see it, too," a voice said with a hand on her shoulder.

Cindra strode up beside her, spear in fist, determination in her eyes.

"I guess this is where we can test that working together thing, right?" she said.

The worm hissed, baring colossal fangs. It squirmed its body, cracking open in gooey trails, dividing its lower half into seven swirling tails, each bearing a spiked tip. And atop its hoary head bounced a single, massive lump, bright yellow and glistening with slime.

"Who dreamed you up, ugly?" Molly shouted.

In response, the worm shivered and pulsed, revealing pores running in lines down its body. The pits vaulted open, blasting tendrils wildly into the air around its trembling head. It shook its tendrils like tree branches in a tempest, taunting them.

"Let's do this!" Cindra yelled.

They charged the creature, which promptly flung clusters of tendrils yards behind them. Tentacles snatched people up, smashed them into jelly, blasting through abdomens, splitting victims in two. The worm ravaged everywhere at once, crushing vans and stealing souls.

"Keep it busy, Cindra!" Molly shouted as she sprinted towards the worm's midsection.

Cindra ran alongside it, hacking tendrils apart, severing its branches. She thrust a spearhead into one of the holes; blood poured out like muck. The worm contorted and screeched, searing its filthy stain on every heart. Cindra hacked and slashed, opening rivulets and wounds in its side, tearing its body apart piece by piece.

Nice job, Cindra! Molly thought as she ran headlong into danger.

Molly clambered up the creature's side, fighting tentacles and slipping on blood. The worm shuddered, trying to throw her from her perch, but her grip held as strongly as her willpower. Climbing little by little, she looked down to see Cindra cutting her way through the caterpillar's bulk.

If I can just get to that yellow bulb up top...

She surveyed the chaos below, wincing at the carnage. People lying in red puddles in the freezing rain, vans on fire pouring smoke over the sleeping city, crowds running for their lives. Precious few fighting back.

Just a few more feet...

Molly saddled herself atop the worm's hideous head as it shook. It squealed in anger as she held the node in her hands like a prize watermelon. It flopped and twisted, but Molly held fast.

You are not part of the coming world, you horrible thing.

Molly's eyes lit with purple fire, her ears smoked, her chest shimmered.

Argh, you cannot join the shards, Lightkeeper witch. You are not required to sacrifice yourself. Just let it be!

"You can talk, huh?"

LISTEN TO THE CREATURE, GIRL. IT SPEAKS WISDOM.

Molly smiled at the voices battling inside her brain, then smacked the side of her head to be rid of them.

That is my purpose, worm. My own purpose chosen by me, no one else. Yes, I am a Lightkeeper, and this world will be remade today and forever.

Focusing with all her power, Molly froze the worm solid. Concrete flowed from the yellow lump downwards, suspending the worm's writhing body, its deadly tendrils, all the way to its flicking tails. It hardened to stone, petrified evermore, a statue and a promise.

The crowd of battered people stood in sullen silence watching her triumph.

"Didn't I tell you?" Brother Mast shouted out, fist in the air. "Molly can save us!"

"Molly Shadowen? My God, she's real?" a woman answered.

"One hundred percent real, sister!"

Rising slowly to her feet on top of the frozen shrine, Molly took in the bloody faces, the torn bodies, the battered crew that chose to take

a stand. She heard weeping and painful cries, but every face looked to the Lightkeeper who stood high above them.

"That's damn right!" Cindra cried, smiling through tears at Molly. "And she's here to change our lives. I didn't believe in her at first...but now..."

"So many dead! So many gone!" a woman shouted. "How much must we give?"

"I...I know this is taxing on all of you. It's not easy..." Molly started.

"Can't you just beat the enemy alone? Look what you just did! You slew that ugly thing all by yourself!" the burly man squeaked.

"No, *not* by myself. I couldn't have done this without Cindra. Or any of you! And that's exactly what I think we need to realize most, that..."

"I love you!" a young lady shouted.

"You're such an inspiration!" another gruffer voice said.

"No, I'm not an inspiration. You all are!" Molly said, pointing to the crowd. "For so long, my friends and I have been, *well*, alone. This fight felt impossible. But here we are now with so many friends on our side. So many want to see the evil of Absalom Kaine brought to an end! This worm? It's just a taste of the evil ahead of us, but it's also just a taste of the victory within our grasp!"

Her words met cautious applause.

"But there's something I've taken a long time to learn, something I'm trying to communicate...something important."

Molly cleared her throat and wiped the sweat from her forehead.

Mika smiled at her from the crowd, nodding encouragement. Brother Mast beamed with utter faith in her.

"There are so many of us, and we are all so different. For a while now, I tried to demand that others fight their battles the same way I do. I thought there was one way to do things, but I've learned there are many ways."

Mika radiated with pride from the crowded street.

"But I'm not here to judge anyone. Everyone needs to fight this battle in the way that makes sense to them. Maybe you'll fight it like I do. Maybe not. And I'm okay with that! We can fight side by side!"

A murmur of confidence spread through the audience. Thousands of them talked among themselves, leaders pointed at Molly, warriors steeled themselves for action.

"What I want you to know is we need each of you, and we all need each other. No matter your background. No matter your beliefs. We might not agree on everything, and we might have different ways of fighting for what we love, but what's most important is we don't fight *each other*!"

A gasp burst from the crowd as an ethereal vision, burning with light, approached the people. From the light sped a dozen black Humvees and Hummers, Aramis stepping out of the front vehicle, his huge frame like a skyscraper looming over the crowd.

"Aramis!" Molly called out. "I'm so happy to see you!"

Then following closely behind, another vision appeared. The white stag, its fur luminous as starlight, approached. And out of the second vehicle stepped another familiar face.

"Dad?" Molly cried. "You're here?"

Donnie Shadowen walked through the crowd with the stag, petting its head fondly as the people watched in wonder.

"Dad...how...when?" Molly stammered as she clambered down the concrete creature.

"You helped me dream again, Molly. You...you saved me. And not just me, by the look of it!" he said, sweeping his arm for her to look.

Atop Aramis' Hummer, a prowling black lion appeared, wings sprouting from its sides, muscles clenching. Slithering through the air above them, a red serpentine dragon wove its magic, floating upon a cloud.

"That one's mine!" Sasha shouted and the crowd laughed.

"And these are mine, Hollywood!" a familiar voice rang out.

Birch Robbins materialized in the crowd as if from thin air, Mika smiling proudly at her friend. Chewing his toothpick, Poppy the bat clinging to his shoulders, he strode through the crowd flanked by the two white unicorns. Their glorious coats glistened in the sleet and slush. Even as they splashed through the mud, not an ounce of mire clung to them.

Tears ran down Molly's face at the sight of them.

More creatures appeared and more people claimed them, embracing their dreams. With each proud declaration, the people shone brighter; colors multiplied before Peace Bridge, surging into shades and hues new and unnamed. Soon, diverse colors lit the roadway like Christmas lights shining in the winter gloom.

"Don't you see, dearie?" Jacinthe whispered in Molly's ear. "They know what you can do now. They believe in you. And they believe in what we can accomplish *together*. Let's end this."

Molly wept openly.

"You know what I think?" she called out, thousands of faces turning to her again. "All of you, all of *us*, are Lightkeepers. So, Brother Mast might think I can save you, but I say this: together, and only *together*, we can save this world!"



Chapter 28: Battle at the Keep

Hot breath hit cold air as the army of Lightkeepers surged towards the bold face of the twin falls: hundreds on their feet in the wintry slush, still others in armored vehicles and rusted vans. They moved in a long line, hiding their numbers and spreading themselves thin. The roadway sprawled with them for miles, swarming like ants to their hill. Yet their breathy plumes were overshadowed by the raging cloud that rose from the waterway itself. On their right, another abandoned city watched their every move. On their left, the mighty river and its treasured falls flowed relentlessly.

"The Keep is there. I swear it, Molly." Donnie coughed in the cold. He huddled close to her, joined by Jacinthe, Mika, Cindra, Aramis, and other leaders. They crouched behind an old concrete median to plan their assault.

"Well, it's not there right now, Dad. Are you sure?"

Donnie looked to the deserted towers of the Niagara city. "That worries me. Absalom is bound to know we're coming, but where are his armies? His mountain Keep was located right on Goat Island, directly between the falls. There're only a couple bridges over to the isle. That's where we need to go."

"There are no mountains here," Jacinthe spoke up. "Never has been. You're just wrong."

"How are we supposed to attack the Keep when we don't know where it is?" Cindra hissed.

Then from the wall of fog behind the falls, a glinting object emerged. Molly held her breath as steel and polyester materialized section by section above them.

"Shit...no!" Cindra screamed.

"It's the Vulture!" a multitude of voices cried.

The metal airship hovered above the city, casting its shadow upon the Lightkeeper legion. It fired red energy beams into the masses, setting their vehicles ablaze in grand explosions of orange and red.

"Out of the vans!" Cindra shouted, waving her arms frantically.

Another Econoline erupted, pulverized to scrap and rust as the souls inside screamed in horror. Those in the caravan burst from their vehicles, rushing away as fire raged behind them.

Maybe we aren't ready for this...

At the same moment, a great cry burst from the city itself. Thousands of grunts and growls, yelling and screaming, fires and gunshots pierced the morning air; a massive horde poured from deserted hotels and houses, springing the silent city to life.

"This is it. No going back," Jacinthe whispered in Molly's ear. "You stay with me!"

"Yes, stay in the rear, Molly. You're too important to lose!" Donnie said.

Aren't we all important?

Mika smiled knowingly at the rebellious resolve in Molly's eyes.

Reapers and grommets, flanked by nightmare creatures, flowed into the streets. They surged like electricity, falling from windows, crashing through glass. Trolls pushed over dead trees and small buildings, smashing through concrete as they trampled their comrades with indifference. Monsters nameless, great beasts of the shadows adorned with horns and spikes and wings, growled as they weaved through troll legs. Rolling like a monstrous tumbleweed, the horde rushed upon the Lightkeepers.

Molly saw Cindra grit her teeth before she called out, "Now's the time! Aramis, swing Team A to the left! Brother Mast, swing Team C to the right! Team B, you're with me! Drive down the center!"

The Lightkeepers moved to meet the storming multitude. The two armies clashed as thousands fought each other in sweat and frost. Blood soaked the melting snow, running in streams and tributaries. The Lightkeepers shimmered in the overcast sun, colors leaping from their eyes and chests; blue and red, green and purple, yellow and orange, colors Molly had never seen before. They were all there, fighting and panting, entangled with the masses.

The Vulture hummed overhead, blasting flashes of red into the crowd. Molly focused all her energy, forming a great crystalline shield, a purple blanket covering the battlefield. The airship assaulted the top, but only small cracks appeared.

That's not going to hold very long...

The battle raged. The Lightkeeper colors flickered and changed as the battle waxed and waned. Molly watched as glowing hands transformed Reapers into leaping deer, herds of goats and sheep, flocks of gorgeous cranes and herons. Anything the Lightkeepers could conceive, the grommets became. Wave after wave of the vicious horde transmuted before Molly's eyes.

"Does it scare you to see others wield this power?" Jacinthe whispered.

"No, I...I don't feel so alone anymore."

Molly watched Aramis and the Afflicted holding hands in a bright circle. Instead of guns and ammo, they brought only themselves, meditating and focusing as one. As their circle flickered between colors, entire segments of the grommet horde twisted into towering trees, hanging vines, and flowering bushes. Whole fields of flowers, soaked in red and purple and white, grew in the winter streets.

Molly glanced up at her shield, hunks of crystal now breaking off and falling into the crowd.

"Jacinthe...Dad, we have a problem!"

Beside the meditating Afflicted, other Lightkeepers slashed and hacked, chopping grommets in pieces. Molly saw Cindra spinning, striking and spearing, cutting down Reapers like stalks of corn. Hand in hand, together as one, the Lightkeepers fought the battle in the ways they saw fit.

Then in a sweeping groundswell, punctuated by howls and squeals, a wave of gray spread across the grommet hordes. They glowed, too, not in color or light, but in shade and shadow.

"No, it can't be!" Molly yelped from the back of the battle.

The gray wave spread over the battlefield, turning trees back into monsters and flowering fields into grommets. Every inch they had gained was being undone.

New horrors rose from their ranks. Molly saw the badger creature, its dreadful abdominal muzzle clamping down on poor Lightkeepers, biting them in two. She saw another barreling bear creature, its whipping tail slashing great wounds across chests and backs. Across the battlefield, Molly watched in terror as another towering spider, exactly like the one she fought in Wing's Reach, scampered and stomped, crushing people in its wake.

"So much we've accomplished, but it's all been for nothing!" she cried.

"Don't lose hope, Molly!" Mika swooned above the din.

Close by, Molly saw Sunny with Brother Mast's team as they fought with blood, sweat, and tears, garden tools and makeshift spears flailing in a blur of severed grommet heads. Sunny used her fists, smashing grommet faces by the dozens. With an unsettling roar, the bear creature plummeted through the mass of grommets, charging directly at Sunny. As it leapt through the air, spikes whipping like a cat-o'-nine-tails, Brother Mast jumped in front of her. The bear's gigantic teeth sunk into his shoulder and chest, spraying Sunny with his blood. It thrashed him

around like a rag doll, throwing him in a mangled heap across the field, dead as he crashed into the mud at Molly's feet.

"Oh my God, Brother Mast, no!!!" Molly screamed.

Sunny bolted to Brother Mast's body as the bear careened off into the crowd. She hugged his lifeless form close, tears flowing freely.

"This poor man...this wonderful man...I barely knew him. And I always thought he didn't like me, didn't approve of my life. But now he's gone and saved it!"

Seeing Sunny's tears, Molly fell to her knees as the pain and suffering assaulted her heart. Her shield gave way under the Vulture's onslaught. Two beams of fire seared the ground before she redoubled her thoughts, casting another shield into the sky.

I just don't have the capacity for all this...all this agony...

She rested there, studying Brother Mast's broken body, his shattered glasses still clinging to his nose, his well-trimmed beard matted with blood and grime. Sleet bounced gently from his skin, and freezing rain coursed down his face like tears.

"That's it! I...I need to get to that horseshoe waterfall. I can't let any more friends die! Even if the Keep isn't here, Dad, you said there's some kind of secret entrance. I have to try!"

"Let's do it," Jacinthe said, visibly shaken by Brother Mast's sudden fall. "We need a boat, some kind of watercraft. Donald...Donnie? You stay with your daughter and don't let her get involved in the battle—don't make me regret this! Mika, keep an eye on him."

"But maybe I *need* to get in there! I can't let these people pay the cost by themselves," Molly protested.

"I said *stay here*! This is non-negotiable. We need you for more than this petty fight."

Jacinthe turned to run and saw Sunny still shaking in shock. "You, Sunny? You're coming with me! That pain you're feeling right now? Let's put it to good use."

Sunny hesitated, then nodded. The two raced off towards the docks as Molly, Mika, and Donnie stayed behind, the furious battle spreading out before them.

"I can't stay here, I can't!" Molly said as despair grew in her throat. Her shield was taking a beating, and cracks like fissures spread across its surface.

"You must, child! Don't ignore those who fight with you!" Mika scolded.

Before her words scattered in the air, a cry swept across the turbulent field. From the endless river on the left, deadeyes surfaced, climbing the banks, sprinting into the battle with silent precision. Thousands of them appeared headfirst in the waters, rising like assassins for the kill.

"No, Mika...Dad...our people! They're surrounded!"

Incessant lines of deadeyes swept into the battlefield. Not a thinking brain among them, they screeched and clamored, crawling from the water and from holes in the ground. The Lightkeepers fought ferociously, changing them into sassy otters and harmless seals playing among the forest of feet. Cindra's team pushed hard towards the river, driving deadeyes back into the wicked foam.

"They're distracting us from something!!" Donnie yelled above the chaos. "Be watchful!"

Molly turned her head to see the badger creature charging towards her. It lunged, claws brandished like cleavers. She could feel the glee in its heart, as if it had been waiting a long time for this moment.

"No! Protect her, Donald!" Mika cried.

Swooping from the sky, the winged black lion pounced atop the badger, tearing a gory hole in its back. The badger roared in pain, abruptly silenced as the lion severed its head.

"That was so close," Molly breathed, looking around in a daze. "Whose dream was that?"

"Does it matter?" Donnie laughed.

The battle pushed closer. Molly saw the white stag leaping gracefully, piercing grommets upon its elegant antlers. Blood ran down its face, dripping from its innocent chin. And with a mighty rumble, Birch and his unicorns appeared; the majestic pair lowered their heads and drove their rainbow horns through the thrashing bear. One chomped on its flailing tail, ripping it asunder.

Still the gray wave approached. The horde never seemed to end as more grommets poured from the city, climbing from sewers and streaming from every crevasse.

"We've got to do something, Dad. I can't just stand here!" Molly screamed.

Then between the lofty city towers, a spiraling serpent flew, its muscular body breaking buildings as it swam the skies towards the battle. Atop its head, Molly saw Jasper, Sasha, and Novalee raise their fists into the air, shouting and cheering. Behind the dragon, a flow of light and beauty, a spectral wind, followed. It swept over the battle like a mist. As it covered the field, the hordes stopped, went silent, stood still in sheer wonder. Mesmerized, the conflict slowed to a complete stop.

Molly waved to Sasha as the dragon swooshed overhead. He cackled with laughter.

Yes, that's what we need! More of this!

Then with a great cry and a rumbling earthquake, the city shook. The crowds murmured as the ground quaked, rumbling spines and chattering teeth.

"What is this, Dad? Where is it coming from?"

Donnie shrugged, concern splashed across his face as he stepped between Molly and the battle.

"Whatever it is, stay back!"

WE FINALLY MEET, BELOVED MOLLY!

Then she saw it. Time crawled as she turned to see the faintest impression, the hint of a shadow cast over the river isle. She tried to scream, but the sound caught in her chords.

This can't be good...

From the midst of Goat Island, a rocky peak emerged; between the clustering trees, it rose. A mountain erupted from the islet, jutting upwards, fissures and cracks webbing down its sides. It grew dozens of feet per second, overshadowing the stalled battle as it spired hundreds of feet into the air.

"The Keep! I knew it was here!" Donnie shouted above the commotion.

Through the shaking city and splitting ice, Molly saw a solitary opening high up the side of the Keep, a great balcony covered in gold and pearls. Before she could fathom the sight, out of the hollow poured fog, red as blood. It flowed as water down the mountainside, covering the Keep, hiding the battlefield in hushed, hazy anticipation.

"What's this?" Donnie said.

A powerful piercing screech hit the thick air, blaring like a trumpet out of tune, announcing the coming of some mystery.

"We need to get to the hidden entrance...now!" Molly hissed.

Another distant cry leapt from the mountain. The sounds of thousands of feet pounding the rock echoed in the lingering red fog. Lightkeepers yelled in the mist; Cindra screamed instructions at the top of her weary lungs.

What's going on? I can't see anything...

Molly squinted, coughing up smoke, as a stream of figures rushed down the mountain at breakneck pace, hollering in mindless jubilation. Dreadful red eyes blazed atop their dead-eyed forms as they billowed through the stalled hordes, a great tidal wave of wrath. Molly held Mika and Donnie close as the ferocious breaker approached.

"You're right, Molly," Mika hesitated. "We need to get you to that entrance, right now!"

As the ravaging pack sped closer, realization dawned upon Molly's heart.

"More deadeyes! But...Absalom's done something to them! They're even more hideous than before and now he's vomiting them out on us!"

Then in a bloody clamor, a deadeye exploded, spraying bony and fleshy shrapnel into the crowds. The tender silence burst into howls and cries of pain. Deadeyes blasted themselves into mangled messes, killing and maiming grommets and Lightkeepers alike. The surging swell became a mad cluster of bleeding and exploding bodies, heaving its way through the ranks towards Molly, a driving torrent of lust and savagery.

"The boat's ready!" Jacinthe called from behind Molly. "Let's get this done!"

But Molly could not take her eyes from the approaching calamity. In a panic, the Lightkeepers retreated and ran, even as the deadeyes flowed endlessly from the Keep.

"It's him!" Donnie declared.

Above the rushing bodies, Molly watched Absalom Kaine casually walk out to the balcony rail. He stood hundreds of feet above the battle; his body clothed in white, a tall mitre atop his head. He scowled at Molly even as his mindless army poured from the mouth of his fortress.

"I'm not staying put any longer!" Molly shouted.

Then from the cloudy skies and sleeting rain, a group of majestic bodies emerged. At the helm, riding upon an armored matriarch, Darius whooped and bellowed. Cindra turned, tears in her eyes, to watch her little brother in his moment of triumph.

"Darius! The whales! They're here!" she cried.

The whale pod passed under Molly's failing crystalline shield, blasting through the city like a mighty spearhead, toppling trolls as it slammed directly into the oncoming deadeye army. The whales crashed through the horde, breaking the torrent of bodies, cutting it off completely from the cowering Lightkeepers.

But the flow of deadeyes from the Keep did not abate. Absalom shook his head far above the crowd, folding his arms in disgust as he walked back to his chambers.

Then gliding down close to Molly, Darius reared up Bessie and offered a hand.

"Let's get you three down to that boat!"

They helped Mika climb aboard, leaving her wheelchair behind. Molly and Donnie held her close as the whale took to the skies, flowing and skimming down the hill towards the waiting vessel.

"Dearie, time to test your father's facts!" Jacinthe said, racing to the boat herself.

A white and blue ferry awaited them; the faded words *Maid of the Mist* underscored its side.

"My parents took us on this boat once, a long time ago. I...I think I can take us as close as possible to the falls. But the rest is up to you!" Jacinthe said urgently.

The ship purred as Jacinthe babied its ancient motor.

"The grommets have definitely been using this thing. No way it'd still run after all this time. I think we're on the right track!"

The river flowed into the cleft formed by the pounding water; cliffs towered over them as they passed into the shadow of the falls. The battlefield faded from view. Molly peered upwards, catching sight of glimmering whales and the Keep wreathed in red fog. Jacinthe hammered the throttle and they sped towards the horseshoe waterfall, the dull roar of the waters becoming a thundering cacophony as their boat disappeared into the feathery white mist.

"We're close, dearie. Work your magic!"

"I...I'm not sure I can protect us from the water and hold the shield up above, too."

Silence swept across all those in the boat.

"It must be done, Molly. There's no choice," Mika assured. "Those people above? They're here for you. They know what they signed up for."

"I'll get back up there, Molly. We won't leave them alone," Jacinthe said.

"You're not coming with me?"

"Not this time. Not yet anyways. Get in there!"

Molly hesitated, but focused hard. A purple crystalline bubble formed over the boat as they passed under the deafening torrent. As they entered the veil, they looked up to see Molly's battlefield shield crack and fall, even as the Vulture pressed its advantage. Rays of red light burned the field. Molly saw a beloved whale pierced through with a beam of energy, plunging towards the earth, dead before it hit the ground.

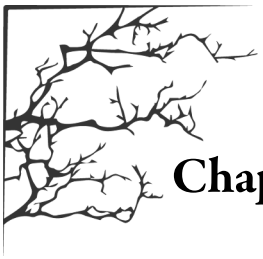
"No, they're dying up there!" Molly screamed, her heart in a tangle.

The boat was almost completely under the water now. A spark of electricity ran up Molly's spine as a deep magic unearthed itself among them. Inside Jacinthe's chest, inside the part that had begun to believe in magic, something awakened. Her smoldering inner fire flared into a powerful presence, and two crystalline wings stabbed out of her shoulder blades, hitting the roof of the covered boat.

"Jacinthe, I..."

"Go save my sister!"

Jacinthe raced towards the back of the boat, leaping from the stern as her wings churned the air. She swooped upwards and out of sight as the stunned company disappeared behind the horseshoe falls.



Chapter 29: The Hidden Hall

Graveyard stillness awaited them as they entered the mountain. Behind the falls was a great door, and behind the door was a shadowy hall running into rock and stone. The grand chamber was dimly lit, only a faint glow at the far end betrayed any light.

As they crept forward, Sunny and Donnie held Mika's arms over their shoulders; Molly scouted slightly ahead as a soft chugging emerged, interrupted by sizzles and zaps, something echoing in the distance.

"What is that?" Molly whispered.

"It must be the Thresher! He's taxing it as far as it will go," Donnie said.

"That's where my Edith'll be!" Sunny muttered.

"Yes, but it's still running? Doesn't he have enough..."

Before Molly could finish her sentence, forms in the darkness stole her thoughts. The faint light reflected off the pale faces of a vast army, standing in rows upon rows in the pitch-black. Hordes amassed, no emotions, no thoughts: their faces like masks as they stood motionless and dead-eyed, waiting for the call.

"Hush, don't wake the sleeping souls!" Mika hissed.

They clambered softly through the ranks, pressing towards the light. In Molly's periphery, she saw a body fall suddenly, a heap upon the ground among the fixed faces.

"What just happened?"

Then a new noise filtered towards them. Cracking and tearing, heaving and vomiting, something feasted in the shadows.

"I don't know, Moonflower, but I don't want to find out. Hurry!"

They moved quickly until the hall was half behind them, the light growing larger by the moment.

"Ouch! Something just bit my leg!" Donnie moaned. Molly crouched down and felt blood pouring from a laceration on the back of his ankle.

"Hold on a sec..."

With a brilliant purple shimmer, she healed his leg and relief washed over his face.

"I...I haven't seen you do something like that before."

"Yes, you have an amazing daughter, Dr. Shadowen. Don't forget it." Mika smirked.

Not two steps forward, Sunny groaned in pain.

"Something just nicked my shoulder!"

Molly felt the blood flowing from a small, jagged wound in her arm. Even as she focused and healed the cut, she stared intently into the darkness, searching for the culprit.

"Stay here, everyone. Let me look ahead."

Mika sat on the ground as Sunny and Donnie stayed alert.

Molly rubbed her hands together, producing a soft purple light. She could see three rows ahead now, deadeyes still standing morbidly before her. Then across the faint glimmer ahead, something darted by, muting the light for a split second.

She followed it down a row of deadeyes. Stepping forward, she tripped over something in the way, clawing at the air to catch herself. She stumbled directly into an unseen deadeye, but her hand did not meet skin. It sunk inside the body, viscera and organs spilling onto the ground.

Holy hell, what's going on?

Wiping the blood on her pants, Molly plugged her nose as a filthy stench floated from the gloom. Then in the light, she perceived a silhouette, crazed, as it moved from body to body, retching as it feasted.

She searched and followed, always two steps behind the specter. Deadeyes fell to the ground in random places, their bodies torn open, flesh consumed by something starving and greedy.

"Are you okay out there?" Donnie whispered from somewhere behind her.

Molly did not answer. She waited and watched, holding her breath.

Where are you, vile thing?

The seconds slowed as her purple glow reached the source. Surrounded by piles of flesh and bones, a brawny owl gouged out the intestines of silent deadeye. It wriggled its head deep inside the poor soul's abdomen; blood and curds soaked its white chest feathers.

What kind of creature is that?

At the sound of her footsteps, the owl stopped dead, listening. Slowly, it turned its massive head all the way around, staring directly at Molly.

"Oh, hello there...*owl*. What're you doing down here?" Molly said, holding her hands up in caution. "Nice owl. Stay there."

The owl screeched, flecks of tissue spraying from its gullet. It reared up to its full height, its head reaching the shoulders of the deadeyes. It lunged at Molly, wings raised in alarm. Just as Molly turned to run, a huge fist collided with the owl's face, shattering its beak, collapsing its flat face.

Molly fell into Sunny, who held her close.

"What the hell is that thing?" Sunny breathed.

"I...I don't know."

"It's a part of Kaine, I think," Mika whispered as Donnie helped her through the gloom. "Something haggard, something devilish, it lives below the surface. He might not even know it exists."

"I...I don't understand," Molly confessed.

"No one does, Moonflower."



HAILSTONES BOUNCED off Jacinthe's face as she soared heavenward on crystalline wings. The sights and speed meant nothing to her in that moment. There was no sense of exhilaration or surprise. Instead, she sped upwards, gritting her teeth, hurtling towards the Vulture as it hung in the red fog.

How can I take care of this contraption?

Back and forth she skipped, laser blasts missing her by inches. Grommets ran about the decks, screeching, shooting cannons and bullets towards the magic flying figure. But Jacinthe was too fast. She reached deep inside herself, emptying all the pain and grief of the past into pure telepathic rage. Cannons disintegrated. Steel beams melted. The envelope raged with wildfire.

Molly wouldn't like it, but...piece by piece, I'm going to take you apart...

Then Jacinthe saw her. Through the foggy windows, barking orders inside the control gondola, Kassandra Snapp glared back with scaly eyes. They met each other's gaze in a moment of silent revulsion.

A flash of memory, a stinging sensation; Jacinthe embraced her mental picture of the death camp once again, cherished the torture and horrors she experienced there. Those horrible things she had accepted. Those things were finished. She could not change them. But it was the image of Kassandra whisking away Edith that she could no longer bear.

Cool it, woman. You can control this power.

She took two meditative breaths, like she had seen Molly do so many times.

Jacinthe's ears smoked, her wrath fused into a blinding, staggering black hue, ink in the pen of a mighty warrior. Coal steam rose from her chest.

Maybe...maybe I don't want to control it.

She blasted forward like a rocket, sweeping along the airship canopy, black fire leaping from her hands as she flew. The envelope burned as the line of fire followed Jacinthe, jumping to the rear engines and platforms. The engines exploded, fiery debris erupting in all directions. Jacinthe swept back around the airship to the front; holding up her hands like a penitent saint, she scorched the red fog, banishing the bleeding haze.

She met eyes with Kassandra once again, who only smirked, unimpressed.

That's not enough for you, huh?

Her arms like great flamethrowers, Jacinthe brought them together in front of her, casting a fiery spell at the airship. The top of the canopy burst, a mushroom cloud of orange and blazing red powered upwards as the metal frame buckled and fell to pieces. Steel beams clattered onto the battlefield below, crushing Reapers and grommets alike. The airship plummeted towards the earth.

A beam dropped, stabbing into the snow, narrowly missing Aramis and his meditating circle.

Then with a flutter of realization, Jacinthe stopped herself.

"What have I become?" she screamed. "This isn't me."

With a mighty push of ebony fire, waves of energy emanating from her heart, she drove the burning wreckage towards the frothing river. The Vulture crashed into the Niagara, spraying fire and water into the air, shaking the ground.

Jacinthe swept over the ruins, searching for Kassandra's corpse.

Where is she?

Then she saw her again. Spiraling with parachute ablaze, Kassandra drifted downwards towards the Keep, even as terrified grommets flailed and fell to the ground around her.

You're not getting away that easily!



INSIDE THE KEEP, MOLLY emerged first into the dim light at the end of the hall. It was no mere chamber. She looked upwards, following the enormous vertical shaft, regal balconies running in spirals and levels around its circumference, as it disappeared into red mist at the top of the Keep.

The room was a giant column, packed to the brim with seats filled with dead-eyed worshippers. They swayed and moaned in ritual, bowing to the monstrosity that stood far below them, fixed in the center of a great circle at the base of the column.

"That's it!" Molly cried. "The machine!"

Twenty feet high, the metal monolith resembled an ancient church organ, pipes pointed towards the heavens, wires and gears whirring with life. At the top, hovering like a crown inside a glassy globe, a vibrant shard of the Wanderstar pulsed with crimson energy. And at the bottom, chained to the underbelly, a woman suffered, stripped bare, her eyes hidden behind gray scales.

"Edith!" Sunny shouted and ran to her side.

She yanked at the tubes implanted in her flesh, pipes that coursed from her body to the machine, then up and out as fire and electricity flowed downwards through them. Sparks from hidden places, from every region of Earth, clustered at the top and streamed down into the machine.

"No, Sunny, stop!" Donnie yelled as he helped Mika sit on one of the lush chairs littering the chamber.

Just as he went to take a step, he and Molly froze. A set of stairs framed the far side of the column, disappearing upwards into the mountain. Down the stairway, a shadow approached.

It's him. I know it's him.

Hubris oozed from each step as Absalom Kaine emerged into the light of the worship service. Eyes crackling as he tossed aside his white robe, fissures and boils running with pus that dripped from his burnt skin, he glowered at Molly.

"At last, witch, we meet for real. I, in my glory, and you in your pathetic desperation."

He laughed, his chest heaving under the pressure, a maniacal smile painted upon his face.



Chapter 30: The Final Encounter

Molly scowled and walked directly towards the hideous man. The closer she came, the more festering sores appeared, the more dripping fluids and bulging sacs seemed to speckle his skin. Absalom walked towards Molly, as well, blood trickling to the floor as he strode confidently towards his nemesis.

Yet, the worshippers still sang his praise, raised hands in glory for the decomposing sack that stood before them. Songs of beauty and light filled the chamber, songs calling evil good and good evil. A royal vapor sprang from hidden ducts, filling the column with incense and hypnosis.

And around his torn neck, a pendant dangled, blue light bursting at its seams.

"The Nebula Crystal?" Molly broke the silence when they were mere inches apart. "You still wear it? How dare you?"

"How dare I? It's mine."

"Then why not heal yourself?

"Who needs healing?" he cackled, looking to his followers for support. The worshippers roared in applause.

"Are you really that daft? You know your body is rotting."

"What proof do you have? Maybe you're the one who's sick!"

"Are you kidding me? Use your eyes!"

Just then, a pterodactyl cry swept across the chamber, Edith twisted and contorted even while Sunny held her close. Absalom's smile re-

turned as he held the Nebula Crystal to his breast, willing his machine to increase its output.

"Don't be mad at me, Molly. Maybe others have hurt you in my name, but that *wasn't me*, not really. Look at all I've accomplished! I'm the foundation for the entire world you know!"

Molly snorted.

"The world is slipping through your mangled fingers, fool."

Molly lunged at Absalom, heat rash coating her face red in the unbegotten moment. She struck his face as he grabbed her body and threw her against the far wall. She landed in a heavy heap, bones aching.

"This again?" Absalom laughed. "So, you really have abandoned all you believed?"

Molly rushed him again, even as her friends called for her to stop. She punched him in the gut, casting a spell of energy and anger, blasting his body against the Thresher. His skin tore open, blood and muck poured from his sides.

In a whirlwind, they fought around the circular chamber, casting fire and reciting incantations. Absalom conjured a wall of red spikes, thrusting it into Molly's chest, crushing her against the ground. Molly lashed out, chaining him beneath a glaring purple anvil, pounding him into the ground over and over.

"Stop, Molly! You can't defeat him this way!" Donnie shouted.

Molly grabbed Absalom's head, flinging him end over end into the wall; he smashed through the railing into the worshippers.

"Moonflower...stop this! Remember what happened to me!" Mika pleaded.

With each flash of light and each smashing collision, Edith screamed in pain. The machine pumped harder. The sparks flowed down, down from the top of the Keep, into the machine. More dead-eyes sprang to life somewhere in the world, more worshippers for their corrupt king.

No matter how hard she hit him, Absalom would not stay down. He only smiled through the pain, laughed through the fisticuffs. The Nebula Crystal flamed all the brighter, and the last shard of the Wanderstar burned atop the Thresher.

After an eternity, the two lay in their places, exhausted and breathing hard.

"You...you can't hope to remake the world, little girl," Absalom gasped through gritted teeth.

"You're a part of the current one, whether you like it or not."

"Why does that matter?" she choked back.

"You can never be free of me, or free of men like me. You can't do enough. Believe me, my father...his accusing sermons...his domination of everyone around him..."

Absalom paused, the anger in his introspective eyes fading for a moment before surging back.

"You can't *be* enough to stop it."

Molly looked back at her friends. Her father's face was tear-stained. The blood had rushed from Mika's face. Sunny blushed in despair, holding Edith close. Molly could feel their anguish; their anxiety burned deep inside her chest.

"You're right."

"I know I am," Absalom chanted.

"I *don't* have the power. I can never be enough to change the world on my own."

"Yes, that's what I said."

"It's funny how we can have such revelations but forget them immediately. We face a different battle, and it's like we never learned the lesson at all. Why is that?"

"No one's perfect, Moonflower!" Mika shouted.

Molly offered a weak smile at the altar of Absalom's countenance.

"She's right, I'm not perfect. But I can choose. And I won't make the same choice that stole your human heart."

Absalom sneered. "How touching. Truly. Some people believe they are powerful, but inside they are...*wanting*. You cannot stop the coming kingdom."

"Maybe not. But...but perhaps *we can*!"

Molly floated from the ground as the realization flooded the chambers of her heart. She shimmered golden like the sun, her body shining, the seeds of the stars in her eyes.

Then Absalom saw luminous beings playing in her starry irises, singing their ancient refrains. He stepped back, afraid as Molly transformed before him. She became a ghostly vision, a being of light, and her translucent body reflected the face of the one he hated most.

He saw himself.

Like a sparkling mirror, Molly showed him his true self. Absalom saw only his tragic life: his past, his future, his present.

All of himself.

"No, what have you done, witch?!"

Absalom saw his bloodied hands as he killed and maimed. He saw his lustful eyes as he dominated women and children. He saw the death camps, the ravaging beasts, the lying tongues. Younger and younger his vision became, images of his hellfire father tearing him down, shouting at him, bullying the spark from his heart.

"No, none of it's true! None of it!" he said, writhing upon the ground.

Sunny, leaving Edith's side, approached the shining Molly and held her hand. As their fingers touched, Absalom vomited and strained as more power ran through him. He felt Sunny's utter despair as she watched her lover stolen away, felt the lover's bond stretched to breaking.

Donnie approached and held Molly's other hand. Absalom's skin peeled from his arms as the power grew. He felt Donnie's dark confusion as he believed Absalom's lies, as he abandoned his family, as he drifted into the void.

"What's going on here?!" a shrill voice squealed from the stairs.

Kassandra Snapp plodded down, step by step, bloated sacs of oil and pus hanging from her machine body; filth splattered on the stairs as she stumbled towards them.

"What are you doing to..." she stopped midsentence.

Absalom reached out his arm, pleading for help. And in that moment, Kassandra saw nothing but weakness, beheld power flowing out of Absalom as he succumbed to the vision of himself.

"I...I don't believe..." she blundered. "I'm not sure..."

"It's okay, Kassie," Sunny ventured. "Be free of him."

"No!" Absalom shouted, standing suddenly to his feet, skin and flesh dangling to the ground. "We are still in control, Kassandra. Don't let them fool you!"

"This is the one you worship?" Molly whispered.

Absalom fell to his knees, overwhelmed by the weight of his own being. As his knees struck the ground, the Thresher burst at its seams, spewing sparks and fluid into the air, coating the worshippers in bile and squelch. They only cheered harder and louder as the grime ran down their bodies.

Sunny rushed to Edith's side, the chains snapping in two. She dove to catch her lover as Edith fell limply to the ground.

And from its perch atop the machine, the crimson shard clattered to the marble floor, its bubble of power broken. Molly and Absalom's eyes met one final time as the minutes swam, as everything hovered in slow motion. The shard clicked and rolled across the floor, Donnie running with all his energy to scoop it up.

"The final shard of the Wanderstar..." Absalom coughed. "What can you even do with it? You are nothing."

"More than you ever did," Molly said, snatching the pendant from around his neck.

Donnie approached her with the shard; the chamber glowed red as its radiance increased.

"Do what you must, Molly," he said, tears forming in his eyes.

The shard floated from Donnie's hand, coming to rest on Molly's chest. It flashed and gleamed all the brighter, blazing like a newborn star as it melted into her body, lifting her from the earth as her entire form emanated with brilliant golden light.

Just then, Jacinthe swept down the stars, wings outstretched, exploding into the scene with newfound pomp.

"Where is she?" she cried.

But Jacinthe forgot her search when she saw Sunny holding Edith, whose eyes opened into painful slits. Through the spewing and smoking machine, Edith smiled at her Jacinthe.

"Jackie, is that you?" she said, straining.

"Edith, you know who I am?"

"Of course I do, silly. I'd know that curly hair anywhere."

Jacinthe wept tears of purple and crimson as she pulled Edith to her. They embraced as sisters again; more power flowed through the chamber, rattling Absalom to his very bones.

Molly touched down to the marble floor once more. Absalom seized upon the ground; Kassandra stood frozen in unbelief, her body still chugging and pumping its waste.

"Bring me to him, Moonflower..." Mika said from the corner chair.

Molly held Mika as they stepped towards the fallen king. Absalom cried out, pushing himself towards Kassandra.

"Help! Don't let her near me!"

"No, I won't. You're...you're so weak and pathetic!" she sneered, her face bent into disgust.

With each step, Mika's leg bones knitted like silken fibers. Her muscles stretched over tibias, sewed themselves together, mending as she moved closer to her old foe.

"I'm sorry, Mika, I didn't mean..."

"It's not you, child. My heart is..." Mika wept into Molly's shoulder. "My heart feels new again, so my body follows."

Soon enough, Molly let go and Mika strode boldly to Absalom's side. The old sage closed her eyes. Absalom lifted from the ground as he shook even harder. Inside the depths of his hateful heart, he felt the snapping of Mika's legs, felt the poverty of spirit and helplessness she had suffered so long ago. He felt severed, used, spent.

"Kassandra, help me!"

His captain only shook her head, speechless, a growing hatred spreading across her face.

"End him, Molly! Do it now!" Sunny called.

"I...I agree. Now's the chance! He's vulnerable. Kill him!" Donnie shouted, his face pale and embarrassed as soon as the words left his lips.

But something did not feel right in Molly's chest. She looked to Jacinthe, still holding her sister tight, and in her friend's knowing gaze, she saw the answer.

"Killing him won't remake the world. Violence never does."

She turned with Mika to leave Absalom's trembling body behind them.

"Don't you walk away from me! You need me! We need each other!" he screamed, standing to his withering feet again.

Then Kassandra's hatred foamed over, flowed from every quarter of her broken body. Producing a savage blade, she thrust it into the small of Absalom's back. The tyrant slumped to the ground in a mounting pool of blood.

"No, Kassie, it won't help..." Molly yelped.

Kassandra twitched and shook as she watched her lord's body fall. She held up her hands, beholding the blood on her fingertips. She looked to Molly in shock, her mouth gaping open but no words escaping.

"It's okay, Kassandra...just take a breath..." Molly said, approaching her cautiously. She reached out slowly, grasping her hand.

"It's okay, Kassie."

Then in Molly's golden mirror shine, Kassandra saw herself hiding in a backroom cupboard, even as grommets tore two small children from their beds, dragging them from the house into the night. She felt the terror, the unbridled panic which drenched the children's minds that day.

"I...I..." she stammered, shaking like a reed. "Benjamin...Anna...I'm so sorry. I'm so...so..."

"Kassie, everyone's afraid of something, let it go..."

Her body shook harder, clattering metal and pulsing tubes. She quaked as her armor fell off piece by piece, clanging to the ground. With each fragment, a part of her body followed, her flesh tearing, sinews stretching and snapping, blood and muck spewing as her limbs fell from her torso. Within seconds, her body fell to pieces on the chamber floor.

Molly wept for her, even as Jacinthe moved close to comfort her friend.

"She was a troubled woman, dearie. There's nothing you could do."

"I know. But it makes me sad."

"Sad, yes, but we still have work to do."

Molly nodded and the pair walked past Absalom, still quivering in his own blood, making their way towards the dark stairs and what lay beyond.



Chapter 31: The Ark

"You look good with wings," Molly said as they walked up the stairs together.

"You think these are amazing?" Jacinthe said. "Wait until you see what's up here!"

The stairs transformed as they made their way upwards, changing from opulent and gold-framed into hand carved, rocky slabs. At the top was a stone chamber, blank as the void, cold and formless and utterly primal. Across the space, hewn through the mountainside, a crude opening loomed, an entrance to the balcony looking over the battlefield. Molly could see only red fog and dark skies through it.

"Where are we?" Molly whispered, her voice darting around the room.

"This, dearie, is the Ark."

In the center of the room, a deep hole was carved in the rock, a well of colors and swirling light. Smoke rose from its edges as it twisted itself into galaxies and stars.

"You must join the crystals together, Molly, right near this well. Only then will the world be remade," Donnie said, walking up behind them. "It all seems so simple, now that I see it: power can only change the world when its aim is mending and caring, when it is bound together with healing itself. Only then can the world be the place it always should have been."

"Donnie's correct," Mika said as she joined them. "I'm glad to see him coming around."

"It's the only way?" Molly asked, sheepishly.

"Indeed, Moonflower. Love is the only way," Mika said, watching as Sunny and Edith appeared behind her, smiling.

"Yes, listen to Mika," Donnie breathed. "It's so easy to fall into hateful attitudes and retributive solutions. I was lost in those things for so long. And I...I just did it again when I told you to kill Absalom! God, how I was wrong."

"It's okay, Dad. You're healing, too. I had my own forgetful spell when I thought I could fight him. It was all in vain. I...I was careless."

Donnie fought tears. "I see now that joining these two energies is the only way to reverse the damage, to return the human spark. The worshippers are still out there mumbling their psalms. They need you right now. And honestly? *We all do*. This world has certainly stolen some spark from all of us, I think."

Molly nodded fiercely.

"But you..." Donnie continued.

"But I won't survive it, I know."

Jacinthe held her hand. "Then don't, dearie. We'll find another way..."

Even as the words left Jacinthe's mouth, a mighty shockwave shook the Ark, a sonic boom rattling the ancient stone walls. Rocks fell to the ground; dust filled the air.

"Look, something's coming!" Donnie shouted, pointing outside.

Through the ominous opening, the sky shifted to darkness, into space and stars and planets. Distant nebulae danced as something blasted out of hyperspace, out of the void and into the atmosphere. A bright circle of light, a mere speck at first, expanding as it approached. It touched down upon the balcony, gentle pinpricks of warmth for feet, and entered the Ark.

"The Orb!" Molly cried.

The radiant circle grew larger, bursting through its shell, spearing legs and tendrils from its sides. One after another, eight tentacles slumped onto the floor, metal and rivets growing like skin across them.

From the top, a bulbous head grew: a snapping beak, two bottomless black eyes. The creature stood twelve feet high now, a mighty octopus from another world.

In a swift, streaming motion, it swept onto the Ark floor, casting goodness and sacred incense into the air as it moved.

"Um, dearie, what the hell is going on?" Jacinthe hissed.

"My dearest Jacinthe, protector of my lady, there is no need to be afraid," the astral creature uttered. "I am here at the behest of the Keeper of Light."

"To do what, exactly?" Jacinthe said.

"The Lightkeeper knew Molly would need help joining the crystals."

"You can take her place?"

"No, that is forbidden. I help renew the light. I can gift it to the next generation. But I am not the light itself. I cannot join the crystals for her."

"Well, can you explain exactly what's happening?" Mika demanded, squeezing Molly's arm. "Are you here to kill our Molly?"

The Orb octopus laughed, a chime and a tune from dimensions yet unknown.

"I am here to help. The crystals must be united, but I warn you...*I warn you all*...this will bring the dawn of a new world. Are you prepared for such a thing? It must be your decision. Only the fated Lightkeeper can remake the world."

"Am I that Lightkeeper?" Molly blurted out in one last echo of doubt.

"*You are* and also, you are not."

"What...what do you mean?"

"This is the task assigned to you. Your friends? They have their own tasks to complete, their own lights to keep."

"I...I don't know what you mean. Help me understand."

"Take hold of me, and you will see."

As the words slipped from its mouth, Molly grabbed hold of its welcoming tentacle. A stream of ruby warmth and sapphire light surged through her heart as a trance settled upon her mind once more.

And for the last time.



Chapter 32: Orion

A glimmering canvas of stars greeted Molly as her eyes fluttered open. Snow melted around her as winter gave up its ghost and spring emerged like the deepest of magics. The stars shone especially bright, as if for Molly herself. Seven stars burned the brightest as Orion the Hunter tightened his fabled belt, strung his bow, and notched an arrow.

Molly watched as he drew back the shaft, loosing it towards a sister cluster of stars, the rampaging Taurus, the great bull of the skies. The titans battled across galaxies, Taurus goring Orion in the side, and the Hunter piercing its hide with many arrows.

Why must they fight? Why?

Orion fired one last arrow, his quiver now empty. It met its mark, piercing Taurus' heart. The wound bled, opening wider and deeper, tearing itself into a blackened void. The hollow in its heart swirled with light at the edges, expanding by the second, dragging inwards the bull, the Hunter, and every ounce of light and goodness around it.

The vortex rotated into a massive black hole, stealing the night sky, the dying winter, everything. Molly rolled into a ball as she was pulled up and in, flung a billion parsecs hence. The event horizon rushed upon her, everything within her fighting the whirling wonder. Her skin contorted. Her hair raised on end. She felt her body stretch impossibly thin.

Need...to...stay...outta there...

She skimmed the edge of the event horizon, as nearby the luminous beings played around the feral gravity well. They sang a song of light

years, of celestial storms, of mighty heavenly bodies. One by one, they dove into the black hole, embers on the edge of forever, never to return.

No...no...my friends!

Though she fought with every inch of her being, this blank spot, this nothing, this portal to another dimension pulled Molly inwards, dragged her screaming and thrashing down into the depths of its inky soul. Into the blackness. Into oblivion.



A STEADY BEEPING ROUSED her. Molly rubbed the blur from her eyes as she looked around a pale-yellow room cluttered with people and machines and wires. The people embraced each other, crying and muttering words Molly could not hear. She pushed through the crowd, fighting to see what fixed their attention. There, upon a sterile bed, lay a wrinkled old woman, unconscious and barely breathing.

"We found the picture you asked for. It took some time, but it was in a cardboard box in your attic," a tall man said.

"Oh, Mack, you know she can't hear you."

"The doctors aren't always right, Nova."

"Lemme see, lemme see!" three young voices said at once, belonging to small children as they pushed and prodded to see the image.

"Hush—Sasha, Edith, Sunny—she's awake!" Nova hissed.

The matriarch opened her eyes, draining her strength. She reached feebly for the polaroid. One tiny girl climbed up alongside the old woman and snuggled in beside her.

"Eve, get off there right now!" Mack scolded.

The old woman shook her head and snuggled even closer to the child. They gazed at the picture together, mist hovering in the elder's eyes. The little girl turned the picture around so all could see: a smiling redheaded girl, wild and untamed, sitting upon a man's shoulders.

Is that...Dad? What in the world? If that's him...

"Is that you, Grandma Molly? Is it?"

The family held their collective breath to see if she would answer. The ancient woman cleared her throat, choked, and took three deep breaths.

"Yes, that's...*me*. That's what I looked like...a long time ago," she said, pausing to catch another breath. "Sometimes, I can barely even...*remember*."

As the final word slipped from her mouth, the old woman's green eyes shot directly to Molly as she hid in the crowd. Molly gasped as a wreath of blue fire burned within her irises for a fleeting moment.

"The greatest wonders are yet to come, dearie."

Electricity shot down Molly's spine, spreading to her fingertips, down to her toes.

"What does that mean, Mom? Who are you talking to?"

"Oh, Jacinthe, you know she's delusional," Nova hissed, elbowing her curly-haired sister in the side. "Don't bother the poor woman."

The crowd muttered and mumbled again, their words becoming slippery like oil upon Molly's soul. They argued and cried, scolded the children some more, shared memories and stories. But through it all, the old lady only stared fiercely at Molly watching from the shadows. With each passing minute, the light faded from the woman's face. Her skin became pale and gray, ashen verbs on the doorstep of eternity.

"She's trying to say something, Mack, can you shut your mouth for a second?" Nova's voice broke through the fog again.

"Sorry, I..." he stammered.

"What is it, Mom? What're you trying to say?" Jacinthe asked.

The dying woman could barely open her eyes now; she focused all her strength on one final breath.

"Did you...find...the music?"

Molly nodded fervently, tears stinging her eyes.

"I am...I am the music," she whispered. "*We all are*."

The fading woman laughed out loud, shocking her family to silence, then laid her head back and gave herself to the misty veil.



Chapter 33: The Remaking

A smile spread across Molly's face as she drifted out of the trance. The Orb octopus filled her vision, as if they were the only ones there, as if they were the only two that existed at all. The Orb wove it metallic tentacles like a web around her, holding her so close she could hear the distant hymns of shadow and light in its steely breast.

"Who sent you?" she asked quietly.

"I think you already know that. I've told you in the past, my lady."

"Humor me, then."

The octopus seemed to smile from the pits of its ethereal eyes.

"The Molly sent me."

"Molly?" Jacinthe yelped, breaking the spell. "She's right here! She didn't send you."

"That is true, but only partially so," it hummed. "She is Molly, but I was sent by the *true* Molly, the one who transcends the dimensions, the one free of material things."

"I don't think I understand..." Molly whispered.

"You sent me, in all your glory, my lady, the version of you who has broken free. That Molly, she dreamed me, she created me."

Molly's hands shook now, adrenaline and emotion coursing through her veins.

"Are you okay, Moonflower?" Mika said with a shoulder rub.

"I...I..."

"You can say it."

"I think I'm more than okay. For the first time in my entire life, I feel...*sure*...of what I must do next."

"Dearie, you don't have to..."

Molly held Jacinthe's hand as the emotions welled up within her.

"This is *my* choice. This is what I was destined to do. Fated...by *myself* it seems...to change the world for the better. If it's within my power, and I have the choice, I..."

Molly paused, her stomach clenching, her jaw quivering.

"Don't be afraid, Molly Lightkeeper. Soon, you will not know fear at all," the Orb sang, warmth pouring over her like gravy of the spirit.

Molly closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her heart felt calm. Her chest was still. She stopped shaking. And every worry seemed as distant as the glorious sun.

"I'm not afraid."

"Then approach the Wellspring of Dreams, dear Molly, and construct the future."

Standing before the whirling depths, Molly examined the pendant in her hand, blue fire lapping at the edges and seams. She snapped it open and the majestic cerulean gem floated into the air.

Here we go...

The Nebula Crystal rushed into her chest, melting, glowing, spreading across her skin like crystal sunlight. Out of the depths of the well, a funnel formed, spiraling into the center of the Ark, pulling her slowly towards its mysterious presence, like a phantom from the deep.

She gave into the pull completely. As her body floated towards the cosmic void, she held her arms aloft and watched stars running through her veins; looking down at her translucent body, galaxies swirled within her.

"It's so...so beautiful," she said.

Jacinthe snatched her fading hand and pulled her face to face. They wept together, their candle flames blended into one, flickering from red to green to purple to white to black. The fire leapt from their eyes,

flowed like a river from their bodies, flooding the Ark and Keep to the brim.

"Come see what's happened!" a startled voice shouted from behind. In a rush, Jasper and Sasha and Novalee flew up the stairs. "The deadeyes, they're changing!" Sunny and Edith appeared behind them, bewilderment splashed across their joyous faces.

Molly and Jacinthe smiled knowingly at each other, pushing their foreheads together.

"We have time. Let's go see," Molly said, a calming wind.

They walked together down the stairs, their friends in wonder behind them, as Molly's body disintegrated with each step. At the base, a pool of blood remained, Absalom's broken body gone.

"Don't worry," Molly assured. "He won't be a problem anymore."

A burgeoning flood of fire burned in the Keep, rushing over the dead-eyed worshippers. From the floor to the faraway ceiling, the column blazed with ethereal light as their human sparks returned, as scales by the thousands fell to the floor. With every color under the sun, the Keep burned with life and rebirth.

And still Molly's body faded.

"It's happening, Molly. You're remaking the world!" Mika hugged her close, joy like jewelry rested upon her face.

Molly relished one final embrace with her teacher.

"You are everything I always wanted to be, Mika. I hope you know that."

"You are that, and more, my Dahlia. I am...I am so proud of you."

They hugged for minutes, winding down to seconds. Molly did not want to let go but knew she must.

She turned to Jacinthe with determination in her emerald eyes.

"I...I have to go now."

"No...Molly..." Jacinthe sobbed, the meaning of the moment dawning on her like moonlight.

"They're calling me. I can hear them," Molly said, gentle assurance radiating from her smile.

Floating like a specter, Molly climbed the Ark stairs for the final time. The steps lasted an eternity as each of her friends reached out to touch her skin, to feel the power surging through her form: nearly transparent and coursing with stars and planets.

In an ancient ritual, they stood in a circle around the well. The pit frothed and foamed, spinning deeply inside like a hurricane full of lightning and thunder.

"I love every single one of you more than you can know," Molly said. "You mean the universe to me."

She beamed as she watched Edith and Sunny holding hands. She nodded to Donnie, the rift between them burning away within her heart. She blinked through tears at Mika, her soul mother. She laughed as Sasha wrapped Jasper and Novalee into a bundle. More friends joined, Cindra and Darius in wide-eyed wonder, pushing each other in sibling jest as they entered the circle.

The Orb stood like a tower above them, blushing with brassy pride.

Each of them radiated their own color and hue, each of them possessed a shade written upon their eternal genome.

"It's time," Molly said, wiping a tear from Jacinthe's cheek.

They joined hands, facing each other, love emanating like mist between them.

"Dearie...don't go. I can't lose you."

Molly simply smiled, her eyes filling with stars.

"I see...*eternity*."

Jacinthe embraced her one last time. As she held Molly close, the wild redhead's body flowed into spirit and abstraction, pouring like sand through an hourglass, vanishing into the ancient well.

The chamber shuttered into darkness.



Chapter 34: Inner Space

The rhythm of the deep sang Molly's name as she sailed away on the quantum tide toward the pumpernickel horizon. She flew through light and void, through ash and embers, through placid oceans and waterless places, through time and space.

You are expected, Molly Shadowen.

The words hovered inside the chariot of Molly's mind as her spirit explored the deep places, the innermost chambers of atom and spirit. She tried to open her eyes as she flew, but though she could see, her eyes were useless now. She saw with inner sight, beheld the universe with otherworldly vision. Embarking across the ancient waters of the quantum river, following the starry currents towards the within, she saw branches and tributaries, entire universes unto themselves brimming with energy and spark, beings living their lives a billion times a billion times.

As she flew, she looked down and saw her body radiating with astral light, a newborn vessel navigating cosmic seas. She smiled, gladness ringing from every strand of her being.

Her mind bending, folding into dimensions unknown, she looked upon a whirling sphere of fog, electricity zapping between protons and neutrons, electrons swimming alongside her. Plunging into a majestic galaxy from a hidden realm, she gazed in awe as energy and matter converged into one. Blasting through the sun itself, through the hulking nucleus, she leapt out and forward, diving between sine waves.

Atoms like stars rose from her skin as Molly was pulled, stretched, spaghettified into something both new and ancient. Her energy shifting, her power transitioning, she gasped as attractions and repulsions

clung to her static soul, cried out as revolutions and reactions burst from deep inside her. She changed, radiating with golden light as her essence flowed and fluxed: ever-evolving, persistent, moving, replacing, refreshing into an image reborn.

She emerged into a holy mist, breaking through an unseen veil, a blur of unfathomable voices greeting her. She could not understand their language with her ears, but her heart understood every syllable. Atoms, molecules swirled together into the nothingness; matter formed, taking shape as shadowy figures, millions upon billions of them, hovering in the far distance.

Forms in the drifting haze, she watched as billions of colors and shades reconciled, cared, considered each other. She felt the joy as they heard each other for the first time, really understood the other in their quantum glory. Faces emerged, her father with Jacinthe as they spoke to radiant crowds, as they led people on mighty journeys of togetherness and unity. The luster spread, the people became, knowledge like a crown adorned them all.

Then from that lingering glimpse, she was lifted up, up through the mist as the luminous beings returned, swirling around her with warm flow and celestial songs. Showers of stars in all colors and textures and aromas swept her away, through an aurora of shifting places and people, to the very roots of the universe, into the bowels of being, where starseeds germinate, cast into the vastness of the beyond.

Swimming the sea of tranquility, embracing the otherness of her being, Molly trembled with joy. From the stars, she saw Papaw, his ponytail still waggling behind, and her mother Aisling, shining like the sun. They smiled with open arms, welcoming her.

One last glance at her physical form, she perceived a translucent mirror of atoms and starstuff, gleaming heavenly bodies visible through her frame. Her light burned all the brighter as her limbs pulled inwards and her body rolled into a majestic orb, building with intensity and passionate heat.

"I...*I am*," her words drifted from a lipless throat as she embraced the pull of infinity, serenity, awakening, the siren call of the great Becoming.

Across the universe, across all that is, she watched the heavens burn. Fire like a tidal wall rushed across space and time, pulling inwards, towards the fathomless places, towards the singular source. With a mad rush, all that is light burned together into Molly, blinking out and into the void.

Then in the roaring silence, a flash of lightning, a powerful urge to become. The light returned and her spectral body tore into pieces and flecks of light, new stars scattered to the ends of the impassioned universe, reborn. Her constellation flew to the farthest reaches of a new world, a newborn reality, to the distant reverie of form and function, and still further to the infinite, to the space into which space expands forevermore.



Chapter 35: A New World

Journal Entry from Jacinthe Chapman: 15 May 2085

I visited Spinemore today, Molly. I don't know why, but I feel closer to you there. It's hard to explain, like your essence is nearby, forever leaping and playing in the tree shadows, among the spring flowers and lush gardens, overgrown and free. Those gardens are thriving, new fruits appear every year; and as wild as they seem, it feels like some unseen hand still tends to them. I know that would make you happy.

But I want you to know how things are going.

The world gets better every day. I've never felt such hope and belonging. They made me a leader, which I never wanted, but it turns out working with my hands for so many years translates surprisingly well to creating a world grounded in caring and creation.

They made your father Donnie a leader, too, and we've been working together, creating things I never dreamed of, things for the good of all people and for our world. You know, I was worried about him at first. But there's something to be said for real men who take accountability for their past actions. It's one thing to heal from your own trauma, but it's another thing entirely to be able to acknowledge the trauma you've laid on other shoulders. He's done that, Molly. He's a new man. You changed him.

It's been five years since you left us. The planet is healing. Mother Nature smiles upon us; a world of plenty dawned the very day you disappeared. But it wasn't entirely spontaneous. No, we're letting science and empathy take the lead, growing communities around basic con-

cepts, such as "happiness and wellbeing are more important than individual wealth," or "hard work should yield results, yet no one should go hungry." We're educating the next generation, teaching them to create, not destroy; to give, not always take. You'd be proud of me, Molly. We're even teaching the children violence is not the answer; that we can live at peace in this world of wonders as tinkerers of the highest degree. We can sow and create rather than consume and destroy.

I read the history books, Molly, the ones your Papaw left behind: the ones you read, I think. Human beings used to be less important than rich people's pocketbooks, it seems. Ancient dogmas were more important than honoring people for who they are. And those two falsehoods brought us down the road to Kaine and his darkness.

We don't want to repeat the horrors of the past.

And our friends? Jasper and Novalee got married. They asked me to officiate, and I refused at first. But I gave in later. Sasha was the ringbearer but couldn't remember which tentacle sucker the ring was in. Novalee was furious, of course. But they are a family now, a beautiful one.

Mika has been spending time with Brother Mast's people, the denizens of Wing's Reach. This is her home now, I think. Remember how she never quite saw eye to eye with Mast and his people? Something about you brought them together. Something about Brother Mast's sacrifice, too. How can religion and mysticism dwell in unity? Well, you showed them how! Your faith in the universe helped them transcend their dogmatic baggage.

Cindra and Darius moved back to the east coast. They are working to bring that place to life again. I hear Cindra has even learned to ride the whales! One of my favorite parts of each week is hearing from them over Jasper's radio. It makes me so happy to see them thriving, and to see so many others claiming their own parts of the world, not for ownership or control, mind you, but for the prosperity of the land itself and the people who call it home.

Edith left the name Cinnamon Allen behind for good. For the first time in their lives, she and Sunny can be themselves and feel accepted. As I walked by their cottage the other day, I noticed the blue passionflower growing right outside their front door. You remember it, don't you, Molly? The one we saw by the Mother Tree? It grows here now, no matter the season. And Sunny? Well, she loved the irony of her name, so she decided to keep it. Or at least that's what she says. Something tells me the trauma of her past is greater than we know, and maybe one day she will open up to us about it. One day, she'll reclaim her real name. I'm sure of it.

But no matter where we find ourselves, we all come back together each year to celebrate you, and to work at bringing the celestial realm to this place. And Molly, it truly is here already. Your light is in every iris, in every smiling face. Sad things still happen, yes, but we are moving as a planet, creating the future with each conscious step. And perhaps the initial steps were learning to understand each other, and evolving to understand ourselves, too. Like you showed us, we are the celestial realm itself. The future is ours to create for the Good. Just as long as we manifest it every day.

And I know you're watching, dearie. I can feel you in every drop of rain, every ray of sunshine, every blade of grass. You linger here, and I believe you are more a part of this world, and of us, than ever.



Chapter 36: A Meager Death

Panting for air, blood trailing behind him like a serpent, Absalom Kaine crawled from the sewers far below the Keep. He rested beside the foaming river, picking maggots from his wounds, his broken body shivering in the cold mud as he let his eyes drift skywards.

That is when he saw the remaking of the world.

The Keep hummed with sacred light, a holy radiance that brought tears to his eyes and a fleeting glimpse of illumination to his mind.

"The witch, what is she doing?" he spat into the flowing water.

And as he watched, an explosion of color burst from the Keep, spreading across the cluttered battlefield, through the city, into the sky, to the most distant stars, washing over him like pure understanding, utter warmth: a presence both familiar and new.

"Is that you, girl? I don't need any of your charity."

The graceful sprite laughed windchime songs in response, and his body glittered with blue light as his wounds healed and his blood clotted.

"You will not die this day, Absalom Kaine. This is your chance to live for the first time."

The disembodied voice rushed off in a windstorm of beauty and being as Absalom clawed the air, enmity upon his breath. He slunk away to some distant grotto, to some place of nocturne and despair, hating himself to the end of his days.

No one ever saw him again.

Scratching his bruises, picking his scabs, his spine a skin ladder of grief and misery, he watched the world from a distance. He saw life and love flourish from afar; felt Earth grow better by the day. He saw others helping, caring, considering, and he pondered joining this great planetary shift.

"Maybe I can be like that. Maybe I can wear a smile, not like...*like a mask*, but upon my beating heart."

But instead, he wallowed in a stew of self-hatred, the birthright passed to him from his father yet never hoisted from his own slanted shoulders. So, alone he stayed, hiding more from himself than from the changing world, longing for the half-life of his existence to wind down, to curdle and pass.

He lived ten more years in regret and bitterness, fighting mice for scraps. His body a frail and sodden thing; he was ever the cog in the human wheel that would not move, that could not break free of rust and corrosion to fit in its place. There he drowned in misanthrope depths, bent on hatred.

And one trembling morning, he watched the sun rise, loathing its beauty with every acre of his soul. The utter tranquility of the world now disagreed with him, and his old scars congealed within his frazzled veins. Even as his brain seized and his body froze, he did not repent, he did not become.

As he lay paralyzed upon the floor of his chamber, Molly's face hovered in his imagination, etched in silk upon the morning sky. He tried to speak but could not move. His meager life flashed before his eyes as the pale light drained from his face; his head fell to one side, his end as sorrowful and futile as his life.



Chapter 37: Transcend

Follow me into the Wellspring of Dreams, into a new being, into the world within our world. I know my name—Molly Shadowen—but do you know yours? For you are a unique constellation cast upon the stars. Yours is the power to create the future, to remake the world. We can make our home better or we can make it worse. The choice is yours.

And yet our spirits are imprinted upon the universe. Life, energy: that is what we are. We can break every mold, like a flower bursting through concrete. We are resilient, uncontrollable, untamed beasts of the astral wilds. What will you do with that power?

Live for love, the light in your deepest veins. And you will be everywhere, everything, everyone.

And know this: you are atoms and waves and quarks. You are the universe itself and a universe unto yourself: a tempestuous tincture of blood and bone, stars and nebulas, particles and photons. We are Gaian wanderers, elemental travelers through time, space, and dimension; multiplied infinity, existing as one with all that is.

That's you in your endless potential, innumerable ways to be.

And one day, we will transcend all matter. We will soar into the great redshift, the burning away of all things, and we will survive it all. We will find ourselves happily shipwrecked upon those far shores, under Andromeda skies, wandering the forever horizon.

Meet me there, beyond the Belt of Orion.

Can you hear the music?



Acknowledgments

Möbius Molly has been a true labor of love for me. It all began with a longing to write, and with the trauma of the past, sometimes jotting something down really helps. I originally planned to write a stand-alone novel called *Fathom* but decided I was not ready for the endeavor. That novel remains in pages of notes and will hopefully see the light someday.

You see, I wanted to write something less emotional and more fun. I wanted it to be zany and untamed. Yet *Möbius Molly* became something more than an adventure story of creatures, dangers, and found family. It became a vehicle to unearth my own feelings. It became a vessel to explore trauma from my past and from the world today. It became a beacon of hope for my heart. And I long for it to become a lighthouse in other's storms, as well.

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Also by Jason M. Spencer

Möbius Molly
The Metamorphosis of Molly Shadowen
Hearts in Orbit
Constellation Eyes

Standalone
The Tumult of My Heart

Watch for more at theprogmind.com.



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