

Chapter 1

Shailene watched Kallum thread a grungy quarter through his fingers and discreetly slip it between the cracks of the weather-worn table. Reverberations of drunken conversations almost drowned out the dull sound of the coin greeting an overly sticky floor. Almost. A shitty magic trick she'd seen a thousand times over.

Shailene hated it.

She overtly rolled her eyes, joined by a performative sigh, but Shailene knew her reaction was invisible to Kallum. He was looking elsewhere. Empty palms spread wide, Kallum set his emerald eyes on Emi, wearing the same stupid snapback from undergrad, as she joyfully clapped her hands. Hands that would momentarily be running through Kallum's messy, white hair, pulling him close to stamp her wet reward on his lips. They were making out again.

Shailene hated that even more.

She gently placed a finger on the rim of her lightly sipped vodka soda and aggressively pushed in the direction of the shameless couple. Specifically, at the demon that'd spurred the vile act.

"Oh, crap!" Shailene yelled.

An unfortunate spill.

"Eeek!"

Emi recoiled as the sticky cocktail flew across the table and splattered her black and white street jacket. The real damage came from the residual liquid dripping through the table and onto her exposed legs. A few faces, curious to stranger's troubles, turned to their group tucked in the corner of the cheap, cozy bar before returning back to drowning their sorrows with drink.

"Wow, that's unlucky," Quinn chimed in, just now returning from the bar with his fourth IPA of the night. His normally fishy dead eyes held a glimmer of concern that was emphasized by tucking his shaggy, blonde hair back.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," Shailene said. She wasn't.

"It's okay," Emi said with a sincere smile. She pulled down her cap, hiding her distinct Asian features, and stood. The showy white strips in her jet black hair displayed an otherwise invisible jitter. "I'll grab some paper towels."

Shailene watched Emi trot off, energetic as ever, and disappear into the maze of a bar. As she did that, Quinn plopped his lanky body into a creaky wooden chair by Shailene and settled in with a light slump. She just traded one problem for another.

"What happened," Quinn asked, placing his drink on the table.

Shailene gave the oblivious boy a sweet smile, tilting her head slightly. "I spilled my drink on Emi."

“Oh,” Quinn said. He picked up his drink and fervently began pouring it down his throat; his sharp jaw—illuminated by faint street lights through a window—steadily rose upward, climaxing with a powerful exhale.

“Whelp, time for another round,” Quinn said, adding another tally to the graveyard of drinks that had been accumulating. He pushed away from the table, in the performatively merry way of someone about to get the fifth drink of the evening, and stood up, lingering for a second to hint if anyone had requests.

“Grab me one,” Kallum said. “And a Mai Tai for Emi.”

Shailene remained silent. She longed for the day Kallum would speak up and order a Moscow mule for her, the *real* favorite hidden behind a calculated veil of vodka sodas—a veil only Kallum could uncover. Today was not that day.

“And another vodka soda for the grouch,” Quinn quipped as he retreated out of sight. Like a well-trained puppy, he follows orders well enough but still throws out a playful nip from time to time.

“A bit much,” Kallum said sternly. His tender lips formed a thin line that juxtaposed his round cheeks. Even when he was upset, Kallum’s face remained adorably soft. A blissful relief from the grungy roughness so familiar to Shailene.

“She’ll get over it,” Shailene replied. And she would. Sticky clothes would be the least of Emi’s problems tonight.

“Where’d you learn that trick, anyway?” Shailene continued, eager to get the conversation flowing. She leaned forward, placing her elbow on the sticky table and brushed a lock of hazel hair behind her ear to showcase elaborate new earrings. She would savor this moment, given the increasingly rare opportunity for them to meet alone.

“Nowhere,” Kallum said. “Myself, I guess. Just to keep my hands busy.” Leaning back, he draped his arms over the edges of the chair and tapped the sides along with the hum of the bar’s generic pop music. “Nice earrings, by the way,” he said casually.

Shailene let out an inner squeal. No one else could read her the way Kallum did and he proved that time and time again.

“You’re competing again?” Shailene asked rhetorically. Keeping his hands busy for Kallum means ways to keep rhythm no matter the situation; like right now. Three years ago, Shailene was blind to a song’s tempo, but now she saw the way it coursed through Kallum’s entire body. A skill he branded on her soul.

“About that...” Kallum’s voice trailed off and his head perked slightly at the sight of someone behind Shailene. The brief rendezvous between them had already come to an end.

“We’re actually competing in RF Jam this year,” Emi chimed, dragging a fist full of towels across the dripping puddle on the table, swiping it on the floor. “And, if you’re not busy at all, then I was wondering if you wanna do the Open-Style 3v3s together?”

“You still dance?” Shailene questioned, somewhat hostile, as Emi pulled her seat away from the spill and towards Kallum—chairs nearly touching.

Emi nodded as she took her seat, “Quinn too. We’ve been practicing recently.”

“Wait,” Shailene paused, gears turning. “You want me to compete with you and Quinn?” She let a drop of disdain leak into her words.

“C’mon Shailene,” Kallum said, reining her in. “It’s mostly on the weekend and you don’t have to practice. Not a huge commitment.”

“Right, let me fly halfway around the world on a month’s notice just to dance for a weekend,” Shailene spat. “We’re not in freestyle club anymore guys. I have a lot going on at work...”

Shailene’s voice started to trail off. She caught an unfamiliar disappointment creeping across Kallum’s soft face mixed with the flashing police lights flying through the rainy streets of Los Angeles. It was a beautiful, striking painting that evoked a very rare emotion in Shailene. Guilt.

“Why don’t you do it, Kallum? She’s your *girlfriend*,” Shailene spat, carrying a level of sharpness that shocked her. She never did figure out how that emotion worked. This was bad. She couldn’t be making herself an enemy before midnight.

“Sorry,” Shailene retracted, “I didn’t mean for...”

“No, it’s fine,” Kallum reassured. “I could enter with them, but I wanna give breaking one last shot...”

His voice trailed off in a wistful tone. When Shailene met him at the competitive freestyle club, he was the top b-boy in the world, carrying multiple BC One world titles. That fact never changed, but neither did he. It’s lonely at the top. Shailene learned that as a child. The most devastating part is feeling like you’ve reached the end, and with nothing left to learn, the former well of passion dries up and becomes an automatic routine, devoid of emotion. It’s why Kallum was probably the only person in the world to get her.

“But, really,” Emi spoke up, pushing the weighty conversation away, “I just wanna compete with you again, Shailene. You’re made for competitions ya know? You can do everything, it’s crazy. I mean, the way you weave other styles into your hip-hop is insane.”

Emi’s pitch was steadily getting higher and higher as she spoke. “Like, casually turning some ground moves into full on breaking. You’re deceptively strong. Honestly, you could be a full fledged b-girl. I’m a little jealous...”

Now it was Emi’s turn to get all emotional. But Shailene was considerably less patient with her, “Sure, whatever. I get it. I’ll go with you guys.”

Kallum and Emi fist pumped the air in unison.

“You’re not going to randomly disappear on us either right?” Kallum chided in a playful tone, but Shailene knew it was serious.

“God, no,” she bluffed. “And foot the bill for another bar crawl? No way. Quinn alone nearly ate through two weeks’ wages.”

Truthfully, Shailene didn’t know why she agreed since the trip would never happen. The demands of her work took priority. Just like it did back then and like it will tonight.

“Speaking of, where is Quinn?” Kallum asked. “It usually doesn’t take this long for drinks here.”

“Probably stun-locked by the trashy bartender with fake tits,” Shailene immediately quipped. “Why do you think he always has us come here?”

“Nah,” Emi shook her head. “Ten bucks on it being the glammed up girl hitting on guys in line outside. With the designer bag.”

“Those odds are so bad this feels like robbery,” Shailene replied.

“Then two-to-one it.”

“Deal.”

Shailene and Emi gave a light slap to each other’s palms, sealing the bet.

“I’ll go get him. Have my ten dollars ready,” Shailene said as she got up from the table. Pulling out of their alcove in the corner, she tucked around a wall to spot Quinn at the bar across the room. He was conversing with the trashy bartender.

A sadistic grin crept across Shailene’s face as she contemplated how that ten dollars would be the first of many things she would take from Emi tonight.

Kallum and Emi watched Shailene’s long, captivating stride carry her across the room. Her hair bobbed with every clack of her heeled boots and her loose blouse swayed opposite to her hips that were tightly hugged by expensive leather pants. Everything about Shailene’s character was unfathomably alluring but overwhelmingly intimidating. The moment she turned the corner, they both let their breath escape, out of sight and earshot.

“God, she’s such a *bitch*. I can’t stand it,” Emi grumbled timidly, as if Shailene might appear at any moment. “I don’t know why I came.”

Kallum turned and adjusted the cap covering Emi’s stunningly picturesque face. At times, he wondered why she hid it so persistently under the bill of a hat. But he also knew the world wasn’t a simple place, and Emi rarely talked about her family; the root of a brutal anxiety. However, Emi had grown immensely since they first got together, wrangling panic attacks into submission through long stretches of counseling. About a year ago, Shailene’s outburst would’ve jostled Emi, but now she kept composed. A surge of emotion brought Kallum’s lips to gently peck hers.

“Well, I’m glad you did,” Kallum said.

“Easy for you to say. You’re not a target. She’s head over heels for you, on a clinically insane level,” Emi said. “Grippy sock insane. Someone needs to check her in.”

“Yep, she’s 100% insane, but it’s not like you to rile her up like that.” Kallum said, draping his arms back over his chair and syncing his taps with the rhythm again.

“Yeah... Well...”

He felt Emi pull lightly on his palm, and watched her turn it upward, gently brushing the nasty burn scar on Kallum’s index finger that he received as a young child—back when his parents were still alive. It always seemed to hurt less when Emi touched it.

“She didn't appreciate your magic trick,” Emi said with a slightly guilty tone. “Why are you even still friends with her?”

Kallum hesitated. The answer was simple, but not virtuous. He would never say it out loud, and Emi would never want to hear it. He reveled in Shailene's insane, primal obsession. He could murder an innocent child and she would still love him. There was no doubt that Emi's love for Kallum, and his love for her, was genuine, but he understood it. Shailene's, on the other hand, was cryptic. And the mystery was fascinating to him.

“She's your friend too, Emi,” Kallum said, deflecting away from dangerous territory. “You killed every duo hip-hop competition together. The two of you were so in sync it was kinda scary. That doesn't happen by accident.”

It wasn't a lie. In fact, it was Emi who brought up competing with Shailene in 3v3s over a modest dinner in their humble one bedroom apartment.

“You two are close in a hyper-competitive way.” Kallum continued, “Like, you guys created Odds.” A drinking game that rose to popularity within their club centered around making bets.

“Sure, maybe in college, but post-grad, Shailene barely talks to me. Makes me wonder why she invited us all out today.”

“I dunno, maybe she just misses you guys. Ever consider that?”

“Nope.”

“I have returned!” Quinn boisterously exclaimed, turning the corner with the dolled-up woman from outside tucked under his free arm. The other was busy sloshing beer across the floor as it wobbly raised the glass to the ceiling. An irritated Shailene followed with an IPA, Mai Tai, and vodka soda held together in a triangle with both hands.

“Shailene tried to get me to leave Maddie at the bar, but I just couldn't do it.” Quinn shouted. He pulled away from the girl and bounded for the other empty seat next to Kallum. Slinking around the table, he slid next to Kallum and leaned his perversely infatuated face in, attempting to whisper.

“I'm in love, dude.”

“She's... quite the catch,” Kallum whispered back.

Maddie slid into the same seat as Quinn, slightly pushing him to the side, and ran her grotesquely expensive looking nails across his shoulder. Her mouth was a flat, puffy line adorned with a distracting, deep crimson lip gloss. Whatever conversation about to unfold must have dwarfed the excitement offered by the iPhone in her hand, held offensive close to her face that was obviously covered with the wrong shade of foundation.

Maddie wasn't ugly by any stretch of the imagination, a trashy Insta model type look, but Kallum was a bit protective of his cousin—though distant and not blood related. Despite not growing up together, Kallum noticed Quinn's gradual pining for affection over the past two years, and given the concerningly frequent romps with these types of people, he knew exactly what she wanted. It wasn't his love.

Shailene grumpily sat down, sliding Kallum and Emi their drinks before fishing out a twenty and sliding it in Emi's direction with explicit disgust. Silently, she proceeded to chug her vodka soda in four large gulps—a bit out of character. Kallum noted the smug smile on Emi's face.

“Guys, this is Maddie,” Quinn said. “She's actually sober and can be our D.D., so we don't have to Uber. How nice is that?”

“It wouldn't be an outing if this fucking idiot doesn't pick up at least one gold digger,” Shailene said.

Barreling straight forward with no shame, Maddie set down her phone and asked us, “So, what do you all do for work?”

“I'm a professional dancer,” Kallum replied courteously, then gestured to Emi. “She's a med student at UCLA.”

“Oh wow, how successful,” Maddie said, raising an eyebrow.

Kallum let out an awkward chuckle and Emi nodded before adjusting the bill of her cap downward. It was an uneasy thing for Kallum to hear. Technically, he was successful by modern standards—middling income aside. A career born from a passionate hobby and an amazing girlfriend who shared his passions. Kallum was living the dream, especially considering he was orphaned as a teen. Yet, he still felt incomplete. So he brushed the discomfort off to someone else.

“Well,” Kallum said, “Shailene here is the CFO of a law firm at the age of 24.”

“Oh my God, that's incredible! How did you manage that?” Maddie asked, turning toward the grumbling Shailene. Just like that, the three of them became the most interesting people in Maddie's world.

Irritated by Maddie's sudden shift in interest, Quinn chimed in, “Okay, well being a trust fund baby is actually more successful.”

Fully aware that Quinn was about to unleash a vomit of words, Kallum picked up his IPA and let the chilled, amber liquid swim down his throat. Through the corner of his vision, Kallum saw Emi violently sucking the contents of her Mai Tai through her straw.

“Truth be told, I actually paid for both their tuition, so I'm kinda the reason they're successful,” Quinn rambled. “Plus, if you marry me then *technically* you could inherit *all* of our wealth cause Kallum is my cousin, and they got this whole polyamorous threesome thing going on.”

Kallum choked on his beer and Emi spat her drink through her straw with the pressure of a power washer, shooting droplets across the table. Maddie flinched as a few made their way to her cheek, evidenced by a slight smear in her foundation.

“Threesome is insane, Quinn,” Shailene said dryly. “You need to chill.”

“Whatever, just make sure *you* marry Kallum if you don't do the Utah Mormon shit.” Quinn continued without a hint of remorse, “Anyways, we're about to head out. I'll tell Maddie where to drop you guys off.” He turned to her, pointing at Shailene, “Shailene's in Brentwood, and-”

“No!”

Shailene leaped up and cut Quinn off with a display of frantic emotion that Kallum hadn't seen before, startling everyone, save Maddie who was unaware of this. Shailene immediately composed herself and quickly checked her phone's display.

“There's still so much more time left in the day,” she explained. “It's not even midnight. Let's go for a walk or something?”

“Shailene, it's still raining,” Emi chided.

“Still?” Shailene asked frantically. “Maybe we can go to Kallum's place?”

“Kallum?” Quinn asked and tugged slightly on Maddie's hip, hinting he'd like to 'borrow his room'.

“Ew, no. You are not doing that on my bed.” Emi retorted.

Kallum shrugged at Quinn, who rolled his eyes in response.

“Fine,” Quinn threw his hands up, “let's just go back to my place. Queen Shailene always gets her way.”

It didn't take long to reach Quinn's place in Culver City. Halfway between Shailene's apartment in Brentwood, and Kallum and Emi's apartment in Inglewood, Culver City tended to be the choice spot for outings.

Kallum stepped into the familiar, ornamental foyer that split the condo between an excessively furnished living room and the hallway that branched into master and guest bedrooms. The five slipped off their shoes and funneled into the living room—Maddie oohing and ahing over the spacious room rarely found in Los Angeles.

Kallum and Emi immediately planted themselves on a conspicuously luxurious love seat on the other end of the room that Quinn dubbed ‘The Kami Couch’; a play on their name. He said it was a gift for the two, but Quinn insisted that it would stay in his condo.

Shailene, less acquainted with the place, took a seat on the well-used, center couch next to Kallum, scrunching her face in dissatisfaction with the substantial, yet surprisingly clean, clutter in the living room. Shelves, end tables, standing lamps, and furniture Kallum couldn't name sprawled about the room with no apparent unifying aesthetic, aside from being clearly expensive. The space felt more like a furniture showroom than a true living room.

Quinn flopped onto the other end of the couch alongside Maddie, who basically sat in his lap and ran fingers through his hair, appearing more affectionate now that she had seen the condo. Shailene scooted away. Kallum felt an awkwardness creeping in, confused why the five were even here right now.

Shailene checked her phone once again before breaking the silence.

“Odds?” she asked.

“I’ll get the beer,” Emi said, eager to break the uncomfortable atmosphere, and got up from the Kami Couch to disappear into the kitchen.

Kallum wasn’t particularly keen on drinking more after rapidly downing his IPA before leaving the bar. However, just as Quinn mentioned earlier: Queen Shailene always gets her way. The alternative is almost never worth the headache. So, the cracking sounds of carbonation escaping aluminum cans filled the room, and the games began.

“Quinn,” Emi began, “ten-to-one you keep your grubby hands off Maddie for the next hour.”

“Whatever,” Quinn groaned while rolling his eyes, but he pulled away from Maddie. “I’m gonna get you so fucked up now,” he threatened.

“Oh yeah?” Emi taunted back.

Sure enough Quinn followed through, and as the night marched on, Emi’s face steadily morphed into a concerningly deep crimson. Kallum had always noticed Quinn could be deceptively strong-willed when it involved Emi; the product of childhood friendship.

“Ahhhh,” Emi groaned while shaking her empty can. Her red face burned with frustration and abruptly swiveled to Kallum with a pleading look to fetch more. It had come time to cut her off. She’d just lost to *Shailene*, two-to-one odds, trying to guess what Quinn likes most about Maddie—having never lost a Quinn bet to Shailene before—and her biggest concern was more booze. The answer, by the way, was Maddie’s feet.

“My turn,” Kallum said, ignoring Emi. “Quinn, fair odds on who Maddie thinks has the most impressive job.”

“Kallum,” Quinn shouted at Maddie, clearly accepting. The poor girl recoiled slightly. Sitting on Quinn’s lap, her ear was inches away.

“Shailene,” Kallum said.

“Bzzzt!” Maddie drunkenly made an X with her arms and pointed at Emi. “It’s her.”

The shock must’ve been visible on Kallum’s face since Maddie shrugged and said, “I dunno, I think women in medicine are pretty badass.” Perhaps she was a bit more likable than Kallum gave her credit for.

His drink nearly empty, Kallum got up from the Kami Couch to grab another beer to serve the deserved punishment. Quinn shook an empty can as he did so, signaling him to grab a second.

It was now Shailene’s turn.

“Kallum,” she called out as he turned the corner to the bar. “You’ll like this one.”

Shailene’s voice instantly sharpened into a sinister blade that he could hear from behind the cabinets.

“Emi, one to ten *thousand* you’re hiding something *nasty* from Kallum.”

Casually, Kallum opened the fridge and grabbed two cans of Modelo. Seems like Shailene had a bit too much to drink and was starting a particularly dirty catfight. He’d cut her off, but this honestly wasn’t a novel situation.

Kallum turned the corner.

In fact, it was a novel situation. Emi's face was frozen with unease, not the usual irritation. A cacophony of emotions ran across Shailene's face that Kallum couldn't even try to comprehend. Understandably, Maddie seemed caught between eager and uncomfortable with the drama that was promised to unfold. But, most concerning of all, Quinn's face took a serious tone.

"W-what do you mean?" Kallum sputtered. "What's going on?"

"Nothing!" Shailene cackled. "Only that your girlfriend has been lying to you for, what? Two? Three years?" Shailene turned to Kallum, her pupils dilated with mania. Kallum had never seen her like this. Ever.

"You think you know her? Cute, little UCLA med student. Hah! Let's ask her what she did in Japan that summer," She turned back toward Emi and loomed over her. The red tinge had completely drained from Emi's face.

"What the fuck do you know about that?" Quinn shouted, aggressively leaping to his feet. Maddie covered her mouth with both hands.

"We weren't dating then," Kallum said, fumbling around the conversation.

"Oh, it's way beyond that, Kallum," Shailene snarled. "You better fess up Emi. Not much time left." Shailene waved her phone—displaying 11:59 P.M—tauntingly in one hand and placed the other on a lump beneath her blouse.

Emi looked like she was drowning, gasping for air.

The room felt like a hostile tundra. No one, Maddie included, spoke up, but the silence broke by the alarm on Shailene's phone. "Bzzzt! Time's up, Emi!" The mania in Shailene's voice was now blended with rage.

Suddenly, a red hue glimmered in the air just in front of Kallum, spinning rapidly and accumulating in size, warping the space around as it folded into the sphere; now, a purple hue began to emerge.

"She's a *mage* Kallum. She does *magic*. She's been lying to you *all* these years! Look!" None of that mattered.

Shailene's words reached his ears, but Kallum couldn't see a thing. He was somewhere else. Thirteen years in the past. Formless memories of his father burst forth from its repressed cage, deep in his memory. Frustration, elation, tedium, vitriol, and wonder were the most tangible elements within the mental stew.

The hues continued spinning rapidly, solidifying into the shape of a large purple marble, with a red, gaseous core that kept the angular momentum; just floating. The sight was otherworldly. Magical.

Memories solidified. The thousands—no, it was millions—of candles lit in that dreary basement. The burn on his hand, daring to push beyond his father's instruction. And the sting of lashes inflicted to solidify he would never do so again. The emotional river swelled and the dam burst. Tears fell from his eyes.

"I— I thought I was alone."

Kallum reached out and grabbed the sphere.

Reality slowly returned. And with it, a scene that carved itself deep into Kallum's vulnerable brain: Shailene holding a revolver, finger on the trigger.

Aimed at Emi.

But the gunshot never followed. Instead, Shailene was looking at Kallum with an expression of horror, dread, and fear that only arrives from discovering the person you cherish most is gone.

The crystal clear scene melted into a blur for Kallum. Maddie fainted. Shailene fled, dropping the revolver. A shot must have gone off because the cops came later that night—a fortunate turn of events. The one thing Kallum remembered clearly was that Emi and Quinn didn't even so much as glance in Kallum's direction. Instead, facing each other with the same frightful face, they reached out to grab the floating, multicolored marbles.

And they started violently seizing.

Chapter 2

“Kallum. I’m not going to the hospital,” Emi insisted, pressing a towel-wrapped ice pack on her bruised temple. She sat hunched over on the familiar guest bed in Quinn’s condo, focusing on her swaying white strands of hair while the room spun. Emi was trying her best to not puke right now..

There was a sound of hinges creaking, leading to a click. The door had closed. Soft footsteps approached her, and then, a thump. Emi felt the bed sag slightly. Kallum was here to comfort her.

“I’m just worried,” he said. His hand carefully approached Emi’s back to rub it gently. A benign display of affection that helped no one.

“Please don’t touch me.”

Kallum instantly retracted his hand.

“I’m fine.”

Physically, at least. Emi suffered a small bruise from hitting the floor, but the oncoming hangover was more pressing to her than the ‘seizure’ Kallum described. In actuality, the seizing was the result of information about a quest for *New Magic* getting uploaded to her brain in milliseconds; a broadcast signed by Talitia—a name she knew nothing about. However, emotionally, Emi was a mess.

Shortly after regaining control of her body, it was hijacked by a crippling panic. A panic that Emi hadn’t experienced since she first started dating Kallum years ago. And Kallum, bless his heart, was never good at handling those. Surprisingly, the cops that arrived were actually useful and had some moderate training in alleviating panic attacks. After a quick and dry interrogation, Emi retreated to the solitary guest room while Kallum and Quinn helped extract an unconscious Maddie.

“Can we talk?” Kallum asked.

Emi silently continued to focus on the contrasting black and white strands of hair swaying with the room.

“Like, about the mage stuff,” Kallum continued.

Emi flinched. It was the last thing she wanted to talk about. She’d so desperately tried to forget. Meeting Kallum let her do that. He made her feel normal. That she was capable of love and deserving of living a normal life. More than that, Emi—the once hollow carapace—blossomed into someone new.

“I never told you either, Emi.”

It’s not even close to comparable. Frankly, Emi didn’t even care if Kallum was a mage, or if he hid it; he wasn’t *really* a mage. Magic was an inconsequential part of his life. Emi knew this with absolute certainty. Kallum would occasionally have a bounce in his step, get depressed on bad days, but most importantly, he always empathetically cared for those around him; even strangers. Kallum cared about *people*.

“Can... Can I show you?” he asked.

A vicious question. She wanted nothing more than to dissociate and sleep, pretending the last hour was simply a nightmare left to fade in the morning. But 'no' died on her lips and she nodded instead. There was a sensitive vulnerability in his voice that spoke louder than his words. This was important to Kallum, and Emi would not deny him that.

The bed pushed upward, now free of Kallum's weight, but she kept her sight trained downward, now counting the stray fuzzballs in the carpet. Emi heard the door squeak open and reflexively played with the Guide Stone in her pocket, dispensing her anxiety through fidgeting. As far as stress-relievers go, the object was stunning: a forest green outer shell with a light-gray mist uniformly swirling within. Only, for Emi, the sight would just send her over the edge; so in the pocket it remains.

Kallum returned, evident from the click of the door, and kneeled before Emi. He was holding a large, half-melted, red candle wrapped in silver ornamental wiring. Instantly, a gentle flame appeared, and at last, Emi shifted her gaze upward.

The flickering, warm hue danced across Kallum's face while he kept his emerald eyes trained on the flame. A compassionate, yet wistful, smile, born from deep within his heart, stared back at Emi. Kallum was smiling.

As quickly as it appeared, it was gone. The flame extinguished into a pitiful smoke trail and Kallum walked across the room to set down the candle on a stock IKEA dresser. Emi's eyes tracking him all the while.

Kallum returned to sit with Emi and gave the candle a sentimental look.

"That's all I can really do," he said mournfully. "You don't have to... ya know. Just when you feel ready." And then he turned to look at her.

Kallum was smiling.

In a surge of anger, Emi flung herself on him and pressed his shoulders down to make him submit. Collapsing onto the bed, the target of her affection let out a small yelp. She coiled her arms around him and pulled up towards the tendon between his neck and shoulder, dragging her pelvis across his hips. Full of rage, she sunk her claws deeper into his back, desperately trying to make contact with the skin protected by thin fabric.

"Woah—Emi. You okay?" he asked, hesitantly reciprocating with hands gently resting on her lower back.

Neck craned towards his ear, she let go a feverish breath, laced with alcohol.

"I'll show you what I can do," she whispered and—not so playfully—bit down on his neck. He made a small yelp.

She wanted to hurt him. She wanted him to feel a fraction of the pain she felt. Vitriolic fury ascended to sadistic ecstasy. She wanted to make him *bleed*. So that's exactly what happened as her teeth pierced the fragile layer of skin.

"Ow! FUCK!" He yelled and threw her off.

"What the *fuck* is wrong with you?" Kallum screamed. "Are you like a vampire? Am I a vampire now?" A vibration of terror made his voice shake.

“No,” Emi said, regaining her sense of self.

Avoiding eye contact, Emi placed her hand atop the jagged wound on Kallum’s neck. Thick liquid pooled to the surface and clung to the palm. A tingling sensation in Emi’s head made her stomach feel uneasy, but as she pulled away, all that remained was the wet blood on her hand.

“Woah...”

Kallum traced his finger along the non-existent wound inflicted moments ago, flinching slightly with pain as he did so; imperfect once again. She felt his gaze but refused to meet it. He sounded so innocent and full of wonder, yet Emi felt absolutely disgusting.

She balled the sheets in her fist and vainly tried to shove the bed away, Kallum along with it, only to find her back now against the mahogany headboard. Softening her grip and hugging her legs close to her chest, Emi kept her eye level low, just above the knees.

“Traditional Restoration Magic,” Emi muttered.

“Can you teach me?” Kallum asked softly.

Emi let out a dry wheeze. If he had a child-like ignorance before, it had been downgraded to infantile. The two lovers were at opposite ends of the queen-sized bed, but the distance felt like the Atlantic Ocean. Two continents that were cleaved and ripped away from each other, leaving a volcanic scar.

“I can’t,” Emi replied. “Magic is hereditary, genetic. You’re born with it, you can’t teach it,” she explained, feeling that she owed him at least that much. A reality check to snuff out the dangerous optimism budding within Kallum.

“Is it?” Kallum asked, desperately trying to protect the sapling that Emi threatened to crush. He repositioned himself sitting criss-cross on the bed, body fully facing Emi head-on. She kept her eyes trained on his chest.

“My dad only ever taught me how to light a candle,” he continued. “I taught myself how to put it out.”

A painful silence followed.

It must have been a minute. The time that the two sat motionless—completely enveloped in their separate realities—before Kallum pushed through the barrier, crawling to Emi’s side of the mattress, threatening to invade her world. But he didn’t.

“I can tell this is hard for you, Emi,” Kallum said, pulling past her field of view. Emi felt the headboard give slightly as Kallum leaned against it, sitting an arm’s distance away. Close, but not too close. “We can take it as slow as you want, but I want to do this together.”

Emi laughed, “You can not be serious.”

The infantile candle boy aspiring to fight for the *New Magic* stirred a sadistic amusement inside her; like watching a spider pointlessly scurry for survival when the only outcome is beneath a shoe. But then, Emi remembered she loved that stupid, helpless spider. The hostile smirk faded and coldness set in. She pulled her knees tight and buried her face.

“Do you remember,” Kallum began, “when I geeked out during Welcome week over the choreo stuff?” His voice was soft and sentimental.

Emi nodded, face glued to the fabric of her pants.

Time slipped for a second and Emi stumbled into a simple memory. A destitute, white room in the student union, co-opted by the freestyle club, filled with more shouting voices than pieces of furniture. Kallum’s loose clothes and formerly brown hair swayed with each expressively infuriated gesture. The club president had just denied Kallum’s request for a show battle and he would be doing a choreographed piece with Emi instead. The deadline was less than a week away.

“I caved 'cause you were chillin’ the whole time,” Kallum said, bringing Emi to the present. “So, I thought you knew a thing or two about choreography.”

Kallum let out a sincere chuckle, so full of life it made Emi’s heart twitch.

“We fucking bombed that performance so hard.”

“Your fault.”

“Okay, yeah I crashed hard, but that’s cause you forgot your cue.” Kallum playfully jabbed back.

Emi peeled her face from her legs with the most minuscule slant in the corner of her mouth. She rested her chin on her legs as Kallum, bless his heart, continued trying to pull their worlds back together.

“But, I think... Well, I didn’t really care,” Kallum said. “And I don’t think you cared either.”

The fond memory of the two of them—*just* the two of them—laughing together on the campus lawn minutes after sprung to the surface of Emi’s consciousness. It was just before they started dating. She remembered every detail of that moment.

How Kallum shyly adjusted his breaking cap when she mentioned how the audience got a *good* look at his ass. A burning redness in her face when Kallum pointed out all the guys staring at her bouncing chest while popping. Distractingly powerful wafts of cheap pepperoni pizza from the overhyped place in the union that every freshman lives off. The insanely random realization that a stray tuft of Kallum’s brown hair perfectly lined up with the bushes running across the lawn. Then the warm feeling of patting it down herself. How insufferable the itchy grass was, which Emi endured to share just one more joke between the two of them.

“That was definitely one of the best weeks of my life,” Kallum muttered lightly, as if to himself.

At long last, Emi turned her head.

Kallum was sitting, much like she was, arms crossed over his knees and chin resting on his forearms, gazing forward into the past. His shaggy white hair lightly covered his wet, green eyes.

“We had no God damn clue what we were doing, but we just went for it. No school, no classes, just that tiny black room with shitty ventilation for hours on end.”

Emi intently watched the twists and turns of Kallum's lips as he spoke, before returning to her own post of vigilantly watching the end of this queen bed the two shared.

"With that weird stain in the corner and the ants," Emi said. "How could I forget? You made it smell so bad in there."

"And you *actually* brought a desk in to research choreo on your laptop. I couldn't stop laughing."

"You laugh but it worked, dummy. We started making progress after that."

"Okay, but that fact you needed a desk for that cracks me up."

A blanket of silence settled on the couple. This one was welcome. A soft heat spread through Emi's chest.

"I fell in love in that room you know," Kallum said.

Unquantifiable emotions bubbled within Emi and leaked into reality through her eyes. How badly she needed to hear those words right now.

"We blindly leapt into darkness," he said. "Together. Without reason. I did breaking and you did hip-hop. There weren't any guides to follow or routines to copy."

Kallum paused and his voice was shaky. The emotional rumbling within Emi was likely stirring inside him as well. He took a deep breath and composed himself before continuing.

"It's so cheesy, but we braved that stupid frontier together and argued so much over things we had no idea about, trying to make the best of what we already knew. We pushed each other so deep into this unfamiliar territory and blindly relied on each other's suggestions that had no basis. Even though we botched that performance we came up with such a beautiful routine. That—that experience is what made me fall in love with you Emi."

Emi lost control of her body. In an instant, her lips connected with Kallum and pressed her face so deeply into his that it captured just a fraction of the love she felt for this man who had ripped her away from the hellish life of magic she once lived. The moment she pulled away, Kallum's soft, wet eyes gazed up at her as she straddled her hips atop his.

Emi watched Kallum's lips move, "I think this... I think what happened, magic, Is another frontier for us to explore. Together."

"I want to figure it out with the girl I love," Kallum said.

A vile curiosity, desperate to crush Emi, caused her mouth to move on its own, "Talitia,"—whoever that was—"told us everything though. What are we figuring out?"

"Huh?"

The magical moment cut to reality.

"What?"

Kallum, the comfortable bed, and his firm lower abs pulled away from beneath her pelvis. The 'this' he wanted to do together was so drastically different from the 'this' that Emi had in her mind. Of course it was. Kallum never received the mental broadcast that she had. That's why he was by her side the moment she began to seize. The distance between

them was greater than the few meters between Emi standing tall atop the bed and the child lying beneath.

“I’m gonna take off my makeup and shower now,” she said. “It might take a while.”

“Okay,” Kallum said as Emi stepped off the bed, leaving him lying alone.

“I love you.”

“I love you too,” Emi replied, twisting the handle of the matching mahogany door and stepping out of the room and back into her own, grimy world.

She might have slammed the door a bit too aggressively, but she wouldn’t ever know because the next thing Emi remembered was painfully scraping her face with wipes in a vain attempt to cleanse the emotional dirt tainting her soul. It was ignorant to believe for even a second that they inhabited the same reality.

Devoid of the faint mask she wore on a daily basis, Emi looked into the mirror and the real *her* stared back. The mage sold into slavery. The mage who led her family into a brutal massacre in a fit of revenge. Once she felt enough contempt for the image in the mirror, she pulled away and turned on the shower, hoping to purge the filth inside.

Time became incoherent as Emi sat huddled under the beating water clutching her naked body. It dawned on her that the only reason the two had been picked for that Welcome Week performance was because Shailene was truant at that pivotal meeting. She was the better dancer after all. It was only because Quinn let it slip to the prez that she was interested in Kallum that they were paired. In another world, Shailene would be lying next to the love of her life, playfully drawing shapes on his rigid chest, naked in that guest bed.

“Whore,” Emi said blindly. Somehow her vicious thoughts leaked into words. The raining water pelted her exposed, huddled back.

Yet, Emi refused to let it break her. Two years ago—one year if she was being realistic—it would have crushed her. Emi was stronger now. With years of counseling, insufficient as it might be, Emi would not cave to the vile creations her mind brewed. Kallum loved her, not anyone else, and she would never let that go. Her new self was proof of that.

Emi stood and faced the shower head, letting the water rinse her defenseless face and run down her fragile skin. She’d been given an opportunity no one else could attempt. No matter how violently she scrubbed herself, the filth of her past would remain, but Emi had the chance to fertilize the ignorant budding optimism in Kallum.

Abruptly, Emi cut off the stream of water and stepped out with a new profound sense of purpose. No matter how corrupt or tainted her soul might be, she would lay her life down to support the loving man who gave her the chance to live.

It had been a considerable amount of time, Emi realized, since she stepped into the shower because when she returned to the guest room, Kallum was fast asleep. The ceiling lights still harshly filled the room. Emi realized that he must have been waiting for her.

Kallum was awkwardly contorted on the side of the bed with his cracked iPhone resting a hair's width away from his half-open palm. Emi delicately walked, heel-to-ball, over and draped the end blanket over his vulnerable body. Retracing her steps, she shut off the lights and entered the hallway, closing the door behind her.

Not so delicately pacing over to the master bedroom, Emi swung the door open. The spacious room was dimly lit by a single lamp on a modern-looking nightstand from IKEA. A litter of beer cans populated the surface, with one loosely held in a hand. The hand of a questionably conscious sleaze with half-open eyes.

"We're gonna do it." Emi said, accidentally raising her voice a few decibels too loud.

Quinn raised his head with a tilt. Vacant brown eyes trained on Emi. "You are?" he muttered, lost in an alcoholic daze. "What if it's a hoax?"

"I don't care."

After a brief delay, Quinn slid out of the bed. Completely nude, he—and a grotesquely used sock—fell to the floor and pathetically crawled over to a disorganized pile of clothes. Emi kept her eyes trained on Quinn, completely unfazed. His naked, thin frame and abhorable, vile behavior was not novel to her.

"What are you doing?" Emi calmly asked.

Quinn fished through the pants he'd worn that evening and fished out his Guide Stone. A magically translucent gray outer shell with a motionless pink mist filling the core. He held it out for Emi to take.

"Fine," Quinn said. "No shot I'm falling for this shit."

Bristling with anger, Emi took three powerful strides toward the pathetic excuse of a man and kicked his face into the pile of clothes.

Emi spat at Quinn, physically and verbally, "No. Fuck you. We is me and you."

Quinn spun his head and gave Emi a malicious glare. He meekly pulled his naked body on all fours.

"I gave up on magic. I thought you did too," Quinn shot back. His voice was full of vitriol and a twang of betrayal.

"I changed my mind. Kallum is actually pure. Like a child," Emi said. "He might be the only mage in the world that deserves this New Magic"

"Ya, I know," Quinn said, as he slowly started rummaging through the discarded pile of clothes. His wiry limbs digging through the heap conjured the image of a bug searching a pile of shit.

"How the fuck do you know that?" Emi said. Heart started bubbling with rage. "Did you know he was a mage?"

"Of course I did," Quinn hissed, at last finding a pair of used boxers to don. "Why do you think my aunt adopted him?"

Emi froze with terror. Her heart was growing way too brittle from the rapid shifts in moods tonight. She slowly began to doubt herself. Had Kallum suffered at the hands of the Cullbrook family like her?

“No. Not like you,” Quinn said, reading Emi’s mind. “He was raised normally, away from the main family.”

Emi watched silently as Quinn pulled up the musty undergarments as he stood. His figure was mostly shrouded in darkness, with his toned shoulders catching the rim of the dim light. However, it was a brief moment. His unruly, blonde hair draped down and cut off the light like a curtain.

“They banned us from speaking to him about magic.” Quinn followed with an uncomfortably humorous tone, “The sole act of kindness within the Cullbrook lineage.”

Then, Emi felt Quinn adopt a refreshingly serious composure.

“I’m not doing it, Emi,” Quinn said firmly. “It’s stupid. I can’t use magic, Kallum can’t use magic. We’ll just die. *Kallum* will die.”

“Quinn,” Emi said softly. “You’ve given me a life of freedom, an impossible dream for someone like me.” She gently rested her delicate hand atop Quinn’s shoulder. Emi gave a soft look into his murky brown eyes. She could tell he was tense from the slight twitch of the nose when she touched him.

“Because of you,” Emi began while dragging her fingers lightly across his neck and up to Quinn’s sharply defined chin, “I discovered what it means to live. The joy of laughter. The warmth of another.”

“I found love.” Emi said, tucking a few stray hairs behind Quinn’s ear, lovingly gazing into his hazel eyes. His face was tense, suddenly aware of the imminent threat.

Emi’s face scrunched inward, pulled by the gravity of rage. Her hand immediately followed. Palm on Quinn’s cheek, her thumb instantly found itself thrust deep inside his eye socket, leading to a satisfying squish.

“Fuck!” Quinn flopped to the ground in pain, clinging to his bleeding eye.

“You also made my life a living *fuckin*g hell,” Emi snarled, completely unrecognizable as the composed girl in the bar earlier. She bent down and stared into Quinn’s tearful good eye while writhing in pain. He wasn’t afraid of her. Emi knew that. He was only afraid of himself.

With a frigid expression and lips lined with poison, Emi whispered, “It took so long before I could be *intimate* with Kallum.”

A stake to the heart.

Emi watched Quinn’s body grow still and close his eyes. There was no fight left in him. Death seemed more preferable to him at this point. Emi knew she had driven the point home and would not grant Quinn the escape he so desperately craved. She brushed her fingers along his gouged eye and felt the irritating tingle in her head.

Emi stood.

She had made her point crystal clear. The despondent man below was on board with her mission. Eye perfectly healed, he remained silent as she began to walk away.

“What if Kallum dies?” he asked. It was an honest question born from an overwhelming fear.

“You love him too, and you want to protect him. So why don’t you try using your magic and find out what happens,” Emi said.

She set her bloody hand on the doorknob.

“I faced my shit. Now it’s your turn.”

She looked back at Quinn, huddled next to a tiny pool of blood. He looked so incredibly pathetic. “You’re not your father,” Emi whispered. A bit of compassion to the boy that raised her. Then, she stepped into the hallway, closing the door to leave Quinn alone with his thoughts.

Chapter 3

Shailene sat next to the malformed, concrete mountain jutting from the sidewalk and idly fiddled with the hidden compartment in her boot. She'd been staring at the texts she received this morning for the past thirty minutes. She pulled her body—clad in a tight black jumpsuit and leather overcoat—inward, cradling her phone like a feeble bird in her lap.

The texts were from Kallum.

She hadn't replied, pondering over what possible response she could give for last night, and now the sun was setting. Shadows born from the discarded wooden planks, jutting from deteriorating chain-linked fences, now threatened to consume this back street of LA.

“What you doin’?”

The deep voice found Shailene in a vulnerable moment, catching her unprofessionally off-guard. The man's dark, middle-aged face was peering over her shoulder, trying to grasp what could make Shailene bundle over in agony.

“Checking the time.” Shailene said, standing up and brushing off nonexistent dust from her jumpsuit to feign newfound composure. The man—codename Yokohama—was nearly familial to Shailene, despite not knowing his real name. Yokohama was dressed in flexible, black clothes that tightly hugged his muscular frame but were considerably more decorative than Shailene's. Silver buckle suspenders peaked under an dragon embroidered leather jacket and matching, ornate tattoo running up the left side of his face, underneath his circular, tainted glasses. For better or worse, she learned everything about fashion from Yokohama.

“You're late, by the way,” Shailene said, trying to regain her professional composure.

“No way to talk to superiors, K.C.,” Yokohama said. K.C. standing for Kansas City, where Shailene completed her inaugural kill at age 14. They don't get names before then.

“Promoted? When?” asked Shailene as she stuck her hands and phone into her jacket, leaning on one hip and watching the cars pass behind Yokohama in the vanishing sunlight.

“Nah,” Yokohama replied, pulling out a pack of Malboros and plucking out a cigarette with his black gloves. “You got demoted.”

He rolled the cylinder of tobacco between his fingers with a solemn expression before settling it between his white teeth. Shailene held her gaze behind him, completely unfazed, while he pulled out a silver lighter and sparked it near his mouth. The trail of embers rivaled the fading daylight.

“Failed your hit. D-class too.” Yokohama let out a dramatic puff of smoke. “Not like you.” He paused for a bit watching the smoke dissipate in the wind. Then, he fiddled with his jacket pocket.

“Lucky I doubled up, otherwise this job’d be done.” He pulled out two Guide Stones from his pocket. They needed two to track the current hit. “Real damage is leaving the two Es.” Yokohama said. “Not like you.”

“There’s an E-class?” Shailene asked, shocked by the news. D-class had always been reserved for the least threatening mages, not that it made them any less of a sociopathic fiend. Some of the most vile, like Dahmer, were Ds; they just tended to get caught. It seemed strange to consider Quinn as E-class though, considering his family name—Cullbrook—had come up in a briefing before.

“Is now. Ton of em too,” Yokohama said, pausing to inhale another cloud of tobacco before continuing. “Almost all faiths. Didn’t know magic existed till they seized up. Can’t even use it.” His voice started to trail off, “Most’ll be dead end of this month.”

The words hung like poison in the air. Shailene stared beyond the empty street, hoping to connect with any remaining emotional processes in her brain to adequately process the weight of Yokohama’s premonition.

“How many?” Shailene asked, failing to connect with her emotions. A chilling breeze flew by as the last rays of sunlight dipped below the horizon, though there were no trees to capture its motion; only piles of trash and Yokohama’s tight braids.

“U.S.? Ten thousand. Elsewhere, I dunno.” He took a deep pull of the cigarette, as if trying to reignite his frozen heart, though Shailene knew it was far too late for that—for both of them.

At least, so she thought.

“That bother you?” Yokohama asked, turning his dark, expressionless face towards her, gaze piercing through his overly tinted glasses.

Shailene found her neck rigidly locked downward, gripping the phone in her pocket with frightening strength. A surprising, yet predictable reaction. The answer was in the sender of those texts.

“I dunno.” Shailene shrugged off the stiff muscles and rolled her neck, surveying the dusky lit scene once more. Nearly two blocks deep off the main street, a nearly empty lot stood across from her, sprinkled with loose trash that managed to sail over the meager chain-linked fencing.

Eager to escape the interrogation and her feelings, Shailene bounded towards the empty lot with a steady speed. She lept off her left foot with considerable force, sinking her right foot deep into the bend of the fence, about half-way up. Holding the top firmly with both hands, Shailene converted the rebounding force, plus some, into upward momentum resulting in a clean somersault into the lot. Yokohama landed a second later.

The two calmly walked toward a discarded pair of trousers in the back of the lot. Delicately lifting the dirt caked leg, Yokohama slid out an innocuous black zip-bag. Inside, a stock iPhone and key for himself, and for Shailene: nothing. She frowned.

“Not much we can do,” Yokohama explained, noticing Shailene’s dissatisfaction. “Operation began last night. Multiple hits on A-class world-wide tonight. Resources are thin.”

“Not that,” Shailene said. She looked down at her boot resting atop the dead grass and wiggled it. “I have this, but I lost my revolver.” Her complete lack of shame in admission caught her wildly off-guard.

“Wanna run point?” Yokohama asked, disregarding Shailene’s humiliating confession. He was busy rapidly flinging through text and images on the burner phone.

“Yeah, of course.”

Yokohama reached into his leather coat and pulled out a 6-chamber revolver, then loosely tossed it over to Shailene without taking his eyes off the phone. She caught it with ease, paying no mind to gun safety; it didn’t matter. If a mistake happened, it meant you didn’t belong in this field of work. Pocketing it opposite of her phone, the two acrobatically crossed back over the fence and briefed on the way to their destination.

Their target was a C-class mage. Type: Faith. Ability: 5-second precognition. The goal was to extract his son, an A-class with 15-minute precognition, and detain him under their watch. The MNA would benefit immensely from a 15-minute human alarm. Might even override Shailene’s demotion.

Detailed information on them was sparse. A lesser agent—rather anyone other than Shailene—would be uncomfortable with that. Faith types drastically varied in their manifested ability compared to Biomancers or Artisans. So much so, that there’s barely a unifying feature other than their sociopathic, parental-induced delusions. But Shailene knew *magas*. That’s all she needed to know because they all worked the same.

They approached their destination: an abandoned butcher warehouse. The run-down building was slightly meager as far as warehouses go, but it was impressive among the caved-in single-story huts and empty lots around. Black tarps and sheets covered the windows, hiding the light, if any, inside the building.

The plan was straightforward. Shailene would distract the C-class while Yokohama extracts the A-class separately. All of this predicated on the mage keeping his son in a confinement room, but given the set of abilities, it was over 100% certainty.

The sun had long since fallen below the low, dilapidated L.A. skyline, and in this particular area of the city, the air sat abruptly still. Ball-to-heel, Shailene and Yokohama walked perfectly in step across the dying, littered lawn so as not to double their chance of being overheard. Stopping around halfway along the side of the warehouse, Shailene led the charge and pushed slightly through the black-tarped window.

The interior was dimly lit with a profoundly musty odor. Despite the dilapidating structure, the contents of the building were well-maintained; typical of Faiths. The window

opened to a straight hall with a refurbished wooden door left slightly ajar on the left and a series of industrial windows spanning the entire right side.

Behind those windows, a room vaguely resembling a slaughterhouse kitchen was repurposed with intricate mechanical contraptions that had no apparent purpose. Then behind yet another set of industrial windows, a blurry outline of a boy slumped against a sterile wall.

Shailene signaled she was entering and pushed through a tiny hole in the window, diving through and rolling across the floor deliberately trying to widen the time and area of impact, diffusing any noise. Naturally, she did not make a sound.

However, she caught a distant voice just barely pushing past the door and into Shailene's ear. "Intruders," it said.

As Shailene now expected, Yokohama was not as delicate as her and landed perpendicular with his dive-roll. Fortunately, the objective was already located on the right. Shailene readied the revolver in her right hand as Yokohama dashed down and around the hallway to his objective. She was on her own now.

Through the door, an all-consuming blackness enveloped Shailene, but the gentle edges of light from the hallway gave her enough sight to grasp the original purpose of this room. Steel shelves lined with canned food were bolted to the dilapidating wall immediately next to her. It was an aisle for a meat grocery. Not so subtle footsteps bounced across the room. Shailene couldn't place a solid read on the distance, but it was a slow gait, maybe thirty paces from reaching her.

Closing her eyes and fully submitting to the darkness, Shailene's ears trained the gun on the mage's location. After a calculated second, the steps halted. Scuffs and clattering followed, giving her the impression that the mage took cover.

"God! It's not him, you pussy," said a gruff voice. Shailene kept her arm, trained in the exact spot for another five calculated seconds before letting loose an ear shattering gunshot that bounced off the echoey metal walls.

"Ahh!" a meeker voice screamed. "We should hide, maybe it's—"

The voice was cut off by a silence heard even through the ringing in Shailene's ears. Cut off by the voice *five seconds earlier*. She now had a full model of the mage's mind, with only a few creases left to iron out. Issues so minute, they could be solved through dialogue. A staggered dialogue.

Shailene began to formulate a distinct thought. One that would be vocalized five seconds later. *Hand over the guide stone and I'll leave in peace*. It was a lie, but—

"Why would I do that?" the bodiless voice asked, responding to the demand that had yet to leave her lips. But now, she decided that those words would never be spoken. Five seconds passed once again. She'd changed *his* future.

That answered crease one.

She'd let the stagger drop a bit, four seconds this time. Her mind empty for a moment, stalling her mental processes before focusing on a concrete response. She

decided to play the part of a fool. A stupid, silly girl that stumbled into a magical world. A vague notion of what she was about to say bubbled to the surface. It—

“Then why are you here? How did you find me?” The darkness questioned.

I'm not a mage.

He beat her to the punch. Crease two.

Right then, Shailene's mind twitched and her lips moved on her own, “I wanna know what it was like. To touch one.” There was no care put into the crafting of those words. It was a mental reaction, pure and simple, to the words the mage uttered. And they were not cut short. She beat him this time.

The final crease.

Shailene knew exactly how to kill the Faith and rid the world of this deluded mind. She did not know when, and she did not know what it would be, but the mage, himself, would trigger his own death. Now, it was a waiting game.

“You won't so much as see my Guide Stone, much less touch it. Now leave,” the darkness called, footsteps slowly getting further away. She needed him close. A primal part of the brain took over, allowing Shailene the capacity to plead the mage for help.

“Please, I just need to know! I lost my boyfriend to it and—”

“Shut up you idiot, she's *lying*,” the bodiless voice howled. Stomping footsteps grew louder. “Ahh! We need to hide, he killed—” a meek voice shouted whilst the mage approached her. Repositioning slightly to cover the windows behind her, Shailene stood firm as the mage stepped from the black abyss and into the dim scraps of the hallway light.

“How did you find this place,” the man snarled. Yellow teeth captured most of the light, but sharp, jagged facial features—characterized by malnourishment—stuck out even in suffocating darkness.

After a heavy silence—Shailene honestly lacking a response—the man stepped closer, revealing a destitute head of hair, save for a few wisps. His beady eyes were jittery, though not from fear. Even though Shailene had a gun, he would see it coming; dangerous as a wet noodle.

“Leave. Now.” The ragged mage snarled yet again, almost within reaching distance of Shailene.

Questions concerning the worth of a mage who lets intruders stumble around their laboratories and muddying their research bubbled to the surface of Shailene's brain. It was time to spring the trap. The uniform trait among all the deplorables that Shailene sank her teeth into. A zealous pride for their magical research.

Before the words bubbled into her brain, the man snapped, throwing Shailene into the wall with his surprisingly modest weight. Her wrist caught the edge of a steel shelf, causing the revolver to clatter on the floor. Claspings Shailene's neck, he leaned his forearm into her shoulder pinning her here. He calmly stared into her eyes, while she kept her body limp and helpless. This wasn't the trigger.

“What do you know about my research,” he spat. Then, his eyes lingered down to the chest, growing wide and still as if he discovered a hidden prize. Malicious eyes caked with a disgustingly selfish hope trained on her stomach. Without question, Shailene understood what was operating under the mage’s simple mind. He’d just realized she was of child-bearing age and his last research project had been a failure. Their infiltration wouldn’t have worked otherwise. His son would have warned him of what unfolded.

A touch grazed Shailene’s hip and her mind went white. That was the trigger.

The mage ducked, releasing Shailene. She tumbled to the right, snagging the mage’s neck with her leg as he tried tumbling away. Muscles stiff, she yanked him to the floor with her. Constricting the mage in a headlock between her legs, Shailene easily snatched her fallen revolver, and after a careful count, 2.7 seconds exactly, she fired a bullet into the darkness. Darkness that was the head of the mage pinning her against the wall *five seconds ago*.

What followed was the harrowing death throes of a man watching the end of life approach, one second at a time. Calm, without emotion, the icy barrel of the gun rested its lips on the back of the neck, pressed against the brain stem. Then, a vomit of blood, flesh, and brain matter exploded onto her lap. Irritated, Shailene reached past the corpse and pulled out the pocket revolver hidden in her boot; she didn’t even need it.

“Worthless,” Shailene spat, now turning her attention elsewhere. Unfazed by the blood splatter and fleshy bits, she left the abyssal room and returned to the hallway. Yokohama was still visible behind the two layers of windows; strange. She jogged down the hallway, around and into the room with inexplicable contraptions with transparent tubes and chutes, turning again into the sterile containment room where Yokohama stood.

Past the metallic latch that resembled a safe more than a door, the contraptions became abundantly clear. A pale, thin boy—barely describable as living—leaned against a wall, chains on one wrist and IV drip in the other. The vacant look in his eyes could be traced back to the contraption, perfectly centered in the singular viewport out of this prison. It was an impossibly complex Rube Goldberg machine. One designed to last 15 minutes long. The control variable of his father’s research. *He was the experiment.*

“Quick work,” Yokohama said casually.

“Couldn’t tell between present and future,” Shailene replied. “Didn’t even need to use this,” waving the pocket revolver in her right hand then nodded toward the apprehended child.

Yokohama who shook his head.

“Won’t move. Even took its stone,” he said. Slowly walking over to Shailene. Her eyes were glued to the boy’s head. His hair was white. “Got no free will. It’s the real deal though. Puffy eyes and a dried tear.”

Sure enough, Shailene noticed a faint streak on his hollow face.

“Knows what’s gonna happen. Still won’t move.”

There was no ambiguity to his words. And it was a command from her *now* superior. She raised her pocket revolver at the boy, ready to shoot. It'd been done many times before, to children younger than him. Yet, this time, she had to *prepare* herself to pull the trigger; a breath to wipe away the surfacing images of Kallum. It would only take a second.

But that was already too long.

Ears pounding, Shailene's brain jostled in her skull, pounding it into her mind that the bloody, lifeless child was not Kallum. Her stiff arm slacked, and her left hand groped for the revolver that was now in Yokohama's outstretched hand. An unbelievable force of shame choked Shailene's conscious mind. It was over. She couldn't bounce back after that.

"Gonna have to report that," Yokohama said calmly. It would be more than a demotion. Two infractions in under twenty-four hours. This one with a *partner*. You don't hesitate in the field, no excuses. That's how you get killed. That's how you get your *team* killed.

In a foggy haze, Shailene trailed Yokohama through the warehouse and out onto the street. She couldn't say exactly how they left the building, if it was through the front or the way they came. All that existed were the last twenty-four hours airing in her head like a horror movie. Scene-by-scene her life dissolving away. Same as the mage earlier.

"It was a mercy, really," Yokohama said. "If that helps."

"I don't give a *fuck* about the kid," Shailene snapped back. Even the piercing cold gust through the street couldn't ice her temper. The rhythmic tapping of her boots launched into double-time. She wanted to be alone, scream till her lungs gave out, and tear a pillow in half. She wanted to go home.

"I know."

The voice tugged Shailene's heart back, slowing her pace back to match her partner. It was—by relative standards—extremely soft. A tone last heard four years ago.

"You should know," Yokohama said, "Volyaska twins are in L.A."

"Since when?"

"Six months ago. Same time we caught wind of this." Yokohama emphatically jostled the now four Guide Stones in his hand. "They're up to something, and I don't like it K.C."

Shailene nodded. She didn't dare ask how he knew this. S-class were too dangerous for field ops to have info on, even for elites like Yokohama and formerly Shailene. Unplanned encounters were a code-red situation. Immediately retreat on contact, any survivors would be a blessing. Like Shailene.

"Gonna check it out," Yokohama said. "Called Salem and Chi' for support."

Shailene ground to a halt and Yokohama stopped a few paces ahead, pulling out a cigarette. She understood keeping her out of it, especially given today's blunder, but calling Chicago? She'd left Kallum only to fall into someone else's hands. The way her life continued to whimsically crumble away was somewhat comical.

"You know how she is about typing up loose ends," Yokohama said, driving the serrated dagger deeper, "that's why..."

Instead of using words, his actions spoke instead. The key from the baggie earlier soared in the air. Shailene caught it reflexively. She blankly stared at him taking a long drag.

“Toss your phone too.” Yokohama exhaled and stepped toward Shailene, pulling a phone from his back pocket—different from the burner he’d been using. “Tracked. How we knew you dodged the E’s. I keep telling you, use a goddamn burner.”

Struggling to comprehend the obvious situation, Shailene staggered slightly atop the shattered sidewalk and tucked her hair behind the ear the way Kallum joked was her nervous tick. Yokohama nodded his hand, reminding her to take the phone.

“Austin and Sea’ set it up good. Has every contact you’ll need. Bug free. Even got a local stone tracker they rigged through backdoor access. Smart kids.”

“I—I just...” Shailene’s lips were quivering.

Yokohama opened the contacts on the phone, trembling in Shailene’s shaky hands. Before her, the screen displayed a name that mattered more than anything else. “You wanna protect him right?”

This was the third time.

The first time was four years ago. It burst forth like a geyser from an unfathomably deep well of grief; a well she unearthed on that hellish day, frantically digging through the raining ashes of her fallen comrades.

The second time was two months later, when a stupid boy she’d barely met caught her alone on a mournful night and dared to ask her if she was okay, grabbing onto a feeling she wasn’t even aware of.

Now, for the third time in her life, Shailene was crying. She knew the cost—war against both sides, mage and MNA. They knew the cost too, and they pushed her to do what she’d been afraid to do till now: give Kallum the truth.

“You’re the last survivor that can feel. Last person in the MNA, maybe. So...” Yokohama trailed off now reaching the cheesy end of his monologue.

But, Shailene didn’t care, flinging her arms around the awkwardly rigid middle-age man that didn’t know how to react to emotions. He was wrong. Their cold interiors still had a bit of warmth inside, just too hard-headed to realize it. Only, they never had Kallum pry that realization into them. So she had to keep him alive long enough to break their rigid shells someday.

“Um.. K.C... The key—”

“Safehouse right?” Shailene responded, pulling away from Yokohama and composing herself, professionally. “Which one?”

“SW3.” Yokohama said. “No one should check. Compromised after Austin bought that hooker off the strip. Blew his whole stipend for that girl. Fuckin’ idiot.”

He paused for a moment.

“Don’t be like Austin.”

Silently, he turned around and trailed down the beaten sidewalk through the rows of ruined fencing towards the main street just two blocks away. That was goodbye for them.

Shailene followed Yokohama's direction but there was no awkwardness. They were now separate people in different worlds, perhaps forever, so Shailene did Shailene things and picked up the courage to call Kallum at last.

The phone rang five times before he picked up. Slightly annoying.

Hello?

"Kallum? It's me," Shailene said, feeling the corners of her mouth turning upward in defiance of the cold, gloomy environment around her. Though for a second, her elation was threatened by the fear that Kallum didn't recognize her voice.

Oh, Shailene? Where are you calling from?

A little bit of background noise floated through the speaker, mostly filled with the word bitch, but Shailene paid no mind; happy to talk with Kallum.

"I broke my phone, so I got a new one."

There was an awkward pause. Shailene's short-sighted bravery had only taken her thus far. She hadn't thought about what to say to him about it all. While mulling about in her head, Shailene suddenly found herself on the main street, Yokohama no longer in sight.

"Um, so Kallum. There's something I wanna say."

Yeah? What's up?

He seemed to be preoccupied. Not fully paying attention to what Shailene was saying. That irritated her. A lot.

"I have a secret that I need to tell you," she emphasized.

Oh?

Again, there was a bit of a pause due to a bit of irritation on Shailene's part. A car whizzed by, blowing up a gust of rotting leaves.

Then a gunshot, through the phone.

"Kallum!" Shailene screamed. "Kallum, where are you?"

At my place. Shit, gotta go. Tell me when you get here.

The call ended.

Echos of police sirens cried through the streets. An anthem of the Los Angeles night. On another day, Shailene would pay it no mind, but tonight she was painfully aware of its presence. Last night, a war had begun and the stupid boy was ignorantly sitting on the opposite side.

Chapter 4

For Quinn, there's nothing more comforting than a morning hangover. His pounding head rings to the tune of cheerful memories. But, more than anything, it's the proper penance for his nighttime—sometimes daytime—festivities. The toll for elation greets the drowsy mind like clockwork, so the night can be enjoyed guilt-free—knowing tonight's merry will be tomorrow's despair. Because, the price for happiness always comes; it came for him last night.

It wasn't the excruciatingly painful eye-gouge. That was just a chip of interest on the sizable, overdue bill teenage Quinn racked up. The price was a relapse into the traumatic world of magic that appalled Quinn, seeing its permanent malfiguring on his metamorphosis into adulthood. Emi used to feel the same before she decided to visit her family in rural Japan—wearing the same coldly precise expression as earlier. She'd conquered the averse emotional terror of magic not once but now twice. Good for her. Quinn didn't need that.

What Quinn *did* need was to loosen the everlasting chokehold of a haunting guilt. Emi had come to collect on the years of his ignorant, self-absorbed teenage pleasure that she shouldered the cost of. If it means braving the magic world, then so be it. That morning under the pounding of his skull, Quinn found himself breathing slightly easier.

Clad with nothing but lounge shorts, Quinn stumbled into the living room around noon to find Kallum and Emi chomping down on take-out burritos in the meager dining room, facing each other with a puzzled look.

"Did you order me anything?" Quinn indignantly asked, navigating through the maze of furniture to take a seat with his friends.

"Yeah, breakfast burrito for ya," Kallum replied with a cheery smile and compassionate eyes poking through damp, white hair that'd been crudely dried.

Quinn felt Emi's careful gaze as he rested his hips down on the foamy cushion upheld by the black, metallic chair frame. A stiff smile did little to relax the thin eyebrows on Emi's naked face, but she jumped right into catching him up to speed on the couple's morning.

It started with an early rise. Kallum was jumping off the walls like a boy on Christmas morning, so he cooked an omelet full of love and brought breakfast in bed for a drowsy Emi. Some affectionate platitudes later—during which Quinn zoned out—Emi went over the calculated summary given to Kallum. She explained Talitia's trial required accumulating Guide Stones from other mages, leaving out the deadly implications of doing so. Tapping two stones provided a dowsing feature, locating other mages with a roughly similar amount of acquired stones, hiding the unspeakable actions those mages would have committed. Finally, she explained the reward. With enough stones, the location of *Heaven*, created by *Talitia* herself, would be revealed and those who enter will be granted *New*

Magic. An ocean of diverse magical spells that could be cast without rules or limit, understating the magnitude of how fundamentally paradigm shattering that was.

As expected, the fantastical explanation fanned the flames of Kallum's curiosity, spawning questions Emi genuinely had no answers to. Eventually, she wrangled the fire down to Kallum's candle lighting magic, which was a genuine oddity to Quinn. The two spent most of the morning running trials to deduce its origin and scope, but it was hardly fruitful. Hours of frustration led to Kallum taking a break to shower while Emi took a breather to grab the lunch presently clutched in their palms.

"So, what do you think?" Kallum asked Quinn, with a hint of desperation in his emerald eyes. Attention had completely shifted from his meal and to Quinn's thoughts.

"Obviously, it's not any variety of restoration," Quinn replied earnestly. The words felt uncomfortable leaving his mouth and brought light dissociation. He pushed through for Emi, and Kallum. "Maybe a super weird variety of transmutation, but extinguishing the flame rules that out."

"It does?" Kallum questioned.

"It turns junk into jewels, not the other way around," Quinn said. "That's the idea behind it at least, from what I've seen."

Kallum turned to face Emi, who was clearly more interested in her burrito than the conversation. Perhaps she was dissociating as well, Quinn considered. Though she'd traversed this road once before, so it might be unfair to project that.

Emi shrugged, chewing while staring through the paper plate under her perched hand. "I didn't know. There's no magic school, Kallum. You just learn what your parents tell you." Emi's unspoken estrangement from her family naturally arose in Quinn and Kallum's mind, but Quinn knew they held very different understandings.

"Ahhhh!" Kallum let out a rather loud breath of exasperation. "We spent almost two hours trying to figure that out. It was our last lead." Kallum threw his back against the chair and slumped into the seat. His dejected eyes clung to the ceiling.

"That means it's gotta be divine magic. It's the most common and most likely answer." Quinn said, unwrapping his breakfast burrito that unfortunately had run a bit cold. He took a bit into the sausage and egg stuffed tortilla. It could have benefited from a bit of salsa.

"Emi said it's not," Quinn said. His defeated expression remained while his body sank lower into the chair.

"Again," Emi said, still engrossed in her meal, "no magic school, but Kallum is too indifferent towards fire. Plus, it doesn't even make sense. Like, the type of magic."

Quinn understood Emi's qualms, but there wasn't any other alternative. "Kallum," he asked, "what do you remember about magic. In your childhood." Quinn shocked himself with the proactive question into the matter. Though Kallum's infectious eagerness tended to do that.

“Well,” Kallum adjusted his posture and sat upright, placing down his half-eaten burrito on the paper plate before him. “I only remember lighting candles for hours a day in the basement. Day after day. For years. That’s about all.”

“Makes sense,” Quinn said, taking another bite from his burrito. “It’s a weird magic for sure. There’s not really a point to developing that, but that process is about par for divine magic.”

“Huh...” Kallum fell into contemplation. He remained silent, giving Quinn the cue to take his meal seriously. So he thought.

“What about you?” Kallum asked.

Quinn coughed up a bit of food.

There were two ways Quinn could take the question. Either Kallum was asking about his own experience of divine magic, which he very much did not want to share right now, or he was asking what kind of magic Quinn used. There was no world where he answered the first one, disclosing his involvement with Kallum’s girlfriend.

“I don’t know,” Quinn replied, banking on the second interpretation. “It’s divine magic, but I don’t know what it does.” Even answering this was painful enough. He swallowed before divulging the information to Kallum. There was no reason to do so, but it felt necessary. “All I know is that it only works with people I love.”

“Whelp, that settles it!” A slam jostled the paper plates a few inches away from its epicenter: Kallum’s palm. An ear to ear grin plastered his face, resembling the manic expressions Quinn would catch in his own reflections. “Looks like we gotta recruit!”

“What?” Quinn asked. “Like other mages?”

“Yeah, a mentor-type leader. Like Gandalf or something,” Kallum said indignantly.

To seal the insanity, Kallum abandoned his meal to begin digging through the antique 17th century flat-top dresser that displayed Quinn’s ceremonial plates. Even Emi paused her meal to watch the scene unfold. From the clutter inside, out came a revolver; the one Shailene had.

“Dude!” Quinn reflexively shot from his seat.

Kallum, with the most casual expression it is the natural course of things, cocked his head slightly. “We need offense right?”

At a loss for words, Quinn turned to Emi for support, but she shrugged it off and returned to finishing the last bite of her food. “Gimme your keys,” she said, mouth full of tortilla. “I’ll drive.”

“Help me find them,” Quinn snapped back, grabbing Emi’s small forearm. He yanked her along with a roughness that conjured depressing memories; likely for both of them. Quinn pulled Emi into his room and slammed the door, explicitly disregarding whatever tumultuous emotions Emi might be feeling. The situation has reversed.

“He’s treating this like some fucking *game!*” Quinn hissed.

Emi refused to look at him, but she couldn’t hide without her signature hat. Instead she gazed to the side and let out a despondent reply. “If he gets hurt, I’ll heal him.”

“What if he’s shot? Or gets blown up? Or set on fire? Or mind-controlled?” Quinn’s list built along with his anger. Emi wasn’t listening. She stepped away to grab keys from the beer cluttered nightstand. The burning fury inside him wasn’t enough to melt her frigid demeanor. Rather, it extinguished his flame.

Emi stopped right before leaving and faced Quinn straight on. Her icy expression made his hairs stand on end. Teeth clenched and jaw locked, as if frozen in place, her seething words carried an excruciatingly hot disdain. “Since you clearly *fuck*ing care, why don't you try using your magic. You wanna protect him? Do it. I pushed through. *Twice*. Are you going to be a pussy forever? Or will you man the *fuck* up and take accountability for once in your life and do what I asked?”

Quinn watched Emi compose her emotions and open the door. She stepped into the hallway, and Quinn, like a well trained puppy, followed.

Kallum popped the tab of another Hazy IPA as he flopped onto the second-hand couch in his modest one bedroom, one bath apartment. Kicking his bare feet on the coffee table, he reclined and gazed at his Guide Stone between his fingers, wondering if it was as useful as Emi claimed. The magical purple hue felt dull under the matching light radiating from the smart bulbs affixed to cheap standing lamps. A disillusioned depression draped over Kallum.

Quickly, the trio found out the dowsing feature of his Guide Stone was broken. According to Quinn, when the stones touch, it’s like a sudden epiphany where you remember that last stash of imported Tequila was left in your suitcase five months ago; only, the tequila is a mage you’ve never met before. Emi suspected it’s probably the same reason he didn’t receive the initial run down: too inexperienced. It didn’t make sense how Quinn was any more experienced than he was, considering he could at least use magic—utility of it aside. Either way, Kallum had to rely on his friends to navigate finding a competent mage willing to partner up with them. But, hours of riding through L.A. streets ate away his soul, eventually questioning if the ‘trial’ is some strange hoax. How could one of the biggest cities in the United States be devoid of any magical communities? Apparently, there’s a ton of solo mages, but Quinn and Emi *insisted* those were last resorts. When they did find a group—twice in all ten hours of searching—the path was swiftly cut off by a cacophony of police sirens that forced them back.

Kallum took a massive swig from his Hazy IPA and let its bitter aftertaste linger on his tongue. A sigil of Kallum’s mood. He’d gotten excessively churlish with the two after they called off the hunt. A well of curiosity sprung forth last night with a promise for answers about his childhood; the days spent in that basement, lighting candles ad nauseam at his father’s behest. God be damned if that was going to dry up in a day, and he made that abundantly clear to his friends, with or without their help.

“We’ve reached an agreement,” Emi said, stepping out of their bedroom where she had been discussing with Quinn long enough for Kallum to get through two pints of canned beer. She wore the same tense expression that’d stuck after stumbling on the first parade of cop cars. Quinn silently brushed past Emi and walked into the living room, standing tall right in front of Kallum.

Kallum took a sip from his IPA as Emi sat next to him, hips touching. Even the stomach fluttering effect of Emi’s light perfume couldn’t lift the blanket of depression wrapped around him.

“We’ll hit the solos if I can get this to work,” Quinn said. His voice shook ever so slightly. “Otherwise, we’ll pay a visit to Victor...” Quinn trailed off.

A flame of hope ignited in Kallum. He’d brought up the suggestion of visiting Quinn’s father, Victor Cullbrook, for guidance, but it was shot down by both of them so violently that he dropped the topic immediately. Meekly, Kallum then considered speaking with his adoptive mother, Quinn’s aunt. That got shot too, Quinn stating she’d deliberately stepped away from the family and wouldn’t appreciate her adopted son learning about magic.

Quinn closed his eyes and stretched his arms outward into an awkward t-pose, seemingly expecting something to happen.

“What are you doing?” Kallum asked, struggling to parse the situation through a haze of alcohol.

“Trying to use magic.” Quinn replied, presumably to concentrate on casting said magic. His voice was still shaky. “You are supposed to want to hug me really badly right now.” Kallum wasn’t sure if that was a joke, but he rose to his feet nonetheless.

Before he could wrap his arms around Quinn, his phone started vibrating on the coffee table next to the two empty beer cans he ran through earlier. It was from an unknown number. Normally, he wouldn’t pay any attention, but there was still another unresolved issue that he’d been wrestling with; Shailene.

He’d sent some texts in the morning, trying to clarify what happened that night. How’d she know what was going to happen? Why’d she have a gun on her? The curiosity nipped at his brain, but apparently that was his exclusive problem. The other two didn’t so much as mention her. So, while Quinn fumbled about the room in thought, he bent down over and picked up the phone.

“Hello?” Kallum asked eagerly. He felt Emi and Quinn’s puzzled looks for picking up the phone at this moment.

Kallum? It’s me.

“Oh, Shailene? Where are you calling from?” Kallum asked, curious about the random number. The mention of that name turned confused looks into scowls.

“That fucking bitch,” Emi murmured.

“Call her a bitch,” Quinn hissed while pointing at the phone. Kallum ignored him. I broke my phone, so I got a new one.

All of a sudden, Quinn began to pace heavily around the room, panicking intensely. It seemed like his plan failed, but it caused Kallum to wonder what his plan even was. Were those weird requests supposed to be magic? He pondered the idea for a second.

Um, so Kallum. There's something I wanna say.

"Yeah? What's up?" Kallum came back to reality, catching a frantic look of terror swirling on Quinn's face. He followed the line of sight to its source. Emi, standing with the revolver aimed at Kallum's thigh. There was a confident look in her eye, a look Kallum learned from their time together in that dingy choreo room. A plan had brewed in her mind and she was about to execute. He trusted her fully, as he did back then.

No matter the outcome, he'd be making progress towards understanding magic; and the paltry spell his father left him. Worst case scenario: few seconds of pain before Emi fixes him up.

I have a secret that I need to tell you.

"Oh?" Kallum murmured. He'd momentarily forgotten that he was speaking to Shailene. There was little energy to spare as his mind braced itself for an imminent tearing of flesh. He closed his eyes and clenched his teeth. A gunshot echoed through the tiny apartment.

Kallum! Kallum, where are you?

The pain never came.

Opening his eyes, Kallum caught Emi's nervous smile of relief.

"At my place," Kallum said, turning to confirm this moment for celebration, but Quinn's face was absent of joy. It bore a red hue that rivaled Emi on a night of binge drinking and contorted with a pain equal to the resulting hangover.

"Shit, gotta go. Tell me when you get here."

"You *insane* fucking cunt!" Quinn bellowed. Spit flew across the living room. Kallum jumped to his feet and slipped his arms under Quinn's shoulders from behind, pulling tight to catch his lunge. Flinging his weight backwards, Kallum chained Quinn to the couch with his hold.

"You're welcome," Emi said. "Now we don't have to see Victor." Kallum's face was pressed between sofa cushions and Quinn's back, but he didn't need sight to tell the quivering unease in his girlfriend's voice. "And you can use magic."

The weight above him relaxed. Kallum tentatively loosened his grip as Quinn jerked away, but the worries were unfounded. His focus had shifted to acquiring an IPA; stat.

"Too far, Em. Way too far." Quinn benignly scoffed in Emi's direction, heading straight to the kitchen.

Kallum received another nervous smile from Emi as she sat next to him once again, hips no longer touching. He returned her smile with a comforting one. The inner conflict was apparent, but it came from a loving place. Like the cigarette burn Emi left when she caught Quinn smoking after quitting for a month; now, he's a year clean.

More importantly, Quinn used magic. *Real* magic too, like Emi. It protected him from a fucking bullet. A feverish warmth spread through Kallum's body.

Cloudy wisps of doubt burned away at the realization of this development. The blanket of depression tossed aside because he was more than warm enough now. Invulnerability *and* healing is the ultimate defensive combination. They'd grit and survive whatever life brings, so it's just a numbers game now. How long till Kallum can find a mentor; someone knowledgeable about magic to guide him.

He felt Emi's abrupt touch pull him back. The purple hues that filled the living room seemed so vibrant now. "So, what's the plan now?" she asked.

"Probably start with the nearest mages and work our way outward," Kallum replied. "It's just a numbers game now."

"No. I mean Shailene."

"Shailene?"

"Yeah, Shailene. The girl that held a gun at me last night." Emi's voice was irate. "Please do not tell me you invited that girl with no plan in mind."

"I just wanted to talk about it," Kallum said hesitantly. "That's all."

"You can not be serious, Kallum!" Emi screamed. "She pointed a fucking gun at me!"

"What? You want us to jump her or something?" Kallum began mirroring her irritation.

"Yeah, I kinda do."

"Woah, guys. We're all friends here," Quinn said, strolling back into the living room with a half-chugged beer in hand, gesturing us to calm down as if he hadn't lunged at Emi earlier. The calming effect of alcohol on him was magic in itself.

"Easy for you to say," Emi snapped back, her eye-catching hair swiveling with her head. "Shailene doesn't hate you for just existing."

"Okay, okay," Kallum said. "I think all of our emotions have been running hot since last night. We should take some time to cool down and figure things out." Quinn nodded in agreement while shoving the cheap IKEA coffee table back with one foot and sitting cross-legged on the carpet in front of them.

It was intended to be a platitude, but Kallum quickly realized how true it was. Quinn's outburst, Emi's outburst, *his* outburst; all in under twenty-four hours. It was so rare for this to happen among them—Emi and Shailene's reactions aside. That reality likely hit all of them at the same time. Kallum watched Emi pull away to the other side of the couch and ball her knees together, her signature—

For the first time today, at nearly eleven p.m., Kallum realized Emi hadn't worn her hat at all today; her signature hat. There's no way she left it at Quinn's, or it would have come up. He'd once joked she would wear it on her wedding night. How could he have missed this?

"I'm not talking to her unless she apologizes," Emi muttered. Her face was lowered, staring at the middle cushion between them, but the distance felt so much greater.

“That’s valid,” Kallum replied, turning back and draping his arm over the couch and swishing the remaining liquid in his beer can, contemplating. Contemplation turned to dissociation. Disturbing levels of dissociation. Quinn picked up on it.

“Yeah, I think this might be a Greatest Battles of All-Time’ angle.” Quinn said, sitting between the two and activating the Roku TV with his phone app. It certainly didn’t fix anything, but the sensory experience of snappy music and bodies moving certainly helped ground Kallum. They made it nearly to the end of a twenty-minute crew battle—featuring some of Kallum’s icons—before the front door wildly swung open and a distraught, heavily panting Shailene barged through.

“Oh my God, you’re okay!” She screamed, nearly on the verge of tears. It’d been years since Kallum had seen her this emotionally turbulent.

“What the fuck?” Quinn had probably *never* seen her this emotionally turbulent.

Shailene charged the short distance across the living room into a before Kallum blurted a concerning observation.

“You’re covered in blood.” Kallum noticed residual blots on his shirt, almost black under the purple lights. The giveaways were tiny specs of fleshy bits that clung to the black fabric Shailene wore.

“Yes, I am,” she said frantically. The anxiety level hadn’t dropped a bit since she came running in. “We need to get out of L.A. Now. They’re coming for you.”

“Woah, woah, woah,” Quinn said, pulling Shailene away from Kallum. The tv paused on a b-boy mid air flare behind him. “Do we need to 5150 you? Who’s they?”

After everything that just happened, Shailene’s spastic ramblings sent Kallum spinning. All he wanted now, more than anything, was a calm environment. Somewhere to get his head straight. A private space where he and Emi could chat and figure out this rollercoaster of events.

“Whatever the fuck this is, I don’t care.” Kallum blurted his inner thoughts aloud. “Sorry,” he immediately corrected himself. “Can you two actually leave? I’d like some time alone right now. With my girlfriend.” Simultaneously, Kallum and Emi both turned to give each other considerate looks.

“No!” Shailene stood firm, and her emotions snapped into place. Her ability to find composure no matter the situation was honestly frightening. “Another agent is coming to kill you.” She turned her head slightly toward Emi and nodded, “And you too.”

“I said I wanted to tell you a secret,” she continued. “The secret is I’m fucking in love with you, Kallum. I’m in love with you so I failed. I kill mages, but I didn’t kill you, so now someone else is going to do it instead.”

Silence hung.

A normal person couldn’t handle this kind of information all at once, and certainly Kallum was anything but a normal person; but right now he sure felt like one. His tongue tied in a knot as he tried processing Shailene’s words.

Annoyed, Shailene briefly faced Emi, “And I’ll tell you about the Japan stuff.”

Kallum attempted groping around for the words that Emi found instead.

“We’ll go,” she said, standing up. “Give us five minutes to grab our things.” She broke Kallum out of stunlock and pulled him into the bedroom where she immediately began to empty her backpack of school supplies.

“I—I thought you weren’t going to talk to her,” Kallum stammered out. It was the only thing his mind could handle at that moment, but once the thought pushed through his mouth, he found reason slowly returned to him. He immediately began emptying a backpack of his own while Emi replied.

“She apologized in her own way,” Emi said. Kallum could’ve sworn he caught a faint smile, but Emi would never admit to that.

“I’m sorry,” Kallum said while grabbing a handful of underwear and stuffing it into the front pocket of his vacant backpack. “I didn’t even notice you weren’t wearing your hat today.”

“Oh.” Emi paused while grabbing a fistful of dolphin shorts. “You’re right.” She curiously touched the top of her head to confirm what Kallum said was true. “I think I left it at Quinn’s.”

That statement made Kallum’s stomach churn. He’d never felt more disconnected from the girl he loved than over the past day. The intimate conversation he shared with Emi last night replayed in his head.

“We should talk, once we’re safe,” Kallum said.

“I agree,” Emi replied, planting a quick smooch on Kallum’s lips as she left for the bathroom, grabbing their toiletries.

Then a warm realization hit Kallum, that would ease his worries for at least the night. Without sharing a single word, the two had seamlessly packed every memorable piece of clothing and essential item between their backpacks; a product of their time spent together.

Kallum slammed the passenger door shut and straddled the overstuffed backpack in his lap. Shailene’s Lexus was filled with an overpowering stench of car freshener, that took on a new meaning with the reveal of her profession. Kallum fastened his seatbelt and the force of the car threw him forward as Shailene reversed out of the parking lot. Emi let out a small yelp from the backseat, followed by the tumbling of her equally stuffed backpack.

Kallum turned around to check on her and she returned a comforting smile. Quinn, on the other hand, was languidly staring out of the window while he held another IPA can for the road in his lap. Since his condo was where the incident happened, it was too compromised to return there and grab any essentials—likely bottles of Tequila.

“So where are we going?” Kallum asked Shailene, holding onto the door handle for stability as she shot down the street roads going 70 mph, almost double the speed limit.

“Vegas,” Shailene replied, while the car let out a terrifying screech as it drifted through an intersection. “Safehouse there.” Kallum’s back immediately slammed against the car seat as it accelerated.

It started to make sense why Shailene was such a good driver. This honestly wasn’t the first time the group had experienced this level of calculated maneuvering, but it also wasn’t under life threatening circumstances; so she was banned from driving them—D.D. withstanding. She swerved onto the 405-North freeway, causing everyone to lurch left.

Rearview lights swung in and out of vision while weaving through the congested L.A. traffic, rarely dropping speed. The bluetooth came to life and started blasting derivative Drift Phonk to Shailene’s chagrin. Kallum checked the rear view mirror to see Emi shooting Quinn a disappointed look.

“What? If we’re in some death chase then it should feel like it,” he said.

The two quibbled over the music a bit, settling on some breakcore which made Shailene particularly eager to chime in on the conversation with songs to queue. The scene made Kallum almost feel at ease, tethered back to the reality that existed for the past three years. It stayed there for a while, long enough for them to reach San Bernardino, but reality kept slipping further back. Back to memories of candles.

“Okay. Elephant in the room,” Kallum said, interrupting their innocuously heated discussion on if good Drift Phonk artists existed. “How did you know what was going to happen last night?”

The car jostled back and forth as Shailene pulled around a car deemed too slow—a paltry 85 mph—as an attentive hush filled the car, along with rapid fire drum kicks and high pitch synths. They’d reached the 15 towards Vegas just now; the lengthy trip had only just begun.

“We all knew,” Shailene said neutrally. “February 22nd, once the clock strikes midnight.”

“Who’s we?” Quinn chimed in, searching for clarification to what Kallum suspected was left intentionally vague.

“All the agents,” Shailene said. Vague, as predicted.

“How did you know *us* specifically?” Emi asked, trying to clarify what Kallum really meant to ask.

For a second, Shailene took her eyes off the road to look into the rear view and catch Emi’s gaze. “You know why.” It was almost a somber tone, or perhaps reverential? Kallum couldn’t quite pin it, but it was oddly *not* aggressive considering their normal interactions.

“Why is that?” Kallum asked generally, hoping to dig a bit more information. The rapid kicks broke into a soft 70s synth hum lightly floated up and down. The sound lingered in the car for a few moments.

“That’s up to her to answer,” Shailene answered. There was a lot more concern in her voice that she would normally display outwardly. Kallum couldn’t catch Emi’s facial

expression then, but he noted it for their later conversation. A foreseeably difficult conversation.

Slowly, the atmosphere repaired itself through artist comparisons, arguments over campy Netflix shows, and calmly listening to a queue of the group's curated music. Feeling loose and comfortable, he once again felt tethered to that earlier reality.

The empty flats of Nevada shot by and the overwhelming night sky wrapped Kallum like a cozy blanket as he settled into the familiar banter between his friends. Undoubtedly secret pasts and trauma had all regurgitated themselves at once, stinking up the amiable group environment; but it could be cleaned up. Right now was proof of that. Guide Stones, Talitia, and even magic be damned. They were friends first and foremost. Kallum closed his eyes and savored the moment.

It could have been a few seconds, maybe a few minutes, he couldn't tell, but his serenity was shattered by Quinn's shouting and the car swerving. Swerving so hard that Kallum opened his eyes to the night sky whirling underneath him. Once, then twice, before it stopped.

The car—perhaps specially reinforced for Shailene's job—held mostly firm, though a torrent of glass still found its way inside. Shailene's side of the car also took the brunt of the damage, and there might have been some blood splatter; but Kallum was unaware. Naturally, he was fine from Quinn's divine protection, and his eyes were trained on the figure illuminated by the shattered headlights—source of the wreck.

A girl, unmistakably in her late teens, was eerily squatting in the middle of the road. Paying no heed to the cold desert night, she wore light rags that swayed not with the wind but the bushy fox tail oscillating behind her. Yellow and red ringed eyes, visible from across the road, fiercely observed Kallum, staring into his soul. Fuzzy pointed ears, jutting from the top of her unruly, long orange hair, twitched with his rapidly beating heart. Amidst the groans and hisses from smarting cuts and welting bruises that filled the car, Kallum was giddy; that was a mage.

Chapter 5

Kallum surveyed the interior of the wreckage. It was much worse than he previously thought. Shailene and Quinn's side ate most of the impact upon the first spin, and while a rain of cuts sprayed all but Kallum, Quinn suffered the most brutal injury. The bone in his left arm snapped completely and had the image of an extra joint in his forearm. But what surprised him wasn't Emi's immediate snap to medic mode despite her gashed leg. It was Shailene holding a pistol ready underneath the wheel, focused intensely on the girl despite the blood trickling down her face; it'd been seconds since the crash.

"Wait," Kallum said, pressing down on Shailene's tense arms. "Let me. I can't get hurt."

The evident lack of cuts on him must have been a strong enough argument for even Shailene to let it go, because she made not a peep as Kallum pushed on the door handle. Didn't budge. Instead, he pushed through the shattered window with a recklessness only possible because of Quinn. He slid out of the totaled Lexus and into the biting cold air.

Kallum nonchalantly strolled across the road towards the girl, as if he and his friends hadn't just been through a wreck.

"Hey, you okay?" he called out, unsure of what greeting would be appropriate in this circumstance. The girl kept her strange eyes on Kallum as he approached, but not moving an inch—save the jostling tail behind her.

"What is your purpose," she said firmly, halting Kallum just a few paces away from her. Left and right, not a single headlight poked through the cover of darkness, but he felt uneasy pausing in the middle of the highway. The girl clearly did not.

"Just checking if you're okay. Did you get hit?" Kallum asked. He stepped forward trying to demonstrate his concern, but he stopped after her nose twitched and face turned sour.

"Your cowardly scent draws my ire. Halt your advance." She said with a scowl.

"What?" Kallum asked while watching her fuzzy ears twitch ever so slightly. It was kinda cute.

"Fear drips from your pores and sings to the beat of your heart," she said. "I have no fondness for cowards." The voice was filled with malice, but Kallum couldn't absorb it through the thick layer of Victorian English. Instead he was drawn to the cuteness of her button face and wobbly tail.

"That's 'cause we're in the middle of the highway," he said after taking a moment to comprehend the girl's words. "Can we move before a car comes?" Kallum stepped past her and off the road, motioning for her to follow. For a second she remained, staring at the ruined car, but then swiveled her head with a look of modest surprise.

"You bear no fear from my presence?" she asked, standing up and walking toward Kallum. She was surprisingly tiny. A thin build that was by no means malnourished and a full head shorter than him. She was petite; in an adorable doll-like way.

“No,” Kallum replied, watching her tail swing to and fro. It never stood still. “I’d hardly call you scary.” He duly noted how inappropriately lax he was considering the situation. But the ship had set sail. Her ears drooped forward as she looked down, arms folded and finger on chin in contemplation. It honestly looked performative. Stumped, she looked up at Kallum.

“You fear the black strip of land. Why?” she asked, eyes full of a new fierceness: curiosity.

“I don’t wanna be hit by a car?” Kallum replied dryly. It felt silly to even explain that.

“Car?” she asked. Her head cocked slightly.

“That thing,” Kallum pointed across the street to the wrecked vehicle containing his friends. Another note of his laxness birthed a sapling of survivors guilt, seeing Emi working in the back seat on Quinn. Shailene had exited the wreck though, leaning against the wreck and watching Kallum like a hawk.

“I don’t want that to happen again,” he said, turning back to the girl.

“But you are unscathed,” she said, her tail wagging a bit faster. “So what causes such worry?”

“I dunno,” Kallum said, growing slightly irritated by her benign questions. “I don’t want other people to crash and get hurt.”

The girl nodded to herself as if his words finished the missing piece of a theoretical puzzle, then turned to face the empty road, alone in the chilling desert. “These strange black strips bear no end to the novel scents they carry. It fascinates me dearly,” She turned further toward the wreck, “that it can insight such powerful terror.”

“You don’t know what a road is?”

“Roads are for the feet of horses and men, silly child.”

She turned back to face Kallum with a softer—but still mostly firm—expression and gave a nod of acknowledgement. “I shall be off now, but I must grant you at least my name.” She puffed out her chest and stood as tall as she could manage. “I am Rhia, daughter of Talitia. Hold that name with regard, and pass it to your children’s children. Do *not* forget.”

Rhia turned to leave, but Kallum, in an incredible act of foolishness, grabbed her arm to stop. It was warm to the touch, but had none of the give typical of flesh. Strong like tungsten and hard like diamond. Magical protection like Quinn’s. That alone screamed to Kallum he was handling an exceptional mage, but that name, Talitia, meant something more.

“Sorry!” he jumped back, surprised by his own body. “I’m sorry.”

Rhia’s tail had furrowed, but when she turned, her face remained firm as ever. She crossed her arms, demanding an explanation for his behavior. That did not need to be asked.

“Sorry,” Kallum pleaded again, “you just said Talitia? Like the organizer of this mage trial thing? I just have a few questions.”

Rhia’s tight lips melted into a frown.

“As do I,” she said.

“Do you know why I wouldn’t get the initial broadcast thing? Am I too inexperienced?” Traces of insecurity fell from Kallum’s lips, but he wanted an answer to at least one of the things bugging his mind. Rhia should be able to answer this much.

“Are you not a mage?” Rhia replied, clearly confused by the subtly cocked head. For what she lacked in facial expressions, she certainly made up for it in body language.

“I am. I got a Guide Stone.”

“Show me,” Rhia said. It was a commanding tone, but the rapid fire tail displayed an overwhelming eagerness. Delighted by an inkling of progress, Kallum bounded over the deserted road back toward his friends. Shailene was out of the wreck, leaning against the car with both hands in her jacket, but Emi and Quinn were still inside.

Quinn shot a sheepish thumbs up from the back seat as Kallum approached. Emi was still deep at work with his arm, but the minor cuts and bleeding were gone—Shailene included. The frame of the car held mostly intact, but it was still an uncomfortable sight.

“Are the doors jammed?” Kallum asked as he reached the shattered passenger window. He suspected the answer was yes, but Shailene didn’t care to respond. Instead her body grew tense, ready to pounce.

“Kallum,” she muttered.

“It’s fine,” he brushed her off. “I’m showing her my Guide Stone.”

Kallum kept the marvelously beautiful stone in his backpack for safekeeping, which was now tucked snug in the corner of the passenger floor. He couldn’t quite reach it without climbing in. Falling inward, he noticed the seat pull away from him and his face met dirt. Rhia toward above with the freshly ripped door held lightly in her hand and a puzzled tilt toward the back seat.

“The two reek of cowardice despite being removed from the black strip.” Rhia glanced down at Kallum, body tinged with curiosity. “Why is that?”

“I think they’re just scared of you,” Kallum replied, getting to his feet and hobbling over to get his backpack.

“Oh,” Rhia said. The disappointment was palpable. “But the girl is not,” referring to Shailene who was behind Kallum as he dug through the front pocket for his Guide Stone.

“She’s just weird,” Kallum said dismissively, then pulled out the purple hue stone injected with perpetually swirling mist. “Here,” Kallum said, depositing it in Rhia’s outstretched palm.

In a small moment of clarity, Kallum realized the absurdity of his action: handing over the Guide Stone. At the same time, the casual tone of their interaction is likely what got him this far, especially considering her reaction to his friends. But it didn’t matter because the look on her face was anything but malicious; it was wonder.

“To think there was a survivor...” Rhia muttered to herself. Wide eyes filled with regard to the stone boosted Kallum’s ego. “This ought to...” Her tail began to wildly crank the spinning gears in her head. This had to be a good sign.

“What?” Kallum asked eagerly. “Survivor of what?”

If there was a spark of admiration in Rhia’s eyes it was doused by a cold contempt that laced her words. “Ignorance of your history, Telekinetic child, is tantamount to taking a piss on the graves of your ancestors and theirs before. Kill that joyful smirk before I do it myself.”

The whiplash stunned Kallum, preventing him from moving a muscle as Rhia apparently decided that was enough to leave—with his Guide Stone. What stopped her wasn’t him, his bodily reflexes, or even a mage at all.

“What do you mean ‘Telekinetic Child?’” Shailene asked. She’d stepped away from the car and took a few paces forward to confront Rhia. Her shoulders tensed and Kallum caught a metallic shimmer from her left jacket as she adjusted her hand.

“For what reason? You are no mage,” Rhia said. There was no hostility or contempt in her voice; it was mostly flat with a bump of curiosity.

“I’m a mage, and I wanna know.” Emi said, climbing out of the back seat, baggy clothes and stylized hair emphasizing her presence as she leapt onto the dirt. “I’ve never heard of Telekinetics.” She gave Kallum a tentative look of confidence. He wondered if she wished her cap was with her right now.

“Me neither,” Quinn called out from the back seat. Apparently, still too injured to crawl through the seats.

Rhia’s ears slumped forward and her tail sagged, but her face remained firm as always. She sighed. “I suppose it is my duty.”

Rhia stood tall and raised her palm, facing the half moon above. Root, of a mahogany wood explicitly not native to Nevada, rose to form low, wide arches around knee height; benches. Four of them surrounded a small bushel of wiry twigs enclosed by larger logs of the same mahogany wood.

Kallum, along with his friends, was astonished. This was *real* magic, like physical magic. The kind you see as just special effects in Harry Potter, but it was happening right before his eyes.

“How...” Emi murmured beside him.

Rhia stepped toward the middle and stuck her hand into the bushel, out of sight. There was a jostle, and then a trail of smoke and faint embers that quickly consumed the thin twigs. The second Rhia sat on the magical wooden bench, Kallum took the invitation to sit as well. Emi quickly took a close seat next to him, thighs touching and huddled in submission to the increasingly unforgiving cold. Shailene was hesitant, but eventually sat after Kallum pressured her with his stare, and by then, the fire had set the logs ablaze, warming the three of them.

“Is he a cripple?” Rhia asked, indicating toward the back seat of the wrecked car.

“No,” Shailene said dryly, pressing her palms to the flame for warmth. “He’s just stuck.”

Without any words, Rhia strode towards the car and effortlessly peeled the rear door off, revealing a wide-eyed Quinn clutching his formerly broken arm. She yanked his leg, sending him flying into her arms with a yelp, and carried him princess style to the bench opposite of Kallum. Her tiny stature carrying Quinn's tall, lanky body was an odd sight.

"Your arm smarts, yet it appears healed." She said, placing him down.

"My arm is smart?"

"You misunderstand me. A fractured mind begets fractured healing."

"Who are you?" Emi blurted out next to Kallum. He noticed her balled fist and tense arms, but no fear leaked into her voice.

"Rhia, daughter of Talitia," she said, sitting back down in a dignified manner. "But such a title is lost on you all." Kallum felt her tone was almost mourning. The death of knowledge.

"The source of the *New* magic," Quinn answered, desperately trying to breathe life into its corpse. "The person who made this trial."

"No," Rhia said, shaking her head. "His stone proves this false." Kallum suddenly realized he'd never given his name; Rhia never asked. "Such a blessing deserves merit, so I will take pity and alleviate your ignorance. None of you know *The Tale of Five Princes*."

A hush fell over the impromptu campfire. Crackle of flames filled the empty cold air, alone under the dome of twinkling stars. Kallum felt a surge of excitement at this moment, one not shared by his friends—even Emi—evident by their tight lips and furrowed brows. But there was a shared curiosity because when Rhia opened her mouth, all eyes centered on her.

"Ages ago, in the continent that birthed mankind, Aksum—a kingdom and culture long forgotten by the faulty minds of men—prospered under their five auspicious princes. The first-born Jone, loved by the masses, toiled day and night under his father, learning to nurture Aksum. The next-in-line, Latwo, rained upon by boundless glory, commanded swift and powerful campaigns against the warring tribes. The middle prince, Threen, was a holy man; devout to Talitia. Forcaus, the penultimate son, shrewdly negotiated the bountiful trades allowing Aksum to truly flourish, though never receiving due recognition. The youngest prince, ever the inquisitive, yet profoundly aloof, boy, was Estifivi, who would purchase whatever novel tome foreign scribes would peddle through Aksum's markets.

"Those can't be real names," Quinn chided.

Rhia ignored him.

"On a cold afternoon, Estifivi got hold of an ill-touched tome, sabotaged by a rivaling power, meant for the king, but curiosity is a vile plague to the naive. A cruel poison rendered the young prince blind and deaf, but if Jone had learned anything from his provisional rule, it was a care for the people; his brothers especially. A jovial parade sent off the princes, rallied into action by the eldest, on their journey to Sangomala, rumored province of all-powerful healers.

“Twas an epic quest,” Rhia said, “one I dearly fond of, but cannot do justice myself.” Kallum almost missed a mote of emotion touch her lips, curling them upwards. Her multicolored eyes fastened to the dancing flames.

“Abridged, Latwo used his might to fend off bandits and barbarians alike, Threen devoutly prayed off a devastating swarm of locusts that tormented a small village, Forcaus haggled with townsfolk for information, rations, and roofs to sleep under—though I truly found that part dreadfully dull—and Jone poured every being of his soul to keep Estifivi and his brothers alive on the arduous travel, nearly severing his arm to nourish them through a tragic mountain blizzard, though Threen’s prayers were answered just before.

“Alas, they arrived at Sangomala, tucked away behind a mountain range after eight months of travel. Though the sight was a tragedy. Buildings all razed to the ground, air completely still, and not a soul in sight, they had made it too late. Torn with despair the brothers fell to their knees and wept; except Threen. Without a drop of doubt he prayed. Prayed to Talitia that their hope be restored, their struggles redeemed, and Estifivi, an innocent, naive boy, boy be healed. So then it came.”

Rhia took a deep breath, reminding Kallum to breathe. He saw her turn toward the stars above, and once again, did the same.

“Talitia herself emerged from the sun and descended upon the princes. ‘Witness of thy travels, I shall answer thy prayers.’

“To Jone, Restoration; for the nourishment of thee to keep man *strong* and *healthy* and *cure* thy kin”

“To Latwo, Telekinesis; for the toil of thee to *effortlessly overpower* foes who stand before thee”

“To Threen, Divinity, a piece of *raw* magic; for the *unwavering faith* of thee. Such devotion must be given proper reward.”

“To Forcaus, Transmutation; for the selflessness of thee to metamorph the *mundane* into the *essentials*”

“And to Estifivi, poor soul. Thou heard thy pleas. Telepathy; for the passionate desire of thee to *convey* to thy brethren the sheer depths of gratitude buried within.”

Those words: Restoration, Divinity, Transmutation, all from their conversation this morning. At that moment, the stars had never felt closer to Kallum. He wanted to reach out and pluck one from the sky, feeling the power of Rhia’s tale. It was the origin of *magic*

Instead, a thud brought his vision earthbound. Shailene had fallen from the bench, head clutched in her hands, distraught. It made him feel crushed and conflicted, because he now felt pain from her pain. It was disorientating.

“But there’s more,” Emi said, leaning in, back taut, forearms on knees. “What makes Kallum a survivor?” She was staring at Rhia. Not up, nor down; forward.

“Um,” Quinn started up, “I’ve never heard of Tel—”

“Hush!” Rhia held a hand toward Quinn, though Kallum couldn’t catch his reaction through the dancing fire. “It is a solemn tale I loathe spreading.” Her piercing red and

yellow ringed eyes swung to Kallum, making his hairs bristle. “Yet you *must* learn the sins of your forefathers.”

“With newfound power, it did not take long for Estifivi to uncover the malicious plot buried in Latwo’s mind; fratricide. Their travels were little more than a chance for ‘misfortune’ to strike Jone and seize the throne, and fate sent a twistedly opportune chance. That same night, Estifivi warned his brothers, but Jone’s heart too soft, Forcaus too meek, and himself too frail, only Threen felt devoted enough to Talitia to seal Latwo away in remote Sangomala, lest Talitia’s holy blessing be tainted by bloodshed. In the veil of twilight, the four princes escaped home, leaving Letwo’s soul forever bound to Sangomala.

“Is it still there?” Quinn asked indignantly.

“Seal your lips and listen, mutt,” Rhia snapped before continuing.

“Seasons changed, winters came and went, and kingdoms fell, but Aksum remained resolute with its power and devotion to Talitia, passing down her blessing to sons, while letting the myth of Sangomala fade away, but never the princes—wretched mistake.

“Santhriti, great great grandson of Threen and pope of Talitia’s church, got word of demons residing in faraway mountains. The most zealous of Talitia’s chosen, he alone had might and willpower to face demons with *unwavering faith*. And such was proven at the end of the eight month journey where he laid waste to the grotesquely malformed wildlife with melted faces and missing limbs, and the demons who birthed them, in an inferno of purifying flames.

“While praying for Talitia to heal the land, a spirit broached Santhriti with a plea. ‘O faithful son, wilt thou free my soul to now join my children’s children. Thy ancestors can not deny that penance has been served.’ Santhriti, fanatical enjoyer of The Tale of Five Princes, immediately recognized his ancestor. In binding Latwo’s soul to Sangomala, it held through the afterlife, meaning he was in Sangomala and the demons, within the charred hellscape before him, were not just relatives, but children of Talitia. A sad, but necessary act of mercy.

At last, the cold air had sunk into Kallum’s bones. Those demons had been his ancestors?

“However, to Santhriti’s horror, the bond failed to break and magic had left him completely. His faith had wavered. The imperfection of Threen’s binding magic, malignant disfiguring by way of Talitia’s magic, and the cardinal slaughter of blessed kin with his own hands carved his mind. So, as the most powerful, zealous pope of Talitia in Aksumian history returned powerless and full of doubt, the degradation of magic began, and since, failed to cease.”

“Just like that?” Kallum asked, his ears captured by Rhia’s every word. “One slip-up and it falls apart?”

“Doubt is a viral disease,” Rhia replied.

“But it can be fixed right?”

“Kallum,” Shailene spoke up, startling him. She’d relaxed her body but was still sitting casually on the ground. “They turned to other faiths. Ones resistant to doubt. Strange, contorted faiths that don’t need immaterial beings like Talitia.” A bit of venom laced the last sentence.

“She speaks the truth,” Rhia said. “And thus is the reason for my birth, two-hundred and some years ago, during the infancy of the American Kingdom. To restore faith in Talitia. Alas, I failed my mission.” She pressed her palms toward the fire. “And I failed it, miserably...”

Kallum doubted if she felt cold, but her demeanor reflected a lost girl seeking warmth; not a demigod.

“That brings me to now,” Rhia said. She withdrew her palms back, and her body relaxed slightly, tail picking up a slow rhythm. “This recent event, the trial, disturbs me. I can not make sense of it.”

She fumbled around the base of her tail for a second, then revealed a small linen pouch giving it a jostle, indicating its fullness. Then, she pulled out, unmistakably, a Guide Stone.

“Undoubtedly the work of Talitia.” Rhia said, staring at the stone. “Even I am incapable of apparating matter from air, much less matter born from an individual’s magic.” She put the stone away. “However, the subsequent broadcast is irregular. Why would Talitia utilize base magic like Telepathy? Why would she not appear before me?”

The words hung in the cold, dry air for just a moment.

“Certainly, that alone raises concerns, but more importantly...” Rhia tilted her head at Kallum, feeling like he was being appraised for authenticity at a pawn shop. “Why would the broadcast overlook a Telekinetic, if not the folly of man forgetting their history once again.”

“The trial is a sham. I am certain of it. Perhaps a test to right the wrongs of human ignorance. A test to restore faith once more.” Rhia gazed at the Guide Stone in her hand before sliding it back within the linen pouch. “A test I will not fail to see through.”

“Let us help,” Kallum said, rising to his feet. He felt a well of desperation brimming, but it was capped by gratitude for Rhia’s words. He’d learned more about magic than he could have dreamed: Telekinesis, Latwo, and the sins he bore. And it gave him a purpose.

“Kallum—” Shailene burst out from her seated position, but she cut herself off before finishing. Though the reprimand was clear; he’d been blindly selfish in his offer.

“At least, let me help,” He gently corrected.

“Why?” A genuine confusion. Rhia was blind to his thankful expression and tone.

“Atonement,” Kallum said. “For my ancestors.”

“Navigating these modern developments *has* been rather irritating,” Rhia nodded to herself. “Some help might be a boon to the search...”

“What are you looking for?” Emi asked. Kallum glanced down at her and she returned with a smile. His knees buckled slightly, relieved that Emi was willing to join him.

“My sister,” Rhia replied. “I believe she resides on this continent.”

“Great,” Quinn said, standing and rolling his eyes. “Got any idea what she might look like? Some kinda instagram or is she also doing the ‘old soul’ bit?” He flitted his eyes toward Kallum and shrugged his shoulders.

“We’ve never met. I am hoping to find her, through the heretic’s magic.” Rhia jostled the linen bag twice. “All I know is that she was born from the sun.”

“We’ll do it!” Shailene shot up so aggressively it caught Kallum off guard. Her voice was dripping with tainted fervor. “We’ll find her.”

And so, the sun rose, calling an end to the first day of the trial and the beginning of the adventure for the five. An arduous journey akin to the princes, but with more differences than similarities. However, both would forever leave a vile stain on human history.

Interlude

It's quite inspiring; that even under the duress of the acidic Los Angeles rain, sycophantic Catholics can still find the strength to stand on the streets of Hollywood and hurl spiteful verses to shame innocent tourists. Though, that admirable malignance was lost on the Twitch Chat flying by, hurling equally vile words at the street preachers.

"Chat," Darius said to empty air, "chat, I'm not gonna harass them."

But that was a lie. Once the three-thousand or so viewers turned their spite from the 'preachers' to the 'pussy', he would be a puppet of the people. There wasn't a single bone in his back, or he would have canceled today's stream the moment the forecast predicted a heavy rain, too afraid of dropping momentum during the week-long L.A. livestream marathon.

"Okay chat, fine. What do I say?" Darius asked, once again to empty space. Empty space crossed by a strange couple, captured by the screen inches from the streamer's face. The girl, long black hair hooded by an oversized green parka and exposed legs, cradled a bundle wrapped with grimey bandages and about the size of a bowling ball. The guy, soaked black hair plastered to his face, guided the girl forward with a lanky arm that was visible under the white, buttoned shirt clinging to his skin. They stepped into the crosswalk, toward the preachers.

Like clockwork, the attention of chat shifted instantly to the passing girl. Half lusting over her slim thighs, teetering on the edge of malnourishment; a concerning reaction, but typical of Darius' chat. The other, more sensible half, curiously chatted about the strange, wrapped object.

"Repent, then, and turn to God," the preachers shouted at the couple, "so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."

Certainly, the hateful Catholics knew they spewed only vile slander because shock—visible across the street—ran across their faces as the drenched man surged forward to kneel before them in reverential prayer. The girl stood frozen near the edge of the cross walk, not moving an inch.

"Oh, how I wish to repent! God please cleanse me of my sins purely and justly for I can not cleanse myself," he pleaded with zealous fervor, making the preachers appear heretics. "How can I purge the evil within?"

"Is this guy schizo, chat?" Darius asked, making his way through the crosswalk to film the guy. And the girl. "This is gonna be content," he said, eager to impress the thousands of nameless faces. Raising his phone and viewing the world as his livestream, a manic courage swelled inside.

"Offer yourself to God in body and soul!" a preacher incited from beyond the stream. But the camera was pointed elsewhere, fated to never capture the faces of the *mostly* innocent victims. Instead, the shot hovered just above the girl's shoulder, trying to catch a pretty face instead.

“Yo,” Darius said. A hand slid into the frame, gently tugging her fluffy green parka.

“Once again, I shall offer myself, wholly, to the Lord!”

There was a rip. The sound picked up on stream, but Darius didn’t react and neither did chat. A flawless face, porcelain in color, produced not a single wrinkle as the girl’s eyelids opened to fleshy colored irises; no pupils.

Then a tear. An explosion of crimson splattered through the frame, smacking Darius’ face and coating her parka in a dark hue. Her skin remained untouched, until the wrapped bundle dripped a stream of red liquid running down her thin leg. At that moment, still through the screen of the phone in front of him, Darius felt the shape eerily resembled a head.

“Alas, you see I can not. Anastasia refuses to grant me salvation.”

In frame now, the now shirtless man spread his arms among a whirlwind of blood, guts and flesh that belonged to no one. Red cuts along his back and shoulders melted into his lanky body. The preachers, with petrified looks masked by the gore caking their faces, were very much alive. Rain slowly chipped away the red smears on their skin. A single scream from the destitute sidewalks could be heard through the multitude of screeching breaks from passing cars.

“But you, who have been touched by my sin, *can* find salvation!”

Darius ran his fingers through the viscous blood splattered on his cheek.

All three-thousand viewers watched the hateful preachers, ridiculed by them moments ago, burst into a fleshy tornado as the stream tumbled through the air, landing skyward to watch the red rain and hail of blended organs fall upon them.

“Blessed souls that may find peace in Heaven...”

Seconds passed.

“Ah, apologies, Anastasia. My mind is so abundant with sin that I can no longer take the lead.” The man’s voice could be heard from beyond the stream once more. “Will you guide your pitiful brother once more?”

A clink, so soft that you could not hear it unless you knew what it was.

Then a voice, so eerily soothing it could make even the most rugged man dissolve into gooey mush.

“To Vegas.”