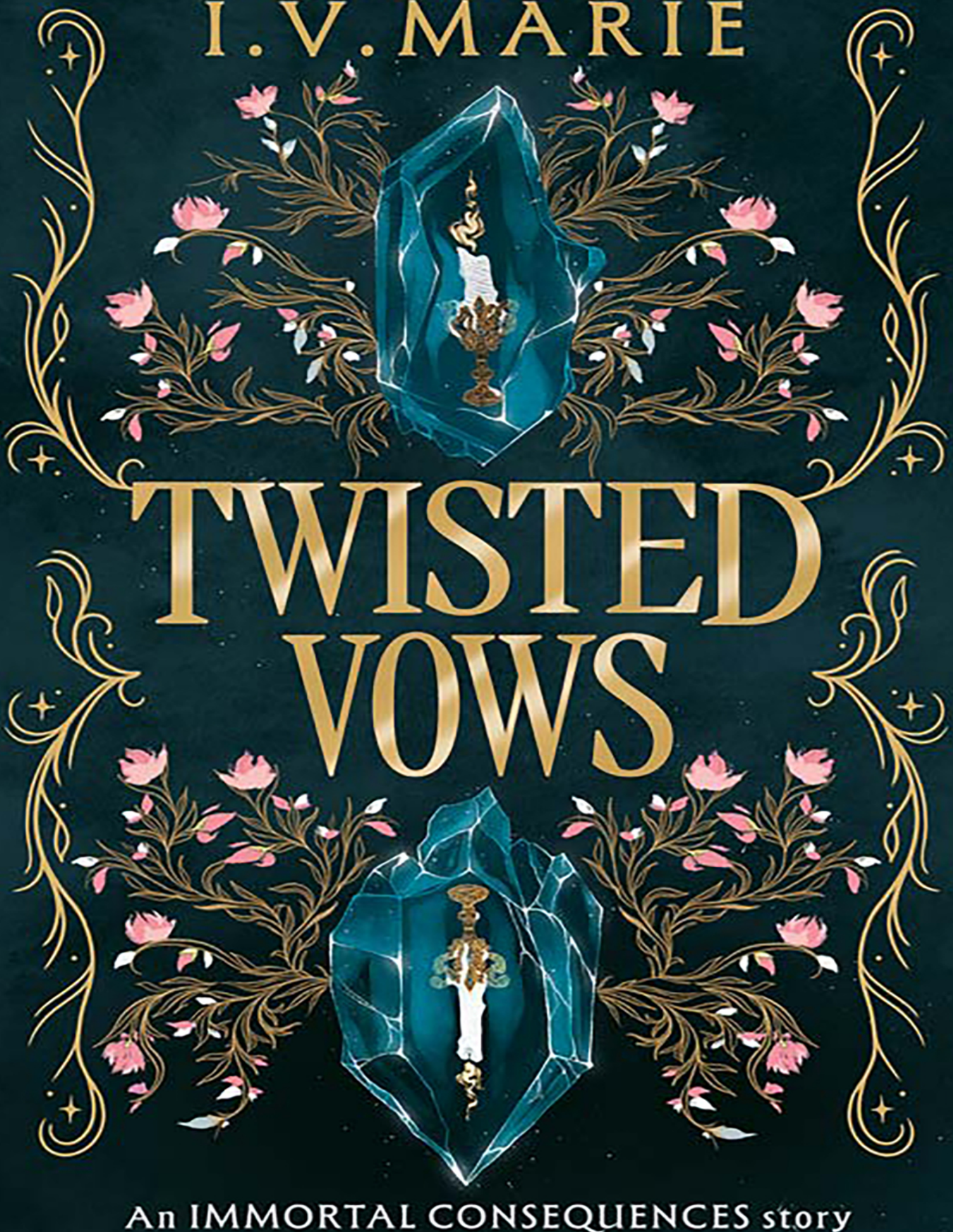


Sunday Times bestselling author

I.V. MARIE



TWISTED VOWS

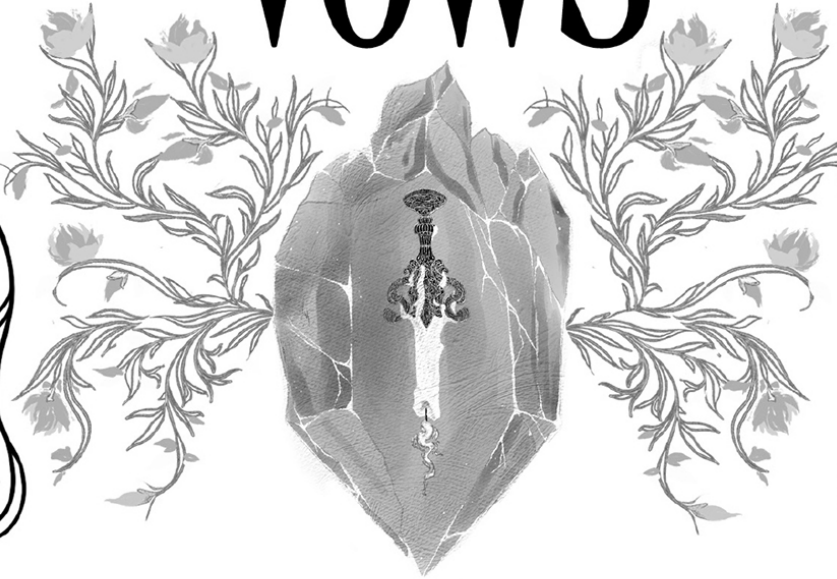
An IMMORTAL CONSEQUENCES story

Sunday Times bestselling author

I.V. MARIE



TWISTED VOWS





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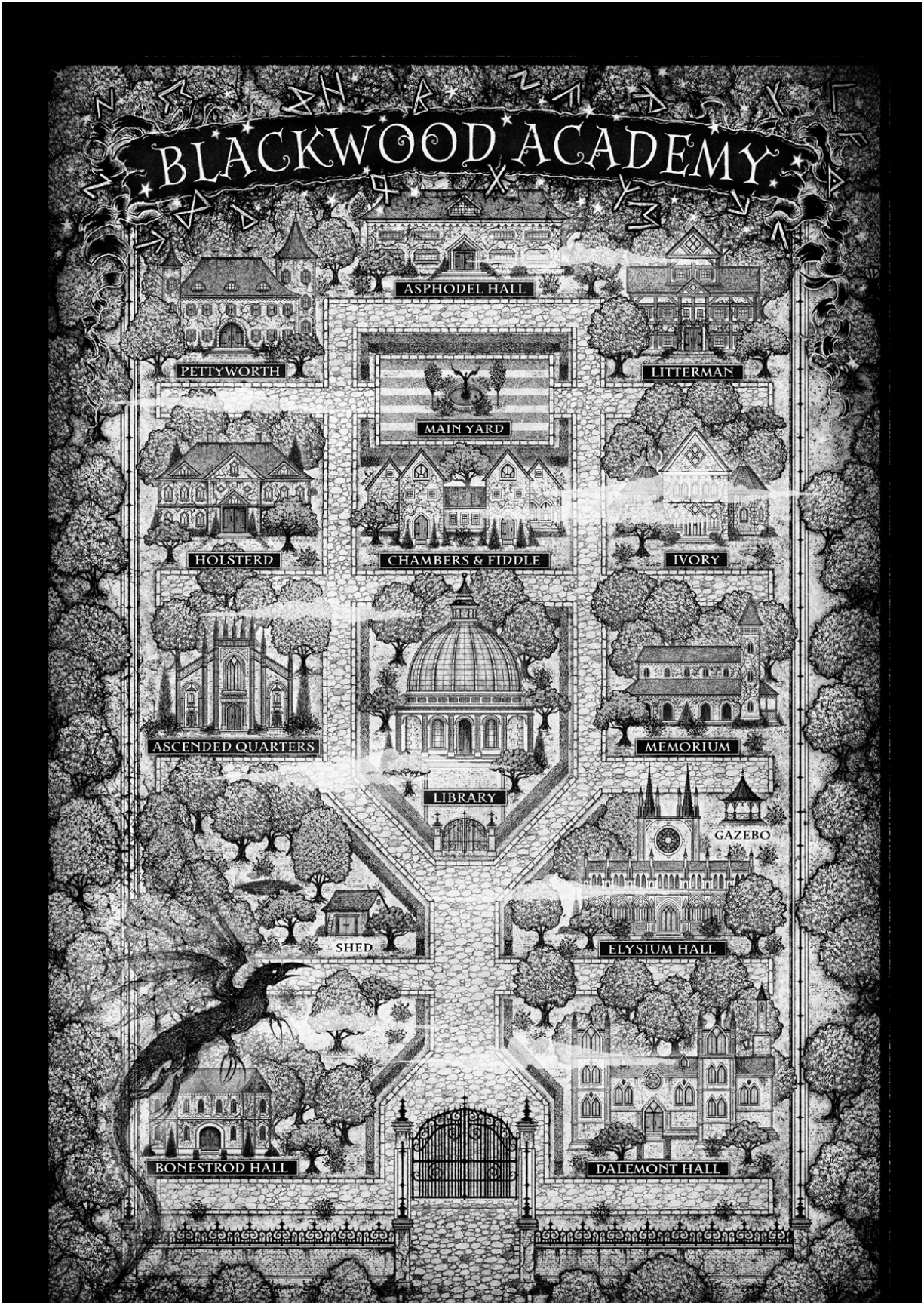
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DEDICATION

*For Josh.
I'd choose you in every eternity.*

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AUGUST

Augustine Hughes strode toward the iron gates, letter in hand.

His mother's voice echoed in his mind as he cut through the evening fog. Those long-ago words she had spoken before being taken from him forever. Hollowed and broken. As if she had known her demise was set in stone.

My son. My angel sent from above. Whatever happens . . . do not let the world harden your heart. Do not let the darkness take you. Protect your sister. You two are all that you have left.

And he had tried. He'd tried to be the son his mother wanted him to be. The brother his sister needed him to be. But he'd failed. The darkness had taken him and spat him back out and turned him into *this*.

Into vengeance.

Into retribution.

And no matter how hard August tried to forget the truth, he couldn't. He had a debt.

And now it must be paid.

When he arrived at the mouth of the forest, he spoke to the figure standing in front of him cloaked in shadows.

"I received your letter."

"Good," replied his sister. "It's time."

August unfurled the letter and let it fall to the ground. Through the darkness of night, a name stared back at him. A name he'd heard whispered to him in his dreams. Carved into the very heart of his soul. A name he had waited two hundred and sixty-three years for.

WREN

Wren Loughy died.

That's how simple it was. How seemingly inconsequential. One moment there, the next . . . gone.

The darkness didn't last. It swallowed her whole, enveloping her in a warm embrace, dragging her under, but just as quickly as it had come—*light*. All around her. Exploding through her, bursting through the core of her soul.

There was a feeling of floating. Weightless.

And then . . . soft ground. Blades of grass slipping between her fingers. Warm, damp earth filling her lungs. Mildew and pine and the acrid scent of decay.

Open your eyes. Open your eyes. Open your eyes.

The words echoed in her mind, relentless, a droning alarm she couldn't turn off.

Why couldn't she open her eyes? Her lids felt heavy, glued shut. But even through the opaque wall of her eyelids, that glorious light shone brightly, burning and burning, until finally . . .

Wren gasped awake.

Her eyelids snapped open.

"Greetings, Ms. Loughy."

Above her hovered a face. A man. His eyes were the darkest eyes she'd ever seen—an unnatural shade, like the expanse of a starless universe staring down at her. His features were sharp and angular, and speckles of gray mixed into the dark waves of his hair. One moment, the man looked to be very old, almost ancient, and the next, perhaps only in his mid-thirties. It was impossible to tell . . . as if he existed beyond the normal bounds of aging.

Wren opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. She cleared her throat. It felt raw, rough like sandpaper. Had she been screaming? She couldn't remember. She couldn't remember anything.

How did I get here? She thought back to what she *could* remember: Her sister. The car. The party . . .

"Easy there." The man with the dark eyes extended his hand toward Wren. "The memories will come back slowly. You want to ease into it. Last thing we want is them hitting you all at once."

Wren blinked. How had he known she was attempting to recall what had happened?

Somehow, by some miracle, Wren managed to lift her hand, snapping her body out of its strange trance. She placed her palm upon his and let the man gently help her from the ground and steady her onto her feet. Dead yellow leaves clung to her body, and as she brushed them off, it dawned on her that she wasn't entirely sure what she was wearing. She'd never seen the outfit before, and was certain she hadn't been wearing it moments earlier, despite being unable to recall exactly where she'd been.

A black turtleneck hugged her torso, tucked into a tartan skirt that fell a few inches above her knees. A black trench coat covered her shoulders; knee-high boots zipped up her calves. Her hands tentatively brushed the fabric of her coat, reaching the soft tip of her braid. *That*, at least, felt familiar. She always wore her auburn hair in a long braid, and she found a fleeting sense of comfort at knowing there was *something* she recognized.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Wren found her voice.

"Where am I?" she croaked, clearing the rasp from her throat.

"This . . ." The man gestured to the large iron gates looming in front of them. It was only then that Wren saw what lay beyond, and she had to stifle a small gasp from fluttering out of her lips. ". . . is Blackwood Academy. Your new home."

Wren blinked, dazed, and took in the view. Past the gates, towering brick buildings and ornate Gothic structures rose from the ground, blanketing the horizon with pointed turrets and arched rose-tinted windows. Hazy warm light spilled from the glass panels; tendrils of ivy and plant matter engulfed the buildings. Swirling plumes of mist shrouded the grounds, dancing as though caught in a breeze over the gravel path. More buildings hovered in the distance, though Wren couldn't make them out

beyond the hazy silver murk of night. Even so, she could feel an almost sentient force radiating from this strange world. A palpable sense of power.

This place, somehow, felt alive.

“Home?” The word felt odd on Wren’s tongue. Wrong. *This isn’t home.* She shook her head. “But . . . I . . . My sister . . .”

“There, there.” The man placed a comforting arm around Wren’s shoulders, guiding her forward, and despite her reservations, she found herself unable to protest. “Come with me. I’ll explain it all as soon as we’re in my office.”

They walked together in silence, passing the arched gates. Wren took in her surroundings as best she could, though her mind still felt clouded. All around them, crooked oak trees creaked and swayed. Their barren branches were gnarled fingers reaching for her, daring her closer. Every once in a while, Wren swore she saw a shadow dart through her peripheral vision. Heard the echo of footsteps drifting beyond the whisper of the wind. A muffled giggle tangled in the breeze. But other than the occasional faint noise and distant figure, the grounds were quiet. Undisturbed.

They had been walking for a couple of minutes when the man stopped abruptly, glancing down at the pocket watch tucked into the pocket of his coat.

“Ah.” He hummed, snapping it closed. “There we go. Looks like it’s been *just* enough time for your soul to adjust to spacial jumps.”

Wren blinked, confused. “What?”

“Apologies.” The man grabbed Wren firmly by the wrist. “The first time is always a bit of a doozy.”

She had no time to process what happened next. It was like falling through the universe, like slipping through the folds of time. Wren felt the very particles of her soul rip apart and join back together, and suddenly she was no longer standing on the unusual campus she had awoken outside of, but was just past the entrance of an office.

Wren fell to her knees, dry heaving. Her head whirled. Her stomach lurched. When she finally managed to steady the nausea that had flooded her body, she glanced up to find the man seated behind a desk in front of her, his dark eyes watching her with a faint inkling of pity. *When did he walk away from me?* Wren wondered. She hadn’t heard him move.

“Better?” he asked casually.

Wren coughed and pressed herself back onto her feet. “What the hell was that?” she choked out, struggling to catch her breath. “And how did we get here?”

“A relocation spell.” The man rifled through one of the drawers of his desk, revealing a single wax candle set upon a brass holder. “If I had done it earlier, the symptoms would have been even worse. You usually have to wait a minute or two for the new soul to adjust to the atmosphere of Blackwood.”

“A relocation—*what?*” Wren’s head spun as the words tumbled in her mind. “What the hell are you talking about?” She staggered forward, her movements still sluggish. It was as if she hadn’t quite gotten the hang of activating her muscles. Like her body was caught between life and death.

Death.

The word pierced something in Wren’s chest. Memories pricked at her consciousness. Something important. Something terrible. Something *awful*. Something that had happened to her—

“Sit down, Ms. Loughy.”

The man’s voice cut through Wren’s thoughts. He gestured to the empty seat in front of him, and the chair jerked backward on its own, scooting to make space for her as if it had come alive.

Wren jolted, stunned. She stared down at the chair, mouth hanging open in shock. “Did that just . . . Did the chair just . . .” She struggled to find the right words. It all sounded so silly. So completely and utterly absurd. *Of course* the chair hadn’t simply moved on its own. That would be ridiculous.

The man smiled.

“Please. It’ll all make sense if you just give me a second of your time.”

Wren considered his words for a moment. It wasn’t like she had a lot of options. She was confused and alone and woefully out of her depth. If she was to have any chance of knowing what had happened to her—*why* she was here—then she’d simply have to sit down and listen to what this peculiar man had to say.

“Fine.” Wren let out a sigh and sank into the chair across from him, hands folded neatly atop her skirt. “Go on, then. I’m all ears.”

But the man didn’t speak. He simply snapped his fingers and one of the teacups on the other side of the room *rose* into the air, glided toward them and came to a gentle and graceful halt on the desk.

Wren stared, jaw slack and eyes wide.

There was no denying it now. Just like the chair, the teacups had moved of their own accord—*No*.

They had moved on *his* command.

Wren could manage to utter only one word in response: “How?”

But the man didn’t answer her. Not directly. He simply gestured to the steaming cup of tea in front of Wren and said, “Take a sip.”

“What is it?” Wren asked, tentatively examining the liquid. It didn’t look malicious or otherworldly. In fact, it looked to be nothing more than a simple cup of tea. The steam rose in gentle ribbons. The familiar, comforting aroma filled Wren’s lungs.

“An English breakfast blend,” he replied with a coy grin. “Two sugars and a dash of milk.”

Wren’s eyes snapped up toward him. “That’s my go-to order.” It was her favorite morning drink. She’d make herself a steaming cup every morning, or walk down to her local coffee shop in the small mid-coast Maine town she lived in.

“I know, Ms. Loughy.” The man pushed the teacup an inch closer. “Please. Drink.”

With a shaking hand, Wren reached for the teacup. She brought it toward her lips, slowly, allowing the steam to gently billow into her mouth. She took a sip, bracing herself for something terrible, for poison to drip into her mouth. But as the warm liquid traveled down her throat, all Wren tasted was the familiar bold notes of spice and citrus on her tongue. The perfect level of sweetness.

It really is just tea, Wren thought, taking another long sip. She drank and drank, comfort and familiarity flowing through her. But there *was* something else. A sense of ease and relaxation that didn’t feel entirely natural. It was as if all the fear and doubt that had been buzzing in her chest since she’d awoken had vanished the instant she took the first sip. She felt calm.

Sedated.

“What . . . *is* this?” Wren whispered to herself, swishing the nearly empty cup of tea.

The man seated across from her leaned forward. “What do you remember?”

Wren blinked lazily up at him. “What?”

“What. Do. You. Remember.” Each word punched out of him, slow and deliberate. His eyes bored into hers with unusual intensity. Gone was the playful glint in his eyes. The teasing, all-knowing smirk.

Wren swallowed. She set the teacup down with a shaking hand. She understood what the man was asking. What he was requesting of her.

“My sister . . .” Wren muttered, her eyelids closing. And *there*, just beyond the fog and confusion . . . Wren could see her. The gentle slope of her nose. The strawberry-blond waves of her hair. The delicate chime of her laughter. “We were in a car. We’d . . . we’d gone to a party.”

“What else?” The man’s voice echoed, weaving through Wren’s memory.

“I . . . I remember a road. A deer.” Wren shook her head. Somehow, she knew what the memory should be making her feel. The terror that should have been coursing through her veins. The horror. But there was something about the *tea* . . . something about her body . . . that wouldn’t quite let her feel those emotions. “She was driving . . . We swerved.” Wren opened her eyes. When her vision refocused, she found the man staring back at her, stone-faced and solemn. “We flipped.”

The man nodded.

“I have some rather unfortunate news I must share with you, Ms. Loughy. It will take some time for you to process it. I’ve offered you a bit of a . . . delay. The tea you drank has hindered your emotions. Dulled those receptors.”

Wren stared down at the teacup, numb. “You drugged me?”

The man’s mouth twisted into a rueful smile. “I’ve helped you.”

Wren swallowed. Her hands trembled, but just briefly.

“Well, go on,” she said. “What do you need to tell me?”

The man nodded. He placed his hands upon the desk, fingers interlocked. “Your memories are correct. You were in a terrible accident. Your sister . . . she did not suffer. It was very fast. Upon impact.” He let out a slow, trembling breath. “You did not make it either, I’m afraid.”

Wren shook her head.

“I don’t understand.”

The man’s voice seemed to echo around the room as he spoke the next words aloud.

“You are *dead*, Ms. Loughy.”

Even as the words settled upon her, Wren struggled to piece together what she was hearing. As if her mind, body and soul were incapable of accepting the truth. “You died on that road. And now your soul has been chosen to reside here, at Blackwood Academy. It’s a prestigious honor . . . one few are granted. Here, you will train to become a reaper of lost souls. You will harness power and magic beyond anything that you have ever known was possible. Here . . . you will be handed a purpose. A guiding light. Here . . . you *will* find peace.”

“That’s . . . not possible.” Wren’s hands went numb beneath her. Her head spun. “I . . . I couldn’t have. I can’t be . . .” Wren tried to find the right words, to say *something*, but no other sound came out.

And then Wren Loughty did the one thing she *could* do.

The one thing she seemed capable of doing, despite her numbed emotions.

She fainted.

WREN

Adjusting to death was proving to be a challenge.

Wren had spent her first three days at Blackwood cooped up in her room, hidden beneath her covers, crying until her vision blurred and reality lost its meaning. She hadn't even known it was possible to produce that many tears. She'd just wept and wept—mourning the life she'd lost, the people she'd lost, the world she would never see again. Her home. Her parents. Her sister. Her future.

The move to New York she'd always imagined—*gone*.

Her dreams of becoming a journalist—*gone*.

The trip she wanted to take to the Amalfi Coast with her sister—*gone*.

All those hopes and dreams and big, shiny plans—all of them . . . gone. Forever. Taken from her because of one stupid mistake. One stupid, *stupid* decision. And worst of all . . . her sister had met the same fate, though her soul, according to the strange Headmaster of the school, had successfully crossed to the Other Side. That, at least, Wren could hold on to. Knowing her sister had found some semblance of peace.

But not Wren. *Of course* Wren hadn't. It was her fault, after all. She was the older sister. The one who was supposed to take care of Maeve. The one who was supposed to make the right choices and smart decisions and do better.

Be good.

Be smart.

Be clever.

Be *perfect*.

And she had fucked it all up. So if she was honest with herself, she deserved this. She deserved eternal unrest, forced to reap lost souls for the rest of eternity, until she could no longer remember all the mistakes she had made.

Light at the end of the tunnel, Wren thought grimly.

After she had awoken from embarrassingly fainting in his office, Headmaster Silas—as he had come to formally introduce himself—had informed Wren of all the grim details. How she would learn magic to help usher souls into the Other Side. The side effects of using too much magic, and that though she might not be able to feel pain, she could still exhaust herself to the point of being forced into a vegetative state and sent to the infirmary. The inevitability of the Forgetting, and how she’d eventually succumb to its amnesic properties unless she was nominated for the Decennial and successfully passed its four trials—though the next one wasn’t for a few years, not that she stood a chance at the nomination, anyway.

She had listened intently, absorbing what she could despite the nausea licking up her throat and the persistent ringing in her ears. It had all felt . . . surreal. Comically impossible. She was just supposed to believe in *magic* now?

Despite Wren’s reluctance, Headmaster Silas had then sorted her into her House, a process that had bewildered Wren.

“Hold the candle in your hand and blow on the wick,” Headmaster Silas had instructed, handing her a white wax candle set upon a brass holder.

Wren had stared down at the unlit candle, head tilted in confusion.

“What?”

“Blow on the wick,” Silas had repeated, a bit more forcefully this time.

Wren thought it was a rather foolish request, but then again, what did Wren know anymore? Her world had been ripped away from her. Her entire existence flipped on its axis. She supposed blowing on an unlit candle wasn’t the strangest thing she’d done since dying.

“All right.” Wren had sighed, bringing the candle closer to her mouth. “Fine.”

She blew on the wick.

And it came to life.

A deep crimson glow *burst* from the wick. A swirling red flame.

“Interesting.” Headmaster Silas hummed, nodding. “Very interesting.”

“What?” Wren asked.

Headmaster Silas had smiled. A proud, curious smile.

“Pettyworth House.”

Wren had come to learn that Pettyworth House was home to some of the most academically inclined students at Blackwood Academy. And though Wren could admit that she was rather smart, she had never been top of her class when she was alive. She hadn't even *enjoyed* school all that much. In fact, she detested the concept of academia. All the bureaucracy and politics and bullshit that came along with it. But Headmaster Silas had insisted that the sorting process was never wrong—and so, Pettyworth House it was.

Not that it made a difference. Wren refused to leave her room those first few days, despite the myriad of letters that had been shoved under her door, requesting she meet with Housemaster Marigold—instructor for elemental magic and supervisor of Pettyworth House—to receive her class schedule.

Screw this place, Wren had thought bitterly. *And everyone in it.*

She ignored the letters. She even ignored the textbooks that had begun to appear at the front of her room—though she had no idea how they were materializing there on their own. Out of sheer curiosity, she'd picked up a few and flipped through them, though most of what she found inside was pure and utter nonsense. Transmutation spells. Psyche mind puzzles. Spatial relocation strategies. She'd tried to make sense of them, skimming and digesting what she could, but no matter how much she read, she refused to acknowledge the reality of what had happened to her. She refused to leave her room and acknowledge her admission into Blackwood.

That was, until, the fourth day.

Today.

Wren awoke not to another letter but to a knock on her door.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Wren peeled the covers away from her face and sat up. She listened intently, waiting, and another set of knocks echoed. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* Whoever it was, they weren't giving up. She wondered who it could be . . . *Surely* it was Headmaster Silas here to reprimand her for ignoring his letters. Better yet, maybe he was here to revoke her admission.

Curiosity piqued, Wren slid out of bed and slipped on her boots before walking across the room.

But when she opened the door, it wasn't Headmaster Silas staring back at her. It was a girl. And given that the girl appeared to be no older than Wren, perhaps even slightly younger, Wren assumed it wasn't this Housemaster Marigold person either. Which meant that whoever this was . . . it was another student.

“Hello!” the girl chirped. Her dark hair was fashioned into a wavy pixie cut and her large honey-brown eyes were wide and eager. She had a thin, upturned nose and full lips, which she had painted a deep plum color. Her Blackwood uniform—which Wren had come to learn was tailored to fit each student’s unique personality—consisted of a lavender vest fitted over a billowing white blouse, which she had tucked into a flowing plaid skirt that fell just below her knees. Her shoes, Wren noticed, were *sparkling*. Shimmering, glittery flats the same color as her vest.

Wren cleared her throat.

“Hey.”

“I’m Maya Romero.” The girl extended her free hand with surprising vigor, hand flexed in anticipation. Her other arm was holding a stack of textbooks precariously tucked under her elbow. “We’re neighbors. Well, kind of. I live across from you—” But Wren interjected before the poor girl could get another word in, keeping her own hand planted firmly on the doorframe.

“What do you want?”

Maya blinked in surprise. She held her hand out for another beat, awkwardly letting it hover between them, before dropping it to her side.

“You’ve been ignoring your letters.”

“Very astute.” Wren glanced down at the dozens of unopened letters strewn across the floor. She’d stopped opening them after the first one—she assumed they all said the same thing. Some variation of how *important* it was for her to start her classes, how it was *imperative* she leave her room, how it was *essential* that she acclimate to the school, blah blah blah. Wren sighed and flitted her eyes back up to Maya. “Let me guess, you’ve been sent here to drag me out of my room?”

Maya chuckled, nervously scratching the back of her arm. “Uh . . . sort of.” She let out a long sigh, and when she spoke next, it was as if she were reciting something she had memorized, each word carefully parsed out. “I am here to help you. I know Blackwood can take some getting used to . . . and learning about one’s own demise is never easy—” Her voice caught in her throat as Wren cut in gently.

“Maya, is it?” Maya’s mouth remained open; she was clearly taken aback by Wren’s unwillingness to listen. “Look. I bet you’re a really nice girl, and I’m not trying to be mean, but I really, *really* don’t give a shit,

okay?" At this, Maya's mouth clamped shut. The tips of her ears burned pink. "I'm not leaving this room. I'm not going to class."

Maya blinked. She gnawed on the inside of her cheek. "But . . ." Her voice was small and thready. "You have to."

Wren snorted. "Or what?"

At Wren's question, Maya's face grew unnaturally solemn. She leaned in closer, the next word creeping out of her in a conspiratorial whisper.

"*Reformatory.*"

Wren sighed. "Am I supposed to know what that is?"

"Think of it like detention," Maya said, swallowing. "But . . . *a lot* worse." She shook her head, and something about the look in her eyes sent a shiver down Wren's spine. "Trust me. You do *not* want to go there."

"Oh, come on. I've had my fair share of detention. It's not like they torture you." But at Wren's comment, Maya's expression only grew more grave, and Wren had the sinking feeling that she was *very* wrong.

"Physically?" Maya shook her head. "No. Given our numbed pain receptors, that would be rather pointless. But there are other ways to torture someone. Other ways to inflict suffering."

A blanket of goose bumps traveled down Wren's arms. The suggestion was . . . ominous. Despite her reluctance to join Blackwood's routine, she wasn't exactly keen to find out the different ways a soul can be tortured. Which meant acclimating to her surroundings was no longer a choice.

It was a means of survival.

Wren groaned.

"*Fine,*" she muttered. "I guess I'll consider going to—"

"Perfect." Without warning, Maya shoved the textbooks into Wren's arms, gripped her tightly by the elbow and practically yanked her into the corridor. "Follow me."

Wren had no time to protest. She found herself walking beside Maya, dragged along as the girl sauntered down the winding corridors of Pettyworth's upper dormitories. Wren's eyes skated past the dozens of doors lining the path, and a part of her couldn't help but wonder how many students were housed in the building.

"How many—"

"Fifty-three," Maya interjected. "There are fifty-three of us in Pettyworth House."

Wren cocked her head. "How did you—"

“Newbies always ask the same questions,” Maya cut in with a smirk.

They made their way down a spiral staircase, pushing past a few students making their way upstairs. They reached the last few steps, and Wren stifled a gasp when they finally entered a large common room on the first floor.

Orange streams of light radiated from the candelabras scattered across the room, a hazy glow emanating from the intricate chandelier dangling above their heads. A crackling fire roared in a stone hearth, and Wren couldn’t help noticing there was something strange about the flames that danced inside. The flames weren’t simply flames—they were *alive*. From one second to the next, the fire morphed from a roaring lion to a soaring bird to a ballerina spinning in elegant circles.

But that wasn’t the only magical quality to the room.

Dozens of students lazed about, sprawled on crimson leather couches or sitting by the large bay windows on the western side of the room. A few of them were studying, and Wren watched in fascination as one student simply flicked her wrist and the page she was on turned on its own. Another student was practicing for some sort of exam, face contorted in concentration as he produced glittering purple runes from his palms. The runes shifted and morphed, changing shape as he rearranged them, and he grunted in frustration when they fizzled away.

As Wren and Maya made their way across the room, Wren couldn’t help but notice the attention that followed them like a second shadow. Curious stares drilled into the back of Wren’s neck as she walked past the other students. A gentle murmur of whispers.

Newbie . . . That’s the girl . . . Look who decided to grace us with her presence.

But despite their snide comments, most of the students actually looked at Wren with a surprising amount of warmth. A few even smiled up at her, and Wren found herself smiling back.

“Funny . . .” Wren whispered to Maya. “I was expecting a colder welcome.”

“Not here.” Maya shook her head as they approached the large double doors at the entrance of the building. “Everyone at Pettyworth is fairly nice,” she explained as she pushed open the doors and sauntered outside, stepping into the brisk morning air. Wren followed suit, her eyes straining to adjust after days spent cooped up inside. Hazy amethyst light fell from

the sky, blanketing the graveled path in a purple hue. Night fog lingered, but it dissipated with every step, breaking to reveal the range of Gothic structures that stretched out on all sides.

Students moved across campus in groups, speaking to one another in hushed whispers. Textbooks wedged between arms. Pens tucked behind ears. Brows furrowed in concentration.

“We Pettyworth students have a reputation for being a bit . . . antisocial,” Maya continued with a chuckle. “But we’re kind enough. Especially compared to some of the other Houses.” Maya’s breath hitched in her throat. “Well . . . all of us except . . . *you know who*.”

Wren quirked a brow.

“Who?”

Maya sucked in a breath. She leaned in closer, dipping her voice to a faint whisper.

“Augustine Hughes.”

Wren cocked her head in confusion. “Augustine—” But Maya silenced her before she could repeat the name.

“*Shh*.” She staggered to a halt in the middle of the path, gripping Wren tightly by the wrist. Students pushed past, flanking them. “You have to be careful. He might hear you.”

“You’re acting like this guy is the boogeyman or something.” Wren chuckled.

“Well.” Maya glanced over her shoulder, and Wren couldn’t help but notice the stiffness in her stance. The way the color drained from her cheeks. “He kind of is. They call him the Demon of Blackwood for a reason.”

The Demon of Blackwood?

Wren snorted. “Guy sounds like a real peach.”

“He’s cutthroat,” Maya added, continuing forward. Wren scurried after her, matching her pace. For a small little thing, Maya sure was fast.

“Handsome . . . but cutthroat. He’ll snap your neck if he perceives you as a threat. Push you off a building just to get ahead in class. Most Blackwood students are competitive and desperate to be nominated for the next Decennial . . . but he takes it to another level.” She shook her head, as if the mere thought of Augustine Hughes was too much for her to handle.

“Just . . . avoid him. If you can. You don’t want to get on August’s bad side.”

Wren shivered.

“Well . . . how will I know who he is?”

Maya gnawed on the inside of her cheek as she considered Wren’s question. “You’ll just know,” she said finally. “Trust me.”

Wren had no idea how she would *just know* who this Augustine Hughes guy was in a sea of hundreds of students, but she supposed she’d just have to take Maya’s word for it. In any case, Wren’s attention was instantly diverted when she noticed that Maya had begun to lead them toward a large building on the eastern side of campus. It had two jagged, pointed spires, each with a circular, amber-tinted window at the top. The arched double doors at its entrance were staggeringly large—at least fifteen feet tall—and fashioned from a dark wood carved with swirling shapes and patterns.

“Maya.” Wren came to a halt in front of the building. “Quick question: Where the hell are we going?”

Maya turned to face Wren. Her mouth curved into a grin. It was then that Wren noticed the piece of paper clutched in her hand. “It’s time for you to become an *official* Blackwood student.”

Wren did not like the sound of that. “What is that?” she asked warily.

“Your class schedule . . .” Maya revealed the paper with a flourish. “*Ta-da!*”

Wren did her best to bite back a smile. This Maya girl was so painfully endearing that it was becoming *really* difficult for Wren to keep up her “I hate the world” routine.

“That’s a long list . . .” Wren muttered, taking the class schedule in her hands. There were about eight classes listed on the piece of parchment, and Wren’s stomach instantly sank at the thought of being forced to sit through all of them. She traced the first one with her index finger and read it out loud. “Elemental Activation and Sense Connection.”

As soon as the words left her lips, something about the piece of paper began to change. Wren watched, fascinated, as the schedule melted away, the ink slowly disappearing until a detailed map took its place. It showed Wren exactly where she was—standing outside Elysium Hall—and a sparkling path emerged, guiding her into the building. “What in the . . .” Wren muttered, bewildered.

“Cool, right?” Maya beamed. “You just have to say the class you’re looking for out loud, and the map guides you to where it is! It’ll help you

acclimate these first few weeks. After a while, you won't need the map anymore."

Wren didn't want to admit it, but it was pretty cool. She supposed there were some perks to this magic business after all.

"We actually have your first class together," Maya said, smile deepening. "So I can take you there."

Relief coursed through Wren. She had been a little nervous about navigating the campus on her own. "So . . . what do I do once I'm in class? I mean . . . I don't really know how to do magic yet. Am I just supposed to sit there?"

Maya chuckled and linked her elbow with Wren's.

"Don't worry. It'll be easy." She nudged her, smirking. "*Trust me.*"

WREN

It was, in fact, *not* easy.

Wren had never felt more profoundly and utterly overwhelmed, seated among the other students in her Elemental Activation and Sense Connection class, watching as they crafted elemental magic from seemingly *nothing*. A girl seated a few rows in front of Wren extended her hands and a miniature tornado formed in her palms, swirling in smooth, even circles. A boy a few seats to her left lifted his hands in the air, flexing his fingers, and a perfectly blossomed tulip sprouted from the desk, fluorescent pink petals *popping* out of the stem.

Maya, who was seated directly next to Wren, created a river of water between her hands, which ebbed and flowed gently as she twisted her hands left and right. When she noticed Wren gawking, she chuckled under her breath.

“Come on, Wren. Give it a try.”

“I *did* try,” Wren grumbled. She really, *really* had. After hearing Housemaster Marigold explain how elemental magic was activated—by attributing each element with a specific sense-driven memory and latching that chosen memory to the core of the caster’s magic—Wren had attempted the easiest elemental spell she could try, according to Maya: *wind*. A gentle gust from the palm of her hand.

She’d done all the steps. She’d closed her eyes. She’d focused all her energy on the source of her elemental magic—her fingers. She’d fixated on the senses that she attributed to wind. *Coldness. A faint tickle on the skin. The scent of freshly cut grass filling her nose.* And though she’d felt a tiny spark in her fingertips—the gentlest presence of magic—nothing had happened.

“I find that sometimes it helps to get *really* specific with the sense memory,” Maya explained, placing a pen on her palm and extending her

hands in front of Wren. “Find an image from your past. Allow yourself to *really* feel it. For instance . . .” Maya closed her eyes as she continued to speak. “When I conjure wind, I imagine standing on the balcony of my apartment in Barcelona . . . the soft kiss of the wind against my skin . . . the way I could hear my mom making coffee in the kitchen . . . the clattering of plates . . .”

As the words left her lips, Wren watched as the pen began to float up and up, gently pushed along by the wind forming in Maya’s palm. As soon as Maya’s eyes fluttered open, the pen fell back onto her palm.

“See?” she smiled. “It’s simple, really.”

Simple was the last word Wren would use to describe any of this, but she wasn’t going to correct Maya. Either way, another thought had occurred to her as Maya was explaining her memory.

“How do we all communicate with one another?” Wren asked suddenly.

Maya blinked, taken back. “What do you mean?”

“I can understand you,” Wren clarified. “I assume you were born in Barcelona. And I assume everyone at Blackwood was born in different countries and continents. Yet we’re all speaking the same language . . . How is that possible?”

“Language doesn’t really exist in the afterlife,” Maya explained. “Not in the same way it does when you’re alive.” She placed her hand delicately against her own throat. “Think of it as all of us being reborn with a universal translator. We all speak the same language now. That’s why we can all understand each other, despite *where* and *when* we were born.”

It was somehow a beautiful yet sad thought. The barriers between them no longer existed, they were connected by a universal thread, but so many of their unique differences had been washed away as well. Language brought a sense of home . . . of identity. And now that was gone, forever.

“But that’s not important right now,” Maya cut in, pulling Wren away from her spiraling thoughts and back into the present. “Come on, Wren. Focus. Pick a memory. Feel it. Let it consume you.”

With a reluctant sigh, Wren grabbed the pen from Maya and placed it on her own palm. She tried to relax in her seat, loosening her muscles, allowing her body to slowly sink into the wooden chair.

With a long, deep inhale, Wren closed her eyes and sank into the recess of her memory. She was no longer seated in the classroom but standing at the top of a slide. She recognized her surroundings instantly. It was her

favorite park, the one she used to go to with her sister when they were little. Only a few miles from their house, wedged between an old church and an elementary school. Around her, children shrieked and giggled. It was summer, and the heat of the sun was beating down against her exposed neck, warming the hot metal of the slide. In the memory, Wren closed her eyes. The wind was hot and thick, and it was almost as if she could reach out and scoop it with her fingers. She let it travel across her arms, through her hair, whipping strands behind her back and across her face. The scent of brine and freshly cut grass filled her lungs, and she could practically taste it on her tongue.

When Wren opened her eyes, finding herself back in the classroom, the pen was floating inches above her palm, cradled in a gentle rivulet of wind. She let out a breathless chuckle, watching as the pen bobbed in the current, before slowly letting it drift back down.

“Told you,” Maya said, grinning. “Simple.”

*

After class, Maya ushered Wren back into the hallway, a bundle of hyperactive energy. “You did it!” she cried, looping her arm around Wren’s elbow. “I knew you could. I can always tell when a student is going to be exceptional. And you, Wren Loughty, are exceptional.” Her voice was all high-pitched and wobbly, as if she were seconds away from exploding in a puff of glitter and confetti.

“Exceptionally lucky, maybe.” Wren chuckled, flushing. “I don’t even know how I did it.”

“You connected to your magic, that’s how.” Maya beamed, coming to a halt. “And you did it more than once! Usually it takes a couple of classes to cast multiple elemental spells.”

Wren didn’t want to boast, but Maya *was* right. Wren had managed to cast three different elemental spells by the time the class had ended—wind, water and fire. It had taken her a couple of tries, and each element hadn’t been the *strongest* it could have been, but she’d done it. She’d actually cast magic.

Before Wren could say anything else, Maya glanced down at the thin silver watch on her wrist and grimaced. “Shoot. My next class is in a few

minutes, and it's in Dalemont Hall, unfortunately. I'd walk you to your class, but I was a bit late yesterday . . ."

"Don't worry about it," Wren assured her. "I promise I won't go running off." And Wren was surprised to find that she actually meant it. Not only did she not want to run the risk of being sent to reformatory, whatever that entailed, but she also didn't want Maya getting in trouble for doing what she had been instructed to do.

Maya smiled, clearly relieved. "Thanks, Wren." She glanced over her shoulder. "Well, I should probably get going. But I'll see you afterward, okay? You can meet me by the Main Yard after your last class and I'll walk you back to Pettyworth. Maybe we can even keep practicing in the common room!"

Wren nodded.

"Sounds good."

Maya smiled. "See you later." She lifted her hands, and suddenly a plume of lavender smoke swallowed her whole. When it cleared, she'd vanished, gone from one blink to the next. Wren startled, not yet entirely accustomed to *literal fucking magic*. The concept still felt insane, despite not only seeing it with her own two eyes but also having cast it herself.

"Okay, then . . ." Wren whispered to herself. She turned to face the hallway, glancing down at the map in her hands, eyes following the glowing path illuminated on its surface. She hadn't wanted to admit it out loud, but a part of her was the *tiniest* bit worried about navigating Blackwood on her own.

But she had a map. She had *literal* instructions.
How hard could it be?

WREN

Maybe it was time to admit to herself that she was lost.

In her defense, she'd followed the map. At least, she *thought* she had. It hadn't seemed all that difficult. She'd traced the path through the main foyer of Elysium Hall, up the winding stairs on the eastern side of the building. Wren had *sworn* she'd walked up the correct flight of stairs, but when she reached the sixth floor, she found herself standing in a narrow corridor lined with old portraits, not a single door to be seen.

Maybe the entrance to the classroom is hidden, Wren thought. It wouldn't surprise her all that much, given that nothing appeared to be normal in this godforsaken place. She continued forward, clutching the textbooks Maya had given her, eyes darting from one portrait to the next. She was considering backtracking and starting from the main foyer again when her shoulder hit something hard, and the stack of textbooks tucked in her arms toppled to the floor. It took her a few seconds to register that the large obstacle she had run into was a *person*.

A boy.

Where the hell did he come from? Wren hadn't seen anyone else in the corridor. But before Wren could apologize for bumping into him, the boy's deep, gravelly voice echoed in the space between them.

"Watch where you're going," he practically hissed through his teeth. He didn't spare Wren a glance over his shoulder as he stormed down the corridor, hands shoved arrogantly in his pockets and eyes fixed forward.

"Dick," Wren muttered under her breath, kneeling to pick up her books, which now lay scattered across the floor in disarray. *Honestly—who the hell does he think he is?* A simple apology would have been nice. A mumbled sorry. But nothing? And to snap at her, as if *she* were the one who had rammed into *him*? What an absolute, complete and total—

"Excuse me?"

Wren blinked up to find the boy looming over her. His eyes, a startling shade of silver that reminded her of the evening fog that slithered through campus, were zeroed in on her, his lips curled back with palpable disdain. He was tall, far taller than Wren, despite her own average height. There was something cruel yet beautiful about his features. All angles and sharp edges. His curls were dark, almost raven black, and pushed neatly away from his face. But there was one crack in his seemingly perfect exterior. One tiny, almost imperceptible detail.

A scar. A small rope of scar tissue beneath his right eye.

As if struck suddenly in the chest, Wren felt a burst of recognition and had to stifle a gasp. It was an innate understanding. A subconscious awareness.

Augustine Hughes.

Maya had been right. Looking up at him, Wren just *knew*. There was no mistaking it.

This was the Demon of Blackwood.

The Monster.

The boy who would pluck your eyes out if you looked at him the wrong way. The boy who would slit your throat just to get ahead in an exam.

But then, just as the realization washed over her, another thought echoed in the back of Wren's mind—*This is the boy they fear?* He didn't look like a monster to her. He didn't look any different from the rest of them. And despite everything Maya had told her, all the warnings and rumors, Wren couldn't find it inside herself to feel anything but annoyance at his lack of manners.

"Sorry." Wren cleared her throat, chin lifted high. "I meant *prick*."

The Demon of Blackwood raised a brow. Wren braced for impact. She half expected him to pull a knife on her and jam the blade into her gut. But Augustine Hughes simply looked at her, a twisted mixture of curiosity and disdain swirling behind his smoke-filled eyes.

"You're the new girl," he said simply.

"Congratulations." Wren snorted and continued to pick up her books.

"You have functioning eyes."

"Wren Loughty." He said her name slowly, a hoarse quality to his voice. "I'm—"

"Augustine Hughes." Wren picked up the last of her books, straightening herself back onto her feet. She faced him squarely and met his

gaze as best she could. "I'm well aware."

His lip rose a fraction, the faintest hint of a smirk. "My reputation precedes me." He made a mocking bow, and it took everything in Wren not to knock him upside the head with one of her books. "And it's August. Nobody calls me Augustine other than my family. And, well, they're *long* dead." He smiled, teeth gleaming, and Wren couldn't help but flinch, as if he were a predator baring his teeth before sinking them into her neck.

"If you mean everyone knows you're kind of an asshole"—Wren sneered back, head tilted—"then yes. Your reputation precedes you."

August blinked, and Wren swore his smile deepened. *Is he enjoying this?* she thought, bewildered.

"You certainly like insulting me," he muttered.

"Well." Wren straightened her shoulders. "You've yet to apologize for knocking me to the floor."

"If I recall correctly . . ." August stepped closer, looking her up and down. "It was *you* who ran into *me*."

Wren scoffed, aghast. "That is not—" But August interjected before she could get another word out.

"*Surface Illusions and Illusionary Obstructions.*" He reached out his hand, gently brushing the spine of one of Wren's textbooks. Wren couldn't help but notice the softness in his movements . . . the way his finger delicately grazed the surface of the book. Languid. Tender. Something about it made her stomach flip. "This is rather advanced for a newbie. Did they bump you up a few classes?"

"They did." Wren had no idea if that was actually true, but she wasn't about to admit that to this arrogant jerk. "Why? Are you intimidated?"

At this, August's eyes snapped up to meet hers. "Of you?"

"Of someone being better than you," Wren replied.

There was a hitch in August's breath. He stared, eyes boring into hers. There was something . . . *disconcerting* . . . about the way he looked at her. An intensity that left Wren feeling breathless.

When August finally responded, his voice was steady. "I'm perfectly confident in my abilities as a student, and even if I *were* worried, it wouldn't be because of some fresh soul with an inflated sense of self-assurance."

A sweltering anger burst through Wren. She stepped forward. "Inflated sense of—"

“I ought to be going,” August cut in. And before Wren could even process what he was doing, before she could move back and distance herself from him, August reached out his hand and delicately brushed a strand of her hair behind her ear. “But I’m sure I’ll be seeing you around . . . *Loughy*.”

And then he was gone. From one blink to the next, August vanished, swallowed in a plume of black smoke. And all Wren could do was stand there, mouth agape, her rebuttal lodged in the back of her throat.

*

That self-righteous, egotistical, self-absorbed, arrogant, pretentious, brooding *asshole*.

Who the hell did he think he was? *Inflated sense of self-assurance*. That was the last thing Wren would ever say about herself. Nobody was more aware, more critical of Wren’s faults, than herself. And who was he to judge her based on a thirty-second interaction? He hardly knew her!

Wren couldn’t stop seething as she continued down the corridor. She no longer cared that she couldn’t find the damn classroom. All she could think about was that rude, insolent, vain idiot, and his stupid, *definitely not handsome* face. In fact, she was so vexed by the memory of their interaction that she almost didn’t notice the strange shimmer on the wall beside her. Luckily, she managed to pause her seething, detecting the effect right before she could walk past it.

Wren cocked her head in confusion.

“Huh.”

It was as if there were a translucent, iridescent gauze on the wall. It waved like rippling water, sparkling with a faint lilac sheen. Wren reached out a tentative hand, brushing her fingertips against the shimmer, and felt her fingers move *past* the wall, as if it weren’t solid. Wren was about to push her hand through farther when somebody cleared their throat behind her.

With a startled gasp, Wren spun on her heels to face a girl with dark brown skin and eyes that almost appeared to be golden, like honey. Her dark curls were pinned away from her face, and she was peering at Wren

with a rather curious expression, her lips pinched, as if she were holding back a smirk.

“Are you going through or not?” she asked with clipped impatience.

Wren blinked, confused. “Am I . . . *what?*”

“Oh Jesus Christ.” The girl rolled her eyes, glancing down at her burgundy flats. “You must be the newbie. I’ll never understand why they put some of you in a course *this* high . . .” She shook her head, an exasperated sigh fluttering from her lips. “You walk into it.” Wren must have continued to look perplexed, because the girl sighed and added, “Just follow me.”

Without a glance back, the girl simply walked *into* the shimmer, through the wall, and vanished. For a moment, Wren considered making her way back to Pettyworth, unwilling to subject herself to whatever this was, but then she remembered Maya’s cautionary words. The threat of reformatory and what might await her if she failed to acclimate.

Fine. Wren thought with a sigh. *Through the wall I go.*

Wren held her breath as she stepped forward, following the girl. For a moment, all she saw was white, as if she’d been swallowed by a thick, oppressive fog, and then suddenly the fog subsided and she found herself standing at the front of a classroom.

Wren blinked as her eyes adjusted. The classroom was large and spacious, with wide, domed ceilings and dark wooden walls bordered with floral wallpaper trim. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined the eastern side of the room, and ribbons of amethyst light trickled through the glass in prismatic rays that bounced across the walls. Students sat in even rows, a sea of sullen, bleary-eyed faces.

And standing at the front of the room, behind a tall podium, was Housemaster Russo. At least, Wren *assumed* that was who it was, judging by the name on her schedule. Like the rest of the Housemasters, Russo appeared to be older than the students, perhaps in her mid to late thirties. She wore a long-sleeved black shirt tucked into black slacks, and her lips were painted a deep shade of scarlet. Her brown eyes landed on the girl who had showed Wren how to enter through the shimmer.

“Ms. Sallow.” Russo pushed up the sleeves of her black shirt. “Three minutes late.”

“Apologies,” the amber-eyed girl muttered, sliding into a seat in the front row. She delicately placed her chin on the flat plane of her palm, her

movements graceful and fluid. “Relocation reserve ran out faster than anticipated. Won’t happen again.”

“I’d hope not.” Housemaster Russo’s eyes skated past her, landing on Wren with a sudden intensity. “And you must be our new student. Ms. Loughty. I suppose your tardiness can be excused . . . *for today*.” She gestured to the two empty seats left in the back of the classroom. “Go on. Take a seat.”

Wren kept her gaze forward as she made her way to her seat, attempting to ignore the dozens upon dozens of students watching her. As she sat down, she pretended to fuss with one of her books, bending the corner of the first page over and over.

Housemaster Russo had just begun to address the classroom again when footsteps echoed at the front of the room. The *swoosh* of someone else passing through the shimmer.

It turned out Wren and the amber-eyed girl hadn’t been the only ones running late.

“Apologies for my tardiness,” a voice announced. Deep. Grating. *Familiar*. “I had a bit of a . . . *hiccup* . . . on the way to class.”

Wren’s stomach flipped. Her breath hitched in her throat.
Of course.

AUGUST

August had intended to be better prepared. He had planned every minute detail of their first encounter. He had turned the moment over and over in his head. He'd spent fucking *centuries* waiting for her, yet somehow she'd managed to take him by surprise. Twice. Because not only had he not meant to run into her in the corridor—he sure as hell hadn't expected to see her in Housemaster Russo's class. Next to *his* seat.

"Apologies for my tardiness," he'd said, keeping his gaze fixed on Housemaster Russo. "I had a bit of a . . . *hiccup* . . . on the way to class." And now the aforementioned *hiccup* was seated a few feet away from him. August had become completely derailed when he'd bumped into Wren in the corridor. So much so that he'd had to hide in the stairwell until the panic in his chest settled and he could catch his breath. If Edith knew just how easily the catalyst had rattled him . . . just how quickly he'd been unmoored by her . . .

His sister would probably kill him all over again.

Housemaster Russo sighed and waved him on. "Yes, fine. Just take a seat, Mr. Hughes."

August nodded and slowly made his way to the back of the class. The students he passed averted their gazes, eyes downcast and breaths held. August stifled a chuckle. He couldn't help but find their obvious terror the *tiniest* bit amusing. He'd been working on his reputation for centuries now—cementing himself as a threat for his own self-preservation. Because what was the easiest way to alienate himself from everyone? What was the best deterrent to ensure nobody tried to get close to him and uncover his secrets?

Fear.

But whatever amusement he was feeling quickly died when he approached the empty seat next to Wren, her glacial blue eyes landing on him with unwavering defiance.

“You again . . .” Wren fidgeted in her seat and crossed her arms over her chest. “Great.”

“Trust me, darling.” August slid into his seat next to her. “I’m not exactly *elated* to see you, either.”

Wren scoffed. August kept his gaze planted on the front of the classroom, but he could *feel* her glare settle upon him. “I have not given you a single reason not to like me,” she muttered defensively.

“Other than insulting me every chance you get?” August tilted his head. “Sure. You’ve been a delight.”

He was acting like a prick, he knew that, but he was just so damn *frustrated* with himself. How had he managed to mess up this badly? He was meant to befriend the girl, get close to her, not make an enemy of her. Was he truly that useless, that remarkably unlikable, that he managed to instill such deep loathing in her in a matter of seconds?

“All right, class.” Housemaster Russo clapped her hands and the shutters on the windows slammed shut. Luckily, there were a few lanterns surrounding the students, and the faint orange glow from their flames kept the room from being completely engulfed in darkness. “As you all know, the Hunt, Blackwood’s yearly corporeal scavenger hunt, begins tomorrow, and makes up nearly *half* of your grade for this class.”

“Scavenger hunt?” August heard Wren whisper beside him. He didn’t think she was addressing him, so he didn’t respond, keeping his mouth clamped shut.

Russo continued. “Like last year, the Hunt will be kept within Blackwood’s perimeters and will consist of three corporeally focused challenges. Your main objective? Locate the three jewels hidden on campus. Your second objective? Accurately complete the corporeal spell that you’ll need to cast in order to unlock the jewels. Third objective?” Russo smiled and her teeth glimmered in the dimly lit classroom. “Don’t kill your partner in the process.”

At this, Wren stiffened. August could practically sense her shoulders go rigid. Her breath caught in her throat. “Partners?” she whispered, this time angling her chin toward August. So she *was* talking to him. “Does that mean . . . Are we . . .” But Wren’s question was answered by Russo before August could get a word in.

“Mr. Hughes. Seeing that you’re seated next to our newest student—and given your *extensive* experience—you will be partnered with Ms. Loughty.”

August couldn't stop the words from tumbling out of him.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Russo raised her brows in mock surprise. "Is there a problem, Mr. Hughes?"

August inhaled a long, steadying breath. *Compose yourself*, August berated himself silently. He needed to play it cool. Not make a scene. "I can't possibly work with her. She's barely been here a week—"

"And?" Russo interjected with a sigh.

"That hardly seems fair," August added, aware of Wren's searing gaze burning the side of his face. "I'm clearly at a disadvantage."

"I am *not* a disadvantage," Wren protested, catching August by surprise.

August sighed, turning to face her. "You've never even cast corporeal magic before. Actually, come to think of it, have you cast *any* magic?"

"Yes," Wren shot back. "As a matter of fact, I just did in my elemental class. *Three* different elements."

August raised a brow. *Hmm*. Three elements on her first attempt was rather impressive, not that he was going to admit that out loud. "Doesn't matter. Elemental magic and corporeal magic are completely different. They tap into different parts of your abilities. Elemental magic is tied to sense memory, while corporeal magic requires *anger*. Fury."

"Yes, I know that," Wren shot back, flushing. "I've been reading. I know what I'm doing."

August groaned. "Reading and executing are two very different—"

"Enough." Russo's voice cut through their conversation, drawing August's attention back to the front of the classroom. He'd nearly forgotten they were in the middle of class, with dozens of other students watching. "This isn't up for discussion, Mr. Hughes. You have plenty of experience to guide Ms. Loughty through the Hunt. Unless you doubt your own abilities . . ."

August scoffed. "Hardly."

"Then sounds like you'll be just fine," Russo replied with a tight-lipped smile.

The rest of the class went by in a blur. Russo handed out the maps for the Hunt, and August reluctantly folded his into neat squares and stuffed it into the pocket of his pants. When the class ended, he didn't bother looking back at Wren, storming out of the room before she could even attempt to speak to him.

As he walked through the shimmer and back into the corridor, he thought that he'd managed to duck out of the room fast enough that Wren couldn't catch up with him.

That was, until he heard a shrill and familiar voice echo behind him, a lilt of annoyance in every word.

"Hey! Wait up!"

August shut his eyes and inhaled sharply. He pushed his tongue against the roof his mouth, summoning his last shred of patience. "I have somewhere to be, newbie."

Wren appeared beside him, chest rising and falling rapidly as she steadied her breathing. She must have sprinted out of the classroom to catch up with him. "Shouldn't we plan where we're going to meet tomorrow?"

"I can do this on my own," August bit out.

Wren scoffed indignantly.

"Excuse me?"

"I don't need your help with the Hunt," he muttered, fussing with the silver ring wrapped around his index finger. "I'll find the jewels. I'll give you credit." He forced his lips into a mocking smile. "Happy?"

"No," Wren huffed, struggling to keep up. August picked up his pace, not bothering to glance back at her. "I'm—*Ugh*. Can you stop being a dick for, like, half a fraction of a second and listen to me?"

August stopped so suddenly that Wren nearly ran straight into his back. August turned slowly, peering down at her.

"Watch yourself," he whispered, voice hoarse.

There was the faintest flicker of fear in her eyes. August had to give her credit—she was stubborn as hell. "Or what? You're going to pluck my eyes out, or whatever it is you do to everyone else here? I'm not scared of you, August. Hell—we don't feel pain, so what does it even matter?"

August stepped closer. He was aware of their sudden proximity, the strange tension vibrating between them. It was almost as if he could reach out and touch it—touch *her*. His fingers burned at the mere thought.

"It's not about pain, Loughy." He needed her to understand this. To hear every word. To *fear* him. Because if she spoke like that to the wrong person, to someone other than him, her bravery might get her a snapped neck or slit throat. "I could land you in the infirmary. You'd be there for weeks. Unconscious. Comatose. Unable to do anything except lie around, useless. You'd fall behind in all your classes. You'd lose all hope of ever

getting out of this hellhole and saving your precious memories from the Forgetting.”

Wren mulled his words over. She bit the inside of her cheek, her breathing slow and steady. For a moment, August thought his words had truly resonated with her. That the fear had once and for all sunk in.

But then she lifted her chin, gaze unflinching, and said, “So do it.”

August chuckled. *The nerve of this girl.* Maybe she really was the catalyst.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” he muttered back with a smirk.

Wren rolled her eyes.

“Listen,” she said through a sigh. “I don’t want to work with you just as much as you don’t want to work with me, okay? You’re not exactly my first pick for a class partner. But I’m trying to acclimate to this godforsaken place, and *you* are not going to be the reason I get stuck in reformatory.”

Reformatory. The second the word fluttered out of her lips, August flinched, unable to stifle his reaction. A chill ran down his spine and his chest tightened, the familiar traces of panic building inside of him.

“Did you get a warning?” he asked, dipping his voice lower.

“Not a formal one,” Wren muttered with a chuckle. “I don’t think, at least. I haven’t even looked through all the letters . . .”

August’s face fell. “You ignored your letters?”

Wren must have caught the seriousness in his tone. The tinge of fear in his voice. Because the smirk faded from her lips, replaced by a look of deep worry. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Memories forced their way into August’s mind. *A blank, dark room. His father’s voice echoing all around him. Taunting him. The icy breath of fear burning in his veins. A feeling of endless doom building in the pit of his stomach. “You’re never leaving,” the voice whispered. “Never. Never. Never. Ne—”*

“August?”

Wren’s voice pulled August out of the memory and back into the present. He blinked, clearing his throat. Wren was staring up at him, eyes wide and full of concern. It made his insides twist. His stomach lurch. *Concern.* He didn’t deserve that from her. He didn’t deserve that from anybody.

“The old shed,” he managed to say, despite the knot in his throat.

Wren furrowed her brow, taken aback. “What?”

“Tomorrow,” August added, straightening his shoulders. “Before your classes. Meet me by the old shed just north of Bonestrod. We’ll find the first jewel together.”

Wren nodded, though August could see an inkling of suspicion whirling behind her eyes.

“Why the sudden change of heart?” she asked.

August tried to find the right words. *Why?* Because the last thing he ever wanted to be was the reason someone suffered the same way he had. To be the reason *she* suffered. But instead, all August said was “Because nobody deserves to experience reformatory.” He paused, breath hitching in his throat. “*Nobody.*” And with that tiny sliver of a confession, August turned away from her, battling every instinct that begged him to stay, and left.

*

August tore into his room like a frenetic tornado, bursting the door open with a flick of his wrist before promptly slamming it closed. He didn’t understand why he felt this way . . . why he was so easily rattled by Wren. He felt *wretched*. Like being near her was enough to rip apart the last remaining shreds of his sanity. Despite all that, he had to admit that a part of him was strangely drawn to her. And not just because he’d been assigned to watch out for her arrival. He wasn’t sure if he was imagining it, but the moment he saw her, the moment he laid eyes on her, it was as if he sensed a . . . *tether*. A connecting thread. As if his soul had been dormant all these years and had just now sprung to life by being near her.

It was ridiculous. Foolish.

August was beginning to pace when he noticed something in his peripheral vision. A full-length mirror was hung on the wall beside him, and before he even turned to look, he noticed a discrepancy in the reflection. Something wasn’t right.

There’s somebody else here.

“Hello, little brother.”

August nearly jumped out of his skin, turning to face the mirror with a jolt. Staring back at him was not only his own reflection but his sister’s, as if she were standing beside him. But of course, when August glanced over

his shoulder, his sister was nowhere to be seen. She only existed within the mirror. A projection enchantment made to communicate over long distances, despite being miles and miles away from one another.

“Jesus Christ . . .” August rubbed his face with his hands, groaning, and glared up at his sister. “Really, Edith? Couldn’t you just write me a letter?”

His sister raised a dark brow, petulant as ever. That ridiculous shadow crown she insisted on wearing sat delicately atop her dark hair, which she had pinned away from her face, fully exposing the inky black veins that ran along her neck.

“I needed to speak with you directly,” she said simply.

“And you couldn’t have found a less creepy way to do that?”

Edith rolled her eyes, ignoring August’s snide remark. When her gaze fell upon him once more, August noticed a shift in her expression. Her eyes grew darker, her expression morphing from one of amusement to one of finely honed inspection. Edith moved, and it was as if the reflection itself had drawn *closer*, as if she were approaching the surface of the mirror. When she spoke next, her voice was a breathless whisper.

“You’ve met her.”

August’s chest tightened.

“How can you tell?”

Edith’s eyes raked up and down his face, her lips curling a fraction.

“Oh, come on, Augustine. You must know by now that I can read you like a book. I’ve always been able to see right through you.”

August swallowed. The thought was terrifying. He certainly hoped his emotions weren’t written *that* plainly across his face. That he could, somehow, keep a part of himself hidden away from his sister.

Despite having once believed in the Demien Order’s cause, August had to admit that his loyalty had been . . . faltering. He’d allowed his own anger at being thrown into Blackwood and his love for his sister to sway him into joining the Order and believing in the Soulless One’s desire for retribution. It wasn’t even that August necessarily *wanted* to destroy Blackwood. He simply wanted to cast his fury at what had happened to him onto something—*someone*. Blackwood was a representation of the control he had lost. Of the life he had lost.

When Edith had approached him about the Order all those centuries ago, joining them had seemed so simple . . . so reasonable. *Of course* he’d

help his sister. Of course he'd choose to believe her. But now . . . now the girl standing before him was someone August hardly recognized.

He didn't even fully understand why the Soulless One needed the catalyst to destroy Blackwood. His sister had laid out the basics—that Blackwood was a source of corruption that needed to be cleansed, and it was only through the catalyst's arrival that their plan could be set in motion. But *how* exactly Blackwood was corrupt had never been fully explained to August. Edith had kept everything rather vague. When he'd pushed the matter, she'd simply brushed him off.

"Until you remove your humanity and fully join the Order, there are some things that must remain hidden from you."

"But . . . this feels important," August had pressed. "Something that could help me—" But his sister had cut him off, unwilling to hear him.

"Do not make me repeat myself, Augustine."

And that was how it went any time he tried to bring it up. More secrecy. More lies. And it wasn't even August's fault that he hadn't removed his humanity yet. It was a necessary part of his undercover work. If he removed his humanity, he couldn't be a Blackwood student. Silas would no doubt sense the change in his soul and discover that August was part of the Demien Order. Keeping his humanity was his way of ensuring that his enrollment wasn't jeopardized. Still, Edith found a way to use it against him. To wield it as a tool to keep him in the dark.

So it was only natural for doubt to blossom inside him. How was he to blindly trust what his sister said? He supposed his trust in the Soulless One should be unwavering. That was the vow he'd taken as a Demien.

Believe in the Soulless One.

Follow the plan.

Awaken the catalyst.

And yet . . .

An image of Wren flitted through August's mind. His chest tightened as he pictured the delicate slope of her nose. Her soft lashes brushing her skin. The teasing smirk on her lips as she branded him with another insult.

He never thought he'd find so much pleasure in hearing his name damned.

"She's . . . different than I thought she'd be," August admitted, finding his voice once again. "The girl. She doesn't *seem* like the catalyst—"

“That’s because she isn’t,” Edith interjected, the shadow veins running along her skin darkening. “Not yet. Her soul is still fresh . . .” She shook her head, as if lost in thought. “She has so much to learn.”

August glanced down and only then realized that he had balled his hands into fists, the tips of his fingernails digging into the flesh of his palm. He had been squeezing so tight that he’d almost drawn blood.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked, each word carefully parsed out.

“Gain her trust,” Edith replied. “Teach her. *Make* her strong enough. She won’t be prepared by the time the next Decennial comes around, that’s for certain . . . but the one after. In eighteen years’ time. *That* is when we need her ready.”

Eighteen years. It was the blink of an eye when it came to eternity. August had already waited centuries for her . . . had already spent so long dreaming of this day. What was eighteen years? It was nothing. A single moment.

August knew what his role was. Teach Wren the ropes at Blackwood. Ensure she strengthened her magical abilities and fortified her soul through her connection to her magic. Then, once nominated for the Decennial, she’d need to make it to the last trial, which notoriously took place in the Ether. There, with the help of August, Edith would have the tiniest window to slip through Blackwood’s defenses and take Wren.

August just needed to wait eighteen years.

Eighteen years of being near Wren, of speaking to her, of looking into those bloody doe eyes of hers and restraining himself from doing something monumentally stupid.

“She’ll be ready,” August replied, clearing his throat. “I’ll make sure of it.”

At his response, Edith nodded, though her gaze lingered on August with an unusual intensity. She cocked her head, eyes narrowed.

“And will *you*?” she asked.

August flinched.

“Will I what?”

“Will *you* be ready, dear brother?” Edith asked, and though there was an undertone of tenderness in the way she spoke the word *brother*, there was also a lethal edge to it. A dangerous quality that sent a chill down August’s spine.

He knew what his sister meant. In eighteen years, once he helped Edith infiltrate the school and take Wren, it would finally be his turn.

In eighteen years . . . August would rip out his humanity.

He would destroy his soul—once and for all.

August inhaled a sharp breath. There was no hesitation in his response.

“I’ll be ready.”

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WREN

Early-morning fog drifted over the grounds as Wren made her way to the old shed. She'd hardly slept the night before. Anticipation buzzed in her chest. A restlessness that had kept her eyelids open and her mind racing. Not that it mattered. Sleep had become more of a formality, now that she was dead. She no longer felt exhaustion like a living human would. Lack of sleep in the afterlife meant a distractable mind and weakened magical abilities—and given the fact that Wren hardly had any magical abilities to begin with, she wasn't entirely worried about weakening them.

Wren shivered as a sudden breeze danced through the air, blanketing her skin in goose bumps. She wrapped her trench coat tightly around her body, bundling herself for warmth. Around her, the crooked oak trees that dotted Blackwood's campus shivered, their gnarled branches creaking and groaning as they swayed with the wind. Deep orange and yellow leaves coated the ground, crunching beneath Wren's knee-high black boots. Despite hating the place, Wren had to admit there was something eerily beautiful about Blackwood. A strange sense of comfort in its isolation.

But that comfort was quickly snipped as Wren spotted the old shed up ahead. It sat nestled behind a copse of trees, a decrepit structure shrouded in shade. It was made of old, chipped wood, with a circular iron handle attached to the door. Wren approached it tentatively, suddenly aware of how far she was from the main grounds. *Is there anybody else nearby?* Wren wondered. *And would they hear me if I screamed?*

She supposed it was too late to worry about that now. Plus, she *had* to meet with August if she wanted to get a good grade on this assignment and properly acclimate to Blackwood. He had the map for the Hunt, after all.

Wren inhaled a sharp, steadying breath and opened the door.

Stepping forward, Wren entered the dimly lit shed. Its windows were shuttered, so only slivers of morning light broke through the cracks in the

old wood. Mounds of dust hovered in the air, itching Wren's nose and the back of her throat. She blinked, attempting to adjust to the darkness, but all she could see were shapes and shadows. She could technically summon light, but she had no idea how to even begin casting that spell. She hadn't quite learned how to fully connect with her magic, despite the books she'd read and the lectures she'd listened to. After her elemental and corporeal class, Wren had attended various classes that allowed her to explore the other magical affinities taught at Blackwood—defensive, illusionary, psyche and spacial. She'd even practiced a bit with Maya like she had promised, and had managed to properly construct an illusion of the girl, though it had flickered and dissipated in a matter of seconds.

She supposed that was the *one* thing she could agree with August on—there was a major difference between reading about magic and *actually* practicing it. But Wren could already feel herself growing stronger. She'd kept practicing through the night and into the morning, even without Maya, summoning small elemental spells on her way to class and attempting to relocate in and out of Pettyworth. It was only a few feet, but still, Wren could sense her connection improving.

"Suppose it's worth trying again . . ." Wren muttered now, lifting her right hand. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying desperately to summon *something*. A faint flicker. The tiniest ember. When she opened her eyes, she saw it. A wisp of light dancing against her palm. A chuckle of relief fluttered out of Wren as the light grew brighter, building in her hand. There was something invigorating about connecting with her magic. Wren felt it inside. The *spark* igniting in the core of her soul. Truthfully, it was the closest to feeling alive that she had experienced since arriving at Blackwood.

But just as Wren was about to push further, expanding the light, a voice echoed in front of her.

"Someone's been practicing."

Wren let out a shriek, unable to stifle her surprise, and spun on her heels.

Leaning against the shed wall, casual and arrogant as ever, was August. He wore a smirk of amusement, arms crossed over his chest. He'd forgone the black vest he'd had on the last time she'd seen him, wearing only his white button-down shirt and black pants. There was a dark reddish-brown stain on the collar of his shirt, though Wren couldn't bring herself to point it

out. Deep down, she knew it was blood. But she had no interest in knowing *whose* blood it was, or how it had gotten there.

“You couldn’t have announced yourself?” Wren sputtered, attempting to seem as calm and collected as she possibly could, despite having already embarrassed herself.

“And miss out on your bloodcurdling scream of terror?” August cocked his head and chuckled. “Absolutely not.”

Wren rolled her eyes and resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at him. If he wanted to act like a petulant toddler, then *fine*, but that didn’t mean she had to stoop to his level. She’d be the mature one. She let out a sigh and tossed her braid over her shoulder. “Well, you’ve had your fun, so now we can get straight to business.” She extended her hand impatiently. “Come on, then. Hand it over.”

August raised a brow.

“Excuse me?”

“The map,” Wren added slowly. “For the Hunt.”

“I’m aware of *what* you’re asking for,” August clarified, stepping toward her. The shed wasn’t large by any means, and that single step nearly eliminated the space between them. They were uncomfortably close. Close enough that Wren was instantly enveloped by the warm scent that seemed to cling to August—amber and musk and something vexingly sweet. “I’m just wondering what on earth makes you think I’m going to give it to you.”

Wren scoffed.

“We’re *partners*.”

August shrugged. “Unwillingly.”

“Partners all the same!” Wren shot back, crossing her arms indignantly. “You cannot hog the map. You *promised*—”

“Settle down, Loughty.” August raised his hands in feigned innocence. “You’re right. I *did* say we’d do this together. But I’m not going to simply turn over the map and send you off without another word.” August shoved his hands into his pockets and chuckled. “You wouldn’t last an hour.”

Frustration flared in Wren’s chest. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You think the Hunt will be that easy? That you can just waltz out there, follow the map, and find the jewels?” August’s voice dripped with condescension. “I hate to break it to you, darling, but it’s going to require a *bit* more effort than that.”

“What are you talking about?” Wren asked, exasperated. “Housemaster Russo said—”

“I know what Russo said,” August interjected swiftly. “But what she *didn’t* mention is how disturbingly competitive Blackwood students can be. How they won’t hesitate to strike you down just to get a better grade. How they’ll weed out their competition by snapping necks and slitting throats.”

Wren shivered. August was being deadly serious. She could tell by the venom in his voice. The intensity in his gaze. Not to mention that the students August was referring to included himself. He was the one with the lethal reputation, after all.

“I mean . . .” Wren forced a nonchalant chuckle. “Isn’t that what I have *you* for?”

At this, August’s brows rose in surprise. “I’m not here to be your personal bodyguard, Loughty. You have to be able to hold your own.” He reached behind his back, unsheathing something attached to his waistband, and Wren had to stifle her gasp of surprise when he showed her what it was.

“Take this,” August instructed.

“What the hell do I need a *knife* for?” Wren asked, aghast. She stared down at the dagger August had produced from behind his back, flinching. “And why do you casually have that on you?”

“Like I said. Blackwood students are competitive.” August flipped the dagger in his hands, the blade swishing between his fingers with ease. “And you have to be prepared to defend yourself. I can’t have you incapacitated for the next few weeks.”

“Incapacitated?” Wren echoed incredulously. “But . . . it’s not like this is a competition. Housemaster Russo said that each pair would have their own set of jewels to find.”

“Have you not been paying attention?” August snapped. “*Everything* is a competition here. The higher your ranking in class, the more likely you are to be nominated for the next Decennial. And what’s the easiest way to boost your chances?”

Wren swallowed the knot in her throat. “By making the students around you do poorly.”

“Exactly.” August nodded. “For instance, let’s say . . . theoretically . . . if you pushed me off a building—”

“Which is becoming less and less theoretical by the minute . . .” Wren muttered under her breath, though August continued, either oblivious to her

threat or simply pretending to be.

“—the injury would more than likely land me in the infirmary for . . . oh, I don’t know . . . a week? Maybe two?” August shrugged, mildly amused at the thought. “Depends on which building, I suppose.”

“Okay, I get it.” Wren sighed. “The longer you’re stuck in the infirmary, the more you fall behind. But I still don’t get what the hell you expect me to do with *that*.” She gestured to the dagger in August’s hand. “If someone tries to snap my neck or push me off a building, that thing is hardly going to help!”

“You’re right.” August inched closer. “But it’s *something*. I can’t have you completely defenseless. *Here*.” August flipped the dagger in his hands, pointing the sharpened blade toward his stomach and angling the hilt toward Wren. “Practice.”

For a moment, Wren simply stood there, blinking. “I’m sorry?” She tried to laugh but no sound came out. “You’re not seriously asking me to stab you . . . right?”

“I’m not asking,” August replied casually. “I’m *telling*.”

“No.” Wren shook her head. “There’s no way.”

“You have to practice,” August muttered through a sigh, as if her refusal to stab him was nothing more than an annoyance. “Get used to the feeling. I can’t have you freezing up if someone attacks you—”

“This is ridiculous!” Wren choked out, taking a rigid step backward. “I’m not going to *stab* you, you absolute lunatic.”

August rolled his eyes. “Oh, please. It’s not like it’s going to hurt. And I’m not asking you to slice my head clean off.” He made a small jutting motion with the knife. “Just a surface wound. It’ll heal in a few minutes.”

Wren stood there, contemplating whether or not she could actually go through with it. She knew August was serious—and, though she didn’t want to admit it, *right*. If the students at Blackwood were truly as cutthroat and devious as he was making them out to be, then Wren needed a way to defend herself. She was already at a disadvantage magically, and without a weapon, she’d be virtually defenseless.

The thought alone was terrifying.

Wren inhaled a quivering breath. She realized then that August hadn’t torn his gaze away from her, silently watching as she gnawed on the inside of her cheek and weighed her options. But he didn’t rush her. He didn’t

utter a word. He simply stood there, blade still pointed at his stomach, waiting.

“I’ve never stabbed anyone before,” Wren said softly. She reached her hand out, ignoring the way her fingers trembled.

August smirked.

“Well,” he murmured beneath his breath. “It’s always an honor to be someone’s first.”

Wren scowled, ignoring the heat rising to her cheeks. But before she could say anything else, August placed his free hand on Wren’s wrist, his touch achingly gentle, and guided her hand toward the hilt. Slowly, Wren wrapped her fingers around it, holding the dagger steady. She kept the pointed tip of the blade aimed at August’s stomach, though she didn’t push forward.

“Now what?” Wren whispered, breathless.

August placed his hand over Wren’s. She tried to ignore the warmth of his skin. The way her body seemed to instantly come to life the moment he touched her. She watched, enraptured, as he guided the blade toward himself just an inch.

“Good,” he whispered, voice hoarse. “Now just . . . push it.”

For a moment, Wren didn’t move. Her limbs felt frozen, as if she’d hardened into stone. But then something seemed to come over her. A strange sense of determination. Her whole life had already been taken from her . . . snatched in the blink of an eye. The last thing she wanted was to find herself defenseless again. Helpless to endure whatever torment the other students were prepared to inflict on her.

No.

Not in this lifetime. Not in this new eternity.

Wren inhaled a sharp breath . . . and pushed.

There was a bone-chilling *snap* as the blade tore through skin and flesh. Wren had thought there would be more noise, but the dagger moved through August’s stomach more easily than she had anticipated. Cleanly.

August kept his eyes anchored on her. He didn’t look away, didn’t bother glancing down at the *literal knife* plunged into his stomach. The blood pooling through his white shirt. He just stared at Wren as if she were the only thing that mattered. As if she were the only thing that existed.

Finally, August broke the silence.

“See?” His voice was deep and gravelly. “Easy.”

Wren swallowed. She knew she should pull the knife out now, but her hand remained glued to the hilt. “Y-yeah. It . . . it wasn’t that bad.”

August must have sensed Wren’s hesitance. Instead of instructing her to remove the dagger, he tightened his grip and yanked it out himself. Instantly, blood splattered from the wound, further staining his white shirt. But he didn’t seem at all concerned by the gaping hole in his stomach.

“Come on.” He wiped the blade on the leg of his pants and tucked it into the pocket of Wren’s coat. “Follow me.”

Wren stood there, dumbfounded. She couldn’t believe she’d actually done it. That she’d managed to go through with stabbing August. It took her a few seconds to snap out of her dazed state, but once she finally regained the ability to speak, she cleared her throat and asked, “Where the hell are you going?”

August came to a halt at the door to the shed. As he turned to face Wren, he lifted his hand and a swirling vortex of crimson flames burst from the center of his palm. He smirked, the corner of his lips lifting a fraction. Wren couldn’t help but notice how terrifyingly beautiful he looked bathed in the glowing light of the flames.

“I think we’ve wasted enough time,” he said. “Let’s start the Hunt.”

WREN

Walking through campus with the Demon of Blackwood was a rather overwhelming experience. Wren thought she had endured her fair share of prodding eyes and unwanted attention since arriving at Blackwood, but none of that came close to what seemingly followed August everywhere he went. As they made their way along the winding path that led away from the shed and toward the heart of campus, it didn't take long for the other students milling about to notice August.

Wren watched, perplexed, as the students visibly cowered in fear. Some even audibly gasped, spinning on their heels and bolting in the other direction. Wren wondered if they saw something she didn't—devil horns jutting from his black curls, or piercing red pupils glowing in his silvery irises. There had to be *something* to explain why they were so afraid of him.

“Do you always evoke such positivity and comradery?” Wren finally asked, unable to stop herself. At her snide remark, August simply raised a brow and shoved his hands into his pockets, unfazed.

“It's not my fault they're scared of me,” he replied with a shrug. At that same moment, a passing student yelped in terror as he spotted August, quite literally *sprinting* in the opposite direction.

“I mean . . . it kind of is, though, isn't it?” Wren retorted. “I've heard the rumors.”

“Yeah?” August asked, amused. He peered down at Wren, brow arched. “And what did you learn about me, then? Since you clearly have me all figured out.”

“That you're . . .” Wren shrugged. “You know . . .”

“The Demon of Blackwood?” August supplied with a lilt of annoyance.

“I was going to say a *jerk*,” Wren shot back. “But yeah. That too.”

August hesitated, eyes roving over her face. Wren couldn't quite pinpoint what he was thinking or how he was feeling, but before she could

even attempt to decipher the enigma that was Augustine Hughes, he continued walking, leaving Wren scrambling to keep up.

“Anybody who I’ve sent to the infirmary deserved it,” August said, not bothering to glance back at Wren as he trekked deeper into the winding graveyard of oak trees, their destination still a mystery.

“I’m sure they’d feel the same way if they sent *you* there.” As soon as the words left Wren’s lips, August let out a low chuckle, gnawing on the inside of his cheek as if he were biting back a smile.

“What?” Wren pressed. “What’s so funny?”

“Nobody has ever sent me to the infirmary,” August replied, deep and gruff. There was an air of arrogance in his words that made Wren’s eyes involuntarily roll. “And nobody ever will.”

“It must get a bit heavy,” Wren hummed.

“What?” August asked.

“You know . . .” Wren let out a long sigh. “Having to constantly drag around that *enormous* ego of yours.”

August came to an abrupt halt. He turned to face Wren, blinking. For a moment, Wren wondered if she had crossed an invisible line between them. Pushed the bickering too far. He had a reputation, after all, despite whether Wren believed it. Who was she to say what August was truly capable of? What he was willing to do?

But then August’s lip curled into a smirk and the panic swelling in Wren’s chest deflated.

“Absolutely,” he murmured. “I have terrible back pain.”

Wren bit back her own smile.

“I figured.”

For a moment, their gazes snagged on one another. Something swirled inside Wren’s chest—something warm and inviting. But before she could give it too much thought, August turned away from her, gesturing forward.

“We’re here,” August said. It was then that Wren tore her eyes away from him and realized they were standing in front a building. She hadn’t seen it before, nor did it appear to be one of the buildings Maya had told her about. It was smaller than Elysium and Dalemont Halls, and given its run-down appearance, Wren assumed it to be far older. Or at least less taken care of.

August sauntered up the steps to the arched entrance. Wren’s eyes skated up to the words written on the door, a name etched in tarnished gold.

BONESTROD.

“What is this place?” Wren asked, slowly making her way up the steps. She couldn’t help but wonder if she was making a grave mistake in following August. He’d led her to a creepy old building, and now she was meant to just waltz inside with him? *Alone?*

“It’s technically a faculty-only building,” August explained, reaching toward the iron doorknob. Golden threads spooled out of his fingertips, funneling into the knob, almost as if the magic were a lockpick. “No students allowed. Though nobody *actually* pays attention to that rule. I come here most nights. Sneak up to the rooftop to think.”

Instantly, a piercing jolt of anxiety shot through Wren. Glimpses of slow mental torture flashed in her mind. Terrifying images conjured up by her own imagination. *Reformatory*. She paused at the final step.

“Won’t we get in trouble?” Wren asked, voice wavering.

“Maybe.” August shrugged. He glanced over his shoulder. “Why?” The smile on his lips was taunting. “Are you scared?”

“No,” Wren shot back, perhaps too quickly. “I just . . . I can’t afford any infractions right now.” After yesterday’s classes, Wren had finally read the dozens of unopened letters she had received. Much to her dismay, Maya had been right. Each letter had grown more and more threatening, and it was clear that if Wren had waited even one more day before joining class, she would have landed herself in reformatory.

But August seemed unfazed. As he finished the last of the spell, the knob clicked and the door swung open. “You’re fine, Loughty. Either way—the first stop on Russo’s map leads us here.” He fished out the map from his pocket and gave it a firm tap with his hand. “Can’t get in trouble if it’s part of the Hunt.”

Wren wasn’t exactly looking forward to breaking a sacred Blackwood Academy rule, but she supposed if a Housemaster had instructed them to enter the building, then it was okay . . . just this once.

“Fine.” Wren straightened her shoulders and summoned her bravery. “Off we go, then.”

She followed August, entering the dimly lit building with as much bravery as she could muster. Mounds of dust floated in the air, and Wren had to carefully make her way over an intricate web of vines covering the floor as she stepped into the main foyer. A musky scent filled the air—something like damp earth mixed with decay. A piercing silence echoed

around them, and each creak of the floorboards beneath Wren's boots seemed to reverberate like a gunshot.

"Where to next?" Wren asked.

August approached the spiral staircase at the back of the building, map in hand. He seemed perplexed by something, brows scrunched together and lips pursed into a scowl. "I don't understand . . ."

Wren peered over his shoulder, attempting to get a better look at the map.

"What is it?"

"It's guiding us behind the staircase," he muttered under his breath.

"But there's nothing there . . . it's just a wall. Maybe we're supposed to—" But August's words were cut short as he lifted a hand and glanced up, as if he had heard something. "*Shit*," he whispered, bunching up the map and shoving it into his pocket.

"What is it?" Wren asked, panicked. "What's—" But her words caught in her throat as August gripped her tightly by the wrist and pulled her behind the staircase. He yanked her closer, pressing his hand tightly against her mouth as he held her firmly against his body.

Wren hadn't felt her heart beat since she had arrived at Blackwood. Hadn't felt a pulse. But even without the steady *thump* of her heart, an electrifying jolt shot through her chest the moment August wrapped his arms around her. A dangerous surge of warmth traveled through her limbs.

She felt dizzy. Weightless.

She felt . . . *alive*.

She realized then what August had heard. Two voices approaching. The cadence of footsteps drawing nearer. It was coming from above them. The murmur of voices rising as two people emerged from above them and made their way down the staircase.

"Jesus Christ, Masi." A voice echoed with a throaty chuckle. "I told you it was strong."

"I'm *fine*," said another voice. This one was familiar. The girl with amber eyes who had helped Wren find Housemaster Russo's classroom.

"We're skipping Birdie's class," said the first voice. Wren could see glimpses of them now through the iron detailing of the staircase. The first girl had long, dark hair with blunt bangs that fell right above her brows. Her skin was ivory pale and she wore a black silk dress that flowed down her frame in delicate waves. She turned to face the other girl—the one with

amber eyes whom she'd called Masi—and pointed at her. “No way you’re sitting there with your eyes bloodshot like that—”

“Oh, like she cares.” The amber-eyed girl gave a dismissive wave of her hand. Even with her vision partially obstructed, Wren could tell there was something off about them. They stumbled as they walked. Their words poured out of them slow and sluggish, their movements languid and lazy.

Are they . . . high? Wren wondered. She tried to get a look at August, but his grip was too tight, and she could barely move her neck an inch.

“She’d send your ass to reformatory faster than you could say *Irene made me do it*,” the girl with bangs muttered, chuckling.

The amber-eyed girl shoved her playfully.

“But you *did* make me do it.”

“Whatever.” The first girl—Irene, Wren assumed—shrugged. “You know I hate smoking alone.” The pair were moments away from exiting when Irene came to a sudden halt, pausing at the doorway.

She glanced over her shoulder. Back toward the staircase.

Instantly, August tensed behind Wren.

“What?” the amber-eyed girl asked. “What is it?”

Irene hesitated. She squinted, as if she were peering through the darkness straight at Wren. *She’s seen us.* Wren was certain of it. But then, with a quick shrug, Irene spun on her heels to face the entrance again.

“Nothing,” she mumbled. “I thought I heard something.”

“Look who’s paranoid now.” The amber-eyed girl chuckled. “So much for *my tolerance is unbeatable*—”

“Oh, shut it.” Irene pushed her friend through the door and the pair stumbled back into the night. “Let’s go.”

The door slammed closed behind them, echoing. For a moment, Wren and August stood there, his hand still clamped over her mouth, their proximity overwhelming Wren’s senses. And then he was dropping his hand away, stepping back, and it was as if a cold gust of wind had swept over Wren, extinguishing the strange warmth that had erupted inside her.

Wren cleared her throat, composing herself. She fidgeted with the end of her braid and turned to face August. He was impossible to read, but even *he* looked slightly frazzled. He twisted the silver ring on his index finger, struggling to keep eye contact with her.

“Who was that girl? The one with the bangs?” Wren asked.

August inhaled a long breath, and whatever nervousness Wren had sworn she'd seen in his gaze seemed to vanish. "*That* is someone you *actually* want to avoid." He made his way from behind the staircase and Wren followed. "Irene Manette Bamford. An absolute lethal force of chaos who will not hesitate to strike you down if you simply look at her the wrong way. Or, quite frankly, look at her at all."

"And the other girl?" Wren asked.

"Masika Sallow," August explained. "She's more forgiving than Irene, but just as uninterested in making friends—so don't bother."

Wren nodded. That wouldn't be a problem. She wasn't interested in making friends either. It was probably for the best if she never spoke to either of those girls—and given their seemingly *lovely* dispositions, Wren doubted she ever would.

"But I did notice something," August added, peeking behind the staircase. "While we were"—he hesitated, clearing his throat, and Wren swore she saw the faintest pink flush sweep over his cheeks—"waiting."

"What is it?" Wren asked, squinting. She could hardly make out what August was looking at through the opaque shadows of the room. But he must have noticed, because August quickly snapped his fingers and produced a small flame from the tip of his thumb. With the hazy orange glow from August's flame, Wren could now see what he had been talking about.

Carved into the wooden wall beside them was a small, almost indiscernible letter.

R.

"Think it's part of the Hunt?" Wren asked. "R for Russo?"

With his free hand, August placed his palm against the letter. Almost instantly, the wall came to life. It rumbled and shifted, the ground beneath Wren's feet vibrating from the sheer force, until the wall had completely split to reveal a hidden passageway.

August glanced over his shoulder, a devilish grin spread over his lips.

"Suppose there's really only one way to find out."

*

Wren couldn't help but wonder if she'd lost all instinct for survival upon her death.

Not only had she followed August—a boy notorious for incapacitating other students—into a creepy old building, but she was now *also* following him into a creepy dark passageway. Two for two on the immensely moronic decision front. But she wasn't exactly rich in options at the moment. It didn't help that the looming threat of reformatory still felt like a tightening noose, perpetually haunting her with the imminent possibility of psychological torture.

So . . . into the creepy passageway it was. Even if it meant following a homicidal maniac who just so happened to have a dangerously beautiful smile.

Not that she had noticed.

"Is this the part where you murder me with an axe?" Wren asked through a half-hearted chuckle. They'd been walking through the dimly lit passageway for what felt like an eternity but really had probably been a few minutes. Their only source of light was the small flame August had produced from his fingers, and Wren could scarcely see the floor in front of her. Her only guiding light was August—*literally*.

August snorted.

"I wouldn't murder you with an axe," he muttered, offended. "I'd be far more creative than that."

Wren sighed. "Fair point."

"But, for the record, *no*." August glanced over his shoulder. "I have no plans to send you to the infirmary, Loughty. If I did, you'd already be there. So how about you trust me from now on, okay?"

Trust.

Wren had to restrain a laugh from pouring out of her. She wasn't sure how she was meant to trust anything, or *anyone*, ever again. Not when her entire existence had been spun on its axis. Not when everything she had put her trust in—everything she had believed to be true—had vanished in an instant.

"Whatever you say, *partner*," Wren drawled sarcastically.

August chuckled. "Much better."

He came to a sudden halt, and Wren nearly crashed into him. She regained her footing, craning her neck to see over his shoulder. "Why did

you stop?” she asked, standing on her tiptoes. All she could see was the impenetrable darkness stretching out before them.

“I believe we’ve found our first jewel,” August said. He snapped his fingers again, and the small flame vanished, replaced by a glowing yellow light that beamed from his palm and hovered in the air in front of them. Instantly, the passageway was bathed in its brilliant glow, illuminating the once-dark space.

In front of them was a statue. It appeared to be made of smooth ivory stone, depicting a woman draped in robes, with a pointed crown on top of her head and a sword clenched in her hands. It was so detailed, so intricate in its design, that the fabric itself appeared to be flowing, as if it were soft to the touch. Embedded in the top of her crown was a glistening amethyst. It sparkled, glowing from within, as if a fire burned inside. It bathed the wooden floors in a shimmering purple light, mixing with the yellow sheen of August’s sphere.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” Wren whispered, her voice a piercing echo against the silence. “Right there. On the crown.”

August nodded. “That’s it.”

“Well . . . what’s next?” Wren asked. “Do we just . . . grab it?”

August cocked his head. “Seriously? You think it would be that easy?”

Wren rolled her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she huffed, crossing her arms. “But are you *actually* incapable of answering me like a normal person? Or is pretentious prick simply your default?”

“I prefer *brooding* prick,” August corrected her.

Wren rolled her eyes. “Apologies.” She shoved him out of the way and walked up to the statue. She wasn’t about to stand there and let him do all the work. For one, he’d probably never let her live it down. But more importantly, Wren wasn’t going to let herself continue to feel helpless. To feel as though she was constantly scrambling to keep up. She had been chosen for Blackwood for a reason. Whether or not she fully understood that reason didn’t matter.

Magic was her right, just as much as it was August’s.

And if she couldn’t escape this place . . . then the least she could do was make sure she had the upper hand.

“Show me,” Wren instructed.

“Excuse me?” August’s voice echoed behind her.

“Show me how you’d magically extract the crystal,” Wren clarified, gesturing toward the statue. “I want to learn.”

“Well . . .” August cleared his throat. He stepped forward so that he was standing beside her. He stared up at the statue, hands shoved into his pockets, and assessed it with a furrowed brow. “This is a corporeal assignment. Which means Russo would expect us to access that type of magic for the extraction. Corporeal magic consists of transmutation spells—altering the atoms of the universe—and battle spells. Things you’d use in a fight. The latter doesn’t entirely make sense for this, so . . . I’m assuming it’s the former. Altering the matter of the stone in a way that it relinquishes the jewel.”

“Could you melt the stone?” Wren asked without hesitation. “Turn it to liquid?”

August hummed.

“Suppose you could,” he muttered, uncertain. “It’s a bit odd, though . . .”

“What is?”

“I don’t know.” August shrugged. He reached toward the statue, gently brushing the flowing robe. “It just seems too simple. That’s not exactly Russo’s style. She tends to prefer a more . . . *hands-on* approach.”

“Well, there’s no harm in trying,” Wren supplied.

August nodded. “I suppose you’re right.”

He rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, the muscles of his forearms flexing as he spread his fingers, sparks of magic bursting at the center of his palm. But before he could cast whatever spell he intended to show Wren, something in the statue began to change. At first, Wren thought it might just be a trick of light, the purple hue from the amethyst melting into the yellow sheen of the glowing sphere.

But this was no trick of light.

The eyes of the statue turned *red*. Two piercing crimson eyes peering down at them, fury burning behind them. No . . . it couldn’t possibly be *fury*. It was a statue. It wasn’t alive. It couldn’t—

“*Thieves.*”

The voice seemed to come from all around them, echoing with power. Wren physically recoiled, and she had to muster all the energy inside her to stay upright, as if the voice itself had pressed on her shoulders. Even August flinched at the voice, wincing slightly.

“*You shall not take what rightfully belongs to me,*” the voice echoed once more. Wren realized then that the voice wasn’t disembodied. It had a source: *the statue*. Just as the thought fell upon Wren, the statue shifted, its movements slow and rough, stone grinding together. Its arm lifted, revealing cracks of silver light bursting from the center of its palm. It was preparing to strike.

It was preparing to strike *them*.

August placed a protective arm in front of Wren, pushing her backward.

“Now, *this* feels more like Russo’s style,” he muttered, smiling. Perhaps August truly *was* mad, because he genuinely seemed to savor the possibility of a fight. “Step away, Loughy. I’ll handle this.”

But something rose inside Wren. A strange resistance.

No.

“I’m not running,” she shot back, shoving his arm away. She ignored the look of disbelief splattered across his face. “I told you I want to learn. And you *promised* we’d work together. So show me how to fight this thing. Teach me.”

August hesitated. He looked quickly from the statue to Wren, clearly torn. But then he let out a weighted sigh and said, “Fine. But listen. The second we send the first spell toward the statue, it’s going to attack. We have to be prepared.”

Wren nodded. “Okay. What do I do?”

“Corporeal magic is activated by anger. You’ll have to locate the core of your corporeal magic first, and then, once you find it, tap into your anger,” August explained. “There’s a connection. I know it sounds vague and complicated, but it really is quite simple. You close your eyes . . . and *feel* it. For corporeal magic, it’s here.” He splayed a palm over his chest. “Once you make that connection, you just have to take it. Claim it.”

“That *does* sound vague,” Wren muttered with a huff.

August glanced warily at the statue before dragging his gaze back to Wren.

“Go on. Try.” He flexed his hands, fidgeting with his ring. “Don’t make me regret this.”

Wren certainly hoped she wouldn’t regret it either.

With one final breath, Wren closed her eyes. She looked inward, searching for that connection August was talking about. That *spark*. It felt as though she was digging through her soul, clawing at the core of it.

Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?

There was something there—Wren could feel it. The faintest ember burning inside her. She just had to reach out and grab it. Thread her fingers through it. But there was some sort of blockage in her way. A wall caging the core of her soul. She had to push through it. She had to fight.

“You can do it.” August’s voice echoed from beyond the darkness. He sounded close, close enough that she could reach out and touch him. “Dig deeper, Loughy. It’s there. It’s *yours*.”

The power. The magic. For once, it was something that was in *her* control. Something nobody could take from her.

It’s mine.

As the two words echoed in Wren’s mind, she felt the wall crumble. The barrier between her and her corporeal magic disintegrated, and then she was surrounded by it, the heat of it bursting through her limbs.

And now . . . anger. Wren almost wanted to laugh. *Of course* she could tap into anger. She had a million things to be fucking *furious* about: Losing her life. Her sister. Being torn away from her reality and forced into an eternity she never asked for.

She didn’t just feel anger.

She felt *fury*.

Wren opened her eyes. In her palms swirled silver sparks of corporeal magic.

She’d done it. She’d summoned the magic.

Wren didn’t allow herself to stop and think.

The first spell hurled out of her hand without warning, the force of it nearly sending her flying backward. She stumbled, regaining her footing just before she could slip and land squarely on her ass. Wren watched, breath held, as the sparks of silver light flashed across the room and burst against the statue. A chunk of the statue’s shoulder fell away, crumbling upon making contact with the floor.

Relief rushed through Wren. A surge of excitement.

And for the first time since arriving at Blackwood—*joy*.

“I did it,” she muttered, slightly out of breath. “I actually—” But the statue’s retaliation was swift and merciless. It turned its sights on Wren, glowing eyes beaming down at her, hand raised.

Next to her, August’s voice echoed. For a moment, Wren swore he was screaming her name, her *first* name, but before her mind could piece

together what she was hearing, the statue's spell came hurtling toward her, striking her hard in the gut, and—

Darkness.

Complete and total darkness.

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AUGUST

You absolute idiot.

What had he been thinking? He should have stepped in front of Wren. He should have pushed her out of the way and told her to back off. She was in no position to fight in a corporeal duel. Not *yet*, at least. So why had he let her? Why did he seem so completely and utterly incapable of saying no to her?

He told himself it was because she was the catalyst. That was the simple answer, the reasonable one. She was the catalyst sent to usher the end of Blackwood, and his dedication to the Soulless One and the Demien Order's plan was the reason for his devotion. For this infuriating connection he felt. It *had* to be. There was no room for anything else. For anything . . . sentimental.

But even now, as he sat on the edge of Wren's desk in the dimness of her room, staring down at her unconscious body splayed out on her bed, something inside him faltered. When he looked at her, it wasn't dedication to his cause that he felt. It wasn't ambition. It was the unnatural, foreign need to protect her. To help her gain her power, not for her to be the Soulless One's instrument but for *herself*.

But that was ridiculous. He hardly knew her. He hardly—

The faintest noise snapped him out of his rambling thoughts. Wren was groaning, eyelids fluttering. *She's waking*, August thought, relief surging through him. He scrambled to his feet and made his way over to her side. He wasn't sure where to place himself—something about sitting beside her on the bed felt a bit too intimate—so he settled for awkwardly hovering over her, one hand pressed against the headboard for stability.

"Loughy?" he whispered. A lock of auburn hair spilled over her forehead, cascading over her eyes, and with the faintest and quickest touch he could manage, August gently brushed it away. "You there?"

At the sound of his voice, Wren's eyes finally opened. For the briefest moment, she stared up at August with wide, adoring eyes. A split second when she must have not entirely recognized who he was. But then August saw it—the recognition flooding through her—and she scrambled up onto her elbows, carving distance between them. As soon as she did, however, Wren winced, clutching her head.

“Whoa,” she muttered. “Dizzy. Really, *really* dizzy.”

“Easy, partner.” August managed a dry chuckle. “You took a bit of a spill.”

“What happened?” Wren asked groggily, blinking. She was probably attempting to rifle through her memories, recall what had happened. Her eyes grew wide suddenly. “The jewel,” she said, panicked. “Where—”

“I got it,” August interjected, fishing the amethyst from his pocket. He held the glittering crystal between them, and Wren sighed in relief. She nodded, pleased, as she sat up farther.

“Did I . . . did I black out?” she asked. “I don't really remember much. I know I managed to cast a spell on the statue, and then . . . did it hit me?”

August nodded. “The statue reacted with a counterattack seconds after you cast the first spell. And it . . . hit you. Square in the stomach. You were knocked out from the impact.” He swallowed, bracing himself for this next part. “Your wound is manageable and will heal over time. It might be a bit shocking to see, especially given the fact that you're not feeling any pain . . .”

Just as the words left his lips, Wren peeled the bedsheet away from her body, revealing the large gash at the center of her stomach, visible through the rip in her black turtleneck. The moment her eyes landed on the wound, Wren's face went ghostly white, her jaw dropping.

“What. The. Fuck.” Panicked, Wren lifted the hem of her shirt, and she let out a gasp of horror as she revealed the rest of her wound. Not only was there a deep five-inch gash on her stomach, but there was also a constellation of burn marks surrounding it. Scar-riddled flesh. It really wasn't *that* bad—not that August thought he could convince Wren of that in her current state.

“Oh my god,” she muttered. “I'm—I should be dead.”

August sighed. “You *are* dead, Loughty.”

She scowled, staring up at him. August tried not to notice the cute little lines between her brows that formed when she frowned. “You know what I

mean. How the hell am I not in the infirmary?"

"It's not as bad as it looks," August said. "Really. Plus, it's already starting to heal. If the wound had been any deeper—say . . . gone *through* your stomach and out the other side—you'd probably have been unconscious for at least a few days. But your body healed itself pretty quickly while you were out."

Very quickly. It wasn't completely out of the ordinary for some students to heal faster than others—every soul was different—but August had to admit . . . Wren had begun to heal at an impressive speed. He'd expected her to remain unconscious at least until morning. Her soul was strong. Resilient. More so than that of the average student.

"How long have I been out?" Wren asked, pulling her shirt back down.

"Few hours," August explained. "Not too long."

Wren shoved the curtains away from the window beside her. Streams of fog obscured his vision, but the faint haze of dormitory windows loomed in the distance, shrouded by the impenetrable darkness of night. There was still that faint silverish glow from the sky, and thin ribbons of it pooled into the room, illuminating the side of Wren's face.

"I missed my other classes," she whispered through a sigh.

"I wrote them a letter explaining," August told her. He had anticipated that would be her first concern upon waking. Especially given the fact that she was already on thin ice for ignoring her letters and delaying the start of her classes. "Don't know if it'll be enough, but I did what I could."

Wren glanced over her shoulder at him. She looked momentarily confused, as if she were attempting to piece something together. And then her lips curved into a soft smile, her gaze surprisingly tender.

"Careful, August." She tilted her head, appraising him. "Someone might accuse you of doing something nice for a change."

An unwelcome flush crept over August's neck, but he cleared his throat, pushing it down before it could reach his cheeks. "You would love that, wouldn't you? Believe it or not, my actions are purely selfish. You've proven more useful than anticipated. It was far easier to defeat the statue by using you as a distraction."

"Sure," Wren grumbled. "Whatever you say." She rolled her eyes, but a smile remained on her lips. A softness in her stare. There was something about her expression—about being this close to her—that stirred an

unwanted wisp of longing in August's chest. It left him breathless. Hands shaking by his sides.

August took a rigid step backward, creating distance between them before he could conjure up any other absurd thoughts. "Well . . ." he muttered, making his way toward the door. "I should get going—" But Wren's voice cut him off, causing him to stagger to a halt just as he had wrapped his hand around the doorknob.

"Where are you going?" she asked, pushing herself to her feet.

"It's late," August bit out. God . . . couldn't this girl give him a break? "I have to meet someone."

"Do you sleep?" Wren asked, and August couldn't help but be taken aback by the sudden question.

He shook his head. "Hardly ever."

"Doesn't it weaken your magic?" she asked. "Maya mentioned something about that. How we don't need as much sleep as living souls do, but that it messes with our connection to our magic if we don't get at least some."

August snorted, leaning against the door, arms crossed. "I don't believe that. I personally think it's just a way to get us to stay inside and out of trouble."

Wren nodded, as if that made sense. "So . . ." She tucked her hands behind her back. "What exactly are you off to do, then?"

August smiled. "Make trouble."

Wren blinked. August could see the smile itching to light up her face. The way she had to physically fight it back. But *God* . . . did he want to see that smile. He wanted to memorize it and bottle it and preserve it for eternity.

"I want to go with you," Wren said, once again catching August by surprise.

This . . . wasn't good. Yes, he was meant to form a connection with Wren. To gain her trust and strengthen her abilities. But he wasn't supposed to do *this*. To form attachments and feelings. Feelings were a complication. An unnecessary distraction. He needed to focus on fostering her potential and strengthening her magic, not *hanging out* together. Not daydreaming about brushing her hair and hearing her laugh and kissing that smile right off her face.

Jesus Christ.

“Loughy.” August spoke her name slowly. He needed to push her away. To form a line between them, however painful it might be. “Let me make something abundantly clear. Just because we’re partners does *not* mean we’re friends.” He didn’t miss the slight flinch in her expression as the words left his lips. “It’s not personal. I simply don’t have friends. It’s not something I do.”

But Wren didn’t seem all that deterred. If anything, August’s feeble attempt at pushing her away only seemed to pique her curiosity.

“Yes, I’m well aware,” she muttered with a chuckle. “And I have no intention of being your friend. You don’t exactly make that an enticing prospect. But . . .” She trailed off and let out a throaty sigh, staring down at her unmade bed. “I can’t spend another night lying here. *Thinking*. I . . . I just can’t.”

August knew exactly what she meant. The memories. Her old life. What she had lost and left behind. He had no idea what had happened to Wren. How she had died and what she was grieving—but he didn’t need to. It was the one thing all the students of Blackwood truly shared. *Grief*. The pain of not only losing their lives and the people they had loved, but losing a future that had belonged to them. Losing control of their existence. So it didn’t matter what had happened to Wren, because August already knew.

He knew loss well.

“I’m making a pickup.” The words were tumbling out of August before he could stop himself. Before he could think twice about what he was about to do. “Collecting something I’m owed. You could . . . come with me . . . I suppose.”

Wren’s pale blue eyes lit up. “And what *exactly* are you picking up?”

August mulled the words over, attempting to figure out the best way to explain it to her, but came up empty. Instead, he simply snapped his fingers, swinging the door to Wren’s room open.

“I think it’s best if I just show you.”

*

“Drugs,” Wren muttered, aghast. “We’re here to pick up *drugs*.”

August knew she wouldn’t react well. He didn’t know all that much about Wren, but she didn’t strike him as the party animal type. Plus, he

could admit it probably seemed a bit silly. They were dead. Trapped in *literal* purgatory. Partying didn't exactly seem like it should be a top priority.

"They're technically called elixirs," August muttered.

Wren huffed. "Oh, whatever. Same thing."

The pickup was at the usual spot most Blackwood students got their fix—the basement that connected Chambers and Fiddle. Both Houses were known for being home to students with a penchant for partying and a rather impressive proficiency in crafting hallucinogenic elixirs and enchanted liquors.

The basement was rather spacious, carved between the two buildings, nestled just underground. A smattering of deep-forest-green and indigo lights were strung from one side to the other, engulfing the space in a cool sheen. Everything seemed to be tailor-made for comfort: Low-set velvet couches and swooping chaise lounges. Large, inviting cushions scattered across the floor, enchanted to lull someone into a false sense of total relaxation—August had made the mistake of lying on one of them once and had found he couldn't get up until two days later. A perpetual cloud of prismatic smoke seemed to hover in the air, billowing clouds in shades of deep plum, glittering sapphire and hazy orange. All around them, students lounged, either smoking or chatting among themselves, all of them seeming perfectly at ease.

It was a rare sight at Blackwood. And the only place August had ever seen a student seem *actually* relaxed in his presence. Sure, half the time it was because they were so out of their mind that they barely registered it was him—but he'd take it.

"What are we waiting for?" Wren asked, arms crossed. She tapped her foot impatiently, eyes scanning the room.

"It's not *what* we're waiting for," August corrected her. "It's *who*."

And then, as if he had been summoned by mere thought alone, Omar Hamdi appeared behind them, dazed smile on his lips. He wore his usual dark blue suit, two thin silver hoops adorning his brow. In one hand he held a pink-tinted glass vial; in the other, a black pouch. August's shipment, no doubt.

"Omar." August nodded in greeting. "You're late."

"Hello, beautiful. Apologies for the delay. Marley got absolutely *plastered* and she mixed up your bag with another, and I had to rifle through

the whole damn—” Omar’s voice caught in his throat as his eyes landed on Wren. “And who is *this* stunning creature? Augustine, you’re not known for keeping company. And such *beautiful* company, at that.”

Wren blinked, clearly taken aback. Her cheeks burned pink at Omar’s sudden attention.

“This is Wren Loughy,” August cut in. “Blackwood’s newest recruit.”

Omar pouted his lips. “Tough luck, sweetheart. But don’t worry. You’ll find there are plenty of ways to pass the time here. A myriad of delicious elixirs to make the passage of eternity more . . . *bearable*.”

“What is that?” Wren asked, reaching for the pink-tinted glass vial in Omar’s right hand.

“Careful, now.” Omar pulled the vial back before Wren could make contact. “One whiff of Devil’s Kiss and you’ll be talking to the walls for the next twenty-four hours.” Omar chuckled and handed August the vial, along with the small black pouch in his other hand. “There you go, beautiful. Everything you requested. And *please*, don’t bother attempting to repay me; you know your bargaining is no good here.”

“How *do* you pay?” Wren asked. “I mean . . . there’s no money here. And even if there were, wouldn’t it be rather pointless?”

“Very astute, my dear.” Omar fished a thin cigarette out of his pocket, lighting it with nothing but a snap of his fingers. He inhaled deeply, exhaling a faint lilac smoke. “Here at Blackwood, *favors* are our payment. Bargains. You want a bit of Angel’s Breath and a fresh supply of enchanted whiskey? Then you better get me the answers to next week’s exam. You want a bottle of enchanted wine and enough Sunflower Powder to keep you dancing until the next Decennial? Then I expect you to send my student of choice to the infirmary in order to secure my top grade in the next assignment.”

Wren nodded, expression grim. “I see.”

“But our dear friend August here,” Omar continued, dramatically draping his arm around August’s shoulder, “requires no payment.”

“And by *no payment*, what Omar really means is that I let him run his affairs without a hiccup,” August added, lifting his lips in a tight-lipped smile. “I see nothing. Say nothing. And don’t interfere with any of his transactions.”

“Having the Demon of Blackwood on my side seems like a fair enough payment,” Omar said through a chuckle, slapping August on the shoulder.

But there was still an inkling of fear simmering behind his olive-green eyes. Omar could pretend all he wanted that he saw August as a friend, but August knew the truth.

Omar was terrified of him. Just like everyone else.

“What do you need these for?” Wren asked, gesturing to August’s shipment. “You don’t exactly strike me as a recreational drug user.”

“Blackmail,” August mused out loud. “Bartering. The occasional bit of *fun*.” He smiled, unable to help himself. “Oh, apologies. I realize that might be a foreign concept for you.”

“What?” Wren choked out, *actually* offended. “Fun? I can have fun. I’m very fun.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” Omar smiled and took a long drag from his cigarette. “You seem the type.”

“I am!” Wren retorted, arms crossed indignantly. “I was the life of the party. Plus, you don’t even know me!” She pointed an accusatory finger at August. “Who are you to say whether or not I’m not fun—” Her voice caught in her throat as her eyes snaked up and down August’s face. “What? What is it?”

August let a smile slowly creep onto his lips.

“I just wanted to see how easily I could get you worked up,” he whispered, dipping his voice down lower. “Turns out, quite easily.”

Wren pouted, clearly displeased that she’d let August get exactly what he wanted. But her attention was quickly diverted by something over his shoulder. Her eyes skated past him, brows pinched together in concern.

“Is he okay?” she asked.

August glanced over his shoulder and spotted the source of Wren’s apprehension.

Olivier Dupont lay sprawled on one of the velvet couches, his shirt half unbuttoned and his hair absolutely disheveled, as if a dozen hands had run their fingers through it. Which, given his current state, was very possible. There were three girls encircling him, giggling as they whispered into his ear. One of the girls, Eleanora, was drawing flowers on his exposed forearm with lipstick, while another braided a lock of his blond hair. The third simply stared adoringly into his eyes while he muttered something under his breath.

“Who? Olivier?” Omar chuckled. “Oh, he’s *fine*. Nothing new. He’s one of my best customers.”

“He seems . . . sad.” Wren’s voice was soft, barely audible.

“What makes you say that?” Omar asked, brow raised. “Seems like he’s having a perfectly lovely time to me.”

Wren hesitated. She stared down at Olivier, who blinked, dazed, as he reached for one of the girls and began to kiss her.

“His eyes,” Wren whispered.

“They’re beautiful,” Omar sighed. “I know.”

“No. It’s not that,” Wren said. “They’re . . . sad. His eyes are sad.” She let out a quivering breath. “He’s lonely.”

Omar inhaled a drag from his cigarette and chuckled.

“We must have very different definitions of the word.”

For a brief moment, Olivier’s eyes landed on August. There was a tense beat. A knowing stare lingering between them. August was the only one who knew that Wren was right—Olivier *was* sad. He’d been at Blackwood almost as long as August had. And though Olivier had managed to trick everyone else into thinking he enjoyed his debaucherous, partying ways, August saw right through him. He knew what centuries at Blackwood did to a soul. He knew the loneliness plaguing Olivier. The regret.

Olivier was a sad, lonely mess.

Just like August.

“I have to go—” August began, but Omar quickly interjected, gripping August by the wrist before he could turn away.

“No, no,” he muttered. “Stay. August, I *insist*. You told me last time you’d stay and have a drink with me.” Omar uncorked a bottle of enchanted wine, expertly gripping two glasses in one hand. “You promised.”

“I know.” August sighed, anxiety tightening the muscles up and down his neck. “But I have company . . .”

“The more the merrier!” Omar exclaimed, scooping up a third glass. “You know me, my dear, I *love* to share.”

Wren shrugged, gripping her wrist as though it might run away from her. “I could have a drink . . .”

“No,” August bit out, the word shooting from his mouth almost involuntarily. He inhaled a steadying breath. “Absolutely not.”

Wren blinked. “Excuse me?”

“You’re not drinking this stuff,” August replied, flexing his fingers in an effort to settle the buzz of panic in his chest.

Wren scoffed, turning to face August, and instantly, he knew he'd messed up.

"Believe it or not, *partner*, I'm not some delicate flower who can't handle a bit of alcohol." Each word was a sharp slap across August's face, dripping with disdain. "I've partied. I've had a beer or two. I can have a drink."

August peered down at her, dipping his voice lower. He was aware of Omar standing beside them, but as he stared down at Wren, he couldn't help but feel as though the two of them were the only ones standing in the room. Everyone else—*everything* else—seemed to melt away the moment he locked eyes with her.

"I'm certain you were capable of partaking in alcoholic consumption when you were alive, but *this* . . ." August gestured around the room. "This is different. These drinks are strong. Enchanted. Infused with *magic*. We have no way of knowing how you will react—"

"Why are you coddling me?" Wren interjected, taking August by surprise. Her voice wasn't as sharp as it was before. It was almost soft . . . a gentle curiosity in her eyes. Sincerity.

August cleared his throat.

"I'm . . . I'm not."

Wren stepped toward him, and August pretended not to notice the warm amber scent that filled his lungs the moment she got closer. The faint hint of vanilla that seemed to be intertwined with her hair. Clinging to the soft planes of her skin.

"We're supposed to be partners, right?" she asked. "*Just* partners? Not friends?"

August swallowed the knot in the back of his throat. "Right."

"Then why the hell do you care whether or not I do this?" Wren asked. "Why do you care if something happens to me?"

Why do I care? August wondered silently. He couldn't understand it himself. Couldn't decipher his complex web of feelings. He felt *mad*. Tormented. There was just something about her.

He had felt it the moment he saw her. The moment their shoulders brushed in that corridor. But what *was* that feeling? *You know what it is*, whispered a voice in the back of his mind. He could sense the word rising up his throat. Lingering on the tip of his tongue. But he wouldn't let himself

indulge in it. Wouldn't dare dream of uttering it out loud. It was a foolish feeling.

One he had buried long ago.

"I don't," August muttered back through gritted teeth, the lie burning his insides. "I don't give a damn what happens to you."

"Good." Wren gave a tight-lipped smile, and before August could stop her, before he could even fully comprehend what she was about to do, Wren snatched the glass vial out of Omar's hand, brought it to her lips, and took a swig.

She swallowed, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, and thrust the bottle in August's direction.

"Then bottoms up."

*

"Loughy. Get down from there."

Wren was standing atop one of the tables, third glass of enchanted wine in one hand, the other tugging on one of the strings of twinkling lights hanging above her. She giggled, twirling in place, spilling a bit of wine down her arm. Without hesitation, she brought her forearm up to her lips, licking the droplet of red wine before it could go to waste. She'd been standing there, *dancing*, making an absolute fool of herself, for the better half of the hour. She was completely drunk. She was maddening.

She was—fucking hell, she was *beautiful*, but that was beside the point.

"Well, well, well." Wren peered down at August, pouting. "Look who it is. The party pooper. Come to poop all over my party."

August pinched the bridge of his nose, exasperated. "Get. Down."

"Or what?" Wren hummed, resting her hands against her knees as she peered down at August. Her pupils were large and dilated—a side effect of the enchanted wine. Unlike regular wine, *enchanted* wine offered a . . . *full sensory* experience. It was quite possible that Wren was hallucinating. Not to mention filled with a false sense of euphoria. "You're gonna send me to the infirmary? I think you've made it pretty clear that you're not going to do that. *You*"—she pointed at August, legs swaying slightly—"don't scare me, August."

August let out a sigh. This was utterly hopeless. He turned to Omar, who was seated beside him, staring up at Wren with a mixture of admiration and the faintest hint of vicarious embarrassment.

“Omar,” he pleaded. “Do something.”

“What?” Omar splayed a hand over his chest in feigned innocence.

“What do you want me to do?”

August groaned, frustration welling in his chest. Wren was going to hate herself—or him—if she missed more classes the following morning. And the longer she stayed awake, the longer the intoxicating properties of the enchanted wine would last. If they wanted it to pass through her system, then she needed to rest.

She needed to get off that damn table.

“Loughy.” August pushed up the sleeves of his shirt. “I am going to count to three—”

“Uh-oh.” Wren giggled, twirling. “He’s scowling. What’s a girl to do?”

Omar whistled, shaking his head. “You’ve certainly got your hands full with this one, August.”

“*One . . .*” August stepped closer. He tilted his head in warning.

“*Two . . .*”

“Oh, please, August,” Wren interjected with a dismissive wave of her hand. “What are you going to do, *hmm*? It’s not like you’re just going to pick me up and throw me over your—” But Wren’s words were cut short, a resounding shriek taking their place as August gripped her tightly by the thighs, quite literally *tossing* her over his shoulder before she could say another word. She wriggled and kicked against his grip, but her efforts were ultimately futile. August was stronger, not to mention the elixir’s intoxicating properties made her movements sluggish. Even if Wren wanted to put up a fight, she wouldn’t get very far.

“Put me down!” Wren bellowed, though August drowned her out, turning to face Omar.

“Thanks for your help,” August muttered through gritted teeth.

Omar bowed his head.

“Always a pleasure doing business with you.”

August chuckled dryly, peeling his gaze from Omar. Luckily, he had been conservative with his relocation spells recently, and his spacial reserve was fairly full. He probably had enough juice to get them to Pettyworth. Last thing he wanted to do was haul Wren the whole way there.

August shut his eyes and summoned the relocation spell. Thick black smoke engulfed his vision, and suddenly he was no longer standing in the basement of Chambers and Fiddle but standing in Wren's room again, shrouded in darkness.

"All right." August set Wren down on her bed, biting back a smile as she ungracefully struggled to right herself. "There you are."

"Don't you *ever*"—Wren snapped at him, shoving him firmly in the chest—"do that again."

August rolled his eyes. "You'll be thanking me tomorrow morning when you're actually functioning and able to go to your classes."

"Don't hold your breath," Wren shot back, kicking off her boots.

God, she was stubborn.

"Tomorrow afternoon," August said, pausing by the door. "Meet me at the Main Yard after your final class."

Wren waved her hand, as if to say she heard him but didn't have the energy to respond verbally. August watched as Wren succumbed to the inevitable exhaustion that came after an enchanted wine high, curling up on the bed, her eyelids already beginning to flutter shut the moment she lay her head on her pillow.

"Good night, Loughy."

Wren mumbled something under her breath, though August couldn't quite hear her, only catching the words *Whatever . . . good night*. Still, he found himself smiling.

He summoned his last relocation spell for the day, feeling his reserve deplete. When he opened his eyes, he was back in his own room. As the smoke from his relocation spell dissipated, August realized there was something waiting for him in his room.

Written upon his mirror in red—in *blood*—were four words.

A reminder.

A warning.

THE SOULLESS ONE WAITS.

August swallowed, disgust burning in his throat, and backed away from the mirror. He had been foolish to let himself forget. To delude himself into thinking he could feel things that no longer belonged to him. Staring at the warning written in blood, the Soulless One's promise carved into his soul, August was reminded of his duty. Of the twisted vows binding him to this fate.

Brutally. Unforgivingly.

The answer was simple: There would be no happiness for him.

He knew then, with striking clarity, exactly what he had felt when he had first bumped into Wren. What he had dared to feel when he first saw her.

Hope.

But with the four words written on the mirror, that same inkling of hope was slaughtered, ripped from his soul and forgotten.

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WREN

There were no words Wren could adequately string together to describe just how embarrassed she felt. In the harsh morning light, the consequences of her actions assaulted her like a sharp slap in the face. And as she attempted to go about her day as normal, attending her regularly scheduled classes and absorbing as much information as she possibly could, the shame tearing at her persisted, unrelenting.

It wasn't like she had done anything *that* bad after drinking the enchanted wine, but there was something particularly mortifying about losing control in front of the prim, poised and ever stone-faced Augustine Hughes. She wanted August to take her seriously, and dancing on a table after drinking too much wine probably wasn't the best way to encourage that.

An image fluttered through Wren's mind: herself, absolutely plastered, getting *tossed* over August's shoulder and hauled out of Chambers and Fiddle like a toddler throwing a tantrum.

"*Jesus . . .*" Wren muttered, physically recoiling from the memory. She dug her fingers into the cold dirt beneath her, clawing for some semblance of comfort. She'd been sitting in the Main Yard for almost ten minutes, waiting for August at their scheduled meeting point, but no matter how hard she tried, no matter how desperately, Wren couldn't stop herself from replaying the previous night on an incessant loop.

She tried to focus on anything else. The burnt yellow oak leaves dancing across the ground, fluttering in the breeze. The faint patter of footsteps in the distance. Voices rising and falling in the wind. Her eyes traced the large fountain that sat at the center of the quad. Her gaze drifting to a pair of students lying on the grass, giggling into their textbooks as they scribbled something in the margins.

But her mind continued to wander. Her concentration crumbling with every second.

She was seated on one of the iron benches lining the Main Yard, knees tucked to her chest. She had to admit, at least her mortification over what had happened and her growing annoyance with August was a welcome distraction from her present reality. She'd hardly thought about the fact that she was . . . well, that she was *dead*. Every once in a while, the thought would slither back into Wren's mind, and she'd find herself unable to breathe. As if a sudden weight had fallen upon her chest. As if her lungs had collapsed, her airway sealed. And then the feeling would pass, whether through time, or patience, or a vexing smile and a pair of teasing smoke-filled eyes.

"Hello, Loughy."

Wren nearly jumped out of her skin. She stifled a gasp, turning her head to find August standing behind her, hands leaning against the bench, eyes beaming down at her. He'd donned a black sweater today, slipped on over his usual white shirt. His lips were curled into an amused smile, and a tiny part of Wren couldn't help but fear that somehow, by some strange magic, he'd been able to read her thoughts.

"August." Wren spoke his name with as much disdain as she could muster. "You're late."

"Did you miss me that much?" August gracefully leapt over the top of the bench, landing squarely next to Wren, who tried to ignore the fact that his leg was now touching hers. Not that she cared. Or noticed.

"Just hopeful," Wren muttered. "Thought maybe you'd landed yourself in the infirmary." She sighed and batted her lashes. "A girl can dream."

August chuckled, leaning back, legs sprawled in front of him. He rapped his fingers against his thighs, the silver ring on his index finger glinting with every flick of his hand. Warm light from the sun washed August's tanned skin in a faint amethyst hue. Soon the sky would melt into a pool of black, a silverish glow emanating from above. Fog would roll in, ribbons of it coating the ground.

Wren hoped that this excursion of theirs would end before then.

"So." August sighed, turning to look at Wren. "How are we feeling today? You know . . . after your . . . *performance*?"

Wren groaned, rubbing her temples. She should have known he'd bring it up as soon as possible.

“I’m fine, thank you very much,” she muttered, doing her best to seem unfazed. “And I would hardly call that a performance. I just . . . had a bit too much. Got a little fuzzy in the brain.” Wren shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “That’s all.”

August shrugged. “It happens,” he replied, catching Wren by surprise. She’d assumed he’d keep making digs at her. Do everything he possibly could to knock her down a peg. “You haven’t formally been inducted into Blackwood until Omar gets you far more inebriated than you intended to be.”

“Even you?” Wren asked, brows raised.

August let out a prolonged sigh.

“Even the infallible Demon of Blackwood—yes.”

“Well.” Wren chuckled, relaxing a bit in her seat. “I guess that makes me feel a tad less mortified.”

“Come on, then.” August jumped to his feet, sauntering away from Wren. “Enough reminiscing. We have a second jewel to find.”

Wren scrambled after him. “And where are we off to today?”

August reached into his pocket, revealing the wrinkled map. “It appears our dear Housemaster Russo is leading us to *Memorium*.”

Memorium? Wren scoured her brain for any mention of the building but came up blank.

“Never heard of it.”

August waved his hand dismissively in the air. “It’s just another building.”

“Is it used for classes?” Wren asked. “Maya didn’t mention it.”

“No,” August replied. Wren waited for him to say something else, to offer some sort of explanation, but August had grown strangely silent. There was also a rigidness in his shoulders, a tightness in his gaze, that hadn’t been there before.

“Okay . . . so . . .” Wren chuckled. “What is it used for?”

“It’s . . .” August’s jaw twitched, the muscles in his neck tensing. “It’s used for . . . thinking.”

“The school has a building solely used for . . . *thinking*?” Wren deadpanned.

“It’s a quiet hall,” August replied, exasperated. He was losing his patience. Clearly desperate to change the subject. There was something

about this Memorium place that he was avoiding. “Sacred. Holy. You sit there and think and pay your respects.”

“Pay your respects to what?” Wren asked.

“Do you always ask this many questions?” August snapped, gray eyes darting down at her.

“Only when the person I’m talking to is being this weird and evasive,” Wren shot back.

And *there*—Wren saw August’s hardened exterior crack an inch. The hint of a smile on his lips. There was something oddly rewarding about it. Unnaturally satisfying.

There was something intoxicating about making the notorious Augustine Hughes smile.

“Just follow me,” he muttered, guiding her forward.

The campus was quiet as they trekked toward Memorium. After a few minutes of walking in silence, the final bell rang from Elysium Hall, late afternoon enveloping Blackwood in dusty purple light and the faintest trace of fog. A gentle breeze picked up the leaves beneath Wren’s feet, sending goose bumps down her arms. August peered at her, mouth twisted, as if he were contemplating something.

He cleared his throat.

“Are you cold?” he asked, squinting.

Wren shrugged. Truthfully, she’d decided to leave her trench coat in her room, a decision she was currently regretting. “A bit. But I’m fine.”

He sighed, peeling off his sweater, and held it in front of her. Wren stared at the silent offering, brows raised.

“Seriously?” she asked, unable to stop the grin from spilling onto her lips. “You’re offering me your sweater?”

August groaned. If Wren didn’t know any better, she’d even say he seemed flustered.

“Just take it,” he grumbled.

“Augustine Hughes.” Wren chuckled, snatching the sweater from his hands. She slipped it on, the warmth of the wool instantly washing over her. “The *gentleman* of Blackwood.”

August scowled. “I will end you.”

“But not before making sure I’m nice and warm.” Wren grinned and crossed her arms over her chest.

“You’re insufferable,” August muttered under his breath.

“And no longer cold,” Wren added. “*Thank you.*”

“Whatever.” August rolled his eyes, but Wren could see the smile peeking at the edges of his mouth. “We’re here.”

She wasn’t sure if it was the cold, but a shiver ran down her spine as she looked up at the building standing before them. Memorium appeared to have been fashioned to look like an old Church, composed of dark granite with a myriad of stained-glass windows that reflected the late-afternoon light. Large oak doors greeted them, a set of steps leading to the dimly lit entrance.

“Looks . . . depressing.” Wren didn’t know *why* exactly, but there was something about the building that filled her with a profound sense of sadness. A deep ache blossoming in the pit of her stomach. Despair.

“That’s because it is,” August grumbled under his breath as he approached the entrance, hands shoved into his pockets. He simply looked at the door and it swung open, moving at his command. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

August crossed into Memorium and Wren followed suit.

She was surprised to find it was rather empty, save for a few pews in the center of the main hall. But there was something looming on the other side of the room. A large stone monument shaped like a pillar, surrounded by what appeared to be letters and dozens of half-burned candles. Other than the faint patter of their footsteps, there was no sound. Just silence. Piercing, oppressive silence.

“So . . . are you gonna tell me what this building is used for now, or are you gonna continue to be super weird about it?” Wren asked, voice echoing through the hall. They walked forward, passing row after row of pews, drawing closer to the monument.

August let out a resigned sigh.

“Have you heard of the Demien Order?” he asked.

“No.” Wren shook her head. “Is that, like, a school club or something?”

August let out a bitter chuckle. “No. It is definitely *not* a club.” There was something dark lingering in his voice. A sharpness. Wren could tell this was a touchy subject for him. “The Demien Order is a separate entity from Blackwood. They exist in the outskirts of purgatory. Nobody knows how and when they formed. All we know is that they follow their leader, a figure known as the Soulless One. And every year, they recruit more and more

students.” August grimaced, a look of disgust on his face. “Brainwash them.”

“For what purpose?” Wren asked.

“To raise an army,” August said simply. “Against Blackwood.”

Anxiety coursed through Wren. How had nobody mentioned this before? It seemed odd that Headmaster Silas would conveniently leave out this vital piece of information. Perhaps he didn’t want to scare the newer students more than they already were. It made sense. Wren was terrified—and had been even before she found out about the hellish army planning on attacking them.

“They want to destroy Blackwood?” Wren echoed. “But why?”

August shrugged. “It’s the Soulless One’s greatest desire. And they blindly follow what the Soulless One demands.”

They paused in front of the monument. Wren could see now that there were names carved in the pillar. *Hundreds* of them. How many students had left to join the Demien Order? How many souls had been tricked by their poisonous words? There had to be a way to stop them. To ensure they didn’t cross Blackwood’s gates.

“But doesn’t the school have magical defenses?” Wren pondered out loud. “Wards to protect against an attack?”

August nodded. “We do.”

“So . . . how do they intend to destroy Blackwood?”

Something in August’s expression shifted upon hearing Wren’s question. His eyes grew dark and grave. His features solemn. He swallowed, hands balled into fists by his sides.

“I don’t know,” he finally replied, letting out a breath. And that was that—Wren could see the conversation shutting down. The wall between them rising once more. “But this building is used to memorialize the students who leave. Who are taken by the Demien Order. Their friends and loved ones write them letters . . . they come here to sit and remember them.”

“To think,” Wren added with a soft smile.

August chuckled. “Exactly.”

“All right, well . . .” Wren cleared her throat, attempting to ignore the weird tension that had built between them. “What now? Where does the map lead?”

August fished the map from his pocket, handing it to Wren. It was the first time since they’d begun the Hunt that August had let Wren hold the

map. She did her best not to draw attention to it, worried that August might snatch it right out of her hands. As she stared down at the map, she noted that the path leading to the second jewel stopped inside Memorium but didn't detail anything beyond that.

"Could be anywhere," August muttered with a frustrated groan.

"Last time, the secret compartment was marked with the letter *R*." Wren shrugged, gesturing to the room. "So . . . let's find the *R*."

They searched for nearly half an hour. Inspecting every crevice. Every stone slab. Every amber-tinted window. Wren was beginning to give up when August's voice echoed from the other side of the room.

"Think I found something."

August was squatting next to one of the back pews, peering underneath the wooden bench. He snapped his fingers, producing a small flame, illuminating the underside of the pew for Wren to see.

And there, carved with an elegant flourish, just like in Bonestrod, was the letter *R*.

"Shall we?" August raised a brow, gesturing her to take the lead.

With a sharp inhale, Wren placed her hand upon the *R*. Instantly, the pew began to vibrate. A deep rumble echoed all around them. And then the pew was moving, shifting to reveal a hidden hatch embedded in the floor.

"What do you think we'll find in there?" Wren asked in a hushed whisper.

"I don't know," August replied, unhooking the latch. He opened the trapdoor, revealing dimly lit stairs. "But stay behind me. I don't need you blindly running into battle like last time, okay?" He peered over at her, a coy smile on his lips. "I prefer my partners awake and conscious."

"That's funny." Wren sucked her teeth. "It *almost* sounds like you care about my well-being."

August scowled. "Again—selfish reasons."

Wren shrugged.

"Whatever helps you sleep at night."

Before August could step forward, Wren cut in front of him, taking the first step down into the hidden underground hatch. She wasn't sure what she might find, but she wasn't going to let August dictate who should take charge. She had to assume this challenge would be different. Stumbling upon another bloodthirsty statue hell-bent on destroying her seemed highly unlikely.

Much to Wren's relief, August kept the small flame alight in his palm as they descended deeper underground, illuminating the dimly lit space. Despite the silence that had fallen over them, Wren could sense his presence behind her. His eyes drilling into her. The fact that he was only inches away, dangerously close, given how narrow the stairs were.

"Think we're almost there?" Wren muttered through a nervous chuckle. She wasn't exactly claustrophobic, but she was beginning to lose her nerve.

"Look," August muttered, his voice low.

Wren's eyes darted forward, relief coursing through her when she spotted a door up ahead. She had no idea what they'd find on the other side, but anywhere was better than this tight staircase.

Before she could second-guess herself, Wren approached the door and swung it open, stumbling forward. Luckily, she had been right: the circular room was far better than the staircase they had been trapped in moments prior. Large and spacious, it greeted them on the other side, illuminated by torchlight and iron sconces lining the walls. Wren inhaled a deep breath as she stretched her arms overhead. August peered at her, a curious smile on his face.

"Not a fan of tight spaces?" he mused out loud.

Wren shrugged. "Is anybody?"

August turned his lips down in an expression that seemed to say *fair enough* and instantly began searching the room for the jewel.

He didn't have to search long.

At the center of the room was a glass display case set upon a wide stone column that came up to about Wren's waist. And in the case, glittering and brilliant, was a bloodred ruby.

But there was something else in front of the display case. As they approached the column, Wren realized what it was.

A mound of sand had been placed on the column, with three wooden discs carefully laid out before it. An image had been carved into each disc—a match, a cake and a basket. A single word was written on a piece of paper beside the display: *TRANSMUTE*.

August hummed. "Figured the next challenge would be something like this."

"Are we meant to cast a transmutation spell?" Wren asked. "Change the physical properties of the sand?"

August nodded. “And I believe these three images are meant to be our hints for what we’re supposed to change the sand into.”

A thought occurred to Wren. “What if we get it wrong? What if we change the sand into the wrong thing?”

August let out a dry chuckle, pushing up his sleeves.

“Suppose I’ll be the one to find that out.”

August extended his arm toward the sand, eyes shut tight. Glimmers of yellow and orange light swirled in his palm, blanketing the mound of sand. But when August opened his eyes, the mound remained unchanged.

“Hmm.” He rubbed his jaw. “Didn’t work.”

“What did you try to change it into?”

“A candle. Figured it made sense with the match and cake . . . though I’m not entirely sure how the basket is related. Well. Good news is that there don’t seem to be any repercussions to guessing incorrectly.” But as August continued to speak, something began to change on his face. Wren thought she was imaging things for a moment, but as the seconds went by, there was no denying what was forming upon his skin. “Guess we just have to try and—”

Wren let out a gasp. “Oh my God.”

“What is it?” August asked, brow furrowed.

“Your face.” Wren clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle the laughter bubbling up her throat. “You’ve got—” She struggled to get the words out, snorting as a cackle of uncontrollable laughter erupted out of her.

August frantically touched his cheek, eyes widening in anger when he undoubtedly felt the fish scales that now covered his face. “Bloody hell. If you don’t alter the element correctly, *you* begin to transmute.” He let out a string of colorful curses, staring at the ceiling in frustration. “Are they . . . are they scales?” he muttered weakly, tentatively tracing his jawline.

Wren nodded, biting down on her cheek in an effort to contain her smile.

“They’re pink,” she replied, giggling. “And sparkly. Like a pretty little fish.”

“This is not funny, Loughty.” August crossed his arms in indignation, which only made Wren want to laugh more. “What if I sprout gills next?”

“Maybe you won’t,” Wren replied. “Maybe it’ll be a tail.”

August frowned. “Laugh all you want, but it’s your turn. Go on, Loughty. You said you wanted to learn and participate. So—*participate*.”

He was right. Wren approached the column and examined the three wooden discs once more, carefully inspecting each image: *a match . . . a cake . . . a basket.*

But wait. There was something about the basket she recognized. Something she hadn't noticed at first glance. It wasn't just a simple woven basket drawn on the third wooden disc. There was a ribbon tied to the handle. Stars were painted on the side.

"How . . . how is that possible?" Wren murmured.

August blinked up at her. The scales had begun to spread, now traveling down his neck.

"What is it?"

"I know that basket," Wren said, tracing the image with her fingertip. "It's . . . it's my mom's. She'd pick fresh flowers from her garden every few weeks and bring them in using that basket." If Wren closed her eyes, she could practically see her mom crouched in her garden, hands covered in dirt, auburn hair tied away from her face. "I drew those stars on it when I was six."

"*Russo . . .*" August groaned in frustration. "She must have made this challenge specifically for you. To ensure it wasn't just me participating in the Hunt." He snorted, crossing his arms. Even those were covered with scales now. "She can never play fair, that one."

"But the match and the cake . . ." Wren whispered, attempting to piece together the clues. "I don't see how the two relate to—" A sudden thought stole the words from her throat, and she sucked in a sharp breath as understanding washed over her. "*Of course.*"

"You know what it is?" August asked, a hopeful lilt to his voice.

Wren nodded.

"I think so."

"Well, go on." August craned his neck, rubbing the skin there warily. "I think I feel gills popping out."

"Every year on my birthday my mom picked a special flower for me from her garden," Wren whispered. Memories of her mother flooded her mind, bringing with them a painful swell of emotion. Grief threatened to pull her under, but she inhaled a steadying breath, focusing on the task at hand. "She knew they were my favorite. She'd place them in that basket and bring them to my room, along with a small cake. Every single year."

August had grown quiet since Wren had started talking, despite his worsening condition, his eyes locked on her intently.

“Lupine flowers,” Wren went on. She reached out, placing her hand on the mound of sand, then closed her eyes, locating the core of her magic and focusing on her chest. On the nexus of corporeal magic swirling inside her.

When she opened her eyes, three things had happened.

One: The scales sprouting all over August’s skin had vanished.

Two: A lupine blossom stood where the mound of sand had been only seconds before.

Three: The glass case had vanished, unveiling the glistening ruby nestled inside.

WREN

“**Y**ou’re never going to let me live this down, are you?” August asked through a sigh.

The answer was a resounding, unmistakable *no*. Wren was still giggling at the thought of August covered in sparkly pink fish scales as they strolled out of Memorium and back into the cool night air. Evening had fallen upon Blackwood, bringing with it plumes of fog and a silverish glow emanating from the black sky.

“I wonder what would have happened if I had waited any longer,” Wren mused, hands clasped behind her back. They ventured farther south, walking along a winding line of oak trees, attempting to find their way back to the main path. “Do you think you’d have formed little fins?”

“Why would my fins be little?” August replied, almost comically offended.

Wren snorted. “I don’t know.”

“I think they’d be very large fins,” August muttered through a scowl. “Impressive, manly fins.”

“You’re being awfully defensive about your fins,” Wren drawled. “Overcompensating for something?”

August rolled his eyes, unfazed. “Definitely not. I’m just deeply offended you’d think I’d have small baby fins.”

“Okay, fine.” Wren sighed. “You’d have gargantuan fins. Super big, burly fins.” She peered over at him, biting back a smile. “Happy now?”

“Thank you.” August nodded. “Elated.” He remained serious and stoic, though Wren could see just how much effort he was putting into containing his own smile. There was a lull in their conversation, a brief pause, and then August said, “Good job, by the way. You did well in there.”

“Wow.” Wren raised her brows in astonishment. “A genuine compliment! I’m stunned. I don’t know what to say.”

August rolled his eyes. “You could try *thank you*.”

Wren came to a halt. She turned to face him squarely, scrounging up as much sincerity as she could muster. “Thank you, August.”

August nodded, pleased. “You’re very welcome, Loughy.”

Once again, a thick, tangible silence fell over them. But it wasn’t uncomfortable. It wasn’t the kind of silence that made you want to crawl out of your skin and seek solitude. It was the kind of silence that felt warm . . . comforting. The kind of silence that reminded Wren of afternoons curled up by the bay window of her room, book in hand, delicate streams of morning sunlight pouring over her skin.

She hadn’t felt that way since arriving at Blackwood.

Except now. *Here*. With August.

“Should we head back to Pettyworth?” Wren asked, suddenly panicked. “It’s pretty late.”

August nodded. He cleared his throat, running a hand through his curls. He seemed to be just as aware of the tense moment that had passed between them as Wren was. “Probably for the best.” He crossed his arms, staring up at the sky, before slowly dragging his gaze back down to Wren. “Look, Loughy . . . I wanted to say—”

But August never got to finish his sentence. There was a flurry of movement. A sudden puff of smoke in the air, and then a pair of hands was gripping Wren by the neck, the edge of a knife held to her throat. As the smoke cleared, Wren saw a girl standing behind August, a sharp dagger aimed directly at his back. She had cropped blond hair that fell right above her shoulders, and wore an emerald-green sweater tucked into a pair of pleated tartan pants. Wren hadn’t seen her before—or, if she had, she surely didn’t recognize her.

Panicked, Wren tried to run, but whoever was behind her held on tighter, yanking her backward before she could try to escape again.

“Don’t move.” The voice behind her was deep and menacing. The anonymous boy pressed the knife harder against Wren’s neck. Logically, Wren could sense it. An almost invisible pressure. But there was no *pain*. None that she could feel, anyway. It was dizzying, knowing he was drawing blood, knowing it *should* hurt her but didn’t. “Don’t you dare move another fucking inch.”

“She’s not moving, Carson.” August’s words were directed toward her assailant, but his gaze was locked on Wren. He looked perfectly at ease,

though there was a lethal edge to his voice that sent a shiver down Wren's spine. He didn't seem at all bothered by the blade at his back. It was as if the other girl wasn't even there. "And neither am I, Evie, so don't worry."

"How did you know it was me?" the girl behind him muttered through a scowl.

"Because you two are fucking inseparable. *And* predictable." August lifted his hands in the air in surrender, though the gesture seemed pointless. Just because he wasn't holding a knife or a weapon didn't mean he couldn't hurt them. After all, *he* was the real weapon. "Doesn't take a genius to know Carson would rope you into whatever scheme this is."

"Fucking hell . . ." Carson let out a manic laugh, jumping up and down. Wren felt the blade press harder against her neck, though still, no pain.

"Look at us, Evie! We did it. We actually did it."

"Did *what* exactly?" August asked through a sigh. "I'm assuming this ridiculous plan has some sort of motive?"

"Ambushed the Demon of Blackwood," Evie drawled, leaning in toward August. "And his new little protégée."

"His new little protégée?" Wren echoed. "Who the hell called me *that*?"

"I kind of like it," August muttered, grinning. "Has a nice ring to it."

At August's teasing remark, Evie kned him squarely in the back of his legs, knocking him to the ground. August let out a grunt but he didn't fight back, kneeling down upon the ground, his eyes still glued to Wren.

"Enough out of you," Evie muttered. She dragged her blade from his back up toward his neck, pressing it against his jaw. Wren watched, breath held, as she drew blood. It trickled along August's jaw, sliding down his neck in thin ribbons. "You're not getting out of this one, so why don't you just shut your mouth and let us do the talking, okay?"

"I'm all ears," August muttered through gritted teeth, angling his head away from the blade.

"We made a deal," Carson explained, voice wavering. Wren could sense that his initial bravado had begun to fade. That whatever show of confidence he'd put up at their initial attack was faltering, and the reality of what he was doing had settled upon him. "We send you and the girl to the infirmary, and we get immunity for the next three months."

"Not to mention the password for the next Ascended party," Evie muttered with a smug grin.

"Immunity from what?" Wren asked.

“Not from *what*,” August replied before either Carson or Evie could. “But from *who*.” He waited, brow lifted. “Isn’t that right?”

Carson shifted uncomfortably behind Wren. His grip loosened slightly, and for the first time since he’d grabbed her, she could turn her neck slightly and get a good look at him. He didn’t seem all that menacing—just another student. Large brown eyes hidden by wire-framed glasses. Tousled brown hair. A small scar in the corner of his top lip.

“Yeah.” Carson nodded. “From—from someone. But that’s none of your business!”

“So let me get this straight,” August said through a sigh. “This person promised you that they wouldn’t send you to the infirmary as long as you send *me* to the infirmary. And you believed them?”

“They made a blood vow,” Carson muttered back defensively. “Can’t break those.”

August chuckled. “A *blood* vow?” He turned down his lips in a mocking pout. “Well, now I feel important.”

“Wh-what’s a blood vow?” Wren asked, voice shaking. She was beginning to wonder what August’s play was here. He clearly was buying time—but for what reason, she wasn’t entirely sure.

“Binding contract,” August replied calmly. “Break it, and your ass is getting sent to the infirmary, anyway. It corrodes your insides. Basically eats you from the inside out.”

Wren shivered. Nausea coiled around her throat. “Charming.”

“Listen . . .” August sighed, swiveling his neck to look between the two of them. “Carson. Evie. You’re not the first ones to be sent after me. And you most certainly won’t be the last. So why don’t you walk away while you still have your souls and pride intact?”

“Don’t listen to him, Evie,” Carson practically growled. “Do it.”

Evie shook her head.

“You first.”

Carson blinked, taken back.

“What?”

“The girl.” Evie nodded toward Wren. “Make him watch.”

Panic shot through Wren like an electric current. She was going to be sick. She tasted bile on her tongue. Her stomach churning at the anticipation of what was about to happen. A part of her wanted to reach for the knife August had given her, but she knew she wouldn’t move fast enough. By the

time she got her hand around the knife, Carson would probably be slicing her open.

What would it feel like? Having her neck split open with the absence of pain? Would she feel her soul fade? Would she fall into oblivion? Tumbling through darkness? Would it feel like dying had felt? Cold. Lonely. Eternal.

“*Don’t*,” August choked out. With a single word, the nonchalant mask he’d been wearing fell away. “That’s not—” He shook his head, panic burning behind his eyes. “She has nothing to do with the contract.”

Carson chuckled, deep and gruff. “Well, well. Looks like we hit a nerve, Evie.”

“Maybe the Demon of Blackwood has a bit of a crush on the newbie,” Evie pondered out loud, humming softly beneath her breath.

“Then we better take our time with her,” Carson drawled. “Drag it out *real* slow.” With one hand, he gripped Wren by the hair, yanking her head backward, exposing her neck. With the other, he pressed the blade firmly against her flesh, prepared to slice her open. “You hear that August? We’re going to make sure that her body is so mangled and destroyed that she’ll be stuck in the infirmary for the rest of the term. She’ll be in there for months. And you’re going to be right there—lying beside her.”

Wren knew she should say something. She should try to plead her case. Beg for mercy. But her mouth seemed to be glued shut. The frantic words she was desperate to utter trapped in the back of her throat.

But it didn’t matter. Because it was August who broke the silence. And not in the way Wren expected he would.

It was a low sound. Deep. Hoarse.

It took Wren a few seconds to process that it was *laughter*.

“Dammit.” August chuckled, shaking his head. He looked at the ground with a bone-chilling smile.

“What?” Carson practically barked. “What’s so fucking funny?”

“You just . . .” August sighed. When he looked back up at Carson, Wren had to stifle a gasp. His gray eyes had grown unnaturally dark. Lethal. Overflowing with rage. For the first time since she had met him, for the first time since she had seen him strolling down the corridors of Elysium Hall, he *truly* looked like the monster that everyone made him out to be.

The Demon of Blackwood smiled.

“You *really* shouldn’t have said that.”

It all happened so fast. Wren barely had time to process August's movements. One second he was on his knees, and the next he was side-sweeping his leg, knocking Evie to the ground. The girl fell, tumbling, and August snatched the knife from her hand and plunged it into her stomach.

The wound was deep. Brutal.

And then he *slashed* across her stomach, splitting her open. Evie's face went ghostly white as she collapsed, her eyes brimming with anger. "No!" she choked out, hands helplessly pressing against the open wound. She didn't even seem scared, just *annoyed*, as if August had merely pushed her as opposed to carving her open and ripping out her insides.

Carson dropped his grip on Wren, shoving her to the ground, and sprinted toward August. Wren didn't even have to warn him. August moved with a supernatural swiftness, lifting his hand and commanding a nearby tree branch to snap off. Before Carson could even reach August, the branch was barreling toward him, shooting through his chest.

The sound was the worst part. The *crunch* of bones breaking. Flesh tearing.

Carson screamed and fell to his knees. It was a scream not of pain but of pure, unfiltered anger. He tried to crawl toward Evie, who had already begun to fade, her eyes staring vacantly up at the sky as she lost consciousness, her soul entering that vegetative state Wren had heard so much about.

But August stopped Carson before he could reach her. He stepped in front of him, squatting to his eye level. "You really should have known better, Carson. You should have known not to do this."

Carson shook his head, teeth chattering. He stared up at August. "Please."

"Now you beg?" August cocked his head.

"I-I'll walk." Carson nodded, a manic sort of laughter spilling out of him. "I'll break the contract. P-promise."

"If you break the contract, you'll be in the infirmary even longer," August explained calmly. Pragmatically. "Just think of this as an act of mercy." He tapped the edge of the knife against Carson's cheek and grimaced. "Not that you deserve mercy after what you said you'd do to her."

A sudden awareness crept over Wren. The blood. *So much blood*. Evie's body splayed open like a frog ready for dissection. Her soul numbed and

frozen, unconscious for God knew how long. And now . . . another body. Another soul. More suffering. More blood. More destruction.

“August—” Wren tried to speak. To call his name and tell him to stop. That it was enough.

But it was too late.

August brought the knife down, striking his target. Instantly, the world seemed to grow hazy around Wren. Her vision went dark and splotchy. If she weren’t already kneeling on the ground, she was certain she would have collapsed. Terror rushed through her body, pooling in her lungs. She couldn’t *breathe*. A heaviness pressed on her chest. A rush of panic lighting up her body.

She needed to run. To get away from this mess. To get away from *him*—

“Loughy.” Somewhere above her, August’s voice echoed, deep and gruff. He was in front of her. Touching her. August cupped her face gently, eyes searching. Wren blinked, attempting to focus and still her racing mind, but her vision blurred, the edges turning gray and murky. “*Look at me.*”

“You . . .” Wren choked out. Her gaze flitted from August’s bloodstained face to Carson’s unmoving body sprawled out like a deer left for slaughter. “He . . .” Wren swallowed. Bile rose up her throat, nausea twisting her insides. She hadn’t realized she could still feel nauseous, given their absence of pain. “His *neck*.”

But August didn’t seem to hear her. He was zeroed in on Wren’s condition, on inspecting her for injuries.

“Are you okay?” His eyes roved over her face, down her arms, analyzing her. “Are you wounded anywhere? Are you losing blood?”

“I—I don’t know.” Wren shook her head. Her lips felt impossibly dry. “I don’t think so.”

Wren couldn’t tear her gaze away from Carson’s body. His neck was slit open—*carved* open—in a gaping trench of flesh and ligament and muscle. Blood sputtered from the wound, pooling around him, soaking the ground beneath him. It was so deep that Wren wondered how his head was still attached to his neck.

Maybe it wasn’t.

Wren found she couldn’t hold it in any longer, and twisted from August’s grasp, emptying the contents of her stomach. But there was nothing in there. Just bile and acid.

Wren cringed, scrambling to her feet, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She tried to still her breathing, dragging her gaze back to August. He seemed . . . still. Unnervingly calm, given the situation. His hands were soaked with blood. His white shirt stained. Carson's and Evie's blood was spattered across August's face. He looked like carnage. Like complete and utter destruction.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" August whispered. Wren flinched at the hurt in his voice.

"I just . . ." She shook her head, attempting to find the words. "I didn't recognize you. For a moment there . . . you looked like someone else."

August glanced at Carson's and Evie's bodies. He didn't seem bothered by them, but he didn't seem apathetic either. There was a tinge of sadness in his stare—of pity. "Sometimes you have to become something unrecognizable in order to survive here."

"Is that how you do it?" Wren asked, voice wavering. "How you rationalise it?"

Her question must have offended August. His gaze snapped back to her, his brow furrowed. "What would you have had me do, then? Let him attack you? Let him slit *your* throat?"

Wren shook her head.

"It's not pretty business, darling, but it's *necessary*." August was seething, each word punching out of him angrily. He lifted his hand to his mouth, attempting to wipe a bit of blood from his face, but only streaked more along his jaw. "I take the ugliest parts of my soul and lay them bare because I have to. Because *we* have to. If you don't"—he pointed at the mangled bodies with unapologetic candidness—"that's what happens to you. *That* is your fate."

"I just don't see myself ever being that desperate to come out on top," Wren whispered, unable to hide the disgust from her voice. "Getting the best grade? Beating the other students on an assignment? Is it really worth all *this*?"

"When you've been here for centuries"—August shot back bitterly—"then you can talk."

Centuries.

Wren's head shot up. August looked wrecked—his eyes were bloodshot and glassy. His face streaked with blood. It had never occurred to Wren that some students could have been here that long. That *August* could have been

here—trapped here—for *centuries*. She couldn't even imagine how he felt. She hadn't even been at Blackwood for a week and she already felt suffocated. A tidal wave of grief rising higher and higher with every passing hour. It wouldn't surprise her if some students lost their minds.

It was no wonder they turned into *this*.

"How long have you been at Blackwood, August?" Wren asked, breaking the silence.

"Loughy." August winced, shutting his eyes. He flexed his fingers, inhaling a long and steadying breath. "I'm begging you. Do not try to poke and prod into my past. Do not try and chip away at me." His eyes fluttered open, and there was a pleading look blazing behind them. "It's only going to hurt you."

Wren took a step closer, shaking her head. "What does that even mean?"

"It means . . . this is it." August let out a broken sigh and gestured to himself with a defeated wave of his hands. "This is all I have to offer you. This is all I'll ever be able to offer you." His voice shook with every word. "Nothing more."

Wren didn't know what to say. It was as if her voice had been snatched from her throat.

"What now?" she managed to whisper, swallowing back the unwanted emotions.

"I'll relocate their bodies to the infirmary," August muttered, running a hand through his curls. "Least I could do, I suppose."

Wren nodded. She scratched the back of her arm, staring up at August. "Should I . . ." She paused, gnawing the inside of her cheek. "Should I stay with you?"

"Do you want to?" August asked, voice soft.

Silence fell between them. Wren tried to find her answer, but truthfully, she didn't know. A part of her understood why August had reacted the way he did. He did what needed to be done. He had protected her. He had saved them from meeting the same fate. But another part of her—the very *human* part of her—couldn't help but want to distance herself as much as possible. To run away and hide and never resurface.

August must have seen her answer written on her face. There was a tinge of sadness in his eyes, of bitterness, and then he was turning away from her, not bothering to glance over his shoulder as he spoke.

“Go back to your dorm, Loughy.” August knelt beside Carson’s body, placing a hand on the boy’s chest. A wispy silver smoke billowed out of August’s palm, devouring Carson, until his body had vanished. “We’re done here for the day.”

“Are you sure?” Wren asked. She wasn’t sure why she felt so hollow. Why there were tears building behind her eyes. “I can help . . . if you want. I can—” But August interjected, voice sharp and commanding.

“I said *go*.”

Wren flinched. She said nothing as August stood up and made his way to Evie’s body, transporting her to the infirmary the same way he had Carson. She said nothing as August straightened his shoulders, brushing the dirt from his bloody shirt.

“I will see you tomorrow,” he said. Calm. Level. As if nothing had happened. “Once we get that third jewel, we’ll be done. You won’t have to deal with any of this again.”

It was in that moment, standing in the middle of the forest, that Wren could see it. The darkness latching onto August. The deep, unending abyss he was plummeting into. She didn’t know why. She didn’t know what was clinging to him, dragging him under, forcing him into *this*. A part of her wondered if she should ignore his demands and stay. If she should simply close the distance between them and wrap her arms around him and find a way to put him back together again. Maybe he could be saved from whatever was clearly tormenting him. Maybe she could pull him back before it was too late.

But she didn’t. Wren simply stood there, silent, and let August walk away.

She let him fall deeper into that abyss and said nothing.

AUGUST

August wasn't exactly one to drink away his sorrows alone, but he supposed it was never too late to start. Either way, it wasn't like he had many other coping mechanisms he could resort to. He supposed he could call on Omar—he was always eager and willing to be someone's drinking buddy—but the mere thought of having to evade his relentless questioning made August's stomach churn. What could he tell him? *Ah, well you see, I'm feeling a bit down because I've been assigned to get close to the girl prophesized to usher in the destruction of Blackwood, but she also happens to make me feel things I haven't felt in centuries, and oh—have I mentioned I'm secretly part of the Demien Order and my sister is their High General?*

No. It wouldn't work. So drinking alone in the Library, slumped at the foot of one of the towering bookshelves, would simply have to do. It was way past curfew, which meant August had been blissfully alone for the better half of the hour. There had been the occasional straggler, but when they had spotted August in the distance, they'd darted in the opposite direction.

Good. August had thought grimly, taking a swig of his enchanted whiskey. *Go away. Run. Leave me be.* This was exactly why he tried so hard to cement himself as the Demon of Blackwood. If people avoided him, then he'd never have to explain himself.

But by the time August had nearly emptied the bottle, he found that his sorrows not only remained but had seemingly doubled.

He hadn't meant to scare Wren off. He'd only been trying to protect her. August knew what desperation did to Blackwood students, and there wasn't a doubt in his mind that Carson and Evie would have followed through with their threats. They would have broken Wren. They would have ripped her apart every which way, just to ensure she'd remain in the infirmary for as long as possible.

The thought alone had been enough to send August over the edge.

And now Wren had seen him. *Really* seen him. The ugliest parts of him. The festering darkness inside him.

“Fuck it.” August chugged the rest of the bottle, letting the bitter liquid travel down his throat, the full effects of the whiskey burning through his limbs. A heaviness swam in his head. A numbness spread over his skin. When he looked around the dimly lit shelves, dazzling lights twinkled in his vision, as if mini fireworks had exploded.

Perhaps if he hadn’t made the decision to chug what remained of the bottle, he would have been sober enough to notice Olivier Dupont standing beside him before the other boy’s thick French accent cut through August’s hallucinogenic bliss.

“Melancholy is not a good look on you, Augustine.”

August tried not to flinch at the sudden intrusion. He turned his head, slowly, and the world seemed to ripple, his vision lagging with his mind. Olivier was leaning against the towering bookcase, a glass of wine in one hand.

August snorted, pressing his head back for stability. When he spoke, his words slurred and there was a wavering chuckle in his voice. “That’s rich, coming from you.” Even in his inebriated state, it didn’t surprise August to find that Olivier had approached him. For whatever reason, Olivier was different from the other students. Perhaps it was simply because he had been at Blackwood almost as long as August had, but they’d always shared a silent understanding. They stayed out of each other’s way but also seemed to hold a mutual respect. In a strange way, Olivier was a reflection of August. Another boy with centuries’ worth of grief filling his soul, desperate to find a way to numb the pain and make it go away—whatever the cost. For August, it was isolation. For Olivier, it was nihilism.

“Ah, but the difference is I wear my melancholy like a badge of honor.” Olivier splayed his hand against his chest, grinning. “My melancholy drinks wine and wears fine fabrics and keeps many lovers. Your melancholy is”—he looked August up and down—“*depressing*. You look miserable. More than usual.”

“Piss off, Olivier.” August shut his eyes and it felt as though the entire world was spinning. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Does this have anything to do with that pesky little redhead I saw you with the other day?” Olivier asked, a teasing lilt in his voice. “The new

girl?”

August's eyes snapped open. He suddenly sounded far more sober than he felt.

“Don't call her that.”

Olivier's brows raised suspiciously. “I take that as a yes, then.”

“And how do you remember that, anyway?” August grumbled. “It didn't even look like you were aware of what plane of existence you were on.”

Olivier shrugged. “Comes with practice.”

“Just leave me to wallow,” August muttered under his breath, tossing the empty whiskey bottle on the floor. “Go get high in the Main Yard or screw some stranger under a staircase or whatever it is you do every night.”

At this, Olivier's expression seemed to change. The teasing grin on his lips faded, his green eyes growing dark and somber. He stepped closer, squatting so that he was at eye level with August.

“Do you want to know what I do every night, Augustine?” Gone was the playfulness in Olivier's voice, replaced by something far more urgent. When he spoke, he made sure to look directly into August's eyes, his gaze unwavering.

“I *distract* myself,” he continued, each word punching out of him slowly. “I take and consume and indulge because it is the only thing that distracts me from the wretched fate that I've been handed. It is the only thing that makes it feel as though I can stand to exist *here*, eternally, until my memories are ripped away from me and I'm finally left an empty husk of who I once was. It is the only thing that distracts me from knowing that all of my happiest days are behind me . . . buried. Dead. Decaying in the earth while I exist here, perpetually bored and dissatisfied and wholly miserable.” He leaned closer, his face inches from August. “*That* is what I do every night, Augustine. That is my entire purpose.”

August tried to find the right words but settled for silence. Either way, it didn't matter. Olivier seemed to be done with the conversation, straightening to his full height, swigging the last of his wine.

“And on that note . . .” Olivier wiped the back of his mouth, offering a final bow of his head. “I bid you farewell. Try not to mope for too long . . .” He spun on his heels, glancing over his shoulder. “I'd hate for that pretty face of yours to go to waste.”

And then Olivier Dupont sauntered away, leaving August to sit there, alone, drowning his sorrows until he could think of nothing better to do

than to close his eyes and sleep for the first time in two hundred years.

*

August dreamt of warmth. There was nothing concrete about the dream, nothing he could make sense of—just warmth and tenderness and light. In his dream, there was no darkness that could hurt him. No memories shackling him to the present. A soft hand touched him. A gentle voice lulled him closer. He was happy. Truly, blissfully *happy*.

But then something changed. A sharp slap across the face. An intrusion. There was somebody else entering his dream.

August blinked, and the scene transformed, the warm sensation vanishing as the dream became clear and his vision solidified. He was standing at the center of a clearing. Flowers encircled him—dark purple chrysanthemums and bloodred lilies. And standing in front of him, hands clasped in front of her and a smile on her lips, was Edith.

“What is this?” August sputtered. He looked around, confusion muddling his mind. He could see a dark sky stretched out above him, wispy crimson clouds swirling in the air. “Did you . . . did you infiltrate my dream?”

“Well, I would have used the mirror portal, but *someone* decided to fall asleep in the Library.” Edith shrugged innocently, prowling closer with slow, steady steps. “I had to get creative.”

August ground his teeth together.

“What do you want, Edith?”

Edith’s response was quick and to the point. Not a moment of hesitation.

“Wren needs to go to reformatory.”

The anger rising in August vanished, replaced by complete and utter panic. He tilted his head, hands balled into fists. “*What?*”

“You know just as well as I do that it isn’t enough for her magic to be strengthened,” Edith explained. “Her *mind* must be strengthened as well. She has to be able to endure a great amount of psyche magic. Learn to withstand her mind being poked and prodded at. Reformatory is the fastest and most efficient way to do that.”

Bile and anger rose in August's throat. Part of him knew this was inevitable; he'd known from the beginning what Wren's fate would be. She would have to transform into the catalyst. She'd have to endure whatever mental torture Edith had planned for her in order for the switch to go off in her mind.

"There are other ways," August said, but even as he spoke the words, he knew it was pointless. "*Subtler* ways. Let me handle it. I can strengthen her mind without having to send her to reformatory."

"Maybe . . ." Edith nodded, though her lips curved into a menacing smirk. "But why risk a hitch in the plan when reformatory is foolproof?" His sister crossed her arms, pouting her lips. "Oh, don't look at me like that, little brother."

"Like what?" August seethed.

"Like I'm a *monster*." Her smirk grew wider, as if she relished the mere thought. "I know you didn't have the best time in reformatory. Lord knows how long it took you to snap out of it afterward—"

Memories threatened to overtake August once again: *A dark, cold room . . . His father's voice echoing in a never-ending loop . . . August clawing at the door, fingers bleeding from the sheer effort . . . His voice hoarse from screaming, begging to be let out, swearing over and over that he would behave—*

August pulled himself out of the past, wincing. "*Enough*." He wasn't sure if he was speaking to Edith or himself. "What . . . what do you need from me?"

"Tomorrow you will find the third jewel for your assignment." Edith's voice was cold and unfeeling. "The following day, the two of you must report your findings to Housemaster Russo for full credit. It's your job to ensure that Wren goes. I've enlisted two potential Demien Order recruits within Blackwood to ambush her after class and get her in trouble with a group of Ascended."

"So I just . . . *what*?" August scoffed. "Walk her to class?"

"Precisely," Edith replied. "Make sure she goes."

"How exactly are these recruits going to get her sent to reformatory?" August asked, rubbing his temples. "Surely I should have more details—" But Edith cut him off, swift and curt.

"Just do it, Augustine."

The finality in her voice sucked all the air from August's lungs. There was no talking his way out of this. No reasoning with Edith. She was lost to the shadows. Her humanity ripped from the core of her soul. He could grovel and beg and plead his case, but nothing would change.

There was only one thing left for him to do.

"Fine." August nodded. "Consider it done."

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WREN

“**Y**ou okay?”

Wren blinked, refocusing her attention on Maya. She had no idea how long she’d been disassociating, staring blankly at the wall, completely unaware that Maya had been talking to her.

“Yeah.” Wren cleared her throat. “Sorry. Just a bit distracted today.”

Distracted was the understatement of the century. Wren couldn’t stop turning over the previous night in her mind. The way she had begun to acknowledge the strange connection she shared with August, only to watch him massacre two students right in front of her eyes without a moment’s hesitation. The crunch of bones. The stench of blood. She couldn’t get it out of her head. So even though she knew Maya was doing her a favor by helping her with this spacial magic nonsense, Wren couldn’t find the willpower to concentrate on anything the girl was saying.

But she was trying. She really was. They’d spent the past two hours attempting to get Wren to connect with her spacial reserve and relocate outside Pettyworth. She’d managed to relocate a couple of feet across the room, but more than that felt *impossible*. Like she was tearing at her insides. Scraping the bottom of her soul, searching for something that didn’t exist—though Maya insisted it was there, waiting for her.

She just had to find it.

“That’s all right,” Maya said encouragingly. She was sitting on one of the chairs by the hearth in Pettyworth’s common room, knees tucked to her chest. “You know, spacial magic is notoriously difficult. It seems like the simplest of all the magical affinities, but it’s actually the most complex. I mean, it’s how we navigate the Ether in the first place. How we find lost souls. Without spacial magic . . . we’d have no purpose.”

Wren shivered at the thought. She hadn’t explored the Ether yet—given that she wasn’t allowed to enter until having been at Blackwood for at least

a month—but she hadn't stopped imagining what might be lurking in the enigmatic passageway. What it must feel like to usher a lost soul into the Other Side.

Wren let out a sigh. "Sounds like I have a lot of work to do, then."

"You'll get there," Maya said, chuckling. "Don't worry. You have plenty of time. You won't get your first reaping assignment until you've been here a full month. The more you practice relocating, the better. It's the easiest way to strengthen your spacial magic." Her eyes suddenly darted behind Wren, the smile on her lips falling away. Her brow pinched in a frown. Her face ghostly white.

"Looks like you have a visitor," she muttered.

Wren glanced over her shoulder. On the other side of the room, out of earshot, was August. He was leaning against the doorway, arms crossed, eyes fixed on Wren.

"Shit." Wren winced, turning back to Maya. "I completely forgot I was supposed to meet him half an hour ago . . ." When she noticed the concern building in Maya's gaze, Wren quickly added, "We're partners, remember? For Russo's class."

"Right." Maya nodded, swallowing. Her entire disposition seemed to shift now that August was in their vicinity. She stood up, smoothing the creases in her shirt. As Wren began to gather her things, picking up her trench coat from the couch, Maya's voice echoed behind her once more.

"Um . . . Wren." She cleared her throat, grimacing. "Sorry. Before you go . . . I just . . . I won't be able to sleep tonight if I don't say this."

Wren braced herself. She turned to face Maya again.

"Go ahead."

"Just . . ." Maya let out a sigh. "Just remember what I told you about him. August isn't to be trusted. I'd hate to see you get hurt."

At Maya's whispered warning, a sudden emotion rose inside Wren. One she couldn't quite understand. She knew that Maya meant well, that she thought she was doing Wren a favor, but Wren couldn't help but feel a strange sting of . . . bitterness. Of protectiveness.

"Actually . . ." Wren shifted on her feet. "If it weren't for August, I would have been sent to the infirmary yesterday."

Maya blinked, taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"We were ambushed," Wren explained. "Someone attacked us. August stopped them before they could hurt me."

Maya's face scrunched in confusion. "He . . . *protected* you?"

Wren shrugged. "I guess, if you want to put it that way."

Maya stepped closer. "Listen to me, Wren. Augustine Hughes has never done anything for anyone but himself. If he protected you . . . there's a reason he did. A reason I would bet on my soul favors him."

"Why are you so certain?" Wren asked.

"Don't you feel it?" Maya asked, head cocked. "When you look at him?"

"Feel what?"

Maya shuddered. "Darkness."

Wren thought back to the previous night. To the look in August's eyes as he stood before her, soaked in blood, carnage and fury burning in his gray eyes. She'd seen it then—that darkness. But she'd seen something else reflected in that same darkness. Something that she hadn't wanted to admit in the moment, too ashamed and confused to face it. But now, as she thought back on it, as she heard Maya's warnings, she couldn't help but confront it. Because she hadn't just seen the darkness in August—she'd recognized it.

She'd *understood* it.

Wren slipped her trench coat on. She gave an affirming squeeze on Maya's shoulder.

"I'll see you later, Maya."

The other girl gave a feeble smile in return. Somehow, she must have sensed that Wren wasn't entirely taking her warning to heart. "Sure." She nodded, retreating to her seat. "I'll see you later, Wren."

Before Maya could impart another warning, Wren walked away, crossing to the other side of the room. She approached August, who straightened his shoulders and pushed himself off the doorframe.

"Hello," Wren said with a tight-lipped smile.

August nodded in greeting.

"What was that about?" he asked, gesturing toward Maya with a tilt of his chin. She was still curled up on the couch, knees tucked to her chest, watching them from afar.

"Well," Wren sighed. "Our partnership seems to be a bit of a concern to my new friend."

August nodded, and Wren could see the tension in his shoulders as his eyes darted between her and Maya. "She hates me."

“She’s terrified of you,” Wren corrected him, chuckling.

August dragged his gaze back to Wren. He looked her up and down, stepping closer.

“Are you?”

Heat radiated in the space between them as August’s question echoed in the air.

“Am I what?” Wren asked, acutely aware of how close they suddenly were to one another.

“Terrified . . .” August whispered, low and hoarse, “. . . of me?”

Wren considered his question for a moment. She thought back on the August she had seen the previous night. Covered with blood. The feral gleam in his eyes. The *darkness*. But when she looked back up at him, it wasn’t fear she felt radiating in her chest.

It was something else. Something far more concerning.

“If I was terrified of you . . .” Wren replied slowly, “. . . I wouldn’t be here.”

August assessed her for a moment longer before sucking in a breath and saying “Very well.” He opened the door with a snap of his fingers. “Sounds like we have a third jewel to find, then.”

Wren waved him forward.

“Lead on.”

August smirked, stepping out of Pettyworth and into the afternoon light. “Was already planning on it.”

*

The room was called the Opal Chamber. Wren had heard whispers of it in her classes—the hall at Blackwood that held the infamous portal that allowed students to travel into the Ether, the liminal landscape where lost souls roamed. Given the fact that she’d yet to master her spacial magic, Wren had assumed it would be weeks before she’d set foot in the mystical chamber.

It appeared her assumptions were incorrect.

The third item led them straight into the heart of the Opal Chamber. Wren had to admit, there was a reverent quality in the air the moment they stepped into the grand hall. Prismatic rays of color danced over the marble

floors, cascading in through the stained-glass windows. Ominous gargoyles and grotesques loomed over them like specters in the night, watching Wren and August as they silently walked down the chamber and approached the portal. Which, much to Wren's surprise, was just a simple arched door.

"We're not going in there to find the jewel, are we?" Wren asked warily.

August shook his head. "Russo wouldn't send us into the Ether. It's got to be somewhere else . . . somewhere hidden in this room."

Just as the words left his lips, Wren spotted something on the floor. Two glass vials in front of the portal.

"Maybe not so hidden," she murmured, bending down to pick up the vials. She raised them in the air, and August stepped closer, inspecting them with narrowed eyes. The glass vials were clear, a vibrant green liquid sloshing inside. An elegant *R* was etched into the glass, and there was a note tied to each one. Three words written in black ink.

MIND INTEGRATION ELIXIR.

The moment August read the note, he let out a deep groan, rubbing his face with his hands. "*Shit.*" He ground his teeth, cursing under his breath. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"What?" Wren looked between August and the note. "What does that mean?"

"It means the final jewel incorporates psyche magic," August explained through a sigh. *Psyche magic*? Wren hardly knew anything about it. Housemaster Wesley hadn't actually let her do anything in class yet—*A mind is a volatile thing*, he had said. *Best we wait till your magic is a bit stronger.*

"I thought this was a corporeal class," Wren replied.

"Magic isn't singular," August shot back, pinching the bridge of his nose. Frustration punctuated every word. "It's an interconnected hive. Oftentimes they overlap. One can't exist without the other. Corporeal magic will still be used, but . . . the challenge begins with mind integration."

"English," Wren snapped. "Please."

August sighed again. "We have to enter each other's minds."

Wren stared at him, unblinking. "Excuse me?" she said slowly.

“Or, rather”—August rubbed at his temples—“*combine* minds, technically. Become a single consciousness.”

Wren staggered backward and leaned against the portal. “I think I’m having a stroke.”

“Our minds will become one, and we’ll enter a psyche landscape of our combined consciousnesses,” August went on, ignoring Wren’s dramatics. He seemed to be spiraling himself, pacing back and forth, fidgeting restlessly with the silver ring on his index finger. “By the sound of it, we’ll be presented with our challenge there. Knowing Russo, we’ll probably have to find a way to work together. Escape some sort of mind puzzle . . .”

“No way,” Wren interjected, shaking her head. “You’re not getting anywhere near my mind.”

“I’m not exactly jumping at the prospect either, darling.” August scoffed, crossing his arms. “I don’t want you in my mind just as much as you don’t want me in yours.”

“Yeah . . . probably ’cause it’s full of nefarious secrets.”

August snorted. “You have no idea.”

Wren groaned. “This can’t be happening.”

“It’s the final jewel, Loughty.” Resignation flooded August’s voice. He snatched the vials from her hand, giving them a firm shake. “We do this, we get that jewel, and we’re done. Assignment over.”

Wren knew August was right. The faster they drank the elixirs, the closer they’d be to completing the assignment. And the closer they were to completing the assignment, the closer they’d be to ending their partnership.

Which is a good thing, Wren reminded herself, doing her best to ignore the hollow pit in her stomach that had suddenly formed at the thought of not being near August anymore.

“That does sound nice,” she muttered half-heartedly.

“Come on, Loughty,” August drawled. He dangled one of the vials in front of Wren’s face, grinning. “I know you’ve been dying to get rid of me.”

Wren hesitated, gnawing the inside of her cheek, before snatching the elixir out of August’s hand. She stared at it, assessing the strange green liquid. Bubbles formed at the top, a faint shimmer traveling up and down the bottle.

Wren groaned. “Screw it.”

She uncorked the elixir and August followed suit.

“Cheers,” August muttered with a wary smirk.

Wren sighed.

“Cheers.”

They clinked vials, swigging the contents in unison before either of them could second-guess what they were doing.

The liquid was bitter and tart. A strange cooling effect traveled down Wren’s throat and into the pit of her stomach, numbing her body. She stared up at August, half expecting to feel *something* tug at her mind, for a connection to form between them. But there was nothing. She blinked, confused.

“Is something supposed to happen?” Wren asked.

August closed his eyes. “Just wait for it.”

“For what?” Wren asked.

August’s lips curved into a smirk, and—

AUGUST

Their minds collided and became one.

August had endured his fair share of mind integration over the centuries—Housemaster Wesley was a big fan of mentally tormenting his students during his exams—but nothing came close to the moment he felt his mind merge with Wren’s. It was all-consuming. A surge of warmth and electricity coursing through his limbs, sending him plummeting into the core of her mind, their two souls intertwining.

He woke up with a gasp.

Darkness surrounded him. Pure, unfiltered darkness.

Entering a psyche mind landscape was always a bit of a disorienting experience. Just as it did when entering the Ether, a dreamlike haze draped over August’s vision and a languid quality swept over his movements. It was his soul adjusting. His mind recalibrating to make room for Wren’s mind.

Which reminded him . . .

“Loughty?” he called, his voice echoing, as if he were speaking into a canyon.

At first, nobody answered. It was just him and that never-ending darkness. But then he saw something in the distance. A flicker of light. Almost like the faint twinkle of a dying star.

He moved toward it. Pushing through the darkness. Pushing deeper into the psyche landscape. Clawing his way forward, until . . .

The darkness erupted. August blinked, and he was standing at the edge of a dock. A dark river stretched out in front of him. Water lapped gently at the foot of the creaking dock. Behind him, tall pine and red maple trees dotted a short hill, the slightest glimmer of houses visible behind the greenery. Woodsmoke and earth filled August’s lungs, the warm scent of dirt and brine mingling in the air.

“Loughy?” he called again, looking around.

He heard her voice not a second later.

“Holy shit.”

August swiveled on his heels to find Wren standing behind him, arms crossed over her chest, eyes scanning the world around her. He couldn’t quite pinpoint what she was feeling. Her expression was a strange mixture of terror and a deep, aching sadness.

“How . . .” Her voice wavered, and it dawned on August that she was struggling to hold back tears. “. . . how are we here?”

“I told you,” August began gently. “We entered a psyche landscape by merging our minds—”

“No,” Wren interjected, shaking her head. She knelt on the dock, rubbing her hands against the splintered wood. “I mean . . . how are we *here*?” She let out a shuddering breath. “It feels so real.”

A rush of understanding fell over August. “You know this place.” It wasn’t a question.

Wren nodded. “It’s . . . my home.” She glanced over her shoulder, pointing toward the thick trees. “My house is just up that hill.”

A shiver ran down August’s spine. He could only imagine how she must be feeling. He wouldn’t have known how to react if he had awoken back at *his* old home. At the large estate where he grew up.

He hoped he would never see that carcass of a house again.

“It’s not real,” August reminded her. “I know it might be tempting to indulge in the landscape, but you *have* to remind yourself it’s not real. This is just our combined consciousness projected for us to see.”

“Well, then what about you?” Wren asked, rising to her feet.

August flinched. “What *about* me?”

“You said it’s a combination of our minds, but we’re in Maine. We’re at *my* home.” Wren glanced around, searching. “What about yours?”

Panic rose in August’s throat, but he swallowed it down, forcing himself to adopt a stoic mask. “It’s not uncommon for one mind to dominate another. Your memories of your old life are fresh. You’re still clinging to your humanity, to your memories, far more than I am.” It was a lie. A raw, blistering lie. August’s memories were still completely unaffected by the Forgetting, which meant the torment of his past was still as fresh as the moment he had first landed at Blackwood. The pain and loss and grief still

had their prickly tendrils wrapped tightly around his soul. But Wren didn't need to know that.

And nobody ever would.

"I guess that makes sense . . ." Wren whispered, letting out a sigh. "Well—what now? How do we unlock the jewel?"

Just as the question left Wren's lips, glowing sparks of light emerged from beneath their feet, forming a winding path. It was leading them away from the docks, into the trees, and up the hill.

August gestured Wren forward. "Looks like we found our answer."

Wren froze, hesitating. "I . . . I can't go up there."

"What do you mean?" August asked.

"My . . . my house." She shook her head. "What if—" But August cut her off before she could continue spiraling.

"None of it is real, Loughty." August stepped closer. He drew her gaze away from the house, gently placing a thumb beneath her chin and angling her face toward him. She stared up at him, blinking, tears welling in her blue eyes. "It's just your mind. Your subconscious and memories forming a projection. Just keep repeating that. *It's just a projection.*"

"It's just a projection," Wren echoed, voice shaking.

August nodded. "Good."

With that final push of encouragement, Wren inhaled a steadying breath and turned on her heels. August followed closely as she made her way off the dock and into the trees, slowly trekking up the hill.

Dusk painted the world around them in hues of dusty purple and indigo blue. Everything was hazy, slightly blurred at the edges. It was vivid enough to feel real, but there were flaws in the facade. Small, almost indiscernible errors that showed the projection for what it really was.

A lie.

A tree that was slightly transparent. A house with no doors or windows. A crow with no beak.

But a part of August knew that Wren wasn't noticing these flaws. Too caught up in the shock of being back at home. Too fixated on what felt real. Maybe a part of her even wanted to believe it *was* real.

The glowing lights led them up a driveway and onto a narrow street. Tall streetlights glowed orange, illuminating their path as the world around them grew darker. Wren had fallen unnaturally silent, and August could only imagine the panic coursing through her. The tension in the air only

seemed to double the farther they walked, and it soon became clear where exactly the path was leading them.

The house was small and square, with olive-green shutters and flower boxes adorning each rectangular window. There was a car parked out front—or what August *assumed* was a car. Considering he'd died over two centuries ago, he'd never actually seen one, but this seemed to match up with the information on modern transportation that he'd heard from the other students. Upon seeing the car, Wren came to a staggering halt, her eyes wide and face pallid.

"It wants us to go in there," she whispered, fear and panic twisting her words.

August stopped beside her. "Seems like it."

Wren shook her head. She turned to look at him, panicked, eyes roving over his face.

"August." The way she spoke his name sent a blossoming ache of longing through his body, and he had to step away, to physically distance himself, before he did anything he might regret later. "Please. I can't. I really, *really* can't." Finally, the restraint inside Wren seemed to break free, and the tears she'd been forcing back fell freely down her cheeks. "Please don't make me go in there."

"Loughty." August winced. His hands itched to reach out and touch her. To wipe the tears from her eyes and pull her toward him. He settled for placing his hands upon her shoulders, hoping it was enough to steady her. "Look at me. You can do this."

"What if it was your house?" she asked, hurt in her eyes. "What if it was *your* past? *Your* memories? *Your* mistakes?"

He would have crumbled. He would have fallen apart completely. But August didn't say that out loud, simply keeping his gaze anchored on Wren, hunching slightly to meet her eyes.

"It's just a projection," he reminded her, his voice barely a whisper.

Wren closed her eyes and shuddered. "August—"

"Say it," he interjected. "Come on."

Wren's eyes fluttered open. She let out a steady exhale. "It's just a projection," she muttered weakly.

"Good." August nodded. "Again."

"It's just a projection," Wren echoed, this time with a bit more conviction. Her breathing seemed to grow steadier. The tears that had been

falling only seconds earlier, subsiding. “It’s just a projection.”

“That’s it,” August whispered encouragingly, dropping his hands away, placing a palm on the gentle slope of her back as he guided her forward.

“Just keep repeating it. You can do this.”

As Wren made her way to the entrance of the house, approaching the forest-green door, she kept repeating those words softly beneath her breath, over and over like a mantra. *“It’s just a projection. It’s just a projection. It’s just a projection.”*

She pushed the door open and entered the house. August followed.

They were greeted by a foyer with dozens of photographs adorning an old wooden entry table. But the faces in the photos were blurred. Crossed out. Burnt.

“It’s just a projection.”

They entered a small kitchen. In the corner was a circular table with four chairs. Cups filled with coffee and plates littered with half-eaten food sat there, unattended, an interrupted breakfast. But the food was old and moldy. The coffee, cold. The clock hanging on the wall showed no time.

“It’s just a projection.”

Wren cut through the dining room. A large rectangular table with a lace runner sat at the center of the room. There were dozens of half-burned candles, a few of which had begun to melt onto the table, tiny embers coating the runner.

“It’s just a projection.”

Wren pressed on, making her way deeper into the house, pausing at the bottom of a staircase, hand clutching the railing. To the left was a wall with more photographs, but just as before, the people in them had no faces. A blur of color and shapes where a face should be. A vacant nothingness where eyes should be looking back at them.

“It’s just a projection.”

Wren made her way up the stairs, stopping in front of the first room at the top. The door was ajar, and warm light from the other side spilled onto the floor. Her hand landed on the doorknob, fingers trembling.

“It’s just . . . it’s just . . .”

August placed his hand on Wren’s shoulder.

“Open the door, Loughy.”

For the first time since they’d entered the house, Wren glanced over her shoulder to look at August. Her eyes were red rimmed. Lip trembling as she

fought back a swell of emotion. “I can’t.”

“You’ve made it this far.” August gave her shoulder an affirming squeeze. “You might as well see it through.”

Wren nodded, defeat written in her eyes. And then she turned back to the room, inhaled a sharp breath, and opened the door. There was a burst of light. Colors and shapes melting together, until—

August blinked. As his vision cleared, it became apparent that they were no longer in Wren’s old home. No longer in her memory.

Because this room . . . he recognized.

Amber light cascaded from iron sconces lining the walls. Towering shelves filled with dusty tomes and leather-bound journals. Tall windows lined the far wall, where a wooden desk sat, piles of pages and inkpots littering the surface. And surrounding the desk, coating every inch of the floor, was blood.

Dark. Splotchy and reddish brown. Thick streams of oxidized blood.

Wren blinked in confusion. She turned to face August, mouth open, as if she were about to speak, but no words came out when she spotted the look on his face. Because this room, this blood-drenched room, was the room that August had taken his last breath in. The room where his life had been taken from him.

The room where he’d watched his father kill his sister.

“August?” Wren’s voice wavered, soft and tender. “Are you okay?”

But what could he say? What good would come of her knowing what had happened in this room? The darkness and violence and torment buried inside him. If he opened up to her about *this*, what was to stop him from exposing more? From unveiling all the secrets and lies he was keeping from her?

“We should look around,” August bit out, swallowing. “Maybe the jewel is in here.”

Wren stepped closer.

“August—” But he interjected sharply before she could get in another word.

“Don’t,” August choked out. “Just . . . *please*. Don’t.”

For a tense beat, Wren simply looked at him, clearly torn between her desire to help him and her understanding that this was a subject August didn’t want to broach. Luckily, she seemed to come to the decision that listening to August was for the best, and she gave a gentle nod of her head.

“Okay,” Wren whispered softly. “Okay.”

They searched the room in silence. August tried to keep his eyes focused on anything but the blood on the floor. Nausea twisted his insides. A burning pit of rage and agony building in his stomach. But he swallowed it down. Pushed it deeper. *It’s just a projection. It’s just a projection. It’s just a—*

“Uh . . .” Wren’s voice wavered behind him. “August?”

August dragged himself away from his thoughts. He turned to face Wren, preparing to step toward her, but what he saw made his legs freeze beneath him.

The curtains adorning the windows closest to the desk had caught fire. Flames burning, burning, *burning*. For a moment, paralysis gripped August’s body in an iron hold. An immobilizing current.

He could practically feel the flames eating away at his skin. The searing pain. And then the nothingness—the numbness. The darkness.

No, August pleaded silently. *Not again*.

Terror clutched his chest. Paralyzed by the fear of the memory, August seemingly lost all sense of reality. His eyes blurred, brown dots spreading over his vision. *Make it stop*, he pleaded. But nobody was listening. Why would they? Nobody ever had. August knew there was no way to stop the torment he was destined for. That there was no God that could save him from the darkness.

“August.”

A soft voice catapulted him back to the present. Wren was standing in front of him, cupping his face, eyes brimming with concern. August wanted her to let go, to peel her hands away, to distance herself. Couldn’t she see that he was an infection? A vicious virus? Why would she want to get close to that?

Why would she want to get close to *him*?

“It’s just a projection,” Wren whispered, nodding. “Say it, August.”

August inhaled a sharp breath. His hands were trembling. When had his hands begun to tremble?

“It’s just a projection,” he echoed, hardly recognizing his own voice. It was deep and hoarse, wavering under his loss of control. But just as the words left his lips, something in the fire changed.

The flames eating away at the curtains began to move. Shifting away from the curtains, rising higher and higher, slinking toward them. There was

something forming within the flames. Limbs stretching out. A torso built in the growing embers. Until it wasn't just a mismatch of limbs but a *body*. A figure made entirely of flames.

"Oh my God . . ." Wren whispered. "What . . . what is that?"

The fire figure remained rooted to the ground. It wasn't moving, just standing there, staring at them. Despite not having any distinguishable features, the figure felt familiar somehow. A prickle of recognition in August's chest made the hairs on the back of his neck rise in warning.

The figure cocked its head. Was it mocking them?

"Do we fight it?" Wren asked, readying her stance.

August stood there, rooted to the ground. He knew he should call on his magic, that he should throw the first spell before the figure could attack, but he found himself unable to move. Paralysis held him in place. Panic and terror snuffed his voice from his throat. And then the fire figure lifted its hand, and a wave of flames rose behind him, completely engulfing the curtains, snaking its way higher and higher up the walls.

Next to August, Wren let out a shuddering breath. "August. *Look.*"

She was staring over his shoulder, and August turned. The door behind them, the one they had walked through to enter the room, had vanished. There was no exit. No escape.

They were trapped.

And *still* August couldn't snap out of his stupor. He couldn't conjure up even the beginning of a plan. He was frozen . . . pathetically, uselessly frozen. Next to him, Wren was screaming his name. Calling out to him. The fire roared, slowly engulfing the room, swallowing every inch of the walls around them.

Move! a voice in August's head screamed. *Do something!*

But it wasn't enough. August couldn't tear his gaze away from the fire figure, from the feeling rising in his chest. *I know you*, the voice echoed in his head. *I know who you are*. But he couldn't admit it out loud. He couldn't bring himself to say his name.

The figure stepped forward, the flames moving with it. But just as it drew closer, there was a sharp *crack* as Wren extended her arm, sending a blast of corporeal magic at the figure. The magic crashed against its shoulder, and the figure wavered, a perfect circle carved into the flames.

"August!" Wren called, desperate. "Snap out of it and *do something!*"

Maybe it was the terror in her voice. Or maybe it was simply the sound of Wren Loughy speaking his name. But whatever it was, August finally snapped out of his dazed state, blinking as he regained awareness.

The fire figure was approaching. And it was focused on Wren.

No.

August hurled a corporeal spell at the figure without a moment of hesitation, hitting it squarely in the chest. The instant the spark of magic made contact, the fire figure disintegrated, exploding into tiny embers that slowly fell to the ground. But though the figure was destroyed, the rest of the fire continued to roar around them. It drew closer, devouring everything in its path, just like it had all those years ago.

“August.” Wren gripped him by the wrist. “Why isn’t it stopping? What did we do wrong?”

August had no clue. He wasn’t sure why the fire hadn’t stopped or why the third jewel hadn’t been revealed to them. They’d followed the glowing light. They’d faced their haunted pasts. They’d destroyed the fire figure. Shouldn’t they be freed from the mind integration? Shouldn’t it be over?

As the questions ricocheted in August’s mind, he suddenly noticed something on the desk at the far end of the room: *A jewel*. A glistening emerald, to be exact. He wasn’t sure if it had been there before or if it had appeared after he’d destroyed the figure, but there was no doubt in August’s mind that it was the third jewel, concealed behind a towering wall of flames.

A sudden wave of fear descended upon August. Because at that same moment, he realized what he had to do.

There would be no escaping. No cowering from the flames.

No more running.

August stepped forward . . . and walked straight into the fire.

WREN

Wren watched, helpless, as the flames devoured August. She'd had no time to process what he was doing. One second he'd been standing there, staring, and the next he'd stepped forward, entering the towering flames. But the horror Wren had felt upon seeing August willingly place himself inside the fire didn't last.

Because August wasn't burning. He wasn't screaming in agony. His skin wasn't melting, blistering and raw. He seemed . . . fine. Around him, flames roared, lapping at his skin, but he didn't burn. He walked closer, step by step, until he was standing in front of the crystal. He stared at it, hands shaking, tears welling in his eyes.

Wren felt her legs move beneath her. She didn't even think—it was as if her body knew what she had to do before her mind processed it. Second nature. As simple and innate as breathing.

Wren entered the flames. Just like August, she remained unharmed by the roaring fire around her. She approached August, gently placing her hand upon his shoulder. He looked back at her, the faintest hint of a smile on his lips.

“Let's get out of here,” Wren whispered. “Okay?”

August nodded. “Okay.”

Together, they reached toward the third and final jewel, placing their hands upon it in unison. Just as they made contact with the jewel, fingers intertwining, Wren felt herself get propelled out of the mind integration. The world blurred as she was thrust away from the psyche landscape and back into reality.

Wren gasped, blinking, as she reemerged in the Opal Chamber.

August was standing in front of her, both of their hands still gripping the glistening emerald.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. They simply stood there, staring at one another, slightly out of breath. Then, slowly, a tentative grin crept onto August's lips.

"I don't know about you," he muttered, rubbing a curl away from his face. He tossed the emerald into the air before slipping the glistening crystal into his pocket. "But I could use a drink."

Wren released a low rumble of laughter, the tension finally dissipating from her body.

"I think that might be the first thing we've ever agreed on."

*

Wren never thought she'd set foot into the Demon of Blackwood's room. But when she did, there was nothing spooky about it—just like August, it turned out to be far more normal than she had imagined it would be. A large wooden desk littered with journals and half-burned candles. A single window adorned with gauzy white curtains. A neatly made bed that looked like it hadn't been used in a very long time.

"So . . . this is where the notorious Augustine Hughes lives."

August chuckled, closing the door behind them with a flick of his wrist. "Does it meet your expectations?"

Wren shrugged, sauntering deeper into the room, making her way to the desk. She let her finger lazily trace the wooden surface, pretending to rifle through his journals. "Dunno. I expected something a bit more . . . I don't know . . ."

"Scary?" August offered with a smirk. Before Wren could answer, he disappeared into his closet for a brief moment. Wren could hear the clinking of glasses and a soft *pop* as August opened a bottle. A few seconds later, August reemerged, two glasses in one hand, while the other held a large glass decanter filled with a dark amber liquid.

"I think we've established I don't find you scary," Wren reminded him. They settled on the floor, sitting cross-legged across from one another.

August poured them each a glass of whatever he had grabbed from his closet, setting the decanter down between them. "Cheers to that." He raised his glass in the air and Wren did the same, gently *clinking* their glasses together.

For a while, they drank in comfortable silence. Occasionally, August's eyes would flutter up to meet Wren's, their gazes snagging. It felt like a game. Who would look away first? Oftentimes it was Wren. But sometimes, she'd let her eyes linger on his, unafraid, and the two of them would stare at one another, eyes anchored on each other's faces. It felt . . . good. Irritatingly good.

Eventually, once they'd finished their first two glasses, August sprawled on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. Wren copied his position, though she curled her body to the side so that she could look at him.

"What are you thinking about?" August said a beat later, the deep sound of his voice breaking the silent spell that had fallen over them.

Wren mulled the question over. She was thinking of a lot of things. But if she was honest with herself, there was one thing that was stuck in her mind like a stubborn thorn. She hadn't been able to let go of the thought since the third jewel challenge. Since she'd had to walk through her old home and face the past.

"I miss my family," Wren admitted softly. "A lot."

August exhaled a long breath. "I know," he said finally, his voice a whisper. "Me too."

A surge of warmth fluttered in Wren's chest. She had never expected August to open up to her, and she doubted he ever truly would, but hearing him admit that he missed his family, that he was just as human as she was, sent a wave of tenderness through her chest, and she was overcome with the sudden desire to wrap her arms around him.

"Does it ever get better?" Wren asked gently.

August turned his head to look at her. "You want the truth?" he asked.

Wren chuckled. "Always."

August nodded. His face grew solemn, though there was a softness in his silver eyes.

"It never goes away," he admitted in a whisper. "Not really. It's like an injury that doesn't quite heal the way it's supposed to. Sure, it's patched up, but every so often, there's a lingering pain." He placed his hand upon his chest, balling the fabric there. "A reminder of what was once there. It's the same with grief. Every once in a while, you're unwillingly reminded of it. A deep, resounding ache. A scar that will never fully go away."

August paused, gently pulling his hand away from his chest, resting it in the space between them. "But why would we want it to? That pain is a

reminder of the love you once shared. What a gift . . . to love somebody so much that their absence haunts you eternally. To love so deeply that that same love follows you. Even into death.”

Something warm slid down Wren’s cheeks, and it wasn’t until August reached out farther, gently brushing the slope of her face, that Wren realized she’d begun to cry. He wiped her tears without fuss, sinking back to the floor once he was done. Wren reached her own hand out, placing it mere inches away from his. Their fingers brushed. Their knuckles grazing.

“You know, August . . .” Wren’s voice was barely audible, a husky whisper. “I knew from the moment I saw you that you aren’t as bad as they make you out to be.”

“You’re right,” August replied. “I’m not as bad as they make me out to be . . .” He smirked, but his eyes remained soft and tender. “ . . . I’m worse.”

Wren rolled her eyes. She wouldn’t relent that easily.

“You’re a kind person,” she shot back.

August physically recoiled at the compliment, grimacing. “I think it’s time to get you to bed, Loughty. The enchanted whiskey has clearly gone to your head.”

He was right. She felt like she was melting into the floor. Her limbs buzzed. Her head swam. A bone-deep exhaustion had suddenly settled upon her, and it was taking every ounce of strength to remain awake, to not succumb to the slumber threatening to pull her under.

Wren blinked slowly. “Some might even say you’re *good*.”

August sat up on his elbows, chuckling. “Okay. That’s enough, Loughty. Let’s get you to your room—” But Wren interjected, as if she were suddenly possessed, unable to stop the three words from tumbling out of her mouth.

“Let me stay.”

August blinked. He stared down at her, mouth agape. He clamped his jaw shut and managed to choke out a single word in response. “What?”

With the whiskey coursing through her system, Wren felt inexplicably brave. A part of her knew she’d feel mortified the next morning for practically groveling to sleep in August’s room, but right now, she didn’t care. Right now . . . she just wanted to be near him.

“I don’t want to sleep alone,” she admitted. She placed her hand upon the floor. “I want to stay here with you.”

August hesitated. A battle raged inside him, his teeth worrying at his bottom lip, before he ostensibly conceded, sinking back onto the floor beside Wren. He matched her position, curling his body in toward her. He extended his arm once again, placing his hand not quite upon hers, but close enough that their fingers were touching.

“Then stay,” he said simply.

Those words were enough for Wren to finally allow herself to accept the exhaustion of the enchanted whiskey, her eyes fluttering closed. And as Wren drifted to sleep, lying beside August, their hands touching, she felt, perhaps for the first time since arriving at Blackwood, completely and utterly and truly . . . *safe*.

AUGUST

Her hand is on mine.

The thought sliced through August's mind as he awoke a few hours later in the dimness of his room. Wren was still beside him on the floor, eyes shut, her chest rising and falling slowly as she took long, deep breaths. Her right hand was extended, placed upon his, as if she had been reaching for him in the night.

August watched their joined hands for an extended moment. He wanted to hold on to the image as long as he possibly could. He wanted to pretend, if just for a moment, that he was capable of feeling this way forever.

But August knew that was just a fairy tale. A dwindling hope. And when the reality of what he was meant to do in a few hours struck him like a bullet to the heart, he tore his hand from Wren's, pushing himself away from her.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, though he knew the words would never be enough. Not after *this*. Not after what he was about to do. *It's better this way*, August told himself. Better that she hated him now than hang on to this false sense of hope any longer.

Because Wren Loughy was destined to become the catalyst of destruction.

And Augustine Hughes was destined to stand back, helpless, and watch.

WREN

It was like clawing to the surface after sinking to the bottom of the ocean. Like blindly pushing through thick concrete. Every inch of her soul fighting, *begging*, to break through. But there was something holding her down. Something lulling her into a false sense of comfort. *You should stay here*, something seemed to whisper. *Sleep. Stay. Forever.* But Wren knew better than to listen to that voice. And eventually, after what felt like an eternity of fighting, she managed to rise to the surface. She managed to thrust herself back into her body and wake up.

It was nightfall. Silverish light pooled around her, trickling in from the window. Tendrils of fog brushed her legs, gently caressing her skin. Beside her was . . . nothing. No one. August was gone. Nowhere to be seen.

But she was certain she'd slept for hours. That morning should have broken by now. There was no way it was still dark. Confusion clouding her senses, Wren got to her feet, barreling out of August's room, down the staircase, into the Pettyworth common room, and back into the cool night air. She wasn't sure where she was going, but there was *something* inside her that felt off-kilter. An impending sense of doom. A certainty that something was terribly, horribly wrong.

Her body moved of its own accord, taking her farther south, toward Elysium Hall. She entered the grand hall, ignoring how ominous it felt in the dead of night. A part of her knew she could get in trouble, that if she was caught by an Ascended past curfew she'd surely be sent to reformatory, but she didn't care. There was something she needed to do. Someone she needed to speak with.

Wren made it to the sixth floor of Elysium Hall. She searched for the mirror entrance to Housemaster Russo's office, but found a door in its place instead. It didn't matter. Wren would have to ask about that later.

She knocked furiously. *Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. Th—*

The door swung open.

Housemaster Russo was on the other side, eyes wide, hair disheveled. It almost looked like . . . It almost appeared that she was—

“Did I wake you?” Wren asked, slightly embarrassed.

Russo ran a hand over her dark hair, smoothing the loose pieces. She wore a robe, and she tightened it around her body, glancing around the corridor, suspicion in her eyes.

“Are you mad, Ms. Loughty?” Russo asked in a seething whisper. “Are you aware of what time it is?” She pointed to the door with an exasperated wave of her hand. “The door means that office hours are closed. I am no longer seeing students.”

“I just . . .” Wren struggled to find the right words. “I’m not sure . . .”

“If this is about missing today’s class and your incomplete assignment, we’ll have to discuss it tomorrow,” Russo interjected with a sigh. “It’s deeply inappropriate to show up this late. I’m sure your other Housemasters will be expecting to speak with you as well, given the fact that you missed your entire day’s schedule. Headmaster Silas will most certainly want a word.”

Russo’s words scrambled in Wren’s mind. “Missed today’s . . .” She shook her head, attempting to piece together what the Housemaster was saying. “I’m sorry, Housemaster, I’m just very, *very* confused. I didn’t miss class. And the assignment isn’t due until tomorrow mor—” But Wren’s words died in her throat when the realization punched in her the stomach. A devastating blow that hollowed her chest.

“It already happened,” she whispered, understanding washing over her. “The whole day. I slept through it.”

Russo narrowed her eyes, inspecting Wren carefully.

“Yes, Ms. Loughty.” Her tone seemed to soften slightly, as if she had suddenly become aware that Wren was truly as confused as she appeared to be. “You missed class today, and Mr. Hughes presented the completed assigned by himself. I’m forced to give him full credit.”

“Full credit?” Wren echoed. “But . . . but I *helped*. I was there. I went to every single one.”

Russo shook her head. “Rules are rules. In order to get full credit for the Hunt, you must show up to class on the assignment due date and present your findings. Explain how you managed to uncover each jewel. Mr. Hughes did it all himself.”

August.

"I think something happened to me," Wren whispered, voice wobbling. "I . . . I was sleeping, but . . . I couldn't wake up. And August—he was with me. He was with me the entire time—" But Russo cut her off with a swift motion of her hand.

"I'm not here to speculate on who did what, Ms. Loughty." Despite the firmness in her tone, there was a deep sense of regret in her stare. "You are not the first student to be sabotaged by a classmate. This is Blackwood Academy. People will do whatever it takes to get the best grades and assure their nomination for the next Decennial." She let out a long sigh. "Let this be your first warning of what happens when you don't look out for yourself." Before Wren could utter another word, Housemaster Russo was gently closing the office door in her face, offering her one final apologetic tilt of her head.

Wren stood there, dumbfounded, turning over what Russo had just told her. Denial rushed through Wren, her mind unwilling to believe that someone would be capable of betraying her this way. But then she saw the pieces all come together. The way August had slowly gained her trust over the past few days. Their playful bickering, which had slowly morphed into a twisted sense of understanding. How he had helped her through the projection of her house. His false comfort. His feigned encouragement.

It was *his* decision to go to his room last night, wasn't it? He'd gone to his closet to open the bottle of whiskey. Had she seen him pour her glass? Had she noticed anything strange in the liquid?

Wren didn't stop to think. She simply started running.

Somehow, she knew where she would find him. She stormed out of Elysium Hall and back into the night, trekking through campus with her eyes fixed forward and her mind racing. If she'd had a heartbeat, it would have been pounding in her ears, loud enough to drown out the faint whisper of night.

Eventually, Wren reached her destination. Just as she had expected, the door to Bonestrod had been left unlocked. She pushed her way inside, beelining up the staircase and out onto the rooftop.

And there, standing at the edge of the roof, hands clasped behind his back and eyes trained on the forest looming around Blackwood, was August.

"How could you?" Wren's voice shook with hurt and anger.

August turned to face her, arms crossed. He seemed chillingly apathetic. As if their entire conversation the previous night had never happened. All the glimmers of light Wren had seen in August over the past few days, the *good* in him, had vanished. His eyes were cold and vacant. His expression . . . *amused*.

“You’ll have to narrow that down, Loughy.”

“You drugged me.” Wren made sure to emphasize each word. She wasn’t going to let him get away with this so easily. She wasn’t going to simply let him stand there and pretend that he didn’t give a damn about anything. About *her*. “You made me sleep in. You made me miss Russo’s class. You took credit for the assignment.”

August made a mocking pout with his lips, shrugging.

“Sounds like you’ve got it figured out, then.”

“So you don’t deny it?” Wren asked. She’d hoped he would. She’d hoped he’d have some sort of explanation. Some way to prove that he hadn’t meant to do this. That this hadn’t been his intent from the very start.

August’s response was simple. Not an inkling of remorse in his voice.

“I don’t.”

Wren shook her head. “But I thought . . .” She trailed off, the words she wanted to say swept away by an invisible current. What *had* she thought? That she could fix him? That he was somehow changing? That he wasn’t the monster everyone made him out to be? August must have read the unspoken words written upon her face, because he chuckled, a grim smile splitting his face.

“Oh, Loughy.” August sucked his teeth. “Did you really believe I was different? That I was . . . that I was *falling* for you? That you could *trust* me?”

Maybe she had. But what was wrong with that? What was wrong with believing that people could be good? That *he* could be good? Even now, Wren didn’t fully buy this apathetic front August was putting on. Not after everything she had seen over the past few days. Not after the night they had just shared.

“Why did you do it?” she asked, crossing the distance between them with a few quick strides. “There . . . there has to be a reason. Something you’re not telling me.” But maybe that was her trying to rationalize his behavior. Desperate to find some explanation as to why he would betray her this way.

“You’re right,” August said, nodding. “I *did* do it for a reason.” For a moment, hope blossomed in Wren’s chest, though it quickly vanished as August stepped forward, poison dripping from every word as he continued to speak. “You can’t trust anybody at this school. Even those who seem to be on your side. Even those you might begin to consider friends. At the end of the day, everybody is out to protect themselves. To come out on top.”

Wren was certain that if she’d been capable of feeling physical pain, she’d have felt the agony of her heart shattering. An aching wound in her chest. “So . . . you betrayed me to teach me a *lesson*?” she seethed, stubborn tears burning behind her eyes.

“Exactly,” August said matter-of-factly. When Wren didn’t respond, August let out a groan and continued. “It wasn’t personal, Loughty. I needed you to toughen up. To learn to put yourself first. To never trust anybody at this school again.” He shrugged, smirking. “Not to mention that this gets me one step closer to the Decennial nomination.”

Wren’s vision blurred as the tears behind her eyes doubled. “Well. Congratulations. It worked.”

For a fraction of a second, August’s apathetic mask fractured. A bitterness welled behind his eyes. The faintest hint of regret. “Don’t give me that look. It’s not the end of the world. You’ll catch up . . .” He trailed off, and Wren could hardly contain her rage as his lips curved into a smug grin. “Eventually.”

“Fuck you,” Wren snapped, wiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. She refused to give him the satisfaction of wearing her betrayal so visibly for him to see.

This is the last time, Wren vowed silently. *The last time I will ever waste a single tear on Augustine Hughes.*

“Ouch.” August mockingly rubbed his chest, as if her words had wounded him. “Come on, Loughty. You can’t hate me forever.”

“I can,” Wren shot back without hesitation. “And I *will*.”

She’d hate him for the rest of eternity. She’d hate him until the very end.

“Is that a promise?” August asked, his voice dipping lower. His eyes roved over her face, assessing her, searching. But what was he searching for? He’d already taken her pride. Her trust. What else did he want to take from her?

“I told you things,” Wren muttered, voice shaking. “I opened myself up to you. I let myself feel—” But Wren cut herself off, unwilling to go any further. There was no point in trying to get August to understand why she’d been so hurt by his actions. It was clear that he was beyond reasoning with. Instead, Wren inhaled a cleansing breath, pushing down the hurt and pain, and allowed the anger and fury to rise to the surface. She welcomed it. She let it wash over her, surging through her.

“I can promise you this, Augustine Hughes.” Wren narrowed her gaze, stepping even closer, their faces mere inches apart. “From this moment on, I vow to make the rest of your wretched eternity a living hell.”

August chuckled. “Is that so?”

Wren stepped closer. “Yes.”

“And how do you intend to do that?” August asked, sighing.

“For starters?” Wren gripped August tightly by his collar, pulling him toward her with a sharp tug. For a moment, August’s face contorted in confusion. It almost appeared as though she was bringing him in for a kiss, as though she intended to place her lips upon his.

But Wren had something else in mind.

Using all the strength she had, Wren extended her arms, pushing August with her full force. He stumbled. Lost his footing. Fumbled backward, until

August slipped from the edge of the rooftop.

AUGUST

Augustine Hughes was falling.

The world around him seemed to stutter, moving in slow motion. He looked up at Wren's face staring down at him, the proud smile on her lips, marred by the betrayal still burning behind her pale blue eyes.

Good, August thought. Hate me.

He'd expected that much when he'd decided that there was no way he would let Wren go to class. He refused to be the one to aid Edith in sending Wren to reformatory. He'd postpone that suffering as much as possible. Save her from as much torment as he could. Even if she hated him for it.

And as August plummeted to the ground, knowing full well that as soon as his body made contact with the hard earth beneath him, he'd more than likely break enough bones to land him in the infirmary for a week, he couldn't help but smile.

It was in that moment, plummeting to his demise, that August was struck by a realization.

He'd happily let Wren break his bones, tear him apart, *loathe* him, if it meant keeping her safe.

Augustine Hughes would protect Wren Loughy for the rest of their eternity.

Even if that meant protecting her from himself.

SILAS

The girl had knocked on his office door late into the night. Headmaster Silas had sensed her arrival, of course—he could feel all the souls that resided at Blackwood, but Wren Loughy’s soul was special. *She* was special.

He’d felt it the moment he’d chosen her.

And he’d been certain of it the moment he killed her.

He’d been so certain, so utterly transfixed by the power in her soul, that he’d even hesitated to take it. It had never happened to him before. Ripping souls from the plane of the living and into Blackwood had become as mundane—and *boring*—as breathing. The criteria were always the same.

1. A soul that had dipped into the Other Side momentarily, through a near-death experience.

2. A young soul, as younger souls had a far easier time connecting to their nexus of magic, given how greedily they tended to cling to their humanity.

3. And lastly, but most importantly, a soul who Silas found . . . *interesting*.

The last criterion was his favorite, because it allowed for his creativity to flourish. There were so many different types of souls. Souls with a feverish anger burning inside them. Souls with defiance coursing through them. Souls with a thirst for vengeance. Souls who were desperate for attention. Souls who were, whether they knew it or not, aching for purpose.

But Wren Loughy’s soul was so much more than that. When he’d found her, when he’d chosen her for Blackwood and caused the accident that took her life, Silas had felt what her soul *really* was.

It was . . . uncertainty. Possibility.

“Come in, Ms. Loughy.”

Wren walked into the room, face puffy and eyes red rimmed. She'd been crying, that much was clear. Her hands were clasped in front of her, but even so, Silas could see her fingers trembling.

"I know I messed up," Wren began, crossing the office. She made her way slowly to where Silas was sitting behind his desk. "I didn't open my letters. I missed class. But I *swear*, this time it wasn't my fault. It was . . . it was August—"

"Ms. Loughy," Silas interjected softly, raising a hand. "It's quite all right. I'm aware of what happened." He gestured to the chair across from him and it slid backward, making space for her. "Please. Take a seat."

Wren hesitated, staring down at the chair, teeth worrying at her bottom lip, before she conceded with a sigh and sat down. She shifted in her seat, pulling at the hem of her tartan skirt. Finally, after a few seconds, she peeled her gaze up to Silas, meeting his eyes. It was clear to him what had happened to her. He recognized the pain in her stare. It was a pain he was all too familiar with.

"You were betrayed," he said simply.

Wren swallowed. "Yes."

Silas nodded. "Good."

Wren's brow furrowed in a mixture of annoyance and confusion.

"Good?"

"Betrayal is a necessary lesson here at Blackwood," Silas explained, leaning toward her. "It will forge you into the person you must become in order to flourish here. It will help you find the power you will need to survive." Silas paused, eyes roving across Wren's face. "But I already see it in you . . . that *power*. You were born for greatness, Ms. Loughy, and it is through death that you will finally achieve that greatness."

Something in Silas's words must have stirred a prickle of recognition inside Wren, because her expression shifted. The betrayal glistening in her eyes melted a fraction, washed away by a sudden burning resolve.

"You feel it too, don't you?" Silas asked in a gentle whisper.

Wren's answer slipped out of her in the form of a question. "Why me?"

Silas hummed. "There's no point in asking *why*, Ms. Loughy. Your fate is your fate. It is now up to you to either turn away from that fate—to fight it—or to claim it." He shrugged, leaning back in his chair. "The choice is yours."

Wren considered his words. She paused, fidgeting with the end of her braid. “What about my punishment?”

“There will be no punishment,” Silas replied simply. When he saw the surprise flash across her face, he continued. “Think of it as a clean slate. Though, you would do well to remember that my generosity only stretches so far. If you build a list of infractions, I will be forced to mete out the consequences.”

Wren nodded fervently. “Of course.”

“Now go.” Silas gestured to the office door and it swung open. “Get some rest. Prepare for your classes tomorrow.”

Wren blinked, taken aback. “That’s it?”

Silas nodded. “That’s it.”

Wren stood, smoothing her skirt. There was clearly something else on her mind, something she wanted to ask him, but she must have decided it was not worth it, because she swiveled on her heels and walked toward the door. *No matter.* They had an eternity between them. An eternity of opportunities to speak together. She’d come to him when she was ready.

Silas called out to her one last time. “I expect great things from you, Wren Loughty.” As the words left his lips, Wren paused at the doorway, shoulders rigid. “I hope you’ll prove me right.”

Wren glanced over her shoulder. Gone was the sadness that had been plaguing her when she first entered the office. Gone were the heartache and pain and loss. Blazing behind her storm-blue eyes now was something far more magnificent. Something radiant. Something Silas recognized.

Ambition.

“Don’t worry, Headmaster.” Wren Loughty smiled, and Blackwood Academy hummed in satisfaction. “I intend to.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When my agents first let me know that Delacorte had approached them about doing a Souls of Blackwood Academy novella, I truly jumped for joy (like I think I *literally* jumped up in the air and screamed). It had definitely been sad to have to say goodbye to these characters after spending the past three years of my life in their heads, and this book allowed me to pop back into Blackwood Academy—one last time.

Forever thankful for my family first: My parents. My siblings. My grandpa. All the other relatives who have continued to endlessly support me since the first book—I love you all!

I also have to mention that by the time this book comes out, I will be a WIFE (still feels very strange and adult, but here we are). This book comes out three days after my wedding, so it feels only fitting to dedicate this book to my wonderful, funny, endlessly patient and annoyingly smart fiancé (and I guess, when this book comes out, HUSBAND?!?). Josh. This is a big year for us. A year of change and big steps and lots of adjustment. We're moving across the fricken country at the same time as planning a wedding (honestly, we're kind of nuts for that). But I'm so grateful that I get to experience this chaotic life with you by my side. I love you, mister!

To my guardian angels, Ariele Fredman and Gwen Beal, aka the best agents in the game. Feels so wild to think about where we started. And now look at us! Three books under our belts. And it's only the beginning. And thanks to Elsa Knoke and Graham Weist for their support and skills! Many thanks to my team over at Curtis Brown UK, specifically Steph Thwaites and Grace Robinson, for everything they do for my books. And, of course, thank you to Savanna Wicks for continuing to champion all my books everywhere else in the world!

To Lydia Gregovic, my tireless champion and the best editor a girl could ask for! As always, it is with your notes and expertise that all of these books

were able to soar, and I am so thankful that this is just the beginning for us! A massive thank-you to the rest of my incredible team at Random House Children's Books—how did I get so lucky? Thank you to Wendy Loggia, Krista Marino, Noreen Herits, Madison Furr, Constance Inglema, Kristin Guy, Gabriella Murdoch, Colleen Fellingham, Barbara Perris, Liz Dresner, Ray Shappell, Tracy Heydweiller, Judith Haut and Gillian Levinson.

Also . . . a moment for the cover art! A big thank you to Abel, aka @superstarfighter, for not one, not two, but THREE perfect covers. I am so grateful we got to work together for this series. You truly blow me away with every cover, and I'm so thankful for your talent.

So much love and thanks to my UK team over at Electric Monkey for championing this entire series across the pond. I really do feel like I've won the lotto with you all! Getting to visit last year and meet readers was such a blast. Thank you to Lindsey Heaven and Sarah Levison. Another big thanks to Ryan Hammond, Lucy Courtenay, Sophie Porteous, Olivia Carson, Sarah Sleath, Hannah Penny, Ingrid Gilmore and Leah Woods.

To my friends for always being my number one fans. You all make me feel so loved and supported, and I am so grateful for you all!

Extra shout-out to Veronica Bane—GIRL. I don't think I know how to write without you lmao. Thank you for endless Zoom writing sessions and coffee shop dates. Don't think you're getting rid of me just because I'm moving across the country. YOU'RE STUCK WITH ME FOREVER!

Always have to end these by thanking my dog, Mr. Darcy. I love my dog a concerning amount, and he keeps me company while I write and cry and disassociate staring vacantly at the wall, so really, he's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

And last but NEVER least—my readers. It is because of you that this novella was possible. It is because of you that ANY of this is possible. Thank you so much for your posts, shares, and endless support. However you ended up with this book in your hands, I am forever grateful that it found its way to you. Here's to many more together!

All my love, forever and ever and ever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I. V. MARIE was born to a Peruvian mother and Chilean father in Miami, where she acquired a penchant for afternoon cafecitos and an all-consuming obsession with books. Her writing ambitions began behind her grandparents' computer, where she spent her childhood crafting spooky and fantastical short stories. When she is not writing, you can find her rock

climbing or watching atmospheric YouTube videos with her dog, Mr. Darcy.
She is the author of *Immortal Consequences* and *Ruinous Ends*.

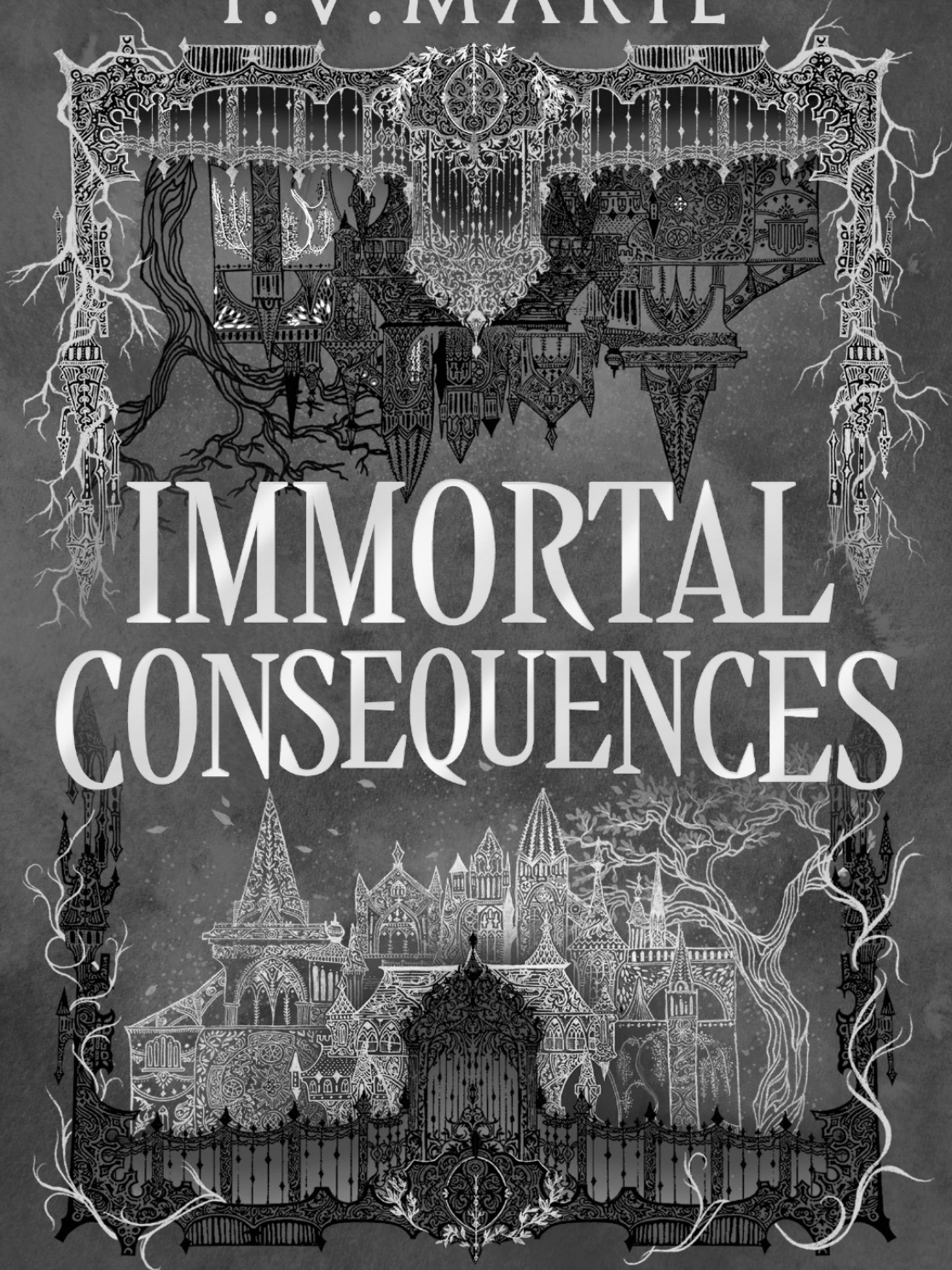
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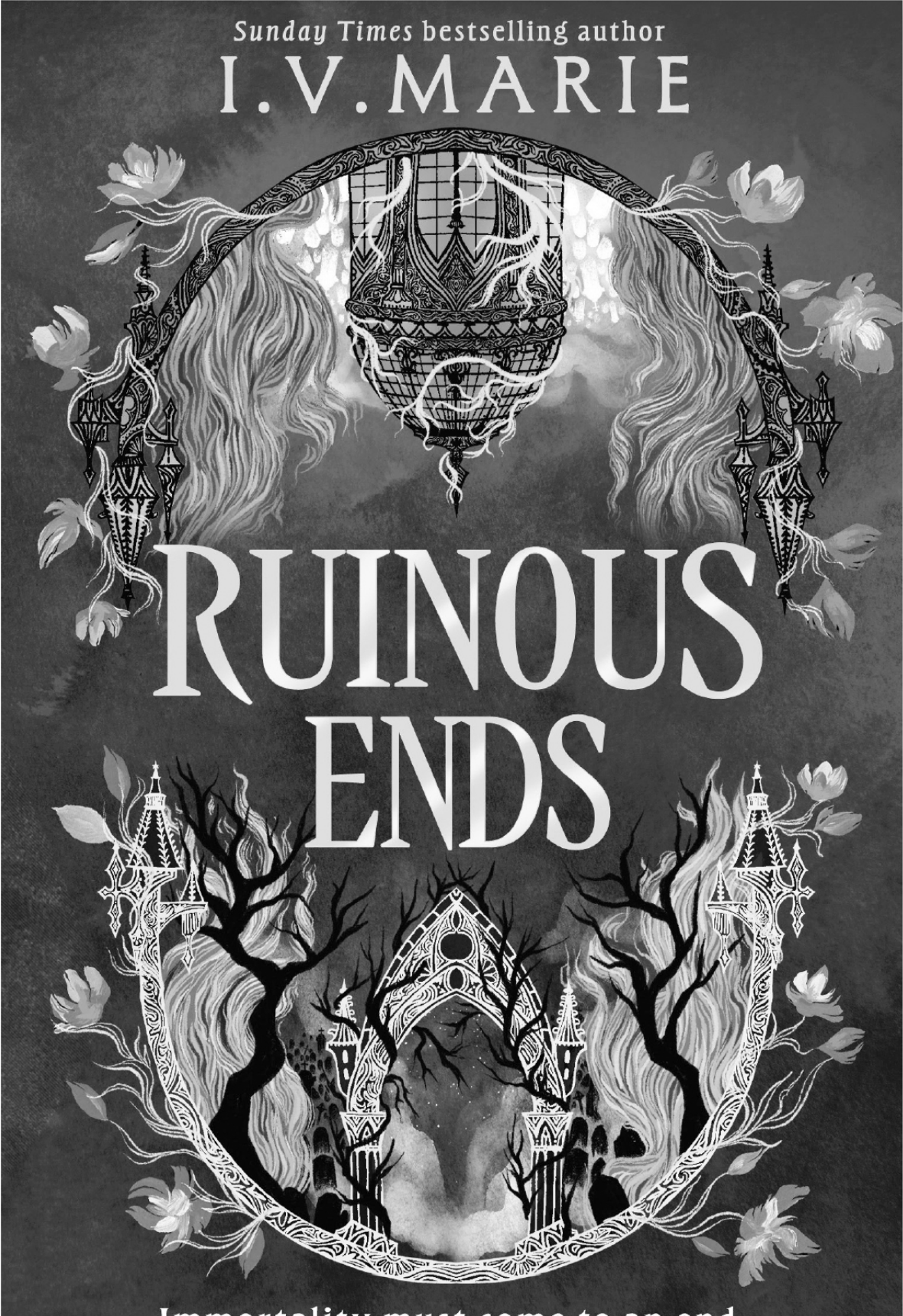
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