

Hear Me, See Me

by

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Fantasy is color, it is light, it is impossible things and miracles that are just out of reach. It is things that don't make sense, with something created from not-quite-nothing and found families that are capable of doing things that we have to create with special effects. That's the kind of fantasy that I love, but I'm not allowed to love it now because it lacks darkness and the darkness is what makes a high fantasy story. Nobody said that, but it's the kind of magic that I love. It's a bit like me, too, because I don't quite make sense and I'm full of impossible things. Things that are miracles, that you don't expect to ever happen in a person and yet they are. That's the kind of fantasy that I want to tell, because I am a fantasy in myself. Full of a wonder that never fades.

Largely lacking the judgment and dissection of people's minds, my senior project aims to explore themes of neurodiversity, perspective, and grief where all of the noise has been shaved away. This comes across in different ways for both parts, but my aim for both *Hear Me*, *See Me* and the other work, *Belrose*, is to show how other people see us versus how we see ourselves.



One of my earliest writing memories is from middle school, on a summer's day. I was holding a notebook in my arms, a pencil stuck through the spine. At that point in my life, I knew that not everyone carried a notebook around with them but thought nothing of it, as a career or otherwise. In the intervening years until high school, I thought of it as nothing but a cute little hobby. By the time I was a high school sophomore, I was beginning to hear the well-intentioned comments from most adults about considering ideas for what to do after high school. *College*. Just the mention of it made me want to bury my head in the sand. All that I had was one of many half-filled notebooks with story ideas, and the concept of turning those messy ideas into something concrete seemed more impossible than touching the moon. The solidification came in the first half of junior year, when I took a class called Creative

Expression. It was the first time I had been told there was a possibility for my future in the little stories that I didn't realize were unique to me, and it was just the chance that I needed. The culmination of my decision came in the winter of 2019, when I visited Purchase on my college tour. The discovery of Purchase and a real program in writing was a culture shock- someone would *want* to read the stuff that came out of my brain? I could reach them, and tell stories, and make something out of a mind that I was battling more often than not because I didn't yet understand it. Each of the characters featured in *Hear Me, See Me* first came to me with that core idea in mind- learning to be kinder to both yourself and those around you, with simple kindness that was perspective-shifting.

What I wanted to end up as a novella started as two separate works from Fiction I; The first part, originally titled *Embers*, was urban fantasy and focused on an unnamed phoenix character as her secret- not being a so-called "normal human"- was revealed. It touched on the theme of conformity, particularly how masking can lead to an erasure of identity. After the initial assignment, I left those pages untouched for over a year until I changed them completely. Trying to turn my scraps and stories seemed worlds away from the worlds of the authors that I had admired for so long, almost to where I wanted to drop the project altogether. When I reopened *Embers* with the idea of including it in my senior project, leaving it alone allowed me to apply real-life experience that wouldn't have been possible in sophomore year. That's commonly how I function with writing itself- word dump, leave it alone, and then come back to it. The process with *Belrose* was similar, although I left it alone for far longer and that further enabled its growth.

Hear Me, See Me takes place in a fantasy world inspired by other high fantasy novels, including *An Ember in the Ashes* and the series *Shadow and Bone*. After waking up in a wildfire relief shelter somewhere in the Northwestern U.S, the phoenix Elisa witnesses her transformation caught on a camera. This propels her back into her first life. Losing her

parents to the mob following a fire they themselves accidentally set, Elisa and her brother flee their home and run to the fledgling rebellion of the planet Kolin. Although Elisa's narration ends there, the story moves on to the girl who became Elisa's first love. Kastia is a seven-year veteran of the Kolinese rebellion who blames the royal family there for her elder sister's death. On a mission to recover evidence for that death from the Low Spins Clinic, Kastia meets a little girl named Omelette and takes her back home to the rebel base.

In stark contrast to Kastia's single minded focus and the resulting emotional spiral, Omelette is young, curious, and innocent. Despite being abandoned by her parents due to her compromised immune system, Omelette holds no grudges against the world. She is full of curiosity about everything that she sees, and it is through Omelette's influence that Kastia begins to glimpse the parts of herself that she didn't quite remember how to be. It is at this point in Kastia's life that Elisa re-emerges as someone who managed to hold onto herself as she grew.

The bulk of *Hear Me, See Me* is told from a point of view adjacent to its main character, in order to effectively explore the theme of how we are perceived by other people. This aspect in particular is very close to my heart; as a neurodivergent child who didn't know what the word meant, I constantly had the impression that the well-meaning adults around me operated from this expectation of how a child my age was supposed to act and behave. There were two tracks, and I moved along one adjacent to the main line. The feeling of disconnect between inside and outside perception, stemmed from my life as a neurodivergent child who knew that she was a little bit off-kilter with her peers but had no way to express it. Omelette's innate kindness proves to be the disarmament in a world where consideration to thought patterns and other people don't go as far as they do in our world.

In a couple of ways, Poppy's relationship with her parents is meant to reflect the one that I had with my parents at the time. But whereas my parents became more accepting of

my identity as neurodivergent (and later queer), Poppy received no such support from her family. Both of her parents are incredibly ableist throughout her youth and they become increasingly so as she grows up in a different way than they were hoping. Poppy's perpetual loneliness has caused her to retreat from life, finding refuge in the world of words. She holds onto memories of her childhood with a similar tightness that frequently causes them to shatter, no longer remembering what untainted joy is. After Poppy's little brother purposefully sets fire to a bear from her toddler days, she is blamed for the resulting destruction and has an emotional meltdown. *Belrose* ends with Poppy running away from home to show how thoroughly rejected she feels by her family.

With most of my characters, I think long and hard about their names. Elisa is named after Elisa Celjska in the manga series *Puella Magi Tart Magica*. Poppy's middle name, Elizabeth, is to give her the strength and tenacity of Queen Elizabeth II. Her brother's name, Basil, is something of an anomaly as basil is a sweet herb which was assigned to a not-so-sweet boy. While the age gap between the siblings made their interactions tricky to write, every one of Basil's lines is meant to emphasize the inherent cruelty in his personality. He feels little to no empathy for Poppy or her tendency to have meltdowns. Basil's role is something of ableism taken to the extreme mixed in with an inability to feel empathy. For most of her life, Poppy has coped with her family's words, and her own feelings, by wrapping herself in cozy sweaters and other oversized clothing. This changes as Poppy becomes more confident in herself, a journey that comes after the conclusion of the work. A similar evolution occurs in her relationship with writing; over time, Poppy's relationship with words allows her to find that she is, in fact, enough.

Words have always been my comfort, my refuge. For many years, I was constantly reading, devouring words wherever I could come across them. More times than not, the piece that I wrote was in some way inspired by whatever book I held in my hand. Some, including

Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes* and Rainbow Rowell's *Carry On*, were fantasy. Others, including *Imogen*, *Obviously* and Angie Thomas' bestseller *The Hate U Give*, were lacking in that magical element but had a strong focus on character understanding that I couldn't help but be drawn to. While Imogen nor Starr is never said to be neurodivergent, their struggles with being genuine in the face of others' perceptions inspired me to add that as one of the central themes explored in my senior project.

I wrote so many words, there were times when I doubted I had any more left in me. The parts of myself put into both works seemed to split upon impact, turning into a million tiny fragments. After everything is laid out on the table, though, the scattered pieces made themselves visible like far-flung stars forming constellations. Who I was, and have become, glows from each page. Some people have human babies, with their DNA inherited from both of the parents. *Hear Me*, *See Me* and *Belrose* are my twin babies, their voices developing as I have; the latter's path is clear, and I will continue to return to *Hear Me*, *See Me*. As a writer, it's never quite a goodbye. More of a "see you next time," which is the same sentiment that I leave for *Purchase* itself.

Hear Me, See Me

The noise was overwhelming: a constant murmur, passed from person to person like a volleyball. Pure curiosity was what drove her eyes open, flickering back and forth between people as she pieced whispers together. Another fire had broken out during the night; she felt the strike, an invisible dagger that pierced her heart. There was no trigger for the fire, unlike those from the previous fortnight's blaze. It had simply sprung into existence between human heartbeats.

When she tried to remember last night, panic set in at the ensuing blankness. She remembered having swallowed a sleeping pill, her brain hurting with every half-portion of a thought. With sleep came the candle hovering inside her heart, driving away the cold. It allowed a night free of dreams that had let her forget what she was. Fire was meant to be a thing of nightmares. It was impossible to control something with origins in a defeatist "what-if" question.

It would become fear, and humans seek to control what they fear, no matter the price or impediment on moral codes.

She sat up on the flimsy cot, nearly tumbling off the side. Her legs were so unsteady they buckled, but no one noticed. They were still staring at a wall-mounted screen as something orange and red exploded in slow motion capture, almost beautiful in its process of destruction.

Brain fog disappearing at the sight, Elisa elbowed her way through the crowd until she was almost at the front. People behind her continued to murmur as she resisted the urge to turn tail and run. Elisa's father had sacrificed his life to keep her from wrongly ending up in a closet-sized jail cell, and she did *not* want to squander that over an anxiety attack.

A well-informed decision was the best kind, she reasoned, stomping out that voice so hard it almost squealed in response. In a past incarnation, Elisa had been a squadron leader. That rationale, the resolve, wasn't so easily discarded. For her, old habits were almost harder to break than cockroaches. Others had it easier, breaking embarrassing or sad moments the next day and then never thinking about them again.

Kastia. For a millisecond, Elisa remembered her. So many lifetimes ago, yet all of them passed with tandem less than a broken lamp, only broken by dreams of her history repeating itself. The peaceful moments that they had enjoyed as a couple during their rebel days had been tangible but tenuous, continuing until they broke. A possible instance of a nightmare brought to life, with the unknown only being more terrifying than the reality.

"Excuse me," she said loudly, reaching out to tap the nondescript man blocking her view. "Can you please move? I can't see."

His unevenly round head moved to stare down at her name tag. *Elisa*. "I'll tell you, lady," he scoffed, pointing up at a wall-mounted television with startlingly fierce brown eyes. "It's a phoenix, that's what it is. Thought they had died out long ago."

Eyes flickering upward as if held by puppet strings, the blurry video played on repeat as Elisa's mind went white. Glimpsing a face was impossible, but she immediately recognized how the flames hugged the body of its subject.

That video was of her, on display for the world to pick apart in *why* and *how*. Just as Elisa's father had always feared.

No... they never did. She thought. *We hid because of the prejudice against us, the assumptions that we signaled the coming misfortune of warring states and nations as something capable of healing deadly wounds*.

Those first three words weren't in her head, but instead lost in the din. She could only hear a thundering roar in her ears, for her own heartbeat drowned everything else out.

Fractions of memories hitting harder than glass, sending her scraped knees buckling to the floor as fire roared to life around her.



Remember me

*Ashes scraped off your wrist
under nails and feet, leaving a
path through generations
to time when you are born of
heart cracks lined with gold and
made you stronger.*

*Extend the pieces,
cut invisible thread tying
beyond name and face.*

*The fear apologizes in a
futile painting of hereditary
Sundays.*



A species capable of both self-reincarnation and sexual reproduction, the phoenix was able to scroll through countless lifetimes of memories. As the column of fire roared to life around her, Elisa shut her eyelids against outside distractions as she was brought back to the memories of her first lifetime. When Elisa didn't have to pretend to be someone else with her own name, losing track of who she was.

When the young girl wandered downstairs just after midnight, her father was still there.

Monsters plagued her dreams, horrible things that happened in the day that continued into night. Her papa was not one of those monsters that he told her about in his stories, but he was always working, no matter what time. Never stopping, never playing, never loving on her or her brother.

For several minutes, the young girl watched her papa. He baked bread, guided by nothing but unsteady flames so as to not wake the family. Why wasn't he going to join them in bed, so they could all rest together?

The stairs were made of unsealed wood, but she still descended in the thin slippers that she wore to bed every night. In the flickering light provided by the oven, she could almost imagine that her father was one of the monsters he spoke about in his bedtime stories. Larger than life, capable of acts that ten men failed at.

Would she be like that, when the other kids saw her fire?

"Papa?" the young girl said, one hand in front of her eyes to shield them from the flames. Her entire family had never been bothered by the heat the oven produced, but they were supposed to shield their eyes. Small gestures to help them blend in with the humans they pretended to be.

Humans are not like us, Elisa. Her father had told her. *You are a phoenix, noble and special. Most do not like what they cannot understand, and they are not kind to those who came from elsewhere. Because we are special, we must hide.*

Papa, I want to show them what I can do! She had gestured towards a group of other children. *Can't I go and practice with them? We can all do the same magic!*

Deaf to anything, he had refused to relent. Elisa would be separated for her prodigal mastery of fire, then turned away when she never got burned. Even if Elisa stuck her whole hand into the oven, the sparks just whirled around in a meaningless dance.

Her father- her entire family- was immune to fire in any form. Not just immune to it, but able to make shapes out of it. That was why her whole family had chosen to run this bakery; it let them play hide and seek, living in plain sight among humans who knew nothing about who their neighbors really were.

“Papa?” the girl repeated her one word, for it had been lost in the roar of the fire. She inched closer in her nightgown, the skirt long enough that it brushed the floor when she walked. “Papa, when are you going to come to bed? Mum and I miss you.”

Minutes earlier, when the young girl had woken up to find her father gone, the bed was too big without him. The young girl had curled up between him and her mother for the warmth they provided, warm and comforting compared to the oven’s scald.

“In a minute, Elisa,” answered her father. He was swaying from side to side the way that her cloth dolls did, hung from the ceiling on a string. “So many orders, so many... the world lacks the time...”

Elisa was holding one of those dolls now, as she stared at her father; it had been sewed by her mother for Elisa’s human birthday and resembled the young girl in its red hair. Their bakery in Mystfor had been closed, and Elisa clutched the doll as she fell securely asleep by her parents in the big bed.

“Papa, please,” she said, beginning to get scared of the way her father swayed like a collapsing tower. “Stop... come sleep... I want to rest together in the big bed.”

“In a minute,” her father repeated, swaying from side to side. “Just have to feed... feed the chickens...”

Elisa’s family did have four chickens, in a coop behind the house. She would help her mum find eggs every morning, but the dark sky outside screamed that something was wrong, that the chickens wouldn’t be in the pen when she woke up at sunrise.

“Have to feed the chickens,” her papa whispered, his legs falling out from underneath his body. He hit the floor gently, barely making a sound.

As her father slumped to the floor, he took embers from the oven with him. They did not burn him or Elisa, even as she caught one in her hand and crushed it between her fingers with the skill of a phoenix.

This was why they had to hide. The embers were spreading across the floor in bursts, setting large patches of hay up in flames that burned humans’ noses but would not disrupt her family. Weeks and months of supplies reduced to ash, while they didn’t even cough from lack of breath. A family like hers would now be called mean names and wind up in prison.

Elisa turned, braided red hair slamming into her back as she ran. “Mum!” she yelled even as she ascended the wooden steps, not caring if it woke the neighbors. “Mum! Papa’s lying on the ground, and the bakery is on fire!”

There were a dozen fast-paced heartbeats before the door burst open, Elisa’s mother on the landing with a young boy in her arms. Both siblings looked just like their father, down to the brown eyes that were wide with panic for different reasons. “Elisa, we need to go,” Ruminet shouted to be heard over the crackling flames.

“We can’t!” screamed the oldest child, hands in fists as her eyes widened with the idea of leaving the man who told her nightly puppet stories with delicate fire-creatures. “They’re are going to find him when they come to put out-”

“That’s exactly why we have to go, Elisa!” Ruminet grabbed her daughter by the waist and edged open the back door, the siblings’ panicked cries lost in the flames. “It doesn’t-”

With a loud *fwoom*, the flames blew outward in all directions, sending both siblings hurtling from her mother’s arms in a blur of red and black. Elisa heard Ruminet’s cry mixed with a mind-numbing *crack* as she slammed into the brick wall before her vision broke away.

Elisa's papa, determined to keep his family's secret to the last, wouldn't say a word in his own defense. Ruminet's husband was sent to prison for the rest of his life while their daughter lay unconscious.

An innocent child would then die, hair stained with the blood of her family. A lord of flame took her place to rebuild the world from its own ashes.



The clinic was built inside the base of a large hollow tree, far away from anything else in the land of Kolin. Its lack of proximity to civilization, the palace said, was meant to protect those within: away from distractions, developing methods to control strong powers and cure conditions in ways that wouldn't be possible in the midst of Kolin's city districts.

For Kastia and her fellow rebels, though, it was nothing more than a symbol of the order that needed to be removed. A symbol of the true freedom their group stood for, reminding Kastia of the name she had inherited when the older sister died.

The alchemists wouldn't tell Kastia what had killed her sister. Not even when she broke a window and needed seven bandages to stop bleeding onto the floor. Her chocolate-colored hair had been caked with blood from that, and cut into a jagged bob on the chin. The sight of it was still, seven years later, the only thing that could ease her memories' heartache.

The memories deserved closure to erase them. That was somewhere in the clinic below, hidden underneath layers of branches and leaves that shimmered if you looked at them just the right way.

Let me find what took you away from us, my sister. When I do, I'll knock its lights out. Fuck them, Kastia thought desperately. *They don't know this is all I've been living for.*

It had been seven years since Kastia donned the mask of her deceased sister. Seven years since, at the behest of her mother when the latter was drowning under the waves of

grief, Kastia had sworn revenge against the system who had allowed her sister to die alone in the wilderness, surrounded by no one, and locked all of her emotions away except for one. A pulsing deep inside her heart, a thrumming, a tugging in some unseen direction that had consumed Kastia until she couldn't see anything else.

Waiting in the building below her was the answer to the thing that had been nagging at Kastia's insides for seven years like an itch that she couldn't quite scratch. What, exactly, had killed her older sister? Kastia had given up her own self to become the living echo of her sister's ghost, even ceasing to paint the sides of large rocks with the colorful silhouettes of whatever she walked past. The little jars had been hidden under Kastia's bed for so long that they'd long since stopped smelling like paint.

Maybe, after this, she'd get them back out. If that part of herself hadn't been eternally fused with the mask that Kastia had donned for seven years.

Just get through this. Kastia berated herself, swinging sideways from her perch on the treetop. *You're so close, Kastia. Don't let this escape from you.*

Without the past seven years, who would stand by her on a desperate mission like this, anyway?

"Okay, remember the plan," said Elisa from where she stood at the far right, clad in dark elven clothing like the rest of them. Her bright red hair, tied back in a complicated braid, made Kastia just want to take her throwing star and cut it off in one motion. "We're here to break these elves out of here- our fellow citizens of Kolin. Be gentle with them, but efficient. Any delays, and all of us could wind up in the dungeons next to those frozen cannibal elves from the last rebellion. Who cut off their own arms to catapult at the palace."

A somber murmur ran down the line of half-dozen rebels, all standing on the tree branch no wider than their feet. Taking advantage of the commotion, Kastia peered down and closed her eyes. If they survived this, maybe Elisa would let her search through the patient

records afterwards. All of them, written secrets piling up like those dismembered arms as they continued to bleed. Seeing the light.

No matter what it took.

With the *whoosh* sound of grappling hooks releasing and thudding into the cliffside, Kastia launched herself off the tree and fell, stone-silent until she could swing onto the top balcony. It had taken weeks to push the level-headed Elisa into this mission- *"These kids aren't being torn away from anyone that would love them!" "Kastia, how do you think those parents will react to our rebellion if word gets out we're kidnapping their children?"* - were all boiling down to this.

A second chance would never come. If Kastia didn't get ahold of those papers, they would be moved or burned and her heart would never scar over.

Before Kastia's boots had landed on the worn wooden floor, the dark-haired Kolinese took off down the circular hallway at a run. Heart beating somewhere in her throat, she knocked each door open with a silver-edged throwing star. The first three rooms were empty, bare of any living presence.

In the fourth was a pink-haired little girl, fast asleep on a narrow oak bed carved with faint symbols of healing and energy regeneration. They were symbols that were dual-function- besides forming a protective barrier, they could mean the subject was healing, or the alternative. If this blameless girl was about to die, those last moments deserved much better than this room pretending it wasn't intruding on wide-open freedom.

Better than what her sister got. Violated at twenty-three by one five years younger, for the sake of stupidity. Dead by year's end with lips never opened to joy. Seven weeks pregnant, with twins crossed in her stomach as they ascended to the open air of waiting skies.

Kastia picked up one of the wall scones, briefly testing its weight balance in her hand. Then she swung at the barrier, where it dissipated with a faint *pop* that was swallowed up by the silence. As the protective runes went out in unison, the sleeping pinkette opened her eyes.

“Moms? Did you come back for me?” she asked drowsily, sitting up as a silver bracelet slid down her wrist. As an answer, Kastia seized the child’s monitoring bracelet and smashed it against the wall, where the jewelry broke into jagged shards.

“Get up,” she insisted, watching as the girl instantly climbed out of bed. “We need to get out. There’s no time.”

She won’t last much longer, Kastia thought, so why can’t her last moments be spent in the sun? Can she at least say goodbye?

Kastia took off down the stairs, not looking back to see if the pinkette was keeping up beyond the rapid footsteps in her wake. As the duo rounded the corner, Kastia skidded to a stop before a large arched window.

“Stay here until someone comes,” said the rebel, forcing her voice to go flat. A flash of guilt went through Kastia; stricter tones were usually for punishing Kolinese children. “They’ll bring you back to the base. You’ll be safe there.”

Curl up under the stars and count their endless possibilities. Kastia willed silently, looking at her booted feet. For your next life, when your chest hovers in the clouds and doesn’t hide from fear anymore.

Whose body was she wishing that prayer on?

“Where are you going?” the child asked, watching Kastia turn back down the hallway, towards the stairs.

There was a faint note of honest pleading in the little girl's voice. Just like that, Kastia was reminded of her sister. The image hit her like lightning: twenty-three, lying in bed with twin eggs stuck inside because there was no energy left to push them out.

"I'm sorry," said a shorter nurse with a comforting short haircut. "There's nothing we can do. Your daughter is going to slip away."

"No!" Kastia yelled, hair blinding her vision. She turned to the group of five or ten nurses that stood behind the family with apologetic expressions on their faces. "Bring back my sister! Bring her back!"

She lunged at the closest cloaked alchemist, but a hand wrapped around her wrist with the impossible strength of grief and held her back. Mother and daughter- one reacted outward, while the other curled up on herself, throwing herself away but for a mind that almost audibly cracked into a thousand fragments.

"Phoebe, that's enough," said her mom. Leaning down, the tall woman was the same height as her daughter. Her voice had gone flat in what the alchemists assumed was grief. "She's not coming back, but Kastia will always be in our family."

One by one, the alchemists shuffled out to give the family some privacy. Bridget gripped her youngest daughter's ear before whispering, "You'll carry on her name, by taking it as your own from today forward."

"It's none of your business," Kastia said, letting go of the child's hand to run down the corridor. "Just stay here."

Climbing onto the stair railing, Kastia slid down in circles until she was knocked off on the first floor. The room was empty, except for a knot-wood desk with bark peeling off and the staircase beside it. A large oaken door stood at the other end, flung open from the evacuation.

Taking a step around the desk, Kastia prodded it with her middle fingers. They found a smooth notch in the wood and dug in, a satisfying *clack* echoing as a section of the floor slid open to reveal a rickety staircase on the verge of collapse.

Kastia put both feet on the top step. Then she checked her supplies once, twice, three times.

If she listened hard enough, Kastia could almost hear Elisa snorting at her visible hesitation. *Where was all of this before your broken bones? That first time you threw yourself off a tree, why couldn't it have come before then?*

Under the admonishment, relief. *I never thought we'd see the day.*

"Shut up, o Numen of Panic and Fear," Kastia muttered. "I'm Kastia, and I can't afford to care."

Just to spite the imaginary Elisa behind her, the hunter did a backflip down the two flights of stairs. The sound of her boots echoed into the tunnel, and she smiled.

After a minute or two of standing there in the silence, she began to proceed down the tunnel. Unlike everything above ground, it was made of brick. Permanence, locking away anything that might have caused a collapse.

They were just kids, a lot of them. They didn't deserve this prison masquerading itself as a safe haven. Kastia kicked a vine hanging from the wall, moving on as it narrowly missed kicking her ass on the rebound. If she had looked behind her, the shock would probably have cut her lifespan down by five or ten years. One and a half for each minute spent in the tunnels.

This tunnel was short, only seven or eight feet long. Kastia brushed aside a large spider web, shuddering as the contact raised hairs on her neck. The presence of a skeleton hand, wrapping around her arms and dragging her into the dark.

Beyond it was a large circular room, piles of documents filling the air with a musty odor. Five or six shelves were over capacity with file folders, their contents slipping outward onto each other. Kastia picked one up at random, hunter's boots scuffing a puff of dirt.

Hamlet, Leah. Fatima. Over two dozen names from different families in this one folder, good for the cause but none of them relevant.

"The newer ones are on the floor. They ran out of room before I was born."

Hearing the voice of a girl she *swore* she had left behind, Kastia jumped with an audible shriek. "What the *hell?*"

The dusty binder in her hands fell to the ground, narrowly missing the pink-haired child that had not been there ten seconds ago. "How did you get here?"

"You left the door open," the child said, bending down to pick up the dropped object.

Kastia took it with a little too much force, hugging the records to her chest. Then she put it down on a random shelf and tried to pop the bubble in her throat.

"You should go back upstairs." She turned away, bending down to examine the closest bundle of paper. "The others are going to be back soon. They're going to get you out of here."

"I don't want to go," the child responded, sitting on the dirt floor as she started looking through dusty piles of paper. A large cloud of dust formed, making them both cough. "There's so much to learn here. That's why you went down here, isn't it? To learn?"

Kastia had picked up another file; she wrapped her hands around it, the knuckles turning white.

"That's not the reason, but I'm not going to tell you." She picked a hair out of her mouth and frowned. *Ugh. Great.*

"Will you at least tell me what you're looking for?" The girl piped up, opening the file by her feet.

Just like that, a defensive remark was on the tip of her tongue; Kastia shook her head, flipping through the files in her hands. None of them were the right one, *again*. At the rate things were going, she wouldn't be done until the next moon cycle was over- *and* Kastia would have to sit through Elisa's lecture on leaving people behind.

The redhead got real testy when they talked about family.

"I already told you that I'm doing this for the sake of my family," Kastia said to the imaginary Elisa and her pursed lips. "Spare me your lecture, please. I just want the record of my sister's death!"

She worked in silence for what felt like a few minutes, before the girl tugged on her sleeve. "I don't know if it's what you're looking for," the pinkette said from behind the binder in her hands, "but this one has your name in it. Kastia."

Faint footsteps came from above, but Kastia didn't hear them. Instead, she looked down at the child, eyes widened as if caught in a dream. "What did you say?"

"Your name is right here," answered the pinkette, pointing down to the folder. The dented metal band of her former monitoring bracelet was back around her wrist; the child clearly hadn't stayed put for even a second, despite explicitly being told to do just that.

Who knew how much trouble she could have run into up there...

With as much indifference as she could, Kastia bent down and sat on the ground. She crossed her legs into a pretzel shape and took the open file.

What if I got my hopes up for nothing? Her fear whispered. If I crash and burn?

You live on. The other voice replied. *You take her home, and you find out who the hell you are now.*

Kastia's palms were sweaty; reflexively, she wiped them on her boots before the words started to blur from any stress-induced tears.

Stuff the nerves, anything that doesn't matter. None of it has a place in a heart, not when her lifelong search is at an end.

Low Spins Clinic, Record Volume Seven Hundred and Twenty-Three. Report

Conclusion: Patient Death.

Patient Name: Kastia Dimitris, age twenty-three. Eldest sister of Dimitris family; survived by younger sister and Moms.

Primary Cause of Death: Multiple organ failure.

Contributing cause(s): Extinguished core energy, accelerated by pregnancy with x2 embryos.

Notes: The patient drew magical energy directly from themselves in lieu of the surrounding environment; prior to pregnancy, expected lifespan was no more than twenty-five years. Moved to Low Spins Clinic by request of mother, against advice to remain with family until death.

Presiding alchemist signature:



At some point, the child had laid her hand on Kastia's leg. "You're crying," she said, reaching out and catching a teardrop on her fingertip. It was smaller than Kastia's entire nail.

The older girl laughed at the sight of it, watching the drop slide and hit the dirt. "Why are you asking after my safety?" she asked, bile rising in her throat. "You can't even like me."

"You're only a child," Kastia continued, looking away from the child to stare at the dirt wall. Stacks of files blurred into colorful lines as the tears over her vision thickened. "You're too young to see it."

The pink-haired youth frowned as a response, the expression carving deep grooves onto her face. She stood up and walked a short way down the tunnel, soft pitter-patter trailing behind.

After thirty heartbeats, Kastia put down the file and turned around. "Why haven't you left yet?" she asked, swallowing the ball in her throat.

The older Kolinese stood up and walked to where the child was, then stopped short at the closed door. "No," she whispered, bringing her hands up to grip her hair. "No, no, no. We're going to be stuck in here for the rest of our lives!"

Elisa had consistently tried to tame Kastia's jagged haircut, she always swatted the redhead's hand away in no uncertain terms. Though it was cliché to the extent of burying one's head in a dirt mound, feeling the strands tickle her face wiped away all dirt in her mind.

The kid was still standing next to Kastia, looking at her as if she actually cared. Maybe she did; it was impossible to read the expression on anyone's face and know if Kastia was guessing it right. Once she had tried to assist a refugee child with changing their bandages, only to get a box thrown at her head. How was she supposed to interpret that body language, again?

"It's not forever ever," the pinkette said, putting her hand on the door before turning to Kastia. "Can't you make it go *pwoosh*, like how you woke me up?"

"I only do that in emergencies."

"Then why won't you do it now?"

"Because it's not urgent *enough*." Kastia paused. She sighed. Was this kid ignorant, or just a missing number being left behind? Either way, she had to calm down.

“Taking energy from the environment for magic uses up energy, no matter what kind of affinity you have.” She explained it slowly, accentuating each syllable as if they hadn’t been the dominant spoken language for two thousand years. “What I do- making light from the stars into something as real as you or me- uses quite a bit. Between what I used to wake you and breaking the door, I might not be able to walk out on my own two feet.”

She wants to tell you everything the melodies are whispering.

Can’t know, can’t breathe, hold in the secrets. Just a child, must be protected. Keep safe, stay kind, block her thoughts of laughter and love. Keep out the screaming, the fear. A small body that can’t ever set its two feet on a chalk line, each hitch spelled out with too much loss.

Somehow, the cowering younger sister had become the older one. The brave rebel who threw herself off of the tree would never be recognized by that scared child, the same one who had been so easily calmed by a puppet from who had been a stranger.

That was her version of “Kastia.” For a second, she wondered what her sister would say about it.

Picking up a broken branch from the ground, Kastia twisted it in her fingers a few times before letting it fall with a soft puff of dirt. If they died in this cave, the pinkette would hate her. There could be no other option in her head. She needed that love herself, Kastia realized. She sighed, her heartbeat slowing minutely with the exhale. “Okay.”

Taking a half-dozen steps back from the door, Kastia crossed her hands over each other. The brown arm guards she wore were fingerless, made of worn leather to match her hunter’s uniform. Closing her amber eyes, Kastia began moving her hands back and forth as many flecks of light appeared between her palms.

Something about magic is that it rewrites all of the possibilities you’ve ever known.
Whispered the voice inside her head. *Most would say light is visible, but not touched; your*

magic can disprove those steadfast assumptions. Light magic takes something intangible and changes it into just that.

Remember those doomed fears, the voice urged. Rewrite them with your power.

Overcome them.

The starlight in Kastia's hands had solidified into a four-inch version of its namesake; she flicked it with an impulse wrist gesture, where it spun at a dizzying speed before shattering the door into a thousand wooden fragments with a loud *BANG*.

Kastia wobbled on her feet before she sat down, lowering her hands. The wooden shards had gone in every direction, leaving razor-thin stinging cuts all over both girls' arms and faces. They were already beginning to bleed crimson; as the pinkette twisted her own arm to look at it, a thin stream of blood was already making its way down her wrist. Kastia watched as the drops began to soak the earth, a helpless kind of dread building in her stomach. There was everything waiting beyond those doors, but she couldn't think, couldn't *breathe-*

"Stay still," the child insisted, carrying a weight far beyond her years as Kastia went to stand up. "I'm going to fix things, and the sky will be waiting outside with open arms."

Kastia knew how it felt to call upon her power, this thing that was always simmering beneath her skin. She could see that same expression in the child's face as they leaned over her, pink hair matted with dirt. The pinkette- Kastia had never asked for her name during the evacuation- spread her fingers wide, starting to make soft sounds. It was one word, whispered over and over in the dead air between them.

Sano.

Heal.

The bleeding slowed, Kastia's skin knitting itself back together as if a speed spell had been cast upon it. There was a faint tugging sensation, which should've felt strange instead

of reassuring. The overlapping shouts in Kastia's mind gradually dimmed to a whisper, guided by the soft glow coming from her healing wounds.

"You can open your eyes now."

Had she closed them? Kastia didn't remember; she cursed herself silently, but it wasn't as if she could see much better with her eyes open. Instead, Kastia probed her skin for the cut, expecting pain like putting her fingers into a lamp. When there was nothing, the older girl's heart skipped several beats.

"Healing magic." Kastia whispered in awe. It had been seven years since she had felt a childlike sense of wonder, but it was there now. "Why are you in this *place* if you can heal so quickly? Devoid of the sunshine?"

Her eyes sparkled at the compliment, turning to look at her rescuer. "Uses too much energy," she said, speaking carefully in a way Kastia associated with drunkards, a bottle of moon-rose in one hand. "Makes me weak-"

Before Kastia could reach out to catch her, the little girl's knees gave out. She collapsed to the dirt floor, pale as a ghost, as Kastia's heart sank along with it.



Once the blood had been washed from her skin, Kastia stepped out from the riverbed. The red flakes floated downstream, carrying with them most of the trauma from the past handful of hours- and the person she had been.

The single-mindedness of a goal had, in a way, dulled Kastia's feelings until she could only faintly recall what it was to feel anything at all. Her long-withheld feelings had started to escape after finding out her sister's fate, each restraint holding them back snapping in quick

succession like a broken rope until Kastia was left floating away in a roaring river of her own overwhelm.

Now that her life's purpose was completed, who was she?

It had taken Kastia over an hour to get them both up the stairs without banging any limbs, and two more to get her bearings. The sun had gone down by the time Kastia heard the bubbling of water; adjusting her grip on the pinkette, Kastia laid her down before sitting on its embankment.

The adrenaline of escaping had worn off, replaced with the dull ache of reality laughing in your face. The rebels were long gone from the area; Kastia could head for the rebellion's headquarters in Daemunta Forest, but the most direct route would involve passing straight through Northlan- nicknamed *Conlis*, for the palace located atop the hill. Kastia's amber eyes drifted in the direction of its upper battlement, invisible from this distance but still lodged in her heart like a spear. The desire to split herself into three was strong: one to stay, one to run to the base, and one to scream until the whole world cried.

Elisa would never let Kastia do anything rooted in destruction, she thought with the tiniest bit of sighs. Somehow, Elisa could tell when Kastia was making her decisions on that wish for discomforting things to disappear.

Having this kid on their side would go a long way towards improving the rebellion's reputation in Alaostar. *That's the only reason she's still alive*, Kastia reminded herself as she spread her cloak on the ground. *To persuade, to induce, to convince the ones on the fence that we're not monsters who burn alive everyone we disagree with. This child's purpose is to sell our cause.*

The brown-haired Kolinese laid down on the warm hunter's cloak, turning onto her back to gaze at the stars. She would be woken in the morning by a familiar face backflipping off a tree, landing inches away from Kastia's feet.

“So, this is where you’ve been,” said Fawne, putting her hands on her hips as Kastia choked out a scream. “Elisa’s been worried sick, you know. *Oh, my poor Kastia, what am I going to do without her? Forget the rebellion, she’s the most important thing in my existence-*”

Kastia stood up and threw her cloak over Fawne’s face, hurriedly glancing over to see the pinkette’s eyelids unmoving. “Fawne, be *quiet*,” she insisted, taking a step back from her squadmate. “She needs rest. Waking in the middle of the forest isn’t going to preserve her impression of us. How do you know she won’t wake up screaming with nightmares?”

Fawne’s teasing grin faded away, and a stab of guilt pierced through the nervousness in Kastia’s heart. Looking at Fawne, with her dark red hair, Kastia saw the two of them reflected in the eyes of her sometimes friend. Kastia recalled her first night in the rebel base, sitting against her bed in a house designated for all of the rescued orphans.

It had been a cloudless night in the underground, Kastia crying as she woke up from a nightmare of shadow creatures calling themselves *Mom*. She turned back to the window, wiping away tears with the back of her hand. The wood-creatures of her nightmare were still floating around Kastia’s head as she lay on the bed in darkness, whispering for her moms even though she had cursed them to oblivion hours earlier. The door creaked open.

A simple hand puppet peeked through the doorway, with dark blue hair and a matching dress. “Don’t cry, little one!” the puppet encouraged, gently putting its hands together. “I’ll scare off the bad dreams, so you’ll stay safe and learn to fight them!”

Kastia’s eyes widened, and she picked up a pillow before throwing it at the puppet. The yell of pain that followed was distinctly alive, but the person controlling the puppet just kept going.

“Even when the nightmares make you scream and cry, you’re going to get better,” insisted the puppet. “Do you know the best way to fend off scary things?”

Parting her tangled hair, Kastia shook her head. She got ready to snap at the puppet and its owner- *go away*- but they were still here, even after she had cried and screamed from dreams too vivid for Kastia's mind to process.

Fuck, she was tired. All of the adrenaline produced by her nightmare creatures was gone, and Kastia was just *tired*. "Is it a lullaby?" she asked, wincing at the exhaustion laced into her voice. "I can't sing any lullabies, so can you go now?"

The only response was silence. After a few moments, Kastia looked up, expecting to see the hand puppet gone and the door closed. Instead, a Kolinese girl about Kastia's age stood in the doorway, olive skin and pointed ears pointing to a heritage in the port district of Furnal.

"Did Delphin make you smile?" she asked, without waiting for the preamble. "If not, I can tell another joke."

Kastia stared. "You named your puppet?"

"Of course," she replied with a self-satisfied smile. "Delphin is my special friend, and she's going to help me get you to smile. The best way to balance out a nightmare is with good old laughter and a smile, because-"

"Laughter is the best medicine," Kastia finished. The knot in her stomach faded with the images of spider-legged trees, and a laugh burst out from its remains. She could almost sense an actual person inside, starting to see the light of day.

Not that sunshine existed in underground cities, but there were plenty of glass lanterns. Kastia had accidentally smashed three, and they lay around her borrowed room as glittering grit. The night guards had tried to get Kastia to stop crying from her nightmares, but their tall, unfamiliar faces had the opposite effect. Kastia focused her eyes now, looking at the puppet Delphin.

“What’s her name?” Kastia asked, pointing to somewhere around the puppeteer’s midsection. Delphin’s sewn-on expression didn’t change.

“Fawne,” the puppet answered, and Fawne took Delphin off her hand. It lay between their hands until Kastia picked it up, fiddling with Delphin’s rough string hair.

“I don’t feel sad anymore,” Kastia answered. “I didn’t want to be sad, but I couldn’t stop.”

Fawne put her hand to her chest and smiled. “Well, now you feel better.”

Fawne asked a couple of joking questions from beneath the cloak, but Kastia didn’t answer. She took her cloak off Fawne’s head, heartbroken. The lighthearted girl that Kastia knew was gone, replaced with someone who slapped with a smile on her face the whole time.

Things had changed between the two of them, after that first meeting and its unburdened laughter. At first, Fawne and Kastia had played in the underground village, making up little games as the air itself seemed to join in. The older refugees had followed the pair with their eyes, but Kastia wasn’t scared. For one of the first times since losing her original name, she wasn’t scared about the outside.

After two months of friendship, Fawne had disappeared. Her job to pacify Kastia was done. Her heart broken for the second time, Kastia developed an armor that would never allow Fawne back in.

They always *left her*.

The two young women fell into a silence that would last for days. They slowly journeyed along Alaostar’s border to avoid any civilization, frequently stopping to rest. Kastia’s pink-haired passenger woke up a few times to eat and stretch before passing out again, but always when Fawne was out hunting.

Selfishly, Kastia had enjoyed those moments. It was quiet; just her, a laughing child, and the river that witnessed in silence.

“Will you tell me the name of that child?” Fawne asked Kastia for the third time.

“I don’t know it,” Kastia answered, the words flying out of her mouth before she could stop herself. “She had a bracelet attached, but I didn’t read it. There wasn’t time for anything.”

“But now you’re safe.” Fawne took the intricate silver bracelet from Kastia, turning it over in her hands. “You’ve fended off all the scary things, so smile and laugh and don’t worry anymore!”

Fear-fueled anger rose on Kastia’s tongue. *Give that back*, she almost snapped. *Don’t take something else away from me*. She bit the inside of her mouth, nearly hard enough to taste blood.

“Laugh like what? A monkey?” Kastia asked to the back of Fawne’s head.

“Omelet,” Fawne answered as they turned a corner. A large oak tree stood in front of them, known only to the resistance as the entrance to their underground headquarters. The door had no handle on the outside

“*What?*” Kastia turned away from the tree, her hand on the rough bark. It was a web of lines and dips in all directions, almost telling the story of their lives. The bandage under Kastia’s arm guard rubbed against her skin in response to her movements. “Did you just say Omelet? What’s an omelet?”

“Her name, silly *aed*.” Fawne tossed the bracelet in the air, letting out a laugh as it landed in her hands. “It says ‘Omelet’ on the inside.”

With Fawne purposefully using the harbor-workers’ word for cat, Kastia almost smiled. Her friend had never cared about the ramifications of using her first language in public, no matter how many people were watching. It had gone along with Fawne’s hand puppets, jokes, and displays of small physical dexterity that all made them laugh. When the older

rebels came back from their recruiting or supply missions with nothing to show for it but dirtied bandages and downed spirits, Fawne... hadn't reacted. She had just kept laughing and making them all focus on the little joys right in front of the other children.

One of the tree's upper branches bent downward, sending a beam of sunlight straight into Kastia's eyes. She blinked the spots away, fear rising like the tide on an ocean shore.

What if Fawne did something while she couldn't see? Jump-scaring Kastia just to lighten her nerves by a degree was nothing of the children they had been, but that was gone. Just like their chances to sip elderberry juice on a roof in the underground, laughing and telling jokes that were flawed on purpose.

Get over yourself, Kastia scolded internally. *There's nothing stopping you from having those moments again*. The kid was going to need someone to play with after the rebellion won, to preserve what exactly she was supposed to be. Maybe Kastia could laugh and do silly things with the kid, like Fawne did for her when neither of them had much of anyone else.

No, not the kid.

Omelet.

Omelet the pink-haired kid, with hopes and a dream that Kastia hadn't tried to find out.

Before she could act on the guilt squeezing her heart, a hidden door in the tree's base swung open from the inside. A guard with short red hair stood in the doorway, holding a polearm almost the same height. As he stepped aside to let the duo pass, Kastia glimpsed the rounded ears which marked him as a twin. A surviving twin, wandering alone in the streets until they found a family. On the outside because of differences, like Kastia and Fawne had both been.

Sometime during her slumber, Omelet's messy rose-colored hair had fallen away from her face to reveal what Kastia had just been thinking about.

A pair of short, rounded ears, indicating the little girl was also a surviving twin. The survivor whose fate had been to live in the clinic for most of her life, but today would mean the end of Omelet experiencing that prejudice.

Hopefully, it hadn't started yet. Kastia was trying to keep her mind off of that, instead staring straight ahead.

"C'mere, give Omelet to me." Fawne took the kid from Kastia's arms, relieving the burning in her muscles- she hadn't realized how long they had been screaming. "She deserves a *bed*, not your arms."

Kastia ignored the words bubbling in her throat- she would *not* give the satisfaction of rising to smart jokes- and walked through the tree hollow. Silent as a fox, the door slid closed behind them before dozens of wall torches all burst into life at the same moment. Even after years of seeing the small act of magic, she could never look straight ahead when walking past them. The bright burning reminded Kastia too much of the squadron leader.

Elisa. Level-headed, cautious, practical Elisa. The redhead whose weak point was, always, the notion of family. The first time that Kastia brought up her sister to Elisa, just trying to start a conversation with a fellow orphan her age, the redhead had given her a warning look with the impact of a lightning strike.

I was a sister once, too. Elisa had said. *Those memories of your blood family, keep them locked in a box inside your head. Lock it tight and throw away the key so nobody can get in except for you.*

If something happens to them, you will never forgive yourself.

The staircase they were headed down, in sharp contrast to everything else, was made of smooth stone. Fawne had once explained to Kastia that the stairs had purposefully been designed that way. "Stone picks up sound better than wood," she remembered Fawne saying thoughtfully. "In case we're ever found, the footsteps will echo on the stone tiles."

Stepping off the final step on the staircase, Kastia's foot once again hit a smooth wooden floor. An arched doorway in front of them opened to an open circular room, torches hanging at intervals to project an image of coziness in what was nothing like that. Open archways lined the circular room, entrances to tunnels that led to different locations within the underground village itself. Kastia turned in a slow circle as she stopped in the room's center, feeling soft carpeting under her feet. The torchlight blurred in her vision, almost forming shapes from Kastia's memory of the past seven years.

A branch, held aloft as a lantern hung from its end. A hand puppet, made for the youngest refugees to ease their loneliness. The curves of a scroll, tied with red ribbon and sealed with lily of the valley as its flowers hung downward. An innocent-looking clump of flowers with large dewdrops and red berries, placed in a beaten-up silver tray with decorative glass stones. Those inanimate objects had a sense of self that she didn't achieve through hunting all the time. They had a known purpose and fulfilled it without complaint.

When Kastia's mind settled back into her body, the circular room was empty of its former inhabitants. Omelet and Fawne had both disappeared down one of the corridors lit with torchlight, leaving not even a scuff on the floor where the footsteps had passed through. Shadows seemed to form and flex within as Kastia's hand reflexively tightened, calling one of her throwing stars to light. A half-illumination bloomed from it as she looked at each of the open archways. Of them, one led outside of the underground, through the forest and ending just outside of Iphodore Mountains. The realm of the Forest Faeries. Guardians of the natural world and growers of rare herbs- who generally resented encroachments on their territories- they had retreated further into the mountains as the civilization of other species swelled outward. The expansive village of several hundred years, rumored to be built into the trees as the clinic had been, was entirely hidden by illusion spells. That's why the tunnel only led to

the mountains outside, for finding one's way through was, without exaggeration, impossible. Nothing leaked through, not even nature.

Despite the impossibility of gaining a foothold within the largely close-minded community, the rebellion's early leaders had maintained a stubborn fire and constructed a tunnel anyway. Matching up with the tunnel's cobweb-covered state, there wasn't even a lit torch to indicate life.

Some of those long-dead people might have been visionaries, but it was hard to tell. After all, just like the tunnel itself, everybody was dead. She couldn't go around and bother ghosts, but she had to *know*.

Yet, as Kastia took a few steps into the tunnel, the heel of her boot crunched on something. Namely, a white Iphodore Mountain Daffodil that was rumored to only ever be spotted blooming from within its namesake. The sealed mountain village wasn't so sealed if something could escape from its borders. If this flower seed could come from beyond the archway, so could other things. More antagonistic things, like the stampeding horse that Kastia had imagined as a half-joke to herself. *Wait, do the Forest Faeries even have horses?* Her pulse thrumming somewhere in the back of her throat, Kastia raised her throwing star aloft before stepping further inside.

She experimentally stuck out her arm, expecting physical pain and a pushback alongside a visible flaring up of the barrier. Instead, there was nothing but a faint pulse of energy from her elbow down. She was relieved at the strange absence, but anxiety quickly settled in; relations between the rebellion and the Forest Fairies had been strained for generations before her birth. It was highly likely that this tunnel wasn't even being watched anymore, at least judging by the several layers of dust that she had kicked up on her way. It almost made her wish for a cloth or something to filter the air.

If she could get in, so could other things. To make sure she could sleep at night, Kastia had to check.

One step at a time, Kastia went further into the tunnel. She was almost at the end, yet still hadn't seen a source of light when a voice- an actual voice- spoke from somewhere to her left.

"You shouldn't be here."

Hearing the voice come from behind her in the abandoned corridor, Kastia's heart seemed to leap six feet into the air along with her body. When it had settled somewhere in the region alongside her lungs, she turned to see the voice wasn't disembodied after all. Her first reaction, fear-based aggression, was wrong. Hiding in the shadows, illuminated from behind, was a willowy figure with long blonde hair. A simple braid on each side of her head combined in the back, where it was obviously held in place by something. No, Kastia couldn't see it, but the hair would have fallen to either side like wet noodles if something hadn't been holding it in place. That was common sense, a basic knowledge of the fact that gravity made things fall.

Wasn't it?

"You shouldn't be here," the objectively beautiful stranger repeated, patiently waiting for Kastia to say something as they leaned against the wall. "Abandoned places can be more dangerous than ones that have been kept up."

"What, because of you? Who are you?" *You won't kill me here, will you? Where nobody will find my body or hear me scream?*

To her credit, the stranger seemed unperturbed by Kastia's string of questions- or her visible fright. She just continued to lean against the wall, fingers interlocked in front, waiting for a moment in the conversation to respond.

“My name is Shiro. Today, I was assigned by the higher-ups of the Forest Fairies to re-establish the protective illusion on this tunnel,” she answered. Before Kastia could do anything more than choke out a high-pitched sound, they continued, “No, I won’t kill you. That will accomplish nothing except panic when someone sees the blood on my dress, and not keep my people protected from yours.”

“The magic was put up to separate you from *everyone*, not just us.” Putting all of her conviction into the words, Kastia’s stubbornness flared up. “Our movement has been going for hundreds of years, and no rebel group was ever able to make contact. One of the higher-ups told the story when we arrived as kids.”

Even before the child Kastia had stopped shaking out of fear, one of the senior rebels had told her about the tunnel before they got struck by a guard spear the next day. It was a cautionary tale, they said, never to go in. until an alliance was formed, or at least a peace treaty or something to prevent the capture of their people upon entry, some bad people could be lurking in the dark at any time.

Going by the little smiles and the giggles, nobody believed the story. Not even the people who had told her the story in the first place, because it was just used to scare children out of the tunnels. Irresponsible children, like Kastia.

Someone was going to tell that same story to Omelet when she woke up, probably.

Omelet.

Oh, shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

Where was she? Fawne had disappeared through the tunnel which opened up to the rebellion’s underground village, carrying Omelet in her arms like the child was a sack of potatoes.

And Kastia hadn’t done anything. She hadn’t even reacted at the loss of a pers.

How could I have been so blind?

“Have you really never been told that your people could have been the aggressors?” Shiro asked, taking a few steps forward to peer around Kastia’s tiny ponytail to look at her.

Again, there was no judgment in Shiro’s question. Just a distant kind of curiosity, and Kastia could almost feel her blood boil if she concentrated. When someone spoke to her that way, Kastia was nothing more than an alchemical experiment being observed for the reaction.

She closed her eyes, focusing on the image of Omelet behind her lids.

“Piss off,” Kastia responded, putting her back to the faerie. “I don’t have time to hear you out- I’m sorry. I’ve already been here too long. There’s someone who I left behind when I came here, and I need to go find them.”

Shiro’s calmness slipped ever so slightly at Kastia’s response, but there was no way to tell. If the reaction wasn’t visible in the outside perception, then it might as well have not existed at all. After a moment of silence, the faerie spoke in the same voice which she had used for everything else. “Do you care about her? Hold onto that. It will protect you throughout whatever hardships you endure, in the sense of that love. It can get you through heartbreaks that you never thought possible.”

Who did you lose? Kastia thought, the soft-spoken words following her down the tunnel in a heart-twisting echo. She didn’t have *time* to think about it, but Kastia’s brain just kept slipping back to that as she ran. *Who did we lose?*

Running back into the central room, she stopped underneath the archway labeled *Camp*. The tunnel’s surface had been worn down by all of the people passing through it, so it sloped up and down, in time with the speed of Kastia’s pulse. She climbed out of the tunnel-like structure and found herself outside of the same building where she had slept since arriving all those years ago, taking up less space than the one from her memories. A small

cottage close to the settlement's center. Made of wood, it had a slanted roof tightly layered with charcoal-black material. A small chimney was attached to the top right corner, and faint puffs of smoke from a fire floated out of it.

Fawne's work, probably. Just to make the rebel base seem a little bit less desolate, like the farm where Fawne had spent her first years tending to animals and sewing until her fingers bled. Far away from the port district, with its ever-present smell of saltwater.

Nothing about the underground had changed since they were small elves. Even if a painting of the place was put up from Kastia's childhood, it would be difficult to find any difference beyond the colors of the torches that dotted the landscape. Even though it had been only a handful of weeks since she left with the scouting team, the unchanged space gave Kastia a feeling of nostalgia that settled deep in her heart like an itch that she couldn't quite scratch.

Before the vines of regret could wrap around her, Kastia turned left and proceeded further into the domain of her memories. Her tough hunter's boots crunched against small stones, broken so many times they became a fine grit that would be impossible to scrape off no matter the stick. The sound stopped abruptly as Kastia stopped in front of another cottage, a lamp on the wall burning bright flames of a pale rose.

The door to the cottage had been left slightly ajar. Through the gap between the door and the frame, Kastia could see a few figures moving around inside. One of them was small, and had pink hair.

Against the greens and browns that were normally worn by the rebels, it seemed to be lit from behind by an invisible lantern.

Omelet, Kastia thought as her heart lurched inside her chest. She put a hand on the rough surface before shoving the door open, with all the occupants jumping in surprise as it slammed into the wall.

Fawne stood up from a round wooden stool and took a few steps toward Kastia, her arm extended in an almost laughable gesture of friendship. “I thought you got lured away by the music of the fairies and ended up hanging out with a sentient tree,” Fawne said with far too much enthusiasm and not enough relief. “I’m glad to see that you’re okay—”

“Shh!” The redhead fourth occupant of the small room insisted, looking up at both of them before returning his attention to Omelet as the child sat obediently. The sack of herbs at his waist, along with the thick round goggles, meant that he was a medic. As Kastia watched, the messy redhead held his finger up in front of Omelet’s face and asked her to follow it. Omelet was awake now, which was good, but the kid also had a large glob of tree-sap colored salve making its home on her arm. Kastia sniffed the air and made a face.

Ick, elderflower salve. Were they out of medicinal herbs?

Just how bad of a condition was everything in, and how had she not noticed it? Were parts of this because of the mission she had pushed for, resulting in the broken glass and all of that screaming?

It’s not urgent enough, Kastia had told Omelette. But now that she thought about it, what was more important than staying alive to live?

“How is she?” Fawne asked, looking away from Kastia almost too quickly.

“You shouldn’t have let her sleep that long,” responded the doctor, standing up to look at Fawne, who turned a rather unflattering shade of red. The reconnaissance elf tugged on a large section of her hair, causing her head to tilt to the side so she resembled a curious animal. From the cot behind them, Kastia heard Omelet giggle.

“Marcos, it wasn’t me! I just carried her down the stairs.” Fawne retorted.

Her panic slowly subsiding at the reunion taking place, Kastia looked at Omelet— who was still in her cotton patient’s dress with the silver band around her wrist, a large hole in the metal where the jewel had once monitored her state. The silver coloring complimented

Omelet's thick pink hair, giving her the startling distance of someone much older than her eight or nine years.

How did all of this look to Omelette? Kastia wondered as she watched the child. She had probably been in the clinic for her entire life until being rescued by the rebellion. Taken from the place that she had been living in, Omelette was around strange people who claimed they had her best interests at heart. Her expression was even, with no discomfort at the checkup that she had been undergoing. Omelet seemed too used to classified hardships, for a child.

Maybe it was because of her being a twin.

The Kolineese, when forming new life, first incubated the embryo inside the body. After several weeks, the child- now a fetus- was expelled from the parent's body inside an egg, complete with a yolk sac containing the exact amount of nutrients required to bring the offspring to term. Because of that, the process was a delicate one- it didn't take a genius to know that much. If more than one embryo was incubated at the same time, the parent's body would instinctively try and care for both. The parent's body couldn't say no. It would try and try to produce enough nutrients in advance for both of the growing embryos, causing symptoms of tiredness and fatigue in the parent. At that point, they would suspect that something was wrong but not be able to do anything about it, even when both of the eggs were already outside of their carrier parent's body.

At least one of the twins would die before birth, not having enough nutrients to survive until full term. The surviving twin, if there was one, would almost undoubtedly have birth defects. The most common one was the lack of pointed ears that Kastia and Fawne had seen on the guard. Kastia's unborn nieces had both had it, according to her mother- the child hadn't been allowed to see the bodies. If one of them had lived until birth, what would her life

have been like? Would those dried lily flowers present at her sister's cremation have symbolized luck and love, instead of just lives that had deserved so much more?

Omelet was one of those lives, Kastia started to realize as she looked over at the pink-haired child. They were all orphans in a sense, alone until they had been taken in by the brave rebels fighting for the greater good.

Have you really never questioned what you've been told? Shiro's words rang through her mind as the bickering continued behind Kastia. Of course she had doubts at the beginning, but she hadn't trusted anyone back then. Taken away from whatever she had known before and put in this place, trust was a thing that took a long time to earn for her. They had all been through that, but Omelet wasn't showing any signs of hesitancy on her face. Instead, she was waiting in the background with a resigned slump to her shoulders. Omelet was used to other people talking about her fate as if she was merely an object that lived and breathed. The din around her had grown to almost deafening levels, and there was no outward expression at all.

"Maybe both of you could try asking her?" Kastia said loudly, putting her hands over her pointed ears. She swallowed the nerves that were trying to crawl up her throat as all heads swiveled around to look at her, including Omelet.

As she hopped off the cot that was slightly too tall, Omelet's pink hair bounced like the ears of a coney rabbit. "Nobody's stood up for me like that before," she said softly, walking underneath the gap in between Marcos' and Fawne's raised arms to stand by Kastia. "Thanks for worrying about me," added the littlest girl, briefly wrapping her arms around Kastia's waist from behind before letting go.

She must be so scared, Kastia thought. Does she feel safe here, as I do, in this space which suffocates me because it is too small?

This was her house, after all. At least, it had been. The cot wasn't super flattering, but it was hers, and that was the closest thing Kastia had to a real home.

Omelette turned to Marcos, who had stopped arguing with Fawne over the latter's stealing of Omelet from Kastia's arms and was just looking mildly irritated.

Smoothly and silently, Omelet slipped her hand around Marcos' arm. "I'm okay now, right?" she asked meekly, tugging on his sleeve until the fabric began to stretch out. "Can we go outside?"

Omelet had always been soft spoken whenever she spoke to Kastia, but never to the extent where she resembled a mouse. Perhaps to keep another argument from happening and disrupting? Kastia couldn't tell, but Marcos made an audible sound of distress at the sight of his best shirt being stretched out as Fawne almost bowed over in barely contained laughter.

"That's what you get for being picky," Fawne said. "Your shirt's going to end up stretched farther than an o-m-e-l-e-t."

She elbowed Kastia in the ribs as the latter's arms instinctively swung up to protect her face. Omelet, running over to Fawne, banged her fists on the redhead's legs. "That's not how you do my name!" she exclaimed. "It's Omelette, see?"

Holding up the silver bracelet, Omelette turned the band over so it was palm up. Written on the inside, in a script that made Kastia's brain hurt just with the task of deciphering it, was the name *Omelette*.

Okay, you're particular like that. Kastia opens her mouth to respond, but something about the expression on Fawne's face gets her to close it instead. Yes, Fawne was looking annoyed about being assaulted by a child, but there was something else in it. Something like danger, making the hairs on Kastia's arms stand up in rows of tiny little warriors about to start screaming and running.

“Of course we can go for a walk outside,” Kastia said quickly, her words almost tripping over each other in their haste to keep Omelette from turning those angry fists on her. Taking ahold of Omelette’s fists, she pried their fingers apart to look like a seirén-scale glove that was used during the colder months.

So, the little girl could be hotheaded after all, Kastia thought with a tiny smile. She shook her head adamantly. Of course, Omelette could be hot headed at times, she was a child. And more than that, Kastia was doing it again. She was doing what she had promised she would not do after hearing Shiro’s words, and evaluated based on her limited perception. She hadn’t known what would happen before.

Again, those words echoed in Kastia’s mind along with the flash of cloudy gray-blue eyes. *Have you never been told that your people were the aggressors?*

She turned to shout they were leaving to go for a tour, not turning her head to hear a response before closing the door.



The passage of time wasn’t as easy to tell underground as it was on the surface. There was no ball of heavenly fire in the sky, descending in a wide arc over the heads of people of varying species as they hawked their wares in Waterket’s Bazaar. The vast open space was entirely sculpted out by hand over hills and slopes, covered in paths of worn dirt and lit in a soft yellow glow by innumerable lamp posts. Kastia had slipped on the ground several times for two years until she was able to navigate its dips and curves, chasing after Fawne as the two of them laughed.

After their fight over Omelette, how was Kastia supposed to patch things up between them? How were they to move on? As those worried jumped around inside of Kastia’s mind

with all the force of twenty-pound glass bottles, Omelette walked beside Kastia in complete attentive silence until the duo rounded one of many bends in the descending path. A soft gasp escaped the child's mouth, and she tugged on the leather laces of Kastia's arm guard until the knot came loose.

"Hey, what's that big shiny thing?" Omelette asked, pointing to a large patch in the center of the settlement.

If they had been above ground, Kastia thought, it might have been called a town square. In the center of the patch was an evergreen oak high as the tallest building in Northaven, nearly 140 feet tall. Someone had placed hanging lamps powered by naturally luminescent yellow stones on a number of branches, giving it the look of a night sky. Wooden fencing went around in a large "U" shape, almost giving the feeling of the park Kastia would play in during her mom's discussions with the doctors.

"The shiny tree? It's a Living Tree." Kastia answered. Raising her free hand, she pointed towards the glowing branches. "After someone dies, we go and hang a lantern with their name on one of the lower branches. It's how we remember them at a gathering place."

It was something of an association that Hunters liked to be in places up high, where everything felt small. Kastia had never been one of those people. When she was upset, she unconsciously went to the base of the tree. Running her fingers over the bark and leaving traces of herself behind almost allowed Kastia to ask for forgiveness from those who had walked those steps before, and to reaffirm her motivations to get out from under the shadow of her adopted name.

After that, she could figure herself out.

"Like the wall at the clinic," Omelette answered in a soft voice. "I think the guards broke it when they were chasing after you, but they left some flowers."

Kastia stopped in the middle of the path, jumping in surprise as Omelette slammed into her back. Not because of the bump, although that didn't help Kastia's arm hairs to stop screaming *danger!*

No, the huntress stopped because she caught a glimpse of fiery red hair moving in front of the tree. A bright orb moving up and down in an irregular pattern drawn in the open underground settlement.

Elisa.

In all of the chaos of finding Omelette and making the return journey with a mostly unconscious child, Kastia had forced herself not to think of Elisa. Particularly with Fawne telling stories and jokes about the things they did as children.

Kastia didn't allow herself to wonder about Elisa, not even in the back of her mind. Not when the littlest things reminded her of Elisa, like the sunset's rippled reflection on the river after that first day of stumbling over trees and jumping at every creature that walked past.

Her shoulder was jolted as Omelette peeked out. The younger girl had her fingers interlocked, and the combined lump brushed Kastia's bare arm as they both jostled.

"What's that?" Omelette said quickly, craning her neck to follow Kastia's gaze all the way to Elisa. "Is it a horse?"

Kastia jolted with surprise, turning her head to look at Omelette. "What, do you read minds in addition to healing people?" she asked, her momentary panic sharpening her voice.

She felt a pang of regret when the edges of Omelette's smile faded, turning in the opposite direction to be replaced by a thin frown. "I was just curious about what you were looking at," she answered, taking a step back. "You looked so happy, but also... really scared."

It wasn't that simple. It was never that simple. Kastia sighed, a groan of frustration and anger at someone who had been trying to help. She had become part of this collective, first

by giving up her name and then by giving herself over to the rebellion fighting for what her mother encouraged. The system which had not allowed Kastia's sister to see the sky on her deathbed. She had given up all of her love for the cause and had none left.

Until she met Fawne, and then became entranced by Elisa's calmness as the latter burst into flames- literally. Now, there was Omelette.

How did she have any love left? Kastia asked herself as she approached Elisa. The redhead looked up, eyes flicking between anger and relief.

She was still not sure what the answer was.

Elisa took several steps forward, closing the distance between them in large strides. Kastia stayed where she was, eyes drifting up and down Elisa's frame in shock. Elisa's fiery red hair was pulled back in her normal intricate braid, but large strands had come loose and were dangling around her face in dizzying circles. Kastia's hand lifted up of its own accord as her wrist guard slipped off, and her eyes instinctively followed it. Kastia looked up only a second later, thin lips parted for something, anything, that wouldn't ruin this moment for all of them-

Slap!

Afterwards, Kastia would note that the initial impact itself didn't hurt. There were only faint pinpricks, like when she held a bowstring too tight so that it made a mark in her fingers. When the actual pain came a few seconds afterward, like that of adrenaline leaking out in a massive wave.

Kastia stumbled backwards, hand flying up to the spot where Elisa had slapped her. It was already turning red and beginning to puff up. Elisa's eyes were bright with unshed tears as the anger seemed to drain out of her face, leaving her pale and ashen. Her own palm was red where it had struck against Kastia's cheek.

“Stop,” Omelette said with an audible shake to her voice, looking between the two older elves in their tension. Her hands were held close to her chest in small fists, as if in a gesture of surrender.

Please don't hurt me, they seemed to say.

Kastia lowered her hands, but Elisa didn't move. Her arm was still angled upwards in the same angle of her slap, and it remained that way as her chest heaved in a complimentary beat with Omelette's. The redhead's eyes seemed to blaze alongside her hair.

Elisa looked exactly like what she was, Kastia realized as she and Omelette both stared. Not just angry, not just sad. She was almost alive with it.

A spark, catching fire and about to burn.

With a whimper, Omelette ran and hid behind a section of the large tree to escape from the yelling. That made sense. Just as the expression that Elisa wore as she stared at Kastia made sense.

“I thought you died.” Elisa's voice was pitched low to hide its shaking, but still the octaves trembled. “We fled with the children as the palace guards arrived, leading them down the riverbank and through the back roads. I didn't see you when we got back, or after that. We all thought you were *dead*, Kastia. I waited but you didn't come back.”

“Elisa,” Kastia started to say, but her eyes drifted down to the redhead's arms. Flames were starting to lick at the grass surrounding Elisa's feet, making their way up her body to coalesce into a ball of emotional overwhelm.

“After two days, I told Fawne I suspected that you hadn't come back. And she *laughed* at my words. Where have you been, Kastia?” Fawne's chest heaved as she sucked in air, pausing for only a moment. “I almost prayed to our gods, but my father prevented me from learning anything beyond a few words. I didn't know how to ask you to just come back.”

It wasn't on purpose-

I had to know, it was tearing at me from the inside. Gutting out the light inside until I couldn't feel it anymore.

Kastia stamped out one of the small flames that was burning grass by their feet. The small destruction fizzled out with a sad sound that sounded rather like a fart.

From her hiding place, Omelette pressed her lips together to resist a giggle. She didn't quite understand why it was that she was laughing, except maybe because it was an adult. Two adults.

"Elisa, you know why I left the group." Kastia answered, the volume of her voice rising. She held her hands together to stop them from shaking in fury. "I told you from the very beginning when you asked why I wanted to do this mission. Yes, I didn't come back with the rest of the rebels, but that *wasn't my fault*. Don't you ever insinuate that I stopped thinking about you for any reason other than refusing to fall apart in front of a child!"

Dimly, Kastia remembered that she wanted to tell Elisa what she had discovered about the rebellion. But that only lasted a moment before it fluttered out of her brain with the speed of a falling leaf.

Breaking the shocked silence, Elisa took a couple of steps towards Kastia. The remaining paltry flames fizzled out underneath her footsteps as she reached to cup the side of Kastia's face with her arm.

"You're crying," Elisa remarked, holding up two fingers to Kastia. Twin tears glimmered there like the cut crystals present in the royal guards' weapons, but most feelings lacked the tenacity to survive that long. Even with it becoming her driving motivation, Kastia had eventually found her answer. The ropes had frayed and snapped loose, leaving only empty air.

Until she remembered the face of someone who she wanted to see again

“Shut up.” Kastia shook her head, blinking rapidly to clear her vision. She leaned in closer to Elisa, close enough to catch the smell of her. Smoke, with an undertone of something sweet like candy. Kastia leaned in closer, breath catching in her chest.

Her lips hit Elisa’s, and for a handful of heartbeats, everything else had the privilege to be forgotten.

See me, pleaded a little voice inside her head. *Notice me, and love me as I am.*

A loud crash came from somewhere on Kastia’s left. Her eyes flew open and around, eventually landing on the ground by her feet. One of the glowing tree lanterns had come loose, the colorful materials shattering on impact. Immediately, Kastia’s heart jumped back into her chest.

“I thought someone was throwing rocks at us,” she said, finally allowing herself to laugh. Romances between people of the same sex barely received a second glance most of the time, but Kastia’s heart still spiked regardless.

Elisa bent down to examine the glittering grit. Her red hair had fallen out of its careful braid when Kastia grabbed it for the kiss, and it hid half of her face in a burning curtain. Kastia looked away, her drifting eyes finding Omelette still hiding behind the tree.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Kastia said, pitching her voice low and extending her hand. Omelette shook her head, and Kastia’s heart dropped. What had scared her? Was it the lantern falling, or the kiss?

Omelette held the sleeve of her borrowed clothes up as if to ward them off, and Kastia jolted in surprise when she saw how dirty the sleeve of it was. “Would you like to get some new clothes?” she asked, ignoring the sound of protest which came from somewhere behind her. Probably Elisa, who wouldn’t be able to forgive Kastia so quickly even after that exchange of romanticism. “We don’t have much pink fabric in here, so we’d have to go aboveground.”

“Absolutely not.” Elisa stood up, one of the lantern shards gripped in her hand. “I humored your desire to go to the clinic, and for two weeks I thought you were dead. Aboveground is not friendly to us, Kastia. It’s too risky.”

Ever the rational one, Kastia thought with a sigh. “You said it yourself, it’s been two weeks. It’s just a quick little trip to the seamstress, an hour or two at most. *I promise*, nothing will happen. We’ll be back before you even have a chance to get tired of me.”

It was the exact line that Kastia had used to topple Elisa’s opposition to anything she wanted to do. That sugar-sweet temptation of a quick reunion which sometimes panned out, and sometimes it didn’t.

When you spend your entire life teaching, yearning to grasp something and it dissipates into nothing but powder which blows away on the wind... and you can no longer glimpse the star that was glimmering in the sky like condensed hope that promised salvation. After your blood, sweat, and tears are gone from the earth with barely a trace, who is the person that’s left behind? In promising Omelette a new dress, in the everyday grooves and dips of freedom which she had hardly paid attention to before, Kastia was finding a purpose to her existence. She was a hunter, an artist, who wanted to make the children like Omelette smile and have something good to look back on. Maybe she would perform demonstrations at the spring festival, which celebrated the beginning of the hunting season. “Let’s go above ground,” Kastia said to Omelette, grabbing the little girl’s hand. “There’s a seamstress who’s sympathetic to our cause in the town. She would have pink fabric for you.”

Elisa pinched her nose with the bridge of her fingers for a long moment. Her resolve was wavering; before she could say anything, Kastia leaned in so her lips almost brushed Elisa’s neck.

“We already traumatized Omelette enough by tearing her away from her life,” she insisted. “If I can do anything to help this girl have a childhood with some happy memories in it, isn’t that worth all of the risk?”

For several moments, Elisa stood statue-still. Then she nodded, avoiding looking Kastia in the eyes. “You have four hours,” she said. “If you’re not back by then...”

Elisa’s eyes flickered over to Omelette, who had silently come out from behind the tree and was standing by Kastia’s leg.

“Please, come back.” Elisa whispered. “I can’t lose my love twice.”

The little girl held onto Kastia’s hand, wrapping their fingers together as she nodded.

To be Continued.

Belrose

by

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The storm outside her window was nearly silent, entirely devoid of the sound of falling raindrops. All that she could hear was a persistent shoosh, shoosh, the sound of a whistle without the human voice behind it. This wind had sounds, syllables and words. If she closed her eyes and turned up her ears, she could almost hear the speech beneath. A persistent whoosh, rising and falling like the musical notes in a soundtrack.

Reaching across her bed, she picked up the small remote control that lay face down. Pressing a few buttons, a tune began playing from the smart speaker placed underneath the bed skirt. It comforted her, this familiar tune, wrapping her in a warm blanket with some kind of pattern on it. Ice cream cones wearing sunglasses, maybe, if that wouldn't get a disapproving remark from her parents.

You're too old for this stuff, Poppy, they'd tell her, taking away the blanket like they took away her decorative Japanese erasers after the shortcake one came apart all over the floor. And the unspoken follow-up that she was a teen girl now, supposed to have left her childhood behind or at least learned to be ashamed of it.

She had hidden the erasers in a box underneath her bed. As if responding to the turmoil of memory, the wind outside her window picked up. The unsourced whistle reached a fever pitch, almost screaming in the same decibel sound as the yell that came from downstairs, barely heard over the lyrics of the song.

*Even if I may stumble and fall,
there is a tomorrow which waits for me
Beyond the clouds lies a shining horizon
reach it one step at a time.
An unseen future, glimpse
not the shadows that block your way
threaten to clip your wings*

*fly high above and those words which yearn
will find their freedom.*

If she ran away now, opened up the window and let the raindrops take her away, would they even care about losing the person who was their only daughter? Poppy had considered the idea before, but her fear of death had proven to be stronger than her desire for freedom. To live like the wind that was currently blowing outside of the glass, untethered by expectations of behavior or decisions.

Even in this bedroom, which was supposed to be her place of sanctuary, there were but little traces of its occupant on the walls. A doll that Poppy's father had bought her upon her birth, resting against a small pile of books with dark covers and titles embossed in gold script. The brightest was a pale green copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, which Poppy had chosen with nothing but slightly raised eyebrows from her parents at the book's original publishing date of 1813. She had first chosen it for the thoroughly-addressed theme of hasty judgments and their consequences, silently screaming for them to gain the connection between the main character Elizabeth and herself. *Look at her*, she silently shouted. *Look at me. Elizabeth did what she wanted and everything turned out alright in the end.*

Every time Poppy professed her ability to handle herself, something would go wrong. Her little brother, Basil, seemed to have an uncanny ability to sabotage any hopes at raising their trust level. Maybe she would forget to pick him up from school, and Basil would break all of the crayons in his after-school program. Poppy had been blamed the last time that happened.

The knocking outside her door resumed in short bursts of louder sound, followed by a handful of words which caused her to sit upright and frantically turn off the remote control.

"Poppy Elizabeth, why is the downstairs floor covered in water?!"

The voice was definitely her mother's. Every cell in Poppy's body was simultaneously screaming *hide, until she stops yelling. Don't yell! Don't yell! Don't yell at me-*

She had promised herself that she would clean up the water in five minutes. Five minutes should be a trackable distance, from point A to point B... but it wasn't, where the seconds compressed themselves together until one second and fifty meant the same thing. *I'm sorry*, Poppy wanted to shout, but the words caught in her throat.

There was too much noise already, with the wind having picked up until it audibly rattled the shutters outside. If she was able to live her own way, Poppy fleetingly wondered, would the scolding stop, so she didn't mask herself anymore.

The little hoop earrings weren't Poppy's idea. Like most things that she did, it never was. She knew that as she got dressed, rummaging around in her drawers for clean underwear and a bra. There was one that was always kept safe in the bottom of a drawer, buried and saved for when the Hurricane Wrath finally made landfall. What was she thinking, buying this thing? It was dark and lacy and just so embarrassing to look at. If her parents found out- they never would, because they only noticed her presence when spiderweb cracks appeared on their television- it was the same risk all over again.

What happened to the times when her boundless energy had made them laugh, spinning around together in the grass as Poppy held her favorite teddy bear?

Overcome by a sudden urge for hugs, she looked up at the position above her desk to glimpse Mister Peabody's soft brown fur. The bear was one of those things which had managed to survive every scruple of Poppy's childhood, only coming out a little worse for wear.

She blinked once, then twice more, a burst of panic exploding behind her hazel eyes. Mister Peabody's comforting shape was gone, leaving behind only a bear-shaped gap in the dust on her shelf. Standing on top of her rolling desk chair, Poppy felt along the wooden shelf

until one bare foot slipped off, sending her crashing to the floor. Suddenly, her chest began to tighten. It was only this one issue now, but what if she never found out-?

Poppy pulled at the front of her pajamas, forcing herself to focus on the soft fabric underneath her hands. With its pattern of donuts and stuffed-animal fuzziness, her heartbeat slowly returned to normal. Just then, the smell of burning polyester trickled into her room from the gap under the door.

It was a familiar smell, Poppy realized. *No, it can't be.*

Fumbling to undo the lock on her door, Poppy wrenched it open. She took the stairs two at a time, slipping when she was halfway down and sailing down the rest on her butt. Hitting the bottom with a thump, Poppy scrambled to her feet like a Labrador Retriever running after a tennis ball.

In the kitchen, standing on top of a black step stool in front of the oven, was Basil. He was also in his pajamas, patterned with bright outlines of cartoon characters. His red-brown hair stuck up in tufts, making Poppy's little brother look deceptively adorable.

In Basil's hands was her precious teddy bear, being reduced to smoldering cinders. As Poppy watched, another section of Mister Peabody's arm turned ashen, the individual fibers curling upon themselves like dying spiders before releasing their last screams.

She swallowed, trying to not feel sick. "Basil," said Poppy, taking a step towards her little brother. "What *on earth* are you doing?"

At least he had the grace to look ashamed. Running around him, Poppy twisted the front knob on the stove, pinching her nose to block the burning smell. The flames fizzled out with a sound like deflating helium, leaving Basil holding a half-burned brown bear and a pile of ashes at the siblings' feet.

Poppy's heart, a rope pulled taut in between two invisible posts of iron, was already fraying. With the sight of her beloved bear reduced to atoms, the rope snapped. Poppy's

knees buckled. The physical embodiment of those fuzzy childhood memories was gone, she realized as tears began to escape from their ducts.

What is the point of memories without the proof of their existence? Poppy wondered, putting a hand over her mouth to stifle the gasping sobs that were bursting out of their own volition. Elizabeth Bennet wouldn't have let herself cry, she knew, but neither Poppy nor anyone she knew was Elizabeth Bennet. If this was a book, then maybe it would have, but she had been forced to realize that life *wasn't like that*.

From above their heads came the sudden sound of creaking floorboards. The siblings' parents had woken up, probably alerted more by the rancid smell of burning polyester than their eldest child's uncontrolled sobs.

The miniscule rational part of Poppy's brain not affected by the meltdown told her to *calm down, calm down*, playing in a drum's steady rhythm. Air was pushed into her lungs with each deep breath, but so too did her parents' footsteps grow closer. No sooner had Poppy managed to curb her drowning sobs did they come into view, with her father's salt-and-pepper hair all leaning to the left just like hers did. When she was a small child- at least according to her parents' stories- Poppy had loved tugging on her father's hairs and watching as they curled in on themselves.

Her heart was filled until overflowing, a plant of her namesake which had been overwatered to the point of drowning. Amidst the shouts- *how could you leave it like this, your brother could have been seriously hurt*- Poppy made her way up the stairs, taking them two at a time before running into the nearest room and locking it. Her hands were shaking so badly that it took three tries to lock the door, then sat against its back.

There wasn't any sound from the other side.

Poppy sat against the door for a few hours in something of a half-daze. With every sound from downstairs, every creak of the floorboards, her heart lightened half a millimeter in

a vain hope that it was her parents coming to apologize. But as the sun inched its way across the sky as a floating ballroom light, there was nothing. Such an argument would have been followed by a dramatic declaration of emotions in *Pride and Prejudice*, Poppy thought glumly as she stood up to grab the book. Her limbs were stiff from being in one position for so long, though, and she fell onto the floor with a rather unceremonious *thunk*.

If Basil had been there, he would have laughed. His behavior hadn't exactly endeared Poppy towards the other sex, especially in the concept of dating them. While her classmates gossiped in little groups about their first boyfriends, Poppy usually put herself in a corner with one of Jane Austen's novels. If not *Pride and Prejudice*, then maybe *Mansfield Park*, just she had been lured in by how many people on the internet were arguing over it.

Reaching the speaker remote hidden under her covers, Poppy climbed into bed with a notebook in hand. She flopped down on the mattress and closed her eyes, the hardcover edges digging into her palm.

Suddenly, inspiration struck her. Poppy quickly sat up, the blood rushing to her head, and began to write.



When the music turns on, I can see a scene in my mind's eye. A woman maybe in her 20's, wearing a halter dress with a sweetheart neckline. She holds the sides of the dress and smiles as she looks at an unknown someone, lips painted with a dark red. When she extends her hand, the scene changes and she is dancing with that unseen person.

It's an old-fashioned scene, from the 50's or 60's. She dances with the person that I can't remember even in the midst of my own daydream. They spin around each other and smile.

It is with a man, because that is how we are taught to dream. Man marries woman and produces the next generation, leading the way for his queer sons and daughters and Those Who Do Not Wish To Identify to wonder at the system which allows for their continued prosecution. I do not love a man; I do not wish to ever know one at the mandated depth. Yet, our society makes it so imagination does not include those who dare to have it.

The scene changes, leaving the girl to spin around the man. Her dress twirls in a bright wave of purple under the lights as she twirls, a band playing on the stage above them. I can't help but wonder what kind of auditorium contains a stage besides the ones that exist in romantic comedies or music videos. There is a 30-year gap between the scene I imagine and the music that plays alongside it, and it strikes me as odd that no one questions this kind of logic when it comes to musical fantasies. The girl is a woman, and yet the people she almost hits with her dress are meant to be younger.

A blue spotlight turns to flash on the camera, and the auditorium empties out. That same woman is sitting backwards on a chair in the room, empty aside from a few attendants clearing out chairs in stacks taller than themselves. She has been abandoned by the one that she considered loving, and then she stands up to sing. The lipstick is still intact with her makeup, even as tears stream down her cheeks in emotion.

The words speak of a heartbreak that comes with a freeing sense of honesty, because the development that leads to freedom is written in the stars.

Written by Poppy Elizabeth Belrose.

When she finally put the pen down, Poppy's hand was cramping and stained with ink. She felt vindicated because of those words she had written without even looking to check if they were spelled correctly, and some of the letters had smeared across the page.

Her condition was often hyped up in terms of its so-called downsides- the attention span of a rock, losing her nose if it wasn't attached to her face- but never the nightmares. Those were never talked about. The ghosts that haunted her in the night, wearing her family's faces and attacking her for every single mistake. The incident in the kitchen had joined that patchwork of jagged lines running circles around Poppy whenever she closed her eyes, accompanied by the acrid odor of burning polyester.

It was no wonder that she was a coward, really. No wonder at all.

Turning to her bed, Poppy began to rummage underneath it. She barely packed her bag before heaving the window open; after all, she would only be gone just long enough to make a point. She was planning to come back after a little while, because Poppy's heart ached for the familiarity even when it was accompanied by so many tears.

Just long enough to make them see how much I am starved of love.