

Nation Nine

A Senior Honors Thesis

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Program

By
Madeleine Bryant
English Major

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Thesis Director: Dr. James Whorton Jr., Associate Professor and Associate Chair, English

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example of an Honors senior thesis project.*

Writing a novel for young adults requires imagination and persistence. Writing a self-reflective essay forces me to examine my own motives and beliefs, and then figure out a way to accurately portray them for an audience. However, after much deliberation, what it boils

down to is why do I prefer writing fiction prose over non-fiction prose and why have I chosen the young adult demographic? Almost all of my motivation for writing can be examined and explained through the lenses of these two questions and the term “escapism.”

I do not write personal non-fiction pieces very often. When I do, it is usually in a stream-of consciousness format, not overly different from Benjy’s section in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*; there is little to no plot development or a constancy of thought pattern, just a literal stream of words and sentences as I think of them, attempting to figure things on my life out. The reason why I write non-fiction is the same reason why I don’t write it often; it is a way of examining and releasing thoughts on an event in my life that has been traumatizing in some way. I focus on traumatizing events such as my parents’ divorce, rectifying the fact that my mother is mentally an incredibly damaged person, and my own extensive health issues that threaten my life day to day.

It is not because these things happen infrequently that I don’t write often about them. My health problems have been occurring for over two years, slowly worsening, and it was only recently that the fifth doctor I’ve seen threw his hands up in the air and told me my symptoms were in my head. My mother has been displaying mental and social deficiencies since I was five and I was home-schooled my entire academic career up to college, effectively stunting my social growth and ostracizing me from the outside world for the majority of my childhood. I don’t write about them often because these events are almost constantly occurring and I can’t bear to think about them another second. When I do write about these things, it’s because I need an outlet for the cruel thoughts tormenting me, the hateful thoughts that make the pain worse.

I write fiction because it's a wonderful way to escape and change my surroundings for a little while. I am in control of a little world all my own, and I can lose myself in it for some time. It makes it possible for me to put my physical pain and self-hate aside for a few hours. Many authors write for this reason. It is said that many of J. R. R. Tolkien's original ideas for *The Silmarilion* and writing came out of the fact that he spent the majority of his childhood alone. Thinking of these languages and exotic places were a way for him to cope with being alone. Tolkien is hailed as the creator of the secondary world, defined as the connection between the real world and a created alternate world, the basis for all fantasy and science fiction writing. He and C. S. Lewis were pioneers in both fantasy and science fiction, and both were greatly influenced by the pain and atrocities in their lives, such as the death of family and friends and being on the battlefields of World War I.¹

As a writer, I find that non-fiction is a very valuable tool in practicing writing skills, and encourages layers of observation that other aspects of life do not require. It is the perfect place for new writers to start because at first they are only required to record what they see and observe and translate it into writing, using engaging techniques. This allows them to practice all the technical skills of writing without over-complicating their task with plot and a large cast of characters. However as a reader, I personally find most nonfiction to be more useful for information gathering, and would prefer to read fiction, specifically fantasy, when I want entertainment and relaxation.

¹ Information relating to the personal history J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis comes from the first chapter of *The Evolution of Tolkien's Mythology: A Study of the History of Middle-Earth* by Elizabeth A. Whittingham.

Granted, this is a thought more widely embraced by younger generations. This preference to fiction for entertainment is why many international best sellers, such as *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *The Hobbit* are all fiction. They grasp the reader's imagination and take them places they have never been. With the increased divorce rates, more and more children are coming from broken and unhappy homes. Many children hate being in school. It is the stage for much of their early failures and personal torment. It is not surprising that it is more interesting to them to read about vampires wandering the halls of a highschool than reading about how bullying is on the rise across America. These children know about bullying; many of them have been victims of it, be it physical, mental or emotional. In their free time, they would much rather read something that gets them away from the trauma, rather than reading something that makes them re-live each taunt and each punch. As these children age, they will gain a greater appreciation for non-fiction works, but as I am writing for the high-school and young adult demographic, I tend toward writing fiction, and particularly fantasy.

The idea I have been dancing around in these last few paragraphs is that of escapism. Escapism is a type of mental diversion through entertainment. This entertainment can range from movies to books to video games to even the pure use of imagination. It is used, as the word itself suggests, to "escape" for a short time a reality that has become too painful or even too boring. Escapism is often frowned upon because society tends to see it in the frame of things such as video games that are marked as useless. The stereotype is an individual who has become so unhappy and removed into his or her own mind that he or she has ceased to become a functioning member of society. In his book *The Time Machine*, H. G. Wells makes a social

commentary on the effects of escapism in his race the Eloi. The Eloi spend their days listening to music, dancing, and eating. All knowledge and forward social progress is non-existent because the Eloi are unable to end their self-destructive indulgence. They are so immersed in their own fantasies that the entire race has been reduced to livestock.

While these negative stereotypes might be true in some extreme cases, the majority of the human population actually uses escapism on a regular basis, such as eating when depressed or exercising to release stress. Religion itself is a type escapism because it provides people with the faith that no matter how bad things might be, they will get better. Religion offers them the strength to pull themselves through the trauma. Escapism is what allows people to pull back from their pain and regain the strength to move forward through difficult and frightening times.

Escapism is a driving force behind social change. In the fantasies of human minds utopias are born. These visions are what push people to invent miraculous machines that change the world. In his article "On Fairy Stories", J. R. R. Tolkien made the point that escapism allowed the mind to wander from the binds of reality into other, possibly more innovative realities. By examining these different realities we can make ideas to improve the future. For example, the man who invented the cell phone chose the design because of the communication devices on *Star Trek*. If that man had not immersed himself in what is, in certain circles, scoffed at as a hobby for the weak and socially inept, society would not have one of the most influential devices of the 21st century.

One of the arguments against escapism is that marks mental instability, which is not true. There is nothing wrong with the use of imagination to expand the scope of the real world. There is no reason for there to be any instability in the secondary worlds that these people escape to. In fact, if there is, that is a mark of poor writing. The secondary worlds that literary escapism is based on are meant to be just as stable as reality, which draws in the reader and presents a sense of wonder. This stability in a secondary world can require a suspension of disbelief, which provides a freedom from the logic of the real world. It is very difficult to create a fascinating world with this amount of stability. This is why *Harry Potter* had such an explosive popularity. J. K. Rowling created a secondary world that functioned on similar rules to reality, yet was fantastic enough to expand the imaginations of millions of people worldwide.

When I was younger, my house had an extensive library, containing over four thousand children books alone. While I loved the *Harry Potter* series and the *Pendragon* series, and even classics such as *Frankenstein* and Edgar Allen Poe's short stories, the books I read the most were the *Artemis Fowl* series by Eoin Colfer, a series that is sadly lacking in widespread popularity. It is a fantasy series that combines advanced technology, fairy magic, and mastermind criminal plots. Colfer's premises and writing style are brilliant, executed with deceptive simplicity. Each new reading reveals details and hints that added an entirely new dimension each time I read it. It provided hours of endless entertainment and comfort through difficult times. Although I have enjoyed works by many authors such as J. K. Rowling, H. G. Wells, Bruce Coville, D. J. McHale, Gail Carson Levine, and J. R. R. Tolkien throughout my

life, Colfer's writing style has been the most influential on my own. I admire his ability to write scenes with great wit and on the next page have the reader in tears. He makes the reader honestly care about the outcomes of every character, to cheer on every victory and mourn every loss.

In my own writing I endeavor to create characters who stand out with their own, complex personalities that are relatable to the reader. I want readers to be invested in what is going on in the book, to be completely immersed in the story, and to walk about in a happy haze after finishing a chapter. Future readers should be able to read my books and see themselves side by side with my characters; to see them as worthy heroes and role models.

Most importantly however, I want to be able to help those who need it, to provide a safe haven for those who need somewhere to go. I would never have been able to make it through some of the hardest times in my life without the friends and heroes I found in the pages of books. I would like to return the favor and help others. Young adulthood is an incredibly difficult part of life. People in this age range are expected to make decisions that will affect the rest of their lives monumentally, yet have not even finished forming physically or mentally. The pressure and stress is immense and many people feel very alone through this. They are unable to depend on their peers for support because their peers are just as inadequately prepared, and unfortunately many come from split homes and no longer feel they can depend on their families either.

These are the people who need the most support. Their decisions are the decisions that will mold the future, yet so often they slip through the cracks of society. It is my desire to be

able to help them through my books, just as much as reading and writing have helped me through my own difficulties. I deeply believe in the power of the written world to help people through their sorrows, and have every intention to carry on the noble tradition. I want to help others just as literature has helped me, and even if I only make a single life better for just a moment, it would make all the hours of crafting and writing and editing worth all the effort.

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Excerpt from *Nation Nine*

Bi-Annual Personnel Report of Compound 62512

One: Mechanics. Male. 24 Years. Performance: **Acceptable**

Two: Guard. Male. 27 Years. Performance: **Excellent**

Three: Textiles. Female. 23 Years. Performance: **Poor**

Four: Nourishment. Female. 53 Years. Performance: **Acceptable**

Five: NA

Six: Hunter-Gatherer. Female. 21 Years. Performance: **Acceptable**

Seven: Sanitation. Male. 59 Years. Performance: **Poor**

Eight: Medical. Male. 44 Years. Performance: **Excellent**

Nine: Agriculture. Male. 23 Years. Performance: **Acceptable**

Five has been deceased for 3 months. Send Compound 62512 a new Five by the end of the month.

Monitor Seven due to advanced age. If health is failing in any manner, file report for expulsion to the Outlands and file for new Seven.

Compound to be re-examined in 6 months.

Chapter 1

“We’re supposed to be getting a new Five today.”

I glanced up as Seven sat down next to me, clunking his coffee cup down against the worn wood of the table.

“About time. We haven’t had one in what... three months?” I replied, slowly stirring powdered milk into my oatmeal.

“Four at least,” corrected Seven. He leaned back against his chair, wobbling as the wood groaned against his significant weight. I watched him quietly for a few moments, making sure that he wasn’t going to crash to the floor, before continuing my breakfast preparations.

“Hopefully this one will last a little longer. I’m sick of scraping Fives off the wall,” said Seven callously, trying to provoke a response from me. I scowled slightly at him, trying to block off the surge of distasteful images that flashed into my mind. I was saved from any more of his disturbing remarks by Four and Six walking in, chattering in their soft voices. It was hard to tell how old Four was since she used injections and salves to keep herself somewhat young. It was whispered she was even older than Seven. People who whispered that usually were promptly whacked in the head with whatever cooking utensil she had on hand.

Six on the other hand was about my age, and had arrived at the base only a few weeks after I did. Our predecessors had been killed in the same energy core melt down. She was relatively small and lithe, with skin browned to a pale nut color by her constant forages outside. My stomach squeezed slightly when she glanced over at my table. I quickly looked back down at my congealing oatmeal.

The others slowly filed in, quietly gathering their various breakfasts. Soft murmurs wove through the air, as sleep wore off and the news of the new Five spread. One sat down next to me, balancing a heaping plate of re-hydrated eggs, Bay-con, and pancakes on one hand.

“Sup dude. So who do you think the Nulls are going to send?” he asked, voice muffled already by a mouthful of eggs.

“Probably a little boy. They fit best in the pipes,” interjected Seven calmly, running a hand over his balding head. I frowned, but One nodded in mute agreement.

“Hopefully this one won’t be as chunky as the last one. Who knows how he managed to get enough food to get that big,” said Seven.

“He might have just been naturally big boned,” I inserted quietly. “Besides, he wasn’t killed because he was overweight. His harness got caught on a snag.”

“Still smelled like a pork barbecue afterwards,” snorted Seven.

One quietly pushed away his bacon, looking a tad green.

“Don’t be coarse, Seven.”

Eight stopped briefly behind Seven, looking coldly over his reading glasses. He had apparently been in his lab all night and forgotten to take them off.

“That you’ve managed to survive longer than most Sevens does not give you the right to mock the deaths of others. Each life is precious and each death is to be fully mourned,” he said. His tone was firm, but his eyes were tired and sad.

Seven snorted derisively.

“Don’t be so sentimental, you quack. People shouldn’t ignore their training and make stupid mistakes that others have to clean up.”

“You’re our cleaner. Learn how to deal with cleaning up messes, no matter how disgustingly bloody they are,” responded Eight coolly, moving on to his own little table in the corner. I returned contentedly to my breakfast, ignoring Seven’s off-colored grumbling.

“Thinking he’s so much better than us, never stickin’ his neck out, always holed up in that little lab of his...”

A harsh buzzer rang out, making the aluminum shades of the hanging lights rattle with a metallic hum. Everyone went quiet, staring bleakly at the plates of half eaten food.

“That must be the tube rat,” stated Seven, standing up. “Come on people, put on your happy faces and let’s greet the kid.”

As one, we stood up, murmuring the traditional thanks to the Nulls for allowing us the food on our plates, and filed out to the strip field. Red lights flashed down the concrete halls, announcing the arrival of the shuttle with our new Five. It was still dark outside and a cool wind whistled through the dilapidated stone buildings. Two walked the perimeter, making sure the electric fences were working and no lamia had slipped through. The Nulls wouldn’t look kindly on our compound if we lost a Five just as we got one.

The shuttle hovered above the dirt field, lowering its pneumatic hatch with a hiss. I squinted against the light pouring out of the belly, trying to make out the small figure, huddled against the wind. A Zed pushed this figure roughly off the hatch platform and threw a small pack of clothes after it. Before any of us could step forward to gather either, the hatch shut with

a reverberating clang and the shuttle lifted off in a cloud of whirling dust. Three and Four rushed forward to help up our new Five.

As Seven had predicted, he was a young boy, only ten or eleven years old. He was small, even for a Five, and had pale skin with slick dark hair. His patched coat was too big for him and covered his hands. He looked around with the same frightened expression every Five had when arriving to a compound; he had no idea what he was doing here and probably had been terrorized by the Zeds on the way here with various stories of gruesome deaths.

Eight quickly kneeled down in front of Five and performed a few quick tests to make sure that his hearing, eyes, and mental capacities were all intact. Three retrieved the bag from where it had fallen, taking it back into the compound. Five started after her with a panicked expression, apparently under the impression that she was attempting to steal his belongings.

“Man,” whispered One to me. “He’s tiny. And not a good tiny. More like he’s gonna snap if I hand him a wrench tiny. What were the Nulls thinking sending us this one? He’s going to die in a month.”

“Maybe they’re running out of Fives,” I frowned. “That Unit does have the highest mortality rate; we usually go through one every year. The breeders might be having trouble keeping up with demand.”

One and I watched as Five was led into the compound, ready to be rinsed and shown his dorm room.

“Not good, man,” whispered One finally. “I don’t have a good feeling about this. We haven’t gotten any real news from the Nulls in months, it takes forever to get our Five, and

when he does show up, he's this scrawny sickly looking little thing. Something's definitely going down."

I shot him a warning look. The shuttle was still within scoping range.

"You've been inhaling too many gas fumes. Nothing's going down in Fiore. No news is good news. Stop licking the nuke cores before you attach them."

One glanced up at the sky and made a face, then looked back at me.

"You should try it sometime. They've got this really nice salty taste and fizz so wonderfully on the tongue."

"You're disgusting."

"Get to work you two," shouted Seven from the compound door. "Play time is over!"

I spent the day in the greenhouses cultivating a new crop of coltsfoot and purslane for Eight. Night had fallen by the time I finally started locking up the greenhouses and walking back to the compound. My little handheld lantern barely lit the dirt path in front of me. Every little rustle made me jump. It was a bad idea to be out this late unarmed. Even though the electric fences were supposed to keep out the lamia, there was always a possibility that one had slipped through a gap. The escaped genetic experiments were constantly morphing and evolving into more horrific, blood-thirsty and intelligent versions of themselves. They roamed the forests and plains in packs, devouring anything and everything, even their own pack

members at times. Even worse, if they didn't finish you off, the radiation would supposedly turn you into one of them. That's how we lost the last Two. All it would take would be One turning off the electricity for fifteen minutes, Two missing a hole in the fence, or Six not closing the gate properly and I would be little more than a bloody smear on the dusty path.

Shrubs directly to my right rustled ominously. I shot to the side, holding out the lantern to see what was there, ready to throw it if need be. Six calmly pushed her way out of the underbrush, a dead lamia strapped to her back, its head lolling on her shoulder. There was blood dripping out of its mouth and staining Six's exposed neck. She blinked, shielding her eyes from the lantern light.

"Hi Nine. What are you doing out?"

I sighed in relief.

"Oh good, it's just you. I lost track of time in the greenhouses." I frowned slightly.

"Where did you get that thing?"

Six glanced at the head on her shoulder.

"I found this guy trying to burrow under the gate. I think he had rabies or something because he was trying to dig through even though the fence had nearly fried him to death by the time I got there. It was pretty weird, so I figured Eight would like to take a look at the body."

I wrinkled my nose slightly, squinting at the creature. Its form was mostly lupine, with reddish brown fur and semi-floppy ears. The lower canine teeth were long and tusk-like with

serrated edges. The paws were large with sharp dirty claws and the legs were longer than those of any wolf.

“I see there haven’t been any major advancements lately.”

“Not unless this disease is supposed to bring about something.”

“Good point.” I poked the paw gingerly. “You’re sure you killed it right?”

Six nodded.

“Right through the head with a crossbow bolt. Let’s get back, I’m starving and I can’t eat until I drop off the body and get washed up.”

I took Six’s bag of daily kills for her and started back to the compound.

“Have you met Five properly yet?” I asked, shouldering the bag more comfortably.

“No, not yet. He seemed a little shell shocked, didn’t he?” Six spit out a few hairs tickling her mouth.

“I feel sorry for Fives,” I said. “They’re never really trained for anything specific, so they never know what they’re getting into. Not to mention how young they are. I heard that one of the units up north got a Five that was only about six years old.”

Six shook her head.

“I hope he was okay.”

I looked down. The boy had only lasted a month. His arm was ripped off when the fan in an air duct started unexpectedly. Loss of blood led to confusion, so instead of making his

way out, the boy had gone deeper into the maze of pipes. No one had been able to get to him for days, by which time he had died of blood loss and already started to decompose. I didn't envy the Seven in that compound.

“So, I was having an interesting conversation with One,” I said, eager to change the subject to something less gruesome.

“Do tell,” replied Six, gently bopping my arm with the lamia's foot. “One is always good for interesting, often illegal, conversations.”

“We were talking about names,” I said, swatting away the paw. “And how the Nulls get to pick their own.”

“I always wondered how they thought of them,” said Six. “That's the one benefit of having your career Unit as your name. You don't have to think too hard.”

I snickered at her smarmy grin.

“So that's why Nulls don't do anything else for the rest of their lives but eat and lounge around Fiore. They wore themselves out thinking of their names.” I flicked her nose with a grin.

“What would you name yourself, if you were a Null?” asked Six, bumping me with her hip. I nearly fell into a bush.

“I don't know,” I replied, regaining my balance. “One said I should be an Ashley. I somehow have a horrible feeling he was mocking me. Isn't it a girl's name? Anyway, what would you name yourself?”

Six's face relaxed into a dreamy expression. She had obviously thought about this before.

"I heard a name once when I was still in Unit Six," she said. "One of the younger girls was being adopted and I remember the name of the Null... Isolde. I always thought it sounded so beautiful. Like a song. She was very pretty too, all thin and willowy with long blonde hair. Oh, I wanted so badly to be the one she adopted... Then I could have a name and family of my own."

I smiled softly down at her. With a blink and small shake of her head, Six snapped herself out of her reverie and looked up at me.

"I was too old and ugly though," she said, grinning. "The girl she adopted was blond haired-and blue-eyed just like her."

"I think you're beautiful," I said defensively, without thinking. "Black hair is just as gorgeous as blonde."

Six smiled gratefully up at me.

"You're just saying that because you have blond hair," she said, slowly smirking. "If she had wanted a boy, she would have adopted you."

"Nah." I shrugged. "I'm a troublemaker."

Six laughed and bumped me with her hip again, sending me stumbling down the path. We made it back to the compound just as Two was about to lock the doors. He leaned against the wall, the number two tattooed into his scalp visible through closely cropped hair.

“I thought you guys were already in,” he said with a wide yawn.

“I had to get something for Eight,” smirked Six, tapping the lamia’s head up. Two grimaced as the head lolled towards him with blood dripping off its nose to the floor.

“Hate those buggers. Curse that chemical-sniffing scientist that thought up this plague to unleash on us. If we’re not careful those things are going to take over the world and eat everything in it.”

He slammed the thick steel door shut behind us, sliding the deadbolts into place and flipping the switch that sent an electric current through the frame.

“Their meat is so poisoned with radiation even Four can’t do anything with it. Just a waste of air and water. Why did you even bother to bring it in instead of burning it, Six?”

Six and Two walked down the hall in front of me, heading towards Eight’s lab room with the lamia corpse. Six was animatedly telling Two in great detail about how she found the creature, its unusual behavior, and how she killed it. I watched her retreating figure for a moment before heading to the kitchen to drop off the freshly caught meat and the vegetables from the greenhouses.

Four inspected my offerings carefully, sorting and marking the food for when and how she was going to use it. I attempted to help, but she shooed me away, claiming that the kitchen was too small for a man as tall as me. I found myself out in the dining hall with a door slammed behind me. Just before I was about to leave and head to my room for the night, I noticed a small figure huddled in the corner with a cup of water. It was Five, still wearing the same ragged coat he had arrived in. I changed course and sat myself down beside him.

“Hey buddy, how was your first day in the compound?”

He looked up at me with his huge, black eyes. I mentally cringed away from their dark depths.

“It was okay. I didn’t do anything.”

“We’ve kind of gotten used to not having a Five around. Don’t worry. I’m sure One and Seven will find some jobs for you soon.”

Five shuddered.

“I don’t like Seven. He said... He told me... he told me that I was going to die. He said I was going to be ripped from limb to limb and that he was going to muck my brains off the duct walls.”

He shuddered epileptically again. I rolled my eyes.

“Seven has issues; I wouldn’t take him too seriously. I’m sorry he scared you on your very first day here, though. That wasn’t fair.”

Five peered up at me. I smiled in what I hoped was a reassuring manner.

“I promise you’ll be fine.”

He frowned, squinting at me.

“No I won’t. You’re going to send me into the pipe works and the ducts and all those little tiny cracks and holes none of you can fit into and I’m going to get snagged by something or fried by something or eaten by something!”

“There isn’t anything living in the air duct system. If Seven told you that he probably stole some drugs from Eight for recreational purposes.”

Five burrowed deeper into his coat, refusing to look at me. I watched him quietly for a few minutes, unsure what to say.

“Listen buddy, I’m sorry,” I finally sighed. “It’s unfortunately pretty much guaranteed that you will die here; I’m not going to lie to you. But you know, we’re all in the same boat; we’re all stuck here until the day we die unless we do something stupid and get carted to the Outlands. That doesn’t mean you’ll die tomorrow, though. Just do the best you can and I promise that you’ll do okay. I can also guarantee you that I will never be the one to send you on a dangerous mission. I work in the greenhouses. The most I’d ask you to do is to get a tool that falls behind the bench.”

I smiled ruefully.

“As you can probably tell, I’m just a little big to get it sometimes.”

Five peeked his head out, smiling slightly. I smiled back and ruffled his hair a little.

“You better get to bed. You’re going to have to get to work tomorrow. I’ll make sure you start with something easy, okay?”

He nodded, unfolding himself from the bench. I led him out and back to his room. It was just down the hall from mine, so I told him that if he needed anything to come and get me. It was nearly midnight by the time I managed to fall into my bed.

A blindingly bright light shone in my face. Blurred figures moved around the edges of my vision and noises reverberated metallically. Someone was holding me; my cheek was pressed against pillow softness.

“Look at that bone structure. He’s small now, but he’s going to be a big one.”

“Quiet though. And he doesn’t move much. He has no energy.”

“Here President. Here is your newest loyal citizen.”

Cold air rushed past as I was lifted. A giant wizened face zoomed into view. I recoiled. It opened its mouth and a putrescent smell rolled over me.

“He will be Nine.”

I struggled against the tight grip this face seemed to have on me, beating the air with my fists. They were tiny and chubby; completely useless. The dark face smiled with its thin lips, writhing over the yellowed, crooked teeth.

My world spun on its axis, flashing between dark and light, but always, always in view were those lips and those teeth, repeating over and over “Nine... Nine... Nine...”

I woke up drenched in a cold sweat. It wasn’t the first time I had this dream and it wouldn’t be the last time either, I was sure. Slowly I sunk back into my bed, staring up into the darkness above. It must have been the day I was born. I closed my eyes tightly, trying to remember the face attached to the softness, my mother’s face. It was frustratingly elusive, but I

desperately wanted to see the breeder that was my mother. I had to try. And as usual, I fell asleep trying.

Chapter 2

“Stick out your tongue and say ‘ah.’”

I obediently opened my mouth as Eight stuck a wooden stick on my tongue. I looked up at the ceiling, slightly uncomfortable with the intensity with which Eight was staring into my esophagus.

“Is it really esisaree?” I garbled around the tongue depressor. Eight calmly looked at me, blinking slowly behind his thick glasses.

“Please don’t talk. That lamia had a really nasty virus and since you came near it I have to make sure you didn’t get anything. You were due for a check-up anyway.”

I sighed a little, shivering as the cold breeze blew through my embarrassingly thin paper gown. Eight pulled back and continued quietly examining me.

“What was wrong with the lamia exactly?” I asked, eyes watering slightly from the bright light Eight had just shoved into my face.

“I don’t know,” responded Eight after a moment, pulling back. “The virus works similarly to rabies, damaging the brain and the neuro-transmission, from what I can tell from the damaged areas of the brain. It seems to awaken a death drive in the infected individual, like those parasites that drive crickets to drown themselves. Anything that contracts the virus would develop the irresistible urge to kill itself.”

I raised my eyebrow fractionally.

“And that was you not knowing what was wrong with it?”

Eight smiled.

“That was what the virus does. I don’t know where it came from, what the incubation time is, how it’s transmitted, or even if it can infect humans. I’ve already examined Two and Six and they’re fine. At least for the moment.”

He pulled out the equipment for a blood test.

“All I need from you now is some of your blood, and I’ll let you go back to work.”

I nodded agreeably. Needles scared me when I was ten, but I had gotten used to being pricked and prodded, what with the constant health tests at Unit Nine when I was still learning my trade. Eight slid the hair-fine needle into my vein with ease and relatively little pain, taking six large vials for study. I could feel myself getting dizzy as the fourth vial filled.

“I repeat, is that necessary?”

Eight grinned a little.

“What if I told you it wasn’t, and I’m just messing with you?”

“I’d tell you to give me back my blood.”

“Well it is necessary, so I’m not going to give it back. You can have juice and a cookie instead.”

“It better be a cookie the size of my head.’

Eight chuckled quietly, pulling out the needle gently.

“Here, put pressure on the gauze and I’ll get you a nice bandage and your cookie.”

I complied quietly and watched as Eight placed my blood into the centrifuge and went to get me some food. I leaned back against the wall, breathing deeply and trying not to pass out. Eight returned relatively quickly and placed a small bandage over the gauze before handing me a small glass bottle of juice.

“Sorry, Four’s fresh out of cookies. You’ll just have to make do with juice and a nice nap. By the time you wake up I should be able to tell you the results.”

“Sounds good to me,” I slurred, closing my eyes. “Nighty night.”

I woke up about an hour later, still clutching the juice bottle with one hand. Eight glanced over as I sat up with a yawn.

“Morning sunshine.”

“Morning.”

I took a swig of the juice to get rid of the odd chemical taste in my mouth.

“So am I clean?”

Eight pushed away from his desk, spinning in the chair to face me. His expression was serious, and he took off his glasses and cleaned them on the edge of his shirt.

“Yes. Yes you are. You’re not allowed to work the rest of the day though. Go to bed, get some rest, and eat a good dinner tonight. Got it?”

I nodded and started getting changed back into my clothes. Eight watched with an unnerving seriousness.

“Are you sure I’m clean?” I asked again, buttoning up my shirt.

“What? Oh. Oh yes, you’re completely clean of the infection.”

“Then why are you looking at me like I’m going to start foaming at the mouth?” I frowned. He paused for a moment.

“It’s nothing. I promise you’re perfectly healthy. I just want to do a few more tests on the sample you gave me. I’ll let you know if I find out anything, all right?”

His grave expression gave little room for argument. I nodded mutely, backing slowly to the door. Eight turned back to his desk and continued working, hunched over something I couldn’t make out. I slowly left the room, careful not to make any noise that would disturb him.

The next day found me in the greenhouses with Five. He sat under my pruning table, picking up the scraps of wire and foliage that fell while I pruned back the blackberry vines. As we both worked, he gave me the news of Fiore; at least what he had been able to hear while stuck in the learning center.

“There was something going on about some of the breeders getting sick,” he said, handing up the spool of wire I had dropped. “I think some of them were either dying or going sterile or something.”

I looked down at his shadowy little form, taking the spool back.

“Were there still a lot of Fives at your center?”

He shook his head.

“I think there were only about a hundred left. Maybe fewer. I heard that all the Eights and some of the Nines are being called back to the city so that they can find a cure for the disease. I bet Eight will be called in soon.”

This was bad news. If the breeders were getting sick, the country would quickly collapse. They were the most cherished of all our resources. It was a well-known fact that they were the only ones capable of producing human beings. No one else was allowed to copulate because their children would be monstrosities akin to the lamia that threatened our daily life. It was our number one law, and anyone who broke it was sentenced to death for endangering the well being of the entire country of Giardino. Even romantic relations were outlawed since apparently one thing could lead to another. Not that I had any experience in the matter. Sometimes I wondered about the logic of that particular law. We had all come from healthy stock at this point and the radiation levels weren't anywhere as high as they had been when the law had been put into place, even in outlying compounds like mine. The population was painfully low as well; copulation should be smiled upon.

“What else?” I asked Five, glancing down at him. He thought for a few minutes, making a tiny pile of fallen leaves with his fingertips.

“I dunno. President Chi-Alpha’s son died. Heard there was a raid on the Outlands a few weeks ago.”

He shuddered. The Outlands were the stage for every child’s nightmares. According to the stories, there were no fences, lamia running rampant, and every criminal, social reject and permanently diseased individual made their home there. The only thing that kept them from over-running the country were the near constant military raids. I patted Five’s head and handed him a blackberry that had fallen off the vine I was pruning. He hungrily jammed it into his mouth, squeaking in surprise as the sweet juice burst in his mouth. I chuckled quietly.

A loud siren blast suddenly rent the air. Our heads instinctively snapped up. I had never heard this particular alarm before.

“What is that? What’s going on? What do we do?” asked Five frantically, scrambling up to his feet beside me. I shook my head.

“I don’t know.”

One dove through the door.

“Come on guys, hurry!”

He took Five’s hand and dragged him through the door, heading back toward the compound. I ran after them, my feet sliding slightly on the slick floor.

“What’s going on, One?” I shouted after the retreating figures, struggling to catch up.

“The President is coming!” he called back. “We’re all needed in the landing field!”

I caught up and grabbed Five’s other hand, yanking him to greater speeds. His feet pinwheeled in the dust as he struggled to keep up with our longer strides. The others were already at the edge of the landing field by the time we arrived, arranged by their number. One shoved Five into his place, before taking his own. I managed to slide into my spot at the end of the line just as the President’s chopper appeared over the trees. Dust blew in our eyes and up our noses as it drew closer. Three’s ponytails beat against her face, leaving angry red streaks on her cheeks while Four’s hair whipped about in a frenzied dance.

The chopper landed gracefully with a soft poof of dust. The flexible plastic blades were nearly silent; the only noises were from the rushing wind and the soft hum of the nuclear batteries. As the door opened, we all kneeled down in the dirt, our heads bowed and our hands extended in a placating gesture. President Chi-Alpha stepped down onto the ground, Zeds flanking him. He stepped down our line, tapping each of our hands in the traditional acknowledgement, then turned and stopped in front of Eight.

“Rise, doctor. Your services are required in Fiore. News of your talents has reached the capital and we need you for the most important of jobs.”

Eight shot me a look, obviously confused. We were one of the most remote units and Eight hadn’t done much more than take care of us, giving us medication when we were sick and mending our broken bones. He hadn’t made any great medical discoveries other than a faster cure for the common cold and slight improvements to our irradiation gel. I shrugged a little. Eight slowly stood up, keeping his head bowed.

“My services are yours, Master President.”

He put his hand to his chest. President Chi-Alpha touched his forehead.

“Pack your things. We leave in fifteen minutes.”

Eight shakily walked back into the compound to gather his few belongings. The rest of us were forced to remain in our submissive positions in the dust. The President seemed completely unfazed by this and pulled out a nail file. I could see the side my face reflected in his highly polished leather shoes. I looked oddly distorted.

Within moments Eight was whisked onto the chopper, on his way to the capital city, miles away, alone in a sea of strangers. All we could do was watch silently, kneeling in the dirt, as the clouds swallowed up his pale, frightened face. Seven was the one to break the depressed silence.

“Wonder how long it’s going to take to get that one replaced.”

“Never,” whispered Five bleakly. “There are no more Eights outside of Fiore. Not a single one all over Giardino.”

We all looked around at each other. Eight had been there the longest of any of us except for Seven and one of the eldest. He was the peacekeeper, the caretaker, the father, and the best friend of everyone. If what Five said was true, we would never see him again.

One suddenly kicked a metal pipe sticking out of the side of the main building. It rang out with a hollow gong that reverberated in my chest.

“Give him back!” he hollered, yanking up rocks from the field and throwing them after the disappearing chopper. “Give him back, give him back! He belongs to us! You had no right to take him!”

We watched numbly as he threw every rock and chunk of sod within his reach. Six finally stepped up next to him, putting a restraining hand on his arm. One let his handful of dirt drop, looking at her with a woeful expression. She wrapped an arm around him and slowly led him back inside the compound, murmuring soft comforting things. We slowly filed in after them, silent under a depressive gloom.

“They don’t know what they’re doing! The system doesn’t work anymore, but they aren’t going to fix anything as long as the Nulls, the Zeds, and the nobles have their toys and luxuries!”

One slammed his fist angrily against the table.

“Without Eight we’re in massive trouble. We could survive without a Five a few months.”

He looked over at Five apologetically.

“No offense meant.”

Five shrugged a little, apparently not bothered by the insinuation.

“Anyway, without Eight, we won’t survive a plague like the one five years ago. What if Six gets bitten by a lamia on one of her hunts? Eight was the only one trained to help her. Without him the best we’d be able to do is have Four stew up some of Nine’s plants. The Nulls have left us nearly helpless. If Five is right with what he heard, and he has been so far, then

Eight is pretty much the last Eight available and we won't get another one. Ever! We're all going to die of infection and disease!"

"Come on man, you make it sound like we're completely helpless," drawled Two. "I have almost as much training as a Zed and Six is pretty deadly with her crossbow and her daggers. Eight stayed in his lab almost all day; we'll hardly collapse without him."

Three looked over at him with an adoring smile. He smirked back, but was cut short when Four smacked the back of his head. One frowned.

"I'm not saying that we're going to crumble in ten seconds without him. I'm saying he was our leader in some ways, he took care of all of us, and without him we could be in really big trouble."

He slammed the table again.

"The Nulls don't care about us! They only care about themselves and they're choking everyone who's not empowered to death! They'd cut off their heads if it would hurt us!"

One leaned forward, squinting his eyes slightly.

"They're lying to us. They're using us and they're lying to us. They tell us what we have to be, they take us from our mothers, they don't even give us our own names, and it's all just so they can sit comfortably in their fancy little homes in Fiore and never have to work a day or worry about anything."

We all looked at each other silently. No one wanted to admit it, but some of the thoughts coming from One's mouth had entered each of our minds more than once. We could see it in each other's eyes.

“I’ll bet you anything the Outlands aren’t even real. It’s probably some place the Nulls made up in order to scare us into behaving.”

“You better shut up if you don’t want to get axed, One,” grumbled Seven. “The laws are in place for a reason. We may not like them, but they are there for our own good. Besides, President Chi-Alpha never said that they would keep Eight in Fiore forever. He might be back within the month and then you’ll be feeling pretty foolish, won’t you?”

One shrugged a little.

“Maybe they will let him back, but even if they do, you have to admit things have been screwy. I know you’re all thinking it even if you won’t say it.”

Three stood up with a loud heaving sigh.

“The government is screwed. We all know it. The government’s got to change cause it’s not even effective. They can’t stop people from falling in love, they can’t stop people from finding their soul mates if they have one. We should totally make our own country where everyone is free to do exactly what they want and be nice to everyone else.”

I stared at her, completely confused. Everyone else looked just as perplexed, except for Two. He looked absolutely enthralled. Three looked around at us and took on an expression that suggested that she was completely offended at our passivity at her heartfelt speech.

“If you don’t understand what I was talking about, I don’t think I could explain it. It takes a superior mind to understand the logical pathways involved. You people are heartless.”

She stomped out of the room in a grand huff, ponytails twitching in great agitation. Two looked at our expressions of suppressed laughter, scowled deeply, and proceeded to run

after her. We all looked at each other, to the closing door, and then back to each other. It took approximately ten seconds for us all to dissolve into howls of laughter.

“Oh, she needs something to do. Quick everyone, start tearing up your clothes so she won’t think about things so much!” laughed Seven.

“She’s going to get into so much trouble some day,” laughed Six. “She’s so sweet, but such a spaz.”

This started a fresh round of laughter and a game of impressions. Three had a tendency to be somewhat oblivious to the world around her and because of that she was a prime target for teasing. After losing one of our dearest members, we all desperately needed a laugh.

Six pushed back from the table, still chuckling. Five stood as well taking her hand. He seemed to have bonded to her over the past few days. He followed her everywhere when she was in the compound and waited with great agitation whenever she was out hunting. They did look very similar, so there was a small possibility that they at least shared one breeder. Even if they didn’t, Five obviously viewed Six as his pseudo-sister. It wouldn’t be surprising if there were any laws against that, but I was glad he had someone to bond to.

He looked over at me with a sweet little smile. I felt a small smile flit across my face in return. They gestured to me to join them, so I pushed away my dishes and stood. Five took my hand when I reached them.

“How are you doing, buddy?” I asked. “Seven is being nice, right?”

Six snickered.

“He’s all right,” shrugged Five. “I had to go into one of the air ducts yesterday, but it was just to clean out some of the dust balls. Four gave me a muffin afterwards, so that was okay.”

Six and I lifted him up, gently swinging him down the hall to his room. He giggled each time his feet left the floor. When we reached his room Six took his hands and I took his feet.

“One... Two... Three... Hup!”

Five giggled happily as we tossed him into his bed, bouncing softly as he landed. Six gently pulled the covers over him as I made sure the one window near the ceiling was securely locked. Six tucked in Five, humming quietly. I watched, smiling, as Five quickly fell asleep.

“He’s kind of sweet,” whispered Six. “He reminds me of a little girl I knew back in training.”

“He likes you,” I whispered. “You look like you could be his sister. Did you know that?”

I tweaked the black braid hanging down her back. Six stood up with a shrug, swatting my hand away. I followed her out and closed the door behind us.

“He likes you quite a bit too, Nine.” She squinted up at me. “I won’t take all the credit.”

“Too bad I’m too blond and green-eyed to be his brother,” I shrugged with a grin, shoving my hands in my pockets. “We could make one happy family. I guess I’ll just have to settle for barging in on you two.”

Six smiled slightly, punching my arm. I resisted the urge to rub the spot.

“He won’t stop talking about you. He seems to think you’re brilliant or something. Have you been hiding something from me, mister?”

Her eyes twinkled mischievously. I snorted a little, rolling my eyes.

“Yeah, I’m just about the smartest person here, didn’t you know? I’m growing a completely organic chopper out in my greenhouses. Even as we speak, magnolias are twining themselves into a fabulously strong frame that is both lightweight and durable.”

Six giggled, walking down the hall. I followed a few steps behind.

“So, Eight said that you were clean from that lamia’s virus,” I stated awkwardly, unsure what to say, but not ready to say good night. Six nodded.

“It was a good thing I brought it to him, though. He was really quite excited by it. He did that little spazzy hand thing he does sometimes.” Six waved her hands in a widely exaggerated imitation of Eight’s habit of gesticulating when excited. I felt myself smile.

“Did he give you the whole serious-eyed lecture on how the virus will destroy anything it touches?” laughed Six, dancing backwards on her tip-toes.

“Something like that. He made me half expect to find myself sticking my hand into Four’s pulper machine.” I made a face at Six as she attempted not to laugh.

“Don’t you laugh. This is a very, very serious matter,” I scolded, trying not to smile. Six shook her head, biting her lips together.

“If I lost my hand to the pulper I wouldn’t be able to do things like this,” I said seriously, poking her cheeks. “I’d have to use my other hand and it wouldn’t be nearly as impressive a gesture.”

Six snorted, giggling a little. She swatted my hand away, pushing her dark hair back with her other hand. I smiled a little.

“Well in all seriousness, I’m glad you’re clean.”

“What about you?” asked Six, rubbing tiredly under one eye. “Did you get his stamp of approval?”

“I think he gave me the green stamp. Well, he said I wasn’t infected, but he said that he was going to do more tests on the blood he took.” I frowned, rubbing the punctured arm. “I guess I won’t know what he was testing for, since... well...”

Six looked thoughtfully, eyes running over the dingy walls and ceiling.

“I suppose we could pop into his lab... See if he left anything of interest that might pertain to you. I mean it would be a shame for you to drop dead with no warning. Or you know, start frothing at the mouth or something.”

I winced as she whacked me good-naturedly in the arm, again resisting the urge to rub the spot.

“Stop doing that. I don’t have a key in or anything. You know that he didn’t like people rooting around in his stuff, and he didn’t ever even let anyone else in except for the physicals. And you are not listening to me.”

Six was already trotting down the hall towards Eight's now empty lab, her hood bouncing with each step. I rolled my eyes and ran after her.

“Seriously, we don't have a key. Did they teach you lock picking at your center as well as how to skin a rabbit in 30 seconds?”

Six skidded to a stop in front of the solid iron door leading into the lab, kneeling down so that she was eye-level with the lock. I stopped behind her, huffing slightly. She was already busy messing with the lock.

“I have a natural curiosity that readily lends itself to the acquisitions of new skills,” grinned Six mischievously. I rolled my eyes again.

“I already know you're smart. Stop trying to beef up my awe of you by using words you learned off of One's joke toilet paper.”

Six stuck her tongue out at me before shoving the door open with her shoulder.

“Voila!”

I stepped over her, looking carefully around for any booby traps Eight might have set.

“Nice job. I think I'll deadbolt my room now.”

“Psh, deadbolts are too easy.” Six sprung easily to her feet and trotted in after me.

“All right, I'm really scared now. I better not wake up in the middle of the night with you hanging over me with your skinning knife,” I called over my shoulder, flipping through Eight's files. Six idly ran her fingers over his metal desk.

“Why would I do something like that?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “What if you did get the virus, but in humans it causes homicidal tendencies instead of suicidal?”

“That’s not gruesome at all,” shuddered Six, sticking her tongue out at me. “You’re too much of a gloomy gus. You’ll kill all your plants with your negativity.”

“I know. Don’t start cleaning my aura or whatever it is you do when people are sad around you.”

“Aura cleaning is for pips. I just pester people into telling me what’s wrong,” she grinned mischievously at me.

“Yes and that is so much less annoying than someone plucking at the air around your head and tsk’ing over how murky you are,” I teased idly, flicking through the pages of my file.

“It totally is,” replied Six as she lightly hopped up to sit on the desk. “Find anything interesting?”

I shook my head, still flipping through the thin pages.

“Just the usual blood work things, weights, the colds I’ve had.... Nothing else in there, as far as I can tell. He must not have found anything or if he did, he’s taken it with him to the capital.”

“Are you sure there was even anything else?” asked Six, swinging her legs.

“Pretty sure. He was being weirder than usual.”

Six snorted back a laugh.

“You’re so mean.”

I shrugged.

“You know how he gets. Got? Gets...”

Six became serious, looking down.

“One is really hurt by him leaving. Eight was like his dad. Remember when One broke his leg in that generator accident?”

I sat down next to her on the desk.

“Yeah. All that blood. I thought he was going to die. Or at least he wouldn’t be able to walk with that leg.”

“Eight was there every second. He fixed it so easily. He’s so good at what he does, even if he didn’t have many chances to show it. I mean, what can you do with an incinerated body or one ripped apart by lamia?”

Six rested her head tiredly on my shoulder. I felt my stomach tighten.

“Do you think he’s coming back?” Six whispered softly.

I shrugged a little.

“I don’t know.”

3

Months passed with no news of the outside world or Eight. One day blended into another as each of us did our part to keep the compound running. It was starting to snow one night as I made my way to the lookout tower to bring Two his meal. A cold breeze whipped the icy crystals into my face and up my coat. It was a thoroughly unpleasant experience, so I was hurrying as fast as the black ice would allow me.

“Two!” I shouted up. “Let me up, I’ve got your dinner and it’s freezing out.”

There was a rustling and a banging from above me. The trap door slowly opened with a creak and a chain ladder dropped down. I carefully pulled myself up hand over hand, keeping the package between my teeth. The ladder pulled out fibers from my tattered gloves as I climbed. Two looked frazzled as I poked my head through the trap door.

“Thanks so much for the help,” I grumbled, shoving the food packet across the floor.

“Uh yeah, thanks. See you later Buddy. Bye,” stuttered Two. I raised my eyebrow fractionally.

“I’m not leaving until you let me use your space heater. My hands are frozen,” I snapped as I pulled myself through the trap door and shut it behind me.

“G-geez, grumpy,” twitched Two. “Did you sit on a bramble bush today or something?”

I shot him a look. His hair was badly ruffled and his shirt was pulled up out of his pants. I glanced over to the corner. There was a pile of quivering blankets with the tip of one wavy blond ponytail poking out. I rolled my eyes.

“So have you seen anything tonight?” I asked, rubbing my hands to get the circulation back into the fingertips. Two shook his head vehemently.

“Nope, no report. I’ll see you back at the compound, okay?”

I ignored him and stood up, walking over to the telescope.

“I always loved using these things,” I said as I looked through the eyepiece, stalling just to make Two more uncomfortable.

“Yeah, sure. Really fun.”

I quietly scanned through the forest, tracing the deer and rabbit runs that Six followed every day. A motion caught my eye. I quickly trained the telescope back on it. A pack of lamia came into focus. They had mutated since I had last seen them, taking a form that looked similar to the pictures of hyenas I had once seen. They were snuffling through the snow, ears drawn back and noses down to the ground. They obviously were on the scent of something as they moved briskly single file adjacent to one of the game trails. I followed their progress with the telescope. Two fidgeted beside me.

“Look at this,” I said, stepping to the side. “Look at those lamia. They’re hunting something.”

Two stepped up and looked through the telescope.

“Weird,” he finally stated. “I haven’t seen them around for a couple weeks. Looks like they’re hunting something.”

“That’s what I just said,” I replied, picking up a set of binoculars from the table. It took me a moment to find the pack again. They were sniffing around an dead tree. There was one that was a head and shoulders larger than the rest of them. Even through the binoculars, I could see the odd orange eyes lamia kept through every transformation.

“Hey Two,” I whispered, nudging him. “Look at that big one.”

He trained the telescope to where I was pointing, a frown slowly spreading across his face.

“That bugger is huge. What are they tracking, can you see?”

“I dunno. Why are we whispering?”

“I dunno. You started it.”

“It seemed appropriate.”

We quietly watched as the lamia milled aimlessly around the base of the tree. I slowly scanned the surrounding ground and trees to find what had attracted them, but I couldn’t find anything. Branches and the fast approaching darkness hid whatever they had found.

“Oh my god,” whispered Two, breath slowly hissing out from between his teeth.

“Nine... I think you need to see this...”

“What?” I swung the binoculars back to the pack of lamia. “What are they doing?”

I felt my blood freeze at the sight in front of me. The lamia were attempting to climb up the twisted old oak, using each other as foot holds while others strained to shape shift their appendages into something more suitable for tree climbing. As horrific as these sights were, the thing that made my heart and stomach squeeze in panic was a lamia ripping and tearing at a leather bag. One of Six's leather bags.

"Oh god," I breathed. "Do you see her? Is she in the tree?"

"I'm looking, I'm looking..." muttered Two, scanning the area with militaristic focus. I kept my eyes trained on the lamia with Six's bag. It was systematically shredding the leather with fangs and claws, and then gulping down the bits of treated hide. My one small comfort was that there was no blood on the snow as far as I could see.

"I see her. She's alive. She's up near the top of the tree. I think she's trying to rig something so she can get to the next tree," muttered Two. "Stupid girl. Why did she pick that tree to climb in the first place; all the other trees are too far away to jump to or too small to hold her weight?"

"She probably grabbed the nearest one to avoid being eaten," I snapped. "Can't you do something? Shoot them, use the flame thrower on them, something!"

"Calm yourself. If we just lunge at this without thinking we could get her and us killed."

Two turned away from the telescope and looked over the wall of weaponry.

"I don't know if I have anything that long range. I'll have to get closer."

"We'll have to get closer," I corrected, grabbing a nearby pair of arm guards.

“Don’t be stupid,” snapped Two, strapping on his light leather armor and grabbing a rapid-fire crossbow. “You’re not trained for this. You’ll get bitten.”

“I’m not going to stand here and watch her get ripped to shreds or you getting mauled going after her! I may not be trained in hunting or warfare, but I know how to use a knife,” I said, nearly shouting.

“These aren’t shrubs, man! They don’t sit there letting you carve pieces off!”

“Listen,” I hissed, pulling his ear to my mouth. “If it was Three down there, you wouldn’t hesitate to help her, even if you were just a Four. You are not going to stop me.”

Two took a step back, biting his lip. He glanced over to the quivering mass of blankets.

“Fine. Fine. Just remember, we don’t have an Eight anymore, so if you get a boo-boo nobody is here to kiss it better.”

“That’s why we have to leave now, so there won’t be any need,” I responded, grabbing a stave off the wall. “Let’s go.”

It was starting to snow harder. Two and I crept forward in the dusk, following the sounds of the lamia. We knew we were close; their musky scent of filth and rotting meat was heavy in the air. The wind was blowing towards us, whisking our scent away from the monsters. Two peered over the top of the rock we were crouched behind. The yips and howls

were becoming more frenzied as the lamia became excited, sure that their prey was almost in their grasp.

Two tapped me on the shoulder and proceeded to make a long string of elaborate hand gestures when I turned my head. After a few seconds of this hand waving, I raised my eyebrow to indicate I had no idea what he was trying to tell me.

“Stupid civilian,” Two muttered under his breath, scooting closer. “Listen, I’m going to draw them off, you help Six down and get to the compound as fast as you can, got it?”

“You’re going to get killed,” I hissed.

“No I’m not!” snapped Two, a little louder than was wise. I clapped a hand over his mouth and listened to hear if the lamia had noticed. After a moment, Two pulled my hand away.

“Um... But if I do... Would you mind... letting people know...”

“I’ll let Three know what happened.”

Two nodded gratefully, pressing his hand against my shoulder before slinking to another outcrop, farther away from Six and me. He stood up suddenly in full view of the entire pack.

“Come and get me you mother-lickin’ garbage spittin’ monsters!” he shouted, firing his cross bow at one, catching it in the base of the skull. “I’m right here. I killed one of your babies. Come and get me!”

The lamia turned towards him, growling ominously. Two was completely unbothered by their advancing forms and shot two more before running off into the underbrush, all the while laughing like a mad-man. The lamia charged after him, slobbering and snapping at each other in their haste to catch this new pile of tasty meat. I waited until the lamia had charged out of sight before vaulting over the rock and running to the base of the tree.

“Six!” I called quietly up. “Come on down. We need to get going before the lamia get back!”

There was some quiet rustling before Six poked her head down to get a good look at me.

“... Nine? What are you doing here?”

“Two and I came to rescue you. Hurry up and get down here before they get back,” I replied, looking around. Six shrugged a little and swung down lightly next to me, wincing slightly as she landed in the cold snow.

“You okay?”

She nodded slightly but grabbed my hand. My stomach tightened.

“I scraped up my leg pretty good. I’m not sure how fast I can walk.”

“Put your arm around my shoulder. We’ll go as fast as you can. All right?” I said softly, lifting her arm up. She nodded again and wrapped her arm around my shoulder, gripping my coat tightly. As soon as I was sure she was settled comfortably, we headed back to the compound. Unfortunately our pace was little more than a limping jog, despite my best efforts to keep Six supported. I happened to look down at her leg at one point and was instantly,

inadvertently repulsed. There was a deep gash down the back of her left leg. She had attempted to bandage it, but the scrap of cloth had already become completely saturated with blood. Far worse, however, was the blood oozing out and trailing behind us in the snow. It was a giant sign to the lamia exactly where we were. It was no wonder they had been so frenzied at the tree; they could smell her blood. I gritted my teeth, and scooped her up into my arms. I was surprised by how light she was.

“Ack! What are you doing?” she whispered fiercely, struggling a little.

“Shut up and hold on,” I glared at her. “I am getting you back to the compound.”

Before she could protest, I was off running, following the trail Two and I had made on the way in. It wasn't long before I started to tire, but I pushed myself forward anyway, mentally promising myself that once I got back I was going to start running around the compound every day.

Now that Six's face was closer to mine, I could clearly see how pale she had become. Her eyes were closed and her breathing was becoming shallower by the minute. I had to hurry. It was fully dark, but a full moon had risen and was reflecting off the fresh coating of snow. I was just starting to think that we would make it back in time when I heard a rumbling growl behind us and to the left. I didn't turn my head, knowing that if I saw the evil orange eyes of a lamia, my legs would lock up and we would both be killed. The rumbling became more insistent.

“Six,” I whispered. “I think we're in trouble.”

Her eyes flickered open.

“D-do you need me to help?”

I shook my head and gently put her down on the ground, still jogging forward. Six stumbled but did the best she could to keep up with me.

“I’m going to fight it off. You get to the compound as fast as you can. One is waiting for us. He’ll let you in.”

I glanced over my shoulder. I could just make out the shadowy figure of the lamia crouched low against the ground, preparing to pounce. Six grabbed my hand tightly.

“We’ll fight it off together.”

“No, you go. You’re about to pass out from blood loss. Just go as fast as you can. I’ll catch up to you in a minute,” I said in what I was hoping was a re-assuring tone. Six looked completely unconvinced, but I wasn’t about to take no for an answer. Six stumbled towards the compound. I watched her for a moment before turning to face the hulking, growling shape. The orange eyes gleamed hungrily at me as the lamia prowled closer. Gore was dripping from the corner of its mouth, a bloody pink foam fizzing around the lips and dripping down to the snowy ground. I swallowed nervously, slowly and clumsily pulling the staff out of the harness on my back. My hands fumbled against the slick dark wood, my eyes frozen on the lamia’s.

“You tried to kill Six,” I whispered under my breath. “You’re going to die.”

I saw its back haunches shuffle as it prepared to leap. I held out the stave in front of me, hoping my survival instincts would take over. I wasn’t quite ready to die yet.

The lamia dashed at me with stunning speed, ramming into my chest with an impact strong enough to break bone. It sent me skittering back in the snow, gasping for breath. Lights popped across my vision as my body seized up and pain blossomed across my chest. My hand jerked forward involuntarily, whacking the stave against the lamia's head. It leapt back slightly with a squealing yelp.

I stumbled to my feet, doing my best to ignore the pain radiating through my body. The lamia shook its head vigorously before looking at me with a snarl.

“Didn’t like getting your face caved in, huh?” I gasped. “I think it makes you look prettier.”

The monster was not even slightly impressed by my pitiful attempt at smack talk and decided to charge me again. This time I was ready. I managed to barely dodge the attack, but somehow gave it what I hoped was a solid whack on the kidney area. It landed with a resounding thwok and the lamia's back legs gave way. I couldn't help feeling a small surge of pride.

The lamia struggled up to its feet again a little faster than I would have liked. Its eyes had an evil frenzy to them. I had a feeling that this last charge would decide it. We had both delivered harsh blows to each other; this last one would finish one of us off. I steadied myself for the monster's charge.

It never came. A crossbow bolt sprouted directly between the lamia's eyes. The lamia stumbled forward a few steps before crumbling in a snowy heap on the ground. My eyes widened in shock as my legs buckled under me, sending me in a snowdrift as well. Two

hobbled out of the underbrush, with a long scratch down his cheek and a purple black bruise blooming under his left eye.

“Nice job, buddy,” he croaked, spitting out blood from a broken tooth. “Not bad for your first time.”

I gave him a crooked grin.

“Nice shot,” I groaned, struggling to my feet. “I’m not sure I would have made it another round. You okay?”

“Oh yeah. I’m just a little scratched up. The pack is way worse off,” smirked Two, helping me up. “Where’s Six?”

“Hopefully at the compound,” I frowned. “Help me get there. I think my breast bone is broken.”

Two helped me wobble back to the compound. We kept our eyes peeled for Six on the way, but saw no sign of her other than the bloody trail in the snow. Worry curled in my stomach and put me in a frenzied mood. It took another 15 minutes before Two and I reached the compound. One was waiting at the gate for us with a worried expression that mirrored my own.

“Oh, thank god you’re back. Neither of you got bitten, did you?”

We shook our heads.

“Where is Six? Did she make it?” I asked desperately.

One’s face fell.

“Yes. Yes she did. She’s in the clinic.”

“Alive?”

One swallowed nervously, looking between the two of us.

“Barely.”