

The Awakening of REN CROWN

Back Cover Copy:

It took a single moment for her life to change. And she'll do anything to change it back.

Ren Crown is a high school senior searching for her identity when a devastating attack on her twin brother thrusts her into a hidden world of magic. Fighting forces that she is woefully unprepared for, Ren illegally enrolls in a prestigious secret university where magic is plentiful and danger is absolute.

Determined to set her family back to rights, she is blocked at every turn and faced with a new reality of boundless fascination and possibility. Animated creations, enchanted gadgets, and marvelous machines vie with the students themselves: mischievous engineers, diabolical tacticians, battle-hardened warriors, and terrifying roommates.

But even amidst an eclectic student body, there is something off about Ren's magic...and the wrong people have started to notice.

Caught in a tightening web, Ren's values stand trial, as does the fate of the world.

Books in the Ren Crown series:

The Awakening of Ren Crown (#1)

The Protection of Ren Crown (#2)

The Rise of Ren Crown (#3)

The Unleashing of Ren Crown (#4)

Book #5 (final book) – coming 2017

This PDF contains the **first five chapters** of The Awakening of Ren Crown.

Chapter One: In the beginning...



I would do absolutely anything for my brother.

“This is hardly a high-security lock, Ren,” Christian whispered, motioning at the precise movement of my hands. “Now isn't the time to be perfect. Scrub those pins.”

“Scrub these,” I whispered back to my twin, my lips barely needing to move in order for him to hear me. We had perfected the art of nearly silent communication over the past seventeen years. I carefully pressed in the torque wrench and slid my lock pick across one pin at a time, feeling them, discovering their secrets, movement, and depth. A schematic of the lock drew itself in my mind, and I rotated the picture to determine which pin to move first.

Brilliant, but impatient, Christian would always be a scrub and bumper, raking a pick across the pins. Which had always worked quite well when our parents were away, and we were uncovering Christmas presents or retrieving items that had been locked up. But uncovering the secret of each lock was what I found fascinating, and doing it silently while my parents were within hearing range increased the thrill. I loved the feel of visualizing the lock, of finding the order, of fitting each pin perfectly in its slot.

I felt the tiny give as I pressed the last pin into place. “Ta-da.”

“Brilliant.” He flashed me a grin as I finished and soundlessly pushed open the door.

So far, so good.

No alarm on the garage. No pets. No houses nearby. Three clear exit routes through the yard. Points checked off in my mind on my “Cover for Christian” checklist. Although Christian controlled everything on the football field and in his social circles, he needed me to make sure he made it out of each adventure safely.

My brother attracted attention and exuded magnetism like a planet pulling in satellites, and he would be the one to get in trouble if we were caught. I had tried to take the heat before, but people always looked amused by my attempts. Quiet, little dreamer, Florence Crown? Right.

I put my pick set in a pocket where I could easily retrieve it and dump it into a bush, in the event that an unnoticed alarm was triggered and we were grabbed by the cops. Having a pick set? Fine. Having a pick set and being caught breaking and entering? Not so fine.

Christian flashed me his widest grin, hiked his bag high onto his back, and prowled into the garage. I entered after him, as always, and quietly closed the door so we could use our flashlights.

We were on our own this time. Christian didn't want his friends to witness his idea of epic romance. After spending two hours with him this afternoon, twisting red tissue into roses, I thought that was probably wise.

I held my light steady as Christian opened the door of the cherry-red convertible, then slipped inside.

Something outside scraped across the vinyl siding on the garage, creating an eerie noise. The wind had been unusual all night. I concentrated all of my senses and took stock of our surroundings. Adrenaline was nicely buzzing through my veins, but other than the branches scraping outside, the house and garage were quiet.

Christian reappeared with a careless and easy grin on his face, sapphire-rimmed teal eyes winking. “Player?” he prodded.

I walked over, wedged the flashlight between my cheek and shoulder, and carefully unzipped my bag. “You don't want to leave it on Sleeping Beauty's pillow?”

“I'm tempted.”

I could practically feel his rakish grin. I rolled my eyes, my fingers finding the wired player we had Frankensteined earlier. If he hooked it up correctly, it would start playing when the car door was opened in the morning.

He took it from me, then absently rubbed the inside of his wrist. “Think of the old man's face if he woke to hearing the music coming from his daughter's room.”

“Let's not. Star quarterback or not, you are playing with fire as it is. Coach is a scary man. He probably turns into a werewolf on full moons *and* nights when his house gets broken into.”

“Might be worth being benched, if you get to see a werewolf. Sate some of your monster-love madness.” Christian smiled and whipped his hair in the familiar gesture women unrelated to me seemed to love—flicking it away from his forehead, then letting it slide down—as he began wiring the player and hooking up the trigger.

Once during middle school, I crept into his room while he slept and cut a huge patch from his bangs. The next morning, I had awakened with half my hair sawed off as well.

I touched the back of my head just to make sure my hair was still attached and hanging past my shoulders. It had taken forever to grow back and that had been a traumatic experience—short, reddish hair made my eyes look larger and my face look even younger. Looking my age was something I battled regularly as one of the shorter girls in our year. In the womb, Christian had somehow grabbed the best height gene and taken some of mine as well.

Christian examined the steering wheel where tasteful tissue flowers were now twined. He frowned. “What do they say in those romance novels and magazines you like to read? Do things need glitter to be girly and romantic? You don't like any of that kind of stuff—but you barely qualify as a girl.”

“Gee, thanks.” I crossed my arms. “Glitter? Seriously? I don't understand how you get dates.”

“I am awesome. And there are some hot girls in your community art class who wear glittery fingernail polish. You should make friends with them—invite them over for sleepovers and nail parties.”

“Great. Maybe I should transfer to a different high school too, in order to widen your selection? Would bikini models be acceptable?”

“Yes. You are the best sister ever,” he said earnestly, carefully shutting the driver-side door and walking to the passenger side.

I smiled at his tone, and he winked, looking more relaxed. He absently rubbed the inside of his wrist again before entering the car from the other side.

He had been peculiarly agitated the last few weeks, and it had taken considerable effort to distract him and keep him busy. I had even dyed my hair a temporary dark brown to secure the success of this stealth mission. If all it took to get him back to his old self was a successful campaign to nab the future Homecoming Queen, I would thank her personally. It would be awkward, since we had nothing to do with each other outside of Christian, but entirely worth the weirdness.

Christian leaned over the center console to complete the last pieces of his campaign, armed the trigger on the “Franken-player,” carefully shut the passenger door, and bumped my shoulder companionably with his.

I had no doubt that tomorrow morning at school he would be greeted gleefully and with an enthusiastic *yes* to the question taped to the dash.

We locked the garage door and crept through the shadowed yard. Mission accomplished. Another operation successfully negotiated.

On the fifteen-minute walk back to our house, Christian was silent, so my mind started connecting the shadows and forming them into dark art in my mind—imaginary creatures twined up and howled as we passed.

I was a bit edgy myself. My community arts class had watched a presentation on making oil paints from scratch. There had been an itch under my skin ever since I had seen the guest artist press the spatula into the linseed and pigment. It had kept me up all last night, staring at my hand-painted celestial ceiling. I had suppressed the strange feeling, and my tiredness, in order to help Christian with the planning and execution of his task, but I couldn't remember ever feeling such a need as the one that continued to run through me—I *needed* to create my own paint.

After I made my first batch, I was going to paint these shadows, with their long curling fingers and slow-moving grace. Excitement built. Yes, that is what I was going to research when I got home. I could probably get Christian to help me beg Mom for the supplies.

Lightning streaked the sky, sending jagged lights through the shadows and scattering my thoughts. Odd. There was no storm forecast and heat lightning was a summer event.

I gripped my flashlight reflexively.

“I saw your mail this afternoon,” Christian said casually.

My heart picked up more speed as I focused on him. “So?”

“So? They are courting you. Why didn't you say anything? Finish your application tomorrow. I bet we can get Mom to take us to the steakhouse to celebrate. Dad won't need any convincing.”

“How...?” No, I knew how he knew. He had poked through my stuff, after sneaking into my room to peek at what the Harvard stationery indicated. I shook my head. “I'm not going.” How could I keep an eye on him next year if he was halfway across the country, riding the football scholarship everyone knew he was going to get from State?

“What? Don't be an idiot. Of course you're going. I told you that arts and engineering exhibition was a great idea.” He threw an arm around my neck and tugged my head into his space. “Once you accept their offer, I can pry you out of your art and math obsessions so you can finally relax and enjoy yourself. This is our year, Ren.”

Lightning flashed again.

I punched his side, halfheartedly trying to free myself. “The year of Crown.”

“We can do anything. The world is our clam shell—”

“Oyster.”

“—and we are searching for the diamond—”

“Pearl.” I tried to bump him again, but he moved his hips out of the way.

“—and the journey to find it will mature us into little mini-adults. All those teen self-help articles say so.” He pulled my neck in closer.

“Christian—”

“Think outside the pyramid, dear sister. Now that you are in at Harvard, you can totally blow school.”

I bent my knees, shoved my hand up against his arm vice, and twisted free. “I thought you said we were supposed to be maturing into mini-adults.”

He splayed his arms wide. “Yeah, at the *end* of the year. This is like the opening chapter of our epic saga. We need to be frolicking in the pasture and splashing at the river's edge and playing harmless pranks.” He motioned with his fingers, as if they were frolicking through tall grass.

I held up an edge of the prank bag he was carrying, in response to that remark.

He grinned and we started walking again. “I know you'll have a good time this year, if you just open up to people a little more. The guys like you, and they rag on everyone.”

“The guys” being Christian's group of crazed friends. The ones who knew me as a helping hand accompanying them on missions, or the stealthy one in brutal capture-the-flag battles, or as the girl who sketched quietly at the lunch table. The girl who rarely spoke.

He frowned. “Like you as a friend, I mean. I'd have to kill them otherwise. But cultivating more girlfriends is always a good thing. For all of us.”

“Very funny.” Lightning lit again, but there was no accompanying thunder. *Where was it coming from?*

“It's all about continuing a benevolent dictatorship and having fun. And it is time for you to become a general, instead of first lieutenant.”

Anxiety ran through me. I could talk to Christian easily, but with other people, words garbled strangely as they emerged from my mouth. “I don't want—”

“So, during our third week of dominion,” he said, trampling over my objection, “you should be in charge of—”

Lightning seemed to light everywhere at once, and Christian suddenly stopped. He bowed forward, clutching his midsection. His bag dropped to the ground, its contents clinking.

I grabbed his arm to steady him. “What's wrong?” I demanded, all humor gone.

“Cramp.”

A weird wave of electricity surged through my fingers where they touched him. I snatched my hand back, staring at the digits. The charged feeling dissipated within me, but increased in the air around us, swirling and darkening. I tentatively touched his arm again, and the energy shot into me once more. It was like focused euphoria.

Christian shuddered, then rolled his shoulders forward. “I feel strange.” His brows drew together and he looked at his hands, extending and retracting his fingers. “But good strange. Like I've just made twelve perfect passes and could complete a hundred more.”

With brows drawn together, he bent and lifted his bag. It looked like something was drawn on the inside of his right wrist. I started to ask, but spectral colors flashed out and wrapped around his duffel.

Our heads collided as we peered inside. It looked just as it had before—full of red tissue paper, green wrap, adhesives, and tools. Christian's fingers ran along the top of the bag, sparking.

His *fingers* were sparking, not the bag.

I stared at him, dumbfounded, moving my hand along his arm and down to his wrist. It seemed important for some reason to maintain contact. “You... You're electric.”

He gave a strangled laugh, hands jamming together and pulling apart. Electricity sparked between his forefingers, then the others, forming five crackling white arcs.

“Is this real?” I reached out tentatively to touch an arc, and a sparkle fell, exploding on the ground with the report of a bottle rocket.

I let go of him in shock. The weird pressure built around us again, pushing.

“The lightning... Was it coming from you?”

There was a depression in the pavement where the spark had hit. I looked to see Christian staring wide-eyed too. “I don't know.”

“Hands out!” A man stepped out of the deep shadows cast by the trees near the end of the street.

No. I had stopped paying attention to our surroundings and now we were about to be caught far past curfew.

“Hands out, and stay right there,” the man growled, his voice unfamiliar, his face still too deep in the shadows.

Christian touched my arm and the grip of his fingers indicated a readiness to run. His hands still glowed an electric blue, and the strange sense of elation ran into me again at the point of contact.

I shifted my balance to an optimal flight response. If we were caught, Christian could be benched until Homecoming. No one would be pleased by that outcome.

“Hands out, and—”

Christian pushed hard on my arm. I rolled forward on the balls of my feet with the motion and we immediately tore off into the yard at our right.

“They're running!” the man shouted.

Another man in black sprinted toward us as we reached the fenced-in backyard.

Christian swore and we veered toward a backyard play structure, frantically climbing it, then leaping over the high fence. We crashed to the grass, rolling to relieve our momentum. Blue lightning arced around us.

The man trailing us yelled and I heard him fall into the hedges. We launched forward, skirting a car parked in the driveway, then sprinted through the front yard and into the street.

Another man, down the street, headed toward us.

“What the hell?” Christian asked harshly as we ran, veering again into another yard, where a fourth man appeared from the shadows. Christian ran straight at him, pushing him hard in the shoulder. The man flew back and crashed hard. Harder than it seemed he should have with a normal block, but there was no opportunity to look back or think on it further.

A man stood at the end of the next street, and we swerved to the right. We were being herded out of the neighborhood.

Lightning flashed again and a crackle of strange thunder finally accompanied it. The lightning connected with the overhead power lines around us, and white, sparking lines led toward the utility company's lot.

Christian pushed at my arm, and we ran directly toward the lot. Something whizzed through the air close to us and then clanged into the chain link fence as we scrambled up and over.

From the other side of the chain link fence, I saw a knife laying on the ground beneath where we had just been, and my heart leaped fully into my throat. A harmless prank of breaking and entering into the coach's garage deserved a punishment on par with laps around the football field, not mortal wounds.

And police didn't fling knives at fleeing suspects.

Electricity seemed to spark from the entire lot around us, the blue lines arcing from the poles and power lines toward Christian.

He pulled me behind a short, square building.

Why were we stopping? I quickly signed at him—*plan?*

I had been in enough paintball fights at his side and knew that staying in one position eventually meant death. But there weren't enough structures for us to move stealthily between.

He motioned with his glowing fingers to signal that he was going to jump the men when they came near. I signed back a quick negative with a few expletives that we had added to the code years ago.

But there was a focused mania in his eyes. "I don't know what is happening, but I can do anything right now, Ren. I can feel it."

"What?" I hissed, grabbing his arm, the terror of being discovered combining with panic at his uncharacteristic behavior. Some of the mania in his eyes immediately lessened at the skin contact, but the focus remained.

He squeezed my hand. "Run. I won't let them hurt you."

"Hands at your sides." A man stepped out of the deep shadows cast by the main tower. There was malevolence in his every movement. "Your type is so predictable, always looking for energy. Boy, put your hands against your sides *now*. Girl, *come here*. Clean and easy. There's no escape now."

The four other men appeared, surrounding our position. One of them was limping—his expression full of rage.

Christian stepped in front of me and the electric field between his fingers grew stronger.

"You don't want to do that, boy." The man lifted something dark and barreled.

I lunged at Christian's back at the same time that he half turned, grabbed me, and threw me to the side as easily as he would a child's stuffed animal. Something cracked in my right forearm as it hit the edge of the building.

I could see Christian dodging left, then lightning lit from his fingers and three of the men went flying. The man from the shadows raised his gun toward me.

Christian's arm reached out, and a wave of something warm and protective shot from his fingers

into my chest.

Then something pulsed, blinding me, filling my vision with crimson. Lights exploded and detonations rocked the universe.

Everything in my world went end over end, and my face slammed onto the concrete.

Blackness. All I saw was blackness.

Darkness blurred. Faint shapes formed. My cheek was pressed oddly to the hard ground, and dark red streams streaked away from me.

I tried to move. My cheek wouldn't lift. My neck wouldn't lift. My vision was streaked red.

I told my neck to move. My lips tried to repeat the command—soundless, something wet upon them.

On my fifth blink, my vision returned. There was a strange absence of light, only the stars and crescent moon casting any at all. Power lines and towers lay in pieces around me. No electricity arced—as if the entire supply had been used. There were six bodies lying twenty yards away. One slowly, painfully, rose—becoming a large shadow hovering above the others. The rising figure gave one of the motionless bodies a kick.

The shape and hair of the kicked body registered, and I instinctively rejected all emotion.

He was so still, splayed like a carelessly tossed doll. I had never seen Christian like that. Not even after being blindsided by a spectacular sack.

Protectiveness and primal panic surged.

I struggled to push upright, blackness completely overtaking my vision, pain radiating through my head. I closed my eyes, inhaled deeply, then forced my too-heavy head to still and my vision to clear.

My view of the obliterated lot wobbled with my success. I tried to move my left arm, but it wasn't working, so I stretched out my right and pulled myself forward. Eighteen feet away. Seventeen and a half. Seventeen. Just a little more.

Each pull scraped a layer of the void from my mind and a layer of skin from my useless left arm, and my pulling became increasingly erratic and frantic as the figure with my brother's hair didn't move. The blackening pain and the nagging thought that something else required my attention were nothing next to my need to reach him, and I curled my fingers into the grit of the concrete, pulling, trying to get to him.

Then I was splayed out on my back, looking up at the twirling night sky. Stars twinkled and whirled. A booted foot pressed heavily on my chest. I felt and heard something crack, but nothing concrete registered through the all-encompassing pain and the thwarted need to reach my brother.

I tried to separate the shadowed features and black clothing from the starry sky beyond. The man held a device over me, his boot pushed down harder, and I could feel a gurgle in my chest.

“Stupid ferals. But I've got you now.” His hands moved with the device. A braided leather band dangled from his damaged fingers. *Christian's band*.

He pressed harder and everything started to go black.

I flung up my free arm and grabbed the end of the band. Power and pressure flooded through my hand, and the sparking seemed to travel from the leather into my bones. The release of the other end of the band sent my arm slamming to the ground, but the band stayed within my grasp, vibrating, then abruptly stilling as it calmed something deep within me. My vision continued to dim, but was

now replaced by a calm blue light hovering in my mind's eye.

The shadowed man above me uttered a long stream of expletives, then stepped harder on my chest.

“Get up and get over here, you idiots,” he shouted. “And either wake up Lynch, or dispose of him.”

Under the increased pressure of his boot, something else cracked in my chest.

I was...going to die.

A spark sluggishly ignited in my midsection around the steady blue light, like a wick that had been dormant too long, and the crack of another rib was echoed by a bang a few feet to my side.

“Son of a—” The foot was suddenly gone.

Flares of brown, swirling and long-tailed, flashed, then the earth trembled as a body crashed next to me, and three others fell farther away.

A long pole twirled over me and poked down toward the ground.

“Isn't hunting supposed to provide a challenge, Uncle?” The new voice was masculine and edged. Could a voice be described as chiseled? I longed to see the face attached to such a voice, but everything was going hazy again.

“You got lucky with that sudden trace that popped from nowhere,” an older voice responded.

“Or maybe I'm just that good.” I could almost picture the smile behind that riveting voice. I wanted to see it, but couldn't turn my head.

Not being able to move, confusion, hearing irresistible voices. Angels? Maybe I was dying.

Dying. *Christian*. Panic penetrated my muddiness. I tried to turn myself, to reach him, but my body was absolutely useless. Heavier now—my muscles seemingly nonexistent.

The older man sighed. “Try to stay out of the headlines this week, won't you?”

The two figures moved into view, but like images from a Kandinsky. Frenetic motion and dark colors not allowing my eye to rest.

“Wild magic is flowing everywhere. The scavengers finished the feral off fifteen minutes ago, then drained him dry.” The older voice sounded disgusted, then swore. “We have to report that they have a tool to identify and hide an Awakening.”

A twinkling white light beckoned me closer, slowly strangling the rest of my senses and letting only a few words filter in.

“Scanning...difficult...heavy in the air.”

“Feral...Awakening...subverts suppression field.”

I couldn't cough or breathe. *Christian*. I pushed away from the light with difficulty. I needed to get to my brother. I tried turning again, but the only parts of me I could still feel were the two fingers clutching his band.

“The scanner stopped working.”

A figure crouched next to me and touched my wrist. “The girl is fighting.”

As if the touch had connected me to an external speaker source, I could hear clearly again. It was the guy with the beautiful masculine voice. Michelangelo's David would sound like this.

I tried to choke out the words for him to help Christian, but only liquid bubbled up.

I used every last resource I possessed to slowly curl my hand and touch the boy's fingers at my wrist. The pressure of his fingers increased minutely at the touch. I tried to tell him to help my brother, but I couldn't remember how to make my lips work anymore.

"I can barely tell it's human under the blood." The older man sounded extremely disinterested. "Broken nose, shattered cheekbones. Girl chose the wrong boyfriend. Poor mongrels."

"She is as human as we are, Uncle." The boy's lovely voice radiated disapproval.

The older man sighed. "The scanner is dead and soon she will be too. Let her find peace," the older voice said dismissively. "You don't waste reserves on ordinaries when you don't know who might be watching for the right opportunity to strike. If only the scanner was working."

"Maybe she isn't ordinary. I've never felt such a linger in the air."

"These scavengers are foot soldiers only—boy probably had more magic than they could deal with—bet they leaked his magic everywhere, or else we'd have found it in a container. Still...check her wrist."

I felt my wrist lifted.

"Nothing. Her skin is clear," the boy said. He carefully laid my arm back down. "But she feels..." His voice trailed off.

"Mother would heal her," the boy continued, as if to himself. "She wouldn't care that she was ordinary."

"She would care if it hurt *you*. You are crouching there as if that girl is the first soon-to-be dead person you've ever seen. Help me finish tying up these scumbags."

The boy stood and the heat from his hand lifted with him. Everything became cold, painful, and hazy again.

The night sky was circling. I...was at the planetarium with Christian? Any moment now there would be music and a laser show. But the manager and lighting technicians couldn't agree on something. I could hear the buzz of their furious whispers. Then someone was once again next to me, kneeling and putting a hand on my arm, and I felt some semblance of clarity, along with relief that his hand was touching me again.

A sigh issued from somewhere far to my left. "Fine. Do it, if you must. A *tiny* amount only. I'll transport these to Processing."

The hand moved to my chest. Something like strangled laughter and blood bubbled from my chest and up my throat with the thought of telling Christian that I couldn't even appreciate my first experience getting to second base.

Christian.

Heat centered in the hand pressing against my chest, and something electric and white hot shot through me.

The electricity connected and something in me—that part that felt neutralized, like a sleeping dragon—pulled greedily, demanding treasure and gold, knitting it together and throwing swashes of energy through my limbs like paint splattering a canvas. And all of a sudden, all I could see was blue. Two circles of ultramarine, the color straight from the deepest shade of *The Last Judgment*. Staring into those eyes, a winged henna design sketched itself slowly in my mind.

"Their police are coming." The older man's voice was flat. Sirens whined in the distance. "They

will take care of her, if she lives, and—”

Her? Not “they will take care of *them*.”

I flipped myself like a flopping fish, then dragged my body toward my brother's unmoving form, arm over arm. There was no pain this time, and I could use my left arm again, but it felt like I was moving through sludge. Like in a dream. A nightmare...

This had to be a nightmare.

“It—she's moving.” The older man's voice sounded disbelieving. “How much did you use, Ax?”

“Half,” he answered.

The older man sounded like he was choking. “Half...what were you thinking, *Alexander*? You are not indestructible, regardless of what you and everyone else thinks.”

“She's a fighter,” he remarked simply, as if that explained all. “She took it, and I let her.”

“You play too many team sports. We should have raised you as an assassin instead. I told them that, but did anyone listen? Where's she going?”

“To the boy.”

“Don't bother, girl,” the older man called out. “He's deader than dead.”

My mind rejected that notion totally. I kept crawling forward. It was getting harder and my vision was tunneling again. *No*. Not yet. Just a little farther.

“Ax, stop following her, dammit. This is getting less amusing. The suppression field won't remove our faces from the memories of the officers should they see us. And don't you dare use more magic for her! No! Dammit!”

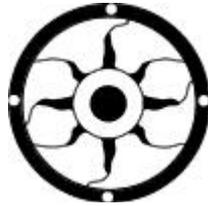
A hand touched my back, and then I was next to Christian, vision suddenly clear, dark tunnel pushed away, my hand wrapped around his limp one, still warm. Oh, God. Oh, God.

“It is too late for him,” the boy whispered. The other man's voice was swearing loudly in the background. “Bringing back the dead like this is forbidden. This is all I can do for you.” His breath, at the nape of my neck, was warm, his voice soft.

My vision was tunneling again—the shot of clarity having come from outside me. “No.” It sounded like my voice, but a croaked, cracked thing under the blaring sirens, which were growing louder. I could feel no life, but there was something else in my brother's hand, something that tentatively brushed me. I could *feel* him. I squeezed his hand. *Please*.

“I am sorry for your loss.” The hand at my back gave a sympathetic pat, then lifted and the tunnel came rushing toward me, faster, blasting, before everything went dark.

Chapter Two: Daydreams and Nightmares



I looked at the winged creature I had penciled in my sketchbook. Since the “accident,” my hand kept recreating its pattern. Why I felt compelled to doodle the same image over and over would have freaked me out, if I had the emotional capability for it.

Three therapists in six weeks had been unable to convince me that Christian’s death had been an accident. The next in line, scheduled for next week, would have no better success. The doctors kept saying that my imaginings were a result of head injuries, and that I shouldn't be concerned with “dreamscape memories.”

I was obsessively concerned.

Especially since people seemed to remember that I was “crazy” now, but not exactly why. Not a single therapist, not even my parents, could repeat the events of that night back to me twenty minutes after I told it. And none of them seemed concerned about that fact.

But at least the men in black had not reappeared. Not in the hospital, and not afterward. No one possessing strange powers had.

I looked at the winged creature—a hybrid of a bird and snake. Not quite a phoenix, not quite a dragon. I wiped at it with my thumb, smudging the shading, then looked down at my otherwise perfectly unblemished hands and curled my long fingers in.

The authorities could try to convince me until the end of time that there had been an electrical explosion that had blacked out the city. But I had seen the pinched looks on the doctors' faces when they couldn't explain why I'd been covered in blood and not sporting a single scratch.

I had searched through every volume in the public library and browsed a thousand websites on magic, secret government conspiracies, “Awakenings” of all types, and a dozen different meanings of the words “ordinary” and “feral.” Nothing matched my experience. Nothing felt right. But the answer to what happened that night was out there somewhere, and I would find it.

Besides, the boy's words—Alexander’s words—flowed through my dreams at night. *Bringing back the dead like this is forbidden.*

What did “*like this*” mean?

My pencil tip broke. I took a deep breath, then another, and let the calm vibes of the art studio wash through me. My only haven. It was the only classroom that didn't have a rose glued to an empty chair next to mine. Christian had elected for study hall during my art period.

I took a deep breath, retrieved a pen from my bag, and turned to a blank page in my sketchbook.

The Homecoming Game was next week. The new quarterback was supposedly decent, but I

hadn't attended any of his games, and I didn't plan to attend any in the future. Students were still weeping about Christian, yet they were excited for the game and dance, and I couldn't understand any of it.

People walked around me living their lives, while I watched them as if they existed on a TV screen.

I felt...totally removed. My second therapist had whispered to a colleague weeks ago that I was suffering from some sort of raging delusion, mixed with clinical apathy, in order to deal with the loss of my twin.

But it was easier to stay silent and unnerve the therapists than to release the sobs that stayed locked in my chest, rippling there, pushing.

My pencil moved and Christian's braided leather band slid along the desk and paper as my wrist dragged it along. The world had stopped turning the moment I had awakened in the hospital, asking for Christian, and receiving the horrific response of silence from my parents.

Then the world had turned without me.

I was stagnant. Like Christian's room or his locker or his classroom chairs. My connection to the world was gone. There was something about me that was different from everyone else now. And until I could figure out how to undo the past, no pathway would reconnect me.

I hated it. I hated choking back cries at the most random of times. I hated feeling powerless and without direction. I hated turning to speak to someone who wasn't there, accidentally setting a place at dinner in front of an empty seat, calling for someone who would never answer.

I hated the knowledge that never again would I be able to talk to my best friend.

The pressure of my thoughts seemed to resonate under my skin.

The drawing grew darker and more violent as I traced over the lines, undoubtedly leaving indelible indents on the pages below. I gripped the pen, pressure riding beneath my skin, and repeatedly outlined the little black figures screaming in Munch-styled pain. They stared out at me in anguish, moans slipping from their lips. I could almost hear their choked and building sobs.

Then they started running across the page, shrieking in agony and tearing the ink from their cheeks.

Literally running and screaming across my paper.

I dropped my pen and slammed my hands down, catching the pen under one finger.

The girl on the other side of my large worktable was bent over her work, ignoring me. Focusing on her sketchpad and drawing without care.

I stared at the fall of her wavy hair, similar to my own—but hiding someone normal beneath.

Black motion on the page forced my eyes down again. Then the pen moved, slipping out from beneath my finger and rolling to the edge of my desk.

Small inked fingers splayed to each side of my hands. My heart hammered harder. I could feel the paper pushing around the edges of my fingers, tiny inked digits trying to lift mine. I closed my eyes and swallowed. Breathe. In, out, in, out. I smoothed my hands across the flat paper. Normal. I took another breath and looked down.

No inky fingers, no movement. The figures were once again standing in frozen torment.

Okay. Sure, no problem. I felt lightheaded. My pulse was racing, and the beat of my heart

thumped through the veins of my wrist. I looked to where the feeling concentrated. Dots of henna brown were forming a vague pattern across the pulsing skin. The creature I couldn't stop doodling was taking shape on my flesh.

I looked up. The girl across my worktable was staring at me, eyes pinched. Her expression was a familiar mixture of horror, pity, and accusation, as if she was sure I was two moments away from slitting the skin I'd been staring at.

I had heard the rumors. Quiet Little Florence Crown had become Mad Ren Crown. That covered in his blood, I had killed Christian, the fury of my psychotic rage causing me to blow the entire utility lot. Or, it had been a tragic accident that had caused my mind to snap due to his loss. Rumors of my insane ramblings had spread quickly at school. Why the specifics of my ramblings—concerning magic, electricity, and men with weapons—were never remembered, and hadn't spread online, was a mystery I didn't have the energy to care about anymore.

Even the people I had been friendly with had that mix of expressions when they looked at me. I chose to stay far away from them most of all. It hurt more.

Half a person.

I was half a person now.

My fingers curled, my veins pulsed, the henna brown dots darkened.

I pictured a paper bag and my cheeks caving in and bloating out in its depths.

Christian's voice yelled in my head, "Breathe, you idiot!"

Breathe. Right. In, out, in, out.

The henna dots faded to a light freckle.

"Miss Crown. Lovely work," an accented, luxurious voice said from behind me. Mr. Verisetti's long fingers placed a wrapped toffee next to my sketchbook. "Keep it up."

He moved around the table and said something in a low voice to the girl. She blushed, averted her gaze, then gathered her things and moved to another table. I shakily unwrapped the toffee and shoved it into my mouth. As soon as it touched my tongue, the smooth bottom layer melted. I closed my eyes. The rich, smooth coat settled in my mouth, then the next layer melted. It was like ocean waves riding over my tongue and softly crashing in my ears. Calming and settling me.

There were no worries. The other students had stopped watching me. And the only magic that existed was in Mr. Verisetti's toffees. Even our cranky calculus teacher loved them.

"I desire your help with something, Miss Crown."

I looked up at Mr. Verisetti, and the classroom lights caught on the small gold cuff around his upper ear, the only jewelry he wore besides a wide black band around his left wrist.

I checked my wrist reflexively. It was completely clear. I crossed my arms tightly, tucking my hands and wrists firmly beneath. Another layer of toffee melted, and I let my arms relax on the table, and let worries drift away.

"Sure." I liked Mr. Verisetti. Everyone liked him. And he never called me Florence like some of the other teachers. He either used the very proper, Miss Crown, or Ren, the nickname Christian had given me long years ago. "What do you need?"

My eyes wandered to the collection of prints that he had hung on the wall after he had replaced our old instructor four weeks ago. They were nice, simple pictures of flowers, gardens, and natural wonders.

But weirdness suddenly hit and the prints swirled and became strange and fantastic. Moving like stylized videos—brush strokes lingering like tracers as teenagers violently battled each other with blasts of colored light and strange objects, while others raised zombies and storms. Hints of a magnificent hillside university landscape with fields of poppies and wildflowers vied with the scorched earth, death, and destruction of the foreground.

“You have earned the glorious job of mixing paint.”

I ripped my eyes away from a print of a girl standing over a boy on a field, restoring his life force—his back arched and his arms flung to the sides, caught in the stillness between death and life. It was hard to breathe.

Mr. Verisetti was observing me with a smile. “Glorious,” he said.

Another layer of toffee melted.

My lips lifted in automatic response. It was always easy to smile at Mr. Verisetti.

He chuckled. It was warm and rich, gliding along the surface like everything he did. With his dark hair, smooth skin, and golden eyes, it was hard to guess his age. I thought thirties, but had heard all sorts of weird opinions from others—everything from being in his late teens to early fifties, as if he was whatever the person wanted him to be.

“True glory,” he said. “The greatest artists are masters at mixing. Masters mixing for *their* masters.”

Despite his urban hotness, Mr. Verisetti loved to speak in old-world terms. Masters and servants, mentors and patrons. Giving up one's soul to art.

“You don't want me to use a tube of Hot Pink Glitter Extravaganza?” I joked, feeling better—relaxing my tight shoulder and neck muscles. Art class served as my daily Prozac now.

“Definitely not. We will use these.” He carefully placed eight dishes of crushed pigments in front of me and a jar containing what looked and smelled like linseed oil.

Excitement sparked. “You want me to mix paint from scratch?” Something in me strained at an invisible leash in exhilaration.

Maybe Mr. Verisetti would let me do a quick landscape after completing my task. My eyes moved to the prints on the walls. Maybe a fantastic hillside town? Maybe a girl raising the dead? Excitement thrummed within me at the thought, and I leaned forward with my elbows on the table.

“Yes.” The conspiratorial look in his golden eyes reinforced my thrum. He placed a flat glass surface in front of me, then added a bell-shaped glass muller and spatula on top. Two other glass surfaces were placed to the side. “Interested?”

“Most definitely.” The oil kit I wanted to purchase weeks ago... I hadn't been able to ask for the supplies after returning from the hospital, even though my parents would probably have purchased anything I had asked for. The emotional need had lodged somewhere between my overwhelming guilt and despair.

But now...the fervor to create a picture of resurrection from scratch was beating inside of me—heavy drum beats accelerating to a frenetic meter.

“Patience, patience.” Mr. Verisetti's voice was soothing, but pleased. “These particular pigments will combine in whatever way you specify. Mix your first choice onto this.” His hand passed over the square glass surface. “Trust your instincts each time a decision forks before you. How does each color make you feel? For what might a color be used? Create the visual story and stir in the essence, matching the consistency of the medium to the narrative behind. Lay the groundwork, Miss Crown,

for the manifestation of a magnificent...Awakening.”

The air felt heavier, the thrumming became a steady beat that swirled the air around it like a finger poking through a curl of steam.

Something about his words made me pause, but another layer of toffee melted, and I let the unease dissipate as I relaxed again. Mr. Verisetti was examining me closely, so I nodded quickly and began. I made my first pigment choice quickly and felt a thrum slide down my arm and into my fingers as I poured a small dollop of linseed into a crater of pigment, then carefully folded the mixture together, spreading and lifting with my spatula. The ache of loss flowed red.

I considered the other pigments and made a second choice. The departure of the other part of my soul spilled gray. I added a third. The loss of my very identity, so wrapped in another being, was a motley green. Sprinkle, pour, stir, consider, release. Far better than any other therapy techniques I had tried; the task discharged internal energy that had been plaguing me since Christian's death. The kind that had kept me awake night after night.

Discharging, but bringing with it an intense canvas of white in my mind.

My thumb dipped to the painted surface almost absently. I examined the swipe on my finger, longing running through me. I wanted to wipe my thumb across a blank page, form a circle, form *anything*.

Mr. Verisetti had been a godsend to me, but for some reason denied me the opportunity to paint, and strangely, I hadn't been able to pick up a brush at home. The desire to ask for a canvas formed, then stuttered on my tongue, hanging there between my parted lips. The urge to paint itched under my skin. Dried paint flakes buried beneath and needing water and brush to free them. But for some reason I couldn't utter the request.

My eyes slowly drifted to my sketchbook on the table, and my thumb automatically extended. A *circle*...

A cloth intercepted my thumb before it hit its goal. “Let me help.”

I looked up to see Mr. Verisetti examining me, a smile hovering at the edges of his lips. He held the cloth around my thumb.

“Some of our greatest artists exploded and died before finishing their masterworks. The loss pains me. If only they might have exploded properly. Afterward.”

I wiped the paint off on his cloth with a quiet thank you. The cloth was damp and the paint seemed to suck right off my thumb. I shook off the strange thought and concentrated on his words.

“Exploded?” I tried to recall any artist who had combusted. I couldn't come up with one. The sounds of the other students intruded into my thoughts—their scratching pencils and quiet murmurs. I had forgotten there were other people still in the room.

The edges of his eyes creased and his lips curled upward, as he carefully wrapped the smeared paint into the cloth. He leaned forward, as if sharing a secret. “Their artistic self exploded.”

“Oh.” Self-destructing artists weren't an uncommon thing in history. All that lead poisoning.

He put the cloth into a plastic bag, then placed it on a high shelf. “Such a shame. All of that passion and energy has to be funneled correctly. Make a misstep and boom.” He signed with his hands. “Artist and earth chunks everywhere. With nothing big enough even to piece back together or use.”

I smiled in response to his entreatings grin and dramatics. “That sounds dire.”

“That is why a good artist must find the right...mentor. Are you interested in destroying the ordinary, Miss Crown?” He leaned toward me in the same conspiratorial, playful way. His eyes seemed oddly cold, though, intensely focused. I blinked, and they were warm again. “Destroying this world and creating it anew, even should it bury you in darkness?”

“Will it bring my brother back?” The words wound from my tongue and released into the air.

I couldn't believe I had just said that. But the last bit of the toffee unraveled and melted and I relaxed into my seat. Mr. Verisetti never gave me pitying glances or uttered useless clichés about time healing all wounds. He just accepted the strange things I said, without judgment, in the same way Christian had.

I wanted to do anything to make him happy.

He smiled. “Keep mixing, Miss Crown.”

But it took a moment to make my hand obey. Distrust...no, trust. A headache crept along my temples and a bitter taste replaced the lingering toffee for a moment. I forced my hand to move. Forced my thoughts to my brother. The paint in front of me turned an odd lavender shade. Just this side of being identified as brown.

It was a moody color. Nostalgic and sad. Haunted and trapped.

I used the glass muller and pressed harder, thinking of Christian, of my failure to protect him, of death and the afterlife.

I stopped grinding abruptly. My mind—and the heavy, sure beat of my pulse—told me the lavender was done.

With my spatula, I collected the paint into the center, then slid the glass surface to the side. The bitter taste in my mouth grew. I lifted one of the two remaining glass surfaces and mixed pigment and oil into a pile of garish orange paint to match the taste. The mixture thinned and thickened as I added linseed or pigment. I ground with the muller to coat each particle, trying to find the right consistency, constantly feeling it was a hair off. That everything was slightly off. Another toffee appeared next to my hand, and I quickly unwrapped and placed it on my tongue.

Sated and relieved, I finished the orange.

Mr. Verisetti usually encouraged purely primary colors in warm and cool shades to start a palette, and even while allowing for a dollop of black, he would say with a slow smile, ‘Better to mix your own black, for there is no true black in nature.’

We had always used manufactured paint on our palettes, though. When an artist made paint from scratch, maybe she could start with whatever hues she wanted.

The sprinkles of lapis lazuli heavily called to me, so I dumped the lot onto the last glass surface. Crushed lapis lazuli made ultramarine paint, the pinnacle hue of the old masters. I added a bit of the crystal that looked like crushed glass and a spoonful of paraiba tourmaline, producing something exciting and exotic swirling within the oil.

Just like the boy's eyes...

Pressure gathered under my skin, and I stirred harder. I stared at the colors mixing beneath my hand, a charged reflection of the mix inside of me. *Magic*. It was like there were little zaps of static beneath my skin, whirling around, seeking an outlet.

“An interesting choice,” Mr. Verisetti said, as he observed from his position in the chair across from me. One of his fingers reached across the worktable and tapped mine, and the electricity settled. “I have only seen such a color twice.”

I would have considered the tone of his voice sinister, if it had come from anyone else. I struggled for a moment, my hand stilled above the paint, as something outside of me tried to suppress the negative thought.

“Almost ready,” he said soothingly.

A layer of toffee melted, and so did my unease. Mr. Verisetti picked up the last glass surface, and rose from his chair.

I looked down at my sketchbook. My pen was in my hand. A butterfly was emerging from a cocoon. I blinked at the pen. When had I picked it up? The butterfly emerged fully and quivered weakly inside the paper. Its wings grew stronger and steadier, and soon it was fluttering all over the page, hitting the edges, looking for a means of escape. I could almost feel the puffs of air on my fingers.

I looked up to see the reactions of the other students, but they were all frozen over their projects, unmoving. No, that couldn't be right. I wiped the back of my hand across my eyes, then slipped from my seat and headed over to the art racks. I pulled out an old canvas.

A self-study. I used to love doing self-portraits—delving into the deep recesses of my mind and determining how to present emotion and thought on canvas.

The darkening afternoon shadows made the sketched features lackluster. I wanted to make the penciled long hair reddish brown—maybe add a few happy gold highlights. To make the colorless eyes a festive teal with a ring of sapphire, instead of dark and empty. I *wanted* to paint a smile on my face. And at the same time, I couldn't see placing anything there other than the strained, haunted look of the sketch.

Need.

There was an easel next to me. A sudden addition worthy of my shifting dreamscape.

I pushed the canvas in and turned to the easel. A fresh piece of paper was pinned at the top. There was one unmarked tube of paint, one toffee, and two pieces of charcoal in the bin—one a pencil and one a raw chunk.

I picked up the toffee, turning it in my hand, then dropped it to the floor, my mind rejecting it. I wasn't sure why, but in that moment I knew I wasn't going to eat toffees, ever again.

I lifted the raw piece of charcoal. It felt strange in my hand, as if something were just slightly off in the texture. I stroked a stripe of black down the page, bisecting it.

Two figures quickly took form on the left side. I saw those lone figures in my head even as my hand worked. One figure was forever gone outside of sketched representation, and the other still wretchedly existed in life six weeks later.

I looked to the right side of the dividing line and saw I had drawn a box. Ornamented and alive. Sooty and vibrating. As if I could reach over, dust it off, and open the lid. I reached toward it, my fingers still wrapped around the charcoal stick. The lid moved. Just a crack of an opening, but an opening was there now where it hadn't been before. And suddenly, despite the insanity of the thought, I needed to see what was inside.

Paint it. It was a whisper of a voice in my head, but I nodded along—yes, of course that is what I should do. I could almost taste the linseed. Without taking my eyes away, I blindly reached for the tube of paint, and energy shot through me as I touched it. Ultramarine blue with a charged edge squeezed out onto two fingers. It was the mixture I had made, but with something—glistening and extra—added. I didn't spare a moment to grab a brush. I had to get paint on that box *right now*.

I had finally come unhinged, and I didn't care. There was something alive in the deadened paper

world that contained a representation of my brother.

My loaded fingers reached for the paper. The sketched box resonated with anticipation, golden light shooting out around its edges. Just one more inch to the paper—

“Glorious,” a voice whispered.

My hand jerked, and the paint flew in a wide arc as I swung to the right in terror. Mr. Verisetti wiped the paint from his cheek in one easy motion, then flicked it. No lingering smudge of paint marred his skin.

I knew him—he had been my favorite teacher since he had begun teaching four weeks ago—but in the strange zone still holding on to me, there was something *otherly* familiar about him as he examined the paper. Or perhaps, familiar in an *other* way.

“Glorious,” he repeated.

“Um, yeah.” I inched away. This man I had considered both my savior and friend suddenly seemed anything but. It was as if I straddled two worlds and saw both—where he was charming in one, and deadly in the other.

At a run, it was about a dozen steps to the door.

He smiled, a nice full smile. It was charming and brilliant—and edged and dangerous. The image of him wavered between the two.

“Do not be afraid, Miss Crown. I am anchoring you.” He waved a hand in an aristocratic manner. “You’d likely be dead otherwise, or locked in a mental ward. Though, you are a fascinating subject, I wonder if you might spontaneously create a portal to another layer of the world.”

“Right.” I cast a quick glance around the room. There were students sitting at each workspace, but every one of them was unmoving. Frozen mid-movement.

“Without a single bit of knowledge or training, you anchored your brother for weeks.” I jerked at the mention of Christian, and Mr. Verisetti smiled. “I find the anchoring beyond interesting. Perhaps it is a twin thing. Perhaps it is you.”

I took a full step back to get a better line of escape around the tables to the door, and tried to cover my actions with a neutral smile. I could barely force the edges of my lips up.

In both images his smile turned into something more satisfied. “You are seeing me truly now? Of course you are. Excellent.”

I took another step back. In movies, when men cornered women, the men were usually hideous in some way. Showing their evil on their skin or in their expressions. Mr. Verisetti looked angelic, except for the intensity of his eyes, and the gold cuff at his ear that seemed to brighten suddenly. I felt an answering electricity—the hair on my arms standing on end—in reaction.

“Don’t you want to see what is in the box?”

There was something mesmerizing about his voice that circled around me, but it was only an echo of whatever spell I had been under while drawing, and I pushed it aside. My heart thumped loudly in the unnatural silence of the room. “What box?”

“The one in the painting.” He motioned toward the piece I had drawn.

“That’s charcoal.”

“Ah, yes, the one you were about to paint.”

“Right. Listen. Have the piece, if you want it.” I actually didn’t want him to have it. There was a

part of me that said *mine* in a vicious voice. “School is almost over. My parents will be waiting for me outside. They’ll probably be in here to get me any moment now.” I tried not to concentrate on the fact that no one in the classroom had moved an inch during our entire conversation.

He laughed lightly, his attention divided between the picture and me. “Clever caterpillar. Clever butterfly.” His voice had changed. It was like a long sweep of a loaded brush, curling about a canvas with never ending shades of red.

He tilted his head, looking at the ceiling. “Your father is indeed texting you right this moment to tell you not to walk home, that he will pick you up, and your mother is planning to leave from work soon. Worried and distrustful now, aren’t they? It was easy enough to put traces on them, when they were connected to someone like you.”

I experienced that feeling of bone-deep fear that only something exceptionally scary produced. Cold rushed down my throat and hardened in my stomach, freezing all my organs, making it hard to breathe.

My phone vibrated once in my pocket.

His smile grew.

I wondered if this was what a heart attack felt like—this non-breathing sort of heart failure. “What do you want?”

“I want you to finish your picture. You’ve been starving. And I’ve been dangling the dish of cream for weeks now instead of letting you drink. I can’t be sorry, alas. Not for such delicious torment. Especially when it is all the more potent when one such as you breaks through on her own. More painful as well, but such is art.” He smiled. It was lovely and terrifying at the same time.

“I don’t understand.” I could handle my own break from reality. But a psychotic break in a guy who outclassed me by a foot and a good hundred pounds? *Not good.*

“No, of course you do not.” He looked back at the piece on the easel. “A little dark treasure waiting to bloom. It has been a great delight to watch you these last few weeks.”

“Okay.” I chanced another step backward toward the door.

“I adore ferals.” His fingers lightly swept a table as he took a step closer. “Draining them dry is such a delight. All for a good cause, I assure you. And with you—double the delicious torment.”

The cold in my stomach turned brittle.

“Here, in your natural element...I could simply sit for days and watch in wonder. Alas, that I have a mission far too important, because watching you...the words escape me...” His other hand went to his chest, and he bowed his head.

I took that as my cue and ran.

I was fast—I had practiced ten million passing drills with Christian, running patterns across our yard in order to make him the best. I dodged desks and chairs, hand outstretched for the door. My hand struck an invisible barrier, fingers crumpling inward toward my palm, then my shoulder, head, and hip hit an invisible wall and bounced me back as if I had run into a giant wall of clear Jell-O. The gross kind with the hard top.

I turned quickly and put up my hands. Betrayal tasted like bitter toffees.

“I can’t let you leave yet. I’m sorry,” he said, not looking sorry in the slightest as his mouth quirked invitingly again.

I couldn’t respond. I didn’t know what to say. There was some sort of force field at work behind

me. *Magic*. A vision of electric arcs hit me, and I clutched my head as pain exploded in my skull. My newly crazed teacher was moving closer, one swaying step at a time. All of the colors and shadows around me drew into a vision of dark El Greco lightning, threatening.

He cooed like I was a small lamb. “Don't be frightened. That just won't do. And you are developing a resistance to the toffees.” He reached into his pocket to grab—a knife, a gun, duct tape?—and I scrambled for anything I could see. I grabbed a pair of scissors on the table and thrust them in front of me.

“Stop!”

He held his hands out. No weapon. Nothing sinister. Only pieces of pocket lint. I could have dropped the scissors, so heady was my relief, but my fingers stayed tight around the handles. My unmoving classmates sat frozen in their seats around us, eyes down.

The lint lifted and swirled and I could only watch, strangely detached, unable to move with the unnatural wall at my back, as the lint swirled and settled over me, covering and embedding small hooks into my skin like some strange glitter.

There was a pull, starting in the top layer of my skin, then the pull became a wrench that spread through my veins, my bones, diving, swirling, sucking. A pull, then a tug. I shuddered as it rippled through me. Something was being taken from me. I tried to grab whatever it was, but the feeling flitted away, swirling into the air like a reflection of the lint. A deep breath released from my lips. Then two. I shuddered, then grew still.

I looked at my shimmering arms. I felt light. Unencumbered. As if the hooks were pulling all feelings of fear—current and past—right from my flesh and dissipating them into the air.

Terror...did not exist. I could think about Christian and my emotional pain, but it was as if it was someone else's life and misery that I was observing.

“Don't you want to finish your picture, Ren?”

I *did*. I did want to finish my picture.

“You've hurt yourself.” He touched my hand. I hadn't seen him move closer, but suddenly it didn't frighten me. “Let me help.”

I looked down. There was a trickle of blood where I had cut myself on the edge of the scissors. The thin rivulet of blood trailed along a path of glitter. The pain hadn't registered. I had been too desperate for a weapon and too scared to think of anything else. Mr. Verisetti's fingers wrapped around the scissors, too.

But I wasn't scared anymore.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I wanted to finish my painting. I wanted my brother. I wanted to go home. I wanted to let go of the scissors that were still clasped in my fist. Why couldn't I release the scissors if I wasn't scared?

The ground beneath me shook.

He moved back quickly, letting me keep my grip. “Bravo, little butterfly.” There was a smile in his voice, even as he kept his distance. If I wasn't scared, why did I feel relief? The shaking stilled.

“Most stubborn of you to fight the Dust.” He smiled, but didn't attempt to come near me again, as if he had sudden cause to be wary. “You beat the toffees, but it will take you far too long to beat the Dust. Should you survive, I definitely will refine my tests on you. Oh, don't look at me that way. It is far better than what the Department will do to you, should they figure out what you are.”

“Who are you?” My mind clinically said that I should be scared in this situation. Like a portrait missing its background—a face floating in empty space. But without the actual fear, my other emotions easily overtook conscious thought. My unchecked desires pushed into control and displayed the possibilities of what I could accomplish without fear.

He smiled, a wide mysterious smile, and the intensity in his eyes grew. “Who am I? I am no one and everyone. But don't you want to finish your piece?”

No. *Yes.*

No.

“Look at you fight. I ache to push the boundaries of such aggression and submission, regardless of the consequences.” But he maintained his distance. He looked back to my picture and cocked his head. “But time hastens all, and for now, I think there is enough to entice you without resorting to other means. Such a hungry soul. And you were twins. Those fools should have captured you both alive.”

The tube of paint was in his hand and not mine. With his finger, he smeared a swath of glittery electric blue onto the figure of the girl twin on the left. The color spread to all areas of her dress, as if absorbing the white space. The strange color was like the second paint I had mixed, but it contained an added shimmer of something. Something almost alive. A color edged in silver and gold.

“I am tempted to keep you, even though it would go against all of my plans. If you learn the pleasure of exploiting such power, though, I just might,” he said as he dabbed on a bit more of the color. “On your own, I am sure you would have created something magnificent for your Awakening—perhaps destroyed the entire eastern seaboard or created a monster from the pits of hell—and I will dream of it, I will. But alas, I must guide this so that I obtain what I must have.”

The figure started...dancing. Her long, white dress whirled outward from the page, flinging white smoke into swirls that appeared to leave the paper entirely. This did not seem to surprise Mr. Verisetti, and I could see his eyes following the motion. I was not alone in my craziness. Or not crazy at all.

He cocked his head, still watching the girl. “Your lavender mix was truly exceptional, and I ached to use it, but this blue is distinctly apt for what I require. A warrior's hue. My heart weeps for what might have been, should we have prolonged this experience another week.” He watched the figure twirl. “I might have procured God's own sword.”

The girl in the sketch tried to get the boy figure to dance with her, but he remained motionless. I wanted him to dance too. *Needed* it.

Golden light illuminated the edges of the girl's dress.

“Ah, yes. There you go, Butterfly. Perfect,” he said. He was suddenly touching my wrist, tucking a stone under my brother's leather band, securing it against my skin. “There is never a force quite as fierce as an Awakening. You possess quite a stubborn will—it amuses me—and I never let opportunities slip by.”

He smiled at me as he stepped back again. “I will confess, here in this moment, that you will never remember, that I have some fondness for you. Art will always be my first love, and you, my dear, will be a dark goddess among artists. Should you survive, it will come in quite handy in the future to have learned your habits and weaknesses.”

I gave a stiff, negative shake of my head.

He put a hand to his chest. “Glorious. Now, as to your other concern...” He looked to the paper,

to the motionless figure of the boy. He smiled, a beautiful, edged smile. “We shall see.”

Gold glinted from his ear cuff, and it felt like molten gold flowed through my limbs in response, weighting them, then bursting into brilliant gold sparks, glitter staining everything in my vision.

I followed his line of sight and everything in me suddenly focused on one thing. I wanted that boy to *dance*.

The girl whirled in her gold-edged dress, leaving the figure of the boy behind. She twirled closer, reaching out from the paper, and hooked her hand over my arm, pulling me inside, amidst the paint and charcoal into a world filled with—

Blackness cleared from my vision. I had...what had I been doing? I stood with heavy scissors gripped in one fist, feeling no fear at all. Just *wrongness*. And it felt as if I had been gripping something in both hands for a long time. My joints hurt with the effort. My wrist burned. My eyes pulled to the clock on the wall. The bell would ring in five minutes.

Five, not fifteen?

I shook my head trying to clear the lingering fog, yet I kept my grip on the scissors. Dried paint crowned every fingertip. What had I been doing? I pushed at the fog in my mind. There was a man in front of me, putting a box into his pocket and smiling at an easel.

“Even something vulnerable like a sapling or chrysalis can be extraordinary given the right purpose, Butterfly.”

I followed his eyes to the picture. It too was wrong. A figure of a girl stood in front of closed drapes holding a potted sapling in her hands. Patterned, circular portals shaded with a dimensional edge were the only adornment on the draperies. No box, no second figure, and no color present anywhere. Yet my fingertips were stained blue.

The man smiled, as if I had voiced my thoughts aloud.

“Who are you?” I asked.

The question was wrong. God, what...? I pushed as hard as I could against the fog.

“I am the man with the answers to all of the questions you don't even yet know to ask.”

I pushed harder. Hard enough, that I felt something tear around my mind.

There was a loud boom outside, and the other students started moving again, but I couldn't look away from the man in front of me. His smile grew. “Ah, conceit, my ultimate weakness. You ripped right through and exposed me. Delicious. But far too late for them.”

Tumbled blocks of memory and information re-formed into a whole, bar one smoking black spot. Mr. Verisetti held something large and dark in his hand, a wide mysterious smile curling his lips. “No time to test further. Do keep hold of that marvelous piece of art.”

He dropped a wide, round, black circle to the floor. It stuck like a suction cup thrown with great force. “They'll be here in five minutes. You should really run. Or else they will take that which I have allowed you to keep—your life and magic. I left a bit in the container since you did so well.” He stepped forward, one foot hovering an inch above the black circle, the other at its edge. “Do remember my generosity. Until next we meet, Butterfly, I look forward to the havoc you will wreak.”

He slid forward on his planted foot, not quite making a hop, not quite taking a step, and his body fell into the black hole. The edges of the black circle pulled in quickly toward center, slipping across the still completely intact tile, as if the circle had been a thin blanket covering a gaping hole,

and weight was forcing the entire blanket down and pulling the rest of the earth around and above it to close the hole. Intact floor tile remained as the circle rapidly pulled to its own center, sealing itself to a point over the top of him like a pod. Mr. Verisetti disappeared into the earth without an iota of displacement.

The last bit of black circle disappeared without a sound.

Only a light scorch mark remained, as if something round had burned the tile, then been dragged, flaming, to center. I held the scissors tightly in front of me.

“What is she doing now?” I heard the whispers of the students, who were moving around once again.

Your life and magic. Magic. I gripped the scissors harder.

The door of the classroom burst open, and a boy ran inside, furtively looking in all directions, then at something in his hand.

I looked back to the spot on the floor where my teacher had disappeared. I pushed against the feel of the hooks still buried in my skin. I demanded anger. I demanded terror. I demanded betrayed sorrow.

“Hey, where did Mr. Verisetti go?” another student said, craning her head. “Did she kill him too?”

“Verisetti?” The new boy said in alarm as he stopped next to me. He looked my age, but I had never seen him at school. The jacket of his tailored suit was slightly askew, his gray eyes sharp. His dark hair and silver-rimmed glasses mirrored the black and silver of his pinstripes.

He looked terrified, but squared his shoulders, held out a device and made a sweeping motion with it over the black spot, as if he were scanning the space. He kept sending quick glances between the door of the classroom and his device. None of the other students were looking at him.

It was like I was in a painting by Magritte—normal objects assembled together to form a surrealistic whole. Except, the boy next to me should be wearing a bowler, not a beret. And carrying an apple, rather than a computer tablet.

The boy's face brightened. “I *knew* it. I knew one could work here. Ha. Suck it, Rational Engineers' Club. The Department can suck it too.”

He bent down and scraped a residue from the black scorch mark, collecting it and placing it on a violet-colored tablet device. Then he ran the device over the spot again, pushing buttons. “Three more minutes and this place will be crawling with those bastards. Come on, come on, a little more. I'm so going to win the competition this year. Record keeping first, though. What's that terrorist's full name?”

He touched beneath his ear and his eyes lit. “Oh, right.”

He cleared his throat and pushed a finger to the tablet. “On this day, I, William Archenwald Tasky, report that I have found traces of portal pad technology in the First Layer. The name Verisetti was mentioned by an ordinary boy. This leads me to conclude that Raphael Immanuel Verisetti might be involved, given the criminal circumstances. Bookmark this report under *Will Is Always Right*.”

He looked smug as he quickly tucked his tablet into an inner pocket. “Suck it.”

I wanted to feel smugness too. I wanted to feel fear. I wanted to mourn the loss of my brother again. I pushed at the feel of the glittering hooks embedded in my skin.

A few tugged, gripping in a last effort before releasing. A light layer on my skin lifted free, leaving me clean and raw, where exposed. I shivered.

The particles streamed into the air, hanging there, as if seeking a new target.

Will looked up suddenly, his eyes going wide at the particles. “Dear magic.” He fumbled in his jacket and pulled out the tablet, the pocket liner coming with it, sticking out in a cloth triangle.

He pushed a button, and the lint moved in a sudden burst of air straight into his tablet. He pushed another button, and his jaw dropped at whatever he saw there. “Docile Dust? This day has been the *best*.”

Along with anger and sorrow, a sense of relief seeped through me. The last remnants of the Dust released from my skin and swooped into Will's tablet.

I rubbed my left arm and my fingers brushed rough edges. I slowly looked down to Christian's band, which was brittle at the edges and burned clear through in spots. I carefully touched the damaged leather. I felt suddenly numb. Numb in a far different way than I had under the Dust.

Will pushed something on his tablet. “Two minutes remaining.”

I scrubbed my free hand over my arm, but didn't take my eyes away from the space where Mr. Verisetti had been. My delayed fear response had firmly tagged Mr. Verisetti as the most dangerous element in my current situation and put nerdy, unknown Will on the waitlist.

“Docile Dust?” I asked, a little too loudly.

“Who is she talking to?” a student whispered.

Will looked at me and blinked. “You can see me?”

“Yes?”

“Are you an expat?” He blinked at me some more, then suddenly looked cagey, eyes darting around. “Are you from the Department?” He edged away from me, then swore and looked down at his tablet. “It shows I still have a minute and a half.”

He hit the edge of the device with his palm as if it was on the fritz, then turned and started walking swiftly toward the door.

“What? Expatriate from what?” I called, my feet moving after him. He had used the word magic and he clearly knew more than I did. “Do you have a Department of Death?”

“She did kill him! I knew it!”

“Crazy.”

“Absolutely nuts.”

The whispers were everywhere now.

My whole body tightened, the environment around me fully registering. Before, they might have simply ignored me when I wasn't near Christian, but I had been fair game for weeks now...and had just put myself in active persecution territory. I kept a grip on the scissors and grabbed my bag, quickly stuffing everything from the easel inside. My eyes kept track of Will as he maneuvered around students without touching them and pressed buttons on his odd-colored tablet.

“Wait!” I ran after him. Everyone hurried out of my way, but no one looked at the stranger in their midst as he quickly ducked through the classroom door and started running. I picked up my pace too, pulling the sleeves of my sweater down as we headed for the front doors of the school.

“Wait!”

The bell rang to signal the end of school, and kids came streaming out of rooms chattering about an earthquake.

“*Please wait!*”

Will suddenly stopped and turned toward me, eyes sharp, one hand clenched in his pocket. “You aren’t a Fed?”

I breathed heavily and tightened my grip on my bag. Relief and apprehension mixed. “Not last I checked, no.”

His shoulders eased, and he removed his hand from his pocket, letting it hang loosely at his side. “Of course you aren’t. And you aren’t a terrorist.” He looked at his tablet. “Come on then, we only have a minute to get clear of here.”

Will put on the black beret as we exited the building. I clutched my scissors. If I found out I was being hunted by some crazy black ops artists’ colony or a technologically advanced prostitution ring that needed art students with mental problems, I was going to go down fighting.

Will looked down at his tablet as we reached the now heavily populated sidewalk. “The rumors are so right. This Layer is rich with illegal goods.”

“Layer?”

He gave me an odd glance. “Yeah. You know, five layers of the world?” He scrolled his tablet. “It says Docile Dust is only supposed to subdue and inhibit, not cause memory loss.”

“You are magical.”

“Yes,” he said slowly, as if I was the slow one.

“How do you bring people back from the dead?”

He blinked. “You do an organ enchantment.”

Painful relief slipped through me. “You know how.”

He shrugged. “The basics. Resurrection experts are a dime a dozen, though, so I’ve never studied it.” His eyebrows creased. “Wait, how old are you?”

“Seventeen. Take me to one. I’ll pay you.” I’d do anything. Whatever had just happened in the art classroom would be completely worth it, if I got Christian back.

“You’re feral,” he said as if just realizing a secret of vast import.

I yanked the scissors into a threatening position. That word had been tossed around the night Christian had died too.

Will held up his free hand. “Whoa. My family supports feral rights.” His eyes went wide, and I followed his gaze to the students giving me a wide berth. They were staring at me and pulling out cell phones. No one was looking at Will.

“Put those down,” Will hissed, indicating the scissors. “You aren’t even close to being cloaked.”

Mechanically, I shoved the scissors into my bag and swallowed as I took in the expressions on the horrified and disgusted faces around me. So this, then, was what rock bottom felt like.

I turned abruptly and started walking quickly. Maybe I could outrun the pain.

“What is he doing here?” Behind me, Will’s voice was so full of astonishment, that I turned to

see what had caused it.

A man dressed in pinstripes and glasses was running toward the doors of the school. He carried a clear aura of authority, even while sprinting, but no one looked at him as he passed. He reminded me of Mr. Verisetti in an indefinable way.

I balanced on the balls of my feet, ready to run. “Is that your Dad?”

Will held secrets that I wanted, but he was also a part of Mr. Verisetti's world—the world that had killed Christian.

Will looked down at his suit. “No. Pinstripes are all the rage right now,” he muttered, blushing.

On the street, a black SUV shot past us, did a quick U-turn and screeched to the curb. Will immediately pushed me out of the center of the gawking crowd and into a crush of kids waiting for a bus. Everyone was looking at me, and no one was noticing the very obvious black ops vehicle or the boy with the beret who stood at my side. Three men rapidly exited the SUV.

Another man exited more slowly, menace trailing him. All of the men wore black. Black sunglasses and soulless expressions adorned their faces.

Frozen. I was frozen. Frozen physically and emotionally.

“We have to go.” Will pushed me into the crowd. “Now.”

“Hey, watch it!” a boy said, as I tripped over him, my body completely unresponsive.

The thin man who had exited last yelled to the others, who were striding up the walk toward the school. “Find Verisetti. Put traces on everything.”

Will pulled me behind a low wall of bushes that defined the edges of the school grounds. I tripped over him, already off-balance, and my bag dumped on the ground.

I mechanically started scooping things back inside. “Who are they?” I asked woodenly. They weren't quite the same as the men who had killed Christian. Those men had seemed far more wild and far less organized, but the feeling of personal danger was the same.

Will tucked my art notebook into my bag, then grabbed the sketch while craning his head around. “Department spooks. Bad news. Just stay here until we can make a break for it.” He held out the sketch to me.

The tips of my paint-stained fingerpads curled around the paper, touching the girl's dress within. The paint seeped from my fingers into the sketch. The girl in the picture began swaying. She smiled, set the sapling down, and began pulling the shaded white drape on the right slowly to the side, exposing darkness in the middle of the sketch.

“What is she doing?” Will scooted closer, pulling the paper back out of my grip in order to examine it. “I didn't realize you were an art mage.”

Anxiety seeped through my wooden state as I watched him. Alarm gripped me. “Let go of that.”

“Okay.” His fingers loosened, but a charcoaled hand reached out from the sketch and gripped his forearm. Will's eyes widened, and he finally released the paper fully, but it was far too late. The hand yanked back into the paper, taking Will's arm with it. His whole body followed, just sucking, *absorbing*, him in. *Schwoop*. Right down to his strange black shoes.

Gone, like everyone in my life.

The freed sheet of paper caught a breeze and gently drifted to the sidewalk. I stared blankly as it finally came to rest a few feet away. A student stepped on it, issued a quick apology, picked it up,

and handed it to me.

I blindly took it. People were passing by, pointing and giving me wary glances. *Me*. Not my hands which held the paper that had just sucked someone inside.

I gripped the paper without looking down. Perhaps it would suck me inside too. Make me disappear completely as well.

I finally looked down. There was a different figure in the sketch now. The girl in the white dress with the sapling was gone, but a male figure, drawn in broad, harsh strokes, looked pretty freaked out as he dashed around, banging into the sides of the sketch.

I lunged forward and grabbed a sophomore passing on the walk, then held the sheet in front of his face. “Excuse me. Could you tell me what you see?”

The sophomore looked scared. “A guy and some curtains.”

“Is the guy doing anything?”

“Doing anything?”

“Do you see him moving?”

The kid backed up, then bolted.

I looked back down at the lone figure in the sketch—complete with a little beret—his hands splayed out against the paper, facing me, banging his palms as if against a two-way looking glass. His features were slowly turning from harsh strokes to the more refined ones of Will.

I tentatively reached out a finger to touch his hand.

“Ren!”

My head snapped up, and I saw Dad's car at the curb. He was leaning into the passenger seat and waving to me through the open window, just like he had done for weeks now—leaving work early so that the three of us could awkwardly sit together—broken—for early dinners during “happy time” when the October sun was only just starting to set. As if the dark wasn't more comforting now.

I looked back down at the sketch. Will looked completely freaked out. I looked back to the black SUV where the thin man stood with his arms crossed, eyes narrowed on the school entrance. I hurried to Dad's car.

“You didn't text back,” he said as I scooted inside. “I didn't know if you had decided to start walking. Good thing you didn't,” he said in a too-hardy, joking manner. “Weather events are getting crazy again.”

I hunched down, casting a quick glance behind my seat and through the rear window. “Sorry. Lost track of time.”

“What have you got there?” he asked.

He reached for the sketch, and I couldn't contain my yell. “Don't touch it!”

He pulled his hand back, shocked.

I swallowed again, pulling it completely out of his reach. “It's done in charcoal. It will dirty up your nice shirt.”

“You trying to say your old dad is afraid of a little dirt?” His smile did nothing to lighten the dark circles under his eyes.

“No, course not.” They were going to pressure me again to take those drugs—I could see the intent forming in his expression. “Let’s go home.” I took a deep breath and dredged up a smile.

But the car stayed in park and he examined the drawing I had plastered against the door—as far as I could get it away from him without turning it face out and risking it swallowing the car with us inside—and nodded sagely while tapping a finger to his lips. “The transcendental aspect of the curvature of your lines is a sterling representation of the Circle Movement. Startling. Brilliant.”

“Dad. Let’s go.”

“What? Are you going to tell me there has never been a Circle Movement? Should I have commented on the symbolism of your hat choice instead?”

“I really want to go home. Now. *Please.*”

“Okay, okay.” The lines around his mouth tightened, but he checked his mirrors and shifted into gear.

I watched through the side mirror as we pulled away. The thin man was scanning the grounds. Fifty yards away, his eyes seemed to lock onto mine through the mirrored glass.

We turned the corner.

The tightness in my chest was overly constricting as I watched Will look over his shoulder to the dark sliver exposed by the slightly ajar drape. “Do you see anything wrong or weird about this picture?”

“Aside from the beret? No?”

The word came out more as a question, and as if it wasn’t the picture that he was trying to decide was wrong and weird.

I looked to the side mirror. No strange cars seemed to be following behind.

Will’s mouth pinched tight as he shifted sideways to keep both of us and the sliver between the drapes in view. He was watching the slivered opening in an increasingly wary manner. Had I conjured up some freaky nightmarish daydream about Mr. Verisetti? Had everything from the time I had entered the art classroom until the time my sketch fell to the ground been a vivid, complicated imagining? Were the lingering traces of such a dream still on me?

Check her wrist.

The memory of the words made me look down. Christian’s band was half destroyed on one wrist. And on the other, strange henna brown pointillist dots now formed what looked suspiciously like the sapling that had disappeared in the sketch.

I thought about balling up the paper. About taking the therapy drugs. Letting them make me forget everything.

I pressed my knuckles to my forehead trying to push against the ache growing there. I was breathing too hard; my Dad was going to stop the car any second.

“What do you say we stop for some fries on the way?” Dad said as he changed lanes. “Your mom is making something healthy again.”

We were away from the school. No one seemed to be following us. I nodded, focusing my gaze on the sketch again. There was something moving behind the drapes. And there was a boy trapped in front of them.

Even if this was all the crazy in my head finally manifesting, maybe my brain was telling me

how to release my fear of another person dying. Or was allowing me to save someone and feel redeemed. I closed my eyes. If I saved Will, maybe I'd gain some unpronounceable psychotherapy resolution.

Dad pulled into the drive-thru, trying to make jokes about Mom's reaction as he ordered three large fries.

I desperately wished for my brother. He would understand. Be able to help. My parents thought me unhinged with my tales of Christian's death.

I had no one. I was on my own.

We finally reached home, and I exited, gripping the sketch, watching as Will repeatedly checked his pockets with his finely drawn charcoal hands, pulling things out and stuffing them back in.

“Roger, that had better not be French fries I smell!” But Mom's joke came out all wrong. High and stringy. I'd bet the Picasso original I would someday own, that someone from school had already called her about either my behavior in art or on the sidewalk.

“Too bad!” Dad's lighthearted reply was equally tight, as he shrugged out of his suit jacket. I clutched the sketch to my chest and stared up the darkened staircase toward my bedroom.

“Sweetie.” Mom appeared in my peripheral view and her hand went to my forehead. “You look feverish. Are you well? Should I call the doctor?”

Or the *therapist*. I could hear what she wasn't saying.

Dad appeared next to her, dark circles deepening. “I thought you were just in your zone thinking about your artwork.”

Hoping. He had been hoping I was just in my zone. And not dwelling on our missing fourth.

“Are you unwell? What is wrong, Ren?”

I loved my parents. Our family had been an awesome foursome. But now we were a very awkward threesome. They vacillated between holding on to me too tightly and trying to give me space. Holding on too tightly and pushing me away. Holding on too tightly and looking at me with ill-concealed censure.

“Nothing.” I had to clear my throat to get the whole word out. “I'm fine. Just tired. Everything will be fine.”

Will had confirmed that there was a way to bring someone back from the dead. Hope swelled painfully in my chest that my words were true. I repeated them as a promise.

“Everything will be fine.”

Chapter Three: Finding the Rabbit Hole



I stepped into my room and closed the door, my stomach grumbling over the abusive way in which I had just shoved my dinner into it. I stood in the darkness for a moment, before flicking on the lights. My carefully wrought walls greeted me, overwhelming and crowding me, instead of providing the haven I desperately needed. I concentrated on the section directly across from the door and took a deep breath. The figures, creatures, and odd shapes remained stationary.

Half of the north wall had been completed during my Picasso cubist period, the other half during my obsession with pointillism and Signac. The transition between those two was...interesting. Demanding that the eye blend color versus elements. Christian had deemed me mad.

I wondered if his statement hadn't been a little true.

The other three walls and portions of the ceiling were a testament to other periods, some short, some longer. Impressionism, Renaissance, Baroque, Surrealism, Art Deco, Pop, Minimalism, Modernism. I looked to my latest period that covered the door to my closet. It was different from the others. It looked more like the designs on the draperies in the sketch—black-and-white patterned circle portals and paths, shaded to create a three-dimensional edge. As if I could enter to find Christian down one of those tunnels. The entrances to Heaven and Hell inside of my room and life.

I looked toward my nightstand and the photo of the two of us that rested on top. I curled my fingers into a fist, then loosened them one digit at a time. I could feel the energy in my skin hum.

I took another deep breath, sat, and unrolled the sketch, clipping the paper to my tabletop easel. Will was crouched defensively in the corner furthest from the slivered opening between the drapes. As soon as he saw me, he jumped up and made large motions with his limbs. The beret was off and stuffed in a back pocket, his dark hair was disheveled, and there was a large tear in the right pinstriped sleeve of his jacket. That hadn't been there earlier. He had been immaculate.

“Are you real?” I couldn't help but whisper.

He replied—a long string of words that were completely silent, but I got the gist through his motions.

“Okay, okay, you are real. And, er, I'm thinking you want out of there?”

Will started pantomiming and doing charades, motioning to me to draw something on the paper.

I looked at the painted walls around my room. Nothing moved there. Okay. I could do this.

He pointed to the tear in his sleeve, then gave me the sign to hurry up. I picked up a pencil, reached forward, and sketched a needle and some thread.

Will looked at me with an expression I could only catalog as contempt bordering on hysteria. He then reached forward, and with his shirtsleeve, wiped clear the lines I had drawn. Unnerved, I set my pencil down.

He motioned to my bag. I glanced down to see the charcoal there. I picked up the thinner of the two pieces—the charcoal pencil. It felt odd in my hand, just as its chunkier counterpart had. Perhaps there was a reason for that.

I re-drew the needle and thread with the thin charcoal. One second after I finished, the lines lightened to a dark gray and fell to the ground at Will's feet. There was a gravity field inside my drawing?

Sure. Why not?

Will didn't even bother to look down, so obvious was his distress. He crossed his arms, causing the rip in his sleeve to grow. He seemed to be taking deep breaths. Finally, he poked a finger at the charcoal pencil, then thrust a finger at his own chest.

I poked him with the pencil. The action forced him back a step, his midsection burrowing in with the poke. The drapes rippled behind him, as though the motions had produced a breeze, and the shaded circles drawn on them slowly rotated, as if they were pinwheels affected by the same wind. His eyes widened, and he backed away from the nearest circle.

I blinked, then touched the needle and thread bundle with the pencil tip and focused on moving them. They inched jerkily to the side, the motion becoming smoother as my motions became surer. The charcoal left only a faint trace of gray, and within a few seconds, the farthest point of the line began to disappear, creeping along the rest of the line toward my implement, as if I was drawing with water. I lifted my pencil and the disappearing line caught up and evaporated completely.

I looked at the end of my pencil, then back at the sketch. Will was wide-eyed as well. He pulled out his tablet, pushed a button, looked frustrated, and shoved it back into his pinstriped jacket.

He pointed at my pencil, then pointed at himself with one hand, while the other mimicked writing.

“Oh.” I drew him a pencil. As the tip of my charcoal lifted from the paper, the drawn pencil turned a lighter hue and began to fall inside the page. Will caught it before it hit the sketched floor.

He immediately wrote “uoyeraohw” on the invisible wall between us.

I tried to pronounce it. “Uoyeraohw. Hawaiian?”

He crossed out the letters, cheeks turning a shaded gray in embarrassment, then in a very stilted way wrote, “Who are you?” in the other direction, though, the “r” was still backward.

“Ah.” Two way glass. Right. “Write normally. I can read backwards, now that I know what to expect.” I nervously ran a hand through my hair. “I’m Ren.”

“Ren, you okay?” I jumped, but then realized the voice had come through my bedroom door.

“Uh...just video chatting, Dad.”

“Okay.” Feet moved down the hall. It was a testament to how much they wanted to believe I had someone to video chat with.

I examined the drapes for a moment, then nudged the panel on the right so that it overlapped the other. Immediately, some of the tension released from Will, though he still cast it a narrowed glance. He started writing again.

I'm Will. Did you create this drawing?

“Yes.” I bit my lip. “I think so.” It hadn't looked at all like this before Mr. Verisetti had interrupted me. But all of the lines had been styled as if by my hand.

Can you remove me, please?

I reached toward the drawing, ready to be sucked inside, but my fingers crumpled into my palm as they hit a solid surface.

Will's shoulders drooped. Then he looked up sharply, motioning to my charcoal, then at the space next to him. I put the tip in the spot indicated. Will tried to grab hold of the pencil, but his hands slid right off, as if there were a thin layer of slick liquid on the charcoal.

Will peered at my fingers, then lifted his pencil to write.

Paint?

I rifled through my bag, but the tube of paint from the classroom wasn't inside. I bit my lip. The tube must have fallen out with the rest of my things. I hadn't paid attention to anything else after Will had been sucked into the sketch. I grabbed for a tube of Cadmium Red. No, too much like blood. I picked up yellow instead. But when I set it to the page, the color slid off like I was painting on wax paper.

Unnerved, I wiped the yellow from my desk with a tissue.

Where is the blue stuff?

“I think it fell out of my bag,” I said softly.

Will's shoulders drooped again. He tried to write something, but the paper wasn't all that large, and his writing had filled the wall between us.

I drew an eraser—a really large one. He gamely began erasing.

I chewed on the end of the charcoal pencil and gagged. I wiped my tongue on the back of my hand, then sorted through my messy desk until I found a large plastic top. Christian had bought them for me years ago.

I stared at the top for a moment, then put it on and slowly started chewing the plastic. I drew a square table and straight chair for Will to use. A little moon and three stars took shape on the white wall to the left side of the closed drapes as I doodled absently. “How did your sleeve get slashed?”

Are you sure the paint isn't in your bag? Please concentrate.

I hated being told to concentrate when I was doodling—as if I wasn't actually thinking. The moon brightened on the page.

“I'm sure. What is behind the drapes?” Looking at them made me anxious. “Do you know?”

No. You are the creator of this world. Don't you know?

“No.” My voice fell to a whisper. Not knowing, deeply upset me. I took my memory for granted. I remembered every image I had ever seen. Why then could I not remember my own drawing...?

The stars began twinkling.

He crossed his arms, frowning off to the side.

Yeah, join the club. I hated me too.

One of the twinkling stars hardened, then shot toward Will. I pinned it automatically with my pencil, my reflexes saving him. Will overturned the table and ducked behind it, narrowly avoiding the other two. The crescent moon, however, had other ideas, and winged its way like a boomerang

around the table. I quickly pulled down the star I was holding so it fell to the sketch floor and put the tip of my pencil in the path of the boomerang, spinning it around. It rotated and whacked into the sketch wall.

Mouth agape, I stared, pencil still pressed to the page. Will peered over the edge of the table, gave me a wide-eyed look, then righted the table. He removed the stars embedded in the tabletop and examined them.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

He shook his head and wrote, *What you feel makes a difference in here. I can feel the change. Like a weather mage manipulating winds—focus and intent are a large part of magic.*

With my pencil pressed to the page, as he wrote the words, the letters rearranged themselves so that they were written forward for me.

Focus and intent.

I rubbed the back of my neck. Will could feel the change? Was that why he had been frowning? Because he had felt a change in the air?

Since Christian's death, I had become so used to people being disappointed in me, that I interpreted everyone's emotions as dislike now. Depressing.

The circles on the drapes began rotating. I quickly blanked my thoughts, and they stopped. I needed to...change my attitude.

“I need to figure out how things work in there. Are you hungry?” I had scarfed down dinner in five minutes flat, then quickly excused myself, saying I was going to study in my room for the rest of the night, but Will hadn't had anything to eat.

Will looked depressed as he wrote. *Yes. Thirsty too.*

Not good. I had never been great at those pet games where you had to electronically keep them alive. They always took time away from drawing or from helping Christian by passing footballs or deriving equations together.

“Request?”

Chicken. Simple. Cooked. Focus. Concentrate!

The last was underlined twice.

I tried to concentrate very hard as I drew a chicken breast and glass of water. I could almost taste the chicken and feel the cool water on the back of my tongue as I drew. But I forgot to draw a plate, so the chicken just sort of thumped down on the table.

“Er, sorry.” I quickly drew a plate, knife, and fork so that I didn't have to see his expression.

Will's first bite was tentative, but then he began eating in earnest, nodding appreciatively.

I sat back, relieved.

Relieved, until a giant spiked tentacle—like a long, flexible branch of a demonic tree—slithered through the drapes, opening them a crack, and wrapped around the chicken and table, crushing it all and dragging it away. I stared, mouth agape. Three more tentacles shot through, one toward Will and two toward me, denting the page outward. I thrust away from my desk and fell back in my chair, hitting the floor hard and breaking the charcoal pencil in two. I grabbed the exposed half-piece and scrambled up. Will was using his knife and fork to ward off tentacle one, but the other two were slithering around him menacingly.

“Ren, are you okay ?” Mom yelled.

“Fine,” I shouted at the door, trying to block the tentacles with my charcoal tip, while hunching over my desk. It was a lot harder fighting the tentacles than fighting the stars and moon had been. This new threat seemed outside my control.

“Are you sure?”

An especially malevolent-looking tentacle, armed with a spike at its tip, lunged toward Will, who dove to the side. I hurriedly drew a messy rectangular shield in front of him. The creature’s spike dented the shield, then hurtled it’s spike at it again.

“Yes, Mom!”

I tried to layer shields around Will, boxing him in and the tentacles out. One slipped through.

“It sounded like you fell.” Mom’s voice was closer now.

Red splattered the black-and-white page. Will let out a silent scream that echoed deep within me. God, I couldn’t let someone else die. I scribbled a wall between Will and the branch tentacles, shading the wall quickly with my bare fingers.

“Ren?”

A tentacle slithered over the top.

“No! No, Mom!” I threw it off the wall with my pencil tip and quickly drew and shaded a higher wall. I nearly sobbed. Why hadn’t I thought of creating the wall first? I frantically tried to bandage Will as the tentacles continued to batter the wall. “I’m fine!”

Will was leaning weakly against the wall and there was blood dripping to the floor from beneath my poorly applied bandage. I drew him a sword, far too late. And a medical kit. I concentrated very hard on what would be in one as I drew it.

“Are you sure?”

I swallowed my sob. I had had practice. “I’m sure! I just saw something awful on the Internet.”

One of the tentacles battered its way through.

“Can I get you anything?”

I sliced through the tentacle with my pencil. Black spewed from both ends. Like hissing snakes, the other two rose in outrage, then lunged toward me. They batted against the barrier between us, denting out the paper.

I furiously sliced them. My eye caught on the needle and thread lying in the other corner. I sliced off the tentacles at the barrier of the drapes and quickly sewed the edges together with haphazard penciled stitches. The now-single drape rippled, as something blasted against it from the other side.

I concentrated on retracing the stitches and closing all gaps completely. The single drape went suddenly still.

“Ren?”

Shaking, I stared at the wreckage inside the picture—broken table pieces and shields, sliced tentacle chunks, puddles of blood—and tried to remember what she’d asked me. “No. No, I don’t need anything. I’m fine, Mom. I’ll be out in a minute,” I called, my voice a little high.

“Okay.” She sounded uncertain.

My fingers were cramping and stained with black, and I realized I was panting.

Will was shakily trying to open the medical kit. I held my free hand over my mouth and drew an already opened one.

“Your dad is asking me to make a run for ice cream. Sound good?”

That meant she had heard the half-sob. “Yes. Please.” I watched Will sort through the supplies. I drew a bowl of water and some sterile cloths, then fixed the broken arm on his glasses.

“Okay, I’ll be back in fifteen minutes, sweetie.”

“Okay.” She had to hate the closed door. I blinked back tears. Get yourself together, Ren.

I righted my chair with shaking fingers. “Are you okay?” I could barely whisper it to Will, as I heard Mom’s footsteps reluctantly walk away. Will had sorted himself out quickly. I had a feeling that danger wasn’t new to him, but being helpless was. His injured left arm was now supported in a sling.

He looked at me in a resigned sort of way, then found his pencil and wrote, *Yes*.

I couldn’t stand the silence anymore. I reached down and drew a megaphone. Will’s face was blank for a moment, then his expression brightened and he picked it up. “Good thinki—”

I slammed my charcoal-covered hand over him as his voice yelled into the loud speaker.

Words emerged in an incensed muffle. Footsteps creaked downstairs but didn’t stop.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

“It is doubtful anyone ordinary can hear me,” he said in a moderately loud monotone. “But you can try and fix the level.”

Electricity was running through me, making me sharper. I connected the megaphone to his lips, funneling the tube down drastically, hoping that would lower the volume. Then I flicked the megaphone away with my smudged fingers. Will rubbed his mouth, but when his voice emerged, it was a normal volume and he didn’t need the megaphone to speak.

“Well...” He looked himself over, tweaking his sling. “This both sucks and is also the most exciting thing that has happened to me in weeks. The research potential is astounding. I wish I could take notes.” He looked longingly at his tablet, before shoving it back into his inside pocket. “I’m definitely taking an art magic class as soon as I return to school.”

“You go to a school that teaches magic?” I kept my voice low. If overheard, my parents would assume I was still video chatting, but I didn’t want them to hear my actual words.

“Of course.”

“Do they teach you how to resurrect people?”

He looked at me strangely. “Medical majors definitely learn. Hey, can you draw some ibuprofen?”

He swallowed the tablets I drew, then asked for a few more supplies, and even though I had to search the Internet, I very carefully drew everything he requested and kept my thoughts focused. My desire for the items to function seemed to go a long way for them *to* function properly within the sketch world.

I felt incredibly guilty and responsible. “Um, are you still hungry?”

“No,” he said decisively.

“Right.” I laughed uneasily and collected the smaller piece of the charcoal pencil from the floor,

shakily removing the plastic chew cap from the top and sticking it on the other piece. The tip was getting dull, so I sharpened it while trying to pull my thoughts together.

I couldn't keep my eyes away from the bloodstains that had dried to a brown crimson—the only color in the sketch.

I rubbed my free fingers together and forced my gaze to my walls. Dungeons, dragons, magic, and mayhem were included in all stylistic forms. Christian had particularly loved anything pertaining to swords and sorcery, so I had included them in everything. He had been so confident that he had roped in everyone around us—even those who had thought it uncool—to liking the magical. He had been the storyteller. The voice that could lead anyone. Ruling the world with a scepter in hand.

“Witches and wizards, sorcerers and sorceresses,” I whispered.

I thought of Mr. Verisetti's prints in the art room—of the boy reaching to the heavens, and the girl reanimating the dead. My gaze moved to the photo of my brother and me on my nightstand. Our arms were slung around each other's shoulders.

“We prefer mage, actually, as it represents both sexes equally.” Will was cleaning up the space, moving debris into a corner with his good arm.

“Oh. I like that. Mages, then.” I attempted to help, but none of my many erasers worked. And Will's eraser inside the sketch was equally ineffective. It seemed that if I drew it, it was permanent. I tried to focus on deleting things through “magic,” but that didn't work either. The piece seemed creation specific.

But what had happened to the items removed by the tentacles?

“Maybe I need to buy a magical eraser?”

He shrugged, but nodded. “Could be.”

I suggested lifting the drape and shoving everything behind it, but Will wasn't willing to chance opening them even a little. As I moved everything to the corners, he started fashioning weapons by taking broken table legs and making clubs. The sword I had drawn for him was tucked in his belt, close to his side. He kept touching it.

Will picked up his beret, looked it over carefully, and dusted it off.

I chewed on my pencil top. “What's with the beret?”

He looked chagrined for a moment. “It was the only garment in the cloaking closet at the checkpoint.”

I couldn't stop a smile. “Seriously?”

“It took a lot of wheedling to obtain it, so I can't really complain. The ironic thing is that I had to argue for it *legally*. People think this layer of the world is generally magic free, but today just proves how many illegal items are here.” He shrugged. “As long as the hat is on me somewhere, it hides me from ordinary sight, and initially, that is what mattered in this foray.”

He tucked the beret into his back pocket again and withdrew a black trivet from his jacket. It appeared identical to the one that Mr. Versetti had used. Will threw it on the ground and tossed a piece of wood at it. He looked frustrated when the wood bounced off.

I shifted uncomfortably, feeling cold. “What is that?”

“Portal pad. Probably better that it doesn't work in here. Should something go wrong, it's doubtful you could get me to a qualified mage in resurrection time.”

“What is resurrection time?” The words were almost incomprehensible; I said them so quickly.

“Ten minutes post death is allotted for resurrection. Not enough time for the soul to separate.” He looked, considering. “Akin to someone being paddle-shocked on an operating room table here.”

I leaned forward. “Allotted? But can a person be resurrected later?”

“Necromancy is considered a black art.”

That wasn't a no.

“Ren?” My Mom's voice jolted me from the conversation.

“Coming!” I checked the defense measures I had put in place for Will. They were solid. I hurried to the door, cracking it open. “Yes?”

Mom tried to peer behind me. “Ice cream?” She held up the cup.

“Great! Thanks!” I took it, shut the door, then hurried back to my desk.

“Ren?” she said through the door.

“I'm doing great, Mom!” I was doing pretty well, actually. I was going to get Will out of there, and he was going to take me to a necromancer.

I set the ice cream to the side and focused on the drawing. “So, let's get you out of there.”

“Great.” Will gathered up a few things around him and leaned forward. “I'm ready.”

Ten minutes later as flowers kept blooming beneath his feet wherever he walked, he looked less enthused. “You have no idea what you are doing.”

I chewed on my pencil top. “Nope. I'm going to make it so you can do magic. Maybe then you can get yourself out.”

He perked up. “Great!”

Twenty minutes later as cheerful pixies circled his head and lightning bolts alternately flashed from his new “orb,” he stared at me in a manner that said I was dead to him.

“Does Mr. Verisetti's magic work like yours?” A shudder went through me, and it took me a moment to realize it was the first time I had said his name outside of school. I had always followed my urge to call him Mr. V when I left the school grounds. Come to think of it, I had never heard him called Verisetti outside of school...ever. That freaked me out a bit.

“Raphael Verisetti is a mage, if that is what you mean. An extremely dangerous one. Smack on the top of the ten most wanted list. Speaking of which... Why do you know him?”

Will asked the question with concern, but his gaze wasn't judgmental.

Fierce warmth rushed through me.

But I didn't want to think of Mr. Verisetti. Betrayal was still toffee-sharp on my tongue. “I don't know him.” Anything I had thought of him as a mentor and friend had been a lie. “Maybe I could give you a magic glove that channels your magic.”

I thought long and hard, then drew one to fit his hand. He pointed it at the pixies, which gasped in shock, then grabbed the orb and flew toward the drapes, sobbing. Will looked chagrined. The pixies disappeared into one of the three-dimensional drawn circles on the drapes, then the glove flew from Will's fingers, raced toward the same circle, and disappeared within. We stared at the circle, then at each other.

“Should I draw another?”

He considered it. “Not now, though I might make one when I get out of here. Magical gloves are a commodity begging to be improved upon. But it only worked on the things that you had just created while thinking about how magic might work. It didn't work on the other stuff.” He pointed at the debris around him and hugged his sword closer. “Maybe we can attach your intent to the base creations of this world, though.”

“Okay.”

He pointed to my closet door. “You really haven't been to the magic world before?” At my negative response he looked bemused. “That looks a lot like the transport system in the main depot.”

I looked at my door—at the winding black-and-white tubes and tunnels funneling around and through each other.

Will held up his black trivet. “Portal pads are just one of the ways that we travel. They only work in the Second and Third Layers of the world. Well, until today when one worked here in the First.” He waved a hand at my unspoken questions about layers. “Another time. Let me tell you about portal pads.”

He leaned forward, eager to proceed. I could recognize a fellow nerd, and knew he was about to embark upon a five thousand-word explanation.

He seemed to read my reaction correctly, as he suddenly blushed. “Okay, let me sum up.”

I smiled—another time I would be interested in the full dissertation. As he described how portal pads worked, I drew a copy of his portal pad trivet on a separate piece of paper, under his supervision. Since I had seen Mr. Verisetti use one, I followed the explanation well enough.

“Magic is all about using the four cornerstones to produce solid results: intent, focus, knowledge, confidence. Send something through the portal while willing it to reappear.”

I drew a feather and let it drop onto the trivet pad. The pad sucked over the top, enveloping it, then it disappeared into the floor of the paper. I blinked. A moment later a black circle appeared on the ceiling and the feather fluttered down and out. The trivet made a suction noise, detaching from the ceiling, and plopping to the bottom of the sketch.

“Yes!” Will's hands were against the barrier of the sketch between us, expression enraptured as I drew. “I can't believe it worked the first time. I wish I could make notes. Where did it go? Did you just let your subconscious magic will it through? Or did you have the feather cease to exist before you willed it to exist again? Or did you create a pocket of space in the sketch using the fibers of the paper, like an insane Origin Mage might? Or was it something else entirely? I need to study art magic more. Send a gopher through, then tell me what you were thinking.”

I blinked at Will, but gamely drew a gopher. The gopher sniffed at the trivet, then looked out at me as if to say, no way. It toddled off the screen. Concerning.

Christian would tell me I needed to draw a gopher with more gumption. And maybe it needed to jump and not just step onto the pad. What if only half of its body made it in?

I drew a little platform above the trivet, then drew a tiny nose-twitching gopher with little stubby legs, and a big belly on a tiny frame. He looked ready to go, but I strapped a hat with earmuffs and a chin strap on him, just in case, then doodled a pair of goggles over his eyes. I accidentally wedged the edge of a goggle into a socket, and a paw reached up and nudged it into place.

The gopher gave a salute then shuffled out onto the platform on his back legs. I halted him with my pencil tip and drew some shoes. He tucked his gopher paws against his sides, then gave three

little grunts as if he were counting.

“Aiyeeee!”

He jumped into the air and plummeted straight down, shod feet out, like a scuba diver jumping off a bridge. The trivet dented down into the floor of the sketch, sucking the gopher halfway in. His little gopher belly-roll pushed up over the edge for a moment. He sat there, suspended, then he was sucked down as the trivet swallowed him whole. The trivet closed over the top of him, then disappeared into the white of the floor.

I waited with dread for a choked little gopher squeal, but there was only the steady hum of Will murmuring, “Awesome,” over and over. A gopher had just disappeared into a sketched oven mat and the only thing to mark the event was a small burn mark in the white floor of the sketch.

The seconds ticked down as the time that the feather had appeared came and went. Then suddenly the ceiling pad appeared and so did the gopher, falling through the air. I caught him with the tip of my pencil and lowered him slowly to the sketched ground. The gopher raised his arms in triumph. Just like Christian after completing a touchdown pass, but with far stubbier limbs.

“Yes!” Will said. “Okay, draw a pad in here.”

But the pad cracked and shattered in Will's sketch. Will blinked at it. “Ooookay. Try again?”

Five more attempts yielded the same result. None of my sketched portal pads worked in Will's world. After some serious discussion with Will about alternate forms of travel, I tried doors, tethers, rips, windows, mirrors, and keyholes. All of the lines would crack and break as soon as I formed the intent to release Will from his prison.

On the other hand, since I tried each mode of transport in the practice sketch first, gophers were dropping, diving, squeezing, and sucking through portals and gateways in their created world like small mad beasts. Little “Aiyeeee!” yells punctuated the air.

I tried to change my emotion. The gopher sketch turned into a serious, marching battle formation. I then thought happy thoughts and flowers bloomed and the rodents did a series of can-can style kicks, before pirouetting and leaping into portals.

Next, Will suggested drawing gates, water pools, tubes, pipes, and pockets. Gophers swam and slid. But as long as my intent was to port Will out of *his* sketch, nothing stayed whole on his paper long enough for a field trial. Will swept the last of the broken charcoal lines into the now-towering pile of trash in the corner.

He became more energized and excited the more we failed. As if the entire process was the best thing that had happened to him—excluding the imminent death part.

“Back to materials,” he said. “That blue paint. Energy in, energy out. Paint in, paint out. Some magic only works to the reverse of what was put into it.” He looked at me expectantly. “We need to retrieve that tube of paint that got dropped.”

I didn't want to go back to school.

Will's expression was full of hope. I looked down at my hands. “My parents installed an alarm system downstairs a few weeks ago.”

They hadn't even been able to look me in the eye the day it had been installed—weeks too late in their minds. I looked up to see Will's hopeful expression disappear.

“I...” I swallowed, then shook my head, unable to look at him.

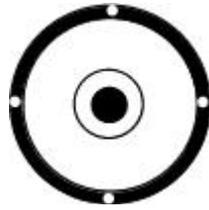
I flicked off my light and took a deep breath, then crept to my door and opened it a crack. A

broom was propped next to my door. Mom had been cleaning again. She didn't even put the supplies away anymore, knowing she'd just start scrubbing everything she could reach again the next day.

I could hear her sobbing in their room even though the volume on their TV was almost loud enough to drown out the sounds. I slumped against the doorjamb, head resting uncomfortably against the wood, listening to my strong mother cry herself to sleep.

As the sounds grew weaker, I closed my door softly and walked unsteadily back to my desk. "We'll go in thirty minutes," I said quietly.

Chapter Four: Unwise Actions



Thirty minutes, a sheet protector, and some safety pins later, Will and his sketch were attached to the front of my black hoodie, and I was slowly removing the screen from my non-alarmed, second-story window.

I tightened the straps on my slim black backpack. It would allow me to move quickly and avoid getting stuck going in and out through the window. The porch roof was a few feet to the side of my window and about five feet lower—an oversight in my parent's alarm installation. Using a chair to balance my arms in a strange push-up, I stuck my legs backward through the window, then pushed out and lowered myself down. I could hear Will swear as the protected paper crumpled a bit when my chest moved over the frame. I dangled for a moment, holding on by my fingertips, then swung my legs over to the porch. As soon as one black moccasin touched, I went with the motion, pushing upright.

Getting back inside the house would require a leap and some extra arm strength, but I'd worry about that later.

I took in a deep breath as I stood on top of the porch and looked out into the dark, silent night. It wasn't the first time I had been out past curfew. Over the years, I had accompanied Christian on everything from post-midnight capture-the-flag battles to TP'ing houses. But I had never been on a mission without him.

“You still with me?” Will asked, voice muffled by the sheet protector. We had debated the merits of puncturing the sketch with a pin and had decided attaching pins through the holes of a sheet protector was the better alternative, even though the barrier muffled Will's voice.

I took another deep breath and held up my thumb in front of the sketch on my chest to wordlessly communicate a positive status, then made my way slowly to the edge where I'd have to jump down to the deck.

My moccasins made no sound as I landed. First mission accomplished, I put up my hood, tightened the straps on my pack an inch more, then took off into the night.

“You live in a creepy neighborhood,” Will said as I jogged along the wooded path behind our house.

I hesitated, then held up a thumb in front of the sketch again. The rest of my hand was wrapped around my closed utility knife. The trees had never seemed creepy before the night we'd been attacked. Now shadows jumped and parted everywhere.

It was a fifteen-minute walk to school. Jogging, I made it in eight, with one hand wrapped around my can of pepper spray and the other around my knife.

The sidewalks in front of the school were brightly lit, which threw darker shadows farther out.

The wall of bushes Will and I had stumbled behind was not near a light. My gaze darted in every direction as I quickly made my way toward the shrubbery. I crouched down with the bushes at my back, the sound of my short, quick breaths filling my ears.

“Ren?” Will asked, his voice concerned.

I gave Will a wordless thumbs-up. *Pull it together, Ren.* Reaching back, I withdrew my flashlight from the open side pocket of my pack.

With my flashlight stuffed between my ear and shoulder, I rummaged under the bushes. Sitting between a familiar brown hair clip and ballpoint pen, was a plain white tube of paint with a blue smudge around the lip of the cap. It shone brightly beneath a gnarled branch.

My fingers clumsily closed around it.

“Yes,” Will crowed. I could almost hear him dancing about. “Let's get out of here.”

I pulled my small backpack off of one shoulder and unzipped it. I nudged the charcoal pencil aside and heard it tap against Christian's lock pick set in the bottom of the bag—mine had been confiscated by my parents in the hospital while I had been comatose. Luckily, since they hadn't known we'd had one set, they hadn't known we'd had *two*. I dropped the tube in along with my other forgotten items and moved the gopher sketch so that I could zip the bag back up. The gophers were still zipping and zooming about.

“You. Hold it.”

I jumped at the sudden voice and the heavy Scottish accent. A large man, dressed in black was quickly advancing down the sidewalk toward me. His brows were furrowed as he looked down at some sort of scanning device in his hand.

A device just like the one Christian's killer had held. I crouched, frozen, staring at it.

“Run!” Will yelled.

The man reacted to Will's muffled shout, narrowed his eyes, and pointed the scanner at me. A light shot from the sketch on my chest and impacted the man's scanner, sending it flying through the air. I scrambled backward and the gopher paper fell to the grass. The Scottish man didn't waste any time going after his scanner, though, and he threw something in his hand at me instead. I dove to the side, rolling with the motion, and came up behind a tree.

Like playing paintball—except there was no Christian to flash signs to, telling him the best field positions. And, again, the enemy wasn't throwing paint.

A bolt of green shot past and a chunk of the tree three feet to my left exploded. At the point of impact, a net stretched nearly invisible tendrils through the air, then slowly collapsed to the ground when they found nothing but wood chips in their embrace. I couldn't catch my breath, so I clutched my pepper spray with tight fingers.

The ground shook all around us.

“A kid?” The heavy Scottish accent sounded irritated. “They left me here for a kid? Well, come on. Whatever little trick you have there won't work for long. I can just destroy that tree too—give you a good concussion or worse. Don't make this more difficult.”

“Do *not* go,” Will warned in a low voice.

“Whatever you've done wrong, they'll work it out with your parents, after your questioning.” When I still didn't move, his voice changed perceptibly. I could hear the soft crunch beneath his feet as he slowly approached. “You don't want to get me irritated. Every capsule that you make me

waste costs a hundred slaw, and I'll rip each loss out of you.”

I peered around the other side of the tree to see him reloading something, my rodent sketch at his feet. Blue seeped oddly from the edge of the rodent sketch, the color growing fainter and blending in as it spread across the page threads. I looked down at my fingers. They were clean. But I had touched the lip of the tube...and the blue smudge at its closure.

The man smirked at me and stepped forward. “There now. Just come along and—”

The edges of the paper crumpled around the sides of his boot.

Schwoop.

I pulled back, harsh, unforgiving breaths issuing from my chest.

“What is happening?” Will's voice was stressed. “Why aren't we running?”

An owl hooted, and the area grew brighter as lights popped on in the houses across the street from the school. I could hear voices yelling down the street about an earthquake and lightning strike. I peeked back around the tree. Only the paper remained. I turned fully so Will could see. “I think...I think I gophered him somewhere.”

Will was silent for a long moment. “Well, I do believe, I feel better suddenly.” I looked down to see him smirking at the other paper. “Hurry, go look at it.”

I slowly walked over and cautiously glanced down at the paper that was now completely blank save for the gopher platform.

“Where do you think he went?” I asked, unnerved.

“I don't—”

“Aiyeee!” A gopher made of paper dropped from the sky. An *animated* gopher made of paper. If a gopher could have a silly, happy grin, this one did.

“Holy—”

“Grab the sketch, quickly,” Will said, his voice high. “And the gopher...paper...thing.”

I didn't waste any time thinking and scooped up the sketch. The paper gopher started to merrily toddle off, but I grabbed him and stuffed him in my pocket.

“Aiyeee!” Another paper gopher dropped from the sky, this one wearing goggles and shoes and doing little twirls. I nabbed him as he hit the ground, then stuffed him in my pocket too. My pocket started moving.

“Get us out of here,” Will said. “If the Department spook falls out of the sky too, I want to be long gone.”

The last intent on the paper had been happy transport. The ridiculous image of the Scottish man wearing the gophers' euphoric grins flitted through my mind. I threw the crumpled paper into a trash bin three streets over. Will hissed at its loss, but instinct urged me to toss it. The paper gophers had stopped moving in my pocket.

Another block over, a good-looking man around my parents' age walked down the street carrying a handheld device. There was something familiar about him. He looked around, eyes peering into the shadows where I was hiding. For some reason I knew his eyes would be blue, though not quite ultramarine. The older man from that night. The uncle. I started to rise.

“Stay down,” Will hissed.

“But—”

“Shh! Don't let him see us.”

The man finally moved away, and I slipped through a park—a longer route, but less likely to be populated.

Will stayed silent for five more blocks. “Is he gone?”

I looked behind me for the thousandth time. “Yes. Why? Maybe he could help us.” He had helped last time. Well, actually he hadn't wanted to help me at all, come to think of it. But reluctantly, he had let his nephew do so.

“Not likely. He's one of the Dares.”

“Is that a cult?”

He snorted. “A family. An old, powerful family. High society. Prideful. They stay out of public politics and barely leave their private island, but like all of the old families, they play deep games. None of them works directly for the Department, but my dad said they occasionally send family members to infiltrate organizations. That one looks like a hunter. Probably hunting Verisetti. One of them goes to Excelsine—my school.”

Alexander. Was Alexander Dare my savior's name?

The fractured conversation from the night of Christian's death wound through my mind. The Dares had checked my wrist. I looked at the sapling drawn in clear brown lines. The dots that had been there before were now smoothly connected, and the sapling looked bigger. That night might have gone differently with the Dares—for better or worse—if, instead of clear skin, this had been on the inside of my wrist.

“He'd scan you at the very least, and...there is something weird about your magic,” Will said. “I don't think most art mages can trap people in sketches. That's a pretty rare skill, I think. That isn't good news for us.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, it's just as bad for me at the moment. I can't trust that guy not to simply lock me in the family library vault and enslave me in this black-and-white prison for all eternity.” Will cocked his head, eyebrows raised. “*I'd* be tempted to keep me for testing purposes.”

“What are you, a mad scientist?”

“Someday, I hope.”

“Great.” I shook my head. Just what I needed. Another me. “We have three more blocks, and you're freaking me out. By the way, how did you perform magic from in there? Something hit that guy's scanning device.”

“Yeah...that...wasn't me. I don't know if I mentioned it, but I'd kind of like to get out of here as quickly as possible.”

All told, even with the stop, we made the fifteen-minute trip home in six.

Chapter Five: Really Unwise Actions



I looked at the clock blearily and cradled my umpteenth Coke. The time steadily showed 5:32 a.m., then the final number blinked to three. Will and I were taking turns watching the draperies in the sketch. I had set up Will with an alarm clock and some cymbals while he stood watch, but even then, with the sketch lying on my pillow, I had woken in a panic every fifteen minutes thinking he had been impaled or eaten. He had had no problem dropping off to sleep, though, after I'd drawn garlands of bells over the drapes and tested to make sure they worked. The sword rested beside him on the bed I'd drawn, and his hand was wrapped around a knife under his pillow.

I didn't know whether it was from too much sugar and caffeine in my system, or something else, but the energy under my skin had steadily gone from a trickle to a torrent, raging through me, seeking an outlet.

Will and I had tried the paint, but a single dot had caused the circles on the drapes to start rotating, and battering to commence behind the drapes—forcing them outward, as if by punched fists. I had quickly captured the spreading dot in a container. It had taken all my focus and intent to do so, and the energy inside of me was raging to get out. The battering and rotations had abruptly stopped. The container now sat in the corner across from Will. We would figure out how to test it in the morning. The blue dot inside the container looked as if it were waiting.

The tube of paint was calling to me and freaking me out in equal measures.

“Ren.”

I started violently, looking around me. That had been Christian's voice.

“Christian?” I whispered.

No one answered.

A good panic was steadily working its way over me. I was sure Will had noticed, but neither of us had said anything aloud about my last piece of magic charcoal being worn to a nub after all the interim drawings and failed experiments. Using a regular pencil, I could eke out the barest of sketched movements—producing little half-alive automatons—but it was obvious that I wouldn't be able to fight off anything magical with a standard No. 2.

The responsibility for Will's safety was not something I was ready to deal with. I wanted Christian back.

I rolled off my bed and lifted the paint tube. It vibrated in my shaky fingers.

“Help me.”

I closed my eyes tightly together. *Christian's voice.* I clasped the sound to my heart.

“*Help me.*”

I sneaked a peek at Will, who was sleeping soundly, his back gently lifting. I wondered at the depth of his sudden sleep. Wondered if perhaps I had magically influenced his snooze in my sketched world.

All for the better, at the moment. I couldn't take this anymore. I would make something work.

I picked through the mountain of papers covering my desk and finally decided on a simple one—a detailed sketch of a butterfly. It reminded me of the one I had drawn earlier in the day, battering at the edges of the paper. It reminded me of Mr. Verisetti calling me that very thing.

That thought made me more determined. I threw the clothes that had been hanging over the top of my small standing easel to the floor. My whole room was a sty. Had been for six weeks now—in contrast to my mother's suddenly pristine world. But I knew, as long as I kept the clutter within the boundaries of my room, my parents wouldn't say a word.

I clipped the paper up and, after another quick check on Will, squeezed a bit of the shiny ultramarine onto my fingertips. I rubbed them together, marveling at the strange glittering of the charged hue.

The color just like the eyes of the boy who had saved me.

I ejected a dollop into a small cup attached to the side of the easel. I chose a short flat brush from my scattered collection, and dipped it. The first small sweep on the paper produced an echoed feeling of heat inside of me. I stopped and examined the paint. It glittered. *Waited*. That was absurd, but I felt the streak of paint was waiting for something.

I dipped my brush and spread another streak. Everything lit inside of me.

It was almost hard to breathe. Painting the butterfly was quick. The paint was alive, pulling together to darken the lines, making a strange sort of electric pop art piece. I rubbed my finger lightly along the surface. My fingertip brushed something soft, and the edge of a wingtip bristled up onto the page.

I stared at it for a long moment. At the three-dimensional protrusion coming out of my piece—a protrusion not created by glue or paint buildup. I stroked my finger a little more carefully around the edges—an archaeologist carefully brushing sand and soot away from my find. With every touch, more was revealed. When I had the edge of a wing half exposed, it started to flutter.

I jerked back. But the fluttering became a heavy beat.

Working with the blue insect, I pried and willed more of it to break free, and it worked hard, determined to do so.

A final, giant flap fully disengaged the butterfly from the paper, popping it out. It landed awkwardly in my hand. I slowly rotated my hand watching the feathery edges move, feeling the gentle beat of its wings. I set the butterfly carefully on my table and stared in wonder. It had worked.

The butterfly straightened, as if strengthening its frame, then beat its wings fully, lifting into the air. It flew around unsteadily at first, then with greater strength. It landed on my windowsill, which was still open to the night. Its wings flattened, then folded gently as it seemed to consider the night. Then it launched itself, fluttering and disappearing over the edge and into the dark.

Life. Created. Alive.

I lurched forward. With my clean hand, I pushed the papers on top of my desk aside. Some fell to the floor and others shifted to bury everything in their path. I paused only when I came to a

canvas near the bottom. I tugged the half-finished image of my brother free.

I had started it in pencil. The perfectionist part of me said that I needed to finish it in pencil. But the need in me said, *Paint. Now.*

Blue was an odd choice for a portrait of my brother. Yet, my fingers squeezed more from the tube and the first brush of paint was intoxicating.

I paused to look at the tube, lying there so innocently. Mr. Verisetti had used me to create this. How? And why?

Don't you want to see what is in the box?

I blinked at the thought and gripped the brush. My breath hitched. My knuckles turned white. The paint glistened.

I looked at the picture, at the features that with each glowing brushstroke seemed to come more alive. *Really* alive. And the electric knot inside me grew.

I made a tentative swipe. Then another. I felt the pleasure in the paint. Easily framing and forming the other side of my twin's face in broad strokes. Every swipe increased my feeling of purpose. Determination and desire filled my motions. Every time a line connected with another, the intersection...glowed for a moment, then transformed into whatever color I imagined it should be. I could almost see the skin of his hand.

I reached out to touch it, and my fingers dipped into the canvas, into a pocket of space that shouldn't exist, and touched the edges of something soft. *Cool skin.* I couldn't breathe—I could *feel* him. I could feel skin I hadn't touched in six weeks. My fingers automatically tried to wrap around, but the paint was drying and the softness was turning brittle, repelling my fingers. My hand came free of the canvas and the spell broke, shattering what was in my hand, spilling what now felt like the ashes of paint chips to the floor.

I stared at my hand, covered in beautiful, unnatural blue. The digits curled in. I had felt Christian.

I touched the canvas again, but it was solid. No hole or magic vortex in sight. But I had felt him. I had.

I had.

The edges of my vision tinged gold, and I plunged my brush into the paint cup and forced blue onto the canvas again, the edges of the brush splattering the canvas before I outlined him once more. The canvas glowed, and I thrust my hand in, the untainted white of the sheet rippling around my wrist like a vat of splotted milk. Skin. I gripped and frantically pulled, trying to wrench my brother from the canvas, but only paint drops and chips spilled free.

Again.

Everything else grayed out around the brightened space of the easel. Dip, brush, thrust, *nothing.* Dip, brush, thrust, clasp a strong wrist, *nothing.* Dip, brush, thrust, skin, *nothing.*

Over and over, drops fell from my hand, the remnants drying and crumbling on the floor, resting amongst the other drips and chips and sobs.

Dip...dip, dip, dip. I picked up the paint cup. Splatters only. I picked up the mangled, flattened tube.

I looked at the splatters on the wall next to me. Like a giant blue beast had been slaughtered against it. How many times had I reached into the canvas and yanked my hand out? I just needed

one more time. I was certain. I wrapped my fingers around the tube.

“Please, please, please.” I whispered, squeezing the dead tube. “I need just a little more.” I didn't know who I was asking, begging. “I know I can do it.”

“Ren!”

I whirled around to see Will banging on his side of the sketch with one hand, a horrified look on his face as he fastened on the armor I had created for him earlier—complete with pinstripes. I could suddenly feel the paint coated on my cheeks. Dripping from my skin. Some truly feral warrior in a jungle of canvas, cubist lines, pointed colors, and deco blocks.

“I can do it,” I told him, beseeching. “I just need more paint like this. Where can I get more paint like this?” I had the paintbrush gripped in my fist, shaking like a junkie demanding her next fix.

“Ren—”

The building electricity within me exploded with a hiss. *“Where can I get more paint?”*

His gaze went past me, widening. I followed it...to the drawings on my walls. The dragons, the vines, the parties and battles. The cubist lines and deco blocks. The birds and beasts and abstract things. Stick figures and realistic portraits.

And now magic paint in a warrior's hue was on one of those walls. And I was vibrating with energy and intent. To make things live. A Renaissance woman started screaming as a gryphon dive-bombed from the sky. A stylized female Don Quixote dressed in knightly silver rushed in with her gleaming helmet and sword and stepped in front of the other, fending away the giant beast as the woman in the flowing gown gripped her desperately from behind.

Oh, no.

I dropped the paintbrush and grabbed the charcoal nub and lunged to help Knight and Renaissance. But near them, the impressionistic lily pads were winding up a bridge and over a couple standing there. They curved around their necks. I slashed my nub through one of the lily pad vines, and it fell to the floor. Others replaced it.

I slashed again and again, and yet similar events were happening all around me. Geometric blocks smashing, modern art squeezing, and old masters piercing. I could never get to everything in time. The savagery escalated, the carnage multiplied, and I could only watch in horror. I needed an eraser, but I had created mostly with paint and ink and I didn't know how to hit undo.

The festive party scenes and whimsical things I had drawn were being consumed by the destructive elements I had also created—sharp mirrored edges, harsh lines, unforgiving borders slashing through their softer counterparts—the balance left unchecked with too few knights and protectors and far too many victims and predators.

I used the nubs, then the charcoal remnants on my fingers, and then I had no more charcoal. I had no more paint.

I sank to the ground, sob unable to release, as everything around me died, dripping and seeping together into a morass of sickly brown at the base of my walls. I clutched Will's sketch, but forced myself to view the last moments of the others, to watch the last one standing on top of the brownish murk that was trying to suck her in—the female Don Quixote in her silver, knightly armor. She had made it to the end, surrounded by the fallen compatriots she had tried to help and the predators she had been forced to kill, covered in paint and pen splatter. And then she fell to her knees and landed face-down in the mud, once-fluffy hair spilling from the back of her helmet in tangled, wet strands. Then she too was absorbed into the endless brown landscape. All lay shattered and still on my walls. The ecosystem collapsed.

Will was quiet. He reached out a hand to me, then let it fall back to his side.

Then his eyes drifted toward my fingers touching the page. The paint splatters on the backs of my fingers had moisturized, then joined together, running down to my pads, unnaturally spreading into the sketch, through my drawings around Will, soaking into his environment. The jar containing the paint dot rattled, the dot jumping around, wanting to join the spread. The circles on the drapes started to rotate— slowly and ominously.

And I realized—I had no charcoal left.

Will's right fingers curled tightly around the hilt of his sword, his left around the knife. He looked at me and gave me a tight smile. “Go to the coffeehouse downtown and talk to the women working there. Don't tell them you are feral. Just say you need some help. Then go directly—”

The bells on the drapes gave a cacophonous clang, as razor-sharp roots came piercing through each swirling circle portal.

~ End of Sample Chapters ~

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