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## Heart of Golde

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HEART OF GOLDE

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Joely Bowman

2022

HEART OF GOLDE

by

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THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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## PREFACE

In September of 2020, while trying to navigate the labyrinth of a world ravaged by a pandemic, I came across an article in *The New Yorker* that began, “Writing a book is like moving into an imaginary house...Often, this space feels like a sanctuary. But sometimes it is...a claustrophobic haunted mansion whose intractable problems nearly drive its creator mad”. The author of the article, Laura Miller, goes on to talk about her interview with Susanna Clarke. Most notably, Miller focuses on Clarke’s newest release, *Piranesi*, which is narrated by a man who does not even remember his own name and lives in a vast house consisting of endless marble halls filled with statues. At its core, Clarke’s novel is an allegory for the confining nature of illness, both mental and physical. After devouring Clarke’s novel in less than a day, I was awestruck by the idea of a magical house that is both setting and character of a story. Turning this idea over and over in my head led to questions. Are our minds not just houses filled with endless rooms, doors, and hallways? Are our memories not kept within those rooms?

I would come to realize in the following months that many of my own childhood memories were kept under lock and key within my mind. Mental health professionals refer to it as “compartmentalization” — the mind's way of protecting itself from harmful or traumatic memories. “Do not disturb,” these particular doors seemed to say, locked away in unlit corners of my mind. As I walked through these hallways, testing doors and opening some of them, another question came to mind: What if a character was connected to a house in such a way that the only way to recover their own memories was by walking through the rooms of a house? This is the question on which *Heart of Golde* was constructed. I originally began writing this story as a way of processing my own traumas and unlocking my own repressed memories, but Jyn Taryn

demanded a story and a voice all her own. *Heart of Golde* explores what it means to come of age in the midst of unaddressed or suppressed traumas and how one's own identity is affected by the heavy burden of grief.

*Heart of Golde* opens with Jyn, the protagonist, struggling to feel content in multiple aspects of her life. She has never felt at home anywhere – not even in her own skin – since a tragic accident killed her mother and erased her memories fifteen years ago. Though her best friend, Arthur, offers her a job at his grandfather's bookstore, Word Smiths, and knows she would thrive in that environment, Jyn turns down his offer repeatedly. She claims she is more content to work with her other friend and roommate, Poppy, at a local diner. When Word Smiths receives a large donation, Jyn discovers her deceased mother's name written inside one of the poetry books. For the first time since the death of her mother, Jyn begins to question who this woman was and the events that led to her death. Her curiosities lead her and Poppy to the steps of the home of Edward Golde. Disguising himself as an odd recluse, Edward seems like an unthreatening host until Poppy disappears. He reveals to Jyn that she is his daughter and the house he lives in was once her home, too. Additionally, he is a creature not from this world and keeps himself cloaked in shadows. He has one request for Jyn: remember.

Arthur arrives at the House, worried for Jyn's wellbeing, and the two of them work together to bring the secrets of the House to light in order to rescue their friend. Edward agrees to bring Poppy back if Jyn grants him a favor in return: open a door. She asks for more time to reach her decision. Jyn and her friends travel from memory to memory, looking for a route of escape. They reveal that Edward's only weakness is the heart he ripped from his own chest in a fit of rage and hid deep within the House. The only way to be free of him is to find and destroy the heart. However, Jyn discovers another being like Edward deep in the heart of the House. He

reveals to Jyn the truth of why Edward has turned into the monster he is: he grieves for the loss of someone he once loved. Once Jyn’s memories are restored, she is finally able to see herself in her father and understand his motivations. She finds it within herself to let her father return to his home world in peace. He parts with her and tells her that her mother is still alive. The story concludes with Jyn locating her mother reading poetry outside of a café and approaching the one person she never thought she would be able to see again.

I first came across the idea of forgotten traumas when I was a few months into sessions with my newest therapist. When it came to light that I might be grappling with some of my own repressed memories, she recommended Dr. Bessel van der Kolk’s book *The Body Keeps the Score*. Dr. van der Kolk explores the evolution of the PTSD diagnosis and how our brains are altered by trauma. When discussing traumatic memory, he explains,

When something terrifying happens...we will retain an intense and largely accurate memory of the event for a long time...But that is true only up to a certain point.

Confronted with horror – especially the horror of “inescapable shock” – this system becomes overwhelmed and breaks down. (178)

I knew that I wanted a character to recover memories by walking through the rooms of a house, but it was not until I’d read *The Body Keeps the Score* that I realized my protagonist would need to be constructed with traumatic memories of her own. The difficulty with choosing this theme, I soon realized, was that it could prove difficult for readers to swallow willingly. Dr. van der Polk states, “Nobody wants to remember trauma...We all want to live in a world that is safe, manageable, and predictable, and victims remind us that this is not always the case” (196). Therefore, I allowed Jyn a “Blue Moon” reason for her missing memories: her own father removed them from her mind. While it is still clear that Jyn’s missing memories and the father



who took them are both allegories for experiencing childhood trauma at the hands of a caretaker, adding the magical element to the story assures readers that the world they live in is still safe.

In order for the allegories to still be recognizable to the reader and for *Heart of Golde* to maintain its impact, I turned to a few resources I'd come across during Professor Daniel Chacon's class, "The Writer and the Brain." John Medina, author of *Brain Rules*, describes one of the models of memory like a library:

In the library model, memories are stored in our heads the same way books are stored in a library. Retrieval begins with a command to browse through the stacks and select a specific volume. Once selected, the contents of the volume are brought into conscious awareness and read like a book. The memory is retrieved...we are able to reproduce a fairly specific and detailed account of a given memory." (Medina, 146).

I knew my protagonist would need to have the ability to examine her memories from all angles in order for it to feel like true memory retrieval. Unlike watching a film or examining a photo, Jyn has the ability to re-enter her old memories, walk around inside of them, and feel them. Much like a 4-D movie theater, she re-experiences all of these memories with her entire body. Jyn's memories often leave her afraid or panicked as she walks through them as a result. When she encounters the memory of Edward throwing her against the wall, she is not an active participant in the memory, but she still feels the pain in her own body:

Then, in the blink of an eye, he lifted his hand and sent her flying against the wall. The air was knocked out of my own lungs, and I felt a deep throbbing pain in my shoulders, back, and base of my skull. I watched in shock as her limp body — my limp body — fell to the floor, unmoving. Poppy gasped, and Arthur moved to my side to hold me upright. I didn't

realize I was at risk of crumpling to the floor, as well, until his arms were around me, holding me up (Bowman, 123).

Though a coming of age story at its core, the backdrop in front of which *Heart of Golde* plays out cannot go unmentioned. While it could fit easily into several subgenres, such as dark fantasy, magical realism, suspense, or family mystery, Jerome Stern describes this type of story as a “Blue Moon story.” In *Making Shapely Fiction*, he explains that these types of stories “appeal to our deepest selves. We enter the world of magic, myth, and dream — fabulous characters, unfathomable mysteries, or chimerical creatures. Our sleeping world, our childhood tales, our religious beliefs are full of happenings whose reality is not of this earth” (Stern, 51). By constructing *Heart of Golde* in this fashion, I discovered it was possible to dive deeper into my protagonist’s pain. I allowed her to literally walk through her most painful memories to learn of her forgotten past, as opposed to another character explaining the story second-hand to her:

That cord – that yanking around my middle, leading me through the house – that was no muscle memory. This hadn’t felt like the thoughtless motions of brushing my hair or making my morning coffee. This was something different.

Something *more*.

I’d pled with the house itself to show me what I needed to find. Where I thought I was speaking with my innermost self, I was asking the *house* for help.

And it had listened. (Bowman, 87).

Craving a deeper understanding of the Blue Moon story came through the reading of Laura Weymouth’s *A Treason of Thorns* and Alix E. Harrow’s *The Ten Thousand Doors of January*. In both stories, the young female protagonists are thrust into a world of magic and supernatural while also processing their own grief and loss. In Weymouth’s novel, Violet must

figure out a way to save her beloved House by uncovering secrets her recently deceased father left behind. She finds herself trapped between her duties as Caretaker and the desires of her heart. In Harrow's story, January discovers there is magic in opening doors and the places they lead. She discovers a journal left behind by her late father, which both details her family history and reveals the power hidden within herself. She is met with many external conflicts that bring her journey to a halt, but she discovers that the truth always has a way of rising to the surface.

In the writing of *Heart of Golde*, I kept returning to Violet's and January's characters. While fascinated by their strengths and powers, I was also drawn in by their pains. Despite living in magical and fantastical worlds, their suffering is innately human. Both have suffered the recent loss of a parent. Both have suddenly found themselves in situations far bigger than themselves or beyond their understanding. Both grapple with newly emerging feelings for a trusted friend. These were the basics on which Jyn evolved into a protagonist all her own.

I have suggested earlier that, in its most basic form, *Heart of Golde* is a coming of age story. This type of novel cannot be discussed without acknowledging that, traditionally, coming of age stories are dominated by male protagonists. Where it is now more common to see females in this light than it was twenty years ago, some stories still insist on leaning into the "helpless female" stereotype. Alba Endicott, in her essay "Females Also Come of Age," argues that a successful *female* coming-of-age story "create complex, multifaceted, appealing human beings with whose plight all readers, male and female, can identify... These female protagonists experience pains of separation and alienation from their families and immediate surroundings in the process of carving their own identity. They face the task of making difficult choices which will affect their lives and the lives of the people they care about" (Endicott, 42).

In creating Jyn's character, I knew she needed to accomplish these things in order to be a successful protagonist. She has grown up without her parents, leaving her feeling alienated from even her closest friends because they do not share this experience with her. This alienation seeps into all aspects of her life including her professional and private life. Jyn feels empty and unsatisfied but cannot quite explain why. Instead of searching for the source, she allows herself to self-sabotage. She repeatedly turns down her friend's offer to work in the bookstore she loves, because she worries taking the risk would put her life in upheaval:

Arthur offered me a chance at my dream job – a chance at being surrounded by books every day. Endless inspiration for my own writing at my fingertips, and a chance to do it all with a friend I trusted more than myself.

Something, way deep down inside of me, refused to let me accept – refused to let me find contentment so easily. All of the things that could be wonderful about the opportunity were quickly clouded out by every single thing that could go wrong. I could lose Poppy as a friend; I could even destroy my friendship with Arthur. What if we were horrible in a work setting together? I couldn't imagine a life without either of them – I wouldn't. (Bowman, 22).

When Jyn and her friends arrive at The House, she finally feels "at-home" which only proves to further alienate her from her friends. However, this alienation is a feeling Jyn must experience in order to further her growth and journey as a protagonist. Without the discontent in her life, she would have no reason to seek out the answers to questions of her own identity and past. As Endicott explains, Jyn must make difficult choices that will not only affect her life, but the lives of her friends. When presented with the task of opening the door as Edward requests, Jyn's friends provide their input, but it is ultimately Jyn's choice in the end. Endicott goes on to

explain in her essay that only after a protagonist finds a way to meet their “special need” have they “undergone the proverbial ‘baptism of fire’ by which she has proved herself worthy of the title Woman...once the choices are made there is no turning back...No one can tell them what is right for them; they must find their answers on their own” (Endicott, 47). The “special need” Endicott refers to is not Jyn’s decision to open the door for Edward. Her need — her driving motivation — is to find her place in the world. The answers she desires to uncover, the memories she attempts to retrieve, and the power she learns she possess, are all results of her most basic need: to discover herself. In the final pages of the story, Jyn begins to find the answers she seeks:

I allowed myself to collapse into his embrace – my father’s embrace. After a moment, I pulled back and looked him in his amber eyes. I saw a man not so different from myself – someone consumed by their grief; their obsession with chasing ghosts making them calloused and weary. Someone who clung to their grief so desperately that they didn’t know who or what to be without it. Though I’d need time to come to forgive him, I now understood him. (Bowman, 144).

Dianne Klein provides in her essay, “The protagonists come of age by going through painful rites of passage, by performing heroic feats or passing tests...by surviving symbolic descents into hell, and finally by reaching a new level of consciousness — the protagonists have changed and have moved from initial innocence to knowledge, from childhood to adolescence” (Klein, 22). Though she discusses the works of Rudolfo Anaya and Sandra Cisneros within her essay, Klein’s explanation of the coming-of-age process could be applied to all works of fiction that follow this story model. In *Heart of Golde*, Jyn begins with what Klein describes as “innocence.” She knows little of her mother and her past, and she is content with leaving it that way. However, once she is drawn to the House, she is left with no choice but to reach that “new

level of consciousness” if she is to survive her ordeal. She experiences her own “descent into hell” when she decides to enter the endless hallway on her own, and it is where she ends up finding the ultimate truth. By the end of the story, Jyn has moved from that “innocence to knowledge,” allowing her to finally shed the burden of her childhood and embrace the future of adolescence that awaits her.

One stereotype Endicott warns away from is allowing a female protagonist to “grow up through the love of a boy,” explaining that “the male role is, at best, a supportive one” in these female coming-of-age stories (Endicott, 47). In writing Arthur’s character, I did not want him to overshadow Jyn’s arc or get in the way of her character development. After all, this story is Jyn’s, not Arthur’s, and she needed to be able to have room to grow. I am not under the impression that their feelings for one another undermines the story in any way. In several instances, I found it useful in moving the plot forward. In Part One, Jyn allows herself an “instance of happiness” when she becomes intimate with Arthur for the first time. However, shortly after, Jyn is thrust into the inciting incident of the story and she must make a choice: stay and work through her feelings with Arthur, or go in search of the truth. Because Jyn does not *need* Arthur to progress her own story, she goes in search of answers, leaving him behind. She is not afraid of putting that space between them, because she knows there are other more important things happening to her in that instance.

However, Arthur is still an integral part of the plot of the story. He arrives at The House — despite Jyn’s wishes — at the exact moment Poppy disappears. Not only does he reveal key information about the supernatural aspects of the House (how time passes differently inside), but he also serves as a grounding point for Jyn when she is at risk of being swallowed by the chaos around her.

Part of me wished he had never followed me here so that he would be far away and safe from all of this. But another part of me was grateful he had shown up when he had. Trying to imagine navigating the situation after Poppy had been lost to the House, without him here to ground me to reality, made me realize I wouldn't have made it this far. It's very possible Poppy would still be lost to the House, had Arthur not been here. He was someone else I needed to protect; without that, I know I would have crumpled in on myself. (Bowman, 132).

He does not save Jyn, but he helps her realize she can save herself and her friends. He instills confidence in her and pushes the narrative forward as a result. The affection Jyn and Arthur feel towards one another has no problem taking a backseat while the main plot of the story moves forward.

Jerome Stern explains, "...there's nothing more important to your fiction than your characters" (Stern, 96). In *Making Shapely Fiction*, he informs writers that they are strictly limited by the words printed on the page. While movies and plays have actors to fall back on for performance and appearances, stories do not get such a luxury. Writers must provide readers with proper information to paint the picture of the characters that will play out their stories. One technique Stern offers is providing readers with a character's thoughts: "The most intimate way of knowing a character is through her mind, her ideas and memories, her fears and hopes. She may speak little and do less, but her thoughts can give readers the feeling that they understand her" (Stern, 98). Mario Vargas Llosa, in his novel *Letters to a Young Novelist*, says of the narrator:

In order to tell a story in writing, all novelists invent a narrator — their fictional representative or agent — who is as much a fiction as the other characters whose story he

tells, since he is made of words and only lives for and as part of the novel he inhabits... The choice is not random: the narrator's distance from the knowledge of the story he is telling will vary depending on the space he occupies relative to the novel. (Llosa, 54).

I was left, then, to contemplate how close I should allow my narrator to be to the story itself. If I created an omniscient narrator “who narrates in the third person and occupies a space independent of and separate from the narrative space” (Llosa, 44), then I ran the risk of allowing too much narrative distance. For the themes of the story, it did not sit well to create a narrator as such. Because this is a story centered around trauma, I wanted to make sure my readers to dive into the protagonist's pain — to be able to feel the heavy burden of grief she feels — but that could not be accomplished with an omniscient or detached narrator. I dove into my protagonist's mind and rewrote subsequent drafts in first-person point of view. This proved a challenge for several reasons, one of which being figuring out Jyn Taryn's narrative voice. The first draft of the story began:

It had been six months since her mother had passed, but Jyn was still just as perplexed by the cryptic note that had been tucked into a corner of her locked music box. Since the day she had discovered it, she kept the note in her pocket or next to her at all times. Jyn understood that was probably a bit excessive — morbid, somehow. Though she did not understand the message her mother was trying to convey to her, she often took the note out of her pocket and found herself staring at it for long stretches of time. Not trying to decipher the meaning — she didn't care to know what it meant — just admiring her mother's rushed penmanship and trying to conjure the image of the woman who left these words behind. (Bowman).



Writing with a detached narrator, I often found most passages in the first draft sounded this way: as if they were listing out events or feelings, rather than exploring and examining them in their complexity. Now, the story begins:

I wanted to go home.

The adults in black suits and shiny shoes told me Mama was in the casket, but they wouldn't let me see her. Aunt Tuley straightened my black hair bow while we waited in the room with floral-patterned sofas. I hated wearing hair bows, but she clipped it at the crown of my head anyway. I didn't know her, but a nice lady in a tight skirt with too much perfume told me I would be living with her now. (Bowman, 1).

The shift in point of view allows Jyn's immediate need to be presented to readers in the very first line: "I wanted to go home." This is the need readers can hear echoes of throughout each part of the story – a need that was not seen in that first draft. As Kurt Vonnegut once said, "Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water."

Given *Heart of Golde's* origins, it proved difficult to separate myself from the narrator at times. While Stern defines voice as "the writer's style as it is expressed in the characters' speech and thoughts" (247), Ursula K. Le Guin argues in *Steering the Craft* that the author should be separate from the narrator. She explains, "In fiction, however autobiographical-confessional it may be, the narrator is by definition fictive" (Le Guin, 62). It was tempting to offer my own thoughts or input, as opposed to letting my characters speak for themselves. After all, I knew the plot of the story, where my characters needed to end up and when, I knew the revelations they needed to be led to, and I knew the central theme around which the story was built. However, I lacked one thing: I was not the narrator of this story. Llosa writes of the difference between the narrator and the author and says:

[A] common misunderstanding: the narrator — that is, the person who tells the story — must not be confused with the author, the person who writes it...The narrator is always a made-up character, a fictional being, just like all the other characters whose story he ‘tells,’ but he is the most important because the way he acts...decides whether we will be persuaded of the reality of the other characters and whether we will be convinced that they are not puppets or caricatures. The behavior of the narrator establishes the internal coherence of a story, which, in turn, is an essential factor in determining its power to persuade. (Llosa, 42).

I had created a narrator to tell this story — a narrator who needed to be given the room to make her own decisions and mistakes within the world of her story. By inserting myself as an author, I was only crippling the story as a whole. I was creating a puppet of my protagonist narrator, bidding her to do the will of the author, rather than acting as she would within her own world. Jyn needed to be able to speak her own mind — not mine — in order for the story to persuade readers that this “Blue Moon” world is as real as the one around them. If Jyn could not be separated from me as the author, the veil of reality within the story would shatter to pieces.

The concept of trauma lives at the center of *Heart of Golde*, so it could not go unasked how a coming-of-age story would be affected by such a theme. How would this theme affect the characters? Most childhood traumas are the result of parents or family members. Using the previously mentioned “Blue Moon” technique allowed me to construct the character of Edward Golde and mold him into a standoffish antagonist that is unable to negotiate affection with others. By the time the story is concluded, it is apparent that Edward cares for his daughter on some level, but his mixed reactions keep readers guessing as to how he will react to any given

situation. When Jyn and Poppy first meet Edward, he wants to earn their affection and trust, but is uncertain how to do so:

Aside from the tea he'd promised, Mr. Golde had also brought out crackers, a few types of cheeses, jams, honey, softened butter, a jar of olives, a dish of sliced pickles, a sleeve of sandwich cookies, a variety of sliced meats, and half a loaf of bread. He sat back in his chair, wringing his hands, after he'd laid everything out before us.

"I wasn't sure what you'd like," he explained. (Bowman, 67).

This is the same man who later explodes at Jyn when she tries to over-exert herself when using her powers:

"I told you," he said, his voice low and rough, "*to come back!*" He exploded to his feet. I saw those deep, dark shadows playing along his skin as Arthur dragged me backward. Edward's eyes were burning gold and his shoulder heaved with each breath he took. (Bowman, 103).

Because Edward's character comes from another world, his reaction to grief is allowed to be exaggerated and elongated. Rather than mourning the loss of his brother, Midas, he continues to reopen the same wound, over and over again, for centuries. He was brought into Jyn's world because he could not accept the fact that his brother had been lost to it. Even when he discovers a glimpse of happiness through Elysia and Jyn, he cannot allow himself to be content with giving up. To give up would mean to admit that his brother is truly lost. As a result, he loses both his daughter and his wife, which only furthers his anger and grief. By the time Jyn meets Edward, his grief and anger has reached a point of no return and it affects their relationship as a result:

There, crumpled on the floor, I saw a man filled with a sadness like nothing in this world. A man who battled his own grief. A man who had turned into a monster because of it.

I saw all of that in him in that moment.

And I pitied him.

In that moment, I saw myself. (Bowman, 124).

Much like a neglectful parent, Edward does not know how to bridge that connection with his daughter, nor does he really ever have a desire to do so. He views Jyn as a tool to use in order to get what he most desires. His choices and actions are a big driving force for Jyn's internal and external conflicts throughout the story. He reveals his history with Jyn's mother, but only as a way to bring her to trust him. Later, he helps Jyn locate her missing friend, but only to demonstrate her powers to her. He makes her question just enough so that she will keep digging for answers and want to help him. In the end, Jyn decides to help Edward, not because of his manipulations, but because she discovers the ultimate truth she has been seeking for so long and she pities him. She learns that they are driven by similar desires to alleviate the pain the past has caused them.

While it was my desire to make Edward's character an other-worldly being that does not understand complex, human emotions, I ran the risk of making the character too cold. In order to alleviate this issue, I turned to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in which Dracula says to Johnathan Harker:

“I am glad you found your way in here, for I am sure there is much that will interest you. These friends’ — and he laid his hand on some of the books — ‘have been good friends to me, and for some years past, ever since I had the idea of going to London, have given me many, many hours of pleasure...I long to go through the crowded streets of your mighty London, to be in the midst of the whirl and rush of humanity, to share its life, its change,

its death, and all that makes it what it is. But alas! as yet I only know your tongue through books...’ (Stoker, 27-28).

While Dracula is the monster and villain of Stoker’s novel, he is still driven by human desire. In this scene, he becomes more than a creature of fathomless evil; instead, he becomes a sympathetic character with human desires to regain his family’s lost power. It was in this light that Edward Golde’s character was created. While Edward is viewed as the antagonist of this story and some may even call him a monster, he is driven by his human desire to reconnect with his family and home:

“When I arrived here, all those years ago, this was the door I stepped through,” he told me. My mouth parted in surprise, but I kept silent. “In my nightmares, I still hear the sound of it slamming shut behind me — the finality of it. In a manner of moments, I had lost everything I once knew and cherished. The door had disappeared that day and remained lost for centuries. I searched for it in the endless hallway, but never managed to find it.” He turned to look at me then. “I would come up here, every day, to see if the door had returned. The day you were born was no exception...” (Bowman, 142).

In this way, Jyn is not dissimilar from Edward. Though she refuses to acknowledge it in the first act of the story, Jyn’s driving motivation is to connect the dots between her past and who she is today. She is unaware this stems from a similar need as her father’s to reconnect with her family and home until the final act of the story.

As I mentioned, the entire framework for *Heart of Golde* was constructed on an idea of memories behaving like rooms in a house. I understood that the undertaking of this project would require breathing life into the House in such a way that the setting itself transformed into a

character. Giving objects sentience, however, can prove challenging. Charles Baxter, in his essay, “Talking Forks: Fiction and the Inner Life of Objects,” explains,

In this century, the fiction with which we have grown familiar has tended to insist on the insentience and thoughtlessness of things, if not their outright malevolence. Generally things have no presence at all in stories except as barriers or rewards for human endeavor. When nature is given something like a face to look back at humans...the expression on that face is typically one of straightforward malice (65).

Baxter suggests that when bringing objects to life, those objects will take on an angry or vengeful demeanor, mirroring the true emotions behind the human character observing them. He goes on to argue,

The things carry the feeling. They do not when our emotions are placid, but when our emotions are violent, they must. In an age of violent emotions, objects become as expressive as the people who live among them...invested with tremendous feeling, and it's sometimes hard to tell what the source of that feeling is. The curtains and the ashtrays and the billboards...sometimes seem more alive than the characters surrounding them.

Considering Baxter's words, I was left to contemplate what kind of character the House would be. Working with a character in a traumatized state, dealing with heavy emotions, warranted the use of a sentient setting. The more that is revealed to Jyn throughout the story, the more the House comes to life on the page. When first introduced, it is not apparent to the characters that this House is anything but normal. A bit unsettling, maybe, but not supernatural:

Edward Golde's home was in desperate need of repair. Beneath the layer of snow, boarded up windows, and decaying vines spreading through cracks in the stone, I could see where it was probably once a beautifully grand manor. I could easily imagine the once brightly

painted shutters waving their welcome to visitors, or the ivy climbing up the western wall with elegant fingers. But as we crept up the circle drive in Cliff's groaning car, an overwhelming sadness settled over my bones – seeped into them like the frigid winter air – scraping its bony fingers down my spine. (Bowman, 60).

However, the longer Jyn stays in the House and the more she learns about her past, the more the House reveals itself:

I reached further and further, until one of the tendrils brushed up against something — something familiar and welcoming. The power of the House. Gently, as to not frighten it away, I brushed against it again with my own power. When it responded in kind, I released the breath I had been holding.

“Hello, my friend,” I whispered.

In response, I felt the power of the House pulse against my own. It almost felt like a heartbeat, and it made one side of my mouth turn up. (Bowman, 117).

Laura Weymouth's *A Treason of Thorns* demonstrates a similar technique with Burleigh House. Violet, as Caretaker of the House, is in-tune with the House's emotions. So much so that when Violet becomes upset or endangered, Burleigh reacts accordingly. Often, the House will cause thorns to grow up through the floorboards or shut people out of the gate in response to Violet's fear or anger. Many times, throughout the story, Violet has to get her emotions in check so that the House will not act out. However, their connection goes both ways. What the House can sense about Violet, she too can sense about the House. Shortly after she returns to her childhood home, she senses Burleigh House is in turmoil and pleads with the House for it to “unburden” itself. As it does, Violet narrates:

The threads grow into ribbons that become ropes that become iron. Intractable bands of the House's pain wrap around the soft, necessary things inside me. Halfpenny nails of it stud my bones, their small, sharp points driving deeper and deeper, filling me with fractures...I must know the worst and the worst is this — even darling Burleigh, ancient as the hills, greater than I can fathom, powerful beyond measure and wise in ways past human comprehension, cannot survive long in the face of so much pain. (Weymouth, 79)

The voice of Burleigh House in Weymouth's novel is louder and more present than that of The House. While Weymouth's story is centered around Burleigh House, *Heart of Golde* is not entirely centered around The House. Unlike Burleigh House, my goal for The House was for it to serve as both a tool to move the plot forward, but also a conflict device for making the protagonist question her own reality. Rather than the conflict being an external one for Jyn, The House is used as a tool to help further the internal conflict she experiences. Yes, the House responds to her actions and emotions, but no more than a mirror reacts to the reflection it holds. At the climax of the story, Jyn is trapped in the dark at the heart of the house and finally comes to terms with her own grief:

*All these human things are capable of is breaking*, he had told my mother. And here, alone in the darkness, I agreed with him. How much of my journey to this House had been fueled by my own heartbreak – my own need to fill those gaping holes within myself – only to be left alone in the dark? (Bowman, 137).

While *Heart of Golde* is not an autobiographical story, it is definitely a personal one. I began the journey of writing *Heart of Golde* at the end of 2020, six months after a worldwide trauma shook humanity to its core. Much like Susanna Clarke, who set me on this path, I found comfort in the world I brought to life on the page. I retreated into my own endless hallway again



and again, hoping the escape of my own mind would be enough to stand against the pain in the world. Eventually, like most illusions, the facade began to crack.

My endless hallway held doors that only opened to my own demons. At the end of 2021, I sought the help of a mental health professional to help me mend the cracks — to help me face the memories hidden behind my doors. Sitting on her white couch, she introduced me to the idea: Our minds are like houses full of doors and rooms. Slowly, and alongside Jyn Taryn, I began opening my own doors. For the first time in my life, I walked through memories that may as well have been just as lost as Jyn's. I watched as the reality around me began to shift. Like Jyn, I descend into my own dark hell over and over again, seeking out the ultimate truth. Armed with new knowledge and tools, I now widen the cracks instead of closing them. I embrace the shattering of the illusion. I welcome the opening of doors.

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## PROLOGUE

*15 Years Earlier*

I wanted to go home.

The adults in black suits and shiny shoes told me Mama was in the casket, but they wouldn't let me see her. Aunt Tuley straightened my black hair bow while we waited in the room with floral-patterned sofas. I hated wearing hair bows, but she clipped it at the crown of my head anyway. I didn't know her, but a nice lady in a tight skirt with too much perfume told me I would be living with her now. I did not want to live with Aunt Tuley; I felt it – deep in the pit of my stomach – I needed desperately to return home. Something was waiting for me there – someone needed me. But each time I tried to picture *home* in my mind...nothing.

*It sent me to the graves the other day...*

“It could take several weeks for her memories to return,” the man with bushy eyebrows in a white coat had explained to my aunt. There was a television above their heads, playing a cartoon show I did not recognize. The colors were bright and comforting, though, so I kept my eyes trained on it. Aunt Tuley kept glancing at me in between the doctor saying big words like “amnesia” and “concussion.” I didn't care what big words he had to say; I wanted the needle out of my arm, and I wanted to go home.

*But I was only there to read the stones...*

The black dress I wore now was itchy, and it made loud rustling noises when I shifted on the sofa. Beneath me, my feet were adorned with squeaky, shiny shoes and lacy socks that kept sliding down. I picked at the already tender skin around my fingernails while the minister spoke. He was old and wrinkly, and he kept squinting at me through his thick glasses while he explained to us how the service would proceed. I did not care, I wanted to go home. Aunt Tuley placed her hand on mine and forced a smile through her tears. I did not return it. We followed the minister out of the tiny room.

“Remember her that way,” Aunt Tuley whispered me, as we stopped in front of the picture of Mama. “Smiling. Pretty. Alive.” She reached out stroked Mama’s photo cheek.

*But though we all may be inclined to wait...*

There was a man in a dark green suit standing next to Mama’s casket. He was reading one of her favorite poems out loud. His hair shone like gold in the sunlight from the windows –just like the handkerchief sticking out of his breast pocket. His voice was deep and soothing; the flow of the poem from his lips threatened to lull me to sleep.

I wished I could wrap his voice around me like a warm blanket and settle into a deep sleep. But the sound of sniffles and quiet sobs echoing off the beams overhead would not allow it. I looked over my shoulder. All of the pews were full, and even more people stood in the back. I didn’t recognize any of them – not a single person. I was lost among a sea of strangers, and all I wanted was to go home.

*I take my incompleteness with the rest...*

Outside, there was a mound of dirt, next to a rectangular hole. All I could think about was sticking my hands into that warm, damp earth – digging with my hands until my fingers bled and ached. Digging for what? I didn’t know. Maybe I would dig a hole of my own right next to Mama’s. We could lie next to each other in the earth, like we used to sprawl out on picnic blankets in the summer sun. She was all I could remember – all I knew about myself – and they were just going to stick her in a hole forever. They hadn’t even asked me if I wanted to go, too. I wanted to crawl into the mahogany coffin beside my mother and hold onto her and make them bury me with her. I wondered if anyone would say anything if I just began screaming at the top of my lungs.

*I would have written of me on my stone:*

*I had a lover’s quarrel with the world.*

Green suit man stood near the edge of the cemetery, away from the crowd that had gathered around Mama’s grave. His eyes were fixed on me, watching me. My feet were overcome with the urge to run to him, but Aunt Tuley’s grip on my hand kept me rooted in place. He pulled a golden

watch from his pocket and checked the time. He met my eyes one last time, nodded, and dissolved into shadows blown away on the breeze.

*And then he flew as far as eye could see...*

“You were so brave today, little one.” Tuley reached out a hand and brushing away a strand of hair from my face.

After Mama’s casket had been covered in dirt, a horde of funeral attendees crammed themselves into Aunt Tuley’s two bedroom apartment. I’d headed straight for my new room at the end of the hallway and shut myself inside. Boxes had been shoved against one wall, making a cardboard fortress around the small bed pushed against the opposite wall. Aunt Tuley fitted the bed in pastel pink sheets and a quilt that smelled of moth balls. *Just temporary*, she’d reassured me on my first night here.

The scratchy dress lay in a heap on the floor at the foot of the bed next to the lace socks and shiny shoes. I’d changed myself into one of the new pajama sets Aunt Tuley had gotten me. They still smelled like the perfume from the department store.

I was too exhausted to speak, even though my brain was buzzing. I did not feel brave, like Aunt Tuley had claimed. I felt lonely and afraid. I didn’t want her to be my new Mama; I wanted my Mama back. I wanted to go home.

“Would you like to stay in here?” she asked.

I rolled over onto my side, facing the window. Outside, a light dusting of snow had gathered on the windowsill and the building tops beyond. Mama’s funeral had ushered in the beginning of winter.

I shook my head.

I heard her retreating footsteps behind me, but there was a question I had to ask before I could sleep – a thought that slammed against the front of my mind so urgently, it made me sit up in bed.

“Aunt Tuley?” my hoarse voice croaked out.

She looked startled as she turned. I had not spoken a word to her until now, I realized.  
“Yes?”

“Who was that man at the funeral today? The one who read the poem?”

Tuley sat on the edge of my bed and took my hands in her own. “An old friend of your mom’s, I think. He asked me if he could read a poem during the service.”

“Were they close?”

She paused, thinking. “Maybe.”

“Mama loved poetry.”

Aunt Tuley’s eyes grew watery, and she reached up to wipe away her tears. “She did,” she agreed. “Would you like me to stay with you?”

I shook my head and laid back down. I could hear the whispers from the living room when she opened the door, but they were gone again when she closed it behind her.

My brain had grown sluggish and sleep was coming like a fog over me. When was the last time I’d slept? Behind my closed eyelids, I could see the golden-haired man in the green suit watching me from across the graveyard. Over and over again, I watched him diffuse into swirling tendrils of shadow and drift away on the wind. Each time, I longed to follow him – to drift on the wind with him until I found my home.

*And then on tremulous wing he came back to me.*

## **PART ONE**

### **THE CHASM**

*“And so the choice must be again,  
But the last choice is still the same;  
And the awe passes wonder then,  
And a hush falls for all acclaim.  
And God has taken a flower of gold  
And broken it, and used therefrom  
The mystic link to bind and hold  
Spirit to matter till death come.”*

- From *The Trial By Existence*, Robert Frost, 1960



The blank page glared up at me. I'd had my pen poised over the notebook for nearly half an hour, but nothing flowed from it today. Well, most days. The empty lines bore into my vision, and I saw them each time I blinked – mocking me. I slammed the notebook shut and shoved it in my bag beneath the counter with a sigh.

Outside, the snow had stopped falling. Robert Frost had written countless poems about snow and winter. Why couldn't I find that kind of inspiration anywhere? Why did the words elude me?

The bell over the door jingled, signaling Arthur's return to the store.

"Hey, Jyn," he called to me.

His arms were loaded down with boxes and packages, so I rounded the small desk that served as the check-out counter to help. I didn't work at Word Smiths – not technically – but I'd been coming here since Tuley brought me the first time when I was ten years old. Back when Arthur's grandfather was still able to run the used bookstore on the corner of Paisley Street and Hendon Avenue, and we would play hide and seek between the shelves and display tables. Now that Arthur had graduated with his Associate's degree in Business Management from the local community college – his grandfather's requirement – the store was left in his more-than-capable hands.

"Where did all of these even come from?" I asked him as we set the boxes down on the giant table that took up most of the back room. I'd spent most of the morning clearing off the table, getting books ready to put on the store's shelves. I frowned at the dozen or so cardboard boxes we'd just piled back onto it.

Arthur leaned against the table, working to catch his breath. "Donation," he managed to pant out.

My eyes widened. “All of these?”

He nodded. “Some old guy over in Viridian sent them. Said he was culling out his personal collection.”

I’d heard of the small farming town a few hours away from here, but I didn’t know much about it. Aside from the fact it was part of the cluster of cities and towns deemed the “Rainbow Valley.” The city we lived in, Claret, sat between Viridian and the coastal town of Cerulea.

I glanced at the time on my phone. “I gotta head to my shift at Petey’s,” I told him with a groan.

“I don’t see why you insist on working there. I’ve been trying to get you work here for *years*.” He’d already begun unloading the boxes, and I wanted nothing more than to join him. The scent of old leather and paper filled the room – I could drown myself in that smell. It almost seemed to beckon to me, like a siren’s song. *Stay with us, Jyn. Stay with us.*

I tore my eyes from the books and shook my head. “Poppy’s waiting on me. I’ll be in tomorrow to help with…” I motioned to the disarray of boxes. “…all of this.” I turned to leave, then paused. “And don’t mess up my system.”

The lunch crowd had trickled out of the front door of Petey’s, leaving behind a few regulars. Poppy was counting her tips next to the cash register, and Stick was cleaning off the grill. The scraping sound of the grill brush reverberated in my pounding head, so I headed for the alley out back. I’d just lit my cigarette when Poppy swung the door open.

“Watch the door, Stick,” she shouted over the scraping of the grill brush.

Petey's Diner sat in the heart of downtown, but the buildings blocked most of the noise of the city. Aside from the occasional car horn, the alley was quiet. I handed Poppy a cigarette without her having to ask.

"Thanks," she said after I lit it for her.

The sky was gray above us, and I knew it would be snowing again by the time we clocked out. Silence stretched out between us.

Unlike Arthur, who I'd spent most of my childhood with, I met Poppy just a few years ago when I started working at the diner after high school. Tuley hadn't been thrilled about me not attending college, but she hadn't pushed me on it either. She'd also helped me pack up my bedroom in her tiny apartment and move everything to Poppy's apartment a little over a year ago. She'd been emotional, but I was indifferent. It had always been Tuley's apartment – it never felt like home to me. Nowhere felt like home.

"Any big plans this weekend?" she asked. Even though we were roommates and tried to work the same shifts, our schedules didn't overlap much more than that. Well, *Poppy's* schedule. When she wasn't working at the diner, she was either in classes, working on a project, or studying.

"Oh, you know," I told her, "just the usual." I hadn't given much thought about my weekend plans. In all honesty, I hadn't even realized it was Friday. Unlike Poppy's jam-packed schedule, mine was usually wide open. The space was sometimes enough to make me restless, feeling like I needed to fill my days with *something*. Those were usually the days I sought sanctuary in Word Smiths.

She chuckled at that, flicking ash into the snow. "So, reading old poetry and staring at the ceiling, you mean?"

I rolled my eyes at her.

“Come with me to the Black Cat tonight?”

I couldn't help but scrunch up my nose at the mention of Poppy's favorite bar. She spent nearly every weekend there, and every weekend, she would beg me to tag along with her. I did go with her once, and I didn't see the appeal. The music was too loud, the women wore too much glitter, and the men wore too much cologne. Poppy was an expert in acquiring free drinks, but I'd spent most of the night at a table in the corner, wishing I was back at our apartment or at the bookstore working on inventory or displays. Since then, my answer was always the same.

“No thanks,” I told her.

“Oh, come on,” she begged. “It'll be so much fun.”

Stick barged through the door, a trash bag slung over his broad shoulders. He pointed behind him, toward the diner. Our break was over. I sent my silent thanks his way and flicked my cigarette into the snow.

As I watched myself in the grimy bathroom mirror, I could see my mother in every corner of my face – in all of my features. From the pale freckles splattered across the tops of my cheeks, to the shape of my eyes. I'd memorized the only picture I had of her when I was younger, so the image of her was forever burned into my memory. Even when my time spent with her was not. But I would never truly know my mother. I was the daughter of a ghost.

The therapist Tuley sent me to in middle school told me it was normal – healthy, even – to allow myself to grieve a mother I never really knew. I always thought it was a load of bullshit, but went to make Tuley happy. I think it helped her to imagine she was trying to fix the mess her sister had left behind when she died. It had also been a last ditch effort to try to restore the

memories I'd lost in the accident. The therapist had gone on and on about how my memories were locked away behind some horrible trauma, and it would take work to extract them again.

Nothing we did worked. Everything before the accident was gone from my mind, aside from a few flashes – sitting on a picnic blanket with her on the beach, her dark hair in the wind, an echo of her laugh. As far as I was concerned, the rest of my memories were buried with my mother. I was perfectly fine keeping them that way, too.

A knock on the bathroom door made me jump.

“Jyn? You okay?” Poppy called from the other side.

I turned off the faucet I hadn't realized I'd left running and dried my hands on what barely qualified as a paper towel. I flung the door open to find Poppy leaning against the wall beside the door. Concern was etched in her features.

“I'm fine,” I told her.

She put her hand on my arm, and her dark brown eyes were fixed on me. “You know, it's okay if you're not...right?”

One of my eyebrows hitched up, and I tried to stifle a laugh. “What do you mean?”

“You don't have to pretend with me. Just know I'm here for you, okay?”

“Uh, okay.”

She turned and walked toward the kitchen entrance, leaving me dumbfounded in the middle of the narrow hallway. *Well, that was weird.*

Then my stomach sank so fast I had to brace myself on the wall. Realization slammed into me like a punch to the gut. I checked the date on my phone just to be sure, but I knew what day it was. I knew what day I'd *forgotten* it was.

The fifteen year anniversary of my mother's death.

#

“Hi, sweetie!” Tuley’s cheery voice greeted me after the first ring. She said to her assistant, “Moreen, a little to the left, I think.”

“Hey, Tuley. You busy?” I walked through the slush on the sidewalk, taking the familiar route from Petey’s to Word Smiths.

She was chattering away to her assistant on the other end, then sighed into the phone. “I swear, these people act like they’ve never set up an exhibit before.”

I chuckled. “I can call you back later if you want.”

“No, no, no.” I heard a door shut and the background noise on her end faded. “How are you?”

I crossed the street and took a right. From here it was a straight shot down four blocks to the book store. “I’m...okay,” I admitted.

“It’s a tough day.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course, sweetie. Anything.”

It had always been this way with us. Even from a young age, I could approach her with any question and she would always provide me with an answer – even if it wasn’t one I necessarily wanted to hear. Like the time I’d been eight and asked her if I had a father. Arthur had a father *and* a mother, but I had neither and thought it was unfair. When I asked Tuley about my father, she told me no one was ever able to track him down – that if he’d wanted to be in my life, he would’ve shown up by now.

I debated asking her if she ever forgot about Mama's death, but stopped myself. Of course she didn't; they'd been close and you didn't just forget someone you were close to. When Mama died, I lost a mother I barely knew, but Tuley lost her sister. What cut even deeper was that I couldn't help thinking it was my fault somehow. Like I was the reason Mama was dead and my memories were gone. Shortly after the accident, Tuley had done her best to reassure me there was nothing I did wrong. Accidents happen every day. But something still gnawed at my insides, slowly widening the dark chasm within me.

I paused beneath an awnings and leaned against the brick wall. Word Smiths was just one block away. "Are we still on for dinner next week?" I asked her.

"Of course! Anywhere you want; my treat." There was more muffled shouting on her end. "I'm sorry, sweetie, I've got to get back to work. Was there anything else?"

"No. I'll see you next week."

When I ended the call, I stayed where I was beneath the awning. The snow hadn't started coming down just yet, but I knew it would any minute. I stepped out from beneath the awning and craned my neck to look up at the gray skies, a poem I'd memorized long ago jumping to mind:

*The way a crow  
Shook down on me  
The dust of snow  
From a hemlock tree*

*Has given my heart  
A change of mood  
And saved some part  
Of a day I had rued.*

#

Word Smiths was always quiet in the evenings, but Arthur kept the store open until nine anyway. The bell jingled above me as I entered the book store. Walking through the door always brought me a certain peace nowhere else in the world could; it had always felt the closest to what I imagined a home would feel like. Which made sense, considering Word Smiths was on the ground floor of a two-story townhouse. Arthur lived in the apartment above the store since his grandfather had been moved to the assisted living facility across town. When we were younger, and inevitably tired of lurking in a bookstore all afternoon, we would escape up the stairs to watch cartoons on the old television set. We'd spend more time adjusting the antenna than actually watching, but we enjoyed it all the same.

*Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes...*

Indeed, Whitman.

Arthur emerged from the back room, his dark hair tied back at the nape of his neck and long sleeves of his shirt rolled up to his elbows. He relaxed when he saw it was just me. "Oh, hey, Jyn. I thought you weren't coming by until tomorrow."

I paused. I wasn't entirely sure why I'd come here – my feet had left the diner and carried me all the way here without stopping to ask my opinion. "I, uh..." I trailed off, trying to gather my thoughts. "I figured I'd get a jump start on the new books. If that's okay?"

"Sure." He reached behind me, his arm brushing against mine, and flipped the sign to *Closed* and I heard the lock click into place. "I was just about to lock up anyway."

I tried my best to ignore the somersault routine my stomach was performing, and followed him to the mountain of books waiting in the back room. It was going to be a



monumental task to get all of this organized, cataloged, and put on the shelves. It was exactly what I needed to occupy my mind right now.

“Poppy go out tonight?” he asked, picking up a book from one of the stacks on the table and flipping through it. The first step in this process was making sure none of the books were too damaged or marked up to put on the floor. If they were, they either went to our free book bin or the discount shelf.

I put my bag and coat in the broken chair in the corner and rolled up the sleeves of my sweater. “Yeah,” I answered. “Black Cat.”

He chuckled and set the book aside. He pointed out which stacks he’d already gone through and which ones were left. I started on the stack closest to me, pulling one book at a time from it, examining it, and setting it aside. Soon, we fell into an easy rhythm; the only sound in the room was the rustling of the pages.

After a few minutes, Arthur asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

*Dammit.* I’d really been hoping the day had slipped his mind, too. “What’s there to talk about?” I tried my best to sound nonchalant.

He set his book aside and peered at me over the stacks. “Jyn...”

I slammed the book in hands shut. I’d had it with the pity today. “I swear, if one more person looks at me like that, I’m going to scream.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “Like what?”

“Like I’m some fragile thing about to break. Like she just died yesterday. Like I actually remember anything about her.”

Arthur remained silent.

I snorted. “You know what’s fucked up?” I didn’t wait for him to answer. “I was actually having a pretty good day until I realized what day it was.”

“And that’s okay. There’s no rule that says you have to feel sad about it forever.”

*Forever.* That suggested that I’d actually been sad to begin with. Whenever I thought about my mother death, though, I just felt...jaded. It was infuriating enough that she’d died and left me alone, but she’d taken my memories with her. Even if I did feel like grieving, I didn’t really have a solid memory of her to grieve. I picked up the book again and nodded, wanting desperately to fall back into that easy silence again.

“Come on,” he said, rounding the table and holding out his hand.

I glanced back at the pile of books.

As if sensing my hesitation, he insisted, “This can wait.”

With a sigh, I took his hand.

“You want the last slice?” Arthur asked, pointing at the Hawaiian pizza we’d just demolished.

I shook my head. “If I eat one more bite, I’ll literally explode.”

He downed the final piece, then reclined back, lacing his fingers behind his head. The studio apartment above the bookstore was small, but cozy. Arthur had spent months repainting, taking care of small repairs, and making the space into his own. It was nothing like the apartment we’d spent so many afternoons after school in. The wall facing the street was entirely brick, and I had been so glad to see that Arthur hadn’t altered it in any way besides hanging some curtains. The small kitchen had been updated with new appliances and a small island that doubled as a cutting board.

Along the far wall, Arthur's perfectly made bed was situated in the alcove between the wall and the bathroom. But most of the room was dominated by the living area. He'd long since replaced the old box TV for a mounted flat screen, which now played a documentary about ancient Egypt from the History Channel. Below the TV was a small space heater that looked like a tiny fire place. The fake flame flickered in front of our socked feet propped on the ottoman. Outside, the snow was falling steadily enough that I knew the city would be covered in a fresh blanket by morning.

Arthur stood and crossed to the window. Despite the cold, he flung one open and lit a cigarette. He offered me one, and I wrapped the blanket around myself as I joined him on the window sill. The documentary played on, but neither of us were really watching it. He peered outside, watching the snow fall.

"It's really starting to come down, now," he observed, craning his head to look up and down the street below. "You're staying here tonight."

My heart pounded in my chest. "I can just get a cab. It's not that bad."

But it was no use. He was already shaking his head. "Nope. No way. You're staying here. I'm not sending you out in that."

He flicked his cigarette out the window and I did the same, thankful to get away from the cold air streaming in through the window.

"Fine," I finally agreed, my teeth nearly chattering. I did my best to bundle back up on the couch.

Arthur looked at me. "Are you cold?"

I sighed. "I'm fine."

He scooted closer to me on the couch anyway and tucked the blanket around the both of us, trapping our heat inside. “Better?”

I nodded, hoping he couldn’t hear how my heart thudded against my ribs. *Stop this*, I scolded myself. *He’s your best friend*.

“How’s the writing coming?” he asked.

“It’s...good,” I lied. The truth was I hadn’t written a single poem in weeks. Something inside of me was just...stuck. Where words remained just out of reach, inspiration outright avoided me, it seemed.

“You’ll have an entire collection before you know it. Anything I can read?”

My cheeks warmed. “Uh...not right now. I don’t have any finished ones.”

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “That doesn’t matter. I’d love to read anything you’ve written.”

“No,” I blurted out. My cheeks grew even warmer as Arthur arched a brow at me. “I mean, they’re just not ready yet. Okay?”

“Okay.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes. Arthur turned his attention back to the documentary. The camera shot widened to encompass the Giza pyramids huddled together in the sand. A cloudless, blue sky surrounded their peaks.

“Crazy to think people actually built those things.”

“I haven’t written anything new,” I blurted.

He turned to face me. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“Because...” I trailed off. “Because I didn’t want you to be disappointed in me.”

Arthur laughed, and I felt myself relax a bit. “Jyn, how could I possibly be disappointed in you?” His eyes were fixed on mine, as if he were searching for the answer in them. Then he asked, “Who’s your favorite poet?”

I rolled my eyes – I knew where this was headed, but I answered anyway, “Robert Frost.” He’d been my favorite poet since I did a report on him in fourth grade and first discovered his poems. His poems made me feel...peaceful. They could always make my mind feel as if everything had been blanketed in a thick layer of fresh snow – like all sounds and thoughts were muffled until all I could hear was the soft fall of snow.

“And at what age did Frost publish his first poem?”

“Forty,” I admitted. It was part of what I’d learned about him when I researched my report. What initially drew him to me, however, was that both his parents had died early in his life. He had been an orphan – just like me.

“Hmm, let’s see...” Arthur held up his hand and mimed counting on his fingers the difference between twenty-one and forty. I rolled my eyes again, but he offered me a warm smile and put his hand on my shoulder. “You’ll get there. It just takes time. You *have* time.”

“I don’t know.” I wanted to believe him – I really did – but with each passing day I grew more and more uncertain about being anything at all, much less a writer.

His smile faded. “Jyn, what’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me,” he pressed. “Is it because of today?”

I shook my head. *God, why does everything have to come back to my dead mother?*

“Then explain it to me.” His eyebrows were scrunched together as he leaned in closer. His hand drifted to my upper back, a warm reassurance.

I took a deep breath. Then another. “I just...”

The look in his eyes made my heart shatter. How was I supposed to explain to him that all I felt like lately was an empty shell? As if I’ve been walking around with my shoes on the wrong feet, but no matter what I try, I can’t get them back on the right way. Like I live in a skin that doesn’t even belong to me.

“I’m okay,” I finally told him, forcing a smile. “I promise.”

The worried look did not leave his eyes, but he relaxed back into the sofa. “Okay.”

I woke the following morning to the smell of coffee. I sat up in Arthur’s bed – he’d refused to let me sleep on the couch and insisted on taking it instead – and saw him filling two mugs. At some point, he’d discarded his t-shirt from last night and now only wore his flannel pajama bottoms. It was difficult not to stare. I’d known Arthur since we were kids, but the changes he’d gone through in recent years still fascinated me. Where he was once lanky and thin, his frame had filled out, and he’d grown into his height well. Even from across the room, I could see a light scattering of hair across his chest and down his stomach. His long hair, that he usually kept tied back, was loose now and cascaded down his shoulders. He hadn’t brushed it yet, and the tousled strands made me smile to myself. In many ways, he was still the boy I recognized. I wondered if he could say the same about me.

“Morning,” he called in his husky voice.

*Shit.*

I'd been staring at him. I stretched my arms over my head as I stood. The hardwood floors were freezing – I didn't know how he was walking around with only half his clothes. I pulled on my thick socks and padded over to the kitchen. "Is that coffee I smell?"

He nodded, passing me a steaming mug. I held it between my cold hands and inhaled deeply. Arthur made the best coffee; I wish I could sink into like a warm bath.

"Creamer?" he asked, reaching into the fridge.

I nodded and he splashed some into my mug. "I thought you drank your coffee black," I inquired.

"I do," he told me. "I keep the creamer for you."

My heart squeezed.

"Sleep okay?"

I was thankful for the change of subject. "Uh, yeah. I would've been just fine on the couch, though." I took a sip of the coffee; I could've melted into a puddle right there, it was so divine. There were few things better than that first sip of coffee in the morning.

He smiled over the rim of his cup. "Well, too bad."

I rolled my eyes. "Do the girls you bring home usually fall for that nice-guy routine?"

The smile dropped off his face. "I, uh..."

I instantly regretted saying it. I smirked at him and patted his arm. "I'm joking," I reassured him. I turned and walked to the couch, hoping he wouldn't see the flush in my cheeks.

*Why would you ask about the girls he brings home?*

"Any plans today?" he asked, taking a seat on the couch next to me. He didn't sit nearly as close as last night, and I felt the absence of his warmth.

“I’m off today and tomorrow,” I told him, ignoring how badly I wanted him to move closer. “I can finish up with the donations today. Might not be able to get them all on the floor, but I should be able to get them all cataloged at least.”

He smiled at me while I spoke.

“What?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. Just wish you’d reconsider my offer to work here. I can tell you enjoy it. It suits you, Jyn.”

My cheeks filled with heat, so I took another sip of coffee. We’d talked about it before – many times, actually. While the offer to leave the diner behind and work full time at Word Smiths was appealing, I just didn’t feel right taking it. Arthur and I were friends – I didn’t want that to change. There were so many unknown variables to mixing friendship and work. Not to mention, Poppy needed me at the diner. I couldn’t just leave her there on her own.

“I just don’t understand why you insist on making yourself miserable.”

My head snapped up. “I’m not.”

He laughed then, and set his mug aside. “Then why are you working at a job you hate? Especially when there’s a perfectly good offer right here.”

“Don’t you think it’d be weird to work together? Since we’re friends?”

He laughed again. “What would be so weird about that?”

I suddenly became very aware that he still hadn’t put on a shirt, and I couldn’t help but blush. “I don’t know,” I lied. “Don’t they say you’re not supposed to mix business with friendships?”

He put his hand on my leg, and I felt the warmth through my pajama pants – well, *his* pajama pants that he’d let me borrow to sleep in. “Jyn.” He said my name in such a way that



made my stomach do cartwheels. I looked up at him and met his gaze. “Listen to me: there is *no one* in this world that’d I’d rather work alongside than you. You just say the word, and the job is yours.”

*Well, shit.*

His dark eyes were intense and set on me while he waited for me to respond. Why couldn’t I let myself accept his offer? He was right: I loved Word Smiths. Not much would change except I would be at the store *more* and not have to work shifts at the diner anymore. Arthur offered me a chance at my dream job – a chance at being surrounded by books every day. Endless inspiration for my own writing at my fingertips, and a chance to do it all with a friend I trusted more than myself.

Something, way deep down inside of me, refused to let me accept – refused to let me find contentment so easily. All of the things that could be wonderful about the opportunity were quickly clouded out by every single thing that could go wrong. I could lose Poppy as a friend; I could even destroy my friendship with Arthur. What if we were horrible in a work setting together? I couldn’t imagine a life without either of them – I wouldn’t.

I knew I was taking too long to answer him, but he waited silently while I turned it over and over in my mind. Finally, I offered him a soft smile. “I’m sorry, Arthur. I just like the way things are right now. I don’t want anything to change.”

“Not one thing?”

I shook my head. “It’s not that simple.”

He sighed, picking up his mug again and taking a sip. “Alright. I’m not going to give up, though. I hope you know that.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that. “Of course.”

#

The bell over the door jingled, and I looked up from the computer screen. I'd been working all morning on getting the books we'd already gone through cataloged in the system. My eyes burned and I was thankful to have a reason to look up from the work. Poppy, dressed in tight leather pants, boots that laced up to her knees, and a thick coat wrapped around herself, stopped in front of the counter and smiled down at me. Like me, she didn't have a shift at the diner today either.

"Are you just now heading home?" I asked her, taking in her messy hair and tired eyes. It was not unusual for her to stay out all night and not come home until the following morning. I glanced at the time on the computer. It was nearly noon.

She ignored my question. "You should've come with us last night. It was amazing." She walked over to one of the leather chairs and plopped herself into it.

"There's coffee in back," I told her.

She gasped and practically sprinted to the back of the store where Arthur kept a small coffee cart fully stocked. I'd just made a fresh pot about half an hour ago, after the morning shoppers had guzzled the first pot. Saturday mornings were always the busiest, and Arthur had been out on the floor most of the morning – talking with regulars, helping customers locate this or that title, dusting off display tables. It made my heart skip to see how much he cared about the store and its customers. There was a reason his grandfather had let him take over – Arthur belonged here.

And he'd said I belonged here, too...

Poppy's laugh from the back of the store pulled me from my thoughts. She and Arthur had struck up a conversation, and she was now peering into the back room he'd retreated to after the store quieted down. I went back to cataloging the towering stack of books in front of me.

A few moments later, Poppy emerged from the back of the store. She tossed her empty Styrofoam cup into the trash can beside my desk and leaned against it. She peered down at me with her eyebrows raised.

"What?" I asked her.

"Oh, nothing," she drawled. Then, she leaned across my desk and whispered, "You stayed the night last night?"

My eyes widened. Had Arthur told her that? And even if he did, what was so weird about that? We were *friends*.

Before I could answer, she added, "You should ask him out already. Before someone else does."

A pang of jealousy shot through me as she shot a glance to the back room, but I shoved it down. "We're just friends."

"So?"

I rubbed my temples, trying to relieve the tension gathering there. "I like things the way they are. We're friends. *Just* friends. Nothing else."

She shrugged.

"What?"

"You're so oblivious to the chemistry between you two."

My cheeks warmed. "There's not..."

"Why won't you let yourself be happy?"

Anger boiled to the surface and stood up so quickly that the stack of books nearly came crashing down. Arthur had accused me of the same thing earlier. “I am happy,” I bit out.

She took a step back. “*Are* you? I mean, seriously, Jyn. How many times has Arthur offered you a job here, for you to just turn it down? Do you *want* to work at Petey’s for the rest of your life?”

No, I didn’t. But that was beside the point. “I like working there with you.”

Her face fell, and she crossed her arms over her chest. I could still see the stamp on the back of her hand from the Black Cat last night. It was faded and smudged, but I could see the faint outline of the growling panther. She brought her hand up to her face to chew on her nails – something she always did when she was nervous.

“What, Poppy?” There was something she wasn’t saying.

“Jyn...” She trailed off. Then she dropped her hand and sighed. “I put in my notice at Petey’s yesterday.”

My stomach dropped to my feet. “What?”

Her eyes softened as she stepped around the desk toward me. “I didn’t tell you yesterday because...” She didn’t need to say it; I knew why she’d kept it from me.

“I wish you would’ve told me.”

“I’m sorry. It all happened so fast.”

“What do you mean?”

She sighed again. “Do you remember that internship I applied for a few months ago?”

I did. She’s stressed for weeks about the application, asking me to read her essay over and over again for my input. Poppy was an art major at Claret University, and the internship at the city art museum was a coveted spot among her peers. Only a handful of students were offered

the position. As I watched Poppy shift from one foot to another in front of me, I understood.

“You got it?”

She was beaming, barely containing her excitement, as she nodded.

I pulled her into my arms. “That’s amazing, Poppy. I’m so happy for you,” I told her, even though everything I found familiar crumbled around me.

“Did you tell her?” Arthur asked, strolling to the front of the store where Poppy and I were still embracing one another.

We broke apart and Poppy nodded.

“Congrats, again,” he told her. “You deserve it.”

“We should celebrate,” Poppy suggested.

They both looked to me, and I managed a nod. It seemed to satisfy them; Poppy immediately launched into night club and bar suggestions. While they discussed it, I went back to cataloging. I didn’t know what else to do. Arthur kept glancing over at me while they talked, but I didn’t have the courage to look up at him.

“Alright,” Arthur said, setting down the shot glasses on our table in the corner. “Let the celebration begin.”

We clinked the tiny glasses together, and I slammed the whiskey down my throat. It was cheap and made me cough, but I didn’t care. A warmth quickly spread through my belly and I felt myself relax a bit. I hated going to bars, but that didn’t matter tonight. We were here to celebrate Poppy landing her internship. I was just thankful we’d been able to snag a table in the corner, away from most of the crowd.

Beneath the table, I felt Arthur's hand on my thigh. I looked up to him mouthing the words, "You okay?"

I nodded and plastered on a smile that seemed to satisfy him.

A few more rounds of shots made their way to our table, then Poppy was itching to get on the dance floor. She found a guy that had arrived without a date and led him into the fray.

*Godspeed*, I thought, knowing the guy had no idea what he was in for. Poppy was not interested in romance – not in the least bit – and would dance and flirt the night away with that guy. He'd buy her a few drinks, think he was going to get lucky later, then she would move on to the next until she was done partying for the night. No guy could get Poppy to commit, though many brave souls had tried. I laughed to myself, watching the guy already falling under her spell as he held her by the hips while they danced.

Arthur followed my gaze and raised his eyebrows. "Brave man," he declared, taking a sip from the beer he'd ordered.

I nodded, watching them dance together until the crowd closed around them. Picking at the label on my beer, I looked around the room. I felt severely underdressed in my jeans and sweater, but I was not about to wear any of the outfits Poppy had suggested. Sequins and leather were not for me. I laughed until I cried when Poppy pulled out a pair of stilettos and tried to hand them to me. Walking in those things in the snow and ice? No thank you.

However, I was beginning to understand why most people chose to wear as little clothing as they did in these places. I wasn't even near the dance floor, and I had to roll my sleeves up a bit. It was warm and inviting when we'd first come in from the winter air, but now the heat was stifling and suffocating.

“Hey,” Arthur said, getting my attention. I’d picked the entire label off my beer without realizing it. “You okay?”

Luckily, we were far enough away from the dance floor and sitting close enough it was easy to hear him over the noise. I nodded and placed my hands flat on the table to stop their fidgeting. A girl with way too much perfume on walked past our table, and Arthur scooted his chair closer to mine to make room for her. When he looked up at me, our faces were inches apart. His dark eyes studied my face, holding me in place. A strand of hair had escape from his hair tie and I wanted so badly to reach out and tuck it behind his ear. And why did he smell so damn good? I didn’t even know Arthur owned cologne.

I tore my eyes from his and looked down at the table. My heart pounded in my chest, and I was very thankful for the dim lighting. *Just friends*, I chided myself. Arthur sipped his beer, and I waited for my stomach to stop its gymnastics routine.

*Why won’t you let yourself be happy?*

Poppy’s question played over and over in my mind. It was a ridiculous question, I decided. Of course I was happy. I was just...figuring some things out. Arthur and Poppy were lucky – they’ve always known what they wanted to do with their lives. Maybe I used to know, too. Maybe that was part of myself I’d lost along with my memories fifteen years ago. If I ever dreamed of becoming anything as a kid, those dreams were gone – lost forever. But how many people actually grow up to be what they dreamed of when they were five?

*Why do you insist on making yourself miserable?*

They were wrong – both of them. I wasn’t *miserable*. I couldn’t understand what was so wrong about just being content.

*Except you're not content. Not really,* I realized. I worked a job that would lead me nowhere. I stared at blank pages more than I managed to write. I didn't feel at home in my own apartment or even in my own skin. I couldn't explain why, but nothing quite fit me. No matter what version of myself I tried to squeeze into, it was like none of the shapes were right. There was always empty space – something missing. What it was, I had no idea, but I carried that emptiness around with me everywhere. It wasn't that I didn't want to fill it; it was that I couldn't.

“You want another beer?” Arthur asked.

I'd been so lost in my own thoughts, I'd forgotten he was right next to me. I shook my head, and watched him head over to the bar. I watched until his dark head of hair disappeared into the crowd. Then, I grabbed my coat from the back of my chair and walked out of the bar into the snow.

The empty, quiet street outside the bar was a much welcome change to the loud music inside the building. I could still hear the muffled sound of the bass reverberating inside, but at least it didn't feel like it was pounding on the inside of my skull anymore. I leaned against the wall, away from as many people as possible, near the entrance to the alleyway. I lit my cigarette and tilted my head back to watch the snow flurrying in the wind. This weather was nothing more than a preamble of the winter ahead.

“Got a light?” a deep voice behind me asked.

I turned, peering into the shadows of the alleyway, and saw a man cloaked in shadows standing there. His eyes were a bright amber color, almost golden. That was the only thing I could make out about him in the low lighting.



“Uh, sure.” I offered him my lighter.

He took it, examining it for a moment, then lit his cigarette. In the soft glow of the flame, I could tell his hair was a rich golden color, almost identical to his eyes. He looked older than the crowd that frequented the Black Cat, and I briefly wondered what he was doing here. Perhaps he worked here?

He handed the lighter back to me, and I slipped it into my coat pocket. “Thank you,” he told me with a nod of his head.

I watched as he turned and walked further into the alley. Something deep within me wanted to ask him who he was. I took a step to follow him, but felt a hand on my arm.

“There you are,” Arthur said.

I turned to see he’d followed me out into the cold. “Here I am.” I glanced over my shoulder, but the man was gone. Maybe he worked in the bar after all. I looked back at Arthur and smiled.

“Can I bum one?” he asked, nodding to the lit cigarette I forgot I was holding.

I pulled one from the pack in my pocket and offered it to him. I held my lighter up to light it for him. My hands were shaking from the cold, so he wrapped his own around mine to steady and warm them. It was difficult to ignore the way my stomach dipped at his touch.

“Thanks,” he mumbled around the cigarette. He took a long drag from it and exhaled the smoke, looking up at the falling snow. “I think Poppy has chosen her victim for the evening. Last I saw, they were practically glued together on the dance floor.”

I chuckled and flicked ash into the slush on the sidewalk. “Poor guy. I bet he thinks he’s the chosen one.”

Arthur smiled. “We’re probably in the clear if you wanted to call it a night.”

I nodded and tossed my cigarette butt to the ground, grinding it beneath my boot. “I’ll text Poppy and let her know.”

I shot Poppy a quick message, letting her know we were leaving. She responded back almost immediately letting me know she would be bringing “company” back to our apartment.

I groaned and showed Arthur her reply. We both burst into laughter.

“Maybe he’s the chosen one after all,” he suggested.

“I doubt it.” Then, I thought about trying to sleep while Poppy had *company* over. I probably wouldn’t be getting much sleep back at my apartment.

“You’re more than welcome to hide out at my place.” Damn, it was like he could read my mind. It was so annoyingly sweet.

“Are you sure? I can sleep on the couch this time.”

He was already shaking his head. “No way, not gonna happen.”

I sighed my resignation, and he slung his arm around my shoulders as we headed up the street toward Word Smiths.

“Coffee?” Arthur asked, shrugging out of his coat.

My teeth chattered as I nodded. “Decaf, please.” A warm cup of coffee sounded wonderful after walking five blocks in the snow and wind. Reluctantly, I shed my coat as well and stepped out of my shoes before curling up on the couch with a thick, soft blanket bundled around me. My teeth were still chattering when Arthur placed a warm mug in my icy hands.

I took a sip of the warm, fragrant liquid and nearly moaned with pleasure. I took another sip, letting the cup warm my hands.

“Good?” he asked, setting his cup aside to turn on the space heater. One up-side to a small apartment like Arthur’s was it took no time at all to warm up. It just felt like a lifetime when you were nearly frozen solid.

I nodded. “Very, thank you.”

“Are you warm enough?”

I nodded, but he scooted closer to me anyway. I was too cold to complain, though. By the time we found a documentary to watch – National Geographic this time – my body had returned to normal temperatures, and I no longer felt like a human Popsicle. Arthur remained close beside me, though.

*Why won't you let yourself be happy?*

Poppy’s question echoed in my mind as I watched Arthur out of the corner of my eye. His hands were in his lap, on top of the blanket we shared, and his eyes were fixed on the television. He’d taken his hair down after we’d settled on the couch; I could see it was still slightly damp from the snow. I allowed myself to imagine what it would feel like to run my hands through it. I felt a warmth forming inside of me that wasn’t from the coffee I’d finished.

And it terrified me.

Arthur noticed me staring at him and turned to face me. One side of his mouth kicked up. “What is it?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

We were close, just like we had been in the bar earlier. I could still smell the alcohol on his breath and traces of that damn cologne. Where his leg pressed against mine under the blanket felt like I was touching a live wire. My heart pounded in my chest as his dark eyes remained fixed on mine.

His hand was trembling as he reached over to touch my leg above the blanket. I was frozen; I couldn't move. I was afraid of shattering this moment, and I wanted nothing more than to live in it forever.

“Jyn?”

When he whispered my name, something inside of me ignited. The distance closed between us, and our lips crashed together. After a few moments, he pulled away and rested his forehead against mine. Both of our breaths were coming in heavy pants.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “Because if I keep kissing you, I don't think...”

All of my uncertainties melted away as I ran my fingers through his hair. His eyes closed as my thumb traced across his cheek.

“Jyn,” he nearly moaned. “I need you to tell me.”

I traced my fingers down his neck and collarbone as I whispered, “I'm sure.”

“Thank God.”

His hands found my hair and pulled me into him again. This time his kiss was gentle, lingering, and deliberate. We kissed each other like we hungered for it. His lips only strayed from mine so that he could kiss down my jaw, my neck, my collarbone. Each kiss was placed exactly where he wanted, and he was in no rush. His pace was heavily mismatched by my pounding heartbeat and unsteady breaths. His hands explored the rest of my body — my arms, my back, my waist, the tops of my thighs — and they were in no rush, either.

I pulled at his t-shirt, and his lips left mine only so he could remove it and toss it aside. I placed a hand on his chest to stop him from bringing his lips back to mine just yet, though I longed for them more than anything. He watched my hands as they traveled all over his torso, tracing my fingers across everything I had admired about him just this morning. I could feel his

heartbeat beneath my fingers accelerate. When I looked up to meet his eyes again, he crashed his lips into mine once more. My fingertips continued to explore his bare chest and back. When my fingernails gently grazed down his spine, a low growl formed in his throat.

“Jyn,” he warned, his breath hot against my neck.

I gently dragged my nails down his back again, and the grip he held on my waist tightened as another groan escaped him. He stood up so suddenly, I nearly fell over. Light from the streetlamps filtered in through the windows and cast him in a warm glow. He looked down at me, still on the couch, and held out his hand. My stomach fluttered, but I took it. He pulled me to my feet and close to him. When had he grown tall enough that I needed to crane my head to look up at him?

He placed gentle kisses along my jaw and down my neck. “Are you alright?”

I nodded, but he stopped his kissing and looked down at me. He was waiting for me to tell him, like he’d asked earlier. “Yes,” I told him.

He kissed me, fully and earnestly, and we melted into each other’s embrace. While the snow continued to fall outside, we reached for and found one another over and over again. Slowly, I felt that emptiness inside of me begin to disappear, if only for a little while.

#

Arthur was still sound asleep when I pulled on my coat and crept out of the apartment. I stole one final glance at him sprawled across the bed, the sheets pushed down to his waist. I could still see a few of the scratch marks I’d put there – that he’d *asked* me to put there – just a few hours earlier, and my cheeks warmed.

I carefully closed the door behind me and descended the stairs to the book store. It would still be a few hours before it was officially open for the day, but I was not concerned with that right now. My mission this morning was coffee.

There always seemed to be a crowd at Brew Ha Ha, but Sunday mornings were especially busy. The small coffee shop was bustling with party-goers still in their makeup and outfits from the night before, parents trying to shush grumpy children, and students from the University getting a jump start on this week's assignments.

As I waited in line, I watched a girl by the window typing away on her laptop. I tried to imagine myself that way. Tried to picture what it'd be like to attend college classes and work on assignments in crowded coffee shops on the weekends. People always said it was never too late to attend college, but what would I even do? My standardized test scores hadn't been great, but they hadn't been bottom of the barrel, either. I hadn't graduated with top honors or the shiny valedictorian sash like Arthur had, but I'd had a decent GPA. I probably could've easily gotten into Claret Community College, had I bothered to apply.

The line moved forward, but I was still lost in my own head. A man behind me collided with me.

"Terribly sorry," a deep voice apologized.

The familiarity of his voice pulled me from my thoughts, and I spun to face him. The man jumped and took a step back. I probably should've said something, but I couldn't look away from his deep amber eyes. They were the same eyes I'd seen in the alleyway last night; I was sure of it. The line moved forward again, and the man squirmed beneath my stare.

"Miss?" the barista behind the counter called. I must be next.

I turned my head and stepped forward. When I looked back over my shoulder, the man with the amber eyes was gone. I shook my head, trying to clear it. Clearly, I needed more sleep than I'd gotten last night. "Two of your house roast, please," I finally managed to tell the barista waiting to take my order.

At the end of the counter, another barista handed me the two to-go cups. I stole one final look at the girl still typing away on her laptop, and headed back out into the chilly morning.

Poppy's boycott on romance, I was convinced, stemmed from one thing: she hated sharing her bed. On the rare occasion she invited someone back to our apartment, the invitation never extended to spending the night afterward. Even still, it put my mind at ease to check in on her. I crept into her bedroom, weaving between the piles of clothes and discarded shoes. How she'd found her way through this mess drunk never ceased to amaze me. I placed the coffee on her bedside table and pulled the comforter back just enough to peak at her face. Once I saw she was still sound asleep – alone and sprawled diagonally across her bed – I went to my room to shower and change. My clothes still smelled like the Black Cat, and my hair desperately needed washing.

My room was just as I'd left it. Not that there was much to see or look through if any of Poppy's dates ever had an inclination to snoop. When I'd moved in with Poppy a little over a year ago, Aunt Tuley had been able to fit most of my belongings in her SUV. Except the mattress, which we strapped to the top. The entire contents of my life packed into a few boxes in a few hours. After the accident that had killed my mother and erased my memories, no one had any idea where we might've come from. All the authorities could tell was my mother had been

driving toward Claret when she lost control of the vehicle and ran us off the road. Most people knew to not drive on the icy roads after dark, but Mama had done it anyway. Though, I've never understood why.

I peeled my clothes off and tossed them into the hamper. I missed, though, and knocked the picture frame from the end table to the floor. I heard it crack against the wood. When I picked it up, the glass was broken in a few different places, and the picture slid right out of the broken frame. I cleaned up the pieces of glass, then sat on the edge of the bed with the picture. It was the only thing I had left of her – a picture of the two of us on the beach at Cerulea. The wind was blowing our hair in all directions, and our noses were pink from being in the sun, but we both smiled into the camera. I was missing one of my front teeth, and my tongue was poking through. In my pruned fingers, I held a sea shell as big as my palm. I turned the photo over to read what was written there: *Cerulea Beach, Jyn – 5*.

I had no memory of the girl in the photo with my mother. At some point, we'd gone to the beach together, but I had no recollection of what the ocean sounded like or what the sand felt like between my toes. I'd found a seashell – had been proud enough to take a picture with it – but couldn't recall what had happened to it after the picture was taken. Had I returned it to the ocean? Or had Mama kept it and displayed it somewhere in a home I couldn't remember, either?

I put the photo face-down on the end table and left it there.

#

By the time I'd finished showering and getting dressed, Poppy had emerged from her deep slumber. She was sitting on the couch with a blanket and the cup of coffee I'd left for her, scrolling through her phone when I closed my bedroom door behind me.



“Hey,” I called out to her, taking a seat at the small wooden table shoved against one wall of the kitchen.

I looked up to find Poppy staring at me. “When were you going to tell me?”

One of my eyebrows shot up. “Tell you what?”

She crossed the room and poked me on my neck.

“Ouch. What the hell?” I reached up and rubbed my neck.

Her arms were crossed over her chest, but she did not strike a very intimidating figure in her fuzzy slippers and tattered pajama pants. “I know a hickey when I see one. Don’t even try to lie to me.”

My eyes widened with horror as I scraped the chair back from the table and ran back to the bathroom to look in the mirror. Sure enough, she was right. I had a mark on my neck from Arthur. There were probably some other’s I couldn’t see, but I wasn’t about to tell Poppy that.

*Shit.*

Poppy appeared in the bathroom doorway, blocking my exit. Then, the widest grin stretched across her mouth. “It’s about damn time.”

I sighed and pushed past her, heading for where I’d left my coffee. It was still too early for this.

Of course, she followed close behind and sat at the table with me. “Now,” she said, settling into her seat, “tell me everything.”

I nearly spat out my coffee. “What? *Hell* no.”

“Oh, come on. I’ve been rooting for you guys for a long time. You have to at least tell me if it was good or not.”

My face grew hot remembering the night before.

Poppy's eyes lit up. "I knew it!"

"Can we please not be weird about this?"

"Who's being weird about it? I'm excited for you, Jyn. Aren't I allowed to be excited?"

I rubbed my hands down my face. "You know what I mean. Just don't tell him I told you. We haven't really...talked about it yet."

She cringed. "Was it awkward this morning?"

"I, uh...No. Not really."

She regarded me through squinted eyes. "You snuck out, didn't you?"

I sighed. I couldn't believe we were even having this conversation right now. "Yes," I finally answered her. "So *please* don't say anything."

"I won't say word. I promise."

"Thank you."

"You probably should talk about it, though. With him, I mean." She sipped her coffee casually.

She was right. I probably should discuss last night with Arthur, but it was the last thing I wanted to do right now. Talking about it meant acknowledging our relationship had changed. Forever. There was no going back to normal after last night. I offered her a half smile and just told her, "I know."

That seemed to satisfy her, and we sat in silence for a few moments.

"Any plans today?" she asked, finishing off her coffee.

"I'm probably about to head back to Word Smiths. We're nearly done cataloging that big donation we got in last week." My stomach fluttered at the thought of walking in to the book store, but I couldn't avoid Arthur forever. Especially since I was actually considering his job

offer this time. Maybe if I was casual about it, he would be, too. Maybe we didn't have to talk, and it could just get swept under the rug. Until it happened again. And *fuck* did I want it to happen again.

“Can I tag along? I want to check out the art books.” She grinned, but didn't say anything further about Arthur.

I nodded. “Of course. I'll wait for you to get ready.”

When we arrived at Word Smiths, a few customers browsed between the shelves, and Arthur was working behind the desk. From the looks of it, he was working on cataloging the endless pile of books between customers. His hair was mussed, though, and his face was ashen as he looked up at me.

*This was a mistake*, I scolded myself. How could I have been so naïve? What Arthur and I had done last night – while it had been wonderful – ruined friendships. This was exactly what I hadn't wanted to happen, and now...

He rounded the desk and took me by the hand. I didn't protest as he led me to the back room; I knew what was coming, and I deserved it. I'd done this – *I* had ruined our friendship. There would be no “acting casual” and hoping this went away.

After he'd made certain no customers were around to hear, he said, “Jyn. We need to talk.”

Poppy hadn't followed us, but I wished she had. I sighed. “I know. I'm sorry.”

He seemed taken aback by that. “Sorry? For what?”

Now it was my turn to look confused. “Uh, last night? That's what this is about, right?”

“No, no.” He shook his head. “Definitely don’t be sorry about that.” A soft chuckle escaped him, contradicting the serious expression painted over his features.

Cautiously, my heart squeezed. Maybe I hadn’t ruined our friendship after all. But I shoved those thoughts away for right now. Something was on his mind – something big. “Then...what is it?”

He poked his head outside of the door once more to double check for listening ears. “Okay,” he said on an exhale. “I, uh...I’m not exactly sure where to start.”

I didn’t know why, but his tone was making me apprehensive. I fidgeting with the hem of my sweater while he gathered his thoughts.

“What’s going on?” I heard Poppy ask.

Arthur pulled her into the room and shut the door. Poppy shot a look at me as if to ask, *What the fuck is wrong with him?* I shrugged, because I was wondering the same thing.

“Okay,” Arthur began again. He was pacing the narrow space between the wall and the table. Then, he stopped in front of me and grabbed both of my hands.

“Uh, I can leave,” Poppy said, backing toward the door.

I snapped my head around. “Stay.” I looked back at Arthur. “What *is* it?”

“Wait here,” he told us, then he was gone from the small back room. He returned moments later, a book tucked under his arm. “Here.” He thrust the book toward me.

The first thing I noticed about the book was the amazing condition it was in. It was a rich green, cloth-bound book with gold gilded pages. A ribbon bookmark of the same color as the cover poked from between the pages, slightly tattered on the end, but that could be mended easily. Then, I noticed what had been printed on the cover: *A Collection of Poems by Robert Frost*. My eyes snapped up to Arthur, who was studying me, gauging my reaction.

“It was in that big donation we received a few days back.”

I wanted to laugh out loud. Why was he being so serious about this? It was just a book. Sure, Frost was my favorite poet, but I didn’t see why that warranted all of his nervousness.

“It’s a book,” I told him. The corners of my mouth turned up. “I’m not sure if you realize this, but you do run a *book* store.”

He ignored my jab, his face still etched with concern. “Open it.”

Poppy was watching me now, too, as I opened the book to where the bookmark lay. I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. In fact, the book was in spectacular condition – it barely had any old book smell to it; no mold on the pages. The poem that had been marked was Frost’s *The Hill Wife*. Four lines were underlined in pencil:

*It was too lonely for her there,  
And too wild,  
And since there were but two of them,  
And no child.*

I’d seen and read the poem many times before. The poem was actually constructed of five smaller poems written over the span of eight years. It was a poem in which a husband and wife were depicted as living like two lonely individuals under one roof – mentally and emotionally miles apart. The wife descends slowly into insanity because of it.

I looked up at Arthur again. “Someone made a notation in a poetry collection? I mean, it’s in pencil; we could probably erase—”

“Front inside cover.”

I rolled my eyes at all this mystery he was insisting on, but obliged him and flipped to the front inside cover. I nearly missed it, the pencil marks were so faded. But there, in the top left corner, was a name written in a swirling penmanship.

*Elysia Taryn.*

The book slipped from my fingers and fell to the floor. I looked back up at Arthur, the world lurching beneath me. “What is my mother’s name doing in that book?”

I tore through the boxes of books stacked on top of each other in the back room. Boxes we had spent days organizing. But right now, I could care less. Books fell to the floor as I rifled through them, checking the front covers for my mother’s name. Surely this book hadn’t been the only one...

“Jesus, Jyn, stop it,” Arthur said, grabbing me around the waist and hauling me back from the boxes before I could do any further damage.

“Where did they come from?” My breath was coming in shallow pants and the room seemed to grow smaller by the minute.

“I told you.” He put his hands on my shoulders, holding me in place. “They were a donation. Someone over in Viridian sent them.”

I broke out of his grasp to pick up the book I’d dropped on the ground – the collection of Frost’s poems. My mother’s book. “How did he get this?” I waved the book in Arthur’s face.

“I don’t know.” Gently, he took the book from me and set it on the table. “But we’re going to find out, okay?”

“Did he leave his name or a return address?” Poppy asked, thumbing through the pages. I’d entirely forgotten she was in the room.

Arthur nodded. “He sent a letter. It was in one of the boxes.” He waited until I met his gaze. “I’m going to go get it. I’ll be right back.”

Poppy and I didn't speak while we waited on him to return. A few customers came and went from the store, and I could hear Arthur chatting with a customer at the front counter. I felt a scream bubbling up in my throat, but forced myself to push it down. Finally, Arthur returned with a single folded piece of paper. He did not hesitate to hand it over to me.

*To Whom It May Concern:*

*Please accept these books as a donation. I have spent many years with them, but I feel they would better serve their purpose elsewhere. My library is vast; I have no need for such things these days. Should you find the shelves of your store lacking in the future, I'd be happy to provide you with another donation.*

*Sincerely,*

*Edward Golde*

I read and re-read the short letter probably a dozen times before I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"You okay?" Poppy asked.

I glanced down at the letter then the book, regarding both for a long time. Then, I plucked the book off the table, tucked the letter between its pages, and headed for the door.

Arthur followed. "Where are you going?"

I didn't stop, didn't even turn to face him, as I said, "I need to talk to my aunt."

The burger place a few blocks from Word Smiths was by no means fancy. Hell, it barely classified as a restaurant. It made Petey's look like a five-star establishment. But it was close to exhibit Tuley was working on, so it had been easy for her to slip away for lunch.

“So,” Tuley said, after the waitress left to put in our order, “to what do I owe this special pleasure?”

Since moving out of her place, we had a standing agreement to get dinner together on the first Tuesday of every month. The book – and all the questions that came with it – couldn't wait two more days, though. “We – Arthur – received a donation at the book store.”

She squeezed lemon juice into her water, watching me with one eyebrow arched.

I pulled the book from my bag and placed it on the table. Resting my hands on top of it, as if I could draw strength from it somehow, I continued, “It was a...considerable donation. One of the largest we've ever received. This book was among them.” I slid the book across the table to her.

She peered down at it. “Frost?”

I nodded. Tuley had helped me with my project all those years ago. It was what led us to Word Smiths in the first place. It was what had led me to Arthur...

She chuckled. “I'm sorry, sweetie. I don't think I'm following.”

I took a deep breath, then opened the cover for her. Her eyes snagged on the writing in the top left corner. Slowly, her hand came to her throat.

Her voice was barely audible as she spoke. “What in the world...” Her other hand rested on the open book, her fingertips grazing just beneath her sister's name. When was the last time she'd seen my mother's handwriting?



Reluctantly, I eased the book from her grasp and set it on the booth next to me. “I need to know what happened to her.”

Tuley’s hand remained on her throat as she stared down at the table – where the book had been. She shook her head, as if trying to clear it, then looked up at me at last. “I don’t know.” Her voice was rough, like she might be about to cry. *Shit*. I had done this. I had dredged up the past, reopened all her old wounds. All this for a few pencil marks in an old book.

Still, I pressed. “Not the accident.” Something beneath my skin itched for answers – answers I’d never cared to search for before. My blood seemed to sing with need, with anticipation. So I shook my head, and explained, “Before.” It was no secret my mother had been estranged from her family when the accident killed her. But it was the only explanation I’d ever gotten my entire life: *There was a falling out. She and our parents were at odds. Elysia was stubborn and independent*. I was tired of the half-truth. I need the full, unadulterated truth of who she was – of how I came to be.

Tuley closed her eyes for a moment. When she spoke, her voice was steady once more. “Elysia and I were very close as girls. We actually grew up outside of Cerulea – a little nothing town along the coast to the north. I, being the older sister and all, was very protective of her. Any boy she tried to run around with always found himself on the other end of a stern talking-to.” She snorted a laugh. “Our parents worked at the docks all hours of the day, so they were hardly around. And when they were...”

The waitress set our food on the table. “Thank you,” Tuley said, then continued, “Daddy had an awful temper. It was even worse when he’d had a few beers in him. I learned to avoid him, mostly, but Elysia adored him. Thought he hung the moon, because he gave her whatever

she wanted. New dresses, books, toys, ribbons for her hair. She was his little princess, and he made sure she knew it.

“When Daddy died...it broke something in Elysia, I think. I was nineteen, she was seventeen. I got a job at the local grocery store to help Mama with the bills and expenses Daddy had left behind. I watched Elysia scrape by in her senior year, failing classes she once excelled in. She started acting out – staying out late with God knows who, doing God knows what. I’d lie for her, just to keep Mama’s mind at ease.

“One day, I grew tired of it. I just...stopped lying for her. She and Mama got into this huge argument over it. Elysia was furious with me, but I couldn’t bring myself to care.” She sighed. “It eventually all just boiled over. She stormed out one night, which wasn’t unusual for her. Sometimes, she’d stay gone two or three days at a time, but she always came back. By the time we thought to go looking for her, she was long gone. She couldn’t have been much older than you are now.”

She glanced to where I had placed the book on the booth beside me. “After Mama died, I sold the house and planned to move to Claret. When I was packing up Elysia’s room, there was only one thing I noticed that was missing. Daddy had gotten her that book right before he passed, and she took it everywhere with her. He’d told her to write her name in it, so it wouldn’t get lost.”

Tuley’s eyes were clouded with tears, but they did not spill onto her cheeks. I reached across the table and held her hand. “It wasn’t your fault,” I told her.

She nodded. “I didn’t hear from her for years. I tried to find her – I really did – but it was clear she did not want to be found.” Tuley took a deep breath and released a shaky exhale. I squeezed her hand. “The night of the accident, I got a call. They’d found Elysia’s car overturned

in a ditch. They needed a family member to come identify her body. It had been eight years since I'd seen my sister, but I knew her the instant I saw her. Then, they told me about you. How you had survived the accident and crawled out of the wreckage. How you were nearly frozen when they found you sitting next to the car in nothing but your pajamas. How you...couldn't remember anything."

I winced, thinking of the burden this must have been for her – to suddenly find out your sister is dead, and she also had a daughter that you're now responsible for. I couldn't imagine being in her position.

"The police couldn't give me many answers. Elysia's ID still had our old address on it, even though she hadn't been there in nearly a decade. They had no idea where she had been coming from, nor where she had been heading on the coldest night of the year. Theories were tossed around, but nothing ever stuck. The case was closed three months after the accident."

We sat in silence for a long time, the burgers we had ordered growing cold. Tuley took a sip of her water, dragging her fingers through the condensation gathering on the glass. The book felt like it weighed twenty pounds as I picked it up and retrieved the letter from inside.

"Have you ever heard of a man by the name of Edward Golde?" I asked.

She considered for a moment, trying the name out on her own lips, but shook her head. "I don't think so. Why?"

I slid the letter towards her. "He was the one who sent the donation. He had Mama's book."

She skimmed the letter then looked up at me slowly. "Jyn, what is it you're thinking of doing?"

My voice was unwavering as I told her, "I'm going to find out why."

#

Word Smiths was dead. The only people inside were Arthur and Poppy, lounging on the leather couches tucked into a corner. When the bell clanged above my head as I entered, they both shot to their feet.

“What did you find out?” Arthur asked.

I tossed the book onto the table between them and removed my coat. “I’m going.”

“Going where?” Poppy asked. She had reclaimed her seat on the couch, stretching across it so that my only choice was to sit next to Arthur.

I was acutely aware of his presence next to me, but I didn’t let myself look at him for too long. “I’m going to find this Edward Golde guy, and ask him how he got my mother’s book.”

Arthur rubbed his chin. He’d shaved the stubble I’d observed there this morning. “So it was hers, then.”

I nodded. “Tuley said my mom and their dad were close. He bought the book for her. When my mom split, it was the only thing she took with her.”

“Then how did this old guy get it? If it was that important to her, I don’t think she would’ve just...given it away. Would she?” Poppy’s last question was directed at me.

I shrugged. “That’s what I intend to find out.”

“Now wait a minute,” Arthur chimed in. “Elysia died fifteen years ago. The book could’ve changed hands any number of times.”

“Then we start with Edward Golde and work backward if we have to.”

A muscle in his jaw ticked. I knew what that meant: there was something he wanted to say, but he was biting his tongue. “What?” I asked him.

He turned to face me on the couch. “Do you really think this is a good idea? Right now, I mean?”

I looked down at my lap. We were *not* about to have this conversation now. My head was so full with questions, it felt like it was going to burst. I could not talk about *us* right now, even if I wanted to. “I know it’s silly and dumb, but I have to know.”

“No, Jyn, it’s not dumb,” Poppy said. “It’s human to be curious, to want to get to know who she was – what happened to her. She was your mother.” She shot a pointed glare at Arthur before continuing, “I just don’t want to see you get your heart broken if you find something you don’t like at the end of it. I don’t want you getting obsessed with chasing ghosts.”

“I know. But I have to follow this road to the end, no matter what I find down it. I have to know who she was.” *Have to find out who I am*, I thought to myself.

She reached over and squeezed my hand. “Then I’ll follow it with you.”

I smiled at her. If it was important to me, Poppy would make it equally as important to her. She would follow me to the end of the line, to the ends of the earth, if that’s what it took to satisfy my curiosities.

Arthur rubbed his hands down his face. “Okay, so you write a letter, pick up the phone – something. We can’t just go to this guy’s house uninvited, unexpected.”

Poppy went silent again, her eyes darting between the two of us. I couldn’t look at him. Letting venom fill my voice, I said, “You’re not coming with us.”

My words landed, and they stung. He recoiled as if I’d hit him with a physical blow. Part of me knew I was ruining this – whatever *this* was – but the chasm that gnawed at my insides had grown wide again during my conversation with Tuley. A small piece of me screamed for

answers, and it was too loud to drown out. Everything else would just have to take a back seat – just until I got this sorted out.

Poppy rose to her feet. “I’ll, uh, see you back at the apartment.”

Only when the bell jingled on her way out did I let myself look at him again. After glimpsing the pain in his eyes, I wished I hadn’t.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “Is this about last night?”

My face went hot. “No. Maybe?” I sighed. “I just...I’m not ready to talk about it yet.”

He shifted closer to me, taking my hands in his own. “Jyn, I care about you. I’ve known you for half my life, and you are my *best* friend. If you need time to think, take all the time you need. I just don’t want anything to happen to you. This man – Edward Golde – he is a *stranger*. We know nothing about him or who he even is. And I truly don’t like the idea of you going alone.”

“Poppy is going with me.”

He sighed. “You know what I mean. I want to be there with you – *for* you. We don’t have to talk about us. Not until you’re ready.”

My heart squeezed, but I forced a smile. “Poppy doesn’t have a job right now, remember? Her internship doesn’t start for another two weeks. I’d feel better if you stayed behind to take care of the store.”

“I can close it for a day.”

I shook my head. “No way. Not happening. Your grandfather would be furious with me.”

His expression softened. A smile appeared. “He would get over it.”

“Please,” I begged. “Keep the store open.”

Though I saw his jaw tighten, he nodded anyway.

“When I get back, I think I want to talk about that job offer again. If it’s still on the table, that is.”

His face lit up. “Of course.”

I stood, and he followed behind me to the door. When I reached for the knob, he braced his hand on the door frame, blocking my exit. I frowned up at him.

“One more thing.” His voice had dropped, and it sent a shiver down my spine. He dropped his hand from the door, stepping closer to me. His hand found my cheek, his thumb tracing across my bottom lip. The kiss was short, but urgent. *There are things we still need to discuss*, his lips seemed to remind me. And when he pulled away, I was left both breathless and wanting for more. He put his forehead against mine. “Be careful.”

I nodded.

He placed a kiss on my neck – right on the newly-discovered hickey. “And for fuck’s sake, please don’t be gone too long.”

The earliest train we’d been able to catch was the one that departed at 8:05 on Monday morning. Sleep had evaded me last night, my mind swirling with questions of where this road would lead. The car we now rode in was relatively empty – only a dozen or so passengers besides us – and no one sat in any of the seats surrounding us. The attendant had come around before we pulled away from the station to punch our tickets, but he had since disappeared. My eyelids drooped, the slight jostle of the train car threatening to lull me to sleep.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Poppy asked as the cityscape of Claret transform into rolling hills and farm land outside the train’s window.

I tore my heavy gaze from the window and feigned ignorance. “Talk about what?”

“I know you didn’t want him to come because of what happened between you two last night.”

“So?” I picked at the skin around my fingernails.

“So don’t be an idiot. Arthur’s one of the good ones.”

I sighed, turning back to the window. “I know.”

Luckily, Poppy let the subject drop. She worked on a sketch while I flipped through the pages of the Frost collection. Not to read, but to look for any more annotations that my mother could’ve possibly left behind. Aside from her name and the four lines from *The Hill Wife* underlined in pencil, there was no other evidence that she had owned this book. I found it a bit odd – all those years with the same poetry book, but only one passage underlined in all that time? There were books in my personal collection that I’d marked up within days. If anything, I admired Mama’s restraint when it came to her annotations.

*It was too lonely for her there...*

I wondered what place had grown too lonely for her. Had it been her own home after the loss of her father? Or somewhere else she’d discovered after she left? Had her loneliness put us in the car that night? Was she desperately trying to escape that lonely feeling when she lost the battle against the icy road? Where had she hoped that road would lead her?

As the train lurched beneath us, readying to stop at Viridian’s small station, I came to understand I may not ever know the answers to those questions. But I could learn other things about my mother, starting with Edward Golde and how he ended up with her copy of Frost’s collection.



A warbled voice came over the intercom, “Now arriving at Viridian Station. To assist staff in the punctual dispatch of your train please ensure you close all doors and windows firmly behind you. Thank you.”

## PART TWO

### THE CORD

*“I dwell in a lonely house I know  
That vanished many a summer ago.  
And left no trace but the cellar walls,  
And a cellar in which the daylight falls,  
And the purple-stemmed wild raspberries grow.”*

- From *Ghost House*, Robert Frost, 1913

The open-air station platform was equally as empty as the train car had been, and it did not take long for those few passengers to disperse. After the train pulled away, all I could see for miles around were cattle fields, a few dilapidated structures, and a crumbling street marked “Main Street.” A thickly forested hill rose into the sky directly across from the train station. At the base of the hill, there was an elaborate golden gate, flanked by golden pillars. On top of each of the pillars sat a golden Griffon — a creature with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. Though snow was steadily trickling down from the sky, none collected on their heads or posed paws. Even from this distance, it felt as if their emerald eyes were trained on me. At the far end of the platform, a rusted out sign read: “Welcome to Viridian! Population: 1,056.”

Poppy had ducked inside the small station building to inspect the vending machine situation. I’d been so transfixed by the odd golden creatures across the way, that I did not hear her approach me. I jumped when she spoke.

“I talked to a few people inside,” she told me, handing me a bag of chips and a can of soda.

My stomach growled, and I realized I hadn’t eaten lunch with Tuley yesterday. “Of course you did,” I said, mostly to myself. Poppy could make conversation and friends anywhere she went.

Ignoring my jab, she continued, “Apparently, this train station is also the Viridian Post Office. There’s a little counter in there and everything – very cute.” She took a sip of her own soda. “They also said that the guy who lives up there,” she motioned to the top of the hill, “is the man we’re looking for.”

My eyes drifted to the golden gate and the Griffons guarding it once more. There bright green eyes seemed to illuminate, beckoning me forward, daring me to enter. A chill ran down my spine, and I shook my head.

“You’re sure?” I asked.

She nodded. “Edward Golde. Apparently his reputation precedes him.”

I frowned at her. “What does that mean?”

“The post office guy said that a lot of people around here call him the Librarian. Said he’s always donating books from his big fancy library up there. Been doing it for years and still hasn’t run out of books to give.”

I thought of the mountain of books back at Word Smiths. If Edward Golde had been donating in mass quantities like that for *years*...exactly how many books could one person have in a single house? And if he was in the habit of giving books *away*, how had he acquired my mother’s book?

“You sure about this?” Poppy asked.

Was I? Not really, no. This would be the first step in discovering what had happened to my mother all those years ago. Even if it told me nothing of my own past, I owed it to Tuley to find any answers I could. She deserved that closure. And if walking up that hill and knocking on a stranger’s door was the first step down that road, I was more than willing to take it.

I took a deep breath and tossed the empty chip bag into the garbage. I readjusted my bag on my shoulder, meeting Poppy’s concerned gaze. “Let’s go.”

“By the way,” she said, grabbing me by the arm, “I got us a ride.”

“What? How?” This didn’t exactly seem like the kind of place to have a car rental service readily available.

She smiled and crossed her arms over her chest. “Paid the Post Office guy fifty bucks to give us a lift.”

I just watched, dumbfounded, as she headed in the direction of the double doors. “Unless you’d rather hike up there.”

I shook my head, already chilled to the bone from standing on the platform in the steady, biting wind. “Nope, no thanks. Lead the way.”

When Cliff the Post Office Guy pulled the car – though it barely classified as one; I was pretty sure there was more rust than car at this point, but it provided a barrier between us and the howling wind and swirling snow outside – in front of the gleaming, golden gate, it swung inward long enough for us to drive through. Poppy and I watched over our shoulders as it closed again behind us.

“No turning back now,” Poppy whispered. The smile on her face was forced and strained.

The car crept forward, climbing steadily up the narrow drive. Gravel crunched beneath the tires. On either side of the car, the trees were thick and unkempt. Some drooped with the weight of snow on their branches where others had fallen over entirely and succumbed to winter’s white blanket. Despite the steady fall of snow, the gravel path before us was entirely clear. My mind drifted towards Frost’s poetry – so many of which inspired by the sight before my very eyes. *The woods are lovely, dark and deep, But I have promises to keep.*

“How long have you lived in Viridian?” Poppy asked, though I would’ve been happy riding in silence.

Cliff's steely blue eyes found mine in the rearview mirror. Like the statues at the base of hill, they bore into me. I found it difficult to look away.

"Long as I can remember," he drawled, turning his eyes back to the road. "What brings y'all thisaway?"

"We came to visit Edward Golde," Poppy replied, perfectly content participating in small talk.

I turned my attention to the forest outside the window once more. Though it was early afternoon, Cliff had to turn the headlights on to see through the darkness. Overhead, the trees curved inward over the drive, creating a canopy and filtering in very little light from the gray skies overhead. As we drove, the forest seemed as if it were opening around the car, opening just far enough to engulf us. It felt like some ancient forest monster was slowly swallowing us whole. I found myself enraptured by the passing of the trees. Were those shadows *moving*?

"And Jyn," Poppy was saying, her voice drawing me back inside of the car where we sat, "she works at the bookstore that received a donation from Mr. Golde, so she wanted to come thank him personally."

Cliff's dagger stare was fixed on me once more as Poppy spoke, and I found it increasingly difficult to even breathe under it. Somehow, I managed a nod. That seemed to satisfy him, for he averted his eyes once more. Their conversation shifted – had Cliff ever been to Claret? No? Well, he simply must visit at some point.

"Have you ever met Edward Golde?" I blurted out, interrupting Poppy's recount of the best things to do and see in the city. I was just as surprised as she looked when she turned toward me. I couldn't say why I even asked.

"Once," was Cliff's curt response.

“What is he like?” Poppy asked. “Is he nice?”

Cliff’s eyes darted between us in the mirror, then refocused on the road. “He mostly keeps to himself.”

Up ahead, the dense forest finally broke to reveal the end of the winding drive. Edward Golde’s home was in desperate need of repair. Beneath the layer of snow, boarded up windows, and decaying vines spreading through cracks in the stone, I could see where it was probably once a beautifully grand manor. I could easily imagine the once brightly painted shutters waving their welcome to visitors, or the ivy climbing up the western wall with elegant fingers. But as we crept up the circle drive in Cliff’s groaning car, an overwhelming sadness settled over my bones – seeped into them like the frigid winter air – scraping its bony fingers down my spine.

Despite the bumps rising on my skin, I leaned forward, trying to get a better look of the house. I felt drawn to it, not out of curiosity, but by an invisible string tied around my middle. As if someone stood on the other end, yanking for me to come closer. I pressed my hand against the cold glass of the window, as if I might reach out and caress the broken masonry.

Cliff pulled to a stop at the top of the circle drive, and Poppy grabbed my hand. “You sure about this?”

I tore my attention from the house that beckoned to me and offered her a smile I hoped looked sincere. Nodding, I said, “No turning back, right?”

“Give me a ring when you’re ready, and I’ll bring ya back down,” Cliff told us, waiting for us to get out of the car.

I nodded. “Thank you.”

#

As soon as we had climbed out of the car, Cliff began his descent back down the hill. I watched as the forest engulfed him once more, leaving us alone in the wind and snow. One of the chimneys was spitting thick, gray smoke into the skies. Someone was home.

We climbed the porch steps, avoiding the spots with missing or broken boards, and Poppy reached for the golden door-knocker. On the first knock, the front door creaked open. Only shadows and the smell of dust greeted us from within.

The cord tied around the vital bits inside me yanked me forward once more until I could peer inside to the entryway. “Hello?” I called. “Anyone home? Mr. Golde?”

Poppy pulled me back by my wrist. “I don’t like this, Jyn. I think we should go back.”

I shook my head. “It’s a big house, Poppy. He probably just didn’t hear us knock.” Warm air floated from the partially opened door, greeting us where we shivered on the porch. I turned toward the door. “If you want to stay out here and freeze to death, be my guest, but I’m going inside.”

“You’re fucking crazy,” she whispered, but followed behind me anyway.

From what I could see, the inside of the house was in just as much disrepair as the exterior. The wooden floors were coated in a layer of dust, the few paintings were hung askew on the walls, and a bouquet of shriveled flowers in a dull vase sat atop one of the tables in the entryway. They’d been dead so long, it was difficult to tell what kind of flowers they’d been – roses, perhaps?

Behind me, I heard Poppy curse. When I followed her gaze to the ceiling, I saw what had garnered her attention – a once-shiny golden chandelier with candles lit and dripping their wax to



the floor beneath. I watched a glob of white wax fall to the floor and splatter a small amount onto the toe of my boot.

“How did you get in here?” a voice demanded from the top of the stairs.

Poppy gasped, and I nearly jumped out of my own skin. I immediately felt ridiculous; we knew someone would be here – had been counting on it, in fact. Regardless, my heart still insisted on thudding in my chest.

A thin man, dressed in slacks and a wrinkled dress shirt, descended the stairs and stepped into the light pouring in through the open front door. His eyes widened at the sight of it, then he turned his attention back to us.

“I asked you a question,” he said, stopping about halfway down the stairs. His bony hand gripped the railing, as if he might fall over.

Poppy nudged me forward. I was the one with the book; I was the reason we were here. I looked up at the gray-haired man peering down on us, and tried to speak. But my eyes kept catching on his face – something about him looked familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it. He regarded me with dull, brown eyes, examining me just as I was studying him. I felt another yank on that cord, and took another step toward him.

I heard Poppy clear her throat behind me, and I shook my head to clear my thoughts. “Um, yes. Hi, I’m Jyn and this is my friend, Poppy.” She offered a polite wave from behind me as I stumbled over my words. I extended my hand toward him, but he only stared at it until I dropped it back to my side. “You don’t know us, and this will probably sound really, really odd...”

“How did you get in?” he asked, repeating his earlier question.

I glanced over my shoulder at the open door. Snow flurries danced in the opening, melting if they wandered too far from the cold air outside. I looked back at the man before me.

“The door was open.”

His grip tightened on the railing. “Impossible,” he whispered so low I almost didn’t hear.

Poppy chimed in from behind me, “Did you know a woman by the name Elysia Taryn?”

As if noticing Poppy for the first time, he ran his cloudy eyes over her. Then, his attention turned back to me. On a shaky exhale, he said, “You look just like her.”

Stunned, I took a step back.

“How did you know her?” Poppy pressed.

He released his grip on the railing and crumpled onto the stairs. Sitting, with his knees drawn up to his chest, he looked...small. Fragile. He rubbed a hand down his face, then asked, “Would you care for some tea?”

Poppy and I exchanged a look, her eyes darting between me and the still-open door behind us. We could leave now and make it down the hill in time to catch the next train headed toward Claret. We’d call Arthur on the way; he’d help us find another way of uncovering my mother’s past – a way that didn’t involve taking tea with the crumpled man on the steps before us. But we were so close. We’d already come this far, what was a few more hours? The poetry book in my tote bag seemed to weigh a thousand pounds. Despite the worry in Poppy’s eyes, I stepped forward once more.

“We’d love some.”

He eased to his feet and descended the remaining steps. His mouth curved upward in a crooked grin while his dark eyes remained trained on me. I’d been so intent on matching his gaze that I started when he extended his hand toward me.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I am Edward Golde.”

His hand was cold and clammy in my own and I fought against recoiling from his grip.

“Jyn Taryn,” I told him. Then, nodding toward Poppy, “Penelope Davis.”

“Poppy,” she amended, stepping forward to also shake his hand.

He regarded us both for another moment, then turned on his heel and walked deeper into the house. Behind us, the door creaked closed. The click as it latched echoed through the entryway as we followed Edward Golde into his home.

Despite the overall decrepitude of the house, the sitting room was relatively comfortable. A fire crackled in the hearth, offering a welcome warmth as we shrugged out of our heavy coats. The furniture was sparse; only a once-luxurious velvet sofa and two matching arm chairs stood before the fire. Between them sat a coffee table in desperate need of dusting. The curtains had been drawn and gray sunlight filtered in, chasing the shadows away. As we sat on the couch, I noticed a discoloration in the wooden floor – a perfect square in front of the fireplace where a rug must have once been.

Mr. Golde sat across from us, his leg bobbing beneath him. “I am afraid I must apologize,” he said, eyes darting between us. “I do not entertain much these days.”

I offered him a warm smile, fighting back the guilt for disturbing this reclusive man in his own home. “That’s alright,” I told him. “Thank you for inviting us in regardless.”

He snapped his fingers and shot to his feet. “The tea,” he murmured to himself. Then, he disappeared into the dark hallway.

We heard sounds of objects clanging together in the kitchen, and Poppy turned to me.

“When he gets back, you need to just ask him about the book so we can leave,” she demanded.

I nodded, but couldn't find that same urgency within me. This place – this house and the man who dwelled in it – should've made my skin crawl. I should've wanted to bolt out of the door the first chance I got and not look back until we were back home in Claret. But I didn't. That ever-present cord still tugged on me, and I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something familiar about Edward Golde.

Poppy stood, walking around the perimeter of the room, examining the dust-covered paintings that hung there. She placed her hand on her cheek and tilted her head a bit, as if she were observing the brush strokes from all angles – a pose I'd seen her assume many times before while walking around art galleries in the city. I retrieved the poetry book from my bag and held it on my lap. The gold lettering on the cover seemed to glow in the warm firelight. I traced my fingers across them, igniting the cord wrapped around the vital bits inside me. The warmth seemed to slowly stitch together that chasm I'd lived with for so long...

Poppy's gasp tore me from my thoughts. I shot out of my seat, leaving the poetry book behind on the sofa, and crossed the room. She stood in front of a painting in a golden frame, her eyes wide. I followed her gaze. My mouth fell open as I watched the painting *shift*. At first, I thought it was just a trick of the light and dust collected on the canvas. But we both watched as the painting began to swirl inside of its frame, like fresh paint being mixed. The colors rearranged themselves until an entirely new painting revealed itself. I thought I had seen it before, but I couldn't quite place it.

When the painting grew still again, Poppy reached out a shaking hand to stroke the new picture before us: a strikingly golden wheat field painted against a dark blue sky with several

black lines shaped like birds in flight. They trailed upward to the top right corner of the painting. A dirt road split the wheat field in two. I inched closer to the painting, not entirely sure what I was looking at. I was shit at recognizing artwork.

“Do you recognize it from anywhere?” I asked her, whispering, though I wasn’t sure why.

She looked at me, her eyebrows pinched together. “Yes.”

“What is it?”

“It’s called ‘Wheatfield with crows,’” she whispered.

I glanced at the painting again. “Very creative name; I don’t think I ever would have guessed it.” I smiled at my joke, but Poppy wasn’t smiling back. “What is it?”

“It’s a Van Gough painting, probably the one most subject to speculation.”

“Yeah? So?”

Poppy shook her head and looked back at the painting. “Van Gough painted this in July of 1890.”

I just looked at her, waiting on her to finish and explain the significance of that.

She turned and looked at me then, her eyes wide. “He painted this in the last weeks before his death.”

I staggered back a step and looked at the painting once more. It almost looked as if the clouds and birds *moved*, but surely it was a trick of the low lighting combined with the coating of dust throughout this entire room. That’s all this had to be – some trick of the eyes or imagination. Paintings didn’t just change in their frames.

“Please do not disturb the paintings,” Mr. Golde said.

Poppy snatched her hand away from the painting, stepping back to stand behind me. We hadn't heard his footsteps in the hallway, nor had we heard him reenter the room. Yet he stood next to the coffee table with a tea tray piled high with a vast assortment of refreshments. Without saying anything further on the matter, he set the tray down and began unloading the tray. We took our seats back on the couch, but I saw Poppy eyeing the painting across the room.

Aside from the tea he'd promised, Mr. Golde had also brought out crackers, a few types of cheeses, jams, honey, softened butter, a jar of olives, a dish of sliced pickles, a sleeve of sandwich cookies, a variety of sliced meats, and half a loaf of bread. He sat back in his chair, wringing his hands, after he'd laid everything out before us.

"I wasn't sure what you'd like," he explained.

My heart squeezed. "This is very kind, thank you." When I realized he wasn't going to make the first move, I poured the tea into the three cups he'd brought. I extended the steaming mug toward him, and he took it into his shaking hands.

Poppy shot me a pointed look as I handed her a cup. I gave her a subtle nod and set my mug aside.

"Mr. Golde..." I began.

"Edward," he corrected. "Call me Edward. Please."

I cleared my throat, starting again, "Okay, um, Edward. How did you know my mother?"

His eyes remained fixed on the cup in his hands as he spoke. "It was a long time ago."

Poppy and I exchanged a look. It seemed getting answers out of this man was going to take longer than we hoped. I took a deep breath and continued, "How did you meet her?"

He worried a chip on the rim of the mug with his fingernail, making an awful scraping sound.

I pulled out the poetry book that had been tucked behind me and held it in my lap. His eyes darted to the gold gilded pages instantly. *Good*, I thought, *a starting point*. I shifted forward in my seat. “You recognize this book, don’t you?”

“Elysia,” he whispered, his voice cracking on the last syllable of her name.

“Yes.” I had to work to keep the urgency from my voice; I did not want to startle the fragile man before me. He was clearly unwell, so I would need to tread carefully. “You donated this book to a bookstore in Claret. Do you remember that?”

He nodded, his eyes still focused on the book in my hands.

“Did she give this to you? Did Elysia give you this book?”

“My Elysia...” he whimpered.

My breath caught in my throat at the longing in his voice. Had this man loved my mother? Still, I pressed, “How did you know her? How did you meet?”

“She is gone.”

I nodded. “I know. She died a long time ago.”

His voice dropped to a whisper again. “Nothing gold can stay.”

My eyes fell to the book in my lap. *Nothing gold can stay*. It was the title of one of Frost’s poems; I knew it well. Even still, I flipped the book open to the page it was printed on.

*Nature’s first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf’s a flower,  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.*

I scanned the poem over and over again, searching for a clue or an answer of some sort, but nothing jumped out at me. Finally, I turned my pleading eyes back to Edward.

“Please,” I begged him. “If there’s anything you can tell me – anything at all...”

He stood without a word and strode out of the sitting room. I felt a tug on the cord, so I tucked the book under my arm and followed after him.

“Are you *insane*?” Poppy whisper-screamed at me as we trailed behind Edward on the stairs.

I ignored her; she couldn’t possibly understand why I needed to follow him. The tug around my middle was becoming an ever-present comfort. To feel anchored to the earth after years of floating aimlessly through the world was not a feeling I could easily describe to her in words.

She yanked on my wrist, stopping me from climbing the next step. “We should go.”

Edward continued up the stairs.

“I can’t leave until he tells me what he knows,” I told her.

“He’s sick, Jyn, can’t you see that? We should go and have the police check on him.”

I shook my head. “He’s not *sick*. He’s just...I mean, you heard what Cliff said about him.”

She gaped at me.

“That he prefers to keep to himself?”

She threw her hands up. “Fucking *hell*. There is a big difference between being a homebody and...” she waved her arms, encompassing the decaying house around us, “whatever this is.”

I sighed. “Just a little longer,” I pled with her.



She shook her head, but her footsteps fell into place behind mine as we continued up the stairs to the second floor of the house. At the top of the stairs, a long hallway stretched out in either direction. There had to be dozens of doors lined up along the hallway. My fingers itched to turn the knobs and discover what lay beyond each one of them, but I kept myself in check as Edward continued down the hallway. When he stopped at the door at the end of the hall, he turned to face us.

Then, he stepped aside, motioning for me to open the door.

“What’s in there?” I asked. The pull on the thread was the strongest it had been since we’d arrived; it felt so urgent it hurt.

When he didn’t respond, I reached for the knob. Something in my hand ignited, sending electric pulses up my entire arm, up and down my spine, down to my feet. I stood, frozen, unable to turn the knob as I felt something inside of me shift. In the blink of an eye, the feeling was gone. Shaking my head, I turned the knob and swung the door inward. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a hint of a smile playing on Edward’s lips as he watched my mouth fall open at the sight within.

A library.

Where the rest of the house had fallen into a state of incredible disrepair, the sprawling room before me was untouched by time, the elements, or dust. The hardwood floors – the same floors as the rest of the house – shone with polish, reflecting the image of the library on its surface like the moon on a lake. Shelves, so tall ladders had been built into them, covered every open surface on the walls. It was as if the entire room was constructed of shelves. Even more were lined up in neat rows in the middle of the floor, surrounding a spiraling iron and wood staircase directly in the center of the room.

I stepped into the room, craning my neck upward to follow where the staircase led. There were at least three more levels that I could see. How the enormity of such a room fit into the architecture of the crumbled house was beyond my comprehension. I walked in a slow circle, my fingers trailing along the cool iron of the staircase. The thread finally ceased its yanking on my insides and dissipated into a low hum in my chest.

Each shelf was full to bursting – old leather and cloth-bound books, newer paperback and hardbound books, and every stage in between. On some of the higher shelves, I even glimpsed some scrolls, carefully rolled and bound to preserve what was written within. Nothing looked out of place or mismatched.

Inhaling deeply, I could close my eyes and picture Word Smiths. And Arthur. A pang of guilt shot through me; he would adore this place. I pulled my hand away from the banister and forced my tears back.

Edward remained just inside the door, while Poppy walked around the room with her mouth hanging open. She stopped a few steps away from me and mouthed, “*What the fuck.*”

We looked around the room in disbelief. The shelves looked like they were regularly dusted; each book was properly tucked into its place. There were no signs of abandon. Even a fire crackling in the hearth near the door, filling the room with warmth and welcome. Beyond the door, though, I could see into the gray hallway beyond – the only indication of the crumbling house around us.

I looked at Edward. “Why show us this?”

His eyes darted to the book in my hands. “This was Elysia’s favorite room in the house.”

My heart hammered in my chest, and I took a step toward him. “My mother visited you? Often?”

He looked around the room. “It was not always this way.”

“When did she first come here?” I took another few steps in his direction.

“She made the house whole. Made it come alive.”

I was growing tired of his riddles, so I pressed, “Did she live here?”

Finally, his eyes met mine once more, though I nearly gasped at the intensity in his stare.

“Of course,” he answered, as if it were the most obvious conclusion in the entire world.

I swallowed down all the new questions that bubbled to the surface. Instead, I asked, “How long did she live here?”

“Ten years.”

The humming in my chest grew with a sense of urgency; I briefly wondered if anyone else could hear it. “Why?”

One side of his mouth turned up in a grin. “She was my wife.”

My breath caught in my throat, nearly choking me. The book in my hands fell to the floor, and the sound echoed through the room. “*What?*” I managed to croak out.

“It’s nice to see you again.” His grin spread until it was thin and sinister. “Daughter.”

“Who *are* you?” I demanded through gritted teeth.

Gone was the timid man in wrinkled clothes. Before us now stood a man draped in a cloak of shadows. Tendrils of darkness pooled at his feet where he walked and dripped from his fingertips. Shadows even filled his face, turning his skin a sickly gray color.

“You have your mother’s eyes,” he told me, striding elegantly over to the leather chairs near the fire. He sat in one and motioned for me to do the same.

I did no such thing.

He shrugged and turned his attention to the fire, where the flames flickered and shifted colors. Orange to deep red, to violet, to bright green, and back again. I couldn't pull my attention away from the dancing flames; I'd never seen anything like it before. Then, a man and woman formed out of the fire, and they began to dance. Their fiery bodies pressed against one another, keeping time to music I could not hear.

"The flames," Edward said, breaking me from the trance, "they dance for you."

"That's all well and good," Poppy said behind me, "but I think we will be leaving now."

She took me by the hand and pulled me toward the door. I did not fight her anymore, though my mind still danced with questions. The door swung open for us as we approached it, and Poppy went through first. Then, my grip loosened on her hand and the door slammed shut between us.

The door dissolved into shadows until only a solid wall remained.

She was gone.

*No, no, no.*

I threw myself against the wall, slamming my fists against it over and over until the plaster threatened to crack. "Poppy!" I shouted.

A dry, grating chuckle reached me.

I turned on Edward. "What have you done with her?" I demanded.

That pointed grin was back. "Have a seat, daughter. There is much we need to discuss."

"I'm not discussing shit with you until you tell me where Poppy is." I wanted to scream at him, but kept my voice as even as I could manage. "Bring her back."

He crossed an ankle over his knee, those shadows coiling and bouncing around him like ink in water. “That would be difficult, since I was not the one who sent her away.”

I pinched my brows together. “What do you mean? You think *I’ve* done this?”

“I think,” he countered, “you are capable of more than you realize.”

I swallowed back the fear that rose in me at his words. This man was a lunatic – nothing he said or claimed should’ve struck me as even remotely true – but the words he spoke and the way he spoke them, reverberated through my entire body. My head spun with a sense of déjà vu stronger than any I had experienced before.

Steadying myself against the wall, I made myself ask, “Are you going to kill us?”

He laughed then, a sickly, gravelly sound in his throat that didn’t sound like it belonged inside of him at all. “No, child. That is not my desire.”

“Then who are you, and what do you want with us?”

He motioned, once more, to the chair across from him. Despite all the alarm bells ringing in my head, telling me not step on inch closer, I sat. Nodding, he drew in a deep breath, the raised his finger to indicate he needed a moment. I watched as he crossed the room, scanned a shelf of books, then plucked one from its spot. He placed the open book on the small table between us. Various star charts had been hand-drawn on the pages in dark ink. The notations were written in a language I did not know or recognize.

Edward sighed, as if steadying himself, then waved his hand over the book. The images on the pages came to life – peeling off the page one by one and swirling around themselves. I watched with bated breath as the stars made of ink transformed into *real* stars, shining and twinkling in the space between us. Beyond, I could see Edward, but his attention was not focused on me. He waved his hand, and the stars spun faster and faster until they erupted outward,

scattering themselves all around the room. They hung where they landed, pulsing like they each held their own heartbeat.

“I am not from this world.” His voice seemed to boom in the space between us, even though he barely spoke above a whisper.

Blood pounding in my ears, matching the hammering in my chest, I waited silently for him to continue. The hum inside of me grew so loud, I was sure he could hear it. The next words he whispered felt like they landed on my skin, one after another:

“I come from a world far from here, where the deepest shadows and voids of the universe collide with the light of dying stars. I come from a land made of gold and stardust.”

Where a healthy fire had once roared in the hearth, it had now been snuffed out. Even the lights overhead had been snuffed out. The room around us was pitch black, save the stars all around us.

And they *glowed*.

They shone and twinkled between us and around us, casting half of Edwards face in their soft light. The other half of his face remained cloaked in his shadows, as if he could not bring himself to fully cast them aside.

That’s when I saw it.

His shadows were not merely a display or an illusion of some sort. His skin – his entire being – was constructed of shadows.

These were not the kind of shadows found in forgotten corners or poorly lit spaces – no, Edward’s shadows were the darkest black I’d ever seen. Completely devoid of all light and color. Not even the light from the stars around us could penetrate the darkness around him. If any collided with him, they were swallowed up in an instant, their light entirely snuffed out. The only

remnant of the man I'd met downstairs were his eyes – now a deep, golden color – shining through the shadows and trained on me.

I blinked and the entire display disappeared. The book lay open on the desk with all of its stars in their proper places again. Edward had cast most of his shadows away, leaving only the ones draped around him and pooling at his feet. Even the fire crackled once more in the hearth. I released a shaky exhale.

“Did my mother know?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Why did she leave?”

He glanced at the flames in the hearth. Edward was silent for a long time – so long, I thought he wasn't going to answer me at all. “Because of me,” he finally said.

“Was she...afraid of you?”

“No,” he blurted out. Then, in his low tone he amended, “No, my Elysia was not afraid of me. She did not cower from what I am.”

“And what *is* that exactly?” I thought of the shadows stretching their wispy hands toward me, and a shiver traveled down my spine.

“The people of this world have given me many names: demon, angel, god, sorcerer, shadow-walker, monster...But the word for what I truly am does not exist in any language in this world.”

“How did she end up here?”

“I am not certain.” He cast his gaze down to his lap. “I was not...myself when Elysia first arrived. The early days with her are a blur. From what she told me after my haze had been lifted, she was drawn here by the House.”

I noticed it then – the way he spoke of the house around us like it, too, was alive. His voice carried the same reverence as someone who spoke of God or the Universe. But there was something else tucked away in the way he said it – something I could not place. Was he afraid of this place? How long had he lived here before my mother came here?

“Why do you say it like that?” I asked. “Is this house...*alive*?”

He considered for a moment. “Yes and no.”

“What does that even mean?”

“The House tends to those within its walls. It does not think, but it can feel. Does not speak, but it can communicate. It does not eat, yet it hungers.”

I gulped. “For what?”

“Power.” His eyes were that burning gold color again, and I held in the scream that wanted so desperately to escape my throat.

Desperately changing the subject, I asked, “What happened to Poppy? Where is she?”

He tilted his head to one side, as if he were listening to a bird’s song on the wind. “She is safe, as far as I can tell.”

“You have to bring her back.” My voice cracked on the last word. So many emotions were swirling around inside of me, but I couldn’t deal with any of them right now. Not until I had Poppy back by my side, safe and sound.

He chuckled, deep in his throat. “You were never supposed to bring anyone with you. It is only you that I want.”

“What do you want with *me*?” I asked between clenched teeth. I was growing tired of all his riddles.



Edward had grown quiet. Neither of us moved. After a few moments, he was the first to speak.

“I need you to remember.”

Before I could ask him what he meant by that, he was gone. His shadows enveloped him, and he floated away, like ashes on a breeze. Alone in this house for the first time, fear tiptoed its way up my spine. How was I supposed to find Poppy? Was she actually safe, as Edward claimed? Would either of us leave this house alive? My own shadows enveloped me, then. Curling into the chair, I wrapped my arms around my middle and sobbed.

The sunlight was fading, and I was alone. I’d neither seen nor heard Edward since he disappeared hours earlier. The hum in my chest had quieted, as well, and the chasm there began to spread open again. My eyes ached, and I wanted nothing more than to close them – to curl into a corner and...

*No*, I told myself. I would not give in to the darkness of this place.

Lowering my aching legs to the floor, I stood and observed the room around me. Edward had demanded I remember something – what, I wasn’t sure of – but what knowledge *couldn’t* be discovered in a library this vast? Whatever it was he wanted me to discover had to be hidden in there somewhere.

So, I approached the shelf closest to me and began my search. At first, I was gentle with the books. I’d scan the titles without touching them, and if I had to remove a book from its place, I’d carefully replace it. After about the fourth shelf, though, something inside me shifted. I yanked the books off the shelves, tore through pages without caring if they ripped, let them fall

to the ground. The path I travelled through the library was marked by piles after pile of useless, abandoned books.

I neared the back of the first floor; the sun had long since set beyond the trees. This far from the hearth, a chill hung in the air. Though my fingers ached from the cold and countless paper cuts, I continued on. Searching for *anything* that might help me find Poppy. If Edward wasn't going to help me, then I would figure out a way to find her on my own.

I grabbed a thick volume from the shelf. Thumbing through it, I discovered it was written in another language. *Useless*. Toss. The heavier volumes landed with satisfying thuds on the hardwood floors. The book next to it was of the same thickness and written in the same language. Likely a set of volumes.

*Useless*. Toss.

Thud.

The next book was bound in soft leather. I scanned the pages of handwritten notes inside, but there was no mention of Edward Golde, this house, or my mother.

Toss.

Thud.

I braced my arms on the empty shelf before me. Even the wood behind the books had been polished enough I could glimpse my reflection. I tried to reassure myself that the similarities between Edward and I were slim – if he had even been telling the truth about being my father. The shape of my eyes, the curve of my jaw, the crease in my forehead – those were all qualities my mother had given me.

*Not him*.

I turned to the next shelf, but the image of my reflection haunted me. All I could recall of my mother was contained within a broken picture frame back at my apartment. What if I was misremembering? Did we truly look alike, or had I stared at the photo long enough to convince myself of such. Perhaps my eyes or the curve of my smile was more akin to Edward's. And if I was like him in those ways...what else did we share?

I hooked my arm around a group of books and raked them to the floor in one sweep.

Thud, thud, thud.

I reached out to do the same to the next row of books, but my hand brushed against something soft at the back of the shelf. Recoiling, I suppressed a scream. I steeled myself and reached behind the books once more. This time, I grabbed onto the softness and pulled, bringing it out into the dim light.

I stared down at the stuffed rabbit in my hands. Its ears were torn and frayed, and its body was covered in a layer of filth. Despite it all, I brought it up to my face and inhaled deeply. My nostrils filled with the scent of lavender. That hum started up in my chest again, and tears welled in my eyes. Something was familiar about this stuffed rabbit, but I couldn't place what. Like trying to recall a dream shortly after waking, I reached into the void of my mind over and over, but came up empty. *Something* danced on the edges of my memories, but I couldn't take hold of it.

I heard a soft chuckle behind me, and spun my head around so quickly it nearly snapped off my shoulders. My mouth fell open as I saw who stood before me.

"Mama?" I croaked.

It was her; I didn't know how, nor did I care why. I just rushed forward and fell into her open arms. I pulled back and looked at her face – it was just as I remembered it. Smiling.

Beautiful. "How is this possible?" I asked her.

She brushed a strand of hair from my face. "You have a gift."

"A gift?"

"A gift from the House." When she said the word "house" she said it with a type of...reverence.

The way Edward spoke of it.

"What do you mean?" My voice was desperate. Pleading. I just wanted answers and she was talking in more riddles.

"Don't be afraid. Papa will show you how to use them. He will keep you safe."

I wasn't following. Was she talking about Edward? What was it he would show me how to use?

"Afraid of what, Mama? He'll keep me safe from what?" I grabbed her by the shoulders, and looked her in the eyes. Her gaze was not focused on mine. It was as if she was a million miles away.

"Here," she said, reaching into her pocket. She pulled out a small, gold skeleton key dangling from a golden chain. She fastened it around my neck. The metal was warm against my chest, almost uncomfortably so, but it didn't burn. "Happy birthday, sweetie."

"Help with what?" I wanted to shout at her, but kept my voice level.

"Now, how about some cookies and milk? Hmm?" Her mouth turned up in a smile that made my heart clench.

*This isn't real*, I told myself. I closed my eyes as tears began to run down my cheeks. When I looked back up, she was gone. I was alone again. The necklace she had given me was gone, too. This was all too much. Had I somehow broken my own mind by coming here? My knees hit the wood floor, a sharp pain radiating up my thigh upon impact, but I barely felt it. I bent over myself and let out a scream that had been building inside of me for fifteen years.

I didn't even remember falling asleep, but I woke to someone shaking me by the shoulders, telling me – no, pleading with me – to wake up.

“Jyn? Come on, time to wake up.”

I knew that voice.

*Arthur.*

My eyes shot open. His face was inches from mine, strands of his dark hair falling around his face. His features relaxed into a soft smile.

“Hey there.”

He was here; he was *really here*.

My brow furrowed as I looked up at him. “What the *hell* are you doing here?” Did Edward know he was here? How had he even gotten here?

His expression matched my own. “What am *I* doing here? Are you serious?”

“I told you to stay in the city.”

He sat back on his heels, rubbing his hands down his face. “I was really worried about you, you know? You could've at least called me to tell me what was going on.”

I pulled myself to a sitting position, ignoring the throbbing in my head and the ache in my side where a book had been jabbing into me. “I was gone for a *day*, and you freaked out?”

His eyes widened. “A *day*? Jyn, you’ve been gone for a *week*.”

“*What*?” I shot to my feet, but a wave of nausea washed over me and I had to bend over my knees until it subsided. “A week? You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

*How was this possible?* Had I been asleep for that long, or was there something else at play here?

Arthur craned his neck, looking around the room as best he could. “Where’s Poppy?”

My gaze fell to the floor, unable to look him in the eye. “I don’t know.”

I quickly ran through the events of what had happened since our arrival – the things Edward had revealed to me and the questions that still remained unanswered. The hallucination of my dead mother.

“So what do we do now?” Arthur asked after I finished catching him up on all that had happened since Poppy and I had arrived.

I furrowed my eyebrows at him. “*We*? There is no *we*.”

He started to say something, but I cut him off.

“*You’re* going to leave and go back home. I told you to stay at home, and you didn’t listen to me. Now, you’re a liability and another person to keep track of in all of...” I waved my hands around, indicating the House around us, “...this.”

“And what is your plan, exactly?” he threw back at me.

“I’m working on it.”

“Oh,” he barked out a laugh. “You’re working on it? Great.”

Silence stretched out between us. Arthur got to his feet, and as much as I didn't want him here – wanted him far away from this place – my stomach lurched at the thought of him leaving me here alone.

“What's that?” he asked, bending to pick up the stuffed rabbit I'd tossed aside.

I shrugged. “It was tucked away behind some books.”

“You don't have any memories of this?”

I frowned. “No. Why?”

He stepped between the piles of books and showed me the tag on the stuffed animal. It was faded, but there was no mistaking the initials that had been written there.

*J. T. G.*

I swallowed. “Jyn Taryn...Golde.” My voice was barely above a whisper.

The possibility that this had once been my home hadn't even crossed my mind. I suppose I just assumed my mother had left this place while she was pregnant, and I'd spent the first six years of my life somewhere between here and the road she'd died on.

*I need you to remember.*

Edward's demand echoed in my mind.

At first, I hadn't understood what he wanted me to remember.

Now, his meaning was clear. If we had any chance of finding Poppy and getting the hell out of this place, we'd need to play his game.

“I need to look in the other rooms of the house.”

Arthur's eyebrows shot up. “What are we looking for?”

The humming in my chest shook me to my core. “Memories.”

#

An entire hallway stretched out before us, filled with doors. Each one a potential glimpse into my past. Each one a step closer to saving Poppy. Edward told me she was safe – but for how long? And had he been speaking the truth?

“Where do we start?” Arthur whispered.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, trying to focus on the cord tucked away inside of me. I hadn’t felt it after entering the library, and I feared my only guiding light had fled from me. After discovering my initials on the tag of the stuffed rabbit, I realized what it had been pulling me in to this place – memory. Not the memories lost to my mind forever, the ones that lived in my bones and sung in my blood. Where my mind failed me, my body stepped in to take its place. I need only to listen to it.

*Show me.*

My feet shuffled beneath me, following the direction of that pull around my middle. I came to a stop in front of a door that was just a few feet from the door to the library. I could feel Arthur’s eyes on me as I turned the golden knob and stepped inside. Before he could follow behind me, my grip slipped on the knob and the door slammed shut between us.

Panic rose in my throat. I couldn’t lose him to this place, too. I jiggled the knob and pounded on the wood with my fist.

“Arthur?” I called.

“I’m here!” his muffled reply came.

Relief washed over me. “Just...stay there. I’ll find a way out.”



He hesitated. I knew he was debating trying to break the door down on his own rather than wait for me to figure out how to open it. But his reluctant reply came, “I’ll be here. I’m not going anywhere.”

I turned to survey the room behind me – surely there was something in here I could use to break the knob off the door or pry it open – but I was greeted, instead, by the most beautiful rose garden I’d ever seen. My mind whirled. We’d been on the second floor of the house – how could this door possibly lead *outside*? And in the middle of spring?

The sun shone brightly overhead, warming my skin and removing the chill that had settled over me. I glanced back, just to assure myself the door – and Arthur who lay beyond it – was still there. Sure enough, a dark wooden door with a gleaming golden knob stood in the grass.

The garden that surrounded me was stunning. There were rose bushes of every color that filled every spare nook and cranny of the room, and in full bloom despite the time of year. A narrow, winding path made of bright white river stones snaked in between them with no organized design that I could see. There were towering fruit trees, taller than any tree I had ever seen, their branches weighed down by the ripe fruits hanging from them — apples, oranges, lemons, avocados, and other fruits I had no idea what they were.

At the center of it all was a pond filled with brightly colored fish. Benches circled the pond, and on one of them, sat my mother. Beside her was young girl...*me*. I was peering into the pond while she braided my hair back from my round toddler face. When I opened my mouth to gasp at the fish below, I saw I had a front tooth missing. My heart clenched.

It all felt so *real*.

Panic washed over me, despite the lovely, happy memory surrounding me. A memory I didn't recognize, nor did I feel like was my own. Was this house playing tricks on me? Edward had hinted that this house contained some sort of power, but...what was it capable of?

Then, realization spread through me.

That cord – that yanking around my middle, leading me through the house – that was no muscle memory. This hadn't felt like the thoughtless motions of brushing my hair or making my morning coffee. This was something different.

Something *more*.

I'd pled with the house itself to show me what I needed to find. Where I thought I was speaking with my innermost self, I was asking the *house* for help.

And it had listened.

I replayed my earlier conversation with Edward in my mind, my attention snagging on what he had told me when I asked if this house was alive.

*It does not think, but it can feel.*

*Does not speak, but it can communicate.*

As if in answer, I felt a tug on that cord – that connection – inside me. I turned from the memory of my mother braiding my hair by the pond, and faced the door.

“Arthur? Are you still there?”

“I'm here,” came his reply.

I released another sigh of relief. He was still here – safe – and just on the other side of the door. “I need you to step back from the door.”

I could hear the question in his voice as he said, “Okay.”

*Please, I begged the house, I need to open this door.*

I jiggled the handle; nothing happened. The door still wouldn't budge.

Dropping my forehead to the wood, I closed my eyes. My palm rested on the door, a gentle, reassuring touch.

*Please. Help me.*

My other hand slid to the knob. Still nothing. Hot tears were streaming down my face, but I pressed forward.

*I'm sorry I don't remember. But if you help me, I'll try.*

Finally, the knob gave way and the door opened. Without hesitation, I stepped through it. But I drew up short when I saw what waited for me. Arthur was there – a few steps back from the door, like I'd asked – and so was Edward. His spindly fingers gripped Arthur's shoulder and his shadows pooled around their feet.

"Let him go," I bit out.

That gravelly chuckle escaped Edward. "No, dear daughter, I do not think I will."

"It's okay," Arthur tried to reassure me, but I could see the panic filling his eyes.

Edward's shadows wound their way up Arthur's legs and torso, wrapping around his throat and mouth.

I had done this.

If I wouldn't have been so insistent on coming here, Poppy would be safe and Arthur wouldn't be bound in those awful, shadowy tendrils.

"What do you want?" I demanded of Edward.

"The House whispers to me. It tells me of your power returning."

The whites of Arthur's eyes contrasted with the shadows around his face as they moved back and forth between us.

"I always knew you would be drawn back here one day. Your connection with the House is a strong one – stronger than even mine." One side of his mouth kicked up in a grin. "This is your home, after all."

"This was *never* my home." Even as I said it, I didn't fully believe it. Nowhere had ever felt like home to me...until we'd arrived here. Despite the state of the house, I'd felt at ease here – it was why I'd been so reluctant to leave, even when Poppy insisted. But had that been my memory of this place, or the connection he spoke of? Could they be one in the same?

"I can assure you, dear daughter, this was your home, whether you remember it or not. And from what *I* recall, you were happy and content with your life here."

*Whether you remember it or not...*

I looked up and met his eyes. "Prove it."

His face settled into a hard stone. "Very well."

Down the hall, a door opened. Arthur's eyes snapped to me as he struggled and mumbling beneath the shadow bindings. I did not need to hear him to know what he was saying: *Don't do it. Don't go through that door.* The same warning alarms sounded in my own head.

But still, my feet begged to walk toward it.

I turned back to Edward. "Let him go, first."

He remained unmoving, his face expressionless and unreadable.

"You want me to remember? I'm not walking into another room in this house without him."

Silence stretched out between us for what felt like years, his eyes locked onto mine while shadows continued to swirl around Arthur.

Edward was the first of us to speak. “You would do well not to forget this act of good faith, daughter.”

Then, the shadows released their hold on Arthur, uncoiling and returning to Edward. Each one seemed to caress against him, like a dog against its owner. As soon as Arthur was free of the last one, he rushed to me and caught me in a tight embrace. I ran my hands over his face, his arms, his shoulders – reassuring myself that he was okay.

“I’m okay,” he told me. “We’re okay.”

I wanted – more than anything – to believe him. Over his shoulders, I watched Edward nod his head toward the open door before dissolving into shadows.

“Front door is sealed shut,” Arthur announced as he ascended the stairs. “There’s no getting out that way.”

After Edward’s disappearance, Arthur had taken it upon himself to find us an escape route. He’d reassured me we could send the police to search for Poppy, but we needed to get out of here – alive – first. But, deep down, I knew there was no escaping this place.

The only way out was through.

The door Edward had opened down the hallway remained open, the warm light inside beckoning for me. A piece of my past – a piece of *me* – lay just beyond that threshold. Who had I been the last time I walked these halls? Who was I meant to become?

The cord – my *connection* with the House – pulled at me relentlessly. I hadn't even realized I'd begun moving until I stood directly in front of the door. Light spilled out into the hallway through the crack in the door. The golden knob shone like it had been freshly polished, and my fingers itched to reach for it...

Arthur's arm wrapped around my waist, and he was hauling me backward. Away from the door. A roaring filled my ears and the cord pulled me in the opposite direction. I felt like I'd surely snap in two. Then Arthur's hands were cupping my face, and staring into his tormented eyes broke the trance that had come over me. The pain in my chest eased, but my throat ached.

"Jyn, are you here with me?" His thumbs traced across my cheekbones.

My breath came in short, shallow breaths that raked against my sore throat. I forced myself to focus on the rich brown color of his eyes, the light freckles across the tops of his cheeks, the stubble peppering his chin and jaw...and my breathing slowly returned to normal. When I felt like myself once more, I gave him a nod.

He exhaled, like he had been holding his breath. "Good." His hands slipped away from my face, but he made no move to step back. "You were screaming. I thought..." He looked away. "I thought he'd come back for you. And I had just left you – alone."

I vaguely remembered him saying something about going to check the windows in the library, but it hadn't registered with me then. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against him. His touch was warm against the drafty air of the hallway, and I allowed myself to melt into his embrace.

"I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you."

I pulled back just far enough to look up at him. “Nothing is going to happen to me,” I told him. And I meant it. I didn’t know Edward’s exact reasons for keeping us here, but I assumed it had something to do with my connection with the House. “I think he...*needs* me.”

His eyebrows pinched together. “What for?”

I shrugged. “I’m not entirely sure. But I don’t think he intends to hurt me.”

“There are more ways to injure a person besides physically.”

My breath was sharp on the next inhale. “I know.”

He looked into my eyes for a long moment. “Whatever you need to do here, I’m all in.”

I should have told him then – what he truly meant to me. That any time I was kind enough to allow myself to imagine a glimpse of future for myself, he was always part of it. That I was all in, too. Or, at least, I wanted to be.

But the cord caught the words in my throat – snared them like a rabbit – and strangled them. *Later*, I told myself, without really know when – or *if* – that would be.

“We have to find Poppy,” I told him, instead.

He nodded, his jaw set in determination. “Lead the way.”

The connection pulsed in my chest, pushing against my ribcage until I was moving in its desired direction: toward the door that still stood ajar. Arthur loosened his hold on me, but followed close behind me. I reached a shaking hand back toward him; he took it without hesitation, squeezing it once.

I reached for the door knob, but the door swung inward on its own. Inside lay another room that had been left seemingly untouched by the decay that spread through the rest of the House.

A child’s bedroom overflowing with pinks and yellows.

There was a bed positioned in the middle of the room, fitted with baby pink sheets and a hand-made quilt. The sight transported me back in time to the first days after my mother's death – to the pink sheets Tuley had put on the mattress in the corner of her spare bedroom. Stuffed animals not as well-loved as the stuffed rabbit in my hands sat atop the bed, piled in front of the white headboard. Plastic bins beneath the bed overflowed with even more toys; some had not been put back in their place and lay discarded throughout the room. Abandoned halfway through a play session.

In the far corner of the room, beneath the wide bay window, sat a tiny table with four matching chairs. Two of the chairs were occupied by dolls in frilly dresses and bows, and a plastic tea set sat between them on the table. Next to the window, there was a bookshelf filled with colorful books, boxes of Crayons, discarded hair ribbons, wooden blocks, and more dolls propped into sitting positions. They seemed to look on their tea-party-going sisters with resentment. Arthur broke away from my side to examine the shelf further while I turned my attention to the drawings taped to the wall. Landscapes drawn in Crayon served as the only décor in the entire room. Though I'd seen paintings in once-glorious frames in other rooms of the House, none dwelled here. There was one drawing, half-finished, laying on the small table.

It was difficult to say for sure, but it looked like a child's rendition of Edward, complete with the swirling black tendrils around his feet and shoulders. I picked it up to get a better look. There, at the bottom, in the right-hand corner, was a child's handwriting. The letters were sloppy, but they very clearly spelled out a name.

*JYN.*



#

I sat gingerly on the bed, afraid of disturbing the mound of stuffed animals piled at the head. Closing my eyes, I ran my hand across the quilt. I searched my memories for any recollection of this room - this *place* - but came up empty.

Edward wanted me to remember my time here – a time when I called this House home and it was all I'd ever known – but nothing surfaced. If Poppy's rescue hinged on me recovering those lost memories, she was as good as gone.

“There's nothing. No memories,” I whispered, clutching the dingy rabbit in my hands.

What had I forgotten? Pieces of me were missing; memories lost forever to the void inside of me. The void that had opened the day my mother left this world without me and had spent the last fifteen years sucking up everything in its path. Was it my mother or my memories I grieved more?

I could not say for certain.

I turned the stuffed rabbit over in my hands, and my attention snagged on the stitch running down its back. The thread didn't match – like he had been opened and sewn shut again. Curious, I pulled on the thread and it came away easily. I continued to pull and pull until stuffing spilled out of the opening.

Beneath the fluff, there lay a familiar golden necklace. A golden chain threaded through a golden skeleton key.

My breath caught in my throat.

This was the key necklace from the first House memory I had seen of Mama. She had put it around my neck, and it felt warm against my skin. But when the memory dissipated, so had the necklace.

Until now.

I reached down and touched the metal of the key, and it was warm. And not just from being stored inside a stuffed animal – no, it was unnaturally warm for a piece of metal. I wasn't certain, but I thought I could feel the faintest heartbeat inside the key. I gasped, pulling my hand away. *What the fuck?* I reached down to touch the key again and, sure enough, the heart beat was still there – was it getting stronger?

“Jyn?” Arthur called from the bookshelf. “There’s something here you should see.”

Leaving the dissected rabbit and necklace behind, I crossed the room. He handed me a one of the books from the shelf: *King Midas and the Golden Touch*. One of my eyebrows hitched up in a question.

“Front page,” he told me.

I flipped the book open, and found my mother’s handwriting there. It wasn’t as neat as it had been in the Frost book, as if she had written the words with a sense of urgency.

*USE THE KEY. NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY.*

I rushed back to the necklace I’d left on the bed and held it out for Arthur to see. It shone beautifully in the late afternoon sun as it spun on the end of its chain.

“Holy shit,” Arthur whispered, echoing my own swirling, spiraling thoughts.

The anger that had been slowly rising in me bubbled to the surface. The cord sang in my chest, echoing through my entire body. Tears threatened to spill onto my cheeks, but I didn’t dare move to wipe them away. “My entire life has been a lie. I don’t know anything about

myself — who I am or what I’m even supposed to do here.” My shoulders sagged, anger quickly replaced by a heaviness that caused my shoulders to sag.

Then Arthur was in front of me, reaching up to cup my cheek with his hand. “Then we’ll find out. Together.”

I met her eyes and nodded. Determination coursed through me as I walked over to the bedroom door – *my* bedroom door – and threw it open. I was going to get the answers I came for. My eyes went wide at what stood on the other side, and my heart began to race. Behind me, I heard Arthur curse under his breath.

A sinister grin surrounded by shadows peered down at me. “Hello, *daughter*.”

“My, my,” Edward said as he glided into the room, “I have not seen this room in ages. Not since the night you were taken from me.”

The door slammed shut behind us. I didn’t have to test the knob to know it would not open.

*Trapped.*

He took a seat on the small bed and crossed one leg over the other. Even though he was surrounded by his cloak of shadows, I was certain he was the only person I knew that could still look dignified on pink princess bedding. The sight of him poised in such a manner infuriated me to my core.

“Tell me where Poppy is,” I bit out.

He shot to his feet and closed the distance between us in the space of a heartbeat. He towered over me, his shadows gathering around me. They felt like ice against my skin and left

goosebumps in their wake. But I refused to flinch or cower to him any longer. I heard Arthur take a step toward me, but I held out my hand for him to stay back. He did as I asked.

*There are more ways to injure a person besides physically.*

If Edward needed me for something, he wasn't going to bring me harm. Not directly, anyway. Keeping Arthur as far out of his reach as possible was my priority now. I would not lose him to this House, too.

“What do you want with me?”

A smile spread across Edward's lips. “There is a door on the top level of the library. Open it for me, and I will release you and your friends from the House.”

My eyes narrowed.

“You have my word.”

“What's up there?”

“Something I lost a long time ago.”

I frowned up at him. “A door. That's it?”

He nodded.

It couldn't be that easy. Could it? “Why do I have to be the one to open it?”

“Certain locks only work for certain keys.”

“But I don't...”

“Do we have a deal or not?” he blurted. His eyes were wide and burned the color of liquid gold.

I took a single step back, and crossed my arms. “No.”

The sound that escaped his throat sounded like it came from a caged animal. He lunged for my throat, but Arthur hauled me back.

“You always were an ungrateful little brat,” he bit out.

Ignoring his jab – and how much it managed to wound me – I told him, “Bring Poppy back *safely*, and I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Jyn,” Arthur warned in my ear.

I couldn’t turn to look at him; it would shatter my heart. But I’d already decided – if it was me or them, I’d *always* choose them.

“Do we have a deal?” I asked Edward, sending his own words back to him.

He rolled his shoulders back, straightening himself once more. The wolf in sheep’s clothing. “Yes.”

I could’ve crumpled to the floor with relief, but Arthur’s arm around my waist held me steady. Edward walked to the middle of the room and took a seat on the floor. After a moment, he motioned for me to do the same.

Arthur tightened his grip on me, and pressed a quick kiss to my temple. “I’ll be right here. The whole time. I promise.”

I couldn’t let him know I was uncertain about this, so I patted his hand and turned toward Edward. I hoped my legs didn’t shake as I took my seat in front of him.

“Do you remember what I told you about the House?” Edward asked me.

I nodded, my throat suddenly feeling thick.

*It does not think, but it can feel.*

*Does not speak, but it can communicate.*

*It does not eat, yet it hungers.*

“Is Poppy going to be okay?” I pressed.

Ignoring my question, he asked, “Were you afraid when the door appeared?”

I tried to recall what I'd been feeling in that exact moment. Right after Edward showed us the library and told me...that he was my father. "Probably," I admitted.

Edward nodded. "The House sensed your fear – *felt* it – and offered you a route of escape."

*The House tends to those within its walls.*

"Well, then, can it bring her back?"

I watched as Edward closed his eyes, moving them back and forth behind his eyelids. Searching for something — searching for Poppy? A few minutes passed before he opened his eyes again. "She is still in the House, but I cannot reach her with my abilities alone."

"Reach her? What does that mean?" Arthur asked before I could.

Edward gave an exasperated sigh. "It means that I cannot bring her here on my own." He looked at me. "I will need your help."

"Me?" My eyes widened. "But I can't..."

"You can," he cut me off. "You have a connection with the House. Even though you did not know what you were doing, you asked it for help. You were afraid, so you unintentionally created a barrier I cannot cross. You will need to remove it before I can bring your friend back here."

"*Remove* it? I didn't even know I created it in the first place." My voice was rising in pitch as I spoke. "How am I supposed to take it down?"

"I will show you," Edward said, his voice calm and even. He extended his hand toward me. "But you must trust me."

I looked at Arthur again, but his eyes gave away nothing toward how he was feeling about all of this. He'd told me he was all in – whatever I needed to do – but I saw that muscle

tick in his jaw. He wanted nothing more than to tell me not to trust the man sitting before me – that we would find another way to save Poppy somehow.

I looked back down at Edward’s hand for a long moment before finally taking it. Tension that I did not realize he was holding in his face eased as he wrapped his fingers around my hand.

“Shall we begin?” he asked.

I nodded.

“I need you to relax and close your eyes.”

My pulse quickened, though I didn’t know why. From anticipation or nerves, I couldn’t tell. I didn’t like being vulnerable this close to him, but I knew Arthur wasn’t far away and would be watching Edward like a hawk the entire time. But I set that aside, and did as Edward instructed.

“Now,” he said, his voice low and calm, “reach out with your mind, try to get a feel for the House. Try to visualize the connection you have.”

I concentrated, but nothing was happening. I imagined tendrils extending outward, creeping along the floors in all directions, reaching. Seeking out the connection. Gently, as to not frighten it away. I thought I felt a slight tug in one direction, and allowed myself to follow it. But it was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

Edward sensed my frustration and said, “Try not to think of too many things at once; that will muddle your connection and bog it down. Think only of your friend and locating her.”

I inhaled and exhaled slowly, clearing my mind of all the clutter. Removing any thoughts that did not center on finding Poppy. Nothing happened at first, and I fought back my frustrations. Then, my mind filled with the image of doors flying past me, as if I were viewing

them from the window of a train or a car. Each of the doors was unique, and there had to be *thousands* of them.

“I’ve found it,” I told Edward, but my voice felt far away and detached.

“Good,” I heard him say. “Do not lose focus.”

Poppy was in here somewhere, and she needed me. I allowed my sense of urgency to enter my thoughts, and the doors moved more quickly, a barely decipherable blur on either side of me. Until it all came to a screeching halt, and only one door stood in front of me. It was the door from the library — the door I’d trapped Poppy behind.

“I found the door,” my disconnected voice told Edward. I didn’t even know if we were speaking aloud anymore, or if we were communicating within our minds somehow. Was any of what I was seeing even real?

“Just take down the barrier for now. Let me handle the rest.”

I wanted nothing more than to reach out and fling the door open, but when I reached out, I could feel the invisible barrier Edward had spoken of. I could probably get past it and to Poppy if I tried hard enough, but I could already feel myself fatiguing. If I pushed myself much further, I didn’t know what it would do to me. I needed to keep Poppy and Arthur safe, so I couldn’t risk it. Reluctantly, I conceded. One step at a time.

“How do I take it down?” I asked him.

“Make it your will, and the House will listen.”

I concentrated, imagining the barrier falling away — shattering like glass at my feet — and flooded my thoughts with that image. The House responded quicker to my will than it had earlier, and I hoped that was a good thing. The barrier fell away.

She was so close, just on the other side of the door.



“Jyn,” Edward warned, “don’t push yourself. You’re not ready. Come back.”

But all I had to do was turn the knob...

“Jyn!” Edward’s voice grew more urgent. “Come back now!”

It was my will, so the door swung inward for me...

“Jyn!” His voice was a distant echo now.

Poppy was curled on the floor, sobs shaking her shoulders. My heart broke to see what I had done — where I had sent her, alone and afraid.

“Poppy,” I whispered.

She sat up and whipped her head around. “Jyn?”

Then I felt myself being pulled away — away from Poppy — and I gripped the door frame, fighting against it. “No, please wait,” I begged.

Poppy looked scared, and I wanted to wrap my arms around her and bring her back with me. To tell her everything was okay and that I was going to get us out of here.

But still, I felt myself being pulled further and further away. My grip on the doorframe faltered, and I went hurtling back down the hallway of endless doors. I slammed back into myself again, the connection with the House I had felt just moment ago snapping as my eyes flew open. Gasping for air, my arms flailed, trying to reach for something — anything — to steady myself. My head was spinning, and I felt like I might be sick.

“What did you do to her?” I heard Arthur shout. Then I felt his hands on my shoulders, trying to steady me. Slowly, painfully slowly, his face came into focus and my breathing slowed to a somewhat normal rhythm. “Hey, hey, it’s me. I’m here. You’re okay, it’s okay.”

Despite my still-spinning head and being on the verge of vomiting, I spun my head around. “Where is she? Did it work?”

Arthur urged me to stay still, but I had to see she was safe. He helped me into a sitting position. Across from me, Edward's face was hard and cold.

"I told you," he said, his voice low and rough, "*to come back!*" He exploded to his feet. I saw those deep, dark shadows playing along his skin as Arthur dragged me backward. Edward's eyes were burning gold and his shoulder heaved with each breath he took.

Arthur pulled me to my feet. He was shouting something at me, but Edward's gaze held me in place. There was something in those golden eyes I recognized, but I couldn't place what. Something that chilled me to my core – something that made me *afraid*.

"Jyn!" Arthur was pulling on my arm, trying to get me to leave the room.

Finally, I found myself again. I turned and ran.

I had no idea where else to go, so I pulled Arthur into the library. We slammed the door and leaned against it to catch our breath.

"What the fuck happened?" he panted.

My head was still spinning, so I took a few deep breaths to try and steady myself. But every inch of me felt like it was shaking.

"What *is* this place, Jyn?"

I threw my hands up in the air. "I don't know." A crazed laugh escaped me. "I really don't know! And I don't really care anymore. I just want to find Poppy and get the hell out of here."

He peeled himself away from the door and crossed to one of the leather chairs.

Unceremoniously, he plopped himself into it and tilted his head back. When I felt like I'd gained

some amount of control over my body – and was certain I wasn't going to vomit – I joined him in front of the hearth.

He picked his head up and looked at me. “What now?”

I shrugged, turning my attention to the flames dancing in the hearth.

“What about the door?”

“What do you mean?”

“For whatever reason, he needs you to open the door. Seems simple enough. I'd use it as leverage.”

“What do you think's up there?”

“Does it matter?”

I considered, and then decided that if it meant saving Poppy's life it really didn't.

Arthur stood and extended his hand toward me. I took it and let him help me to my feet.

“You have to promise me something,” I told him.

He looked surprised. “Anything.”

I stepped toward him. “If it comes down to it...I need you and Poppy to get out of here.”

He closed the distance between us, putting his hands on my shoulders. “Jyn, it's not going to come to that. We're *all* going to walk out of here together. Okay?”

I shook my head. “Promise me.”

That tell-tale muscle in his jaw ticked. “Jyn, I...”

“*Promise me*, Arthur,” I begged.

Resigned, he touched his forehead to mine. “I promise.”

#

Edward was still in the bedroom, his shadows stretching and filling the room bit by bit. Every instinct inside of me was screaming at me to run – far away and never look back. But I couldn't abandon Poppy. I narrowed my eyes at him. "Bring her back."

His burning golden eyes turned to me, sending a shiver down my spine once more.

*Run, run, run...*

My mind was pleading with me, but I wouldn't give in to it. Not yet. Not until Poppy was safe.

"The barrier is down now. Bring her back," I demanded.

Still, he remained silent, his unrelenting gaze boring into my soul.

"I won't do it," I told him. "I'm not opening any doors for you until I see my friend is safe."

He tilted his head to one side. "Then you will never leave this place." His voice was filled with smoke and darkness; shadows poured out of his mouth and snaked their way through the air towards me. They coiled and wound around my legs, taking the shape of shackles. I kicked at them and they dissipated. Behind me, I heard Arthur curse under his breath.

"I'm not afraid of you." And I meant it. I had something he needed, and he wasn't getting...whatever it was until Poppy was safe. "Bring her back, or no deal."

He just stood there – staring – for the longest time. Then, the shadows began their retreat. He pulled them back in towards himself until the room was free of them. Despite the golden eyes, he looked like himself again. Slowly, even his eyes returned to their normal amber shade.

I lifted my chin, hoping I didn't look as nervous as I felt. Even with the shadows receded, I knew they lurked just beneath the surface. "Well?" I prodded.

Edward took up the same position on the floor as he had earlier; he motioned for me to follow suit.

It was easier to find the connection Edward had explained to me last time – my connection to the House itself. Finding it again felt like putting on a familiar sweater. It was even easier to find myself in the endless hallway once more.

"Find the door," Edward instructed.

I concentrated, pushing aside my fears and uncertainties, and focused solely on finding Poppy. The House responded to my thoughts and placed me in front of a door. At my feet, the shards of the barrier lay scattered. I reached for the door...

"No." Edward's voice filled my head.

Then, he was there with me – in the endless hallway – his hand around my wrist. I yanked my arm away from him, and stepped aside. I watched as he opened the door, but I felt myself being pulled back.

*Wait*, I tried to plead with the House. But it was no longer listening to me. Poppy's door was getting further and further away. *Wait, stop. Please.*

I returned to myself in the bedroom with a gasp. In an instant, Arthur was there. He held my hand between his hands and assured me that everything was okay.

But everything was *not* okay.

Edward was no longer seated across from me. He was in the endless hallway. *With Poppy.*

My breathing came in short, shallow breaths, and I felt like I might be sick.

“Jyn?” I heard a familiar voice call out.

I pushed Arthur aside and swung my head around.

*Where, where, where...*

There, in the doorway, was Poppy. Edward was standing behind her, removing his hand from her shoulder. He’d done it. He’d brought her back. I didn’t know how, and I didn’t care right then.

I stood and ran towards her as quickly as I could. She met me halfway, and I caught her in my embrace – or, she caught me, considering how unsteady my legs were beneath me. I pulled her close to me, and stroked her hair. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” I whispered over and over, needing her to know I meant it.

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” she whispered back. Shit, she was shaking in my arms.

I made eye contact with Edward, who remained in the doorway to the parlor. He clasped his hands in front of himself and I could’ve sworn his eyes flashed gold. I needed to press him far enough to learn about this power I held, how this key worked, and why he wanted me here so badly.

Stepping away from Poppy, I faced Edward fully. “I need answers. Now.”

“I’ve told you all I know,” Edward told me in between clenched teeth.

“Why can’t I remember anything form before she died?”

“Memories fade, child.”

“No, I would remember a place like this. It’s...like nothing I’ve ever seen or experienced before.”

“So was your mother,” Edward said, his voice low. “But without pictures, it is difficult to remember her face after all these years. I imagine you’ve noticed the same thing by now. It’s

why you came here in the first place, is it not? To remember her. Learn new things about her. Feel close to her again. But let me tell you, daughter, I walk these halls every day. Her memory still fades.”

I closed the space between us; I was tired of playing these games with him.

“Why did Mama take me away?”

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “She was a stubborn woman. When she got a notion in her head, it was nearly impossible to change her mind.”

I should have known he wouldn’t answer my questions outright. Fine. I would submit to his games to get the answers I needed. “What kinds of notions would she get?”

He sighed. “All manner of things. Mostly to do with you.”

“Maybe she was just trying to do what was best for me.”

A laugh escaped him, but it was harsh and cut short. “You certainly have grown to sound like her. Even after all these years without her.”

“You didn’t want me to leave?”

“After what I’ve shown you – all I’ve done for you -” he pointed at Poppy, who was still cowering next to Arthur, “you think I do not *care* for you?”

“I had no idea you even existed until I came here! You may as well be a stranger to me!”

His eyes softened – like I had wounded him. “That...that part was my doing.”

My heart skipped a beat. Edward had demonstrated he was a power being, but I didn’t know the extent of that power...*yet*.

“You altered my memories.” It was not a question, for the answer was written on his face.

He cast his gaze to the floor and nodded.

“Why?” I pushed down the anger that threatened to rise in me again.

“She planned to take you away!” he exploded. Then, reigning himself in, he continued, “You were *our* daughter, and she wanted to just take you away to live elsewhere. She wouldn’t even tell me where she planned to take you.” He looked back up at me. “You have to understand that all I ever did was love you, and *she* punished me for it.”

“What did you do to my memories?” I tried to keep my voice even, despite my rising heart rate.

He looked down at the floor again, and let out a long exhale. “The night before you were to leave, I acted out of spite. I don’t even know if Elysia knows what I did.” He rubbed the back of his neck, then let his hand drop to his side. “It took nearly the entire night, but I managed to remove your core memories.”

Despite myself, tears pooled in my eyes and my voice broke. “Why would you take that from me?”

“Because,” he said, “if you were going to be removed from the House, I wanted the House removed from your memories. At the time, it seemed like a fair trade.”

“And now?” I challenged.

His eyes snapped to mine. “Do not mishear me, daughter. I do not regret what I have done to protect this House. I only tell these things to you so that you might understand my actions.”

“No.” I shook my head and backed away a few steps. “No, I don’t understand. I will *never* understand or forgive you for what you’ve done.”

“You’re also mistaken if you think I seek your forgiveness.”

“Then what *do* you want?” I bit out.



“Your power.”

The key in my pocket felt like it now weighed a hundred pounds, and I was hyper aware of the way it felt against my leg. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, but I think you do.” His eyes darted to my leg and back up again. “You might not have known what you were doing, but your abilities are returning to you. I have lived in this House longer than you can even fathom, but not even I can manipulate the doors within it.”

“Why should I believe anything you say?”

He shook his head, eyes glowing brighter. “Do not play coy with me, child. I know the image you have of me in your mind.”

“Is it not just a mirror you see in my eyes?” I snapped.

His hand snapped out before I even had time to react, and his hand clamped down on my jaw — not squeezing, just holding me in place — forcing me to look at him. I met his stare, my anger fueling my defiance. I wasn’t afraid of this man — my father. If what he’d said was true, I held a deeper power within myself. And if that was the case, *he* needed *me*. Not the other way around.

As if he could read my thoughts, he released his hold on me and backed away. “You do not understand — neither of you.”

“Then explain it to me.” I was done with his games. I needed the truth.

When his eyes met mine again, there was pain in them. Deep, lasting pain that wore at one’s soul, eating away at it day after day until nothing was left. He blinked, and it was gone again — hidden behind the mask he had curated over the years. “Would you ever stop trying to return home if you remained trapped here?”

I blinked, startled by his reply.

“All of this,” I began, the tears already forming in my eyes, “was just a means to an end, wasn’t it?”

“Jyn,” he started, taking a step toward me.

I shook my head and stepped back, refusing to let him near me. “Did you even love her? Is that even something you have the ability to feel where you come from?” Hot tears streamed down my face now.

“That is enough, child,” he warned.

“Was she just a pawn to you? A way to find someone like you? Tell me, how long did you look for someone like me in this world before you realized you needed to *create* your own?”

“Do not assume to know anything about which you do not understand.”

“You manipulated her!” I shouted at him.

“She took you from me!” His shoulders were rising and falling in quick succession, his own rage building. “After everything I had done to train you and help you use your abilities, she took you away. I should have removed her from your memories, as well. My weakness has only proven to make this process more difficult.”

My mind came to a screeching halt.

He had mentioned earlier that he had altered my memories out of spite, because he had been upset that Mama was sending me away. But my mind had kept snagging on why he would do that if he ultimately wanted me to end back up here one day.

Now, it rang crystal clear.

“You altered my memories so that it would be easier to get me to come back, didn’t you?”

His rage-filled gaze meeting mine was the only confirmation I needed.

“You knew that if I had no memories of this place, you could reshape my opinion into whatever you wanted. Get me to agree to help you. Get me to believe whatever you want.” I smiled then, mimicking the one I had seen on his face so many times before. “You are nothing but a miserable, lonely old man. You cannot stand to be trapped here alone.”

Edward had brought each one of us here. Trapped us, so that we may also feel his pain. Cages within a cage.

Only difference was I’d left this place once before.

And I would do it again.

“Now that you see your friends are safe,” Edward began, “We have a deal to discuss.”

“Deal?” Poppy chimed in, looking over at me. “What deal?”

I sighed, deflating. I’d almost entirely forgotten they were in the room with us. I needed to keep them safe, and I was only provoking the monster.

“If I open a door for him, he will release us.”

Poppy shot me an inquisitive look.

“I’ll explain later.”

Edward was growing impatient. “Do we have a deal or not, daughter?”

“I need to talk to my friends first. Give me some time.”

Though I could tell Poppy was bursting at the seams with questions, she held them back. Instead, her eyes darted between me and Edward.

“Fine,” Edward conceded. “You have until morning. He tossed me a golden pocket watch. “Not a moment more.”

Outside, the sun was setting. My stomach dipped, but I managed to nod.

Then, Edward was gone, dissolved into his shadows.

Poppy threw her hands into the air and shouted, “What the *fuck* is going on?”

## PART THREE

### THE CRUX

*“The heart he wore in a golden chain  
He swung and flung forth into the plain,  
And followed it crying “Heart or death!”  
And fighting over it perished fain.*

*So may another do of right,  
Give a heart to the hopeless fight,  
The more of right the more he loves;  
So may another redouble might*

*For a few swift gleams of the angry brand,  
Scorning greatly not to demand  
In equal sacrifice with his  
The heart he bore to the Holy Land.”*

From *In Equal Sacrifice*, Robert Frost, 1915

After answering Poppy's slew of questions, I glanced down at the time on the pocket watch. One hour gone already. Dusk was settling outside the windows, casting the room in a deep orange glow.

"So what are we going to do?" Poppy asked.

I tore my eyes from the watch face. "I guess I'm going to have to open the door for him."

"What do you think is behind it?"

I shrugged. "It could be anything."

"I don't think you should give him what he wants," Arthur added. He had been silent for so long while I had filled Poppy in that it startled me. "We can win this fight."

"No." I shook my head. "Absolutely not. I've already put you two in enough danger. My priority right now is getting all of us out of here alive and in one piece."

"But you said it yourself," he pressed. "He can't hurt you. You have what he needs."

I met his gaze and threw his own words back at him, "There are more ways to injure a person besides physically."

They were both quiet, and I could feel their nervous energy radiating off of them. They never should have ended up here — it was my fault their safety was at risk.

"What about the House?" Poppy asked, after a few minutes.

"What about it?"

"Can't you like...talk to it? Communicate with it, and get it to help us? It worked earlier, when you found me."

Arthur looked over at me. "It's not a bad idea. At the very least, maybe it could show us something useful. A key memory, or something Edward doesn't want us to find."

I glanced at the ticking second hand of the pocket watch, and swallowed back my apprehension. Whatever we did, we needed to do it soon.

“We can try,” I said at last.

Both of their faces filled with determination as they nodded.

“Where do we start?” Poppy asked.

Startlingly on cue, the bedroom door eased open. We all watched, then exchanged looks with one another. I was the first to stand, followed by Arthur, then Poppy.

“We follow the doors,” I answered, hoping I sounded more certain than I felt.

Though my heart was pounding, I led the way out of the room and into the hallway. The hallway was cast in the soft glow of lamp light and shadows – eerie yet beautiful. I found myself looking around, trying to imagine myself living in a place like this as a little girl. Had I found all of the best hiding spots? Where had my imagination led me in a place like this?

“Where to next?” Arthur asked, bringing me back to the task at hand.

I looked up and down the hallway. No doors stood open for us, so I would need to use my powers to find the right door. That still felt weird. *My powers*. The phrase felt odd even in my own mind. Setting those thoughts aside for now, I walked up to a door at random. The key felt warm — not uncomfortably hot or burning — against my chest. I fished it out of my shirt and looked down at it. It looked the same as when I had put it on, not glowing or extra shiny or anything out of the ordinary, aside from the warmth.

I tucked the key back into my shirt and focused on the door in front of me. I could feel Arthur’s and Poppy’s eyes on me as I placed my hand on the door and closed my eyes. Just like I had when I was searching for Poppy, I looked for that connection with the House. What I assumed was my power responded more quickly this time, and soon those tendrils I had

imagined in my mind were already reaching out. I reached further and further, until one of the tendrils brushed up against something — something familiar and welcoming. The power of the House. Gently, as to not frighten it away, I brushed against it again with my own power. When it responded in kind, I released the breath I had been holding.

“Hello, my friend,” I whispered.

In response, I felt the power of the House pulse against my own. It almost felt like a heartbeat, and it made one side of my mouth turn up.

I had no idea if Arthur and Poppy could hear me, but I didn’t care. “I’m sorry I don’t remember you like I should.”

There was a slow pulse that filled me with grief and sadness. Our connection strained, and it felt like it might snap.

“I think I can trust you, though.”

Another happy pulse from the House.

“I know we used to be friends. A long time ago. Didn’t we?”

The pulse I felt against the connection filled me with a feeling of love.

“Is there anything you can show me that will help us?”

Silence followed, and I thought I had lost the connection until I gently brushed against the House’s power again.

“Please,” I begged, “I know Edward needs me to use these powers, but I can’t remember how.” I took a deep breath, knowing the gravity of what I was about to ask of the House. “Can you help me remember?”

The House was silent for a long time, and I began to worry I had scared it or said something wrong. Then I felt a gentle graze against my power, and the door beneath my hand



swung open. The key felt cool against my chest again. My eyes fluttered open, and I turned to see Arthur and Poppy still standing behind me, waiting.

“Well?” Arthur asked.

I nodded. “Let’s do this.”

Stepping through the door was jarring for Arthur and Poppy, as it had been for me the first time. I did not rush them, and we waited just inside the doorway until they had both steadied themselves. As we had stepped through the door, I had sent my will down the connection with House, hoping it would allow Arthur and Poppy to come with me through the memories. I don’t think I could have done it on my own, so I was grateful the House listened.

“This is weird,” Poppy told me, placing a hand on the wall to ground herself.

I shrugged. “You get used to it.”

While I waited, I looked around at where the House had sent us first. We were in a hallway of the House I did not recognize. The walls here were repaired, and the floorboards looked clean and polished. The windows hadn’t been boarded up. Instead, deep burgundy curtains hung in front of them, fluttering in the breeze. Paintings without a layer of dust hung on the wall in shiny, golden frames. Much like the hallway we’d just come from, this one was lined with doors fixed with golden door knobs.

The House hadn’t transported us to a different hallway, but a different *time*.

A memory.

The sound of humming drifted toward us from an open door at the end of the hallway. Taking a deep breath, I followed the sound to the room at the end of the hallway. Arthur and

Poppy followed closely behind me, careful not to make too much noise even though there was no disturbing the House's memories. They lived as they were – there was no changing or disrupting them. I eased the door open the rest of the way and peered inside.

Mama was sitting on a plush, four poster bed with gauzy curtains hanging from the canopy. Behind them, she looked hazy and her features were distorted. It reminded me of how she now looked in the grainy photograph on my nightstand. A younger version of myself sat in front of her, fidgeting with the ears of a familiar stuffed rabbit, while she brushed through my long, golden hair.

“Is that...?” I heard Poppy ask behind me.

I couldn't tear my eyes away, so I just nodded. I could have watched this memory all day — soaked up every ounce of love and happiness my mother emitted in this memory alone. But I knew the House had sent us here for a reason, if only to remind me of the love Mama felt for me before we dove deeper into the depths of memories. I quietly thanked the House for bringing us here first, and forced myself to look around the room.

It was furnished simply — the bed, a wardrobe, a vanity, a fireplace with two chairs in front of it — each piece was extravagant and impressive. It was shocking to see myself sitting among it all, at the center of a plush feather bed, and paying absolutely no mind to it. I had seen for myself that this had once been my home, but this was the first time it felt plausible.

“Mama,” I heard my younger self say.

My head snapped in their direction.

“Yes?” Mama answered.

I watched the conflict fill my tiny features, watched my fidgeting with the rabbit's ears increase in urgency, as I spoke again. “I don't want to study with Papa today.”

The soft smile that had found a home on Mama's face vanished, and I watched as her shoulders slumped forward. She set the brush aside and pulled me into her arms. "I know, sweetie." She sighed, spinning me to face her. She brushed the wisps of hair from my face. "But Papa is a very smart man, and studying with him keeps you safe. It helps you learn how to speak with the House and not get lost."

I watched myself nod, and look down at the key necklace that hung from my neck. I found myself reaching for it as my younger self reached for hers. It was warm in my hand, as I knew it was in my tiny hand, too. The House wanted us to move, to walk through the door to the next memory, but I found myself hesitating.

As if my younger self could sense us there, she looked right at me.

I knew this was just a memory the House was showing us — knew that my younger self didn't actually see us standing there — but when I watched her nod, it felt like she was giving us permission to go. To dive deeper and find the secrets this House held. I turned and walked through the door without looking back.

Arthur and Poppy followed, and we found ourselves in another area of the House I did not recognize. I did recognize Edward kneeling on the floor, his back turned to us. His shoulder shook like he was sobbing, but no sound came from him. My heart rate kicked up, and I fished the golden watch out of my pocket to check how much time remained. *It's just a memory*, I reminded myself. We still had time.

"What's he doing?" Arthur asked, stepping up next to me.

I shrugged, my eyes trained on the back of Edward's head. His feet were bare and dirty, and his cloak of shadows was not draped over his shoulders. Instead, he wore khaki pants and a wrinkled shirt — how he had looked when we first arrived.

“How close can we get?”

I hadn't thought about it before — about getting in close and examining the memories. I had just assumed they were for me to watch, but it would make sense if the House wanted us to inspect things from all angles. Against my chest, I felt a faint pulse of energy from the key. I looked at Arthur. “I think we can get as close as we want. We can't change anything, and they can't see us, but I think we can look around.”

He nodded and we all spread out, looking around the room. It was a small room – smaller than most of the rooms in the House – and was outfitted with a few tables covered in books and notebooks written in a language I had never seen before. I crossed to the table nearest the door and tried to make sense of the symbols and shapes on one of the pages, but I had no luck.

The table in front of where Edward knelt held a different smattering of objects – specimens preserved in jars, bundles of herbs from the garden room, a few liquids that I could not tell what they were, and a single book propped open on a stand next to a wide bowl. I abandoned the book I was squinting at and made my way over to where Edward sat silently on the stone floor.

The wide, shallow bowl was half-filled with white sand and more of those symbols had been drawn in it. Peering at the book, all I could tell was that some of the symbols there appeared in the bowl of sand. I looked down at Edward, who sat silent and unmoving where he had apparently collapsed into a heap on the floor.

“This is creepy,” Poppy whispered, peering down at the specimens on the table. “What is he doing with all of this?”

Edward's head snapped up suddenly, making all of us jump and stumble back. It's just a memory, I reminded myself again. But that did not help the unease that had settled into my

stomach, as I saw his eyes. They were a deep golden color. And not just the irises, but his entire eye. They looked like they had been dipped in liquid gold.

They did more than shine – they *burned*.

As if a fire had ignited behind them.

“Dawn goes down today,” he said in a voice I barely recognized as his own.

The three of us exchanged a wide-eyed look.

“Nothing gold can stay.”

Though I knew he could not see us, those burning, golden eyes bore into me. I felt entirely exposed, like he was peering directly into my mind – my *soul*. The only thing that brought me out of my trance was Poppy’s hand on my arm.

“Maybe we should go to the next one?” she offered, her voice coated with fear.

“No,” I blurted. There was nothing I wanted more than to leave this room, but the House had brought us here, so I needed to see whatever it wanted me to see. The key was still cold against my skin, so I knew it wasn’t time to move yet. “I have to see it through.”

I could tell she wasn’t happy about it, but she nodded.

“Nothing gold can stay, nothing gold can stay, nothing gold can stay,” he repeated over and over again, as if it were part of some ritual.

“Papa?” I heard a small voice ask from the doorway.

All three of our heads snapped in that tiny voice’s direction. I saw myself standing there, the stuffed rabbit clutched to my chest, eyes still heavy with sleep, and slippers on my feet.

*No*, I thought to myself. *No, no, no, no*.

“Run,” I whispered. “Please, run.”

But she remained unmoving, confusion slowly being replaced by fear.

“Come on,” I plead with my younger self. “Please run.”

She finally picked up her slippers and began to move, but instead of running away, she ran *toward* Edward. Toward the man she viewed as her father, the one who was supposed to protect her. Protect *us*.

“Papa!” she cried. “Papa, please stop! Come back, please!”

He turned to look at her with his burning, golden eyes. She wrapped her arms around his neck and began to cry. Then, in the blink of an eye, he lifted his hand and sent her flying against the wall. The air was knocked out of my own lungs, and I felt a deep throbbing pain in my shoulders, back, and base of my skull. I watched in shock as her limp body — my limp body — fell to the floor, unmoving. Poppy gasped, and Arthur moved to my side to hold me upright. I didn’t realize I was at risk of crumpling to the floor, as well, until his arms were around me, holding me up.

Edward stood, and was slowly walking toward my younger self.

“Edward!” another voice called from the hallway. It was Mama’s voice, though she didn’t sound like herself, either. Then she spoke to him in a language I did not understand or recognize. She sounded...*ethereal*.

I watched his face as his eyes returned to their normal amber color. He looked as if he had just come out of a daze or awoken from a deep sleep. He blinked several times, stumbling backward and clutching his head. Mama sprinted across the room and knelt next to my small body, checking to make sure air still filled my lungs and my heart was still pumping.

Edward made a move toward them, but Mama shot him a look that stung even me.

“Ellie, I--” Edward tried to say but she cut him off with her hand.

“Enough,” she said, and he did not push her further.

I watched as she pulled me into her arms and stood, staring daggers into Edward as she turned and left the room. After they left, Edward's chest heaved and he gripped the edge of the table so tightly, his knuckles turned white. He let out a roar that barely sounded human, and knocked everything on the table to the floor in one grand sweep of his arm. He slid to the floor once more, and violent sobs shook his entire body.

The key grew warm against my skin, and we shuffled toward the door. I glanced over my shoulder one last time before closing the door behind me. There, crumpled on the floor, I saw a man filled with a sadness like nothing in this world. A man who battled his own grief. A man who had turned into a monster because of it.

I saw all of that in him in that moment.

And I pitied him.

In that moment, I saw myself.

There was barely time to catch our breath on the other side of the door, because the House dropped us into the middle of another memory. We were back in Mama's bedroom from earlier, and Edward was pacing the floor angrily while she sat casually in one of the chairs in front of the fireplace.

"I'm not letting her stay here," Mama said, her voice even and calm. "It isn't safe for her anymore."

"It's perfectly safe," Edward nearly growled.

Mama shot out of her chair. "You nearly killed her!"

"She knew it was forbidden to go down there while I was working! She made her choice, and suffered a consequence!"

Mama shook her head and backed away. “I don’t even know who you are anymore. Listen to yourself! You care more about your experiments than your own daughter.”

“They’re not experiments,” he bit out.

“Your family is *here*, Edward. Why can’t you be content with that?”

He turned away, shaking his head. “I can never be content here. This is not my home.”

I watched Mama’s heart break at his words, tears forming in her eyes.

“All I’ve ever wanted was to figure out how to get back, you know this,” he continued, his voice devoid of any emotion. “Nothing else matters more than that.”

I thought back to what Edward had told me in the library – about how wasn’t originally from this world. *I come from a world far from here, where the deepest shadows and voids of the universe collide with the light of dying stars.*

*I come from a land made of gold and stardust.*

What was it he had asked me earlier?

*Would you ever stop trying to return home if you remained trapped here?*

What if Edward hadn’t lured me here to share in his own suffering like I originally thought? What if he needed my help to end it?

To free him from this prison.

The tears were falling freely down Mama’s face now. She swiped at them, but still they fell. “Then you will find your way back without her — without either of us.”

Mama tried to storm away, but he grabbed her arm and spun her around. She let out a yelp of pain and tried to shake his grip.

“The girl stays,” he growled.



She shook her head, defiance filling her features. “She’s leaving, Edward. I will not watch you kill our daughter!”

His grip loosened, and Mama shook his hand off. “Fine. Then you will stay.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“Only one of you can leave. You or her — make your decision.”

“Her,” Mama said, without hesitation. “Jyn leaves, and I will stay here with you.”

My heart was breaking, watching her sacrifice herself — watching her throw her entire life away — for my freedom from this place. I could tell Edward was both surprised and frustrated with her decision. Even after the centuries he had apparently spent in our world, he clearly still didn’t understand us very well. I could see on his face that he had expected Mama to choose herself to be freed.

“Fine,” he finally said.

The key warmed against my skin, and I had to tear my eyes away from Mama’s defeated face as we walked through the door. The House put us back in my childhood bedroom, and I thought we were out of the memories, until I saw my younger self sleeping soundly in the bed. I watched Edward enter the room, and cross to where I slept. His expression had changed from the last two memories we had been in — it was softer, kinder, and a tired I knew seeped into his bones.

I held my breath as I watched him reach out and stroke my golden hair that shone even in the dark of night. Then, he bent and placed a kiss on my cheek. If I hadn’t seen what the House had shown me, I would assume this was any normal, loving father kissing his child goodnight. But I already had a suspicion what the House was planning to show me.

I watched as Edward stood, plucking a single strand of hair from my head. As he ran his fingers down it, it turned to golden dust suspended in the air. He coaxed and moved the dust into different positions over and over again. This was how he had altered my memories — how he had taken everything I had ever known and swept it all away, like it had never happened. How he had turned me into a blank slate, so that he might try to mold me into the shape he wanted later, once my mother was no longer around to tell me the truth.

“I don’t need to watch this one,” I whispered, and turned toward the door.

Arthur’s hand landed on my shoulder, and he turned me back around. He pointed in Edward’s direction. “Wait. Look.”

He had finished working with the golden dust, and now sat on the bed next to where I still slept soundly. He reached down, and removed the key necklace from around my neck — carefully so as not to wake me — and held it up in the moonlight. It shone, reflecting the light as it rotated at the end of the chain. He tucked it into his breast pocket and patted it.

“I know fate will bring us together again, my daughter,” he whispered. “And when it does, I’ll be waiting here for you.”

The key — now safely around my neck again — warmed once more. I reached up absently and wrapped my hand around it, letting the soft pulse of energy bring me comfort.

I tugged on Arthur’s and Poppy’s sleeves. “We have to go, *now*.”

They nodded and followed me through the door once more.

The bright sunlight coming through the sitting room windows was a shock after the dimly lit memory we had just come from. It was the same sitting room that we’d entered upon our arrival, but it hadn’t crumbled in on itself just yet. . I heard Poppy gasp softly behind me, as she came to the same realization.

Edward was standing in front of the window, watching a car pull away from the House. Mama entered the room, and all but collapsed onto the sofa. Her eyes were puffy and red, and I knew whom that car contained.

*Me.*

“She will believe me to be dead, then?” her hoarse voice asked.

Edward said nothing, only nodded, as he watched the car disappear down the hill.

“It is better this way,” Mama whispered, mostly to herself.

Slowly, Edward turned his stony gaze toward Mama. When he looked at her, his eyes were as I had seen them before – burning bright with liquid gold. The roar that escaped him made all of us clutch our ears and crumple to the ground.

And then, darkness erupted.

The darkness that exploded from Edward consumed everything in its path. Dozens — *hundreds* — of serpents made of shadows burst from his chest as he screamed. At first, I thought he screamed because they were hurting him, but the awful, inhuman sound continued even after the tendrils had stopped flowing out of his chest. I heard windows shatter and wood snapping all around us, but I could not look away from him. Outside, the winds picked up and lightning struck a nearby tree. Rain began to pour in through the broken windows. My entire body began to shake with cold and fear, despite knowing this was just a memory.

“Edward!” Mama called out to him — plead with him, “You have to stop this!”

He turned his attention on her then, his golden eyes penetrating the shadows around us.

“Please,” she begged him, “please stop this!”

He slowly raised his hand, and I feared he would charge and strike her.

But the blow never came.

Edward remained where he was.

I watched as he plunged his hand into his own chest, more shadows spilled out around him as he dug around. I thought I was going to be sick. I heard Poppy gagging behind me, and Arthur cursing. When he pulled his hand back out, it was not empty.

A still-beating, golden heart sat in his palm. Liquid gold dripped from his hand and open chest, and it pooled on the floor beneath his feet. Mama's eyes were wide and her face had gone deathly pale.

Edward had been wrong – she *had* feared him.

When he spoke, his voice was not his own. A much deeper, other-worldly voice echoed in tandem with his own. “Leaf subsides to leaf. Eden sinks to grief. Dawn goes down to day.” A podium the color of emerald broke through the floorboards and rose front of him. He placed his heart upon it. The beating had slowed and the golden color seemed to be fading from it, though not entirely. It almost looked tarnished and weathered, like a piece of gold jewelry one might find at a pawn shop. A glass dome encased the heart, and just as it beat for a final time, Edward spoke once more, “Nothing gold can stay.”

Then, the tendrils of darkness wound their way back inside him through the hole in his chest. When all of the darkness had been replaced inside of him, the wound closed itself beneath his torn, gold-stained shirt. His eyes returned to normal, and he observed the now-still heart that lay beneath the glass dome.

Mama was curled on the floor, clutching her legs close to her chest. Though her face was still pallid, she still spoke to him. “Edward,” she began, her voice shaky and unsteady, “what have you done?” Her eyes remained, like his, fixed on the heart he had just torn from his own body.

I didn't expect him to answer, but he eventually turned his eyes toward her. "I have no use for such things any longer, it would seem. All these human things are capable of," he told her, gesturing to the emerald podium, "is breaking."

"Fucking *hell*," I heard Arthur whisper behind me.

I turned to see their faces were both filled with absolute terror. I had done this. I had brought them here – dragged them through these memories with me – and if I didn't open that door, the same man who had ripped out his *own* heart, would come for them next. The door behind us opened, and we wasted no time getting to our feet and practically running through it.

On the other side, we found ourselves back in my old bedroom.

Poppy leaned against the wall to steady herself. "Please tell me that was the last one," she gasped out. "I don't think my body can take much more of going through these doors."

"Yeah, Jyn," Arthur panted, trying to catch his breath, "Do you think you could ask the House to let us out of the memories now?"

I opened my mouth to answer, when the door behind us opened and my mother stepped into the room.

Poppy threw her hands into the air. "For fuck's sake!"

Ignoring them both, I watched my mother cross the room toward the small bookcase and remove the one titled *King Midas and the Golden Touch*. I knew, without getting any closer, what she was inscribing on the first page: *USE THE KEY. NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY*. When she was finished, she sat on the edge of the bed.

"I'm so sorry, Jyn," she whispered to the empty room.

She sat for a few moments longer, then stood and walked toward the door again. I watched her hesitate, contemplating something as she looked at the door. It was still ajar from

where she had slipped in without wanting to make any unnecessary noise. She closed it and looked at it for a long time. She let out a shaky breath. Her hand slid down to the doorknob and turned.

Then, she stepped through the door, and it shut behind her.

*It was too lonely for her there,  
And too wild,  
And since there were but two of them,  
And no child...*

Once she was gone, there was a shift in the room, and my instincts told me that we were out of the memories. I pulled the pocket watch out and checked the time. We still had a few hours, but it felt like the time was slipping away faster than it should have. I supposed that shouldn't have come as much of a shock, since Arthur had shown up after he thought I had been gone a week, when only a day had passed inside the House. Time worked differently here, and we didn't have time to spare towards figuring out how.

"Are we back? Is everything normal again?" Poppy asked, her eyes squeezed shut.

"There's nothing *normal* about this place," Arthur said under his breath.

I ignored him. "Yes, the memories are over."

"So, now what?" Arthur asked, his irritation building. "Because after that last memory, I'm thinking you should just open whatever door he wants opened and be on our way."

I shook my head. "I can't."

"Why not?" Poppy chimed in.

"We have to stop him. I don't know what's behind that door. What if it makes him more powerful, and he just kills us anyway?"

“*Stop him?*” Arthur asked. “Jyn, we just watched him rip his own *heart* out! There is no stopping something like him!”

Silence fell between us, and I didn’t try to mend it. All of this was my fault. We were all going to die, because I had brought us here. Perhaps that much was my destiny, but not theirs. There had to be a way to free them. Even if it meant remaining behind.

I thought of my mother’s sacrifice, and how she had not hesitated when forced to choose between her own life and another’s. Perhaps she was a better person than me, because I desperately wanted to live, too. I wanted to know a life outside of this House again, even if I was tethered to it somehow. I’d wasted so much time before – sabotaged my own happiness because I hadn’t thought I deserved it.

But I wanted to *live*.

I wanted to accept Arthur’s offer to work at Word Smiths and write bad poetry. I wanted to witness Poppy’s art in a gallery one day, like she always dreamed of. I wanted to go to the Black Cat on the weekend and not be afraid to dance in front of strangers. I wanted to watch documentaries and drink beer with Arthur in his apartment.

I wanted to finally be able to tell him how I felt.

Part of me wished he had never followed me here so that he would be far away and safe from all of this. But another part of me was grateful he had shown up when he had. Trying to imagine navigating the situation after Poppy had been lost to the House, without him here to ground me to reality, made me realize I wouldn’t have made it this far. It’s very possible Poppy would still be lost to the House, had Arthur not been here. He was someone else I needed to protect; without that, I know I would have crumpled in on myself.

“I’m sorry,” I told them, and I hoped he knew I meant it with every fiber of my being.

“So how do we stop him?” Poppy asked, drawing the tension away from both of us.  
“Your mom said to use the key, right? Can it do more than move us between rooms?”

My mind snagged on her question. “Wait a second.” I darted over to the bookcase and retrieved the book.

*USE KEY. NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY.*

I thought she had been telling me to use the key to escape – to re-establish my connection with the House after all these years and wrest control of it from Edward – but after watching the memories the House had guided us through, I now understood.

“Nothing gold can stay,” I whispered, repeating the words Mama had written — the words I had heard Edward recite multiple times now.

Arthur and Poppy had their eyes trained on me. I knew they were waiting on me to explain, but my mind was moving a mile a minute.

Finally, Poppy asked, “What does it mean?”

“It means,” I told her with a smile, “I know how to stop him.”

Both of their faces contorted in confusion.

“How?” Arthur asked.

The House hadn’t shown us that memory of Edward ripping his own heart out to scare us or demonstrate how much power he held. It showed us Edward’s weakness.

It showed me what I needed to look for in the hallway of endless doors.

I trusted the House, and in return, it showed me the only route of escape where we all leave this place alive.

“We destroy the heart.”



#

“Time?” I asked Poppy. I’d tossed it to her while I took up my position on the floor, and Arthur piled pillows and soft things around me.

“Just after midnight.”

“Shit,” Arthur muttered. “It’s moving faster than before. Do you think he knows?”

I shook my head. He was right, the time did seem to be ticking away more quickly since we had come up with a plan to find Edward’s heart. I also knew that Edward wasn’t likely to play by the rules even if he had decided them. But I couldn’t allow myself to believe that he knew what we were planning.

Because if he knew or found out, it was already over.

Arthur took a seat across from me. “Comfy?”

“It’ll have to do,” I told him. “We’ll have to move quickly.”

He nodded.

“Are you sure about this?” Poppy asked, chewing at her fingernails.

No, I wasn’t. I didn’t even know if I would be able to find Edward’s heart, or, if I did find it, if I’d be able to bring it back with me. When I had tried to bring Poppy back, it had been too much. But surely, one heart would be easier than an entire person. Even though I was filled with uncertainties, I was not afraid.

I smiled at her and reached for her hand. “I’ll be fine. I promise.”

She nodded and released my hand.

I looked to Arthur. “You remember what he did to pull me back?” I asked him, referring to how Edward had pulled me out of the endless hallway to keep me from overexerting my powers.

“Yes,” he assured me.

“Okay,” I told both of them, taking in their faces one more time before closing my eyes. “I’m ready.”

I took several deep breaths, then began to turn my concentration inwards, searching for that kernel of power tucked away inside me. Each time it had been faster to find, so I was sending it outward in no time, seeking the power of the House. Once I found it, forging the connection was easy — instinctual — and sending my will down that connection was even easier. It couldn’t have been more than a handful of minutes before I was standing in the middle of the endless hallway, doors stretching forever in both directions.

I took a sigh of relief.

“I’m in the hallway,” I heard my distant voice telling Arthur and Poppy. If they responded, it did not make its way to me. The only communication here was a one-way channel. Edward and I had been able to communicate, but he had used his powers to do so.

I was on my own.

I turned my focus back to my connection with the House. *Show me where the heart is*, I sent down the connection. Several excruciatingly long seconds passed, then the doors started moving — flying past me on either side until they were indistinguishable as doors. *The heart, the heart, the heart*, I kept feeding down the connection. After a while, the doors came to such an abrupt stop it made me feel sick and it felt like it jarred my entire body. Once I regained my

balance, I studied the door in front of me. It was identical to the rest of the doors in the House, down to the golden doorknob.

I reached for it, but my hand immediately bounced off a barrier. *Of course*, I thought to myself, *Edward wouldn't hide something down here without protecting it*. I instantly filled with panic, remembering how Edward hadn't been able to reach Poppy because she had been hidden behind my barrier. One he couldn't cross or destroy.

But then, I remembered Edward's own words: *Your connection with the House is a strong one – stronger than even mine*.

The connection in my chest hummed. Though I knew I hadn't been trained in years and my powers were still unwieldy, I knew that much. If it was my will, the House would listen.

I placed my hand on the barrier and concentrated, willing it to shatter and fall away as the one in front of Poppy's door had. I could feel the energy of the barrier pushing back, trying to push me away – trying to break my connection with the House. Instead, I leaned into it, sending every ounce of my will down the connection, demanding the House shatter it. Just when I thought I would exhaust myself and have to be pulled back up to the surface, the barrier cracked beneath my hand. Despite my fatigue, I honed in on that crack, exploiting the barrier's weakness until it spread and spread and spread, fracturing in all directions. With one final push down the connection, the barrier gave way and shattered. I felt light headed and weak, and should probably tell Arthur to bring me back, but I was so close.

I reached for the doorknob, but it turned on its own before I could grab it. The door swung open into an empty room. Empty, except for what stood at the center — an emerald podium with a glass dome on top. Beneath the glass was the tarnished gold heart. I could have collapsed with relief at the sight of it, but I knew I needed to move quickly. I removed the glass

dome and set it aside. Trying not to gag or think about it too much, I grabbed the heart. Examining it more closely, it looked like it was entirely made of gold, and felt solid, too. That at least made it easier to hold and not feel sick.

Before I could call out to Arthur to pull me back up, the door slammed shut behind me. I spun and sprinted toward where the door had been, but it was gone. I turned again and the podium had disappeared. Darkness surrounded me from every direction.

*Shit.*

My heart hammered in my chest, and the sound seemed to echo in the dark void. The key against my chest felt colder than normal – so icy it burned. The House sworn to protect me, tethered to me from birth, had abandoned me.

I was completely, utterly...

Alone.

I sunk to my knees, the weight of everything suddenly too much. I cradled the golden heart in my hands, my silent tears dripping onto its tarnished surface. In the darkness, the heart gave off a faint glow that pulsed with the same rhythm as a beating heart.

Edward's heart.

My *father's* heart.

*I can't do this*, I thought to myself.

Just moments earlier, I had watched as he ripped it from his very chest. *All these human things are capable of is breaking*, he had told my mother. And here, alone in the darkness, I agreed with him. How much of my journey to this House had been fueled by my own heartbreak – my own need to fill those gaping holes within myself – only to be left alone in the dark?

“Jyn,” I heard a voice call.

I looked around, but saw no one. “Who’s there?” I called back.

“You know who I am.”

I squinted into the darkness around me, trying to figure out where the voice was coming from, but I couldn’t see anything or anyone. “Show yourself.”

Then, the sound of bare feet against the shiny, black floor echoed all around me. I kept squinting into the darkness until I saw a figure appear in front of me.

“Who are you?” I asked the silhouette before me. Glancing down at their feet, I saw the light from the heart reflecting off the shackles fastened around their ankles. The only other thing I could make out was the golden glow of their eyes. They reminded me of the golden eyes I’d seen in the alley outside the Black Cat.

“Who are you?” I demanded again.

Ignoring my question, they asked, “Will you open the door?”

Their question startled me, and I didn’t know how to respond.

“Do you plan to open the door?” they asked again, more urgency in their voice this time.

“I-I haven’t decided.” My words stumbled out of me.

“You must decide now.”

I frowned at the shadowy figure in front of me. “I’m not deciding anything until you tell me who you are.”

“I told you,” they said, “You already know who I am.”

The key grew warm against my chest, and my heart sped up. “You’re...you’re the House?”

Those burning, golden eyes blinked. “In a way, yes.”

I shook my head. “What does that mean?”

There was a long stretch of silence, and I almost repeated my question, but the shadow spoke once more. “I am much like your father. Much like you. That is why our connection is strong.”

“Like us...how?”

“I came from the same world as your father. I was imprisoned here when your world was still young.”

“Imprisoned? Why?”

“For the same reasons as your father – for meddling in power I should not have. I was sentenced to remain in this new world until it crumbles to nothing. Only then may I return home.”

I swallowed past the lump that formed in my throat. “Is my father a prisoner, as well?”

“No, he came here willingly.”

“Why?” From what I’d seen, he missed his home desperately. Wanted nothing more than to return to it.

Those golden eyes blinked closed for a moment, the reopened. “He was trying to find me. He was trying to bring me home.”

My mouth fell open, but I immediately closed it. “You knew my father? In your own world?”

The shadow’s head nodded.

I looked down at the heart still cradled in my hands. “You showed me how to find this. Through those memories. Why?”

“I knew you’d know what to do with it.”

I wanted to laugh; I had no idea what I was meant to do with his heart aside from use it as leverage in case he became lethal. I truly had no idea if destroying the heart would kill Edward.

“Am I...meant to kill my father?”

“You will know the answer to that question when the time comes.”

Speaking in riddles must be common in their world, because I was getting nowhere with the golden-eyed shadow. “What’s behind the door he wants me to open? Is it something dangerous?”

“If I tell you, you must decide now if you will open it for him or not.”

I nodded my agreement. “Okay, I’ll decide. Just tell me what’s up there.”

The shadow stepped aside, the chains dragging along the floor, and a door appeared where they had been standing. I watched as they turned the knob and swung the door open. The shadow’s golden eyes turned to me once more.

“Decide,” they told me.

Then, I felt myself being pulled back. The House was sending me back to the surface – out of the darkness. I closed my eyes and braced for the uneasy feeling of snapping back into my physical body. Though it was still jarring and disorienting, I was prepared this time, so I didn’t feel the need to gasp for air or claw at the person nearest to me. My eyes flew open, and Poppy and Arthur were right in front of me, concern etched on their face.

“Hi,” I said, still fighting back the dizziness.

I watched them both take a huge sigh of relief and sit back.

“Well?” Poppy asked.

“Did you find it?” Arthur added.

In my lap, my hands were empty. I hadn't been able to bring the heart back with me. I shook my head, and they both fell silent.

After a moment, Arthur asked, "Now what?"

I thought about the interaction with the shadow while I was trapped in the endless hallway. I'd made my decision; even before the House had sent me hurtling out of the darkness. As soon as I'd seen what lay beyond, I'd known my answer.

"Now..." I looked to my friends. "I open the door."

"No matter what happens," I told them, "neither of you follow me up there. First chance you get, you run." When Poppy wasn't looking, I gave Arthur a knowing look. He'd promised me he would get himself and Poppy to safety. Even if meant leaving me behind.

A few more moments passed, then we heard the footsteps approaching. He smiled when he turned the corner to find us all standing there waiting for him. "A wise choice, daughter. This will be over in a matter of moments."

I forced a smile.

"Shall we?" he asked, motioning toward the spiral staircase.

"After you," I shot back, offering him an insincere smile.

He sighed and moved towards the stairs. "Very well, then. Come along."

I looked back at Arthur and Poppy one last time before ascending the stairs behind Edward. *Keep them safe*, I told the House. I felt the key pulse against my chest. What I willed, would be done.



On the second floor of the library, along the very back wall, there was a door. It looked no different from the other doors in the House. Edward ran his hand along the wood lovingly.

“When I arrived here, all those years ago, this was the door I stepped through,” he told me. My mouth parted in surprise, but I kept silent. “In my nightmares, I still hear the sound of it slamming shut behind me — the finality of it. In a matter of moments, I had lost everything I once knew and cherished. The door had disappeared that day and remained lost for centuries. I searched for it in the endless hallway, but never managed to find it.” He turned to look at me then. “I would come up here, every day, to see if the door had returned. The day you were born was no exception. But when I came up the stairs that day, something miraculous had happened — the door had returned. I didn’t know why or how, but there it was. However, I couldn’t open it. I tried and tried and tried, but nothing worked. Until I remembered the House had given me a *key*.” He put his hands on my shoulders and I scowled up at him.

I brushed his hands away. “And what if I don’t open it?” I challenged, despite my racing heart.

“Then you will remain trapped here until you do.” His voice was matter-of-fact, emotionless.

“Like your brother, you mean?”

His eyes widened and he backed away from me. “What?”

I turned toward the door, placing my palm on the slightly warm wood. Once I knew it would open for me, I slid my hand down to the knob and turned it. The door swung inward, revealing a dark room similar to the one I had been trapped in earlier. But I hadn’t been trapped there at all; Midas had summoned me there – to the heart of the House. Behind me, I heard

Edward gasp as his brother stepped into the doorway. He was still cloaked in shadows, like he had been when we met, but his eyes still glowed with their golden light.

Midas turned to me and nodded.

I faced Edward, who had fallen onto his knees at seeing his brother for the first time in thousands of years. “I went into the endless hallway to find your heart.” Edward’s eyes darted to me; his face was eerily pale. “While I was there, I met Midas. The heart of the House.”

“Brother,” Edward whispered, his voice quivering.

“Brother,” Midas replied, remaining in the doorway.

“I tried to find you. I tried to bring you home. When I was trapped here, I tried to get back home so I could try again. Believe me. Every day, brother, I tried to find a way to reach you. And you...” Tears welled in Edward’s eyes.

“I know, I know. I was always with you, dear brother. But your grief never allowed you to turn your head in the right direction.”

My heart sank. I thought of Arthur, probably anxiously pacing downstairs. How many opportunities had I passed by because of my own grief? I glanced at the golden heart in Midas’s hands. I sent my question down the connection with the House – with *him* – and he handed it to me. I knew Midas’s imprisonment kept him shackled to the room behind him, so I stepped toward Edward and kneeled in front of him.

“Father,” I began, then corrected myself, “Papa.”

“I did love her,” he told me, and I knew he meant my mother. “She was never supposed to find out what I truly was; that was never my intention. But when she did, she was not afraid of me. She embraced me for what I was, and showed me what love felt like.”

“I know,” I told him. I looked over my shoulder at Midas. “I remember.”

Edward's mouth fell open in disbelief. "You do?"

I nodded. When Midas sent me back through the darkness, he made sure to restore all of the memories my father had removed. Things were still a little jumbled up, but there would be time to sort through them later.

Before I could react, his arms were around me, pulling me to himself. "I'm so sorry," he told me, stroking my hair. "I'm so sorry."

I allowed myself to collapse into his embrace – my father's embrace. After a moment, I pulled back and looked him in his amber eyes. I saw a man not so different from myself – someone consumed by their grief; their obsession with chasing ghosts making them calloused and weary. Someone who clung to their grief so desperately that they didn't know who or what to be without it. Though I'd need time to come to forgive him, I now understood him.

I placed the golden heart in his hands. He looked down at it, seeming to remember the pain it held within.

"Brother," Midas said behind me.

We both turned to look upon a world of gold and stardust, just beyond the door. Edward slowly got to his feet, and I did, too. He turned to me, conflict dancing in his eyes. "Jyn..."

"Go," I told him.

He did not move or speak, just stared at me for a long time.

"You should go," I told him again.

I looked over at Midas – at his golden eyes and shackled feet. And he nodded his agreement. "She is right, brother," he told Edward. "I know you came here to bring me home, but I am not permitted to return. I must remain here."

Tears flowed down Edward's cheeks again. "I cannot leave you."

“You must.” He now stood close enough, so Midas placed a hand on his shoulder. “Go. Live your life once more. I will return once my sentence has been served, and I will find you.”

The brothers embraced for a long time, until Edward finally pulled away and turned to me again. He placed the heart in my hands again. When I tried to protest – tried to insist he needed it – he cut me off. “Keep it,” he told me. “There is something I must tell you.”

“What is it?”

He took a deep breath, then looked me in the eyes. “Elysia lives.”

Back downstairs, on the first floor of the library, Arthur and Poppy were sitting anxiously in the leather chairs near the fireplace. I’d left Edward and Midas to their goodbyes. Arthur saw me first and met me at the bottom of the stairs, wrapping me in his arms and breathing a sigh of relief into my hair.

“You’re okay?” he asked.

I nodded and held him close to me as I assured him, “I’m okay.”

Poppy was standing by the fireplace. I nodded to her to let her know all was well. She sat back down in the chair facing away from us, giving us privacy. I pulled away from Arthur and looked into his eyes. There was something I needed to tell him. “Arthur...”

But he cut me off by pressing his lips to mine. His fingers tangled in my hair, and I pulled him close against me. The final stitch sewing up the chasm inside me pulled closed. When we finally pulled away from each other, I rested my forehead against his chest, absolutely breathless.

“I know,” he whispered.

Poppy approached us, then. “What happened to him?”

I sighed, taking a seat on the steps. I scooted over so she could sit beside me. I did not have the energy in me right now to launch into the full story, so I simply told her, “He was finally able to go home.”

I think Poppy sensed there was more to the story, but she did not push me or badger me with questions. She only leaned against me and rested her head on my shoulder.

“So we’re done here?” Arthur asked. “Time to go home?”

When I didn’t answer immediately, Poppy lifted her head. “What’s wrong?”

“I...can’t go back. Not yet, anyway.”

“What? Why?” Arthur demanded.

I took a deep breath. “Before Edward...left, he told me something about my mother. Something I have to find out for myself.”

Poppy’s forehead was creased with concern. “What did he tell you?”

Only because I trusted them more than anyone in this world, I told them, “My mother is alive.”

It had not been easy to convince Arthur and Poppy to return to the city, but I did managed to convince Poppy she needed to be on time for her internship that would start soon. Arthur only agreed to go, because of the promise he’d made to me. Neither one of them had felt entirely thrilled about driving back down the hill while I waved to them from the porch steps, but it brought me peace knowing they were with each other and they were safe. I would join them back in the city soon, but there were a few things to take care of here first.

Once I began looking, it took me nearly three days before I found the door I now stood before, even with Midas's help. Though he was still imprisoned within the heart of the House, our connection allowed us to communicate – a connection, I learned, he had gifted to Edward through my birth so that they might find one another again someday.

The key Edward had made for me when I was an infant remained around my neck at all times. Though I didn't need it to contact Midas or use my powers, I found it enhanced both. And, much like the golden heart that remained on its new pedestal in the library, I liked having a reminder of who I was with me at all times. My memories were still jumbled, and the key felt like an anchor I could hold on to.

*You hesitate*, I heard Midas's familiar voice say in my mind.

He was right. I had been searching nearly nonstop for the door in front of me, and now that I was here, I felt uneasy. *I'm afraid*, I admitted to him down the connection.

*What is it you fear?*

I considered his question, then replied, *What if she has been happier without me? What if I only serve to remind her of the heartache she experienced here?*

Midas was silent for a long time. *I used to wonder the same thing about my brother.*

My heart squeezed at the love in his voice, at the tenderness he felt for his younger brother – my father.

*I think*, he continued, *you must consider what it is you value more – finding the closure you've been searching for all these years, or guarding your heart against potential heartache.*

I considered asking him what he would decide, but he'd already made his choice. Even when Edward's grief overtook him, Midas had continued to find a way to bridge that connection with his brother. Even though he knew it would end in the heartache of sending him home again.

I looked at the door before me – the dark wood, the golden doorknob. I took a few deep breaths, then told Midas, *I'm ready.*

*I'll leave the door open for you until you return.*

When I stepped through the door, I found myself on a cobblestone street lined with shops on either side. People were bustling past and parted around me. A few threw snide glances or remarks at me for standing in the middle of the sidewalk. But I barely heard them – my attention was focused on the café across the street. The building was simple and painted white with blue awnings over the few tables and chairs outside. Inside, the shop was lined with people waiting for their coffees or pastries. A chalkboard sign had been set up on the sidewalk to catch the attention of shoppers, beckoning them to come in for a sweet treat. A woman in a navy-blue coat and a white beret sat at one of the tables outside, sipping her coffee. It was still warm, steam rolling off of it into the crisp air. On the table in front of her was an empty plate that, I imagine, once held a blueberry scone – like the one drawn on the chalkboard a few feet away. Even from across the street, I could see the cover of the book she was reading.

*Robert Frost's Poems.*

Nearly identical to the one Arthur gave me a little over a week ago. It felt like a lifetime ago I'd found the note tucked between the pages of that book. It was written by the woman I was watching now. Despite the frigid air, my hands were clammy. My heart thudded in my chest, where the key was a comforting, warm presence against my skin.

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood...*

*And be one traveler, long I stood...*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh...*

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-*

*I took the one less traveled by...*

I took that first step, which led to another and another, until I was standing next to her table. She peered up at me, smiling politely until her face slowly filled with recognition. She closed her book and set it on the table.

I couldn't help myself, and a laugh escaped me, despite the tears forming in my eyes. "Hi Mama."

*And that has made all the difference.*



## VITA

Joely Bowman is a Louisiana native, but she finds her home in fantasy worlds crafted either by herself or others. She graduated from Louisiana Tech University in 2018 with a Bachelor's Degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and a minor in Theatre. She went on to attend the University of Texas at El Paso and graduated in 2022 with a Master's degree in Creative Writing. Her poetry has been featured in Volume 20 of *The Windward Review* at Texas A&M – Corpus Christi. This is her first full-length, fictional work.

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