

VERONICA ROSSI

UNDER THE
NEVER
SKY

HARPER

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Under the Never Sky

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First Edition

ARIA

They called the world beyond the walls of the Pod “the Death Shop.” A million ways to die out there. Aria never thought she’d get so close.

She bit her lip as she stared at the heavy steel door in front of her. A display screen read AGRICULTURE 6—NO ENTRY in flashing red letters.

Ag 6 was just a service dome, Aria told herself. Dozens of domes supplied Reverie with food, water, oxygen—all the things an enclosed city needed. Ag 6 had been damaged in a recent storm, but supposedly the damage was minor. Supposedly.

“Maybe we should turn back,” Paisley said. She stood beside Aria in the airlock chamber, nervously twisting a strand of her long red hair.

The three boys crouched at the control board by the door, jamming the signal so they could exit without triggering an

alarm. Aria tried to ignore their steady bickering.

“Come on, Paisley. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Aria meant it as a joke, but her voice sounded too high so she tacked on a laugh. That came out sounding mildly hysterical.

“What could happen in a damaged dome?” Paisley counted on her slender fingers. “Our skin could rot off. We could get locked out. An Aether storm could turn us into human bacon. Then the cannibals could eat us for breakfast.”

“It’s just another part of Reverie,” Aria said.

“An off-limits part.”

“Pais, you don’t have to go.”

“Neither do you,” Paisley said, but she was wrong.

For the past five days, Aria had worried constantly about her mother. Why hadn’t she been in touch? Lumina had never missed one of their daily visits, no matter how engrossed she was in her medical research. If Aria wanted answers, she needed to get into that dome.

“For the hundredth—wait, thousandth—time, Ag 6 is safe,” Soren said without turning from the control board. “You think I want to die tonight?”

He had a point. Soren loved himself too much to risk his own life. Aria’s gaze rested on his muscled back. Soren was the son of Reverie’s Director of Security. He had the kind of flesh that only came with privilege. He even had a tan, a ridiculous upgrade considering none of them had ever seen the sun. He was also a genius at cracking codes.

Bane and Echo watched at his side. The brothers followed

Soren everywhere. He usually had hundreds of followers, but that was in the Realms. Tonight just five of them shared the cramped airlock chamber. Just five of them breaking the law.

Soren straightened, flashing a cocky smile. “I’m going to have to talk to my father about his security protocols.”

“You did it?” Aria asked.

Soren shrugged. “Was there ever a doubt? Now for the best part. Time to turn off.”

“Wait,” Paisley said. “I thought you were just going to jam our Smarteyes.”

“I’ve been jamming them but that won’t give us enough time. We need to turn off.”

Aria brushed a finger over her Smarteye. She had always worn the clear device over her left eye and it was always on. The Eye took them to the Realms, the virtual spaces where they spent most of their time.

“Caleb will kill us if we’re not back soon,” said Paisley.

Aria rolled her eyes. “Your brother and his theme nights.” She usually cruised the Realms with Paisley and her older brother, Caleb, from their favorite spot in the 2nd Gen Lounge. For the past month, Caleb had planned their nights around themes. Tonight’s theme, “Feeding Friend-zies,” began in a Roman Realm where they’d feasted on roasted boar and lobster ragout. Then they’d cruised to a Minotaur feeding in a Mythology Realm. “I’m just glad we left before the piranhas.”

Thanks to her Smarteye, Aria had kept daily visits with her

mother, who had followed her research to Bliss, another Pod hundreds of miles away. The distance had never mattered until five days ago, when the link with Bliss broke.

“How long are we planning to stay out there?” Aria asked. She only needed a few minutes alone with Soren. Just long enough to ask him about Bliss.

A grin broke over Bane’s face. “Long enough to party in the real!”

Echo pushed his hair out of his eyes. “Long enough to party in the flesh!”

Echo’s actual name was Theo but few people remembered it. His nickname suited him too well.

“We can shut off for one hour.” Soren winked at her. “But don’t worry, I’ll turn you on later.”

Aria made herself laugh, smoky and flirtatious. “You better.”

Paisley shot her a suspicious look. She didn’t know Aria’s plan. Something had happened to Bliss, and Aria knew Soren could get the information from his father.

Soren shifted his thick shoulders like a boxer stepping into a ring. “Here we go, Glitches. Hold on to your pants. We’re shutting off in three, two—”

Aria startled at a shrill ringing that came from deep within her ears. A red wall crashed over her field of vision. Hot needles of pain stabbed into her left eye and then spread over her scalp. They gathered at the base of her skull and then shot down her spine, exploding through her limbs. She heard one of the boys swear stiffly with relief. The red wall

vanished as quickly as it had come.

She blinked a few times, disoriented. The icons for her favorite Realms had disappeared. The messages in the queue and the news crawl in the lower part of her Smartscreen were gone as well, leaving only the airlock door, which appeared dull, filtered through a soft film. She looked down at her gray boots. Middle Gray. A shade that covered nearly every surface in Reverie. How could *gray* seem less vibrant?

A sense of loneliness crept over her despite being in the crowded little chamber. She couldn't believe people lived this way once, with nothing but the real. Savages on the outside *still* lived this way.

"It worked," Soren said. "We're off! We're strictly meat!"

Bane hopped up and down. "We're like the Savages!"

"We're Savages!" Echo yelled. "We're Outsiders!"

Paisley kept blinking over and over. Aria wanted to reassure her, but she couldn't concentrate with Bane and Echo blasting around in the small space.

Soren spun a manual release bar on the door. The chamber depressurized with a quick hiss and a rush of cool air. Aria looked down, stunned to see Paisley's hand clasped to hers. She had only a second to absorb the fact that she hadn't touched anyone in months, since her mother left, before Soren slid the door open.

"Freedom at last," he said, and then stepped into the darkness.

In the shaft of light that spilled out of the airlock chamber, she saw the same smooth floors that ran everywhere in

Reverie, but these were coated with a layer of dust. Soren's footprints stamped a trail into the gloom.

What if the dome wasn't secure? What if Ag 6 crawled with outside dangers? A million deaths in the Death Shop. A million diseases might be swimming in the air rushing past her cheeks. Inhaling suddenly felt like suicide.

Aria heard beeps from a keypad coming from Soren's direction. Tracks of lights flickered on with a series of loud clicks. A cavernous space appeared. Farming rows stretched back as even as stripes. High above, pipes and beams crisscrossed the ceiling. She saw no gaping hole or other signs of wreckage. With its dirty floors and solemn quiet, the dome simply looked neglected.

Soren jumped in front of the doorway, bracing the frame.

"Blame me if this turns out to be the greatest night of your life."

The food grew from waist-high plastic mounds. Row after row of decaying fruits and vegetables spread out around her in endless lines. Like everything in the Pod, they were genetically designed for efficiency. They had no leaves, and needed no soil and little water to grow.

Aria plucked a withered peach, cringing at how easily she'd bruised the soft flesh. In the Realms food still grew, or pretended to grow virtually, on farms with red barns and fields under sunny skies. She remembered the latest Smarteye slogan, *Better than Real*. It was true in this case. The real food in Ag 6 looked like old people before aging-reversal treatments.

The boys spent the first ten minutes chasing each other down the aisles and leaping over the farming rows. That turned into a game Soren dubbed “Rotball,” which consisted of pegging one another with produce. Aria played for a while, but Soren kept aiming for her and he threw too hard.

She took cover with Paisley, ducking behind a row as Soren changed the game again. He lined Bane and Echo against the wall execution-style and then fired grapefruits at the brothers, who just stood there laughing.

“No more citrus!” Bane yelled. “We’ll talk!”

Echo put his hands up like Bane. “We give, Fruit Reaper! We’ll talk!”

People always did what Soren wanted. He had priority in all the best Realms. He even had a Realm named after him, SOREN 18. Soren’s father created it for his eighteenth birthday a month ago. Tilted Green Bottles played a special concert. During the last song, the stadium flooded with seawater. Everyone had transformed into mermaids and mermen. Even in the Realms, where anything was possible, that party had been spectacular. It had set off the underwater concert craze. Soren had made caudal fins sexy.

Aria rarely meshed with him after school hours. Soren ruled the sports and combat Realms. Places where people could compete and be ranked. She normally kept to art and music Realms with Paisley and Caleb.

“Look at this messy *thing*,” Paisley said, rubbing at an orange smear on her pants. “It won’t go away.”

“It’s called a stain,” Aria said.

“What’s the point of stains?”

“There isn’t any. That’s why we don’t have them in the Realms.” Aria studied her best friend. Paisley wore a pinched expression, her brow overlapping the edge of her Smarteye. “Are you all right?”

Paisley waved her fingers in front of her Eye. “I hate this. Everything’s *missing*, you know? Where is everyone? And why do I sound so pseudo?”

“We all do. Like we swallowed megaphones.”

Paisley lifted an eyebrow. “A what?”

“A cone people used to make their voices louder. Before microphones.”

“Sounds mega-regress,” Paisley said. She scooted around, squaring her shoulders to Aria. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on? Why are we with *Soren*?”

Now that they were shut off, Aria realized she could tell Paisley her reason for flirting with him. “I need to find out about Lumina. I know Soren can get information from his father. He might already know something.”

Paisley’s expression softened. “The link is probably just down. You’ll hear from her soon.”

“The link has only dropped for a few hours before. Never for this long.”

Paisley sighed, leaning back against the plastic mound. “I couldn’t believe it when you sang to him the other night. And you should’ve seen Caleb. He thought you’d broken into your mother’s medicines.”

Aria smiled. She usually kept her voice private, something strictly between herself and her mother. But a few nights ago,

she made herself sing a sultry ballad to Soren in a Cabaret Realm. In minutes that Realm had reached full capacity, with hundreds of people waiting to hear her sing again. Aria had left. And just as she'd hoped, Soren had been chasing her since. When he'd proposed the idea for tonight, she'd jumped at the opportunity.

"I had to get him interested." She flicked a seed off her knee. "I'll talk to him as soon as he calls off the fruit war. Then we'll get out of here."

"Let's get him to stop now. We'll tell him we're bored . . . which we are."

"No, Pais," Aria said. Soren wasn't one to push into anything. "I'll handle it."

Soren leaped on top of the farming row in front of them, making them both jump. He held an avocado, his arm cocked back. His grays were covered in blotches of juice and pulp. "What's wrong? Why are you both just sitting here?"

"We're bored with Rotball," Paisley said.

Aria winced, waiting for Soren's reaction. He crossed his arms, his jaw working side to side as he stared down at them.

"Maybe you should leave then. Wait. I almost forgot. You can't leave. Guess you'll have to stay *bored*, Paisley."

Aria glanced at the airlock door. When had he closed it? She realized he had all the codes for the door and for resetting their Smarteyes. "You can't trap us in here, Soren."

"Actions precede reactions."

"What's he talking about?" Paisley asked.

"Soren! Get over here," Bane called. "You need to see this!"

“Ladies. I’m needed elsewhere.”

He tossed the avocado into the air before he jogged away. Aria caught it without thinking. It popped open in her hand, becoming a slick green mess.

“He means we’re too late, Pais. He already locked us out.”

Aria checked the airlock door anyway. The panel didn’t respond. She stared at the red emergency switch. It was wired directly to the mainframe. If she hit it, Reverie Guardians would come to help them. But then they’d also be punished for breaking out and probably have their privileges in the Realms docked. And she’d lose any chance to speak with Soren about her mother.

“We’ll stay a little longer. They’ll have to go back soon.”

Paisley pulled her hair over one shoulder. “All right. But can I hold your hand again? It feels more like being in the Realms.”

Aria stared at her best friend’s extended hand. Paisley’s fingers were twitching slightly. She took her hand, but fought the urge to pull away as they walked to the far end of the dome together. There, the three boys stepped through a door Aria hadn’t noticed before. Another set of lights clicked on. For a moment, she wondered if her Smarteye had reactivated and she was actually seeing a Realm. A forest loomed in front of them, beautiful and green. Then she looked up, seeing the familiar white ceiling above the treetops, run through by a maze of lights and pipes. It was

a huge terrarium, she realized.

“I found it,” Bane said. “How champ am I?”

Echo jerked his head to the side, his shaggy hair shifting out of his eyes. “Champ, man. It’s unreal. I mean, it’s real. Zap, you know what I mean.”

They both looked at Soren. “Perfect,” he said, his gaze intent. He pulled off his shirt, tossed it aside, and ran into the woods. In the next moment, Bane and Echo followed.

“We’re not going in, are we?” Paisley asked.

“Not like that.”

“Aria, be serious.”

“Pais, look at this place.” She stepped forward. Rotten fruit was one thing. A forest was a true temptation. “We’ve got to see it.”

It was cooler and darker under the trees. Aria ran her free hand over the trunks, feeling the rough textures. Pseudo-bark didn’t grip like it might bite into her skin. She crushed a dry leaf in her palm, creating sharp crumbs. She stared at the patterns of leaves and branches above, imagining that if the boys quieted down, she might be able to hear the trees breathe.

Aria kept track of Soren as they headed deeper into the woods, looking for an opportunity to speak to him, while trying to ignore the moist warmth of Paisley’s hand. She and Paisley had held hands before in the Realms, where touching happened. But it felt softer there, unlike the constricting grip she felt now.

The boys were chasing one another through the woods.

They'd found sticks, which they carried as spears, and they'd rubbed dirt on their faces and chests. They were pretending to be Savages, like the ones that lived on the outside.

"Soren!" Aria called as he darted past. He paused, spear in hand, and hissed at her. She jerked back. Soren laughed at her and ran off.

Paisley pulled her to a stop. "They're scaring me."

"I know. They're always massive scary."

"Not the boys. The trees. It feels like they're going to fall on us."

Aria looked up. As different as these woods felt, she hadn't thought of that. "All right. We'll go wait by the airlock," she said, and began to backtrack. A few minutes later, she realized they'd come to a clearing they had already passed. They were lost in the woods. She almost laughed at how unbelievable it was. She let go of Paisley's hand and rubbed her palm against her pants.

"We're going in circles. Let's wait here until the boys come by. Don't worry, Pais. It's still Reverie. See?" She pointed up through the leaves at the ceiling and then wished she hadn't. The lights above dimmed, flickered for a moment, and then came back.

"Tell me that didn't just happen," Paisley said.

"We're leaving. This was a stupid idea." Was this the part of Ag 6 that had taken the damage?

"Bane! Get over here!" Soren yelled. Aria spun, catching a glimpse of his tanned torso jogging through the trees. This was her chance. She could talk to him now if she hurried.

If she left Paisley there alone.

Paisley gave her a shaky smile. “Aria, go. Talk to him. But hurry back.”

“I promise.”

Soren was hoisting a stack of branches into his arms when she found him.

“We’re going to make fire,” he said.

Aria froze. “You’re kidding. You’re not really . . . right?”

“We’re Outsiders. Outsiders have fires.”

“But we’re still *inside*. You can’t, Soren. This isn’t a Realm.”

“Exactly. This is our chance to see the real thing.”

“Soren, it’s forbidden.” Fire in the Realms was a rippling orange and yellow light that gave off a gentle warmth. But she knew from years of Pod safety drills that real fire must be different. “You could contaminate our air. You could burn down Reverie—”

She broke off as Soren stepped closer. Water beaded on his forehead. It cut clear trails through the mud on his face and chest. He was sweating. She’d never seen sweat before.

He leaned in. “I can do anything I want in here. *Anything*.”

“I know you can. We all can. Right?”

Soren paused. “Right.”

This was it. Her opportunity. She chose her words carefully. “You know things, don’t you? Like the codes that got us here. . . . Things we’re not supposed to know?”

“Of course I do.”

Aria smiled and slipped around the branches in his arms.

She rolled up onto her toes, inviting him to whisper. “Well, tell me a secret. Tell me something we’re not supposed to know.”

“Like what?”

The lights flickered again. Aria’s heart gave a lurch. “Tell me what’s going on with Bliss,” she said, making her best attempt at sounding casual.

Soren stepped back. He shook his head slowly, his eyes narrowing. “You want to know about your mother, don’t you? Is that why you came here? You’ve been *playing* me?”

Aria couldn’t lie anymore. “Just tell me why the link is still down. I need to know if she’s all right.”

Soren’s gaze dropped to her mouth. “I might let you persuade me later,” he said. Then he pushed his shoulders back, shifting the branches higher. “Right now I’m discovering fire.”

Aria hurried back to the clearing for Paisley. She found Bane and Echo there as well. The brothers were building up a pile of branches and leaves at the center. Paisley rushed over as soon as she saw Aria.

“They’ve been doing this since you left. They’re trying to make fire.”

“I know. Let’s go.” Six thousand people lived in Reverie. She couldn’t let Soren risk everything.

Aria heard the clatter of sticks falling just before something struck her shoulder. She cried out as Soren spun her to face him.

“No one’s leaving. I thought I made that clear.”

She stared at the hand on her shoulder, her legs softening beneath her. “Let go of me, Soren. We’re not getting involved.”

“Too late.” His fingers dug into her. She gasped at the shock wave of pain that ran down her arm. Bane dropped the large branch he’d been dragging and looked over. Echo stopped midstride, his eyes wide, wild. The lights shone off their skin. They were sweating too.

“If you leave,” Soren said, “I’ll tell my father this was your idea. With our Smarteyes shut off, it’s your word against mine. Who do you think he’ll believe?”

“You’re insane.”

Soren let her go. “Shut up and sit down.” He grinned. “And enjoy the show.”

Aria sat with Paisley at the edge of the tree line and fought the urge to rub her throbbing shoulder. In the Realms, falling off a horse hurt. Twisting an ankle did too. But pain was just an effect, sprinkled in to boost the thrill. They couldn’t actually get hurt in the Realms. This felt different. Like there was no limit to the pain. Like it could go on forever.

Bane and Echo made one trip after another into the woods, bringing back armfuls of branches and leaves. Soren directed them to place more here, more there, as sweat dripped off his nose. Aria eyed the lights. At least they were holding steady.

She couldn’t believe she’d let herself—and Paisley—get into this situation. She’d known going into Ag 6 meant risk, but she hadn’t expected this. She had never wanted to be part of Soren’s clique, though he’d always interested her. Aria liked looking for the fissures in his image. The way he watched

people when they laughed, like he didn't understand laughter. The way he curled his upper lip after he said something he thought particularly clever. The way he glanced at her occasionally, like he knew she wasn't convinced.

Now she realized what had intrigued her. Through those fissures, she'd seen glimpses of someone else. And out here, without Reverie Guardians watching, he was free to be himself.

"I'm going to get us out of here," she whispered.

Tears pooled in Paisley's bare eye. "Shhh. He'll hear you."

Aria noticed the brittle crackle of the leaves beneath her and wondered when the trees had last been watered. She watched the pile grow one foot high, then two. Finally, with the pile at nearly three feet, Soren declared it ready.

He reached into his boot and brought out a battery pack and some wire, handing them to Bane.

Aria couldn't believe what she was seeing. "You *planned* this? You came here to make fire?"

Soren smiled at her, his lip curling. "I've got other things in mind too."

Aria sucked in a breath. He had to be kidding. He was just trying to scare her because she'd led him on, but she'd had no choice.

The boys huddled together as Soren muttered, "Try it like this," and "Other end, stupid," and "Just let me do it," until they jumped back, away from the flame that flickered up from the leaves.

"Oh, zap!" they yelled in perfect unison. "Fire!"

ARIA

Magic.

That was the word that came to Aria's mind. An old word, from a time when illusions still mystified people. Before the Realms made magic common.

She moved closer, drawn by the gold and amber tones in the flame. By the way it changed shape constantly. The smoke was richer than anything she had ever smelled. It tightened the skin along her arms. Then she saw how the burning leaves curled and blackened and disappeared.

This was wrong.

Aria looked up. Soren had frozen in place, his eyes wide. He looked bewitched, just as Paisley and the brothers did. Like they were seeing the fire without really seeing it.

"That's enough," she said. "We should turn it off . . . or get water or something." No one moved. "Soren, it's starting to spread."

“Let’s give it more.”

“*More?* Trees are made of wood. It’ll spread to the trees!”

Echo and Bane ran off before she’d finished speaking.

Paisley grabbed her sleeve, pulling her away from the burning stack. “Aria, stop or he’ll hurt you again.”

“This whole place is going to burn if we don’t do something.”

She glanced back. Soren stood too close to the fire. The flames had nearly reached his height. The fire made sounds now, pops and crackles over a dull roar. “Get sticks!” he yelled at the brothers. “The sticks make it stronger.”

Aria didn’t know what to do. When she thought of stopping them the ache in her shoulder flared, warning her of what might happen again. Echo and Bane ran up with armfuls of branches. They threw them onto the fire, sending sparks into the trees. A surge of hot air blew past her cheeks.

“We’re going to run, Paisley,” she whispered. “Ready . . . go.”

For the third time that night, Aria grasped Paisley’s hand. She couldn’t let Paisley fall behind. She wove through the trees, her legs churning, as she tried to keep them on a straight course. She didn’t know when the boys started chasing them, but she heard Soren behind her.

“Find them!” he yelled. “Spread out!”

Then Aria heard a loud wailing sound that brought her to a halt. Soren was howling like a wolf. Paisley’s hand clamped over her mouth, stifling a sob. Bane and Echo joined in, filling the woods with wild, keening cries. What was

happening to them? Aria broke into a run again, tugging Paisley so hard that she stumbled.

“Come on, Paisley! We’re close!” They had to be near the door leading back to the farming dome. When they reached it, she’d trip the emergency alarm. Then they’d hide until Guardians came.

The lights overhead flickered again. This time they didn’t come back. Darkness slammed into Aria like something solid. She went rigid. Paisley rammed into her back and cried out. They tumbled blindly to the ground, their limbs crashing together. Aria scrambled upright, blinking hard as she tried to orient herself. Eyes opened or closed, what she saw didn’t change.

Paisley’s fingers fluttered over her face. “Aria! Is it you?”

“Yes, it’s me,” she whispered. “Quiet or they’ll hear us!”

“Bring the fire!” Soren yelled. “Get some fire so we can see!”

“What are they going to do to us?” Paisley asked.

“I don’t know. But I won’t let them get close enough to find out.”

Paisley tensed at her side. “Do you see that?”

She did. A torch wove toward them from the distance. Aria recognized the solid tromp of Soren’s stride. He was farther than she expected, but she realized it didn’t matter. She and Paisley couldn’t move without crawling and feeling along in front of them. Even if they knew which way to go, moving a few feet would hardly help.

A second flame appeared.

Aria groped for a rock or a stick. Leaves disintegrated in her hands. She smothered a cough against her sleeve. Every breath tightened her lungs more. She'd been worried about Soren and the fire. Now she realized the smoke might pose the worst danger.

The torches bobbed across the darkness, drawing closer. She wished her mother had never left. She wished she'd never sung to Soren. But wishing wasn't going to get her anywhere. There had to be something she could do. She turned her focus inward. Maybe she could reset her Smarteye and call for help. She reached for commands as she always had. Even in her mind, she felt as though she were fumbling in the dark. How did you restart something that had never been turned off?

It didn't help her concentration to see the torches closing in, or the fire burning brighter and louder, or to feel Paisley quivering against her side. But she had no other hope. Finally she felt a tap in the depths of her brain. A word appeared on her Smartscreen, blue letters floating against the smoldering woods.

RESTART?

Yes! she commanded.

Aria tensed as hot nails dragged across her skull and down her spine. She gasped in relief as a grid of icons appeared. She was back on, but everything looked strange. All the buttons on her interface were generic and in the wrong places. And what was that? She saw a message icon on her screen labeled "Songbird," her mother's nickname for her. Lumina had sent

a message! But the file was stored locally and wouldn't help her now. She needed to reach someone.

Aria tried contacting Lumina directly. CONNECTION FAILURE flashed on her screen, followed by an error number. She tried Caleb and the next ten friends who came to mind. Nothing went through. She wasn't linked to the Realms. She made a final attempt. Maybe her Eye was still recording.

REVIEW, she commanded.

Paisley's face appeared in the playback square on the upper left of her Smartscreen. Paisley was hardly visible, just the contours of her frightened face and the glint of the fire catching on her Smarteye. Behind her a glowing cloud of smoke seeped closer. "They're coming!" Paisley said in a frantic whisper, and the recording ended.

Aria commanded her Eye to record again. Whatever happened, whatever Soren and the brothers did, she'd have proof.

The lights flashed back on. Squinting at the brightness, Aria saw Soren scanning the area, Bane and Echo at his side like a pack of wolves. Their eyes flared as they spotted her and Paisley. She jumped to her feet, pulling Paisley up once more. Aria ran, holding tight to Paisley, tripping over roots and pushing through branches that snagged her hair. The boys' shouts were loud, rumbling in Aria's ears. Their feet pounded right behind her.

Paisley's hand tore from Aria's grip. Aria spun as she fell to the ground. Paisley's hair splayed over the leaves. She reached for Aria, crying out. Soren lay half on top of her, his arms

wrapped around her legs.

Before Aria could think, she slammed her foot into Soren's head. He grunted and fell back. Paisley twisted away but Soren lunged for her again.

"Let her go!" Aria stepped toward him, but he was ready for her this time. His hand shot out, clamping onto Aria's ankle.

"Run, Paisley!" Aria yelled.

She struggled to get free but Soren wouldn't let go. He rose to his feet and grabbed on to her forearm. Leaves and dirt stuck to his face and chest. Behind him, smoke tumbled through the trees in gray waves, moving slow and fast at the same time. Aria looked down. Soren's hand was twice the size of hers, rounded with muscle like the rest of him.

"Can't you feel it, Aria?"

"Feel *what*?"

"This." He squeezed her arm so tight she cried out. "Everything." His eyes darted around, not settling anywhere.

"Don't, Soren. Please."

Bane ran up, holding a torch and panting for breath.

"Help, Bane!" she cried. He didn't even look at her.

"Go get Paisley," Soren said, and Bane was gone. "Just you and me now," he said, stroking a hand through her hair.

"Don't *touch me*. I'm recording this. If you hurt me, everyone will see it!"

She hit the ground before she realized what had happened. His weight crushed her, driving the air out of her lungs. He glared down at her as she gasped, struggling to draw a breath. Then his focus moved to her left eye. Aria knew what he was going to do but her arms were trapped, squeezed between his

thighs. She closed her eyes and screamed as his fingers dug into her skin, prying up the edges of her Smarteye. Aria's head snapped forward and then slammed back to the ground.

Pain. Like her brain had been torn out. Above her, Soren's face looked red and bleary. Warmth spread down her cheek and pooled in her ear. The pain lessened and became pulses, beating in time with her heart.

"You're crazy," someone with her voice slurred.

Soren's fingers clamped around her neck. "This is *real*. Tell me you feel it."

Aria still couldn't pull in enough air. Spears of pain shot into her eyes. She was fading, powering off like her Smarteye. Then Soren looked up—away from her—and his grip loosened. He cursed and then his smothering weight lifted.

Aria pushed herself to her knees, gritting her teeth at the piercing shriek that erupted in her ears. She couldn't see. She swiped at her eyes to clear the murkiness, her legs quaking as she rose to her feet. Framed against the roaring blaze, she saw a stranger step into the clearing. He was shirtless, but there was no mistaking him for Bane or Echo.

He was a real Savage.

The Outsider's torso was almost as dark as his leather pants, his hair a blond Medusa's snarl. Tattoos coiled around his arms. He had the reflective eyes of an animal. They were bare eyes, both.

The long knife at his side flashed with firelight as he came forward.

PEREGRINE

The Dweller girl looked at Perry, blood running down her pale face. She took a few steps, backing away from him, but Perry knew she wouldn't stay on her feet for long. Not with pupils dilated like that. One more step and her legs gave out, bringing her down.

The male stood behind her limp body. He looked Perry over with his odd eyes, one normal and one covered with the clear patch all the Dwellers wore. The others had called him Soren.

“Outsider?” he said. “How did you get in?”

It was Perry's language but harsher. Edged where it should have been smooth. Perry brought in a slow breath. The Dweller's temper hung thick in the clearing despite the smoke. Bloodlust gave a scorching red scent, common to man and beast alike.

“You came when we did.” Soren laughed. “You came

after I disarmed the system.”

Perry spun his knife for a fresh grip. Didn't the Dweller see the fire closing in? “Leave or you'll burn, Dweller.”

Soren startled at hearing Perry speak. Then he grinned, showing square teeth, white as snow. “You're real. I don't believe this.” He stepped forward with no fear. Like he held a knife instead of Perry. “If I could leave, Savage, I'd have done it a long time ago.”

Perry stood a head taller, but Soren easily outweighed him. His bones were buried deep beneath muscle. Perry seldom saw people that big. They didn't have enough food to grow that thick. Not like in here.

“You approach your death, Mole,” Perry said.

“Mole? That's inaccurate, Savage. Most of the Pod is aboveground. And we don't die young. We don't get hurt, either. We can't even break anything.” Soren looked down at the girl. When he looked back at Perry, he stopped walking. It happened too fast, his momentum rocking him up on his toes. He'd changed his mind about something.

Soren's eyes flicked past him. Perry drew in a breath. Woodsmoke. Burning plastic. The fire was heating up. He inhaled again, caught what he'd expected. Another Dweller's scent, coming at him from behind. He'd seen three males. Soren and two others. Were they both sneaking up on him, or just one? Perry drew another breath but couldn't tell. The smoke was too dense.

Soren's gaze dropped to Perry's hand. “You're good with a knife, aren't you?”

“Good enough.”

“Have you ever killed a person? I bet you have.”

He was buying time, letting whoever was behind Perry draw nearer.

“Never killed a Mole,” Perry said. “Not yet.”

Soren smiled. Then he surged forward and Perry knew the others would be coming too. He spun and saw only one Dweller, farther away than he'd expected, running with a metal bar in his hand. Perry hurled his knife. The blade sailed true and sank deep in the Dweller's stomach.

Soren thundered up behind him. Perry braced as he turned. The blow came from the side, slamming into Perry's cheek. The ground reared up and back. Perry wrapped his arms around Soren as he blurred past. He pushed but couldn't bring Soren down. The Mole was made of stone.

Perry took a shot to his kidney and growled, waiting for the pain. It didn't hurt as much as it should have. Soren hit him again. Perry heard himself laugh. The Dweller didn't know how to use his own strength.

He pushed away, throwing his first punch. His fist smashed into the clear eye patch. Soren seized up, the veins in his neck standing out like vines. Perry didn't wait. He put his full weight behind the next blow. The bone in the Dweller's jaw snapped with a crack. Soren fell hard. Then he tucked in slow, like a dying spider.

Blood ran through his teeth. His jaw hung too far to the side, but he never took his eyes off Perry.

Perry swore, stepping away. This wasn't what he had

wanted when he'd broken in. "I warned you, Mole."

The lights had gone out again. Smoke moved through the trees in rolls, glowing with firelight. He went to the other male to retrieve his knife. The Dweller began to cry when he saw Perry. Blood gurgled from his wound. Perry couldn't look him in the eyes as he slid his blade free.

He came back to the girl. Her hair fanned around her head, dark and shiny as a raven's feathers. Perry spotted her eyepiece resting on the leaves by her shoulder. He prodded it with a finger. The skin felt cool. Velvety as a mushroom. Denser than he'd expected for looking so much like a jellyfish. He slipped it into his satchel. Then he hoisted the girl over his shoulder as he carried larger game, wrapping his arm around her legs to keep her steady.

Neither of his Senses were any help to him now. The smoke had grown thick enough to cloak all other smells and block his vision, making him disoriented. There were no rises and falls in the earth to guide him either. Only walls of flame or smoke wherever he looked.

He moved when the fire inhaled. He stopped when it exhaled in bursts of heat that scorched his legs and arms. Tears streamed from his eyes, making it harder to see. He pushed on, feeling skitty and drunk from the smoke. Finally he found a channel of clean air and ran, the Dweller girl's head lolling against his back.

Perry reached the dome wall, followed it. At some point there had to be a way out. It took longer than he hoped. He stumbled up to the same door he'd come through earlier,

stepping into a steel room. By then every breath felt like embers kindling in his lungs.

He set the girl down, closed the door. Then for a good while, he could only cough and pace until the pain behind his nose let up. He swiped at his eyes, leaving a streak of blood and soot on his forearm. His bow and quiver rested against the wall where he'd left them. The curve of his bow looked stark against the room's perfect lines.

Perry knelt, wobbling as he did, and looked the Dweller over. Her eye had stopped bleeding. She was finely made. Thin, dark eyebrows. Pink lips. Skin as smooth as milk. His gut told him they were close in age, but with skin like that he wasn't sure. He'd been watching her from his perch in a tree. How she'd stared at leaves in wonder. He nearly hadn't needed his nose to know her temper. Her face showed every small emotion.

Perry brushed her black hair away from her neck and leaned close. With his nose blunted by smoke, this was the only way. He drew in a breath. Her flesh wasn't as pungent as the other Dwellers', but it was still off. Warm blood but a rancy, decaying scent as well. He inhaled again, curious, but her mind was deep in the unconscious so she gave off no temper.

He thought about bringing her with him, but Dwellers died on the outside. This room was her best chance to survive the fire. He'd planned to check on the other girl too. No chance of that anymore.

He stood. "You better live, little Mole," he said. "After all this."

Then he sealed the door behind him and stepped into another chamber, this one crushed by an Aether strike. Perry ducked through the crumbling dark corridor. The way grew tighter, forcing him to crawl over broken cement and warped metal, pushing his bow and satchel ahead of him, until he was back in his world.

Straightening, he drew a deep breath of the night. Welcomed the clean air into his singed lungs. Alarms broke the silence, first muted through the rubble, then blaring all around him, so loud he felt the sound thrum in his chest. Perry looped the strap of his satchel and quiver over his shoulder, took up his bow, and pulled foot, sprinting through the cool predawn.

An hour later, with the Dweller fortress no more than a mound in the distance, he sat to give his pounding head a break. It was morning, already warm in the Shield Valley, a dry stretch of land that reached nearly to his home two days to the north. He let his head fall against his forearm.

Smoke clung to his hair and skin. He scented it with every breath. Dweller smoke wasn't like theirs. It smelled like molten steel and chemicals that burned hotter than fire. His left cheek throbbed, but it was nothing compared to the core of pain behind his nose. The muscles in his thighs twitched, still running away from the alarms.

It was bad enough he'd broken into the Dweller fortress. His brother would cast him out for that alone. But he'd tangled with the Moles. Probably killed at least one of them. The Tides didn't have problems with the Dwellers like other

tribes did. Perry wondered if he'd just changed that.

He reached for his satchel and rummaged through the leather pack. His fingers brushed something cool and velvety. Perry swore. He'd forgotten to leave the girl's eye patch behind. He brought it out, examining it in his palm. It caught the blue light of the Aether like a huge water droplet.

He'd heard the Moles as soon as he'd broken into the wooded area. Their laughing voices had echoed from the farming space. He'd crept over and watched them, stunned to see so much food left to rot. He'd planned to leave after a few minutes, but by then he'd gotten curious about the girl. When Soren tore the eyepiece from her face, he couldn't stand by and watch any longer, even if she was just a Mole.

Perry slipped the eye patch back into his satchel, thinking to sell it when traders came around in spring. Dweller gadgets fetched a sizey price, and there were plenty of things his people needed, to say nothing of his nephew, Talon. Perry dug deeper into the bag, past his shirt, vest, and water skin, until he found what he wanted.

The apple's skin shone more softly than the eyepiece. Perry ran his thumbs over it, following its curves. He'd bagged it in the farming space. The one thing he had thought to grab as he'd stalked the Moles. He brought the apple to his nose and breathed in the sweet scent, his mouth filling with saliva.

It was a stupid gift. Not even why he'd broken in.

And not nearly enough.

PEREGRINE

Perry strode into the Tide compound near midnight, four days after he'd left. He stopped in the central clearing, inhaled the briny smell of home. The ocean was a good thirty minutes' walk to the west, but fishermen carried the scent of their trade everywhere. Perry rubbed a hand over his hair, still wet from his swim. Tonight he smelled a bit like a fisherman himself.

Perry shifted the bow and quiver over his back. With no game slung over his shoulder, he had no reason to follow his usual path to the cookhouse so he stayed where he was, taking in fresh what he knew by heart. Homes made of stones rounded by time. Wooden doors and shutters worn by salt air and rain. As weather-beaten as the compound was, it looked sturdy. Like a root growing aboveground.

He preferred the compound like this, in the dead of night. With winter coming and food in such shortage, Perry had

grown used to anxious tempers clotting the air during the day. But after dark, the cloud of human emotions lifted, leaving quieter scents. The cooling earth, opened like a flower to the sky. The musk of nighttime animals, making paths he could follow with ease.

Even his eyes favored this time. Contours were more crisp. Movement easier to track. Between his nose and his eyes, he figured he was made for the night.

He drew in his last breath of open air, steeling himself, then stepped into his brother's home. His gaze swept over the wooden table and the two ragged leather chairs before the hearth, then rose to the loft nestled against the roof timbers. Finally he relaxed as his eyes settled on the closed door that led to the only bedroom. Vale wasn't awake. His brother would be asleep with Talon, his son.

Perry moved to the table and inhaled slowly. Grief hung thick and heavy, out of place in the colorful room. It pressed in along the edges of his vision like a bleak gray fog. Perry also caught the smoke from the dying fire, the tang of Luster from the clay pitcher on the wooden table. A month had passed since his brother's wife, Mila, had died. Her scent was faded, almost gone.

Perry tapped the rim of the blue pitcher with a finger. He'd watched Mila decorate the handle with yellow flowers last spring. Mila's touch was everywhere. In the ceramic plates and the bowls she'd shaped. The rugs she'd woven and the glass jars full of beads she'd painted. She'd been a Seer. Gifted with uncommon sight. Like most Seers, Mila

had cared about the looks of things. On her deathbed, when her hands could no longer weave or paint or mold clay, she'd told stories and filled them with the colors she loved.

Perry leaned his weight on the table, suddenly weak and weary with missing her. He had no right to brood, with his brother who'd lost a wife and his nephew who'd lost a mother hurting far more. But she'd been his family too.

He turned to the bedroom door. He wanted to see Talon. But judging by the empty pitcher, Vale had been drinking. A meeting with his older brother now would be too risky.

For a moment, he let himself imagine how it would be, challenging Vale for Blood Lord. Acting on a need as real as thirst. He'd make changes if he led the Tides. Take the risks his brother avoided. The tribe couldn't go on cowering in place for much longer. Not with game so scarce and the Aether storms growing worse every winter. Rumors spoke of safer lands with still, blue skies, but Perry wasn't sure. What he did know was that the Tides needed a Blood Lord who'd take action—and his brother didn't want to budge.

Perry looked down at his worn leather boots. Here he was. Standing still. No better than Vale. He cursed and shook his head. Tossed his satchel up to the loft. Then he pulled off his boots, climbed up, and lay staring at the rafters. It was stupid to daydream about something he'd never do. He'd leave before it came to that.

He hadn't yet closed his eyes when he heard a door whine and then the ladder jostle. Talon, a small, dark blur, catapulted over the top rung, buried himself beneath the blanket, and

went still as stone. Perry climbed over Talon to the ladder side. The space was cramped, and he didn't want his nephew taking a tumble in his sleep.

"How come you never move that fast when we're hunting?" he teased.

Nothing. Not even a stir under the blanket. Talon had fallen into long stretches of silence since his mother's death, but he'd never stopped speaking with Perry. Considering what had happened the last time they'd been together, Perry wasn't surprised by his nephew's silence. He'd made a mistake. Lately he'd made too many.

"Guess you don't want to know what I brought you." Talon still didn't bite. "Shame," Perry said after a moment. "You'd have loved it."

"I know," Talon said, his seven-year-old voice bright with pride. "A shell."

"It's not a shell, but it's a good guess. I did go for a swim." Before coming home, Perry had spent an hour scrubbing the scents from his skin and hair with handfuls of sand. He'd had to, or one whiff and his brother would know where he'd been. Vale had strict rules against roaming near the Dwellers.

"Why are you hiding, Talon? Come out of there." He drew the blanket back. Talon's scent came at him in a fetid wave. Perry rocked back, hands fisting, his breath catching in his throat. Talon's scent was too much like Mila's had been when the illness came in force. He wanted to believe it was a mistake. That Talon was well and would grow to see another year. But scents never lied.

People thought being a Scire meant having power. Being Marked—gifted with a dominant Sense—was rare. But even among the Marked, Perry was unique for having two Senses. As a Seer, he made a skilled archer. But only Scires with noses as strong as Perry’s could breathe and know despair or fear. Useful things to know about an enemy, but when it came to family felt more like a curse. Mila’s decline had been hard, but with Talon, Perry had grown to hate his nose for what it told him.

He forced himself to face his nephew. Firelight from below reflected off the rafters. It outlined the curve of Talon’s cheeks with an orange glow. Lit the tips of his eyelashes. Perry looked at his dying nephew and couldn’t think of a single thing worth saying. Talon already knew everything he felt. He knew Perry would trade places in an instant if he could.

“I know it’s getting worse,” Talon said. “My legs get numb sometimes. . . . Sometimes I can’t scent as good, but nothing hurts too bad.” He turned his face into the blanket. “I knew you’d get wrathful.”

“Talon, I’m not—it’s not *you* I’m wrathful with.”

Perry drew a few breaths against the tightness in his chest, his anger mixing with his nephew’s guilt, making it difficult to think clearly. He knew love. He loved his sister, Liv, and Mila, and he could remember feeling love for Vale as nearly as a year ago. But with Talon, love was only part of it. Talon’s sorrow dropped him like a stone. His worry made Perry pace. His joy felt like flying. In the span of a breath, Talon’s needs became Perry’s own.

Scires called it being rendered. The bond had always made life simple for Perry. Talon's well-being came first. For the past seven years that had meant plenty of roughhousing. Teaching Talon to walk and then swim. Teaching him to track game and shoot a bow and dress his kills. Easy things. Talon loved everything Perry did. But since Mila had fallen ill, it wasn't as simple anymore. He couldn't keep Talon well or happy. But he knew he helped Talon by being there. By staying with him as long as he could.

"What's the thing?" Talon asked.

"What thing?"

"The thing you brought for me."

"Ah, that." The apple. He wanted to tell Talon, but there were Audiles in the tribe with hearing as keen as his sense of smell. And there was Vale, an even bigger problem. Perry couldn't risk Vale scenting it. With winter only weeks away, all the trading for the year was done. Vale would have questions about where Perry got the apple. He didn't need any more trouble with his brother than he already had.

"It has to wait until tomorrow." He'd have to give the apple to Talon a few miles away from the compound. For now it would stay wrapped in an old scrap of plastic, buried deep inside his satchel with the Dweller eyepiece.

"Is it good?"

Perry crossed his arms behind his head. "Come on, Tal. Can't believe you asked me that."

Talon muffled a giggle. "You smell like sweaty seaweed, Uncle Perry."

“Sweaty seaweed?”

“Yeah. The kind that’s been on the rocks for a few days.”

Perry laughed, nudging him in the ribs. “Thanks, Squeak.”

Talon nudged him back. “You’re welcome, Squawk.”

They lay for a few minutes, breathing together in the quiet. Through a crack in the timbers, Perry could see a sliver of the Aether swirling in the sky. On calmer days, it was like being on the underside of waves, seeing the Aether roll and pitch above. Other times it flowed like rapids, furious and blazing blue. Fire and water, come together in the sky. Winter was the season for Aether storms, but in the past years the storms were starting earlier and lasting longer. Already they’d had a few. The last nearly wiped out the tribe’s sheep, the flock too far from the compound to be brought to safety in time. Vale called it a phase, said the storms would lessen soon enough. Perry disagreed.

Talon shifted beside him. Perry knew he wasn’t asleep. His nephew’s temper had grown dark and damp. Eventually it tightened like a belt around Perry’s heart. He swallowed, his throat raw and aching. “What is it, Talon?”

“I thought you’d left. I thought you dispersed after what happened with my dad.”

Perry let out a slow breath. Four nights ago he and Vale had sat at the table below, passing a bottle back and forth. For the first time in what seemed like months, they’d talked as brothers. About Mila’s death and about Talon. Even the best medicines Vale traded for weren’t helping anymore. They didn’t say it but both of them knew. Talon would be

lucky to live through winter.

When Vale started to slur, Perry told himself to leave. Luster sweetened Perry but it did the opposite for Vale. Turned him rabid, just like it had their father. But Perry stayed because Vale was talking and so was he. Then Perry made a comment about moving the tribe away from the compound to safer land. A stupid comment. He knew where it'd lead, where it always led. Arguments. Angry words. This time Vale hadn't said anything. He'd just reached out and cuffed Perry across the jaw. Given him a sharp knock that had felt familiar and horrible at once.

He'd swung back, pure reflex, catching Vale on the nose, starting them both grabbing and swinging across the table. Next thing he knew, Talon stood at the bedroom door, sleepy and stunned. Perry had looked from Vale to Talon. Same serious green eyes, both pairs fixed on Perry. Asking him how could he give a new widower a bloody nose? In his own house and in front of his dying son?

Shamed and still in a fury, Perry had left. He'd gone straight to the Dweller fortress. Maybe Vale couldn't find medicines to help Talon, but he'd heard rumors about the Moles. So he'd broken in, wild and desperate to do something right. Now he had an apple and a useless Dweller eyepiece.

Perry pulled Talon close. "I was stupid, Tal. I wasn't thinking straight. That night should never have happened. But I do need to leave."

He should have done it already. Coming back meant seeing Vale. He didn't know if they could keep pacing around each

other after what had happened. But Perry couldn't let that be the last memory Talon had, him slamming his fist into Vale's face.

"When will you go?" Talon asked.

"I thought I'd try . . . maybe I can hang on . . ." He swallowed. Words never came easy, even with Talon. "Soon. Sleep, Tal. I'm here now."

Talon buried his face into Perry's chest. Perry pinned his gaze on the Aether as Talon's cool tears seeped through his shirt. Through the crack above, he watched the blue flows circling, churning in eddies this way and that, like they weren't sure which way to go. People said that the Marked had the Aether flowing through their blood. Heating them up and giving them their Sense. It was just a saying, but Perry knew it had to be true. Most of the time he didn't think he was very different from the Aether at all.

It was a long while before Talon grew heavy in Perry's arms. By then his shoulder had gone numb, pinned beneath Talon's head, but he kept his nephew there and slept.

Perry dreamed he was back in the Dweller fire, following the girl. She ran ahead of him through the smoke and flames. He couldn't see her face but knew her raven-black hair. Knew her off-putting scent. He chased after her. Needed to reach her, though he didn't know why. He was just sure in that certain senseless way of dreams.

Perry woke sweating to his clothes with both his legs cramping. Some instinct kept him still when he wanted

to rub the soreness out of his muscles. Dust motes swirled in the dim loft, how he imagined scents must look, always churning through the air. Below, floorboards groaned with the sound of his brother moving around. Adding wood to the hearth. Getting the fire going again. Perry peered at the satchel by his feet, hoping the worn layer of plastic would keep Vale off the scents wrapped within.

The ladder creaked. Vale was climbing up. Talon slept curled against Perry's side, a small fist tucked under his chin, his brown hair wet with sweat. The creaking stopped.

Vale breathed just behind him, the sound loud in the quiet. Perry couldn't scent Vale's tempers. As brothers, their noses skipped past the tones, reading them as their own. But Perry imagined a bitter red scent.

He saw a knife reaching over him. For a panicked, mindless instant, Perry was shocked his brother would go about killing him this way. Challenges for Blood Lord were supposed to be held in the open, before the tribe. There was a way of things. But this had begun over the kitchen table. Wrong from the start. Talon would be hurt, no matter whether Perry left or died or won.

In the next instant, Perry realized it wasn't a knife. Only Vale's hand, reaching for Talon. He rested his hand on his son's head. Vale held it there a moment, brushing Talon's damp hair from his forehead. Then he padded down the ladder and across the room below. The loft flooded with light as the front door opened and closed, leaving the house in silence.

ARIA

Aria woke in a room she'd never seen before. She winced, pressing her fingers against the throbbing at her temples. Heavy fabric crinkled over her arms. She peered down. A white suit covered her from neck to feet. She wiggled her fingers inside loose-fitting gloves. Whose clothes was she wearing?

She sucked in a breath as she recognized the Medsuit. Lumina had told her about therapeutic garments like this. How could she be sick? Reverie's sterile environment eradicated disease. Genetic engineers like her mother kept them physically well. But she didn't feel well right now. Gingerly she turned her head left and right. Even the smallest movements brought shocking aches.

She sat up slowly, gasping at the sharp pinch in the crook of her elbow. A tube filled with clear liquid poked out of a patch in the suit by her arm and disappeared into the thick

base of the bed. Her head pounded and her tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth.

She sent a hurried message. *Lumina, something's happened. I don't know what's going on. Mom? Where are you?*

A steel counter ran along one side of the room. A regress screen sat on top, two-dimensional, like the sort used a long time ago. Aria saw a series of lines on it, the vital signals her suit transmitted.

Why was Lumina taking so long to respond?

Time and location, she requested from her Smarteye. Neither came up. Where *was* her Smartscreen?

Paisley? Caleb? Where are you?

Aria tried cruising to a beach Realm. One of her favorites. She stiffened as the wrong images streaked through her mind. Burning trees. Smoke that moved like waves. Paisley's wide-eyed terror. Soren *on top of her*.

She reached toward her left eye and poked herself, jerking back as she blinked. Nothing but a useless eyeball. She flattened her palm over her naked eye just as a slender man in a doctor's smock entered the room.

"Hello, Aria. You're awake."

"Doctor Ward," she said, momentarily relieved. Ward was one of her mother's colleagues, a quiet 5th Gen with a serious, square face. It wasn't unusual to only have one parent, but a few years earlier Aria had wondered if he was her father. Ward and Lumina were similar, both reserved and consumed by their work. But when Aria asked, Lumina had answered, *We have each other, Aria. That's everything we need.*

“Careful,” Ward said. “You have a laceration along your brow that’s not fully healed, but that’s the worst of it. Your tests came out clear on everything else. No infection. No damage to your lungs. Remarkable results considering what you must have gone through.”

Aria didn’t move her hand. She knew how horrible she must look. “Where’s my Smarteye? I can’t get to the Realms. I’m stuck here. With no one.” She bit her lip to keep from rambling.

“Your Smarteye appears to have been lost in the Ag 6 dome. I’ve ordered a new one for you. It should be ready in a few hours. In the meantime, I can increase the dosage of sedative—”

“No,” she said quickly. “No sedatives.” She understood now why her thoughts felt scrambled, like important things had been rearranged or lost altogether. “Where’s my mother?”

“Lumina is in Bliss. The link has been down for a week.”

Aria stared at him. A beeping from the monitor announced the spike in her heartbeat. How could she have forgotten? She’d gone into Ag 6 because of Lumina. But how could Lumina still be unreachable? She remembered resetting the Smarteye and seeing the “Songbird” file.

“That can’t be right,” she said. “My mother sent me a message.”

Ward’s eyebrows drew together. “She did? How do you know it was from her?”

“It was called ‘Songbird.’ Only Lumina calls me that.”

“Did you see the message?”

“No, I didn’t have a chance. Where’s Paisley?”

Ward drew a slow breath before he spoke. “Aria, I am sorry to have to tell you this. Only you and Soren survived. I know you and Paisley were quite close.”

Aria gripped the edges of the bed. “What are you saying?” she heard herself ask. “Are you saying Paisley’s *dead*?” It wasn’t possible. No one *died* at seventeen. They easily lived into their second centuries.

The monitor beeped. This time it was louder and persisted.

Ward was talking. “You left the secure zone . . . with disabled Smarteyes. . . . By the time we responded . . .”

All she heard was *beep-beep-beep-beep*.

Ward trailed off and looked at the medical screen. At a graph that showed, in rising lines and soaring numbers, the collapsing sensation inside her chest.

“I’m sorry, Aria,” he said. The Medsuit stiffened, crinkling as it puffed around her limbs. Cold surged into her arm. She looked down. Blue liquid snaked its way through the tube and disappeared into her Medsuit. Into her. He had ordered the sedative through his Smarteye. Ward stepped closer. “Lay back now before you fall.”

Aria wanted to tell him to stay away, but her lips grew numb and her tongue became a strange limp weight in her mouth. The room lurched to the side as the beeping slowed abruptly. Aria fell back, hitting the mattress with a thud.

Dr. Ward appeared above her, his face anxious. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “It’s the best thing for you now.” Then

he left, closing the door soundly behind him.

Aria tried to move. Her limbs felt weighted and pulled, like a magnet held her down. It took all her concentration to bring her hand toward her face. She scared herself, not recognizing the gloves over her fingers or the emptiness around her left eye.

She let her hand fall away, unable to control it any longer. Her arm slipped off the edge of the bed. She saw it, but she couldn't bring it back.

She closed her eyes. Had something happened to Lumina? Or was it Paisley? Her mind had filled with a thrumming sound, like a tuning fork deep within her skull. Soon she didn't have a clue what had saddened her.

She didn't know how much time had passed when Dr. Ward returned. Without a Smarteye, Aria felt like she didn't know anything.

"I'm sorry I had to sedate you." He paused, waiting for her to speak. She kept her eyes on the lights above, letting them burn spots into her vision. "They're ready to begin the investigation."

An investigation. Was she a criminal now? The Medsuit slackened around her. Ward stepped forward, clearing his throat. Aria flinched as he removed the needle from her arm. She could stand the pain, but not the feel of his hands on her. She pushed herself upright as soon as he stepped back, her mind reeling with dizziness.

"Follow me," he told her. "The Consuls are expecting you."

“The *Consuls*?” They were the most influential people in Reverie, governing all aspects of life in the Pod. “Consul Hess will be there? Soren’s father?”

Dr. Ward nodded. “Of the five, he’ll be the most engaged. He’s the Director of Security.”

“I can’t see him! It was Soren’s fault. He started the fire!”

“Aria, hush! Please don’t say any more.”

For a moment, they just stared at each other. Aria swallowed through a dry throat. “I can’t tell the truth, can I?”

“It won’t do you any good to lie,” Ward said. “They have means to get at the truth.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“Come. Any longer and they’ll condemn you solely for making them wait.”

Dr. Ward led her through a wide corridor that curved, so Aria couldn’t see what lay ahead. The Medsuit forced her to walk with her legs and arms slightly apart. Between that and her stiff muscles, she felt like a zombie shuffling after him.

She noticed cracks and streaks of rust along the walls. Reverie had stood nearly three hundred years, but she had never seen signs of its age until now. She’d spent her whole life in the Panop, Reverie’s vast and immaculate central dome. Most everything happened there, on forty levels that housed residential, schooling, repose, and dining areas, all organized around an atrium. Aria had never seen a single crack in the Panop, not that she’d bothered to search very hard.

The design was purposely repetitive and uninteresting to promote maximum use of the Realms. Everything in the real was kept bland, down to the grays they all wore. Now, as she followed Dr. Ward, she couldn't help wondering how many other parts of the Pod were deteriorating.

Ward stopped before an unmarked door. "I'll see you afterward." It sounded like a question.

Aria didn't see the five Reverie Consuls when she stepped into the room. That's how they always appeared in public address, the five speaking from a virtual, ancient Senate house. Only one man was seated at a table.

Soren's father. Consul Hess.

"Take a seat, Aria," Consul Hess said, indicating the metal chair across the table.

She sat and looked down, letting her hair fall in front of her bare eye. The room was a steel box, the walls pocked with dents. It smelled strongly of bleach.

"One moment," Consul Hess said as he stared through her.

Aria crossed her arms to hide her trembling hands. He was probably sifting through reports of the fire on his Smartscreen, or maybe talking with an expert on how to proceed.

Soren's father was a 12th Gen, well into his second century of life. She supposed he and Soren resembled each other, both being even-featured and stocky. But their likeness wasn't obvious. Aging-reversal treatments kept Consul Hess's skin as thin and tender-looking as an infant's, while Soren's tan

made him look older. But like everyone over a hundred years old, Consul Hess's age showed in his eyes, which were sunken and dull as olive pits.

Aria's gaze moved to the chair next to her. It shouldn't be empty. Her mother should be there instead of hundreds of miles away. Aria had always tried to understand Lumina's dedication to her work. It wasn't easy, knowing as little about it as she did. "It's classified," Lumina said whenever Aria asked. "You know as much as I can tell. It's in the field of genetics. Important work, but not as important as you."

How could Aria believe her now? Where was she when Aria needed her?

Consul Hess's attention closed on her like a focusing lens. He hadn't spoken yet, but she knew he was studying her. He clicked his fingernails on the steel table. "Let's begin," he said finally.

"Shouldn't all the Consuls be here?"

"Consuls Royce, Medlen, and Tarquin are attending to protocol. They'll see our conversation later. Consul Young is with us."

Aria looked at his Smarteye, growing conscious of the missing weight on the left side of her face again. "He's not with me."

"Yes, true. You've been through an ordeal, haven't you? I'm afraid my son bears some responsibility for what happened. Soren's a natural code breaker. A difficult trait at this age, but one day he'll be quite useful."

Aria waited until she knew her voice would be steady.

“You spoke with him?”

“In the Realms only,” Consul Hess said. “He won’t be capable of speaking aloud for some time. New bones are being grown for his jaw. Much of the skin over his face will have to be regenerated. He will never look the same, but he survived. He was lucky . . . but not as lucky as you.”

Aria looked down at the table. There was a long, deep scratch in the metal. She didn’t want to picture Soren with disfiguring scars. She didn’t want to picture him at all.

“Reverie hasn’t suffered a security breach in over a century. It’s both absurd and impressive that a group of Second Gens could do what Aether storms and Savages have not accomplished in so long.” He paused. “You realize how close you came to destroying the entire Pod?”

She nodded without meeting his eyes. She’d known how dangerous it was to start a fire, but she’d sat and watched it happen. She should have done something sooner. Maybe she could’ve saved Paisley’s life if she hadn’t been so scared of Soren.

Aria’s eyes blurred.

Paisley was dead.

How was it possible?

“With the nonfunctioning cameras in Ag 6 and your Smarteyes deactivated, we find ourselves in a bit of a primitive situation. We have only your accounts available to tell us what transpired that night.” He leaned forward, his chair scraping softly on the floor. “I need you to tell me exactly what happened in that dome.”

She glanced up, searching his cold stare for a clue. Had they found her Smarteye? Did Hess know about the recording? “What did Soren tell you?” she asked.

Consul Hess’s lips thinned into a smile. “That’s confidential, just as your testimony will be. Nothing will be divulged until the investigation is completed. Whenever you’re ready.”

She traced the scratch on the table with a gloved finger. How could she tell Consul Hess what a monster his son had become? She needed that Smarteye. Without it, they’d believe whatever story Soren gave them. Soren had said it himself in the agriculture dome.

“The sooner we settle this, the sooner you can go,” Hess said. “You need time to grieve, as we all do. We’ve cancelled school and unessential work for the remainder of the week to allow for the healing to begin. I’m told your friend Caleb is organizing a tribute for Paisley.” He paused. “And I can imagine how you’re anxious to see your mother.”

She tensed, looking up. “My mother? Ward said the link was still down.”

Hess waved his hand dismissively. “Ward isn’t on my staff. Lumina is quite worried about you. I’ve arranged for you to see her as soon as we’re through.”

Tears of relief wobbled on her lower eyelids. She was sure now. Lumina was all right. She’d probably tried to reach Aria while she was in Ag 6 and left the message when Aria hadn’t been available. “When did you speak with her? Why was the link down for so long?”

“I’m not the one being questioned here, Aria. Your account. From the beginning.”

She told him about shutting down their Smarteyes, slowly at first, but gaining confidence as she described the game of Rotball and the fire. Every word brought her nearer to seeing Lumina. When she got to the part where the boys chased her and Paisley, she faltered, her voice cracking. “When he—when Soren—tore off my Smarteye, I guess I went unconscious. I don’t remember anything after that.”

Consul Hess propped his arms on the table. “Why would Soren do that?”

“I don’t know. Ask him.”

Hess’s dull gaze bored into her. Were the other Consuls feeding questions through him? “He said going there was your idea. That you were after information about your mother.”

“It was his idea!” Aria cringed as the ache in her head flared. Sedatives. Pain. Grief. She didn’t know what hurt most. “Soren wanted to go on a real adventure. He came ready to make fire. I just went because I thought he’d be able to tell me about Bliss.”

“How did you come to be found in the exterior airlock?”

“I was? I don’t know. I told you. I blacked out.”

“Was someone else in there with you?”

“Someone *else*?” she said. Who else could have been in an off-limits dome? Aria tensed as a blurred image appeared in her mind. Had that truly happened? “There was . . . there was an Outsider.”

“An Outsider,” Consul Hess said evenly. “How do you think an Outsider came to be in Ag 6 on the same night you went there, at the same time Soren disabled the system?”

“Are you accusing me of letting a *Savage* into Reverie?”

“I’m simply asking questions. Why were you the only one brought to the safety of an airlock? Why weren’t you attacked?”

“Your son attacked me!”

“Calm down, Aria. These questions are standard procedure, not intended to upset you. We need to gather facts.”

She stared at Consul Hess’s Smarteye, imagining she spoke directly to Consul Young. “If you want to gather facts,” she said firmly, “then find my Smarteye. You’ll see what happened.”

Consul Hess’s eyes widened with surprise, but he recovered quickly. “So you did make a recording. Not an easy feat with a deactivated Eye. Smart girl. Just like your mother.” Hess tapped his fingers on the table a few times. “Your Eye is being searched for now. We’ll find it. What did you capture in the recording?”

“Just what I told you. Your son going crazy.”

He sat back in his chair, crossing his arms. “This puts me in a difficult position, doesn’t it? But be assured that justice will be done. It’s my responsibility to keep the Pod safe, above all else. Thank you, Aria. You’ve been very helpful. Can you manage a few hours of transport? Your mother is eager to see you.”

“You mean actually go to Bliss?”

“That’s right. I have a transport waiting. Lumina insisted on seeing you in the flesh to be certain you’re receiving the

proper care. She's quite persuasive, isn't she?"

Aria nodded, a smile stirring inside her. She could just imagine their showdown. Lumina had a scientist's patience. She never stopped until she had the result she wanted. "I'm fine. I can go." She wasn't anywhere close to fine, but she'd pretend to be if it got her to Lumina.

"Good." Consul Hess stood. Two men dressed in blue Reverie Guardian suits entered the room, crowding it with their imposing size, while two more stayed outside. They stared at her face, where her Smarteye should have been. Aria decided there was no use covering her naked eye anymore. She rose from the table, fighting off a riot of aches in her joints and muscles.

"Take good care of her," Consul Hess said to the Guardians.
"Get well, Aria."

"Thank you, Consul Hess."

He smiled. "No need to thank me. It's the least I could do after all you've been through."

PEREGRINE

Perry pulled his satchel and bow over his shoulder and stepped outside with Talon late the next morning. Fishermen and farmers milled around the clearing. Too many people, mingling like the workday was done. Perry dropped a hand on Talon's shoulder, stopping him.

"Are we getting raided?" Talon asked.

"No," Perry answered. The scents rolling past didn't carry enough panic for a raid. "Must be the Aether." The blue swirls looked brighter than they had overnight. Perry caught glimpses of them stirring above thick rain clouds. "Your father's probably called everyone in."

"But it doesn't look so bad."

"Not yet," Perry said. Like all the stronger Scires, he could anticipate Aether storms. The prickling sensation in the back of his nose told him the sky would still need to take a turn for the worse before it became a threat. But Vale never took

chances with the Tides' safety.

At the mercy of his growling stomach, Perry steered Talon toward the cookhouse. He noticed his nephew favoring his right leg. It wasn't a terrible limp. Hardly even obvious. But when a pack of boys came yelling and drumming up dust, Talon stopped walking. The boys shot by. Wiry mutts, lean from work and meager meals, not illness. A few months ago, Talon had been at the head of that pack.

Perry swept his nephew up over his shoulder, hanging Talon upside down and making a show of having fun. Talon laughed but Perry knew he was putting on a show too. He knew Talon ached to run with his friends. To have his legs again.

The smell of onion and woodsmoke hung in the cool dimness of the cookhouse. This was the largest structure in the compound. Where they ate. Where Vale held gatherings in the winter months. A dozen large trestle tables took up one side, with Vale's head table on an elevated stone platform to the rear. To the other, behind a half wall of brick, there was a cooking hearth, a row of iron stoves, and several worktables that hadn't held food with any plenty in years.

The day's haul ended up there, from the fields and the sea. Whatever else Perry and the other hunters managed to bring in. Everything went there to be shared among the families. The Tides were fortunate to have an underground river running through their valley. Made irrigating easy. But having all the water in the world didn't help when the Aether storms came, scorching stretches of land. This year, their scarred

fields hadn't yielded nearly enough to fill their stores for the winter. The tribe would be eating because of Perry's sister, Liv.

Four cows. Eight goats. Two dozen chickens. Ten sacks of grain. Five bags of dried herbs. They were just some of the things Liv's marriage to a northern Blood Lord had bought the Tides. "I'm expensive," Liv had joked the day she left, but neither Perry nor his best friend, Roar, had laughed. Half of the payment for her had already arrived. They expected the other half any day, after Liv reached her intended husband. They needed it soon, before winter came in force.

Right away Perry spotted a cluster of Audiles at a table in the back, bent close as they whispered. Perry shook his head. The Ears were always whispering. A moment later, he caught a vibrant green wave, bracing as cypress leaves. Their excitement. Probably someone had overheard his tussle with Vale.

Perry set Talon on the brick bar, ruffling his hair. "Brought you a weasel today, Brooke. Best I could do. You know how it's been out there."

Brooke looked up from the onion she chopped and smiled. She wore one of his arrowheads on a leather cord as a necklace, drawing his eyes down. She looked good today. Brooke always looked good. Her sharp blue eyes narrowed on Perry's cheek for an instant, then she winked at Talon.

"He's a cute little thing. Bet he tastes good." She tipped her head toward the large pot hanging over the fire. "Toss him in there."

“Brooke, I’m not a weasel!” Talon giggled as Perry scooped him up.

“Hang on, Perry,” Brooke said. She dished out bowls of gruel for them. “We might as well get him good and fat before we cook him.”

He and Talon took a table by the door as always, where Perry could best catch drafts from outside. They might give him a few moments of warning if Vale showed up. Perry noticed that Wylan and Bear, Vale’s best men, sat with the Auds. That meant Vale was probably hunting alone.

Perry wolfed down the barley porridge so the flavors wouldn’t linger in his mouth. Being a Scire also meant having a great sense of taste. Wasn’t always a good thing. The bland mash soaked up traces of other meals from the wooden bowl, leaving the rancy aftertaste of salt fish, goat’s milk, and turnips on his tongue. He went back for another helping because he knew Brooke would give it to him, and food was food. When he finished, he sat back and crossed his arms, feeling only mildly hungry and more than a little guilty for filling himself at the price of his sister’s happiness.

Talon had stirred his food for a while, making lumpy mounds with his spoon. Now he looked everywhere but at his bowl. It pained Perry to see his nephew looking so drawn.

“We’re hunting, right?” Perry asked. Hunting would give him an excuse to get Talon away from the compound. Perry wanted to give him the apple, Talon’s favorite. Vale always bought a few in secret just for Talon when traders brought them around.

Talon stopped stirring. “But the Aether.”

“I’ll keep us clear of it. Come on, Tal. We could go for a bit.”

Talon scrunched his nose, leaned forward, and whispered, “I can’t leave the compound anymore. My father said.”

Perry frowned. “When did he say that?”

“Umm . . . the day after you left?”

Perry pushed down a flare of anger, wanting to keep his nephew from feeling it too. How could Vale deny him hunting? Talon loved it. “We could be back before he knew.”

“Uncle Perry . . .”

Perry glanced over his shoulder, following Talon’s line of vision to the table in the back. “What, you think the Ears heard me?” he asked, though he knew they had. Perry whispered a few suggestions to the Auds. Ideas for what they could go do to themselves, rather than listen to other people’s conversations. His suggestions brought several hard stares.

“Look at that, Talon. You’re right. They can hear me. Should’ve known. I can smell Wylan from here. You think that reek’s coming from his *mouth*?”

Talon grinned. He’d lost a few milk teeth. His smile had the look of calico corn. “It smells like it’s coming from his south side.”

Perry leaned back and laughed.

“Shut up, Peregrine,” Wylan called out. “You heard him. He’s not supposed to leave. You want Vale to know what you’re doing?”

“Your choice, Wylan. Tell Vale or not. You want to deal with him or me?”

Perry knew the answer. Vale’s form of punishment meant halved rations. Outhouse duty. Extra rounds of night watch in the winter. Miserable, all, but to a vain critter like Wylan, better than the beating Perry could give him. So when the whole lot of Auds stood and charged him, Perry nearly knocked the bench over getting up. He put himself in the alley between the tables, Talon well behind him.

Wylan, at the lead, stopped a few paces away. “Peregrine, you streaky idiot. Something’s going on outside.”

It took Perry a moment to understand. They’d heard something outside and were simply heading out. He stepped aside as the Auds poured past him, the rest of the cookhouse hurrying after.

Perry went back to Talon. His nephew’s bowl had spilled. Gruel dripped through a knot in the table. “I thought . . .” He glared at the worn planks. “You know what I thought.”

Talon knew better than anyone how Perry’s blood was primed. He’d always had an edge, but it was getting worse. Lately, if there was a scuffle to be had, Perry found a way to mix himself into it. The Aether in his blood was gathering, growing stronger every year with the storms. He felt like his body had a will of its own. Always looking. Preparing for the only fight that would satisfy him.

But he couldn’t have that fight. In a challenge for Blood Lord, the loser died or was forced to disperse. Perry couldn’t imagine leaving Talon fatherless. And he couldn’t force his

brother and his sick nephew out in the open. There were no laws in the borderlands beyond tribe territories, only survival.

That left one choice. He needed to leave. Dispersing was the best thing he could do for Talon. It meant that Talon could stay and live out the rest of his days in the safety of the compound. It also meant he'd never help the Tides like he knew he could.

Outside, people crowded around the clearing. The afternoon air thickened with excited tempers. Brisk scents. But no traces of fear. Dozens of voices chattered, muddled to his ears, but the Auds had surely overheard something to make them dart outside. Perry caught sight of Bear creating a wake as he moved through the crowd. Wylan and a few others followed him out beyond the compound.

“Perry! Up here!”

Brooke stood on the tile roof of the cookhouse, waving him up. Perry wasn't surprised to see her already there. He climbed the farming crates stacked to the side of the structure, pulling Talon up with him.

From the roof, he had a good view of the hills that formed the Tides' eastern border. Farmland stretched back in a patchwork of browns and greens, woven through by a line of trees that followed the underground river. Perry could also see the stretches of Aether-blackened earth where the funnels had struck early in the spring.

“There,” Brooke said.

He searched where she pointed. He was a Seer like Brooke, saw better than most during the day, but his real strength lay in seeing in the dark. He knew of no other Seer like him and tried not to call attention to his vision.

Perry shook his head, unable to make out anything distinctive in the distance. “You know I’m better at night.”

Brooke shot him a flirty smile. “I sure do.”

He grinned at her. Couldn’t think of anything to say besides, “Later.”

She laughed and turned her keen blue eyes back to the distance. She was a strong Seer, the best in the tribe since her younger sister Clara had disappeared. More than a year had passed since Clara had gone missing, but Brooke hadn’t given up on her coming home. Perry scented her hope now. Then how it wilted with disappointment.

“It’s Vale,” she said. “He’s bringing in something big. It looks like a buck.”

Perry should have been relieved it was only his brother coming home from hunting. Not another tribe raiding them for food. But he wasn’t.

Brooke stepped toward him, her gaze settling on his bruised cheek. “That looks like it hurts, Per.” She traced a finger along his face in a way that didn’t hurt at all. When her floral scent reached him, he couldn’t stop himself from bringing her closer.

Most girls in the tribe were wary around him. He understood, considering his shaky future with the Tides. Not Brooke. More than once as they’d lain together in the

warm summer grass, she'd whispered into his ear about them becoming the ruling pair. He liked Brooke, but that would never happen. He'd choose another Scire to be with someday, keeping with his strongest Sense. But Brooke never gave up. Not that he minded.

"So it's true what happened with you and Vale?" she said.

Perry let out a slow breath. There were no secrets with Auds around. "Vale didn't do this."

Brooke smiled like she didn't believe him. "Everyone's down there, Perry. It's the perfect time to challenge him."

He stepped back and swallowed a curse. She wasn't a Scire. She could never understand how it felt to be rendered. No matter how much he wanted to be Blood Lord, he could never hurt Talon.

"I see him!" Talon said from the edge of the roof.

Perry darted to his side. Vale was crossing the dirt field that skirted the compound, near enough for all to see. He was tall, like Perry, but seven years older; he had a man's build. The Blood Lord chain around his neck shone under the light of the sky. Scire Markings coiled around Vale's biceps. One band on each arm, single and proud, unlike the two cluttering Perry's. Vale's Naming Mark cut a line on the skin over his heart, rising and falling like the lines of their valley. He had his dark hair pulled back, giving Perry a clear view of his eyes. They were steady and calm as ever. Behind Vale, on a litter made of branches and rope, rested his quarry.

The buck looked to be well over two hundred pounds. The head was doubled back to keep the enormous rack from

dragging. A ten pointer. A huge animal.

Below, the drum began to pound a deep rhythm. The other instruments joined in, playing the Hunter's Song. A song that got Perry's heart pounding every time he heard it.

People ran toward Vale. They took the litter from his hands. They brought him water and praised him. A buck that size would fill all their stomachs. A beast like that was a rare sign of bounty. A good omen for the winter ahead. For the following growing season as well. That was why Vale had called the tribe back to the compound. He wanted everyone there to see him coming home with his prize.

Perry looked down at his shaking hands. That buck should have been his kill. He should be the one hauling in that litter. He couldn't believe Vale's luck. How had he brought in a buck like that when Perry hadn't tracked one all year? Perry knew he was a better hunter. He gritted his teeth, pushing back his next thought, but failing. He'd be a better Blood Lord, too.

"Uncle Perry?" Talon stared up at him, his scrawny chest heaving for breath. Perry saw all the jealous rage inside of him crossing his nephew's drawn face. Tangling up with Talon's fear. He breathed in the desperate mix they made and knew he should never have come back.

ARIA

Aria followed the Guardians through the curving corridors. She wanted out of the real, where things rusted and cracked. Where people died in fires. She wished she had her new Smarteye so she could fraction and escape to a Realm. She could be gone right now, somewhere else.

She began to notice more Guardians in the halls and in passing glimpses of chambers that looked like cafeterias and meeting rooms. She knew most of them by face, but they were strangers. They weren't people she meshed with in the Realms.

The Guardians brought her through an airlock chamber labeled DEFENSE & EXTERNAL REPAIRS 2. She stopped in her tracks as she entered a transportation hub larger than any space she'd ever seen. Hovercrafts were lined in rows, rounded iridescent vehicles she'd only seen in the Realms before. The sleek ships looked hunched, like insects poised

to take flight. Aerial runways marked by blue beams of light floated in the air above. Laughter erupted from a cluster of Guardians in the distance, the sound small and stifled by the drone of generators. She'd been within walking distance of this hangar her entire life. All of this went on in Reverie, and she'd never known it.

One of the Hovers in the distance lit up with a shimmering glow. It hit her then. She was actually leaving. She never thought she'd leave Reverie. This Pod was her home. But it didn't feel the same. She'd seen its rotten fruit and rusted walls. She'd seen machines that turned her mind blank and her limbs into anchors. *Soren* was here. And Paisley wasn't. How could she go back to her life without Paisley? She couldn't. She needed to leave. More than anything, she needed her mother. Lumina would know how to make things right again.

Eyes blurring, she followed the Guardians to a Dragonwing. She recognized the vehicle. It was the fastest model of Hovers, built for raw speed. Aria climbed the metal steps, hesitating at the top. When would she come back?

"Keep moving," said a Guardian with black gloves. The cabin was surprisingly small, lit with dim blue light, with seats along both sides.

"Right here," said the man. She sat where he indicated and fumbled with the thick restraints, her fingers useless through the Medsuit. She should've asked for grays, but she hadn't wanted to waste time and risk Hess changing his mind.

The man took the straps from her and fastened them with

a series of snaps. Then he sat on the opposite side with five other men. They ran through coordinates using military jargon she hardly understood, falling silent as the door sealed with a sound like a gasp. The craft whirred to life, vibrating, buzzing like a million bees. Near the cockpit, something inside a cabinet shook, creating a metallic chatter. The noise set off her headache again. A cloying chemical taste slid into her mouth.

“How long is the journey?” she asked.

“Not long,” said the man who’d buckled her in. He closed his eyes. Most of the other Guardians did too. Did they always do that? Or were they just trying to avoid staring at the blank spot over her left eye?

The lurch of liftoff pressed her down into the seat, then sideways, as the craft thrust into motion. With no windows to peer through, Aria strained to listen. Had they left the hangar? Were they on the outside yet?

She swallowed the bitter taste on her tongue. She needed water and the seat straps were too tight. She couldn’t draw in a full breath without pushing against them. She began to feel light-headed, like she couldn’t get enough air. Aria ran through vocal scales in her mind, battling against the shrill note of her headache. Scales always calmed her.

The Dragonwing slowed much sooner than she’d expected. Half an hour? Aria knew she wasn’t tracking time properly, but it couldn’t have been long.

The Guardians pressed at wrist pads on their gray suits and donned their helmets, moving in quick, practiced

movements. Soft light glowed from within their visors, shining clear through their Smarteyes. Aria looked around the cabin. Why hadn't she been given a helmet?

The black-gloved man stood and unfastened her seat restraint. She finally drew a deep breath, but didn't feel satisfied. A strange weightlessness had come over her.

"Are we there?" she asked. She hadn't felt them land. The Hover still hummed with noise.

The Guardian's voice projected through a speaker in his helmet. "You are."

The door opened with a blast of light. Hot air gusted into the cabin. Aria blinked furiously, willing her eyes to adjust. She didn't see a hangar. She didn't see anything that looked like Bliss. Empty land ran clear to the horizon. Desert, reaching as far as she could see. Nothing more. She didn't understand. Couldn't accept what she saw.

A hand clamped onto her wrist. She screamed and reeled back. "Let go of me!" She grabbed the seat restraints, clutching them with all her strength.

Hard hands fell on her shoulders, crushing her muscles, tearing her from the straps. They pulled her toward the edge in an instant. She looked down at her cloth-covered feet. They were inches from the metal lip. Much farther below, she saw cracked red earth.

"Please! I didn't do anything!"

A Guardian came up behind her. She caught a glimpse of him as his foot crashed into the small of her back, and then she was falling through the air.

She pressed her lips together as she struck the earth. Pain speared through her knees and elbows. Her temple smacked against the ground. She stifled a cry because making any sound—because even *breathing*—meant death. Aria lifted her head and stared at her fingers splayed on rust-colored dirt.

She was touching the outside. She was in the Death Shop.

She turned as the hatch closed, catching her last glance of the Guardians. Another Dragonwing floated beside it, both glistening like blue pearls. A buzzing sound shook the air around her as they glided away, kicking up clouds of red dirt as they sped across the flat expanse.

Aria's lungs tightened in spasms, aching for oxygen. She covered her mouth and nose with her sleeve. She couldn't fight the need to draw air any longer. She inhaled and exhaled at the same time, choking, her eyes watering as she fought to settle back into her breath. She watched the Hovercrafts blend into the distance and marked the spot where they disappeared. When she could no longer see them, she sat staring at the desert. It looked bleak and barren in every direction. The quiet was so complete she could hear herself swallow.

Consul Hess had lied to her.

He'd *lied*. She'd been prepared for some kind of punishment when the investigation was done, but not this. She realized Consul Young hadn't been watching her interview through Hess's Smarteye. She'd been alone with Hess. His report would probably say she'd died in Ag 6, along with Paisley, Echo, and Bane. Hess would blame her for thinking up the

night and letting in a Savage, too. He'd probably tied up all his problems and tossed them out with her.

She stood, her legs trembling as she fought waves of dizziness. The heat of the earth soaked through the fabric of her Medsuit, warming the soles of her feet. As though on cue, her suit blew a rush of cool air over her back and stomach. She almost laughed. The Medsuit was still regulating her temperature.

She looked up. Thick gray clouds blotted the sky. In the gaps, she saw Aether. Real Aether. The flows ran above the clouds. They were beautiful, like lightning trapped in liquid currents, thin as veils in some places. In others, they gathered in thick bright streams. The Aether didn't look like something that could put an end to the world, yet that had nearly happened during the Unity.

For six decades, when the Aether came, it had scorched the earth with constant fires, but the real blow to humanity had been its mutative effect, as her mother had explained to her. New diseases had evolved rapidly and thrived. Plagues had wiped out entire populations. Her ancestors had been among the fortunate few who'd taken shelter in the Pods.

Shelter she no longer had.

Aria knew she couldn't survive in this contaminated world. She hadn't been designed for it. Death was only a matter of time.

She found the brighter patch in the cloud cover, where light shone through in a golden haze. That light came from the sun. She might get to see the real sun. She had to fight off

the urge to cry, thinking about seeing the sun. Because who would know? Who would she tell about seeing something so incredible?

She headed toward where the Rovers had disappeared, knowing it was pointless. Did she think Consul Hess would change his mind? But where else could she go? She walked with feet she didn't recognize on earth that looked like giraffe print.

She hadn't taken more than a dozen steps when she started to cough again. Soon she grew too light-headed to stand. But it wasn't just her lungs rejecting the outside. Her eyes and nose streamed. Her throat burned and her mouth filled with hot saliva.

She'd heard all the stories about the Death Shop, like everyone else. A million ways to die. She knew of the packs of wolves as smart as men. She'd heard of the flocks of crows that picked living people to pieces, and Aether storms that behaved like predators. But the worst death in the Death Shop, she decided, was rotting alone.

PEREGRINE

Perry watched as his older brother strode into the clearing. Vale paused and lifted his head, scenting the wind. He held the buck's rack in his hand, a huge snarl of horns, thick as a small tree. Impressive. Perry couldn't deny it. Vale searched the crowd and spotted Perry, then Talon at his side.

Perry became aware of a dozen things as his brother came forward. The Dweller device and the apple, both wrapped in plastic, deep inside his satchel. His knife at his hip. His bow and quiver slung across his back. He noticed the way the crowd quieted, easing into a circle around him. He sensed Talon shift at his side, drawing back. And he scented tempers. Dozens of bright scents, charging the air as much as the Aether above.

"Hello, Son." Vale ached, gazing at his boy. Perry saw it in his eyes. He also saw the swelling around Vale's nose, but wondered if anyone else would notice.

Talon raised a hand in reply, keeping back. He didn't want to show weakness in front of his father. How he hurt, both from grief and illness. Once it had been Perry hiding from his father behind Vale's legs. But hiding didn't work around Scires. Scents carried.

Vale raised the rack. "For you, Talon. Choose a horn. We'll make a handle for a new knife. Would you like that?"

Talon shrugged. "All right."

Perry glanced at the knife at Talon's belt. It was Perry's old blade. As a boy, he had carved feathers into the handle, making a design fit for him and later, Talon. He saw no reason for him to have a new one.

Vale finally met his gaze. He looked at the bruise on Perry's face, suspicion flashing in his eyes. Vale would know he hadn't given it to Perry. He hadn't landed any solid punches that night across the table.

"What happened to you, Peregrine?"

Perry went still. He couldn't tell Vale the truth, but lying wouldn't help him either. No matter what he said, people would think Vale had given him the bruise, just as Brooke had. Blaming someone else for it would only make him look weak.

"Thanks for caring, Vale. It's good to be home." Perry nodded at the rack. "Where'd you bring him down?"

"Moss Ledge."

Perry couldn't believe he'd missed picking up the buck's scent. He'd been out that way recently.

Vale smiled. "Fine beast, don't you think, little brother? Best one in years."

Perry glared at his older brother, holding back the bitter words that sprang to his lips. Vale knew it annoyed Perry to be called this in front of the tribe. He was no longer a boy. There was nothing little about him.

“Still think we have overhunted?” Vale added.

Perry was sure of it. The animals had left. They’d sensed the Aether growing stronger each passing year in their valley. Perry sensed it too. But what could he say? Vale held proof there was still game like that out there, ready to be brought in. “We should still move,” he said without thinking.

A smile spread over Vale’s face. “Move, Perry? Do you mean that?”

“The storms will only get worse.”

“This cycle will play out as they all do.”

“In time, maybe. But we may not survive the worst of it here.”

A stir ran through the crowd. He and Vale might argue like this in private, but no one crossed Vale in front of others.

Vale shifted his feet. “Then tell us about your idea, Perry. About moving more than two hundred people into the open. Do you think we’d be better off *without* shelter? Fighting for our lives in the borderlands?”

Perry swallowed hard. He knew what he knew. He just never said it well. But he couldn’t back down now.

“The compound won’t hold up if the storms get much worse. We’re losing our fields. We’ll lose everything if we stay. We need to find safer land.”

“Where do you want us to go?” Vale asked. “You think

another tribe will welcome us into their territory? All of us?”

Perry shook his head. He wasn't sure. He and Vale were Marked. Worth something, purely for their blood. But not the others, the Unmarked, who weren't Scires or Auds or Seers. Who made up most of the tribe.

Vale's eyes narrowed. “What if the storms are worse in other territories, Peregrine?”

Perry couldn't answer. He wasn't sure if the Aether raged elsewhere as it did there. He only knew that last winter, the storms torched nearly a quarter of their territory. This winter, he expected, would be worse.

“We leave this land, we die,” Vale said, his tone suddenly hard. “Try thinking once in a while, little brother. It might serve you.”

“You're wrong,” Perry said. Didn't anyone else see that?

Several people gasped. He could almost hear their thoughts through their excited tempers. *Fight, Perry. This'll be good to see.*

Vale handed the rack to Bear. It grew so quiet that Perry heard Bear's leather vest squeak as he moved. Perry's vision started tunneling as it did when he hunted. He saw only his older brother, who'd defended Perry countless times as a boy, but who didn't believe him now. Perry glanced at Talon. He couldn't do this. What if he killed Vale right there?

Talon shot forward. “Can we hunt, Father? Can Uncle Perry and I hunt?”

Vale looked down, the darkness in his gaze vanishing. “Hunt, Talon? Now?”

“I feel good today.” Talon lifted his small chin. “Can we go?”

“Are you so eager to show me up, Son?”

“Yes!”

Vale’s deep laugh roused a few forced chuckles from the crowd.

“Please, Father. Just for a while?”

Vale raised his eyebrows at Perry, like he thought it fitting that Talon had stepped in to rescue him. That look nearly launched Perry forward.

Vale knelt and opened his arms. Talon hugged him, his skinny arms closing around Vale’s broad neck. Covering the Blood Lord chain. Stealing it from Perry’s sight.

“We’ll feast tonight,” Vale said, easing back. He cradled Talon’s face with his hands. “I’ll save the best cuts for you.” He straightened and motioned Wylan over. “Make sure they stay close to the compound.”

“We don’t need him,” Perry said. Did Vale think he couldn’t protect Talon? And he didn’t want Wylan along. If the Aud came, he couldn’t give Talon the apple. “I’ll keep him safe.”

Vale’s green eyes settled on Perry’s swollen cheek. “Little brother, if you saw yourself, you’d know why I don’t believe that.”

More laughter, unchecked this time. Perry shifted on his feet. The Tides saw him as a joke.

Talon pulled his arm. “Let’s go, Uncle Perry. Before it gets late.”

Perry's muscles filled with the need to move, but he couldn't give his brother his back. Talon let go of him and ran ahead in pitiful lurching strides.

"Come on, Uncle Perry. Let's go!"

For Talon, Perry followed.