

**GAMMA**



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**M. SUSANNE WIGGINS**

GAMMA  
a novel  
by M. Susanne Wiggins

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*GAMMA*, Book 1.

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN 978-0-9970736-3-8

eBook ISBN 978-0-9970736-4-5

Library of Congress Control Number 2016919730

Data available upon request.

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*For Anna*



*To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour*  
~ *Auguries of Innocence* by William Blake



Shadows  
Stolen Pearls  
Drake  
The Future's Past  
Infrastructure  
Newcomers  
Ripple  
Altered  
Ante Finem  
Multiply  
Discover Me  
The World Beneath The Island  
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Mea Culpa Genus  
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The Meeting  
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And So It Begins  
Acquisition  
What It Took  
Today Is A Good Day To Fight  
No Liberty  
Today Is A Good Day To Die  
The Ancients  
Epilogue



## Shadows

*Some argue that Gamma's end came with its beginning;  
...and so begins the end.*

~

There was no trepidation lurking in Meg Arcana's expression, nor in her thoughts. Alec looked at the branch in question and worked on a strategy of how best to arrive there. It was positioned in such a way that they could climb to it like they did the first one.

"We'll go up like before, but that's it," he said. "We won't go any higher 'cause it gets trickier and we could fall and die and then our moms will kill us. Okay?"

"Okay."

Alec went first, grabbing the branch then pulling himself up. Secure on the higher limb, he held his hands down to reach for hers. Once her hands were in his, he began the upward tugging. It was a little harder this time, as they weren't on solid ground and he watched her face for panic.

At first there was none, but when she was halfway up to the second branch primitive fear evolved on her face. Her eyes widened, her mouth opened in what looked like the beginning of a scream, though she made no sound at all. Fearing she'd fall, he gripped her hands tight. She seemed frozen, and her eyes were fixed on a single point where a limb branched from the tree trunk.

He leaned forward and saw what garnered her attention—a spider. Alec figured he must have disturbed it when he went up. The fact that the spider was moving made matters worse, as he could feel the increasing tension in her hands.

"Ignore it, Meg. Let me pull you up."

"I can't, Alec," she whispered. "I think it's about to jump on me. I know it is, it's a jumping spider."

Alec sensed her working out a plan while he tried sorting out one of his own. Suddenly, it didn't matter. A well-formed sphere encapsulated the spider, its legs now walking along the sphere's inner surface. Meg waited for it to move farther down the limb, but when it took too long she inhaled a deep breath and blew the sphere away.

He realized all at once that it had been *her*. Meg had cloaked the spider; he hadn't even considered the idea yet when the sphere formed. He recognized the concentration on her face and it was strange seeing it on someone else. Then it dawned

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on him—Meg was different, she was like him. His heart beat a faster pace and seemed overly loud to him; he wondered if she could hear it.

With the spider far enough away now, she allowed the sphere surrounding it to dissolve. Eight legs on solid branch again, it skittered away. Her hands relaxed, like nothing had happened—like the hiccup in time never happened. She simply finished her climb and sat on the limb next to him.

Did she think it was normal for spiders to fly through the air just to suit her? He scrutinized her, searching for some kind of knowledge, some sense of awareness, but found none. Meg was too young to understand that what she did made her different.

He wasn't sure what it was all supposed to be for, but he knew she was the only other child on the island that could do what he was able to do. Alec remembered how scared his mother was, and her warnings echoed again in his thoughts: *'Keep what you can do a secret.'* He thought of Ila, Meg's mother—there was no way she could handle Meg being so different from everyone else.

His gaze swept over the landscape. Unsure of why, Alec knew he was always being watched. Though he never saw anyone, he could feel their presence and the hefty weight of their inquisitive stares, and sometimes he heard their whispers in the wind. He made a quick decision, a brash decision, but he'd prefer a more secluded place to do it. Time to coax Meg out of the tree.

"What's that building?"

Meg looked at where he pointed and giggled. "It's a barn, Alec."

"I know it's a barn, I have one, too. I was just curious about what's in *your* barn. Do you have any animals in there?"

"We have chickens and two horses in there. You want to see them?"

"Yeah, come on."

They worked their way down the tree. Once four feet hit the ground, they took off toward the barn. Alec bent down by the entrance and picked through several rocks until he found the kind he wanted: smooth and flat on one side; heavy, but small enough to conceal. He pocketed it and went inside to find her.

She introduced him to the horses first; their names were Antony and Cleopatra, even though they were both female and heavily pregnant. All eleven hens had names as well and Meg could tell them apart, but Alec insisted they all looked the same. She explained that some of the hens were incubating eggs and it wouldn't be much longer before they hatched.

*Now's a good time*, he thought to himself, but then she turned to him.

"I like watching them break open their shells," she said. "Have you ever seen that?"

"Nope. Do you think some have already started?"

Alec wanted her back to him. If he snuck up behind her, she'd never know what happened or that he threw the rock at her. Meg turned toward the nest boxes and crept up the ramp to keep from startling the hens.

*Do it now*, he told himself.

When she reached the entrance to the coop, just leaning over to poke her head

in, Alec pulled the rock from his pocket and launched it. It made contact with the back of her head and landed nearby in the hay. He rushed forward to catch her before she fell; and, as though he was a bird swooping down on its prey, he opened his arms wide enveloped Meg like a cloak.

Other than the sound of crunching hay beneath his feet, the barn was silent. Alec lowered the unconscious Meg to the floor. He closed his eyes and concentrated harder than he ever had and soon a soft glow surrounded both the children, giving them the appearance of slumbering cherubs.

The sphere around them began to diminish, the opacity giving way to transparency and then the arc of energy vanished. Alec moved in a slow and cautious manner, unsure if he'd been successful. He lifted his arm off of Meg and waited to see what would happen, but still she remained motionless. He worried the rock hit her too hard and he found a sizeable lump on the back of her head. Alec leaned in and sighed with relief at hearing her steady breathing.

He brushed aside her mop of blonde ringlets to study her face, searching for anything different. Finding nothing, he closed his eyes and paid closer attention, blocking out the new sounds of horses munching on oats and the soft clucking of hens returning to the barn.

Alec felt it, something had changed. In one way, he felt bigger and stronger than ever. In another way, Meg seemed daintier and diminished in some new capacity. He opened his eyes again, but found nothing different about her physical appearance. Still, he couldn't be completely sure he'd succeeded in absorbing her abilities and this was the exact moment when Alec vowed to watch over Meg—forever if he had to.

He whispered in her ear, "I'll always protect you, Meg. I swear it."

She stirred a little and let out a small moan, worrying Alec as to whether or not she'd heard him.

"What the hell is going on in here?" came a thunderous shout from the barn door.

Alec's head snapped toward the sunlight filtering in to the barn's interior. His heart plummeted at seeing Ila's silhouette in the light.

"Meg wanted to show me the hatching eggs." Alec removed all panic from his face and voice. "But she tripped and hit her head on the ramp. I think she's starting to wake up now."

Ila's fierce glare softened, replaced by a concerned frown. She was by Meg's side in seconds, prodding her fully awake. Alec relaxed when Meg's eyes opened, but waited to hear what she'd say.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" Ila asked her.

Meg looked at her mother and blinked a few times, then she turned to Alec and the emerald-green eyes stared so long at him that Ila turned her gaze back to him. It took almost more power than Alec possessed to remain calm and indifferent.

"What happened?" Meg squeaked out.

Alec exhaled pure relief at hearing the question. Neither Meg nor Ila had any idea what he'd done to her and he would make sure it stayed that way.

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*Yet, there were those who saw. One, whose cloaked figure retreated to the shadows of the barn, glad she hadn't killed Alec after all. The other drifted away among the wood planks of the barn to prepare the way for a successor.*

"Alec said you bumped your head," Ila told her, though it sounded more like a question.

"I was gonna show him the hatching eggs, and then I... I don't remember after that."

Ila scooped Meg up in her arms and hugged her. She thanked Alec for trying to help and reassured Meg that it wasn't the first bump on the head she'd ever had and probably wouldn't be the last.

~

A quiet decade had passed since that day in the barn, and Alec and Meg were walking along the same familiar beach they'd walked on countless times before. They called it Alaret Beach, a combination of their names; Alec and Margaret. They had coined the term when they were children and it became unofficially adopted thereafter by the rest of the islanders.

At nineteen years of age, Alec was almost three years older than Meg and he always reminded her that seniority rules. Throughout their childhood, Meg believed him when he told her that being older made him wiser. As she grew older, she grew wiser as well.

Though he made it his personal duty to protect her for as long as she could remember, it never bothered Meg, nor had she ever questioned why he felt it was necessary. At times, she thought it was nice having Alec look out for her. But life on the island was easy, certainly safe in her opinion, so there wasn't much to protect her from, and this day was no exception.

It was beautiful and sunny out—and typical, since it only ever rained at night when everyone on Gamma had retired to their homes. Meg leaned over, picked up a shell from the sand, and held it up in front of Alec. He guessed its name correctly, as he always did, and laughed when she tossed it over her shoulder.

Alec pointed out their shadows. "You've read, *Peter Pan*, right?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Remember when Peter was in the Darling nursery and he was trying to find his shadow so he could reattach it?"

"That's one of my favorite scenes. What about it?"

"Want to play with your shadow?"

Meg quizzed their shadows, each of which walked in step with their counterparts. "Hmm, I don't know, Alec. It kind of looks like they're glued to our feet. I'm not sure how much fun we could have with that. Are you bored, or just crazy?"

"Where's your sense of adventure? And I'm not crazy, by the way."

Meg laughed. "My sense of adventure lives in reality. Apparently, it lives alone at the moment."

"Fine, be that way." Alec sighed. "It could've been fun, though."

Meg scowled at him, but he stared straight ahead, as though bored now. His light-brown hair was messy, like he hadn't combed it since the day before and he had a bit of dirt on the front of his shirt. The blue of his irises were uncommon, different from the rest of the islanders. But they were beautiful, as the sunlight seemed to agree and reflected how blue could be made more perfect. The color reminded her of the ocean and sky together. To be sure, it was a color to envy and she always thought her green eyes must pale in comparison.

"All right. How does one play with one's own shadow?"

Alec smiled, exquisite dimples competing with inexplicable blue now. He knew she wouldn't be able to resist the challenge, not even the idea of it. "Pay attention to your shadow and try to concentrate on it."

Confused, but curious, Meg watched her shadow. Nothing happened at first, but then her shadow's arms lifted in a sort of signal for her to wait. Her eyes widened at the sight, as her physical arms hadn't left her side. She wanted to look at Alec, but couldn't tear her eyes away from the sand in front of her. Instead, she looked at Alec's shadow and saw it was near motionless and facing her animated shadow.

Her own began to inspect itself in a self-discovery sort of way, starting with its hands, then arms, and moving on to the legs. When it reached its feet, the shadow made a small hop and stood upright again. With hands on hips, the shadow shook its head, as though just as amazed as she was. After a shrug, it twirled in circles, then performed an odd version of an Irish jig. It continued for several minutes before coming to a full stop.

Slowly, with an apprehensive shyness, the shadow turned toward Alec's still motionless one. Little by little, the void between the two shadow heads closed. When there was only an inch between the shadow faces, and after a brief pause, hers quickly closed the gap between their lips.

*It was a sweet kiss of youth; wherein the brief exchange, all of time squeezes itself into a sphere in which only two people exist. Nothing and no one would dare to interrupt, as it's simply understood to belong in the moment—a moment fixed in time.*

Meg's shadow soon broke from Alec's and sunlight again divided them. Her shadow straightened, turned toward her physical self, and resumed its rightful place. Just as quickly as it began, it ended. Both shadows were normal ones again—

*...bringing Meg and Alec, and us, back to our moment on Gamma's Alaret Beach.*

"Are you okay?" he asked her. "Your face is red."

Her face burned all the more. Meg scrutinized him and saw his cheeks were also flushed. "I'm fine," she said, but was curious if he knew about the shadows kissing.

"What happened? What did you see?"

"You don't know?" she asked.

"No." Alec frowned. "I had to... go away for a bit." He smiled, but it was forced. "I had to give a little of me to you so you could have fun playing with your shadow. You know, like Peter Pan? Did it work?"

"Yeah." Meg shrugged, then nudged him. "It was the most amazing thing to ever happen to me. Or ever will, probably."

"You still haven't told me why your face is all red."

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Turning redder still, partly from irritation now, she said, “My shadow danced, maybe that’s why.” Meg eyed him carefully. “Why’s *your* face so red?”

“Is it? The sun, I guess,” he said a little too quickly and stared at his feet as though he’d just discovered he had them. “What did my shadow do?”

Concerned he knew more than he was admitting to, but not wanting to quiz him about it because then it would be spoken aloud between them, Meg opted to drop the matter. “Your shadow just stood there looking at my shadow dance.”

A few clouds formed, blocking the sun from providing further shadow viewing. They resumed their stroll along the beach, and were silent for a while before Meg gave in to asking the question that kept nagging her. “Where did you *go* exactly?”

“I don’t know. Just forget about it, okay?”

As usual, she chose not to interrogate him about the strange things he was capable of doing. “Okay.”

Silence fell on them again as they walked. Alec felt bad for lying to her, yet again, as he seemed to be doing more and more lately. He contemplated her question and was hit with even more guilt. He hadn’t *gone away* while she played with her shadow, nor had he given part of himself to make it happen.

All he did was give back part of who *she* really was. Just a small bit so she could manipulate her own shadow. He hadn’t been expecting her shadow to kiss his and was surprised by how weird it made him feel.

Alec chanced a peek at her. She was preoccupied, thinking about the kiss, he sensed from her thoughts. Though it embarrassed him, he’d rather she concern herself more with that instead of questioning how she was able to do what she did.

He’d been worried Meg may somehow sense her true self, the miniscule amount he gave back to her. It had been a risk, but he was sure she sensed nothing. He was happy she enjoyed herself, and it temporarily stayed his guilt.

“Race you back to the path,” he said and took off running.

“Cheater,” she yelled, running after him.

~

Later that same day, a man walked along a stretch of shoreline not far from Alaret Beach. Occasionally, he glanced at the island to make sure none of the residents had decided to go for an evening stroll.

Jack Cavanaugh had ulterior motives when he took the job as a researcher in weather analysis, but he couldn’t figure out why he felt so drawn to Gamma. He looked back at the docks, checking that he hadn’t wandered too far away from the boat he *borrowed* at the research station to get here.

He figured he could spend a few more minutes to recline on the sand and listen to the waves crashing onto the beach. It was a rare treat for him, to be in a wide open space instead of cooped up in that stuffy office with even stuffier businessmen. He closed his eyes and considered how far he’d gotten in his goal to expose them for what they did to his parents. Having worked there for almost a year, Jack had yet to find a shred of evidence that the Stone Davis Corporation was involved in their deaths.

Something in the wind shifted around him and when he opened his eyes, a man wearing sunglasses was sitting beside him, smiling down at him. "Hello, Jack," he said.

"Holy shit!" Jack panicked and tried to scramble away, but got nowhere as his wrist was soon clamped in a vise-like grip.

"Relax. You're not in trouble. I want to talk to you about something before you go back to your boring job on Digamma."

Jack frowned at him. He couldn't argue against how boring his work was, but it was insulting hearing someone else say it. "How do you know my name?"

"I've been watching you. Every time you come here I walk alongside you. Today's the first time I'm showing myself to you."

"Is that so?" Jack looked down the beach toward the docks and wondered if he could outrun the nut job. "Can I have my hand back?"

"Promise not to run?"

"Of course." Jack ignored the eerie feeling that the man had sensed the lie.

Soon as his wrist was free, Jack sprang to his feet and bolted. Halfway back to the docks he glanced over his shoulder, but no one was there. He stopped running and scanned the entire beach where he'd been. Maybe he'd only been dreaming. He shrugged it off and turned back toward the docks, finding himself face to face with the nut job.

"Oh, there you are," Jack grumbled.

"You said you wouldn't run."

"You said you were invisible. Who wouldn't run?" Jack scowled when a smile spread across the man's face. "Who are you?"

"My name's Drake."

"Why are you wearing sunglasses, Drake? Maybe you've been smoking something?"

"I'll take them off in a minute. First, I want to tell you why I'm so interested in you. You don't know it yet, but you're unique and I think we can help each other."

Jack backed away a little. "I'm flattered, but I'm not interested."

Drake ignored the misunderstanding. "I can help you, Jack. You want to know the truth about your parents. There's more truth there than you realize. I know your past. I know your future, too. Do you want to see it?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Do you want to see what I see?" Drake asked.

"Sure, why not? Let's keep the weird and strange going, right?"

Jack resisted the temptation to run again when Drake moved closer to him. He watched Drake's hand go to the sunglasses and pull them down to the bridge of his nose, offering Jack a glimpse into the eyes that held everything.

He witnessed his future swirl with bits and pieces of the past, some of which remained just beyond recognition. Even the present moment worked its way into the fray of what was to happen. There were so many things he saw and wanted immediately, and was angry that he'd have to wait for them to unfold.

"I'm not done," Drake said. "Keep watching."

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By the time Drake ended it, Jack was torn between hope and sadness.

"I don't want to believe any of it," Jack said, there lingered a wisp of doubt in his voice.

"But you know it's true." Drake pushed the sunglasses back into place. "You have to decide now, Jack. Will you help me?"

"I'd rather be dead than say no." Overwhelmed, Jack looked to the ocean as though it could provide him with guidance. "How am I supposed to get through it knowing what I know now?"

"That's not a problem for me. But you have to tell me, Jack, do you want what I showed you?"

"Yes."

Drake grabbed hold of him, an eye-blink second before Jack's instinct to escape kicked in. He lowered Jack's unconscious form to the ground and suppressed the memories of what he'd shown him.

Leaning in, Drake whispered, "You're a good man, Jack Cavanaugh. Thank you. *Remember...* but only when it's time to." Then he left in a blur of color and light.

He didn't worry about leaving him there; Drake knew Jack would wake soon, angry that he'd fallen asleep and hurry back to his job at the research station. There was so much more Drake needed to accomplish, and after he made his way through Gamma's forests to the mountain region, he settled down in his new home—waiting to discover who else on the island will be among those to help him shape the future and destroy a tyranny that had reigned for far too long.

## Stolen Pearls

In the three years that had passed since the shadow incident on the beach, neither of them had ever broached the subject, nor did anything like it happen again. As their reality marched forward in time, Alec's vow to watch over Meg became more of a struggle. His easygoing watchfulness turned to aggressive guardianship the older she got, coinciding with her increasing rebellion against it.

~

They sat on two moss-carpeted boulders neighboring a small stream; their fishing gear and bait-crickets set on the ground nearby.

It was the middle of spring and the temperature was still mild. As they lazed in the forest, listening to the sounds that accompany this time of year, Meg closed her eyes to hear them with more clarity. The most prominent sounds came from all the birds singing their best spring songs. Right along with them, and for the same reasons, was a chorus of frogs and toads. Of course, their crickets had a lot to say as well. Meg wondered if they were also trying to attract a mate, or if they were chirping their swan song. The trickling stream provided the backdrop of the spring symphony.

"Guess what I found out the other day," Alec said, interrupting nature's musical.

Meg opened her eyes. "What?"

"Your name means pearl."

"Really?" She smiled when he nodded. "Not bad, I suppose. At least it's not something weird, like catfish whisker warrior."

"What?"

She shook her head. "I just made that up, silly."

"Anyway, Margaret's Greek for pearl. I thought it was kind of neat. Know how they're made?"

"Oysters, right?" she said, but her attention was now devoted to a toad hopping along the edge of the stream.

"Yep." Alec eyed the toad Meg stared at, knowing she wanted to pick it up. "Did you know pearls start off as an irritant to the oyster, and that it keeps adding layer upon layer on it until a pearl is formed?"

Meg watched the toad leap to the other side of the stream, as though it also

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knew Meg-handling was possible if it lingered too long. She turned her attention back to Alec. “Are you saying I’m irritating?”

“No.” Teasing, he amended, “Well, maybe sometimes.”

“Shut up.”

“You’re not irritating... much. I’d say you’re more like the finished product, a rare pearl.”

She gave him a sideways glance and it made him laugh.

“You’re the one who’s irritating.” Meg thought about the process of an oyster making a pearl. “I guess that makes my mom an oyster.”

“Maybe. What’s that make me?”

“Oh, that’s easy. You’d be the diver” —she held her hands up, making a snatching motion in the air— “who yanks the pearl from the oyster.”

Though she’d only been joking, there was an instant shift in Alec’s mood. His smile vanished first. Then he broke eye contact with her and stared at the ground, leaving her to guess at what could be the current cause of his increasing tendency to brood over nothing.

“What’s wrong, Alec?” She sighed at his continued silence. “I was being silly. I don’t really think you’d ever forcefully invoke your will and pluck me away from my mother oyster!” She’d let her voice boom theatrically, hoping to make him laugh again, but it only made him more sullen. “Hello, are you there?” She waved a hand in front of his face.

Alec looked into her eyes. “I don’t want anything bad to happen to you.” He leaned toward her. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Meg leaned in closer still and whispered, “I don’t know what I’d do without you either.”

Her breath against his ear sent a shiver down his back and it didn’t escape her notice. Meg backed up to see his expression and watched his gaze move to her lips. For a moment, she thought he might kiss her, but he sat up straight instead.

“You don’t have to worry about that. I’ll be right here, watching out for you like I always have for as long as I can remember.” He stood, putting a comfortable distance between them.

Meg stared at the boulder where Alec had been sitting, frustrated and embarrassed now. She knew he wanted to kiss her, she’d felt it, and it wasn’t the first time it had happened either. Many such moments had occurred, more so over the last few years, but they always ended the same way—with Alec pulling away and her never questioning him about it.

She hated admitting it to herself, but it became more annoying each time. As usual, she let it go and decided to ask him something else instead. She hopped down from the boulder and joined him by the stream. “How far back do you remember? The first memory I have of you is when you and Kyrie came over to my house on my birthday and I refused to come out of my room until you tempted me with tree-climbing.”

“I remember that day,” Alec said softly while staring at a school of small fish evade a hungrier, bigger fish.

“It’s always been kind of fuzzy to me. Tell me what you remember.”

“Come on, let’s go.” He finally looked at her again. “I’ll tell you while we’re fishing.”

~

Three large freshwater lakes dotted the island and the one they settled down by was their favorite, mostly since it was the one closest to their homes. The second lake wasn’t much farther away from where they were, though, and the two lakes situated side by side were often referred to as the twin lakes. A large waterfall accompanied the other, and it was beautiful, but Meg and Alec preferred to fish in the less turbulent water.

The third lake was high up in the mountainous area of the island. There were no shortcuts to get there and only one traveling lane provided accessibility to the remote area. A small population of islanders lived there and they had a smaller version of the main town center. They were sociable and friendly enough, but preferred living farther apart from one another than what the original layout of the residential areas had provided for.

At first, management had denied all requests from islanders seeking to build homes at the higher elevations, but they inexplicably changed their minds and allowed it. Their only stipulations were that all children attend the island’s school, regardless of their residence, and that the parents were responsible for getting them there daily during the school year. Also, any and all medical care was to be provided by the island’s sole physician.

“Have you ever seen the mountain lake?” Meg asked.

“A long time ago with my mom,” Alec said. “Every now and then she has to take something to the other general store.”

“What’s it look like?”

“A big hole in the ground filled with water.”

“Smartass.” Meg picked up a small rock and threw it at him. “Seriously, what’s it like there? I’ve never seen it, my mom refuses to go anywhere near it.”

“It’s creepy. Ila doesn’t want to go up there because that’s where Mors Cliff is. I don’t particularly like that area either.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot about Mors Cliff.” Meg fell silent for a moment and considered the cliff’s tragic history. “I wouldn’t mind seeing it for myself.”

Alec snorted at the notion. “Forget about it. No way am I taking you to such an awful place.”

Meg bristled at his presumption she’d need a chaperone, but chose not to challenge him this time since she wanted to ask for his help. “Hey, Alec?”

“Hey, Meg?” he mimicked her voice while baiting his hook.

“Will you help me with this?” She held out her own hook and the bait bucket.

Alec smiled at her reluctant patience. “What? You don’t want to bait your own hook?”

“You didn’t bring worms. You know I hate baiting with crickets.”

“Yeah, I know, but there were crickets everywhere and it would’ve taken too long to dig for worms. Here, give it to me.”

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After much debate about how to bait a cricket onto a hook without being squeamish about it, they settled down on a log with their lines in the water. Twenty minutes passed and not a single nibble pulled on either of their lines.

"Think we'll catch anything?" she asked.

"Probably not, but you never know. Are you hoping to?"

"Well, Alec, let's see... I'm sitting on a log by a lake with a fishing rod in my hand, hoping something happens. I think it's safe to assume that catching fish is my objective. So, what are you hoping is gonna happen to the cricket at the end of your fishing line?"

"Okay, Madam Sarcastic. I was only hoping you won't be disappointed if we don't catch anything. It's getting dark and Ila will lecture me if we're out too late. You know how she gets, and it'll be all *my* fault, not yours."

"She's getting better about it." Meg sighed. "I'd like to catch one at least, even if I don't keep it. It's so exciting when you pull a fish out of the water."

"I guess," he said. "It's kind of weird, though."

"Weird in what way?"

"Well, here we are... you know, the fishermen, and there they are in the water, doing exactly what fish do, they live in the water and eat in the water. We come along and throw food in the lake that we know they like to eat, but it doesn't come without a price. We put a trap on the food. A fish comes along, falls for the ruse, and we yank him right out of his home without a care in the world. We never even consider what the fish thinks about it. And you know he doesn't like it because as soon as you pull him out, he starts flailing about in such a way that's obvious his only thought is to get back home."

When Alec finished his fish philosophy, Meg looked at him and asked, "How do you know the fish is a *he*?"

"It was just a thought, Meg. An idea, a way of looking at something from a different perspective."

"I know." She rolled her eyes. "I was being Madame Sarcastic again. Remember her? Besides, you're forgetting something."

"What?"

"You went on and on about the fish, but you didn't consider what it must be like for the pitiful cricket. From *my* perspective, the cricket has it worse. It's impaled on a hook, which is bad enough, but done in such a way that it still lives to be enticing. After that ordeal, it's forced to be prey to predators with no hope of escape. Then, it was all for nothing. The fish doesn't get to live either after its trick of a meal because of the strings attached to it. Pun intended, of course."

Alec chuckled. "Excellent point."

"Enough about fish and crickets, you said you'd tell me what you remember about my birthday."

"How much do you remember?" he asked.

"I remember bits and pieces. That was the first time you'd come over to my house to play with me, right?"

"It was the first time Ila had a birthday celebration for you. My mom told me Ila

was kind of over-protective while you were a baby.” Alec snorted. “Actually, my mom was probably worse than Ila.”

“Yeah, she’s mentioned how Kyrie was with you. She uses it as an excuse when I get angry at her for not letting me do what I want. I’ll say how you get to do whatever you want, and she says it wasn’t always like that. She told me Kyrie was a complete weirdo until after you went to school.”

“I think it’s because of management. You know how everyone here mistrusts them.” Alec peeked over at Meg. He sensed her thoughts and found her still trying to sort through her memories. “What else do you remember?”

“Actually, I remember a lot of it.” A crease formed on her forehead. “At least up until the part when we were in the barn.”

Alec remembered this part clearly, like it had happened just yesterday. He’d spent much of his life struggling with the guilt of what he’d done, but relied on the standby of convincing himself that he did what was necessary to protect Meg from everything he and the entire island feared: management and the powerful influence they had over all of them.

Truthfully, he had no regrets about that day, not one. Meg had been different, like he was, until he absorbed it all. What shamed him was, what made her normal was what made him stronger. As much as he’d like to deny it, there was a bit of ego and superiority that came with absorbing what made Meg who she was. It also helped him go unnoticed and he relied on that, too, when the guilt threatened to keep him awake at night.

“Don’t you remember the spider?” he asked.

“Absolutely! That part I remember well.” Meg looked around the log. “You know how much I hate spiders.”

“*Everyone* knows that,” he said. “What about the barn?”

“Not much. I remember climbing the tree more than anything else.”

“Best tree I ever climbed,” Alec said, giving her a wink.

“What happened in the barn?”

Alec hid his discomfort by reeling in his line and saying, “You hit your head on the ramp.”

“Yeah, that’s what my mom told me,” she said, sounding disappointed by the lack of new information.

~

It was early evening and after catching nothing, they released the crickets and headed back to their homes along one of the footpaths surrounded by vast tracts of forest trees.

Alec broke the awkward silence that had fallen on them. “Do you want to try fishing at Alaret Beach tomorrow?”

“I can’t.” Meg snapped out of her thoughts of wondering why Alec always lied to her, to an overwhelming sense of sadness. “I’m going to visit Frank and Lena tomorrow. I’ll probably be there for a while.”

Frank and Lena Doscher were an elderly couple who lived near both their

homes. There was a small population of older people on the island and Meg had always gravitated toward them throughout her childhood. They were particularly fond of Meg, but none so much as Frank and Lena. They doted on her, fussed over her, gave her anything she wanted. They loved nothing better than when Meg came by to visit and she loved visiting them just as much.

However, she hated how their time was limited in their elderly years and it brought her fresh new pain every time one of the elders died. No matter how many times she experienced it, the loss never got any easier, and her heart broke in a hundred new ways. She loved them all and missed them terribly when they weren't there to visit anymore.

"I'm curious about something."

"Okay."

"I feel awful for wondering about it, but why do the elders like me so much? Sometimes, I can't stand it." Meg came to a stop. "That sounded really bad."

"I know how much it upsets you." Alec turned and faced her. "Don't beat yourself up for not liking death."

She frowned at him. "You know Lena's dying?"

Lena's declining health was common knowledge at this point, but Alec couldn't exactly blurt out to Meg that he'd been picking through her thoughts. "I just assumed that's what you meant. Is it certain?"

Meg nodded. "Frank told me a few days ago. Dr. Patrick said there's nothing that can be done, except make her comfortable. She'll die soon. Guess who she's asking for?"

"She loves you, Meg. Of course, she wants to see you." Alec took her hand, but when a warmth traveled up his arm and settled in his chest, he gave a gentle squeeze and let go.

"Right." Meg ignored the awkward step Alec took away from her. "I don't want her to die. I know it's inevitable, but I hate it. Lena and Frank are special to me, but it's not just them. Why do some of the dying latch on to some of the living at the end, and why does it always seem to be me?" She stared off at the nearest tree. "I swear, Alec, when Lena dies she's gonna take a little bit of me with her."

The tears that had been threatening her won and spilled onto her cheeks in a beautiful gracelessness. She wiped them away as they fell. Alec put his hand on her shoulder and the indescribable warmth greeted him again, but he ignored it this time. He wanted to comfort her, and at her continued silence, he pulled the length of his body closer to hers. As he stood just slightly behind her, Alec willed as much strength to her as he would allow.

He wanted her to know and see what he guessed the truth to be about the elders. Alec assumed they were drawn to Meg because of what they sensed about her. He thought they must see what he'd grown so accustomed to seeing that he hardly paid attention to it anymore. It was the unique light that always seemed to surround Meg, what he figured was the hollowed result of what he'd taken from her—the void left behind by thievery had filled with a light he constantly feared would tell on him one day.

Alec tried to find a way to impress this knowledge on to her without words, and especially without telling her the complete truth. He wrapped his arms around her, slowly at first, then with more purpose. Ideally, he'd like to transfer to her what he understood about the old and dying, though he barely comprehended it himself. He worried, though, how best to go about it without making irreversible mistakes.

He closed his eyes, trying to translate the knowledge for her. He put all the important parts into just a few feelings and thoughts so she would understand why they seek her out to accompany them in their last and final journey through life.

Just when Alec found the perfect thoughts, the tension in her muscles relaxed. She seemed to melt against his chest and he was suddenly cognizant of how close they were when Meg leaned her head back and rested it on his shoulder. His eyes opened and the first sight to greet him was her face leaning in toward his neck.

An all too familiar panic pulsed through his bloodstream. He wanted to look around to see if they were being watched, but he couldn't take his eyes away from the serene look on her face. She appeared to be at a strange kind of peace and he found it both captivating and bewildering.

A beautiful white light flowed all around her, it streamed away from her at times and thus encapsulated him as well. It felt more wonderful than anything he'd ever experienced before. Blue finger-like projections jutted out from the white glimmer and seemed to pet them both. Meg still had her eyes closed and he wondered if she was even aware of the animated light. He sensed her thoughts and knew she'd yet to see it.

What Alec saw was different from the soft light that always surrounded Meg, and he understood it was far greater than what set them both apart from the rest of the islanders. His mind raced to come up with an explanation to provide her with when she would open her eyes and see the odd enigma.

He relaxed a little at coming up with an idea that might make her feel better about Lena dying. Alec nudged her gently, coaxing her to open her eyes.

"Oh my God. What is that?" she asked in a whisper, staring wide-eyed at the strange lights and colors encasing them. They became more animated now. What had only been white with soft blues at first, burst into a myriad of colors.

"I'm not sure exactly." He frowned at how excited the entity appeared.

"It's so beautiful."

Refusing to give up on his idea, Alec contemplated his next words. However, he had trouble verbalizing anything as he continued to stare at the lights and colors, observing a distinct organization in its movements now. Alec detected a purpose, some intellect in its structure, and he desperately hoped it was only his imagination.

Less sure of himself, he said, "Maybe they're all the people who've come and gone. It wouldn't surprise me if some of the elders you cared about are in the more colorful parts."

"You really think it's possible?" The awe and hopefulness in her voice could've created new worlds.

He grew more uneasy about making up such an outlandish lie. Alec swallowed back the nervous lump in his throat and said, "Sure."

“Look at all the colors, Alec. Aren’t they fantastic?” Meg still whispered, as if afraid speaking too loudly would make it all go away.

“Yeah,” he said, mindful of a shift occurring in the enigma.

A stream of blue light came close to Meg’s face and it seemed to be looking at her. It had no true shape at first, but slowly developed one and sent it forward. Alec suspected its intent was to make contact and he tensed to protect her.

The blue shape’s projected arm paused at the change of atmosphere, as though having sensed Alec’s concern, but then continued advancing toward Meg.

He felt powerless to stop it from gently caressing her cheek. It moved a little higher up her face, and appeared to place a loving kiss on her forehead. Alec worried it might scare her, but she didn’t flinch. In fact, she appeared more at peace—happier and more perfect—than he’d ever known her to be.

It withdrew the blue appendage, back into itself, to rejoin the rest of the various colors of whites, pinks, and greens. Having resumed its initial form, Alec hoped it would leave now. Instead, it moved toward him and sent out a small tendril of white light so close to his face, he feared accidentally inhaling it.

Alec backed away, losing his hold on Meg, but it followed him and stayed within mere inches of his face. It occurred to him that the entity was searching for something. What it was determined to find he could only guess at, and now he worried it had done the same to Meg. Soon as the idea formed in his mind, the light conveyed a single thought: *‘I have discovered her, and I know more about Meg than you ever have or ever will.’*

Though stunned, Alec only wanted to stop the light from studying him any further. The only plan that came to him was to whistle. He let out a loud, long monotone whistle, then switched it to the first melody that popped into his head. The light backed away from Alec a few feet, and moved in a way that, oddly enough, looked like dancing.

But it soon came to an eerie halt.

It gathered its many colors together in a more combined shape and turned around in the opposite direction. Alec stopped whistling, wondering why the light had lost interest in them. He scanned the trees, fearing something else was coming. In the distance, he saw two brilliant orbs of white light, both of enormous size, headed in their direction at a fast clip.

The mysterious enigma of color also saw the approaching orbs and compacted in on itself, forming a tight sphere of iridescence. It turned to Alec once more, imparting a final thought to him, *‘I know what you did to her. It changes nothing.’*

It raced away from Alec in a blur and swirled around Meg before shooting off skyward. The two newly arrived white orbs chased after it with a speed that seemed immeasurable.

“What happened?” Meg asked. “Where did it go?”

“Where it should be, somewhere else,” he said under his breath.

Alec had no idea where they went, what they were, or what had just happened. Finding himself with no way to decipher the strange events, he rushed over to Meg and grabbed her wrist. He wanted to get her as far away as possible, fearing the lights would

return. Having tugged her along the forest footpath in silence for several minutes, he nearly jumped out of his skin when she spoke.

“Do you think she’ll be with that... whatever it was we just saw?”

“What?” he asked, sounding annoyed as he searched the safety of the path and trees ahead of them while constantly scanning the sky for light anomalies. “Who are you talking about?”

“Lena.”

He’d forgotten about their conversation prior to the lights showing up and scrambled to recall his last few words. What he remembered was how much he wanted to help Meg be at peace with accepting Lena’s impending death.

“Probably.” He shook his head at the creeping discomfort of trying to keep up the lie.

“I didn’t see yellow in that light. Think Lena would be yellow since it’s her favorite color?”

“If that’s her favorite color, then I know she’ll be yellow... if for no other reason than to make you happy. I’d be yellow for you.” Shame and guilt nagged him for making it all up. Figuring everything had returned to normal in the forest, he slowed their pace. “Do you feel better about Lena now?” He hoped her answer would make him feel better.

It took a long time for Meg to answer him. “Yes, Alec, what we just saw has helped me more than you know.”

He wasn’t sure what that was supposed to mean. It really didn’t sound like Meg at all. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

Alec froze, but Meg had continued on a few steps before halting, then stood motionless with her back to him.

He made his way over to her and tried sensing what bothered her, but found that he was unable to. “What’s wrong?” he had no choice but to ask.

Instead of answering him, she extended her arm and offered her hand out for him to take. He looked at it and wasted no time slipping it into his. Peacefulness began to find its way back to him at the contact. Meg turned to face him and the new look of defiance in her eyes surprised him.

“Did you make all those lights and colors happen?”

“No.”

“Don’t lie to me, Alec.”

“I’m not. I have no idea what they were or where they came from.”

“Then why did you say they were from all the people who died here?”

Alec frowned, wondering if she’d just tricked him, but decided to admit the truth anyway. “Because I didn’t want you to be sad anymore. Before those lights showed up, I was going to tell you why I think the elderly are so drawn to you.”

“Okay. Tell me now.”

The birth of new confidence in her voice puzzled him as well. Had anything else changed about her? He stepped closer and leaned his face so near to hers that she

started to inch forward as though he meant to kiss her. He smiled and said, "Meg, don't be silly."

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you going to answer me, or not?"

Alec grasped her shoulders to bring her nearer to his chest so he could whisper the answer in her ear.

"You're special, and the elders know it. I think they can sense things about people that others can't." He paused, worried that he'd been so caught up in sorting out what bothered her that he hadn't paid attention to their surroundings. "When I pull away from you, we can discuss how the elders see certain things, but I'm warning you now, don't question me out loud about why I think you're special. Nod if you understand me."

Meg nodded and moved her face closer to his ear. Her lips swept across his earlobe and it sent a shiver along his spine, forcing every hair he owned to stand on end.

"I understand, but why do we have to whisper?"

Still in a heightened state of awareness, more so by the fact that he could feel the weight of observation on both of them, he put his arms around her waist. Alec wanted the scene to look like two people sharing a private moment.

"Because they're listening," he said softly, and every muscle in her body contracted in fear. He ran his fingers along the base of her back. "Don't look so frightened, try to imagine what this looks like and go with it. We'll break apart in a minute and keep walking home like we normally do."

Meg relaxed and when she tilted her head back, her cheek brushed against his. Their lips were just inches apart and she pressed on until they touched. The initial contact felt glorious to her and she locked onto his fully.

A shockwave of energy shot through Alec's body, and he responded in a way neither of them had foreseen. His arms, still around her waist, tightened and his lips explored hers with increasing urgency. Alec felt a different sort of hunger, one that her lips failed to satisfy. When her body sensed the craving, she leaned against him and the intensity of her eager movements forced him to regain control of the moment.

He broke away from her. "Stop it, Meg."

The wildness in both their eyes seemed more easily tamed by Alec, leaving her with a feeling of frustration, yet again. Meg wanted to scream at him, but figured it would be more embarrassment than she could endure.

"You started it," she muttered. "It's getting late, I want to go home."

"Wait," he said when she walked away. "I'm—"

"Forget about it." The last thing she wanted to hear was a chivalrous apology. Trying to bring normalcy back to their conversation, she asked, "Do you want to come with me tomorrow to visit Lena?"

Alec hadn't paid a proper visit to Frank and Lena in quite a while, not since Lena started looking at him differently. Fearing Lena saw more about him than he'd prefer, he distanced himself from them. He made up excuses about having to work whenever he bumped into Frank.

"I can't. I told my mom I'd make deliveries tomorrow."

“If you had to work tomorrow, then why did you ask me to go fishing at the beach?”

“Well, maybe I would’ve put it off if you wanted to go.”

Meg rolled her eyes at the sheepish glance he gave her, making it impossible for her to hold a grudge against him for long. She sighed and said, “Tell me about your opinions on the elders and why they like some people more than others.”

“Do you remember Mr. Horton?”

“Yes.”

“I noticed he could get around pretty well even though he was blind, so I asked him about it. He said after he lost his sight to that sea urchin, his other senses got better. He told me he could hear things better than anyone else on the island and he could sense things about them that he couldn’t before. I think the elders are like that, too, even if they can still see.”

“Why do you think that?”

“At their age, they’ve known people longer. They’ve seen more people born, and experienced more death than we have. They know more than we do because they’ve seen more. I think they pay closer attention to details we haven’t got a clue about yet. I think when Frank and Lena look at you, and talk with you, they see a great person. They may even see you as a light or a color. That was what I really wanted to say to you earlier.”

Meg smiled at the apology mixed in with his explanation. “A color, huh? What color would you say I am?”

“Oh, you’re definitely a beautiful white.” He perked up at what he considered to be an all-is-forgiven tone.

She contemplated the idea for a moment. It made sense that older people were better at understanding the world around them. It made even more sense that they would want certain kinds of people around them in the end, but the idea of people being a color perplexed her and she tried to imagine herself as a white in someone else’s eyes.

“What do you mean? Why white?”

“You’re a good person. The elders can sense that about you. To them, you represent everything that’s right about the world. If they had to pick a color for that, they’d probably say white.”

Meg stared off at the trees ahead of them, all the way up to where they met the skyline. “Do you think all things can be seen as a color?” she mused aloud.

Alec followed her gaze and chuckled. “Yes, Meg, trees are seen as green by most people, young or old.”

She laughed. “What color would you say you are?”

Alec’s gaze drifted from the trees to nowhere in particular. He’d already thought about this question and had pondered its answer. He considered his past, his present, and his uncertain future. He considered Meg’s as well and guilt settled once again in his chest.

“I’d have to say my color would be black.”



## Drake

Frank met Meg at the door. “She’s not doing very well.” His voice sagged, much like his shoulders—his face more haggard than age alone would excuse. “Dr. Patrick said she won’t hold out much longer.”

She leaned her umbrella against the outside wall of the porch and stepped inside the eerily quiet house. It had been raining on and off since last night, unusual for Gamma’s weather, and it was the sound of raindrops on her windowsill that woke her up this morning. She looked into his eyes, the sadness there made her own seem pointless.

“How’re you doing?” she asked.

“I’m fine, but I don’t know what I’ll do without her.”

Meg’s heart broke at this and she put her hand on his. She also didn’t know what life would be like without Lena in it. He seemed to understand, as he patted the top of her hand.

Frank then turned away and she suspected he was trying to hide his tears. For his sake, Meg headed toward the kitchen with the flowers she’d brought for Lena. “Are the vases still under the sink? I brought some of her favorite flowers. I’m gonna perk them up before I take them to her.”

The flowers were perfectly fine, still wet from the rain, but she wanted to give him a moment to compose himself.

“They’re still there, where she likes to keep them,” he said. “You go ahead, child, I need to close the barn door before any more of this rain gets in and floods everything. I’ll be right back.”

The rain had lightened somewhat for more than an hour, and though danger of flooding was minimal, Meg understood Frank’s need for solitude. As she opened the cabinet under the sink, Meg realized she needed a moment alone as well.

She wiped the errant tears from her cheeks and grabbed the prettiest of all the vases Lena had collected over the years on Gamma. With the flowers splayed out on the counter, she filled the vase with water and began the arrangement. One by one, she picked up the flowers and placed each one in the vase, coupling them with fond memories.

The first were the sunflowers, the giant sort with petals mimicking the color of the sun and a rich shade of brown in the center that reminded her of oak tree trunks. The next three flowers were musk roses; their alabaster white petals so like silk to the

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touch, their fuzzy stems like velvet, and their fragrance unchallenged from any other in Meg's opinion.

After the roses, Meg pulled four stems of lavender lilacs, the flower Lena referred to as the most stubborn and persnickety on all of Gamma. Then she reached for the last two flowers—edelweiss, and they were not only Lena's favorites, but coveted by everyone on the island. She wished there were more of them, but they were notoriously hard to find and she'd been lucky to have found any at all. Lacy green sprigs polished off the arrangement, along with slender pieces of driftwood she'd found washed up on the beach.

"That's beautiful, Meg," Frank said when he returned and joined her in the kitchen.

"Think she'll like them?"

"She'll love them. Let's go surprise her."

And so they went, down the hall to the door that would take Meg to her last moments with a dear friend. When they entered the quiet, soft-lit bedroom, Lena was sleeping. Frank sat on the quilt and waited a couple of seconds before putting his hand on top of Lena's. He gave it a gentle squeeze and her eyelids fluttered open. She looked at Frank and a smile spread across her face; he smiled back—there seemed a lifetime of conversations in their smiles.

"Look who came to visit you." Frank turned to reveal Meg standing in the doorway.

Lena's eyes illuminated. "What have you got there? Did you bring me flowers? You precious child. Bring them closer so I can get a proper look at them."

Meg put the vase on the nightstand and sat in a chair near the bed. "I hope you like them. I tried to find all your favorites."

"Of course I like them. You could've brought me dandelions and I would've loved them all the same. How've you been? I haven't seen you in a few days."

"Helping my mom with the horses," Meg said. "Three of the mares are pregnant and it won't be long before they foal. You know how anxious she gets when the mares are this far along."

"Imagine how the mares feel!" Lena tutted, but there was a playful twinkle in her eyes. "Tell Ila to stop worrying so much, mares have been foaling for eons. They'll do just fine."

"I'll tell her." Meg was happy to hear the frisky edge still intact in Lena's voice.

Lena turned to Frank. "I think I'll have some of that soup you tried forcing on me earlier. Give us girls a chance to talk. Thank you, Frank. You're too good to me and I don't deserve you." She gave him a wink when he chuckled at her.

He stood from the bed, too slowly, and Meg figured his knees were bothering him again. A pang of worry settled in her chest, but she pushed it aside so she could focus on Lena.

Frank walked to the doorway and turned to them before leaving. "You two have a nice visit."

When he left, Meg got up and sat on the bed. She picked up one of Lena's hands and held it in both of her own. "How're you feeling today?"

“Oh” –Lena grinned– “’bout the same as yesterday.”

“Well, aren’t you rather cheeky today?” They were having fun, teasing each other, but Meg wondered if Lena put on a brave face for her benefit. If so, then Meg was grateful. The thought of Lena in pain was more than she could stand.

“Margaret Arcana! I see you frowning. Don’t you dare fret over me. I’m not in agony if that’s what you’re worrying about. Dr. Patrick gave me some wonderful pills and I have to say, I’m quite fond of them.”

Meg only nodded and offered a weak smile.

“I’ve lived a very long life and it’s time for it to end. I’m perfectly fine with it and I’m mostly happy with the life I’ve had. I had the best husband a woman could ask for, a lovely home, beautiful memories, and just as important as all the rest is you, Meg.”

“Me?”

“Of course you, don’t be an eejit. I remember when I first saw you. You were just a little baby, so precious and new. Why, I think I fell head over heels right then at the sight of you.”

Lena pulled herself up higher onto her pillows to look at Meg fully. “Margaret, you were a beautiful child, you’re a beautiful young lady, and you’re a beautiful person. You’ve brought more joy to my life than you’ll ever know. Understand me when I tell you, I’ll die a happy woman. Does any of what I’ve said set your mind at ease?”

She stared at the beautiful pieced quilt Lena had made and fought back the urge to cry. She knew it was important to Lena that she accept the inevitable and be at peace with it. “Yes, Lena, I understand.”

“Now, there’s a good colleen.”

Meg rolled her eyes and laughed at Lena’s brogue. “You’re impossible.”

“I know. Frank’s told me that since the day we met.”

“Lena?” Meg’s curiosity piqued. “Were you and Frank born on Gamma?”

There was a slight shift in Lena’s demeanor. Her dependable look of always spunky transformed into a somewhat guarded expression, and it took a moment for her to answer. “No, we came here from somewhere else.”

“Were you children when you came here?”

“No. We’d been married for about six years when we arrived, if memory serves me correctly.

Meg’s mind was full of questions, but the one she settled on had always plagued her. “Why don’t you and Frank have any children?”

The question was innocent enough, but the shock of it showed in Lena’s unblinking stare.

“I’m sorry.” Meg shook her head. “I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“It’s okay, don’t be embarrassed. You’re just being curious and I don’t mind talking to you about it.” Lena turned her head toward the window panes. “We almost had a child once. We’d been married for four years and I suspected I might be pregnant. The doctor confirmed it and Frank and I started getting everything ready. The problems started halfway through, but I kept it to myself. The pain got so bad that Frank noticed and he talked me into going to the doctor.”

“What happened?” Meg asked when Lena paused and closed her eyes for a moment.

“The doctor said the baby had died and that I needed surgery because infection had set in. I woke up later in the recovery room and Frank was there, holding my hand. He told me I’d be fine, but I knew he wasn’t telling me everything. So, I demanded he tell me what he was hiding from me.”

Lena paused again, as though going back in time to revisit a painful memory was about to get worse. “Complications came up during the operation and the surgeon had no choice but to save my life... I couldn’t have children after that. I got so upset the nurse had to step in and sedate me. I lived in a terrible fog after I was released from the hospital, and for almost two years all I did was sit around the house and read books. Frank did everything, and sometimes he even had to remind me to take a shower.

“One day he came to me with a letter from the day’s post, but I ignored it as usual and kept reading. For the first time since I’d met Frank, he lost his temper. He yanked the letter back up and yelled, ‘Dammit, Lena, I’ve had enough of this. All you do is read and sit around this house like a ghost. If you don’t snap out of it right this instant, I’m going to pack a suitcase and I’ll leave you.’”

She chuckled at this memory, able to laugh about it now with the passage of time. “Well, that was enough for me. I loved Frank more than anything. A life without him would’ve been worse than a life without children. So, I got up from that ugly old armchair and asked him what he’d like for dinner. He said he didn’t care about dinner, all he wanted was for me to read the damn letter.”

“What was the letter about?” Meg asked, entrenched in the story.

“About coming here.” The guarded expression and nervous tone returned. “It was an invitation, a sort of volunteer opportunity that management had offered to us. That’s how Frank and I came to be here, and now you know why we have no children. However, I’ve grown so fond of you, Meg. If there could’ve ever been a substitute for me, you’d be it. I want to thank you for being part of our lives.”

Lena let this be the end of her story and looked past the window panes again.

“Thank you for telling me about it, Lena.”

“It’s raining again,” Lena said. “Did you know that rain on any important day is considered good luck?” She turned back to Meg. “Sweet child, please don’t cry. I’m very happy. If you cry, it’ll make me sad.”

“I just don’t want you to go.” Meg looked up at the ceiling, trying to prevent gravity from pulling the tears down onto her cheeks.

“All right, enough of this sadness. Tell me more about how Ila’s doing?”

Lena was wise to change the subject, it gave Meg something different to concentrate on, and some of the previous misery lifted off her shoulders.

“She’s doing great. Management decided to make her the sole horse breeder on the island. The horses we’re waiting on to foal have already been sold off to the mainland. It puts her under a lot of pressure, even more now since management keeps nagging her to increase breeding. Despite the stress, she’s proud of herself and I’m happy for her.”

“How’s your flock doing?”

“I knew you were gonna ask me about them.” Meg smiled; Lena was always ribbing her for having too many laying hens. “My hens are fat, happy, and sassy.”

“That’s good.” Lena nodded and inhaled deeply. “I want to ask you about something else now.”

“What?”

“What’s going on between you and that boy?” Lena asked so matter-of-factly that it confused Meg.

“What boy?”

“That boy you’re always going off with.” Lena’s voice took on a twinge of growing agitation.

“You mean Alec?”

“I think that’s his name.”

“You know his name perfectly well.” Meg frowned at her.

“Fine. I know his name,” Lena grumbled. “You haven’t answered my question. What’s going on between you and Alec?”

“He’s my friend, you know that. We’ve known each other since we were kids.”

“You’re not kids anymore.”

“Maybe not, but we’re still friends.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Of course I’m sure about it. Alec’s my best friend, he’s the most amazing friend anyone could want. Are you implying he’s not?”

“No, I’m asking you if he’s more than just a friend.”

Meg comprehended the meaning and blushed.

“The color on your face answers my question,” Lena said and looked toward the window panes again. The rain had slowed, providing her a better view of the pretty colors she’d been seeing for days, swirling and dancing by the trees near her window. She considered asking Meg if she could see them, but was afraid she wouldn’t and that it had been the medication causing her to hallucinate all along. Lena thought they were too beautiful to risk finding out they weren’t real.

Meg remained silent, not sure how to respond, or even if she should.

While staring straight ahead at the window, Lena asked, “How far has your relationship with Alec progressed?”

She knew exactly what Lena wanted to know and heat blazed across her face. “Nothing like that!”

Lena turned to Meg, wearing a chastising expression. “Don’t be so horrified and offended. You’re not a little girl anymore, in case you haven’t noticed. I’m quite certain Alec has.”

Even when he pushed her away, Meg knew Alec was fully aware she wasn’t the same little girl he’d grown up with. “I’m not comfortable talking about this kind of stuff with you,” Meg said, shifting her gaze to the floor.

Lena ignored the hint and pressed on. “If you’re telling me the truth that nothing’s happened yet, I want you to make a promise to me. Will you do that?”

“What sort of promise?”

“That nothing will ever go beyond friendship. Even better, promise me you’ll

start distancing yourself from him. Make new friends. Find a boyfriend... or two. Whatever you do, just get as far away from Alec as possible. Promise me, Meg." Lena waited for the oath.

Though she feared it may break Lena's heart, Meg had no choice. "I'd sooner jump from Mors Cliff than make a promise I know I can't possibly keep. Why are you asking me to stay away from Alec?"

"Because I want what's best for you."

"Alec would never hurt me, he only wants to protect me and make sure I don't get into trouble."

"He's not good for you. He'll destroy you."

"Lena, that's ridiculous. Alec's not gonna destroy me. I don't understand why you're saying this."

"I suspect he already has destroyed part of you." There seemed a challenge in Lena's eyes as they narrowed to get her warning across.

Still, Meg defended him. "He's never hurt me in any way. I think maybe you're just being overprotective of me. Kind of like how Alec is sometimes. Could that be possible?" Meg affected light-heartedness in her voice, hoping to ease the increasing tension between them.

Lena snapped. "I'm not just being overprotective! Listen to me. I noticed something about him before he started avoiding me. I could see he was growing darker, like a blackness was taking over him. I'm scared that blackness will surround you, too, and drag you to the same place he'll end up. Promise me you'll stay away from him, Meg."

The admonishment seemed to have taken the last of her strength and Meg knew Lena would never regain the effort it took to get this emotional declaration out. Knowing this was why it was so hard for Meg to say what had to be said.

"I love you dearly, Lena, and I'll miss you more than you know. I'd give you some of my own years if that could make you live longer, but what I won't do is lie to you. Not even now, when I feel like you're giving me your dying request, I can't make a promise to you that I know I'll never keep."

Lena's face softened as she looked deep into Meg's eyes, and she held her hands out for Meg to take. They sat there for a short while, holding on to each other for the last time. The renewed rain pattering on the windowsill suggested a semblance of peace. Meg sensed Lena wanted to say something, so she leaned in closer to listen.

"Then I fear all you'll ever know is sadness and death."

Meg backed away from Lena, but held her gaze. Resolute defiance evolved on Meg's face before she responded to Lena's dying words. "You may be right, perhaps I will know sadness and death, but I have a feeling that'll be the only way I'll ever know about happiness and living."

~

Meg quietly slipped out of the bedroom when Lena fell asleep. From the hallway, she

saw Frank seated at the kitchen table, reading a book and sipping his coffee. She took a moment to collect herself before announcing her presence.

Her visit with Lena had been emotionally exhausting, but it had also helped her gain a more placid acceptance of death. Meg was thankful for how Lena imparted the understanding that life, and the happiness there was to have, was what you made it.

It was only when the conversation turned to Alec did Meg feel a kind of loss that their last meaningful visit ended in such an unfulfilling way. It was unsettling to hear Lena prophesize such doom and gloom with the eventuality of her continued friendship with Alec. She shook off the oppressive feeling and headed down the hallway.

She put her hand on Frank's shoulder. "Lena fell asleep."

"It's the rain, it always makes her sleepy." He closed the book. "Did you have a nice visit?"

"Of course." Meg focused on the best parts of their conversation and remembered the story about Frank. "She said you're the best husband and that she's lucky to have you."

Frank laughed softly and stood. "Would you like some coffee?"

"No, but thank you. I told my mom I'd help her in the stables today," she lied, all she wanted was to be alone with her thoughts.

"Want me to drive you home?"

"I'd rather walk. Maybe I'll stomp a few puddles on my way home," Meg said, offering him a convincing grin.

It worked, and Frank teased her again about how when she was little, she'd go out of her way to find rain puddles perfect for stomping in.

After donning her galoshes and saying goodbye, Meg saw herself out. She grasped the umbrella, but decided not to use it. Considering her raw emotions, she thought the pounding rain would complement them rather nicely. She marched down the porch steps and resisted the urge to lower her head when the first pelting of raindrops stung her face.

She slogged through their front yard, aiming for the footpath that led to her house. When she reached the privacy of the trees, Meg allowed her tears to join the raindrops running down her face. She came to an abrupt halt at sensing she wasn't so alone anymore. Through the wall of rain, she couldn't be sure she hadn't seen a brilliant flash of colors before seeing the figure of a young man standing a few feet away from her.

Some odd eternity passed between them as they stared at each other in the middle of a downpour.

He wore a reticent expression under the wide umbrella perched over his head. Meg thought how strange she must appear to him, to be carrying her umbrella instead of using it. She considered nodding a polite hello to him and then continue on her way, but he stepped forward with his hand extended.

"Meg Arcana?" he asked.

"Yes." She lifted her hand and he shook it while giving her a warm smile.

"Hi, I'm Drake Quinlan." He released her hand and put his in his pocket.

“Hope I didn’t startle you. I just came from your house and your mom said you were visiting the Doschers. I was just on my way over there.”

“You know them?” She couldn’t recall if they’d ever mentioned his name before.

“A little. Not as well as you do.”

“Lena’s asleep right now, but Frank’s there.”

“Actually, it’s you I wanted to see. Ms. Elwin sent me to ask if you’d help get the school’s auditorium ready for the children’s art show this weekend. I’m already helping out, but there’s still a lot of work to do.”

“That’s right, I forgot it was this weekend. I’d love to help. Tell her to call me whenever she needs me.”

“Well...” Drake hesitated and looked at her sheepishly. “I think she’s hoping you’ll start today.”

“Oh, of course.” She shook her head. “I wasn’t trying to blow it off, it just didn’t register she needed help right away. You probably think I’m an idiot. I have a lot on my mind right now.”

“I don’t think you’re an idiot.” His tone took on a sympathetic understanding. “Your mom told me about Lena. I’m sorry for what you must be going through. Everyone on the island knows the Doschers. She’ll be missed by all of us.”

Meg was stunned by his compassionate words and turned toward the path again. She took a few slow steps, hoping he knew without her having to tell him that he was welcome to walk with her.

“Thank you for saying that,” she said.

They walked along the path in silence the rest of the way to Meg’s house. She saw an unfamiliar cart parked on the lane with a rain cover secured to it. In the back seat were several boxes filled with decorations: a few balloons already inflated, a rainbow of crepe paper rolls, and ribbons and streamers overflowed the sides. The bright colors made her smile again.

After telling Ila where she was going, Meg got into the cart with Drake. They were almost to the school when her curiosity got the better of her. “You live in the mountains, don’t you?”

“Yes.” He looked over at her. “Does that bother you?”

“No.” Meg grinned at him.

~

As Ms. Elwin was in the middle of an art class, they went straight to the empty auditorium with the boxes of decorations. Meg set the box on the floor and looked around. She hadn’t been in here since graduating, but it was the memory of being Ms. Elwin’s student she tried to recall.

The auditorium was halfway set up for the art show and Meg chuckled when she remembered her own first-grade picture.

“What?” Drake asked.

“My first-grade picture hung on that partition.” Meg went over to one of

the several partitions used to hang the children's artwork on. "I was so proud to see it hanging here and how everyone on the island got to see what I considered to be a magnificent work of art."

"What was it a picture of?"

"A crayon drawing of a hen's nest full of eggs. Took me weeks to get it just right." Meg fell into a fit of laughter. "I wonder where it is now. I bet my mother saved it, even if it was hideous."

"Why would you call it hideous?"

She frowned at him. "Because I was six when I drew it."

"Hold on a minute," Drake said.

He rummaged through a large canvas bag and pulled out an artist sketchbook. Further searching produced sketching charcoal, and then he sat in one of the auditorium chairs. His hand raced across the page and when his brow knit in concentration, she took a few steps closer to him.

"Wait, it's not finished yet," he said in a soft voice.

She stopped and waited, but grew fidgety after a couple of agonizing minutes.

He looked up at her, wearing a tranquil expression. "Patience, Meg."

"Okay." She gave him a playful scowl and grabbed a decorations-filled box to begin readying the auditorium for excited first-graders.

She headed to the supply closet by the stage to get the ladder, tape, and thumbtacks she'd need to hang the streamers. After dragging the ladder out, she returned to retrieve the scissors. When she turned around, Drake stood in the doorway holding the sketchpad up for her to see. He had recreated her first-grade drawing.

"Is this what it looked like?"

"It's what it should've looked like," she said, staring in awe at the drawing. The shadows he'd created with the charcoal gave it such a lifelike quality, like she could almost pick up one of the eggs. "Wish I could draw like that."

"You can. Ms. Elwin mentioned to me she thought you had potential if only you would've spent more time working at it. I can teach you if you want."

Her eyes left the drawing and met his. Something promising, something fun and mischievous, swirled in his eyes, and it was intoxicating to her. She saw, or felt perhaps, something else as well—like a memory that hadn't happened yet.

"I do want that," Meg whispered. She lost her grip on the scissors and they clattered to the floor; the sound brought her back. "I mean, if you want to. I don't know how good of a student I'll be."

"You'll be a great student," he reassured her. "But first, we need to decorate this auditorium."

It took them the rest of the day to finish readying the auditorium. All that was left to do was hang the art, which Ms. Elwin would do herself. After returning the supplies back to the closet and clearing away the trash and boxes, they left to find the rain still coming down.

"Why are you stopping here?" she asked when Drake parked the cart in front of the general store.

"I need to pick up a few things for our art lessons."

A smile spread across his face and, for the first time since meeting him on the footpath, Meg noticed how beautiful he was. There was an infinite youthfulness about his facial features and curly brown hair.

"Then I should warn you now." She sighed. "I have an extremely over-protective best friend. His mom manages this store and if he's in there, you're probably gonna think he's the rudest person you've ever met."

"Why would I think that?"

"Because he's probably going to behave like the rudest person you've ever met. He's suspicious of people he doesn't know very well, especially anyone taking up too much interest where I'm concerned. Do you know Kyrie's son, Alec?" She hoped maybe they already knew each other.

"I've seen him around. Does that count?"

"Probably not, so I'm going to apologize in advance for the cold reception you're about to get."

"Are you two... *close*?"

She knew what he meant. "Yes, but not like that." Meg recalled the most recent fiasco of kissing Alec and it further embarrassed her. "No. He treats me more like I'm an annoying child that needs constant supervision, and he's the poor schmuck that got stuck with the task."

"Okay." He leaned over and peered into her troubled eyes. "I've been sufficiently warned."

Drake went to the art supplies area while Meg chatted with Kyrie, explaining that she and Drake had just finished decorating the auditorium for the children's art show. She also told her Drake had offered to give her art lessons.

"Lucky you, Nissa tells me he's quite good," Kyrie said. When Drake piled the supplies on the counter for Kyrie to sort through, she asked him, "How's Nissa doing? I haven't seen her in weeks."

"As witty and charming as an Irish woman can be." Drake gave Kyrie a warm smile. "How've you been?"

"I'm doing very well. Meg was just telling me you're going to be her new art teacher. I'm jealous."

"Care to join us?"

"Sounds nice, but I have a store to run."

"Alec could handle the store for you," Meg said.

"What about me?"

Alec had just returned to the store from making deliveries and heard his name mentioned. He saw his mother jotting down items in the ledger while Meg and a young man stood in front of the counter. Though they'd never been formally introduced, Alec recognized him as someone who lived in the mountains, and that he'd been spending more time recently at the island's school. Alec shrugged out of his raincoat and joined everyone at the counter.

"I was trying to convince Kyrie to take art lessons from me, but she's making

up excuses for why she can't," he said to Alec and held out his hand. "I'm Drake Quinlan, and you must be Alec. I've seen you around."

Alec shook his hand. "You've been helping out at the school, for Ms. Elwin, right?"

"Yes. She's been having trouble with her arthritis lately and I'm substituting her art classes on the days she can't make it. Much as I hate the thought of her being in pain, I do enjoy teaching her art students."

"When she retires, I'm sure she'll give you a glowing recommendation to take over her job," Kyrie said while bagging Drake's supplies. "In the meantime, you can practice by being Meg's teacher. Ms. Elwin always said she had a natural talent, if only she'd stop climbing trees with Alec."

"Meg's teacher?" Alec asked, looking at each of their faces for an explanation.

"That's what we were talking about when you came in," Meg said. "Drake offered to teach me how to sketch."

"I'll turn her into a full-fledged artist in one week's time," Drake said.

"I can't wait to see her work," Kyrie said. "You think he can do it, Alec?"

Kyrie had seen the expression on her son's face change from a pleasant demeanor to something darker at hearing the news. She watched him appraise the two standing together in front of him and got a feeling he hated the idea.

"I guess we'll see," Alec said, eyeing Meg keenly. He sensed she'd already agreed to Drake's offer and that she looked forward to it. There was nothing he could do to prevent it, which angered him—even more so that he wanted to. It soured his mood and he suddenly wanted to share it. "Meg, how's Lena doing?"

The instant frown on her face brought him temporary pleasure, but he soon regretted it when he felt her sadness. He caught glimpses of her earlier conversation with Lena and he understood why she was hurting. Some of what he gleaned from her memories hurt him too.

"She's not doing very well," Meg said.

Only moments before, Meg was so at ease, and even happy, and now a gloominess flitted across her face. Alec hated himself for reminding her of Lena. An awkward silence had taken over, but the sound of thunder broke it—startling Kyrie and Meg, but Alec and Drake remained unfazed by it.

"Meg, I'm sorry." Alec took her hand, interlacing her fingers with his. He didn't care that his mother and Drake stood by watching. "Let me take you home."

She nodded, squeezing his hand before letting it go to turn to Drake. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

Drake smiled ever so slightly; they hadn't discussed when to start their lessons and he admired her determination.

"Let me check with Ms. Elwin first to see if she needs anything. I'll call you when I know more. Until then, I'll give you your first assignment." Drake handed Meg a sketchpad and several graphite pencils. "Pick an object, it can be anything, and work on drawing its outline. Don't worry about the details, just focus on the most prominent lines of the object."

Meg glimpsed an acknowledgement swirling in his irises for a brief second

before they settled on a fixed color—a soft amber this time. A smile graced Meg’s face again. “Thank you, Drake. Tell Ms. Elwin I’m sorry I missed her today, and tell her I’ll start drawing the trees instead of climbing them.”

“I will.” Drake turned to Kyrie. “It was nice to see you again, and I’ll tell Nissa you asked about her.” He said to Alec, “Glad to finally meet you properly.”

~

Meg told Alec about decorating the auditorium, then fell silent the rest of the drive to her house. She’d started thinking about Lena again, and by picking through her memories, Alec caught more of their conversation. It hurt him to know how badly Lena thought of him and he stopped trying to sense Meg’s thoughts when he detected her turmoil and uncertainty. He didn’t want to know if Meg gave more credence to Lena’s warnings beyond what he’d already considered on his own.

The silence between them had become intolerable. Alec pulled the cart to the side of the lane, turned it off, and sat back against his seat. He waited. She remained silent, but eventually reached for his hand. The gesture comforted him, bringing relief that Lena’s words hadn’t completely turned Meg against him.

“Talk to me, Meg. I know there’s something wrong.”

“I’m just sad about Lena, and I’m worried about Frank losing her.”

“I can’t imagine it’s gonna be easy for him, but he’s got a lot of friends and we’ll all be here for him.” Alec hesitated for a moment. “Is that all that’s bothering you?”

Rather than answer right away, Meg scooted closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder. He let go of her hand and draped his arm around her shoulder, hugging her close to him. Peacefulness returned to him at sensing some of her tension lift away, but then she sighed. Her breath on his neck created a tingling sensation that caused his body to stiffen.

Meg lifted her head to look into his eyes and then her gaze drifted to his lips. Her face inched forward and he leaned away. When he removed his arm from around her shoulder and sat up straight in his seat, Meg’s mouth opened in shock. For more times than she cared to count, she’d been about to kiss him and he pulled away before she could. It was easier to count the times she’d actually made contact.

It was beyond embarrassing; it had become a shameful cat-and-mouse, chase-and-never-catch game between them. She’d had enough of the constant rejection, with just a hint of a reason to keep trying that he threw in occasionally. Even more humiliating was her consideration that he probably did care enough about her to stop himself from taking what she continued to keep throwing at him.

She scooted back to her seat and stared at the paved lane in front of them, refusing to look at him anymore. Meg loathed even sitting next to him any longer and desperately wanted to get out of the cart.

“Nothing else is wrong,” she finally answered his earlier question, her voice cool and monotone. “I’m very tired, though. I’d like to go home now.”

Alec noted a distinct shift in her emotions, as if she’d given herself over to a new resolve. Having refused to see more of her thoughts, fearful he’d hear more of Lena’s

unpleasant premonitions, he chose to let it go—figuring he could always sort it out later if need be.

“I’ll see you later,” she said after he parked as close as he could in front of her house so she could avoid the rain.

Meg gathered her things from the back seat, not once looking at him, not even when he suggested drawing one of Ila’s horses for her first sketching assignment. As he watched her walk up the steps to her house, Alec began to regret not probing her thoughts. When she didn’t turn around to wave goodbye before closing the front door, he felt the full brunt of her dismissal. He stared at the closed door for a moment before he left, confused by the overwhelming feeling of having just missed an opportunity to fix something before it was broken.

~

The phone rang early in the morning. It woke Ila first and while talking to Frank on her bedroom phone, Meg came in. Their eyes met and Meg knew what the call was about, Lena had died in the night.

Meg returned to her bedroom. She tried to go back to sleep, not wanting to think about Lena, but the attempt was useless—she kept remembering their last conversation. After giving up, she got dressed and went to the kitchen.

Ila was already there, sipping tea. When she heard Meg’s footsteps, she prepared another teacup. Noticing the shoulder bag and sketchpad Meg had placed by the door, Ila said, “I think it’s a good idea for you to immerse yourself into something new. I know you’re sad about Lena’s death and the best advice I can give you for how to handle the pain of losing someone you care about...” Ila frowned, remembering her own pain when Joseph died. “You just have to find something new to care about.”

She figured Ila’s thoughts had drifted to Joseph, Meg’s father—a man Meg had only seen pictures of. Hoping to make her feel better, Meg said, “That’s exactly what I intend to do. I’m going out for a while and I want to ask you for a favor. That is, if you don’t mind fibbing a little for me.”

“Fibbing? For you?” Ila raised her eyebrows. “I can’t wait to hear this.”

“If Alec... actually, *when* Alec comes by, tell him I’m not feeling well. I’m going to meet Drake for my first lesson and I don’t feel like dealing with Alec today.” Meg shook her head. “You know how he is.”

Ila laughed. “I certainly do. I’ll tell him you’re not up for visitors if he stops by.”

When Meg stood to take her teacup to the kitchen, the phone rang. She smiled and picked it up. “Hello?”

“Meg? Hey, it’s Drake. I talked to Ms. Elwin and she doesn’t need my help today. If you’d like, we can start our lessons.”

“I’d like that. How about I meet you?” she suggested, not wanting to risk bumping into Alec.

“Sure. Meet me at the lake with the waterfall near your house. In about an hour?”

“Sounds perfect. I’ll see you soon.” She hung the phone up and turned to Ila. “I have to go now. I’ll call you if I’m late for dinner.”

Meg grabbed her bag and rushed out the front door, but had to turn around to get her umbrella since it was drizzling. Once she was facing the forest, she decided on the longer of the two shortcuts, just in case. The last thing she wanted was to run in to Alec, and she looked forward to a break from his ridiculous broodiness.

She ran the whole way and estimated she had at least half an hour to herself before Drake showed up. Meg wanted the time alone, she’d been waiting for it and savored it while she walked alongside the lake. The grief of Lena’s death finally hit her and she sat on a flat rock by the water’s edge.

Crying felt great, and when the tears ran dry, a sense of completion relaxed her. Lena was gone, she was never coming back except in fond memories, of which Meg decided to only remember the good things. She also decided to give up on whatever strained her friendship with Alec. He wasn’t going to budge from his stance and he meant too much to her to keep testing him.

Meg caught sight of something white floating in the rippling water. She leaned over as far as she could to reach it. The paper was saturated and she laid it on the rock to examine it. Some of the lines had blurred, but it was clear enough to depict a drawing of a young woman sitting by a lake in the rain, staring out over the water. Beside her was a familiar shoulder bag and umbrella.

“What do you have against using an umbrella?”

Meg spun around. “Drake! You scared me.”

“I’m sorry.” He came closer and shared his umbrella.

Meg looked back at the drawing. “You drew this? How long have you been here?”

“I got here right after you did.”

She was horrified he’d seen her crying, but supposed she should thank him for not including that spectacle in the drawing.

“Don’t,” he said. “Never be embarrassed to feel.”

“Just the same, thank you for not drawing that part.”

Drake stooped down to retrieve her umbrella and shoulder bag. “Ready to start our first lesson?”

“On one condition.” A playful smile adorned her face.

An equal one spread on his. “I was already planning to take you there.” The swirling in his irises intensified. “I’d prefer not to have any distractions.”

~

Still early, they met no one on the lane while they drove past the town center and continued on to the mountain region. The higher up they drove, the softer the rain fell, and finally stopping altogether once they reached the place Meg wanted to see.

“Let me see the lines you drew,” Drake said when they had settled down on the very tip of Mors Cliff.

Meg couldn’t take her eyes away from the scene in front of her and she handed

Drake her shoulder bag so he could get the sketchpad himself. He opened it and studied the lines of the horse she'd worked on. She did exactly as he had instructed, drawing several examples of the same horse and focusing only on its most prominent lines.

"Very good. I'm impressed."

She took her attention away from the crashing waves below and glanced at her sketchpad resting on Drake's lap. "Are you sure? I was worried it looked strange without any details."

"Stop doubting yourself. You did what I asked, and did an excellent job at it. We'll work on adding a few details today."

She looked back at the waves slamming against the jagged rocks, awestruck by the explosions of white spray sent airborne for a time before returning to the sea. It was all so immensely powerful and violent, but it was also beautiful and she wondered why anyone would ever want to come here to die.

"Because it is so beautiful," Drake said of her thoughts. "Here, take your sketchpad and pencil."

She took them, saying in a playful daydreamer's voice, "What to draw, I wonder."

Drake looked out over the ocean and fixed his sight on an osprey just about to dive into the water. Instead of snatching up the fish the bird was hunting, it turned and flew in their direction. Meg's lips parted in surprise when it landed on the ledge next to Drake.

"He'll do." Drake smiled at the osprey. "He doesn't have a lot of time, though, he has a hungry chick to feed."

Immediately, Meg set her pencil to paper and worked on the outline of the osprey, who had jumped up into Drake's lap. Her pencil streaked across page after page, as she feared the raptor would leave at any moment.

*'He has to go now. Make this your last sketch and add detail to his wings this time.'* Drake instructed silently.

Meg's pencil paused on the paper. She looked at Drake, confused at hearing his unspoken instructions. The osprey grew restless, leaning and spreading its wings, its golden eyes searching seaward. She returned to her drawing and added details to the individual wing feathers. When she finished, the osprey took flight, going back to his previous task of hunting fish.

"Let's see how you did," Drake said, taking the sketchpad. He flipped through the pages and returned to the final drawing. "You're doing very well at seeing the important lines, and the details on the wings aren't bad. We'll work more on details tomorrow."

Ignoring his assessments, she asked, "How'd you do that?"

*'You mean this? Talking to you without speaking aloud?'*

"Yeah," she whispered.

*'It's nothing. You can do it, too. Go ahead, try it.'*

Meg wasn't sure what she was supposed to do. She stared into his eyes and saw

the irises swirling in a beautiful array of colors. When she leaned closer to get a better look, she was happy he didn't back away as Alec so often did.

*'Why do your eyes do that?'*

*'Because of who and what I am.'*

*'Our lessons are to be private, aren't they?'*

"That's right, and I'm glad you brought that up," Drake said, returning their conversation to speaking aloud. "Our time together *is* to be private. To be sure of that, I'm going to shield your thoughts and memories of our lessons... particularly from Alec."

"So, you know Alec's different?"

"Yes, I know about Alec. You're different, too, Meg. You're very special, more so than Alec, and especially to me. I don't want to talk too much about that right now. I'll tell you later, on our last art lesson." Drake gave her a boyish smile. "Will you agree to wait till then?"

"I'll wait." She nodded, feeling more comfortably alive than she ever had.

They spent several more hours perched on the cliff. When lightning struck over the island's lower elevation, Drake knew Alec had just discovered where Meg was. Having returned a second time to Ila's house asking to see Meg, Ila told him she was out on her first art lesson.

This was when Alec's mood darkened, and the weather on Gamma fell in line to join his allegiance.

Drake decided to take advantage of the lightning and positioned his body behind Meg's so that he could put his arms around her. He took her right hand into his and guided her pencil across the pages of her sketchpad to draw out the lightning strikes—each strike appearing to slow down for him to capture its lines properly.

"You smell like trees," Meg said to him.

He had released her hand so she could draw the lightning on her own. However, he remained in the same position behind her, looking over her shoulder at her progress. His arms wrapped around her waist and his face turned in toward her neck. Meg's eyes widened at the tingling sensation occurring all over her body.

"And you smell like flowers," he whispered in her ear.

Her pencil ceased moving and she closed her eyes.

"Speaking of which," he continued, still speaking softly against her neck, "tomorrow we'll work on drawing flowers. They're great for learning detail."

"Any homework?" she asked.

"Go to bed early, that's all. I'll pick you up in the morning while it's still dark. Make sure you tell Ila tonight that you'll be gone before she wakes up."

"Okay."

~

Meg was asleep when the colorful stream of lights trailed in through her open bedroom window. It swirled above her for a moment before reaching out a blue tendril to caress

her face. She sighed at the velvet touch and opened her eyes. She recognized the brilliant colors hovering over her as the same she'd seen in the forest with Alec.

*'Good morning, Meg. It's almost dawn, time for our second lesson. I'll meet you outside.'*

The blue tendril left her face and pulled the sheets down before gathering itself together and leaving out of the window. She smiled and rushed to the window to find Drake seated in the cart looking at her.

*'I'll be right out. I need to brush my teeth and get dressed.'*

Though still dark outside, the sun announced its forthcoming advent by casting orange and pink hues across the sky. Drake drove the cart through the forest along a barely discernable footpath that Meg wasn't familiar with. The trees grew denser and she wondered where he had in mind for their next lesson.

"It's a beautiful garden that none of the other islanders know about," he said and stopped the cart. "We're going to walk the rest of the way. It's just through the trees in front of us."

As they passed through a thick stand of tall evergreen trees, a magnificent garden came into view. It was unlike anything Meg had ever seen. Enough of the sun had risen to show her an explosion of color in the form of thousands of flowers.

"Whose garden is this?" Meg asked, astounded by its beauty.

"A very special woman, someone you'll get to know soon. She won't be here today, so we can have our lesson uninterrupted."

He took her hand and led her to a fountain. She sat on the bench beside it and marveled at how the water defied all she knew of gravity. Meg turned to Drake, thinking of asking how it was possible. His irises swirled again, reminding her of how she woke this morning.

"That was you I saw in the forest with Alec, wasn't it?" she asked.

*'Yes.'*

*'And that was you in my bedroom earlier?'*

*'Yes.'*

*'Who were those other lights that came after you?'*

*'A couple of old friends who came by to visit me.'*

"You'll tell me later, right?" Meg asked aloud, smiling at his refusal to share more information.

"That's right," he said, smiling back. "Ready to draw some flowers?"

They spent hours selecting and drawing various parts of different flower blooms. Meg grew weary of the process. "Can't we sketch a whole flower instead of butchering them?"

Drake laughed at her candor. "You're adorable, you know that? Okay, go find a rose you like and we'll sketch it."

Meg selected a deep-red rose and when she finished sketching it, she understood why Drake had made her spend hours drawing the individual parts of a flower. She attempted adding dimension, but he confiscated her pencil.

“I’ll teach you about shading tomorrow. We’ve done enough for today and it’s about to start raining again. Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” she said.

“Let’s have lunch at the café.”

~

While sitting at a window-side table and waiting for their food to arrive, Drake pulled out her sketchbook to point out the progression of her work. She caught on to what he meant; it was the importance of knowing the definition of an object before trying to capture its nature.

“You’re an excellent teacher,” she said.

“You’re an excellent student.” Drake put his hand over hers on the tabletop. He knew Alec watched them through the window.

“Where will our lesson be tomorrow?” Meg asked after the waiter brought their food.

“Depends on the weather. I’ll let you know in the morning.” He winked at her and looked past the window at the increasing rain. Alec had just left, returning to the store to sort through his new feelings of jealousy. “I expect we’ll have more rain, though.”

## The Future's Past

Meg was awoken again by Drake. As before, the blue tendril caressed her face and she decided to make sure her window was open every night from now on. Her bed sheet slid down from her body, and this time there was a long pause before she heard him speak.

*'Are you ready for our third day of lessons?'*

*'Yes. I'll meet you outside.'*

~

It was the day of the children's art show and they sat in the auditorium's top row. Drake had her sketch the backs of the chairs in front of them, coaching her to focus her attention on the shadows created by the auditorium lighting. They stifled their laughter at the increasing number of black smudges on their faces.

Meg liked the way the shading looked in her drawings, but wished she could go back to drawing the flowers again.

"It'll be trickier leaving, but I think I can manage it," he said.

When they stepped out of the auditorium, they were met with a wall of rain, forcing them to run to Drake's cart. Alec stood under the porch railing of the general store, staring at them while they laughed and drove away. Once they made the turn on the lane that led away from the town center, Alec jumped into his own cart to follow them. When he made the same turn, Drake's cart was nowhere in sight. Alec spent the next hour trying to find them before giving up.

~

*'Wake up, Meg.'*

She opened her eyes to discover the sheets already pulled back. Instead of the colorful lights hovering over her, Drake lay beside her on the bed, caressing her cheek with his fingertips.

*'Fourth day of lessons?'*

*'Yes. Unfortunately, someone's waiting outside this morning. Alec seems determined to follow us. We'll have to leave out the back today.'*

"I still need to get dressed and brush my teeth," she said, getting up to peek out the window. Alec sat in his cart on the other side of the lane in front of her house; Meg almost felt sorry for him.

She went to her closet and started to pull a pair of jeans off a hanger when a hand covered hers. Drake guided her hand to a different hanger, one with a white sundress.

“A dress?” She didn’t bother hiding her disgust.

“Please.”

“Turn around,” she said, rolling her eyes.

He waited in her bedroom while she left to brush her teeth. When she returned, they crept down the hallway and left out the back door. As a precaution, Drake cloaked them both until they reached his cart, hidden in the woods behind Meg’s house.

“We’re going to the mountains today,” Drake said after he maneuvered the cart through the trees and was back on the traveling lane farther away from Alec. “I want to show you the lake up there.”

When they’d arrived at the mountain lake, Drake instructed her to sketch the waterfall. She’d been at it for over an hour while he occasionally offered suggestions. Each time Meg thought the sketch was finished, he told her it wasn’t quite right and turned the page for her to start over. They sat on the blanket he’d brought and after a while, he lay back, continuing to watch her progress as she showed him one drawing after the next.

“I don’t know what you mean by *capture the motion*,” she said, exasperated.

“Take the lessons we’ve had so far and put them all together. Sketch the most prominent lines, add the details, and then add the shading. If you get it just right, you’ll have created the illusion of the moving water.”

She tried several more times, but still it didn’t meet with his approval. She threw the charcoal and pad down on the blanket and lay back next to him. “My hand hurts, and I’m beginning to think I’ll never get it right.”

“Yes you will. Come with me.”

Drake got up from the blanket and held out his hands to help her up. He led her to the edge of the lake and reached for the bottom of her sundress.

Meg had an idea of what he planned for her to do, so she allowed him to lift the dress and pull it off over her head. She stood there, clad only in her underwear, and watched him remove his shirt. She scowled at him for leaving his shorts on. They swam closer to the waterfall and waded under the cascading wall.

“Feel the way the water hits you,” he said. “Watch how it splashes down into the lake and listen to how it sounds. Inhale the fresh scent of new morning. This is what you need to capture, a feeling of totality in your drawing.”

Meg closed her eyes and listened to the water falling around her, visualizing how sound, scent, and touch could be drawn. She understood what he meant now and wanted to return to her sketchbook. When she opened her eyes again, she found herself already back on the blanket and Drake was offering her a towel.

“Dry yourself off and draw.”

She was halfway through sketching the waterfall, knowing she got it right this time, when Drake slipped the sundress over her head. Meg stopped drawing long

enough to slip her arms through the straps and resumed where she'd paused. When she was satisfied with it, she held it up for his approval.

"You did it!" He took the sketchbook to examine the details.

Meg stretched out on the blanket and stared at the sky. As had been the case for almost a week, there were only grey clouds to look at, but at least it wasn't raining where they were. She knew Alec was causing it, punishing the whole island for the time she spent with Drake, and she didn't care. It could rain forever; she was learning so much and enjoying herself too much to consider placating Alec's dark mood. The only thing on her mind was holding on to it for as long as she could.

"You said you could teach me how to be a better artist in a week's time. That only gives us three more days."

"I know," he said. "And I've been thinking about that. I have an idea I want to share with you."

Drake set the sketchbook aside and leaned over her, blocking her view of the clouds, their faces mere inches apart. Meg saw his irises swirling, but at a slower rate than she'd grown accustomed to seeing.

"You'll have to agree with my idea, though. It won't happen unless you accept it."

She turned away from his gaze. "Somehow, I think you already know my answer."

Drake hooked his finger under her chin and made her look into his eyes again. "Yes, I do, but you always have a choice. Never forget that." He smiled. "Actually, maybe I'm not so sure of your answer. In fact, right now, in this very moment, I feel stuck between two parallels because I said you can make your own choices."

"Then tell me your idea."

"I want you to tell Ila you're going to bed early tonight because you're tired and have to get up earlier than usual tomorrow."

"Why?"

"I want to come back to your house tonight and take you to where I live, to my house." Drake closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When they reopened, the irises had stilled. "I want you to stay with me for as much time as possible for the next three days, day and night."

"What if she checks on me?"

"She won't, not if you tell her tonight that you need to sleep for your early morning outing. Besides, I think she likes the idea of you spending time with me. Even if she did check on you and saw you weren't there, I don't think she'd ever mention it to you."

Meg nodded. "Yes, Drake, I want to see your house. I want to stay with you."

~

During dinner with Ila, Meg told her she was tired and going to bed. "I'm leaving early in the morning, probably before you get up. I'll call you if I'm gonna be late for dinner."

“Okay, sweetie. Get some rest.” Ila yawned. “Those mares are about to run me into the ground. They’re spoiled rotten. I think I’ll turn in early, too.”

Meg went to her room and looked at her bed. Truthfully, she was tired and hoped there was enough time to catch a quick nap before Drake showed up. She glanced at the window to make sure it was open and made her way over to the inviting sheets, welcoming the softness of her pillows. Within moments, she fell into a blissful sleep.

Her eyes opened again at the unfamiliar feel of someone else lying beside her. It was Drake, and he had fallen asleep. She looked at the clock on her bedside table; it was just past midnight. The quick nap lasted over three hours and she wondered how long he’d been here.

Meg studied his sleeping face. It was the same as when he was awake: youthful, boyish, and quite beautiful. Not how a woman is described, nor handsome like a man, but beautiful like light and color in its purest form. There was an element of nature in his features and it made her think of boundless expanses of forests with giant trees that couldn’t be measured in any sense she knew of. She thought of plants, leaves, and flowers with creatures who visited them she didn’t recognize, but loved just the same.

Yet, blended with all his beauty was an undercurrent of unrestrained power. It was almost like the sun, or how the forces of nature could sometimes be destructive. It reminded her of how the universe is destructive, but that it’s forgiven since that’s the only way to breathe new life in an otherwise hopeless and dismal end.

She reached out her hand to touch his cheek and it felt as equally beautiful to her as did his visual features. A series of images presented themselves in a neatly arranged collection, but then they occurred too rapidly and sometimes spiraled together, confusing her as to what they all meant and why they seemed so indecisive. One image in particular made her breath catch and the shock of it forced a gasp to escape past her lips.

Drake’s eyes opened instantly and saw her flushed face, causing him to analyze every second that had just passed. A smile formed on his face and she smiled back despite what she’d seen.

“You’ve been studying me while I sleep.” Drake cupped her hand, where it rested on his cheek, and brought it to his lips to kiss it. “The question now is will you politely ask me to leave, or will you come with me?”

“I only saw a little. The rest was too fast.”

“You saw enough. Tell me, Meg—”

“I want to know more.”

His irises, mirroring the emerald color of Meg’s, swirled and shifted to the rest of his body. The stream of lights, green and white this time, left her bed and hovered at her door for a few seconds and then returned. Once again, Drake settled beside her and picked her hand back up—like he’d never left.

“What did you do to my door?”

“Gave it a reminder that you need your rest, just in case.”

“How do you do that? How can you be lying here one minute and be those lights the next?”

*'Because of who and what I am.'*

*'You'll tell me later, right?'*

"Right." Drake laughed softly. "Actually, I'll explain it to you by showing you, but not yet. Are you ready? It's officially our fifth day of lessons."

"Are we going to your house?"

"Soon, but I want to show you another house first."

~

They left out of Meg's window and entered into a soft mist. The rain had stopped for hours, but clouds continued to loom over the island, ready to resume the deluge by morning. She followed Drake to the backside of the stables, where he'd hidden the cart before sneaking into her bedroom window.

He drove to Alaret Beach and parked the cart in the tallest of the sea oats. Once Meg got out of the passenger side, Drake gave the cart a brief glance and it vanished. He saw her eyes scan the sea oats, searching for it. "It's still there, only hidden." He tugged on her hand. "Come on, I want to show you something."

They walked quietly along the beach for a while, hand-in-hand. Finally, Meg was compelled to say, "I know this beach very well. I can't imagine what you want to show me that I wouldn't already know about."

"Is that so?" Drake was intrigued and surprised by her willfulness. "Besides teaching you how to sketch, and soon I want to show you how to add color, I want to also teach you how to be more confident. I want you to learn how to go after what you want. For now, you may *think* you know everything about Alaret Beach, but I assure you, there are some things you've yet to see."

"Ooh, don't you sound mysterious? All right then, lead on."

They continued down the beach, past a cliff wall, all the way to the farthest end before Drake turned their direction inward. When they got to the trees edging the beach, he pulled a tactical flashlight from his shoulder bag. Drake didn't need it, but he'd felt Meg's tension. He turned it on and a powerful beam of light illuminated the ground, and Meg sighed her relief.

"Thank you for bringing a flashlight. I was just about to turn around and run back to the beach."

"I would try to convince you that spiders aren't as horrible as you imagine, but it won't help. You'll always have an irrational fear of them. Don't worry, I'll shoo them all away before you see them."

"Everybody fears something," she mumbled.

"Very true."

"What are you most afraid of?"

Her question caught him off guard; he hadn't foreseen Meg asking him about his fears. Though it puzzled him, he loved these unexpected moments when he didn't already know they were going to happen. They were so rare, but he'd been experiencing more of them since befriending Meg and they were like precious gifts each time.

Drake contemplated the question and knew exactly what he feared most. "I fear being alone."

Meg swallowed back the instant lump that formed in her throat. "You're not alone right now."

"I know, and I'm very thankful to you for it." Drake frowned at his desire to say more, confused by the pleasant unawareness of his own feelings as they surfaced.

They reached a clearing at the top of a slope and Drake pointed the flashlight at a dense patch of leafy vines that appeared to be growing out of control. While maintaining the position of the flashlight's beam on the vines, he turned to her with an expectant look.

"Weeds? I just walked through a jungle in the middle of the night so you could show me a giant pile of weeds?"

He laughed. "It's more than that."

Drake led her to the front of the massive vine-covered structure and with a simple wave of his hand, a section of the vines parted to reveal a door. Meg gasped in surprise at seeing the arched doorway and her eyes explored beyond it to take in the entirety of the structure.

"It's a building," she whispered.

"Actually, it's a house. Want to go inside and have a look?"

"Obviously," she said as though he'd asked a supremely stupid question.

Meg climbed the stone steps to the door and the hinges squealed their disuse when she opened it. She stepped inside the dark house with Drake right behind her. The sound of a striking match preceded the smell of sulfur and then the room was aglow from the hurricane lantern he carried.

"I brought this here earlier so we could see."

"You were right, there are a few things I didn't know about Alaret Beach." She marveled at the interior of the house. "What is this place?"

"Besides being a house, it's a refuge of sorts. A place to go when there's very little hope left." He knew she waited for one more piece of information. "I built it a long time ago."

She nodded and turned to explore the rest of the house while he followed with the lantern. Meg eyed the barren walls in lengthy intervals, and when she continued staring at one particular spot, he reached for her hand and allowed her to see what would be there one day. She didn't question the image that burst to life in her mind, she merely studied it awhile as though it was already there.

Without a word, she moved away from it and headed toward the end of a hallway to a room made almost entirely of windows. As the house was covered in vines, the only source of light came from the lantern Drake still carried. He allowed her to see what the windows would look like once all the vegetation was removed, and with the sunlight filtering in the room from the vision, she found it warm and inviting.

"You'll create that painting I showed you a moment ago in here," he said.

Meg watched him carefully. "Is this supposed to be my house one day?"

"Yes."

She asked nothing more of him and left the windowed room. Meg paused at

an empty room halfway down the hallway, but remained silent and continued on to the base of the stairs. Drake positioned himself between her and the first step, preventing her from ascending the staircase.

“No,” he said. “You can see it later.”

His irises portrayed a controlled swirling of color that wouldn't settle on anything final. She understood it was important to him that she not question his refusal.

“I think I've seen enough of this house for now,” she said.

“I'd like to show you one more thing before we go.”

Drake led her to the middle of the front room and shined the lantern on the dust-covered stone floor. Meg could just make out a distinct pattern beneath the grime—a fading rectangular border of intricately carved markings.

She kneeled to get a better look. “What is it?”

“Many things, but my favorite part is the fantastic history written into it. You'll read all about it one day, but not tonight.”

They exited the house, and with another wave of his hand the vines fell back into place over the door. Once again, the house disappeared. Drake led her over to a large oak tree and turned her around to face the clearing surrounding the house. The moon cast just enough light onto the scene for Meg to see colors in various locations in what would be a yard if the house was lived in.

“Alec knows about this place,” Drake said. “He'll show you soon.”

Though surprised, and a little hurt that Alec hadn't told her about the house, she made no comment. Halfway back to the cart, Drake slowed their pace along Alaret Beach and pointed at the cliff wall.

“There's another place up there you don't know about,” he said in a hushed whisper, as though afraid someone would hear him. “Alec doesn't know about it either, but you'll both discover it together.”

“Show me now.”

“I can't. Someone's up there and the last thing I want right now is for her to see me... especially with you. In fact, let's get out of here.”

~

When they were a good distance away, Meg couldn't stand the nagging question anymore. “Drake?” She looked at him and frowned when he laughed. “What's so funny?”

“You, and how long you've been wanting to ask me, but not wanting to ask me. No, Meg, I don't have a crazy girlfriend hiding out at the top of the cliff.”

“Oh.” She felt her cheeks burning. “Do you have one hiding out anywhere else? I don't want to make anyone angry.”

“Nope, no girlfriends anywhere.”

“Then who were you worried about seeing you?”

“Not yet, Meg, but I promise I'll tell you soon.”

Drake drove along the sole island traveling lane to the mountains and eventually turned onto a forest path. It was bigger than the other forest footpaths Meg

was used to, but not paved like the traveling lanes. When they passed by a large building, Drake told her it was the mountain region's general store. He pointed out a few other buildings, explaining what each of them were and the names of the people who managed them. It was like a smaller version of the main town center and Meg was fascinated by its quaintness.

Though it was a few hours before dawn, it wouldn't be long before the first of the shopkeepers showed up to open for the day. Since it was still deserted, Drake stopped the cart and let her explore. She peeked in all the windows while he shined the flashlight inside. When she started to yawn, he coaxed her back to the cart and continued driving up the mountain.

The wide dirt path narrowed the farther they travelled higher in elevation and she wondered if he was taking her to Mors Cliff again. They were so close to it when he finally pulled the cart into a small clearing that had the worn appearance of it being his usual parking spot. She got out and looked around for a nearby house. Finding nothing, she turned to Drake to see him smiling and pointing upward—his expression akin to that of devotion. Her gaze followed the directive, and then she saw it.

There, amid the trees and perched over a moss-covered rocky crag of mountain face, was the edge of a wooden porch. Though she couldn't see it properly from the ground, Meg knew the planked deck must lead to a house. To the left, she caught sight of medium-sized boulders arranged in a staircase leading up to the side of the porch.

Her eyes returned to Drake's and an adventurous smile spread over her face. Before he could say a word, Meg took off running to climb the boulder staircase.

A sense of happiness warmed and soothed Drake, watching her make her way up to see the inside of his home. He retrieved their bags from the cart, taking his time so she could explore on her own for a while.

Meg was breathless when she reached the porch, breathless still by the sight that greeted her. The entire front of the house was open and airy by the lack of glass windows, exposing the scenery of the trees and mountains. Generous swaths of sheer white fabric—which billowed in the occasional passing breeze—covered the many openings, allowing moonlight to spill into the front room.

She knew when Drake was with her, she'd heard his footsteps and saw his silhouette go to a table against the wall. He lit several candles and the front room came alive with new light. The windowless room was for sketching and painting, several easels and canvases in various stages of completion leaned here and there against every available surface. His hand slipped into hers and he led her to the farther recesses of his home.

Drake carried one of the candles in his other hand and as they walked along, the flickering light showed more of each room, but she longed for the sun so she could see everything clearly. When they reached his bedroom, he placed the candleholder on the bedside table and she eyed the giant bed draped with delicate netting suspended from the ceiling.

He parted the netting and sat on the edge of the bed. When she came to him at his gentle tugging of her hands, he closed the netting again behind her and scooted them

both up to the pillows. Then he pulled the bed sheets over their bodies and cocooned her in his embrace.

“Let’s get some sleep before our next lesson,” he said in a soft whisper.

~

The cheery sounds of singing birds woke her up several hours later. Meg was still in Drake’s bed, but he wasn’t there beside her. She sat up, parted the netting encompassing the bed, and looked up at the cathedral ceiling towering over her. It seemed impossible to have achieved and she wondered if Drake had built this house as well.

“Meg,” he called from somewhere at the front of the house. “I can hear your stomach growling from here. Come have breakfast with me.”

She smiled to herself and followed the smell of something wonderful. He was in the front room, sitting at a high table overlooking the porch, and spread out on the tabletop was a variety of decadent food. It was the only thing her eyes would focus on and she dashed to the chair opposite him. The mouth-watering aroma turned out to be freshly baked bread—she wasted no time, snatching off the loaf’s prime heel piece and slathered on butter before devouring it. Drake watched her, smiling, and she didn’t care what he thought of her ravenous appetite.

While buttering a second slice, she surveyed the rest of the options. There was a plate of beautifully arranged cheeses accompanied with fruit, both fresh and cut in artisan preparation. Drake selected what he considered to be the best of the cheeses and spread on a thin layer of fig confit, sprinkling it with walnut shavings. He held the piece up to her lips and waited for her to open up, which she did and then closed her eyes. An explosion of flavors rewarded her and she opened her eyes again at his urging.

Drake held a glass of red wine in front of her, insisting she complement the flavors with it. Meg took the offered glass and sipped it, enjoying the finishing flavors the wine had created on her palate while he nibbled on Corinth grapes from the plate of cheeses.

“I like the way you eat,” she said, reaching for a different selection of cheese, topping it with a blackberry glaze.

“I thought you’d like it.”

When she satisfied her hunger, Meg eyed the canvases. She could see them better now in the daylight, and she studied each and every one. One in particular grabbed her interest and she got up from the chair to examine the biggest of all the canvases in the room, also among the most completed ones.

It depicted a forest scene, but unlike any she knew of. The enormous size of the tree trunks was proof that it wasn’t a Gamma forest scene. One of the trees held a nest, bigger than that of an osprey’s, with multiple vines bearing gigantic leaves trailing down the sides. That alone was impressive, but it was the center of the painting that pulled her in. A tiny bird approached an enormous flower and all around the scene there seemed a busyness that escaped her full knowledge.

Meg felt Drake’s presence behind her. “That’s not from here, is it?”

“No. It’s of where I came from. You can’t see the colors properly because...” He hesitated briefly, then wrapped his arms around her. “Can you see it now?”

An incredible knowledge filled her and she saw more of the painting she hadn’t noticed before. There were colors there she couldn’t name and they dazzled her eyes. Not only that, but she saw the tiny bird’s wings beating to stay aloft. It reminded her of the waterfall sketching lesson Drake tried so hard to make her understand—*capture the motion*.

“You see it now, don’t you?” he asked.

“Yes, I can see it. I want to paint like that.”

“And you will” –Drake turned her around– “in just a little bit. We should make a painting for Ila so she doesn’t start doubting what we’re up to.”

“Think she’s starting to?”

“Not yet, but she will if you don’t give her something by tonight.”

Drake went back to the table and gathered the rest of their breakfast. He took the bounty outside, amassing it all in a hollowed out log positioned near a small creek running alongside the length of his front yard. Meg watched him from the hammock strung on the porch until he fussed at her to follow him to the prepared scene.

He handed over her sketchpad and pencils. “I want you to sketch a drawing of the ravens eating the rest of our breakfast. Remember our first lesson of focusing on the most prominent lines, but make sure to pay attention to details so you can paint them in later.”

Meg glanced at the log, “I don’t see any ravens.”

Drake looked up into the treetops and swept his arm in a beckoning motion. Within seconds, two healthy-sized ravens descended onto the log, cawing at each other in what appeared to be a discussion on who got first dibs on the cheese.

“You have about twenty, maybe thirty, minutes to sketch them, and don’t forget to draw outlines of the trees in the background.”

Drake took up residence in the vacated hammock while she frantically sketched the ravens gorging themselves on the food. Even after the cheese and bread were consumed, and while the ravens considered the feasibility of being able to eat or carry away the fruit, her pencil raced across the page. When they left, she focused on the lines of the trees behind the log.

In her peripheral vision, she saw the familiar stream of colors descend from the porch and come to a stop near her. “Well, what do you think?” she asked, holding the sketchbook up.

“You even managed to capture them arguing with each other.” He took the drawing and walked back to the stone staircase. “Now, let’s go make a painting out of it.”

Meg followed him inside to the front room where he’d already set up an area for her painting lesson. He motioned for her to sit on the stool in front of a blank canvas. They spent hours perfecting the painting, not one second bored her and she looked forward to having her own studio one day.

There were moments when Drake enveloped her body and took her hand into

his to show her how to paint a troublesome area of shadows beneath the ravens, or to teach her how to blend the oil paints directly onto the canvas. Each time he touched her, she grew more aware of their close proximity, and even more perplexing was how her body responded to it.

The painting was declared finished as early evening approached. Drake studied it and smiled his satisfaction that she had captured the essence of the scene's motion. He waved his hand across the surface and the oil paints instantly dried.

"Impressive, Meg," he said, still viewing the work. "You're very talented. Even from the very beginning..."

He turned around, noticing her silence, and found her looking out over the porch railing at the skyline. Drake had a sense he was about to experience another one of those coveted moments he hadn't foreseen.

She faced him after he'd only taken a few steps. His presence in her life had filled the hole Alec left behind when he absorbed who she really was. Meg grew stronger; Drake suspected she may even be absorbing a bit of himself. If so, he didn't care—he'd gladly give it all to her if he thought she'd have it. He stopped walking toward her and waited for her to speak.

"Our fifth day is almost over," she said.

"That's right." He hated the reminder. "I'm about to take you back to Ila so you can have dinner with her and give her the painting."

"I want to know what's really happening here."

"I know you do. I'll tell you—"

"Soon, that's what you keep saying."

Meg teetered on a thought, and then it came to him—the part Drake hadn't foreseen.

She looked up at the sky. "You know, all I have to do is think about Alec for more than a few seconds and..." She left the rest of the warning suspended and a bolt of lightning blazed across the sky above them. The sound of thunder soon followed and rain finished the procession.

"Stop it, Meg. You'll send more than just Alec after us. I swear, I'll tell you. I'll show you tomorrow. Please, don't make me tell you now."

Drake rushed the rest of the way to her in a blurry trail of light and color, encasing her in a brief eternity before returning himself to a physical form and wrapping his arms around her. Meg felt horrible again, reminiscent of when he told her his worst fear. She suspected that same fear caused his sudden anguish. Her arms went around him, hoping to calm his trembling.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. I trust you, Drake."

He pulled away from her and cupped her face in his hands. "Don't be sorry. I'm asking a lot of you, and I'm afraid to say there's more I'll ask. Will you be patient with me a little while longer?"

"Yes."

~

Meg sat at her dining table, informing her mother that she'd be going to bed early again. Ila finished the last of her dinner and glanced at the painting Meg had given her.

"Fine by me, especially if you keep bringing me presents."

After they cleared away the dishes, Meg showered and retired to her bedroom. She expected Drake would be there waiting for her, but the room was empty and so she went about the task of getting her bag ready. While reaching into her dresser drawer for a shirt, the thinnest trail of blue light streamed in and settled over a white one. She smiled and picked the shirt up, pulling it over her head while the animated blue light raced in and out of the shirt's sleeves, making her giggle.

"Stop, that tickles," she said, keeping her protests to a hushed whisper.

Drake materialized in front of her, fixing her collar and tucking the shirt into her shorts. "Ready?" he asked.

"Don't you need to remind my door again?"

He looked at her bedroom door and chuckled. "It still remembers."

They left out of their usual exit of Meg's bedroom window and Drake drove them to an area of vacant houses. He held her hand while they walked around all three of them. She waited for him to explain why he'd brought her here, but he remained silent.

"Why are we here?" she asked. "These are newcomer houses."

"There'll be some newcomers soon, and they'll change everything." Drake faced her. "So will you, and these newcomers will help us make that happen."

Drake led her back to the cart and drove up the mountain lane to his house. When they arrived, she waited for him instead of bounding up the stone staircase ahead of him. Once inside, Meg lit the candles herself and took his hand into hers to lead him to his bedroom.

"Can we sleep for a while?" Meg parted the netting surrounding the bed, hoping he hadn't planned on having her draw the moon. "I'm really tired."

Like before, he sat on the edge of the bed and tugged her down with him toward the pillows, encircling his arms around her as they settled among the sheets. Before she drifted off to sleep, he shared an idea with her.

"I want you to stay here for the remainder of our time together. I'll go down tomorrow evening and handle Ila myself, but you'll have to go back to her the following evening. Are you okay with this, do you want to stay with me?"

"Yes, Drake." She closed her eyes, welcoming sleep. "That's exactly what I want."

~

Meg's eyelids fluttered open, and the harshness of daylight made her squint. When her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw Drake sitting up on the bed with his sketchbook, in deep concentration on whatever it was he'd been drawing.

He glanced up and saw she'd awoken. "Good thing I'm finished with it." He turned the sketchbook around for her to see.

It was a drawing of her asleep in the very position she still reclined, its depiction

was exact and flawless. Meg scanned the bed's surface and discovered several more pages of her in various sleeping positions strewn about the sheets.

She grimaced at one of them. "No way! I can't believe you drew me with my mouth open like that. It looks horrible. Please, tell me I wasn't snoring."

"You could never look horrible, Meg. Surely, you know how beautiful you are."

Meg averted her eyes at the compliment and fiddled with a crease in the bed sheet. "If I went around thinking that about myself, I'd be a vain and conceited person." Her voice was soft, but determined. "And I don't ever want to be like that."

"Vanity isn't the same thing as confidence." Drake set the sketchbook aside. He put a hand over hers, stopping her nervous fidgeting with the bed sheet. His other hand went to her chin to lift her face toward his. "Don't forget, our final lesson will be about increasing your confidence in every aspect of what makes you who you are."

She smiled. "You haven't answered me yet."

"No, Meg, you don't snore."

~

At breakfast, Drake blindfolded Meg, explaining that a good way for her to have more confidence in herself was to learn how to trust her senses. He tied a white cloth around her eyes, then returned to the seat across from her to continue the lesson.

"Open your mouth," he instructed. "I'm going to feed you and you'll have to tell me what it is."

Meg smiled first before opening her mouth. His fingers brushed past her lips as he placed something cool and soft on her tongue.

"What do you taste?"

She closed her mouth and analyzed the flavors and textures of the food on her tongue. It was a fruit for certain—the sweet was there—but it wasn't as firm and crisp as an apple. "A pear?"

"Very good. Let's try something else."

"Grape," she said quickly of the next object.

"That was an easy one."

After she correctly guessed a strawberry, an orange slice, and lemon zest, he tried a different kind of food. "Okay, what do you taste now? I'll give you a hint, it's not a fruit this time."

She squished the food around in her mouth with her tongue; its texture was noticeably different from the fruit and had a creamy quality. "Cheese."

"What kind?" he tested further.

"Well, I've already eaten it. Can I have another piece?" She opened her mouth and Drake put another cube on her tongue. "Goat?"

"Exactly. Let's try adding your sense of touch before you taste."

Something soft brushed against her lips, but its edges were course and grainy-like. It was delicate, too, as she could feel parts of it crumbling away. "I think I know this one. Can I eat it now? Bread is probably my favorite food."

Drake fed her the bread and after a few seconds of silence, Meg felt something wet pass across her lips. A droplet fell off her bottom lip and ran down her chin, falling to the table. After a second swipe of the same sensation, she asked, “Am I allowed to taste it?”

“Yes.”

She licked her lips and knew instantly what it was. “Wine... red, and don’t ask me the year because I don’t know.”

Meg heard him chuckle, and then the sound of his chair moving; she readied herself for the next object. It was soft, not wet like the wine, but not dry like the bread. Whatever it was, it gently tugged at her bottom lip. An idea presented itself in her mind, but she was afraid to voice it and tried to come up with an alternative. The object left and awaited her answer.

“Um, a flower... petals, I mean?”

“No. This is the first one you got wrong. Try again, and don’t be afraid to trust what you know.”

The soft objects returned to her lips, caressing, and she knew exactly what they were—she could feel his breath, and she’d memorized his scent days ago. Though still deprived of sight, she could almost see them. They felt so wonderful; she prolonged giving her answer, fearing it would end the test.

“What do you feel, Meg?” the objects whispered.

“Your lips,” she whispered back.

“Yes.”

His lips left hers, and then she sensed he was all around her, urging her to stand from the chair. She could barely feel the floor beneath her feet as he led her back to the bedroom. Though still blindfolded, Meg knew they stood beside the bed. Hands went to her arms, lifting them above her head, and her shirt was tugged up and then off. Her shorts were unbuttoned and pulled down, and she lifted her feet so they could be moved aside.

Delicate fingers went to her chest and unclasped the bra, slipping it away from her arms. These same hands pulled down her underwear and helped her step out of them. Meg stood there, wearing only the blindfold, feeling as though she was being studied before Drake gently guided her to lay down on the soft sheets.

He scooted himself onto the mattress, sitting beside her, and she heard the sound of charcoal scratching against paper. Meg allowed her body to relax and after a while a smile curved her lips.

“Yes, that’s perfect,” he said. “Keep smiling like that.” The fervent race across the page resumed. When it slowed and came to a stop, she heard it being torn from the sketchbook. “Roll over and turn your head toward me.”

Meg did as he asked and after another long while of him sketching her form, his hand went to the back of her head to untie the blindfold. Her gaze fell to the most recent of his drawings and a rosy color spread on her face, made redder when he showed her the first drawing.

“Too bad I’m not painting, that’s a beautiful pink on your face.” He flung the sketchbook aside.

Drake lay down and pulled her to him, hugging her tight. Meg couldn't begin to describe the growing sensation of heat building inside her at the feel of her nakedness against him, and was glad he still had his clothes on.

"Don't be ashamed of your body, it's wonderful. I should know, I just drew it several times," he said as though giving her perfectly sound advice.

Regardless of his assurances, Meg pulled away a little and tried to tug the bed sheet up, but he gently nudged her hand away. He propped himself up on his elbow to peruse her body from an elevated angle. She knew he'd already studied her bared physique, but it had been easier when she was blindfolded. Meg started to close her eyes, but he wouldn't allow it.

"No, keep them open. I want you to watch me looking at your body."

Meg focused on his eyes, the irises swirled intensely while they studied every inch of her, occasionally lingering in some places longer than others. Something changed in her after the initial feelings of modesty had passed—she started to feel emboldened and infinitely braver. She found the discarded blindfold and draped it over his eyes, tying it behind his head before relaxing back against the pillows.

She picked his hand up from where it rested on the bed between them and placed it palm down onto her abdomen.

"Tell me what you feel," she said.

"Downy soft skin, and delicate, like peaches. Goosebumps are rising, you're chilled."

There was some initial nervousness at having their roles reversed, but he soon regained his own confidence. Drake's fingers splayed out across her belly and he allowed his hand to explore every detail of her, as his eyes had done. At times, he felt her body quiver and he had to pause before continuing on, fearing things were going too far, too quickly.

He pulled the blindfold off, ending the exploration. "I think you mastered our confidence lesson."

Meg noted his shaky voice and his trembling hand as he tugged the sheet up. "This isn't over yet," she said, the statement laced with warning.

"I know."

She yanked the sheet away again and stood from the bed. Ignoring her clothes on the floor, she went to the closet and selected one of his white button-up oxford shirts and slipped her arms into the sleeves. When she turned around, he was already there, reaching for the buttons himself.

They went to the porch and lay in the hammock together. Meg had a new sense of ease with her body now and had no qualms about wrapping one of her legs around his. While he pulled on a rope tied to the side of the house to keep the hammock swinging, she snuggled up against his side and stared at the treetops swaying in the wind.

The hours passed by too quickly and when evening crept up on them, they got up from the hammock. Meg followed him to the kitchen and accepted the glass of wine he held out to her. After they ate, she picked up the bottle of wine and her glass and walked to the front room where all of Drake's artwork rested against the walls.

One was a composite of colors that reminded her of the flower garden he'd

taken her to. Again, her eyes fell to the largest canvas in the room, the one with the small bird and gargantuan trees. She leaned over and noticed something she'd missed before. There were tiny specks all over it, forcing her to lean in even closer for a better look. The specks revealed themselves to be tiny people with wings who flew all throughout the painted scene. She stood upright again at feeling his presence.

"Do you miss being there?" She pointed at the specks. "Do you miss them?"

"Yes."

His arms went around her waist and pulled her back against him. They stared at the painting for a while, each of them longing to be there.

Finally, Meg asked, "Are you sure you don't want me to go with you to my house?"

"I'm sure. I'm going to give her last night's memory." Drake chose not to go into the details of how Ila would relive the events, even talking to Meg as though she was actually there and compliment the painting of ravens for a second time. "Wait here for me, I'll be right back."

Meg saw a flash of streaming light and color trail out of the front room and over the porch railings into the trees—he was gone. She knew he'd be back soon, but experienced a terrible loneliness at his absence. Feeling drawn there, she went back to the bedroom and gathered up all the drawings from the bed, smiling as she appraised each one.

"You're the most peculiar person I've ever known, Drake," she mumbled to herself and smiled at realizing that this was what she cherished above all about him.

She stacked the drawings on a small wooden desk near his dresser and when she turned around, her eyes widened in shock at the vision standing by the bed. The room had grown dark with the approaching night, but she could still see clear enough to know Drake was nude. It was her turn to draw him now. Only briefly did she avert her eyes out of modesty before setting about the task of lighting every candle in the room while he waited for her on the bed.

Rain began to fall again, and lightning lit up the sky as she approached him—studying the lines of his form. She climbed onto the bed, took the sketchbook into her lap and drew the lines already committed to memory. At times, the pace of her sketching slowed, coinciding with her cheeks turning crimson, and he'd smile without mentioning it.

She took her time with the shading and when there was nothing left to perfect, he held his hand out. Meg relinquished the sketchbook for his inspection, hoping he thought it as good as the ones he'd drawn of her. Drake was silent for too long, making her worry he didn't like it.

"Stop worrying, Meg, it's excellent. I was only thinking about how much you've learned in our week together. I'm proud of your accomplishments. I hope you are, too."

Meg nodded. "I am. Thank you, for everything." She took the sketchbook from him and set it aside.

“You shouldn’t go thanking me for *everything* just yet, there’s still more I intend to show you. Do you want me to answer some of your questions now?”

“Yes, but I get to choose what I want to know first.”

Drake already knew what she wanted to learn before all else. He struggled between two parallels again. Either one led to the same result, but the essence of his turmoil was what was best for Meg. He cared for her, as was his nature, even more so for her specifically, and he wanted Meg to be at peace with her decisions. Ultimately, he decided to allow her to make her own decisions as she approached each one.

“What do you want to know?” he asked.

Meg took the blindfold that still lay on the bed and placed it over his eyes, securing it behind his head.

After a moment, her fingers delicately brushed across his chest, then down the central line of his torso and abdomen. He submitted in blind silence to her exploration of his anatomy. When it became excruciating, he reached for her hands in the effort to make her take pause.

Her hands slipped from under his, dodging his efforts. For a moment, he felt nothing at all and just when his mind formulated what was to happen, her body stretched out over his. Though she still wore his shirt, she had unbuttoned it and the feel of her skin in such an intimate way sent a glorious pulse of electrified energy shooting through his body. He knew Meg still wanted to explore, still wanted to learn—she was testing new boundaries, and he forced himself to give that to her calmly.

She branded soft kisses on his chest. Her hair fanned outward and the curls felt like needles piercing their image onto his shoulders and sides; the sensation made him shiver. The delicate kisses traveled up his chest, finding new places to discover at his neck and earlobes. Despite the intensity of it all, he did well maintaining his control. It was when her lips connected with his that the first beginnings of doubt trickled into his thoughts.

It was about curiosity and pursuing sensual knowledge for her—she grew more determined and uninhibited, and her kissing became feverish from her body’s demands to discover more. His own urges became increasingly more difficult to ignore as the eager movements of her hips sought closer contact. When his hands reached for her hips, to help her find that contact, he forced himself to speak.

“Meg... please,” he whispered against her lips, but it only inflamed her intense desires. If he intended to stop her, Drake knew the time to do it was presenting itself and he cared too much about her to let it slip away. *‘You shouldn’t be doing this with me. I know you love Alec.’*

Her body tensed at the conveyance. She wanted to ignore it, but it was like he’d thrown cold water on both of them. Meg sensed his resolve and it forced her away from him, snatching the blindfold off his face to look at him.

“Why would you say that to me?” she demanded.

Drake saw a mixture of passion and newly emerged anger staring down at him. He hated reminding her of it. “Because it’s true. Are you gonna try lying to me and say you don’t?”

She climbed off of him and tugged the shirt closed. "It doesn't matter. It's got nothing to do with what's happening right now."

"Yes, it does."

"No, it doesn't!" Meg's anger at having to discuss Alec became palpable. "He and I are... ridiculous, that's what we are." She refused to look at Drake anymore. "He doesn't want me, not like this."

Drake let go a heavily burdened sigh. "Actually, Meg, he does."

Meg shook her head. "You're so wrong about that." Her gaze drifted toward her clothes at the end of the bed. "He's rejected me so many times that I've given up on him."

Drake reached for her hand, but she recoiled at the touch. He refused to let her dismiss what he wanted to say. "I think your first—"

"No! I'm not having this conversation."

"It's important, Meg. We should talk about it." It became more of a struggle for Drake to continue with his noble intentions, all he wanted was to bring her back to his arms. "Alec loves you and he's finally realized it. He's so jealous you're spending time with me that I'm afraid we'll all wash out to sea if he doesn't get you back soon."

"It's not jealousy," she spat. "He's only concerned. Alec's protective over me like he's always been, but that's all there is to it."

"You're right, but he feels other things for you."

"I'm not an idiot, Drake. I know what *other* things Alec feels, but he's determined not to act on them. He's stronger than you know."

His next words tasted like venom on his tongue. "You have to show him what you want." It was a nauseating venom. "You have more confidence now."

Meg looked at Drake as though he'd attempted to rip her heart out. "When I met you at the lake by my house, I wasn't just mourning Lena's death. I'd made a decision not to suffer any more rejections from someone who didn't want me." She shook her head. "Yet, here I am... being rejected again by someone else who doesn't want me."

She'd had enough and lunged forward to get her clothes, but a stream of blue light beat her to them and flung them out of her reach. Drake was under her again and instantly returned to a physical form, sitting up and saddling her in his lap. The look on his face was agonizing.

"Please, don't go. Don't leave yet," he said, his pleading voice thick with emotions that confused her.

"Drake..."

"I wasn't rejecting you. You have no idea how hard it was for me to stop what was happening." His arms went around her waist, hugging her to him as though she meant to leave with his soul. "It's just that I don't want you to have regrets."

"You know better than I do." Her voice whispered over his bare shoulder, staring blankly at her clothes she'd so desperately wanted to retrieve. "Would I regret being with you?"

Drake pulled away from her, enough so that he could cup her face in his hands

and look into her eyes. He had to answer the truth as he saw it forming. “No, not about this.”

Inching forward, her lips pressed to his again. At the contact, a series of thoughts, emotions, and memories tried presenting themselves to her and she knew they came from Drake as a last offering for her to decide what was best for herself. Meg saw them and walled them off from her mind, having already made peace with what she wanted.

He felt the wall go up and ceased trying to show her more—he ceased resisting as his hands crept to her shoulders and slipped the shirt off of them. His fingers wound through her hair and reached the back of her head, turning it slightly and kissing her in the unrestrained way he’d been wanting to do since the minute his lips touched hers this morning.

His lips left hers, but only to greedily connect with her neck and chest. A yielding sigh escaped past her lips and his own returned there, wanting to taste it while it lingered. Drake leaned her back against the pillows and looked into her emerald green eyes, seeing that they accepted him more than he did himself. He gently nudged her knees apart, and she welcomed him—her whimper muffled by the sound of thunder.

They neither stopped nor slept as the night continued, it was hunger that finally forced them apart. They satiated their ravenous appetites in the kitchen, forgoing plates and discussion. Stomach hushed, Meg wedged herself between Drake and the counter. The rest of the pear fell from his hand as he hitched her legs up around his waist, using the cabinets as support while he pushed against her.

Eventually, they had no choice but to give in to their bodies’ demand for sleep. Drake scooped Meg up from the kitchen floor and carried her to the bed. Still half asleep, she rolled over and he snuggled up behind her before closing his own eyes.

~

The early morning light came in through the bedroom windows and Meg opened her eyes. She knew Drake had already awoken without having to turn around to see his face, her eyelids fluttered closed again at feeling him move against her. He shuddered and whispered her name on the back of her neck.

A moment later, when his heartbeat returned to a normal rhythm, she turned to look into his eyes. His irises were swirling, but slowly with calmed passion. Meg put her hand to his face and traced the outline along his jaw and chin with her finger, trailing it up to his lips, nose, and forehead. Somewhere outside, a bird sang while she fell in love with his beautiful lines, the way he clung to her, his crazy swirling irises, and how he filled an emptiness in her life that only he could fill.

The happy song of the unseen bird brought forth the unhappy reality of what day it was. “It’s our final day together, isn’t it?” she asked him, hoping he’d say it was their first day of lessons.

“Yes,” he said, dashing her hopes, but pulled her into an embrace that suggested there’d never be an end between them.

"Then we're going to spend the whole day right here," she said, ignoring the hideous way the future felt.

"I like that plan, but only after we get up long enough to eat."

"From what I recall, there wasn't much left in your kitchen to eat." Meg smiled at remembering their ventures in his kitchen. "Want to have breakfast at the café?"

"Yes, but certainly not the café at the main town center." Drake ran his fingers through her hair and struggled to discern his scent from her own. He enjoyed the puzzling way it made him feel. "We have a small café up here. I say we grab a bite and come back to this exact location. Good plan?"

Meg's stomach growled her answer. "Think I could get away with wearing only your shirt?"

"Hmm, sounds appealing, but I think you should put your shorts on, too."

~

Drake and Meg sat at one of the high tables by the window, having full view of the pouring rain. Meg scanned the menu and ordered the first things she knew she liked. After the waiter jotted down their order and left for the kitchen, Meg put her foot on Drake's knee under the table and inched it higher to his thigh, watching his expression. He grabbed her foot, pulling it toward where she had intended for it to end up.

The café manager, a potbellied older man with fiery red hair and a bushy mustache, frowned at them from the bar, but continued polishing the glasses. It wasn't until he saw Drake stretch his arm out under the table, toward Meg's parted legs, did he go to the kitchen to put a rush on their order.

They managed to make it back to Drake's bedroom, but their clothes trailed from the stone steps to the side of the bed.

Meg collapsed on top of him and sighed into Drake's neck a short while later; her body still tingling and his just starting to tremble beneath her while his hands clutched tight to her hips. White light escaped from him, enveloping them both. When his trembling intensified, there was more of the light, but it came from her this time. Her composition changed, shifted to a different way of being, and it amazed her. She felt so alive.

The light surrounding them dissipated when his trembling slowed and his breathing returned to normal. Though it was the middle of the day, the room became darker from the storm clouds gathering over the entire island. Sheets of rain fell, bolts of lightning burst through the air, and the sound of thunder was so loud at times, it shook the house.

Drake's eyes went to the window at one point when lightning struck particularly close by. Meg refused to let it distract him. "I don't care about the weather right now. I want to know what just happened to me."

"Did it scare you?" he asked.

"No, it was incredible."

His hands left her hips and went to her back, hugging her into his embrace. Their time together was drawing to a close and there was still so much he needed to

share with her. Answering her question, though he hadn't expected it would happen, was only one of the many things he needed to explain to her. It would also be one of the more difficult subjects he'd have to reveal to Meg.

"There's a part of you that's missing. It was taken from you a long time ago. Probably because of the way we've been together, I think that part of who you really are latched on to what I am and used it to express itself."

"What do you mean by taken from me?"

Drake sighed, dreading having to show her the memory, but allowed it to flow into her thoughts. She lifted her head from his chest to look at him, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"He stole from me," she said in an eerie whisper. "He stole who I am."

"He was a child, Meg. He thought he was protecting you."

"How am I supposed to ever look at him again without demanding he give back what he took from me?"

"Don't worry about that, I'll help you deal with it." He reached up and grasped her face firmly in his hands, forcing her to look into his eyes.

The irises swirled a menacing turbulence. Meg understood more lurked there amid the colors: thoughts, memories, and emotions that he wanted to show her. The past was there, mingling with the future, slamming against one another to create this very moment—the future's past.

His fingers fanned out against the sides of her head, squeezing gently in the effort to gain her full attention. "Are you ready?"

"Show me," she said.

The images of Drake's history presented themselves first, colliding and then fusing with the history of others. Thoughts propelled through a vast expanse of time and space before moving on to a more recognizable realm—her home, but one with an accurate history. She saw her birth and ignored the shock. He showed her again what Alec took from her.

The memories careened forward and she saw herself standing with Alec in the forest through Drake's perspective. She suffered his loneliness, so sad and desolate, but it changed to hope as she examined herself through his memory, as he had done.

Everything sped up again, to their time together and to every place and thing he'd shown her, to moments that hadn't happened yet. The further through time he went, the tighter he had to hold her still, and he fought against his nature to put a stop to it to spare her. This moment of showing her was fixed now and he knew it, stopping isn't part of her future.

The memories slowed, then ceased altogether. It was all he knew to happen with certainty, but it was more than enough. He eased his grip on her, watching her carefully. Meg's eyes closed and a single silent tear fell from each one, landing on Drake's chest. She may as well have driven daggers there with both hands; he thought he may have finally found a way to die.

Yet, he continued to live and she continued her silence. He sat up a little, keeping her saddled in his lap while maintaining his hands on her cheeks. "Meg, please, say something. Talk to me. Look at me."

“What do you want me to say?” She opened her eyes. “What choice do I have?”

“You always have a choice.” He was determined to make her understand this. “So much of what I showed you happens because we help make it happen, but only after you agree.”

“How could I not agree?” Meg sighed with defeat. “But so much destruction, Drake. Why?”

“You saw what will happen. Either way, there’ll be destruction. There’s no avoiding it.”

Meg knew he waited for her answer, she half-waited for it herself. There was no way to put it off, the people he showed her would be here soon, bringing with them the genesis of a war of astronomical proportions. “Lena was right, all I’ll ever know is sadness and death.”

“No, Meg, her words were only partly right. It was what you said to Lena that held more truth, it’ll be the only way you’ll ever know about happiness and living.”

The reminder of her own words changed something in Meg’s understanding. It was true, she couldn’t have one without the other. There were others, too. Some she knew, some she hadn’t even met yet, but their happiness and survival also depended on her answer.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure? Do you think you can do what I showed you?”

“You showed me doing it, Drake. Obviously, I find a way. What I want to know is how I’m gonna go back to a normal life, interacting with these people who are coming here. How the hell am I supposed to pretend like I don’t know these things?”

“I’ll help you with that.”

Her eyes narrowed at him, knowing what he meant by the statement after seeing the true nature of her birth.

“No, I won’t take these memories from you. I’m not exactly pro-memory absorption. What I’ll do instead is tuck them away in your own mind. They’ll be suppressed for you to remember as you need to.”

Meg relaxed at his reassurance, but maintained her eye contact with him. She found no deception in his eyes, but what she did see was an innocence very different from her own. It was pure and genuine, it amazed her how intact it was given what she learned of his history.

“No, Meg, don’t ever think that.” Drake smiled at her. “I didn’t come from an oppressed race. We lived separately because it was the only way we could all be happy.”

“I know, you made sure to put that sentiment in your history. It still bothers me, though.” Meg brushed the conflicting feelings aside, not wanting to think about it anymore. She was stronger now, like she was meant to be before it was stolen. “Make sure you *extra*-suppress the memory of what Alec took from me. I know how I am. If I remember too soon, then our plan will fail.”

“I will.” Drake lay back, tugging her with him.

*‘You want me to name her Kai?’* Meg asked him silently.

*‘Please?’*

*'I like it.'*

"Maybe they'll be more like me one day," Drake said, pondering, unable to see this sort of eventuality.

"Maybe, but why does it have to be so sad?" Meg asked, more to herself.

"Are you speaking in generalities, or are you referring to the sadness of having to let someone like me go?"

"Both, I think." Meg fell silent for a while, struggling to find a better way to say what was on her mind. "I know you're all alone. Maybe we could find a way so I could stay with you."

Drake was touched, even though he heard the uncertainty in her voice. "I can already feel you wanting to leave me now that you know what I am."

"No, Drake, I'm not like that."

"Yes, you are like that, and there's nothing wrong with it. You can't share your life with someone like me. You can't be with someone who knows every thought and memory you'll ever have. No one *really* wants to know what their future holds because everyone knows not all futures are perfect and rosy."

"Well, I already know about mine. You showed me."

"You only know how much I allowed you to see. You don't know all of it," he dared to say and felt her body go rigid. He knew it would happen and as Meg's lips parted to speak, he allowed the future memory of her words to proceed her spoken ones.

"I'm strong... I... can handle..."—she frowned—"...knowing—" Meg stopped, disgusted with the way her spoken words echoed with the shared memory of them.

She fell into yet another bout of silence while hating how small and pathetic she was. Meg grimaced when she accepted there was no counter-argument to present that he wouldn't already know to be forthcoming. Even worse was the feeling of wanting to be with people like herself again—those as clueless to the future as she had been a week before.

"You understand now? Only another Lucusan could ever live peacefully alongside me," he said, hating the reality of the explanation.

"I won't lie and say that wasn't a problem for me, but I also won't lie about how I wish it wasn't like that." Meg clung to him. "I like being with you. I'm sorry for being who I am. I wish I was more like you."

"Don't be sorry for who you are, you come from a long line of superior beings," he chastised. "Without them, I wouldn't exist." Drake urged her to lift her head to look into his eyes. "Without you, Kai won't exist."

It was strange for Meg to be reminded of someone so important who'd yet to take their first breath, to think of them in a physical sense. "Will she be safe?"

"I'll make sure of it." Drake saw apprehension growing in Meg's eyes. "We don't have much more time together and I need to know now, before I take you back home, are you sure you want to do this?"

"I'm sure. I want a future." Meg placed a kiss on his chest. "Are you sure we can't spend more time together?"

Drake smiled at her question and thought about how being with Meg made

him feel. It was wonderful being wanted by someone who knew exactly what he was, and still wanted him anyway. It had been a long time since he'd had any kind of a relationship. None of them had resulted in the sort of kinship he'd developed with Meg. It reminded him of the life he had before his home was destroyed, a life he had few memories of—even his true parents were long gone.

He didn't look forward to resuming a lonely existence after taking Meg back to her normal life. If he wanted a better world for her and for so many others, he had no choice. Their time together on Gamma had run out; Meg needed to return to her life and develop a relationship with Alec. Drake knew she was armed with enough knowledge and experience to make that happen. It brought a sense of jealousy to him, which he instantly recognized and it made him laugh.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing." He shook his head. "I wish we had more time together, but you already know we don't and I want to tell you a few things before it gets much later."

"I'm listening."

"After you get to your new home, I want you to go to the library. It's enormous, not like the library here. I want you to go to the historical section and learn everything about yourself and your ancestors, where you came from, how I and people like me are created. However, and this is important"—he raised his eyebrows—"read it yourself. Don't rely on the historians to help you."

Drake showed her an image of how the historians relayed an otherwise daunting mass of material to someone without them having to actually read it all. "Because of the nature of your situation, they won't question why you'd want to read it all without their assistance."

"Okay, but why? You already showed me quite a bit."

"I care about you, Meg. I want you to know all of it. I think it'll help you find comfort in what you'll start planning after you get there."

"Yeah, I already have more questions that we don't have time for you to answer."

"I do have to take you back tonight, though." Drake half-grinned. "I laughed a moment ago because I recognized some rather petty emotions I was having."

Meg understood and it caused her to blush. "Oh."

"That same emotion will be what drives him to finally let go of all his reservations to keep you at a certain distance. You saw the memories, you'll be happy with him. You need to develop that relationship before they get here."

Meg was uncomfortable discussing this issue with Drake. She wondered why he seemed so at ease with it.

"No, it isn't easy for me," he said of her thoughts.

"Good, I'm glad I'm not the only one." Meg's brow creased at the embarrassing tension before changing the subject to one even more delicate. "That's not the only reason, though. I know who else you're worried about."

"You're right, I am worried about her," he said. "She's come down from the cave, and she's a force to reckon with. All this bad weather has finally gotten her attention. Chaza knows Alec's doing it and she wants to know what's causing his dark

mood. She'll start searching for you if I don't get you home soon." His face took on a timid expression. "You should know, Chaza fears me. She knows what I am."

"I really don't care what she thinks." Meg acquiesced at Drake's frown. "She'll be fine tomorrow when she sees me again."

~

They went to the small café to have their last meal together. Though happy for each remaining second they had, there was still a somber mood that haunted their dinner. When they finished, they went back to Drake's house and he handed her an unframed painting.

"Give this to Ila in the morning. When I take you back tonight, I want you to go straight to your bedroom. I'm going to Ila first." It caused him pain knowing what he'd have to do. "I don't have a choice, I have to alter her memories. I'll have to be thorough about it, too, given what's already been done to her mind."

The idea of it hurt Meg as well, so she shifted her attention to the painting he handed her. "Really, Drake? Pegasus?"

"Too much? You're right, we shouldn't give it to her."

"Wait." Meg held the painting out of his reach. "I mean, well, it *is* kind of cruel in a way, but she'll like it for now. She won't know what it means."

~

Drake picked Ila's limp form up while Meg remained rooted to the front room floor, watching him walk down the hall and turn into her mother's bedroom doorway. She could still see the smile on Ila's face when they'd walked into the front door only moments ago; a smile that faded when Drake immobilized her. He had assured Meg this part was necessary to absorb Ila's memories thoroughly, considering the people who would try picking apart her splintered memories.

When Ila's bedroom door shut, Meg went to her own bedroom and waited.

After changing out of the clothes that had remained at the foot of Drake's bed for days, she put on a t-shirt and crawled under her own sheets. She thought they'd disappoint her after having been tangled up in Drake's, but they felt oddly comfortable and familiar. Maybe, Meg considered, this was a sign that she looked forward to starting the rest of her life, and it was better than the life she'd been living.

A stream of green and blue light slipped in under her sheets, encompassing her body in a feeling of warmth, surrounding her in everything she defined as good and beautiful in any world worth destroying or saving.

"Don't suppress them yet," she whispered to him.

Drake returned to his physical form and pulled the t-shirt off of her. He looked down into her eyes and denied himself the urge to take her away from Gamma immediately. "I wasn't planning on it."

He stood on the edge of their final moments together before delivering her over to someone else, and if insanity was possible in his breed, Drake considered he may be standing on the edge of that as well. There was no way to thank Meg for the

companionship she'd given him and for the hope of a future with endless possibilities she'd chosen to help him fight for. He could take comfort in knowing her legacy would be known forever, written in historical documentation as being a monumental figure who spear-headed a movement for equality and universal peace despite all the odds against it.

"It isn't enough, but thank you," he said, rolling her onto her front and lifting her hair to kiss the back of her neck. *'I love you, Meg.'*

She closed her eyes at the beautiful sensation she'd grown to crave. Meg had wanted to say something in response to his silent declaration, but whatever it was fell to the forgotten state of waiting to say it later as he lifted her to her knees and moved her body against his.

As the night marched on, Meg finally succumbed to the drowsy pull of her eyelids while cradled in Drake's arms. Seeing her give in to the need for sleep was the moment he both dreaded and waited for—the very same reasons he'd kept her awake until the very last minute. He glanced at the window and saw the first pink tinge of the approaching dawn.

He had no choice but to leave and allow Meg to start the rest of her life. In just a few short hours, she'd emerge from her house and show those who needed the confirmation that she was fine, and they'll be too relieved to question her week-long odd behavior. Drake saw it all, the torrential weather would cease the minute Alec sees her again. Chaza would relax and return to her own lonely existence—hers of choice.

Drake looked back at Meg's peacefully sleeping face and pulled her to him. Halfway between his physical form and his expressed colors, he suppressed all the memories he'd shown her and all the intimate moments they'd shared, leaving her with only the barest memory of their art lessons for her to recall.

When it was done, he leaned over and kissed her before turning to her bedroom door. He'd already thought to keep all of her drawings, concerned they'd be reminders to tug on her suppressed memories. Drake looked at her one more time before leaving, before returning to his lonely life. His only comfort being the pact they made together to right a wrong, and to provide a home and a future for everything and everyone they cared about, and ever will.

As he drifted away from the island, Drake knew he'd come back soon. He had no choice, the future was set, and it was unbreakable. It returned to him his own confidence.