

# **A History Rewound**

Matthew Conner

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# 1 Chapter 0

There is a red string that runs through this world. As delicate as a silk ribbon, and as strong as spun steel. As thin as a thread, or as thick as an oak tree. It wavers, shimmers, winds its way through all things. And when we die, our string is cut, and we fall into the void. It is a place vast and dark, where thought echoes in all directions, and all the knowledge gathers in a nexus of understanding. It is eternally In Between, holding memories within memories. Sight within sight. But we can only stay for so long... And once we see it, the sweet depth of it, the great gasp of a universe of knowing\*, of seeing so far beyond...we will always ache to return. Perhaps not overtly, but rather in secret. Like a little seed of dissatisfaction, of displeasure. A self-indulgent aloofness of the world.

Those who go Between, and find a way out, will always seek to return. Their sadness is rooted, unmovable. Their spirits stuck like a fly in a web, in thrall of death and its sweet void beyond. But it is when our spirits find love that the void can be conquered. Purpose can exist outside of what lies Between. And it is the most painful and worthy of all. For we cannot stay long in the void if we have nothing to give to it

in return for all its vastness\*.

But we can never truly stay...

Where do we wander afterwards?

Anywhere. Nowhere. It all depends.

It depends on so many factors, so many absolusions or lack thereof that we cannot truly determine where our place is until we see our thread and where it connects to the world around us. Many die never seeing it, never discovering where their red string ends, where their ribbon of life branches out into little blood-colored tributaries to tell them where their purpose lies. We comes closest to it in dreams or when we temporarily cross the threshold between this world and the next. When we almost die, and our brains take deep, dying gasps, a piece of the void opens inside us. It is always there, but only the threat of the greater void can open it.

It is a wondrous place, and there is nothing like it. But if one has seen it many times the vastness becomes too much. The knowledge is too great a weight to a life that has been pulled through the great strain of rebirth so many times. This is when we truly find ourselves. When we reject the void, and seek where the red thread leads us. We fit into the waking world. And find who the red string leads us to.

I have seen Between.

And I have met the creature who lives there. I have

seen the red string makes it way into the distance as well as touching all that lay around me, an endless web and red lines cascading from the sky, some rising out of reach, others touching lives around me. As if there was a puppeteer in the heavens, or a great\* pair of hands that held it all aloft. But I do not believe in a puppeteer. I believe in the void, and our ability to navigate it. To navigate the burning book of the past and take back what is ours.

The void belongs to us. Even the creature who lives there would tell you such.

Though we cannot control, it is made of us. Made of knowledge and experiences, infinitesimal and cosmic at all once. Going on farther than our understanding, farther than all of our eyes may seek. But it is ours. Collectively, wholly ours.

We glimpse it upon meditating, in dreaming, and it often shows us the things that we do not want to see, things that burned us, things that lay beneath our eyelids, in our hearts, or, in my case, buried beneath mounds and mounds of rubble. Beneath waves of black smoke and detritus manufactured by a mind that could not, would not cope.

He lives there. But not everyone can find him. A being that time forgot only because so few can find him. His existence is lonely, but made whole by the filling of the void. By seeing what others see, he is

sustained, feeding on experiences that others choose to be cleansed.

The Eater of Memories.

He chose to seek me, but I ultimately chose to disappear.

He allowed me to go on, and I let him place the void between me and my past.

I chose to give him my mind and wipe it clean. And leave behind everything the void could teach me.

But one can only disappear for so long. The void waits for no one. And you cannot hide from yourself, for the world is made of mirrors. In the end, the void is only what we have made, it is made of our thoughts, our notions, our vices. It will not tear you apart, but it will hurt you. Fill you with brutality, unflinching, untainted view of what lays below and behind. But it will only show you what is already there. It cannot create. It can only replay in hopes of teaching. How you handle the ultimate knowledge is your own decision.

Even if we leave nothing for the void, we owe it to ourselves as human beings to reach into the unlit ether and pull the ugly out of our thoughts. To go into the dark and find fear. If we do not face the vastness, the emptiness, then we will never be able to find where the universe is trying to take us on its little red paths.

I chose the void in order to choose life. I chose to

seek out what lay buried, and, in the end, decide what mattered, and what could be cast aside. Even when I chose to be buried, I chose to rise, I chose to dig.

I chose the red string, and it led me to life renewed.

## 2 Chapter 1

Many of my recollections up to this point are hard-earned products of drudging through my own psyche armed with nothing more than determination and decades worth of anger. Mortal weapons would have been useless, anyway. Things are still very unclear, parts of my memory are the blindest of blank slates. Some things I fear are not retrievable. Bringing myself to this point, with my very sparse collections of memories and events has been a trial beyond anything I thought I was capable of. But I had no choice.

My personal strength was barely a factor, at least I think so... There was simply no other choice but to tear mercilessly into my own consciousness and reclaim what I could. And so I did. I would say that it was horrible, but that would be an understatement in every regard possible. The word horrible is but a shadow of my ordeal. I would do the word a rather unfair disservice by using it that way. Yet, for every world-rattling hardship, there was something fragment of wonder and accomplishment. Some ethereal wonder nestled in my mind, as if rewarding me for pressing forward.

Recounting up to this point, as difficult as it is

going to be, would be nothing compared to actually getting here. Everything starts with dark and ends with tiny points of light leading me closer to something warm and safe. I am still searching.

Before my search up to this point, everything ran together, everything melted when I touched it. There was simply not enough to hold onto, let alone form into something functional and stable. I didn't know where the time went. The square block didn't go in the round hole. Of all the stories you hear, urban myths, 'true family stories', war horrors, the intrigue of amnesia is rampant. Until it happens to you. It was not glamorous, or romantic. It was surreal. Haunting. Confusing on a cerebral, integral level of understanding the world around me.

Only one event held onto my brain, but, besides that, any semblance of memory from the rest of my life had been wiped. There were really no flashes of memory, no shreds of evidence that gave me any idea of what I did, where I lived. No pictures of me as a child. Or any sentimental object I had kept just because it *means something*. There was no meaning. There was no sentiment. Nothing. Not a speck of semblance or a tendril of drifting haze hovering over some fond memory. I was a pitiful protagonist, one without an introduction or a decent motive. In the worst way, I had lost myself. I was a great, empty

space.

There was only The Event. It all ran together like a river over a watercolor painting, but it was there, looming and ravenous. An occurrence so terrible and unforgivable that it is had the power to remain. Something terrible happened. I lost everything in seconds. I had a loud, loud noise. And then nothing except a long, high-pitched squeal. I felt my skull break and bleed. I heard the cracking, the splintering. That occurrence bleeds into another, more concrete one. I woke up in a drawer, encased in formaldehyde and death... My eyes water when I think about it. My chest hurts when I try and recall life before that loud noise. Something warm and perfect lay just beyond the horrific memory.

Why did I have to leave it? I wish I could remember the people that I loved, the hearts that I wanted to house in my own. I knew love, but I also knew discomfort and pain. I HAD something strong to hold onto to, I knew it. But it was all stripped away. I would have died to know why.

The emptiness and confusion when I awoke from The Event in a metal drawer is the strongest memory I have. Lonely and cold, like the bodies lying in suspended rot around me. I screamed until the inhalation of the fumes makes my nose bleed. I was woozy with the smell of chemicals, coughing until my throat hurt.

My head was spinning. I did not have time to wonder where I was, or how I got there. Channeling panic into action was my only option, my only defense. I held my breath, using my foot to feel for the door, scooting slightly until my toes found it. I took a deep, cloying breath, reared my legs back, and gave it the kick of my life.

It hurt. I felt a pain scream through my legs as I slammed my feet into it. I yelled and gave it another kick. The door buckled with an angry screech of metal. I kicked open the tiny door with one final blow. Cold, but breathable air rushed into the tiny space with me. I gave the wall behind me a push, and the drawer beneath me slid out with a clang. My relief did not last long. I was exceptionally dizzy, and fell out of the drawer and onto the icy tile. I was still breathing hard, my heart still beating rapidly enough to propel me into a harsher panic.

There is a blur where the next memory should be. The memory of how I got out is just an unclear amalgamation of the tactile feeling of cold, the sound of breaking glass, and the groan and crunch of metal. Maybe I broke a door, broke a window. I don't know. I just know that I got out the morgue, and I ran. Through a dark, wet courtyard. The grass was like slimy fingers on my ankles. The courtyard was white with mist. Something about it seemed wrong.

Hellishly empty and horrifying. My panic resurfaced. I was naked and chilled to the bone. A cold, girlish streak of pale skin and scars running across the lawn of the hospital... That was when I got the shock of my life.

My back began to ache, then sting, a stretching shriek of pain sliced through my shoulder blades. My arms flailed backwards frantically, trying to reach the pained area, only to feel a hard, bony lump at each shoulder blade, stretching the skin thin until it split open, bleeding profusely. I whimpered. They were like fleshy bone-filled tumors, bursting out like unearthly fists from my thin shoulders. I screamed; my voice was strained and shrill. My nose burst into bleeding again.

I heard a wet, squelching noise, along with a series of clicks. A pair of fleshy appendages slithered from the massively bleeding wounds on my back, wet and weak, flopping to the ground. They were heavy, and sent my slender body slumping to the ground. I fell into a heap of shrieking and weeping, all thin strips of flesh and bones. My screams assaulted the air, constricting my throat. My logic, a product of my lost memory, was broken immeasurably. The appendages on my back squirmed and clicked, lifting in a futile effort to straighten themselves, my tiny body trembling under their massive weight. They stretched outward,

desperately straining toward some alien, unknown goal. Then they gained a mind of their own. Doubling in height and width, they spread outward, flattening into a boney, beautiful carapace of veins and thin, hollow bones. Wings. I had wings.

I stopped screaming, now shaking and gasping through pain and exhaustion. My breath steadied to a series of grunts and whimpers, and I pulled myself up. The wings quivered. I trembled with shock. I thought I might collapse again, but my wings spread of their own accord and stopped my fall. I was overcome with a feeling of such horrible entrapment and oppression... A feeling of something watching my mutation and seething in their anger and misunderstanding. It was nonsensical. Anyone who saw would surely believe themselves to be delusional, or hallucinating... But, still, the tension that I felt there in that empty, wide yard was so palpable, I feared for my safety.

The streetlights gasped and flickered, the air stopped circulating. The mist thickened. All was still and silent. The fear took on a noise. A buzzing. A steady, low buzz, like that of insect trapped in a corner or a wind screen. My face tickled. My hand flew to scratch, feeling the wetness and mucus and blood. And something else. A lump of tissue, perhaps, but no... It was a squirming, flinching, buzzing thing. I caught it between my fingers. I brought it to my face.

It was a scaly, bloody thing, now twitching in its death throes. It was a fly. A single, desperate fly called by instinct to the smell of death and carrion. I choked. My stomach churned. I flung the thing away. What must I smell like, to attract flies to myself, while I still breathed?

I shook. A flurry of thoughts flashed through me all at once. My senses took several desperate blows. The smell of death, the shock of my awakening, and the emptiness of my memory. I was alone, utterly and resolutely alone. What state must I have been in for a doctor to think me dead? Even in my state of nonexistence, I knew one thing very well. The dead do not rise. The dead do not wake up in their boxes in the earth or the morgue and panic for air that they can no longer breathe. Even when alive, breathing is not something that you thought about... it was just something you did. If I was thought dead at one point in time, and recently, too, for I had not been autopsied...I shuddered at the thought of being sliced open alive... If I had risen, after a medical professional had pronounced me *dead as a doornail*, then what must I be now, walking about in a mutant form? Sprouting wings, summoning flies with the call of my corpse-scent? My blood was still fresh and warm on my face, my breath was uneven and terrified, but I DID breathe.

WHAT am I?

My face itched, tickled by three more scaly flies, twitching in a tiny red puddle. I sobbed, scraping away the triad and flinging them to the ground, only to have them rise from the ground and reattach to my cheek, this time clinging even as I slapped at them. They bit. There were sharp stings against my cheekbone. I clawed at the horrible offenders, only to have them latch further into me, itching painfully, feeling their legs cross my skin, then sink in like thorns...

Then there were more.

Thirty at least, all going after my bloody nose, biting at the sensitive skin there. Several found their way in. Pinching it close, I felt them crush under the weight of my fingers. It was a mistake. They felt like tiny shards of glass popping under pressure and spreading. My nose bled more, slicking my fingers. I kept my grip on my nose, even when their spiny legs broke the surface of my nose and impaled me.

Then there were more.

A hurricane of black specks, noise and wind rose against my side, grating my skin until it bled. I closed my eyes as a thousand bites covered my flesh. Hundreds of biting flies, the thickening noise, the heaviness of their scaly bodies, thousands of tiny legs dancing across me. The feverish glee in their hurricane

noise made my ears ring. My eyes were shut, my ears covered, my voice drowned by the crowd of vicious insects accosting me in a swarm. It ate my screams, echoing them like a cave, mocking me, mocking me into a frenzy of flailing arms and panicked yelps.

There was only black of flies and the red of my vision flashing fearfully at the attack. I couldn't scream. All I could do was swing my arms helplessly as I felt the thousands of stings repeating in endless, senseless patterns. I wanted it all to be still, to make sense again, instead of this swirling madness. I opened my eyes, seeing only black and movement, all flurrying madly. But, there, further ahead, there was a thread of light, thin and fleeting, blinking on and off, whispering through the clouds of death. I ran to it, only to feel that it was warm. Its heat pierced the cold, misty air, getting warmer as I drew closer, until the ray of light became something solid and tangible. I reached out and touched light.

I knew I shouldn't be able to, but I grabbed it. It was hot and pliable in my hands, like hair warmed by the sun. I pulled it like a rope until it became a hard, hot shaft that blistered my hands. But I didn't let go. I pulled, not knowing or caring where it took me, so long as it was away from the swarm. The light became softer, escaping my hands, returning to its particle form, sliding through my fingers like glowing sand.

The heat faded, the scenery around me fell away like cardboard cut outs. Large black pieces fell away from the swarm of flies, and broke away, disappearing, revealing a harsh blinding light. The light was all-encompassing; it was the ground, the sky, the floor and ceiling. It was all light and silence and safety. I wanted to stay...

Then I blinked. And I was elsewhere.

## 3 Chapter 2

Elsewhere was hot; the air was wet and thick, like breathing boiling water. I could see the sun, its head sinking toward the horizon, but still hot enough to be warping the air into ribbons of distortion. I was panting, and with the air so muggy I could hardly get a breath. My wings went limp against me, became rubbery and useless, then without warning pulled back into my shoulders. I let out a sharp, shocked grunt. The skin opened up to allow them in, then folded over and closed, leaving my shoulders bleeding and me slightly confused. I finally caught my breath enough to grasp my surroundings. There were buildings surrounding me. On all sides but one, blurred and wobbling, making it impossible to distinguish their distance from me. One second they were closing in on me, the next they were farther away. My senses were unstable. I reached out an arm to steady myself, and put one bloody hand against the brick. I felt the brick, leaned on it, only to see it sway sideways and move a good foot away. But I didn't fall.

I itched all over, a burning, irritating crawling sensation beneath my skin. I had no nails left to speak of; they must have been clipped at the morgue. It was just

as well, if I had had nails I would have destroyed my skin scratching at it. I slapped at my shoulders, letting the sting distract me from the horrible, intense itching. I leaned a shoulder into the disappearing wall, felt the dense man-made rock scratch into my skin. The coarseness of the brick felt wonderful against my bare shoulder, I pressed my naked back against it, rubbing up and down like a bear against a tree. I felt warmth on my back, heat and wetness as the skin pulled open and wept. Even then, I let out a shuddering sigh of relief as the itching abated. As the itching finally stopped, I could hear every open wound buzz with a hissing sting. I felt the bites each sing their own little chorus of pain, but even that was better than before. It was the pain that awoke me. My vision was swimming for a good minute before my depth perception returned, and the buildings finally stood still. I saw the sun, relentless and blazing, peering over a scattering of buildings, making its final stretch before it slept. I was alone, naked, and probably not safe in the least, but, God, was I relieved. That awful presence had departed.

I got a good, deep breath and stood up straight, entering a state of bizarre hyper-awareness, knowing every inch of my body was covered in fly bites, and in them were tiny pieces of bug glass. Even in my state, my loss of memory, I knew how strange that sounded,

but I was so suddenly cognizant of my body that I knew it wasn't just a hallucination. Despite having no idea what to do about it, I knew where all the damage was instantaneously, and knew that the bites were an urgent matter. They were already infected, not terribly so, but enough to be cause for worry. They were also open and wet, turning a brownish black as the blood congealed, the delicate under-flesh exposed to the foreign air and all of who-knows-what was in it. The air was not exactly toxic, but not necessarily the cleanest. I smelt smoke, and people, and something indistinct but industrial coming from all directions at once. My sense seemed to be over-reacting, but I still wondered, how did anyone live here with this stench being omnipresent?

Yet I could sense that this...*city* was rather populated, and that there were people running into one another, some carrying food, some with children, and others standing very still and holding nothing at all. All this I knew by the smell. At the time, it didn't strike me as odd, only alarmingly convenient and slightly unpleasant. I smelled food, a lot of it, most of it terribly unhealthy, but still edible. I didn't feel hungry, just tired and a bit sick. But above all, I felt very, very exposed. Staggering naked into a crowd of strangers was not high on my list of priorities. I knew that where there was food, there would be people ready

to consume it. It was getting dark, and the streetlights hummed to life, illuminating the alley with their dim, sputtering eyes.

I was conflicted as to whether I should venture out to find help, not knowing what I would find. My skin flared with heat, and I felt my bites pulse with the same angry sting. My arm was beginning to go numb, and my face felt assaulted with a thousand whispering pinpricks, all of the tiny glass-like legs still stuck in my skin. The infection was spreading fast, and the pain was steadily becoming a hot throb. My back was the only area of my body that wasn't burning with an unearthly infection. I had stepped out of one nightmare and into another, one that was becoming more intense by the second. My eyes burned and watered, I could feel the veins swelling, irritated and inflamed. The world became a crimson wash of harsh reds and floating lamplight, the streetlights twisting into cyclopic tendrils, blinking in awe. There was a voice in the nightmare, a sudden high-pitched shout of alarm. I thought it was mine, at first, but it was deeper, yet distorted and mangled by waves of superfluous sound, amplified and sharp. I was hearing a thousand things at once; smelling the stagnancy of the city and seeing the streetlights tighten into spirals of metal and swirling light.

The world stopped making sense. Suddenly, there

was a creature, made of sharp, blue angles, six feet tall and stumbling toward me, its great, green horns and gaping mouth glowing seven shades of deadly in the dying light. The non-threatening voice quickly became a vicious, raging maw. As I felt the creature's hands touch my arms, I screamed as its fingers rekindled the pain in my wounds. It was holding me tightly, roaring in my face, its hands locked around my elbows and squeezing. My screams became a gasping, wordless screech, my arms going numb, disconnecting from my body like a doll's, with a loud pop. Even then, it grabbed a hold of my shoulders, and I felt its claws tipping into my skin. My senses had failed me, terror was controlling me... An ancient, animal instinct hammered through me.

*Make yourself bigger. Intimidate the enemy.*

My body did the only thing it could. My wings exploded out of my back, the tips scraping against the brick, as I broke loose from its grip and tried to get away. My wings would not obey; they flapped and strained to carry me, resulting only in me flailing about like a rag doll in the air, seeing my arms below me still twitching in shock. The creature was still and staring.

I could feel my strength leaving me, my wings becoming limp and hot. I could see them shriveling into useless, black husks, fires alight under the skin,

red and orange. My eyes were burning, rolled back in my head. My body was heaving and shaking, burning with fever and fly bites. I fell into a heap of ash and flesh. I felt everything in the world collapse. Reality blew away like dust, the buildings crumbled into themselves. The streetlights fizzled and melted. I saw my arms on the ground, clawing and squirming like larvae. My wings burnt away till nothing remained, and the last thing I saw was the blue angle creature turning into a black blanket of darkness and swallowing me.

## 4 Chapter 3

When I awoke, the visions had faded, the monster was nowhere in sight. The buildings were nowhere in sight. I felt sick. My stomach was sour and churning, my head pounding, my breath uneven. Yet, despite the shock of changing locations, I felt reassured, and my breath quickly steadied. The threatening presence was gone, and though I was unsure, I still felt much safer. The blazing heat of the sun was gone, replaced by cold, softly churning air. I could smell food, hot and fragrant. I was inside somewhere, and judging by the smell of food rapidly approaching, I was a guest. My senses steadied, and my breath became calm and relaxed, as I took in my surroundings more thoroughly. My head was heavy, and my stomach was still upset, but I equated that to hunger more than anything. The fever from the infection had subsided. I could no longer feel the tiny legs in my skin. The air was cold, but there was a blanket near me, which I had cast off to the side at some point, probably from thrashing about. I pulled it around my shoulders. It smelled acrid and sweet, like someone had tried to

cover up the smell of smoke with something artificial, but the effect wasn't unpleasant. I shifted my weight, sat up and threw my legs over the side of the bed I was laid out on.

I was clothed in a soft white dress. It was a simple garment with short sleeves. My hair was clean and washed, hanging down my shoulders. The next thing that I got a look at was my feet. Compact, thin feet with long toes and dirty toenails, connected to thin, hairy ankles. My glance traveled up my legs, noticing the jutting kneecaps and scrawny, square thighs. I got the feeling that this wasn't quite normal, that there wasn't enough there. I was too thin, in need of nourishment, and running from skyscraper monsters and swarm of bladeflies didn't leave me much time to eat well. But I could smell it coming towards me. Food. Some base animal instinct in me went to jump and run and tear into it like it was carrion, but I hadn't the strength. I felt useless and weak, only being able to wait and hope and shake, whilst the aroma came nearer. My eyes focused on a door at the other side of the room, letting out a hungry sigh.

The door crept open slowly. A man stood there. He was thin, but without the malnourished look I had. His hair was short and messy, a sort of mud brown with slices of lighter color. Like tiny little patches of sun. His eyes had color painted above them, like

some sort of powdery war paint. He was dressed plainly, in gray and blue. His nails were also painted, a dark blue against his bronze skin. His face was thin, but round, with high cheekbones and a small forehead. Delicate features. He was carrying a plate of something, steaming and fragrant. I smelled meat and rice and audibly groaned. My hands gripped the sheets as I stared hungrily at the plate. He looked shocked to see me up. He stopped just inside the door, hesitant and unnerved.

“Hello...” he said nervously. His voice was soft, but gravelly, an odd assortment of tenderness and worry.

I opened my mouth to respond, but all that came out was a brusque, harsh grunt and a cough.

The man smiled sympathetically, and ceased to look worried. “I know you’re probably scared, but I won’t hurt you...”

*I know that*, I thought. I watched him placidly, but did not try to speak again. I just nodded.

“I also figured that you would be hungry. There’s not much to you, you know.”

To this, I nodded emphatically, my teeth clenched in anticipation, and my hands white-knuckled from squeezing the side of the bed. He stepped forward quickly and steadily, and laid the tray in the bed near me. “Here. Eat as much as you want. There’s plenty more.”

In that moment, I felt as if I could have eaten ten plates of anything. And when I tasted it, I felt like I could eat twenty. It was a savory meat stew, and I could taste a thousand layers of flavor and spice. It was hot and wonderful and hearty. I ate the entirety with gusto, but could only eat one plate before my stomach felt tight and full. The stew seemed to banish the cold and the shaking of my limbs. It warmed my throat, which had been sore and scratchy, but now felt at least useable. He handed me a glass of milk when I was done, and I drank it slowly, letting the cold soothe my throat further. All the while I gazed at him, watching me with calm, paternal concern and eventually smiling as I finished the meal and placed the dishes back on the tray.

“You want more?”

I shook my head.

“Your eyes are bigger than your stomach, huh?”

I shook my head, and spoke with a shaky voice. “No one’s eyes are bigger than their stomach. That’s nonsense.”

He smiled brightly. “It’s an expression.”

I coughed. “It’s silly.”

“Awful young to be so cynical, aren’t you?”

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember what?”

“How old I am.”

Our conversation had been smooth until then. He looked at me with a deep concern, and looked genuinely at a loss for words. “Maybe you hit your head in the alley?”

I tensed up thinking about the alley. “No...” I said softly. “No. This is from before that. When I woke up... There was nothing there. Nothing important anyway. Nothing but...death and noise and...” I couldn’t go any further. The fear from that Event was creeping up my spine. My lips tightened over my teeth.

He looked sad for a moment, then said in a very kind voice, “You poor thing. I’m so glad that they didn’t find you.”

\_They. \_I looked up at him. The question was written all over my face. He frowned, and, in a sudden, unexpected gesture, reached out and touched my left hand. I fought the urge to yank back, but watched him intently. He, watching me close for resistance, flipped my hand over so that the palm faced up. There, stretching in sharp points across the entirety of my palm was a mark. A black star, drawn into the skin, with thick, hard, arching lines.

“Kid...I don’t know where you came from, or from what world, for that matter... But when I found you, you had wings. I’ve never seen anything like it. And this,” he gestured to my hand, “is odd, too. I read about this somewhere. Some really old legend. Probably a

weird coincidence. But, somehow I don't think so...

My brain could not comprehend all the questions I had. There were all just as pressing, and fighting for their turn. "Why would you need to hide me?"

"It's kind of hard to explain. It's been something that's been going on for a while now. Someone is reporting people like you. To someone. Some organization. No one is sure where they are, otherwise they'd have been taken care of by now. But I think they pay people to gather information and rat people out. And then, from what I understand, someone shows up and takes them away. No struggle, though. They just go."

"What am I?"

"Esper is the term that is generally used. I don't know if I would call you that."

"How do you know about this...organization?"

"My brother was an esper. He would know things, say things. Things a kid couldn't know, shouldn't know. It terrified my mother, but after a while, neither of us thought anything of it. And then, one day, when he was about 22, he was just gone. He left a note, saying that he was going to be with more 'people like him.' And that was it. We thought for months that he was dead, until we got a phone call in the middle of the night. All he said was, 'I'm alive. Tell Mother I love her.' It was all very, very strange. He would not have

just left like that. But, apparently he did.”

I could feel the sadness radiating from him, all at once; I could see it as if it were a tangible thing. It was a deep blue, a mist hanging about his head. I squinted at it, not quite sure what I was seeing. His eyes looked lost and forlorn. They were gray like a stormy sky, and quiet like a whisper. I gripped his hand. The sadness caressed me like tiny fingers and became my own. Everything in his demeanor told me that he never saw his brother again. I clutched his hand. His hand was warm and large compared to mine, but slender and well-groomed. It looked rather odd clasped in mine, with its grubby fingertips and nonexistent nails. He seemed to find comfort in the gesture, but I still felt compelled to comfort him further. It was an odd turn of events really, me comforting him when I had been the one who needed saving. I said the only thing that seemed appropriate.

“I’m sorry about your brother.” Hearing my own voice, low in tone and slow in cadence, was very bizarre. Almost as if I had forgotten its unique sound. I had mostly heard my own screams as of then. But hearing, and therefore knowing that I had not lost it, was also comforting. “Thank you for taking me in.

I reached back and touched my shoulder blade, feeling a deep, soft fold in the skin, right next to the large, scabby abrasion made by the brick wall. The

skin was tender to the touch, but felt as if it has been cleaned up. I wondered if the wings had withdrawn, like a beetle's wings, into my skin.

"They came out whenever I got scared... but I was so weak and tired. I remember feeling sick and feverish, but I feel better now..."

"You ought to...You slept for 2 days. I cleaned you up as best I could. You were really beat up... You had all these awful bites, which were all infected and had tiny little twigs in them. You were covered in what looked like glass. I thought about giving you antibiotics, but I didn't want to risk giving you something that you could react negatively to. For all I know, you could have been allergic. So I just cleaned and disinfect them, gave you some natural painkillers and waited. I made food every day, brought it in here and waited to see if you would wake up. I was surprised when you finally did. I got worried for a while. I was scared to take you to a hospital. I thought of you being sent away, and I have no idea what happens to those that are. I barely managed to get you out of the city. I'm sure people were wondering, especially since I covered you up. I'm sure it looked strange. When I saw that star on your hand, it made me think of some old superstition. Even without wings, if someone had seen that..." He didn't finish, as if trying to pull up a memory that sat just out of reach.

“I wonder myself how I got it. I think it’s part of my skin. Like my wings...” The room became heavy and quiet. I felt my voice come stronger and surer, breaking up the atmosphere as best I could. “I wish I could tell you more. About what I am, or where I came from. Even I know that there is something...abnormal about me. But I feel like I should be more scared than I am. But there’s another feeling...like it’s always been this way. The shock has faded so fast. The only true shock is that I was being chased by something. But, for what it’s worth, I feel safe here. I only hope that I don’t...attract whatever was chasing me. Although...it could have just been my imagination. I hope that’s all it was.”

I wasn’t sure how to interpret the look that he gave me. An odd combination of intrigue and confusion, perhaps, with furrowed brows and a fretting mouth. But then he smiled at me.

“You are...very different. Do you remember your name?”

I felt a tiny pinprick of sadness in my chest. “No.” I clutched my hands together, my left hand sliding out of his. “There’s not much left, honestly...” I knitted my thin fingers. The pinprick became a blossom of worry. There was also a twinge of fear, not overwhelming, but nagging. It was a restless type of fear... as if I should pick up and leave. As if I should run, and pray

that I would not be followed. My chest ached a bit. I only hoped that I wouldn't worry this kind man too much. He had done so much already...

"May I ask your name...since I can't remember mine?" I chuckled to lighten my own gloom.

"It's Asher. It's a bit of an odd name, but my mother was an odd woman. My brother's name was Kaynen. We called him Kane for short."

"I know all about odd, it seems. But I like it. Your name, that is. It's strong. Having a strong name is important, I think. It empowers you." My words poured out, from some sort of unconscious source. Even after the loss of whatever life I had, I still seemed to have a tiny reservoir of morals and personality, to draw from. It occurred to me that, perhaps, such things might be an indelible part of a person, or whatever I was...

"Thank you. I'm sure that you have a strong name as well. It would certainly make sense. I hope you remember it soon."

"Me too...Asher." Even after that bit of hesitation, the name sat on my tongue with a warm, friendly weight. "Could you...get me something more to drink, if it's not too much trouble..."

"It's no trouble at all. I took you in, you're my guest. Although it's a little weird that I am at a loss as to what to call you."

"Something strong, like yours, for now. If you

don't mind too much. Nothing too common, though."

"Of course. You're anything but common." He patted my hand fondly, like you would a child. "Well, when I think of strength, I think of trees. Like an ash. Or an old oak tree. But there are also more... feminine trees, like willow or rowan."

"I like that. Willow. It sounds...romantic, but steady."

"You're quite poetic. In that case, I think that Willow is perfect."

"Yes. I do, too."

He gave my hand another pat and smiled. He quietly excused himself and headed into the kitchen to refill my glass. I pulled my knees to my chest and exhaled. The room was getting chilly, and the dress was the only thing that covered me. The cold made me strangely aware of my body, not of its nudity, but of its thinness, its innate ability to burst into strength when threatened. Not like a tree at all, but like some sort of cornered cat. The cold made my breasts tighten and my muscles twitch. But I did not cover myself. The cold made me feel awake and alive. It made me feel grateful that I could feel at all. The joys of just *being* made me feel strong and grounded, like a tree.

Willow. The word tickled some sort of far, far memory, of a tree. A great, wavy thing, near a lake, its limbs trembling in the breeze with a quiet, supernatural grace. Its leaves were like slender dabs of

color, reflected on the lake's surface. The memory was lovely, but fleeting, and somehow, very, very painful. I was stabbed with nostalgia, for one terrible moment. And then it was gone. I thought to myself that I should, learn, with time to be more like the willow... Graceful, yet powerful. And having no need to move my roots.

## 5 Chapter 4

The few weeks that passed after my gracious inception were hard to describe. Far gone were the horrific noise and the smell of death. There were no more killer bugs or miasmic shadows. I was in a state of stasis, almost. Even with a thousand new memories to glean happiness from, I was still worried about those memories left behind. I found, to my surprise, that my memory was quite good... I could draw upon previous conversations and happenings at will, within the finite time span of the past weeks, of course. It was a marvel to me, how effortlessly I had filed away the memories and how tidily. Without a second thought, I could retrieve arbitrary conversations, or the contents of past meals, but the remnants of any time before the Event remained untouchable.

There were only a few fragments of permanence concerning my past, things that I knew without a doubt, had always existed. My wings, my tattooed hand, my lightness of movement despite having lost a lot of physical strength. My limbs were still strong, though I knew they had weakened. Most prominently, my bizarrely strong sense of smell. But that was more a source of fascination for me. For Asher, as well. I

told him one day that I liked the smell of glass. He looked at me like I had sprouted a second head, and told me that glass was scentless, and that perhaps I hit my head after all. I insisted for a good half hour that it did indeed have a smell, I could smell it right now from where I was sitting, and if he was so sure, he should go and put his nose to the damn glass. He did, after some convincing, and then glared at me for making him look ‘ridiculous.’

This wasn’t the oddest thing, however. I could see what Asher called ‘auras’. Asking him about the odd clouds of color swirling around people’s head was not an easy subject to approach, after the sniffing glass scenario. But he caught right on, saying that his brother had seen them. He asked me to describe them more thoroughly. I told him that they seemed to be emotions put to color and shape. And they were around everyone. At least the people I had seen. I hadn’t seen many other people, only fleeting looks out the window at night, when I was less likely to be seen. There weren’t usually very many people at night, but they all had one, an ‘aura’. They were some similar auras, but no two the same. Asher’s small housing unit barely looked out on the quiet street, you could only see the corner, and you had to lean to get a serviceable view. But all those people, were unique, yet with the same determined, unaware look on their faces. With

different emotions and conflicts floating above their heads. Going different places, but with a thread of connecting humanity swirling above them.

I didn't tell him that I spent a lot of my free time looking out that window. Like a child, I leaned with all my weight pressed forward, craning for a look, hoping to see something fascinating and adult happening. I would catch myself, unaware of time passing, my hands pressed to the glass for hours. The coldness pulsed beneath my fingers; the hard, frosty scent teased my nose. How could Asher not smell that wonderful smell? It smelled like cold earth and clean air. It was so simple and perfect. It never occurred to me that not everyone could feel the things I did. It felt like a private treasure. These textile feelings were strangely comforting to me, and when I slipped into them, it was like a trance. I would turn my left hand inward at an awkward angle to hide my tattoo, as if it were a beacon that would invite trouble. But after that one moment of reason, I would slip away.

I had discovered many things about myself. They were alarming at first. But like the shock of having wings, it faded fast. I had an extended epiphany, a piecing together of assumptions. None of this was abnormal for me. But there was something beyond that. I was accustomed to discovering amazing things, and quite often.

The first time I had been inclined, at Asher's insistence, to take a bath, I became startlingly aware of my body. Aware of its thinness, its need for attention, even being both fed and hydrated for several days. My muscle tone was lacking, but still strangely defined, especially around my abdominals and arms. My legs were thin and a tad unstable, but I was still agile and fleet of foot. Asher told me on several occasions that I moved like a willow tree. I began to agree with him, over time. I seemed to be built for swift movement. Like an arrow, or a missile. I had slender hips, and a sparse, aerodynamic chest. My breasts were set high and my shoulders were strong. My hair was the color of straw, falling just past my shoulders and my eyes were the color of grass. But there was something much more striking about my body. Another tattoo. An intricate thing, far from the simple star on my palm, though less likely to be seen. It was vast, surrounding my stomach, along the front of my torso, trailing into the outskirts of my back. It was a rose. With fat, defined thorns and thin, trailing vines forming spiky loops and sharp knots. It was richly detailed. You could see the light green veins in the dark green leaves, and their tiny sharp edges. The rose itself was far right of center, and just below the navel, red and prominent. A shade lighter than crimson, with thick cadmium veins, all the delicate petals outlined in an

earthy brown. The rose was ever so slightly open at the tip, but still young and cloistered. The tattoo was so lifelike that the rose looked ready to burst open. I felt, in my gut, that, if it were to bloom, something painfully wonderful would happen. I wasn't sure whether to be elated or terrified. I ran my fingers over it, as I had done with my Mark so many times; to be sure that it truly was part of my skin. There was a strange feeling about these marks, like their permanence would one day dissolve, and my skin would be bare again, if only the right circumstances arose. But I knew that that was nonsense. The ink, Asher told me, was a part of me forever and there was nothing wrong with that. But still, that feeling remained, hovering above, silent but not forgotten.

The apartment that Asher lived in was usually cool, being that the building was made mostly out of stone, and was also well insulated against intense summer heat. It was an old building, he had told me, built during an awful heat wave to house the elderly, who, like young children, were more prone to be affected by it. They put the building up very quickly, and paid the workers a higher amount than usual, due to the working conditions. Eventually, they began to add stories to the building, so that the aides could live upstairs if they wished to, to cut the costs of transportation and housing. A third floor was added

for emergency storage, which Asher said was now rented for a lower price due to the small size of the rooms. Eventually the nursing home received a grant for a larger facility, and moved downtown. And though the original owners were long gone, it still had the same name, and the same family working to keep it up. The building was then converted into an apartment complex.

It was a rather isolating place, squished between two other buildings I could barely see the edges of if I leaned. Offices, he had said. One small restaurant, with a bright sign. Where people worked. I asked him if he worked.

“Yeah. Downtown. I serve drinks in a tavern.”

“What’s a tavern?”

“A bar...kind of. People go there to drink.”

“They can’t drink at home?”

“They could, but... They want to socialize, maybe hook up.”

“Hook up?”

He gave an awkward, wide-eyed look, like you would a child who asked too much. I was getting nowhere. I just got more and more confused as he went on.

“You know...hook up. Like...have sex.”

“In the tavern?”

“NO. They go home for that...Except that one time,

but they aren't allowed back anymore. And it was quarter tequila night."

"Couldn't they just do that at home? Both the drinking and the sex?"

"Well, yes, and I'm sure people do, but some people would rather meet at the bar, then go home together. I don't think about it that much, it's not my business. And if they didn't, I wouldn't have a job."

"You could work at the office buildings."

"I don't think so, honey. Not my kind of place. I don't think they want people like me working there."

My words slowed to a crawl.

"People... like you?"

His lips scrunched, as if he had bitten his tongue. His aura suddenly became unsteady, rippling and flustered like disturbed dust motes. He looked disquieted for several painful moments. Finally his mouth unfurled.

"People...don't like different. Even with everything that's happened in this country, there's still that feeling. That bristling on the back of your neck when someone...disapproves. \_That feeling never really goes away. The less I have to deal with that the better."

The light from the setting sun, filtering in from the window, played on his face, making him look wise, but weary. His features were sharper in the low light, more defined. His emotions, less opaque. His

eyes looked wistful, and far-gazing, as if something he could see far, far away held his attention and hurt immensely.

“And even after all that...,” he muttered. He blinked, the sun dancing on his eyelashes. “We have all these unspoken rules about workplace fairness, yet those who are different in the most profound way just disappear. Someone just spirits them away. We hide them like you hide a mess when company comes over. We sweep them under the rug. I have to wonder, what will happen when they become tired of that? I don’t think they’ve really thought it through...”

He sighed. Not just a soft exhale, but a great, slumping affair with a heavy breath rolling out with it. It was times like that when I worried for him. How quickly he slipped into sad, cynical statements.

“Just listen to me. All gloom and doom, waxing philosophical on you... I’m sorry about that.”

He leaned back into the sofa. His sofa was a wide, squishy thing that smelled like hand-rolled cigarettes and old books. It was laden with the smell of his aftershave in some places, and in some tinged with the smell of his sweat. It was a great big blanket of comfort to me. I had to wonder what he found comfort in. My thoughts went back to the gentle, paternal pats on the hand when he first found me. I leaned into him, nestled my head into his thin chest, and grasped his

hand.

A funny thing happened. Rather than see him smile, I felt it. Soft, fluttery warmth forming a tangible heat on the back of my neck. It was more than an empathic perception. It was fleeting, but the happiness I felt having caused such a strong reaction lingered. His fingers absent-mindedly traced their way through my hair as we lay quietly and our thoughts went their own ways. Mine wandered toward an impasse, a branching of paths. A choice. Either a quiet future, filled with the sureness of moments such as these, or an uncertain but very different one in the unknown but fascinating world of the outside.

That night, my senses were too stimulated for my thoughts to rest. The world outside was a soft hum of activity, a thoughtless, continuous buzz of people and thoughts, even at night. I had to wonder if it would be as intriguing if I were to actually be a part of it, the way Asher was. My curiosity was humming in the back of my head. It was that constant drone that caused me to rise out of bed and walk noiselessly to the slightly ajar door of my bedroom. The sudden rush of cold air made the hair on my legs stand on end as I rose from the warm cocoon of the bedclothes. I shivered as I entered the hallway and stepped into the milky light of the connected kitchen and living room. The kitchen floor was like ice, even with the heat of

the summer night straining to sneak in. I nearly cried out when my bare feet hit the floor. Suppressing the odd, warbling noise I almost made, I moved toward the carpeted floor of the living room. My feet favored it instantly, though my thin legs still held onto the chill shock. I made my way to the couch, grabbing an old afghan off its lumpy spine and huddling up in it.

The apartment was cold, but breathing. There was life in every inch of it. The light from the streetlights bled into moonbeams and cast a hard, blue glow across everything. When a car passed below, the room took a deep breath as its amber glow splashed into the room. The resulting shadows in the wake of the light were intricate and fascinating. There was so much noise in silence, so much light in dark. There was great injustice in this world, I thought. How could anyone want to sleep through the night? It was this quiet thrall, this endlessly intriguing display that caused me to wake. I couldn't miss it. It felt wrong to. The city never slept, and I envied it so.

I heard a buzzing outside as a marquis went out. I turned around and peered over the top of the couch, still swaddled to keep warm. I pulled aside the heavy, worn drape and looked out. The street below was empty, but not lonely. It was waiting. The window was a portal into another existence, a needlessly distant place I couldn't reach or comprehend. I wanted

to get closer. I peeked behind the couch. I don't know what I thought I'd find. Another afghan, maybe? Dead insects, among other debris? There wasn't a thing. It was a little disappointing. I moved the couch away from the wall and crawled behind it. There was just enough room for me to curl up near the window, making a wonky nest out of the afghan and using the curtains like a shawl to keep my shoulders and chest warm. This allowed me not only the reassuring embrace of enclosed space, but an unobstructed view of the outside.

There was sibilant symphony of noise just beyond the icy barrier. My brain struggled to pick out sources to each auditory oddity, pinpointing a few only to have ten more arise. The loudest was the buzz of a streetlamp, just near the window, accompanying by an audience of bugs making a similar noise. Their noise was unnerving. It made me think of the blade-flies. A few silky moths landed on the window, making me jump. The twinge of fear in my gut faded when I saw their wings. They looked like dust on an old lampshade, with odd little designs etched in them. They crept along the glass, three perfectly imprecise patterned bodies wandering about aimlessly, content and unconcerned. They were like little machines, each movement efficient and measured, never more than needed, never less. In a moment of indiscretion, I laid

my tattooed hand on the glass.

And then there were more.

A small flock of at least a hundred insects landed near it. I let out a sharp noise and snatched my hand away. They didn't move. They lingered, a few whirling in circles, seemingly upset by the absence of my hand. Maybe not upset so much as disappointed. Taking a deep breath, I hesitantly laid my hand on the glass. They all returned, ecstatic and fluttering, only to land in three evenly spaced circles around my hand. They were still then, as if waiting, quietly, reverently, for my next move. I didn't dare move. We seemed to have reached some sort of unspoken agreement, a strange, quiet little kinship. They didn't budge, frozen in a circle of contentment, bathing in the strange glow from the streets below. As I started to lift my hand from the glass, they all tensed, lifting their wings in anticipation. I laid my hand flat again. They recovered quickly, welcoming its presence. I let my hand slide down the glass, they followed in a tight circle, then scattered when I let it slide to the carpet.

A few remained, looking about, but when they couldn't find my hand, they flew to seek a light elsewhere. Did the mark give off light? Is that why they were attracted to it? I hadn't seen it give off light, nor do anything interesting other than attract bugs. And that was marginally interesting at best.

It was pretty, in a simplistic way, but what was its function? Other than to attract moths. Asher said that, according to some old, vague wives' tale, it marked someone special and powerful, but I had my sincere doubts. And I hoped it did something, anything else. I pressed it to the glass again. The moths returned, feverishly happy, and landed in a blissful little circle. I laid my head to the glass, trying to peer at my hand. I lifted it slightly, and saw a sparse, pale blue light emanating from the mark. I humored the moths for a minute or so more. They seemed bizarrely happy sitting around my light. When I removed my hand, they retired to the street below. I got the impression that they were disappointed.

I watched them fly, until they disappeared from my sight. Then I sighed. I stared at my feet. The cold blue light of the apartment embraced me from all sides. I let the quiet dress me, and sought warmth from the material wrapped around me. For a moment, the stillness frightened me, prickling me with a sense of creeping anticipation. I peered outside, now vigilant and acutely aware. I let the unnerved feeling disperse as I watched the street below. Maybe if I watched it long enough, something glorious would happen. Somehow I felt that it could gaze back, as if wanted to please me, to show me the something glorious that I desired. What was it waiting for?

Maybe I had to meet it halfway...

The feeling of aimless, yet aware drifting became something more concrete. A burning formed in my chest. I wanted to go out there. I was jealous of the stars blocked by the brick walls. Jealous of the tiny moths with lampshade wings. Jealous of the street cooling in the humid air, and the screech and sizzle of the artificial lights. I wanted to see all that was beyond the glass cage. No matter how much it scared me.

My head hurt. Suddenly. There was a brilliant red flash behind my eyes. I laid my hands over my eyes. With my eyes closed, I could see the waving, sinewy limbs of the willow tree over the water. I suddenly understood the faraway look that Asher had at times. Those looks of longing, of knowing that something was across a great, uncrossable distance, unobtainable and taunting. I knew that feeling, and all that it implied. Willow was more than a name, more than a place. It was important, even if it was so distantly elsewhere... And it caused me an aching, deep-seated pain. It left me feeling inexplicably empty.

And unfathomably sad.

‘How do I tell him?’

## 6 Chapter 5

My dreams were chaotic, all bleeding colors and pulsing noise. I saw the city in shadows, being swallowed by the creature. I heard the deafening swarm of bladeflies, blooming into a cacophony. They were screaming in glee as they filled every corner of the city with their deafening song. They wove in and out of buildings, their presence spreading a black necrosis into every structure. People were pressed against windows, screaming as they rotted into dust, their death cries swallowed by the swarm. Their eyes became empty, hollow holes as the flies dissolved them. Then they were gone. Everything was crumbling. There was a gloom cast over the city. A veil of ashes hid the sun. And then the shadow swallowed the great orange globe, its light snuffed forever. For a brief moment, I heard it sizzle in desperate protest. The sound of the swarm ate the noise within seconds. The shadow showed a row of smoking, white teeth and laughed. It was a low, squealing cackle. Like a teapot left on the stove. The sound boomed from its closed mouth, combining with the flies' delighted buzzing to form a discordant choir. There was nothing I could do. I was everywhere and nowhere, watching. Ever watchful,

ever complacent, ever worthless.

Asher was nowhere to be seen. I was sure he was dead too. Like the others, he had screamed as he was melted, his cries earning him nothing as they were overpowered by greater noise. The shadows oozed through the city's smoking carcass almost cheerfully, as it surveyed the catastrophe. I felt my chest become solid and heavy. I could hear an arcane whispering amidst the droning buzz, but its words were muddled and nonsensical. My ears ached from the constant assault. I couldn't think anymore, I didn't want to. I suddenly ached for darkness and solitude. Even the box I first awoke in was better than this. The whispers grew louder, more insistent, forming horrible phrases and lies, pressing in on my brain like a vice. The words became harder, more exact, forming one terrible phrase.

"I found you."

The finality of that sentence struck something in me. I had heard that voice. Its raspy, growling crawl was buried in me, somewhere vulnerable and hidden. The voice lent credence to the words that somehow transcended the dream. Even with the kernel of reason I held among the chaos, this voice, above all things, was very real. It belonged to someone. \_Something. \_It gave a threat as well as a promise. A promise of something much more threatening, even in the

wake of the looming shadow and the sharp, deadly swarm. There was no more time to flee. It was not seeking anymore. The search was over. I couldn't see its dreadful eyes, but I knew it was looking at me. I could feel it staring into me, daring me to question its assertion. I thought of the Event. I thought of the light that carried me elsewhere. I thought of the blinding joy of a means of escape. But it didn't come. I felt my corporeal form manifest. As my body melted into physical form, I became horribly aware of my weak, leaden limbs. I was a thin, tiny form in the wake of a wall of darkness. There were no muscle spasms to indicate a reaction from my wings. They were lifeless, as if still asleep. I felt a numbness spread from head down to my fingers as it drew near, casting a shadow over me.

Its nonexistent eyes instilled in me a complete lack of hope. I thought as I looked into its inky, billowing depths that there was nothing left but to give in. I wondered what it would feel like when it overtook me. Would it swallow me? Dissolve me? Keep me in limbo? As it loomed over me, the swarm stopped buzzing, and all I could hear was the shifting of its mass and a low, needling squeal. The sound filled my ears like water, blocking out all other noise while building a crushing pressure. As it rippled and oozed, I became aware of soft squelching tangled with the

movement of wind. I had the horrific notion that that must be what its insides sounded like. There was something solid inside it, a fleshy sac for a stomach, quivering in hunger. When it opened its mouth, it nearly split in two, and I could see into it. I could see its red, fleshy insides, pulsing and quivering as they drew closer. They awaited me, craved me. My previous numbness became a waking, screaming terror. Even so, I could not move. All I could do was stare into the blood-colored swell of its innards as they descended upon me...

When I awoke, I flung myself forward so hard I nearly doubled over. I let out tense cry through clenched teeth. I was shaking violently, and felt wet and warm all over. The tactile feelings from its stomach still clung to my skin. The feeling of being swallowed, the fear of staring into my doom, it was all too real. I couldn't think. I could hardly breathe. I let the cold smoothness of the sheets reassure me that I was no longer in that other world. In that \_thing's \_presence. I could still hear its voice, venomous and rasping, "I found you." Dread crawled across my skin. I felt as if my spine would tremble into a bloody exit from my back. My head tingled. I laid my head down between my knees, breathing hard. I sifted my hair through my hands and gently pulled on it.

There was no way in hell I was going to get back

to sleep.

I rose from my bed, this time remembering to grab one of a jacket from the nearby closet. It was old, made of faded, blue denim. One of the buttons on the breast pocket was missing. As soon as I took it off the hanger, I had an odd feeling. Something akin to how I felt when I saw the willow tree...a painful, sobering feeling of lost time. I felt like I was holding a ghostly memory. Even though it looked like it would fit, I couldn't bear to hold it any longer, and I quickly laid it on the bed. Just as it left my hand, I felt a prick of loneliness. Even looking at it laying flat, the feeling didn't quite fade.

I walked into the kitchen, only to stumble back out as the cold shocked me. As before, I nearly squealed. I managed to come across a pair of Asher's house slippers, sitting right by the threshold where the carpet ended and the iceberg floor began. They were old and worn. They had his energy in them. They felt rather wonderful on my feet, despite being way too big and flopping around. Somehow, they were just the comfort I needed to ground me. I headed back into the kitchen, feeling way more accomplished than I should for having conquered the cold floor. I had a feeling that food might help me settle down, as well. Food was sparse, but there was always something to eat, whether it was leftovers, or something you needed

to prepare. I heated up some stew Asher made a few nights ago, made some tea and made my way to the couch. The darkness outside was deep, which led to guess that it about 4:30. Asher wouldn't be up for another 5 hours, and wouldn't go into work until late afternoon. I had to find some way to entertain myself.

Usually when Asher was away, I would read something from one of the bookshelves in the living room. However, after having stayed with him for so long, I was beginning to run out of reading material. So unless I wanted to dip into the 'Trash Stash', the books with the distasteful covers and the even more distasteful prose, I was out of luck. I had even read the crime dramas, which I didn't like very much. They were so bleak, and they had way too many scenes with characters gathering in the morgue, scrutinizing dead people like vultures.

Television bored me. A lot. I didn't feel right fiddling with Asher's laptop, even though he told me I could. I didn't even feel right being in his room without him here. It was so full of his energy, and his belongings, that it felt intrusive to just go in and poke around. Let alone pick up the most expensive thing he owned and fool around with it. My thoughts went back to that jacket. And the flood of feelings that seemed to be attached to it. My chest constricted just thinking about it. Despite being cold, I couldn't

bring myself to put it on. It was the only thing in the apartment that I knew wasn't Asher's. The sleeves were too long, and the shoulders were too big. The rest of the clothing in that closet was heavy winter wear, long coats with high collars. It wasn't *that* cold. Come sunrise, it would be much warmer, and I'd be thankful for the cold interior. It was the dark, blessed night that brought the cold with it. I was willing to tolerate it for the thrill of the darker world outside. I just grabbed that old afghan and huddled in it. It smelled of something herbal. Something warm and soothing. It smelled like memories.

After I finished my food, I shuffled into the kitchen, having to scoot my feet to keep the slippers on. Being swaddled in the afghan made carrying the dishes much more difficult, but I managed to get them into the sink without breaking anything. I shuffled back into the living room, and moved the couch aside to squeeze behind it. The nightmare had sobered me, but I felt a lot better indulging in the familiarity of the apartment. That cramped area behind the couch felt like an embrace. I looked out into the humming thrall of night, and the hellish vision couldn't have been farther away.

No one was out on the streets. There was no smoke, no swarm of bladeflies poisoning the air. It was comforting and normal. There were at least 20

stars pushing through the strong lights. The noise was its own blended brand of chaos. It was like a song only I could hear. I pressed my forehead to the cool glass, letting out a hot breath to form a damp cloud. I let my mind wander beyond the solid glass veil and into the streets. Surely something must be going on. The drone of the city was constant, but it was punctuated by the sharp wail of sirens, and distant shouting. It wasn't close to the apartment. Maybe a few blocks down. Even with my vision obstructed, I could see it, through some sort of fog billowing around the edge of the image. I saw just past the building, and mentally pinpointed where the noises were coming from. It was some sort of dispute, and the police had been called. Nothing that intriguing.

I was surprised how easy it was to cast out my perception, as if my eyes themselves could travel. Even though I didn't travel that far, it still amazed me. I peered a bit further in the same direction, just past the police cars parked in the yard of that same disputing group of people. There were more long lines of buildings, the monotony broken apart here and there by smaller houses, pressed in on the sides by the looming buildings. I found myself searching for trees, searching for some disparity in the landscape. By the time I found a few, just on the edge of a pine forest, my head began to ache, and I was snapped back

so vigorously that I felt like my eyes would be pulled from their sockets. My hands flew up to cover them, still feeling the tug on my skull. My eyes felt heavy.

It was a good few minutes before I recovered. When I moved my hands, a light shade of red filtered my vision. I had a dull headache. I blinked hard, willing my vision to readjust. I leaned my head on the cool glass, letting the chill sooth me. There was a painful upheaval in my chest, a choking feeling in my throat. I felt as if I had struck a raw nerve within the very skin of the earth. Something about that forest had caused my brain to reel back. It was similar to a pain reaction, like I had put my hand on something hot. Thinking back to the image of the forest filled with a sense of nostalgia, as well as dread. It was one of the strangest combinations of feelings I had ever experienced. The two emotions just didn't seem to fit. Somehow I felt like I belonged in that forest, but another part of me screamed in protest.

As badly as I wanted to look past the buildings and into a more diverse landscape, my eyes had a pressure behind them that kept me from looking further than the street in front of me. I gave my 'perception casting' a rest for the day, feeling a little disappointed that I hadn't gotten to use it for a bit longer. The deep, persistent dark outside was beginning to wane, a soft grayish blue reaching up from the bottom of the sky.

I felt a sense of loss upon seeing it, having seen so little of interest that night, other than a brief dispute that I barely glanced at, and a kick in the eye sockets when I tried to find some trees. It didn't seem like a fair exchange.

The city was beginning to stir. The noises of night started to fade. The spattering of stars that barely shone through the lights of the city dissolved into the changing colors. I wrapped the afghan tighter around me, even as the cold faded with the dark. Even as the fascinating night faded to an intriguing array of colors, it was the sunrise that gave me the deepest sense of longing. I thought more of what lay ahead cloaked in the veil of dusk. I thought of the sun filtering through the sparse pine trees as it rose, determined to dissolve the night with its violent rays of color. The thought of the trees alone sent a soft pain murmuring through my temples and across my eyes. Was there something there that I shouldn't see? Were the pine trees, with their long-reaching limbs and impossibly tall bodies, too similar to the swaying willow?

Ow. That pain again.

Apparently thinking about any tree was an instant kick to the head. I curled into a tight cocoon and lay down on my side, watching people start to filter out of their houses, rising with the morning. Having slept

through the night, and never having seen what I had. When my temple touched the rough carpet, I pulled up the afghan to lay my head on. I felt tired. It may have been the pain that made me weary, or perhaps the perception casting had worn me out more than I thought... It might just have been that I felt safer sleeping during the day time. Something about the warmth of the sun touching my face, and the husk I had formed with the afghan made me feel like it was finally safe to sleep. Like I could rest without worry about being chased down while I dreamed. I hoped that I wouldn't dream at all...

Somehow I doubted that my luck would be that good. Although the warm, womb-like space I had created for myself gave me hope.

My dreams were all colors and sounds. Nothing frightening, but nothing distinctly good either. Nonsense, mostly. I only remembered the jacket. I could see someone wearing it, someone with hair the same soft brown as Asher's, but taller, with broader shoulders. He had stronger, squarer features, but they had the same eyes. There was a dense swirl of colors around him, like a fog. He was holding something in one hand, something long that seemed to be supporting his weight. Just as he turned, as if he had noticed someone staring at him, the colors became evanescent mist and dissolved.

Then there was the forest. Suddenly, without transition, as dreams do. I could see it from above, denser, darker. Pulsing, wavering, as if heat were distorting my vision. In the very center, there was a tiny clearing. In the exact center was a small sphere of light. I could make a figure, curled into a loose fetal position, suspended in a milky, liquid light. The figure's long hair drifted. Long, dark shadows against the brilliant glow, tendrils of black reaching to all ends of the sphere. The glow inside the sphere grew brighter, the fluid inside pulsed. The figure stirred, a slight twinge, its body seizing forward. The sphere twitched, and its brilliant light began to fade, revealing the sphere's translucent skin.

The figure had a face. It looked uncomfortable, troubled. Perhaps even in pain.

The sphere seemed to be breathing. The trees swayed in unison, creaking and trembling as the sphere trembled with life. Suddenly and violently, the sphere burst. It split in the middle, like a rip in canvas, as if cleaved open by a blade. The figure's face was trapped in a silent scream, his eyes filled with shock and fear. The fluid leaked out in a brisk, immeasurable flood. It spilled across the clearing, sizzling and luminescent as the sun touched it. There was only a thin membrane left, sticky and shapeless. The figure lay fairly still, naked, his palms upturned

to the sky. His breath heaving, his eyes wide with distress. His charcoal hair clung to his pale skin as he trembled. His flawless form was sprawled out in a field of glowing, wet earth, as daylight shown on his unprepared face for the first time.

It was daylight that tore me away from the clearing and back into the living room. It came spilling onto my face, warm and welcome as well as upsetting and sudden. The figure's eyes haunted my inner vision. The gasping horror as he was thrown into the light left a heavy feeling in my chest. As the light filtered in through the window, the sun steadily creeping toward the center of the sky, I lay on my side. Still shrouded in the afghan. The light that terrified him so had destroyed my beautiful blue night. Our pain, in some sense, was similar. My loss was but a mild sting, though. Almost a bitter nostalgia. His eyes belied something deeper. A pain both enduring and new, both sudden and resurfacing. As if his very emergence had filled him with some deep revelation of an unrelenting, unfathomable truth.

The dream was both horrifying and eerily beautiful. His form was immaculate. His hair moved like water across his skin. All cast in that spectral, wavering glow. How unearthly. How odd. And how amazing.

“Willow?”

I heard a voice, soft and familiar. A few feet away.

Its sound was distorted with the hazy filter of sleep. I stirred, but did not rise. The cocoon I had created was too perfect, too bracing to leave.

“Willow?”

This time it sounded worried. It took me a while to realize someone was calling me. Asher. Somehow the way that given name flowed out of his mouth sounded so foreign and uncanny. If only for a moment before my wits returned to me.

“Willow!”

By the time he called my name a third time, fear had crept into it, propelling me from my daze. I unraveled my wool cocoon and flopped over the back of the couch, waving my arms to grab his attention, my speech still arrested by drowsiness. I attempted some degree of spoken words, but it came out as a long string of grunted nonsense. I swatted aside a curtain of hair to look for him. He stood near the doorway to the kitchen, and bodily jumped at the sight of me.

“What the hell are you doing behind the couch? You scared me to death!”

“Sleeping.” There. Words. They were working again.

“Behind the couch?” He, very pointedly, put his hands on his hips. His aura flared. Blue and red. Concern and anger.

“Yes?” The phrase of affirmation came out like a question, since his own question seemed so ridiculous

to me.

“Why?” He sounded exasperated, confused.

“Why not?”

“Because I woke up and couldn’t find you. I had no idea where you were. You scared me to death.”

“I usually stay behind the couch at night...I just fell asleep this time.”

He looked as if he wanted to ask me more questions, as well as scold me for longer, but refrained. He just sighed deeply, walked over to me and patted my head. He looked relieved now, and suddenly affectionate, his eyes soft when I looked up at him.

“Just don’t scare me like that again.”

“Just check behind the couch next time?”

He smiled. “Okay, I will. What are you doing behind there, anyway?”

“Just looking out the window. Watching. It’s more intriguing at night, though. There are also fewer people.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? What if someone sees you?”

“They don’t really pay much attention at night. What few people there are on the streets are concentrating on the path ahead of them, not looking in windows. I keep the curtains closed around me.”

“If I didn’t know that you would do it anyway, I would tell you to never do it again...”

“You know me too well...”

He patted my head again. “Come eat breakfast.” He walked off toward the kitchen, shaking his head. I folded the afghan and hung it over the back of the couch, scooting out from behind. I pushed the couch back to its original position and slunk into the kitchen. As per always, the kitchen floor was like ice, and I found my self envying those ratty slippers he always wore.

I shuffled as quickly as I could to the stools near the kitchen counter and hopped up. The apartment was just beginning to warm up. Once Asher turned on the stove and started cooking, every part of me was comfortably warm. The smell of food fostered a deep sense of well-being. I watched him cook, observing his hands, his placid face, all the subtle twists of his abdomen. Never too much movement, never too little. Optimized to perfection, like the moths with the lampshade wings. It occurred to me that he had the prettiest fingers I had ever seen.

I was in a slight daze when the coffee machine kicked into life and began percolating its brazen morning melody. Without missing a beat, he took out two cups and prepared each to our own preference. I didn't much care for coffee. It was drinkable at best, no matter how stimulating it was. But I would not have missed coffee with Asher for anything. Without the

benefit of morning caffeine to awaken his skepticism, I could pretty much ask him anything. I usually opened the conversation with an odd, branching question. Something random I had thought of, or some concern about the outside world. It wasn't that he wasn't forthcoming when I was curious. He was just easier to talk to in the morning. Our quiet, often bizarre morning conversation was outmatched only by the wonders of the blue-tinted night.

“What's in that forest?”

He didn't skip a beat. “The one on the edge of town?”

“Yes.”

“That's an old area of town. Very odd stories circulating around down there.”

The coffee machine squealed a bit as its morning song was finished, and Asher extracted the pot from the machine and began pouring.

“Stories?”

“Old superstitions. Mostly nonsense, I'm sure.”

He slid me my cup. It was ridiculously hot, and I gingerly held the handle and blew on it. He went back to the sizzling bacon and bubbling oatmeal.

“Like?”

“Well, they say that that forest is haunted, as well as the area around it.”

“Haunted? As in, ghosts, or just creepy because it's

old?”

“Ghosts haunted. Screams in the middle of the night, ghostly figures, loud booming voices threatening those that enter. Cheesy, cheesy stuff. But most people are completely convinced. Or completely terrified. They just don’t fool around with it...”

“And you?”

“I what?” He turned his back to me to put a bit more cold milk in his mug.

“What do you think about it?”

He laughed softly. “You’re asking the wrong person about ghosts. Believe me. Even if there was something in that forest, I’m sure it would have no interest in me. I have the psychic sensitivity of a sliding glass door. I actually lived in a so-called ‘haunted house’ and I never saw shit.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Near the edge of town, actually. Very close to the forest. God my brother hated that house. He was always on edge. And I was no help. I never saw or heard *anything*. Even when things would fly off the walls, I’d just assume it was underground tremors or something simple and explainable. My mother was a nervous wreck, too. Seeing her little boy so paranoid at such a young age. I felt like a real ass, to be honest, not being able to see what he was seeing.”

“Did you eventually move?”

“We were going to. Just when we started discussing relocating, my mom let slip that she had no idea if we would be able to afford it or not. That seemed to affect Kaynen somehow. He got really quiet for a while. Then, later that night, he did the most amazing thing I have ever seen.”

I leaned forward on the stool, just slightly, my eyes locked on him. He smiled. Just the corner of his mouth. I couldn't tell if he was smiling at the memory, or at how enraptured I was in his story.

“Don't do that obnoxious dramatic pause thing! Just tell me!”

He laughed. “Okay, okay. He was sitting in my mother's lap. She was comforting him. He was about 8, too big, really, to be sitting in her lap. But she let him because he was so upset. Then he hopped up out of her lap like he'd been shot. And he marched into the middle of the hallway, put his hands on his hips and yelled, ‘Now you listen here! This is our house, and we're not leaving! We're not scared of you, and we paid good money for this house! So you can just go somewhere else and get over it!’”

It was my turn to laugh. I couldn't help it.

“And?”

“The house kinda groaned. Like it was talking to him. He just glared at the ceiling and yelled ‘I don't care!’. Didn't move an inch. He looked fearless,

even though I could see him shaking. And, after that, we never had a problem. He wasn't scared, and my mother was a lot less tense. I still think that it was the bravest thing I have ever seen anyone do. I can laugh about it now, but mother and I were both speechless. After that, he started acting completely different. He was special and he damn well knew it. He didn't hesitate to tell someone if they were full of it. He had no problem asserting himself. Telling other kids who bugged him that he was smarter, stronger, and just overall better than them."

"How did your mother handle that?"

"She was just happy that he wasn't freaking out over every little thing. She just saw him as a special kid who found a way to deal with his problems. That way was kinda disruptive, but he wasn't hurting anybody. I think that she was right. He was a good kid. A smart kid who handled the situation better than most adults would."

"Did you guys get along?"

"Oh God yes. He was my big brother, of course I loved him. I mean, he was an asshole in the way that all big brothers are, don't get me wrong. But once I got older, and other kids started picking on me, he turned into my protector. He wasn't a big kid by any stretch of the imagination, but he never backed down from a fight when someone was harassing me. I saw

him take down a kid twice his size and girth. It took three seconds. He hit him in the nose. Kid cried like someone shot him.”

The memory made him chuckle.

“He never let anyone hurt me.”

There was that look. It was coming back to him. That painful faraway feeling.

“Why would they want to?”

He sighed.

“I was always pretty quiet. I liked to read and keep to myself. I was always so small. And I liked to paint, sew, knit. Domestic pursuits. I saw my mother doing them and wanted to learn. She was more than happy to teach me. I didn’t think anything of it, I just loved spending that time with her. But I paid for it.”

“Did that stop you?”

“No. But if he weren’t there, it might have. He even tried to learn how to knit to make me feel better. I think I still have a rather lumpy scarf he made me.”

Now his eyes were clouded, sad. He stopped stirring the pot. His thoughts were elsewhere, wandering, wondering. I felt my chest ache.

“Even when we got older, and someone made me feel inferior or upset, I’d go to him. I had to build my own defenses once he left... I talk to mother, but it’s not the same...”

He was silent for a long while. He turned down

both burners and stared empty at the food, his hand absentmindedly drifting to the counter. I couldn't bring myself to say anything. When he did speak again, it was in a soft, pained tone. Low and awkward and strained.

"I'll never forget how it felt to go to his room and realize that he wasn't there. I had had a god-awful day at work. I don't even remember what happened. Some asshole came in and gave me a hard time. Said something needlessly rude and mean. I got home, all in a huff. Threw off my shoes. Stormed through the house. I was so damn mad. And, just out of habit when I was going down the hallway, I stopped in front of his door. He always kept it open during the day. But when I turned to walk in..."

His eyes were wet. His voice was quavering. He let out a deep breath, blinked a few times before he continued. I could feel that sickly, spiky feeling of unshakeable grief leaking out of him. Soft blue and black waves flickered above his head.

"The door was open. But the room was dark. And his bed was made. And he wasn't there. It was just an empty room, full of his things."

A deep, pregnant pause.

"We used to have coffee like this. It made us feel very adult. He'd sit in that stool. His legs damn near came up to face when he put his feet on the rung. He

looked like a grasshopper trying to perch on the head of a pin.”

He let out a long sigh. It was an odd sound. Somewhere between defeated and hopeful. Then he, with thorough but pained movements, placed his mug down and pulled down two plates from the cabinet.

With his back to me, he asked, “How much bacon do you want? Half?”

“Yeah. That would be fine.”

“Same as usual on the oatmeal?”

“Yeah...”

He had told me as much as he was going to. I felt terrible for prying, for dredging up so many dormant memories. There was nothing left to do but change the subject. Pull him out of the maelstrom of thoughts that came with bringing up his brother. His aura settled down a bit. Flowing more smoothly, closer to his head. As always. His thoughts lay close to the surface, but he held them close to his chest like a hand of cards. In some odd way, I felt honored that he even opened up to me. Yet still slightly guilty for the upset I had caused.

After so many weeks together, we had reached a gentle rhythm. It was something I hadn’t considered with any depth of thought other than being grateful that he was willing to put up with me. But the look in his eyes when he talked about his loneliness and

longing for his brother, who was so very far out of reach, made it dawn on me. I was staying in his brother's room. Sitting in the same stool, drinking his coffee, eating his food. Over time, I had nestled my way into his brother's shadow. And he had let me.

What did that mean for his painful recollections? His warm smile when he greeted me? His caring gestures, as well as his hesitance to enter that room? Where did his love for his brother begin and his affection for me begin? Was it separate or combined? Just as doubt began to creep in, he slid me a plate and a bowl, and with a sudden, sweet movement, he kissed me on the top of the head. Soft, platonic, like you would a child.

"Eat something. I can hear your stomach growling."

Something warm settled over me. A feeling made of the smell of hot food, the feel of ratty slippers and the sadness of a single denim jacket with no owner. The solid familiarity of four strong walls, the cold rush of night and the breaking orange dawn that brought his presence with it. There was a word for it... One that I could barely grasp. It was a tangible thing, yet the thought of it was slippery, gossamer, capricious. It danced in front of me like light, but it was hard to reach out and touch it. But I had touched light once. When I had to escape the bladeflies. I had reached out

and grabbed it, like a great molten rope. It was harder to accept the feeling of our companionship than to actually touch light itself. I simply basked in the glow of it, searching for a word to label it.

I ate quietly, letting my thoughts digest my feelings. It got too quiet, and, longing to prolong the golden feeling swimming through me, I spoke up.

“When do you go to work?”

“Later. They don’t need me till six. I’ll get home around one.”

There. That was it.

The domesticity of our situation was never lost on me. But that word held a promise I had not thought possible. Home. Just the way his lips embraced it made the outside world seem far away. The way he said it sounded \_right. \_The way he affirmed his return as if this house belonged to the both of us.

“I’ll probably be behind the couch. Now that my secret hideout has been found.”

He laughed. He sat down beside me, pulling up his untouched plate next to my nearly desolate one. He smiled, nudged me with his shoulder gently.

“You’re so weird.”

The blue luminescence of the streets at night held my awe. But this golden glow made by the simplest of things held my heart. I laid my head on his shoulder, just for a matter of seconds. The next few minutes

were quiet except for the sound of silverware.

The desire to be elsewhere was beginning to sting.