



# Dead By Dusk

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** 6 ASSUMING STRANGERS

5 HAVE NO MEMORIES

4 BECOME HUNTED

3 WERE FRIENDS

2 ARE LOVERS

1 IS LYING

Something is very wrong. Easy enough conclusion to come to when you wake up in an unfamiliar house, have no memories and youre covered in bruises. Easier when youre not the only one in said situation.

When Silene finds herself in these exact circumstances she knows that she needs to find a way out. Working together felt like the best option at the start, but when she finds a hidden dagger, one exit and is given a warning not to trust anyone, she decides the to do exactly what she was advised to.

Run.

But her returning memories are telling her a different story. Something more complete. Something complicated and dangerous. Will she regain all of her memories in enough time to end this deadly hunt, figure out who the traitor is and protect her heart? Or will she only live long enough to burn with the rest of them?

**Total Pages (Source):** 33

# Page 1

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## Prologue

There isn't much to talk about, though I wonder if that's when there is most to be said. In the midst of confusion and questions, wouldn't that be when you desire your voice to be heard? To demand answers, to speak unknown truths, to beg someone to tell you who or when or what you are? I know that I wish to speak, though silence is where one must dwell to truly understand the way life slips through our fingers and secrets escape our minds, crawling into the deepest crevices of our souls until we're completely made of them.

And right now, that's what we all are.

Secrets, waiting to escape completely until not even time remembers they had ever existed.

### Our Little Secret: Silene

C old, hard floor against warm skin. That's the first thing I feel as my eyes flutter open. I inhale deeply, and the smell of bleach instantly invades my senses. My body is awkwardly propped against something hard. I blink rapidly through bleary confusion and bolt upright. The swift movement sends a deep, dull ache through my neck. I massage the tender muscles and hope it'll stop feeling like I slept on it wrong for five years, eight months and twenty days.

No such luck.

Instead, the pain worsens, sharp needles shooting into my skull, quickly followed by a pulsing, throbbing ache. Wincing, I glance around the unfamiliar room, trying to get a feel for where I am and what condition I'm in. My eyes dart to the floor. Dark hardwood. A kitchen? I turn my head to scan behind me, and my aching neck screams in protest. Annoyance flares within me when I realize the pain is probably because my head had been precariously balanced against the oven door instead of on the ground like the rest of my body.

Where am I? How did I get here?

I continue my scan, and my hair follows, cascading down the length of my side to the curve of my waist in a mess of dark ebony curls. My eyes catch sight of bruises that wrap around my wrist like shadowed fingerprints. A few more marks are scattered across both arms in hues of dark purples and blues. They look very fresh.

For now, I brush away the questions around how I may have gotten them. I have more pressing concerns. Bracing my hands on the ground, I slowly try to stand up, fighting down the sudden nausea that threatens to overwhelm me. I only make it into a crouch before I'm forced to stop, breathing in deeply over and over again to ease the sudden sickness. Releasing one final deep exhale, I grip my knees tightly and force my legs to straighten.

It's only then—when I'm standing—that I see I'm not alone.

Not alone at all, actually.

There are two people sprawled out in different positions near me. The first one is laying on the couch. Lucky asshole probably won't wake up in any pain. The thought gets on my nerves more than it probably should. He seems to be decently tall, skinny and pale with red hair curling on his forehead. His chest rises and falls with the steady breaths of sleep. He's wearing black sweatpants and a blue sweatshirt, as if he had been ready to go on a run but decided to take a nap instead.

Next, my eyes find a woman propped on her side against the wall next to the couch, her long legs curled underneath her. She's tall—definitely taller than me. Her light brown hair lays flat against the wall, framing her tan face and falling well past her shoulders, almost to her waist.

Something tugs at me as I look at her; she almost has this aura of innocence surrounding her like a cloud that conceals her from everything bad and ugly in this world. Her oversized jacket swallows her in a mass of brown, red and green knitted fabric, paired with black leggings and ankle boots. Comfortable and practical for a season of change.

Who are these people?

I'm about to continue my search when the sound of shuffling feet pulls my gaze to the other side of the room. There's a closed door. Shadows flicker underneath as if someone had walked up to the door to leave, then thought better of it. Maybe that's the smart thing to do. Maybe I shouldn't have stood up immediately. Maybe I should have waited for something to happen instead of investigating the unbroken silence. But deep down, I know I was right.

That this, here and now, isn't right. Something is very wrong here.

I need to get moving.

And so, instead of exploring further, I turn back to the kitchen and start opening drawers and cabinets in a frantic search. There has to be something that might help me understand what's going on. Something that will trigger the memory of the events that led me here.

Something I can use to protect myself.

The first drawer holds nothing but oven mitts and kitchen rags. Not helpful. But it means there may be knives as well, and I can use them to defend myself if it comes down to it.

I have a feeling it's going to come down to it.

The next drawer holds measuring cups and spoons but nothing sharp. I keep searching, growing increasingly frantic. The sound of drawers and cabinets slamming shut fills the air, but thankfully the slumbering man and woman don't stir. I find plates, bowls, a toaster, cutting boards, baking dishes, pots and pans, whisks, just about everything you would need in a kitchen, including cans of food and seasonings. Conveniently missing, however, is anything that could be used as a real weapon, unless you count an old lighter. Fuck .

I am about to give up my search when I notice something peeking out from the plaid mat under the kitchen sink. I quickly glance around the room one more time to ensure that no one had moved and that the stranger in the other room hadn't quietly entered in search of answers.

No one out of place. I loose a breath I didn't realize I was holding and slowly bend down to see if my mind was playing tricks on me.

Once on my knees in front of the rug, I notice what looks like a carving of an "x" in the hardwood floor beneath me. Moving the rug away, my eyes look over the two short sentences roughly carved into the ground next to it.

"X" Marks the spot.

Let's keep this our little secret, love. - X

I allow myself one second of hesitation before pushing down on where the 'X' is carved and watch as the right side of the board dips down, revealing a small but beautiful dagger with an all black, steel, slightly serrated blade, sitting atop a small sheath. The handle is wrapped tightly in black rope that knots at the bottom.

Curiosity is a living thing that blooms within me as I hold it, thinking about just how familiar it feels in my grip—significant, even. I shove it into my right side pocket just as I hear murmuring coming from the living room.

Placing the rug back, I ensure the carving is concealed before standing and heading toward the living room. It's then that I see the man on the couch looking around the room with a dazed look in his eyes. He startles when he sees me, rushing to sit up as far as he can. His eyes quickly become curious and inquisitive, filling me with unease.

Maybe it's just the situation, though, because I can feel myself giving him the same look.

"Who are you?" he asks me, voice deep and gravelly with disuse.

I soak in his appearance for a while longer before answering. His face is covered in freckles, giving his pale skin more color. Dark brown eyes are framed by blonde—almost white—eyelashes and stay locked on me, but every now and again he lets them flick to other parts of the room before returning to where I hover in the middle of the room.

"Silene," I answer, before clearing my throat, realizing this is also the first thing I've said since I woke. "And you are?" I prompt. I'm starting to feel unsettled with the way he's sizing me up like I'm some sort of obstacle before he rapidly blinks a few times, and sits upright, feet planted on the hard floor. Taking a moment to scan the room, his gaze catches on the other woman a few feet away and doesn't stray when he finally answers.

"Nathaniel. But if you can tell me where we're at and how we got here, then you can call me Nate," he says before leveling his gaze back to me. "All my friends call me Nate. At least, I think they do. I honestly don't remember much other than my name."

That's when I realize I've been so focused on finding a weapon that I haven't really considered how I got to this strange, unknown house.

What the hell happened?

What day is it?

The fact that I even remember my name is honestly a surprise to me. Maybe I let all of these thoughts show on my face at once, because Nathaniel just pushes out a deep

sigh. He tries to stand, but a small grunt escapes his lips as he falls back onto the couch instead.

“If it’s dizziness or nausea, it’ll pass soon. That happened to me too,” I say as I head back into the kitchen. Grabbing two cups from one of the cabinets, I fill them halfway with tap water and bring one back to him, cradling the other in my grasp. “I don’t know how we got here or how many of us there even are. I woke up a few minutes ago. If even that. I think there’s someone in that room. I heard footsteps and saw a shadow under the door before it walked away. I didn’t check it out yet though. Didn’t know what would be waiting for me on the other side.” I gesture to the door that’s no more than ten feet away.

We both look at each other and then toward the door slowly, him seeming just as nervous to find out what’s possibly waiting on the other side as he pops every knuckle on both hands. The sound, loud and sharp, sends an uncomfortable chill down my spine. Yet, the sound is much less unnerving than how familiar the tell of his emotions feel.

I don’t tell him that, while he was asleep, I was loudly searching for a weapon and that whoever was in that room undoubtedly heard me rummaging around.

They must have heard me, yet made no move to come and investigate. Why?

Are they also nervous about a possible ambush? Are they hurt? Do they know why we are all here? Did they bring us here?

There are too many questions stacking up. I don’t remember much about myself, but some part of me feels tremendously uneasy with the number of unanswered ones. Which, in case no one else is keeping track, is all of them. There are zero answers to many questions and I’m not sure that any information I could be given wouldn’t result in the addition of—you guessed it—more questions to our already overflowing



plate. So, I take the step toward the door that hasn't opened yet.

The one where with something waiting on the other side.

I look at Nathaniel as he stands, taking a few steps closer to me and nodding me on. Turning back toward the door, I force myself to move forward, one step after the other. A slight tremble courses through me, only noticeable when I reach my hand toward the doorknob and take a breath, trying to steady my emotions. Admittedly, it doesn't help the pounding in my chest, but it does ease the shaking in my hands.

The deep inhale quiets every question I've been asking myself over and over like a broken record. It almost feels like I was used to this. Silencing my inner turmoil and calming myself in stressful situations. Putting my mind at ease when everything inside me is screaming "DANGER." This realization has me pausing for just a second before one more question flashes in my mind.

Who am I, really?

Closing my eyes, I take a few more steps, slowly approaching the door. Nathaniel's presence behind me is like a shadow, something I can't feel but I know exists, ready to move as soon as I do. That thought gives me little comfort. I wrap my small, calloused hand around the cool metal, but as soon as I begin to turn the knob, I'm yanked forward with the door. I yelp before I hear the crashing sound of glass shattering against the wall behind me, only confusing me further as I stumble into the chest of another man.

One that seems to have quite a bit more muscle on him than the one behind me, but I don't let my thoughts drift much further than that before quickly regaining my balance and back away from him. Away from him and closer to the lanky ginger who definitely could not take him in a fight, but I at least know his name. I make it back to the other side of the door, and a shattered lamp on the floor catches my eye. Turning,

I quirk an eyebrow up at Nathaniel whose face turns just about as red as his hair. I turn back to Muscle Man in front of me.

I give him a good once over, the same as I've done for the others, and the slightest of nods as I finish and straighten myself up.

He's taller than me, but not by much. My guess is he stands at about five foot ten, but what he lacks in height, he makes up for in size. The man looks like he's never missed gym day in his life with biceps and thighs bigger than my head. I hope I never have to fight him, because that might just be a losing battle.

Though, the jeans he's wearing wouldn't be great for mobility. That might give me a leg up considering I'm in a pair of well-fitting black cargo pants that seem tailored for maximum efficiency and comfort.

His hazelnut and honey hair is cropped close to his head. His olive complexion is similar to mine, and his hazel eyes haven't strayed from me for more than a second, presumably also sizing me up. His perusal ends with a small, confident lift of his lips, giving away his lack of concern.

The look of an arrogant man. I have to resist the urge to roll my eyes at his automatic assumption that I could pose no threat to him.

Reaching out his hand, he looks at me expectantly.

"The name is William. I prefer Will," is all he says as he waits for me to shake his hand. I almost don't. I can't say if it's because of pride or something else, but some part of me doesn't want to be pleasant with him. Maybe spite? I do know, though, that I can't afford to make any enemies in such an uncertain time, so I meet him halfway.

“Silene,” I say when our hands meet. I nod my head to the left, “This is Nathaniel. He has a nickname too, but unless you’re friends, you can’t use it.” I crack a small, amused smile.

“And you two are friends, I take it? Just checking, you know...since he threw the lamp at your head about two minutes ago,” he says. I whip my head back and pin Nathaniel with a glare, pain jolting through my neck at the action. Nathaniel opens and closes his mouth several times, gesturing between Will and I.

“I know we just met, but damn,” I start, forcing my features into a picture of mock concern. “I thought we were past the wary stage. You think you know a guy,” I mutter, crossing my arms over my chest. His eyes widen more than I thought humanly possible, and my lips twitch slightly—just once—and I hope it didn’t give myself away.

“I thought it was a trap, but as I was throwing, I realized the lamp would probably hit you so I angled it to the side,” he trails off in defeat before adding, “I didn’t realize G.I. Joe was on the other side of the door.” Before he can continue defending himself, there’s a small cough from behind us.

William stills while Nathaniel whips his body around and takes a small step forward before stopping himself.

Odd.

Slowly, I turn my body, taking cautious steps toward the tall and petite, formerly asleep, woman, who is now aggressively rubbing her eyes with one hand and using the other to balance herself as she tries to stand. Before she can rise, I’m in front of her, kneeling and placing my hand on one of her shoulders to help.

She startles at the contact, rearing her body back and dropping her hand from her

face. When she opens her gold-speckled brown eyes, she stares at my hand on her shoulder before looking around. Her gaze darts between the frozen men across the room, the broken lamp at Will's feet, then finally settles back on me. She furrows her brows. Questions upon questions are written all over her face. Even if she could better mask her emotions, we all had them. I wouldn't expect her to be any different.

"Do you know your name?" I ask gently. Quietly. Almost as if she were a lost child searching for her family. She opens her mouth as if to answer but instead coughs into her elbow several more times, much louder than when she'd first woken up, and I back up a little to give her some space.

"My name is Carmen, where...where are we? Who are you? Why are we here? H-how did we get here? H—" she fires off, but I just slowly shake my head. I relax my face, hoping to convey that none of us have the answers either. She seems to understand because her eyes well with tears. Large tears, drenched with fear, stream down her face, and when she begins taking large gasping breaths like she's struggling for air, I release a deep sigh and grab her hand hoping she'll focus on me again.

"Alright, Carmen, take a deep breath for me and hold it for a few seconds, okay? Breathe in...and out. Okay, one more time, hold it... slowly exhale. Good. My name is Silene, behind me are William and Nathaniel, okay? None of us remember much except our names. We haven't seen or heard anyone else yet, and I think it's about time we all start investigating, yeah? You can stick with me if you'd like. Does that sound good?"

She only nods her head, so I rise and help her stand on shaky legs and turn to the boys.

"Are you guys ready to try and find some answers? She and I take the upstairs, you two can take downstairs? Any objections?" I ask while walking backwards toward the staircase, guiding the timid woman along with me. I keep one eyebrow raised in

question at the two vastly different men. Both stand still in front of the bedroom door, as if frozen in time. It isn't until I clear my throat expectantly that they both jump, nod their heads yes, and take off in different directions.

With that, I glance at Carmen again making sure she's still focused before we head up the dark hardwood stairs. My knuckles are white as I grip the black iron rails leading to the second landing of this beautiful house.

One so beautiful, yet so full of mystery to all of us, I can't help but wonder: What will we find?

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Field and Forest and Fog: Silene

The first step onto the second landing gives way with a long, high-pitched creak that makes me wince. I pause to look around before walking any further, ensuring that nothing else was stirring up here besides us. Once I'm sure we're alone, I take another step forward, nodding Carmen on.

It's quiet.

Steady.

But I know it won't stay that way. In the back of my mind, I know someone is here. Lurking, silent in their wait. But for what? I've asked myself so many questions since I've woken and have yet to find any answers.

I have nothing but a dagger and an impossible pain in my neck.

After a few steps down the hallway, I stop to scan my surroundings. The second floor is furnished similarly to the downstairs area where I spent the last twenty minutes. Dark hardwood floors, olive green painted walls. A small bookshelf holds a stack of books most would consider classics, volumes of poetry...beautiful works of literature. I can't help but step closer and gently trace the spines.

"Much Ado About Nothing," "Macbeth," "The Cask of Amontillado," "The Most Dangerous Game. They're all gloriously dark books. My brow creases slightly. I

can't help but wonder why they all seem to be in perfect condition? Why would someone keep a collection so hauntingly beautiful and dark if not to devour and decipher them?

I don't linger too long on this and tear my gaze away from the books. With a deep exhale, I turn only to be met with hazel eyes entirely too close to my face. Instinctively, I shoot my palm into the person's throat before I blink and realize who it is.

His eyes go wide as he chokes, and I can't help but mimic his facial expression in surprise.

“Dear Lord, Bobby boy, you can't just sneak up on a woman like that! You're going to get yourself killed! What the hell are you even doing!? You're supposed to be downstairs with Nathaniel!”

He's still gasping for air, doubled over and red-faced, his eyebrows drawn. He holds up a finger as he struggles to breathe. I quickly scan the area while he recovers, noticing that Carmen is nowhere in sight. I furrow my brows before my gaze lands on a door left slightly ajar—one that had been shut.

I find myself proud of Carmen for wandering off on her own. As long as I don't hear anyone dying, she should be good on her own until I know why William has decided to leave the area downstairs and join us.

With that thought, I turn back to the large man in front of me. Thankfully, he seems to have mostly recovered, though occasionally his breathing still sounds strangled—his eyes still watery and face red.

“We found a couple more people downstairs. Ol' Carrot Top told me to come up here, that his face might be a friendlier one to see first anyways. That it might be

easier for them to take in the information if they have fewer eyes on them or some bullshit, I don't know. I would've told him to fuck off if I'd known I was going to get throat punched. Jesus. Who the hell even are you?" he says, exasperation lacing his words. I just shrug it off.

"I'm Silene. I'm sure you know as well as I do that I don't remember anything else. Just like everyone else here."

He just hums in response but scans me carefully. His eyes catch on my arms.

"You know, one of the guys we found down there, he's got some bruises on him too. Nothing too insane, but it's odd, ya know?"

"Why is it odd?" I ask, wishing I weren't so curious, but the need to know feels as important as the need to breathe.

"You're both wearing similar clothes. No one else is dressed almost for...combat. Both of you have bruises on your arms, he has a split lip, you have a bruise by your hairline. They seem to be fresh too. Like whatever happened, happened right before we were brought here. It's just odd."

My hand drifts to my forehead, feeling along my hairline and wincing at the pain that follows. Focusing back on him and his little speech, I could somehow sense where his thoughts were taking him. Had I known him? Were we in the same place at the same time before being brought here?

"Did he say what his name was?" I ask, hoping it might jog my memory.

"No, he didn't. He wasn't awake yet." And then he walks away from me and that was that, I suppose.



There was nothing else left to say, and so, when he opens a door on the left, I veer right to the door I know Carmen had already entered. I purposely make my steps heavier to alert her of my presence. Still, she doesn't move from her spot near the lone window.

She's so still, she might have been a statue if not for the sound of a shuddering exhale as I let the door creak open a little more and slowly approach. I take note of the empty room around us.

The walls are the same shade of green as the rest of the house, and the only window is draped with blackout curtains able to drown this room in darkness with one sweep if one wanted to, and I wonder if that was what she's thinking about or—

"There's nothing else," she starts, her voice so quiet, it could have been a whisper but instead echoes around us in the drowning silence. "Someone brought us here. We don't remember anything. There is nothing else here but field and forest and a fog so heavy that even if there were anything else we would have no way of knowing."

It isn't until I'm finally behind her and peeking over her shoulder that I understand. There's nothing but green as far as the eye can see wrapped in a blanket of mist. The same sense of unease washes over me before I try to open up the window, but it doesn't budge. Not even the slightest movement to indicate that it can be opened.

I shake my head, grasp her hand and head towards the door, back into the hallway.

"Anything in there?" I ask as William steps out of the room opposite of us.

He just shakes his head before saying, "Just an empty green room with a window leading nowhere."

That's absolutely no help, but we have nothing better to offer either. We all stare at

each other for a beat before continuing down the hallway. Opening every door. Searching for something —anything, that might clue us in to what’s going on. But we don’t find a single thing that could possibly help.

That is, until we reach the two doors at the far end of the hallway. One is locked so tight, it might as well have been welded into the wall. The other door leads to a bathroom with one window.

A window that slides right up with the slightest pressure.

We should have felt relieved, but not a single one of us seems to appear as such. No, instead we stop at the halfway mark, and then push the window closed. Leaving it just as we’d found it.

An exit should have us all tripping over one another to climb through, but we’re all looking at it like it’s the plague. Like everything changes the second we climb through. Maybe it does. Maybe it will. Maybe we go through the window, jump off the roof and leave. Make our way through the forest, find a road and follow it into a town. But I think we all know that may not be the case.

I think we all know that it’s, unfortunately, the least probable thing that will happen.

So instead, we stare and try to figure out what happens next. Try to figure out if we investigate or go downstairs, find the others and decide on a plan together. It’s me who looks away first. Who steps away from the barely open window and walks back towards the stairs calling for Nathaniel until his lanky form and inquisitive eyes come into view.

“Is everything okay up there? Did you find anything?”

“Everything is fine, and we, uh...we found a way out,” I say. My doubt must show on

my face because his own features are filled with skepticism.

“You’re sure it’s a way out?”

“I’m not sure of anything right now, honestly. But it’s the only window on this whole floor that will open. I don’t trust it, but we might have to.”

I know he knows I’m right. I can see it wash over his features, mingling with the doubt from before. But unless they found something on the first floor, we may not have a choice. I watch as he tilts his head towards the living room but keeps his eyes fixed on me, only glancing away when he has to. I don’t hear anything, but it may be because the newly-awakened people are still getting their bearings.

He looks back at me and gives me a slight dip of his chin before saying, “Okay, yeah. Someone go out there and investigate. Not everyone though. Just one of you until you know it’s safe. Then let someone else know so they can relay the message. I’m still trying to explain what I can to one of the other two down here. The other one hasn’t woken up yet.”

I just give him a tight smile and nod before walking back to the bathroom to let Carmen and William know, deciding to offer myself up. Concealed or not, I am the only one with any sort of weapon, and it gives me a better chance of defending myself if I need to fight. Something tells me we will have to fight. We are here for a reason, and whatever reason that is, was enough for someone to make us forget.

No memories. No weapons. One way out.

We were not meant to survive whatever waits for us, merely given the illusion.

The taste of a possible freedom.

My steps are cautious, easy and calculated. We have scoured every square inch of this floor with the exception of what lies behind the impossible door, and I still don't feel safe. I refuse to let my guard down even though I know the only other people up here won't hurt me.

You don't know that, says a small voice in the back of my mind, and I stop for a second to fully come to terms with the fact that my subconscious is right. I believe it, even though I don't want to. I don't know them, not really. Just their names, if those are even true. Maybe I should remind myself of that a little more. I don't have to be rude, but I don't have to act like their friend either.

I try to listen for whispers between them as I get closer to the bathroom, but instead am met with complete silence. I take one heavy step to make myself known to them and open the door to find them facing each other from opposite walls. Carmen, slightly crouched, leans against the left wall while staring at her tightly clasped hands sitting in her lap. William is sitting on the sink countertop to my right, back against the mirror, his legs swinging around like he's bored with the entire situation.

"Nathaniel said one of us should go down, and I agree. One person checks out the immediate surroundings, makes sure everything is okay, and tells the other two up here. Then, a second person can head out while the third lets the others know. It makes sense," I say. They both share a look before turning towards me and nodding.

"I think it should be me." I say with a sense of finality and confidence. I hope they'll agree with me, but William just huffs a laugh before looking at me like I'm a child telling their parents I have super powers because I dreamt I could fly. I can't do anything but cross my arms over my chest defensively and shoot him a glare that—I'm hoping—screams, "elaborate before I stop telling myself that killing you wouldn't solve any of my current problems."

He smiles arrogantly and shakes his head. "For the sake of not coming off as an

asshole, I just think that if there's anything dangerous out there, the odds of me being able to fight it off might be better than your odds. What're you going to do if someone my size comes at you? I don't think begging for your life would help much, considering our situation."

"This is you trying not to be an asshole?" I scoff incredulously, looking to Carmen for support, but she just gives me a sheepish look and resumes staring at her hands.

"Maybe just let him go down there? He's an asshole, yes, but he is much larger than you. Maybe he would have a better chance if something happens?"

For the sake of my pride, I roll my eyes and gesture toward the window in surrender. He looks like he can hold his own for sure, so there's no need for my ego to take another hit from Bobby boy over here. Even if he seems to have already forgotten the throat punch from earlier. I should remind him, but that would be rude of me...very very rude of me. And not necessary at all.

"I didn't realize begging for my life is what stole your ability to breathe earlier."

He goes slack jawed for only a moment before closing his mouth and grinding his teeth together. He closes his eyes, inhaling deeply.

"Glad to see you're doing better," I say with a mock smile.

He exhales sharply, but he can't seem to cool himself entirely as his face reddens and fists clench.

Not necessary, but definitely fun. You have to keep men humbled. He seems to have forgotten that all those muscles didn't protect him when I had him doubled over in pain not too long ago.

He jerks the window up all the way and begins climbing through. Once he's found steady footing on the roof, he ducks down to look at us before saying, "I'll call up here and let you know what I see when I get down there. Don't leave." Straightening, he turns his back to us and starts taking measured steps down the slight decline of the roof. I count three steps before he loses his footing and slips.

He lands on his shoulder with a loud thud and grunt before his body starts rolling of its own accord, sending him down down down, and just when I think he's given up and will allow momentum to carry him the entire way down and just brace for the impact of the ground, I hear it.

I hear gears turning, the sound of a lock clicking. A second later, large metal spikes shoot out from the entire perimeter of the roof, sprouting up from the eaves. The spikes impale three different points of his body, and it's all I can do to not think about how his little nickname is more accurate than ever.

Bobby got kebabbed.

I almost laugh at the thought, even though it's possibly the worst time ever to laugh, and realize just how desensitized to death I must be in my day to day life. Then, an ear piercing scream rings out from behind me. I flinch away as I turn to see a horrified Carmen shaking like a leaf, her eyes locked on the scene in front of us.

Dismissing the stupid joke my brain conjured up, I turn to fully face her and shepherd her against the wall. Guiding her to a sitting position, I try to gently calm her down while concealing his body from her view. Once she's fully seated, I grab her face and force her to look at me. Slowly, she focuses on my soothing words instead, and it works. Instead of screaming, she is now taking large gasping breaths as if she had been drowning and finally resurfaced.

Or if they just watched someone be killed in a truly barbaric way.

“Just keep taking de—”

“Is everything okay? What’s going on up there!?” I hear yelled from the bottom of the stairs.

I sigh and look at Carmen telling her, “Just close your eyes and keep focusing on your breathing. I’ll go and give a quick update. She just shakily nods and places her head in between her knees, not moving from her spot on the ground.

I take that as my cue to get up and jog over to the stairs before anyone else heads up here and freaks out the same way she just did. When I make it down, I see a frantic Nathaniel cautiously beginning his trek up the steps, relief crossing his features when he sees me.

“What the hell was that? Who was screaming? What happened?” he asks, eyes still worried and face flushed. I see a slight tremble in his hand as he drops it from the railing, and I recognize it for what it is.

Fear.

Probably not for me or Carmen, but for the unknown, most likely. Which is fair, even if also unreasonable, considering that everything happening to us is just that: unknown.

“William is dead,” I say rather bluntly. There’s no reason to beat around the bush anyway. None of us have known each other more than an hour at this point, so my sympathies are rather limited for the man whose last few words toward me were demeaning. Maybe Nathaniel shares the same feelings, because he just looks at me for elaboration rather than looking like someone died.

“Okay, what happened? You don’t seem afraid or panicked, so I assume it was an

accident of sorts?”

“Of sorts,” I say vaguely while looking a little sheepish and add, “How familiar are you with Turkish street food?”

A raised eyebrow is all I get in return. That’s all I get, and I don’t even think that I care because I have to fight the smallest of smiles before adding one small sentiment. “How do you feel about kebabs?”

He doesn’t laugh. He instead looks slightly horrified, questions dancing behind his eyes revealing all his thoughts at once, and honestly, I don’t care if he’s terrified. He can be terrified because I’m a little upset. I didn’t realize I was dealing with such a tough crowd, yet here I am.

“He slipped going down the roof. There was a trap that sprung up and killed him. It’s a mess. Carmen screamed when it happened but I got her to calm down a bit. It happened at the roof’s edge, so I’m going to take the same path he did, walk in between the gaps, and jump down to check the surroundings. I’ll call up to Carmen with the ‘all clear’ or the ‘no go’ order from there. Are the others up and moving yet?”

He looks at me like I’ve grown five heads and suggested we just live in the house the rest of our days and resort to cannibalism or manifesting that we’re plants and surviving on photosynthesis. He looks at me like I’m crazy . That’s the second time a man has looked at me like my idea was outrageous in less than that many hours, and I’m starting to take it a little personally. But just as soon as I decide to comment on it, he neutralizes his facial expression and just runs his hand over his face before rubbing his eyes.

“Yeah, they’re up and moving. We haven’t found any other way out yet, no paperwork, no weapons, nothing useful, really. No more people though, and that’s a



win in my books. Six is more than e—”

“Five. There’s five of us now.” The abrupt interruption stopped him for only a moment. His cautious gaze roving over my form once again before continuing.

“Right, yeah. Five is more than enough kidnapped and clueless people. I explained everything to them, we’re still searching, but once we’re done, we’ll head up there. We may have no choice but to go through that window.”

I just nod my head and quickly look behind me before returning my attention to him. Tapping my fingers against the banister, I wonder what he’d make of the sealed door, and when I decide that it doesn’t matter and try to continue my way back to a shaken and skittish woman, Nathaniel clears his throat expectantly. Releasing a small exhale, I call over a shoulder, “There’s a door up here that won’t open. I don’t know what to make of it but it feels important. Just in case one of you wants to take a crack at it when you get upstairs.” I continue my path to the bathroom after I finish speaking, not bothering to wait around for any further questions. Instead, I’m bracing myself to try and explain to Carmen that I have to go outside to figure everything out.

As soon as I walk back into the bathroom, I see she’s right where I left her. Head tucked between her legs and arms loosely dangling over her knees, she’s doing her best to regulate her breathing and ease her anxiety.

I try not to startle her as I approach and bring my boots toe to toe with her converse, and she looks up at me with big light brown eyes, slightly glossed over from her tears that she had shed presumably from the aftershock of the adrenaline. I crouch down to her level, my knees almost touching hers and give a tight lipped smile which she returns with a wobbly one.

“I have to go out there,” I say calmly. Firmly. Confidently. I say it in every way I know I need to so I don’t freak her out, and for the first time, someone doesn’t look at

me like I belong in an insane asylum, though she does look slightly unhappy and extremely unenthused by the idea of me doing what I'm suggesting. Honestly, that's fair.

"Someone has to go. The spikes appeared so far down on the roof that it should be safe to walk now. I'll be careful, but I don't want you to watch. Moving his body might be the only way to get rid of the spikes, and I don't want you to have to see that. So just listen for me, okay? Don't go down there unless I tell you that it's safe. Do you understand?"

She just slowly nods at me, offers another wobbly, unstable smile and a quick "Good luck, don't die please," before I allow myself to stand and walk away from her.

And then I'm out the window, taking small and cautious steps, not allowing myself the opportunity to slip and fall the way he did. When I get to the spikes, I take a closer look at the man I only knew for a short period of time.

In Carmen's defense, he really does look quite terrible. Especially this close up. His head is turned towards us, jaw open wider than normal. His lifeless hazel eyes stare into the house, and his face is so much paler than it had been before he stepped through the window. The first spike went through his neck which explains why he never got a chance to scream. At least not one that was audible to us, but probably one that had sounded more like a gurgling gasp while he choked on the very blood that once filled his body. That same blood now pools around him and drips off the house.

The second spike shot through his back and lower abdomen, while the third hit around his knee cap. His leg is now bent at an unnatural angle, and even though I didn't know him well, part of me hopes that he died on impact rather than having to live through even a second of the pain. All jokes aside, it isn't a death I'd wish on anyone.

I use the spikes as leverage and wrap my hands around them. Sidestepping to where his feet are, I squeeze my body in between two of them before peeking at the ground below. The drop shouldn't be any more than 10 feet which, yes, will make for an uncomfortable landing, but is manageable.

I can live with manageable.

I begin to shift and turn my body back to the house when I realize that I have no idea what traps lay below me. Instead, I decide to do something that others may think terrible, but I am okay with being thought of as such if it means that I live past this drop.

I unlace his boots, so similar to mine, and toss them on the ground below in two separate areas, and wait for a reaction. After a few moments of stillness, I figure it's safe for me to resume my descent and lower myself to a sitting position on the ledge.

Twisting my body, I grab the edge and allow myself to drop. I hold on for dear life while I dangle several feet above the ground, hoping to brace for the pain and damage from the fall. Unfortunately, of all the things that I can't remember, my brain decides that now is the time to remind me that heights and I are not friends. Not in the slightest.

And suddenly, the height is decidedly a little less manageable. But I know I don't have much of a choice except to let go.

"Silene, my love, you can't hang on forever."

It was barely a whisper in the back of my mind, a voice that didn't belong to me, but it was enough to finally let go. If not for myself, then for the memory of the man with a deep, honeyed voice who had to have, at one point or another, spoken to me with such tenderness and affection. I don't know if I was able to then, but I will let go

now.

And when I land on my feet, I bend my legs to ensure no injuries would result from my landing and to, hopefully, ease the pain making its way through my legs on impact. My hands hit the ground to steady myself. I only let myself take a second to notice how soft and green the grass is between my fingertips because once I have my balance, I slowly rise up and turn my body so it's no longer facing the house of mystery, and instead, is facing the land stretched out around me.

The first thing I notice is the vast stretch of flatland that looks like it forms a circle around the house before trees burst from the Earth. Trees that look as if they have stood for hundreds of years and will stand for a hundred more if they must. Evergreens that are so full of life, I know I could stare for hours if given the chance. I would walk through those foggy woods slow enough to memorize every tree and wonder what it had lived through. Maybe wonder how many had been planted and meticulously tended to and how many had willed themselves to life. I would've—

My thoughts are cut off when someone barrels into my body and pushes my back against the hard wall of the house. My head makes harsh contact with brick as the stranger slaps a dark hand over my mouth. And when my eyes open up again, they're met with the wild, frantic and possibly, crazed gaze of another woman.

### The Woman With The Crazy Eyes: Silene

I bend my arms as best I can to try and wrap my hands around her wrists, hoping that my eyes are able to convey my message of “I won’t do or say anything, please just let me go.” As she pushes me into the wall harder, I realize that is probably not the message received on her end.

I don’t try to fight her off. I don’t find a real reason to, honestly. Call me crazy if you want, I’ve been looked at like I am several times already, but she doesn’t seem interested in harming me. No matter how distressed she may seem with torn clothes, greasy and wild hair, and wounds in various stages of healing marring her body, she seems frightened and pleading more than anything. Though her fear and injuries definitely don’t seem to be doing anything to hinder her physical state. She’s strong, stronger than she appears at first glance.

No matter how crazed she may appear, she’s survived something that I know awaits me.

So, I release all tension from my body instead and slowly blink at her, waiting for her to either let go or give me answers. I’d be okay with either at the moment. Though, answers would definitely be the preferred option. She may be the only one able and willing to provide them.

I notice her eyes shift slightly and observe her the best I can from how we’re positioned. Her grip is strong and sure, but her hands slightly shake as if she’s unsure

she's making the right decision. Her face is gaunt, with dark circles under her eyes. When was the last time she ate or slept? I can sense a bone deep exhaustion emanating from her. Despite it all, she still seems on guard. Like the exhaustion won't stop her from running at the drop of a hat. Like she's willing to fight if she must. She's tired, but she's a fighter.

She keeps as much of a watchful eye on me as she can while continuously scanning around us and over her shoulders. It almost seems as if she's expecting someone to approach us. Someone unwelcome who has obviously embedded fear into her.

But no one does.

When she realizes just how alone we are, I watch as her gaze softens with relief. I'm half hoping she'll ease her grip on me, but that hope falters when her gaze lands back on me and hardens once again. Breaking the silence, she finally speaks her first words. They're quiet, but raspier and deeper than I would've expected.

They chill me to my very core.

"I need you to listen and truly hear what I'm saying. We don't have time for me to repeat anything, so hear me now. Nothing is as it seems, and someone in that house is lying. You can't trust them. You can't trust any of them. You need to run. Get away from this field. It might be the worst place for you right now. Do you understand? They're hunting you. You can come with me if you want, but if you don't, that's fine. But you're better off dead than with anyone in that house. Staying with the group is practically a death sentence. Run into that field, do what it takes to survive, but you can't stay here. We have to leave before the hunters find us, they're the ones th—"

That's all she gets out before her dark almond eyes bulge open as wide as possible, her brows creasing, and she drops her hands from my body and whispers the word "Run." She falls onto her knees in front of me. Behind her is a tall and lean, pale man

wearing all black fighting clothes, clothes so similar to mine , standing twenty feet away with a sinister smile on his face.

I chance a brief look at the woman that stood paranoid in front of me just seconds ago, now on her knees with a knife through her upper back. Slowly, I back away from both of them, watching the man's movements with quiet calculation. A calculation that seems practiced enough to be muscle memory, telling me that this isn't the first time I've been in a situation such as this one. God, I hope that my instincts pull me through the version of this that ends with me still alive.

He watches me as if he's a predator and I'm the prey he's been hunting for. Watches me like he knows something that I don't and is waiting for me to put the pieces together, but when I make no sudden movements, a smug smile tugs at his lips. It should piss me off, but there's something else hidden in his eyes. Such a contradiction to what his body language says, but I recognize it quite well from watching the skittish woman in the house. The one that I hope has remained hidden in the second floor bathroom and hasn't grown curious enough to investigate why I've taken so long.

Fear.

There's fear in his eyes, and I know he knows me from somewhere. He has to, and what happens next, I assume, is going to be revenge for something that I don't have any memory of doing to him.

His hand glides up and down the length of a sharp metal staff that's not quite as tall as him, but definitely taller than me, and I see it for what it is.

A threat.

A warning.

A promise.

I await with bated breath to see if he'll move closer to attack or if he'll decide that I'm not worth the effort. I wait to see if he'll do anything other than tighten his grip on the staff. Will he take the necessary step forward in order to gather enough momentum to launch his weapon from a distance? I wait for any kind of tell to help me determine my next move. I won't give myself away; but I will wait for him to.

It doesn't take long for him to grow impatient waiting for me to give him a sign. His foot twitches ever so slightly before he stops again, taking another brief moment to ensure I don't plan on moving. Hopefully with the belief that my instincts have disappeared along with my memories. Hopefully, he fully believes I'm too scared to do anything other than keep my feet rooted to the ground in shock and paralyzing fear.

I will not die today.

It only takes one second for him to find a solid grip, take a long stride toward me while swinging the staff over his head and letting momentum carry it toward my body. It happens quicker than I thought it would. Quick enough that, had I not been waiting for this moment—anticipating it, even—it would have killed me. In another reality, I would have faced the same fate as William and the woman who lived long enough to warn me before she fell victim to the same end.

But I don't.

Instead, I throw my body to the side, tucking and rolling, landing on the balls of my feet. I remain crouched down and look at him as the metal spear hits the wall with a loud clunk. A small smile graces my lips before I grab the grounded weapon and test its weight in my hands. Rising to my full height, I rest the bottom of the weapon on the ground and tighten my hold on it. My eyes lock on him. And for the first time,



uncertainty crosses his features as he watches me with curiosity, but doesn't move from where he stands.

Uncertainty, fear, anger, and challenge. They all battle for dominance behind his eyes, and I let him decide which should win while I roll my shoulders and stretch my neck, rubbing the back of it with my free hand to try and ease the discomfort, to no avail. I widen my stance, my left foot slightly in front of my right to keep my balance. I ready myself for a fight, but he makes no move indicating that he wants to close the distance between us. It's fine, it really is. Because honestly I'd love to swing first. Whether he expects it or not, holds no bearing on the fact that I'm angry. I'm fuming and I have something that this hunter seemingly doesn't. Patience. Something you need while stalking any prey. Something that turns me into the hunter instead.

He reaches for something behind him, and I hear the sound of metal sliding against leather as he slowly pulls a machete out of a holster strapped tightly around his chest and back. His dark, sinister smile matches my own. Though his is full of hunger as well. He swiftly rolls his neck, the sound of each pop echoes through the stillness around us. Then, he begins his approach.

Fucking finally, is my only thought before I grip the long staff, and I step forward, steady in my approach towards him. I don't remember much, but my body does. My instincts are screaming at me in glee and my smile grows wider as the distance between us closes.

He gives himself away when he tightens his grip on the machete, his knuckles whitening with the pressure. His steps seemingly stutter as he bends his dominant arm slightly while walking toward me. They were small things, but I notice them enough to know he is preparing to throw his arm straight for a clean stab while also trying to protect his weaker side. Maybe someone else would find this smart. Swing swiftly and guard your weak side, but I find it to be nothing short of predictable. Boring, even.

I grip the staff with both hands, my arms slightly bent to my chest, keeping the staff parallel to the ground yet still close to me, and then swiftly lunge my upper body to the right, watching him and the world tilt as I straighten my arms. The sound of metal hitting metal rings out around us, and once the staff makes contact with the machete, I release the staff from my left hand and use my right arm to push the machete up and away from me, but to also swing the butt end of the spear in a circular motion until it hits the ground again.

The man begins to circle me warily, lightly tapping the hilt of the rusted and, now, damaged blade in his hand. A blade that gives the impression of having killed plenty of people before me. I decide to do the same as him. Circle and wait.

Watch.

Fear is what gets you killed, don't just watch him. Observe, I tell myself, and it feels as if icy water rushes over every inch of my skin, washing away any doubt that had knotted in my body, even if only momentarily, and untying it in one swift tug. You do not die today.

Whatever moment of clarity I was having, I think he may have had one too. But instead of a similar icy calm washing over him like it had me, his realization seems to have lit him up. His clarity set him on fire and ignited his rage into an inferno behind his eyes. It's then that he grabs the weapon with both hands, brings it above his head, and then slams it down in a quick, choppy movement. A blow that surely would have been deadly if it weren't for my sidestep at the last second causing him to lose purchase. It wasn't a lot, but it was just enough. He stumbles, and I use this opportunity to crouch down, brace my hands on the pillowy grass, and stretch my leg enough to swipe his feet out from underneath him.

His body slams into the ground with a loud thump. I see the way his chest puffs out. I hear his sharp intake of breath as the wind gets knocked from his lungs and decide to

throw my body on top of his. Straddling his waist, I bring the staff to his neck and push down, constricting his airway. Call me sick or twisted but...

I kind of like the sight of a man at my mercy.

His eyes bulge as he lays there and stares at me, desperately fighting for the breath I won't allow him to take. I push down harder. His eyes shift to the left in panic, and I see something else cross his face. Relief. It was so brief, it could've been nothing, but I don't leave it to chance, pushing down harder and following his gaze. I see another man running toward us. Fuck . I need to think quickly and figure out how to escape this situation alive, chanting in my head once again, 'You do not die today,' before remembering the dagger in my pocket. The one that had been coated in familiarity.

Seconds.

I have seconds to make a move, and so when I reach into my pocket for the blade, I also shift my body closer to the man underneath me, laying my whole forearm against the staff, adding more pressure to his neck, while deftly flicking the blade towards the man running at us. I hit him square in his chest. I dart my eyes back to the man beneath me. His face has changed from flushed red to one underlined in a shade of purple. I could be cruel and drag this out, but instead decide I can't waste any more time if I'm to do as I was advised and run. So instead, I readjust my position to its original one, ensuring both my hands are gripped on the cool metal on either side of his neck. Then I push. As hard as I possibly can, I force as much weight down onto the staff and watch.

His eyes go wide, his mouth gapes open, and a sharp intake of breath tries to enter his body. But it can't. As his eyes flutter shut, I press my pointer finger to the side of his neck and feel as his heartbeat slows and slows and slows—and stops.

I slowly stand and give myself only five seconds to fully process the situation. To

process the warning and the implications. I only give myself five seconds before I'm grabbing every weapon that has been thrown with the exception of the shitty, rusted and bent machete.

I may not trust everyone, but if only one person is guilty in that house...the others don't deserve to die for one human being. They just don't deserve it, and I will not allow myself to be the reason every single one of them is defenseless, and with that last thought, I'm walking.

I'm walking and deciding that I can't look back. That I can't risk waiting or sifting out the good from the bad. " You don't have to come with me but you're better off alone than with anyone in the house."

That was the warning I was given.

That is what I will choose to believe.

I have to, even if it doesn't feel wholly right. Even if it feels like a mistake leaving alone right now.

Three steps.

I make it all of three steps into the field when I hear a small thump and then a high pitched scream. A scream I'm already familiar with, yes, but one that neither of us can afford right now.

Run or save her from herself? Those are the two options that are running through my mind on repeat. Run ? Or save her from herself ? Run...that option sounds extremely appealing. More than it should, yet I still find myself throwing my head up to the sky wondering why I'm okay with killing people but can't bring myself to leave this woman I know nothing about.

Fuck, I can't leave her here.

I run over to where she is and promptly do what the strong woman with the crazy eyes had done to me earlier. What was done to me no more than ten minutes ago—slam my hand against her mouth and push her against the wall. Practical, considering she's maybe four inches taller than me? No. But is it necessary? Absolutely.

She's hyperventilating, and her sweaty hands are grabbing my wrist trying to remove it from her mouth, but I don't let her go. I shake my head no quickly and make a few harsh shushing sounds to get her to shut up. It's only once she's quiet that I remove my hands from her body and let out a deep worrying breath of my own, hoping that I didn't make a mistake by coming back for her.

"We have to leave," I say quickly and matter-of-factly, leaving absolutely no room for questions and then checking our surroundings quickly.

"We have to...to leave," she repeats slowly while pinching her brows together in confusion. "But the others that are inside?"

"No. We leave. Me and you, or I leave and you stay. But I was warned not to trust them, and I will not ignore that warning. I'm running into that forest. I'm not looking back. You can do as you wish."

Her glazed eyes dance over at the scene around us. First to the tall and lean man who was ready for his revenge and ended up with a crushed windpipe instead. Then, her gaze drifts toward the stockier man, closer to my height. Next, they land on the woman whose last actions were to try and save me. How she could tell I wasn't a traitor or how she thought I was possibly worth saving, I'll have to think on later. There's no time now.

Still shaking, Carmen looks at me and nods once. Then nods a second time with a little more conviction. And then she's walking, shaking out her hands like that will erase any nerves or unease, and we walk in silence for a moment. I'm well aware that we should pick up the pace. That the others in the house were bound to hear the screaming, and I'm sure will investigate here soon. Even if they didn't hear it, it's been too long since they've heard from us. I chance a look at the second story bathroom window, but it's hard to say if there's anyone in there for sure with Ol' Bobby Kebab up there blocking the view, but just the thought that the wrong someone could see where we're going gives me all the worst feelings imaginable. I lightly tap on Carmen's shoulder, and when she angles her head to peer at me, her eyes are glistening. She fiercely rubs the unshed tears away, nods her head again, and starts jogging.

I quickly follow behind her, turning my head every which way as we go, ensuring that we're not being followed while also getting a better look at our surroundings. It's all so green. A monochromatic scene with shades of brown peeking through leaves and trees. As we approach the treeline, the fog is thicker closer to the ground and thins out the higher it gets, and I allow myself to briefly wonder how we got so lucky and ended up in the scene of a Silent Hill movie.

I leave that thought behind with each passing step and take one last look around as we leave the open field and house behind.

Stepping into the forest of evergreens, vines, fallen logs and, more importantly, the cover we need to stay hidden from whatever or whoever may still be out here, I move my eyes ahead and realize I need to stay aware of my steps if I want to stay unharmed and alive. Then, I turn my focus back to the mousy girl that's running with me and how she's slowing her steps. She's panting heavily, using each passing tree for support until she finally stops about fifty feet into the forest. I stop alongside her, making sure to remain cautious of our surroundings. Possibly more so now that our long distance visibility has decreased so much, that I almost feel like I shouldn't just

keep my guard up at all times, but also keep at least one weapon on the ready as well.

“What now?” she asks in deep, panting breaths, forehead resting heavily on the thick trunk she’s using for support. In her day-to-day life, cardio definitely did not play a role if she’s already this exhausted from running no more than a quarter mile.

“Now...now we keep running. We don’t stop to look over our shoulders. We take turns to be on guard during breaks. We find a way out. And most importantly, we only trust each other until our memories start to return. But not a second before we have a better grasp on what got us here. Understood?”

I stop checking our surroundings long enough to mark her expression and the way that her chest is still rapidly rising and falling with each breath she takes. She’s holding onto the tree as if it’s a lifeline right now, knuckles and fingertips turning white in contrast to her deep tan complexion. Her mouth is still slightly open and eyes are squeezed tightly shut, and I decide to keep watching the area around us while she processes the information and breathes.

“We really just left them,” she says between breaths, and I just nod my head hoping that she can see me but decide to respond anyway just in case.

“Yeah. We did. And it’ll have to be something you’re okay with now. That woman gave her life to warn me, and I refuse to let it be for nothing. You can turn back at any point, but I’m not. I’ll keep going as long as I have to, but I won’t become someone else’s prey.”

Then I lightly tap her shoulder to get her attention, and once I have it, I just nod my head towards the thickening fog deeper into the forest before stepping in front of her and leading the way.

I will not die today.

### Too Many Bodies: Ronan

*\*30 Minutes Earlier\**

“Ronan, you have to get up,” the woman sitting on top of me says. I’m still laying in my bed, my hair is longer than it should be right now and is falling onto my forehead in black messy waves. I’m not wearing anything other than boxers and the blanket that is haphazardly covering me from the waist down.

I let my hands wander under my white button-down that the woman had put on before straddling me and decide that there are other things I’d rather be doing than leaving this bed, and the first thing is removing this shirt from the goddess on top of me. It seems, however, that she doesn’t agree with my idea when she lets out a loud, throaty laugh and throws her head back in amusement before grabbing hold of my wrists and pinning them above my head. She leans forward, bringing her nose to mine. Her long hair cascades around us in dark brown waves, still slightly mussed from sleep, and her mossy green eyes bore into mine while a smile still graces her full lips.

“Ronan, you have to get up now. You can’t stay in bed forever. Boss man will kill you,” she says, amusement lacing her words as if she’s not even surprised. I just keep searching her face, looking for the answer to a question I’m not even sure of. I’m focusing on each and every one of her facial features as if I’ve never seen them before and never again will. I always look at her like this though, never able to understand how one woman could be so beautiful.



I lift my head and bring my lips to the tip of her nose, and she lets out a small chuckle.

“Ronan...” Then I bring my lips to her cheek.

“We have...” Her other cheek.

“You can’t just.” Then her jawline.

She just sighs, one that’s filled with contentment, and I can’t help but let my lips lift into a grin. I go for her lips, but she pulls back at the last second with another small smile on her face. She starts pulling me up with her, and I let myself rise too. Now that we’re sitting face to face, I rest my hands on her upper thighs, gliding them up and down the smooth expanse of her soft skin. She rests her hands on my shoulders before letting them explore up my neck and my cheeks, then up to my hair. The next thing I know, she’s pulling my face closer to hers and I raise my hands up to the dip of her waist and hold on tight, bringing our bodies as close as possible when our lips finally meet.

There’s nothing urgent about the kiss. In fact, it almost feels lazy, as if we have all the time in the world. I wish it could last forever. This closeness and intimacy as she lightly drags her tongue across my lower lip, and I grant her access only for her to gently bite down on it as she pulls away, still with a smile on her face. Only this time, it’s not one that’s content, it’s one that almost seems worried. She brings one of her hands back down to my cheek, cupping my face as her thumb rubs back and forth against my cheekbone, and I lean into her touch.

“Ronan, you have to get up,” she says again. Her eyebrows draw together as if pleading for me to understand. Then she’s off my lap, on her feet and walking away from me toward the bedroom door. I throw off the blankets still covering me, quickly trying to follow her but she’s through the door first and shutting it behind her.

I reach for the door knob, open it and —

“Silene,” I say in a gasp as my whole body shoots up in awareness.

It takes me a moment to realize that it hadn’t been anything more than a dream, and that instead of a soft bed inside my home, I’m laying in a bathtub. I’m alone, cold, covered in bruises, and I have absolutely no idea where I am at the moment. No idea how I got here. No idea who I am other than my name.

With a frustrated sigh, I bring the palms of my hands up to my face and harshly rub at my eyes to try and wake myself up, attempting to force some kind of memory to resurface, but it doesn’t work. I didn’t really expect it to, but there was hope for a moment. As I bring my hands back down to my lap, my gaze catches on the black ink engraved into the skin of my thumb. It’s simple, just the letter S. My thoughts drift back to the woman from my dream and the name that passed through my lips as I woke.

Who are you, Silene? It’s the only thought dancing through my mind as I grab the edge of the tub and use it as support while I try to get to my feet. However, I don’t even make it halfway to standing before I’m overcome with nausea and dizziness. Just a moment longer, I guess. I can sit here for another moment and mark each of my surroundings.

The bathroom I’m in is small but not unkempt in any sort of way. It’s actually kind of nice, if not too clean. The free standing bathtub is a sleek oval shape, and its bright white color is a direct contrast to the slick, black marble countertop a few feet away. The outer rim of the mirror and the toilet are also porcelain white. The walls are painted a light olive green tone, the only true color in the small room.

I take a few breaths after scanning my surroundings, and attempt standing again, swallowing down the nausea that tries to resurface. I step out of the tub on light feet,

being as quiet as I can, not knowing if I truly am alone. I make my way to the countertop, setting my hands on top of the dark marble and look in the mirror.

Dark hair, pale skin, dark blue eyes, slight freckles dusting my nose and cheeks, split lip, hair waving over my forehead like I've gone too long without a haircut, bruises covering my arms, black tactical pants, black under armor shirt. Definitely breathable clothing, but not practical for a day-to-day life unless it was part of a uniform, but I don't even know that for sure right now. All I have to go off of is my appearance in terms of any true facts. And the only fact that I see right now is that I got my ass absolutely handed to me.

I stretch my arms over my head to release some of the tension in my shoulders, along with my neck to also try and ease the dull ache from sleeping in what could be the worst position and circumstance possible. Then I hear it.

Movement from outside the door.

Movement that has me backing away and looking for anything to use as a weapon. There's nothing out in the open that I can pick up, but there are cabinets under the sink, and all I can do is hope that wherever I've landed myself has any—

There's nothing. Nothing useful, though whoever stocked this place made sure there was enough toilet paper in here to last through a zombie apocalypse, and I'm not sure if I'm scared of the fact that I'm currently standing in a bathroom owned by someone who could be part of an elementary school math problem, or if it's smart planning. Either way, I don't think I like it.

With no weapon in sight, I decide the best thing that I can do is give myself space. If the door is going to open, I don't want to be too close. If someone wants me, they'll have to get closer to try and get me. So I stand and wait, about three feet from the door, for someone to enter the small space I occupy when I hear someone take hold

of the doorknob. Just as it begins to turn, it stops.

It stops when a scream rings out through the house, one that's loud and high pitched. Not full of pain, but fear. It's a blood curdling scream that chills me down to my bones, and it's only when my own hand touches the cold metal of the doorknob that I realize I've crossed the distance from the middle of the bathroom to the door and fully intend to help the woman whose voice has rung through the house. The one whose voice sounds so far away yet so close at the same time and has echoed through the calm stillness of the area surrounding her.

I'm out the door in seconds but stop when the scream suddenly halts. I look up at the soft thud of footsteps sounding from above me. The steps, while soft, do not falter for a single second. They're quick, measured, confident even, and I let my eyes trail over the distance they cross above me. Watch the path they take and wonder who they belong to. Wonder why the screaming stopped just as quickly as it had begun.

And then I hear muffled voices from somewhere else around the corner. I hear a man ask what happened and if everything was fine. Then I hear...a woman. A woman who sounds so familiar that I stop focusing so much on the conversation and instead listen to her hypnotic voice, hanging on to every syllable and the cadence of every word. I listen as her seriousness fades away and is replaced with humor at the mention of food, and I'm unsure how it could correlate but I don't let myself think about it. Instead, I find myself following the sound of the conversation, back and forth, still not paying much attention to what's being said, wholly focused on finding her .

Whoever she may be, her voice seems to have a hold on me, and I can't help but think about how similar it is to the one I heard in my dream. But then she stops talking, and I hear the soft thuds of her footsteps above me again.

I have half a mind to find the steps that will lead me to her and follow, but I instead crash into another person walking, and it forces me out of whatever trance I was

locked in. I stare at the man in front of me, analyzing every part of him. Sizing him up, still unsure what this situation is exactly. His appearance is...normal. His clothing is very different from what I'm wearing, just black sweats and a blue sweatshirt, and I can't help but be slightly envious of the asshole who stands in the way of me and the stairs I can now see leading up to the second floor.

"Whoa there, I didn't realize you were awake yet. I was going to go check on you but then there was a scream, and I figured it was best I handled that first. How are you feeling?" he asks. I can't help but narrow my eyes at him a bit. His question seems genuine, but his voice almost sounds flat with feigned interest. I decide to tuck that away for now, needing answers more than I need to start an unnecessary argument and answer the question at hand with caution.

"I'm feeling about as good as I look, though I don't remember much, so if you wanted to lay everything out for me that'd be great," I say, flicking my gaze between him and the stairs I notice are peeking out around the corner. His eyes track the movements of my own.

"Short and sweet version? There were six of us, now there's five. None of us remember anything but our own names which isn't very useful, but it's something. We split up and have been searching for a way out and answers. So far, we have only found one exit, but that resulted in one person's death already. If we can use that as a last resort, that would be great. I'm Nate. You are?" he asks with a raised brow. I just stare at him instead. My blue eyes meet his dark brown ones, and I try to read him again but get nothing that helps me get a feel for who he is.

I regard him speculatively, trying to gauge his body language reveals any deception, but he's approached me the same way one would approach a wounded animal: with caution, yet certainty. Every word that falls from his lips does so in a stately manner, so I drop the suspicion from my face and keep it locked in the back of my mind, as I will do with any information I'm given from this point forward. I make decisions

based on facts, and right now I'm limited on those.

“Ronan.”

I don't elaborate anymore than that, and I think he gets the vibe that I'm not going to say anything else when he draws both eyebrows together and purses his lips as if he has something else to say, but I decide to step away from the lanky man and take in the area instead. It's all painted in the same color as the bathroom I woke in. Olive green, unchipped. Almost as if it were a fresh coat of paint. There's not much furniture other than a small sectional against the wall, a side table and a lamp that lay completely shattered on the floor. Every doorway down the hall I'd just come from is open indicating that every room has already been checked. Looking past him, I see a quick flash of movement from the right that draws my attention to the kitchen.

Brushing past him, I'm heading through the living room toward the source of the sound and see a man who, based on appearance alone, could be a professional fighter in his normal day to day life. He's cut, muscular, just slightly shorter than me. His skin, almost as dark as the soil that covers the Earth, is covered in white-inked snake skeletons and iris'. Wearing a charcoal gray t-shirt and pants similar to my own with black tennis shoes, I can't help but notice that even in casual wear, there's only one impression he gives: Dangerous. My footsteps are quiet enough that I know he shouldn't be able to hear my approach, but as I take my first step into the kitchen, the floor beneath me lets out a slight groan under my weight, and he quickly pivots toward the sound. Upon looking at me, he raises one eyebrow like I'm expected to say or do something, and when I don't, he just turns back around and continues rummaging through the drawers and shelves.

“I take it you already got the rundown?” his deep baritone voice draws out, still with his back facing me, not bothering to waste time with niceties, and I can't help but respect the acknowledgement that we're not here because someone was feeling nice. Why would we act otherwise?

“Yeah. No one knows anything, we’re in desperate need for answers, and someone’s dead.”

“Basically.” And that was that. We both fall into a quiet rhythm of overturning every object in every cabinet. Every pot, pan, oven mitt and cooking utensil is taken out to ensure there’s nothing hidden, but there isn’t. There’s no mail, no message, no weapons and no—

It’s then that I see it. The rug that has shifted under the feet of my curt partner just enough to see an abnormality in the otherwise perfect hardwood floor beneath us. I don’t say anything though. I keep quiet and wait for him to move before I head over and discreetly move the rug an inch to the side, ensuring that my eyes weren’t playing tricks on me. My thoughts are confirmed when I see a couple letters disturbing the smooth finish of the floor. I gently set the rug back into place and glance over my shoulder to make sure no one is looking at me, and when those concerns are confirmed, I turn back forward and gently lift the rug to see the full message. It looks familiar. It isn’t until I press my fingers to the ruined wood that I get a feeling of familiarity too. I don’t know what it is, but it feels important. It makes me feel like I’ve been here, and I don’t think that’s the realization I want to be having at this moment.

I’ve been here, but when? Why?

I want to ask myself who this message was for, but the letter inked into the skin of my hand tells me that I already know the answer if I’m right about having been here before. But if I wrote that then...

I press down on the side of the board and watch it open up, then feel around the bottom. At first I don’t see or feel anything, but as I’m bringing my hand up, my fingertips graze the bottom of the floorboard next to the one currently open, and it doesn’t feel the same. It feels like paper, and when I run my hand along the bottom of

that board, my suspicion is confirmed. First, with the rough feel of paper and then with the muted, smooth feel of what must be tape holding it in place. I check behind me again, not hearing the sound footfalls, but wanting to ensure that no one else is here for this. I don't know why, but I don't want anyone finding this until after I know what it is. When I notice that the unnamed man from earlier is no longer here at all, and that both men are out of eyesight, I quickly peel the paper away, trying my best to keep it intact, and then lightly let the floorboard fall back into place.

Then, I stand and pocket the paper before returning to the other two men talking at the base of the stairs, looking up to the second floor every now and again.

"Any news?" I ask as I approach them and they both go silent. Nate shakes his head then looks back up the stairs, and I follow their eyesight. There's nothing I can really see up there, and I wonder if it wasn't what they saw that got their attention, but the fact that they haven't seen anything. That none of us have heard any sound come from up there in a while. I try to take a step up when Nate grabs my arm. I look into his eyes and they hold a warning. He brings his pointer finger to his mouth as a sign for me to be silent. He then holds out his palm, indicating I should wait. So I do. I wait, and I listen.

After only a minute, I decided that I'm done waiting for whatever they think is going to happen when I hear it. The sound of a brief scream before there's a soft thud against the outside of the house. It's at this point that Nate loses all sense of patience and darts upstairs. While I'm close to follow him, I notice that only the two of us are bothered. Looking back, I see the other man still standing at the bottom of the stairs with a pensive look on his face before he backs away from the stairs and walks out of eyesight. I continue my trek up in time to see Nate storm out of the bathroom, and for the first time, he seems like he isn't composed. There's anger in his eyes, but it's not the only thing I see there when he hits the palm of his hand against the doorframe. Other than that, though, he doesn't do anything else to betray how he might be feeling.



“They left us,” he mutters. I can’t help but cock my head to the side in confusion. He must sense the question dancing in the back of my mind when he finally looks back at me and just lets out a long, drawn out sigh. “The two women that were here, they left us. I saw them right before they made it into the forest, and there’s definitely more than one dead body out there now. There’s not supposed to be that many.”

I am about to question what he means by that when he stands up straighter and walks towards the only door still closed up here and tries to open it. It doesn’t budge. It’s obviously a door. It has all the makings of one, and the slight discoloration on different parts of the knob indicate that it had been used quite frequently at one point or another, but it doesn’t move.

There’s no give.

“She said it wouldn’t work, I just figured it might be stuck. That she didn’t push hard enough maybe, but now I see what she was saying. It doesn’t seem like it’ll open.” I just look at him with furrowed brows.

“You keep saying ‘she’ but you don’t mention a name. For either of them,” I point out, and he just looks at me for a brief second before shaking his head and stalking back off to the stairs. “Why won’t you just say their names? If we’re going to be looking for them, shouldn’t we know them?” I ask, knowing that I’m right but ready for him to brush off the question.

To my surprise, he doesn’t. He just looks me dead in the eyes and says, “It doesn’t matter right now. They left. We’ll find them or we won’t.” Then proceeds down the stairs. For what? I’m not sure, but I don’t care to find out.

Rather than follow him, I decide to investigate each of the rooms on my own, though there’s not much to see in any of them. They’re mostly empty with the exception of curtains and a mattress sitting in the middle of the floor in one of the rooms. But

there's nothing else to be found anywhere.

Until I make it to the end of the hall.

Once I enter the bathroom, I see it. The open window, the body with multiple spikes shooting through it and his ashen face staring at me. His eyes are still open. Wide. A look of surprise and pure agony forever etched onto his face.

It isn't until several minutes later that I realize I'm still staring at the lifeless man in front of me with curiosity, when the other two men return. Nate looks indifferent as he steps toward the window and places his hand on my shoulder. The contact sends a wave of apprehension rolling through my body, and I pull away from the icy feeling. He doesn't seem to have the same reaction nor notice mine. Instead, he steps into the spot where I was standing and leans out of the window, gaze swinging from left to right before he brings his body back into the house and studies both of us.

"Alright, I'm going down first. I don't know what happened here but it doesn't look good out there, so I expect that something can and will happen. That means, when we get down there, we move. We don't stop and look around. We head for the forest. It's our best bet of survival if there's something or someone after us. Understood?"

I don't know when he was appointed leader, and even though I don't want to listen to him, it's not a bad plan, and I don't want to be in charge of anyone. Not when I'm thinking about tan legs, staring into a sea of green, and listening to the way my name rolls off her tongue like venom laced honey. It sounds so poisonously sweet.

So instead, I watch as the man next to me gives a curt nod. I mirror the motion, also shrugging—indifferent despite the oddness of our situation. Nate gives us another once-over before taking a seat on the windowsill, giving us one last look before swinging both legs over and onto the roof. His steps are taken with meticulous calculation. They're careful, measured even. Not once does he stumble as he moves

around the body, sits on the ledge and carefully adjusts his grip, before he begins his descent. Then he disappears. The two of us copy the same movements, though, it isn't until we all hit the ground that I take a good look around and question once again what Nate meant when he said there were multiple bodies.

Too many bodies.

That's what he said, though standing here, I only see one. A woman with wild hair, wide, frantic eyes, and a dagger through her back.

Always: Silene

We've barely just begun running again, but this time at a slower pace than we were before. I had given her a couple minutes of walking to allow her a brief moment to continue catching her breath, but we need to keep going. Thankful as I was to have a minute, we can't waste any more time this close to the border of the forest when the others are bound to have already discovered the fact that we're both gone. Not when there's an unsettling air surrounding us with every step that we take, the silence cloaking the sinister intentions of those around us, only disturbed by the snapping of twigs with every few steps.

"Si," Carmen says, breaking the silence, and I slightly look over my shoulder while keeping my pace steady.

"No." I say, keeping my response short as to keep the journey silent.

Anything other than a warning can wait for a break, and there seems to be nothing urgent happening at the moment, and by the deep breaths she's releasing already, she should keep talking to a minimum and not waste more of her energy.

"You don't"—breath—"even"—breath—"know what"—breath—"I was going to"—breath—"say."

I stop running for the sake of her well being, and turn around in time to see her almost crash into me. "You can hardly breathe as it is. Wasting any more breath on

conversation is not going to help you right now. We also don't know how many people are out here, and conversing through the entire journey does nothing but give away our location to anyone trying to find us. I do not need to know what you were going to say, unless it is to tell me you see someone else out here."

She just looks at me for a minute. Her chest rising and falling with every breath that she takes, the setting sun shining through the trees enough to cast dark shadows on her face.

"Do you remember anything?" she asks, and I just release a deep sigh, letting my shoulders drop. "You already know that I don't. I said as much earlier. We—"

"We've done this before," she says, effectively cutting me off. I draw my eyebrows together, confusion written all over my face. My spine straightens and my body tenses while I silently hope she'll continue what she was saying. Instead, she just looks at me.

"We've done this before? Ran from people trying to kill us in the middle of nowhere?"

"No, not the whole 'middle of nowhere with people trying to kill us' part. But the whole running together. We've done that before. We know each other." Then she looks down for a second before taking a deep steadying breath and stepping in front of me to continue the run. It catches me by surprise. Causes me to just stand there looking around for a moment hoping that my memory will serve me just as well, but I don't remember anything other than my ridiculous fear of heights.

Turning around, I watch her retreating form for a moment before following her. She doesn't say anything when I catch up, and that's well enough since I need another moment to think about what she said. I realize that I went back for her out of pure instinct after having been warned away from everyone. Some part of me had to

recognize that we knew each other already. But how? So far we have vastly different reactions to everything around us. I'm all harsh lines and cold demeanor while she feels warm, curious and soft around the edges. My base instincts are to fight and solve problems, whereas hers are to have a mental breakdown. She is also very obviously not well acquainted with anything to do with cardio. All of these things point to the fact that there's no way we could know each other from work. Our features are also far too different for us to be related in any way. But other than those two scenarios, I don't know how else we might know each other well enough to be going on runs together.

"How do you know for sure?" The question comes out harsher than I intend it to, and she flinches a little, stumbling over feet and then rushes to regain her balance. Her breathing is still slightly heavier than I think it should be for how often we've stopped and how little distance we've covered, but I don't focus too much on that while waiting for her answer. I let my eyes drift to our surroundings for a moment, ensuring that it's still just the two of us, and when I'm confident I haven't overlooked anything, I bring my gaze back to her and find her hands fidgeting before she aggressively rubs them on the baggy material of her too big zip up jacket. She doesn't make any move to look back at me.

Instead of pushing the matter, I decide that the answer can wait until we stop somewhere. I did, in fact, just make a whole point about her conserving her breath for running and not giving away our location by talking, so following up that whole speech with a question of my own is a little hypocritical. I wouldn't want to answer myself if I were her either. Picking up my pace so I'm back in front of her, I start guiding us to the left to change up our direction.

We do that a couple more times before eventually slowing to a brisk walk while the sun begins to set, deciding to search for more suitable shelter to stop for the night. With the dense canopy of trees, we are granted very few daylight hours which I hate to waste, but Carmen needs the break. And if we're unable to see anything, then the

others from the house must also face the same predicament, which means there's three less people I need to worry about finding us tonight.

We find a cluster of trees closer together than most with an ivy-covered one felled in front. It's as good a spot to camp as any. Once we're sitting down and settled across from one another, I'm startled by how small her voice sounds when she finally begins speaking. Her words are slow—tentative even.

“You asked how I know for sure, and to be honest, I don't know.” I open my mouth to ask her how she could make the guess then, but I promptly shut it again when she looks down to her lap and shakes her head.

“Maybe I shouldn't have said it at all. But, it felt like a memory that was just out of reach. Something trying to float to the surface but just falling short. Regardless of its shortfall, it still felt right. Even if trying to breathe felt like I was swallowing a million grains of sand. Even if it always feels that way, I can't let any word be left unsaid.”

“Why not?” I ask, just as softly as she had been speaking, though it feels as if I might already know the answer.

“Because I don't think I'm meant to survive.” This answer, unlike her earlier explanation, is said with such resolution that it doesn't just seem like a thought; it seems like she's certain.

I respond by saying, “I don't think any of us are meant to survive this,” but she gives me a wan smile in return. One that's forced and doesn't feel like something that should ever cross her features, but her smile is light. It's understanding and sad, and her gaze feels like one you'd get from someone much older and wiser. The all-knowing-ness of it all throws me off before a wave of grief overcomes me, because only someone who has experienced horrible things would have eyes so haunted. How

much have I misjudged her already?

“That’s not what I meant.”

I don’t get a chance to squeeze in another question before she goes to lay down next to the fallen tree with her back toward me leaving me to wonder what she meant.

The air around us is warm, unseasonably so, but I’m thankful nonetheless. The fog had slightly dissipated in the past several hours, but between the heavy mist and sweating from running, I know that any colder weather would result in the possibility of catching a cold with how damp my clothes have gotten along with my lack of sleeves. Nothing terrible, but it would be mildly annoying given the current circumstances. Running through a forest with a clogged and runny nose, only able to breath through my mouth while sneezing every thirty seconds sounds less than ideal on a good day.

Carmen fell asleep a few hours ago, her soft, even breathing a sure indicator of as much, and nothing has happened around us since. No snapping twigs, no crunching leaves, no voices. There’s nothing. It should put me on high alert, but my eyes grow heavier and heavier by the minute, and it takes a massive effort to reach out and lightly grab her arm. I don’t expect the reaction, but she jolts awake and quickly sits up, whipping her head from side to side. I doubt she can see much in the inky blackness of the night before she tracks my outstretched arm and realizes that it’s me. Her shoulders sag with relief. She stretches out her muscles, and then switches positions with me.

“Remember, if you hear anything at all, you need to wake me up. Understood?”

She just looks at me, unimpressed that I feel the need to say it, before she looks up to the sky, hidden by the branches of the surrounding trees. “It’s curious, isn’t it? How we fear the vicious things that lurk in the dead of night. But I feel it’s usually during



the day that you find yourself needing somewhere to hide. True monsters don't need the cover of shadows. They're usually standing in front of you, waiting for you to see them."

I think about what she just said, but decide not to question her. Thus far, every question I've asked has yielded yet another question.

"Sleep, Si. I'll wake you if something comes along."

Not too long after I situate myself, laying down with my back pressed firmly against the fallen tree, and my body facing her, I find myself in sleep's embrace.

"Ronan, you need to listen to me," I exclaim, with an urgency that isn't like me. Usually, I'm a picture of cool and calm, but something about me seems off. My long, curly hair is thrown up in an extremely messy bun, my shirt is wrinkled, and I hadn't had the time to throw on anything more than a pair of workout shorts before he had shown up at my door.

"I just think what you're saying seems a little improbable. Do you even have any proof? You know I want to believe you, but what you're insinuating is...I just — "

"Is it so hard to believe given our line of work? If he'd hire us for the things we do, then is this so far removed from reality? Is it so far outside of what he could be capable of? Just think about it, Ronan. I have paperwork upstairs, I've been doing a lot of research, and I just think it's worth investigating more. I don't know why you're not willing to even—"

"And this is where I cut you off. This sounds crazy." I suck in a harsh breath. Neither one of us dares to speak for a minute. This moment feels like a pivotal one. It feels like the Earth has shifted beneath my feet. I don't know why, but it feels wrong. Those words don't feel like they can belong to him, yet they do.

“I’m not crazy,” is my only response. My voice sounds small. Smaller than I would ever think myself capable of, but it’s the only sign of hurt that I let myself show. It’s more than I’d reveal in front of anyone else, honestly. Only for him do I allow myself to come undone— to show even this small level of vulnerability. Only for him, because he is the one who showed me there’s a strength in it.

His gaze softens, as realization dawns on him that his choice in words hurt more than he intended. His all-encompassing deep blue eyes scan my face and take in my unkempt appearance before he locks his hands behind his head while looking up at the ceiling of the living room of the small apartment I keep under a different name. A small part of me recognizes his posture as a sign of an internal battle that he’s fighting right now. A battle where he’s fighting himself to choose me. One that I hope ends in my favor.

He turns his back to me, ready to start pacing, but I bring my hand to his bicep and stop him. One touch from me, that’s all it takes. He lets his arms drop down to his sides, exhaling deeply, before turning his piercing gaze first to my hand, probably noting my bitten fingernails, and then towards my face. I’m not sure what he sees when our eyes lock, but I do know that whatever it is, is convincing enough for him to agree to see things my way. Or to at least really try to hear me out.

His opposite hand takes hold of the one I have yet to remove from his arm before he faces me, brings my knuckles to his mouth, and leaves the lightest of kisses on them, leaving his mouth close enough for his lips to continue grazing my skin before giving me the smallest of nods. “Okay. I can’t say I’m fully onboard without seeing hard proof, but I’ve never seen you like this. So if you want to show me what you found, I’ll keep an open mind.”

“Yeah?” The smallest of smiles lifts upon my lips as I look at him, praying that the evidence I have is enough.

“For you? Always , Killer. Always.”

The sound of a snapping branch rips me from my dream, but when I turn my head toward the sound, I see that it’s just Carmen shifting her position. The sun is peeking out from between branches, and I take that as my cue to get up. We don’t have time to spare, and every bit of daylight needs to be utilized. Giving myself a moment to stretch, I wince at the pain that still radiates through the back of my neck. I massage my fingers into the affected area, hoping I’m able to rub it out, but it doesn’t do much other than cause a violent shiver to run down the length of my spine.

I guess I won’t be doing that again , I think to myself as I begin to fully take in my surroundings. The trees are so tightly packed that the sun doesn’t do much else besides cast a gentle glow around us. The fog is lighter today, giving us a little more visibility, and I can’t help but admire the way that the light beams through the branches and falls onto the Earth as if it were raining gold and monochromatic yellow hues.

“Dawn was not too long ago, I was going to wake you in a few minutes. You crashed pretty hard, even started mumbling a little bit, though I couldn’t understand much of what you were saying.” I stand as she says that, trying to shake off any remnants of sleep that still cling to me knowing I need to be as alert as possible for the rest of the day.

“Thank you for letting me sleep, but we need to go ahead and get moving. I don’t know how much daylight we’ll get, but we need to take advantage of every second.”

She doesn’t make any comment about my abrupt tone of voice, and honestly, I wish she would, though I can already tell it’s not in her nature to. Instead, she just picks herself up off the ground, stretches her long limbs, and dips her chin towards me in acknowledgment before we both start our journey.

Yesterday, we covered a lot of ground, so today we should be able to walk more as long as we cover our tracks and frequently change the direction in which we're walking. Though we don't know where anyone else left off before nightfall yesterday, I do know that changing directions often enough should keep them off our trail. And yes, we'll have to run eventually, but I'd rather pace ourselves to maintain our energy rather than deplete so early in the day, especially since we haven't found a water source yet.

We walk in silence, watching the ground bend beneath our feet with each step while I think of blue eyes, and the ghost of his lips still trapped against my skin.

Ronan.

What was it that I told you? Why did you react the way you did? What happened after? Who are you to me? And do any of these things have to do with me being here? If they do, would you come for me?

Would you find me? Even here?

Something tells me I already know the answer.

Always.

### Walking Into Hell: Ronan

I am not a superstitious man and, even with the limited information I have about myself at the moment, I can say I'm not really the poetic type either. I look at the facts and speak in actualities more than anything else. These are things that I know to be true.

But after we set up camp for the night, I can confidently say that I could write sonnets about Silene if I had to. A woman I've dreamt of twice in less than twenty four hours. I know more about her than I know about myself, and if given the chance, I would write verses about how her hair falls down her back in dark chocolate waves, something that could bring any man to his knees. The way her whole demeanor changes when she laughs could destroy and rebuild empires in her name. Her voice, so enchanting, is more beautiful than any siren's song. Her will would be my every command, and I'd follow it into the darkest pits of hell as long as it meant I could stand by her side.

But most of all, the way she looks at me like I'm somebody worth knowing...I know that in itself will always be my undoing.

These are the thoughts that have haunted me since I was woken up for watch duty. The ones that still plague me as we walk through this forest. Nate has been quiet since we left the house yesterday. We might be better for it. Though it does seem odd, considering he appointed himself leader. He was the one to explain the situation to us. He is the only one who actually knows more than he's telling, though how much, is

still unknown.

The air around us is thick, though the fog has mostly settled, giving us a better view of what we're working with, and what we're working with is a whole lot of forest. Green as far as the eye can see, somewhat muddy earth beneath our feet, and silence. So much silence that you wouldn't believe there's any form of life around us, but for the sake of our survival, I'm going to have to believe that isn't the case. A forest this large, there has to be a food supply. There has to be something somewhere. But it remains unchanging for a while, the absence of life becoming more and more harrowing with every step we take.

No one talks much other than Nate. When he does speak, his voice, which had been clear yesterday, now ripples in between breaths. He mumbles so quietly that he's near incomprehensible. We stop frequently, and I assume it's in search of signs of life. I can only assume that's what he's looking for as he examines the Earth beneath our feet. What else would he be searching for if not footprints, human or animal alike?

Other than these small breaks in the silence, no one else utters a word. Maybe it's because there isn't much to talk about, though the silence often makes me wonder if that is when there is the most to be said. In the chaos of all that is still and quiet, wouldn't that be when you desire your voice to be heard the most? When there is no other choice but to be heard, to speak the truths that no one else has yet learned, to beg someone to tell you what and how they know?

I wish to speak, though to truly understand, I must wait in the silence. To learn what my companions wish to conceal, I have to listen when there's nothing to be heard. After all, that is when we often speak the loudest. To know what we are too ashamed or guilty to admit.

And right now, that's what we all are. Too guilty or ashamed to speak about what brought us here. Even if we don't know the "what" yet, we will eventually. No one is

branded with a death sentence without reason. We all have secrets.

Secrets, waiting to escape us completely until not even time remembers they had ever existed. And I will wait as long as I must to discover what they are.

Next to me, a deep voice breaks the silence like a million shards of glass yet when he speaks, his words come out smooth like freshly melted chocolate.

“Do you know what exactly we are looking for out here? Feels like we’re just walking to walk, but if there’s a purpose, you should tell us. Now. I’m not one to blindly follow someone like a dog.”

Fair. He’s being fair. Direct, yes, though that’s what we all should be right now. There shouldn’t be dancing around truths. Our current situation is bleak at best.

“You’ve said nothing to us since we left the house other than to divide up the shifts. Now what? What’s the plan?” Nate’s jaw ticks for a moment as he lets a deep breath escape him before finally looking toward us.

“You’re right,” he starts, and let me tell you, those were definitely the correct two words to begin with. “I apologize, I’ve kind of just taken the lead and haven’t explained much to either of you, and it was wrong. Rather than offer you the respect that I should have, not just as two grown men, but two grown men who seem much more equipped to handle things out here than I am, I left you both as far in the dark as I could. Granted, I don’t know much, but I do know what I’m looking for and who we might run into, and I haven’t spoken a word about it.”

He speaks with sincerity, his voice even, as his gaze flickers between us. While Nate seems much thinner than us both, his baggy clothes make it hard to tell. The way he navigated down the roof and jumped off was done with far too much ease for him to not have at least some training. I tuck that observation away for the time being

though. Despite the silence leading up to this moment, he seems genuine in his apology, and I'm willing to listen further before I decide my next steps.

"I'm looking for any signs of life at the moment. Whether animal or human, both could aid in our survival. Answers would be helpful, but won't do us any good if we don't stay alive long enough to get them."

"So food then. We're looking for food," says the man next to me. He sighs as he looks around, no doubt seeing what we've all seen the past several hours: nothing.

"Food and water, preferably, yes. Though information is valuable as well. I would bet money that the other two found something, and that's why they ran. Should we find them first, I'd still count us lucky." This time when he mentions them, I notice how he slowly lets his gaze travel away from us and scan around with something keen to curiosity.

They. Them. The other two.

He still has yet to say a name, regardless of his apology about leaving us in the dark. Has still danced around the truth, and I wonder what exactly there is to hide. Wonder if I should speak or if my words are better left unsaid to slowly pick and chip away at my desire to know more. I need to know more. I need to know that I'm right. That the voice I heard on the other side of the stairs is her. I would recognize that voice anywhere, yet a part of me doubts. Not really. My dreams might just have her voice because it was the last feminine one I had heard, but even if that were the case...

It has to be her. It has to be her, and I have to do whatever it takes to make sure that she's okay, because the last time—

The last time what? When was the last time and why do I have a feeling it didn't end well? That there were lines that weren't just crossed, but completely shattered, the



pieces so small they may as well be grains of sand weathered by the ocean crashing down on them. The line doesn't exist any longer, and I hate not having the knowledge of how it all went wrong. I let myself drown in those thoughts, deeper and deeper until I am no longer anything but the sea that has carried them away.

A pale hand on my shoulder pulls me out of its depths.

Blue clashes with brown as his eyebrows furrow, and his head tilts in an unspoken question.

"I'm sorry, I seem to have lost myself for a moment. What was the question or the decision?" I chuckle, trying to sound lighter than I feel. Both men stare at me, though their thoughts are impenetrable as I try to read them.

"We decided upon a vote."

"A vote for—"

I don't get to finish the question as I'm cut off when Nate moves, quicker than I would've imagined possible, grabbing my shoulders and shoving me out of the way while spitting out a quick, "Watch out!"

Stumbling over my feet, I lose my balance for a moment, but not before turning my head in time to see an arrow shoot through the air where I had been standing. The sound slicing through the static noise that fills my senses. Time seems to slow down. None of us were hit, but I'm tracking the direction of the arrow, looking for the source. The fog, while lighter, wasn't completely gone, and the shooter is using it to their advantage.

Ducking behind a tree and staying low to the ground, I look toward the other two men, and see that they're already doing the same. They start aggressively making

hand gestures at each other and, while I'm not a genius, I do know it's most definitely not sign language, but instead a silent argument to see whose plan we'll follow. Fair, but I'm not going to just sit and wait. I know the rough direction it came from, and the angle wasn't harsh. They're on the ground somewhere, probably heading closer now. There's no time to waste.

Patting the ground, I start feeling for rocks or twigs. The shooter will expect us to move, and I'm hoping they're ready to fire upon any movement. I find a large stone wedged into the earth beneath me. Thankfully, the ground is till soft beneath my fingertips and easily moves away, allowing me full access to remove the stone I had found. Taking one more glance towards my companions, I see they are still engaged in a silent and useless argument—progressively getting more and more agitated.

Useless. The arguing is useless. I start ruffling some of the leaves and branches around me as if I'm working to stand, purposely making noise. Hopefully, when I throw the rock, the sounds will make the movement seem convincing. They'll either shoot because they're ready, or they're not ready and are just watching us in hopes that someone is idiotic enough to emerge right now. Either way would be good and tell me everything I need to know about the attacker in the forest with us and how we should react. The other men don't understand as one gives me an inquisitive look and the other glares at the noise I'm making, but I don't care much. I smirk, wink and then let the rock roll out of my palms and through the air—still somewhat low, but not at a steep angle.

Not too soon after it leaves my hands, there's a thwarp sound as an arrow whizzes by and makes contact, telling me everything I need to know.

Whoever the shooter is, they're ready and watching.

They shoot with precision. One misstep, and we're dead.

The shooter is closest to me, because the arrow wasn't shot at an angle.

There may be more than one shooter. While they possibly heard the noise I was making, there's no guarantee, meaning, multiple players could be ready to fire at a moment's notice.

We'll be lucky to make it out alive.

The three of us look between each other a few times, silent words and commands passing through each of us, small agreements with the slightest of nods. We know the stakes, but we'd rather fight and die than wait here like cowards. Inhaling deeply, I mentally go through my plan, ensuring it's flawless through and through—that there's no version of what happens next that ends with an arrow through my chest when I hear it. Five words. Short and simple, but ones I know I've heard before with the way my chest constricts as if the sheer memory is painful.

You do not die today.

I will not die today. Not now.

Not ever.

Not without you, Killer.

Looking to my right, I make eye contact with the bulky man whose name I still don't know. If we don't make it out alive, then I'll never learn the most basic identifier of a human being I've been around for at least the last twenty hours. Someone who is trusting me with his life, and I am doing the same. The thought is as sickening as it is comical, and I know the first thing I do if we live is going to be asking for his name, even if I'll look like a complete asshole for going this long without knowing.

We share a brief nod and I mouth one word. Simple and short.

Run.

He doesn't waste any time as he books it away from us, body low and steps quick, covering a short distance before he slides down and stops behind a different tree, curving his hand around the trunk to halt his momentum. In the time it took him to make it over, two arrows were shot in rapid succession, though at an angle and not while he was standing, but after he already dove to the ground.

They weren't ready for him, is the thought that races through my brain. There's no way there can be multiple shooters. Not when they were so unprepared for him to move.

They've set their sights on me.

Our chances for survival, in my opinion, have increased slightly now that we know what we're dealing with. He looks towards us, his face like a stone that gives nothing away—even as his chest rises and falls heavily, and then he angles his head to better see what's happening behind us. Now that he's a few trees away, he's at a better vantage point to see the attacker.

He remains looking back for quite some time before looking toward us again, beginning the worst game of charades I've ever played in my life. One shooter. Twenty feet away, getting closer. Two arrows already nocked. Moving around to the side of the tree. When he signs that last part, I start shifting my body around the trunk, but he holds up a hand to stop me. Eyes darting back and forth from me to the other, I wait for his go ahead to move.

Slowly. I move so slowly, it's almost painful when he finally dips his chin and mouths the word at me. With my eyes fixed on him, I didn't notice that Nate had

moved from behind his tree to mine, but I definitely do notice when my foot knocks into his, startling me enough to swiftly pin him to the tree by his neck.

His body tightens with tension as his wide gaze settles on mine. He brings his finger up to his mouth in a way that says “calm down and keep quiet” without actually telling me to get my shit together. I squeeze a little bit harder for a moment, glaring at him before ripping my hand away. I look over my shoulder to see if we’re still good from the other man’s perspective.

He brings both hands up to point at the two of us and motions for us to both go around the tree on either side and attack simultaneously. He quickly holds one hand up signaling for us to wait. He looks around for a moment, before grabbing a couple of small stones and twigs, and then mouthing “five seconds.”

I watch as his free hand counts down.

Five, he’s already crouching rather than sitting, meaning he also plans to move when we do.

Four, he’s looking past us again toward the shooter before checking the rest of our surroundings again.

Three, Nate and I position ourselves to take off in our respective directions.

On two, the man tosses the handful of stones and twigs in one direction while booking it in another, effectively drawing the attention away from us as we both hear the snap of the band.

On one, we’re both running while the shooter looks at us in shock, scrambling to ready a new arrow. Neither of us back to make sure our companion is unharmed as we dart toward our attacker.

A woman, and I shouldn't be surprised given how light on her feet she had been. She'd practically been the slightest breeze on an already cold day, going unnoticed as she went in for a kill. A good skill to have, but you need to never miss if you're going to use it. Stealth only gets you so far if you can't make the killshot.

Her blonde hair is in a long braid that flies behind her as she turns around and begins to run in the opposite direction, continuing to try and nock another arrow. She looks back and notices how much distance we've gained and releases a groan of frustration, skidding to almost a complete halt as she swings her body to the left, her right arm holding the bow coming up before she thrusts it back down, hitting Nate in the shoulder. I don't have time to assess the damage because she's already using her left hand to grab a dagger sheathed at her waist, spinning and slicing at my approaching form while Nate groans in pain. I dodge the blade, hearing it swoosh through the air as time seems to slow down, watching as it misses my chest by less than an inch.

She narrows her black eyes at me, her face twisted with wrath as we circle each other. I watch Nate approach her from behind, rolling and rubbing at his shoulder before taking his place across from me, the two of us circling her as she continuously adjusts her body to keep eyes on the both of us, still holding her bow and dagger. I watch her like a hawk. The second I see her tighten her hold on the dagger and fix her gaze on Nate, I know she's about to make the first move, and pretty soon we're in a battle of kicking, punching, and slashing.

She moves like an experienced fighter, able to hold her own against two men much larger than her. If she weren't trying to kill me at the moment, I'd probably respect her rather than want to twist her head all the way around like an owl and see if the last word that leaves her mouth is "Who," while the rest of her sentence gets cut off as the deafening sound of her neck snapping echos through our minds. Regardless of how satisfying it would be in the moment, it would be nothing but a taunting realization that we had murdered the first chance of answers that came our way.

“We can’t kill her,” I grunt out as I’m dodging almost every hit that comes my way. I check how well Nate is faring, but the second it took cost me because her dagger grazes my left upper arm, the wound stinging as blood rises to the surface.

“I know that already, did you not!?” Nate grits out, exasperation lacing every word, possibly perplexed by the thought that I even felt the need to even say it.

“Just making sure!” I push out as all my breath leaves my body when she lands a kick at my stomach, though I manage to wrap my hand around her ankle before she can pull away. Turning my body to the side, I yank her leg toward me and then knock her other leg out from underneath her. She falls to the ground with a soft thud.

In an instant, I’m pinning her arms over her head while Nate holds her legs down. It’s then that our friend decides to join the party—unharmd, might I add. “So, where have you been, Princess? Too good to fight or what?” I ask the man who, in fact, does not look like a pretty little princess, but I’ll call out the behavior if I have to. Mammoth of a man that looks like he could snap my body in half like a little twig or not.

He keeps his focus on the woman, his body loose, as if he’s unbothered by the whole situation as he responds, “It looked like the two of you had it under control. I’m the one that risked death to give you both an opening. I deserved a good show.”

Unbelievable. Truly.

Would I have done the same?

Almost definitely, but that is beside the point.

“Okay, Princess, I was going to feel guilty about not knowing your name if one of us died, but now I realize that I don’t need to.”

Silence. From everyone. Even the woman that had been trying to break free from our hold stills and angles her head toward me. I look at each and every one of them with one of those “If you have something to say, go ahead and get on with it,” faces. Mister Princess’ whole body just shakes with laughter so boisterous that you’d think I just told the world’s funniest joke. Suddenly, everyone is looking toward him rather than me while he gasps for breath and doubles over with his hands on his knees, shaking his head.

“You really were out here not knowing my name this whole time?” he asks, still breathless from his laughter. My mouth breaks into the biggest grin, and then I’m laughing right there with him. The split in my lip reopens, and the bitter taste of blood dances across my tongue as I suck my lip into my mouth. I’m still chuckling when Princess kneels down beside me and roughly grabs my injured arm, and the dull pain quickly turns into a deep, throbbing one.

“The name is Adonis,” he starts, and his humor fades as he squeezes my arm, thumb digging into my wound. He drops his voice even lower and adds, “And if you call me Princess one more fucking time we’re going to have an issue.”

An issue? Did we—just become best friends? I think we did. It definitely feels like it. So despite the pain now pulsating through my arm like its own heartbeat, I give his own arm a few pats, mimicking his movement. I give him my best smile and say, “Sure thing, Donni.”

He levels me with a glare before we both look back to Nate who looks borderline horrified at the whole interaction but clears his throat and looks down at the woman. He unsheathes every dagger she has strapped to her thighs and hips, dropping them on the ground next to him, but keeping hold of the last one before handing it to Adonis, who just balances it on one finger and keeps his gaze fixed on her. His presence is large—deadly, something even I acknowledge, but she doesn’t flinch away from him either. Even as his deep voice, lower than I’ve heard it yet, cleaves



through the now dreary silence with only one word.

“Speak.”

### It Wouldn't Be Enough: Silene

The forest can be a dangerous place on a normal day. A day when you know where you are and where to go. A day where you know the risks and are prepared for them. But you take that assurance away, strip someone of their memories leaving them with only their base instincts, and send them out to be hunted? Well, then that danger becomes outright deadly.

Thirty minutes into walking this morning and someone had snuck up behind Carmen, holding a knife to her throat. If it weren't for the woman's ability to scream at the drop of a pen, I probably wouldn't have noticed that she was in distress until it was too late. So when she let out a yelp, quickly muffled by the offender's large, dark hands, I was quick to respond. Not quick enough to stop the small cut that had just stopped dripping dark red blood down her neck, but quick enough for him to be the one bleeding out on the ground instead. One dagger through his shoulder was what it took for him to release her and drop his blade. Then, once she had ducked away from the man, I shoved the sharp metallic staff through his neck and twisted before ripping the cool metal out, watching as bright red blood spurted and gushed out of his gaping out of his star-shaped wound.

I'll never forget the silent sobs Carmen released, the look of fear and panic on her face as she frantically tried to wipe the blood on her neck. From that point on, I insisted she walk ahead of me. I promised her I'd do my best to keep her alive and this is how I do it.

Several hours, a few breaks and no luck finding food or water later, we got our second attack of the day, and I knew while I was fighting that I should keep them alive. Or at least one of the two, as they could offer some sort of help, but I don't have it in me to dial back my hits while they're actively trying to murder me. For some reason, I thought all villains liked to tell their life stories before they got on with the hacking of someone's head and whatnot, but none of these kind folks have gotten the memo, I suppose. The male attacker carried a staff similar to mine, while the woman carried a set of small hatchets, and let me just say, I liked her style. So much that I told her as I plunged two daggers in her sides before quickly dragging them across and through her chest, then plucked them out of her still-warm hands after her body had landed on the soft dirt and leaves, possibly cushioning her hard fall.

Carmen didn't react the same after this one, probably because I didn't let either of them get close to her, ensuring that she sustained no further injuries. Though her hands still shook, she didn't look as horrified as I thought she would've at the death of the woman. It was far more brutal than the first in my opinion, though maybe she's getting used to it after seeing so much violence in less than twenty-four hours. While I should feel relieved, something akin to disappointment and sadness stirs in my chest at the thought of her acclimating to such a macabre way of life so quickly. As necessary for her survival as it might be, I hope that she doesn't let these moments define her when we escape. Oddly enough, I sincerely believe that, despite her softness and oddities, she deserves a chance to not just survive, but live.

Maybe more so than me.

I get the impression that I've done some terrible things in this life of mine, and that should I die, it would be the only proper way to atone for these atrocities I've lived by. Eternal damnation may be the only way to redress the balance of lives I've stolen. And even then, would that be enough? It's hard to know when you hardly know who you are and what you have done. But dwelling within me are thoughts more confident

than the ones sitting at the surface.

I could give everything in myself. Mind, body and soul, fighting to ensure she lives. I could destroy myself in the name of a promise of protection, and it would never be enough. I'd have to live a life much longer than I deserve to in order to properly atone. Even sacrificing myself...my soul is not a worthy offering.

For now, though, it will have to do.

That's the mindset I've carried since we walked away from the last fight, the thoughts that have plagued me as memories continue to slowly make an appearance in the oddest of ways. Memories that play like a mirage of moments falling around me and fluttering through my fingertips like ash, maybe mistaken as snow to those who don't know a once-dormant volcano has awakened nearby. Memories come to me in the words Carmen says, in the actions I take, in the way the black dagger that I'd found underneath the kitchen floorboard easily twirls through my fingertips whenever we take our breaks.

Each one that appears is a missing puzzle piece, though none seem to fully connect yet, which only fuels my frustration while continuing our journey through the woods that seem to be devoid of any life other than our own. That is, until I hear the smallest of ruffles through the branches above, leaves heavy with condensation falling quickly in the space between us. I look up to track the movement, trying to find the source of discourse, when I see it.

Two birds, not large by any means, but big enough to supply some sort of nourishment. It's hard from the distance we're at to see exactly what they look like, but I know it doesn't matter when any second they could flutter away, and we could miss the first real chance we had at staying alive.

Lack of food and dehydration can kill just as easily as a blade. Easier if we're being

honest. And while I would prefer water at the moment, I will take anything that I can get at this moment. I put my hand on Carmen, stilling her movements. When our eyes meet, I first motion for her to stay quiet, and then to stay still. When she nods her understanding, I quietly wipe my sweaty hands on my pants before removing two blades from my pockets, prepping one in each hand for the throw. I calm my breathing. I'm exhausted, and the slight tremor in my hands doesn't escape my notice. This could definitely impact my aim, but I have to pray that it doesn't.

Looking back up towards the birds that linger in the branches above, I estimate the distance to be about fifteen feet. There's no breeze; in fact, the air around us seems so still as if the whole world is holding its breath, and it makes me feel as if maybe I should too, but I don't. I can't. I keep each inhale and exhale deep, steady, quiet and count to three before I set my arms in motion. I swing my forearms forward from the elbow, ensuring that my arms are just about straight above me and release the knives, making sure my wrists are straight. With the longer distance, this helps ensure that neither knife flips in the air too much.

Waiting feels like an eternity with the hunger that I know not only plagues me, but Carmen as well, and my breathing hitches as I hear the sound of the impact. I take several steps toward the direction in which the birds have fallen to the ground. I hear the high pitched squeals leave their bodies in their descent, and in my periphery I can see the faltered steps of the woman behind me. See the way her face crumples at the sound, and I know that even though she knows that we need this, it still affects her more than she wishes. Even as the two animals hit the ground, the impact solidifying their death, I can't bring myself to feel remorse in the same way that she does. Not for an action born out of necessity.

I'm only a few feet away from the birds, beginning to reach forward, when my body is thrown to the ground by someone much heavier than me. Before I have time to react, their hands grab my head and pull me closer before slamming it into the ground, and for the first time since everything started, I release an anguished,

distressed sound as black spots flutter across my vision. Everything is blurry, but I can still see a rush of movement behind the man. The movement of my petite friend, who has seemingly never wielded a weapon in her entire life, slamming my metal staff into his side.

Probably thinking I'll be down for a while, he rolls off of my body and onto his feet, dodging her next couple swings before ripping the staff from her skinny and delicate hands. The shock is palpable on her face as she tries to step back but stumbles as he reaches for her and pulls her into his grasp. Her back to him and her gaze on mine. I'm trying hard to get to my feet, to help in any way that I can, but I'm so fucking dizzy, and the haze in my vision refuses to vanish, but I can still see enough. Enough to note the way Carmen has stopped using her hands to try and rip his arms away from her body and instead has quickly raised her knee and brought her foot down onto his.

Hard.

Hard enough to distract him and for her to slip free from his grip, though not enough to keep him off her for long. She doesn't make it more than a few steps past me before he leaps for her, grabbing a hold of her ankle and bringing her to the ground as well. Her arms are outstretched in front of her as I watch her be dragged back. I don't understand why she doesn't fight back at first, so I reach for the man who holds her, trying to grab onto him. My efforts are fruitless; he just kicks my hand away and tightens his grip on her ankles, but he doesn't look down at her. No. He misses the fact that her retreat was purely out of a need for a weapon. One that was lodged into a bird moments ago but is now clutched in her hands in a white knuckled death grip.

He doesn't see it until it's too late, too focused on my rising body and the axes I've picked back up despite my still slightly fuzzy vision. Doesn't notice that she's no longer pretending to fight him until her arm has already swung out and the dagger is burrowed deep into his side. The first stab shocks him enough to begin letting her go,

but she digs her fingers into his arm with her free hand before pulling out the knife and repeating the movement. The second time the cold metal perforates his body, she lets him go as a sob wracks her throat. He tries to retreat, taking sloppy steps as blood pours from both wounds in his side but she grabs the collar of his shirt, and starts pulling him back, and when they're practically next to each other, she places her hands on his chest and pushes him towards me.

With my body turned to the side and the hatchets raised high, I cut through the air slashing all the way from his right shoulder to his left hip, leaving two gaping wounds gushing bright red liquid while darker blood flows down to the ground. He drops to his knees, a tormented moan slipping past his lips as I squeeze my eyes shut and release one weapon before opening my eyes and cracking my neck. My steps towards him are taken at a menacingly slow pace, but once my feet straddle his tapered waist, I bend my knees, crouching above him and grab him by his hair, yanking his head back.

"How, in the actual fuck, do we get out of here?" I ask the man as each breath he takes comes quicker and more shallow than the last. When he doesn't answer immediately, I dig the heel of the hatchet into one of the wounds in his back. A deep, shuddering scream leaves his throat. "I asked you a question, and I really don't enjoy asking more than once," I say. He just chuckles, weak and humorless.

"You don't."

Two words is all it takes for my bravado to falter. Only for a second, as that's the only amount of pity and doubt I will allow myself right now. One second, and I'm digging the heel of the hatchet into his wound again. His head jerks as he tries to pull away from me and swears before falling into a fit of hysterical laughter. "Do what you want, I'm not lying," he starts before a rattling cough takes over, shaking his whole body. It's only when he stops and spits on the ground, saliva dripping from his bottom lip that our eyes meet and a lifeless smile overtakes his features. "None of you

can make it out of here alive. Nobody ever survives the forest and even... if...y—,” his voice fades. Each word quieter and harder to push out, and I tighten my grip in his hair and tap his cheek a few times to keep him with us a little longer.

“Even if what? Finish your sentence,” I force out through gritted teeth. The way he looks at me says that he doesn’t have much longer. His lids are heavy and staying closed longer with every blink, but he continues regardless. “Even if you do—which you won’t, you would wish you didn’t. You’d remember who you are, what brought you here and realize that you lost everything. You’d have nothing to return to. So fight if you want. But you might find that acceptance is the easiest way out. Your fate is set in stone. No one—”

I cut him off by lodging the axe into the back of his skull, his blood spattering onto my face as I step on the back of his head for leverage and dislodge the blade before dropping it on the ground next to me. “I’ll accept death when she comes to take my hand and drag me to hell, but not a moment before,” I spit out, but as I go to step away, my knees buckle and it’s Carmen who takes my arm and drapes it over her shoulders to steady me before I fall. Studying her features, I see the sadness still carved into every facet of her being, but there’s also a strength there. Somewhere behind the shock and grief I know she must be feeling after killing someone for what very well may have been the first time. Or at least aiding in his demise.

She guides me down to the ground, and I press my forehead into the earth and my palms into my eyes. The throbbing in the back of my head hasn’t lessened in the slightest and I feel as if it may split in two at any moment. Carmen’s hand gently rubs reassuring circles into my back. Pressing my forehead into the soft, cool dirt for just a moment longer, I allow myself to feel and process the man’s words. Few as they may have been, they were also too much, and I almost wish that I would have ended him sooner.

I will not die today.



The mantra is small and short and so repetitive at times, but it's a promise as much as it is a reminder. I am strong. I am smart. I will find a way. That's all there is to it, and I cannot allow myself to die as long as I have Carmen to think of. "Do you think..." her voice is small and shaky as she trails off, and I brace my hands on either side of me before slowly pushing up until I'm almost eye to eye with her. She pulls her hand off my back and starts fidgeting her fingers, busying herself while she gathers her thoughts, I suppose.

I don't speak as she tries to form the rest of her question, giving her a moment of peace to collect her thoughts. It's the least I can give to her after she saved our lives. Not just hers, which she could have easily done, but she felt mine was worth saving too. "Do you think he was telling the truth? That we—" Her voice wavers, and she tightly clutches her hands together, squeezing her eyelids shut as if to keep tears at bay. Bringing my hands to hers, I gently cradle them in mine, waiting for her to look at me. When she does, I keep my facial expression neutral, not allowing her to see any uncertainty.

"I think that he knew he was going to die. A dead man will say anything—is willing to wreak havoc and destruction upon anything and everything because he's weak and wants everyone to feel the same way." I move to stand, guiding her up with me as I continue. "I know he's lying."

"And how do you know? How could you possibly know that with absolute certainty?" she whispers, her voice filled with disbelief. I don't blame her for sounding unsure. Our survival rate seems minimal at best, nonexistent at worst. The thought alone casts a somber mood around us, but I keep my feet planted firmly on the ground and my shoulders squared back.

"I know that I already made a promise to myself. I don't break promises."

"What did you promise yourself?"

“That you live. No matter what, you live.”

Her breath hitches as she looks at me with something akin to shock. Neither of us speak for a long while after that. Not while we pick up all the discarded weapons. Not while we check the man for anything that can help, not finding much other than a small flask of what seems to be water and more holsters for different weapons. We don't talk while we defeather the birds either. It isn't until I'm preparing a small fire to roast the birds that she clears her throat, and I turn my gaze towards her.

“How do you do that? Start a fire, I mean?” The question is simple and I give her a small smile and nod her over to me.

“It's pretty easy, actually. Normally, you would make a small pit into the Earth but the ground is wet, so instead you want to elevate it. I gathered more rocks and then set the twigs on top. This also will encourage air circulation, which is helpful as well.” She's nodding her head, brows furrowed and chin tilted as she listens and watches my hands with rapt fascination. Seeing how the rocks create sparks as they slam against each other several times, creating more and more friction before a spark turns into a flame and the small flame turns into a small fire. A fire just big enough to cook our little meal.

Once the birds look as if they've been cooked all the way through, I snuff out the fire by throwing wet soil over the top and ridding it of its access to heat and oxygen. While I don't think anyone would have been able to see the smoke caused from the small bundle of heat and light that had been in front of us, it's not a risk we should take. “We should eat this while we walk,” I start as I look around us, ensuring that we aren't leaving anything behind. “We've been sitting still long enough. I don't believe there's no way out, but I do believe in tempting fate. With how many times we've been hit today, I don't want to risk tempting her any further.”

Carmen's gaze is inquisitive but she falls into step next to me regardless. The two of

us slowly eat while stalking steadily into the forest, our silent footfalls mystified by the oddity of our environment and circumstance. With every step my gut churns, not with hunger but with anticipation. In an unnerving suspicion that something is off, that we're walking toward more questions than answers, and it isn't until after we've eaten and taken the smallest of sips from the dead man's flask that I understand why this foreboding feeling dug itself into my chest so thoroughly.

For in front of us lies death.

As far as the eye can see, an electrical current zips through the air. A fence-like enclosure stretches far up above the trees, wrapping around everything and trapping us like animals in a zoo.

No way out plays through my mind with every harsh beat of my heart. It repeats over and over again, and the pain in my neck and head returns, thrumming along with it. It's impossible. There has to be a way out, I know it. But not this...this—

God, the closer I get, the straighter the hair on my body stands, the harsher the microshocks rushing against my skin feel. Not a light caress, but a fire lighting its way through all that I am, until I'm nothing but a promise that feels further and further away. We need to leave and we need to leave now, but—

“I can feel it in my veins...the electricity. It feels like it's part of me. Almost as natural as a current in a river. Inevitable. Expected.” Flicking my gaze toward her, I see her waving her hand in front of the area, still quite a few feet away, but closer than I dare to stand. She almost looks as if she's living in a dream, entranced by the magnitude of power being released at such close proximity. “I wonder if this is what it feels like.”

“What what feels like?”

“Living.” Her eyes look toward me, wide with a dream-like wonder as a small laugh escapes her.

I gently smile and say, “When we get out, maybe you can tell me.” I say as I reach toward her, not wishing to get any closer as each beat of my heart seemingly comes faster than the last. She hesitates before she reaches toward me, her finger a hair’s breadth away from my palm, and a small blue current of electricity darts out and zaps me. I yank my hand back, but she steps forward as if her feet have a mind of their own before dropping her hand back down to her side and steps to the side.

“But we need to actually get out to find out. Let’s go, Little Dreamer. I don’t want to be anywhere near this if we get attacked again.” A few steps is all she takes before she stops dead in her tracks again.

“Little Dreamer,” she says in a questioning and bewildered voice as our eyes lock. “That feels familiar.”

She’s not wrong. I’m not sure what compelled me to call her by that nickname, but something about it felt right—safe even regardless of the position we’re in. But I don’t think I could place a time that I’ve met her before yesterday, the memories of “before” still a fog that washes uncertainty over me. Pieces. I’ve gathered bits and pieces together, but nothing that would have me believing that she and I knew each other.

Now I’m not so sure anymore.

“It does, doesn’t it?” I ask as I consider her for a moment longer. Maybe we’ll remember soon, but we should keep going. Sundown is no more than a few hours away, and we need to find a safe space to lie low for the night. She nods and begins her trek through the forest again. Shivers run up the length of my spine as a chilling feeling of being watched sinks into me. I check our surroundings one more time,

though there doesn't seem to be anyone or anything around.

Including Carmen.

### Say It Again: Silene

Panic settles into me when I realize that she's no longer in my line of sight. My heart jolts and sets me off in the direction I know she wandered in. I'm trying to listen for any footfalls other than my own, but the roaring of my thoughts are drowning out any other sounds. For a woman who never walks too fast, especially if it means creating distance from me, Carmen made it further than I thought she would have. My stomach churns at the possibilities of what could happen while she's alone, and I'm about to stop and reevaluate when I hear it. Her soft, muffled cries that sound closeby.

My steps are hushed but hurried as I follow the sound and see her pinned against a tree, paralyzing fear written all over her face as tears fall down her cheeks and drip onto the arm of the man holding her there. I can't hear what he's saying, neither do I care to try, as she squirms further under his touch.

He's hulking in size, someone that gives the same impression as an impenetrable wall, with soil-dark skin covered in white tattoos. His clothes are disheveled and dirty as if he's already been out here and in some trouble of his own, but there's only one word that I could use to describe the feeling that radiates from him.

Dangerous.

And yet, I don't care. I can't bring myself to care as I watch her petite form struggle against his larger one while a blade is held under her chin forcing her to meet his

eyes. I check our surroundings as quickly as I can to ensure he doesn't have any lurking friends, and when I see no one else, I take off in a dead sprint towards them. Any effort to be quiet has been forfeited as I'm hoping to bring his attention away from her. He marks my movement instantly and throws the blade toward me while shoving her away from him.

I study the fall of her body while sliding my own onto the ground to avoid the strike of the blade. Carmen's body hits the stone and leaf covered ground harshly enough to elicit a small groan. I rise from the ground and take back off toward the tower of a man. He cracks his neck and shakes out his wrists before stalking towards me, but he only makes it a couple of steps before I'm using every muscle in my legs to push off the ground. Then, I'm using the momentum to catapult my body into the air.

The shock coursing through him is palpable as I wrap my legs around his neck and dig my thumbs into his eyes. He swears loudly, but quickly recovers from the force of my impact, wrapping his large fingers around my wrists and easily yanking them away from his face regardless of how tight my hold on his head had been.

He throws them back harshly and goes to grip my waist, presumably to get me off him, but I quickly force my upper body back before thrusting forward, gripping the sides of his head again. My forehead collides with his nose, and dark red blood immediately floods from it. He removes his hands from my waist just to place them on the undersides of my thighs, forcing my legs apart and up. I fall to the ground beneath us so fast, that I don't have time to brace myself before impact. Don't even have time to take in any air after it all leaves my body before the man is straddling my body. He goes to take hold of my hands, but not before I reach for his bloodied nose and twist it sharply.

"You fucking bitch!" he yells and rips my hands away from him.

He's holding them together with one hand before his knuckles hit my jaw with brutal

force. I bite down on my tongue hard enough for the tangy taste of metal to fill my senses, and all I can do is laugh.

“What the fuck is so funny!?” the man asks incredulously, which only makes me laugh even harder.

“You called me a bitch,” I start and laugh more when I’m met with furrowed brows and a glare. His tilted head sets off another bout of laughter before it dies. I fix him with a steely gaze and smug smile before I add, “Say it again. I liked it.” I don’t give him time to react before I use my legs to flip us over and bring our joined hands to my mouth and bite down on his hand with as much force as possible until he releases me. As soon as his hands are off me, I lurch off of his body and quickly rise.

I slowly unsheathe my axes out while he reaches for the metal staff that, at some point, was removed from Carmen’s possession before I arrived. He moves to stand. He soaks in my stance, probably assessing me for weaknesses. I stop myself from wincing or squeezing my eyes from any sudden movements, not wanting him to know I’m about one more hit to the head away from passing out. I scan him and see his only real injuries he seems to have obtained are from me. His nose, still bleeding at an ungodly rate as he spits out blood, likely due to how much is rushing down his throat. If he doesn’t get it under control soon, there’s a good chance it will cause light headedness, which would be good news for me if the both of us last long enough to get to that point.

I consider the outcome of this fight, unsure of how it ends. On one hand, this feels evenly matched despite his size. On the other, something tells me he held back when he hit me, and the idea that he’s pulling punches for any reason doesn’t sit well with me.

I take a moment to glance at where I knew Carmen had fallen earlier but she’s not there anymore. I retreat a few steps, scanning as much of the area as possible until I



see her.

She's trying to reach for me but being restrained by a slightly bloodied Nathaniel, his eyes cold as they bore into me. She starts to say my name, but his hand covers her mouth as he whispers something in her ear. Her entire body stills as she slowly looks at him, her mouth falling open ever so slightly.

The distraction of their encounter distract me long enough that I hardly register when cold hard metal plunges toward my abdomen. I barely block it enough time, and spin out of its reach. We circle one another slowly before I rush forward with a battle cry. I raise both axes, but before I can strike him, he swings the staff at me and I have to jump back to avoid it. I barely dodge the hit by the skin on my neck. At this point, I know we're just dancing around each other, but I also know that he is the only real obstacle currently standing in between the woman who still has tears streaming down her face and worry etched into every feature.

I will not die today.

I say it a thousand times over and over in my head as a reminder to myself of what's at stake. And so, he and I continue this ridiculous game of cat and mouse. I know he's toying with me. He's had several openings, and he's taken none of them, but continuously blocked my every attack.

"Just fucking hit me already," I grit out in annoyance. He huffs out an amused chuckle before I throw an axe towards his right side. He swings his body left, but I was waiting for that precise reaction, thrusting down my second axe toward his shoulder. He catches the movement and attempts to block the impact, but it's fruitless. I feel it the moment the blade slices through his skin. Not deep enough to kill, but definitely deep enough to leave a nasty scar from his jaw down to the side of his neck.

The man stumbles back, clutching his wound, and I can only think about how lucky he was. If he hadn't caught the movement in enough time, his efforts to dodge the weapon would have resulted in me not piercing his neck, but the side of his head instead. His mouth twists as he applies pressure, and I see the dark liquid flow and glisten in the last beams of sunlight flitting through the trees and onto his fingers.

I can't stop the smile that pulls on my lips.

"Nathaniel, if you don't let her go, you both die now. I would hate for six of us to become four and then two. I've had quite an eventful few hours. I would like to just go on my merry way," I say, and the two men observe me silently. "Please, I would hate to have to put an axe in your head. You seemed nice. Not your buddy though, I think he could use a nice little hat, and red might just be his color." Nathaniel's eyes widen in shock as his partner blanches at my sentiment.

"I'm sorry, Silene, just put your weapons down and we can ta—"

"Wrong answer," I say and begin to take a confident step forward but immediately still when I feel sharp metal digging into my neck. I don't dare breathe too deep as I feel the presence behind me get closer and closer. His body heat envelopes me, and my breathing hitches just slightly as his own fans against my ear.

"Not so quick there, Killer. Your math was wrong. There's five of us, and if you don't slow down here I might think you're trying to kill my best friend. And that...well, that wouldn't be very nice, now would it?" His voice is deep and mocking. It's one that could command armies and no one would dare question a single demand that escapes his lips. Somehow cold and distant, while also being warm and friendly. A humoured undertone to his words. A complete dichotomy if I've ever heard one. And I think I have, at least in a recent dream. A memory. This is a voice I've fought with before.

“Now, I’m going to ask you very nicely: please put the axe down so we can have a civilized conversation,” he says. I slowly exhale and extend my empty arm out, palm face up, then slowly lift my other arm. The second I release the axe from my hands, the pressure of his knife disappears, and I quickly reach for one of my sheathed daggers, the black one that feels like home, and face the man.

His reaction is quick, but not quick enough. I push him against the closest tree and hold the blade to his neck. Now that he’s in front of me, I see him for the first time. His skin is tan, but definitely paler than mine. Dark raven hair falls onto his forehead, his hair overgrown. He has freckles that dance across his nose and dark eyelashes that frame the most beautiful and capacious set of blue eyes I have ever seen. They’re boundless and captivating and too damn familiar and suddenly neither of us are smiling.

My hand that holds the blade to his throat quivers ever so slightly. I begin shaking my head and trying to back away as darkness clouds my vision. His hands are on either side of my face, cradling it like it’s something to behold.

As if I’m something to behold.

But darkness keeps creeping up on me the same way that the night approaches us now. It’s inevitable and to believe otherwise would be such a terrible, terrible way to drive yourself mad. So I let myself fall into it, slowly. In the distance, I hear Carmen scream my name, and it echoes in my ears. I see her get further and further away as she tries to crawl to my falling body while Nathaniel struggles to keep her still. I feel strong arms wrap around me, catching me and laying me down gently as if I’d break if I fell too hard.

I vaguely remember whispering his name as if it were a plea before everything went dark.

“Ronan.”

### Rotting Dreams: Silene

“It’s such a quiet thing to fall,” a soft, melodic voice says over my shoulder. Shifting my body to the right, I glance behind me to see Carmen standing there, looking out of the same window as me. Her face conveys a look of understanding. I turn back to the courtyard, where my gaze had originally been glued to. Nathaniel’s lithe body deflects so many of Ronan’s swings. They had been sparring for hours, alternating between offense and defense.

I see the brilliant smile bloom on Ronan’s face as he finally gets past Nate’s defenses, effectively leaving him weaponless and splayed on the ground. They’re both drenched in sweat, both heaving as their chests rise and fall. They’re unmoving beside the words that pass between them, too far away for me to hear, but they seem as if they’re ready to finish up for the day. Ronan extends his hand and helps Nate up, and it’s then that I turn back toward the woman behind me.

Some might call her odd, but I find that those are the ones unwilling to try and understand her. I think her a dreamer. She speaks of dreams as if they’re facts, as real as any of us, and maybe she’s right. I’ve never known her to be wrong about anything before, no matter what anyone else may say or think.

“What is it that you mean?” I ask her with my eyebrows drawn tightly together. She only gives me a small smile before looking past me into the courtyard again. “To fall. It’s quite quiet, is it not? Not something you hear or see coming, just something that simply is.”

I let my gaze travel back to the men, now standing side by side and walking back to the building together, laughing at something one of them had said, I'm sure. "Even when you're unsure and trying to convince yourself that it's impossible. It's nothing more than a whisper of a thought going against the actuality of the situation. You don't have to say it aloud for it to be true, Silene."

I slowly turn to face her again, keeping my eyes on Ronan for as long as possible, but when they finally land on where my little dreamer stood, they're met with nothing more than an empty room and open door. Her absence washes over me at the same time as her words, and I peer back outside and track Ronan's every step. It was then that I realize I knew exactly what she meant. I knew what she was telling me. The problem isn't that I had been trying to deny it. If anything, I had accepted it long ago, I think.

Loving him was never a problem. It came to me as easily as the shore meeting the sea. There was no end I would not be willing to meet if it meant he was there in whatever afterlife my soul found itself in.

When I met him, he had given me a purpose. I hate that it was one born of a pure need to be the best, but it was. Before him, I was nothing but someone who had been hired on as a temporary head for hire, having to prove herself worthy of a full-time position. But him? He was the best. It instilled a desire in me to stand where he stood. To be as respected as I was feared. To be as openly vulnerable as I was physically strong. He was everything I didn't just want to be, but needed to be.

If I had never started working for Robert Delgado, this burning need would have never caught fire within me. Mr. Delgado was one of the wealthiest men in the country, one of those old money types who believed most women had no purpose outside of the kitchen or bedroom. Despite this, he liked to say he was an equal opportunist, that he was willing to hire a woman for the job he needed, as long as she could prove herself worthy and capable. At one point in time, his men all had been on

active assignments. When an emergency came up, he needed a quick and capable body to handle them for him.

At this time, I was in the underground fighting scene and heard about the position from one of my opponents before we entered the ring. One hour and two wins later, I found myself in my shitty apartment doing whatever research I could on the Delgado family. While there were no mentions of any shady dealings and no criminal records on anyone in his circle, he definitely appeared to be the type to keep his hands clean while outsourcing his dirty work, which was perfectly fine for me as someone who needed a stable job and thrived in the little gray areas.

The next morning I found myself on a train heading for his estate, where I told him I wanted the job and that no wasn't an answer I was willing to accept. Bold? Possibly. Presumptuous? Most definitely. However, I was someone who believed in herself enough to make such demands. And if his only complaint was that I was not a man, I would prove to him I could be better.

Maybe he found amusement in the fact that I was bold enough to walk straight up to his door and demand a job, or maybe I was just naive enough to believe that was the case. I knew it wouldn't be easy, and when he drafted up a contract, it only reaffirmed my suspicions. But I was always up for a challenge.

So I accepted. Through the next several weeks, I killed for him and asked no questions. Occasionally, I'd even brought someone back alive when it was requested of me. I did everything I was told, never talked back, put in extra time training when I wasn't out on jobs, and worked strictly on a case-by-case basis. Not allowed a full-time position until I could prove myself the way the others had.

Determined isn't a strong enough word to describe how I felt, and this feeling increased tenfold the second the rest of the team showed up. All men, which makes sense given the boss, but all seemingly strong in their own right. One that screams

arrogance, another that looks outright dangerous, and the last one who seems...watchful — guarded, even. Not in a way that says he's unapproachable, but he gives the impression he doesn't just look at anything, but instead, sees everything.

His eyes are the most remarkable shade of dark blue, and paired with his lighter skin tone and dark hair, the contrast is inhumanly beautiful...at least that's what I would've thought if I hadn't already done my research on everyone here. But I did, and I already knew he was my number one competition.

Ronan Callaghan.

Boss Man's number one go-to for any mission due to his personable personality, planning, endurance, and well, the fact that the man knows how to get shit done. The other two were great, very strong muscle men for sure, but they weren't like him. Maybe no one was. Maybe he's one of those "once in a lifetime" kind of men that everyone hopes to have on their side when things go awry.

I was not mindless enough to believe I would be exactly like him. I don't think I needed to be, though. Not when I knew I could be better.

But suddenly, months had gone by and I couldn't find it within myself to hate him like I had at the start, though I would never say that to him. Our banter was something I lived for while sparring and working together. His outlandish remarks, and my animosity-filled ones suddenly carried a lot less heat behind them as I began to learn more and more about how he became the best. Despite it all — everything I had learned about him — I knew that if people were books, I'd only gotten a glimpse at the few chapters leading up to where he is now. There's more to him than he lets on, but I guess that could be said for anyone, especially me; however, I had been far less open about my past. Lord knows that any time he had dared ask me about myself, I ended up putting him on his ass.



“In your dreams, Blue,” I would say to him, but he’d laugh it off like the good sport that he was.

“One day you’ll let me catch up to you,” he’d say, and I would just quirk a brow in response. “Let me crack open those pages, Killer. I don’t care how dark you feel your story may be. I want to know it all.” His words often threw me for a loop. So serious yet paired with a goofy grin, like he was waiting for me to catch up to him instead.

“Maybe when you can stop calling yourself Number One around here, even though you’ve never been able to pin me, I’ll let you in on a few more of my secrets,” I’d retort, and his laugh would deepen. Like a lie on a polygraph, he’d jump and sputter as each new wave of laughter hit. I couldn’t help but watch the way his head would tip back and a full smile would grace his face. He was devastating and these moments were the only times I would let myself fully drink him in. It’s painfully obvious the man has an ego through the roof and does not need to know he has me completely captivated at any given moment.

“Like I said, you’ll let me catch up to you eventually.”

I hadn’t been as confident about that as he was in that moment, but over time, I found myself wanting him to be right. I guess that’s how we ended up where we were now: sharing a small apartment right outside the Delgado estate’s property line and cooking together every night we could. We shared secrets and small nothings about versions of ourselves that we had already quietly mourned long ago. How we got to the point when I told him my suspicions about Mr. Delgado and how they had been confirmed by his own daughter. How she begged me to find a way out, not just for her but for myself — Ronan, too, if he was willing to leave.

She called her father a monster — a term I believe to be more relative than anything else — because, what is a monster if not the things we fear most about our own capabilities? If not what we fear is hidden within ourselves? What is a monster if not

someone who doesn't hide from, but embraces the darkness within them?

No matter how relative the term, I don't feel like her sentiment is far off. Ronan wasn't so sure and asked for whatever time I could give him to investigate on his own. I knew that he would come to the same findings, so how could I have denied him?

"For you? Always, Killer. Always," he had said before he looked at my gathered evidence and then stalked off into the dark to find his own. He left with a few more parting words, "We need undeniable proof before we make any moves. Don't trust anyone else with this, love. You're the one thing I cannot risk in this life. We're treading a very fine, dangerous line digging into this man."

"Ronan, I—" My words stop when the door shuts behind him, and suddenly it's just me staring at the space where he once stood, where the scent of him still remains. One I could never place but will always give me a little sense of what heaven must smell like.

"I love you," is what I was going to say. It would've been the first time those words had escaped me in years. The first time that I trusted myself to not just speak them, but mean them with every part of who I am. That night I had thought it best I didn't get the chance, especially when I didn't hear from him for the rest of the night leaving me in a restless state while lying in our bed. Thankfulness that I didn't get a chance to say those three fickle words coursed through my veins when I didn't see him at our normal sparring session the next day and had to train with Adonis instead. I continually repeated this sentiment until I was rotting away in my baggiest pajamas that night and watching my favorite film before I hear the sound of the lock turning.

Immediately grabbing the pistol we keep holstered underneath the living room sofa, I make sure a round is chambered and duck behind the arm of the furniture and wait. But the second the door opens, I hear three small raps against the door frame. I exhale

in relief and return the weapon to “safe” just as his head peeks around the corner of the door, and he hits me with his most infuriating smirk.

“Easy there, Killer. I might start believing you actually want me dead if you don’t put the gun away,” he huffs out as he shuts the door behind him and makes sure the lock is firmly clicked into place before turning back to me. I regard him with uncertainty, curious as to where he’d been all night and day. While he’s in a fresh set of clothing and appears to look normal, his body language doesn’t indicate that to be the case. His shoulders are slightly hunched, normal for most, but not for him. His dark sapphire eyes look slightly duller, and the dark circles under his eyes add more contrast against his light skin and dark hair, which tells me he hasn’t slept much and he’s more exhausted than he is letting on.

“Where were you all night? And today?” I demand the second he tries to reach for me, pulling out of his reach. His shoulders straighten, and his body goes rigid. He looks around as if ensuring it’s just the two of us.

“I went out looking for more proof, gathering evidence, listening in on and following some of the other employees to see if I could find anything you didn’t already have yourself,” he says cautiously. With raised eyebrows I motion for him to keep talking, but he just tilts his head up and swallows deeply before reaching into his coat pocket and setting an SD card into my hand.

He locks eyes with me as he slowly closes both of our fingers around the small object, and then looks down at our joined hands. I follow his gaze and softly gasp at the sight of the irritated black ink now on his thumb. Right in between his knuckles is the letter S.

“Ronan.” His name is so gentle when I say it. So at odds with the wild, erratic beating of my heart. “What is this?” I ask, but I already know. He never did anything without purpose and careful consideration. I know what that is and what it means, but I need

him to say it out loud.

“I told you last night that you were the one thing in this life I could not risk. I meant it.” His long, calloused fingers gently rub over my closed hand, sending chills up my spine. Ripping my gaze from the movement, I look to him only to find his eyes already locked onto me. His attention feels like a light caress on my skin as his eyes trace every part of my face with fascination and an openness I’ve never seen before. Is he always open and honest? Yes, but this...this was different somehow. This moment...it feels like raw, unconcealed care, and I need him to say it.

“I choose you, Silene. From now until the world, one day, burns to ash. I am unequivocally yours in every way possible. If you want to fight, I will follow you to whatever end meets us on the other side.”

“And if I want to run?” I ask as tears begin to well up and fall on their own accord.

“And if you want to run—which I know you enough to know is not the case—I would run with you. Everyday, anywhere you wanted to go. I’d run to every corner of the Earth, sail the seven seas, hide in every shadow, as long as I could say you were by my side through it all,” he declares. No trace of humor laces his words, but a light smile, small and caring, remains plastered on his face.

I choke on a laugh as tears continue to fall, and even though I know he means every word, I still push a little. After leaving me alone, worried about him all night and day, I’m not ashamed of the fact I want to hear these proclamations. I’m not ashamed that I want to hear him .

“You’re scared of the ocean. You’d never sail across any sea and you know that,” I counter. He smiles, a soft sad smile. If he knows what I’m doing, he shows no signs of it as he shakes his head.

“You’re wrong. If you asked me to, I would. You make me feel like I could do anything. You make me fearless just as much as you make me fearful, my love, and if the ocean is the only sanctuary for the two of us, I would brave it every day.”

A small, breathy laugh escapes me, and his hands leave my own to cradle my face as his thumbs brush away each teardrop that falls down the expanse of my cheeks.

“I don’t want to run,” I whisper, the words dancing in the small space between us. His lips gently kiss over both cheeks before he presses his forehead and nose against my own, and warmth blossoms across my face.

“I know. It’s one of the reasons I love you,” he whispers.

“You love me?” The question leaves my lips of its own accord. I don’t process that I’m asking it until it’s already out and in the open. Luckily, he doesn’t hesitate for even a moment to answer.

“Always,” he says it so faintly that I almost don’t hear it over the sound of my own breathing.

The weeks that follow are spent working as if we knew nothing, while secretly gathering more and more information. The stack of evidence is daunting to say the least. Enough that we feel comfortable involving a few others we know would help us.

Adonis, an absolute mountain of a man and who I’d become quite close with on the sparring mat as the only one who could hold his own against me, and William, who I am admittedly hesitant to bring on but am assured if I looked past his ego, I’d find a strong, loyal fighter on my side. Ronan also broached the idea of bringing Nathaniel on. According to him, Nathaniel was the best tech guy we had. Though because of his daily proximity with Mr. Delgado, the information we trust him with needs to be

limited for the safety of everyone involved.

The plan, surprisingly enough, is coming together, but with every day that passes I feel more uneasy about it all. Is Robert Delgado a terrible person? Absolutely, yes. But wasn't I as well? Did I have a right to judge when I worked for him every day and hadn't dared ask questions at any point during the last two years that I was here?

I don't have the answers to those questions, but I do know that his daughter is trapped here and scared. I know that the further in the process we have gotten, the closer to her I have found myself. The sweetest woman I'd ever met, with the most beautiful of dreams. Her light was bright, and I would not allow it to be dimmed by the darkness that had been surrounding and clouding over her thoughts.

Worry had seeped into her bloodstream, rotting her dreams of an enchanting life and turned them into nightmares of death and darkness, all just to keep secrets she bore for a man who had been nothing but a ghost of memories that echoed in her mind on haunted nights during her childhood. I remind myself everyday that I'm doing this for her. As we read together and secretly pass notes regarding all that we hope to accomplish in a new life, should we get away.

Her words seem to ease some of the strain in my mind with every day that passes. It is easy to recognize my ever growing fondness for the woman as the same thing I'd been feeling for Ronan. Not in the same way of course, but if not for love, I don't think I would have chosen to fight. Fleeing would be easier, but I know that she would never truly feel safe with him still walking the Earth. She would've fallen victim to the same madness as her father. Always looking over her shoulder wondering when he would inevitably find her. So, I told myself I would make sure it ends with us, which leads to today.

Today is the day before we are to enact our plan. Ronan trained with Nathaniel as he usually did on Mondays to get him out of his networking cave. Me, watching in

admiration as I normally would. None of us made one wrong move that could cause suspicion. Carmen's words would have surprised me if I hadn't already admitted to myself that I was completely undone for Ronan Callaghan several weeks ago. Even after he admitted his feelings for me, I kept mine silent. He didn't seem to mind. I think he knew that I was never one to express my feelings, but would always be loud in how I expressed them through my actions.

"I'll see you for dinner tonight, yeah?" Ronan asks as he comes up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. His lips are a ghost of a touch against my cheek, and I turn my body to face him, unable to stop the grin that forms when I see the smile on his irritatingly handsome face. Lightly chuckling, I stand on my toes to close the distance between our lips and let the kiss linger for a moment before falling back on my feet.

"I'd sure hope so, considering we live together and you know how I am about missing meals," I say but stop short when I see a shadow pass behind him at the other end of the hallway. It grabs my attention long enough to notice the sounds coming from the direction of the library. The room is fairly large but usually empty with the exception of Ronan, myself and...

I feel physically ill as I move away from him and take off in that direction. Each step takes a life of its own as they grow faster and louder—echoing as the doors slam shut.

"Silene, what are you doing?" Ronan asks, concerned, maybe even following me, but I don't turn to face him. Instead I keep on my trek, following my gut, knowing that something isn't right. Faster and faster until I'm in an all out run, hoping—no, praying that I'm wrong—but when I throw open the doors to the library, my throat constricts, unable to take in a full breath of air. My eyes go wide as saucers as I take in the scene in front of me.

Carmen.

God, she has tears streaming down her face. Her petite frame is tied up in a chair in the middle of the room, a cloth wrapped around her mouth. I can faintly hear my name leave her mouth in a muffled sob. I try to take a step toward her, just one step closer to her, but she quickly shakes her head and lets her gaze travel over each person in the room with us. Twelve men. There are twelve armed men in here with her, and I can't even begin to wonder why as every single one looks at me.

Twelve armed men, and her father who stands next to where she sits, brushing some of her hair behind her ear with the barrel of a pistol. "Ah, Ms. Dimitriou. Nice of you to join us on your own. I was worried someone was going to have to retrieve you. You do know how much I hate waiting." I'm as still as a statue as Mr. Delgado speaks, fearing the smallest movement will result in the death of someone who has come to be my dearest friend here recently.

The doors open behind me, and the sound of a sharp intake of breath followed by the hand gripping my waist are the only two giveaways of Ronan's presence. Every man stands just a little taller than usual, knuckles turning white as they grip their firearms.

"Ronan! Glad you could make it. We wouldn't have been able to start this little meeting here without the person who brought awareness to this, uh...situation." Ronan's grip became punishingly tight on my skin as those words were uttered. The sob that escapes Carmen is guttural, as she and I both experience that violently sickening feeling that is betrayal.

My body is not my own as I pull my elbow back into Ronan's mouth. His hand releases me, and I lunge for the man standing closest. I vaguely hear shouting all around me, but I don't really process any words said. Not as I dodge hits from fists, legs and the bullets firing around me. I don't stop for anything until I hear her scream. My attention pulls away from the men that have fallen, as well as those still standing and run straight to her. Her father pressed the barrel of his gun into her head while aiming another one at me.



“Si—” Ronan starts, but the rest of my name is cut off when the butt of a gun hits the side of my head hard enough for black shadows to cast over my vision as my body falls to the ground.

### You Know Who I Am: Ronan

I knew she was here but I didn't expect our reunion to pan out quite this way. Her firm body is cradled into my arms, lip bloody and jaw swollen. Bruises litter her arms and hairline in a greenish yellow hue, and dirt covers her entire left side, but she's still just as exquisite as I remember. She's still "her" in all of her murderous, protective beauty.

The guys decided we could stay here for the night since the light was fading fast, but I couldn't have been bothered regardless, willing to carry her wherever they wanted to go if it was necessary. Though, I will admit I'm happy we're not walking because it gave me more time to just look at her in the soft light before night fell. Allowed me time to take the knife from her hand and tear part of my sleeve off to create a makeshift hair tie and pull her hair up for her. I can only imagine how much she hated fighting with it down. She's never liked her hair down during combat.

Stopping gave me time to admire the blade that's as dark as the night that envelopes us. It gave me time to wonder where it came from, even if part of me feels like it knows the answer already.

I haven't moved the entire time she's been unconscious. Not when Nate had approached and asked if I knew her. Not when Adonis tried to tell me that we weren't best friends. And not when the tall, skittish woman crawled over to us and just stared down at her with nothing short of awe.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?” she asks cautiously, but I don’t remove my gaze from Silene’s sleeping form. To be fair, I don’t think she does either, both of us focused on the steady rise and fall of Silene’s chest.

“I don’t know. Is there a reason she wouldn’t be?” I question, more accusatory and far more harsh than I should be. “She doesn’t seem to look as bad as Princess over there, unless something happened before you found us?”

I study the way her hands twist together, a nervous tell if I’ve ever seen one, then glance up to see her looking around while tugging her bottom lip in between her teeth before she whispers, “Before we found you guys, someone else found us. Obviously we both made it out, but her head got slammed into the ground pretty bad. I’m not sure if she lost consciousness, but she didn’t move for a minute. And she hasn’t said anything about it, but I’ve noticed her rubbing the back of her neck quite a bit like she hurt it and I ju—”

She stops herself for a moment and meets my eyes, the soft glow of the fire revealing the soft sheen that coats them. “I just need her to be okay.”

After she says that, she turns slightly toward the other two men. “Do you trust them?” she asks, taking me by surprise. I regard her with wary and caution, my eyes narrowing and hands clenching, unintentionally gripping Silenes body much harder than I meant to..

“Why would I not?” She looks around again, this time slower, before she leans into me so close that I can feel when the next words leave her as if they were reaching out to tell me themselves.

“Silene left for a reason. A warning that she was given...”

I quickly look down at the woman lying in my lap before raising my head up to ask

another question, but when I do, the tall woman has already stumbled closer to the fire we lit right before darkness consumed us. Nobody says a word as the crackling of flames fill the air. Not Nate as he remains focused on the tall woman's every move. Not Adonis as he uses his own shirt to apply pressure on the wound to his face and neck, irritation written all over his expression. Not the woman who occasionally glances back at us but otherwise remains seemingly unaware of the brown eyes that follow every breath she takes.

Not me as I reach into my pocket and remove the note I'd found in the house. The note I've read over and over again as I try to remember why I wrote it, what it means, and how it got there. But for some reason those are the memories that evade me. For some reason, all the memories from how we got here remain just out of reach, and all that I see or hear is Silene. The sound of her voice. Her bright, mossy green eyes.

Green eyes that begin to move beneath her lids.

I pocket the paper and sit up, pushing back the loose strands of hair that had fallen out of the tie I'd made for her so her hair wouldn't be in her face any longer than it already had been. When I'm done fixing her hair, my hands cradle her cheeks, wanting to be the first thing she sees and feels when she wakes.

When she finally opens her eyes, though, it's not relief or happiness I see, but pure unadulterated rage that crosses her features. Even with only the soft glow of the fire lighting her face, I can almost see her every thought, but only one thing passes through my mind.

She's okay is the chant that plays over and over in my head as short-lived relief washes over me. Very short-lived relief.

"Get. Your. Hands. Off. Me." she grits out through clenched teeth. Her calm should not be mistaken as anything other than deathly. Lethal, even, as she removes my

hands and puts distance between us while moving to sit up. I observe every flicker of her gaze and how it settles on the other woman longer than anyone else. I notice the way their eyes catch and the silent conversation that seems to pass between them before her shoulders slump forward in what could only be relief.

One asks How are you? And the other silently answers with Okay. Safe.

I observe the way Silene's hands trail over her body, taking count of every blade that is sheathed on her thighs before she slowly moves to a crouching position and turns her whole focus to me.

She's watching me as one would watch an enemy, or worse...a stranger.

"Sile—" She holds up her hand, silencing anything else that I was hoping to say and looks back to the others. They are all watching us with rapt fascination.

"Why did you do it?" she asks me with a withering look, and I don't know how to answer the question. Genuinely, I've never been more confused in my life. Considering our current situation, I feel as if that says a lot.

"Why did I do what?" I ask, but she just scoffs before leveling me with a glare that sends ice into my bloodstream. I'm stuck wondering what it is she could be talking about considering she's been asleep the entire time we've been here together.

"Ronan, cut the shit. Why. Did. You. Do. It?" she demands, every word pronounced with a determined conviction. Slowly, she moves to stand, and I follow every single bend of her body that she created in the process. The curve of her spine, the bend of her elbows, her grimace at the rolling of her neck. There's not a single thing she does that escapes my notice. There never will be. She catches me openly staring, and I just hold my hands up in surrender hoping that she doesn't think of me as a threat.

Though, at least then she's still thinking of me.

"Killer, I really don't—" I attempt again, but she scolds me and I promptly shut my mouth as she speaks.

"Ronan, you have five seconds." She slowly unsheathes a blade and points it at me. Nate takes this moment to rise to his feet in a panicked frenzy, but Silene whips her head in his direction, halting him when she aims the blade at him instead.

"Tsk tsk, Nathaniel, I don't think you want to test my aim with this," she says pointedly with a mocking undertone.

I see Carmen's face fall as she says, "The answer is very well. If your life is something you value, you should listen to her." The statement is quiet, but we all hear it well enough for him to take a few steps back.

"Very good. Ronan, since we were interrupted, I'll give you five more seconds. But only five. Don't make me put this blade through your pretty face. It would be quite a shame." She smirks, but I don't mistake that small feature for anything other than a warning she's hopeful I won't heed. And damn, do I want to see her smile enough to pretend that I don't know just how violent my woman is.

"You think I'm pretty?" I ask, and she barks out a laugh before she's glaring at me with narrowed eyes.

"Time's up. Wrong answer."

The next thing I know, she's putting her blade away and walking toward me with a violent gleam in her eyes. I may not remember much of the events that landed us here, but I do remember how good she is in hand-to-hand combat. I do remember how she came to us as someone with mostly boxing experience, and a little martial

arts training here and there. I remember training her, not because I was forced to, like she thought, but because I was entranced by her. I remember the long hours we spent on the mat so she could learn how to be more proficient and to read her opponents' tells. I remember her abundance of hatred toward me and how I would fuel the fire inside her with a snark and underhanded comments.

She eventually surpassed me, but our training days never stopped. I never wanted them to. I don't think that she did either.

I let her throw the first punch, wanting to watch what she went for to know just how fucked I was. She goes for a left hook. Immediately, I know that my odds of winning this fight are probably sitting somewhere in the negatives.

In other words, I'm completely and utterly fucked if I can't convince her I'm innocent of whatever she has already found me guilty of.

"Look, Silene, let's talk this out," I say as I try to dodge every swing she throws my way, but she's fast.

And not only is she fast, but she's pissed off. I know when she's like this, she needs to release as much steam as possible before she begins to see even a smidge of reason, which doesn't bode well for me considering it's my head she wants on a platter. The only other person that I briefly remember keeping up with her is sitting next to the fire, leaning against a tree with a smirk on his face, watching in amusement.

Not a very good best friend if you ask me, but I guess we'll have to talk about that later.

"Light of my life, I need you to—" I narrowly avoid a roundhouse kick to the face, "—please stop for just a minute. You know who I am, Killer." I catch her wrist before her knuckles connect with my face in her next swing. "You know who I really

am.” This doesn’t result in her stopping anything other than scowling before pulling her wrist back.

The scowl is soon replaced with a laugh that shakes the ground I stand on and makes my knees buckle enough to forget my dire situation. Her laugh is cold and unforgiving, yet it still somehow manages to tear my focus away from what it should be on. Makes me forget why we’re here long enough for her to trip me and throw her body over my own, bringing one of the blades back out to rest against the skin of my throat.

“We both know I’m nobody’s light. Now tell the group what you did and why.” Her head is cocked to the side and several strands of hair have fallen out of the makeshift tie, now framing her face in dark tangled ebony waves.

“A knife to my throat? Are you flirting with me right now?”

The words seem to impress her very little as the murderous glint in her eyes sparks brighter.

“I loathe that I ever found any ounce of appeal in you,” she says as she brings her free hand to the base of my throat and starts to squeeze while thoroughly observing me, but I refuse to let the small smile leave my face while she does so. Not in an attempt to mock her—though I know she’ll see it like that—but because I like when her eyes are on me. I like when she studies me as if I’m a puzzle that she can’t quite figure out. I love that the indifference and hatred has left her eyes because that means that she might feel something other than contentment at this moment.

“Why did you sell us out?” Her words are a low, disbelieving whisper against my ear and my body stills completely at the implication of her words. I attempt to turn my head toward the others, but she uses her grip on my neck to force my head back. She pulls away from my ear and meets my gaze with a fierceness that would have me



kneeling before her if I were standing.

“I remember, Ronan. I remember that day and the weeks leading to it. Tell me why, and don’t lie.” The words leave her mouth, still hushed as if to keep this exchange a secret from the others and I wish I knew why. I wish I knew what she remembered and I wish I knew why she was asking me in a way that doesn’t make me look like a traitorous bastard in front of the rest of the group. Then again, if I remember anything correctly, she’s always been somewhat reasonable and has never sent anyone on a witch hunt without knowing all the facts first.

Which means she might not be completely sure of what she remembers.

“Tell me,” I whisper back. A deep cough rings out near us, and we both whip our heads towards the sound.

“If you two are done with your lover’s quarrel, can I go to sleep?” Naturally, the question was from Adonis, the Princess himself. Nate’s face warps from one of worry to one of amusement as he attempts to stifle his laugh with a cough.

Carmen is the only one that still looks truly worried for her friend and doesn’t mask the questions lingering in her gaze until Silene dips her head to her. Our onlookers get situated for sleep near the fire, Adonis and Nate facing away while she faces towards it. Si loosens her grip on my neck and sits up, but keeps the tip of her blade at my neck.

“Is this necessary?” I ask, but her answering smirk tells me I’m not getting out of this until I answer her question. Unfortunately for me, that means I could be here all night given I have no idea what she’s talking about.

“You have yet to answer any of my questions, why should I give you the pleasure of comfort?” Her eyebrow raises, indicating she requires an answer I can’t give.

“I have no answers to give you,” I tell her earnestly, but she just lets out a small, breathy laugh before leaning back down, her nose almost flush against my own, and whispering one word to me.

“Bullshit.”

Her breath fans against my lips, and I worry that if I breathe too deeply, she’ll pull away so I hold my breath for as long as I can. “I don’t remember anything you’re talking about, Silene. I swear on my life.”

“Your life isn’t worth much to you, is it?” Curiosity laces her tone as she pulls back from me and briefly glances at the three sleeping forms no more than ten feet from us before turning back to me. “It’s not worth much to me either. Your life, I mean. You swore it to me once before and look where I ended up now.”

Lifting herself off me, she stretches her body out before leaning against the nearest tree.

“Sleep. You’ll live long enough to remember what you did.” She pauses long enough to take a deep breath before saying, “But not a second longer. If your life is mine, then I’ll be the one to slit your throat for the lies and betrayal. No one else should have to be burdened with the task. I’ll take the first watch.”

Then she stalks away from me and checks every area where the light falls before taking a seat on the other side of the camping area, and cleans her nails with the knife she just used to threaten my life.

For the next several hours I truly did try to do as she said. Tried to get closer to the heat but found myself tossing and turning under the light of the flame. It wasn’t until I was further away and closer to the dark that I found myself settling a bit easier, but not easily enough I suppose, since I was acutely aware of every breath she took

behind me. Too aware of every movement she made and the sound the tip of the blade made against her fingernails as it scraped away any remnants of dirt or blood.

I really only start drifting off when she kicks one of the other men awake and tells them she needs her beauty sleep. I hear Adonis' deep grunt. A muffled curse word to her, or maybe even about her, before I faintly hear her lay down with an amused huff beside her friend.

The minutes drag on and on as I hear her toss and turn just as I had done for the past couple hours. What's leaving her so restless? Is it the sleep she'd fallen into earlier that keeps her awake now? Is it the answers she found or the questions that still linger plaguing her now from them? Is it because she doesn't feel safe with me around? These thoughts torment me longer than they should, and when sleep finally starts to take over, I send a quick thank you to God for the mercy he's granted me from the all-consuming thoughts of the woman.

"So what do you say? Drinks at Labyrinth's? It's always a good time and the job took a lot longer than all of us anticipated. It'll be good for us to get out for a bit." I snap out of the daze I'm in just in time to hear the question from William, but don't fully process it until his elbow slams into my arm. "What are you looking at, anyway?" he questions, and I peer down at him in the hopes that he wasn't able to follow the direction that had stolen my attention.

But it's too late.

"Ahh, new hire, do you think?" he asks, as one of his overly confident smiles lifts his lips. "Probably for the interior work Mr. Delgado wants done around the place, right?" His voice is hopeful as he lightly hits my shoulder before heading in her direction.

Not unusual behavior from him, for sure. He's always been one to invite women into

his bed, and often. But never are they anyone from the manor, always a stranger from a bar or club out in town.

She's not his usual type, though. Her deep, olive-toned face is all sharp edges. Her hair is the color of a tree's dark timber, slicked back in a hair tie, yet still falling in cascading waves down her back. Several strands fall down and frame her face, and her eyes are the color of the moss that tends to grow in abundance over the estate walls.

She's mesmerizing, for sure.

Anyone would stare, but she's not the type I've seen him chase after. So, I follow. Though I'm not sure if it was to see what would happen to him, or if it was because I hadn't taken my eyes off her from the moment we arrived here today, but I allow one foot to fall in front of the other over and over again until I'm across the room and able to see her up close.

Devastating.

She is completely and utterly devastating in every sense of the word.

And she was completely locked onto whatever bullshit was flying out of William's mouth. The only saving grace was that she wasn't falling at his feet and laughing at every word he said like most women would have been doing by now. Instead, she wore a small smirk with her head cocked to the side and nodded her agreements every now and again.

"William, is it?" she questions, and he extends his hand before responding with one of the worst lines in the books.

"Yeah, but you can call me whatever you like." I can practically hear the answering

eyeroll as she begins to outstretch her hand towards his.

At the last second, she shifts her body to mine with a mumbled, “I don’t think I will,” and gives me a soft smile. “That was William, and you are...” her voice trails off in a questioning tone, but I stare at her. Momentarily paralyzed by the sound of her voice coupled with her attention wholly on me.

Her voice sounds like melting butter on freshly made pancakes, a wealth of knowledge, the fountain of youth. It feels like life washes over me in a refreshing bout of rain after years of choking on the life that had been thrust upon me.

“Ronan.”

It’s the only word that I say. The only one that I can muster as I drink her in, my voice raspier than usual as I take her waiting hand and bring it up to my mouth to lay a feather light kiss on her knuckles.

Her answering blush is patient, polite —

“This isn’t right,” I say to her, and the grin that spreads across her face is wicked. I find myself smiling just the same.

“Shucks, Ronan. What gave me away?” Her deep sultry voice and feigned accent brings laughter out of me.

“Well, the first hint was that I’ve never known you to be the docile type.”

“True. What else?” It was a question, but by the way she asks, it seems like she already knows the answer but wants me to say it first.

“That was when we first met. I tried to kiss your knuckles, but you tried to break my

wrist.” The laugh that bubbles out of her is uncontained and raw and all her. Not this version of her, but the late-night movie and baking adventures “her.”

The version that let me catch up.

“Ahhhh, that I did. Sorry for going a little off script. I didn’t think you would notice.”

“I notice everything you do, Killer. Besides, I fell in love with every wicked, sharp edge of yours. Bashful isn’t really your look.” My eyes roam over her figure and then check the surroundings of the gathering room in the manor. Everyone else has vanished.

“This is a dream.” It’s a statement, not a question and the way her eyes light up at my acknowledgment of the situation is like a beacon of hope at a time where there is none.

“A dream. A memory. Whatever you’d like to call it, I suppose. Part of your subconscious. You control this.” She responds, beginning to walk away from me. Before she can get too far, I reach out a hand and take hold of her arm, forcing her to stand before me again.

“I control this.”

“Of course. I’m sure you already know I’m not really here. This version of the two of us are just ghosts of who we used to be, you and I. A ghost of simpler times.”

“Can we go somewhere else?” I ask, wishing to speak in private. Even in my dreams where only my truths reside, here doesn’t feel safe to be so open with my thoughts.

“And where exactly would you like to go, Blue?”

My answer is simple. A place made up of four letters. The answer is the only place I want to be with her, and once I say it, understanding washes across her face.

“Home, Killer. I want to go home.”

And suddenly our surroundings become pitch black as a whisper of a touch floats across the skin of my hand. “As you wish, Ronan. Let’s go home.”

12

What You Believe: Ronan/ Silene

Ronan:

Suddenly, we're in the small little apartment that we called our own. It was away from everything. Her hair is knotted in a messy bun on the top of her head, and she's wearing one of my old t-shirts with the sleeves cut off, work-out shorts and a sports bra underneath.

"I think this might be my favorite version of home," she says as she fiddles with the radio by the stove top. Food is splayed everywhere on the counter, but she always said —

"The messier the cook, the better the meal," she interrupts as she straightens and looks me directly in the eyes. "Now that we're here, ask what you're wanting to ask. You don't have long to do so." I watch as she heads back towards the counter and begins chopping up onions, tomatoes and bell peppers while the chicken, broth, feta cheese, lemon juice and every other ingredient is pushed to the side.

"Chicken Orzo?" I ask with raised brows

She just throws a soft smile my way before answering with a cool, "It was always your favorite meal to make together. Naturally, it's what you would conjure up. Next question."



She doesn't look away from the food or the knives as she speaks. She doesn't need to.

"Where are we right now? Not the two of us, but when I wake up, where will I be? Your dagger, where did it come from? When have I been to the house before we all woke there? Why does everything I'm surrounded by feel so damn familiar?" Every word feels more rushed and frantic than the last, but she doesn't once turn away from the food, only slows her chopping as if she's working out the answers in her mind.

Or my mind, I suppose.

"Everything is familiar because you've seen it all before, Ronan. You're smart. Circumstance may have stripped certain memories away, but it can't take away the way certain things will make you feel." The sound of the blade slicing through veggies continues at a punishing speed but I'm wholly focused on her and the truths she's speaking.

"The house: we used it as a safe house after a job went wrong a year ago. It was the first time we really talked outside of work. You tried to cook, I saved the meal, we stayed up the entire night talking under the guise of not letting our guards down. Really, we were just enjoying each other's company and didn't want the night to end. We left a few days later and decided it would be our permanent safe zone when needed. And we've needed it a few times."

Once everything is chopped, she looks at me expectantly, but I just shake my head and reach for the pots and pans I know she's wanting me to give her.

"Thank you. The dagger. That was a gift to me a couple months ago. While I loved it, I thought a nine-month anniversary gift was ridiculous, so you said I could wait for the rest of it when a year came around. Which should be in a few days, actually."

"What was the rest of the gift?" I know that the hopeful sound of my voice is for

nothing when — in true Silene fashion, my subconscious or not — she doesn't tell me. Not really, at least.

“You know, Ronan. Just look for it. The answer is on you. You just have to look.” Her gaze is all knowing and there's a pit forming at the bottom of my stomach and a monster tearing its way through my chest whose claws grow sharper and sharper with each breath I take as it catches on my ribs. A monster that's trying to free itself of its misery and touch her.

It's my heart, I realize. Beating and bloody and desperate for the answer to one more question.

My fingertips caress her cheek before grasping her chin and forcing her gaze to me.

“What did I do to you?” The words are soft leaving my lips but her gaze hardens and cools.

“Don't ask stupid questions, Ronan. It's not what you did to me, it's what you didn't do for me. It was the lies, and the secrets and — ”

“What do you mean!? You can't seriously believe that I — ” I start, but she throws her hand up as a sign for me to shut the hell up.

“I don't believe it, Ronan. Not really, or else you would be dead and you know it. But you believe it. I haven't said anything here that you don't already know or believe.” Then she drops everything she's doing and wipes off her hands before walking to the door.

“Si, where are you going? We're not done here. I need to know more, please.” I've caught up with her in just a few steps and grab her hand to stop her and turn her around before I drop to my knees before her.

“Please, Si...” It’s the last bit of pleading I have in me. I realize that it won’t mean much, though. Because she’s right. There’s nothing that’s happening that isn’t my own mind’s doing. There’s nothing she has said that hasn’t been hiding in my own head.

“You need to wake up now, Ronan.”

And then her hand is out of mine and she’s walking out the door of the small little home we called our own. I already know what’s going to happen when I stand and follow her out.

\* \* \*

Silene:

The sun is rising, and skittering gold dances across the ground around us. The wind blows the leaves surrounding our feet with every step, and I can’t help but stare at the beauty of it all. For in this moment of quiet, no matter how deadly this situation may seem, there is still a graceful waltz of nature that we cannot stop.

I woke up for this, I realize. When I heard Carmen shuffling about to take watch, I took it instead. The sleep I got was more than enough, and I found myself a bit restless in the midst of our new company.

Knowing two of our three companions should set me at ease, but the knowledge of how we got here puts a vile taste in my mouth. One that should eventually diminish with more time together and his head separated from his body, but something tells me I need to leave now rather than wait. For some reason, I feel more in danger with those I know I trusted at one point than I did with just Carmen at my side.

Don’t trust anyone. That’s what I was told, and yet here I am surrounded by the very

people I was warned against. Though, I also wasn't given much of a choice in the matter, given the course of events yesterday, and I can't help but look to my left at where Carmen's petite frame rests against a tree. She's fiddling with the hem of her jacket while staring off in every which direction while the others get in their last bit of sleep when I hear deep, heavy breathing. The kind of breathing one does when they're running or panicking.

My body stiffens on instinct as I check our surroundings, but there's nothing. I finally look down at the three other sleeping forms, and I see it's him.

Ronan.

His hands are clenching and unclenching, legs jolting slightly, and I'm about to wake him from whatever nightmare seems to plague him when his eyes snap open, his body jerks upright, and a barely audible gasp of my name escapes him.

His entire body seems to slump back for a moment as he exhales a long, slow breath. He still looks tired as his skin has lost its normal flush and darkness lingers beneath his eyes. Like whatever was haunting his dreams, followed him back here and he can feel its weight on his shoulders like a burden he never asked to carry. Something that seems to be incredibly heavy.

And for a moment, I find myself wanting to care.

For a moment, the part of me that knows who he was to me before wants to lift the weight off of his shoulders so he can sit a little straighter and sleep better in these bitter-aired uncertain nights. That woman would've held him every day if he needed her to carry the weight of the world in her arms. She would have given him everything should he have asked for it. But then I remember what he did to me, and realize that woman died the second the barrel of a gun was pressed against Carmen's head.

Or maybe it was prior to that moment. Maybe when he kissed my hand out of jealousy that I would even listen to another man's words before we knew each other. Maybe she died then. Or, what if that was the start of her death?

What if her death was slow and sickly? It was one of false promises and proclamations that wasted her away slowly—day by day—until she was finally put out of her misery with the betrayal of her heart and the loss of her mind.

So when our eyes connect, I just raise an irritated brow at him for disturbing my peace. When he doesn't look away, I finally decide to speak.

“Do you remember yet? Looked like you weren't having the best time in your own head, and if my name was any indication I can only assume it was one of two things.”

His brows raise in response, head tipping to the side before a raspy and deep whisper answers back.

“What would those two options be, Silene?”

If I could describe the way he looks at me as he asks the question, I would say it was something of wonder. Maybe even curiosity. It was deep rooted and overgrown and a seed of emotion that had been planted long before we woke in that house.

“I would say you dreamt of what I asked you yesterday.” He shakes his head inquisitively, gaze locked on my own. “Or I would say you dreamt of all the ways I could kill you, now that you know your death is imminent.”

The chuckle that he lets out is soft, quiet even and he shakes his head again. “Why would you assume that my dreams have anything to do with you?”

I wait until he lifts his chin back up and our eyes are locked together before I respond.

“Well, the way you were saying my name when you woke up was the first hint.”

“And the second?”

His question holds no heat behind it like one might expect it to. Instead, it feels sad—like an intense unwavering of his mental state has settled into his bones. Sad with just a little hope dusting the edges and I almost falter.

Almost.

“Does there need to be another reason? You saying my name is undeniable reason enough.” He chuckles and looks me up and down, drinking my appearance in like my lips aren’t horribly chapped and cracking, or like my skin isn’t paling from dehydration, and lack of any real sunlight in days. Instead, he looks at me like I know he always has. A heaven-sent gift made of honey and emerald isles with hair so brown it resembles life. The same color as the soil that I grip between my fingertips as we speak.

He looks at me like I wasn’t moments from stripping him of his life yesterday, and for some reason I hate it. I hate that I’m burdened with the truth of what happened while he remains unaware enough to look at me like I’m something to adore when he so easily turned his back on all of us when we needed him most.

“Let’s say I was dreaming of you...who’s to say your options are the only two that are possible?” He questions, a smirk playing at his lips for a brief moment. Any real feeling gone and replaced with humor. “What if my dreams were of you with that dagger to my throat again? What if we were both wearing far less clothes? Would that be an appealing option to you, Killer?”

Red hot fury blinds me. A flush spreads across my entire body as heat envelopes me—confused by the sudden change in the way that he looks and speaks to me.

“I hope that I haunt you. In every single dream that you have, I hope I’m there. That you’re never able to escape me.” I recognize that my words are harsh and venomous as I speak them. I don’t even mean it. But for some reason I can’t stop myself from saying them when he’s looking at me the way that he is.

His bravado falters.

“You do.” His words are warm, the cadence of his voice unwavering. So much so that it seems like he expected me to say what I had, and that it was right on par with who he knows me to be. Like the idea that he would dream of anything or anyone else would never have even been a possibility, and for some reason, it makes me so damn unexplainably mad.

“Good, I’m glad.” It’s out before I can stop it, and suddenly I want nothing more than to run away—to crawl within myself and find the part of me that hates so deeply and tuck her away—the second his face morphs as if my words had landed upon him in a physical blow. I know they were petty and childish, and I can’t bear to look at his reaction as I suddenly feel a violent grief over the loss of something that the current me hardly knows. I know what happened, but for some reason...

I hurry to my feet in a rush to get away as the other two begin to stir awake. I give Carmen’s shoulder a light reassuring squeeze on my way past her before stalking away to check our surroundings and clear my head, but when I do, I swear I hear the faintest response. Two words that might just be a trick of my mind. Because why would he? Why could he possibly...

But I know I heard it, no matter how insane the response would be. I know I wasn’t imagining them. Two quiet, measly words that should mean nothing to me, but deep down, no matter how much I wish they don’t, they do. They’re an all-encompassing everything that washes me in confusion and longing.

For what? I'm not sure. But I do know that two words should not hold as much meaning to me as they do.

Two whispered words.

“Me too.”



13

Destruction: Ronan

I watch as she walks away in a hurry, her steps rushed but calculated and even. No step shorter than the last. I know she didn't mean the words, I could see it behind her eyes, but I couldn't deny that the shot she fired hit its mark.

My heart.

I'm not sure how she'd always been so good at hiding her feelings. It's almost as if she's built an impenetrable wall around her heart and donned a mask to cover her face.

Cold and unfeeling.

Others would call her that for the fact that nothing seemed to shake her. No words hurt or deterred her, no hit was hard enough to warrant a reaction other than a smile or laugh, which was quite terrifying at times. You could never get a reaction out of her.

I knew it wasn't due to a lack of feeling though, but a well of it. Hidden deep below the surface. You just had to be daring enough to reach for it and hope you didn't end up drowning in the water flowing deep below.

Surface level was all she let anyone see, but two people had gotten through. I know that. Me, from my memories, and the other woman that she'd been willing to kill for.

I don't remember her yet, but I know that Silene doesn't offer blind loyalty to anyone. You have to catch her first, and prove yourself worthy of it time and time again before she peers into your soul and determines if you're worthy. With her it's all or nothing.

Right now, her emotions are running high. Her cool mask has slipped away in the dream-like absence of our two other companions, Nate and Adonis. The real her, the one that felt comfortable being vulnerable, had been caught off guard. She didn't want to say the words, but she did, and she doesn't even know how true they already are.

"Where do you think she's going?"

His voice, cold and curious, startles me out of my thoughts and drags my attention away from the direction she'd walked in that now holds no evidence of her departure. I open my mouth, the response ready just behind my teeth but a quiet, soft voice beats me to it.

"Perimeter. She likes to check the perimeter first thing in the morning. It gives her mind some peace." I turn my gaze to her, studying her body language and notice that despite her dreamy and quiet nature, she only speaks of Silene with a firm assurance. She may not be willing to meet any of our eyes, but her shoulders are held just a tad higher and her eyebrows ease. This tells me she doesn't care to convince us, she just needs to know the answer has been given for those who bother to listen.

"Her mind can be quite loud when her body stills. She may wield a blade with ease, but her thoughts tend to be the most violent part of her. In the silence, if you pay attention, sometimes you can hear it all."

The wind picks up as no one speaks for a moment. The words of a dreamer settle in the air as the leaves run across the ground, her hair whipping sharply across her soft

features.

“What can you hear?” It was Adonis, his voice a deep disruption of the air that had grown heavy around us, the only sound the whistling wind and rustling leaves. For the first time since last night, she decides to lock gazes with someone other than Silene. I’m not sure if it’s a gesture of trust after what she told me, or if it’s a dare.

“It’s almost like a machine. The way her thoughts run wild, like gears ticking and clicking and constantly slamming against one another. Each one louder than the words that she speaks.” All three of us look toward her as unease permeates the air. None of us dares to interrupt, but Adonis’ raised brows and weary stare has her continuing.

“Destruction, Adonis. It’s a vile thing, and you can hear it like a whisper echoing in the silence.”

A violent set of shivers run the length of my body as the words leave her mouth, her eyes wide, but her jaw set in determination. Adonis—to my surprise—looks away first. The last embers of the fire died a while ago, and the ash begins to move with the leaves, but I don’t look at how they scatter and mix with the earth and air. I continue gazing at the curious woman in front of me who speaks in riddles of confusing truths.

Minutes fly by before I hear the steady cadence of approaching steps. Something I know she’s only allowing us to hear so we know it’s her and not another attacker. I snap my head toward the sound and see her features have settled into a cool mask of indifference. Her emotive state neatly folded and tucked away so no one else can see that she feels just as much, if not more than the rest of us.

“We’re clear as far as I can tell,” she starts but looks around at the four of us. Carmen is still staring at Adonis for a beat before flicking her gaze back to her friend. Nate stares at Carmen, Adonis at the ground, while I keep my eyes locked on her. “Did I

miss something?”

Her eyes bounce to and from each and every one of us in search of an answer, spoken or silent, to her question but no one speaks as we all rise and gather our weapons. I don't believe that anyone wants to be silent right now, but it feels wrong interrupting a soundless morning after such words have been spoken. I'm still digesting what's been said, when Silene speaks.

“Okay...is there a plan or are we all just on the same page for what we're doing next?”

“We're continuing the way we've been going. With how far we've gotten, we have to be coming up onto a trail or road somewhere.”

I would be shaking my head in agreement if it weren't for the manic laugh that erupts out of Silene. We all look towards her in confusion, all except for Carmen who just looks around us like she's ready for something to go bump in the night while we hash this out.

Whatever it is that we're unaware of.

“You know you would have never caught us if we hadn't been forced to turn back, right?” Her voice is filled with admonishment and disbelief, making me feel like a dog with my tail tucked between my legs, and I wasn't even the one wholly on the receiving end of it. “News flash, you go that way you're going to end up looking like a malnourished turkey on Thanksgiving.”

“What's with you and using food to describe death?” questions Nate, as he tries to fix his hair which had gone from flopping over his forehead to wild and poking every which way from sleep. His eyes are wide and brimming with curiosity and disbelief at her ability to compare just about anything to food.

“The large presence of one combined with the absolute absence of the other makes it easy. But I feel like you’re worried about the wrong thing here,” she urges with an eyeroll. It wasn’t until she had mentioned it though, that I began to think about how I don’t recall the last time I ate. The dehydration was an obvious weight pulling me down, but the hunger...my stomach roils loudly in retaliation for the days it has spent empty. I try to go back to what I had been doing this whole time already.

I ignore it.

If only for the sake of not reminding anyone more than she just had and interrupting the conversation that needs to be had right now. “What do you mean?” The question leaves Adonis slowly, like he’s tasting each word as it leaves his mouth, unsure of how to feel about the uncertainty. As he voices it though, everything around us stills, the wind included, as if even the air is holding its breath in anticipation.

For what, though? An answer?

Or maybe whatever God is out there also knows what I do—when she speaks, nothing else has a chance of being heard.

Nothing else should even try.

She, graceful as ever, hmphs over to the center of the group, and plops herself onto the ground while grabbing a nearby stick.

“Gather around, children. Mother is speaking,” she says, and I can’t help but choke out a laugh at the way she doesn’t look at any of us as she begins to draw a picture on the ground using the small stick, probably just assuming we’d do what she said. Unsurprisingly, we do. Gathering and crouching by her side. Everyone else for the most part moves in front of her, but I opt to be slightly behind her. I look over her shoulder as my breath fans the bare skin there. I use my arms to brace myself on the

ground, slightly brushing against her upper arm and elbow.

Her breath shudders as she stills. It may have only been for one painstaking moment, but it was a reaction enough to know that she's not immune to me. That I affect her just as much as she does me. It may only be a small victory right now, but I suppose a win is a win. The more affected she is by the small brush of skin against skin might mean the less likely she is to try and kill me again, though I'm not sure I really mind much if she does.

I've always found her particularly beautiful when she was on a vicious streak.

"So," her low voice interrupts my thoughts, and I bring my focus back to the ground where I notice she has drawn a small little picture of a house, squiggly and sharp lines surrounding it, and then a large circle encompassing it all. "This house is where we all woke. Our starting point." She's using her stick to point to the drawing of the house in question, and looks at us to make sure we're all paying attention, but when it comes to me, she doesn't turn her head to meet my gaze. At least not fully. Instead she just gives me a slight tilt of her head and looks towards me using her periphery as much as possible.

It would only take another inch of movement from her and the tips of our noses would touch. Our breaths would fan across each other's lips and mingle. But that doesn't happen. She doesn't allow me the honor of remembering the way that it feels. At least for now.

"This." She takes the stick and drags a long line from the house to the first bit of squiggly lines around it. "This is the field surrounding the house, and these are the trees that lead into this fun lil' forest of death. You guys following?" She doesn't look up again as she asks, telling me she doesn't actually care if anyone speaks anyway. No one does. Instead, most of us nod our heads, and she follows suit as if she could feel the physical response.

“Good. Now, we’re somewhere around here.” This time she uses the small stick to point to somewhere about three quarters of the way through the forest, close to the large circle drawn around everything. “We keep heading west and you’ll end up here at this fun little thing I like to call a death wish.” She looks back up, proud of her little demonstration as she drops the stick and wipes her hands off on her pants, attempting to rid herself of the dirt coating them, but failing considering there’s not much of her that isn’t covered in dirt or dried blood.

Unfortunately for her, Nate and Adonis are still looking at her like she has three heads and didn’t explain anything good enough.

“So...when you say ‘death wish’ is it like...something we can work around, like a—uh—I don’t know, a possible death if we’re not careful but could still be an option?” The exasperated stare she levels tells me there’s no “option” here, and we need to go back to the drawing board.

“Just to be clear,” Carmen cuts in quietly while maintaining eye contact with Silene. “I think you did a lovely job explaining things. If you wanted to continue as we were, I’d be okay with that. They can go whichever way they please. I trust you.” Silene gives her a small, friendly nod. One that seems to express gratitude.

“We have no choice but to trust you wouldn’t do anything that goes against your best interest. I just would like to know if—”

“An electrical fence of sorts.” Her voice is cold and sharp as she interrupts Nate again. “Tall enough that I couldn’t see how far up it goes, stretches far enough I couldn’t even begin to guess where it ends, but you can feel it from several feet away. You can feel the current run through you as the hair on your body stands straight up in warning. I don’t want to get anywhere near that thing.” As she finishes her sentence, he just nods.

He looks around and appears to be thinking about a new plan, since the one we were working off seems bleak at best and tragic at worst.

“So, where do we go from here?” This time it’s Adonis, his voice cutting through the silence, asking the question we were all thinking. All except her, I guess, as she wears a wicked grin on her face filled with satisfied delight.

“Is it not obvious?” Her eyes meet his before they flick back down to the shitty diagram at her feet before she wipes it away.

“We go back to the start.”



14

Ghosts That Haunt: Silene

D istance.

I have to remind myself to keep distance between him and I. It's irritating to say the least as I had assumed it would be easy to ignore those deceitful blue eyes. Instead, I'm finding it harder and harder with each step that we take. With each whispered word between him and Carmen as they walk in front of me. She doesn't speak much, but she listens. She nods her head every so often and makes the most sparse eye contact I've ever seen.

Almost like she's just as wary of him as I am, though she's been more kind and accepting than I have. He doesn't look back at me like I expected, but instead stays close to her in a protective manner, one that is more than appreciated at the moment. I continue to look around and notice the way Nathaniel keeps hesitantly looking back at the pair in front of me.

He walks near the front, just slightly behind Adonis' imposing form taking the lead. I can't tell what brims behind his features each time he looks back, but it appears to be something akin to suspicion, resentment and...envy? Though, I'm not sure if that can be correct. Not when I scour my brain for memories in which Nathaniel resides, but find only the ones in which he spars with Ronan. Nothing that could link him to any of us in a way that would allow him to harbor such emotions.

Though there is one memory, a recent one in which the young woman woke, and his

immediate reaction was to step to her before faltering, and I move that small movement to the forefront of my mind, as I begin to observe him closer. I may have remembered Ronan being the villain in this story, but I would be a fool to believe that he is the answer to every question we have. A fool to believe that he is the only one lying.

Trust no one.

The warning rings through my ears as I scan the movements of each person here. Part of me wants to believe I judged Ronan too quickly...too harshly when our lives hinge on knowing the entire truth surrounding us. And he's handled everything with a delicacy that I'm not sure could belong to someone uncaring and dishonest unless...I was wrong and that the liar came here the same as the rest of us.

Clueless to the actions that brought them here.

And if that's the case, wouldn't that make them more dangerous? Anger can make us do terrible, terrible things. If the liar helped bring us here just to end up in the same situation, they may not just blame themselves, but everyone else as well. They may feel as if they're blameless, victims of everyone's actions and not just their own.

Either way, I know that I need to tread carefully and be mindful to not say too much to anyone. After taking in our surroundings, I look back to my companions and think back to the brief encounters I've had with them thus far.

Though Adonis carries himself with such rage and uncertainty, a permanent scowl etched onto his face and an air of confidence surrounds him at any given moment. Being around him feels like burning alive, so much so I'm not sure how he himself has not turned to ash with the fire that lies beneath. This itself feels like it should be a warning to stay away. This man looks just as dangerous as I know he is. I've felt power in each blow, and even after days of no food and water, there's not a single hit

that landed without purchase. Not a single blow that didn't feel intentional. And that's with me being fully aware of the fact that he was holding back.

Nathaniel, who appeared to be calm, settled, with almost a leader type of presence in the beginning, has wavered with his emotions. I fear that at any given moment, he puts on a different mask, one he thinks fits best. His emotions are hard to read, and I only get a real sense of who he is when he's unguarded. I'm acutely aware that out of everyone here, he's the one I remember the least about, though I can't be too entirely sure, especially when he doesn't feel like a strange presence as much as he feels like someone who would have been a constant. A confidante.

Then there's Ronan. Blue. The one I know had something to do with this regardless of how wrong it feels. The one who speaks to me in soul ties and pretty lies. I fear that if I lived with him and knew him in the most intimate of ways and was still betrayed, who I am now may not be able to detect his deceit either. I may not know for sure until it's too late. Though I suppose it may already be given that I have no fucking idea what I'm doing or where we truly go from here. We go to the house and then what? There's only one unchecked room. One room that seems sealed shut so tight we may never be able to enter. One door that will be getting demolished if it gives us even a chance of the answers we've been robbed of.

Tearing myself away from my thoughts, I bring myself back to reality enough just in time to notice the fist Adonis holds up, the quiet turn of his body as he holds a finger to his lips, a signal to still and silence all movements.

We all do as he requests and look around. Listen to the way some of the branches of nearby trees brush against each other in small scratching noises, the bark falling to the ground in long sweeps through the air. But in the distance, I can hear it.

The slight, unmistakable crunch of footsteps.

We're all taking defensive stances, grabbing whatever weapon we have on us in a given moment. Me, with my small hatchets, the boys all holding their respective daggers and then there's Carmen holding a staff with a shaky grip. All ready for whatever it is that waits for us.

My head is still killing me from yesterday's fights, my body aches from the near-constant exertion, begging me to just stop and rest.

But I can't.

Shoulder to shoulder, we all wait with shallow breaths, listening for any more movement. Maybe twenty seconds pass before we hear another twig snapping and leaves crunching. Carmen is adjusting her grip on the staff, her sweaty palms slipping, we here more rustling and—

A rabbit. A rather large one that now has a blade through it courtesy of Nathaniel releasing it as soon as it appeared from behind a large tree. There's a collective sigh of relief as most of us relax our stances, but Adonis and Ronan continue to stare out into the mass of bark and greenery like they're not quite convinced. I see their caution, and suddenly I'm gripping my weapons a little tighter.

It isn't until Nathaniel starts walking toward the small animal and semi-cheerily talking about dinner in a glass half full type of way that I see movement just beyond him. Black that is a stark contrast in comparison to his red hair, the golden light, and the greenery around him.

My eyes grow wide as I find myself yelling at everyone to duck or hide while throwing my body over his. Our bodies collide and roll onto the ground just in time to hear a sharp whizz as a starblade passes us before lodging into a nearby tree.

Our bodies roll twice before they stop, and I grab onto the collar of his shirt and yank

him up with wide eyes and whisper, “Axe. Now.”

My eyes glance to the left where I released both my hatchets in our fall so as to not accidentally kill him.

He quickly grabs one and hands it to me. I roll over one more time to ensure I’m completely covered by the trunk of a tree and listen for any and all movement. My head is pounding just as hard as my heart, but I remind myself to breathe. In and out as deep as I can until it feels less like the bass of a drum and more like small waves washing over me, until I can finally hear something other than the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Leaves crunching is all I hear, all I think any of us can probably hear, though the only one of us that I’m able to see at the moment is Nathaniel. His eyes are as wide as mine were mere moments ago, though he keeps his brows furrowed, peering up at me like my whole existence is questionable from where he’s seated behind his respective tree. I slowly begin to round the tree, quiet as death itself. As I do, I’m able to see the unfamiliar man crossing the threshold between both trees.

I stay low and, in an instant, swipe at his calves, watching the man yell out in pain and surprise as he falls to the ground. He attempts to catch himself with his hands. He can’t though. The long blade of a machete stops his attempt, doing nothing more than redirecting itself straight into his mouth, through his throat. And as his full weight lands onto the ground, the blade pushes its way through his neck.

His death seemed quick, probably only painful for the brief moment the weapon first entered him. Though I can only imagine how frightening it must have been. How time most likely slowed in those seconds. How fear probably took hold of him as he could do nothing to stop the gruesome and bloody fate that quickly descended upon him. Or, more accurately, him upon it.

I stare in what I'm sure has to be disappointment as blood pools around his head, and the others gather around, grimaces on most of their faces.

"Well, I feel that even though it was effective, there may have been a better way," Nathaniel says slowly, disgust a picture painted on his freckled pale face. "We may have been able to get information out of him."

"All their information is bleak as Hell, and I'm not sure if you noticed, but I didn't particularly go for the kill. It just happened," I respond back as if he didn't just see the scene play out the same way I did. It's really my only defense, though I'm not sure what I have to defend myself against.

"How does that just happen?" Ronan asks across from me. His face doesn't hold any judgment or disgust, just piqued interest and astonishment at how one could manage to accidentally eat their own blade without assistance from someone else. His gaze sets me on fire and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from saying something stupid, and yet...

"Hmmm, why don't you take his blade and I can show you?" The words are mine, though the voice is anything but. It's raspier—more suggestive—and the gleam in his eyes does nothing but tell me he noticed the change in my tone.

His brows raise slightly as a smirk rises to his lips before he responds.

"There she is, I was wondering when I'd get her back." His voice is quiet, though dosed with humor nonetheless.

The scoff that escapes me is laughable, and for some reason it seems like it encourages him to continue on, before a gruff sound interrupts us. We have a crowd...again. It seems we always do in these oddly intimate moments. It's infuriating, though not as much as the fact that we keep ending up in these moments

at all when it's the last thing I want or need happening. I wish I wasn't fighting every impulse when it comes to him. We are nothing of what we had been before these past few days. Nothing but remnants of broken promises and potent lies.

We are nothing, yet he haunts me the way I hope I do him. I find that to be such an odd thing. How one has the ability to haunt while they still live and breathe—while they walk by your side and meet your gaze.

He still has that look in his eyes. The one that makes me want to crumble. The one that makes me feel like it was reel to him at some point in time. It's one that pleads for a fraction of my time or attention like it could save him or damn him. I have to steel myself, have to straighten my composure and remind myself of the last thing I remember. The fighting, the barrel of the gun pressed against a frightened Carmen, the admission of how we all ended up in that room together at the same time.

Thunder rips across the sky, and all our heads snap toward the source of the sound through the dense canopy of trees. The gold from this morning has vanished, and in its place is a dark and dangerous shade of gray.

"We need to hurry and get to the house," Nathaniel says in response to the skies that are now gloomy and darkened. "There's a storm coming." The rest of us respond with a simple nod while continuing on our trek. Nathaniel, carrying the bloody rabbit by its foot at his side.

The rest of the journey was mercifully quiet, though a cool draft crept upon us in the early hours of the night as small rain drops steadily began to fall. Part of me—a very large part—has tensed up since the first strike of lightning shot across the sky. The other part of me, however small it may be, is thankful for this as the blood and dirt from the past several days seems to slowly wash itself from my body.

I know I'm not clean. Remnants of the violence are still ghosts upon my skin. No

longer visible but still there for those who dare to really look.

But it's nice to be able to fully see myself, even if it's in the distressed state that has taken hold of me, currently covered in goosebumps, cuts and bruises both old and new.

“Just push me up, it's—no, what are you doing?” Ronan's agitated voice comes from below. I'm silently laughing at the fact that the men can't figure out how to get back on the roof now that Carmen and I have been easily lifted and pushed atop the house. Since then, it's been at least fifteen minutes where they've gone back and forth about how to lift each other up without hands slipping into uncharted territory.

The rain is now at a downpour as I sit near the spikes on the roof, a good distance away from where Bobby's mutilated body had been when I was last here, though it is now gone. The only sign he had ever been here was the dried blood on the spikes when we first arrived that has since washed away with the harsh conditions. The idea that someone had lifted his body and moved it sends terribly violent shivers down my spine. Who moved it? Where did they take his body?

“Hey, geniuses, why don't you both lift Nathaniel first? He's the shortest and lightest which means he'll need the extra boost. He can step in each of your palms and you lift from there,” I shout over them. They all look at me the best they can as water harshly falls into their eyes, and the wind picks up speed and makes them glance back down at each other. All except Ronan, whose gaze lingers on me for a moment longer before adjusting the soaking wet pants clinging to his body like a second skin. When he seems satisfied with the way it bunches and grants a better flow of movement for him, he squats down and allows Nathaniel to step into his hold before lifting up.

Their movements aren't graceful by any means, but it gets the job done. Slowly, a head of ginger hair comes into view. His hands, pale and pruney, grip the edge as tight as possible before he throws one arm on the roof to brace himself as he pulls the



rest of his body up and over, grunting as he does so.

With eyes closed, his chest rises and falls in labored breaths before he moves to sit up. He jolts in surprise when he turns his head and comes face to face with one of the metal spikes protruding from the roof. To spare him the embarrassment, I say nothing of it, and instead call his name so he turns his body back toward me, which he quickly obliges.

Though he doesn't look at me long before he's staring past me, at the spot where William had been. His face, already pale, is suddenly drained of any remaining color, including the small patches of pink that had been dusting his cheeks from the cold wind and rain. He doesn't ask the question, though I know that he wants to. His expression directly mirrors Carmen's before I walked her into the house and forced her to lock the bathroom door to ensure no one could get to her if there were already occupants in the house waiting for our arrival.

"Hey, Ms. All Knowing up there, what do we do next?" The voice is deep and sarcastic and makes me huff out a laugh.

I look down at him with an overly bright smile and respond with, "Donnie, I know all those days in the gym weren't just to look good. You can partially lift Ronan, and we'll grab his hands when he's high enough to take some of the weight off your end."

And so he does. Both Nathaniel and I help pull his body up until he has enough leverage to lug himself over the rest of the way. Then I hold up a finger to him and shout, "Give us one moment and I'll bring the plan out to get you up."

"Get the—HEY! Where are you—" I don't listen to the rest of his sentence. I already know what the barrage of questioning will be as I fully stand and trudge back to the window before stepping inside, silently laughing as I go.

Shivers instantly wrack my body at the temperature change. It's warmer in here, but I'm soaked to the bone in my current clothes, dripping all over the hardwood floor. I turn my gaze over to Carmen who is staring at me expectantly, and I just give her a small smile and tell her to wait there for a few more moments before I unlock the door and take light silent steps toward one of the bedrooms. The hair on my body stands straight up in anticipation at what could be hiding behind any door or corner, but I don't run into anyone. I take that as a temporary win as I remove the curtains from one of the windows, then go to a different room and grab those curtains too.

Once I have two long lengths of dark fabric, I tie the ends together in the best knot I can manage and walk back to the bathroom, lock the door and head back out the window to the waiting men.

"So, I figure we toss one end down, you grab hold of it and climb while we also lift. So you're not doing all the work again," I call down as I drop one end of the makeshift rope to him and tell him to wait for my signal. Keeping my hold, I sit back and brace each leg against two separate metal spikes, hoping that my feet don't slip with all the gathered moisture covering them. I'm about to call down to Adonis to start climbing when I feel heat enveloping me from behind.

Ronan has taken it upon himself to straddle my body, his feet propped on the same spikes as mine though slightly lower so that his heels still touch the roof below us. His hot breath fans my ear as he whispers, "I know you're enjoying this, but if you don't tell him to start climbing soon, everyone else might realize it too."

My body is a scorching inferno with anger at his blatant arrogance, but also in a blush that overtakes every one of my senses until all I am is confused, with my mouth wide open, gaping at the man behind me.

"We're ready for you," I call out, barely loud enough for him to hear but I know he does when tension takes hold of the fabric in my hands and threatens to pull me down

with it. But it doesn't. Not with Ronan behind me pulling as well, anchoring us to the roof, and in no time, I see dark hands come into view.

Nathaniel rushes over to grip one of his forearms and assist, while Ronan and I pull one more time together on the count of three. A deep grunt escapes through my lips, exhaustion and pain pouring out of me as Adonis releases the fabric. My body slightly slumps into Ronan's as his cold, calloused hands briefly run across my waist and he whispers, "You did so good," into my ear.

Then, the heat of his body is gone. It's gone and he's helping the man up the rest of the way. I hurriedly make my way inside and place as much distance between the two of us as possible, pointedly ignoring the zoo that has exploded in my stomach at the praise in his words.

### The Dead Don't Walk: Ronan

My skin is slick as water droplets drip steadily down my face and off my jaw. They fall onto the floor from my fingertips and join the small puddles forming at my sides. Clothes cling to my body uncomfortably, and I find myself shifting where I stand inside the small bathroom. With all five of us in here, our combined body heat causes the cramped room to feel much warmer than I know it actually is, unfortunately adding another level of discomfort.

“His body was moved.”

It's the first thing any of us says, but I know it's what we're all thinking, even if we didn't know how to approach the topic. I shouldn't be surprised that it's Nate's voice that slices through the silence. It seems he's always the one who breaks the unforgiving silence to address the questionable. I know his statement should be followed by discussion, but the quiet wraps around us like a blanket woven from tension and uncertainties.

Silene sits atop the counter, conveniently the one both closest to the door and farthest from me. Her hair, long and heavy, is falling out of the makeshift ponytail I had made her while she slept. Long strands frame her confused and wary face. Next to her sits Carmen, whose gaze is trapped down at her lap. Her pinky finger is interlocked with Silene's. A gesture I don't recall seeing since we've found each other.

A gesture that I'm sure might be part of the cause for the confusion locked on Si's

face since she is selective in the touch she allows others to receive from her.

Adonis stands directly across from them a few feet away from me, legs shoulder width apart and arms crossed against his chest defensively. His expression is a little harder to read—it always seems to be. His emotions tend to stay locked in, focused on the tasks ahead. And he’s watching. He’s always watching.

Then there’s Nate, who for some reason feels foggy when I try to remember who he was to me before all of this, but instinct tells me we were close. Closer than most. He sits on the closed toilet seat on the other side of me, looking very similar to Silene in the way his brows furrow, though I can tell he’s also biting on the inside of the cheek to try and silence any other words that try to tumble from his lips. Likely, hoping that someone else voices the questions these missing bodies raise for all of us.

Bodies. Plural. Because both bodies I had seen before we entered the thick veil of fog and forest are gone. Other bodies that had littered the ground before, gone too—though those disappeared much quicker. Quick enough that I had never seen them, and only know of their presence because of the way those quick minutes played out that day.

“All.”

The word is quiet. Tentative, even as it escapes Carmen. It’s sure, though her pensive expression says that she’s not done speaking. And no one interrupts, but instead, we wait for her to continue.

“Four have disappeared, and while that in itself is strange and unusual to think about, that’s not what the focus should be. The dead do not walk, but they often speak—tell stories—to those willing to find them and simply ask.” Hazel eyes flick to mine, and I notice the way her hand slowly slips from Silene’s grasp and tucks away the hair that has fallen into her face. “There’s a door in which we never opened. It might be time

we find what the dark has hidden away from us for long enough.”

Though timid in posture and exterior, her words are wiser than most, especially for someone who appears much younger than the rest of us. Mature, not in age, but in experience and wisdom.

“So we break down the door.” It’s Adonis now, the one who always seems to respond to her, and her gaze slowly travels to him. There’s no judgment of the man whose first thought is to break something, but instead intrigue.

Fascination.

She looks at him like he’s a puzzle to solve before giving a small, assured nod.

A whispered, “yes.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” Silene’s words are far more chipper than anything else I’d heard from her, and I shouldn’t be surprised that violence excites her. I’m not surprised in the slightest actually. She presses her foot against the cabinets of the counter she sits atop, and kicks off before grabbing her small hatchets. “Let’s go tear this shit down.”

She’s out of the door before I can blink, and then all of us are trudging after her, but rather than walk straight to the door that’s only a few feet away from us, she continues down the hall, kicking every door open. She only briefly peers into each empty room before moving to the next, and when she reaches the stairs, the wood groans beneath her feet. She flicks her gaze over her shoulder and stares at all of us still in the bathroom. None of us followed her through the hall due to what I would assume is confusion on all our parts.

“Well, are you going to make me do all the work? We need to make sure the house is

secure before we go destroying everything.” Then, she’s facing forward and walking confidently down the steps. I don’t move as Adonis steps around me to follow, and then Carmen after him. I just stare down at where she disappeared, feeling as if this is all too familiar.

A hand, cold and strong, clamps down on my shoulder, pulling me from the daze that I’ve fallen into. Familiar yet distant brown eyes bore into my own in silent question. A way of asking if I’m okay, maybe. Or more likely as a way of possibly asking why I’m not okay. Because I’d be damned if I described my state of mind as “okay” while grief and hatred lace every longing and uncertain stare she sends my way.

God, hatred is the most common feature painted across her features. A scowl perpetually adorns her. Only she could make disgust look like jewelry.

It’s been nearly twenty-four hours since we found each other, and in that time she has tried to kill me, accused me of betrayal, kept her distance, only spoke to me to ask if I’m a means to an end, looked at me as if I’m the plague itself, and for the briefest moment...relaxed against me. Let her body fall into mine, her back molded to my chest where I know she belongs.

And then I separated myself from her. Not because I wanted to, but because I needed to. I can shamelessly flirt. I can wait for her to come back to me. But I refuse to let myself hope that she will. I refuse to let myself believe that, in a moment of exhaustion, she wanted to lean into my touch. That she wanted comfort. I’m delusional, but not when it comes to her. I know her better than I know myself, and she’s too tired right now to trust anyone, let alone herself.

Though the warmth that radiated from her skin and burrowed itself into me before I let her go and the blush that rose to her cheeks when I looked back at her on the rooftop makes it hard to believe she’s as uncertain as she may seem. I know that sometimes the body reacts against our will, and maybe I used just how much I know

her to my advantage. Weaponized the knowledge tattooed into my very soul. Maybe I had been playing unfair in her eyes. But in mine? Any method, no matter how ruthless or unconventional, is acceptable as long as it means she comes back to me.

Focus.

I need to focus.

I release myself from my thoughts and focus on Nate, giving him a tight-lipped smile before pressing forward and following the group down the stairs. They creak and groan beneath my weight, more than they did for Silene, whose first step was the only one to cry out under her. I take note of the way its cry is quieter for Nate than me and tuck that information in the back of my mind as a way to figure out who is coming and going while we reside here.

The house is as I remember it. Clean, very little furniture, a broken lamp near the door in the living area. Shuffling sounds throughout the floor as the search for anything or anyone is well underway by the time Nate and I join the others. I just observe the organized, frenzied chaos that is the woman roaming the area.

Thunder, loud and commanding, rings out through the house, shaking the very foundation as lightning cracks across the graying skies and sends light through each window, illuminating the rapidly darkening room.

Shadows fall over Silene's face as she immediately turns to me. Her eyes are wide as tension spreads through her body like a disease making it hard to breathe. For all her talk, she's never been one for thunderstorms. Never been able to stomach the way the Earth would shake beneath our feet as if it were about to open up and swallow us whole. I never understood her fear, but I remember the first time I noticed it and the way she endlessly denied it. I remember the offered comfort and the shiver that overcame her as she laid her head over my beating heart and let the rhythm lull her to



sleep.

She's looking at me for comfort that I know she'll never allow me to provide in this moment, preferring stiff muscles and uneasiness over the contentment and safety I used to cocoon her in. She's denying me the pleasure of taking her fear away.

"If we're all clear, I say we check to see if there's food and running water. There's wasn't much in the forest in terms of hunting." It's Nate's voice behind me, calm and steady as he speaks. I refuse to tear my eyes from Silene as she slowly nods her head, though I'm not sure if she actually agrees.

"The water ran well enough when we woke up here. I'm assuming it still does. There are nonperishables in the cabinets...I checked already. I still think we should check the room first," Silene says.

"Who does it hurt if we get cleaned up and eat first, though?" Again, it's Nate who counters her argument, and her expression of neutrality seems to falter almost as if she doesn't trust the man before her. As if his argument seems unusual to her, but she easily slips on a mask of indifference to hide the mistrust that seems to linger longer than it should. Longer than she usually allows herself to go without a mask in order to keep her true feelings tucked away from the watchful eyes.

"I think if there is someone in that room, leaving it untouched could cause a lot of harm." The second she says the words, we're plunged into silence and darkness as thunder booms all around the house, shaking the wooden floor and rattling the untouched broken glass lay untouched. Shakes my bones as we all become nothing more than shadows in an impossibly black room. I can imagine the horror on Silene's face just as well as I can hear the shuffling of light feet after a small gasp.

Carmen, most likely. The woman who doesn't seem afraid of the dark or creatures that walk within it as much as she fears those who she's seen in the daylight. Those

who have looked her in the eye, walked by her side and promised her safety as much as they have fed her lies. The conversation last night, a short distance from the prying ears of a liar in the midst of confusion...

A liar.

The one I've been labeled as but have no recollection of being.

A soft hum sounds through the house before we're covered in a yellow fluorescent lighting once again. A backup generator, I assume, which does make sense if this house was used often enough. It also makes sense if there's something else hiding here that we haven't caught sight of.

Yet.

I look around my peers. Each silent and still, none where they were before the darkness overtook the room besides her and me. As suspected, our dreamer is standing shoulder to shoulder with Silene, their pinkies interlocked again, while Silene's hand grips the hilt of one of her knives so hard that her tan knuckles have lost all color. Nate is several steps behind me, one foot resting on the first step of the stairs as if he is ready to quickly ascend and disappear. Adonis, the heaviest of us all, managed to move the farthest. His body, strong and wide, is knelt by the bedroom frame. Kneeling by the broken glass. Red blood drips down dark fingers and white porcelain as an edge digs into the palm of his hand.

I can't explain how I know this for sure, what it is about everything that I've seen and heard up to this point, but something urges me to be cautious. Deep down I know...

One of us is lying.

It isn't just a fear of Silene and Carmen's, it's a truth.

But who?

Is it the one who cloaks himself in silence everywhere he goes, the dreamer dancing in nightmares, the leader who looks at everyone as if they're a mystery, or the vicious woman who can't help but keep running?

Or is it me?

### A Passing Storm: Silene

The water around me is hot, thank God. I wasn't sure if it would be after the extensive shower I took, ensuring I was as clean as I possibly could be before filling the tub.

The storm that rages outside is frightening, and the tension still hasn't left my shoulders. I know breaking the door down first would have been the better option, but after the power went out, I don't think I had it in me to continue arguing my point. I don't think I could pretend I wasn't scared out of my wits any longer than I already have. Not when it's just a stupid fucking storm. A stupid storm and three days worth of blood and grime coating my body, while my mind feeds me half-truths and circumstance forces me to stand beside those I don't trust.

I don't know how long I'm in here before the door slowly creaks open, slightly followed by quick raps against the white wood. I know who it is before I see him. Know exactly what the lean, muscled arms will look like before they even come into view. Know there's no reason for my body to stiffen more, but it does anyway when I choose not to look at the man who I hated long before I loved.

The man who I'm supposed to hate now, who I'm supposed to be ready to kill. But I'm not. I would rather keep running from him until my very last breath if it meant I didn't have to be the one to watch the life slowly dissipate from his eyes as he accepts his fate. I don't want to do it, yet I've already vowed to be the one who does.

“We found a couple towels and blankets. They’re not much, but it’s something. We also took down the rest of the curtains in every room.” His voice is soft and uncertain. It’s...different from what I’m used to hearing from him as he places a towel and large strip of dark fabric from one of the curtains on the counter top in neat square folds. Meticulous, for no reason, since I’m about to use them anyway. Though it may be to keep himself busy and facing away from my body just a few feet away from him.

“You know there’s nothing you haven’t seen, Ronan. You don’t have to be so cautious right now.” The words are lighter than I feel. His shoulders jump slightly as a quiet laugh escapes him.

“You know I would never just look without your express permission, love. And that wasn’t it.”

A sharp intake of breath is my only response as I continue looking at his back and the way his muscles move underneath his shirt as he continues his listless movements.

“If you want me to turn around, just say it. Use your words, Silene. You’ve never had a problem with them before.” Uncertainty is replaced by teasing, and his tone of voice is far raspier than it should be. I realize this was my goal when I said what I said. To ensure that the version of him I’m used to has come back to me.

“No.” His head bobs up and down for a second before lightly tapping the folded fabric with a loose fist. “Okay, well call out for me if you need anything then.” He’s heading out and before I can even stop myself—let alone think about it—I’m saying his name.

“Ronan-”

“Yes?” His hand is already on the doorknob, but he remains unmoving. So still it almost seems like he’s holding his breath waiting for my next words.

I guess I was doing the same too, though, as I release a long exhale before slowly speaking again. “Stay. Please.”

“Okay.”

That’s all he says before he’s closing the door and dropping his hand to the side. Slowly, with his back still facing me, he walks backwards. Each step is measured and deliberate until the heel of his foot hits the wall of the tub, and he lowers himself to the floor with his back resting against the cool porcelain.

I watch as small water droplets soak into the material of his shirt. Watch as he brings his elbows to rest on his knees and cradles his head in his hands and breathes deeply. Evenly. The silence stretches around us, molds itself into time while I drag my hands through the water.

“What do you remember?” It’s a shaky and whispered question, one I don’t know why I’m asking when I know the information has the ability to destroy me, and possibly even contradict what I’ve come to remember myself. I suppose it could be the cover of the house and the warmth enveloping me that’s allowing me to feel brave enough to ask. The tension that is slowly seeping from my pores and replacing itself with something akin to settling.

“I remember us.”

Strong. That’s really all I can say for the way he’s speaking right now. The conviction in his voice. Only three words, but possibly the most honest thing that he could have said. I’m not sure if it was what I was expecting him to say, but I would be a fool to believe only I remember who we are to each other. Even if not wholly, there is enough. I truly believe that’s why every look is one of confliction when our eyes meet. Longing and grief on his end. Want and hatred in my own.

“I remember the first time we met and how utterly intrigued I was by you at first glance. How beautifully violent you are. I remember our home. Cooking together—or really, watching you save the meals I tried to cook for you which turned into cooking lessons every Tuesday and Sunday night. I remember us in this house. I remember the first time we came here. I remember your favorite color and how it varies depending on the season. How you finally let me catch you.” He stops to take a deep breath, and I count the seconds.

“You have to breathe, Silene. Breathe for me. In four seconds, I’ll count with you. One... two... three... four... good. Hold it for a few seconds. Three... four... Now exhale.”

He’s doing it now, just as he’s taught me. Like the memories resurfacing are causing him physical pain. His head stays hanging low in his hands while his fingers grip his hair in frustration.

I let myself watch him. I allow myself the pleasure of observing his every movement while he can’t see me. I allow myself to welcome the onslaught of thoughts regarding him and all that we had once been. The storm outside is forgotten for a brief moment, my thoughts drowning out the noise before thunder tears through the peace, and then my body is tensing again and my eyes are squeezing shut. I vaguely hear the sound of his clothes rustling and then footsteps. It sounds as if he’s leaving at first, but then the tearing sound of fabric interrupts the silence, and soon, I hear him approach me once again.

“I remember just how much storms terrify you and why.” His voice startles me even though it’s no more than a whisper, and when I turn to look toward him, he’s on his knees before me. His outstretched hand holds a torn piece of the curtain he’d brought in earlier, and his eyes are closed. Closed to give me privacy, I realize as I hesitantly reach for the torn cloth in his hand.

“Blindfold me.”

The two words fumble from his mouth into the air, and my arm stills halfway between us. His breathing appears normal, but when I really listen, I can hear the tremble in it. I can see the slight shake of his hand as it extends its small offering to me.

“Please. So I can help you.”

I only try to talk myself out of it for a few seconds before I close the distance between our hands and a shaky exhale lands in the space between us. I’m not sure if it belonged to me or him, but I make sure to hold my breath when both my hands take hold of the fabric and let it move in between my fingertips until they’re both holding separate ends. I hold my breath as I cover his eyes and tightly tie the fabric behind his head, then adjust the front to make sure his eyes are fully concealed.

Regardless, he turns his head away from me for a second afterwards.

“What’re you doing?” I ask and watch as he adjusts the fabric on his own and turns back in my direction.

“Ensuring I can’t see anything.”

Something about the way he made sure before chancing a look at my bare skin sends a wave of appreciation and longing through my body, making me wish that we were anywhere but here, in a time and place where we’re different people than we are right now. His hand slowly reaches out again, and this time I don’t hesitate to meet him halfway. The second our hands connect, I watch as his fingers run the length of my palm before wrapping around my wrist, his thumb rubbing small circles over my pulse point.



“Turn your back toward me, but don’t move your hand. Please.” His command is the same as every other word he’s spoken since he walked in unannounced: soft, steady, and sad. I’m not sure why he doesn’t bother to mask the emotion. Not sure why I’ve done everything he’s asked of me, either. But I have, and I don’t stop as I use my other arm to push my body in a different direction against the floor of the tub.

His fingers are still wrapped loosely around my wrist, now resting lazily on my shoulder. I have to resist the urge to lean into his touch as he slowly slips his hand away from my wrist and creates a trail from my shoulder to my scalp with his fingertips.

“May I?” I just nod my head, knowing he can feel the movement, and my body relaxes as both of his hands gently brush through my hair and massage my scalp. I can’t help the sigh that escapes me, nor do I think I would’ve stopped it if I could have. All tension seems to fade away as my shoulders sag forward. My body slumps against the side of the tub, and my head tips back. He keeps going for a while, letting the moment stretch between us.

“What do you remember?”

I know I should’ve been expecting this given the fact that I just asked him the same thing, but I was hoping it wouldn’t come so soon. I don’t answer him immediately. Not because I don’t want to, but because I’m not entirely sure of what to say yet. All of my memories are so clear, yet the picture they paint isn’t one where all the pieces fit together.

His frustration at my lack of answer is palpable, and I can almost taste it in the air. I can feel it in the way his hands slow their movements and make their way to rest on the base of my neck and shoulders. I can hear it in the long sigh that escapes him.

“Si—”

“I remember us too.” It’s not a lot, but it’s a start. A slow one maybe, but one that gives me time to piece together another sentence that will make sense. Stepping stones, I suppose. Little bits at a time that eventually create something whole and tangible.

“Pieces of us, really. Not everything.” I can hear his breathing, hear the shakiness as he gets closer and brushes his lips against the skin where his thumb rests on my shoulder before he sets his forehead against me too. The metallic tang of blood and dirt invades my senses, but I welcome it. Welcome the feel of him, even if it isn’t very much. I welcome my own betrayal, as I lean further into his touch.

“I remember why we’re here.”

He lifts his head off me, and I miss the warmth that disappears with him as I realize the water is now cold. Realize just how uncomfortable it is and how much I’m shivering, though I’m unsure if it’s from the temperature or his proximity.

“Why are we here?” No sooner than the question is asked, there’s a creak that sounds out through the house. A creak, long and groaning, on the top step. It breaks me from whatever trance I’d fallen into before both of his hands leave my body. Turning, I watch as he stands, facing away from me before removing the blindfold.

“Ronan, it’s probably just—” Another loud groan invades the eerie silence. The air around us stills as the only sound is the quiet pitter patter of the passing storm and the drops of water falling off of my skin and into the full tub.

“That came from up here. Everyone else is downstairs” Sharp, cool words in a hushed tone. This is the Ronan I remember, the one that I kept my distance from in the start. A true leader whose observations had kept him alive when everyone else failed. The one who is always right, even if it is frustrating to admit.

A third deep groan of the wooden stairs gives way and so does a curse from Ronan. Quickly grabbing the towel off of the bathroom counter, he extends it as far behind himself as he can, ensuring his gaze doesn't fall upon me when I stand. My bare body is completely on display, and yet there's no sign of him trying to push through boundaries I've set to see it. I hate that he's being so sweet, that his touch has been nothing more than gentle and caring. That in my weakness, he has remained strong. I hate that he hasn't given me more reason to hate him, even if I already have one.

"Someone else is in the house. Three steps creaked, they can't be any bigger than me. Get dressed."

"Ronan, what are you talking ab—"

A scream pierces the air. Loud and terrified and something I've heard enough times to know who it belongs to. I'm fumbling to wrap the towel around my body, but Ronan is already shooting through the door, faster than I can blink, and sprinting down the stairs. Three creaks followed by pounding footsteps, and I realize what he meant. He listened to each of us descend the steps in order to differentiate who is who in our comings and goings. Something I didn't think to do, only noting the way it groaned under my own weight on the first one.

The scream doesn't last long, before a large thud sounds through the house. Grunts follow before there's three more bangs, loud enough to echo, in rapid succession.

Then silence. It permeates the air as I wrap the towel around me tighter, grab one of my discarded blades, and step into the dimly lit hallway only illuminated by the bathroom light and trickles filtering in from the downstairs area.

I turn my head to the left, toward the end of the corridor where the only point of entrance is and slowly make my way to the door. Soon, I'm walking through nothing but darkness, relying on my eyes adjusting to make out the outline of the door and

knob.

I can't hear anything or anyone behind me, but I also hear nothing ahead as I grip the cool metal and open the door. The bathroom is just as we left it. Dark, somewhat damp from the dripping water, and the window closed. Sealed.

Locked.

No one able to get in unless they shattered the glass that remains in one piece. This only means one thing. Something I had already guessed, but was ignored when I brought it up. I ease out of the bathroom, glancing at the door that remains shut to the left of me. And when I set my hand upon the knob and turn...it still doesn't budge. Not even a fraction of an inch. But I know the answer is in there. I know that there is something in there.

"Si, what're yo—" In an instant my trance is broken, and my dagger is leaving my hand and flying in the direction of the voice.

His voice, though it's something I realize just a little too late, and can only watch as the blade soars through the air as all my breath leaves my body.

### What Remains Hidden: Ronan

I barely have enough time to dodge the blade as it flies through the air, directly toward the space where my heart beats frantically beneath my skin. Just barely, but enough, and it ends up catching the area of my arm that had already been torn through the other day. My eyes are wide as they take in her shocked features before her eyes darken with fury.

Her eyebrows furrow and her cheeks redden before she stomps towards me and begins slapping my arms and pushing my chest while spewing incoherent profanities at me.

“You stupid fucking—How could you even, why the hell—and you’d think, but obviously you didn’t—and what the—” I feel the cold surface of the wall against my back, still wet from the storm we got caught in. The chill that runs through the length of my spine borders on painful as I try to hide any sort of noticeable physical reaction.

I see the rage in her gaze as she continues her mission to bombard me with open and closed fists while keeping me pinned between her and the wall. But I lock on her eyes. Even through the rage, there’s something so ethereal about them. The violence in them. They’re almost like Venus fly traps, ready to draw in their prey with promised divinity before consuming it. The painful truth of loving her is a revelation: she would devour me in a suffocatingly slow death with no remorse as she feasts on the essence I so willingly give her. There’s something to say about the way I would

willingly put myself through such pain over and over if it meant I could experience what it was to love and be loved by her again.

“Easy, Killer.” Her movements stop as she throws a glare my way, but I just rest my hands on her shoulders and slowly inch her body backwards. Beneath my palms, I feel her whole body tense when she realizes how close we are in proximity only separated by a towel.

“You scared me, you stupid idiot,” she says, aiming her gaze at the hardwood floor and tightening the towel around her body. She crosses her arms over her chest to hold the fabric in place, almost looking sheepish as she avoids my gaze. I don’t like how foreign it feels coming from her. Not once have I ever seen her like this—ashamed for defending herself—even if it was from me. “You could’ve gotten yourself killed sneaking up on me like that.”

“I could’ve. Thank God you’re a shit shot.” She whips her head back to me quicker than I can blink and that bashful look is quickly replaced with pure fire. Good. Shame is not a feature that was ever meant for her, and as long as I’m around, I’ll ensure it never will be.

“Anyone else would’ve been dead,” she states plainly as we hold each other’s stares.

“I’m not anyone else.”

Our standoff lasts far longer than it should as she scrutinizes me. A look that promises death, so much so that, even though I stand taller, I feel much smaller as she looks down upon me. “Well, out with it then. What happened?”

I continue to drown within her emerald isle eyes for a moment longer, allowing my thoughts to wander further than is appropriate before bringing myself back to reality.

“You were right. Someone got in. They went straight for Carmen while she was scrubbing the past few days off of her jacket. Nate and Adonis were in other rooms when it happened, I guess.”

She nods her head, looking at everything but me while taking in the words that I’ve said before waving me on.

“Adonis got to her first. Nate and I showed up just in time to see him bashing the guy’s head in...it was strange.”

“Why was it strange? He’s more than capable of handling things, wouldn’t you say?” Her voice isn’t soft and inquisitive like I thought it would be while discussing the matter revolving around her friend. Instead, it’s cold and hard. Calculating like I know she can be, but wasn’t expecting her to be at this moment, suggesting she has a theory of her own that she has yet to share. That isn’t surprising though, not when she likes to be certain before speaking of uncertainties.

“That’s not what I’m saying. It’s just that he hasn’t killed anyone up until this point. There was something about the way he did it that just felt...off.”

“But why?”

Again, she demands an answer to a question I’m not sure of yet. I don’t know why it didn’t feel right. I don’t really know much about anyone here other than what I’ve seen. I have barely remembered anything that doesn’t revolve around the frustrating woman in front of me. Quickly brushing past her, I take soft steps toward the stairs, watching which board I step on to not make any noise. I want to make sure no one has made themselves busy by listening to our conversation.

When I’m convinced no one is in sight, I stalk back toward her and push her own body against the wall, resting my hands against her shoulders, despite there being no

need for them to.

“Anger, Silene. He seemed possessed by it. There were other ways to do what he did, but he opted for the messiest option. We had to pull him off the man to get him to stop. Had to move Carmen to another room so she wouldn’t have to look at what was left of the man.”

Gone is the cold calculated look, as hesitance settles on her features before she looks away from me and shakes away any lingering thoughts. She doesn’t voice them.

“Okay well...let me put on some clothes, and then I’ll head downstairs. You don’t have to wait for me,” she says while taking a small step to the side to try and escape my hold, but I drift my hand to the side just enough for a few strands of her long hair to weave between my fingers. A small cough tears my focus away from the dark chocolatey strands, and I step back far enough for her to walk around me.

I’m not sure how long I linger. Not sure if she closes the door as soon as she enters the confines of the bathroom, or if she looks back and waits for me to return her stare. I’m not even sure why I stay unmoving in the dark, empty hallway, but I wait until light outlines my skin and the creak of the opening door tells me she’s dressed and ready.

“You waited.” Her voice is hushed and raspy with disbelief, though I’m not sure why she doesn’t understand. I shift my weight for a moment before turning to face her. She’s wearing a black sports bra and running shorts. Her feet are bare against the hardwood floor, and her towel is hanging over her arm as she runs her fingers through her long hair, curls already forming despite her lightly combing through them.

“Always,” is my only response as I continue staring at her. I’m not sure if she heard me, but the way she immediately stiffens and turns away from me is evidence enough that she most likely did.



“I was wearing these under my clothes,” she says in explanation as to why she’s wearing so much less than what she showed up in. “I thought maybe it was still decent enough while the rest of my clothes dry off a bit more.”

I go to say something but stop the incoherent ramblings that threaten to spill from my lips. Truthfully, I don’t really know what to say right now with her standing in front of me. Not when I said all that I did yet still know nothing from her end. Not when she’s staring at me as if she’s waiting for me to say something that I myself am unaware of.

So I say nothing. I dip my chin and clear my throat as I walk past her and toward the stairs. Each step down is slightly more daunting than the last as the light flickers around us. The closer we get, the louder the sound of arguing becomes, and the more I slow my descent. I’m straining to hear the words being said, praying each step I take is lighter than the last. No attention is given to Silene as she presses close behind me, and I assume she’s doing the same as me.

Each word is harshly whispered, and I’m unable to tell who is saying what, but the anger echoing in one voice is unmistakable as I see flashes of blood and bone across the floor that splits the kitchen and living room. Flashes of torn flesh and thumbs pressing into dead eyes embed themselves into the deepest parts of my mind as I listen to the harsh tone disrupting the hushed conversation already taking place.

If it weren’t for the last step onto the first floor, maybe she and I would have made it unnoticed long enough to decipher the words beyond us. But we don’t. Instead, my weight gives us away and our three acquaintances fall silent. Their gazes bore into our own as their postures straighten. None look surprised by our presence.

“What’s going on?”

I look to Silene as she asks the question and then look back toward the others.

“Nothing. We’re just trying to figure out what to do. We didn’t think there was any other way in or out of here. Now we know there is but don’t know where. We thought a discussion was necessary. Wouldn’t you think so?”

As expected, it’s Nate who answers. The man who has played mediator and leader for the duration of this nightmare. But I didn’t just watch him as he spoke. I watched Adonis as his own stare pierced through me. Watched him move to a more defensive stance, while Carmen stands rigid and wide-eyed. Similar to how one would look if they had just been caught red-handed. But her eyes have me wondering if that’s actually the case for her because they are filled with a searching sincerity. Filled with an unknowing desire. But for what? For the first time, I wish I could be inside her head and learn what exactly is going on in there. I know it’s not intrusive thoughts of guilt, but those of a lost hope whose remnants have lingered longer than they were ever meant to.

It’s the same hope that wraps itself around bones and convinces her to keep moving despite the fact that she, of everyone here, doesn’t seem to belong. Whispers to her soul the names of those she should stick by and heed warnings she’s not sure she even believes. She may be a mystery among us, but the facts are obvious in her actions.

“The answer is obvious. We tear that fucking door down. There’s no discussion to be had over the matter. I’m not waiting any longer.”

I feel the loss of heat from her before I hear the sound of loud steps rushing up the stairs. By the time I turn, she’s over halfway there and everyone is rushing to follow.

“Silene, what the hell are you doing!?” Nate booms from somewhere behind me, and I only continue forward so as to not get trampled, but once I make it to the second landing I step aside watching Adonis and Carmen shoot in the direction Silene had gone. Once they’re past, I swing my arm out and catch the sleeve of Nate’s sweater

and pull his body toward me. The sound of his head slamming into the wall behind him is a dull roar compared to the way I feel as my hand grips his neck.

“You don’t get to raise your voice to her. She did it your way, and it was a piss poor plan that almost got someone killed. She’s allowed to be mad. Not you. Raise your voice to her again, and you’ll find yourself missing your tongue. Understood?”

Strangled sounds escape his throat as his face reddens and his hands claw at my own. But I don’t loosen my grip in his struggle, only tighten it further at his delayed answer.

“I asked you a question. Do. You. Understand?”

He continues to struggle against me before urgently nodding his head, and it’s only then that I release him.

Then I hear the chaos around us. The sound of metal slamming against the wood of the door and breaking it apart. The crunching sound mixes with Silene’s grunts as I turn to watch her slam one of her axes into the area over and over again. Adonis has his arms wrapped around Carmen’s waist. He’s holding her back as she tries to reach her friend pleading Silene to slow down before she hurts herself.

But she doesn’t stop.

Silene keeps going over and over again until she’s able to break apart the small pieces of wood that are still connected and blocking the way through. When she’s done hatching and clawing, she drops the blade and lets it clatter to the floor as she heaves, violently trying to catch her breath while staring at the damage she’s inflicted upon the door. The hole is big enough that we should all be able to bend through it if we desire to see the contents of the other side, though now that the opportunity is upon us, I’m not so sure I’m ready to find out what is waiting for us on the other side.

If it weren't for the fact that I know we need to and that I don't want her going in alone, I probably would have left it alone for the night. Would have been okay with not knowing just a little longer: but anywhere she goes, I will follow.

And that's what I find myself doing as she briefly casts a glance at all of us before slipping through the jagged wood of the broken door. The rest of us hesitate for a breath before I follow suit.

Memories invade my senses the second I see the bed centered against the far wall of the room. I refuse to look at anything else as I remember the late nights that would always end with us watching the rising sun as dawn came and passed. The stories we would tell each other to pass the time.

I remember the small pockets of time spent here, and it feels like everything.

"Do you see this?"

I take my time tearing the bed from my line of sight before turning toward her and what I assume she's asking about.

I almost stop breathing altogether when I study the sheets of paper tacked to the wall.

Photographs of each of us line the walls, our personal information haphazardly scribbled onto Post-It notes attached to yet more printed pages of our lives. Names, birthdays, addresses, schools we attended, parents and siblings if we had them...everything you could know about us has been reduced to sentences and numbers inked onto the paper before us. The only thing more unsettling is the fact that the photographs aren't just from our old day-to-day lives and interactions with each other prior to arriving here. There are also images of us here in the woods. Sleeping, fighting, walking.

There may not have been a single moment where we were truly alone.

My fingers brush over my own family history and see the names of parents that are still alive and doing well from the looks of it—living in the four-bedroom house off the coast of Whidbey Island I was born and raised in, apparently. But some information is blacked out, hidden from prying eyes, and it makes me wonder who would have access to these papers that wasn't meant to know everything.

The next set of pages belong to Adonis, then William, Silene, Carmen, and lastly Nate. Every single page of lives we don't remember and will remain just out of reach while information is still withheld. As our lives will remain our own in the little moments that no one sees and thoughts no one hears.

My eyes scan each page to see little bits of information on my counterparts. Adonis is the oldest at twenty-nine, while Carmen is the youngest at nineteen. Silene, the only one born outside the US, was raised in Greece but shortly moved here after the passings of both her parents: supposedly an accident, but the details are redacted. William was prior Military Special Ops. There's not much about Nate's family ties or personal life, but his early adulthood gives enough information to know that he was intelligent enough to graduate high school early and attend MIT where he earned his computer science degree.

Pieces of all of us that lead to this moment but don't quite connect.

"What the fuck are you doing?" My shoulders tense at how calm his dark and lethal voice sounds. I turn to face Adonis, but he's not looking at me, and instead, is glaring daggers at the women before us. I follow his line of sight to see Silene at the opposite wall standing next to a desk and computer screen. She shifts, and I realize what Adonis is referencing.

There is a corpse seated at the desk. I see the hole that had been put through his head

and the blood spattered across the computer screen.

Silene is poking and prodding at the seated body, checking the stiffness in its neck and arms. My assumption is that her actions are to check for a brief idea of when this treacherous man had taken his final breath.

“I want to know when he died.”

She pays no mind to either of us as she makes quick work of her investigation. Neither of us stop her. To me, it seems like an open and shut case since the weapon that killed him lies near his body. It could have easily been a suicide. He could’ve been remorseful for his actions or sick of all the death he has likely been forced to witness. No one else has had access to this room, that we know of, at least. So the time of death doesn’t seem necessary at the moment. But I also don’t know much about forensics and Silene, if I recall her paperwork correctly, obtained her degree in the field.

“Rigor mortis hasn’t set in yet. He hasn’t even been dead for two hours,” she says as she stands behind him and examines the bullet hole before gazing at the blood.

“You can tell a lot by the bullet hole and blood trajectory. The angle the blood spattered suggests he was shot by someone standing much taller than he had been sitting. They probably knew each other given there’s no sign of a struggle beforehand. That, or he was unaware that anyone else was in here. But this was very recent.” There’s no room for question in her voice. No doubt marring her features, but instead morbid curiosity.

“That would be impossible, wouldn’t it? We would have heard something if that were the case. And no one has entered the house since we checked it.”

I’m not sure when he quietly entered the room, but it was Nate who voiced the

question.

“It would be impossible,” she starts coolly and confidently before locking eyes with him. “It would be, if it weren’t one of us that killed him.”

Liar, Killer, Traitor: Silene

Silence bears down on us as we all observe one another. I have only completely trusted one person since I woke up in this godforsaken house riddled with memories that don't feel like my own. I have only trusted a singular person and tried to keep her away from anyone that could pose a threat, and yet, we found ourselves woven into a web of lies alongside them anyway.

We find ourselves locked inside with a liar, killer and traitor tied into one. The worst part about it is I know every single one of these men are capable of ending a life just as easily as they are of lying. I know, because I remember what it was like working with them at one point in time. I still feel the aftermath of fists connecting with my body during training and the skin of my own cracking while fighting back. I remember some but not enough.

"How would it have been one of us?" Ronan finally asks, breaking the silence that coils around our bodies like a snake ready to suffocate us until our breath is no longer our own. My green drowns in his deep ocean blue when I look at him and find that he doesn't look surprised by my statement in the slightest.

Knowing what I want to say isn't difficult, but knowing how to approach the subject is an entirely different matter. How will each person react? How do I differentiate their truths from their lies?

"It's time we talked about what we remember and how we got here." It's a slow,



careful statement as I step away and around the body before ducking through the shattered door and coming face to face with the only one who hadn't entered the room.

Her back is propped against the wall opposite of the door. Her fingers nervously fidget and twist as we stare at one another.

“How did he die?”

Her question throws me off balance as my second foot touches the ground through the shattered door, and I find myself slightly stumbling. Her wide, autumn eyes are brimming with curiosity as they track every movement.

“How did you know?” I question as we both fall into a silent cadence of footfalls away from the others who have yet to follow me through. I suppose that's a good thing though, as I'm reeling from the fact that someone has died in this house while we've been occupying it. It feels like my thoughts are in a free fall of curiosities and secrets that I may never have the fortune of knowing.

“The stench of metallic death was heavy—enough to know I didn't want to be in there. I presume the smell will linger everywhere we go now that there are two bodies,” she says, following a soft, thoughtful hum.

Something about the way she says it feels as if she's becoming desensitized to what is happening around us. As if the fear has molded itself to her soul long enough that death is still an inevitability she knows exists, but it doesn't make her uncomfortable anymore. It's the nature of the beast, some would say, but I don't like the change in her. I don't like how I've told myself she would live, but something that is a core part of her identity feels as if it has been ripped away to make room for the very thing that makes everyone else here the same.

I never wished for her to be like me.

“He was shot. Recently.”

“Oh.”

“Do you remember anything?” I ask as we navigate the dark hallway. “Because all of us are about to have that conversation, and you need to be ready to be questioned pretty heavily. If you remember anything that could help us figure things out, that would be—”

“I don’t. At least, nothing that would be helpful to you.” Her voice shakes a little as she grabs onto my arm and pulls me to the side. The grip is harder than I would have imagined possible from her, and I wonder what she could have remembered that would cause such panic. “Please don’t make me say more than is necessary.”

“I can’t promise anything and you know that, just...just figure out what you’re going to say in front of them. They don’t need to know, but you cannot keep things from me after tonight. I need you to be one hundred percent transparent with me. Is that clear?”

There’s hesitation behind her gaze as it shifts, and I realize that no matter how much I’ve told myself I could trust her, I did so blindly. Can I really? Have I been so stupid as to put my trust into someone after I was explicitly told I shouldn’t? What if she was the one who has betrayed me?

I can’t help but wonder about the possibility. If I were to die by her hands, who could I blame but myself? Or maybe not by her hands, but rather her unintentional doing. Not when I so easily gave her my protection and showed my most vulnerable self to the sad and dreamy soul whose heart I thought matched my own. How stupid is it that I still don’t think she is capable, even at the brink of this realization?

The feel of her grip on my arm eases as she backs away and takes small steps toward the staircase while tears surface and threaten to spill as she frantically shakes her head. Each movement is delicate and swift before she turns her back to me and continues on her own.

I give myself a moment to gather my own thoughts, chancing a backwards glance to find nothing but Nathaniel's searching gaze, intense and accusatory.

His eyes, already dark, are emphasized in the shadowy unrest that the house casts over his face, making him appear unintentionally menacing. Standing unnaturally still, he doesn't move when I do. Not until I take a step toward him and he cocks his head to the side. It was a small movement, but it has me faltering, nonetheless. It has me taking back that distance I'd attempted to bridge and instead grabbing the cool railing that presses into the bare skin between my shorts and sports bra. I turn and make quick work of the steps below.

Once I'm downstairs, I shake my arms out as a chill shoots up my spine. The house isn't necessarily cold, but it feels as if the eeriness surrounding us has drained any remaining warmth left to be found, leaving me with only the frigid sense of awareness.

Carmen sits still on the couch, as far away from everything as possible. Moving to walk to the kitchen, I abruptly stop in my tracks when I almost run into the body in the middle of the living room floor. Just as Ronan had described, his head is nothing but a mess of brain and bone and too much blood.

One thing I wasn't expecting was to feel safer in the middle of the woods than I do inside the house. But even with an escape route, I feel trapped within these four walls of death and secrets. Like there's no real way out now that we're back where we started. These thoughts feel like giving up though, so I decide to check the cabinets for what I might be able to stomach instead. Decide to use food to take my mind off

of the matter rather than dwell on the formidable.

Food fixes everything.

Almost everything, at least. But dread continues to settle within me as I grab a package of crackers from the pantry and rip it open. The sound of plastic tearing is almost too loud in the silent house. Though I refuse to care as I shove a few crackers in my mouth and begin pacing.

My thoughts run rampant as I decide what I need to do.

Survive.

Above all else, that has to be the goal, and not just for myself, but for Carmen as well. Regardless of my newfound doubts I have toward her, I made that promise. I intend to keep it.

It doesn't help that my memories amplify my desire to get her out alive.

But how?

How do I get us out alive when there are three others here watching our every move?

Despite my original thoughts, I'm not so sure this situation is as black and white as I believed it to originally be. Lines seem to have blurred within the past twenty-four hours. The lines that were never supposed to have the chance to, seem to have slowly dissipated into the space around us, leaving nothing separating me from them. Nothing holds me any less responsible than my counterparts for us being here.

I'm hoping that with the talk we're soon to have, maybe the tides will turn in my favor. There's a possibility someone will reveal something that will help me

understand or piece together what's been forgotten.

Or maybe we'll be stuck in this tumultuous cycle of mistrust for a while longer.

The sound of footsteps descending the stairs halts my thoughts, as well as my pacing, and I turn toward the living area where Carmen is seated. She stares at the ground in quiet contemplation, as the sound of thunder slowly fades as the storm travels farther away. Not for even a second does she pull her attention away from what clouds her mind, even as the three men crowd around the couch of the living room.

I expect Ronan to be the first to look my way, or even my shadow who seems to follow everywhere I go, but instead it's Adonis whose eyes land on me. His cool gaze is full of questions as he holds six folders low at his sides. Each varying in just how much information seems to be contained within, and the idea of answers hidden within the flimsy binds compels me forward.

"What do you have there, big guy?" I question, stepping forward and dipping my chin toward his hands. The three other sets of eyes narrow on me, and Carmen's tight-lipped smile tells me I might not really like what they have to say.

"Answers," Adonis grunts out. I reach for the folders, and he raises them up, far out of my reach. "Answers reserved for after our talk," he says with finality, holding no room for any questions or arguments.

"Have you seen what's inside?"

He shrugs with indifference, but by the way Ronan and Nathaniel look away, I see the truth that they won't speak. All three have seen the contents of the folders, yet they are denying us the same courtesy.

"Why don't we get the same privilege you have so graciously bestowed upon

yourselves? Why keep it away from us?” My tone is cold, accusatory, and I know they feel its bitter chill. Carmen looks away from everyone again once the words leave my mouth, and Ronan has the decency to look as if he doesn’t necessarily agree with their actions, but the other two men—Adonis and Nathaniel—seem convinced they are in the right.

“The three of us spent a couple days alone. We saved each other. You ran off the first chance you got...” Nathaniel tries to explain everything, tries to keep the peace, but my temper is rising, and I do not care for such pleasantries at the moment. Not when I’ve done just as much for them as they have done for us.

“I don’t think that’s a good enough reason for us to be kept in the dark,” I spit out, my voice deceptively low, despite how I wish to scream and fight. How dare they deny me the right to know as much about myself as they now know of me?

“We don’t trust you.” If Nathaniel was attempting to be the keeper of peace, Adonis was the chaos that disrupts it. He doesn’t care about pleasantries, and while it’s something I think I would normally be fine with, at the moment it only causes the inferno inside me to burn hotter and hotter, ready to burst and destroy everything around me. This almost feels like an odd change given how silent he has been for the majority of the time spent around him thus far, but if he’s ready to speak and it’s words of trust, then he better be ready for me to talk back.

“You think I trust any of you!? You think I want to after you held a blade to her neck the first chance you got?” I question while jabbing my finger into his hard chest. Carmen inhales sharply, surely thinking I have a death wish, but I don’t care. Who is he to talk about trust when his first action was one against the two of us?

Nathaniel slowly steps between the two of us and cautiously removes my finger from Adonis’ chest, but even without the contact, our gazes remain locked on one another, daring the other to look away first.

But neither of us do.

“We haven’t tried to kill you, but you’ve tried to kill every single one of us, or at least showed that you have no qualms about doing so,” Nathaniel says warily, as if he’s walking directly into a fight between two predators. I take one step back, but keep my gaze narrowed until Adonis chooses to look away.

“If I wanted to kill any of you,” I start, voice low and indifferent, while leveling a murderous glare at every man in the room, “I would have done so already.”

Minutes pass by as the residue of the argument lingers in the air. Silence that no one wants to fill stretches around us. Not a single person wants to counter the statement I had just made—the truth that I had spoken—because I have had every opportunity to kill them if I wanted to. When they had trusted me enough to keep watch while they slept by the fire, I could have easily slit each and every one of their throats while they slept and left their bodies to rot.

But I didn’t. Instead, I kept them alive. I told them about the electrical fence, I helped them get back into the house, I got us into the room, and still they actively question my motives.

They question me .

“Well, you were the one that wanted to ask everyone what they remember. So go ahead and share first. Make us believe you.”

I look to Nathaniel as the words leave his lips and slowly study him. His tone suggests he is still rightly cautious of me after my little display, but his body language says otherwise. His cheeks are slightly flushed, but he appears to be steady with his arms resting at his sides, and his fists are clenched together.

He tracks my gaze and relaxes his hands, shaking each one out. I turn my curious eyes to Ronan, who hasn't interjected at any point, though I wonder if it's because he knows I wouldn't want him to fight my battles for me. When our eyes lock on one another, I find that he was already staring at me.

In his typical fashion, it's not in a way that diminishes my presence, but one that is always searching. He looks at me as if there's always something new to learn, and he's eager to find out what it is—even if it's something as crazy as violent and murderous tendencies.

“Help them believe, Silene. You don't have to convince me. I'll tell you everything you want to know no matter what. But help them see.”

There's a plea in the way he looks at me as he asks this, one that has me taking a deep breath and shoving past them all to sit next to Carmen. I allow myself a moment to gather my thoughts. No matter how much I hate to admit it, I never would have relented as easily as I did if it weren't for that damned look on his face. I would have held my ground or started throwing kicks and punches to pry the folders from Adonis' fingers.

Dead or alive.

“Fine. I have nothing to hide.”

I regard everyone the same as I say it, searching for any changes in body language, but nobody breaks the carefully constructed facades they've created. No twitches, no scrunched eyebrows, no change in breathing or shifting weight. Not a single person moves except Adonis whose head tilts, just slightly to the left, as if he knows something I don't.

Or worse, that he's already caught me in a lie.



### We've Been Here Before: Ronan

“It’s the little things that I remembered first, really,” Silene starts, her piercing stare roaming the faces of everyone in the room. “Phrases, really. Someone’s voice speaking to me.” She flicks her beautiful green eyes to mine and lets them linger a beat longer than she had anyone else’s when she reaches the end of her statement. This little action tells me that, while she had warned me in my dream, I was her guide on her way out.

When she turns away from me, she clears her throat, the lights above us flickering, briefly casting our attention elsewhere before she continues.

“My fear of heights came first. Fighting felt like second nature. Next was one in the form of a dream. I had discovered something about someone Ronan and I worked for. Something big and terrible. He didn’t believe me. Not at first, at least. When I woke, I didn’t know what I knew, or even how I knew it, just that there was something.” Every single person is listening in their own way. Nate is a picture of inquisitive hesitation while Adonis appears to be more scrutinizing over the words that she’s saying. Like he’s tearing apart every word that she says and is building it to fit a narrative that makes more sense. Then there’s Carmen, who hasn’t stopped looking at the ground, but has shifted closer to Silene, taking hold of her hand in a comforting sign of support.

Though every now and again, her body stiffens slightly, or her eyebrows pull together with worry. Small but noticeable signs that I see clear as day.

Carmen's hiding something.

"The next dream I had gave me more information. Who I was before we all met, how we know each other, and lastly...how we got here." My attention pulls back to her when she says this, and I notice the way her confidence slightly falters. Her shoulders fall inward as a shuddering breath escapes her, seemingly in preparation to explain what she means.

"We all worked for someone. He..." Her gaze flickers to Carmen for the briefest of moments. I'm not sure anyone else would have even noticed, but I do. I notice everything she does. "He was very wealthy, cruel, and dangerous. We ended up on the wrong side of his business."

And suddenly, I'm thrust back into the memories she's speaking of, except now they're my own.

"Can you just give up, already? We've been at this for hours and I'm starving," I grit out between kicks and punches, but Nate continues to deflect each and every one of them. Offense seems to have always been his strength. He has some muscle, but he's still much lankier than me and the other guys. But he's also faster.

So much faster it borders on frustrating.

His eyebrows crease, but he smirks as he keeps dodging everything I throw his way. The sun beats down on us, and sweat covers every inch of our bodies. I had enough sense to rid myself of my shirt pretty early when I realized how unseasonably warm it was today, but he didn't think to do the same, so I know his exhaustion must be quickly approaching. I just have to keep going long enough for it to catch up to him.

He's almost there...just... one moment more, and...there.

I feign left as he sloppily dodges my last punch, and when he moves in response, I quickly switch direction, slipping past his defense. I kick in the back of his knee and smile in victory as he falls to the ground. My chest rising and falling just as hard as his, I take a second to look around, my gaze falling on the estate behind us. I know she's in there, probably tucked away in one of the many lounges with a book.

"I have something that I need to tell you," I say as he still struggles to catch his breath. Long white lashes brush against his cheek, and he doesn't bother to open his eyes as he speaks. He doesn't spare me a single glance, but grunts to tell me he's heard me regardless. I don't take much offense knowing his day-to-day work isn't physically demanding like ours. Our infrequent sparring sessions take a lot out of him.

"Go ahead, asshole, we don't have all day."

I reach a hand out to Nate and help him up. He groans and grimaces as he stands, and I can't stop myself from laughing at the sight of him so obviously uncomfortable with his sweaty shirt, now covered in dirt, clinging to his body like a second skin.

"You know Silene, right?" I ask as we begin walking toward the house. I work with Silene often, while Nate doesn't often get the chance to. At least not directly since he works more on the cyber side of Mr. Delgado's business. Honorable work, but a waste of his talent for sure.

He sideeyes me, that smirk back on his face. A gentle breeze pushes some of his wild orange hair from his forehead and makes it easier to see his dark brown eyes. "Yes. I know of her at least. Her success rate on missions is phenomenal. She's only failed once and that was uh...one you assisted with, yes? Correct me if I'm wrong."

I push at his shoulder, and we both bark out a loud laugh.

“What happened with that one anyway?”

“Irrelevant.” I cut in while smiling to myself at the memory.

“Okay then, why bring her up? And be careful what you say. That research you asked for a few weeks back is...dangerous,” he trails off, and suddenly I’m not so sure about what I want to say. He’s right. Voicing my thoughts could potentially end me, but carrying out these plans—involving him—without telling him the complexity of the situation doesn’t feel right. He and I haven’t always been close, but h—

I’m forced back to the present by the sound of Silene loudly clapping her hands before resting them in her lap. She’s rolling her lips together and anxiously looking around the room at the other men.

“So, did I pass this little test of yours? I told you everything that I remembered,” she calmly, if not a little awkwardly, states. Carmen grabs her hand, a movement tracked by all three of us, and Nate releases a deep sigh.

“Yeah, you’re good.”

I study the way he looks at her, always calculating, always questioning. She may have passed whatever test she needed in order to gain access to the folders, but the coolness in his gaze makes me wonder if she truly gained his trust. My gut tells me it’s unlikely as he shifts his gaze away and to the stairs beyond us.

“I guess it’s my turn, then?” Nate says. “Though, you’ll find that I don’t remember anything useful.” It’s a calm and casual statement, with no hint of a lie as he slowly rubs his hands together and brings them to his mouth. The sound of him blowing warm air into his hands fills the brief silence, and when he drops his hands, he shoves them into the pockets of the fresh pair of sweatpants he’d found in a drawer upstairs, reminding me that I should have grabbed a pair for Silene before we had made our

way downstairs.

“I mainly remember my childhood. Not all of it, of course, but some. The basics, really. I remember having an older brother that I was really close with until he graduated from high school and moved out of our parents house. Though, I don’t remember what he set out to do, but I suppose it doesn’t matter because I graduated a year later and went to MIT. Studied computer science, got my bachelor’s and then...I don’t really know what happened after that.”

He ends on a shrug and then looks to Adonis, surely as a way to move the direction of conversation to the big guy in the room, but Silene doesn’t let him off so easily.

“You expect me to believe you know that little of yourself? You don’t remember what you’ve been doing for the past, what, two or three years? Not even a little bit?”

The question is fair, if not expected. It would make sense for more recent memories to resurface first. His dark gaze meets hers in a daring gesture, one I wouldn’t ever expect from him. Not when I’m slowly remembering more and more and know it’s not in his character to engage in any type of altercation if he can help it at all. He’s more the type to de-escalate, to stand back and only insert himself when necessary, and yet he looks to be picking a fight with the one person here who wouldn’t second guess sinking a blade into his throat and watching him bleed out.

“Yes. I have no reason to lie. The truth will come out eventually.” They face off for another moment, her unrelenting gaze freezing even me in place before I finally cut in between the two of them, making sure she doesn’t do anything else that could jeopardize her position further when she’s barely made it into their good graces.

“I’ll go next,” I offer, hoping it’s enough to distract them, but it only pulls Nate’s attention back to me. He gives a curt nod and small smile, while Silene continues to glare at him with so much mistrust that I wish I could look into her mind and find out

what she's thinking. Though, Carmen did warn us about what we'd find if we just listened long enough.

Destruction. A vile and wicked thing.

Taking a step forward, I go ahead and tell them what I remember, however useless it is. I tell them about the house and how I know that I've been here before. Tell them that the clothes upstairs are remnants of laundry from using the space as a safehouse after high stakes missions.

All of their attention bounces back and forth between Silene and me when I get to our relationship, something we had kept hidden due to Mr. Delgado's fraternization policies. A "conflict of interest," is what it was labeled as, but neither of us cared. I spoke of her more than myself, and when I finish, all eyes are on me. All except one pair, that stared at the cushion to her right, shoulders pulled back and spine straight, putting on a show of being uncaring, but I see right through it. I see the cracks in her carefully constructed mask she wears, I notice her rapid blinking and the occasional anxious bounce of her leg.

I almost turn away to give her a moment, before I notice her go completely still before slowly turning her face toward me.

"We've been here before," she states in a way that feels more like a question than a fact, but I slowly nod, knowing she's not really asking me anything, but turning something over in her own head. Her thoughts, racing one after the other, each one pushing the last out of its way to reach the forefront of her mind. "How did we get in and out?"

The question leaves me breathless as I try to figure out the answer, something that might make her believe me, but there's nothing there. No memory resurfaces that could make me feel useful in this moment where I desperately hope that I could be to

her, and I can tell she knows that by the way her brows scrunch tightly together. She aggressively rubs the area from her left wrist to thumb—an anxious tell that rarely makes an appearance.

“Strange,” she mumbles, barely audible, but loud enough to know none of us will be privy to her thoughts roaming aimlessly.

Everyone else seems to feel the same, but no one voices their own questions, but instead moves on in a way I know Silene never will. Instead, the deep rumble that is Adonis’s voice cuts through the lingering curiosity in the air as he begins to tell us what he has remembered. Like Nate, it wasn’t much that was useful, but it was recent. His memories were of training days with Silene and me as well as the nights of him and William hitting the bars after longer missions away from home. His cadence was steady and sure with each word spoken in a way that feels rehearsed to me. His head doesn’t so much as tilt, as if he is reading directly from a script etched on my face. Not once does he look away from me. But his eyebrows do pull together and his fists clench and unclench several times over as if there’s more to the story that he’s telling.

A daring gesture, one that begs me to second guess or question him. I refuse to do as such, though. I know better than to pick a fight I can’t win. No matter how suspicious it may be, I’m smarter than that. Thankfully, so is Silene. Or maybe she just didn’t listen to a word he said, not bothered with anything other than something that may prove useful, and in her eyes, he might not be worthy of that title in this moment.

However, I don’t feel as if I have any room to speak, seeing as my memories are nothing more than a mirage of what led me to her.

“Carmen,” her hesitant voice tears me away from my thoughts as I refocus on the scene around me. Everyone’s attention is locked onto the quiet woman who seems to be entirely made of her fears and discomfort. I’m not sure when she had shifted her

body and unlaced her pinky from Silene, but now she looks at nothing and no one. Anxiety is etched into her every breath and movement. I can see it in the way she picks at her nails and the irritated skin around them. She has pulled her feet up and onto the cushion of the couch so she could wrap her arms around her long legs.

“I’m here,” Silene says. She reaches a tentative hand out to Carmen, a silent offering of comfort and support, that she willingly—albeit, slowly—takes.

I notice the way that Nate shifts toward her. Even if it’s only one foot that’s now closer to Carmen than the other. A small but tentative step forward. I find it strange that he does this every now and again. I find it even stranger that he had nothing to say about her when he seems to always be searching for a reason to be near her. He never questions or challenges her the way he has the rest of us, and I wonder if maybe his fondness of her is similar to Silene’s. He seems to care for her in a similar manner, though I’m not sure Carmen realizes it.

Si definitely catches it though.

“I don’t remember things the way all of you have, at least it doesn’t seem that way...to be quite honest, I’m not even sure how to explain everything,” she starts with a shaky and uncertain tone. Silene, ever present, gives her a silent and reassuring nod. A way to tell her she can continue whenever she’s ready.

“The second I saw Silene, I had an odd sense of déjà vu, or something similar to it at least. I wasn’t sure how well we had been acquainted or how close we had been, but I knew that, around her, I felt calm. Safe, even. The cold bite of the iron railings reminded me of my childhood. Bitter, harsh and unforgiving. There was no picture, but just this feeling that growing up hadn’t necessarily changed my circumstances, whatever they may have been.”

Her hand, still clutching Silene’s, tightens so much that I know it has to be painful,



but Silene never wavers. She remains present, firm and strong, never flinching away from Carmen's touch. An anchor, I realize, ensuring that her friend doesn't drift too far away.

"I saw the binds of the books on the second floor and remembered the words that I would write to escape the reality I was born into. The words I had given in the hopes I would one day leave. To survive."

A shuddering breath releases itself from in between her lips as a tear slowly rolls down her cheek. Still, her gaze remains faraway, distanced. As if summoning an old reality is a task so heavy, it does nothing but weigh her down and chips away at her current self so much that even dragging her eyes away from the ground would be too much effort.

"At the sound of the birds chirping, I had heard the voice of my mother singing. When they were struck down, I felt waves of grief that I know were not just an echo of something that has long passed, but a reminder that all things come to an end eventually." Another tear falls, chasing the words that have been spoken as we all process the odd memories.

"So, I don't remember events as all of you do, but I feel them all the same."

No one makes a sound for a while. I still wonder what she could be hiding, but now...now is not the time to push for answers.

Then she's standing and removing herself from the small huddle we had formed, her shoulder brushing past Nate's, who had slowly inched closer the longer she spoke. Her arms curl around herself the further that she gets, and only when she's at the door to the closet room does she stop moving just long enough to briefly look back at us and whisper one last thing.

“I feel everything.”

### A Better Way: Silene

Not long after Carmen drifted away from the group, I found myself doing the same, dragging myself upstairs once again with six folders in hand. Dread seemed to pull me down with each step that I took as I pondered over what might be found within. I shut myself in one of the rooms hoping to be left alone while I scoured through the folders and all the information within them.

Wishful thinking on my part, I suppose, as the door slowly opens. Not trusting that it isn't another intruder, I quickly reach for the axe at my side and prepare to throw when three knocks sound out. Next thing I know, a mop of wavy black hair and worried blue eyes appear around the door frame.

"Easy, Killer, or I might start thinking you actually want me dead," he teases, a mocking lilt to his voice as he enters the room. I pull the axe back further and watch as he tenses. His back straightens at the action and I can't help but smirk at his uncertainty.

"Who says that I don't?" I question, one brow ticking up as he mulls the possibility over in his head. The likelihood of me wanting to kill him at this very moment. I admit, my initial desire has dimmed now that I've had time to think about what I saw in my dream. However, I would be lying if I said it'd completely disappeared when it hadn't.

"Well, do you?" he asks, eyeing me curiously as he steps closer, testing the

waters—calling my bluff. My grip on the axe tightens before I relent and set the weapon aside. I flick my head to the side, an invitation to join me in the bubble of solitude I had hoped to preserve a little longer.

“I haven’t decided yet...though the odds aren’t looking too good for you right now,” I reply distantly as I look over the many open folders scattered across the floor. “What do you want?” I ask.

He replies quickly, with such ease and certainty that I wonder if he was waiting for me to ask the question. “To know what you make of what’s inside.” He gestures to the haphazardly strewn pages scattered across the ground.

“I think that I was led to believe there was more information here than there actually is.” I comment, my eyes scanning the pages. Lines upon lines of information have been crossed out, concealing anything that could be of any use. Anything that might tell the story of how we ended up here or what had made us who we are is gone, leaving behind nothing but diminished, barely there basic facts.

His jaw ticks before giving me an infuriating smirk. He grabs the folder with my name and photo on display. “Hmm, I think there’s plenty to find in all this mess if you look hard enough.” The feeling of his gaze on me sets me ablaze. It’s teasing and light, yet filled with such knowingness, it almost feels like a taunt. For the briefest of moments I forget our conversation, forget the situation, and only remember who he was to me, a version of us that existed only a week ago.

What we were to each other.

Maybe he’s remembering that too because his attention flickers back and forth between my eyes and lips, coming so close that I can’t tell whose breath is whose as they mingle, my end becoming his beginning. I lose myself in the memories of what should have been a future together. But as his hand brushes along my cheekbone, a

ghost of a touch against my skin, I remember it's no longer possible for us. Anchoring myself back to reality, I quickly wrap my fingers around his wrist and bend it at what I know would be an uncomfortable angle.

"And what is there to find?" My voice is disbelieving, laced with a harsh bitterness. I hope it expresses just how unimpressed I am with his guessing game and the short-lived distraction. Rather than reading the room though, he just breathes out a laugh, not bothering to fight my hold on him. Instead, he rolls his eyes and pushes the file he's holding—my file—toward my face.

"Smell it," he says in such a rush it almost seems as if he has to break himself away from whatever thoughts consume him—possibly the same thoughts that consume me—and it's all I can do to swat his hand away from me, perplexed by his sudden change.

"You're funny, Ronan, I'm not going to—" I stammer, attempting to gather my thoughts, but he cuts me off.

"We've been here for days, Silene, and the sharpie smells fresh enough that it could easily have been done hours ago. Some lines are clean and precise, but most look as if the writer was in a rush. There are also too many inconsistencies in terms of just how much information is removed."

I hate to admit it, but his ramblings make quite a bit of sense. I didn't notice the inconsistencies that he did, nor did I bother to sniff the papers. However, I'm not sure anyone is quite weird enough to think of doing that.

"So what do you think?" I ask skeptically. I let go of his wrist and watch as the redness from my grip slowly eases and disappears, leaving no sign of the hold I'd previously held on him. If he notices my lingering stare, he doesn't say anything about it as he roughly shakes his wrist out.

“Whoever killed the guy in the next room is the one who blacked out the information here. Something in one of these folders would’ve given them away, something we’re not supposed to find,” he says plainly while moving to set down my file and pick up his own. With furrowed brows, I watch as he flips through page after page with a sense of despondency painted on his pale and slightly freckled face.

“And why are you telling me this? You know you’re suspect number one on my list, right?” A small smile graces his lips, and any sign of the hopelessness he’d just shown is now masked or truthfully replaced by something else entirely. A soft, genuine smile that promises trust. One that appears hopeful for a feeling of reciprocation.

“Yes, and I’d suspect nothing less. I propose a truce.”

“I would rather die than trust you. Besides, I already knew someone here was untrustworthy.” I’m searching his face, looking for anything that could tell me if he’s hiding something, but if there’s one thing I know to be true about him, it’s that he can keep a secret. There is no piece of information you could pry from him, no matter what position he is placed into. Unfortunately, this is just another reason I know I can’t trust him. “I’ve known from day one.”

“Now, I just don’t believe that,” he counters, and I can’t stop myself from scoffing and rolling my eyes at the way he completely brushes off the idea I could have already known this information. The blatant disrespect of the notion.

“You don’t believe that I already knew?”

“Oh, I completely believe you’ve known for a while. What I don’t believe is that you don’t trust me.” A sharp laugh sounds out, one so loud and dark that I don’t even recognize it as my own.

“Let me prove it to you then.” My voice is taunting and bitter, deeper than I would normally speak as I grab my discarded weapon. The sound of the metal blade roughly dragging across the floor is nothing but a dull roar in my ears as the idea of lodging it deep into his heart plays in my mind on repeat. His smile is something wicked and taunting as he spreads both arms out in mock surrender before me, all hope vanished, leaving nothing but defeat plastered in its place.

“Be my guest.”

“Why are you so willing to die to prove a point?” There’s no answer to my question as he drags his hand—the one permanently marked with a sign of his unwavering devotion to me—through his messy hair. He brings himself to his feet and extends a hand to me.

I don’t take it though. Instead, I wait for him to say something. Anything. But he doesn’t. He bides his time, taking in every inch of my body, reading my every movement, noting the way my fingers tighten around the hilt of my axe, just to loosen them, hesitating to know what exactly my right choice is. He must clearly see my indecision.

“Come with me,” he says, his arm still outstretched toward me in a silent offering but I refuse to take it. Refuse to allow any more contact between the two of us today, and instead push myself up on my own. I watch as he drops his hand, takes a deep breath, and walks away.

There’s nothing but silence spread throughout the house as I follow his quiet steps. My own footfalls mirror each of his.

I don’t voice my question, but he senses it nonetheless as he whispers, just loud enough for me to hear. “The others decided to get some sleep before I came up. I told them I’d take the first watch,” his voice trails off as we approach the shattered door.

Just before he steps through, he pauses. Taking a deep, harrowing breath he steps back. He steps in front of me, crowding my space and pushing me against a wall. One of his hands grips my waist, the other presses against the wall as he leans down to look at me.

“I know you don’t have any reason to trust me right now, but I want you to know I don’t trust them either.” Just like that, he puts distance between us again, stepping through the door and leaving me to decide my next move on my own and consider his words. His last words replay in my mind over and over, slowly guiding my body through the gaping hole. None of my movements feel as if they came from me by choice. Rather, a gentle push from someone else, a ghost of the past or future, something all knowing and omnipotent that is leading me toward the answers I need more than my own breath.

“You left before looking at everything earlier. I stuck around and kept digging for a while. I think I found something that you’re going to want to see,” he rushes out in one breath. The room is just as I remember it: coated in death and hidden truths. The stench is one that lingers throughout the room, heavy and honest with the reality we’re forced to face. Fight or die. Believe everything or question everyone. I look toward him and see an unmistakable tremble in his hands as he pulls a crumpled piece of paper from a cluttered drawer.

“Do the others know?” I’m breathless as I look over the paper. A layout of not just the house, but lines stretching for miles beyond the forest. As I back up, my thighs hit the edge of the bed, still perfectly made, a soft comforter draped over it. I swiftly turn around and smooth the paper out over the mattress and trace every line, trying to understand what exactly I’m looking at.

“No...I kept it hidden and didn’t look any further. I wanted to show you first. I thought maybe...” he trails off. “It doesn’t matter. I just trust you more than I trust anyone else and would rather follow your lead on this.” His words are a distant hum



in the background of my mind. I hear them and understand what he's saying, but have set my sights entirely on what's in front of me.

Lines. But not lines at all, I realize.

Tunnels.

Stretching all throughout the surrounding area.

A new way out.

A better way out.

The only way out.

Abruptly standing, I rush to the side of the bed closest to the outside wall. The only wall that seems to be made of wood. It's completely bare and doesn't have recent photos of everyone here scattered all over either, a fact that I try not to think of too often right now.

"What are you doing?" His gaze is inquisitive, curiously taking in my rapid movements, but I don't answer as I begin pushing into different areas of the wood, ear pressed against the wall until I hear a distinctive click. I stand unmoving, as a section of the wall I was leaning against dips inwards.

I step away.

The wall seems to follow me, opening into a dimly lit stairwell. I can see it leads further down than the first floor of the house. It steals my breath away. The light flickers, and I don't recognize how cold the air within the desolate space was until warmth envelopes me.

Ronan's hand, splayed against the dip of my waist, moves inwards and stills on my stomach as he presses his body against mine. I don't breathe for even a second as the contrast in temperature makes me shiver harsher than I already was. The hair on my arms stands straight up, as if it too is overly aware of the source of heat.

"You have some clothes here. Just sweatpants and one of my cut up shirts, but it will keep you warmer than those shorts will. Put them on," he rasps from behind me, his mouth too close to my ear. It couldn't have been more than a mumble, but it sends chills erupting through every limb, and I quickly nod, remove his hand from my body, walking across the room. I look at him expectantly.

As if he knows the effect he has on me, a smirk finds his lips. He wordlessly nods toward the bed, and as I peer down to the space under, I see the dark makings of a drawer hiding beneath the length of the comforter. Quickly scrummaging inside, I grab what I can before throwing the fabric over my mostly bare skin.

He was right, the shirt isn't much, but it's more than what I was wearing, and the sweatpants are so large and soft, it almost feels as if a blanket was wrapped around the lower half of my body.

"Where does it lead?" I fix my gaze back to where I'd left him. He is back to examining the hole in the wall, or maybe he's looking at the light that flickers so harshly that I can hear it sputtering in and out of life. Maybe, he's looking at the stairs leading to an unknown destination. Just another question that begs to be answered.

"Wherever you would like it to, I suppose. If you know where you're going."

### Tunnel Vision: Ronan

It happens in slow motion. Life ticks by so loudly, and I fear that I may be nothing but a pawn in its game as I watch her walk away from me with storm clouds dulling the vibrant green of her eyes. With each step she seems to increase her pace, following something I can only assume is similar to the apprehension that angrily twists my gut.

I can do nothing but follow in her steps, guided only by my desire to ensure she knows there is nowhere she could go that I wouldn't follow.

Watching as she throws the library doors open and slips inside, I quicken my steps, trying to lessen the distance she created between us, but something holds me back. Something makes me hesitate as I take the last few steps. A veiled voice speaking into my mind that everything will change once I open these doors. Life itself may never be the same once I'm inside, but that's a risk I will always take when I know it's one I'm not taking alone.

But when I open the door, I wasn't expecting the sight in front of me to suffocate me.

Besides Silene, there are fourteen others in the room. Twelve, I noticed, are extra security that stand watch at Mr. Delgado's estate. They don't go out for missions and do the dirty work as we do; instead, they remain here to protect him while we're gone. Their numbers have risen in the past week or so, something that makes sense with the increased paranoia I've witnessed, though it doesn't make sense for them to

all be in the same place at once.

Or it wouldn't make sense if it weren't for the two other bodies in the room. One, seated and bound to a chair. Tears are streaming down her face as muffled sobs fill the air. The second person stands behind her, pressing the barrel of a gun into the side of her head. I don't know if it's to keep Silene from going on a murderous rampage or if it's to steady myself, but I find myself tightly gripping her waist.

Every man in here stands up straighter at my presence due to the reputation I've built here. It's impossible not to know who I am and what I'm capable of; however, it's an insult and miscalculation that will only result in their deaths if they think I'm the deadliest one in this room. Any smart individual would realize the woman in front of me is the creature that goes bump in the night. They just need to open their eyes to see it.

A deep voice thunders, filling the gaps between the small cries, causing Silene to tense.

"Ronan! I'm glad you could make it. We wouldn't have been ready to start this little meeting here without the person who brought awareness to this uh... situation that we have here." As he speaks, my grip on Silene becomes tighter and tighter, and in any other situation, I might have felt bad for the bruising hold I have on her if I didn't fear what might happen next.

I had fallen in love with a runner. Someone accustomed to a life of chaos and violence, and the first person to show her delicacy and kindness was sitting across the room bracing for death. She had just been told the second person was the reason all of this was happening. I knew what she was going to do next, but I couldn't let her get herself killed without knowing the truth. Even if I wasn't entirely sure what the truth was.

What I did know was that Carmen did not deserve to be in that chair. The next sob she releases comes from so deep within her, it mirrored the betrayal I'm sure is woven onto Silene's face. Even though I can't see it, I can feel it beneath my fingertips just as much as I can feel it on my face when she sends her elbow as hard as she can into my jaw.

I taste the blood from my lips more than I feel the pain, but I know she wasn't trying to hurt me as much as she was trying to remove my hold, something I hate to admit she succeeded in. Even if I knew she was going to escape me regardless of my efforts to keep her back.

Her body dances through the room in a chorus of spilled blood and final cries. For a moment, I'm mesmerized by the sight of her in a fight to defend the only friend she has ever truly known. Then, I'm thrust into action, fighting to make sure that her rage doesn't blind her so much that she inadvertently lets someone slip past her defense through any one of her blind spots.

I'm doing my best to gain back some of the space that separates us when someone does to me exactly what I was worried would happen to her and kicks the back of my knees in. I try to regain my footing, try to turn myself around, but more men have surrounded me and hold back my arms. My focus doesn't stray from her though, as I keep my gaze fixed on my destination. I won't stop fighting to get to her.

I never could, even as heavy boots kick my abdomen, stealing my breath so much that stars flit in and out of my vision. But I still see her. No matter how much my vision blurs and threatens to disappear completely, I see her through it all. It's the only thing that keeps me grounded. Having no other choice but to grind my teeth, I think of another plan — a reckless plan, but one that might get us out alive. Instead of trying to fight away from them, I change tactics and grip their arms, pulling them toward me. Their footing falters as they trip over themselves at the unexpected defense maneuver, and I use that surprise to regain my footing. I don't make it far, as

the man closest to me hits my head with what I can only assume is the butt of a gun before kicking my back so hard that I have no choice but to use my hands to catch myself on the hard marble floor of the library.

My sight is hazy, worse than it had previously been, and I try so hard to just focus. Focus for her, but I see it too late.

“Si — ” I try to force out, but she’s already on the ground, and as I watch her unmoving body stay down, I force myself to crawl to her. The effort that it takes to just keep my eyes open is monumental as shadows threaten to take over. My wrists and head scream in pain, begging to just give in, but I can’t do that before I reach her. I refuse to fail her more than I already have.

But it seems what I want doesn’t matter as a boot slams into the side of my head and sleep overcomes me. No more than a foot away from where her body fell, I fall and drift to a world where she and I never walked into this room.

\* \* \*

I wake alone in what looks suspiciously like a cell, bombarded by the smell of piss and blood. I’m still in the clothes I had been wearing, but my limbs ache and feel as if I had just moved them for the first time in what had to have been hours. My head is pounding so hard that everytime that I move, pain shoots through the length of my back. It’s a struggle to keep my eyes open, but I force myself to keep blinking, adjusting to the dim fluorescent lighting.

“You’re awake.” His cold dark voice fills the entirety of the space as a door slams open. Slow steps get closer and closer, the sound increasing menacingly as I await the man who had brought me here. “I was wondering how long you would be out. I’ll be quite honest, it took longer than I anticipated. Though — ” He stops talking as he halts in front of me. His greedy dark brown eyes scan the length of me with a mix of

disgust and intrigue hiding behind them. “That woman of yours, she had some fight in her.”

Had .

That singular word plays in my mind like a broken record before rage tunnels my vision, and I shoot forward, slamming my hands into the bars of my enclosure.

Red is all I see at the thought of what could have been done to her while I’ve been out. The way he speaks is as if she’s been awake long enough to give him hell, which would fill me with satisfaction if I didn’t already know he could do much worse to her under the wrong circumstances.

His laughter echoes off the walls and fills my ears, a mocking rumble that tells me he knows what I’m thinking, and he isn’t willing to confirm nor deny a single thing.

Torture, I realize. This is torture in the only way he knows would be effective on me.

“It’s funny, you know. You two thought you could hide from me all this time. You thought you could run from me. You thought you could kill me. Maybe you could have...” He stops his ramblings for a moment and begins pacing the area in front of me, back and forth in a punishingly slow cadence as he returns to his speech.

“I do have you to thank for the fact that I’m alive, though. You’ve helped me more than you know.”

“I didn’t tell you shit,” I grit out through clenched teeth as I track his every movement, biding my time to obtain as much information from him as possible. I know it will be an impossibly difficult task. But if he wanted me dead, I would be, so I need to do my best to find out why. What is his end game?

“Possibly. But what if you did? You know every corner of the estate, Callaghan. Every camera placement, every worker. Are you sure you were able to properly avoid saying the wrong thing in front of anyone and everything?” His eyes glimmer as I turn over every conversation I’ve had in the past two weeks. His smile becomes alarmingly wide as he watches doubt settle within me, because I don’t know for sure. As careful as I had been, was it enough?

“Do you really believe that no one can be bought?” I flick my gaze to him, curiosity looming over my head like a dark cloud. An admission of betrayal that isn’t my own, even if he didn’t say it outright. He’s been like this as long as I’ve known him, speaking half truths and asking enough questions to throw you off course. Belief being brought into question typically points in the direction you should follow when ensnared in his web of deceit. “I never believed I would find myself with this issue given how handsomely I pay everyone for their discretion. Admittedly, that may have been foolish on my part. Especially with women. They get so emotional.”

My knuckles wrapped around the bars whiten as static noise fills my ears. Restraint is becoming harder and harder, but I steel myself, taking deep breaths to try and balance out my emotions. The attempt is futile, as my rage becomes a living, breathing thing. I know he can feel it because his spine stiffens, and he moves to stand in front of me once again.

“I guess money can’t buy everything. Certainly not loyalty. When they realized I knew something was off and I had my own methods to find out what, it became very easy to negotiate information for certain guarantees.”

“Why are you doing this? What danger has any of these people posed to you? What danger has your daughter posed to you?”

“You don’t understand the bigger picture, Callaghan. You never did. It made you a great soldier. You followed orders, you watched everyone and everything. You didn’t



question me because you were getting paid enough not to.” I listen to him speak and feel a sense of guilt, because he’s right. I had never questioned a single thing he had asked of me. There was not a single kill, torture, or kidnapping I had not been willing to dole out for the right price.

Everyone who signs a contract understands it’s a “no questions asked” gig. Mr. Delgado did this so he wouldn’t have to waste his breath on someone who wouldn’t last or would just end up on the wrong side of the dirt anyway. I chose to never change those terms when I could have.

“Ms. Dimitriou though...she’s got a fire inside her. Maybe if I had done more digging, I would have understood it better. Initially, I had her pinned as some orphan who would do anything for a sense of purpose. But that wasn’t it at all.” A momentary scowl takes over his features as he turns his head to the side. It almost appears as if he’s trying to recall a memory the way his dark brown eyes drill holes into the ground.

“To do this job, you must have something to lose, and she had nothing. She was nothing before she came here. I played my cards and found there are many lines she’s willing to cross for the right reason. I just bet my hand on the wrong one.” His brows furrow as a wicked grin reappears on his face. A chill skitters down my spine at the sight of it.

“There has to be some sort of poetic justice in order for her to believe what she’s doing isn’t wrong. How was I to know she would find something or someone worth fighting for? It’s pathetic, really.” His dark gaze bores into me, and I know he’s not referring to me. But the grin on his face tells me something else. Something hidden and sinister.

“As for my daughter, she never had a purpose here. She was meant to be silent, read her books, and eventually marry someone that would be advantageous for me. She

went digging in matters that weren't her own. Silene will never stop fighting as long as Carmen is alive, so now my daughter is nothing more than a necessary casualty."

"Where are they?" I grit out, my voice sounding as rough and unrestrained as I currently feel. My eyes are squeezed shut, breath held in anticipation of his response. I fear what he may have already done and what it would inevitably do to Silene when she found out. I worry she may never recover if she knew she had failed the timid woman who showed her a truth worth dying for.

"Silene woke hours ago ready to kill you herself for the betrayal she believes you committed. She said you were second on her list after me. God, no one could hold her back in those initial seconds." A dark, disingenuous laugh interrupts his statement before he continues. "She made it clear across the room kicking and screaming, demanding answers. It was an admirable attempt. We had to sedate the bitch just to get her to shut the fuck up." No longer can I hold my tongue and listen, regardless of the answers I still need. She may laugh at such insults, but it's my job to defend her when she's not around.

Reaching through the iron bars, I grip the fabric of his suit jacket and yank him toward me. His body slams into the bars with a loud thud, but he only laughs. The sound is wild and maniacal as the other guards storm inside and rip him from my grip. I don't stop pulling and pushing the bars caging me, though. Even when I feel the prick of the needle in my arm, grabbed and pulled taut for the cool liquid inside to flood my system, I still fight.

I fight as hard as I can for as long as I can before drowsiness wraps me in its warm, dreadful embrace, and pulls me back into the shadows.

Sweat coats my skin as I shoot up with a deep gasp. The only light in the room is the moonlight filtering in, casting a silver glow throughout the otherwise dark room. I'm in the downstairs living area accompanied by Silene who is tucked into the complete

opposite side of the couch than I had been laying. Nate and Adonis are asleep in opposite corners, as far away from the blood stain, the only remnants of the man Adonis had killed. His body was moved to the bathroom I originally woke in.

They had both created makeshift beds from anything they could find, though it doesn't escape my notice that Adonis' head lays on one of the pillows from the upstairs bed. A development I assume happened before he woke Carmen to take over watch.

Fucking Princess.

I let my eyes roam back to Silene, curled in a ball with one of the black curtains wrapped tightly around the upper half of her body, fast asleep. Her curly hair is tossed in a messy bun using the makeshift hair tie I'd made her, and something deep swells in my chest. This profound feeling of hope that something greater lies waiting on the other side of all this. Then I remember the dream that had catapulted my body awake with fear that I was already too late, and I know that I can't tell her what I remembered.

Not yet.

Heavy: Silene

Despite the fact that the sun is not visible through the window I'm facing, blinding light still bleeds into the room. Deep in the forest, it was easier to ignore with the trees surrounding us at every angle, keeping us shaded at almost every hour of the day before night drowned us in darkness. So, despite the harshness of the light, I find myself inching closer to the window, squinting as I let the light wash over my skin.

After Ronan and I discovered the hidden stairwell and the branching tunnels that pour out from it, we discussed the best way to tell the group of what he found while they slept completely unaware. We talked about what each symbol on the map meant and the possibilities that were born from it.

We formed a plan.

A loose plan, but a plan nonetheless.

There's nothing concrete about what had been our tired ramblings, but it was more than we had twenty-four hours ago, and that's something.

Tilting my head over my shoulder, I see Carmen approaching me. Her steps are quiet, and when I get a good look at her, I see the bone deep fatigue that clings to her every movement. Each step drags across the floor, her posture slightly hunched and her gold-flecked hazel eyes are so dull—so lifeless. I refuse to comment on these things, and instead turn my head back forward, letting the moment stretch for a while.

“You still don’t trust them.” Her statement is quiet, but it’s one that feels like a question as well as a fact. I can’t help but think about everything that I’ve noticed since we’ve been here. The warning I was given, my dreams, Adonis’ silent rage, Nate’s skepticism.

Ronan’s ability to be absolutely infuriating while he waits for me to figure something out for myself, while also caring for me in a way that feels too intimate in this setting. Every single person has something to lose, and whoever is lying is doing a damn good job at making sure it’s not their life that abruptly ends.

“I do not.” I turn back towards the window, letting myself adjust to the bright light, before searching for any sign of life. As far as I can see, there appears to be nothing but trees. It would be easy though, for anyone to become invisible at such a distance. I find myself grateful that no one is close enough to the house to be spotted.

“All of them?”

I don’t answer her question for a while and instead let it sink in. Wondering for a few moments before turning to make eye contact with her, but she keeps her focus on the view instead.

“Yes. All.”

Carmen hums in thought, and I wish I knew what was going on in her mind. When her eyes gloss over and she enters this faraway place, I wonder where it is that she goes. I long to know what she finds there.

“Do you want to know what I remembered?” she asks, and I startle when she does. I search the area around us, looking for the men, but no one is in the room with us so I slowly nod my head. Before she can answer though, I find myself asking one more question.

“Did you lie last night?”

“No. But I wasn’t wholly honest, either.” Her response is immediate, as if she anticipated my question, and so I nod and face the window again and what lies ahead, humming in thought, waiting for her to speak.

“It’s why I don’t get much sleep,” she starts, a slight tremble in her voice. “I try my best to, but it can be so incredibly heavy. Sometimes, it’s easier to close my eyes and pretend something better finds me.” She pauses for a moment, and I stare at her in the reflection of the glass, watching her chest rise and fall evenly with closed eyes. But when they open, it’s not only exhaustion that I see, but a look of someone that’s being haunted by the simple memory of what they had endured.

“I remember my father more than I wish I did—the marks he left on me after my mother passed. I remember how he beat me into a silent submission. I was so terribly lost for so long just doing what would keep me alive in hopes of finding a better way of living. I—” She stops for a moment, taking a deep breath when she realizes that her voice has increased, not just in speed, but in volume as well. I allow myself this moment to inspect the room, ensuring it’s still empty before offering her my hand. She gently wraps her pinky around mine, a habit we’ve fallen into these past few days. I want to believe it’s carried over from our life before all of this.

“I don’t regret asking for your help. I know it was selfish. If I hadn’t, neither of us would be in this situation. But, I know that I wouldn’t have survived much longer there if I kept living the way I was.”

She steals a glance at me through our reflection, giving me a tight lipped smile before looking down and continuing. “I can’t help but be thankful that I’m here. With you. In the chaos, you have remained steady. I can think of no better way of dying.”

I turn to face her completely and cradle her cheeks in my hands, forcing her to meet

my eyes. If I could take away the pain she has lived and is forced to replay in her mind—forced to feel all over again, I would.

“You’re not going to die. We get out of here. Tomorrow. And then we live.”

If uncertainty was a picture, she would be the painting. Her inhale is soft and slow as she backs away from me. With furrowed brows, crinkled eyes, and a fallen smile, there’s no questioning whether she believes me or not. I know she doesn’t. If it’s due to a lack of faith in me or the naivety that died the first time her father laid a hand on her, I can’t say. But I won’t fault her for being skeptical.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Ronan and I think we found the way out,” I say softly, reaching for her hand again. She allows me to hold it within my own, but still appears to be uncertain about the words that I say, so I give her hand a gentle squeeze before adding, “A real way out of all of this”

“I thought you didn’t trust him?” she counters, as she shifts her weight. I feel her palms grow sweaty as she scans my features. I know my smile is relaxed, but my brows are practically halfway up my forehead as I try to convince her to trust me. The way she has this whole time, I just need it to continue a little longer. No matter how things look, I just need her to trust me.

“He doesn’t trust anyone here either, but he wants out. And we found the way together.”

“How do you know he didn’t find it earlier? They all kept the files from us. What if they kept that away too? To try and gain your favor.” As the words leave her lips, my mouth pops open, suddenly dry. Turning the possibility over in my head, it feels wrong. Asking her to trust me is different than me trusting anyone else here, but the

idea of Ronan plotting something like this just...doesn't feel right.

It feels nauseating and disgusting and impossible. The idea makes me sick, and I know I wouldn't feel this way if I truly held any distrust for him. I may still be weary, but my gut is telling me our discovery last night was genuinely that. Ours.

So, I roll with that, forcing my face into a neutral expression and squeezing her hand once more before letting go and continuing.

"Trust me. Please. You have this far, I need you to keep doing so, just a little longer." I'm not sure if it was my tone of voice, pleading with her, or the fact that I actually asked her for something, but her shoulders release the tension that was holding her hostage as they fall forward. She nods her head quickly. Now that both of her hands are free, she wraps her arms around her body before asking me if I really believe we have a chance at this.

When she does, I just gently smile as I'm reminded of all the times I've made this promise and how every time I answer, it's the same. I'm certain we live through this. The first time she had approached me about her father's activities, I told her we would figure it out together. When we were in the field alone and I felt compelled to save her, and before we found the fence, I told her the promise I made to myself regarding her safety. It's non-negotiable.

"I don't just believe, I know. We'll get out of here, move to Greece and live on a goat farm. I think you would like it there," I respond, and for the first time, a small smile—a genuine one—breaks through any cracks of doubt that remained. It's accompanied by a small chuckle as she looks down at the ground and covers her face with her hands before pushing them through her hair and out of her face. None of what she did was big or boisterous, in fact, all her actions were minimal and contained. Nonetheless, being on the receiving end of them felt foreign, and I suspect it may have been the first time she's had any real hope in a very long time.



“Why’d you leave?”

The last time I had this conversation was with Ronan. Beside him, I never spoke of why I left home or what happened there. I never spoke of my family life, one that was far too similar to her own before I took matters into my own hands. I never wanted to remind myself of what I had to do and wonder what kind of person that made me in the end.

“I had no one, and no good memories,” I say so quietly that I’m not sure if she hears me, but if she doesn’t, she doesn’t say anything. I turn back to face the outdoors. “It was easier that way, but I do miss it at times. To move back with a friend, somewhere I know we could both call home, I could think of nothing more beautiful after so much pain.”

Another small, simple smile appears on her face through the reflection for a moment, but I don’t appreciate it the way I should because I’m locked in memories and thoughts of how to make these promises come true.

We do not die today.

This becomes a prayer to whatever or whoever is out there listening to me.

I refocus my attention on the reflection of her behind me but watch as her smile falters and her gaze falls to the ground as if any hope is reserved only for my eyes as Ronan approaches.

His steps are hesitant, and he rubs his palms on his pant legs and furrows his brows. His discomfort in interrupting us is obvious, but I’m grateful for the reprieve. Not from Carmen, but my own mind with its festering thoughts begging to make an appearance, but I can’t let anyone else see the uncertainty and the pressure I’ve put on myself. I cannot falter or break when we’re finally close to getting out of this mess.

But as Ronan gets closer, he seems uncomfortable and standoffish. I don't know how to explain it, but it doesn't feel like the man that I spent half the night plotting with or the one who comforted me during the storm. This feels like a man hiding something and suddenly Carmen's question is at the forefront of my mind.

Am I sure I can give him access to even a fraction of my trust right now? Or will it get me killed?

"I don't mean to interrupt, but I took the initiative in telling the other two there's been a new development. I didn't want to tell them everything without you..." he trails off, and I turn to face him fully, taking in his whole appearance. Unlike Carmen and I, who had changed back into our original clothes now that they have been semi washed and dried over the course of the night, he remains in the sweatpants and t-shirt that he had slept in. His wavy raven hair is disheveled and his five o'clock shadow has become more prominent—slightly longer and fuller than I recall ever seeing it before.

I assumed he would have done what Nathaniel did and used a dagger and conditioner to shave, but he hasn't. Not yet, at least. The ruggedness would be appealing if his annoying smirk would find its way back to him or if there was any light in his eyes, but all playfulness has gone into hiding. It's odd, the contrast from him last night to now when all that separates the two things has been sleep.

But I don't ask about it, instead I just dip my chin and allow Carmen to walk ahead of me before following in the rear. But as I move to pass Ronan, he reaches his calloused hands out to grip my elbow and I freeze, inhaling sharply at the sudden contact. It takes everything in me to not look at him, so instead, I look at the only point of contact we share. It can't be more than a minute of us like that, me waiting with bated breaths for him to say something witty or sarcastic, but he doesn't. A minute of me staring down at the way his thumb, the one vowing loyalty to only me, slowly rubs circles on my skin before he grips my arm tighter.

I cannot begin to guess what's on his mind and what he's fighting to say or not say in his head, but Nathaniel shatters the moment when he and Adonis enter the room.

“So, Ronan said you found something,” I sharply turn my gaze to him as Ronan's hand drops, his jaw ticking in what appears to be annoyance. He doesn't meet the challenge in my gaze as I wonder why he gave me full credit, but keeps his eyes locked on the part of my arm where his hand had just been. I wait a beat hoping that I can get him to just look at me, but he turns away, sharply breathing in through his nose as if he's forcing himself back to reality instead.

“Technically, we both found it after everyone went to bed,” I reply distractedly, as I track Ronan's every clipped movement and the way his muscled arms contract with tension while his other hand tightens around the paper I hadn't realized he was holding before he takes a deep breath and kneels on the ground. Gently, he unrolls the map we found and tries to smooth the wrinkles that formed within his harsh grip.

Carmen's eyes go wide at the sight, all breath loosed from her parted lips. Adonis takes a knee next to Ronan, lightly picking up one of the corners and bringing it closer to himself to get a better look. Nathaniel tilts his head, curiosity lingering behind his brown eyes.

“This can definitely be useful,” He hums as he leans between Ronan and Adonis, taking in every line the same way I had when I first saw it. “Do you know where these lead or how to even get in?” he questions, looking at Ronan and I expectantly. I fix my attention onto Ronan who quickly averts his gaze as soon as ours were meant to meet. His distance is concerning, though it only helps make this situation easier. Neither of us trust anyone, and the closer we get, the larger this predicament will become when all of this comes to an end.

His distance is for the best.

The whole group makes their way to the steps. No one fills the silence, the only sound is the loud creak of the stairs under our feet. I take the initiative to bend my body through the chopped wooden door and watch as each person enters after. Every face has varying looks of disgust as the body remains and the smell of rotting flesh has only grown stronger over the course of the night.

Still, no one speaks as they wait for whatever revelation lies ahead, and I tip my head back in quiet thought of what revealing this to everyone could mean for us. When I do though, the pain in my neck that has refused to fully vanish resurfaces. I can't help but wince and raise my hand to put pressure on it before turning back to open the wall. As I take a step forward, stretching out my hand, I find Ronan's own wrapping around my wrist, pulling my focus away from the task at hand.

"Are you hurt?" The seriousness that is held in the conviction of his question stuns me, and I can't do anything but shake my head.

"No, no I think I just slept wrong. It's been hurting since we got here, but I'll be fine." I attempt to roll my shoulders back and pull my wrist free but he keeps it in his grip, forcing me to stay still.

"Stop," Ronan says. I attempt to question him, but when his other hand moves to my neck, pushing aside the loose curls that escaped my messy bun, to get a better look I pause.

"My neck feels the same. I assumed it was the same thing but...it shouldn't still hurt like this," he murmurs in a hushed tone barely even audible to me. Chills roll down my spine at the contact and the softness of his touch, and it's a struggle to push away every conflicting thought that drifts through my mind.

"There's something here," he continues. I try to turn to him, but he grips the base of my neck and forces my head so far forward that my chin touches my chest. He grazes

his fingers over the area that has been bothering me. The second he applies pressure in two different places, and slightly presses them toward each other, my head jerks back up and I force my elbow out in defense. The hit doesn't land as he side steps and levels me with a stare—hands up in mock surrender.

“Now, now, Killer. There's no need to get violent,” he tsks as I send a glare his way promising death if he ever does that again, and for the first time today, he smirks. The asshole smirks as if my reaction was predictable.

“There's something under your skin and a cut that is mostly healed, but the skin is still irritated.” I cover the back of my neck with my hand protectively, though I already feel uncomfortable knowing someone had quite literally buried something unknown in my body without my knowledge.

“What do you mean there's—” Carmen rushes out, but Ronan answers before she can finish.

“My guess is a tracker. It's the only thing that makes sense. How else would they know exactly where we are at any given moment?” He questions, but nobody answers as we all stare at one another accusingly. “I suggest the three of you check amongst yourselves to make sure there's nothing there, but I have a feeling it's just Silene and me” he finishes, chancing a quick look in my direction before turning his attention back to the ground.

“Why would it only be the two of you?” Nathaniel questions while harshly pushing his fingers into the base of his neck, then feeling his way all the way up to his hairline. Ronan doesn't answer until everyone has checked and confirmed his suspicions. And then he still doesn't answer. Not for a while at least. Even when the atmosphere turns awkward.

“Just a guess,” he murmurs before reaching his hand out for me to take and leading

my body back in front of him and to the wood paneled wall. As I ease my fingers from his, I watch him keep it held out for a moment before slowly dropping and flexing it at his side. When I turn my attention forward, I inhale deeply before pushing in, hearing the visceral reactions of my peers behind me.

But while they see a way out, all I can think is that the perfect trap has been laid. The words of a dying man replay in my mind, and I can't help wondering if he was ever lying at all.

No way out.

23

Lie To Me: Ronan/ Silene

Ronan:

Everyone immediately begins talking over one another, grabbing at the map to try and make a point or ask a question regarding the logistics of some half formed plan yelled over someone else. The chaos of it all is interesting. We've all been cautious of each other, walking on eggshells and casting sly allegations. I welcome the current frenzy.

"I'm just saying, we have no idea where the tunnels lead, and if these two are being tracked, then we're sure to have company at the end of whatever path we take," Nate says. I come back to reality, pulled from whatever stupor I was stuck in when he speaks. I'm not surprised he was the one to say something logical through all the questions, not when I know how smart he is. How smart he's always been, apparently.

Silene and I remain unspoken, but I don't miss the pleading glance she throws my way when I refuse to look at her for too long.

"You live long enough to remember." That's what she said to me the first time we saw each other, and now I do. My memories though, I'm not sure how to process them, let alone what to think. I'm not sure how to tell her that it's not what it seems without her accusing me again when we're on shaky ground as it is. I don't know how to get her to believe it wasn't me.

I can't even look her in the eyes knowing that none of this was ever about killing us, but breaking her will enough to leave him alone.

"We use a diversion," Silene says, feeling on the back of her neck.

"A diversion?"

"You three take the tunnels while Ronan and I take off through the woods. They'll assume we're all together and follow me and Ronan. No one will know." When she says this, I turn to face her before looking at the rest of the group, waiting for a response.

"I go with you," Carmen says quietly, though something in her voice feels final. Like she won't be deterred from her decision, and if Silene didn't interject, I would have.

"No, you don't."

"You promised," she says, pleading with Silene to understand what she means, even though the rest of us don't. I see the way she fights to keep her tears at bay, refusing to let them fall as she begs her, but it appears to be for nothing because the woman I love shakes her head no. And if there's one thing I know, it's that Silene would never willingly risk the life of someone she cares about. All plans are meticulously calculated, and if she thinks Carmen is better off with the other two, then I will stand by her side and support that decision.

"I didn't promise this. People are going to be coming at us from every direction. You'll be safest going with one of them." My gaze continues to flick between the two, knowing who will win the argument, but amazed at Carmen's persistence. An impossible task, but an admirable effort.

"What about you two? When do you go through the tunnels? Or do you even care if



you die out there?” Silene stills as the words leave Carmen’s mouth, and my heart stops as I realize the probability of what her answer might be. The probability of her knowingly running into a fight she won’t win. Shame washes over her face, coloring her cheeks pink as she looks away, and I have my answer.

Though, I would die before I let her. A world where she doesn’t exist is not one worthy of living in, and I would never let her do something that would get herself killed.

“There are access points to the tunnels. We can go far enough out to ditch the trackers, run in a different direction, and if we calculate it correctly, we should be able to meet up with the rest of you at the end,” she says slowly, as if it’s a new part of her plan. Something she’s unsure of, but saying it anyway in case it helps her case.

“Carmen, she’s right. It won’t be safe out there, and her plan could easily work,” Nate says, reaching out to softly grab her arm and pull her away from inside the circle we formed after taking several steps towards Silene. But she pulls her arm out of his grasp and turns to face him.

“If it’s not safe out there for me, then it’s not safe for anyone. I don’t care how skilled she is, one person can only handle so much at a time,” Carmen counters. She turns to face Silene, but her eyes meet my gaze instead. I’m surprised that she’s fighting back. The woman who tends to speak in riddles and dreams, who feels more attached to the metaphysical rather than reality. This is the first time I’ve heard her words spoken with conviction. She sounds more like Silene than herself.

“No, and that’s final,” Silene responds before turning back to the group before Carmen has a chance to argue any further.

“Let’s just solidify a plan,” Adonis interjects, commanding the attention of everyone in the room. He’s been staring at the map since the women started arguing, but now

he's looking at Silene, withdrawn and curious. "Silene isn't off to a bad start, and she's not wrong."

"I told you th—"

"I didn't say you were right, either," he says over her voice, cutting off whatever else she was about to say. This only results in another staring contest, a battle of wills that he, to my surprise, wins.

The next several hours consist of fine tuning the details of our escape. Tonight we'll eat, drink plenty of water, sharpen weapons, and rest. Anything that can help with tomorrow. If all goes right, we'll be out by tomorrow night, finally escaping all of this. We'll survive, and I'll spend however long it takes proving to Silene that my loyalty remains to her. Always.

As long as I breathe, my life is hers to give or take.

But when everyone is settling in for the night, and I see Silene exit the upstairs death room, refusing to acknowledge my presence as I come out of the bathroom, I know something is wrong. Especially when I see a piece of folded paper clutched between her fingers with ink smudged onto them. As she pockets it, I can't help but reach into my own pocket and feel the note I've kept hidden from her for the past several days.

\* \* \*

Silene:

Everyone wants to leave. They want a quick break, a way out—they want to survive. I don't share their sentiment because I know this doesn't end when we escape. It will never end until he is dead, and since I know there isn't anyone I can trust to not turn their back on me at the first sign of danger, so I'll be leaving alone.

Tonight.

Carmen may never forgive me for leaving her behind, but one day she will see I had to. If I survive what I'm about to do, then I can explain it to her in a way that, I hope, she'll one day understand. Without me doing this, there will be nowhere to hide from his madness.

Leaving in the dead of the night while the others sleep is a calculated risk I'm taking. I know anyone could wake at any moment or that the stairs could creak and give me away, but I'm hoping if I keep my footfalls nice and light, no one will know until the morning. But as I move to take the first step, I hesitate.

I freeze with fear of what might happen here without me. The consequences I may have to bear if I live and someone doesn't. I look over my shoulder at the men in the room, sleeping soundly. Nathaniel and Adonis in their respective corners, Ronan taking a small sliver of the couch, unmoving except for the gentle rise and fall of his chest. My fists clench as I lightly step away from the stairs and check the room Carmen chose to sleep in all alone. Her long limbs are spread out over curtains and a blanket to give her some cushion on the hard floor, and her hair partially covers the delicate features of her face. My heart squeezes at the betrayal she'll wake to find.

Though I don't trust the men with my life, I do trust them with hers. In the way, I've already seen them worry for her here and there.

I'll see you soon, my little dreamer. I just have to do this one last thing for us, I think to myself as I quickly approach her sleeping form and lay the letter next to her before I return to the staircase and begin my ascent. Thankfully, the short trip up is silent. The wood doesn't groan under my weight as I keep to the sides of each step rather than the center, and when I get to the top, I take a deep breath before walking the distance to the room at the end of the hall and stepping through the hole in the door.

One minute later, and I'm taking quick, careful steps through the tunnel to my right, the one I'm hoping will lead to the estate based on the building shape on the map we found.

Successful in no one waking and finding me gone. That's what I thought, at least. Now, as large hands grip my wrists and pin them above my head, and a muscular body presses into mine against the stone wall, I know I was sorely mistaken.

“And just where do you think you're going? Huh, Killer?”

His voice is dark, carrying a menacing undertone, yet there's no bite to it.

Taking a deep breath, I try to assess the situation, looking anywhere but him. My lack of answer and avoidance of his gaze, despite the full body contact, does nothing but frustrate him. At least I can assume as much based on the way that he grips my chin between his fingers and forces my gaze to lock onto his.

“You know there is nowhere you can go that I wouldn't find you,” he says in such a way that I almost believe him. I almost have no choice to believe him, given the fact that he's here . And for what? He has no reason to be here, not when he all but handed me a death sentence. Not when he's the reason we're all in this situation right now.

“And why is that? Huh?” My voice carries so much hostility, and I refuse to feel sorry for it when this is what his love has done for me. “Why won't you leave me alone? Haven't you done enough? Was this not enough? Let me guess, you're the traitor, right? Putting me here wasn't enough for you, but you needed to watch it happen?”

“What do you even mean? You really think, for even a moment, that I could do anything to hurt you when you're—”

“I’m what? I’m crazy?” I say, cutting him off. I’m trying to keep my voice low, considering the echo in the tunnel, but I’m struggling. And anger and confusion are living things coursing through my veins with every beat of my heart. If he could see it in me, I don’t know, but one second my arms were pinned above my head, and the next his lips were on mine...

His lips were on mine, and it is the most terrifying and beautiful thing I have ever felt. It is pure desperation in the way his mouth molds with mine as he softly bites and tugs on my lower lip to pull a reaction from me. It takes everything in me to stay standing. However, even if my legs had given out the way that they so desperately wanted to, I wouldn’t have fallen. Not with the way his left arm wraps around my waist, hand gripping my hip and pulling me so close to his body that it feels like we could become a single physical being.

He just has to keep holding on.

He kisses me as if he’s trying to use his lips to write poetry onto my skin, a story of everything we had once been—of everything we were supposed to be. The thing about poetry though is it usually ends in tragedy, and for that reason alone, I remove my hands from where they have taken their place—tangled in his hair, and slowly place them onto his chest to stop this from going any further.

Words fail to escape me as I try to regain my thoughts, but every single one of them is just his name tattooed into my soul.

I know this moment is delicate, but I also know that there is so much that needs to be said even if it was everything I didn’t want to have to voice. Words that would hurt more than anything has ever hurt me before. Words that no one would understand except a version of myself that I’m not even sure he even remembers.

A version of me that loved him more than I had loved anything in my life and had let

myself surrender to him.

I loved and I loved and I—

“Lie to me again,” I whisper against his lips before gently resting my forehead against his. Our breaths mingle with each other, and I begin to feel as if he’s breathing his own life into me.

“Silene, I—” I know his eyes are open...that he’s looking at me, waiting with bated breaths for our eyes to meet again, but I can’t bring myself to make eye contact with him in fear that I’ll fall into my desire to believe anything he says. I refuse to give in that easily, but I grab two fistfuls of his shirt, and pull his body impossibly closer, shaking my head no.

I can’t let myself give in. I can’t allow myself to accept this fall again, not when I know what he did, and not when I still have so many questions for him that he can’t answer right now.

That he refuses to answer right now when we no longer trust one another.

“I wish I never loved you,” he says, and then he’s removing my hands from his shirt and taking a step back. My closed eyes are now wide open and watching him intently as he turns away from where I stand and crouches down before roughly running his hands through his hair, tugging on the ends in frustration.

“I said, lie to me,” I say quietly. It was barely a whisper but I guess he heard it because he abruptly cuts me off when he stands back up, dropping his hands and looking at me, his eyes holding an unspoken plea, but my gaze holds nothing more than a challenge. Once he realizes that I’m not moving from where I stand, his head tilts up to the ceiling as he shakes his head and storms back to where he left me.

“Fuck it.” His hands slide through my hair and pull, forcing me to tilt my head back and allow him better access as his lips claim mine again. And there was no mistaking the fact that this kiss was just that—a claim. A promise. A prayer.

I’m frozen, rooted in place, for no more than a second before my own hands are gripping his hips and pulling them against my own. Consequences be damned. Trust and truth be damned. The familiarity feels too good to let go of, but he’s pulling away too soon, leaving a trail of small kisses from the corner of my lips up my cheekbone, and then he’s whispering in my ear.

“Come back. Whatever you were planning on doing, we’ll do it together. But never alone.” He pulls back to look at me, still forcing my head to look at him, but my eyes drift downwards. One of his hands trails down the length of my neck and along my arm before landing on my waist, squeezing on the area of bare skin left exposed after my shirt rode up during the kiss. “Please, Silene. I’ll get on my knees if I have to.”

“You’re asking me to trust you, and I don’t know if I can,” I reply, still not looking at him, but when he squeezes my waist, my green clashes with his blue, and I can’t ignore the rightness of it all. The invisible string that has done nothing but pull us together time and time again.

“Okay,” I whisper, gazing up at him through lowered lashes. I may be unsure if I’m making the right decision, but I follow him anyway. Back through the tunnel, up the stairs and to the doorway where Carmen stands with disappointment and betrayal reflected in her hazel eyes while she clutches the note I had written to her between her delicate fingers.

“You said... No, you promised we both make it out of here alive,” Carmen grits out, and I can’t bear to look at her knowing how she must feel or what she must be thinking.

“I did mean it. I thought it was the only way for us all to be safe. I was hoping to return before anyone noticed, but I was stopped,” I say, trailing off and sneaking a peek at Ronan who doesn’t look surprised at all as he places his hand on the small of my back. Relief floods my system at the small show of support, even as my heart breaks every time I look at the woman in front of me. I know at this moment she probably feels as if I haven’t meant a word I’ve said to her in the past twenty-four hours, but the reality is that I’ve meant every single word and knew that escaping wasn’t living.

It was just surviving.

“Then why did you say goodbye?” she questions, frantically shoving the letter into my chest, and my hands clutch the paper, attempting to grab onto her hand as well but she pulls away too quickly. “Just in case I didn’t succeed. I felt you deserved to know that I didn’t mean to break my promise. I wanted you to know that—”

“It doesn’t matter,” she cuts my explanation short as she backs away, wrapping her arms around herself, and as she turns around to leave, I hear her say one last thing that sends a chilling numbness through my entire body.

“Your apology means nothing to someone who’s already dead.”

I don’t remember what happened after that. Not leaving the room, or walking downstairs. Nor do I remember getting settled on the couch, and Ronan draping a blanket over my body. I remember nothing other than the nausea settling in my stomach as dread pulls me into a fitful slumber.



Button: Silene

“O kay, so tell me,” I laugh as he pulls me in between his legs from the kitchen stool where he’s sitting, a smile on his face.

“Pray tell thee, what shall you want to know?” I ask as he moves his hold from my waist and grabs my hands, kissing the backs of them while gazing at me intently. He doesn’t drop them when he speaks, just lets his lips outline the words he says against my hands and, in a way, it feels grounding. It’s a comforting notion, to feel the question just as much as I feel the ground beneath my feet — a gentle reminder that I’m here and not lost in the past.

“I know you don’t particularly like talking about it...” he starts, cautiously, and my smile falters. My laughter dies as I try to pull away, but he pulls my body back against his own. “Si, my love. Nothing is ever going to change the way I feel about you. For the past two years, it’s only been you, and for as long as you’ll have me, nothing will change that.”

“Always?” My voice trembles with uncertainty as I place my hands on his cheeks, searching for any proof of a lie that I knew I would never find.

“Always. No matter how tainted you feel your soul may be, I will be here—loving you—unconditionally. I will be here to remind you that you are good. I’ll do whatever it takes to prove that to you.” One of his hands covers my own, and in his eyes I see everything that can be ours if I just give this part of me over to him.

“And what if I one day stop loving you, or push you away?” I question, and he smiles softly, gripping my waist before backing me up so he can stand in front of me and lead me to the living room couch. He swiftly grabs a blanket, placing it over my legs that I have tucked to my side, and once he’s sure I’m comfortable, he sits on the ground in front of me. His hand grips one of my covered knees and the other takes hold of my hand.

“Even then.” He tries to hold my focus, but I just look away, ashamed. I can’t keep my past hidden forever. At some point, I have to choose a different path for myself than this solitude I’ve created, and who else to change for than the man in front of me who has been so patient? I can think of no one more worthy of helping me lighten the heaviness I’ve carried alone for all of these years.

“Okay, yeah...I just, I need you to not say anything. If I don’t get it all out, then I’m not sure what I’ll do, but it probably isn’t pretty. I don’t even remember the last time that I cried,” I admit with a nervous chuckle, but he doesn’t throw a pity laugh my way.

He just squeezes my hand one more time and whispers, “I promise.” And in those two words, I find a strength that I have never been able to find before. One that’s always been too far away for me to grasp.

My heart—the great traitor that it is—stutters. My palms begin sweating, something that doesn’t usually happen. My chest constricts for a mind numbing second halting my ability to breathe. I force myself to look at him one more time, and when I see that his sapphire eyes never left my face, it feels like I can breathe again.

“I guess it started when I was little. My parents were very bad people, heavily involved in the mafia. I was their only child and naturally, my father had wanted a son. Sons are more valuable for the lifestyle and inheritances, so I was nothing to them for a very long time. It was so lonely,” I begin, attempting to keep my voice

steady, but I can't help the way it dips and wavers with truths that have remained unspoken for so long. Can't deny the anxiety that begs and pleads with me to look away from him.

"Sometimes, I don't think people understand how lonely it can be as a kid. To be someone who doesn't matter. Whose wants and needs and thoughts are disregarded if it doesn't align with what's convenient. I wasn't allowed to have anything unless my father would benefit from it. I was constantly fighting for even an ounce of his attention, but I wanted it so bad. Ronan, you don't understand. Back then, I would have given anything. I would have done anything for his attention, and he knew it. He used it against me and raised me to just be another one of his workers. I was only eight years old when he started teaching me about the business side of things, but by the time I was fourteen..." My voice cracks, and I find myself pulling my hand out of his to run it through my mess of dark curls, making an active effort to try and get them to conceal my face as much as possible. Trying to hide the shame and grief I still carry from the past.

"Silene, you don't have to continue, I think I understand." Ronan, bless his heart, tries to give me an exit from the truth, but I know I have to get it out now. If I don't, I may always find myself running from a version of myself that was carefully curated and callously manipulated into being something worthy when I already was.

"He used me as bait when I was only fourteen years old because I told my mother I wanted him to love me more, and she said that was how to make it happen. She said that if I wanted him to love me, then I needed to be willing to give anything. So I did." I pause, taking a deep breath, still hiding any physical reaction, but I know he hears my pain in my voice, and I'm terrified at the possible disgust I might find if I allow myself to look at him.

"I didn't really understand what was happening at the time, but when I turned sixteen, I knew what I was being forced to do in order to gain his favor was wrong. I was just

a kid, and they were grown men. I should never have had to do any of it, but it was too late to go back. I wanted to be able to protect myself in case it got worse, so I asked for fighting lessons. I thought...I thought it would make it easier to do the things that he was asking of me, but it just became more and more frequent.”

“Jesus, Silene. I can’t even — ” he interrupts, but a harsh, unfeeling laugh rips from my throat and breaks through whatever he was going to say.

“He called me his little button. I was his executioner, Ronan. I killed a man for the first time when I was only sixteen. For a year, I did this because I wanted his love, but then I realized what he was forcing me to do wasn’t love. He was just tolerating me because he could benefit from my obsession with the idea of him finally caring for me.” A tear falls from my eye. Only one, and I wipe it away as soon as it forms, hating everything that I’m feeling at this moment. It’s so overwhelming, even without all the details. The reliving of a time in which I was willingly exploited because my own mother told me it was the only way I would be useful and I trusted her to not let me get hurt.

“I killed him a week after my seventeenth birthday,” I whisper. “It was my only way out. I waited until he slept, but he woke seconds before I did it. Woke to the bite of cold metal pressed against his neck and when he did, there was no fear. Only a challenge, a dare. Like he knew I wasn’t strong enough to kill the only two people I had ever wanted to love me...I’m not sure how much pain he or my mother were in or how long it lasted. I just knew I needed their deaths to be quiet. I took as much money as I could and paid for a ferry to the mainland before purchasing a charter flight here. I was on my own, living off the money I stole and underground fights for six years. I didn’t trust anyone and that was okay. I didn’t need to. I had myself, and after years of begging for someone else to care, that was enough for me.”

No more tears fall, and while my fear of what I’ll find when I look at him still feels like too much for me to face, I do it anyway. All the disgust or disappointment I

thought I would find? It doesn't exist. There's not a trace of it. Instead, there's sadness, fury, and something that looks like pride and love. It takes my breath away.

"And then I met you, and the rest is history," I say, and one of those sad smiles appears again as his empty hand takes hold of my other knee before he's kneeling in front of me.

"You are so strong, my love. And I am so proud of you for taking charge of your own life in whatever way you needed to. I'm so grateful that you saw the situation for what it was, no matter how long it took. You were only a kid. You didn't deserve that, but I'm so thankful you found your own way in life, and that you made the best of what you were given. I'm thankful you found your way to me. I am honored to know you felt I was worthy enough to let in. I know it couldn't have been easy."

My lips tremble and air whooshes through me as I realize that love truly is not conditional for everyone. Even after I knew my feelings were my own and that nothing could take that away. Now that I've experienced what it's like to love him and receive his love so freely in return, I'm not so sure anyone would survive taking him from me. Honestly, I don't think I would survive it, either.

"Tell me something good, Blue" I whisper, and he does. No hesitation at all, he tells stories of what it was like growing up with his family. He told me about his kid genius brother and their family dog — a corgi he named Fish, much to his parents' dismay. He tells me how angry his parents would get at the dog when he began refusing his dog food at the first sniff of pizza in the house due to how often Ronan and his brother would sneak him bits and pieces when he was a puppy.

His parents take up a great deal of time as he speaks of the example they set for him and his future wife, should he be so lucky. I don't miss the way he looks at me as he says it. He talks animatedly about anything and everything, and suddenly I feel my heart grow lighter and my future feels a little clearer. Less chaotic and more

inevitable.

Even with what's to come in the next few weeks, I find myself at peace for the first time in what may be my whole life. I know that everything will be okay.

It has to be.

25

We Live: Ronan/ Silene

Ronan:

Waking the next morning to see Silene still asleep with a look similar to peace on her face was not what I was expecting after last night. Not when I had picked her up from where she was frozen in place, emotionally numb and staring at the space where her friend had just stood. Her almost leaving and the resulting confrontation had me worried she would no longer be here when I woke, but now, in the light of day, I think I was wrong to worry.

Maybe she needed to see just how much two people care about her to realize she is important. Being gifted the knowledge of knowing she's been chosen—not once, but twice. She has to know there can be no more running. Not alone.

Not anymore.

“You ready for this?” I’m startled out of my thoughts by Nate’s voice as he approaches. His wary gaze drifts between Silene and me. Thousands of questions go unspoken when I turn away from her completely and slap an arm to his shoulder.

He winces, and I immediately pull back apologizing for hitting his bad shoulder. I’m offered nothing more than a tight lipped smile in response as he stretches his limbs and neck. “I’m not ready. Not really, I don’t think.” I say solemnly. He looks back to me under furrowed brows.

“I’m ready to not worry, of course. I just don’t think I’m ready to find out what comes after,” I admit. He nods, looking around before a smile breaks through and he laughs.

“I don’t think I quite understand. I don’t think the point of getting out of here is to question what comes next. I think what comes next just happens. You breathe and take it one step at a time. Eventually, you’ll understand where it leads. Just appreciate the chance you have to change your outcome,” he says, as his gaze drifts to Carmen.

“And what are you going to do when all is said and done here?” I ask him, as a knowing smirk forms on my face. When he realizes that I caught him staring, he quickly looks away, blushing in a way that makes him appear extremely boyish and young. My hand ruffles his hair, a gesture that feels oddly familiar, and our eyes catch each other’s gaze.

“I think I’m going to take the chance I’ve been given and see about a girl,” he responds, sheepishly turning back to her. I let myself look back to Silene and where she lies on the couch, stretching as she wakes.

“Me too.”

\* \* \*

Silene:

“I’m sorry,” I force out in a rush. I’ve wasted nearly the whole day turning over in my head what to say to her. She has purposely evaded every attempt I made to get closer to her, keeping herself near the others or tucking herself away in the bathroom to shower one last time before we leave the comfort of the home. Finally, I’m close enough to speak, and she stops walking away from me. Her brown hair sways behind her back as she turns to look at me from over her shoulder—any warmth she had



previously shown me is gone. All eyes land on us from around the house. Adonis and Nathaniel slow their eating of canned corn in the kitchen while looking over the map, and Ronan stops turning the page he'd just finished reading of one of the books he'd found upstairs.

"I told you that it was already done. There's nothing left to apologize for," she replies before continuing on to the room where she slept.

I let out a groan of frustration, fiddling with the hair tie on my wrist while looking around at the men. As my narrowed gaze flickers to each of them, a chorus of clearing throats sound as they continue on with what they were previously doing. But Ronan's gaze lingers longer than it should with unspoken knowledge of what I'd almost done the night before. A secret it seems he'll keep from the others without me asking him.

He dips his head in solidarity before returning to his book, and I march into the room behind the young woman, and shut the door behind us. She's lacing her dirty, worn boots, not paying me any mind. As I approach carefully, she hums in acknowledgement of my presence, but nothing more.

"Can I tell you something?" Her eyes dart up at my question for a moment before looking back down at her nimble fingers slowly tying the laces of her shoes. No words are said, but I take her silence as an invitation to continue.

"You told me a little bit about your family, what you remember of it at least," I start hesitantly, unsure of where I'm going with this. "I didn't know what guided me last night as I was doing it. I wrote the letter apologizing in case I didn't return, but I know if I truly planned on returning, I never would have written such words. I would have left in confidence and returned before anyone woke. Our plan could have changed. We would have been able to leave together." She keeps her gaze on the floor as she listens, and I have no choice but to keep my train of thought moving.

“You are entitled to your anger,” I confess as I sit next to her, defeated. It takes me by surprise when she intertwines her pinky finger with mine, but something in my chest feels lighter when she does. “I didn’t know if I would come back, but I wanted to believe that I could end this all,” I admit with a long, guilt-filled sigh.

“You don’t have to do this alone, Silene. You never needed to. The plan will work. You still believe that, don’t you?” I smile at her question and belief in all of us, but I would be lying if I said I knew without any hesitation that we will succeed.

“I do believe the plan could work, I just worry...” I say hesitantly, eyes flickering to the closed door. She registers the doubtful tone of my voice and waits for me to continue speaking.

“There is still someone here who’s lying, and I may not know what they’re lying about, but I know that—”

“How can you be sure? Maybe whoever lied forgot alongside the rest of us? Maybe that woman lied. Maybe you’re worried for something that’s no longer a possibility. But wouldn’t we be dead already if...well, if the so-called traitor was among us?”

“I suppose that may be—” I start, but she grabs onto my hand and faces me before interrupting.

“If you’re uncertain, then I want to go with you. Don’t leave me behind with people you’re not even sure you trust. Don’t make me beg you. If I live or die, I want the path taken to be one of my choosing. Si—” she rambles, and I stop her from speaking with one word I didn’t think I would be saying. An agreement that strips my bloody, beating heart bare, even though I know it’s what’s best. Giving her this choice is not easy for me, but the right things in life often aren’t.

“Okay.”

She startles, her hands freezing where they clutch mine, and a smile spreads over her face and tears well in her eyes. Uncertainty temporarily silences her, but her touch doesn't waver.

"Oh...okay. And you're sure?" I hesitantly nod my head, looking down at our tightly joined hands before swallowing the lump in my throat.

"I cannot choose for you any longer. You're right. Your life is your own. I won't dictate how you live it, but if you go with me, it will be dangerous and—" I'm interrupted again when she lunges into me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"I know, but if we're doing this, then we're doing it together."

"Together," I whisper in her ear as I awkwardly pat her back. For a moment, I wonder how we've come from such similar backgrounds, but react so differently to the situations life throws our way. She is willing to trust and hold and accept the affection she was denied once she believed someone fit to receive what she could offer them. Then me, with my inability to trust, even when I'm given every reason to. My inability to do anything other than fight when the opportunity presents itself. "And then we live."

We sit there for a moment—her holding me as I awkwardly accept her embrace—when a quick knock sounds at the door. Nathaniel's ginger hair appears from around the corner, and he quickly takes in the scene before him.

"It's time to go over the plan again, one last time. Last light will be upon us soon," he says before knocking on the side of the door twice more and exiting the room. He leaves the door ajar, another indication of how quick this must be.

"Well, forever awaits us," I say as I remove her arms from around me and push to stand. She follows suit, dusting off her pants and stepping around me, walking with

more confidence than I think I may have ever seen. I quickly follow her and see the men leaning over the kitchen counter with the map in front of them. Ronan looks at me, a question in his expression, and I grimly nod before closing the distance between us.

“One last time, let’s make sure the plan is clear. Nothing can go wrong on the way,” Nathaniel reiterates, peering at everyone. Everyone seems keen on listening to him recite the plan we decided on last night, but I clear my throat, tossing a look at Carmen’s hopeful eyes. The men follow my gaze before turning their attention back to me.

“The plan has changed. Carmen comes with me,” I state with finality, and although I see understanding fall over Ronan, his arm brushing against mine in a sign of support, he is the only one.

“Absolutely not,” Nathaniel starts. “The plan was fine enough yesterday. She’ll be safer in the tunnels where no one is tracking us.”

“I can keep her safe just fine. It all ends the same anyway, and it’s not us who should be choosing what she does and does not do,” I explain but Adonis’ deep timbre cuts through my reasoning.

“You say you can keep her safe, but you lost her the other day. If I were one of them, she would’ve been dead before you found her.”

“That’s different,” I respond, attempting to find a way to defend myself, but I know he’s not wrong. No matter how much I wish he were, he’s not.

“And why is that?” he questions.

“Because I don’t trust any of you other than her.” Every eye turns to her as she

crosses her arms over her chest and keeps her shoulders pulled back. Pride washes through me as she defends herself. Truthfully, I believed I would have to fight for her on my own, but I'm proud of her willingness to fight back. Tension builds around us in the quiet. Tension so thick, you could feel the air shift the longer no one speaks. Carmen breaks the silence.

"I believe it's settled then."

Ronan's shoulders jump up and down as he tries to hold back his laughter, and I harshly jab him in the side to get him to stop, but he isn't able to. It isn't long before I'm right there with him, staring at Adonis and Nathaniel's appalled expressions.

"Okay then, this changes things," Ronan says, but winks at me as he says it. He points to the map. "We don't have long before the three of us head out, might as well get everything settled while we still can."

Shadows seem to fall over Adonis' face and weariness follows his movements as he points to the map. "There are several entrances into the tunnels. It seems to be how they're traveling so easily through the forest without any of us knowing," he says as he begins pointing at the hidden tunnel doors. "We've already decided that he and I go in separate directions. Me right, him left. We only go long enough to see what lies beyond, and then we meet back here." He points to a tunnel that intersects both of theirs directly where Ronan and I are to lead anyone ready for a hunt.

"We meet here no later than sunrise," his deep voice commands, staring each and every one of us in the eyes, ensuring we understand. "We should know which way leads out for sure by then."

"And if we're not all there?" I question, though I already know the answer.

"We'll know what happened. The rest of us leave if we must," Nathaniel replies, but

there's an edge to his voice that wasn't there before. Uncertainty seeps into the air as we all look at each other one more time.

"Are you ready?" Ronan asks, extending his hand out to me. I stare at it, calloused, rough, and sure. Then I turn to Carmen, and nod my head absently before taking her pinky within mine.

"I am."

I face him one last time, and he just dips his chin to me before heading upstairs, leading the way outside to the forest that lies beyond.

This only works if they believe we don't know about the map, tunnels, or that there is any way out. They have to believe we're running again.

Step by step, we walk in the golden light that falls over us. No one says a word as we make ourselves the perfect unassuming bait. And when we make it to the tunnel entrance, wedged into a large tree, we leave Carmen there as previously discussed.

"Don't move no matter what you hear," I quickly say before Ronan and I depart. "We'll return in no more than an hour. Please, do not leave. We'll only be half a mile away, and then we'll be back. Stay hidden. Within the entrance to the tunnel if you must," I add, even as Ronan is grabbing my hand, readying to pull me ahead of him. "Promise me."

"I promise," she responds quickly, waving me on as she conceals herself within the bark of the tree, and then I'm off. Rushing along to a battle I know I must survive.

### A Beautiful Dream: Silene

N ight rapidly approaches as dark clouds begin to blot out most of the remaining light, and I'm becoming more and more unsure of our plan. It's been quiet. Our importance and the want for our deaths may not be worth the uncertainties that lie in the darkness of the forest. But when we finally begin to question each other aloud, I hear the crunch of the leaves and snap of a twig.

"Are you ready?" Ronan mumbles, gripping a blade in each hand. He turns to look at me as I twirl both hatchets in my own.

"It's about time something interesting happened. I was quite bored." I joke, feeling the way he laughs as his back presses against mine.

Just as we expected, it wasn't just one person who showed up to secure the bragging rights of taking either one of us down. It was at least a dozen. Men of every size, with just about any weapon, and for a second, I question if this is a fight either of us walk away from. Then I remember how incredibly angry I am to have been stripped of my identity and thrown to the wolves with the expectation to just take it and die.

That fury blinds me as we begin to fight, and I don't see anything other than red. Blood red spattering onto my body with each slice. I don't notice when my hair tie is torn causing my braid to come undone. I don't comprehend how many hits I've taken, knowing that none were fatal. I hear and see nothing until I am standing alone in a sea of bodies that litter the ground in a heap of blood and bones.

Scanning the scene, I realize that while Ronan isn't among the dead bodies, he is also nowhere to be found either. With a racing heart, I frantically trace and retrace the area around me, hoping—no, praying that I'm just missing him. But as I search every bit of land, every single body scattered at my feet, I know that there's no him. Anywhere. He's gone, and I'm not sure if I should be thankful or begin to mourn this loss a second time in a completely different way.

The beating of my bruised and bloody heart is so loud and violent, I can hear it with every pump. It grows claws as it rages inside me, ready to tear its way out of my chest. A monster, that's what it has become as each breath becomes more strained.

Breathe. I say to myself. I have to repeat it, but I can't remember how, as each beat of my heart feels like a painful struggle. Deep within, this pounding becomes harder and harder.

I just need to breathe, but my hands are shaking, and my steps are wobbly as my vision blurs and the forest seems unforgiving and too large. Too large, yet it's closing in on me.

Breathe. Even if it feels like swallowing a million shards of glass, I have to fight through it. Deep gasping breaths, in and out, as I attempt to think any kind of rational thought. Slowly, I take cautious steps backwards. Far enough to remove myself from the field of death. I turn myself around to look at the trees that seem like they're closing in more and more, no matter how much I know that's not what's happening.

Before I know it, I'm taking one step at a time. Confident and determined steps back to the tunnel entrance where I left Carmen, needing my little dreamer to tell me something real. To distract me, give me an answer, or even tell me what I need to do next. Anything really. I need her to do anything because I'm not sure I know the way right now. Not when Ronan is lost.



But then I hear it.

Deep breaths sounding out from the trees ahead.

Loud and rattling breaths that instill a different kind of fear in me than before. A fear that maybe I'm already too late. Late for something I never should have been gone long enough to miss. And suddenly I'm running. I will my legs to move faster than I may have ever ran before, one step in front of the other, taking in every bit of my surroundings when I see her.

A sob, one I didn't realize I was holding in, escapes me at the sight of her. The dullness in her pale face, the blood that clings to her clothes, and the dirt covering her skin. All of it brings me to my knees, panting as tears begin to coat my lids and lashes. The sound of my grief is so foreign to me, I'm not sure I've ever made it before as my throat tightens. I don't remember a time in my life where I've ever been allowed to feel in such a way—so thoroughly broken, but this might be it. This might be too much to bear.

Pale face, bloody chapped lips, chest rising and falling fast and shallow, eyes sunken and closed.

A knife slicing all the way through her abdomen.

Blood pours out of her, and the warmth that resided within her now soaks my pants—covering the skin of my knees as it seeps through the fabric of my clothes. It's all I can do not to rip her body away from the trees and cradle her in my arms. Instead, I take her slim face in my hands and whisper her name.

“Carmen, honey. Open your eyes for me.” It comes out as a broken whisper, the plea that I'm not sure will be answered. Even if she can wake up, our time together won't last long.

“Please wake up. I need you to open your eyes and tell me what happened. Carmen, please.” My voice, no matter how much I try to keep it steady, wavers. It breaks and shakes just as much—if not more, than my hands.

Her eyes flutter open, though I know it’s a battle. I can tell by the way she draws her eyebrows together and lets out a whimper so small that I wouldn’t have heard it if she didn’t have my full attention. Our gazes meet each other and a small smile graces her lips. Her bloodied, pale lips.

“It’s okay, Si. I was never meant to make it out of here,” she says as a cough wracks her body. She releases another cry. Her eyebrows tightly pull together, the blade still moving within her body with each breath that she takes.

“I was never meant to live.”

Her voice is strained with each word, but she keeps going, tears slowly falling down the length of her face and onto the palms of my hands. “Falling is so quiet, it’s so...” Her eyelids flutter as another cough escapes her and more cries of pain sound out in the space around us. “It’s so quiet, but so is death sometimes. And I wish we would’ve been able to make it out together. My friend...the only one I’ve ever had, really. The only one who cared long enough to be one. Thank you for,” she weakly starts, but I cut her off before she can say anything else.

“Don’t thank me. You’re going to live. You’re going to.” The lids of her eyes seem to get heavier as each blink takes longer. The rise of her chest is getting harder and harder to recognize. “Carmen, please. You have to stay awake. I just have to find a way to safely remove the blade and stop the bleeding. You’re going to be okay, you have to be okay. You—”

Weakly, she brings her hand to my arm, and I stop talking for a moment at the feeling of her cold, clammy skin covering my own. She says nothing as more tears escape the

both of us.

“You’re the only person I can say with certainty I will always love. You’ve always been such a beautiful dreamer and I just—” Tears gather in my eyes, blurring my vision, and I can’t get any more words though my mouth. Can’t seem to get out the words she deserves to hear from someone before life escapes her grasp, but I don’t know how to say them.

“I will thank you. And I will always love you too...I just need you to p-p-promise me some- something.” Her voice is getting smaller now. Her breathing is inconsistent, and her head is getting heavier in my hands like it’s getting too hard to hold it up herself anymore.

“Anything,” I say in a rush, knowing that there is nothing I would deny her anymore. I would promise her anything in this life or the next if it means her last moments can be as peaceful as possible despite the pain.

“Live. Escape, and live. Live a beautiful life and love. For me, don’t deny yourself this anymore.” She looks at me with such clarity and so much pleading that I know this is something she would have wanted for me regardless. Her last words, her last desire in this world before her soul leaves me behind is for my happiness. And for her—only for her, do I know I will find a way to be that. So I just smile at her, nod my head, and move my right hand down to her left, linking our pinkies together for the last time.

“I promise.” It’s then that she lets out one last breath. One last word, a barely there whisper of “okay” before her eyes glass over. Two final tears fall from them as her whole body sags against the tree. Tears continue to slip down my cheeks and into my mouth. Bringing my lips to her forehead, I give her one final act of affection, a goodbye for the both of us. Then I whisper one more thing. A wish that I hope she somehow is able to hear.

“Dream something beautiful for me.”

And then I scream. The most gut wrenching, soul crushing sound, and I don't even care who hears it as I fully cradle her lifeless body, rocking her in my arms. Her blood covers most of my own, but I don't care. I can't bring myself to care about much of anything as I wrap myself around her and let myself mourn the loss of the most beautifully misunderstood woman I have ever had the pleasure to know.

I couldn't tell how long I stayed there. I couldn't tell how long I cried and rocked her body in my arms and prayed for her peace to a God I'm not sure I believe in but know she did. I don't know how long it took me to crack my eyes open after they had all but swollen shut so I could close her eyes for the last time and watch her dream. I couldn't say why I whispered to her the whole time. The little “something goods” I always wished someone would tell me when I was little, those were the things I whispered in hopes that maybe her soul lingered nearby to listen to.

It isn't until a cool breeze brushes across my bare shoulders that I slip back to reality and check my surroundings. A chill sweeps through me and the all-consuming silence that devours me whole while her body lays stiffly in my arms that are now caked in her blood that has long since dried.

Softly, I lift her body off mine and lay it on the ground. Nausea threatens to take over as my stomach roils with the realization that I'm meant to just leave her body here for the bugs to devour.

She deserved better.

More.

She deserved someone who would have been able to save her.

I'm not sure I'd be able to carry her back to the house, but it doesn't stop me from trying. Even though my bones are weak with exhaustion, I attempt to lift her into my arms. But her limbs are longer than mine, and we've been here so long that her body no longer has any free range of motion—each joint incredibly stiff.

Hot tears well in my eyes again as I set her lifeless body back down and push the knotted and filthy strands of hair away from her face and behind her ears before forcing myself to stand, finally walking away from her. Each step gets harder to take than the last, as it just feels wrong to make the journey back to the last place I want to venture on my own. It won't take long, though. If I decide to run, it would only take five minutes. But I am in no hurry to put distance between her and me. Not when I still feel as if her wound is my own.

Not when my own heart stopped beating with hers.

So I walk.

Slowly.

I painfully feel the growth of distance with each step.

And when I turn back around, she's nowhere in sight. Her body is nowhere to be seen, and I wish it were because I had unknowingly gone too far, but I'll never forget the stretch of Earth that soaked every bit of her blood that it could get.

I can now only find solace in the life that will one day bloom in favor of what had been stolen from her.

And for now, that will have to be enough for me...at least, almost enough. I fear, though, that my bones may become a gate for the wasteland that now resides within me. The absence of my withered heart—taken by grief—just might leave my body

without a trace of blood to flow through my veins. I may very well become a sorry excuse for a carcass that not even vultures would dare feast upon because I would only taste of the bitterness and sorrow I am now entirely made of.

### Seven Minutes: Ronan

Running away from the fight didn't feel right, even though I knew it's what she would have wanted me to do. The sound of Carmen's screams filling the air would have done nothing but get Silene killed if she continued to hear them, and I knew she trusted me to save her. But when I followed the sound that pierced the air around me, I realized she was never even there.

Her body was nowhere to be found, but in the place of where it should have been, lay a speaker with the sound of her pain and fear playing over and over again. It was then I remembered the photos of us scattered over the bedroom walls and realized they could have easily recorded us just the same.

But if I had to leave Silene alone, then I was going to make it worth it. That's what I told myself at least, but that's not what happened. I never found Carmen, and as the sun sank and the moonlight trickled between the open spaces of the trees, I returned to the house to wait. All I could do at the time was hope that Carmen and Silene would both be there when I arrived.

But they weren't.

For several hours I waited and waited for any sign of them through the treeline. I walked the tunnel path we were supposed to take until I hit the entrance where we left Carmen and checked through the opening, but they weren't there either. Then, I traced the steps to where I had left Silene, and even in the darkness, I could see the

bodies that littered the ground.

It was a massacre. I got on my hands and knees to search the bodies, seeing if I could make out the feel of her hair, slope of her nose, or small calloused hands. I did everything I could, but her body wasn't there. That small fact alone allowed me to fully take in a breath for a moment before crawling back in the tunnel and deciding which way to go. Forward? Or back?

For some unexplainable reason though, something pulls me back to the beginning.

So I walk that tortuous distance back to the house and up the steps and wonder what has happened. In these hours that I've searched for my home, where has she been? What will I see when I find her? Each question grows darker and darker as the tunnel lights dim and flicker around me. Even when I get to the room and peer out the window to see her walking back alone, a growing pit forms in my stomach as I dart for the window that will lead me straight to her. The lights from the house flicker on her body and cast shadows over her face, but the closer I get to her, the more she seems off.

Gone is the woman that notes every movement around her, because this one looks right through me as I approach her. She has no care or concern for who or what could be running toward her. Gone is the woman who hates to show any emotion that could make her appear weak. Now her face is swollen with the tears that keep falling whether she knows it or not.

Gone is the woman who endures.

The woman in front of me looks tired and defeated as blood coats her arms and her clothes, causing them to cling to her stomach and legs. Her shoulders fall forwards, her feet barely raise off the ground, her gaze is withdrawn.



I slow my steps as I approach and gently place my hands on her upper arms to stop her movements, but she flinches away. When she looks at me, it appears as if she just sees right through me. I might as well be a ghost the way she doesn't even process my presence, and we stay like that for a while. Her staring into the distance, slightly swaying on her feet, tightening and loosening her grip on her bloody axes while I hold onto her and wait for any real sign of the woman I love hiding in her.

A cool breeze wraps around our bodies, and she jolts back to reality for a brief moment before slipping back into a semi-conscious state. I almost decide to guide her body down to the ground to let her rest when her unseeing eyes focus on where I'm touching her.

"Tell me you didn't do it," she demands quietly, but her voice is hoarse and raspy as she snuffles. She uses the back of her hand to wipe away the trail of tears that have finally slowed.

"Si, what are you talking about?" I ask cautiously, knowing this moment is as fragile as shattered glass put back together with scotch tape. It's useless to pretend the break isn't inevitable, but preventing it for as long as possible will never not be worth the shot.

"Tell me you didn't do it, Ronan. Please, just—" One more tear slips down her face and as it drips off her chin, she finally looks at me. Red rims her eyes, and despite the absence of any physical injuries, her brows are scrunched together as if she's in an unimaginable amount of pain. "Just tell me it wasn't you."

Understanding pours through me as I hold her grief-filled gaze. I try to get closer to her, but as soon as I do, she pulls away and extends one of her arms, bloodied axe and all. Any trust she may have looked at me with hours ago is long gone, and I do nothing but hold my hands up in surrender when the sharp, bloodied metal presses into the center of my chest.

“Please,” she whispers, and in that one word I hear the anguish and turmoil she’s fighting. But I can’t tell her what she wants to hear. Not when I failed to keep Carmen safe after leaving her to fight alone. I may not have been the person to stop her heart or put her in here, but I couldn’t find her or protect her when she needed me the most. So I can’t tell Silene what she wants to hear. Saying I didn’t do this would be a lie when I didn’t do anything that could’ve prevented it, either.

“I can’t.”

I wasn’t sure it was possible for her to look at me in a way that would make break, but she does. Disbelief and despair linger in her sweeping gaze before she nods her head as if she’s trying to convince herself of something only she knows.

“I told you. I told you that you live long enough to remember, and now you do. You remember and, God, I was hoping I was wrong. I was hoping my memories were wrong or that he lied to me, and I was hoping that I would have something left after this was all over. Hoping maybe there would be some part of me left worth saving...I’m not so sure that’s possible anymore.” She trails off, her eyes narrowing as she looks away from me.

“Silene, please just listen. I can explain everything, I swear I ca—” I try to force out, stepping forward despite the weapon pressing into me with every breath that I take, but her eyes grow wide and wild with a fierce determination to keep me away from her. I’ve never wished to be closer to her than I do in this moment.

“No,” she spits, voice rough and cold, and when I look into her eyes, I see it’s not fear that has its grip on her, but something far worse. With one look, I see clear as day that its potent and vile claws have sunken deep into her.

Doubt.

There's nothing I can do to convince her to hear me out right now. She's too far gone to believe anything that comes out of my mouth, and so I'll do one last thing for her, even if it means this is the last way I'll know her. At least it will be on her own terms. At least it will make her feel as if she's in control of something right now.

My blue eyes stare into her green ones, and in them, I see a kaleidoscope of memories and emotions play out in front of me while I remove every weapon I carry on my body. Every silver dagger I had taken from a hunter is thrown on the ground with blatant disregard, but when the black blade touches my hand I stop.

The knowledge of what this blade was meant to be makes it hard for me to drop it like it means nothing, when in reality, it's a symbol of the life I thought she and I might one day experience. So instead, I drop to my knees in front of her and carefully place the dagger next to my body. Not for a single second do I look away from her, for when she wields that weapon and rids me of the life I have dedicated to healing her, I wish to see nothing else but what it was all for.

In her gaze I see everything we ever were and the life I had hoped to build with her after all this. I see what we could have been if not for the lifestyle we fell into and wonder how different it would have been if we had met at a coffee shop or book store instead. I can't help but wonder if in that life we would have survived and hope that in another universe, we do.

With the way she's looking at me, I would like to believe maybe she's thinking about that too. It's unlikely though because the longer we gaze at each other, the more the war rages behind those beautiful mossy green eyes. Any part of her that loves—no, loved—me is dying as grief and doubt make a home within her heart and infect her mind.

I am nothing more than a casualty.

I lean back, sitting on my heels and laying my arms over my legs, with open palms. The picture of a willing sacrifice as I memorize every curve of her body and curl of her hair one more time.

She takes a step forward. And then another, and another, and suddenly she's standing close enough to touch, if I were so daring to reach out. But I won't. I'll respect the boundary she has set and instead wait. Her arm moves up to wipe away the evidence of tears she has shed one more time before dropping one axe and letting both hands grip the handle of the other, raising it above her head while the wind howls like a beast begging to be uncaged.

I know anything I say now won't be heard, but I don't mind it. I don't mind whispering the words one last time.

"I love you, and I'm so sorry."

The wind stops, as if nature itself began holding its breath to wait for a response I know will never come. She will not speak to me, and no matter how terrified I am of leaving her to do this alone, if it's my destiny then I will bear it with my shoulders raised and a small smile of acceptance on my face. I nod slowly, the movement small but one that she tracks nonetheless. Then she's taking a deep trembling breath as her hands slightly shake. One more breath before raising that axe higher and drawing it down upon me with a loud, Earth shattering scream.

From the second the blade begins its descent, everything plays out in front of me in slow motion. I let my eyes close, wanting to remember a better time before I lose the ability to recall such things forever. I see my life, all the best parts of it, flash by for what feels like several minutes.

The first memory was the first time we met and her holding my wrist at an angle it should not be, an obvious threat to never touch her again and my immediate, resulting

intrigue. Then it flashes to the first mission we'd ever gone on together and her almost killing me for getting in her way.

“ You were told to stand back,” she had said to me while storming forward and harshly pushing at my chest.

“ I tried, ” was my only response at the time. She kept pushing, demanding answers about why I had interfered but I couldn't muster more than an indifferent shrug. I never gave her the answer she was looking for. It's one of my many regrets, but in that silk black dress that clung to every curve of her body, I couldn't tell her I didn't like how every man in the room had been looking at her the way I wished I could everyday.

That mission was such a large-scale event, there was no way to kill every man that looked at her. So, selfishly, I made sure every man there thought she was mine by stepping in for a dance or two, instead. Consequences be damned, I cared a lot less about a target than I did about her.

The next memory was the first time we hid out at the house together—the first time she opened up to me. It was her, in all her messy hair, baggy clothes, clean faced glory. God, the way she laughed at my jokes no matter how awful they were, the way she stubbornly hesitated to even let me know her. In the end, it was a storm in this very house that brought out her truths. No matter how limited they were at the time, it was more than I'd been able to get out of her for months, and it was out of fear of all the words she may never get to say.

The fear of no one ever knowing who she is.

Suddenly, I'm flashing forward to the conversation when we figured out exactly what we were to each other. She was in nothing but one of my cut up T-shirts and short shorts, her hair thrown in a bun on top of her head. She was attempting to teach me

how to cook for the umpteenth time, but I wasn't catching on. Admittedly, I wasn't quite focused on cooking anyway. Not when she was wearing my clothes and dangling the possibility of us right in front of my face.

"Ronan, you know it's strictly prohibited. No fraternization between co-workers. He'd have our heads for it," she had said while laughing at my efforts, but I was relentless.

"He hasn't found out yet, and when he does, it'll be too late anyways. You know he'd be stupid to get rid of his two best agents."

"Two of his best we may be, but we're being reckless enough as it is," she proclaimed, and I knew that she was right. Yet...

"Move in with me."

"Ronan, I can't just—"

"Yes, you can. Keep your apartment if you're worried about anything, or just want to make sure you have space when you want it. But bring some stuff here. Then you could at least stop stealing my clothes everytime you stop by unannounced."

"You love it when I steal your clothes and stop by unannounced." She pouts, stopping all movements.

"You know I do, but I would rather you have a key and be here more than you're not. You know that you love hanging out with me."

"Uh uh, tolerate at best. Check yourself, Blue."

She moved in a month later, and it felt right. Every second we had shared a space

called home. The memories that pass after that are a mix of restless nights and mornings when she tried to get me out of bed but I would convince her to stay a little while longer with whatever methods I could depending on the day.

These are my seven minutes, I realize. All the memories I get to relive before I die, and they all belong to her. But when time speeds up again, and her scream echoes in the absence of the wind, I watch as the weapon flies past my face and digs into the ground several feet away from me.

My breath hitches as I focus entirely on her empty hands and how she looks at them as if they do not belong to her. Her breathing rapidly increases as she begins to roughly grab and scratch at her skin.

Every inch of it that had been caked with dried blood is being clawed at with each harsh breath that escapes her.

“Get it off me,” she sobs as she continues clawing at her skin. Each scratch results in flakes falling freely to the ground, but she continues digging into her skin over and over again.

“Get it off, Ronan,” she says again as her panic rises, and I move closer to her—crawling, but she backs away from me. Shaking her head as she mutters over and over again. My heart stops for a beat or two while watching her break this way knowing there is nothing that I can do to make it better.

“Get it off me, please.” A cry for help that agonizes me and chills me to the bone. I stumble to my feet, tripping over the emotion that bubbles and pours out of her, crashing into me in tidal waves.

“Ronan, please. Get it the fuck off me. It won’t come off.” Angrier. The words are progressively getting louder and louder, each movement jerkier than the last. I rush to

her as fresh blood begins to trickle from her arms and stomach. This time, she doesn't move away from me as my shaky hands grip her body and it collapses against me. Her arms wrap around my abdomen, and I let us both fall to the ground. I'm cradling her body, rocking us back and forth gently as she cries into my shirt, and I look up at the sky, unable to watch as she breaks.

"It's okay, it's going to be okay," I whisper, even as I know this may very well be her breaking point. Even though I know we can't stop now, I give her this moment of rest. Pressing one hand into her hair, pushing her further into my chest, while the other wraps around her body as I trace soothing circles down the length of her back.

Her hands grips my shirt with each sob that overcomes her. When sleep eventually takes over, I massage the irritated skin on both arms and kiss each fresh wound while rocking her body until the sun rises.

Although I'm not sure where this leaves the two of us, I'm thankful I can keep her safe while she sleeps. Even if she wakes up and hates me for it.



### Dead By Dusk: Silene

I 'm not quite sure how I got here. When I open my eyes, I'm tucked into Ronan's chest. His arms are wrapped around my body as he gently rocks us back and forth, and for a moment, I'm content. I don't want to move from where we rest, but I know we need to. However long we've been here is too long given the situation, but the throbbing in my head makes me want to stay. The swelling of my eyes makes it hard to even keep them open long enough to see anything, which almost solidifies that desire.

But I need to move.

My body aches, and as I try to stretch, Ronan's hold on me tightens and he rests his chin atop my head.

"How long have we been here?"

My throat feels overwhelmingly scratchy as I speak, but the sound of my voice is much worse. It's raw and deep and cracks more than it doesn't. Self consciously, I bring my hand to my throat, deeply rubbing the expanse of my neck. Coughing wracks my body for a moment, and when I open my eyes again, my gaze lands on my fingers and the dried blood packed under my nails.

"What is..." I attempt to remove myself from the fortress that is his arms, but he just continues to hold me in place while I observe my skin and clothes. Multiple areas are

covered in the same dried blood, even though there are no real wounds to dignify the amount of evidence left behind. “Ronan, what is— where is—let me go.”

I’m struggling to escape his grip, but he won’t release me. Won’t even loosen his grip. No matter how much I try, his hold just gets tighter, and the longer I struggle, the more I remember. But whatever well of tears I had been made of before sleep found me, has run dry. And suddenly, I’m not fighting to remove myself from his grip as much as I’m fighting him. Still, he doesn’t let go. He remains steady through every punch I throw into his chest and every question or accusation I toss his way.

He endures until I tire myself out and am left weakly questioning why it had been her and not me. Not once does he correct me, probably assuming that nothing would be able to change my mind and that guilt will most likely weigh on me for as long as I breathe.

It’s not quite guilt, though.

No, it’s rage. An inferno burning me from the inside out, chanting a dark prayer for revenge.

“Let. Me. Go.” His hold on me hesitantly loosens as I grit each word out through clenched teeth. I immediately remove myself from his embrace, crawling several feet away, taking deep breaths, trying to cool the fire that feels like it’s burning me alive. The chill that flows through the air does nothing but suffocate me with all the words I’ll never get to say.

I slowly move to stand, but Ronan doesn’t move. He instead stays seated on his heels, and I take this opportunity to fully look at him and the dark circles beneath his eyes. He is hunched over, and he looks so defeated and withdrawn that I can’t help but step closer to him again. His eyes trail the length of my body, from my shoes all the way past the hand I have extended out to him and land on his face. I steady my breathing

under his graze while sorting out my thoughts. Everything that needs to be tucked away for the time being and what I'll keep at the forefront of my mind to guide me the rest of the way through this insanity.

"It's not safe out here," I calmly state, and he slowly nods, taking my hand and standing up to full height. I drop his hand to turn around, but he grips my wrist and pulls me back into him, holding me again. But this time I don't pull away. I hold him the way he held me as he murmurs in my ear—emotion lacing every word. "I'm so sorry. I couldn't save her but I made sure you were safe. The whole night, I made sure you were okay."

I let my hold on him tighten, not trusting myself to speak before pulling away and offering him a small grateful smile.

"I tried to find her, I swear it," he whispers, his eyes pleading with me to understand what he's saying. For a moment, I remember the fight and the screams that sent terror racing through me before the rage took over. I remember him telling me he would save her, and I do understand what he means. The direction he ran was completely opposite from where I had found her. There would have been no way for him to know it was a ploy to separate us.

"I know, Ronan," I say softly, offering him my hand, but instead of taking hold of it, he laces his pinky into mine and brings it to his mouth, softly kissing my knuckles. When our hands drop, we hold each other's gaze for a moment more before looking to the house and then the space around us.

"It's quiet," he notes, his eyes squinting as he looks at the surrounding emptiness.

"I'm not surprised," I start while shading my eyes and quirking my eyebrow at him. He looks down at me, tilting his head to the side as if wanting me to continue, and I stare back out to scan the treeline, searching for any hidden movement. "He's lost a

lot of men recently. He'd be stupid to send anyone else out here when he's going to need protection."

"Protection from what?" he asks, but the way he's looking at me when I turn back to face him tells me he already knows the answer. Even if he would rather leave now and fly to some remote island, he knows I would never leave things unfinished.

"Me," I state plainly, and his eyebrows draw together as he tries to grab me, but I move out of his reach, holding out my palm as a way of asking him to not try to stop me or talk me out of what needs to be done. "No, you can't stop me. It's already been decided."

"You can't seriously still want to go back there and kill him, Silene. You have to let this one go," he speaks with urgency, borderline begging me to give in just this once. But I cannot simply turn my back on what has been done to us and the others who came before. We cannot all be casualties of this man's power hungry paranoia. Not anymore.

"You know I have to. I have a score to settle." I shrug lightly as I say this, and he just brings his fingers to his tired eyes and presses into them before roughly rubbing his face. When he drops them, any sign of exhaustion that had been there before is gone, replaced by his cool, calculating gaze. For a moment, I see part of the man I love again. His steadfast confidence in me and unwavering support will forever be something I carry by my side, and I think that when this is all over, I'll say the words I haven't dared speak yet.

"Okay, so you kill him and then what?" he asks, but he's no longer focused on me or what I'm saying and doing. Instead, he's turning over plans in his head. Assessing the probability of each idea that could result in our survival or death. As another breeze flows through the air and pushes my hair out of my eyes, I think about how this all should end and know there's only way it can.

With fire.

Something that will cleanse the Earth of the stain he's left. No evidence of who he was or what he did will be found, no one will remember the man who clawed his way up to the top of the food chain just to be overcome by madness and tormented with delusions that he would never be safe. There will be no proof of the payments he sent so others would kill innocent men and women who had families. There will be no hint that suggests there was ever a monster who sent his daughter to die.

He will be what he fought his whole life to escape becoming.

Nothing.

"I'm going to burn that place to the ground."

I'm not sure if it was the conviction in my voice or the confidence I carried, but he no longer appears concerned. Something about him seems more proud than anything as one side of his mouth tips up into one of his half smiles accompanied by an irritating wink of his capacious blue eyes. Before I can get lost in the comfort of knowing he's on my side no matter what, I gently push his shoulder and look away with a smile.

"Sunrise is long gone. Nathaniel and Adonis with it. We're most likely on our own, so make yourself useful and help me back up onto the roof. I'll get something you can use to climb after," I say haughtily. His laughter fills the space around me. I can't help the smile that forms upon my lips, mirroring his amusement.

"If you have a plan, why don't we just go to one of the tunnel entrances into the woods?" he asks through bouts of laughter as he clutches his stomach and runs his fingers through his hair. My eyes trace every movement he makes, enjoying that he feels a little more like himself, a quality I need from him at the moment to help keep me moving. It's a gentle yet painful reminder of the promise I had made to Carmen

before she took her last breath, and even though it still hurts every time my heart beats, I know I cannot fulfill her promise without avenging her. And I don't think I can keep moving without this man that wholly believes in all I am to remind me that there's something after this ends.

Should I survive, I still have him.

Always.

"Si?" His voice breaks me from my train of thought and forces a tight lipped smile from me.

"Because we need to know exactly where we're going if we're going to do this. I need another look at the map." He shakes his head before squatting down low and weaving his fingers together, forming a space for my foot to step into.

"As you wish, Killer," he says, smirking and waiting for me to move. I place my hands on my waist, cocking my hip to one side, debating if I should question him further. Ask if my every demand is his wish to fulfill. Maybe when this is all said and done, I can ask him and see if he'd get on his knees for me with one simple command. But right now, I need to focus and not delay the inevitable journey back inside the house. The knowledge that my feet don't rest on solid ground has my hands sweating and throat constricting.

My stomach drops at the thought, and I have to force myself to push away the anxiety.

"Come on, Si. Don't let your fear guide you. You can't hold onto it forever," he says, and I can't help but force my attention back to the man in front of me, patiently waiting. The man who has said this to me before and unknowingly helped me find my way down on the first day we woke here.

Dropping my hands from my waist and placing them on his shoulders, I place my foot in his hold. With far too much ease, he lifts my body above his head, my chest easily the same height as the roof, making it easy to pull myself up. It took no more than a minute—the whole process—but not for a second did I have fear. Once I was in his hands, there was no moment that I worried I would fall. Not because I trusted myself to hold on, but because I knew he would always catch me in my fall.

“Alright, I’ll be right back. I just have to get one of the curtains from downstairs, and I’ll tie it to one of the bed sheets. That should be long enough to tie around a spike and reach you,” I call down to him. He winks, crossing his arms over his broad chest and nods at me as I turn around and rush to the window.

I tell myself he’ll be fine by himself, that he’ll pick up the weapons he left discarded on the ground and wait for me. He can defend himself just fine. But as I’m rushing down the steps of the house, I can’t help but feel unnerved. My chest tightens as I hear muffled voices come from outside of the house, too far away for me to reach him, and next thing I know, I’m running back up the stairs with the long cloth dragging behind me.

When I get back to the window and look around the field, I don’t see him. His weapons still lay haphazardly on the ground, but there’s no him. My hands tighten around the fabric in my hand, wringing it out as I bend my body through the hole.

“Ronan!” I call out, my voice carrying further than I thought possible. He doesn’t answer. I cautiously step down the slope of the roof, looking around the expanse of land that now feels as if it extends forever.

“Ronan!” I call out again, but still, no response. No other voice than the sound of my own taunting me with the name of the man who was here just a few minutes ago waiting for me.

He's gone.

Panic tries to take control of me, but I reign my emotions in and remind myself to breathe as Ronan always does while I tie the cloth to one of the large metal spikes. I pull, putting as much of my weight against it as I can to make sure it will hold before throwing it over the side and ensuring it's long enough for me to reach. Once I'm sure it is, I do what I did six days ago.

I jump.

Once I'm steady on the ground, I'm checking the immediate surroundings of the house. There's no sign of struggle, no red covering the green grass beneath my feet. But as I turn the final corner, it's obvious he is no longer here.

Someone else has taken his place as I feel a blade on the skin of my neck. There's enough pressure for me to know that with one small movement, it will slice my skin.

"Don't move. I've come to take you back, dead or alive." A laugh tears through me as something in me snaps. I move forward just enough for the blade to pierce the skin of my neck and feel the warmth of my blood flow freely down my chest. The wound isn't deep enough to kill, but it's definitely enough to throw him off track. And when my laughter dies, I say the one thing he should know before he dies in a cold, detached tone as my hand slowly moves to one of the daggers at my side.

"A smart man would've just gone for the kill."

For a moment I feel the way he tries to deepen the wound, making for an easy death, but he's not fast enough as I swipe my blade across my chest and let it sink into the skin just below his elbow, and then tear through veins and tendons as I drag the blade all the way down to his wrist.



He drops his weapon, backstepping away from me as I begin to laugh again before dragging two of my fingers across the dagger, clearing it of his blood. He wears a prominent scowl on his tanned, aged face. He's examining the wound, undoubtedly noting it's not deep enough for a quick death, but one that will be slow and painful if not treated soon. He isn't deterred though. It instead seems as if the promise of death only compels him forward.

One last job well done, I suppose. If he's going to die, he wants to do so fulfilling his purpose. It's almost admirable when he pulls another blade out and readies it in his grip.

Almost.

We rush toward each other, each carrying our respective weapons in our hands. He is the first to throw out his arm, attempting to easily slash my neck, but I crouch low, making the same motion he did, catching one of his shins in the process. A deep, pained grunt fills the air as he kicks out my leg from underneath me.

I roll away from where I fall just in time to evade the impact of his dark leather boot stomping into my head, but not quick enough. I release a loud yelp at the painful pull that results from the pressure on my hair and roll back to where he stands, shoving my blade into his calve and twisting it.

He collapses, and as I rip my knife from his leg, dark red blood oozes from the gaping wound. An unfeeling smile forms on my lips as I crawl onto his body and sit at his waist.

I drag my blade across the man's neck, watching as skin breaks and warm blood bursts over my hand indicating I had hit a vein. I wasn't planning on the cut being as deep as it was, but I can't bring myself to care the way that I knew I should at the moment. Instead, I just let my hand cover the length of his neck and feel the

haphazard beating of his heart beneath my fingertips, and let a crazed smile grow on my face. I grip the handle of the dagger so tightly that my knuckles begin to turn white as I force myself to focus.

You can't kill him yet, a small voice in the back of my mind reminds me, and I do my best to tell myself that over and over again, but the man struggling beneath me is making it hard to not just end him as he spits blood at me and laughs out a weak, "Kill me if you want. You're both already dead."

My grip on his neck tightens, and I force his face to the side, my smile widening. "Why would I do that when the sight of you suffering beneath me brings me so much joy?" I question and watch as his face pales further. Logically, I know it's likely due to the amount of blood he has lost, but it's nice to believe I've instilled fear into this man.

I shouldn't kill him without demanding answers, but my control has frayed and before I finish him off, I lean my body down and bring my mouth to his ear to whisper a quick message. The last words to a man who will die a failure.

"Anyone who dares touch him will die by my hands. Their blood will be spilled come sunset, and every drop will be a love letter and an apology for all the words I have been robbed of," I start, and as his arms struggle for freedom beneath my body, I huff out a quick laugh and continue, "If only you had killed me when you had the chance rather than running your mouth. Now, their blood will be on your hands."

And then, sitting back up, I finish the movement I had begun earlier, digging the tip of the blade into his skin and roughly dragging it across the length of his neck. Agonizing screams fill the air, and when the blade reaches the halfway point, I make sure to push it in deeper across the bob of his Adam's apple. Satisfied as his blood shoots out of his neck, splashing onto my arms and chest before pooling around his body, I feel his pulse grow weaker and weaker before his final heartbeat shoots

through my hand like one final distress signal. I feel no remorse as I numbly stare down at the man before me .

They all die by dusk.

### Wake Up: Ronan

“ Ronan, you have to get up,” Silene says from where she sits atop me. I’m still laying in my bed, my hair is longer than it should be right now and is falling onto my forehead in black, messy waves. I have an odd sense of Déjà vu.

My hands wander under the white button down shirt that she had stolen from me before straddling me.

Deciding there are other things I’d rather be doing than leaving this bed, I begin unbuttoning the shirt from the goddess on top of me. It seems, however, she doesn’t agree with my idea when she lets out a loud, throaty laugh and throws her head back in amusement before grabbing ahold of my wrists and pinning them above my head. She leans forward, bringing her nose to mine. Her long hair cascades around us in dark brown waves, still slightly mussed from sleep, and her mossy green eyes bore into mine while a smile graces her full lips as she lets her hands roam up the expanse of my arms.

When they reach a wound on my bicep I wince, looking down at the irritated area. The scab that had been forming begins to fall away, and red drips on the white sheets we lay in.

“Ronan, you have to get up now. Come on,” Silene says, humor still etched onto her face as if she doesn’t even notice the blood dripping and making a mess.

Her hands move to cup my jaw, and when she does, I pull away as if I have been physically struck, but she doesn't react to that either as she pulls me closer to her body. Even as uncertainty courses through me, I wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her closer to my body. She laughs at the actions, trying to pull her chest away from my own. Fits of giggles continue to rack through her.

“Ronan,” she starts, gasping for air as her laughter continues. “Come on, you have to wake up.”

When I don't pull away, her laughter turns into deep gasping breaths, as if she can't get in enough air. Concerned, I let her go to ask if she's okay, but when she pulls away, her body is covered in blood. With wide, haunted eyes, she breathlessly peers at me as if I'm not understanding her.

But then I realize the blood on her body isn't hers. It's mine. Bloody patches of my body where skin has been removed scatter my torso. They're not large but plentiful, and when two more cuts appear on my upper arm and shoulder, I look back up to her eyes that hold so much pain and horror.

“Ronan, wake up!”

I wake, bound to a chair, screaming in agony.

### Beginning of The End: Silene

After killing the man who helped take Ronan away, I numbly stumble over to where my black dagger lays on the ground. Turning it over in my hand, I let the feeling of what it had been wash over me. Closing my eyes, small memories flicker through me but instead of happiness or peace, all I feel is rage.

Red hot anger courses through my body and doesn't stop until it has me deep within its clutches. But when I reopen my eyes, my focus narrows on the paper placed where I had just picked up the blade. It was dirty and crumpled, but it couldn't have come from anyone other than Ronan. It had to have been something that he set down last night while I slept.

Curiosity begs me to open the small paper to check what's inside, but its quiet pleas are nothing compared to my fury. So I pocket it before climbing back on top of the house. I waste no time washing off the hard flakes of blood that are still irritating my skin, but when my gaze catches in the mirror, I don't see myself anymore. At least, not the version of me I had become—but the sixteen year old who had no one in this world that loved her. The one who was constantly scared of what her father's affection meant for her, even if it was all she wanted. I saw her innocent and fearful eyes, and knew that the version of myself today felt far too much like she did.

I did not come all this way to be who I was, though.

We do not die today.

I say this in my mind as I clean off the rest of the blood and went on a hunt through the house. I'm scouring the room Ronan and I used to share, searching for anything that can guide me in the right direction. I'm emptying every drawer looking for anything other than the map with no key or direction, and just when I'm about to give up, I have one more idea. It's ridiculous and unlikely, but—it's something.

Feeling along the underside of the wooden desk, I squeeze my eyes shut as I wait for any change in texture beneath my fingertips, and there it is. Along the right edge, I feel the smooth, soft texture of tape before the rough paper it's attached to. Delicately, I remove the paper, still not daring to open my eyes until I know it's secure within my grasp, and then...I still don't look. There would be no reason to put something away like this if it weren't important, and yet I'm questioning if it will even be something useful to me right now.

One second passes, and then another as I blindly unfold the paper in my hands. Only then do I steal a glance. Its secrets are unfurled before me and I see parchment paper, so thin it's translucent. Words and numbers are scattered throughout in a seemingly disorganized fashion, and I take memorized steps back to the bed where the map had been discarded earlier.

But it's not there anymore.

I frantically search everywhere that we had taken it in the house, but no matter how many objects I turn over, I can't find it, and all I'm left with is my thoughts as I'm roughly pulling on my wild hair.

Think, Silene. Think.

Studying the parchment once more, I figure out where I think I'm starting and take a pen, sketching out what I can remember, attempting to recreate a visual of the path I need to take. I throw the paper back onto the bed and think about how to execute my

plan even if it's not necessarily fully formed. In my head though, one word plays over and over again, and I know where I want to start. If everything must burn, so too must this chapter that helped build the foundation of mine and Ronan's relationship and the woman I had become.

Everything must burn.

I make quick work of gathering every piece of paper in the house and scattering it down the stairs, and into the living area, but keeping most of it within the upstairs bedroom. Once everything is placed in a way that should easily spread throughout, I grab one of the thick curtains and tear a piece long enough to use as a mask before stepping into the kitchen.

Opening the drawer next to the sink, I grab the old lighter I easily disregarded upon searching the kitchen for weapons the first time around. Then, I walk to the stoves and start the gas on the stove burners but don't allow the fire to catch. Then, I open the oven, and repeat the process before calmly walking up the stairs for the last time.

As I'm about to light the first piece of paper, I hesitate before walking to the dressers where we kept extra clothing and pull out one of his shirts. I don't have much time before the smell of gas reaches me, so I bring it with me, light the paper, and lock myself in the tunnels. Not a moment to waste, I take the tunnel directly to the right and run as fast and far as possible before I hear the explosion. The ground shakes beneath my feet as the cobblestones walls crack—small pieces crumbling to the ground around me.

I will my feet to move faster as my breathing becomes labored, but when a rush of thick black smoke pushes past me, I'm thrown to the ground as the force of the explosion catches up to me. Fumes fill my lungs as my vision blurs and coughing overtakes me. Quickly, I remove one of my daggers, tearing the fabric of Ronan's shirt and tie it around my head, creating a makeshift mask. It hardly helps protect me



from the billowing, black smoke that causes my throat, greedy for clean air, to constrict.

Pushing to my feet, I continue. Stumbling through the dark tunnels, guided only by will, when a tingling sensation flows through my veins. Every hair on my arms stands straight up.

I'm being watched.

I almost stop, but I don't. While hiding in such conditions would be quite easy, surviving—unmoving—would not be.

I must keep moving.

But continuing to walk or run when my throat has been smoldered and my head is light, I wonder if this is the end for me. Have I already failed? Have I succeeded in nothing more than broken promises?

White spots dot across my vision, and as coughing becomes me, I drag my body forward. Further. I crawl, inching myself forward as far as I can go. Propelled by the desire to be more than accidental lies. More than someone who fails every time it matters.

Live. Escape and live.

A desperate cry forces itself out of me as I keep going. Pushing, despite the blindness and inability to breathe.

Live.

And then a body approaches. A silhouette. But my vision is far too hazy to recognize

anything other than the blur of it all. Closer and closer the person comes, and I grip the dagger in my hand tightly, ready to swing, but my efforts are futile as my weapon is ripped from my hand. Sure and steady hands grip my wrist, and I fight the best that I can as my body is dragged on the harsh warm ground. Stones tear into my skin as I continue to fight, but soon enough, my body finally gives out as I succumb to the demanding darkness.

\* \* \*

I wake with a start. Heavy metal encases my wrists, and chains rattle around me with my every movement. The sound elicits a groan from me as my head pounds, but I continue pulling and tugging, frantically checking the space around me. I immediately stop at the sight of what lies behind.

Or, in more accurate terms, who sits in wait.

“ I expected more of a fight from you, though your little spectacle was quite entertaining,” he says, a wide smile on his face. He wipes imaginary dirt from his pants legs from where he sits in a chair, not too far from where I’ve been abandoned on the ground. “I was almost worried for a moment.” A dark chuckle escapes him before he slams his palms against his thighs, bringing himself to stand. It’s then that I hear a delicate jingling sound, and my eyes zero in on the keys that dangle loosely from one of his belt loops.

“Miss Dimitriou...it was quite disappointing to hear what you have been up to. You showed such amazing promise and loyalty for such a long time,” he starts, but keeps a short distance between the two of us. I tilt my head to the side, intrigued by where his little spiel is leading.

“You’ve worked for me for two years, have you not? Tell me now, how long have you been whoring yourself out to the men you work with? I knew of your past, to a

certain extent. I have to, before bringing anyone onto my staff. And do you know what I thought to myself?" he questions me, exasperation lining his features. He rubs the underside of his jaw as if he's actively recalling the memory.

"Not particularly, but I have a feeling you're going to tell me anyway," I respond, feigning disinterest. Truthfully, I was curious. I wanted to know what his thoughts were, just as much as I wanted out of this atrocious smelling cell. His eyes narrow at me as he ticks his jaw and turns his back to me, beginning to walk away.

"I thought, 'How wonderful it is to have someone so undesirable, that not even her parents cared if she lived or died.' I just wish I would have had the foresight to see just how troublesome that could be. Was my praise not enough that you had to go and spread your legs to anyone who might pretend to care about you?"

"Oh, careful now. You're beginning to sound a little jealous. Don't tell me this is all because you wish it could've been you. I'm sorry, Robert, I just prefer my men with a little more passion, more giving, and less...well, less bitchy to put it bluntly."

He's in my face faster than I realize, slapping me so hard that I bite my tongue. The tang of blood fills my mouth, and I just smile, allowing it to flow down my chin and drip onto the floor.

"What did I say about being careful? This is like foreplay for me. I didn't know you had it in you," I say between bouts of deep laughter. He grips my face, pulling my body closer to his, and I begin to fight against his hold, making him come even closer than he already was.

Good.

"How could some insolent little slut know anything about me and what I'm capable of? How is it that you think my wife died, huh?" he asks, his grip becoming much

harsher and his eyes more crazed than I've ever seen them. Red circles his murky brown and green eyes and veins protrude from his neck, but my smile pushes back his punishing grip as much as possible. As he loosens his hold, I spit the blood that filled my mouth into his face.

"Insolent or not, at least I'm not dead," I retort, hoping to slightly throw him off, but it almost intensifies the madness that hides within him.

"Oh, but you will be," he laughs, as he pushes my face and stands, wiping away the bloody spit as he walks away.

"Will I?" I question, and when a small click sounds out behind him after those two small words, he stops. Slowly, he turns back to me, watching as I push to stand, dangling his keys in my fingers. It's an unnecessary taunt, but the look of shock and panic on his face is worth it.

I begin walking towards him as he steps back and bangs on the door. The only way out of here.

"What's wrong, Robert? Can't get out without these?" Each step toward him has him increasing the distance between us however he can. "Not so tough when I'm not chained down now, are you?" I look down at him from where he stands, studying the man before me.

"I have a question before I kill you," I state plainly, watching him. He doesn't show fear, but the caution displayed in his every movement is obvious. "What compelled you to do all of this? Everyone we captured for you, how did they deserve to be hunted like prey? How did anyone we killed for you deserve to die? We looked into it all. Every single person. And no matter how many answers I found, there were always more questions."

“They were threats to me,” he defends himself, but I just laugh at the blatant lie, already knowing the truth of it all. “You would never understand. When you get ahead, enemies are inevitable.”

“But they weren’t enemies, were they?”

“They were,” he exclaims confidently. His posture is wide and proud, and he appears so sure of what he’s saying. It’s almost convincing, but when you already know the truth, you begin to see through the lies a bit easier.

“We did so much research. Do you know what we found?” He huffs out a deep breath, clearly annoyed by anything I have to offer to this conversation, but waves his hand in a gesture to carry on.

“Tell me what you think you found.”

“We found that they were innocent.”

“No.” A simple smile graces his lips, one of denial, and he clasps his hands together in a show of ending this conversation, but I’m just getting started.

“We found that they were just random people you passed on the street or in the store. One wrong look from them was all it took to solidify their fates. Did you even know their names before you sent the kill orders? Before you sold their organs and body parts off to the highest bidder?” I demand, bringing myself closer to him with each accusatory word.

“You’re wrong,” he says, shaking his head, continuing to back away from me. With each step backwards, his hands pull at each other, and his lips twist with disgust and disbelief.

“No. You’re paranoid and sick in the fucking head!” I declare while storming forward. I jab my finger against his chest, but when he roughly grabs my hand, I let him force me away.

“Your storytelling abilities are lacking just about as much as your intelligence.” He says dismissively.

The door behind us clangs open, and I sharply turn to keep an eye on everyone in the room. Three men enter, eyeing me like I’m a new threat, giving me far more credit than they did the last time we saw each other. For a beat, we all look to and from one another, waiting for someone to make a move, and when someone does, all hell breaks loose. Mr. Delgado slides against the back wall, watching the four of us fight. But as each man falls, another enters the room, and I can’t keep up with who’s alive or dead and how many people there are.

Arms grab me from behind and lock my arms at my sides, I have no other way to fight. And when I feel a sharp pain in the back of my neck accompanied by a tingling sensation, I know that something is very wrong.

“Calm, now. When you wake, you won’t remember a thing. After that, you’ll find yourself a lot more willing to accept this one simple fact,” he says, a sinister smile pulling up his lips. His tongue darts out to lick the area as if he’s savoring the way these words taste.

“You will die.”

“I will not.” I fight back, even as drowsiness threatens me, stealing every last bit of strength I have left.

“Yes, my dear, you will. And, well, it will be quite delightful, really. I must tell you, seeing as you can do nothing about it now. It’s genius, if I do say so myself,” he says,

and I fight to keep my eyes open. Blinking rapidly, I meet his gaze as best as I can and throw him a glare that promises death. He only laughs.

“As I’m sure you know, Ronan did not tell me anything, much to my dismay.” He clicks his tongue, disappointment obvious, but there’s something else there that screams satisfaction. “But his brother, well, he was very easy to persuade,” he finishes, looking at me from across the room where I’m still being held back by his men.

“Brother?” I question, my brain fogging, and I wonder if I heard him correctly.

“Oh, he didn’t tell you? How very amusing. Well, his brother works here too, but he decided to take me up on my offer to stay here rather than pay for something he was hardly included in. He never could stay away from my daughter which made bargaining very easy,” he says dismissively, somewhat disgusted by the mere thought.

“It was so easy to get him to admit to everything he knew, and find out what he didn’t. He was all too willing when I promised he would survive this all. That the two of them could survive, and that he would get my blessing.” He looks far off as if the memory is fond, and he wants to recall it correctly. “I’m sure he will be slightly confused when he wakes without memories in the same situation as the rest of you,” he finishes, ready to leave the room before holding up a finger and turning back around.

“I almost forgot about the best part. Oh, this is so good, how could it slip my mind?” he chuckles, walking back over to me and grabbing a strand of my hair and tugging on it.

“He thought he got Adonis to help. I was almost impressed by the young lad, but Adonis...well, he duped us, to put it simply.” I expected some sort of animosity to

follow his words, but I'm wrong. He almost seems gleeful at the idea of another betrayal, and despite the darkness creeping into my vision and my legs wanting to give out from underneath me, I force myself to stay conscious through the punishing grips of the hands on my arms and wrists. "For his act of a secondary betrayal, he gets a punishment far worse."

Realization dawns on me as I understand what he means. The more he's betrayed or lied to, the harsher our punishments will be.

"He won't die until after his wife does. Poor Iris, she's already there. The place that you'll go. Fighting much harder than I thought she would. I presume that may have to do with the fact that her memories weren't stolen from her. I do wonder what she'll do when the lot of you arrive. I wonder if she'll even be alive by then. I've given careful orders to make sure he doesn't die before seeing her lifeless body, though. Only then will she be brought back to serve a different purpose. She'll die, he won't remember who she was to him, then he'll die and I'll have enough organs to sell to last me long enough to rebuild my agency. Everyone will get their punishments in due time, Silene, and I'll get some wonderful entertainment for the time being."

"What is wrong with you? You know how insane you sound, right?" I question, though it's hardly anymore than a disbelieving whisper.

"You are the one that set out to kill me. You did nothing but bring this on yourself. You didn't really think you would get away with it, did you?" he inquires, tilting his head down at me.

"Wait!" I yell, but it sounds more like a whisper as it leaves my lips.

"Sleep now, child. You'll need the rest," he says, and as darkness invades every one of my senses, I watch him leave me alone in the cell.



31

Vengeance: Silene

Coughs wrack my body as a steady heartbeat pounds in every crevice of my mind, and I just wish it would go away. If only for a moment of peace, I pray for the coughs to disappear or my head to stop hurting, or just anything that would feel better than this currently does. But as I gain more awareness, I realize my body is sat up against a wall, arms tied tightly behind my back.

I struggle for another minute before looking around the room and seeing Nathaniel sitting back in a chair, and for the first time, I see the similarities. Though Ronan may have dark hair with cool watercolor eyes, and Nathaniel is all warm tones, the freckles that dot their noses and cheekbones should have been a sign. Their watchful eyes over the ones they care over mirror one another. And they were close in a way that was different from Ronan's bond with anyone else. I didn't understand it then, but I do now. I see it so clearly even in the confusion.

"My friends call me Nate," and yet not a single person here referred to him as such with the exception of Ronan.

"I promised him my blessing. That they both live," Mr. Delgado admitted to me, and suddenly every time Nathaniel stepped towards Carmen in a way that showed protectiveness came to mind. The way he had tried to make a decision for her as if he had some ownership over what she was and was not allowed to do.

He doesn't see me move at all, doesn't hear the way my body shifts uncomfortably as

he's far too focused on something across the room from us, but the quiet is suffocating me. I almost speak but when he stands and walks over to a large box that sits tall enough to be at his waist, I clamp my mouth shut. His sad eyes rove over whatever contents lie inside before he runs a loving hand over something.

I take this moment to try and stand, but the second I'm able to get my feet under me, his attention focuses entirely on me. I still, not daring to move a muscle as our eyes meet and I see resentment replace all the softness that had just been in its place.

"You said you would be able to protect her." His voice is so low as he turns back to the box in front of him.

"I tried. I really did, Nathaniel. Trust me, there's nothing you can say to me that I haven't already said to myself," I reason, moving to stand, but when he pulls a gun out from his waistband, I stop completely. He aims the weapon at me with a practiced ease, a surety of what is to come.

"You failed, you should have just let her come with me, you should have—"

"She still would have been dead," I say carefully, dragging my body back to the ground in hopes he'll lower the weapon and just talk to me, but he's reckless, waving the gun around as he speaks.

"No—no she would have been fine. She would have been here," he insists, pointing the barrel to the ground. His hair is messy, sticking up all over the place, and his wide frantic eyes are wild.

"You killed her, Nathaniel. No one else," I say, voice deceptively calm, when I want nothing more than his blood on my hands.

Because it is his fault.

We would have gotten away—nobody would have had to die if he had some courage. He could have come with us if he truly wanted and gotten to know her as she was and not as her father's pawn.

“No. No no no,” he starts, banging his fist against his forehead as if his own thoughts are as damaging as the words that I'm speaking. Quickly aiming the barrel at me again he finishes, “You're the one that failed.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Adonis enter the room. He puts a finger to his lips in signal for me to not say a word, before tilting his head towards Nathaniel.

Distract him, he seems to be saying, and I immediately look down, feigning fear and shame. “Maybe,” I start, thinking about what to say next, but there is only one option. The truth. “But you're the one that told her father what you knew. You sent your brother to his death for validation from a man who was never going to let any of us live. You—” He storms toward me, but stops a foot away. As he aims the gun toward my head, I notice the shakiness of his hands, the white knuckled grip on the weapon, his finger already on the trigger as he threatens to end my life here and now.

“Shut up,” he forces out through clenched teeth.

“How stupid could you have been to think a man who was okay with killing and selling innocents wouldn't lie to you ? That he wouldn't—”

“Stop fucking talking, you don't know anything!” he exclaims, but his voice wavers, and I see the grief beneath his surface, the stutter in his breathing. I know that even with misguided intentions, he just wanted her safety. He just wanted her love. But his obsession overpowered all logical reasoning.

“You sent us all to our deaths when you decided her worth was only what her father made it,” I continue, keeping his attention on me, no matter how damning it may be

for me.

“I said to stop fucking talking!” he yells, pressing the cold metal against my forehead, and not for a second do I look away from him. Green and brown clash in a battle of truths and secrets that still have yet to be surfaced. And then his finger moves to the trigger, and I embrace the death that approaches me.

Yet it doesn't come.

Instead of the clicking sound of the trigger and the explosion of gunpowder that follows immediately after, I see dark arms covered in white inked snakes and iris' wrap around pale freckled skin before bones crack. A pained and strangled grunt escapes Nathaniel before his body falls to the ground, his head turned much further than it should be.

He's dead. His life has been traded for mine, and I remember what I had been told before this all started. Adonis and I warily stare at one another, wondering just how much the other person knows. When his body comes closer to mine, hand pulling a dagger from his belt, my body flinches away from him. It doesn't escape me that this is the first time that I've ever actually been scared of him. If he's been playing both sides of this game from the start, can I trust him now? Saving me from Nathaniel doesn't mean he intends to keep me alive. But then I see the red rimming his eyes, accompanied by pinched brows and stop.

“I'm sorry.” Sincerity floods his words, and I give a slow small nod. My vision catches on his ring finger, and I notice—for the first time—the difference in skin tone where a wedding band would have been.

“Me too,” I respond, holding out my wrists in a silent promise of trust.

“I didn't even recognize her. That first day, I saw her body on the ground outside the

house and didn't know that she was..." he trails off as he cuts the rope that binds my hands together and realization dawns on me. "I didn't recognize her like he recognized you. She was no more than a stranger for all I knew."

"She saved me," I whisper to him, breathlessly. The woman who I thought looked to be a warrior, who appeared frantic and worried, warned me to err on the side of caution when it came to everyone else—she was the wife of the man in front of me. Yet another victim that should have never fallen and wouldn't have if it weren't for...

My eyes drift to Nathaniel's lifeless ones a few feet away from me as I think of what could've been had he never been corrupted or had his need for acceptance not been exploited. Looking at Adonis and his hate filled gaze, I place a hand on his shoulder attempting to get his attention away from the man who no longer breathes.

"He may have betrayed us, but he wasn't the one who took her. He didn't know the price that would be paid. He's not the one you want," I urge, stumbling to my feet before another coughing fit scratches and tears at my throat. Even as he acknowledges my words and mumbles a half hearted agreement, I can see the thoughts that invade his knowledge of the truth and lingers.

A wish that he would have prolonged the man's suffering if not just a little longer.

"We have to—" I start, but he slams his hand over my mouth, silencing me once again and instead of fighting against him, I listen to our surroundings. Soft footsteps approach us, and we both hurry to stand. He hands me a dagger and motions for me to follow him, and as I fall into step, I let my curious eyes look within the large box on the other side of the room and feel my heart stop.

Held within is a cold, stiff body. Her skin is white as paper, a stark contrast to the dark blood that still covers her body as if no one could bother to clean her before putting her on display. Even in death, there was no real care shown, only neglect to

the one good thing that has ever resided within these four walls, far too cruel to ever be called home. It makes me nauseous to even think about it.

“Silene, we have to go now.” Adonis urges, but I don’t move from where I stand.

“Do you know where Ronan is?” I question, attention still focused on the woman in front of me as I comb my fingers through her tangled strands of hair. He hesitates too long, and when I turn to him, his expression is grim. “Is he alive?”

“Yes, but—”

“Don’t tell me anything else. That’s all that matters. I’m not leaving him.”

The footsteps get closer and closer, his eyes dart from where we stand and what lies ahead. “It’s not possible,” he says, before grabbing hold of my wrist and attempting to drag me forward, but I fight back. I dig my nails into his wrists and kick at his knees until he lets me go.

“It is,” I demand, taking one last look at Carmen and promising myself that I’ll come back for her if I live. “You’re either with me or against me, Adonis. But there’s only three of us left, and I will not leave him to die. Not when he’s saved me in every way that a person can be saved.” His face softens with a newfound tenderness, something that battles his desire to leave. An understanding of what it feels like to have someone like that. “The only way this doesn’t end today is if I die,” I say, lowering my voice and scanning the area where we stand.

I see the weapons I’ve been stripped of on the other side of the room, past the large opening where the others approach. They’re too far to grab now, but it’s where I set my sights as I pull his large body behind furniture in the room, swiftly grabbing Nathaniel’s discarded pistol that lies on the floor from the still semi warm hands of Nathaniel.

“This ends now,” I whisper once more, reiterating to him my conditions of leaving. I can tell he is apprehensive, but as he grabs a second dagger and pops his neck, I take the gesture for what it is. An alliance of sorts, I suppose. A promise of solidarity.

“Whatever it takes,” he whispers, before sliding through the room, throwing a dagger at a man’s head while stabbing another in his foot.

Shouts of orders sound through the chaos as I join the fight. I sprint and leap onto a man’s shoulders, pulling his body down to the ground, repeatedly stabbing him in his abdomen. I roll off his shoulders as we hit the floor and shoot a man that has gotten far too close to Adonis’ large body for my liking. He throws his head in my direction, surprised, before throwing another dagger over my shoulder. The deep gurgles of someone behind me are indication enough of the mark he has hit as we both begin fighting once again. A sphere is aimed in my direction, and I only see quick enough to bend back and reach my hand out, catching it before it could go any further.

Laughing, I aim my dagger at someone’s leg, throwing him to the ground in a shout of pain before twirling the sphere in front of my body, adjusting to the weight. Then, I’m dancing through the bodies, hitting and stabbing with the sharp tipped metal in my hands, heading in the direction of my precious hatchets. When I get to them, I drop the long weapon, ready to pick up the ones who offer my comfort as a large hand grips the back of my head, pulling me down by my hair.

My body slams into the ground as the air is knocked from my body. I struggle to breathe as he straddles my waist and mimics the laugh I had thrown his way before my dagger had been thrown into his thigh. Red sticky blood oozes from the wound, and as he lifts the very weapon I’d used on him, ready to kill me, I smile back at him.

Faltering for only a moment, I let him see the way my eye darts past him, and when he turns to look, Adonis is there, shoving my discarded sphere through his chest. When death lingers at his side, I reach for the axe and shove the blade through his

skull, granting him a quicker death, even if I don't find him deserving of that mercy.

I quickly move to stand, taking in the room littered with lost lives before signaling a thanks to my acquaintance and motioning for him to take the lead as I grab the second axe and my black gifted dagger.

"You're not going to like what you see," he tells me, not bothering to look back to see if I'm following.

"Alive. That's all I need for him to be," I reply, and as we pass one of the cameras in the hallway, I stop. I gaze at it, the red flashing beacon of proof that he's watching. A smile blossoms on my face. One I know replicates the one Robert had given me the last time we saw each other. I put my blood lust and thirst for vengeance on full display, cocking my head side to side before stepping back and watching as the light disappears.

Adonis clears his throat from across the hall, urging me to keep up, and I quickly shorten the distance between us. His eyebrow raise in silent question and I just shrug, but keep the smile on my face, not caring how unsettling it may seem. He doesn't shy away from me, though, but rather straightens his back and matches the eerie nature of how I stand and carry myself. Not for a single moment do I forget the way I will always see this man for what he is.

Dangerous.

Especially since he has nothing left to fight for, pushed forward only by the grief forced upon him.

"He's in the dining hall. The one right next to his office." His muscled body pushes forward, determined to reach our destination just as much as I am. Mr. Delgado's life is not mine alone for the taking.



As we turn the last corner, he holds his hand up in a clenched fist, halting me in my tracks. Pulling a gun from his waistband, one I realize he had picked up from where I discarded it earlier. He releases the magazine, checking the bullets, before pulling out a spare from his pocket. Before I can question what he's doing, he's angling his body around the corner and emptying the first magazine.

The sound of gunshots echo around us as he pulls back and reloads the weapon. He waits for a second, when it sounds like the gunfire is slowing down, then turns the corner and empties it again.

"There are two more," he says as he drops the second magazine to the ground, throwing the weapon into the middle of the hallway where the shouts and gunfire are loudest. We each grab a dagger before he looks back around the corner as quickly as possible.

"Against this wall, not too much taller than you. That's where you aim," he says before counting down from three. Then, we're both throwing our bodies around the corner, flinging our weapons out, hoping that they hit their mark.

When both bodies hit the ground, we quickly move to stand, but no sooner than we're on our feet, another gunshot sounds from behind us. I turn around, flinging one of my axes toward the noise, and watch as it makes contact. But not before the bullet makes itself a home within Adonis' shoulder.

He grips the exit wound tightly, trying to minimize his blood loss as he leans against the wall. "You okay there, big guy?" I question as I approach him, reaching to take a look at the damage, but he slaps my hand away.

"I'll be fine. I just need a minute, but you should go ahead. I don't know how much more he has in him." My brows furrow as I turn toward the door ahead, and as I take a step forward, I hear a scream of agony pierce the air, catapulting me forward in

sheer panic.

When I step inside though, I'm unsure if what I said earlier was correct. Maybe him being alive isn't best. Perhaps, at this point, death would be much kinder.

### Who Did This: Silene

The first thing I notice is the sharp coppery scent that permeates the air. The long dining table has been removed, and in its place is Ronan's limp, bloody body, bound to a wooden chair. The sight of him feels as if the ground tilts beneath my feet. Everything is unstable, as if the world unraveled and wrapped itself around my legs, bringing me to my knees. The blood—mine mixed with his—mingles as I trace the wounds on his mangled body.

“Who did this to you?” I whisper, but he doesn't answer me. His head hangs low as his lashes kiss pale, freckled cheeks. A broken sob leaves my body as my mind conjures up the comparison of him to his brother who lays dead on the other side of the building. A brother who he doesn't realize died a traitor and liar.

His heartbeat is weak under the pads of my fingers, body damp with not just blood, but the sweat that drips from his pores. Lashes whip across his back in jagged lines, tearing through layers of skin. Multiple bruises cover his face and abdomen, and lacerations cover his chest. Patches of skin here and there have been peeled from his body, including the area where there used to be black ink covering his thumb.

Even if he lives, there may be no coming back from the torture he's been subjected to.

A door opens further into the room, and when I flick my gaze toward the sound, I watch as four more men enter, followed closely by a dead man walking. His laugh

sends waves of fury prickling through every bone in my body as the sound of my metal axe dragging across the tile flooring fills the dining hall. His laughter eases down before he scratches his chin as if observing a piece of artwork that had been delicately created.

“Do you like what I’ve done with him?” he asks, taking note of my trembling hands and scowl etched onto my features.

“Don’t feed me that bullshit. You and I both know you’re too much of a bitch to have done this yourself,” I retort, watching as his smile drops.

“You wound me, Ms. Dimitriou. I could have easily done this. It honestly would have been my pleasure after all the trouble you’ve caused me this week. Burning the house down, smoking out my tunnels, killing most of my men.” He sighs as if it’s been a great pain, but the boredom in his voice and body language is clearly feigned. He stuffs his hands into his pockets, shrugging before looking at the men around him.

I can’t help but think about how exhausting it must be to keep up the facade, pretending to not be terrified of what awaits you when he is nothing but a byproduct of his own fear.

“But you didn’t do it,” I state plainly, gaze traveling over each man currently in the way of my target. “So, which one of your little bitch boys did?”

The two men to his right pale as a toothy grin appears on my face knowing their association alone has marked them with a death sentence, and I commend them for their willingness to show how they really feel. A feral type of joy fills me as their acknowledgment of what I signify to the two of them. The one who stands to the left smirks right back at me though, an undermining and arrogant gesture that only has me more excited to continue.

Bringing one of my hands up, I aim my weapon at the man on the far left. “You.” His smirk widens just a hair, and I know I’m correct. It’s always the arrogant assholes that make the easiest targets. Only the narcissistic feel as if their size makes them a predator to fear.

As I begin my approach, they all grab machetes and daggers, readying for the fight. I keep my eyes on the one man who I know inflicted all the damage that will never fully heal upon Ronan’s body. He will not die first, but he will hurt worse than he ever thought imaginable. However, unlike the man who sits unconscious behind me, no one will come to save him. He will burn with everything else and be nothing more than a forgotten memory.

A scream tears through my throat as I begin to fight the three men in front of me. More skilled than the other fighters I’ve been through, it takes far more effort than I’d like to admit keeping track of each and every one of their movements. I suppose it makes sense though, keeping the best nearby in the off chance I make it through everyone else. A last ditch effort to survive. I get one knocked to the ground at the same time as two swing their blades at me. One aims for my head in front of me while the other aims at my lower back. I throw my body to the side in order to dodge both blows at the same time.

They realize far too late just how much momentum has been put behind their swings as their blades lodge into each other’s bodies. The one that had been behind me dies instantly as the blade slides right through his throat. The one in front of me looks down at the blade that pierces his abdomen. He goes to grab the handle with shaky hands, removing it from himself. Dropping to his knees, he watches the blood that pours from the wound before looking back to where I stand.

“Please,” he whispers, and in that one word I know what he’s asking of me.

Mercy. A swift, easy death. I offer a small tilt of my lips, and he closes his eyes. His

head tips back as shaky breaths escape him. Swiftly, I swing an axe back, and it slices through his neck with butter like ease. His body remains upright for a second before falling to the ground, his head rolling several feet away.

I've taken too much time focusing on him though, and I forgot there was one last man standing until I hear the sound of his long machete swinging through the air. My body turns on instinct, an ill attempt to dodge at the last second as his blade slices through the side of my waist, just above the hip bone, and I immediately drop one of my weapons in favor of clutching my side. Hot liquid steadily flows through my fingertips as I look down at the clean cut wound that is sure to scar. Slowly, I raise my head, staring at the man in front of me. His ego seems to have inflated at the fact he was able to get a single hit in despite the fact I had been out numbered at the start.

"Aw, look at you getting a good hit in," I coo, and I can't help but find myself amused at the flush that covers his ruddy face as his grip on his weapon tightens. For the first time, I see the fear in Mr. Delgado's eyes just beyond where this man stands, and watch as he backs away into his office. He's shutting and locking the door behind him as one last safety measure, leaving his last line of defense to fend for himself. I don't mind, though. Not when I would like to take my time picking his body apart as he so callously did to Ronan.

"Let's get on with this, shall we? I have better things to do than stare at you all day," he says, words dripping disgust as he takes me in.

"If your plans involve dying, then I would like to agree."

An annoyed grunt leaves his throat as he lunges his body at me and my axe meets the metal of his machete—his weapon slides off my rounded axe, his body pushing forward as it follows the momentum. I use his momentary imbalance to send my axe cutting the length of his back. From shoulder to waist, his skin is torn open, and an excruciating yell fills the large, empty space we occupy. His legs give out from

beneath him, as his confident facade crumbles.

“Get up and fight,” I demand as I slowly stalk toward his cowering body. His retreating form stops before I watch his arm try to push his body up. When he finally makes his way to his feet, he’s fuming as he studies me. “Don’t look at me like that, now,” I tsk. “I at least had the decency to leave your strong side unharmed,” I add with a snicker. He listens, unamused before swinging at me once again, but his movements are choppy and predictable now that he’s injured. With almost no effort, I ensure with each missed mark on his part, another wound is inflicted upon him.

“This is boring me,” I state when the whole left side of his body is battered and covered in wounds that bleed so much, I can no longer see where they are. Through it all, I left his right side completely unharmed, adding unnecessary comments—fueling his rage further while keeping the sorry excuse of a man on his feet and fighting. But the win feels too easy now, and I myself am losing enough blood that exhaustion has begun weighing on me as well.

“I would say this has been fun, but you have been about as disappointing as a stale bread sandwich.” An exasperated huff of disagreement weakly makes its way to my ears, but before he can argue anything, I deftly throw the bloody hatchet, burrowing it deep within his stomach. He sinks to his knees, mouth gaping wide open while metal clatters loudly on the ground before he throws me the same look as the last man.

A plea for mercy. One that will go unanswered.

He will receive no quick relief from the pain I’m sure wreaks havoc upon his body.

“Only a coward inflicts pain on someone who can do nothing to defend himself,” I start, speaking over his gurgled and laborious breaths before kicking him down on the mutilated side of his body, eliciting another cry of agony. “You will feel every bit of pain possible until you die.” Then, I’m stepping away from his body, red blood

coating the ground around him, mixing with those he had fought alongside.

His groans continue in waves. Inevitability pulled each one forward as another died on his lips. It's then that Adonis enters the room. He had created a makeshift wrap around his shoulder and arm, helping keep the damaged limb in place. His gaze travels over the scene that I have created. A painting of pain, despair, mercy, and grief.

"Take Ronan to the medical room," I call out, and his gaze snaps to me. But he doesn't look like he understands what I'm requesting of him. He looks down right appalled that I even suggested such a thing.

"Si—" he starts, but I cut a murderous glare in his direction and he falls silent.

"Take him. Start preparing pain meds, antibiotics, anything that can be used to disinfect his wounds. Both of you need it. Don't fight me on this." He stands still, a debate playing out in his mind over what he should or shouldn't do. Whatever argument he had for staying, dies on his lips though as he cuts a glance at Ronan.

"Give him hell," he says, his deep voice holding its own command, but the look we share—one of dark intensity—speaks volumes. Everything that we could say but refuse to.

"Keep him alive for me, will you?" I request, and he dips his head, eyes full of sincerity before he turns away from me.

His large muscled legs make the trek to the center of the room where Ronan still lies unconscious before dipping his chin at me. A small, sure gesture that comforts me as I turn back to the locked door. Subconsciously, my hand drifts back to the throbbing cut above my hip and the blood that stains my skin when I pull away. I search the room for anything that could be used as a makeshift bandage, ultimately cutting a



strip of fabric from one of the dead men's shirts. I tie the fabric around my waist, tightly knotting it and wincing at the new pressure.

I grab the dropped axe before stalking back to the final man. Surprised as I may have been, he is still breathing. His skin is a sickly pale color, and as I grip the handle of my secondary weapon still lodged in his stomach, I let him lay unaware that I am even here. Then, I rip the rounded blade out and relish in the sharp intake of breath he takes as the blood begins flowing freely—faster and unrestrained.

“Oh, Robert,” I call out, loud and playfully as I approach the door. “I have a bone to pick with you.” My foot slams into the newly painted wood of his office door. The lock breaks beneath my force, and the door opens.

He sits behind his polished wooden desk. Papers litter the entire surface, save for where his desktop and mouse sit. There are no family photos that line the walls, no drawings or letters like the ones I'd kept in the room of mine and Ronan's apartment. There is nothing indicating he had ever been anything other than alone.

He clicks and slides the barrel forward as he points a gun at me, but he's shaking too much for a steady shot. His chances of hitting me—even at a distance this short—is slim and he knows it.

“Now now, there's no need for that. I just want to talk. I know how much you love hearing the sound of your own voice,” I say as I approach him with my hands up in a surrender we both know doesn't mean shit while my fingers still loosely grip my weapons.

He doesn't have a retort for me. No smart remarks or volatile thoughts to send my way. He doesn't have to have any, I suppose. He knows what his fate has become.

“I thought that if I took everything away from you that you would finally stop

fighting,” he shakily admits, a thoughtless chuckle immediately following. Beads of sweat fall down his forehead as he fumbles for the next thing to say. “I thought I figured it out.”

“You were never very good at the whole thinking thing,” I say, closing the distance with another step, and he monitors the movement. His eyes take notice of every step that I take before frantically looking around the room as if there’s someone else here that might still save him.

“You’re going to kill me,” he says and I laugh humorlessly.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I say, removing another foot of distance, immediately marked by the monster in front of me. “Maybe your brain isn’t completely fucking useless after all...but I will be doing much more than just killing you.”

Time seems to slow as the aim of his weapon changes. No longer at me, but at himself. Just before he can pull the trigger, I react, sending my axe soaring through the air, completely severing his hand from his body. His screams surround me, deafening cries that almost make me wonder if I’m the same as him. Just a bloodthirsty monster, who gets off on the suffering of others.

But the man who was tortured within an inch of his life would disagree. The disbelief that would mar the delicate features of a dreamer would convince me I could never be such a thing. The woman who risked her life to warn me knowing what it would cost, would be ashamed to know I thought myself the same as him when she had given everything for me to end this all. Every single one of them knew, and I let that thought carry me through as time speeds up, and I do to him what he had tried to do to us—had done to so many others.

“Why don’t you just kill me?” he questions, his voice strained as I begin to wrap his severed limb before he has the chance to bleed out. His face scrunches as I tighten a

discarded jacket around the butchered area. A smirk lifts my face at the sign of his discomfort.

“Mercy...I want to see you beg for it first,” I reply while moving to stand and walking around the spacious area of his office. Scanning the area, I pluck random objects from their spots. A stapler, pocketknife, some pens, and my axe from where it lodged into the wall.

“I hate to inform you that this will be quite unsatisfactory for you then. I don’t beg anyone for anything,” he replies as he tracks my every movement. With pallid skin and sweat beading at his forehead, I know I need to begin now before his death ruins the punishment he should suffer.

“Oh, but you will,” I singsong in response as I set everything out in front of me and pretend to take my time choosing how I would like this to play out. I brush the pads of my fingers against a dagger before moving back to the stapler and taking it into my grip. Walking toward his body, I enjoy the way he tries to back away before a wall stops his retreat.

“Now, now, stop trying to run away from this,” I start as I crouch down to his level and gaze at him. I release a deep sigh before reaching toward his face, but his free hand comes to stop me. Swiftly, I grab his wrist and twist his arm as far as I can. His deep grunt that follows, is almost as satisfying as the small cry he releases when I crush his hand beneath my foot, pinning him in place. “Oh, come on now, Robert. Don’t be such a bitch. Sit back, and enjoy the show,” I say as I go back to my original task of stapling his eyelids open. “I know how much you love a good show.”

His cries and whimpers last longer than I’d hoped as I skin back layers and layers of his arms.

“Do you want mercy yet?” I ask, staring into his cold eyes, but he shakes his head no.

Even as snot falls from his nose—as blood, sweat and tears drip from everywhere on his body, he still refuses to beg. “What a pity,” I murmur as I tighten my hold on my dagger and force it into his wrist and twist the blade over and over again.

Muscles, tendons, and veins are ruined from the action, but so is his ability to fight back.

“Mercy?” I question, once again.

“No,” he grits out, but his voice is much weaker. His surety, wavering.

“Hmmm, as you wish.” Then I’m grabbing a pen and forcing it into one of his ears. He screams, loud and alive once again, as he attempts to bring his hand up to his head, but it’s just another painful reminder of how useless I have rendered him. “I shall ask you one last time. That’s it, Robert. How you live or die will be determined by this decision that you make. Mercy? Beg and die a basic human being, or say no and keep being treated like the monster that you are.”

His steely eyes carry so much all-consuming rage, but his body tells a different story. Torn to shreds, bruised and battered, I see the desire for everything to end.

“Please,” he forces the word out like it pains him more than anything else. One single syllable, and he spit it out like venom on his tongue. I lean forward, to the ear I know still works to say one last thing to him.

“I just don’t believe you mean it,” I whisper as I bring my hand up to his skinless shoulder and pat at the disgustingly wet and sticky blood that covers the area and squeeze, relishing the way his sob breaks through. And no matter what I do to him from that point on, I don’t listen to his cries. I just continue, the same we they had done to Ronan.

I reduce him to nothing more than the embodiment of agonizing misery. And soon, everything he is will be reduced to what he always tried to run from becoming.

Weak. Coward. Nothing.

\* \* \*

Blood covers the entire length of my body as I walk to the medical wing. When I arrive, I'm surprised to find him stitching together some of the deeper wounds on Ronan's body. Ronan is clean of excess blood as Adonis tended to most of the inflicted damage.

"I'm almost done with all that can be fixed," he states as his gaze flits to my body. "You should probably clean yourself up."

I release a grunt in agreement as I walk to the large sink against the back wall and scrub my hands clean before moving up to the rest of my arms. I note all the bruises that pepper my skin, as well as some smaller scratches I've accumulated. Then I'm splashing water onto my face, relishing how clean it feels as I watch red and pink swirl in the sink before disappearing down the drain.

Dragging my tired body to the station where Adonis is working, I grab a spare needle and thread, as well as rubbing alcohol and as much tissue as can be spared. I don't hear a word or receive any odd looks as I slink into a chair across the room and untie the makeshift bandage I'd made for myself and douse the cut in alcohol.

Once I know it's completely clean, I clench my jaw, preparing for the sting that will follow as I insert the needle. Using the curve of the needle, I pass the suture through the entrance of the wound before pulling the edges of the cut together and loop it through either side of my skin. Each time, I tie knots at the end of the process, ensuring that the wound stays closed as tears well in my eyes. Soon after, Adonis

rises to his feet, all but carrying Ronan on his uninjured side.

“Get to the garage. The largest vehicle you can find. I have something I need to do first,” I state, as I watch the last golden and orange rays of light flitter in from the windows. Two things, actually, I think to myself.

He watches me, hesitant to leave me behind, but ultimately gives in to my request as he stumbles away. I then turn and walk to the study I had woken in. My eyes immediately narrow on the box in the middle of the room as I walk over to it and begin to push. The wheels squeak with every foot of distance I close, and when I make it to the door that will lead us out, I find it already open—Adonis looking around mindlessly at the choices he has while Ronan’s body is slumped in a chair.

When he sees me with the box though, his features soften, even if only for a minute before walking over to where I stand, and cradling her into his arms. Even with the tension coiling in his body, begging him to take it easy, he walks confidently to a van. He sets her down long enough to open the hatch and gather a tarp that lay discarded on the ground before laying it down on the carpeted area of the trunk. He picks her up again, setting her body on top, before covering her with the rest of the tarp.

It’s then that I grab a full gas can, turn away and continue, ignoring the way Adonis yells after me.

I stalk through every room of the estate, laying trails of paper everywhere that can be found. I leave small streams of gas here and there—not too much to run out too soon, but just enough to ensure fire catches everywhere. The bedrooms, offices, dining hall, study, and even the library. As I go to leave, I notice the worn book sitting on the bench next to one of the windows where Carmen always loved to read.

Without thinking, I grab it, shoving it into one of my pockets, and then walk through the length of the house. Once I’m halfway to the garage, I pull out the old lighter I’d

found at the old house and light it, watching as small flames catch here and there.

Everything must burn. I think to myself one last time as I quickly make my way through the last hall. Everything he has done, must burn.

It's my last thought before I make it to the garage and hop in the backseat, keeping a watchful eye on Ronan. I lay his head in my lap and feel the way his pulse thrums beneath my fingertips, a heavenly beat my heart echoes as I look out the window. I watch darkness descend upon us. With every mile through forests, forgotten memories whisper stories of the past in my ears. I relive the tales of lost loves—the ghosts of friends that had occupied the space around us only a week ago. Friends that are now held in the arms of death herself, only residing in the house of wishes created from the despairing truth that they no longer live, while we do.

“Did you read the note?” Ronan's groggy and pained voice interrupts the trance I'd fallen into while staring at the passing trees as I meet his stormy gaze. He forces his eyes shut with furrowed brows and tensed muscles before bringing his hand to hold the one I have rested against his chest.

“What? Ronan, what are you even—” My question trails off as I catch sight of his bandaged hand that holds mine, tracing circles over my knuckles.

“The note that was...” His muscles tighten further, and he clears his throat before continuing. “It was under the dagger.”

“No, I—” The question catches me off guard, stumbling over words. I've never been the best at them, and they never came easily to me like they did for him. “I didn't want to intrude,” I finish solemnly, allowing my other hand to brush through his dark wavy locks.

“It's yours.”

Breathless, I allow silence to stretch around us as I think about the implication.

“What do you me—” I slowly start, but he interrupts my question.

“It was a gift. It was with the dag—” His deep voice trails off as his muscles relax once again, and sleep pulls him deep within its clutches. My lungs are greedy for air, but with each inhale, I feel as if I’m choking until I cautiously check his pulse.

Weak, but stronger than it had been earlier now that the bleeding has stopped.

Slowly, I reach into the pocket where I had placed the folded piece of paper. It’s covered in dirt, blood, and God knows what else. I open it and see two words written next to a poorly doodled knife and ribbon.

“ Look Inside ”



*\*Six Months Later\**

Flowers surround me. Everywhere I look is a kaleidoscope of blue, purple, and yellow hues. It feels dream-like, and my heart tugs knowing how much she would have loved to see this. The wind kisses my skin, and a sigh escapes me as petals fall to the ground around me.

“I’m sorry it’s been a couple weeks since I’ve been able to come see you,” I whisper underneath the wispy branches of the willow where Adonis, Ronan and I had let the wind take Carmen’s ashes. I gather the length of my dress that flows freely with each breeze that greets me, and sit on the ground, setting down the book I had brought her today.

“Now that Ronan is mostly healed, he wanted me to meet his parents.” Absent-mindedly, I twirl the golden band wrapping around my finger like vines, holding an emerald-cut diamond in the center. “I guess it’s something you’re supposed to do when you’re marrying someone whose parents are alive and, well...not terrible people,” I huff out in a laugh.

My fingers brush through the soft grass before I bring my knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around them while I take in the landscape around me.

“I should have met them at Nathaniel’s funeral, but it didn’t feel right.” The breeze around me picks up just slightly at the mention of his name, and I worry my lip between my teeth as I try to find my next words.

“But I couldn’t meet them for the first time under the pretense of a lie about how I

knew him. I couldn't look into their eyes and apologize for their loss when I still harbored so much anger and resentment towards him." I push some hair behind my ear so it doesn't block my view, despite the blurriness of the tears that threaten to spill. "I could tell it was hard for Ronan too...lying about an accident that didn't happen. Even now, I see how heavy it weighs on him. No matter how wrong Nathaniel's actions were, he was still his brother, you know? He still loves him."

By now, my voice wavers and cracks as I remember how much grief I had watched him endure in those first few months. The grief I know he still feels when he wakes up some nights, shaking as sobs wrack his body.

"It was terrifying at first," I start, changing the topic when too much emotion begins swelling within my chest. The new subject brings about a whole different set of feelings, though. Feelings that have become all too familiar with each visit here we make. "How do you tell your soon-to-be in-laws that their son proposed using a dagger with the question carved into the wooden hilt? A dagger you killed many people with before you realized what its purpose was." A laugh escapes me for a moment at the absurdity of the situation while a single tear snakes its way down my cheek.

"The answer is, you don't. We definitely made up a scenario about how he proposed during a cooking lesson. They thought it was adorable." Another breeze flows through the air, sending my cascading waves to one side.

My head follows the direction it's being pulled to, and I'm met with the sight of Ronan walking around the flowery grounds. He always does this. He always comes with me for support, but gives me time to myself, and I couldn't love him more for knowing what I need.

"I'll never forget the promise I made to you." Another tear falls down my cheek, and I can't help but close my eyes, allowing the memories to fall with them. Live. Escape, and live. Live a beautiful life and love. For me. Don't deny yourself this anymore. "It

feels selfish sometimes, but..." I inhale deeply as I attempt to gather the right words for her and this moment.

"I think that one day—if I am allowed the pleasure of seeing you again in the next life—if I live now the way you asked me to, it will become a grand story, and I hope that I can tell it to you." I admit, reaching for the book I had brought with me. It was still terribly worn and, for the first time, I understand why it had been so well read. Clearing my throat, I stretch my legs out in front of me and lean against the trunk of the tree.

"Speaking of stories, I saved this one for you," I say, turning the pages. Birds chirp and sing around me as I look at the pages that she had dog-eared and lines she had underlined while looking at the new parts I had highlighted and annotated. "I understand why you read it so much."

"There was this one line you had marked, on the last bookmarked page. Naturally, I was curious about where you left off, so I went straight there and immediately was drawn to the inked lines beneath the words." I say, opening the book to the page I have read over and over again, attempting to understand its importance.

"It says, 'I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me.'"

My gaze drifts back to where Ronan stands, his eyes turning to me as if he felt my attention on him. His brilliant smile graces his lips, and my heart stutters at the sight. The serenity of this moment takes away my breath as I look at him and how far he's come in his healing—both physically and mentally. He begins walking to me, sure and confident in his perfectly fitted gray pants and deep blue button down shirt. As he nears, I slowly stand, turning to face the tree and place a hand on it.

"I think I finally understand what it means," I whisper, as if it's a secret just for the two of us, before turning back to the man who has quickly become the only home I

have ever known.