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La Bete Noire et le Beau

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La Bete Noire et le Beau



Hannah Wright

Betrayed by the one who is supposed to care for her most Marceline must find a way to reverse her curse before she loses everything that makes her human and her mind reverts to that of a beast.

Honors Thesis

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[Margaret]

Twenty Years Ago

The Great Lady Margaret, co-leader of the Two Nations, stood staring out her palace window, thinking about how much she hated the view. She could see the dark outlines of the hulking oak trees outlining the Silver Forest below her. Those disgusting trees made up almost two thirds of the State of Eurditus, the disgusting hole she now called home. They were impractical for defensive purposes, took up valuable farm land, and merely the sight of the trees could turn her stomach.

Her real home didn't have forests.

Her home was the City of the Split Tree, the capital oasis of the Vagrant Lands, placed perfectly at a crook of the great River Anguis. The only trees in sight were the great palms that looked down lovingly at the Jewel of the Vagrant Lands. Every day, the northern sun warmed the city, gently caressing those who were brave enough to live at the edge of the Flowered Desert. But the sun didn't touch Eurditus, only bitter frost and biting winds rushed down from the Black Mountains and the people surrounding her.

Just as Margaret was thinking about how much she would love to cut down every last tree in the forsaken state, she noticed a man's reflection in the window's glass. He had shattered her solitude.

Her husband looked at her with eyes of pure hatred, just like he always did.

"What are you doing here, Christopher?" she screeched as she spun around. "These are my private rooms, my guards...".

“Are all preparing for the ceremony,” he finished, “which I guess is how you managed to sneak her out of the nursery.” Christopher’s eyes dropped to the pallet on the floor where their one year-old daughter was playing with an empty glass vial.

Quickly, Margaret stepped in front of the child, allowing her flowing orange skirts to obscure the baby from Christopher’s sight. “She belongs to me just as much as she does to you.” she snapped. True, in the commotion surrounding today’s preparation she had tricked the nanny into letting her take the child away, but her intentions were pure. She only wanted to spend time with her child before the ceremony tonight. Margaret had hardly even seen the child since her birth when a palace official snatched her away.

“She is not a possession, Margaret. She’s a baby.” he countered. “And what are you thinking? She’ll choke on that thing!” Margaret glanced carelessly down at the child, flared her nostrils and turned down one side of her mouth.

“She’ll be fine,” Margaret replied, pulling her waist length black ponytail in front of her shoulder, twirling it around her finger. “She’s learning to be a good little witchling, a good little Vagrant. Aren’t you, my little tiny child?”

“You’re unhinged.”

Margaret cackled in response. “I’m unhinged? You’re unhinged. The door’s unhinged. The treaty between our two nations is unhinged!” With every item on her list, Margaret’s voice became louder and higher pitched until she almost thought she would strain it.

Before either of them could continue, Margaret’s sister Diana burst into the room. Standing side by side, the sisters looked like two versions of the same person. It had always annoyed Margaret when people said so. Both wore dresses of the same orange hue, signifying their loyalty to the Vagrant Lands. Margaret’s skimmed the floor, announcing her role as wife

while Diana's stopped at the knee. There was also a slit up the side of Diana's skirt, signifying her role as the eldest sibling. A small section of the dark hair behind her ear was braided, a common practice among Scholars; the rest cascaded down her back, stopping just short of her hips. Every bit of Diana's appearance looked the part of a loyal Vagrant, but Margaret knew it was a lie.

"Molly!" she beamed, her long black hair flowing free while Margaret's was tied up in a sleek pony tail. "Look who I've brought for a visit!" Holding her hand was Aaron, Margaret and Christopher's son.

"Don't call me that," Margaret snapped, scowling at the childhood nickname. She was the ruler of a nation and still she couldn't shake the diminutive name.

"Hello, Chris," Diana said as she released Aaron's hand. Margaret watched as Christopher scooped their son off the ground and spun him around in circles. Aaron's giggles filled the room. Jealousy and paranoia slithered into Margaret's head.

"They've turned my son against me."

"They'll do the same to my daughter."

"They're all out to get me."

Hit with a wave of desperation, Margaret dropped to the floor and held out her arms. "Hello, my little ruler. Would you like to come see mummy and baby sister?" The boy buried his round face into his father's shoulder. Gently, Christopher returned the boy to the ground.

"Go to your mother, Aaron" he commanded. The boy took a few sheepish steps before breaking into a haphazard run, stopping just short of Margaret's open arms.

"Hello, mummy. How are you today?" the little voice chirped. She reached out and ruffled his dark, curly hair. Aaron looked like his father's people, there was no denying it. The

dark brown skin and textured hair was almost an exact match to the people of Eurditus. It made Margaret furious that the only part of their son's appearance she could claim was the boy's clear blue eyes.

Their daughter, however, looked like her Vagrants. She was a beautiful light olive skinned baby with chestnut brown hair. Margaret's greatest hope for her daughter was that she would one day grow up to be a great Vagrant beauty.

"I am fine, little one," Margaret replied, returning her attention to her son. "My, what fine manners you have. Have you been practicing for the ceremony tonight?"

"Yes, mummy. As foo-ture ambassador, I must be very good for sissy's naming tonight." Margaret furrowed her brow as Aaron waved at the baby. Future ambassador? No one was supposed to talk to him about that. It was part of the treaty. Of course! Only she followed the rules, no one else. Christopher's people were probably telling her little son all about how they think he should govern the Two Nations.

"And tell me, future ambassador," Margaret asked slowly while glancing back at Christopher and Diana. Her husband watched the two of them tensely, looking as dense as one of those stupid immovable trees. Diana simply watched, looking like a useless fool. "What will your first act be when you take your seat at the council? Would you let your people take advantage of the resources surrounding them, or would you rather they live in fear of things they don't understand?"

"Margaret!" Christopher shouted, cutting off the conversation. Aaron jumped, taking a step back from his mother. Even the baby seemed to tense. "You know you're not supposed to talk to him about that!"

She didn't respond. Margaret stood quickly and turned her back on them all, placing her forehead against the cool glass window. A headache was beginning to form above her left eye. The boy was so frightened by her sudden movement that he ran back to his aunt, hiding cowardly behind her legs. My, how she hated her family.

After a few moments of tense silence, Diana cleared her throat. She was down on the floor, trying to comfort Aaron. Margaret knew that her sister was trying to diffuse the situation, but Diana was still dead to her. "Why don't we go down to the Great Room? The Naming Ceremony should be starting soon anyway."

Suddenly furious, Margaret picked up her daughter and crossed the distance between her and her sister in a few long strides. She leaned over Diana's head and whispered in her ear,

"Traitor."

Diana jerked up and faced her sister. The two stood silently, staring daggers at each other until Margaret smirked and walked away, still holding the baby.

~

The light rumble of conversation ground to a halt as two servants swung open the hulking oak doors, allowing Margaret, Christopher, and Diana inside. In front of them, a sea of people were seated in rows of perfectly parallel lines. Margaret took in the spectacle as she carried her daughter down the center aisle. On their left, the polished stone walls, wooden chairs, and people were adorned in the orange silks of the Vagrant Lands. Margaret could almost swear that the sun from the desert sky was shining through her people. Her own great father sat in the front, his once regal stature was hunched beneath his orange vest. They all turned and smiled at her as she walked in. Just seeing them made her long for the warmth of her homeland.

Opposite the orange of her Vagrants was the hideous ice blue of the State of Eurditus. Whereas her people had looked at Margaret with adoration and respect, the Statesmen glared in her direction as if she were nothing more than a common street rat. She imagined that every single one of them was staring not at her, but at her daughter with twisted bloodlust. She tightened her grip on the child. She couldn't trust any of them with her daughter. They would turn the baby against her in a heartbeat, as they had already done to her son.

Margaret glanced to the front of the room. Nailed to the wall was a giant tapestry depicting a map of the Two Nations. To the north lay the Vagrant Lands, named so because the first people to settle there were nomads, searchers of great adventure. The stitching for the Vagrant Lands almost perfectly matched the creamy brown shades of the desert sands that covered the nation. Running near the eastern border was a thick line made of deep blue thread, the Anguis River. It flowed down until it passed the southern border of the Lands and continued on into the State of Eurditus, which was stitched in an ugly swatch of ice blues and greens. Hideous state.

In front of the tapestry there sat a box filled with twelve people all in gray, the Scholars. One of the seats in the box was left empty for Diana, who shed her usually neutral gray robes for tonight only to celebrate the naming of her niece. Margaret glanced back at her sister and scowled. Diana and Christopher followed her to the front of the box and bowed before turning to face the hall full of diplomats. In the dead silence of the room, the sound of chair legs screeching from the Scholars' box reverberated through the Great Room.

Slow steps pounded through the silence as an old woman came to stand between Christopher and Margaret. The woman's hair matched the color of her robes except for a few white strands that made her hair gleam silver. She glittered like the glass chandeliers that hung

from the ceiling. Her bright green eyes took in the three adults, lingering for a moment on Diana. Wordlessly, she took hold of the baby in Margaret's arms and confiscated her. With a strength that didn't match her outward appearance, she hoisted the child into the air for the entire audience to see.

"May peace reign over your minds," she greeted.

"And your life," the rest of the room chanted the predetermined greeting for nobility.

"I am Anicilla, the eldest of the Scholars. Tonight we gather for the Naming Ceremony of our new Lady Princess." A polite round of applause rippled through the crowd as they shuffled in their seats. "I will begin with a reading of the history."

Margaret saw the eyes of everyone in the crowd glaze over. Every important ceremony in the Two Nations was preceded by a reading of the history, but no one cared. Each person in the room had heard the history repeated so many times that they could say it in their sleep. All anyone cared about today was the future of the baby.

"The era before ours was one of great development. Men and women labored to lessen the strains of everyday life. In the beginning, their intentions were pure. However, well meaning magicians and physicians soon gave way to manipulators and conspirators. The tinkering of these terrible people inadvertently plunged the world into chaos." At this, Elder Anicilla reached inside her gray robes and pulled out a pendant on a long chain. "This," she bellowed as she held up the small square, "is the price of hubris." Margaret noticed a few of the audience members snap from their stupor and lean forward.

The pendant was a small, sliver square with green lines etched in a maze like pattern. In one corner three small indentations glittered at the onlookers. While the trinket was a useless

ornament that only the Scholars were allowed to touch, when the pendant was operational in its time, it was once the greatest weapon of all time.

“This was the undoing of mankind,” Anicilla continued as she gestured violently to the object. “Its official name was the Amygdala Project. The original purpose of this device was to be placed in the minds of the physically and mentally disabled, so that they might experience life to their fullest potential. Magic was pulled from the recesses from the Black Mountains and placed in each chip. At first, the project was met with overwhelming success. The lame were able to walk, the blind were given sight, and those with locked minds regained control of their mental faculties.”

Margaret looked out at the audience and noticed how bored they all looked. She let her mind wander as Elder Anicilla’s voice boomed the details of how certain individuals - meaning Margaret and Diana’s ancestors - had begun using the Amygdala chips to control the minds of those who had had it implanted. War and terror ruled the time until the leaders of the two nations came together and declared peace. As called for in the treaty, all chips were destroyed and the two groups came together to form the Two Nations.

As another part of the treaty, the eldest children of the two ruling families after a hundred years must come together in marriage, producing heirs who would rule the nations as one. As luck would have it, those children had been Margaret and Christopher. She shifted between one foot and the other, thinking about the day she had been forced to leave her beautiful City of the Split Tree and the sparkling desert to take up residence in this stupid forest. She’d begged and pleaded with her father, but to no avail.

“Be my spy, my desert jewel,” he had said to her. “Be a shining light in their world of darkness.”

She was trying her best.

Snapping herself out of her sad thoughts, Margaret refocused on the elder just as she was beginning the important part of the ceremony.

“We are here today,” Anicilla said haltingly, “for the naming ceremony of the newest member of the royal family. On this day, when the child is one year old, the Scholars will determine what the child’s markings will be.” She paused, clearly conflicted about what she was going to say next. Her lips collapsed into a thin line and the wrinkles around her eyes became more prominent.

“And at the end of the ceremony, we will discover which side of her family the child will be loyal to, and which she will betray.”

Finally, the reason everyone was here. They all wanted to know if the new baby would grow up to be loyal to Margaret’s Vagrants, or if she would choose her father’s Statesmen. As the political climate grew ever warmer between the two groups, Margaret knew that the choice her one year old child made today would determine the course of the rest of her life.

Anicilla turned back to the box of Scholars and was handed a purple drawstring bag covered in silver swirls. The front row of family and friends leaned in hungrily. Margaret watched their eyes as they seemed to beg the elder to move faster. Margaret focused on her father again, his hand resting heavily on the shoulder of her closest friend and confidant, Baron.

Baron had been in Margaret’s life since childhood. In simpler times, before she was ever told about the treaty, Margaret used to imagine that Baron would be her chosen husband. Together, the two could have ruled the Vagrant Lands with power and pride. As children they had spoken of leading their people into war against Euridtus, fighting for the last remaining sources of magic in their lands. Alas, it could never be. Baron turned to look at Margaret. He

seemed to sense her thoughts as he smiled and nodded, his shaggy hair falling for a moment into his eyes before he returned his gaze to Anicilla.

The woman balanced the baby in one arm and the bag in the other while speaking to the crowd. “All subjects who had the Amygdala chip implanted recovered quickly from whatever malady ailed them; however, people soon realized that use of the chip had unintended aftereffects. Users of the Amygdala chip showed marked improvements in the following areas, which make up our Marking system today: Beauty, Strength, Bravery, Intelligence, and Discernment. After thousands of years of use, the use of the Amygdala chips became obsolete, as the effects began to pass genetically. Whether through predestination or some form of natural selection, every person today is born with the potential to have any number of the five Marks which can appear at any point during their lifetime.”

As she explained the rituals to the crowd, she drew from the bag three very realistic paper flowers and one real one. Margaret smirked. She noticed those in the room who were unmarked by Beauty squinting at the flowers, trying to discern which was real. Margaret, of course, knew instantly that the flower on the far left was the real one.

Anicilla walked back in line with the family and placed the baby on the floor. She had just learned to walk, the nanny had informed Margaret.

For a moment, the pudgy little thing just sat there, legs spread wide and pulling at her wispy hair. Her large blue eyes looked curiously at the flowers, taking them in. For a moment, Margaret thought that the baby would just sit there the whole time. Then suddenly the baby pushed herself onto all fours and crawled haphazardly towards the flower on the left, the real flower. She picked it up and began to put it in her mouth, but Anicilla chased after her just before she could put it in her mouth.

“The child is Marked by Beauty.” She announced to the anxious crowd. There was a round of polite applause as Margaret beamed. Her daughter’s first mark was the one she herself held most dear.

The flowers were gathered up and replaced by three piles of pebbles and a medium sized rock to determine if the child were marked by strength. Once again, the child was returned to the middle of the room. This time, the child stood on her wobbly legs. Her halting gate took her immediately to the rock. Her tiny hands tried to lift it. Again there was polite applause; the child would be Marked by Strength.

In the following two tests, the baby chose out of four objects the ones that proved that she would be marked by Bravery and Intelligence. Four out of the five marks was considered above average. As each test passed, Margaret became more proud, but also more worried. With each new mark, her daughter would become more of an asset to whichever nation she tied herself to. More than anything, Margaret wanted a Vagrant daughter.

The final test was more of a formality. Discernment was an ability that few ever received. It was rare even for a scholar to possess such a mark. Margaret had always been jealous of it. Diana used to lord her Discernment Mark over her sister, but Diana had her deficits. Margaret smirked just thinking about how Diana had been born without the Bravery and Intelligence Marks that Margaret had, leaving her with only Beauty and Discernment.

The items laid out for the Discernment test made no sense to Margaret: a peacock feather, long jeweled necklace, a large uncut gem, and a small ball of brown twine. For the final test, Anicilla put the baby on the ground and turned back to the Scholar’s box, trying to speed the process along for the remainder of the ceremony. Margaret watched uninterestedly as the child walked forward and picked up the ball of twine.

Diana gasped.

Margaret jerked to look at her sister, whose eyes had grown wide, staring at the child. Anicilla, also turned, and after gathering herself walked forward in almost a daze to pick up the baby.

“The child has been Marked by Discernment.” She paused, staring awestruck at the baby. “The child is fully marked.”

Margaret was dumbstruck. There hadn't been a fully marked child for at least a hundred years. Her eyes searched for her father and Baron, both of whom looked as shocked as she felt. Baron was stroking the dark stubble on his chin that had grown during his time on military tour, while her father sat with his elbows on his knees. Christopher also stood in awe, rubbing the back of his neck.

Before the reactions of the onlookers grew completely out of hand, Anicilla recovered her faculties. “While this is a highly unconventional result,” she began, “we must continue with the night's schedule.” She motioned at the Scholars' box and one of the apprentice Scholars came down, bringing with him two small boxes, one orange one blue. “The following test will reveal if the child will follow her father and the Statesmen of Euriditus,” Anicilla motioned to the blue side of the room. “Or if she will be a child of the Vagrant Lands like her mother.”

Just like before, the two boxes were set on the floor and the baby was put in line with the adults. With the knowledge that her daughter was the most powerful child born in the last century, Margaret hoped more than ever that she would walk to the orange box. The audience sat with bated breath. Nothing in the room moved.

Including the baby.

Everyone waited for what seemed like hours, but the child simply refused to move. The room began to stir again. The crowd began to buzz angrily.

“What do we do?” Diana whispered to Anicilla. “Has this ever happened before?”

“No,” the Elder replied, “I don’t know. We can’t make her move.” She placed her forehead in her palm.

She wouldn’t choose. “What could this mean?” Margaret wondered. Would the child decide later in life which side of the war she would live for? Would she never choose at all? She turned again to look at her people. Most of them had brows drawn together in confusion, but the sides of Baron’s mouth were turned down into a frown and his eyes almost pierced the baby. He was angry. Margaret didn’t know what he was planning, but she knew that whatever it was, it was probably for the best, and she would follow his advice without question.

Margaret felt a rustle beside her as Diana suddenly stepped forward. “Ladies and gentlemen. The results are inconclusive. We will continue with the rest of the ceremony.” The crowd’s mild aggravation morphed into rage. Shouts of “You can’t do that!” and “Can’t you just choose for her?” bounced off the brick walls. Diana shuffled forward and picked up the baby, returning her to Margaret’s arms.

Clearly shaken, Anicilla turned first to Margaret, then to Christopher. Her words shook as she concluded. “As the final piece of the ceremony, the child will be given a name by one of her parents.”

Christopher had gotten to name Aaron, which meant that it was Margaret’s honor to name their daughter. She scowled. Even though the baby hadn’t chosen the Statesmen, it still stung that she hadn’t chosen the Vagrants that Margaret held so dear. She looked at the child, thinking about how her daughter’s life would revolve around the war, no matter what side she

eventually chose. Finally, Margaret straightened her back, looking out over the crowd, who was becoming louder by the minute. With a voice that carried all the way out into the corridors of the palace, dwarfing the interjections from the crowd Margaret boomed,

“I name my daughter, Marceline.”

[Jasper]

As Jasper walked down the muddy roads of Andalusia, the capital of the State of Eurditus, he thought about how much he would enjoy it if he had a pimple on his nose. Or anywhere else, honestly.

Since it was one of the more common Marks, hardly anyone ever focused their attention on practicing Beauty, but Jasper had no choice. Most of the people who focused on it were common women masquerading as exotic birds in the streets at night. The powers that came with it were nothing more than charismatic personality traits. Practitioners of the Beauty Mark were supposedly able to persuade a person's mind. There were rumors of people with the ability to completely control someone else. One moment you were following a scantily clad woman up a narrow flight of stairs, the next you woke up in the middle of town with no money, no clothes, and only her discarded faux silk to hide your shame. Jasper didn't want to be known as a Beauty, but his Beauty Mark betrayed him, starting at his elbow and spiraling all the way down to the back of his right hand.

As if that weren't bad enough, he was a Two. Of course there were hundreds of others who only had two marks, but they were all under ten years old. Jasper was twenty-two.

Almost without exception, everyone acquired their first two marks around the time they entered school. The most common to receive first were Beauty, Bravery, or Strength. Strength was by far the most common, usually showing up around the time a baby learned to walk. From that moment on, a combination of nature and nurture determined whether a child was marked with Bravery, Beauty, or both.

Everyone always theorized that Jasper wouldn't have been such a disgrace if he hadn't been coddled so much as a baby. His father had always been the most vocal of Jasper's critics.

Even when he and his brothers were small, Elias Marshall loved to put forth ideas as to why his son was such a failure.

“You carried him too much!” Elias would bellow at his wife as he towered over her. “If you hadn’t carried him so much, he would’ve walked earlier! What kind of child takes a year and a half to walk?” This would usually elicit a silent plea from their mother on behalf of the boys. “I suppose I should at least be thankful that you weren’t totally useless,” he would spit at her. “I have two good boys that will turn into men one day. You’re not going to ruin them too, are you?”

That’s usually when the conversation ended. The boys would be given some sort of sweet. They were told to be quiet around the house because mother wasn’t feeling well. She’d usually be up around the afternoon making lunch for her family. Almost without fail, her mysterious illnesses caused her to break out in tender, purple-black marks that looked suspiciously like bruises.

That cycle continued for fifteen years.

Jasper was just mulling those parts of his life over when he felt an arm snake around his shoulders.

“Have you seen this?” his best friend spat, shoving a paper in front of Jasper’s face. “They must think we’ve no brains at all if we’re meant to take this at face value!”

“Get off me, Allan!” he grunted.

“Why? Afraid I’ll destroy your perfect posture, lovely?” Jasper shoved Allan’s shoulder. The other boy stumbled, legs flailing like a baby horse learning to walk. “Well if you’re going to be that way, I’m not going to tell you my latest theory,” he teased.

“Oh, what is it this time?” Jasper sighed as he retrieved the paper from the ground. “The government’s slipping truth serum in the water? Sports were invented to keep the layman from uprising? Baker Okans’s daughter told everyone you have STDs and that’s why you can’t get a date?”

“That last one is absolutely true!” Allan cried while dusting off his clothes. “Why else would I be having such a dry spell?” All Jasper could do was roll his eyes before returning his gaze to the paper.

“All right, you’ve got me,” he resigned. “I can’t figure this one out. What does education reform have to do with world domination plots?”

“It’s simple!” he replied. Snatching the paper, Allan explained his plan while the two walked onward. “Read this!” he commanded.

“‘Recommendation 7: All individuals between the ages of 20 and 25 must show intention to complete a one year internship after traditional schooling has been completed.’ So what?”

“Keep reading!”

“‘All students with potential to develop four or five abilities will be privately educated in a government facility that has been specially prepared for their learning needs.’”

“Don’t you see what this means?”

“No.”

“Seriously?” scoffed Allan. “I thought intelligence was one of your abilities!”

“Would you just tell me what you’re getting at?” Jasper moaned. Allan looked around and lowered his voice, hiding his theories from imaginary adversaries.

“They’re categorizing us!” he explained. “The Republic is trying to count us. They want to know how many people they have with each type of ability. Once they have a head count, they’ll begin the separation.”

“Oh please, tell me more,” Jasper deadpanned, feigning interest.

“It’ll start small. Kids will be put in different schools. Their young, impressionable minds will feed on the preexisting stereotypes of each ability. Fours and fives will be even more separated! Everything they’ve learned will be strengthened by these stupid internships in Rec. 7 that are only there to further divide people. By the time formal education is over, everyone will think they’re better than everyone else. The country will be in anarchy!”

“And why would the Two Nations want the country to be in anarchy?” Jasper interrupted. Allan opened his mouth as if to reply, but stopped short of speaking. “Yea, that’s what I thought,” Jasper replied as he swung open the door to the library.

“Morning, boys!” called a voice from somewhere among the shelves. Stacks of books rested in so many small piles that Jasper could hardly see the hard wood floor.

“What, you love work so much that you come back after hours?” Allan asked Jasper.

“I didn’t come in this morning. Mom needed me,” Jasper said without looking at his friend. “Besides, sometimes I need to remember that I’m not just a Beauty.”

Suddenly, a short, old man with white hair wandered out from between one of the shelves carrying a pile of books.

“Good afternoon, Mr. James,” Jasper said.

“Afternoon? Hmm. I could have sworn it was still morning. Oh well,” he glanced at Allan suspiciously. “This isn’t one of those brothers you’ve been telling me about, is it?”

“I’m not,” Allan interrupted. “I’m just a friend.”

“Ah! Well that changes everything, doesn’t it? Come in, boys, come in. Sophie!” Mr. James yelled as he turned quickly on his heel and disappeared down one of the rows of books. Jasper jerked his head, indicating that Allan should follow.

After two right turns and one left, the boys found themselves in the library kitchen. Like the rest of the building, the kitchen was filled with stacks of books, some lying open on the floor while others rested precariously on the edges of shelves. Mr. James had plopped himself down at the table in the center of the room, a book open in front of him.

“These need to be catalogued,” Mr. James said, pointing at the books behind him. “These should be stamped.” He indicated the books under the table. “And these should be reshelfed.” He pointed at the books on the counter. The librarian looked suddenly at Allan, “You may stay if you like, but my rule is if you’re in the library you have to have a book in your hand.”

Allan scrunched one eye. “I don’t think so, Mr. James. I’m not marked with Intelligence, so I’d probably just make a mess of all this.”

“Suit yourself,” he said. Just as Allan turned to leave, a beautiful young girl walked past him.

“You know, I could stay a little longer.”

Jasper rolled his eyes and sat at the table across from Mr. James. Allan followed suit, opening a book and alternating between staring at it and the girl.

“Sophie,” Mr. James called, “make some tea for the boys please dear.”

“Of course, papa,” she replied and smiled.

Her sugar blonde hair was a just a few shades lighter than Jasper’s own. Her strong, dark eyelashes curtained deep blue eyes than anyone would find attractive. She was marked by Beauty, of course, but unlike Jasper, Sophie wasn’t ashamed. Sophie used her abilities any way

she thought pertinent. Jasper knew that she liked him, she didn't try to hide it, but he wasn't interested in her that way. While her Beauty mark made her irresistible to almost everyone, Jasper found her too dull to be around for more than a few hours at a time. Sophie put two cups of tea in front of the boys. Jasper met her gaze and she smiled, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“So Jasper,” Mr. James began, oblivious to his daughter's flirtations, “you said your mother needed your help this morning. How are the two of you doing lately?”

“We've been making it,” Jasper said. “Money's a little tight sometimes, but it's worth it compared to how we lived before.”

“And your father, is he helping?” Allan released a noise that sounded like a cross between a donkey braying and an angry rooster. Jasper glared at him.

“No, he's staying pretty far away from us,” Jasper replied. Sophie gasped dramatically.

“Oh, that's awful! You and your poor mother have been on your own for a whole year and there are still people who gossip about it!” She squeezed his shoulder in an attempt at sympathy, but Jasper shrugged it off uncomfortably.

“There's a council meeting today, Jasper,” Mr. James continued. “He'll probably be around.”

Jasper stared down at the books. He was well aware that his father was in town. As a city councilman, Elias came into the city center of Andalusia every other month for meetings and hearings. The reason that Jasper had asked to come in late today was because he'd helped his mother with her deliveries.

Jasper's mother Maura worked as a physician's assistant, checking on long-term patients and taking them medicine. Her job usually kept her out all day running all over town. Today, however, their combined efforts had gotten her home by noon. Their plan was for Maura to stay

hidden away at home for the rest of the day while Jasper would stay in the library for work and come straight home afterwards. Jasper didn't like that his father was still having this effect on their mother, but at least they were out of that house.

"It's just awful!" Sophie repeated, drawing attention back to herself. "I got to the council meetings sometimes. Elias says such terrible things about your mother! He sounds so angry. Do you think the two of them will ever get back together?"

"Doubt it!" Allan scoffed

"I just couldn't survive if my future husband and I separated. I could never be apart from the man I love."

"Enough, Sophie!" Mr. James commanded. Jasper stood abruptly, knocking over the tea in front of him that had started to go cold. Mr. James shuffled to move the books out of danger.

"I'll go get a towel," Jasper muttered, leaving all but Allan in a state of confusion. He heard Mr. James mutter something about finding a drying rack for the books as the older man shuffled off behind him.

Jasper knew it wasn't Sophie's fault. She didn't know about all the things that had made him and his mother leave. Elias's position in town made it almost impossible to get anyone to believe Jasper's mother about the abuse. Finding himself at a window, Jasper looked out onto the streets of Andalusia without actually seeing anything. Mindlessly, he opened a cabinet and picked out an old pink towel filled with holes. He shuffled back to the table and sopped up the water without saying a word.

He looked up at Sophie. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but before she could, the front door of the library flew open. Two muscle laden young men barged in, kicking down piles of books as the barreled through the library.

“Oh great, just what we needed today,” Allan mumbled.

“Al pal!” the taller of the boys cried when he saw Allan. “We figured you’d be around somewhere.”

“You’re always hanging around with baby brother, aren’t you?” the other asked, sliding one beefy arm around Allan’s shoulders. Allan attempted to shrug the larger boy off, but he only tightened his hold.

“What do you want?” Jasper demanded. He clutched the towel so hard that the tea began leaking back out onto the table. “How did you know where to find me?”

“Saw you in the window, buddy,” said the one holding Allan. He chortled, “Probably checking his makeup, eh Lee?”

“Probably!” Lee replied, “You know how vain Beauty marks are!”

“I resent that!” Sophie interjected, crossing her slender arms.

“Well it’s true, sweetheart,” the accused smiled. “If you’d allow me the honor, I’d be happy to humble you up a bit!” Sophie went to slap him, but he bent his torso back and caught her wrist, pulling her against his chest.

“Cut it out, Andy!” Allan commanded as he tried to stand, but Lee clamped down hard around his shoulders. Just as Jasper was about to get Anderson away from Sophie, a deep, gravelly voice yelled from behind them.

“Get out of my place of business before I call the Guard on you!” Mr. James commanded. He held a wooden dowel over his head like a sword. The brothers considered the old man with amused looks on their faces before releasing their captives and turned their attention back to their brother.

“So,” Lee drawled, running a hand over his dark, buzzed hair. “How’s life in the big city, prodigal son?”

“Ready to come home yet?” Anderson joined, “Or are you still hiding out with mommy dearest?”

“Leave her out of this,” Jasper commanded.

“What are you gonna do?” Anderson laughed, “Fight us? The first of the family to ever be born without a Strength mark is going to beat up his bigger, stronger brothers?”

“What would mom say?” Lee jeered. Jasper stepped forward to take a swing.

“I said get out!” Mr. James cried. “I’ll have every single one of you thrown in prison!” Lee scowled at the old man.

“Sorry we can’t stay and play, baby brother,” Lee threatened. “Maybe next time we’ll get to have some real fun.” He threw up his hands in faux surrender and backed out of the front door. Anderson followed, throwing a final smile at Sophie. She went to put a hand on Jasper’s shoulder, but he violently shook it off. Without another word, he turned on his heel and followed his brothers out the door.

Stepping out onto the busy street, he looked to his left and saw his brother’s backs as they walked toward the city council office. Lee punched Anderson on the shoulder as they laughed over the rabble of the crowds walking home from work. For a brief moment, Jasper thought about chasing them down, but they were right. What could he do?

Defeated, Jasper turned right and walked to the small apartment that he shared with his mother. He wanted to tell her what had happened but he knew it would break her heart. Jasper muttered something about a long day at work as he walked through his front door, smiled, kissed his mother on the cheek, and went straight to his tiny room to stay for the rest of the night.

[Marceline]

“Nothing?” Marceline asked as she drummed her gloved fingers on the dark wood table.

“I’m afraid not,” her advisor, Arthur, answered. Marceline looked at him and groaned, her hands falling still.

“Don’t worry, darling,” her Aunt Diana added, putting a hand on Marceline’s shoulder. “We still have time.” Angrily Marceline pushed back her chair. The screech of the legs on the wooden floor shook the entire empty library. She began pacing.

“But we don’t have time!” she exclaimed. “It’s been four years already. I only have one left.” Marceline paused. “We’re not going to make it.”

As if she sensed the tears trapped behind Marceline’s eyes, Diana rushed to her niece’s side. Marceline buried her masked face in Diana’s shoulder.

It had been four years since Marceline’s mother had poisoned her. Four years since Marceline’s life had started falling apart. Somehow, her mother Margaret had been able to study the effects of the old Amygdala chips to the point that she was able to create a substance that reversed them. Slowly but surely, Marceline’s Marks had begun to disappear, along with her humanity.

“You can’t think that way,” Arthur said, interrupting her thoughts. “If you do, it means she’s already won.”

“Hasn’t she though?” Marceline spat. “She got what she wanted. I’m dying.”

“Marcy,” Diana cooed, pushing Marceline’s face up by the chin. “You’re not dying. We can fix this.”

“You said that last time too,” Marceline muttered. Immediately after she said the words, she regretted them. She felt her aunt pull away from her, releasing the embrace. She watched as Diana walked over to Arthur and slid her arm around his waist.

For a moment she was jealous of her aunt. Her beautiful aunt.

“I’m sorry, Di. I shouldn’t have said that,” Marceline sighed after a moment of tense silence.

“It’s fine, Marcy,” she answered, still frowning a bit. “You’re under a great deal of stress. The ball is coming up, and the coronation along with it.”

“And, of course, there’s all this,” Arthur interjected.

Without saying anything, Marceline turned her back on her aunt and her most trusted friend and walked over to the fireplace. Even though the State of Euridtus was in the middle of winter, there was enough of a chill in the air to warrant stoking the fire. She looked over the flames to the giant painting looking over the library.

The portrait contained the likenesses of four people who seemed to be a loving family. Subtle pink cheeks from Margaret’s face, as well as the full lips of her father, Christopher, combined to form smiles on the faces of Marceline and her brother, Allan. However, after a closer look, it appeared that the mother’s hand was resting just a bit too firmly on the son’s shoulder, and her seemingly kind eyes seemed to conceal the threat “Keep quiet. Be still. Do as you’re told.” At a glance the family looked happy, but Marceline knew it was all for show. Her eyes rested for a moment longer on Allan before turning back to Diana.

“Have you spoken to the rest of the ambassadors yet?” she asked abruptly. The two looked as if they had been whispering. Diana hesitated for a moment too long. Marceline’s heart sunk. “They said no?”

“I’m afraid so,” Arthur stepped in. “But we knew they would. Di is excluded from the line of succession because of the vows she took as a Scholar.”

“As for Arthur,” Diana continued as Marceline’s shoulders grew heavy. “Because we’ve already announced our engagement, they feel it would be a conflict of interest for him to put him on a list of successors.”

“Also, I’m not family.”

“Yet,” Marceline said.

She watched as Diana and Arthur smiled in spite of the dire situation. Arthur ran one hand through his curly hair. Marceline remembered a time when his hair had been a dark cherry brown. It had lightened over time. From age she supposed. She hated to ruin the moment between them.

“Which leaves only my mother.”

Their smiles faded.

“We’ll find another way,” Diana said, clutching on to the edge of Arthur’s shirt. “I know we will.”

“I know,” Marceline whispered, trying to force herself to believe as much as her aunt did. She felt the tears threatening to flow. “Why don’t the two of you have the rest of the day to yourselves?”

Arthur cleared his throat, “I really don’t think…”

“Arthur, please. You’ve done more for me than I’ll ever be able to pay you back for. And besides, I’m sure you both have lots of flowers and such to discuss before the next three months pass.” Arthur looked as if he were going to protest again, but Diana place a hand on his shoulder, giving him a knowing look.

“She’s right, dear. Let’s leave her be.” Marceline and Diana hugged each other in parting.

“Fine.” Arthur obliged, “But we’ll need to start tomorrow’s briefing earlier than usual.”

Marceline grasped his arm, silencing him.

“I know, Arthur. Thank you.”

With a final wistful look from Diana, Marceline was finally alone.

She immediately felt the need to call them back. All Marceline wanted was to be a child again and crawl into her aunt’s arms. Diana always made Marceline feel safe. Holding her elbows, Marceline walked back to look at the painting of her family. She looked longingly at her younger self in the painting.

The first of her Marks that had disappeared was Strength. Marceline used to be able to train with the young soldiers that came to the palace to learn sword fighting. A few years ago she could have beaten any opponent. Now she could barely stand for an hour without becoming fatigued. The small rectangle with slanted sides that had once been made out of bold, black lines on the inside of her right elbow now looked more like a thin, white scar.

Her Bravery had gone the following year. Ever since she was sixteen, Marceline had attended the Ambassador meetings. Even though she wasn’t allowed a vote yet, she would speak out on issues that meant a lot to her. These days she could hardly force herself to speak her name in the introductions. She’d always thought that the Bravery Mark looked like a rudimentary hourglass that took up most of her left thigh, but not anymore.

Her Intelligence and Discernment Marks, the ones she held more closely, had faded more slowly than the first two. As the tiny equilateral triangle signifying her Intelligence turned white at the base of her neck, all the languages she’d learned left her mind. Marceline could no longer discuss the history of the Two Nations with the Scholars nor the placement of the stars with the

astronomers, all things she used to love doing. The only things that remained in her mind today were the stories of old that she had enjoyed reading with her father as a child.

Marceline's Discernment Mark, a circle with an "x" piercing its sides, remained for now etched on her right collarbone. She reached up and touched it, as if trying to feel for the mark on her skin. It hadn't started fading yet, but her ability was slowing coming out of her control. It allowed her to read the emotions and intentions of anyone who was around her. She used to be able to use it whenever she wanted, but now the ability almost controlled itself.

Marceline sighed. The loss of all her other abilities was easily hidden, but not the loss of her Beauty Mark, the spiral on her left hand. She looked longingly at her face in the portrait again. Her deep blue eyes seemed to look longingly at the books in the library, and her thick, brown hair cascaded in loose waves past her shoulders. Her bright lips looked like they had been stained by biting into a fresh strawberry, and her skin was kissed by the sun with freckles dotting her face and bare shoulders.

She didn't look like that anymore.

She was hideous.

Her body had betrayed her to the point that she could no longer be seen in public without being completely covered. Today, she wore a purple cloak clasped with a large gold broach at her neck. Her deep purple gown hit the floor, covering her knee-length boots. Even her hands would give away her new appearance, so she always wore gloves. Her hair was easier to conceal. Marceline had asked Diana to learn to sew extensions into her hair, which covered a great deal of the damage done by the poison. The worst was her face. Every day for the past year, Marceline had worn a mask.

Today, where her face should have been, Marceline wore a black face mask. Instead of covering the entire face, there were sections cut from the sides that resembled tongues of fire, each pointing in towards the center of the face. The eye holes were surrounded by small, blue sapphires, they accented the color of her eyes, the only thing that had remained the same in her appearance. The golden mouth was painted closed.

Marceline looked into her own painted eyes one more time before turning her attention to the painting of her mother. The woman stood proudly, almost taunting those looking at the painting for not being as beautiful or as clever as she was.

She suddenly became furious. Marceline turned frantically to her left and ran to one of the heavy desks. One by one she yanked open the drawers as if the antidote for this cursed poison were hidden somewhere in the library. Finally she came across a pair of scissors.

Using every bit of Strength that hadn't been ripped from her body, she pushed a chair to the side of the fireplace and struggled to push herself onto the mantle. She climbed the mantle and looked her mother directly in her acrylic eyes, cutting her mother's face out of the portrait. With every snip, Marceline felt her eyes well with tears.

By the time she finished with the face, she was out of breath from exhaustion and from sobbing, but she didn't stop at the face. She attacked her mother's hand that was holding on to her brother so tightly.

Sobbing, Marceline yelled, "I'm sorry" as she sat down on the mantle, slid back into the chair, and stumbled back to the floor. Still muttering apologies to her brother, Marceline hatefully threw the pieces of portrait into the fire. She gladly watched them burn as she sat on the ground and cried until there were no more tears.

When her crying stopped, Marceline slowly pushed herself back to standing. She looked at her brother again, suddenly wanting to go see him. Marceline lifted her mask and wiped the tears that clung to the inside with her cloak. As she wound her way through the giant library shelves, she rolled her shoulders back and released a final sigh.

Marceline was running out of time.

[Maura]

“What is wrong with Jasper?” Maura wondered to herself as she scrubbed the grime off of the mismatched dishes. He was never really talkative, but he usually had at least one thing to say when he came home from work. Normally Maura would credit his silence to his age, but it was a council day.

As if on cue, there was a knock at the door about an hour after Jasper had gotten home and locked himself in his room. It was Sophie, the pretty girl from the library.

“Good evening, Maura, is Jasper home yet?” Sophie asked. Maura forced a smile. Jasper had told her about Sophie.

“Yes, Sophie, he’s here, but he went to bed early tonight. I don’t think he was feeling quite well.”

“Oh, of course,” the girl replied, looking a bit dejected. “I would too after the day he’s had. He told you, didn’t he?”

Maura hesitated. “Of course,” she lied, hoping the town gossip would keep talking. She wasn’t disappointed.

“It was just awful!” the girl prattled on. “I’ve never met Jasper’s brothers before, but they certainly were rude.”

Of course! Elias had brought the boys to town with him, Maura thought to herself as Sophie continued talking.

“I hope that the next time you see your husband that you talk to him about setting your other sons straight. The two of you really should work together on these things.” Maura frowned. Of course, this wasn’t the first time someone had suggested she speak to Elias, but it still hurt.

“Thank you for stopping by, Sophie,” Maura said as she tried to shut the door. “Say, hello, to your father for me.”

“You’ll tell Jasper I came by, won’t you?”

“Yes, yes. Good night!” Maura rushed to slam the door.

She turned around and looked up the stairs to where her youngest son was sleeping. Whatever had happened today, he’d wanted to keep it a secret from her. Unfortunately for him, while the realm of the Two Nations was massive, stretching outwards for hundreds of thousands of miles, its capital, Andalusia, was very small. It was the type of place where businesses, houses and mannerisms were passed from parent to child for generations. Such small places are suitable for few things. Government was one, gossip was another. Even if Sophie hadn’t come by to tell Maura what had happened, someone else would have.

Instead of confronting Jasper, Maura decided to confront her husband. Even though Lee and Anderson had chosen to stay with their father, they were still Maura’s children. She couldn’t let all her years of parenting go to waste at the hands of Elias. Maybe in the back of her head, she knew it would be a bad idea to confront the man who had abused her for so many years, but what choice did she have, really?

It was just after dark when Maura arrived at the home she used to share with her whole family. The dilapidated shack that she and Jasper lived in now was a flea bag in comparison to this estate. As well as a sense of entitlement, Maura’s husband had inherited a hefty fortune when his parents passed on. Fond memories of watching her children grow up wafted out through the bay window that Maura had always loved sitting in. She used to read stories to her children while sitting there, but only Jasper had the attention span to hear them from beginning to end. A small smile wormed its way onto her face before turning into a much deeper frown.

Her husband had never liked when she read to the boys. Darker memories began to intertwine with the happy ones until there was no light left. Her husband hadn't liked a lot of the things she did.

Before she could reason herself out of it, Maura made her way up the front porch steps. She raised her hand to knock on the door, but stopped short. Why should she knock? Technically this was still her home. Grasping the antique brass doorknob, Maura took in one final breath before pushing the door open.

Almost the entire house was shrouded in black. The lights in the hallway were out and no candles were burning. Above her, she heard a thump followed by laughter and yelling. Her sons were wrestling, as always. At the end of the hall, Maura could see a thin strip of light coming from the last door on the left. He must be in the kitchen.

Carefully, Maura stalked toward the swinging door and pushed it open. The sudden flash of light blinded her for a moment. Once her eyes had adjusted, she found her husband seated at the kitchen table where she used to serve meals. Official papers surrounded his place at the head of the table. Feeling suddenly timid, Maura cleared her throat.

“What?” Elias barked without looking up.

“I need to talk to you,” Maura replied shakily. “It’s important.”

“I assumed,” he replied. Elias made no reference to the fact that his wife hadn't stepped foot in the house in four months.

“It’s about the boys,” Maura said. When Elias made no comment she continued. “They’re too rough on Jasper. Something happened in town today...”

“What’d he do?” Elias mumbled as he ruffled through the stacks of edicts.

“Nothing!” Maura whined, “It was something at work. Lee and Anderson showed up and...”

“Did he fight back?” Elias demanded as he finally stood up from his work.

“Of course not,” Maura implored, “You know he’s not like that.”

“Then I’m not doing anything,” Elias answered as he walked toward one of the cabinets.

“Elias, please! You have to,” he slammed the cabinet door. The temperature of the room dropped.

“Are you telling me what to do?” he demanded. “You leave, you come back, and now you tell me what to do?” Elias straightened so that he was towering over Maura. His broad shoulders blocked her view of the door.

“No,” she mumbled. “No, I’m leaving.” Maura tried making her way to the door but Elias was too quick. In three strides his massive arm was blocking her means of escape. Maura opened her mouth in protest, but no words came.

“What?” he parroted. With his free hand, Elias snatched Maura’s right arm and forced her palm up. Nestled in the center of her hand was the telltale triangle Mark of Intelligence that Maura had been so proud of before she had gotten married.

“You always thought you were better than me,” Elias continued. “You thought that this made you special.” His words slithered out like snakes. “I put you back in your place. I showed you how special you really were and you couldn’t take it. You ruined my son!”

“I didn’t do anything!” Maura said as she began crying audibly.

“Shut up!” he yelled, shoving her back against the stove. She caught herself before falling and tried to bite back her tears. His voice dropped to a whisper. “All I wanted was good, strong

boys. That's all I ever asked, but you couldn't do that for me, could you? You just had to have one like you."

"I couldn't help it." Maura whispered. "Markings are determined by chance, you know that. "

"No," his voice careened as he strolled toward her. "You changed him. You did something and you changed him. Now he's worthless."

"He's not worthless!" Maura challenged, her eyes glued to the floor. "He's intelligent."

"And what else?"

"No!"

"Say it!"

"No!"

"If you're not ashamed..."

"I'm not ashamed!"

"Then say it!"

"No!"

"Then I will!" Elias bellowed, "He's nothing but a Beaut!" Silence hung in the air. Elias was breathing heavily, looking smugly down at his trembling wife. However, in his anger, he had left just enough room between himself and the door for Maura to see an opening.

Before Elias knew what was happening, Maura had slipped around the side of the kitchen and out the door. The beat of her heart was outpacing the beat of her shoes on the wooden floor as she ran out the way she came. Usually when she ran, Elias just let her go, but this time was different. This time he chased her.

Elias's family home was near the edge of the city boundaries. He owned most of the surrounding property, so there were no neighbors to witness the cruelty. All that Maura could do was run into the forest. She could hear her husband behind her as she whipped branches out of her way. The woods that were so inviting during the day were sinister at night. While running, Maura remembered days of building tree forts with her sons, watching as they tumbled around on the ground, laughing. Those were the days before Elias became so violent in his anger. It was back when Jasper's lack of Strength didn't matter as much. He was so young then. Maura had been younger then, too.

She felt a drop of blood curling down her cheek. One of the branches must have cut her. Maura had no idea where she was going. Elias bellowed her name as she began to draw further and further away from him. Once she had gained a bit of distance, she took time to take in her surroundings. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw what looked like a wrought iron fence topped with spikes. Hopefully, it would be a small home with sympathetic owners who would allow her to hide.

As she drew nearer, however, her hopes were crushed. She found that the gate was surrounding what looked like a small cemetery full of above-ground crypts surrounding a mausoleum. Still desperate, Maura had no choice but to follow the enclosure until she found the gate. She swung the unlocked gate open with a soul wakening screech. When she tried to push the rusted structure shut, one of the metal rods broke off in her hand. Clutching it for defense, she ran to hide behind one of the crypts.

Maura was just able to quiet her breathing when she heard the gate swing open again. Slow, quiet footsteps contrasted with the heavy breathing of Elias. She clutched the rod in her hands until her knuckles turned white.

“Well, what now?” Elias asked as his breathing returned to normal. “You don’t have anywhere to go.” Maura remained silent as Elias casually meandered through the graves as though he were gazing at art in a museum. Her mind was racing. She was afraid for her life. Elias was getting closer.

Almost without thinking, Maura reached around at her feet until her hand closed around a large pebble. Taking aim, she tossed the stone, hitting one of the crypts between her and Elias. A sickening grin sat on his face as he slowly turned his head toward the sound. Maura stayed hidden as Elias walked in the direction of the sound.

“All you have to do is say ‘sorry,’” Elias said. “You and the boy could come back, and we’d forget all about this. Everything could go back to normal.”

Maura thought about his version of normal. It was waking up next to him each day at the crack of dawn. Normal was sliding out of bed without a sound and making sure that breakfast was ready when Elias came downstairs, and being chastised if it was too hot or cold. In Elias’s normal, if he had a bad day, then Maura did too. Long sleeves in the summer were normal. Bruises on her neck were normal. Stares and whispers from neighbors were normal. Disrespect from her children was normal. Hatred for being human was normal.

Maura didn’t want normal.

Elias lunged behind the crypt where Maura had thrown the stone. He stumbled a bit at the shock of finding no one there. In that moment of weakness, Maura raised the pipe above her head and brought it down with all of the strength in her body. The rusted edge hit the top of Elias’s head with a sickening crack, followed by the quiet vibrations of the pipe. Elias slumped to the ground, blood flowed through his dark hair before dripping into the dust. He groaned as he tried to raise himself back to standing, but Maura hit him again.

It was as if her body were acting without the help of her mind. She couldn't stop herself from hitting Elias, over and over again. Even after he stopped moaning, Maura couldn't stop herself from bashing the pipe against Elias's body. At some point she began crying. She cried harder with each hit. It was almost as if she were trying to match him for every hit that he had ever given her. She just kept going until her body was devoid of energy. Her blows came with declining force. Her breathing was heavy.

Eventually everything stopped. With one last puny hit, Maura let the pipe fall to the ground. She stumbled backward until her back was against the large mausoleum in the center of the graveyard. Her legs gave out and she slid to the ground. Tears leaked from her wide eyes as she looked in horror at what she had done.

Elias wasn't moving. What had she done? No one would believe her. She had never issued any type of formal complaint against her husband, and any bruises that he had given her had long since healed in the months living away from him. Everyone would mourn the death of the beloved town councilman as they shook their heads at his lunatic wife. She'd go to prison, or worse. Her boys would be left all alone. What would happen to Jasper?

"What have I done?" She whimpered. Her entire body collapsed as she slid down to the ground. Unable to look at Elias's body, Maura turned so that her forehead was against the marble side of the mausoleum. In her exhaustion, Maura fell asleep.

She was startled awake by a rustling noise. The sun had just begun to rise, and it painted the sky in a warm orange glow. Maura turned to Elias in apprehension, both hoping and dreading that the noise had come from him. What Maura saw was much more frightening.

Standing over Elias's body was a woman, or what appeared to be a woman. The body was covered entirely by a dark purple cloak. All that stuck out were black hands and a face that

was shrouded by a black mask painted with feminine eyes and lips. Maura was so shocked that she couldn't move.

"Please!" she cried. "I didn't mean to hurt him! You have to believe me! Please?"

"Be quiet!" the woman barked as she looked over the body. "How dare you disturb my brother's resting place?" Her hands, which upon closer inspection were gloved, were curled into fists. For many minutes, she didn't speak. Maura began to sense that the being in front of her was no spirit, but a very irate human. She attempted to explain.

"He's my husband..." Maura began.

"Silence!" the woman bellowed. "How dare you defile the burial place of my family?" Before Maura could attempt to explain further, the woman raised her left hand over her head. Embroidered on the palm of the glove was a spiral, the Mark of Beauty. Almost immediately, distant yelling began, followed by rustling in the woods behind the gate. In the light of day, Maura could see that an ill defined path led from the gate into the forest. To her surprise, two soldiers, one a Statesman the other a Vagrant, came running down the path and into the enclosure.

"Lady," the first inquired. "Are you in distress?"

"I'm well equipped to take care of myself," the woman replied. "However, I'm entrusting the two of you to deliver this prisoner to my home. Do you think you can handle that?"

"Yes, Lady Marceline," replied the second.

Before she could protest, the two men grabbed Maura's shoulders and started pushing her toward the gate.

"Lady Marceline?" Maura whispered in shock. Little was known about the reclusive heir to the Grand Ambassador. In a year, she was set to take the place of her deceased father as a

representative to the Two Nations from its capital, Andalusia. Lady Marceline hadn't been seen outside of her family home in years.

“Please, Lady!” Maura yelled behind her. “If you'd only let me explain!”

“I'll need one of you to take care of this,” Marceline said, indicating the lifeless body. She completely ignored Maura as she was dragged away.

[Marceline]

As soon as she was alone, Marceline walked to the front of the mausoleum and sat on the steps. Resting her elbows on her knees, she untied the black ribbon holding her mask in place and let it drop into her lap. She covered her face in her hands. There were no tears. They had all been cried out earlier. When she had regained her composure, she stood again, taking her mask in her hand. Instead of putting it back on immediately, she lifted her face to the rising sun. A slight breeze kissed her face. She took it in with a sigh before turning back to the door of the mausoleum. Marceline placed a hand on the door, signaling goodbye to her brother who lay resting inside.

Marceline almost laughed as she left her family crypt. The sun was shining bright yellow directly overhead; its cheerful canary glow was a harsh contrast with the scene in front of her. The man's body was still lying exactly where he fell. Were it not for the fact that his face was plastered directly into the earth, he could have been mistaken for a sleeping drunk. In this state he was harmless, yet that didn't stop the feelings of wariness bombarding Marceline from her powers of Discernment.

Marceline had always been lectured on how rare her Discernment Mark was. At her peak, she had been able to look directly into the minds of others. Just by touching someone, Marceline could learn a person's hopes, fears, and motivations. From a distance, she received feelings or hunches. A person skilled with their Discernment Mark, she had been told, could feel the malice of attackers behind them before the strike of a weapon, as well as feel the tender compassion of a lover before being caught in an embrace. Most of the time, those marked by Discernment do not develop their ability until they are well into their elder years. Marceline's mark had appeared when she was twelve years old.

She tried to ignore the feelings of hatred and rage coming from the body. It wasn't uncommon for her to get passing feelings from those who had departed, but these were stronger than normal. Either the man's soul was still leaking out of his body, or these dark feelings she felt had run common throughout his lifetime.

There was no way out of the enclosure except to walk right past the remains of the dead man. As she tried her best to skirt around the body, her foot accidentally grazed against his hand. Marceline braced herself against a tombstone as the memories of this man named Elias began flooding through her mind.

First, Elias was a little boy born to a well off family. He was the fourth of six sons. As each of the boys vied for the attention of their parents, he tried to set himself apart. Elias became the ambitious one. His ambition caused his parents to push him harder. He was going to be the one to bring their family to greatness. He wasn't marked by Intelligence, but he didn't care. What mattered to him were his Strength, his Bravery, and his drive to greatness.

Next, Elias grew from a small boy to a young man. The world was at his feet. Familial connections within the government had him working as a page for the Councilman of outer Andalusia. He had been taken under the wing of the Head of Council. He advised Elias to marry and start a family. The public liked a family man.

A few years passed. Elias had found a wife from a good family who had born him three sons. The councilman mentor was beginning to drop hints about his impending retirement. Everything was going smoothly except for one thing. At the youngest son's Naming Ceremony, he hadn't been marked with Strength or Bravery, only Intelligence and Beauty. Surely this wouldn't last. Perhaps the person conducting the ceremony made a mistake. The boy would mature into a great man one day, wouldn't he?

But he never did. Elias felt the apprehension wash away into anger. His entire life had been dedicated to making this perfect life for himself. He had worked hard for decades making himself into a respected public figure. Everything was exactly how he wanted it except for the boy. That just wouldn't do.

Finally, Elias felt the rage from the night before. Life had been crumbling around him. Whispers among his colleagues plagued his very existence. They all wondered what had made his wife leave. Was it a lack of manhood? Was it perhaps something more? It was all Maura's fault! She had given birth to that monstrosity, she had left their family, then she showed up at their house demanding things of Elias. She needed to be taught a lesson, and Elias was going to be the one to teach her.

He was running. He was in the woods. He followed Maura into the cemetery. He was going to rid himself of this problem once and for all.

Marceline ripped herself back to reality before she could witness anything else. She didn't need to see how the man had died, she already knew. She didn't need the extra headache. As she began the long walk back to the manor, she shuddered. The guards needed to take care of his body sooner rather than later.

As soon as she walked in the door, Marceline was bombarded with the regular onslaught of questions.

"May I take your cloak, my lady?"

"Are you in need of food or drink, Lady Marceline?"

"Madam, there are new documents on your desk regarding your line of ascension." That was the last thing Marceline wanted to think about.

Marceline walked straight through the faceless servants, intending to go find her prisoner. Before she could leave, however, she was stopped by Arthur.

“You’re going to drive them all off,” he said, referring to the servants waiting at the door.

“Let them go,” she replied. “They’re probably better off somewhere else.” Arthur rolled his eyes.

“You can’t live all by yourself.”

“That’s why I have you!” Marceline smiled.

“You seem to be feeling better,” he remarked.

“I was,” Marceline quipped. “I thought you weren’t going to bother me until tomorrow.”

“You really need to look at those papers,” he said.

“Eventually.”

“Soon. Where are you going?” he asked as the two walked down a stairway.

“The prison,” she replied

“You’re going to deal with that woman,” Arthur said as he curled his upper lip.

“Her name is Maura,” Marceline replied, looking hard at her mentor. “You’re usually much more compassionate towards ‘poor unfortunate souls’.”

“Word has started getting around,” he replied. “Apparently that man that she killed was rather well liked in town.” Maura thought back to her moment of Discernment with Elias in the cemetery. Charisma could be blinding.

“She didn’t like him so much,” Marceline replied. “Don’t you think there was a reason?” Arthur grabbed her arm, stopping her on the next to last step. Of all the people working in her home, Arthur was the one she trusted most. He was also the only person besides Diana that she still allowed to touch her.

“All I’m saying is that this should be handled delicately,” he replied, letting Marceline draw her own conclusions on the true meaning behind his last word. She pulled her shoulders back and straightened her mask before opening the massive metallic door that led to the manor prison.

This part of the palace hadn’t been used as an actual prison in decades. Hundreds of years ago when the Two Nations came together, prisoners were taken out of the hands of ruling families and put into government sanctioned buildings. However, there were rare occasions when a prisoner or two would find themselves in Marceline’s basement.

The entire enclosure was made of concrete. The gray look of the rooms was made even more dull by the lack of windows and natural lighting. There were twelve cells in total, but only three remained intact. It was in these door-less cells that had been the beginning of so many imaginary stories when Marceline was younger. She and Aaron used to play ‘war prisoner’ in these rooms. Whoever lost would have to stay in ‘prison’ until the victorious party deemed they had suffered enough. At the time, even five minutes was suffering. Marceline would have given anything for another five minutes with her brother.

Maura was standing in the cell right in front of the door. When Marceline and Arthur entered, she was facing them, ready to plead on her behalf.

“Please, my lady,” Maura began, “You must let me explain.” Marceline looked on her with pity for a moment before turning to address the guards.

“Has she been unruly?” Marceline inquired.

“Not in so many words,” one of the men replied as he stood up. He was wearing Vagrant orange. “She been spouting off a lot of lies though. They’ll say anything to get out.”

“What’s she been lying about?” asked Marceline.

“Talking about the man she killed,” he answered. “Saying he’s a wife beater. All that stuff.”

“And you don’t believe her?” Arthur interjected.

“Not a bit,” he replied. “I knew Elias personally. He’s my councilman. He’d always make sure to listen to me at the meetings and such. He’s not the type to hurt anybody. She probably just wanted his money or something. She left him a while back, ya see. Nobody knows why.”

“I see,” Marceline answered. She turned from the guards and went back to the iron bars of the cell. Maura stood straighter, wringing her hands together. This time, she offered no words in her own defense. Marceline and Maura stared at each other in silence. Finally, she issued a command.

“Guards. I’d like to be left alone with the prisoner.” The guards offered only mumbles in protest as they filed out the door. Maura looked warily at Marceline and Arthur. As soon as the door shut behind the guards Marceline snatched the keys from their hook on the wall and unlocked the cell. Maura shied away.

“What are you doing?” she asked fearfully.

“Something ridiculous, I’m sure,” Arthur replied.

“I’m trusting you not to run,” Marceline answered, looking at Arthur with contempt. The door swung open with a loud creak. Marceline walked straight in the cell and stood directly in front of Maura. “May I see your arms?”

“Pardon?” Maura asked. Marceline reached out and took Maura’s bare hand in her gloved one. She pushed back the long sleeve to reveal a dark bruise around Maura’s forearm. It was about the size of a man’s hand.

“Arthur, come look,” Marceline commanded. He obliged. “Have you ever seen a bruise like this before?” He studied Maura’s arm closely as his eyes widened.

“I see,” he said.

“Do you have anything for it?” Marceline asked.

“Yes,” Arthur replied as he turned quickly on his heel. He ran out the door and back up the stairs, leaving Marceline and Maura alone.

“Bring something for the cut on her neck as well!” Marceline yelled after him.

“How did you know?” Maura asked. She looked to be on the verge of tears. Marceline thought back to when her Discernment had activated in the garden. Even now, it was pulling a few memories out of Maura. All of them were bad.

“You aren’t the only one who uses clothes to hide,” Marceline replied, reaching up with her free hand to touch her mask.

“What’s going to happen to me?” Maura asked, her voice shaking. Marceline paused for a moment before answering.

“I can’t just let you go,” she said regretfully. “But I may be able to work something out.” The wheels in her brain were turning as Arthur returned with a brown messenger bag slung over his shoulder.

“Please, sit,” Arthur said as he reentered the cell. He sat opposite Maura on a bench while Marceline paced. The last thing she wanted to do was punish this woman for defending herself. However, because of the status of her husband, she couldn’t just let Maura go. If he really was as popular as Arthur believed, then those who knew him would riot in the streets demanding Maura’s head.

“She’ll stay here,” Marceline declared.

“What?” Arthur asked. Stopping his healing for a moment to look up at Marceline.

“I said she’ll stay here,” she repeated. “We’ll say that she’s being rehabilitated as a prisoner and keep her here. She can stay on as a servant. It’s a way to work off her crime in a way that she’ll be protected from the masses and still maintain as much of her freedom as possible.” Arthur raised one eye brow and shrugged.

“It isn’t a bad idea.” He replied, emphasizing the word ‘bad’. “It’s unconventional, but if it comes from you, I’m sure no one would question it.”

“Except the ambassadors, you mean,” Marceline replied with a scoff.

“It’s not as if you care what they think anyway,” he replied.

“This could work!” Marceline replied excitedly.

“What’s gotten into you?” Arthur replied as he wrapped Maura’s arm in a cloth bandage. “I haven’t seen you this excited since the Ambassador of Moroe tripped on his own robes at the Spring Ball two years ago.”

“Well, I don’t like the Ambassador of Moroe. Obviously I was excited when he fell flat on his giant nose.” The two chuckled.

“Wait.” Maura interjected quietly, wiping the smiles from Arthur and Marceline’s faces. “I have children. Three boys. I can’t just leave them alone.” Marceline furrowed her brow behind her mask while Arthur tilted his head to the ceiling.

“I don’t see any reason why you can’t bring them here,” Arthur said. “They don’t have to be prisoners, but they can stay here as well.”

“Should I summon them, then?” Marceline asked.

“I wouldn’t,” Arthur cautioned. “People might start asking questions if the boys are summoned here and then no one hears from the entire family ever again.”

“Well then why don’t you go get them!” Marceline asked. “You’re vastly unimpressive. No one would expect you to come from here.” Arthur rolled his eyes.

“I’ll go,” Maura replied. Marceline swiveled her head to look at Maura. Her tiny frame was dwarfed by the cell, but she looked resolved.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Marceline answered hesitantly.

“I could go tonight, after the sun goes down. I’ll be back with my boys before the sun rises. No one will know the difference.” Arthur and Marceline shared a look.

“That may be our only option,” Arthur said. Marceline let out a small sigh, then nodded.

“I should be able to take care of the guards for one night,” Marceline replied. “We can have a horse ready for her when the night comes.”

“That’s it then,” Arthur replied. Silence hung in the air for a few moments. “We should probably let the guards back in. So they don’t suspect anything.”

“Right,” Marceline replied. She and Arthur started towards the door.

“Wait,” Maura said as she grabbed Marceline’s arm. She tensed at the unfamiliar touch. “I just wanted you to know...” she began. “I didn’t mean to...”

“I know,” Marceline replied. Suddenly, she had a thought. “What are your Markings?”

“Beauty, Intelligence, and Bravery, my Lady,” Maura replied. Marceline winced at the title.

“Bravery,” Marceline replied, hoping her tone sounded reassuring. “I can tell.”

“Thank you,” Maura said. Marceline nodded as she locked Maura back in her cell and followed Arthur out the door. Arthur began questioning her as they walked back to the main hall.

“What’s gotten into you?” he asked.

“How do you mean?”

“You usually aren’t so...involved in these things.”

“Have I really been cold for so long that you thought I was uncaring?” Marceline asked.

“No!” Arthur said. “I know that you still have a heart hidden somewhere. What I’m asking is ‘Why now?’” The two paused outside the door of the meeting room. Inside, there would be diplomats and dignitaries waiting for Marceline to hear their cases. They would name drop, flatter, and beg Marceline to do favors for them. They all wanted something from her. Maura was different. Marceline had never seen maternal love, but she was sure that Maura embodied it.

“Call it the attempt of a dying girl to make a difference in the world,” Marceline replied as she steeled herself. “I assume that I can trust you to have the horse ready.” Before Arthur could offer a rebuttal, Marceline pushed open the doors of the meeting hall. Just as before, Marceline was met by a barrage of baseless questions from faceless people.

[Jasper]

Jasper hadn't seen his mother since last night.

That wasn't particularly unusual, however. She worked for a doctor in town who made house calls. Their hours varied a great deal. There were times when elders ran out of medicine that they needed first thing in the morning, and there were times when expectant mothers would be in labor well into the night. Most nights Jasper tried to wait up for her, but if she wasn't home by midnight, he went to sleep.

The moon was at its peak when Jasper was awakened by his mother bursting into his room. He stared at her through a haze as she shook him awake.

"We're leaving, now," she commanded. Jasper was still trying to fully open his eyes as she started pulling clothes off the floor and flinging clothes into an old backpack. Her odd behavior pulled Jasper out of his stupor.

"What's going on?" he asked as he sat up. Now she had moved to the closet and was throwing more clothes in the bag.

"There's no time!" she replied. "We have to go get your brothers and go."

"Mom?" Jasper inquired. Maura threw the bag at him in answer.

"Pack only what you need. And pack light. I'm going to get some of my things then I'll meet you out front. Our horse is tethered there."

"We don't own a horse," Jasper said, but his mother was already running out the door. Concerned, Jasper looked down into the bag his mother had thrown him. Quickly, he took out a few of the extra shirts and exchanged them for some of his smaller books.

What was going on? His mother had never acted this way, even when leaving the family house. Jasper and Maura had left in broad daylight. Elias had gone into town, leaving Maura

bruised once again. His brothers had left already, but Jasper had stayed behind to make sure she was ok. He had peeked in her room and seen her crying silently as she carefully went through her things. She was meticulous. Once Jasper saw what she was doing, he went and packed up most of his belongings as well. When Maura left the bedroom with her things, Jasper was waiting at the front door, bags in hand. She had sighed and nodded to her son. Without words, they left.

This time was different. This time was rushed.

Jasper took one final look around his room before running down the stairs and out the front door. He was greeted by a strange horse, just like his mother had said he would be. The horse was panting lightly, as if it had been run hard. Jasper placed one hand on the beast's nose. The gesture was returned with a nuzzle. He had always been good with animals. Jasper had just finished securing his lone bag to the saddle when he heard the frantic thud of his mother running down the stairs. She locked the front door as she pulled it shut quietly.

"Ma, what's going on?" Jasper asked once more.

"Shh!" Maura whispered. "Later." She gave her bag to Jasper and he secured it to the horse as well. Mother and son climbed on the horse. Jasper held the reigns as Maura held her son's shoulders. "Quickly," Maura continued, "to your father's house."

Without another word, Jasper steered the horse in the direction of the family home. The steady beat of the horse's hoofs didn't allow Jasper to question his mother on her strange behavior. Their pace didn't slow until the family home slowly came into view. As soon as the horse began to slow, Maura swung one leg over and jumped to the ground. Without hesitation, she opened the front door and ran into the house.

Jasper ran in after her after tethering the horse. He couldn't understand why his mother was acting like this, especially if there was a chance that his father was home. Jasper wasn't keen

on seeing him, or his brothers for that matter. When he jogged through the door, his mother was running down the hall calling for his brothers.

“Anderson! Lee!” she yelled as she ran to their rooms. Jasper followed apprehensively, waiting every moment for his father to emerge. Instead, his brothers came stumbling out of their respective rooms.

“Whaddya want?” Anderson slurred to his mother.

“Pack your things,” Maura replied. “We need to leave, immediately.”

“Where we going?” he asked.

“The Royal Palace,” she said. Jasper stared hard at his mother.

“Mom, why are we going to the palace?” Jasper asked. Maura sighed, pausing only for a moment before pushing past Lee and into his room. She repeated her actions from before, grabbing a bag and shoving clothes inside.

“I already told you,” she said. “I’ll explain it all when we get there.”

“I’m not doing anything without Dad,” Anderson said. Maura packed more furiously.

“He isn’t coming.”

“Why’s he not coming,” asked Lee.

“He just isn’t.”

“I’m not going without him!” Anderson said.

“I’ll go get him,” said Lee as he started up the stairs.

“Stop!” Maura yelled. Everyone froze in their places. The boys looked at Maura as she stared intently into Lee’s closet. “He isn’t there.” Tension built as the seconds ticked on.

“Mom?” Jasper asked. “Where is he?” Maura didn’t answer. Without knowing quite why, Jasper began to feel an uneasy pricking sensation in the pit of his stomach.

“Where’s Dad?” Anderson demanded, fists clenched. Maura still didn’t answer.

“Where is he?” Lee yelled, stomping back in his room. He hovered over his mother menacingly. “Where’s he gone?” Maura slowly stood from where she had been kneeling on the floor. She looked her son straight in the eye and steeled herself.

“Away,” she whispered. “And he’s not coming back.” The family stopped for a beat. Maura took advantage of the silence and threw the bag to Lee. “Hitch up the horses.” She ordered. “We’ll have to hurry if we want to be back before the sun rises. I’ll go make a bag for Andy.”

“No,” Anderson replied.

“What?”

“We’re not going anywhere.”

“What?”

“You’re going to stay right here, and we’re going to call the guards. You did something to Dad!” Maura didn’t say a word, which only made Jasper more nervous.

“What’d you do?” Lee chimed in.

“You can’t call anyone!” Jasper interjected. “She’s our mother.”

“What if she hurt Dad?” Anderson yelled.

“What about all the times he hurt her?” Jasper yelled. “Besides, he wasn’t much of a father to me anyway!”

“He might have been if you weren’t such a Beaut!”

“Take it back!”

“Make me!”

“Boys stop it!” Maura yelled! She rushed to Jasper and grabbed his arm. The two ran back outside to where the borrowed horse was tethered. Anderson and Lee chased them back into the yard. Maura jumped onto the back of the horse while Jasper tried to untangle the knotted reins. His heart was thumping madly in his chest. Lee grabbed Jasper’s arm, trying to take the reins, but Jasper, finally fed up with his brother, punched him as hard as he could. Shocked, Lee stumbled backward, giving Jasper time to untie the horse and jump up into the saddle. As quickly as possible, mother and son rode away.

Jasper had a lot of time to think between their home and the Royal Palace. He’d known that Lee and Anderson had always been partial to their father, but how could they just abandon their mother like that? She was the only one who had ever loved the boys unconditionally. Why couldn’t they see that?

What had she done to Elias?

Jasper felt his mother place her forehead on the back of his shoulder. Even with the movement of the horse underneath them, he could feel her sobbing. All Jasper could do was urge the horse to move faster towards the palace.

When they arrived at the main gate, there was a small, slender man waiting there for them. Jasper immediately worried that this unassuming character would cause them trouble.

“What took you so long?” he demanded as the horse came to a stop. “You should have been back an hour ago.”

“I’m sorry,” Maura said as she slipped off the back of the horse. “We ran into a bit of trouble.” She pulled in both lips, trying not to cry again.

“Yes...well,” the man began, “Lady Marceline was just beginning to worry, that’s all.”

“Lady Marceline?” Jasper asked in shock. “The next Ambassador for Andalusia? What does she have to do with anything?”

“Pardon me,” Maura interjected, “I haven’t gotten the chance to explain anything yet. Jasper, this is Arthur. He works closely with Lady Marceline. Arthur, my youngest, Jasper.”

“Charmed,” Arthur replied, although Jasper didn’t think he looked charmed at all. “I’m afraid that’s all the explaining you’ll have time for. We have to take you back down to the cells.” Arthur made a move to take Maura’s bag.

“Wait! You can’t take her!” Jasper said. He’d been through too much tonight to just let his mother go off with a stranger.

“Jasper, calm down!” Maura replied, “Everything will be fine. I promise.” Jasper looked hard at his mother, wishing for even an iota of explanation.

“Wait here,” Arthur said as he ushered Maura away.

Jasper didn’t know what to think anymore. Yesterday everything had been normal. Everything had been fine. Now his mother was going to the old prisons under the palace, his father was who knows where, and there was nothing he could do about it. He wished that Allan was around. Maybe if he could just talk all of this out with someone, it would begin making sense. As he unstrapped his bag from the heavily breathing horse, he shook his head. He did the only thing he could do in the situation. He pulled out a book and began to read. Jasper remained undisturbed for about two chapters when felt a shadow above him.

“This way, please,” said Arthur. Jasper squinted at him in the light of the rising sun. He nodded and followed the stranger into the inner workings of the palace.

“Now that I assume there’s time, could you please explain to me what happened?” Jasper asked. Arthur let out a small sigh.

“In short,” he began, “Your mother is in a particularly bad place at the moment. She’s committed a crime.”

“I figured as much,” Jasper interrupted. Putting as much weight behind his words as possible, Jasper asked the question he had been dreading, “What did she do?”

“I think it’s best that we allow her to tell you,” he replied. “Just know that we are trying our best to help her in a way that makes sure she is held fully accountable.”

“Wait,” Jasper interjected, “you have to understand. If this has anything to do with my father, it’s possible that he provoked the whole thing. You can’t believe a word he says when it comes to my mother.”

“We’re well aware of his misgivings,” Arthur interrupted. “Allow me to repeat. We want your mother to be held accountable for her action.” Jasper stared blankly, “Even if that action was defending herself.” Jasper’s eyes widened. He nodded. Finally, someone understood. “Anyway,” Arthur continued, “until such a time that the goddess of Justice can see rightly, we must keep your mother here. That way she can be kept safe but still maintain as much freedom as possible in her situation.”

“What convinced you that my mother was innocent?” Jasper asked after a pause.

“Lady Marceline is Marked with Discernment,” Arthur replied. As if on cue, a beautiful purple silk cloak with silver swirl designs floated around the side of a pillar. The woman wearing it also sported a plain, long sleeved black dress and a full face mask with designs that matched her cloak.

“Arthur,” she announced. Arthur offered a short bow, encouraging Jasper to do the same. Jasper copied his movements without taking his eyes off of the creature before him.

“Lady Marceline,” he replied, “We’ve completed our task. Everything is fine as it is.”

“I thought she was bringing three boys?” Marceline inquired as she turned her head to Jasper. Jasper clenched his fists and looked to the ground.

“My brothers aren’t coming.”

“I see,” Marceline replied slowly. “And your mother?”

“She’s fine, but upset.”

“And your hand?” Jasper looked at Marceline in shock. Up until that moment, he had forgotten that his hand was throbbing. He must have hurt it when he punched Lee.

“It’ll heal,” Jasper said, “How did you...”

“Discernment,” Lady Marceline dismissed. “Arthur, fix his hand, then come find me.” Marceline was about to walk away when she turned back suddenly. “You like to read?” she asked slowly. Jasper nodded. He could feel her looking him over. “Interesting,” she said as she turned sharply and started walking away.

“Did you learn that through Discernment too?” he asked after her. She turned slowly back to face him. Without a word, she pointed at the book he was still holding in his hand. Jasper looked at the book and looked back up to Lady Marceline, but she was walking away again.

Arthur began walking in the opposite direction. Jasper followed, still watching Lady Marceline as she glided away.

“Why does she wear that?” he asked.

“What?”

“The mask.”

“Ah,” Arthur murmured, “that secret is not mine to tell.”

“But you know.”

“Yes.”

Jasper turned his gaze back to Arthur as Lady Marceline disappeared from sight. He followed Arthur to a small room off the side of the palace where Arthur mixed different liquids together and bandaged his arm. Jasper was full of questions. What was Lady Marceline's story? Why did she want to help his mother? Why did she wear that mask? He pondered quietly as the smells of the room slowly lured him into a deep sleep.

[Marceline]

Marceline threw a vase at an ambassador. The tinkling smash of the porcelain hitting the marble floors was a small satisfaction in her anger at being forced to attend her fourth meeting of the day.

“Lady, please,” the ambassador pleaded. “In a year when a new ambassador ascends there has always been pomp and circumstance. There really is no way around it.”

“There will be if I don’t attend,” Marceline replied. He was of course discussing the festivities that were meant to announce Marceline’s placement as the Grand Ambassador for Andalusia, the place previously held by her father. Ever since her Beauty Mark had faded and taken her normal appearance with it, Marceline had shied away from the pomp and circumstance of the palace. Besides, at this point she probably wouldn’t live long enough to take her father’s place anyway.

“Madam,” replied a different ambassador, this one from the providence of Berumba. “The men and women of the Two Nations will worry if the leadership of their capital comes under question.”

“Shouldn’t they?” Marceline asked. Everyone in the room shifted uncomfortably.

“Lady Marceline,” Arthur interjected, “perhaps for the time being it would be best to put forth a type of show for the people of the Republic.” Marceline looked at him warily. “It would keep them from feelings of undue fear. There’s no use worrying them without reason.”

Marceline took a deep breath before answering.

“If my most trusted advisor wishes it,” Marceline said through a grimace, “then I will oblige. If only to end this argument.”

“The arrangements will be made, post haste,” someone replied.

“I ask that this meeting be moved forward,” bellowed an older man. He was seated in the middle of a row of thirteen plush chairs. Instead of sitting in the middle chair, he sat on a slightly smaller stool in front of it. The chair was symbolically left open in memory of Marceline’s father, who had been the Grand Ambassador until his death. As his oldest surviving child, Marceline was set to take her father’s place after her twenty second birthday, which was about a year away.

“We agree,” chanted the voices of the twelve other ambassadors. Six wore the traditional desert orange hues of the Vagrants and the others were covered in Euridtus blue. Only Marceline wore neutral black. By chanting together, they signified that no one was more powerful than the other.

“We hear there is a prisoner in your midst,” said the man as he looked at Marceline.

“You hear rightly, Moderator.”

“What are her charges?”

“Murder of her spouse, the councilman of Outer Andalusia, Elias Worth.” Murmurs scattered around the meeting hall. Even in the highest circles of government Elias was known as a good man and a hard worker.

“Are there any that would speak for her?”

“A son.”

“Did he witness the crime?”

“No.” There was a shuffle around the room. Marceline could see the guilty verdicts planting themselves in the minds of the ambassadors.

“Are there others who would speak?” asked the moderator suspiciously.

“I.” Marceline’s heart dropped to the pit of her stomach. She relied on the element of surprise to convince the council to agree to her more lenient sentencing for Maura. Everyone in the room simply stared.

“On what grounds?” asked the moderator.

“My ability of Discernment.” All muttering stopped. It seemed like even the flies on the wall stopped buzzing for a moment to look down at the spectacle. Everyone knew that Discernment was a rare gift, including Marceline. That’s why she only reserved using it for special occasions such as this.

“You’d be willing to speak on her behalf at trial?” one of the ambassadors asked out of turn. Marceline simply smiled.

“Oh, we aren’t going to trial,” everyone stared again.

“Pardon, my lady?” asked the moderator.

“I want the fate of Maura Worth decided right now, by us.”

“On what grounds?”

“On the grounds that a fair trial would be impossible to get anywhere else,” Marceline answered. The moderator looked pensively to the sky. Marceline watched apprehensively as he stroked his white beard.

“Explain,” he commanded.

“It is no secret that the man killed was well known and well liked by citizens of Andalusia,” Marceline began as she started pacing. “I believe that if Maura is to be fairly judged, she must be kept as far away as possible from those who knew her husband. Otherwise, she may receive a harsher punishment than she deserves.”

“It’s very uncommon for people of our stature to trouble ourselves with petty problems,” replied the only ambassador who seemed to be unimpressed with Marceline’s demeanor.

Marceline scowled. His name was Baron. Marceline had always thought he looked like the devil personified. His pallid skin contrasted with the pitch black hair that framed his face. Even his eyes seemed to be the color of coal. It was these looks combined with his unkind demeanor that had frightened Marceline when she was a child. She had taken to calling him Lucifer behind his back. Once she realized that he was nothing to be afraid of, she started calling him Lucy.

“I didn’t think that murder was petty, Baron,” Marceline replied, willing her eyes to shoot daggers into his heart.

“Murder, no. A domestic dispute, yes.”

“So you’re saying that we should only concern ourselves with, what, creating a new world order?” Marceline asked sarcastically.

“You mock my life’s work!” Baron hissed, “Even though my work is in high favor with…”

“Don’t you dare mention that name in my presence!” Marceline boomed.

“Is the princess throwing a tantrum now?” Baron smirked. Marceline wanted nothing more than to smack him, but she’d already thrown the vase at someone else. There were a lot of rumors going around about Baron and her mother. They’d been going around since before Marceline was born. She didn’t care, honestly. She couldn’t be bothered with how her mother spent her time.

“Ambassadors,” Marceline began again, turning away from Baron, “I protest this case going to trial on the grounds of unreported domestic abuse that I witnessed through the use of my Discernment Mark.”

“Do you wish to put this matter to a vote?” the moderator asked.

“I do,” Marceline said, squaring her shoulders.

“All right,” the moderator replied. “All in favor of allowing the lady Marceline to decide and control the punishment of Maura Worth on the grounds of her Discernment ability, please raise your left hand and say ‘I.’”

Marceline watched as ten of the men and women acknowledged their approval. She had expected as much. Her Discernment ability was something of a mystery to people, and it often caused events to move in her favor. She was the only person in the room who had it. One of the two who didn’t raise his hands was Baron. Marceline praised her self control for offering only a smug smile in his direction. At the moment he didn’t look too concerned.

“The decision has been noted,” the moderator said as he wrote something down in a little book. “Now I believe the Ambassador Baron of the Western Oasis has some closing remark.” Baron slinked out of his seat. Even from here, Marceline could feel the confidence oozing out of him.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I have great news for you all,” he began, positioning himself in the center of the room. “The education reforms that I have implemented, which you all have so kindly approved, have been going along very well. Our data shows that children in this new, reformed system are picking up new techniques at a rapid rate, especially those related to their abilities.” Marceline rolled her eyes resisting the urge to ask him where this ‘data’ had come from.

“I must admit, however, that the plans I presented to you were not entirely mine,” he continued. Marceline furrowed her brow. She had never heard Baron give away credit for

anything that went well. She looked around the room and noticed that everyone else was also curious.

“The plans came from one who has only ever had the greatest interest in the lives of the citizens of the Two Nations. This person has worked tirelessly by my side while toiling to make this new system work,” he suddenly looked right at Marceline. Her stomach dropped. Surely he was joking.

“This reform is the work of Lady Margaret, Princess of the Vagrant Lands.” The room shook with the shocked outbursts of Baron’s audience. “And she’d like to come for a visit,” Marceline blanched.

“Hasn’t she been banished?” asked one of the ambassadors as he twisted the sides of his robes.

“Twice,” Marceline yelled over the rabble, “She’s been banished twice.”

“Lady Margaret feels a great deal of remorse for any alleged actions against the well-being of the Two Nations and wishes to make amends. Perhaps most of all, she’d like to attend the future coronation of her daughter.”

“She has no daughter,” Marceline snapped, “just as she has no son.”

“Moderator, the Two Nations Treaty states that representatives of the royal families of both the Vagrant Lands and the State of Euridtus must be in attendance at each coronation,” Baron whined over the still muttering crowd.

“Does not the lady have a sister?” asked the Moderator coolly.

“The Lady Diana has renounced her place in the royal family by becoming a Scholar,” Baron replied. “She is not eligible to represent the Vagrant lands.”

Marceline couldn’t take it anymore. She left, heading straight for the dungeon.

When she burst into the room, Maura was standing against a back wall of her cell, wringing her hands. She ran to the bars as Marceline grabbed the keys from the wall.

“What are you doing?” one of the guards demanded. Marceline looked harshly at him.

“Is that how you address me?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Apologies,” he said gruffly. “What are you doing, my lady?”

“I’m freeing this woman, obviously.”

“On what grounds, lady?”

“She’s to be released into my own custody.”

“Really?” Maura exclaimed. Marceline redirected her attention to Maura.

“You’ll stay here and work for the time being. We’ll figure everything else out as we go.”

Marceline unlocked the door and Maura burst forth.

“Thank you, Lady Marceline,” she exclaimed.

“But my lady!” the guard interjected, “she murdered Elias Worth. He was a great man! You can’t just let her get away with that!”

“She isn’t getting away with anything,” Marceline replied firmly. “She’ll work off her debt to the Two Nations here.” Just as Marceline was going to suggest they find Maura’s son, she began to feel the guilt of someone in the room.

Since being poisoned by her mother, Marceline’s control over her gifts was slipping. When she didn’t want her powers to work, they did, and vice versa. Just as she was becoming more suspicious, Arthur burst into the prison.

“Maura, will you wait outside for us?” Marceline began. “We’ll take you to your son when we’ve finished.” Maura hesitantly obeyed and went out the door. Arthur looked questioningly at Marceline.

“Lady?” asked the second guard, who had been silent until this point. With his word, Marceline felt the powers of her Discernment Mark begin to pulse.

“What are you hiding from me? she asked.

“My lady?” he asked again, his face instantly turning white, blending into his blonde hair.

“I can feel your fear,” she answered. “What has you feeling so guilty?”

The guard balked. “Well,” he began, “I was one of the men tasked with taking care of the remains of Elias Worth.” Marceline could feel his hands shaking.

“And?”

“We couldn’t find him.”

Marceline jerked backwards slightly. “You what?”

“When we went back to recover his body he wasn’t there,” he spilled. Marceline looked at Arthur questioningly before turning back to the guards.

“I want men sent to his house to speak with his other two sons.” Marceline began. “I also want a search team to comb through the woods between the family home and here.” She steadied her gaze, doing her best to strike fear into the heart of the man. “You won’t rest until you find Elias Worth.” Both guards stood at attention, shaking.

“Go!” Marceline bellowed. The guards scurried away. Suddenly tired, she turned back to Arthur. “What does this mean?” she asked.

“I honestly have no idea,” Arthur replied. He had crossed his thin arms. “The only thing I do know, Marceline, is that you’ve saved Maura from a great deal of pain already. Perhaps it would be best to keep this from her.”

“I agree,” Marceline nodded. She turned to go back up to the palace. “You’ll watch her, won’t you?”

“Of course,” Arthur replied.

“And her son?”

“Yes.”

“Arthur?”

“Yes, Marceline?”

“My mother’s coming, isn’t she?”

A pause. “I’m afraid so, Marceline.”

“When?”

Another pause. “I’m afraid she’s already here.”

[Jasper]

When Jasper woke up, he was alone.

He wobbled a bit as he stood up. His brain was still foggy from the medicines Arthur had given him. Jasper started to walk towards the door when he felt a sharp pain in his wrist. He massaged the tendons with his free hand. The medicine must have worn off.

Curious, Jasper started poking around the room. Dozens of dark leathery books lined shelves on the back wall. Many of them were crumbling to the point that little flecks of leather binding fell in small piles under the shelves. Jasper pulled one down that seemed to be more stable than the rest. Opening it, he found it was a notebook filled with scrawled notes and swift sketches of plants.

Jasper mindlessly flipped through until he found a mention of pain relief. Out to the side of the entry was a sketch of a round bulb from which ten spiked tentacles protruded. An arrow pointed to a small offset of the notes which read "*One arm ground mixed w/ two drops Pm.*"

On a whim, Jasper turned to the opposite side of the room. Instead of books, the shelves were filled with various shaped glass bottles and jars. Taking the book, he crossed the room and began rummaging through the bottles. All of the jars were labeled, but they were in various states of legibility. After a great deal of squinting, Jasper was able to find a small bottle of the mysterious "Pm" and a plant that seemed to match the drawing. He broke off a branch of the plant and began mashing it in a mortar and pestle that was lying on a counter. Once the branch had turned into a thick paste, Jasper added two drops of the minty smelling liquid. He mixed the salve once more before applying it to his hurting wrist. Jasper breathed a sigh of relief as the pain subsided immediately.

“Intriguing,” said a voice behind him. Jasper whipped around to find Arthur leaning against the doorway, watching Jasper.

“I’m sorry,” Jasper exclaimed. “I didn’t mean to impose. It’s just that my hand started hurting again.”

“I’m sure it did,” Arthur replied. “The particular salve I gave you only lasts a few hours.”

“I’ve been asleep for hours?”

“It seems you have, yes. Have you always been an adept healer?” Arthur asked, suddenly changing the subject.

“Not really,” he replied. “I just read a lot, and I help my mother with her work sometimes. She’s a doctor’s assistant.”

“Very intriguing. What are your abilities?” Jasper balked at the question. It was rare in the close knit city of Andalusia for anyone to ask about his abilities. Everyone just knew that he was defective.

“My main is Beauty,” Jasper began with a sigh, glancing down to the giant spiral on his arm. “But my other ability is Intelligence.”

“That’s all?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?” Jasper hesitated. “Never mind that now. Come with me,” Arthur continued. Without giving Jasper a chance to reply, Arthur turned and walked down a hall that led straight into the palace. With a final glance at his work, Jasper followed Arthur.

The two walked in silence for a few moments. Every once in a while, Arthur would turn back to look at his companion. It was almost as if he knew something Jasper didn’t.

Once, when looking back at him, Arthur collided with a marble table. He reached out quickly and caught it, fumbling through the air, but allowed a vase that had been sitting on top to fly to the ground. The vase shattered. Muddy flower water leaked through the cracks on the tiled floor and disappeared into the flush red rug.

“Why do you keep doing that?” Jasper asked, exasperated.

“What?” Arthur asked, surveying the damage. “Oh!” He smiled. “I just don’t like marigolds, I suppose.”

“That’s not what I meant!” Jasper replied. Arthur looked around for witnesses. Finding none, he gave a wide berth to the fallen flowers and kept walking. Jasper stumbled after him.

“Would you like a job?” Arthur asked abruptly.

“Excuse me?”

“One of your abilities is Intelligence,” Arthur stated. “I’m in need of a research assistant. You feel a need to help your mother.”

“How do you know that?” Jasper demanded. Arthur ignored him.

“In exchange for your services, you’ll receive a reasonable stipend and the opportunity to grow your Intelligence abilities.” Jasper furrowed his brow.

He had heard of people who continued their education after the age of sixteen. Many had been able to manipulate their abilities, making them stronger. If Jasper could strengthen his Intelligence Mark, he could redeem himself.

“I’ll do it!” Jasper stated resolutely.

“Good,” Arthur said, turning suddenly. In front of him now was a large set of wooden doors. He continued speaking as he pulled on the large brass circular handles. “I’ll show you the library before taking you to your mother.”

“My mother!” Jasper was about to keep questioning Arthur when the sounds of angry yelling came through the doorway.

“I don’t care. I don’t want you here,” yelled the voice of Lady Marceline. Jasper turned to leave, but Arthur grabbed his arm. The two stood in silence, listening.

“Darling,” a new voice cooed. It was a woman’s voice. “I just don’t understand why you act like this. It’s not as if I’m your enemy.”

“It’s exactly like you are!” Marceline interrupted.

“Only because that’s how you see me,” the woman replied. “I’m certain if you’d just let me explain my intentions, you’d forgive me of whatever I’ve done to hurt you so.”

“Whatever you’ve done,” another voice almost whispered. Arthur’s eyes widened at the new voice. “You say it as if you don’t know.”

“Honestly, sister,” replied the first. “You’re siding with her? She’s a child. She’s barely left this place in years. You can’t honestly stand behind her as ruler.”

“Stop speaking as though I weren’t here,” Marceline interrupted.

“But darling,” the woman said, her voice dropping an octave. “You aren’t important.” For a moment, no one spoke. Jasper turned to Arthur who shook his head. Finally, the quieter of the unknown women broke the silence.

“You’re a criminal, Margaret,” she said, her voice gaining volume with every word. “You will answer for what you’ve done one day. For now, leave. Leave and don’t come back!”

“Silly sister,” Margaret sneered, “You can’t just kick me out. What would the ambassadors say? This used to be my home, you know. And how could I miss the festivities leading to my daughter’s ascension?”

“She’ll stay, Diana,” Marceline replied. “But not here. After midnight each night, she’s to be escorted from the palace. Accommodations will be made for her elsewhere. I’m sure Ambassador Baron would happily offer her a room.”

“Are you implying something?” Margaret asked.

“And when she’s on the premises, she’s not to be unaccompanied,” Marceline continued, ignoring her.

“Now, Marceline,” she parroted, “don’t speak of me as if I weren’t here.”

“You’re not important,” Marceline replied. The tension in the room stood. Jasper held his breath as Arthur clutched the doorframe.

“Oh, but I will be,” Margaret whispered. “One day you’ll see that I am no one to be trifled with, darling. I will be the one to bring forth revolution to the Two Nations, with or without you.”

“Leave!” Diana shouted.

“Fine,” Margaret sighed. “But just one more thing. Marceline, darling, would you please smile more? It makes you look so much prettier.”

BANG.

Startled, Jasper turned to Arthur. He had purposefully walked through the door and slammed it with all his might. The out-of-sight voices stopped suddenly.

“What did you do that for?” Jasper whispered.

“Lady Marceline is known to be...” Arthur hesitated. “Easily irritable. In certain instances.”

“Why did that woman tell Marceline to smile if she always wears a mask?”

“To irritate her,” he replied.

Just then, the three women came walking around a corner. All three stared at Jasper and Arthur. One of the strangers was leaning hard on Lady Marceline. Her lithe build was covered in a white sheath dress. Long black hair was braided and thrown over her shoulder. The other woman was covered head to toe in black, like Marceline. She wore a wide brimmed black hat tilted askew atop a long black braid that mirrored the other woman's. A low cut, long sleeved black dress clung to her full figure. Even her eyes seemed to be made of a black glass that could pierce through the souls of the strongest men. The woman in black looked as though she were about to speak, but Marceline interrupted her.

"Arthur, would you be so kind as to call an escort. My mother needs to leave now." Jasper's mouth almost fell open from shock. He couldn't believe that this woman was the dowager of the household. There had been rumors circulating about Lady Margaret of the Vagrant Lands for decades. She was accused of murder, espionage, and numerous other crimes that no one had ever been able to prove.

"Right away, my lady."

"Marceline," the woman careened. "what's this little pretty thing?" She walked up to Jasper and began circling him like a bird of prey.

"That little thing, Mother, is a person," Marceline said, crossing her arms. "And he's not a toy for you to play with."

"Oh why not?" Margaret whined. "I promise I won't break it." She reached out to touch his face, but he jerked back. She furrowed her brow for a moment before smoothing out her face.

"A Beauty Mark, like myself, no doubt," she said as she continued observing him. "Rather rare, isn't it for it to be so pronounced on a boy?" Jasper's face flushed. "Oh, I've embarrassed him." Margaret giggled. "I'm so sorry."

“Mother, please,” Marceline scoffed.

“I know, I know,” Margaret lilted. “Don’t break the toys.” Before anyone could say anything else, a guard dressed in Vagrant orange came to the door. Arthur followed closely behind him. “Ah look,” Lady Margaret said. “my chariot awaits,” With a final nod to the room, Lady Margaret left with the soldier, lacing her arm through his.

As soon as the massive doors shut, Marceline put her hand on Diana’s shoulder. “Are you all right, Di?” she asked. The other woman looked frail and white. Jasper worked out in his mind that this must be Marceline’s aunt.

“I’m fine, Marcy,” she replied, placing her hand on Marceline’s own. “She just tires me out is all.”

“I know the feeling,” Marceline said. She turned to Arthur. “Dearest advisor, would you mind taking your future wife to get some water, and perhaps lie down for a bit?”

“No, no, I’m fine!” Diana protested.

“I wouldn’t mind at all.” Jasper watched Arthur move tenderly toward Diana, placing an arm around her shoulder. “But when I come back, we’ll need to discuss some things.” Arthur led Diana out, leaving Jasper and Marceline all alone.

Jasper turned back to Marceline, but she had busied herself with some papers on one of the giant square desks. Without the distractions from the other people in the room, Jasper was finally able to realize the extent of the library he was in.

It was two stories tall with an open wall leading out into a lush courtyard covered with glass to protect the plants from the elements. The entire back wall of the first floor was made of windows, allowing for as much natural light as possible to come in. Every other wall of the first floor was covered from floor to ceiling in books. Smaller shelves stuck out from the walls in a

diagonal pattern. On the second floor, which was really more of a walk way, there were more floor to ceiling shelves full of more books than the library in the city had ever seen. There were periodical chairs placed sporadically throughout the room. The only break on the first floor shelves was from a massive brick fireplace. Jasper could see a painting above the mantle that had been mutilated. He was about to go inspect the painting, but Lady Marceline spoke.

“You like to read,” she said without turning her gaze from the pages in front of her.

“We established this earlier,” Jasper replied.

“I suppose we did,” she muttered, pausing for a moment. She shook her head, “You’re welcome to anything here as long as you’re careful with it.”

Jasper raised an eyebrow, “You’re very trusting. I’d never let anyone just borrow one of my books.”

“You’re an Intelligence Mark, aren’t you?” she asked, still not looking up from her work.

“Yes.”

“So am I,” Marceline replied. She finally stood up from her place behind the desk.

“Besides, I looked through your records. You work in a library. Surely you wouldn’t be in that line of work if you didn’t know how to treat a book.”

“You bothered to look up my job, but you didn’t care enough to look up how I’m marked?”

“I hardly bother with other people’s marks,” she said, leaning back against the desk, “When you’re the only person in a hundred years to be born with full marks, you have to find other ways to gage people than how many fewer marks they have than you.”

Jasper’s eyes widened. He vaguely remembered at every royal holiday someone would mention the young heiress with full marks, but it had slipped his mind until now.

“So what do you judge them by?” he asked.

“How they treat others.”

“I find it strange that you’re judging me without even knowing my name,” he quipped.

Jasper was surprised at how easily he was interacting with someone so high above him.

“Jasper,” she said. Her voice lilted on the first syllable. “Your name is Jasper.”

“You know,” he started, “It’s a little creepy that you know my name without my telling it to you.”

“I could say the same,” Marceline retorted. Jasper considered for a moment what it would be like for everyone in the Two Nations to know who he was. The thought made his skin crawl. On a whim, he walked forward and stood directly in front of Marceline.

“Hello, I’m Jasper. It’s nice to meet you.” He stuck out his hand. “What’s your name?” Lady Marceline looked at it, cocking her head to one side. Slowly, she reached for his hand and grasped it. Her hand was small, but strong.

“This is ridiculous,” she replied. “I’m Marceline.”

Jasper smiled as the two shook hands. “Good, now that that’s over, do you have any book recommendations for me?”

Marceline dropped Jasper’s hand and turned quickly, walking with purpose to one of the shelves. Quickly, she skimmed a gloved finger over the spines of the books, stopping at a small blue one. She plucked it off the shelf and brought it to him.

“Ever read it?” she asked.

Jasper skimmed the cover. “No, I haven’t.”

“It’s one of my favorites.”

“That’s a lot of pressure,” he replied.

“I think you’ll be fine.” Jasper imagined that he heard the remains of a smile in her voice. As he began flipping through the pages, the heavy oak doors opened again. Marceline straightened suddenly, as if she had been caught doing something wrong.

Arthur walked in, balancing a stack of papers in his arms. Without warning, he dropped the entire stack on the desk Marceline had been leaning against earlier.

“These need to be looked through before tomorrow,” he informed her, panting from the effort.

“Looked through or skimmed?” Marceline asked. Arthur scrunched his forehead.

“Skimming is fine except for the last two,” he said. “But if you get the chance, I would go back over the proposal from Baron and...”

“Right, right, her. I’ve got it,” Marceline interrupted. She sat back down at the desk and began shuffling through the new stack. Jasper watched her, intrigued.

“Would you like to go find your mother now?” Arthur asked.

“Why in the world would I want that?” Marceline demanded.

“I was speaking to Jasper,” Arthur replied. Jasper looked at Arthur with wide eyes. He had almost forgotten his mother.

“Yes, please,” Jasper said. He turned back to Marceline. “It was nice to meet you, Lady Marceline.”

Her hands stopped shuffling papers for a moment. “Call me Marceline,” she replied without looking up. Jasper smiled and nodded to her, clutching the book in one hand. He turned to follow Arthur, who was smirking at him a little. He threw Arthur a lopsided smile and followed him out the door to find his mother.

[Maura]

Maura paced the hallway outside of the kitchen. Arthur had told her she'd begin working there as soon as the week started. He and Lady Marceline had been nothing but generous, but she felt a bit uneasy. How was she going to explain to the only son she had left that she had murdered his father? Of course, Jasper had developed a certain disdain for Elias over the years, but she didn't know how this death would affect him. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement coming from around one of the ornate marble corners.

She tackled her son as soon as saw him.

"Mom!"

"Sweetheart!" she exclaimed as she buried her face in his shoulder. "Are you ok? What's wrong with your hand?" Jasper looked down at his bandaged hand and hid it behind his back.

"Just a scratch," he muttered. Maura looked her son over, searching for even the smallest hair out of place.

Jasper had always been the strongest of her sons, Maura believed. Her other boys were always fighting over silly little things. Andy and Lee would come home covered in bruises and scrapes almost every day when they were younger. Even when they were old enough to know better, Maura was always patching up one of them from a fight. Jasper, though, was quiet. He held his tongue. He was stoic, never letting pain show through.

Once, when he was a child, Maura had walked in on him changing the bandages on a deep cut in his hand. He had been playing with some of his friends when one of them had found a glass bottle lying on the ground. The boys were throwing it around when it gouged a deep gash in Jasper's hand. His school's nurse had instructed him to go home that day and get his mother to

help him with his wounds, but he had kept it secret. It was in almost the exact same place as this new cut.

“Jasper?” Maura had asked when the nurse told her what had happened, “why didn’t you tell me?”

“It was my fault, Momma,” he had replied with drooping shoulders. She’d always loved when her boys called her something other than ‘Mom’ or ‘Mother’. “I needed to fix it myself.”

Yes, Maura believed that Jasper had a different kind of strength than his brothers. Because he wasn’t marked for Strength or Bravery, he wasn’t able to lift heavy things or run for miles without tiring, but he could stand without moving in the face of hardship, which she supposed was a type of strength and bravery on its own. He was going to need that soon, Maura thought to herself.

“Oh, Jasper,” Maura began, “I’m so sorry. You’ve had to uproot yourself again and it’s all because of me.”

“No, Mom. It’s not your fault. It’s his.” Maura’s head hung heavy.

“I beg your pardon,” Arthur interrupted, but it would appear that we have some more pressing matters at hand.”

“What do you mean?” Maura asked.

“The Year of Ascension,” Arthur said. Maura, of course, knew what he was referencing. Within the Two Nations there were thirteen provinces, including Andalusia. Each of those provinces was governed and represented to the council by one man or woman, known as the Ambassador. The position of ambassador was passed to the oldest child upon the death of the parent, providing that the child was twenty-two years of age. If the children were underage, the

ambassador position would be left open for them. When necessary, a spouse or sibling would be called in to conduct business on behalf of the deceased.

About eleven years ago, the former ambassador of Andalusia, Christopher, died suddenly. He had two children, Lady Marceline and her older brother Aaron. The brother had been fifteen when their father died, so he had only seven years before he could take the place of his father. Unfortunately, the son had also died rather suddenly only three years after the passing of his father. Not many details had been released about the death, only that it was a tragic hunting accident. With his death, young Lady Marceline became the heir to the Ambassador's seat. She was twenty-one now. She had less than a year left.

Whenever a new ambassador was sworn in, there was a year-long celebration. There were three festivals for each season of the harvest: planting, bringing in, and replenishing. At the end of the third festival, there would be a week of nothing but parties. On the last day, Lady Marceline would ceremoniously take her father's place at the Ambassador's council in the presence of most of the Two Nations.

"We have a great deal to prepare for," Arthur started. "The festival of Planting has already passed. The time of Bringing In will soon be upon us.

"I'll do whatever you need," Maura said. Arthur looked at her and pursed his lips.

"You'll start at the bottom, like everyone else. The head chef is going to need a great deal of help with all of the extra cooking he's about to take on. However, just like any other servant here, you'll be given the opportunity to improve your standing. The harder you work, the farther you'll go."

"I'll do my best," she replied. Arthur turned to leave, but Maura interjected, "Wait, I need to ask you something."

“Yes?”

“When can I go get my boys?” Arthur stopped short. Jasper massaged his bandaged wrist.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible.”

“What do you mean?” Maura exclaimed. The thought of Anderson and Lee all alone made her heart ache. “You can’t expect me to just abandon my children?”

“I understand your concern,” Arthur began. “However we don’t believe that it would be safe, for the time being.”

“We?”

“Lady Marceline and myself.”

“Why wouldn’t it be safe for me to return to my own home?” Maura inquired.

“Due to the…” Arthur paused and wrung his hands, “…delicate nature of the crime you are accused of, as well as the stature of your husband, we believe that it would be best for you to remain here indefinitely.” Maura hung her head.

“So I’m still a prisoner, then?” Arthur looked off into the distance before replying.

“In a way.”

Maura sighed. This was the second time she would be leaving her oldest sons to fend for themselves.

“Right,” Arthur said after an uncomfortable silence. “I’ll show you to your quarters. You’ll be able to rest there for the time being.”

Arthur led the refugees through the maze of halls. After walking for a while, Maura noticed that where the walls were once adorned with priceless paintings and tapestries, they had changed to plain, undecorated marble that seemed to sparkle a bit less. The floors were still covered by rugs, but they were less plush. They had entered the servants’ quarters.

The room he led them to was nice, Maura thought. It was smaller than the apartment she and Jasper shared now, but a soft red rug covered the hardwood floor. There were no cracks in the white plaster walls. It even came with a few chairs that were obviously old, but still in good condition. Their new space had a combined kitchen and living area with a small hallway that led to two bedrooms and two small bathrooms. It was small, but it would do for now.

“If you need anything, please let us know,” Arthur said as he turned and left Maura alone with her son.

Maura looked warily at her son. She hadn't had much time to think about what she was going to say to him, but she knew it wasn't going to go well. She could just imagine Jasper yelling at her and running off to go live with his brothers, leaving her a failed mother as well as a failed wife. Perhaps in the back of her mind, she knew that it wouldn't really happen that way, that Jasper would never leave her, but years of emotional damage had taken their toll on her mind.

“Mom,” Jasper began, dropping his backpack on one of the overstuffed, antique looking chairs, “will you please tell me what's going on?”

So she told him. Slouched in one of the chairs, she told him about Sophie coming to their door after Jasper had gone to bed the night before. She described walking in their old home and confronting Elias, skirting around how afraid she felt. By the time she got to the chase, her hands and voice were quavering. It was all she could do to keep talking. She said that she lost control, that she didn't know what she was doing.

She said that she hit him. She hit him and killed him.

And Jasper just sat there listening.

After she'd finished her story, Maura counted slowly in her mind. It was something she used to do when she lived with Elias. Counting calmed her mind. She got to the number one hundred and forty two before Jasper finally spoke.

"He's dead?" Jasper asked. Maura tried desperately to read her son's face, but his grey eyes only stared blankly at the floor. His hands were clasped so tightly that his knuckles were turning white, and his elbows rested firmly on his knees.

"Yes."

Slowly, Jasper stood up from his chair and kneeled in front of his mother. He looked straight into her eyes for a long moment before wrapping her in a hug. All of the emotions that she had kept balled up in her stomach during the past few days came completely unraveled as she sobbed into Jasper's shoulder. Maura could hear him whispering encouraging phrases every once in a while, but her cries drowned them out for the most part.

Once she had cried all she could, Maura lifted her face and smiled at her son. "We're going to be all right, you know."

"I know, Mom." Jasper replied. "This is our chance to really start over." He smiled a smile that Maura hadn't seen since he was a little boy. It was hopeful, and it gave Maura hope too.

"We're going to be all right," she parroted, thinking not just of Jasper, but about all three of her sons. "We're going to be a family again."

[Diana]

Diana's steps matched her heartbeat as she stormed toward the meeting hall. She had colored her lips an eye catching red that morning. It was something she did when she wanted people to pay attention to what she was saying. By painting her mouth the color of blood, she demanded the attention of those looking on. She was fierce, and she was furious.

As she burst through a small wooden door, Arthur fell into step. He matched her strides while shuffling a stack of papers as always.

"Don't say anything you'll regret," Arthur cautioned.

"I wasn't going to say much," Diana countered, reaching for the knife she always kept strapped to her back.

"Fine then. Don't do anything you'll regret," he emphasized the word "do." Diana ignored him. "Diana!"

"Oh please!" she exhaled, "I'm not going to hurt anyone."

"But you want to."

"But I want to."

"Well don't."

"I won't!"

"Diana, stop." Arthur grabbed her upper arm. Begrudgingly Diana halted without turning to face him. "Talk to me for a minute," she looked sideways at Arthur as she stepped backwards to the marble wall. Bracing herself against it Diana slid to the floor and hugged her knees. Arthur plopped to the floor beside her. "You're upset."

"Yes, I'm upset!" Diana cried. "They're calling a meeting."

"I know."

“Without Marceline.”

“I know.”

“They’re trying to get rid of her,” Arthur started to respond, but said nothing. His chin came down to his chest. “This is all Margaret’s fault!” Diana exclaimed.

“I know.”

“She’s only been here a few weeks and she’s already started getting people on her side.”

“I know.”

“Can’t you say anything else?”

“What else is there to say?” he reached out and put an arm around Diana. “We’ll figure something out.” Diana leaned against him, letting go of a long sigh. “We can help Marceline, but not if you go in there without thinking.”

“I know.” Diana pulled herself upright and held a hand down for Arthur. He stood also. The two looked at each other wordlessly. Just as Diana was about to speak again, a young maid burst out of one of the rooms. She precariously balanced a stack of books as she inched her way down the hall. Diana looked at Arthur questioningly. She’d never seen the girl before. His look matched hers, and she guessed he had never seen her either.

“You there,” Arthur demanded. “Where are you taking those?”

“They belong to the Lady Margaret, sir,” the maid explained. As she spoke she attempted a curtsy. The two top books started to tumble to the ground. Diana adeptly stepped forward, catching them before they could fall. “Thank you,” the maid muttered, hanging her head. “I’m taking them to her carriage. It’s been set to depart before the sun goes down.”

“By chance do you know where it’s going?” Diana asked the girl.

“Her escort is taking the books and the lady to the home offices of the ambassador of Berumba.” Diana shot a look at Arthur. They should have known where Margaret had been staying.

“Thank you,” Arthur said. “Carry on.”

“Oh, thank you, sir!” the tiny girl said as she grinned. “Thank you very much.” With that, she hoisted the books up a bit higher and proceeded down the hall.

“I knew I always hated him,” Diana said. Her hands coiled into fists at the thought of the ambassador of Berumba, Baron.

Diana and Margaret had grown up in the Vagrant Lands with Baron. Margaret had always been fond of him, but Diana soon had her fill of his cockiness. Even back when Christopher was alive, Baron had always been combative. The two never agreed on anything. For the most part, he had been seen only as a rebellious conformist. His ideas were almost always dismissed. However, once Christopher had died and the ambassador’s seat for Andalusia had been left open, Baron went through some sort of rise in power. He was now one of the most respected of the ambassadors and was considered a free thinker and a visionary.

His latest bid for school reform was his wildest idea of all. He had started calling it the Specialization. It was the idea that he had credited to Margaret. They had speculated that no one was using their characteristics to their full potential. He argued that by separating people according to how many abilities they possessed at a young age, the potential for growth would rise exponentially.

“Who,” he had argued at a meeting many months earlier, “would want a Bravery Mark to balance their bank accounts?” Many of the ambassadors huffed under their breath. “And who would want a Beauty Mark fighting for them in war? I certainly wouldn’t.”

He had paced, sputtered, yelled until his face was the color of a sunset. And he had gotten part of his motion passed. It mainly affected those still of schooling age, but Baron wasn't done. At almost every meeting, he brought up new ideas that involved separating the citizens of the Two Nations according to their marks. Many of his dissenters had started calling his plan The Separation.

"Come on," Arthur said, jolting Diana out of her thoughts. "The longer you spend out here, the more time the ambassadors have without someone to defend Marceline." Diana snapped out of her daze immediately.

"Right."

A few minutes later Diana burst into the meeting room like a general charging the battle field. Arthur followed one step behind her. As she entered, she saw none other than Baron standing in front of his chair ready to speak.

"I'm glad to see you didn't start without me," Diana proclaimed to the room as loud as she could, "or my niece." A few of the ambassadors looked down in guilt, shuffling their feet. Baron glared at her.

"Oh, sister dear. Always one for dramatics, aren't you?" Diana spun on her heel to see Margaret standing off to the side. "We were just waiting, that's all." Diana turned angrily to the Moderator.

"What is she doing here?" Diana demanded. "This meeting is meant only for ambassadors and their appointed stand ins."

"This meeting was called by the ambassador of Berumba on a matter that directly concerns the Lady Margaret." The Moderator replied, "For that reason, she is here."

"And what about the Lady Marceline?" Diana fumed.

“Due to the delicate nature of the subject matter, I thought it would be best that she be left in the dark, for the time being,” Baron interrupted. “After all, we’ve all seen what happens when things don’t go her way.”

“I agreed,” the Moderator said before Diana could respond. She silently cursed Marceline’s quick temper. “On the condition that no motions be proposed or voted on at this time.” Diana fumed, but said nothing. “Now, if we could all please begin the meeting.”

“We are ready, Moderator,” the entire room spoke. Everyone took their seats as Baron began to speak. Margaret came to stand by her sister. It took everything Diana had not to slap her as hard as she could.

“I ask permission to speak,” Baron bellowed as he stood up from his plush chair.

“Permission granted,” the moderator answered.

“Thank you,” he replied. “It has come to my attention, council, that we are ignoring a major problem that could lead to the crippling of the council. The ascension of Lady Marceline cannot go on.” The council mumbled. Some shook their heads while others listened with rapt attention. Diana felt as if her eyes were about to bulge out of their sockets.

“As we all know, Lady Marceline’s younger brother was struck down early in his life by a terrible disease. It took away all of his abilities, leaving him a husk of a man. A beast, if you will.”

Diana looked pointedly at her sister. This was the lie that the Ambassadors had chosen to spin instead of telling the truth about Aaron’s death. They had called it a hunting accident. The official report said he was bitten by an animal with rabies. But that’s only because no one could prove that Margaret had poisoned her own daughter.

Margaret saw Diana looking at her and shrugged while giving the tiniest smile. She didn't even feign ignorance.

“While staying near the palace, Lady Margaret has become concerned that her daughter is exhibiting the same symptoms that manifested in her son around the time his illness began to take him.” Again the crowd began to mumble.

Diana watched as Margaret put on a show. She pressed her perfectly manicured hand to her mouth and closed her eyes. Her black clothing offset against the stark white walls helped her play the part of the perfect grieving mother.

“I ask you, ambassadors, what is the point of placing Marceline on her father's seat if she will only die a few months later?” Baron queried. Diana rolled her eyes as the murmurs from the other ambassadors grew louder. He was getting into one of his moods again. Sometimes she was surprised that he didn't bring props to these meetings. “It would give the people of the Two Nations false hope, and the quick death after her ascension would cause mayhem in the lower classes.” He nodded, signaling to the Moderator that he was finished speaking.

“Do we have others who would like to come forward?” the Moderator asked. Before he could finish his sentence, Diana was in the center of the room.

“Illustrious ambassadors,” she began, “I speak on behalf of my niece, whose fate you have decided to steer without her knowledge.” Everyone leaned in to listen. “I must point out that all evidence at this point in time is circumstantial.” She turned to look Margaret in the eye, “And from an unreliable source at that.”

“Do you doubt my loyalty, sister dear?” Diana fumed. Her Discernment Mark was beginning to make her spin out of control. She could feel the emotions of everyone in the room, but what stuck out the most was her sister's pride.

“Your loyalty, your honor, your honesty. Sister, I could sooner count every star in the sky than all the things I doubt about you.” The giant, sterile meeting was filled with ice. Diana felt the confusion in the room turn to paralyzed fear. “Ladies and gentlemen, we forget that Margaret, the woman who is now vying for the empty ambassador’s seat, has been banished for the alleged murder of her husband.”

Margaret stepped forward. Every slow, decisive click of her heel sliced through the room. “No one has ever proven that.”

“Enough!” the Moderator exclaimed. “This is not the time for petty sibling rivalry or for past accusations.” Diana stared at him as he glared pensively at the wall. “As I’ve said, nothing will be decided today; however, both sides of this argument have had time to make their case. Ambassadors will take all information into consideration for the future.”

Then he dismissed the meeting. Diana practically ran from the room, pushing past anyone who tried to talk to her. Filthy animals, every single one of them. She’d seen them flatter Marceline in her childhood, trying to make themselves her special pet. Now they’d turned on her almost immediately.

When she finally stopped running, Diana was in her private chambers. She collapsed backwards onto her bed, lying with arms and legs spread wide. Without knocking, Arthur walked in and sat down beside her.

“Arthur.”

“I know.”

Diana hesitated, “What do we tell her?”

“The truth, I suppose. She deserves it.”

“She deserves a proper life away from all this. She deserves a better mother than the one she has.” Diana grabbed a pillow and held it over her head. The pressure dulled the headache that was already forming behind her temples.

“I think you’ve made a great surrogate over the years.”

Diana removed the pillow and looked sideways at Arthur. He certainly wasn’t marked by Beauty. His ears were rather large and there was a small scar on the side of his nose from a fight he’d gotten into when he was a student. Diana didn’t care about all of those things. There were different kinds of beauty than what sits on the skin.

“And you’ve been the best surrogate father she could have ever asked for.” Diana replied. She remembered falling in love with Arthur while watching him teach Marcelline how to read, and hoisting her on his shoulders when she was a toddler. More than her own mother had, Arthur had picked up Marcelline when she had fallen, and had pushed her to get back up.

“Di.”

“Hmm?”

“We’re getting married next week.”

“Have you only just remembered this now?” Diana asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No.”

“Do you think we should postpone it?”

“Absolutely not,” Arthur stated.

“Why?”

“Because I love you, and we could all use the distraction.”

“Oh, I’m just a distraction to you?” Diana teased. Arthur pushed her shoulder and sighed.

“I only have one stipulation,” he said, looking down at Diana.

“What?”

“Your sister can’t come.”

Diana laughed harder than she had in a long time. Everyone always thought Arthur was so serious, but she knew there was a softer side to him. That was the side she turned to at times like these when things were going terribly, horribly wrong.

[Marceline]

Marceline stared up at the small circular window of the spare meeting room. She knew what was going on. The ambassadors were meeting behind her back. They were trying to find a way for her to fade softly into the background without making the Two Nations suspicious. Her future was being decided for her, and it was all her mother's doing.

Margaret had never been an unkind mother, merely an uninterested one. When Marceline and her brother were younger, their father would play with them. That wonderful man built forts out of tablecloths and swords out of sticks. He would fend off imaginary bears from made up colonies that Margaret always said were too childish. She would run off in her chiffon trimmed gowns to silk lined parties stuffed to the brim with stuffy people and not give a second thought to the daughter and son she left behind.

“Papa,” a young Marceline had asked, “Why doesn't Mama play?”

“Well, darling,” he replied, “Mama does not play because her mother taught her not to.”

“Why?”

“Because that's just the way things were done in her country, and there haven't yet been enough brave people to change the old ways.”

“I'll be brave!”

“I know my dear, I know.”

Marceline grimaced at the thought. Her father had died two years later. Marceline took one last look up at the small, circular window before shaking her head and walking back to the library.

Her mother had always said it was improper for a lady of well breeding to read all the time. That had only made Marceline want to read more. The night Marceline had received her

Intelligence mark she had been fighting with her mother. Margaret had demanded Marceline put down her book and get dressed for a party.

“You want to see people your own age, don’t you darling?”

“No,” eight year old Marceline had said, pulling her book closer to her face.

“Oh, but don’t you want to show everyone your new dress? It’s so sparkly.”

“It itches.”

“You’re coming downstairs, child. I demand it!” Margaret had reached forward and snatched the book from her daughter’s hand and tossed it unceremoniously across the bed. Roughly, she grabbed Marceline by the forearm and yanked her into the hall way. No matter how Marceline thrashed and twisted, she couldn’t get free. Just as the two reached the wide open gilded doors of the ballroom, Marceline released a shriek.

“I hate you!”

Those in the ballroom who were closest to the doors turned to take in the spectacle. Women in pastel brocades turned pink as the gossip welled in their throats. The men looked with disinterest at the tiny walking heathen making too much noise.

Face pinched, Margaret looked down at her daughter with a mixture of disgust and shock. The surprise made Margaret loosen her grip on Marceline just enough that she was able to wrench her arm free and run away. She heard the voice of her father behind her as she wound her way through the family palace to the library. After letting herself in, Marceline wandered through the dark pathways created by the parallel shelves. She looked up at the book spines until she found one that caused her to stop. A man with a sword, a woman in finery, and two women dressed in black were making their way up the spine of the thick, green book. The letters making

up the title were hand painted in gold and they spindled their way around the cover of the book like vines. Marceline stood on her tiptoes and took the book down.

She read the whole thing. Then she read another. And another. By the time she was found the next morning, Marceline was surrounded by a dozen books. She had fallen asleep on her stomach attempting her thirteenth.

Her father was the one who found her. When he saw his darling daughter on the floor, he immediately took off his dark, thick jacket and scooped her up in it. The movement stirred her.

“Papa,” she mumbled, resting her head on his shoulder.

“Go to sleep, little one,” he cooed, tucking back her hair. As he did, he noticed a small smudge at the base of her neck. He tried wiping it away, but it wouldn’t budge. He was studying the mark intently as one of his advisors walked up.

“Alister,” Marceline’s father whispered, gesturing him to come closer, “what do you make of this?” The man approached and looked down at the sleeping child. He studied the smudge for only a moment before declaring.

“Her Intelligence Mark has come in.”

Marceline’s father looked down at the circle of books that his daughter had fallen asleep inside. He rubbed Marceline’s back as he took her up to her room and tucked her in bed. He told her immediately when she awoke about the wonderful new development in her life.

Marceline thought of her father every time she passed that spot in the library. Even now, she liked to sit there and read from time to time. Her feet took her without her mind’s assistance to that very spot.

As she rounded a corner, she ran straight into Jasper.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed as he dropped the books he was carrying. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t looking where I was going,” he smiled at Marceline.

For absolutely no reason at all, Marceline began to panic. Her hands flew to her mask make sure it was still on straight. “What are you doing here?” she demanded, more harshly than she meant to.

“I was picking up a book for Arthur,” he replied, looking a bit dejected. “I guess I just got carried away.”

“I’m sorry I bothered you” Marceline turned and walked quickly away.

“Wait!” Jasper called after her. Marceline paused.

“Yes?”

“I wanted to thank you,” he began. “My mother has had a hard life.”

“Yes I know,” Marceline answered without turning back to face Jasper.

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“Did she tell you?”

Marceline paused. “Not exactly, no.”

“Then how do you know?”

Marceline sighed. “My Discernment Mark.” She turned to face Jasper as she spoke. “In times of great emotion I can reach into the minds of others and feel their experiences. That’s what happened the day I met your mother.”

“You saw my mother’s memories?” Jasper inquired astounded.

“No.”

“Then whose?”

“Your father’s.” The two retreated back into their silence. Marceline looked curiously at Jasper as she adjusted her mask. She wondered at what this poor boy must be feeling. He had grown up under the care of one kind parent and one cruel one. After a certain age he must have raised himself. When put that way, his story wasn’t much different from hers.

“You do that when you’re nervous, you know?” Jasper said suddenly. Before she could ask what he meant, Marceline became aware of the weight of her hand on the side of her mask.

“I know,” she responded. “I can’t help it.”

“You could take the mask off.”

“No,” she said. “I really can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’m hiding.”

“Hiding from what?”

“The world I suppose.”

“It isn’t working,” Jasper said. Marceline’s heart sank, though she didn’t know why.

“The mask makes people want to see you more.” Marceline’s face flushed beneath her mask.

“You have two books,” Marceline said, desperate to change the subject.

“I do.”

“You said Arthur asked for ‘a book’ but you have two.”

“Yes,” he replied, “one is for me.”

“Have you already finished the book I let you borrow?”

“I read it twice.”

Marceline’s eyes widened. “Did you like it?”

“Very much.”

Without thinking, Marceline walked forward until she was eye to eye with Jasper. She took both books from under his arm and looked them over. One was a dictionary of plant uses, and was most assuredly for Arthur's use. The other, however, was a piece of satire written thousands of years ago. Marceline had read it dozens of times.

"An excellent choice," Marceline said, turning the book over.

"I hope so."

"Well," Marceline said as she handed both books back to Jasper. "Like I said, you're welcome to anything you like."

"Thank you," he said, smiling. Marceline watched as Jasper turned and walked toward the door that led back to the main part of the castle. "Can I talk to you about it?" Jasper asked.

"About what?" Jasper held up the book in response. "Oh," she replied, "of course."

"Thank you, Lady Marceline." He said with a nod. "I look forward to it." Jasper started to leave again.

"Wait!" Marceline called after him. "Do you like working with Arthur?"

"I do," he answered with a question in his voice.

"Would you like to come to his wedding?" The words spilled out before she could stop them. Jasper's eyes opened wide. At first Marceline thought she had crossed a line, but then he smiled.

"I'd love to," he answered.

"It's next week."

"I'll see you there," he said, smiling again. Without another word, Jasper walked out of the wooden library doors.

Marceline found herself watching the doors intently, hoping that he would come back. He was witty, and inquisitive. She found him intriguing. Marceline took one last look at the doors before turning her back on them and walking to her reading spot.

She sat on the floor with her back to one of the shelves. Her eyes scanned the titles in front of her as she searched for the green binding with the tiny people and the golden letters. Marceline pulled the heavy book down and placed it in her lap. She looked around one time before pulling her mask off. She hated reading with it on. Seeing the edges of the eyes holes always annoyed her. As she began reading, Marceline suddenly became exhausted. All the events from the last few weeks had begun to catch up with her. Before Marceline had reached the second chapter, her chin had fallen to her chest and she entered a calm, dreamless sleep.

It was several hours later when Marceline was awoken by the sound of her own name. The sun had gone down and the library was now cast in a low glow of candle light. Startled, Marceline frantically felt around on the floor for her mask. She tied it on just as Diana rounded the corner.

“There you are!” she exclaimed. “I was calling you. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Diana, what’s wrong?”

“Your mother.”

“Yes, I know. She’s very bad.”

“No, Marceline!” Diana dropped to the floor in front of Marceline, looking her in the eye. “This is very bad.”

“What’s happened?” Marceline asked, suddenly straightening herself.

“I tried to stop her.”

“Stop her from what, Diana?”

“I don’t know how she did it, but she’s gotten enough of the Ambassadors on her side that she’s able to do what she wants! She’s going to be running Two Nations before anyone knows what’s happened.”

“Diana!” Marceline interjected as she grabbed her aunt by the shoulders. “What has she done?” Suddenly, Arthur came running frantically past them. He doubled back when he noticed that he’d passed Marceline and Diana.

“She’s done it, Marceline,” Arthur said as he walked into the aisle as well. “She’s all but secured her spot as ambassador.”

Marceline looked at the floor, “Well, we knew this was coming,” she began. “All we can do now is try to secure as many allies in the council as we can.”

“Or find a cure!” Diana cut in. “I’m not giving up on you, Marceline.”

“We have less than a year, Di.” Marceline said grimly. “We have to get as much accomplished before then as possible.”

“Marceline...” Diana trailed off. “There’s more.”

Marceline looked back and forth between her two advisors. “What is it?” Both looked uncomfortably at each other. “Just tell me!” She said.

“She’s trying to convince the council that it wouldn’t be prudent to allow you to act as though you were going to take your father’s place if there’s no way possible for that to happen,” Arthur said.

“So what does that mean?” Marceline asked.

“Instead of waiting until the full year is up, your mother will assume the Andalusia Chair at the time of the second festival.”

Marceline stood up and paced. “But that’s only two months from now?”

“Yes, it is,” Diana replied.

“So they’re just going to replace me with her?” Marceline demanded.

“We’ll try to persuade them that Diana is a better fit, but she’s still a Scholar, and your mother was Christopher’s wife. She still takes precedence,” Arthur explained.

“Don’t give up, darling,” Diana said. “We’ll figure something out!”

Marceline’s light mood from earlier was gone. The impending threat of her mother was enough to take away any sense of hope. Without a word, she placed one hand on Diana’s shoulder and the other hand on Arthur’s.

“We’ll figure something out, right?” She asked of her confidants.

“Right.” Arthur said as Diana nodded.

None of them looked convinced.

[Jasper]

Jasper was lost in thought when Arthur dropped a brown knapsack on the table beside him. It landed with a loud thud that made Jasper jump out of his chair. Arthur sniffed. He looked perplexed.

“Sorry.” Jasper said with an exhale. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

“I noticed.”

“Sorry,”

“You said that already.” Arthur opened the bag and poured out an assortment of different shaped balls covered in dirt. Jasper picked up one of the smaller ones and turned it over in his hands.

“These are onions.”

“Correct!” confirmed Arthur as he reached underneath the table and pulled out two boxes. “Green onions in one box, white onions in the other. Wash them, then peel them. I’ll give you another task when you’ve finished that one.”

“I thought I was supposed to be your apprentice,” Jasper scoffed.

“You are.”

“But what does any of this have to do with being a healer?”

“Nothing,” Arthur shrugged. “It has to do with following instructions.” Jasper glared at his employer before he began rummaging through drawers for a knife. He found one and had raised it to one of the roots when Arthur interrupted him. “What are you doing?”

“What you told me to.”

“Well don’t do that in here,” Arthur said as he wrinkled his nose. “I’ll never get the smell out. Go work on that in the kitchen.”

Jasper shoved the onions back into the bag and slung it over his shoulder. In a small act of rebellion, he grabbed his book as well before he huffed out into the hallway. Even though he was upset at being assigned to menial labor, he was at least allowed to return to the thoughts that had been distracting him all day.

He and his mother were fighting. It seemed like all Maura could talk about lately was Anderson and Lee. How as soon as Lady Marceline and Arthur said it was all right, she would go back to town and try to convince them again to come live here with them. A few days ago he had yelled at her.

“Please, sweetheart,” she’d begged while he was washing some dishes. “You see Arthur all the time at work. Would you mind slipping a thought into his head about letting me go back to town? It would only be for a day.”

“Mom, I don’t want you to go back to town,” he’d said after a silence.

“Why not, Jasper?”

“Because Anderson and Lee aren’t going to come.” He didn’t look at his mother, but he knew the words hurt her.

“But if I just explained it to them...”

“No!” Jasper yelled, cutting her off. “They’re not coming. They were always dad’s kids. They never cared about you, Mom, or me.” He turned slowly to look at her. “Our lives are good here. Just leave them alone.”

Maura looked as if Jasper had slapped her. When she finally spoke, her voice was an octave lower than usual. “I’ll never give up on my children, Jasper. Never.”

He hadn’t spoken to her since. The two had just been skirting around each other in their tiny apartment. Any time Maura had come upon her son reading in their shared living room, she

had turned stiffly and shut herself in her room. He knew she was still upset about Anderson and Lee, but Jasper couldn't care less. His brothers had chosen their father over their mother. That was the end of it for him.

Even more than his mother, however, Jasper was thinking about Marceline. She was like the oldest books in the library in town, the most intriguing, but she wasn't allowed to be read. He had made it his mission to find out as much as he could about her. After he left her in the library, he had gone off to question some of the kitchen workers.

"Oh look at this strapping young man," one of the matronly ladies had crooned. Her name was Marie. "You've come to help your mother with the heavy lifting, haven't you?" Jasper had glanced at his mother in the corner, but she hadn't acknowledged his presence.

"Don't bother the boy, Marie," another of the woman scolded. "You're going to scare him away!"

"Actually, I just came to talk," Jasper said.

"Did you hear that, Kara?" Marie inquired of the other woman, "He's come to pay us a visit!" she giggled. "Ask me anything you want to know, dear."

Instead of going right for what he wanted to know, Jasper decided to skirt around the subject for a bit. "What can you tell me about the Festival of Planting?"

"It's going to be wonderful!" Maire cried as she ran a hand through her white curls. "There will be visitors from all of the other provinces. There will be men and women dressed in their finest linens." She grabbed Kara and began twirling around the room. "Every night for a week there will be a ball! Dancing from dawn till dusk!"

Kara disconnected herself from Marie's musicless waltz. "For the nobility, Marie! For us, there will be work!" Marie pouted as Kara threw an apron at her.

“But why are they all coming?” Jasper asked.

“For Lady Marceline!” Marie sighed. “Everyone’s all in a tizzy because she’s finally of age to take the ambassador’s seat. All the parties and such are for her.”

“I see,” Jasper nodded. “But will she have to take her mask off, I wonder.”

The atmosphere in the room changed. Marie released a small gasp and Kara sniffed. “Oh sweet boy” Marie sighed, “I’m afraid that can never be.”

“But why not?” Jasper prodded. Kara still offered no words, but slowed her scrubbing on the dishes.

“Of course, there are stories,” Marie began. “Most of them are awful things. Slanderous lies told for no reason other than making her different ways seem unnatural.”

“Please tell me, Marie,” Jasper urged. “I’m new here, and I’m only curious.”

Marie looked Jasper up and down. “What I’m telling you is all I know, you understand?” Jasper nodded. “Lady Marceline was just a normal little girl for the longest time. She ran through the halls, tormented the visiting dignitaries, played with her father and brother. She was life in this place. After her father died, she became quieter.” Jasper nodded again. “But it wasn’t until after her brother died that things started to become strange.”

“Strange how?” Jasper asked. At this point Kara had completely abandoned her work.

“She began having fits. It was as though she would be living her days normally, when suddenly she would drop into one of her worst nightmares.”

“But what does that have to do with her mask?”

“Well, the timing of the whole thing was odd. A year or two ago, she began covering her face. At first it was with simple things like sunhats or veils, but before too long she was wearing the masks every day. It wasn’t long after that her mother left here.” Marie looked over her

shoulder as if Lady Margaret would turn up behind her. “There are many among the household, Housemaster Arthur among them, who believe that Margaret did something to young Lady Marceline.”

Jasper furrowed his brow. “Did something?”

“It’s all speculation, of course,” Marie added.

“Of course!” Kara piped up. “And it’s all useless conjecture.”

Marie looked oddly at Jasper before giving herself a quick shake. Her chipper mood from before returned. “I’m so sorry, darling,” she cooed, “I shouldn’t have chosen such a dark topic.”

“No, please,” Jasper had said. “The fault is mine.”

He had left the kitchen shortly after, still without saying anything to his mother. Thinking about his mother again he huffed as he switched the bag of onions to his other shoulder. He decided to try his luck in the greenhouse outside the library. Maybe Marceline would be there and he could ask her himself.

Walking through the giant library by now felt like walking through his home. He looked all through the shelves and desks for Marceline, but she wasn’t there. A little disappointed, Jasper walked outside to begin peeling the onions. He stopped short when he saw a girl sniffing under a small tree. Jasper approached her slowly so he wouldn’t scare her.

“Are you ok?” he almost whispered.

The girl looked up at him. “I’m fine.” She said as she quickly swiped the tears from her eyes. The clear blue in the tears made her green eyes look like the ocean, Jasper thought. “I’m sorry, I should go.”

“Wait a minute!” Jasper exclaimed as the girl tried to run off. “Is there anything I can do for you?” her full upper lip began to quiver.

“No, I’m fine. Really, I should get back to work,” she tried to leave again, but Jasper found suddenly that even though he didn’t know this girl, he didn’t want her to leave.

“Where do you work?” he asked. “I’ve never seen you before.”

“I work for Lady Margaret,” the girl replied, she stood a little straighter. “I’m her newest lady in waiting.”

Jasper scoffed, “That must be why you’re crying, then. Did she say something to upset you?”

The girl’s eyes grew wide. “No, of course not. Lady Margaret has never been anything but kind to me.” Jasper was confused. Could this be the same woman he’d heard antagonizing Marceline in the library a few weeks ago? The one who was accused of killing her husband and poisoning her daughter.

“You’ve fallen in with Lady Marceline, haven’t you?” the girl asked. Jasper stammered for a moment. “I should have known by the look on your face. You believe all those awful rumors!” The angrier the girl became the more he wished he could sink into the ground. “Lady Margaret is the most wonderful person in the world! It’s that Marceline that is always so mean to me!”

“What do you mean?” Jasper inquired suspiciously.

“Lady Margaret sends me to the library to get her books sometimes, but Lady Marceline yells at me to get out every time she sees me!” The girl’s frown returned. “I feel like I’m letting Lady Margaret down.”

Jasper didn’t know what to think. Everything that Marceline had done for him and his mother was completely selfless, and she was always kind to Arthur and Diana; but he had also heard that Marceline’s temper was one to be reckoned with. What if the person who had given

him and his mother a chance at new life was actually cruel and heartless? But why would she have helped them in the first place? Jasper was getting a headache.

“I’m sorry,” Jasper said, although he didn’t know what he was apologizing for. “I’ll help you get your books if you like.”

The girl looked at him suspiciously, “Would you really?” Jasper nodded. Slowly the girl approached him. She took in a deep breath. “Thank you.”

“I’m Jasper,” he said, offering a tentative smile.

“Glory,” the girl replied, giving Jasper a fraction of a grin. “It’s nice to meet you.”

[Marceline]

Marceline had always loved the woods surrounding her home. The tall, black tree trunks reminded her of the shelves inside her beloved library. She reached out and touched one of the trunks, silently thanking it for the sacrifice that turned its body into book pages and shelves. Its leaves rustled in the wind in a sort of acknowledgement. Marceline's horse began to grow restless under her.

"There, there," she whispered, reaching down to stroke the black and white dotted neck. The horse stilled as a soldier came out from behind one of the trees.

"My lady," the man said, offering a short bow.

"Evans, is it?" she asked, he nodded. "Have you found anything?"

"I'm afraid not my lady," he replied as he took a map from his satchel. Marceline swung her leg over the side of the horse and hit the ground with a light thud. She walked over to Evans as he unrolled the map. "We began our search at the cemetery, as you suggested. The first trail we found was the one that the couple took on their way here. It led all the way back to the family home on the outskirts of the city."

"How long was the journey?"

"About a mile through heavily wooded terrain." Marceline was morbidly impressed. Maura had been determined to get away, and Elias had been very determined to catch her.

"Did you find a second?" she asked.

"We aren't entirely sure," Evans replied. "We found something that resembled drag marks going from the cemetery to the outskirts of the woods, but if it was a trail, we lost it at the Anguis River. We searched the banks for a while, but found nothing of consequence."

Marceline sighed. “Do you think there’s anything else you could do to determine what happened to the body?”

“Honestly?” he asked. Marceline looked at him. “No.”

Marceline sighed again and began absent mindedly petting the horse. “Thank you, Evans. You and your men are relieved.” He nodded and disappeared once more into the woods.

She wracked her brain trying to figure out what could have happened to Elias. He was definitely dead when Marceline had found him, so he couldn’t have just walked away. It was possible that some sort of animal had dragged him away, but then what had happened to the body? Was it possible that some person had dragged him away?

This whole situation was driving Marceline insane. She slowly walked back to the castle as she thought up different solutions to the conundrum, each more ridiculous than the last. Still in a daze, she dropped the horse at the stable and wandered through one of the palace doors. Suddenly, Marceline heard a voice calling her name.

“Lady Marceline,” the servant called. She was a young girl, maybe about sixteen. Her parents probably worked here somewhere. Her hair was a dusty blonde and was cut attractively to her shoulders.

“Yes?”

“Oh, thank goodness! Lady Diana has sent me looking all over for you. She’s getting ready now.”

Marceline’s eyes grew wide. She’d almost forgotten the wedding. She followed the servant as she twisted and turned through the castle hallways, passing by banquet halls and heavily decorated rooms until they came to a small door that led into one of the garden rooms. The garden rooms were something that Margaret had installed when she first came to Andalusia

because she missed her home so much. Even though Margaret was gone, Marceline had ordered the plants to be regularly cared for. Marceline thought it almost made her mother seem more human in the way she cared for something so beautiful.

There were people filling the well lit garden, all dressed in muted colors. No one was allowed to wear their nation's colors to special occasions like this, which Marceline had always thought was a wonderful idea. There wasn't a speck of orange or a dash of blue in sight. She spotted Arthur on one side of the room and waved. He offered a quick smile in return. Marceline rushed to a small, white tent that had been set up on the other side of the room. She burst in and there was Diana.

"Where have you been?" she asked sternly. Her hair was curled and cascaded all the way down to her exposed naval. Her skirt was a flowing, violet organza that billowed when she walked like waves crashing over rocks in the ocean. The top of her outfit was the same color violet with no sleeves, allowing her to show off her arms, which were stacked with bracelets.

"I'll tell you about it later!" Marceline replied.

"Your dress is over there," Diana replied as she pointed to a small corner that was sectioned off. Marceline's heartbeat quickened.

"My what?" she asked, walking back behind the makeshift changing room. Hanging from a copper pipe Marceline saw a tight green dress the color of new spring leaves. It had full sleeves that came to a point at her middle finger and covered every part of her body from the base of her neck to her feet. The entire dress had an overlay of the same fabric that Diana's dress was made of that was attached at the neck. Over to the side lay a lightweight mask, a wide brimmed hat, and a green veil. It was beautiful. "Oh, Di," she exclaimed.

"You like it?" she asked, smiling.

“I love it,” Marceline said as she embraced her aunt. She didn’t know she could still get excited about clothes. Ever since she’d been poisoned, she’d hardly shown her skin to anyone, because of how it had changed. Clothes were hardly fun anymore.

“Well, put it on then.” Diana replied. “We’re starting soon.” Marceline rushed behind the curtain and threw her wide, black dress and mask on the ground. She raced to step into the green dress, fastening the small button at the back of her neck. She let the light green fabric run through her hands as she pulled her head through the hole. Marceline pulled up her hair and stuck it in the hat, then tied the mask behind her head. The final step was the green veil that, when draped over the hat, stopped perfectly at her shoulders.

“Well?” she asked as she stepped out from behind the curtain.

“You look great,” Diana said, beaming.

“You look pretty great yourself,” Marceline teased. “Today’s about you, you know?”

“I know,” she replied, “I just like seeing you get excited about things...and people.”

Marceline knew that tone. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“Jasper.”

“What about him?”

“The two of you are becoming quite close, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but don’t you think I have other things to worry about?”

Diana’s smile faltered just a bit. “I just want you to be happy, no matter what happens in the future.”

“What would make me happy is watching you get married,” Marceline teased, hoping to change the subject as quickly as possible.

Diana smiled, “I think I can help with that.”

The ceremony was absolutely beautiful. Marceline watched from the back corner as the two people who meant the most to her in the world got married. Right as the ceremony started, Jasper came and sat beside her. He smiled at her when he arrived, but he seemed a bit distracted. Marceline switched back and forth between watching the ceremony and watching Jasper. She desperately wanted to ask him what was wrong, but there wasn't much of a chance until the end of the wedding. As one of the Scholars tied a red rope around Arthur and Diana's wrists, the entire room stood in applause. They were married.

"That was nice," Jasper said, still looking distracted.

"It was," Marceline replied, looking at the ground.

"I've never seen you wear colors before," he mentioned, looking over her green ensemble. Marceline blushed beneath her mask and veil. "Can we walk?" Jasper asked.

Marceline was taken aback. What did that mean?

She followed him through the crowd and out of a small door in the garden room that led out into the back gardens of the palace. Marceline became shy.

"How are you and your mother adjusting?" she asked. "Do you need anything?"

"No, we're fine," he said. His eyes clouded over a bit.

"Oh, I see," Marceline said, growing more curious by the second.

"I wanted to ask you about your mom," Jasper said quickly. Marceline's heart dropped. Of all the things he could ask her, why that?

"What do you want to know?" she asked, trying to hide her disappointment.

He seemed to pause for a moment. "What did she do to you that was so awful?"

"She killed my father."

"Are you sure?"

Marceline stared at him, “What do you mean ‘Am I sure?’”

“Well, you were really young when he died, weren’t you?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, how do you know that she killed him?” Jasper continued. “Was there ever any proof?”

Marceline blinked. “No.”

“Then how do you know she killed him?”

“I suppose I don’t,” Marceline said.

“Well then how do you know she’s as bad as you say?”

Marceline sighed. She wanted to tell him the whole truth, but she also didn’t want him to run screaming from the palace. She wanted him to stay. A partial truth would have to do for now. “Are you familiar with the Amygdala project?” Marceline asked. Jasper nodded. “Do you know why they aren’t implanted in people anymore?”

“Something about remotely messing with people’s minds?” Jasper shrugged.

“Not ‘messing with.’ Controlling,” Marceline began. “There was a group of scientists a long time ago who started manipulating the chips before implanting them. By manipulating people’s emotions, that group was able to make the people with the defective chips do anything.” Marceline paused. “They made them afraid, and they made them fight.”

“All right,” Jasper sighed, “But what does that have to do with your mother?”

Marceline pursed her lips, “Today, only a handful of the Amygdala chips still exist, and the only people allowed to have them are the Scholars. It has something to do with their quest for purity in knowledge. A little while after my parents were married, my mother stole Di’s chip.”

“Really?” Jasper exclaimed. He seemed to be warming up to her view.

“Yes. It was a big deal” Marceline continued. “Everyone in the palace was searched, and they found it in her pocket. She didn’t even try to deny what she’d done. When they got to her, she pulled it out of her pocket and handed it to the soldiers.”

“Did she say why she’d done it?” Jasper inquired.

“No, but around that time there was an uprising in the Vagrant Lands. It was a fanatical group that wanted to divide the Two Nations again between the Statesmen and the Vagrants. A lot of people thought they would use the Amygdala chips to do it.”

“And you think your mother was part of that group?” Jasper asked.

“I’m certain.”

Jasper sighed. “Would you hate me if I still wasn’t entirely convinced?”

“No,” Marceline replied. “But I might question whether or not you have an Intelligence Mark.”

Jasper offered a small smile. “You know, I’m just taking you on your word that you’re fully Marked. You could be lying to me.”

“I could be,” Marceline replied, grinning in spite of herself. Suddenly desperate to change the subject, Marceline started pulling up the green fabric that obscured her body from view. She pulled it up until her bare hand peeked through to the outside world. Marceline held out her left palm to Jasper.

“My Beauty Mark,” she said. In the back of her mind, she realized the irony of herself, perhaps the most hideous creature in the Two Nations, revealing her Beauty Mark to someone.

“That’s proof of one at least.”

“Well I guess I should return the favor,” Jasper replied. He pulled up his sleeve, showing off the spiral that reached all down his arm.

“Beauty as well,” Marceline replied, returning her hand to the safety of her organza shield. “I should have known.”

“Did you just call me handsome?” Jasper quipped.

“I did no such thing,” Marceline said, perhaps a bit too quickly. Her heart began to flutter as Jasper laughed.

“I’m only joking,” he replied. “I think the Mark fits you pretty well too.”

Marceline blushed, afraid of what was coming next. “What do you mean?”

“Why do you wear the mask?” Jasper asked.

“That’s a story for another day,” she replied, slightly taken aback. She’d never had anyone ask her so bluntly before. Her Discernment Mark showed that Jasper was intrigued by every word she said.

“Promise?” Jasper asked playfully.

“I promise.”

“We should be getting back to the party, shouldn’t we?” Jasper asked after a short pause.

“Yes, we should.”

Jasper walked forward and offered Marceline his arm. The fabric on her dress offered just enough give for her to comfortably wrap her hand around the crook of his elbow. Marceline felt lighter than she had in years. Even though they separated as soon as they returned to the wedding venue, Marceline kept sneaking looks at Jasper until the sun had long gone down. Every once in a while, she thought she caught him looking back at her, and that thought made her heart soar.

[Maura]

Maura was elated to find that her life was finally becoming what she had always wanted. In the few months that she and Jasper had been staying in the palace, she'd impressed the chef so much that he had asked her to help prepare a section of appetizers for the Festival of Planting later that night. Instead of being jealous, the people she worked with were friendly and supportive of her growth.

The only thing in the way of her happiness was her children.

No matter how many times she begged Arthur to let her leave the palace and speak to her sons, she was denied. Maura didn't have the courage to ask Lady Marceline herself. Even though she had never been anything but kind to Maura and had developed a kind of friendship with Jasper, Maura was still a bit terrified of her regal nature. She wanted to get her sons back. What was wrong with that?

Jasper was also making the situation painful. He made it obvious that he didn't want anything to do with Anderson and Lee, which disappointed Maura a great deal. She had always thought her sons would develop into great friends as they grew older. Now she wasn't so sure. Any time she brought up Andy and Lee, Jasper would practically bite her head off. She'd learned to just not say anything.

"Ms. Maura?"

Maura shook her head. She had been daydreaming while chopping vegetables again. "Yes?" she started.

"I was just asking if you could use any help," said the young girl. She was one of the newer maids, Maura supposed, about Jasper's age.

“Oh, no. I’m just working on tonight’s dinner, that’s all,” Maura replied. Since the appetizers came first, Maura had been relishing her rare time alone in the kitchen before the rabble of people came and started clogging up her work space.

“What were you thinking about?” the girl asked. She jumped on one of the empty tables and started swinging her legs back and forth like a child on a swing. Her small, black boots made her skirts swish back and forth in a mesmerizing way.

“Nothing really,” Maura replied. “I was just thinking about my family, that’s all.”

“What’s your family like?” the girl asked. Her voice was melodic.

“I have three sons that are all around your age,” Maura answered. “But I haven’t seen my oldest two sons in a while.”

“Why not?”

“I just haven’t had the time,” Maura lied.

“That’s terrible,” the girl replied. Her legs stopped swinging as she jumped back off the table. Without warning, she reached out and hugged Maura. “I miss my parents all the time. I wish I could see them more often.”

“When’s the next time you’ll see them, dear?”

“I’m not sure,” the girl replied, retracting her embrace. “Hopefully soon after the Planting Festival tonight.” Her body began to sway wistfully. “I always liked festival seasons with my parents. There were games in the streets, everyone was dressed in their best clothes, and there was always so much delicious food!” She twirled in excitement.

Maura handed the girl one of the candied yams that she had been making. She thought back to the times when Jasper, Andy, and Lee were little and she would take them to the festival sites in Andalusia. They had always been so excited to see all the flashing lights and experience

the strange sights and smells from every region in the Two Nations. Even Elias had seemed more pleasant when it was time for one of the festivals. Maura made her decision.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Maura said, looking at the girl. “You reminded me of something.”

“What’s that?”

“The things that are really important in life,” Maura said. She walked to the back door of the kitchen and picked her coat off the rack. Almost as an afterthought, she turned back to the girl. “I’m sorry. I didn’t ask your name.” The girl smiled.

“My name is Glory.”

Maura had enough time to explain her plans for the appetizers to some of her kitchen friends before she ran back to her apartment. Her mind was building grandiose plans about her long awaited reunion with her sons when she heard a soft rustling in the corner of her living room.

Jasper was sitting in the corner chair reading.

“What are you doing here?” Jasper asked. “Shouldn’t you be at work?”

“I was,” Maura said, squaring her shoulders. “But I have something more important to do.” Quickly, she busied herself packing a few apples and some spare coins in her saddlebag.

Jasper sat up.

“What are you doing, Mom?” he asked suspiciously. Maura couldn’t turn to face him.

“I’m going to see your brothers.”

“Why?” Jasper asked as he stood up. “Did Arthur say you could?”

“No,” Maura replied, keeping herself busy buckling the bag. “But he can’t stop me.”

“Mom, you can’t be serious.” Jasper moaned.

Maura felt herself beginning to snap. “What’s the matter with you Jasper?”

“I just don’t like it, that’s all,” he replied. His hand was pressing hard against his forehead.

“But you won’t tell me why!” Maura challenged. She suddenly noticed how tired Jasper looked. She hadn’t really checked on him in a few weeks.

“It isn’t safe for you back home. People probably already found out about dad. They’ll lock you up if you go anywhere near Andalusia.”

“But that isn’t the real reason, is it?” Maura whispered menacingly. She felt like such a failure. Because of her relationship with Elias, she had created feelings of hatred between her children. She had always dreamed of having the perfect, happy family, but now that could never be.

“What do you mean?” Jasper asked.

“You just don’t want me to bring your brothers back!” she yelled.

“Mom?”

“No! I don’t want to hear it!” she yelled as she pounded her fists on their tiny kitchen table. “I’m your mother! I don’t have to justify my decisions to you!” Maura took a deep breath. Jasper’s mouth hung open as if she had just slapped him. Maura ignored the feelings of guilt that were beginning to boil over in her stomach.

“You can’t just leave,” Jasper said. His words stumbled out the same way they did when he was a toddler.

“Yes, I can,” Maura replied evenly. Without another word she left her son standing in the middle of their living room. Before she could reason herself out of it, Maura had gone to the

stables and asked to borrow one of the horses. The workers willingly gave over one of the mares and allowed Maura to ride off into the woods.

The ride to her old home was only a mile's walk from the palace, but there were parts of the terrain that were difficult for a horse to maneuver. Maura decided to just take the main roads to get there rather than risk the horse breaking an ankle on the rocky banks of the river. She kept the horse at a steady, slow run for the journey, relishing the silence she felt on the back of the animal.

Every once in a while, the guilt of leaving Jasper behind would sneak into her heart or gnaw away at her mind, but she tried her best to ignore it. She counted to the beat of the horses canter, waiting for her mind to empty. Maura snapped herself back into reality when she noticed that the dark woods surrounding the palace began to thin out, giving space to the outskirts of the city. Rather than directing the horse into the center of town, Maura turned the animal off the road to follow the edge of the woods.

Her house stood in a gaping clearing a mile or so from the main part of town. If the beautiful, two story house with the bay window had been in the middle of a town, it would have looked completely normal, but something about the house being alone in the middle of the woods made it seem ominous. Like the house of a fairy tale where a witch would live.

Maura swung her leg over the side of the horse's back and walked the rest of the path to the house. When she walked by the garden, she stopped to run her hand along the soil. To her surprise, it was soft and damp. The garden had been tilled and watered. She had always had to nag her boys to do the chores when she lived at home. It made her heart swell to see that Anderson and Lee were learning to be responsible on their own.

She walked the horse to the stable, allowing him to get a drink with the others before walking on to her front porch. Maura was just beginning to feel confident. This was her home. Her sons were here. There was nothing scary or threatening waiting for her inside. Just like she had a few months ago, Maura pushed in the door without knocking.

“Hello?” she called into the dark hallway. She thought she heard some shuffling coming from the kitchen. “Hello?” she repeated, following the sound. Maura pushed open the door to the kitchen and found it empty. She noticed that the back door was open, leading out into the yard. Just as she was about to call for her boys outside, she heard the kitchen door swing open behind her.

“Lee? Andy?” she exclaimed. Maura spun around quickly to see who had walked in behind her.

“Mom?” It was Anderson.

“Oh, Andy! I’ve missed you so much.” Maura exclaimed as she ran to give her son a hug. He was still standing in the doorway, propping it open with one arm. Maura ruffled his hair, which was starting to become a little unkempt. She should probably cut it for him later.

“What are you doing here?” Andy asked. He looked confused.

“I came back for you,” Maura exclaimed. “Where’s your brother?”

“Outside somewhere.” He replied. Maura let go when she realized he wasn’t hugging her back. “Let me yell for him real quick.”

“How have the two of you been getting along on your own?” Maura asked, watching as Andy stuck his head out of the back door and yelled his brother’s name. She strained for her voice to sound happier than she actually was. Her family reunion wasn’t going as planned.

“Fine,” Andy replied.

“I saw where you boys had watered the garden,” she continued. “I’m glad you’ve grown up to be such responsible young men.”

“Thanks,” he answered. Lee came through the back door, wiping his hands on an old cloth towel.

“Mom?” Lee asked. His eyes opened wide. Maura saw the two boys exchange looks before walking back over to her.

“I missed you,” Maura said as she hugged Lee. “Both of you.”

“Where have you been, Mom?” Lee asked. “We haven’t seen you in months.”

“I’ve gotten myself a new job,” Maura said, willing her excitement onto her boys. “I’m working as a cook in the palace.” They exchanged glances again.

“Is Jasper with you?” Andy inquired.

“Yes. We share an apartment in the servant’s quarters. It’s small, but quite nice.” Maura continued. “He’s gotten himself a job there as well.”

“No, I mean is he here right now?” he clarified.

“Oh, no. He’s still at the palace,” Maura replied shortly. She didn’t want to hurt their feelings by telling them that Jasper didn’t want to see them. It might make them not want to come back with her. “Believe me, I wanted to come back to get you so long ago, but after that first night, they wouldn’t let me come back for you. It’s been driving me crazy.”

“Who wouldn’t let you come back?” Lee asked.

“The Head of Household at the palace. His name is Arthur. He oversees all of the things going on around the grounds. He’s also Lady Marceline’s most trusted advisor. I’m sure you’ll like him once you meet him.”

“You want us to go back with you?” Andy asked. He scratched the back of his neck.

“Of course, honey,” she crooned. “We’re family. I want us all to be together, just the four of us.”

“Mom,” Lee said. “Tell us what happened to Dad.”

Maura’s heart dropped from her chest to the bottom of her stomach. She should have known that this was coming. Gingerly she placed a hand on each of their shoulders. “I’m sorry boys. Your father is gone.”

“How?” Andy asked. Surprisingly, neither of them showed much of a reaction. Maura thought they would have been more upset. She knew how close they had been to Elias.

“It was my fault,” Maura began, clenching her fists. “But it was an accident. We had been fighting and your father got upset with me.” She started shaking. “I was so afraid, that I lashed out. He had chased me and I just kept hitting him and hitting him.” Maura dissolved in tears. “I just couldn’t stop.”

“You said it was an accident,” Lee whispered after a short silence. He didn’t look her in the eye, he was watching the wall behind her. Maura released a shaky exhale and nodded.

“I’m so sorry, boys. I know you loved him,” she cried, leaning heavily with her forearms over the kitchen island. For a while, she just kept whispering about how sorry she was. What had she been thinking, coming back here? Her sons weren’t going to forgive her. She should have listened to Jasper. She should have just left well enough alone. Finally, after a short spell, Maura ran out of tears. She wiped her eyes and finally looked her boys in the eye.

“Haven’t I always told you she’s a liar?” said a voice from behind her.

Impossible!

Quickly, Maura turned to the main kitchen door and saw Elias blocking her way out. He looked awful. Part of his dark hair had been shaved away, revealing a line of stitches wrapping

around his head from the back of his left ear. There was a dingy white cast on his right arm, keeping it locked firmly on his chest. Maura felt the blood drain from her entire body. Elias was more frightening than he had ever been.

“I...” Maura tried to speak. Her lungs wouldn’t contract. She couldn’t breathe.

“She hit me on purpose,” Elias said, his voice deadly level. “She wants the house, and the property, but she knew she’d have to kill me to get it. Every single hit was intentional.”

“That’s not...”

“You’re mother’s a criminal, boys. Do you want to run off with her, or do you want to make sure justice is served?”

“No!” Maura stuttered, trying as hard as she could to push the words out of her mouth.

“Please. He’s lying.”

“Have I ever lied to you boys?” Elias asked. “Have I ever left you like she has? Abandoned you like she has?” Maura could feel the boys stiffen behind her. They believed him. He was alive. How was he alive?

She knew she had to run, but there was no way out. Elias was blocking the front door while Lee and Anderson were standing between her and the back. Which was the better option? Elias was injured.

Without warning, she sprinted straight forward, hoping to barrel past him in the surprise. Her shoulder hit the doorframe but she made it through, almost knocking Elias to the ground in the process. Maura could see the light streaming through the front door at the end of the dark hallway. She just might make it. She would grab the horse and spring away as fast as...

A thick, calloused hand grabbed around her arm, jerking her to a halt.

“Let me go!” she screamed, her tears began flowing again. “Elias let me go!” Maura turned to try to fight her husband off, but the sight of her captor shocked the fight out of her body. It wasn’t Elias that was holding her. It was Lee. Any chance of hope for her family drained out of Maura as she looked into her son’s eyes.

She had tried so hard to make sure that the boys never saw what was happening. Her bruises were covered, her cries were muffled, and she did her best to please Elias so he wouldn’t hurt her. She had failed again. No, this failure was the worst of all. All Maura could do was cry as her son hauled her back into the kitchen and slammed the door.

[Marceline]

Marceline stood hunched over her delicate, white vanity. She braced herself against the wood and clutched at the wrought iron bars that spindled up to connect the desk to the mirror. Her head was bowed and she stared at her mask as she thought about Jasper.

He was smart. And kind. Just yesterday she had happened upon him reading a story to some of the servant's children. He had a light, trilling voice for when he was speaking as the princess in the story and a deep baritone when he was the handsome prince. Marceline wished that the real world was like the stories she had read when she was little.

"My, what a story," she had remarked after he had finished and the children had dispersed.

"Thank you, my lady," he had replied with a sarcastic bow.

"I thought I told you to call me Marceline," she said, feigning annoyance.

"Are you sure that's allowed?" he teased.

"I'm in charge, aren't I?" she scoffed. "If I say it's allowed, then it is."

Jasper had tilted his head to the side. "Whatever you say, Marceline."

The two had walked in silence for a while. Every few minutes, Marceline would peek through the holes in her mask and catch Jasper staring at her. Marceline wanted to think his intentions were kind, but she knew that he was probably just curious about what's behind her mask.

"How is your mother adjusting?" Marceline had asked, trying to break the silence. "I feel bad for not checking on her personally."

"I wouldn't know," he replied. "We haven't talked much lately."

"Oh."

“She’s upset about my brothers. And she’s upset that I’m not upset.”

“I see.”

He had changed the subject fairly quickly after that. Marceline had thought she’d sensed him hiding something with her Discernment Mark, but her control over the ability had been slipping lately. They had sat in the garden for a few hours, just talking. They had discussed their childhoods and their lives, but mostly books. Marceline had never met anyone before who had made her feel as if she wasn’t well read.

Those thoughts from yesterday made Marceline smile in the present. Then she frowned. She untied her mask and let it fall to the desk. The bare face she saw in the mirror was horrifying.

Her once olive skin was now ashy white. The area around her nostrils was morphing into a blackish-gray, as if the skin had died and begun to rot. In the same way, her skin around her mouth was black and receding. She almost looked like she had been born without lips, leaving her teeth to hang over the side like an animals’. Even her tongue was turning black. Everywhere she looked, Marceline’s skin was flaking off, leaving red, irritated sections around the dark parts. It also seemed that the bones in her face were flattening, getting rid of her once high cheekbones and giving her forehead a sloped appearance.

The changes had been gradual over the years. At first she had been able to hide the skin discolorations with cosmetics. A bit of blush here and a dab of powder there and she looked perfectly normal. After a while, however, the changes had become too much to hide without her masks. Marceline had never really thought about how much she took her looks for granted until they were taken and replaced with the opposite.

Marceline's disgust was interrupted by a knock on her bedroom door. Quickly, she grabbed her mask and retied it behind her head. She threw a head covering over her drastically thinning hair before flinging open the door. Standing outside was a young girl with blonde hair and blue eyes wearing Vagrant Orange.

"Good evening, Lady Marceline," the girl greeted her. Marceline's Discernment Mark was telling her that something was off with the girl, but she couldn't tell what.

"Hello," Marceline replied.

"I'm here because your mother would like to speak to you before the festivities tonight." Marceline sighed. Every once in a while her mother would try something like this, but it never worked. The one time Marceline had agreed to one of these meetings was the day that everything started falling apart.

"That's not going to happen," Marceline said. She started to close the door, but the girl stuck her boot in before Marceline had the chance.

"Are you sure, Lady Marceline? She only wishes to inquire after your health," she offered up a sickening smile. Marceline didn't need her Discernment Mark to tell her that something wasn't right with this girl.

"I'm sure," Marceline replied shortly. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'd like it if you removed your foot from my doorway."

"Can I at least deliver a message?" she asked.

"Go ahead."

"You're not going to figure it out," the girl whispered. Marceline's heart started beating a bit faster.

"Excuse me?"

“All of the pieces of the puzzle are falling into place and you don’t even know what the picture is supposed to look like,” the girl’s smile grew wider and she started giggling.

“Stop that,” Marceline demanded. The longer the girl stood in her doorway the more sinister she began to look. As the laughter continued the grin grew wider, until it seemed to take up the entire bottom half of her face.

“You’re going to lose, Marceline,” she replied. Her face suddenly started changing. Her blonde hair turned black, her blue eyes turned green, and her skin began to darken. Before Marceline’s very eyes, the servant girl was turning into Margaret.

“I told you to leave,” Marceline said. She was panicked. Petrified with fear. She couldn’t push the girl out. She could never be rid of her mother.

“You’ll lose your humanity.”

“No.”

“You’ll lose like your father did.”

“I said stop.”

“Like your brother.”

“ENOUGH!” Marceline bellowed. Her father had died when she was young and Marceline had given up on herself a long time ago, but her brother was a sore subject.

“My lady?” the girl mumbled, suddenly meek. Her appearance had returned to normal.

“I don’t care what she has to say!” Marceline flung the door open and stepped so that she was in the servant’s face. “Crawl back under whatever rock you came from and don’t come speak to me ever again.”

“Glory?” a voice from down the hall interjected. It was Jasper. He looked concerned.

Realizing how threatening she must look, Marceline took a quick step back into her room. She looked back at the girl and noticed that she had started shaking. Her heart stopped beating for a moment.

“I’m sorry, Lady Marceline,” she whimpered as she hung her head. “I’ll leave now.” The girl started shuffling down the hall to Marceline’s right. She grabbed her stomach as if she was going to be sick.

“Wait!” Jasper called after her, “I’ll walk you back.” He walked over and put an arm around the girl’s shoulders.

As he passed by Marceline, he gave her the most scornful look she had ever seen anyone give her. It almost mirrored her own facial expression whenever she saw her reflection. She started to say something, but thought better of it. She could tell he was furious.

Marceline took one step backwards into her room. Stunned, she leaned her shoulder against the door to shut it, sliding down to the floor after she heard the latch click. How could everything have gone so wrong in such a short amount of time? Was her mind leaving her already? Had she just imagined that the girl had changed shape in front of her, or was this another one of Margaret’s tricks? Honestly, did it even matter at this point? And on top of all of that, Jasper was upset with her. He wasn’t the most important part by far, but he was still a little important.

Angrily, she ripped off her mask and flung it at the mirror over her vanity. It made a satisfying thump against the drawers of the desk before landing on the carpeted floor. Marceline started crying. All of the pressure from the past few months poured down on her like the waterfalls in the Black Rivers pummeled the rocks at their base. The places where her skin was peeling stung as the salty tears glided over her face.

She was still sitting at the base of her door with her knees bent up to her chest when Jasper came back.

“Let me in!” he called from outside the heavy door.

“One minute,” Marceline said as she tried to steady her voice. She stood up and looked at the ceiling for a moment, willing the tears to go back where they came from.

“No, now!”

“I said one minute!” Marceline took a few steps and bent to retrieve her mask when her door burst open.

“What are you doing?” Marceline demanded. In her shock she dropped the mask. She did her best to cover her face and keep her back turned while trying to retrieve the mask from the ground. It was her shield. No one had seen her without one in a year.

“I said I needed to talk.”

“Jasper!”

“Why did you yell at Glory?”

“Can you please give me one second?” Marceline cried. She was trying not to start crying again.

“No, I can’t.”

“Jasper, please!”

“I don’t care about your mask, Marceline. I care about what you did to Glory!” With every word, it felt like he was stabbing a knife into her lower abdomen. She was still so panicked that she forgot that she could call for help and have a dozen guards ready to protect her.

“Jasper...”

“Why did you yell at her?” he demanded.

“She was saying things. Awful things about my family!” Marceline choked out the words. Her throat had gone completely dry. Finally her fingers fumbled to the mask and she managed to tie it back on. Her breathing started to slow.

“So what?” Jasper asked. “They’re just words, Marceline.”

“And her face, it changed,” Marceline tried to piece the moment back together in her mind. “For a moment she looked like my mother.”

“Oh, that’s what this is!” Jasper scoffed. “It’s always about how awful your mother is and how she ruined your life. What about her? Do you think you’re making her life any easier?”

Marceline was beginning to grow suspicious. She hadn’t known Jasper for very long, but she didn’t think he was capable of this kind of anger. And why all of a sudden did he care about her mother, or the servant named Glory?

“Why do you care?” she asked, voicing her thoughts.

“What?” Jasper looked as if he had run into a fence. His eyes grew wide and his jaw dropped just a bit.

“Why do you care about what I said to Glory? Are you her friend?”

“I mean...I met her once,” Jasper said sheepishly. His face started to twist from rage to confusion.

“But you don’t know her well?” Marceline demanded. The more her thoughts cleared the less she was willing to put up with Jasper’s attitude.

“No...I don’t.”

“Then why are you defending her so much?”

Jasper’s face looked completely blank. “I don’t know.”

Marceline was confused, and it looked like Jasper was too. “You don’t know?”

“No.” Neither of them spoke for a few moments.

“Well, that’s odd,” Marceline stated sarcastically. Her mind worked through every conceivable possibility, but nothing really made sense, then something dawned on her. “A few weeks ago when you were asking about my mother, where did those questions come from?”

Jasper looked sheepishly at the floor. “It was from when I met Glory.” Marceline should have guessed. This had her mother’s name written all over it.

“Do you want to know why I wear masks?” Marceline asked suddenly.

“What?” Jasper asked. He looked more in shock now than he had when he’d snapped out of his angry phase.

“Do you want to know why I don’t let people see my face?”

“What does this have to do with anything?” he asked.

“You’d be surprised,” Marceline replied. “Now do you want to know, or not?” Jasper waited a moment to answer. Almost reluctantly, he nodded. “All right then,” she said, breathing out one last time. “Follow me.”

[Jasper]

Ever since he'd met Marceline, Jasper had been curious about why she always wore masks. It was a question that had been constantly nagging him from the back of his mind for a while, but something about this seemed forced. He had wanted Marceline to tell him willingly about why she wore masks all the time, but the way she was acting made it seem like she had no other option.

He followed Marceline outside of the palace and onto a back part of the grounds that no one ever used. There were no gardens, no patios, and nothing else that would draw the nobility out to play. Marceline walked straight through the middle of the open yard to the side of the forest. Jasper thought surely she would stop there, but she didn't.

At first Jasper thought that Marceline was leading him through the woods randomly, but after a few minutes of crunching through fallen leaves, Jasper realized he was stepping on a flat stone path. He followed her blindly as she twisted and turned among the trees.

While he walked, he had time to think about what had just happened. What had just happened? He had seen Marceline yelling at Glory and had gotten irrationally angry, but he didn't know why. Jasper had never been that confrontational in his life, and here he was about to start a fight with someone he cared about over a girl he hardly knew. He blushed just thinking about it. He honestly couldn't think of a good reason for his actions.

"This is it," Marceline announced as they came to a small clearing. Jasper balked at the sight. It was a small cemetery with a few above ground tombs scattered among the tomb stones. Raised high above everything else was a small but ornate mausoleum made of black marble inlaid with gold veins. Whoever was buried in that center crypt had a nicer home in death than Jasper had ever had in his life.

“What are we doing here?” he asked, still in awe of the simple splendor.

“I need to show you what’s in there,” Marceline replied, pointing to the black crypt. She reached forward and swung open the iron gate surrounding the cemetery. Jasper expected the gate to let forth a bone piercing shriek, but it swung forward smoothly. Suddenly, Jasper remembered something he had heard from his mother.

“This is where it happened, isn’t it?” he asked. “Where my father died.”

Marceline paused, “Yes.”

Jasper looked around, as if he were expecting to see his father’s ghost appear and start berating him from beyond the grave, but there was nothing there. It was just a normal, empty graveyard. Marceline swung open another soundless door and walked into the mausoleum. She turned back to Jasper, signaling him to follow.

“Before I let you in,” she began, blocking the entryway, “You have to promise me that you won’t say anything about it to anyone besides Arthur and Diana. They’re the only ones who know.”

Jasper hesitated, thinking about his mother for just one second. “I promise.”

Marceline looked at him and nodded before turning and descending down a flight of steps. Jasper couldn’t help but think how much the inside of this crypt looked like the mausoleums he had read about in books. The walls were made of a textured stone and were lit by old time torches. It was so cold that the walls were sweating. The only thing that seemed odd about the place was that there were no places to lay corpses to rest.

At the bottom of the steps was a gate that looked identical to the one at the entrance to the cemetery. Jasper expected Marceline to open it, but he bumped into her at the bottom of the last step.

“This is as far as we go,” she said, pushing him back a bit.

“But there’s nothing here,” Jasper looked past her, but the room past the gate was barely lit. Marceline reached through the bars of the gate and pulled at a small string that Jasper hadn’t noticed before. It must have been attached to a small bell because a small tinkling noise echoed through the room.

From the other side of the gate, Jasper heard a large shuffling noise, followed by a loud thunk. The shuffling drew closer and closer, filling Jasper with unease. Slowly but surely, a large, ominous figure came into view. It was hideous.

Jasper could tell that whatever this was, it used to be a man. There was no nose left, only the holes where the creature was wheezing. The sides of the mouth were pulled up mid cheek, frozen in a sickening grin. One of its ears was missing. Its entire body was gray except for the parts that were covered by the extremely expensive looking clothes that didn’t match the appearance at all.

“Jasper,” Marceline said, “this is my older brother, Aaron.” She turned back to the creature. “Aaron, this is my friend Jasper.”

Jasper tentatively stepped forward, letting the creature get a better view of him, but it started jumping up and down. Startled, Jasper stepped back, but he did it too quickly. The creature, startled, started pounding on the bars and screaming. It sounded as though something was blocking its airway, so the yelling was sporadic.

“Your brother?” Was all Jasper was able to say as he watched the creature panic.

“You should leave,” Marceline said over her brother. “I’ll be up in a minute, I have to calm him down.”

Jasper walked back up the stairs in shock. He didn't know what to do with this new information. Everyone had always said that Marceline's brother died in a hunting accident. He had been bitten by something, but apparently he was very much alive. Or at least partially alive. And what did her brother have to do with Marceline's mask?

He leaned against the side of the crypt, letting the cool marble press through the back of his shirt as he tried to understand what was happening. Usually in situations that didn't make sense, his mind would create different scenarios and situations to find a solution, but right now his mind drew blank.

"You're confused," Marceline said. Jasper had been so lost in thought that he hadn't noticed her walk back outside.

"Very."

Marceline sighed, "My mother did that."

"She...made your brother like that?" Jasper asked.

"She poisoned him," Marceline confirmed. "Then she poisoned me."

"She poisoned you?"

Marceline held her upper arms, tensing up as she told Jasper the rest of the story, "My mother was banished when I was really young because she was suspected of killing my father and poisoning my brother." She began. "I was allowed to see her on rare occasions, but never alone. One day she sent me a message through one of her personal servants asking to talk with me by myself." Jasper's stomach filled with dread. He could figure out where this story was going.

“It was a wonderful time, really,” she continued. “We met in a field in the middle of the woods. She had a lot of servants that kept bringing us food and drinks. It was a regular mother, daughter picnic.”

“She poisoned you that day?” Jasper concluded.

“Yes. And she gloated about it,” Marceline sat down on the edge of the crypt. “Right as I was leaving, she told me what she had done. She said I’d end up ‘Just like my brother’ and that she’d make sure to use my place at the Ambassador’s council for the good of the Vagrant Lands.”

“But why would she do that to you?” he asked. “You’re her kids.”

“She poisoned Aaron because when he was a baby, he chose allegiance to the Statesmen, like my father.” Marceline explained. “As for me, I was one of the few babies that never chose a side. I guess she had someone watching me and thought that my loyalties were leaning too far towards those of my father and brother.”

“She poisoned you for that?” Jasper asked incredulously.

“Yes.”

“Just because she thought you were more like a Statesman than a Vagrant.”

“You want to know the really funny part?” Marceline asked bitterly. Jasper looked at her, waiting for her to continue. “She was wrong.”

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. Jasper sat digesting the new information. Some things made sense. He and Marceline were drawn to each other because they were both children with an abusive parent. Jasper sighed. At least he had one good parent. Marceline’s dad was gone.

“What will the poison do to you?” Jasper asked. “I mean. How does it turn you into. . .?” he trailed off, letting the crypt behind them finish his question.

“There are five Marks,” Marceline began. “Beauty, Intelligence, Bravery, Strength, and Discernment. Subjectively speaking, these are the five things that make up a person’s humanity, whether or not they’ve been Marked by all five. The poison takes them all away from you. I’m slowly losing everything that makes me human, and it’ll continue until I’m. . .”

“A beast.”

“Yes.”

Marceline stood up and looked around. Jasper watched as she moved. He looked for any resemblance to the creature below them, but he couldn’t see it. As far as he could tell, she was just as human as he was.

“I just want you to know that I wasn’t always this vain,” she said as she bent down and picked at some grass. “I didn’t want to be beautiful until I was hideous.”

“Do you look like him?” Jasper asked. He immediately regretted it. Even though he couldn’t see Marceline’s face, he had known her long enough that he was able to read her gestures. She adjusted her mask when she was upset, as she did now.

“Not quite yet,” she replied. “But I’m getting there.”

“How much longer?”

“I’m not really sure,” she replied. “It can’t be long now though. It took almost five years for Aaron’s sickness to take over him completely, and it’s been almost five years since I was poisoned. It can’t be long now.”

Suddenly, Jasper became frustrated. “Why can’t you tell anyone about what she did? They’d all believe you!”

“I’ve tried,” she replied. “Of course Di and Arthur believe me, but the Ambassadors all think I’m playing some kind of political game.”

“Is that how they explain the mask, too?”

“Mhm.”

Jasper carefully reached out and placed a hand on Marceline’s shoulder. He wanted to fully embrace her, but he didn’t know how she’d feel about it. She placed the side of her mask so gently on Jasper’s shoulder that he could barely feel it against the fabric of his shirt. He felt her breathing, slow and steady against his side. They stayed like that.

“We should go back,” Marceline whispered. “We have to get ready for the festival.”

“You’re right,” Jasper replied. He offered Marceline his arm and she took it, wrapping her entire arm around his. They walked in silence all the way back to the castle. The two of them snuck through a back entrance so that Marceline wouldn’t be bothered by the nosey servants. As they reached the doors to the library, Arthur came running up to them. Diana followed closely behind them.

“Where have the two of you been?” Diana demanded, rushing to hug Marceline.

“I took Jasper to visit the cemetery,” Marceline replied. Diana gave Jasper an odd look, but quickly shook it off.

“Marcy, something’s happened,” Diana said, gripping her niece’s shoulders.

“Great,” she deadpanned. “What has she done now?”

“It’s not her Marceline,” Arthur cut in. For once he wasn’t juggling a giant stack of papers.

“Well, what is it?” Marceline asked. “It is Baron?”

“It’s actually about Jasper,” Arthur said, turning his attention toward Jasper.

“What is it?” he asked. Before any theories could form in his mind, Arthur asked a question that made his heart stop beating.

“Jasper, when’s the last time you saw your mother?”

[Diana]

Diana fed the nobility some lie about not feeling well as she and her husband flew off into the night with Marceline and Jasper. Even through the gravity of the situation, she couldn't stop herself from wondering about her niece and this new boy of hers. Marceline had never told anyone that her brother was still alive, let alone taken them to see Aaron. They hadn't even known Jasper for a year. Diana would have been more worried if she wasn't marked by Discernment.

When Marceline and Jasper had walked up to the library doors earlier, arm in arm, Diana had sensed something familiar about the boy. Something that reminded her of Arthur. Maybe once this awful situation was over the two of them could form some type of normal friendship at least. She looked at Marceline. She only wanted her beautiful niece to be happy.

Diana had ridden ahead on single mounts with Jasper and Marceline while Arthur had stayed behind to alert the palace soldiers. He'd be bringing reinforcements shortly. Arthur was always the practical one. He was the one who had gotten suspicious when he went to check on the kitchen and found that Maura had left early. Instead of just letting it go, he went around to the gardens, checked with the maids, and then searched the stables to find out where Maura had gone. Diana hoped it wasn't too late.

She and Marceline were following Jasper's horse as he wound around the edge of the woods and into a hard to miss clearing. All of a sudden they came upon a beautiful house in a disconcerting place. Jasper had jumped off his horse before it had fully stopped running.

"Mom!" he called, running up to the front porch. "Mom!"

Diana could tell that he wasn't going to find anything. There was no light shining through any of the house windows. If it weren't for the stray chicken running around and the well-kept garden, Diana would have thought the house abandoned.

"No one's here," Jasper reported breathlessly as he came back outside. "I don't know where else she could be!"

"Jasper wait!" Marceline interrupted. She jumped off her horse and grabbed his arm. "We have to think for just a minute."

"There's no time to think, Marceline!" he exclaimed. "I need to find her!"

"She's right, Jasper." Diana said. "We need to take a moment to catch our breath."

Jasper started pacing in front of them. "This is all my fault."

"No," Marceline said, "It's not."

"But she told me she was going to come," he cried. "She told me and I didn't stop her. I just let her go."

"What's done is done," Diana interjected. "Right now I suggest we go into town. Maybe someone there knows where she is."

Jasper looked up at her and nodded. The three set off.

~

In spite of the situation, Diana couldn't help but be fascinated by the beautiful festival setup. Colored streamers were strung between streetlamps and shops, twinkling lights glittered out from store windows, and music seemed to flow from everywhere. She slowed her horse to make room for the people around her.

She saw Jasper jump off his horse and start talking quickly to a boy with sandy hair. Diana couldn't hear them over the sounds of the festival. The other boy seemed nervous. He said

something that made Jasper step back in shock. Diana ushered her horse closer to Marceline's as the two waited patiently. The other boy ran away and Jasper walked stiffly over to them.

"That's my friend Allan," Jasper replied breathlessly. He still seemed to be in shock. "He said my mom's in prison." Diana looked quickly to Marceline and saw her eyes widen.

"What's happened?" Diana demanded.

"I'm not sure," Jasper began. "But he said he saw my dad."

"I thought your father was dead?" Diana said.

"Oh no!" Marceline interjected, placing her hand over the painted mouth on her mask. Diana and Jasper both looked at her for explanation. "When your mother was arrested, I was the one who found her and the body. I left the guards to take care of it. I found out the next day that it had vanished."

"The body?" Diana asked. "You couldn't find the body?"

"I didn't want to say anything until I knew for sure that he wasn't just carried off by wild animals."

"Why on Earth didn't you tell anyone?" Diana demanded.

"I didn't want to cause undue worry!"

Diana turned to look for Jasper, but he was already gone. She searched the entire crowd, but couldn't pick him out. She turned back to Marceline, who was gazing over the crowd in a panic.

"Excuse me!" Diana called out to the first person she saw. It was an older woman with salt and pepper hair and a pink apron tied around her plump waist. "Can you tell us how to get to the prison?"

“It’s out that way dear,” the woman replied, “But the execution isn’t due to start for another hour.”

Diana felt her heart stop. “The what?”

“The Town Council met and decided to have an execution to start off the festivities.” The woman continued.

“Who’s the criminal?” Marceline interrupted.

“A local woman. Said she tried to kill her husband. She’s got two of her sons backing the story too.”

“This is what your town calls entertainment?” Marceline demanded.

“Not particularly,” the old woman said. “If you’re asking me, I think it’s all a bit insane, but the husband’s got some weight behind his name, so they’re doing it.”

“Thank you for your help!” Diana said before Marceline could say anything she regretted. The two turned their horses in the direction the woman had pointed and started riding.

“Don’t they have to approve these things with the Ambassador Board,” Marceline demanded angrily.

“Probably,” Diana said, after some thought. “However it’s festival season. I’m sure this isn’t the only thing that’s going to slide under our noses tonight.” The two rode on in silence as they approached a small wooden shack with iron bars on the windows.

It was so ridiculous looking that it was almost comical. The building had obviously been constructed just for this occasion. Out beside it was a small stage set up below a large oak tree. A rope was hanging ominously from one of the branches.

“They can’t be serious,” Marceline exclaimed. Diana kept silent as she dismounted her horse. Marceline did the same. The two locked arms as they took one final look at the tree and walked inside.

“Have you lost your minds?” Jasper yelled to a younger man with a thick mustache. He was obviously the one in charge. “You can’t just kill someone.”

“Tell that to your mother, son,” the man replied. A few of the men sitting off in a corner laughed at his joke. Some of them were palace soldiers.

“Why don’t you run off to the palace, Jasper,” the tallest man replied. “Maybe if you’re lucky some big strong knight will save you.”

“Back off, Lee!” Jasper yelled, antagonizing the man. “I’m not taking orders from someone who wet his bed until he was fourteen.” The ensemble of men started laughing again as the man stood up.

“Watch yourself, baby brother,” Lee replied. “Don’t make me call dad.”

“Call him!” Jasper countered. “See if I care.”

“Yes, please call him,” Marceline said. Her voice reached over everyone in the crowd. The men who were townspeople didn’t recognize her, but the soldiers dropped to one knee immediately. “The other brother as well. I’d like to speak to them.”

Diana admitted to herself that she was thinking of Marceline as a little girl all the time. She was just so used to taking care of her that she often times forgot that Marceline was a capable leader.

“Yes, Lady Marceline,” one of the soldiers assented. Diana saw the eyes of Jasper’s brother grow wide with fear. The men in the room started to stir uncomfortably. They all knew her name. From outside, Diana could hear some sort of commotion. She peered through the tacky

iron bars and saw her husband riding a horse, followed by two dozen palace soldiers. She felt safe.

“Why don’t we take this outside?” Diana suggested. Marceline smiled and gave a curt nod in Lee’s direction. One of the remaining soldiers pinned the man’s arms behind his back and escorted him out the door. As they walked out into the twilight, a few more soldiers were escorting two other men in their direction. One was an older man with a severely beaten face and a cast on one arm. Diana suspected this one to be Elias. The other must have been the other brother.

Marceline stepped up onto the stage meant for Maura’s hanging. “Bring the men forward,” she commanded. At the sound of her voice, Elias and his sons were brought to stand in front of the stage. “You,” Marceline demanded, “state your name.”

“My name is Councilman Elias Worth,” the bandaged man said. “These are my sons, Anderson and Lee.”

“Tell me, Elias Worth, are you responsible for building this stage that I’m standing on?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you build it?”

“To execute a criminal.”

Marceline paused. “Is that criminal your wife?”

“Yes.”

“What is she being accused of?” Marceline asked. Diana noticed that the boys beside Elias were beginning to grow nervous and twitchy.

“She tried to kill me, my Lady.”

“That’s a very serious accusation, Elias Worth. Was she acting in self defense?”

“No, my Lady.”

“Are you sure?” Diana noticed the people in the audience began to murmur back and forth to each other. Why was a member of the royal family in the middle of the capital? Something important must be happening. “Elias, I think you’re lying.” Marceline said. “In fact, I know you’re lying.”

The audience was becoming more confused by the second, and Elias’s sons kept fidgeting.

“I’ve seen into your mind, Elias! I’ve seen the things you’ve done to your wife. How you hit her, yelled at her, then made her hide the damage you’d done from your sons.” Diana gasped. She’d almost forgotten about Jasper. She turned to look for him and was surprised to find he was right beside her, watching the show.

“If it were up to me, which it is, I would make sure that you received three strikes from a whip for every one time you hit your wife.” Diana could sense the fear coming off of Elias. “But I’m going to give the honor of handing out your punishment to someone else,” Marceline paused. “Bring me Maura Worth!” she yelled.

Diana figured out the game Marceline was playing. She was trying to shame Elias, taking away his stature, the one thing he had been more proud of than anything. From somewhere in the crowd, one of the soldiers brought forth Maura, still handcuffed, and led her onto the stage. Marceline rushed to Maura and demanded the key from the guard that had escorted her. Marceline unfastened the handcuffs herself.

“Now Maura,” Marceline bellowed. “What would you have done with your husband? You can choose any punishment you’d like.” Maura was quiet for a moment. She clearly wasn’t used to this many people staring at her, waiting for her to make an important decision.

“Please,” she said, looking at Marceline, “I don’t wish him ill will. I just want this to be over.” Marceline nodded.

“Life in prison,” Marceline announced to the audience. “You’re going to want to elect a new Councilman.”

Diana watched as the man was led away. He spat curses at Marceline, Maura, and basically anyone but himself. The crowd buzzed in an excited confusion as Marceline led Maura off the stage and over to Jasper.

“Mom!” he exclaimed, running to throw his arms around her. “I’m so sorry I didn’t stop you.”

“Sweetheart, this wasn’t your fault,” Maura replied. Diana turned to Marceline to give the two some privacy.

“That was quite a show,” Diana commented.

“Too much?” Marceline asked. She waved as Arthur walked up and placed an arm around Diana’s shoulders.

“No,” Diana replied. “Just enough.”

“Perhaps not quite yet,” Arthur interrupted. “There’s still the matter of the other boys.” Diana looked over to where Anderson and Lee seemed to have been forgotten. They were still standing in front of the stage, but even though the crowd was no longer staring at them, they both looked rather unwell.

“I’m still willing to offer them work at the palace if they’ll take it.” Marceline said after some thought. “But I want them to be supervised at all times. I worry that this time around they weren’t just passive participants in their father’s abuse.”

“I agree,” Arthur replied. “I could set them up working in the gardens. It might be a good place for them to start.”

Diana jumped as one of the boys screamed in pain. The taller one, Lee, had fallen to the ground. The crowd surged around him, forcing Diana to fight her way to the front. Arthur and Marceline followed. When they finally got a clear sight of the boy, he looked almost dead. His skin had lost all color and he was sweating profusely. He was on the ground twitching, moaning loudly in pain.

“What’s happening to him?” Diana asked as someone she assumed to be a doctor pushed through the crowd.

“We’re not sure, my Lady,” the woman said. “But this is the fourth case we’ve had in the last two months.”

“Is it fatal?” Marceline asked.

“No, but some of them probably wish it was,” the woman replied. “It leaves these poor kids in pain, and there’s not much I’ve found that I can do.”

“Kids?” Arthur asked. “It only attacks children?”

“I believe so,” said the doctor. She tapped two of the men behind her and instructed them to go grab a stretcher. “It only occurs in the people who have gone to the new reform schools.”

“Really?” Arthur asked suspiciously. Diana looked at him, wondering what he was thinking. “What are the typical symptoms?”

“Pain, immobility, loss of appetite, fatigue, and this.” She answered. Pulling back Lee’s ear, the doctor pointed out a strange discoloration underneath the earlobe. It was an odd, but familiar gray color.

“Marcy,” Diana whispered.

“I see it,” Marceline answered. “but what does it mean?”

“May I examine the boy for a moment, doctor?” Arthur asked quickly.

“Of course,” she replied. Arthur started running his hands over the patient’s head and neck, searching with his fingers for something he wasn’t even sure was there. When he reached the section on the back, right of the boy’s head, Arthur’s eyes grew wide.

“It’s a scar!” Arthur exclaimed.

“Lots of people have scars, Arthur,” Diana said, patting his shoulder, “It isn’t anything special.”

“Can you take me to where the rest of the patients are located?” Arthur asked, ignoring Diana’s sarcasm.

“If you’d like,” the doctor replied. The two got up to leave, but Diana placed a hand on Arthur’s arm.

“Sweetheart, what is going on with you?” she asked, genuinely confused about her husband’s excitement.

“It may be nothing,” he replied before running off. “But if I’m right, I may be able to get rid of your sister once and for all.” As he explained his theory, Diana began to smile. Of course! It all fit! Diana ran to find Marceline so she could relay Arthur’s theory. This really might be the end of Margaret.

[Marceline]

Marceline charged into the ballroom in the clothes she had been wearing all day. She was tired, angry, and finally understood what her mother had been working on for over twenty years. The multicolored ocean of people split in two as she made her way through them. They started to mutter and stare at the eccentric heiress, but Marceline wasn't listening. For once in her life, she only wanted her mother.

"Over there." Diana pointed. Marceline smiled at her aunt. She could always count on the fact that her aunt would be behind her, no matter what.

"Mother!" Marceline practically screamed over the rumble of the crowd. More people turned to watch the spectacle. "I found you."

Margaret turned. She was wearing a deep sheath dress that wrapped around one shoulder and left the other bare, exposing her spiral Beauty Mark. Of course, standing next to her was Baron, looking as meticulously groomed and ridiculous as ever.

"Marceline, dear," Margaret exclaimed, feigning excitement. "You've made it. But why aren't you wearing a ball gown?"

"It was itchy," she deadpanned. "But I just couldn't wait to talk to you about what I found out today."

"What's that, dear?"

"It's about your schools, mother. The ones you were in charge of starting up." Marceline watched as Margaret's eye twitched just a bit. She knew she was on to something.

"What about them?" Margaret asked innocently. Her painted red lips were drawn into a thin line.

“I’m afraid to tell you that we’ve had to quarantine one of them.” Marceline told her mother in a faux tone of concern. “Your students are getting sick.” Everyone was watching them now. All of the sound had been sucked out of the room.

Margaret began to laugh. “Marceline, darling, children get sick all the time. This isn’t anything unusual. Everything will be back to normal in a few weeks.”

“I certainly hope so,” Marceline replied. “We’ve already taken one of the students in for surgery.”

“Surgery?” Margaret exclaimed. Her eyes were growing wider by the second. “Whatever for?”

“That’s the interesting part, isn’t it?” Marceline teased. “You’re sure you don’t want to tell everyone what makes your schools so special?” Before Margaret could answer, Marceline motioned to a pair of guards. They stalked through the crowd and placed hands on Margaret and Baron’s shoulders. “Oh, all right then, I’ll tell them,” Marceline continued.

“My mother and Ambassador Baron are accused of implanting altered Amygdala chips into the brains of young people who go to their schools. My assumption is that they were trying to raise an army in order to destroy the Treaty of the Two Nations and enslave the people of Euridtus.”

“You have no proof!” Baron exclaimed. His face was turning the same color as Margaret’s dress. “Let us go.”

“You’re right, I don’t have proof,” Marceline began, “Yet. But as I said, one of the students is currently undergoing an operation. A scar is being reopened in her head to search for and remove the chip. If we find it, then that’s our proof.” Out of the corner of her eye, Marceline caught a glance of Glory, the servant that had been causing so much mayhem. The girl’s blonde

hair was tied up in a high bun on the top of her head. Marceline looked at her ear and noticed a bit of gray forming around the lobe.

Margaret turned around and slapped the guard that was holding her, releasing a guttural scream. Five more guards rushed forward to restrain her.

“You brat!” Margaret spat at Marceline. “I wish you’d never been born.” The guards dragged her and Baron away. Suddenly afraid of the hundreds of eyes trained on her, Marceline rushed out of the door. Of course, Diana followed.

“Are you all right, sweetheart?”

“Yes,” Marceline sighed, “It was rather anticlimactic, wasn’t it?”

“What were you expecting?”

Marceline paused, “I’m not sure.” She replied. “Fire and brimstone?” Diana chuckled, lacing her arm around Diana’s shoulder. “I’m glad I got this out of the way, though.”

“What do you mean?” Diana asked, looking sideways at Marceline.

“This doesn’t change anything, Di. I’m still dying.” Immediately after she said it, Marceline felt bad. Diana looked as if she had just been slapped.

“Marcy,” Diana said, but the words wouldn’t come. Diana started crying. “This isn’t fair, sweetheart, it isn’t fair. You deserve a life.”

Marceline comforted her aunt. She found it ironic that she was the one slowly losing her mind, yet she was the one comforting her crying aunt. Strangely, Marceline also felt at peace. As soon as Arthur came through with the Amygdala chips, her mother would go to prison. Maybe she’d finally be able to convince the Ambassador board that Diana or Arthur would be a successor. Besides that, Jasper and his mother would be taken care of. Every problem she’d been having lately was being wrapped up in a nice little bow except for her death.

“It’s all right, Diana,” she said as she stroked her aunt’s hair. “I’m sure everything is going to be fine.”

They sat in the outside air for a while before Marceline heard quick steps pounding from around a corner. She looked up to see Arthur running towards them with a messenger bag slung over his shoulder. He looked frantic.

“Marceline!” he called when he was still a way off. “Marceline!”

“We’re over here,” Marceline replied. She shook Diana off of her shoulder and went to meet her mentor. “Did you find it?” she asked, worried for a moment that Arthur’s hunch had been wrong.

“What?” he asked. “Oh, yes, yes, I found it!” he rushed. “I gave it to the Elder Scholar a few minutes ago. They’ll have to authenticate it, but she seemed confident that it was real.”

Marceline frowned. “That’s wonderful news. So why do you seem so flustered?”

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

“Of course,” Marceline replied without hesitation.

“Arthur, what are you getting at?” Diana asked, placing a hand on her husband’s shoulder.

“Drink this,” he commanded, pulling a small vial out of his bag. Gingerly he grabbed Marceline’s arm and placed the vial in her hand.

“What is it?” she asked.

“It’s a cure.”

“You’re serious?” Marceline asked.

“It’s a long story,” he replied. “Basically the chips run on a ground up mineral that’s mixed with some plant juices. I was able to work really quickly with some of the plants I was

more familiar with and I think I created something that will work to at least slow the progression of the disease, if not stop it all together.”

“And you’re sure you don’t want to test this before making me drink it?” Marceline asked sarcastically.

“This time last year, I would have, Marceline. But speaking bluntly, we don’t know how much time you have left.” Arthur grabbed Diana’s hand and started wringing it between his own.

Marceline took one final look at the clear, unassuming liquid. She thought about her brother, and the fate that had befallen him. He wasn’t even capable of cognitive thought anymore, as far as she knew. If that was all that was in her future, then she reasoned that she had nothing else to lose.

“To your marriage,” Marceline said as she raised the vial in Diana and Arthur’s direction. Before she could reason herself out of it, she put the vial to her lips and drank the whole thing. It didn’t taste like anything, and it slid down her throat easily.

“I don’t feel any different,” Marceline replied after a few moments of tense silence. “I suppose everything is anticlimactic tonight.”

Then she fainted.

[Jasper]

It had been about a week since Jasper had seen Marceline, the entire time she had been confined to her room. He hadn't even gotten to thank her for saving his mother's life. Or yell at her for lying about his father's death. Jasper honestly didn't know what he was going to do when he saw her.

Out of instinct, he turned down the marble hallways until he was in front of the heavy library doors. He swung them open and was shocked to see Marceline sitting in the middle of the room, reading. Jasper was annoyed with himself because the first thing he noticed was how little she was wearing. She was still wearing a mask, but the dress she was wearing had short leaves, a medium neckline, and only went down to her knees. He could see some places where the skin was a bit darker than in others, and places where it was red and irritated. In the middle of the room filled with neutral shelves and dark walls, she was a bright speck of blue.

"I told you I'm fine," Marceline said without looking up from her book. "You don't need to come check on me every few minutes." Jasper didn't speak, he just stared at her. After a moment, she looked up, marking her place with her finger. Her shoulders tensed when she saw him. "You're not Arthur."

"You're right," Jasper said. He stood awkwardly in the door, waiting for Marceline to say something else.

"You can come in, you know," she said. Jasper walked a few steps into the library and shut the door. Again, neither of them spoke.

"How do you feel?" Jasper asked after a few minutes. Marceline lifted up the side of the rug and stuck it between the pages of her book.

“Fine,” she answered, drawing her legs underneath her. “I’m still a bit weak, but my abilities seem to be coming back strong.”

“You can read again,” Jasper said, looking at the book she had been reading rather than at her.

“I can,” she replied. “My attention span is slowly expanding.”

“That’s good,” Jasper said.

“Does Arthur think he can manipulate the antidote to work for your brother?” he asked quietly.

“He’s still not sure,” Marceline replied. “It’s going to take a much stronger dosage, but he’s been working very hard on getting all the ratios right.”

“What is it you want to ask me?” Marceline inquired. Jasper’s eyes widened. “My Discernment mark is coming back under control, too,” she explained.

Jasper hesitated for a moment, still looking at the ground. “Why did you lie about my father?” he asked, finally daring to meet her eyes.

“Honestly?” Marceline said as she started pulling at fibers on the rug. “I’m not sure. I think mostly I didn’t want to frighten your mother. She seemed so happy. I just couldn’t give her a reason to be afraid again.”

“Mostly?” he asked.

“Maybe I didn’t want to give you a reason to be afraid either,” she stated.

“Oh,” the two were silent again. “Thank you.”

Jasper couldn’t stand the silence. He didn’t know why he couldn’t speak all of a sudden. She was still Marceline. Jasper sat down on the rug beside her, stretching his legs out in front of him. Marceline shifted as well, sitting on one side of her legs. Jasper suddenly smiled.

“That’s two,” he said.

Marceline looked at him. “What?”

“On your leg, that’s your second Mark, isn’t it.”

She looked down at her leg, tracing the bottom of the hourglass shape. “Yes. That’s two.”

Jasper rolled up his left pant leg, revealing a small triangle on his ankle. “There’s my second one,” he said. “And my last.”

“You only have two marks?” Marceline asked in surprise. Jasper nodded. “Interesting.”

“Beauty and brains, that’s all I have,” he replied.

“I don’t think that’s entirely true,” Marceline said. Without warning, Marceline stood up. “One, two.” She said, waving her hand and pointing at her leg. Jasper smiled, thinking back to the day she had showed him the Mark on her hand. It was the first time she had ever opened up to him.

“Three,” She opened her right arm, revealing a slanted rectangle symbolizing Strength on the inside of her elbow.” Jasper thought about all the brave things he had seen Marceline do. She’d stared down the angry mob for his mother and taken down her own mother in a single day. That was more than he had ever done in his entire life.

“Four,” Marceline pushed her hair out of the way so that Japer could see the small triangle at the base of her neck. It was the Intelligence Mark that he never had any doubt about her having.

“And five,” she said. She pulled down the collar of her dress about half an inch, revealing a small circle with an “X” through the middle.

“That’s Discernment?” he asked. Marceline nodded.

“Do you believe me now?” she asked teasingly.

Jasper smiled, "I never said I didn't."

"But you implied it."

"But I implied it."

"All right then," she said. "There's nothing left for you to see."

"I wouldn't say that," Jasper quipped. He stood up to face Marceline. "There's still a lot about you that I'd like to know."

"Like what?"

"You said you're getting better?" He asked.

"I am."

"So one day you're going to take off your mask."

Marceline grabbed her elbow, massaging the skin around it. She nodded, "One day."

Jasper inhaled deeply. He had no idea what Marceline had been hiding behind her mask for all those years. It could have been something imaginary for all anyone knew, but he did know that he wanted to see what was on the other side of the porcelain and paint.

"Will you promise me something?" he asked.

Marceline hesitated, "What?"

"Can I be the first to see you without your mask?" For a moment he thought he had overstepped. She didn't say anything for the longest time. His heart started beating too quickly.

"I promise," she said.

"Good," Jasper said, breathing a sigh of relief. "I guess I'll let you get back to your reading then." Jasper turned to leave, hoping in the back of his mind that Marceline would call him back and ask him to stay.

“Wait,” she called. Jasper wondered if she was using her Discernment Mark to read him or if she just had really good timing.

Marceline walked a few steps forward, closing the distance between them slowly. As she walked, one hand reached behind her head to pull at the ribbon keeping her mask in place while the other reached up to stop it from falling down. She stopped walking when the ribbons were hanging loose at each side of her head. Jasper swallowed hard. He knew what this meant to her. Marceline lowered her hand, taking her mask away from her face. She looked straight into Jasper’s eyes the entire time. He smiled when he saw her face, and his heartbeat started racing.

“Hello,” she said, smiling for the first time that Jasper could see. “It’s nice to meet you. My name is Marceline.”

The End