

THE WINTER LEGACY:

Heritage

C. Håkansson

1.

Missing

Ava Simonsen, age 15, disappeared on October 2nd. Ava has red hair and was dressed in a dark shirt with a dragon on, net gloves and camouflage pants. Have you seen her or know anything? Call us!

A telephone number followed, and a picture had been printed above the text. Ava Simonsen glared at the viewer, appearing to wonder why she had to smile at the idiot behind the camera. Frozen in time, she stood with her arms crossed across her chest and a single curl of hair falling in her face.

On the tree a couple of feet away sat another paper, exactly the same as this one. Tree after tree down the street, street after street. The Simonsen family had been around the entire town and had even been on TV, red-eyed and distraught, wondering where their second oldest daughter had disappeared to.

No one had been able to give them any clue. The last bit of sketchy information the police had received about Ava was that she had been seen running up the street towards the football field, but there all traces ended. No one had seen her since.

Well, that was not entirely true.

Natalie Winters sighed to herself and tore her eyes off the print. The tears had dried up and only a dark cloud of emptiness remained, hanging over her, never to leave.

Natalie had been the last person to see Ava. No one knew that, but then they did not know Ava to be dead either. They had not seen her crash into the wall head first – they had not heard the crack of her spine breaking. They knew nothing.

Natalie could never tell them. She had killed their daughter.

“I’m sorry,” Natalie said softly to the photo. “You weren’t supposed to be there.”

The lump in her throat felt familiar and Natalie started walking again. She did not want to cry any more. On every tree, the image of Ava stared back at her.

Reaching Lake Sunflower High School, Natalie stood still and looked at it for a moment. It loomed tall and pompous, a bit too big for a tiny town such as Lake Sunflower.

Students stood scattered around the entrance and the stairs. The gang of nerds, the black-clad and black-haired goths, the bunch of pretty cheerleaders hanging off the arms of muscular football players. Natalie saw Chase Eadan, the annoying rich boy of the school, standing in the middle of the crowd with his girlfriend Lindsay Weaver cuddling next to him. Natalie smiled contently; their faces were still specked with pimples and their hairdos would not stay nice-looking. The curse – she could not describe what she had done any other way – had lost some of its power but not all.

It could not make up for what they had said but they had not made a move towards her since. Eadan looked scared every time he caught sight of her and though the others in his gang mumbled ‘witch’ when they saw her, no one dared to do anything.

“You look deep in thought.”

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Natalie turned around. Cecily Cordell stood behind her, looking like a doll in a long, light blue dress. She had braided her dark hair down her back. She wore the necklace she had received from Natalie's grandmother.

"They're not the least bit deep," Natalie said.

Cecily followed her gaze to Chase and his friends. "Still not back to perfect, hm?"

"I don't think they will be for a while longer."

Cecily smiled. As with Natalie, it did not quite go all the way. The dark clouds of grief that still hung above their heads made it impossible as of yet to be completely happy. Natalie wondered briefly if they would ever be completely happy again.

They entered the school and continued up the stairs.

"Remind me never to make you angry."

"I don't think you could," Natalie said. "Not that way."

"Good to know," Cecily said softly.

She rarely spoke any other way. Softly, gently – that was Cecily's persona. The only thing that had changed about her in the last three weeks was that she was a bit healthier than before. Whatever magic Natalie had managed to conjure, it had helped Cecily. Some color had returned to her cheeks and the circles beneath her eyes were almost non-existent. It was unusual, at least for Cecily.

They passed the second floor bathroom and Natalie glanced at it. She had not been in there in three weeks. It had been too freaky and she preferred to run all the way down the corridor now, just to not have to go to that bathroom.

Cecily looked oddly at her. Not for the first time, she seemed to know that Natalie was having strong feelings about something.

"It's just the bathroom door," she said. "No need to shoot deadly looks at it."

"Sorry."

Natalie realized she had stopped to stare at the door. She shook her head to clear it.

Cecily's eyes betrayed her curiosity but she did not say anything.

Ahead of them, a couple of students were working on fastening a banner for the Homecoming Dance so that it would hang over the corridor. They had decorated it with flowers, the theme of the year. Natalie thought they had incredibly bad imagination, considering the town's name, but she kept this to herself. She would not be going anyway. She did not feel at all like dancing.

Cecily glanced at her. "Have you ever been to one of those dances?"

"I was at the junior high ones back in New York, but I never found them particularly entertaining."

"We had a small Prom-like dance at the end of eighth grade."

"Did you go?"

"Yes. I even had a date."

Natalie raised an eyebrow. "Oh really?"

Cecily smiled slightly, her cheeks reddening. "We were fourteen, it was nothing like that."

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Natalie could not help but giggle and she had to admit to herself that it felt good to do so, but then the guilt came like bile in her throat. Ava was gone and she was laughing? She just barely held back a sigh to herself.

“You’ll have to tell me more about it sometime.”

Cecily smiled slightly. “Yes. Sometime.”

Natalie wondered what Cecily’s life had been like when she had lived in Los Angeles. Cecily rarely mentioned it at all. Natalie did not know if she had had friends, a best friend or if she had had a crush on anyone. Cecily had given it all up to come to Lake Sunflower to help Natalie.

“I’ll see you later,” Cecily said a moment later. The science classroom where Cecily’s biology class took place was a few doors away from Natalie’s history classroom.

Natalie nodded. She hoped she did not look as disconnected as she felt.

“See you.”

History was all right, unlike math an hour later. In math, it felt simply wrong to Natalie. Ava should be sitting there, right behind Natalie. Cecily to the left, Ava behind – the way it should be. But no. Natalie had to glance over her shoulder to look back at the empty seat behind her, as she had in the classes that had passed in the previous three weeks, just to make sure that Ava did not appear.

Cecily reached out briefly and squeezed Natalie’s hand. Natalie smiled back, a pained smile. Mrs. Miller, the math teacher who had made it a sport to ask Natalie questions when she saw that Natalie was otherwise occupied, chose another student to answer her question, only sending a concerned and sad look towards Ava’s seat.

Natalie did not quite listen anymore to any of her classes.

Just minutes before the class ended, Cecily received a note from the administration’s office.

Once class was out, Natalie asked, “What does it say?”

“I’m supposed to go to one of the administrators. They probably need to discuss my frequent sick leaves.”

Cecily did not look annoyed, as Natalie would have been. Anyone could see that Cecily was sick – what could there be worth discussing? She kept up with her school work and even excelled in several subjects, so what could they whine about? It only made her miss more of her classes.

“Relax. They do this once a week. I suppose it makes them feel good, to have their weeks scheduled.”

Natalie smiled but rolled her eyes at the same time. “It would be typical them. Administrators are morons.”

They had packed their bags and said a quick goodbye. They would meet up in English once Cecily was done.

Natalie opened the door to the English classroom and stepped inside. The other students were chatting and laughing, some yawning and one appeared to be asleep on his desk. Natalie sat down heavily in her chair and dumped her bag on the floor next to her. She wondered what they had be doing today – for the last week or two, they had had substitute teachers filling in for Mrs. August. The substitutes were rarely any good.

She doodled idly in her notebook, wondering if the ghost writer would ever make an appearance again. She felt it was a bit annoying to be called ‘worthy’ and then not get any sort of explanation.

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“Good morning, class.”

Natalie’s heart stopped in her chest.

Her fingers became white around her pen as she gripped it hard – she knew that voice. It would never, ever, *ever* leave her again.

Slowly, Natalie looked up.

There he stood, standing up by the teacher’s desk, as though nothing had happened at all. As though the world was perfectly all right and he was perfectly normal. He had his hair pulled back into a ponytail and he wore a white shirt and black jeans.

The necklace around Natalie’s neck, her mother’s beautiful human-shaped necklace, began to vibrate. Natalie had not done magic since hexing Eadan and his group – it had been too painful, too much of a reminder – but now she felt it flowing through her blood as easily as anything.

“I’m Ramon Keys. I’ll be substituting for Mrs. August today.”

Natalie could not breathe.

She did everything she could not to lash out at him right then and there – hurl the strong burst of magic towards him and hopefully hurt him enough to get out of there alive.

Ramon was there. Standing before her.

She had known he would be back. She had not left him in his Mithridates to die and because of that, she had known he would return. He had obviously waited for a bit, collecting himself and his powers. The tight grip on her pen made Natalie’s knuckles go white.

“I study English at Sunflower Lake University and as I have to make a living somehow, I thought I’d try my hand at teaching.” Ramon smiled – *smiled* – and the girls in the class giggled, obviously thinking him quite handsome.

Natalie just saw a murderer.

The boy sitting next to Natalie shot her worried looks, as she continued to attempt to take deep, steadying breaths. She ignored him and kept her eyes glued on Ramon.

The more power she collected, the better.

She wondered what his plan could be this time. Why had he dressed so casually? Where was the jewelry he had worn and where had he hid the necklace? He could pass for a regular person now.

Natalie knew better.

She wished for Cecily to be there, though there she could not possibly do anything. Cecily did not have any powers, other than the occasional premonition, and that would not help now. Ramon stood right there, frighteningly real.

Suddenly she realized that more than the boy next to her was looking at her weirdly. The whole class stared at her – as did Ramon.

“Miss—” he said and looked at the seating charts, “—Winters, are you all right?”

He walked towards her and held out his hand to her.

“Don’t touch me!” yelled Natalie.

She stood from her desk and backed away quickly.

Ramon looked at her. Had she not known his true identity, she would have thought it was concern in his eyes. Ramon, feeling concerned for her? That was rich.

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“Don’t touch me,” she hissed again, taking another step back.

She did not want to do magic, not in front of the whole class. They would think her a freak and she did not want to deal with that, or their questions. She had dealt with enough of their stares and whispers over the last few weeks, and the pitying looks they had sent her way. They did not need more to talk about, to giggle at behind her back.

“Miss Winters, perhaps you’d better go see the school nurse?” said Ramon. He made a good actor, Natalie thought. Ramon glanced at the seating chart again. “Mr. Davis, could you possibly go with her?”

Natalie barely heard. She was backed into the wall now and her hand touched her necklace – she would strike if he moved again. She hissed, “You won’t kill me like you did her!”

“Miss Winters, what are you talking about?”

Ramon looked utterly confused, taking another step towards her. The image of him looking equally confused, lying on the floor of his Mithridates as it came crashing down around them, flashed before Natalie’s eyes, but she pushed it away. He was playing her, though she did not understand the game. His skills far outdid hers anyway.

“I haven’t done anything to anyone,” Ramon said.

He tried to be gentle, he tried to lull her into some false sense of security. She would not fall for it, for this new plan. Had he a new Mithridates now? A new place to sacrifice her and bring forth Chaos?

Natalie could feel her own Chaos simmering in the panic rising within her but it would not come forth. She feared it, fighting it at the same time as she wished for it to take over, to make Ramon go away with the help of its power.

He raised his hand.

Natalie did not know what he was going to do but she felt certain he would hurt her, like he had hurt Ava.

Like he had killed Ava.

With a cry of anguish, Natalie released the power she had been holding onto. The flash was brief – Ramon stood quite close to her, and the magic smashed into him immediately. It felled him and he landed on his back, crashing down on the ground and into the chairs and desks of the students around them. He was writhing in pain and Natalie wondered dimly what kind of magic she had created this time.

The shouts of her classmates echoed around her, farther and farther away. They all moved, in slow-motion, calls passing over her head, someone asking her if she was all right. She did not answer. Ramon thrashed as the magic hurt him and Natalie could not take her eyes off him. Was it over? Would he die now?

Ramon stilled on the floor.

Had she killed him?

She sank to the floor as others rushed into the room. A part of her brain identified them as medical personnel but it did not really register. It was all too much.

Someone called her name but she could not find it in her to answer. The world became a dizzying swirl of colors and sounds and she could not quite make sense of any of them.

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Ever so briefly, she saw a red color that reminded her of Ava's red hair. It was enough for her mind to shut down and for blessed darkness to take over.

2.

She stood atop a mountain, looking down over a valley that shifted in browns and green. It looked as though it had not rained there in a long time and what little vegetation in existence seemed burned by the scorching sun above. It was not particularly beautiful yet it still not ugly either.

Natalie wondered why she had come there – and then she wondered where ‘there’ was. She suspected it might be a dream but she could not quite tell. It did not feel like just any dream – she could feel the heat of the sun against her skin and the dry air. It felt real and little like a dream. She could even feel the sand slipping into her shoes – that did not happen in regular dreams, did it?

Vaguely, she recalled Ramon – he had stood before her a moment ago, had he not? Where was he now? Was this a trick of his?

“Hello.”

Natalie turned around. Briefly, she wondered if she should be scared. The place did not frighten her and it did not have the qualities of a nightmare, but perhaps it would get worse. Had she used magic to come here? No, it did not feel quite right. But neither did the thought of this being a dream.

A figure stood before her, at a distance. Natalie had to call the figure ‘it’, for it dressed in long, dark robes and where the face ought to have been, nothing but a blur beneath the hood could be seen. The figure had no shape that Natalie could use to determine if it was male or female – even its hands were covered.

“Hi,” said Natalie, frowning.

They stared at each other for several long moments. Or rather, Natalie stared – without eyes, she could not tell if the figure stared back at her or not.

“Who are you? Where are we?”

“Always inquisitive,” said the figure calmly.

Natalie could not tell its gender from the voice – melodic yet deep, female and male at the same time. It sounded a bit as though it was part of a song.

“When I don’t know where I am or who I’m talking to, yes, I tend to be.”

Had the creature before her brought her there? Where was ‘there’? It looked like no place Natalie had ever been before. Beyond the bare valley were more mountains, fading off into the distance, and a clear blue sky hung overhead.

The figure asked, “Do you still wish to help your friend?”

“My friend?”

“Cecily.”

“How do you know of Cecily?” asked Natalie.

Could this be a dream after all? If so, then any creature she would talk to would know everything that she knew, right? They would simply be part of her imagination. But again, it did not feel right. This was no ordinary dream.

“We’ve talked before, Natalie, though not in this forum.”

Natalie merely stared at it before finally saying to the figure, “You’ll have to be a bit more specific than that, I think. I talk to a lot of people. Though I usually can see their faces.”

She did not care that her tone of voice was not the most pleasant – this figure before her annoyed her with its silly way of talking.

The figure shook its head. “Not the way you talk to me.”

A pearl of sweat from the heat of the sun made its way down Natalie’s cheek. She frowned at the figure. She had never seen anything like it and she felt, of course, quite certain that she had never talked to it before. She squinted her eyes, trying to make out a face in the dark blur beneath the hood. She failed.

“You will not be able to see me.”

The way the figure spoke reminded Natalie of something. Not the voice – the voice sounded unlike anything Natalie had ever heard before – but the words and the short sentences that did not quite make sense. Always riddles, always—

Natalie’s eyes widened. It could not be.

“*You’re* the ghost writer?”

“Yes.”

There was slight amusement in the one word the figure uttered.

Perhaps the term ‘ghost writer’ was more accurate than Natalie had first realized. The figure before her certainly seemed anything but corporeal – perhaps there ghosts actually existed. Could the figure be controlling her dream? But then, how would it do that? It seemed impossible.

A small voice in the back of her head said that her own visit in Cecily’s dream was equally impossible. In fact, a bunch of things that had happened recently ought to be deemed impossible and yet they had happened. Natalie did not know what to make of it all, so she ignored it.

The figure repeated its question, tugging Natalie from her thoughts.

“Do you still wish to help your friend?”

“Of course I do,” said Natalie.

The figure said nothing for a while. Natalie wondered if the figure had eyes – it certainly felt as though it studied her. She did not appreciate it but if the figure had information on how she could help Cecily, then she would undergo the scrutiny. Besides, she reminded herself, she had no idea of how she had traveled to the place and as such, she did not know how to leave.

She wiped away the sweat drop nervously.

“Very well,” the figure finally said. “There is a stone, the Nebula Medeor, that could help her.”

“The Nebula wha-huh?” Natalie repeated.

“The Nebula Medeor,” repeated the figure. “It is a very powerful stone that has not been used for centuries.”

“Why?”

Natalie’s heart beat quickly. Could there be a way to get Cecily completely well? There were few things Natalie wanted more than to see Cecily healthy.

The figure did not answer her question.

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“Come,” it said. “I have something to show you. Look to the sun.”

The figure lifted a glove-clad hand towards the sun as though about to touch it. Natalie did as told and looked into the bright light of the sun.

Natalie did not understand – show her? What? The stone? If so easy to find, why had she not already heard of it? Why had no one used it for centuries? Why had not Cecily, who was more well-versed in the world of Wielders than Natalie? If a stone with enough power to heal Cecily existed, then it should be found and used.

Natalie’s head swirled with questions.

She wondered again where she was and how she had gotten there. Then the sun’s bright light blinded her and surrounded her, all at once.

Her surroundings changed completely. The hot sun disappeared as well as the valley and the sand, and instead, she stood in what looked like – a village of the fifteenth century? Small houses made of clay, with roofs made of some sort of dry grass, lined a dusty, dirty walkway. The houses were very simple and quite tiny. Without going into one to check, Natalie would have to guess that they only held one room.

The sun had just started to make its journey up on the horizon. It appeared to be quite early in the morning. Only a few birds, flying across the skies, disturbed the peace with their song. Natalie breathed in. She had never inhaled such clean air – it felt amazing. The temperature was only a bit chilly and Natalie would have liked an extra sweater.

Just then, a woman emerged from one of the little houses.

She wore a long dress with an apron, her brown hair pulled back. The colors and style of her outfit suggested that Natalie had not been far off in her assumption of what century this was. She appeared to speak French, but Natalie had no problem understanding it, for some reason.

The woman appeared to be only a few years older than Natalie, and about the same height.

She looked around the village, checking to see if anyone had noticed that they were leaving. She appeared a bit anxious. When she did not spot Natalie, Natalie frowned – she stood right in the middle of the so-called street, after all. Was she invisible to the woman?

Two other women, one possibly Natalie’s age and the other about the same age as the first, exited the house. Natalie wondered how many lived in there. The thought did not bother her for long, for far more burning felt the question of why she had been brought here. Was she still dreaming? The clear air in her lungs suggested otherwise – it felt very real – but how had she gotten here if not through a dream? The level of detail here was far greater than any other dream Natalie had ever had, that was for sure.

With a gasp, Natalie noted that she moved even though she was not walking. It felt like she flew over the grass. A gentle breeze swept through her hair.

The three women still walked straight ahead of her. They looked around every now and then, perhaps to see if anyone was following them or perhaps to keep a look-out for wild animals. Natalie did not know which one. By now she had, however, deduced that the women could not

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see her. They had looked her way several times. Natalie could only assume that she was there to watch them – nothing else made sense. Of course, Natalie felt unsure of whether anything about this made sense.

“Merely a bit further,” said the woman who had exited the house first. Natalie thought she was the oldest as her behavior made it seem that way.

“Good, for the sun is rising,” the youngest one said and glanced at the sun. “The herbs will not be of much use after noon, sister.”

So they were sisters, then. They did look alike.

They climbed a hill and Natalie followed at the same distance she had been the entire time. She started feeling oddly comfortable in this strange world, with the flying and the beautiful scenery. Around them, green fields untouched by human hands stretched on and on. Here and there, scattered by nature’s hand, stood trees and bushes. In the distance, Natalie could make out animals, possibly deer, calmly eating grass to their hearts’ content.

“We are here,” the oldest sister said a moment later.

A wide smile spread on the youngest one’s face. She hurried to a set of bushes to her right. She had not braided her hair like her sisters and it flew free in the wind. She was a beautiful girl. She kneeled by the second bush and began picking out leaves and branches, placing the ones she deemed good enough in her apron as she went.

The other two sisters calmly went to work on a tree on the other side. It hung heavy with some sort of fruit and the sisters plucked it gently. They also gathered some of the tree’s leaves.

They moved around the area for several hours, working their way around bushes with oddly shaped berries and beautiful flowers that Natalie had not seen before and placing bits and pieces of bark in their aprons. Natalie wondered what they needed it for – and even more, she wondered why she watched girls of several centuries ago as they collected beautiful but boring leaves? She wondered where the robe-clad figure of her previous dream – or whatever this was – had disappeared to.

Suddenly, the youngest sister gasped. “Oh!”

The other two turned their heads to her. “Sandrine? How are you feeling, sister?”

Sandrine’s blonde head became visible beyond one of the bushes. “I am well – but I laid eyes upon—”

As the two sisters drew nearer, their curiousness getting the better of them, Natalie was also taken closer to the youngest.

“Oh my,” said the oldest sister. “That is truly magnificent.”

Natalie leaned over their shoulders to see. She too had to gasp when she saw it.

A beautiful, oval-shaped stone lay in Sandrine’s hand. It nearly filled her palm and it shone brighter than any stone Natalie had ever seen, glimmering in pearly white and dark black, lines passing over the stone in an irregular pattern. Natalie could make out the other girls’ reflections in the stone, though not her own. She wondered, but did not let her thoughts linger too long on it. Instead, she looked upon the stone.

With sudden clarity, Natalie realized this stone to be the reason she had been taken here. Power emanated from it – power unlike any Natalie had felt in her brief time since becoming a Novus. It was different. It seemed to be based on something else, something unlike the magic Natalie had performed and where that had been drawn from.

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It almost seemed to have a life of its own, Natalie thought.

Still, though she had now realized why she was here, she still did not know the bigger why. If she assumed correctly about what time they were in, this scene had taken place five hundred years ago. Even if she was completely off in her judgment, it had still happened at least a century ago, if it had happened at all. What did it matter to her? Why had she been taken to see this scene? What was the purpose?

“I have decided to keep it as my own,” the youngest sister said.

Neither the middle or older sister seemed to mind. They both appeared quite interested in the black stone. The middle sister – who had hair the same color as the youngest one, but was a bit heavier set with rougher features – even smiled.

Another breeze swept past them. The oldest sister shook her head.

“It would appear I lost myself for a moment,” she said softly. “We need to return to the village.”

The other sisters agreed but all three seemed strangely reluctant to stand and go. They all looked upon the black stone. Natalie’s eyes rested upon it as well – for some reason, it felt like it should not be left out of sight.

However, as the girls stood up to make the trek back to their village, the world around Natalie started to fade. Darkness swept in from all sides. The women were leaving, walking away from her, but somehow, Natalie could still sense the stone in Sandrine’s hand.

The last thing she saw before darkness erased the world around her was Sandrine clutching the stone close to her heart.

3.

The nurse informed her that she had been out for nearly half an hour, before she asked how she felt. Natalie had not been awake long enough to be able to tell but mumbled, “Okay,” and the nurse seemed to accept that.

She had been taken to the hospital, she realized as she sat up. She did not like it. The Sunflower Lake Hospital already held too many bad memories for Natalie and she did not want any more.

The dream she had been in came back to her in bits and pieces. She recalled the hot sun and the sand beneath her feet and a hooded figure that spoke in riddles. Then—a village? Natalie could not be sure. Three women, walking, wearing dresses. In the end, a black stone that shone in the bright morning.

Natalie shook her head to clear it, trying to make sense of it. It felt like she was missing something, something just out of reach. She pushed it out of her mind – Ramon was more important at the moment. In fact, he made for a very great concern for her.

Natalie’s bare feet felt cold against the floor as she gingerly stood.

She bit her lip. “Ramon—I mean, Mr. Keys. Is he all right?”

The nurse shook her head, a crease appearing between her eyebrows.

“Had a heart attack, the poor man did,” said the nurse. “Doctors can’t explain it – he’s young and healthy.”

“But is he still alive?”

She could not decide what she wanted for an answer. If he had died, then she had killed a person – another human being. She would be a murderer, no better than him. Though unlikely that anyone else would realize that it had been her because she had not so much as touched him, she would always know. She would always be aware of what she had done.

If he lived, then what? Would he try to kill her? Would he try to kill her friends? She did not understand what he was up to. Why had not he deflected the magic she had sent his way? It had been sudden, yes, but it should have been easy to avert for a Master Wielder such as himself. She was still a mere student in the arts of Wielding, a simple Novus.

Her thoughts raced a mile a minute and she nearly managed to work herself into hysterics in the few seconds before the nurse replied.

“Last I heard, he was doing better down in the ICU.”

Natalie let out a breath she had not realized she had been holding.

He was alive.

Ramon was alive.

She did not know whether to be relieved or not at the fact that Ramon had not died, but she felt very thankful that she had not killed anyone.

The nurse left and Natalie walked slowly to the doorway. She felt weak. Unsurprisingly, the burst of magic she had cursed Ramon with had left her drained. She mostly wanted to go lie down again but the urge to see Ramon was stronger.

She knew her way around the hospital these days. Even in the short time she had known Cecily, Natalie had already come with her several times. So she made her way down the corridor to the elevator and waited impatiently for it to come. She realized as she stood there that she had left her shoes back in the room she had been before and as such, she stood barefoot, but she decided it did not matter. She supposed the nurses would force her back into bed once they realized she had left. After all, she had been unconscious for quite a while.

Nurses, doctors and patients filled the first floor as always. Though a small city, there seemed to be enough sick and injured people to fill it. The intensive care unit was less crowded, its patients each having their own rooms with glass doors to see through. It did not take long for Natalie to locate Ramon.

She thought he looked a bit like Cecily had, when she had been comatose mere weeks ago – back when Ava had still been alive, before their fight with Ramon.

He looked anything but dangerous now. Lines went into his hand and one sat stuck under his nose. He looked far too pale. The machines around him beeped steadily as she pushed the door open and entered.

To her great surprise, Ramon's eyes fluttered open. They locked on Natalie's frightened ones immediately, as she stood right in front of the bed. Her hands gripped the wooden end of his bed.

Why had she come here?

“Miss Winters.”

Ramon's voice was raspy and weak. He did not sound any better than Natalie felt, but Natalie steeled herself in case he was acting. Still, the rational part of her did not understand why, or how, anyone could ‘act’ a heart attack – at least not one that fooled the doctors.

“Are you feeling better now?”

It was Ramon who asked the question, not the other way around. The honesty in his voice took Natalie by surprise – he truly wondered how she felt.

Perhaps it was not an act. Perhaps the confusion had been real, perhaps he did not know who she was or that he had murdered her best friend. Perhaps he had an evil twin – though why would they share the same name? – or perhaps he simply did not remember, though she could not figure out why he would not. All she knew was that when she came back from giving into Chaos in Ramon's Mithridates, he had looked very confused.

Finally, Natalie asked softly, “Don't you remember me?”

Ramon cocked his head slightly to the side. “Why, of course I do. You were in my class earlier, Miss Winters. Though you seemed to have me confused with someone else.”

Natalie did not take her eyes off him as she shook her head. “No, sir, I don't think I do. And you should know me, but not only from class. You've met me before and you—you killed my best friend.”

It was some accusation to come with, to say that another person had committed murder. Natalie stared at Ramon for any sign of recognition, any gleam of knowledge in his eyes. She had her body wound as tightly as it possibly could be, ready to bolt if it all turned out to be an act.

But she found no recognition in his eyes.

He stared back at her, mouth hanging open. Then he finally sputtered, “What? Murd—me? Are you crazy?”

“Yes, possibly,” muttered Natalie.

How could he not remember? Natalie remembered it far too clearly – she wished she could erase it. The resounding crack of Ava’s skull against the wall, the pit of darkness within herself that was Chaos, the mad, cackling laughter of Ramon.

Ramon’s pulse quickened and he lay back, seeming exhausted from the short but intense conversation. A nurse came into the room, checking the monitors and telling ‘Mr. Keys’ to calm down, it was not good for his health.

Natalie backed out of the room slowly, eyes still on Ramon. She knew the nurses would ask her to leave anyway. She would not get to speak more to Ramon and she felt uncertain of if she even wanted to speak to him any more. A doctor hurried past her, apparently Ramon was having breathing difficulties.

Natalie turned and ran.

She did not stop until she reached the front doors and a cool outside breeze swept past her. It ruffled her hair and sent chills down Natalie’s spine. Something was coming. Really, something had already come. Ramon had already come.

Her bare feet felt cold against the concrete but she could not bring herself to go back in just yet.

What did it mean? Who was he? Would he try to raise Chaos again? Why did he stay in the hospital? Why had he not fought back and protected himself against the surge of magic she had sent his way?

Another breeze swept past.

After a few minutes, Natalie had calmed her quickly beating heart. She sat down on the concrete and sighed to herself. She needed to get a grip.

Suddenly, someone dropped down next to her. At first, Natalie ignored him but she felt his eyes on her and finally looked up, ready to deliver a scathing line. She stopped dead and stared before breaking out into a smile.

“Butler Thomas!” she exclaimed.

“Yes, quite.”

Natalie searched his eyes briefly, and then looked to the man’s chest to look for a magical necklace, to make sure that this was really butler Thomas and no one else. She did not want to be abducted again. She found nothing strange about the man. He wore his regular grey suit and his eyes were a calm blue. His hair had his grey hair parted straight down the middle and not a single strand laid the wrong way.

“Your grandmother wishes to see you,” the butler said.

Natalie’s smile vanished. She still felt unsure of what to make of her grandmother and the words of butler Thomas did not necessarily bode well.

“Now?” asked Natalie.

“Don’t look so frightened,” said butler Thomas, as though reading her mind. “Madame isn’t that angry.”

The fact that she was angry at all made Natalie rather hesitant to go with the butler but she assumed she would have to see her grandmother sooner or later.

“Now, we should get going,” butler Thomas said.

“But—I’m supposed to be in school.”

“And yet you are here.”

Natalie blushed. “Yes, well, there was a thing—an accident of sorts.”

Butler Thomas raised an eyebrow. “I’m sure the school will understand that a student who has been unconscious needs to go home and rest afterwards.”

She wondered how he knew about that. His reasoning seemed logical, though she doubted the school would be as logical about it.

“I just—” said Natalie indecisively.

Butler Thomas placed a hand upon her shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, Miss Natalie. If Madame wishes to see you, I am certain she will also see to it that your school will not punish you for your absence.”

Natalie bit her lip and looked down at her bare feet. She had run out of excuses, she realized. She did not know why she did not want to see her grandmother, but she did not. Perhaps it had something to do with the tone of voice butler Thomas used when he had told her – “*Your grandmother wishes to see you.*”

“My shoes are inside,” Natalie said finally.

“I’m sure you can come get them later,” said the butler. He stood, surprisingly agile for a man of his age. Though Natalie realized, she did not really know his age at all.

The carriage waited for them on one of the smaller streets just a block away. Natalie wondered why no one had discovered it – sure, it was one of the less populated streets but people always moved about in Lake Sunflower and they ought to notice something as big as the carriage. She guessed it had to do with magic. Natalie glanced at butler Thomas, but decided not to ask him about it – he did not seem the type to enjoy playing twenty questions.

Minutes later, they were on their way. Natalie sat comfortably against the cushions that filled the carriage and she fought the urge to sleep that the magic stones swept over her. It did not work and before she knew it, she had fallen asleep.

It felt like mere moments had passed when Natalie awoke. Butler Thomas had opened the door to the carriage and the fresh air roused Natalie quickly. She climbed out of the carriage carefully and then turned to face her grandmother.

“Hello,” Natalie said. She eyed her grandmother gingerly, wondering about her mood.

“Good afternoon, Natalie,” said her grandmother, speaking in clipped tones that were as crisp as the air around them.

Natalie held back a sigh – this did not bode for a fun afternoon.

“Walk with me, Natalie.”

“Yes, grandmother,” said Natalie.

She had obviously done something wrong – something to anger her grandmother. Considering the timing, she rather suspected it had to do with Ramon. She thought briefly of what it would have been like to have a warm, loving grandmother who awaited her arrival with open arms. It did not seem likely that this relationship would ever evolve to that.

They passed through the house, out into the backyard and down the stairs that led into the great forest. Its beauty still took Natalie’s breath away – the forest simply continued on and on, into

the horizon. Natalie wondered about this place, this separate reality. How did it work? How could they travel between realities? Were there other realities than this one and the regular world?

Natalie did not feel the least bit surprised when her grandmother led them to her Mithridates. The grass still stood green but the leaves of the trees around the clearing had begun to turn red, marking fall's quick approach.

Natalie's grandmother turned and faced her.

"Tell me what happened today."

Natalie knew there would be no point in pretending she did not know what her grandmother spoke of. It would only forestall the inevitable.

Quietly, without meeting her grandmother's eyes, Natalie told the story of Ramon's sudden and unexpected reappearance in her life. It hurt just to say his name – images of his mad eyes flashed before her together with pictures of Ava. Yet when she thought about it, she could not quite piece the two images together – the one of Ramon in his Mithridates and the one of Ramon in the classroom. The latter lacked in madness. Ramon in the classroom, and in the hospital, had been sane and even kind. It was like the person she had faced off with in the Mithridates had been his evil twin.

Natalie sighed as she finished, ending with butler Thomas' appearance outside the hospital.

"I don't know what happened, grandmother," Natalie said softly. "It was him, I swear. But he didn't recognize me. It was like he had absolutely no idea of who I was."

Her grandmother looked down her nose at Natalie. Her expression softened, but only a little, and she sighed.

"At least I will not have to start by lecturing you on the ground rules of Wielding. You don't seem to have done this on purpose."

"Ground rules of Wielding?" echoed Natalie.

"*Do not use your powers to harm another*," her grandmother recited.

Natalie shook her head. "I was scared. I only wanted to hurt him because I was scared. I thought he was back to kill me."

"I do not believe that Ramon – Mr. Keys – will try to kill you again."

Natalie looked up sharply. "What?"

"I said, I don't think he will try to kill you again," repeated her grandmother. "I don't believe it was his doing at all to begin with."

"What are you talking about?" asked Natalie. "Of course it was him!"

Her grandmother hesitated for but a moment. Then she reached into a pocket of her dress and fished something up. It glimmered in the afternoon sun.

Natalie took a few steps closer – she had been staying at a distance, a bit frightened of her grandmother's anger – to be able to see what her grandmother was holding. It was obviously some kind of jewelry.

"Do you recognize it, Natalie?" asked her grandmother and held out the trinket for Natalie to see.

Natalie did not need to gaze upon it for more than a second to identify it.

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The shiny black necklace lay comfortably in her grandmother's hand, the blood-red stone that had once adorned it cracked into a million pieces. Most of them had fallen out and only tiny shards here and there remained.

Natalie imagined she could still feel dark, evil power emanating from it – for it was Ramon's necklace.

4.

“Where—where did you get that?”

Natalie stared at the necklace – that thing of evil – then up at her grandmother. Her mind took her back to Ramon’s Mithridates, when she had been in that dark place where Chaos controlled her, if only for a brief period of time. She vaguely remembered a burst of magic shattering the stone on Ramon’s necklace.

She could also clearly remember Ramon’s confused eyes upon her when she had fought back Chaos.

“I found it here, in my Mithridates,” her grandmother said. “It seems I might have been wrong about your abilities – that you did, after all, travel with Mr. Keys back to my Mithridates. If this is indeed his necklace—”

“It is,” Natalie said.

“—then I see no other explanation,” finished her grandmother with a look that clearly said what she thought of being interrupted. Natalie’s cheeks turned red.

For a minute, both were silent. Natalie studied the necklace but did not dare touch it. She could feel her grandmother’s eyes upon her. A chill ran down her spine. Was she really safe now? Had the necklace lost its powers?

“Could it?” Natalie whispered. “Could a stone control another person?”

She did not know what it would mean if it could. In her eyes, Ramon would still be guilty of murdering her best friend – but perhaps she could, in time, forgive him? She could not be sure. Would it be better to blame a necklace, a stone, of murder, rather than a person? It almost felt silly.

She looked up into the unreadable eyes of her grandmother.

“Not the stone itself,” her grandmother said. “But there is magic – magic to trap a part of one’s soul, or all of it upon death, inside a stone. The essence of the person will then live on within the stone and it will, if strong enough, control the wearer of the stone.”

Natalie swallowed. Sometimes, she really did not like magic.

“Why would anyone do that?” she asked softly.

Her grandmother sighed and placed the necklace back in her pocket. “Some want to live forever.”

Natalie shuddered at this. She could not imagine why anyone would do such a thing – she did not want to live forever and she certainly did not want to trap herself, her soul, inside a stone.

Natalie glanced at the pocket in which the necklace now lay once more.

“Does it still work?” she asked. “Is there still a part of the soul in that stone?”

“No, the stone has been broken and the essence has been released. There is nothing there now but shards of stone, for the essence drains the stone’s energy.”

“Oh,” Natalie said. “How did you know it was Ramon’s?”

Her grandmother hesitated before answering. “I saw him. He wore it when he kidnapped you.”

Natalie had to smile slightly at the memory of her grandmother slamming the doors open to Ramon's Mithridates and rescuing Natalie. It had been quite the entrance.

"Now," said her grandmother, "there are other things we need to discuss."

Natalie glanced questioningly up at her grandmother, but did not say anything.

"Though lecturing you on the ground rules of Wielders was not the first thing I needed to do," her grandmother said, "it is still on the agenda. This seems as good a time as any for you to start – you are supposed to be in school after all. This will merely be a different kind of school."

Natalie refrained from making a face. School in her grandmother's Mithridates should, after all, be better than classes at Lake Sunflower High School.

"You are a beginner in magic, in Wielding," her grandmother continued. "You are what we call a Novus because though you do, undoubtedly, have quite some power, you still don't know how to Wield it."

Natalie wondered if she should tell her grandmother about the spell she had cast on her classmates, but decided against it. Her grandmother would just frown at her and tell her not to do such things – surely, that sort of magic fell within the category of 'harming another', even though it had been well deserved.

"As I have never been particularly patient, I have never made a good teacher," her grandmother said, with a slight roll of her eyes. "So I have taken the liberty of bringing a Diophane here for you."

"A Dio-wha-huh?"

Her grandmother sent her a disapproving look. "A Diophane. A Diophane is a Master Wielder who teaches magic to Novus and Wielders. Helps them develop their powers, teach them how to use their skills the best way possible, to whatever extent that is. Many teach meditation techniques to get in touch with the inner powers and to connect with nature's magic."

"Right," said Natalie, trying to keep the different titles and strange names straight.

"Diophane McCoy is a special kind of Diophane," her grandmother continued. "She is, despite her age, already one of the most highly trained Diophanes in the world. She reached her own Master title at age fourteen, one of the youngest in history, and she has dedicated her life to studying magic and training others. But she doesn't just teach any Wielder, she—" Natalie's grandmother stopped in mid-sentence and smiled, pleased. "Ah, there you are."

Natalie wondered who her grandmother spoke to. She turned around – and found a woman standing by one of the trees. Natalie felt rather certain that the woman had *not* been standing there the entire time and as such, she could only assume that she had used magic to get there. As one of the few things Natalie felt she could control somewhat, the transportation magic no longer felt all that foreign to her.

Her grandmother passed her and walked towards the redheaded, tall woman. Her clothes did not match Natalie's grandmother's at all. The woman wore modern, businesslike attire – pants and a sober, clean cut jacket, all in black.

"Natalie, come along," said her grandmother, giving Natalie a slightly annoyed look over her shoulder.

Natalie hurried to catch up.

They stopped before the woman. Natalie gazed at her; she was beautiful. Her long hair reached down nearly to the small of her back, falling in gentle waves. Her eyes were intensely green.

“Natalie, meet Diophane McCoy,” Natalie’s grandmother said.

Natalie reached out her hand to the woman. “Hi, I’m Natalie Winters.”

Diophane McCoy looked down at her. She stood nearly a head taller than Natalie in her high heels. However, not only her height made Natalie want to cower. While Diophane McCoy looked only thirty-something, she radiated knowledge and wisdom beyond her years.

“Mina McCoy, but you will call me Diophane McCoy,” the woman said with a smooth voice that held authority.

Natalie nodded quickly.

Her grandmother spoke. “I think it’s safe to call Natalie a Wielder by now – she has done magic that far surpasses that of a Novus.”

Natalie would have liked the tone of her grandmother’s voice to be a bit more proud. Obviously, this conversation was supposed to pass over Natalie’s head and although she happened to be the subject, she would not be allowed to interrupt.

“What magic has she done?” asked Diophane McCoy.

“Transportation magic – with another person – and she has managed to survive the attacks of a Master Wielder twice,” said Natalie’s grandmother.

The very first time, when Ramon had kidnapped her obviously did not count – Natalie had not done anything at the time but scream and beg. It did not quite count in the toll on whether to be titled a Novus or a Wielder.

“The latter can be purely accidental,” Diophane McCoy said, “but the former is usually not. I shall have to test her to see what she has to offer and then I will decide whether to train her or not.”

Natalie did not think it a good idea to tell the Diophane or her grandmother that she had done more than just survive the attacks of Ramon – she had made his Mithridates fall apart. Natalie did not know all that much about magic and Mithridates, but she would be willing to bet quite a bit that making a Mithridates fall into a million pieces was not something easily done – nor something that would be an appreciated skill.

She had not told anyone but Cecily about Chaos and how she had brought down the Mithridates with its power. It did not seem like something her grandmother would be happy about. It had been too dark, too frightening. The raw power she had held had scared Natalie.

“Do what you need to,” said Natalie’s grandmother.

Natalie resisted the urge to ask what kind of tests she would have to go through. She felt certain she would find out in time and she did not know if she wanted to know beforehand, if the tests were something she should be nervous about.

Diophane McCoy gave a curt nod. “I will be back at four p.m. sharp.”

Natalie’s grandmother nodded as well. “She will be ready.”

Natalie supposed she would be staying here for the afternoon. This made her realize that she needed to get a message to her uncle Richard. If he had found out that she had been taken to the hospital – a rather likely scenario, since he was her next of kin – he would probably be worried to pieces by now.

“Good,” said the Diophane. Then she touched her necklace briefly and, in a sudden burst of wind, she disappeared.

Natalie stared for only a moment. She had seen it once before, when Ramon had kidnapped Ava, but at the time, she had been distressed enough to not really take it in at all.

She turned to her grandmother. “I need to tell Richard where I am.”

“Of course,” said her grandmother and began walking back towards the house. “You’ll have to write a letter and I’ll have Maya run it over to your house.”

“Maya?” asked Natalie. She could not recall meeting anyone named Maya. Then again, she probably had not met all of her grandmother’s friends and staff.

“Maya is one of the wood elves,” her grandmother said, “They help me run errands into the other world sometimes. They’re very fast runners.”

She spoke as though a wood elf running errands was the most natural thing in the world. Frowning, Natalie thought that perhaps it *was* the most natural thing in the world in this place. Her eyebrows rose at the thought of little flying elves running about in the regular world.

“But—don’t people wonder about them?” asked Natalie,

Her grandmother actually laughed as she started climbing the stairs. “Of course not! For one, they’re very careful to stay hidden, but really, that isn’t necessary. The majority of humans can’t see them at all.”

“Why?” Natalie asked.

Natalie’s grandmother stopped and turned. “Have you ever seen an elf? Or a Pegasus? Or a unicorn?”

Natalie’s eyes were wide. “No.”

“That’s not because they don’t exist, my dear,” her grandmother said. “They exists – in the forest behind us and in the world that you live in. Never doubt that. But the reason you can’t see them is simple – humans cannot see beings that are magical. Only other magical beings can see each other. There are exceptions of course, but that’s the general rule.”

Her grandmother sighed suddenly. “That was more than I had planned to tell you just yet. There is a lot to magic and the rules that it follows and you have yet to even grace the surface of understanding.”

Her words were not harsh, merely honest. Natalie knew it to be true – she knew hardly anything about magic. Even now, Cecily knew more about it than she did.

She asked softly, “But – if I may ask – can you see them, then?”

Her grandmother nodded. “Yes. And so can you, now that you have been awoken.”

Natalie had to smile. She would see unicorns? Elves? It sounded fantastic.

Her grandmother could read her thoughts from the smile on her face. “I have to warn you, though – they do stay out of sight. Angels are very rarely seen in your world or mine at all as they prefer to stay invisible, and the winged horses like to keep to deep forests. If you haven’t seen anything up until now, that is why.”

Natalie shrugged, still grinning. “Perhaps I’ll get to see them, perhaps I won’t. I’m sure that if I ever get to meet an angel, it will be worth the wait.”

Her grandmother smiled and began climbing the stairs again. “Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves,” she said. “Let’s concentrate on Diophane McCoy’s test first.”

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Natalie did not appreciate the sound of that. Her grandmother's tone of voice suggested that Natalie ought to be nervous.

Back in the house, the rather round woman that always served them food, showed them to the dining room. Natalie had not been in the dining room before – it was beautiful. A large wooden table with eight chairs, four on each side, filled the room and on the walls hung paintings and mirrors with ornate borders. A chandelier hung from the ceiling. On the opposite side from the entrance was a large window that overlooked another part of the surrounding forest than the living room did.

The table had already been set with plates for two, and beneath silver covers their dinner waited for them. Upon taking in the delicious scent of fresh potatoes, vegetables and meat, Natalie realized her own hunger. She had not eaten since breakfast. Although Natalie did not wear a watch, she suspected that dinner would not last too long, as the time probably already neared four p.m.

Butler Thomas entered the room, dressed immaculately in his dark, but not quite fashionable, suit.

“Have a seat,” said her grandmother to Natalie and gestured towards the table.

Butler Thomas walked before her and pulled out the chair to her seat. Natalie thanked him and sat down.

Dinner was delectable but quiet. Her grandmother seemed to be deep in thought on other matters and Natalie did not want to interrupt her, so she kept silent. As Natalie took her second portion, butler Thomas came in with a piece of paper and a pencil, and asked her to write to her uncle so that he would not worry. She wrote him a short note and gave it back to the butler.

“Do you have any questions before we go meet the Diophane?” asked her grandmother after Natalie had inhaled her second portion of meat and potatoes, finally feeling full.

Natalie did not know what to answer. She had no idea what she would be doing, so how could she ask about it?

“Don't worry too much about the tests,” said her grandmother. “A person either has it or she doesn't. If you don't, you could never fool Diophane McCoy and if you do, she will see it. And the fact that you survived not once but twice against Master Wielder Ramon, suggests that you are definitely a Wielder that she should train.”

Natalie realized suddenly what her grandmother was saying and what she had been about to explain earlier. Diophane McCoy did not train just any Novus or Wielders – she hand-picked the Wielders she believed could one day reach Master status.

5.

Diophane McCoy awaited them in the living room when Natalie and her grandmother had finished dinner. She stood straight, not leaning towards anything, and Natalie suspected that even if they had kept the Diophane waiting for hours, she would still not have slouched. Then again, Diophane McCoy did not seem to be the kind of person one kept waiting.

She eyed Natalie critically. She would certainly have a hard time impressing this woman, Natalie thought, and she likely did not take new students very often. If her grandmother had not stood right next to her, Natalie might have tried to run away from the stare. As it was, she tried to meet it squarely without flinching.

“Bring something warm,” said Diophane McCoy to Natalie. “We will be outside for a while and it might get cold.”

Natalie barely dared to nod – she merely grabbed her shawl and hurried back.

“We will be back after nightfall,” the Diophane continued, now speaking to Natalie’s grandmother.

Her grandmother nodded. She looked rather pleased that Diophane McCoy was considering her granddaughter as a possible student. Natalie held back a smile at this – perhaps she could make her grandmother proud after all.

“Good luck,” said Natalie’s grandmother to her granddaughter.

Natalie smiled nervously. Then they walked away from her grandmother, out the glass doors that led to the porch and into the back yard.

Diophane McCoy looked down upon Natalie with a stern face. “I hope you are aware, that luck has nothing to do with this.”

Natalie did not know how to respond, so she kept silent, eyes trained on the ground. She wondered where they were going, when Diophane McCoy stopped suddenly, in the middle of the grass field.

“How good are you at transportation magic?” the Diophane asked.

Natalie did not know. Though she could control it, she did not trust her ability at the moment – she had balled her hands into fists to keep them from shaking with nervousness. It did not matter if her grandmother told her not to fret about it.

“I have done it a couple of times,” Natalie said.

The Diophane pursed her mouth. “That does not answer my question.”

“Oh,” said Natalie quietly. “Well – I think I’m okay at it.”

Diophane McCoy sighed. “Take my hand. I will transport us to the testing location.”

She held out her hand. Natalie felt like a small child, with the Diophane in the role of her angry mother. Still, she took Diophane McCoy’s hand. Almost immediately, the world around them turned into the familiar swirl of colors and shapes, as they transported away from her grandmother’s home.

The journey did not last long. Natalie stumbled as they suddenly stopped, while Diophane McCoy stood perfectly still, her hair as neat as before and not the least bit frazzled. Natalie blushed at her own clumsiness.

“Come on, we have much to do,” said Diophane McCoy and turned away from Natalie.

Natalie hurried to catch up, then followed a few steps behind the Diophane. They climbed a grass hill and when Natalie glanced behind them, she saw wide-stretching plains. Flowers, in all colors of the rainbow, grew all over the field.

They reached the top of the hill. The wind felt stronger up there and Natalie’s breath caught when she saw the beautiful view before them: the sea. It shifted in blues and grays and reds, the skies overhead reflecting in the dark water. The sun started to set beyond the clouds. Natalie took a deep breath and smelled the salt hanging in the chilly air. It calmed her somewhat.

“The tests will be performed here, where we will not be disturbed,” Diophane McCoy said. She turned her hand and a piece of paper on a board appeared out of thin air. Natalie only barely kept from gaping at the casual use of magic – Diophane McCoy did not seem to have to think about her magic at all. “Are you ready to start?”

It was not quite a question as the tone did not leave any room for any answer other than ‘yes’. Natalie nodded.

“Good. We will start by seeing if you have any strong element,” said the Diophane.

Natalie recalled her grandmother saying that her element was water – the first magic had ever witnessed had been her grandmother creating a drop of water out of nothing.

Natalie did not know what it felt like to have a strong element and she doubted that she did. There had at least never been anything that had come especially easy for her, save for the time when she had felt Chaos. She doubted that Chaos could be counted as an element.

“We will go through them one by one – water, fire, earth and air,” Diophane McCoy said. “Start with water whenever you’d like.”

Natalie nodded, trying her best not to let her apprehension show on her face.

Then she closed her eyes and tried to imagine water. She remembered her grandmother’s very first attempt to make her do magic – she had told Natalie to think of anything to do with water. Still, that had not helped, so Natalie very much doubted that her element was water, if she had one.

She drew upon the stormy sea before her, attempting to create a large ball of water. But all the while, she could feel the Diophane’s eyes upon her, judging her, and when she finally opened her eyes, she had to wince. A single drop of water, no bigger than the average rain drop, hung in the air just above Natalie’s hand.

“Not water then,” said the Diophane, eyes hard. She marked something in her notes on the paper, then demanded, “Fire.”

Natalie bit back the question of if her mother had never taught her to say ‘please’. Instead, she tried to channel her irritation into the vision of fire she was creating. She could see the fire, a warm and safe fireplace, and could almost even sense the heat it emitted.

Opening her eyes, she saw that she had fared a little better this time, but not much. The small fire that she had conjured would be big enough to keep a cat warm, but hardly anything more.

Diophane McCoy pursed her lips in displeasure again. It did not calm Natalie any. Unfortunately, she did just as badly on the two remaining tests, earth and water. For earth, she attempted to

create soil in which a pretty flower grew, but only managed to make enough dirt for a few straws of grass to grow. Finally, she wanted to do a tornado, but the one she created would hardly even have upset an ant if it had been put to the test.

“Not an elemental, it would seem,” Diophane McCoy said. She wrote something in her notes. “We will continue with reflexive magic. I will throw magic at you and you will defend yourself.”

Natalie’s eyes widened. “W-what?”

Diophane McCoy sent her a look that clearly stated that she would not be repeating herself. Natalie did not need for her to repeat her words – she had understood it the first time. She merely did not want to be a part of it.

“Move back a few steps. It will give you enough time to react to my magic,” said the Diophane. “If your grandmother told me the truth, you should be good at this.”

Natalie swallowed. She did not know what she had done back at Ramon’s Mithridates – she had just been so very angry and heart-broken after Ramon had killed Ava that it had all come naturally. The darkness, the chaotic powers – it had all seemed natural.

This did *not* seem natural.

The Diophane still stood close enough for Natalie to be able to see her face. She appeared to be completely calm, her face wiped free of emotion. Her eyes looked cold, but not evil.

Natalie’s heart nearly pounded its way out of her chest.

“Let us begin,” said the Diophane.

This time, when the Diophane did magic, she closed her eyes briefly. Natalie wondered if it was necessary for her to do so, or if it she wanted to give Natalie a little bit of extra time to react.

A ball of fire came hurtling towards her and the world slowed down. Without thinking, Natalie threw herself into a ball on the ground, squeezing her eyes shut, and wished as hard as she possibly could that she would not get hit by the fire. It did not matter that she was supposed to protect herself – she did not know how to!

A strong hand around her upper arm made her open her eyes again. Diophane McCoy stood above her, looking displeased. She did not say anything, but it her wish for Natalie to get up could not have been clearer.

Natalie did, albeit carefully. She looked around to see if the ball of fire had hit anything but it appeared it had not. Perhaps the Diophane had stopped it before it could do any damage.

The Diophane wrote something in her notes and then turned back to Natalie.

“Let’s try one more time,” she said and it was not a suggestion. “This time, do try to defend yourself.”

Natalie’s cheeks turned red again. They seemed to be doing that a lot in the Diophane’s presence, but then the Diophane was that kind of person. She made Natalie feel like a kid who could do nothing but wrong.

They put some distance between each other once more and Natalie took a deep, steadying breath. She had to try to do this right.

Diophane McCoy closed her eyes once more and when she released her magic, a ball of sparkling blue energy was flying Natalie’s way. With everything she had, Natalie resisted the urge to throw herself onto the ground again, and forced herself to think of creating a force field around herself to protect her.

The single second that it took for the sparkling ball of energy to travel from the Diophane's hand to Natalie's position seemed like an eternity. As it came closer, Natalie closed her eyes, one hand going to her necklace and holding on tight.

A moment of heat – and Natalie opened her eyes.

The ball of energy had disappeared, but the world around her looked odd. After a moment, Natalie realized that she stood within a bubble that appeared to be made of very thin, blue-tinted glass. It distorted the world outside, though only a little.

Diophane McCoy neared Natalie. Quickly, Natalie let go of her necklace and relaxed. The shield evaporated.

The Diophane looked happier this time. She did not quite smile, but her face looked less hard.

“Well done,” she said shortly, marking in her notes.

Natalie could not keep the smile off her face. Finally, she had done something right. She felt far from certain that it would be enough to become the Diophane's student, but it felt like a victory for her anyway. Besides, she did not know for certain that she *wanted* to be a student of the Diophane's. If this was the kind of tests the Diophane put her through to see if she proved to be good enough to be a student, then Natalie did not think she wanted to know what an actual student of Diophane McCoy's would be forced to do.

“I have one more test for you before we return to your grandmother's,” said Diophane McCoy. “You are to go down onto the beach and pick out one stone. You are to pick the stone that you feel holds the most power and that you feel you could do the most with. There is no time limit and no right or wrong, so take your time deciding. You may start whenever, if you don't have any questions.”

Natalie had several questions, most of them related to how she was supposed to tell if a stone was powerful or not, but as she suspected that that was the point of the test, she did not ask.

She took off her shoes before going down, as she knew she would only get sand in her shoes otherwise. Then she made her way down the hill, on the other side than the one she and the Diophane had arrived on. On this side, the slope consisted mostly of soft and slippery sand. Natalie stumbled several times, but managed to get down to the more even ground without getting sand everywhere.

As she looked upon the beach, she realized that there were thousands upon thousands of stones embedded in the grey sand. There were all shapes and sizes and several of stunning colors. Natalie gaped and wondered how she was supposed to know which one to pick – if she was to go through them all, she would be here for years.

Slowly, she started walking down the beach. The beach continued on behind her as well, but as she had had to choose a direction, she had chosen to go to her right.

The soft, wet sand felt cool beneath her feet. Every now and again, a cold wave of water would rush in and soak her feet and after the first one, Natalie rolled up her pants so that they would not get wetter than they already were.

“Okay, let's find a stone,” Natalie mumbled to herself. She rolled her eyes at the impossibility of finding a single stone in this mass. Briefly, she considered simply picking up a stone and take it up to the Diophane but she quickly dismissed the idea. The Diophane would probably send her back down again anyway, or get angry with her. Natalie did not want Diophane McCoy angry with her.

She picked up a stone here and there. Mostly, it was the shiny, colorful stones that caught her attention, but she did not feel anything when she picked them up. Natalie was not entirely sure what it was she was supposed to feel. So far, every magical stone Natalie had had in her hand, had been placed there by her grandmother who'd told her that it was a magical stone. She had never picked one out herself.

She walked a bit further. Looking over her shoulder, she could see the tall figure of Diophane McCoy, watching over her.

Suddenly, something caught Natalie's attention.

It was not much, but Natalie crossed the beach towards the slope. A rather small stone lay in the sand, half-way hidden in soil. Natalie picked it up. There was nothing special about it – it was grey, its outside soft to the touch from many years of water shaping it – but still, there was something. Natalie could not put her finger on it. The stone seemed to radiate something.

Natalie frowned at the stone. Was that what she was looking for? This 'sense' that the stone was radiating magic? She brushed some dirt off the stone and pocketed it. She would keep it for now, and if she did not find anything better, she would present it to the Diophane.

She continued down the beach, the wind pulling her hair hard. It seemed to have done that all day long, she thought. Darkness was starting to spread, as the sun sank beyond the dark clouds. Salty splatters from the worried ocean landed on her face and hands.

Walking and trying not to think of much of anything paid off after nearly half an hour. It seemed like she had found another stone of power. This one was stronger, and unlike the first one she had found, it was a small thing of beauty. Its color was gentle green, with darker green dots sprinkled over it. It seemed serene but to Natalie, it pulsed with life.

She exchanged the grey stone in her pocket with this one but decided to continue a little longer, muttering to herself, "Third time's the charm."

The wind was picking up and the clouds seemed heavier now. A light rain started to drizzle over Natalie. As her hair and clothes began to get soaked, Natalie wondered why she was doing this. She had found a stone that she could say called to her, which filled the requisites for Diophane McCoy's task, and she had been out there for quite some time. She should stop and go back.

Still, she did not. She walked onwards, although she now had to hold on tight to the scarf around her shoulders, lest it blow into the ocean. The rain was coming down hard, each drop like a small spike on her skin.

Then she heard it. Heard, yes, not felt it.

It was like a song, a melody that hung in the air that easily made itself heard over the noisy wind. Natalie could not put her finger on it, could not quite tell what the melody was, but it was there. It was—magic.

She found the stone lying only a few steps away. It was unlike any stone Natalie had ever laid eyes upon before. It looked like a sunrise – reds, oranges and yellows were all melted together in a symphony of colors. All the while, the stone kept playing the song to Natalie. She held it in her hand and despite the rain and the cold, the stone made Natalie smile.

She had found it.

She turned around, about to return to Diophane McCoy.

She gasped in surprise when the Diophane was standing right there, before her. Had she been following her? No, Natalie had seen her, standing up on the hill, watching her. She had probably used magic to get there so quickly – but how had she known Natalie was done just now?

“Here, I know everything,” said Diophane McCoy.

Natalie’s eyebrows rose. Still it somehow did not surprise her that the Diophane could read her mind. The Diophane was obviously a very powerful woman.

Diophane McCoy reached out and took Natalie’s hand. A second later, they were soaring through the air as the world swirled below them, transporting them from wherever they had been to wherever they were going. Natalie hoped they were going home to her grandmother.

They landed, Natalie no more graceful this time than she had been the last, and she quickly – and happily – gathered that they were in fact back in her grandmother’s backyard.

Her grandmother was waiting for them, sitting in a stuffed chair on the porch. She stood and hurried over to them when she saw them.

“How did it go, Diophane McCoy?” her grandmother asked eagerly, obviously hoping for a positive answer and expecting one as well.

The Diophane looked at Natalie briefly before turning to Natalie’s grandmother.

“The girl has some good traits and magic in her,” she said, “and I’m sure she will make a good Wielder. But she is not an elemental, she is not a natural at any magic, and while she did find a stone that will serve her well, it is not nearly enough to warrant a place as my student. She is nowhere near ready for that. I am sorry, Wielder Turner.”

Natalie’s grandmother’s face fell. Her disappointment was obvious and it hurt Natalie to see it. She studied the ground instead, uncertain of her own feelings. Part of her had wanted to become a Master Wielder such as her grandmother, but another part of her was perfectly content with just being able to do magic here and there. It had not done her much good so far, she thought and the image of Ava came back to her once more. It was best left as a hobby.

“I see,” said her grandmother finally. “I understand.”

It was obvious that her grandmother did not understand.

The Diophane turned to Natalie. “Thank you for doing your best, Miss Winters. You did well, with what you have.”

Natalie wondered if she should be annoyed with the platitudes the Diophane was offering. She had obviously not done well enough to become a student of Diophane McCoy’s. But Natalie was overcome with tiredness and she did not have the energy to be irritated with the Diophane. The day had been too long, too trying, for her to feel much of anything by now. She barely held back a yawn as she recalled just how much had happened in this one day.

“Thank you,” she said simply to Diophane McCoy, taking the Diophane’s outstretched hand.

“Oh,” said the Diophane, “and you may keep the stone you found. Like I said, it will serve you well.”

Natalie smiled briefly. Then Natalie blinked and when she opened her eyes again, the Diophane was gone.

6.

Butler Thomas took her home and Natalie did not need the magic to make her fall asleep. The day had simply been the most exhausting she had ever been through. She was almost glad that her grandmother had been disappointed with her – it meant almost no conversation before allowing Natalie to go home.

When the alarm went off the next morning, Natalie wanted to throw it out the window. She wished that she could stop time so that she could sleep for just a little longer, but her wish did not work.

Coming down the stairs for breakfast, she found Emmanuella chewing on her piece of toast, looking as irritated as ever that another day had come and Natalie was still there.

“Good morning,” mumbled Natalie. She did not know why she bothered, but it felt like she should.

“Morning,” Emmanuella sniffed. “You came home late last night.”

Natalie nodded, picking out her cereal, and some milk from the fridge. She took a piece of bread and put it in the toaster. “Yes, grandmother picked me up and I spent the evening there. Didn’t you get my note?”

“Richard did,” Emmanuella said shortly. Then, looking at her piece of toast and turning rather green, Emmanuella exited the kitchen hurriedly.

Natalie looked after her – it was not the first time Emmanuella had been ill in the last several weeks. In fact, it was more of a rule than an exception and Natalie had to start to wonder about it. After all, the evidence pointed in a very certain direction. Still, she expected Richard and Emmanuella to tell her if that was the case.

Half an hour later, Natalie walked to school.

As she turned onto Garden Avenue, on which the high school had its address, she heard a familiar voice.

“Natalie!”

Natalie gave Cecily a smile and stopped to wait for her to catch up. Cecily did not run without good reason – even a quick walk would have her gasping for breath.

“Good morning,” said Natalie once Cecily had come within talking distance, instead of shouting range.

“Good morning,” Cecily smiled, and then went straight to the point. “You disappeared yesterday.”

Natalie knew she had. She had not even returned to the hospital to pick up her shoes.

“Yes. Sorry,” she said, knowing that she had probably worried Cecily.

Cecily made a face. “The whole school is talking about how you had a seizure and a substitute had a heart attack in class. I’d say they’re all quite wild rumors. What happened, Natalie?”

Natalie studied the ground as they came closer to the school. “Well,” she started hesitatingly, “it’s not all wild rumors.”

“You had a seizure?” asked Cecily, immediately concerned.

Natalie shook her head. “No, no, of course not. I—I just sort of panicked.”

Cecily frowned. “Panicked? Over what?”

“The substitute teacher,” Natalie said with a sigh. At the strange look Cecily was giving her, she continued. “It wasn’t just any sub. It was Ramon.”

Cecily’s eyes widened. “Ramon? As in *Ramon-Ramon*? Are you serious?”

Natalie nodded, biting her lip. “Yeah. I just—I thought he was there to kidnap me again, or something, so I panicked. I did magic and I think I gave him a heart attack. But the thing is, he did nothing back! And when I spoke to him in the hospital, he didn’t have a clue of who I was, other than a student in class.”

Cecily looked at Natalie with eyes wide as saucers. “You’ll probably have to take me through that a bit slower. You were at the hospital? Why?”

“I think I used up all my power supply, or something,” Natalie said, throwing her hands in the air, frustrated with not quite understanding. “I kind of collapsed once I’d – well, once I’d given Ramon the heart attack.”

They had arrived outside the school now and began climbing the stairs. Natalie noted that there were a few people looking at her – obviously Cecily’s rapport of ‘wild rumors’ appeared to be true. Natalie sighed.

“But you said he didn’t recognize you?”

“No, he didn’t,” Natalie said. “After I woke up in the hospital, I went to talk to him – and he didn’t have any idea of who I was, or who Ava was. It was just not him. He didn’t know anything. And then my grandmother has found his necklace—”

“Whoa,” said Cecily, “your grandmother?”

Natalie pulled open the door to the school. “Yeah. Butler Thomas came and picked me up at the hospital and I got to spend a *lovely* afternoon with my grandmother.”

“Right,” Cecily said, “I’ll have to hear more about that but—Ramon?”

“Yes, right, Ramon,” Natalie said. The bell rang. “Well, we obviously need to go, but just answer me this: Could a necklace really hold the soul of another person, and would that necklace then be able to control the wearer? And if the necklace was broken, would the soul be released and the wearer be returned to normal?”

Cecily raised an eyebrow. “I’m guessing that’s not a hypothetical question?”

Natalie shook her head. “Grandmother found Ramon’s necklace. It was broken – and I think I broke it when we were in his Mithridates. It was after that he became all confused.”

“It would make sense,” Cecily said, frowning. “I haven’t heard of it, but I’m not all that well-versed in magic, really. Did your grandmother tell you it could happen?”

Natalie nodded. She glanced at the clock on the wall; they were running short on time before class started.

“Then my guess is, she’s right,” Cecily said softly, “although I’m not sure what position that puts Ramon in.”

Natalie did not know either. She had been able to keep Ramon from her thoughts for the most part while at her grandmother’s – the visit and impromptu tests from the Diophane were more

than enough to keep her mind and body occupied – but now they were back full-force. What was he? *Who* was he? And if he had been controlled, whose soul had been in the necklace?

Natalie and Cecily had just spent the last two hours discussing everything Natalie had been through, from the sudden appearance of Ramon in the English classroom, to Diophane McCoy's tests. Though Cecily had been curious about the latter, most of her concern remained on Ramon's sudden reappearance.

Cecily sat by her desk; it was her favorite place in the room, Natalie had come to conclude. Natalie was propped up against a few of the pillows on Cecily's bed, feeling rather comfortable.

"I'm conflicted," Cecily said. "On the one hand, Ramon seems to be almost a good guy now, or at the very least, neutral. He came in as a substitute, he didn't recognize you, and he didn't defend himself against your magic, which he should have easily been able to do. Instead, he ended up in the hospital, still without recognizing you and seeming very ill."

Natalie nodded. "On the other hand—"

"On the other hand," Cecily said, "it is possible that he knew what classes you are taking, and faking amnesia isn't really that hard." She sighed. "Still, it leaves the question of why he would let you hurt him."

"And why would he leave my mother's necklace with me when we were in my grandmother's Mithridates?" asked Natalie. "He stole it from me to begin with – why give it back?"

"And what's with the broken necklace your grandmother found?" Cecily said, rounding up the questions they had yet to answer.

Natalie sighed.

"It does, undoubtedly, look as though Ramon is a good guy now after all," Cecily said softly.

"A good guy who just happened to kill our best friend?" asked Natalie, bitterness lacing her voice. "Yes, that's a really good guy."

Cecily's smile was pained. "It also appears that your grandmother was serious when she told you that a stone can hold the essence of a person, or at least a part of it."

"But who?" asked Natalie, standing up and starting to pace to try to vent her frustration. It did not work. "Who would want to kill Ava and release Chaos? Why would anyone want to do that? Releasing Chaos – it's insane. It's a dark power, a really dark power, Cecily. I've felt it – it's a pit of black, where everything is—well, chaos."

Cecily shook her head. "I don't know. I don't know who'd want to release it."

"There was nothing on it in your Script Magia?" asked Natalie. "Nothing on maniacs wanting to release it? Or worshipping it, or whatever it is maniacs do?"

"No," Cecily said. "There was nothing on Chaos at all in the Script. There have been Wielders that have gone bad – but I never found anything that described what you felt."

This frightened Natalie. She had thought that any Wielder who was angry enough when performing magic would feel the darkness within, would feel Chaos, but according to Cecily, that did not seem to be the case. But Cecily was not an expert in the field in any way – perhaps there

had been others, Wielders that Cecily did not know of because they had not been mentioned in her Script Magia.

“We need to find out more about Chaos,” Natalie said.

Cecily cocked her head to the side. “How’re we going to do that?”

Natalie thought for a moment. “I guess I’ll have to ask my grandmother.”

“Do you think she’ll answer?”

Natalie frowned. “I’ll have to make her answer, or something.”

Cecily was quiet for a moment. For once, Natalie could read her thoughts – part of Cecily thought it was a good idea while the other part of her wondered how she would do it. Could a Wielder make another person spill their guts? Could she make a Master Wielder such as her grandmother do so? And did her grandmother even know much about Chaos?

“I suppose that’s easier said than done,” Cecily said finally, “but if it works, I’m sure she has at least some stuff to tell you.”

Natalie smiled slightly. “Thanks. Do you know how Wielders communicate within the second dimension?”

Cecily shook her head. “No, sorry. Nothing on communication in the Script.”

Natalie gave a mental sigh. “Oh well. I’ll just have to wait until my grandmother asks me to come visit again – and who knows when that’ll be. She usually just sends a letter or shows up.”

“Yes,” said Cecily, “she’s a bit peculiar.”

“I think anyone would be, living in a place like that,” Natalie said with a roll of her eyes. “No electricity, no contact with the outside world, and wood elves running around.”

Cecily smiled. “I think it sounds lovely.”

Half an hour later, Natalie looked at her watch and realized that it was time for her to go home and prepare dinner. Emmanuella was cranky enough without the added bonus of low blood sugar. Natalie bid Cecily goodbye and left the Cordell house.

The air was cool and the sky was a colorful palette of reds and yellows as she walked home. It was beautiful – the opposite, compared to the stormy clouds of the night before, with its heavy wind and spray of ocean water on her face. It had been lovely in its own right, though cold and harsh.

Natalie thought of the Diophane. The woman had authority like no other person Natalie had ever met. Simply by looking at her, Natalie had known that she was powerful, a force to be reckoned with. She was undoubtedly more powerful than Natalie’s grandmother, but was far less obvious about her powers than Natalie’s grandmother. Natalie appreciated that.

Natalie was deep in thoughts and was not quite paying attention to the world around her. Therefore, it came as quite a shock when a very familiar voice suddenly could be heard.

“Magic really never gave me anything good.”

Natalie whirled around, eyes wide and mouth hanging open. There was no one standing behind her, or to her side. Still, she knew that voice. Was she going crazy? Was she hearing things that no one else did? It had to be, because that voice—Ava was *dead*. Dead people did not talk.

“I mean, first it made us fight.”

The Winter Legacy: Heritage
by C. Hakansson

Natalie turned again, trying to pinpoint the source of the voice. It felt like she was in one of those movies, where the crazy character hears voices in surround.

“Ava?” she said weakly.

The voice continued. “Then I was kidnapped, gagged, hurt and finally I waded through ten tons of sand to get back home. *Then* we go and face the madman again and not only do I get choked – I finally get thrown into the wall and break my neck.”

The voice seemed to be moving around her, taunting her. It was here and there, willing her to believe in her own insanity. It was not possible.

Natalie sank to her knees on the empty side-walk. A weak thought of hoping there was no one watching from one of the houses passed through her mind but mostly, it was just grief coming up to the surface once more. She squeezed her eyes shut, new tears falling even as she told herself that she was being weak. Oh, how she wished for Ava to be alive once more, to taunt her and throw sarcastic comments her way.

To not be dead.

“I’m sorry,” said the voice and this time it was far softer. “That’s one thing I can’t do anything about. And neither can you.”

It seemed to be coming from a single place this time. The voice had stopped moving and instead, it was coming from straight before her.

Slowly, Natalie opened her eyes.

“Hi,” said Ava softly.

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Natalie's mouth dropped open and she backed up, probably looking incredibly strange crawling on the concrete. She did not care. In fact, she had never cared less about anything in her life.

"A-Ava," she stammered, eyes wide.

Impossible.

"Yes," Ava said, her voice as gentle as Cecily's usually was.

Ava was standing there, before her. Her hair was red and her face was freckled and she was wearing the exact clothes she had died in, even the fishnet gloves. The only difference was that she had little or no makeup, for some reason. Natalie had never seen Ava before without makeup, but it was not quite what her mind was on.

"But—no, you can't be here—you're dead. I saw you die. I—I had to leave you." Natalie stumbled over the words, her brain in overdrive.

Ava sighed. "I'm still dead. Like I said, neither of us can do anything about that."

"But—you're here," Natalie said weakly. "You—I'm going insane, aren't I? I'm imagining things. I'm imagining you, because I want so badly for you to be alive."

Ava smiled slightly. "As flattering as that is, no, you're not going crazy."

Natalie squeezed her eyes shut again. "You're not here, you're not here," she mumbled to herself. She tried to clear her mind, to think her away. The sidewalk was to be empty when she opened her eyes once again. Ava was dead, she had to accept that.

Hesitantly, she opened her eyes again.

"Still here," said Ava.

Some part of Ava seemed to think this was fun, because she smiled and her eyes were glittering. Then Natalie looked again. No, it was not Ava's eyes that were glittering – it was the grass beside the pavement, small droplets of water sparkling in the afternoon sun. Someone had been watering their front yard.

Natalie squinted her eyes at the image of her dead friend.

Her eyes weren't the only things that was see-through. In fact, as Natalie looked at her, she realized that she could see the entire backdrop, if a bit hazily, through Ava's body.

"You're not real," Natalie mumbled. "You're just some figment of my imagination – why else would I be able to see through you?"

Ava rolled her eyes and shook her head with a loving smile at Natalie.

"I'm not a figment of your imagination. Am I really this sarcastic in your thoughts?" she asked.

"Yes," Natalie responded, then realized that she shouldn't talk to beings of her imagination. It would only get her an even quicker way to the mental ward.

"I'm a ghost, Natalie," Ava sighed with another roll of her eyes.

"I—what?"

Natalie had not expected that. Or perhaps some part of her had expected it, though she had thought it impossible. Still, with the things Natalie had lived through in the last few weeks – why shouldn't it be possible? Then again, it might just be that she was going insane.

“A ghost. You know, dead with unfinished business or some such? That's me.” Ava pointed at herself.

“Uhm—oh,” said Natalie, still staring and thinking herself to be quite nuts.

Ava sighed again. “Look, there's nothing I can do to convince you. I mean, it's not like I can tell you about something only you and I know about, because your imagination would know those things too. But it's me. It really is. I'm just—slightly more see-through and slightly less breathing.”

Natalie did not know what to say. “You're—dead.”

“Yes.”

“And a ghost.”

“Yes.”

“And I'm not crazy.”

“Well, I'm not entirely sure about that,” Ava said with a half-smile. At Natalie's look, she chuckled. “No, you're not.”

“But you died over three weeks ago,” Natalie said, frowning. “Why can't I see you until now?”

Ava looked suddenly uncertain. “It's been three weeks already?”

Natalie nodded slowly.

“Well, I'm not sure,” Ava said hesitantly. “I didn't know it had already been three weeks... I just – I think I remember seeing you once, just briefly. But I wasn't strong enough back then and I had to collect more power to be visible for longer.”

Natalie stared again. “So it was you—in the bathroom? I really did see you?”

Ava nodded. “Yeah. I'm sorry I couldn't stay long. It was my first try and I just sort of—flickered into visibility. I guess I just wanted to see you so badly.”

“I was sure I was going mad.” Natalie stood slowly, her legs shaking. Shock did not even begin to describe the feeling she was having and she still was not entirely sure that she was not going on a one way train to the mental hospital.

Ava reached out. “You weren't. You aren't.”

Ava attempted to touch Natalie's cheek, but her hand went straight through. It felt chilly as she did, like a cold wind. Ava's face fell and Natalie's eyes filled with tears.

“I—” she said, but found no words to continue.

Natalie noticed that Ava was not quite standing on the ground; rather, she floated just above it. She wondered if Ava was aware of it but decided that now was not the time to ask her.

“Look,” said Ava, “I have to go. I still don't have this visibility thing down. But I'll be back, I promise.”

“But—don't go,” Natalie said, tears spilling down her cheeks. Even if it was just a figment of her imagination, it felt so good to see Ava.

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“I have to,” Ava said. She moved closer to Natalie and placed a kiss on Natalie’s forehead. At least that’s what Natalie assumed she did; for a moment, it felt cool on her forehead. Natalie closed her eyes briefly.

“I—” she started when she opened her eyes again, her throat thick with feeling.

The street before her was empty. Ava – if it had indeed been Ava – was gone again, just like that. A breeze drew past Natalie, feeling surprisingly warm for the cool autumn day.

Arriving home mere minutes later, Natalie’s mind was numb. Her mind was filled with so many questions on what had just happened that, if she was not already going insane, she would soon go crazy. Question after question and not a single answer – was she imagining things? Was it really true that Ava had turned into a ghost? Where was Ava now, if she was a ghost? Was Natalie going mad? Had that really been Ava, three weeks ago in the bathroom?

Dazedly, Natalie began making dinner. She set the table for three and filled the glasses with ice and water. The smell of the food was not making her hungry, however, it was making her nauseous. It had been two very long days and Natalie would have loved to go to bed and sleep for forty-eight hours, at the very least. But she knew that once dinner was over and the dishes were in the dishwasher, she had homework that was waiting for her. She had ignored it in favor of going to Cecily’s but she would have to do it.

The front door opened as Emmanuella and Richard arrived home. Natalie saw Richard take Emmanuella’s coat and place it on the hanger, each move gentle and loving. She wondered dully what he saw in her.

“It smells delicious as always,” Richard said, walking into the kitchen.

He kissed Natalie’s forehead and Natalie was forcefully reminded of the cool sensation of Ava doing the same.

“Yeah,” said Natalie distantly. “Enjoy.”

“What is it?” Richard asked. Even before he asked, he placed a hand upon her forehead to feel her temperature. “Are you sick?”

Natalie shook her head. “No, I’m just tired. Long day in school.”

Emmanuella sneered but before she had time to deliver a scathing comment on how school was nowhere near as hard as work was, Richard said, “Okay. Well, just see to it that you get to bed on time today. You were up late last night.”

Natalie nodded. “I will.”

They ate in silence for a few moments. The food had little taste in Natalie’s busy mind. Still, even with the million questions running through her head, Natalie was soon picking up on the looks being shared between Richard and Emmanuella. Richard was hardly touching his food, his eyes on Emmanuella and a silly smile on his lips.

Natalie sighed inwardly. She suspected what this was all about, though she was not quite sure she wanted it confirmed. She was not sure what she would feel about it if her suspicions turned out to be true.

In the end, she decided to ask. “Is there something you’d like to tell me?”

Richard looked a bit like a deer caught in headlights for a moment, before the silly smile came back over his lips. He glanced at Emmanuella, who looked a bit less surly for once.

“Yes, actually, there is,” Richard said. He stumbled over the words, as though he had rehearsed them but they weren’t coming out quite right. “Really, Emmanuella and I have something to tell you, together.”

Then he stopped and did not continue for several seconds.

“Okay,” said Natalie to fill in the silence. “What do you want to tell me?”

“We—we’re having a baby,” Richard said, looking a bit worried but very happy all at once. Natalie assumed that the worry was only about Natalie’s reaction and nothing to do with the baby.

The baby.

It was not surprising – in fact, it was exactly what Natalie had suspected. Still, when faced with reality, it hit her like a ton of bricks. Richard and Emmanuella were having a baby. A little, itty bitty baby of their own that they would pamper and love with all their hearts. Natalie felt selfish, but she wondered where that left her. Richard had loved her as his own – but would that change now that he was going to have a child that was truly his?

She swallowed her thoughts for the moment.

“Congratulations,” she said, hoping that it sounded more heartfelt than it felt. “So when—?”

“Em is nearly four months along,” Richard said, his eyes shining with happiness.

“The due date is in March.” Emmanuella spoke for the first time since they had seated themselves at the table. Natalie could not quite tell what her thoughts on the baby was – in her eyes, Emmanuella was always whiny and snippy. The idea of her being a mother seemed quite odd – she had never been any kind of mother to Natalie.

“We would have told you sooner,” Richard said, “but we didn’t find out until a couple of weeks ago and we wanted to know that everything was all right with the baby.”

“Oh,” Natalie said. She smiled at them, a phony smile. “Well, again, congratulations.” She stood up, leaving her plate half-eaten. She was nowhere near hungry anymore. “I have to go.”

She left the kitchen, rushing up the stairs. She did not care that she left the dishes for Richard and Emmanuella – instead, she threw herself onto her bed and buried her head in her pillow.

It was far, far too much. Nothing made sense anymore – the world as Natalie had known it for fifteen years had been turned upside down in the last two months and she had no idea of how to make anything work again.

She thought of calling Cecily, but decided against it. She did not really want to talk to anyone. She would have had no idea of what to say – her thoughts were too jumbled for even herself to make sense of them.

Natalie realized that she was crying. Her body shook with each sob and she wondered what it would have felt like to have a mother. A mother’s calm, warm arms around her, calming and comforting her.

The thought only made her cry harder.

After a few minutes, Natalie realized that crying would not get her anywhere. As she tried to be rational, the sobs became quiet tears, falling down her cheeks without a sound. Her head continued to spin with questions and thoughts and her heart was still heavy with feelings – but

she quieted down. She tried her best to put it out of her mind. For now, she could simply concentrate on all the parts of her life that did not involve any heavy feelings. As that only left her with school, Natalie picked up her bag.

The heavy math book was the first one to be hefted onto the desk and Natalie began doing her homework. Natalie was mediocre at best at math and for once, she was thankful. Solving the problems laid out before her took all of her attention and she dove into the problems as though her life depended on it. After that she started on a paper for her history class that was not due for another two weeks, and a short paper on an artist of choice for her art class. She did anything that required her full attention.

Every now and then the paper was stained with a teardrop but Natalie ignored it.

Natalie had been planning on sharing both the news of the baby and, more importantly, the appearance of what might in fact have been Ava's ghost – if Natalie was not going insane – with Cecily, but in the next few days, there seemed to be no time. Natalie's teachers decided that it was time to start thinking of their midterm exams and grades, and as such they upped the workload for the students. On top of that, Cecily was gone every afternoon, leaving straight from school when her father picked her up.

A part of Natalie did not mind the excuse. She could not for the life of her figure out how she would start telling Cecily of Ava's ghost. Cecily's knowledge of magic's existence did not matter – the leap from knowing of its existence to believing in the return of a dead friend's incorporeal presence was quite huge. Natalie herself was not sure she believed it. She had been tired at the time; perhaps she had imagined it. Ava had not been back since, either, which only spoke in favor of the argument that she had been daydreaming.

When the weekend came around, Natalie decided that she *had* to talk to Cecily. If nothing else, she needed an excuse to get out of the house. Now that the secret was out, Richard suddenly behaved like Emmanuella was made of fine glass.

"I'm hungry," she would whine and he would immediately be up, asking her what she wanted and if he could get it for her. If this was the way it was going to be for the next six months, Natalie thought she might move out. It was sickening.

A grey cat sat perched upon the Cordell mailbox when Natalie arrived. Its intelligent green eyes followed Natalie as she walked up and knocked on the door.

Cecily opened.

"Hi," she said. She looked cozy and tiny, wearing a sweatshirt that was far too large, and a pair of grey sweatpants. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail for once; usually, Cecily wore her long brown hair down.

Natalie was invited into the kitchen, where Cecily was just preparing a light snack consisting of a delicious-looking fruit salad.

"Would you like some?" Cecily asked and added, "it's all high on vitamins and I need vitamins – or so the good doctors tell me."

"Sure," said Natalie, "it looks yummy."

Cecily smiled and handed her a bowl. Once they had each filled their bowls, they sat down by the kitchen table, opposite each other.

They spoke idly for a few minutes of their classmates and homework but both could sense that the other one had something to talk about. Natalie wondered what Cecily could be sitting on.

Finally, they lapsed into silence, each eating their fruit salad and studying the grains of the wooden table. It was a beautiful, handcrafted table but it was nonetheless boring to look at after a few minutes.

Cecily spoke first. “They’ve been doing tests,” she said. She hesitated for a moment, then continued, “That’s were I’ve been going in the afternoons. And on Monday, when you faced Ramon again and I was called to the office. I’ve been to one of the bigger hospitals.”

Her voice was quiet and the sentences not as structured and together as usual. She was obviously upset. Cecily was usually very calm; now she fidgeted.

“They found—” She stopped, clasping her hands in front of her. “They believe I haven’t more than a few months left.”

She looked down, and Natalie felt the world come crashing down around them.

Cecily’s words cut like a knife straight through Natalie’s heart, zigzagging down and making her entire body ache. She swallowed hard to keep the tears back; they would do Cecily no good.

Cecily, her eyes trained on her hands, said, “My heart is showing signs of being affected, as well as my lungs. They can’t figure out why and nothing helps and nothing makes sense to them.”

Natalie reached out and squeezed Cecily’s hand. Her own eyes were filled with tears and when Cecily looked up, she saw the same in her brown eyes. Natalie had never seen Cecily cry for herself before.

“I’m scared,” Cecily said. “I don’t want to die.”

Natalie wished that she could say that she would not, that they would find a way around it, a way to cure her. Something nagged in the back of her mind, but she could not quite recall and now was not the time to try.

She moved around the table for she had no idea of what to say. *I’m sorry? I know?* She was sorry, yes, but it felt to cold and distant. I know – no, she did not know how scared Cecily must be.

Wordlessly, Natalie wrapped her arms around Cecily instead and Cecily cried with hiccupping sobs, wondering why this happened to her.

8.

The remainder of the weekend passed as though wrapped in mist. Natalie felt unable to concentrate on anything, whether to do with schoolwork or trying to figure anything out with the magical aspect of her life. She could not even begin to ponder Ava's ghostly reappearance, because every time she thought of Ava, she thought of death, and that led her straight back to Cecily.

By Sunday night, Natalie had gained only one thing from the weekend – fierce determination to find something that could help Cecily. As Cecily and her father already seemed to have emptied out the medical possibilities to cure Cecily, and Natalie could not help in that department anyway, it left magic.

The nagging feeling in the back of her mind, that Natalie had forgotten about something, stayed with her. Just out of reach, it vanished into thin air each and every time she thought she remembered. It left Natalie feeling thoroughly annoyed.

Her mother's necklace hung around Natalie's neck, and it shone softly in the moonlight spilling through the window. Natalie had studied the beautiful craftsmanship many times but tonight, it only irritated her. No matter how breathtaking, the necklace could not save Cecily. Natalie had tried – and failed. The effects lasted only for a couple of hours and Natalie doubted it would matter at all in a few months time.

She wondered what she would have been able to do as a Master Wielder.

She played with the magic she could control, lazily as her thoughts drifted. It moved through her, starting at her toes and pulling power from everything around her. Focused through her necklace, she could pull it out, feeling it sparkle at her fingertips. The power was not terrible, but beautiful. She placed her fingertips on the stone and pulled out a string of whispery magic, forming it into a ball in her hand that illuminated her room in a silver glow. Moving her fingers, she could form the magic and in her hand, it became a horse at first. She added a pair of wings to its side and it left her hand, circling the room.

Eventually, it faded and the room became dark once more.

She lay awake for hours, sleep evading her. When she finally did fall asleep, the dreams were fleeting and nightmarish, with vivid colors and sinister laughter surrounding her.

Far from her bouncy self the next morning, the scene in the kitchen made her want to gag. Richard kissed Emmanuella, although he pulled back hastily when he saw Natalie.

“Good morning,” he said with a nervous glance between his wife and Natalie. “Would you like anything for breakfast?”

Natalie only barely kept a roll of her eyes at bay. She knew that this would be her morning greeting for the next few months: Richard and Emmanuella all lovey-dovey, and Emmanuella playing up every symptom of her pregnancy. After the baby was born – who knew what things were going to be like then? Natalie sighed.

As she walked to class half an hour later, students shot her odd looks. Natalie was not surprised, although she wondered how long it would stay that way – a week had passed since she had cursed Ramon into the hospital and people really ought to have better things to do than gossip.

Still, she heard them.

“That’s her,” a girl whispered theatrically, obviously not minding much if Natalie overheard, “she actually punched a teacher and now he’s in a coma and they don’t know if he’ll wake up!”

The girls around her gasped, looking fittingly horrified. Another continued where the first had left off – “Well I heard that it was because they’d been having a sordid affair and he—”

Natalie shook her head, tuning them out. Rumors had a life of their own. True, Ramon still stayed in the hospital, but hardly in a coma – and the rest of the rumors were simply ludicrous.

“Quite the reputation,” said an unpleasant voice. It belonged to Chase Eadan, who leaned against one of the walls, attempting to look casual. Blond hair fell into his cold eyes. “One could start wondering what kind of person you are, Winters.”

Natalie raised an eyebrow. She was not in the mood but Eadan never left her alone once he had started.

“The same can be said for you,” she said.

Eadan smiled and he probably thought it made him look charming. “My reputation hardly states that I go around punching people.”

“No, it states that you are the most spoiled brat the school has ever seen. A brat who’s not used to getting ‘no’ for an answer, and one who doesn’t understand when people don’t want to hang with him.”

Eadan spat, “Are you really deluding yourself with thinking that I’d want to be friends with you and the runaway freak? And the little inane sicko? You are all freaks.”

Natalie’s temper flared. “Don’t call my friends that.”

Eadan appeared pleased that he got a reaction from her. He took a step closer to her. Out of the corner of her eye, Natalie noted that people stood around them, staring and whispering. Did they truly have nothing better to do?

“What are you going to do about it?” asked Eadan, staring down at her. Then he added, smirking, “Freak.”

“That I am,” Natalie said. “Would you like to find out just how much of a freak I am?”

With her temper, her magic ignited within. She kept it at bay – she did not want another occurrence like the one with Ramon – but left it simmering just below the surface, where she could easily reach it if need be. She doubted it – Eadan would not sully his hands and risk detention to hurt her here. Besides, she had already used magic on him once. He knew, even though he did not know exactly what it was, that she could do extraordinary things.

Eadan’s face fell and for the merest of moments, Natalie could see some dread in his eyes. He feared her. She felt unsure of whether to be pleased or not – if she frightened him enough, he might leave her alone, but then again, she did not want to be fearsome to anyone.

Then Eadan’s façade was back up and he sneered at her. “You are nothing, and you can do nothing to me.”

Natalie took a few steps closer. She narrowed her eyes at the boy, who tried to look suave.

“Are you sure?”

His eyes flitted to the sides and Natalie wondered where his followers were. They usually did not leave his side.

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Eadan's eyes locked with hers and they stared at each other. Natalie could feel the irritation welling up in Eadan's eyes – frustration that he did not have her under his command. He was not used to people who were not – when Ava refused to follow his orders, he had bullied her for years.

“Leave me and my friends alone,” Natalie hissed to him, “or you might find out that there is something I *can* do to you.”

With a final glare at Eadan, Natalie turned from him and continued down the hallway towards the her History class with Mrs. Hensley.

An hour later, Natalie met up with Cecily in math. She had not seen Cecily since Saturday and felt unsure of how to act with her. Cecily calmed her quickly, behaving as she always did – serene and quiet, her homework at the ready when Mrs. Miller asked for it. Natalie had to give Cecily credit: she made for a very good actress.

They only had a few minutes to speak even between math and English, and what little they did say, they kept light. Walking down a corridor in a student-filled school was not the place for serious conversations with dying friends.

A substitute, one who was not Ramon, held their English class. Natalie did not participate much in the discussion on famous writers. She usually did not, but especially not now.

Packing up their books after class, Cecily said, “I’ll see you at lunch, but not in art.”

“Why?” asked Natalie although she suspected the answer.

Cecily appeared concentrated on placing her books back in her bag. “They’re going to do a battery of tests this afternoon. I won’t be here tomorrow; they want me overnight for observation.”

Natalie’s heart constricted. “Would you like me to come visit you?”

Cecily looked up. There was gratefulness in her eyes, as though she was glad that Natalie had offered. Still, her answer was, “No, please don’t.”

Natalie had already seen her in the hospital on more than one occasion but it did not matter. Natalie knew Cecily thought this was different – Cecily was wide awake this time, for one, not unconscious like she had been the other times. There would be nurses poking and prodding, doctors asking questions and doing tests. Cecily would be a lab rat, not a human.

Natalie nodded. “Okay. But I’ll see you at lunch.”

“Definitely.”

That afternoon, Natalie felt only like drawing a paper full of black in art. She had a very hard time seeing what the good in life at the moment – she had already lost one best friend, would she now lose her second one as well?

Mr. Connell, the rather short art teacher, looked over her shoulder as she stabbed at the paper, drawing lines up and down and across, filling the paper with darkness.

“Might I assume that you are feeling unhappy?” he asked, perfectly politely.

Natalie looked at him and tried to not make it an obvious glare. He would, after all, be setting her grade.

“Yes, sir,” she said.

Mr. Connell ignored any hostility in her voice. “Am I also to assume this has something to do with Miss Cordell’s absence?”

Natalie hesitated a bit before saying, rather more quietly, “Yes, sir.”

He smiled slightly, a sympathetic smile. “I would think that if a friend has less time amongst us than others, one would make the most of it, rather than spend it in darkness.”

Natalie looked at him for a few moments, processing his words. He had obviously been able to tell that Cecily was unwell and getting worse – but as she had been absent twice in one week, it was not hard to figure out how he knew.

More important were his words. He was right, of course. If Cecily did not have more than a few months left – Natalie swallowed back tears at the thought – they should make the best of it rather than tread on eggshells around her and curse the illness. They should be making it the best time for her, no matter how hard.

“Yes, sir,” Natalie said a third time to her teacher. He smiled kindly at her and hurried away, as other students needed his counsel.

Natalie looked at the paper before her. It was nearly all black, filled with the thick strokes of the oil crayon she held in her hand. Natalie closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. She could do it; she could make Cecily’s days good.

Still, the resolve within her to find something else, something to cure her, was stronger than ever.

That night, Natalie began composing a letter to her grandmother, wishing to come see her. She had no idea of how she would get the letter to her grandmother, but perhaps she would figure something out. She needed to see her grandmother, and even more, she needed to see Diophane McCoy. The Diophane, she was sure, would know a way to help Cecily.

As she finished up the letter and wrote ‘Madeline Turner’ on the front of an envelope, Natalie came to think of the ghost writer. She had not heard from it for a while.

Outside, a dog was barking in the darkness. Natalie stared out the window, into the starlit skies. It was another beautiful Californian night with no clouds in sight. It was calm and clear night, the air fresh. Natalie felt herself getting sleepy, her mind wandering to places she could not quite remember.

As she sat there, memories started seeping into her mind. Natalie frowned at them – there was a desert and a cloaked figure, and then there was a village and three women and a stone that everyone was looking at... Places she had never been and people she had never met but they seemed very familiar all the same. Natalie had the sense that the images were important. She recalled speaking to the hooded figure, and it had spoken back to her. If only she could remember what they had talked about.

As if on cue, there was writing on the paper when Natalie next looked down.

‘Go to the library of Lake Sunflower.’

Natalie frowned at the direct order. The ghost writer had always spoken in riddles before – what was with the clear instruction?

Natalie wrote, *‘Why?’*

Natalie concentrated on the photo of herself as a baby with her mother, while she saw her arm move out of the corner of her eye.

'You wish to help your friend, don't you?' wrote the ghost writer.

Natalie answered immediately. *'Of course!'*

The next response was longer; it was the longest she had ever received from the ghost writer.

'Then go to the library and to its West Wing. Find the shelf closest to the wall. Use magic to get in.'

Natalie frowned at the ghost writer's strange directions. The library? She had only visited it once – she had gone with Cecily to pick up a book a few weeks ago – but she found the place freaky. The building was at least a century old, if not more, and both the exterior and the interior reflected this. Its outside looked like an old castle, and inside, the walls were dark. Though filled with modern literature, the shelves were original, ornately carved wood. They were beautiful, but something had sent shivers down Natalie's spine when she had been there.

At the ghost writer's words, Natalie wondered what the old building could be hiding. What history was in there?

'Get in where?'

Natalie decided not to ask questions about the building – she suspected she would not get an answer anyway. The ghost writer only answered the things it wanted to answer, and going through a building's history was not likely to be on that list.

'You will see.'

The return of the secretive answers, Natalie sighed. The ghost writer never had been straight forward. However, Natalie knew she had to go. It did not matter if she found the place freaky, or if it had been in hell itself – Natalie would still have gone. One friend was enough to lose – Natalie would go to great lengths to keep the one she still had.

She decided rather quickly, however, to not tell Cecily of this at all. There was no need to get her hopes up, if it did not work out. Natalie could not stand the thought of disappointing Cecily, especially not when it came to this matter – a matter that was in fact life or death.

The ghost writer seemed to have left her again for no more words and sentences came forth. Natalie finally put her pen away and left the letter for her grandmother laying on the desk. Looking at her alarm clock, Natalie realized the hour and that it was time for bed.

The house was quiet. Natalie brushed her teeth and returned to her room. Just as she was about to push open the door, she caught a glimpse of something through the small opening that was between the door and the doorframe.

She was not sure what she saw; it was gone before she had a chance to get a good look. It was about the size of a seven-year-old child, but it did not move like a child would. It had been far more graceful, each movement refined.

Natalie opened after a minute, when she was sure the thing was gone. Looking around the room to make sure it had not been a thief that had been in the room, Natalie noted that the letter she had written to her grandmother was gone.

She smiled slightly, a feeling of excitement running through her.

She had just seen her first wood elf.

9.

The next day looked rather bleak as Natalie woke up. Not only were the skies outside filled with grey clouds, quite unlike the previous evening's clear, starry darkness, but Natalie faced an entire day in school without Cecily. It made her drag her feet more than usual as she walked towards the school.

Her history class was fine; she was usually on her own there anyway. As her teacher spoke of some great occasion of blood shed, Natalie let her thoughts wander. She thought of the first time the ghost writer had written to her, on her fifteenth birthday, before anything else made its shocking entrance into her life. That had been before Ava, before Cecily and before Ramon.

Natalie sighed softly to herself and once the bell rang, she collected her books and trotted towards math class.

Math class was doubly dull. Not only was it a dull subject in Natalie's opinion to begin with, but today she had it alone. Before class began, however, a nervous-looking boy tapped her on her shoulder.

"Uh, Natalie Winters?"

He wore glasses that he anxiously pushed back up on his nose, and had mousy hair.

"Yes?" Natalie asked, eyeing him up and down. She did not think she had seen him before.

"I'm Na-Nathan Reynell," said the boy. He held out a hand that was actually shaking. One of Natalie's eyebrows rose at the sight of it – was this boy afraid of her, or simply nervous in general?

"It's nice to meet you, Na-Nathan," said Natalie, consciously saying his name the way he had presented himself. She hoped her slight smile would calm him.

He looked at her for a few, long seconds, apparently gauging whether she was making fun of him or not. Finally, he offered her a hesitant half-smile. He had to look up at her, because she stood a bit taller than him.

"Was there something you needed from me?" Natalie asked after the silence between them had gone on for a bit longer than necessary.

"Oh, yes, of course," he mumbled, suddenly becoming animated once more. He rummaged through his bag and came up with two pieces of crumbled paper. "Here. This is—well, Cecily asked me to take notes for her today in class and I thought that maybe since you're her best friend you could give them to her today and she won't have to miss out on anything more than necessary."

He stopped to breathe. His cheeks were turning rather red at his inability to keep it short and to the point.

"Thank you," said Natalie, taking the notes from Nathan. "I'll see that she gets these."

Briefly glancing at the notes, Natalie found the neatest notes she had ever seen. There were even different colors used for different sections. Natalie glanced back at the boy. He looked rather too small for his clothes, which only accentuated his shortness. This boy was undoubtedly a nerd.

"I'm sure she appreciates it," Natalie said.

Nathan turned bright red. “Oh, it’s nothing. I just—she asked me and of course it wasn’t a problem—”

He trailed off and Natalie had to force herself to not chuckle. This boy was not nervous about talking to her – well, maybe a little bit, but it was not all – because she was Natalie Winters, but because she was Cecily Cordell’s friend. The boy before her was, quite undoubtedly, in love with Cecily.

It kept Natalie entertained throughout her math class. She noted that the boy was in fact in the same math class, so she perhaps she ought to have noted his existence before. On the other hand, Nathan said very little and looked as grey as a mouse in the midst of the rest of the students.

Natalie wondered how Cecily would react if Natalie told her she had a not-so-secret admirer. She pondered it for a moment and came to the conclusion that she had not the faintest idea of how Cecily would react. They had discussed a great many things in the last few weeks, but boys had not been a subject. They had both simply had too many things to think about since meeting one another, and besides, the males of the school were most of Eadan’s caliber – egocentric, spoiled, or simply just annoying.

That was something Nathan had going for him – he seemed neither egocentric nor spoiled, and although his nervousness would undoubtedly get on Natalie’s nerves eventually, it was not nearly as bad as Eadan’s boasting or his followers’ blank stares. Nathan seemed more like the studious type, like Cecily, although the very short conversation she had had with him was far from enough to see what he was truly like.

The school day passed without incident. Natalie hardly spoke to anyone – save for a question from Mr. Chen in her fifth period, no one talked to her. Natalie had not made friends outside of Cecily and Ava since coming to Lake Sunflower, and it showed when the two were both gone.

Once the last bell of the day rang, Natalie rushed home. She was only going to dump her bag and then leave for the library, but caught sight of the day’s mail and decided to sort it, hoping for a letter from her grandmother. There was nothing. Of course, she doubted the letter would arrive with the regular mailman – more likely was another wood elf coming to deliver it.

She just placed her hand on the door handle when—

“Hello.”

Natalie swirled around, her heart stopping at the sudden sound of someone else’s voice. She recognized the voice, of course.

“You scared me, Ava,” Natalie said, looking rather pasty.

Ava made a face. “Sorry. It’s just hard to announce my presence, seeing how you can’t feel my touch.”

She was standing right next to Natalie, still dressed in the same clothes she had died in; the same clothes she had worn the last time she had appeared before Natalie. She was still a bit see-through – all in all, she looked exactly as she had the last time she appeared before Natalie.

They were silent for a few moments, looking at each other. Natalie finally asked, “Am I to believe that you really are a ghost, then?”

“Wouldn’t it feel better than believing yourself to be insane?” Ava asked back.

“I still might be,” Natalie said, not quite ready to believe in ghosts. “But then again, magic is real so maybe then so are you.”

Ava nodded. "We're getting somewhere."

"Fine, we'll pretend I've not gone totally and completely bonkers." She hesitated. Then she studied the floor and the seconds became minutes. A fly was making its way around the room, hoping for an open window.

"I've missed you."

Ava gave a crooked smile. "Right back at ya."

Again, the silence between them spread. Natalie wondered at this; she had thought that if she had another chance to see Ava, she would have so many things to say to her, so many things to tell her. Right now, her mind was busy enough trying to wrap itself around the idea that Ava was here, before her, and Natalie could not remember a single thing she had thought about saying.

"Well, I can't exactly offer you anything to eat," Natalie said eventually, her voice quiet and hesitating.

This time, when Ava's eyes glittered, it was actually tears. Natalie wished she could touch Ava. She wanted to hug her tightly and never let go.

"I'm so sorry about what happened," Natalie whispered.

Ava shrugged, though Natalie could tell that it was not a light one. "I chose to go. You told me not to, and I came anyway. Besides, you weren't the one who threw me into a wall."

"No, but I'm the one who should have been protecting you," Natalie said and she could not help the bitterness seeping into her voice.

They were still standing in the hallway and the guilt lay like a heavy quilt around Natalie. Ava looked as though she was on the verge of speaking but stopped herself at the last minute, several times over. Natalie wondered if she was on the verge of saying that it was not her fault, but could not say it because it was not true. It was Natalie's slip into Chaos' powers that forced Ava to focus on Natalie more than Ramon, and Natalie's loss of powers that had allowed Ramon to break free.

Ava could not say that it was not her fault, because it was.

Ava sighed softly. "Let's talk about something else. How's Cecily?"

She could not have chosen a worse subject to switch to. Of course, she did not know of any of the things that had happened since she had died, and Cecily was the one thing Natalie knew anything about. She had no idea how Ava's family were coping, or any other friends Ava might have had.

"She's—not good," Natalie said. She spoke to the floor, rather than the ghost before her, but she could sense Ava's eyes observing her. "They don't think she has more than a few months left."

"Oh," mumbled Ava, her hand going up to cover her mouth.

"She's at one of the hospitals right now," Natalie said. "I don't know what they're doing but—tests of some kind."

"But I thought—after the light and what you did and—I thought your magic would make her better." Ava obviously had a hard time finding the words.

Natalie's eyes were filled with pain. "So did I."

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As they stood there, Natalie noticed that Ava was fading slowly, only to come back for a few seconds and then start to fade again. She recalled Ava's words about not being able to control her visibility very well yet.

"My god," whispered Ava again. Then she caught sight of her own fading body and her head snapped up to look straight at Natalie. "I have to go."

"Where to?" asked Natalie.

Ava did not answer immediately. "I don't know where it is. It's just—a place. I go there when I'm not here."

"Are you coming back?"

But Ava faded, just like that, the wall behind her suddenly becoming completely visible once more, before she had time to answer. Natalie could only hope that she was going to appear again. All the things she had forgotten that she wanted to say – I love you, mostly – came back to her as soon as Ava had gone.

She looked at the door. She had been planning on going to the library once school was out. She was not going there for herself; she was going there for Cecily. Perhaps, against all odds, there was something in the old library that could help Cecily – that could *save* Cecily. Natalie pushed back the doubt into a dark corner of her mind and headed out.

The shadows were starting to grow longer as she made the trek to Lake Sunflower's old library. It lay in the complete opposite direction from the high school, up on a hill. Beyond it lay the reason for Lake Sunflower's name – the rather large lake. Some genius back in the day had thought the lake resembled a sunflower, and had thus named the town after it.

The library looked as though it had been there since before the naming of the city; there were greens clinging to every inch of the walls, covering it all the way up to the black roof. Natalie thought it looked rather like an old scary castle out of a children's novel, with round towers on each side and dark windows.

Natalie pulled the heavy wooden doors open and stepped inside. She seemed to be the only visitor at the moment. It smelled old and dusty inside, and as she spotted the librarian, Natalie wondered, with a bit of a smile, if it the smell came from her or the library itself. The librarian had more wrinkles than a raisin and her hair was nearly white. Her neat, but ugly, shoes clicked against the granite floor as she came to greet Natalie.

"Hello, dear," she said. "Can I help you with anything?"

Natalie tried her best to smile charmingly. "I'm new here, so I just thought I'd have a look around."

"Oh! Of course," said the librarian happily. She only just reached Natalie's chin; she was tiny. "Have a look around then, have a look around."

The librarian did, thankfully, not seem to remember that Natalie had in fact been there before.

"That in there," the librarian said and pointed to the left section of the building, "is the East Wing. You'll find all the school books there, if you ever need to borrow them. And this," she pointed to the other side, "is the West Wing, where we keep all of our fictional literature. I promise, you'll find a favorite in there."

Natalie smiled once more at the lady librarian. "Thank you. I think I'll start in here, then."

"Just shout if you need me, dear," the librarian said, "and I'll be there in a jiffy."

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by C. Hakansson

She seemed utterly charming, the little old lady, and Natalie held back a chuckle. Then she headed into the West Wing, remembering the words of the ghost writer. She was supposed to find 'the shelf closest to the wall'. Looking around the wing, she realized that that was not a very specific order.

There were rows upon rows of book shelves, all filled to the brim with books of all sizes and colors. Some were old and rather dusty, others looked new. However, there were at least four different shelves that were 'close to the wall' – it all depended on which wall one meant.

Natalie sighed – she supposed she would have to try them all.

As she positioned her by the closest shelf that was closest to the wall, she wondered about the next step of her instructions – 'use magic to get in'. Natalie frowned. Was she supposed to say a magic word? Do a spell of some kind? And what was she looking for, anyway?

Pushing her annoyance to the side, Natalie focused on Cecily and wanting to help her – that was, after all, why she was doing this to begin with. She focused on the image of a healthy Cecily, laughing and running around in a field of flowers. She felt the warm feeling of good healing magic flow through her, emanating from the necklace.

She opened her eyes, not sure what to expect.

The shelf before her looked exactly the same as it had before. Nothing had appeared, or disappeared; the books were where they had been before, with the layer of dust on them.

Natalie sighed and moved to the next shelf, on the opposite side. She went through exactly the same process as she called forth her magic, and her necklace glowed softly in the rather dark library. Still, nothing happened.

She wondered if trusting the ghost writer was a good idea or not. Perhaps he, or she, was not someone nice. Then again, the person was trying to help her save Cecily, so there must be some good at least. The person might just enjoy sending her vague clues of what she was supposed to do, so that she felt stupid for a while. The person might find that fun.

Either way, she made her way over to the third corner where the shelf stood close to the walls. It was the darkest of the four, with no window behind spilling light onto the shelf.

Immediately, she sensed something different about it. She was not sure what it was, but there was definitely *something*. Looking at the books standing on the shelves, she realized that she was, fittingly enough, in the fantasy section. There were a few book she recognized, that she had read when she was younger and she smiled at the fond memories.

Then she focused once more on Cecily and the wish to see her well.

She had a feeling that it would work this time.

10.

Natalie could not believe her eyes.

The world before had changed in an instant – the shelf with the dusty books had soundlessly split in two, revealing before her a long, dwindling staircase. It was made out of large blocks of stone, and looked quite uneven but sturdy.

Natalie glanced around. There was no one there. The lanes between the large shelves were completely empty.

Slowly, she made her way down the stairs. There was no handle so she treaded carefully; the staircase was steep and she did not want to fall. Though the staircase lead downwards and no light shone behind her through any window, the passage was dimly lit. Once she had gone down far enough to not see the opening back to the library anymore, she saw the reason; a three-armed candelabrum burned quietly in a small pocket in the wall.

She reached the bottom of the stairs, carefully treading onto the dark floor. The musky, heavy air felt like no one had been there in years. Considering how she had found the place, Natalie believed that to be entirely possible.

Nonetheless, she said, “Hello?”

There was a tiny, tiny window at the other end of the room. It, together with the candelabrum, lit the room only just enough for Natalie to make out the contours of bookshelves lining the walls, and shadowed items strewn across the place.

She took another tentative step further into the room and—

“Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Natalie swirled around and screamed. A huge man with a beard and glowing red eyes stood behind her, looking furious. Natalie scrambled backwards, terrified. She stumbled over one of the dark pieces that was standing on the floor, and crashed into the bookshelf. It gave a great shudder and several of the books moved, but only one managed to fall out of its place and hit Natalie hard on the head.

The enormous man – his feet were on the ground and his head was touching the ceiling, and he was nearly as wide as he was tall – looked surprised.

Natalie stared at him, her whole body shaking, completely terrified. The man’s red eyes, still glowing in the dimly lit room, rested upon her.

They gaped silently at each other for several moments, before the red-eyed man said, “Oh, sorry.”

“E-excuse me?” Natalie asked, her voice trembling with fear. In the back of her head, the thought crossed her mind: she should probably be gathering magic to be able to defend herself – but she could not think clearly at the moment, much less defend herself. Her heart tried to beat its way out of her chest.

The man chortled, loudly enough for Natalie to draw back further, pressing herself against the bookshelf behind her. Her head ached slightly from the place where the book had hit her.

“I didn’t mean for you to get hurt,” said the red-eyed man.

Then something strange happened. Before her eyes, the man shrank, both lengthwise and widthwise. The clothes shrank with him, until only a sliver of the man who had appeared before her remained. The beard was still there, rather bushy and long, but it hung from a rather slim, older man.

He reached out his hand to her, but then shook his head and took it back. “Silly me, still think I can help.”

Natalie was still on the ground, shaking. She knew she would probably be better off standing up, from a protection view, but she could not make her limbs work.

The man looked a bit concerned. “My, my, I frightened you for real, didn’t I? Well, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. Or, well, perhaps I did, but it’s only for fun. I so rarely get visitors, you know.”

He looked like he was in his sixties, though between the beard and the strange red eyes, Natalie could not quite bring herself to take in enough details about him to make a truly informed guess. She wondered if he was a powerful Wielder as well – he had to be, considering how he had just changed his appearance.

“Now, do you speak?” asked the man. He appeared curious about her.

“I—I—” said Natalie, trying to make her tongue work. “Who are you?”

“Jules Sihera,” the red-eyed man said. “Keeper of this sorry old place.”

“Keeper?” repeated Natalie. She dared to take her eyes off him to glance around. She still could not make out much more of what the place was, than a minute ago when she had first stepped down here.

“Yes,” said Jules Sihera, “Keeper. Protect the things down here.”

“So—you live here?” asked Natalie. It did not seem like a particularly comfortable place to live – Natalie could see no bed and no kitchen, or any other necessity. Then again, there might be a hidden door somewhere.

Jules Sihera chortled again. “Yes, live here, you might say that.”

Natalie bit her lip. “And you’re not going to kill me for being here?”

The smile on his face was almost affectionate. “No, I most certainly am not. Like I said, I rarely get visitors. When I heard you coming, I just had to scare you. But anyone who can get here has a right to be here, that’s the rule, isn’t it?”

Natalie did not know of a rule at all, so she did not answer. Gingerly, she got to her feet, and placed back the book that had fallen on its rightful shelf. She still kept rather a close watch on Jules Sihera, in case he was lying and only pretending to not want to kill her. It did not appear to be the case, but one never knew.

“I’m not sure why I’m here,” Natalie said.

“Really?” asked Jules Sihera. “I thought you’d know exactly why you were here. Takes some knowledge to just get here, don’t it?”

Natalie did not answer. It had taken knowledge, but the knowledge had not been hers. Everything had been told to her.

“Well, never mind that – we’ll just see what the Script says,” Jules Sihera said.

Natalie’s eyebrows rose. “You have a Script Magia down here?”

“Of course.”

Natalie decided to be quiet. Jules Sihera already seemed a slight bit suspicious of her and although she had nothing to hide, Natalie thought it might be better to pretend to know things from now on.

They walked over to the side opposite from the staircase. Natalie could make out a shape in the darkness and as they came closer, she saw that the shape was in fact a pedestal of sorts. It looked to be made out of boxes simply stacked on top of one another, but it did the trick. On the top box lay an old-looking book.

Natalie recalled the first Script Magia she had ever seen – Cecily’s Script, in Ramon’s hands just before he burned it. The book now laying before her was much older than the one Cecily had owned – every single page of this book was worn and fringed. Natalie could see this even as the book lay closed before her. The cover of it was made of leather, also looking beaten by time.

Natalie reached out to touch the Script.

Before she had a chance to lay so much as a fingertip on it, it flew open. Natalie pulled back her hand with a gasp.

The layer of dust that had been on the boxes became a cloud that made Natalie sneeze. It took nearly a minute before everything had settled enough for Natalie to be able to make out what page the book had landed on.

“The Nebula Medeor’,” she read aloud.

Jules Sihera stared first at the page of the book, then at Natalie. “Oh my. If that’s what you’re after, then I can only wish you luck.”

There was a picture of a stone on the page – Natalie assumed that it was the Nebula Medeor. It was a beautiful stone, with black and white lines crossed its oval shape in odd patterns. It looked shiny and sparkling.

A sense of déjà vu overcame Natalie – she had seen this stone before. Once more, the image of three women accosted her, like a memory from a lifetime ago. The women had something to do with the lovely stone pictured in the book.

‘I have decided to keep it as my own.’

The word echoed through Natalie’s mind. She had heard someone say them. Someone young, a girl, just like herself.

Pulling herself from her strange pseudo memories, Natalie glanced to her side to find Jules Sihera.

“What do you mean, that you can only wish me good luck?” Natalie asked.

Jules Sihera looked at the picture of the stone and then his red eyes rested upon Natalie. “Read the text,” he said, but then continued anyway, “The Nebula was split in pieces. Each piece was hidden and no one knows where. There have been those who’ve tried to find it, but I don’t think anyone succeeded. We’d have heard about that, for sure.”

Natalie squinted at the text. It was hand-written and far from easy to read. On top of that, a part of the text was missing. Someone had ripped out an entire page from the Script Magia and only jagged edges remained.

Natalie read slowly, deciphering the text as she went.

The Winter Legacy: Heritage
by C. Hakansson

Found in France in the fourteenth century, the Nebula Medeor has powerful qualities and can be used to heal that which is broken or sick, though it is also effective for breaking bonds of magic and protect the wearer. It is possible it has other, as of yet undiscovered, qualities.

Little is known about the origin of the stone, though some say it has been around since the creation of this world. The tale of the three sisters who found the stone will be told through generations: The sisters discovered the stone and used it to heal people in their village. The line soon grew long outside the sisters' home and it gave hope to the masses, but in the end, the stone was split in pieces, during a tragic and stormy night. The sisters hid the pieces in hopes of preventing it from being reassembled.

The stone was named the Nebula Medeor – named for its healing powers and its dark lines. Obviously of great power, no one knows—'

The text ended at the end of the page – obviously, the writer had continued on the page that had been torn out. Frustrated, Natalie read on the page that followed, but it was about a red stone that helped fire elementals become more powerful.

Natalie sighed deeply. Helping Cecily seemed more and more hopeless with every second that passed. A stone that had been lost for ages and was, on top of that, in pieces? What chances did Natalie have to find them?

“As I said,” Jules Sihera said, “I can only wish you good luck if that’s what you’re after.”

Natalie nodded unhappily. “I see what you mean.” She paused, looking at the ripped out page for a moment. “If you’re the what-did-you-call-it, *Keeper*, of this place – do you know who took the missing page?”

“I believe the children got to the book before I had a chance to stop them,” Jules Sihera said.

Natalie raised an eyebrow at him, but he did not continue.

He asked, “Why are you looking for this stone? Begging for trouble, that is.”

“A friend of mine is very sick,” Natalie said. “I need to help her.”

A crease between his eyebrows appeared. “You know, sometimes it’s just time for people to go.”

“No!” said Natalie forcefully, glaring hotly at Jules Sihera. “She’s fifteen years old – she’s *not* supposed to die!”

He held up his hands in peace. “All right, all right! I’m just saying, that stone is an awfully big something to try to find. Can be anywhere, and not just in this world, I’m sure.”

Natalie wanted to slam her head into the wall, for of course Jules Sihera was right – not only was there the regular world, but the entire dimension where her grandmother and the Diophane, and no doubt others, lived, could hide the pieces as well.

“And I’m guessing you can’t help me?” asked Natalie.

Jules Sihera looked rather shocked to be asked. Then she shook his head vehemently. “No, no, can’t do that. Can’t leave. There are rules, you know.”

“You can’t leave here?” Natalie asked, rather horrified. This did not seem like a place one wanted to be held prisoner in. “Why?”

“Those are the rules,” Jules Sihera said. “Now, you might want to go back upstairs before old lady Ruth comes looking for you.”

Natalie could only assume that ‘old lady Ruth’ was the ancient librarian that she had met upstairs. Natalie could not help but ask, “Does she know that this place exists?”

Jules Sihera chuckled. “Goodness, no! Takes good care of her books, old lady Ruth does, but magic’s not for her.”

Natalie smiled slightly with an accompanying nod. She did not quite listen to him. Her mind had filled with questions – if the ghost writer had sent her here, then he or she must mean to say that Natalie would be able to find it. Natalie, however, simply could not see how it could be done. Others had apparently tried before her – what made the ghost writer think that Natalie could do it?

It felt like she had taken a heap of mental beating – the only thing she felt confident about at the moment was that finding the pieces was totally and completely impossible. It was not even just the one piece to find, but several, and Natalie did not even know how many!

While she raged on internally, a small part of her still protested. The small part kept sending images of a very ill Cecily for her to see and think about, trying desperately to motivate Natalie to try to find the stone anyway, no matter the impossibility of it all.

Natalie sighed.

“Thank you for your help, sir,” she said softly to Jules Sihera.

Jules Sihera nodded and smiled at her. He looked far more pleasant now than when Natalie had first laid eyes upon him, although his red eyes freaked Natalie out.

“You’re welcome,” said Jules Sihera and continued with the burning question, “Are you going to try to find it?”

Natalie glanced at the picture of the shimmering stone in the book. She remembered seeing it in a girl’s hand, its raw power drawing her in without pardon. She knew that if she did find the stone, it would be able to help Cecily.

She nodded, albeit a bit hesitantly. She was still rather certain that she would fail spectacularly, but then at least she had tried. If she did nothing and simply watched Cecily become sicker and finally die without doing something, she would never be able to forgive herself.

“Yes,” she said to Jules Sihera. “I’m going to try.”

He looked almost proud. There was a smile on his face and he said, “Well then – I wish you good luck.”

Natalie smiled at the only thing he could give her.

“Thank you.”

Then she crossed the floor, heading back towards the stairs leading up to the library.

“Bye,” she said to Jules Sihera, who simply waved back.

Natalie turned towards the staircase and, with the help of the soft light of the candelabrum, she made her way back up to the regular world.

11.

Natalie pretended not to notice when Cecily returned to school the next day, looking even more drawn than before. Cecily did not want her pity and there were no words to make her feel better, so Natalie left it alone although pain stabbed her heart at the hollow look in Cecily's eyes.

"Here," Natalie said instead, handing Cecily the notes Nathan Reynell had given her the day before. "I'm surprised the notes aren't sprinkled with little red hearts."

She wanted to tease her, to pretend that things were normal, and she was rewarded with a slight blush rising on Cecily's cheeks.

"Thanks," she said, grabbing the papers quickly.

"Do you like him?" Natalie asked.

Cecily glared at Natalie and Natalie was glad to see some fire burning in there. "He's just a friend."

Natalie chuckled. "I'm sure. But I think he wants more."

Cecily shook her head at Natalie with a small smile gracing her lips. "I don't know."

Natalie wondered if Cecily was blind – had she not seen the way Nathan looked at her? Then again, it was often the hardest for the two involved to recognize their feelings, whilst everyone else around them saw it at the first glance.

It was a lovely thing to think of, Cecily in love and being loved. In the midst of everything that was going on at the moment, Natalie needed lovely thoughts. They kept her going through classes and when she sat with Cecily during lunch and breaks. Cecily barely ate.

"The Homecoming dance is on Friday," said Cecily instead of eating her lunch, looking at one of the huge banners hanging over the cafeteria. There were balloons hanging from the banner and glitter everywhere.

"Still not going," said Natalie. She felt no more like going now than the last time she and Cecily had discussed the dance – it was quite possible that she felt like going even less.

"I am," said Cecily, studying her sandwich with great interest.

Natalie was startled by Cecily's sudden admission. "Huh?"

"Nathan asked me and I said yes," Cecily said. "I just—I want to go to a high school dance before—and he's sweet, he really is."

She seemed a bit nervous, as though Natalie would not approve of her going. She could not be farther from what Natalie was feeling – it was simply wonderful.

Natalie smiled widely. "That's great!"

Cecily smiled shyly. "You really think so?"

"Yes," Natalie nodded. "I'm sure you'll have a great time together. And then you'll have to tell me everything afterwards."

Cecily chuckled and her tired eyes twinkled. "Perhaps not."

"Oh, you cheat," said Natalie, laughing.

They both needed the laughs. There had not been many in the last few weeks and Natalie doubted there would be all that many more in the months to come. All the more reason to treasure the moments.

That night, the ghost writer reappeared in Natalie's dream. The memories that had been just out of her grasp came back to her: the figure, the warm sand between her toes, the three women and the beautiful stone they had found. It was all as clear in her mind as if it had just happened a moment ago.

"Welcome back."

Natalie expected the hooded figure standing behind her when she turned. She remembered the voice, both male and female at the same time.

"Thank you," Natalie said.

She was thankful. Being back meant she would receive more clues for finding the stone – the Nebula Medeor – and that brought her closer to healing Cecily. Saving Cecily.

"If you wish to heal your friend, you are to find the stone."

Natalie cocked her head to the side. "I understood as much. But where can I find it? The pieces? I was at the library but it didn't say. Someone had ripped out a page."

The figure did not respond. Its voice was calm and steady. "The stone has great power."

Natalie felt agitation grow at the lack of answer. The figure would only answer what it felt like – it had been that way since it had first made Natalie write, *'You are powerful.'*

"Then why haven't you collected it?" Natalie asked. The figure before her seemed most powerful – this was the second time Natalie had been brought here and the figure had controlled her arm enough to write complete sentences – so why would it not want the powers of such a stone?

"I have no use of it," said the figure. "I don't walk your earth."

"Then why do you want to help me? Was this what you meant by worthy?" Natalie asked. She had more questions – what was the figure then, if it did not walk the earth and why had not someone else already taken the stone if it was so powerful? – but she refrained from asking. She would not get the answers she was looking for anyway.

"Yes, you are worthy now," the figure said. "Worthy and able to get the pieces."

"Good," Natalie said. "So where are they?"

"Let us start by continuing our journey," said the figure.

Natalie wanted to scream, 'no, I don't want to continue our journey, I want to know where the pieces are', but she did not. It would have no effect anyway; the figure seemed to be deaf except when Natalie asked the right questions. Frustrated, Natalie squeezed her eyes shut as the brilliant light of the sun engulfed her.

When the light faded, Natalie was back in the same village she had been in once before. Like the last time, no one seemed able to see her though many passed by. A man even walked straight through her.

Birds twittered happily as they flew across the blue skies. The sun's position suggested it was late afternoon and there were villagers everywhere. The hut where the sisters lived was the busiest.

"Next, please!"

The youngest girl – Sandrine – leaned through the doorway and called to the long line of people standing outside. The one at the very front of the line, an old woman with a crooked back and a heavy limp, made her way into the sisters' home. Sandrine closed the door behind them.

Floating forward, Natalie did not fight as she was taken into the hut.

It was as dingy inside as Natalie would have imagined; the floor was merely dirt stomped together through years and years of walking, and there were three beds made of hay.

"Come," said the youngest sister, motioning for the old lady to come rest atop a large slab of stone. It was not entirely unlike the Stone of Sitis in her grandmother's Mithridates.

The two older sisters stood on the other side of the large stone.

"Lay down," Sandrine instructed the lady and then Sandrine helped her because the old woman had trouble bending her body.

Sandrine backed away.

The round stone they had found, the Nebula Medeor, was still whole and shining beautifully in the oldest sister's hand. She held it out towards the woman, who looked only a bit worried. She craned her neck as much as her hurting body would allow, to see what was going on.

It was not much to see, at first. The sisters did not speak, nor did they move. They simply stood in a triangle around the old woman, the oldest sister reaching out her hands towards the center, the stone laying calmly in her hands.

Then, the stone began to shimmer. Natalie glanced around and frowned briefly, wondering if the hut had become darker since she had entered. The glow of the stone now seemed to be the only light source.

"Oh," the woman sighed. Her eyelids slid close and the lines on her face evened out as she relaxed.

Natalie watched, taking everything in with great hunger. She imagined herself in the oldest sister's place and Cecily in place of the old woman. She could see Cecily laying there, calmly trusting in Natalie, her dark hair spilling down both sides of the uneven stone bed. Cecily would have her eyes closed; she would not have craned her neck to see what was going on. She would have known Natalie was doing everything she could to save her.

There was a flash and the room exploded in light. It could have lasted for a millisecond, or perhaps for hours; Natalie could not tell. They were amidst the stars all of a sudden, galaxies passing them by and breathtaking beauty leaving them wanting more. Everything moved around them, and when Natalie saw the look on the old woman's face, it was pure bliss.

She saw Cecily there, the dark shadows of illness washed away as though they had never been there at all. She saw the same smile grace Cecily's lips.

Then the light was gone and the hut returned to normal, the sounds of the world outside once more making their way through the walls and light spilling in here and there.

Sandrine and her sisters all panted, as though they had just stopped running from something. Natalie realized she had not been paying attention to what they had been doing while the lights had played around them – was it important?

“Heavens all mighty,” said the old woman, tentatively flexing her wrists and sitting up. “I cannot believe it.”

She looked up at the three young women, who smiled back at her. They looked pleased.

“Believe it,” said the middle sister.

The old lady stood, treading gently over the floor. The look on her face was a mixture of amazement and uncertainty – would this truly last?

“You three are sent by God,” said the old lady. She took them each by hand, bowing her head to them, and then she exited the hut.

The sisters looked at each other. Natalie noted that they all looked rather pale. What did the healing take out of them? It did not matter to Natalie – she would do it for Cecily no matter the cost – but she was still curious.

“It is too much,” said the middle sister. “I cannot keep doing this – can you not feel the strain?”

The eldest sister nodded gravely. “I can. I have little energy left.”

“If not quit completely,” the middle sister said, “then we should not do as much.”

“But there are people needing our help!” said Sandrine. “Have you seen the line outside our door? They ask for us in villages miles away!”

“It is better for a few to have our help, rather than none,” the eldest sister said. Her voice and eyes were stern as she gazed at her younger sister. “The stone is not only for good.”

“How can you say that?” asked Sandrine. “After all it’s done, how can you claim it is not good?”

“Look upon your sister!” said the eldest sister. “Do you think she seems well?”

Natalie and Sandrine both turned their heads to look at the middle sister. Natalie had to agree with the eldest sister: the girl looked pale and her eyes looked dull. A light sheen of perspiration gleamed on her forehead.

“Perhaps she is getting sick,” Sandrine said, shrugging. “This stone heals, it does not harm.”

The eldest sister placed her hands upon her hips. “How do you know?”

“Have you seen the miracles it has worked?” asked Sandrine, exasperated. She threw her hands into the air. “Never you mind. Tell those people to leave. Say that we are tired; tell them we will not heal them today. Tell them to return tomorrow, if they can manage to walk all the way here then.”

Her anger was obvious and when she finished her rant, Sandrine stormed out of the hut. The two remaining sisters glanced at each other. Perhaps they had been having the same argument before; Natalie did not know and could not quite read the looks shared between the sisters.

The scene began to fade like it had the last time. The edges became blurry and everything turned white for a while – Natalie could not tell how long – but she was not returned to sleep’s blissful imaginative dreams. Instead, she stood back in the desert.

She turned to face the figure, whom she knew would be standing behind her. She wished there was a face to look at, eyes to search, but there was still nothing.

“It’s lovely to see the history of this thing,” Natalie said, “but what’s the point?”

The figure was standing rather closer to her this time. Natalie could see the fine patterns woven into the fabric with golden thread.

“The point is for you to see the Nebula’s history,” said the figure.

Natalie felt as frustrated as Sandrine had been just a moment ago. She wanted to yell at the irritating figure before her – she did not care about the stone’s history, she cared about the stone’s present. She wanted to know where it was now.

“It is important for you to see what the stone can do,” the figure said. “The qualities it holds and even the things that might scare you.”

“What do you mean, scare me?” Natalie asked.

The figure did not answer her; it merely said, “Are you willing to find it?”

Natalie did not hesitate. “I want to find the stone.”

She was set in her decision – she did not care how much it drained her, she would use the stone to heal Cecily, if she could only find the pieces. Besides, she was only healing one person where the sisters had been healing many every day – it could not possibly be as hard on Natalie as it had been on them.

“Good,” the figure said evenly. “I had hoped you would still want to continue.”

“But I don’t know where to go or what to look for,” Natalie said. “How many pieces are there?”

“You will find out.”

Natalie rather felt like strangling the figure. Why could it not ever directly reply to her questions? She fired off more:

“Where are they? Why’s it broken?”

The figure stood still before her. Perhaps it was contemplating her questions, though Natalie had no hopes for it to answer anything but the things the figure wished to tell her.

Natalie’s toes dug into the sand. There was a small, beautiful flower standing just next to her, thorny and pale from the harsh sunlight. Pale pink lines ran through the leaves, like a fine net. Natalie studied it as she waited for the figure’s response.

She heard the figure take a breath – which meant it actually breathed, something of which Natalie had not been sure – and then came the answer.

“The first piece is right here.”

Everything became black for only just a second, and Natalie awoke with her breath caught in her throat – and sand between her toes.

12.

This time, Natalie had no trouble remembering the dream. Everything that had happened felt as clear as if it had happened for real. Briefly, she wondered if it had to do with her being unconscious during the first dream and only asleep during the second, but her thoughts did not linger on it for long. Instead, the sentence the cloaked figure had uttered filled her mind.

“The first piece is right here.”

Right there – in the dream? Could real things exist in a dream? Perhaps she ought to even question if it had truly been a dream – each time she was there, she felt perfectly aware. When she dreamed real dreams, she hardly ever remembered more than tiny bits and pieces. Could it be a separate dimension, a world that was not-quite-real? Her grandmother lived in a second universe, an alternate reality. Considering that, it might not be entirely impossible that the dream took place in something like that, but it still did not explain how Natalie was supposed to get the stone out of there. The sand had managed – she had brushed it off her feet, staring in wonder, and saved it in a small glass.

“You don’t look particularly interested.”

Cecily’s soft voice broke through Natalie’s thoughts. Cecily stood in front of her bed, on which Natalie sat. She looked stunning. She had curled her long brown hair and it fell gently down her back, framing her face. Her blue dress had the color of a summer sky; light yet vivid.

“I’m sorry,” Natalie said. “You were saying?”

Cecily ignored her question. “What were you thinking about?”

For a moment, Natalie wondered if she should tell Cecily. Then she decided no – she had no idea if she would ever find the stone or if it would work the way she hoped, and giving Cecily false hope was simply cruel. She trusted Cecily, but she would never want to hurt her.

“Nothing important,” Natalie said. “I just get lost thinking about Ramon, and my grandmother, and magic and everything sometimes.”

Cecily smiled. She did not have much make-up on but it still made a difference as Cecily very rarely used it. “Of course.”

“But you were saying?” said Natalie once more, turning the attention back to Cecily.

“Oh, I was just talking nonsense, about the dance.”

“It’s not nonsense,” Natalie said, standing up. “You look gorgeous and I hope you have the time of your life there.”

Cecily looked at her briefly and in the dark eyes, Natalie could see the response neither would voice – yes, because you might not have your life much longer.

Natalie sighed and pushed a strand of hair out of Cecily’s face.

“I hope it’s nice.”

“How could it not be?” Natalie asked. “You look like a princess. Cinderella, or something.”

Cecily smiled. “So I was an maid before, sleeping in the ashes?”

“Of course,” Natalie grinned.

The doorbell rang. Cecily glanced at the clock on the wall.

“Right on time.”

Cecily turned back to the mirror, appearing self-conscious for once. “Do I look all right?”

Natalie shook her head with a laugh. “All right? You’ll be the belle of the ball.”

Cecily blushed pink.

Natalie walked before Cecily downstairs, to where Cecily’s father and her date Nathan waited. He looked nice; the tux he wore was only a moment too big, but he wore it proudly. He had combed back his hair.

She glanced at Nathan as Cecily made her way down the stairs. His chin dropped on the floor and Natalie hid a smile.

Cecily looked like a goddess. The gown floated around her as though she was treading on small clouds rather than walking down the stairs. She wore small, pretty sandals that glittered in silver.

“You—you look fantastic,” said Nathan when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

Cecily smiled. “Thank you. You look great, too.”

Nathan preened. He handed her a dark blue flower on a bed of green, and she fastened it around her wrist. Nathan had a matching flower in his breast pocket.

Mr. Cordell looked a bit teary at the sight of his daughter. “You look so much like your mother.”

Cecily smiled at him and hugged him tightly.

Natalie grabbed the camera from Mr. Cordell and started snapping away photos – photos of Cecily and Nathan, of Cecily and her father and in the end, when Mr. Cordell pried the camera away from Natalie, a picture or two with Cecily and Natalie together.

Her father had gone all out on his daughter’s lovely evening. Outside, a limousine waited for the couple. The chauffeur opened the door for the two and Cecily waved goodbye to her father and Natalie, her smile the widest Natalie had ever seen.

“Didn’t you want to go?” asked Mr. Cordell as the limousine headed off down the street.

Natalie shrugged. “I’d have liked to be there to watch her have a great time.”

Mr. Cordell nodded. “Wouldn’t we all like that.”

He sounded tired. It was a rare occasion that he did not sound tired, although he acted well around his daughter. The worry took the energy out of him.

Natalie said goodbye to him, still smiling at the thought of Cecily on her way to the dance. She could picture her and Nathan dancing together – Natalie felt certain that Cecily danced well, although she had never seen her dance – and she imagined the envious looks of the people around them.

She walked down Haven Ave, where Cecily and her father lived, towards her home. Darkness fell quickly around her. Natalie’s thoughts slowly turned back to what her mind had been on for the last two days - *“The first piece is right here.”*

How was she to find the stone in the dream? She felt far from certain how the place worked – did the figure decide what happened there, or did she simply decide when the tale of the sisters would continue? Were they in a real place, or was it a dream landscape that the figure had

formed? If the figure controlled that world and the stone hid in there, why not simply give Natalie the stone? If it was another reality, how on earth could she possibly get the stone?

She wanted to talk to someone, but who? Cecily was out of the question. Natalie would not tell her until she had the stone in hand. Her grandmother? No, that would be very strange. Richard? Yes, Natalie could see that go over incredibly well – ‘yes, by the way, magic exists and I want to find a stone to heal my dying friend’. Hardly a good idea.

The answer appeared next to her.

“I’m getting better at this visibility thing.”

Natalie gasped loudly, pulled back to reality by the sudden appearance of Ava walking beside her. Or floating, as Ava really was, but that was simply a matter of wording.

“You scared me again,” said Natalie, getting her heart rate back to normal.

Ava shrugged. “Yep. Not much to do ‘bout it.”

Natalie shook her head at the ghost, then wondered briefly when she had accepted that Ava was really a ghost rather than a figment of her imagination.

They were silent for a moment when Ava studied the ground, looking sad. “But you know,” said Ava, “you’re the only one who gets scared, because you’re the only one who can see me.”

Natalie frowned. “Have you been to see your parents?”

Ava nodded. “I tried. But they can’t see me, they just walked right through me and they could not hear me even when I screamed at the top of my lungs.”

“I’m sorry.”

She recalled her grandmother’s words - *humans cannot see beings that are magical*. Ghosts must, rather logically, fall under the category of ‘beings that are magical’, although Natalie was not quite sure.

She said as much to Ava, who nodded miserably. “I kind of figured. So I guess you’re stuck with me. Not much point in haunting people who can’t see me.”

Natalie wished she could reach out and hug Ava, but she knew her hands would pass straight through Ava’s incorporeal body. It would probably make them both even sadder if she tried.

“You’re more than welcome to haunt me,” Natalie said instead, “although you can’t expect me to not jump a mile in the air when you just appear.”

“Yeah, I know,” Ava said, her eyes glistening with tears. “So, um, what are you doing tonight?”

The change of subject was welcome. Natalie did not know how to comfort her friend as she could not possibly understand how much Ava had lost.

“I just said bye to Cecily,” Natalie said and she smiled at this. “She’s at the Homecoming dance – with a date!”

“Ooh,” said Ava, “who’s the date?”

“A boy in her science class,” Natalie said.

“Of course,” Ava added with a snigger before Natalie had a chance to continue. “Brainy people go together.”

“His name is Nathan Reynell.”

Ava stopped for a moment, then smiled bigger. “I should have guessed.”

“Do you know him?”

Ava shrugged, “He’s the one kid Eadan always picked on even more than me. Nathan was always such a geek with big glasses and odd clothes, and he’s really smart. It was kind of natural for him to get on Eadan’s nerves.” Ava made a face. “I think Eadan even broke Nathan’s glasses once, when Nathan got another one of his perfect scores. Eadan lured him outside and then he and his cronies beat Nathan up.”

Natalie was shocked. “What happened after that?”

“Nothing,” Ava said, anger flashing in her eyes. “Nathan’s mom wanted to have Eadan expelled, but it turned out that there were absolutely no witnesses to the beating – even though half the school had been there watching.”

Natalie felt sick. No wonder Nathan had been nervous when he had started talking to Natalie – he had had no idea if she would be nice to him, or if she was another mean bully. After all, most of the school’s students were under Eadan’s thumb.

“I’m going to teach that bastard a lesson sometime,” Natalie said, eyes narrowing.

“I’ll help, any way I can.”

During the short silence of shared, pleased smiles, Natalie came to think of the help she had wanted when Ava had appeared. She needed someone to talk to about the stone, about the Nebula. Ava was the perfect person to do so with.

“There’s something else I need to discuss with you,” Natalie said. “Are you able to stay for a while this time?”

Ava nodded thoughtfully. “Like I said, I think I’m getting better with this visibility thing. It’s just a bit tiresome to stay for too long, and then I have to go back and get some more energy.” She frowned. “Time doesn’t move there like it does here, I think. It always feels like I’m there for just a minute, and then days have passed here.”

“I see,” said Natalie softly, because she could not come up with anything else to say.

A moment’s awkward silence followed.

“What did you want to tell me?” Ava asked.

“It’s about – well, it’s about a lot of things, really, but mostly it’s a stone,” Natalie said. “And magic, of course, and a few sisters that I’m not sure about yet...”

The two wandered back to Natalie’s house as Natalie spoke. She told Ava of the dreams she had had, the Nebula Medeor, the sisters, and her hopes to heal Cecily with the stone in the end. The long story left her hoping that she had not forgotten any vital part. As they entered the house, Natalie stayed silent until she reached her room, as to not draw attention to the fact that she was speaking to no one at all.

Sitting back on her bed in her room, Natalie finished up her tale.

“...so now I have absolutely no idea of where to go from here,” Natalie said. “I mean, ‘*The first piece is right here*’ – right. Am I truly stupid to not understand that?”

Ava frowned. “Well, I would love to help you, ‘cause it sounds like a fabulous stone to have, but I don’t see that I can. I can’t enter dreams or do anything like that, so I guess you’ll just have to reason with the figure type?”

“But I can’t reason with it! It’s completely unreasonable. It just says the things it has planned to say and nothing else.”

She had tried enough times to know this. She sighed.

Ava looked thoughtful. “You know, there is the other possibility as far as the meaning of that sentence goes.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, ‘*right here*’ might mean in the dream – but what the figure has been showing you the desert because it’s a real place and that’s where the stone is?”

Ava appeared rather hesitant to even present the idea, as though she thought it would sound foolish.

Natalie frowned for a moment before responding. “I suppose it’s possible. But perhaps that’s even worse. I mean, how many deserts are there in the world? How am I supposed to know the one where the stone is?”

“Good point,” Ava said. She made a face. “I was only trying to help.”

“Oh, I know,” Natalie exclaimed. “And I’m very grateful for that. It’s just – impossible.”

She closed her eyes briefly, recalling the image of the desert. The mountain on which she had been standing, the valley below it. It had not rained in a long time. An odd, pink flower grew at her feet, but other than that, there was absolutely nothing special about the place. The figure had not even shown her the spot ‘*right here*’ spoke of.

She felt a chill and when she looked up, she realized Ava had been attempting to pat her shoulder. Ava quickly masked her crestfallen look and pretended that she had done nothing of the sort. Natalie did not comment.

“You need to keep your spirits up,” Ava said. “Although it’d be nice to have some ghostly company, I don’t want it to be Cecily.”

Natalie smiled, though the veil of hopelessness hung silently before her. She thought of Cecily at the ball, dancing the night away with her date, and she hoped that she had a good time. Pain stabbed at her heart as though she had been shot, when she thought that if she did not find the stone, there was a possibility that Cecily might not live to see another dance.

“I have to go now.”

Ava’s voice brought her back to the present.

“Okay. I hope I’ll see you soon,” she said, more a question than a statement.

“I hope so too,” Ava said.

She disappeared slowly, like a cloud whisked away by the wind. Natalie felt suddenly cold, standing by herself in her dark room. Despair weighed heavily on her.

13.

Cecily could not keep from bubbling on and on about the wonders of the dance. Natalie felt rather like a zombie, walking next to her. She giggled uncharacteristically and spoke excitedly, in a display of happiness that should not be possible at that hour of the morning, Natalie thought sleepily – especially on a *Monday* morning. Still, she kept quiet because Cecily deserved her happiness.

The fifteen minute break between second and third period allowed them to go get their books out of their lockers. As the two stood there, Natalie saw Nathan approach behind Cecily. He tapped her carefully on the shoulder, looking terribly nervous.

Cecily turned and her smile grew at the sight of Nathan. “Hi!”

Nathan looked tongue-tied and Natalie had to bite the inside of her mouth not to laugh. She wondered how the nervous Nathan had managed to ask Cecily to the dance at all.

Nathan stammered out a, “H-hi,” to Cecily and then held out a rose that he had been hiding behind his back. The dark red color and the long stem with a single leaf made for a beautiful flower.

“Oh, thank you, Nathan,” Cecily said. Her cheeks colored as she accepted it.

Natalie turned back to her locker. The uneasy display of affection between the two did not need a gawking onlooker. Instead, she busied herself with filling her bag with the necessary books for the day, forcing herself not to listen to Nathan’s nervous stuttering and Cecily’s soft words. She would likely receive a word-by-word recount later anyway.

“Aw, look at that – little nerd A and little nerd B, giving each other flowers and blushing beet red. It’s almost too cute for words.”

Natalie did not need to see him to know who had spoken. She glanced at Cecily and Nathan, who had stopped talking to each other and now had their eyes trained upon Eadan.

“What, no answer?” Eadan continued. “No stu-stu-stuttering reply? No witty comeback?”

Anger rose in Natalie. An echo of her grandmother’s words – *do not use your powers to harm another* – passed through her but she did not pay the words any heed. Without a moment’s hesitation, driven by the resentment she felt for Eadan, she drew upon her magic. His words would come back to haunt him, immediately, she thought, as she imagined him as beet red as he had described Cecily. She smiled wickedly.

She passed her fingers over her mother’s necklace, feeling the magic sparkle at her fingertips. Then she allowed it to leave her, knowing it would find the correct target. It would not be long. She imagined she could feel the magic take effect, spreading.

Eadan sniggered at them. “You really are pathetic. You—”

“Chase—”

Natalie heard one of his cronies, and he sounded a bit worried.

“What?” snarled Eadan.

“You—” said the crony, but he hesitated before continuing.

“Oh my god!” shrieked Eadan’s girlfriend, Lindsay Weaver, suddenly. “Chase, you’re turning purple!”

“What are you talking about?” Eadan sneered at her. Then he obviously caught sight of himself – perhaps his hands – and with a horrified scream, he stuttered, “What—you—impossible!”

Natalie never turned around to admire her work. She did not have to. Besides, she could feel Eadan’s scorching glare burn into the back of her head just fine without having to meet it. He knew it had been her, although he could not know how. He screamed, and she felt the air around her shake with anger rather than magic. She heard Eadan, Lindsay and the rest scurry away, leaving the hallway empty. She smiled contentedly to herself, finishing putting her books away.

“Natalie!”

Cecily was upset. Natalie had never heard her sound angry before but when she turned and faced her friend, she knew that Cecily thought she had done something wrong.

“What?” asked Natalie.

Cecily grabbed a hold of Natalie’s arm and dragged her away from Nathan, who stood staring behind them. Natalie could have pulled away from Cecily’s rather weak hold at any time, but she did not. She could see no point – it would probably anger Cecily more, and Natalie wanted to find out sooner rather than later what had upset Cecily. She had a sneaking suspicion.

“You do not use magic to hurt people,” Cecily said. A fire in her eyes told Natalie just how furious she was.

“I didn’t hurt him. I only turned him red. It’ll pass.”

It would. Magic cast at the heat of a moment would not last forever, at least not hers, at least not yet.

“That qualifies as hurting.”

“I didn’t hear you complain when I turned them ugly for a while and gave them colds – wasn’t that hurting?”

Cecily narrowed her eyes. “Yes, it was – but you were grieving at the time, so we let it slide.”

“We?” Natalie asked suspiciously. “What do you mean, ‘we’?”

“I,” Cecily said. “I let it slide.”

“No,” Natalie said. “You said ‘we’.”

Cecily sighed. “Your grandmother wrote to me and asked how you were doing after Ava died. I told her what you did—”

“What I did?” repeated Natalie. “*What I did?* He said that Ava’s disappearance was a ‘good riddance!’”

“Like I said, we let it slide.”

“What are you talking about? Why are you talking to my grandmother?” Natalie said.

“She wrote to me and she was worried about you.” Cecily sounded exasperated. “We simply talked—”

Natalie felt her cheeks become hot with anger. “Behind my back!”

“No, it wasn’t like that, we were simply afraid that you’d—”

The Winter Legacy: Heritage
by C. Hakansson

“That I’d what – get another person killed?” Natalie glared angrily at Cecily, hurt rising like a tidal wave. “We’ll I’m not planning on it.”

“We didn’t think you were, she just wanted to see how you were doing and since you wouldn’t talk to her, she asked me!”

“She never asked me to begin with! And what little she did ask, she didn’t believe my answers!” Natalie cried out. “You are not my goddamn mother! Neither of you are! What I do is none of your business!” Natalie said.

Cecily glared hotly and she crossed her arms across her chest. “It is, when you misuse magic and—”

The bell rang.

Natalie’s chest heaved with irritation. She glared down at Cecily and for once, she appreciated the fact that she stood taller than her. Cecily looked fiercely up at her with heat Natalie had never seen before. Students passed around them, glancing their way but they did not dare, or care, to interfere. Lucky them, Natalie thought furiously. She did not need anyone else messing about with her life.

Finally, Natalie broke the staring contest. Returning to her locker, she grabbed her backpack, slammed the locker door shut and stormed away from Cecily.

Two days passed blessedly Eadan-free. Natalie did not notice, because the two days had also passed without a single word spoken between her and Cecily. Natalie changed her seat in the classes she shared with Cecily, so that they would not be sitting next to each other. Though Cecily looked mostly sad at this, and though Natalie felt a bit childish, she did not bulge – she had done nothing wrong.

Rather, she felt betrayed. Her grandmother and Cecily had been speaking to each other behind her back. They had been talking about her. Who knew what they had discussed? What else had they ‘let slide’? Did they have any other opinions about her actions? About her behavior? Perhaps about her grades, or something else? Natalie sneered bitterly at the thoughts – they probably did. She probably acted the wrong way, did the wrong things, and received grades far too poor for them to be content.

She slumped in her seat, her eyebrows drawn together in an angry frown. She doodled idly as she did more often than not, but no new words had appeared in days. She did not care. She had pushed the thought of the Nebula Medeor out of her mind, together with all thoughts of Cecily.

“Thank you, thank you for your help. I’ll be fine from here on.”

The voice was familiar. Natalie looked up and found her breath catching – Ramon had returned. He looked frail, with sallow skin and shadows beneath his eyes, but he walked on his own. He had said thank you to an older woman, whom Natalie recognized to be one of the counselors.

Ramon – perhaps she ought to call him ‘Mr. Keys’? – let his gaze slide over the class. It settled on Natalie for a moment too long and she turned her stare to her desk, studying the grains of the wood.

“Hello, class,” Ramon said. His voice only barely carried over the classroom. “I hate to disappoint you, but I’m back.”

Natalie glanced around and saw several students smile at the rather sad joke. She kept her own face a stony mask of annoyance and anger, as well as a bit of fear. Though she had quite convinced herself by now that Ramon no longer had come to kill her – he would have surely attempted to do something by now, instead of spending his days in the hospital – his mere presence made her uncomfortable.

“Well, let’s see, Mrs. August has been kind enough to leave some notes here on what you’re supposed to be doing – does everyone have a book to read?”

Most of the students nodded. Natalie did not bother. Her book stood in the bookshelf and if they were supposed to read, she would go get it. Instead, she watched Ramon as he bumbled nervously through the lesson. After a while, his eyes stopped landing on Natalie quite so often and he calmed down. He seemed to pretend that she did not exist.

Not until the bell rang, signaling the end of class, did anything of interest happen.

“That’s it for today,” Ramon said, although they had all already begun packing their things. Then, with a note of apprehension, he added, “Miss Winters, would you mind staying for a moment?”

Natalie did not feel particularly inclined to speak to him. She felt irritated enough already, without the added bonus of Ramon’s bad memory.

“I have class.”

“It wasn’t a suggestion.”

The tone of his voice did not quite match the authority of the words, but Natalie sighed to herself and decided that a detention would make the day even worse.

The last student made his way out the door and Natalie and Ramon stood facing each other silently. Her mind flashed the memories before her – Ramon in his Mithridates, cackling madly and killing Ava with a single burst of power. It made her hands shake, strands of magic passing through her, and she closed her hands into fists, trying to block the memory. She did not want to remember.

He looked at her, eyes dark with flecks of green.

Finally, after a deep breath, Ramon said, “I’m unsure of what to say to you.”

The annoyance that Natalie could reach so easily these days rose to the surface. “Then why are you keeping me here?”

“Do you still claim that I—that I—*killed*—your friend?”

Natalie stared at him. She could not believe that this was happening. Why could he not simply be evil? Then she could throw magic at him, hurt him, make him pay – but this meek, frail version of Ramon did not pose any sort of threat that would make hurting him all right. She could not get her revenge on him.

She sighed, letting her breath out slowly. Some of the annoyance vanished along the way.

“Do you remember what you did in—well, all of September, really?”

She did not know what she would do if he could give her a perfect account of what he had been doing – then she was somehow, some way, mistaken about his identity, and she would have hurt an innocent man.

She need not have worried.

The Winter Legacy: Heritage
by C. Hakansson

“I—no, I don’t.” Ramon’s soft words sounded very hesitant. He seemed nearly broken. “I’ve thought of it since you—since we were at the hospital. I thought of it before as well, and I couldn’t—I only remember flashes. I don’t know of what but—”

A sudden lump formed in Natalie’s throat. She did not want to hear this. She did not want to know that Ramon, the dark and powerful Master Wielder, stood before her with no memory of what he had done. That would mean that she would never be able to get revenge on him. Right now, revenge mattered. It would not bring Ava back to the living, but perhaps it would soothe at least a part of this empty, aching hole in her heart, the place where Ava should be, laughing and happy. Natalie did not want to know that she would never be able to fill that hole with anything but passing time, slowly healing. Right now, healing seemed so far away, and she wanted to fill it with something else.

‘Do not use your powers to harm another.’

She wondered if that rule applied to revenge as well. She suspected it applied even more there.

Students for the next class began spilling inside. The noisy, laughing teenagers talked loudly with each other. Ramon’s eyes stayed on Natalie, searching her for knowledge.

“I have to go,” Natalie said. The bell would sound any second and she would be late for phys ed anyway, but it gave her a way to escape.

“Can you come back after classes?”

Ramon did not ask her as a teacher asking a student. He asked like a lost boy, holding on to the only person he could find that had any sort of answers. She probably did have answers, at least more than Ramon himself had now. Still, she wanted to say no to him. She wanted to scream no, to inflict the same pain on him as he had on her, on Ava, on Ava’s family. He had *killed* her! Murdered her in cold blood – how could Natalie even think about helping him?

“Yes.”

She turned and left, not waiting for his answer. Her heart broke into a million pieces. Had she just betrayed Ava?

The day passed surprisingly quickly. Natalie attempted to focus on her school work and in art, she threw herself into the project. They worked with oil crayons, creating whatever they wanted, and Natalie grabbed the darkest colors she could find. An hour later, a dark angel stared back at her, his dark wings folded around him, and long black hair falling in his face. He had a knife in hand and she searched for a red crayon to draw blood on it.

“That is fantastic use of the crayons,” Mr. Connell said, gazing down upon her finished piece. “A touch of light somewhere might give it the final touch?”

“There isn’t supposed to be anything light about him,” Natalie said coolly.

She sensed Cecily’s eyes upon her from the other side of the classroom.

Her feet felt like they were lined with lead as she walked back towards her English classroom. The other students chatted happily around her, blissfully ignorant of all things magical. She wondered how she could have been one of them mere months ago.

Ramon sat behind his desk, leaning his head in his hands. He looked tired, more so than when Natalie had first seen him earlier. He had his hair tied back in a ponytail, though a few strands had loosened and fell across his face. She wondered if his exhaustion could be blamed on a long day of work, or if her magic had caused it. Perhaps a combination of both, she thought, and felt the unwelcome sting of guilt – she should not be the one feeling guilty!

She closed the door and he looked up at the sound. His dark eyes searched hers.

“Why can’t I remember?”

He sounded desperate. Natalie hated that she was able to understand. She did not want to be able to understand a murderer.

“You may have been possessed,” Natalie said. She felt unsure of how much she ought to tell Ramon, yet at the same time, she felt that he deserved to know. It was his life, his month, that had been taken from him. But what if he knew nothing of magic? What if he thought her to be a lunatic, a crazy person?

She wanted to laugh, because Ramon had been a Master Wielder – and now she would Awaken him?

“Possessed?” echoed Ramon.

“I can’t explain it,” Natalie said. “I just—I don’t understand it all and I’m not very good at understanding magic—”

“Magic?”

“Magic.” Natalie did not say anything more, did not know what else to say.

“I found a necklace,” Ramon said. “It was— it—I put it on. And then it all started.”

“When was this?”

Ramon thought about it for a moment. Natalie wondered why she cared – it did not matter. Ava would still be a ghost no matter what Ramon’s story entailed.

“A few months ago. I started having weird dreams and then I started blacking out,” Ramon said. “I’d wake up in strange places.”

Sadness and annoyance battled within Natalie. “You didn’t think to remove the necklace?”

Ramon frowned. “I tried. I just—I couldn’t. It wouldn’t let me.”

‘But there is magic – magic to trap a part of one’s soul inside a stone.’ Natalie recalled her grandmother telling her about it. It seemed so long ago already, though it had only been two weeks. ‘The essence of the person will then live on within the stone and it will, if strong enough, control the wearer of the stone.’

If the story Ramon was telling her was true, of course – perhaps he had not wanted to remove the necklace at all. Perhaps he had wanted it all along – how would she know? Perhaps he still played her, although she could not understand why. No one could fake a heart attack, could they? No one would freely stay in the hospital – and no Master would allow himself to be attacked and hurt the way Ramon had been, without any kind of attempt to protect himself? Would they?

Natalie’s head pounded painfully.

“And then I blacked out completely and I only remember bits and pieces until— something woke me up.”

“Yeah,” said Natalie. “Me.”

The Winter Legacy: Heritage
by C. Hakansson

Ramon looked questioningly at her, but she did not offer any explanation. No one but Cecily knew how much power she had had in Ramon's Mithridates, how close she had been to giving herself up to Chaos. No one else should know, least of all Ramon.

"Look, I can't explain it all. I'm not even sure I want to," Natalie said. "But I have a grandmother—she lives in the second universe. She might be able to tell you more."

"Second universe—what—I can't—I—"

"Nearly killed me? Killed my friend?"

He stopped, stared at her, and she saw fear in his eyes. She wondered if he feared her or himself. Perhaps a bit of both. He hesitated, then nodded slowly.

"Yes. I think I might have."

"All the more reason to find out why," Natalie said. "You're coming with me the next time I go there."

She felt unsure of whether it was wise to do this or not, but she decided that she did not care. It sounded like a sort of logical thing to do. Her grandmother might be able to shed light upon at least some of the questions she had, as well as some of Ramon's questions. And if she could not, then Ramon would at least prove a distraction – a needed one, because Natalie's mind still became dark with rage when she thought of her writing to Cecily rather than to her.

She turned and left Ramon, and the questions that spilled from his lips.

14.

Her grandmother's reply awaited Natalie on her desk the next afternoon. Unfortunately, it was not quite the answer Natalie had hoped for.

Dear Natalie,

I had hoped to be able to invite you for the weekend, but things have come up that need my tending to. I hope you understand.

Instead I wish to invite you next week, perhaps on Tuesday, if that is a convenient day for you. My carriage will be waiting for you. There are some matters that need to be discussed, and it sounded in your letter as though you have questions for me as well.

Love,

Your grandmother'

Natalie sighed deeply as she read. She would have liked to come during the weekend, as it was the only time she did not feel completely wiped out from school work and the early mornings. Alas, not much could be done if her grandmother had other things to do. In the end, she wrote a short note back – yes, I understand, yes, I would like to come on Tuesday, and by the way, I am bringing Ramon – and she left it on her desk, hoping that a wood elf would be by to pick it up.

She snorted, and wondered when it had become completely natural to have thoughts like that.

She headed downstairs and started cooking the night's dinner. Her mind led her thoughts elsewhere, as she tried to remember everything she would have to speak to her grandmother – and Diophane McCoy if opportunity was given – about. A great many things, she decided.

Emmanuella and Richard arrived home. The pregnancy showed, but not too much – Natalie could still ignore it, and for that she felt quite grateful. Richard placed his hands upon her stomach enough times to remind her anyway. She could not decide upon her feelings towards the baby – she despised the unborn child's mother, but the innocent baby could hardly help its parentage.

“Look what we bought today!”

Richard held up a yellow piece of fabric. It had happy ducklings on it.

“Isn't it a bit early to be buying baby stuff?” Natalie asked, trying to keep the hostility out of her voice.

Richard smiled sheepishly. “Well, perhaps, but I simply couldn't resist – a baby blanket for my son or daughter – I just had to.”

“What, are you jealous we didn't get anything for you?”

Emmanuella rarely said anything aloud about the lack of new things in Natalie's room. Natalie suspected it to be part of an agreement of some sort – Richard had begged Emmanuella to stop taunting Natalie. She did not know why Emmanuella had agreed, but she did know that since they had shared the news of the pregnancy, the rule no longer seemed to apply. Nastier than ever, Emmanuella seemed to use her pregnancy as a reason to attack Natalie.

Her voice dripping with sarcasm, Natalie said, “Oh yes, I'm very jealous that you didn't get me a baby blanket as well. I so need one to hug at night.”

Emmanuella glared at her.

An hour later, Natalie had returned to her room. The letter for her grandmother had disappeared. Natalie sighed – she would have liked to catch another glimpse of a wood elf – but at least the letter had been sent.

She sat down to read but could not concentrate. Her thoughts went to Cecily, the Nebula Medeor, Ava—Natalie could think of a million things to occupy her thoughts, none of which Natalie particularly wanted to dwell on. She wanted her mind quiet.

She threw the book aside, frustrated with her own inability to steer her thoughts. She wanted to talk to someone, but who? Her fight with Cecily had not yet been resolved, Ava was—well, not there, and her grandmother lived in another dimension, or something like that, and Natalie could not get there.

Pacing for a moment, Natalie decided to head out. Perhaps the crisp, cool air would clear her head. She headed downstairs, grabbed a pair of shoes and headed out with a shouted, “I’m going for a walk!” to Richard. Perhaps he answered, but the door closed, effectively shutting it inside the house.

The air felt chilly and she wished she had taken a jacket. The weather had turned colder than she had thought. The skies had filled with heavy clouds, building up on top of each other, each trying to threaten the world more. She thought of warming herself with magic, but thought that no, cold fit her mood.

Natalie had not felt so alone since she had moved to Lake Sunflower.

She thought for a moment about where she wanted to go. Lake Sunflower did not offer many places of solitude, but she decided to try the town’s namesake.

It took only fifteen minutes to reach Lake Sunflower. The glittering of the lake spread out before her. It reflected the cloudy skies in its cold surface, and Natalie thought for a moment that perhaps there were two skies. One above, one below. She smiled at the thought of an upside-down world.

She sat down on the small hill where she had a perfect view of the lake. Almost as big as the city itself, Natalie had been told that if looked upon from above, the lake did have a certain resemblance to a sunflower – at least according to some genius back in the day, when the city had first been founded.

Whether or not it looked like a sunflower, Natalie left up to others to decide. For now, she felt content to simply sit and take in the serenity of the water. It might not be her element, but water had still always calmed her.

The sound of the waves, softly clucking against the small shore below, rocked her uneasy mind to rest. Her thoughts floated on top of each wave, coming and going but never strong enough to upset her or truly reach her. The chill of the wind made her body go quite numb and after a while, though her hands were shaking and her fingers had turned blue, she thought she could no longer feel it.

Two stars could be seen through the blanket of clouds when Natalie finally shook herself back to life and decided that she needed to be getting back. She had absolutely no idea of what time it was as she had not brought a watch or even her cell phone to her impromptu tour to the lake. Stifling a yawn, she could only assume the hour was late.

She hurried down the street, wind grabbing her hair and pulling at her clothes.

A car drove by her. At first, she barely noticed, but then it sounded as though it turned and came back. The engines roared loudly in the quiet night.

“Looky, looky, what do we have here.”

Natalie sighed at the sound of Eadan’s voice. They were not in school and he still had to try to torment her. Why could he not simply give up? She would not be intimidated.

The car rolled right next to her, moving at her pace as she walked on.

“Miss Winters,” hissed Eadan, and Natalie could see a bottle in his hand, “isn’t this a bit late for you to be out all by your lonely self?”

His cronies sniggered. Without looking, Natalie thought there might be three, perhaps four of them. Her heart beat a bit quicker but she pretended not to be affected.

“Ooh, she’s being sassy, boys,” Eadan said. “D’you see that – she’s trying to show us that she’s above us. Above *us!*” He broke out laughing, as though it was a huge joke. “She’s not, is she?”

“No!” said the other boys, and joining in Eadan’s manic laughter again.

“You’re dirt, Winters. Below us.”

He spat at her feet, just barely missing her left shoe.

“Go to hell,” Natalie said, sending them a scorching glare. Her heart pounded in her chest now – Eadan did not seem about to leave her alone this time. She quickened her pace although she knew that if they wanted to continue tormenting her, there were no hiding places ahead of her, not until she reached her house, a good ten minute walk. She thought of turning around, but decided that it would be giving in to Eadan and showing him that he could intimidate her.

Eadan shook his head. “I don’t think so. But that might be where you’re heading, witch.”

Before Natalie knew what had happened, Eadan slammed the door open and jumped out. His fist hit her in her stomach and she doubled over, gasping for air. Every nerve in her body screamed at the sudden attack and as she smelled the alcohol on his breath, she knew that whatever fear he had for her in school, had gone now. He forced her down, one arm around her neck, and the world around her swam as she tried to get oxygen into her lungs. Her chin smashed into the concrete and the metallic taste of blood filled her mouth.

The car’s engine still ran, but the boys had jumped out and now stood in a circle around her. Eadan sat atop her, one arm still around her neck and his face far too close to hers. He reeked of beer. Tears sprang to Natalie’s eyes.

“No one turns me into a joke and gets away with it.”

He slammed her head into the ground. Her world exploded in pain and black dots danced before her eyes, what little she could see through the tears.

For a moment, she thought of magic, her necklace—

Eadan stood up and then, before Natalie had a chance to protect herself or so much as think, he placed a well-aimed kick in her abdomen.

“You—do—not—mess—with—me!”

Each word was punctuated by a kick.

Natalie curled together, the taste of vomit and blood mixing in her mouth. She coughed, spraying the concrete with a mess of saliva and blood. Around her, Eadan and his friends laughed.

Another kick, another gasp, another pang of fear – would she get out of this alive?

She struggled for breath, her lungs burning and her body aching so badly she wondered if she would ever heal.

She felt Eadan grab her hair, his fist like cold, hard metal. He forced her head up, so that she could look at him through tear-filled eyes. Warm blood dripped from her mouth.

“Never ever cross an Eadan,” he hissed in her ear, his eyes mere slits.

He let go and she fell to the ground once more with an unceremonious thud, her head once more connecting painfully with the concrete. Eadan walked over her, his boot stopping to grind her hair into the dirt.

“We’re done here.”

They resumed their seats in the car they had arrived in, and a moment later, they were gone.

Natalie focused on trying to breathe. Everything hurt, and every other intake turned into a cough and she lay curled together, her knees below her chin. She fought unconsciousness, knowing that allowing it might well mean her death. She had no idea how badly hurt she was – she had never been assaulted before. Her body throbbed, but it came and passed as she wavered in and out of consciousness.

After a while – it could have been a minute, it could have been an hour – Natalie thought the pain abated somewhat. The pain in her head had dulled to a throbbing ache and she did not seem to be bleeding as badly anymore. She dried her mouth with the back of her hand. It came back red, stained with dark spots of dirt from the concrete. Her stomach was still in an uproar and she thought she might puke any minute.

She felt around her stomach but she did not seem to be bleeding there. The pain had lessened – perhaps she had been so lucky as to avoid internal damage. Still, everything hurt.

Slowly, she collected herself. She placed her feet on the ground and managed to sit up in a kneeling position. She sat there for several long moments, taking steadying, deep breaths, as her vision swam and spun in patterns that made no sense. She only just managed to stay upright, hardly knowing which way was actually up.

She swallowed back vomit.

“Oh my god.”

Natalie did not have the presence of mind to be frightened at the sound of Ava’s voice. Only dimly did she identify it and she had half a mind to laugh – why did a ghost have to find her, rather than a real person? In this particular case, the latter would have been much more helpful.

“What happened?” Ava asked.

Her horrified, slightly translucent body swam before Natalie’s eyes. Natalie winced as it made it even harder for her to be able to tell anything about the world around her.

“Eadan,” Natalie muttered, surprised she could get any word out correctly at all.

“Oh that—” Ava went off on a tirade with a string of swearwords that Natalie tuned out.

She fought her way through nausea and lightheadedness, to an almost upright position. She stumbled, but thankfully found a tree to lean against. She breathed heavily, trying to will the world to steadiness.

“Ava, I—need help.”

Ava stopped in mid-cuss, her eyes widening. “Of course, I’m sorry, I just—”

She looked around, taking in her surroundings for the first time since appearing before Natalie.

“We’re far from your place,” Ava said. “What are you doing out so late, anyway? Never mind. Go to my house. It’s only a block away, and mom can help you and—”

She trailed off, but Natalie nodded. A block seemed like an obstacle unlike anything else, but she would have to make it. There were other houses and she thought briefly of simply ringing the bell of the first house she could reach, but they were all silent and dark and Natalie did not want to disturb them. It sounded perfectly reasonable to her pain addled brain – she did not want to be a bother.

Ava led the way down the street. They walked slowly, Natalie stumbling between trees for balance. She threw up by the fourth tree and her body shook badly as they continued on. Ava cried but Natalie pretended not to notice.

“Oh, wait, I think I see—”

Ava rushed off suddenly, leaving Natalie panting by a tree trunk. She looked up to see one of the posters about Ava’s disappearance. The corners flipped upwards in the wind, but Ava continued to smile down at her from her picture.

She sank down. Her knees hit each other painfully as she shook. She closed her eyes, briefly, though she knew she should not. She forced them open again, but she could not manage to keep them that way. Natalie welcomed the blessed darkness and felt reality slip away from her.

Far away, she heard voices.

“Oh good god—”

“There’s a girl!”

“She’s bleeding – someone call an ambulance!”

Someone touched her. The hands were warm and nice, not like Eadan’s cold, hard fist in her hair.

“Hey, stay awake. No sleeping, okay?”

Natalie heard mumbling and realized after a moment that it was her voice. She forced herself to open her eyes once more. Several faces swam before her. One bore a striking resemblance to Ava, she thought, but looked real – it could not be Ava, could it? No, no, it could not – something was off, although she could not decide what.

In the distance, Natalie heard sirens. They made her headache worse but despite her wish for silence, they only grew louder.

“Hey, you, the ambulance is coming in a minute, so just hang on, okay?”

The girl did not appear to care that she could not answer. She continued to speak to her, and ask her questions. Natalie’s eyelids drooped once more – the darkness seemed so very lovely, in contrast to staring into a street light’s harsh brightness.

She felt a cool wisp of air on her forehead. At first, she did not understand it, but she opened her eyes briefly to find Ava’s face floating above her, one hand outstretched, and Natalie could only assume that it rested on her forehead.

“Ava,” she mumbled.

Beside her sat the other girl, the girl who looked like Ava. They really did look alike, Natalie thought lazily.

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Then she was moved, ripped away from Ava and the other girl. She felt like someone had poured lead into her limbs – nothing worked as it should.

Her last thought before darkness took over was a fleeting, wry thought that she had managed to get her mind quiet tonight after all.

15.

The doctors released Natalie the next day. With the severe concussion she had, she should stay off her feet, at least for the weekend, and she should be woken every couple of hours and asked questions. With these rules laid out for Richard, they saw no reason for her to remain in the hospital. Her head had been bandaged – white gauze covered both the side of her face and her chin, where her face had connected with the concrete. Her stomach looked rather like a chessboard with its black and blue bruises and white skin, but Eadan had not managed to break anything. The doctors instructed Richard to contact the hospital, should Natalie get worse.

Natalie stayed quiet throughout the discussion between Richard and the doctors. She did not want to move – her head felt as big as a balloon, but heavy and hurting. But more than the physical pain, she felt sick at the mere thought of returning to school on Monday morning. Bile rose in her throat when she thought of having to face Eadan’s smug face – she did not want to do it. If she never saw Chase Eadan again, it would be too soon.

The police had been there to speak to her. However, as soon as she uttered the name ‘Eadan’, they fell silent.

“We—we’ll see what we can do, Miss Winters,” said the man, a graying fifty-something cop with glasses.

His tone told her that no charges against Chase Eadan would ever stick. The Eadan family simply had far too much money.

The only nice thing about the day so far had been Richard’s warm hand stroking her hair, waking her up. It had been a lovely way to awaken, she decided, though the intense pain in her head and abdomen made it less pleasant.

“Good morning,” Natalie mumbled.

He smiled, a pinched smile that told her just how much he had worried for her. “Good morning, my dear. How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been pounded on by a bunch of angry unicorns.”

Tears sprang to her eyes at the flashing images of how she had come to be there. Her heart beat rapidly, the shock only just now hitting her. Richard sat beside her on her bed and hugged her tightly, holding her as she cried and whispering nonsense in her ear, making her feel safe. Never had he filled the shoes of a father more, than in that moment.

Arriving home, Richard quietly helped Natalie up the stairs. For once, Emmanuella refrained from commenting – perhaps she found Natalie’s bruised appearance to be so appalling, she could not come up with anything to say. Whatever the reason, Natalie felt thankful. Her body shook with exhaustion from simply climbing the stairs.

Her room was tranquil, the open window allowing a light breeze inside. Natalie wondered what about the room had made her want to flee so badly the day before – she would now give almost anything to not have gone.

“Can you—please, close the window?” Natalie asked once Richard had helped her settle beneath her covers. Her head hurt, a reminder with every heartbeat of what had happened. She would not be allowed to forget, not even long after the bruises had faded.

Richard gazed sadly upon her. “He’s not going to hurt you again.”

“I’m sorry, but you don’t know that.”

He did not have an answer and instead he closed the window and, after placing a kiss on her forehead, left the room.

She spent an hour reading some girly magazine Richard had bought her in the shop at the hospital. With her head throbbing dully, she could manage nothing more complicated. Finally, she gave into the tiredness that swept her mind and allowed herself to fall asleep. Her dreams filled with cackling, mad laughter and dark faces that taunted her. She tossed and turned, both in her dream and in her bed. Richard woke her to ask her questions every couple of hours, and then she returned to the monsters hunting her. Her headache followed her, in and out of the dream worlds she unwillingly created.

The harsh morning sun filtered through Natalie’s eyelids and she winced before she had even woken up. Her headache had not yet given way.

The strong need to visit the bathroom drove her out of bed and she stumbled there. Swallowing back bile, she closed her eyes, trying to block out the light.

On her way back, she heard voices. They belonged to Richard and Emmanuella, lying in bed on the other side of the door, right across from Natalie’s room.

“It’s really showing now! Can you believe it, that’s our baby in there.”

“I know, I’m getting fat.” Natalie could hear Emmanuella’s pout, though in her ears it sounded more like the whining of a child.

“No, not fat – pregnant – gorgeous!” They shuffled about. “Hey, little one – it’s your father speaking. I hope you have a good time in there and just know that we can’t wait to meet you—”

Natalie could not stand listening to any more of Richard’s ridiculous baby voice. The puke she could taste in her mouth had only partly to do with her concussion, now. She crawled under her blankets again, pulling them over her head, and squeezed her eyes shut, wishing she had not woken up at all.

A few minutes passed. Natalie concentrated on her own breathing, trying to ignore the headache that pulsed in time with her heart. It helped a tiny bit.

“Natalie?” said a familiar voice suddenly. “Natalie, please tell me that’s you under there and that you’re okay?”

Ava sounded rather frantic. Natalie pushed down her covers and looked up at Ava.

“I’m okay. A concussion and lots of bruises, but I’ll be all right,” Natalie said.

Ava smiled widely. “That’s my girl!”

She ignored her status of ghost and threw herself at Natalie. Natalie smiled at the cold, tickling sensation that followed when Ava passed through her. It felt pleasant, like a spray of cold water cooling her hurting head and easing the pain of the bruises.

“I was so worried! I had to use all my energy to get to Lynn and then I had to go away and so I didn’t know if she’d gotten it or not and I didn’t know if you were all right and I’ve been fighting my way back here—”

“Lynn?” asked Natalie, thoroughly confused.

“My sister!” Ava said. “She found you, didn’t she? I tried to get her attention but being invisible and sound-proof, that’s kind of hard.”

Natalie remembered the girl who had looked rather like Ava just before she passed out. A slightly distorted version of Ava – it being Ava’s sister made sense. Natalie recalled Ava telling her and Cecily that she had several siblings.

“You—how did you get her attention, then?” asked Natalie.

“I don’t know,” Ava said, calmer now. “I just—I had to, you know. You weren’t looking too good and I just had to. All I know is that it took all the energy I had, so then I had to go away for a while.”

Natalie smiled softly. “Thank you.”

“Oh, it was nothing, I just—”

“You saved my life,” Natalie said. “That’s not nothing.”

She fell quiet, guilt washing over her – she had not been able to save Ava’s life.

Ava cleared her throat. “Well, you might not want to mention me to my sis’. She’ll think you’re nuts. Or that you’re keeping me prisoner or something, since they don’t know I’m—”

“Yeah,” Natalie said, knowing what Ava had been about to say.

Silence spread for a few moments – the same uncomfortable silence that always happened between them these days each time Ava’s death came up. They should simply try to avoid speaking of it, but it came up on its own accord.

“So are you all right?” Ava asked finally.

“Yeah,” Natalie said, “a concussion and a bunch of bruises isn’t enough to beat this Wielder. It’ll heal.”

Ava cocked her head to the side. “That’s the physical – what about the psychological?”

“I’ll be fine,” Natalie said softly. “I’d like to never see Eadan again, but that’s not going to happen, so I’ll just have to make it work. Back down, stop using magic on him.”

“Was that why he attacked you?”

Natalie nodded. “I don’t see any other reason, other than that I was simply in his way. But I kind of turned him purple earlier this week.”

“Purple?” Ava could not hold back a giggle. “Why?”

“He pissed me off when he was teasing Cecily and Nathan. I just—did it. He wasn’t in school for days, but he looked all right now so I guess it passed. Anyway, I guess—they’d been drinking, I think—and I was out there, walking—”

She closed her eyes and stopped talking. It felt too close, too hard to talk about. The headache started to return, as she became more distressed. Eadan’s face kept flashing before her eyes, and she flinched at the memory of him kicking her.

“You—do—not—mess—with—me!”

She felt a chill on her hand and when she opened her eyes, she found Ava floating next to her.

“You know, I was never good with the touchy feely stuff while I was alive and I don’t think I’m any better now, but if you need someone to talk to – I mean, Cecily’s probably better but I think I can still listen—”

A pained expression passed over Natalie’s face as she remembered Cecily and the fight. She had put it out of her mind for a moment.

“We’re not speaking to each other at the moment,” she said quietly.

“Why?” Ava frowned.

Natalie sighed. “Well, that turning-Eadan-purple thing? It didn’t go over too well with her. She said I was misusing magic, or something of the sort.”

“Oh.”

“I just—” A knock on the door interrupted Natalie mid-sentence and she stopped. “Yes?”

Richard opened the door. He frowned at her and looked around the room. His eyes swept right over the spot where Ava was floating, but they passed it blindly. Recalling her grandmother’s words, Natalie could quickly deduce that Richard did not pass the magical test. It did not surprise her.

“Are you talking to someone?”

She felt a stab at the tone of voice. It sounded nothing like the way he had spoken to his unborn child. And although Natalie did not want him to speak to her that way, she still felt strangely jealous.

Natalie gazed up at him, trying her best to look innocent. “I’m just—reading out loud a bit,” she lied. “There’s this ringing in my ears and I thought I’d try reading the article aloud instead.”

She motioned at the magazine lying on her bed. Ava giggled and shook her head at the lie. “Reading out loud? Nice.”

Natalie ignored her.

Richard gave her an odd look but nodded. “Okay. Just so long as you’re not seeing things – that ought to fit the bill of you getting worse like doctor Vincent said.”

He worried about her, at least. Natalie gave him a shaky smile. “I’m not, I promise. I’d tell you.”

“Good,” said Richard. “Well, I’ll bring you up some breakfast in a few minutes.”

Natalie nodded, but regretted it immediately. Her headache certainly did not want her moving around. She managed to hold back the wince until Richard had left the room.

“You okay?” Ava asked.

Natalie made a face at her. “Just this headache. It won’t bulge.”

“I suppose there’s nothing I can do?”

Natalie looked up. “Actually—”

An explanation later and Ava floated beside her, her hands by Natalie’s temples and her fingers sunk inside. The chill of Ava’s fingers, gently massaging her, made her feel worlds better.

“This is so weird,” Ava said.

Natalie merely smiled. She closed her eyes, basking in the sensation of the now distant headache. The pain melted away, like snow off a mountain on a sunny day. The light spilling through the windows felt warm and nice on her skin, rather than bringing forth nausea. After a while, the world around her slipped away completely as she fell back into slumber.

She stood once more on the sand banks of the hot desert. The lovely pink flower grew right next to her still, pulling itself upwards towards the sun.

The figure did not appear. Natalie waited for several moments – she did not know how to count time in a dream, but it felt like a while – but the figure still did not come.

Natalie frowned. If she had not come there to speak to the figure, then what on earth was she doing there? The sandbanks stretched around her, climbing upwards to her left, and down into the valley to her right. A bunch of rocks had been strewn about in a haphazard way at the bottom of the valley. She stood on the slope, searching for clues as to what she was supposed to do.

Then it struck her – she had been sent there to search for something in particular.

The frown deepened. What? She bent down and ran her hand through the sand. It felt hot, like the sun, and a bunch of it stuck to Natalie's hand. She brushed it off, but it reminded her of the sand she had brought back to her own reality.

Should she be digging around, searching for the stone? It seemed impossible that she was meant to find a single piece of a stone in the vast amounts of sand that surrounded her. Still, she started running her hand through the sand, hoping to stumble upon something of interest.

Much later – although she could still not even begin to tell how long, for the sun did not move from its position – Natalie sighed in defeat. She had found absolutely nothing. Now, she had sand all over and sweat beaded down her back. It felt unpleasant, even in her dream.

She returned to sit next to the pink flower, which had been her landmark throughout the search. All around, the sand was overturned – darker sand from below mixed with the soft, dry top sand. She had searched through quite a bit of land.

“What am I supposed to do here?” Natalie yelled at the empty sky.

She slammed her hand onto the ground, into the sand. Sand splashed everywhere.

Suddenly, she felt an odd tugging at her mind. She realized after a moment that she was waking up, in the other world, and as such, she would leave this place.

She could not have been brought there to find nothing, Natalie decided. She looked around urgently, searching the area once more, a deep frown etched to her features. She took in the stones once more and then her gaze fell upon the pink flower.

The tugging became strong.

Natalie shrugged to herself. It could not hurt.

She grabbed the flower and tore it up. More sand splayed over her but only for a moment, before she returned to her real body and her bedroom.

“Good afternoon, sleepyhead.”

Richard's kind voice reverberated through her head. She still had a bit of a headache, though far less than before, she realized. Whatever Ava had done, it had helped.

“Yeah, hi,” Natalie sighed.

“I was merely wondering if you'd be interested in some dinner,” Richard said. “There's soup waiting for you, if you only want something light, or chicken and rice.”

Natalie decided upon the soup, not quite feeling up to eating a full meal just yet. Richard left and she stretched her body. Only as she felt through her body did she realize that not only did she have quite a bit of sand with her from the dream – this time, the pink flower lay in her hand as well.

She smiled. She had a feeling something important had just happened.

16.

Natalie felt utterly alone.

She had done her best to cover the bruises on her chin with makeup, though it did not seem to work too well. Besides, no matter what she did, gossip still traveled through the school faster than anyone could say ‘magic’.

A mere month and a half had passed since she had last been the subject of stares and whispers. She found that she did not care for it any more this time than she had then – in fact, this time it felt even worse. Now she had no one to share it with. Cecily kept away, though she continued to send her curious, pained looks – and other than Cecily, Natalie really had no friends at school.

Eadan walked around looking smug as if being royalty, the descendant of a long passed king.

“Little Miss Winters will stay out of my way from now on,” he said to his friends, cackling madly and looking far too proud.

Natalie hid in the bathrooms until he had left. She berated herself – she should not be so weak! – but she could not help it. She did not want to face Eadan, not now.

Not ever, a small voice in the back of her head added, but she pretended she had not heard it.

Ramon gaped at the sight of her, but did not say anything. His eyes kept traveling back to Natalie time and time again, but she kept her head down, refusing to look at him.

Because she had made friends with no one but Ava and Cecily, she felt rather surprised when at lunch, a girl approached her. Natalie remembered her face instantly, for she was almost the spitting image of Ava. She had longer hair – it fell beyond her shoulders – and blue jeans and a t-shirt, rather than Ava’s mostly black attire.

“Hi, I’m Lynn,” she said, presenting herself with her hand held out.

“Hi,” Natalie said. “You were the one that helped me.”

“Oh, so you remember? I wasn’t sure you would,” Lynn said.

Natalie did not know what to say, but to pretend that she did remember. After all, what could she possibly say?

“Yes, well, thank you,” Natalie said uncomfortably.

Lynn smiled. “I just wanted to see that you were all right – you had me worried.”

Natalie smiled, though it felt fake. What was she supposed to say to her? She had brought death to the younger sister and now she had been saved by the older one?

“I’ll live,” Natalie said. She hesitated for a moment, then asked, “You’re Ava’s sister, right?”

A look of sadness came over Lynn’s face. She nodded. “Yeah.”

Natalie had to remind herself that Lynn and her family did not know that Ava had died. She had to be careful as she phrased herself.

“I—I’m sorry that she’s—gone,” Natalie said. “She was my friend.”

It felt natural and strange, both at the same time, to speak of Ava as though she no longer existed.

“Yes,” Lynn said, her voice thick. “I believe I remember her talking about you. It was Natalie this, and Natalie that. You and some other new student, right?”

Natalie nodded. “Cecily.”

“Yes, that was it. She went on and on about the two of you.”

An uncomfortable silence spread between them. Lynn looked miserable and Natalie had no trouble understanding why: week after week passed and not a single scrap of information appeared.

Finally, Lynn said, “Well, I was just coming to—you know, see that you’ll be okay. And you are, so—”

“Yes, thanks to you.”

Natalie held out her hand, feeling rather silly. A handshake for a saved life?

Lynn took her hand. “It’s nice meeting you without blood all over. Quite the unpleasant way to find someone.”

The corner of Natalie’s mouth twitched into a smile. Lynn had her sister’s sense of humor.

She cocked her head to the side. “I’m just curious - how did you find me? I didn’t see anyone before I collapsed.”

Lynn frowned for a second. “I was heading out with a few friends of mine – there was a party – and I just—something told me to turn and go in your direction. I guess I might have heard you or something.”

“I was quite loud, I suppose,” Natalie said softly.

“Yes,” Lynn said, sounding a bit weak. “I suppose.”

She left a moment later, appearing deep in thought at the simple question. Natalie watched her go. She knew why Lynn had found her way to her, although she did not know exactly how.

Natalie felt the rest of the class’ eyes on her throughout her classes. In art, where the students worked on their own, they spoke under their breaths to each other. Natalie made out words here and there – “she was drunk and she tried to defend herself from a bunch of guys” and “she’s made up some story that *Chase Eadan* did that to her, can you believe it?” – and she tried to hide herself in her drawing. She wished they could be allowed to listen to music.

Cecily’s eyes rested upon her. The little hairs, prickling on the back of her neck, told her as much. She had not taken her eyes off Natalie since the start of class. She had been the same all day long.

Natalie did not know what to think, or feel about it. She still felt upset that she had gone behind her back – but so much more of her anger and frustration was now reserved for Eadan, that she did not know if there could be any left for Cecily.

“You know, the drawing might get done a slight bit sooner if you actually work on it.”

Mr. Connell stood behind her, looking over her shoulder at the nearly blank page before her. A few pencil lines stood as the only thing Natalie had managed to produce so far.

“I’m sorry, sir, I just have—other things to think about,” Natalie said, finishing lamely. She should be doing her work.

“I’m sure you do, my dear,” Mr. Connell said. “But do not dwell on everyone else’s opinion of you, or you’ll drown.”

Natalie sighed. “Yes, sir.”

It was not the first time Mr. Connell had given her advice. Though he enjoyed playing the part of a stern teacher, Natalie had found Mr. Connell to be one of the few teachers she had ever had, who cared about his students for real.

When the bell rang, Natalie stood waiting at the door to leave. She did not want to be in school for a second longer than necessary. Hoisting her school bag onto her back, she made her way out the door, down the stairs and left through the main entrance.

Natalie’s wish to get away had carried her so far that she did not notice at first that she had been followed.

“Natalie.”

The wind carried the soft call to her. She turned and found Cecily standing a while away, looking tiny. Were she any lighter, the wind would have swept her away.

They stood gazing at each other for a long moment. Cecily’s face remained neutral. She did not wear the small smile that she usually did. Natalie felt a pang at her heart – she missed it. Still, no matter what she had been through with Eadan, Cecily’s lack of trust in her smarted.

Cecily took a few steps towards Natalie. The brown eyes, usually expressive, told Natalie nothing.

“I don’t want to fight,” Cecily said levelly. “I don’t have enough time left to be spending it that way.”

Natalie looked at her with wide eyes. She knew Cecily to be right and yet, she could not bring herself to forgive her.

Cecily continued, “I’m not asking for your forgiveness, because I don’t think there’s that much to forgive and either way, I don’t believe you can, at least not yet. I get that you think I betrayed you, I really do, but I want you to know that I was only trying to look after you.”

A pause, to breathe.

Natalie did not know how to respond, so she stayed silent. Cecily seemed to have enough to say for the both of them.

“I’m sorry about what happened with Eadan. I—I couldn’t believe it when I first heard. I just—he’s a jerk and I hope you’re okay.”

She stumbled a bit on the words and for the first time since she had started speaking, she studied the ground. Once she looked up again, she said, “When you are ready, if you want to, I’ll be here to talk to.” She smiled wryly. “Well, for a while longer, at least.”

Then, with a small smile, she turned and walked away. Natalie stared after her, wondering if she should call out and ask Cecily to come back, if she should forgive her then and there.

But she said nothing.

Cecily disappeared down the road and Natalie stood there, rooted to the spot without a coherent thought passing through her mind.

“I don’t want to fight. I don’t have enough time left to be spending it that way.”

The words played through Natalie’s mind like a broken record. Cecily was *dying*. She tried to process the word, tried to understand it. Dying? She would no longer exist.

Tears rolled down her cheeks though she was barely aware of it. She did not care that she stood crying in the middle of a street. No other people were around to see her and it would not have

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mattered if there were. Natalie's eyes fixed upon the spot where she had seen Cecily disappear. It seemed unreal, that she would do so for real – disappear, die, be gone.

Her thoughts ran in circles.

Then suddenly, they came to a complete, halting stop.

She knew what she had to do. Everything else gradually faded into insignificant nothingness – Eadan, her grandmother, even Ava. Natalie had to find the pieces of the stone. She simply had to.

She did not know how long she had been standing there, but in a flash, she turned and ran home.

The pink flower lay pale in her hand. Though it had been taken out of the dream a day earlier, it still looked strong and beautiful. Natalie held it in her hands, running a finger up and down its leaves. It seemed to almost shimmer, though she could not be certain. Perhaps her tired eyes played tricks on her.

“All right, then,” muttered Natalie to the flower, “how are you going to help me find the stone?”

She wanted rather a lot to scream. It did not matter how decisive she became about finding the damn Nebula – she was not getting anywhere anyway! And all the while, Cecily grew sicker.

She made a simple dinner – if she could go to school, then she was certainly well enough to make dinner, according to Emmanuella – as her mind kept her preoccupied with thoughts. How could she get back into the dream, if the piece was there? Should she try to sleep more? It seemed stupid.

Richard and Emmanuella distracted her for a few minutes as they sat down to eat. Natalie felt rather maliciously satisfied as she saw the bump Emmanuella had started to develop – she would be huge by nine months. No matter the result, it would still be fun to see Emmanuella waddling around.

“We thought we'd make the room next to yours into a nursery,” Richard told her with great excitement. “We're not really using that space so it'll be perfect!”

“If she could just move out, we could tear down the wall and make a big room instead,” Emmanuella said sourly.

Richard sent her a look. “She's fifteen, Em. It'll be a while longer.”

Natalie did not say anything. She rarely did, when it came to that kind of conversation – Emmanuella had never appreciated her input and Richard tried to make both happy. Easier to simply stay out.

She returned to her room, with only a glance at the next door – currently, it was their office. Natalie wondered what it would be like to have a baby at home all of a sudden.

Then she stepped into her room, closed the door, and only the thoughts of the Nebula Medeor remained. Natalie's eyes grew wide.

The flower truly glowed.

It emitted a soft, white light that lit the room. Long shadows and bright spots mixed, and the room looked dream-like.

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Natalie's gaze turned downwards and she gasped. The flower was not the only thing glowing. Her own necklace, the one she had gotten from her mother, shone with equal brightness.

Natalie nearly stumbled over herself as she walked into the room, towards the flower. Her hand shook as she stretched out towards the flower. It called to her, a tune slipping from it and playing inside her head. It was magnificent.

Her fingers connected with the flower and there was a bright light.

Natalie squeezed her eyes shut and shielded her face with her arms. A sudden wind had picked up around her and something blew into her face. It took her a moment to realize that it was sand.

Once more, she had been sent to the desert.

"Fine, what am I doing—"

Natalie stopped herself in the middle of her sentence. The place was nothing like it had been on the previous occasions she had visited. Clouds filled the sky, dark and ominous. The wind slapped sand into her ears, nose and eyes and she could only squint at her surroundings.

A young woman stood before her. She did not seem to be able to see her. Her tear streaked face looked older now than it had before, but Natalie recognized it – the middle sister.

She carried something in her hands, wrapped in a blanket. She held it carefully, but Natalie could not tell if she did so because she was revering it, or if she was frightened of it.

She dropped to her knees in the sand. She was mumbling something, but Natalie could not hear it, until the last part.

"Here I lay my part to rest, never to be found again!" she screamed.

Tears poured down her cheeks. She slammed the stone into the ground, letting it go from the blanket. The wind immediately covered the stone with sand and a moment later, the piece had vanished. Even though Natalie knew exactly where it had been placed, she could not be certain she would have been able to find it.

The sister stood. She glanced down, one last time at the sand, her shoulders slumped. Natalie wondered what had happened to leave her so achingly sad.

As the sister walked away, Natalie gazed at the spot where the stone piece had been buried. For some reason, she could not feel all that surprised when she saw a flower begin to make its way up through the sand with unnatural speed. Even in the howling wind, it grew relentlessly. It twisted, turned and grew, green leaves and stem, and finally, on the top, a lovely pink flower resided.

Natalie awoke a moment later, her fingers no longer curled around a flower, but around a pearly white stone with dark lines passing over it in irregular patterns.

17.

The sharp-edged, triangular piece of the Nebula weighed rather heavily in her pocket for such a small stone. Natalie wondered at the wisdom of her decision to take the stone with her to school, but she had not been able to bring herself to leave it behind. She had fought too hard to lose it now.

She kept her head down, studying the ground, throughout the day. She did not wish to speak to anyone and she succeeded, save for when Mrs. Miller asked her a question about equations that she, as usual, did not know the answer to. She really ought to study harder.

She saw Cecily, who watched her curiously, and wondered if she should go talk to her. She probably should. Then Nathan showed up, kissing her lightly on the cheek, and Natalie decided that no, she should not.

After classes ended, she headed to Ramon's – Mr. Keys, she had to remind herself, as he was after all her teacher – classroom. He sat alone by his desk, all of his students already gone.

"We're going to my grandmother's," Natalie announced. She had not asked him beforehand.

"Are you—are you all right, Miss Winters?" he asked.

Natalie stared at him for a moment. Kindness, from him of all people.

"I'm fine."

Ramon nodded mutely. He gathered the papers he had been reading in a neat stack, then stood up. His clothes, light and airy, did not match his expression.

"Her butler will be picking us up outside," Natalie said.

It felt odd that she had to tell him these things – the first time she had met him had been when he had pretended to be that very butler. She pushed away the memory. Things had changed since then. This time, she traveled to her grandmother to get answers, not just more questions.

Though the school had been mostly emptied, the grounds outside still milled with people. Some drove, trying to find their way out in the mess of cars, while others waited for the bus, their parents or a sibling.

Natalie, closely followed by Ramon, headed down to the small side-street where the carriage always waited.

Butler Thomas greeted them with a thin smile, not appearing to be the least bit surprised by Natalie's company.

"Your grandmother is waiting, so let's make this journey quick," he said, holding the door open.

"You're the one who's going to be awake, so you get to decide that."

"That is true, Miss Natalie," the butler said.

Ramon climbed inside first, then Natalie, and they both made themselves comfortable. He looked astounded at both the carriage and the butler.

"This is how you always travel there?" he asked timidly.

Natalie nodded. She could not bring herself to engage in conversation with him – it felt too strange already, sitting next to him as though they were an odd kind of friends.

He fell asleep moments after the carriage started moving. Natalie fought it until she had convinced herself that the man truly was sleeping and not just faking it. But his breathing evened out and his head lolled to the side, and the only thing missing was the bit of drool coming out of his mouth – he definitely appeared to be asleep. He looked calm – and rather handsome, even. Natalie finally relaxed and allowed herself to doze off as well.

The sun stood rather low on a beautifully colorful sky when they arrived. Natalie rubbed her arms and wished she had brought a sweater – it felt rather chilly.

Her grandmother stood straight, with her hands clasped behind her back, and stared down at Natalie. Natalie fought an urge to squirm under her stare as she came closer. She had to be confident and strong to get the answers she wanted. Her grandmother's face faltered as she caught sight of the bruises on Natalie's face.

“Good heavens, what happened to you?”

“A few guys decided that my head was perfect for soccer practice. Or something.” She did not manage to keep her tone as light as she would have wished.

Her grandmother looked suitably horrified. “Are you—”

“I'm fine,” Natalie said.

Her grandmother would not be able to do anything about Eadan anyway, so what point was there in dwelling on the subject? Her grandmother did not believe in using magic to hurt others. The thought led Natalie back to Cecily and the letters she had exchanged with Natalie's grandmother, and her blood started to boil slowly. She wondered if her grandmother would ever fess up.

Her grandmother's hand slid over her necklace, which glowed for a second. A moment later, a pleasantly warm sensation passed over Natalie's skin, traveling down her neck and ending on her stomach. It left her body tingling. She could not see what it had done, but suspected that the next time she looked at herself in a mirror, she would look less broken than she had a minute ago.

She was about to say thank you, but her grandmother's gaze had already moved to Ramon. Natalie could not tell what she was thinking – not a single muscle in her face moved.

“I see you've brought company.”

“Grandmother, this is Ramon Keys,” Natalie said.

“I assumed as much. You said he'd be coming with you,” her grandmother said shortly. “I am Madeline Turner. We have seen each other once before.”

“He doesn't remember any of the stuff that happened. He wants some answers and I can't really give them to him.”

Ramon looked uncertainly from Natalie to her grandmother, probably wondering why he had decided to come along in the first place. He tried his best to arrange his face to look pleasant, it seemed, though it came out more like a grimace.

“And you think I can?”

“You were the one who told me that it was possible to keep a person's spirit locked up in a stone – and you're a Master Wielder – so yeah, I'm sure you know more about these things than I do.”

Natalie felt an annoyance rise. Why could her grandmother not simply help?

Her grandmother nodded. “Let's go inside.”

Natalie trotted after her grandmother and without looking back, she knew that Ramon followed her. Natalie took a deep breath – dragging all the information she wanted from her grandmother would certainly not be easy. And she had a lot of questions, though not all of them were directly related to each other.

The maid with the strange hat who always seemed to be at Natalie’s grandmother’s side, appeared with a choice of hot chocolate and tea on a tray. Natalie chose a cup of hot chocolate absently, all the while gazing at her grandmother. Her grandmother chose tea and carefully placed the tea bag into the water and stirred with her spoon, until Natalie thought the noise of the spoon hitting the cup would drive her mad.

Ramon, who had chosen a cup of tea, had not even put his tea bag into the cup – instead, he wrung his hands and appeared to be sweating.

Finally, Natalie had had enough. It was time – time to get answers, time to finally know *something* about some of the things she had had to deal with already.

“What is Chaos?”

Her grandmother dropped the spoon and it fell noisily to the floor. Her grandmother’s face had suddenly turned ashen. She would not look at Natalie.

“Why do you ask?” her grandmother said.

“He tried to raise it by killing me,” Natalie said, nodding towards Ramon. “Why me? What’s Chaos? Why did he try to do it?”

She attacked her with questions, hoping she would give in and answer them. If she had time to compose herself, Natalie had a strong feeling her grandmother would never answer. She would get her answers, to all of her questions.

“I don’t know,” her grandmother said, her voice weaker than Natalie had ever heard it.

“I think you do,” Natalie said, narrowing her eyes.

Her grandmother looked at Ramon. “He was possessed. That was why.”

“Still doesn’t tell me what Chaos is.”

“It is nothing you need to know—”

“He tried to kill me to raise it – her, as he said,” Natalie said coolly. “I think I have the right to know.”

She rather enjoyed the feeling of being in control for once. Since the first time she had met her grandmother, it had always been her grandmother who had been deciding the subjects talked about and the questions asked. It had been fine the first few times, but no more. The stakes were higher now.

The stone in her pocket weighed heavily, as a reminder of just how high the stakes were. She needed answers about the stone as well, but that would come. Hopefully.

Her grandmother contemplated what to answer, it appeared, for she gripped her cup so hard her fingers turned white and the surface of the tea rippled slightly as her grandmother’s hands trembled. Natalie wondered briefly if she had pressed too hard, but pushed the thought aside.

A deep breath, then her grandmother spoke.

“Chaos is—darkness. Magic gone bad, dark, and deadly. Everything alive has some part of it in us, a little or a lot, but everyone has it. Some are more susceptible to it than others. It makes us

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break the rules – not necessarily the laws, but the rules of human kind. It can make a person depressed, suicidal, insane—”

“But Chaos is more than that,” her grandmother continued after a moment. She spoke quietly. “It is an entity as well. A devastating entity, that ruins all that is good and light and controlled. It—it can be called into a being, so that it is trapped within a body, and then it walks the earth as though it is human. It has powers—it doesn’t need stones, it doesn’t need anything but itself. It can kill with a single gaze, and drive you mad with a flick of its hand. It is raw darkness.”

Her grandmother stopped, staring at the contents of her cup. Natalie gazed at her. Chaos was in everyone? Then perhaps what she had felt in Ramon’s Mithridates had not been specific to her – perhaps anyone could be seduced by Chaos if deep enough in grief, like she had been.

Ramon stared at Natalie’s grandmother, looking rather entranced but with his eyebrows tightly drawn together in a horrified look.

“Why me?” asked Natalie. “Why did he insist that I was the one he needed to kill?”

Her grandmother continued to study her cup. Eventually, she said, “I don’t know. Perhaps it was the ideas of a madman.”

A slight waver to her voice made Natalie wonder.

Natalie looked at Ramon. “And you don’t remember why you did it?”

Ramon startled at being spoken to. “Huh?”

Natalie repeated her question and Ramon shook his head.

“No, sorry,” he said. “I—I remember feelings – there was fury and power—and love—but I don’t know why it made me want to raise her—it sounds awful.”

“It is,” Natalie’s grandmother mumbled.

Natalie cocked her head to the side. “You’ve seen Chaos raised?”

Her grandmother looked distressed. “It was a long time ago.”

“Tell me,” Natalie said.

“No.”

Her grandmother stood up, sounding suddenly resolute. Her hands still trembled, which meant she still had not calmed, but her face was set.

“I should not have told you as much as I did. It was a mistake.”

“A mistake?” Natalie asked disbelievingly. “Are you kidding me? He tries to kill me to raise this *thing* and you think it’s a mistake to tell me about it?”

“Well, he didn’t succeed, now did he?” her grandmother said.

“No, but that doesn’t mean someone else won’t try.”

“I’m sure nothing more will happen. You had enough adventures for a lifetime.”

“And yet, they just seem to keep coming,” Natalie said harshly.

“What are you talking about?”

Natalie glared at her. “What do you know about the Nebula Medeor?”

Her grandmother stared at her. Natalie could nearly see the wheels turning in her grandmother’s head – she knew something. Would she tell, or would she lie?

“Never head of it,” her grandmother said. “You’ll have to ask someone else.”

“Fine,” Natalie said. “Can you get Diophane McCoy to come here?”

“One does not simply call for a Diophane to come!”

“You made an appointment the last time I was here.”

“That was because you needed to be Tested and the Diophane was interested in a Wielder of our family,” her grandmother snapped. “As you did not pass, we have no business bothering her.”

Natalie continued to glare. “What’s with the secrecy, grandma? What is it you’re not telling me? What is the Nebula? And what about Chaos – why do you think you’ve already told me too much?”

“Because it’s dangerous?”

Her grandmother actually yelled. The usually so calm, collected woman whom Natalie barely knew, raised her voice to a screeching level. Chaos obviously made her quite upset – and considering Natalie had felt it, she did understand why. But she needed to understand *more*.

Natalie took a deep breath and her tone was calmer when she started speaking again.

“I know. I know it’s dangerous. But Ramon here nearly killed me because of it, and we’re both trying to understand why. Please – he killed my best friend for that cause – I need to understand.”

She saw Ramon’s face scrunching up in the corner of her eye at the mention of Ava’s death. She did not care – could not care. Not if she wanted to make her grandmother tell her more.

Her grandmother returned, and sank down onto the couch. She looked terribly old, all of a sudden. Every line on her face could be seen, every shadow darkened. A thin stray of grey hair had even left its place in the tight bun at the nape of her neck.

“A young woman raised Chaos over a decade ago,” Natalie’s grandmother said. “She did it to fight a Wielder gone bad, but in the end, Chaos took over her body and decided to make the world her playground.

“To make a long story very short, another Wielder finally bound Chaos and contained her – but not before she managed to up the death toll on the ‘good’ side, and gather a gang of Wielders on her side.”

Natalie noted with some annoyance that her grandmother gave her the cliff-notes-version. She wondered whether it was because her grandmother did not want to tell her, or if she simply did not know.

“Did you fight?” Natalie asked.

“Yes.”

“On which side?”

“Natalie!” said her grandmother indignantly. “Against her, obviously.”

Natalie shrugged. “There’s nothing obvious about it. Power corrupts – absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

They stared at each other in silence for a long moment, while Ramon fidgeted. Natalie could see him move around in the corner of her eye. She did not move to make him more comfortable.

“So who was controlling him?” Natalie asked, nodding towards Ramon.

“I think he has the best answer to that question,” her grandmother said.

Ramon looked from one to the other and squeaked, “What?”

“Who gave you the necklace?” her grandmother asked.

“No one,” Ramon said. “I didn’t get it from anyone – I found it. Sort of.”

“What do you mean, ‘sort of?’” Natalie asked.

“I—I’d been looking for it for a while.” He sighed. “My father died when I was ten and didn’t leave me with all that much. Since I’d never actually met the guy – mom didn’t want me to see him – it didn’t really matter. But when I turned eighteen, she gave me this paper that had apparently been part of my inheritance as well, and it turned out to be a map. I didn’t look at it much until about a year ago, when I finally had some time over. I decided to find whatever it was he had left me – I hoped it was a load of money, because I have some loans to pay off – but—well, it wasn’t, obviously.”

Natalie glanced at her grandmother. She looked quite unhealthily white, and Natalie got the distinct feeling that Ramon’s story meant more to her.

“So the necklace was your father’s, then,” Natalie said. “He was a follower of Chaos?”

Ramon shrugged heavily. “I suppose – I mean, he must have been. Why else would he have—”

Ramon trailed off. Natalie knew what he was thinking. She could not understand how anyone could enclose a part of themselves in a stone – it sounded insane. To have one’s father do it must be awful.

“Mr. Keys,” Natalie’s grandmother said, too quietly for it to be good. “What was your father’s name?”

Ramon hesitated but a moment before he answered.

“Orion Winters.”

Natalie stared, while her grandmother’s face turned ashen.

18.

Natalie could not decide what to think. Ramon had just given his father's name – and it happened to be the name of Natalie's father. Her grandmother had gone completely white, and sat staring at Ramon.

But it could not be, could it? Ramon could not possibly be her—half brother? That was far too twisted. Surely, there must be other men in the world named Orion Winters. There could not just be the one, her father.

Their father...?

Natalie noted suddenly that her hands shook, but she resisted the urge to sit on them to keep them from doing so. She stared at Ramon, who looked rather curious, as though he had suddenly realized that his father's surname happened to be the same as Natalie's. He did not appear fazed – he did not know that the first names matched as well, and he understood as little as Natalie of Natalie's grandmother's pale face.

Briefly, Natalie's thoughts rested on what it would mean if Ramon's father turned out to be her father as well. Then he had been a follower of Chaos, and her own father had done what she thought insane – he had allowed a part of himself to stay in the stone, to haunt it and control the wearer. He had tried to kill her. Her father had tried to kill her.

She shook her head – she jumped to conclusions! Her father could not possibly be—

She turned slowly to her grandmother, her eyes leaving Ramon at last.

“Grandmother – is he my half-brother?”

Ramon's head shot up suddenly. “What?”

Her grandmother did not speak, but nodded the affirmative.

Natalie's world came crashing down around her. She fell back into her seat, her mind overloaded. It was true – she had a *brother*. A brother who had tried to kill her because he had been controlled by the spirit of his father. Her father. Their father.

She had a brother.

“There must be some mistake,” Ramon said. “I don't have a sister – I'm sure my mom would have told me about it!”

Natalie's grandmother shook her head very slowly and when she spoke, she did so quietly.

“Your mother didn't know,” she said. “It was long after they saw each other the last time, I'm sure. You are much older than Natalie.”

Natalie realized she had never reflected on Ramon's age. She asked, “How old are you?”

“Twenty-five,” Ramon said.

“Ten years older than Natalie,” her grandmother said.

“So then—my father – our father – died soon after her birth,” Ramon said. “But I—why did he die? What happened?”

Natalie's grandmother took a deep breath, which she appeared to be very much in need of. Very little of the color that usually graced her cheeks had reappeared. Natalie did not feel much better

than her grandmother looked – most of all, she would have liked to go lie down and sleep for a couple of years.

But she had pushed for answers, and now she got them.

“He supported Chaos,” her grandmother said. “Perhaps he even loved her – he was deeply encompassed by her power and darkness. He was—a casualty in the battle we fought to tame Chaos.”

Then her father had been one of the Wielders in the ‘gang’ Chaos had gathered – and her grandmother had been on what she had fought against him. It was no wonder she had been hesitant to divulge the information to Natalie. Still, Natalie thought she deserved to know. He had been her father.

“I have a sister,” Ramon said with the same air of disbelief that Natalie felt.

Natalie thought suddenly of Ava. What would she think – her killer was, one way or another, directly related to Natalie as either her brother or her father. She felt sick.

“Excuse me,” she mumbled, standing up suddenly.

The room swam around her as she dashed towards the bathroom, one hand covering her mouth. Once inside, she bent over the toilet and retched.

After several minutes, she sat back, feeling utterly drained. Her hands shook badly and she knew she must look like death itself. Waves of hot and cold ran through her, as though she had a fever.

The bathroom ran without electricity, but it seemed magic did the trick instead. A basin of water emptied and refilled itself as she rinsed out her mouth and washed her hands.

Finally, she laid down on the hard wooden floor. She felt drained and tiredly recalled the time a couple of weeks ago, in the desert, when Ava had left her to go find a way back to Lake Sunflower. She had felt about the same then – lead lined and bone tired. She did not want to move, ever again.

Images of Ramon mixed and blurred before her. Her brother. She could hear the cackling sound of his mad laughter, but also the rather gentle voice he had used as her teacher, his kindness when he asked her how she was. His eyes, going from raging mad to dark and kind. There was no likeness between the two, him and Natalie, but then she had never looked at him that way.

She fell asleep, curled together on the wooden floor.

When she awoke again, she had been moved to the guest bedroom on the second floor. She did not recognize it at once, and it took a few seconds for the disorientation to abate, but then she recalled the events that had taken place earlier. She supposed someone had brought her up here.

A rocking chair that had not been there before stood at the other end of the room. Ramon occupied it.

“Where is grandmother?” Natalie asked.

Ramon, who had been staring out the window, jumped at the sound of her voice. “She’s resting, too.”

“Why aren’t you?”

“I don’t think this has been as bad for me as it has been for you,” he said. “I’ve merely found out I have a sister. I still don’t recall any of the things that happened last month, so I’m no worse for wear for that. I just—I suddenly have family again.”

Natalie cocked her head to the side. “Don’t you have your mother?”

Ramon shook his head. “She died a year and a half ago. Cancer.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Ramon nodded. “Me too. It was the reason why I started researching father’s map. I wanted to feel connected to something, have some family left.”

“I see.”

She wondered if it could all have been avoided if his mother had simply not died when she had. Then what? Ava would not have been dead, and Natalie would never have experienced Chaos. She would not have found out about Ramon. She could not decide if the latter was good or bad.

They sat in silence, each lost in deep thought. Though Natalie tried to keep her thoughts on track – she had to find out more about the Nebula Medeor while she was here – she did not manage. Her mind replayed all the times she had ever spent with Ramon. The first, starting in a dream and ending with her grandmother’s great entrance, and then passing through each and every one of their meetings.

Natalie looked up suddenly, remembering.

“I’m sorry I put you in the hospital.”

Ramon’s head snapped up. “What?”

“I was the one who put you in the hospital,” Natalie said. “When you first taught at Lake Sunflower.”

“But—how could you—” Then he answered his own question. “Magic.”

Natalie nodded. “I was convinced that you were a threat. I couldn’t really control it – I’m still just a Novus, or at least I was at the time – and it just—I thought you were going to attack me, or at least defend yourself. But you just—didn’t.”

Ramon stayed silent for a moment. “That explains why the doctors couldn’t say why my heart stopped all of a sudden.”

Natalie studied her hands. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“Considering what I did to your best friend, I don’t think you are the one who should be apologizing.”

Natalie had no answer to his quiet words and even if she did, it would have been lost. A knock on the door interrupted them and at their admission, the maid appeared.

“There is a visitor who would like to see you,” she said.

Natalie glanced at Ramon. “Which one of us?”

“She didn’t specify,” the maid said.

She waited for Natalie to get out of bed. Natalie did so gingerly – she still felt a bit shaky – but finally stood and followed the maid down the stairs. Ramon walked just behind her.

Night had started to fall and the living room looked cozy and spooky all at the same time. The flickering light from the fireplace sent shadows dancing all over the walls. Natalie did not notice the two figures standing in the corner of the room at first.

“Miss Winters.”

Natalie recognized the chilly voice of Diophane McCoy.

“Uh, hi,” Natalie said.

“You wished to speak with me,” the Diophane said.

Natalie frowned. Had her grandmother sent for the Diophane after all, despite her protests? Natalie almost wished she had not, as she stood and tried not to fidget under her stare. She had forgotten what Diophane McCoy was like.

“Yes,” Natalie squeaked. “I—”

She trailed off, her eyes catching the boy standing behind the Diophane. He had moved just a little and she could see him. He wore a long cloak with a hood that cast his face in shadows, but she believed she could make out the rather sharp features of a boy her own age. He stood proud, his hands clasped behind his back.

“Miss Winters?” Diophane McCoy said again.

Natalie decided to go for it. She did not have anything to lose. “What do you know of the Nebula Medeor?”

She studied the Diophane’s face and that was the only reason she caught the brief, shocked expression. A second later, Diophane McCoy had rearranged her face back into perfect calmness.

“Where did you hear of the Nebula Medeor?”

Natalie hesitated, and thought about her answer for a moment. Then she shook her head.

“You answer my question first, then I’ll tell you.”

The Diophane’s green eyes pierced her; it felt as though she stared into Natalie’s soul. Then Diophane McCoy’s necklace glowed dark red for a moment. She wielded magic but Natalie did not know why.

“Now we are protected,” Diophane McCoy said. “Now I will speak.”

She moved forward and sat on the couch where Natalie’s grandmother had sat earlier. Her stance was still hard, even sitting down. The boy followed her and sitting down, leaving enough space for another person to come sit between them. Natalie and Ramon sat down where they had been sitting earlier.

“The Nebula,” the Diophane said, “is not a well-known artifact. I shall be very interested in hearing where you found out about it. However, as you drive a bargain—” Natalie held back a proud smile “—I will tell you a bit about it. What do you already know?”

“I know that three girls found it and they used it to heal people,” Natalie said. “And then for some reason, it broke.”

“For some reason, yes,” the Diophane said. “No one knows why, although there I have my personal theories.”

“Which are?” Natalie asked.

“Far too long and complicated to explain.”

Natalie glared for a second, but the returned hard gaze made her shrink in her seat.

“The Nebula Medeor was, like you said, found by three young women – sisters. As far as I have been able to tell – not much has been written about it – they used it to heal people of their village. However, the stone appears to have been just as dangerous as it was helpful. The more they healed, the more they began to fight, drawing them into darkness. The three girls had never been known to fight before they found that magical stone – but afterwards...”

Natalie felt herself fading from the semi-lit room. The shapes of the shadows cast on the walls twisted and turned. Natalie felt suddenly sleepy and when she blinked, she no longer sat on the comfortable couch. The Diophane had disappeared, as had every part of the living room.

Natalie stood on a grass slope, harsh winds pulling at her hair. Rain poured down from black skies and in the distance, she heard thunder. Before her, the slope ended and when she moved forward, she saw that it did so by plunging downwards, hundreds of meters, into the cold, dark ocean.

The three sisters stood at the top of the cliff, too close to the edge for comfort. Natalie could see their angry faces – red blotches on their cheeks, their brows drawn together. The youngest sister appeared furious. They had soot on their cheeks and clothes, and Natalie wondered where it came from.

She moved closer.

“...we were given the stone for a reason! We are supposed to use it!” Sandrine yelled, though the words were partly erased by the loud wind.

“The village *burned*, Sandrine!” the eldest sister yelled back. “It burned, all because of us!”

Natalie looked around, and saw the village behind them – or what was left of it. Black pillars of smoke rose towards the skies, and suddenly Natalie could feel the smell of burnt wood in the air.

Tears coursed down the eldest sister’s cheeks, while the youngest only appeared furious.

“That’s not our fault! We did not cause the fire!” Sandrine screamed. “This stone is good – it will do great things, if only we let it!”

“The stone – you saw what it did,” the middle sister said. She cried quietly. “Please, give the stone to us. We can’t use it anymore.”

“No! Leave me be!” yelled Sandrine. “You will not stop me from using this stone. Have you not seen the happiness in the people we have healed? How can you call that anything but good? The stone will aid so many.”

The eldest sister shook her head. “It has a mind of its own—it is dangerous!”

Sandrine pulled a cloth out of her pocket. The fabric fell away and the stone became visible. Suddenly, the sound of the storm around them faded and all Natalie could see and hear was the stone, lying still before her, power seeping from it in waves.

The three sisters appeared to be equally entranced by the stone. They reached out and touched it gently, all the while staring at it. They bore different expressions. Sandrine looked suddenly giddy at the sight, while the eldest looked truly horrified and the middle sister appeared sad.

“It’s a stone, Sophia!” Sandrine yelled to the oldest sister. “How can it be—”

A deafening crack drowned out the sound of the rest of her sentence. A flash so bright, it made it look like day filled the sky. It traveled down from the clouds as though in slow motion, reaching its long arm out to the three sisters standing precariously on the top of the cliff.

Like a magnet for lightning, the Nebula Medeor pulled the flash towards itself.

It hit, and Natalie could see the stone break. Three perfectly even pieces, each girl touching a part. Wide-eyed, they stared at it – all save for Sandrine, who jumped back upon impact. In the slippery grass, she lost her balance and though she tried, she fell back. Her hand clasped her part of the stone as she realized that she no longer had anything to stand on. Her eyes became wide with terror – and a moment before all was lost, she knew it would be.

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She fell over the edge of the cliff and the second she had fallen so far back it was far too late to save her, the world started moving at normal speed again.

Her sisters screamed and the storm around them continued. Natalie moved to the edge once more and looked down. Sandrine had disappeared in the dark waters far, far below and could not be seen no matter how much her sisters begged.

19.

The world around her returned to what it had been before – Diophane McCoy opposite her, speaking about the Nebula and what little she knew of it, the boy next to her and Ramon next to Natalie.

“According to the few records I’ve found of it, the stone was split in three, each sister left with one part,” the Diophane said. “No one knows what they did with the parts and no one has been able to locate the Nebula since the tragic death of the youngest sister.”

Natalie’s thoughts raced. She had found the eldest sister’s – Sophia’s – piece but two remained to be found. If Sandrine had died still holding her piece of the stone, then the part had been lost for centuries in the cold waters where she had died. Natalie would never find it.

She felt her heart fall into a pit of black despair. She wanted that part. She *needed* that part.

The Diophane caught her attention once more.

“But make no mistake, Miss Winters,” she said. “The stone was as dangerous as it was powerful. People have given witness to the destruction of the three sisters after they started using the stone – the more miracles they performed, the harder they fought. No one knows the origin of the stone, but there are stories that claim it had a life of its own.” She looked down her nose at Natalie. “Now, tell me where you heard of this stone.”

Natalie had prepared her lie. “At the library at home. I stumbled upon a magic room and there was a Script Magia. It had a page on the Nebula Medeor.”

The Diophane’s hard eyes bore into her, searching for deception. Natalie held her own, meeting the gaze unwavering. After a long moment, Diophane McCoy pursed her lips.

“It is odd that you would find such a text. I thought all texts on it had been moved here.”

Natalie assumed she meant that they had been moved to this dimension. She thought of Jules Sihera, the guardian of the Script Magia she had found. He might be the reason why the Script had never been moved. After all, he had claimed to be its Keeper.

Natalie wondered about the vision she just had of the three sisters. Why now? Why had it happened as she sat listening to the Diophane tell the very same story – albeit with much fewer details? No one seemed to have noticed her disappearance into the dreamlike place. She wondered how long it had lasted. It all felt very strange, especially as the previous dreams of the sisters had been so controlled, with a meeting with the robed figure before or after.

The Diophane stood and the boy with her. Natalie followed suit.

“I urge you not to try to find the stone, Miss Winters. There are Wielders who have gone mad trying to do so. It no longer exists and it is no longer a danger, as long as it is in pieces.”

“Yes, Diophane,” Natalie said. The piece of the stone that currently rested in Natalie’s pocket felt suddenly heavy.

“Good. If that is all, we shall be on our way.”

“It is,” Natalie said. “Thank you.”

She meant her thanks. The Diophane’s story had obviously made it possible for her to see something – perhaps a part she would have had to wait for much longer otherwise. However, despite the death of the youngest sister, the vision did not worry Natalie. It had, of course, been

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awful, but she felt convinced that the stone would not have much effect on her – she would only be using it once, and then leave it be. She only needed to heal Cecily – people would not line up outside her door to be healed.

The Diophane and the boy – Natalie presumed him to be her student as he followed her every move – swept their fingers across their glowing necklaces and in the next second, they had disappeared.

Natalie turned to Ramon, who had not said a single word since they had arrived downstairs.

“You’re going to look for it, aren’t you?” he asked.

For some reason, Natalie felt no need to lie. Perhaps because he was no longer a threat, or perhaps because some part of her recognized him to be her brother – and one should trust one’s brother.

“Yes,” she said simply. “I have to.”

“Why?”

“A friend of mine needs it.”

“I see,” he said, though he clearly did not.

Silence spread for several minutes.

“What are you going to do now?” Natalie asked.

Ramon looked out the windows, his face distant. “Your grandmother has offered me to stay here. I believe she wants to monitor me.”

“Oh,” Natalie said – she could come up with nothing more.

She wondered what she should feel about suddenly having a brother. Happiness? She could not quite bring herself to feel anything.

Darkness had fallen over the forest. Natalie could hear the faint sounds of the wind whispering outside and she felt weary. She wondered how it could be possible that a mere two months ago, she had not known anything about magic.

How simple life had been then.

She called for butler Thomas and asked to go home. Her grandmother slept on and Natalie did not bid her goodbye, as she did not want to disturb her.

She wondered whether she would ever be able to look at Ramon without thinking of Ava’s death.

The almost complete lack of bruises on Natalie’s face the next day had the other students whispering and pointing yet again. Natalie pushed it aside, not wishing to think about it. Besides, it had almost become part of the school day by now, people giggling and murmuring behind her back. She tried to focus in her classes but continuously returned to the Nebula.

Natalie sat in her first afternoon class, listening as the teacher droned on, when she looked down and found the sentence.

‘You have found the first piece.’

'You pretty much gave it to me,' Natalie wrote back. She really had not done much to find it.

'Do not underestimate your own work.'

Natalie thought of the vision she had had of the sisters while at her grandmother's. Although the ghost writer had shown her that the three sisters had fought about the uses of the stone, it had not shown the death of the youngest sister. Where had the vision at her grandmother's come from? Had the ghost writer taken her there while she was completely conscious this time? Feeling a slight bit suspicious, Natalie asked,

'Is the stone dangerous?'

It did not take long for an answer to appear.

'No thing has ever only one quality.'

Natalie frowned. What did that mean? That the stone could be dangerous? It sounded like the old saying – in everything good lies some bad. Perhaps that was what the ghost writer meant, in its typical, cryptic way.

She sighed, for she knew the ghost writer would not be any more forthcoming.

'I saw when the stone was split,' Natalie wrote. *'Is one part lost in the ocean?'*

The answer took some time to appear and Natalie began to wonder if the ghost writer had once more disappeared. The teacher wrote briefly on the white board and Natalie copied it down into her notes. When he turned back to the class and continued speaking, Natalie let her mind drift again. The answer appeared.

'Not everything is as it seems.'

Now *that* answer annoyed Natalie. What did it mean by that? She rather felt like ripping the piece of paper into shreds but refrained, taking long deep breaths instead. The gossipers did not need more fuel to their fire on her mental state.

'What do you mean?' Natalie wrote, though she doubted she would get an answer.

The clock showed five minutes left before class would end. Natalie wanted an answer before then, but the seconds ticked on and became minutes. Then, with only one minute left, she found an answer on the paper.

'The first piece was not in the desert, but in a dreamland. The second piece is not in the ocean, but with the sister.'

The bell rang, and everyone around Natalie bustled out of the classroom. Natalie stared at the words. Though the fact that the piece had not ended up on the bottom of the ocean made her rather happy – she would never have found it then – she did not understand where else it could have gone. With the sister? Had one of the other two sisters grabbed it just before Sandrine went over the edge? It certainly seemed possible and Natalie could not quite remember what the two sisters had been doing at the time – her own eyes had been glued to Sandrine in the brief second it took for her to fall and disappear beyond the edge.

Natalie sighed and packed her things. She wished she could talk to Cecily – perhaps she would be able to shed some light on this. But no, she would not – not until she had the pieces, and could heal Cecily with it.

Two days passed without Natalie gaining any more understanding. The latest of the ghost writer's words had her lost – but she found an odd sort of solace in the fact that she had been equally lost the first time around, and she had still managed to get that piece. However, she stressed – Cecily

had been gone from school again and to Natalie, she looked worse each time Natalie saw her. She was running out of time.

As she walked home from school on Friday afternoon, company faded into view before her. A warm feeling spread in her chest at the sight of her friend – she had wondered why Ava had not been to see her in several days.

“Hi,” Natalie said.

“Hi,” Ava said. “What’s wrong?”

Natalie sighed – she had no reason to keep anything from Ava. After all, who would she tell?

“I found the first piece of the stone.”

“That’s great!” Ava said. “No?”

“It is, definitely.”

“But?”

“But there are still two more parts and the ghost writer is giving me such annoying clues – and Cecily’s just getting worse,” Natalie said.

“Ah,” Ava said. “I see. What’s the clue?”

Natalie grabbed her notebook out of her bag and held it up for Ava to look at. Once Ava had read the text, Natalie told her about the vision she had had of the three sisters up on the cliff.

By the time she had finished, they had reached Natalie’s house and while she unlocked the door, Ava floated right through it. She smiled smugly for a moment at Natalie, before cocking her head to the side.

“That’s just horrible. But – ‘With her sister’? What does that mean?” she asked.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out – and it’s driving me mad,” Natalie said. “I’ve been trying to think if any of the other sisters grabbed the stone but I don’t really remember but perhaps—I don’t know. And even if one of them did, it doesn’t get me anywhere!”

“And it says it’s not in the ocean,” Ava said thoughtfully. “That’s good, at least.”

Natalie nodded. Ava followed her to the kitchen, where she grabbed a piece of toast.

“I’d offer you some but, you know,” Natalie said to Ava, who shrugged.

“Who needs eating when I can do this instead,” Ava said, and floated up in the air towards the ceiling. She did not have it quite down yet, as she floated through the ceiling and for a while, all Natalie could see were Ava’s legs and feet, which faded into the background.

“Show-off,” Natalie smiled as Ava came back down.

As always when she spoke to Ava, it felt nice. Since the first time they had met, they seemed to have clicked – Natalie kept forgetting that it had only been two months. She sighed.

“What is it?” asked Ava.

Natalie shrugged. “I’m being sentimental. I just wish we could’ve had some more time together.”

“Me too,” Ava said. She hesitated before continuing. “Natalie? You know this stone – the Nebula—if it can heal people, do you think it could make me—”

Natalie knew what she was asking. “I don’t know.”

The sisters had used it for healing, but Natalie doubted they had used it to raise the dead. They had never said anything to point in that direction, at least.

“I suppose you’d need my body anyway,” Ava said. “And that’s—well, not available.”

She tried to keep her voice light, but Natalie could hear the undertones of desperation.

“Do you want to live again?” Natalie asked.

Ava looked miserable and nodded. “I do. I miss things. Just looking at you eating toast right now – I want to eat toast too. The regular stuff, the things I never thought about doing. And I’d like to see my family again. They—they think I ran off, or got kidnapped – I’d like for them to know what happened. I—I was at my parents’ house a couple of nights ago and I saw mom and—she was crying. And I just wanted to comfort her and I couldn’t—”

Silver tears traveled down Ava’s cheeks. “I guess I’d have liked to see what my life would have been like. I just—now, it feels like someone is dangling my life in front of me, showing me everything that I can’t have. I think I’d be all right if I actually died and moved on somewhere—but right now it just feels like I’m stuck in limbo. See, but not touch.”

Natalie wished she could take Ava into her arms and hug her close, but that was exactly the problem – see, but not touch.

“I’m so sorry,” Natalie said.

Ava shook her head. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Natalie’s eyes grew suddenly wide, as she remembered what she had not yet told Ava.

“He’s my brother,” Natalie choked out.

“Who?” Ava asked. “You have a brother?”

“Ramon,” Natalie whispered. “He’s—he’s my half-brother. We—my dad—”

Ava stared at her for a full minute, feelings passing quickly over her face – surprise, anger, hatred, fury, shock. Finally, Ava looked to the floor.

“That still doesn’t make it your fault.”

“But—”

“Please, Nat—I don’t want to talk about it—I have to—”

Though a ghost likely did not need to breathe, Ava’s chest heaved. She closed her eyes, pinching her eyebrows together, and let out a long, shuddering breath.

“I—I’ll see you later,” she said.

Before Natalie had time to say or do anything else, Ava turned and passed through the walls of the kitchen, disappearing from Natalie’s sight.

The feelings of shock that Natalie had felt when she had been at her grandmother’s returned. Sadness passed through her – she had not wanted to upset Ava further. Still, she knew that she would have had to find out at some point, and lying to her would not have made anyone any happier in the end.

She sank down into her chair, feeling like a heavy weight sat upon her heart.

20.

Natalie spent her weekend in solitude, mostly in her room. The revelations and emotions she had gone through in the last couple of days and weeks had her drained.

The thought of her father, on Chaos' side, inevitably steered her mind towards her mother. Who had she been? Why had she sided with someone who supported darkness? Natalie had always envisaged her mother as good and kind – had that been wrong? Had she been on Chaos' side as well? She had died at about the same time as Natalie's father, had she not? Had she too been killed for being on the wrong side?

On Sunday evening, Natalie walked downstairs to find Richard sitting in the living room. He sat alone, watching TV.

"Where's Em?" Natalie asked.

She slumped down onto the couch as Richard answered, "She's out with a couple of friends for the night."

"Oh."

Emmanuella did that some times – left with her girlfriends, who were all like her: stuck up, underdressed and loud. Natalie did not mind her being gone.

"You've been quiet lately," Richard said.

Natalie shrugged. "There's just been—a lot of things going on."

"What kind of things?"

"Just—a lot of things." Then, on a whim, she asked, "What was my mother like?"

Richard whitened at the question and turned back to the TV. He looked as troubled as always, when Natalie asked the question. She had not asked in over a year – she had learnt that it was of no use.

"She was lovely," Richard said. "But really, shouldn't you ask your grandmother about it instead?"

As expected, he evaded her question. Natalie shook her head. "I'm asking you. You were her brother."

"It's been so long," Richard sighed. "I barely even remember anymore."

His face told her that he did remember. The pained expression made Natalie unsure of what he remembered, however – had her mother been a bad person? But no, the only thing Richard had ever said about her, was that she had been lovely.

She wanted to know. She wanted to know so badly – if her father had been a supporter of evil, then what had her mother been? Why had she died? Why had Natalie been forced to grow up with her uncle instead of with her parents?

An idea surfaced – could she use magic to make him tell her? Could she force it out of him?

She began to collect magic, her wish clear in her mind.

"Please," Natalie said. "Just something—she was my mom. I just want to know."

Richard shook his head and made to stand. "I'm sorry, Natalie."

“Please!”

Natalie reached out and grabbed his wrist. A surge of magic passed from Natalie’s hand into Richard’s – she could feel it move. The magic felt specific like nothing she had ever done before. It had only one purpose – she wanted Richard to tell her of her mother. She had to know and Richard’s memories might be able to give her at least some answers.

“I don’t—”

But Richard’s words were drowned out. Something sucked Natalie forcefully in and she landed in a blurry landscape that seemed to change around her as she watched. She saw the vision through someone’s eyes and she realized with sudden clarity that the magic had pulled her into Richard’s memories.

A woman, whom Natalie soon could tell to be her own grandmother, bent down in front of her and showed her a small baby.

“This is your sister,” her grandmother said. “Her name is Carolina.”

A chubby hand belonging to the body Natalie resided in, was raised and touched the baby’s cheek.

The scene changed, the girl had become a few years old and ran down the stairs. The boy ran before her, looking over his shoulder and glancing back at the girl. Both giggled madly as they dashed around the house.

A school followed, a regular school with many children milling about. Richard had never noted them in his memories and they were merely a big blur, loud and ever-changing around him. Richard sat with friends – boys with blond hair and blue eyes, some freckled. He laughed with them. Then he looked to his side and there the girl was once more – unlike the ones surrounding him, this girl could not be clearer. She had aged to somewhere around seven years old, her hair in two braids and her clothes neat and tidy.

Natalie could feel a pang of regret, but she could not understand why – she merely thought it fantastic to see this. Then it dawned on her – regret was Richard’s feeling. She still did not understand why.

The memory changed abruptly into afternoon after school. Richard watched from afar as a group of boys and girls followed a lone girl.

“Freak!” they yelled and Natalie felt another stab of emotion – this time, it was anger and fear. The boys and girls continued to chant ‘freak’ and ‘misfit’ to the girl who would grow up to become Natalie’s mother.

Once more, Natalie’s grandmother came into the picture, along with a man Natalie had never met – her grandfather. He had kind eyes and thinning hair.

“Philip, would you take Richard outside – I need to speak to Carolina,” her grandmother said.

Richard turned and Natalie’s mother came into view. She was older yet again, perhaps around eleven. She sat quietly by the table, her face hidden behind a cascade of hair that had the exact same color as Natalie’s.

Natalie’s grandfather led Richard out. He looked over his shoulder one last time and Natalie wanted desperately to stay behind and hear what her grandmother would say to her mother.

Brief flashes followed that seemed to go the same way – her grandmother asked to be alone with Carolina, whilst Philip took Richard somewhere. Natalie felt Richard’s curiousness grow. She

suspected what her grandmother spoke to her mother about. Carolina had been told of magic, and trained in it – Richard had not.

“Crazy! That’s what you are, Turner – a crazy, ugly freak!”

The scene changed and the voice echoed over Natalie’s head. The girl who had screamed stood before Carolina, who crowed. Two other girls stood behind the one who had yelled.

Suddenly, Carolina’s necklace glowed brightly. For a moment, everything became white and when the scene returned, the three girls were lying unconscious on the ground. Richard, who sat hidden behind something, felt shock and amazement – it traveled through Natalie as well. Carolina turned and ran from the scene.

Then Natalie returned with a gasp to the living room. Richard appeared dazed, but no longer than a second seemed to have passed. He shook his head and Natalie tried to get her breathing under control.

“There’s nothing I can tell you,” Richard said.

He pulled his hand from Natalie’s slackened hold, and hurried from the living room appearing badly shaken.

Natalie sat staring after him. She had not received any answers from her trip down Richard’s memories, but one thing was certain – her mother had been a victim of grim bullying. Natalie could not decide what to think of Richard – he had been there, he had wanted to do something, but he had obviously not, at least not for many years. Natalie had felt his fear of saying something. He had been scared they would turn on him too.

Natalie buried her head in her hands. That had given her nothing but more grief, this time for her mother. And a new question had surfaced – how much did Richard know about magic? He had obviously seen his sister do magic, but how much had he understood? Why had he not been told?

And still, she wondered – why had her mother died?

Despite the anger at Richard for what he had failed to do for her mother, and the lack of ideas to find the second part of the Nebula, Natalie still felt rather excited when she thought back to the events on Sunday afternoon. She had done magic completely on purpose that had worked on another person – she had entered another person’s memories.

She went to school on Monday morning with renewed energy.

Cecily sat in math class already when Natalie arrived. She looked tired as she usually did, and though Natalie knew that it would not last, she still concentrated for a minute and then sent a string of magic towards Cecily. It was not bright and shining this time, like when she had first healed her – this time, she consciously made it invisible. Cecily did not react when it touched her.

Natalie took a deep breath and decided that it was time to end the fight with Cecily. Though not quite ready to forgive her, they should still be able to talk to each other. Like Cecily had said – she did not have enough time left to spend it fighting. And though Natalie still hoped for the Nebula, there was still a risk...

“Hi.”

Natalie sat down in the chair next to Cecily.

“Hi,” Cecily said carefully.

“How are you?”

Something lit in Cecily’s eyes. She smiled. “I’m good, and you?”

“I’m good too.”

They eyed each other, both rather unsure. Natalie could not recall feeling uncomfortable with Cecily before, but she did now. It would pass, eventually.

Class started and Natalie and Cecily kept shooting each other furtive glances, smiling rather shyly. To Natalie’s pleasure, a hint of color returned to Cecily’s cheeks as time passed.

They followed one another to English class, where the new substitute teacher waited for them. A woman in her late forties, likely the mother of some student. Natalie’s thoughts went to Ramon, still at her grandmother’s.

Her brother.

It still felt unreal.

Cecily watched her curiously. Natalie wanted to talk to her, but could say nothing as the teacher started speaking.

“Would you like to sit with me at lunch?” Natalie asked at the end of class.

Cecily smiled. “I would.”

“Good. I’ll see you then.”

It still felt stilted, but at least they were speaking again. Natalie had not realized how much she had missed Cecily. If she had realized, she would have made peace much sooner. A warm feeling spread when they met up an hour later, and sat down outside with their lunches.

After an uncomfortable minute of silence had passed, Natalie said, “So—what’s happening?”

Cecily cocked her head to the side, pausing for a moment. “Nathan and I are dating.”

“Oh,” said Natalie, hardly surprised. “How long has that been going on?”

“Since the dance,” Cecily said. “We’ve been on a couple of dates – I wanted to experience the dating-thing.”

The sentence continued, *before I die*, but Cecily did not say it.

“You should. Really, so should I,” Natalie said with a roll of her eyes. “Is he a good kisser?”

Cecily blushed bright red and giggled. “He’s quite fine, yes.”

A few minutes passed with easy banter – Cecily told Natalie that Nathan was a gentleman, interested in science and sometimes a poet. He worried for her health, had bought her flowers once, and he had insisted on paying for the few dinners they had been out on. Natalie listened and basked in the feeling of being a regular teenage girl, talking about boys with a girlfriend.

Eventually, Cecily turned the question back to Natalie.

“What have you been up to?”

Natalie studied her sandwich. “I don’t even know where to start.”

My father was insane, Ava's killer is my brother, my mother was bullied in school, and I'm trying to find the pieces of a stone that should be able to heal you. Oh, and by the way – Ava is a ghost.

She decided not to put it quite that way.

“At the beginning, perhaps?”

“I don’t know which part is the start,” Natalie said. She took a deep breath. “My father worked for Chaos.”

Cecily’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “What?”

“Apparently, he was quite fond of it – he got killed by the other side, the light side or something,” Natalie said.

“But—why?”

“Trust me, I’ve been asking myself that very question quite a few times. I don’t have a clue why he would do that. I mean—it’s darkness! And then my mother—I don’t know if she was good or not.”

“I’ve told you before,” Cecily said. “You’re a good person, so they can’t have been too terrible.”

Natalie sighed. “I just don’t know.”

“Don’t fret about it,” Cecily said. “It won’t do you any good. You’re not your father.”

Natalie wanted to tell her of Ramon, but refrained. The bell would ring in a matter of minutes and Natalie knew that they would not have time to dive any deeper into the subjects. Telling Cecily she had a brother would not be a topic finished in a minute or two. Cecily would have questions and Natalie wanted to discuss it, talk about it. She wanted to tell Cecily everything – save, of course, for the Nebula. And perhaps she would not mention Ava’s ghost either.

“I know we’re not on the best terms right now,” Natalie said, “but I really need to talk to someone. Do you have time this afternoon?”

Cecily nodded. “Nathan and I thought of doing something, but I can call him.”

“Thanks,” Natalie said.

They stood. Cecily said, “I’m glad we’re talking again.”

Natalie smiled. “Me too.”

Afternoon had come and they sat in Cecily’s room, Natalie in the chair by the desk and Cecily propped up against pillows on the bed. The curtains moved lazily in the breeze and light played throughout the room. Cecily sat staring at Natalie, not quite able to form words.

“He’s—what—your—”

Natalie said nothing. What could she say?

“He’s your *brother*?”

Natalie nodded. “Yeah.”

“And he was controlled by the evil spirit of your father?”

“Well, the spirit of my father at least. I don’t know if he was evil.”

“And he killed Ava while he was being controlled?”

“Yes.”

“And he doesn’t remember anything?”

Natalie shook her head. “Not a thing.”

Cecily looked quite blown away – a look that Natalie had never seen on her face before. Her mouth hung open and a frown came and went as she went through the information Natalie had just relayed.

“That—changes things,” Cecily said.

“It does.”

It felt good, to have told her. Natalie had definitely needed to speak to someone about it – someone other than the brother himself, or his victim. Once Cecily got over the stunned part, she would be able to talk about it. Natalie needed to speak about her conflicted feelings towards Ramon – on the one hand, he was an innocent taken advantage of, but on the other hand, he had killed her best friend. Natalie’s head hurt just thinking of it.

Her headache would get worse.

“Natalie,” Cecily said carefully, “I had a dream.”

“A dream?” Natalie echoed. After a moment she realized. “A prophetic one?”

Cecily frowned. “I don’t know. It was odd – you were in the desert. But it seemed so real, so like the prophetic ones I’ve had before – but you’re not going to the desert, are you?”

Natalie shook her head, and told herself that it was not a lie. She was not going to the desert – she had already been there, in a dream of her own.

“I suppose it was only a regular dream, then,” Cecily said softly. She gazed at Natalie.

“I suppose,” Natalie said.

Cecily sat quietly, appeared deep in thought, when Ava’s transparent body suddenly materialized before her. She looked tired, her lips pulled into a tight smile, and Natalie wondered if ghosts could really become tired. Did they need to sleep?

“I need to talk to you,” Ava said quietly.

Natalie glanced back at Cecily, who still looked quite far gone in thoughts. Cecily would not be able to see Ava because she was not magical.

“What is it? Are you okay?”

Ava shrugged. “I’ll be fine. Just a bit of a shock with Ramon being your—you know. Anyway, I—”

A loud gasp stopped Ava mid-sentence. She turned around as Natalie moved her gaze to Cecily – who stared wide-eyed and white-faced straight at Ava.

“Oh my god.”

21.

“You—you can see me?”

Ava and Cecily stared straight at each other. Cecily’s mouth hung open in complete shock.

“You’re dead,” she whispered.

“Yeah. And you’re not supposed to be able to see me,” Ava said.

Natalie’s gaze wandered between the two. She thought it was good that Cecily had been sitting down already, for she feared she would have passed out otherwise. Her face matched the white sheets.

Finally, Cecily swallowed. “You’re a ghost?”

Ava nodded.

“But that means that I’m—” Cecily said, trailing off.

Natalie finished with a smile. “Magical.”

She remembered the shimmer she had seen surrounding Cecily on several occasions, though it had been a while since the last time. She thought of the prophetic dreams and the sense that Cecily had always been different than them.

Cecily stared at her. “But I’m not a Wielder – I can’t do magic.”

“Perhaps you’re something else, then,” Ava said. “I mean, fairies and whatnot are real, aren’t they?”

Natalie nodded, “That’s what grandmother said.”

“But I’m not a fairy – mom and dad – mom died of cancer,” Cecily said. “She was human.” She sighed and closed her eyes, rubbing her face with her palms. “You’re a ghost. Why didn’t you tell me?”

She directed her question to Natalie.

“Uh—I thought I was going insane,” Natalie said. “I had no idea ghosts even existed!”

“Neither did I, until I became one,” Ava quipped.

“She told me she was a ghost but I couldn’t really believe it,” Natalie said, “and there wasn’t exactly anyone to verify it for me, either. I mean, who would I ask?”

Cecily sighed. “Just don’t expect me to be fine just yet. I had just started accepting that you—”

She did not need to finish the sentence – all three felt rather happy that she did not. The translucence of her body served as enough of a reminder – Ava still existed, but not quite.

“I had a dream about you,” Cecily said. “I didn’t realize it at the time – I thought it was a regular dream – but it must have been a prophetic one. I saw you with Natalie, weeks ago.”

“You didn’t tell me that,” Natalie said.

Cecily shook her head. “What was I supposed to say?”

“Have you had any other prophetic dreams?” Natalie asked.

A crease appeared between Cecily's eyebrows as she thought. "I'm not sure – I've had this very fuzzy dream—you're chasing something, but I can't see what it is."

She glanced curiously at Natalie for an answer. Natalie tried to keep her face neutral as she replied. "I haven't a clue what you're talking about. Perhaps I'm chasing good grades and they're getting away from me."

Cecily rolled her eyes but smiled. She turned to Ava. "What are you here for, then?"

"Here for?" Ava asked.

"Yes, what's your purpose? All ghosts have a purpose – something they need to do before they can move on," Cecily said.

"I don't know," Ava said. "I'm just floating in and out of this place. I don't think I have a purpose. No one's told me, at least."

"You'll know, eventually," Cecily said.

"But I don't want to move on!"

A note of desperation tinted her voice. Natalie wanted to hug her but could not, for obvious reasons. She stayed quite, having no words of comfort to offer. She could not imagine the situation Ava was in – being forced to watch life go on, not participating, just watching the world, waiting for the time when she would die for real.

Cecily studied Ava with a pained expression. "Then all you have to do, is to not fulfill whatever purpose you have here."

"But what if it's something important," Ava said, perhaps mostly to herself. She shook her head, cleared her throat, and looked at Natalie. Her voice sounded thick. "I still need to talk to you."

If Ava did not want to speak in front of Cecily, then it could only mean she had one subject in mind – the Nebula Medeor. Natalie stood.

Cecily did not ask. She saw the looks exchanged between Ava and Natalie and Natalie could only assume that she knew she would not get an answer. She would not force it out of them. Natalie hoped it would not drive a new wedge between them – they certainly did not need that.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Cecily said.

Natalie nodded, her cheeks red with shame of so obviously leaving Cecily in the dark. She bid her goodbye together with Ava and they left. Ava floated through the wall because she could.

Once they were outside, the two went a whole block without saying a word. Natalie felt guilty about not telling Cecily, though it was for the good of things. She did not like to keep secrets.

A small park spread out a few blocks down from Cecily. Natalie and Ava headed that way. It was no bigger than two blocks, but it stood out green and lush amongst the suburb houses. A fountain stood in the middle, and a playground inhabited by a few children, their mothers sitting on the benches just next to it, lay on the other side. Natalie and Ava stayed as far away as possible from it, wishing for privacy. Natalie would appear to be talking to herself, and the less audience, the better.

"You wanted to talk?" Natalie said finally.

Ava startled. "Yeah. Sorry. Just—the Cecily thing threw me for a loop. I mean—I hadn't even tried to talk to her, I just assumed it wouldn't work. I knew she was different but – I didn't know she's *magical!*"

Natalie shook her head. “Neither did I – or she, apparently.”

“I wonder what kind of magical,” Ava said thoughtfully.

“Ava, please,” Natalie said. “The Nebula.”

Ava gave her a slightly annoyed look. Natalie could not blame her – had the roles been reverse, she would probably have wanted to think of the new person that could see her.

“Right,” Ava said. “I was thinking about your second clue. The whole ‘not in the sea, but with the sister’-thing. And I was thinking – what if it wasn’t with one of the other sisters, but with the one who died?”

Natalie stared at her.

“Just hear me out,” Ava said hurriedly, seeing Natalie’s face. “It’s kind of weird but still. Just listen. The stone’s not in the ocean. It’s with a sister, according to your ghost writer thingy. If the sister who died—”

“Sandrine,” Natalie filled in.

“—if Sandrine had it, and it’s with her, then she could’ve brought it along with her. Into death.”

Natalie’s eyes grew bigger. It sounded insane – but she had learned in the last few months, that insane did not mean impossible. Could it be? But then, that still begged the question of where the stone had disappeared to.

“But where’s ‘into death?’” Natalie asked.

“Ah, that’s where I come in,” Ava said, “‘cause I think it’s where I disappear to, when I’m not here. I don’t know what it is, but in my head I call it the Land of the Restless, because it seems to be filled with beings like me – not quite dead, definitely not alive. Just—spirits. Restless ones.”

“But—can things exist there? A piece of a stone?”

Natalie felt both excited and horrified with the idea. Excited, for if Ava was right, then they might soon have the second part of the stone, and horrified because – the Land of the Restless? It did not ring too well for a living person.

“I think so,” Ava said. “I have seen something there. Or well, seen is a big word ‘cause you just kind of float around in there, being nothing at all, just *there*, but I’ve sensed something. Something that shouldn’t be there.”

“Could it really be—?” Natalie asked.

Ava nodded. “Like I said, I think it might be. It fits too well. A stone should not be there, because it’s material, and it should disrupt things. If the sister – Sandrine – managed to bring it along with her spirit to the Land, then—it fits with the clue, doesn’t it?”

Natalie did not know what to say. It did fit with the odd ghost writer’s intelligible clues and it seemed strange enough for the evasive stone.

“It does,” Natalie said. “But how would we ever get it out of there?”

Ava shrugged. “I suggest you use magic.”

She appeared to be under the impression that magic could do just about anything. For a moment, Natalie frowned – nothing she had seen so far had done anything to prove that statement wrong. But visiting another realm, or whatever it was? But reaching beyond death? Could that be possible?

She could not ask anyone either. Her grandmother would certainly get suspicious, as would Cecily. Diophane McCoy would tell her grandmother, without giving Natalie the information she wanted. Other than those three, Natalie had no one to ask. Ramon no longer had the knowledge of a Master Wielder.

Perhaps the ghost writer could help. Then again, relying on the tight-lipped ghost writer seemed a bad idea – Natalie never knew when she would start talking, and she could never get straight answers out of her.

She would have to do this on her own – with Ava.

“I suppose you can’t just grab it and get out of there?” Natalie asked.

Ava shook her head. “I’m not corporeal. I can’t grab anything.”

“And while I’m corporeal, I’m not there,” Natalie said.

“So really, all we have to do is combine the two of us,” Ava said lightly.

Natalie did not know if Ava suggested it seriously or not. It did not matter – it was still exactly what they would have to do. Somehow, they would have to become one to be able to enter the Land of the Restless. And if she could not ask anyone, she would have to do it another way.

“I think you’re onto something,” Natalie said. “That’s exactly what we have to do.”

Ava had obviously not expected her throw-away words to hold any kind of idea. She stared at Natalie.

“You know, that place – it’s for us folks that are dead,” she said. “I kind of doubt it would just allow you in there.”

“It allowed the stone,” Natalie said.

“If I’m right!” Ava said.

Natalie rolled her eyes. “You’ve sold the idea to me. Don’t take it back now.”

“But you can’t go there – I mean—it sounds like one of those stupid things people do in movies and then they end up *dead*.”

Natalie pursed her lips. “It’s either me or Cecily.”

Ava had already breathed in to respond, but the air left her like a sad balloon. Her mouth hung open for a second.

“Okay,” she said finally, with a great sigh. “But if you don’t manage to get back, then it’ll be both of you.”

“I’m willing to take my chances. I’m getting that stone,” Natalie said.

Ava nodded. Silence spread – though they had agreed, somewhat, upon what to do, they still did not know how to do it. Natalie studied the trees, hoping for a sudden flash of insight. She did not get one.

She glanced at Ava. “You haven’t said anything about what we talked about the last time.”

Ava shook her head, rather slowly. “There’s nothing to say. I was—upset. But there’s nothing to do about it, and it doesn’t change what happened. It especially doesn’t change that I love you – you just happen to have the same father as him. Like I said back then – though I didn’t really believe it, I think – it doesn’t make it your fault.”

“I still feel guilty,” Natalie said.

“I know.”

They fell quiet. On the other side of the small park, a child fell and started crying. Natalie watched the boy’s mother come pick him up and she thought again of her own mother. What would it have been like to have a mother like that?

To her side, Ava gave a great heaving sigh.

“Don’t you have a magic book or something? You know, with spells and whatnot? Then you could just look in that and—”

Natalie’s face lit up with a great smile. “Ava, you’re a genius.”

“I am? Well, yes, I am but—I am?”

“Yes, you are! There’s a Script Magia in the library – there must be something in it, right?” Natalie stood, excitement running through her body.

“There’s a magic book in the library? Why would they have that?” Ava asked, obviously confused.

“It’s not in the library, it’s in a magic room, so it’s hidden but—come on, we have to go there,” Natalie said. She talked quickly.

Ava gave her a bewildered look, but shrugged and said, “Right. Okay. Sure.”

Still smiling widely, Natalie took off in a run.

Ava watched curiously as Natalie opened the way to the staircase that lead to the magic room. This time, Natalie did not have to think of anything more than a need of pure magic for the staircase to open. It ought to serve as more proof that she could control it now, she thought.

They walked downstairs.

“There’s a man who lives here,” Natalie said. “He might try to scare us. Obviously, he doesn’t get much visitors.”

“He *lives* down here?” Ava asked, looking rather horrified. “How can anyone *live* down here?”

Natalie shrugged.

Jules Sihera did not disappoint. As soon as Natalie’s foot touched the floor of the room, he jumped out, this time spooked out like a pirate, complete with the eye-patch. Though Natalie had been prepared, she still jumped at his sudden appearance.

“Ah, it’s you,” Jules Sihera said when he saw her. “And a friend.”

“You can see me?” Ava asked.

“Child, you’re in a magic room – do you think there’s a chance I might be magical too?” Jules Sihera asked.

If ghosts could blush, Ava would certainly have done so. “Sorry, sir.” She paused, then asked, “May I ask what kind of magical?”

Jules Sihera chuckled. “I would have thought that’d be rather easy to figure out.”

Natalie frowned at him.

“No?” Jules Sihera said. “Oh well. I’m a spirit.”

“A spirit?” asked Natalie.

“Is that like a ghost?” Ava asked.

Jules Sihera thought for a moment. “Not quite,” he said. “I belong to the Script – have done so for a couple of hundred years. You don’t belong to anything, really – you’re simply stuck between life and death.”

Ava nodded morosely.

“What do you mean, belong to the Script?” asked Natalie.

“Now, now, I’m sure you don’t have time for such a long story,” Jules Sihera said.

The revelation that Jules Sihera was not a regular person, but a spirit, made sense now that Natalie knew it. Living down here, without a kitchen and a bed, without food or anything else necessary – he might as well have written it on his forehead.

Natalie shook her head; Jules Sihera was right in that they did not have time. “You’re right. I just get distracted sometimes – I’m still new with magic.”

“And yet you’re looking for that stone.”

Natalie nodded. “I am. That’s why we’re here. I need to see the Script.”

“Of course,” Jules Sihera said. “It’s right here, at your service.”

It did not seem as though anyone had touched it since she had been there last. The page of the Nebula Medeor still faced her when she reached it. Natalie eyed through the text, but it told her nothing new. She held out her hand, and the book’s pages flipped by themselves, as though a sudden wind went through the room.

‘Combining essences’ it read at the top.

‘The combining of essences has been thoroughly researched by Master Wielder Theodore Marque, and he has been quite successful. Words are unnecessary for this magic, but a complete trust in one another and an openness of mind has proven a requirement. In his research, Master Wielder Marque has found that an unwillingness towards the magic whilst performing will prove quite disastrous, with results raging from simply failed magic, to misdirected magic binding the two subjects together in an unwilling bond feeding on unhappiness. See the pages on Bonding for more on this.’

Natalie made a face at the book. Though she did not know what an ‘unwilling bond feeding on unhappiness’ meant, she could only assume that it was not pleasant.

‘Combining essences, for whatever reason, is made easier if both subjects are magical. Combining a non-magical can be done, but requires much more energy from the Wielder, and concentration from the non-magical.’

‘The combining itself is by Master Wielder Marque quite simple – body contact is necessary (the more, the better) and calmness of mind. Both need to reach a meditative state, going to the realm beyond flesh, before attempting to find the other’s spirit in the spirit realm. Once there, Master Wielder Marque describes it as the two souls ‘embracing each other’, leading to the combining of essences.’

‘Once combined, subjects have been able to control the other’s body, speak to each other telepathically, read each other’s minds, and so on.’

Then the text ended, although at the very bottom of the page and in very small print, Natalie could make out, ‘Not tried.’

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by C. Hakansson

As Natalie had never heard of the spirit realm before, she could not quite describe the ritual, or what one would call it, simple. Also, she did not feel confident that she would be able to reach 'calmness of mind' considering what they planned to do.

The book did not show her anything else. Natalie wondered about how they would get to the Land of the Restless, but thought that perhaps, once their essences had combined, she would be able to go there with Ava.

They would simply have to see where the magic took them.

22.

Natalie had to wait for Ava to return from the Land of the Restless to do the magic. Although Ava had become much better at controlling her coming and going, and could now stay for hours in the real world, she still had to go back and recharge. She had promised to return as soon as possible.

For the first time in over two weeks, Cecily met up with Natalie as she walked to school. They greeted each other good morning and fell into step next to each other.

“I haven’t been able to get yesterday out of my head,” Cecily said. “Seeing Ava—I don’t know what to think about that—and I’m *magical*. I still haven’t been able to wrap my head around that. I asked dad but he didn’t know.”

“But he must know, right?” Natalie asked. “I mean, either him or your mom must be magical?”

Cecily made a face. “Or perhaps I was exchanged when I was a baby. Some troll put me there and took mom and dad’s baby.”

“More like a fairy, then. You really don’t look like a troll,” Natalie said.

“Have you seen one?” Cecily smiled.

Natalie rolled her eyes. “No. It’s common knowledge.”

Cecily chuckled. “Well, yes, that’s true.”

Like Cecily, Natalie wondered. What kind of magical could Cecily be? She did not know much about magical creatures – and she thought it odd to think of Cecily as a ‘creature’ to begin with. She had heard of wood elves, and even seen one once, and her grandmother had mentioned unicorns, angels and pegasi had she not? Perhaps Cecily was part elf. She was certainly pretty enough.

They reached the school and Natalie hurried up the stairs when she saw the Eadan’s large car roll down the street. The Eadans had a private driver that dropped him and his older brother off every morning. Natalie felt sick at the mere thought of Chase Eadan. She had been able to put the incident out of her mind for most of the time since it had happened, merely because she had enough other things to occupy her mind – but she still ducked away each time they came in near vicinity. She feared facing him.

Cecily shot her an understanding look. They said good bye and headed towards their respective classes.

The day passed in a blur of activity. She had lunch with Cecily, steered clear of Eadan, and thought of the magic she and Ava would have to perform. Through it all, she listened to teachers droning on and on. When Natalie finally made it back home, she felt tired enough to warrant a nap. She placed her backpack by the desk and dropped down on the bed. The room felt chilly and she climbed under the covers. Soon, she had fallen asleep.

It felt as though she had just blinked and everything had changed. She stood in a small, but perfectly round, field of green. Around it flowed a stream of water, crystal blue. In the midst of the green grass stood a circular stone that Natalie had come to recognize by now, even though she had never been in this particular place.

“Whose Mithridates is this?”

As she expected, the cloaked figure stood behind her when she turned around.

“You’re learning,” the figure said. “Very good.”

“Thank you.”

“This is the Mithridates of Sophia Neige,” the figure said.

“And why are we here? I haven’t even found the second piece yet,” Natalie said.

“I am sure you will manage.”

Natalie looked around at the lovely Mithridates. The circle of water surrounding it pearly, making the setting most serene. Her grandmother’s Mithridates was quiet, but never quite this tranquil. The stone in the middle of the glade shone blue, rather than the granite one in her grandmother’s Mithridates.

“And the last piece is here?” Natalie asked. “If this belonged to the eldest sister, then that makes sense – that’s the last one.”

“Indeed.”

“May I ask what I have to do then?”

The figure nodded. “Of course you may. Once you have assembled the pieces, you simply have to merge them. They belong together and placed together, they will merge on their own. When this is done, the stone will start to function once more.”

“And I’ll be able to heal Cecily?” Natalie asked.

“Yes,” the figure said.

“Just like that?”

“Just like that,” the figure said. “But I recommend that you are in a place of strength – a Mithridates, perhaps, to ensure that the stone works completely.”

Natalie felt surprised. “Isn’t it powerful enough on its own?”

“The stone is,” the figure said. “You may not be. It is through you the magic will have to pass – you ought to want to make sure that as much as possible can do so.”

Natalie nodded. “Okay. But I don’t have a Mithridates.”

“You have family. Theirs will do,” the figure said.

Natalie thought of her grandmother’s. She had said that the Mithridates would work as a place of power for Natalie as well. She remembered Ramon’s as well – the one he had used when he had been under the influence of the stone. Just then, Natalie realized why she had been able to get away from there when she should never have been able to control the Stone of Sitis – the Mithridates had been hers as well. The Mithridates had likely belonged to Orion Winters, which meant it belonged to both Natalie and Ramon now. Of course, Natalie had made it crumble to little pieces, but still—

“I would like to show you one last of the sisters’ past,” the figure said. “You already saw the tragic day when the youngest sister died, and the stone was split – this is what happened afterwards.”

Tell-tale light surrounded them and the next instant, Natalie stood on the same dirty street that she had stood upon on the first time she had seen the sisters. It was not early morning this time –

the sun stood high in the sky and the small village bustled with life. On the fields beyond, Natalie could see men working.

Natalie floated into the house that she knew belonged to the sisters. She caught sight of the middle sister at once. She carried a baby on her shoulder, looking happy and healthy.

Sophia, the eldest sister, entered through the door. She wore a dress and an apron around her waist. A boy followed in her footsteps, blond and freckled.

Natalie caught sight of the necklace Sophia wore. On a thread of leather, hung a triangular piece of the black-and-white stone that Natalie easily recognized as her piece of the Nebula.

“Maurice, come here,” Sophia said in flowing French. Natalie somehow understood it.

The child came running and Sophia smiled at him. A man entered, rather large and bushy, with dirty hands and a tan face. He placed his arms around Sophia.

“You see, Natalie,” the figure said, appearing suddenly next to Natalie. She had never appeared in one of these dreams before. “They lived happily.”

“I’m glad they did,” Natalie said.

“Sophia wore the stone throughout her life and only parted with it days before her death,” the figure said. “She learned in time that it was not a bad stone and came to terms that Sandrine had been right about it.”

Natalie nodded. Perhaps the ones who had written about the stone had only heard the first part of the story – the fights and the death of Sandrine. The Nebula did not seem dangerous – after all, it had healed people. And that was all Natalie was looking for – the ability to heal another person.

“Find the last pieces, Natalie,” the figure said.

The figure and the surroundings faded slowly into a dark mass of nothing.

An echo of her voice lingered for a moment. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Natalie said.

Ava did not appear the next day either. Natalie started to feel anxious – she wanted to get it over with. She wanted the second piece, so that she could travel to the other universe and find Sophia’s Mithridates and the last piece. Then she wanted to heal Cecily.

Watching Cecily’s ashen face all through Wednesday made Natalie feel sick as well.

“They’re testing a new medication for me,” Cecily explained.

She rinsed her mouth with water. She had just been sick. Natalie wished she could do something to help her, but came up with nothing.

Thursday passed no better and Cecily’s father had to pick her up from school during lunch because she felt too ill to be there. Natalie watched her go with a heavy heart.

When Natalie came home the same afternoon, she found more bad news. An envelope with the sigil of the local police had arrived. Natalie took it upstairs and opened it.

Miss Winters,

As we lack evidence in your case against Mr. Chase Eadan, we are now closing the investigation. In the case of new evidence, the case can be re-opened.

There were a few more lines on how they could do absolutely nothing, and it had been signed by some cop. Natalie blinked away tears – she had been beaten to a pulp and they did not have evidence? Anger and hatred welled up in her towards Eadan. She wanted to hurt him.

She ripped the letter to tiny pieces.

That night, Natalie spent half an hour in the company of Richard and Emmanuella during dinner and she could not wait to get out of there. She did not tell them of the letter from the police. She was still angry with Richard for what he had failed to do for her mother, and Emmanuella acted as childishly annoying as only she could, complaining about her weight – her belly was now well-rounded – and she pouted like a child until Richard told her she looked beautiful. Natalie ran out of there.

When Ava appeared in her room, Natalie pushed away the anger, allowing excitement to fill her instead. Finally, they could do this.

“You look impatient,” Ava said.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” Natalie said. “I just want to get this done.”

“And you’ve thought about it? The consequences?” Ava asked.

“You’re not supposed to be the worrier, you know.”

Ava placed her hands on her hips. “I’m the dead one – I really don’t think much can happen to me. You on the other hand—”

“I told you,” Natalie said, “it’s either me or Cecily. I’m willing to take the risk.”

Ava pursed her lips. “Okay.”

“Good. Now, let’s do this.”

Natalie had explained what the book had said about combining their essences, so Ava did not need any instructions. Natalie lay down on the bed and Ava floated right next to her, the chill of her incorporeal body touching her. It gave her goose bumps.

Her heart beat wildly in her chest. Excitement mingled with nervousness and fear – she wanted to do this, but what would it do to them?

“And when we’re connected – you take me to the Land of the Restless,” Natalie whispered.

“Yes. Just hold on and I’ll get us there,” Ava said softly.

She took a deep breath. “Let’s do it.”

Ava gave a tiny nod. Then they both closed their eyes.

Natalie used her imagination as she did when she did magic – she imagined herself calm, floating away from her own body. She floated out of her window and up into the sky, slowly gaining altitude. The houses of Lake Sunflower became smaller and smaller until calming blue skies surrounded her everywhere. The sense of her own body disappeared and little by little, she became one with the heavens.

She no longer had any sense of time or place – it could have been hours, days, years or merely a second – but a light suddenly started to glow not far from her. She looked around to see other lights, growing brighter and brighter. There were all colors – blue, red, yellow, purple, orange.

Every color of the rainbow and then some was represented in the multitude of lights around Natalie. Some were near, others far away. Every living being in the world seemed represented.

The one closest to her glowed red, but appeared see-through in a way that the others were not. Without having to think about it, Natalie knew it was Ava.

She neared the light when she sensed something else. Not too far from her – in fact, the second closest light – glowed a bright green light. Within it, a small, dark red light glowed, pulsing with each passing moment. Natalie smiled to herself. Her unborn sibling. Without knowing how, she could tell – it would be a girl.

She turned back to the light of Ava, who appeared to be working to get closer to her as well. Natalie floated towards her. No stress existed in this place, no hurry and no worries. No time at all existed.

Ava and Natalie reached each other. Natalie could vaguely make out Ava's shape in the light – lying down, outstretched in the real world.

They touched each other, their spirits embracing one another. Natalie did not know if she should have expected a bang or a burst of magic – either way, nothing happened. Ava's spirit mixed with Natalie's and they became one, just like that. Natalie could feel Ava's thoughts and feelings – Ava shared Natalie's fear but still felt calm and collected, concentrated on the task at hand. Beyond that lay a sadness, a wish to be alive once more.

'I can read your mind.'

Natalie did not know for certain if it was her thought, or Ava's. She concentrated – it seemed to be Ava's.

'I know. Me too.'

Together, they began their journey away from the spirit realm back to the real world once more. The lights around them dimmed, and the blue skies Natalie had imagined before returned. It mixed oddly with a field of flowers, growing oddly out of nothing – it was Ava's meditative state.

The field and the skies disappeared as they floated towards their own bodies. But instead of going into their own bodies, they now had to work together.

'We have to get into my body,' Natalie thought. *'We have to get my body to the Land of the Restless.'*

'I know,' Ava thought back.

Ava's spirit pulled towards her still, ghostly body, but both Natalie and Ava resisted. Natalie's spirit wanted to go into Natalie's body and she allowed it. Ava pushed to come along, to not split up.

'It's working.'

It did not matter who had thought it – it was true. A moment later, the joined spirits of Ava and Natalie landed in Natalie's body, flowing through her. Natalie gasped hard, then winced at the foreign feeling of another spirit in her body. She tried not to fight it.

'Take us to the Land of the Restless,' Natalie said.

'I'm working on it,' Ava replied. *'You just work on letting me stay here.'*

It was easier said than done. Two spirits were not meant to inhabit one body and every fiber of her being told Natalie to fight it.

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Then she felt a strange lightness. Her body moved and Natalie felt Ava working to get them to the Land of the Restless. She felt Ava's agitation and frustration when it did not work as easily as it usually did. She saw flashes of the place where they were going – Ava's memories, accessible for Natalie. It looked like a place built of white clouds.

She gazed down at her own body and gasped when she saw it – part of it had faded into nothing. Briefly, she saw the wispy white clouds of the Land of the Restless again. This time, it was for real, not a mere memory. Natalie did not know how she knew the difference, but she did.

Then suddenly, they were there.

Walking among white clouds, soft to the touch – they were not regular clouds. The place felt warm and inviting, light and serene. Ava called it the Land of the Restless but Natalie did not feel restless.

Ghostly beings passed around them. Some slept, resting in cocoons of clouds, while others moved about in a zombie-like state. None of them were corporeal. They faded into the background and passed through Natalie's body. No one seemed to notice her and Ava at all.

'It is so weird to see this and be aware of it.'

Natalie felt the note of wonder that passed through Ava.

'There,' Ava thought.

Natalie looked up and saw a glimmer. It could be a stone, possibly. A transparent being rested next to the sparkle and when Ava and Natalie rose upwards, Natalie recognized the ghost.

'That's Sandrine!'

'Then that,' Ava thought and they looked at the shimmering thing that lay in Sandrine's hand, *'is the piece you're looking for.'*

23.

The piece of the Nebula did not quite lie *in* Sandrine's hand, but rather just below it. It rested upon a bit of the white clouds, and could be seen because Sandrine's hand was not solid.

Sandrine appeared to be sleeping. She looked as beautiful as when Natalie had seen her in her dreams – her hair fell softly down her shoulders, her skin perfect and white as porcelain. She did not seem to be the least bit aware that anyone watched her.

'What do you think happens if we take it?'

Ava could obviously sense Natalie's feeling of unease and worry.

'Yeah, me too,' Ava thought.

Natalie looked around at the ghosts floating around them. Though some stood upright and floated this way or that, they did not seem aware of their surroundings. One or two glanced at them, lazily, mostly staring through Natalie's body.

'How quickly can you get us out of here?' Natalie asked.

Ava's nervousness mixed with Natalie's until she did not know the difference. Ants occupied her entire body, making her want to squirm.

'Quickly, I hope,' Ava replied.

Natalie swallowed. *'All right then. Be ready and we'll do this on three, okay?'*

'Okay. On three.'

'One—'

'Two—'

'Three!'

Natalie reached out her hand. It went straight through Sandrine's incorporeal body and landed on the only solid thing in the Land of the Restless – the second piece of the Nebula Medeor.

Her fingers wrapped around it and she picked it up.

Immediately, everyone awoke.

Every single ghostly being that had been vacantly floating around the realm suddenly had its eyes on them – hollow but furiously red eyes. They awoke from their deep sleeps, soaring through the air, all towards Natalie.

The first one hit Natalie like a cold shower. It stayed for just a second inside Natalie, chilling her to the very bone.

She screamed, nearly dropping the stone.

'Get us out of here!' Natalie thought to Ava.

'I'm trying! Something is stopping us!'

The next one hit, the ghost of a young boy. Natalie looked into his eyes for a mere second before he disappeared into her. His spirit tore into her, as though he was made of broken glass. It cut her, all the way through.

They were trying to kill her, trying to force her to stay in this realm.

Ava worked with the same panic and great fear that rose like bile in Natalie's throat.

A woman, older, with hair floating around her like a halo, hit her from the side. Natalie saw her only for the briefest of moments before she cut into her, and Natalie fell into a heap in the white fog that surrounded them. She noticed dimly that she was bleeding. She held onto the Nebula even harder.

They moved through her at a quicker pace. Each ghost that passed through – an old man, a very young child, a lady, a teenaged girl – made Natalie bleed more, cuts appearing on her arms and chest. She bled through her nose, tasted the metallic taste in her mouth.

Then suddenly, she felt as though she fell, and she wondered if this was what it was like to die.

Should she be scared? She did not feel much of anything, but pain and the rushing of wind in her ears.

Natalie – hold on!

Natalie did not know what to hold onto, especially as she fell quicker and quicker.

She stopped as suddenly as she had started falling.

Panting heavily, she felt strangely unaware of her own body. Then with little ado, something left her – something different, something warm. A moment later, Natalie felt her own aching body once more.

“I'm never doing that again.”

Ava floated in front of her, horizontally as she had before they had started their combining adventure. She had obviously returned to her own non-existent body, and she crossed her arms defiantly to punctuate her words.

“Are you okay?” Ava asked when Natalie did not respond.

“I'm—woozy,” Natalie said. “And achy. But you—you're not with me anymore.”

Ava shook her head. “Splitting us up wasn't hard – our spirits weren't meant to be one to begin with. I just left.”

“I see,” Natalie said, though she did not really. Her mind felt as though it had been filled with the white clouds of the Land of the Restless.

“Did you get it?”

Natalie realized she still held onto something with great strength. She relaxed, finally safe, and showed the piece to Ava.

“The second piece,” she said, smiling tiredly.

Ava's grin grew wide. “We did it!”

She glanced to her side, as though expecting something.

“What is it?” Natalie asked.

Ava waited for a second, but nothing happened. “Oh, it's nothing—it's just—”

“What?”

Ava sighed. “You know what Cecily said about a purpose for ghosts – I thought maybe this one was mine. That I was meant to go get that piece with you.”

“Oh,” Natalie said.

“But it seems I was wrong,” Ava said.

“You don’t look happy about it.”

Ava shook her head. “Like I said, I’d like to live again. I don’t want to die. But this in between thing? It’s worse than either. I mean, I can talk to you and Cecily, but—you guys live your life. I float in and out every now and then, and the rest of my time is spent in a foggy mist. And I just don’t want to be around for six hundred years waiting for my purpose.”

“Six hundred years?” Natalie asked.

Ava shrugged. “It’s how long Jules said he’d been around. I mean, he’s a spirit and not a ghost but—still. I don’t want to be here that long.”

“Oh,” Natalie said, though when she thought of it, it did not surprise her – after all, his mother Sophia had lived in the fourteenth century.

“Anyway,” Ava said, “I just thought this might be it. My purpose. It would have been kind of nice, if my purpose was to save Cecily.”

Natalie did not know what to say. “Well, I guess you’ll just have to wait around.”

She felt utterly unhelpful. She did not know whether to comfort Ava, or give her a pep-talk.

“I guess,” Ava said. “But at least we got the stone.”

Natalie nodded. “And we survived the crazy ghosts. I thought I was going to die.”

Ava looked down. “You had me worried there for a second. I mean, I felt some of the pain but not all of it – but you screamed and I couldn’t get us out of there.”

Natalie sat up gingerly, stretching her limbs. She looked at her arms and chest – no cuts could be seen now, though she did not doubt that she had been cut in the other dimension, and she had been close to death. She ached.

“You got us out of there in the end,” Natalie said. “So you did great.”

Ava nodded. Natalie cocked her head to the side and asked a question that popped into her head just then.

“Will they punish you when you return, or something like that?”

Ava tried to sound neutral. “I don’t know. But what can they do to me – I’m already dead, right?”

A stab of worry shot through Natalie. She hoped it did not show on her face.

With the two pieces now safe in her pocket – she decided to keep them with her at all times, because it felt safer than leaving them at home – Natalie felt more sure of herself as she walked to school the next morning. She had braved death – surely, she could handle Chase Eadan?

But as she came closer and closer to the school, and saw Eadan standing with his cocky smile and irritating minions, she felt her resolve disappear. She cursed herself – she should be strong! Yet no matter how she tried, she could not bring herself to walk past them. She hung back until they went inside.

“Don’t force it.”

Natalie turned to face Cecily. She wondered how long she had been watching.

“I shouldn’t be scared of him,” Natalie said. “I have magic! I should turn him into a toad.”

“It’s not that simple and you know it,” Cecily said gently. “He hurt you and it marked your soul – it’ll take time to heal. It’s not something magic can fix.”

Natalie nodded, though she did not quite want to accept that. “They closed the investigation.”

Cecily stared at her, a wordless question.

“They ‘lack evidence,’” Natalie said softly, and with a humorless snort she continued, “Apparently, my blood being everywhere but inside me wasn’t enough.”

“I’m sorry,” Cecily said.

“Why?” Natalie shrugged, feigning indifference. “It’s not your fault.”

Cecily grabbed her hand and squeezed it. “No, I know it’s not.”

Natalie looked down at their locked hands. Cecily’s touch felt good and she squeezed back. Cecily gave her an encouraging smile.

“You’re more okay than many people would be,” she said. “You’re in school, you’re doing things.”

“I have to,” Natalie said. “There are things I have to do – and I can’t stop. If I stop, I’ll think about it.”

“I know.”

The bell rang and the two girls climbed the stairs. “Are you feeling better today?”

Cecily shrugged. “A little. It doesn’t matter – I can’t stay in bed all day long, then I just feel sicker.”

The stones felt heavy in Natalie’s pockets and she held back a smile. Just one more to go and Cecily would be healed. Then Cecily would be able to be in school every day, she would not have to live in hospitals, she would be able to join the rest of the school in sports and activities – she would live.

Natalie thought all day long about the final piece of the Nebula Medeor. She would have to come up with a reason to visit her grandmother to be able to then find Sophia Sihera’s Mithridates. She did not know where in her Mithridates she had hidden the piece, so she would need enough time to look for it once there. Someone needed to keep her grandmother busy.

She realized as she sat in her art class, drawing rather absentmindedly, what she would have to do. She smiled, as a plan formed in her head.

“You look pleased,” Cecily said with a sideways smile, as she worked on perfecting the wing of a white dove.

Natalie grinned back. “I am pleased.”

She almost had a skip in her step as she walked home that afternoon. She ran upstairs, grabbed a pencil, and quickly penned a note to her grandmother, wishing to come visit whenever her grandmother would have her. She left the note lying on her desk, neatly folded with ‘*Madeline Turner*’ printed on the front, and then she went downstairs to make dinner.

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It felt a bit strange to know that the baby residing in Emmanuella's body was a girl, when Emmanuella and Richard did not know. They had decided to wait until birth.

Natalie decided that she felt quite excited about the new baby.

"You're looking happy today," Richard said when they arrived home. "It's a nice look for you."

Natalie thought about it – she did feel more up than she had in a while – she and Cecily were friends once more, and the talk they had had about Eadan had actually helped. Those things, coupled with the two thirds of the Nebula in her pockets, made her happy. She decided to cut Richard some slack about the way he had acted when he was young. It could not have been an easy situation for him either.

"Thank you," Natalie said. "I've been working on it."

"Good. You had me worried, after the assault and everything," Richard said hesitantly, obviously scared to bring it up.

Natalie swallowed, not completely at ease with talking about it with Richard. "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right?"

He heard the undertone of desperation in her voice. "Definitely. And I'm proud of you for how well you've handled the situation."

Natalie placed the salmon she had cooked on one of the plates.

"Thanks," she said, "By the way, I don't think I've really said it and meant it – congratulations on the baby."

Richard's smile went from ear to ear. "It makes me so happy to hear you say that. I know you and Emmanuella don't get along too well, but this baby – he or she will still be your sibling. I would like for you to really feel like the big sister, not just the add-on to this family. Because you're not. You never were and you never will be."

"You're getting sentimental," Natalie said, chuckling. "But it's still nice to hear."

They ate dinner and the overall mood felt much better than it had in months. Emmanuella even managed to speak in civil tones to Natalie, if only to ask for her to pass the salt.

Once Natalie returned upstairs, she smiled – the letter had disappeared. Now all she could do, was hope for a swift reply.

24.

The weekend passed without much ado. Natalie studied the two pieces of the Nebula which she had managed to get her hands on, but nothing happened when the two were placed together. Though they fit perfectly, they gave no spark of magic to give even the slightest suggestion that they were powerful.

Natalie hung out with Cecily on Sunday afternoon. They stayed inside because the weather had turned rather cold, fall gripping the city.

Cecily sat in the chair by Natalie's desk as they talked, while Natalie paced the room. She did not feel nervous, but she could not find peace in her own skin – too much would be happening soon and she wanted to get it started. Get it over with, get Cecily well and get on with their lives.

“What's this?”

Natalie looked up to Cecily's question. “What's what?”

“This,” Cecily said.

She held out the orange stone that Natalie had found over a month ago, at Diophane McCoy's Test. It seemed to shine lightly in Cecily's hand. Natalie had placed it in her desk drawer and forgotten all about it.

“Oh, that's the stone I found when Diophane McCoy told me to get a magical stone,” Natalie said.

“It's a beautiful stone,” Cecily said.

“It sings to me. Or it did, then, at least.”

Cecily smiled. “I'd like to hear the song of a stone some time.”

“Perhaps you will. You're magical, after all,” Natalie said.

Cecily smiled and shook her head so that a few strands of hair fell in front of her face. “I don't know about that.”

“You can't mess with evidence,” Natalie said. “You saw Ava, that means you're magical, one way or another.”

“It's a nice stone anyway,” Cecily said, with a pointed look at Natalie. “You should try to use it.”

“I have my necklace,” Natalie said. “What do I need another one for?”

Cecily shrugged. “Back-up is always good.”

She handed Natalie the necklace and Natalie put it in her pocket – the one that did not contain the pieces of the Nebula. She could sense the light, humming music coming from it – not nearly as strong as when she had first found it, but still there.

To Emmanuella's displeasure, Cecily joined them for dinner. Natalie spent the time ignoring Emmanuella and reveling in the joy of having someone to speak to during a meal.

When the two girls returned upstairs, Natalie found a letter lying on her desk.

“Where did that come from?” Cecily asked when Natalie picked it up.

“A wood elf probably dropped it off,” Natalie said, and thought for a second about how natural it felt to say such a thing these days. “Apparently, they’re the mail men of the magical world.”

“Oh,” said Cecily.

Natalie grinned. “How nice – I knew something about the magical world that you didn’t.”

“Indeed. What does it say?”

Natalie read aloud. “*Dear Natalie. My carriage will await you once your classes are over tomorrow, Monday, if you still wish to come visit. We do, still, have much to talk about. Love, your grandmother.*” ‘Much to talk about,’ Natalie snorted. “I wonder if she has another new sibling to tell me about.”

Cecily smiled. “Two weeks ago, you had no siblings and soon, you’ll have two.”

“Yeah, I will,” Natalie said. “One big brother and a little sister.”

“Sister? How do you know?” Cecily asked. “Mr. Turner only called it ‘the baby’.”

Natalie realized she had said too much – attempting to explain how she knew would reveal far too much to Cecily. She shrugged instead, and said, “It’s just a feeling I have.”

Cecily regarded her suspiciously, but did not say anything.

Natalie took a deep breath, glancing at the letter from her grandmother. She attempted to sound casual as she asked, “Would you like to come along tomorrow?”

Cecily’s doubtful expression changed into one of surprise. “You *want* me and your grandmother to see each other?”

“I don’t see the harm – you obviously talk to each other about me anyway,” Natalie said, but her voice held no malice.

Cecily turned red and though Natalie was no longer angry with the two, she could not bring herself to break Cecily’s feeling of shame. After a moment of silence, however, she had to say something.

“So, what do you say?”

Cecily hesitated. “I’m not sure—”

“It’ll be fun,” Natalie said. “Come on – it’ll be a nice, calm afternoon.”

If things went as planned, it would be anything but, but that did not matter.

Finally, Cecily nodded. “All right, I’ll come.”

Natalie smiled. Part one of her plan had now been completed. The two spent what little remained of the evening before Cecily had to go home, just talking.

That night, Natalie dreamed of stones that were alive, calling to her and telling her to find them, but when she went out into the darkness, all that awaited her was Eadan and his cronies. No matter how Natalie tried, she could not reach the stones, her salvation – instead she was doomed to lie there on the ground, tasting the metallic tang of her own blood. When she awoke, she realized she had bitten so hard through her own lip it had started bleeding.

The day crept by, slow as though someone had sent time to walk in thick mud.

“You seem stressed,” Cecily remarked. “Is Eadan worrying you again?”

Despite her dream, Natalie had not thought much of Eadan. She stayed out of his way, but that had become habit by now.

“No, I’m just—tired of school,” Natalie said. “Aren’t you going to eat that?”

Cecily, appearing rather grey-faced, sat with her lunch box in her hands. She had eaten one bite since the two had sat down ten minutes ago. She shook her head.

“No, I don’t feel all that great.”

Natalie wanted to yell, “Tonight, I’ll heal you for good – just wait until tonight!” – but she did not because she still did not have all the pieces. If she did not find the last one – although she thought she would – she did not want to have given Cecily false hope. Yet she could not hold back a small smile, which she hoped Cecily did not notice.

“Maybe grandmother can do something to make you feel better,” Natalie said.

Cecily nodded absently, not appearing to believe it.

When the end of the day came around and the final bell rang, Natalie nearly ran to the small street where the carriage always waited for her. She smiled when she saw it, grand and beautiful. The two horses that pulled it looked powerful, both pearly white and in perfect shape.

Cecily came up behind her, slightly out of breath.

“You really want to go to your grandmother, don’t you?”

“I do,” Natalie said. She felt no need to lie.

“Miss Natalie,” Butler Thomas said. “I see there’s no need to find you in the crowd this time.”

Natalie shook her head.

“And Miss Cordell. Will you be accompanying us as well?” Butler Thomas continued.

Cecily nodded. “If you’ll have me.”

“I’m sure Madame will see no trouble with it.”

They climbed into the carriage and settled against the pillows. Natalie did not mind falling asleep quickly this time – once she arrived in the second universe, she would certainly need all the energy she could muster. A string of excitement passed through her at the thought of what lay ahead, and the two pieces of the Nebula Medeor felt heavy in her pocket. And despite her wish to sleep immediately, it did, for once, take her some time to do so.

The skies were filled with clouds when Natalie and Cecily awoke as they stopped right in front of Natalie’s grandmother’s house. It seemed dark and ominous, not unlike the afternoon when Diophane McCoy had put Natalie through the test.

“Natalie,” greeted her grandmother and then she saw Cecily. “Ah, Miss Cordell.”

Natalie rolled her eyes. “No need to be so formal. After all, you two are pen pals.”

Her grandmother did not appear fazed by her words, but Cecily reddened again. Natalie did not feel surprised with either one of their responses.

“Hi,” Cecily said. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” Natalie’s grandmother said.

As the two girls followed her inside, Natalie could not help but think that her grandmother did not look quite fine. She wondered if it had to do with the revelations of Natalie's previous visit, or if it was simply a cold.

The lady with the funny hat served them hot chocolate on a tray, as she usually did when Natalie arrived. The three sat down and studied one another.

Natalie decided that now was as good a time as any to put her plan into action. She placed her cup of hot chocolate on the table.

"If you'll excuse me – I have to go to the bathroom," she said.

She stood up and left the room. She felt both their eyes on her back but did not mind – if they thought she left because she felt uncomfortable, that worked just fine with her.

She did not go into the bathroom. As soon as she turned the corner of the living room, she stopped and turned back. She waited a few moments, her heart beating rapidly in her chest with excitement and nervousness. Then she looked around the corner, very carefully.

Her grandmother's eyes rested upon Cecily, who spoke in hushed tones. Natalie could not hear what she said, but it did not matter. She smiled slightly with satisfaction, and then started to draw magic. The house seemed magic in itself, for it felt very simply to gain the momentum she needed. She held it carefully in her hand, dark green magic floating just above her palm. Then she turned the corner once more, and sent the magic towards her grandmother and Cecily.

The effect came instantly.

Her grandmother yawned briefly, then leaned back, and fell asleep in her chair. Cecily stopped, perhaps mid-sentence, and did the same.

Natalie waited for a few moments longer before going back into the living room. Had the magic been strong enough? Would they stay asleep? She did not need it to last for long – only long enough for her to get out and get to Sophia's Mithridates.

"Natalie."

The voice made her jump. She turned and found Ramon standing behind her. He looked relaxed, wearing a button-down shirt that matched the style Natalie's grandmother seemed to prefer, and loose pants. His hair fell down his back, shining black. Natalie could not piece this man together with the insane one that had kidnapped her – but she could also not piece him together as her brother.

"I—uh—hi."

"Hi," Ramon said. He looked at Natalie's frozen grandmother, the Diophane, and Cecily. "What did you do?"

"Magic," Natalie said defiantly. "What are you going to do about it?"

Ramon held up his hands in defense. "Nothing. I'm sure you have your reasons."

Natalie's irritation abated. "Sorry. I just—I have to do this and I don't know how long the magic will hold them."

"Then you should probably go," Ramon said.

"You're not going to ask me where I'm going?" Natalie asked.

Ramon shrugged. "After what I did to you, I don't think I have any right to question you on anything you do."

“You didn’t do it,” Natalie said, startling herself with her gentle voice.

“No, right, our dad did,” Ramon said. “That’s so much better.”

Natalie shook her head, with a half-smile. “No, it’s not. But that’s life and we’ll just have to live with it. Now, I really need to go.”

Ramon nodded. “Good luck, with whatever it is you’re doing.”

“Thanks.”

Then Ramon surprised her when he took a step forward and placed a kiss on Natalie’s forehead. “Be careful.”

Natalie smiled widely, and then he left.

Transportation magic required far more power than making someone fall asleep, and it took her longer to gather it. She imagined Sophia’s Mithridates before her, as clearly as she could remember it from the dream. It seemed to come easily to her – the green grass, the water surrounding it, and the Stone of Sitis in the middle.

Suddenly, she felt the familiar feeling of wind rushing in her ears. She opened her eyes to find the world passing at great speed below her, a blur of colors and shapes. She smiled.

She landed on her feet, stumbling only slightly, for the first time since she started transporting herself with magic. She felt proud.

“There you are. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Natalie’s eyes rose at the sight of Ava before her. Then she gasped as she took in her friend’s appearance. Cuts and bruises marked every inch of her skin.

“My god—what happened to you?”

Ava shrugged. “It’s nothing. It doesn’t hurt.”

“Doesn’t hurt?” Natalie exclaimed. “How can that not hurt?”

“It doesn’t, as long as I’m here,” Ava said.

“Here?”

“Yeah, here. In your world, the world with living people. Here, I’m just a ghost – I can’t feel anything,” Ava said, a tinge of bitterness lacing her voice. “Here, I can’t bleed and bruise.”

“And there? In the Land of the Restless?” Natalie asked, almost afraid of the answer.

Ava hesitated. “There, it hurts like hell times a thousand.”

“Oh god—” Natalie said, choking. “I’m so sorry—”

“It’s not your fault,” Ava said. “They decided to punish me – I don’t even know who ‘they’ are, but someone there – but it’s not your fault. I took you there by my own choice.”

Natalie remembered the pain of the ghosts of the Land of the Restless, as they passed through her. It had felt like knives going through her, blades cutting every fiber of her being open. Was that what they had done to Ava as well? She felt sick.

“I’ll just have to hang around here more,” Ava said. It did not come out as strong as Natalie suspected Ava wanted it to sound.

“I’m sorry,” Natalie whispered again.

“There, there, none of that,” Ava said. She reached out a translucent hand, touching Natalie’s cheek. “We have a stone to find. That’s why we’re here, remember? That’s why we did that stuff before. To save Cecily. Now, are you with me?”

Ava’s short pep-talk made Natalie swallow back her sorrow and guilt. She nodded.

“I’m with you.”

“Good,” Ava said. “Then let’s go find that final piece.”

Natalie had landed in the outskirts of the circle. She walked to the middle of it, to the blue stone, and Ava followed. Natalie touched the stone hesitantly, remembering how the stone in Ramon’s Mithridates – their father’s Mithridates – had caught her and held her prisoner. This stone did nothing of the kind – in fact, it did not react at all. It felt cool beneath Natalie’s fingers, but nothing happened.

“So—where’s the stone?” asked Ava.

Natalie frowned. “I don’t know. The ghost writer never said.”

Ava placed her hands on her hips. Natalie tried not to stare at her – the skin that used to be transparent white, was colored in dark purples and reds, some still appearing to be bleeding.

She looked away quickly, lest her thoughts get caught up in her guilt once more.

She climbed up on the stone, wondering all the while if that was allowed at all. Nothing happened, so she hoped it was all right. She looked around the clearing. She could see nothing special – nothing that gave her any clue as how to find the third and final piece of the Nebula Medeor. The grass grew thick and green, and beyond the circling water grew tall trees.

Ava, who had made a quick sweep around the Mithridates, returned.

“I can’t see anything special,” she said. “But then it’s been a couple of hundred years since Sophia lived, hasn’t it? I mean, the traces might be gone.”

Natalie nodded. She cursed the ghost writer for not telling her more exactly where the piece was hidden, but then the ghost writer had not been forthcoming with the information at any point. She had had to find the exact locations of the pieces every time. The first, in the flower – using magic to get it out. The second, in the Land of the Restless with the youngest sister’s ghost – using Ava, and magic, to get it out.

Natalie nearly slapped herself. The common denominator had been magic both times – why would it not be it this time as well? After all, they were in a Mithridates.

“Let me try this,” Natalie said and she held her necklace in her hand.

Ava watched her as she focused on an image of finding the last piece. She imagined her happiness and wonder at finally reaching her goal. It made her smile even as she thought of it.

“Natalie, whatever it is you’re doing – don’t stop,” Ava said, “‘cause I definitely think you’re doing it.”

Natalie opened her eyes. The entire Mithridates had begun to shine and glimmer with magic. It came from the ground and rose like bubbles into the air, floating and shining in gold.

“Wow,” Natalie said, her jaw dropping.

“You bet,” Ava breathed.

An image appeared before her, of a woman she had seen several times before.

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“Are you seeing that too?” Natalie asked Ava.

“Uh-huh,” Ava said, and it sounded as though she did not quite believe it.

“Hello, stranger,” the image of the eldest sister Sophia said. She looked older than when Natalie had seen her – perhaps in her early fifties. She must have lived longer than most of her time. “You have found my Mithridates – it appears to have deemed you worthy.”

“Worthy?” echoed Natalie, but the Sophia’s message did not respond or react at all.

“I don’t know who you are, or when you live, but my magic, and the magic of my Mithridates, has deemed you worthy. Here, I have hidden my most precious, and most awful, item. It is dangerous, yet it can bring great joy. As you have been found worthy, you are free to take this item with you – but do so knowing that it can bring great danger.

“This is one piece of the Nebula Medeor, the stone my sister found that led to her death. Care for it if you do take it, and care for this Mithridates, for it is now yours.”

She made a gesture with her hand, and suddenly, the last piece of the Nebula dropped down at Natalie’s feet.

The image of Sophia faded. Natalie looked into her eyes as the image disappeared and she caught a glimpse of great sadness but also wisdom. Natalie wondered what kind of life Sophia had led.

“Natalie?”

Ava’s voice woke her from her thoughts. She looked down and stared at the final piece. Black and white, striped like the other pieces, it lay on the blue stone as though it had always been at Natalie’s feet, just waiting for her to pick it up.

Natalie’s fingers trembled as she bent down. Her fingers grazed it and wrapped around it. She waited for a surge of magic, a surge of something to tell her that she finally had all three pieces, but nothing happened. She held up the stone and Ava floated up before her.

“You have all three pieces,” she said. “Happy?”

Natalie grinned. “That doesn’t even begin to describe it.”

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“Can you get back to my grandmother’s by yourself?”

Ava nodded. “It shouldn’t be any different from moving to any other place.”

“Good,” Natalie said with a quick grin, “‘cause I haven’t a clue of how I’d move you with me.”

Ava paused for a second. “It’s nice to see you smile again.”

“Isn’t it?” Natalie said, grin going ear to ear.

She had never felt so accomplished – she had reached her goal. She had all the pieces of the Nebula Medeor, and now it was just a matter of putting them together and using them to cure Cecily.

“I’ll see you there,” Ava said.

She faded, and Natalie could only hope that she did not have to return to the Land of the Restless as she moved. Guilt washed over her, replacing the giddy happiness she had felt a moment ago. She wished she could have spared Ava the pain somehow – she had already died because of Natalie and she did not deserve more pain.

Natalie took a deep breath. At the moment, she had other things she needed to concentrate on.

She touched the blue, round stone, and focused on the image of her grandmother’s home. She gasped at the sensation of the magic coming from the stone – it truly seemed tuned to her now, enhancing her powers and making the transportation magic come easy to her. For a brief moment, Natalie pondered bringing Cecily there instead, but she discarded the idea – taking her to her grandmother’s Mithridates was much easier, and ought to work just as well.

Natalie landed on the grounds just outside the house, where the carriage usually stopped to drop them off. It was not so much a preference on Natalie’s side, but a test – could she land where she wanted to? It seemed so.

She pulled open the front door and entered.

“—and I really don’t see what you wish to accomplish by calling me here—”

“She put us to sleep!”

Natalie identified both voices – the first belonged to Diophane McCoy, and the second to Natalie’s grandmother.

“She used magic—”

“She controlled magic heavy enough to keep me sleeping for nearly half an hour – and poor Miss Cordell would still be sleeping if I hadn’t woken her up!”

“It doesn’t mean anything, Master Turner. The Test always tells the truth – Natalie does not possess magic great enough for me to take an interest in her.”

“You are impossible! You know who her mother was – what she did. How can you say that Natalie doesn’t possess enough magic—”

“Mother and daughter are not the same being, Master Turner,” Diophane McCoy said, her voice cold.

Both fell silent, to Natalie's great disappointment. They had started speaking about her mother – and they had spoken of her as though she had done something hard, something not everyone could do. Natalie wanted to hear more.

“Where is the girl now?” Diophane McCoy asked.

“I don't know. She seems to have disappeared. Probably using transportation magic – how else would she have gotten anywhere?”

Her grandmother's voice made a point of Natalie using magic consciously.

“She has done so before – many Wielders have. It doesn't mean they are Master material.”

Natalie pondered what to do – should she go into the living room and announce her presence, or not? She suspected her grandmother would not be happy with her for what she had done and Natalie did not feel like being yelled at at the moment.

She took the risk of peering into the living room. Her grandmother stood glaring at the Diophane. The Diophane in turn stood as calmly as she always did, dressed in black and hands clasped behind her back. Cecily sat on the couch, as she had done when Natalie had left, staring blankly ahead. Natalie swallowed – her magic seemed to have affected Cecily quite heavily.

“Natalie!”

Natalie nearly gasped at the sound of Ava's voice, whispered in her ear. She pulled back, hoping no one had noticed her. After a few seconds had passed and no one had come for her, she could only assume that they had not.

Natalie pulled back further and huddled in a corner. Ava kept close – she could not rely on invisibility here among magical people.

“I need to get Cecily away from my grandmother and the Diophane—”

“The who?” asked Ava.

Natalie made a face – she did not have time to explain. “The other woman in there. I need to get Cecily alone and down to my grandmother's Mithridates.”

“And how do you suggest we do that?” Ava asked.

“I was hoping you'd have an idea or two.”

“Can't you magic them somehow?”

“I don't think that'll work,” Natalie said. “The Diophane's too strong, and my grandmother will be prepared this time.”

“Oh,” Ava said. She thought for a moment. Then she cocked her head to the side. “Maybe I can distract them. You'll have to be really sneaky and get Cecily out – but maybe?”

It did not sound like a winning concept, but Natalie could not think of anything else. She had not calculated into her plans that Diophane McCoy would be there, and either way, she had not planned this part very carefully. Perhaps they ought to simply wait until later? No, that would not do. Her grandmother knew what she had done and Natalie knew that her grandmother would not leave her alone for so much as a second – she would probably send her home as soon as she could. She would not get a chance to go down to the Mithridates.

“Okay. But you need to really get their attention,” Natalie said.

Ava nodded and grinned wickedly. “No problem.”

Then she squeezed her eyes shut – and transformed before Natalie’s eyes. Ava’s curly hair grew long, flying behind her spookily. Her clothes changed into a black, torn dress and her eyes were nearly white.

“What—you—” said Natalie.

“Do you like?” Ava asked, and her voice did not fit with the appearance. “It’s just a little trick Jules told me about. Apparently, both ghosts and spirits can change our appearances when we want to.”

Natalie remembered how she had first met Jules Sihera – he had changed his appearance into a huge, bearded man and he had scared her half to death.

“Okay,” Natalie said weakly. “Go get ‘em.”

She doubted that the Diophane or her grandmother would be as shocked by the sight of the scary ghost – they had probably seen many ghosts through their lives – but Ava would likely catch their attention.

Natalie snuck back to her watch post by the living room, and glanced around the corner.

Ava floated into the room, looking freaky and rather like something from a movie.

“Hellooo,” she said, sounding like a lunatic. “Who are you?”

Natalie’s grandmother gasped lightly at the sight and sound of Ava, likely mostly because of her sudden appearance than any real fear. The Diophane’s cold eyes rested upon the ghost, unimpressed. One eyebrow rose, and she spoke:

“I think the question is, who are you?”

As Ava began to engage the two women in conversation, Natalie snuck into the living room, behind the first set of couches the room held. She stopped for a moment, her heart beating hard with anticipation, but heard no footsteps come nearer. She snuck quickly to the cover of the next couch, bringing her closer to Cecily, but also closer to her grandmother and the Diophane.

“Look, I can do all these things – have you ever seen anything so awesome in your life?” Ava said, though Natalie could not see what she did.

“We are both Master Wielders,” the Diophane said, speaking in short tones, “I think we have seen far more than what you are capable of.”

Natalie had a long distance between the couch she currently hid behind, and the next one – the one Cecily occupied. However, the distance between them gave her grandmother and Diophane McCoy plenty of time to discover her. Then they would both question her, and her grandmother would no doubt send her and Cecily home – and Natalie simply could not accept that.

“Oh, but have you heard this very funny story – I just have to tell you—”

Ava talked on and on, and Natalie had to grin at her inventiveness. Though the Diophane sounded more than annoyed in her replies, Ava kept on going.

So when Ava started speaking the next time, Natalie took a chance and dashed forward towards the next couch.

“Natalie!”

Her grandmother’s voice cut through her. The hurt felt physical – she had to get herself and Cecily down to the Mithridates! Her grandmother could not stop her now.

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“Natalie, what are you doing hiding behind the couch?” asked her grandmother angrily. “Stand up, right now.”

Natalie thought for a moment. Then she moved consciously further away from her grandmother and Diophane McCoy, putting Cecily between herself and them. She stood up.

“Hi,” she said weakly.

Cecily looked at her questioningly.

“Young lady, what do you think you’ve been doing?” her grandmother asked. “Spelling us to sleep! Leaving without a trace! And now hiding from me?”

“Yeah—” Natalie said. She really did not know what to say.

“You are going straight home, do you hear me? I invite you to my house and this is the thanks I get—” her grandmother trailed off, muttering.

“Do you trust me?” Natalie asked Cecily, speaking quietly, quickly.

“What—yes, of course I do,” Cecily said. “But—”

“As it seems you have found your lost granddaughter, and she does not seem to have become a Master Wielder or even close over night, I shall be leaving,” the Diophane said. “Young Wielder Mar awaits me.”

“Then come with me to grandmother’s Mithridates,” Natalie said. “I have something I need you to see.”

“But your grandmother—” Cecily said.

“It doesn’t matter. Will you come?”

Cecily nodded.

“Then we’ll have to run,” Natalie said. “On three.”

Cecily gave another nod, although confusion shone clearly in her eyes. Natalie took her hand.

“One—”

Her grandmother mumbled, “I should even write to Richard and have him ground you for this – using magic on your own grandmother—”

“Two—”

Diophane McCoy moved to the side, readying herself for transporting.

“Three!”

Natalie pulled Cecily off the couch and they both took off running. Her grandmother immediately fell silent, staring after them, and the Diophane stopped in mid-motion.

“I suppose no one wants to hear the end of my story, then?” asked Ava, and then she flew after Cecily and Ava.

Natalie feared they would both fall as they ran down the stairs leading into the forest, where Natalie's grandmother's Mithridates lay. Neither would be any better off with a broken neck, but Natalie could not bring herself to slow down.

"Natalie! Stop right now!" screamed her grandmother behind them.

Ava flew up beside them. "You have two women in hot pursuit, just so you know."

Natalie did not dare turn her head to look back, so she simply trusted Ava's words.

"Keep them from doing magic on us!" Natalie said.

Ava nodded. "I'll do my best."

"What—are—we—doing?" Cecily asked, gasping for breath.

"I'm going to make you healthy," Natalie said, her own breath coming in rather short. "That's what we—Ava and I—have been doing – we've found this stone—a Nebula – it'll make you well."

Cecily's eyes widened. "What? Are—you—serious?"

"Do you think we'd be running away from my grandmother if I wasn't?"

Cecily stumbled but Natalie kept her on her feet and they continued their mad dash towards the Mithridates. Natalie could not remember the way there being so long, but then she had never been in a hurry to get there before.

Then suddenly, it loomed before them. The wide, circular clearing, tall trees closing it in. The grey skies above seemed a promise for rain. In the middle of the clearing sat the stone, grey and with a crack running down its center.

Natalie and Cecily ran to the middle of it and reached the stone. Natalie did not hesitate – she grabbed the pieces from her pocket and placed them on the stone. With trembling fingers, she placed the pieces together, bit by bit.

They fit together perfectly.

Diophane McCoy and Natalie's grandmother reached the clearing as Natalie pushed the three pieces together, joining them as they had been centuries earlier.

Both women stopped dead in their tracks.

"What is that—"

"Oh great heavens, save us all!"

The latter came from Diophane McCoy, whose eyes widened in pure fear at the sight of the stone.

It only took a second after the three pieces had been put together – suddenly, it soared into the air, resting on a pillar of black smoke that seeped from the Stone of Sitis. The black smoke surrounded the Nebula. An earsplitting noise followed, making Natalie fall back and cover her ears, and then the Nebula Medeor rose higher, once more whole. No marks showed that it had ever been in pieces at all.

Then the sky lit with a great bolt of lightning. It passed straight through the Nebula Medeor, and continued on down the pillar of smoke. Time seemed to stand still as the light made its way down, down, down – into the Stone of Sitis.

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The crack that seemed to have been sealed once was opened with great force. Natalie threw herself to cover Cecily as pieces of stone shot everywhere.

Then something rose from the Stone of Sitis, from the middle of it, where it had been split. A dark shadow, black smoke that seemed to have a life of its own.

All sound died, and everything was silent.

Then came her grandmother's voice:

“Oh, Natalie – what have you done?”

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As the audience watched in perfect silence, the pillar of smoke changed and took shape. A human shape took form – long legs, hips, torso, arms and finally, head. The smoke whirled around the shape, twisting and turning. The contours of a female body became more pronounced and filled in with pale white skin that looked almost translucent, with blue veins visible here and there, and wild hair spreading out around her. The smoke grew a cloak around her which suddenly became solid.

Natalie watched with her mouth hanging open.

What had just happened? Why had it happened? Who was this creature standing before them so suddenly? Why did her grandmother look so aghast? Would this person heal Cecily?

The smoke did not disappear completely. After the cloak formed around the woman, it stayed at the bottom of it, twisting and turning slowly upwards.

“Who are you?”

Natalie’s voice sounded far off to her own ears.

The being laughed and Natalie shuddered at the sound. “I would have thought you’d have figured it out by now.”

“Natalie—Cecily—get back here!”

Natalie’s grandmother’s voice barely held.

The woman cocked her head to the side. “Mother. How nice of you to be here today, on this very special occasion.”

“*Mother?*”

This word brought Natalie’s world to a screeching halt, and would almost have been comical, if Natalie had not realized the severity of the situation. Her brain worked frantically.

“No,” she breathed.

“Tsk, tsk, Madeline – not telling your own grandchild about her mother,” said the woman. “What *have* you been telling her?”

“I have told her exactly what I needed to tell her to keep her safe,” Natalie’s grandmother hissed.

Natalie took a step back, away from both her grandmother and the woman. “What—what are you talking about?”

The woman, who still stood atop the split Stone of Sitis, took a step down to the ground. Her movements were gracious, exact – not a finger out of balance. The smoke made it seem as though she had just floated down to the ground. She was beautiful – and familiar.

She moved her hand and the stone, the Nebula Medeor that Natalie had worked so hard to assemble, flew into her hand.

“You asked me who I am,” the woman said, advancing on Natalie, her tone as soft as honey yet dangerous. “I’m not just one thing, least of all to you.”

“Carolina, get away from her—”

“You can’t be—” Natalie whispered.

The woman flicked her hand once, and then said to Natalie, “I have spoken to you many times in the last few months – on paper and in your dreams. Remember?”

Natalie’s eyes widened. “You’re not—”

“What is it you call me,” the woman said. “Ah, yes—the ghost writer.”

“But you—”

Natalie could not find the words. Her brain felt like it had been completely overloaded and though it somewhere all made sense, it made absolutely no sense to Natalie.

“And then there’s this body,” said the woman. “It once belonged to a woman – a woman who thought she could wield me. That she could control me.”

“There’s no controlling me.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed at the memory. Natalie took another step back, and the woman followed. She slid rather than walked. Natalie felt a sense of dread spread through her, building slowly but surely.

The woman turned her hand. Fire floated above her palm.

Tears came to Natalie’s eyes. “Then you’re my—mother.”

The girl her grandmother had spoken of – it had been Natalie’s mother. Looking into the woman’s eyes, Natalie could see a ghostly resemblance, like looking into a twisted, dark mirror. But of the sleeping woman in the photo on her desk back home, nothing remained. This woman had a hard face, with angles and shadows and eyes so cold they seemed able to kill, icy blue and the darkest black swirling together. They flashed with danger, dark and endless.

“No,” the woman said. The fire in her hand disappeared as she made a motion over her body. “This *shell* was your mother’s. I am a force stronger than any other in this world or any other. I am powers beyond what you could ever imagine.”

Her grandmother’s cry of ‘what have you done’ had been fitting.

“Then you’re Chaos.”

The woman smiled cruelly, her words cold as ice. “Indeed. And I have you to thank for finally being free. I’ve been trying to get out of that prison for a great many years.”

Natalie glanced at her grandmother, and Cecily and the Diophane who stood on either side of her grandmother. Her grandmother’s face stood out, as white as a sheet of paper, frozen. The Diophane’s proud stance still held, but lines of worry stood out on her face. Cecily did not look well, but then she had not in quite some time.

Natalie looked back at the woman – her mother – Chaos.

“There never was a way to heal Cecily, was there?”

Chaos glanced aside as well for a brief second. “Of course there is.”

“What?” Natalie said.

“I could heal her in a second,” Chaos said. “And the Nebula works. You saw the sisters – I didn’t make that up.”

Chaos held out the stone. It lay in the palm of her hand, perfectly whole. Natalie stretched out a hand to take it from Chaos – if she could only heal Cecily, the it would all be worth it—

Just as she was about to touch the stone, Chaos clenched her hand to a fist.

“It works – it is powerful, as you just saw,” she hissed, “but healing your friend would require you to get your hands on it and use it. And there is only one way for you to do that.”

Natalie glanced at their audience once more. She frowned – they had not moved an inch. When she thought about it, none of them had moved or spoken since—

“What did you do to them?” Natalie asked.

“I thought you and I should have a little chat,” Chaos said. “*Mother to daughter*. Without interruptions.”

“Release them!”

“They’re not in pain. You really should be more worried about yourself.”

“If it’s me you’re interested in – leave them alone!” Natalie said. “And if you’re so goddamn powerful, why didn’t you get the stone yourself? Why that stone? Why *me*?”

“I couldn’t get it myself,” Chaos spat. “Your grandmother saw to that. And the stone – let’s just say, it’s mine.”

Natalie waited for a second, then asked again. “And why me?”

Chaos smirked. “Because while I’m not actually your mother, you and I are still bound together, Natalie. Your mother was pregnant with you when she took me in. A part of me lives in you.”

Natalie’s mouth fell open – she had not expected that. Bile rose instantly in her throat – she did not want to have part of Chaos in her. Still, it made perfect, twisted sense. It must have been what she had called upon when she had been with Ramon – it had not simply been the little bit of madness that existed in everyone. It had been the real Chaos.

“You were easy to get to, easy to contact. Easy to control and manipulate. And with such a wish to cure a friend – who could pass it up,” Chaos said. “After the fiasco with Keys, I knew you were ready.”

“Did you have something to do with that as well?” Natalie asked. “With sending Ramon after me?”

They played cat and mouse – for each step backwards that Natalie took, Chaos followed. Every now and then, dark lines flickered from Chaos’ hands, her magic completely colorless. The dark lines drew Natalie in; she stared at them and her mind became enticed, shadows seeping in like poison. Panic, despair, hatred, emptiness, all at once in those dark lines.

“Actually, no,” Chaos said. “He just happened to come along and find your father’s necklace just as I’d started talking to you. I thought for a while I wouldn’t have to use you to get out – that he would do so for me. But where he proved worthless, you proved worthy.”

Natalie recalled the ghost writer’s – Chaos’ – words after Ava had died.

“But he was going to kill me to free you,” Natalie said. “That obviously wasn’t necessary.”

“Obviously,” Chaos said. “He knew only one of the ways to call me to life once more.”

She took a few steps forward towards Natalie and suddenly, they were face to face less than an arm length from each other. Natalie glared hotly at Chaos, who gazed back with calm, cold eyes.

“I’m quite satisfied that he didn’t kill you,” Chaos said. “You’ll do fine by my side.”

“I’ll do *what*?”

“You cannot imagine the powers I am,” Chaos said. “It is already within you – and I could teach you to use it fully. We could rule – right wrongs and control the people of this earth. Punish them.”

“I’ve heard about your reign – it’s a reign of terror,” Natalie said.

“What’s terror for some is paradise for others.”

“Not for me – I don’t want to rule over anyone,” Natalie spat. “I’m a human being, not a monster.”

Chaos eyes bore into her. “Are you sure? I’m sure there are people who have been monsters to you. People you’d like to hurt?”

Chaos knew all about what Chase Eadan had done to her. Natalie swallowed back the hurt and anger she felt against Eadan – she still did not want to rule over him, or punish him, did she? That was what the justice system existed for.

Except the justice system had already failed to punish Chase, a voice said. The very same voice wanted to say yes to Chaos’ proposition. A part of her did want to hurt Eadan the way he had hurt her.

Natalie pushed the thought back.

Chaos looked unpleasantly satisfied. “See, there you go.”

“I don’t want to rule with you,” Natalie said. “People can be monsters, but that doesn’t give me the right to do anything like that to them.”

“But turning people purple is all right? Where is the line drawn, Natalie?” Chaos hissed the last part, leaning close to Natalie. “Is it all right to hurt someone because you think it’s right?”

“I wouldn’t—”

“Your brother would beg to differ, I believe,” she said.

Natalie turned white at the reminder of what she had done to her brother – she had given him a heart attack. But no – she had not done it because she wanted to hurt him, she had done it to protect herself. Or was that simply what she told herself?

She took several steps back. “Get away from me!”

Chaos shook her head. “What if I offer you something you want?”

“You have nothing I want.”

Chaos smiled. “What if I cure your friend?”

“Cure Cecily?” Natalie asked before she could stop herself.

Chaos nodded, satisfied with her curiosity. “I could do it with a flick of my hand.”

Natalie’s heart rate sped up further. Curing Cecily – that was what this had all been about. That was why they were now in this situation. Natalie wished that more than anything.

And yet, she could not. Her grandmother’s story of Chaos’ killing sprees and terror-filled reign – Natalie could never, ever be part of that. But even more than that, she thought of Cecily. Cecily would never want Natalie to agree to such a deal, no matter what the cost would be for herself.

“No.”

Chaos shook her head. “And here I had such high hopes for you.”

She raised her hand and Natalie felt her body leave the ground. Something tightened like iron fists around her throat, making breathing difficult. She hung in the air, helpless, breathless, and was at once reminded of that this was exactly how Ramon had held her. But Natalie could not use Chaos to get out of this – Chaos had become her opponent now and she was much stronger than Natalie could ever hope to be.

“Oh,” said Chaos and walked over to her, “and this belongs to me.”

She flicked her wrist and the necklace ripped from Natalie’s neck. The beautiful crystal flew soundlessly into Chaos’ gloved hand and it disappeared. Natalie’s only source of protection, what little it might have been able to provide, had gone.

“No! Natalie!”

Natalie saw him come barging in, from the corner of her eye. Ramon’s looked livid, angry red splotches on his cheeks and his hair flying in the wind.

“Ramon—don’t—” Natalie choked out but he did not listen.

He charged at Chaos, physically throwing himself at her.

And then he stopped in midair.

“Hello, Ramon Keys,” Chaos said. “I saw you lurking in the shadows – I wondered when you’d come out and introduce yourself.”

Ramon’s face turned redder. Natalie wondered if he could breathe. Her own air supply was so short, black dots danced before her eyes. But she heard Chaos words loud and clear.

“The illegitimate child,” she hissed. “The one Orion spoke of sometimes. You have his eyes.”

“Let—her—go,” Ramon gasped, and Natalie no longer doubted that he had a hard time breathing.

She felt consciousness fading.

“You have no say in what I do,” Chaos said.

She turned her hand and Ramon screamed, a guttural scream that pierced through Natalie. It made her open her eyes and start to fight once more – she would not give up. Ramon had come to save her – now she had to do something.

An invisible knife had slashed through Ramon’s shirt and his chest bled through it. Another flick of her wrist and another cut appeared, this time on his leg. A third time, and his abdomen colored red with blood. Ramon screamed each time, and it pierced through Natalie like ice. It drove her in her wish to get free. She pulled whatever magic she could from her surroundings – perhaps she could still use it, even when Chaos had taken her necklace.

“You’re no challenge,” Chaos said to Ramon. “I could snap your bones without so much as a second thought.”

She flicked her wrist again and sent Ramon flying. He landed in a lifeless heap on the ground and Natalie realized she was crying.

“Stop it!” she yelled at Chaos.

At the very same moment, she let loose the magic she had been able to collect. It passed from her and through Chaos, like a sound wave. For a moment, everything stood still – then Natalie dropped to the ground, coughing and gasping for air.

Chaos smiled, as though she had done well. “You, on the other hand, are worthy. Let’s see about the others.”

With a flick of her other hand, Chaos freed the other three. Natalie’s grandmother, Diophane McCoy and Cecily came to life at once.

“Natalie!” yelled Cecily, horrified.

“Let her go!” Natalie’s grandmother bellowed, taking powerful strides towards Natalie and Chaos.

“Of course, *mother*,” Chaos said with a mocking bow.

Natalie’s lungs burned and she gulped down air. The edges of her vision swam a bit, but she stayed conscious. She had to. She watched her grandmother approaching Chaos quickly, and Ramon’s lifeless body, lying well away from her. She had to get to him, she had to know that he was still alive.

“I locked you away once, I can do it again!” Natalie’s grandmother said.

“You got lucky,” Chaos said. “You won’t be again.”

They circled each other. Natalie’s grandmother looked ready to kill, while Chaos eyed her with cruel amusement, like a cat playing with its prey before killing it. A chill ran down Natalie’s back when she realized that was exactly what Chaos was doing.

“No! Grandma, don’t!” she cried.

“Natalie, stay back,” her grandmother warned her. “This is not your fight.”

“But grandmother—”

“Natalie, quiet.”

Natalie fell silent. She stood unsteadily and started towards Ramon, whilst Chaos’ attention stayed on her grandmother. Or perhaps Chaos saw her move but did not care. Tears coursed down Natalie’s face – when had things gone so wrong? She looked over to the other side of the clearing, where she saw Cecily, grey-faced and shaking. Like Natalie, she tried to make her way towards Ramon without diverting Chaos’ attention. Next to her, Diophane McCoy stood, her eyes trained on Chaos, ready to attack, should things go wrong. Natalie wished she did not already know that things would go wrong. The feeling in her gut told her that this night would not end well.

Natalie wondered where Ava had gone. She had not seen her since they had been running towards the Mithridates.

If only her grandmother had managed to stop them.

If only Natalie had listened when the Diophane had said the Nebula Medeor was dangerous.

If only her mother had never called Chaos into her body to begin with.

If only.

But it did not matter how much she wished – reality still played out before her. She reached Ramon, who lay motionless on the ground, his leg bleeding and broken and his face contorted with pain. The cuts Chaos had made on his body bled profoundly. He appeared to be breathing still and when she searched for his pulse, she found a weak one.

“Ramon,” Natalie mumbled, brushing his hair out of his face. “I’m so sorry.”

Cecily came to sit next to her, her eyes moving from Ramon to Chaos constantly. Natalie stood up, moving towards Chaos, and began to concentrate.

She needed magic.

Her grandmother and Chaos still circled each other, predator and prey. Everything moved slowly, as though the world warped with their every step.

Then it happened.

Natalie's grandmother made her move, much quicker than a lady her age ought to have been able to do. A string of blue magic flared across the Mithridates, rushing towards Chaos.

Chaos deflected it effortlessly. She held up her palm and the blue magic bounced off, sending it flying up into the air. It shimmered like a blue rainbow for a moment, but no one had the time to appreciate the beauty. Chaos sent a string of her own magic – all black – towards Natalie's grandmother—

She did not have time to react. The magic hit her full force, and she fell back, landing in a boneless heap.

“No!” screamed Natalie, tears blinding her.

Then Chaos turned towards Cecily and Ramon.

Diophane McCoy suddenly sent a salve of her orange magic towards Chaos. Chaos repelled it easily – she did not even look at the Diophane. Instead, she gave Natalie a smile, a cruel one that sent chills down Natalie's body.

Chaos flicked her wrist, and a line of red magic traveled across the Mithridates.

Natalie did not know how she managed to get in front of Cecily and Ramon in time – perhaps it was magic. But as the line of red was just about to hit her brother and Cecily, she threw herself in front of them.

She heard someone scream but she did not know who it came from.

A million thoughts passed through her mind, so quickly she did not have time to register them.

She waited for the hit.

And waited to die.

27.

The night sky filled her vision when she woke and she wondered, is this heaven? There were clouds but also stars, peeking out in the holes in the clouds. It seemed serene, but the air felt chilly.

Natalie heard someone crying.

She sat up on her elbows, wincing all the while as the muscles in her body protested.

What had just happened?

“Natalie!”

Cecily threw herself around her neck and hugged her tightly. It felt good to have Cecily close but Natalie had to know—

“What happened?”

Cecily drew back. There were tear tracks on her cheeks and new tears formed in her eyes.

“You saved us,” she said thickly. “You made a shield and that woman’s magic—it bounced back at her.”

“A shield? Bounced? But I don’t have a stone—”

She noticed that she was holding something in her right hand. She opened it – her fingers hurt from the tight grip – and found—

“The stone from the beach.”

Cecily gave a watery smile. “I told you, you should have it as backup.”

Natalie stared at the stone. “That you did.” She looked up. “So she’s gone then? Chaos is gone?”

Cecily shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. It hit her but—I think she just left to recuperate.”

“Oh,” Natalie said. The nightmare she had created was not over.

Cecily looked uncertain. “Natalie—I don’t know if you remember—but—your grandmother—”

“She’s dead,” Natalie said softly. “I remember.”

Pain, fresh and searing, tore at her heart. The images flew past her and she saw it once more – her grandmother’s magic, bounced off Chaos’ hands, and then—

She did not feel the same agonistic pain at the loss of her grandmother that she had felt with Ava, but she still left a hole in her heart. Natalie had kept the hope to become close with her grandmother, to understand her and make her proud. Now, that chance was gone, disappeared in a single moment in time.

Taken from her, as Ava had been taken from her.

She wondered again where Ava had gone. Had she filled her purpose? The thought hit her suddenly. Had she left for good this time?

Tears ran down her cheeks.

“And Ramon?” she asked.

“He’s alive, but badly injured,” Cecily said.

Unsteadily, Natalie stood. Ramon lay on the ground, his face ashen and still. Cecily had done her best to stop the bleedings from the cuts Chaos had made.

Diophane McCoy walked towards them. She did not appear to have cried, but her hands shook where they hung at her sides. She seemed to be in a state of shock. Natalie could relate.

“I’m sorry, Miss Winters,” she said.

“Call me Natalie, please,” Natalie said thickly.

“Natalie.”

The Diophane kneeled by Ramon’s side. With one hand on his forehead and one hand over his chest injury, she closed her eyes. Magic, this time white and healing, flowed through her hands.

Natalie looked the other way. She saw her grandmother’s body and walked to it.

To her.

She could not quite manage to believe that her grandmother was really dead.

Her grandmother’s body lay at a strange angle, but her face appeared calm. The lines of anger had evened out as death relaxed her. It was a cliché, but she did look as though she merely rested. She looked gentler in death than she ever had in life, at least in the time Natalie had known her.

She kneeled at her grandmother’s side. Long, grey strands of hair had fallen out of place and Natalie gently placed them back, her hands shaking, knowing that her grandmother would want her hair in order. At least she imagined she knew that.

“Forgive me,” Natalie said softly.

She squeezed the lifeless hand, then stood, unable to look at her grandmother’s body any longer. Diophane McCoy still healed Ramon, although Natalie could not see him become any better.

When she stopped, Natalie asked, “What do I do now?”

She had no idea. Was there a procedure to follow? A way to care for the body? A funeral? Who would take care of the house now? What happened to the Mithridates? Who would take care of Ramon?

The Diophane’s eyes softened as she gazed at Natalie.

“We need to move him back to the house,” she said. “I’ll take care of the rest, Miss—Natalie.”

“I want to help,” Natalie said. She did not want the Diophane to believe she did not care. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“I understand,” Diophane McCoy said. She looked at Ramon, who lay either sleeping or unconscious. “Can you please elevate him and take him back to the house?”

Had Natalie not been so tired, and still in shock, she would have been surprised that the Diophane believed her able to do such magic. As it was, she merely began collecting what little magic she could still feel in the air and ground around her. Tears traveled down her cheeks as she transferred the magic onto Ramon, and lifted him into the air.

Behind her, the Diophane stood over the body of Natalie’s grandmother. Her necklace, orange just as the magic she had used before, glowed and a light shone from her hand. It fell over Natalie’s grandmother, illuminating her for a few seconds. Then the light died and Diophane McCoy allowed her hand to drop.

At Natalie's questioning look, she said, "Keeping magic, until the elves can care for her. They will come once we leave, to prepare her for the funeral."

"Oh," said Natalie.

She gazed at her grandmother's body one last time. This did not feel like when Ava had died – it had all been so stressed then, with no time to say goodbye. Natalie had a feeling that her grandmother would not return as a ghost – she had served her purpose, fulfilled her life.

She floated Ramon ahead of her, and the three women walked away, as the dark of night began enclosed them. Cecily cried silently, still sick and frail. Her face was white, her eyes red. Natalie felt like a complete failure – despite everything, she still had not managed to make Cecily well. The Diophane walked behind them, her head down.

Perhaps she cried too.

Natalie sent a note to Richard, but did not return home. She did not feel that she could leave, because Ramon had not yet woken up. She did not want to leave him – he had very nearly sacrificed his life for her.

Butler Thomas, appearing as red-eyed as well, took Cecily back home. Like Natalie, she appeared to be in shock.

The cook served Natalie food and draped warm blankets around her, as she sat in the chair next to Ramon's bed. She hardly touched the food, and the blankets did not seem to keep her warm. The cook lit a fire, and yet Natalie shivered.

She slept through the day, waking up crying from nightmares as she watched her grandmother, and Ava, die over and over again. The image of her mother turned into Chaos, and Chaos laughed at her, taunted her, and sent her magic towards Cecily and Ramon. In her dreams, they both died as well. Natalie curled into a fetal position, holding on to a teddy bear and tried to think happy thoughts before she fell back to sleep. It did not work.

Ramon did not stir.

On Wednesday, butler Thomas came knocking on the door to the room where Ramon rested and Natalie stayed.

"Madame's funeral is today," the butler said. "If you wish to attend."

Natalie did not. The mere thought made her want to cry and feel sick.

"Of course."

The wood elves had taken care of the body, and the funeral itself. Natalie wished she would have gotten her first good look at the beautiful creatures at some other time – they were breathtaking. As it was, her attention stayed on her grandmother's final journey. They did not use a coffin, but a small boat made entirely out of wood.

"She was a Master Wielder of Water," butler Thomas said from his place next to Natalie. "She is sent off into the water, for it to take her where she belongs."

Natalie nodded mutely. The wood elves played music – haunting yet perfect music, stringing notes that made ripples on the water – and tears ran down Natalie's cheeks so that she could

hardly make out her surroundings. Her heart ached. Were all people she loved doomed to die when she came too close?

Natalie returned to Ramon, who lay perfectly still on the bed. His chest barely heaved as he breathed. The Diophane, or one of her students, would return within the hour to continue performing healing magic on him.

“Don’t you dare die on me too,” Natalie said, choking.

She grasped his hand, holding onto it like a lifeline.

She sat there, tears running down her cheeks. She wondered if the tears would ever end. She resisted sleep, for sleep only meant nightmares.

Another knock on the door – Natalie was just about to tell the butler to go away, when the door opened and Cecily stood before her.

“Hi.”

Natalie did not know what to think, or feel. “Hi.”

“I—uh, the butler came and picked me up,” Cecily said. When Natalie did not respond, she continued, “I brought someone.”

Natalie remained impassive. Then Ava floated through the wall.

“Ava!”

Natalie resisted the urge to throw herself at her friend. It would not do anything good. A tired, but happy smile spread over her lips. Ava had not left for good after all.

Ava sized her up and frowned. “You look like hell.”

“Thanks.”

Natalie’s tears would not quite dry. She did not wipe them away, because more would come.

Then Ava stopped, her eyes locking on Ramon’s still form.

“Ava—I’d like you to meet my brother,” Natalie said, very softly. “Ramon Keys.”

Ava stared, and a multitude of emotions passed over her face. “Is he—?”

Natalie shook her head. “Not yet. But the wounds won’t stop bleeding, so—they don’t know.”

“Can’t the Diophane do something?” Cecily asked.

“They are, but it’s not helping much,” Natalie said. “They just open up again. The Diophane believes it’s Chaos’ dark magic that keeps him from healing.”

“Chaos?” said both Cecily and Ava.

Natalie nodded.

“So—that woman – she was actually Chaos?” Cecily said.

Natalie gave another nod.

“But—why?” asked Cecily. “How could it – she – escape?”

Ava’s eyes stayed on Ramon. She floated over to him, suspended right above him, and stared down at him. She reached out a hand towards him as though to touch him, but stopped at the last minute.

“He—he doesn’t look insane,” she said.

“He’s not being controlled by someone else anymore,” Natalie said. “He tried to save me from Chaos. He’s—good.”

Ava stared at Natalie. Then she asked, “So what happened – what went wrong?”

“When did you leave? How much did you see?”

Ava paused for a second. “I didn’t leave, not on my own accord anyway. They yanked me out of this place, to the Land of the Restless. I thought they’d beat me up again but—it wasn’t that.”

She looked thoughtful and Natalie had to ask, “What was it then?”

“She left,” Ava said. “The girl we took the necklace from – Sandrine. Everything just stopped there and we saw it. She woke up and a light flooded her and then—she was just gone. Just like that.”

“I merged the pieces of the Nebula,” Natalie said. “I suppose it set her free.”

Cecily followed their conversation with a frown. “I don’t suppose either of you would like to explain? I still don’t get what happened.”

“Me neither,” Natalie said softly. “The ghost writer told me of a stone, the Nebula Medeor. She said it’d make you healthy again. But it was in pieces and it took us a while to get to them.”

Cecily cocked her head to the side. “Make me healthy? But why didn’t you tell me?”

Natalie shrugged, studying the floor. “I didn’t want to raise your hopes, in case it didn’t work, or in case I didn’t find all the pieces.”

“But why did you – it – raise Chaos instead, then?” Cecily asked.

“The ghost writer turned out to be Chaos,” Natalie said softly. “It had been her plan the whole time, in case Ramon didn’t free her. She said the stone belonged to her, or something, but I don’t understand, not really.”

Natalie glanced from Ava to Cecily.

“And—I can’t believe this, really but – she’s also—”

“Also what?” asked Ava.

Natalie studied her hands. “She’s also my mom.”

“*What?*” Ava and Cecily chorused.

Natalie’s voice sounded dead to her own ears. “A girl took Chaos into her body years ago. Apparently, that girl was my mom. And since my mom got pregnant with me, Chaos is also a part inside of me.”

She hid her face in her free hand – she still held onto Ramon with the other. She did not want to let go of him, this new brother of hers.

Time passed, though Natalie did not know how much. She thought she could feel the shocked – perhaps disgusted – looks on Ava and Cecily’s faces. How could they be anything but shocked and disgusted? Her parents were both murderers.

Then she felt Cecily’s hand on her back, stroking it hesitantly. A moment later, Natalie felt the chill of Ava’s touch. Though she already felt cold, the sensation was pleasant. She looked up into the eyes of her two friends, still crying.

“My mother killed my grandmother and tried to kill me,” she said, then looked at Ava, “and my father killed you. I’m the daughter of two murderers – what does that make me?”

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Ava shrugged at her. “It makes you, you. Your parents don’t make you who you are.”

“But I have Chaos in me!”

“And you have won over it once,” Cecily said. “And you’ll do it again, if you have to.”

Natalie sighed. “I don’t know if I can.”

Cecily gave her a slight smile. “Of course you can. You’ve just spent weeks trying to find a stone to cure me, and you saved both Ramon, me and Diophane McCoy – Natalie, you’re nothing if not good.”

Ava nodded. “What she said.”

Natalie smiled through tears. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you two.”

Ava shook her head theatrically. “Neither do I.”

Cecily smiled. “You don’t deserve friends. You get them anyway.”

Natalie’s heart still felt close to breaking – her grandmother had died, Ramon lay comatose and both her parents were killers. At least now she could understand why her father had supported Chaos – if they had loved each other, that made a disturbing, horrifying kind of sense. Still, it did not help as Natalie thought of it.

She knew Chaos would return. She wanted Natalie on her side and Natalie knew that she would try again. Natalie did not know what she would do when that time came. Chaos stood far stronger than she could ever hope to be – she was not even a Master Wielder.

But then Natalie looked from Cecily to Ava and back again, and turned her gaze to her brother on the bed. Suddenly, she felt something other than the pain and despair she had felt in the last few days. She knew she had something that Chaos did not have, nor would she ever be able to have it. A power that Natalie had been able to Wield for years:

Love.

And that made the tears fall a bit slower.