

THE FAUN
AND
THE HOUND

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Acknowledgements

*To all the kids like us, and the ones who don't know
they are yet.*

*To the adults who don't know they've changed our
lives*

To everyone who peers behind the curtain

To the modern heroes.

PART ONE

The Adults Are Talking

“Being gifted needs courage.” - Georg Brandes

Prologue

Tonight,

I cannot tell that the sun has set

It is a sickness, the air

Dark smog stains my lungs

Borne of churning silver machines

Scramble to the shores and dig

Dig until you are raw and the plague rots under your nails, but no water remains

Wander through whitened reefs, pull bottle caps from turtle skulls

I can dip my hands into the gray streams

Have you seen them, Gaea?

They smell of money

Oil sticks to tissue, to bone and blood

young one...walk, into our once great streets

You can no longer see the marble, nor cobblestone

I am grateful I never had to see the colors in glor

Now all they be

Of the plastic shards embedded

I beg you, cover my eyes.

Shatter my skull

I am tired of seeing.

Angry, too.

There are dead in the streets, I watch them,

My chest pangs, stomach turns

Unfortunate souls.

Look to the north!

To the city,

city of Hades, a fitting name

Praise the King!

Holler out his name

Beg, beg and pray that he will answer

Pray for the antidote, a magical fix for this world

He is no savior

I will rip the salvation from his hands

- C. V

Chapter 1

Jason

“Those who control the money control the world.”

- Henry Kissinger

“This is Hurmise Pravida on Channel 13 News. We are broadcasting live, where it has been found out King Pelias Fleece II has been dead for three days! Although it has only just hit the public. King Pelias I was known for his discovery of plastic, forming the company Argo Plastic Production or A.P.P. This allowed him to gain enough power to take control of Elysium.”

“King Pelias II was known for expanding the operation, making plastic a core part of our lives. Now that he has passed, his son; Jason Pluto Fleece, will inherit the empire. But should we trust a 16 year old with our livelihood? Going to John Peirce’s interview with Councilman Atlas, to get more informations on the proceedin—”

I switch off the TV and flop back onto my bed. I know I should be more upset about my father's death, but I just... feel numb. He never really treated me like a son, more like a vessel for the family to carry on his legacy, he only acknowledged me when I did something that he found to be obnoxious or could damage his reputation. And it wasn't the type of acknowledgement that you'd want.

But I'm getting ahead of myself here. I'm Jason, Jason *Faunus*. Not Fleece. Heir to the throne of Elysium, new CEO of A.P.P, etcetera, etcetera. Truth be told, I- I don't know what to do. What I do know is that my father's company, or I guess now *my* company, is doing horrible things.

I've heard of the mounds of plastic waste. I can smell them when I walk near the gate that separates us from "The Wastelands" as my father called it, whenever he'd ever acknowledged the city's existence. Kinda like me actually.

Anyways, I once even hacked my television to get the lower news, not the news my dad had run in the Elite areas. And it was horrifying.

They were talking about the water shortage, trash covering the ocean, inhumane conditions. Then, when they switched to a live feed, I almost threw up.

There was garbage as far as the eyes could see. Broken pieces of plastic; toys, bottles, bags, and so much more. They were stacked into mounds, some the size of islands. Animal carcasses piled, having perished from eating the garbage. I could smell *death* through the screen.

Sickly looking people were everywhere. There were few with real clothes, many had just bins, bags, and melted together plastic fashioned into something resembling clothing.

Some, more fortunate people wore gas masks because of the smog that blackened out the sky. Others were trying to salvage as much water as they could, using old bottles to scoop up from small puddles.

When they showed the water, though, it wasn't even ressemblant of even a liquid. It was a gray sludge, a mix of microplastics and factory run-off. It was truly horrifying.

So A.P.P. needs to be shut down. The problem? We need plastic, it's everywhere, embedded in our lives, And I don't even know if I have the power to close the corporation if I wanted to! I know what you'd think, "Aren't you the CEO now, Jace?"

Well, yes I am, but that doesn't mean I have total control. The company has a board of directors, and they're the ones that make most decisions. My "father" was just the figurehead. A puppet, you could say. I'm nothing but their new pawn to control. So I don't know what to—

"Mr. Fleece! The board would like to see you!" Hollers my personal butler, Khiron. "They want to consult with you about the proceedings following your late father's death." Khiron was a kind, older man, originally from the wasteland. He has rough coffee skin and these lively blue eyes full of wonder. His head was topped with long, black, curling hair, starting to thin. His face is covered with a gray goatee, like the kind children make out of snow.

He was the one who raised me, not quite like a father, but more so as mentor. Khiron used to tell me stories about forests, mountains, heroes and monsters. He'd also told me about my mother, who left my father when she saw the world crumble around them. He'd tell me about how she wanted to take me with her, but my father wouldn't let his sole heir leave. I jump up from my bed and walk to my closet. "Coming, just need to get ready." I called out. "Okay, just don't dawdle, the board doesn't like to wait." he responds, sounding a little stern. "I know they don't! That's why I'm dawdling." I call, smiling to myself, just slightly.

I grab my favorite suit from the closet, which is a gray suit with a blue tie. My father always hated it because he believed "gray is the color of the poor" but it's a lot better than the revolting green suits he would wear.

I jump in the shower. I already bathed today, but I'll do anything to not have to go into the boardroom. My father took me there once before, and all I remember is that it was lifeless. It was a relatively empty room with the only lights over the five board members and you. They tower above you, maybe it gives them a sense of superiority, looking down, as if you're insignificant. Once I'm done showering, I get dressed and look in the mirror. I try to put on a serious face, hide my anger, disgust and fear. I take a deep breath, and go to step out, then I imagine standing in

front of the board. I see the polluted ocean and the people. And suddenly my stomach starts to churn, a glaze comes over my eyes.

I stumble over to the nearest trash can and I retch. There isn't enough air all of a sudden, as if I'm out there with the living dead. My eyes water, down flushed cheeks, and my throat burns as the little breakfast I ate goes everywhere. I start hyperventilating, my lungs won't work.

"C'mon Jace, you gotta go, you can do this, you're the CEO, you can stop this. Just old greedy raisins, nothing to be afraid of." I tell myself.

I pull myself up, and brush my teeth again, getting the taste of puke out of my mouth, then take one more deep breath, fixing my demeanor.

"THUMP THUMP THUMP!"

I hear Khiron bang on my door "Mr. Fleece! It has been 30 minutes! I implore you to get going now before you agitate the board!"

I run over to the door and swing it open, putting on a smile.

"Oh don't worry Khiron, that's WHY I took so long." I joke while leaning on the doorframe. "And you know I hate it when you call me "Mr. Fleece". Mr. Faunus is the only name I will accept, if you insist on calling me by my last name."

"You know I can't do that, now more than ever! If someone hears you refusing to go by your fathers name, what would they think?" Khiron looks me up and down, "I see we're going with your favorite suit today, are we? You're just trying to make the board bring wrath upon you, aren't you?"

"That's the plan!" I say, trying to slip away.

Khiron grabs my collar, "Not. So. Fast. If you are going to infuriate the board, at least do it with a correctly tied tie." He says as he starts to unfurl the tie that I thought looked fine, "look at this mess, did I really teach you nothing?"

We stand there quietly for a few seconds, only speaking when he gives me pointers, "-loop here, pull there, wrap once, twice aaaaand... done!"

I look down at a perfect tie, admittedly a lot better than what I had done.

"Now come on Mr. Fleece before you are any more late." as he starts to walk towards the elevator.

I pretend I don't hear him, and he looks back and rolls his eyes.

"Come on, Mr. FAUNUS!"

I smile and go to catch up.

While we walk, I say hello to the maids, butlers and other workers. They wave back and smile, and I can see the pity in their eyes. They know how bad the board is.

But I can also see the disgust. Father only hired people from the wastelands, saying it was for charity, but I knew it was because it was cheap labor. So knowing that I'M the son of the man

who destroyed their home, that disgust in their eyes would never go away, no matter how kind I was to them.

When we reached the elevator, Khiron patted me on the shoulder, “I would say good luck, but I don’t know if even luck can save you.”

I give a somber nod as the elevator door closes. I can slightly see Khiron getting smaller and smaller through blurry plastic doors, before the elevator goes to the next floor.

You see, where I live is the same building where the main headquarters of Argo is, and where the bank is, and the government’s capital building is, and where the Board lives. Along with a lot of other stuff.

The elevator dings as it reaches the top floor. The doors slowly creak open to a dark, seemingly empty room.

“ENTER, SIR JASON PULTO FLEECE!”

The five voices of the board members echoed through the room. I shudder, It’s as if they’re a hivemind.

I step into the pitch black room. Then, spotlights start to flash on, illuminating one member after the other.

First Hyperion, then Krios and Coeus, then Petus, and lastly, the head of the board, Atlas. I don’t know why they have the lights, they always keep their faces covered with these black masks that mold to their facial expressions without showing their identities.

Then, a spotlight lands on me.

“What a flair for the dramatic.” I congratulate them, trying not to show my loathe.

“You can cut the sarcasm, Mr. Fleece” Coeus snaps.

I smirk, “Please, Mr. Fleece was my father.” I joke, trying not to shake, they make me furious, but they hold the power, so I can’t afford to lose my cool.

“You’re right, Jason,” Hyperion says as he leans over his seat, “You aren’t worthy of that name.”

I clench my teeth, They are disgusting, the scum of the earth.

“Okay, well, let’s get on with business.” Atlas says, “We must talk about what to do with the company, and the rule of the Elysium in general.”

“Yes, I actually have plans of where we should go with the company, and what I would like to do as the new CEO. Let’s first start wi—”

“Actually,” Atlas cut me off, “We have been discussing and we have come to the conclusion that we should run things for the time being, so that you’re able to enjoy your youth. You’re only 15 ½ after all! You shouldn’t need to worry about all this government stuff. Your father took over the company when he was 34, and he still had no idea what to do!”

I knew this would happen, they would never let me have any real control. I’m not as greedy as my father was, and that makes me harder to control.

“Aw don’t have that down-turned face,” Atlas says, noticing my expression, “It’s not forever, just until you’re old enough, let’s saaaay...26? The brain doesn’t fully develop until 25 anyways!” he says, voice condescending. It makes my skin crawl.

I can’t keep my cool any longer, “26!?! That’s ELEVEN years!” I exclaim, “By then, the plastic problem will be a HUNDRED times worse!”

I can tell that surprised the board, “Plastic...problem?” Petus questioned, “how can plastic even *be* a problem?” These horrid people make my stomach turn, how could they not know what they’ve done, how many lives they have taken.

“How can it be a problem, how is it NOT?! Have you not looked out your window at all, I know my father tried to keep it a secret from the Blessed Isle, but I’d think at least you all would know!” I clench my hands so tight, my knuckles crack.

“Ohhhhh, THAT’S what you’re talking about!” Krios says, a look of realization on his face, “Well, that’s not a problem, that’s in the wasteland, it doesn’t concern us. Only street filth and rebels live there.”

Now I’m absolutely fuming. These... old, greedy, wretched monsters, they only care about making themselves richer. And THEY control the banks! They just want to see the others suffer to inflate their own egos. “NOT A PROBLEM!?! PLASTIC IS POISONING ELYSIUM, AND IF NOTHING CHANGES, WE’LL ALL BE SCREWED!”

“Now hold on, Jason.” Atlas says, I can tell by the way his shoulders stiffen, he’s getting agitated, “We’ve been doing this since your grandfather’s time. We know how to run a company. So I think we know more about this than you, and everything is fine. Nothing needs to cha—”

“IT’S NOT FINE! YOU ARE CREATING YOUR OWN DOWNFALL! THERE IS SO MUCH POLLUTION, AND WE JUST KEEP CREATING MORE! WE NEED TO STOP PRODUCTION, OR AT LEAST CHANGE SOMETHING! ALL YOU GREEDY PIGS CARE ABOUT IS TURNING A PROFIT INSTEAD OF HELPING YOUR NATION! SO AS THE NEW KING, I SAY- NO- I DEMAND WE CHANGE SOMETHING! AND I DON’T CARE IF WE DON’T MAKE A PROFIT, I WANT TO HELP MY PEOPLE!”

The whole board looked stunned, then appalled, as if I just called them a derogatory word. Coeus started to growl, voice smooth even in his anger. I compare it to Khirons, cracked and pained from inhalation of the board’s mistakes.

“Don’t you DARE speak to us that wa—”

“Shush.” Atlas cut him off. I could tell he was barely holding himself from also shouting at me.

“We. Will. Take. Your. Words. In. To. Consideration.” He spit out through gritted teeth, “You may leave now.” as the elevator doors open.

I bow, and turn to leave. They go into a hidden room behind them, and slam the door, not even waiting to see if I leave.

I walk towards the elevator, regretting everything. How could I let my emotions get the best of me, now they'll never let me make a decision for the com-

“The nerve of that brat!”

I turn, hearing Coeus shout from that secret room. I start to tiptoe over, and the sounds become clearer.

“We will never be able to trust him, Atlas.” Hyperion says

Then I hear Krios, “He’s right, the boy is too kind, he cares too much.”

“Pelias Jr. was easy to manipulate. He would do anything to upstage his father.” Petus said, “-he was easily consumed by greed.”

“And Pelias Senior was good and oblivious, consumed in his inventions.” Kois adds

“But that BRAT is too aware, too emotional. Damn kid.” Coeus grunts.

“You all think I don’t know this!?” Atlas exclaims, “That kid will ruin this company. So I have a plan.”

“Great Atlas, what is it? We ship him away, or kick him out?” Hyperion giddily asks.

“No, he knows too much, We have to... take care of him. Permanently.”

I gasp. Kill me? They wouldn’t! They’re not that evil!

“Oh, If that’s it, why did you let him leave? We could have taken care of him right then and there!” Coeus asks, I could hear the bloodlust in his voice.

“No, that’s too suspicious, it has to be impossible to trace to us.” Atlas calmly states, like this is an everyday conversation, “I was thinking something more discrete.”

“Oh, like poison, say it was a family illness, passed down from his father.” Hyperion suggested.

“Or we could go with suicide, like he couldn’t live with being an orphan.” Petus asked

“Both good ideas, but I already have a plan.” Atlas says. “On the day of the funeral, we have him killed. And blame it on that rebel group, what are they called again, Syrens, I think. So then, the people in the Blessed Isle turn against the rebels, and we kill two birds with one stone. Or I guess two stones with one bird, haha.” I faintly hear others start to congratulate him, but I'm freaking out, what am I gonna do, he’s gonna kill me. I can’t stop it, what’s going to happen with Elysium, when they take full control.

I’m hyperventilating, I have to go before I get caught. I run to the elevator and slam all the buttons. It brings me to every floor, but eventually It reaches floor five, my house floor, where Khiron is there waiting for me,

“Mr. Fleece, tell me how it went.” Then he sees my expression, “Jason, are you alright, you look sick. What happened up there..?”

I push past him, trying to get to my room. I stumble through the door and lock it behind me. I bolted into the bathroom and for the second time today, threw up. It feels like I'm throwing up my intestines, Tears stream down my cheeks, salty around my lips, the taste of salt makes me throw up more. I feel like I'm already dying.

I wipe my eyes and take a breath. I pull myself up, my knees are weak. I stumble over, and look at myself in the mirror.

I'm sweating profusely, my heart is racing. My golden hair is moist from the sweat, washing out the dye and revealing its true fiery red hue. I look myself in my emerald eyes, I look like I did when I first left that room, the same fear in my face. They're gonna kill me, I know when and how, but there is nothing I can do, they will always find me, and they will kill whoever I tell. It's not if I'll die, it's a matter of when. It's like I'm like a chicken on a farm. Once I can't make eggs, off to the fryer. And I was born infertile.

Chapter 2

Cerberus

"If there is a God he will have to beg for my forgiveness." -phrase carved into the walls of a concentration camp cell during WWII by a Jewish captive.

DEAR DAD, MAKE ME GOOD AGAIN

I'LL TEAR AT MY STERNUM AND KNEEL TO YOU

AND I WILL TAKE THE BOTTLE CAP-6 RINGS FROM MY PALMS

I WILL TELL YOU

I DID NOT DIE TO BE BORN TO BE LEFT TO ROT, TO BE SO THANKLESS

AND, MOTHER, I ALREADY KNOW YOUR RESPONSE

AT WHAT POINT IS THERE A LINE I COULDN'T CATCH?

WHAT IS LEFT IN ME TO BECOME WHAT YOU WANTED?

MORE AND MORE I FIND MYSELF QUESTIONING YOUR JUDGMENT

WHO ARE YOU TO DARE DECIDE THE LIFE MY LOVER LEADS?

YOU ARE NO DIFFERENT FROM ANY OTHER ABSENT PARENT.

PLEASE, LEAVE ME TO ROT.

-CV

Some people were destined for greatness. And all the same, some were born just to die.

My cold expression slips the same as the pen from my rough hand, when I hear the news. "...dead...? The King is *dead*?" I draw my voice out, eyebrows raised, both. Messy black curls fall over one eye, and I don't move to straighten up. Is presentation still necessary when you hear of death? I think so.

I stare at my commander, my mother, my judge and jury. She looks formidable as ever, the leader of the rebels, ashy brown skin and hazel eyes, far unlike my glassy blue ones. Her cheeks are bone straining against skin, and I wonder not for the first time if she is sickly. But back to the matter at hand, the king's (rather) timely death.

Perhaps his passing is something the capital's citizens grieve- but grief is not something I've been taught to allow myself, growing up in Hades. Grief is a pointless emotion that changes not one thing. And of course, I do not plan to mourn a monster like the king.

How many times I've seen bloody cutouts of him, marred with gun-shots and dug into daggers. It's not a fitting death, illness, for such a creature. "And so it's over then? The reign?" I ask, eyes cautious and far too hopeful, I am. Too hopeful for a boy hell-borne.

"Perhaps, only for a few days, Corporal." She responds. I frown, for although I have seen many things growing up in Hades, I have never seen the dead come back. If it was possible, our streets would not only be flooded with plastic, but ghosts too.

"How would that happen, mother?" The term is foreign on my tongue, I call her this only in private. I am not alone with my mother often, nor would I wish to be. She does very important things that I don't wish to interfere with. For if I do, she may make a fatal mistake. And the world may as well cease to exist without her and her league of rebels with dirty clothes and pure hearts. She sighs, looking down her nose at me. Disappointment shines clearly through her obsidian-like eyes.

I take a second to think of a way, how might we suddenly have a king- oh. It's the prince. How hadn't I picked up on that already? It should have been my first thought after hearing the broadcast on my busted old battery radio- well, after getting it confirmed by Mother.

“The prince? They’re going to crown him... so soon? Isn’t he my age?” I question, voice scratchy and cracked like most of the citizens of Hades. I love my city dearly, but it is more of a wasteland than a home. Mother wrinkles her nose and doesn’t bother replying. I repeat my question, for I must know. If he has been crowned so early, it seems only fair I should know. He is my greatest advisory, my parallel in royal blood.

I catch my thoughts wandering like that. I dared compare myself to the scum that sits upon the throne of A.P.P- that has turned Hades into a hellscape. He has done nothing but release suffering upon us, and I, as the only heir of the Valence’s, commander’s of SYREN, I will cause their downfall. We couldn’t be more different, me and Prince Fleece.

“Stop with all your demented questions, Corporal Cerberus. Don’t waste my time.” she mutters, not so much as looking up. I nod in response, although I cannot help but wonder who would allow a fifteen year old to run the world. Or... our world, I suppose. This island is all I have ever known, and one of the few surviving hotspots of humanity.

It reminds me of a poem, the author lost to time, for they wrote this when the walls were still only being built.

*“When the sky turned to gray, as it had been threatening to do for so long, when the oceans became multicolored with endless waste, the world began to slow. Humanity dug its hole so deep that no plastic woven net could catch them. **That is when the world ended.**”*

Although I suppose since we’re still here, the world has only ceased to be one of life. Or... perhaps it was only a foretelling of what’s to come.

“You have a new job.” my mother breaks my thoughts, which are often inky, black, twisted and inhumane, but today carry a drift of... hope? I pause once more at that. My heart would have skipped a beat, if I considered myself to have one. If I ever did, I imagine it turned to what our oceans did, plastic.

For if I, Cerberus Valence, will save the world, I must be heartless. I watch my mother, not daring to interrupt her thoughts. “You will infiltrate the prince's home and end the battle on this front. Begin preparations. I will have details delivered at my earliest convenience.” She tells me, waving her hands in dismissal.

I am lucky to be her son, lucky to have a mother who does not baby me, or sugarcoat her words. I am her little soldier, her secret weapon. In return, I do not complain, and I do not cry. I am a weapon, and weapons do not weep.

“Corporal.” she calls, and I pause in my tracks, trying not to look like a deer in headlights for rather than that I am a hound who's just pinned down a bloody little bird. “Ma’am?” I question. Her look lingers on me for a long second, and I almost think she’s going to measure me, that this won’t kill me, that I could achieve this feat. Even though as a monster, a creature bred from praise, I do not need it. “Don’t screw this up.” She says darkly, and I look her dead in the eyes, nod.

“Yes mother.” I tell her, saluting. I am not required to salute, but I am respectful, I would not want to slip. My manners are all that separate me from the dead; as my commander once told me. I stride out of the building with no real plan. Today I shall consider all that lies ahead, plan like a hunter in the final stretch of his season.

I pull my gas mask off the bit of elastic cord around my waistband, opening the buckle at the back. I am proud of the makeshift belt, off it hangs a multitool- I do not have pockets in these ill fitting pants- and my mask. I created the belt from remnants of some noble rubbish. The rich throw it out of their capitals walls, perfectly good things. But we no longer need things, there is too much rubbish on our not-so-little island.

The mask fits me nicely now that my once childlike face has smoothed into the sullen and gaunt shape that is common around these parts. However, I do not forget when I was tiny (I grew very little until I was thirteen, two years back) that I had to duct tape it harshly to my cheeks, only taking it off when I slept every few days to avoid wasting valuable tape.

I take a deep breath, filter in the mask amplifying the rasp that lies deep in my throat, and step out into the city of the dead. It is a tragic yet familiar scene, these streets. You see no pathways any longer, only piles and piles of waste. Some human, compostable- which gives these streets a horrendous smell- but most of it is another kind of waste.

This place is cursed by plastic. Plastic does not seem terrible to the untrained eye, but I know far better. It is despicable in every way, and I curse the creators of it- but more so the generations who continued to use it for- if you can even imagine- convenience. How twisted must you be, to know something could end the world, that it will take thousands of years to fade from its existence, and still purchase without a second thought?

My beaten sneakers kick garbage away as I go down the “road”. I have had them almost all my life, they are covered by duct tape, everywhere but the laces, which are only strips of plastic bags. The soles are soaked through with years of crusted sweat and dirt. The outer cloth, which I imagine was once red and bright, is practically coal black.

But I am one of the lucky ones, for I have shoes of cloth and tape. I have never had to go as far as covering myself with rotted and gnarled milk jugs, like many I see around me. Most rebels have basic needs met. Well, given that the basic needs are; not starving to death, puking up organs, and water.

Water is a rare commodity, not something you have more than twice a day. My throat scratches now more from the lack of something to soothe it, than the pollution of the air that caused so much pain.

As I walk, I see people scavenging, bodies of those who couldn't find enough. And I hear the cries of those who are looking, and those who have lost. I do not pause when I hear crying. I do not turn my head. I have seen far too many tragic souls that way.

If I still was young, I may have been roped in, but now I know not to feel, for once your eyes connect, it is in our unwritten laws to help in any way you can. I have made the mistake of trying to help this way before. I will not make it again. There is only one way to save Hades, to save humanity from itself.

The revolution.

There are corpses lying among the rubble and dirt here, and you must avoid stepping on them, for no matter how desperate, you shant deface the bodies of the fallen.. I wonder, sometimes, what the streets of the capital look like? I have never been inside those city walls, although when I was small I begged my mother for her stories of the missions in the outskirts of the capital. She always had the same response. Without looking at me, an important lesson was given. "Do not let your mind wander to that city. No good lies there, and you have enough to focus on." I never quite understood why I, a soldier, a weapon, should not know of what goes on in enemy territory.

But now I will! Leading an initiative like this- it's what I've worked for all my life. My first chance to show my prowess, to prove myself.
'Do not dread any longer, people of Hades, for I, Cerberus, your savior has come!'
Suppose I'm getting ahead of myself- and it wouldn't be the first time. Right now, I must figure out the key to success, de-throning Prince Fleece.

What kind of last name is that, anyways?

Nevermind.

So, how to catch a rich, pathetic child?

I know in the "capital" which, let's be honest, is basically a separate country, they mourn their dead for an exorbitant amount of time. Like, whole weeks- it's insane. But I suppose as they

lounge in their palaces, they have all the time left in the world. And they hoard it. I know so many lost children, orphans, who would kill for only a few days.

As they mourn, they throw depressing parties called funerals. I like that word quite a bit, but I've never been to one. Being missed is a luxury. I'll find a way to get there, to the king's funeral. Then, like the grim reaper himself, I shall swoop down and drag the greedy prince to see the hell he's ignored, living up in the clouds. "The Blessed" shall fall to my scarred hands.

A sharp noise, a shatter startles me from my thoughts, and I perk up, head raising, eye wide, wild as any lunatic. (Hercules tells me that there are always some lunatic's about, that it would be a dull world without them) He is my writing mentor, and he is the only one who considers me to be human. It is a strange thing that he can be so smart, yet so blind.

I think he must not see much talent to have picked me, of all people. I've never been incredible at my studies. I couldn't focus during rallies, history briefs. I wasn't good at math besides quick facts, things I could really apply. But I've always been a good writer, a good artist. That gets onto my nerves, as it is unnecessary of a talent for a weapon. Hercules simply looks disapproving when I say this, however, makes me promise to send him a new poem next week.

I have one in my pocket right now, one I didn't send, for I do not want to give him the wrong idea of how I view my world, that he could drag me away from my purpose.

SPoon-FEED POWDERED PLASTIC BAGS
INTO MY MOUTH IGNORE MY
FACTORY RUNOFF TEARS, FORGIVE ME FOR CRYING,
THERE IS NO SALT IN A LIQUID GRENADE

POOL WHISKY AND HONEY-CRIMSON BLOOD
AT MY SILVER TAPED BOOTS
APOLOGIZE FOR TAINTING
YOUR HOLY GROUND?
EXPECTED YOUR DEMANDS BUT
IT

WAS ENTIRELY UNFAIR TO
FORCE ME AND THE ONE LOVE
(MY FALSE FATHER)
APART FOREVER.

PERHAPS YOU DERIVE PLEASURE FROM
MAKING ME AS IF A
GLASS BLOWN DOLL

ONLY YOURS MAY I BE,
OH HOLY MOTHER
FOR IF I LEAVE I SHALL SHATTER

If you see what I mean when I say that it shows the wrong facet of the crystal, you understand me more than I would typically approve of. A gust of wind makes me shiver, only so slightly. Weather is unpredictable, here in Hades, only yesterday the sun was beating us dry, and today I see people clinging to each other for warmth.

I must get strange looks for wearing only shorts and a ragged synthetic tank today, but I was taught that it wasn't strange as it was important. The cold is good for you, I have been taught. It makes you stronger. Perhaps it is an old hero's tale, but I will follow it until proven otherwise.

I come to a stop in front of the training center, where I am certain I'll find a good match. (Again, see? Told you today I've been strangely optimistic.) And so I waltz, basking in the whispers and smirks, smiling softly at the young trainees who giggle and gasp. I am popular- if only for my devotion.

An empty training square, scattered with bags and other now unidentifiable objects catches my attention, becoming the prep station for today as I quickly wrap my fists with synthetic cloth. Something about fighting, hunting, the chase, the struggle before making a- ...well, you get the idea, something about it invigorates me, it's as if a drug, but one I can afford to indulge in, for it is a necessary skill. Only a few minutes pass until I've got a challenger, a boy with dirty brown hair and eyes of salt. Strong, from the look of him, but overconfident. Cocky.

I shake his hand first, he raises an eyebrow at the courtesy. I am a monster, not a punk. "Corporal Valence. And you?" I call him out, it's his turn to introduce first, yet he hesitates, before going; "-Thesian." I nod, "alright then. Standard match, anything goes. A cry is surrender." I receive a reluctant nod (second thoughts are being had, I'm sure) before we begin. They like to tell me I fight too hard, too desperate, too angrily.

But that is my only sin, that I do not repent for in my horror-filled dreams. I am always angry, always raging. A dog that cries after it kills is no better. Guilt will not purify me. Thesian is already gasping for breath, given up on trying to land a blow, all defense, big mistake. He's on the ground, panting hard, after a sharp kick to the leg, a knife concealed in his hand drops just like him.

I place my sneaker on his ribcage upon seeing it, I hate cheaters, I hold him down with one foot. Then step off, as he doesn't even try to get up. "-I-I'm done, Corporal, I surrender." He stammers. Perhaps he was looking for a quick ego boost, training here where all the little ones do? Never again. I hate cheaters.

And suddenly, I feel as if I'm talking to the prince. "You don't *get* to surrender. You lose when I say so, win when I decide. Pick up your weapon, and get the hell up."

Chapter 3

Jason

“Join me tonight, witness the revolution of our world! Live in the moment, embrace, for the miracle material is a reality.” - Pelias Fleece The Second

I haven't left my room since I went to the board four days ago. Or was it five days ago? Six? I've lost track.

But whatever length of time it's been, I've been in my room. And It's not because I'm *paranoid* that I'll get killed the moment I leave. I know they could easily break in or poison the air. And anyways, they said they want it to be done during the funeral so it's very public.

No, the reason I haven't left is because I don't see the point. I know I'm going to die, having wasted my life and only worsened the world. Why leave my room, when it can only cause trouble and misery for my people and the people I care about.

So, I haven't left my room. Admittedly, I barely leave my bed. Only when I need to go to the restroom, shower, or pick up my food from the chute connected to my room from the kitchen. (which my father had installed for when he'd lock me in my room when he got angry at me, or at something else and took that anger out on me.) The rest of the time I've been in my bed, either sleeping or thinking about what will happen when I'm gone.

Khiron tried every day to get me out of my room. He would ask to talk about what happened that day, and how talking would help. He would tell me that we didn't even have to talk about what happened, but just talk in general!

Oh, how I wanted to take him up on that offer. I wanted to talk to him and have him tell me stories about heroes and monsters like when he would when I was a kid. I just wanted to forget about everything.

But I couldn't, because I know if I saw him, his warm smile, his kind, understanding eyes; if I saw the man who raised me, I- I wouldn't be able to conceal the events of that day.

And you may ask what is wrong with that? Well, If I tell him, and the board found out he knew that they set up my assassination, then he'd be next on the chopping block. And I'm not willing to take that chance.

My life isn't worth nearly as much as a pure hearted man like him. My family, and I have made things worse, while he has and will do more good for Elysium than I could ever do.

So I shrugged him off, told him I was just tired and that I just wanted to be alone. I told him I was fine. I guess he saw through my act, because he kept insisting that I wasn't fine, and he was worried. Hearing the worry and sadness in his voice killed me inside.

I almost cracked, but then he stopped coming. I guess he gave up on trying after so long or gave in to my requests and left me alone. It does kinda sting though. I know it sounds wrong, but I liked having someone care and worry about me. It made me feel more loved than I deserve.

But it's for the best. My resilience was about to crumble. So I'm just going to wait for the funeral. For now I'll For now I'll just build gears out of the parts of electronics.

I tinker with a broken light, entangling the wires, weaving them. It is my art. I screw the final bolt into place, and there. It's a little box, with a robotic cricket on top. I wind up the clockwork screw, and then let go.

The cricket moves up and down like its hopping, and tiny, metallic chirping sounds play from the box. This is what Khiron told me what the woods sounded like, years ago, when they still existed.

I sink into my bed, and close my eyes, listening to the crickets.

I let the sound... take me away... and... sweet embrace of calm... wash over me. Now... I... can... just... forget. Zzzz-

BANG BANG BANG

My eyes burst open, who is banging on the door-

"HEY, YOU LAZY MISER! IT'S TIME TO GET UP!" Someone shouted from outside the door.

Wait, not just someone, I knew that voice!

"Go away Cala! I'm fine, just tired!" I shout, not moving my head off the pillows.

"I didn't use up my days off and traveled from the Duke Eury's mansion to be told to "go away", Now come on out you depresso espresso!"

Turns out I will have to leave my room.

Why will I leave for her, but not Khiron? Well, I grew up with Cala, and she is the most stubborn person ever, and has been that way since I've known her.

I think it has something to do with us being more like brother and sister than boss and worker.

You see, Cala grew up in the wasteland like the rest of the maids, but only lived there till she was four. Then her aunt, who was my nanny at the time, took her away from the wasteland. I think it has something to do with her bum leg and her mother being part of the rebels, I don't know.

But her aunt didn't have a place to put her while she watched me, so she just took her with me. She was my first real friend, not like the sons of my father's business associates. She and I grew up together, always squabbling and messing around. And many times she protected me from father's be- a, wrath.

But when she turned nine, and I was eight and a half, her aunt collapsed and died, which we later found out was from microplastics in her bloodstream, poisoning her.

Cala said she was going to kill my father with her own hands, then would storm into the boardroom and slit their throats! (it was really quite graphic!) But then she started to get angry at me, telling me I better not end up like my father. I promised her I wouldn't.

That's when I truly realized what the company is doing is wrong, and that something needed to change.

But back to the story. She needed to go somewhere to live, so she decided to become a maid for me. But she rebelled a lot and didn't act like the other maids, always arguing and not taking things seriously, with everyone, even my father.

But her mistake was when she yelled at my father. He was sla... punishing me after something bad happened when he visited the board, and Cala walked in on him.

She freaked out and started shouting at him to back off, and saying that he was a monster, getting in between me and him.

My father got infuriated, and almost slapped her, but left when the other workers started to react to the commotion.

But my father didn't do nothing. The next week, she was shipped off to be a maid for Duke Eury, one of the APP's branch managers.

That was 3 years ago, and we had only seen each other twice in that time. So, I wasn't going to let this moment pass me by. And I think I could hold myself together.

“OKAY! I'M COMING OUT” I shout, dragging myself out of my bed.

I grab some clothes off my dresser, a collared shirt and blue jeans, and tug them on. I go and open the door, but no one is out there. I look outside, but she's nowhere to be seen.

“What's up?”

I jump, and whip my head around to see a teenage girl sitting on my window sill.

She wore a blue hoodie and bright red pants. I couldn't see her face through her messy silver hair, which the wind blew in her face, but when she pushed her hair back, I saw those mischievous, brown eyes I could never forget.

“Cala?”

“Who else?” She says as she leaps into my room.

“Wha-, bu, whe... HUH?” I stutter out. I'm absolutely flabbergasted. I must have been making a pretty funny face because she burst out laughing

“What is it?” I asked.

“AH HA HAH AH HA, *your, your hair.* BWAH HA HA” she's practically shaking with laughter.

I looked in the mirror and blushed, my hair was stuck straight up, revealing the red roots. I brush my hair down with my hands, and look at her, waiting for her to regain her composure,

“You done?” I grumble, but a small smile graces my lips after weeks of them pointing down.

She takes a deep breath, “I think so. Sorry, your hair was too funny. ”

I roll my eyes, “Ok, well, care to tell me how you got up here?”

“Oh, well you were taking too long, and I learned how to rock climb in Duke Eury’s mansion.” She says it's common knowledge.

“Bu– nevermind. So, why are you here?” I grumble

“Well, I heard you caged yourself in your room, and I can’t let someone that's like a little brother to me be miserable unless I caused it.” I look at her suspiciously. “Ok, aaand I maaay have needed an excuse to get away from Eury’s needy butt. But whatever, we’re going out.”

I stare at her for a moment, I’m about to say no, but she gives me a look, and I realize I don't have a choice.

“Okay, let’s go.”

As I go to follow her, she stops me, “You are NOT going out looking,” she sniffs, “-and SMELLING like that! Go get ready and come out when you're done.”

I roll my eyes, walking to the bathroom grumbling swears, but I do actually appreciate the way she mothers me, seeing how I never had my own mother.

When I finally get ready, dressed in a blue and green button down and khakis, I follow her out of the mansion. We go to the elevator, and I notice that Khiron is nowhere in sight.

Maybe he is at the banking level, where he will sometimes help with accounting.

We reached the bottom floor, where you make appointments, and people bowed as I walked out. I glanced at some of them, and I could see their staring. Some people's eyes were full of awe, others disgust.

It’s a rare sight to see me going out unless there is a government ceremony. Usually when I go out, I disguise myself by getting rid of my hair dye and wearing common clothes, but Cala told me not to do that today.

“You shouldn’t care if people stare,” she told me, “you're the king now! You make the rules!”

I wanted to tell her that wasn’t true, and me trying to make the rules is what caused my death sentence, but I managed to hold it back. I won’t risk her either.

But as we began to leave, I see a news van outside,

“Oh hell no!” I exclaim, “oh no no no no, Cala, let's use the back exit.” I start to lead her to the back door.

“What, why what’s wrong?” Cala struggles against my grip, “Let go, the door is right the– Oh, OH NO”

Cala sees why I’m trying to get away, but it's too late. *She* has spotted us. Hurmise Pravida. The most nosey, gossip hungry reporter ever.

She begins to run over to us, leading her camera crew behind her. I can see the lust for content in her eyes, her greed for any news she can get her hands on, true or false.

“Hello your highness, care to answer a few questions?” she asks, signaling to her crew to start filming, “Of course you do! Terry, start rolling!”

I try to think of an excuse but it's too late. I let go of Cala, who whispers a slight apology to me, but I just sigh back.

“We’re on in three...two...one...and we’re live!”

She begins her routine, “Hello, this is Hurmise Pravida, on Channel 13 news. I’m her with Prince, soon to be king, Jason Pluto Fleece,” She looks over at Cala, “And who are you?”

Cala, a bit flustered, says, “I- I’m Caladrius Dove, Jason’s mai-”

“And The prince’s spouse, Cal-”

“Wait wait wait wait! I never said that! I-I’m just-st- I’m a-a maid for Jason.” Cala stammers, clearly shaken up.

Hurmise chuckled, “Sure...sorry, you two just seemed pretty close, seeing how he was grabbing you, and how you call him Jason.”

Crap, she’s leading Cala into a trap. I go to warn her, but it’s too late, Cala already started to respond,

“I, Bu- call hi- Mr. Fleece- grew up.” She was totally flustered.

“It’s okay *darling*, I see how it is! Just the beginning of the relationship.” Hurmise winked. Cala started to respond, but Hurmise unfortunately directed her attention at me.

“Sir Fleece, What do you think about the increase in rebels attacking innocent people from the blessed isles? Seeing how your mother left to join the rebels, and nothing has changed, are you supporting these attacks?”

I take a deep breath. She's leading me into a trap, trying to get me riled up, but I know not to give in.

“I don’t want any of my people to die or be hurt. That includes all of my subjects, even Wastelanders. And knowing that I-”

She interrupts me, “So you’re saying that the wastelanders are going to be protected? That would put even more people at risk! Are you doing this so you don’t have to pay a lot of money? Are you letting your people be killed to satisfy your own greed!?”

I grit my teeth. I guess she is desperate for content today, but I won't give it to her. I go to respond, “ I didn’t sa-”

But Cala interrupts me, now recovered from the earlier shock.

“You annoying, manipulative bastard! You twist words to your own desires! Jason is trying to better the world, and what are YOU doing with your life? I can tell you, putting more hate, and confusion, and fear into people’s minds, dividing them. Come on Jason.”

Cala drags me away as Hurmise, and some other people watching stare at her.

“Sorry I freaked out back there. I know you can’t fall into the trap.”

I looked at Cala and laughed, “No, that was amazing! You said everything I wanted to say. I was going to apologize for not speaking up about what she said about you! I just wasn’t thinking about it at the time because I’ve grown used to people talking about my love life.”

Cala hits me in the stomach, “shut up, idiot. You can’t act all mister proper around me!”
“Now *there* is the Cala I know” I tease as I clutch my gut.

We bicker back and forth a bit more, but then Cala stops me and announces, “Here we are, my liege!” while giving a mock bow.

I look at the house she points at. It’s a red brick house with a plastic roof and door. It takes me a second, but then I recognize where we are!

“We’re at Medea’s place?”

Cala rolls her eyes, “Yeah, you think I was here only to visit you? I mean, I love you and all, but that’s a FAR trip for one person. And besides, we’re a TRIO!”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that,” I say, “I just can’t believe I didn’t recognize where we are! We’ve been here millions of times!”

Medea is our other best friend. She’s from the Blessed Isles, and has lived here her whole life. Cala and I met her around eight years ago when Cala and I snuck out to “go on an adventure”, as we called it. We were running from a group of butlers who were trying to track us, (mostly me), down.

Medea saw us and took us to her house to hide for the night. We bonded over stories and joked around for hours, quickly becoming friends. Cala and I both agreed that it was refreshing to talk to a kid who wasn’t a stuck up brat, and she liked to hear our stories of the royal building, and what it was like to be or just be around the royal family!

Eventually, Cala’s aunt found us by following a tracker in my laces (that’s why I don’t wear laced shoes any more), and took us back to the royal building. But we kept in touch, visiting her every time we went out, and eventually sneaking her into the tower, becoming inseparable. And even after Cala left, Medea and I still hung out, just a bit less often.

But now we can finally reunite! I start to walk to the door, Cala in pursuit, and knock, the plastic making a hollow cracking sound.

“Coming, one sec.” We hear someone shout, followed by some frantic banging.

Then, I can slightly make out through the plastic door Medea wearing a teal dress, and her short green hair looking wet, like she just got out of the shower.

I look over at Cala, who has a giddy look on her face, and is rocking back and forth.

“Excited?” I ask.

“I’ve been excited for three years!” She giggles.

I chuckle and look back as the door opens,

“Hey, Mede—” I catch a glimpse of her normally golden brown eyes red with fury, then feel her slap me straight on the cheek.

“What was that for!?” I exclaim.

It’s not even that it hurt a lot, I was just surprised, Medea was extremely non-confrontational, leaving that to Cala. That’s how our friendship worked, Medea has a problem, Cala solves the problem, and I’m left apologizing for the mess left behind. So for her to slap anyone, she must be truly furious.

But when I look at her, her face is full of remorse, “Oh my gosh, I’m sorry, Jason.” helps me up, “I didn’t mean to lose my cool, I just-” her expression turned angry, “Why haven’t you visited Khiron?!”

She pokes me in the chest after every wo- wait, What about Khiron?

“Khiron? What happened to Khiron?!” I ask frantically, grabbing Medea by the shoulders.

Her face softens, and her eyes turn even more remorseful, “Wait, you didn’t know? I found out today so I’d thought you’d know.”

“Know what!?” Me and Cala ask at the same time.

Medea turns to look at Cala, “Cala, yo- you’re BACK!”

“Medea, what happened?” I remind her.

“Yes, Khiron collapsed two days ago and was found by a maid, he was taken to the infirmary and has been there for a while.”

He collapsed? That’s why he stopped visiting me! Oh god, I’m so selfish!

“Guys, I- I gotta go, see you later.”

Cala and Medea nod in agreement, “Yeah, Medea and I are going to catch up, you gotta go NOW.” Cala tells me, pushing me to go.

“Ok, bye. Thanks for telling me, Medea!”

I leave and run back to the tower as fast as I can. I run inside and go into the elevator, pushing the fourth floor button.

Oh goodness, what happened to Khiron, I hope he’s ok. I’m such a self absorbed jerkwad.

The elevator dings and I run out, checking each room, but Khiron is nowhere to be seen. I double check, and he’s gone. I ask about him and they say he’s gone.

I probably should have asked them more questions, because I don’t know what they meant by gone. Gone like checked out, or gone like, well, let’s think positive.

I get back into the elevator and go to the house floor, and walk to my room. But then, as I open the door, I see Khiron, sitting in a wheelchair, in the middle of my room.

“Khiron! Are you alright?!” I ask as I run over to him.

“I should be asking if you’re alright Jason!” He exclaims, genuine worry on his face, “You have been locked in here for seven days! A WHOLE WEEK!”

I start to say I’m fine, but it gets caught in my throat. I look into his eyes, and there is no malice, just concern. I crumple to the ground, my legs giving out. I try, unsuccessfully, to hold back my tears.

I mumble, “I can’t tell you, you’ll die, you’ll die!” and I start hyperventilating
But then Khiron rolls over to me, and pulls me up, “It’s ok if you telling me kills me, I’m not going to make it much longer anyways. I have contracted the same illness as Cala’s Aunt.”

My eyes widen, “Khiron are you al—”

He puts his hand up, “I told you my troubles, you tell me yours.”

I can’t hold back the truth any longer, and I tell him everything, the meeting, the Board’s plotting, me going to die at the funeral, and how they’ll blame it on the rebels,

“And that’s the part I hate the most about this,” I tell him, “I’m okay losing my life, but they are going to use it to start a war! All to put more paper in their pockets, and more plastic in Elysium. Thats why, “ I reach into my dresser and pull out a small handgun, “I was going to do it before they ca—”

“NO!” Khiron shouts, snatching the gun out of my grasp, “You MUSTN’T! You are the next era, and Elysium needs you to change things! You know what, I’m gonna—” He ponders for a moment, going through options in his mind. Then you can see him think of something, “I’m going to get you a bodyguard to watch out for you! I’ll get the best in all of Elysium!”

He starts to wheel out, but I stop him, “wai- wait but if you get me a bodyguard, then they’ll know for SURE that you know about the assassination! It’s practically a death sentence!”

He gives me a warm smile, pats me on the shoulder, “I’ve already told you Jason, I’m sick. I’ll live for, at most, another two years, and that's if I’m lucky. Which I’m not. So if saving the kid who’ll go to do great things for Elysium will cost pushing up the due date to my eventual demise, I’ll take that trade any day.” He starts to wheel off again, “Now I have some calls to make, but please try to sleep because I’m going to make sure you get up out of bed and leave your room in the morning.”

And with that, he closes the door. I collapse to the ground. They say that talking will make it feel better, and they lie. I just talked about it, and it ended in me trading the life of a man with a heart of gold, for my worthless life, scummier than plastic waste.

Chapter 4

Cerberus

"There is something soft in me - / we killed it and it's rotting." - Cassandra de Alba, from "A Barbie Dream House But All The Dolls Are Kitchen Knives"

TO BE HUMAN, OR TO GIVE INTO THE KILLER THAT BREATHES UNDER MY
CRACKING, SERUM INFUSED SKIN?

OFTENTIMES I AM CAUGHT IN THE BINARY OF MORALITY. WE CAN NEVER KNOW
FOR THE TRUTH, NEVER UNDERSTAND TRULY A LIE, EVEN ONE FROM OUR OWN
TONGUES, MINE IS SPLIT LIKE A SERPENT'S FOR ALL I'VE DONE, A BURDEN TO
CARRY WITH THE NAME I WAS GIVEN. A CAST IRON BOY WITH A MOLTEN INNER,
ORGANS WET AND ASHY INSIDE, CRUMBLING LIKE POMPEII, FOR IT DOESN'T
MATTER WHAT YOU LOVE, IF IT ISN'T HALD TIGHT, ALL WILL BURST.

AND ALL THE FACILITIES IN OUR REALITY, OUR PERCEPTIONS AND THE ONES THAT
WE'VE TAILORED LIKE A FINE DRESSER WILL COME UNDONE. AND THEN AS
LUCIFERS CANNOT CATCH HIMSELF, AS ATLANTIS SINKS INTO THE SEA, WE WILL
SEE OURSELVES. HUMANS, MONSTERS? IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE BOTH? I ASK,
KNOWING FULL WELL THAT THEY ARE NOTHING BUT SYNONYMS. NO, MORALITY IS
NOTHING TO STRESS OVER.

NO ONE IS GOOD. JUST AS NOT A SINGLE DYING SOUL IS EVIL.

WE ARE ALL MURDERERS.

ALL MONSTERS.

ALL LOVERS,

ALL HEALERS.

-THAT IS THE TRAGEDY OF BEING HUMAN.

“Get up, Valance.” a voice snarls. I open my eyes tiredly, to see an older rebel standing over me. I slept for only an hour or so, and a yawn spills from my cracked lips. “Morning, sir,” I murmur, pulling myself up. Marker stains cover the floor around me...

Glancing at the ink on my hands, I realize I must have conked out because of carbon inhalation. There's been a lot more in the air these last few weeks, simply because it's getting warmer. Sometimes, fires just start due to the sheer amount of chemicals and dried-out papers.

“You need to be more prepared than this,” he says, kicking me lightly in the leg. More of a nudge than anything else, but given how sore I am, it still hurts. I sit up and pull my legs to my chest, making eye contact. “Sorry, I just got carried away drawing these plans out-”

“And if we'd been on a mission? You'd be easy meat, and nobody would wake you up.” he snaps back. Rule one of living in the wastelands, watch your own back first and foremost. I nod and study the black bag in his hands. It's a nice quality- and I mean, it looks practically unused. I've not seen anything like it before in Hades. “From the capital?” I wonder aloud.

He smirks and tosses it in my lap. I catch it and open the drawstrings, pulling out two days' worth of rations, and a small bottle of some unknown substance. There's *money* in here, and I pull it out with fascination. "Is this for... the mission?" I already know the answer.

"Call it a 15th birthday present." I frown and look at him. I didn't know my birthday was today. Why would I, it's irrelevant. And what was a birthday present? Must be some capital tradition. "Is it-"

"No, it's not your birthday. Now get down to the mess hall, and go to the backroom. you've got to meet with some people." Then he's gone, turning back into the hall. I stretch my bandaged arms behind my head and yawn, before climbing down the side of the stone wall.

My feet are quick and know exactly the rhythm of where they need to go to get me to the hall in the fastest duration possible. It gives me this stupid flutter of pride, being so good at this. I watch my step, but this time I let myself run slightly. Getting to the collapsed building that has been somewhat cleared of garbage, I compose myself and wear my mask.

Strolling into the hall gets mixed reactions. Mostly just glances, but the other rebels either smirk or glare at me. They've known me almost my whole life, growing up here. I wave to the ones who wave at me, but I don't stop, I'm on a mission after all.

I slip into the backroom of the building, crumbled walls scratching at the back of my arms. I love the way the darkness falls around me, warm air soft and gray. It's solace that I rarely find. I think of all the wonderful words I could scrawl down about the joy it brings. It's a blessing and a curse, my writing. Art has no place in Hades, but... I think it keeps me sane, like a leash on a rabid dog.

But the darkness fades as I begin to near the meeting room

"...And here the guard dog of Hades comes, heart of stone, eyes of coal."

The voice is teasing, amused. I turn to see one of my favorite people, the man who gave me my curse, my first pen and pad. A friend of my mother, with consorts in the capital. Perhaps he's one of the few exceptions to the snobs of capital. Although- from his name, you couldn't tell that. "Hello, Mr. Hercules," I say, eying the Mati patch sewn onto his shoulder.

The Mati is the group that sends people from Hades to work in the capital. I've never known what to think about them... I know according to my mother, excluding our spies, they're just selfish traitors. But... is it traitorous to want a better life for your kids and yourself-?

Of course, I have no idea what I was thinking. It's probably my fondness of Hercules, who founded the Mati, that's making me doubt. "Hey there, punk. How's the writing going?" he asks, sounding interested, but I know he has to be teasing, for poetry has no place in Hades. . "..."I've been trying to quit, but,"

"Art is a drug, punk. But it's not the drug that kills. It's what will cure us. And you've got a real spark, under all this mess," Hercules pauses and sighs, "But onto business. We're sending you to one of the highest positions we have in the capital, just as your mother requested."

My eyes widen slightly as he says this; "... just how high?" I wonder aloud.

He gives me a mischievous grin- "You're going straight to the palace Cerberus, or should I say; Alecto, the security detail of the one and only *Prince Fleece*." Oh, hell no.

"Ahah- no. No way, sir. I... can't do that, he's-" My words come out disconnected and messy. I don't know why I'm refusing the biggest offer of a lifetime, but I feel like my body won't let me accept. Thankfully, or maybe not, Hercules doesn't give me a choice.

"I'm sorry, punk. Your mom sold you for the next few months. No idea what she's playing at, sending her son in as a lowly spy, but," Hercules makes eye contact with me now, his expression now serious. "-Don't let her take your life. Do your job, but don't sacrifice your skin for that stuck-up arse. you'll do great as long as you don't do anything stupid."

My mouth goes dryer than the once-lakes, now filled with tires and decomposing bottles. He doesn't know about the plan?

I pull myself together, and nod; "So... what all do I do?" He smiles, but I feel bad pretending nothing is going on but honest work. "But yeah, it's basically a bodyguard position, but a little more pretentious," he admits, "So you're gonna have to get all dressed up for the gig." I wrinkle my nose at that. My clothes may be old, recycled, whatever...But they're mine.

They're more than that; they're a part of me. Just like my sneakers and bruised knuckles, my raspy voice, they make me uniquely an underworld child. Dressing like one of the monsters I was born to slay makes my stomach feel weird, and not "I had too much weird sludge for breakfast" kind of weird, but a different, more primal feeling.

“...Okay, but bodyguard clothes, right? No scratchy capes and suits like the people in the comics you’d get me?” I ask, eyes narrowed. Hercules looks at me with a raised eyebrow, “Well, for big events, maybe a tuxedo. Otherwise, just tactical gear.” I don’t know what a tuxedo is but it sounds horrible.

We talk for a little longer, about protocols, measures in place. “There’s a man you’ll be working closely with. He’s the prince’s butler, and his name is Khiron. Show him respect, he will show you the same.” Hercules tells me. The name rings an alarm bell in my brain. I frown and furrow my brows, who is that? But the conversation does not pause, as he hands me a few objects.

A license and I.D, some papers. Legal documents, he explains. I’ve never seen such professional ones, things definitely aren’t kept this way in Hades. In Hades, we are fairly lawless. We have unwritten rules, pacts and grudges. We repay favors, and we pay with them as well, since currency is practically extinct. There is no need for it here. We’re fairly certain nobody will survive long enough to use it a second time.

“You leave in an hour, so get to packing. Or... do you need to pack? I...” he seems unsure, and I am reminded of just how different our lives are.

“I don’t have much to pack,” I tell him, as I begin to leave, “Nothing but rations and-” he touches my wrist now, and I flinch.

He looks at me, slightly frowning, “Erm, sorry.” he says.

I study his face for malice, one of my fists has curled- but he doesn’t make another move. “I just don’t like to be touched. ‘Gets you killed down here.” I tell him.

He gives me a solemn nod, “I understand, just wanted to let you know that you’re not going to need rations or anything. There’s more than enough where you’ll be staying.” Then he checks his watch, “The car will be at the gate, but won’t be there long. So I’d say your goodbyes and get over there. But once you get into the capital, you’ll do great.” Hercules smiles, and I nod slowly, “Thank you, sir.” I tell him as I close the door.

Now comes the hard part, farewells. At least, I’ve heard they’re difficult. I’ve never had anyone to say goodbye to, save my mother. So I take it back, this will be trivial.

I begin to run to the headquarters. It’s not far but it’s getting dark, so I must be swift.

I keep down the path, my body having memorized the way. Cans, bottles, bags and other waste crunch and crease under my feet.

Then there’s squelch under my foot, rustling in front of me. I look down, I see roaches; an infestation apparently, in the patch of ground I’ve just decimated. I step back, and find another way around. It is my fault for disturbing them.

I look around, taking the pollution of my home in before I go. I've heard a phrase from cracked old lips; "The grass is greener on the other side" but that seems unfair. Why do they get the green, and us only have the withered grass? That's why I shall leave, to bring the greenest grass here, for all of Hades to enjoy.

My endless spiraling thoughts swarm around me until I've reached the collapsed town center, or what now is the Syren headquarter. I know that I think too much, according to my mother. Hercules says that if I were in the capital, It would be a praised ability. I am tired, I do not want to think anymore, just do. Be a soldier, be a weapon. *Leave these thoughts of childish attachment behind.*

I can hear my mom's voice, as she talks among her circle. Perhaps I'll let my attachment slide after this one last time. I wander down the crooked steps, angling my weight onto the crumpled walls and listening to the rats scurry. She's here all right, cloak on her back, posture straight, face cold.

I wave, and someone says "Oh, it's Cerbie!" and I think how lovely my name sounds in short. I wait for more, but it's quiet for a second, and then; "He shouldn't be here. I don't need to see him until he's done his job." she says, voice monotone, head not turning. I stiffen, but when I open my mouth to question, not so much as a whisper comes out.

In a whisper, my brain talks; *It's over now, Cerberus. She's refused you one too many times. Prove that you were worth all their time. Go on, give her a piece of your mind.* And I yearn to do just that, for I know what I would say, "*You may never see me again. Do I mean nothing?!*" But I just walk off, as I know the answer already.

The walk to the gates is uneventful.

I can't stop thinking about her voice, the way she didn't so much as look my way. The conversation, if you can even call it that, felt rushed, painful. Worse even.

When I feel pain, I usually cause some too, so it's a trade off. But this time it only hurt me. That doesn't feel fair. Neither is life, I suppose.

My thoughts continue to spiral on until I reach the gate. Then, as I see the car in sight, I force myself to focus on the mission.

The car is black, shiny. It's hardly a few feet from the gate, and yet while observing from a distance I can see airtight windows, driver in full face gas mask. Are they truly so afraid of what they have created? I took off my mask a while back, since this is nearing capital territory and the air is cool on your face, soft winds.

This is also open territory. If the capital's patrol officers think you're being "indecent" in this area, which could mean as little as kicking a rock, they'll either put you away or beat you bloody.

I've learned how to roll with the punches, but I'd rather give them my chipped-tooth smile and wait for them to recognize me. I've done some very bad things to some of their friends, and so I am left alone.

Sometimes I regret those "things". Other times, I am grateful for my rage.

Before today, I've only seen old cars rotted far beyond use, with tires lying around. They end up homes for diseased critters and half-dead birds. I don't think I need cars anyways, I jogged the last 40 minutes to get here. I'm still barely sweating, although my chalky lungs hurt in my chest.

I see the driver get out, and their face is still concealed by the mask. They pull open the back door, and I notice even their hands are covered by gloves, not an inch of skin showing. I don't immediately understand what to do, and then I walk over and offer to shake the driver's hand. They don't take it, and sit back in their seat after a moment of awkward silence.

I sigh and clamber in, legs crossed on top of each other, bag nestled in my lap, up to my chest. The seats are made from an unknown material, in a shade of black that feels smooth and soft to the touch. The air in here is cool, (at one of the high cliffs by the coast, before they started burning fuels there) even though it's summer? It tastes sweet, and I find myself sticking my tongue out curiously.

Obviously, I catch myself, and ignore the burning sensation in my cheeks as I compose myself. Sure, the car is cool, I've never been in one before now, okay! Doesn't matter, if it's made from the money of murderers. The driver starts that car, the sounds of it are muffled, but each and every one still causes me to startle. I don't like not knowing what's going on.

I press a button and the window slides down, and it's fascinating just how fast this thing goes- I always thought I'd be able to outrun a car, but now I'm not as sure.

As soon as we crossed into the capital, the difference was stark. The buildings are modern, glass, climbing and twisting into the sky. Streets are paved in white, people wearing cloth clothes without stains, smiling or more often glaring at everyone near them. Children walk with parents, tall men argue loudly to people on devices they hold in their hands.

Animals are kept on leashes, trees trimmed to perfection. It's a very... controlled environment. But people here, they look healthy, they look to be thriving. They're alive, at least physically. The car doesn't stop except when bright lights flash, and while I'm sure there's a method to the madness, I cannot fathom what it might be.

At one of these stops, a cleanly cut folder in black color is passed to me, along with a package of clothes. I tuck the clothes into my bag, and without thinking too much about it, flip open the folder. "Oh." I whisper, seeing the file I've been given, on my charge. The prince.

Page one is simply legal names, medical conditions. I'm supposed to keep an eye on increasing symptoms, according to Hercules. Apparently this sweet summer child comes with a side of depression and the stomach of a four year old. Either way, I've got to keep him from letting these "conditions" get out of hand. I will, but for my own reasons. I want to savor the kill myself. "Prince Jason Fleece, of the Blessed Isles" I read out to myself, nose wrinkling. It's so strange that that's what they call their home.

The second page details past injuries- and there are photos for these. I feel almost guilty for flipping through his life like a picture book. Not really, though. The attacker is labeled as (undisclosed) but images of a small boy with blonde hair and bruises down his torso mark the page. It's not a big deal. I've seen and *had* much worse. But even as I think that, the pictures stay buried in my mind. I look up to see where we are, and I can just make out the palace in the distance. It looks like a tower or a company headquarters- not quite a home.

I quickly flip through the last pages, habits and quirks, security codes that I instantly memorize, knowing they'll likely be very important for my real job, and some other useless details.

The car reaches a stop just as I finish "We're here." the driver bellows with a deep smooth voice, smoother than even Hercules.

I nod at him politely before getting up, which when I do, I promptly smack my head on the roof of the car. I cuss for a solid five minutes, but then try to compose myself; hardening my eyes, removing all expression from my face, straightening my coat, and perfecting my posture. I take one more deep breath, and step out of the car. But as I step out, I tense. For only a few feet away, waiting to greet me, stands my mission.

The one who has killed so many without knowing, the last living member of the family that ruined my home. The new and last king,

"Mr. Fleece. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." God, I sound like my mother.

Chapter 5

Jason

“I think the scariest thing in this world is you never know someone’s true intentions with you.”

-Anonymous

Today is the day.

I’ve been anticipating it for a week now, always a nagging thought in my mind, even while hanging out with Cala and Medea.

Today’s the day I’ll meet my bodyguard.

Khiron told me his name is Alecto, and that he’s my age. I was skeptical at first- if he would be up to the job, but Khiron told me not to underestimate him, and his connections would never let him down.

I just don’t want Khiron’s risk to be wasted. He’s done so much for me, and now he’s risking his life. And if it didn't work, he would’ve put himself in danger for nothing.

And that’s really why I’m going along with this. He would have gotten me a guard either way, even if I told him not to. But if I didn’t try to survive, then his sacrifice would be for nothing.

But it’s getting about that time for him to be arriving, so I should get ready. I have to put a good foot forward, especially because my family has poisoned his home.

I get up from the chair I was sitting in, and look at my watch, and it’s–

Holy Crap! It's 8:30! He’s going to be here in *thirty minutes!*

I run to my closet and look for a pair of clothes. I grab a white t-shirt and a brown overcoat, with some jeans.

I put on my shoes while running out of my room. I look at my watch again, 8:50. Okay, I have time. I jog to the elevator and make my way to the base floor.

“Good, you remembered.” Khiron greets me and I step out, “The car will be here anytime now, so be ready to greet Alecto.”

Khiron tries to turn towards the door, but has trouble maneuvering his wheelchair 180 degrees.

“Here, I got you Khiron.” I say, as I grab the handles to his chair.

“Thank you, Mr. Fleece, I am still learning how to use this thing.” He tells me, patting the armrest.

I almost corrected him by calling me Mr. Fleece, but I remembered we are in public now, so I just replied with a, “No problem.”

We go out the backdoors that lead to a small garage with the royal cars. We go up the exit of the garage into an obscured area behind the tower where any secret royal arrivals or departures take place.

Khiron must have heard my slight panting because he told me, “sorry you had to push me this whole way, I’m the one supposed to be your caretaker.”

“No, no. It’s the least I can do, you have cared for me for so long.” I tell him, “And it’s my company’s fault you are like thi—”

“Stop, Jason.” Khiron interrupts me, his voice firm. “It’s not your fault this happened, so don’t blame yourself.”

I was going to reply, but decided it was best not to disagree. So we just waited in silence, listening to the bustling of the Blessed Isles.

“Ah, here they are.” Khiron says as a sleek black car pulls in, its headlights blinding.

Khiron and I back up as the car reaches a stop in front of us. I hear rustling in the back of the car, then a loud bang against the car roof, and some swearing, then more rustling.

I whisper to Khiron, “Are you sure about this?” And he gives a so-so motion with his hand.

My mouth feels dry, and I start to regret doing this. But it’s too late now, and the car door opens.

But who stepped out wasn’t what I expected. I don’t know what I expected, but the person who stepped out wasn’t it.

Alecto was shorter than I thought he’d be, and couldn’t be taller than 5 '6". He had dark brown skin with unevenly cut black hair down to his shoulders, which was extremely matted. He looked malnourished, which I expected, but you could tell he was strong. He had cold blue eyes, and you could tell he had seen some things.

He walked over to me and stiffly put out his hand, "Mr. Fleece. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." His voice is even rougher than Khiron, and a lot less friendly.

I take his hand, which is rough and calloused, “The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Alecto.”

He has a look of confusion on his face, but it’s only for a second. Must have been my imagination.

“Ahem.” Alecto clears his throat, and I realize I was still shaking his hand.

I let go quickly, “Sorry, got lost in thought for a sec.” We stood there for an awkward second. “Oh, and this is Khiron,” I say, changing the subject.

Alecto extends his hand, and Khiron takes it with a firm grip. Alecto’s eyes narrow, but again, the reaction is gone in half a second.

“Thank you for coming, I’m Khiron, as Ja- I mean Mr. Fleece said. We will be working closely together, but don’t forget to also enjoy yourself.”

Alecto gives a slight nod, but doesn’t say anything. He seems to study Khiron for a second, almost surveying him. We again stand their in awkward silence, but this time it’s Khiron to speak up,

“Let’s go inside, and we’ll show you around.” and he starts to wheel himself off.

I try to grab his chair’s handles, but he puts his hand out to stop me. I give him a look and he gives me a defiant one back. We argue with our eyes for a few seconds, but he finally relents, and I grab the handles. I look over at Alecto, and he’s looking at my hands on the chair.

“Oh, Khiron isn’t used to the wheelchair so I help him with it.” I tell him. But his eyes just look more confused.

“Why?” He asks, finally speaking, “Why would you help him? He's *your* butler.”

I guess this would be confusing if you only saw me as the prince, the new owner of the company that destroyed your home.

“Oh, well, Khiron raised me, so it's the least I can do.”

Alecto ponders this for a moment, but doesn’t say anything. I guess the conversation ends there.

We enter through the back entrance of the building, and Alecto studies our surroundings very closely. He seems on edge, like something is going to jump out at any moment. I guess that’s his job, to watch out for danger, but it’s... intense. But it seems to run deeper, like it's instinctual, forced into him. It probably was, living in the Wasteland.

We get into the elevator and Khiron gives descriptions on each floor's layout, and what goes on there. But Alecto doesn’t seem to be listening, he seems to be surveying his surroundings, and observing our electronic devices with curiosity.

I feel bad for him, I have grown up in luxury, and he has had to stay on guard 24/7. But I also don’t completely trust him. I don’t know why, he just seems to be holding something back. He’s too silent, like he’s trying not to say anything, to prevent from letting a secret slip.

But then again, you probably have to be more silent to sneak around the Wasteland, I might just be judging a book by its cov—

“If you have a question, ask it. It’s better than your silent stare, sir.” I snap out of my daze and glance at Alecto, who has been walking by my side. He is looking straight forward, and his face remains calm... but there's just a hint of something... else in his voice. A vicious anger, barely noticeable, but overwhelming at the same time.

“Well?” He asks, still looking forward

I freeze for a second, but then regain my composure, “I just was wondering about you. I don’t know anything about you, but you're going to be with me for a long time. So I just want to know about you.”

He ponders this for a second, then responds with, “I could see why you’d want to, sir. So yes, but later.” Alecto doesn’t say anything else, focused on security camera placements, doorways, and windows. I get the idea he's very good at what he does.

Khiron glances up at me with a slightly sympathetic expression. My efforts at holding a conversation have been futile, so far. But then he pipes up.

“Well, I have some work I should attend to, so I’ll be off now. It was nice to meet you Alecto.” Alecto gives him a nod of acknowledgement, then glances at me, looking for a reaction.

“Bye, Khiron. But remember, only floor 12 and below have ramps installed, so only stay on those floors.” Khiron rolls his eyes and wheels himself away.

I’m now alone with one of the people I’ve caused so much damage to, but will still follow my every command. It’s a strange feeling, being in charge of someone. I know my father took pleasure in that, but I don’t think I ever have.

It’s silent, and then out of nowhere; , “Do you have a library?”

“I- We.” I take a breath, “Yes, yes we have a library. Would you like to see it?”

This is the first hint of emotion Alecto shows. It is slight, but his lips turn up slightly, and his eyes show a hint of excitement.

“Yes, sir.” He says, his voice a bit more elated, “If you want to.”

I give him a smile, and I relax a little, “Ok! Let's do it!” And we walk to the elevator.

When we get to the library, Alecto's eyes widen, and he does something I didn't think he could ever do, he smiles.

“You like it?” I ask him, though the answer is obvious.

“Y- yes.” He whispers, a sliver of awe under all the formality from earlier.

I yawn, and look at my watch, “Jeez,” and exclaim out loud, “It’s already 11:30. I gotta head to bed.”

Alecto's face falls, then evens out lifeless again, “Understood, sir” and he starts to leave, looking disappointed, but I speak up.

“Hey, why don’t you grab some books. You're usually not allowed to take the books, but what's the harm.” I tell him, and he looks at me with confusion.

“Are you certain?” He asks. And I nod.

With a grin playing on his lips, he carefully selects maybe half a dozen books, rather old ones. Worn covers offer comfort, I guess.

“Alright then. Thank you, sir.” he says, not even trying to hide his cautious smile.

I chuckle, and head to the elevator, and tell him the sleeping arrangements. “The room next to mine is where you can sleep, and do what you want with it, nobody stays there.”

He looks at me like I’m pranking him and asks, “I get to sleep in a royal bedroom, but I’m a servant from Had– I mean the Wasteland, that’s what it's called here, right?”

Wait, they don’t call it the Wasteland. Now I feel stupid, why would they call their home a place of trash? I just never thought of it. How selfish can I be?

Then I look at him and remember his question. “Oh yes, why wouldn’t you? You’re going to have to be in tip top shape after all!” But as we get in the elevator, I remember a drastic detail.

“One very important thing!” I say suddenly, my voice serious. Alecto whips his head to me, as if ready for danger.

“What? Is there a threat?” He asks, his eyes darting around. Hands are tentatively at his sides, fingers twitch next to a folded pocket knife that I just notice in his pants.

“No, but there will be if you make this mistake. Don’t go into the room to the side of mine, go to the room *across* from mine. The room to the side is my best friend Cala’s room, and If you go in there, you won’t make it out.”

He looks at me with a suspicious expression, and raises a brow, “That’s what was so important?” His skepticism is probably valid. He doesn’t know Cala. Yet.

I look at him directly in the eyes, “I am not joking. Do. not. Go. in. there!”

Alecto looks mildly amused , but he nods “Um- Okay.”

I let go of him, and the elevator dings, “Here we are! Good Night.” I tell him as I go to my room.

I close the door behind me, and change into my sleep clothes. I let my shoulders relax, and get into bed. As I begin to drift off, I wonder if I can trust Alecto, and what he is hiding.

Chapter 6:

Cerberus

"There is something inside me, I don't know what it is. what I see nobody else sees and sometimes it finds me. I think I'm losing my mind." - Vincent Van Gogh, At Eternity's Gate (2018)

THE ANGEL WHO TOWERS ABOVE CONGRATULATES YOU, HE SAYS I AM GETTING BETTER, PROMISES IT.

HE IS A LIAR, I WANT TO TELL YOU, I WOULD, IF YOU WERE NOT THE SAME.

FOR I AM SO VERY SICK, ENDLESSLY REPLAYING MOMENTS IN MY HEAD, A

BROKEN CASSETTE TAPE WITH ONLY 3 ROLLING SLIDES,

ILL AND I WAS NOT BORN THIS WAY, I LOVE TO SCREECH INTO YOUR ALREADY

PEELING EARS, SHOVE THE FACTS DOWN YOUR THROAT.

YOU MADE ME AND NOT JUST IN FORM BUT IN THE WAY I HESITATE BEFORE

SLIPPING A SMILE, THE WAY MY EYES REMAIN DRY AS I WATCH YOU DROWN.

YOU MADE ME, SO WELL, SUCH A PERFECT ICE SCULPTURE, THAT WHEN I THREW
LAVA AMONG, IT SMOKED, MELTED, UNTIL IT WAS FINALLY WATER THAT I COULD
LAP UP WITHOUT BEGGING, WITHOUT CHOKING ON RUNOFF.

BUT, I CAN SAY THAT IT IS NOT ALL THE FAULT OF YOUR OWN FORCE ONCE I WAS
NOTHING BUT A POOL OF POSSIBILITY LIKE A BRIGHT EYED CHILD,

AND IT HAS BEEN MY OWN UNDOING, HOW I CREATE UNTIL MY SKIN BURSTS
AGAINST THE DESK SPLINTERING WOOD

HOW I HAVE BURNT SO FAR, FORGETTING I WAS NOT OF WAX LIKE MY
BRETHREN, BUT CLEAR SPRING, AND I EVAPORATE INTO THE SKY

RETURN TO MY HOME.

I drop my only pen back onto the desk. As much as I wish I had the time to write something cohesive, I no longer do. I have already scoped out the room, but I must figure out the rest of the hall- possibly avoiding the room of this so-called "friend" of the prince.

I had seen luxury like never before yesterday- how castles sometimes climb to the sky, palaces of machinery and metals. I steady myself, head spinning slightly as I stand. My head feels stuffed with cotton. From malnutrition or just shock? It's anyone's gander. The walls feel thin (though I

know they aren't), I could pick up every little noise from *Sir's* room. That might not be normal, but having good senses is a talent in my eyes. It's worth a headache in a crowd when you can hear a man's footsteps as you lie, creeping, coming closer, *pain-*

I walk to where my bag lies on the bed. The covers are folded with immaculate precision, a bit of pride rises in me at seeing them. I love doing things right the first time, it hits the right key in my strange brain. I noticed on the way up that they hire people to clean their spaces, and I can't have people poking around. I'll have to find a way around that.

The clock on the dresser reads: 4:00 a.m. I have slept in, although the sun has yet to rise. I pull the clothing from my duffel bag, surveying them with slight interest. I don't think too much about the presentation of myself, I've always worn the same thing, as if a personal uniform. But now that I'm here, I should untangle my hair and clean up.

I walk to the bathroom, where the floor is cool, tile hits my bare skin -I have only just removed my sneakers. I've seen showers before, but I have yet to ever use one. The caves by the coast have always done the job well, if you can ignore the salt that burns into your very being. My clothes from Hades lie on the ground, discarded, as I turn the knob.

Cold, rushing, *clear* water, streams down. Water you can see through is impressive enough, this is... both incredible and oh-so instigating. How dare these people have so much of something we fear to touch? How can they gulp it down without boiling and boiling for hours? It is deeply, truly unfair.

The water feels lovely against my dry and beaten skin, running over scars of so many years. The drain collects brown and blackened liquid, it is quick to be disposed of. "Oh..." I breathe, and my throat rasps, water dripping into my mouth as I tilt my head upwards.

I wrap myself in the towel, a white piece of cloth that had been folded and kept in a cupboard. I glance at my gaunt face, defined cheekbones, ghost-blood eyes. I pull my knife- *slice, cut.*

Matted, wavy pieces fall at my feet, I clean them up afterwards, to keep my surroundings as clean as I can. Chaos is comfort, comfort signals home. I will not let this strange place of kings and green papers become my home. My hair now reaches only halfway down my neck, curls already forming. When my hair is clean it turns to black locks. It isn't a common occurrence. I note that these curls look similar to the ones of the man I met earlier, what was his name?- ah, Khiron.

I pay that no more thought, wearing provided clothes. A plain black shirt, and a vest that fits neatly over it. My jacket, sewn from fabrics I had found venturing about Hades, is shrugged on. It is a mangled mix of colors that blend together into one Frankenstein's monster of cloth. I love it, no matter that it is baggy and worn in the elbows.

I glance into the mirror once again, I do not have mirrors in Hades. There is a boy in the glass, he seems to know what he's doing. I cannot connect to him. He smiles, awkwardly. I reach up and pull the corners of my lips down. He frowns back, almost comically.

I grab my shoes, and am glad they gave me sneakers, not the shoes the prince wears. Sneakers feel good and familiar. I don't wear uniform socks. I needed a level of *familiarity* in this dystopian world I have entered into. If that means chapped, bleeding feet, I will take it. I take my bag, organize what needs to be. With some hesitation, I placed the two books I haven't read yet- I managed to get through four last night- in the bedside drawer. I am unsure how I read so fast, I didn't mean to make such haste. I think the feeling of knowledge in my hands was too much to not become wild and scarf it down.

Leaving the room is easy. The room key slips into my pocket. I do not want people touching my few possessions. The sky is just beginning to make light as I inspect the hall, its windows. Several are left unlatched, this makes me smile stiffly, to myself. If I was here to maim, it would have been far too easy. I latch them, correct security camera directions.

Then, I simply sit beside the prince's door, eyes calm and face aloof. A few hours pass before I hear loud thuds. My hackles rising, I stand up and try the doorknob. And it's *unlocked*. Does he have no survival instinct?

. I step in, to find the bed messy and unmade, items strewn about without a care. It's his home, truly.

As for the prince? Well, he stares at me with wide eyes, still in sleeping clothes. The thuds I heard were apparently him bumping into the bathroom's door frame. *I'm so tired*. "-Uh- Hey- how did you get in my-?" He seems surprised. I have my ways, is what I want to say.

"You left it unlocked, sir. Do not do foolish things like that. Even with the best security detail in the world, which I do not claim to be, stupidity kills." I say, and a bit of anger rises in my voice above formality. Why do I care? It must just be the desire to do a job properly.

The prince, though, looks thoroughly shameful. "Oh jeez, I must have missed it with the mess of yesterday- It doesn't normally happen," he pauses and I just sigh slightly. "Make sure it never

does, sir.” I say, professionalism recovered. He gives me this abashed nod, which I don’t bother responding to.

“Where would you like me to set up surveillance?” I ask. He looks more confused than abashed now, and I try not to make some annoyed remarks. “Oh- uhm, how about you just... stay in here? Or by the door?” It’s as if he’s suggesting ideas. How does the prince not understand the art of giving commands?

I nod, and start to walk out of the room, making notes on the contents. My eyes land on a gun, half buried by clothes. My shoulders stiffen, I stop in my tracks. I turn slowly to my charge. He has started to pull out clothes, a button up, some pants, nothing remarkable. “Sir.” I say, I sound tense.

Prince Fleece meets my gaze. He looks anxious, as if I wasn’t supposed to see that. He doesn’t say anything, he doesn’t explain. “I’m... going to get ready.” He says slowly, eager to end this conversation. I force myself to swallow my words. “For your own safety, I’ll have to remove the weapon from the premises, sir.” I say.

I pick up the gun, a nice ‘42, and take it with me outside the room. I don’t look back at my charge. *Why would he... have a gun?*

I sit out by the door, I compare and contrast differences. I have started to enjoy small things about this place, and that is the first step to my downfall. I think about our water, gray and grime-filled, microplastic laces. I consider theirs, endlessly clear. They have home to live inside, places of safety. Safe enough to leave windows open, forget to lock doors. In Hades, it is rare to have a door to lock. I feel the little bubbles of rage in my head- perfect.

The door across the hall opens, and I watch apathetically as a new player enters the scene. This is Cala, I suppose. Silver hair covers her eyes, I take note of the pale green hoodie and black leggings. She looks at me with interest and something I can’t quite decipher. “...So you’re the guard? Kinda short for that.”

And there’s the spunk I was warned about. I notice her slight lean on one leg, a bum leg? Interesting. “I’m Alecto, yes. Hello.”

“Where’s Jace?” she asks, not returning my greeting. “The prince is in his room, readying himself,” I say, although I do think a bit of annoyance falls into my tone. I was rather deep into my thoughts when this... person interrupted my quiet solace. Well, almost quiet. I could hear the noises of my principal’s room.

“...Are you going to let me in?” Ah, so that’s what she was waiting for. “I don’t have approved contact lists yet.” I respond, and I let my eyes flit around, observing her for weapons and whatnot. “Oh c’mon! I’ve known him for way longer than you’ve been here-” she begins to protest. I blink my eyes once, slow, and contradict; “People are often most in danger from those they are close to.”

“Sure, but not from me, dirtface.” I wrinkle my nose at the failed attempt at an insult. “I cannot let you in until my charge has confirmed your presence is welcome. It’s just part of the job.” “Well *screw* that!” She says, and tries to push past me. I hold her back, but she bites my ear and I let go, wincing. God, I hate these people.

My hand reaches for the handle of my knife, after she pushes past and opens the door. “Jason, you new bodyguard is a jerk!” she shouts, walking in.

The principal looks thoroughly shocked that people are in his room again, half changed, hair still dripping wet. The color appears to be... leaking out of it? Blonde color drips onto his towel, contrasting the red spread across his face. “He’s so freaking condescending!?” Cala groans as she literally flops onto the prince’s bed. I, with as straight a face as possible, lock the door.

My knife is open now, I slid it out when she strode in like she owned the place. “U-uh, Cala? Did you-” the prince is at a loss for words, and so I silently walk and stand near him. At a distance to interfere. “My apologies for the interruption, sir.” I tell him, He shrugs his shoulder as he grabs a button down of his dresser, “Oh- uh, no, it’s all good. So, this is Cala, and Cala, this is my bodyguard, Alecto. You’ve... met, I guess?”

“You could say that.” I half growl at her, under my breath. I was expecting manners if nothing else from these people. “Ugh, can Khiron send someone else? He’s such a killjoy, Jace.” Cala mutters. The principal swallows and puts on his shirt, buttoning them up as he talks; “He’s not that bad, Cala. You might have...” the prince surveys us both, “-something in common?” even he sounds skeptical.

I raise an eyebrow, but manage to fix my face into something resembling apathy. “That reminds me, sir. Who all would you like to have admittance to your quarters?” My voice is steady, I find comfort in the roughness of my breaths. Jay blinks at me; “u-uhm, Well, Khiron, and Cala... Medea,” he pauses and knits his eyebrows together. I wait, I will be patient for now.

“...I think that’s it, besides the staff...” He doesn’t call them servants, I observe. “You cannot be in here alone with staff, sir. They may come when you are out, if that is agreeable.” These words

feel as if the boy in the mirror is saying them. You know, the guy who has it together and isn't probably slowly dying from microplastics like everyone else.

“Yeah, uhm, sure. Are you... hungry? It's time for breakfast, probably. What time is it?” He questions, glancing at his clock. Then his eyes widened, “9:30 already?! I was supposed to meet Khiron for lunch by now!” The prince groans. He throws on a pressed jacket and makes for the door. It is still rather unfathomable to me that the prince is this forgetful.

I sigh and bolt after him. I catch him right as he steps into the elevator. “Sir, you must wait for me. I have to be with you.” I told him. The principal looks at me, breathing hard, “Sorry...Just got...huff...worried about being late.” He takes a deep breath and slaps himself. He seems nervous, but I don't know why.

“What's the hurry?” I ask, “Isn't it just Khiron, Si-”

He stops me, “Call me Jason, Sir is... way too formal. The only reason Khiron calls me “Mr. Fleece” is because he, well, I actually don't know why.” He looks off for a second, lost in thought. But then he snaps back, “But back to your earlier question, Khiron said he had something very important to tell me.” I nod, but I'm stuck on that earlier comment, why would he not want me to call him Sir, I'd think he'd like the sense of power..do not promise me a life where I will lie on the linoleum of a kingdom that has treated me unkind.

I see the silvery elevator numbers switch from five, to four, three, then come to a stop on two. It dings, and we step out. I glance around, see a whole spread spanning multiple tables. The food looks nothing like what I grew up eating. It looks almost decorative.

I scowl, they hoard so much food, most of which probably gets wasted. Meanwhile, in my tragic city, young children die of starvation every day.

Jason takes no note of the food, and as I know how to keep my mind off needs such as meals, I follow him. I enjoy the way my feet make nay a squeak as I creep. All my careful tiptoeing has paid off. The prince's butler sits at a table, looking more than slightly stressed. His blue eyes, ones that mirror mine, are small and squinted and I cannot tell if he is in pain or simply worried.

The principal slips into his seat, hands clasped. I stand about a foot away from him, scanning the room as subtly as possible. Someone drops a tray, and I startle, curls falling over my eyes. I blow them away with a huff.

Khiron's watching me now, with yet another strange expression, but quickly reverts his attention to Jason. “They've finalized a date for the funeral, Mr. Fleece. It's... it'll be tomorrow.” he says hesitantly. My principal pales, shoulders stiffening. I watch them, from a distance, still.

“-tomorrow? They...” he trails off, glancing around the room. Most of the people have dispersed now, leaving it relatively private.

“Alecto, can you come over here?” I step over to them, I wait, and he seems to be looking for the right words until he blurts out; “I’m going to *die tomorrow*.” I raise an eyebrow skeptically. “I doubt that, sir. I’ll be there at the funeral, as well with what I imagine to be a rather well done security detail for the ceremony.” I say matter of factly, but I keep my voice lower, a little tenser.

If the funeral is tomorrow, then I get to leave this city sooner than I had intended. No matter, this only adds to the complications by the prince being on guard. And honestly, Jason on guard is pretty damn pathetic. The guy doesn’t even lock his doors. “No... I mean, there’s an assassin coming.”

An assassin? How... exotic.

“Sent by who, sir?” I ask finally. “Don’t call me sir... and... uhm; the rebels.” Now this is interesting. He’s lying. And for what? “Well s- Jason, assassinations in broad daylight aren’t common. I... doubt they’d attempt to do that.” I hate this conversation, hate pretending my only family, a bunch of *ragtags*, are villains.

Perhaps we were going to dispose of the king, before he dropped dead. But we protected the queen, took her in when nobody else did. At least, my mother took her in. We keep each other safe. And we would *never* hire an assassin to do our job for us. “Listen, Alecto.” Khiron says, and his voice is firm, but soft around the edges.

It is the tone parents use to explain terrible things to their children, and it makes my aura falter for barely a second. “We know an assassin is coming tomorrow. A highly trained, coldblooded killer. He may, or may not be from the rebels. Either way, the funeral will be precarious, to say the very least.”

I end up swallowing my protests about the likelihood and chances of injury, and switch to planning. “Okay then. What measures have been set up at the funeral, and what are the timings?” I ask Khiron, more than aware that Jason will have no idea. The prince doesn’t really seem to know what’s going on around him. “Well, I’ve sent up a schedule to Jason’s room, as well as some gear that was supposed to be given to you yesterday. However, the event will take place in the evening.” Khiron tells me, and his voice is back to normal.

“Okay, then.” I murmur. I’m deep in thought about both of my plans. I must somehow make it convincing that I’m protecting Jason, as well as stop an assassin, while kidnapping the crown

prince? Well. I've had worse odds, the odds of me surviving being raised by my mother, in Hades. Bet's were on. I wouldn't make it past seven years. Look at me now.

"I can figure it out. I assure you that I'll do the best I can, sir." I tell this to Jason. Everyone knows it's more for the worried parent in this equation, Khiron.

Khiron opens his mouth to talk once more, and I find myself eager to listen. There's something about the way he talks. I've never met an adult back home without anger and hatred burned into their very essence, and yet... This man, from Hades, has such a gentle smile, a smooth voice with a few cracks, like someone's favorite vinyl. He treats Jason with respect, but also something that's taken a while to spot out. It's love. Parental love, for a child that is not his own.

Ignoring the jealousy that burns in my stomach, how dare this boy have everything I never got even a sip of? Jason has everything on a golden platter, just handed to him. Two loving fathers, a place up in the sky. An empire, anything he could want. My mind whispers something in the image I have conjured is wrong, a hidden crack, the pictures from last evening's folder come to mind. I banish those thoughts. I do not dare feel sympathy.

I've missed some conversation between the two, and at some point they asked me something, because when I've snapped out of it, Jason is watching me, Khiron doing the very same. "Sorry, what sir?" I ask, trying to ignore yet another voice in my head, this one is loud and cold, my mothers; *get it together, useless child. You won't amount to anything unless you work much harder than this.* "Oh, um, to make tomorrow and everyday after that run smoothly... Khiron suggested we get to know each other?" Jason suggests.

I have a suspicion it's more than just that, but I end up nodding, confirming. Khiron eyes me with the same look as earlier, confusion. He watches my hands, my posture. I do not know what he searches for, but I have a feeling he finds it when those pupils widen and he shuts his eyes, rubbing his temples. "Oh, hey. Let's get something to eat, and bring it up?" The Principle suggests.

"...I'll be fine, I have some food in my bag." I say after a pause. I don't trust their fancy little treats and tricks. Jason frowns; "C'mon, please? Just try this stuff, I bet it'll taste decent." I don't know why he's concerned about my eating habits, and it feels strange, but that is an order and I will obey. I take less than Jason, pretty much just taking things that look amusing or intriguing to me.

"Pickles and macaroons are a very interesting combination." Jason remarks, half-smiling. I don't know what to say, and so I shrug, never heard these words before. We quietly walk to the elevator

after bidding Khiron farewell, and I keep my eyes on the windows. There seems to be something sinister about this place... just lurking out of sight, so close.

Observation 1, Jason holds the door for me. I hold it instead, and he insists. It was strange. He takes a seat on his bed, and I set my tray down, checking the almost wall length windows on one side of his room. They seem to be acceptably thick, and are thankfully locked. I tighten them anyways, closing the curtains and clicking on the light switch. It's safer this way. I had locked the room door as well, but these precautions all feel necessary.

The principal doesn't touch his food yet. He waits for me. Why is he being polite to a little renegade child like me? Unknown at the moment. "So... what do you like to do? Besides reading, I mean." He asks, as I sit nearby to the door. "You first, sir." I respond, wincing at the automatic title usage. He opens his mouth to correct me, I interject, "Sorry, I meant Jason." The principal gives me a slightly amused look and then says after a pause; "I like books too, and I'm pretty good with technology stuff. I once hacked a television."

"Huh. That's interesting." I do mean it, although I attempt to keep my voice flat. "So... what's your deal? Like, how'd you become a bodyguard?" Jason asks me, and I pause. Not because I need to remember details, but because I hadn't come up with a cohesive backstory just yet. Perhaps I can give him the truth with little alterations. "My mom works closely with Hercules, and so I got training both from there and my mother's other coworkers."

"Oh, who's your mother? She sounds... important." His voice is a little envious. I wonder why. He never had to deal with a cold woman and her scolding words and looks, suicide missions, horrible commands. "You wouldn't know her." I say, you know, like a liar.

"...Oh. Okay, so." He picks at a piece of warm bread, slowly nibbling at it, as if he doesn't have much of an appetite. I glance at the "food" with suspicion but don't bother trying it. I don't think it would end well. "It's not poison, Alecto." I glance up. "Didn't say it was." I mutter. The principle shrugs; "You didn't have to." I sigh and push the food around on the plate with my knife. I enjoy the flawless cuts that are left, but stay silent, watching. "If it's not poison, then why do you avoid it?" I ask. The question feels more... intimate, as if I'm trying to get to know more than the person he presents to the world.

Jason chews the food slowly, and after he swallows, clasps his hands as a sort of fidget. "...I just have a hard time eating in general. Food makes me feel gross. And yes, I do know that that's horrible, that so many people don't have access at all," he pauses. "-But when I make myself eat, half the time it just comes back up. So what's the point, y'know?"

“It said in the file that I’m supposed to protect you from yourself as well. You should eat, or you’ll be even more distracted and tired tomorrow.” I say after some consideration of Jace’s words. “Oh.” he looks a little surprised, but he ends up finishing the bread.

I shrug, screw this. I took a bite of the colorful thing he called a macaroon. It’s sweet and crumbles under my teeth, fluffy texture mixed with a crunch. It’s nothing like... anything back home, and I eye the food with a sudden fascination. A crunch in your food back in Hades meant either dead animal bone, or thin plastics. This doesn’t seem to be the case.

“Hey, if something goes wrong tomorrow,” I look up at the prince. Is he attempting to threaten me with what may happen if I fail tomorrow? But his tone isn’t malicious, it almost sounds...remorseful?

Jason continues, “I just want to say I’m sorry about the wastela– Hades, that's what you call it right? My company destroyed your home. You have no reason to protect me, but you do, so thank you, and sorry.” Sorry? He’s saying sorry?

What could sorry ever mean? How could an apology change anything? He’s only apologizing so I do the best I can to protect him tomorrow. Although I recognize that... a part of me really wants to. If it’s out of duty or something else, remains a mystery. You know what?

“Nothing will go wrong tomorrow. You won’t die at this assassin's hand.”

You’ll die in mine.

Chapter 6.5

Icarus

The Sparrow sits, legs folded beneath him. His wings are clipped, plastic chips slipped under his skin. The room is cold, bare. There is no sign of life until he exhales, soft breaths from parted pink lips. He likes the silence no longer, longs for cheerful noise. But that is not the purpose of the Sparrow.

Click, twist. Oh, the door opens now, and Sparrow looks up, dazed eyes connecting with a man wearing a mask, rubber thick and stuck to his face. He looks strange. The Sparrow imagines with his twig-like, scarred body, he does as well. The case, black and smooth, is in one of his hands. The Sparrow looks up now.

“Icarus.” Man calls, voice smooth and sickly sweet. Sparrow hates it, Sparrow does not like his name.

“It’s time to take the Sun.” Man says smoothly. Sparrow frowns, he tilts his head.

Sparrow takes the case. He runs his hands down it, opens the latch. Sparrow sees knives, he frowns up at the man. Sparrow does not get so close. He is small, he needs to be far away. He prefers to take from far away, up high.

“Do you understand?” Man asks.

Sparrow watches, he has a frown now. Sparrow remembers what he was taught; “Understanding is for children and those who are tired of knowing. I do not understand, and that is what preserves the greater pattern.” He says. Man pulls a hand through Sparrow’s hair, he ruffles Sparrow’s feathers.

“Good, little sparrow.”

Is Sparrow good? His feathers are crimson, dripping with red.

“Now Icarus, the sun has a new moon to guard it. The moon is much bigger than you, so strike when the moon is the farthest from the sun.”

Sparrow nods, and grasps the knife in his hands. Then he stabs himself, etching a circle into his arm.

It is enough. It will be his eclipse.

Chapter 7: Jason

“Death leaves a heartache no one can heal. Love leaves a memory no one can steal.”

-Pastor John Carthy

I'm surrounded by chaos.

There was trash as far as the eye could see. I run, trying to escape, but the garbage is unending.

But as I run, I feel my pockets filling up, overflowing. I look down and I see heaps of plastic flowing out of my pockets, quickly becoming over five times my height.

“NO NO N—!” I shout, But then my yells stop as I feel my stomach churn and food begins to come up.

But it's not food. It cuts my throat, and I feel the metallic taste of blood in my mouth. But that taste is quickly overshadowed by the artificial taste of...plastic?

Chunks of blood stained plastic spew out of my mouth, forming another large mound. They continuously rise, higher and higher until there are five pillars in the sky.

I crane my head to look up, and there are monstrous looking creatures, hidden in shadow. They look at me, and open their mouths.

I expect to hear booming voices, but I just hear a slight whisper, almost as if they're right behind me, “Ssssyyyyy iiiit... Condeeeem theeem.”

The plastic stops spewing from my mouth. I try to not say anything, but my mouth opens, as if someone is prying it open. I begin to speak, but not of my voice, but the voice of the old king, “Truth.”

Then, I see Elysium. I try to call out, to warn them! But it's too late, it explodes.

I hear the screams of pain. They won't stop. They're in my head, in my soul, they are ingrained in me!

I can't tell where the screams are coming from anymore. Am I screaming? There are too many to tell. Oh god, oh god!

I can't breathe, can't think! I claw at my ears, make it stop, MAKE IT STOP! I'm throwing myself on the ground, my skin getting shredded by the plastic shards.

Then, the screams fade as I hear a booming bellow above me “Ga ha ha ha, GA HA HA HA!”

It sounds...robotic, like a machine was trying to laugh. I turn around, and the five pillars have returned, monsters and all.

“Your tuuurn.” They bellow, and the pillars begin to rise.

But now they aren't pillars, but fingers. The monsters disappear, and a giant hand, made out of scrapped plastic lifts into the sky.

The ground trembles as the rest of the giant rises. It's unfathomably massive, Impossible to stop, all powerful. It's unlike anything I've ever seen, and yet so familiar at the same time.

*My legs tremble as it raises its hand. I can't run, can't hide! It's inescapable, Something that will never end, will never cease to haunt me.
The back of its hand comes down, and I squeeze my eyes shut.
Please not again.*

Then I'm laying down, drenched in sweat, and instinctively curl into the fetal position. Protecting the organs and other vital areas is the best thing to do when he's angry.

I wait for a few seconds, but his hand never comes down.

"All okay?" I hear a voice ask, who is that, why are they in my room? Then I remember everything—that voice is Alecto. He's my bodyguard. He's here because he wouldn't let me sleep by myself in case the assassin decides to do it at night instead.

I start to sit up, pulling the blanket off from above my head. Was it all a dream?

"What, a nightmare?" I look over at Alecto, who is sitting in an armchair next to my bed, holding a pen, and some paper on the desk in front of him.

My jaw is sore from grinding my teeth at night, but I manage to get out a weak, "y-yeah."

Alecto chuckles and looks back down at his paper, "Don't worry Jason, the assassin won't be here until tomorrow." he says.

I blush and rub my neck, what do I have to be scared of, he has grown up in a hellscape and he's fine, so I don't have anything to complain about. I'm so inconsiderate,

"I know it's fine, I shouldn't worry." I apologize, "It's stupid that I had a nightmare."

Alec looks at me with a confused look, "You know I was trying to make a...Joke? That's what you called it, Right? You said it's something to help us get to know each other better."

I freeze, and don't know what to do. I feel stupid, but I don't want to make it worse, so I just let out a, "ohhhh."

Alecto rolls his eyes and goes back to his writing. I glance over, and see that his paper is covered in writing, with the smallest handwriting ever,

"Whatcha writing?" I ask, trying to alleviate the awkwardness from earlier."

He pauses, as if waiting for something, but then looks at me with surprise, "-Oh, really?"

"Why else would I ask?" I say, but immediately regret it. That sounded so rude!

He doesn't seem to notice, and just shrugs his shoulders, "Well... y'know, back in Hades, you know, the wasteland, I'd end up in deep water for wasting time with my poems, and wasting supplies. Usually people ask as a mocking sort of thing. Art is... not a good talent, back home. It ends in scolding. I suppose, here though..."

He looks downcast, and I listen intently. This is the first time he's talked about his past, or let any emotion like that out.

He glances over at me, and blushes slightly, "But now that I know you're serious, I'll tell you." He says, trying to change the subject, "I'm writing some poetry about the differences of the Capital and Hades."

I open my mouth but he cuts me off, "And no, you may not read it, si- Jason."

“I wasn’t going to ask that actually.” I told him, but then realized that sounded rude, “Well I mean I was, just that wasn’t my first question. And not because I’m disinterested ju-” You’re rambling Jason. I pause and try to get back on topic, “Whatever, I’m just confused. The capital? This Isn’t the capital technically.” I point out the window, “It’s still dark out, but you can slightly make out the silhouette of the main factory, even though it is over a town away, “technically, that’s the capital of Elysium.”

Alecto shrugs his shoulders, now engrossed in his work, “We just called the non Hades area the Capital in Hades, but I guess that wouldn’t make sense if you lived here, what do you call the capital?”

I blush a little, “It’s kinda embarrassing. It’s super pretentious.” I tell him.

He looks at me with a raised eyebrow, “what could be more pretentious than this?” He asks while waving his hand around the room.

“Ummmmmm... calling your kingdom The Blessed Isle.” I mumble.

Alecto looks at me, and then shakes his head, “That name doesn’t even make sense,” he sighs, “It’s not even an Island.”

“That’s what *I* said!” I laugh, and we both start laughing.

It feels good to laugh, after everything that’s been going on, and...and what’s about to happen. I remember what today is, and I stop laughing. Alecto stops laughing too, and the moment is over.

We sit in silence for a while, him writing and me tinkering with pieces of a broken remote control, trying to take my mind off things.

Before I know it the sun is up, and it’s time to get ready. Alecto got dressed soon after I woke up, putting on a dark tuxedo with slight green accents, to match his employer’s colors. A Mati patch is neatly sewn on. He yelled more swears than I knew while putting it on. I told him he looked good, but I don’t think that’ll stop him from burning his tuxedo after today.

I go to my closet, and grab a green tuxedo and gold tie. I hate this suit so much, but it was my father’s favorite suit colors, and demanded I wear it at his funeral, so I don’t have a choice.

But as I go to put it on, Alecto shouts from outside my closet, “Put on some clothes to run in under your suit, in case we have to make a quick getaway!”

Quick getaway? I shrug, can’t hurt, I guess. I grab a long sleeve elastic shirt, and some sweatpants, then I put on the suit. I’m sweating profusely, but I try to ignore it..

I step out of the closet, “How do I look?” I ask, but Alecto just shrugs.

I roll my eyes and walk over to the bathroom. I brush my teeth, then look at my face. I noticed that my nose scar looks red today. I have a scar on the bridge of my nose that I have to put a paste on to lessen the reddening.

But as I look around, the paste is nowhere to be seen. I look again, It’s not too red, I should be fine missing one more day. I just can’t have people notice it too much, or else I’ll get in trouble.

I take a deep breath. Get into character. I smile in the mirror, but it looks sloppy. I've done this forever, I should have a smile down to a tee. More in the cheeks, less teeth, more rise on the left for a smirk. Aaaand... Perfect.

I step out to Alecto standing in a military stance, and he immediately raises his eyebrow, "What happened to your nose?" He asks, rubbing his finger over the bridge of his nose.

Dammit, "It's just a scar!" I tell him, giving him a reassuring smile, "I usually put something to lessen the reddening, but I can't find it."

"Did you get it from the attack?" I freeze, and stiffly turn to look at Alecto. *Does he know?* What is he talking about? Do I say anything?

"What attack are you talking about?" I ask stiffly.

"When you were younger, unknown attacker, it was in your file I was given." He answers. Thank goodness, that's what he was talking about.

"Oh, y-yeah. That... attack. That's where I got it. Sorry I forgot." I say, trying to play it off.

Alecto tries to ask something, but I put my hand up, "Alec, please. Just drop it." And I begin to walk out, not looking at him.

"I- Yes sir." Alecto says robotically. I flinch a little, but don't correct him. It is not the time right now.

We walk down the hallway in silence, heading to the elevator. The actual funeral is in the evening, but we do a "royal mourning event" all day.

We reach the elevator, and I expect to see Khiron, but he's not waiting there. I'm a bit worried, what if his illness is getting worse. Maybe-

"Looking for Khiron?" Alec asks me. Am I that obvious? "He told me to tell you that he is caught in planning and to not... Worry? No, wait, that says worry. Not to worry."

I turn to look at him and he's reading off a notecard. I roll my eyes and chuckle. This guy. He looks up at me and slightly blushes.

He crumbles up the card and scowls, "-stupid writing, what's the point in making it so curly?" he mutters.

"It's called cursive." I tell him, stifling a laugh. His scowl deepens, and I can tell he's actually annoyed. I stop laughing, and we walk into the elevator.

I press the button to the main floor, and I prepare for a day of suffering.

The day goes by in a blur. There is a parade in the king's honor, then an interview, and a million meetings where I did nothing but smile and wave.

Alecto kept to the schedule Khiron gave him. He seemed annoyed about the events, and even commented on the usefulness of some of the meetings. But he mostly just scowled when reading the list.

We walk out of the last meeting, which was in the capital factory, and I checked my watch, 4:45.

“When’s the funeral?” I ask Alecto, and he checks the paper,

“It’s at 5:15,” so you have a... Royal walk?! What the hell is that?!” He looks bamboozled. I guess it does seem stupid, but it’s tradition, and I have to keep up appearances.

I rub the back of my neck, “Oh, it’s where I have to walk to the funeral location and greet people. It’s so I’m “more connected with the people” but it’s mostly just to improve the public’s view. I think it’s stupid, but people will get mad if I don’t do it.”

Alecto goes to ask something else, but decides against it.

“Well, we better leave now then.” he says, and we begin to walk to Argo Tower.

People shout at me and I wave to them. But don’t get up close. The path we take is barricaded from the public, but people have tried to grab at me before and drag me into the crowd.

But even with the path being blocked, it didn’t stop some people from trying. Many people reach for me, trying to get a hold of something. I try to step away, but somebody grabs my shirt roughly from behind,

“Prince, prince, what are you doing about the cat debate? Should cats have the same rights as humans? Wouldn’t that be unfair to dogs? Do you agree with this down wing propaganda?” I get bombarded with questions, and I realize I haven’t been grabbed by just somebody, I’ve been grabbed by the paparazzi.

More people begin dragging me over the guard rails, and I look for Alecto.

Where is he? I look over and I spot him a few feet behind. Someone is talking to him, and hands him a small package, no bigger than my hand.

“Alecto! HELP!” I shout, and He whips his head around. He sees me and runs over, and grabs the guy who snatched me, pulling him over the gates. He flips the guy over the railing, and there’s a sharp yelp. The man screams, delayed and dramatic, and it falls silent for a few seconds, then pandemonium breaks loose as we get bombarded with questions, angry shouts, and yells of surprise.

Alecto jumps up, and drags me away as I yell to the man that the government will cover his medical bills. We quickly run to the tower, and dart inside.

I look at him, and I start yelling, “What are you doing!?! You can’t be doing that, it will ruin public support! Without that, I can’t do ANYTHING!”

Alecto looks at me stunned, and I realize what I just did. I go to apologize, but he stops me, “Save it, I was in the wrong, I’m sorry for ruining your reputation, Sir.”

I stay silent, and we silently walk to the courtyard behind the tower.

“What was that box that guy gave you? Who was that guy?” I ask Alecto, trying to fix the tension.

“Gift from my mom,” Alecto says bluntly, “and please, don’t ask.” He says before I can even open my mouth. I have questions, but I respect his wishes.

We walk out to the courtyard. Workers are running around everywhere. We only have 15 minutes before the funeral starts, so they are trying to finish the last parts of the funeral.

I look around, and see Khiron directing some waiters to set up the food stands. Most of the guests were already here from the meetings, but they are all rich factory owners, and I have no inclination to talk to them.

So I keep my distance from the crowds, and wait. Alecto looks around with a disgusted expression, muttering something I can't hear, though I pick up on, greedy and ruin.

I try to look busy, but I can see someone walk over to me from the corner of my eye. Oh god, I don't want to talk to a prick factory owner that my father had been "friends" with for years.

I brace myself for a conversation from hell, and I feel a tap on my shoulder. I slowly turn, not even hiding my grimace, but my expression quickly changes,

"Are you really that upset to see us?"

"Cala! Medea!" I exclaim, and give them both hugs.

They are dressed in the fanciest dresses I've ever seen either of them wear.

"Wow! You look stunning, you two!" I tell them.

Medea blushes a little, but shoves me as well. "Thanks Jason, I had a hard time picking something out, but Cala just threw something at me, so she deserves the credit."

Cala smiles smugly, "Yes I do, yes I do." She looks me up and down, "Maybe I can help you next, that outfit is *disgusting!*"

I open my mouth to retort, then stop myself. I really can't deny it, "It wasn't my choice, this was my dad's fashion sens—"

"Ahem." Medea slightly clears her throat, "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt, but who is that?"

She points at Alecto, who is standing behind me. Alecto looks up, having zoned out. He shakes his head and goes, "Hmm?"

"Oh!" I look between the two of them, "You guys haven't met yet? Well, Medea, this is Alecto, my new bodyguard. And Alecto, this is Medea, my other best friend."

Medea sticks out her hand politely, and Alecto apprehensively shakes it,

"It's a pleasure to," Medea cringes as Alecto's calloused hands scrape against her skin, "M-meet you, Alecto. Please watch out for my friend Jason."

Alecto nods, but doesn't speak. Medea begins to talk about school, because neither me nor Cala have been to school (Alecto probably hasn't either), so we love to hear what it's like.

But as she gets the part about Jake Odonald's relationship with Jenny Mars, Khiron wheels over to pull me aside.

"Jason, I would like to have a word with you." Khiron asks.

"Okay." I say, and start to go and Alecto goes to follow.

"Alone." Khiron adds. Alecto looks at me, and I realize he is waiting for my approval.

"Oh, yeah. It's fine. Stay here with Cala and Medea, I'll only be a second." I tell him, and he gives a slight nod.

Khiron takes me aside, and pulls me into an embrace. I tense up, flinching, but then relax in his arms. I feel the weight of the world fall off my shoulders. I start to tear up, but hold it in. We are still in public, I must look strong.

Khiron lets go, and I stand up, he warmly smiles, but then looks at me with a serious expression, "Jason, be careful today. I don't want you to get hurt."

I nod, trying hard not to cry, and he pats me on the shoulder. I begin to walk back, when I see someone running at me out of the corner of my eye.

I turn, and see a masked boy, running towards me, with two daggers, in the shapes of feathers, in hand. He doesn't even try to hide it, and I remember what the council said, "Out in the open, for everyone to see."

It's happening now though? They said during the funeral!

"DIE FALSE PRINCE!" The assassin shouts, and all eyes turn.

The world slows. I see the assassin is leaping, daggers raised. He wears plastic clothes, like the ones in the wasteland, but has a coat over them. There is a patch on the shoulder, and I recognize it, it's the symbol of Syren, A "terrorist" rebel group in Hades. So they're going for a set up.

I see Alecto running over, but he won't make it in time. Cala is trying to run over, screaming, but Medea is holding her back trying to protect her. Guests are staring eyes wide, and I can hear screams.

Is this really the end? Was it all for nothing?! Khiron risked his neck, and it's for nothing?!

My family is really a curse on this world, aren't we? Everywhere we go, death follows. Maybe it's best this happens, to finish off the bloodline before we can cause more pain.

Goodbye cruel world.

The cruelty being a product of *my* own family.

I close my eyes, waiting to feel the cold sting of steel pierce my skin.

But nothing happens.

I open my eyes, and I see Khiron standing in front of me, standing up from his wheelchair.

What happened? I gradually look down, and suck in a breathe,

"*Khiron, no*" I whisper, as I see a thin dagger, looking like a feather tip, sticking out of his chest.

Khiron coughs, looking almost ghostlike for a second- and then red splatters from his lips. There's a second of tranquillity, before he slumps tragically to the ground.

"*KHIRON!!*" I scream, and wet, hot tears blur my vision. I look up to see Khiron's killer. He holds another dagger, and his muzzle-like mask is speckled with blood.

He doesn't even glance at Khiron's body, immediately going for another swing at me. I flinch, but Alecto punches him in the face, knocking him over a few feet away.

The assassin begins to stand, but people begin to surround him. He turns and runs away, climbing the tower with ease. Then he jumps.

At first, he free falls, but then he spreads his arms, showing webbing connecting his arms to his body, and glides on the air.

People are screaming and running around, it's chaos everywhere. I ignore it all though, running up to Khiron.

Blood is pouring from his wound, and I check his pulse,

"I'm still- cough cough- alive Jason." Khiron says weakly, almost in a whisper.

"We, we gotta get you out of here," I say, then turn to Alecto, "Come on, we gotta get him out of here."

Alecto nods and begins to help carry him away. I look around for Cala and Medea, but they must have gotten caught in the crowd. There's no time to wait, and Alecto and I run into the building, Khiron in arms.

I go to press the elevator button, but Khiron weakly grabs my hand, "*n-nooo, I won't make it.*"

I shake my head, I refuse to let him die, not like this. "No! I won't let you die. We can make it, just hang on till we get you to the medical ward, please," a second wave of tears begin streaming down my face, but Khiron just shakes his head,

"I won't make it even if we get there. He stabbed an essential artery, and I bet his blade was poisoned. There is no way I can make it out of this."

Alecto puts down his legs and goes to check his wound, "He's right. They used micromaine, a famous toxin where I'm from. There's no cure. He's as good as dead." Alecto puts him down, and shakes his head.

"NO!" I shout, "T- THIS CAN'T BE! PICK HIM BACK UP, WE MAY HAVE A CHANCE IF WE GET HIM TO THE WARD! WE HAVE TO TRY!"

Khiron just shakes his head, "*Y- you would only be wasting time, and I don't think that assassin will stay away for long. L-leav-ve me.*"

That gets Alecto's attention, "Crap! You're right. I'm going to go do reconnaissance." and he runs off.

I collapse to my knees, Khiron lays in front of me. "No, no, you-" I sob, messy, "Why?!"

Khiron weakly grabs me on the shoulder, "*I'm sorry, Jason.*"

I look down at him, and I'm confused, why is he sorry? "Huh, w-what do you mean?"

"It's my fault you have to see this, my own selfishness." Khiron rasps, "*You see, there's a saying fro-*" he burst out in a coughing fit, "*- from Hades. It's when the rebels were younger, stupider, when we were more reckless. "In peace, sons bury their fathers, in war fathers bury their sons". And, even if you don't see me as your father, I see you as my son, I couldn't bear the idea of burying my child. I'm sorry I was so selfish, son...."*

Khiron's eyes gloss over, and chest stops moving,

“NO! KHIRON!” I cry out. He can’t die! I begin doing chest compressions, but when I do, blood sprays out of his wound like a geyser.

It’s ok, I’ll cover the hole. I put my hand over the wound, trying to stop the blood, but it didn’t help. My face is moist, but I can’t tell if it’s from the salted tears or sticky blood.

I stop trying. He’s gone. He’ll never give a warm smile again. Never tell stories, never joke with his friends. He’ll never have that loving twinkle in his eyes ever again.

I give him one last hug, completely staining my suit red. My eyes try to water, but I can’t even cry anymore. I whisper, “You were my father. I love you, dad.”

I get up, and I feel numb. Everything is a blur. I am walking, where am I going? My body moves on autopilot, and I stumble around. Somebody is grabbing me, why am I so tired. Am I eating? Someone is feeding me.

My vision clears for a second, and I see Alecto. I open my mouth, and my voice comes out in a whisper, “Khiron died.” I see him pull out a rope, “What are you doing?”

He ignores me, and ties my hands together, and gags me. I try to struggle, but my body is weak. I look up at him, and he pulls out the brown box. He opens it, and pulls out a walkie-talkie.

The world starts to go dark, and I see a plate of food beside him, he must have fed me spiked food.

He turns on the walkie-talkie, and right before the world goes dark, I hear him say, “Hello, is this Syren? It’s Cerbeus, the target has been apprehended.”

Chapter 8: Cerberus

"Everything I've ever let go of has claw marks on it." - David Foster Wallace

I AM THE 29TH OF FEBRUARY

I AM BOTH HOLY WATER

AND HELLFIRE.

WHAT YOU GET DEPENDS ON HOW I VIEW YOU

THROUGH MY SHATTERED GLASS EYES AND

TIRED ACHING MIND.

I AM A BLASTING STEREO

A RADIO SHOW DISCONTINUED-

I AM A STARVING ARTIST

AND A KING IN MY OWN RIGHT

I AM THE JUDGE, PICKING WHO DESERVES TO LIVE

AND WHO WILL LIE RESTLESS 7 FEET DOWN

I AM THE SOLDIER COLD AND CALCULATED,

FOLLOWING ORDERS WITHOUT QUESTION

I AM THE REBEL, BITING DOWN ON THE HAND THAT FEEDS

I AM THE GROOMED AND THE UNEXPECTED

I AM UNNERVING AND I AM A MISTAKE

FOR HUMANS CANNOT LEARN TO CHANGE.

I AM FEBRUARY 29TH.

-CV

The golden boy has gone limp. I would have expected fakery, but no. He's just... exhausted? I can see that, honestly. The bottle I had dripped into his food must have finally done the trick. About time. "*~This is Minerva, confirm status.~*" the radio buzzes to life. I drag us behind a dumpster, up into an alley. How are even the alleys here so pristine?

"Status confirmed, middle ring of city. Target acquired, Expected delivery... a few days." I rally into the device, leaning up against the wall. The prince is oddly light, like a twig- surprising given the amount of food at his disposal. Minerva sends back a quick "Confirmed." and the conversation is over. I open my bag and quickly get the tuxedo jacket off my back. I want to set it ablaze, but it can be traded, I suppose.

I get Jas- the target's jacket off as well, and while I quickly get myself into more camouflaged clothes, clean but street-smart. The target's hair looks stupid like this, all blonde and styled, and so I mess it up, smirking at the shaggy mop look it's going on now. "Heh. Not so flawless now, porcelain." I murmur. He groans in his drugged state, and I look away.

A little bit off me... feels off about this. I'm not certain of the reason just yet, but I know that it's something that needs to be kept on a leash. Some of my emotions are too volatile, too... messy. *Plastic all around, blood on his face, all over your hands, screaming-* Stop. I take a slow breath, comfort myself with the rasp.

We both look convincingly normal- convincingly human, although I suppose we're still a strange sight, so for the walk tonight I stick to the backstreets, the more hidden side of the capital. They call it the "Blessed Isles." I seriously cannot tell if that is meant to be a bad joke. Either way, my blood and grime covered nails will scratch at their world, drag them down to the home of the damned. Laugh, watch them run.

Then my right boot starts to itch, I have chosen to leave the socks off again, and so I pause to tug that shoe off. A note falls to the ground, folded neatly. I stare at the folds for only a second before tucking it into my bag. I do not have time for distractions, as the sky begins to dim. I keep going, even when the prince starts making noises in his sleep. Instinctive, stressful noises, little whimpers and cries, so different from his normal demeanor.

I wonder what it is that a prince dreams about? He had a nightmare when I was standing guard as well, one he never clarified. Probably something like having to sleep on the- gasp- floor. I despise him so much. I chant this as if a mantra in my head. I start to get lost in my thoughts, until my

leg gives out. Profanities spill from my lips, soft and under breath. It's probably just tired after walking for so- oh hell.

I touch my pant leg, off it comes red. There's no way I walked so long in shock, is there? I chew on my lip, trying to figure out the plan of action. Slowly, I manage myself and the target into an abandoned looking park. I slump up against a bench, tug up the rolls of cloth. Ah. Last week, I had been attempting to find some filter materials in a coastal lab. I'd ended up lost, and my mother's consort had left me there. My leg was trapped half the night, till I was able to struggle it out. It thankfully didn't break, but it got slashed pretty deep.

I'd forgotten about it, after facing my mother's wrath at not bringing enough material back. It closed up on the surface, but all the sudden action today must have reopened it. Annoying, the lightheadedness that accompanies blood loss. I cut the prince's ugly coat, taking off part of the shimmery gold inner lining and bandaging my leg.

Jason seems to be coming to, so I sigh and drag us over to an old skating area of the park that clearly nobody has been to in years. There's a large tunnel, and I pull us both into it, then begin prepping for when my old employer wakes. I take some old zipties, secure his wrists and ankles- maybe a little too tight. I see the way his skin reddens under the plastic he played a part in creating. Smile now, tighten it further. I cut more cloth, a long strip that I fit neatly into his mouth. I tie it up at the back, I am proud of my knots. The prince begins, now, to squirm and curl, not completely able. A little scream parts from him, before dazed eyes and a sweaty face stare at me.

I stare back into his green-hazel eyes, I've seen the same ones from the queen. "It's the middle of the night. Go back to sleep." I grumble, not at all expecting him to listen. I wait for the anger, the struggle- none comes. Disbelief, realization, sorrow, it all burns far worse. "Mmmm-alemagou-" he struggles with my makeshift gag. I smile to myself. "Silence is golden, duct tape is silver. Though, the cloth is gold, so... silence is golden, yes." I messed up that line. My stomach feels weird, looking at the prince.

I check my wound, and when I look up, there are little jewels in his eyes. He is crying, so silently, with such a blank face. I cannot do that. When I cry, though it is rare, I scream and I hit. I break things, I drag everything down with me. Is it weak? Perhaps.

"Crying? I'm not that bad, golden boy." I tease, but it's half hearted. I sound tired, as if there's no more energy left in the entirety of me. Jason doesn't make eye contact- god, I can't stop using his name-looks down at the cement floor. I don't like the silence as much as normal. I loosen the cloth around his jaw slightly. A small, broken noise comes from him. I don't know what to do with that. "...Khiron.." He whispers, to himself. Is he really grieving, right now?

Grief, as I have aforementioned, is truly one of the most pitiful things a person can experience. It has little to no function. It simply distracts you. I'm kidnapping this idiot right now, and he's rambling on about his butler. The worst part is that he's rubbing off on me. I will never hear the man's record player voice again. That is fine. Traitors deserve what comes to them.

The prince looks as if some of him died with his fake father. I want to laugh, gloat, jeer. I know I have fooled him, that I fooled them all. Hercules, Jason, Khiron, Cala as well, I suppose. All I can think of is the disappointed look Hercules gave me when I tore up my writing. I desire his approval, for unknown reasons. Seeing me sitting among the pieces, he raised his voice. Scolded me for wasting my potential, but after...

He didn't simply leave. Hercules stood there until I painstakingly taped each and every piece together. And then... he read them. Smiles, laughs, little sighs. I carefully listened to all of them. Two were folded, slid into his pocket. Words stuck with me; "*Don't you dare take your talent for granted, Cerberus. You have a duty to serve the world.*" It makes me feel strange, thinking so much about one person.

Jason makes a little gagging noise, and I move my things far away from him. He sealed his mouth shut, and I know. I push his head out of the tunnel and roughly hold him down. I keep his hair up, deciding against pulling it sharply. Vomit splatters everywhere, little flecks all over his face. I let them dry there, re-gag him. It is almost half an hour of silent writing before he tries to talk (futilely) once more. I let the gag off.

"W-why...? Well... no. I know why." He says softly, voice hoarse from grogginess and regurgitation. "Where are you taking me?" Is what he finally decides on. I'll give him props for being this collected. "Home. I'm taking you home, for my mother." He opens his mouth once more, but I know what the question will be.

"My mother is the head of the rebels. I am to be the next one, and you were my little initiation project, basically." I say, voice flat. I am unsure of whether the idea of being in charge eventually makes me feel. I wish I could write, instead. "I guess you were right." he mumbles.

"What?" I frown. "You... um, said that I wouldn't know her." Jason mumbles. I don't respond, cutting more strips of cloth. Jason's face is likely dirtier than it's ever been, sweaty, plastered with vomit and blood. His nose is bleeding. I scoff, for if I cared so much about the answer of who gave him those injuries in the first place, I could get them easy as a quick blow.

“Y’know, I don’t blame whoever squared you in the nose,” The prince’s posture noticeably stiffens, “-You really do look quite punchable, especially when you glare at me like that.” He bites back a response. I take the bottle of water out of my bag, dab the cloth before (not too gently) cleaning the wound on his face. He has a few little scratches besides his nose, nothing too bad. I lift the bottle slightly, cock my head at him; “You want?” I don’t have the energy to complete my sentence. He gives a small nod and so I dribble some into his mouth.

The prince seems to consider spitting it out at me- and if he had I would’ve made that scar a hell of a lot more noticeable- but he swallows it. Before spitting on my shoe. “Jokes on you. Your dad paid for those.” Jason, (I’ve given up on calling him “target”) glares only harder at me. Loathing, lost in fatigue.

“Why did he die?!” It’s sudden, loud. I jam my hand over his mouth, hissing through my teeth; “Shut *up*, summer child.” How would I know why he sacrificed himself? Khiron was a capital man in his heart (which he was, in fact, stabbed in). I do not know how those people work. I could have saved him, if I wanted. Have I killed him, by not preventing his death? I haven’t killed anyone since- since Niobe. And there’s no way Jason knows. “I didn’t kill anyone.” I tell myself. *It’s a clear lie.*

“I...I know who sent the assassin, and it wasn’t you guys. I just don’t know why he had to sacrifice his life for— for *mine!*”

I give him an amused (and likely unhinged) look. “I cannot fathom the reason either.” He gets a downcast look, and just shakes his head. I feel something pull in my stomach. Is that...Pity? How could I ever feel pity for someone like him. The Capital has changed me; I must remember what I stand for.

“Well,” I I speak up, my tone coated in venom, “It’s good you know that we would never send a child to such a high priority mission.” He assesses me, doesn’t yell again, just; “Seems like they already have, Alecto. Is that... your name?” I begin to snap on his comment, but I catch myself, it’s futile. So I decided to focus on his question instead. I consider him for a moment. What harm could it do?

“I’m Cerberus. Cerberus K Vallence.” I say my name softly. I do not know what the middle letter stands for, and it does not concern me. “I’ve... heard the name Valance. From the staff, whispered.” Jason mumbles. “Not surprised. We’re the lifeblood of Hades.” I say, pride-toned into my voice.

“...what are you going to do? Why haven’t- aren’t you going to kill me?” Jason asks. I consider this, I will dispose of him eventually, not yet. “Not in my orders this time.” I respond, screwing

the bottle closed. I sit back against the cement, his eyes land on my bandaged leg. “Are you hurt?”

Why would he want to know? Weakness assessment? I doubt it, he’s very bad at tactical things as all the experience around him has proved. “Yes. Injured. Hurt is the word of a child without understanding. Hurt is the term of a man who never grew and has been left on his own.” I correct, I explain. Jason tilts his head; “You talk like a writer, too.”

I nod, a smile threatens me. I still see flecks of browned blood (on my hands, it wasn’t my fault!) from the record player man, and that silences the ichor of pride. The silence drags on, I dislike it. “Talk.” I tell Jason, staring at the cement floor. I don’t want to think. “About what?” I want him to scream at me, let out his anger-

“Tell me about your dreams.” I ask, he stares. “-You scream in your sleep, you cry and struggle.” I inform him, as if he already does not know. “Oh. Yeah.” Jason looks shaken, as if he’d rather not think about it. “Nightmares. Um, about plastic.” there’s more. I don’t press, although I’m not sure why.

“Since you’re awake, we can keep going.” I say, already I am uneasy. I feel as though we are being followed. I get up, pull Jason up by the wrists. He flinches when I grab him, we both pause for a second. Does he fear the mad dog in me, what he has seen glimmers of, the snaps and sickening cracks? I fear myself as well, Cerberus. A guard dog, baited into biting down, hard.

“*Sorry.*” he mumbles. I wonder what he is sorry for now, how come he hasn’t seen that that word has no effect on me? I do not *care* for his apologies, no matter the reasoning behind them. He has... they have taken too much to give anything back, to ever be received with open arms.

We begin to walk, I drag him, I am rough and unkind in motions. Jason cries no more, but that was all the noise I could have heard, so late it’s early. My mind begins to wander...

Khiron is dead. It hits me softly. I didn’t know him so well, but there’s something about him, there *was* something he knew about me, the way his eyes had widened. Is that why he had given me the note, slipped it into my shoe? It has a *K* scrawled on the outside, hurried. I slip my hand into the pocket it was in, fidget with it, don’t take it out. I’ll give it to Jason later. Not now- I will let him grieve. *You could have saved him.*

I stiffen. What? Jason looks at me, confused. The realization (this one) hurts. Why can’t I ever do things right? I saved the prince, I let a man die. I’ve done this before, I wish it was a new experience, it’s not **it’s not**.

“Oh.” a whisper from Jason. I turn, sniff. The stench, the rot hits me hard. A few days of clean air, I have grown easy in my breaths. I am quick to change it, fix them. In from the mouth, out of the nose, short little gasps if you are walking slowly. The prince gags, he doesn’t know how. I could wear my mask, I could let him. No. “Do you like it, *sir*?” I ask, drawing out the last word. He swallows and looks away; “You should pu-” I tighten the gag. “I don’t want to hear it.” And with that, we start into the neutral territories.

Plastic is scattered around the ground, starkly different from the “Blessed Isles”. Jason looks both scared and oh-so-sad. He’s holding his breath, I will give him my mask before it gets too bad. The sun stays down, but I know it will rise in a few hours. Jason won’t be able to run anytime soon, and I won’t be able to carry him the whole way.

I’m going to need help, I guess. And I see the exact thing I have been dreading and waiting for after only another hour of walking (Jace is panting by now, having a hard time in the air, I am a little displeased.) I see a patrol car. “Sit down.” I tell Jace, and he tiredly slumps. The zipties have cut into his ankles, I notice. I don’t smile this time, seeing droplets.

“Hey Cerberus.” He says quietly, staring at the red cloth round my leg. “...What, Jeffery?” He looks very taken aback. Sometimes I pretend to forget people's names. Y’know, just to rub in the salt that I *do not* care about them. “I was gonna say that we’re matching.” he tilts his face up.

I look away as a small, shaken laugh breaks from my lips. Things are getting wilder by the day. Am I monstrous enough to keep up?

The truck comes closer, beaten and old but still loud! I feel my shoulders tense, but my face stays cold. Jason struggles to try and get to his feet, but fails. I don’t help him. “Vander, pop the back for this-” the truck halts quite jerkily, and my eyebrow raises. Vander is a smooth driver, from what I’ve heard. I’ve avoided riding in this menacing truck-like contraption.

Someone struggles with the door, before half falling out. I watch in mild disbelief as one of the patrol guards points their gun at me- one I can tell from where I’m standing is unloaded. “...um?” This has never happened before, even with the most demented guards. They know how to *obey*. Just as I did when I was unable to fight and claw my way to where I am. And the real guards, not these patrol clowns, well....

They don’t mess with me any longer.

“Hands up! We’re here for the prince!” the guard shouts in a frankly childish manner. I sigh, grab my knife, twirl it around my fingers. They’re fakes. It’s oh-so obvious. I pretend to raise my hands- and then I pounce, knocking her to the ground. The guard punches me hard in the gut, and I barely feel it as I pin down her wrists. She squirms futilely, and I feel dizzy for a millisecond. But *I won’t go as far as I did with Niobe.*

I press the blade of my damascus, sharp against her neck. “Stay still. One cry and it’s over.” I whisper harshly. My hands pry off the mask, and I hear Jason startle from where he’s (barely) managed to get up onto his knees. “Cala?!” he exclaims. I roll my eyes at the utter devotion in his tone. How can he be so loyal? Loyalty gets you killed.

Though I suppose, Jason isn’t far from that. “Ale- Cerberus, get off her, please?” He half yells, trying to get over. The sun is peeking up and out, I am hot and sweaty, the plastic fumes familiar to only me, Cala coughs even as my blade is to her. I can feel her pulse, softly thrumming, speedy beats. A trapped animal, a cat under the dogs claws.

I could teach her, the guards, Jason... all of them, a lesson. Don’t bark if you won’t bite down; my mother says. But my blade draws no more than a drop before the other guard comes out, hands up. “Mask off.” I don’t need to say ‘or else’. I’m in control now. She takes it off, and it is Medea. She looks at me with hatred, as if I had broken her trust. Maybe I am a traitor. Maybe I don’t care.

“You two really just-” I sigh, sharp and annoyed. “What was the plan, exactly? Point an unloaded gun at me, all robo- rebel?” They frown, I suppose they don’t know what that is, being fancy pricks. “You’re pathetic. I should make an example out of this, shouldn’t I, *sir*.” I mock the prince once more.

“C-Cerberus, please. I swear- they,” his voice sounds broken. I feel just this slight wave of pity again- gross. “Use your words, golden boy.” I say darkly. “I-I’ll go along so well. You can do whatever you want to me, order me to do things, b-” He flinches a little bit, but forces out the word “beat me up if you want, and I won’t resist. Just don’t- don’t hurt them. *Please.*” There’s something new in his tone.

It’s... courage, strange from such a lamb of a person. Willingness to sacrifice himself- is he too willing? Is this bravery, or stupidity? I can’t tell, and it drives me mad. But I cannot find it in me to refuse, who knows how they may come in handy. I sigh darkly. “I could make you do anything I wanted *either way.*” Hasn’t been a struggle at all.

“I’ll fight. I know I can’t beat you, but I won’t stop trying, till I’m dead.” I stare him down, and this time... he doesn’t back up, take a minute. A dead hostage is useless. “Fine. You do anything I say, understood? *And* that goes for you as well, ‘guard’” I snap.

She nods slowly enough and I pull off her, taking the gun. It’s no use to those who can’t use it. Calla is still shaking, trembling slightly. Her eyes darken as she looks at Jason, then me. “Back up.” I order, mostly to see if she’ll listen. Pure hatred reflects in her eyes and then, she steps back.

“Get lost. I don’t care where, just stop following us. If you come back, I will finish what I started. And Jason will watch.” I spit, venom-coated words that burn my throat. And so they do as I say, leaving in some unknown direction. Jace whispers something to Calla as she passes, an apology.

Jason manages to get to his feet, and I watch him, ever so silent. He looks at me strangely; “*I didn’t know you were a killer.*” I tense up. Am I a killer? I don’t want to be a killer. I don’t look at him, and just pull on his zipties, “Shut up and move.” I growl. I try to ease my worries as we walk deeper into Hades. I shouldn’t worry if I’m a killer, for a weapon doesn’t care who it harms.

Chapter 9: Jason

“Never judge someone by the way he looks or a book by the way it's covered; for inside those tattered pages, there's a lot to be discovered.” - George Elliot

We've been walking for hours now.

I don't know what time it is, but the sky is getting darker, or maybe I'm imagining it. It's hard to tell from the unending clouds of smog deeper in Hades that block out the sky. Or maybe the smog has stained my eyes, as it has already done with my lungs.

Every breath is excruciating, like I can't get a big enough breath, and yet I have too much air in my lungs. And that because it's not air, it's a poison, sapping the life out of everything.

But I don't complain. How can I? Alec— I mean Cerberus has grown up in this place his whole life, and he's not complaining. And anyways, I deserve this. It's my fault that Hades is like this.

We continue to walk, stepping over plastic piles, and avoiding people when Cerberus sees them. Every step makes a crunching sound. I've stopped being able to tell if it's trash, bones, bugs, or plastic. Some steps make a moist squelch, and I feel nauseous.

My stomach softly growls. I raise my eyebrows in surprise. My stomach never growls, unless something is coming back up.

How can I be hungry? I don't have the right to be hungry, with how much food I'd get in the tower. I try to shake it off, but my stomach growls again. This time Cerberus notices.

He looks back at me, and scowls. “Worked up an appetite, sir?” he asks, and I flinch a little.

That's what my dad used to call me when he was mad, telling me how privileged I was, and how I “should be grateful that my father paid attention to me”.

I open my mouth but then stop, remembering the deal. He said do everything he said, and he said before to shut up and move.

I stay silent, and he looks at me expectantly. I avoid his gaze, and he stands there, as if expecting an answer. Then, a smirk slightly creeps across his face, “Mhm, I did tell you to stay silent. Good then, I don't have to hear your insufferable voice.”

He walks over to me, and raises his hand. I flinch, is he angry? He's probably angry that I'm hungry even though we've only just got here. I probably deserve th—

He reaches behind me, and grabs his bag. I forgot he put it on my back earlier. He opens it, and reaches inside looking for something. While he rummages in it, he looks up at me, "Sit." He nods to a pile of mud, trash, and plastic shards. I nod slightly.

I plop down, and I feel the shards dig into my legs. I look down and realize that my pants are shredded up, now more shorts length.

When did that happen? They must have been getting caught on chunks of plastic sticking out of the ground. I lift my leg slightly, and bits of glass and plastic sticking out of my legs, opening my scars. Blood drips down my legs.

I feel my chest tighten, my breathing quicken, and get a sense of *deja vu*. I've been like this millions of times before.

"Found it." Cerberus announces, pulling me out of my thoughts. I look at him, then back at my legs. Crap, he can see the cuts.

I try to cover them up, but he already turns to me. He looks at me, and at my legs. He shrugs, "First time, I bet." I let out a breath, so this is normal.

He leans down to me, and hands me a piece of bread and a water flask out of his bag. I give him a confused look, and he shoves it into my hands. He glares at me, "Don't think this is a favor, I just need you in your best shape to make it the rest of the way."

I open to say something, but then just slightly not. He nods, and pulls another piece of bread and flask out of his bag, and sits facing away from me.

I look at the bread. It looks truly exquisite. I try to take a bite, but as I do, it just unnerves my stomach.

I can't waste this food. It's priceless. I contemplate what to do, when there's some movement out of the corner of my eye.

I glance over, and see a small child peeking out from behind a broken table. They quickly hide, and I start to shout to the kid to come back, however I stop myself. I glance at Cerberus, who seems to be concerned with eating and scouting out the area.

"*Hey, come back. I won't hurt you. Are you hungry?*" I whisper, as soft as I can, and the kid peeks out again, and slightly nods.

I wave to them, and they cautiously creep out from behind the table. He's a little boy, couldn't be more than five, covered in soot. The only thing that covered his body was a sack and some bags. He is extremely frail, to the point where you can see every detail of his bones.

"*Oh, you look... When's the last time you ate?*" I whisper, and he shakes his head,

"I...mm..I dunno." He manages to say, with a lot of concentration. His voice sounds raspy and dry.

I give him a somber look, and look at my bread. I wasn't going to eat it anyways. I hold it out to him and whisper, "*Take it.*"

He looks at me suspiciously, his eyes full of distrust, but also hunger, "*you...true?*" he asks, beginning to reach for the roll.

I nod, *“I’m sure. No lie, only true”* He snatches the bread from me, and spits on it. He gives me a triumphant look,

‘Heh! You don’t want now!’

I chuckle a bit, *“It was never a trick... wait, what’s your name?”* I ask him.

He looks me up and down, then nods to himself, “Okay, ... trust you. Me call R-aine.” He sounds out, and beams. It’s amazing how this kid can still be happy.

“Well hello, Raine, I’m Jason. It’s nice to meet you.” I look at what he’s wearing, and I take off my suit jacket, *“It’s getting cold kid, hear you go.”*

I wrap my jacket around him, and it’s giant on him. I take off my belt and use that to keep it from falling off. *“There, now you’ll be warm.”* His eyes begin to water, and that reminds me, *“Oh, and here is some clean water. Don’t try to save it, drink it when you get thirsty it should last you a fe–”*

He rushes at me and gives me a hug, I can feel his bones, and his whole body feels slightly rough and calloused, “Th-thank you...J-Ja...sun.” I embrace him, and put the canister around his neck. I lift my arms above his neck, and he looks at my wrist bound, *“Why–”*

“Shhh.” I interrupted him. I look him in the eyes, wiping his tears away, *“Don’t worry about me. Now, go, and listen to what I said. Stay strong, Raine.”*

He looks at me, then nods, his face determined. He runs off and I smile. Then the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight up. I feel a presence behind me.

“Ahem.” I turn around, knowing who’s there.

Cerberus is standing there, just raising an eyebrow at me. “What do you think you’re doing? I told you to stay silent, and to eat. You didn’t do either! There are *reasons* we don’t go around feeding street kids, idiot!”

I look up at him, scared. What is he going to do? Will he go after Cala and Medea because I broke the deal, “I- I wasn’t hungr– he seemed he n-needed it m-more.” I stutter, but realize he wasn’t really asking. I stop talking, and just look up at him.

He stares at me for a long second. I at first think he’s going to yell, but I know what a face looks like right before someone yells, and that isn’t it.

Then he does something I don’t expect. He blows air from his lips, then laughs. And this isn’t like the semi-laugh from when he was in the Blessed Isles, or the cruel laugh he would make before.

No, this is a genuine laugh. He looks at me, and then tries to collect himself. His face stiffens slightly, lips curling. He shakes his head, and then sits down beside me. I look at him, and even I crack a slight smile.

He looks over at me, and slightly shakes his head, “Oh norns. You’re absolutely backwards, aren’t you?” Cerberus looks at me, more tired than angry or crude. I don’t know how to respond, so I just look away. “I don’t have more rations on me.” he tosses his half eaten piece of bread onto my lap. “-idiot.” he grumbles, but it’s almost... playful.

I slightly smirk, and whisper, “thanks, but it will just come back up.” I tell him, and hand it back to him. I give him a smile, and he looks dejected, “You good?”

He looks over at me, and takes the bread, “Yeah– well no. I’m annoyed. You’re...unexpected. And that’s strange, because I’m not wrong often. I’ve never felt this way before, and I shouldn’t. A weapon isn’t supposed to feel anything at all.”

I look at him, with disbelief on my face. “Weapon? What do you mean weapon? You’re a human being, and you have your own feelings.” I reach to comfort him, but he snatches his hand away and his face hardens, “This is what I’m talking about! I let my captive give *me* emotional advice! You’re not supposed to be like this!”

He begins to breathe faster, but then shakes it off, “It doesn’t matter how fake you are. Your legacy created this mess, and continued it after your dad died, so once we ransom you off and make our negotiations, you will be out of my hair, *Prince Fleece Jr.*”

I clench my teeth when I hear that last part, I freeze up. He begins to get up, when I mutter something, “*Faunus.*” I growl

“What?” Cerberus asks, looking down at me

“I’m Jason Pluto Faunus, not Fleece. I’m the son of Scyla Faunus, not Pelias Fleece.” I growl. I’m not controlling myself, it’s as if I’m speaking on instinct.

“Faunus...?” Cerberus asks, taken aback, “I recognize that name.” He begins to ponder, but he snaps back quickly, “But no matter! It doesn’t matter what you want to go by, you are the son of the king, which means we can use you for ransom.”

I shake my head and begin laughing. I can’t keep lying about this, and I think I’ve cracked, “Oh, that won’t work.” He frowns, turning slightly. “*What?*”

“The council won’t pay anything for me! They don’t care, Cerberus!” my voice feels too loud and the sudden intensity of Cerberus’s glassy eyes jumps to match it. He grips his knife, which seems to be a thing he does whenever he’s stressed.

“You’re going to explain, right now. And if you lie... well.” His gaze tells me everything I need to know.

But for some reason I’m not scared. There is something about the cockiness in his face getting wiped off his face that invigorates me, “You guys don’t know about the council? Ha! If you don’t know of the council, then you guys must really have no information.” I mock him, and he starts to get flustered. “How can you be *so* clueless about your own enemy?!”

Cerberus grits his teeth, “Shut UP. *You are our* enemy! So quit *ridiculing* me, before I gut you like a dead man. We are aware who the Council is, but they are under your control, from what we’ve heard.” He’s fuming, but I don’t back down.

“Well, your sources are full of feces. The old prunes that make up the council are the real ones who control A.P.P. They’re the ones who make the real decisions, and they have since the very beginning, like my grandfather’s time.” I look at him, and his face is a mix of furious, and stunned.

I shake my head, “And they don’t like change, trust me. They gave my father no real power, and I have no real power, just a figurehead. And if you try to be something more, well, they’ll eat you alive. Take it from me. I tried to do something, and I got an assassin sent for me.”

I look at my reflection in broken pieces of plastic, my hair is now mostly red, the gold having been washed out from sweat. My face is stained slightly gold, and grime covers my face, I look truly pitiful,

“I... will not give in to these half-baked lies, Jason.” Cerberus snarls, and I look up at him. His hands run through his hair, and his eyes are... psychopathic. Cracked with red, and his blue eyes are now more of a gray, like a water bottle cap.

“You- you’re just a liar. A terrible soul. That’s what it is!” He’s shaking, and I feel bad, but can’t hold back my smile, “This is another one of your little tricks! Well, I won’t fall for it! Why would they do that anyhow!?”

I roll my eyes, “I told you. I tried to take their power, and they did like it. And if I’m lying, where did the assassin come from? And why would the assassin be wearing a rebel patch on his jacket? Can’t you see, they are trying to frame the rebels, and kill me! Two birds, one stone.”

“SHUT UP!” He shouts, “STOP LYING, YOU SICK ARSE! WE ARE GOING TO RANSOM YOU AND SHUT DOWN THE COMPANY! THEN THE PLASTIC WILL STOP BEING MADE AND USED. ALL OUR PROBLEMS WILL BE GO—”

“Wait,” I stopped him. *That’s* their plan? “Let me get this straight, your whole plan is to get rid of the use of plastic, and that’s it?”

“Uh- yeah?” Cerberus stares at me like I’m an idiot, but he doesn’t realize he’s an idiot.

I stand up, and give a surprised laugh. Cerberus backs up, as I tower over him, I didn’t notice before, but he’s only like 5’ 9, while I’m almost 6’ 2.

“I didn’t think you could be this *Short-sighted*,” I mock him, and his face flushes. He goes to respond, but I talk over him.

“You’re just going to get rid of the plastic? We RUN on plastic. See that bag you have? It has plastic! Medical supplies? Plastic! Cars? Plastic! Walkie- Talkie? I can build things, and the electronics have plastics! Buildings, weapons, your clothes? Plastic, Plastic, and more plastic!!!”

“Oh, how about that ocean?” Cerberus finally jumps in, and points to the ocean, “*PLASTIC!*” He gives me a triumphant look, but I just smile.

Has he put any thought into this? He doesn’t understand anything? “Yes, it is. But what are you going to do with that plastic? It doesn’t go away, but plastic will be outlawed!” He opens to retort, but he has nothing, as I thought.

“And you want to know something?” I ask him, “I want change!”

“Then why didn’t you change things!?” He shouts at me, how can he be this dense?

“Why can’t you get this through your mind?” I shout, “The board makes the decisions! And when I argued that to the board, and you know what happened!”

I look into his eyes, and I can see his world view flickering, “W-well you should have gone to the public!”

“HA! Like that would work! The people don’t care because they aren’t affected. Either that, or they see me as public enemy number one if they do care, JUST LIKE YOU! That’s why I

have to keep up my public appearances! Nobody will listen to me if I don't have a good reputation!"

I go rub my temple, but then remember my arms are bound. It's funny, I'm the one tied up, but still hold the power in the conversation, "And anyways, the Board fuels stupid arguments to distract people. Like what the hell is the cat debate!? But you see where I'm coming from? It's not that simple! And here's the thing, I agreed with the rebel's cause and when you took me, I thought maybe there was a chance! But now I see you have no true plan, and are just as hopeless as m—"

"SHUT THE RYK UP!" Cerberus shouts, and swings at me. I see his hand raise, and it is as if his figure is growing. I'm small, he's giant. I feel as though I'm a kid again, his hands wrinkled and covered with golden rings. Royal robes drape off his arms, "*This is for your own good, boy.*" I hear in my head.

my knees give out. I collapse to the ground and his hand starts to come down,

"I'M SORRY YOUR HIGHNESS, PLEASE NOT AGAIN!" I shout, and tears well up in my eyes. I clench my eyes tight together, awaiting the hit, but I hear a slight, "*wha-?*"

I slightly open my eyes, and Cerberus is looking at me, taken aback. He looks like he's about to question, but then just nods. He lifts his head, eyes washing into a cold, darkened glare. "Good, remember who's in control." He glances up at the sky, and it's almost pitch dark, "We'll sleep here today, and we'll arrive tomorrow. Now really stay silent and don't even think about running. Rebels control Hades, and they might not care about you being a hostage, especially after what you said. Not to mention, I could use a good hunt and I doubt those two have gotten so far."

He starts to walk, but then he pauses and turns, "And if what you said was true, about you being a worthless hostage, then, well, get on your knees and pray it's not true. We in Syren don't like to waste supplies on a mission, just to not reap a reward."

He goes and lies on a pile of plastic, and my body gives out. I relax, and don't even care about the shards digging into my skin, and the bugs crawling around on my body. And as I fade off, I see a grub-like bug eating a bottle cap. I wonder how these bugs still don't know not to eat trash.

I'm standing on a giant rose. But it's not a real rose, it's a plastic rose, made out of fragments of trash. I try to move, but I'm sinking, as if it's quicksand. I struggle, shaking. I try to shout, but all that comes out is a dry rasp.

Slowly, the plastic consumes me. The rose closes, as if de-aging, and my whole body is consumed into the bud, my head the only thing poking out. The pieces of plastic slice into my skin like teeth, and I can feel my blood draining from my body. I try to shriek, but my vocal cords are torn apart.

I can't breathe and I can feel my skin turn blue. Then, A figure rises from the land in front of me, holding a giant sphere of garbage on his back, "**It's your turn to carry!**" It booms, and

throws the giant planet over me, but it's not a planet, but a giant hand, going to crush me. I struggle, but I'm held in place, I scream and the floor shakes. The earth is rumbling/ It is the apocolap-

I wake up to Cerberus shaking me, "AHHHHH!" I scream and sit straight up. I look around, and he stands up nonchalantly.

"Time to go, can't waste daylight." He says, and pulls me up. I groggily wipe my eyes, and immediately regret it. Grime gets in my eyes, and they begin to water, and I instinctively rub them again, only making it worse.

Cerberus looks at me, panicking, and I can make out a slight shaking of the head, "Here." He says as he tosses me a towel, "Just to wipe your eyes, then give it back. You're gonna run today and I need you to be able to see two feet in front of you."

I nod, and wipe my eyes, then toss the towel back. We go to leave, but Cerberus puts his hand up, "Stop, something's not right."

I pause. Nothing seems out of the ordinary to me, but this isn't my ordinary. Something rustles behind me, and I whip my head around, and see a figure jumping at me.

Cerberus pushes me out of the way, and I hear the blade in the man's hand woosh right next to my ear.

I stumble over, and I look up to see a boy in a mask, and I immediately know who it is, Khiron's killer.

I would have thought the board would have gotten someone new, but I guess not.

The Assassin lunges at me again, but gets, again, gets struck by Cerberus. Stunned, the assassin stumbles, but then turns to Cerberus. He raises his daggers, but Cerberus lands a punch in the jaw.

But that doesn't go without consequence. The assassin manages to kick him right in the kidney, and Cerberus stumbles. The killer raises one of his blades, and I remember what Khiron said, "*Laced with poison.*"

I jump up and charge, ramming the assassin, making him tumble over. He tries to sit up, but I headbutt him. It tries to hit me, but I'm biting and scratching. He flails around, trying to grab onto something, but it's too chaotic.

Rage envelopes me, he killed Khiron, he murdered my dad. I continue my assault, kicking and elbowing. But then, I manage to knock off his mask, and underneath, I see the face of a kid. An innocent child, who couldn't be older than 13, if he's an early bloomer.

I look into his eyes, and see myself, with the fury that once consumed my father's eyes. I stop hitting, and He kicks me off. He goes to get up, but Cerberus has recovered, and pounces on him.

He begins wailing into him, a barrage of punches. I thought he was just going to subdue him, but he just keeps going. Blood spatters, stains his knuckles. I snap out of my frozenness, and begin to stand,

Hey Cerberus, he's had enough." I say, but he doesn't listen. I hear a bone crack, and I can hear his mutters under his breath,

"Murderer... Evil... Khiron... nothing like you...killed!" He growls under his breath

I have to put a stop to this, it's a child. He's going to kill him. "Cerberus, STOP, HE'S A KID!"

I shout and run over to him. I swing my bound arms, and nail him in the head.

Cerberus is stunned for a sec, and gets knocked off the assassin. He looks at me, bloodlust in his eyes, "He killed Khiron, he's a monster." He growls, and slams me to the ground before I can do anything. Then he just turns away from me, and walks over to the boy.

"Well, if he's a monster, what does that make you?" I groan, beginning to get up again.

"I have told you before. A weapon, Jason." And he punches the kid in the face, over and over.

My legs wobble, but I start to stand up.

CRACK

I feel a strike to my head, and I start to go down. The world begins to fade, but I slightly hear a, "Sorry punk, can't let you hurt the leader's son."

"Shut up Aries, we gotta get him off that kid before it's Niobe all over again."

Looks like the rebels have arrived.

The world goes black.

Chapter 10: Cerberus

"Born in destruction, it follows you everywhere you go. Raised in destruction is the only friend you know. (Maybe peace is not meant for all of us)" -AH

THE DARK IS FEARSOMELY EMPTY, FOR ALL OUR HEROES HAVE BEEN IRREVOCABLY WRONG. I AM WILLING TO BET AND YOU MAY SEE IT IN THE WAY THEY BARE THEIR TEETH AND BRASHLY UNSHEATH KNIVES.

THEY SAY THAT THEY AVOID THE KILLING, THAT THEY ARE ABOVE SUCH OTHERS WHO COMMIT TRIVIALITIES BUT WE KNOW DO WE NOT KNOW WHAT A LIE THIS IS?

FOR LITTLE ROGERS WHO PROMISED HE'D NEVER TAKE A LIFE TILL HE THREW A MAN OVERBOARD AND DIDN'T THINK TO WATCH HIM DROWN, AND TO THE BATMAN WITH HIS DARK BROOD AND BLOOD SPLATTERED MASKS.

FOR ALL THE VILLAINS OF THE STORIES WHO WERE FAR KINDER JUST IRREVOCABLY DAMAGED AND THROWN INTO THE RED FLUORESCENT SPOTLIGHTS.

TO THE ONES IN THE SUPERHERO SHADOWS; SIDEKICKS AND CHILDREN, PARTNERS AND LOVERS.

ALL DEAD FOR THE PLOT.

I am lost in a blind rage as my arms are yanked back. I struggle wildly, until I've come out to my senses. I look down, and see my boots are filthy with mud and luke-warm blood. The enemy, a child- *that's all he is, a little killer...* His eyes are shut, face bruised. I have my vengeance for Khiron.

"Oh, you're a right dogfighter." laughs one of the older rebels besides me. I turn to Aries and look him in the eyes, message clear; *not the time*. He puts his hands up in mock surrender. I get myself out of the grasp, and walk slowly back to the assassin. I use my boot to tilt up his chin, and his eyes look at me weakly. "Do you surrender, bird-boy?" I ask calmly as I can.

"..." there isn't a response, as I pull off the bottom half of his mask, which resembles a muzzle, almost. His scrawny arms push himself off the ground, only for me to kick him down again. Perhaps it is cruelty, but I am the guard dog of Hades and this pup must learn to mind his manners.

"Yes, sir." he whispers. I'm not used to the title, and my face must twitch. "What's your name, hm?" Aries asks, and I step away to survey the situation. "...Sparrow..." I hear, in a soft mumble. Minerva and Aries had come out on patrol, I guess. Hearing the... erm, commotion, they must have come to assess it. Must have been quite a sight, to see me as wild as that.

It's something under my skin, that lives and breathes with me, that attacked the sparrow so violently. It has both helped me survive and slowly killed me, and I believe that the duality of my anger and my words will be forever the way it is now.

The sky is bright (as it gets in Hades) somehow it is both windy and furiously hot outside. Jason's normally prim and proper hair flaps haphazardly in the harsh breeze- messy with mud. I greet Minerva with a nod, and glance at the blood stains on her sleeves from pulling me away. Those won't be easy to get out, although I suppose having another's blood smeared in a sign of status;

I am wild, I am cruel, and you should not mess with me.

The ground is soft and mucky, under the blanket of plastics and milk cartons. There was a time people tried to reuse them, and gathered a good many in this area, a once-great town square. There are still a few building wrecks, metal and concrete jungles. I wonder what it might've been, had we not turned our world to a business....

“Cerberus.” Minerva calls me back from my thoughts, and I look. Sparrow has been zip-tied the same way I had done Jason, gagged tighter. I frown slightly, for it looks crude, but what else is to be expected of Aries? “-is this the prince?” she asks, and I nod, and then correct; “King, now.”

She holds Jason’s unconscious body up. His head has already begun swelling from Aries punch. “That little twig is the-” Aries, looks absolutely gob-smacked, and stares more than what’s polite. “I could break him with one hand! Oh my god-” he’s so appalled by this, in fact, that I have to wonder what he imagined Jason looked like.

The scruffy little bag of bones (sparrow) is tugged up, and I pull my hostage up. I’m startled at the sharp wince he makes in his sleep, but I try to ignore it. “Why aren’t his ankles locked?” Minerva asks, not bothering to hide her frown. “I was worried about infection... plus he was starting to have a hard time moving and I couldn’t carry him the whole time.” I know my explanation falls on deaf ears, as I ramble. I will be facing my mother on the count of that flaw.

“Let’s go.” I tell my ragtag little group. And they obey, for now. I take Jason from Minerva, as a semi apology for my earlier trivalty. We only have to walk for like half an hour longer, and I manage to keep Jason thrown over my (now rather sore) shoulder.

He’s such a strange person, and I have formed an unfortunate view of him, one unfitting for the narrative and the role Jason should be playing. I cannot believe I’ve been so... careless, messy in my actions. Somewhere along the line I became lost in Khiron’s soft tones and the smooth pens Jason so absentmindedly provided. At some point I drank too much milk and honey.

No matter. I will fix that as soon as I can, and I’m sure my mother will help. Talking to her always gives me a new grip over my potential, and my failure(s). I feel the overwhelming urge to break Jason. He is such a smug... spoiled... brat.

The fact I felt a little bad for him earlier? Unfathomable. It won’t happen again. Jason begins to stir, slowly. “He looks like he’s about to wake.” Aries tells me. I glance at him, “Yeah. Wanna do something fun?” He raises an eyebrow. I smirk, and (rather immaturely) drop him onto the hard, plastic sharded ground.

The prince (king?) wakes with a childlike cry. Does he ever sleep without nightmares? I can’t imagine it. “ah- “ he groans, softly. Looks up at me through bleary, red-rimmed eyes. I smile, Aries barks a sharp laugh, the same one he used holding me down in training so many years ago. I still have the scars, I am thankful for those lessons.

Jason weakly tries to get up, Aries kicks him in the ribs. It is cruel, I think. Jason has never had

to struggle, so he knows not how to deal with it. And he will be dead long before he learns. Jason flinches, pathetic. Why am I thinking about his actions so deeply? I do not care.

“Get up.” When Jason struggles, fish out of water- he’s kicked down. “I’m talking to you, get the hell up!” Aries snarls. Bruises black and blue flood my brain. I am thankful. Sweat stained baggy shirts and bloody noses, hot mid-summer air and weak gasps. I am thankful

You’re the goddamn guard dog of hell. Get. Up.

I am thankful.

Jason is red in the face by the time he’s up. He stares at me. I stare back, undaunted, apathetic. I am a weapon, he is human. I think I prefer the cold metal to unkind flesh. “Freakin weakling, ain't ya?” Aries gloats. As if he does not outbulk Jason in every way. The prince goes to respond. I warn him with my eyes. Don’t talk in bark, unless you can back it up with your bite.

“Take your god-forsaken golden boy.” Aries says, roughly grabbing me and pushing me in Jason’s direction. I glare, and he just smirks condescending back. “I’m not carrying you. You can run, can’t you?”

It turns out, he can’t. It took less than half an hour before he’s on his knees, rasping. I look at Minerva, who remains unimpressed. The gas mask I had is roughly tied to Jason’s grimy face. It hurts as I tighten it against his nose, he winces. I stare at him, blank. I am so blank, all of a sudden. I was horrible. I am horrible?

I just broke a child. A tiny little thing. *A tiny little killer.* A little kid. Jason isn’t so little. He’s a horrible person. I could break him, and it wouldn’t be bad

“Cerberus.” Minerva calls as I stare. She knows this look, that I have, the (absence) of one. It means I am a good weapon. A good soldier follows orders, but more so his heart. I am a weapon. I follow orders, blindly, puppet-like. “We’ve got to finish patrol. We’ll take the ‘Sparrow’. Bring the hostage soon as you can, understood? Your mother is expecting you.”

A chill runs down my spine, cold and strange. My face doesn’t change, as I nod, obedient. She has the (ghost) of a smile as she and Aries leave. Aries brushes his rough hands against my wrist before he leaves. There are burn marks. He gave them to me. I am thankful.

But as soon as they are gone, Jason grabs me. I turn, face still impassive. “What?” I ask. “What. Was. That?!” he yells. I am silent... “What, golden?” He looks unhinged, at a loss for words.

“You- you just- you were gone.” his voice cracks. I frown at the emotion, but internally.

“Meaning?”

“Your face. Your motions. It was wrong. It wasn’t... you, Cerberus.” He grapples for words and I sigh. How has he not understood? “There is no “me” Jason. I cannot be gone if there was nothing there in the first place.” I informed him again. He stares, “How long are you going to lie to yourself?! You’re not some loaded pistol!” he reaches for my wrists, sees the burns- I yank my hand away.

“Don’t touch me, your Highness.” I tell him, cold, apathetic, and my chest is hurting. It hurts and at the same time I am black ice, a killer without a face, without a means, without a method. I am destruction, I am the eye of the storm. I am calm and I am the fire and I am crying and it won’t stop and I can’t make a sound and there aren’t any tears.

And Jason won’t stop looking at me, as I cry without tears and without noise, in my mind and in my chest. I am so tired, and if he is not a liar, if Jason told me the truth yesterday...

“...Cerberus?” he asks and he sounds sympathetic like he hasn’t shattered my world into a million tiny pieces. I hate him and I feel for him. I am sorry and the sky is broken and I can’t fix it.

“You are a liar. You are a liar, Jason, because I don’t want to fight a war I am losing.” I tell him, and he doesn’t understand but perhaps at the same time he does? I can’t tell anymore. “We’re going to walk,” *and we are not going to stop until you are in another's hands and I can forget you until you're only flesh and blood.*

Plastic crunches, not under my shoes but under Jason’s stupid fancy ones. I hope they make him bleed, I like the irony. But I hear a second set of footsteps, as I let Jason rest after another hour. I have calmed by then and I am no longer breaking apart. I am glued by fleeting hopes that my mother will hold me in her cold acid-burned gloves and tell me how I will save us...

I can tell, by the noise level, that it’s a child. An untrained one... not like Sparrow. I let myself pretend not to hear, wander off just long enough... and sure enough, when I’m back, there’s a young boy, maybe five years old, scrappy and oh-so tiny. He holds my water canister (I don’t plan on Jason dropping dead from dehydration) and whispers at my hostage.

It’s only for a moment. That’s all it takes to have him by the scruff, canister at the prince’s feet. Jason looks utterly terrified, as if- oh. I know what he thinks, and it’s good he’s learned what I am. Monstrous. But a little part of me misses the kindness and remorse that Khiron and he shared with me. I cock an eyebrow at the fearful gasp of Jason, as I support the kid with my arms. Damm light little thing.

“Hello there. You must be the little crawler Jason’s been supplying, hm?” He shuts his eyes tight. I sigh, for I am scary and (I need it that way) but sometimes it is annoying. “I’m not going to rough you up. I’m a Valence.” I tell him, for the name is one he will have heard. He looks up, excited. Why do they place such... (misguided) hope in me?

“Mm..mhhm.” he gives a feeble nod. “Name?” I ask, I haven’t set him down. He’s not running this time, little bugger. “..I-it’s... ra-in.” He pronounces it weird.

“Raine,” I smile slightly. Jason winces. I am bad at smiling. “Well. How old are you, 5?” He bobbles his head, yes. “Do you have parents? I’d like to have a word.” Raine looks down and I know the answer. “Okay then, crawler.”

I set him down, with a firm glance. And I give the same to Jason, who looks offended, like; *how would you ever imagine me to do something stupid?* Out of my bag I pull a bit of twine with my sign tied onto it. “Camp Aberdeen. You know it?” I ask. He glances at Jason, who gives a thumbs up, and the boy nods..

“Head down there. Anybody asks, you show ‘em this and tell them the wolf sent you.” Hastily he nods, taking it. I give him a bit of bread and then whisper so Jason can’t hear; “*You’ve got a good spirit, Raine. You’re going to go places. I’ll see you soon.*”

“Now scam, crawler.” Raine does as I say, and he’s gone. Jason stares at me, he is so lost.

Please stop trying to understand me, I want to say. You won’t like what you find. “Get up already. We’re almost there.” He’s getting a little better at walking, the blood on his legs has dried. He keeps staring at the people and sky in horror, and every time I see mothers or children, I give them some of my stolen rations. I feel like Raven Blood, the rebel who stole plastic and gave food to the poor. I think my childhood was weird.

When we reach Headquarters, there are people crawling from the outer ring. They mingle and mix and talk and jeer. I pay not much mind, apathy, then nod. Apathy, nod. I am thankful. People glare at Jason, hatred deep and deserved. I let them spit and cuss, but I do not allow them to hurt him. I want the kill.

But more so than looking at the hostage, they look at me. Angrily, hostile, respectful. I am outcast from them though I may have tried a long time ago to befriend them. I am the leader’s only offspring, the weapon she has groomed so flawlessly. I am lonely as a bomb. I wonder if anyone would ask what this feeling of outcastry is.

Maybe then I would try and get them to understand what it is like for me. What it feels like walking into a building where people side-eye me in the hallway and think I am *different*, and

maybe then I will try and get them to understand what I mean when I say *different* without having them give me a speech about why it is so great to be unique.

When we've reached the main building, an old town hall, Jason trips. Or perhaps he is tripped. Either way, I reflexively catch him and pull him up. He's a little too close for comfort and there is an awkward pause before I drag him inside. An agent hollers out my name, I turn, smirking. "Hey, you got him!"

"Yep." It's another long pause. "Can you lock him up or...?" I question, and the agent confirms. As Jason is marched away I am relieved to not look at him any longer. I miss the silence of my own thoughts and little of me (hidden bits of humanity) cry to bring him back! *He's all I have...*

I shudder on the way to my mother's meeting room because I already know where she will be. I always know. I am cold because I have given up my jacket (that I love) to protect one who needs it more... I am too kind today, too fake. Am I repenting for what I've done...

"Cerberus." Dark tones make me look up. My mother sits at the end of the crooked table, hands clasped, fingertips pressed to her temples. Her eyes are hard, unforgiving of anything that might become of us. The hood covers half her head, and I cannot make out many details. "Yes, moth-

"You're a proper agent. Use your manners." She scolds, and I nod. "Yes, ma'am." I stand close by to her, not too close. "You've been gone *for far too long*." she hisses, and I wince, knowing she's right. "I know, Ma'am. I... I didn't mean to. I was going as fast as I could with the hostage-" A sharp glare shuts me up.

"Where is the hostage, Cerberus?" she questions, and it seems as though her mouth remains in a still line as she speaks. I said "Did you want him here? I thought tha-" "You don't *think*, Cerberus. You follow your orders. You do not question anything, understand?" I nod quickly.

I'm running hard to the cells. I get strange looks, more than normal. I catch up to the agent and Jason soon enough though. "Change of plans. I need him." A raised eyebrow- "For the command lead." and I have the hostage who has since been re-gagged. Rather painfully, I observe.

"Okay Jason. There are rules to talking to my mother," I whisper as I walk fast, pulling him with me. A bruise is forming on his arm from the tightness of my grip. I wait for a response, remember he's gagged and shrug it off. "You bow your head. You listen, don't interrupt, don't talk back, don't fight. Understood?" We have reached the room door yet I wait for the skeptical nod before dragging him in. I am rough about it, (for show).

I meet my mother's gaze as I pull Jason into old metal cuffs, this place used to be a prisoner's cage...? Gallows... it still is in a way. They snap so perfectly, and I love the click of a well done task. I stand at my station to discuss with my mother. "Here he is, ma'am." Jason looks a little lost at the formality.

"*This* is the prince, hm?" Her tone is so... condescending, so hateful. And I know just how to mimic it; "In all his glory." She steps up, (heeled boots, protective) click against the floor. I stay still, posture perfect, I watch. She tilts his head up so she can look him in the eyes. "...Piteous."

Then all eyes are on me, and she begins. "Mission report, agent." I nod, rigid, cold. Jason's eyebrows are knit and he looks at me so sadly, pity? "Casualties minimal, 1. Not a registered agent that I have met. Butler. Duration: seven days, five hours. 3 resting periods. Mission successful, delivery delayed." I sum up, and I am proud of how I have learned to organize these facts, tuck them away.

"You've forgotten mileage, injuries, god... are you trying to be disobedient, Cerberus? Are you asking to be in Aries's hands this week?" I- I NO. I do not want that, and perhaps a glimmer of fear flits through my eyes, and my mother, my commander clicks her tongue disapprovingly. I don't know the miles traversed. "Right leg twisted, presumed mild concussion from a fall. ...Some stitches came undone, but I was able to treat those wounds well enough without alerting the hostage." Jason looks uhm... horrified, for some reason?

Before she can ask, and sentence me to a broken body with Aries, I interject; "Hostage accumulated mild lacerations and reopening on a nasal wound. Both have been cleaned but to avoid infection, I suggest re-treating."

"It's not your place to suggest things, Cerberus." and I know, and I feel the disappointment, the annoyance in her tone. I could have been faster, if I hadn't been so stupid about my leg. If I'd stolen that patrol car- and somehow avoided detection in it. If I'd forced Jason to run. So many if's and not one (real) solution besides begging for forgiveness.

"And of this assassin I heard?" She inquires and my heart (of stone, plastic, rock...) skips a beat. "Yes! Sorry ma'am. Assassin was sent but an unknown party," Jason raises an eyebrow "And I disarmed him." "I hear you didn't finish him off." She sounds disappointed, and so I "I figured he could be questioned." *No I didn't, that was Minerva. I was going to drown my ledger in yet more red ink...*

"Fine." and that's it, I am done? "Requesting further orders, ma'am." She does look annoyed but only for a ghost of a second. "Casualty report... and leave the hostage with me. I want to

question him, alone.” Oh, how I pity Jason.

“Yes Ma’am. The casualty went by the name of Khiron, an adult male. Employed by Mati, I do not believe he was one of ours.” I inform. “Khiron...” She looks stunned. Shocked, even. “...ma’am?” I question when she does not say anything else for a long pause.

“Nothing, Cerberus. Go and train. I’ll see to your consequences later.” I nod, squeeze my eyelids shut as I leave, trying to calm my racing heart. Am I shaking out of fear? No, out of fury. Anger for I did all I could.

Anger; Mother said that there is no anger like the kind I quote, and that she had never felt it crawl up her throat like acid and leave her shaking. I had nodded to this, but god, I wanted to tell her about how sometimes I felt like a dog, baited into biting. About how I crushed things in my bony hands and dug my nails into my palms. How I would worry my knuckles like bones until they were raw.

I’ve known mother doesn’t like pit bulls because they attack, blind. She says they're violent dogs, that they don't know when to be tame, to pull from instinct. She had me, though. Maybe the other pitbulls tell themselves they're too polite for biting, too violent for polite conversation.

Maybe they spend their nights trying to hide shards of plastic.

Chapter 11: Jason

“It’s okay to be angry, it is never okay to be cruel.” - Adeetya Kakkarr

It feels as though we have been in silence forever.

I can’t tell what time it is, but it’s been forever since Cerberus left, and his mother has just been sitting in front of me, staring me down.

I don’t break eye contact with her, not backing down. I don’t know why, but there’s something about her that irritates me. I can see... *him* in her and it wears on me to no end.

But it’s in a different way- clearly it’s not the same person. It’s almost as if she’s what my father was meant to be. Cold, calculated, above all others. He was brash, a drunk. Loud, greedy, and narcissistic ...

but there’s something about Cerberus’s mother that they share. They share the same aura that reeks cruelty.

“Cerberus seems to be rather attached to you. Pity.” she murmurs, voice apathetic even as she says her child’s name. It feels wrong... compared to how he praises his mother, eyes shining.

“He’s not. He wants me dead.” I respond, voice as even as it will go. It cracks, dryness of the air getting to me.

She snorts, yanks my head up. I want to spit in her face, fight back. But I heed Cerberus’s warning, grit my teeth. “Start talking. How did Khiron die?” she asks and I frown. Why would she want to know?

“...I...he was stabbed. It was th-” I pause, I don’t know why she wants to know, but she might hurt the kid if I tell her it was him, “I mean an assassin.” I tell her.

She raises her eyebrows, “Who’s the assassin that killed Khiron?” She squints her eyes at me

“I-I don’t know.” I say, averting my eyes. She’s too intense, too much like him.

She looks him up and down “I see.” I can tell I have not deceived her, but she waves it away, “Well, it’s irrelevant. I’m just glad that tr-t traitor” she forces out, “Is... dead.”

I grit my teeth, how dare she congratulate the death of Khir– No, My dad.

I look into her eyes, and there is a slight sadness, but not a warm remorse, but a selfish self-pity. I grind my teeth,

“That “*Traitor*” was the greatest man I know, and a better parent than you could ever be.” I spit out. I say it to her, but all I see is my father.

She cocks her brow. “What are you talking about?” How does she not know how much of a horrible parent she is? Does she not see the way she talks to her son?

Realization glimmers in her eyes, “Oh, you are talking of my creation. Yes, he probably is a better “parent” than me, seeing how soft he was, but I never intended to be a parent. I intended to be a blacksmith, crafting the perfect blade to pierce the wicked’s heart. I have to craft it well, but I don’t need to coddle a weapon.”

I-I’m speechless. Now I know how Cerberus got that mentality. I suspected it had something to do with his mother, but this is truly awful.

“Y-you, I-.” I don’t even know what to say, at least my father accepted me as his son! I wish I wasn’t his son, but to have your parent see you like a- like a *thing* nothing more than an *object*. “You’re a, you’re a–”

“I’m a what? A monster? Do you really think that, or are you looking into a mirror, dear prince? I know who I am, I’m the messenger of revenge, coming to purge your bloodlines evil. Do you know who you are?” she asks, calm, cold.

I stare at her with disbelief, how can she be fighting for good, but be so corrupted with hate? If this is the person who will defeat the A.P.P and take over, I don’t know if I’d even want that to happen.

I have idolized the rebels for so long, seeing them as the true heroes, going to defeat the villains such as my father. but if this is who has been leading them, then I guess only evil can rule.

I began to fidget with a pieces, scraps on the ground, and twist them. Entwining them together into a ring, and stylizing it a little more.

“I know who I am,” I whisper, “I am the one who will help the world, and stop tyrants like my father,” I look up to her, a smile spread across my face, “and that’s why I don’t like you.” The look of fury I receive is priceless, although gone in a moment.

“Oh, is that what you believe yourself to be? How self entitled.” She looks me up and down, “I’m sure the child who grew up in the lap of luxury would know everything about horrible people, seeing how it takes one to know one.”

“I never said I was a good person,” I retorted, letting my cocker, masked side show, I must not let her see my emotions, “but you just admit you're a bad one. Like you said, it takes one to know one.”

Surprised by my sudden feistiness, she turns away, collecting herself.

“Little prince, I don't think you are a bad person.” she speaks up, not facing me. Her voice is almost cooing.

It catches me off guard, she doesn't think I'm evil? Yet I hear a slight something in her tone, and I recognize what she is doing.

I've heard it so many times, from the board, other nobles, and even my father. It's the default manipulator tone. They set you up, give you hope, then break it all.

She whips her head around and scoffs at me, “Because I don't consider you to be the level of a person. You are just a problem that my weapon has solved, that is all.”

I stare at her, fury in my eyes, searching desperately for a way out. I miss Cerberus' spiteful humor, almost. At least he has some at all.

I take a deep breath, and put on my smile again. A smile is a valuable tool. It keeps your enemies in the dark, makes it look like you are having no struggles, no doubts. It ensures that, no matter how powerful an opponent, you are the one in control. “You are so high and mighty, aren't you? So heroic, so amazing.”

I smile at her, I hate that I have to use this, but I'm going to use the one thing my father meant to teach me. Manipulation. She used it first, so now it's my turn. Though, I know I'll win this. She can't break me, I'm already shattered. Yet I can break her. She sees herself as a perfect sculpture, and the greatest of sculptures are made from the softest of stones.

Well that's what my father thought, thinking he was better than his predecessor, so he could do no wrong. And yet, history repeats itself.”

I'm grinning ear to ear, but rage exudes from my eyes, “The manner you speak about others, it's just as how my father spoke of his father. Don't you know what's wrong with that?! You are no better, so easy to corrupt, and so corrupting.”

She's staring daggers at me, but is trying to regain her cool, “I would be quiet, I could call my weapon to eliminate you now.”

“Cerberus isn't a weapon, this is what I'm talking about. All of this, this sociopathic stuff. That's what hubris mixed with power gets you, an urge to rule the world, and slaughter all in your way.”

I'm yelling now, but I keep smiling. I'm going against everything I was told to do, not to go against people like my father, not to question. But I can't back down now.

I have never had the power to oppose my father before, he was too overwhelming, but seeing this person here now, who is so like my father, and yet seems so weak, I realize he- he wasn't so powerful, it was just the way he presented himself. So now I must seize the moment to stop my father's second coming.

“Aw, you're just realizing that now? The only way to change things is mutiny, prince, and that means blood and, if you're a weakling, tears must be shed.”

She's scolding me, but I tune her out. She turns for a second and I writhe in my bonds, slipping the ring into my pocket. I make these little things to keep myself calm, I always have done so with little scraps, but this one serves a purpose.

She's describing her plan, doing a whole villain monologue, but I cut her off. “-I- And what happens then? After I'm dead, you think it's all easy? Do you even know of the Board?”

She opens her mouth, irritated, but gets interrupted. Just then, there's a knock at the door. “Ma'am, your 4:30 is here.” someone calls out. She nods to herself, not bothering to respond.

“Good, I'm done with this troglodyte, take him away.”

The guard walks over to grab me, and I go willingly, but slip the ring on my finger, and flick my wrist, making it fly to her feet.

“Oh, miss, I think I'll relinquish something you've been trying to find.” I speak up, and I hope she will fall for it.

She turns, eyebrows raised. I grin, all a part of the plan. I signal to the ring at her feet, she looks down, and picks it up, examining it. She stares at it for a confused second, then glares, realizing what it is.

To anyone else, it's just a spiked ring, but I knew she would recognize it. How could she not? It's the representation of her worst enemy.

I made a miniature replication, shoddily made, of the royal crown.

“That is what you have been trying to get, right?” I ask, and she fusters. She starts to stomp over to me, but catches herself, remembering the guard grabbing onto me.

I look at her, and smile, but my legs feel weak. It's identical to the look my father gave when Cala yelled at him. It's the look of realization when they want to beat you to a shred of death, just to heal you, so they may do it again, but they can't because they must keep up appearances.

She takes a deep breath, and grits her teeth, “Get...him...out of my sight.”

The guard drags me out, and I just smirk, but my heart feels like it's going to explode, it's racing so fast.

The guard leads me down to a small underground area. There's barred doors to cells, and I can hear a rasping breath echoing through the tunnels.

The sound gradually gets louder, and I'm thrown into a cell right next to the rasping sound.

I wince as I'm thrown to the ground, dirt digging into my scraps. “Ryking prince.” He says to me before walking off.

I take a shaky breath, and lean against a grimy wall. It's almost pitch black, with only one or two lamps illuminating the tunnels.

I look at my surroundings, and there's a bucket, a mat I think is meant to be slept on, and scraps of food and garbage on the floor. It's very claustrophobic, with me barely being able to stick out both arms.

I look up to the pitch black ceiling, and I feel a slight drop of water on my cheek. Is it a leaky ceiling?

But as I feel more stream across my face, I realize I'm crying. I make no sound, no sniff or coughs, but the tears won't stop.

I try to push it down but it's no use. I decide to just let the tears fall, and begin to whistle a song Khiron would sing to me.

But as I hum, I hear the rasping person next to me start to weakly sing, in a broken, kid-like voice.

"When the crickets don't chirp...and the birds don't tweet... When the foxes don't howl... and the deer don't bleat... the world might feel dead...filling you with despair...don't be worried.. Don't be scared..." I begin to sing a long, and a somber smile stretches across my lips, *"you'll hear faint music... Piping sounds in the air...you'll see a furry tush... now Pan is there."*

We are starting to sing louder now, and a few other cells have started to hum the same tune, or have joined in,

"He will come to save the wild, and the forest so lush, So whistle this tune when the land starts to hush, then a tune will match coming behind the brush, and hooves will clop near in a rush."

It's Pan! The satyr god of wild, protector of the flora and the faun, calls upon him when nature is gone! He will play fluted pipes, growing the flowers, the the garbage and pollution shall cove--"

CRREEEEEEEK

Everyone shuts up as the door to the dungeon opens, and the clapping boots echo across the floor.

Eventually, the person stops at me, and I look up to see Cerberus opening the cage, and I give a pathetic smile.

"Welcome to my humble abode." I joke, but he looks at me deadpan.

"No jokes, we are going to have you cleaned and given new clothes. The suit is valuable for gauze."

I smile at him, and open myself to joke, but he puts his hand out.

"Save it, Prince." I frown, but I should have seen this coming, we were never real friends, or even anything positive.

He walks over to me and yanks me up by the arm, and drags me out of the cell. We walk up some steps, and he leads me out of the broken tower, into a small building, which looks very clean compared to the rest of, well, everywhere.

We walk into a grimy room, with rusty metal buckets in a line, and a stool or bin in front of each bucket. Cerberus grabs me by the arm, and drags me over to a stool.

“Sit down, take off your shirt, and put this on.” He forces a synthetic, T-shirt in my hands.

“I’m going to clean the wounds on your legs with the cleaning water, then I’ll look away and you’ll change your pants with these.” He forces some torn running shorts into my hands.

My mouth turns dry as he tells me I have to change my shirt. My scars feel warmer. He looks at me expectantly but I stutter out, “I-I, N-n-no. Ple-”

Cerberus grabs my collar, “I wasn’t asking. You are a prisoner, you don’t have a choice.”

I mutter, “O-okay, s-s-sure.” I pull off my shirt to reveal my scars and bruises from the years of abuse, and Cerberus’s eyes go wide.

“...Where did you... obtain these, Jason?” Cerberus asks and he looks at me like his mother does, glazed over with cold vengeance but underneath, there it glimmers, *he looks angry*.

Not with me, exactly. It’s almost... protective, as if he wishes to take his own hands and claim revenge.

“I-I, um. You’re not the only one with a terrible parent, Cerbie.” I try playing it off cool, but the sickness churns in my stomach. He stares at me, not even correcting me to praise his mother as normal. He walks over;

“T-the king?” Cerberus murmurs from under his breath. scratching, but it cracks and not from toxic air this time. It’s sorrow, and I can see it in him from the way his hand trembles slightly to the way his features soften- oh dear lord, he looks *so* much like Khiron.

“May I?” he asks, and his hand is right away from a marring red one that tears into my upper shoulder. I want to say no, tell him to get away from me but I nod, blank. Cerberus gently touches it (he’s kinder than I expect, I still have bruises from how he likes to drag me).

“These are rather deep, Jason.” I scoff, wrinkle my nose, trying to put on my mask, but it crumbles to dust “You think I don’t- don’t know?”

The last bit is quieter. Cerberus looks at me strangely, now. I wonder what goes on behind those unnaturally blue eyes, like a glass doll he is. A sad one, with yellowed teeth and cracked hands.

“No. I think you’re perfectly aware”. He remarks “I may ask you more about these later.”

He seems to be regaining his composure, but it doesn’t stay. He begins to look down at my body, and notices the giant bruise along my abdomen.

“What’s this one? It’s... wow- that’s impressive.” He lightly presses on my ribcage, and the world begins to spin, and I feel as though someone just crushed my organs with a sledge hammer.

My vision begins to go dark, but Cerberus shakes me, “These are *really* bad! You need to get checked. I suppose it’s my job to ensure that...”

He pulls me up, but my legs are lead, and I buckle. “I-I can’t. It’s okay, I’ve had-d it fo-forev-ver.” He mutters something, and I try to get up again, but fall, “It’s okay, don’t waste materials on me.”

“You’re a hostage, so we need you in the best condition, that’s why I’m helping you.” He says, almost as if trying to convince himself. And I feel myself rise, and I realize he picked me up.

He pulls me over his shoulder, and I cry out, his shoulder blade digging into my wound. I never noticed how much this one hurt, or the rest of them to a lesser degree.

I never let people touch me. I feel bile in the back of my throat, And I realize how weird this looks.

I’m like three inches taller than Cerberus, but he is carrying me over my shoulder. I try to chuckle at the thought, but that causes me to cough, and I taste a little iron in my mouth.

This has never happened before? Why is it happening now? I never thought it was that bad! I have had it for a year or two now, and I rarely spat out blood, except slightly when I threw up. I probably should have gone to the clinic, b-but my dad ensured I never did, except once.

I slightly opened my eyes, as I heard Cerberus yell, “Code, hostage injured.” He takes me over to a mat, and lays me down, when a female doctor, wearing the cleanest clothes I’ve seen in all of Hades comes over.

“Move over, Vallence Jr.” she says and pushes past him, examining my wounds. She observes my scars on my legs and arms first. She gradually works her way up in severity, letting out a gasp, or a swear every once in a while.

Finally, she reaches the giant bruise along my rib cage. She lightly presses a stethoscope to it, and I shout out. “S-sorry kid.”

There is rage in her voice, and she stands up. She walks over to Cerberus, and I slightly turn my head to look at her, just as she full force smacks him in the face.

“This is worse than Niobe, I don’t know how he isn’t dead!”

Niobe? Who is Niobe? D-did Cerberus kill someone?

“Th-this wasn’t me...this time.” He says, but the doctor quickly retorts, “Oh yeah!? Well who did!?”

Cerberus opens his mouth to respond, but then catches himself, “That’s not for your knowledge.”

She cocks her eyebrow, “Okay, well now you’re pretty much admitting guilt!”

“He didn’t do this, and please don’t ask who did.” I groan, and slightly sit up, wincing. She whips her head to me, and runs over, pushing my back down, “No, no, no sit back down. Here, I’m going to give you a painkiller.”

I feel a prick in my side, and I let out a slight gasp. It hurts alot, but then...all the pain fades away. My body feels new. I sit straight up. The doctor tries to push me down, but I resist.

“No, no, no. I’m fine. You probably have more important patients, like that Sparrow boy?”

She looks at me confused, “Who are you talking about?”

Oh, yeah. They probably didn’t tell her his name, “He is about 11 to 13 years old.”

Shelook at me with confusion, and tries to think, but shakes her head, “We haven’t had any kids in here today.”

Wait, what? She hasn’t— That kid was really hurt, so he has to be here? I don’t, wait no. I slowly crane my head to look at Cerberus, and I can’t read his expression, but I feel the guilt exuding from him, “You did bring him here, didn’t you?” ask him.

He looks downcast slightly, but then hardens his expression. “No, he’s a killer, a weapon for the enemy, why would I? Plus... Minerva...”

I stare at him with a defeated expression, “Y-you’re a killer too, from what it sounds. And you probably had a reason, but he may too!”

Cerberus looks taken aback. For the first time, it seems I have actually hurt him. His eyes fill with rage, and he scoffs, “Yes, I am a killer, but I wouldn’t go to the infirmary either. A broken weapon is a useless on—”

“SHUT UP. You are *not* a weapon!” I shout. Eyes turn to us, but I ignore him. The doctor tries to get me to sit down, but I push her off. Cerberus clenches his fists, but doesn’t speak, so I continue “You are a person who deserves to be cherished. Don’t let your mother hypnotize you into giving up your life!”

He immediately perks up when I say that, “Don’t you *dare* disrespect the leader like that! She’s creating the future!”

“Oh please! You know that’s cow waste! I want to help, but she has no solutions, replacements, or public support outside of Hades! You have *seen* how politics operates!” I yell. I’m shaking, full of rage. I always thought there was a chance with the rebels, but all they want is to fight and destroy, instead of create and solve. They aren’t fighting because they want to help the good people, they are fighting to hurt the bad.

Cerberus shakes his head. I don’t understand why he can’t realize this! “I-I— How would you know!? You have never been here before! How can you think you know better!?”

“That’s what I’m asking myself!” I scream. “How do I know better!? How have *I* thought about this more than the literal *rebels*?! And I know you are asking that too!”

Cerberus blushes, and furrows his brow in confusion. “H-how—. No! You aren’t right! The privileged prince knows *nothing* of our suffering.”

I grit my teeth. “Suffering?! Do these scars mean *nothing*!?”

“Yes, they do have no importance!” He yells, and I almost slap him. “You still had everything you could *ever* want! Sure, you have a few battle wounds, but you still have *never* experienced what someone from Hades has. *That* is why you don’t know how to solve our problem!” his fists are clenched and his eyes lack their luster, both hurt and furious.

I’m— what am I doing? I’m full of rage, but I’m not yelling. I’m... laughing?

“Hahahahaha!” I bellow. “You’re right, I’ll never know what you have gone through, but I do know what my father is doing is wrong. I use these scars to reassure myself of that, but it seems you are unable to know who’s given you your scars.”

Cerberus glares, “I remember every person who managed to damage me.” He growls, and reveals a scar on his neck, arm, and legs.

I shake my head with pity. I can tell I'm aggravating him, and I make a genuine smile.

A wave of self-loathe washes over me. How can I enjoy the hurting of others? I shake my head and drop my smile, and put my face back on.

"I call that statement untrue. You don't seem to remember who gave you these sc—" I go to tap his forehead, but a man sitting in a bed lunges out and tackles me right in the wound. The painkillers prevent any pain, but I know that he just destroyed my wound.

The man pulls me up, and Cerberus jumps back, "Lieutenant Orus?" He questions, and the man nods.

"Yes. When your mother heard you were taking a *prisoner* to the medical bay, she commanded me to hide in case things got out of control, which it has. Now, I'll take the prisoner ba—"

"No!" The doctor grabs my arm, "He needs to be bandaged up, and probably a small operation after you tackled him!"

The guard rolls his eyes, "Okay doc." He says sarcastically, then turns to Cerberus, "You still leave. It's obvious you can't handle this precious cargo."

Cerberus blushes, then turns to leave. The doctor sits me down and says something, but I don't pay attention.

I don't know what to think, or do. Cerberus spouts so much evil, but does much good. How can he be good and evil at the same time?

Khiron once told me about the Greek monster Cerberus, Guardian of the Underworld. It is said he had three heads, so could Cerberus be like his namesake, one head for good, one for evil?

Maybe. but if that is true, what is the third head?

Chapter 12: Cerberus

“I’m not too far gone to be healed, am I? I’m not too gone, am I?” - Alice Notley, In The Pines

I didn’t want to end up this way.

I really, really didn’t. Ever since I was tiny, a little monster trotting among sewer-dripping people, I knew what I wanted. This was before I understood I was not made to want, or need things. I was meant as a means to an end. Jason refuses to see this. As does Dr. Apolla.

I wonder what it would be like, to be as pure as they are. To live without shame, blood on your hands. I wonder what it is like to live. My cheek still burns from the angered slap I have just received, but I’m not sure if it’s from the impact. I think it’s the words that the doctor used.

“This is worse than Niobe!” Well, he’s alive, and that’s more than we can say about Niobe. It’s not fair, even before I was a weapon, back when I was still a little hot-pink monster, Dr. Apolla still looked down at me, HATED me. I didn’t understand why. I was scolded for every bruise, every broken bone as if I wished to hurt.

I only understood recently, reviewing my mother’s file for her. My medical file, a few torn out pages. I read them in utter silence, late at night. Pages and pages about how I was a vengeful creature only capable of causing pain. When I walked to give the files back, and Dr. Apolla took them, she saw what I had read.

It was silent then. I smiled at her, then. A childish smile, one absent of hatred or anger. I loved the control I’d held in that moment. The doctor couldn’t hurt me anymore. Could anyone? I realize, now that then, nobody could have. I have given people power over me only of late. Jason, Khiron, Hercules, even.

“Cerberus.” A sharp voice brings me out of my thoughts. “Leg.” it’s an order, I think, staring at my bloody-gold rag tied leg. I shake my head, no. There’s a pissed off sigh and I know I will pay. I don’t care enough, silently straightening myself to survey the room. The medical center reeks of sorrow and oh how it smells.

The thing about blood is people don’t really understand how terrible, how distinct it’s scent is. I heard from someone that the smell is meant to trigger something, the feeling of being a hunter, or being hunted. Either way blood really smells, it does, not just of iron but of fear and of sweat, salt. The stench of vomit likes to waft in and I wish for my gas mask, but it remains hanging around Jason’s neck and I don’t feel like looking at the prince.

I watch the doctor do her job, neatly dotting with antibacterial, gentle, calm movements. It’s fascinating and I regret to think of all the poems I have written for it. “I’m sorry you had to stick around that mutt for so long,” she apologizes to Jason and I hear him respond, but not really.

I am suddenly in the hallway, I must be a bit too tired to keep a check of my consciousness. I haven’t slept since the palace, surviving on a quarter of the minimum rations I’m supposed to have. I guess if you add that to the stress and carrying Jason, plus the fighting, the running, the existing like this...

I’m halfway to the cells when I realize what I’m doing. Going to find Sparrow. I find a package of itinerary somewhat nearby before I go down to the holding cells, and bring it with me. Orders fall away, I am a creature of desperation now. My steps are too fast, and I have to prepare myself for the brutality of my errors.

The child is braced against the wall, bloodied and tired. I decide now that if Jason asks what I did, where I went, I will lie. I step in and immediately, *fear*. Pure and animalistic, the child backed into a corner. I kneel down in the front of the area, watching his dazed eyes struggle to focus. “Hello, child.”

It’s a long bit of tension, heavy silence before; “‘ve you come to finish me off, then?” I just shake my head, opening the kit. I fold the bedding pad, sewn from plastics and loosely covered to be safe (and somewhat comfortable) neatly and make up the bed in the corner. I wipe the blood from the floor, slide unopened beeswax packages of food from a distance.

He doesn’t trust me to be near him, and neither do I. I sit silently upon cold stone, watching as he inspects the food. Unpack the medical kit, because I will not give Dr. Apolla the satisfaction to give me to Aries. “C’mere, I won’t do... that again.” I look away.

I don't know what makes him, but after half a minute he slowly creeps over. I can see the extent of the damage, along with plastic sticking out of his scrawny little legs. "Never been to Hades?" I ask him, as I begin to remove shards. I kept them nice and ordered them on the floor next to me. I don't get a response, but that's okay, I don't deserve one.

I slowly take gauze, long cloth strips wrap neatly around every little affliction. I stare at the child every time he yelps or flinches, completely still until he untenses. I hold his head gently with my rough fingers as I clean each wound, and I make sure each is perfectly dressed, so unlike the hasty manner I use with myself.

I know where I picked up these skills, I've always been good at mimicking people. I suppose the doctor doesn't know that the little one she hated so much really did look up to her. I was such a strange breed of terrible.

"...w-why...?" the words are so soft, fearful, rasped. I consider this myself, why am I fixing him up? I suppose I had intended to even when I stalked outwards of the room. "-Due payment." I say finally. I regret what I did, but... was it not necessary?

I don't get any response, (fair) and so I finish cleaning and wrapping, slathering on creams. From my little belt, I pull a container of orange tint. My every move is intently watched, and I let it be so. In the pill-box, I have collected a few medications. I pick out a painkiller, carefully using my knife to cut it in half.

"Swallow this, and don't spit it out. Medication is precious." I warn him, setting it in his little palm and gesturing to the bottle. He looks at me warily, and I sigh; "Listen, if I were going to kill you, *I wouldn't wait so long.*" Sparrow meets my eyes, haunted look. I roll my glassy-blue.

He takes them down, fortunately. He picks at the sandwich for a long minute before starting on it, and I end up coming up with a new composition.

I MAKE MYSELF INTO A MONSTER, THE ONE YOU WARN ABOUT IN THE WOODS.

TELL ME JASON, OF MY DESPICABLE NATURE, OF PICKING OUT THE PACK'S

WEAKEST PUPPY DOG TO PUT OUT OF HIS PAIN

I LAUGH FOR APPLAUSE, SMILE AT THE SOBS THAT BREAK LOOSE SO SHAKILY; I

HAVEN'T WON THIS WICKEDNESS

I'VE WORKED FOR IT

FAIR AND SQUARED, BUT ONLY A SLIVER OF MYSELF

BECAUSE I WANTED TO MAKE THINGS; THAT'S ALL. I WANTED TO FEEL NICE IN A COAT THAT DID NOT FEEL LIKE HANDS ALL OVER ME, SCRATCHING AND BEGGING FOR ME TO CURL UP AND WITHER, IT'S MORE THAN DIGNITY I'VE LOST.

SO I MADE AND MADE AND WENT MAD FROM IT, WROTE UNTIL MY FINGERS BLEED SO HARD, UNTIL MY WRISTS WERE SLIT.

BLACK INK TURNED RED AND THEN BROWN, AS WE DISCOVERED THAT A STAR WHO BURNS SO BRIGHT IS ONE ABOUT TO DIE.

LIKE LUCIFER, IT IS PROPHESED I WILL FALL, UNMERCIFUL ANGELS CARE NOT FOR MY MATTED HAIR AND MUDDY FACE, THEY DO NOT CARE WHEN I SCREAM AND PROTEST THAT I AM SPECIAL. BECAUSE HE WAS ALSO SPECIAL, WASN'T HE? HE TOO, THE BRIGHTEST, UNTIL HE COULDN'T BEAR TO STAND BY AND SMILE, HIS TEETH WERE ROTTING AND FALLING OUT, INTO APPLE SEEDS.

The writing reminds me of the letter in my pocket, all of a sudden I'm flooded with the realization that *I never did* open that note. The one from Khiron, so carefully hidden. It's all that's left of him, and I do consider for a moment giving it to Jason, but I am far too selfish for that. Quietly, I pull it out of my bag and stare at the pretty-blue paper. I wish I had stationary like that.

Slowly, I unfold it, creases pressed up against my fingers which are beginning to pale at the tips from the tight hold I'm utilizing. Eventually, I mustered up the courage, back against the wall, missing my lovely jacket (it's not really lovely, but I love it, so does that make it so?)

Dear Vallence,

It is the greatest tragedy of all that I may never know your name. I assume it isn't Alecto... no. That wouldn't be like your mother, now would it? Before I confess the thing that may just tear your world apart, I would like to ask you for two things, although I don't truly deserve any favors. (1) I beg forgiveness once you read all that I have written. For your own sake, Vallance, you do not need more vengeance to seek. (2) **Save Jason**. Please, my child, protect him for me, for us. Nobody else will. I already see the way you talk to him with doubt in your eyes. Don't draw blood. Not again, Vallance. And I hear the funeral is starting up now, so I must make haste. The truth I have realized over my short moments in your presence has been a puzzle to solve, until it wasn't and all I could do is mourn for you. Oh, Vallence, did you know that we share the same blood? I know that this must b-

I scrunch the note up into my hand, fast. My heart, (previously believed to have been one of cheap-tupperware) is throbbing and *hurts*. I glance up and I meet the Sparrow's curious eyes, muttering out a quick farewell as I dash out. *Pit-pat, pit-pat*. The sound of the gift Jason's not-father gave me only fuel my panicked daze.

I am out into the air all of a sudden but it seems that there is no air left anymore, that all I can find is thick and hot, inhospitable to my human lungs (they do not meet standard weapon regulations). My head hurts, as does my head, and I can't find a better word than hurt.

"Shhh, shhhhhh." I hiss under my breath, hot little gasps stifling. I shut my eyes, leaning against the wall, soothing myself to keep from screaming until my throat goes bloody and raw. Little rocks, from my heel to my toes keep me as complacent as possible. The realization physically makes me sick, that the man I have mourned so lightly (I cared more than I'd admit) was half the reason I am here. ...How could he?

How could he leave me?

Khiron... he showed kindness to everyone he met. Was I so terrible that he left? I stare at my ugly hands, long and spindly, marred with little cuts and ink stains. I must have driven him away, because he wouldn't leave without reason, right? My head has stopped pounding, no longer rushing glitter glue blood out my ears- rather it feels stuffed with cotton, as I numb myself. The

rocking begins to slow as I hear footsteps (do not dare comfort yourself around others) and I look up to find Aries.

“Hello,” I say, tone cautious as if I’m boiling water-bubbles splattered across thin sheet ice. “Hey there little (use your imagination)!” He semi-greets, clapping me on the shoulder. I flinch ever so slightly. “What can I do for you, sir?” My voice comes out firmer than I feel, which is foot deep in cartoon quicksand.

“You’re going to take out a small group for an expedition today, mutt.” I nod, although the term makes me feel off, like I’m floating above myself. “Kids?” I ask, to clarify and I just get an annoyed nod. “Head out to the front, they’re waiting.” He tells me.

“Hey, hold on, anywhere specific or-” Aries cuts me off, raising a hand, “Yeah, take them down to the Guillotine River and teach them some sparring.”

“Yes sir.” I say, and he just leaves, assumingly pleased with himself dumping for the load of work on me. Perhaps this is good, it’ll give me some time to think. I humm under my breath to try and keep the sticky-sweet sick feeling that a dead man has given me, walking to where the trainee’s are.

I’m almost immediately pounced on by Lakshmi, (or Laki, she doesn’t seem to mind) a nine year old I practically mentor. I assist in our signature move, swinging her around, ignoring the slight shake of my leg which only seems to be getting worse. “You’re *finally* back! You were gone for like, ages! They wouldn’t even give us anything to do! It was so boring Bhaiya-” I laugh, for the first time in a while.

“I bet it was!” I’m oddly cheerful now, glancing around at the ragtag group I’ve come to be basically the older sibling of. Lakshmi, Conan, and Diyonus. Conan is buried in one of my old books, dirty blond curls completely over one eye. Diyonus keeps throwing small bits of lint at him, and it’s honestly amusing. Off to the side, I spot a new-ish face; Raine?

“Oh, looks like you have a new friend, huh?” I ask Lakshmi. She nods, tilting her head “He’s like, terrible at talking, but he’s tiny so it’s alright I guess, his name is Raine,” I give her that half eyes closed smile that quite honestly means *you’re rambling, love*.

“Hey Conan, re-reading the *Compendium of the Ocean*?” I say, tossing a bit of lint that got in his hair at Diyonus who snorts and giggles like he’s never seen anything funnier in his 7 years of life. The boy looks at me ever so slightly, nodding. I smile softly- he’s a quiet one, and I love him for it. Perhaps it is strange to believe he is what I might have been if I had it in me to become humane.

After maybe 20 minutes, we're at the river set, (I had to keep Raine on my shoulders, I wanted to practice running. Lakshmi is getting absolutely sublime at it, it always makes me smile how she bounds up to me, wavy black strands in her eyes. I've learned (just for her) how to braid it into neat little plaits, to french, triple-curled. She doesn't care so much for my braiding, but enjoys having my attention on her.

If I had more time, and a more sentimental life, I might have learned how to take care of my own hair, braid it as well, but for now I am accepting the messy mullet like mop. I'll try to clean it at the River if we have extra time. I don't want them out past sunset, no matter what...

"H-hey, Mr. V-all-en?" Raine sounds out, quiet voice as we're climbing down through the mounds of waste. I go first, sharp eye on the kids who follow only exactly in the path I've cleared. I protect mine. "Yes, Raine? And you can call me C, if that's easier to say." I inform him, carefully moving some shards of fiberglass over to the side. "W-why did, um, why did you tell me I was allowed to come here?" He asks.

"Ah? Well... you needed somewhere to stay, and if you've made it this long out on your own, I expect you'll be a very good agent in the future," he's staring at me like he understands none of my words, as Conan slips a bit on some slimy, decomposing plastic bag clumps, and I rush to support his wiry little frame. "Hey, hey, it's okay!" I immediately (auto pilot of machine has been engaged, AI emotions?) I soothe him the same way I do myself, until he's breathing regularly. I carefully take the "Compendium" out of his shaky hands, thankful for my reflexes.

"To elaborate, Raine, I just wanted to." I clarify, as I watch Lakshmi playfully slide down a cascade of bottle-caps. I trust that she won't hurt herself too badly, but I'm still keeping an eye. Conan immediately squeezes my wrist, which always means he needs something, this time he wants his book. He doesn't like talking, (a selective mute, they tell me) unless it's simple, scripted (exe; are you reading ____, how are you?) and I respect that. Children should have respect as well. I think all but weapons of mass destruction should.

"So... are we gonna spar, or?" Dyonus asks me, as I set Raine down. "Well-" Conan is sitting upon a makeshift-barrel seat that I helped build a while ago, reading, looking so sweet- that I do not pull him away today. Lakshmi, however, looks enthralled by the idea of getting to spar. "Yes, alright. I'll teach you a little bit- Raine, not you, I want to give your system a bit longer to develop before I start training you, but please practice balancing or even jogging around here,

okay? Don't go far." I warn him, but with a smile. He nods and waddles himself down, and so my attention turns back to my little "students".

"Okay, so rule number one of any fight is to protect your face, understood?" I begin, making them repeat every word I say. "And can we guess why this is?" I question, cocking my head and raising an eyebrow. "Oh-oh! So that you stay really handsome, and pretty, and-" I cut Diyonus off just there, giving him a stern look. "No. We do this to keep our minds and orifices from being damaged or getting knocked out. If something were to jab into your eye, say, that's a very delicate part of your body and it'll impair you in the fight and likely after."

"Oh- c'mon Cerberus! *Pleasssee* just let us fight! Or let me fight with you!" Diyonus whines, clearly not paying attention. I glance at Lakshmi, who's been hanging onto my every word and shrug, setting them up. "You know my rules," I confirm, and Diyon recites them; "Yeah, ummmm, no drawing blood, stop if they cry or scream, listen to what you say- oh, and always stay in control." He takes a little to list them all, but I am impressed with the memory skill.

"Good! So, square," I tell them, and Lakshmi (my star student, my little prodigy) perfectly guards her face with clenched fists. Unfortunately, she's clenching them wrong. Unless she tries to really hurt Diyonus, it shouldn't be a problem, though. Mentioning Diyonus, he's just made fists and is holding them back like some action-rebel.

Before they can even start (I already know who would've won) Raine comes stumbling over to me, quick steps. "Whoa there-" I tell him as he quickly grabs my jacket sleeve, tugging me. "I-I-fund, a little, a little puppy, and, nd-" he's got more of a stutter than normal, so soothingly I rub his back, but he deflects it, saying; "Go save the p-puppy, please C?" He whines, and I can't help the way I rush to the shore, just for the child.

I'm in the habit of healing these little critters and setting them home free, just not with the kids with me. Sure enough, though, a little mixed pup is weakly caught in a number of plastic rubbish, practically drowning in the runoff that forms 90% of the river. Why do you think we call it River Guillotine? "Oh, he is little, isn't he?" I murmur, and Raine looks at me so hopeful that I can't refuse. "Stay up here, tell Conan to get out my kit, okay?" I nod in approval as Raine runs off to tell.

I very carefully lower myself, firmly grasping a rigid metal structure to keep me suspended above the grey-brown water, it's disgusting to look at or even smell. It puts a lot of strain on my bad leg, bracing vertically against the shore edge, practically climbing up a wall. The little pup's head keeps going under the currents, and I can see her beginning to drift. "Oh, oh." I whisper, almost slipping as my hand loosens.

Very slowly, focusing every muscle in my body, I am able to roughly grab the clump of garbage the little animal has become stuck in. I throw it up onto the shore, and now slowly pull myself up, feeling my stomach cramp as it brushes the metal.

Slowly I get up off the ground, up off my knees, to walk over to the half drowned mixed-mutt that I just risked my little life for. I unbuckle my knife and slowly begin to cut off tags and whatnot, the dog lies limp. I hope it isn't too late, for it would destroy Raine and his big eyes.

“Hey, ya little weakling.” I murmur, echoing Aries's words from so long ago (it wasn't that long ago, but I want it to be). Its tiny body is only a half-dozen pounds soaking wet, although I can attribute that to its showing bones and age.

Left to die by its own parents or simply lost to fate? I'll never know.

Conan passes me the bag, and I carefully begin to clean out the pup's mouth. It doesn't try to bite, so weak, it reminds me far too much of Jason's limp body. I am certain it won't die on me, I climb up to where Dyonus is sulking, Lakshmi grinning triumphantly. Raine looks so scared until I show him the half-conscious pup in my arms.

“Are you guys ready to head on back?” I question, as I gather all our stuff. The puppy weakly whines in protest as I set it down to wrap in my coat. I'm not leaving it out here to starve to death or be picked off. (System error, weapon developing emotional sentience?)

It ends up alert and tucked in a swaddle, Raine constantly gawking at it. I don't really mind, since we have enough time to get back. We're there in another half an hour, and the day is beginning to wane again. I'm so, so tired.

However before I can rest, maintenance. I lean up against the wall where I cannot be seen to unwrap my leg. I wince upon seeing it, it's only worsened. It looks infected, which... Well, that's obviously not good. I check my belt quickly and my face falls. I have used up my disinfectants on the summer boy.

I am on tiptoe as I creep into Aries's supply room. I mean, it's not really his, but he stashes his stuff here and nobody takes them. There are consequences for stepping in here. However, my leg has begun to change colors at the knee, and that is disorienting enough to warrant action. I scanned the perimeter for him already, so I shouldn't get caught.

And... other than that, I somehow want to sneak out a bit of a present for the Sparrow kid. I know I shouldn't.

I am also aware that other kids my age here in this very hideout are likely in possession of the materials I hope to acquire. They share resources with their parental figures (I will never understand why they spend so much time together. Are they not wary of the bruises that come with them?) Either way, I cannot ask them. Even when we were little, a "crew" I was not allowed to interact with.

I suppose I appeared strange? Sometimes I consider apologizing for my very nature, my strangely cropped hair and constant malignant eyes. My dismissive tone and over performances. I would beg forgiveness for being myself, because people will always tell you that it is good to be unique until you are different. My hands slide open a drawer, smile to myself seeing the bottles lined up neatly.

"Someone's getting cocky." A voice snarks from behind me. My empty stomach clenches and I turn to find Aries standing there. Looking at it unbiased, it must be so pathetic. A weapon that is slowly shattering apart, a man meant to craft the gun's caliber. A kid on his broken bloody knees and the man who was the first to teach that child the way of hot sticky and red.

"I- hey, sir, how-" words don't sound nearly as smooth as normal, and I loathe the way they clot in my throat as if the platelets are malfunctioning. "You can explain? Don't even try, sweetie." He sneers at the end, basking in his patronization. I take a step back, but don't take the bottle out of my pocket. "Listen, I can pay you, I, don't tell my mo-" he's up closer now, teeth clenched.

"No, she's going to hear all about this and the justice I served. Or perhaps I should give her free rein..." he purrs. I hate his tone. Perhaps I am inhuman (handcrafted, flawed, not factory made) but is it fair to call me like a doll? "-Aries, please. Please." I'm dreading, now. pathetic. Jason has gotten into my head.

I blank out the next events, but when I leave the room my leg is no better off, twisted oddly. I am limping horribly but I should be able to make do with painkillers and a little bit of adrenaline for the next week. After that... Well, judging how it only seems to be getting worse, I might even lose the limb. How disappointing would that be to my dear mother?

And my father. The one I never really knew. Is he really my father or just my sperm donor? A genetic link? I know that if he had been here for longer he would have loved me no matter how twisted, how broken. Perhaps it is best he has fallen before I could corrupt him with my rusted silver blade.

Jason deserves to know.

The thought hits me out of nowhere.

It's his dad.

I suppose....

Khiron asked you to protect him. To save him. Can't you do that much?

Before I know it I'm limping down the hall, fingers running over the same worn bolt of my knife. It's a rhythm and it grounds me more than I'd like to admit. How funny is that? The loaded pistol is only calm with a knife in his hand.

That's not entirely a true statement. There's one other who makes me feel eased. One other only, my writing mentor. Hercules. Oh dear... how he calms me down from broken sobs and clenched fists. He is the only person to make me cry and the only one who can offer condolences.

The only person anything like Jason.

Who I watch now before I enter his cell, heart thumping **bud-um-bud-um**. He sits with tear streaks down his face and once perfectly styled hair fading into red at the roots, greasy. His shirt is gone and in its place valuable gauze. He looks up, and opens his mouth but before he can I open the cell door and walk in.

"We need to talk, Jason." I tell him, voice even as I can keep it. "I know, I didn't mean to yell at you earlier, but I fully stand by-" he begins, and I interject.

"About *our* father."

Chapter 13: Jason

"Nobody is all good or all bad. People become good or bad when doing it becomes a habit while the other does not." - Sussy Kassem

"Huh?" I ask. I stare blankly at Cerberus. He's said something and I have no idea what. He's staring at me, expectantly. Did he ask me something?

I am already in a slight daze, the pain killers still in effect. The doctor said I had a fractured rib that healed incorrectly. It's not serious enough to operate on, and the rebels won't waste resources on a hostage.

She bandaged me up, and the guard holding me took me back to my cell.

Though, that's not the only reason I'm distracted. There's one more. It's curled in his arms, my heart skips a beat. It is...

It is...

IT'S A PUPPY!!!

I hop up, and the world begins to spin slightly. My body begins to sway, and I quickly throw my hand and brace myself against the wall. Leaning there, I shuffle over to Cerberus.

He turns from me, defensively. I put my hand out, touching the dog's ears, and Cerberus looked surprised.

“Wha—“

The puppy stirs, and I pet it in its sleep, while Cerberus looks at me, stunned.

I know he said something, but this puppy is so cute. It looks like some kind of German shepherd mix, and it is so frail it makes me want to cry.

I want to pet it and give it a warm bed and feed it until it's the healthiest dog I'm all the land, and pamper it for the rest of its life—

Cerberus yanks the dog back from me, and I notice that I was pulling the puppy into my arms. I think I'm blushing, but my face is already flushed from the heat. I step back,

“Sorry, why are you here?” I shake my head, clearing my mind. I feel bad for not listening, “Sorry. I know you said something, but I wasn't paying attention.”

Cerberus opens his mouth, but pauses. I can't read his face. His eyes are squinted, as if cringing. He avoids my glare and scratches the back of my neck. Is he... Embarrassed?

“I came here to... give you Mirk.” He motions to the puppy, Oh my goodness, that is the worst name for a puppy. I try to not let out a chuckle as he continues.

“I am unable to care for him while I am working, and I believe I can trust you for the time being.” He glances at the dog, and looks at me, his eyes clear. “Although, if you do something to him...” He pauses, thinking, “I'll pull you open and string your intestine like a banner.”

I weakly smirk, does he think that threatens me? But I still nod, trying to look scared. He seems to notice I'm not really worried, but hands me the puppy, hesitatingly.

I pull him closely to my chest, and he's shivering slightly. I feel his slight heartbeat, and there's a slight snore sound coming from him.

“Awww.” I whisper, “Hi fluffy.”

Cerberus whips his head around, “What? His name is *not* “Fluffy”, his name is Mirk.”

He seems actually upset. It catches me so off guard, I let out an audible laugh. He glares and now I can easily tell he is embarrassed. I shake my head,

“No offense, but that is a terrib—” I look up at him, and if looks could kill, I would be eviscerated. “Mmmirk? yeah, ok!” I lean down to the puppy’s ear, “Your name is Fluffy, I won't give you such a rancid name.”

Cerberus nods, pauses for a second to observe me with the dog, then nods and leaves.

I sit down on the ground slowly, trying not to wake Mi-. Okay, no, I’m not calling this little angel something that means somber and dead.

I lightly pet *Fluffy*, and he sniffs the air and yawns. He begins to wake up, blinking his eyes. He looks up at me, looks around, and lets out a loud yip.

“Oh Sterc!” I yell, whisper, and instinctively clamp the dog's mouth close. Its eyes widen, and shakes his head violently. I release him, and he nips my finger. I grunt, trying not to make a loud noise, but Fluffy does that for me.

Fluffy begins to yelp, frightened. The barks echo through the tunnels, and I creep over to, cautiously. “*Shhh, shhh.*” I whisper, “*Hey boy. Please be quiet. You are going to alert the guards, and nobody is going to like that.*”

Fluffy, being a dog, doesn’t listen. Actually, I think he starts barking louder. Is there something I can give him to show I’m not a threat? I look around, and notice, I taste puke slightly coming back up to the back of my throat, a dead rat in the corner of my cell, barely illuminated by the slight light of the morning sun.

Swallowing the bile in the back of my throat, I grasp the rat. I rip off it’s tail, and twist it’s head off. It’s neck makes a sickening crack, and I feel cold blood drip onto my fingers.

I shake away my nausea, clear my throat, and reach the rat over to Fluffy. “Here boy, take it. I know it doesn’t look appetizing, but you must be hu...” The dog snatches the rat carcass from my hand without a second thought, and tears into it, “grrry.”

I look away, trying to ignore the slurping sounds. I listen out for any other sound to focus on. The cracking of plastic, the buzz of flies, the footsteps of a guard, the creaking of rusted metal.

Wait. I listen out, and there is no mistaking it. Boots clonk and squelch down the tunnel halls. “What the Mournfield did I just hear?” A squeaky voice shouts.

A short, mouse looking man rounds the corner. He is peering into each cell, “Is there a puppy in here?” As he nears my cell, I leap over to Fluffy, trying to hide him.

The guard bangs on the bars of the Sparrow boy’s cell, right next to me. I tuck Fluffy behind me. Fluffy makes a slight whimper, but stays quiet.

I try to pretend to be asleep, keeping my face down. I hear my bars bang, “Isss the doggy in heeereee?” He hisses. I expect him to walk off, but I don’t hear hiss boots. The door creaks open, and my heart begins to beat out of my chest.

“Heeey,” He squeaks, “aren’t you the priiiince? I know you’re awakeeee.” I sense he leans down, and I feel his hot, smelly breath right next to my face.

I look up slightly, and he pauses. I glance up at my head, and I see my real red hair is showing. I guess I would look different without the blonde hair most people see me have.

He yanks my head up by my hair, and examines my face. "Okay, Hhhhad to check. You look different." He grins cruelly, and I can see his rotting teeth, "I'm going to have fun dealing you your retribution!"

He zip-ties my wrists and ankles, and pulls me up. He's too focused on me, so he doesn't notice Fluffy, and I let out a sigh of relief.

Though, that relief dissipates as he knees me hard in the stomach. I grit my teeth, but don't make a sound. I won't give him the satisfaction of hearing my pain. He grabs my shirt collar, and pulls me up, "

Not soooo tough nowww?" He punches me in the gut. "The Leader will know if I hurt the face, but your body is already hurt, so it doesn't matter." He kicks my leg out from under me. I fall, and he puts his knee in my path, and I gasp.

It hurts... It hurt so much. I crumple into a fetal position, waiting for another hit. "GAH! What the RYK!?" He screams.

I look up, and Fluffy's jaw is wrapped around the guard's achilles, incisors stained with blood. The guard kicks his leg frantically, but Fluffy is glued to his leg.

"D-DAAMN MUTTT!" The guard squeals. He puts the foot Fluffy is biting down, and kicks Fluffy with his other foot. He yelps and skids across the ground.

The sound of claws against the stone rings through my ears, and already I see how I am so attached to this little bundle of fur.

The guard turns back to me as I charge, using my head as a battering ram. The guard's eyes widen, and he tries to dodge, but it's too late. My cranium connects with his stomach. He kneels, and gasps.

But I fell with him. I didn't think this through all the way but if falls with my head in his gut, he is taking me with him. I land face first into the ground. I try to get up, but he shoves my face into the dirt. He spits onto the back of my head, and kicks dust on my head.

"Take tttthat, You Son of a buck!"

I look up weakly. I see the guards boots, pointing away from me. The guard takes a deep breath, and reaches down, picking up Fluffy by the scruff. All Fluffy makes is a weak, slight, whimper.

"Ttttime to deeeal with you, lousy mutt." the guard whispers, squeezing his hands tightly together. All I can do is sit and watch. Tears flood my eyes, but my throat feels dry. I shake, trying to move, as Fluffy's squeals. It's over. It OVER! NO!

"What the RYk is going on!" Somebody yells from behind me as the barred door creaks open.

I recognize the voice, and so does the guard. He drops my dog, turns on his heels, and salutes in one swift motion.

“Corporal Valence! W-what are you doing here?” I don’t know how high or low the rank of Corporal is, but it must be far higher than him if he is so scared of what Cerberus might do to him.

I hear Cerberus stomp up to the guard. He steps over me, and his boots are right next to my face. “Second Class Private Manius, the prisoner you have just accosted is my responsibility to care for, so I must check in on him regularly. Although, I would like to be enlightened as to why *you* are here?”

“Well, I heard a noise, so I came to investigate.” Manius hurriedly explains. He is bouncing his leg in nervousness. I smile, just slightly. He knows he is in trouble, and he is a bad liar.

“Well, seeing by the way you were holding *my* dog, I think you were doing more than investigating.” Cerberus’ voice is full of venom. When he says it, it even makes my skin crawl. He seems to have so many different facets, different tones and acts.

Manius stutters, “Your– ho– I wa–...? I do–” It’s as if he is glitching. Cerberus puts his hand up, and shakes his head.

“Save it. You will only be demerited, as long as you do not speak about this.” Cerberus growls. Although, he sounds much more like a leader than he ever has before.

Manius opens his mouth, closes it, and nods, walking out of the cell, grumbling to himself.

As he steps away, I shuffle over to Fluffy, and pull him to my chest, “*Hey, I got you, Fluffy. Thank you boy for helping me. I got you, I got you.*”

Tears stream down my cheeks, and I sniffle. How could I let this happen? I was supposed to protect him. “*I-I knew it,*” I say softly to myself, “*Anyone who ever comes close to me suffers. Not even animals are safe.*”

A rough, calloused hand softly grasps my shoulder, “*Khira-?*” I turn to see Cerberus looking down at me, an unreadable look in his eyes. “*O-oh, Cerberus! or is it Mr Valence? I- I’m so sorry. You entrusted me with Fluffy and I- I- I let him be beaten to near death!*”

I’m visibly shaking, my breath and I sob and bow my head, “I remember what you said if he got hurt, so do it. I deserve worse.”

I wait for a blow that never comes. Cerberus just stands there. Some time passes, and I look up at him, now more puzzled than sorrowful,

“Are you going too... you know?” I ask him, and I punch my hand in my palm. He pulls out a knife, and I close my eyes.

I wait for the cold sharp blade to pierce my flesh, yet all I feel is the zip ties on my wrists snap off. I peek to see Cerberus holding the plastic bindings while putting his knife away.

“*Huh?*” I’m confused. Why isn’t he at least getting a few licks in?

Cerberus kneels down to a knee, (Funny, now I’m taller than him) and just shakes his head.

“Jason,” he says sternly, but not in a demanding manner, but an oddly worried one. The, “you may not like to hear this, but it’s for the best” kind of manner. The way... the way Khiron used to speak.

“You didn’t do *anything* wrong. It is *not*. *your*. *Fault*.”

His words repeat again and again in my mind, a chorus of lies. I mean, it must be a lie, right? He entrusted the guard of his pet to me, and I allowed for Fluffy to be pummeled!

“But, Cerberus. Look at him!”

I show him Fluffy, passed out in my arms. This is the first time I examined his wounds too. His fur is stained with patches of dark red. I can’t tell if it’s his or the guard. But that doesn’t matter, he shouldn’t have any blood on him. My tears stream down my cheeks, and drip onto Fluffy’s fur, diluting the crimson fur into a dark salmon. I pull him closer, feeling his slight heartbeat.

Bu-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

Relief flows through my body as I hear the sound, but it’s soon corrupted by guilt. There shouldn’t even be a worry of if his heart’s rhythm continues. I feel... tyrannical. Like me and my father are becoming one. “I’m just like my dad.” I sob aloud, “Watching as ones suffer around me.” he makes a face at this, weighing the idea.

“*Be. Quiet.*” Cerberus scolds me. “I saw your... admitted bravery for Mirk, a try to save him. And you, I suppose did! If you hadn’t bought him time, he wouldn’t have survived. It is not your fault, really.”

This isn’t Cerberus. Cerberus only says the blunt truth, and the words he speaks are dead face lies. “B-but... because of me—” I sob, incoherently. Cerberus covers my mouth, shaking his head disappointedly.

“No. You didn’t do anything to cause Mirk pain. It was the Second Class Private.” Cerberus’ eyes fill with rage, and balls his hand into fist “And I’ll take care of that.”

I shake my head, and wipe away the tears in my eyes, “No, please don’t. Don’t hurt him, that will just continue a cycle of violence.”

I expect Cerberus to refuse, to argue about what he deserves, but he just gives a somber nod, “*Okay, I won’t*” He whispers.

He stands up, does a little stretching, and looks down at me, “But, after what happened, I can not allow you to be put at risk by staying here.”

I blink once, then twice. Where will he take me? He reaches out his hand and I hesitate, looking around the room.

Eh, anywhere is better than here. Well, maybe not the board’s office. Or concerts, those are too loud and high energy for me. Although—

“Ahem.” Cerberus clears his throat, pulling me back to reality.

“Oh yeah, sorry.” I blush and take his hand, cradling Fluffy in my other arm. He pulls me up, and I stabilize myself on the wall. My knees feel weak, and my wounded side throbs, the painkillers long gone by now. Cerberus makes sure that I can stand, then steps to the door.

“So,” I say in a raspy voice, “Where are we going? Isn’t this place teeming with guards?”

Cerberus turns back to look at me and opens his mouth. Then he closes it. He does this a few times, and I'm starting to think he isn't responding but trying to get some food out of his teeth.

He sticks his finger in his mouth, and picks out a small green glob. He flicks it away, "Sorry, had to get rid of that. Now to answer your question." Well, that answers that question.

"You know how that tower you lived in never felt... Home-spun?" He asks, and my brows raise. I didn't think he would say that. I blush slightly,

"Y-yeah, what does that have to do with where we are going?" I ask.

He chuckles melancholily, "Well, I have the same feeling about this place. Eventually my hiraeth for a personal shelter became too much, and I decided to build myself a...getaway."

"Oh, okay well, lead the way!" I look down at Fluffy, who seems to have stabilized, "Maybe we should get him to Dr. Apolla fi—"

"NO!" He shouts, and I jump back, "Ah- sorry, I didn't mean to shout. But can we not? I have bandages at my hut, and I know how to treat minor wounds like these."

Cerberus brushes Fluffy's wounds lightly, causing his tail and arms to twitch. I grimace, and ponder what to do,

"Are you sure he'll be fine?" I finally ask. "Are you sure that you can treat him, without causing long lasting wounds?"

Cerberus' eyes glaze over as he thinks, playing with the hair in the back of his head. He sighs, and nods, "Yes. I wouldn't risk this if I couldn't."

I look down at Fluffy, and lean down to his ear, "It's okay boy, hang in there. You're going to have to wait for a little longer." I kiss the top of his head, his fur tickling my face. I look back up at Cerberus with a stern expression, "Okay, lead the way."

Cerberus nods seriously, though he stays holding the door open. We stand there for a second before I realize he is holding it for me to go through, "Oh, my bad. Thanks." I embarrassingly chuckle at him as I step through the doorway.

I begin to turn right to the entrance, but I'm yanked back by Cerberus, who begins to drag me in the other direction.

"Gah! HEY!" I cry in surprise, "Wha- where are you going?"

Cerberus looks back at me, exasperated. How can one person change their attitude so quickly?

"One, SHHHH!" He shushes me. I can't help but chuckle as he continues, "and second, you never have a tunnel with one entrance, that's an easy way to get cornered. We only take prisoners through one entrance so they believe that's the only exit, so we have at most one guard there."

"Oh okay." I responded, and the conversation ended there. We walk in silence as the tunnels get darker the deeper we divulge

After what feels like hours,(but, to be honest, it probably wasn't over *one* hour) I notice we start to slope upwards. Gradually, a slight glow spreads through the tunnels, illuminating the way. Eventually, I can see the end of the tunnel, and it seems to be...midday.

I stop before the end of the tunnel remembering what Cerberus said about the guards.

“*Good remembering.*” I hear whispered next to me as a hand pats my shoulder.

“Holy—” I jump, and whip around to Cerberus, obviously. I let out a laugh, “Jeez, I’m a klutz.” I chuckle.

Cerberus nods in mock seriousness, “Affirmative.” I go to laugh again, but Cerberus slaps his hand over my mouth, “Stop. There might be a guard.”

He peaks around the corner, turning his quickly, left, right, left right.

“Okay, clear.” He says as if he is in a spy movie. I roll my eyes while smirking, “Ooookay, special agent.”

I strut out, almost dancing as I walk. I hear Cerberus let out a “sto-” before sighing, and running up beside me.

“You can’t do that, what if someone was out of my line of sight?” Cerberus tells me as he runs up. He sounds annoyed, but in more of the way an owner scolds their pet for breaking something, but breaking it in a funny way. I look over at him with a cheeky smile, and shrug,

“I don’t know what I would do,” I admit, and he smiles. That smile is about to drop, for I didn’t finish speaking, “but I know you would get me out of it.”

His snarky grin drops, “Ha ha, very funny. How do you know that I would do that? Maybe I would have been fed up with you at that point.” He retorts.

I make fake puppy dog eyes, “Awww, you’ll never get tired of me, and even if you do,” I make my face turn dark, and monstrous and put on a growling tone, “You’ll never get rid of me, Mwah ha ha h—”

Cerberus smacks me on the top of my head, “Shut up, you imbecile.”

I snicker, and we begin to walk in silence again. I don’t know how to feel anymore. I usually act this way when I put my mask on, so is this an act?

But, it is also kind of nice. It feels more... natural. More real.

How long has it been since somebody spoke? I look over at him, and he seems unbothered. I can’t understand how? The silence is unbearable. I can’t not talk anymore, I’m caving

“Sooo, this is a random question.” I pipe up, and he glances over at me, “But you used a word before, Hiraeth? What does that mean exactly?”

His eyes light up when I ask, and he is almost beaming, “Oh, you don’t know? Let me tell you! My house is ten minutes away, slo that is plenty of time!”

He begins to ramble on and on about meanings, and how many have bad vocabularies, and words lost to time. I listen to his rambles, flowing like a river. I don’t completely digest his words, but they bring me peace to me, seeing his grin, hearing his exuberant tone I didn’t think his voice could make. I enjoy his joy.

“Welp,” Cerberus says, bringing me back to earth, “We are here, welcome to my severely humble abode.”

I look to where he points, and up a slight hill is a small, run down, storage facility. I feel my stomach drop, and the furry ball of joy in my arms seem slightly heavier.

What am I doing laughing around? I need to make sure Fluffy is fine!

“I know it’s not much, but it’s the closest thing I ha-” Cerberus begins to mutter, but I push past him.

“Hey, don’t forget what we are here for!” I yell, and his eyes widen. He runs up, shoes crunching on plastic and bugs. “Ryk, come on! Lay him on the table, I’ll get the bandages.” He tells me while running past and opening the rusted, decrepit door.

I follow right behind him, having to bend over slightly to fit in. I don’t take a chance to digest the house, focused on the table. I look left, and right but I don’t see it. Finally, I realized what I thought was a chair is actually one of those plastic tables little kids have.

I lean down and lay Fluffy on the table. The table is covered in soot and grime, looking many years old.

Will Fluffy’s wounds get infected? I glance at Fluffy breathing calmly on the disgusting table. It’s the cleanest place to lay him, and we can deal with the infection if it comes to that.

Cerberus steps out of a little closeted area, with fresh gauze and bandages in hand, “It was nearly impossible to take these from the medical building, so we have to use them sparingly.”

I look at him questioningly, “But still enough for Fluffy to be healed, right?” I ask him. He promised he was sure he could heal Fluffy. Is he going back on that?

Cerberus looks at me somberly, “Yes, of course. I didn’t lie to you. Can you please move?”

He sounds as if I hurt him. I... I feel bad. He’s started to be nicer to me, and I’m doubting his kindness at every turn. I nod, and step over. Here, take this.” He says, and hands me something. I look down, and it’s a moldy roll of bread. “You haven’t eaten anything since you got here. I know it’s pretty much inedible compared to the Capitals food, but you have to—”

I break the bread in half, and scarf the moldier half down ravenously, while handing him the other half.

I force myself to swallow. “Most food tastes the same to me,” I shrug, “nauseating. Here, you have the other half, you probably haven’t eaten much either.”

Cerberus looks at the bread questioningly. Does he think I poisoned it? How could I when he just gave it to me? “Come on, it is edible, I just ate it.” I tease him, “Don’t tell me you have now become a food snob.”

Cerberus glares at me and snatches the roll of bread from me, “No I’m not, I just was worried about how much you are eating, that’s all. But you don’t deserve this food, so I’ll eat it once I’m done with this.”

I roll my eyes, but on the inside, I’m smiling. “Thanks.” I say grumble over to him, and he looks at me.

“For what?” He asks.

“For worrying about me. Not many people have done that for me.” I turn away, nervously twiddling a piece of cloth I found, (Don’t ask when or where, I have no clue).

Cerberus doesn't say anything for a second. Did I do something wrong? I go to apologize, but he intercepts me, "Well, thank you too. For worrying about me." I pause. That's new. I smile, "You're welcome. Now, may I watch you bandage up Fluffy?"

Cerberus, back turned, responds, "Two things. One, his name is Mirk, not "Fluffy". An infant could think of a more creative name."

"Agree to disagree." I quickly interjected.

"No." Cerberus scoffs and keeps talking before I can argue, "And second, I'm already done."

He turns back to me, cradling a bandaged Mir- no, just doesn't sound right. He holds a bandaged Fluffy in his arms. I rushed over to him, and pet Fluffy. "Hey boy. Are you okay? I'm so sorry." I ask, and

Cerberus shakes his head. "He's still sleeping. He isn't even sleeping due to his injuries, he is just exhausted. He needs to eat and drink something." Cerberus puts Fluffy in my arms, startling me.

He walks over to a cardboard box, and begins to rummage through it, "Ahhh, don't tell me! Am I really out of food and water?" He punches the wall, and doesn't even wince, "Okay well I'm going to have to go back to the base."

He begins to walk out the door. I clear my throat, "Forgetting something?" I ask. He turns back to face me, and face palms.

"Right. I should be back in forty five minutes, don't try to run away. I don't think you will though because you have had a chance previously."

Before I can even respond, he is out the door. I stood there, stunned.

Okay, I guess I'll... I look around for something to tinker with. I didn't get a chance before, so I examine the room. It's a square room, probably a 20x20 feet room, which is slightly bigger than a bedroom.

It's pretty empty, which I expected. There is a small closet, not even an arm length, with some scraps of random clothing, weapons, and other supplies. There is also a dirty, yellow mattress, shelf eaten away by termites, and the table.

I sigh, and lay Fluffy onto the mattress and flop next to him. It feels like a cloud, but that's probably because I have been sleeping on the ground, and most of the time I've gone to sleep not of my own volition.

It's so calming...

So peac...

Ful...

...

.....

.....

"Woof!"

I feel a wet, slobbery tongue lick my face. I sit up with a jolt.

I open my eyes to see Fluffy standing in my lap, breathing his dog breath in my face. I can smell the dead rat and who knows what else in his breath, but I don't care,

"Oh my goodness, Fluffy, you're alright!" I pull him into an embrace. He licks my face, and something drops into my lap.

"Hm, what's this?" I pick it up, and it's a folded up piece of paper. I begin to open it when fluffy hops up and runs into the closet.

"Wait Fluffy, get out of there!" I pocket the note (or, well, waistband it) and get up, following Fluff into the closet.

Before I can grab him, he pulls out a open metal lock box, papers nearly bursting out of it. One of them slides out. I pick it up and read it.

JASON SMILES ONLY IN SURPRISE.

HE HAS NO MINDLESS JOY, A BRAINWASHED BLEACH-HAIREZ SOLDIERZ BOY

WHO'LL NEVER SEE WHAT IT'S LIKE, YOU'Z LIFE ON THE LINE. AND YET HE

KNOWS MORE THAN I EVER COULD, SMILING AND NODDING, HE DOESN'T

SALUTE-

HE BOWS.

AND HE WOULD CURTSEY IF IT GAVE HIM FAVOR

IF HE THOUGHT IT WOULD DRIVE THE RATS OUT OF HIS HEAD

RANSACKED AND SHACKLED AT ONCE

A PERFECT CONTRADICTION,

LIKE THE SMILE HE GIVES ME AS WE DANGLE OUR FEET OVER THE EDGE,

DARING NOT JUST TO LIVE BUT TO BE ALIVE, TO BREATHE IN SMOGGY AIR

LIKE DRUG DEALERZ ON ONE LAST JOB, BUT WE WERE NEVER SO

CAREFREE EVEN THEN, AS HE WONDERED HOW ALL HE LOVES TURNS TO
ASH, AS I WONDER HOW LONG UNTIL THE MONSTERS FINALLY FIND ME,
AND I WILL NOT BE HIDING.

I WILL NOT BE EXPECTED

-BEAR MY TEETH AND CUT THEM WITH A KNIFE BORN FOR

CRUCIFIXATION,

UNTIL I AM FANGED AND MONSTROUS, A DIFFERENT KIND OF BEAST
THAN THE ONE THEY BREED, NO LONGER SILENT, NO LONGER COMPLACENT,

I WAS NEVER A GOOD CHILD.

BUT IT HAD TO HAPPEN SOMEHOW.

- CV

Did Cerberus write this? It's amazing! I grab another-

I continue on, reading more and more. I get consumed by the literature. I get about half way through, then I hear the door creak open.

Oh Pan, I'm dead.

Chapter 14: Cerberus

“Own your longing. Do you hear me? Own it.” - Anne Sexton, Self-Portrait in Letters

I have always been told that one day with one person, the mask will slip and I will be revealed in all my gory reality. I just wasn't expecting the person to be my so-called enemy for life. “Hey-! Jason what the hell? You can't just go through my-” I feel my face get hot, but it's not only anger since I can't feel the pounding in my head.

“Y-you were born a poet, Cerberus.” he tells me and suddenly my fear has quieted. “I didn't mean to, um-” Jason looks incredibly awkward, and Fluffy comes running up to me, licking my ankle. “To read my life's works? Yeah. Okay.” I glance at the box of loose papers, which he's organized into neat little scrolls.

He's the one red in the face now as I walk over to the box. In his hands lies the poem I really, really wish he hadn't read. “...so...” he tries to find words. I snatched the poem out of his grasp, re-reading it to see what I'd scribbled down. The bag of dog food is placed haphazardly in Jason's lap.

I stare at Jason blankly as I can muster, and he starts talking before I tell him to shut up. “Cerberus, I- I'm sorry, I didn't mean to go through your stuff. But... you've got a gift. This is really good. I've never been able to write well and I'm supposed to be good at writing, I'm a politician!” He pauses, and he leginemetly seems to mean what he's saying. “But, I can see-kind, what you have put in them. It feels... melancholy? But- but not in a bad way. They... actually feel good? Does that make sense?”

I stare him down for a long moment and then say, slowly; “I am an artist. Art... is supposed to make you feel things. It’s supposed to hit you in the gut and leave you begging for more, supposed to rip your world apart and recraft it. So yes, Jason. It does make sense.” He watches me with wonder, and so I have to ask; “What?”

“It’s just... I keep discovering more versions of you. There’s polite- Alecto, there’s your weird soldier thing, when you’re furious, and then there’s this version. Artistic Cerberus.” He notes and I scoff at how stupid it sounds. “*Artistic Cerberus?* Jason. You need to accept that I am not a person like you, okay? That’s why I’m like this.”

He just stares at me, less angry this time than determined. “No, You need to accept that you’re flesh and blood. And that you crave friendship and love, like you write about. You need to understand that you aren’t a loaded pistol, a perfect machine. You are human and therefore not broken, just flawed.”

It feels like he’s trying to pull me apart and I know he doesn’t mean to be cruel (for Jason is not cruel, just stationed in black and white) but it hurts. It hurts that he attacks what I am and who I was raised to be, my very existence.

“Listen- Jason,” I pause, and put the poem to the side. Jason takes his hands and slowly grabs my wrists. I blink and turn, questioningly, pretending I didn’t flinch hard when he touched the wrapping burn scars. “-what are you...?” He presses his thumb down on my vein and I can only hold still and wish to be alone.

“Do you feel that, Cerberus?” He whispers, and he sounds like Khiron now, and I wonder if this is something that my father has taught. “I... Of course I feel my pulse, it’s a function, Jason.” I respond but my voice wavers. Jason is bent over from his injuries and so for once I look down at him, and he’s up so close that I cannot avoid those eyes.

“You’re alive.” He tells me but it sounds more like a warning. “Start to understand that, my friend, because you are one of the few people left who may just change things. If everyone saw your poems.... If the world united under someone...” he wonders out loud and I can’t help the way my chest flutters at the idea, the idea of salvation without so much bloodshed.

For I am tired of the violence. I learned long ago that I was good at no emotion but rage, but now I can’t help but wonder if that is the ringing truth or just another lie, another falsity. My mother always says that lies are only camouflage for promise, that her tricks get her farther.

I did not dare respond, for I see the games to be cruel. I find my broken doll limbs and try to help the chess pieces recover, pawns, rooks, now a king. It is all I can do in repenance. "Are we really... friends?" I ask him slowly, (I have never had one, I would not know).

"I... I think so. We're not just contacts anymore. Are we enemies?" I pause to consider these words, respond; "No. Meant to be, but..." "And we're not family, really." He confirms, and I nod. "So friends?" I ask, and he nods, hands slipping away from my wrists finally. "My mother would gut you if she knew, Jason. My only friends thus far have been my hunting knives."

"Then maybe it's time you've made some new ones." He says with a little smile, the kind I barely live for. "Maybe." I told him.

"You understand I have to be this person, though?" I wonder aloud.

"Do you really have to be anyone, Cerberus? Without your mom... you can still change things, y'know?" That feels like a revelation to me, for some reason I can't put my finger on. "Jason, just feed the dog, okay? I'm going to..." I don't have much to do, to be honest. As soon as I go back to the base, I will, and I don't want to. I'd like to sleep.

Could I sleep right now? Jason is in no state to leave, is he? If I cuff him, perhaps I could... my eyes flutter shut and I whip my head back up suddenly, making the king flinch. "Oh hell Cerberus, have you slept like... at all?" he asks, eyes wide.

I shrug. "I had a mission. That takes priority." Jason stares at me for a long moment. "Go to sleep." he practically orders me. I raise and eyebrow at the audacity. "You're aware this is my jurisdiction? And that you're my hostage?"

"You're about to pass out. Trust me, I could tell." I want to scoff and tell him that I would never trust scum such as he. But... oh god, I want... (weapon functionality low, extreme measures to be taken) "Fine- BUT! You're going to stay zip tied to the desk and you aren't going through my stuff, got it?"

He puts his hands up in mock surrender and I sigh and sit down, tugging my jacket hood over my head. Perhaps to Jason this looks awkward of a position, but I have learned to sleep in any ways I can. I slip into my own head as fast as a cast out bear cub, slipping under icy waters.

*Even when I'm asleep, I'm restless.
The sky is no longer one of smog
It is no longer at all
I am under the currents,*

*Falling yet
The very thing that attempts
To take my
Feeble life, tries it's best to comfort me
Strokes my wheezing, liquid filled lungs with promise
That one day I will return to the world
One absent of
The brutality that lost me*

I'm awake half an hour later, scrambling up for a pen to jot another lovely dream. Jason had clearly started to doze off (seriously, that guy is terrible at survival) and he looked up at me blearily. It's oddly endearing and a tiny smile comes across my face, one that can only be achieved from sharing a moment of solace.

"Oh- *yawn* -nothing happened when you were asleep." he mumbles. I raise an eyebrow. "Sureee, Jason. "You don't... seem disturbed in your sleep. I'd expect because you know..." he's avoiding it. What? Talking about Niobe. "A killer can still have tranquil dreams." I tell him, stretching.

"What was it ab-" I cut him off; "Drowning." he deadpans, and I give him a sickly-sweet smile. The little dog licks my ankle, and I snort at its pathetic nature. I stand, my world tilts, tilts on its axis. Nay they see thou weakness, straighten my jacket, smile sharply.

I glance out the shattered window pane, a glitz of green and blue that bounce off the wall, greet me. "It's only midday." I note, pleased. I've made decent time so far- although today I need to train with Aries. And that'll take up... most of the day. It always does.

"So..." Jason looks at me awkwardly and I untie him with a roll of my eyes. The sleeve of my patchwork-jacket lifts and for a second, the circling burns of my past failures gleam. They haven't healed as well as most of mine, still crosshatched and pink in the centers. I suppose that... they were quite harrowing at the time.

He lets a little gasp from his pale-pink lips, and I don't say anything. Just re-pack the zip-ties as he thinks, furrowing his brow deeply.

"W-what are those? Where... Cerberus?" he sounds, well, almost worried. It's so incredibly demented of a question and so much one that Jason would ask. I want to tell him that they are nothing, that I understand their meaning. I know what it means to hurt but oh dear lords of hell, if I hide the bruises and say that I am fine all it means is that I've had worse. I know how to manage.

“These are my failures. My imperfections, trials gone wrong.” Perhaps it is yet another default that orders these words to march like toy soldiers. Jason looks at me utterly clueless, and I fight the urge to refuse an explanation. Why should I have to explain how I am and what made me this way? Not a single person will ever truly believe me.

“-For a weapon, every time a mission is failed, tinted into the red, there is a price to be paid. A reminder, a warning.” I tell him as if he should know, but I am glad he didn’t. I am glad that Jason had his struggles but is still humane under the regality he swore off.

“That’s not, that’s not normal! What the- ryk!” he exclaims and his hands flutter with rage like the dying butterflies in my stomach acid. “It’s not for you, Prince.” I inform him and he looks wrecked.

It’s a metaphor, my scars. Well, that’s what I should say, that’s what I know they are meant to be. But my brain doesn’t really know how to connect what’s meant to be into a reality that I possess.

FOR I AM NOT A METAPHOR, BUT A MONSTROUS CHILD,

HOT PINK AND ROTTEN TO MY VERY CORE.

SHACKLED WITH CHALKY CANDY NECKLACE,

(HALF CHEWED OFF, I AM HUNGRY, WAS BORN THAT WAY)

“Oh, relax,” I say instead, tilting my head. “I only have two, out of eleven missions I’ve ever been on. I almost got one for this last one, getting you here, though. Because of tardiness.” I note aloud. “That’s not... that’s not fair! You’re a... you’re still a kid-”

“You know I do not consider myself in that light, Jason. And... perhaps, no, it remains unfair. As is the world.” I respond and this time I am sad when I speak because I mourn his visions of grandeur fairness.

I have only ever heard two definitions of fair. 1, everyone gets the same thing. 2, everyone gets what they need. I do not believe I needed to watch a child die in my arms, to cut my legs on shards of plastic and crawl from wreckage. If things were fair, then my existence wouldn’t be a concept at all.

“I don’t care if you don’t!” he says, and he slips his hands over mine. I flinch, raise my head and look at him, tense. He shoves the fabric up, and traces a soft-skinned pale finger ‘round my wrist.

“It’s just pain, that you had to suffer. It’s not a lesson. You... you might not think yourself to be a person but... you are one. And it won’t change, you can’t become robotic, perfect!” he yells now.

The world spins behind my splintered plastic-doll box. I’ve been sitting in it my whole life, no matter what I do, what I attempt. “-I am! I’m, I’m- perfect! It’s just little, little splinters, cracks and missing bolts, not enough ammunition-”

I fall as silent as the last blanket of snow, 53 years ago.

“I need to train now. You can do whatever, but... don’t leave, please. I don’t want to tie you up.” *but I will if necessary.* He nods slowly, glancing around and at the ground. “Please... just think about what I told you?” he whispers as I leave and I open my mouth to respond, before shutting it, tugging my gas mask high and over. I have to tug the elastic’s hard back into my face shape, from how long I made Jason wear it.

Trotting down and around, my leg wobbles weakly. It throbs ever so slightly, painkillers having removed any feeling at all. I can be numb. I like it that way. I hear footsteps, light and shaky behind me after walking for maybe 15 minutes. Jason? He really doesn’t know what’s good for him, does he?

My tormentor, my teacher, the man who is a blacksmith taking to my dull edged sword is already there when I arrive. I look up, see his dark brown eyes, not kind ones, muddy and easy to get lost in. I have so many times, curled up, broken toy limbs curled to my chest in the back of patrol vans.

“Ah. And there he is, the little punk who thought he was smarter than me.” My shoulders pull back ever so slightly, one of my tells, I am aware. I so believe myself to be smarter, he could not carve a narrative from ivory-ink words as I can. But I will grit my teeth and bow, for he holds the cards here.

“I... I apologize for yesterday. I don’t know what got into me. I malfunctioned, I think, sir.” I stumble over my words, but keep eye contact because I was trained to do so, otherwise I wouldn’t look up from the filthy training room floor. “Oh, you sure did. I hope you learned your lesson... but I guess we’ll see, hm?” He’s only a little taller than me, but his hand pulls my head close to him, I have to force myself not to flinch; “Yes sir.”

“Square up, brat.” he orders, shoving me away, and I keep my balance, fists up, *always protect the face.* Firmly my boots dig into the ground, cool leather against bare feet. I am lucky to have

such protection and it feels almost like a shield the Khiron may have given me, an apology, I'm sorry I never loved you, I would have if I'd known.

And that fuels me with rage as soon as he counts to zero, and I lunge as if death itself (I am the guardian of the underworld of course I do so). It is not fair how I was given Aries rather than the man who shared my blood and would have protected me rather than thrown me to the wolves, I duck from a left uppercut. But fair is non-existent and the wolves are my own kind, I will repay what they have made me into, a cunning dog with matted fur and great blue eyes.

Sharp, one leg goes up, straight into Aries's face, spin-kick. Retreat, counter. Footwork, footwork! Hands in front of your face, don't make eye contact, don't you dare lose your focus. Hands come sharp into my stomach and I just barely miss a hard one to the head, up from behind, hit him in the gut hard as I can. He takes it with a sharp growl and after a few minutes of utterly exhilarating, draining sparring, he plays dirty, sharply stomps my already miserable leg, knocks me off balance.

I take two more, sharp in the ribcage, glass shards into my hands.

"Ah-!" A little yelp escapes me, because I can't help it. Useless child, is what I am. If only I were a little bit smarter, a lot stronger, colder. "Pathetic little stroc, aren't you? Crying like a little kid?" Boot up against my ribs, I focus on breathing, words automatically engrave into my mind.

"Hey!" Some demented soul cries out and the weight lifts slightly, I let out a needy breath of air. It's... oh dear, it's Jason. He looks utterly furious, head held higher than I'd ever seen it. "What are you doing? What makes you think you can treat him like that!?" He's closer now, and I pity him, wince, look away through half closed eyelids. "He's only 15!" Jason continues to yell.

"...This little punk?" Aries laughs sharply. "This little system error is my protege, royal brat. What in hell are you doing out of your cell?" He tilts his head, malicious. I get a sharp kick to the chin before he waltzes towards Jason, who doesn't back down. I slowly, shakily climb to my feet. "Hey... hey, Aries!" I call, nervous as he looks ready to snap. And he does, at me, which is how I'd prefer it. Jason darts in front of me, getting the blunt of the blow to his arm, which he winces at, suddenly sprawled at my feet. I blink down at him, hissing under my breath; "are you trying to die?"

Aries raises his hand once more and I retort quickly, "We can't damage the merchandise, sir. I'll... I'll deal with him after." This earns me a rough jostle, and I flinch, pull slightly because I am shooketh, to my very center. Jason took a hit for me, Aries screwed my leg. I'm malfunctioning all over the place.

“Talking back, are we, now?” Aries glances at Jason, “Scram, I’ll deal with this little stroc myself.” I do not look forward to that, but Jason climbs to his feet, suddenly I want to beg him, please don’t leave me. I’m sorry for all I screamed and argued- “Well, guess I’ll see you, um, never!” He says playfully as he can muster, darting off, half hunched from pain.

There’s a comedic pause, and Aries frowns; “Is he trying to run?” I nod hastily in response, “I can chase him down, sir! I’ll come back tomorrow, after my duties are accomplished and you’ll have me as long as you need...” He sharply hits me across the back, a gesture of, ‘go ahead’ and I shakily begin my chase, all I can think is, “why?”

Why would Jason do that, try to let me escape Aries’s wrath? I didn’t deserve a break, after my pitiful performance, I’m losing my touch, aren’t I?

I sprint only for maybe a quarter mile before I find Jason splayed outside my own little hideaway, panting so hard I’m scared that bile will burn his throat and whatever little I’ve forced him to take down will come bubbling up. “You okay?” I end up asking, quiet, awkward. He looks up at me, nods, out of breath.

I... I don’t know what to say to him anymore. I’m still going to kill him. It will be hard to watch the breath flee his lungs now, the life from his eyes. (Harder, I suppose, the term is).

“...thanks...” it’s barely a grumble, barely a noise but I’m almost certain Jason hears it.

“You’re welcome, Cerbie,” he says as soon as he can make coherent sentences. I fight a little, ironic smile. “I should take you to get your wounds redressed, right?” I wonder aloud, and he tilts his head. “I mean, I’ll be fine. Don’t want to take up anyone’s extra time!” I give him a long, hard look. “We need you in proper shape.” I tell him, pretend it’s not an excuse for myself growing to care for him. I shouldn’t care. I am a... a thing? A weapon? I can’t piece it together any longer...

We reach the medical center just near dusk, and what little light that peeks behind the smog is dimming. I gave Jason my jacket, which while baggy on me fits him only slightly loose. Weird genetics from the capitol, I guess. They’re born tall, and nurtured, for they have the resources to be nurtured and grown with. I was never given that, was born wrong and more of a mutt than Jason with his handsome smirks, and styled (fake!fake!) blond hair.

Either way, my painkillers begin to wane as I take us in, posture closed and protective. Heads snap up at my voice, excited to be in my presence. I smile at all of them, as Dr. Apolla glares. “There you are! I thought you’d let him rot in his cell, Valence jr.” I shrug, look away. There’s a messenger from the capitol here, I realize with a start, one of the ones bribed and slowly dragged into our allegiance. I wander off as she situates Jason, leg dragging slightly.

“Hello, young Valence.” She hisses, voice smooth but shrill. I tilt my head, studying her. “Do you have something to tell me? Otherwise, I really do need to-“ she interrupts me with the handing of a letter, a real fancy one, 3d shapes swirled on the outside. Is this what rich people spend cash on? I take it, slowly, unsure.

“What’s it... about?” I ask cautiously. She shrugs, looking away, “No idea, but it came straight from the board head, so it’s definitely important.” She coughs weakly, and I take a step back, opening the letter with a quick slice of my knife. I do not rip envelopes, why waste stationary? But before I can read it, Jason screams. I’m immediately running off towards where he is, fighting a cry as my ankle rolls and my shattered leg jostles. “What-?!” I exclaim, and the doctor blinks at me in surprise. “-Told you he cared about me!” Jason tells her smugly, and my face falls angrily. “Hey, what the Hades? You can’t just *scream* to get my attention!”

“Aw, but you worried about me!” He teases. I growl sharply; “Never.” The doctor doesn’t say anything just yet, eyes on my leg, horrified. “-it’s gotten worse, somehow?” She still sounds disgusted with me, perhaps a little less so? It could be wishful thinking, it wouldn’t be the first time!

“Ah? Oh, my leg. It’s fine.” I say firmly, checking Jason's injuries, which seem to be beginning to heal, however slowly. “He needs to eat more. I’, going to give you some anti-nausea pills for him after I check your leg.” Dr. Apolla informs me. I raise an eyebrow, ain’t no way I’m letting her insult me and cruelly wrap my injuries today. “Yeah, uh no. I can do it by myself,” Jason looks mortified at my lack of manners, and so, “-Not to be rude, but it’s not so hard to wrap a wound.

And I grew up watching how you soothed and coached others through it, while you squeezed my injuries and sprayed them with antiseptic for an extra bit of entertainment.

“Oh, no. No way, Valence jr. That leg is ryked, and you aren’t going anywhere.” I could say no, but Jason couldn’t run. I slowly climb up onto cold metal and recycled plastic bag covering, listening to the signature crinkling. It makes me feel nervous, and I suppose it’s auditory conditioning kicking it. “There we go.” She says and it’s slightly mocking as she slides my pant’s leg up, beginning at my bruised hips.

“Hm...” she muses repeatedly under her breath, seemingly unamused by the little jokes Jason attempts to crack throughout the sessions. “I’ve known others who’ve had theirs amputated for this bad of a break. Thankfully, you’re still developing, so you have a higher chance of recovery...” she murmurs, I glance away, annoyed, I don’t want to respond.

“I know how to manage. You can focus on your work.” I say, perhaps sounding a bit childish but when I am angry, when I am in disdain perhaps I am a child? Messy-throwing tantrums and making hot bloody messes.

“Ah, sure. Listen, if you don’t fall silent and hold still, I’ll call Aries and he’ll get you to hold still, won’t he, Valence. I stiffen, eyes clouding just slightly. “No- don’t do that, ma’am...” I glance away, but catch her through my peripheral vision, looking almost apologetic.

Wet rags, damp and rough against dry skin, soothing if not for the stinging buzz, makes you want to pull your leg up and never set it back down. You look down and (!) suddenly and inexplicably your kneecap is sticking out of brown shaded epithelial tissue.

Raggedy pink unhealing scabs, they perhaps know that closing will be pointless, all it takes is another dawn to undo so much effort, another sharp kick and reprimand. White bandages are a stark contrast, as they wrap around, (tight, but not so painful this time). “Wow, Cerberus.” Jason says, staring at the wound, he looks sick, he has a weak stomach.

It’s almost half an hour before I’m cleared to stand up. I reject painkillers because I would like to feel the pain, as I was meant to. Embrace it, for it is part of me. Embrace the pain, for I was designed to. She reaches for me as I wobble, and I pull sharply away, raise my head, and I am back, the heir to SYREN itself.

Face calm, as I was raised with cold eyes, we learned not to show the flaws of flesh. “I thank you for the assistance, Medic Apolla.” she looks reproachful for a few seconds, before turning away with a slight nod. And that’s all there is to it.

I pull Jason up, although I am unsteady myself. “I have business to attend to, now.” He frowns, “You’ve been up and about alot.” I shake my head as we walk down a corridor, rolling my eyes. “Barely, today. I got supplies, did maybe half a training session, and got baptized by a medicinal position.” He doesn’t argue, peeking out a window. “Oh wow, it’s so...”

I stare out from behind him, and yes, it is amusing how he’s taller than me by so much, but it also doesn’t quite matter given our circumstance. The sun is still out, and the sky is smoggy as ever. The buildings and ruins come together in an imperfect collage, and I can’t help the tiny smile that parts from my lips.

Once I have sent Jason to the earth (I wish I had, but that is only more of lies) he is alone in my home, curled up with the imp pressed to his face, not peaceful as you should be asleep. His night terrors seem only worse since Khiron’s unseemly passing.

But again, once he is asleep, I leave to perform the remainder of my work. The letter from the messenger is heavy in my hands, and so ever so slowly the wax seal breaks, Breaks like the sn-ap of Niobe's neck, the crash of the old water towers bones, crushed pavestone. "Ah-" so they are unsatisfied, now?

The letter is simple in its statement, and I ride on my feeling of superiority, I can craft a far more convincing pact than they have proposed. They want the prince's head on a silver platter, they care not for the remains. In return? A boon, and a place of power, a way to speak and be heard.

It would be a tempting offer, if not for the nature of it, the infidelity. It's lies, all lies, bled out onto paper. It's a shame, really. Such a deal might have been favorable in any other circumstance. But if they want him dead, well, there's no ransom to happen.

I guess this means first and foremost that Jason cant' lie to save his life, second that I have failed in my mission. A shame, really, I liked the matching nature of the two branding scars I possess. I know my mother is smarter than me, that she knows how to orchestrate the masses, and so I'll take it to her.

Once it's in her hands, well, the reaction is delayed. She stares at me, I stare back, stolen marble eyes like pools of disdain. "This is secure information?" I nod, my mouth feels dry, when doesn't it? "You've taken him to your little spot, haven't you, corporal?"

"Yes ma'am." I tell her, there's no point in a lie. "You shouldn't have done that." my mother says, cold. "I know." I told her, but I'm not sorry.

"It's your mission." she tells me.

I know.

"Don't waste time."

Time is only relative

"I want him dead by next sundown. Could you even go through with it? Bring him back, before you mess anything else." And that's it. That's the end of all this madness, the final walks. I do as I'm told, leave, go to get the hostage, don't ryk anything else up.

Goodbye, Jason.

Chapter 15: Jason

“Someone who has the best intentions, when offered the wrong advice, can cause more problems than solutions” - ???

I'm worried. I awoke to Cerberus gone, and Fluffy resting on my lap. Cerberus left a note saying he had more training, and he left small rations for Fluffy and I, but to not eat more than a fourth of it.

I think that was several hours ago. Yesterday he left not long after he arrived. That probably isn't how long he usually works for, but it has been most of the night and early morning.

But you may ask what I have been doing? Well, I played with Fluffy a bit, but at his age he gets tired quickly and needs sleep. So when he did sleep, I did what I always do, I built.

At first, I just entwined a few straws with zip ties and bags to make rings, but that gave me an idea that could distract me for the rest of the day. A project that I have just finished.

I hold it up in the light, and, though not the greatest, I think it's a good collar for the materials I have.

It's a black and white collar, a mix of shoelaces, pipe cleaners, and some random unrecognizable scraps. The part I am most proud of though, is the charm. I had laid down outside, when I felt a cold, sharp pain in my shoulder. Immediately leaping up, I turned to see what had stabbed me. What I saw confused me. It was a broken dagger blade, but it contained no rust on it.

When I looked around more, I found broken blades, guns, armor, and other supplies. I still don't get it, but I think the rebels might leave their broken weapons here. But that doesn't make sense, wouldn't they want to reuse them?

Yet, after finding out everything else I thought of the rebels is false, I shouldn't be surprised.

That got sidetracked, back to what I was saying. I found that dagger shard, I had an idea. Taking a piece of brick, another piece of a blade, and the dagger shard, I managed to dull down the edges of the shard, and even engrave fluffy into it.

I used the other metal piece to make a hole. Then, with the keychain ring's assistance, I have just finished the collar.

"Fluffy, C'mere boy!"

Fluffy darts inside, as if teleporting. Before I can react, he runs on leaps onto my chest. I fall to the ground, and let out the first real laugh in the last week. It feels as if almost all the stress I had built up is absorbed by Fluffy's fur.

Fluffy slobbers on my face, giving me a full face wash with his tongue. I laugh-gag at his horrid breath, and pet him behind the ear. I don't want to leave this moment, to return to reality, to remember the type of scum I am. I sigh.

"Okay boy, get off me." Fluffy hops up, and I get down on one knee. "Here boy, it a gift to you." I lip the collar on. Fluffy resists at first, scratching at it, but calms down. He looks at it, and it seems he stands up a bit straighter.

Is he proud of his collar? I mean, it is my masterpiece. I jumped up, "You like it boy, do you? Do you?" I pet Fluffy, and he springs around, spinning in circles.

It's funny, he's a completely different dog than the one Cerberus brought me. He has so much energy for a puppy, even when he wakes up from his naps.

"Wanna go outsi-?" As soon as the word outside leaves my lips, Fluffy is out the door, grayish white fur trailing behind him.

Goodness, he's a mess. But who isn't? I step out of the house. I still don't understand Cerberus's complete change in trust. He wouldn't let me use a single limb before, and now I'm traversing his house freely.

Fluffy is digging all around, getting covered in soot, dirt, and other grime. It kinda makes him look like a dalmatian. I begin to shout at him to stop, but catch myself. Waste begins to fill the holes, almost like sand.

Plastic filling potholes, maybe it can be useful for something. We could call them Plastic potholes. I chuckle to myself.

Wait, that's actually a good idea, plastic potholes. Potholes? Hmmm... Streets? I feel a lightbulb moment. Oh my goodness, it's brilliant. "STREETS! THAT'S IT!" I yell, unable to control my joy.

I run inside, Fluffy right behind me, seeming to pick up on my excitement. I look around frantically. I need a piece of paper to write this down before I forget.

The closet? I am rummaging through it, but all pieces have been used for poems. Arrgh, why does Cerberus have to be such a good writer?! I turn the house upside down looking for a sheet of paper, or something to write on. I, in a last ditch effort, pat my leg down. I know it's no use, there isn't going to be anyth-

I feel a piece of paper in my pocket. When did I get it? I rethink my steps. Ooooh yeah, I took it from Cerberus' poem bin.

It isn't going to work, Cerberus always uses the front and back of his paper, or the paper is poor quality, or it's just too small.

I grab the sheet out of my pocket, and it's surprisingly tough. Usually the pages Cerberus has are frail but this paper feels like sketch paper. My surprise only grows as I unwrinkle the page, which ends up being a normal sized piece of paper, not as small as the sheets in Cerberus' stash.

It's almost too perfect. The paper is completely blank, though I can tell there is some writing on the other side. I contemplate reading the poem, but Cerberus will probably get upset if I read anymore of his writing without asking.

I scramble over to the desk and pick up the pencil, though it's more of a block of lead with frail wood slightly covering parts. I try to find a comfortable way to hold it, but give up, turning back to the paper to...

What was I going to do again? God damn it! Every time! Plastic... something. Fluffy was digging, I thought about sinkholes. And, and...Pavement, fill, car, ummmmm, here it is, I almost have it! Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Don't interrupt me, my thought process!

I remember! I write and sketch my invention before I lose it again. I don't know if five minutes or five hours have passed, and I don't care. My wrist cramps, and fingers stiffen. Finally, I drop the pencil, and look at my blueprint. It's an asphalt paver, yet paved with used plastic instead of, well, asphalt!

I don't know if it will even work, but it's a good idea, I think. It sure is a hell of a lot better than the "Recycling" programs that my Father had implemented, that you would have to pay for, and only reused the old plastic one, then would throw it out with the other plastic. And it didn't even get a tenth of the plastic Argo would make!

Stop it Jason, don't dwell on how wrong something is, focus on how to fix the problem so it doesn't get worse. I shake my head, attempting to make the thoughts dissipate. I can't be going down an existential rabbit hole. I have work to do.

I wanna start building it already. Keeping myself busy, doing something that I truly am passionate about, brings me to bliss. It's funny, the worst thing to ever happen to me is what brings me back from my own personal hell.

I'm snapped back to reality as Fluffy barks from outside. The moment the sound hits my ears, I snatch a rusty mallet I had found earlier, which I had used to straighten out the metal for rusty's collar. But now, I might have to desecrate the tool for violence.

I sneak behind the door, slightly peaking out. I notice the gas masks worn by the rebels, and my pulse quickens, to the point of my ribs rattling at the beats. Did they know Cerberus took me to his hideout?

My thoughts of worries still, and my frantically beating heart skips what feels like a dozen times as I see Fluffy trot over to the guard. My body freezes up, I don't know what to do. Will they hurt him?

I can't take the risk. I begin to run out, Mallet raised, but catch myself at the last second. Fluffy has stopped parking, sniffs the guard, and rolls on his back. I drop the hammer, waving to the guard. A street dog like Fluffy would only have someone he was familiar with pet his stomach. It seems the other dog has returned.

"Cerberus!" I shout out. I never thought I'd ever say that name with any hint of joy. Cerberus looks up, I can see my reflection in the lenses. My hair is now a bright red, the hints of gold now completely gone. I'm covered in soot, but I feel more cleansed than I ever before. "I have something to show you! I have an idea that could help with pollution!"

I began to mutter myself, deep in thought, "We could also use this to create a stable economy in Hades. Then we could hire people too. And bugs I saw were eating- Well anyways, you have to see my... blue...print."

I look back at Cerberus, who has removed his mask, and his face is somber. Eyes sunken, eyebrows scrunched, jaw clenched. His cheeks even seem to have a slight redness to them. As he stands slowly, I catch a quick glance at zip ties, and a letter with the royal seal.

"Oh, I see." I say. "The Board has reached out, right?" Cerberus just barely nods. My heart sinks, I feel as if I'm going to cry, to scream, to react at all!

But I don't. All there is is numbness.

"So, it's time." I step slowly to him, and put my wrists out. "It was inevitable. I just have one request. Please look at the blueprint. I would have liked to do one positive thing before I go."

Cerberus looks at me with slight confusion. I guess he was thinking I'd put up a fight, but the truth is I'm tired of trying. I'm tired of fighting. Everytime I do good, everything goes wrong right after. I think the universe is telling me my bloodline can only do wrong.

Even my mother abandoned the nation, and disappeared. Khiron had connections with the rebels, and yet I haven't seen her here. She could have told Elysium of Father. But she didn't, she was a coward.

Cerberus nods to me and stretches out his arm, signaling that I can go grab my blueprint. I run in and pick up the paper. But I catch a glimpse of the back, and notice a familiar signature. My heart pangs, as Khiron's signature sticks out like a sore thumb on the pristine sheet of paper.

What? A million thoughts flood my mind at once. The first part is addressed to Cerberus, so I skip it. It isn't my business. I also skipped it because I saw my name on the second part. I begin to read,

Dear Jason,

I never wanted to have to write this letter. Even as I'm scrawling, I can barely focus, shaking. I know why, too. You're going to have to do so much alone, my dear child. I wish I could be there to help you, but... if Valence, or Alecto, has given you this, it means I'm never going to be able again.

And you may be wondering, help you with what?

You've got a gift, Jason. A gift and so many burdens, too many for someone your age. You were a blessing to raise, and to nurture that.. spark, that rebellious little scientist that you were, that you will be, was what I believe my purpose was. Because it'll save the world, Jason. You will. I know you've grown up believing all is cursed in your lineage. That you were born only to fill your father's role. But you weren't, so don't. Fill the role of Pan, the savior. Or don't, be in the background. Just do what you want, for yourself. The sins of the father aren't the sins of the son.

Leave that behind, now. Your father was an effect of how he was raised, alone and only shown what the powers of the monetary. His father neglected him, so he wanted to surpass your grandfather's legacy. His anger makes it easy for the board to control his mind.

His father, though? He was a genius, a mastermind with good intentions, but he failed to see what he was doing wrong. Eyes blinded by the greed of his so called friends. The ones we refer to as the board. They are the true evil, not the monarchy. Your family is a family of achievers, your predecessors just didn't listen to the right people.

So grow up, my child. Learn from their mistakes, and understand that this will not come alone. You have true people you can trust. Valence will help you. As cruel and malignant as he seems, he's my child and he won't hesitate to pull you out holes you'll find yourselves in. He'll be there for you. Please, Jason. You can save them all. Do it for Cala. For your mother. For Valence.

But more than anything, do it for yourself.

I-my brain feels fuzzy. I feel as if it can only be a scam, a joke, a bamboozle! I read the note again and again, yet it only gets more confusing the more I try to take it in.

He- he can't be serious. Only suffrage accompanies me, not salvation. The sins of the father might not be the sins of the son, but that doesn't make my sins irrelevant.

"A mastermind with good intentions."

I clutch my head, trying to stop the insolent whispering in my mind. The devil on my shoulder, excusing my evil. I'm no mastermind, and my intentions don't matter when I cause harm. I am just like my father. I can't change.

"You blame your father for your sins. You don't fix yourself. You make the true excuses."
The voice whispers again. *"List-*

I slam my head against a metal rod, and it makes an ear splitting ring. The voice dissipates, but it will only be for a second. I don't know what to believe anymore. M-my father raised me this way, so can I change?

The voice begins to start in my ear. I must think of something else. Father...

Oh, wait, right! What did Khiron mean, “he’s my child”? I glance at the door. Almost as if he had read my mind, the door swings open to Cerberus staring at me intently, bloodlust radiating as if an aura.

“I knew you would try to es-” His eyes widened, and he sucked in a breath. “...scape” The focus of his glance darts around from the note in my hand, to the pole, to my face, to my forehead. I question his last glance for not even half a second before I feel burning sensations from my forehead, and a glossy, red, liquid flows down my forehead, staining my vision, and dripping onto the ground.

I must have not noticed the cut due to the adrenaline, but it is all too noticeable now. I wince, and clutch my head, however still not breaking eye contact with Cerberus.

He is frozen in his stance. It might just be the blood, but Cerberus cheeks seem to moisten. I rub my face on my sleeve, and now it's unmistakable. Cerberus was really crying.

I have heard of dogs crying to cool themselves off, maybe that's what this is?

Ha, that's a funny joke!

Cerberus looks at me with wide eyes, worried exuding from him. Why is he worried? Sounds of laughter echo around me, ringing in my ears. Who is laughing? Is Pan mocking me from beyond the grave?

I take a breath, and the noise stops. Am... Am I laughing? The realization only makes me laugh harder. How did I not know the laughter was coming from myself?

My lungs hurt, my heart hurts, my throat hurts. My head hurts. Everything hurts, yet that won't stop me from laughing.

Cerberus just stares at me with fear in his eyes. Isn't this what you wanted though? To break me? To destroy my spirit? Well you have. I have nothing. Khirons last wish was pointless, I'm pointless.

Khiron said for me to make my own reality, but I'm too late. Sorry Khiron.

“Isn't it time for my execution, dear soldier?” I cackle at Cerberus. “Let's not wait to get there, take this!”

I toss him the metal rod. I lived my whole life being beat down, both literally, and figuratively. I shall die how I lived.

Cerberus stands there, silent, for one, two, three seconds. He kneels, and grasps the beam in his hand. He observes the rod in his hand, averting his eyes from me. Lingering on the bloody splatter, brushing off the grime.

How nice of him to clean it before the execution. My laughs grow dim, letting him approach. I grin, “It was fun, dear executioner. I shall meet thy in hell, along with the rest of the inhabitants of this pitiful island. for that is where all humanity deserves to reside.”

He raises his arm, and I bow my head. However, stop half way. I always closed my eyes with my father, but I won't close my eyes now. I shall face my death.

I stare Cerberus in his eyes, and give him a wink. His arm comes down, and he throws the rod across the room.

Cerberus grabs my collar, and pulls me up. I begin to mock him, “Oh, rather strangle my yourse-”

Cerberus wraps me in a hug.

“It’s okay,” He whispers. “I got you. You aren’t alone, I don’t hate you. You don’t have to be Jason Fleece, you don’t have to be the Target, you don’t have to be Mr. Fleece, you don’t have to be Broken. Be Jason.”

At that moment, I for the first time felt... safe.

I felt as if I didn’t have to be in control. I felt I had someone to rely on. I felt I could let down the act. I could relax, breath. A single tear leaves my eye.

Cerberus lets me go, “I’m sorry. I... have been the evil I believed you were. Run, now. I’ll fend off the rest of the rebels, go and sail off this wretched island. Forget about here.”

“No.” I grab his forearm before he walks off, “I can’t let you die for me. I have been throwing myself at death. Saying my death would do good. But that was an excuse. I wanted to die, but I wanted to give my life purpose. I could have done good, yet I excused my action, or lack thereof, by dating its fate. I wanted to convince myself I wasn’t selfish. But I was. I was going to give up my people to the council’s will, for the sake of myself.”

“I-” before Cerberus can respond, the voice of a man cackles from the door. “Well well well. What a charming relationship we have here!”

I’ve been in this hell hole long enough to not even need to look to know who was talking.

“Aries.” Cerberus gasps, not turning his head. I could feel his arm tense. His whole body seems to have been frozen by Medusa.

Aries claps his hands, bellowing in haunting laughter, “OH, HO, HO, HO! This is PERFECT! I told the Leader you weren’t trustworthy! Oh you are in for it now!” Aries stomps over towards us, towering over even me. He pushes Cerberus to the side and grabs my collar “But first, I have to take you to your execution.”

I glare. His eyes. His eyes aren’t like Cerberus’ or Khiron, or the doctor, or even that assassin boy. They are like My father’s, like the Board. Unable to change, driven by hate. Driven to corruption. This is evil. Denying to change even when you are wrong. Not even questioning your decisions.

“You- you know I’m not the evil I have been portrayed as, don’t you?” A smile creeps across his face.

“Of course I do! But your death will rile up the Capital. You are the perfect pawn. Your death will move us forward.”

I won’t let him take me. I won’t die. I have a duty- no, I have a desire to help, to save. And I won’t let it go now. “Try your worst. I may not be as strong, but I will kill you. You are beyond help. I can see it in your eyes.”

I grab the pipe next to me, and slam it on his head. He doesn’t flinch. “You dumb ryk!” He growls and lifts me above my head. “I’ll kill you here, like your-”

“Let go of my friend, you Ryking son of a Buck!”

Chapter 16

Cerberus

“I think it hits us all at the same time that maybe we'll live long enough to grow up.”
— *Andrew Joseph White, Hell Followed With Us*

The first time I saw another's blood, I was only a kid. A baby blue eyed toddler, curly locks like a detective, wrapped in my mother's coat. It was the first time I met death, looked her in the eyes and refused to get on my knees. I still remember the snap of Mrs. Faunus's neck, the way her satin dress folded into the snow. I stared at Aries, then my Mother. And I raised my head, cold and indifferent. I thought it made me stronger. Colder. *Better.*

And yet now I stand, blind with grief and rage and so much... exhaustion. I'm so tired. But here it is. Jason is truly what I have left. All of it. It's funny how a few weeks with a boy from a different world leads to yours collapsing. I resent him for it, as much and I thank him for it. It is a strange parallel, a quid-pro-quo.

I never freeze up. Never. I'm a fighter. A soldier. Not a poet, not a lover. Not a kind soul. Not *weak.* But I have frozen up, and I'm just watching as Jason dangles from Aries's arms, and he looks at me. They both do. “I knew you'd gone soft. You ryking *brat.* You've never been a good soldier. But this?” Aries pauses, tsking. “-You're a goddamn traitor!”

It takes a second, but words come out, sharp and angry as his. “Maybe I am a traitor. Maybe I don’t care. In the end, I’m what you made me.” I step closer to him. And I snarl under my breath like he’d always do on cold winter nights to a frostbitten little boy; “and I am unapologetic.” Aries smirks back and I’m dealt a sharp one to my leg *again*. “Your mother won’t be pleased.” he quips.

“Is she ever?” I snark back. “She wouldn’t know ‘pleased’ if it shredded up her planning room.” He stares at me in vague disappointment mixed with rage and it’s making my hands shake and clench. Fingernails burn deep into my palms. Blue is darkening in my head and my pupils feel the same. Epithelial be damned if I can’t fix this. “Such disrespect from the puppy dog! Never seen the muzzled thing talk like a snapper.” He drops Jason’s collar roughly and there’s a thud that makes something in me snarl with discontent.

“Cerberus!” Jason calls as he scrambles back into my poetry dresser, calling my name for apparent reasons, Aries has got his boot on his chest. Not for long, and Jason rolls up onto his feet, clenched fists like an old TV star I used to dote over. Messy hair has fallen over his eyes, and the blond has faded into a faint red. He does this awkward punch straight at Aries’s glabella and I would have laughed at the scene if it had been any other time. It’s a valiant *Captain Esylum* type fight on Jason’s part, but it doesn’t last long and he slams into the earth.

I scramble over, paralysis gone as I slam into the man who has tormented me all my life. It hurts me more than it hurts him, I think, and I feel sparks up my leg which has slowly begun to go numb over the last few days. I wonder if I’ll lose it briefly before the impact sends us flying into hard, cracked and crumbled stone.

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Feel it when Jason yells and I growl and Aries thuds into the twisted metal frame.

I don’t feel the hot stickiness or the rusty metal and palms and sweat, maybe it’s something else but I cannot tell for certain. I don’t see the blow to my stomach coming but I tuck and roll and bite down like some feral street cat on the man’s hand.

There's wind in my hair and it's not as fun as fights normally are because I know in my chest that I can't do it to the death, can't have more cat blood on my hands. Jason has recovered somewhat, groaning in the background as I shove Aries as far as I can down onto the metal, cruel spikes and shards. Oh, the horror.

"Cerberus." it's his voice that makes me get up when Aries's body starts to still. His voice that drags me back into focus, my sunny day with hellfire. He's not all he seems, because as Aries spurts crimson, he pushes me back and grabs the man's collar. He says, dangerously quiet; "You will never hurt him again. You won't touch him, or anyone else. How *dare* you treat him like this? Cerberus is more loyal than you ever were, kinder, smarter, *better. You disgust me.*" And he lands one last blow.

I'm not sure when I stumbled over to my bag and grabbed the tarp to cover his body, not sure when Jason snapped at me that he didn't deserve it, not sure when I mumbled; "'s tradition, is all." And I remember though, kneeling by the body and whispering the code, and soft apologies only in my head. He was cruel, but I will grieve.

I have been faceless, emotionless for too long.

"He'll never hurt you again. Why the ryk are you sorry?" Jason asks from behind me, holding the dog. "...he didn't have to die, Jason." I respond, eyes not looking up at him just yet. "He did though, Aries was-" I interrupt him now, squeezing my eyes shut. "I didn't have to kill him, Jason," I paused, frowning.

"I couldn't let him hurt you. I wouldn't survive it if you were the one to die. But... you need to understand something, now." I shut my eyes for half a second and regained my composure, like my mother's but not nearly so cold. A leader's stance, and a soldier's posture.

"There is no going back Jason. Not ever. I know what I want, now. I'm going to take the world not by storm but warm rain. And I will not stop for anything. There is no going back to my mother, to my roots. I've done some things that are... unforgivable. This isn't my redemption arc. It's taking it all back. Are you with me?"

And I suppose this is our turning point. My viva la vida. When he looks at me as if he realizes what I've just asked him, will you devote yourself? Will you die for this? Hell, Jason, will you live for this? For our cause? *For me?* Perhaps, we are too young for this. Too young to decide our fates standing in ruins, red-splattered and cold from the frosted air. But there's something in us that's different.

Jason is a truth seeker. He's a mask shatterer, a curtain burner. A hero who hasn't come into it, a genius in another field from the one he was born into. So I only nod sharply when he says, steadying his voice; "You know I will. But I won't just smile and go along. This isn't just your world, now."

"We've got to fight for it to be ours." I say, hushed. "And we will, but... they'll notice you didn't bring me. That A-" he wrinkles his nose in utter disgust; "-that that utter disgrace of a man didn't kill me like a war prize." "I know. We have to leave, get our footings. Make a plan." Jason looks at me, I look at him, Fluffy barks.

"How is this even going to work?" Jason mutters as I military style fold all the supplies I have into Aries and my field kits. "Hm?" I question, not so much as looking up. "I hate authority, and you intend to uphold it." I snort; "So what, total anarchy? I know what you hate, Jason, and it's not the idea of leaders above you." He rolls his eyes from where he's fidgeting with some metal bit's on my cot.

"Oh, then what do I hate? Please *enlighten me*, Cerbie." Jason snarks in that sassy way that only really he's able to pull off. "-You hate unjustness, but more so you hate the false flag operations that cover them up. You need to see everything, and it'll be too much for you." I tell him, shrugging as I toss a roll of slightly stale bread at the dog's feet. "Guess that's why you're here then." he says sarcastically, but I don't quite catch the tone until after I nod.

There's silence as I finish, tossing him a bag and whistle at the dog, who bounds eagerly to my side. "But also, you're not...you're not easy to get, you know? I don't... understand you." He says, quietly as we leave, discreetly as we can, I awkwardly hold his flailing legs as we slip from the back window, and again, the height difference is both humiliating and a bit annoying. "What do you mean by that?" I question, as the pup is dropped into my arms.

"The board is evil. Your mother is evil. Khiron was good. Calla is good. But you... you're kind to the little kids, and you saved a drowning dog- and me. But you also killed someone, and you did- w-well I'm sure a lot of other horrid things." Jason states, and the confusion that tints his voice is both adorable and so ignorant. "...It's not black and white. I'm no binary white knight of Elysium, and neither are you, right?" He opens his mouth in protest but I continue before he can continue.

"See, the way I see it is that people aren't... inherently anything. You can't *be* good or evil precisely because of human nature. We can't be one thing." Jason doesn't immediately change his worldview, cutting in; "Was... say, Aries, not evil?" He interjects. I raise an eyebrow. "Well that's quite the recent scab to pick open, yeah? No, I daresay he wasn't evil. He was deluded.

Cruel, sometimes. I expect he was a sociopath. But he's had his stuff to fight through like us. We just got lucky."

Jason looks at my leg, so mangled and possibly infected, looks at my hair, slightly matted, and the dried blood on his hands, and echoes; "Lucky? I think, no matter how clever your poems are, this is a load of bullshit." I scoff and roll my eyes. "Yeah, okay Mr. Splitter." Jason turns sharply and I have to shush him since we're creeping about. "What the heck does that mean?"

Splitting is a trauma response that involves seeing things overly simplified. "While most of us see the world, and the people in it, as complex and shades of gray, some people's minds get... what do you say? Stuck in black and white. It's not your fault. It's a complex traumatic response that—" Jason throws a plastic bottle cap at me.

"Shut up. When did you learn all this, anyways?" He mutters. "Old books. Tapes, oh and... Hercules." I mumble the last bit in an attempt to stay discreet. Jason, being as infuriatingly clever as he is, immediately asks; "Whose that?" I sigh as I kick a gate open; "Nobody you need to know about."

"-Hey! I don't do secrets, Cerberus. If we're gonna save the world, I need to know all about you." I roll my eyes. "You know enough to make your own deductions, dear prince." is all I say, but he doesn't seem to drop it anytime soon. "He's like my writing mentor. Got me the job in the capitol, and all." I say, vaguely as possible.

It's getting darker out, but I have no intentions of staying put in one place until we're far away from the city of spies. Jason's eyes are flickering open and closed, and I'm certain he's not used to being active for so long, although it still irks me when he leans up against a wall for a moment to catch his breath. Not as irritating, however, as the sound of an explosion not so far away.

I slam my hands over my ears as the air around us ripples, and Jason shuts his eyes, wrinkling his forehead. The rain that's been going cold and slow seems to pick up, as if in response. Fluffy barks and yips and my legs shake. The aftershock passes fast.

And I can feel my heartbeat again. Jason stares at me expectantly as if I know what the ryk that was. "No, that wasn't normal." I grumble at him before he asks, scooping up the puppy desperately scratching my shins to be let up. "We need to figure out what that was! It was so... cool!" he's got this shine in his eyes and I sigh. "Where's this energy when we're fleeing? Jason we don't hav—"

“Hey! Of course we do! It’s *our* decision what we have time for!” He sounds almost giddy and I roll my eyes, then recall that he has a scheduled face washing break on his schedule back in the capitol and shrug. “-fine, but quickly!” I scold, putting the dog down as Jason starts to tread that way. Y’know. Towards the explosives. *Yay.*

So we trudge for a while, and I moonlight gaze with a head that’s beginning to throb from the amount of life changing experiences that happened in just only one day, and Jason walks beside me. I let him go a bit ahead, taking some time to think about everything. I slip my hand into my pocket, hoping to rub against the comfortingly soft paper Khiron had- *it’s not here.*

Ryk. Ryk. Rykkkk. I blink hard, and I’m not sure why I’m so upset. Barely knew the guy! But I thought I’d... at least get to read the rest of it... and... Jason. I was going to give it to him when he left. How dare I deprive him of his father?

I sigh softly and look at Jason with coal speckled glass eyes and slip my thumbs into my pockets, because you cross your thumbs when you pray and I have not an ounce of faith in anything but my pen now. I miss summer with Hercules and Reinhart, running from my mother after grueling days of training and sitting at a keyboard as I baked in the warm sun. I miss the hesitance I had before holding the baby for the first time and the squeeze of my shoulder when Aries found me. I don’t miss Aries though. Crows are my favorite animal.

Reinhart would be a crow. He didn’t like me very much, raising his eyebrows and murmuring into Hercules’s ear’s. And he’s got that slicked back black feather hair too, although I will interject and say that it’s really soft brown he’s just a lawyer is all. And he’s like Jason, he’s got a compass but he doesn’t split because when I turned up in the middle of the night, legs scabbed up and eyes red, he pulled me in by the wrist and made me sit on his kitchen countertop.

Hercules would be a polar bear. He’s got down the slightly whitened dyed hair and protectiveness. He’s got the furious scoldings and the scruff pulling down to a notch just as he has the holding until I stopped shaking finally, until I stopped sobbing, until I was fine. I was not fine, still and I did not go home for three days. The black glasses are like look-throughs that make me smile because they look so perfect on just him? Unapologetic. He is so unapologetic. A genius and a good man. That I have betrayed.

And Jason, Jason is a long legged baby buck, with eyes full of salt that’s been shoved into his wounds, ones less physical than engraved into the way he holds his head up. His head swarms with impulsive righteousness, and he doesn’t seem to understand the concept of change in the slightest, unwilling for compromise. He says he despises me and what I could do, have done.

Strange. I can't hold anything to him. He's got antlers too, his crown that's been chipped at and bloodied, broken off like tree branches and sawed in. Herbivores aren't always gentle.

I can't forget my mother! Of course, of course we must cover her on this walk to doom. Off the edge of the earth, where the asphalt drops off. She's... she's a falcon. A peregrine, quick to dive and swoop and a baby killer because I was just a little one when she ruined my fun. It was only survival, I suppose. Famous last words everytime I ran to the polar bear and the raven,
You'll be back.

I used to think I would. Not anymore. I have taken what she gave me and turned it into a mockery of us. I have taken my name and stamped it into the mud, dragged a dagger through another man's skin. So now I say-

You'll be back.

No

You have nothing.

False. I have not much, but I have my fury, I have Jason.

And until the last star dies, I have my words.

-to my soul. For I own it, and she does not, and she will never be allowed to possess me like some toy again, I will not be puppeted by a sadist, I will not be the guillotine in all its glory. For as glorious as it may be, I was never meant to be cruel, just as I was trained not to be kind. I am something else, something other, and I am insufferably alone in that existence. Perhaps, it is fine. Perhaps I can live as something other, something too twisted to recognize as human.

Jason grabs my arm as I stare off into space and I'm back from my mental retreat, my descent into utter madness, into absurd thoughts that make me want to sob out my own liver. "Yeah?" I question, and he points a little ahead to a building which is smoking, crisped at the edges. "Ah. That looks like the place. You ready to, what, explore?"

He rolls his eyes and I pull out a bottle of water, motioning for him to do the same. Jason raises it slightly and I toast him "To not dying!" I whisper. He responds stoically; "To fight the good fight." and that answer makes me feel small for not being as noble. Then he runs off towards a burning building to find sciencey junk and I am back to feeling comfortable in my own skin.

I put the dog down and firmly say “Stay. Don’t give me that look. Stay.” And bolt off after him, leg dragging slightly. Damn things getting worrying... I don’t know what to do though. My medical training only goes so far. There’s no reason to tell Jason, though. Not... not yet.

I shove the door further out of the way so it doesn’t fall over onto anyone or thing, and creep in, turning on my flashlight. Jason is only a few feet ahead of me, slowly wading through the smoke wearing my gas mask (I did insist.)

The air smells faintly of smoke but strangely enough it’s... sweet smelling, not stomach turning. Like the baskets of flora in the banquet’s I attended as a bodyguard. And it reminds me of the bitterest of freedoms. Was I too bad to be free? Was I too unholy to be purified?

No.

Maybe I wasn’t a horrible person.

Maybe I was a child.

“Sh! Jason, quiet. You hear that?” I hiss, grabbing his shoulder, and he flinches and I apologize with my eyes. “-wh-” Jason pauses, listens, and he hears it too. Soft murmurs, people. People are noisy. I don’t think I like them very much. I would like to write about people rather than talk to them. Much less fight them. So tell me, why do my fists clench at the voices?

We creep up, soft as I can. I try to make Jason stay, I fear he is far too loud for being an agent. He doesn’t listen. He’s too curious. I wonder how he’s made it so long.

That’s when the second ripple hits.

The rocks begin to splinter.

Nothing ever lasts forever.

I bolt, silence forgotten.

There's a room where the light won't find you

When vision goes white and you hide from angels.

And I tackle Jason out of the way. He yells something.

I can't hear him.

He's bleeding.

You wanted to save the world?

I do, please stop. There's so much blood.

~ to be continued~

