

**CHRISTIANITY, QUEERNESS, AND COMICS: FANTASY AS THE  
IDEAL GENRE FOR INTERSECTIONALITY**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Christianity, Queerness, and Comics: Fantasy as the Ideal Genre for Intersectionality

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It is no secret that the last couple of decades have found the Christian and LGBTQ+ communities increasingly at odds with each other as they each seek to uphold their vastly opposed ideologies. Even with this growing tension, however, it was not until the mid-2010s that experts in the fields of both Christian theology and queer theory began to publish notable research that addressed how the two communities could and should coexist with one another. While this conversation has been beneficial and necessary, it has remained almost exclusively in the scholarly realm when it comes to literature. In order for social change to occur, widespread knowledge, especially among young adults, an age group historically known for their revolutionary tendencies and strong initiative, is a prerequisite. Consequently, in this thesis, I seek to discover the most effective medium and genre through which to encourage reconciliation between the antithetical people groups. Through research, I have determined that a young adult fantasy graphic novel would be the ideal literary form through which to convey the intricacies of both the Christian and LGBTQ+ communities and examine the intersectionality between the two.

In order to demonstrate my theory, I have utilized this research, which surrounds medium, genre, content, and thematics to create the first queer Christian piece of graphic fiction.

## **DEDICATION**

*In memory of Dr. Craig Kallendorf, who was the first to encourage me to write what I know and  
to do so boldly.*

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### **Contributors**

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## NOMENCLATURE

**LGBTQ+:** Acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, usually in reference to the community and/or culture of those who identify with any of the aforementioned labels, used interchangeably with the term “queer.”

**Queer:** An umbrella term used for those belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, regardless of specific identity.

**Trans\*:** “An umbrella term for persons whose gender identity or expression (masculine, feminine, other) is different from their sex (male, female) at birth” (CDC).

**Gender Identity:** “Refers to one’s internal understanding of one’s own gender, or the gender with which a person identifies” (CDC).

**Affirming:** A term to describe “those who believe that consensual, monogamous, same-sex sexual relations can be sanctioned by God” (*People to be Loved* 30).

**Nonaffirming:** A term used to describe “those who don’t believe that God sanctions same-sex sexual relations” (*People to be Loved* 30).

**Masking:** A technique in which illustrators intentionally use simplistic character designs with the idea that more people will be able to see themselves in said characters. This may allow readers the ability to more “safely enter a sensually stimulating world,” connecting with the story in a deeper way (McCloud 43).

**Thematic Masking:** The use of rhetorical technique to make a given subject or theme more approachable to a desired audience in a work of prose.

**YA:** Short for “Young Adult,” specifically in reference to the literary genre.



# **1. AESTHETIC MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

## **1.1 Motivation**

It is no secret that the past several decades have found the Christian and LGBTQ+ communities increasingly at odds with each other in the scope of American (and global) politics. As both people groups continue to grow both in numbers and in polarization towards the other, it becomes more necessary that we find a way to encourage cooperation between the often radically-opposed communities. Being someone who belongs to both groups, I have felt a particular responsibility to play a role in their reconciliation. That being said, I wanted to utilize my opportunity through the Undergraduate Research Scholars program to do just that. Having gained an affluence of knowledge on and experience working with modern literature, I was inspired to wonder through what literary means the most impact could be made towards my goal; thus, I turned to research.

## **1.2 Background**

In research, it was made immediately clear to me the necessity in the literary realm for work which examines the intersectionality between the Christian and LGBTQ+ communities. It wasn't until the late 1990s that prominent (though minimal) research began to emerge surrounding the increasing discourse between the two communities. Even this research, however, had more to do with disagreement within the church on how to handle the growing cultural voice of the queer community. These essays documented the existing battle "between, on the one side, the "orthodox" claiming to uphold the Bible and the tradition, against, on the other, straight liberals (also claiming to be within the tradition) and their gay allies, each struggling to prove the

other wrong” (Gorsline 112). All the while, the conflict between Christian and queer peoples continued to grow.

It was not more than a decade ago-- in the mid 2010s-- that experts in the fields of both Christian theology and queer theory began to release notable books and papers that addressed how the two communities could and should coexist with one another, a topic that I seek to explore through my thesis. One of the leading voices in this conversation is Dr. Preston Sprinkle, a professor of theology, president of The Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender, and New York Times best-selling author. To date, he has written three books and over a dozen articles specifically addressing what the Bible says about non-cishet identities as well as how Christians should respond to those in the queer community. He takes a compassionate stance, interviewing and taking into account the experiences of LGBTQ+ identifying people. His work, as one of the most highly-recognized contributors, marks fairly clearly where this conversation stands today. Other Christian contributors that have had a large impact on this conversation are Vaughan Roberts, a Church of England clergyman and author of *Transgender*, which promotes very similar themes to those of Sprinkle’s work, and Jackie Hill Perry, poet, hip hop artist, and author of *Gay Girl, Good God*.

### **1.3 Shortcomings of Current Research**

Perry’s autobiography, released in 2018, is one of the first in this conversation to be written by a queer author (she identifies today as ex-lesbian, but still same-sex attracted). It is also one of the only notable works of *prose* that exists in the realm of this discussion. Its genre makes it significantly more likely to hold an audience outside of the strictly-scholarly realm, unlike the work of Sprinkle and Roberts. That being said, even Perry’s book misses a large group of young adult readers because of its autobiographical approach. Contrary to the

Memoir/Autobiography genre, fantasy consistently ranks in the top best-selling genres for young adults according to *Goodreads*. It would be logical to assume, then, that a fantasy novel featuring the same topics that are found in Jackie Hill Perry's writing would have the potential to reach a significantly larger young adult audience. This led me to explore whether an author had taken on this subject matter through the fantasy genre before. Unfortunately, upon further research, I was unsuccessful in finding any works of fantasy literature that address both Christian ideology and queer identity. In fact, I was only able to discover a singular piece of fictional prose of any genre that does. This means that despite increasing conversation surrounding the Christian and LGBTQ+ communities, not much of it is being circulated to the general public.

### 1.3.1 *Choice of Genre*

In order for social change to occur, widespread knowledge, especially among young adults, an age group historically known for their revolutionary tendencies and strong initiative, is a prerequisite. This is exactly why my research, and consequently, my artifact is necessary; it will be filling a significant gap in literature as well as opening up this scholarly conversation to the larger people group which it involves: young adults. Deciding how to most effectively convey these messages of cooperation, however, took a great deal of thoughtfulness. I knew that trying to reach two (typically) very different demographics of people at the same time with the same message would require strategic planning, but I decided that the fantasy genre could rise to the challenge of becoming an effective foundation for my story, entitled *Revenant*. Fantasy seemed like a natural choice, as it, unlike any other genre, has such deep roots in conveying both Christian allegory (such as C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* series and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*) as well as queer representation (as seen in Rick Riordan's *The Heroes of Olympus* series and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*).

### 1.3.2 *Choice of Medium*

While plotting my story, however, I also understood that I needed to be intentional about the medium through which I planned to convey the ideas reflected in my research. I knew that I wanted to create new literary content that would allow for better understanding of both the Christian and LGBTQ+ communities through a medium which was proven to be effective in reaching young adult audiences. Consequently, I came to decide on the graphic novel because of its radically-increasing popularity with this age demographic in recent years.

Scott McCloud is arguably the most highly esteemed author when it comes to the history, impact, and technique of the graphic novel. One of my biggest takeaways from his renowned work, *Understanding Comics*, is his theory of “masking,” which he defines as “amplification through simplification,” a technique in which illustrators intentionally use simplistic character designs with the idea that more people will be able to see themselves in and relate to these characters (McCloud 30). McCloud takes this theory of masking even further than just the relatability of characters, however. He says that our ability to see the characters as ourselves allows us to “safely enter a sensually stimulating world” and encourages us to explore the potentially difficult themes presented in the story more comfortably (43). This gives us an opportunity to connect with the story in a deeper way than may be possible without an illustrative element. This means that the graphic novel is unique in this way, but its ability to “mask” is also what allows it to work so well as a vessel for a fantasy narrative.

### **1.4 Connection of Genre and Medium to Aesthetic Approach**

Though this connection hasn't yet been made in scholarly conversation, I would argue that the genre of fantasy seems to use a version of this technique, to which I will refer as “thematic masking:” the use of rhetorical technique to make a given subject or theme more

approachable to a desired audience in a work of prose. Fantasy as a genre is unique in that it utilizes other-worldliness intentionally, often to convey specific messages to readers in an effective way. Because the goal of my graphic novel is both to teach Christians how to compassionately approach members of the LGBTQ+ community and vice versa, I would argue that masking (both of the visual and thematic veins), is the ideal way to do so.

In order to exemplify my theory, I have combined each of the aspects of my research to create an effective young adult fantasy graphic novel. My work features a diverse set of characters all hailing from different backgrounds as they are united on a quest to reconcile their two nations to one another. Throughout the story, they not only learn what aspects of themselves are more similar than they may have thought, but also how to gain a wider perspective from better understanding their differences. Rather than being explicit about either the biblically-based worldbuilding or the queer identities of my characters, though that could certainly be an approach, I have utilized the masking technique in both my dialogue and illustrations. In this way, I seek to make both the topics of Christianity and the beliefs that come with it as well as queer lifestyle, struggles, and joy more approachable to a reader of any background.

## 2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DISCIPLINARY PARADIGMS, AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS

### 2.1 Foundational Research

The first book I read in preparation for this project was Vaughan Roberts' *Transgender*, a talking points book for Christians who may or may not have a good understanding of what the trans\* experience is like. He tackles how the church should respond to transgender issues in a very compassionate way, admitting right from the start the ways in which Christians have fallen short thus far. "Christians," he says, "have often failed to discern the difference between our own cultural values, and those which are demanded by Scripture. We are as prone to bigotry as others" (Roberts 7-8). Though he discusses the ways in which queer/trans\* identities are not agreeable with the teachings of the Bible, he spends almost as much space emphasizing the importance of how Christians should respond to that "with great sensitivity and compassion" (Roberts 14). As both a Christ-follower and someone who has struggled with my own gender identity, this book immediately held credibility to me, primarily because of the humility with which it was written. As I began writing the dialogue for my own novel, *Revenant*, I knew I wanted to take inspiration from Roberts' tone. I wanted to approach the creation of this story with compassion, conveying the admiral qualities of the Christian community, but also acknowledging their past and current faults in regards to addressing the LGBTQ+ community.

On the other side, there's a widespread philosophy in the LGBTQ+ community (whether an individual has personally experienced hate from Christians or not) that Christians are intrinsically hateful towards them, and thus, deserving of returned hatred. I have not come across any non-Christian, queer-written works that attempt to combat this idea. In fact, any resources I

have found have been quite the opposite, taking a strong anti-Christian stance. This was frustrating to me for a while, but after much thought, I began to understand more and more that the LGBTQ+ community does not have much of reason to approach the Christian community any differently than with disdain. Historically, it is they who have been hurt by the Christian community, not the other way around. Thus, it is not necessarily the responsibility of the queer community to mend the relationship between them. If we as Christians are called not to “seek revenge or bear a grudge against our fellow people, but love [our] neighbor as [ourselves],” I strongly believe that it is Christians who should seek to correct our mistreatment of this ever-growing people group and provide instead a sense of hope that is so often lacking in the queer community (*Holy Bible*, Leviticus 19:18).

In his compilation of essays entitled *Queer Anxieties of Young Adult Literature and Culture*, editor Derritt Mason focuses on the idea of anxiety within queer literature and brings up the fact that so often in fiction, queerness is synonymous with hopelessness. He mentions several examples of queer-centered literature of which tragedy is the overarching theme. To combat this, he says, “It is crucial... to combine the authentic experiences of gay youth with a hope that is life-affirming and encourages the reader to consider and develop a workable moral philosophy” (13). It shocked me how similar this sentiment felt to the goals of Christianity, which likewise seeks to provide profound hope and inspire morality. He claims that we must seek a sort of utopia in YA when trying to depict queer stories in order to encourage queer or questioning readers to feel comfortable in their identities. I think he’s right, in a way. In a world where queerness for most teens already amounts to hurt, tragedy, and immense loss, literature can and should serve as a beacon of hope, not just a reminder of a reader’s real-life pain. Consequently, it only makes sense that Christianity be integrated into LGBTQ+ stories, as it is, I would argue, the

biggest source of hope possible for anyone and everyone. If, as Mason implores, we must inject our queer stories with a life-affirming hope which develops moral philosophy in a reader, Christian theology seems to be the ideal place to turn.

## **2.2 World Building and the Inclusion of the Heart**

At the start of my project, I really debated whether or not to include a God or Jesus-like figure within my work, but I thought that would be difficult to do correctly in the scheme of a work that doesn't entirely focus on this figure as a character. Consequently, I decided to instead use the Holy Spirit as a model for this figure, which I have named the Heart. The Heart's role is primarily to be a source of strength, guidance, and hope for my characters, which very closely mirrors the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's life. Isaiah 11:2 describes the Spirit well, calling it "the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and power, [and] the Spirit of knowledge" (*Holy Bible*).

In this decision to create the Heart, I want to make known the immense strength and knowledge that my Christian-coded characters are able to draw from their connection to it, even when they don't personally harbor that strength. For a good example of what this looks like in the life of a Christian (and more specifically, a same-sex attracted Christian), I turned to Jackie Hill Perry's memoir, *Gay Girl, Good God*. In chapter sixteen, entitled "Same-Sex Attraction and Endurance," Perry quotes Hebrews 10:35-36 when she remarks that in faith, believers are strengthened and provided with endurance from the Holy Spirit in a way that differs from those without a connection to God (172-173).

The kingdom in which the Heart resides and which it protects is named Marakh, taken from the Hebrew adjective *m'vrakh*, meaning "blessed." Marakh is symbolically representative of the church, with its reliance on and trust in the Heart. The Heart's influence is visibly seen in



those who reside in the kingdom. That being said, I also wanted to make very clear that the Heart is not a source of power only accessible to those that abide by the specific culture present in Marakh. It is available to all people, including those from the city outside Marakh's border, Merred, whose name is taken from the Hebrew noun *mered*, meaning "rebellion."

Though the dichotomy found in my research is between the Christian and LGBTQ+ communities, my setting is not wholly indicative of that. Because these two communities do not exist in a vacuum, my work does not allow them to either. Merred, then, is not necessarily a representation of the queer community, but of any group outside of the Christian community, some of which seek to dismantle and disprove Christian ideology, and some which don't. Ultimately, for my transgender main character Quinn, it serves as a place which is free of the expectations many feel within the Christian community, specifically those which are difficult to conform to for someone whose identity is naturally contrary to them.

### **2.3 Inclusion of the Trans\*/Queer Experience**

When deciding how to best portray queer and queer-coded characters in my work, I relied very heavily on both of Preston Sprinkle's books. He is a Christian author who takes a nonaffirming stance, but explores the implications of the queer experience in a very open-minded and empathetic manner. Right from the preface of his first book, *People to Be Loved*, he implores readers to "listen to the pain and joy of real people who are gay" and "hold our views with a humble heart and an open hand— inviting God to correct us where we have been wrong" in our prejudice (*People to Be Loved* 10). He discusses every possible angle and attribute of the presence of either affirming or nonaffirming passages in the Bible. He discusses marriage and gender identity, homosexuality in Old Testament law and in Greco-Roman culture, what Jesus has to say, and the way Christians should respond to queer and trans\* folk today. He reminds

readers of the inclusionary gospel, remarking that “if the gospel is not good news for gay people, then it’s not good news” (*People to Be Loved* 15).

I also want to mention Sprinkle’s differentiation between people who are nonaffirming and those who are homophobic. For a while, I struggled to refer to many people in my own life as homophobic because I did not want to cast this identity of hatefulness over a person that (oftentimes) was otherwise very agreeable to me. That being said, I really enjoy Sprinkle’s term, “nonaffirming,” which describes those who believe that the Bible speaks against same-sex practices, but still seek to love and welcome those that identify with queerness in any form. It creates a space for those in between “affirmers” and homophobes: those who actively and intentionally work to hurt those dealing with same-sex attraction, and are inarguably in the wrong according to the Truth of the scripture.

To create Quinn’s backstory, I looked of course to my own experience, but did so with the understanding that there is no singular “queer lifestyle;” each queer person is radically different in their beliefs, culture, practices, orientations, etc. just like every cisgender and heterosexual person is different. Thus, I also pulled from Perry’s memoir.

When she describes dressing intentionally masculine for the first time, the euphoria that she describes is very reminiscent of the trans\* experience (Perry 48). She expresses her (and many others’) frustration with gender norms and the struggles that come with not fitting into them, something that really resonates with Quinn in his discomfort with remaining within the bounds of Marakh’s expectations for him (Perry 48-49). In this moment, she makes similar commentary to Sprinkle that the gender expectations that we set, both in society as a whole, but especially in the church, can make it difficult for people to feel comfortable being who they truly are at the same time as identifying with their assigned-at-birth gender.

With Marakh being a kingdom metaphorical of the Christian community, or “the church,” Quinn’s experience is very similar to that which Perry describes. He struggles to feel comfortable in the kingdom, having difficulty relating and conforming to the standards of others in it. I wanted to take inspiration here from both Perry and Sprinkles ways of thinking, making clear that there truly is no one “way” that everyone in the kingdom (or the church) has to be; thus Quinn, and any member of the LGBTQ+ community, can be themselves and still be an integral member in that Christian community. I think that this will be a good reminder to readers (Christian or queer or neither) that the foundation of the Christianity is the idea of bringing everybody, even if that’s not always what’s practiced by followers of the faith.

Deciding on the place where Quinn’s faith and gender identity/sexuality intersected was also a large step in creating my story. I knew that I wanted his faith, which in my story, is symbolized by his connection to the Heart, to be his largest source of motivation. Though it’s kept a secret for most of the book, Quinn’s dedication to the kingdom is one of the clearest parts of his identity. This idea is promoted by Jackie Hill Perry when she remarks that humans were created uniquely, to “reflect God on Earth, in body, mind, and soul. Being an image-bearer was their primary identity.” Though this statement is not related by Perry in any way to transness, this statement is a big influence on how I see Quinn as a character (and how I believe, by the time this story has started, that he sees himself). Thus, though it will be revealed later in the story that he’s transgender, his gender identity is not what is focused on by those around him— it’s his drive to reach the kingdom’s center and save it from destruction that becomes most prominent about his character. It’s what Iris, Norah, and Henry notice and are primarily impressed by once they’ve heard his story.

I believe that the impact of making Quinn's gender identity less important is twofold. First, it will promote the idea that queerness (and one's ability to overcome it or not) is just one of many aspects of one's personhood. I believe that this will encourage Christians to view LGBTQ+ people as whole beings rather than solely their queer identities. That is, non-queer people, in their attempts at discipleship, often "[teach] men and women how to walk free from the loud shouts of their broken sexuality but [forget] to teach them how to quiet all the other noise that the flesh makes" (Perry 101). Those in the church can be prone to the desire to "fix" a queer person's sexuality/gender identity before getting to know them as a complex person or instead of considering other areas of that person's life that may need attention. Similarly, queer people seeking Christ can forget that there are other ways that they must be refined in their spiritual journey outside of just their struggles with sexuality/gender identity. This not only emphasizes to all readers that queerness does not have to be the only (or even most defining) part of one's identity, but it reminds queer readers (whether they are exploring Christianity or not) that queerness does not have to be an unmoving obstacle to attaining faith.

By the end of the story, Quinn has made the decision to return to Marakh, a community in which he once felt unwelcome. About her own return to the church, Perry notes that "to leave [the gay community] for another one was terrifying, especially when the transition was being made to a community that seemed to be everything but safe" (Perry 94). She came to find, however, that "the group of Christians that [she] came to enjoy were ones that did more for [her]" than those she knew before coming to the faith because "they showed [her] God" (94). Exploring the queer identity, then, also necessitates for Quinn the exploration of his identity in faith, and those around him play a large role in helping him find himself.

## 2.4 Character Relationships: Healing Through the Found Family

In creating the five main characters in *Revenant*, I knew that I wanted their relationships with each other to be the solution to the polarization between their communities (and symbolically, the Christian and LGBTQ+ communities). If I was able to place the five on different points of a spectrum which ranged from “Christian and homophobic” to “queer with anti-Christian sentiment” and create a deep connection between them all, why wouldn’t this be possible for people with differing ideas in real life?

My three main characters that are from and have remained in Marakh are Iris, Norah, and Henry. When they are given a quest to journey out of Marakh and retrieve the person who had left a few years prior, they have differing reactions. Iris, the princess of Marakh, connotes rebellion and danger with the people of Merred, but nevertheless, sets out on her quest with an open-mind, seeking to use empathy and connection to bring her lost subject back to their original home. Iris’ bodyguard, Norah, on the other hand, enters Merred defensively, immediately believing anyone who lives there to be troublesome and hateful. Of the three, she is the one who takes the most convincing to rid herself of this prejudice and find friendship in people from Merred. Henry, the brother of Marakh’s army general, begins their journey with the least bias against those from Merred. He sees it as an adventure to enter a new place and meet new people, even if he knows that they will be different from himself.

My two main characters that live in Merred by the start of the story are Quinn and Silas. Quinn, being originally from Marakh, is welcoming to people from either nation. He has had time before the story begins to better understand plenty of people from both cultures, so he is able to enter into a friendship with this group of five without having any sort of negative feelings towards others based on their nationality. His best friend Silas, contrarily, views the three from

Marakh as harmful, elitist, and exclusive, which makes it very hard for him to trust them when they first meet. Through the diverse array of ideologies that are presented in my characters, I hope to show that connection is possible when compassion for those with different beliefs is prioritized. Ultimately, the five form a very tight-knit group of friends and find themselves all working towards the same goal: reconciliation between their nations as a whole.

I knew that for this to be possible, I needed my characters to be open-minded to those different from them, if not at the start, then by the end. Preston Sprinkle quotes a trans\* friend of his, Kat, when they told him that in order to consider the faith, “[they] didn’t need a know-it-all Christian. [They] needed a Christian who desired to know [them], and who had the humility to admit that they didn’t have it all figured out” (*Embodied* 50).

I’ve discussed the purpose of my work being twofold in that it, theoretically, will both encourage open-mindedness in homophobic/nonaffirming Christians as well as draw queer non-believers to Christ. I believe that through the utilization of the found family trope in my story, not only will the latter be enlightened in the way of Christian ideologies and morals, but will find a sense of comfort and hope within that as well. Thus, I strive to reach that sort of “utopia” that Mason mentions (and which I discuss above) through the comfort in these relationships, even if in a unique and complex way. Luckily, the quests and danger that so often come with a work of fantasy literature allow for significant and lasting bonds to be built, even in a short period of time.

## **2.5 Young Adults and the Fantasy Genre**

At the start of the introduction of *Teens and the New Religious Landscape*, editor Jacob Stratman was already posing the question: “How do young adult authors use religious texts, traditions, and beliefs to add layers of meaning to their characters, settings, and plots?” He notes

that while “the world of young adult literature has been very open to a variety of complex social issues,” the integration of religion into these issues is not very popular (Stratman 2). Stratman touches on the importance of showcasing “protagonists struggling with and navigating religious belief as a part of identity construction,” a sentiment with which I wholeheartedly agree. He goes on to claim that “the genre of fantasy holds a unique power to appropriate mythology and thereby make reality more visible for a postsecular audience” (Stratman 3). This utilization of genre is especially important in a world where both spirituality and secularism are normalized and accepted as equal life practices. Though in the Western past, it was practically unheard of for someone not to be a part of the Christian faith, we are enduring a sort of “disenchantment of the world” which results from “secular wonder” in the place of “respect for a transcendent creator” (Stratman 12, 27). This has inspired me as a Christian author to reinstill that sense of God-inspired awe in my own work. Fantasy, in all its whimsy, provides a foundation for this. Not to mention, fantasy is a bestselling genre within both the young adult and LGBTQ+ communities, just as the graphic novel form is growing to be.

## **2.6 Use of the Graphic Novel Form**

Though the media is still lagging in a lot of ways when it comes to queer representation in the mainstream (as opposed to exclusively in stories branded as “queer”), comics have held a strong queer presence for decades. This presence has only increased as time has gone on and is “happening now with new force” (Chute 387). In her novel, *Why Comics?*, Hillary Chute discusses the presence of Archie Comics’ first gay character, Kevin Keller, writing that in 2010 “the first issue in which Kevin appeared was so popular it sold out, and the company reprinted an issue for the first time in their history” (387). It’s no secret that as the LGBTQ+ community continues to grow, there are increasingly more people who, like a young Alison Bechdel, are

“very hungry to see visual images of people like [them]” (362-3). Comics provide an incredibly reliable space for that.

I really liked what Howard Cruse, creator of *Barefootz*, had to say about the possibilities that are available to queer comic creators. He notes that “each artist speaks for himself or herself. No one speaks for any mythical ‘average’ homosexual” (357). This is made very clear just by browsing the several-page-long list (to which Chute refers as “very, very short”) of notable queer comics included on pages 385-386. There is a wide variety of subjects, characters, sexualities, gender identities, genres, etc. in these works, and they all draw from the individual experiences of the authors who created them. Chute herself discusses an encouraging aspect about comics: that they “inspired that kind of creative practice: if you perceived a gap, you could fill it yourself” (355). She writes how “comics can be a space for sophisticated storytelling about the complexities and joy of queer life” (350). This holistic, down-to-earth, realistic adaptation of the queer experience is something that I’ve really sought to show in my work through my diverse characters, even if the inclusion of Christian themes differentiates it from those who have come before.

In order to use the graphic novel form in the most effective way possible, I first had to analyze the intricacies of the masking technique. McCloud writes on the universality of cartoons that results from masking, noting that “the more cartoony a face is... the more people it could be said to *describe*” (31). Though my characters are more complex in appearance than, say, Tin Tin or the Peanuts, they retain a simplicity that still allows them to be universal (see Figure 1 in the Appendix).

McCloud also discusses the “emotional impact” and “expressive potential” of deliberate color choice in comics (188). Taking a page from Stevenson’s book (quite literally), I aim to be



intentional about my color schemes particularly as they relate to “good” or “evil,” what I am equating to the Spirit and the flesh respectively in my own work. I have created a rough color palette of both of these areas in my world, using relaxing blues and purples to reflect the Spirit (or the kingdom), which will contrast heavily with the harsh browns, reds, and oranges of the flesh (the lands outside of the kingdom). I have also worked to create a palette of conceptual textures for each area of my world. McCloud touches on the impact of expressionism and synaesthetics: how elements such as line or color can be used to convey a specific tone.

My ideas for such strong color and texture schemes have been heavily inspired by N.D. Stevenson’s portrayal of his first published graphic novel, *Nimona*. The work has become a major touchstone for me as I have worked to create my own graphic novel. Something that I admire so much about Stevenson is the way he takes an art form— comics— which have so historically been associated with children, and places in them these pictures of queerness— a topic usually kept *away* from children— in a manner that understands his target audience. He desexualizes the queer and promotes in a real, but simplistic manner that allows a wholesome exploration for the children for which his work is created. Not only that, it also serves as healing for adults, young and old who have had extremely negative connotations with either their own queerness or someone else’s. Stevenson portrays queerness, whether it be in *Nimona*, *Lumberjanes* (a series which actually made it onto Chute’s aforementioned list), or his TV remake of *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, in a manner that makes the idea easier to swallow or better understand for LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ people alike. As I continue to work on *Revenant*, I seek to take inspiration from this as I combine the fantasy genre, graphic novel medium, and themes of intersectionality and compassionate open-mindedness within my work.

### **3. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT**

#### **3.1 Exhibit Resources and Venue**

For my exhibit, I gave a spoken presentation in Texas A&M University's Liberal Arts building. This space worked well to present my research and creative artifact because I was able to utilize an online presentation aid that allowed everyone in attendance to view pieces of my work as I was discussing them. This allowed for better communication of ideas from myself to my audience, and gave everyone a chance to connect my visual work (illustrations and dialogue) with the research that I did.

I utilized a PowerPoint as a presentation aid and had the opportunity to discuss with a wide audience my motivation, research question, and methodology in completing my project. I was also able to explain my research and how it related to and influenced my final artifact. Finally, I gave a summary of my creative work, the graphic novel entitled *Revenant*, and showed attendees samples of several illustrated pages in order to demonstrate some of the elements (including character design, synaesthetics, and dialogue) that I discussed in my presentation beforehand.

#### **3.2 Exhibit Planning and Content**

In order to plan for my exhibit, I communicated with my thesis mentor to decide both which aspects of my thesis were most important to share and which would captivate my audience most. I wanted to receive as much feedback and audience participation as possible during the presentation and in the Q&A portion that followed. Because of this, I decided to center my presentation on the way that I utilized the masking technique in my graphic novel. In order to demonstrate the way that McCloud's theory impacted my work, I presented several of my own

illustrations from different places in my story, all of which can be found in the Appendix. For example, I discussed my decision to depict simplistic characters over more complex, detailed backgrounds (Figures 2 and 3). In my background work, I use heavy shading and high contrast in order to approach realism, as seen in the cave walls of Figure 2 and dark forest setting of Figure 3. This greatly juxtaposes my characters, who are illustrated in flat, neutral-toned colors. They remain, unlike my backdrops, relatively untextured, and I use no more than a few lines to compose each character's face. I am hopeful that this technique combined with my effort to convey a diverse cast will allow for as many readers to relate to my characters (and consequently, connect with my story) as possible.

I also pointed out my deliberate use of color choice, expressionism, and synaesthetics in the way that I created two separate color and texture palettes for each nation in my story (these can be seen juxtaposed in Figures 2 and 4). For the nation of Merred, I chose darker, more neutral tones as well as rougher textures and shading, as exemplified in the cave background of Figure 2. Alternatively, to represent the kingdom of Marakh, I have chosen a brighter and lighter color palette with softer lines and textures. This can be seen in the greenery in front of the castle as well as the sky behind it in Figure 4. I also use minimal shading in my depiction of Marakh. This differentiates it even further from the society with which it is opposed, creating more tension for readers as I seek to ultimately bring the two nations together.

Within my discussion of masking and synaesthetics, I was able to explain my motivation for using a technique that would allow for the themes and ideas that I conveyed in my work to be more approachable. This consequently gave me space to also explain the inspiration for and research behind my project. I ended my presentation by showing the audience illustrated panels from *Revenant* so that they could have a better idea of what the final creative work might look

like. Though I'm still in the process of illustrating my novel, which will, in its completion, be upwards of 200 pages, it was an incredible opportunity to showcase the work that I have already completed and gain feedback from an audience that was seeing my piece for the first time.

### **3.3 Presentation Feedback**

After my presentation, I was able to take questions from my audience. Several attendees asked me more about my process of illustration as well as about the program that I use for digital art, which is called Procreate. I was asked to go more in-depth about the plot of my story and was able to explain how much *Revenant* has grown in complexity since I began working on it. I described how, originally, this story was only about two of my characters, Quinn and Iris, but that my resolution to implement the found family trope influenced my decision to add more characters to my main lineup. Here, I had the opportunity to share the large impact that surrounding oneself with a diverse group of people can have on one's ability to become more open-minded and empathetic, and how this can be a great first step in ridding our society of polarization (whether between the Christian and LGBTQ+ communities or not).

Perhaps the most encouraging feedback I received, however, came from several queer students who attended my presentation. I was told that they really liked my main character, Quinn, specifically because they could really relate to him and because they admired my decision to feature a trans\* character as a protagonist. It surprised me, but was deeply impactful that even in the short span of my presentation, several queer audience members found an immediate connection to Quinn and his transgender identity.

The topic of my presentation was not only able to open up conversations surrounding queer identities, however. It also paved the way for conversations surrounding the Christian faith with my audience. I was able to go into more depth with some of my queer presentation audience

members about my own experience growing up in the Christian faith and how my being queer has shaped my perspective there. This was exactly the goal that I wanted to achieve when sharing my work: discussions about intersectionality and open-mindedness within those who viewed my work. It was definitely shocking to see this goal come to fruition with such immediacy, but it has given me a lot of hope about the impact that my work will be able to have as I continue to develop and share it with others.

## 4. REFLECTION

### 4.1 On Research

When I began my research, I very quickly learned how few of the sources that I wanted to use could be easily connected. While I was able to find work that centered on Christianity and queerness, graphic novels, or the fantasy genre, it was very difficult to find sources that discussed more than one of these subjects. Further, hardly any of this research was geared specifically towards young adults other than those which focused on this age demographic as their primary topic, such as Mason, Stratman, and Stevenson's work. Consequently, it was a challenge to figure out how to take the information that I learned and adapt it to create a cohesive and understandable work, especially the goal of reaching a diverse (primarily in thought, background, and beliefs) young adult audience. One of my primary goals from the start of my project, as I've previously mentioned, was making this information not only more accessible to my target audience, but also more applicable to their individual lives. For my creative work, this meant taking my research and placing it into my characters, whether that was through their dialogue, their personalities, or their hardships.

I also wanted to be sure that the experiences and belief systems that I was learning more about were being depicted correctly within a creative work. Specifically, because I chose to use the fantasy genre, and the world in which my story takes place is not our own, I had to be very thoughtful and intentional about how I conveyed these experiences in order that the messages remained effective and relatable while not skewing the truth surrounding these communities in a harmful way. I do believe that using my characters as vessels for teaching both information and empathy was a strong choice. Those that have read my work have said that they really enjoyed

my characters, maybe above anything else, and that this likeability that they immediately have is what gives them *credibility*. Readers feel more prone to take to heart what my characters are saying when they have already felt a connection to them and/or have been able to relate to their experiences. Having been intentional about the traits and backstories that I have given each character, it is so meaningful to be able to see them impact those that read of their quest, their connection to one another, and the ways in which they are able to grow as a result.

#### **4.2 Personal Growth and Final Remarks**

Similarly to my characters, I believe that this project has allowed me to personally grow as well. Through both my research and the creation of *Revenant*, I have been able to witness the histories of so many different people, each with radically different backgrounds. Through this opportunity, I have gained a significant amount of perspective from and empathy for other people. In the progression of my characters' quest, I myself have felt challenged to reconsider what my preconceived notions of other might have been, as well as open my eyes to the ways in which those different from myself may perceive the ideas that I put forth.

Being both a Christian and a member of the LGBTQ+ community has definitely given me a unique viewpoint when approaching the creation of *Revenant*, and I hope that my ability to understand (at least to some extent) the perspectives of members of both groups will allow for not a polarizing, but a mind-opening experience for those who read *Revenant*. I'm optimistic that this story will be able to have a positive impact on how readers perceive those different from (or even entirely opposed to) them, causing them to consider where they may have prejudices of which they would like to rid themselves. Ultimately, however, I hope that *Revenant*, and the entirety of this project, will be a safe space for people to come and explore, to challenge their beliefs, and to leave more compassionate than they came.

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## APPENDIX: CREATIVE ARTIFACT

### *Revenant*

#### Sketches and Illustrated Panels



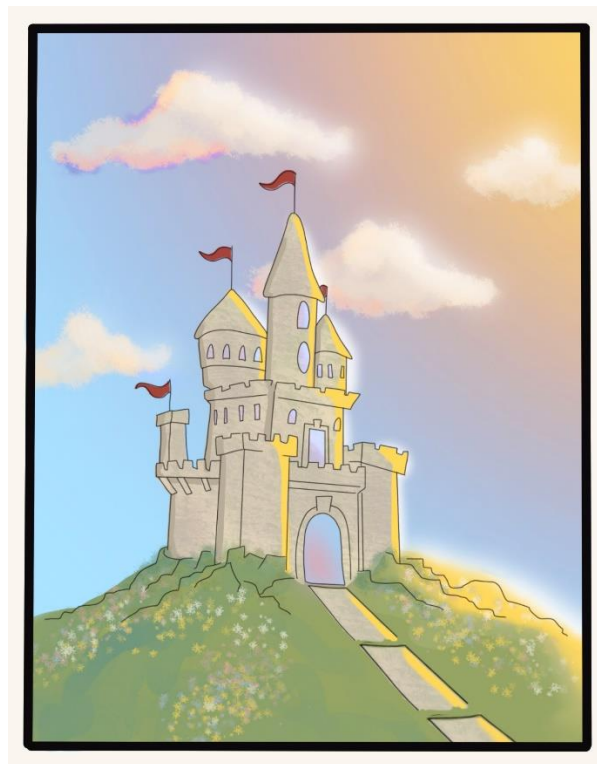
*Figure 1: Preliminary sketches of each of my five main characters.*



*Figure 2: Silas and Iris in the caves of Merred.*



*Figure 3: (From left to right) Norah, Quinn, Iris, Silas, and Henry as they begin their journey to find Magda.*



*Figure 4: The castle in Marakh's city center.*

## Script

### *Prologue*

[For as long as people had lived in the kingdom of Marakh, so too had the Heart (For context the Heart looks essentially like a big piece of rose quartz). It provided love for its people in their times of joy and hope through their trials. It protected them with a barrier that reached all the way to the wall which surrounded the kingdom, keeping them safe from the evil of the borderlands.

Some Marakhians grew to resent the Heart's barrier, believing it to be not one of protection, but of censorship: the Heart's way of maintaining their reliance on its power. They longed to find out what lay beyond the wall, to find their *own* power separate from that of the Heart.

Marakh's king, after much deliberation, allowed them to leave. He built a singular doorway in the wall which surrounded the kingdom, and the group left through the border town of Gonen.

A year went by before they returned to Marakh, telling great stories of the lands they had conquered and wealth they had found. They pleaded with the king to tear down the wall, and with it, the Heart's barrier, allowing all of Marakh to experience what they called "true freedom." This time, he denied their request.]

King: The "freedom" to be found out there is not freedom at all, but enslavement to greed and hunger for power. You become compelled to do what seems right for yourself. Here, the Heart provides all that our people need, and I must do what is right for *them*.

[In their anger at the King's rebuke, they who came to be known as "the heartless" attacked the wall. They tried to bring it down of their own accord, but their anger was no match for the Heart. Defeated, they threatened the King.]

Heartless Man 1: You think you know better than we do? That your ways are higher than ours? One day, we'll grow strong enough to destroy the Heart you depend so wholly on, and you'll finally see how much better your life can be without it.

[Despite the warning, the king ordered that the doorway in Gonen be left open, should any of the heartless choose to return. None ever did.]

Marakh and the new city of the heartless, Merred, grew as two separate nations for nearly a hundred years. The people of Marakh continued to draw strength from the Heart, never sure if the promise of the early rebels would be fulfilled. All they knew was that the king's doorway had only ever been used by one person in the years that followed, not to return to Marakh, but to leave.] (Front-lit silhouette of a young girl standing at the doorway, back to audience)

### *Chapter One*

(Thunderstorms. Merred army headquarters: a cave-like structure: dark, rocky, torchfire-lit. Similarly shaped silhouette of Magda, now facing the audience. A man, Dorion, stands behind her but is not the focus of the panel. Chants of Magda's name from the crowd.)

Magda (determined, voice cuts through their cheers): Soldiers! I've called you all here today because I have important news.

(Shot of the soldiers crowded together as they listen to her. They all look very tough and rugged)

Magda: In our careful preparation for battle, we have allowed Marakh too long a period of peace. They have built their own army. There are many of them, and they're skilled... But you're *better*.

In the last three years under my command, you have become the best fighters this army has ever seen. It is because of the work of our founders, who fought, trained, and died for our city that you are here today. It is their direction that we continue to follow.

When I became your commander, what did I promise I would lead you to do?

Soldiers (responding in unison): Destroy the Heart!

Magda: Right. Well, soldiers, the time has finally come.

(Soldiers cheer, chant, etc., shots on and the two soldiers that will appear later and Quinn, who's not looking nearly as enthusiastic as they are)

Magda: After nearly a century of building our army, we're now strong enough to tear down the wall that keeps the people of Marakh separate from us. The wall that keeps them thinking they're superior. This advance is the pinnacle of everything you've trained for.

Now, go home and prepare. Sharpen your swords, your technique, and your minds. In three days, we will fulfill the promise our founders made. We will defeat Marakh's Heart, eliminate its barrier, and show them who truly holds the power.

Soldiers: *cheers, yells*

(Quinn is in shock.)

(Quinn pushes past soldiers to get outside, it's now night. He hurries home, flings open the door to his house)

Quinn: Silas? Silas!

(Quinn looks around, panicked. The house is empty. He writes a note, packs a sack, and leaves the house)

\*\*\*\*\*

(Iris sits up in bed, panicked, heaves a breath. She is in the castle at the center of Marakh. This transition to a different setting is marked very clearly by a shift in color and texture schemes)

Iris: Norah.

(Iris gets out of bed hurriedly)

Iris: Norah!

(Norah runs into her room, Iris is getting up and dressed.)

Norah: What's going on? Are you okay? (Iris looks straight into her eyes)

Iris (a little worried, still processing): It's happening. I saw her, the traitor.

Norah (moving towards Iris): What? But you haven't dreamt about her since—

Iris: Since the night she left Marakh, I know. But it *was* her, I'm sure of it. (Pause, face puzzled and upset) She was... commanding the Merredian army.

Norah: You've got to be kidding.

Iris: I wish I was. Unfortunately, that's not even the worst part. There's more.

Norah: How could that not be the worst part?

Iris: I saw her talking to her soldiers. We only have three days before their first attack.

Norah (a bit panicked): Three *days*?! I was kinda hoping we'd get a little more warning.

Iris: Me too, but I'm packing our things now so we can leave as soon as possible.

Norah: Iris, I know you've been preparing for this, but *three days*? There's no way we're going to find her in time.

Iris: (She grabs Norah's hands and looks at her with determination) We have to. My family has been waiting to see which descendant of King Titus' would fulfill the Heart's prophecy since the heartless left Marakh. The responsibility fell on me when the traitor left four years ago, and I can't let my people, or my family, or most importantly, the Heart, down. Plus, you'll be with me, and you're the strongest sword fighter I've ever seen.

Norah: I don't know about—

Iris: Why else would my parents let you be my guardian? Norah, we can do this.

(Norah looks at Iris and nods)

Norah: Go get your parents and I'll finish packing our things, okay?

(Iris leaves the room. Norah turns, scrubs her hands over her face, and takes a deep breath. She pulls her sword out of its sheath. She sees her reflection in it, steadies herself.)

\*\*\*\*\*

(Iris stands across from her parents in their throne room)

King: I'm sorry this burden has fallen on you, my daughter. I know that the Heart knows what's best, but if I could take it from you, I would.

Iris: I know, Dad, but it's *my* prophecy to fulfill. I must leave the kingdom, journey to find the traitor, and bring her back before the war begins. I can do it.

Queen: Well, you certainly have your father's determination. I hope you'll have his wisdom and bravery on your journey as well. As much as you've learned about Merred through your visions, there's still so much you don't yet understand.

King: You'll need to be cautious, Iris.

Iris: You don't have to worry, I promise. Just talk with the General and make sure everyone is prepared here. I'll be okay, Dad. I'm sure the Heart will protect me, even out there.

(Norah walks into the room, Iris and parents look up at her)

Queen (with an affectionately knowing smile): As will Norah, I'm sure.

(Queen takes the shawl from Norah's arm and ties it around Iris' neck, covering up her Heart, a small piece of the gem visible on her chest as a part of her skin. She hugs Iris.)

Queen: Come back to us safely.

(Iris hugs her back, her father pulls them both in. Queen looks at Norah and pulls her in too.)

## *Chapter Two*

(Under the cover of night, Norah & Iris arrive in Gonen. They can see the doorway. It looks dark compared to their sky.)

Norah (half-whispering): We've got three days before the heartless attack and we can't even begin to guess where the traitor might be.

Iris: Norah, the Heart doesn't give us tasks that we can't handle. It'll provide us with everything we need.

(We see some of this scene from Henry's POV sitting on top of the wall)

Norah: Then you aren't, I don't know, *scared* at all?

Iris: Of course I am. But this quest is what It's calling me to do with my life, so I'm going to follow Its path even *though* I'm scared. (Beat.) *Are you?*

Norah: (trying to be stoic) No, of course not. Just... apprehensive.

(they've come to the doorway, Norah looks it over. There is a distinct darkness past the wall that's not present on the Marakh side)

Norah: I'll go first. (She starts to step, but before she can, Iris grabs her arm.)

Iris: We'll go together.



(They cross through the doorway and look at each other, then around. Iris is curious/excited, Norah is defensive. Maybe 2 side-by side panels of the same shot of them. All of a sudden, Henry jumps off the wall behind them, we see only his shadow. They whirl around and Norah steps in front of Iris, pulls out her sword and holds it out.)

Henry (as his face comes into view): Woah, woah, I'm not trying to hurt you! (Henry hands up in surrender, a little afraid).

(Norah glares at him, sword still up)

Henry: That means you can put the sword down now. (She lowers it a little.) Okay. (He turns to Iris and bows:) Princess. Just wondering what you're doing.

Norah: What are *you* doing?! (Norah is appalled) You crossed the border.

Henry (shrugs): So did you.

(Iris & Norah look at each other)

Norah: Who are you and why are you following us?

Henry: You mean you don't remember me?

Norah: Uh...

Henry: We've definitely met... several times.

(Norah still looks confused)

Henry: I guess with ten brothers you really get lost in the crowd, huh? I'm Henry.

Iris: Henry? You're the General's brother?

Henry: (deadpan, he gets asked this a lot) Yeah. (Becoming curious again: ) Did you say that the heartless are attacking soon? Is that why you're leaving?

Norah: How did you—

Henry: And the traitor? Are you looking for her?

Norah (starting to pull Iris away): You know, Henry, we're actually in a pretty big hurry.

Henry: Hey, wait! I could come with you.

(Norah and Iris look at him in surprise: Norah's look says *absolutely not*, but Iris seems to be considering it)

Norah: I don't think so.

Henry: Come on, it wouldn't hurt to have an extra person tag along. I'm very resourceful. And sneaky, which you've already seen. Plus, I grew up helping my *brother* train. *And* I've already got my sword on me.

Iris: He's right, Norah. We don't know much about what's out there. It may be good to have an extra person with us, especially since I'm not technically the best fighter.

Norah: You don't *need* an extra person, you have *me*.

Henry: Relax, firecracker. She'll still have you, I'll just be there too.

Iris: (looks at Norah) I say he's in.

Norah: (very obviously unhappy with this) Fine, but you should know I'm only agreeing as your subject, not as your friend.

(Iris scoffs in amusement)

Norah (with a small smile she's trying to hide): Come on. We're losing time.

### *Chapter Three*

(Quinn walks through town, it's dark. He wears a cloak and a mask to avoid being recognized. He comes to the edge of the forest and hears the snap of a branch underfoot. He cautiously proceeds until he sees three dark figures. He stoops behind a bush just as he hears a voice)

Soldier 1: Who's there?

(Quinn turns to see the soldiers emerge from behind him, thinking he's been caught, but they don't notice him. They walk right past him and towards the strangers ahead.)

Soldier 2: What are you doing out here so late? You know Magda doesn't allow entrance into the forests past dusk.

(The three look at each other, and Henry reluctantly steps forward.)

Henry: Uhh...yes! Yeah. *Magda*. You know, she's actually the one who sent us out here. We're... working on some travel preparations for the attack.

Soldier 1: That's odd. We should've been told to look out for you. (He gets closer to them, suspicious)

Soldier 2: You said you're working under Magda?

Henry: Yes, I did say that, didn't I?

Soldier 2: Then why aren't you in uniform?

Henry: Because... we're not soldiers. We're from a *different* department.

Soldier 1: So what are the weapons for?

(Henry looks at Iris a little helplessly)

Iris (stepping in and past Norah): Look... why don't you just take us to Magda? That way we can talk to her and straighten out this misunderstanding.

Soldier 2 (scoffs): No one gets to just *talk* with Magda. Surely you know that.

(Norah tries to step back in front of Iris, but Iris holds her back.)

Iris: Of course we do. We were... just... hoping... (Soldier 2 gets progressively closer to Iris until he's uncomfortably in her space.)

Soldier 2: You were hoping what?

(He lifts Iris' chin up with his hand so she's looking up at him, and Norah pushes back in front of Iris.)

Norah: Get off of her!

(Norah pushes him back with her forearm and brandishes her sword. In doing so, she knocks Iris against a tree and her shawl shifts, revealing her Heart.

Everyone freezes for a moment, assessing the situation. Then the soldiers begin reacting. They take their swords out and hold them up to Norah. She's terrified but stands her ground as they start to attack her. Henry pulls Iris away from the fight and brandishes his own sword, but doesn't join the fight. Norah is knocked to the ground and visibly begins to panic. The soldiers now turn their attention to Henry, who's holding his sword like he has absolutely no idea how to use it.

Suddenly, Quinn rushes onto the scene and takes Norah's place. He holds both of them off on his own and almost makes it look easy. After a bit of intense parrying, he ends up knocking them both out. He catches his breath as they fall to the ground.)

Henry: (looking at Quinn from behind, awestruck) Woah.

(Quinn turns around to face them. Norah and Henry's swords are still up in the air, ready for attack, but he looks straight past them to Iris, eyes wide in disbelief/awe. He puts his sword away and immediately kneels.)

Quinn: Princess.

(Iris looks down at him, meeting his gaze, equal parts amazed, confused, and surprised)

#### *Chapter Four*

Iris (shocked) : You know who I am?

(Quinn begins to stand. For as tough of a fighter he is, he's visibly timid. He stands a little hunched over like he wants to take up as little space as possible.)

Quinn: Yes.

Iris: And you still saved us?

(Iris steps forward and puts her hand on his upper arm. Quinn starts to recoil slightly at the touch. He's a little uncomfortable but mostly just surprised.)

Iris: Thank you.

(The faint glow of her heart sticks out like a sore thumb in the dark forest. Quinn glances at it, and glances away, trying not to stare.)

Quinn: Princess—

Iris: Just Iris is fine.

(Quinn nods a little sheepishly, corrects himself)

Quinn: Iris. You shouldn't be here. It's not safe for you of all people to be in Merred, especially right now.

Iris: I know.

Quinn: You *know*?

Henry: About your army's plans to attack our home? Yeah, we know.

Quinn: How did you—

Norah: We're not telling you anything else, *soldier*. (She says this last word with emphasis, trying to remind Iris and Henry of who Quinn really is.)

Quinn: Can I at least ask why you're here? If you're trying to dodge the attack, you came to the wrong place.

Iris: It's not that. We—

(Norah cuts Iris off, grabbing her hand and pulling her away from Quinn and towards herself.)

Norah (in a loud whisper) : Iris! I *know* you're not about to just tell our whole plan to this Merredian soldier.

(Iris pulls her hand out of Norah's as Henry moves to join them)

Henry (apologetically to Quinn): Sorry, could you give us a second?

(Iris, Henry, Norah move off to the side into an almost-huddle)

Henry: Okay, what's going on? Do we want him in on our whole Quest to Save the World or not?

Iris: I wasn't going to tell him our whole plan, but he seemed like he might be able to help us.

Norah: Help us? Iris, *look* at him, he's not like us. Out here, they don't value the same things as we do. He probably wants the Heart gone as much as the rest of them.

Iris: I don't think so. He *saved* us, Norah.

Henry: Yeah, that was really cool.

(Both girls look at Henry, Iris with some amusement. Norah rolls her eyes at Henry)

Norah: He probably just did it so he could take credit for our capture instead of his other soldier friends.

Iris: I don't know. He doesn't really look like he's trying to capture us.

(The three of them all turn to look at Quinn, who's standing a little awkwardly, looking around. Quinn notices they're staring and becomes visibly embarrassed)

Henry: Either way, I think we should go with him. If he's trying to capture us, odds are, he'll take us straight to where Magda is, right?

Iris: Right.

Norah: And if he's not?

Henry: If he's not, that means he *doesn't* want us dead, and might actually help us.

(Henry looks to Iris)

Norah: Seems like a risky bet if you ask me.

Iris: Does something about him seem... familiar to you guys?

Henry: Uh... I don't think so.

Norah: Not at all.

Iris: Huh. I could've sworn I recognized him from somewhere.

Henry: Maybe he just has one of those faces.

Iris: No, wait—he was in my dream! The last one I had at the palace. When Magda announced the attack, I saw him there.

Norah: Well that sure doesn't help his case.

Iris: No, something about him stood out. He didn't look eager for battle like the rest of them. He looked... worried. Guys, I think he's on our side.

Norah: Okay, well, how do you plan to find out for sure? Ask him?

Iris: Sure, why not?

(Iris turns from the huddle and starts walking back towards Quinn.)

Norah: What? No! Iris, I wasn't being serious.

(Iris stops in front of Quinn, looking at him with kindness and curiosity.)

Iris: I'm realizing we never got your name.

Quinn: Oh, uh...

(He sees all of them watching him)

Quinn: It's Quinn.

Iris: Quinn. (She smiles at him.) I like that.

Quinn (a little embarrassed): Thank you.

Iris: Can I ask why you saved us?

Quinn: I don't know. I guess I didn't want you to get hurt.

(Norah comes up next Iris, Henry following close behind.)

Norah: You didn't want us to get hurt? Why not? We're the enemy.

Quinn: That doesn't mean I want you dead.

Norah: Then you want us alive? So you can, what, torture us or something? Imprison us?

Pawn us off?

(Norah is getting closer to Quinn. Quinn is becoming more anxious.)

Quinn: I— no!

Norah: Then why did you do it?

Quinn: Because... because I saw Iris' heart.

(Beat. The three look at him with curiosity, Norah with a little more suspicion.)

Quinn: Those soldiers did too. They would've taken you to headquarters and.... I don't know what they would've done to you, but it wouldn't have been good.

Henry: Headquarters. Is that where Magda is?

Quinn: Yeah. It's a maze though. Even if you were taken there, it wouldn't be easy to find her. Or get out even if you did. Wait, why are you looking for Magda?

(Iris looks at Norah, lets her know she's making a decision)



Iris: Listen, Quinn. I know we're supposed to be enemies. We've lived opposite lives and believe opposite things and we're supposed to want the worst for each other, but something's telling me to trust you.

Quinn: Really?

Iris: Really. We're here because we want to stop the war from happening. I think I know how, but I *have* to be able to talk to Magda before the first attack, which means we only have a couple of days to find her.

Quinn: How do you know about the atta—

Iris: Can you help us get to her? Please.

(Quinn is quiet, he's processing)

Norah: I told you he wouldn't—

Quinn: Yes, I will. Look, I don't want this war either, so if you think you know how to stop it, I'll help you. I can lead you to the entrance of our headquarters, but I won't go any further than that.

(Iris takes Quinn's hands and squeezes them.)

Iris: Thank you. (Beat.)

Henry: Okay, well, if we're all on the same page, let's get going!

Quinn: Not yet. We'll rest for now, before the sun comes up, and then we'll stop by my house. You'll need new clothes and weapons if you want even a *chance* of getting to Magda unnoticed. We'll travel using back roads so you're not caught. Which reminds me, your heart.

(Quinn looks at Iris, unties his cloak, and wraps it around her to cover up her heart.)

Quinn: You can't leave it visible like that. The wrong person seeing it could mean a death sentence for you... all of you.

Norah: Doesn't that mean we have to watch out for everyone? Last time I checked, your whole nation's not too fond of ours.

Quinn: Actually, a lot of people in Merred are peaceful. They don't want your destruction any more than you do, but revenge is written into our history. It's Magda and her followers that are determined to be the ones to finally have it. They believe that it has to be either you or them who survives in the end— and that it *will* be them.

Iris: And you don't?

(Quinn looks away, takes a pensive breath.)

Quinn: No, I don't. (Beat. This is a bold statement, and the fact that he said it out loud to these people almost scares him. He nervously clears his throat.) We should go. We'll need to find a place to rest for the next few hours.

### *Chapter Five*

(Back at headquarters, the cave-like structure. We see the older man, Dorion, who was standing beside Magda in chapter one. Now he is alone. Unknown soldiers keep themselves busy around him as he supervises. He obviously holds some sort of authority. The two soldiers who attacked Iris, Norah, and Henry before approach him in a hurry. He doesn't even look at them.)

Soldier 1: Sir, we need to talk to the Commander immediately. We have some crucial information for her.

Dorion (seemingly unbothered): She's busy. Why aren't you at your station? (He turns to them and looks them over.) And why do you look like you were run over by your horses?

Soldier 2: That's what we need to talk to her about.

Dorion: Well, you can talk to *me* about it. If I find anything you have to say important, I'll communicate it to her myself.

Soldier 2: If we could just—

(Magda approaches, swings her arm around Dorion's shoulder and leans on him in a way that lets the audience know they're together in some way.)

Magda: Dorion, what are you telling my soldiers?

(She looks over the soldiers in front of them and is shocked)

Magda: What happened to you?

Soldier 1: Commander, we've got some news that you're going to want to hear.

Magda: Alright, go ahead. And make it quick.

Soldier 1: While we were on duty in the forest, we came across three intruders...

Marakhians.

(Magda processes for a second, she doesn't believe them. She looks at them like they're unintelligent and truly believes that they are.)

Magda (with a scoff of laughter): Marakhians? I don't believe it. There's no chance they crossed the border, and even less of one that they did that to you. Their pretentious moral code wouldn't have let them do that much damage to another person.

Soldier 2: No disrespect, but he's telling you the truth, Commander. One of the girls... we saw the heart. On her chest.

Magda (starting to become worried): What?

Soldier 1: And it wasn't the Marakhians that did this to us. One of our soldiers is with them. He's the one who challenged us.

Magda: That's impossible. I don't train traitors. (She's losing her composure, becoming fierce, angry) Who was he?

Soldier 1: We don't know. He came at us from behind. And he was wearing a mask and cloak.

Magda: Well why didn't you capture him and find out? Soldiers, that's your *job*. It's what I've spent the last three years teaching you to do.

Soldier 2: We tried Commander, but his attack skills were *good*. Really good.

(Magda stands for a moment to think. She's seething. She turns to Dorion.)

Magda: Dorion! Get a search party together. Include only our strongest fighters, (she glares at the soldiers in front of her) which means, leave these two behind. Have the team find the traitor to our army and defeat him, but more importantly, eliminate the intruders from Marakh. If they take any news of our plans to attack back to their kingdom— if Marakh is prepared— we'll no longer have the advantage. You understand?

(Dorion nods)

Magda: Good. Now go.

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(Iris wakes up in a cold sweat again, gasping for air. She (along with the rest of the Marakhians) is in a secluded spot in the forest. It's clearly morning now, but the trees still shield her from any sort of harsh light. Iris sits up in a panic and looks frantically around her for Norah. Luckily, Norah's already awake, sitting closeby with her back against a tree, keeping watch.)

Iris (calling out): Norah!

(Norah hurries to sit criss-cross next to Iris and puts a hand on her shoulder, soothing her)

Norah: Hey, it's okay. I'm right here, you're okay. Another dream?

Iris: Yeah. (She looks at Norah, her eyebrows furrow.) You look exhausted. Did you sleep at all last night?

Norah (shrugging): I wanted to make sure you were safe.

(Iris laughs a little and leans into her side. Norah wraps her arms around Iris. A moment of comfort before Norah dares to ask:)

Norah: What did you see?

(Iris pulls away to look at her.)

Iris: I saw Magda again. The soldiers that found us before, they told her that we're here. She's going to send others to come find us... to kill us.

Norah: We won't let that happen, okay? We just need to make it to Quinn's house to disguise ourselves as soon as possible. Think those back roads are as hidden as he said?

Iris: I hope so. (She looks up and notices that Quinn is gone.)

Norah: He said he was going to get water, but I don't think he went far. He should be back soon.

Iris: That's good, because we need to get moving before those soldiers trace us back to here.

Norah: Right. Hey, maybe don't tell him about your dreams yet. I know you think he's on our side, but I'm not entirely sure.

Iris: I won't if I don't have to, but I can't promise anything. If there are things he needs to know, I'm going to tell him.

Norah: But—

Iris: Norah, I'm not asking you to trust him. But I need you to trust *me*, okay?

(Before Norah can answer, Henry starts to wake up, stretching his arms above his head and yawning.)

Henry: Good morning. Did I miss anything? Where's—

(Quinn rushes back onto their makeshift campsite)

Henry: Right on cue.

Quinn: Good, you're up. We need to leave. Now.

Iris: What's happening?

Quinn: I ran into some people from town while I was out. Word of your arrival is spreading like wildfire. The soldiers from last night were gone too. I'm sure it won't be long before Magda's onto us, so we have to get going.

Henry: And those back roads you said we'd be taking...

Quinn: They're paths that I mapped out myself, so they're virtually untraceable. We should be safe.

### *Chapter Six*

(Iris, Quinn, Norah, and Henry are out of the darkened forest and are now making their way down a rocky cliff. The ground is scattered with patches of grass and some wildflowers. There are sparse trees.)

Quinn: See that town down there? We're only a couple of hours away now. That's where we're headed.

(All of them stop to look over the cliff's edge to see the place that Quinn is talking about. It looks like it's a few miles out from the mountain's base.)

Henry: And where exactly is that?

Quinn: The town is called Bar Gellah. My friend Silas' house is there. It's where I've lived for the last few years.

(They all come back from the edge and keep walking.)

Iris: You live with your friend? Don't your parents worry about you?

Quinn: Oh, uh, I don't think so. I never knew them.

(None of them really know how to respond to this. A look of empathy flashes across Norah's face. Quinn clears his throat.)

Quinn: So, did you want to tell me any more about this plan of yours?

Iris: Right. Well, there's this prophecy that's been in my family since the heartless left Marakh. Someone in our bloodline would have to restore peace between our nations and stop the promised war from happening.

Quinn (thinking): ...And because the war is about to start, you're the one who has to fulfill it.

(Iris takes a heavy breath and nods.)

Iris: Yeah. For whatever reason, the Heart decided to choose me. But luckily, it gave me some starting points. Apparently if I can get Magda back to Marakh before the first attack, the conflict between us will be fixed somehow.

Henry: Did the Heart happen to give you *any* sort of clue on how to do that?

Iris: Not really. I figured I'd just try to reason with her. If I can convince her of the importance of the Heart, and of saving our kingdom, maybe I can get her to come back with me.

Quinn: Iris, I hate to tell you this, but Magda's not really a good person. The only thing she cares about is retaliation *against* your kingdom. It's not going to be easy to convince her. At all.

Iris: I know. But I don't know what else to do. Bringing her back to Marakh is my fate. I just have to trust that the Heart will equip me with all that I need when we get there. If you can get us to the entrance of your headquarters, hopefully that'll be enough.

Quinn: I—

Iris: It's okay, Quinn. We'll worry about that when we get there. For now, all we need to focus on is staying out of the public eye until we can make it to your house.

(The four of them continue to walk the path in a staggered, shoulder-to-shoulder line.

Quinn is just a little bit ahead of the group.)

Quinn: Right, about that. You know how I told you I live with my friend? Well, he may not be too happy about you showing up there with me.

Norah: Why? Is he a soldier too?

Quinn: No. Actually very far from it. He hates everything about the war, and bringing you to him would *kinda* be forcing him to get involved.

Henry: But helping us would hypothetically stop the war, right? So maybe he'd be happy to help.

Quinn: I don't think so. He's pretty adamant about not wanting anything to do with it.

Henry: Why not?

Quinn: Because if he were to join the army, his dad would—

(All of a sudden, a stranger rushes at a high speed towards Quinn and attacks him from the side. Quinn is shoved away, leaving a significant gap between him and the Marakhians. He is put into a rough headlock.)

### *Chapter Seven*

Iris: Quinn!



(The Marakhians immediately react by pulling out their weapons: Norah and Henry their swords and Iris a dagger. Again, Henry is very awkward with the sword— this isn't overly important right now but will be a point of conversation later.)

Stranger: Where have you *been*? I've been looking for you for hours!

(Surprisingly, a laugh from Quinn as he starts pushing himself out of the headlock.)

Quinn: Silas? Get off of me, you idiot!

(Iris, Norah, and Henry look at each other confused, they let their weapons drop a little.)

(Quinn pushes away from the stranger until he's standing facing him. The stranger has his back to the Marakhians.)

Quinn: You scared me.

Silas: You scared *me*. I can't believe you left without telling me.

(Quinn looks a little guilty.)

Quinn (sheepishly): I left you a note.

Silas: Yeah, *this* note?

(Silas pulls the crumpled note out of his pocket and holds it out. It says: *Had to leave. Not sure when I'll be back. Within the week.*)

Silas: *Very* reassuring, thank you. Seriously, something could've happened to you and I wouldn't have known.

Quinn: I know. I'm sorry, okay, but it was important.

Silas: What are you even doing out here?

(Silas looks around and sees the Marakhians.)

Silas: And who are— (His face drops as he comes to a realization.) No. Quinn, you didn't.

(Quinn looks more than a little guilty now. He plays dumb.)

Quinn: What?

Silas: *You're* the traitor everyone's been talking about?

Quinn: Uh...

Silas: And these are the Marakhians, aren't they? You just decided last night was a good night to go pick up some *intruders*?

(Silas is absolutely appalled.)

Quinn: Just let me explain—

(Henry steps up beside Quinn and Silas, gives a little interrupting wave.)

Henry: Yeah, hi. Intruder Henry here. Quinn really didn't mean to get mixed up with us, it just kinda happened. You know, *fate* and all that?

Silas (to Quinn): Then why did you leave?

Quinn: Magda announced that the attack was coming.

Silas: You were at headquarters again?

Quinn: You know it's not because I want to help them—

Silas: I know. I just don't understand why you have to go there at all.

(Beat.)

Quinn (very sensitively): I don't think he saw me.

Silas: You know what? It's okay. I'm just glad that you're safe.

(Silas turns to the Marakhians and gestures to them.)

Silas: Now, what is all this about?

Quinn: Silas, this is the princess of Marakh.

Iris (with a little wave): Hi, I'm Iris.

Quinn: Norah's her protector. And Henry's...

(Henry looks to Iris)

Iris: Our friend.

Silas: And you're intent on keeping them?

Quinn: I have to help them.

Silas (with a sigh): Alright. Then as much as I'm sure I'll regret this, we should get them home before we're caught.

### *Chapter Eight*

(The five have now arrived at Silas and Quinn's house. It's a small, modest home made of stone and wood. The roof is thatched with wood and straw.)

Quinn: Well, here it is. Home sweet home. We don't have any time to lose. For all we know, your being here could make Magda want to attack earlier.

Iris: Let's hope not.

Quinn: Okay, first, you need some disguises. And then—

Silas: New weapons.

Quinn: Right. Could you...

Silas: Whatever will get them out of here quicker. I'll head to the workshop.

Henry: The workshop? Can I come?

(Silas glares at Quinn, who shrugs back at him.)

Silas: Fine. Come on.

Quinn: I'll stay here and find them all some new clothes.

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Henry: So... what exactly is the *workshop*?

Silas: I'm a metalsmith. Best in Merred, actually. You want a weapon in Bar Gellah, you come to me.

(Henry is very in awe.)

Henry: That's incredible. So, are you a big swordfighter too, then? Is that how you got that scar?

(Silas is shocked by the bluntness. His glare now shifts to look at Henry.)

Silas: I don't talk about my scar.

Henry: Okay. Sorry.

(There's a second of tense silence before: )

Silas: But, yes. I can use a sword as well as I can make one. Who do you think taught Quinn what he knows?

Henry: No way. Then you must be amazing.

Silas: I wouldn't say that, Quinn's really the prodigy. He hardly knew anything when we met, but he was a natural. It was only a couple of months before he was beating me pretty consistently.

(Silas looks over at Henry with disappointment)

Silas: You, on the other hand... Let's just say I saw how you were holding your sword back on the mountain. Not promising.

Henry: Hey! I'll have you know that my brother is Marakh's highest ranking general.

Silas: Who cares who your brother is? *You* don't know the first thing about fighting.

(Henry is shocked.)

Henry: Everyone cares who my brother is. That's the only reason anyone cares who *I* am.

Silas: I of all people understand that your family doesn't define who *you* are. (Beat.) Let me see your sword.

(Henry hands it over.)

Silas: See, part of your problem is that this sword is unbalanced.

(They arrive at the front of Silas' workshop.)

Silas: Come in, let's see what I can do.

(They enter the workshop. It's small, but there are beautiful, intricate swords/daggers/knives hanging on the walls and laying on the central wooden table. There are tools scattered around, a forge in the corner, and an anvil beside it.)

Henry: Woah. You made all of these? They're beautiful.

Silas (a little distractedly): Thank you.

(Silas is searching around the room. He pulls a sword off of the wall and looks it over, weighs it in his hand.)

Silas: See how this one feels.

(Silas hands the sword over to Henry who tries his best to hold it, but again, just looks a little uncomfortable. Silas leans against the table and observes what Henry's doing wrong.)

Silas: You're left-handed?

Henry: Uhh... no.

Silas: Okay then, first thing: switch your hands.

(Henry switches his right hand to be above his left.)

Silas: Good. Now, tighten the grip on your last three fingers. Loosen your thumb. And...

(In a quick movement, Silas grabs another sword off the table and swings it at Henry. Henry catches Silas' sword with his own— he's caught off guard and is visibly freaked out. Silas nonchalantly pulls his sword away and sets it back down.)

Silas: See, you're already better.

Henry (still catching his breath): Yeah. Thanks.

### *Chapter Nine*

(Back at the house. Iris, Norah, and Quinn are inside. In the bedroom, Quinn digs through a trunk of his clothes.)

Quinn: Alright, if you wanna make it into Headquarters unnoticed, you'll need to know a little more about our army.

(He pulls out a couple articles of clothing and hands them to Iris before turning back to the trunk.)

Quinn: You already know Magda's in charge, but she can be pretty hard to talk with. You'll most likely have to get to her through Dorion, her right hand man, and unfortunately he's even worse than her. At least Magda is skilled in both fighting and leadership. She knows how to manage a situation and a group of people, but Dorion has none of that, so most of the time, he's just violent.

Iris: Then how did he get to have so much power?

Quinn: He only has his position because he convinced Magda that being with him would benefit the war effort. He abandoned his family to be with her, to have her power. He's terrible. (Quinn stands to face them with another stack of clothes in his hands, which he gives to Iris.) And someone you'll need to look out for. Norah, you'll need to be on high alert around him. I'm assuming Iris will do most of the talking, so you're going to have to keep her safe.

Norah (a little defensively): Of course I will.

Quinn: I'll let you get dressed. I'm sure Silas and Henry will be back soon.

(Quinn leaves the room and shuts the door behind him. Norah and Iris start unfolding and looking at the outfits they've been given. They start to take off their shawls/cloaks, and their hearts are revealed. Norah looks down at her own, puts her hand on it)

Norah: It's different here, huh?

Iris: What's different?

Norah: The Heart. I don't think I've felt its presence since we left Marakh. It just... feels distant.

Iris (looking down at her own): I know what you mean. I've been feeling pretty lost too.

Norah: At least you're still able to have your dreams. The Heart's still speaking to you, even if it's not as often as usual. I haven't felt *anything*, and I'm getting weaker.

Iris: You've been doing a great job.

Norah: The first time we faced any kind of danger, *Quinn* had to step in and save you.

Iris: You've never actually had to fight anyone for real. All your training has been safe, with other people on your side. It's going to be a learning curve.

Norah: You don't think I can do it.

Iris: That's *not* what I'm saying. I just mean that Quinn has been practicing here his whole life! He knows what to expect, and just because you didn't doesn't mean that the Heart's not with you. I know it's harder being outside of where it's comfortable, but I'm sure the Heart still reaches here.

Norah: That's easy for you to say, you're the princess. The Heart always seems to be guiding you. It gives you more peace and joy and strength than anyone I know. Definitely more than it gives me.

Iris: Norah, I'm not of more value than you because of my position. The Heart doesn't love me or provide me with more than it does anyone else. It's just that I choose to trust in it, even when it feels far away. It's been ten years since you decided for *yourself* to trust in the Heart. It's always a part of you, even if you don't feel it.

Norah: And what happens when Quinn leaves us at the entrance of headquarters and I can't protect you in there?

(Iris grabs Norah's hand and looks at her sternly.)

Iris: Hey, look at me. I'm here, right? I'm safe. You're doing a good job. We'll be okay.

(A knock at the door.)

Henry: You guys okay in there? We brought you some new weapons from Silas' shop. I think you'll really like them!

(The girls leave the room and we see the three Marakhians in their new outfits and with their new weapons for the first time. They look very different, a lot more battle-ready, and a lot more mature. Iris looks her new dagger over and, satisfied, puts it in its sheath on her belt.)

Iris (with a heartfelt smile): Thank you, Silas. These are amazing!

(Silas nods in thanks.)

Quinn: We should probably all eat something and start coming up with a more solid plan before tomorrow.



(Scene change. It's now nighttime and all five are sitting in a circle on the floor of the house where some blankets have been laid out. There is a fire burning in a small hearth in the corner of the room. They're eating and making light conversation.)

Quinn: So, the entrance to headquarters is a tunnel. You have to watch out where you're going because there are tunnels all over the place and they split off, sometimes without warning. You have to be careful to make sure that you stay together.

Norah: Why would headquarters possibly need to be that complicated to navigate?

Silas: The tunnels weren't always our army headquarters. Our founders built it after they were unsuccessful in attacking your wall. They thought you might try to come after them and kill them for what they did, so they wanted to be sure they'd be hidden and safe here.

Henry (concerned): Kill them? We didn't want them dead, we wanted them to come back. We always want people to be able to come to Marakh. That's why we've always left the gate open, so that maybe someone would find a home there again.

Silas: But here, there's this widespread idea that you hate us. How were we supposed to know that we'd even be welcomed if we *were* to cross the border?

(Everyone is silent for a moment, they hadn't really considered this.)

Quinn: We don't really promote going to Marakh as an option here. Most people don't see it as a good place to be like you do.

Iris: But that's not really your fault. We should be better about letting Merredians know that they're welcome here. Maybe talking to Magda will help.

Quinn: I hope so.

Silas: Just don't let yourselves get split up tomorrow. It'll be much harder to stay safe if you lose each other.

(Quinn and Silas leave to go to their rooms. Iris, Norah, and Henry stay sitting in a circle on the blankets, all lost in their own thoughts. After a moment, Henry breaks the silence.)

Henry: So, you think we'll be able to pull this off?

(Beat. The girls aren't quite sure what to say.)

Henry: I mean, it won't be long until it's just the three of us in those tunnels. How are we supposed to know where to go? What if we're caught? What if we don't find Magda in time and Marakh is attacked and we're not there to help stop it? What if—

Norah (turning her head towards his, in a loud whisper): Henry, shut up! I do *not* want to spend our last moments in safety coming up with the worst case scenario.

Henry: Sorry. It's just... you guys seem so much more calm than I feel.

Iris: We're not, Henry. We're scared too. But as long as I can fall asleep tonight, we should at least have a better idea of what to expect tomorrow.

Henry: Right, because of your dreams? The ones that keep giving you information about the traitor?

(Iris turns to Henry, shocked.)

Norah: How did you know about that?

Henry: Yesterday morning, I overheard you two talking about it when you thought I was still asleep.

(Henry grins.)

Henry: I *told* you I'm sneaky. I'm always learning a lot of things I'm probably not supposed to know.

Norah: Well, at least now we know you're good at *something*. Those combat skills sure aren't going to be of any help.

Henry: Hey, I'm *not* that bad.

Norah: I thought you said you trained with your brother.

Henry: Admittedly, I may have exaggerated just a little.

(Norah raises her eyebrows)

Norah: A *little*?

Henry: Fine. I carried his weapons for him sometimes.

Norah: And the truth comes out.

Henry: I'll have you know that Silas helped me practice in the workshop, and I'm pretty sure he was impressed.

Norah: Just because someone is shocked doesn't always mean they're impressed, Henry.

Henry: I—

Iris: As much as I hate to interrupt this, can we please get back to what's important right now?

Henry: Right, sorry. So if you're getting dreams here, that must mean that the Heart has been able to reach you outside of Marakh.

(Iris nods)

Iris: Yes.

Henry: You too, Norah?

Norah: No, I haven't gotten anything.

Henry: Me neither. I didn't think I *could* out here.

(Beat. Iris reaches out and puts one hand on Henry's knee, the other on Norah's hand.)

Iris: I know that not feeling the Heart's presence is discouraging, but I'm sure you will soon. It's here in Merred too, I know it; it's here with us even now. And once it sends me a dream tonight, we'll be prepared to take on whatever happens tomorrow, okay?

(Norah and Henry look at each other and then back at Iris.)

Henry and Norah: Okay.

Iris: Let's get some rest then, huh? That means you too, Norah.

(The three of them lay across the blankets. They are all on their backs, looking up at the ceiling and getting ready to sleep.)

Iris (whispering): Goodnight. Love you guys.

(Henry and Norah are both visibly warmed by this, they smile as they fall asleep.)

(Scene change. It's dawn now and everyone is awake. They're all getting packed and ready to leave. Iris and Norah are putting up their hair. Henry is putting his shoes on. The three Marakhians are in the front room together and are all a little on edge.)

Henry: So, you didn't dream at all then?

Iris: No. I didn't see anything, and the attack is *tomorrow*. I was really counting on some message, some kind of help from the Heart before we were just thrown into the battle.

(Norah grabs Iris' hand to comfort her.)

Norah: Iris, you said that the Heart's with us here, and I believe you. It's not going to leave us alone.

Henry: Right. Besides, it chose you to be here for a reason. The Heart must've thought you could do it, so I know you will. Even if we're not really sure how yet.

(Quinn walks into the main room. He looks a little hesitant.)

Quinn: Are we ready to go?

(The three nod, a little nervous but mostly determined. Silas walks in.)

Silas: Let's get this over with.

### *Chapter Ten*

(The five have made it to the entrance of the tunnel that leads to HQ. From the outside, the entrance looks like a cave, but once inside, the tunnel splits off several different ways. The first panel in this chapter will show the five standing shoulder to shoulder with their backs to the audience as they look into the cave mouth.)

Silas: Well, here we are.

Quinn (looking hesitant): Right. I—

Silas (turning to face the group): You guys should probably get going. You don't have much time left.

Iris: Yeah, I guess we should.

(Beat. Then Iris reaches out and pulls Quinn into a hug. Quinn is surprised and doesn't fully reciprocate, but he doesn't pull away.)

Iris: Thank you for everything, Quinn. We'll miss you.

Henry (to both Quinn and Silas): Both of you.

Silas (with a curt nod): Good luck.

(Iris pulls back from Quinn, and the three Marakhians turn back to the entrance. Quinn and Silas turn to leave.)

Norah: Alright, let's go.

(The three are just about to take their first steps into the tunnel, when—)

Quinn: Wait!

(Quinn turns back towards the Marakhians, who look back at him in curiosity. Silas looks at him with suspicion/concern/curiosity. Quinn looks like he's conflicted.)

Henry: What is it, Quinn? Is everything okay?

(Quinn takes a deep breath and looks to Silas apologetically before speaking.)

Quinn: I can't let you guys go alone.

Norah: What do you mean?

Silas: Yeah, Quinn, what do you mean?

Quinn: I mean that if I just drop you off here and leave, I'll regret it for the rest of my life.

Henry: So does that mean you're coming with us?

Quinn: With all due respect, I'm worried that if I don't, you'll get yourselves killed.

Silas: Quinn, you've done enough to help them.

Quinn: But it's not just about *them*. It's about a whole kingdom of people and about our own, too. Iris has talked about her fate, how following the Heart's prophecy is her destiny, and I think that it's mine too.

Silas: How could it be yours?

Quinn: I'm not sure. I always felt like I would play a role in stopping the war from happening when the time came, I just thought I would have to do it alone. When we met for the first time, I was actually on my way to Marakh. I heard about the attack, and... I don't know, I wanted to warn you.

Iris: You did?

Quinn: Yeah, but then the three of you showed up right in front of me. I don't think that was a coincidence.

(Norah comes to a realization.)

Norah: All this time, we've been thinking the Heart wasn't communicating with us.

Henry: The Heart didn't give you a dream last night, Iris. It gave us *Quinn*.

Iris: You're right. Quinn, the Heart sent you to us, and us to you. I know that it will be a risk, but please come with us.

(Quinn looks at Silas, trying to read his reaction. Quinn looks part hopeful, part cautious. Silas looks like he's still making up his mind.)

Silas (after a moment): Okay, we're in.

Quinn: Wait. Silas, you don't have to come. This isn't your responsibility.

Silas: No, but *you're* part of my responsibility. I don't want you getting hurt in there.

Quinn: But your dad—

Silas: I know, but this is important to you, so I want to help. I'm not going to leave you on your own here.

Quinn (very genuinely, with gratefulness evident on his face): Thank you, Silas.

(Silas nods. The five approach the tunnel again, and this time, they all cross the threshold into the shadowy cave. As they progress through the tunnel, more and more soldiers start appearing, coming in and out of tunnels around them. The sheer numbers and business becomes reminiscent of an ant hill.)

Norah: How many soldiers *are* there?

Silas: Definitely more than I remember.

(A tunnel appears right beside them and Henry and Iris almost walk into it before Silas grabs them by the back of their clothes and pulls them to the side. The two are both shocked.)

Henry: What *was* that?

Silas: Remember those tunnels we told you to be *extremely* careful about?

(An echoing voice starts making its way down the path they're on, too muffled to understand, but loud enough to suggest that's where they probably should be going.)

Quinn: Do you guys hear that?

Iris: Sounds important. Let's go.

(They turn a couple more corners and emerge in the same central room that Magda was speaking in at the start of the book. This time, Dorian is at the front.)

Dorion: I'm sure you've all heard about the Marakhians who have infiltrated in an attempt to sabotage our efforts to destroy the Heart. And if so, you also know that one of our own men, one of *your* fellow soldiers helped them to escape our grasp. It's been over a day since these intruders were last spotted, so our new top priority is to find them before they can take news of our attack back to Marakh and ruin our chances at winning. That said, the attack will still be going on *tomorrow*, so make sure you're prepared. And if you hear or see anything that might reveal the rebel soldier, report it to me immediately. Is that understood?

Soldiers: Yes, sir!

(Dorion scans the audience and his eyes land on Silas. Suddenly, he looks confused, suspicious. Silas looks back at him with anger, disgust. Quinn looks at Silas and notices he's been seen by Dorion. Without taking his eyes off of Silas:)

Dorion: Dismissed!

(The soldiers start to scatter and Dorion makes his way towards our group. Quinn pushes the Marakhians behind some rocks so as not to draw attention to them. He does so just in time. Dorion has approached Quinn and Silas.)

Dorion: Now what do we have here? My boy, here for a visit?



(The Marakhians are shocked from behind the rocks. Silas is unmoving, looking stern.

Quinn moves close to him as a sign of protection.)

Silas: I'm *not* here for you.

Dorion (with a sly grin): Of course not. You're here for him.

(Dorion gestures to Quinn.)

Dorion: Am I right? You always did what you could to protect him, huh? Even if that meant staying away from your own father.

Silas: You know that *Quinn* was never the problem.

(Dorion moves closer to Silas, puts a hand on his face, covering up Silas' scar.)

Dorion: You look so much older than I remember. How long has it been? Two, three years?

(Silas is becoming visibly uncomfortable, he freezes under his father's grasp. Quinn grabs his arm and pulls him back out of Dorion's grasp and behind him.)

Quinn: Dorion, enough. We need to see Magda.

Dorion (with a sly, insincere look): Good to see you again too, Quinn. I'm glad at least one of you is willing to support the cause. You've become quite the impressive soldier since we met. Unfortunately, I can't let you see Magda.

Quinn: We have information about the attack. You told us to report it.

Dorion: Yes, to *me*.

Silas: This is sensitive information. Forgive us for not trusting *you* to get it to her.

Dorion: You'll have to. Magda's busy right now— she's in her office, which means she's not to be disturbed. You want to talk to her, you'll have to find her first.

Quinn (shrugs): Works for us. Let's go, Silas.

(Quinn starts to guide Silas towards the rock where the other three are waiting, but Dorion catches Silas' arm.)

Dorion: Stop!

(Immediately, Silas uses his other hand to pull out his sword and lift it's point up to Dorion's neck. Dorion freezes, surprised and afraid. Silas is buzzing with anger.)

Silas: *Don't* touch me.

(Dorion lets go of Silas' hand and begrudgingly watches them walk away: he's been defeated. Quinn and Silas make it to the rest of the group and Quinn gestures for them to all follow him.)

Quinn: We've got to go.

(Together, they walk into the nearest tunnel, hoping to get out of Dorion's sight in case he were to follow them. In the barely-lit atmosphere of this new tunnel, the five are silent: no one really knows what to say. After a moment, Quinn breaks the silence.)

Quinn: So, it looks like we're going to have to find Magda ourselves.

Norah: Where should we start?

Quinn: Honestly, I have no idea. I've only been here a couple of times and I've always just followed the crowd.

(The tunnel is completely empty aside from the five.)

Henry: I hate to state the obvious, but it doesn't look like there's anyone here to follow.

Quinn: Yeah, that's strange. I guess here's as good a place as any to start. We can try different pathways & see what information we can pick up along the way, but we'd better hurry.

(The five start walking forwards, when all of the sudden, a new tunnel appears and Iris and Silas are split from the group.)

*Chapter Eleven*

(Iris and Silas enter the new tunnel and realize they've lost the rest of their group. They turn around, but behind them is only the other side of the tunnel they're in— there's no immediate way back to their friends. Iris is afraid, Silas is cautious, analyzing the situation.)

Iris: Silas! Where did everyone go?

Silas: It looks like we got pulled into another tunnel.

Iris: Well, can we get back?

(The two begin looking around, trying to find the place where they entered the tunnel, to no avail.)

Silas: I don't think so. At least not directly.

(Iris stills.)

Iris: What are we going to do?

Silas: We don't seem to have much of an option. I think the only way out is forward.

Iris: Then how are we supposed to find them again?

Silas (exasperated): Okay, enough with the questions, princess. I don't know how to navigate this place any more than you do.

Iris (looking at him apologetically): Sorry. Let's just keep moving and we can worry about finding them again when we're out of the dark.

Silas: Right. See that light coming around the corner? I'm sure there are plenty of people wherever that leads that could help. Maybe the other three will even end up there too. Just... stay close to me, okay? We don't want to be split up again.

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(Back to Norah, Henry, and Quinn. They're alone. Henry is concerned, Quinn is already trying to think of solutions. Norah is in an absolute panic, looking desperately around for Iris, who's very obviously not there.)

Norah (muttering): No no no no no no no. I can't believe that I lost her.

Henry: You didn't lose her. She just got pulled into one of those weird tunnels.

(Norah glares at Henry.)

Quinn: Norah, it'll be okay. Silas is with her. He won't let anything bad happen to her.

Norah: No, you don't understand. Keeping her safe is *my* job. It's *been* my job for my whole life, it's what I'm supposed to be good at.

Henry: You *are* good at it. Accidents happen sometimes, it's not your fault.

Norah: I should've been right next to her. I don't know what I was thinking. She could be hurt right now and it'd all be my fault. If I can't keep her safe then what good am I?

(Henry puts his hands on Norah's shoulders. Surprisingly, this grounds her. She looks up at him.)

Henry: Hey. Whether you see it or not, there's a *lot* of good in you. You care for her so well. You always have.

(Norah takes a deep breath, it seems like her nerves are settling a little.)

Quinn: We'll find her, I promise. We just have to keep trying.

(Henry pulls away from Norah and starts looking around.)

Henry: Maybe we're not moving fast enough?

Quinn: I don't think that makes a difference.

Henry: What if there are only certain spots that the tunnels can open up? Maybe we just haven't reached another one yet.

Norah: How would we even know if we had?

(Henry shrugs, walks ahead of the other two as he tries to look closely at the walls in the barely-there light.)

Henry: Wait, I think there's something here.

(Henry places his hand against the wall, feeling for texture. All of the sudden, a new tunnel opens up and Henry disappears into it.)

Norah and Quinn: Henry!

(They race over to where he was just standing, but he's gone— the tunnel is closed.)

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(Meanwhile, Iris & Silas turn the corner to emerge into a large training room with a sword fighting arena in the center. Dozens of soldiers are gathered around watching a fight take place. It's crowded and loud in the room. The two soldiers in the arena are doing one-on-one combat training— and it's intense. Silas and Iris watch for a moment from the back of the room, both clearly uneasy.)

Iris: So this is why no one else was in the tunnels. Everyone's *here*.

Iris: We should probably try to find out what's going on. Maybe we can learn something about where to find Magda.

(They zig zag their way through the room until they've joined the crowd. Iris turns to a soldier beside her. The soldier is really invested in what's going on. Iris pretends she is too.)

Iris: Hey! Great match, huh?

(He turns to her. He's a big guy, significantly larger than Iris, and he seems a little surprised at her approaching him.)

Soldier 3: Oh yeah. These guys are no joke. After *this* kind of a practice session, they'll be on the front line tomorrow for sure.

Iris: I don't think I've ever seen a match this rough.

Soldier 3: Sure, you think that *now*, but just wait until Magda gets out there and takes someone on. You'll change your mind.

(Another soldier beside them joins the conversation.)

Soldier 4: When's Magda supposed to be here?

Soldier 3: Within the hour, I'd think. She wants to get us all fired up before we go out tomorrow. She said she'd challenge one of us— someone she deems highly skilled— in celebration of the attack.

Soldier 4: Well then, you have nothing to worry about.

(Soldier 4 elbows Soldier 3 mockingly, laughs.)

Soldier 3: Look who's talking... (the soldiers' conversation starts to fall to the background as Iris and Silas begin to speak again.)

Iris: Did you hear that? Magda's coming *here*! We could talk to her without finding her office, which we've already proven we're not very good at. And with all the commotion surrounding Magda's fight, this room may be the best chance we have at finding our friends again.

Silas: It's probably not in our best interest to be here when Magda comes in. If she happened to pick either of us to challenge her, we would be in big trouble. If this match is just *practice*, I can't imagine what a real battle against them would be like. Besides, I don't know how much more of this I can watch.

Iris: Huh. I would've thought intense sword play would be right up your alley.

Silas: Definitely not. I like the art and skill behind weaponry, sure. But not the violence.

(Silas is visibly uncomfortable, averting his eyes from the arena. Iris picks up on this.)

Iris: Why don't we just head back towards the tunnel? We'll be much harder to see there, but we can still stay alert.

(The two push their way through the group of spectating soldiers towards the tunnel they entered through. They lean against the wall by the mouth of the tunnel, happily allowing the crowds to block their view of the practice.)

Iris: So, what got you into sword crafting, then?

Silas: It was my father's business. He taught me how to craft weapons at a young age, and it used to be a lot of fun. The art was the one thing we really shared an interest in. He was actually kind of... peaceful then?

Iris: Really? What happened to him?

(Silas hesitates. Iris pulls back from him a little.)

Iris: Sorry, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to.

(Silas shakes his head.)

Silas: No, it's okay. A few years ago, my mom got sick. She passed away pretty unexpectedly. She was this... extraordinarily compassionate woman. She had a way of making everything seem so *good* all the time.

(Beat. Iris is listening intently, compassionately.)

Silas: After she was gone, I guess my dad had a hard time seeing the good in anything at all. He stopped crafting weapons in our shop and started *using* them instead. He would get really angry, and then...

(Silas trails off, looking to the ground.)

Iris: Your scar.

(Silas nods. He still looks tough, but he's avoiding eye contact with Iris.)

Silas: One of several.

(Iris grabs his hands and he looks at her. Her eyebrows are furrowed in concern.)

Silas: But things got a lot better when Quinn showed up. He would go with me to help in the shop every day so that I wouldn't have to be alone with my dad, or he'd find places for us to hide during the day and map them out so only we could find them.

(Silas smiles a little here.)

Silas: He took care of me even though he probably needed more taking care of than I did. Even after my dad left to be with Magda a few months later, Quinn still made sure I was safe. You know, in some ways, you remind me a lot of him.

Iris: What do you mean?

Silas: Well, you're both really easy to talk to, for one. But I think it's your optimism that stands out the most. Even when you're facing something difficult, both of you just seem to have this crazy amount of hope that everything will be okay in the end. It makes me hopeful too.

(Iris grins.)

Iris: Thanks, Silas, but my hope definitely doesn't come from me.

Silas: What do you mean?

Iris: I can't speak for Quinn, but I know that any sort of optimism that I have is something that the Heart has given me.

(Silas looks a little skeptical.)

Silas: Right... So tell me more about this Heart, then. You all keep talking about it like it's this great thing.



Iris: We grow up hearing about and then learning for ourselves the greatness of the Heart and all that it provides for us. Then, when we decide we're ready, we commit ourselves to the Heart and all that it offers. That's when *our* hearts appear—the crystal across our chests. They're an outward manifestation of our spiritual state.

Silas: And everyone in Marakh gets them?

Iris: Yeah, I guess so. I've never heard of anyone that didn't, aside from the group that left to found Merred.

Silas: That's probably why I don't know much about it. All *we're* taught about are its restrictions. You're all expected to be the same because of the Heart.

(Iris nods, hums in acknowledgement as she thinks.)

Iris: I don't think it's an expectation of the Heart as much as it's a cultural expectation. We just find so much community in our shared sense of morality that we start becoming similar in other ways too... which I guess could be difficult for someone who doesn't share those similarities.

(Beat.)

Iris: Maybe that's why Magda left.

(Silas looks at Iris in disbelief.)

Silas: What? Magda's from Marakh?

Iris: I think so. That's why we're trying to find her. There's a prophecy that says that the only way to stop the war is to bring the traitor back to the kingdom.

Silas: And you're sure it's her? It's not going to be easy to get her back there... unless you trick her or something.

Iris: I don't want to *trick* her. I just want to talk to her.

Silas: I highly doubt that would work, but even if it does, how are you going to get her back through the walls? I thought the whole point of them was for the Heart to keep you safe away from us.

(Iris looks thoughtful.)

Iris: You know, just days ago I thought that too— that the walls were there to show us where the Heart could and couldn't reach. It's why people in Marakh used to call this place and the people in it "the heartless." But that's not true. Even out here, beyond the boundaries, the Heart has spoken to me in dreams. It's continued to give me hope and strength, and it brought all of us together. The Heart isn't bound only to Marakh.

Silas: So... that means the walls are only there to *symbolize* divide, right? They don't actually mean anything.

(Iris has discovered something.)

Iris: You're right. We have to find the others.

### *Chapter Twelve*

(Henry appears in a new tunnel, which is a direct path to Magda's office. He's surprised and excited— he made it exactly where he was supposed to and it was a complete accident. Coming alone was also an accident. He looks around and notices he's lost his friends, but that Magda is just a couple dozen feet away from him. He quickly ducks into Magda's office and out of view behind some large rocks.

Magda is at a table in the center of the room and Henry watches as Dorion walks into the office via his own tunnel and joins her, sitting down heavily.)

Magda: I hope you've got news for me. The soldiers we sent looking for the intruders are absolutely useless. Haven't got a single lead from them yet.

Dorion: I'm sorry to say that I haven't quite figured out where they are yet.

(Magda looks at him suspiciously.)

Magda: ...But you've figured out *who*.

Dorion: I'm not sure... but I have an idea.

(Dorion looks hesitant, Magda looks at him impatiently).

Magda: Well, spit it out! In case you hadn't noticed, we're a little tight on time right now.

Dorion: I understand. It's just... my son, Magda. I saw him in headquarters today.

Magda: Silas? Why? I haven't *ever* seen him here. I thought you said he wanted nothing to do with the war effort.

Dorion: He doesn't. Or at least he *didn't*.

Magda: Then why pick today of all days to join up? He wouldn't have a chance at any sort of ranking this late in the preparation process. In fact, if you hadn't seen him today, he probably would've just been thrown on the back lines. We probably wouldn't have even noticed that he was here.

(Magda's face drops as she comes to a realization.)

Magda: We wouldn't have noticed he was *here*. He wasn't trying to be seen.

Dorion: Exactly. Before today, I wouldn't have been able to convince him to come here for anything. He *has* to have something to do with the Marakhians and how they keep evading us.

Magda: I agree, but he can't be the traitorous soldier we're looking for. Last time I checked, he wouldn't have had the guts to knock out two other guys, much less to save people he doesn't know. Was he with anyone when you saw him?

Dorion: He was with his friend, Quinn.

Magda: Who?

Dorion: He's blonde? *Deadly* with a sword. He's been in here a few times recently.

Magda: Ah. Yes, I know him. I've seen him train. (With somewhat of a disappointed look: ) I wouldn't think he'd be friends with your son.

(Dorion is a little offended, but hides it quickly.)

Magda: What's his story? *Quinn*.

Dorion: I don't know much. He was alone when he met Silas and said he didn't have a home, so he came to stay with us for a while. Probably less than a year before I left to be with you. I assume he still lives with Silas, but I haven't actually talked to him since then.

Magda: Until now.

Dorion: Right.

Magda: Huh. And he never told you where he was from or why he left?

Dorion: Maybe he did, but I don't remember. It was a while back. I guess I just assumed that his parents kicked him out or something.

Magda: Any reason why they would've done that?

Dorion: I can definitely think of *one*. See, when I met him, he—

(Pebbles clatter in the corner of the room: Henry has accidentally bumped them so that they're rolling across the rocky ground. Magda and Dorion stop talking and look in Henry's direction, but he's still hidden. He holds his breath, trying to keep as silent as possible. After a moment, Magda and Dorion turn back to their conversation.)

Magda: Something about him isn't sitting right with me. I want you to find him and bring him to me.

Dorion: What about your match? You're supposed to be in the practice room soon, right? Everyone will be waiting.

Magda: Ah. Great idea, Dorion. Bring him *there*. I have my suspicions about him, and if I'm right, he could lead us right to the intruders.

(Henry is shocked as he watches Magda and Dorion exit the office through two different tunnels. When the room is empty, he turns around and heads back into the tunnel he came in through with a look of urgency on his face.)

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(Scene changes back to Norah and Quinn. Neither of them look overly happy. They're both still in relative darkness in the tunnel where they started out. They're trying to make out any sort of pattern in the wall where Henry disappeared. Neither of them are having much success. Norah groans in frustration.)

Norah: I just don't get it! Henry was looking at something on the wall, right?

Quinn: I think so.

Norah: So then where did it go?

(Finding nothing, Norah groans again and slides her back down the wall until she's sitting on the floor with her back against the wall and her knees up against her chest. She lays her head down on her knees in defeat.)

Norah (quietly): I should be with Iris right now.

(Quinn looks at her sympathetically. He comes over and sits cross-legged beside her. His elbow is propped up by his thigh, and he's holding his head up with his hand.)

Quinn: I'm sure you will be soon.

Norah: Will you *please* stop acting like everything is going to be okay? You don't know what it's like to spend so much time protecting someone, worrying about them, wanting so *strongly* for them to be safe and happy, only to watch them walk into a situation where they're not either and you can't even be there to help.

Quinn (gently): Well, I might know. Just a little bit.

(Norah looks up at him so that her chin now rests on her tucked-in knees. Her eyes are slightly red and watery like she's been trying not to cry.)

Quinn: Coming here and seeing his dad again has been Silas' worst nightmare for almost as long as I've known him. I knew that bringing him with us was putting him at risk, but when he volunteered, I told myself that I would keep him safe. Now look at what's happened. Sure, I don't know what it's like to protect someone as a job, but I do know what it's like to care for someone like you care for Iris.

Norah: Oh.

Quinn: I think in our worry, sometimes we underestimate our friends' strength. We place so much value on our roles as protectors that we forget they have skills of their own. We'll keep trying to find them, but in the meantime, they'll keep each other safe.

Norah: I hope so. How are we going to fulfill the prophecy if Iris isn't here?

Quinn: Hey. This is your quest as much as Iris'. Do you think that the Heart chose her to be here because she could do it on her own? It chose her because it knew that you and Henry and Silas and I would be right there alongside her. This is your purpose too, you're here saving Marakh and the Heart and Iris on top of all of that. We'll find her, and then Magda, and we'll get out of here, okay? We just have to keep trying.

(Norah nods begrudgingly and starts to stand. She offers her hand to help Quinn up. He takes it. They begin moving forward, looking around again.)

Norah: It just seems like we've been walking down this same tunnel for a long time already. I thought it was supposed to actually take us somewhere.

Quinn: Well, hopefully it will... eventually. We could try turning around and going back the way we started.

(Norah and Quinn turn to look behind them. For a moment, it's just as dark and empty there as it is ahead of them. But then, a tunnel appears. Dorion walks out of it and sees the two looking at him. Quinn grimaces at his arrival.)

Dorion: Good news, Quinn. I just talked with Magda. It turns out she *does* want to speak with you after all. If you follow me, I'll take you right to her.

(Quinn looks to Norah skeptically, but decides to do it. He takes a deep, grounding breath.)

Quinn: Okay, Dorion. Lead the way.

### *Chapter Thirteen*

(Quinn and Norah have reached the end of a tunnel on the opposite side of the arena from where Iris & Silas came in. Dorion is behind them, keeping them moving forward. When they enter the arena, Magda is there to greet them. Dorion keeps pushing Norah forward until she's out of the way, hanging back from the conversation.)

Magda: Quinn. I heard you were looking for me.

(Quinn nods, keeping his gaze down.)

Quinn: Yes, Commander.

Magda: What a coincidence. *I* was just looking for *you*.

(Norah puts a hand over the hilt of her sword, which is in its sheath on her belt. She and Quinn look at Magda suspiciously.)

Quinn: May I ask why, Commander?

(Quinn keeps his head down. His arms are by his sides.)

Magda: Well, I've seen you training the past couple of weeks, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't impressed. You might be one of the most skilled soldiers I've ever trained.

(Norah looks at Quinn. Though she is suspicious of Magda's intentions, she's impressed that Quinn is being complimented by her.)

Quinn: Wow, uh, thank you. I—

Magda: Stop talking. I want you on the front line tomorrow.

(Quinn's eyes grow wide, and he begins to look up at her.)

Quinn: Commander, I—

(Magda cuts Quinn off, reminding him that *she's* the one in charge of this conversation.)

Magda: —what did I say?

(Quinn shuts his mouth.)

Magda: Before I give you the honor of being one of my most highly esteemed men, I have some questions for you. I need to be sure I can trust you.

Quinn: Of course.

(Magda hums as she looks him over.)

Magda: First, why did you join my army?

Quinn: Oh, mostly to get stronger. And to be a part of the war effort. I've wanted to help for several years now.

Magda: Was your involvement something your parents encouraged?



Quinn: I don't know my parents, Commander. I grew up without them, but I'm sure it would've been a decision they supported.

Magda: Good. (Beat. Suspiciously: ) And you're from...?

Quinn: Bar Gellah, Commander.

Magda: You've always lived there?

(Quinn looks a little uneasy now— this is the first time he's had to blatantly lie to her. He steadies his breath.)

Quinn: Yes.

(Magda's jaw sets in a sly smile. She's caught him.)

Magda: Alright. And last question... where are you hiding the intruders?

(Quinn's face drops. He's been caught. He tries to keep his cool.)

Quinn: With all due respect, Commander, I'm not sure what you're talking about. I don't know where the intruders are.

(Magda's eyes narrow at him.)

Magda: Hmm...I think you do. You and *Silas*, right? I order you to tell me where they are.

Quinn: What do you even want with them?

Magda: Simple. I want to kill them and go on with our attack on Marakh as planned.

Quinn: Commander, please. You *can't* do that.

Magda: And why not? I thought one of my best soldiers would agree with me wholeheartedly.

Quinn: Because...

(Quinn hesitates, looks towards Norah, who nods at him.)

Quinn: Because we found a way to stop all the conflict between our nations *without* war.

We could save so many lives. All you have to do is come back to Marakh with us and—

(Magda begins to laugh. She looks at Quinn like he's ridiculous.)

Magda: Quinn, you don't seem to understand. I'm not in the business of saving lives.

(She steps closer to him.)

Magda: I *want* this war to happen. I don't care what kind of solution you found, because I'm not looking for one.

(Dorion steps in.)

Dorion: Sorry to interrupt, but the crowd's getting pretty impatient out there. They want you to choose someone to challenge.

Magda: *I'm* their commander. I'll choose someone when *I'm* ready.

(Quinn looks at Norah, her eyes widen. Quinn turns back to Magda. He takes a steadying breath.)

Quinn: Choose me.

(Magda and Dorion both look at Quinn.)

Magda: What?

Quinn: *I'll* challenge you.

Magda: You can't just—

Quinn: I want to make you a deal.

(Now, Quinn is looking Magda straight in the eyes. Dorion steps in front of Magda.)

Dorion (mockingly): She's not going to *make a deal* with you, Quinn.

Quinn: It's not *up* to you, Dorion. Magda?

(Magda takes a moment to consider.)

Magda: What's the deal?

Quinn: You choose me to challenge you. If I win, you come to Marakh with me, Silas, and our friends. (Beat.) And the rest of the army stays here.

Magda: Hmm. And when I win?

Quinn: You tell me.

Magda: Fine. I *kill* your friends, and we attack Marakh tomorrow. With you... *and Silas* on the front line.

(Quinn takes a deep breath and steels his nerves.)

Quinn: Deal.

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(Silas and Iris are back in the tunnel, looking for any sort of pathway back to find everyone else.)

Iris: ...and I don't even know what we're going to do when we get Magda back to Marakh.

Silas: *If* we get her back. You know, as potentially dangerous as it would be, I *really* hope at least one of them has found Magda.

(All of the sudden, Henry drops into their tunnel right in front of them. They jump before realizing who it is. Henry breathes a sigh of relief.)

Henry: Thank goodness it's you guys. I found Magda.

(Silas and Iris look at each other.)

Iris: What? Are you okay?

Henry: *I am, but Quinn's in trouble. I heard Magda and Dorion talking to each other, and they're after him. They're onto you too, Silas. They said they were going to confront him in a... practice arena, I think? But I have no idea where that could be.*

*(Silas looks terrified, Iris looks more concerned.)*

Iris: We just came from there, it's not far.

Silas: We have to go find Quinn.

*(The three of them take off back in the other direction towards the practice room.)*

### *Chapter Fourteen*

*(Back to Quinn, Norah, Magda, and Dorion.)*

Magda: Well, let's go. We don't want to keep my soldiers waiting any longer, do we?

*(Magda starts leading Quinn to the arena with Dorion close to her side. He passes Norah, who is in shock. She looks at Quinn like "what have you done?") Quinn whispers to her quickly: )*

Quinn: Go try to find the others. We'll need to get out of here fast if things don't work out in my favor.

Norah: What about you?

Quinn: I'll be okay. Just hurry.

*(Norah turns and starts to move quickly towards the crowd, hoping she'll see her friends (specifically Iris) there. Then, she spots Iris, Silas, and Henry running out of their own tunnel entrance. She looks like she might cry of relief. She pushes through the crowd until she's made it to them.)*

Norah: Iris!

*(Iris, Silas, and Henry stop and turn to look at her. They look just as relieved to see her as she does to see them. Iris hugs Norah.)*

Norah: Where did you go? I didn't know where you were. I was so worried you were going to get hurt.

Iris (with a smile of relief as she pulls away from the hug): It's okay, Norah. I'm alright. I'm just glad you're safe too.

Norah: Quinn—

Silas: Where is he?

(Magda gets in the arena. Her voice booms across the room and the crowd falls silent as she says: )

Magda: The time has come for me to choose a challenger! The final practice match before tomorrow's big event, and I need a worthy opponent.

(The crowd cheers, shouts of "choose me," etc.)

Madga: Quinn, come and join me!

(Another round of cheers as Quinn walks up to join her. He looks small next to her, but he's visibly tough and determined. Iris, Henry, and Silas' eyes grow wide in surprise and fear.)

Henry: Magda already got to him.

Iris: We have to help him.

(Iris, Henry, and Silas stand at the back of the crowd.)

Norah: Wait! Quinn made a deal with her. If he wins the match, she'll come back to Marakh with us.

(Iris becomes hopeful again, Silas looks apalled, Henry just looks shocked.)

Iris: He did? That's incredible!

Silas: No, you don't understand. Magda's not a fair fighter, she could really hurt him.

(Beat.) What happens if he loses?

Norah: You know what? That's not important right now. Quinn said that everything would be okay, and I trust him. I told him that I would get you all here so we could be ready to leave quickly either way. The most we can do right now is just show him that we're here, okay?

(Iris, Henry, and Silas look resolved.)

Silas: Okay.

(They watch as Quinn and Magda brandish their swords. Quinn sees them out of the corner of his eye and looks relieved. He gives them a quick, determined nod before turning back to Magda.)

Magda strikes first, but Quinn catches her sword on his with ease, which surprises her a bit. They parry around each other, and the match gradually gets more intense. Quinn switches from playing mostly defense to being on the offense, and Magda looks like she's struggling to keep up with him. He pushes her farther and farther backwards until she hits the stony side wall of the arena. He strikes once more and catches her sword in a bind— both swords have met in the middle. He draws his sword up higher until Magda's sword-holding hand is above her, almost pressed into the wall. They make eye contact, both grimacing as they strain to hold their swords steady against the other's.)

Magda: You know, for *years* I wondered who it was that would actually cross the border and leave Marakh. I thought if I could find them, they'd make a great addition to my army. But you're even better than I could've hoped.

(Quinn startles, looks at her in surprise, fear. His force against her sword loosens a little.)

Quinn: What?

(Magda smiles sinisterly as she notices Quinn weakening. She moves her face right up close to his.)

Magda: That's right. I know *all* about you, Quinn. You're not just a traitor here, you're a traitor *there* too. Aren't you?

(Quinn stalls out for a moment: no one has ever recognized who he is. Magda takes this opportunity to get the upper hand. She flips them around so that Quinn's back is now against the wall. She forces the hand that holds his sword above his head with her sword. With her other hand, she pulls a dagger from its sheath on her belt. She holds the blade up to his throat, just barely pressing into his skin. Quinn is afraid.)

Magda: It really wasn't hard to figure out. You wouldn't tell me the truth about where you're from, you've got no parents, there's no known history of you in Bar Gellah, or *anywhere* in Merred, and you just *happen* to show up on Dorion's doorstep right after someone left Marakh for the first time in a *century*?

(Quinn desperately looks into the crowd for his friends, trying to tell them that something is wrong, but they're no longer at the back where he saw them before. He gulps and turns back to Magda.)

Quinn: Magda, please.

Magda: Does anyone else know who you are, or am I the first to have figured it out?

Quinn: No—

Magda: No one else knows? Well, now would be a good time to make an announcement, don't you think? I mean, everyone's already gathered together, and I'm sure they'd be delighted to learn that one of the soldiers that will be leading them into battle tomorrow is Marakh's very own *traitor*.

Quinn: I'm *not* a traitor!

Magda: You don't want to confess?

(Quinn stays silent.)

Magda: That's fine. I guess I'll just prove it on my own.

(All of a sudden, Magda pulls her dagger off his throat and instead slices a clean line across his chest. She cuts probably a quarter inch deep into his skin and through his clothes. It starts bleeding quickly, but not before she can see the skin under the fabric where she cut through his shirt to reveal Quinn's crystalline indication of the Heart on his chest.

There is a burst of confused speech from everyone in the room as they try to figure out what has just happened, but Silas, Norah, Iris, and Henry appear up against the arena, close to the action. They're shocked at what just happened, but it's not long before Silas springs into action anyway, the other three following close behind. Silas attacks Magda, forcing her to drop her grip on Quinn so she can counter. Quinn falls to his knees: he's losing blood fairly quickly.

Iris and Henry cross to Quinn. Iris helps Henry put Quinn on his back. The three of them move out of the arena and towards the tunnel exit of the room. Dorion catches up to them, but Norah is there to stop him. She keeps him occupied and his attention off of the others as they move. Silas performs a last attack against Magda before slipping away to meet his friends. On the way to the exit, where Iris, Quinn, and Henry have made it, Silas grabs Norah by the arm, pulling her away from her fight with Dorion and towards the tunnel mouth alongside Silas.

Together, the five of them burst through the tunnel, trying to beat out the hordes of soldiers who will inevitably be following behind as soon as they realize what's happened. As they're still running: )

Norah: How are we possibly going to make it out of here?



Henry: Oh, I figured out how the tunnels work, more or less. They function like a sort of a trap door mechanism. There are levers hidden around the place, you just have to know where to look. Like... right there!

(The group stops, all out of breath as Henry reaches for a lever on the wall. A new tunnel opens up for just a moment, and he pushes them all through.)

### *Chapter Fifteen*

(The tunnel opens up again to the outside, right where they entered headquarters in the first place. Everyone is relieved to have made it out: they're all visibly exhausted. It's now nighttime.)

Norah (out of breath): Now where do we go?

(Quinn lifts his head up from Henry's shoulder for just a moment. He is *not* looking good.)

Quinn (weakly): Silas. Our hiding spot.

(Silas looks very worried about Quinn.)

Silas: Right.

Norah: We have to hurry. Quinn's losing a lot of blood. I could bandage him up now, but I'm worried Magda will catch up to us before I'm done.

Silas: We're not going very far. Just follow me.

(Silas starts moving quickly into the forest and the rest of them follow closely behind. It's not long before they reach a rocky area dense with brush. Silas pushes shrubs and vines out of the way until a small cave mouth is revealed.)

Silas: In here.

(Everyone clambers into the cave. It's a tight fit for all five of them, especially when Henry lays Quinn on the smooth floor in the center. They all sit around him, trying to catch their breaths, except for Silas, who is looking for something to use to wipe up Quinn's blood. He sees Iris' cloak—the one that Quinn gave her at their first meeting.)

Silas: Iris. I need your cloak.

(Iris hurriedly pulls it off of her and hands it to Silas. Silas uses it to stop the bleeding on Quinn's chest, and Quinn winces. Henry grabs a canister of water off of his belt and uncaps it. He passes it to Silas.)

Henry: Here, Silas. Water, if you need it.

(Silas looks at him as he grabs it from his hand.)

Silas (very genuinely): Thank you.

(Silas pours water over the wound to clean it off. Here, his heart is revealed more clearly again, but Silas quickly reapplies the cloak to Quinn's cut.)

Silas: Norah, you said you have bandages?

(Norah nods. She pulls them off of her belt and hands them to Silas. She helps him wrap Quinn's chest. This seems to help: hardly any blood comes through the linen bandages, but Quinn has passed out. Silas collapses back against the cave wall where he's sitting, exhausted. Everyone else looks completely unsure how to react or what to do next.)

Iris: Is there anything else we should do to help him?

Silas: I'm not sure there's much we *can* do until he wakes up.

Henry: He *will* wake up though, right?

Silas: He'll be okay. He just needs time.

(Everyone sits in silence for a moment. They pass around the water canister and share swigs of it. Finally, Norah hesitantly turns to Silas and asks: )

Norah: Did you know?

(Silas looks back at her, a little hurt.)

Silas: That he was from Marakh? No, he never told me. I always thought there was something different about him, something really *good*, but I never knew what it was.

Iris: The Heart.

(Silas nods.)

Norah: So we were really looking for *Quinn* the whole time? Why were all of your dreams about Magda, then?

Iris: Quinn was in them too, remember?

(Silas looks puzzled, like he's missed something important, which he has.)

Silas: What do you mean, your dreams?

Iris: My dreams are the way that the Heart communicates with me. They're how I knew about Magda and the attack and to trust Quinn when we first met. Sometimes they're not always the easiest to understand, clearly, but I think the Heart always knows better than we do. If we hadn't gone to headquarters, we wouldn't have gotten to know *you*.

Silas: Yeah, I guess you're right.

(Silas smiles a little, Iris returns his smile. Meanwhile, Norah looks puzzled.)

Norah: There's still one thing I don't understand, though. The person who left Marakh... she was a *girl*, right? That's why we assumed Magda was the one we were looking for.

Henry: Oh, you're right.

(Silas looks a little uncomfortable, like he's been backed into a corner. Norah, Henry, and Iris all look at Silas, awaiting his response.)

Silas: Uh, yeah. About that... Quinn—

(Quinn interrupts Silas, stirring awake.)

Quinn (weakly): I *was*... I used to be... a girl.

Norah (more curious than shocked or upset): What do you mean?

Quinn: It was one of the biggest reasons I left Marakh.

Norah: I don't— you left Marakh because you were a girl?

Quinn: Sort of... it was more that I just didn't feel like I fit in there. (Starting here, the illustrations will be flashbacks: ) I grew up in the orphanage in Gonen, and I was happy there for a while. I got my own heart when I was really young, and it made me feel safe and *loved* exactly as I was. But the older I got, the more expectations were put on who I was supposed to be. All the girls around me seemed content— even *excited*— to learn how to be wives and mothers... but I would watch the boys come back from training to join Marakh's army— the defenders of the Heart— and I couldn't escape the feeling that *that's* where I was supposed to be. I needed to be like them so badly that it physically hurt.

(The other four listen to him empathetically. They've all converged a little closer around Quinn and to each other.)

Quinn: None of the girls understood me, and they didn't *want* to, so they just started ignoring me when I was around. Finally, I asked if I could join the boys during the day instead, but I was told it was inappropriate of me to ask. I had a role, and it *wasn't* in the army. I left Marakh that night. (End of flashbacks and back to present.)

(Quinn sits up with a little effort, and Iris reaches out to grab his hand..)

Quinn: I know we were taught growing up that Merred was this place full of rebellion, and that that was bad. But to me, it just sounded *free*— a place where I would be allowed to be myself, whoever that was.

I met Silas, and I became the person I am now, but when I was gone, I realized that regardless of how I was treated in Marakh, I missed being so close to the Heart. I still wanted to protect it, because even if someone said it wasn't my role, that I wasn't welcome where I was, that I wasn't *wanted*, the Heart told me otherwise.

Iris: And protecting the Heart is still what you want, even now?

Quinn: Of course it is.

Silas: Okay. Then we need to get you to Marakh before Magda and her soldiers can get there. Are you going to be able to make it?

Henry: We'll be there to help.

Norah: Absolutely.

(Quinn looks at the group resolutely.)

Quinn: Then yes, I'll make it.

### *Chapter Sixteen*

(The five are making their way through the forest towards Marakh. Quinn is now walking between Silas and Henry, one arm slung over each of their shoulders. They're moving as quickly and slyly as they can in Quinn's condition.)

Norah: It's not long before we get to the wall. Did anyone happen to come up with an idea on how we're actually going to stop the war? Because I don't think just bringing Quinn through the gate is going to magically fix everything.

Quinn: I've been thinking a little about it. If we're wanting to solve the problem between our nations, it's probably important to consider what separated us in the first place, right?

Norah: I guess so.

Quinn: So, the problem that our ancestors had with each other was that they both wanted the others to change their ways. They never *wanted* to be separated from each other, the debate was over what place was better to live in *together*.

Iris: Huh, I never thought about it like that.

Quinn: I didn't either until now. But it seems like the solution, then, would be to find some middle ground. We don't need to *beat* Merred at anything, we just need to bring everyone together again.

Henry: But how would we do that with the wall in between us?

(Everyone looks thoughtful for a moment.)

Silas: Back at headquarters, Iris and I talked about the walls. We think that the Heart isn't actually constrained by them.

(Quinn nods.)

Quinn: I think you're right. I've felt the Heart here. Even as far as I thought I was from it, its presence didn't ever go away.

Silas: Yeah, it was present enough that I could sense it was a part of you, even if I didn't know what *it* was.

Iris: ...so then, the walls don't serve much of a purpose at all—

Quinn: —Which means that tearing it down might not actually be a bad thing.

Silas: It could be a *good* thing. But not if the Merredian army are the ones to do it— they'd go straight for the Heart after. And they'd do a ton of damage on your kingdom in the process.

Henry: So, we need to tear the wall down ourselves? That seems counterintuitive to the whole... protecting the kingdom thing.

Norah: Not necessarily. It'd mean that we're all in one place again. There wouldn't be anything dividing our two nations...

Iris: ...so it may be just what we need to bring us all together.

Quinn: Exactly.

Henry: Look— it's the entrance to Gonen!

(They all look. Up ahead, standing out against the dark forest which surrounds them, is a bright light— the indication of Marakh's doorway.)

Silas: It doesn't look like Magda and the army have made it there yet. We may be able to get through the gate unnoticed.

Iris: Let's hope so. We'll have to find—

Henry: —my brother, right? He's *always* saving the day, even when it's my quest.

(Norah elbows him playfully.)

Norah: Hey. Your *brother* didn't cross the border and spend a day tunnel-jumping in enemy territory, did he?

Henry (with a mock pride): You're right.

(More seriously: )

Henry: But I guess we'll need his help if we want that wall taken down as soon as possible.

(They've now arrived fairly close to the doorway. They're on the edge of Merred's forest.

They pause. Silas hangs back a bit. Quinn turns to him, addresses him gently: )

Quinn: You okay?

(Silas looks a little nervous.)

Silas: I can just... walk in?

(Quinn nods.)

Silas: And they won't stop me?

Quinn: Of course not.

Silas: But you said you used to feel like you didn't belong. Which means I *definitely* wouldn't.

Quinn: I don't feel that way anymore. If being around all of you has taught me anything, it's that there's not one specific way to be if you want to live in the kingdom. You're all so different, but the Heart is still using each of you.

Iris: And both of *you*. Silas, you're welcome here.

(Silas nods. The five of them walk forward. Silas and Quinn look at each other, preparing themselves. They cross the threshold.)

### *Chapter Seventeen*

(They arrive on the other side of the wall. The environment and its color scheme are entirely different— it's brighter, the world feels more saturated. We meet Henry's brother, Aric, as he notices them from where he's been leaning against the wall they just entered through. He's even bigger than Henry, but looks very similar to him, just older. He immediately reaches for Henry, pulling him into a hug.)



Aric: Henry! Thank goodness you're safe. We didn't know where you went. We were out looking for you for a day before we found out you might've left with Iris. I've been waiting here for you ever since.

Henry (squished in a hug): Sorry, it was kind of a last-minute trip for me.

(Henry pulls away from his brother, and Aric looks at the rest of the group.)

Aric: Is this all of you, or were there other stowaways we missed?

Iris: This is all of us, General.

Aric: I'm of course glad to see that you're safe too, princess.

(Aric turns to Norah.)

Aric: I had no doubt that you would make sure of it.

Iris: It's good to see you too, but we need to get to the castle and talk to my parents.

Henry, could you stay and explain to your brother how he can help?

Henry: Of course.

Norah: I'll stay too.

(Henry looks at her appreciatively. Iris nods.)

Iris: We'll meet you back here as soon as we can, okay?

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(Iris walks briskly through the halls of the castle looking for her parents. Quinn and Silas follow closely behind, Quinn looking nervously ahead of him and Silas looking curiously all around. Suddenly, they turn the corner into the throne room, and there are the king and queen. They get up from where they're seated and rush over to her, the worry on their faces turning to relief.)

King: Iris, you're home!

Queen: We were so worried about you, we almost went after you ourselves.

King: Are you hurt?

Iris: No, father. I'm alright.

(The king and queen both hug her tightly before letting go to look at her again. They now see the boys over Iris' shoulder. They're awed to see people that they don't recognize.)

Queen: Iris, who did you bring with you?

(Iris turns and gestures to Quinn and Silas.)

Iris: This is Quinn and Silas.

(Immediately, Iris' parents are amazed. They don't recognize Quinn and Silas, which means that someone finally crossed the threshold coming *to* the kingdom. The queen stands and crosses to them. The king follows her lead. Quinn immediately bows, Silas notices and follows his cue, a little late. As they come up, the queen grabs each of their hands.)

Queen (emotionally): Welcome to Marakh.

King (with a nod towards them and a genuine smile): Welcome. We're glad to have you.

Queen: You know, you've done something big by coming here. No one has ever come to Marakh— and now there are *two* of you!

Iris: Not quite.

(Beat as the queen turns back to look at her daughter.)

Iris: Mother, Quinn is originally from here.

(The queen looks embarrassed, apologetic.)

Queen: Oh! I'm sorry, I thought—

(She pauses to collect her thoughts.)

Queen: Where are you from?

Quinn: I'm from Gonen, your Highness.

Queen: Ah. You've always been there?

Quinn: Uhh, no. Not really.

Queen: Well, where else did you live? Maybe I know your parents.

(Quinn starts getting more flustered, he's trying to figure out how to tell her he's the traitor to the kingdom she rules.)

Quinn: I don't think— Your Highness, I...

(He looks to Iris for help. She steps up beside him.)

Iris: Mother, he's been living in Merred for a few years now.

(The queen is taken aback, confused and in disbelief. She shakes her head.)

Queen: That can't be. Only one person has ever left Marakh.

(Iris takes a deep, steadying breath. She looks determined, but not angry.)

Iris: Yes, it was Quinn. I met him there, and now he's come back to help.

(The King and Queen look confused.)

King: So, you weren't able to bring Magda back?

Iris: It wasn't ever Magda that we were looking for, Father. It was *him*.

(Iris' parents look at each other, concerned.)

Queen: Iris, I don't think—

Iris: Mother, we can prove it. (Beat.) He has his own heart.

Queen: But... I don't understand. You said that in your dream the traitor was a girl.

(Quinn looks to Iris, a little nervous, but tries to maintain his confidence standing in front of the king and queen. Silas is concentrating on what will happen next; he shifts just a little bit closer to Quinn, defensively. Iris nods.)

Iris: I did, because that's what I thought before. But Quinn's not who he was when he left Marakh.

(Iris looks at him comfortingly. Then, she turns back to her parents with another thought.)

Iris: And I don't think we should call him that— a traitor. He never did anything to betray us. In fact, it's because of him that all of the conflict between us and Merred will be solved.

(Iris' parents still look like they're in denial. They pull her off to the side for a moment, leaving Quinn and Silas standing awkwardly in their wake.)

King (whispering): Iris, that can't be right. He can't be the one that's supposed to save us.

(Iris is getting a little frustrated with her parents.)

Iris: Of *course* he can, he's our revenant. The Heart said in the prophecy that it would be him.

(A beat as the king and queen look conflicted, borderline judgmental.)

Queen: I'm sorry, Iris, he's just...

King: ...he's not what we were expecting.

(Iris is taken aback at her parents' response. It strikes her that just a couple of days ago, she probably would have felt the same as her parents do now.)

Iris: Father, why do you think no one has ever come to Marakh?

(Beat. The king doesn't have an answer.)

Iris: *I* think it might be because we haven't made people that are different from us feel welcome here. We've encouraged likeness instead of diversity and not a *single* person came through the gate to Marakh until today. Silas came here because he loves Quinn. And he sees the love *in* Quinn. It's not because of our conformity to expectation, or our exclusivity, or anything

else that we did. It was Quinn showing Silas the Heart that brought him here. And you think that when the Heart has placed that power in him that he can't do it again?

(Iris looks back at Quinn and gives him a nod of reassurance.)

Quinn: I just want to help. And we think we know how.

Iris (with confidence) : We have to tear down the wall.

(The king and queen absolutely balk at this.)

King: Absolutely not. The wall is the only thing keeping our people safe from Merred.

Iris: The wall won't hold them back forever, all it'll do is delay the inevitable. But if we can tear it down ourselves before they can, it'll show them that we don't want to keep them out. That we want to unite our nations.

Quinn: The Merredians aren't all bad people. A lot of them are really *good*. If we break down the barrier between us, we can finally be one people again.

(The king and queen look between each other, still wary. Iris gets serious.)

Iris: I need you to trust me on this. Please. Henry and his brother have all of our soldiers lined up in Gonen. We just need your approval.

(The king and queen begin to make up their minds and become more certain.)

King: Alright, Iris. Go ahead.

(Iris nods, very grateful and relieved. She grabs Quinn and Silas' hands and practically drags them out of the castle.)

### *Chapter Eighteen*

(When this chapter starts, Iris, Norah, Henry, Silas, and Quinn are all at the wall surrounding Marakh. Hundreds of soldiers are there alongside them. They all hold hammers, shields, tools that will work to start demolishing the wall.)

Aric: Ready. And... strike!

(Aric calls the command to his soldiers. They move to the wall and start to bring it down. All of the sudden, shouts can be heard from the other side. Confusion ensues in the Merredian army, who have just arrived to attack the wall themselves. They stand and watch, puzzled, but understanding that this event is a big deal. Soon, the wall falls from the inside, and the light that was once contained strictly in Marakh is cast all over Merred too. The soldiers from both armies are now face to face on either side of the demolished wall, none of them moving to begin any action, still in shock. That is, until Magda spots Quinn. Her shock turns to anger. She climbs over the rubble and approaches him. He bravely steps up to meet her. All of his friends remain behind him as he does.)

Magda: *What* have you done?

Quinn: We destroyed the wall.

Magda: I see that. But why?

Quinn: So that we wouldn't be separated from each other anymore.

Magda: Our ancestors *chose* to be separated. It's meant to be us against you.

(Quinn steps up closer to her.)

Quinn: I *told* you we didn't want to fight you. Magda, we don't have to be defined by what people in the past thought was best for us, especially when it meant keeping us all apart from each other.

Magda: We're not supposed to be together. Only *one* of us is supposed to win.

Quinn: Hating us doesn't mean you win, just like keeping you out doesn't make us better than you. It only hurts us both.

Magda: Tearing down the *wall* hurts us both. How is anybody going to know which nation they belong to?

Quinn: They won't. That's the point. We want to unite all of our people, and that means destroying the thing that divides us.

(Magda's anger is giving way to a tough stubbornness now.)

Quinn: We want all of our people to be free, to learn to love one another, and to understand what makes us different. But we need your people to be willing to join us too. And we can't do that without your help.

Magda: You want to make another deal.

Quinn: No. This time, I want to work *together*.

(Magda's look of anger softens a little. She tries to remain stubborn, but it doesn't seem like she has much support from her army anymore. They all watch her in silence, waiting to see what she'll say. Many of them have put their weapons away at this point. Finally, she gives in.)

Magda: What do you have in mind?

(Quinn smiles in relief and turns back to his friends, who look very proud of him. He gestures for them to come up to join him; they do. While they continue their conversation with Magda, Iris leans over to Quinn.)

Iris (quietly, very genuinely): I'm really glad you decided to come home.

(Quinn gives a small smile as he turns to look at her.)

Quinn: Me too.

*The End*