

AND THE CAT LOOKED

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

MEREDITH WHITE

Submitted to the LAUNCH: Undergraduate Research office at
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by
Faculty Research Advisor:

Dr. Lowell White

May 2021

Major:

English

Copyright © 2021. Meredith White.

RESEARCH COMPLIANCE CERTIFICATION

Research activities involving the use of human subjects, vertebrate animals, and/or biohazards must be reviewed and approved by the appropriate Texas A&M University regulatory research committee (i.e., IRB, IACUC, IBC) before the activity can commence. This requirement applies to activities conducted at Texas A&M and to activities conducted at non-Texas A&M facilities or institutions. In both cases, students are responsible for working with the relevant Texas A&M research compliance program to ensure and document that all Texas A&M compliance obligations are met before the study begins.

I], Meredith White, certify that all research compliance requirements related to this Undergraduate Research Scholars thesis have been addressed with my Research Faculty [Choose an item: Advisor] prior to the collection of any data used in this final thesis submission.

[Choose an item: This project did not require approval from the Texas A&M University Research Compliance & Biosafety office.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--|------|
| ABSTRACT..... | 1 |
| DEDICATION..... | 2 |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | 3 |
| NOMENCLATURE..... | 4 |
| 1. AESTHETIC MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTION..... | 5 |
| 2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DISCIPLINARY PARADIGMS, AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS..... | 8 |
| 3. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT..... | 11 |
| 4. REFLECTION..... | 14 |
| WORKS CITED..... | 18 |
| APPENDIX: CREATIVE ARTIFACT..... | 20 |
| Prologue: A Bad Penny Always Turns Up..... | 20 |
| Now: Interlude..... | 25 |
| Children Should Be Seen Not Heard..... | 27 |
| As Thick As Theives..... | 44 |
| No Man Is An Island..... | 55 |
| Now: Part Two..... | 70 |
| A Good Man Is Hard To Find..... | 71 |
| Now: Part Three..... | 91 |
| Now: Part Four..... | 93 |
| Epilogue: Let's Talk of Graves, and Worms, and Epitaphs..... | 94 |

ABSTRACT

And the Cat Looked

Meredith White
Department of English
Texas A&M University

Research Faculty Advisor: Dr. Lowell White
Department of English
Texas A&M University

This is a creative work that looks at the practice of ritualistic human sacrifice throughout different ages and cultures and how this custom affects the people of that society. While it is commonly known that ancient civilizations practiced forms of human sacrifice, it is not overtly shared what their reasons were and how they differed. With various interpretations of religion, these customs can affect the self-worth of a people whose lives hinge on an assigned fate that cannot be avoided in a Calvinistic way that stifles creative expression, individualism, and lives. The main character of my story, a boy named Brennan, is a chosen sacrifice to a deity, and the story will explore his upbringing, his relations to his peers and the world around him, and his mindset. While submitting to the rigid structures of society, Brennan does not escape his fate, but through study and research, the people of the future are able to find his journal and understand the situation of his very short life in relation to the power of knowledge and uncovering the truth.

DEDICATION

To every storyteller out there.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Contributors

Contributors

I would like to thank my faculty advisor, Dr. Lowell White for his guidance and support throughout the course of this research. Thanks also go to my friends and colleagues and the department faculty and staff for making my time at Texas A&M University a great experience. Finally, thanks to Abbigail Forrest, Aarushi Mudavangatil, and Gabriel Zolton for their encouragement and to my family for their patience and love.

The analyses depicted in *And the Cat Looked* were conducted in part by LAUNCH and the Aggie Creative Collective. It is currently unpublished. All other work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

Funding Sources

Undergraduate research was supported by the Aggie Creative Collective at Texas A&M University. This work was also made possible in part by the Aggie Creative Collective scholarship.

NOMENCLATURE

| | |
|-------|-------------------------------------|
| [B/CS | Bryan/College Station |
| HSUS | Humane Society of the United States |
| P | Pressure |
| T | Time |
| TVA | Tennessee Valley Authority |
| TxDOT | Texas Department of Transportation] |

1. AESTHETIC MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Many creative works evaluate and expand on the idea of a lack of choice. Mine specifically leads with the idea that one day someone will know and acknowledge the struggles people of the past went through and oppression and hurts brought by social will not be unknown for long. My story highlights the upbringing of someone marked for death by ritual sacrifice to the society's deity, but it does not have a happy ending. Many people in history didn't have happy endings, and it is only with intense study of history and geography that we are even aware of their existence. The bodies of sacrificed Incan children have been unearthed revealing how they died and what they died with. My story also uses this fact with the death of the main character but the reveal of his tomb where his personal journal is recovered by archeologists.

The events leading up to his death are recorded and reflected upon throughout the book. His relation to the world and people around his is constantly under the influence of his own preplanned destiny. His immediate family is under the impression that he will die at age twenty-five and so therefore does not place too much emphasis on his dreams and goals. He is stifled by the limitations of his birth and the expectations of his culture however wrong or unfair they may be.

Many stories have touched on the powerlessness one can experience in their own life, and in the more lighthearted recounts, there is a way to circumvent this fate, even if some of those ways are not the most conventional. I have drawn inspiration from works as old as *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and as recent as Susanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* in order to form a well-rounded literary representation of societal helplessness. Through that fictional research, I then applied it to historical research such as the Capacocha ritual of the Inca Empire, the Roman

Empire's Vestal Virgins, and various other examples of human sacrifice. Specifically, in my thesis, the mode of execution is immurement. The difference between immurement and being buried alive is when one is buried, they are expected to die of asphyxiation as opposed to the former where one would most likely die of dehydration and starvation. I drew inspiration for this story through a nightmare I had in which I was prematurely buried.

With this idea in mind, I concluded with writing a story in which the truth is 'dug up'. One of the biggest inspirations I came across was the Buddhist saying 'three things that cannot be long hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth'. Using some poetic interpretation sense my main character is being buried under the earth away from the sun and moon, it seemed fitting that we are able to recover his story later from the very ground that killed him. The title of this book is actually part of the English phrase 'even a cat can look at a king' which means that regardless of one's station or circumstance, they are still allowed some freedoms. Even if the main character cannot grow old and get married, he can still see others who do in the literal sense. In the figurative, even if he will not live as long as others does not mean his life is worth less. Every chapter title in the book is different English phrase in order to better explain that sense of curiosity and truth-seeking ideals the story uses as common themes. The need to understand the world, the people in it, and yourself perpetuate the plot of the story, and I wanted these phrases we hear in everyday conversation to appear as something else, something foreign, because we have never sat down and given it anything other than a cursory thought. 'A bad penny always turns up', 'a drowning man will clutch at a straw', and 'the good die young' are some examples of my chapter titles.

In relation to the larger area of fiction and creative writing, I will direct this as an adult novella that expands on the idea of wasted potential because of situations of birth. There is also a

relatable figure of comparing one's life to the lives of others. In order to present the world building I've done, the main character – who is marked as a sacrifice because of being born on a certain date – and his twin sister will serve as my experiment group and my control group. Being born just before and just after midnight resulting in two different birthdays, the reader is able to see what life would have and could have been for the doomed main character through the milestones his sister goes through without him. I want the reader to be able to visualize themselves being in this situation not for anything in their control but because of circumstances.

The other sacrifices all have vastly different dreams, attitudes, and personalities, and some serve as direct foils for the main character. The main character is not able to fully process the situation of his life – and death – as quickly as others are and so is not completely on board with the idea of trying to avoid it in the first place. There is a process of grief that must be experienced before there is even the ghost of an idea of how to proceed. This work is very much focused on the mental state of the main character and how that changes throughout the book verses the action-packed adventure hero should be doing on. That is why it is told in first-person point of view and through a journal. His account is biased and personal in order to express how deeply his emotions play into the plot. I was at first planning a third person omniscient point of view and alternating chapters for different characters in order to provide intense contrast between their ideas and values, but for a story I would be writing in only one year before presenting it as a thesis, it seemed too ambitious.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT, DISCIPLINARY PARADIGMS, AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS

The genre of my thesis is firmly rooted in psychological horror/thriller where the impending death of the main character is both traumatic and inevitable. There are social commentary elements to it as well as having a setting in a fictional, fantastical world. I have created a fictional world that was heavily inspired by real life events.

Most of my historical research was that of different human sacrificial rituals from different cultures and time periods specifically in manner in which people are buried alive. The initial research pretrained to that of the Vestal Virgins, and they have the most noticeable allusions in my work considering the main character will end up in a room underground as opposed to a coffin or hidden in a wall. I have looked into many ghost stories and myths about castles in Europe in which people would be placed in the walls to keep the building structurally sound, one such case being the story of Rozafa Castle which I drew naming inspiration from for one of my characters. These included many tales of nuns and monks going into the walls of convents as punishment. The Japanese would have a similar practice in which they would place people into pillars. I made it a focal point in do research like this that held a specific religious vein like the Incan Capacocha ritual and the process of making living buddhas and the story of Isaac and Abraham before delving into more specific areas of human sacrifice.

Literary research was started though a series of Edgar Allen Poe stories which featured similar actions such as *The Cask of Amontillado*, *Premature Burial*, and *The Black Cat*. I drew from these tone and ambiance for my own storytelling, resulting in a darker and dower narrative to better fit a thriller or horror genre. I also explored the classics in search for examples of human

sacrifice in the story of Iphigenia, but then I diverted by attention to looking for fiction that had the same or similar themes. These included Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera*, and S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. The first two reflect a major plot point of a society that had rules that people follow out of blissful ignorance or because they have no choice. My worldbuilding took a sharp turn with *Brave New World* because it follows the idea of social complacency. No one thinks this is wrong, and therefore, it isn't to them. Those who do know follow that ideology cannot live in the same society. *The Hunger Games* featured a more literal approach to how the structure of the world lead directly to the suffering of others. Using both of these, I was able to lay the ground work for what sort of place I was going to be setting my characters in.

The last two listed were more inclined to the disposition of the people within my thesis. Character from both books cannot achieve some of the same things as other because of circumstances far out of their control. The Phantom is never going to be able to live as a normal person because of his deformity, and the 'greasers' are stereotyped and put down for their lack of financial superiority. While reading these stories, it's easy to think 'if this one thing changed, this character would be able to achieve more than they ever thought possible'. This quote from Leroux particularly stuck me for this narrative: "he had a heart that could have held the entire empire of the world; and, in the end, he had to content himself with a cellar". I wanted to carry that same emotion – that very same tone – into my story, so that my character would be able to say if this one thing about me was different my entire life would be. And of course, it would be something he could never change.

Many people in the world fall out of favor because of one little thing that is irrevocably part of them, and there is a hurt there, a desperation to change oneself to better be suited for the

world around you because so many others fit into the mold that is deemed acceptable. This pain, this specific self-hatred, is what my characters work through as they age and come closer to the day that will be their last.

One of the more difficult parts of creating this work is the fact that I need to create a religion. I have mainly been drawing on Catholicism as inspiration since that is the one I am most knowledgeable about while also delving into Celtic and Druidic religious themes such as nature. The horror movie *Midsommar* (2019) directed by Ari Aster helped me to develop what exactly I wanted the fictional religion to be presented as. With the idea of returning to the Earth, I structured a religion around the idea of the great goddess or mother nature with similar worshiping matters as that of Catholicism in which this nature goddess is part of a greater pantheon in which other sacrifices are demanded although they are executed in other ways. Live burial is only for the earth goddess while the fire goddess require immolation. This world works almost like a theocracy with major political aspects relying on the worship of their deities. The main characters' parents serve as heads in both the governmental branch and the religious community in order to impress upon this relationship.

Applying all of my research into my narrative allows me access to a vast wealth of knowledge about the situations surrounding the idea of human sacrifice while also applying it to a modern social commentary that focuses on the wellbeing of the members of society that are doomed to the margins of the community. With the situation my characters are in, I have brought them into a corner in which the only two options seem to be lying down and accepting your fate and place in your world or rebelling against all that is expected of you for your own health.

3. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT

For my exhibition of my thesis, I created a PowerPoint in Google Drive and presented it through a recorded Zoom call. I then submitted it to the URS Symposium with the rest of the undergraduate thesis' in order for it to be reviewed and seen. Because of difficulties faced with COVID-19, the online, recorded format suited the necessary requirement of a thesis presentation. I chose to do a PowerPoint along with the rest of my cohort because it was the most accessible way to explain my motivations and reasoning behind my creative work. My PowerPoint features a dark background in order to stand out and convey the horror/thriller elements my story contains. I wanted to put emphasis on the overall tone of my story in order to provide the right context for the subject matter. Because my idea came to me in the form of a nightmare, I decided to lean into that angle more in order to provide intrigue. The first slide features an edited illustration of a Vestal Virgin who was one of the major inspirations for my thesis.

I made individual slides explaining my idea's origin, a summary of my thesis, historical research, literary research, themes, and a page set aside for my reading. After going to a presentation workshop orchestrated by LAUNCH, my advice was to focus on where exactly I came up with my research question and how it relates to the world around me. My focus being on these subjects, I made sure to highlight the themes specifically in my presentation in order to show the level of reflection and thought put into this thesis.

I created the format of the PowerPoint, and then chose three excerpts from my thesis that embodied some of the themes I had been so adamant on reviewing. I read those three parts out loud to a friend in order to see which one sounded more interesting and entertaining to hear in the presentation. I then practiced reading the chosen excerpt out loud while stressing different

words and practicing diction in order to give a performance that made the characters come to life and make the listener invested in their story. I also tried to pick a part of the story that expressed my creativity and writing ability and also featured a heavily emotive scene in order to provide an interesting reading. Luckily, I read my thesis aloud already just to see if the dialogue I write actually sounds like someone talking.

Afterwards, I turned on screen share in Zoom and presented both my PowerPoint and my reading while having a timer set on my phone in order to not go over the ten-minute time limit. I recorded three total videos around nine minutes long and chose the best one to submit for the URS Symposium. Creating an account and posting the video on YouTube was the biggest hurdle I faced when making my presentation. I had some minor difficulty trying to find the link to the video in the account I had just made and pasting it into the final submission box.

I wanted the audience to know that this was a creative work presentation from the very beginning. The main literary inspiration I drew from were different short stories by Edgar Allen Poe. Already, that name brings forth a certain atmosphere and sense of unease to the subject matter, and that was the tone I wanted to convey as well. Although my thesis is not a direct horror story, the elements used do indeed invoke a certain fear of death that Poe is famous for. Dark settings with dismal imagery and grim subjects were his main mode of literary communication, and I wanted to remind the viewer of such a recognizable sensation without presenting myself as a copycat. I tried to focus on already created imagery in order to provide an interesting viewing experience.

In regards to my feedback, I received overwhelmingly positive reviews on my thesis and presentation. The two people who gave me feedback are Samantha Bell and James Michael Tate. I was told that my presentation was personal and engaging which is difficult to do through a

digital setting. My body language and diction during my reading proved to be the most entertaining part of the presentation. One of phrases Bell used to describe the concept of my thesis itself is “I am both horrified and fascinated by this” which is a very high compliment considering the genre of my story. In terms of relevance, Tate reviewed that in this time of social isolation this thesis is not only relevant but timely.

I did receive some criticism for the style of the PowerPoint itself, but this opinion varied between Bell and Tate. Tate enjoyed the minimalistic imagery and the darkness of the slide while Bell wanted the inclusion of more images and less text. Bell did also comment that she would have preferred for me to not read directly from the slides themselves like a script. Looking back on it, I do wish I had put the excerpt of my thesis in the slides for the audience to follow along. If I could do it again, I would have PDF of the reading up in case my recitation was difficult to understand. Fortunately, my feedback state that I spoke clearly and well, making it easy for the viewer to follow along.

Bell specifically stated that she enjoyed the overview of the thesis and how I provided information about the nightmare I had that started this project. Both she and Tate mentioned that the overall tone and atmosphere I provided in my thesis and presentation was gripping and the research behind it was just as interesting. My favorite response is Bell saying she genuinely wants to read this book which is exactly the type of response I was hoping for. I consider my presentation an overall success and have used the advice I received in my feedback to revise my thesis, placing more emphasis in tonality and atmosphere in order to achieve that grim style I’m trying to employ.

4. REFLECTION

The stories I have always enjoyed reading are those that are as tragic as they are thought provoking. One of my biggest complaints in terms of creative writing is that rarely are there any consequences for the characters in the story. Terms like plot-armor serve as an expression and unfinished literary development, and so I have always strived to make sure the reader is always concerned about the characters whenever they are in danger. Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* genuinely made me worried that the characters could die at any second. I admired the way the reality of their environment seemed to beat down upon them at every turn and how that reality broke the characters away from who they were in the first book.

I have always tried to express that same level of danger for my characters and, considering I mainly write in the horror/thriller genre, I have plenty of opportunities to do so. The other side of this tale is not writing expendable characters. I don't necessarily want to write a character that is a concept that I'm destroying in a full-fledged novella. Maybe I would contemplate that in the structure of a short story, but specifically in my thesis, I want to present real people in a scary situation. I have never leaned quite so hard into the reality of how many people would die in certain fictional situations as I have in this story, and so I was worried about being perceived as lacking in any real conclusion or plot resolution because all of my characters die. To remedy this, I implemented an epilogue that featured a glimpse into the world post the main character's death. I wanted to show that there was a worldly change, but none of the characters got to experience it in their lifetime.

Through my literary research, I focused heavily on ideas presented in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. In that book, John is not able to change what he perceives - correctly - to be

an unjust and corrupt world. One person couldn't upend the fabrics of social convention just because they think it's wrong even if it is. That doesn't happen in reality. That's an ideal found in fairy tales or children's stories. *Brave New World* ends with the suicide of the main character as he fails to live in a world, he cannot abide the conventions of the populace. I remember when reading this, how shocked I was at the ending. Very rarely do we find fictional stories that end in the way they would in real life. Very rarely is someone so lucky as to see injustice in the world and correct it upon their own means and ideals. This was the unfair reality that still exists today that I wanted to show in *And the Cat Looked*. This story is not about brave heroes and the power of love and friendship, although I do pretend to lean in that direction. It's the story of how even finding the drive to change your own fate is not all that is required for actually doing it. Just because you want something to happen, does not mean it will.

There are many people in the world who are stuck in a cycle of injustice that they cannot escape even if they want to. It takes so much manpower and will to change the world, and many people fail to live up to those requirements. That does not, however, mean that what happened to them was deserved, just, or right. Just because it was normal to sacrifice children to Ican gods does not mean it was okay. This is where my historical research came into play. Many of the people who died because of ritualistic murder in the name of their king or gods did so because of the mindset of their people. Many people who received this execution because of a perceived sin did so because of that same mindset. There is a social vacuum that exists in terms of morality in such situations, and in my story, I put in characters who received the short end of the stick.

My story works as a social commentary on what the world perceives as right based on preconceptions of tradition and value and how that changes over time until scholars of the future look back on us and wonder what went wrong in our heads. My audience is targeted to adults

mainly in terms of writing style and subject matter but it is specifically written to introduce critical thinking on social conventions. I have firmly placed my characters in the margins of society; they are not welcome to interact or interfere with the perceived system that they live in. I do address the strange allowances of freedom such a position brings, though, including specifically the freedom of relationships. Sense the main characters' purpose in society is to die, their world is built for them to enjoy themselves why they are here. Normally, all children are assigned a betrothed according to birthdays and religious purposes, but people born on the dreaded January 2nd do not have this. They are free to love whomever they want, meaning LGBT relationships are only possible under this rule.

Although they have a deadline in terms of how long they can live, there is nothing required of them other than to live their lives. It is a very cushy existence with benefits no one else in their society gets to indulge in, but this makes the choice to fight to survive such a difficult one. Sense they have certain allowances, most children born on January 2nd believe it is only fair to submit to their fate, like it is owed of them or something. The emotional taxation of finding the will to fight for yourself, to stand up and rationalize that you deserve better, is one of my main themes in this thesis.

I wanted to boil this story down into one of the main struggles of humanity: to not be limited by anything. People are always pushing the envelope, always asking for more, and always looking for more. This trait is the reason for any human innovation, and that selfishness defines human drive. The main character in my works is powered by the basic need to live longer. He wants one more minute, one more day, one more year. He's fighting for scraps in order to keep his heart beating just a little bit longer, and he is writing journals to keep his

thoughts around even after he is gone. The simple need to live and the desperate fear of dying are the two elements explore in this book, ones that everyone can sympathize with.

WORKS CITED

Andrushko, Valerie A.; Buzon, Michele R.; Gibaja, Arminda M.; McEwan, Gordon F.; Simonetti, Antonio; Creaser, Robert A.. "Investigating a Child Sacrifice Event From the Inca Heartland". In *Journal of Archaeological Science*. 2011 38(2):323-333 Language: English. DOI: 10.1016/j.jas.2010.09.009, Database: ScienceDirect.

Collins, Suzanne. *Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic, 2008.

Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Iphigenia at Aulis". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., March 2020. www.britannica.com/topic/Iphigenia-at-Aulis.

Gibbons, Ann, and Andrew Lawler. "The Ultimate Sacrifice." *Science*, vol. 336, no. 6083, May 2012, pp. 834–837. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1126/science.336.6083.834.

Hinton, S E. *The Outsiders*. New York: Viking Press, 1967. Print.

Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. New York: Harper Brothers, 1932.

Mitchelhill, Jennifer. "Castles of the Samurai." *Sunday Mail, The (Brisbane)*. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=n5h&AN=20040229K610605318&site=eds-live. Accessed 17 June 2020.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Premature Burial." *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. Lit2Go Edition. 1903. Web. <<https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/147/the-works-of-edgar-allan-poe/5360/the-premature-burial/>>. June 17, 2020.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Cask of Amontillado*. The Floating Press, 2016. *EBSCOhost*,
search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1403643&site=eds-live.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Black Cat." *American Literature to 1865*, Indian River State College
Libraries, 2018.

Raymond, Richard C. "Albania Immured: Rozafa, Kadare, and the Sacrifice of Truth." *South
Atlantic Review*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2006, pp. 62–77. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20064784
Accessed 17 June 2020.

Schultz, Celia E. "The Romans and Ritual Murder." *Journal of the American Academy o
f Religion*, vol. 78, no. 2, June 2010, pp. 516–541. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfq002.

Tsuda, Noritake (1918) "Human Sacrifices in Japan.," *The Open Court*: Vol. 1918 : Iss. 12 ,
Article 6.

APPENDIX: CREATIVE ARTIFACT

Prologue

“A Bad Penny Always Turns Up”

Roma, Dec29, had wanted her children born on her birthday, but, following the teaching of Vin, she left the date up to her god and found herself convulsing in pain on her bed on a snowy New Year’s evening as the midwife, Jun3, tried to soothe her as much as she could. Roma had started having contractions just as the sun went down, and fear was pushing her on almost as much as the babies were. She was running out of time.

“They’re almost here, Ma’am.” she rubbed Roma’s leg in comfort. “Give me another push.”

Roma’s throat hurt from her screaming, but not as bad as the contractions. She’d been in labor since 7:00 am, but her little ones decided to take their sweet time before entering the world. Her husband, Konrad, Sep17, usually so stoic and composed, anxiously held her right hand, his fingers running over her knuckles in rushed repetition. Roma almost wished he’d let go so she could rip her hair out, but she was in too much pain to move much. This was her first pregnancy, and it was just her luck that it was twins.

Is this Vin’s blessing? She wondered. Is this my pat on the back?

Another scream knocked all semi-rational thought from her mind.

“You can do it, Ma’am!” The midwife was doing something, but Roma could barely open her eyes to see. “So close, keep breathing!”

“What -” Roma almost bit her tongue as she tried to stifle a groan. “Time - What is -”

Konrad's restless hands tightened on hers. She could feel him shaking.

"Roma -" he began.

"The time!" She all but growled back. She was in agony. The least he could do was answer her questions.

Konrad seemed to want to deny her again but relented. In a slightly panicked voice, he said: "11:40 pm."

Roma threw her head back with a cry of frustration and pain. She was running out of time. *They* were running out of time. With her occupation she could get a pass if they were both born tomorrow, but Konrad would suffer for it. Is this what Hashvin wanted? A double gift? Must They take both of them?

I want one, Roma prayed, sweat puddling on her upper lip, *just give me one then*.

Another contraction hit, and Roma screamed out her plea.

"Here they come! Push!"

Roma did as instructed and felt something give a little along with a small sense of peace before the pain returned to her. A baby's scream joined the cut off gurgle Roma let out.

The midwife was up, holding something. She fiddled a little more, and Roma could see out of her tear-filled eyes that she was writing down the time and date. Roma cried as the pain continued. One out, one to go.

"Sep17, hold her. We're not done here." The midwife passed the baby to its father and returned to her spot between Roma's legs. Konrad had let go of her hand, but the word 'her' was ringing on Roma's mind.

"One more, Dec29, one more and you're done. Endure a little longer. Push!"

Her voice was soothing, and Roma tried to focus on it as she pushed. Everything was pain, and she had no one to hold onto now. It was only her cold fingers twisting in the bed sheets. The baby was still crying.

The second baby felt bigger somehow; Roma had been under the impression that the second birth would have been smoother now that one had already paved the path. If she hadn't known any better, she would have thought that the baby was fighting her, fighting their own birth. *I'm delirious*, she thought tonelessly.

Her head felt flooded; a great wave had breached the shore of her mind, tearing up sand and dirt as it swept into the cities and neighborhoods. Houses were ripped apart, gates torn up, and it didn't seem to slow at all. She could feel every impact and water pounded in her ears. A soft hand wrapped around hers, and Roma became aware of how tense her fingers were. Konrad balanced the baby in one hand and held her with another, face gentle but less nervous now. He was even holding the baby right, Roma realized blearily. Same old Konrad, good at everything he tries. She wanted to smile but couldn't. The baby in his arms was fussing, but it was a little quieter now.

"Push!" The midwife pleaded, and Roma listened.

After what felt like years, she felt that give again, and the world seemed to hold its breath with her. Still and suddenly quiet save for her panting. Roma's eyes were closed. She didn't know when that happened, but she forced them open when the silence continued.

The baby wasn't crying.

The midwife was holding them close, checking them over, Roma figured, but no one was speaking. Roma rolled her head over to her husband, and saw his pinched eyebrows and firm mouth as he looked over at their second born.

The midwife nodded, like she was content with her inspection. She swaddled the baby, and leaned over a notebook that lay spread open on the table. She jotted something down before facing the new family. Roma felt a sigh of relief as she saw the baby in the woman's arms moving. It was alive, Roma's face formed an exhausted smile. It took effort but she reached out of both of them, Konrad leaning down closer to her reclining form, and the midwife walking over.

"Congratulations, Priestess and President." She said in a tired voice herself. She smiled happily for them anyway, though. "You have a healthy baby boy and a healthy baby girl."

She passed the boy to Roma who happily received him. She curled around him, turning towards Konrad to include her new daughter. They were almost identical, with a small tuft of blonde hair on their heads and clear blue eyes. The little girl's eyes were red along with the rest of her face as she had only stopped crying at the birth of her brother. She still made soft noises as her little arms moved slowly around in small wiggles, her face twisted up in irritation. Her brother on the other hand was noticeably different in demeanor. He didn't cry, but he did release quiet little gurgles of noise as he gazed at his parents, probably barely seeing anything but blobs. He was flushed in the face as well, but his lips were curved down and his eyes were wide. He looked . . . Roma searched for a word.

Disappointed.

Her son looked disappointed, and Roma didn't know what to do with that information.

Konrad's arm wrapped around all of them, laying the little girl on Roma's chest next to her brother.

"This is Jan1 and Jan2." The midwife reported, and Roma almost forgot she was there. "May your family be strong and healthy for the rest of your days."

Roma's head snapped to look at Konrad who was already looking back at her. She could rarely figure out what he was thinking without asking him, and his eyes were just as unreadable as always. The watch on his left hand was in front of Roma, and she could read the time.

12:03 am.

She had been too late.

Feeling a surge of maternal protectiveness, her arms tightened on her children, causing the little girl to cry out at the movement and her doomed little boy to murmur.

"We got one," Roma told Konrad, eyes glued on the blue-eyed boy looking up at her.

"At least we got one."

Now: Interlude

It took Bren a while to accept that his eyes wouldn't adjust to this level of darkness. He used to practice, prepare for this. He'd pull his blankets over his head, he'd shut his eyes, he'd turn off all the lights and face a corner in his room. But all those times Bren could still feel the world around him. Could hear the clicking of the fan above his head and feel where he'd chipped the blue paint off his bedroom walls. Somehow, dark wasn't that dark at home.

This wasn't anything, though. Bren's eyes were open, and he couldn't see anything. His pulse throbbed in his ears, and the packed dirt that had been dug out into the form of a chair was crumbling under his fingers, but that was it. Bren nudged his bare foot forward and felt it brace against the stone wall in front of him. Pushing against it sent him further back into the dark soil, so he stopped. He blinked but could only tell by feeling his eyelids shut. There was no light underground. There weren't any clocks, either. Bren had no way to tell how long he'd been down here. He dug his nails harder into his throne of dirt.

Bren drew his legs up to his chest. The seat didn't offer enough room to brace his feet against it, so they dangled in the air. He leaned back to balance his weight, his head resting against the earth wall behind him. There were probably clumps of soil staining his white tunic, gathering in his equally light hair. His mom would've thrown a fit.

The sharp lurching of his heart reminded him that now might not be the best time to think about his mom. Bren's trembling hands released his chair and wrapped around the journal in his lap. It was leather bound, a birthday present from his father, and his plus one to this singles party. It was too dark to read in his tomb, but Bren had always had the habit of pressing down too hard with his pencil, bending the papers down with his words. There were other things he could have brought, other keepsakes that serve no purpose other than to provide comfort, but his hands have

molded to grip his journal. This had been a popular topic at their socials, a morbid twist on the question ‘what would you bring to a desert island’. Bren could vividly remember Zain leaning toward him, a sardonic smile etched across his pale face, asking what Bren planned on bringing to his own funeral. He also remembered Elletta scoffing at the question, so sure she was that it wouldn’t come to that. So sure they would survive.

Bren opened his journal and felt his way to the built-in fabric bookmark, a golden brown. The exact color of Roza’s eyes. Not that he could see it, but there was no way he could forget.

“I never got to finish it,” Bren spoke into the darkness, pressing his thumb against the edges of the papers, flipping it and letting the sound of rustled paper fill the air. The entries stopped a little more than halfway, and they didn’t allow him to bring both a journal and a pencil. There was so much left unsaid, in the end.

The story he didn’t want to claim as his own was retold in these pages. But, maybe, the best thing about knowing when you’re going to die, is that you have plenty of time to get out the things you need to say.

In the dark, far away from the pastel blue bedroom that he used to share with his sister, Bren opened his journal and dove back into his life. The saying is seeing your life flash before your eyes, but Bren was determined to take longer. Is it so wrong to want your existence to last longer than a flash?

Chapter One:
“Children Should be Seen and Not Heard”

Dad sent me this journal about two weeks before my death. He said it might be therapeutic for me to get everything down on paper. You know, organize my thoughts, get things off my chest, etc. At this point, I would have preferred to tell him how I felt to his face instead of hiding it in papers no one is ever going to read since it's joining me six feet under.

Well, if we're going to be exact, three hundred and eighty-four feet under.

I'm in my room - not my childhood bedroom - but my assigned one in the correction center all of us were moved to after Elletta tried to attack the Prophets four years ago. Too troublesome to let loose on the general public but too valuable to dispose of prematurely. I don't know if I regret my part in the disturbance - that's what they're calling it, a *disturbance* since it was too pathetic to actually be considered a revolution - but I have plenty of time to think about it these days. Especially since these doors lock on the outside, so I'll be sitting here in relative silence until it's dinnertime.

Since my last birthday is in two weeks. Miska had gifted me a candle, but they figured I could use that as a weapon which left me holding Dad's gift. I don't understand why I can't have a small candle but I can have a pen instead. As if you can't hurt yourself with a pen.

I never used to think things like that.

Maybe writing this all down actually is helpful, but it just makes me feel worse. I'm all jumbled inside, like someone is constantly shaking me and my brain is beating the inside of my skull. I'm confused and regretful, but mostly I think I'm angry.

I never planned on fighting this hard. Or failing this hard.

There had to have been a better outcome to this that I just can't see yet. I'd ask Roza, but I don't think she's here mentally anymore. Watching her float off these past few years makes me wonder if there will be enough of her left to die when we turn twenty-five. I'd ask Elletta, but she's worse. I would have thought her already dead if I hadn't seen her wandering around purposelessly yesterday. It makes me wish Zain was still alive, so I can ask him where I went wrong. That's the real problem.

I just can't figure out where it all went so wrong.

The first time I even realized I was going to die young was on my ninth birthday, the age when children were allowed to witness the Planting ceremony. It was January second, and Dad wouldn't let me play with the forty-five color box of sidewalk chalk that was a resting temptation in the garage. He said that even though Miska and I had different birthdays, twins should share things regardless. I would argue vehemently that this should exclude presents.

Mom had gone to pick Miska up from school - I never thought about how she had to go and I didn't, I just thought I was lucky or something. Oh, the irony. I was waiting in the mudroom, bouncing on my heels as I kept glancing down at my watch. It was almost 4:00, they'd be home any minute, and then I can turn the driveway into a collage of masterpieces. Any moment how the garage door would open, and I'd just have to wait for Miska to change out of her uniform. I don't remember if I was tapping my foot or not, but I can picture myself doing it.

Dad was in his office, eyes glued to the white screen of his laptop. His glasses would reflect blocks of tiny black text, and he'd be filing away complaints and proposals and taking phone calls. I know by now not to bother him when he's like that for anything less than a

compound fracture. That was difficult during the week whenever it was just him and me alone in the house. Although I suppose I was the only one who was really alone since he had his coworkers.

That's why it was killing me to leave that glorious chalk - so close yet so far - just sitting like discarded trash on the side of a busy street. Entertaining myself was nothing new, but there were some tools that certainly helped.

I looked down at my watch again. 4:02. I groaned as loudly as I could, hoping to shake the walls of our house, to cave the roof in. That way, Dad would back off the computer and I may be able to convene him to be the body I'd outline in order to draw a life-sized wizard. Maybe a pirate, maybe both.

The moan of the opening garage door was the same as a chorus of angels to my ears, and I would not deny that I did my own victory dance as I ran to the garage, my mom's car pulling inside. I moved forward, but Mom honked the horn at me. I had to placate my energy while waiting for them to come to me.

Once parked, Miska was let loose like a bouncy ball, jumping up and down and running right at me. Her thin, blonde hair was tucked into two pigtails. The neon green headband she wore clashed with her navy school uniform, but that didn't seem to bother her. Being unique was a big deal to Miska. I opened my arms, thinking she was coming in for a hug, but she tore towards the chalk. Her fingers were twitching as if it took everything she had not to rip off the plastic covering and go to town in the name of art. Naturally, I couldn't abide this.

"Hey!" I grabbed her arm and tried to pull her away. "That's mine! Don't open it!"

"It's both of ours," Miska's barely visible blonde eyebrows furrowed in irritation. I was proving to be an obstacle. "Dad said we both get to use it."

“Yeah,” I concede, “but it’s *my* birthday -”

“I’m older than you!”

That meant war. “You’re older by *one day* -”

“Children, children!” At the sound of my mother’s voice, both my twin and I froze.

That’s the same tone Dad uses whenever I keep bothering him in his office. Mom was stressed about something, you could see it in the lines by her mouth, and she was walking towards us with purpose. “There’s no time to play with that now. Go upstairs and put on your nice clothes. We have to go to the Temple.”

Sharp betrayal curled through me, but Miska’s eyes lit up.

“We get to go this year?” she asked.

Mom reached and touched the back of Miska’s head, a momentary smile on her face.

“Yes, dear, now go. We’re running late.”

Miska went back into bouncy ball mode and dashed inside while I was still reeling. I could feel tears trying to form at my waterline and barely put any effort into stopping them as I stared at my mother.

“But -” I began, but she put her hands on my shoulders, spun me around, and started leading me into the house.

“Today is January 2nd,” she said, as if I didn’t know that. “The Planting ceremony is today, and we really need to get going. Fix your face and follow your sister.”

I tried again to plead my case. “But Dad said -”

“Brennan, I don’t care what he said,” she snapped. “Go get dressed.”

Brokenly, I followed her finger to the staircase and went up as if I was marching to a firing squad. My heart was heavy, and my tears flowed freely, but then again, my parents always had a way of breaking promises.

Miska and I had matching outfits for occasions like these, pastel green tunics with white embroidery whose buttons would catch on everything and whose fabric would scratch my skin. Once changed, the entire family piled back into the car. I tugged at my collar from my place in the back seat, discontent. My father was in dress clothes, formal and crisp, but Mother was wearing her ritual robes. I usually see her in rich browns but these were white and lacy. They vaguely reminded me of the wedding dresses Miska showed me once. She said she'd wear one someday, but when I asked her if I was supposed to as well, her usual fountain of wisdom ran dry. We later had asked Dad, and he laughed. He said Miska would be wearing a wedding dress, and that I was never getting married at all.

I hated being left out of things and recalling that memory shoved me even deeper into my bad mood.

Miska was untouched by my irritability. Her leg was jumping up and down, and she leaned towards me, eyes wide with excitement. "I can't believe we're going! I learned about this in school, it's called the Humbling of Humanity and -"

"I don't want to do this, though." I pushed her away and pressed my cheek to the car window. "Dad said I could play as soon as -"

"Brennan, please," my mother interrupted. "Today is very important. We're supposed to be celebrating."

"We're always celebrating," I retorted. "I don't get what's so special about today."

Father turned to meet my mother's eyes. They both looked tense, upset at my persistence but refusing to answer me. The car was silent until we reached the Temple.

You could have seen it a mile away; It was built of white stone, smoothed into curves to make the circumference of the building. Like a milky eyeball that glared into the sky, surrounded by lashes of cypress trees. When Miska and I were younger, we'd play in those gardens, dodging each other behind tree trunks and laughing airily until we were called inside. Nice memories to hold close on our days.

The parking lot was harder to find since it was tucked away five blocks down the road. Mom said it's important to walk to the Temple doors, approaching on your own two feet. The only people who were exempt from this rule were those exempt from walking in general. They were just dropped off, and a Son or Daughter would usher them inside.

We always got there early since Mom had to set everything up for the service, so I was surprised by how many cars there were. Mother pulled into a space and reached back for her shawl. It was a light green with the golden symbol of Vin embroidered on her chest – a thin double circle with calligraphy in the middle. I always thought it looked like a lily. Father helped her tuck her hair into her hood that she then tightened with a gold circlet. She got out of the car with a grim smile, a priestess in body instead of a mother, and at her arrival, the others emerged from their cars.

I had found it strange they were waiting for us.

I didn't recognize anyone since they were all older at the time, but I remember their expressions. Tightly wound with anxiety and sadness, eyes that twisted at the corners as they faked pleasantries with those around them.

“Welcome,” Mother smiled, speaking loudly. “We have a busy day ahead: check in, checkup, and ornamentation, so please step lively. Don’t forget to smile, this is all for you after all!”

Some of them actually flinched but followed after my mother as she started towards the shady path wreathed with fake flowers and trees. The trail to the Temple was very scenic. I moved forward to catch up with Mom, but my father’s hand wrapped around my arm, stopping me.

“We have to walk back here,” he explained, moving his hand down to hold mine. “Mom’s working right now, and those people are important.”

“Who are they?” I asked. Miska had taken Father’s free hand. “Why are they here so early?”

“They’re the guests of honor.” He didn’t look at me as he talked. “They have a big role to play in the celebration today.”

“They don’t look very happy about it,” I commented. Father squeezed my hand in reprimand but stayed silent.

Mother continued toward the Temple, a trail of people shuffling after her. I remember one girl with her auburn hair who stared at the ground the whole way. Her parents were walking behind her, and the distance stood out to me. She looked so alone; even the dappled shade of the cypress trees abandoned her when we reached the stone steps of the Temple.

Pushing open the ornate double doors, everyone dragged themselves into the lobby. This was usually where Sons or Daughters would direct the congregation to the stairs to the left, which would lead down into the belly of the building: the auditorium. This group, however, took

a right and went down the stairs that led farther into the earth where various workrooms, offices, and relics resided.

“Wait, are we going to Mom’s office?” Miska asked.

“No, these people just need to be checked in before the parade,” Father explained.

That threw me. “Wait, the parade is for them?”

“Why do you think we have a parade?” Miska snarked.

“I don’t know,” I scrunched up my nose. “Harvest or something.”

Father looked ahead. “Or something.”

We walked farther underground. The bright artificial lights illuminated the halls that branched off in various different directions like an ant hill. We passed many rooms, and I actually found comfort in the intimate proximity we all shared in that little hallway. No one else seemed to share my sentiments; the lady with the auburn hair looked like she was going to be sick.

Mama took them down another hallway and finally stopped at a door. Uncle Aldrich in all of his grey weariness was waiting for her in his matching priest robes. They spoke briefly before they turned towards the congregation. Uncle Aldrich addressed the clipboard in his hand. “When I call your name please step forward and head towards the left for a brief physical. Margot, 25 of 790.”

A pale girl with pale hair and equally pale parents approached. Aldrich checked her name off. “Jan2s only please, you’ll see her at the parade.”

Her parents stuttered in place just like my breath. The girl held her mother’s hand even as a Son gently steered her away.

I couldn't take my eyes off her, but I still tugged on my dad's hand. "She's a Jan2? I've never met another one before."

"Yeah," was all he said in reply.

"Callum, 79 of 790."

A tan man walked up alone, was checked in and entered.

"Abner, 16 of 790."

Someone else went forward.

"Izumi, 66 of 790."

And so they all went, and my unease grew.

"Dad, do they all have my birthday?" I figured it to be an innocuous question at the time, and I even allowed myself to wonder if this was my destined job since no one had told me what Jan2s were meant to do yet. But my father was rigid, and Miska even wormed her way out of his grip, his hand tightening on ours as he frantically sought an easy answer to provide me with.

He landed on a stiff: "Yes, Bren, they do." And then tried to play it off with a:

"Technically you have their birthdays because you're younger."

"*Dad,*" I stressed, "why do we all have the same birthday? Am I going to apprentice with them?"

"Jan2s don't do apprenticeships," Miska said. "Duh."

Konrad had looked choked when I swung on Miska, mouth wide open to plead my case. His hand clapped on my shoulder, and he steered me away from the antagonist my sister was at that age. "Behave, please."

"But what -"

“That’s just how today goes, Bren.” he cut me off and turned to watch the group of Jan2s that was slowly but surely dwindling.

“Imogen, 12 of 790.”

That girl with the auburn hair stepped forward, and I watched her move like a ghost, detached, barely affected by the world around her. She was the last one, and as soon as her name was checked off, she disappeared down the hallway. I stood with their families, wondering why it felt like a funeral.

Uncle Aldrich turned to my mother. “Okay, Dec29, everything is set up outside.”

Mom released a small growl, leaning over to look at his clipboard. “We’re running a little bit behind.”

Aldrich shook his head with a smile. “It’ll be fine. Why are Dec29s so anal about scheduling?” Mom shot him a look which only caused him to laugh again.

Our uncle was of the same temperament as his wife, Aunt Romilly; both relaxed, easy-going people. I think I might have inherited more from them than from my own parents. With a hug to greet Miska and I and a handshake for our father, Aldrich turned back to Mother and held out his hand for the clipboard.

He flipped through it, a small smile growing on his face. “No one’s AWOL this year?”

“Nope,” Mother popped the ‘p’. “Everyone here and accounted for, on time and ready to go. For once.”

“Wonderful,” Alrich returned the clipboard. “Then we can move outside to the -”

“Mom,” I interrupted, reaching out to fist my hand in her shawl. “Why do all those people have the same birthday as me?”

You could've heard a pin drop. I didn't think too much of my mother's reaction - only barely registered the flicker of something in her eyes. Despair? Fear? I'd like to believe so. She somehow distracted me since I don't remember her answer, and the next thing I knew the four of us were winding our way back up into the sunlight.

How is it possible to miss the sunlight so much already?

"The floats!" Miska cried. "We're going to see the floats, right? *Everyone* at school was talking about them."

Not for the first time, everyone around me seemed to know something I didn't. You never really get used to being left in the dark, and that bitter feeling would follow me for the rest of my life.

"Yes, dear," Konrad said with a forced smile.

Mother and Aldrich were talking softly to each other, but I heard and still remember every word.

"You're going to have to tell him sometime," Aldrich says, not unkindly.

"I know." Roma wipes her palms on her skirt as if she was sweaty. "I know just - just not now, okay? Not at this age. Not on a day of celebration."

"Like he won't figure it out by the end of the day? It's not for him," Aldrich shot in. "And it's not for you. It hasn't been since the day he was born."

Roma said nothing, and my uncle just sighed in defeat.

Oh, so criminal and oh, so sad, the feelings my mother experiences on my birthday. Everyone is always so ready to speak to the parents, to offer condolences and well-wishes for their blessing and their curse. So many times, I've stood right by them and watched neighbors, and coworkers, and distant relatives fumble through some meager expression of compassion to

my parents all the while saying nothing to me. Roza says this is why wakes and funerals aren't for the dead. It's the family that's given comfort, not the rotting body in the casket. And this is where Elletta would chime in with the reminder that people like us don't get caskets. We get closets.

We followed the same path through the trees and flowers back towards the parking lot where a large tarp rested like a cape on a float that would become more familiar as the years went by. Behind the foliage of trees, sitting innocently in the parking lot, was the Earth. An Earth on wheels made of paper and adorned with streamers. There was a spiral platform with ledges on it for people to walk or stand on.

Miska screeched in excitement, jolting forward like a stuttering engine. "Oh! Can we go up? Please? Pretty please?"

I would be lying if I said I was able to hold on to my dour mood in the face of such a thing. I had never seen anything like it at the time, and my sister's happiness was not only palpable but contagious. In the face of two begging children, the adults admitted us.

There was a small gate that prevented people from just climbing up, and Mother unlocked it with a smile. I remember it so vividly, placing my hand on the globe. The blue paper was fine and soft, consisting of some kind of linen. They were cut up into little rectangles, attached at the top to give off a paper-mâché appearance. It would be years later that I learned that the texture was supposed to convey a man-made feeling. Humans did not create the Earth, and when we try, it looks fake. Childish. Pitiful. The float lacks any real religious significance, though - a rarity on January 2nd - but culturally, it's just as important as the Planting itself. The day would feel incomplete without it.

I dragged by hand along the circumference of the Earth, following the spiral railing up, past the many empty platforms. They wouldn't be empty for long. The float could hold about fifty people when necessary, but I had my eyes set on the North Pole. The apex of the world, and the closest I could get to the sky. Miska was already there, silent, her hands gripping the railing. Joining her, I shared in her awe. Even now, if I close my eyes, I can still see it

From the top of the float in the parking lot near the Temple, you could see a majority of the 790th Section. The rows and rows of houses, the grey roads that need to be repaved, and the sprawling farm land where the corn grows. Usually so flush and green, but not that day. Nothing was growing in January, and the landscape appeared uneasily barren. The sun was hovering lazily in the middle of the sky, and I felt if I gave it a slight nudge it would tumble down to us.

The adults joined us, and Aldrich laughed. "What's it like, kids? Being on top of the world?"

"It's amazing," Miska breathed. "I wish I could ride it in the parade."

Konrad's expression gave way to a minor panic before he calmed down again. He gave a weak chuckle and reached up as if to bring us back to the ground. "Only the people you saw earlier will get to ride it."

I perked up. "The Jan2s?"

Father didn't say anything, but that was enough.

Miska frowned, looking affronted. "What? Bren gets to ride this, but I can't? How is that fair?"

"It's not *fair*," Mother corrected. "It's *fate*."

I hate that word.

“He won’t be riding it anytime soon, Miska,” our uncle chimed in. “He has to wait another sixteen years to see this view again.”

“Why?” I ask, not for the first time.

And no one answers.

“What’s so different about being born on January 2nd compared to any other day?” I tried again.

No one answers.

“Come on, let’s head back.” Mother held out her hand.

“Is it why I can’t go to school?” I couldn’t seem to stop once I actually voiced all of the secret inquiries I’d kept locked in my head. “Is why I’m not going to marry anyone?”

Each question was aimed like a bullet, and I had good aim. Each flinch told me something, every pair of eyes that avoided mine confessed, but I still wanted to hear it out loud.

“Is it -”

“Brennan!” my mother snapped. Her hand recoiled, and her scowl was all encompassing. “Behave, won’t you? Today is very special, and there is no reason for you to be throwing such a *fit*.”

“But, Mom -”

“What’s that old saying?” Roma turned to Konrad. “Children should be seen, not heard? Maybe we should bring that back.”

I felt like I’d just been slapped. “Children should be what?”

My father’s eyes were hard, stirred up by his wife. “It means behave, listen to your parents, and don’t cause trouble. Understand, Brennan?”

“But that’s not -”

“Here’s another one for you,” Roma said, “silence is golden.”

This wasn’t the first time they’d done something like this. Purposefully use a phrase I didn’t know, make a reference I didn’t understand, or mention a story I had never heard of. Not going to school means you miss out on quite a bit. Not having friends means you miss out on even more. All those inside jokes made about required readings, all of the history lessons that bring about famous sayings and people, I understood none of it. I can still vividly remember Miska once telling me I was like a little Hitler because I wasn’t sharing a toy, and I handed it over because I was too embarrassed by my own ignorance. I had no idea who that was. Who would teach me? Why waste time teaching someone with the lifespan of a fruit fly?

My family knows how to shut me down, and it’s by using my ignorance against me. I shut up for the rest of the day.

I didn’t say anything unless explicitly asked. Not that anyone really did. I hadn’t realized at the time that this dose of social interaction was probably too much for a lonely child that usually stayed at home. I was getting tired and didn’t want to start anything with anyone. Just going through the motions and waiting for when I got to leave. Trying not to step on anyone’s toes sense I was too stupid to know how not to.

I was quiet when the older Jan2s - all dressed up in ceremonial tunics and beaded necklaces, stone earrings, and metal circlets - climbed onto the float we had vacated. I watched their hollow eyes as they took up their places on the platform, and I watched the girl named Imogen stand on the North Pole.

I didn’t say anything as Roma and Aldrich left us for the car that would travel in front of the globe, and as Miska, Father, and I found a place on one side of Main Street. The curb was filling with people, all wearing various shades of green with straw tucked into pockets and

sleeves. They cheered when the high school band walked through first, followed by the other floats brought forth by our section's different organizations. A temporary stage was even built up on wheels to perform the play *Vin Gives Life*. A dancer wearing a straw and moss ensemble displayed their skill as our god and seeded the Earth so food and plants would grow. After that was the Earth, and everyone - the whole city - kneeled in reverence as the Jan2s came.

After the thrum of noise, the silence was unnerving. The Jan2s stood still on the float, some openly crying, some staring off into the distance. I remember meeting Imogen's eyes from where she stood on top of the world. I remember her crying, and I remember wanting to cry, too – once again stuck by how much I didn't understand. Once more wondering when someone would tell me what was going on and why.

When the float – our own Charon's boat - passed, the crowd followed it all the way back to the Temple. Father was able to shove his way forward to get us a good view of the anointing of the Jan2s. Mother and Uncle were doing it, praying, and chanting, and wiping dirt over the Jan2s' closed eyes.

I'll never forget when my own mother faced the crowd and spoke. "Off they go, into fate, and into peace."

The Jan2s turned and walked single file towards an ornate door I had never seen opened during all of the times I've been to worship at the Temple. It was like a mouth, it opened and a woosh of cool air was exhaled like a breath. It was dark, and at the time, I didn't realize that the two Sons standing on either side of the door were there to make sure no one tried to run away.

The Jan2s descended, one after another, and Imogen's auburn hair swallowed up as the jaws snapped shut.

I've had nightmares of that moment for as long as I can remember.

Even after the party my parents hosted where there were games, and food, and drink. Even after meeting some of Miska's friends from school and actually interacting with people my own age that weren't related to me for the first time. Even after Mom kissed me goodnight and Dad brushed my hair out of my eyes. Even as Miska snuck into my room and told me to move over so she had room. Even when I held onto her, terrified of being alone and terrified of being myself.

I've had nightmares of the Earth eating me, swallowing me whole, and I've had a chronic fear of the dark ever since. One that has never faded with time.

That was my first Planting ceremony.

Chapter Two:

“As Thick As Thieves”

At age ten, children are required to go to their first social. It's supposed to build community strength while giving a chance for children to meet their betrothed before they actually marry them. That is, if you aren't a Jan2. Jan2s still get socials, of course, but it's with other Jan2s. We are encouraged to build bonds, have a gaggle of friends, have lovers, and in order to do that, you actually have to meet people.

When Miska and I were ready to go to our first socials, our Dad drove us. He took me farther out into the field to a May22's barn where they had set up foldable chairs and tables and busted out those plastic table clothes. I was half an hour early because Miska's social started at the same time as mine, and she could absolutely not afford to be either late or early. She needed to arrive right when she was supposed to just like everything in our lives.

“Don't look so worried, Bren,” my father tried to comfort me as he dropped me off in front of the lone house in the middle of a corn field. “Just be yourself, and make friends, okay? I'll be back to get you at 10:30.”

That was almost a whole hour and a half after the social was over. Dad had to go court some of the other bigwigs at Miska's party. I would have to wait. I wasn't this bitter about it when it happened, but I suppose time has a way of changing things. There's only so much I can take before I realized my parents would never invest more than they had to in me.

I just nodded and turned to go inside, knocking the door with a certain despairing limpness. A woman opened the door, grey eyebrows pinched as she saw me. I dropped my hand and backed up a couple steps, my stomach doing unhappy twists.

“Are you a Jan2?” she asked, and I nodded. “Oh, you’re early. The social’s at the barn farther down the drive.”

Her pointed finger showed me the way down, the waning sunlight lingering just enough for me to see the barn off in the distance, a dark splotch against the sunset. I wilted at the thought of having to walk so far, and the woman took pity on the pathetic Jan2 on her doorstep and offered to walk over with me.

“You have to help me carry things, though, okay?” she said, placing a cardboard box of plastic plates in my arms. “I’m May22.”

I was exceedingly shy as a child, and knowing she already guessed who I was, I held my silence as we walked on the dirt road. My shiny black loafers were a tad smudged by the time we made it, but I didn’t mind. Adults rarely shut up around me, desperate to fill the silence as if aware of the fact that I had only a limited time to hear them, so May22’s gentle humming was welcome over insistent small talk. Probably not the mindset to have when about to go to a party, but I allowed myself small liberties.

The wooden door didn’t squeak when we opened it, and the inside wasn’t full of hay like I expected. The floor was concrete, and tables were set up around the room - some waiting for plates and others loaded with board games and cards.

May22 had me set down the box I was holding off to the side and asked me if I’d help her set up the buffet. I assisted her in silence until the last of the lingering daylight slipped away, and the shine of headlights made rivers down her driveway. May22 left me to go greet people, and I stood loitering at a table near the bathrooms.

Watching the other Jan2s walk in was supposed to be important. I was supposed to see a variety of people, learn new things, and grow as a person. But every sullen, still child that

entered the barn was just a mirror. Dozens of Brens with the same tight lips and the same sweaty hands dragged themselves through the doors. We were all alike. Every single one of us. Just scared and trying very hard not to show it.

Many of the other kids made eye contact with me since I was the only person in the room, but their gazes drifted off like castaways. Some seemed to recognize each other and would stand in groups or tentatively take seats at empty tables. Once all thirty-four of us were accounted for in the barn, May22 cleared her throat.

“Hello and welcome, Jan2s, to your first social,” she said. Probably. It was a while ago, and as much as I remember interacting with her, my attention was a tad diverted once the ‘festivities’ started. “Dinner is set up buffet style over on the right. Plates are at the beginning, and please use both sides. There are games on that table there, and we will be doing introductions after everyone has eaten. Feel free to talk and play, and don’t forget to make friends! Everyone, please form a dinner line.”

In a daze, I joined the line of children loading up their plates with catered barbeque and filling their cups with watered down lemonade. The styrofoam squeaked in my hand. No one spoke to me in line, and I wasn’t about to initiate. I retreated back to my bathroom side table and was dismayed to see it occupied.

Two girls were sitting there, one animatedly talking to the other with wide, open gestures. I bounced my weight between both my feet. I describe myself as shy but stubborn is not far behind, and so I took back my seat. I didn’t look at them as I plopped down, too busy distracting myself with opening the to-go plastic utensils, but I was addressed soon enough.

“Hi,” one girl said with a big smile that took up half her face and showed off the two incisors in her mouth that pointed out away from the rest of her teeth. She reminded me of small,

angry animals, like a weasel or a ferret. The kinds that are small enough to know they were almost outclassed in every fight but would bite nonetheless. I nodded to show I heard her.

“I’m Elletta,” she stabbed her flimsy fork into a piece of brisket. “Who are you?”

“Brennan,” I reported and eyed the other girl. She didn’t share her name.

“Do you like this?” Elletta said, gesturing with her speared dinner. “It tastes bad.”

I actually thought it was pretty good and opened my mouth to say so, but Elletta was already moving on.

“It’s slimy, or something. I don’t want it. Do you?”

She reminded me of Miska, and I think that’s why I didn’t run to hide in the bathroom that was to tantalizingly close. I shook my head.

Elletta frowned but shrugged it off, lifting her plate and scrapping the brisket on the other girl’s plate. The weight of the extra food bent the styrofoam. “Roza will eat it then.”

Roza made an aborted move that ended up just being a minor jerk of her arm. At the time I didn’t know if she was flinching or trying to stop the leftovers being shoved on her plate, but now I know that it was her trying to have a say in what was happening to her and failing. Roza does that a lot. Did that, I guess.

“Are you having fun yet?” Elletta asked me.

“Um -”

“I’m not. I’m going to go grab a game.” She got up and wandered to the somewhat crowded game table leaving Roza and I alone in silence.

Roza wouldn’t look me in the eye. She was hiding behind her straight brown bangs, using her hair’s shadow as a mask. A skill she would perfect as she got older. I didn’t think she wanted to talk to me. Not hungry anymore and feeling anxious, I started pushing down on the little

plastic tongs of my fork just to have something to do. I didn't pay attention to how much force I was using or how much barbeque sauce was staining it, so when it predictably flung food in my face, I was actually startled.

There was a snort, a quiet one, and I looked over to see Roza covering her mouth with her hand. It was the first time I had ever made her laugh. Something special I look back on now, but it was too much for my pitiful, ten year-old self at the time. I turned beet red and went for my napkin which I just knocked to the floor instead. My face was burning, and it felt like my throat was closing up.

"Use mine?" Roza held out her own napkin which I snatched out of her hands and frantically rubbed the sauce off my cheek.

Roza was looking at me, smiling. She seemed amused. Was the secret to making friends making an idiot of yourself? I should take notes.

Elletta returned and dumped a pack of cards on the table. "This was all I could get. The table was pretty picked over."

We didn't get a chance to start a proper game because May22 called for us all to gather around in the only space in the barn that wasn't littered with tables for our introductions. I remember the first one; my insides felt like they were being crushed under a steamroller. I didn't want to talk, but I wanted people to know me. I didn't want to reach out, but I wanted others to reach for me. The risk of being known was too great but at the same time worth it. I wonder if any of the other Jan2s felt the same. When I close my eyes, I can still see their pinched faces, their hollow eyes.

Ignorance is bliss, but our world was quite liberal with information.

This introduction was the first time I saw all of them. All we had to do was stand up and state our names - sans our birthdays, though. We all had the same one, of course. Maybe throw in something about yourself for good measure. It was as depressing as it was awkward; some of us didn't even know yet that listing what we wanted to be when we grew up was off the table.

"My name is Mei, and I am from the 23rd family in Unit 790." Mei was small, and quiet, and had a sadness about her that defined her as a Jan2 more than her actual birthday did. She was one of the few who knew our fate at age ten. Her older sister was the one who spilled the beans when she was eight. "And, um - my favorite book is *The Spider and the Fly*."

And so it continued.

"I'm Eider, 70th family of 790, and my favorite animal is a koala."

Remembering them is harder than I expected. I saw my friends only about twenty minutes ago, and one day I'm going to see them for the last time. I wish I was allowed a camera here, so I could preserve their faces. Take one big group picture, force some smiles and blink at the flash. I could stick it in this book and look at it when I'm underground. Maybe it wouldn't be so much of a goodbye then.

"Hi, my name is Dove, 22 of 790, and I want to be a teacher when I grow up."

It's so depressing. This is just so fucking depressing. I love all of them, and I'm going to lose them. They're going to lose me. How is any of this fair? How pathetic is it to want a different story?

“I’m Elletta, 32 of 790, and I want to go home.”

Roza used to be obsessed with hourglasses, wanted to make her own one day. She said she could sit and watch the sand slide downwards for hours, and I’ve seen her do it. There was a time when she broke down crying about a block away from my house, cowering under a neighbor’s fig tree and just wheeze sobbing. Roza said we all lived in the top half of an hourglass, and, gradually, the very earth beneath our feet was falling away. I think if that image a lot, can imagine pressing my hands against the smooth, cool glass, and wobbling around on unsteady sand. I didn’t know at the time that this was when the hourglass started. With each name, another grain of sand fell.

“Heyo, I’m Zain, 54 of 790. Uh - I like rock music.”

I used to not want so much. I never used to demand anything of life, but now, I’d hold a gun to its temple just to beg for one more year, one more day, one more minute. I’m constantly running out of time. We’re all just running out of time.

“Um, my name is Roza, 48 of 790, and I - um, my favorite drink is Coke.”

I never allowed myself to be bitter when I was a kid. Didn’t think I had the right, but now I’m scavenging for any boiling emotion I can stuff into my chest. I have to condense a hundred years into twenty-five.

I swallowed. My mouth was dry. “My name is Brennan, 50 of 790, and I want a friend.”

Introductions were over, and we returned to our seats.

Elletta is, and always has been, a livewire, so our little bathroom table became quite popular as the night went on. It was her laugh and her voice that drew people, I think. She could get even the shyest person - me - rowdy with just the sheer amount of electricity in her veins. I would compare her to a drug. Lots of fun in reasonable doses but deadly in abundance.

Eider was the only one who could ever really handle her, and it was that night that I saw that legendary competitive streak burning through the two girls as we played some card game that required you to slap the deck to win. Roza and I were never really good at it - didn't have the drive, I guess - and Mei stopped playing after Elletta nearly broke her hand on impact. Zain always was up to bat though, his loud voice faster than his reflexes. It's weird to think about all this again much less actually write it down. That first night we all met.

“What do you want to do when you're older?” Zain asks, pointing towards Mei with his plastic spoon.

Mei's face whitened, and she looked down. Looking back on it, I'm assuming she was battling whether or not to tell the rest of us. If ignorance is bliss, then she wanted to be blissful tonight. She mumbled out, “nothing in particular. You?”

Zain pushed back his chair in a fit of confidence, the clatter echoing in the barn that was trying to host a party. Only our corner seemed to be feeling the love.

“A singer,” he said with the charisma I associate with him to this day. “I had a cousin who was born on June 17th and had to take an apprenticeship all about music. Sometimes - when I was younger - she’d even let me play on her piano. It was the *coolest*.”

“But isn’t being a musician something only Jun17s can do?” Eider asked, blunt as always.

Zain didn’t so much as blink. “I think so, but I’m gonna do it anyway.”

Blissful, blissful ignorance.

Eider nodded - at that age, that was enough to convince any of us. “I think I want to go to space. There’s this one movie about astronauts that I’ve been obsessed with ever since I was, like, four.”

As I’m writing this, I can hear our voices. Unbroken and unfettered by social constraints. The most free we’ve ever been and ever will be.

Elletta thrives in groups; she sits atop the social hierarchy like a cherry. She makes a show of tapping her finger to her chin and takes the card deck away from Roza when she doesn’t shuffle fast enough. “I can’t decide. There’s so much I want to do, and there *is* so much to do. I want to go to Europe, I want to learn karate, I want to decorate a wedding cake. I want to do everything.”

Dove laughed. “You can decorate my wedding cake. I want to get married and be like my mom and dad.”

“What about you, Roza?” Eider asks. “What do you want in the future?”

Roza looks up, startled, and blushes slightly. She never did enjoy having everyone’s attention the same way Elletta did. “Um, I don’t know.”

Zain frowned. “Oh, come on. There must be something.”

“I-” Roza squirmed in her seat. “Well, I’ve always wanted a cat?”

There was a brief bout of silence, and I withered on the inside watching Roza sink in on herself more. Second-hand embarrassment is no joke, and I didn’t even understand what was weird about what she said.

“Can you not have one now?” Zain asked.

Roza opened and closed her mouth, her shoulders doing a stuttering jerk that I assume was supposed to be a shrug. My mouth was dry, my tongue writhing in a bed of cotton.

“Um,” Elletta said, her eyes darting from face to face. She liked having control of the atmosphere, and awkward silences weren’t really her style. “Have you told your parents you want a cat?”

Roza frantically shook her head, eager to provide the ‘right’ answer.

“Well, maybe you should tell them? You can’t get a pet if no one knows you want one.” Elletta dealt out the cards, the conversation, in her eyes, done. The others were eager to turn their attention towards something else, and I was just happy that I was left out of the question. I didn’t want to make the same mistake Roza did, although I still wasn’t fully sure what that was.

What did I want though? What out of this life was available to me? In reality, nothing, but I didn’t know that yet. I absentmindedly tapped my finger on the edge of three of clubs. If nothing was the limit, what would I want? I looked at the table. Earlier I was here alone, and later on tonight, I’ll be alone again. But right now, playing cards with a group of maybe not-strangers, wasn’t so bad.

When the social was over, Elletta had everyone exchange addresses and phone numbers. “We could hang out more!” was her reasoning, so as the night drew to a close and

tables were being cleared and parents were coming to pick up their kids, I said goodbye to six new people, a napkin full of numbers stuffed in my pocket.

They all climbed in their cars, and I watched the headlights fade farther away into the night. I pulled out the napkin and reread it, hardly believing how easy that was. You show up alone, and you leave alone but not empty handed. May22 didn't ask for my help cleaning up, and I didn't offer it. I sat outside on the concrete step underneath a flickering light that was orbited by moths. Elletta had written a little note by her address (the first one listed):

"As thick as thieves!"

I snorted. She really was over the top, but I think I liked it. It was something I wasn't. The thieves part, though, I'd never heard of that. I knew that thieves took things, and I wonder what we planned on stealing and why the thought of getting in trouble with those six didn't really worry me.

I know now that it was desperation.

Maybe we were going to steal time. Pocket hours and minutes and stuff them right next to the napkin. Maybe we'll take all the lifetimes we want. Maybe we'll take chances.

I think I already had what I wanted, though, and, now that I thought about it, I actually wouldn't mind having a cat either.

Chapter Three:

"No Man is an Island"

That happy feeling was nice while it lasted, but that was before the new DMV building kept collapsing. Mom would have to go with Uncle Aldrich to try and bless the foundation. And when that didn't work, bless the employees. And when that didn't work, they ended up pouring prayers over the actual bricks.

Miska and I had to go with her sometimes, and we watched as the frustration and worry filled the construction workers with every failed attempt. It wasn't long before someone finally said it.

"Vin's angry with us," said one hardhat. "She's furious. She needs a child."

My mother, decked out in her full priestess regalia, flinched. "Let's not state that so -"

"He's right, Roma," Uncle Aldrich folded his arms, looking down. "We probably should have tried that already."

"But -" Roma's eyes flitted from face to face and grazed me before she stared at her hands. "We don't have that many this year. We need to be careful."

"Edgar of 22 of 790 is the one in charge," Aldrich continued. "He has a daughter."

"Oh!" my mother's concern was wiped away, fingers still twitching at her sides. "Oh, well the choice is obvious, isn't it?"

Aldrich laughed. "Dec29, you're transparent."

"I just worry. You would, too."

"I know," his voice softened. "I know."

The conversation stuttered to a stop and died right there. The atmosphere was weird - heavy, in a 'grown up' way. Mom eventually shook herself of it and clapped her hands. "We'll do it tomorrow then. Does that work for everyone?"

This is one of those moments you don't think much about when it happens but haunts you forever afterwards. I look back on this and feel sick. The bile in my stomach feels like its bubbling inside me. I should have figured it out. I should have read the air, but I was just so, so stupid.

Fuck, I'm crying while writing this. So damn stupid.

But I was a kid, and so I just went home and fought with Miska over our damn sidewalk chalk again while my mother called Dove's father. There was yelling on the other line, but I remember Roma's calm but firm voice. I drew a dragon that day, and Dad drove over it with his car, leaving dark track marks all over its wings. I cried for hours while Dove was being prepped for the ceremony on April 4th. I was throwing cheerios at my sister while Dove was changing into her white tunic, a bracket of Oak leaves encircling her hair.

I only got to see her off because I begged my mother to take me with her and Miska back to the construction site because my childhood dream was to drive a steam roller. Maybe she shouldn't have let me. Maybe living in peaceful ignorance would have been a nicer gift than the reality my mother deemed to expose me too. I don't know when I would have figured it out if I hadn't gone.

I was happy to see Dove there. I hadn't seen her since our Social, but we talked over the phone. She lived too far away for me to visit. She was dressed like Mom; in full regalia, the mark of Vin shining on her collarbone in gold paint. I had only ever seen the Jan2s dressed like this on the Planting.

I have many regrets that I'll probably get into in this journal, and this is one of them. Maybe this book will just be a list of my many hopes and mistakes. I've kept track, after all.

Miska and I were standing with Uncle Aldrich and Aunt Romilly, and our cousins, Lenox and Lianna, were there too. Dad wasn't there because of work, but even with him gone, this did kind of turn into a family affair. We all stood before the scaffold, and I remember how awkward it was to tilt my head up to watch my Mom address the crowd, saying prayers, and blessing the stone necklaces that she then draped over Dove's shoulders.

No one explained anything to me. I couldn't even tell Dove was upset because I was just too happy to see her.

So pathetically stupid.

"Early into death, perfect at birth, we bring you forward into the world," Roma rubbed dirt on Dove's wrists, staining them. Dove's eyes were red. "And we commend you back to Vin, whole, and alive, and perfect. Into birth, into life, and returned to birth. A January 2 is replanted in Vin." She brushes some dust against Dove's eyelids. Roma kisses the ten year old's head, and I once again heard the words that haunt me.

"Into Fate, Into Peace."

And Dove cried, and my blood ran cold.

The pair marched towards the construction, and my shaking hand wound into Miska's. There was already a wall up - about ten feet high and one foot wide, hollow and one side missing.

Jaws. Incomplete things like this always look like unhinged jaws.

They tucked her inside, and I finally got it.

It's that brief moment of euphoric epiphany - like you finally got a joke that everyone else has been laughing at - before the ground underneath me shifted and gurgled and swallowed me down. Everything fell into place so perfectly there wasn't any room for misunderstanding. I was in a state of bafflement the rest of the day. Mother was casting concerned eyes in my directions, and Miska was trying her best to bring me back to reality. Bring me back from where I'd fallen into my head.

Oh, I realized, this is why Mei acts the way she does.

It was seeing Dove stand docile, sobs wracking her small body, as her own father and his coworkers laid bricks and cement at her feet. Building up higher and higher, past her knees, past her waist, up to her chest, and she's finally pushing forward, finally begging for mercy that no one here will give her. She's finally saying "no" and "wait" and "please" but it's too late. The bricks cover her head, and she's gone. The only proof that she was even here in the first place was the muffled tears struggling through the stone.

Mom finally had the decency to bring it up officially when we went home where Dad could back her up. Miska was sent to her betrothed's house for a visit so we could have this conversation alone.

"Jan2s die," I say numbly, ignoring my parents' flinch. I repeated myself, picking up speed. "Jan2s die. That's why we don't have betrotheds, or apprenticeships, or jobs, or go to the school with the other kids! That's why -"

"Yes, Bren, yes, but you need to calm down, sweetie," Roma said, reaching out for me.

Her fingers looked like teeth.

I jumped up from our couch and almost ran from the living room completely, but they both stood with me. I was shaking.

“You killed her,” I whispered. “You killed Dove, and you’re going to kill me.”

“It’s not killing!” Roma shouted, drawing up as if pulled by a thread, very much our Section’s Priestess and not my mother. “You are a gift, a divine gift, and payment to Vin.”

I shake my head, eyes wide. “I don’t get it. Why does Vin want me dead?”

Konrad came forward like he wanted to comfort me but was failing. “She doesn’t want you dead, son. She just wants you back.”

“Back?” My voice cracked.

“Yes, baby,” Roma tried to speak softly. “You were born on the second of January. You only have one job - that’s why you don’t have apprenticeships or betrothed. Bren, you can do whatever you want.”

I shook my head. I should have a vivid memory of this conversation, but I think I blocked it out. There was nothing about that I wanted to recall. There was comfort. There was no compassion. There was no protection.

That I do remember. I remember begging my mother and father not to kill me, and I remember them shaking their heads. They sent me to my room to lie down and try to relax, and I spent hours staring at the turning ceiling fan and wondering when I would die. I know I’m not the first person to ever think that, but it felt so close to me now. I saw Dove go into a wall today, and my mind would not abandon the image. Everything dressed up in a mockery of holiness while someone I considered my friend was buried alive. Realizing that I’d be next one day.

Ten was a hard age for me.

At around seven p.m. that same night, after avoiding both my parents and my confused sister, I tiptoed into our kitchen to where I knew my mom kept her phone charging on the island. That charger was labeled, her name scrawled on it with a blue sharpie because Konrad loses

every charger he uses. I've known my mom's password for years, and I pulled out that napkin from my first Social and dialed.

Ring.

Elletta didn't pick up.

Ring.

Eider didn't answer.

Ring.

Neither did Zain or Mei.

Ring.

"Hello?"

"Hello, ma'am, my name is Brennan, and I'm a friend of Roza's?"

"Oh." She sounded surprised. "Okay. Hold on, I'll go get her."

"Thank you." My voice didn't shake. Score.

"Bren?"

Roza sounded exactly like she looked. Quiet, timid, shy, other synonyms for someone who would rather die than be the center of attention. Bad news bears that she will be killed in the middle of a religious ceremony.

I swallowed.

"Bren? Are you there?"

I took a breath. "Do you know?"

The line was silent.

"Roza?"

"Do I know what?"

Her voice was low, and I couldn't tell if she was lying or not.

"About Dove."

That got her attention. "What? Did something happen? Is she okay?"

Those were a lot of words for her, any other time I would have been impressed.

"I'm gonna leave," I say before I could figure out what I was thinking. "I'm going to leave tonight."

"What? Bren -"

"Bye," I whisper, and I hang up.

I could hear voices in the living room, hushed, secret little sounds. My parents.

Remembering it now, I wished I had eavesdropped, but I just went back to my room in a daze. I had a goal, and endgame, for the first time in my life. It was almost thrilling. It's a wonder I didn't explore that with all that I was feeling that night.

I stood in my dark room for a second longer than necessary, taking it all in for the last time. I heard footsteps on the stairs and leapt into bed, buried myself under covers and closed my eyes, my back to my door. The creak sounded at my father's entrance and his exit. Checking on me. Any other time I would be happy, but tonight he was a watchtower. A prison guard making the rounds. And tonight, I was going to be an escapee.

When I felt that the coast was clear, I toed my way into my shoes and opened the door. It was another testament to my life that I had to take one of Miska's school bags because I never went anywhere. No duffels, no backpacks, nothing. I crept down the hallway to my sister's room, turning the door knob slowly to make the click as quiet as possible. I edged my way into her room, the crescent moon nightlight - Miska was still scared of the dark at the time

(something we had in common) - was the only light source, and it provided just enough for me to see her discarded backpack by the foot of her bed.

I didn't look to see if Miska herself was in bed.

The footsteps were my only warning, and I bounded towards her closet door, slamming it shut as quietly as I could. The plastic moon's little light shone out from under the door, right on my tennis shoes.

Someone came into the bedroom. "Is Bren okay, Dad?"

"Yeah, honey. He's just going through a tough time right now. He'll be better in the morning." There was a shuffling sound. "Drink your water and go to bed, okay?"

"Did Mommy cry?"

"What?"

"Senen said that Mom would probably cry when Bren found out."

"Don't believe everything people tell you, hon. Your Mom is fine."

Dad's voice was tight.

"I wish Bren wasn't sad. It's nothing to be sad about."

"Goodnight, Miska."

"Into peace, Dad."

"Into peace."

The thuds of my dad's feet fading as he left the room, and I stood holding my breath to keep from crying.

Miska had already known. Did Mom and Dad tell her before they told me? Did she learn it in school? How is that fair? How was any of this fair?

It's still not fair. I'm writing this from within a locked room. None of this has ever been fair.

I slid down to the floor as slowly and as smoothly as I could. Miska took a while to go to sleep, and I was going to be stuck in the closet until she did. There were dusty toys shoved in the corners, and clothes that had fallen on the floor were under my feet. I flexed my hand in the meager light from under the door. It was dark; it was so dark. I thought of Dove. Was she still alive right now, inside the wall? Did any light reach her from between the bricks?

I remember the sound she made when she went in.

My hand was shaking. My lungs felt like they were shaking, too. My eyes might have been shaking, too, vibrating around inside my head because everything was a little blurry. I couldn't seem to focus. The light was poured all over the floor, and I ran my hand in it. It was so dark. I closed my eyes and made it darker.

I don't know how long I stayed in there, but it was long enough for Miska to fall asleep. With a confidence in my stealth that doesn't exist, I trotted across the room, grabbed the stupid backpack, and made my way out. When you're ten, you pack the essentials. Some clothes, a good blanket, a brown lab stuffed animal, some pens. I didn't have a lot of things I thought were worth toting around the world. I pictured it; me walking with a little stick with a bag of possessions tied to the end. I was picturing myself in the desert for some reason. A tumbleweed, a cow skull -

"Water," I whisper. "I'll need some water."

I swung the bag over my shoulder and made my way to the door, jogging back to dig through my bedside table and grab a flashlight. The house was quiet like a storm, ready to arouse at any given notice and bring with it a downpour. Every corridor had already been memorized,

but once again, it was so dark in here. Had it always been so dark in my home? I dared not turn on a kitchen light lest illumination now came with sound. I shoved my hand into drawers and grabbed some protein bars and stuffed them away in my bag like a thief. I did the same with the water.

I burgled my own house. None of it was ever mine.

I loitered on the doorstep for an unnecessary amount of time. Hand on handle, I looked around the shadowed house. I thought I would be overcome by memories, but nothing in particular came to mind. This was just a place I stayed at. The mausoleum of my living days. I was breaking out tonight. A regular zombie, I pushed open the door.

And it beeped.

We had an alarm. Everytime a door opened there was a small beep. I had forgotten about it, having lived here for so long, but a notification was being sent to my father's phone right now. The house itself was a good jailer. I stood there for a second, actually fucking surprised by my own stupidity, and I heard Konrad say my name from further inside.

I ran.

I knew he was following close behind, but I cut through yards and under fences, and he eventually went back to get in the car. My one employment of intellect told me to stay off the roads, and I dashed off between buildings and under trees. That is freedom right? The moon seemed to disagree with me considering she was out in full glory tonight. At least it wasn't dark out.

This was the start of my wandering, and I started to miss my friends. I was not usually so entirely isolated without another person around. I briefly reminisced on Roza wanting something as simple as a cat. A cat would be nice right now.

I don't fully remember the trip to town, just blurry memories of bugs caught in street lights and rocks in my shoes, but I made it there just the same. There were some people walking through town - it was probably around 9:30, but that was late for little ole me. I strutted by like I belonged there. Everyone knew I didn't.

"Excuse me, sweetheart, are you lost?" a lady asked when I passed her by.

I started. "No. No, I'm just going to a friend's."

"Do you need help getting there?" I don't remember her face, but I remember her voice. Timid, nervous. "I'm Oct6. Who are you?"

Isn't that the question. "I'm Jan1, my name is Miska."

Doctors would have fun breaking apart that decision. I even flashed her the name tag on the backpack.

"Nice to meet you, Jan1," *oh*, that sounded so nice. I straightened up, growing like a damn weed under the cursory glance of the sun.

"Nice to meet you, too," I say, trying to sound like my dad, "goodnight!"

"Woah, wait!" Oct6 got in front of me. "Hold your horses, kid. I - I don't think it's safe for a child your age to be wandering around so late at night."

Better than being in a wall in my opinion. "It's okay -"

"I don't think it is. Do you know your parents' number? I'll give them a call."

I was shaking my head. "No, no, I'm really okay."

"Jan1," now that sounds like an admission of guilt, "it's either we call your parents, or we call the police, and they can take you home."

My little hands clenched on the backpack straps. "I don't want to go home."

I could see where the word *runaway* connected with her. She grabbed my hand, fingers already typing on her phone. Just three numbers. Just had to run into an Oct6. Fucking bleeding hearts, all of them.

And so concluded my worldly travels. The cop car pulled up right then and there, the two of us standing on the sidewalk on Main Street. Because Mommy raised a little gentleman that wouldn't scream and bite to get away but instead would just start crying and shaking like a little blade of grass in the path of a lawn mower. I blustered out my real name for the officer, and Oct6's reaction is burned into my memory.

“Oh!,” a breathe, and then a quieter, “oh.”

I cried harder when she bid me goodbye and called me Jan2.

The officer didn't know what to talk about as we drove back to my dark little house, so it was silent save for the wheezing of the bad air conditioner. The driveway had never seemed so short, the house perilously close to the road. Roma answered the door when we knocked, Miska at her side. Both of them had been crying, so all three of us matched. Dad was still out looking for me. The police had my picture and everything, my birthday front and center under my face. I could pass for Miska if that date wasn't there.

As I was ushered back into the house, smothered by hugs and tears, I came to a surprise in my living room. Roza and her mother were sitting around the coffee table; Roza's eyes matched mine. I stared at her, and she ducked her head.

“They called us soon after you left,” Miska's voice was shaky. “You told her, and you didn't tell me?”

I couldn't say anything. The air was already so depressing, and the presence of two Jan2s wasn't helping. At least no one asked me why I tried to leave.

The officer talked to the adults for a while before patting my head.

“Don’t do this again,” he said firmly. “No man is an island. Stay at home where you belong. People here love you and would miss you if you left.”

Twenty-five year old me would have had the fire to retort that they’re going to have to miss me anyway considering my days were numbered, but ten year old me was caught up on what he said. No man is an island? I’ve only ever been an island. I’ve always been a damn castaway, floating in this coffin house, waiting for someone to show up and *give me something*.

I cried even more as he left. Roma took it to mean I was touched.

It took awhile for my plea to be excused to go to the bathroom was heeded - I was a flight risk after all - but the solitude to break down in peace was worth it. The face in the mirror was identical to my sister. We both had the same short stature and the same short, curly blonde hair. How come we were so different? Born a couple minutes apart, and our futures could not be more different. Was I bitter? Was I mad? I don’t even know.

Was I jealous?

Someone knocked on the door.

I hurriedly splashed water on my face. “One second!”

“Okay,” a small voice said, “take your time.”

I stared at the closed door. I made my way over and cracked it open as if she might hit me. “Roza?”

She was standing there, staring at her feet. I just now realized she was wearing pajamas. They were grey with small, orange cats on them. She was watching me, opening her mouth to say something, but I cut her off.

“Why do you like cats so much?” I said, a tad cruelly. “What’s so good about them?”

Roza's mouth snaps shut, and I could see her floundering. She bounced between answers for a second, her jaw opening and closing as if she might cry instead of speak. She drew herself up like a knife, a hardness I've never seen in her eyes. "I don't need a reason. I just like them."

I ducked my head. We both just stood there for a second, and Roza spoke again, gentler this time.

"Sorry," she said, like most of her sentences start. "I just love them."

"It's okay," I say, tongue thick. "It's been a rough night."

She nods jerkily, and we lapse back into silence.

"Um -"

"I should -"

We both stopped. It's kind of funny how awkward we were in the beginning.

"Bren," Roza said, "you know now."

I stilled, looking into her eyes. "You knew already."

"Yeah," Roza fiddled with her hands. "My parents told me two years ago . . ."

"Oh," I choked out. There's another pause. "Dove's dead."

Roza's head jerked up, her red rimmed eyes were so wide. "What? But we're just -"

"The DMV," breathing is hard, "the new DMV kept falling. They put her in the wall. I saw it, I saw her, Roza, I was there -"

In a moment of unexpected bravery, Roza put her hand on my arm. It was like her touch was keeping me from floating away. She was crying again. We both were.

"I-I -" I was wheezing. "I don't want that to happen - I don't want -"

Roza hugs me, and I hold on as tight as I can. I briefly wonder who was there to hold her when she found out about what being a Jan2 meant. My legs go out, and I drag us to the floor.

We were both crying. Agonizing over our fate, our unfair destiny - not for the first time were we overcome with our own powerlessness in our own lives.

Weak to the point of despair. Carried on the current of our own lives, unable to drown until the time is right. Lambs to the slaughter, the both of us.

We cried until we ran out of tears, and no one came to bother us, strangely enough. Maybe we were given space because of our shared birthday, I don't know. I never really thought about this until now. When we were reduced to just wheezing rest, Roza asked her question.

“Why didn't you take me with you?” her brown eyes stared at me. “Why did you leave me behind?”

I spoke with the only answer I had. “You didn't ask to come with me.”

Roza looked as if I had hit her. She sat, stupefied, for a second before speaking again. “I didn't even know I could.”

I was a hypocrite, but I still told her: “if you want something, you should ask for it.”

I made eye contact. Out of all the people I had met at the Social, Roza was the last person I expected to help me here. The last person I expected anything of, actually. Which is why I gave her a promise. “You can always ask me for things.”

This time when she cried, I like to think it wasn't out of sadness. Roza was the first person to ever sail out to my island, and for the first time, I didn't feel like I was alone.

Now

Bren stopped reading to shake some dirt out of his shirt. It was cold and slightly wet; the ground here was so fertile. Barely any rocks that weren't placed here by the people. Vin is meant to grow things, and She is very good at it.

Bren's Grandmother once called her seedling - much to the horror of everyone under the age of seventy - and it took a while to understand what she meant. As he closed his hand over a clump of soil, watching it retain the imprint of his fit, he got it now.

Seedling.

No wonder that fell out of fashion.

It's a little too on the nose.

Chapter Four:

“A Good Man is Hard to Find”

[Incomplete]

When Dove didn't show up at the next Social, people took notice. The news of her death was the wake up call for the rest of the Jan2s who weren't aware that they were marked for death. There were variations on how people reacted to the news. Some just froze, some cried, Elletta actually broke a handle right off a door, locking us in which did wonders for everyone's new found claustrophobia. It was just delightful. Great party. We all had to go home early which meant I ended up intruding on one of Miska's 'dates'.

I don't fully know if it counts as a date when it's you betrothed, but that was the first time I met Mathias. Mathias and Miska were perfect for each other - which I guess was the point. Priestess and priest chosen, they were destined for divinity it seemed. They were both loud and chipper, bouncy in a way I have never been. Playing with them was like being a bad storm chaser. Instead of feeling that high of adrenaline, I was too slow and ended up just wandering about the debris their chaos created. Usually, when Mathias was over, Mom and Dad let me invite Roza, so it was the two quiet kids and the two whirlwinds. What a perfect picture.

“Do you think it's weird how much I'm over?” Roza asked one day. We were both sitting on the porch, blowing bubbles in the hot summer hair while Miska and Mathias filled up water balloons. I was keeping an eye on those; it will prove to be the end of me if I don't pay attention. Miska had a fondness for headshots.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She falls silent, bouncing the words around in her head. “I feel like my parents prefer it when I'm over here and not home.”

“Maybe they just like you socializing?” I blew a bubble and watched it pop. “My parents like it when I hang out with Miska instead of being in my room.”

Roza falls silent and churns the bubble solution in a nervous, frantic kind of way. Back then, I just assumed the conversation was over and that she agreed, so I was surprised when she spoke up again.

“That’s not what I meant,” Roza whispered. “It seems that they like me being here with *you* specifically. Or . . . any Jan2, I guess. They act the same way when I go over to Elletta’s.”

‘But Eider’s always there’ was left unsaid. Elletta and Eider were the same as Miska and Mathias; natural disasters where Roza and I were spring showers.

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. Roza didn’t speak again til dinner. We really didn’t know what to do with each other back then. I suppose I’ve come full circle because I don’t know what to do with her now. It’s just like we’re ten again.

That summer went by in a blur of blow dryer hot winds and forced ‘fun times’ with the family. I won’t lie and say I wasn’t just a little neurotic the whole break, staring into space and ‘dissociating’ according to a therapist my parents made me go to, but I think I had plenty of reasons. Roma and Konrad would coach Miska on how her apprenticeship will go when she turns fifteen. Miska would work with Mom at the Temple, help organize pews, print out flyers, and give blessings. This would then loop over into how to parent - which Miska loved most, she wanted to be a mother so bad.

Mom reminisced on how much fun it was picking out clothes for us when we were babies, and all of the tiny, miniscule things toddlers did that adults find endearing. Miska ate it all up, talking about how she had baby names picked out already, and she’s run then by Mathias

but he didn't really have much to say over the topic. Not that Miska would really care if he didn't like them anyway.

Meanwhile, there I was, letting the conversation wash over me in hard waves having the realization that I wouldn't live long enough to go to have kids. Not that that was ever really an option, what with Jan2s being sterilized as babies. I was floored when I found that out. Just one more thing everyone else gets to do that I didn't. It was in that book, *The Life Of January Seconds* by a Willum-Something? I don't remember, but it was the book that was written to break the hard news to Jan2s when their parents didn't want to. It was really preaching, talking all about the joys of our sweet, short lives. How we had so much freedom with our dreams and relationships without destined husbands and wives. Meanwhile I'm ten reading this thinking, *I don't have the pleasure of reaching twenty-six, sir*. What kind of freedom even is this? Congrats, you can do whatever you want but only for a few years. It suddenly feels so cheap, everything static because the one thing that you want - just a couple more years - is something you can never have.

Nothing of note really happened for the rest of the year. Or the year after that for that matter. The attitude my parents carried was one of relief, a massive parenting hurdle was over and done with for them. Time to move on, I guess. It wasn't so bad. Getting older meant hanging out with my friends more. Picnics at the small park off of the square where I'd sit with Roza as we both flipped through the pamphlets from the local animal shelter. She still hasn't asked her parents for a cat. I didn't understand why she was so desperate to limit herself. Maybe she just was terrified of being told no and so refused to even ask.

But I think the biggest downside was by far the fact that my mom was at the Temple every single day and sometimes I had to go with her and sit in silence in what will one day be my

tomb. All the decorations, all of the relics, even that Temple shade of grass green started to piss me off and make me cry all at the same time. I would sit in my mother's office - sometimes with that stupid Jan2 book - and wait for her to take me home. Whenever that would be. But that was the only time I saw the older Jan2s whenever they would come in for 'blessings' and those who were about to turn twenty-five were given their pamphlets to study (the same one that rests on my bedside table. The one with all the smiling faces and bright, bright teeth like broken rocks, staring at me right now).

Roma worked to make sure I wasn't around whenever the older Jan2s came in - maybe to keep them from talking to me or to overall discourage interaction completely - but I would find a way to sneak down the weird ant hill hallways and hover behind corners to hear and see. I wanted to see them, to ask questions, but I always felt like I was choking whenever I finally saw them. There was one time where I was the one approach though, and it was both a blessing and a curse.

"Hi, there," he had said, and anyone who has ever been addressed by someone kind and older than you as a child understands the spurt of unhindered happiness and the sharp boost of self esteem. But I was shy and so just nodded with wide eyes.

"What are you doing sneaking around here by yourself? Did you lose your mom?" he asked. I wonder why everyone thought I was lost as a kid.

I shook my head and pointed at Roma who was standing a little ways away, talking to a small group of people. He followed, and his eyes widened. He snapped back to me, the undercurrent of a reluctant epiphany bubbling under his gaze. "What may I call you?"

I hated that question. People always treated me differently when they found out the answer. "I'm a Jan2."

The suspicion confirmed, the light-hearted demeanor of ‘I’m talking to a child, better by all nice and happy’ visually bled out of him but not in the way I was used to which confirmed something for me, too.

“I’m a Jan2, too.” The tired curve of his mouth suited him better than an actual smile. “So why don’t you just call me by my name. I’m Chris.” He stuck his hand out, and I tentatively shook it. First name bases weren’t exactly what I expected from a first meeting, but there was a sense of adventure about breaking free of constraints even if they were just verbal ones.

“My name’s Brennan.”

“How old are you, Brennan?”

Another question I don’t like to answer. “I’m fifteen.”

“Cool, I’m twenty years old.” He was watching me, gauging my reaction, and I was too young to even try and mask my visual despair at the fact that he only had five years left. It was like a portal to the future, a mirror set here just to remind me of where I’ll be one day.

Oh, the games we play in order to try and understand each other.

“You know your way around this place, right?” Chris said. At my nod he gave that fake smile again. “Can you show me where the bathroom is?”

I glanced back at my mom who had no idea I was even here and started to walk off, Chris hot on my heels. The bathroom was a little farther away, and the hallway was empty. So no one noticed whenever Chris hurriedly ducked inside, draggin me in with him. When the door closed, he leaned down to check underneath all of the stall before returning his gaze to me. There was a frantic urgency in him, a cornered animal kind of mentality that was so strong it seemed to hover in the air.

“I’m going to tell you something you *cannot* tell anyone else, okay?” Chris kneeled down in front of me, and only at my confused nod did he continue. “You don’t have to die at twenty-five.”

Looking back on it, I almost want to curse him for even giving me that hope, but at the time, I latched onto it as if I was drowning.

“What?” I wheezed.

He nodded frantically. “There’s someone that can change your birth certificate, give you a different birthday, and set you up to live in a different section. He can save people like us.” The various smiles Chris showed me gave away his emotions. This specific smile was strangely wistful and happy. I wasn’t used to seeing anyone with the birthday January 2nd happy unless they were still living in the blissful ignorance of childhood. I wanted to smile like that. I wanted to be as carefree as the sheer idea of an out gave this stranger.

“His name is Nadan, and he lives off of Country Road 8. There will be a totaled blue truck on the side of the road and after that there will be a totaled silver one. Take a right at the silver one - it’s not an actual road, but there are gaps in the trees big enough for a car. Whenever you get to his door, he’ll ask you why you came all the way out in the middle of nowhere. Tell him “a good man is hard to find”, okay?” He was holding my shoulders. I didn’t fully understand his intensity at the time, but looking back on it, he was just trying to save my life.

“Have you met him?” I asked, unbelieving.

Chris flinced. “No . . . I didn’t have the chance. Someone I met at a Social told me about him, and they disappeared, so I assumed it worked . . .”

I was never a gambler, but I could tell how badly he wanted to go see this Nadan. “If I go, come with me.”

This startled him, but he gave that weird bitter smile again and shook his head. “You’re a good kid, but I can’t. I’ve snuck off one time too many.”

I get what he means now, seeing as how I did the same. Under watch. Under lock and key before you’re underground.

Just as he said that, there was a commotion outside. Chris sighed and said “That’s my queue.” He stood and patted my head as he walked out of the bathroom. When the door opened I heard many voices yelling. Chris was yelling back. There was eventually a thunk, and everything got quiet. Once the silence reigned for long enough, I opened the door a crack, and peered into an empty hallway. Taking a shuddering breath, I once again closed the door and retreated fully to one of the empty stalls where I sat with my knees pulled up to my chest. I cried for a minute; Chris gave me something I never even considered having. Something I’ve dreamed about, sure, but never actually fully cared to imagine into reality.

A way to decide my own fate.

That was scarier than the thought of dying.

After I pulled myself out of the crumbling mess I was becoming, I left the bathroom stall and went to find my mom. She was still talking to the same people from before and barely acknowledged me when I walked up to her and threw my arms around her waist. Chris was nowhere in sight.

Roma prattled on happily about some of the decorations they were putting up in the Temple for the changing of the season while on the way home. This was one of those moments I vividly remember wishing I was a more outgoing person because that way my silence would be seen as unusual and she’d ask me what was wrong. But when we picked Miska and Senen from school, their loud retellings of their day drowned me out even more, and I resigned myself to my

quietude. As we walked in the house, Mom went to the kitchen where Dad was already making dinner. He patted my head as I went by and asked me to help set the table.

“Six plates?” I asked, surprised. “Who else is coming tonight?”

He opened his mouth to answer me, but the ring of the doorbell interrupted him. He gave a sly smile. “Why don’t you go and see?”

Cradling the plates to my chest, I went to open the door. Roza was standing on the front steps in a light blue dress that would become her favorite as the years went by. It was the first time I remember thinking she was pretty.

“Hey,” she said, looking a tad guarded.

I move to open the door wider and fumble with all the plates. “Hi. Um, I didn’t know you were coming over?”

Probably wasn’t the right thing to say considering how she seemed to shut in on herself even more, and I worked quickly to resolve the situation.

“Not that you’re not welcome or anything.” My hands were getting sweaty. “I just didn’t - um, I wasn’t aware that you were coming, and I -” I make even more room in the doorway.

“Please come in -”

I lose a plate.

The resounding crash saved me from talking anymore considering I could only stare at the shattered ceramic on the door mat. I probably would’ve continued to stare at it if I didn’t hear the weird noise Roza made. Face feeling hot, I slowly turned my gaze upwards to see Roza with a hand covering her mouth as her shoulders shook.

I knew her laugh; it was always quiet and hidden, as if she was more embarrassed by the fact that she was tickled by something than whatever she was laughing at. In comparison to my

sister, who was willing to scream her joy to the sky, Roza's reservation was both refreshing and relatable. Roza always made me feel as if I wasn't reacting the wrong way to things. This laugh was new however, and I think I liked it more.

She helped me pick it up and I finally escorted her inside and into the dining room where my family was standing watching us expectedly. I don't think I've ever made my face as red as I had that night, almost ten years ago now. I set the plates down and cleaned the mess I made on the front steps and eventually found myself sitting down next to Roza. The dinner was awkward, but she made it better.

My parents once again went off about Mathias and Miska's wedding, talking about dresses and veils and foods and table settings while Roza and I commented about how dry the chicken was quietly to each other. The rest of my family tuned us out.

"I really didn't know you were coming," I murmur.

"I didn't know I was coming either," she replied, "but my mom had this dress picked out and did my hair as soon as she walked in the door. She even sent me with an overnight bag, so I guess I'm spending the night too."

I frowned. "Is it a holiday? An anniversary?"

She shrugged. "I don't have a clue what's happening. Do you have any water?"

I nod and head to the kitchen. While I poured Roza a glass, and that's where my dad cornered me.

"So," he began in the most cliché tone of voice any dad can use with his son when a girl was over. "How's it going?"

I gave him a look. "It's going."

He nodded, smiling. Konrad glanced back into the dining room and danced closer, fumbling for something in his pocket. “You should use this - I know children aren’t a problem but it’s still a good idea to be safe.”

“Safe? Safe from what -”

He holds out a condom.

I almost break another glass. My tone is biting when I say “Dad, what -”

“This is awkward, I know, I know, but you’re a young man.” Konrad takes my hand and drops off the rubber. “It’s a requirement of Jan2s anyway. You do like her, don’t you?”

I’m beat red for the second time that night. “That’s not the problem. I-”

Konrad wrapped me into a hug I didn’t want and headed back to the dining room. “Keep that in your pocket for now, yeah?”

I was left standing there, that thing curled up into my hand. I was holding it as tight as possible, folding my fingers in weird ways to cover it completely. It felt like a sentencing. It felt like evidence to a crime I didn’t commit. It felt like just another thing I didn’t want to do that was expected of me. I will learn later that this was mentioned in that book mom gave me, but I never finished it. I wonder if I could find it now.

I did stuff that damn thing in my pocket and had to backtrack to remember what I came into the kitchen for anyway. I was like a shaken soda that had just exploded everywhere - too many little pieces of me spreading out of the tile in every which way with no direction other than *away*. I stood there longer than necessary, and a part of me contemplated climbing through a window and hightailing it to Zane’s house but I couldn’t ditch Roza like that. I needed to talk to her about this anyway - or I should at least. It depends on if I could get the words out.

I had trouble talking through the rest of dinner, and Roza didn’t try to get me to.

We eventually moved to the living room where my mother and Miska fought over what movie to watch for twenty minutes before we finally settled on watching reruns of an old sitcom I never learned the name of. It shouldn't have felt like a punishment to share the loveseat with Roza, but it did with my parents looking over with approval. I remembered when she and her mom were sitting on this that time the cops caught me running away and any desire I had at all to reach out and take her hand went out the window. My stomach churned.

My parents wouldn't let Miska and Mathias sit together, but then my mom asked me if Roza and I needed a blanket. The glare Miska sent my way was unappreciated.

It was around ten o'clock when Mathias' dad came to take him home, and Miska made sure to groan and grumble about it the whole time. With a friendly punch to my arm, he left, and it was just my sister, Roza, and myself.

"Okay, kids," my mom clapped her hands. "It's pretty late, so why don't we go to bed?"

"Late?" I repeat. "What do you mean late -"

"I can help set up the air mattress," Roza offered.

Roma shook her head. "No, honey, you can say in Bren's room tonight, okay?"

Roza's mouth snapped shut so hard, I heard her teeth clack. She blushed, then paled, and her eyes teared up. And I was completely useless on how to help her.

Miska just snorted and elbowed me and whispered, "stud." She hightailed it up the stairs and into her room, slamming the door louder than necessary which earned her a glare from Dad. My mom looked between Roza and I expectantly before finally physically pushing us up the stairs.

"Alright, I'll see you in the morning. Or, actually, if you need anything, your father and I are downstairs. Just try to keep it down, okay? I have work tomorrow."

“Mom!” I squeak out, almost tripping over a step as she herded us to my room. “Hold on a second -”

“Oh hush,” she patted my head and kissed my hair. “Have a good time now. Goodnight.”

And with that, she shoved us into my room, turned off the light, and closed the door. We stood there in the dark for a second, balancing our breaths, before I slowly went over and turned the light back on. When I faced her again, Roza was crying.

“I’m so stupid,” she said, taking her hair down in jerky movements. “I’m so stupid.”

“Listen, I’m sorry about them. I- uh, I don’t really know why they’re -”

“Do you have that one book?” She interrupted. Roza never interrupts anyone.

“What?” I was blanking.

“That one Jan2 book that they gave out as a way to *explain* our purpose? It’s the life of Jan2s or something - do you have it?” She walked over to my meager bookshelf, running her finger across the spines as she searched.

My hands drifted up uselessly and hung there as I struggled to remember where it was or why it mattered right now. Her stress was infectious, and I was starting to twitch. I eventually strung two thoughts together and looked inside the drawer to my bedside and found it lying there ominously. Roza snatched it and started rifling through the pages. It was a relatively large book - maybe four hundred pages - and she was looking for something specific. I stood by idly as she growled and had to look through the table of contents to try and find what she was looking for.

Her hair hung in sturdy clumps around her face - she had used hairspray - and her dress was still pristine even after eating dinner. My own shirt had a stain near the hem, and I felt my heart tweak in my chest. She was still pretty, but it was hard to remember that when her mouth was so tense and her eyes were wild. Her hands shook and her chest heaved, and I was starting to

copy her. My own breathing was becoming erratic, my hands still twitching near my heart as I curled my arms in. To stop them, I formed fists and pressed my hands against my chest. I could keep it all in as long as she didn't talk to me. I could pretend for as long as I needed to just so long as no one acknowledges me. I could ride this. I could ride this.

She eventually found what she was looking for and pointed at the print with a passion I had never known her to possess. Reading aloud she said, "*you will be encouraged to have relations with other Jan2s. Because you are sterile these relations are purely of love - the restrictions that embrace the rest of the populace will not apply to you. You must fall in love. You must live.*" She growled and threw the book to the, and I tried not to flinch upon impact. "Yeah, we must live so it'll be a much bigger deal when they *murder us.*"

"Roza," I breathe. I had never heard that word used in regards to what was to happen. Murder was a sin. It was a crime. It was never applied to what was going to happen to us. They weren't murdering us; they were killing us.

"I'm right!" Roza snapped, throwing her arm out wide. "How am I anything but right? We -" she bounced two fingers between the pair of us, "- we are going to die. But, Bren, tell me something." I was stock still as she marched up to me, leaning into my space. I could smell dinner on her breath and her shampoo from her hair. "Do you want to?"

I blinked. "What?"

"Do," Roza stressed, "you want to die?"

I had never in my life asked myself that question, and I have never been brave enough to answer. Did I want to die? Did I want to miss out on growing up, of the future Winterfests and October Nights? Did I want my family to live on without me, grow old enough to where they could only remember me as the evanescent memory of a cog in a machine?

I shake my head. I was going to cry. “Don’t ask me. Please, don’t ask me that.” I tried to breathe. I hadn’t been breathing this whole time and just now noticed. “I can’t give the answer. I can’t - I can’t -”

I remember watching her come back to herself. All the fire she apparently had burning deep under her skin went out under my tears. Her face went like the moon, a pale light that waned into a mimsy gray. She collapsed like wet tissue. She turned her back to me and sat on the bed with a weight that was more than what she had.

“Don’t answer, then,” she whispered. “Please, just- just forget it.”

That was worse. I shook my head. “I don’t want to forget. Don’t ask me that either.”

She looked over her shoulder at me. “Then what do you want?”

Again, a question I had never asked myself. I choked on the spit in my mouth. “I want-” Another choke, as if my body was forcing me to stay silent. I give the only emission I could. “Roza, I want to live.”

She was up and in my arms, and I finally noticed she was crying too.

Thinking about it now, I think that’s the moment everything changed for me. I was so used to just floating along reluctantly through my own life, like my family had a chain on me and dragged me through the years. The memory of earlier today returned.

“There’s someone who might be able to help us,” I whispered into her hair. I told her about what Jan2 Chris said, about the hope he gave me that I didn’t know what to do with, and I watched her eyes widen in her already pale face.

“Country Road 8? That’s almost forty minutes away, we can’t walk that,” Roza said. “We’re going to need a ride.”

Very few Jan2s get their license - most parents don't see the point in it - but luckily enough, we knew someone who did. "Elletta won't keep this quiet though."

"Did you ever plan on telling her?"

No sense in lying. I told her no. "She doesn't want to run, and I didn't know if I would have told *anyone*."

She closed off again. "You wouldn't have told me?"

"Not to leave you behind," I rushed to say. "I didn't know if I would have gone at all."

She looked away. "Do you know anyone with a license who could help besides Elletta?"

I thought about it for a second before an unfortunate realization came to mind. "Oh no."

Senen, 57 of 790 was a Feb3 meaning he was priest-chosen. He was slightly older than me, maybe by about two years, and was already into his apprenticeship at the Temple under Uncle Aldrich. He was bragging all about his license for the past three weeks, and his number was sitting innocuously in my contact.

There was an argument about who would make the call. We shoved reasons back and forth until Roza finally won with a, *'I don't even know him and you're the one who has his number'*. Weirdly enough, it didn't seem like Senen had anything to do this evening either.

We turned off the lights and waited. Someone came by at some point and stood outside the door, listening. In hindsight, I would have faked a moan or banged on my bedside table, but I was too red faced and tongue tied to do anything at all to prove that what was expected of us was actually going down. I don't know if I'd be able to do that if I was alone much less in front of Roza.

About thirty minutes later, Senen texted me saying he was outside, parked around the corner like I asked him. Roza borrowed a pair of shorts to wear under her dress, and we both

shimmied down the drainpipe outside my window. We tried to be as quiet as possible - although, I don't think my parents would be upset about us sneaking out, just about who we were going to go see. We hustled to Senen's car. It was a beat up, blue hand me down. Maybe from a cousin or something, and it smelled like old cigarettes and gum. Roza ducked into the backseat, and I took the front. I get carsick like nothing else. Vomit wasn't something we needed on top of everything tonight, and I don't have much faith in Senen's driving skills to be merciful.

"Hey, man," he greeted, a wide smile pulling on his skin. He shook his head as if mystified. "Gotta admit, I didn't think you had it in you. You seem like a goody-two shoes. No offense."

I was offended, but I have been told that it's not hard to do. I buckled up and refused to look at him. "Thanks for doing this. I owe you."

Senen started the car and laughed me off. "It's cool. Not like you're going to be around long enough to actually deliver on any debt, am I right?" He reached out and shoved my arm. I gave a sound that probably passed as a laugh. "So where are we going and why?"

In the rearview mirror I could see Roza's brows furrow, but she didn't say anything.

"Didn't want our date to end in my childhood bedroom?" I say to her. Her eyes widened, but she just shrugged helplessly as Senen guffawed.

He laughed so hard he playfully slammed his head into the steering wheel, jerking us around on the road. "No way, holy shit, Bren, I did *not* peg you for that kind of guy." He turned around and addressed Roza. "You're really going with this guy? Blink twice if you need help!"

"Hey . . ." I started, but he was already turned back around. Roza resorted to looking out the window and dissociation. I was a tad jealous, but I had to give directions.

Senen always seemed to be laughing. “In an old field? *Dude*, you’re such a cliché, it’s almost sad. You guys going for in-of-the-world-sex because you only got ten more years?”

Always laughing even if no one else was. Always joking even when it’s not funny. I didn’t know if I wanted to be more like him or the complete opposite. “Just drive, please.”

“Sure, sure, but you owe me big time for this. I’m a porn chauffeur.”

“We’re not going to be filming anything!”

“You should, it could be found by archaeologists a million years in the future or something. You could end up in a museum.” We drove out of the city.

“Why would I want a video of me having s-sex to end up in a museum?” I backtracked. “And I don’t owe you anything for this! You’re here because you smuggled pot into the Temple and I didn’t rat you out! You owed me.”

“Potato, patahto,” Senen giggled.

I don’t know why that is such a vivid memory in my head. Maybe because it was only the beginning of me calling in favors from Senen. I definitely owe him now, not that there’s anyway to repay him now. Weirdly, he was one of my best friends. Past tense, of course.

“Take a right after we pass the grey truck,” I said.

Senen gave me some side eye. “You have a very specific place you wanna do this.”

I blushed. “I . . . put some things over there. Things that we’ll - uh, need.”

I made eye contact with Roza in the back. She squinted at me and turned away.

“Holy Vin,” Senen shook his head in awe and did as I asked. I always thought it was so weird to hear someone who was going to be our next priest swear on our god’s name, but back then it never even occurred to me that maybe Senen wasn’t *supposed* to be a priest in the first palace. His parents were caught trying to schedule his birthday, trying to ensure that he was born

on a day that would benefit them in terms of money and prestige. If I remember correctly, they wanted to have him on September 17 in order to become a president chosen. Vin has a funny way of ratting out people who do that to her worshipers. I think it was my mom who caught them and so did the proper rites to divine where Vin wanted a new child. It all boiled down to Senen being a Feb3. Vin doesn't tolerate thieves or arrogance. She takes back what isn't handled correctly and decides for us.

“Let us out here, please.”

Senen stopped the car and made kissy faces at us as we climbed out. As he's leaving, pocketing some spare cash I was able to scrounge up for him, he called out, “give her a kiss for me, Bren!” then peeled back onto the dirt road, his car making upsetting little chugging sounds.

Roza and I stood in an uncomfortable silence as she turned to me and raised her eyebrows.

“I don't know how to drive!” I defended myself.

She rolls her eyes and changes the subject. “Where to next?”

“Um.” I turned to look at the wooded area around us. Chris said there wasn't a path, but there was room between the trees for a car. Looking a little farther into the darkness, it was easy to see the way. I started forward, and Roza followed.

The trees were weak looking things, all spindly and breakable. A heavy wind might upend the whole place. It was weird walking into a place that felt so temporary when it was legitimately rooted into the earth. It was a long walk, the stars were barely out, but we eventually found a dilapidated house tucked away among the dead branches. Roza reached out and fisted her hand into my shirt and remained standing behind me which sucked because I definitely

didn't walk to lead. We stalled for a second before I felt her hand push me forward slightly. I chewed on the inside of my cheek and went to the front door, knocking lightly.

There wasn't a response for a second, but eventually, a gruff voice answered. "Who is it?"

That wasn't what Chris said he would do. That wasn't what he was supposed to do, so what do I do now? I thought this was scripted, wait a second - "Uh . . . hello?"

Another beat of silence. "Well? Who is it?"

I looked to Roza in a panic, but she was no help at all. Her eyes were just wide, her hand shaking against my back. I turned back to the door. "I'm Jan2 and this is . . . Jan2, too. Wait, not like Jan22, I meant Jan2 as in also. We're both - uh, both Jan2 . . ." My face was burning.

Silence once again before the man finally said, "What are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere?"

Finally. "A good man is hard to find."

The man scoffed. "Ain't that the truth. Fine, come on in."

We heard the door unlock, and it drifted outward slightly. I reached out slowly, and pulled it open even more and ducked inside.

It was dark inside, a worrying amount. Somehow, the lackluster light of the stars outside provided more visibility than this black hole of a house. I took a step back, more than ready to just leave, but I ran right into Roza, knocking her back. Her foot slid off the concrete porch step, and she laid sprawled on the unlevelled ground with a cry. I choked on my own noise and reached for her.

"Oh," a voice said in realization. "You're the timid type."

Nadan was shorter than me, but his eyes were brighter. He looked at us as if he just found some rabbits caught in a trap, struggling and screaming and only alerting the hunters to come and collect. He appeared right at my back, freaking me out even more as I hurried back to Roza's side. What a sight on the first meeting.

“Usually the timid ones don't bother coming here,” Nadan continued. “I usually get the fighters.”

Definitely not us, not from where we were cowering on the ground.

Now

Bren purposefully ran his thumb down the edge of his journal just to feel the cut and watch the blood bubble tentatively underneath his skin. Maybe he wouldn't have dreaded his future so much if he could have been assured that his death would have been quick. In other Sections people go under blades or into flames or under waves, but here he is more than six feet down but still alive.

Tickled by his own rhyme, Bren's fingers twitch with the urge to write that down for later before he remembers he doesn't have a pen or really a 'later'. Bren licked his bloody thumb and thought about food. If he cut himself more, his last meal could be his own blood. He whispered a curse.

There was a sound on the other side of the first, where the stone hallway is. A quiet sound that bounced in footsteps, and Bren jerked up. There was enough room to stand. The stone that was walled up after he climbed in and separated him from whoever was walking away was cold on his hands and soothing on his papercut. Bren - against all reasoning - slapped his palm against the rock. "Hello?"

It hadn't been that long at all, but Bren's throat was already to scatchy.

Well, he didn't actually know how long it had been. There wasn't exactly a clock in here.

Before he was buried, Bren swore to himself that he would endeavor to be stoic. To be calm, cool, collected, and anything else he needed to be to subvert the expectations of the people who knew he was down here. Those are bold vows of a stupid man, and there has been plenty of time for self reflection buried in a wall.

Bren slapped his hand against the stone again. "Hello? Is anyone out there?"

No answer, of course.

He slapped again. “Hey, I-I need to go to the bathroom. Could you just let me out for one second?”

No one answered.

Bren turned his hand into a tight fist and slammed it as hard as he could into the stone, heedless of the sharp sting. “Hey! Let me out!”

No one answered.

He threw his journal down and used both hands to pummel the wall. As if the only reason no one came to help him was because no one heard. As if he could beat his way out of his own coffin. He punched the wall until his knuckles split and he painted the stone red, smearing it with frantic fingers. When his fists hurt too much, Bren switched to scratching, nails bending under the force of his frenzy.

He was crying. He always devolved into crying.

Hours went by like this, and Bren, thoroughly exhausted, crumbling against the wall like a limp puppet. He pressed his cheek against the rock, warmed by impact and sticky with his own blood. The sides of his hands were numb; the bed of his middle finger burned from where it lost its nail. He slid down until he was bent over on the ground. The dirt stuck to his white clothes, damp and compact. Bren closed his eyes, going through another cycle of defeat and surrender until something else lit a fire under him. Until something else about his life pissed him off enough to actually strike back. He just had to wait till he lost again.

Today, the last thing he succumbed to was sleep.

Now

[Post Chapter fourteen]

[Incomplete]

Bren closed his journal with limp hands. That was it. That was all he had. Everything in his life added up to just a few pages. It was so dark in here. So dark and wet. He might not starve, he could just rot away right now. Hidden away in the dirt like some animal was storing for winter.

Emotion - he doesn't know which one - churns in his stomach, arching through his veins and he jerked and flailed. He screamed out his injustice, his pain, his sorrow, and helplessly kicked his feet against the stonewall in front of him. It pushed him back into the dirt crevice, and he kept kicking and pushing. Maybe hoping to get it out of his system. Maybe hoping to break his back. Mostly wanting something on the outside to hurt for a change.

His screams were cut off when the dirt to his back gave way, and he fell.

Bren was surprised by his own silence.

Epilogue

“Let’s Talk of Graves, and Worms, and Epitaphs”

[Incomplete]

As soon as the dirt gave way, it fell like rain into the chamber. The stone floor which had never felt sunlight was suddenly bathed in it. The pile of bones in the corner was easy to see now, out of the darkness.

Dr. Alexander Whippet coughed a bit as the dust rustled in the air. Despite that, he had to fight the urge to take a deep breath; no one had been in this room for over three hundred years. Well, nothing except the corpse of a young man.