

MARSEILLE, FRANCE—1343

“Your eyes.”

The man hovers over me, gripping my shoulder. His fingers dig into my bones. I stand in the middle of the market, surrounded by people, but that doesn't change the fact that if I were to scream, no one would hear me.

“What are you?” he asks.

He pushes me away, and I stumble into a wooden cart full of barley. The merchant glares at me before turning his attention back to a customer.

“Are you a witch, girly?”

The man is large, huge compared to me. I stare at his hands; they could kill me. He wouldn't hesitate to strangle me.

“What are you?” he screams, and this time more people in the street glance over in our direction.

“I'm nothing,” I sputter. “Nothing out of the ordinary.” The words were meant to sound strong but come out only as a whimper.

“Silver.” The man points to my eyes.

I wrap my arms around my middle. Strangers in the street stare; they want to see what this man sees.

“This girl has silver eyes! She barely has an iris!”

“No,” I beg.

The man slaps me across the face and grabs my shoulder again. “Anyone who holds witness to this young girl, come forward. If no one speaks to her innocence, then she must be the Devil's child.”

I look across the field of strangers. Everyone in the marketplace has stopped and turned their attention to my eyes. No one rushes forward to save me or to stand witness by saying I have nothing to do with the Devil's work. Instead the faces look curious. *How will this end?* They want to know. *Will this man kill the girl he holds? Or will he beat her, rape her, and leave her in the streets, scoffing at her uselessness in the world?*

“Please,” I cry. I had been saying it to the strangers in the street, but when they make contact with my eyes, they all look away. The man holding me prisoner is my only hope now. “Please ...” I look to the ground and with a shove, I'm on my knees, my skirts sprawling out around the cobblestones.

It's my eyes. The irises—they lack pigment, leaving only a small pupil in the center of my eye. It tells the public I'm unsafe, not to be trusted. Mama tells me that I've been like this from birth. I was

born the day the sky grew dark. The moon and sun aligned in the sky, and all that could be seen was the circular outline of the sun's rays behind the moon. Everyone knew to look away from this turn of nature, but I was drawn to the sight. Years later, here I stand, silver-eyed and accused of being a witch.

"Will they hang her, Mama?" a little boy whispers to his mother in the crowd.

I look at him in his dirty clothes that hang from his body. He clutches his mother's skirt, as he looks back at me, hiding behind her with a muffled cry.

They all want to kill me.

A sharp pain cuts across my back. "Be there any witness to this girl's innocence?" the man shouts again, a leather whip balanced in his hands.

I haven't done anything wrong. I didn't look at anyone, like Mama told me. I kept my eyes down. I paid for my food, was careful not to disturb others, but this man looked at me. He saw my eyes, and that's all it took. Most strangers glance quickly, see my irises, and walk away, afraid to bring attention to something they can't explain. This man gripped my hand as soon as he saw me and questioned me without allowing time for answers.

The whip comes down on my back again, and I curl into a ball on the street. My body numbs the pain, and soon the tears streaming down my face are the only things I can feel.

"I've done nothing," I say in a whimper.

"She speaks lies!" a woman in the crowd shouts. "I saw her steal the kale! Look at it! She's hidden it in her satchel!"

Lies. They all lie. Why do they want me to die?

The man coils the whip around his wrist in order to bend down and take the satchel slung across my body. I release my grip on my belongings and give up fighting. Even though I know the lashings have stopped for now, it's as if the leather still drags across my skin. Hot, fresh blood warms my back, pooling on the cobblestone path. No one moves to help me.

"What's this, girly?" He holds out the kale I had purchased just seconds ago.

I shift my gaze to the merchant I had bought it from, but he cowers away. Another man from the crowd comes forward and kicks my back.

"Don't you look at him," the stranger yells.

"I purchased it." But it's just a shout among chaos. My words are nothing.

The merchant speaks up, "She bought nothing from me. The girl is a thief!"

When I look at him again, he stares at me with malice, like I really am the thief he accuses me of being.

This is where I will die. Not because of the flu or starvation, but murder. These strangers want to kill me under false charges, and no one here is willing to stop them.

"Please," I say again, turning to my would-be killer. The crowd stands over me. The man's feet

are just inches from my face, and I know that, if he wanted, he could draw out my death and see just how long I would suffer before my body succumbs.

He laughs at me and uncoils the whip for the second time. The crowd gathers.

From the corner of my eye I see mothers push their children back, guarding them from the scene that is about to unfold. Men close in, make jokes, mock me, kick at my body, even though I give no fight.

My tears are cold. My hands are dirty. My body is broken, but my eyes supposedly hold an evil everyone can see. I am not this evil.

I look up at my accuser and he smiles, whips the leather to make a loud snap. It cuts in front of my line of sight. It doesn't touch me, but a fast, cool breeze of air warns me of the danger. He takes his stance. This time, when he brings down the whip, I can tell he means to hit me.

One.

I put up my hands to block the blow.

Two.

I close my eyes, trying to forget the face of this horrible man.

Three.

“No!”

Someone screams, just as the leather cuts across my hands and face. It's not my scream.

“Aida!” she calls out again.

My hands fall away, and I catch a glimpse of my accuser winding his whip back again for another blow. He wants me to bleed. He wants the witch's blood to spill. Doesn't he understand, witches don't bleed? That's what the tales say—witches can't bleed. It's the only way to tell a Devil's advocate from a human.

“I bear witness. Aida is my friend! She's no witch! Stop yourself!” the girl screams in terror.

My head turns, and then I see her. Cyrielle.

She runs toward me, but my thoughts leave me. The last thing I hear is my own shallow breathing.



I had a dream once that I passed on and no one cared.

It was just me, lying on the dirt floor of our small cruck house. Papa decided I wasn't good enough to sleep on the thin mattress of straw. I was dying; why would it matter if I were comfortable or not? So they left me there. With no tears or goodbyes, they departed. My *family*.

A heart beats only as long as someone is there to witness its livelihood. As each second passed,

the air grew colder, and the sun slipped from the window's view. Dying was strange, unlike I'd expected. I was light-headed, with a crushing pressure on my chest that kept me from moving or screaming. In my dream I cried, because I could tell nothing was happening. The glory of the Father didn't bring me salvation, like I had been told.

I was dying. I was alone.

BOOK 1

I.

Anton walks into our small home, the walls made of wattle and daub, a straw roof with a hole above the fire that Mama uses to cook our meals. He's a tall man with a strong build, perfect for working the fields. Margo married him three years ago, after Papa arranged a trade—Anton's best sheep for Margo's hand in marriage.

To Papa his daughters are nothing more than an item to sell. That's all women are worth after all, right? We're too weak, too tender, to work in the fields like men. We are to cook, to clean, to tend to our husbands. Compared to the heavy work our husbands and brothers do, we are nothing but the womb that produces the next set of workers.

Mama doesn't notice Anton at first. He's supposed to live in the next village, raising his family. He scans our home, until he notices me skinning a rabbit in the corner. When his eyes rest on mine, I drop my knife. It makes a soft thud as it comes to rest in the dirt.

"Taking your latest victim?" he asks.

I begged Margo not to marry him, but she was charmed by his very presence, with his lean muscles and dark hair that fell to his chin. He was never to be questioned. And that is why he hates me, because I've always questioned him.

"Dondre brought the coney," I say, holding up the bloodied fur. The meat of the animal rests in a skillet next to me, waiting to be cooked.

"Anton, what are you doing here?" Mama snaps at him, finally turning around. Her dark hair is gathered in braids around her head and covered by a hood, just as all married women should fashion themselves.

"I've come to deliver your daughter."

Margo walks through the threshold then, her own child in tow. Joelle is four years old, the mirror image of Margo, with light hair braided down her back, like Margo used to wear before marriage. Upon entering, Joelle lets go of Margo's hand and finds company with Mama.

"What's wrong?" Mama asks, pushing Joelle away to see Margo.

"Always welcoming, Celine."

Anton is about to pick up the knife I dropped, but Mama doesn't give him a chance to step farther into our home.

"Out with you!"

She doesn't trust him. Never has. Maybe she understands this man, like I do. Papa may have convinced Margo to love this man, but not Mama. She can see the glimmer of venom lighting his eyes.

"Fine," Anton says, taking hold of his daughter's hand.

Joelle protests, dragging her feet, dropping herself on the ground, not consenting to be moved.

"Joelle, come!"

"Papa, we just walked here!" She digs in her feet, slurring her words.

"Now." He tugs her, lifting her off the ground.

"Leave the child!" Mama yells.

Anton lets go of Joelle, and she skips away, putting the cooking fire between herself and her father. He stands there glaring at Mama, then he turns to me and spits on the ground. He walks out the door and doesn't bother to glance at his wife or daughter as he leaves them behind without the slightest regret.

Joelle finds her way to her mother. Margo sits on my bed, just barely able to hold up her head.

Now that I see her, I understand why Mama asked what was wrong. Margo's skin is pale, and long hairs hang loose from the braids piled on her head underneath her hood. All I see is skin, bone, and dark circles under her eyes.

"I'm fine," Margo whispers. Her voice is coarse. She coughs and her entire body moves as her hand clutches her throat.

"Lie down, Margo," Mama says.

Margo obeys and lies on the mattress. On the other side of the room Joelle brings her knees to her chest. She mumbles something, but I'm unable to understand her words. I wander over to Joelle's frail body, but when I do, she moves away.

"Aida, get me a wet cloth! We need to cool her. She's burning."

I follow Mama's instructions and grab a scrap of fabric as I step over the threshold. In the blinding sunlight I can still hear Mama's voice lingering from within.

"What has he done to you?" she says. But there is no surprise in her tone—she always knew this would happen someday.

"Nothing, Mama," Margo says, but her voice is fading.

Anton. Mama didn't care when Anton grabbed me, whipped me, tried to kill me. Papa didn't care either. I was their spare child who had survived against all odds. At my birth they were prepared to let me go. One look at me and my parents knew: *this infant is only a ghost of what we wished to have.*

My eyes, my luna eyes. Once upon a time my mama loved me, because she thought I was dying. She named me Aida de Luna. *Helper of the moon*. My silver-white eyes connote purity, but also evil. They were my mark of death. Born of the sunless hour, my parents waited for my passing, but it never came.

On the side of our house a pail of water is reserved for cooking, so we don't have to walk all the way to the river's edge every time we need some. I soak my scrap of cloth in the bucket, and the droplets wet my fingers.

When I return, Margo's thick wool kirtle has been removed, so all she wears now is the thin, pale chemise that clings to her body. Her body is burning up, sweat coating her skin in a milky layer.

"Tell me where it hurts," Mama says.

"It doesn't. Anton's just being delirious, is all. I fainted in the fields, and he acts like the Devil possessed me." She laughs, but Mama's face grows serious.

"Aida," she says, her eyes never leaving Margo's.

I pass Mama the cloth, and she lays it on Margo's forehead. The water droplets slide over her skin, and Margo seems relieved by the cool touch for a moment. Mama motions me close and whispers in my ear, so Margo doesn't hear.

"Take Joelle outside. Tend to the sheep. Do something to distract her. I don't want her near Margo."

And just like that Mama prepares for Margo's decline.

No evil will infect her household. It's the reason she keeps me hidden. If I were allowed to wander the village or work the fields, people would see me, see how different I am by one look of the eye. And just like that, I would no longer be wanted. It's what happened when Anton beat me near to death. I didn't know then that, in a short few years, the man who accused me of being a witch would marry my only sister.

Cyrielle had saved me, but Papa would rather let me sleep with the sheep than in his household after word flew within the village that I was accused of witchcraft. Mama resisted his ideas of confinement at first—she might have still loved me then—but soon she stopped thinking of me as her daughter. I was the child they gave birth to, ignorant of the eyes that spoke of evil.

"Come, Joelle." I hold out my hand, but she shakes her head. I kneel down to the mattress and grab her hand before she has a chance to move farther from me.

"No!" she screeches. "Mama! Mama, stop her!"

She's not talking to me. She's not even looking at me. She looks to her sick mother. Margo doesn't glance our way as I scoop up Joelle in my arms. She screams, cries, and pushes against me until I have carried her from the room and into the daylight.

"I don't want you! I want Mama!" I put her down as fast as I can, and she stomps away. Her

voice is loud enough that it stirs the sheep that graze within their fence.

“You can’t see your mama right now,” I say, but Joelle tries to walk back inside. I catch her arm and pull her toward me again. My grip is harder than I intended, and she stumbles, crying as if a knife had been plunged in her chest. “Shh, Joelle, your mama needs rest.” I try to cradle her in my arms, but she only pushes away from me.

“No!” She hits my arm with the little strength she has, but it’s done in vain. Her body goes limp; she finally surrenders, and soon her crying quiets enough so all that is left is a mumble.

“Mama will be all right.” I curl her body toward me. I imagine this is what Margo looked like when she was small, but I can see Anton in this child’s body. Every time Joelle looks at me, I see him in her face. The nose angled just so, the sunken eyes, but most of the similarities are in the way she holds herself. He’s there when she looks at me like I’m a monster.

She must have fallen asleep because all her murmurs stop. Her body is dead weight against me. Inside I can hear Mama tending to Margo, and Margo insisting nothing is wrong. But if nothing was wrong, she’d stand up, take her daughter from my arms, and find Anton—wherever he may be. The problem is she can’t. Something is very wrong.

II.

Cyrielle is a girl I've known my entire life—a neighbor's daughter who has always been a friend. She was there before people looked at me as some evil thing. To her, I was just a normal girl to play with. When I was small, Mama and Papa taught me to keep my eyes hidden, but as I grew older looking to the ground to hide my gaze became rude. The only way my parents could hide my eyes was to act as if I didn't exist. Cyrielle saw me though. Every day when she finished her chores and I finished mine, we played by the stream.

One day Cyrielle's mama found us and saw me. The woman screamed, clutched her daughter, and dragged her away. It was a long time before I saw Cyrielle again. I was only about ten at the time, and I stayed home with Mama to help care for my baby brother, Dondre. I watched Mama nurse him, and she taught me how to prepare our food, wash clothes, and clean our pots, all so she didn't have to.

Cyrielle found a way to sneak over to visit me, even after a scolding from her mama. She greatly enjoyed the art of escaping with only a whisper as her trail.

I thank the Heavens for Cyrielle. She saved me, when no one else would.



I lay Joelle across my thin mattress before leaving. Mama is gone somewhere—roaming the fields for herbs that may help heal Margo. My sister is asleep when I creep from the cruck house and leave her daughter behind. They can manage. It will only be a short time before I come back.

The village's stream is shallow, just a trickle of water compared to the ocean that hugs the borders of Marseille.

All my life I've stayed hidden. Cyrielle and I have had our fair share of sneaking away, but we always stayed inside the village when I was younger. People knew my face. We were a small community full of secrets. I was one of them. People didn't bother to look at me twice. I was just a question mark in the background. They didn't know what to make of me, but I paid them no harm.

The heart of Marseille is just outside my village, and it's a place of wonder. I've gone within its walls once, and that ended with my life almost taken after being accused of witchcraft. Since then I have hidden myself away, never setting foot onto the soil where I bled as the crowd withered away and Cyrielle took me home.

Marseille resides on the coast of France. It's our epicenter, our connection to the world. Ships

come and go, and exotic foods and herbs pass through our borders. I wanted so badly to see it; I was foolish enough to wander off from Cyrielle after we had traveled there together five years ago.

The withering stream of water leads to something much grander, and I follow its path until the stream grows. Wider and wider the water expands, deepens, and brings me forward. Looking up, I see the ocean that welcomes me to the coast—the Mediterranean Basin. A chill wind blows off the sea, and the fresh air makes me want to cry with joy.

Ships dock in the port, their huge sails halting as they are pulled down and stowed away. Goods are carried off the docks, and merchants barter not far away, already making deals to sell their wares.

“What are you doing here?”

The voice freezes me, and I know it’s the man who waits for me to enter Marseille again, so my life can be taken properly—just like it should have been five years ago. But he knows I will never do that again under my own will.

“Shouldn’t you be tending to your sister?”

I swallow, knowing his voice from the one that haunts my dreams. “I’m getting her fresh water. Shouldn’t you be tending to your wife?” My words are sharp, braver than I expect. I’m surprised because I can already feel my hands shaking. My back is to him, and I want to turn so he doesn’t have an upper hand, but I’m afraid to move.

“It’s the wife’s job to tend to the husband, not the other way around,” Anton says.

He laughs, and it makes me want to slap him, but what would that get me? A quick, painless death if I’m lucky.

“Do you even love her?” I say. Tears start to brim in my eyes, and I wipe them away, even though this man cannot see my face.

“She is a bearer of my child, is she not?”

“You would sacrifice your daughter’s life if it meant saving your own skin,” I say, but a hand shoves at me and the next thing I’m on the ground. I turn to look at Anton. He looms over me, the sun at his back, making him appear as a giant dark outline.

“Care to repeat? I don’t think I heard you,” he says.

I bite my lip and want to pick myself up but know he will simply throw me down again.

“Now here’s the funny thing. I met you before I met your sister. But your sister,” he scoffs and puts a knee on the ground next to me, leaning forward. “Well, let’s just say she puts on quite the show when prompted.”

I don’t think, and my actions are stupid. I spit in his face and he slaps me so fast I’m not even sure it has happened. But it did happen because my cheek feels as if it has been set on fire. His large hand wraps around my neck, and my head’s on the ground again. I can feel water soaking my hair,

and that's the funny part—I'm concerned about my hair. I spent such a long time braiding it on top of my head, and now the water will ruin it. The fact that Anton might kill me right here doesn't even occur to me.

"Maggot," he says in a whisper, like it's some secret love poem only meant for my ears. His forearm bears down on my throat, and I can't breathe. His other hand slips to his sheath, and he pulls out a dagger.

"Nothing is stopping me from killing you. No one wants you," he tells me.

"My mama would find out and take Margo from you!" I try to scream back at him, but my vision is blurring. My breaths come in quick little movements, like my chest doesn't have enough room for air. He runs the blunt side of the knife down my throat, and a small squeak that sounds like a newborn pup escapes from me.

"The same mama who lets a dying women sleep in your bed?"

"What?" The word is more of a cough, but he seems to understand me.

"A pestilence is coming, Aida. It's spreading. Kills everything it touches, and, by God, how it has touched Margo."

"What did you do to her?" I scream. I don't understand where the sudden burst of energy has come from, but it explodes from my body.

Anton doesn't seem fazed though; in fact he seems rather amused.

"Look over there, Aida. Nothing but ships, but something is on those ships."

He loosens his grip on my neck, and I dare a glance at the harbor. Just like before, ships load and unload their hauls. Nothing out of the ordinary.

"You don't see it, do you?" His hand wanders from my neck to my face. His chokehold on me is over, letting my throat gasp in air. His hand grips my jaw and forces my gaze upon one ship in particular. "Tell me what they're unloading."

My eyes try to focus, but my body is still gasping for air. It takes me too long to focus, and Anton knees me in my side. I close my eyes, and a single tear runs down my face.

"Look!"

And so I do. At bottom of the cliff, caressing the ocean, is the port. My eyes find the ships, just to the right of where the waves crash. People are gathered around like the Pope has come, but this is different. Bystanders cry out or even run from the sight. I see it then. I see what is being carried from the ship.

One by one, bodies are removed—limp, lifeless. Each man being hauled off the ship is dead. Even from this far away, I cannot pull my gaze from the scene.

"Are those ..." I lose my words.

A man crosses onto the dock and pulls a body off the ship. The dead are so mutilated by rot I

can't make out any human features. A body is hauled away and thrown onto a cart with others. The dockworkers stack the dead together and on the sides of streets people cry and hide their faces. I cannot hear the screams, but I can see a woman as she rushes toward one of the deceased. Another body is tossed on top of the one she seeks, and a stranger pulls her from the cart so its contents can be hauled away.

Cold air brushes across the ocean and brings with it a deathly numb feeling. I wrap my arms around myself to shield from the wind, but I'm not sure if the chills come from the air of death or the last bit of fall saying goodbye, before the winter scatters its snow across the villages.

"You live in your own fleeting world, Aida. Out here people are dying of a pestilence. It's wiping out entire villages, and it's come all this way, right here, to ours. I did nothing to Margo. The pestilence got her. I've yet to hear a tale of someone who's hosted the disease and lived to tell of it." He backs from me and stands up.

I sit up and scoot from the man as fast as I can.

I'm nothing but an animal to him—disposable. He stands above me, as if it's five years ago again. He could kill me now if he really wanted to. No one is stopping him. He steps forward, and I think this is it. He'll finally have his way with me, but he doesn't. He leans forward and his eyes come to my level.

"I don't understand you." He grips my chin and forces me to look at him—allowing him to look at my eyes. He stares at them, memorizes them.

I can't stand to look at him. Yet I have to look at him. I can see the shift in his gaze, as he tries to process what I am—witch, monster—all the accusations play across his features. "Some say this thing that's coming is God's wrath. He's here to wipe the slate clean, and I suppose, if that is true, then you'll be one of the first to die."

He pushes me away, and I stumble back. Anton stands again and hovers over me, always looking down, like I'm something for his amusement.

"Margo is going to die," he says.

Not a question or a wandering thought—a fact. The words sting. Margo had never been the most accepting sister, but she didn't treat me like a monster, like Papa. Like Anton.

"You don't deserve Margo." I mean to shout the words, but my voice fails me, dying almost as soon as the sounds form on my lips.

My words make him smile. "Oh, I know that. I deserve much, much better. In fact that's what I plan on finding."

For the first time I look at Anton under my free will. He smiles, and it scares me. His dark hair creates shadows around his eyes, and I realize just how alone the two of us are next to this stream. My fingers dig into the dirt, and I retreat from the man I once called my accuser—the man who could still

pose as my killer should he choose.

He laughs at my sudden fear.

“No one wants you,” he tells me, pushing my arm with the tip of his boot. It puts me off balance, and I fall to the side. Anton watches me from where he stands, looking down at me as nothing more than a dying animal on the street. His expression blanks away to something different, followed by a change in his posture as he backs from me.

“You’re leaving,” I say. “What about Joelle?”

“She doesn’t belong to me,” he says, a simple, quick statement that doesn’t make him think twice.

“She’s your daughter.” The words come out biting, shouting to a man who would never care for someone other than himself. “Your flesh and blood. And you’re abandoning her.” My words grow softer and softer, emotion erupting in my throat, threatening to close off my air. “What if this pestilence comes? Your daughter could *die*.” I choke on the word. In my mind I don’t see Margo getting better. I only see her dying in Mama’s arms, never able to say goodbye to her daughter—her daughter who may have the same fate.

“She isn’t my concern anymore,” he says, never turning his back to me.

“Then what is?” I ask.

“Why, my life.” He pivots now, walking away with a quick wave of the hand. In the distance I see a horse tied up to a tree—his escape was planned; he’s never coming back. All this time I’ve wished for him to leave. But now the time has finally come, I can’t stand it. My sister—his *wife*—could be dying, and he sees it as an invitation to leave.

I’m gathered by the stream, covered in mud-stained clothing, glaring at a man I hate, wishing he would come back.

III.

Papa and Dondre return from their day's work when I come home from the stream. I'm still a ways from our cruck house, but Papa's voice rings out loud and clear. He's screaming at Margo, saying she's worthless if a man no longer wants her. We're women. We are judged by the men who wish to marry us; take that away, and all that is left is a useless body that must be fed.

"Well, go track him down!" Papa shouts, continuing some fight started long ago. His voice echoes in the small space of our home. It leaves us only to mingle at the sides, in hopes he won't look at us and scream.

"I can't, Papa!" Margo is trying to scream, to get his attention, to make him listen, but it's useless. Her voice comes out muffled and broken.

All Papa sees is two extra mouths to feed if Anton no longer wants them. Little Joelle sits outside the cruck house, inside the fenced area where we keep the sheep. Dondre keeps watch over her nearby, sharpening his knife. He doesn't see me, but when Joelle recognizes me she backs up and casts away her gaze.

Dondre must hear my footsteps, because he looks up, as I close the distance between us. "You used my knife," he says.

"It was the only one I could find. Mama asked me to skin the rabbit you killed."

His expression doesn't change; he just goes back to sharpening his knife.

"When did you get home?"

"Not long ago," he says. Papa yells again, and Dondre peeks into the cruck house for a moment before turning to me. "Margo's back."

His gaze has mild interest toward his oldest sibling, probably wondering, *why is Margo here? Is Anton coming back for them?*

If Papa found out Anton was never coming back, I don't know what he would do to Margo and Joelle.

"She's sick," I tell Dondre. "Anton didn't want to leave her alone while he worked the fields."

My little brother doesn't believe my lie. He flicks his knife to the ground, where it sticks in the gravel. "It's not fair. You know that, right?" He crosses his arms and stares me down. He looks so much like Papa when he does this that it scares me.

"It's not meant to be fair," I say.

"Don't pull that on me, Aida. Anton will come back for Margo and Joelle. I'm talking about

the coney. I killed that rabbit on my own yesterday, and what did I get in reward? *You* skinned it with *my* knife.”

“Is that what this is about? A filthy rabbit? I skinned it because Mama said she would cook it.”

“And now it’s rotting away, because Margo showed up before Mama could cook it. That’s how things always go. If I’m lucky, they’ll look at me for five seconds, but then you and Margo go ahead and—”

“Watch yourself, Dondre,” I warn.

His face is tight, as he stares into me—never has he been afraid of my eyes.

“Do you think I want this? I’d prefer Papa ignored me, and I’m sure Margo feels the same right now.”

Dondre calms slightly and the tense up-and-down movements of his chest slow to a normal pace. His hands are fisted at his sides, but suddenly it’s like all energy has left him as he lets his anger melt away. We both hear Margo cough violently inside.

Something breaks in him at that moment. I see it in his eyes. His fear pulls out his true age—that of a child trying to be an adult—and I’m reminded of just how vulnerable he is. He no longer tries to mask his true emotions, and the small quiver of his lip tells me he’s scared; scared for our sister’s life. She can’t get sick; we have no doctor.

“Is Margo dying?” he asks in a shaky voice.

I don’t say anything. Beside us, Joelle’s face is hidden behind a fence post, but one eye peeks out, watching. Margo’s coughs become muffled and hoarse. Papa has stopped yelling, but I can hear quick, hushed whispers between him and Mama inside the cruck house.

“We all die,” I say.

Dondre latches onto my gaze. He’s shocked, stunned that I’ve just told him that our sister is going to die.

“How can you say that?”

Because it’s true ... “I’m not saying she’ll die now.” He hears me; he doesn’t want to, but my words shake both of us to the core.

“But when?” his voice snaps at me.

I catch Joelle scooting from us. I don’t want to know what her face looks like as we discuss her mother’s death, but I find myself looking anyway. And I regret it. Little Joelle—my small niece—looks like she’s just seen a ghost. She stumbles away, tripping over mounds of dirt, and doesn’t bother to hide her whimpers as she slips under the fence and goes into the cruck house to find her mother.

“Dondre ...” I try to find the words.

“No!”

I look back at my baby brother. He’s so strong. Ever since he was born, I was jealous. Just the

simple fact that he was a boy made my father favor him. Sometimes I wonder if he realizes how much I envy him. He is only twelve years of age, yet he's seen and experienced more than I ever will in my lifetime.

"Don't tell me that she's dying. Tell me ... tell me she'll be okay. Lie to me."

His tears stain his dirty cheeks. He uses his hand to wipe away the streaks as quickly as possible.

"Okay," I say, the breath leaving me. "She'll be okay."

Dondre runs toward me and wraps his arms around my torso. He cries into my dress and hides his face in the folds, like he did when he was a toddler. His grip tightens around me and his cries grow louder as Margo coughs again. I try to decipher which sound is worse: the suffocating coughs of my dying sister or the heart-wrenching sobs of my baby brother.

"She's going to be okay," I say again. He nods his head against me, and we're both aware we are lying to each other. In my mind all I can see are the dead bodies being unloaded from the ship at the harbor. It's the first time I had seen or heard of this pestilence that Anton spoke of, but I live in a caged world.

Joelle exits the cruck house in a silent progression. Her pace is frightful, and I see a worn, raggedy doll hanging from one of Joelle's hands. It's Margo's from when she was little—and had always refused to give it up—and now her daughter is its caretaker. Joelle comes to my feet, next to Dondre and sits. She doesn't say a word as she grips the doll and presses it to her face.

IV.

“We can’t just let her die,” Mama whispers.

“Well, if we try to feed two extra mouths, we’ll all die. We don’t have the food to feed ourselves, Celine. That rabbit is the first meat you’ve seen on the table in a week, and you let it rot because you couldn’t stand to see your firstborn suffer. You and I both know that Aida has been looked at with fear for a reason.” Mama and Papa continue their conversation outside, unaware of the growing volume my father’s voice has taken.

“She’s your own blood,” Mama tries to reason.

“She has never been. Nothing about that child’s eyes proclaim innocence.”

Dondre, Joelle, and I sit, trying to eat our meal, blocking out the sounds of Mama and Papa. Joelle sits with us but doesn’t eat; instead she turns every few seconds to look at her mother who has fallen asleep on the straw mattress. Dondre looks at his bowl of soup but doesn’t eat it. It’s made of herbs, the only thing Mama could find to feed us with the rabbit gone.

I worry Margo may hear Mama and Papa fighting, but her sleep goes undisturbed. It’s the first time since her arrival that the air has stilled. The only sounds now are Mama’s and Papa’s voices outside. Dondre and I clean the pot used to make the soup, while the sun is still above the horizon, the two of us hovering over the basin of water. I haven’t heard him speak a word since I told him that Margo would be okay.

He refuses to look at her. Or Joelle. She’ll walk up to him, clutch his hand, but he’ll just push her away. Dondre is everything I’m not. I’ve never found Joelle asking for my attention, yet here he is, pushing it away like an unwanted colt following its mother.

“Aida.” Papa walks back inside and doesn’t stop his stride as he talks to me. “You can’t sleep here tonight.”

My hands freeze around the pot I am cleaning. I lift my head to look at him, to see if he’s angry or at least to get an idea of what I’ve done wrong. I think back, trying to remember disobeying or breaking the rules. I had left the village without his permission, but how did he know? Anton was the only one who saw me, and he’s gone.

“What did I do?” I ask in a small voice.

“Margo needs somewhere to sleep, along with Joelle. We don’t have enough mattresses for everyone, and you can’t expect me to send your sick sister out on the street, can you?”

“You just told Mama you didn’t want two extra mouths to feed.” My lips stumble across the

words.

“Aida!” Papa’s voice is stunning in the silence of the approaching night. “You will find somewhere else to reside.” He points me to the door, and I stare at him, his words final and sharp. He won’t look at me.

“Mama?” I beg. My hands shake around the pot I haven’t finished washing. She won’t let me leave. She can’t let me be removed from the family just because my bed has been taken by another.

“Listen to your father,” she says. Her eyes are focused on the ground.

Why can’t she look at me?

I release a breath, and I feel like screaming. I drop the pot on the ground and don’t care that it may break or that it will take a week’s worth of work or crops to trade for a new one in the market.

I look at Margo’s sleeping figure as I step out the door. Her hair is falling from its braid and I can see almost every bone in her body. I hope the dark spots around her neck are shadows, but are probably another sign of the pestilence, and I get it—Dondre was right. This is unfair. He hunted his own meal and has yet to receive praise. Margo is dying, but Papa’s only concern is that now he’ll have to find more food for our family. And here I am, walking from the only home I know, because there’s no longer room for me.

V.

The sky is growing dark as I make the last steps to Cyrielle's home. Jermaine, her husband, is outside tending their livestock and I'm a few steps from their fence when he looks up.

"Aida," he says. Jermaine examines me, sees my face, and leaves one of their sheep. "What's wrong?"

"Is Cyrielle here?" I ask. I mask my feelings, as he nods his head and allows me into their home.

He remains outside, feeding the sheep that wander in the fences only feet from their cruck house.

Cyrielle has her back to me, when I step through the door. With the sun setting, the inside of the house is growing dark, and I can tell Cyrielle is getting ready for bed. She wears only a thin chemise and is sitting on the mattress, resting close to the ground.

"Jermaine, I felt it kick," she says in a hushed, peaceful voice.

I can't see her face, but she cocoons her stomach in her hands.

"It's only me," I say.

At the sound of my voice Cyrielle turns and smiles in my direction.

"Oh! Aida, what are you doing out so late? Won't your parents be upset?" Even with this she still ushers me to sit beside her.

"Did you say you felt it kick again?" I smile.

She nods, takes my hand, and places it on her stomach.

She's carried her baby for months now. Any moment she will be blessed with an infant who is already announcing its presence in the world as it kicks through Cyrielle's skin.

My hand glides over the thin fabric on her abdomen. I close my eyes and focus all my attention on the movement beneath my hand. A small, silent kick hits beneath my fingers.

"Did you feel it?" she asks, eyes aglow, as I pull away my hand.

"Yes."

She cradles her stomach again. Cyrielle's hair has been undone for the night. It cascades in long dark waves over her shoulders, all the way to her bulging stomach. It acts as a curtain around her body, and I think to myself how much of a shame it is that we have to braid our hair and hide it away when in the eyes of the public. A few moments pass in silence between us until she stops thinking of her unborn infant and looks at me.

“What happened?”

Her face is serious then, aware I wouldn't visit her at this time of night if it weren't for a good reason. Her eyes beg my soul, and I want to open up to her and scream how Papa has abandoned me, but I can't worry her. She has her own family—a growing family with a baby.

“I just wanted to see how you were.”

She laughs quietly to herself. “It's almost sunset, and you don't like to walk in the dark. You're trying to tell me that you came just to check in? Besides, your father would never let you.”

“I don't always need to follow Papa's rules, you know,” I say.

“Until your father refuses to feed or house you,” she says, laughing.

I shrink back a little. My smile disappears, and that's all she needs to know her words are true. Her face is devoid of any giddiness she may have had previously, as she registers my reaction. “Did he ... He didn't ... Aida?”

I watch as her mind turns over the possibilities, everything I would have had to do in order for my father to participate in such a harsh punishment.

“What did you do?” Her eyes are sad.

I shake my head. “That's the thing. I didn't do anything.”

“But ...” She stops, thinks, and I look down, ashamed, as if I've done something horrible to deserve this. “Did your father hurt you?” she asks in a meek voice. She tries not to make it obvious, but I see her eyes scan me for injuries.

“No,” I say. “No, he didn't hurt me.”

Cyrielle exhales a breath. There have been multiple occasions where I've come running to her, bruised, after defying Papa's wishes.

The most prominent instance was after I met Anton in the market. Cyrielle brought me home covered in dirt, limbs shaking in shock, only to have Papa punish me for sneaking away. Mama stood inside as he hit me. Dondre was away, playing with his friends, I suppose. But I was lying on the ground after Cyrielle left, Papa kicking me, telling me that I'd lied and how I'd snuck away with boys to sell myself. I told him no, that wasn't true; but each time I spoke, he grew angrier.

The next day, when Cyrielle came to check on me, I was still in bed. She'd peeked her head through the door, seen my battered body, and begun to cry. For weeks she'd refused to forgive herself because she'd left me with Papa, but I'd told her that it didn't matter. He would have done the same, even if she had been there. It was better that she didn't have to see it.

“What happened?”

The longer I stay quiet, the more upset she grows. I don't want her upset; she should be happy. Cyrielle is having a baby, and I can't ruin that for her.

“Margo and Joelle came to visit is all,” I explain. “They needed a place to sleep. Papa said they

could take my bed.” It’s a simple lie, just a stretch of the truth, but she sees it. I look at her and try to smile, tell her not to worry.

“I don’t care how despicable your father is, he wouldn’t throw you on the streets for that. There’s more.” Her eyes are intent on me, and I can’t look away.

“Margo is sick,” I say. “Anton left her with us because ...” I stop myself, brush away the thoughts again. I lied to Dondre. I can’t lie to Cyrielle.

“Why?” Cyrielle whispers.

“Because she’s dying.” I feel numb. These words aren’t mine. This life isn’t mine. I have no attachment to what I’m saying, yet it’s still true.

Cyrielle sucks in a breath, and I can’t look at her. Instead I turn my eyes toward my hands. They lie in my lap, small and feeble. I make my hand into a fist and pretend I’m strong, but it’s just a façade.

“Anton doesn’t want Joelle after Margo dies. He doesn’t want either of them any longer.”

Cyrielle gets up slowly, one hand on her stomach and the other skimming the wall to keep her balance. She doesn’t look at me, just leaves. When she stands, I see just how much her baby has grown inside her. The chemise is stretched to fit around her otherwise small frame. A veil of dark hair trails behind her.

As she steps outside, I’m left alone. I can only hear hushed whispers, and I know Cyrielle is talking to Jermaine. I hug my knees to my chest and pretend everything is okay. I make up a world, a fake world, where I’m only here to visit Cyrielle, to see if her baby has arrived. I’m just waiting, waiting for the baby. I’m not waiting for their deliberation and decision.

“Is it true? About Margo?”

It’s Jermaine who is at the door.

His tall shadow hangs over me in the setting sun, and I wonder if I will have to leave the safety of their house to search out another place to stay for the night. I’m surprised because he doesn’t look horrified when he looks at me; he looks sad.

“Yes,” I whisper.

Jermaine looks outside where his wife must be standing. I see his lips move, but I can’t hear what he’s saying. He sighs, puts his hand to his face, and covers his eyes for a moment. From far away I hear Cyrielle’s voice. Jermaine nods and agrees to whatever she’s saying.

“You can sleep here tonight. I don’t know for how long you can stay, but we’ll let you reside,” he says.

My head snaps up in his direction. He looks tired, and I realize how much I am intruding. If I weren’t here, they’d both be sound asleep by now. Cyrielle steps back into her home, her hand supporting the baby.

“You’ll have to gather some hay from outside to use as a mattress, but at least you’ll be inside.” Cyrielle’s smile is small, as she comes to me. Her steps are tiny and awkward, as she tries to balance her offset body. Carefully she lowers herself next to me.

I hug her, being careful not to hurt her, because I know how weak she must feel. Jermaine walks through the threshold as I get up. “Thank you,” I whisper, giving the smallest, yet most sincere smile.

He nods, and I walk outside to find hay for my bedding. A bale is near their fence and I drag it over. In the pasture a lone cow watches me in silence, as I haul away his food.

Pushing it into the cruck house, I see Jermaine and Cyrielle have already settled in bed. In the corner, as to give them as much privacy as possible, I break apart the hay so it is long enough to sleep on. I don’t have any cloth to cover my makeshift mattress, so I lie across the hay as it picks and nips at my skin. I fall asleep like that, fully clothed, and wishing I didn’t have to invade Cyrielle’s life.

What comforts me to sleep is the chorus of crickets, always there to lull me to a slumber. Otherwise the night is silent.

The haunting darkness leaves me to wonder how much time Margo has left and whether Joelle knows she has lost both her mother and father.

I tell myself I’m foolish. Margo is alive. I told Dondre she would be okay.

She will be okay.

VI.

“It’s not safe.”

The words come in the morning. The air is cool and damp. I can hear the rain making a small rhythm on the straw roof as it falls precariously to Earth.

“We can’t send her away.”

My eyes are sewn shut. The voices don’t register with me at first, but as they continue and my mind finds its place again, I know who they are.

“What about the baby? Our son or daughter could come any day now. I can barely afford to feed just the two of us. I know Aida is your friend, but we can’t give her food. I don’t even know what we will do when the baby arrives.” Jermaine’s voice is hushed in the early morning.

I can hear other bodies stirring in the background, far away. I imagine the villagers have begun their day. With the sun in the sky, the chores begin; work awakens the peasants to their place.

“The baby feeds from my breast. You know that,” Cyrielle says, pleading with her husband, but I can tell she is giving up, hearing the sense in his words.

“It’s not just the baby. We can feed you, me, and our son or daughter. Not another adult.” He says this fact sadly.

There’s a lost hope in his voice, as if he wishes he could supply me with a home and food, but he knows the truth of our world.

The people here till the fields just to give crops to our lords. It’s only in our own time that we can harvest our own fields. At home this was what I had done. During the day, when everyone else was tending to the lords’ fields, I was sent to my family’s pasture. The small area was planted with barley, carrots, lettuce, sometimes corn if the season was right.

Feeding ourselves became more and more of a task as each day passed. That was my only value to my family: I tilled our field. Alone. I could pretend, if not for the slightest moment, that I was working like everyone else in our lord’s field—not hiding my eyes. I could offer something to my family.

“What do you want me to do?”

I open my eyes and see nothing but the wooden walls of the cruck house. I can feel myself breaking from my core outward. Everything hurts and I’m unwanted. I can feel their voices reverberating off me behind my back. I urge myself to fall sleep, to just wait and put off the inevitable. Cyrielle would never wake me to kick me to the streets.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

It’s true. I can hear his remorse. He doesn’t want to send me away, but he has to, for his family.

“We can’t help her, not this time.”

“But we have to ...” The words are said to herself. She doesn’t believe them and neither does Jermaine.

“I’m sorry,” he says again.

Everything is still. No one moves toward where I lie on the ground. My mind spins and turns, thinking of how I can possibly get more time. My eyes are closed, but a new energy runs through my veins. Panic keeps me awake, and I know sleep is beyond my reach, but I try anyway for more time.

I don’t want to listen. I scream inside myself to block out the voices. In my imagination I’m at the edge of Marseille. I can see the docks and the grand ships, but I’m not there for the sights. Instead I’m there to scream. I stand at the edge of the cliff face, the water roaring in the cascades. One deep breath and I release it. I scream to Heaven and Hell, begging someone to hear my cries.

“Look at me!” I scream, but no one is there. No one is ever there, so I stand and continue to scream until my lungs give out. Until I’m just standing there, waiting for my tears to run dry or for my muscles to release me.

But I’m here. A coward in my friend’s home, hoping she will nurture me more than I deserve.

“You know we can’t.” Jermaine’s words are final.

Cyrielle doesn’t say anything afterward, but I can hear a catch in her breath. She coughs, a sound I’ve heard from her on many occasions. It was there every time she fell and hurt herself as a child, and it was there when her mother told us that we could no longer be friends. Cyrielle holds back her crying. Her breathing is staggered, and it’s all I can do to stay in my place, to not rush to comfort her.

And I tell myself this is the closest I will ever come to being loved, and it seems right—to be loved by the one who has saved my life.

“I’ll be okay,” I whisper. The words are so silent I barely hear them. I wonder how many times I will lie to myself. “I’ll be okay,” I say again in the hushed tone, and I’m lying again.

For the first time in my life Cyrielle doesn’t hear me. She’s always been there to receive my thoughts and feelings, and now, when it’s most important, she can’t hear me. I want to say the words louder, but I can’t. I don’t know if they’re true. Will I be okay?

Jermaine walks outside and brings Cyrielle with him, as their small house grows quiet. I’m left to brew in my own cowardice.

And somehow sleep finds me.



“Come, before it’s too late,” Cyrielle says. She’s running to the cliff face, hopping, skipping almost. I can see the smile on her face as she talks, and I don’t understand her happiness. Her dress sways behind her, and her hair is in a complicated braid around her crown. Ribbons are twined into the plait, the strips of fabric draping her shoulders.

“Before what’s too late?” I rush after her. The salty air comes in from the ocean. The smell of low tide fills my senses. It’s a distasteful smell, but it reminds me of home.

“Don’t you see it?” She turns to me and her face suddenly goes solemn. A corset is pulled tight around her middle, and I realize how she must have had her baby in the night. Her sleeves are tailored close but taper away at her elbow and extend to the ground in a train. The fabric is dark as night and the wind sweeps the cloth around her like magic.

“What?”

Cyrielle lifts her arm, the long fabric trailing the ground, and she’s the most elegant beauty I have ever seen—she looks like the lord’s lady.

Her finger points to the heart of Marseille. The white fog from the smokestacks floats up and away from the town. The church bells don’t ring. All is silent.

“They are burning the dead,” she says. “You can smell it.”

I watch the thick smoke ascend to the sky and disappear. And yes, I smell it. What I thought had been the repugnant scent of low tide is rot. It’s the odor of wasted flesh being burned. The wind off the ocean sweeps it away, but it’s still there.

“What happened?” I ask.

She doesn’t answer, so I turn back to Cyrielle, but she’s gone. In her place a woman stands. She wears the rich clothing Cyrielle had been in seconds ago, but her face is sharper, more distinct. The woman’s dark hair is twisted into the same plait Cyrielle had been wearing, and I wonder how such an intricate braid can be duplicated. Her beauty is almost unfair. This lady doesn’t speak a word to me. Her stare is unbroken and fierce.

“Where’s Cyrielle?” the lady asks.

My voice is withheld. Papa told me never to talk to those of higher class; it could only cause me trouble.

She looks confused by my lack of words. “We have to leave,” she says, frowning. She holds out her hand in an inviting gesture. I find myself stepping forward. I cover the few feet between us, and we’re both at the edge of the cliff. The waves spray a mist up to us, and I can feel the cold pricks of water at my feet.

“Where are we going?” I ask, mesmerized by the water below. It sways violently, and a broken tree has fallen into its wrath. The thick wood crashes into the rock wall of the cliff and snaps in two before being washed out to sea again.

“Frioul Archipelago!” The lady lets go of my hand and holds out her arms. The wind catches her dress and whips it around her body. She’s a mass of dark cloth as she sways slightly. She smiles as her lips move, though I can’t hear her words. Below us waves crash, but it’s like she has detached herself from this world.

“Tiboulain, Aida de Luna.” And even though she whispers it, I hear her steady voice, as if her lips were at my ear.

“How do you know my name?”

“How do you know mine?” she asks. She brings her arms to her side again, and the long sleeves of her dress fall to rest at her feet. Her body faces the ocean, but her face is turned to me. She smiles.

“But I don’t know your name,” I say. Her smile doesn’t fade.

“Find Tiboulain.” Her feet wander to the edge of the cliff. She isn’t wearing shoes. As she loses her footing, she dives into the water. She falls with unnatural grace, pulling her arms in toward her body. I don’t see her face or hear a scream as she falls. I can’t even decipher when she makes contact with the water—the waves are so loud.

“My lady!” I scream, kneeling at the edge of the cliff. I can’t see her down below. The waves crash against the hard rock; I see no sign of the lady. A body neither comes up for air nor is thrust into the onslaught of the rocks. Everything appears as it had, just before the lady jumped. She’s nowhere to be found.

I cower from the edge and push myself away. The rock I had been using to support myself falls off the edge, into the water. My limbs quiver as I lose my balance. The scream that comes from my throat pierces my ears, and it’s everything I can do to call out for help in a place where I can never be heard.

VII.

I'm covered in my own form of morning dew. Sweat clings to the fabric of my thick clothing and my skin. My heart feels as if it's still leaping off the cliff edge and I have yet to catch it. I push myself from the wall and extend my body across the hay mattress. Something near my head moves and I leap away. A small mouse scurries across the ground, stopping only for a second after hearing my movement before beginning its pursuit again and escaping out the door.

"Are you all right?" Cyrielle stands at the doorway. A small frown is etched across her face as she looks down at me, frightened and awake.

"I just ..." I don't want to tell her about my dream or how she was no longer pregnant with her baby, how she turned into a stranger who jumped from the cliff. "There was a mouse."

This seems to ease any stress from Cyrielle. Her demeanor softens, and she comes to me and offers her hand. I curl my fingers around her frail bones, but I don't use her as a lever while I lift myself from the ground, knowing how much weight she already carries with the baby.

"Mice scurry through here all the time. Don't you have them back home? They don't bother much, as long as we don't leave out our food of course." She smiles at me, and I follow her outside into the day's sun. Her walk is slow as she sways with her stomach. Whenever I see her face, all I see are the tired eyes of a soon-to-be mother.

Jermaine is out in the fields not very far away. He works to unharness a plow from a cow in their field. "He wanted to talk to you," she says, not really looking at me.

"Okay," I say, but my feet don't move.

Cyrielle turns to me and smiles, skimming her hand across my arm, as she walks back into the house.

As I approach Jermaine, I can hear him cussing under his breath while he struggles to harness the animal.

"Cows are for milking, not plowing," I tell him.

He looks up at me, sweat dripping down his face. The hat he wears shades his face, so I can't see his eyes.

He laughs, taking off his hat to wipe the sheen of sweat from his forehead. "If I had a bull, I would certainly use it."

I smile, but he doesn't return the gesture.

"Cyrielle said you wanted to speak to me?"

“Yes.” He looks to the sky and frowns. “Looks like it’ll rain again.”

I follow his eyes and see that, although it is the middle of the day, the bright sun is hiding behind the clouds. Windblown trees sway in the humid air, warning us of an approaching storm. I hadn’t noticed it before, but the ground is already wet—it must have rained, while I slept.

Jermaine leads the way back to his home, leaving the cow in the field to be harnessed once I’m gone.

“Aida, can you tell me more about what’s happening with your sister?”

He’s far in front of me, his body strong from working, his pace much faster than mine. I try my best to walk beside him but find myself looking at the ground, so I don’t lose my footing on tree roots or rocks.

“Margo?” I ask.

“Yes, she’s six years older than you, right?”

Jermaine and Cyrielle’s cruck house sits atop the hill that overlooks their pasture. It’s larger than the home my family lives in even though we house more people, but Jermaine inherited his cruck house.

“Five years.”

He stops walking and turns to look at me. “Doesn’t she have a daughter that’s four years old?”

I nod my head and am finally able to catch up with him. Margo married when she was young, just like any normal girl. We girls grow up, dreaming of the fine young man who will come to our doorstep with an offer to convince our father to let us marry. Margo’s dream came true. Anton saw her in town one day, and soon after he found our doorstep. It wasn’t long before he recognized me as the girl he had tried to have killed. This was after the wedding, however—and after Margo was pregnant. If Anton had known I was Margo’s sister sooner, I’m almost sure they would not have married.

“When did she have the baby?”

I think back to the day Joelle was born. I wasn’t there, but I remember Mama rushing home to tell the news. She had been staying with Margo and Anton in their village; when the baby was born healthy, it was all Mama could do to run home and tell us.

“I think it was six months after the marriage.”

Jermaine looks cross at me. “But it takes nine months ...”

“I know,” I say. A drop of water lands on my hand, and I see the sky is already threatening to rain. I step toward the cruck house again. “She won’t admit to anything against Anton.”

Jermaine grips the top of my arm lightly, just enough to stop me. “That’s a lot to accuse a man.”

I look into his eyes and wonder what he sees—whether I’m the friend Cyrielle sees or if he’s just pretending to like me for his wife’s sake. He doesn’t wander from my white-eyed gaze, and part of

me is amazed by his bluntness.

“You don’t know Anton like I do.” I wanted to sound strong when I said the words, but instead my voice wavers over his name.

Neither of us says much of anything for a while. We just stare at each other. It’s very rare that I hold my gaze with someone this long. Usually they look away, disgusted by my features, or I hide my face, so I don’t get rejected in the first place.

“Why do you want to know about my sister?” I ask suddenly. And still he does not waver. His dark eyes bore into my light ones, and I wait—always wait—for the onlooker to be afraid of me.

“Some disease is spreading in the villages. No one has found a way to wane its efforts. Anyone who catches the pestilence could die as soon as the next sunrise.”

I lose my breath. I knew Margo’s life could have been at risk, but could she really be gone as soon as one day? “You think that’s what Margo has?” And this time I’m the one who breaks the stare. I had left my sister; I could return, and she could be gone without there ever being a goodbye.

“Yes.”

“They’ll find something that will help.” But even as I say the words, they sound unsure. I’m lying to myself. They never find a cure. The village doctors just experiment on our bodies and say it’s for knowledge when they are really just killing us.

“No, Aida. You don’t understand. We aren’t its first victims. It’s already gone through countless villages.”

I nod my head and feel my eyes water. I fight back the tears.

“People have been fleeing their homes to find safety, but it follows them. Whatever it is, it’s following the carriers. Rumors are that it’s wiping out half the population wherever it hits.”

I imagine my family in half. Margo is gone; Dondre is gone, and maybe I’m gone as well. Just like that the world decides too many of us are living and chooses the pestilence as the quickest way to dwindle our sheer mass.

I look up at Jermaine. Maybe at the end of all this he will be gone as well, and all that will be left of his small family would be Cyrielle and the baby.

I close my eyes, daring them to release the moisture that shows my weakness, when I’ve tried so hard to be brave. My eyes don’t brim over, but I have to suppress the shudder that erupts in my lungs. I gag on my own breath, every muscle in my body tense.

“Aida,” Jermaine says.

I feel his hand touch my shoulder, a kind, tentative gesture, and I’m jealous. Cyrielle is so lucky to have such a husband. I open my eyes and look at the man my best friend loves.

“I have to ask you to leave, for the baby’s sake. You could already have what your sister is suffering from.”

I cough out my cry and choke myself. I can't be here—I knew that. From the moment I stepped through the door of their home and saw Cyrielle carrying her unborn baby, I knew I didn't belong. I should have slept on the streets and saved myself this rejection.

A raindrop falls on my cheek and I take a deep breath. I hold back every emotion and try to look brave as I nod toward Jermaine. He looks back at me, unsure, but I find the strength to smile.

"I'll go say goodbye to Cyrielle," I say.

His eyes are pleading, and I know he wants to explain to me why I must go, but I walk away because I already know the answer—I'm unsafe.

Their house is only a few paces away. Cyrielle reaches the threshold before I do as she rushes to hug me. I try to stop her, to pull away so I don't spread whatever Margo has to Cyrielle, but her grip is final. I can feel her crying into my shoulder, and I wrap my arms around her frame, hugging her baby also. She mumbles something, but I can't make out the words. I stop trying to listen after I realize she's crying because she knows I have to leave. I comfort her, but I don't tell her everything will be okay like I had for my brother.

"I'm sorry," she says.

I try to ignore the words, but I hear them anyway. She repeats herself and acts like she's the unwanted one, when really it has always been me who no one would even look at.

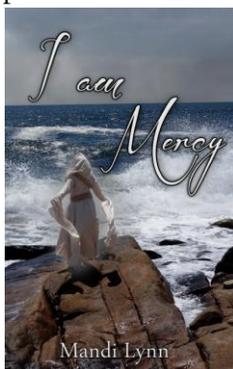
I hold Cyrielle from me and smile at her. She wipes her tired eyes and wraps her arms around her abdomen again. I don't say a word to her, and I don't know if it will make our parting easier, but I do so anyway. I lay my hand on her stomach and wish the baby health. She places her hand on top of mine.

"Aida, you don't have to leave. We can figure something out," she says.

She looks so worn. I only hope that once she delivers the baby she will grow to be strong again.

I hug her one final time and it is brisk. Her fingers trail down my arm as I pull away. Just steps away Jermaine stands, staring at me like he has no idea what to do. I open my arms to him, and we hug in the way a brother and sister might.

"Thank you," I tell him. This time it's Jermaine who doesn't speak. I walk away from both him and Cyrielle. I wrap my arms around myself, as the wind grows stronger. Rain builds in the atmosphere, and I wonder how long it will be until the Heavens pour.



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