





# IRON SPIRIT

iron legacy • book one

linn foster

IRON SPIRIT

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01

*DID YOU KNOW, MY little Kelly, that today is the day the world ended?*

*Yes, my little kit. You are living in the end of the world.*

*Once upon a time, there was a beautiful faerie queen named Enaid, who loved every living thing. She loved all beings so much that she gave her life to save a magical white stag, the last of his kind. A hunter was prowling the forest and came upon him grazing in a clearing. Thinking him an unusual deer, the hunter took aim, intent on bringing him down and taking him home to display his beautiful white fur and horns proudly on his trophy wall. Enaid, in the forest admiring the stag, saw this and dashed in front of the beast as the hunter pulled the trigger. The bullet struck her in the chest, right through her loving heart.*

*The faerie king, Dorcha, heard the gunshot and her scream and came running to find her. He burst into the clearing to see the hunter kneeling over Enaid's fallen form, panicking.*

*Now, Dorcha was not like Enaid. He did not love everything that walked the earth. No, he only loved one thing in all the world: his wife. When he saw that man bent over her, pressing a hand to her bleeding chest,*

*he charged the man and buried an ax between his ribs, taking the queen in his arms and disappearing into the trees.*

*In the safety of the dense woods, Dorcha held his wife and watched her blue blood stain her milk-white dress. Not gifted in the art of healing, he could do nothing for her but beg her to stay. Enaid, knowing she had but moments left, simply smiled at him and whispered, "I love you, my moon and stars."*

*Enaid died in Dorcha's arms, and Dorcha's heart turned to stone.*

*Now cold and filled with rage the likes of which no mortal man has ever seen, Dorcha looked to the sky and said, "I will not rest until every single human pays for what happened here today."*

*And he ended the world.*

*You see, my little Kelly, mankind had forgotten that faeries were real once. When humanity learned how to wield iron, the metal that burned and sickened the fae, they went into hiding, living deep in the wilderness, where humans stopped looking for them. As the years went by, more and more people forgot that the fae had ever truly walked the earth, and called them stories. Faerie tales.*

*Dorcha made them remember, though.*

*Calling upon all the citizens of the Unblessed Court, for that was the name of the realm he ruled, Dorcha declared war on all of humanity and sent his armies forward to destroy every mortal being in their path. He told them to do so by any means necessary, even those that had become taboo among fae-kind in their centuries of hiding. Fae used their magics to enslave humans and drive them into the iron-soaked cities they could not set foot in, telling them to kill any and all they saw. In the countryside, where the iron wasn't as strong, fae came crashing down on towns and villages, eradicating all who lived there, leaving only ghosts.*

*Mankind fought back as hard as it could, but they were no match for the power, the force, the anger of the fae. Desperate to survive, humans fled into the hearts of their cities, hoping the iron would protect them. That is*

*why we live here, deep inside Halifax. The buildings and the fences keep us safe.*

*It's been thirty years now and mankind still lives, but barely. What little of us remain, we are all the hope humanity has left. But we are a mere candle flame in a sea of darkness, emitting the smallest flicker of light amidst the shadow.*

*But don't worry, my little Kelly. It will be okay.*

*I know the world will come back someday.*

Kelly blinks and the image of her mother begins to fade away, replaced by the empty grass where she once sat. She remembers that moment vividly, the last time her mother ever told her a story. The last time she ever existed in the daylight. She'd been five years old when she heard that story, sitting in the grass and pulling blades of it out as she listened. The grass had long since grown back, any evidence she'd ever done such things lost to time—thirteen years' worth of time.

Kelly walks over to the place her mother occupied and sits down, propping one leg up exactly as she had then and resting her arm atop her knee. She stares out at the expanse of the park, a few goats and chickens picking their way through the grass as the sun rises. Slowly, she feels herself sink into another memory.

*Haruka's looking down at little Kelly, lying in her pile of blankets she often prefers to the bed. She and Ken normally sleep in their parent's bed, but since she could safely climb down, Kelly has always taken to curling up in a pile of fleeces and comforters in the corner of the room instead. She is barely awake, trying to fight off sleep to keep staring up at her mother. "I'm sorry..." Haruka murmurs, leaning down to press a kiss to her forehead. She disappears out the door, but for a brief moment, Kelly can still hear her voice.*

*"I'm so sorry..."*

Kelly closes her eyes and takes a slow, deep breath, letting it settle in her chest a moment before sighing. She grips the grass in both hands, listening to the fibers of the blades tear from the roots. After several minutes, she pulls herself back to her feet and tosses the torn grass into the wind. It flutters out into the field, disappearing in the growing light of the sun. Another pause, then she turns back the way she came and dusts off her hands, taps the tip of her shoe on the ground and begins jogging. As the edge of the park draws near, she speeds up to a run.

By the time she's home, her father has breakfast ready and on the table. Oatmeal. She mutters a quick thanks as she takes up a bowl and settles at the small card table tucked into the corner of their kitchen to eat with him.

Robert is silent for several moments as they begin their meal, then finally clears his throat. "So, big day is almost here, huh?"

Kelly looks up at him in the middle of chewing a mouthful. "What?" she asks, the word muffled by the food.

"School is almost over," Robert clarifies. "You're going to be an adult soon, out in adult society." He chuckles a little at his own comment, holding out his hand and letting it cross from one side of himself to the other, as if taking in a scene.

Kelly barely holds back a snort before she swallows, grinning. "Oh yeah, going to take on the world."

Robert's smile softens as he looks at her, settling his hand back on the table. "Your mother would be very proud of you, you know."

His words make Kelly think of her morning memories, of her mother's almost-constant smile and dreamy eyes that always seemed to be looking at her and something else at the same time, and her smile is somewhat lopsided. "I know. I wish she could be here."

She gets up and grabs her bowl, rinsing it and setting it into the sink before heading for her bedroom to grab her smartphone and check the time. Swiping up with her thumb, she presses the music app on the



bottom bar of the screen and scrolls through several songs before settling on one. A soft melody drifts through the still air. Kelly shoves the phone in her pocket speaker side up and kicks off her shoes, making her way to the chest of drawers. It takes no time at all to choose her clothes for the day, most of her wardrobe being fairly similar. Jeans, some shorts, snug T-shirts, a jacket, a coat and some scarves for when it gets cold. She pulls out an outfit without paying much attention, humming along with her phone as lo-fi plays. She makes her way to the bathroom as the song rolls over. Kelly sets her clothes on the bathroom counter and drops her phone on top, still playing.

Halifax, Nova Scotia is fortunate enough to still have running water. Most of the big cities do; it's the small communities that dare to exist outside the metropolitan centers that are lacking in what was once considered necessities.

As she showers, she looks at her reflection in the mirror hung on the tile and her thoughts drift off to other childhood memories. Once upon a time, she was a little sister, not an only child. Her brother's face still lingers in the corners of her mind, growing fuzzier with each passing year. Many had thought she and Ken were twins with their matching black hair and brown eyes, but he had been nearly two years older. Kelly reaches up to run her fingers through the shorn side of her jet black hair and into the long top, pulling through it until it released from her hand and slapped back against her wet skin.

People often liked to mention how much they looked like their mother, too. It was purely the physical features, Kelly came to realize. Her father had brown hair, bright eyes. It was natural for people to look at Haruka with her ink hair and dark gaze and think, 'Oh you look so much like your mother.' But looking at herself now, Kelly knows that's as far as it goes. The wistfulness of her mother's face is not present in her own, the serenity in her eyes absent. Haruka looked at the world like it was a thing that could be saved. Kelly looks at it like it needs comfort as it draws its last breath.

Kelly looks away from the mirror and picks up the shampoo, squeezing a glob into her hand and scrubbing it into her hair.

That wasn't the only thing they said about Haruka, though.

*That Haruka was always an odd one. I bet she gave her boy to the fae. I bet they took her too.*

Her father has always maintained that the fae stole them away against their will, and Kelly keeps up the facade of believing it, but the memories of that last night linger in her mind. For all she could tell, Haruka had left on her own. Maybe she should have been bitter, or angry, but after all these years it's just left her confused. Why would her mother leave? And why take Ken with her? In thirteen years, she's never come up with a reasonable answer to that question. At least, not one she was willing to accept.

She feels the inkling of thoughts better left as feelings begin to creep up and try to form words, and she shoves them down, leaning her head into the spray of water to wash out her hair.

She never speaks to her father about these things. The first time she tried he kept his composure, probably because he didn't want to scream at a ten-year-old who didn't know better, but she could tell he was seething under the surface. She can still remember how his fists were gripped so tightly that his nails left shallow divots in his palms. Nothing would change his mind about what happened, and to insist otherwise is to invite his fury for the fae onto you. Even watching it happen to someone else made her anxiety twist in her chest. Thankfully, no one seems to poke at the subject anymore.

Twisting the shower knob, she steps out onto the rug and grabs her towel, wiping water off her face, then draping it across her chest. She makes quick work of drying off and getting dressed, then goes to her room to grab her tablet off her desk and settles in their tiny living room to study her notes. Her father mentioning school reminds her that exams are Monday.

Like running water, some cities manage to still have electricity and Halifax is one of the lucky ones. Devices like computers and tablets still work, but there is no Internet. They can be charged, but not updated. New items of this nature are not invented, mankind does its best to preserve the ones they still have. It's easy enough to do. Technology outnumbers humans.

Half an hour passes this way before Kelly sighs and tosses the tablet to the other side of the couch, where it lands with a muted *thwump*. "I know it well enough." She lies splayed out on the couch, mulling over what to do before finally deciding she's going to find her dog, Bear. He isn't in the apartment, from what she can tell, which means he must have been let out last night. Her father often lets Bear stay outside overnight in spring and summer to wander around and enjoy himself instead of being cooped up in their small home. A tiny two-bedroom isn't always the best space for a big dog like him.

"I'm going out!" she shouts as she heads for the front door.

"Don't forget your keys!" Robert calls back.

Kelly pauses mid-step and backs up to grab a key-chain off the hanger on the wall, giving it a jingle, then stepping out.

She takes the stairs two at a time down to the ground floor and out of the complex, where she finds Bear relaxing in the grass of the building's front yard. It's a small patch of greenery stuffed full of growing vegetables, herbs lining the edges like weeds, taking purchase anywhere they can. "Hey, Bear!" she shouts, smiling as soon as she sees him.

The dog scrambles up, trotting over to her, tail wagging immediately. Kelly drops into a crouch and takes his face in her hands, ruffling his fur and ears. "How're you, buddy?"

Bear barks in response and leans into her touch, panting happily. His tail wags faster.

Kelly sighs as her hands drop to her knees and she lingers there a moment before rising to her feet again, looking around the yard for any sign of a stick or a toy. She spots an old tennis ball near the tomato plants

and approaches it, snatching it up and showing it to Bear. "Want to play a little fetch?"

Bear perks up immediately, hopping on his front paws as he waits for the ball to be thrown. Kelly winds it back and tosses it as far as she can, watching it soar over the yard and into the road. Bear goes bounding after it and she watches as he grows smaller, shoving her hands in her pockets. Eventually he comes running back, the ball between his teeth, and he drops it at her feet.

"It's been thirteen years now, Bear," Kelly mumbles as she stares up into the partly cloudy sky, the golden haze of morning now completely lost to blue. She turns her attention back to the ball and pulls a hand from her pocket to grab it, tossing it again and watching the malamute go dashing off.

Bear has been privy to many of her secrets, in many places. The yard, the park, her room. Things she never felt like she could tell her friends or her father, Bear has heard them all. There is something comforting about having a friend who doesn't understand anything you say.

"Longer than you've been alive," she adds as he returns with his prize. "Thirteen years, and I can't get over them." She sighs and picks up the ball again, but doesn't throw it. "I wish you knew my mom. Maybe you could help me understand better if you did." She is quiet for a few moments before sending the ball flying again. When he returns once more, she takes the ball and holds it loosely in her hand, staring into the empty street. "Maybe that's why it's so hard. Even I didn't know her."

The complex door creaks as it opens and Kelly glances over her shoulder. Her father is stepping out, letting the door swing closed behind him. He offers her a wave, a tired smile on his face. "Got a patrol."

"Be safe!" Kelly calls as she waves back.

"You, too," Robert replies, letting his hand fall to his side as he walks briskly down the way, his gaze drifting to what lies ahead.

Kelly turns her attention back to Bear, who is watching her, head tilted. She offers him a smile not too different from her father's and tosses the ball again.

When evening rolls around, Kelly cooks dinner. Her father, being a patrolman, works long hours and she always feels guilty at the notion of him coming home from ages of walking only to stand in the kitchen and cook a meal, so she usually takes care of it.

Bear lies in a corner of the kitchen, dozing as he keeps her company.

When Robert gets home, he is stiff and ill-tempered, slamming the door shut and kicking off his boots. Bear sits up immediately, alert as he watches the man slump into his chair at the dinner table and takes up his fork. He says nothing, stabbing a chunk of carrot and ripping it off the utensil with his teeth. As he chews the same bite for the twenty-fifth time, Kelly watches him silently for a moment before asking, "So what happened today?"

Robert swallows and sighs deeply, then takes another bite and chews as he looks off in contemplation, his shoulders sagging. When he finishes, he speaks. "Had an enthralled today, right in the city."

Kelly stiffens and stares across the table at him. "How far in?"

Neither of them notices Bear stand slowly, his attention flitting between them as they speak.

"Up to the fence," Robert answers. "Bastard tried to negotiate his way in and everything, tried to convince us he got lost and couldn't find the caravan he'd been traveling with. Insisted they'd either gotten here already or were on the way." Robert frowns harder at the memory, gripping his fork tighter. "But he had that look in his eye that those slaves just can't hide." His shoulders squared in that way that Kelly knew meant he was fighting back a shiver. "That dull shimmer."

Kelly nods. She'd been taught from an early age how to spot someone under the influence of faerie magic. The shimmer, the glassy stare into the middle distance, that is the easiest way to know someone has

been taken by magic. She'd seen photos and video footage of enthralled in class, and once from a fellow student who'd seen one just before being ushered away by soldiers, but never been in the presence of one herself.

"What did you do?" Kelly asks.

"Shot him right between the eyes, of course." His voice is calm and measured, holding back something that Kelly chooses not to think about. "That's the only way to save those poor souls."

When you become a victim of it, you lose your name, referred to only as the enthralled or the fae-touched. There are fewer things more dangerous than an enthralled in the city. They'll do anything the fae ask of them, which usually is 'kill everyone you see.' They'll die for them. Most do, in the end.

Kelly nods, a grim expression on her face. She turns her attention to her food, but suddenly her appetite has dulled. "Of course."

"Had to have his body thrown out in the Wild," Robert continues. "No one ever wants to do it, but it's a job that's gotta get done. Everyone gets antsy the closer they get to the Wild."

Kelly nods as she listens and takes another bite, chewing it slowly as she tries to summon up the desire to swallow it. "Just the one, though?"

Robert nods. "Thankfully."

"That's good." Kelly goes quiet after that and the subject dies there.

There is a haunted look in her father's eyes. They had no choice in what they did once they were enslaved, and in that way they were innocent. No honorable man wants to kill innocent people, but they can't afford to let them live. No one can free the enthralled, save the fae.

The rest of the meal passes in silence, until Kelly offers to do the dishes. Robert thanks her, then disappears into the bathroom to shower. The apartment fills with the sound of running water. Kelly stares at her hands as she scrubs at the plates. It takes several minutes for her to realize Bear is sitting beside her, watching. She glances down at him briefly. "What's up, bud?"

Bear whimpers and paws at her leg.

Kelly smiles that same weary smile as she runs a plate under the faucet. “He’ll be fine, Bear. Everything always turns out fine.”

Except when it doesn’t, but she keeps that part to herself.



02

KELLY STEPS INTO THE courtyard of the school and pauses. A couple of her classmates surround the front door, chattering excitedly about something she can't see. She tenses, balling one hand into a fist as she approaches slowly. "What's going on?"

"There's someone new!" a girl, Jenna, replies excitedly. "He came here from the Wild!"

A lump forms in Kelly's throat and she doesn't come closer. "When?"

"Caravan came in about two days ago," a boy's voice says from behind another pair of girls. He pushes past them, flashing a grin as their eyes meet. Kelly's gaze immediately darts to his eyes. They're clear like ice. That relaxes her and her fist loosens, but she still stays in place, taking in his details. Red hair buzzed close to his head, a spattering of freckles on sun-tanned skin, and a toothy smile that immediately made Kelly think of a few choice guys in her grade that she couldn't stand.

"Oh yeah? Where from?" she asks.



“From Quebec City,” the boy replies. His tone is rather casual. “Week and a half journey.” He steps forward and offers his hand. “Name’s Dalton.”

Kelly stares at the space between them a moment before slapping her hand into his and giving it one firm shake. “Kelly. Did you travel with a military escort?”

Dalton snorts. “You think they’d let me in the city if I didn’t?” He flexes his fingers. “Our people got word that Halifax could use a little more manpower moving some goods along the trade routes, sent a few of us greenhorns along so we could get some experience.”

One of the girls shoves past Dalton to stand between him and Kelly, looking between them with a bright smile. Despite Kelly’s apprehension for this newcomer, seeing that familiar smile brings one to her own face. “Kelly is going to do that!” Cassandra quips. “Escort caravans and such.”

“Not be a patrolman like her old man?” someone behind them remarks. Kelly’s eyes drift to a boy off to the side, Tim, who is sneering directly at her. “Wander around the city like some tough girl?”

“Big words for an inner city boy,” Kelly retorts. “Do you even know what the fence looks like?”

Tim’s cocky expression falls immediately and he looks away, mumbling something under his breath as he pushes open the front doors and disappears inside. Jenna and the other girl, no longer interested in this conversation, follow him.

Dalton seems to pay this exchange no mind, giving Kelly a once-over. “You’re gonna be a military escort?” Kelly nods and Dalton does the same. “You look the part. Strong muscle definition, even if you’re a little small.” He taps the side of his head with his pointer finger. “I like what you did with your hair.”

Kelly reaches up to run her fingers along the buzzed side of her hair and one side of her lips tweaks up into a grin. Her hand slips back to brush the band of her ponytail, as if needing confirmation it’s still bound tightly and standing high. “Thanks.” As her hand falls, she crosses her

arms over her chest, shifting her weight onto one leg. "So, Dalton, you going to sit here and make us late for class, or do you have somewhere you need to be?"

He chuckles at that. "Alright, you got me. I've been hauling grain up here to store. They're probably bitching about the fact that I didn't follow them all back." He begins sauntering his way down the path Kelly came from, pausing to glance over his shoulder. "Good luck on your tests, kids."

As he wanders off, Cassandra takes a step towards Kelly and drapes an arm over her shoulders. "That's gonna be you in like a month."

"You didn't have to stick up for me, Cass," Kelly retorts, glancing at her friend. "I'm not looking to impress some random guy from Quebec City."

Cass laughs and shrugs one shoulder. "Can't I be proud of my friend once in a while?"

Kelly can't help it and chuckles with her, her laughter a little infectious. She glances at the empty space in front of the doors. "We better go in," she says, pulling away from Cass. "Exams and all that."

"Right, right." Cass follows behind her. "Good luck, by the way."

"You too," Kelly replies, smiling at her and holding her hand up.

Cass gives her a high-five, then they go their separate ways. Kelly pauses a few steps down the hall, looking back to the entrance like she expects Dalton to be there still, but it's empty.

Everyone else is already in their seats when Kelly steps into her math class, a couple glancing up at her briefly as she walks to her desk and slumps into it. The exam hasn't begun, but she is the last one to enter, earning her a pointed look from the teacher before he clears his throat. The soft chatter dies down. "I'm going to hand each of you a test packet," the teacher, Mr. Ramsey, says as he stands, gathering up the shabby stack at the corner of his desk. It's clear these papers have seen years of use. "Please do not write on it, note your answers on a separate sheet of paper, which you will turn in when you return this test to me."

You do not need to show your work on your answer paper, but you're free to if you want." He walks down the aisles, setting one wrinkled packet on each desk, not making eye contact with any student. "If you need paper or pencils, there are blank sheets on my desk. You may use calculators, of course." He returns to his seat with the remaining packets and sets them aside, leaning back in his chair. "You may begin."

Kelly gets to her feet and approaches his desk, taking two blank sheets of paper off the second stack and the sharpest pencil of those offered. Returning to her desk, she sets to work immediately. Math has always been one of her stronger suits, something her father likes to say she inherited from him. *I wanted to be an engineer, you know*, he would tell her. *When I had done my time*. Sometimes she finds him at the kitchen table reading old textbooks on calculus and differential equations like there is still some chance he can pursue that dream, as if his time is close to done. It'll never be done, though, extended to a life sentence.

*Kelly is going to do that!* Cass's voice chimes in her mind.

Kelly frowns and writes down the answer to the first question.

The test is over soon enough and she stands, grabbing her answer sheet and approaching Mr. Ramsey's desk to offer it to him. "Thank you, Ms. Cullman," he says as he accepts the paper and places it off to the side. "You'll have your results tomorrow."

"Thank you, Mr. Ramsey," Kelly replies.

He makes a motion to dismiss her and she walks out of class, the first one to do so.

She does not have the same results in English, where she finds herself among the last students to turn in their exams. She has a decent grasp on the subject, but forming her thoughts into the shape she is expected to present them in has always made her stumble. She thinks through presentation too slowly. Why couldn't they just write the same way they speak? Does it really matter anymore?

*It will matter someday*, her teacher once said when she brought up the subject. She had to hold back a snort then much like she has to resist

the urge to roll her eyes now as she deletes a sentence and begins to rewrite it.

What feels like ages later, she saves the file to the thumbdrive her teacher had offered her and pulls it from the borrowed laptop, closing the computer and bringing them both up to the front desk. "Thank you, Ms. Cullman," Mrs. Essex says as she accepts both. "You'll have your results tomorrow."

Kelly mumbles a half-hearted thanks and shoves her hands into her pockets as she heads for the door.

The military courses are conducted differently. Kelly sits as straight as she can and rests her hands in her lap, keeping eye contact with the sergeant serving as their teacher. Behind him, five other soldiers stand at ease, waiting for him to give his instructions. This exam is not done by typing on a tablet or a laptop, but by working with one's hands. Sergeant Schuler holds up a rifle, his face measured in much the same way her father's is when he doesn't want to betray himself. Must be a military thing. "Each of you will take apart a rifle, clean it, and put it back together, then we will take it outside and fire it. Should it fire successfully, you will have passed this exam. Understood?"

Each student nods once, speaking almost in unison. "Yes, sir."

Sergeant Schuler brings the rifle to a nearby table, setting it in the center, then motions for the other soldiers to take their positions at the other tables. "Then approach the rifle of your choice."

Kelly gets to her feet and makes a beeline for him, cutting off a young man, Brent. She hears him give a little *tch* before turning and heading for another table. The sergeant meets her gaze and holds it for a moment before speaking. "Are you ready, Ms. Cullman?"

"Yes, sir," Kelly replies, resting her hands on the table just enough that she can feel it under her fingertips.

Sergeant Schuler motions to the gun between them. "Then begin."

Her gaze drops to the gun as her hands move, taking it up and turning it this way and that as she examines the finer details of its design. To

her left, Brent is already pulling his apart. Her hands move deftly over the metal. She has worked with this kind of rifle all her life, has memorized its parts and how they fit together. Her father has one hanging on the wall of the living room. Many an evening have been spent setting it on the kitchen table as if it was dessert, the act of dismembering it no different from savoring the flavor of well-baked hot cross buns with honey butter. Seeing it back together is almost as sweet.

When Kelly sets it back on the table, it looks exactly the same as when the sergeant held it. Schuler stares at it for several seconds before taking it into his own hands, turning it upside down, then right-side up again. This seems to satisfy him and he nods towards the door as he holds the rifle back out to her. "Follow me."

They pass through the halls to the far end of the building, where a lone tree stands a few feet off from the walkway. Several bullet holes dot the tree's surface already, marring the sloppily painted red circles in the center of its trunk. It continues to stand tall and green in defiance of this, its leaves rustling in the light spring breeze. Kelly stares up into its branches as Sergeant Schuler steps aside and assumes an at-ease position, her grip on the rifle tightening. "Your goal is to hit the center of the target," Schuler says. "Please step up."

Kelly does so, lifting the rifle and looking down the sight at the center-most circle. This part is second nature, the act of grounding oneself and aiming, of making sure the bullet flies true. *You won't have a second chance*, her father would say when they practiced in the front yard. *If you miss a faerie, you're dead before you can pull the trigger again.* It takes her hardly any time to aim and pull. A loud crack sounds across the clearing, and as it fades she lowers the gun, narrowing her eyes as she scrutinizes the shot. There is a new crater in the bullseye, about an inch to the left of what would've been perfect center. She *tsks* at the imperfection.

Schuler nods, a hint of emotion to his face finally. Approval. "Good. Now a moving target." He raises his hand to cup one side of his mouth and shouts, "Pull!"

Somewhere from the foliage beyond the tree, another soldier unleashes a clay pigeon.

Kelly whips the rifle up and follows the path of the pigeon, pulling the trigger. It shatters in the air.

"Pull!" Schuler shouts.

Two more go flying, and falling in pieces.

"Pull!"

Three fly, two break by the impact of a bullet. Kelly fires a fourth shot, catching the edge of the clay disc before it smashes into the ground. She grits her teeth in frustration, but remains quiet and at the ready for more.

Sergeant Schuler nods. "Good work, Ms. Cullman. The Canadian Armed Forces will be fortunate to have you."

"I missed one," Kelly says as she lowers the rifle, her tone bitter.

"It's alright to miss one," Schuler replies, already walking away.

Kelly bites back the desire to disagree, her father's words playing in her head again. The sergeant slows to walk beside her as they return to the classroom and pulls a case resting against the wall from its companions, setting it on the nearest empty table and undoing the clasps. Once it opens, he motions for her to set the gun into the molded foam. She does so, letting her hands rest on the tablet afterward. Schuler snaps the case closed and pushes it towards her. "Congratulations, this is yours."

Kelly blinks and looks from the case to her teacher. "I get to keep it?"

Schuler nods and motions to it. "It's all yours now."

Kelly's lips twitch a moment before turning into a half-smile. She pulls the case off the table and swings the strap around her shoulder, offering the sergeant a salute once the case is settled against her back. "Thank you, sir."

There is a bit of a spring in her step as she leaves the classroom for the next.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Cullman,” the man behind the desk says as Kelly takes her seat.

She sets her rifle case flat against the floor beside her before addressing him. “Good afternoon, Sergeant Aims.”

Sergeant Aims looks across the classroom for a moment before clearing his throat. “Approach my desk and I will administer the jump-drives with the exam. If you have a tablet, I will offer you a computer for the duration of class.”

Kelly waits for the other students to go ahead of her, watching each as they pass by. She gets up from her desk and approaches the teacher’s, resting one hand against the edge. “I need a laptop, please.”

Aims reaches down and procures one from the stack beside his chair and slaps a thumbdrive on top, holding both out to Kelly. “Please bold the correct answer, or fill it in if there is a blank. You have one hour.”

Kelly accepts the laptop with a muttered thanks and returns to her seat. She renames the file— KellyCullman\_FaeHistoryFinal.docx— then opens it and begins. The first twenty questions are all about types of fae. They’re easy enough to answer, memorizing faerie stories is something she’s been doing since she was a child. Not on purpose at first. When she was small her mother liked to entertain them with tales of the different kinds of fae. When she disappeared, those same tales were told to her by her father, but the whimsy and wonder of them was gone. They became warnings to heed.

Kelly pauses as she reads the final question of this section.

*20. What is a barghest?*

- A. A faerie that takes the form of a black dog.*
- B. A type of deer native to Canada.*
- C. A type of ghost similar to a poltergeist.*
- D. A faerie that resembles a black horse.*

*“Remember, never follow a black dog,” her father says, voice firm. He’s on one knee beside her, standing outside in the yard as Bear occupies himself with a stick.*

*“But what about Bear?” Kelly asks, pointing at him. She’s eleven years old, having just celebrated her birthday last month. Bear was her present.*

*“Bear is black and white,” Robert explains. “He’s safe. But an all-black dog is dangerous. It could be a faerie.”*

*“A barghest,” Kelly says confidently.*

*Robert nods. “Exactly. A barghest looks just like a black dog.”*

*“Did a barghest take Mom and Ken?” Kelly asks, watching his face.*

*Robert cringes and looks away. “I don’t know, sweetie. I don’t know.”*

Kelly bolts the first answer and continues on.

The second portion of the test occupies itself mostly with accepted lore and things that have been proven over the thirty years since their emergence. More stories drilled into her memory by her father and teachers alike. It feels like the same material every single year. Never touch a damp horse, don’t eat food from strangers, never say your full name outside of designated safe spaces. Everyone knows these things.

She comes to the final portion: essay questions. She sighs and slumps back in her seat for a moment, staring at the screen with a pout. More writing. Kelly scans over each of the three prompts, settling on the last and repositioning herself to type her answer.

***What— if anything— is the greatest threat to mankind besides the fae?***

*It could be argued that the greatest threat to mankind is lack of supplies due to the scarcity of people to maintain necessities or the finite nature of some things we’ve come to rely on, but with proper rationing and careful cultivation of urban farming, animal husbandry, and recycling, I believe this threat has been diminished since the start of the war, and will continue*



*to diminish over time. In this essay I will argue that the true second greatest threat is, in fact, witches.*

*‘Witch’ is the most recognized modern term for a child born of man and fae. They are given this name because of their ability to wield magic. To be a witch in eras past was to be a human with the power to do the same, though the veracity of “human magic” is debatable. Some believe famous witch cases of history were actually half-faerie children, giving the term some historical backing in the modern day.*

*Witches are considered extremely dangerous because they are able to touch iron like a human and wield magic like the fae. Fae, as has become common knowledge, grow sick and weak from the presence of iron and will avoid it whenever possible. This is why we can safely exist inside large cities like our own Halifax. Witches are not burdened with this sickness and can pass through the iron fences protecting us with ease. Their possession of free will and inability to be charmed by the fae is also considered a significant threat.*

*In 2035, the city of Halifax formally declared that witches, like the fae-touched or enthralled, were executable on sight. This was done as a protective measure, as the threat of witches siding with their fae family was deemed too much of a risk. The general, albeit informal, consensus among humans is that, while having the choice, witches are most likely to side with their magical brethren rather than with their mundane ones because they believe the fae will “inherit the earth.” To put it bluntly, when offered the choice between the winning side and the losing side, it’s far more likely a witch will choose the winning side—the fae—as a means of survival.*

*We have seen what the fae can do to us. Witches can wreak the same havoc, but from inside the heart of our safe places. No one is safe from the presence of a well-concealed witch, as they are physically identical to humans, down to their crystal clear sight. They bear no markings of fae touch. One moment of carelessness in the presence of a witch, and you are as good as dead.*

Kelly reads over her response once. It's not perfect, but this isn't English class, a little informality is probably acceptable. Satisfied with this answer, Kelly saves the document and closes it, then brings the laptop and thumbdrive up to the sergeant's desk. Aims looks over the rim of his book at her, then to the computer, and motions for her to set it down. "You'll have your scores tomorrow."



03

A WEEK AFTER RECEIVING her scores, Kelly is in the park again, but it's a far cry from its usual state. The chickens and goats have been corralled and all the open space is filled with people who have gathered in clusters to chatter, leaving pathways between them and the next group or the various tables that have been arranged on the grass.

Kelly gives each group a once-over, seeing who she can recognize. Her classmates dot the crowd, their families close by. Strangers excited for something to celebrate, or eager to get some free food, make up most of the others in attendance. Not far from where the crowd thins out, teachers and soldiers are putting the final preparations on a stage— which is really just an outlined square of grass with some decorative pillars and draped fabric.

As soon as they are at the edges of the crowd, Robert has his hands on Kelly's shoulders and is gently ushering her forward. "There's still some time before the ceremony," he says when she looks back at him. "Go find your friends. Tonight is about you guys."

Kelly offers him a half-smile and plucks at the hem of her black dress. It's a simple strapless number with a light cardigan, accompanied by a pair of wedges. She doesn't remember the last time she wore it, or the shoes for that matter. "You sure?"

Robert nods and motions for her to get going. "Yes! Go have fun!"

Kelly offers him a playful salute and turns back to the crowd, disappearing into the throng. She glances into each group, looking for her classmates. A few catch her eye and offer waves or greetings and she returns them, but doesn't stop, not until she sees Cassandra standing with Jenna and Brent. Cass's laugh fills the air and Brent grins, proud of himself for causing it. He notices Kelly first, waving. "Hey, Kells."

Kelly takes the empty space beside Cass and shoves her hands in the pockets of her cardigan. "Hey, guys. We're finally here, huh?"

Cass giggles and drapes an arm around Kelly. She's wearing a gray A-line skirt with a white blouse, a chunky turquoise bangle on her wrist the only pop of color in her outfit. "We're finally here!" she repeats.

Jenna and Brent are both dressed in slacks and button-up shirts, the latter wearing a tie and suspenders. Jenna's dimples are on full display as she smiles, Brent's expression more subdued now. "You excited to get your ass kicked?" he asks, looking at Kelly as he crosses his arms over his chest.

"I'm excited to see *you* get your ass kicked," Kelly replies, grinning as she pulls her hand from her pocket and swings an arm around Cass's waist in return.

Brent scoffs and rolls his eyes, but one side of his lips tweaks up into a half-grin.

"You're both going to be great," Cass chimes in.

"You know I finished reconstructing my gun before her," Brent comments.

"I have better aim than you," Kelly counters.

It's Jenna's turn to roll her eyes. "Can we not? We're supposed to be happy and celebrating, you know."

“Yes!” Cass exclaims, pulling her arm from Kelly’s shoulders to slap her in the middle of her back. “So play nice! You’re probably going to have to live with Brent in boot camp, you know.”

“Gross,” Kelly retorts, but she grins anyway.

Brent chuckles under his breath and relaxes his stance. “Because you asked nicely.”

Kelly is about to make another comment when a loud clapping gets her attention. The chatter begins to die down as more hands join, guests looking to the empty square for the source of the noise. Mr. Ramsey is in the center of the square, his colleagues flanking him in two groups, one the other civilian teachers and the other soldiers. “If all today’s graduates would join me at the back of the stage, please.”

Cass practically squeals at that and grabs Kelly by the wrist, yanking her along as she hurries ahead of Brent and Jenna. They’re two of the first students to join the teachers and are quickly ushered to the empty space behind the marked square serving as the stage. As they get corralled into place, the audience begins coming together, forming one unified group in front. A few people continue to whisper and mutter to themselves, but most of them have gone quiet.

Once the modest array of students have taken their places, Mr. Ramsey gives one more clap, keeping his hands together as he looks over the audience. Behind him, the sky begins purpling as the first signs of dusk settle on the horizon. “Welcome, one and all, to graduation. I have the esteemed honor of officiating this ceremony today. Like many of you, I have watched these individuals grow into exceptional members of our community, and I am proud to be bidding farewell to them today as they take their places in society.” The audience claps when he pauses. Mr. Ramsey clears his throat and continues. “Without further ado, please welcome the class of 2050.”

The teacher at the head of the line ushered the first student forward and they began their measured walk up to Mr. Ramsey, facing the audi-

ence. “William Edgar,” the student announces before taking a bow, as is custom for civilians.

“Welcome, William,” Mr. Ramsey says as he straightens, holding out his hand for the young man to shake, holding out his other hand to the woman beside him. She hands him a thin coin the size of a silver dollar, which he then holds out to William. “Keep this coin close to your heart and let its iron protect you. It will bring you luck as you traverse the world, and travel on to the next phase of your life.”

William nods in thanks as he takes the coin, pressing it to his chest before saying, “Thank you.” With that, his turn on the stage is over and he walks to the end, where another teacher is waiting to take his photo.

Cassandra is next. Once the stage is clear, she approaches and faces the audience. “Cassandra Jefferson.” She curtsies.

“Welcome, Cassandra,” Mr. Ramsey says, then shakes her hand and offers her one of the iron coins, giving her the same message, albeit slimmed down for time. Cassandra accepts it with thanks, then walks across the stage.

Kelly is next. She takes a deep breath, then approaches the front of the stage, facing everyone. Her father is in the front row, a smile threatening to crack his face in half. He motions like he’s going to clap, but his hands don’t meet. Kelly returns the smile before announcing herself. “Kelly Cullman.” Unlike her predecessors, she stands at attention and salutes. Everyone claps, but Robert claps the loudest, throwing in a holler than earns him a few glances. Kelly’s smile widens a touch at that, and her eyes linger on her father for a moment before turning to Mr. Ramsey as he presents her coin. She shakes his hand and offers a small thanks, then walks to the other side to stand for her photo. Once it is taken, she pockets the coin and joins Cass and William to the side to wait for the others to make their way across.

Once each student has walked, the entire group is ushered back into the square to stand in a line and offer one last collective bow and thanks to those who came before them. The crowd claps and cheers, and

finally they are dismissed to mingle into the others again as the ceremony quickly shifts back into a party. Kelly makes a beeline for Robert, who holds up a hand. She grins as she slaps hers into his with a loud clap, their fingers curling around the other as their high-five turns into a hug, their clasped hands caught between their chests. Robert gives Kelly one clap on the back before backing up and letting her go. “You did it, kid.”

Kelly flashes horns with her pointer finger and pinky and laughs. “Sure did.”

Robert chuckles with her, then reaches into his pocket to produce an envelope. He holds it close to his chest, hesitating a moment before extending it to her. “Here, before I forget.”

Kelly’s smile falls slightly, but she takes the envelope, pulling the flap open and peering inside. At first she thinks it’s empty, but a spot of red makes her realize that the contents are as thin as paper and clinging to their receptacle. She reaches two fingers in to grab it and pull it out, revealing a ribbon. It’s slightly frayed at the ends where it was originally cut, but someone took the time to hem it so it would stay intact. Her gaze lingers on it for a moment before she turns her attention to her father. “What’s this?”

A sadness makes its way into Robert’s eyes that is reflected in the way his smile falls ever-so-slightly. “You might not remember, but your mother wore that ribbon.”

Kelly’s gaze darts from her father’s face to the ribbon, the image of her mother forming in the back of her mind as she recalls flashes of her, the red ribbon tied around her neck. Kelly could only remember one time she ever saw her without it, the night she disappeared. She hadn’t thought anything of it at the time, but seeing it here now, knowing she’d left it behind, it stirs something in her chest that she can’t quite name. A memento of a life gone. “Are you sure you want to give this to me?”

Robert nods. “I think your mother would’ve wanted you to have it today.”

Kelly offers the empty envelope back to him, taking the ribbon in both hands once he accepts it. She reaches behind herself with it to wrap it twice around the base of her ponytail, tugging it until it's close and tight, then tying it off. The ends of the ribbon drape down unevenly.

Robert's smile returns, but the sadness in his gaze grows darker. "It looks good."





04

*HER MOTHER'S FACE LOOMS over her, mournful and apologetic. "I'm so sorry..."*

*Haruka flees through the city into the wilderness, the bright eyes of the hiding fae watching her from the bushes and shadows. They begin to cackle and laugh as she runs, the fear on her face growing stronger as she goes. Ken clings to her back, held in place by a cloth sling, and begins to cry against her shirt. She runs harder, but the cackling only grows into shrieks, coming closer and closer. The stomping of paws on the ground mingle with the sound of her haggard dash, followed by hooves.*

*"Please!" Haruka shouts, daring to glance over her shoulder. Yellow eyes meet hers in the dark, their bearer hidden in the night. "Please, just let me pass!"*

*A cackle fills the air before the beast leaps, teeth flashing in the glimpse of moonlight as it opens its mouth wide.*

Kelly startles awake and bolts upright at the sound of shattering glass. Her room is flooded in darkness, not even the stars visible. She reaches

for the knife on her bedside table, groping for the handle. As soon as her fingertips graze the cold wood of the handle she grips it tightly, holding it close to her chest as she tries to make out any unusual shapes in the dark.

Bear scrambles up in response and barks, crowding around her immediately and sniffing her. She grabs his ruff and pushes him back gently, hand lingering on his fur as she gives the room another pass. Bear barks again and Kelly hisses sharply. She sees only the outline of her dresser and a floor lamp, but that doesn't put her at ease. Her heart pounds, filling her ears and making it hard to listen.

Moments later, Robert bursts in, a hunting knife of his own at the ready. He flicks the switch multiple times before he realizes it's not working. "Kelly?" His voice is a whisper.

"I'm safe," she replies calmly, taking in a deep breath and releasing it slowly. "Just had a nightmare. Startled Bear I guess." Slowly, she reaches out and sets the knife back on her bedside table.

Robert sighs softly and lowers his knife. "Thank God." He glances up at the ceiling. "Guess your light burned out while you were asleep. What timing, huh?" He flips the switch one more time for good measure. "I'll go get another bulb." He disappears into the apartment and briefly Kelly considers taking up the knife again, but she settles for another deep breath instead. Bear sniffs at her shoulder before settling down beside her, pressing up against her like he needs confirmation she is solid and safe.

Robert returns a few minutes later with the bulb in hand and Kelly uses her phone flashlight, pointing it up at the ceiling as he steps onto her bed. They both frown when they see it. The bulb in the ceiling fan is shattered, jagged edges catching the light off the phone and outlining it in white. Their gazes drift down in unison to the comforter, where fragments of the bulb lie. "What the hell?" Robert mumbles.

Kelly says nothing, but that strange film of anxiety settles over her again.

Robert carefully unscrews the base of the broken bulb and replaces it. The light comes to life and washes them in soft white. Holding it by the metal anchor, he jumps off the bed and tosses it into a nearby wastebasket. “Don’t move, I’ll go get the broom.”

Kelly nods and watches as he leaves, her gaze following him still when he returns and uses the hand broom and dustpan to sweep up the broken shell of the previous bulb, tossing that in the trash as well. Once done, he double-checks for any stray pieces, then sighs. “That should do it.” He snaps the hand broom back into the dustpan, eyes lingering on the now clean comforter. “You got any idea how that happened?”

Kelly stares at the same place a moment before shaking her head. “No idea. I woke up and I—” She pauses, then looks at her father. “I think it happened as I came out of my dream.”

Robert’s frown deepens at that and he turns his attention to her, looking her in the eye. “Could you have thrown something in your sleep?”

Kelly shrugs. “I don’t think so.” She pats at the blanket several times before finding her phone, holding it up for him to see. “The only thing I ever leave in my bed is my phone.”

“Hmmm.” Robert’s stare lingers on her long enough to make Kelly shift slightly, discomfort growing within her. Finally, he turns away and sets the broom and dustpan on top of her dresser. “No use dwelling on it in the middle of the night. Get some rest, okay?”

Kelly nods. “Good night— again.”

“Good night.” Robert closes the door gently as he leaves. The light remains on.

Kelly lies back in bed and Bear squishes himself to her side protectively. She lies there for several minutes, staring at a corner of the ceiling, then sighs and rolls onto her side, closing her eyes.



The outer ring of Halifax is not a forbidden place, but it lies empty most of the time anyway, only occupied by soldiers guarding the fences and a handful of farmers willing to cultivate in all that uninhabited space. Sheep, goats, and deer wander through the area grazing on the grass growing through all the cracks in the asphalt and cement. There once was a time when the streets and sidewalks of the city bustled with cars and people, all going every which way and living their lives. Their memories have long since faded, their homes and footsteps devoured by the return of nature.

*Over 400,000 people lived here when I first arrived,* Robert once said, leaning against the tall iron-link fence that separated the heart of the city from the decaying corpse the rest of it had become. *Now, well. We'd be lucky to have 5,000 still living here now.*

Kelly tried to imagine that world once and found herself struggling. So many people in one place, it seems overwhelming. She remembers asking her father if that many people lived where he came from. He'd laughed at the question. *There were almost three million people where I came from.* She remembers the haunted look in his eyes, even though he hadn't stopped smiling. *Wonder how many are there now.*

Kelly doesn't feel trapped in Halifax, but being complacent with one's place doesn't equal satisfaction. It's a thought that doesn't occur to her until she thinks about things like the outer rings and the escort roads. The world is so big and so different from everything those who came before her can remember. Rumors and stories come rolling in with every caravan.

*The trees have taken on the shapes of people, and I swear some of them have moved since I was here last. I think they're going somewhere.*

*I heard Rochester saw a lubber fiend following us in the woods on our way here, but we lost it a mile out of the city. I'm glad we didn't have any milk with us.*

*You can always feel eyes on you out there...*

Kelly stares into the fire at the center of their little circle as Dalton chatters away about his own caravan stories, but none of them involve fae so she only half pays attention. Cass and the others, however, are eating it up. Cassandra had come knocking at her door that afternoon, inviting her out to the park with some of their school friends to spend time with the caravan and get the latest gossip. The only thing more interesting than what is going on in your own city is what is happening somewhere else.

“Kelly?” Cass nudges her shoulder with her own.

Kelly blinks and looks back to her. “What?”

Dalton scoffs and leans forward to rest his elbow on his leg. “Not impressed with what I’ve got to say?”

It would be a lie to say she was completely unimpressed, but she is not about to admit that to a braggart like Dalton. Besides, it’s not what *he* has done that she envies or admires, but the fact that he gets to do it at all. To walk those empty roads, to see the rolling hills and forests with her own eyes. To touch the person-shaped trees...

Kelly shrugs. “I mean, same shit, different city, right?”

Dalton chuckles at that. “Okay, try this one on for size.” He flexes his hands so his knuckles crack, then sits back. “Few months ago, on my first run through the Wild, I saw a human and a faerie together, and the human wasn’t fae-touched.”

Cass and one of the other girls gasp at that, but Kelly only squints.

Dalton nods. “A real bonafide tryst, kids. A woman sneaking off in the dead of night to meet her faerie lover.”

“How do you know that?” Kelly asks, her tone sharp.

Dalton’s smile drops slightly at that. “You can just tell when you see it.”

Dalton continues telling his story, but Kelly’s gaze drifts back to the fire, losing the thread in her own thoughts. The warm orange glow entrances her for a moment before she begins to see images imprinted in the flames. She imagines the kind of woman who would do such a

thing, flee the safe world she knows for the dangers of a lover who could take her life, figuratively and literally, at any moment. The trust she has to have for that faerie. The woman in her mind's eye runs through the embers and into the arms of a tall, beautiful man. For all the disdain humans have for the fae, anyone who has seen one always waxes poetic about their beauty. Then Kelly thinks of the world that woman and her paramour get to see, all the valleys, with their rainbow flowers, and rivers of churning waters, cut through with fish whose scales catch the light of the sun and create white shimmers in the currents. The inky black of the northern sea. All that came before them, all that would remain after. All the fae have done with the world they worked so hard to take back.

Kelly feels her heartbeat quicken at the very notion and balls her hands into loose fists. Her skin itches at the idea of dipping her hands into the ocean water and pressing her fingers to her lips. She almost tastes the salt.

Kelly stands up abruptly, her actions cutting Dalton off in the middle of his sentence. Cass looks up at her, her brows furrowing slightly. "Kelly? You okay?"

"I'm going to take a walk," Kelly replies, already stepping away.

"Don't you want to hear the end of my story?" Dalton asks.

"Raincheck," Kelly says, then breaks into a jog.

She makes her way to the edge of the city, where fences have been built in any open space. Thick iron chain-link has been hammered and drilled into the walls of any buildings that help make the perimeter, encasing the core of the city in a protective barrier that few who live inside ever see, let alone pass through.

Kelly comes up to the chain-link fence and leans against it as she looks out at the abandoned landscape, not too unlike her father the first time he brought her here. A few hearty weeds are growing between the cracks of unmanaged roads and sidewalks, flowers blooming here and there. In the distance is a pile of wilted, crumpled petals, torn from the

ground and left for dead. Kelly recalls a superstition as her gaze settles on them. *When flowers bloom too much, the fae are drawing closer.*

The city still looks largely like a place people could live. Maybe not well, but still. Kelly watches the empty space past the fence for a few moments before movement catches her eye. Her head whips in its direction, but she only catches a glimpse of black before it's completely gone. She squints, staring into the emptiness where she swears she saw it. "Dalton?" A pause. "Cass?"

A patrolwoman appears in the empty space, waving as she catches sight of Kelly.

"Hey there, Kelly," the woman says, jogging the distance between them to catch up to her. "Having a walk? Little unusual for you to be out this far, isn't it?"

Kelly nods, trying to will herself to relax. She doesn't remember this woman's name, but her face is familiar. Her father probably introduced them at one point. "Yeah." She considers telling her about the glimpse. "Just thinking, you know?"

She nods back. "Well be careful, okay? You heard about that enthralled we had the other day, right?"

Kelly shrugs. "Yeah. It's okay, I was just leaving."

The woman offers a small salute. "Happy trails."

Frustrated and slightly unnerved, Kelly walks off quickly, glancing back over her shoulder once she is a few feet away. The soldier has moved on, walking down the length of the fence, checking it periodically. Most of her attention remains on the swath of city beyond, though. Kelly waits for her to disappear down a side street, following a building, then approaches the fence again. She scans the length of the city she can see again, but all is still and quiet. Not even the wind moves.

Shoes scrape against the asphalt as someone approaches, but Kelly doesn't turn to see who it is.

"You walked out in the middle of my story," Dalton says as he comes to stand beside her, following her gaze. "Not a fan?"

"I'm not in the mood right now, Dalton," Kelly says flatly, turning to leave.

Dalton's hand shoots out and snatches her by the wrist, making her freeze. "Wait."

Kelly yanks her arm out of his grip and turns to glare at him. "*What?*"

"What's going on in that head of yours, girl?" Dalton asks, an odd softness to his voice.

"None of your business," Kelly snaps, turning to leave again. She makes it a few steps before stopping, sighing, and turning to face him. "Maybe the world just feels too small lately."

Dalton offers one soft chuckle at that. "Yeah, I felt the same way. That's why I'm here now."

Kelly watches him for a long moment, debating if she wants to ask the question lingering on her lips. "Did it help? Doing this?"

Dalton nods. "It did, yeah," he replies. "I don't talk about it around the old hats because they get a little weird about it, but—" He turns his attention back out to the city, looking down the main road. "It's really beautiful out there."

Kelly's gaze follows his and her shoulder sink slightly as she relaxes. "I want to see it," she admits.

"You will," Dalton says. "Your friend said you want to be on an escort team. You seem like a good fit for it. You'll do good."

Kelly scoffs and tries to keep a grin from forming on her face, but fails. She looks away, waving a hand as if to dismiss his words as she starts walking away. "Flattery will get you nowhere, Dalton."

The young man laughs at that and turns to follow her.





05

“So THIS IS A what? Some kind of air fryer?” Dalton hefts up the small boxy appliance, eyeing it curiously as he tilts it from one side to the other. It looks more like a tiny oven than anything else. Bear tilts his head up and sniffs the air, as if he can catch a scent off the device, then gives a small sound and wags his tail lazily, watching Dalton a moment before turning his attention to his owner.

Kelly chuckles and takes the object from Dalton, twisting it so the front faces her chest, then shoving it back into his hands. “Yes—well, kind of.” She grips the handle and pulls it, popping open the device and reaching inside to remove the two trays and inspect them. “It’s like an oven and a fryer in one. I’ve found one before. The fryer basket is missing, though, so it’s really just an oven.” She shoves the trays back inside and clicks the door back into place.

“And you know how to fix these?” Dalton asks, glancing from the appliance to her.

"Enough that I got the other one to work," Kelly replies, motioning for him to follow her down the path of scrap piles. Bear sticks close to her side, trotting along and matching her pace with ease.

Dalton shifts the device in his arms so it's settled better and follows along behind them, peering over the top of it. "How did you learn all this?"

"I read," Kelly answers, glancing back over her shoulder at him. "And I do a lot of trial and error."

"What do you do with all the things you fix?" Dalton asks.

Kelly waves a hand in the general direction of the entrance, where the junkyard master's tiny shed of a house is situated. Bear looks where she points, ears perked up like he expects something to be there. "I give it all to Greg. He figures out who can make use of it. Wouldn't be surprised if the soldiers end up with this fryer when I'm done with it."

Dalton chuckles under his breath as he adjusts his grip on the appliance again. "You're too good for Halifax."

"What did I tell you about flattery?" Kelly pauses as a glimpse of something red in a pile of scrap metal catches her eye. Bear trots a few steps ahead before stopping himself and looking back at her.

Dalton comes up to her side and tries to follow her gaze. "What is it?"

Kelly approaches the pile and plucks the red cylinder from the scrap metal, turning it slowly to inspect it. Attached to one end is a thin metal tube with a trigger. "A blowtorch, I think."

Dalton leans in to get a better look at it. "Wow, definitely don't see those everyday. Do you think it still works?"

Bear attempts to sniff the torch, but it's held too high, so instead he sits and watches, head tilted slightly.

Kelly brings the blowtorch close to her ear and shakes it, frowning as she listens. "Doesn't sound like it has anything inside."

"Damn," Dalton mutters. "Would've loved to have seen it in action, you know? My dad says blowtorches have blue flames."

Kelly grins at that, holding the torch away from her slightly. “Oh yeah? Are you a bit of a fire-starter, Quebec boy?”

Then the blowtorch roars to life in her hand, producing a long blue flame with a golden core, filling the air with its hiss. Kelly yelps and drops it, jerking her foot back as it hits the ground. Dalton lurches back, nearly dropping the air fryer in the process. When the torch lands, the flame snuffs out.

Kelly stares down at it, then at Bear, who is on his feet again and looking at the fallen tool. She looks at Dalton, who has the same confused expression as her. Their eyes meet and both remain frozen for a moment before Dalton tentatively says, “You said it was empty.”

“It sounded empty,” Kelly says, looking down at the torch again. She reaches down with the intention of picking it up, pausing a moment in hesitation before taking it into her hand and shaking it again. Not a single slosh to indicate there’s any leftover fuel in it. It’s completely spent. “It *is* empty.” Bear whimpers and paws at the ground nervously. “It’s okay, boy,” Kelly says, trying to sound soothing, though whether or not it’s for Bear is up to interpretation. “I’m just going to give this to the yard keeper, okay? Don’t want anyone to burn themselves.”

“Wait—” Dalton leans the air fryer more against one arm. “Try to do it again.”

Kelly narrows her eyes at him, gripping the torch tighter just a little. “Why?”

Dalton shrugs. “Maybe it’ll light again.”

“It’s empty,” Kelly counters.

“You said that the first time too,” Dalton offers in rebuttal.

Kelly sighs and looks at the torch, adjusting it in her hand so she can push in the trigger. Nothing happens. “See?”

With a flicker and a hiss the torch comes to life again, its long thin flame reaching out almost two inches. Kelly gasps sharply and pulls her finger off the trigger and the flame dies. Her hand feels strange against the metal, as if it contains a charge.

Across from her a wide smile spreads across Dalton's face. "Oh come on, we got to keep it."

Kelly glares at him and takes the torch in her other hand. "You might be here on a little vacation, but I live here, and if we do something stupid with this *I* will be the one in trouble for it." She begins to walk away, Bear hot on her heels. "It's going to Greg's."

Dalton groans, but follows after she's a few steps away. "That Brent guy was right about you. He said you always have a stick up your ass."

"Yeah well Brent's a bitch," Kelly retorts, picking up her pace. Neither of them say anything else as they walk to the shed. Once there, Kelly knocks on the door and taps her foot, waiting for him to open it.

"Yes? Find something you want?" the yard master asks as he appears from behind the faded, scratched-up door. Upon seeing Kelly's face, his own brightens and a smile crosses his features. His gaze flickers to Dalton briefly, then back to her. "Oh, Kelly! Find another air fryer, huh?"

"Well, yes," Kelly replies, holding up the blowtorch. "But, actually, I think I found something dangerous too."

Greg raises one brow slightly and takes the torch from her, giving it a slow once-over. "Oh, these aren't dangerous. They don't work anymore."

"Well this one, uh, turned on," Kelly mutters.

"Twice," Dalton adds.

"Oh." The yard keeper gives the blowtorch another look, much more critical this time. "You sure? I haven't seen a working torch in, gosh, must be twenty years now."

Kelly nods. "It sounds empty, but maybe it's got a little bit in it." She shrugs. "Anyway, just seemed better to give it to you."

"Well, I'll put it aside for safekeeping, then." He disappears briefly to place it somewhere inside, then reappears at the door. "Find anything else? Besides that air fryer, I mean. Something you want to trade for?"

Kelly shakes her head. "Nope, just that."

Greg nods. “Well if you do, let me know. I’d be happy to get another drill or sander, wouldn’t even ask you for anything in return if you bring it back fixed. You’ll be bringing the fryer around later, I imagine.”

“Yeah,” Kelly replies, already turning back to Dalton. “Once it’s patched up.”

Greg nods and disappears back inside, closing the door behind himself.

Kelly begins walking toward the entrance and Dalton follows. “What, we’re not going to look for more?”

“One project is enough,” Kelly replies, not looking back at him. Part of her does want to go back, wants to search the scrap for another thing like the torch, but not when Dalton is with her. It really *did* seem empty, why would it catch fire?

“Can I watch you work on it?” Dalton asks, jogging a few steps so he’d be at her side.

Kelly glances at him, then back to the road. “Don’t you have like, literally any work to do?”

“It’s a rest day,” Dalton says. “Why do you think I’m out here with you?”

“Yeah why *are* you out here with me?” Kelly asks. “Why not hang out with Jenna or Brent?”

“You’re more interesting than them,” Dalton answers simply.

Kelly snorts. “I mean, yes, but I’ve not exactly been nice to you.”

Dalton grins. “Maybe that just makes you more interesting.”

Kelly rolls her eyes. “You don’t give up, do you?”

Dalton chuckles, but offers no response.



When Kelly returns home— sans Dalton but plus one air fryer— she expects Bear to follow her inside, but he doesn't. Instead, the malamute stops a few feet away and stares at her. His tail doesn't even wag.

"You sure, bud?" Kelly asks, one hand holding the apartment complex's door open while the other presses the bulky appliance to her chest.

Bear sits down and continues to stare.

Kelly narrows her eyes at him slightly, then shrugs. "Suit yourself."

Once back inside, she goes to her room and sets the fryer beside her bookshelf, giving it a once-over as she runs her finger over the manuals that line it, wondering if, by chance, she has one on blowtorches. She finds nothing amidst the car and appliance manuals, though, and pulls out one for a similar brand of air fryer.

She's amassed quite a few manuals for vehicles and large machinery by now and read nearly all of them. The librarians and Greg, amused by how invested she is in the subject, let her keep the books, sometimes finding them for her and giving them to her the next time she visits. *No one else is interested in learning about cars anymore, they say. Save that old junk master.*

Greg is, in fact, quite a fan of cars. He often likes to lament how useless these "beautiful things" have become. *I had quite a pretty one myself, back in the day. These days I bet she'd be a real classic. 2009 Dodge Challenger.*

They found a Challenger in the junkyard once and the master opened the hood and showed Kelly the inner workings of the engine, which immediately fascinated her.

Unable to drive one, she'd consoled herself by reading about them and inspecting their engines. *You know that's a lot of useless information to have*, her father kept saying. Kelly likes to learn it anyway; cars were a part of history, something so important to the world and now gone. Their bodies lay strewn about the world, serving as storage or jungle gyms for the children, places to hide and sleep or have clandestine meet-

ings. Many get repurposed but so many exist that it's still easy to chance upon their rusting skeletons.

As usual, Kelly makes dinner so it's ready when her dad gets home. When they finish up, Kelly takes the dishes and sets them into the sink. "You mind if I go out for a little bit?"

Robert glances out the kitchen window with a mild frown. "Where are you going?"

"Cass's," Kelly replies, not facing him so he can't see the tightness in her jaw as she lies.

None the wiser, Robert nods. "Bring a knife with you, and if Bear is there have him walk with you. It'll probably be dark by the time you come home."

Kelly quickly disappears into her room to grab a holstered knife and strap it to her thigh. She taps her pocket to make sure her phone is still there and trots out of her room for the front door. "Be back later!"

"Be safe," Robert says over the running water in the kitchen as he starts washing the dishes.

Outside, Bear is nowhere to be found. Kelly walks the perimeter of the building, but doesn't see him. She pauses by the complex door, glancing between the road and the building a few times before finally shrugging and heading away. She'll be fine, she doesn't need her dog.

Kelly goes walking through the city, starting in her neighborhood and gradually drifting out farther as she completes a circle around the apartment complex. She contemplates the city as she walks, and the people inside it. All these lives, safe or in danger at any moment, depending on the security of the iron fences. She thinks of the farmers who dare to live on the other side of hers, where the fence around their fields and pastures is much weaker and more prone to attacks. They risk the fae every single day for the sake of the people. Some considered them foolish for it but everyone still accepted their wheat and produce anyway. Kelly frowns at the thought.

The farther she walks, the darker it gets, and by the time the sun has set completely, she's made it to the neighborhood Cassandra lives in, the place she said she was going. She stops across the street from her friend's front door, staring at it.

Finally, Kelly unclips the holster to her knife and turns around, keeping an eye out as she starts down the path back home. Even deep in the city, where they are supposed to be safe, people don't like to be out at night, and the empty streets reflect that. Something about the darkness convinces people that the fae are closer, hiding in the shadows. Even this deep inside the superstition reigns.

She scans the darkness for any sign of movement and startles when she sees a white and black shape bounding for her. The creature barks as it gets closer. She relaxes a little, but not fully. "Bear! Are you trying to scare me to death?"

Bear barks louder and more frantically as he gets closer, hopping back and forth. Kelly tenses up again, gripping her knife tighter as she looks past him into the dark. "What is it?"

Bear barks again and grabs at her jeans with his teeth, tugging on her. She hesitates, but he tugs harder. He's a smart dog; something must be wrong somewhere and he came looking for help.

It feels foolhardy to run into the unknown with just a knife and a dog, but Kelly does. Bear has never acted like this, so she couldn't help but feel it must be something serious. If she ran all the way back home to get her dad, or tried to find a patrol, it might be too late. She needs to see what is wrong for herself and assess the situation, like she was trained to do.

Bear runs just fast enough to stay ahead of her, but not lose her. The two blaze down the streets of Halifax, away from the city center and out past the far neighborhoods. Kelly begins to worry. How far away is this? Where is Bear taking her? In the back of her mind, she feels like she needs to turn back, but she knows Bear. He's always been there for her, always helped protect her. He wouldn't lead her into danger.



Bear looks back to make sure she's still following. They don't slow down until Kelly sees the fence at the city's edge form in the darkness. Her stop isn't sudden, but in three steps she's still, brows knitting together as she glances between her dog and the fence. There is a wide gash in the chain links, big enough for a person to step through easily.

"Bear?" she asks in a harsh whisper, her voice wavering slightly.

Bear barks and tugs at her jeans again.

Kelly shakes her head. "I can't, it's not safe out there. We need to warn someone that the fence is broken. Only soldiers go beyond the border."

Bear barks with more urgency and pulls on her harder, nearly dragging her off her feet. She hisses in protest and pushes him off, but he just whips around her and begins using his head to push her forward.

"Okay! Okay." Her voice is louder this time as she tentatively begins to step forward, holding her knife at the ready. *I trust him. I'm supposed to trust him. He wouldn't lead me into harm.*

Kelly takes a deep breath. Slowly, carefully, and with her dog on her heels, she walks through the open hole to investigate. Once they're on the other side, Bear begins leading her into the outer city. The farther they get from the fence, the more she feels a roiling in her chest, the more her eyes dart from place to place, frantically searching for the enthralled she is sure are lingering out here, waiting to strike. "Bear, where are we going?"

Bear keeps moving, doesn't look back. They pass buildings, and eventually houses, and when Kelly looks back, the fence is nowhere in sight. They've traveled far, nearly to the Wild. "Bear, we need to go back. This is too far."

Again the dog ignores her, trotting forward.

Trees begin to form out of the darkness and Kelly freezes, eyes scanning the surroundings. This is a neighborhood. They're making their way toward the edge of the city. As Bear passes one of the trees, he stops.

Kelly's eyes scan the area. She's gripping her knife so tightly that her knuckles are turning white. "Alright, Bear," she whispers, still looking over the area. "Why did you bring me out here? Is someone hurt?"

There's a crack of a branch in the darkness and Kelly's head whips in that direction, but she sees nothing. Her gaze drifts back to where Bear stopped.

A woman is looking back at her.

Kelly gasps and jerks back immediately, raising her knife. "Stay back!"

The woman merely smiles and begins to hum softly. Kelly takes a step back, knife still raised, and takes in the stranger. Her hair is black as ink, her clothes unfamiliar, a mix of sweeping fabrics and layers, intricate wisps of smoke snaking over them. The humming grows louder and Kelly blinks, her eyelids feel heavy. She takes another step back, and it takes more effort than it should. The knife begins to feel like an impossible weight in her hand, and each time she closes her eyes, she feels the desire not to open them again. "I'm... I'm warning you."

The humming continues, and suddenly it feels like Kelly is falling. The whole world becomes pitch black, everything disappearing but that soft hum following her into the dark.

Bear doesn't make a sound.



06

LIGHT FILTERS THROUGH THE darkness and, slowly, Kelly realizes her eyes are still closed. She opens them just enough to see, staring up at a ceiling that appears to be made of dirt. Someone is humming, a woman. She remains still, listening. The humming dies down and silence stretches between them for a few moments before the woman speaks.

“I know you’re awake.” There’s a sing-song quality to her voice.

Kelly opens her eyes fully and turns her head towards the sound. The woman is sitting merely a foot away, watching her. She’s dressed the same as she was in the darkness, and Kelly realizes she is in a silk kimono, a large fox pelt draped across her shoulders like a shawl, its front legs clasped around her neck and tied together with a red ribbon. She smiles gently, but Kelly immediately panics, scrambling to get up and searching frantically for her knife. It’s nowhere, but when she manages to pull her gaze away from the woman, she spots a young man sitting behind her, holding it and watching her carefully, like she’s a spooked animal he might have to subdue.

Kelly looks back at the woman. Panic blinded her to the obvious, but the longer she looks into her smiling face, the clearer everything becomes. Her eyes, the same eyes that have haunted her for thirteen years.

*"I'm so sorry..."*

Something seems to shift in Kelly's expression, because the woman's smile widens slightly and she leans forward, resting a hand against her knee. Despite her fear, she doesn't jerk back, too stunned by the realization.

"Hello, Kelly."

Kelly glances behind her briefly again to the man, who meets her eyes. It's much harder to tell with this one, but there is something familiar about him too. It's the hint of her in his black hair and skin tone, a hint of him in the sharp cheekbones they both share. Kelly swallows a lump forming in her throat. The man's expression relaxes a little and he offers the tiniest smile.

Kelly feels a wave of panic wash over her and her whole body tenses. "Am... am I dead?"

As the question leaves her lips, her anxiety spikes at the very thought. That has to be the answer, though, right? She must be dead.

"Shhh, shhh." The woman's tone is soothing and gentle. She shifts to take Kelly's hands in hers, her grip firm as she laces their fingers together. Kelly jerks back from her touch this time, but the woman doesn't let go, pulling her hand back. "You're not dead, I promise." There is a hint of an accent to her voice, the same one Kelly remembers from her childhood, when her mother would tell her stories.

"B-but you—" She glances between the two, panic rising. Her palms are warm and beginning to sweat. "You're dead. The fae took you. You have to be dead. *My mom is dead.*"

"I am very much alive," Haruka says gently, leaning back so Kelly can see her face better. She continues to smile. That was something about

Haruka she remembers so clearly, the fact that her smile hardly ever left her face. “We have always been alive.”

Kelly stares into her eyes for several seconds. She’s alive, and this woman before her is alive. They’re all alive. All this time...

“Mom...?”

Haruka’s lips lift just the tiniest bit and she nods.

“You disappeared. *Why?*” The question leaves her before she even thinks of it, sharp and angry.

“I had to,” Haruka replies gently, not bothered by the venom in Kelly’s voice. “For Ken’s safety. For mine. I had no choice.”

“But *why?*” Kelly repeats, more insistent. She squeezes Haruka’s hand tightly, letting her nails dig into her mother’s soft skin.

Haruka’s expression remains unchanged. She takes a slow, deep breath and lets it out in a long sigh. Silence stretches between them again. “Because,” she starts, her words coming slowly. “I am not human, Kelly. And neither are you.”

“What—” Kelly’s voice is lost immediately, stuck in her throat as her mother’s words play through her head over and over.

Haruka nods.

“We are fae.”