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# Fresh Air

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# Fresh Air

By Claire Kooyman

## Chapter 1

Crashing still sounded outside the dark chamber. Ena could see both the dead and the living from the slightly elevated bench on which she sat with her mother. One small man below kept threading his clawed fingers between each other, over and over, as if out of habit. Another citizen, a woman, hummed under her breath- Ena could hear snatches of a lullaby whenever the woman turned her head. Then the noises outside of the chamber grew louder again and all other sounds were lost. Ena knew that there was a possibility that this tunnel would collapse, too. She could feel sporadic tremors under her feet. The air smelled dusty, and she worried that soon there wouldn't be enough of it. The people sat still as they had been instructed by Ena when the collapse had occurred. She didn't know how much longer *she* could sit still, though, even if it *was* crucial to conserve air. She adjusted her dress. The design was extremely impractical, with a long train that followed behind her when she walked like a shadow. It was a dark purple, now caked in white-grey dust.

“Ena, stop fussing with your sleeves. The people will see you, and they will worry. Besides, it's unnecessary movement.” Her mother sat straight and still, and her head didn't move when she spoke. It was as if the words formed on their own in the space between them. The cold stone underneath Ena's legs made them feel numb. The stone walls surrounded them, but she didn't feel comforted by them the way she had, less than a month ago.

“Mother, the people are already worried. How could they not be?” Ena caught herself in the act of picking at her sleeve, and folded her hands in her lap. “We’re trapped in a part of the tunnel system, with some of our own, dead, among us.” She made her foot stop tapping.

“A ruler’s job is to display calm at all times.”

Ena was about to tell her that she was no ruler, but then she stopped herself. Just as well, she knew, before she gave her mother another reason to demonstrate *her* ability to remain calm in public. Her father had been killed in a tunnel exactly like the one they sat in now, only a few days ago, when an unexpected earthquake had created an avalanche, crushing him and his accompanying group of officials and guards immediately, or so she hoped. A few of the times she had tried to sleep since it had happened, she had laid there instead, eyes open, worried that maybe they had slowly suffocated before the rocks fully collapsed. She could only hope it had not happened that way.

She had been out of the home when guards had found the remains of her father’s team, so she had not understood what was happening. She had nearly run away when the guards had come to collect her at Arawn’s home. She had never had so many armed people come for her in her life. That had been the beginning. Immediately after she had been brought back home, hysterical and safe, her mother had declared herself to be in mourning. That had meant that the leadership passed on to her. She was seventeen years old, woman enough, but she had found herself wiping back the tears of a girl who remembered her father, not the ruler of an entire people, alone in her small chamber that night. She was allowed to wear the colors of mourning, so she had draped her arms in nearly-black shades of purple fabric, like her mother, but her clothing remained white, because she was not allowed to rest now. When she felt tears begin to pool in the corners of her eyes, she squeezed them shut tightly and brushed the liquid away with her hands, like dirt.

So many things had changed that day. Before, she had spent her days throwing off her royal clothing at the gates of her house to reveal her dirt-street clothes, running away as the rich fabrics fluttered to the floor behind her. She would hide from the two guards who were assigned to keep her safe and hang out with her friends in the narrow, dark streets of the city, or go to small restaurants and drink bubbled teas and juices. Now, Ena knew what her father must have known- no person in a city had less freedom than its ruler. Her father had known many things that she wished she had asked about, now. The ground beneath her rumbled, and the bench shifted a little, no small feat as it was made of heavy stone. She heard her mother gasp next to her, though she still did not move. Ena stood up where she was, fearful of the movement.

“Sit down,” her mother hissed at her.

Ena ignored her. Her mother would have to move to make her stop. There was another loud noise outside of the chamber. It didn't sound or feel like an earthquake. It sounded like something was picking up heavy rocks and dropping them again. Someone had finally made it to them on the other side! Ena sat back down. She tried to make her voice calm as she announced to the room, “Help has arrived. We must be patient. They will not let us down.” She folded her hands in her lap and tried to stop them from twitching with the anticipation of imminent freedom. *A good example*, she told herself. Small noises from the people below started and then halted.

“We can't continue like this,” she said quietly to her mother, beside her. “Why did you insist on declaring mourning, now, when we're in an emergency? What do you think is going to happen without a capable leader?”

“You are capable, Ena,” her mother responded, just as quietly. “You resist this like everything else about your life, and despite that, you will still be able to do this. It was my right

to declare myself unfit to rule. I...find myself unable to concentrate.” The pause was uncharacteristic- every sentence her mother spoke usually came out fully formed.

“I know,” Ena said. Under her many dark scarves and veils, it was hard to see her mother’s face, but she knew that she didn’t sleep at night, either.

“You can do this,” her mother said, again, her voice assured again. “You are the one they need.”

“Me?” Ena said, louder than she had intended. “There must be someone better qualified than me.”

“No one with the experience and knowledge that you have,” her mother replied. “No one else whose eyes look the same as the former ruler’s,” she said, her voice catching. “Agrata was a good and just man, and they all know that. They look to us to lead now, and I cannot do it. You must.”

“I might look like my father, but that doesn’t magically give me his talents, his skills! I never asked Dad enough questions. I thought I would have decades to learn. Now, here I am, with none of the time I thought I’d have.”

“You still have me,” her mother replied, with a sad smile on her face. “I might have picked up a thing about ruling in my thirty-plus years at your father’s side. I, too, ruled.” To punctuate her last sentence, there was a loud metallic bang, and then a crash of stones right after. The air became dusty, and hard to breathe. When the dust settled, Ena could see that a hole had been made where the doorway had been blocked.

“We will continue to the funeral,” she announced to the room. “All of those who are unwell, or wish to go home and rest after this ordeal are free to do so. No one will think less of you. It has been a difficult and frightening day.”

She straightened her dress and mourning silks, and made her way out of the hall as calmly as she could. Outside of the room, around the corner from where the hole had been made, she stopped and took in a deep, shaky breath. A few of the workers could likely see her, but they knew to pretend that they could not. She stood up straight again. It was time to finish what had been started this morning, before the rock collapse. It was time to put her father to rest.

She could hear people talking in relieved tones behind her, and she knew that the rest of the party had joined her outside of the dark chamber. The long tunnel was a little lighter than where she had come from and so her eyes adjusted for a few moments before everything seemed to look normal again. She saw a few families and elderly folk going home, discreetly, and she nodded her head at them, reassuringly. They were right to go home; she wished that she could join them. She didn't want to continue, either. Workers and nurses had begun to treat the sick, and remove the dead with dignity. Her mother was at her side, suddenly. Wordlessly, they then began to walk where they had been walking that morning, to the royal cemetery and the church beside it. Most of the party they had begun with followed silently behind them.

The rock walls looked steady enough. They had been in place for over one hundred years, give or take ten. She knew, though, that the appearance of security was far from enough to protect the group. The walls had been less reassuring than they were terrifying since the earthquakes had begun. Her father had been attempting to inspect one of the affected sites after a large earthquake when he had been killed. Her father had loved the caves and the tunnels, the darkness. She loved all of those things too. She and her father had shared many days together when she was young; he had taught her the names of everything living in the underside of their planet. When she had grown, and her father was busier, she had explored on her own instead of

doing her schoolwork or attending functions her mother assigned her. This world, her world, was beautiful. Despite that, though, Ena had begun to realize something she didn't like, at all.

"We have to go back up," she mumbled.

"What?" her mother asked her, shocked. "Surely there is something else we can do? This is our home, and the surface is not safe!" Her voice rose a little at the end of the last sentence, making her sound frightened. Ena was not used to fear of any kind from her mother. She thought of her father's love of the tunnels, and felt ashamed to be going against her mother's wishes, as well. She tried to shift the conversation, as the folk behind them began to look up at them, worried at their raised voices.

"It will be safe, once we make it safe," she said, forcing an air of confidence. "I'll need your help to plan how to announce this to our people. I'll need you for a lot of things, Mom." For the first time since they had been trapped in the chamber, she spoke to her mother informally. "Let's go see Dad off right." She took a breath that felt too shallow and turned the corner. Now that they had switched streets, the *Church of Feast and Famine*, their people's largest and most important church, stood in front of them like a monster. All other buildings near it seemed dwarfed, although they were the same size as many the Caylan buildings.

"Are you ready?" she asked her mother.

"I don't think so," her mother said, voice hushed. "Let's go, anyway."

## Chapter 2

The inside of the church was fragrant as always with the scent of fresh vegetables and dirt, but above that, there was also the smell of the flowers that grew in the chambers behind the pulpit in darkness, that were stronger than any other scent present. When a person died, some of the flowers were cut and brought into the light symbolizing that from the darkness, they, too, would be brought into the light after death. The petals were white on their backs, but when you peered into the flower, the petals were a vibrant red.

She felt a little like one of the flowers herself, cut off at the stem. She doubted that this is what the priests intended her to meditate on. She tried to move her thoughts to what she should be thinking about, her father, but she found herself pushing memories and tears away. Her father, chasing her around the school yard one day after classes when she was still very young, his still-brown beard flowing over his shoulder as he ran. Her father, explaining the purpose of the rules they all must follow to a stubborn daughter who had refused to obey curfew. Her father. Did rulers cry at funerals? Had her father cried for his father when he had assumed the leadership position? She was unsure, but the room blurred in front of her either way.

Her father had been burned, as was customary, as soon as he had been brought home that night. His ashes were all that remained, sitting on a gray table in a jar in the front of the room. The attendants were all there and had been for two hours. Their clothes were rumped and creased with time. However, they looked suitably grieved for their ruler, in their best robes and wrinkled faces. *He was a good one*, Ena thought, *worthy of a few hours of patience*. The priest, hearing the quiet sounds of their entrance, came out from the side door next to his lectern, and stood in silence until all the arriving members of the trapped party had seated themselves. She

and her mother sat in the front row. The young leader allowed herself to pull the purple silk over her face, her red eyes. *No one will say anything*, she thought. She sniffled once, and then bit her lip, hard, until she could stop.

The priest, Pryderi, gently cleared his throat, casting his eyes over the entire room. Ena knew him fairly well. He didn't much care for her during normal times, she knew, due to their religious disagreements, but he had been kind to her during the past few days, and he had been very comforting for her mother. A few seconds passed, and then he spoke.

"Agrata Ge Henders," Pryderi said, solemnly. "He was perhaps one of the most well-respected politicians to become the ruler of Underground, and the Caylani. What I will remember most about him though was his kindness. He never met a person he didn't wish to learn more about, and he always had an ear for the most unfortunate of our people. Once, he joined me on my rounds to see the children in *Feast and Famine's Balance* Hospital. When he saw how many sad children there were there, how many that wished to be outside playing with their friends, he was moved. He excused himself and promised to return shortly. I assumed he just needed a moment to collect himself. It is sometimes hard for people who don't spend their days around suffering to comprehend the magnitude of it. When he returned however, an hour later, he had brought entertainers from the court and toys from the toy stores in the capital. Those children laughed all day. He took their pain away for an *entire* afternoon. That was more than the doctors could do, in some of those children's circumstances. He has sent the entertainers to the hospital every month since then, ten years ago. Nearly all of you are learning of this for the first time, though, because kindness was his first motivation, and boastfulness and pride weren't even on his list."

Many people were nodding their heads, Ena could see. She was crying silently, and it felt like her chest would explode from holding it in, from keeping quiet. Pryderi was still talking, telling another story about how her dad had done something wonderful. It was cruel, she thought, to keep reminding the living of how great their loved one had been. They were gone, *he was gone*, and there was no bringing any of them back. She stopped listening, and through the purple fabric and the tears, she saw the stone walls and the flowers, strung on metal threads that hung from the ceiling. There was no air movement, so they sat, limp, above the people as they listened to the priest speak. She looked down at her feet and was fascinated by the pattern in her shoes for a good five minutes. She wanted to be out of the church, away from everyone.

She saw Rainea, and the sight momentarily brought her calm. She sat with her parents, across the aisle on the end of the second row. Her father and mother were dressed exactly the way one should dress when mourning a public figure. Her mother's purple hat was shiny like a bruise on the top of her head. Her father was wearing the purple jacket he had worn to every funeral she'd ever seen him at, but his shoes were shiny from the effort he'd taken to shine them, in a public show of grief. Rainea looked like someone had woken her in the middle of the night. Her hair was not brushed at all. Her dress was in tatters. Her parents' faces were frustrated and begrudging, pinched and sucked dry. Ena herself felt more love for Rainea then, than she thought she'd ever known. In the original interpretation of their religion, before the *revisions* that had been made, the proper way to show grief had been to show how it made you feel on the inside, and not to dress in a manner that befit the dead person's station. There were no stations, high or low, in the void.

The priest was finishing his statements. He paused. Ena focused as much as she could. “The flowers above us tonight symbolize the dead, who create the world now that we will join them in, someday.”

“Someday,” the entire congregation echoed. Then *Remembrance* began. She knew it would be a long one for her father. The priest looked around and then he looked down at Ena. “Would you care to say a few words about your father, Ms. Ena? Our people long to hear the stories only you can tell.” Her mother, who had begun crying, gloved hands folded in her lap, raised a hand and touched her shoulder. She didn’t speak, but Ena knew what she wanted. She stood up, and began to walk to the front of the room. The three stairs up seemed abnormally tall as she forced herself to climb to the podium. She didn’t want to be speaking, to be moving. She did not want to remove the veil. But she did.

“My father was a good man, it is true. I was always proud he was my father, and I would have been if he had been a shoemaker or a waste collector. My father’s worth did not lie in his title- or at least, not in his title alone.” She’d prepared herself to speak before she’d come, but her hands gripped the podium tightly and her eyes leaked. Her voice was steady, but she wasn’t sure how long that would continue. “My father’s worth was in everything he loved, and how well he loved it. As Father Pryderi said, he always wanted to help others. He loved so much- his family, his friends, the country he looked after...but most of all, he loved the Caylan. He loved you, so much. He wanted to see you prosper.” She looked out at the packed room and took a deep breath. As if the rocks and the soil and the very planet itself could hear her thoughts, there was a deep rumbling coming from somewhere not far from the church. The people looked around furtively and huddled together in small groups. Many people were here, but there were certainly still many more in the city proper.

*Should I continue?* she wondered, momentarily overwhelmed. People were frightened, and Ena was unsure if more scary information was what they really needed. She also wanted to see if the entrance to the church was in any way blocked. She could not stay in another dark room for hours with only the hope of escape twice in one day. She breathed deeply, and continued. “Hem?” she called to a guard in the back of the room, who was standing stiffly by the door. Every person in the room turned their head to stare at him. “Please go and check on the tunnels between here and the city, and bring...” She looked around at the other guards. “Bring Jade, she can help you. If there is any major damage, one of you stay behind and the other one come back here immediately.” Hem and Jade nodded their heads at her, and left out the large double doors. The parishioners’ heads turned back to Ena, wanting her comfort.

“Things have grown increasingly dangerous for us down here,” Ena began. “For my father’s memory, and due to my own concern for our people, we will soon begin to leave here.” She stopped for a moment, blown back by the power of her own statement.

“And go where?” someone in the crowd cried out, alarmed.

“Up,” said Ena.

The room erupted into loud conversation. Occasionally Ena could hear a snippet of what someone yelled. She looked down at where her mother sat, her mouth open and slack, her eyes wide. Ena felt her breath catch. Was she doing the right thing, or would she be remembered as the last ruler of the Caylani, the one who had doomed their people?

What felt like seconds later, the double doors burst open. It was Jade. Jade strode into the room. Her hair, neatly in white braids falling down her back, whipped around as she turned to the younger ruler.

“Hem is dead,” Jade said bluntly. “We rounded the corner heading back into town, then when we were within city limits, we heard a rumble above us and the walls began to fall again. Hem attempted to run ahead and help the people in town. I followed a pace behind and so I was able to watch as an entire section of the wall collapsed on top of him. He was buried in the rubble.” Her eyes were grim.

“Is there no way into the city now?” asked Ena, anxiously. “Is the way completely blocked?”

“No, Ms. Henders. There is still a way out, though it is narrow. We should enter one or two people at a time, and carefully.”

“Thank you, Jade. Please escort us all back through the exit, such as it is, and then go back and find other guards who can help you to dislodge the rocks on top of Hem, so that he may rest in peace.”

“Yes, Miss, it will be as you say.”

Behind her, the priest and his assistants moved to take her father’s ashes away, to be spread later. The ceremony of dispersing them would have to be cancelled. Her father would understand that, right now, his ashes would need to wait to achieve nothingness. Ena addressed the crowd again. “The two back rows will leave first, and when those rows have completely emptied, the next two rows will exit, and so on. The more frantic our movement, it seems, the likelier we will be trapped inside. Everyone, be calm.”

No one was calm. They followed the instructions she had given, but they also cried and clung to each other as if this were the end of the world. *Their* world. *Maybe they’re right*, Ena thought. *Maybe it was.*

### **Chapter 3**

The next day, Ena prepared to speak to the entire city, while Criers prepared all over town to pass on her message accurately. Each wore their uniform, complete with two red official city crests, one on each shoulder, that proclaimed the wearer trustworthy. She sat patiently in her seat, waiting for the official stylist, Shaela, to finish braiding her hair and pinning it. She had insisted on something that she would be able to move in, both in clothing and hairstyle. She needed to be able to move quickly if things went poorly. She considered her speech. Would they understand? Her mother had been in her room since the funeral the day before, refusing to come out of her mourning chambers. It had been very quiet everywhere Ena went in the government building. Shaela patted the top of her head, reassuringly.

“You’ll do fine,” she said, although her eyes were still red. She and Hem had known each other since they were ten. “What must be done, can only be endured,” she added. Her curly white hair framed her light-gray face. The jeweled hair pin in her hand sparkled green in the dim light of the chamber. She placed it on the side of Ena’s head, securing the end of the right braid behind her left ear and turned her in the chair so they faced each other. “Do you know how you’re going to tell them?” she asked, candidly.

“I have words written down on paper,” Ena replied. “I’m not sure I’m ready, though. Nothing like this has happened since we came to Underground in the first place.” She smiled at Shaela. “It will be all right.” She bit her tongue at the lie and stood up to leave.

She strode out the double doors from her room to the large hallway. From there, she walked into the work room which had been her father’s, and out onto the large balcony where she could see the large waiting crowd below in the courtyard. She’d stood in this same spot,

looking down, many times as a child, but never had she done so intending to speak. She'd always sat behind, quietly, listening.

In the front of the throng, she could see a wall of red-shouldered Criers, waiting for the words they would pass on for the rest of the day. In normal situations, the rest behind them, civilians, would attempt to remember and would, instead, pass on wild misinformation until corrected. Last time her father had made a large announcement, at a celebration feast open to the public, there had been rumors of sky-walking magicians come to entertain. No such thing existed. Her father had finally disputed the rumors, and reminded the city of the sanctity of the Crier's role. Ena sadly thought that it was unlikely there'd be any confusion after the speech she intended to give. Perhaps those things were behind them entirely.

She raised her arms, and the clatter of sound soon quieted. "Caylani citizens," she began, nervously. She twirled her hair around her smallest finger. A few strands got stuck in her claw. She yanked them out of her head, then out of her nail, and kept talking. The speech had to be persuasive. "You have likely heard the rumors, even if you were not at the funeral yourself. Well. What you have heard is true. We have all felt the ground and the walls shaking for days. Many have died in the collapses, including my father. May they all rest in the void in the place of end creation." Ena saw the Criers writing code notes for themselves. She pressed on.

"We must go back, friends," she said gently, looking out at the Criers, her messengers. She wanted them to see her sincerity. "We must go back where we came from and rebuild for ourselves the lives of our ancestors. Something under the ground here is making it uninhabitable. We are not safe here. Your children are not safe here."

She started to say the next line of her speech when a large, pale man in the back of the crowd started yelling at her. "What of us who don't want to leave? Do we have any say?"

Another tall man jostled a few shorter men and women until he was near his fellow. He chimed in, “Yes, what about us Undergrounders who have pride in our heritage Below? Do you even know what is causing the ‘quakes?’” Black shirts, wiry gray hair on pale white skin and red eyes were all she could see from her vantage point, but she knew who they were. Fenders. They were an old group, founded when the people had begun life underground over a hundred years ago. Now, entire families of men were members. They saw themselves as defenders of their territory and history. Many of them came from some of the oldest families, as well- the ones who had left Above first.

“If you were drowning would you need to know which body of water you were in?” Ena asked, angrily. She reached for the pin under her ear, and pulled at it as she looked down at her notes again. She tried to continue as if nothing had happened.

“We will begin the evacuation process as soon as possible. While you are waiting for evacuation procedures to be explained, please prepare your family and your most important belongings- that you can carry- to travel. It will not be long. ” Ena looked around and noticed more of the Fenders filling the courtyard. More importantly, many Criers had disappeared from their normal positions. In their place were more Fenders. They began to shout as one group.

“What are the quakes? We want to stay!” Although she had no doubt seen many of these men in their monthly meetings with her father, she didn’t recognize their faces as they were, contorted with anger. Some began stomping their feet rhythmically as they shouted. There was a light rumble.

“Stop!” Ena shouted. “These loud noises will bring the walls down on us!”

“*You* stop shouting!” one of the men yelled back at her. She heard people laughing.

“Stop!” she hissed, as loudly as she could without yelling. It was too late. She heard a cracking noise and looked around for the cause of it. She saw chunks of the courtyard fly away as they broke apart from each other. There was a shaking underfoot that was disorienting. Underneath where the stone had been, she saw dark soil which had been lying there, waiting for them for a hundred years. Her feet kept getting knocked out from under her. She heard more cracking noises and realized that the balcony had begun to separate from the rest of the building. She immediately turned and ran away from the edge, so she saw the balcony finish detaching from the building, sliding and breaking apart as it ground against the wall of her home. She fell flat on the floor of the balcony and hit her head on one of the pillars. She lost consciousness then for a few minutes, maybe only moments. When she opened her eyes again, though, one of the walls had fallen apart completely. She saw many people trying to dislodge the pieces from a specific area. Shaela’s face hovered above her own, and then the woman herself helped her to stand.

“Get to safety, Shaela,” she said. “You shouldn’t be here, putting yourself at risk. Find my mother, if you can.” Then, surprised but relieved to find herself able to walk, Ena started climbing out of the rubble that had been the balcony. Bits of stone were everywhere, mixed in with the dark soil. Her head was bleeding, she discovered; her hand came away bloody when she touched it. When she had escaped the balcony’s wreckage, she saw that there was still a crowd trying to dislodge stones on the other side of the courtyard. Unable to run, she moved as steadily as she could over the uneven landscape that had once been familiar until she reached them. The crowd dispersed a little, so she could reach the front of the group who were moving the stones.

“Who is trapped inside?” Ena asked Rainea, who was hurriedly moving what she could away from the walls of the courtyard.

“Many people,” she said, “Many Fenders, some other men and women, and a couple of children.” There were specks of black dust in her white braids and on her hands. Her faded blue dress was ripped at the hem.

“Have you seen or heard any signs of life from the rubble since you began searching?” Ena asked.

“None, but the mothers of the children are beside themselves crying, and the children of the men and women trapped...” She drifted off, and Ena noticed for the first time that many of the volunteers were children or very young adults. “They won’t let us give up.”

“Of course not,” Ena agreed. She turned to call some guards to help them in their task, but of course there were none behind her. She’d run off without finding them. She had to break herself of that habit. She began to help moving the rocks herself, and discovered that the chunks of wall were extremely heavy. She nearly fell a few times until she figured out how to support herself as she lifted.

“You’re brave to help these people, Rainea. The quakes could shake these walls down at any minute.”

“That’s true I guess,” she said. She shook her head, and bits of the rocks in her hair sprayed across the floor beneath her. “I can’t leave though, knowing people are stuck in there. I just keep thinking that they must be so scared. If they’re still alive...” Her voice trailed off, and then she began lifting and moving the rocks again.

The group worked for at least a half-hour before the guards showed up. It was Jade and another woman that Ena didn’t know by name. They both looked annoyed but relieved to see her, and went to work moving the rocky wall fragments without complaint when asked. The

steady noise of rocks falling into the pile that the group had made became hypnotic, and it was better to work than to think about her arms, so Ena was startled when someone shouted suddenly.

“I think I see them!”

Everyone looked, and there was a hand visible under the rocks. Ena found it hard to breathe suddenly. Her hands felt like they were separated from the rest of her body and her chest was tight. She was thinking about her father. She forced herself to stop and take deep breaths. The hand moved. Rainea and many others rushed in to move the rocks and unearth the survivors. Ena felt ashamed, standing still, legs shaking beneath her like a baby who had just learned to walk. She felt rooted where she stood.

Jade walked up beside her and put her arm on Ena’s shoulder. “It’s all right, Ms. Henders. It’s so soon after, everyone knows...” She drifted off.

“No! It is not all right,” Ena responded, spitting out her words. Her anger emboldened her, and she walked towards Rainea and the effort to rescue the survivors. Some of the people who were trapped were now partially visible. The black shirts showed many were, indeed, the Fenders. A few seemed too still, but most were alive. She went back to work.

“Do you like what has happened to us, *your highness?*” one Fender sneered at her as she helped him out of the cavity where he’d been trapped. “Bet you’re laughing to see us trapped like this. Some of us are even dead! Fewer left to disagree with your plan.”

She let go of his arm and took a step back. “What? Are you really asking me if I enjoy your suffering? No, no I don’t. I’m not laughing!”

“You must think that we’ll agree with you now because you saved us. That is not how it works, missy,” he said. He sat, then laughed, a wholehearted, wheezing sound. “Some of these

will probably hate you more, now. Hard to like someone you disagree with. Harder when you owe them something.” He coughed, and Ena thought she saw some dirt spray out of his mouth.

“You don’t owe me anything!” she said, exasperated. “Other than maybe a little respect,” she muttered to herself.

“That’s how it starts!” the man said, responding as if she were speaking to him. “You think you’ve earned respect just because you ended up in charge when your mother decided she’d had enough. You’ve done exactly nothing worthy of my respect, or anyone else’s.”

“You don’t think my assistance in saving your life is worthy of respect?”

“Should that five-year-old over there rule the people? He can lift rocks, too!” the man said. “Or her?” He pointed at Rainea. He laughed again. “You don’t get it.” He dismissed her the same way her grandfather had done, with a withering look. He struggled to stand, but resisted her offered hand. He finally stood and then walked away slowly, chuckling.

The others, those not dressed in black, were much happier to see her. The two little boys had been protected by their short stature, and were only covered in a light dust. They clambered out, none the worse for wear, and ran to their crying parents. Jade and Rainea hauled out an unlucky man who had been killed when part of the wall had hit him in the head. They covered his face with Rainea’s sweater, so the younger ones didn’t have to see. It was the tenth dead person Ena had seen since her father had died. There would be many more funerals soon, Ena realized, as she found a dead woman. She climbed into the hole where the woman had been found, and helped Jade and the other guard, named Alne, remove her from her makeshift grave so that she could be purposefully burned, and then dispersed.

Soon, all the surviving people had been removed from their debris prison. Most were only slightly injured, and could walk or limp home to recuperate. A few had broken limbs, and

they sat waiting for the nurse who had come from the capitol building. The nurse had insisted on cleaning her wound and dressing it before she saw anyone else, so Ena now had a white dressing on the right side of her head that slightly blocked her vision. She had helped a man to get out whose leg bone had protruded from below his knee. She'd had to leave the area for a moment, so she wouldn't be sick. She was unsure if he'd walk again, or if he'd keep his leg. He was alive, though, and likely to stay that way.

Suddenly, Ena gasped. She turned to Jade and grabbed her arm. "Jade, where are the Criers?"

The guard looked at her blankly. "We thought they had already left to deliver their message before the riot began...they didn't?"

Ena turned away and grabbed the nearest man in black. "Where are they?" She looked for Rainea. "Where are they?" she shouted.

The man in black she'd grabbed began to laugh. "No one to pass on your message. No little red bats to fly for you. Where are the Criers?" he said, spitting as he said it. "I don't know, *your highness.*"

"Why are you doing this?" she asked him. She gestured to Alne, who restrained the man carefully. His legs were broken, so she just held his arms behind his back in the simple way that every basic recruit knew. He couldn't get out of the position without breaking his arms, too.

"Maybe we think we know better than a seventeen-year-old child," he said.

"You mean a seventeen-year-old woman," Ena retorted.

"No difference," the man said. He narrowed his eyes, seemingly unsure if she understood he was insulting her. Ena stood as tall as she could, which was still shorter than the old man.

“So, what? Your better plan is for *all of us* to get crushed in the stone walls?” She laughed, but her face had turned red.

“No, our plan is to stay out of the Above wasteland. You must be real stupid to want to do that.”

“Where are the Criers?” Ena asked again. Rainea had finally seen the commotion and had come closer.

“They were led away as a group. I thought the city was taking them away from the danger of the riot and the collapse.” Rainea said. “I did wonder why they left us behind, but then these people were trapped and...” She looked disgusted.

“Led away where, Rainea? Jade, Alne, please assist me.” She pointed, and Jade and Alne bound the remaining Fenders, so they couldn’t escape.

“Led away out of the courtyard, towards town,” Rainea said.

“Jade, bring twenty more guards, make sure they wear body armor.” Jade nodded and left at a trot. She was reliable. Ena decided she would promote her soon. “Alne,” she said, “Please take these civilians to the city. I will wait with the prisoners, now that they are bound, until the other guards arrive. Surely, I should be safe.”

“As you say,” Alne said, though she looked at the prisoners threateningly a few times before she gathered her charges and left. The men, women and families seemed ready to leave. Ena watched them quickly form a line and follow Alne. She heard Alne singing an old folk song, *She Knew All Their Names*, as she left. Then, it was just Ena and her fan club: a group of four broken, bound men wearing black shirts.

## Chapter 4

As a group, the men were fond of spitting and complaining, both of which they did without making themselves useful to Ena at all. She'd asked them questions, and in response she'd had her shoes spit on numerous times and they had taught her several rude phrases that she'd most likely never have a reason to use. The nurse continued to treat them as if nothing had changed. Ena waited for half an hour, then Jade returned from the other direction with twenty guards marching in a straight line behind her. Their dark blue uniforms stood out at least half a mile.

Ena asked the first four in the line to walk her prisoners back to town. This required the guards to carry the men on a large litter, with one guard holding each corner up. The remaining sixteen guards stayed with Jade, awaiting Ena's orders.

"All right," Ena told them. "You are here to help regain our town's Criers, who have been kidnapped by the Fenders. They are most likely prepared to attack, but if it is possible to defuse the situation non-violently, please do so. Let's make all efforts to keep everyone alive."

"You will be staying behind here, of course, to await our report. Yes, Miss Henders?" Jade spoke as if this were a foregone conclusion.

"Absolutely not, unfortunately," Ena said. "Their issue is with me, and not my guards. If I don't come along with you, then there is no point in your going at all."

"I'm not sure if seventeen guards can keep you safe," Jade said.

"That's not why you're coming. I need you all to get the Criers out if I cannot through more diplomatic means. Try not to hurt anyone- they are all citizens, even if they have lost their way."

“What do you mean? Will you be going in unaccompanied?”

“No. It was my hope that you would choose two of the best of those you brought with you to accompany me. The rest of them would stay here and follow your command. Hopefully, all you will be is my honor guard on our way back to town. If things go badly, though, and I don’t return when I say I will, you’ll need to be prepared to do what is necessary to bring the Fenders to justice, and save as many innocent lives as is possible.”

“Yes, Miss Henders,” Jade said.

“Oh- Could you just call me Ena?” she asked the guard.

“It would be improper,” Jade replied.

“Only for a little while. Until everyone else does it too.” Ena said. “Then it will seem normal. Miss Henders is just very formal. I don’t feel like that’s me.”

“It’s how we are trained to address you,” the guard replied. “We aren’t supposed to be familiar with our charges. It’s hard enough knowing that if you make a mistake, someone might get killed. It’s worse if that person was your friend. Might make you make the wrong decision, too.”

“I’m not asking for you to be my best friend, and I hope neither of us is killed, now or in the future, Jade.”

Jade smiled. “Me neither. Either way, it’d be the end of my career.” She chortled. “Oh, sorry, *Ena*. This is what comes of familiarity.” But she still looked amused with herself. “I will certainly take my command seriously,” she said, a moment later, her face solemn again. “If required, I will free as many people as possible with as little bloodshed as possible.” She nodded her head and left, her braids swishing behind her. Ena heard her yelling her instructions to the other guards.

She stood in place a minute longer, thinking about what needed to be done, before she made her way to the front of the line where Jade now stood. Behind her were two guards, a man and a woman. The man was tall, perhaps five feet. Ena could see few scars on his body, although he was not a young man. The woman, who was much younger and only slightly shorter, had strong arms to equal the man's, and her eyes were sharp with intellect. She had her shining white hair in two braids that lay against her shoulder and fell down to her waist.

“These are your bodyguards, Ena,” Jade said, gesturing with a smile at the people behind her. She nearly choked on Ena's name, though, and the other guards' eyes bulged for a moment.

“Wonderful. Thank you, Jade.” Ena smiled at her, then focused on her task. “If you have heard nothing by the time we agreed upon, follow your instructions.” She nodded at the older guard, and walked away; her new bodyguards hurried to walk behind her. Ena's hands twitched at her sides as she thought about the times she had watched her mother work with the guards. She'd always made it look easy to befriend them and everyone else. Ena forced the phantom ants crawling inside her stomach to settle.

“What are your names?” she asked the two guards.

“Albina,” the woman said.

“Liam,” the man said.

“All right, then, Albina, Liam. We are going to go find the Fenders and their prisoners. I need whichever of you is faster to go on ahead and see if you can find them, and then report back. The other will stay here with me so I don't get myself killed.”

“Albina is quick and quiet,” Liam said. “She should go. I'll stay here and make sure you don't stub your toe.” He smiled. Albina nodded, and then left at a jog. Ena and Liam stood silently and watched her disappear into the distance.

“Do you know Albina well?” Ena asked. She struggled to think of what she could say next.

“Passing well, I’d say,” Liam replied. “She’s my youngest,” he added.

“Oh!” Ena replied, stunned quiet again.

“We try to work the same shifts when we can so her mother doesn’t get upset at us for missing family meals. Plus, we like each other’s company.”

“Well, your wife has my thanks,” Ena said. “It must be hard having two family members in the guard.”

“She likes it better than she does being the mother of three in the service,” Liam answered. “My two other daughters and my oldest, my son, they serve. She does not care for that at all. That’s why Albina and I, we have to toe the line with her.”

“I understand,” Ena said. She wasn’t sure that she did.

Twenty or thirty minutes passed in near silence. Liam watched the area vigilantly and Ena worried- about her situation, the Criers, Liam’s daughter and her own mother. She was about to say something to break the silence when Liam’s head turned sharply.

“Here she comes now,” Liam said. Albina ran up to them and stopped abruptly.

“I patrolled the city as quietly as I could. The main square was very quiet, no one in black uniforms. I walked around the perimeter and was about to return and say the reports must have been wrong, when I spotted a black uniform on the roof of The Cave,” Albina said. She spoke precisely and never seemed to stop to breathe. “No one saw me.”

“Are you sure there were more of them there? You only saw one?”

“I only saw one man in black, yes. However, I saw many red armed-uniforms, and men who were sitting on the ground, looking as if they were chained together.”

Ena gasped. “You are sure that you weren’t seen?”

“Yes, Miss.” The woman stood firm, confident.

“Wonderful. Great job, Albina; you may have just saved the Criers.” Albina smiled in a way that only took up a small portion of her face but which seemed genuine. Her father stood beside her and said nothing, but he still looked pleased with his youngest child.

“What now?” Albina asked.

“Well, now it gets more dangerous,” Ena said as confidently as she could, although now her stomach felt like there was a swarm of bats flying inside of it. Maybe they’d eaten the ants.

“Liam, do you have any problems with any of the Fenders?”

“No, I don’t make problems,” Liam said, grinning.

“Good. Could you convince them that you were one of them, you think?” *Don’t do that*, her mother told her in her mind. Ena stopped herself from biting her lip, just in time.

“Well, family lineage is pretty important to those men, and I’m not from any great family,” Liam said. His posture was solid as ever. It was just a statement of fact.

“Sometimes, when my father would hold their meetings in our house, there would be visiting members from the outskirts of town. No one knew them except for one or two of the men. They never knew anything about the rules or anything, either. Maybe that’d make it easier for you to fit in. Could you convince them you were one of those?”

“He can do it,” Albina said. “He’s able to get along with anyone.”

“What will you two be doing while I’m in there?” Liam asked.

“Well, my hope is to send you in as a member while Albina sneaks in and I attempt an official entry. I have set Jade on the mission to liberate them in an alternative way if we fail.

They must be freed. I cannot allow my Criers, my voice, to be taken from me. It is a dishonor I cannot permit. We need to be a united people if we want to escape before the ground consumes us all.” Ena realized she was raising her voice and breathing hard. She forced herself to take even, slow breaths.

“It’s true,” Liam said, and shook his head. “You are quite right. The quakes are going to bury us all. My wife says the same thing.”

Albina nodded. “We believe you,” she said.

Ena nodded back at her, and smiled a little. It was good to know some people agreed with her. She began to lay out her plan.

“We need them to believe you are one of them, so that if things go south with the Fenders and myself, you will already be in place to assist me. Meanwhile, Albina will attempt to get to the Criers while we are both with the main force of the Fenders. Hopefully. Albina will wait, hidden, and see if we show up to release the Criers. She will start escaping with them one at a time, if we don’t.”

“And if we do?” Liam asked.

“She will put on a Crier uniform and sneak out with them when they are released. One of the others will just have to wait until she is out safely, or claim that they took it off and lost it. I can claim him or her as my own, if necessary.”

“What about me? I don’t have the proper outfit to fit in with the Fenders.”

“That is where the danger comes in. You are going to have to attain one of their shirts by taking it off one of them. No need to kill the man, if you can just knock him out, but make sure you have somewhere you can take him that he will stay until this is all over,” Ena added, firmly. “He cannot interrupt the negotiations, which are likely to be tense anyway.”

Liam shook his head sharply once, acknowledging the task assigned to him. “Very well,” he said.

“Albina will go first, then you, Liam. Then I will come through the front door, hopefully, a couple of hours later.”

Albina hugged her father fiercely for a moment, then took off. Her father watched her go, and did not comment on it. They stood together for about forty-five minutes, making meaningless conversation for a while, then resolved to a still silence. When enough time had passed, Liam turned to her, smiled, and left. Ena was struck by how much quieter it was after he was gone, even though he hadn't made much noise. *It's the lack of his presence I feel that makes it quiet*, she thought. *I hope I haven't made the wrong decision*. She stood in the quiet for a few minutes and held her eyes open, staring at the surroundings until forced to blink. She took deep calming breaths.

Then she heard a scratching noise behind her.

## Chapter 5

Ena turned around, but at first, she didn't notice anything different. All around her were the normal gray stone walls, mostly intact. They rose about fifteen feet high. The width of the tunnel was around fifty feet, and in that space she saw nothing behind or in front of her. She heard the scratching again, and turned her head and saw a shiny black leg hanging over the side of the wall. Something was slowly trying to pull itself up and over and into the tunnel with her. Ena stifled a scream and stood still.

What appeared next challenged her ability to stay silent. The short squat arm writhed and pulled and suddenly there was a head and some more limbs. The head was covered in yellow and black splotches. The rest of its body eventually showed as it crawled over the edge of the wall. It had four legs in total, two on each side. Its small black eyes looked dead and menacing. Ena tried to will herself to disappear. The creature turned towards her and approached a moment later.

"Famine," Ena cursed. "Famine, this is bad," she said, as it got closer to her. She moved slowly to the left and wished for a moment that she'd kept Liam with her. Her hand inched to the long slender blade that was tucked securely in a sheath on her waist, under her skirts. She'd managed to grab it when she realized that the creature had stopped. It looked at her and its long tongue moved out of its mouth for a moment and then snaked back in. It saw her weapon and then it raised its two front legs up above its head and hissed. She took her hand off the weapon, and it lowered its legs again.

"Hello," she said, cautiously.

Its black eyes were like unlit coals in the fireplace in her room. It came closer, non-threatening again, now that she had decided to hold off on drawing her weapon. It did not make

any noise, though. Mere inches from her it stopped, and laid its legs and face on the ground so it was flat beside her. It was easily twice her size. She felt confused. How long had it been since Liam had left? Maybe ten minutes. *What does the creature want*, she wondered.

It came closer and nudged her foot. Then it lay its head and legs down again. She just stared at it for another minute. It stayed where it was and waited. It stared at her. Then it advanced even closer and nudged her side with its head. It didn't seem to Ena that it wanted to hurt her, but it wanted her to do something. Then it looked at her again, and it came right up to her. For some reason, she realized, this creature wanted her to ride it.

She started to climb it. She made it onto its back, and before she could fall off, she grabbed ridges on the sides of its shoulders. *What is this?* She asked herself. It began to run, and she was forced to hold on so tightly that she thought only of that for a while. It moved across the stone floor rapidly. Ena's body shook, and she lost contact with the back end of the creature, only to slam back onto it heavily with a crash. The creature did not seem to mind, though. She felt glad that she was able to continue to hold on at all. It took her closer and closer to the end of the tunnel, the direction that Albina and her father had both gone previously. *It's not time yet*, she wanted to tell it, but somehow, she knew it wouldn't heed her. She began to hear clicking behind them, and realized it sounded like the feet of the creature she was on top of, only louder. Were there more of them behind her? She couldn't crane her neck far enough around to see.

The creature charged out the end of the tunnel into the wider chambers of the city. Its four legs skittered onto Main Street, where a few people had begun to set up to sell that morning. Most had not arrived yet, though, since it was still so early. The men and women's reactions made her think it was probably more than just her creature running down the road, and then she saw them spreading out on both sides of her and her mount. There were at least a dozen. Ena

worried that the power of their feet, skittering down the stone walkway, might be enough to provoke stones to fall, but nothing happened, that she saw. The animals did knock down a food stall selling early morning fare, Elent cake. She heard a man scream, first cursing, then in fear, at the creatures as she rushed by.

The creatures, hers included, ran past the building Ena knew was filled with Criers and Fenders. There was no way to stop the endless movement all around her, though, and they continued on. The creature beneath her did not seem to mind her presence, as he or she ran beside all of its brethren, who were without riders. They all seemed to be following hers, as if it led them.

Then, Ena heard something within her mind, an echoing hollow sound that was almost a voice. It said, simply, *Up*. And then, as Ena cowered on the back of the creature, its front legs grabbed the side of the building beside the Fenders' building, and began to climb up. Her legs dangled down its back as they moved upwards. Her hands tightened anxiously on the ridges she'd found on its back. She felt a finger slip and clung harder with the rest. She couldn't look down, but she didn't see any of the others on the wall beside them. What it was doing, she did not know. Then it climbed atop the roof of the seamstress' store, which was next to the shoemaker's store that the Fenders had taken over. Ena rolled off the animal and panted while she stared at the stone ceiling ten feet above them. It was painted the red of a night sky on the surface. Were the night skies still like that on the actual surface?

*Stand.*

Jolted, she stood up quickly. "Famine," she swore. She hadn't been the one running or climbing, but her arms and legs were exhausted from the effort of hanging on. "Why have you brought me here, and, forgive me, but what are you?" She directed her question to the entire

group of animals, then to the one which had approached her first. Her knees quivered now that she stood again.

*We answer the call.*

“The call? What call?”

*She arrives soon.*

Ena stopped trying to talk to them. Instead she started paying closer attention to her surroundings. *Who* was coming? She heard more noises like the creatures had made. She turned and saw someone crest the lip of the building she was on. Ena saw a woman hop off of one of the creatures nonchalantly. The woman was not Caylani, that much was apparent from sight alone. She was far too tall, and had very dark skin in comparison to Ena’s own, pale skin. Her hair was darker than any that Ena had ever seen as well. Her face wasn’t particularly striking, but she looked friendly. There was something comforting about her. She smiled at Ena.

“Hello,” she said, “Are you Ayna?”

“Ena,” Ena corrected, absently. “Wait, how do you know my name?”

“Ena,” the woman said, correctly, “There is no time for this. I am Marilla. I’m so glad you weren’t afraid of the Cathal. They look a little frightening, but they aren’t anything to be afraid of, unless you hurt them or upset their rider.” Ena remembered holding her blade up to her companion, and was glad she’d put it away.

“Prepare for the void,” Ena agreed.

“What?” Marilla’s dark eyebrows rose and fell. “Anyway, here we are together. You get back up on that one and I will ride my Thunder.” She gestured at one of the Cathal. “We must get into that building. The enemy is in there, stirring, and it will destroy us all.” With that, she jumped onto Thunder, and the animal began galloping, even faster than Ena’s had done when

they were running down the city street. Ena simply stood, mouth open, and watched as the creature and its rider sprung from the rooftop and landed a few hundred feet away on the roof above the Fenders and Criers. The woman was graceful on top of the Cathal, and Ena noticed that she tucked her feet into the animal's sides.

“Come on, then!” Marilla called to her. Her voice sounded very far away.

“What is the enemy?” Ena asked herself, bewildered. Unsure of what she was agreeing to, she hopped back on the Cathal. It began to run and she her head was pulled backward as it accelerated rapidly. Suddenly its back legs pushed tremendously and they were airborne. Ena screamed and dug her feet into those spots she'd seen Marilla use until the ground came up beneath the creature's feet, and the wind was knocked out of her and they were on the ground again. The Cathal walked placidly to Marilla. She grabbed Ena by the waist and helped her down. Her fingers felt warm even through Ena's dress, and when she removed her hand, those spots where her fingers had just been felt strangely cold.

“Let's go,” Marilla said. She gestured to a hatch that she opened. Once open, it revealed a long metal ladder. Ena looked down past it and saw darkness, but down she went.

## Chapter 6

The metal ladder was grimy. She held on firmly anyway and climbed down. The edges of her claws scraped stone wall. As she got closer to the ground, wherever it was, the darkness seemed to grow. Below her, Marilla whispered, “I can smell it. It is close. Quiet.” Ena did not answer, but focused on placing her feet onto the ladder quietly, instead. She did not smell anything familiar, but there was a strange smell that reminded her of a forge burning. The air wasn’t hot, though, so she knew the Fenders hadn’t somehow built a forge in the building while no one was watching. She took another step down, and hit solid stone instead of a rung. She made a small noise of surprise.

“Shh,” the other woman whispered. She grabbed Ena’s hand so they would move in tandem. Ena shivered, although her hand burned with heat. Slowly, the room lightened as her eyes adjusted to the dark of the shoemaker’s building. The smell she had noticed moments earlier grew in intensity as they moved. Marilla’s hand squeezed tighter, and Ena bit her tongue so she wouldn’t ask questions; she had many. She saw the shoemakers’ tools and materials, which she had expected, and a large hole in the center of the room, filled with dirt and fragments of the stone floor.

“There,” Marilla whispered. She pulled at Ena’s hand and headed toward the hole.

“What are you doing?” Ena whispered, urgently. “That doesn’t look safe.”

“We must destroy it,” Marilla said, insistently. Ena was about to reply, but then she heard something fall onto the stone floor somewhere across the room, and so she froze instead. Next to her, Marilla had done the same, she could see from the corner of her eye. There was movement across from them. Ena saw Marilla pull out a throwing knife from somewhere in her clothing,

and watched her prepare to throw it. As the woman was just about to release the knife, she saw white hair in two braids streak between two tall boxes directly across from them.

“No, Marilla!” Ena’s voice squeaked loudly in the silent room. Ena forced herself to keep her eyes open, to see what happened.

She was too late to stop Marilla entirely, but the other woman raised her arm sharply before she released the knife, which changed her aim just enough. The knife flew across the room and narrowly missed Albina’s waist. The young woman fell flat on her stomach and made no sound Ena could hear, but looked where the noise and the knife had come from. Her eyes fell on Ena and Marilla, then flashed with recognition. She raised her arm, tentatively, in greeting and then Ena did the same. *How long has it been*, she wondered, suddenly. An hour, maybe longer? They had to hurry to rescue the Criers, or soon they would be in the midst of a battle between the nation’s guards and the Fenders. She still wasn’t sure why Marilla had shown up, or where she had come from. Albina stood up and slowly edged her way over to them.

“Who are you?” hissed Marilla. Her body was rigid. She was ready to defend herself and would, given any provocation.

“Albina, Miss,” the young girl whispered deferentially. *She must think Marilla is part of the Council or something*, Ena thought. It was Marilla’s tone, she decided.

“This is Marilla,” she whispered. “She didn’t know better, I’m sorry.” *We really need to actually talk, soon*, she thought, frustrated.

“Everyone, quiet,” Marilla hissed, the suspicion on her face replaced by a wide-eyed fear. Marilla pointed towards the disrupted ground in the center of the room.

Ena saw huge furry clawed feet emerge out of the center of the mulched ground and grab wildly for purchase. The feet alone were nearly her size. The claws were like some horrible

parody of her own, almost half the length of the feet themselves. A snout peeked out of the ground next. Ena saw white and black fur, black eyes. Albina gasped next to her. The mouth opened. There was no sound coming out of the monster's mouth. She turned to Marilla to say something, but then the ground began to shake.

“What--is--it?” she said, her every syllable exaggerated so that Marilla might be able to read her lips. Rocks scattered around them. Albina had her arms and hands covering her head and neck. Ena remembered herself and followed her example.

Marilla leaned against her back and said in her ear, “Hexyte, it's a Hexyte. Don't move.” The creature opened its mouth again, and Ena saw sharp teeth that could most likely rip her apart. Above, a door opened. Its frame was outlined in bright light.

“You hungry, you beast?” A man had appeared in the doorway. He seemed unconcerned by the Hexyte's behavior. “Dinner's coming, friend.” He gestured behind him, and a group of men in black shirts with sleeves that hardly contained their muscled arms had a Crier by the arms and legs. They chucked the man down below to the agitated animal. Ena wondered why the man didn't scream, and then she saw that his mouth had been bound with cloth. Above, the door shut and the light was gone. Ena began to run to the man. She'd only made one large step when Marilla and Albina grabbed her by the arms and pulled her back.

“No!” she yelled. Marilla covered her mouth to stop her from yelling anymore. The Hexyte climbed out of the hole and stomped in the dirt loudly, not noticing her at all. There was a crunching noise as he found his meal, and then a wet splat as he spit out what he didn't intend to swallow. She heard the creature, rather than saw it, crawl back into its home. She had closed her eyes after the man had come back out as bits of meat and bone. The ground shook for a moment, then stopped. One of the women pulled her hand and started moving, and after she

nearly fell, Ena began to run, too. Albina and Marilla ran to hide behind a broken pillar of stone; she let them pull her along. She felt sick.

A moment later, they were slumped against the stone pillar. It was quiet again.

“That Hexyte has been killing livestock for a month. Last week, it killed two children,” Marilla said angrily. “It’s also what’s been knocking down your city. The sonic power of its voice is enough to break stone. When it’s disturbed, things break. When more than one of them gets annoyed, you can lose entire towns.”

“I don’t see us stopping that thing on our own,” Ena said in response. “While we’re talking- where are you from, and how did you know my name?”

Marilla stepped closer to her and spoke quietly. “I’m from above here.” Next to Ena, Albina’s eyes grew huge, and then she looked down at the ground, quietly, and picked at the tails of her braids.

Ena stepped back. “Above? How did you get down here? Is there a way back? You must take me to it.”

“Yes, I must,” Marilla agreed, “but not yet. We aren’t done here.”

“How did you know my name?” Ena asked again.

“My brother. He sometimes hears things on the wind, things no one else can hear. No one really knows how it works, not even Eamon, not really. Anyway, a few nights ago, he woke up and told me that he heard sounds from below. He described sounds of a world breaking, broken stones and bones. Another Hexyte in and out of the ground. Then he said that someone named Ayna needed me.”

“Your brother could hear us?” Ena asked. She took a large gulp of air. Was she supposed to believe this, and if she didn’t, how could she explain it?

“Yes, if he says he did, I believe him. Eamon is the best person I know.” Marilla looked sincere, Ena supposed. She spoke again, quickly in a hushed voice. “He’s always been different. We were only born two hours apart, but he came out with a full head of hair and a couple of teeth in the middle of his mouth. I was bald and toothless as an old man. The midwife said he’d been given special gifts--our mother told us that later. And then as soon as he started to speak, he began to report hearing strange things. Anyway. I’ll tell you everything soon. For now, just know that I came here to find and help you.” Finished speaking, she took a deep breath and stood still. Ena noticed her fingers shaking nervously.

“All right,” Ena said, placated. She turned to Albina, who had begun kneeling in guard pose, one knee up, one down, her head bent towards the ground. Ena placed her hand on the younger woman’s chin, and raised it so her eyes met her own. “Albina, you don’t have to do that. You’re more than worthy! Please stand, and help us figure out what can be done.” The other woman stood, eyes unsteady. Ena looked to Marilla. “What do we do with this creature, Marilla? We can’t leave it here.”

“It’s not ideal, I agree,” Marilla said. “It’s hard to uproot one of these jerks, though. Plus, there are people upstairs we can’t alert.”

“Not until we rescue the captives!” Albina said. *And her father*, Ena thought.

“Yes,” Ena agreed. “Albina. Did you see how many Fenders patrolled upstairs?”

“Not too many near here,” she said. “They seem to be trying to keep their *friend* secret.” She shuddered. “But that man who’s watching the door, he looked strong.”

“There’s only one?” Marilla laughed. “Amateurs.”

“Are you a soldier?” Ena asked.

“Sort of,” Marilla said. “Enough of one that we should be able to get past one guard, anyway,” she added. She rolled her eyes.

“You can’t kill him, though, Marilla,” Ena said quickly. “He’s still one of the Caylani.”

“Who?”

“That’s us,” Albina added, helpfully. She was at least making eye contact with Marilla now.

“Yes,” Ena agreed, blushing. “Sorry, Marilla, forgot you didn’t know that.”

“I don’t need to kill him,” Marilla said. “You two, five steps behind me.” Without further explanation, she began moving quietly up the stone staircase to the next door that led out of the basement. Ena’s thoughts raced. She had never intended to sneak in from the basement. None of this was part of the plan. She hoped no one would get hurt. She followed quietly behind, though she worried her pounding heart threatened to expose them all. Albina was behind them both, silent as a bat in flight. Ena didn’t even hear her feet touch the stone steps as she ascended.

Marilla made it to the door. Ena and Albina waited behind her, each flat against the wall. Marilla pushed on the door. It opened. She disappeared around it to the other side. There was a thump. Ena rushed to see what had happened. She made it to Marilla just in time to watch her gently hoist the beefy man into a sitting position.

“What did you do?” Ena asked.

“There are places on the body that produce effects when pressure is applied to them. Size doesn’t come into it if one is quick enough.” Ena wondered where she had trained, to know these things. “Don’t worry,” she added. “He’ll be fine.” Once Albina was standing with them, Ena barred and locked the door.

They moved down the hallway, their footsteps thundering in Ena's ears. She knew they weren't being that loud, but in the absence of other noises, every sound they made seemed amplified. Marilla found the main staircase, and started climbing. Ena followed, then surprised herself when she grabbed Marilla's hand.

"Wait," she said. "We need to go to the roof, that's where the Criers are. Let Albina show you." She pulled her hand back, message delivered, and took a deep breath.

"All right," Marilla replied softly. The two women switched places. Albina led them to the third floor landing, then she gestured to Marilla to lead again.

"There's a ladder on the other side of the room," Albina whispered. Marilla nodded, and opened the door. There was a cry of surprise on the other side of the door as she entered the room, and then only the muffled sounds of confrontation. Albina rushed in and assisted her, and when Ena walked in cautiously there were two men in black shirts on the floor. One was conscious, the other not, but both were quiet. Her knee pinned his chest to the ground. Albina's left sleeve quickly became shorter than her right one, and their conscious captive was bound and gagged. Both men were dragged to a corner, and covered with a blanket. All three women climbed the ladder into the dark.

## Chapter 7

Ena was holding onto the ladder directly beneath Marilla, who was beneath the hatch-door that led up to the roof. There was a quiet rumble of sound above them that Ena knew came from the men and women above talking to each other. She hoped the only loss had been the poor man in the basement. She pushed her thoughts along so she wouldn't think of the crunching sounds she had heard; ...*Stones and bones*, she heard Marilla say in her head. There had certainly been an assortment of both in the basement. Marilla cranked the door handle to the right. It spun, then opened. They climbed out to chaos.

The roof was sheer pandemonium. Red-shouldered Criers in chains tried to use those chains to choke or strike Fenders in black shirts and scowls. A third group in blue attempted to subdue the Fenders and release the Criers from their bondage. The guards, Ena thought, saddened. She saw their climbing hooks on the ridge of the roof in front of her. She had ordered this, but she had hoped she would be able to give the signal and halt it before it started. It was too late to stop it now. People would definitely be hurt. As if to punctuate this thought, she heard Albina scream beside her. Ahead of them, against a wall, she saw Liam lying still on the ground. At first, she thought he was dead; then she saw his chest rise and fall, slowly. He was bleeding in a few places, but he lived.

“Father!” Albina cried, then ran to him and fell on her knees at his side. Ena could see his mouth moving but could not hear what he said. She left the two to each other for the time being. Marilla tugged at her sleeve and hollered in her ear over the noise: “I think the guards can do this. Now you just need them to evacuate everyone.”

Ena nodded. She searched for Jade across the chaos, and found her in the middle of the fighting. “Marilla,” she said, pointing, “Go tell that woman to start pulling everyone out of here, Fenders, Criers, and guards. I don’t think I should run through that group of people right now.” Marilla nodded and left. Ena went to check on Liam.

“How is he?” she asked Albina. Her other sleeve was gone.

“I stopped most of the bleeding,” Albina said. “He should be okay. We just need to get out of here.”

“Working on it,” Ena replied. Liam coughed. “What happened to him?”

“There was a fight among the Fenders about what to do, and he was attacked by some drunk Fender.” Albina scowled.

Ena watched Marilla run through the crowd, dodging blows intended for others. Eventually, she was standing in front of them, panting.

“Okay, she’s going to start moving out the prisoners and injured guards as she can, and then she’ll deal with whoever is left over,” Marilla said. It appeared almost every Fender was on the roof, fighting with the guards and the Criers. “Let’s go,” she added, looking at Ena.

“Go?” Ena asked, dazed.

“Yes, I need to take you above now.” She placed a couple fingers in her mouth and whistled. There was a scratching noise, and suddenly their mounts from earlier in the day were back. Marilla jumped on Thunder, and Ena awkwardly fell onto her creature, who she had no name for. Then the creature ran back to the edge of the building and began crawling down the side of the building. Ena bit her tongue so hard it bled, but did not scream. She held onto the creature so tightly that her fingers began to feel numb. Its legs moved like propellers at her sides. She knew that it didn’t want to hurt her, but she was still afraid of its power. When it ran, she felt

fear, no matter what she told herself about its good intentions. It didn't slow down, but instead accelerated once it hit the ground, running at the heels of Marilla's Thunder. They ran all the way back to where Ena had first met the creatures, through the hole she had seen her mount climb out of. Once through that hole, Ena clung even tighter than before, as outside the stone walls there was no planned road for the creatures to run on.

Marilla turned the top half of her body while she held on with her right hand. "Just hold on, Ena!" she shouted, then turned around again. Ena watched dirt clods explode and tumble into pieces down hills made of crumbling red dirt. The creature she rode on dove in and around the falling debris, and Ena learned to keep her mouth shut. Thunder and Marilla scrambled up a particularly mountainous pile of the dirt and rocks that surrounded them; it looked pretty much the same as all of the others, but this was clearly the spot, the way that Marilla doggedly led the animal up the mountain. Managing to lead her animal for only the second or third time, Ena followed her.

The road became rockier as the animal got closer to the top. Where the light had been fairly scarce and it had been easy to see, there was instead a luminous brightness that seemed to grow. It became so bright that Ena could no longer see, and so she just held onto her mount tightly, and hoped that it knew where it was going. After a few moments of utter blindness in searing light, Ena could smell that the air was different. The creature stopped, then shimmied her off of its back like an unneeded skin. Ena was about to scream until she felt solid ground beneath her, and a hand held her up.

"I'm sorry. I should have realized," Marilla's voice said. "It is much brighter up here. Just stay still for a moment." Then some sort of thin cloth was wrapped around her head, blocking her eyes enough that when she opened them, she could make out the shapes of the

things near her but her eyes hurt less. She could see lots of tall unfamiliar shapes and she could smell things that smelled...fresh. She realized she was Above, and despite the necessity of it, she felt faint for a moment. Everyone had told children her entire life that the Above was dangerous. Her eyes hurt, but otherwise, she felt fine. She steadied her breathing.

Marilla grabbed her hand again. When Ena looked at her through the fabric, she realized she was wearing the other girl's shirt as a bandana. Marilla was still dressed from the waist up, as she still had on some sort of binding undergarment. There was nothing improper in it. Something tickled in Ena's stomach until she steadied herself.

"Is this where you live?" she asked.

"Almost," Marilla answered. "I'll help you walk the rest of the way." She took Ena's left hand and started walking, slowly. Ena allowed herself to be guided. She felt dazed. Was her mother all right? She would need to find out soon. Had Liam and Albina and the other guards escaped? Had the Hexyte destroyed her city? She couldn't stay long in this place. She had to return to help the others. She said nothing out loud, and Marilla began to talk and filled the silence. "My family lives over here," she said although Ena didn't know where she was gesturing. "When we get inside, I can turn off all of the lights in my room. That should help."

Ena saw things that must be buildings through the shirt on her eyes. Marilla slowed down beside her. Ena began to stop, too, and then her foot caught on something. She nearly fell on her face again, but Marilla caught her. The shirt fell off of her eyes onto the ground. Through the brightness, Ena saw a world filled with colors she didn't have names for. Everything around her was very alive. Nothing seemed to be made of stone. There were tall, sturdy things with shaking bits that reminded her of bats' wings hanging off of them everywhere, but which were a vibrant color, not black or brown, or purple like mourning. It was beautiful. Ena sat down in the dirt and

wept. She would bring them all here, too, and there would be no more need for factions or fighting. They would all understand once they'd seen everything Above. She hoped.

**End of Part One**