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The Self and Society: Critical Reflection of *Taking Root*

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Bridgewater State University

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INTRODUCTION

This story, *Taking Root*, was in its brainstorming stages back in the summer of 2016, while the actual writing began in the fall of the same year. Since the beginning, I considered this my own “coming out” story, a full-length novel for and about queer people. I had dabbled with the inclusion of queer characters in short stories before, but they were shy attempts compared to *Taking Root*. Although I had considered writing outside of my genre comfort zone for my first longer story with queer characters, going a more traditional slice-of-life young adult route, in the end I wanted to write what I wanted to read: queer characters in a fantastical setting. Influenced by similar genre pieces, I tested my hand at a different type of fantasy and horror, where there is less violence and more of a haunting, unsettling experience. Considering the character’s struggles--and, perhaps, my own, too--this was easier said than done. Self-discovery is never an easy or enjoyable process, but that is essentially what this story is about, as well as the acceptance that hopefully follows. Anxiety and tension is a part of that process: at the beginning, with self-denial; in the middle, where there is an inner struggle against the self and an outer struggle of finding a safe space; and the ending, where the discovery is acknowledged, regardless of what is done with that knowledge. *Taking Root* depicts four characters, and thus four different ways of maneuvering through this self-discovery process, and the tension it creates between themselves and their environment along the way.

WRITING

This story has its basis in the young adult, fantasy, horror genres. There is little blood in the story--some, but not much--and few physical altercations. Instead, the type of horror aimed for in this story was one of a different tone, where instead of it being in-your-face violence, it’s

an unsettling feeling underneath your skin that just won't go away. This isn't my first time writing a story of this nature, but it was my first time writing a story based entirely on such a form; other times it plays a second role to the initial, physical danger that the characters face. There are physical consequences to the character's actions (Zackery's death, Devin and Krystal's near-death) but there is no physical assailant. Even when the characters aren't being tormented by the faeries, I still think there is this discomfort that is residual throughout the story that I hadn't naturally intended to be there, but which naturally comes with writing the sorts of characters that I did. All of my characters are struggling with accepting themselves, and I hope for their tension to resonate with the reader; that being said, these sensitive topics can themselves create a similar unease, with topics such as struggling for acceptance (amongst peers and oneself) and the dealings with life and death.

Part of the horror aspect in this story is the confusing nature of the woods. Characters easily lose their way, and they are forced to wonder what is real and what isn't due to the faerie's tricks and charms. There is also this fear of being alone and isolated in the forest, with there being little in the forest to offer solace from the faeries and with the forest constantly trying to separate the characters from one another. So, these fears that exist outside of the woods are only amplified while inside: characters that are othered, feel as if they don't belong, and having trouble surviving in a heteronormative society and sticking to this single idealized way of life are thrown into a place where these troubles that originally they suffered alone in their head are now physically manifested.

While preparing for this story, a major interest of mine was the inner-workings and interrelations of the queer community, a place where friction exists but is often overlooked and sometimes idealized as a monolith. Two of my characters are nonmonosexual, which means to

be attracted to more than one gender. Typically lesbians, gay men, and straight people are all monosexual; bisexuals, pansexuals, etc, are nonmonosexual. It is a subcommunity that other LGBTQ members have difficulty embracing, as well as straight people. Another character is gender nonbinary, which requires a specific focus in writing that my other characters do not, especially in the form of pronouns. Jasper Rey, part of the gender nonbinary, prefers the use of they/them pronouns. There is a dispute over the use of the singular “they” as a gender-neutral pronoun. Misusing it could lead to confusion if there are multiple characters in a scene, but it is a way of representing people who do not feel comfortable using gendered pronouns. Although people on the gender nonbinary reserve the right to use gendered pronouns, there also should exist a pronoun when they feel that neither “he” nor “she” properly fits the bill for them. This is Jasper’s case, a discomfort and lack of connection with either gendered pronoun, and so the singular “they” is used.

Being able to write these characters was an experience because it meant I was able to learn about, some for the first time and other times more in depth, problems confronting and problems within the LGBTQ community. As a story that is trying to better represent the LGBTQ community to queer readers and straight readers alike, this research was necessary, but sometimes daunting, as Gloria Anzaldua notes about the general writing process in her book, *Into the Borderlands*: “Writing produces anxiety. Looking inside myself and my experience, looking at my conflicts, engenders anxiety in me. Being a writer feels very much like being queer--a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo” (Anzaldua 94). It just so happens that, at least in part, I am writing about being queer, so there was a lot of “squirming” happening while writing this story. There is some anxiety in representing these characters properly, who identify so

differently from who I am, but I have trust in my research and know that I will continue learning so that future characters of various identities will better represent their communities. That being said, the anxiety is more than that; it's the releasing of a story that has been so long inside of me, a story that has been mine alone. Like Joshua Gamson argues in *When Freaks Talk Back*, "When the personal becomes political . . . [it is] often met with this kind of backlash" (Gamson 207). Gamson explains how in matters of heteronormativity and homophobia--as well as other forms of injustices, such as racism or feminism--the personal is always political and the political always personal for the marginalized person. So while writing this story, there is this anxiety that not only will I do others injustice in telling this story but that I will do injustice unto myself; because unlike straight people who can just write a story, a story with gay people and about gay people becomes a political statement. There is this fear of public backlash about writing a story with gay people that, of course, does not exist to the same extent when writing a story with all straight people; people will not see this story as a personal extension of self like any other story of mine, merely because of the existence of gay people as main characters.

GENDER&SEXUALITY

There are still many difficulties getting queer characters represented properly in story-writing today. Even with a growing amount of books written by queer authors or including queer characters, the number is still far too small, and often the books are sectioned off into their own section of the store, not mingling with genre fiction. The coming-out story is still the most popular story to include queer characters, and it certainly has its time and place as worthwhile literature for queer and straight readers alike. But having queer characters play a larger role in

genre fiction and accepted alongside stories with all-straight or primarily-straight characters is what determines my focus in this story. When queer characters are included, there is usually only one, two if said character is lucky enough to end up in a relationship with another queer person. The problem with this is known as the token minority trope, where there is only one character in a story to represent an entire gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and so on. This is unlikely to occur in everyday life, however, as Richard LeBeau explains in his study on the psychological aspects of being involved in the gay community: "...Most effective ways to combat the negative effects of minority stress is to socialize within a larger community of gay individuals" (LeBeau 57). People are more likely to mingle with those they have something in common with, and this is especially true for marginalized members of society. These are problems that non-queer writers face while trying to include queer characters in their stories, by not giving them the proper community member(s) that people would search for in reality. The benefits that come from being a part of something larger than oneself are monumental, especially in terms of self-esteem and mental health; non-queer writers wouldn't understand this sense of isolation or lack of community because the default assumption is that every around them is heterosexual.

That's one aspect to this story; all of the main characters are a part of the LGBTQ community, and they all differ in their orientation and how comfortable they are with their sexuality or gender, in the hope of dispelling this token character trope. But, what is a problem in both the non-queer and queer community is the portrayal of the LGBTQ community. Too often, the single character used to represent the community is white, middle-upper class, and cisgender, and a gay male, when in reality the community is far more diverse than that. While Joshua Gamson focuses primarily on television talk shows and how the representation of gay people on those shows changed over time, the same can be seen in various forms of media: "But then

again, the image [of the gay community], although more socially acceptable, was no less distorted when it was only white, middle-class, gay movement movers and shakers” (Gamson 191). This distortion is what I wanted to avoid by including characters from various walks of life, taking into account not only their sexual identity and gender identity and presentation, but also their social class and racial identity.

Even with four characters, there’s no way to portray each possible member of the queer community, but it offers a bit more breathing room. There’s Zackery O’Connor, a white middle-class gay man. Then Jasper Rey, a black, demi, androgynous nonbinary of an upper-class upbringing. There’s also Krystal Clare, a lower-middle class bisexual mixed femme. And finally Devin Xiao, a lower-middle class androgynous lesbian Asian woman. Jasper and Krystal are the most assured in their identity while Zackery knows how he identifies, but still has many troubles with coming to terms with it. Devin, then, is completely unsure of her feelings, and is afraid to even acknowledge them until the end of the story. Without such an explicit mention of their identities, the story explores all of these while simultaneously dealing with the fantastical plot at hand. As with any community that does have a unique mixture of people, then there comes the problem of tension. What mainstream media fails to recognize is that lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans, amongst others, don’t all share the same problems; as don’t upper-class versus lower-class queers, or white queers versus queers of color. Each has a unique set of problems when dealing with a heteronormative society that is lost when the media amalgamates the queer community into a singularity. Gay men and lesbians not willing to date bisexuals or even excluding them from the queer community entirely; gay men and lesbians having a “gold standard” pressure put upon them; cisgender queer people not accepting transgender people into their proper community, ie, not seeing trans-lesbians as real lesbians, and so on.

Although there is plenty that unifies the community, and such differences should be overcome, ignoring their existence does not help in solving them. I hope to express this in my story, where some of those differences are displayed, but they do end up clearing those problems as they occur. While trying to understand the way queer people relate to one another, Michael Warner's description of queer culture is the kind of depth that is ignored or overlooked in terms of the queer community that this story attempts to bring to light: "Queers can be abusive, insulting, and vile toward one another, but because abjection is understood to be the shared condition, they also know how to communicate through such camaraderie a moving and unexpected form of generosity" (Warner 35). The queer community does hold similar values-- they are outcasts from the heteronormative society, and in this sense, have the ability to lean on one another. But, at the same time, the community is filled with people of various identities and the problems that arise within the community, as many do, should not be ignored. This is the key to what ties Devin, Zackery, Krystal, and Jasper together. Throughout the story the characters struggle to even like each other (seen especially with Devin towards Jasper, and between Zackery and Krystal) but these differences are soon surpassed when they realize that without each other, some may not survive. By the end of the story, even though relations between them may not be perfect, there exists a more solidified understanding and respect for one another through their mutual outcast from society. Although the outside world does not accept them, the four create their own small community inside the forest.

NATURE

The forest in literature has a mixed history, having both depicted a place to be fearful and wary of, as well as a place to be mystified by, a place where new beginnings lie. In this story, the forest acts as both, the antagonist of the story and where the characters find themselves truly coming to life for the first time. I wanted to play with this duality; I didn't want the forest to be painted as all evil, even though all of the problems that afflict the characters take place in the forest. Here is a public place for otherwise very private characters to meet up with people that are similar to them--they may not always meet up under the best of circumstances, but even then, they have each other, and a place with a sense of belonging.

Nature plays various aspects in the story. Devin, one of the main characters, has a natural affinity for plants and flowers; the forest which the majority of the story takes place in is an important setting, but can also double as a character; furthermore, the duality of nature is explored in the story as both a safe haven and necessity for human life, but also a dangerous and uncontrollable aspect that humans must confront. Each of the characters, to keep along with their various life experiences, have different views of the forest/woods: the former is used to refer to a more positive view of the area, with the latter denoting a more negative view. Zackery, having died in the woods but also not being fond of nature to begin with, tends to refer to it as the woods, as does Krystal, who also does not liking nature but overall this specific wooded area in particular. Jasper, intrigued by not only the natural and scientific life that is often abound in woody areas, they also tend to be homes to supernatural experiences, and often uses the word forest to refer to it; Devin, feeling at home in natural areas herself and connecting emotionally with flora, also refers to it with that term.

The forest ends up being a character in and of itself due to the significance it holds to all of the other characters and due to its integrity to the story. It can also be seen as an extension of the faeries, considering that they are never given a physical form/face outside of the forest in which they reside, so to the characters and to the readers, they become one and the same. Furthermore, the liveliness of the forest itself--as in, the very trees and plants that inhabit it--are emphasized throughout the story, as well as the fact that things in the forest, or the forest itself seem to move, giving it yet another aspect of liveliness but also one of surreality. It is in this place that is so difficult to describe and so unlike any other place they know that these four characters are able to find themselves and find each other. Zackery finds genuine friendship in this forest in the form of Devin especially, but also Jasper and Krystal. Jasper's cold exterior is broken through in the second half of the story, displaying someone who truly does everything for their friends. Devin goes from the soft and passive character that the reader knows her to be at the beginning of the story, to becoming more independent of others but especially of Krystal, while also gaining confidence for her feelings for Krystal at the same time. Krystal, on the other hand, is someone who depends on others too much for acceptance and reassurance, and who learns to be independent and a little more detached from her emotions by the end of the story. This can only take place because they managed to create this space in the forest where they feel safe enough, close enough, to begin to change.

CONCLUSION

Although this story is something that started off as a personal experiment in genre, and as an exploration of self, it will hopefully also display a respectful interest in queer studies and intersectionality. While each person's experience is different, there is an underlying tension and

shame that exists in marginalized people, although it may vary in degrees from person to person. This exists because marginalized people recognize that they aren't a part of the dominant culture, and are at a dissonance with their internal feelings and experiences and the external expectations of them. Not only with this story do I hope to showcase this tension in each of these characters, but also the overcoming of this tension and shame, or at least an attempt being made to overcome it. The characters are able to begin or to accomplish this feat because they manage to create this mini-community and space for themselves which they otherwise lacked.

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Taking Root

Prologue

The sun was already beating down at one-thirty in the afternoon, a haze still lingering from the heat and humidity. There were no clouds or a wisp of wind to offer any momentary relief. On any other day, Zackery O'Connor would have found himself in his bedroom, the lights off and the air conditioner on high, moving as little as possible. Today, however, he was outside, walking alongside Ace Martinez, to some sort of surprise destination. It was his birthday. He would have preferred maybe some company and a slice of cake in a conditioned room, and yet this was his present instead.

The pair was silent as they walked, crossing a dusty makeshift parking lot into an open field. Already, Zackery could feel himself sweating, although it didn't help that his outfit was completely black and covered up each inch of his fair skin. The only color on him to be found was the red on his cheeks and the yellow of his hair. With some reluctance, he pulled the sleeves of his dress shirt up to his elbows, but that offered little relief. Ace beside him was in a simple t-shirt and cargo shorts, both of which looked as though they had seen plenty of adventuring excursions beforehand. Even with the proper attire, there was already a shiny gleam on Ace's bronzed skin. It didn't seem to bother him, though, and he remained in all smiles, while Zackery desperately searched his face for any sign of familiar discomfort.

"When you told me that you had never gone camping before, I knew the best way to spend your birthday! It'll be so much fun. It's just nice to get out of the neighborhood, you know? Plus, the feeling of catching your first fish... it's really memorable! If the weather stays this nice, we may even be able to sleep under the stars!" Ace rambled on, starting off excited but then flinching as if someone had hit him. "No, that's not what I meant, I just mean--"

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Zackery grumbled. "You can relax, okay?" He sighed, knowing full well he wouldn't be able to have as much fun as Ace would. But he went along with it anyway, because he didn't have any other plans when Ace had surprised him. "So, you've gone fishing here before..?" Zackery asked. In front of them was a small field, dry and yellow stretched out below the burning sun. In contrast, the forest just beyond the field they had to cross looked dark and menacing the way that the greens were completely unaffected by the summer heat. Zackery began to imagine the relief of the shade on his scalp and his arms, and began to wonder if that was a good enough reason to sprint in the forest's direction. Since Ace managed to compose himself, he did too, although a nervous tension began to build in his limbs.

"Nope! But I had heard about it through some friends. I thought coming here with y--I mean, that's part of the fun of today, coming here and finding the pond and then being able to fish in it!" Ace laughed. "Brandon bet me twenty bucks that we wouldn't be able to find it, he

says that it probably doesn't exist. I don't see why it wouldn't, though, this whole place borders a beach."

So long as he's not here with us, Zackery thought, unable to control the sneer that was forming on his face. "So, we're Lewis and Clark-ing this, then? No map at all?" He asked, knowing that both of them were dancing around dangerous topics. Even though he was friends with Ace, and even liked spending time with him because he was such a genuinely nice guy, they were not close and it was at times like this when he remembered why that was. It hadn't always been like this, but more recently there was a distance between Ace and Zackery that was nearly tangible in the way they both actively avoided talking about it yet both knew it existed through their exchanged glances and and fumbled words.

Ace stopped when the two of them made it to the edge of the forest. He pulled out his phone, which read one-thirty in the afternoon at eighty-three degrees. There was also a compass application, which Ace opened and held out in front of him. "We'll follow this for a while. I know how to read it, so don't worry about it."

"Oh, good," Zackery muttered. "You lead the way, then."

And so they began their walk through the woods.

The field ended abruptly--grass that tickled their ankles soon dropped to nothing so that there was mainly dirt and bushes instead of a mess of grass and weeds. Zackery was thankful for the shade of the canopy above, feeling the cooling effect immediately on his baking scalp. When the three boys entered the forest, all conversation dropped as their attention was captivated by what surrounded them, awed them into silence. There were no cleared paths through the forest, so Ace was in the lead with Zackery directly behind him. Thick trees surrounded them on all sides for a few minutes, so much so that if Zackery held his arm out even before fully straightening it he would hit the closest tree. Ace held his elbows tight to his waist with his arms angled perpendicularly so his fingertips would just brush the bark of the tree trunks. Unlike the trees alongside the roads in town or even in the local neighborhoods, the trees that stood here were healthy, retaining their scratchy exterior. Outside of the forest, most of the foliage had been bitten off and trunks had been smoothed away to nothing because of the recent moth infestation. The healthy greens and browns surrounding him made Zackery feel like he was *truly* in the middle of nature, and not just five minutes off of a back road in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

Once there was a clearing wide enough for the two boys to stand side by side, Ace and Zackery stood side-by-side. Ace dropped his bags to the forest floor and fell back on the nearest tree. If anything, Zackery was carrying the least amount of equipment: his personal items and some food. Ace was carrying everything the three of them would need to fish, and was also hauling along a tent. Not only did Zackery not own any such materials at home, he also wasn't as physically capable as him and left it to Ace to do the more demanding chores. Even if the supplies hadn't been too heavy, the last thing he wanted to do was sweat unnecessarily.

"Time to start searching for the lake!" Ace cried, breaking the silence that had settled amongst the boys. Although Ace was trying to spur Zackery into a good mood, his voice fell flat in the forest. The air was thick and heavy with humidity and there was no wind to rustle the

trees. There weren't even any birds singing. It was quiet until Ace spoke and his voice died from the muffling power of the foliage.

"What I said earlier..." Ace tried again, eyes searching the forest and avoiding Zackery's eyes. "I didn't mean for it to come out that way. I--I didn't mean to *say it* that way!" Ace cried, smacking his forehead.

Zackery tightened his jaw until pain shot up to his ears. The only thing worse than avoiding a topic was confronting it head on. In the woods. With no one else around them, and nowhere to run. "It doesn't matter. Let's just keep moving."

Ace grimaced, grunting as he hauled the supplies back onto his back. "You know, Brandon said--"

"I don't really care what Brandon says, like, ever, Ace," Zackery cut him off. Ace turned around to look at him, but the movement allowed a branch to slap Zackery in the face. Ace let out a sound that was a mixture between a laugh and a surprised cry, while Zackery remained silent. He walked a few paces forward with his eyes closed, watering even without being open. When his eyes stopped watering, his cheeks began to burn, tiny little scratches now covering, burning his face. "Thanks, for that," He grumbled, knowing that it wasn't on purpose but still feeling as if it was. "The only person I wanted to know about it was you, you know."

"I'm sorry... I mean, tons of people at school had guessed it already, so I didn't really tell them so much as..."

Zackery looked over at Ace, but his voice had trailed off, and the look on his face made it clear that he wasn't going to continue. He wasn't sure if he should be thankful or not. "Just forget about it."

"I mean, we're just friends, right?"

Another blow to the face, another explosion in his abdomen. He tried to ignore Ace, as if he hadn't just heard him, and instead turned his attention to the possibility of the sound of running water. But he could feel his face burning up to the tips of his ears, and his hands clenching at his sides. If there had been a river that would lead them to the pond, he wasn't sure he would have noticed it at all.

"I just invited you as a friend, for your birthday, there's nothing more to it than that, you know..?" Ace repeated, a slight whine to his voice, a desperation creeping in. Now that it was Zackery's turn to avoid Ace's eyes, Ace was leaning toward him, trying to catch his gaze.

"Just drop it, Ace," Zackery spat through gritted teeth. "We're supposed to be looking for a pond."

"Right..." Ace nodded, before taking a sudden turn. "Continue walking for a bit, will you? I'll look in this direction. We can meet up in a few minutes, I'll come find you if I hear anything over here, and if you hear something, come find me."

"That sounds like a horrible idea," Zackery shook his head, grabbing Ace's shoulder to stop him. Ace jumped, turning around too quickly with his large load and nearly falling over. "I don't know my way around my backyard, forget this place. How are we going to be able to hear anything anyway, this entire place is just dense wood?"

“Here,” Ace held out his cellphone and placed it in Zackery’s open palm. “Just follow the application. I’m not saying entirely splitting up, we’ll meet right back here in like ten minutes or so! But this place is pretty big and we want to make sure we’re at least heading in the right direction, so that means investigating different areas for potential signs of bodies of water. Besides,” Ace continued, turning his back once more. “This is part of the adventurers experience!” With that, Ace took off, his footsteps muted by the soft ground beneath him, the only sound being his hands passing over the rough bark of branches and trunks.

Zackery rolled his eyes but continued heading straight, holding Ace’s phone out in front of him and staring at it steadily.

...Even if he didn’t like Ace right now, he decided that he was right and listening out for running water would be his best and safest bet. He didn’t want to think about what would happen if he got lost and had to somehow survive on his own, find his way out of here on his own. And Zackery had to keep reminding himself that he wasn’t in some rainforest in South America, but that this was just a cluster pine and oak trees in Plymouth. Getting lost would be an impressive feat even for Zackery. Right? But it was hard to keep that in mind with the way this forest felt so removed from society. The greens were at a vibrancy where each leaf he passed by called his name, making him dizzy as he spun his head right and left. Then there was the forest floor he needed to be careful of, as sometimes there was bare grass but other times he had to pass through bushes. Some of these only reached to his ankles while others brushed his shoulder, with branches scratching at his face. Although he didn’t enjoy this feeling that the forest was closing in on him, what he was really worried about was what was poison ivy and what wasn’t. Zackery found himself wishing that nature came with large neon, blinking signs that said WARNING, in all capital letters, so that he knew what exactly to avoid. There were different shades of green and brown, and sometimes there were red or blue berries hanging from these bushes, but nothing that looked incredibly dangerous. But, Zackery guessed that the most dangerous thing about poison ivy was that it blended in with all of these other plants that he also couldn’t identify.

He wondered what else he was unable to see, hidden in the underbrush or up in the canopy. Other than his own footsteps, Zackery didn’t hear any scurrying or any flowing water. It was easier to hear each breath he took than know what direction he should take for finding the lake. He stopped for a moment to steady his breath, ragged as it was. In through the nose and out through the mouth.

Zackery pulled out his phone to check on the time. Roughly fifteen minutes had passed since he had left Ace. He was about to put his phone away when something at the top of his screen caught his eye: the battery. It was already in the yellow, even though he had made sure to fully charge it before leaving. He rolled his eyes and stuffed the phone back into his pocket, wondering what it was *this* time that ate up all his battery.

Even though he only had his eyes on his phone for a second, when he looked up his face was met with a thick tangle of briars. Instinct forced him to drop his phone as he pushed himself back out of the mess of rough bushes which were clawing at him to stay, clinging to his clothes

and making quick scratches at his face and arms. Once freed, he smoothed his shirt out, rubbing at his arms as if the scratching sensation that was lingering on his skin could just be brushed away. Although walking through this forest had been no picnic as there was no straight path and there were plenty of branches to hold out of his face, it hadn't required him to walk through any plants nearly his height.

And Zackery wasn't about to force his way through the wall of thorns, as his hands were already red in spots from irritation and bleeding. The last thing he wanted was a thorn in his eye or a tear through his clothes. He picked up his phone and headed to the left, which was the clearest direction he could take while still delving deeper into the forest. Otherwise, he would have to backtrack, but according to Ace he wouldn't find the pond that way.

He figured that since he hadn't turned that often on his walk, that he would be able to find his way back to the edge of the forest. Part of Zackery wondered if Ace was angry or disgusted with him, and if he planned on ditching him in this forest. No, that didn't make sense--why would Ace invite him along only to ditch him? Except, if he was Ace right now, he would also probably ditch himself and find a better person to go fishing with. Actually, Zackery didn't even want to be himself right now--the disgust that built up in him pricked at his insides, stabbing in every direction, hitting every major organ.

The overwhelming need to run took over Zackery, and he fought to push the urge down, stifle it before it took over him. He couldn't outrun himself, and the last thing he wanted was to confuse himself in this place even more. Why weren't there any downed trees, or misshapen trunks, or bended branches in the form of a certain image, or anything that would serve as a landmark of some sort? There was nothing out of place or bent out of shape in this place--every tree stood tall and straight, without any markings on their trunks or hanging branches. Even at the end of summer, with this dreadful drought, the leaves were green, fleshy and alive. This forest didn't belong in New England, it was like another world in the way that it looked as though it had never been touched by fire, by snow, by wind, by death.

Zackery grew to hate the color green, and became desperate for relief. The random bright white pebble or ruby berry stood out to him, even though they too were plentiful and didn't help him distinguish his surroundings.

The silence of the forest was suffocating in its own way. Just like the color green, there was too much of it, and Zackery was forced to either escape into his own thoughts for want of sound, or to strain his ears and risk imagining sounds that weren't actually there. If the leaves ever moved, it wasn't thanks to the wind--there was no rustling. Sometimes they moved of their own volition, with a life of their own, or Zackery brushed against them. For a moment there would be skin or clothing material contact that would sometimes reach his ears, sometimes not. Unless he dragged his feet with the intention of kicking up dirt, his footsteps were muted on the forest floor. Even if he kicked rocks across the ground or into a bunch of bushes, the sound was muted, as if it had happened farther off in the distance, instead of just a few feet in front of him. If he thought he heard the pitter patter of tiny rodent feet, he would stop moving, hold his breath, try to not lose focus as he looked at the *green green* surrounding him. When Zackery's vision

began to blur and he felt dizzy, only then would he realize he was being a bit ridiculous and would start walking again.

While his phone was alive, he would check the time: three minutes had passed since he last checked, eleven minutes, six minutes, two minutes. It was getting closer to the dreaded deadline, but there was something that gave Zackery hope: the sound of music.

Or, at least, it was music to Zackery's ears. The gurgling murmur of water flowing over rocks suddenly hit his senses--like it appeared out of nowhere, instead of growing louder and louder as he got closer. The corners of Zackery's lips twitched upward into an almost-smile; could this be the river that leads him to the heart of the forest? Throwing caution to the nonexistent wind, Zackery picked up the pace, going from speed-walking to running towards the direction he heard the water coming from.

There was no sign of a river nearby, though. There was no tapering off of land to form a coastline of any sort, the land remained flat as flat could be. The geology of the floor didn't change: the same loamy soil surrounding him in every direction, becoming no more rocky or sandy than it had been. But Zackery was *sure* of the sound of running water. It wasn't his ears playing tricks on him, it was the distinct sound of a babbling brook.

Was he just supposed to ignore it? How could he hear something that seemed to be so far away?

"Okay, Zackery," He began, reasoning that the best way to ground himself was by talking to himself. "Don't be ridiculous. Control yourself." Shaking out his body, even if it was only a momentary relief from the stress he felt building in the pit of his stomach, tightening all of his muscles to a painful level. As he began walking forward once again, he felt his joints stiffen making it almost impossible, like his body was screaming at him to *stop, just stop, turn back*.

When he opened his eyes, there was no longer the sound of running water, but there was a glint in the distance of something shining. Perhaps the dappled rays of sun over water? Maybe Zackery had not been so far off as he had thought, and merely overshot the river that led to the pond. He was thankful then that he managed to calm down and catch sight of the pond, or else he would have been wandering around this forest for who knows how long. Then Ace would have found him, looking like an idiot with nothing to show for it...

As he began to walk towards the lake, he noticed a break in the monotonous scenery: pearly white mushrooms sprouted up to the left and right of him. He began counting them, but was afraid that if he stared at the ground too long, the pond would disappear. But now it wasn't just a shiny glint in the distance, but Zackery could make out where the grass ended and the water began. He would crane his neck in one direction and the next just to try and get a good look around the trees at the pristine pond. Sometimes standing on tiptoe to see over the bushes of briars, he noticed that the clearing from forest edge to lake edge was maybe ten feet of grass and sand. There was nothing spectacular about the sight, and certainly there were romantic views of waterfronts all throughout Plymouth. Yet there was still something that drew Zackery to this body of water in particular. Was it the sudden blue contrasting with green, a relief to his sore

eyes? Or was it that he suddenly felt safe, realizing that beforehand he was going a bit crazy at the fear of losing his way in the woods?

It also seemed as though there was nobody else around, meaning that he had beat Ace to the camping site.

With a thicket he didn't dare trying to push his way through, Zackery turned to his left to see yet another bright mushroom. Scoffing, he sent it flying with the toe of his shoe. Amidst the shrubbery he lost sight of the mushroom itself, though he heard the puffy explosion of its landing. A cloud of dirt and dust wafted into the air where it must have landed a few feet in front of him, before dissipating. His white sneakers were now brown, coated in the dirt that the mushroom trailed behind.

When he made to continue for the pond, he no longer saw it. In front of him there was no body of water, no glimmer of sun reflecting off the surface; there was nothing but more green green green, trees and bushes and grass.

So disoriented by the change, Zackery was physically moved, stumbling back over his own feet. He managed to catch himself before he tripped, forcing himself to look in the opposite direction. Perhaps being so focused on the mushrooms--oh! there's one, to the left, and three in a cluster to his right--meant he had lost his direction of the water.

But no... it wasn't here either. Spinning around in a circle showed nothing but spindly grey-brown branches huddled low against thick brown tree trunks. The trees mocked Zackery as they towered above him, suddenly seeming to threaten him: how dare he walk where they stand, thinking that he could somehow master this unknown territory in less than a day, less than an hour--

Oh, the time. Zackery pulled out his cellphone to find a blank screen. Despite himself, he pressed at the home button a few times, hoping against hope that it would turn on. A flash of red shattered that hope, and he pocketed his now useless device. There was now no way for him to contact the other two boys in a timely manner, now it was a matter of whether he could hear them or they could hear him.

But now was not the time to panic. There was no way that a pond could just get up and disappear, so all Zackery had to do was find it. Everything around him though was starting to become the same shade of dark green, almost black, as the sun began to set. Although there hadn't been much sunlight to reach the forest floor to begin with, now it was most certainly getting dark. He had a flashlight on him and that offered him a sense of security, although the fear that it too would die out on him lingered in the back of his mind.

When the darkness that crept over him was not only the black of nighttime but also a blurring of his vision, that was when adrenaline started to course through his veins. Zackery began to rub at his eyes desperately--maybe a bug got into his eye, or he hadn't noticed when a branch had hit his face--ideas that Zackery knew were false but forced himself to swallow and believe, anyway. His vision didn't get any better though so he swung his backpack off and rummaged for the hard, cool touch of his flashlight. In comparison, his skin was on fire; the air around him boiling and suffocating.

He managed to concentrate long enough to flick on his flashlight. It wasn't as bright as he wanted it to be, barely breaking through the haze that was his vision. Feeling cross-eyed, his head began throbbing, forcing him to his knees. Zackery didn't even have space in his head to wonder why this was happen--all that he could think about was how much pain he was in, everywhere, all at once.

And then it was gone, lifting off of his body slowly like fog. Even his vision cleared so that he could make out distinct figures.

Or, whatever could be called distinct in the deep of woods in the middle of the night.

"Ace!" Zackery choked out, the moment he remembered that being alone was a horrible idea. His voice was breathy and cracked, as if he hadn't used his vocal chords in recent days. If everything had looked the same in the afternoon, each direction was a clone of the other in the dark, with just a hint of more menace than he had encountered earlier. Mustering up the strength to disturb the enemy that surrounded him, he tried again. "Ace Martinez!" Louder but still unsteady, shaking just like his grip on his flashlight.

He decided that moving was better than standing still, figuring that it would the very least keep himself from worrying too much. Instead of focusing on what was going wrong, at least if he was walking he would have to focus on where he wanted to go and where to step. When Zackery walked to where there were the clusters of white mushrooms, glowing even without the light from his flashlight, his knees buckled underneath him so that he kneeled just in front of the fungi.

There was a heaviness to his body that made him not want to get up. He wanted to crawl into his bed back home, snuggle under the blankets, and forget about his fellow classmates, forget about these woods, forget about Plymouth entirely. Instead, he found his body unfurling against his will, lying on dirt and rocks and leaves that would be his bed for the night. The chance to lie down allowed his bones and muscles to begin aching with a ferocity that made it difficult for him to keep his eyes open.

With more force than he wanted to exert, Zackery rolled over onto his stomach to find himself face to face with the exit. Or the entrance. Although it was night out and his eyelids were fluttering, just outside of arm's reach the trees disappeared to a grassy field. Beyond that was the dirt road that would lead to the main street. He couldn't see the street and he couldn't hear any cars passing by, but he knew that's where the dirt road led. That's where he had begun his trip this afternoon.

He no longer tried to question how he managed to get anywhere and only thanked his feet for managing to carry him to where he wanted to be without his eyes even realizing it. All he needed to do now was stand up and get moving. That was easier said than done though, as it felt as if he was carrying a full other person on his back while trying to get off the ground. When he managed to get to his knees, the weighted weariness did not leave, so he began crawling towards the entrance. A surprising amount of focus was needed for Zackery to put one hand in front of the other, not so much lifting his hands and feet as he moved as he was literally dragging them

through the dirt. He was digging into the ground as he moved, making it all the more difficult to gain any distance.

At one point, he passed out. He was no closer, no farther from the path leading out of the forest. His arms and legs collapsed underneath him, his chest and nose falling flat against the dirt. Zackery managed to tilt his face slightly so that he could breathe, and then his energy was wasted. Nothing moved. Just a few feet from Zackery's body was the overturned mushroom he had kicked earlier in his travels. To the left of where his body lay was a single white, bright mushroom. A few feet to the right, a cluster of three.

He opened his eyes to sunlight and the vibrant green of the forest, encircled by trees and bushes. This didn't phase him at first, so much as he relished in the new lightness of his body. Whatever weight had suffocated him the night before was gone. He felt as light as a feather. Sitting up caused him no difficulties, and breathing had never felt so exhilarating. Zackery turned his face up towards the canopy far above and smiled, big and wide, feeling released and free. No birds were singing, and Zackery felt as though he could replace them as the forest's music singer.

Zackery stood up, testing his strength one foot at a time before standing straight. He stretched, pulling one arm and then the other over his head and expected to feel sore, but he didn't feel a thing. While brushing dirt off his clothes, that's when he realized something was wrong.

The entrance.

Didn't he see it last night?

Where did it go?

Zackery spun around in a circle, but there was nothing but trees surrounding him, thick and intimidating. They blocked out the sky, yet still remained a blinding green down below. Once more disoriented, he wondered which way he had come, which way he was supposed to go.

Where was Ace? Did he spend the night in the forest as well, or had he managed to find his way out? Zackery began running in whatever direction he was facing to find shortly after, the very entrance he was searching for. He heaved a sigh of relief, shaking his shoulders out and laughing at himself.

"That's no good, Zackery. What will people make of you if you are so quick to panic?" Another chuckle, slightly high-pitched from his nerves. When he made to walk past the border of mushrooms and then cross the threshold of forest and field, the heaviness overwhelmed him once more. Afraid of another black hole in his memory, he thrust himself backwards onto the ground, dragging himself in the dirt and away from the mushrooms.

Except he was not really dragging himself along, as there was no streaking in the dirt from his hands or shoes. His hands were clean and his shoes were the same dustiness as they were yesterday. This didn't really phase him, although it did confuse him. He imagined by now his clothes should be brown and torn, and that he would smell his own sweat.

By now, Zackery associated pain and a dizzying sickness with the small white mushrooms, and wanted to avoid them as best he could. Walking in the opposite direction of

those mushrooms, and of where he thought he had last seen the entrance, in less than twenty feet Zackery found himself faced against a similar foe. The same mind-numbing trance took over his body when he tried to pass through the scattered line of mushrooms.

Frustration was beginning to pent up inside of him. What the hell was going on here? An army of mushrooms seemed to surround him, and his escape out of this forest seemed to be always just out of reach, elusive and evasive.

Grumbling under his breath about how he would never come out to a forsaken forest again, and forget any plans of vacationing or retiring to a northern woodsy state, he began to retrace his steps once more. This time, his steps landed himself in his own shoes. Looking down, there was a lack of color: the earth had already begun to reclaim what had once been hers, but Zackery recognized the clothes as his own.

Stepping off of his corpse, Zackery leaned down beside himself. Some flesh remained, but physical features alone would have left him unrecognizable. The first signs of life in the forest buzzed around his body, although they didn't seem to notice the copied image of the dead boy sitting beside them. Flies flew through Zackery to get at his corpse, making home in what was left of him. His clothes hung limp against him, no longer having a proper body to fill them out the way they were meant to look. The shirt was black and silk, the shoes were Nike, once white and now grass-stained and brown.

Instead of feeling depressed at the thought--at the fact--that he was dead, there was a lack of emotion in Zackery's heart. An emptiness that felt similar to the heaviness this forest made him feel.

The only thing that came to mind was that he hoped that somewhere in these woods, Ace was rotting, too.

Chapter One

The phone read six in the morning. With a practiced maneuver, Devin Xiao turned off her alarm just after the second ring, forcing herself into a sitting position at the same time. Even though her days always started this early during the weekdays, it never seemed to get any easier. With the deep blue of the morning sky to her back, Devin made her way out of her bedroom and to the kitchen. Considering she lived in an one-floor house, there were no stairsteps she had to worry about tripping over in her exhausted stupor.

In an hour, her younger siblings Sam and Frankie would wake up to go with her parents for a summer vacation to Provincetown. During the school year, this would be the time that Devin would make them their lunches, and something that they could take with them to the bus stop for breakfast, too. Even though she knew she probably didn't have to, habit forced her to turn the stovetop on. It wasn't uncharacteristic for her to make breakfast for her parents sometimes, too, so it would kill time before her day actually had to start.

It didn't bother her having to wake up this early. Where she stood in by the stove, there was a window just in front of her, which let her watch the sky change colors and hues as the sun also woke up. Some birds were already in full song, while others were testing their voices before they too would sing to the sun as it began to rise. Devin liked to imagine that the birds were all singing for her: the chirps of the chickadees imbuing her with positive energy, the screeches of the jays filling her with strength to last the long day, the caws of the crows reminding her that even now, in the dead of summer, the seasons were in constant transition.

When she had finished making breakfast of fried rice and sausages and hard-boiled eggs, the house began to rustle with the sound of movement. Both her mother and father arrived into the kitchen at the same time. Their bedroom was adjacent to Devin's younger siblings, which was on the opposite side of the house than Devin's room. The benefit of being the oldest meant that she had a room all to herself.

"Good morning, Devin," Her father said in Mandarin. He took one of the breakfast dishes off the counter and took it to the single table that constituted their dining room. "There is still time for you to change your mind and come with us."

Her mother smiled as she walked by Devin to Frankie's and Sam's room to wake them up. Devin nodded in her direction before pointing her attention to her father. "No worries, dad. I need to stick close to home to work."

He tsked but didn't respond and resumed eating. Devin was happy to know that her father cared about her, but she couldn't bring herself to smile. There was a part of her that wanted to go down to the cape with them and just escape the monotony of everyday work, but she couldn't afford to do that. She depended on her work, and her work depended on her; quite literally, as she grew and tended to flowers in her own home garden before trimming them for flower arrangements. If she left them, there would be no one to take care of them, and they could die.

Being away from her garden was like a limb being torn off from her body. People would never leave a cat or a dog unattended for a week straight without food or water, and yet for some

reason people thought plants could survive with similar treatment. If her flowers withered because of personal neglect, shame would eat at Devin for weeks on end.

That was the primary reason Devin didn't want to go to Provincetown. The other reason was named Krystal Claire.

"Can't wait for the beach!" Sam cried, running out of his room at full speed before skidding to a halt when he saw breakfast. "Can't wait for sand! Can't wait for ocean! Can't wait for sun! Can't--"

Frankie and her mother came out of the room slower and quieter than Sam. While Mrs. Xiao tried to calm her son down, Frankie was taking out her bags and suitcases to the car. Knowing that her younger brother would be too excited to notice he was letting his sister do all the work, Devin made her way into their bedroom to carry out the rest of the kid's bags. With her long strides, Devin managed to catch up to Frankie beside the car and help her rearrange the luggage. This was done in silence unless Devin spoke up.

Before she spoke to her younger siblings one-on-one, there was always a sense of awkward anxiety that took hold of her. There was a large age difference between her and both Frankie and Sam, so she often found it difficult on how to act around them. This didn't help that most of the time she was the one watching over them, making her feel like a second mother rather than an older sister. "I hope you have fun on your vacation. Take lots of pictures for me, okay?" An inward sigh--that was lame.

Frankie looked up at Devin, craning her neck. "Take care of yourself, sis," she said, offering a smile. Despite being a teenager, she was so tiny--short and fragile, at least in Devin's eyes. "I wish you were coming along, too."

Devin ruffled her sister's hair to her frustration. "You see me all the time. Have some fun with mom and dad, okay? You'll be back in school before you know it."

Frankie scoffed, looking offended at the very mention of the s-word. "I *don't* want to think about it!"

Devin was still laughing, soft and breathy, when Frankie ran off back inside. With the sun making its slow ascent, she knew that her family would soon be off in an attempt to beat Cape traffic. She decided that standing in their way wouldn't help anyone, so she should prepare for her day, too. This meant taking care of her plants and flowers before going off to see Krystal.

Their backyard was small, but each inch was used. There was a clear divide between Devin's half of the lawn and the children's half; hers was made up of meticulous rows of plants and flowers, while the younger kid's half was strewn with toys, and also had a swing set. By the end of the day, she realized it would be for the best that she cleaned up the lawn considering Frankie and Sam wouldn't be around to play outside for the next few days.

Depending where flowers were in their bed, some were growing in loamy soil and others in more sandy. There were the customary roses that everyone loved, and carnations in various colors. Fragile forget-me-nots grew opposite of the mint that she grew, which needed constant care in case it ever became uncontained. Then there were her azaleas, which grew in bundles of different shades of pink. This flower wasn't normally asked for by clients, but she grew it

because it reminded her of Krystal. There was a feminine quality in the flower that she saw and admired in Krystal, equipped with a deadly strength--maybe not as literal in Krystal as in the azalea, but she had her own kind of ferocity and tenacity, too.

When a blaring horn sounded, Devin was burst out of her thoughts and nearly dropped her watering can onto her beloved plants. "Coming!" She called out, rushing over to the shed, situated on her side of the lawn. Inside she placed her watering can and took out her trusty bicycle. Her parents would be taking the one car the family owned.

With Frankie and Sam already in the car, her younger brother still jumping and singing about all of the things he looked forward to doing at the beach, her mother and father were standing just outside of the car. Devin smiled and gave them both a kiss on the cheek, before they too got in the car. She watched as they pulled out of the driveway before settling onto her bike.

Once she could no longer hear the lone engine on the road, Devin took off for her bike. For the past few weeks Devin had been riding over to Krystal's house basically every other day since summer started. During the school year it was impossible for Devin to see Krystal because she was so busy with college, and it was very rare for her to be able to use the car. With this abundance of time and their close proximity, it meant they could hang out that much more. Without Krystal, Devin didn't leave the house much--she would meet with a potential customer to know what they wanted sometimes, and always met up to give them their flowers, but she was otherwise stuck at home. And that didn't bother her much, she wasn't *unhappy*, but she also knew that when she was with Krystal, she was *happy*.

Being with Krystal meant adventure. Even if it was something pretty mundane, like going to the movies or downtown. Devin was comfortable and herself when she was with Krystal--she felt more herself with her than without. Devin didn't really know who she was without Krystal. Bland, maybe. A homebody, definitely. Partially workaholic. Krystal didn't see these things or she didn't care. A small part of her liked to believe that when they hung out, Krystal had fun, too. It was a small hope, a faint glimmer, but as she was pedalling, the thought grew stronger, brighter, rising with the sun.

Technically, Krystal didn't live very far from Devin. It just felt like a lot longer than it should have considered she had to bike there instead of drive. Plus it didn't help that when Devin arrived in Krystal's part of the neighborhood, or stood in her driveway, it felt as though she had entered another world. Krystal's house was a double-story, and she had a pool in her backyard. Devin's house was painted an off-white, but Krystal's house was this bright green color that shouldn't have worked for a house, but it did because it was Krystal's home. Besides, she loved bright, neon colors. Devin had to agree that they suited her personality.

Pulling up into Krystal's driveway, Devin was barely aware of the fact that her calves were sore, cramped from the slightly-too-small bike as well as the length of the ride. Krystal must have been waiting by the window because the moment that she parked her bike there was the sound of a door closing and the tiny little click-clacks of Krystal's shoes on her stone walkway.

“G’morning, Dev!” Krystal called out, waving as she walked over. “Let’s go have some fun today!” Her car beeped as she unlocked it. Even her car was neon-green. To Devin, it just looked like the color of a highlighter catastrophe.

Without words, Krystal slid into the driver’s seat and Devin wriggled her way into the passenger seat. Despite how often they hung out, she found herself constantly needing to shift the seat backwards so that her legs had room. Then again, she shared this car with her moms, both of whom were as short as Krystal.

“Where are we off to this morning..?” Devin asked, not sure she really wanted to know the answer. In the back row of her car, there was an assortment of items that all looked very sporty: a soccer ball, a frisbee, a football, a bat without a baseball in sight, a tennis ball but no rackets, and a javelin. It was a mess.

“To the park!” Her answer was short and sweet as she pulled out of the driveway with harrowing focus. Devin didn’t need a deeper explanation though, as there was one park that was especially popular during summer. There was no official name for it, but it had the best of all worlds when it came to nature walking: there were lakes nearby and past the field there was a forest. If and when she had free time, and a car to drive out to it, Devin enjoyed walking around the field. More than once she had fallen asleep in the fields under the warm rays of the summer sun or the refreshing briskness of autumn wind.

“And the... torture equipment behind us?” Devin asked, a shy smile creeping across her face. It was out of place underneath her wide and unblinking eyes.

“Oh, c’mon! It’ll be tons of fun. The field is a great place to play sports.”

“And where exactly did you get a javelin..?”

“I used to be on the field and track team back in high school!”

High school. Vivid flashbacks of lunches spent sitting alone in the cafeteria or the library, being a classroom group projects leftover that had to be assigned to a group by the teacher, and being enticed by after school clubs only to wait just outside the door to the club room listening to the meeting for ten minutes before leaving. She had met Krystal during middle school and they had been friends throughout high school, but the two of them hadn’t had many classes together. They kept in touch only through hanging out on the weekends and texting each other during the weeknights. Neither of them were amazing at school--Devin managed to get honor roll but she never went into the advanced classes, and Krystal never did too poorly in school, either. But Krystal had played sports--not just one, but many, she seemed to never be able to make up her mind--and had been a part of other clubs, too. Devin only had Krystal; Krystal had Devin, but she had other friends, too. Maybe Devin wouldn’t have had any friends to this day if Krystal had never first spoke to her back in middle school.

Despite no longer being in high school, things hadn’t changed much. Krystal went to community college during the fall and spring, but Devin was stuck at home. Really, it was her own fault, because she hadn’t even bothered to apply for colleges. This had led to many arguments back home with her parents, who had desperately wanted her to get a higher education in America. She enjoyed the simple life she led, though, taking care of her younger siblings and

growing her flower business. When Mr. and Mrs. Xiao realized that their first daughter wasn't going to college any time soon, they focused their attention to Frankie and Sam's studies. Each month, Devin paid her parents rent to stay at the house. Each month she wondered when it would be her last, and her parents would finally force her to find her own place.

The drive from Krystal's house to the park was short, under ten minutes. Devin was at a loss as to how to strike up a conversation, as it was something she usually left up to Krystal. This morning, though, Krystal was more interested in singing along to her iPod, instead of talking. It took some of the burden off of Devin, and she enjoyed watching and listening to Krystal sing. She wasn't great at it by any means, but she was very passionate about it in the car, anyway. The more she loved a song, the more enthusiastic Krystal's performance became. And it was a performance, a show for one, with Krystal sometimes waving her hands or locking eyes with Devin, pointing at her and singing in her direction. Devin laughed and clapped at the end of each song, sometimes cheering "encore!" just before the next song started up.

In mid-song Krystal went from full bravado to a quiet hum as she turned right off the main road onto a dirt path. Her car jostled around a bit as she drove a little too quickly, causing Devin to hold onto the safety bar. The road opened up to reveal a larger dirt area that was designated for parking. There were no other vehicles in the parking lot, and it was empty save for a small dirt mound with flowers growing out of it,

Krystal parked right next to it.

"You have an entire lot to yourself, and you park next to this thing? On my side, too?" Devin sighed as she made her way out of the car. A quick peek, though, told her all that she needed to know. They were white lilies, sympathy flowers. Unlike the rest of the lot, which was dry, dusty, and unkempt, this one section stood out because the soil was dark, like it had recently been watered. She diverted her attention from the car to Krystal, who was carrying the frisbee and the soccer ball, two of the lesser evils from her backseat.

"Oh? What's this?" Krystal asked, standing by Devin's side.

"Someone must have planted these here. I wonder why," Devin looked over at Krystal for a split second before she looked back at the flowers, cheeks ablaze. "Someone must have paid their respects here."

"It's sad, but also kind of creepy." Krystal frowned as she locked arms with Devin. "C'mon, let's go! You can look at flowers all the time at your house!"

In front of them was an empty field of ankle-high grass that was smattered with dandelions. The green grass was almost blinding from the sun, which had risen to expose itself in its entirety. A pale blue sky had now awoken and greeted them, making the open field feel warm and inviting despite its vast emptiness. By the outskirts, that grass grew wild and the weeds were a few feet tall. Considering that the field was laid out open in front of Devin and Krystal, it made the wall of trees beyond the field a bit foreboding. From this distance, the inside of the forest looked dark. Devin felt more of a tug to the forest than the field, wondering what secrets that the forest held amidst its floor, the underbrush, the canopy. She had never taken a walk past the field, and of the few times that she had visited, she had never seen anyone else do so, either.

“Spread out, Devin!” Krystal cried, waving her hand to indicate that she should run across the field.

Even while she was running, Krystal kicked the soccer ball in Devin’s direction. Devin managed to send the ball rolling back in Krystal’s direction without tripping over herself or the ball, a feat that surprised even herself. Krystal had to run forward a few feet, pulling the ball backwards and then kicking it up with her toe and dribbling it on her knees until she returned to her previous place across the field. Only then did she pass the ball again to Devin.

With nothing to halt it, there was a welcome breeze across the field. It was warm as expected of summer wind, but it was better than if the air was settled and unmoving. As the sun rose the grass began to look more yellow than green, especially when compared to the trees just beyond. Krystal matched the sun for its brightness and ferocity; the orange ribbon in her hair brought out the color throughout her outfit, even giving her brown hair a warmer, reddish tint. Devin’s passes to Krystal proved to be testing the other girl’s athleticism, as her kicks were either pitiful and forced Krystal to run halfway across the field to meet the ball, or were sent spinning hard to the left or right. Krystal passed the ball with generous energy so that it always landed right in front of Devin. She didn’t have any cool tricks when it came to sports, though, and to stop the ball from sliding past her, she would use whatever part of her legs the ball was closest to. It didn’t take long for her toes and shins to feel sore.

“Are we having fun yet?” Krystal asked, laughing in between gasps. Devin responded only with her own laughter as Krystal took her shot. Devin ducked, hands over her head as the ball was sent flying over her and into the woods.

“Does that mean it’s my turn to start running..?” Devin called over to Krystal, who had taken a seat on the ground.

“Oops, sorry! Did that go into the woods? I didn’t even notice!” She cried, waving to Devin. “It’s game over now, I think!”

Devin groaned but made her way in the ball’s direction. Walking past the first few trees was like entering a haven where her scalp was no longer burning and there wasn’t the vast emptiness of the field. The dried grass of the field disappeared to mere dirt and soil, but in its place grew various bushes and trees. Devin’s eyes were wandering even when she knew this was meant to be a quick get-in-and-get-out situation, and she suddenly wanted to *touch* everything. Her hands skimmed the rough, squared bark of pine trees that stood ramrod straight. Where the pines didn’t have any branches except near the canopy, the hemlock trees neighboring them grew round and puffy. The forest floor was littered with their pinecones, although a few still hung on strong to their homes on the branches.

She had thought that just entering the forest would be enough--the ball would be right there, waiting for her. Perhaps a few feet in, but straight ahead nonetheless. That proved not to be the case because there was no straight ahead. Trees huddled together in close groups of two or three, some partially or wholly surrounded by bushes. This made walking straight impossible and the only way to maneuver was the long way: around any and every obstacle that was crossed. A hint of neon green in this otherwise natural forest told Devin to turn left--because of course

Krystal's soccer ball was not the ordinary white-and-black, but was instead decorated with her signature highlighter color.

While she made her way over to the soccer ball, out of the corner of her eye she thought she saw something. Whatever it was, though, it was gone faster than she could lift her head. Even in the midsummer heat, goosebumps began to raise along her left arm, the side she had noticed the shadowed figure. It had probably just been one of the critters that called this place home, but where it was difficult to see in this crowded forest, she felt spooked nonetheless. Devin stepped on her tiptoes to look in the direction she thought she had saw something, but between bushes and tree trunks, there was nothing to be seen. She hadn't heard anything, either, although the forest floor was clear of litter.

"Devin!"

Her voice broke through Devin's stupor. Devin looked behind her as there was a scuffling through bushes and branches--Krystal made her way to her. In an attempt to recover before she arrived, Devin stepped forward to reach for the soccer ball, but was held back and stumbled backwards by a sudden pull from behind her. The arms wrapped around her shoulders and the high-pitched giggle let her know that Krystal had caught up to her.

"What's taking you so long?" Krystal asked, pulling Devin down to her height so she could put her head on Devin's shoulder. It was an uncomfortable bend that Devin had trouble holding. "Are you hiding from me? Was playing soccer really *that* much torture?"

Devin struggled out of Krystal's grasp, holding her hand a second too long before pulling her grip apart and turning around to face her, standing up straight. Her back cracked and spasmed as she did so, unhappy at her for the forced awkward position. "I was just going to come back once I found the soccer ball. Hey, did you see anyone enter the field while I've been in here?"

"Huh?" Krystal asked, walking over and picking up the soccer ball, her back to Devin. "No, it's still just us. I even left my frisbee on the ground out there, alone. You don't think someone will come and steal it, do you?" Krystal whirled around to Devin and faked a pass to her, causing Devin to launch out her hands as if to catch, though she caught nothing but air. Krystal laughed as she spun the soccer ball on her finger and made her way back to Devin's side. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh!" Devin shook her head, her braids on each shoulder moving stiffly and awkwardly with the movement. "I thought I had heard someone, maybe I was wrong." Pressing her hand to the back of her neck to find cold sweat clinging to her skin, she rubbed it away along with any possibilities of someone entering the forest. "I think the heat is getting to me. We should take a break."

"Yeah, definitely," The look that crossed Krystal's face was one that did not appear often, not in the middle of the day, in what would technically be considered public: eyebrows knit close together, mouth slightly agape, eyes half-lidded. Interlocking her arm with Devin's, much to her surprise, Krystal half-pulled half-walked with Devin to a tree at the edge of the forest. There, the two girls slid their backs along the trunk, hands slowly freeing themselves and resting by their respective sides. Devin laid sprawled out, pressing her back and head firmly

against the tree trunk, trying to ignore the heat that was slowly becoming more suffocating by the second. Krystal was also sitting in a relaxed position, hands by her thighs to keep her dress situated each time the wind breezed by. Every few seconds she would take a quick peek at Devin, which she noticed through her peripheral vision, before looking straight forward at the field in front of them. Devin became unsettled by her looks--did she have something she wanted to say, or was she just worried about her because of the heat? She didn't think it was her place to break the silence, so she remained silent.

Devin closed her eyes to avoid catching Krystal's gaze, letting the dappled sunlight through the leaves of the trees brighten her eyelids from black to a deep red. Laying in the broad daylight was one of her favorite things to do--or not to do, depending on the point of view. There was nothing like the sun kissing her skin, the breeze whispering to her most sensitive nerves, the feeling of lush grass under her palms. Except here, where the forest and the field met, there was no lush grass, mainly dirt and some dry stubs of grass that pointed and pricked at her hands.

A nudge on her foot jostled her out of her daze, her eyes shooting open to see an out-splayed Krystal grinning in her direction. "You can't fall asleep on me!"

"I'm not sleeping," Devin countered, shaking her head and sitting up straight. The wind blew, gentle and warm, but goosebumps raised on her arms. A knot of unease in her stomach began building, forcing Devin to shift positions every few seconds to try and relieve the tension, to no avail. The pressure began to crawl from her stomach to her limbs, where her legs began to feel restless and her arms had an itch just beneath the skin.

Krystal's mouth hung open as if she was about to speak, and Devin looked at her, waiting for what she had to say, hanging on each word before it even left her mouth, before each word even formed in Krystal's head. But the voice that escaped Krystal was not her voice, but instead a male's voice, saying, "Please help me find my way, if you can, I seem to have gotten lost." For a moment, both girls stared at each other without attempting to speak again, both stunned silent. Out of the corner of Devin's eye, she could see a darkened shadow, but only dared to look up when she exchanged a curt nod with Krystal so that they both looked up at the same time.

Two pairs of brown eyes met one pair of blue eyes staring down at them. Devin jumped up, feeling an intense awkwardness at the fact that he stood while she remained seated. Even while standing, with this boy only coming up to about her chin, Devin still felt as though she was being stared down at. She felt like she was only three inches tall, although that was a normal feeling for her when she was around boys. His face was pale and his mouth set in a hard line as his eyes moved smoothly between Devin and Krystal. Though behind his eyes he seemed to be calculating something, Devin couldn't even imagine what he was thinking. The mess of blond hair and the neat, though ultimately unfit for summer, clothes made her wonder what exactly he was doing out here. As far as she knew, there was no camping allowed in the forest, and the only way to get in was through the field that she and Krystal had walked through. He was growing increasingly more irritated with the silence that neither Krystal nor Devin had yet broken. And Devin knew it, but she didn't dare say anything, and instead looked over at Krystal, who had remained seated.

“...As I was saying,” The boy huffed, crossing his arms tight over his chest as if to hold himself together, “I’m in a predicament. Or won’t you help?”

Devin opened her mouth to say yes, of course they would help, because how couldn’t she help someone who was in need? How couldn’t she help someone when she felt she had no choice? But Krystal was faster and cut her off, saying, “What do you need help with? Who are you, anyway?” While talking to the boy she neither looked at him while she spoke nor made any movement to stand up. If it had been anyone but Krystal acting this way, Devin would have been embarrassed--she preferred to concede immediately before any sort of trouble started--but now she was just in awe that Krystal could, in a sense, stand her ground.

“I’m trying to find my way through the woods. As you may or may not know, there are no paths through these woods. I keep getting turned around.” The boy explained, staring at Krystal with a hardened gaze. It wasn’t as though he was begging for their help, but was instead trying to will them into helping him. Standing as close as they were next to each other, the restlessness in Devin’s limbs returned and the chill threatened goosebumps all along her arms and neck. Perhaps she was getting sick, but there was also an uneasiness she felt whenever she spared a glance in the boy’s direction. “My name is Zackery O’Connor. If you won’t help me, just say it. I don’t want to waste my time.”

“Why are you trying to get through the forest? You’d just end up on the edge of the highway, or by one of the nearby ponds.”

“I’m not a chicken trying to cross the road,” Zackery countered. “I want to get into the middle of the forest.”

“Are you searching for something?”

At first, it didn’t look as though Zackery would say anything to Krystal. The look that flashed through his eyes made Devin feel sure that he was going to shut down, and she became afraid that Krystal may have pushed him one step too far. She wanted to grab Krystal’s hand and run across the field, put as much distance between them and him. So when the boy heaved a sigh and began talking, Devin was surprised. There was still no way for her to know if this boy--who didn’t seem younger or older than her or Krystal, but nevertheless had an air of superiority to him--was any danger to them or not. Was he the type of criminal to reveal his plans and then kill his victims after doing so? Or was he really just a lost boy amongst the trees? She hadn’t traveled by herself deep into any wooded area, and couldn’t really fathom a place large enough to get lost in, here in Massachusetts.

“Have you ever seen mushrooms naturally form into a perfect circle? In the middle of the woods there are many small and large circles, but I don’t know why they are there. Even stranger, they only occur around the lake in the forest. Of course, I can’t study them if I can’t even get to them.” Zackery had released the tension in his arms, but only dropped them to his side for a moment before they were on his hips.

“You’re asking us to help you look for mushrooms? Sorry, I have better ways to spend my time.” Krystal scoffed, rolling her eyes before looking in Devin’s direction. “Can you believe this guy? What am I, a girl scout?”

Devin noticed the blond boy flinch, the corner of his mouth twitching into a snarl. The moment passed before Krystal noticed, before the boy even opened his mouth, a composed smile replacing his features. "All you have to say is no. Then we can both move on with our lives." Another flicker of emotion passed over Zackery's face, too quick for Devin to fully understand what it meant.

"Sorry, I think it's best we get going. You need to find your mushrooms and we... we just came to grab the soccer ball!" Devin reached down for Krystal's hand, who reached for it and stood up beside her. Holding her friend's hand, Devin realized her own palm was sweating. "Goodbye, now!" Without a spared glance, Devin took off sprinting. Krystal, her hand still locked with Devin's, fumbled with her soccer ball and nearly dropped it as she tried to keep up with her friend's longer strides.

Part of Devin was afraid to look behind her--she didn't want to see the boy chasing them across the field. No part of her wanted to stop when she saw Krystal's sad frisbee lying on the ground, but if she didn't then she would be forced by Krystal's incessant tugging, and so she did. Krystal grabbed her toy and Devin dared a peek behind her to see--nothing. Zackery was nowhere to be seen on the outskirts of the field, and so it made it harder for Devin to gauge where they had just been standing. She imagined him trailing through the depths of the woods, like a hunter stalking prey, and it sent a shiver down her spine. So focused on trying to parse through the green and shadows for a shock of yellow that Devin didn't notice when Krystal began to start walking again.

"Krys!" Devin cried, wondering when exactly her hand had fallen out of grasp with hers, and why the sensation still lingered. "You're okay, right? That was--"

"No weirder than an average Friday night at school," Krystal huffed. "While I was at university, I just wanted to get back to my dorm one night and on my way there was a dude peeing right outside the dorm's entrance! Then he his pants back up and walked away like nothing happened! I think you made the right decision in not going to school." Her face was twisted in disgust as she recollected the memory. Otherwise, though, she seemed composed and unperturbed.

Devin laughed out of nervousness, and also thankful for the change in topic. Of course it made sense that Krystal wasn't as afraid of boys as she was, since she saw them on a daily basis while at school. She was unable to imagine what she would have done in that situation. Probably she would have turned on heel and tried to enter her dorm some other time when he wasn't there. But Devin didn't go to university--she remembered graduating from high school and being afraid of the separation that would divide her and Krystal. And there had been a divide for the first year, but since then they became closer than ever. It was lonely thinking about the friends Krystal probably made at school while she made friends with the azaleas in her garden, but school wasn't an option for her.

There was something beautiful about nature that people lacked. Or, most people, Krystal excepted. The field around her, the trees behind her, the flowers waiting for her back home, they expected nothing of her. There were no eyes judging her, no tongues criticizing her, but instead it

was the very opposite. Whereas it was testing for her to spend an exceptional amount of time with people, being around plants relaxed her. As if they recognized that there was tension in her limbs, her nerves, her very soul, and they freed her of it, instead burdening themselves with the heaviness that she felt. In return for the comfort they brought her, she nourished them, pampered them even, giving life to as many flowers and plants as she reasonably could in her small backyard.

Even crossing the boundary from yellow-green field to empty, dirt wasteland was enough for Devin to feel the weight on her shoulders renewed. Wasteland, of course, except for the single lily that grew only because of human hands. Stepping back into civilization, into Krystal's car, the weight of not doing her part became overwhelming. It was not just in her head, it was a physical pain in her heart and in her stomach, a fight-or-flight reaction that she could never escape because there was no physical catalyst.

"I need to drop you off at your house, okay? I'm going to go meet Jasper a little later noon in Boston. But I'll be back at your place tomorrow. The beauty of summer break!" Krystal laughed as her car revved to life, pulling out of the sandlot that passed for the parking lot.

"Jasper... Rey?" Devin asked, ashamed of herself as her voice barely came out above a whisper. Krystal took a left, leaving the forest behind them. Passing by bodies of water on the driver's side, Devin took a sidelong glance to look for ducks, swans, swimmers--to hide the expression on her face when she said their name. "Why are you hanging out with them? I thought you broke up with them?"

"Oh, I did, a while ago," Krystal's nostrils flared and she shifted in her seat, trying to regain her composure. "They're a good friend, is all. Shitty datemate. But you already know that."

Devin did know that. She remembered nights where Krystal would call her at two in the morning, crying about how cold Jasper was. They had never done anything wrong, so Krystal said, but they were too emotionally distant for her. More specifically, Jasper was "a robot, someone who would rather fuck their textbooks than console their girlfriend." Devin had met and hung out with Jasper a few times, but she didn't know them like Krystal did. It was true that they were a little on the quiet side, and did always seem to have a book on hand. She wasn't sure she had ever seen Jasper smile, either; because of all of this, Devin had never understood why the two of them had started dating in the first place. There never seemed like a good time to ask how they met, and who was she to judge who Krystal dated? "How can they be a good friend and a bad boyfr--datemate...?" Devin asked, turning her focus away from the shifting scenery. It flew by too quickly, and she knew she would be home soon.

"Oh, you know... If I don't expect any emotional intimacy, then everything is fine. Casual friendships are one thing, but when I'm dating someone, I can't be with someone who doesn't *care*, you know?"

"Right..." Devin nodded. She had no idea what Krystal was talking about. A friendship needed a similar kind of emotional intimacy and solidity that a romantic relationship had. Did

Krystal just want her to stop bugging her with the topic? She could take a hint. “Well, I hope you have fun together. What do you plan on doing together in Boston?”

“Shopping! If there’s one thing we agree on, it’s that. Not that our fashion tastes are even close to being similar. But, I need a new wardrobe for the upcoming semester.” Krystal explained while pulling into Devin’s empty driveway. “Your parents aren’t home?”

“No,” She shook her head, hand already on the door handle. “They went to the Cape for the week with Frankie and Sam.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?”

Devin laughed, even though she didn’t mean to. “I need to stay close to the house to work. That’s all.”

For a moment, neither girl said anything. Krystal stared at Devin, lips pursed as if she was hard in thought, studying Devin, trying to coax the truth out of the expression on her face. But Devin had known too long how to bottle that up inside, even if only momentarily while she felt Krystal’s eyes on her face. She waited for the right moment to escape from the car, which came only after the other girl gave a sigh, giving up Devin’s chance to speak whatever was on her mind. “Okay, well, try not to lose yourself in working, okay? Lighten up and do something fun, too. I’ll call when we can hang out next.”

“Yeah, okay,” Devin nodded, before hauling herself out of the car. She allowed herself only a quick glance at Krystal to offer a “have fun with Jasper” before she closed the door behind her and made her way to her front door. Before unlocking it, she turned around to wave goodbye as Krystal pulled out of the driveway. When she did get inside, there was a gloom that hung low over the house. Each step to get to her bedroom was taxing, so that by the time she made it she barely had the strength to pull herself into bed, let alone to manage anything for work. The sun shined through her windows, but Devin didn’t really see the rays as they filtered through and pooled onto her floor--it might as well had been night time for her, the way the heavy storm cloud that followed her greyed out her vision. She told herself she would rest only for a little while, before finishing the work she had to do for the day.

Chapter Two

Devin didn't end up seeing Krystal the next day. It didn't bother her as much as she thought it would. What work she didn't get done after returning home from the field the previous day, she managed to get done because she didn't expect to see Krystal. There was mainly work online to do, like accepting orders and sending messages, sometimes making phone calls. For the most part, she had managed to separate her emotions from her thoughts so that, at the very least, she could get the work done that she needed to do. There was no point in being sad or lonely, wondering what Krystal was doing and whether or not she was having fun with Jasper or what it was like spending time with friends in the city, considering that she had neither the time to bother doing it herself nor the friends to go there with.

When Krystal did call, she didn't mention anything about her time with Jasper and Devin didn't bother asking. This was primarily because Krystal was calling to invite Devin over to her place, where she and Jasper were already hanging out. The thought of declining crossed her mind but only for a moment because she knew that she would have no explanation as to why she couldn't hang out, considering Krystal knew her parents were gone and Devin had no strict work hours. So she stared at her house as she biked away, wondering how so small a house could loom so heavily in her eyes, before every house she passed was a single blur before she arrived at Krystal's place.

"Devin, you're here!" Krystal cried, although Devin was still processing the fact that she was already here, and not still on her bike. Dread had began bubbling and broiling in the pit of her stomach as she had biked over, and now she was here, without any sort of way to get comfortable. "You remember Jasper, right? They're kind of hiding inside." Krystal greeted her at the door, waving her in to find a motionless Jasper waiting in the hallway. The knot in Devin's stomach tightened.

Jasper's presence wasn't ominous, it was just... *weird*. There was always a physical distance they kept from other people, even when they were in a group; a distance that was too close for them to be truly alone, but also too far to be considered a part of the group. It wasn't so much the attention to personal space that bothered Devin than it was the fact that they seemed so disinterested at any point in time. The other few times she had met them, they rarely made eye contact. If they could, there would be a phone or a book in their hand; Devin was never sure if Jasper was actually reading it or just looking at it to avoid eye contact. She understood being shy, but that coupled alongside Krystal's relationship--previous relationship--with them, made them seem cold. But for the most part, she just considered Jasper to be eccentric, wearing dark clothes nearly the same shade as their skin yet accessorizing with what looked like rings, bracelets, and shoes that would all glow in the dark. She didn't know what to make of them, and that seemed to be Jasper's goal, to be as elusive as possible.

"Devin Xiao," Jasper nodded, or so she thought, in her general direction without lifting their eyes up from the floor. "Yes, I remember you. It has been a while, and I hope you have been well."

“Nice to see you again, too,” Devin responded, unsure if either their or her words were even slightly genuine. “Did you guys have fun shopping yesterday?”

“Krystal missed out on a perfect opportunity to buy matching skirts,” Jasper said, raising their eyes only enough to glance in Krystal’s direction. “Actually, we could have had complete matching outfits. I would have gone to your school just to see your reaction. It would have been priceless.”

Krystal laughed, so Devin offered a smile. She didn’t doubt Jasper’s taste in fashion as much as she wasn’t sure they knew how to tell a joke. There was supposed to be some sort of inflection when people were talking, but their voice remained very flat. An overwhelming sense of exclusion settled over Devin, as if she missed a clue in Jasper’s voice or expression that would have hinted at their humor.

“Did you do anything fun yesterday, Devin?” Krystal asked, interlocking their arms together. Horror flashed before Devin’s eyes and shame flooded her veins as she thought about the day before. It wasn’t so much that she had *done* nothing as it was that she had *felt* nothing, so the day itself was hazy and uneventful. There was a passion for her plants but a distaste for working, for making money off of something she loved so dearly. Besides, yesterday was more of the boring parts of her job, anyway, but of course that meant they were the most necessary to actually making a living.

None of that, though, was polite conversation. So, she just shrugged and offered Krystal a smile, who then playfully swatted at her arm. “Fine! I see you completely ignored what I said the other day. But that’s fine, we’ll do something fun today.” Krystal’s glistening eyes flickered over to Jasper, but they were busy staring at their phone, so she turned her gaze back to Devin. “Jasper suggested heading back to the forest together. They said they have never been there before and thought that swimming in a lake would be perfect on a hot day like today, considering none of us have pools.”

“I heard that you have become quite the botanist and would be pleased to have you identify any plants along our excursion.” Jasper added. Their eyes were a deep, rich amber, a golden-brown so mesmerizing that it became understandable why they never looked anyone in the eye. Instead of being flustered, though, there was a prickling sensation under Devin’s skin when she met Jasper’s gaze. They were flawless eyes with the goal to pinpoint every flaw in her own demeanor. And in Jasper’s presence, she felt flawed; average at best, far from intelligent compared to the study worm before her.

“Sure, let’s do that.” Devin nodded. Was she supposed to oppose two people that seemed to have decided on plans before she even arrived? She tried to keep the idea of Krystal having hoped to spend today alone with Jasper from creeping into her head, but was unsuccessful. As the trio clambered into Krystal’s car, she wondered just how much Krystal had mentioned to Jasper. Taking her seat beside Krystal in shotgun, Devin looked over her shoulder. “Jasper, did Krystal tell you about the weird boy we met at the forest the other day?”

Jasper leaned forward so that Devin had to lean away to keep the same amount of airspace between them. “A situation with a weird boy? You would have to be more specific.”

“Ugh!” Krystal scoffed, shaking her head. “He was so weird! What was his problem? Hopefully he won’t be there again today.”

“Are you allowed to camp in undesignated areas?” Jasper asked with barely an inflection in their voice. “Regardless, I wonder as to why you did not bring one of your various weapons to ensure your safety.” They waved to Krystal’s sports equipment, which surrounded them on either side. “Certainly, this would have sent any weird boy running in the opposite direction if wielded correctly.”

“Okay, bring my baseball bat. My aim is top notch.”

Devin fidgeted in her seat a little as unease settled over her at the thought of Krystal beating the shit out of someone. As they pulled off the main road and bounced around as cement turned to dirt, an idea came to Devin that would probably work better than threatening any passerby. “You know, we essentially walked straight yesterday when we bumped into him. Perhaps walking to one of the extreme corners of the field would help in avoiding him.”

“I mean, I guess we can. The ends of the field are totally overgrown, though. I don’t want to imagine the ticks that are hanging out in there!” Krystal said, her voice half-muffled as she shifted from the car to stepping outside.

“No more than what is already amidst that forest, I assure you.” Jasper exited the car on the same side as Devin, and the close proximity forced Devin to stand still and let Jasper naturally create distance between them. But they didn’t move, and instead leaned against Krystal’s car while waiting for Krystal to walk around and join them. Devin stared hard at the ground. Walking straight past them would be rude, and she couldn’t bring herself to do it, although the strange distance at Krystal’s house was now degraded to nothing.

“Fine,” Krystal nodded. “So long as we find water along the way. I’ll walk barefoot for all I care.”

“Then you would be even more liable to ticks.”

Devin allowed Krystal and Jasper’s banter to fade into the background as she took the lead into the field. The sun, high in the sky, made the grass growing appear more yellow than green. She began to feel itchy just looking at the dry field, so desperate for water and nourishment. The backdrop of the forest only further made this field look like a wasteland, considering the healthy green glow the trees emitted. Instead of making a beeline for the trees, though, Devin managed to steer herself away, forcing a break in eye contact and focusing on the wild growth of weeds and yellow-brown indiagrass to the far left of the field.

As the trio neared the edge of the field, the grass towered tall even above Devin, the tallest in the group. Not wanting to wander through the mess of weeds or to get ticks as Krystal said, Devin got as close to where the forest and the field met so that they needed to walk through as little of the indiagrass as possible. The heads of the plumed flowers were normally soft, but they scratched at Devin’s cheeks as she pushed past them into the shaded forest. Once amidst the trees, Devin’s thoughts again skirted away from Krystal and Jasper and became consumed by the trees around her. How did the trees retain such liveliness in the midst of summer, with no one around to tend to them, not even Mother Nature? Or was it because no human hand had ever

soiled them, that they managed to flourish even when in drought? Being in her twenties, Devin thought that she was too old to get her turn to bloom, no matter how much she tried to learn from her tree companions. They stood, solitary, without leaning on anything, yet still managed to do so much for the animals of the forest and for humans that would never look upon their beauty. So Devin wanted to be the same, although she saw herself more like a fallen log, decaying even as it leans on other trees or smaller plants, perhaps crushing them in her wake.

“Ah, it’s so much cooler in here! What a difference the shade makes! I wonder if the water will be cold, too?” Krystal asked, the sound of her voice forcing Devin back to reality, and she immediately stopped walking so she could wait to be by Krystal’s side. Krystal smiled and tugged at one of Devin’s braids, causing her to stumble closer. Jasper had stepped in front of them, it was now their turn to lead the group through the forest.

“Don’t forget to let Jasper know about all sorts of plant stuff! They are really into... well, everything, I guess. I’m surprised they don’t have their face in a book right now.” Krystal shook her head and rolled her eyes. She opened her mouth as if to laugh, but all that came out was a sigh.

“No, I think it’s best they forgot they said that. If I stay back here, then I’ll probably be okay, right?” Devin asked, only half teasing, trying to earn a smile out of Krystal, even while she was always smiling.

“It would really impress them to have someone recite scientific names at them!”

“I don’t care about impressing Jasper.” Devin mumbled, dragging her shoes through the sandy ground to make small indentations.

“Dev...” Krystal tried to catch her eyes, but Devin pretended she couldn’t see her staring. “I hope it doesn’t bother you that I brought Jasper along. I figured you two would get along, there are a lot of similarities between you, I think. Besides, it would do you some good to broaden your group! You’ll get tired of me if it’s just us hanging out!” There was a smile on Krystal’s face as she said it, but Devin didn’t think it was funny, it wasn’t even something that had crossed her mind. The very idea that there could be something that connected her to Jasper other than their both knowing Krystal... if there was something like that, then she didn’t know what it was.

“Have you decided on a major yet, Krystal?” Jasper asked without bothering to look over their shoulder. Devin would never have guessed that they had never been here before, as Jasper seemed completely unphased by the fact that they were leading the three of them through a forest they had never been to before; a forest that was impossible to navigate even for those who visited it frequently. Then again, when aiming for the heart of the woods, could it ever be easily navigable?

“School again? Don’t you know it’s common decency not to talk about school outside of the classroom?” Krystal huffed a sigh. “I still have plenty of time to decide.” She nudged Devin with her elbow. “Get this: Jasper majors in *paranormal studies*. I didn’t think they would ever actually do it, but I guess their grandparents don’t care what they major in.”

“That is putting it brusquely. My grandparents care. Do they understand? Certainly not.” Jasper shook their head, turning around to face Devin and Krystal, all of them stopping. “My situation does not require me to take the ordinary college route, so I chose what best suited my interests.”

There was a moment of silence, broken by Krystal’s jump to action. “What are you doing, just stopping like that? Let’s go! I don’t want to spend all day searching for this pond!” Krystal gave Jasper a gentle shove, trying to urge them to start moving again.

Sometimes they walked in silence, urged by Devin to do so in case they could hear the trill of a songbird or even the whistle of summer bugs. The silence never lasted for long, but that didn’t matter because they were unable to hear anything other than the rustling of leaves in the wind. Although she tried not to pout, Devin was disappointed. And a bit afraid. It was the middle of the day, and yet there were no sounds to welcome them. It wasn’t like they were making any noise to scare off the forest creatures, except for their footsteps. If there had been any clouds in the sky, she would have taken the vacant forest to mean that a storm was coming, but that didn’t look like it was the case. The warning silence that filled the air against the warm and welcoming feeling of being surrounded by nature, by life, left her confused and fearful. She tried not to show it to the others, though.

“Hey guys,” Jasper whispered, standing as close to both Devin and Krystal as they could. “Is that the creepy guy you were talking about earlier?” Jasper pointed ahead of them, slightly to the left.

The underbrush was not so tall as to obscure their view, so the group were able to see the blond boy from the other day. He was kneeling, his back turned to them; if he stood up, or even just looked over his shoulder, he would be able to see them, too. Here in the forest, where there was little to break the monotony of greens and browns, the boy’s bright blond hair and black outfit stood out by contrast. Back in the field, though, his head could have been amidst the yellow indiangrass and Devin would have mistaken him for a stalk.

Without a word, Krystal began nudging Devin in the opposite direction. She took care to take the lead while watching where she stepped, not wanting any crunching sounds to alert Zackery of their presence. Once more, the silence of the forest overwhelmed Devin, and now it seemed like a major disadvantage. There could be no way that Zackery hadn’t heard them when they first started walking. But Devin didn’t look over her shoulder to see if he had noticed them at all, and only prayed that Krystal and Jasper also kept their eyes forward. Her blood pounded in her ears for no reason at all, except the silence of Krystal and Jasper made her feel a sense of urgency.

After a while of making painstaking choices of where to place her feet, Devin leaned against a tree trunk and slunked to the ground. When she looked in the direction they had walked from, to the left, she saw nothing. Which meant they had passed by Zackery without a problem. She heaved a sigh of relief, her lungs aching from having to stifle her breath for so long. Perhaps he didn’t want to see them as much as they didn’t want to meet up with him.

Jasper sat across from Devin, and Krystal sat nestled beside her.

“Did you really need a baseball to handle that scrawny kid? It seems as though you could have stomped your feet in front of him, and he would have scampered off.” Jasper said. Their voice was naturally low, but now they were whispering, their shoulders hunched over so that they didn’t have to raise their voice.

“Oh, I’m sorry, but why is some guy wandering around in the woods all by himself? Who the hell does that?” Krystal whispered back in a high-pitch, tense voice.

Although she didn’t mean to, Devin’s eyes caught Jasper’s and the two exchanged a look that said, *we would do that*, but neither of them said that out loud. Even though she knew she would never go far from home all alone, Devin’s house was surrounded by trees and she enjoyed the occasional venture into the suburban growth that rimmed her neighborhood. For the most part, such adventures were mainly to keep up to date her journal of flora--yes, she even kept a journal of the plant life that surrounded her home. It was more like a scrapbook with some notes in it, considering that she drew in it anything she came across and even would tape or glue specimens to the pages. She couldn’t imagine what Jasper did in the woods, except maybe find a nice tree to lean on while reading a new book.

“Okay, can we get moving? I am starting to sweat through my shirt.” Jasper mumbled, grabbing the front of their shirt and shaking it out, as if it would help them breathe any easier. Even on their dark brown cheeks, a deep red flush was beginning to show. Devin felt sorry for seeing them in what was probably discomfort, although they did well to hide any sort of emotion, but also wondered what they expected when wearing all black in the dead of summer.

“Yeah, I can see that. Okay, let’s go,” Krystal waved them forward and Jasper took the lead, heading slightly upward but mostly to the right of where they started walking.

The forest hadn’t changed much in what it had to offer the senses. Around them were tall pine trees which shaded the forest floor, with small flowering oaks on the floor waiting to overtake the pines in the far future. Also surrounding them were mainly blueberry and huckleberry bushes, with some of the bushes being nearly taller than Krystal. Even more common than those colonies was the bracken, which dominated the forest floor and obscured much of their view. The bush would grow thick and tall, so the group did their best to avoid having to walk through it. That also made it hard for them to watch where they were going, though, because they couldn’t see through the colony very well and some grew well over their heads so that they couldn’t see past the bracken, either. Krystal didn’t want to walk through any of the berry bushes though in case any had fallen to the floor, and she stained her shoes by accidentally stepping on one. So this left the three of them very little of the forest to navigate, except for the rare opportunities that the forest cleared at a wider space than five feet. There wasn’t any wind, so other than the sound of their own footsteps on the dry ground, it was silent around them. No heat bugs, no bird songs, barely any talking, too focused on the task at hand.

While the three were walking, Devin brought up the rear, her eyes caught by funny-looking white mushrooms. They were big and round without a noticeable stalk, probably puffballs, but there were several rather close together. Normally, bigger mushrooms grew singularly and smaller ones grew clumped together, but these had no rhyme or rhythm to them.

Sometimes there were a few clumped together, making it looking like one white-brown lumpy mass, and then a few inches to the right or to the left would be a single lonesome mushroom. All she wanted to do was bend down and study them for a few minutes, just a few minutes, but a sharp cry disrupted her thoughts. Devin looked up to realize she had been stalling and left behind, and jogged to catch up to Krystal and Jasper.

When she made it to her friend's side, Devin made eye contact with Zackery-- he was kneeling, basically in the same position as when they had last seen him--and even she found it hard to suppress a cry of surprise. Just beyond Zackery, Devin was able to see the forest fade away, and shift into the tall, light brown stalks of the indiangrass.

Somehow, without having ever turned around, the group had managed their way back to the edge of the forest.

Despite having walked for roughly half an hour, the three of them were no closer to the elusive lake.

"It's you again," Zackery muttered, loud enough for them to know he was talking to them, yet looking away so as to let them know he didn't particularly care for their presence. When he did stand up and look their way, his eyes landed on Jasper. "And you brought a friend this time, too."

"It's not to help you, if that's what you think," Krystal tsked. "Unlike you, we went home and came back for a fresh day of fun. You..." Krystal eyed Zackery's clothes that she had seen him in the first time they met, which should have been dirty and wrinkled and sweat-stained from wear, but they showed no such signs. His face was still twisted, but his clothes were pristine. "Are you still searching for your ridiculous shrooms?"

"I'm not here for some psychedelic trip!" Zackery spat. Devin imagined him akin to an angry yellow cat, haunches raised and hair spiking. He was easy to offend and quick to flare up. "I'm studying this accursed forest, but I can't find those mushrooms. But you're no better than me, wandering around in this place. You'll get lost."

"Mushrooms do not belong in a luxurious ecosystem such as this. They are little symbols of death, not of life. But now that you mention it... this place is confusing. I would never expect the local watering hole to be impassable." Jasper turned their attention to Zackery, their focused stare even making Zackery squirm where he stood. Devin had to keep herself from laughing, wondering what it was like for Zackery to meet Jasper for the first time. "What is it about the mushrooms that interest you so much?"

"It only concerns you if you will help me search for them." He said, arms crossed over his chest. "Otherwise, like I told those two over there, don't bother wasting my time."

"Oh, I would never," Jasper seemed serious, but Devin couldn't suppress a giggle at this response. It earned her a glance from Zackery, but not a particularly harsh one. "But it might entice my urge to help you in your search. We do have a local botanist on our hands."

"Th-that's not true!" Devin cried out quickly, giving Jasper a shove. They rocked to the side, though there was a smile on their face, Devin was horrified. Who were they to act as if they

knew her, as if they could just give out such personal information to a complete stranger? She turned to Zackery. “At least tell us why this is so important to you.”

Zackery nodded in Jasper’s direction. “Shouldn’t I at least know his name? We haven’t been properly introduced.”

Devin flinched, but Krystal didn’t miss a beat. “Their name is Jasper. I’m Krystal, and she’s Devin. Introductions are completed, now it’s your turn.”

Zackery pressed his lips together into a line so hard his lips paled to the same shade as his skin. “There’s something odd about this forest. I’m a local. What’s wrong with me investigating the place? It may help anyone else from getting... *lost*.” He looked off to the side as he said the word ‘lost,’ placing a strange emphasis on the word that Devin couldn’t understand. “I do believe the mushrooms are the source of the oddity. The last time I saw them, though, I didn’t get a good enough look at them. Too preoccupied by their effects.” Zackery met Devin’s eyes and crossed the distance between them before she could blink and step back in surprise. “Will you help me?”

“I saw some mushrooms,” Devin said, almost on automatic. There was something odd about Zackery that made her skin prickle--the way that, despite him being mere inches from her face, he still felt so indistinct; the way that she should be able to feel his breath on her face, but it didn’t look like he was breathing, and that was making her hold her breath, too. Her lungs were beginning to burn. “They were white, small and thin, sometimes growing in clusters.”

Zackery’s blue eyes sparkled and his smile spread wide across his face. “Yes, *precisely*,” His voice came out like a hiss. “What’s your name again? *Devin*? Lead the way to where you last saw them.”

“How am I supposed to do that? I don’t even know how we wound up back here.” Devin whispered, and Zackery nodded, although he didn’t look disappointed.

“I didn’t even realize you had seen any mushrooms, Dev! I didn’t see anything while we were walking...” Krystal grabbed at Devin’s shoulder, pulling her over a bit closer to her and away from Zackery. “Besides, maybe you got too close to them, Zack. You’ve gotta be more specific, or I’ll just think you took a wild trip.” She had a protective stance around Devin, despite being thinner and shorter than her.

“Zackery,” He corrected, clenching his teeth together as he said it.

“I can go search for them, it’s not a problem...” Devin whispered again, her chest tightening at how close everyone was gathered around her, their eyes all focused on her. “I’ll help you, Zackery. Just stay with Jasper and Krystal, okay?”

“You’re not going off by yourself!” Krystal cried, glaring at Zackery. “You’ll just get lost. Besides, there’s no reason to help this creep.”

Zackery huffed a sigh and rolled his eyes. “There’s no reason not to help me, either. I’ve done nothing against you. If anything, don’t you think you’ve treated me unfairly? All I’m doing is asking for some help. I wouldn’t do that if I weren’t desperate. I don’t know if you noticed, but most people don’t venture into these woods.”

“So get some friends to help you.” Krystal spat. “Or don’t you have any?”

“Devin--” Zackery turned to appease Devin, but she had already turned off and ran in the direction that the three friends had *maybe* come from. Zackery smirked, feeling more real than he had in--how long had it been now?--before he began to run off in a different direction. “Let’s go, slow pokes, maybe we’ll find the mushrooms before she does. Or, maybe, we’ll meet up with her.” Jasper and Krystal exchanged glances before they quickly followed after him, trying to not lose sight of him despite how fast he could disappear, how he seemed to be visible and translucent at the same time. Krystal ignored it, figuring it a trick of the eye whenever the sun managed to peek through the canopy, but each time it happened, it shocked her.

Devin was doing her best to backtrack, but nothing stuck out at her--everything looked familiar because the scenery was always the same. There were tall hardwoods and short berry bushes or thorny shrubs, but nothing distinctive, and no mushrooms. She didn’t even see any footprints that suggested she or the others had even walked this way. It was understandable considering how dry the dirt floor was, but still, her skin prickled at the fact that she didn’t know exactly where she was going. If anything, she was walking farther away from the entrance--deeper into the heart of the forest.

To keep track of where she had been, Devin would drag the side of her shoe across the dirt to leave a fresh pile of upturned earth in sporadic marks. She would look over her shoulder to make sure that the marks were still where she had placed them, but because the path was winding, sometimes she could not see them from the around the tree or bush she had passed. Even though she was afraid of them disappearing, regardless of how ridiculous that seemed, she continued to walk on, trusting that so long as she kept tracing her marks, they would remain where she put them.

After a few more minutes of trekking, Devin expected to hear Krystal’s voice calling out for her. Part of her wanted to hear her voice, to pull her out of this reverie of focus on these elusive mushrooms, but then a line of white appeared in front of her and the thought of Krystal disappeared. Devin ran towards the mushrooms, kneeling down beside a few of them. They weren’t clustered, but still close to each other, creating a line of mushrooms. She felt compelled to touch the little fungi, their smooth caps and tender stocks, but otherwise nothing abnormal. During the fall, Devin collected plenty of mushrooms, or even just went about documenting them, and these may have well been in her backyard. She wasn’t sure what she had expected, except that Zackery’s words, and the very way he talked about these mushrooms, she thought that there would be something obscure about them, or she would feel something innately when she touched them. There was none of that, only the sound of Zackery’s voice in her head and the force of his intensity pressing down on her skin and bones.

Zackery was nothing but a figment to her--she knew nothing about him but his name, and that he had some sort of obsession with mushrooms. Not mushrooms in general, and in no way similar to her own passion for nature; instead, it was specific to this forest, and there was no reverence for these specimens, but instead a wary caution--like wanting to read the instruction manual before dealing with dangerous equipment. And in that moment, when she was this close to the little mushrooms, she felt connected to Zackery in a way she had never felt to a stranger,

even though the connection was estranged. At the same time that she felt like she understood him--her own awe of plant life taking over--there was also this distance she felt deep within her.

Devin stood up to find that the line of mushrooms did not end with the few that were right in front of her. She followed them, a mushroom never more than half a foot from another so that it was clear this was the same line. That was, until she realized it wasn't a line at all, and she had begun to slowly turn while following them. When she was forced to turn around, facing the direction she had come, Devin could make out the mushrooms on the far end of the circle--it was just four feet long, and at most two feet wide. The small distance was encircled by trees and bushes, since the mushrooms were often found near the base of the growing trees. This clearing, if it could be called that, was as large as any other space Devin had seen when walking with Krystal and Jasper.

She was surrounded by mushrooms and her vision filled with nothing but the sight of them. There was nothing she wanted to do but brush her hand across the tops of each and every one. It was only when her lungs began burning and her legs started trembling, when Devin was forced to bend at the waist and put her hands on her knees that she realized she had been running in circles inside the ring of mushrooms. Her heart was pounding and the blood was rushing in her ears so loud that she could hear nothing else. Tears stung her eyes, overwhelmed by what had come over her.

What *had* come over her?

Although Devin couldn't see her marks in the earth from inside the mushroom ring, she thought she could remember which end of the circle she had entered. Although her frenzy frightened her, she didn't want to think about it too long, as too much time had passed already. The forest was growing darker as the sun was going down, and she needed to find her way to Krystal. Already heavy with fear, her heart swelled inside her chest thinking that maybe her friends--no, just Krystal--might have left her stranded in this forest, or didn't care about her absence. Now that there was no haze hovering in her thoughts, she no longer cared about the little white mushrooms that surrounded her, and instead there was only Krystal.

Where was Krystal? Was she looking for her?

She didn't want to think about Jasper and Zackery. How Krystal was with her ex-boyfriend alone in the woods, or was stuck with some unknown creep all because she had felt too pressured under his stare to say no to his request. Devin took off at a run in the direction that looked as familiar as the forest could be in the shifting lights and shadows, before she was thrust backwards.

No, that wasn't quite right. She never met with any physical force, but while she was hoping to surpass the edge of the ring of mushrooms, she expected to just cross it without a problem. Instead, she was back at the long end of the ring, finding herself staring at where she once stood.

Her heart had no time to slow down before she felt it thumping painfully against her ribcage once more. At first she figured it was nothing more than another line of mushrooms that

she hadn't noticed at first, but when she slowly approached the edge once more, she reached out her hand instead of running headfirst.

There was nothing in front of her, as far as she was concerned. Although she could see the forest as it expanded before her, when she reached out just past the line the mushrooms created, her hand created a wave, blurring the outside into indistinct shapes of greens, browns, and blacks, until it looked like nothing existed outside of the mushroom circle.

Devin screamed once, "*Krystal!*"

Chapter Three

Zackery was growing bored of Krystal's cold shoulder, and fast. He kept as much distance between her as he could, forcing Jasper in between the two of them, or otherwise walking in front of the pair of friends. Any time he tried to drop behind them, Krystal tried to push him in front of them, but he would move just out of reach. The last thing he wanted was for either of them to try touching him and find their hands grasping nothing but air.

"I better see some damn leprechauns for all the chaos you've caused over some mushrooms! Maybe I would be shocked if they were neon pink colored, or if they were as tall as me, but you're making a big deal over ordinary mushrooms!" Krystal huffed, her eyes boring holes into Zackery's back.

"No, I'm arguing that they aren't ordinary. *Obviously*, I'm not here to waste anyone's time. But I don't know exactly the extent of what they do, or how they do it, and that's why I want to study them."

"Except you have yet to tell any of us what makes these specimens so spectacular, and now even Devin has run off because of you. It makes you suspicious to say the least." Jasper pointed out, eyeing Zackery even while he ignored their gaze. "We may not know each other, but if you demand something of us, then you must give us the necessary information in return so that we feel compelled to oblige. Devin did not so much oblige as she felt pressured."

"Ugh! I wonder if Devin is having any better luck than us at finding these ridiculous things," Krystal whined, her voice reaching an even higher pitch than her speaking voice. "All I wanted was to go swimming! Now look at me! I'm all sticky and gross because I have to go mushroom hunting!"

"Swimming? Why bother going to a forest to swim and not the beach that borders it?" Zackery shook his head, a sneer carved into his face. "Besides, finding any of the water sources in this place is basically impossible."

"Do you blame that on the mushrooms too?" Krystal huffed, stomping her feet. "It's not even in season for them! I hope you know I'm not afraid to use this on you!" She swung her baseball bat with one hand, whistling just behind Zackery. He could hear her force but not feel the wind that it created.

"I was afraid to ask why you were carrying a baseball bat," Zackery grumbled.

"So, Zackery, what made you interested in these mushrooms? You said yourself that most people do not wander deep enough into these woods to notice what it has to offer. What led you here, camping?" Jasper asked.

"I hate camping," Zackery spat. He hated the empty void that was his body. The very word spurred hated memories, half-forgotten and foggy but still enough to fill him with anger. Although he could clench his teeth for hours on end--although he never could know if something took him minutes or hours, because most of the time he didn't even notice when the light shined or faded--he would feel no stiffness or pain. Even now, after hearing Jasper's words, he longed

for the tightness of his stomach or the tingling at the tips of his fingers whenever he was angry when he was alive. Now there was nothing, an emptiness too gaping to be anything but noticeable and heavy. This detachedness from his own body was what made him long for being human the most--there was no physical response his body offered him to make him feel as though his emotions were logical or rational. Instead, even though he thought he was angry or sad, they were nothing but words now, vague concepts that he could no longer understand except when he thought long and hard about past experiences.

“It was just a question, Zackery, of course we have no idea what you’re doing because we have no idea who you are...” Krystal’s voice dropped off quickly, until she was muttering the second half to Jasper only.

“My fr-friend brought me here... I saw the mushrooms with them and decided to come back on my own. Satisfied?” Zackery asked, trying to recover from his stutter with a ferocity that he knew was too much. He backtracked, catching a glimpse of Krystal’s shining stare. “Look, it’s easier just to show you guys what I mean than explaining it. That’s why I need to find them--”

“All we’ll see is the fact that you’re crazy, and have been in this place for too long. Actually, how long have you been searching for these mushrooms? Shouldn’t you go home and give it a rest?” Krystal sighed, trying to exchange a glance with Jasper, but found that they were looking at Zackery. She puffed out her cheeks, annoyed that they were even bothering to pay attention to this guy who was so blatantly out of his mind.

“Where is your friend now, Zackery? Did they not believe you?” Jasper asked.

“Who knows. For all I know, he never saw anything weird. I just visited this place with him. It was only after we... parted... that the woods became strange. Threatening.” Zackery knew that for him to get any sort of help, he had to let these people in. The problem was that they had already decided that he had no idea what he was talking about, and there was no way for him to change their minds until they found any of the little white mushrooms.

As expected, there was nothing but greens and browns surrounding them. If Zackery was capable, he was sure he would puke. Even that might offer a change in scenery. Although he was no longer able to feel in a physical sense, it still annoyed him to see, day in and day out, the same setting. What did home look like, now that days, weeks, months--dare he say years?--had passed since he had been there? He didn’t even know what the woods looked like anymore from the outside, he had been stuck in its clutches for so long. With each passing moment, he felt as though he was losing more and more of his memories of what his human life had been like. That wasn’t something he could tell these newcomers, though, how he was desperate to find these mushrooms because when it came to how he died, that was all he remembered, and he was desperate for answers, desperate to feel alive again. Even if they somehow believed him on that front, they would never understand. It was better to keep quiet, and just hope they were compassionate enough to follow along with his plan without many details.

That much had worked on Devin, but he could see he was completely failing with Krystal. When he glanced over his shoulder at Jasper, they were as blank as a slate and he was

unable to read them. They might as well be as adamant against Zackery as Krystal, but he had no way of knowing from his facial expressions alone.

“Just stay with me a little longer, okay?” Zackery asked. “Either the three of us will find them or your friend will find them, and then you will see what I mean.”

“There’s no way of knowing if Devin will find them! Ugh, I should have gone with her. Now she’s alone, because of you.” Krystal heaved a heavy sigh, dragging her feet through the dirt.

“Devin is not in any danger, now, is she?” Jasper asked, moving to Zackery’s side, catching him by surprise. “You mentioned that you felt threatened by the woods. What did you mean?”

“How should I know if she’s in danger? You said she’s the nature lover, I’m sure there’s no place she’d rather be than alone with some leaves and twigs,” Zackery sneered. “Besides, it’s not like I forced her to go off on her own. That was her decision.”

“You don’t think Devin’s in trouble, do you?” Krystal asked, grasping Jasper’s sleeve, tugging them back towards her and away from Zackery. “Should we go find her?”

“Yeah, perhaps we should. Like you said, this place can get confusing, and it is going to be evening before we know it. Besides, Devin said she saw mushrooms, so us following after her should not be a problem, right?” Jasper asked, staring at Zackery. Krystal caught on and stared him down in turn, daring him to question her.

Zackery opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it. At the very least, the two of them were still willing to help him out, it was just a matter of finding their friend first. He wanted to argue, knowing that separating would mean finding the mushrooms easier and quicker, but he also knew that he had already made a case against himself. It took convincing them that the fungi were dangerous to even get them to help him; there was no way he could now argue that they weren’t too dangerous to worry about their friend without then invalidating his former argument.

Just thinking about all of that was enough to frustrate him once more. He knew nothing about these people, but they cared enough about this girl Devin to want to head after her after only a few minutes of walking.

His supposed friend didn’t care enough to check for him hours after he had gone missing. Days after.

“Right, fine, let’s go look for your friend,” Zackery spun on his heel and shooed Jasper and Krystal forward. “Lead the way.”

“I can’t believe this right now,” Krystal hissed to Jasper. Zackery rolled his eyes behind her, wondering why she thought he couldn’t hear her. “This is the last thing I expected to do today. Why is he still here? No wonder he has no friends, all he does is creep in the woods and mess up everyone’s plans.”

Zackery wanted to say something, but he bit his tongue. He wasn’t supposed to hear any of it--or, he didn’t think he was supposed to, but maybe Krystal wanted him to hear all of her shit talk--and anyway, he didn’t know what to say. All he wanted was their help. If he could do it by

himself, he would, without question--their assistance was barely worth the struggle--but by now he was desperate, and that meant putting up with whatever annoying punk came wandering through the woods. Jasper, Krystal, and Devin just so happened to be the first living beings he had seen since he died in the woods. Getting help required some sort of luck, because he could not leave the boundaries of the woods to find anyone that would help him willingly.

But he had followed this train of thought before, and he always ended up blank when it came to who would help him find out how he had died, help him find out what it was like to be alive.

“If you’re really worried about your friend, perhaps we should quicken the pace.” Zackery said. He kept his place behind the two friends, knowing that at any moment if he wasn’t completely focusing on the task at hand, he could end up in front of them or in another part of the forest entirely in a blink of an eye. Krystal didn’t say anything, but instead began jogging in front of Jasper and Zackery. Jasper didn’t bother looking at Zackery before they too began running to keep up with Krystal.

The sun began to set, setting fire to the indiangrass that bordered the trees. The red hues weren’t able to penetrate into the forest. Instead it only grew darker, blacker, more confusing and impenetrable. Krystal, Jasper, and Zackery had been walking for hours without finding Devin. With each passing quarter hour, Krystal grew more and more desperate, calling out into the forest and running ahead of the two others, yet never too far before stopping and waiting for them. Although Zackery didn’t know the girl they were looking for, even he began to feel a sense of worry--as much as he could feel anything, which wasn’t saying much for someone who had transcended physical sensations--since it was his fault that she was out in the woods alone in the descending dark.

“Where the hell could she have gone?” Krystal cried, her voice cracking more and more frequently. The sound was grating to Zackery’s ears, a sound mixed between whining and trying not to cry, but he kept his mouth shut and his eyes open.

“Splitting up and searching for her probably sounds like a preposterous idea at this point, right?” Jasper asked.

“I’ll search for her,” Zackery offered. “I’ll come back,” He continued after earning quick glances from both Krystal and Jasper. “We’ll cover more ground while separated, but you two can remain together. I have no problem going off on my own.” Before he left in what he hoped was the direction that would take him away from those two and towards Devin, he looked over his shoulder and added, “Find the edge of the forest. Don’t leave, just try and find it. I’ll bring Devin to you. It’s the best landmark I know.”

Krystal looked like she was about to argue with him, but Jasper cut in. “Fine, we will see if we can find her along our way there. Once the sun sets, though, you come find us, Devin or not.”

“Jasper!” Krystal cried, hitting them on the shoulder.

They ignored her, grabbing her hand and running off. After a few moments of rustling branches, Zackery couldn't see them anymore through the mass of vegetation and shadows. He turned his back on them and began letting his mind wander.

Being able to travel without actually moving his legs was one of the few perks of being dead, he could just think about where he wanted to go and he would just... *be there*. Of course, he had to know where he wanted to go, which also meant having seen something before. No matter how many times he had willed himself to a circle of white mushrooms, or to the spot where he had died, they never appeared to be the same position in the forest. The spacing of trees would always be different, and sometimes they wouldn't even be the same species of trees--one would have pines and the other would have leaves and he would know that he was in different spots of the forest. He often caught himself wondering if the trees actually moved--the woods shifting without his noticing so even though he was always in the same spot where he died, the scenery would change. He didn't even know how far from the wood's edge that he had died because even though he had seen the field with his last look at the world, he realized now that it must have been some sort of hallucination. Nowadays he could skirt alongside the edges of the woods and look out to the field, but it wasn't the same neck of the woods that he had died.

When he thought about Devin, a tall girl with dark skin and darker hair tied in two braids, it didn't take long for him to find himself in a new part of the woods--probably nowhere near where he, Jasper, and Krystal had been looking, but he had no idea how to tell distance in this place.

The first thing he noticed was the sound of water--it wasn't very loud, but it was close. It wasn't even running water or the lapping of waves, but instead sounded like calm footsteps wading through water, or a constant drop of leaves or rocks, loud enough to make a sound but quiet enough to fall into the background. Rhythmical and almost musical, the sound reminded Zackery of something that he couldn't put his finger on, and created almost a physical longing and yearning throughout his body. He began to walk towards the sound.

Until he saw something even more striking--little white mushrooms.

He turned around to see a girl curled up in a ball on the forest floor. Devin.

"What are you doing?" Zackery asked, rushing over to her, unsure whether to be furious or pleased. She was surrounded by white mushrooms that, even though he couldn't be sure were the same ones he had seen when he uttered his last breath, it didn't matter now that he could finally study them. When he finally raised his eyes from the mushrooms, though, he realized that Devin still hadn't moved, and he thought that she was dead, too, though her position was quite awkward. He knelt down and crawled towards her on his hands and knees, reaching out with one hand gingerly.

"Devin, it's... Zackery..." He said, holding his hand steady and away from the mushrooms, little physical temptations to take his attention away from the girl in front of him. He tried waving his hand in front of her to get her to look at him, but her head was buried between her knees. The dirt around her had long, thin marks, and her hands were covered in dust.

The divots were deep, circling around her hunched body like she was forming some sort of ravine around herself.

Zackery wasn't sure how to get her attention except to sit next to her and keep talking to her, but the moment he crossed the line of mushrooms, pain struck his fingertips and travelled up the length of his arm and then down his spine. He fell backwards, scrambling away from Devin until his back hit a tree, cradling his hand against his chest. Already the tingling sensation was beginning to fade from his memory, as if it hadn't just happened moments ago but was instead a memory from months ago.

When he looked over at Devin again, she was looking at him. "...Zackery..." Even while she looked at him, she didn't see him. Her eyes were glazed and unfocused; if he had been able to touch her, Zackery would have shook life back into her or broken her neck trying. He didn't want to cross the line of mushrooms, afraid of feeling that shock, afraid of *feeling* again.

"Zackery!" Devin gasped, sitting up and trying to scramble over to him. He leaned forward slightly, ready to meet her, but something stopped her. She held her hands up and pressed them flat against the airspace around her, as if they had met some invisible wall she couldn't surpass.

One shiver after the next coursed down his spine, sending vibrations to all of his extremities until he couldn't prevent himself from shaking. The motion made him sick. "Devin, your friends--they had been looking for you for hours. I told them to wait for us outside of the woods. It's getting late," He said, feeling like an idiot even as the words left his mouth. It was true that he rarely found himself at a loss for words, and this dumbstrickenness was not a feeling he was acquainted with, and he felt all the worse for it knowing that he was the reason she was in this situation. Even though he didn't properly understand what exactly this situation entailed. "Y-you found the mushrooms..."

Devin burst into tears, covering her face with her hands. They were coated in dirt and when she wiped away her tears, she left behind streaks of dust across her face. She didn't seem to notice, or didn't seem to care. "I'm stuck, Zackery! I can't leave--I don't know what's going on!" She pressed her palms flat against the invisible wall again, letting them slide down to the forest floor. There was no gap that he saw or she could feel.

"I-I don't know either," Zackery said. That was only partly the truth, because he did remember a similar sensation when he was dying--a small space that he couldn't leave, no matter how many times he ran in one direction or another. He couldn't explain though why such a force appeared, and he didn't know what to do to help Devin. If anything, though, he was pleased to know that it wasn't only him that could be stuck in these woods, that they were not only playing a cruel joke on him, but would torment other wanderers, too.

"I want to see Krystal," Devin cried, tears rolling down her face. She was choking and shaking, her chest heaving with every breath she managed to take. Zackery's lip curled at the sight and sound of her, unsure of how to deal with someone in such a vulnerable situation.

For a few moments he said nothing, too awestruck by her tears and her sobs to say anything or do anything than watch her cry. It was only when he realized how dark it was

becoming that he remembered that he was supposed to meet with Krystal and Jasper that he stood up. Devin looked up at him, her head snapping up in such a quick movement that it caught Zackery off guard, and he paused, waiting for her to say something, while she waited on him.

“I’ll... go find Krystal, okay? I’ll tell her I saw you, and we’ll come back. We’ll help you,” *Somehow*, Zackery thought, biting his lip.

“You’re leaving...?” Devin asked, barely above a whisper. She, too, stood up, her legs shaking with the effort. “Please don’t go, Zackery--I don’t want to be alone here!”

A mere foot separated them in distance, but Zackery didn’t dare cross any closer to her. “I don’t know how to help you, so I’m just going to get your friends. They’re worried about you, so I’m sure they’d be happy to see you.” He shrugged, feeling more and more pathetic. “What am I supposed to do if I just stay here?”

He watched as her face changed, her round face puffy from crying, but no more tears were falling. Her arms fell limp to her sides, and her back hunched a bit, as if she could no longer hold herself up. For a few seconds she said nothing, just stared at the ground mere inches in front of her that she could not get to, looking as if she could tip over at any moment. He began to turn and leave her again, when she started speaking. “Please come back... and bring Krystal with you. I--I made a trail. It’s easy to get lost, and it’s getting dark so maybe you can’t see it, but...” Devin trailed off, though she nodded in the general direction of her ‘trail.’ Zackery gave a half-smile, doing all he could to keep from groaning out loud. She watched him as he followed where she pointed, dismayed at the very idea of having to physically walk through the woods. It was dark now--whether it was nighttime it was hard to say, but it was close to it, without any light filtering into the woods. Despite that, Zackery was able to notice the so called trail that Devin had mentioned, which was appraised of nothing more than scuffs of dirt every couple of steps.

The only reason he did not allow his mind to wander to where Krystal and Jasper would be is because he knew he would have to move just as slow if he was to lead them back to Devin. For a while, he wondered if he would even be able to get to the edge of the woods with this simple trail of scuff marks, and there was a constant fear that he would lose the trail in the darkness. He was no longer afraid of the woods at night, although he remembered the feeling of confusion when he spent his first night here. Although Zackery knew that there had once been a fear of this place, the reasoning was because he had been unable to see the moment the sun fell below the horizon. Now that he was dead, even though he knew it was pitch black out, he could still see vague outlines better than a living human could. Still, there was no color to distinguish anything, which still made it difficult for him, but he knew that there was nothing in this place except plants. All his time here he had never seen any scurrying critters, only the occasional person crossing the border into the forest.

While he had been walking through the woods, Zackery had half-expected Jasper and Krystal to have gone home. He didn’t know anything about their relationship, although it seemed as though maybe Jasper and Devin weren’t friends at all, considering her lack of mentioning them. But even if they had been best friends for years, it was dark out and even the closest of

friends wouldn't stick around if their friend wasn't in imminent danger. And, technically, she wasn't--she was stuck where she was, which probably made her safer than either Jasper or Krystal. Of course, he was safest of all, being unable to feel physical pain.

It didn't take him long to be able to reach the edge of the forest, even though he was surprised he actually managed. Although he never left Devin's scuffed trail, there were plenty of times he wanted to wander off, the twisting and turning senselessness it went in made him sure that the woods were leading him deeper in instead of towards the field. Despite his mind numbing confusion, Zackery never ended up back with Devin, and knew that he had made it to Jasper and Krystal when he saw a single circle of light in the distance. The sun had now long since fallen beneath the horizon, and he could not make out where the field ended, but they stood several feet from the woods. Zackery drew as close to the border as he was allowed, just watching the two friends for a moment. Neither of them were talking, just standing next to each other, Jasper holding a flashlight pointed at the ground, both of them staring at the only bit of light in the proximity.

"Hey! You two!" Zackery shouted, causing both of them to jump, Krystal adding in a scream. He began waving them over, watching the two make their way slowly over to him. Jasper flashed the light in his face and out of reflex, he looked away even though the light didn't bother or blind him.

"Where's Devin?" Krystal asked, her voice subdued. She was eyeing him carefully, and he was afraid that she would throw a punch in his direction.

"She... is in a bit of a predicament." Zackery started, inching his way back into the woods. "I can take you guys to her, but there was no way she was going to be able to come out here."

"And why's that?" Krystal hissed, her voice still quiet and even. Jasper didn't say anything, just remained stoic and solid by Krystal's side. Zackery was more worn down by their unflinching gaze than by Krystal's flickering eyes. "She's not hurt, is she?"

"No, she's not hurt," Zackery shook his head, taking steps backward into the woods. "C'mon, before it gets any later."

"What does that matter? I can barely see anything as it is..." Krystal huffed, following after Zackery as he took off. He had to remind himself to take it slow and to stay in sight of Krystal and Jasper as they straggled along, unable to see him or the trail very well in the pitch black. Krystal yelped with each *whap* in the face by an unexpected branch, and Zackery even heard the occasional grunt from Jasper, who hauled up the rear. Even though he didn't know or care for Devin very much, even he was growing impatient with how slow Krystal and Jasper were going. Whenever Krystal called his name to slow down, it only lasted long enough for Jasper to shine their flashlight on him, before Zackery was off again, leading mindlessly through the woods. Even if he could make out outlines of distinct bushes and trees, unlike Jasper and Krystal who could only know what was in front of them by diving in face first, Zackery was still surrounded by dim browns and plenty of blacks, so it was nothing but a nightmarish landscape of shadowy figures. When a hunched figure became to show itself in the distance, even he halted in

his tracks, shocked after seeing nothing but thin straight lines aimed for the sky. With a swift movement, he managed to maneuver out of Krystal's way before she nearly slammed into his back--she slowed down only so much to turn on him, practically running in place.

"Why are you stopping? We need to find Devin!"

Zackery scrunched his face together, nodding in front of them. He made eye contact with Devin, who had managed to get up out of her slumped position, hands pressed flat against the airspace she could not pass. Raising an eyebrow, he pulled his gaze away from Devin's face to look at Krystal. "What do you mean? She's right here." Krystal advanced towards him and he stumbled backwards, looking at Devin for help. "D-Devin, can't you see Krystal and Jasper? Let them know!" He held his hands up in front of his face, so he no longer had to look at the anger on Krystal's.

"Krystal!" Devin cried, watching as her friend stiffened in horror. "I-I'm here, can't you see me?" Her voice cracked, tears already running down her face, knowing the answer just from the look on Krystal's face.

"Huh...?" Krystal stumbled forward in the direction of Devin's voice, but Zackery blocked her path and Jasper grabbed her shoulder, holding her back. She shook off Jasper's hand before pointing a finger at Zackery, mere inches from his face. "What's the big idea? Where are you hiding her?"

"Krystal..." Jasper began, but Zackery cut them off.

"How was I supposed to know this was going to happen?" Zackery raged, gritting his teeth and tensing his shoulders until they nearly met his jawline. "Hell, I don't even know what happened. She's there, clear as day for me!" He turned around and waved a hand in Devin's general direction, who still looked like she was crying. When he turned back to face Krystal, she had begun crying, too, but was no less angry.

"Zackery," Jasper snapped, forcing him to cut his rampage short. "Devin, can you hear me? It is Jasper talking." They exchanged glances with Zackery, before walking to stand by his side. They held up their flashlight, twisting and turning it in their hand as they looked at the woods around them. Sometimes the light landed on Devin, but neither Krystal nor Jasper made any sign that they saw her, as Jasper flashed his light on the ground or in the leaves beyond her. Zackery saw Devin's eyes follow the light trail as it wandered around, searching for her even though she was right there, and never catching sight of her. Even though Zackery could see her, he also saw how the light did not catch onto Devin--the flashlight would light up everything around her, but not her. In the darkness of night, she remained shadowy and surreal.

"I can hear you... I can see you... Can't you see me too?" Devin asked, speaking louder than usual, as if because her friends couldn't see her, she had to compensate with her voice. Even then, Krystal and Jasper were spinning their heads around, trying to pinpoint where her voice was coming from. It was odd for Zackery watching them act so strangely--but then again, they thought they were listening to some sort of disembodied voice. He could see Devin, so hearing her wasn't bothering him, even if he knew something was off. But he remembered the same

thing happening to him, where there had been a certain point he couldn't walk past, even though there had been no physical barrier.

"Are these the mushrooms you were talking about, Zackery?" Jasper asked, shining their flashlight on the little white mushrooms in front of the group. Without an answer, they said, "I guess you found what he was looking for, Devin," They said, stepping closer and kneeling down beside the closest mushrooms. Although they couldn't see her, Devin had kneeled down as well, right in front of Jasper. Mere inches separated them, but they couldn't see her. In their view, there was nothing but short mushrooms directly in front of them. Otherwise, it was an unobstructed patch of grass for a handful of feet. Jasper turned their head, staring up at Zackery. "Did you know this was going to happen? Did you want one of the girls to be trapped like this?"

Zackery squeezed his eyes shut and ground his teeth together, the sight disturbing to Jasper and Krystal but otherwise unaffected Zackery--it was a bad habit he could no longer break because he couldn't feel the awful sensation of his teeth scraping against each other. "More blaming! I get that it looks bad, but I had nothing to do with this! All I wanted was some help in finding them because I knew they were weird--I wasn't expecting anyone to get hurt!" He turned his back on them, crossing his arms over his chest. "If Krystal and Devin had just gone with me when I had first asked, this wouldn't have been a problem because there would have been the three of us together! It's your fault Devin ran off alone in the first place!"

"Does that even make any sense to you, or do you just enjoy hearing the sound of your own voice?" Krystal asked, the haze that had fallen over her expressions having cleared to reveal clenched fists and flashing eyes. "You got Devin trapped, now you have to bring her back!"

"I can see her, clear as day! You're the one that needs to get your eyes checked! Maybe you're playing some sick joke on your friend while we all stand here in the woods in the middle of the night?"

"You stupid fuc--" Krystal positioned one arm to punch Zackery in the back of the head, then nearly fell face first when she was forced to stop upon hearing Devin's voice.

"Stop fighting!" Devin cried. Zackery watched as her face fell and her shoulders slumped, and all the fire died inside of him, too. "Just help me... I don't want to be stuck here by myself..."

"We'll--we'll figure out something, Dev," Krystal stuttered, wringing her hands together. "We won't leave you!"

Jasper glanced at Krystal before looking at Zackery. "Er--I might leave." They received a look so hostile from Krystal that they held their hands up, "Not forever! But it is nighttime... I will not just spend a night in the open air, and besides, if there is anything I can do for you, Devin, then I will need my books." They offered a rare smile as consolation for their slip up, but Krystal still looked upset, stomping her feet.

"We can't just leave her all alone! And I don't want to spend the night in the woods all by myself!" Krystal whined, hugging herself.

"You won't be alone, Krystal... I'm here, too," Devin reminded her, exchanging forlorn glances with Zackery before staring after Krystal.

“Ah!” Krystal perked up, looking in every direction as she said, “Well, I just mean... It will seem like I’m alone because I can’t see you--I need a physical presence, you know..?”

“I *am* here!” Devin insisted.

“...And, you know, I’ll be staying, too,” Zackery flinched when all eyes turned on him. “What? Did you think I was going to leave? I--”

“Yes,” Krystal stated matter-of-factly, looking the most baffled out of the three of them.

“Well, I won’t!” Zackery grunted, turning away from Krystal and looking at Devin. “I know this is partly my fault, so... I’ll see what I can do. At least, I’ll keep you company through the night.”

“*Partly* your fault! This is all your fault!” Krystal cried.

“That’s all you’re getting out of me!”

Jasper sighed, turning their flashlight to the ground. “Then, I will take my leave, and return as early as possible. Maybe I will come up with a way to leave a better trail, too.” They waved before jogging away and the three others could see nothing more than a single bobbing circle of light, and hear the rustling of branches and the pounding of footsteps.

That, too, disappeared, and the forest fell quiet and darker still. Zackery could still see Devin and Krystal, but only mere outlines of their figures--their distinct features on their face or the details of their clothing were lost in the shadows. Nobody moved, each of them feeling vulnerable to the darkness that was now suffocating them--Zackery couldn’t find a way to break the silence and so he thought it best to stay quiet, but that just made his thoughts rush faster. He had spent plenty of nights in this forest alone, but most nights he could just shut down his mind, and before he knew it the sun would be peaking through the canopy, no memory of the nighttime. Now he had to consciously remind himself to not disappear, because now there were witnesses to his existence--both Devin and Krystal would notice if he was gone for hours, even if Zackery wasn’t always sure how much time had passed.

A small light flared to life, and Zackery saw that Krystal had pulled out her cellphone. She pointed it in his direction, and he half expected for her to be unable to see him, although he had long since been able to control just how physical he wanted to appear. He blinked and squinted his eyes before looking away, remembering that a bright light straight to the eyes would hurt any other person.

“Devin, where are you?” Krystal whispered, edging as close to the mushrooms as she dared, although the way she dragged herself and how her eyes remained locked on them proved just how afraid she was. Did she not want to end up in the same predicament as Devin? Zackery sneered--did she not want to end up stuck *like* Devin or *with* Devin?

“Right here,” Devin said, her voice low yet still managing to startle Krystal, causing her to jump. Zackery watched as Devin laid down on the ground, putting her head on her hand. She looked like she was going to sleep. “If you stay there, it would look like we’re sleeping together under the stars. At least, to me...” Devin whispered, somehow managing to drop her voice even lower. Her eyes were locked on Krystal’s; even though the other girl couldn’t see her, her eyes still managed to roam where her face would be if she was visible. Zackery watched the two girls

until Krystal turned her phone's light off, and he could no longer see their faces. There was no point in lying down, so he didn't bother--he listened to the two of them whisper to each other, and he kept listening when their whispers dropped off, and there was nothing but the sounds of their heavy breathing.

They were asleep and he was alone and he fought the urge to skip the night, to skip out on them. Zackery sat, his back against a tree, staring in the direction of Devin and Krystal even though he could only barely make out the shapes of their bodies in the darkness. He waited, aching to see the canopy above him brighten. All he had wanted from these girls were answers about his past, but so far there were just more questions.

He had forgotten just how soothing sounds could be. Being stuck in this place, there was nothing but silence to overwhelm him--when he was alive, he had been used to silence, because he was so often on his own. But the dead quiet of the woods was different, it was threatening and it was the trees' way of tormenting him while he waited to hear what they had to say. Zackery had long waited for the sound of animals or of birds or of the wind, or even the crack of branches or whole trees falling or collapsing, but that never happened. Any sounds created in this place were made by humans alone.

To hear such a wondrous sound as breathing made him feel just as alive as Devin.

Chapter Four

Devin laid down on the ground, not caring how dirty she got. What she wanted was to sleep, and what she needed was to calm down, and there was no better way to do that than to be as close to the earth as possible. She pressed her cheek onto her hand, relishing the cool hardness of the ground against the back of her hand. No more than two feet away from her was Krystal, her eyes locked on the line of mushrooms that separated them. She, too, lied down, although her lips were pressed into a tight line and she quickly curled up into a ball. Even though Devin could tell she was uncomfortable, she smiled, staring at Krystal even while Krystal was searching for her. "If you stay there, it would look like we're sleeping together under the stars. At least, to me..."

Krystal didn't respond, she just closed her eyes and pulled tighter into herself. She didn't leave, though, and that was reassuring enough for Devin. It was impossible for her to feel uncomfortable when she imagined her night like that--a night under the stars with Krystal--and she tried not to remind herself that Krystal couldn't see her. She closed her eyes, feeling warm and safe even in the open in the middle of the forest.

When Devin woke up, her neck was stiff, and she felt damp--from sweat or from dew, she wasn't sure--the bones in her back and neck cracking as she sat up and began stretching. She looked over at Krystal, still sleeping, curled up in a ball. Even while she knew she couldn't, Devin reached her hand out to try and touch her, to wake her, but her hand met resistance.

It was odd, touching something that she could not see. When she woke up, she had hoped that something would have changed, maybe given her a chance to know what the hell was going on with her. There was nothing like that, though--there was no epiphany, there was no change in vision, she was no wiser than yesterday. She waited for the weight of this realization to hit her, but it never came. Devin sat, a numbness gnawing at her insides, starting at the core of her body and fighting to spread its way outwards. Even while she felt herself waking up, the tingling that was taking over felt like her body was falling asleep. She didn't care enough to fight the feeling, which intensified the numbness and increased her lethargy.

"So, are you awake?"

Devin managed to lift her head enough to see Zackery, but even that was a challenge. She saw him, but it took her brain a few seconds to register where he was. Her brain seemed to be lagging on her, her vision not a swift, continuous motion but a set of staggered freeze frames, disjointed and separated. When she was finally able to focus on Zackery, her heart jumped into her throat, startled at how long it took her morning daze to clear. Running her hands over her face and through her hair in another attempt to wake up faster, it still felt as though she was falling asleep--she pinched her skin and tugged at her hair and even though she could feel herself doing it, the pain was dulled.

"Are you ignoring me?"

"I'm awake..." Devin whispered, holding her head, as she made her way as close to Zackery as possible. It wasn't very close--he had sat himself some five feet from the girls during

the night, and her border didn't let her go nearer. She did position herself so that she was facing him instead of Krystal, though, and Zackery took it upon himself to close the distance. "How long have you been up?"

"Too long," He huffed, although Devin couldn't see any signs of exhaustion on him. His eyes were bright, there were no shadows on his face, and his voice was clear and steady. "Jasper hasn't come back yet."

"Okay," Devin shrugged, looking up at the canopy. Light was trying its best to break through but instead of making anything clear, it only add a hazy green glow to the surroundings. The color warmed her heart to see, especially this deep into summer--it felt like springtime, the way the trees deflected the sun, making everything appear greener and greener. "I don't know what they will be able to do. I... I don't have high hopes," Devin admitted.

The two stared at each other for a few moments, and Devin had to shove down the urge to get angry. Not even a few comforting words for her, even though he was the reason she was in this mess? Maybe Krystal had been right--this guy wasn't worth their time. She began inching her way back to Krystal, not even wanting to look at Zackery anymore. Tears began to form, overwhelmed at the fact that the one person who she was most angry at was the one person who was still able to see her.

"You only stayed so as to not piss Krystal off, didn't you?" Devin asked, her tongue burning as she swore. "You might as well have gone home and slept soundly in your bed, or something."

"Are you mad at me?" Zackery asked, frowning. "I didn't know anything would happen to you. I didn't plan for any of this to happen. And you're the one who--"

"Shut up!" Devin cried, cutting him off. Krystal jolted up into a sitting position, looking around wildly.

"What the--? Ugh! My clothes!" Krystal groaned, brushing the back of her shirt off.

"Good morning, Krystal," Zackery muttered, earning another jump out of her. "Your friend has yet to make a return."

"Ugh, you're still here..." Krystal shook her hair out, running a hand through it, as if that would somehow get the knots out. "I figured you would have run off in the middle of the night."

Zackery opened his mouth to make a comment, but then bit his tongue. Whenever he dealt with people, he inherently didn't trust them; unfortunately, now they both had reason not to trust him. Even if he had started at baseline zero, he had now worked his way into the negatives, and there was no way of knowing just how long it would take for him to gain their trust. Although he wanted to point out that he had stayed the night, that was a moot point, even if they didn't realize it. There was no point in leaving because he really couldn't go anywhere, except to a different part of the woods.

"Can't you get in touch with Jasper?" Devin asked Krystal, the girl looking around widely at the disembodied voice. "I'm still to the right of you."

"Ahh! It's so weird hearing your voice and not being able to see you!" Krystal whined. "Tell me--if I can't see you, does that mean there are certain things you can or can't see?" She

asked, before waving away Devin's question. "Besides, my phone's dead. I'd have to go to their house, and I'm sure they're on their way."

Devin exchanged glances with Zackery, before she stuck her nose up in the air. She didn't mean to catch his eyes, but for some reason, she felt like he was the one to understand her--probably because he was the only one that could see her. It was strange that the one person she knew the least was the only one who was able to see her. Sometimes, when she thought about it, it made her skin crawl, feeling naked and vulnerable in front of someone that she didn't know how he would act. Other times though, it felt right--like if it was anyone who was going to be able to see her, then of course it would be Zackery, the boy that got her into this.

She wanted to paint him as the devil, but even with his permanent sneer and brick wall defenses, she couldn't bring herself to hate him. If Devin told this to Krystal, she knew that Krystal would judge her, and judge her harshly, claiming that she was too trusting, too forgiving, too careless.

Maybe she was all those things. But, as far as she understood the situation, her life was in Zackery's hands. She gulped, realizing just how precarious that could be, considering how little she knew about him.

All at once, her body began to fight her--warning signals went off in her lower region that she needed to relieve herself, while at the same time her mouth was parched, making it painful to swallow. She felt her cheeks heat up and her heartbeat start to quicken, panic coursing through her veins. At first, her only thought was about escaping this entrapment--but now she realized just the kind of problems it caused. She was completely unprepared to spend hours, days stuck in this one spot, where she could neither leave nor others enter.

What was she supposed to do?

"Wow, it is as if none of you have moved from last night. Or, perhaps Devin has, and I just cannot tell," was Jasper's way of a greeting, as they made their way over to the threesome. They were stuck for a moment, at an awkward distance while they untangled themselves from a snarl of branches.

"Good morning to you, too," Devin muttered in a low voice while staring at the ground, although Zackery was the only one to acknowledge her, turning to look at her. She felt his eyes on her, but she didn't dare look up.

"Alright," Jasper huffed as they threw down their oversized backpack, sitting down in between Krystal and Zackery. Still none of them sat together, although now they looked a bit more like a group instead of a bunch of strangers hanging out in the same random neck of the woods together at the same time. "Let us take a look-see..." They began pulling items out of their pack, one-by-one. A few hardcover books, a journal with various things sticking out from between the pages, a compass, a flashlight, and three granola bars, one which they passed to Krystal and another to Zackery. One remained which they held in their hands for a moment, before tossing in the direction of the white mushrooms, which was Krystal and Jasper's only idea of where Devin would be. Devin reached out her hands, eyes wide and expecting, only for the breakfast bar to make contact against the same thing that Devin does, before falling straight

down to the forest floor. The breakfast bar hit the cap of one of the mushrooms before bouncing off, the mushroom remaining undamaged by the impact. She dropped her hands into her lap, staring at the fallen granola bar, an empty stomach filled with longing.

Jasper grabbed for their mess of a journal and started scribbling in it. “So, not only can Devin not leave the circle, but outsiders cannot enter. Furthermore, it appears as though there is some sort of physical barrier, even though we are unable to see it. Just as we are unable to see Devin. The barrier itself lines up neatly with the little mushrooms that Zackery is so interested in, and understandably so.” They were nodding as they wrote this, tapping the tip of their pen against his lips.

Zackery raised an eyebrow, first looking at Krystal who shrugged her shoulders, before shifting to Jasper. “I’m sure we all already knew that. Is that what you spent the night thinking about, just what the perfect item would be to throw at the barrier?”

“Although we know from Devin that she is unable to leave, nobody had tested whether or not they could cross over to her. That is understandable, considering the reasonable possibility that they would be stuck, too.”

“Is that all, Jasper? Don’t you study freaky shit for a living?” Krystal asked, crossing her arms over her chest, before once again staring at the little white mushrooms.

“Well, I will admit, most of my studies have been focused on places like Nevada, or even Oregon--it is rather uncommon to for sightings of anything mystical to be seen here in Massachusetts.” Jasper bit their lip. “Of course, I have my hunches, but it is far too early to claim anything--I need time--”

“You don’t have time!” This came from Devin, causing Jasper and Krystal to jump and Zackery to turn his attention in her direction. “I’m stuck here! And you guys can’t even see me! What’ll happen when my parents get back from vacation? What happens when I need to go to the *bathroom*?” Devin groaned, putting her face in her hands.

Zackery grimaced at the sight, feeling even worse for Devin knowing that her friends could not see her pain and sadness, even while it could be heard in her voice. She choked back sobs, trying hard to keep herself from crying. Zackery averted his eyes.

“It won’t take that long for us to help you, Dev,” Krystal whispered, her voice soft and soothing, a completely different person between Jasper and Devin. “Will it, Jasper?” There--the edge in her voice returned, causing Zackery to hold back a smirk.

“There is something rather extraordinary about this situation, which could narrow my search...” Jasper nodded in Devin’s general direction. “The mushrooms. Zackery was right to be interested in them--the way that they form a circle... There is a term for it. A faerie ring--but neither of you have mentioned actually seeing any faeries.” Jasper backpedaled. Devin began to wonder if this was his first time dealing with the supernatural head-on, had otherwise only ever had his head in a book. “Well--you have not, have you?”

“Are... are you for real, right now?” Zackery asked, leaning slightly in Jasper’s direction. “You’re really trying to tell me that this is the work of *faeries*? Little people with wings?”

“I have to agree with Zackery on this one. That doesn’t make sense!” Krystal scowled, looking in the direction that Devin was supposed to be. “What about you, Dev? You haven’t seen anything like that, have you? I mean--seen any winged people lately?”

Devin shook her head, but then remembered that the only purpose that could see that was Zackery. “O-oh, no. I haven’t seen anything since we got into the forest. But,” Devin added, watching Krystal as she had begun to turn towards Jasper. “I think that’s strange--don’t you? This is a place where wildlife is supposed to be able to roam free. I haven’t even heard anything that wasn’t what one of us caused. But... but maybe I’m overreacting.”

“No, that is a good point!” Jasper said in a voice that, for them, was unusually loud, shocking everyone else. “Animals are more sensitive than humans, so they would avoid a place inhabited by faeries. They would be more apt to recognize their presence, and then as in any case of prey versus predator, would want to remain as far from them as possible.” Jasper’s eyes flashed, thinking they now had the proof to have the others believe them. “Creatures that would not want to be around when the faeries find them destroying their natural landscape, or defecating in it.”

Krystal sneered at Jasper and then shuddered at the thought. She turned to her side and opened her mouth to say something, but then closed it, and turned back to Jasper. Her eyes turned to stare at the ground.

“Okay,” Zackery cleared his throat when the silence went on for too long. Jasper was looking in Krystal’s direction, but they seemed to be lost in their thoughts; Krystal seemed out of focus, too. Devin seemed to be fine--as fine as someone could be, trapped and invisible to her friends--though she, too, was staring at the ground, drawing lines in the dirt. “Okay,” Zackery repeated, a bit sharper this time. “Let’s say this faerie idea is even plausible, how does that help Devin at all? Do you know how to get her out of this... *faerie ring*?” Zackery asked, huffing as he forced the words out of himself.

Jasper grabbed at one of their journals, flipping through the pages so fast that Zackery had to wonder if they were looking at all, or knew they had nothing written on the topic and just had to look frantic. It was only when Jasper looked up for a moment and caught Zackery’s eyes that they stopped searching through their notebook and sighed. “I have plenty of books at home that have probably dealt with something of this nature, but personally--”

“Answer the question, Jasper! You have nothing, right? There’s nothing you know that can help Devin, whether it’s faeries or witches or aliens?” Krystal asked, her cheeks flushed with anger.

“Actually, aliens are more prone to crop circles instead of rings of mushrooms. The exact opposite of each other, where one creates a ring of life another mows down any sign of it.” After searching for the page that they wanted, Jasper turned their notebook towards Krystal and Zackery. The journal was opened to a full spread of drawings and newspaper clippings of what, Zackery guessed, had to be crop circles. As Jasper had said, they did look like odd drawings in the ground by a lawnmower.

Krystal launched her hand out and slapped the book out of Jasper's hands. A shadow fell over their face; as Krystal stood up, Jasper looked away from her. "This is ridiculous!" She was crying again, but she was trying to talk through her tears. Zackery winced as he watched. "What use are you if you can't even save my best friend?" Even through her tears, Krystal was careful not to cross the border of mushrooms. She walked along the edge until she was on the opposite end, away from Jasper. Devin stood up and followed her as close as she could.

"Listen, Zackery," Jasper said, and when Zackery turned toward them, Jasper had closed any distance between the two of them, forcing Zackery to jump where he sat. He arched his neck away from Jasper, trying to create any space possible even with his back to a tree. If he tried hard enough, maybe he would meld and become one with the tree and disappear altogether. "You and I, we both have the most experience with the supernatural, right?"

Zackery sputtered, again trying to look for a way out. In one direction there was the sobbing Krystal--he wanted nothing to do with that--and there was no other direction because Jasper stood in his way. "I have no idea what you're talking about! I don't know anything about faeries or ghosts or--"

"You said you thought these mushrooms were different, right? Maybe you did not want to admit you thought of anything supernatural until you had someone else verify it. Now I have, now Devin has--so let us work on this together." Jasper dropped their voice to a hurried whisper, forcing Zackery to strain his ears just to hear them. "Krystal will not come with me, and it is probably best she stays with Devin anyway. Come back to my house so we can find out how to fix this. Like I said, I have tons of books back home, and I could use my laptop."

"Why don't you just go by yourself?" Zackery whispered back. With Jasper this close and naturally a quiet speaker, Zackery couldn't help but feel urged to keep his voice low. There was a tingling sensation in his chest and in his throat--enough for him to notice, but only for a split second before his attention was forced back on Jasper. "Krystal will probably beat the shit out of me if I try to leave. She'll think I won't come back." He only half heard the words that he was saying. Zackery was desperately trying to prepare a way to explain why he wasn't next to Jasper once they left the woods.

Jasper stood up without another word and started walking back to their backpack. While putting their journals back into the bag, they called out to Krystal, "Zackery and I are going back to my house to use the computer. We will search up anything we can find on faerie rings and how to break them. I will do my best to make sure we are back by sunset." Jasper stood up, facing Krystal, but her back was still turned to them. Even Devin didn't bother to pry her eyes away from Krystal to spare a glance in Jasper's direction.

"Alright, we are off," Jasper said, more to Zackery than to either of the girls. Zackery scrambled to his feet, willing to at least walk Jasper out of the woods, even if he could not join them.

For the first few minutes, Jasper was leading the way and Zackery was walking right behind them. He stared at the forest floor, biting his lip trying to devise the best plan on how to slip away from Jasper. If he left right now, Jasper wouldn't even be able to notice, and he could

just return to Devin and Krystal. But would they come back to grab him? Then he would be ridiculed by both Krystal and Jasper. And there was a chance that Devin would be upset with him, too, although he couldn't imagine it; or, maybe, he didn't want to imagine it.

But he had no choice, where he could and could not go.

"You can walk beside me, you know," Jasper said without turning around.

Fuck, Zackery thought, tightening his jawline as he dragged himself next to Jasper. He continued to stare at the ground, part of him not wanting to make eye contact with Jasper and the other part not wanting to get lost in the woods. With each sidelong glance, he could see Jasper, eyes wide and taking in their surroundings, not taking in what they saw but their head constantly bobbing side to side anyway. "You'll get lost doing that."

"Doing what?" Jasper asked, tearing his eyes away from the trees to look at Zackery only for a moment, before they began to look through him, past him to the vibrant green behind him. Zackery snapped his fingers inches from Jasper's face, forcing them to look at him. "You never seem to get lost."

"I... spend all of my free time in this place," Zackery grumbled, turning his eyes back to the forest floor. "Even if there aren't any marked paths, I've gotten better at navigating this place. I still don't think I've seen all there is to it, though."

"Why do you say that?" Jasper asked, even though their attention wasn't on Zackery. Zackery looked up and followed their line of sight, to see a flickering in the distance. Maybe it was a leaf falling from a tree, or maybe it was the light catching off a winged animal.

As fast as it was there, it was gone, and Jasper and Zackery locked eyes. Zackery's steady stare caused Jasper to flinch, a touch of pink rising on their cheeks. "I've heard there's supposed to be a pond in the middle of this place. I've never seen it though. And I believe it's here. I mean," Zackery scoffed and rolled his eyes. "I have no reason to believe it's here, but I do."

"Just like you believed that there was more to those little mushrooms?" Jasper asked.

Zackery opened his mouth to say something, pointed at Jasper, and earned a small grin from them. "Shut up!" He tried to come up with anything else to say and failed, half-formed words and sputters the only thing falling from his lips.

"I mean, then probably it exists, right?" Jasper laughed. "I know that Krystal has been giving you a hard time, but she said you gave her and Devin a scare when they came here the other day. And--and obviously you can see that my relationship with Krystal is still lacking. But it makes sense that there are parts of the forest that you have yet seen, if this really is the work of faeries," Jasper stumbled through some thicket, catching their balance on the trunk of a tree. Zackery stepped away, not wanting them to try and grab onto him for assistance. "Then they are known to be secretive little bastards. They love messing around with humans, and part of what we are going to search for when we get back to my place is how to not only protect ourselves from their games, but also how to beat them at their own game. The faeries, I mean, because then we may be able to break Devin out of that faerie ring."

With a heavy sigh of relief, Jasper made their way out of the forest. The sun was still shining even though it was now on the decline, and before them was the open field. Zackery

recognized the large patch of indiangrass to the right of them, and straight across the field he saw the field narrow to a single dirt path that would lead to the makeshift parking lot. When he first found himself free to roam the forest, Zackery had spent most of his time just trying to find the edge of the woods, over and over again because each time he tried to cross into the field in front of him, he was forced back into the woods. It wasn't just a shove or stumble backwards, it was a complete transportation from one end of the woods to anywhere in the middle so that he had to wander to find his way back. He would try to cross several times in a single day--or, so he thought it was a single day, because the sun was shining each time--but it was exhausting. To keep up his form took all of his concentration back then, and when he tried to pass into the field, it was like slamming into someone twice his size, then having that person lift him off the ground by his very nerve endings, before being launched into the distance.

Zackery had been punched often enough to not give up right away. But that was then, and this was now, where the last thing he wanted to experience was that tingling, numbing sensation, the complete lack of control over his own body. He watched as Jasper continued walking, not realizing that Zackery wasn't beside them right away. When they turned around, Jasper waved to him. "We should make this quick, or the girls will worry. Come on!"

"Are you sure you need me? I could just wait here, and help you find your way back when you return," Zackery suggested, wondering if the tightening in his stomach and chest was the forest beginning its work.

Jasper trekked back over to Zackery, grabbed his hand, and pulled him out into the field. "I said come on! We cannot leave Devin in that precarious situation for longer than necessary. Krystal will have your head if we dilly-dally."

Jasper was still talking, but Zackery could no longer make out what they were saying, he could only see their lips were still moving. All at once, he was overwhelmed. There was Jasper's hand, still gripping his wrist. Zackery seemed to be outside of himself as he watched his hand press against his chest, and *felt* them touch, *felt* the beating inside. He had long since forgotten what it was like to breathe, and now his lungs burned for air as he struggled to find some sort of natural rhythm to breathe to. Each breath was forced and harsh, unfamiliar and painful. Through his nose, it burned; through his mouth, he choked; he began to feel light-headed, and the grass below him was moving, shifting, so that it touched the sky, became the sky, and the sky touched the ground.

Zackery opened his eyes to find himself in a car, a moving car, the forest and the field nowhere in sight. He sat up bolt right too quickly, and a mass of shadows and swirls entered his vision. Though he meant to just press his palm to his forehead, the force was more like a slap, worsening the throbbing in his head. The stinging of his skin only lasted for a few seconds, but it was noticeable, and Zackery shook at the realization.

"Holy shit, Zackery," Jasper said, catching Zackery off-guard. "You straight up passed out back there. Are you feeling okay? We are almost to my house now, so if you need painkillers or something, let me know."

“Your house?” Zackery asked, his voice catching in his throat and coming out with a rumble. He cleared his throat before focusing on the moving scenery just outside his window. Houses and cars passed by, trees and power lines marked the edges of the road. Seeing them pass by in a blur was dizzying, and he had to tear his eyes away and press his forehead against the window to keep the burning sensation in his throat down.

“Yes, my house, where we are going to look for information on how to block faeries and destroy faerie rings, remember?” Jasper asked, their voice still low yet with an added clip to it. Zackery glanced over at them and couldn’t make out anything from their expression. Perhaps they’re upset over his fainting episode. The thought made Zackery’s cheeks turn red.

“Right, I remember,” Zackery nodded, banging his head off the window glass as he did so. “I’m just surprised we got there so fast, I guess.”

“Well, it would not have seemed so fast if you had been awake for the entire ride,” Jasper said as they pulled into a long driveway. Their house sat on a hill which rose above the driveway, which led to a garage underneath the house. With the push of a button, the garage doors opened for Jasper to drive in smoothly into the darkness. As their car crossed over, though, lights flashed on, one after another, automatically.

“Yeah...” Zackery muttered as he fumbled with the door and stumbled out. “I don’t know what that was about,” He admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“No worries,” Jasper marched forward, urging Zackery to follow. “So long as you are feeling better now, because we have work to do.” They turned around a corner, Zackery hearing them go up a flight of stairs before finally managing to walk ever-so-slowly to the staircase himself. He stared up at Jasper who was already waiting for him at the landing. “Come on, we do not have all day! My room is upstairs.”

Zackery grimaced as he made his way up the narrow staircase, out of breath and legs shaking by the time he made it beside Jasper. Already, he was beginning to miss being able to just will himself somewhere. Even if he did have to take the time to physically walk somewhere, it wasn’t taxing on his body. Pair that with his newfound inability to breathe with ease, and suddenly even taking the stairs became a burden. He did his best to mask his breathless discomfort in front of Jasper, while he started leading the way again. Zackery caught glimpses of a kitchen directly across from where the staircase opened, a marble island and matching countertops. A flicker of envy burned to life in the pit of his stomach, before he turned the corner and could no longer see the kitchen. They passed through a living room or a den of some sort, with a large flat screen television in the middle of the room and a fireplace beyond it. The room was dimly lit by whatever light from the windows could pass through, but Zackery noticed that each room they passed through had a minimalist style while still managing to be breathtaking.

Jasper, of course, had said nothing as they made their way up another flight of stairs.

“So... your parents. Are they working? Are you a single child?” Zackery asked, unsure if he was allowed to ask these questions but was also becoming more and more uncomfortable with the silence with each step.

“Parents are dead, sister is at school. Probably. It is a weekday, right?”

“I don’t know...” Zackery mumbled, eyebrows nearly meeting his hairline and his jaw unhinged. “I-I’m sorry for your loss?” It came out more like a question than he had intended. But the blase nature of Jasper’s curt statement knocked him off guard. ““You can’t be living here on your own with just your sister, right?”

“Why not? We are both adults. But, my grandparents do live with us as well. They may have gone out for brunch, though.” Jasper took a right after reaching the top of the stairs, which led to an open room. It looked like a master bedroom, but it was empty. There were no pictures on the walls, and aside from the pristine and untouched-looking bed that was in the far corner, there was no furniture in the room either. If this had been Jasper’s room, Zackery would have accepted it. It would have been surprising nonetheless, but it would have almost fit Jasper’s personality to a point. But Jasper didn’t stop, and instead crossed the room to another door. This one was closed and, when opened, Zackery realized that at one point it had been a closet. It was a small space, and now there was nothing in it but a ladder and a few lone coat hangers. “Alright, watch your step,” Jasper said as he began his ascent.

“Your bedroom... is up there?” Zackery asked, grabbing hold of the lower rungs of the ladder. They were cold to the touch and felt solid in his palm, both unfamiliar feelings that sent shivers down his spine. His teeth chattered once, painfully clicking together, before he managed to give himself a thorough shake and pull himself up the ladder. He reached the top, arms throbbing and tingling, legs shaking, and gasping for air. Jasper grabbed Zackery by the shoulders and hauled him out of the space before helping settle him onto the ground where he could catch his breath.

“What, does climbing ladders bother you?” Jasper asked, kneeling down beside Zackery, whose face was pressed to the dusty floor as he gathered his bearings. As he slowly lifted his head, Zackery felt pressure on his back that caused him to straighten up faster than necessary. Even with throbbing head and blurring vision, Zackery noticed, felt Jasper’s hand rubbing his back between his shoulders. By the time his vision cleared, the feeling was gone and Jasper was standing up, walking over to a desk on the other end of the room.

The room was dark, dusky, having only one window, and that being very small. The desk that Jasper sat at was cluttered with papers and with piles of books. As Zackery walked over, stepping over more piles of books or journals as he did so, Jasper’s computer flared to life, lighting up half of the room. To the left of the desk and lining the wall was a bookshelf, with every available space filled with books, or leather-bound journals stuffed with papers, just like the one he had seen earlier. On closer inspection, using the light from the computer screen, Zackery managed to read some of the titles. *Not Just Monsters: An Understanding of Cryptids and Folktales*, *Supernatural of New England Field Guide*, and his personal favorite, the one that really got his stomach churning, *The Daily (after)Life of Ghosts*.

“You have a lot of books,” Zackery muttered, flipping through the pages of the ghost textbook. The margins were filled with notes and entire sections were underlined, probably by Jasper’s own hand. He didn’t have the courage to stop and read any of them, though, and placed the book back in its place.

“I have a lot of time to read,” Was Jasper’s answer. “Would you consider the mushrooms brown, white, or beige?” Jasper asked, though by the sound of their tick-tacking fingers, they weren’t waiting for an actual answer from Zackery. “I am pretty sure the colors of the mushrooms are irrelevant, but it is best to be as detailed as possible while doing research.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Jasper, but you have no idea what you’re doing, do you?” Zackery asked, as he moved away from the bookcase and took a seat on the bed that was on Jasper’s other side. The bed, though, was little more than a mattress on the floor with pillows and a blanket. There was a stabbing in his back when he tried to lay down and when he felt behind him, Zackery pulled out an uncapped pen, then tossed it in Jasper’s direction who instinctively swatted it away. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to help you with this research if you only have one computer.”

“For starters, you could not throw pens at my face,” Jasper said, the creeping smile on their face the only hint Zackery had to let him know that they were joking around. “If you want to see if I missed any books involving faeries on the shelves, you could do that. Otherwise you are just here for when I need you to corroborate something that the internet says. Right now... it is just the basics. Faeries play tricks, faeries inhabit forests, faeries do this, faeries do that, but what about faerie rings and how to break through them...?” Jasper wondered aloud, Zackery watching as they scrolled through web pages faster than he thought they could actually absorb the information.

“I think I’ll stay away from your bookcase, thanks for the offer, though,” Zackery responded, lying down on Jasper’s bed. He was hyper-aware of his body and the bed adjusting to each other at the same time, and he couldn’t tell if the ache that was starting in his bones was comfortable or painful. He closed his eyes, hoping that when he opened them, he wouldn’t find himself back in the middle of the forest, or anywhere else along the way. When he had first died he was unable to control his movements, which wasn’t similar to the way he moved while he was alive; but when he opened his eyes, there was nothing but the roof, not far above. When he rolled over onto his side, Jasper was still there. Or, more correctly, he was still in Jasper’s house. He felt as though his heart was being squeezed, but it wasn’t an unpleasant feeling, either, even while it caused his breath to hitch in his throat.

“Faeries are known to be weak to metal or iron, but who knows if that would have any effect on the ring itself. Since we cannot see the faeries, then that may just be useless, although it is the most common weakness given...” Jasper rambled in his soft, low voice, and Zackery could feel his head nodding backwards.

“I mean, if the mushrooms are what’re keeping Devin stuck there, can’t we just, like, uproot them?” Zackery asked, sitting up with his back pressed against the wall. “Maybe then--”

“No,” Jasper cut him off. “If only it worked like that. Even if the mushrooms were knocked away, the ring would still exist. We just would be unable to see it until another mushroom grew in its place.”

“Great,” Zackery grumbled. “I think I need food.”

“Food...” Jasper leaned back in their chair, folding their arms behind their head as they looked at Zackery. “Oh, *fuck*.”

“What?” Zackery asked, getting up to look over Jasper’s shoulder. Jasper tilted their head up to Zackery. “What? Did you find something?”

“We have to get back to Devin and Krystal,” Jasper stood up, grabbing Zackery by the shoulder and half-leading half-shoving him towards the end of the attic. “Devin needs to know not to eat the food of the faeries. If she does, she could be stuck in the faerie world forever.”

“Wait,” Zackery turned around, trying to stop Jasper in their steps. “What are you talking about? Devin isn’t in some other world, you just can’t see her.” Zackery did his best to hold his ground, even though Jasper stood close to him, the two of them stopping in an awkwardly close position and neither one willing to budge. “Besides, how does standing in the middle of some mushrooms automatically make her a part of this fairyland? She said she can see all of us perfectly fine.”

“A faerie ring connects this world to the home of the faeries, sort of like a portal. So it is more accurate to say it is both here and there; and thus, it is neither here nor there. That is why Devin can see us, but we are unable to see her. Or so I figured,” Jasper walked away from Zackery and paused at the lip of the opening to the ladder. “But it sounds like, maybe, you *are* able to see her?” With that, they dropped to the floor below.

Zackery poked his head through the opening to look after Jasper before following after them. “What are you...?” Zackery laughed, shaking his head. “No, nonono, I can’t,”

“You did not include yourself when mentioning that we could not see her--you used you, to refer to me, or maybe Krystal included. But you did not include yourself. So you can see her?” Jasper asked once Zackery made it to their side.

“Look, if Devin needs us, we should stop stalling and head out.” Zackery tried to walk past Jasper, but the two danced in their spots, trying to escape and getting blocked at each turn. “Stop that! What are you doing?” He huffed, shoving Jasper away from him. Their eyes narrowed, but they didn’t retaliate. “Isn’t she your friend? Why are you fucking around here?”

“It could be crucial to our understanding of the situation if you are able to see her or not, and the fact that you are skirting around the question is suspicious!” Jasper countered. “She could die if we are unable to release her from the faerie ring, and you might be able to save her if you are able to see her!”

Zackery swallowed hard the lump that was beginning to form in his throat. “Nothing is going to happen to her if we just leave now. You mentioned iron, so grab something and let’s get out of here.”

Once more, Zackery tried to push past Jasper to the door, trying to escape for the stairs. But Jasper held out their hand, shoving his chest slightly so that he couldn’t leave. Zackery felt his heart skip a beat, wondering if their hand would go straight through to the other side, even as he could feel his own heart in his chest and knew that it was impossible. Instead, Jasper’s hand met against his body and dropped away, leaving nothing but the memory of his touch on Zackery’s skin, on his brain.

“Did you do this to Devin?” Jasper asked.

The room fell silent, with Jasper staring down at Zackery. He had never felt so small and insignificant, with their steady and judging eyes unblinking in his direction. There had never been a time he wanted to be dead, except for at this moment. If he was still dead, he could have escaped, and Jasper would have been unable to stop him. Instead, he was stuck here, under the heat of Jasper’s stare. Here was this man--person?--that dedicated their life to the supernatural, and Zackery himself was having one extraordinary experience after another. If there was anyone who would have been able to help him, understand him, *believe* him, it would be Jasper.

Zackery bit his tongue. “I didn’t do anything to Devin. Until the other day, I didn’t even know who she was. All I wanted was some help. I never meant for any of this to happen.” Another lump, another swallow, this one more painful than the first. “But now she needs my help, so let me help her, in whatever way I can. We both know we can’t do anything here, though.”

Jasper’s eyes searched Zackery’s face, and he could tell that Jasper knew there was something he wasn’t saying. He could feel heat start to burn his cheeks and he couldn’t hold Jasper’s gaze for longer than a few short seconds. But Jasper didn’t say anything and just left, leading the way downstairs and out of their house. Zackery thought they were running from him, the way they did not wait for him to walk beside them. Instead, Zackery struggled to just keep Jasper in his eyesight. When they reached Jasper’s car, Zackery figured they may very well drive away without him, leaving him stranded here.

He struggled to catch his breath as he plopped himself into the passenger’s seat. The silence that hung over them was heavy and suffocating. In, and out. He had to remind himself to breathe, even while the air felt like poison to his lungs.

Chapter Five

Over the course of the day, Devin could feel her lungs constrict and found it harder and harder to breathe. Talking to Krystal had become difficult because she never knew when she would be forced into a fit of coughing, a desperate attempt to catch some air. Every now and then, she clutched at her chest, feeling her heart beat against her open palm. The beat was irregular, painful, and she had already puked once from the pain it racked through her. There was also one solo corner of the ring where the soil was a darker color than the surrounding area. There was no longer any pain or building pressure in her lower area, although immediately afterwards she had cried out of embarrassment, even though Krystal had gone out of distance while she had relieved herself. Krystal had started the day off by talking to her consistently while Jasper and Zackery were gone, but by now she feared that Krystal was losing her momentum and was just barely finding it in her to stay by Devin's side.

"Do you remember the sleepover we had for my birthday? A long while ago now, we were probably thirteen," Krystal reminisced, twirling her pointer finger through the dirt, looking as if she was talking to no one in particular. It didn't matter because Devin knew she couldn't see her, but she still wished Krystal would look in her direction. The way she never looked her way made it feel as if Krystal was ignoring Devin, even as she talked about her, or to her.

"Are we really doing this right now?" Devin asked, keeping her voice low and soft so as not to upset Krystal, even though Krystal's own tone was bothering her.

"My moms had just finished renovating the basement, so we slept on the long couch set together after spending a night of using the computer or watching movies on the new television. You were a little scared of the rumbling of the laundry machine, especially after it became dark. So we spent the night close together."

"This sounds like a parting speech," Devin whispered, reaching her hand out in Krystal's direction, splaying her palm out against the whatever was separating them from each other. "Something you would say about someone who is dead. Or dying."

"All I'm saying is," Krystal said, eyes misting over. "That I will be here, as close to you as I can be. Even if you are scared, you aren't alone, I won't leave you by yourself."

Devin was rattled by another fit of coughing, her lungs feeling three sizes smaller than they had been at the start of the morning. Even if she tried to take a deep breath, her heart sputtered, beating out of rhythm, a painful thudding against her chest that forced her to cough. She covered her mouth out of habit, and when she drew it away, her palm was slicked with blood and phlegm.

"Devin?"

She laid down, pressing her warm cheek to the cool dirt, and closed her eyes. Although she continued to cough, her lips feeling wet and salty now, she felt farther and farther from herself. She didn't know where she was going, but she just wanted to fall asleep. Maybe then this burning in her chest and building up her throat would die away.

Chapter Six

Shadows began to grow early in the day in the woods. Little sunshine managed to find its way in, so the majority of the day felt like dusk instead of midday. Krystal wasn't afraid of the dark, but she hated being alone. Rationally, she knew she wasn't alone, and that somewhere, mere inches from her, Devin sat nearby. But she could not see her. For all she knew, Krystal was sitting in the middle of the woods all by herself like a fool. Her heart told her she was a fool, and that she should leave, or at least should have had one of the guys remain with her. The only remedy was to listen to Devin's voice, but even that was becoming impossible.

"Devin?"

There was no response except more wet hacking from her invisible presence. A moment of silence, and another gasp and choke that made it sound as if Devin was drowning. There was nothing Krystal could do, but still she let her hand draw towards the edge of the mushrooms. She was still afraid of what would happen if she touched them, or tried to pass her fingers past them, but she knew that the closer she was to them, the closer she was to Devin. Krystal had never felt so far from Devin before.

"Jasper should be back soon. They'll know what to do." *As for Zackery...* Krystal scowled, still unsure as to why Jasper thought it would be a good idea to bring him along. She pulled her hand back, drawing along dirt as she did so. She sifted it in her palm, holding it up, and then letting it fall through her fingers.

She didn't want the same to happen to Devin.

"Krystal!" Jasper cried, popping out from the bushes. Behind them was Zackery, not looking nearly as lively. "We have returned and apologize for our tardiness, but there are a few things that I did end up finding out."

"What's the matter with Devin?" Zackery asked, walking close to the mushroom ring and close to Krystal, but his eyes were direct and focused. "Devin..?" Zackery asked, reaching his hand out. Krystal and Jasper both reached out, grabbing his hand and his shoulder, pulling him backwards.

"Don't! We don't know what would happen!" Krystal cried.

"There's blood," Zackery whispered, rubbing his shoulder that Jasper had grabbed. "Did she hurt herself, or is she getting sick?" He asked, turning to Jasper.

"Blood...?" Krystal asked, her eyes flickering between Jasper and Zackery, her mouth slightly agape.

"What do you mean, blood? Is she bleeding right now? She did not eat anything, did she?" Jasper asked, turning their attention to Krystal.

"You... you can see her?" Krystal asked, ignoring Jasper and turning toward Zackery alone. "How can you see her? What do you mean, blood? She's not dying, is she? We were just talking a few minutes ago, but then she went quiet and..." Krystal bowed her head, squeezing her eyes shut. Blood. Silence. *Don't jump to conclusions. That won't help Devin. Hold it together.* Through the cracks, tears fell through.

"I... I think she's just sleeping but... I don't know."

“How can you see her? I can’t see her! She’s my best friend and I can’t see her! Who are *you*, to be able to see her..?” Krystal asked, her voice rising. She was grinding her teeth together trying to keep calm, but out of nowhere she felt overwhelmed, filled to the brim. There was only one way she knew how to release this tension which forced her skin to feel too tight. Opening her eyes was like opening the floodgates, but she couldn’t keep her composure.

“This is not the time, Krystal,” Jasper sighed, shaking their head. They looked at Zackery, and Krystal saw for the first they communicate with just their eyes, rolling them in Zackery’s direction.

She knew it had been coming, but it still felt like a shot to the heart. Even when the two of them weren’t dating, Jasper still had to go out of their way to criticise her, didn’t they? She couldn’t help the way she felt, how *much* she felt. “No,” Krystal spat. “It’s not the time to tell me to make fun of me, okay? My best friend could be dying, and what are you going to say? That I shouldn’t waste time crying? But what have you done except stick your nose in your books? Oh, that’s right, *nothing*. Don’t act as if you’ve handled this situation any better than I have, because you haven’t, and you’re supposed to be the paranormal know-it-all!”

“Krystal, you and I should go find--” Jasper began, otherwise ignoring her.

“I don’t want to go anywhere with you,” Krystal interjected.

“Listen,” Zackery said, his voice loud and steady. Krystal stared him down, not intimidated since they were roughly the same height, but the way his eyebrows were pulled into a straight line and his lips were pursed made her cede to him and listen to what he had to say. “We want to help Devin, but you’re going to need to do something too, and not just fight with us.”

“It would help if the two people I was stuck with weren’t total asshats,” Krystal groaned, looking in the general direction that Devin was supposed to be. “I won’t forgive you if something happens to her, you know.”

“I know,” Zackery nodded, his voice softening. The change in tone was enough to refresh the tears in Krystal’s eyes. She rolled her eyes to stare at the canopy above, trying to keep the tears from falling. “What Jasper was going to say is that there may be a way for you and Jasper to be able to see Devin, but it requires some wandering around the woods. Would you be up for that?”

Krystal scoffed, and her lips formed the word ‘no,’ but then she let it settled in what Zackery was saying. The last thing she wanted to do was traipse through the woods, full-well knowing that it would be getting dark soon, looking for who knows what. But Devin’s face--round and friendly, with lips that naturally formed a pout that made Krystal want to pinch her cheeks--told her that she needed to do anything to be able to see her face again. “...What would I be looking for?”

“A witch’s rock,” Zackery answered, before shrugging and looking to Jasper for help.

“A rock with a natural hole in the middle of it. If you look through the hole by holding the rock to your eye, you should be able to see through faerie tricks.” Jasper explained, before they too shrugged and exchanged glances with Zackery. “It sounds simple enough, but it is

actually difficult to find one. They are uncommon, and it is easiest to find them beside bodies of water... and Zackery has already told us how that has gone for him.”

Krystal ringed her hands together, although that didn't help her so much as it made her heart race even faster. “I can't just, like, drill a hole in a rock?”

“Do you have something on you that can do that?” Zackery asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm. It was poorly timed, and he seemed to know that but, neither Jasper nor Krystal reacted to it.

“It will not work like that,” Jasper shook his head. “It must be naturally made.”

“That doesn't help us save Devin, it just helps us be able to see her,” Krystal said, frowning but also gathering herself together. She knew she would be heading out, whatever it meant, just to be able to see Devin. To hear her and not be able to see her was the oddest feeling--it made her feel as though she wasn't living life, but instead dreaming, or stuck inside a memory. In memories and dreams, details can be lost and still the person or the situation can feel distinct and perfect; even though Jasper was offering her a way to break through this illusion, it still seemed like she was walking farther and farther away from reality.

“Right...” Zackery muttered, looking at Jasper.

“There are a few things we can try.” Jasper nodded, rummaging through their bag before continuing. “I brought enough iron for all three of us to carry with us. I can also create an offering for the faeries that might appease them enough to release Devin back to us,” Alongside the iron pieces they pulled out of their bag--a pair of horseshoes and a plastic bag full of nails--there was also a small bowl of rice and a whole bottle of champagne.

“Did you bring any food for us in there?” Krystal groaned, clutching her midsection. “I haven't eaten, and Devin was complaining about food earlier too.” *When she was still awake and talking.*

“Zackery, maybe Krystal would prefer if you went with her. You know this place better than any of us, so you might also be the safer choice, too. I can stay here with Devin and give a proper offering. Oh!” Jasper waved Zackery over as they were laying out the offerings and handing the other two the horseshoes. “Help me find where Devin is exactly. I should be as close to her as I can.”

“Just so you know, I don't actually prefer you. Like, at all, actually. But I also have no idea what to do for an offering, either, so... And there was no way I was going to walk off on my own, either.” Krystal said. She and Zackery had been walking in silence for a few minutes, Krystal keeping a few paces behind Zackery while he led. Even from behind, Krystal could tell that Zackery had no more an idea of where they were going than she did. His halting footsteps, the way his head flicked from side to side, as if he could have somehow missed an entire pond beside him.

“I'll try and suppress my heartache,” Zackery said. “Are you looking at the ground? You're supposed to be keeping an eye out for a rock.”

“Yeah, yeah, a rock with a hole. Got it. Find us the pond and then we'll talk.”

“I’m sorry for getting you and Devin into this mess.”

Krystal tried to peer over Zackery’s shoulder, shocked at his low voice but unable to see how, and if, his expression matched his tone. “You really didn’t expect any of this to happen?”

“I had no idea what to expect. If I knew someone else would get hurt in the process...” Zackery emitted a low chuckle, and then sighed. “I’m no closer to getting any of the answers that I wanted.”

Krystal groaned, hearing her footsteps start to make a squelching sound. “Disgusting, I’m either stepping in shit or in mud, and I don’t know which is worse.” She whined, trying to tread lightly on her tiptoes, but being unable to see where she was going as she and Zackery were up to their chests in briars. The path had led them to an area where there was no free space, only thick-trunked trees and overgrown brambles. The only way to continue exploring was to walk through them. Looking out for the witchstone wasn’t an option, as Krystal barely wanted to keep her eyes open, and most of the time she kept her eyes shielded with one hand.

“You better let me know if I’m about to walk face-first into a tree, I won’t forgive you if you don’t.” Krystal reached out with her free hand to try and feel for anything solid. All she met with were slim branches and pine needles. “I’m beginning to think that there may not be a pond in this place.”

Instead of finding any relief from the bristles, there came a point where she just didn’t want to take another step forward. Her skin was burning and she was dying to scratch at it, but her hands were stuck in their upraised position. She was afraid to move them because already every inch of her skin was being pricked by the branches and thorns. She imagined the scratches that might have been faint when she first started wandering around blind, that were now trickling something wet down her arms and face, stinging with each new cut it met. Krystal tried to reach one hand out farther in each direction, biting her lip and holding her breath to control the pain. But there was no end, no open airspace just in reach, only more thorns. She was afraid to open her mouth in case thorns made their way in, although her lungs were beginning to burn; she could no longer tell the difference between blood and tears, as she began crying from the pain. One step backwards in an attempt to retrace her steps just rubbed pinpricks over raw wounds. She couldn’t keep quiet anymore.

“Zackery!”

She began to feel dizzy, now that she allowed herself to breathe again. Each breath was a quick gasp; each breath felt like it could be her last. Thorns were crawling their way across her face, brushing against the corners of her lips, seeping into her mouth. Their hold on her grew tighter. Another step backwards and she tripped, feeling her skin rip and tear off as she fell, thorns holding onto long strands of skin as a reward. She felt exposed, thorns pressing against bare nerves, blood staining the greenery around her.

“Krystal!”

She choked, gasping for air, and unable to force anything into her already-filled lungs. Everything was dulled--her ears were pounding, roaring, her eyes and lungs burned, so when she puked out all of the water in her airways she barely noticed it at first. The first thing she was able

to recognize was Zackery, kneeling beside her, eyes wide and one hand on her back. They were on a sandy shoreline.

They had found the pond.

“W--wha?” Krystal sputtered out, sitting up. Only then was she able to notice that Zackery was now holding his hand up, a rock being pinched between his thumb and his forefinger. Then she realized that Zackery was dripping wet. She looked down at herself, her clothes clinging to her like a second skin; even the tips of her hair were dripping water. “I’m all wet! Gross!”

Zackery smacked his forehead, groaning as he stood up. “Are you crazy? What exactly were you thinking?”

“What are you talking about?” Krystal asked, standing up to find her back side coated with sand. “Ugh! Now I need to wash off,” She made one step towards the pond before Zackery stood in front of her and held her back, with his hands on her shoulders. Each time he held onto her, his grip was rough, but she was determined; she shrugged him off but nearly dislocated her shoulder as she did so. “What’s your problem? It’ll take one second and then we can get back to Devin!”

“You realize that I just saved you from drowning, right?” Zackery asked, holding out the witchrock for Krystal to hold onto. “You were walking in the water--which was weird to begin with because I figured the rock would have been on the sand, but then you really weren’t looking for anything you were just walking... And when I called your name--and I called it like, three times--you didn’t even turn around, you didn’t even hear me, and I figured something must have been wrong. I mean, you managed to find this place, so, congratulations on that, but, *man*,” Zackery sounded as if he was going to swear, but Krystal was more caught up on everything else about him. The way his eyes were wide, the way his breath began hitching and how often he gasped for air--he was scared.

Goosebumps spread over her skin when Zackery’s expression and words sank in. “I-I don’t remember that. I remember walking through the forest, and I thought I still was. I was following *you*!” Krystal said, trying to keep her voice at a regular pitch; her voice warbled, but she managed. “Are you saying you left me on my *own*?”

“What are you talking about? You had insisted on taking the lead, so I was following *you* half the time we were walking!” Zackery shook his head, huffing with impatience. “Come on,” Zackery grabbed Krystal by the crook of her elbow and began dragging her along, away from the pond. She allowed him to take her away, because she found herself unable to pry her eyes away from the pond.

There was no sun to be seen with it hidden behind the trees, and yet the pond still seemed to glitter as if it was under noontime rays. She couldn’t understand what it was that made her think so, but she couldn’t help but feel that this place was beautiful. The pond seemed to be framed by trees, branches hanging low over the surface and trees lining mere feet from the shore. Yet even with all the greenery, there was nothing reflected in the pond; it merely shimmered, retaining an undisturbed white-blue glow. She knew better to resist, what with the witchrock

feeling heavy in her palm, but tearing her eyes away was painful, like she was denying herself the sight of some heavenly beauty. “We can’t just leave like this--you had said, the reason you wanted Devin and I was to help find the pond, wasn’t it? But now we’ve found it!”

“And now it’s no use for me,” Zackery grumbled, pulling hard on Krystal’s arm. “Let’s focus on the task at hand, shall we?”

Krystal tried to free herself from his grasp but each attempt was met with another tug from him. She glanced at the rock in her hand, realizing she didn’t even know if this would work. Glancing behind her, she held the rock up to her eye and closed the other so that she could catch a glimpse of the pond through the hole.

The pond was shining, sparkling, even more vibrantly than when she looked with unaided vision. This was more than what sun rays could produce; it didn’t even look as if it was produced *on* the pond, the sparkles seemed to be coming *from* the pond, rising slowly into the air. It was like gold dust that hovered most concentrated in the airspace above the center of the pond, before becoming sparser towards the shoreline. By the ground where the trees grew, there were more lights, this time more white and dense. These were less concentrated, and instead seemed to loop around in thin lines. In circles.

“Wait!” Krystal cried, again tugging on back on Zackery’s grip. He finally turned on her.

“What? What could you *possibly*--?”

“There’s so many of them...” Krystal gasped, holding the rock away from her, staring at it in fear. She knew better than to toss it away because the rock may be the only way to keep them from walking into one of these faerie circles. But she had not wanted to see any of this--seeing it meant all of it was real. Seeing it meant she probably needed to apologize to Jasper at some point. She didn’t want to think about that right now. “I think they’re all faerie circles. Why are there so many of them? And the pond--”

“So that really works?” Zackery asked, stopping and pointing at the rock in Krystal’s hand. “Then you’ll be able to see Devin too, now? Maybe this means that whatever Jasper had planned to break her out will work, too,” Zackery said, his voice low and eyes narrowed.

“Here, do you want to try it? Everything looks so freaky, like we’re not even walking in the same woods.” When she held the rock up to her eye, she felt as though she was seeing the woods for what it really was, and that the image she saw with unaided eyes was nothing but a disguise. Little changed, except for the lack of glowing lights, but there was also this feeling of liveliness in the woods that she could feel, even if she couldn’t see anything moving. That feeling was missing the moment she removed the witchrock. Rationally, Krystal knew that made no sense, but the rest of her body refused to catch up. Krystal shuddered as she held out the witchrock to Zackery, but he shook his hand in dismissal.

“I don’t need it.”

“How is it that you’re the only one that is able to see Devin without needing this thing?” Krystal demanded, shaking the witchrock in Zackery’s face. “And what, now you’re telling me that you were able to see all of... all of *this*?” She opened her arms wide to suggest everything

around her, even though without the witchrock to her eye she herself only saw the ordinary greens and browns of the woods. “How can that be?”

Zackery shook his head, head lowered and shoulders hunched. “I--I don’t know...”

“That’s a lie!” Krystal cried, fist tightening around the rock until it hurt.

Zackery remained silent, biting his lip as the two stared at each other until he could no longer stand it and bowed his head once more. “You’re right, it’s a lie.”

A sense of relief flooded through her so quickly that the tension she didn’t know she was holding in her shoulders fell away. She tried to hold onto the last wisp of frustration, though, to further crack him open. The last thing she had expected was for him to fold so quickly, and she had expected more than just relief with that happening--maybe a sense of accomplishment--but that was completely absent. “Well? What is it then? How is it you’re able to see her, see all of... whatever... this is...” Krystal spun her free hand around to motion to the woods, while still gripping the witchrock in her other hand tightly.

“I don’t know for sure,” Zackery started and when he saw Krystal’s eyes flash, he held his hands up to his face and rushed to continue. “I really don’t! That’s the truth! But--” Another pause. Krystal watched as his face dropped. “I can only guess that it’s because that I was...” He squeezed his eyes shut and held his hands to his face as if to hide him from her view. “I think I was stuck in one of those faerie rings, too. It’s the only thing I can think of, but I don’t know for sure if that’s what would let me see her and see everything else, too. Because I can, I saw them too, the closer we got to the pond, the more of the rings that popped up. They’re still surrounding us. But there’s not as many near the edge of the wood and yet... and yet...” Zackery coughed, then stopped talking. He avoided her gaze.

“Well? How did you get out of the ring?” Krystal asked, mouth dropping wide. “However you did it, then Devin can, too!” Her stomach began to do flipflops seeing the distress that Zackery was in; she wanted nothing more than to be angry at him--and a part of her still was, but that part was quickly diminishing while the discomfort and fear in her was growing. She knew she needed to continue pressing him, even though she no longer wanted to hear anything he had to say, and was still unsure of what to believe. She felt like she was skirting dangerous territory. The last thing--or, at least, it wasn’t on the top of her list--Krystal wanted to do was push Zackery over the edge. But this didn’t seem like a time for precautions, and everything just came spilling out of her mouth anyway. “You have to help her. She’s not well, and she’s my--my best friend.”

“I know that, but I don’t know how I ended up...” Zackery dropped his hands from his face and looked up at Krystal from half-lidded eyes. Krystal noticed a tremor in his legs, and worried he was about to collapse at any moment. “The last thing I remember is being trapped in the ring, just like Devin, without anyone being able to see me.” A bitter laugh racked through Zackery, startling Krystal and sending shivers down her spine. “In a fucked up way, Devin’s pretty lucky, you know? She has friends that are trying to save her. Nobody tried to save me.”

A wave of nausea rolled through Krystal, her bottom lip quivering. “What are you talking about?” She could barely make her voice come out at a whisper. “Zackery, how did you get out of the faerie ring?”

Zackery closed his eyes and let out a deep but shaky breath before he continued. “I’m sorry, Krystal. I really am. But I didn’t make it out of my faerie ring.” His lip curled into a sneer as his eyes narrowed, and the look on his face frightened her. “I died. Hah! That’s all there is to it. The only way I was able to get out of the faerie ring was to die first. But then even after death I’m not free of this place!” Zackery’s voice was shaking, but rising, his blue eyes alit with an angry fire inside him. “Do you know how long I’ve been stuck here? Because I don’t! I had thought, well thank God I’m dead, because at least I’ll be free of this suffocating circle! But there was no afterlife to greet me, I was still stuck in this forsaken neck of the woods, not able to leave the boundaries of it but barely able to explore it. I had been released from my tiny cage to a slightly bigger one. It was some sick fucking tease, but Jasper did say faeries enjoy playing tricks.” Zackery scoffed, panting heavily. His eyes locked with Krystal’s, both were misty with tears; one from frustration, and one from fear. He backpedaled. “I’m sorry--I shouldn’t have--I haven’t told--”

“Devin can’t die,” Krystal whispered, cutting him off. The tears brimming in her eyes refused to fall yet didn’t disappear, making it difficult for her to see anything. Part of her wanted it to stay that way, because she couldn’t bear to look at Zackery’s face. “You can’t let her die. I’m really, truly sorry about what happened to you, Zackery, but you can’t let her die. Please,” Krystal pressed her hands together, the witchrock in between them, begging, even though she was still unsure if Zackery could really do anything at all. “She means everything to me, and she doesn’t deserve this.” With the back of her hand, she wiped away her tears before they had a chance to fall.

“I know that,” Zackery said. “That’s why I’m trying to get back to her as quickly as we can. I don’t know what it will take... But if I can do *anything*...” He didn’t continue but instead turned to start walking once more. “Follow me, I’ll make sure you don’t walk into anything, okay? Keep your eyes low, don’t get distracted again.”

Krystal bowed her head and held the witchrock up to her eye. Even with her head lowered, out of the corner of her eye she could see the bright lights of the faerie rings. The thought of Devin dying hadn’t even crossed her mind--hidden in the dark shadows, noticed but ignored, maybe, but never fully acknowledged. All she wanted was for Devin to be by her side again, and for her to actually be able to see Devin.

But she couldn’t help wondering if asking for Devin’s life meant damning Zackery to die, *again*. Even if there were parts of him that had brushed her the wrong way, Krystal wasn’t sure she would have the courage to do that, even for someone she cared for as much as Devin. Especially not after seeing Zackery nearly break down in front of her, someone who had been a complete stranger just the day before. The last thing she wanted to imagine was him having to suffer through that same pain again, yet she feared that Devin was experiencing what he had before.

With pursed lips, Krystal walked on. She lowered the witchrock from her eye and held it in her palm, squeezing it tight, and then pocketing it.

Chapter Seven

“You’ve never done anything like this before, have you..?” Devin asked in between coughs.

Jasper heard her spit and felt a sudden desire to vomit, but their face remained unchanged. There was no way of knowing if she had actually puked, but Devin kept making too many weird, wet sounds that were triggering Jasper’s gag reflex. They flipped through their journals, knowing that they had written down about various example offerings. Performing an offering didn’t require much, and Jasper had both alcohol and bread with them.

In one small bowl they poured in red wine, held the bowl in both hands and raised it above their bowed head. They placed it in front of them, close to the mushrooms that surrounded Devin, before doing the same thing with a slice of bread, breaking it off into pieces so it fit neatly into the bowl and then performing the same action. They placed that beside the bowl of wine and closed their eyes. “I offer you this bread and this wine in exchange for my friend, Devin Xiao, to safely return from her entrapment in this faerie ring before me. She has done you no harm and deserves to leave freely from whence she came of this forest,” Jasper paused, allowing a silence to fill in the gaps of their offering.

A wet cough from Devin and a bit of mumbling, but no actual words that they could make out. So, they continued.

Jasper rummaged through their bag before pulling out a kitchen knife. Holding their palm directly above the bowl of wine, they pressed the blade against their palm and squeezed. A cut opened slowly, and a few drops of blood mingled seamlessly with the wine. “I offer part of myself as a token of my gratitude for ensuring her safety.”

More silence.

“Are you still with me, Devin?”

“Whatever you did... didn’t work...” Devin let out what sounded like a laugh, but which got cut off by more coughing and some gagging. A whine, or maybe it was supposed to be a cry. Jasper couldn’t tell if she was starting to cry. That seemed like it would take up too much energy that she no longer seemed to have. “It’s hard to... say it hurts... when everything... is numb...”

“It could take time just for my offering to be noticed. I would not abandon hope just yet. Be strong, okay?”

“What’s next?” Devin asked, sounding far more distant than she was supposed to be. Jasper sighed, but didn’t speak. “Is that all? Paranormal student and enthusiast... and yet...”

“Yet there’s nothing Jasper can do.”

Jasper looked up from the empty space in front of them and turned to see that Krystal and Zackery had returned. They both looked worse for wear; Zackery entered first, but his face was sunken, his eyes dull. Even when the two of them made eye contact, Zackery didn’t try to conceal the pain and discontent that was plain on his face. Krystal looked as though she had been

crying, but Jasper knew just how easy it was to set her off; it was Zackery, who looked like he had gotten punched in the gut, that concerned them the most. Jasper ignored Krystal's comment. "Something happened?"

"If anyone can help Devin, it'd be Zackery," Krystal said, her voice hoarse and flat. Jasper stared after her as she walked right by them, and then sat down on the ground. Then they noticed the rock that was placed against one side of her face.

"You found the witchrock! That is an accomplishment."

"I have something to tell you, but I don't know if it will help," Zackery whispered as he drew closer, sitting down beside Jasper. The three of them sat next to each other like ducks in a row. He looked at Jasper, and then at Krystal, and then Jasper had to spare a look in her direction too; she was dead silent, holding the witchrock to her eye and staring, staring.

Jasper stood up and moved away from her to give her some room, and Zackery followed. "What do you have to say?"

"This--this might sound weird... Or maybe it won't to you. So don't freak out, okay? But I'm, I was... The reason I care so much about these stupid mushrooms is because they were the last thing I saw before I died. I was trapped just like Devin had been and then I was able to leave, but only so far as the forest extended. And for so long I've been trying to find these ridiculous rings to figure out how they killed me, but there are so few of them by the edge of the woods and it's so easy getting lost in here that I could never find them again on my own." Zackery paused, and Jasper felt his eyes search their face, and so they remained as stoic as possible; don't flinch, don't break eye contact. When he caught the drift, Zackery continued. "But then you took me to your place and I realized I could leave the forest, I was breathing and I was alive again--I still am! But I think--"

"A life for a life. You are only alive because Devin took your place in the circle."

A pressure began to build deep inside of Jasper, rising up their core until it lodged in their throat. It wasn't so much the fact that they had been beside a supernatural being for longer than they had thought, or even the idea that in under a week they had come into contact with not one but two different types of supernatural entities that made them pause for breath and completely restructure the past few days in their head. Certainly, that put a few kinks into Jasper's current plan that might have otherwise been avoided had Zackery come clean earlier--but it bothered them that they had been completely unaware, totally unable to tell that there was something different about Zackery. Of course, Krystal and Devin had been the first to meet him, and then Jasper was influenced by their opinion of Zackery; and there was no way the two of them would have thought that he would be a ghost, and so Jasper had let their guard down.

That, or Jasper was just that piss-poor at being a paranormal investigator.

"I didn't know anything like this could have happened. I wouldn't have gotten anyone else involved if I had known." Zackery whispered, closing distance between him and Jasper. "All I wanted was to find out how I had..." He gulped, skipping over the word that made him visibly tremble. "Can you blame me for wanting to be alive for a little longer..?"

“You could have told us sooner. If my interest in the supernatural had made you uncomfortable, you could have told any one of us. It would have helped this whole ordeal. There might have been a way for the both of you to live.” Jasper lied through their teeth, and as they raised their eyes to meet Zackery’s, he smiled, not falling for it. Even Jasper couldn’t convince themselves of it, even as it fell from their lips.

“Maybe there could have been,” Zackery agreed, letting the lie go unacknowledged between them. “But that was my fault, not trusting you guys with the truth. Now the least I can do is help Devin, but I don’t know how I can do that. I’m sure you know something though, right? She doesn’t deserve to go through-- and I don’t deserve to--” Zackery pursed his lips, letting the words unsaid hang over the both of them, adding another layer of gloom and tension to the situation.

Whatever Jasper did, they knew they were sending someone off to their death. Their brain wasn’t working at full capacity; it seemed to be filled with nothing but liquid, slowing down their thought processes, making it impossible to wade through the options that could save Zackery, save Devin, save both of them. Time around Jasper seemed to slow down, even while they knew that the passing minutes were precious. When one option failed to save the two of them, Jasper immediately fell back on the idea of just letting Devin remain in the faerie ring--a thought that they didn’t want to recognize was their own, one they knew existed in the realms of their brain but one that they didn’t bring to the forefront, because they knew what that suggested. Jasper would be choosing nearly a stranger over--*another stranger*. And yet they knew that was no longer true, and that neither Zackery nor Devin felt unknown to them anymore. Devin was no longer just a friend of Krystal’s, and Zackery was no longer the guy that Krystal needed a baseball bat to deal with. But admitting this to themselves was no simple task, because it made the weight of their deaths that much heavier. Even if it wasn’t their hands committing the task, Jasper still felt like the executioner, with no way to escape without someone’s blood on their hands.

Jasper pursed their lips, not letting the words *I apologize* fall from their lips, knowing that they would be unable to stop once they got started. “There may be a way for you to enter the faerie ring. When I had found this tidbit, I did not think anything of it, because scholars claim that the only way to re-enter a faerie ring is to have already once been a part of the faerie realm. But, if you have already been entrapped in a faerie ring, then you have already crossed over to that realm at some point. It is as simple as circling around the ring nine times. Then you should be able to cross safely into the ring, and then Devin would need to leave--the rings were only made to encapture one human at a time.”

“Nine times?” Zackery wondered, before standing up. “Then let’s begin.”

Jasper watched as he walked away, over to where Krystal sat, Zackery’s eyes easily finding Devin in the ring even while Jasper saw nothing but green grass and small white mushrooms. The solution felt too simple. But then again, none of this was meant for them specifically. It was just the faerie’s way of playing a game, nothing more. To them, their lives

were nothing but pawns in their game, enjoying watching as all four of them squirmed under the pressure to stay alive and to stay sane amidst this forest that the faeries called home.

Jasper swallowed, hard, their body nothing more than pinpricks and numbness. If they closed their eyes, they could imagine thousands of pine needles forcing their way out of their skin, as if the needles had been caught inside of them, a part of their bloodstream and nervous system for so long and finally being set free in the most painful way possible. Never had Jasper expected their first dealing with a case of the supernatural to be so arduous, so futile. There had been this ideal that Jasper had held that if some light could be shed on these creatures, then they wouldn't be so feared; now all Jasper wanted was for them to return to the shadows from whence they came, so that they never had to feel so useless and bottomless again.

Chapter Eight

Devin couldn't make out any of the words her friends were saying, although she knew they were speaking to her. Where once there was just Krystal in her line of sight, then there was Zackery beside her, and not long after Jasper joined them, too, all three close together. Close to her. None of them were distinct shapes, just mere blurs of colors, but still she knew who was who; the most colorful was Krystal, with Jasper and Zackery both adorning all black, but Zackery having a shock of blond and Jasper remaining dark to the top of their head. Lifting her hand up was futile because she knew there still remained the barrier that separated them, but even if she wanted to she wasn't able. Her body was heavy, leaden, tingling, and she felt like she was floating above her body and yet imprisoned in it at the same time. This feeling would have terrified her if she was able to fully appreciate it, but she was too busy trying to keep her eyes open to wonder why she was finding it so hard to stay awake.

There was one other blur, parts of it red and parts of it brown, just out of the corner of her eye that had been slowly spreading for a while now. She didn't know where it began, although her face was wet and her mouth was full of salt.

As the yellow blur began to move, Devin closed her eyes. She had expected some sensation of relief considering the effort it took to keep them open, but there was none. Instead, she felt comfort in the fact that finally they were leaving; her friends knew better than to wait around for her, and she no longer had to feel guilty for being unable to hold her eyes open any longer.

Behind her eyelids was a world of whites, silvers, and light greens. At first she thought it was the very forest that she had been lying in, but it wasn't a forest at all. There were trees, but they were behind her, encircling her. She was in the middle of a meadow far more alive than the field that she had to cross to enter the forest--*her* forest.. There were flowers of all colors and species, perfuming the air with their intoxicating scents, just enough to be pleasant and noticeable but not overwhelming. In the middle of the expansive meadow was a pond, shimmering in the distance, mirroring the warm blue sky above it. There was no change from meadow to pond, just like the border between the forest and the meadow was one and the same. Grasses and flowers grew right beside the waterline.

Devin took one step forward and felt a hand grasp her shoulder. She turned around, smiling, to find Zackery behind her. Her smile only grew wider. "Zackery! Look at this place!" She cried, reaching out for his hand. A warm feeling in the pit of her stomach was growing, and all she wanted to do was frolick with Zackery, and look at each and every flower that this meadow had to offer. She wished she had her journals with her, so that she could draw them and maybe even take some specimens back with her.

"I see it, Devin, I see it..." He muttered, eyes wide and mouth agape as he took her hand, not even realizing what he was doing. When he finally managed to pry his eyes away from what

surrounded him, he leaned towards her. “Devin, you’ll be leaving soon, okay? E-everything is going to be fine.”

“Why would I want to *leave*?” Devin asked, waving her free arm to the great wonder around her. “This place is beautiful, and warm, and *open*.” She turned around suddenly, causing Zackery to stumble. “I want to go over there,” She pointed to the pond. “Isn’t it lovely? Look at all those flowers! I haven’t even seen those kinds before! How do you think they manage to grow here? And all of the *colors*!”

“What are you looking at?” Zackery asked, a little more forceful than he intended, grabbing each side of her face, his fingertips pressing too tightly against her forehead.

“You’re hurting me, Zackery,” Devin tried to say, but knew he couldn’t hear her.

“Just go, Devin, okay? Whatever you’re seeing, it’s not real. Juh--” Zackery’s grip on Devin loosened until his hands fell away, Devin falling a few steps back as he doubled over, hands on his knees. Each time he tried to straighten himself to a standing position, he was forced to hunch over, racked by coughing and violent shaking. It all happened very quickly, where one moment he looked fine and the next he was having difficulty standing on his own. Devin reached out to him, wrapping her arms around him to hold him up, trying to get him to stand. He sounded as if he was being choked, the way each breath was caught off, never getting enough air before he was forced to cough again. His coughs were followed by vomiting. Blood began to dribble down his chin. The blades of grass that surrounded the two of them began to shrivel, to brown, and then crumble into dust.

“What’s happening..?” Devin asked Zackery, even as her focus floated away from him, watching the scene around her melt away into the dry and cracked ground that was spreading under their feet. The only thing that remained was the pond, but it no longer sparkled as if touched by an unseen sun; instead, a grime began to cover the topmost layer, and a haze began to linger above the pond. The blue sky turned red and then a glowing brown, as if the world around them was being set ablaze.

Zackery didn’t feel any heavier in her arms, but still she could no longer support him as he dropped to his hands and knees. More blood, but it was no longer the liquid red that had burned the ground dry. Even before it left his body, the blood had dried, clumped together into the brown that was surrounding them, globs of it being forced from his body. His insides were dying faster than his outer shell could show, but Devin began to notice a difference on his skin, too. The yellow in his hair was graying, his already pale skin was turning ashen, and some of the brown clumps that he choked up were accompanied by a single speck of white. That too quickly decayed to nothing, although the gaps where his teeth had been allowed for fresh blood to flow down his mouth.

Zackery tried to curl into a ball to hide himself from Devin. He fell onto his side, his wrists cracking under the weight of trying to hold himself up. His back was turned to Devin, his eyes staring at the putrid pond before them.

All the while, she didn’t realize that her lungs were opening up, feeling freer than before. Her breathing was catching, but only to try and keep herself from sobbing at the sight of

Zackery. Her legs were shaking as fear coursed through her, sending a shiver down her spine. Even these sensations were welcome, because even these accursed feelings meant that she was alive, and had the energy to feel once more. She knew this without needing any explanation. The haze that had fallen over her was lifting, but now all she wanted was to be blind once more.

Now she had to watch as her friend writhed on the ground in front of her, dying.

“I’m sorry,” She whispered, eyes brimming with tears as she began to back away. The last thing she wanted to do was turn her back on him, but the world around her was darkening, no longer brown but black, dulling like the ending to a movie.

She turned towards the forest, dark and gloomy once more, and sprinted. Devin spared a glance over her shoulder at Zackery, white mushrooms growing out of the barren ground surrounding him.

A glimmer was the only warning--no, it was more like a glitch. Jasper and Krystal had remained seated while Zackery had walked around and entered the faerie ring, and were now unable to tear their eyes away from it while they awaited Devin’s return. Return? It seemed like an odd word because she had technically never left. Not being able to see her, though, made it hard to remember that she was with them, especially when she got quiet. Neither of them were sure whether they would see Zackery again. Krystal tried not to think about it, and instead focused on dear Devin being alive and well again. Jasper hoped for the best, wondering if there was a way that instead of returning to the faerie realm that Zackery might have completely crossed over, instead. That didn’t make them happy, but it seemed like the better option of the two.

Where once there was nothing but grass, Devin appeared. Krystal gasped, painful and loud, lunging towards her without a thought. Jasper immediately wrapped their arms around Krystal, holding her back. “We still are unsure if we should cross the border or not.”

“Devin!” Krystal whispered sharply. Devin didn’t open her eyes, her body splayed out in an odd position. The way her arms and legs were bent didn’t look comfortable, like she had been pushed to the ground and hadn’t moved, instead of laying down of her own accord. Surrounding her head was brown, the blades of grass tinted with the color and making the ground appear barren. There was the smell of blood and vomit, making Krystal’s eyes water and her own gag reflex active, but she did her best to ignore it, swallowing down the rising bile. “Devin, please wake up.”

Almost on command, Devin’s eyes fluttered open. She didn’t say anything, and didn’t keep her eyes open. Her hand reached out sluggishly, but the moment it crossed past the mushrooms--completely ignoring how her palms made contact with them, which sent a shudder through Krystal--Krystal reached out to hold her hand. Both she and Jasper reached forward to pull Devin toward them, getting little help from Devin. With Devin’s head on her shoulder, Krystal situated her so that she was practically sitting in her lap. She was unconscious again, and Krystal had to cradle her so she didn’t fall face-first. At the very least, Devin’s chest was rising and falling, and when Krystal held her tighter against her, she was happy not just to be able to

see her again but to be able to feel her. Devin felt real once more, and not a figment, a disembodied voice that could have been in Krystal's head the entire time. She was here, even if she was passed out.

“Zackery...” Jasper said, staring into the faerie ring as if he, too, might materialize in the middle of it. Was there a sound of longing in their voice, or was it mere dismay? Krystal pretended that she didn't hear their whisper, and focused her attention on Devin, stroking her hair. Jasper cleared their throat before standing up. Their bowed head made it impossible for Krystal to see what was written on their face, which for once was no longer the blank slate that it normally was. “Right, we should get out of here. It might still not be safe, and Devin should experience something more grounded in reality now that she is out of the faerie realm. She should probably eat something, too.”

Krystal stood up, trying to hold Devin, who was still limp and unconscious. Devin was bigger than her, so there was no way she could carry her; Jasper seemed to catch on and both of them wrapped an arm around her shoulder and began their trek through the forest. While Krystal fixated on Devin, she gave Jasper the witchrock so that the two of them didn't walk into any other faerie rings. Krystal would have figured that Jasper would have been excited to find out something they had suggested actually worked, but Jasper's face remained the same, cold and stone-like. Now and then, there would be moments of waking from Devin, but they never lasted long. Just enough so that she was able to stumble forward a few paces on her own, catching both Jasper and Krystal off guard, before passing out again, forcing the two of them to get used to carrying her on their own once more. If anything, her moments of waking were more difficult than her time passed out, due to their short brevity, which forced Jasper and Krystal to walk at such a slow pace.

“You know where you're going, right?” Krystal asked, in just an attempt to make conversation. She was sure she knew the answer, because even with the witchrock, it was nearly impossible to know where exactly one was going. After being in these woods for what she thought was far too long, she had long since lost her sense of direction, especially considering that having a sense of direction seemed to be a lost cause here. Krystal wasn't sure if she was supposed to be panicking or not; the only urgency that made her feet move faster was the thought of getting out of this place, eating some real food and sleeping in a real bed, with Devin beside her, never being so tantalizingly far from her again. She wasn't a huge fan of bugs and dirt to begin with, but since then, the woods had grown to another level of creepy that the very idea of being free of this place made her want to run for the entrance if she could. The primary concern before all of that, though, was making sure that Devin was capable of being awake for longer than a split second. “It's just a matter of getting out now, right? There's not anything you're not telling me?”

“Zackery told me how to get out of the forest with ease. You have nothing to worry about, just leave it to me and we will be out of here in no time. Devin should be fine if we just keep up the pace.” Jasper grunted, the witchrock never leaving their right eye.

Krystal didn't bother them any further.

Only when Krystal felt that she could no longer put one foot in front of the other, her legs feeling weighed down and on fire, did the forest finally reveal the exit to the field. Devin managed to stumble forward on her own, breaking free of Krystal and Jasper, and then collapsing onto the twilight field. Krystal felt every urge in her to do the same, to just curl up just out of reach of the woods and fall asleep. Jasper, though, was already reaching down to help Devin get back up.

“We should leave. My place is closest, so we can head there.”

Devin managed to stand up, but she was hunched over. It made Krystal nervous that she was having such a hard time, but she had to remember that she had no way of knowing what Devin had gone through. Sleeping on dirt was uncomfortable, and she also must be hungry, but Krystal had heard her choke and saw the random spots of blood stains that covered her clothes and which had surrounded her back in the woods. She didn't know how to bring it up, and so she kept quiet.

“My parents can never know about this,” Devin said, the first full, comprehensible thing she managed since the trio had become their trek through the woods.

“Trust me, I will not tell them,” Jasper said. The three of them exchanged glances and laughed, laughed while waves of relief washed over all of them. Not really funny, not really happy, but still felt the overwhelming urge to release any and all pent up emotion inside of them. Quickly, the laughter turned to tears for Devin. Jasper and Krystal quieted down, both of them closing the distance once more to offer their support.

“I'm sorry,” She whispered, wiping away tears. “You didn't deserve to go through... all of that... In the end, I did nothing but hurt you.” A hiccup, and then a sob. Jasper and Krystal exchanged glances, Jasper shrugging. Krystal was afraid that maybe Devin was seeing things, or had officially lost her senses. What she said didn't make sense.

“So, you *can* see me.” A small laugh. It sounded like it was playing on a broken record, skipping, struggling to be heard. “I didn't think I would catch your attention before you left,” Zackery said, a few feet behind the others, standing back inside the woods.

“Zackery,” Jasper whispered, otherwise frozen.

Devin was the only one to walk forward, reaching out her hand to him. She didn't go back into the forest. Zackery held out his hand, holding his palm out towards her, and she made to press her palm to his. Of course, it passed right through, Zackery feeling like nothing more than a passing breeze. As they did touch, though, Zackery *flickered*. His entire form seemed to gain strength, a physicality that was missing just moments before, seeming brighter, fuller, realer, before returning to a more faded version of himself. As the two of them lowered their hands, the flickering continued, where he began to wave in and out of sight, becoming at one moment transparent, and then completely gone, before finally stabilizing. Zackery closed his eyes, and Devin could see from the twisted expression on his face that whatever he was doing for them to be able to see him was taking a lot out of him.

“You’re okay?” Zackery asked, looking at Devin, trying and failing to not glance in Jasper’s direction. For all of their previous flat and blank demeanor, the expression now apparent on their face was too much for Zackery to look at directly.

“Thanks to you,” It felt odd to say, but it came spilling out of Devin’s mouth before she could stop herself. And it was true, even if only partially; and Zackery’s embarrassed and forced grin told her that he knew it, too. “I don’t want to leave you here with…” Her eyes drifted past Zackery into the forest, not sure of what to say. The faeries had never shown themselves physically, and it felt weird now that she was outside of the forest to say that word out loud. The word itself only seemed to truly exist inside the forest, just like the faeries did; referring to them in the real world felt taboo.

“There’s not much more they can do to me now, I think,” Another forced grin, until he looked at Krystal and Jasper and it broke. “You guys should get going.”

“We’ll come back tomorrow, okay?” Krystal whispered. She stood the furthest from Zackery, and couldn’t bring herself to look in his direction. She stared at the ground as she spoke. “Just take care of yourself until then, and we’ll be back.”

Jasper didn’t say anything, but was the first to turn around and start walking across the field. Zackery watched them leave, biting his lip. In the evening shadows, it was getting harder and harder to see him, just as he was finding it more and more difficult to keep his form. His head drooped and then flickered out of view. “Tomorrow, then,” His voice seemed to be all around them at once, as if riding on a nonexistent wind; even having stood beside them just moments before, he already seemed so far away.

Krystal was the next to start walking, grabbing onto the crook of Devin’s elbow to guide her away. The farther they walked across the field, the darker the forest became, nothing but blackness and shadows. Devin continued to look over her shoulder, though, for any last glimmer or glitch just on the edge. Too quickly, the forest became nothing but a single, solid mass of darkness behind them.

Chapter Nine

Devin had never been to Jasper's house before, and so when she woke up the next day, she was struck by fear at the unfamiliar surroundings. It was still dark, the sun just barely making its way across the horizon. Beside her was Krystal, still asleep. A few feet further away was Jasper. While she and Krystal were on the floor, Jasper was sleeping in a chair, feet hanging off the armrest. They didn't look very comfortable, but as Devin sat up, she realized that the floor hadn't been very kind to her either. She wasn't sure why they had decided to sleep here, instead of in any of the rooms of the household; most of the previous night was a blur to her. She remembered saying goodbye to Zackery, and making it to Jasper's house, but otherwise, the details were missing. Maybe she had been dozing off the entire time. Even after all of this sleep, she still just wanted to go home, lay in bed, and stay there for hours. Maybe days of not leaving the house would be the only remedy to feeling normal once more.

But she knew she needed to wake up now, or otherwise risk sleeping the day away. If there was one thing she did remember, it was their promise to Zackery, which she had no intention in breaking.

In her head, Devin bounced around the ideas of wandering Jasper's house by herself to wash up and maybe ransack it for food, or waking up Jasper and Krystal. Both of them seemed like frightening prospects.

Devin leaned her head forward, so that she hopefully wouldn't wake Jasper up. She poked Krystal's cheek without a response. "Krystal, wake up."

No response. Her cheeks were flushed, and Devin wondered for a moment if she was getting sick. Immediately she felt guilty, because of course she was to blame for that, being the reason that Krystal stayed outside, day and night. She pressed the back of her hand to Krystal's forehead, wondering if maybe she would need to stay behind while she and Jasper visited Zackery--a thought that made her nervous, but that didn't bother her as much as it might've before--when Krystal's eyes flickered open at the touch.

Devin shot her hand back. The guilty feeling grew stronger. "We're supposed to go back and check on Zackery."

Krystal groaned., closing her eyes and rolling away from Devin. "Not at the asscrack of dawn, we don't!"

"No swearing in this household."

Jasper was now awake, too.

"Oh, if you're awake, now we *really* need to get going," Krystal grimaced, sitting up on her knees. "Is anyone else, like, really dreading going back to that place, or what?"

Jasper didn't respond. They, too, were now sitting up, but they weren't paying attention. In their hand was the witchrock. Devin had no idea where they pulled that out of. Maybe Jasper had slept with it on their person.

“We don’t have to stay long,” Devin said. “But we do need to check on Zackery. That’s the least we could do. I mean, I’m not sure there’s much else we can do. We do need to be careful, though, especially you two.”

“You think it’s still dangerous? The forest?” Krystal asked.

“The forest itself is not dangerous, it is what lives in the forest. The faeries,” Jasper corrected. “Which we are able to escape as we please, leaving Zackery to take the brunt of their fury.”

“Shouldn’t everything be fine now since they have Zackery? I mean, I figure that’s why they were pissed off to begin with, because Zackery had been a part of the forest and then all of a sudden he wasn’t and there was just...” Krystal flailed her arms. “A vacuum that needed to be filled, and Devin was caught up in it. Am I not understanding something?” She asked, looking in Jasper’s direction.

They shrugged, just twirling the witchrock between their fingers.

“They’re going to be useless, aren’t they?” Krystal asked, without even lowering her voice. That earned a glance in her direction, but nothing more.

“I’d say we get going, maybe that will perk Jasper up a bit. Will you be taking any of your ghostly mechanisms, or don’t you have any?” Devin asked, standing up and holding out her hand to help Krystal off the floor.

“Yeah, just wait here. There is stuff I want to bring, but none of it should bother Zackery.” With that, Jasper jumped out of their chair and headed upstairs. From the sounds of it, they took two flights up. Devin resisted the urge to peek up the stairs to see how far up the house went. Even this ground floor was bigger than her entire home.

She hadn’t expected anything like this from Jasper’s family, but it also seemed lonely. The house was big and it was silent. Devin thought that Jasper had mentioned once before that they had a sibling--a sister, maybe? She couldn’t remember--but she was nowhere to be found. Was it possible the house was big enough that their sister could be off in a room and be unheard by them?

“I figure it is best for us to return with our pieces of iron. I imagine you still have your trinket, Krystal?” Jasper asked, returning quickly. They had yet another backpack slung over their shoulder. “Just to be on the safe side, I will also bring along one of my video cameras. It is unlikely we will notice anything, but perhaps it will help in giving Zackery the energy necessary to remain opaque. If he is unable, then we should still be able to locate him with this, like you said,” Jasper said, nodding in Devin’s direction.

Devin exchanged a surprised glance with Krystal, shaking her head frantically. Another joke lost on Jasper Rey.

“Furthermore,” Jasper continued, either unperturbed or oblivious to their exchange. “It should help us in determining what is real and what is not; it also has a heat map application which may come in handy, may not. I still do not completely understand the workings of the forest, so it is hard to guess which of my pieces of equipment would work best in keeping us safe.”

“You have extra batteries, don’t you?” Krystal piped in. “If there’s one thing I do know, it’s that the supernatural drain those things even faster than a tv remote.”

Jasper rolled their eyes. “Of course I do. I always carry plenty of spares. I am not a complete amateur.”

Devin and Krystal looked at each other again and laughed. This time, Jasper smiled in their direction, too. They all left for the forest content because they were together.

As they drew closer, though, they were reminded that in this place, there was no safety in numbers.

“We never told Zackery when we were coming, or where to meet us. This is going to be another sort of goose chase, isn’t it?” Krystal moaned as the trio crossed the field that would take them to the forest. “How are we supposed to find someone that we might not be able to see?”

“It makes sense for us to enter the forest. We may not want to go too deep at first, sort of testing the waters if you will. But I am sure it will be easy enough for him to find us, instead of the other way around.” Jasper stopped short of the forest, trying to pierce its shadowy front without walking in.

Devin looked at Krystal, and then at Jasper, both of them staring ahead, just inches in front of them, and yet neither walking. She took Krystal’s hand in hers and walked forward, taking her by surprise and waking her from her stupor. “There’s no point staying out here any longer. We came here to check on Zackery, and he won’t be out here.”

Krystal just nodded, and the two of them crossed over. She looked over her shoulder back at Jasper and held out her hand to them. They didn’t take it, but quickly followed in turn.

“There is nothing odd about the rings as far as I can see...” Jasper said, kneeling beside a faerie ring, video camera, open and rolling.

Although their original plan had been to not wander far from the entrance, none of them had been able to keep themselves from putting one foot in front of the other. It didn’t make sense for them to stand around waiting for someone--Krystal certainly didn’t want to stand in one place, and just watching Jasper made her want to keep moving. Even with all of their technology, and with Devin beside her, hand in hand, she was still afraid. There was too much about this place that she didn’t understand, and now it constantly felt like she was being watched.

She didn’t mention it, though, and tried to keep the complaining to a minimum. Devin was entranced by the woods for a reason far different from her own, and Jasper had never seemed too fazed by this place. Now they seemed more interested in it, not less, if that was even possible. She wasn’t sure if it was because of Zackery or because of the faeries. The camera in their hand was pointed at the mushrooms, as if expecting them to do something while being recorded. Nothing happened, and the heat map showed no irregularities. Krystal had no idea what this meant, except that Zackery was still nowhere to be found.

“Is there a chance that, maybe...?” Krystal trailed off, exchanging glances with Devin. They both looked at Jasper at the same time--for confirmation? To read their expression?--but Jasper was resolute on those mushrooms doing something, and refused to budge their camera.

It was, after all, the same faerie ring that Devin had been trapped in.

“We should keep looking, or at least try and make our way back to the border.” Devin insisted, moving to Jasper’s side. “We don’t know how long that could end up taking, and we might end up finding Zackery along the way.”

“We arrived here without any problems thanks to me, and I am sure of my ability to have us leave without harm either. You two can go for a walk, if you want.” Jasper held up the witchrock. “I will hold onto this, if it is alright with you.”

Devin left Jasper’s side and returned to Krystal, grabbing her wrist and pulling her slowly away from them. Even while she didn’t want to leave them on their own, the last thing she wanted to do was spend time arguing with Jasper. Besides, it seemed that the best way for them to deal with their feelings was by themselves, without any eavesdroppers.

The two didn’t need any words. Devin was just trying to bring Krystal to the edge of the forest, where she knew she would be more comfortable. Even when she said nothing, the way her eyes flicked with uncertainty from one thing to the next showed just how afraid she was of this place. Surprisingly, there was nothing to distract her on her walk; no flickering lights, except for the white starchy dust that sometimes floated in the air that was the indicator of a faerie ring.

In here, she didn’t feel like herself. She was a different person who really had visited another world. Even when she left the forest, she felt herself take a part of the faerie realm with her.

At some point, Krystal began tugging on her hand. Devin stopped in her tracks, figuring something was wrong, but Krystal didn’t stop walking, didn’t even look at her as she ended up taking the lead. Naturally, Devin followed. For a while, they kept up the leisurely pace that they had been going at, but when the tugging on her wrist grew a little rougher, a little more constant, but with still no word from Krystal, Devin tried to stop her.

“Krys, is everything okay? Do you want to stop for a moment?” She grew uneasy at the thought of Krystal leading them through the forest, basically blind. Devin could make sure, of course, that they didn’t wander into any of the faerie rings since she could see them well in advance, but this still felt like reckless behavior on Krystal’s part. “Hey, slow down at least, okay? My hand is starting to hurt!”

When she said that, Krystal let Devin’s hand drop away. The action stung Devin more than any of the catching thorns, and she reached out to try and hold her hand once more, but each time she tried, Krystal was just one step too far ahead of her. It was impossible to catch up with her in the forest, since even walking side-by-side was most of the time prohibited because of the density of trees. Running was just as dangerous, considering the brambles and the lack of space. It all made catching up to Krystal difficult, let alone trying to stop her in any way.

“Krys--tal,” Devin fumbled, breaking through a particularly thick patch of brambles by charging straight through them and then nearly falling face first on the other side. “Agh!”

Running her hands down her face, she didn't feel anything, but just looking over her arms she could see the scars of her chase through the forest.

But she was no longer in amidst the trees. Before her was a small sandy beach, and a large pond. Krystal was already wading in the water, and seemed unperturbed by the deepening water. It rose quickly on her short figure. Surrounding the pond itself was floating gold dust, and in most every direction she looked, Devin saw a bright white light that signalled a faerie ring just beyond the wooded border between the forest and the pond. They were everywhere, and Devin hadn't even noticed them, her attention too focused on Krystal. Guilt overwhelmed her, wondering what would have happened if Krystal had taken a wrong turn or was unable to stop herself fast enough before pummeling straight into one of those things.

"Krystal!" Devin cried, running across the short length of beach, but not crossing into the water. She looked down at the lapping water, which seemed to try to reach the toes of her shoes but without success, and saw nothing. She didn't see her face in the water, nor a reflection of the trees; Devin's hands flew up to her face to see if she was still able to see herself, and then even brushed her cheeks to make sure she could feel herself. For a moment, she believed that she had died--or maybe she was stuck in the faerie ring again, or both?--and so she could no longer see herself in the water because she wasn't really there physically. But as she began to wade through to Krystal's side, she realized that there was no reflection of her in the water, either. That was either a very bad or a very good thing, and it was too early for Devin to tell.

"What are you doing? I know you said the other day that you wanted to go swimming, but this..?" Devin asked, grabbing Krystal by the shoulder and forcing her to turn to face her.

Krystal's body immediately went limp, but not before Devin saw the whites of her eyes. With eyes rolled in the back of her head, she collapsed, sending splashes and ripples around them. Devin tried to catch her, but it was hard to keep her from getting wetter than she already was; it was more of a matter of just keeping her from falling underwater. Krystal wasn't heavy by any means, and in the water it should have been even easier to hold her up, and yet Devin was struggling, fighting just to keep her above water.

The water trembled, and Devin thought she felt the ground shake beneath her, even through nearly a foot of water. She thought it was a mini-earthquake, the way it shook the ground of the pond and broke the tension of the surface. But then she realized that it wasn't a one time occurrence, and that the tremors were steady, rhythmic even.

With Krystal unconscious in her arms, Devin dragged her out of the water. Once she was on land, it became infinitely easier to carry her, no longer having a fighting force trying to draw her back into the water. She laid her down on the beach, on her side, and almost immediately Krystal's eyes flew open and she spat up water.

Devin waited for her to catch her breath before she bombarded Krystal with questions. Krystal seemed to sense that she was biting her tongue and the moment that she could, she started talking. Her voice was raspy and she was shaking, but Devin no longer felt the ground quaking beneath them.

“I’ve been here before. With Zackery.” Krystal gasped, eyes glazed over as she looked out over the pond. “I don’t know why this keeps happening.”

“He must have been thrilled, I’m guessing this was the place he’d been looking for all along.” Devin offered a small laugh, and then shivered. Why had he been looking for this, of all places? Just looking at it gave her the creeps. The rest of the forest was a bounty of nature, truly what one would think of when they thought of flora and plant life. Even with the faerie rings and the lack of animals, it still felt real and alive. But here, by the pond, it felt alive when it wasn’t supposed to; it didn’t feel real, either, with the way that it lacked any reflection and glittered with gold just above the surface. This was not a place Krystal was supposed to be, having never entered the faerie realm before; and Devin felt that, except for the faerie ring, that was as close to their world that they had been yet.

“We need to get out of here,” Devin whispered, even though there was no one around to hear them, she still felt as though there were ears everywhere.

“I hope Jasper had better luck finding Zackery than we did,” Krystal groaned. She slowly stood up, keeping her eyes locked on the pond even as she tried to dry herself off a little. Devin stepped into action, grabbing her wrist and jerking on it, hard, forcing her to break eye contact and retreating back into the trees.

“Then, let’s go find them,” Devin said, her voice soft and low but still managing to grab Krystal’s attention.

“We can try.”

“It only works if you’re leading,” Krystal muttered as Jasper and Zackery came into view. Jasper was sitting on the ground, and Zackery was imitating them, although floating a few inches off the ground. “Or Zackery.”

“Sorry, what?” Zackery asked. “What did I do?”

“You know exactly what you did!” Krystal plopped down across from Jasper. Devin sat beside her, and across from Zackery. The foursome naturally sat in a circle when they gathered together. “Whereas I still have no idea what I do, or what happens when I’m wandering through this place.”

“It happened again? You went to the pond on your own?” Zackery leaned forward, feeling like a passing rush of cold air. “That’s dangerous. If you ever get separated from one of us…”

“Perhaps they are trying to talk to us,” Jasper wondered aloud, forefinger pressed to their chin in thought. “What is the difference between finding yourself in a faerie ring, or walking into the middle of a pond?”

Zackery rolled his eyes. “Please, don’t.”

“I have already written it into my notebook. It will be a part of my next studied subject.”

Both Krystal and Zackery groaned. But Devin smiled, exchanging glances with Jasper. She wouldn’t say it aloud, not with Krystal beside her, but she appreciated Jasper’s attempts at

understanding this place. All she wanted was to keep Krystal safe, especially now that this place seemed to have its eyes on her.

Ever since leaving the faerie ring, she could feel them watching, hiding just out of view. The gleams of gold were taunting her, hints to where they had been, where they had touched. She wondered if, in the faerie's eyes, she glowed gold, too.

"Devin!" Zackery cried, waving a translucent hand in front of her face. It became more solid as he did so, and a shiver coursed down her spine. "Aren't you listening?"

"Oh! Yeah," Devin nodded, smiling. When she felt herself slipping, one of them was always there to call her out of her thoughts. Krystal thought that the forest no longer worked on her, but she still felt she had a long way to go before she was impervious to its tricks. "Yeah, I'm listening. Tomorrow too, right?"

Epilogue

Everything was quiet. The sun was shining, but there were clouds in the distance and the wind was picking up, so Devin knew that she had only a limited amount of time today. The last thing she wanted to be caught in was a summer storm, and she didn't want to imagine what that would be like while in the forest. As she passed across the border of the field into the forest, she was immediately surrounded by a busy rush, overwhelming but welcoming compared to the vacant grass behind her.

The leaves retained their vibrant greens, and the trunks of trees were still healthy, roots growing strong beneath them, but now Devin was able to see more. She knew where to step and where to avoid because of the warning white lights of the faerie rings; trees that had recently been ill and taken care of by a faerie sparkled as if it was under a constant direct ray of sun. There was a golden quality to the forest that she hadn't seen before, making it feel warmer. This warmth was a deception, though. It looked kind and friendly, but even as things got easier for her, she knew the forest may still try and play cruel tricks on her--tricks that could be harmful and dangerous. Deadly.

Krystal would not have come with her today even if Devin had asked, and so she didn't. Part of her worried if she would come back after the pond incident, but she also understood if Krystal needed to take a breather from the place. The sight of Krystal walking blindly into the pond appeared every time Devin closed her eyes, and it made even her uneasy coming back to this place.

Jasper had offered to join her, but Zackery had already told Devin in advance--knowing that they would try and do something like that--and told her to deny them. She didn't know how Zackery knew Jasper would ask to join her, but she knew the two of them talked in private as often as she and Krystal did. While hanging out at Jasper's, she also could have sworn she saw a ouija board. Devin didn't think it worked, but... she wasn't too sure. Regardless, she did as Zackery asked, and it was just her walking alone through the forest, knowing that halfway to the pond she would find Zackery waiting for her. He was no longer stuck in the faerie ring that had trapped them both, yet he still spent most of his time near it. He had nothing but time, of course,

and nowhere to go except wandering forever amidst these trees, and still he chose this one small section. If she had been in his place--but she didn't like thinking about that, and instead just focused on what she could do for him.

Although it was rather pointless now for her and Zackery, the two of them had put up different colored ribbons tied onto trees to let Jasper and Krystal know where exactly they were heading. Blue ribbons meant the wanderer was still en route to the pond; yellow meant they were getting closer to the grass field that Devin had just passed through. White ribbons weren't tied around singular trees but instead bound several trees together, sort of like tying off a crime scene, but in this case it was to warn Jasper and Krystal of the faerie rings that they still could not see with their naked eye. None of them were sure what would happen if any of them crossed into a ring, but none of them wanted to test it again. Even Devin was cautious to not pass through a line of the small white mushrooms, although she wasn't sure they would hold her captive again. Even with the witchrock to assist them, Zackery and Devin both wanted to be as safe as possible. The witchrock wasn't fool-proof; even though it gave the ability to see through a faerie's guise, it didn't keep the user from getting distracted and dropping the witchrock from one's line of sight. Once that happened, it was a useless rock in someone's hand or pocket. Outside of the natural greens and browns of the forest, the ribbons stood out, too, which helped keep three of them grounded in reality. And, most obviously, there was only one witchrock they had found so far. If there came a time that one person wanted to visit the forest and the other had the witchrock, then the plans would have to be deferred. Or risk getting caught in the forest's traps.

"You're here," Zackery said in way of greeting. Even though she, Jasper, and Krystal had been coming to visit nearly everyday, sometimes all three and sometimes individually, Zackery always uttered that phrase first, as if he was perpetually surprised. Devin found it sad, and hoped he would stop soon.

"Give me a minute before we leave, okay?" Devin asked, even though Zackery hadn't moved from his spot. He knew better than to move too quickly, because it expended too much of his energy. Being close to Devin, or to any of the others often helped in keeping his form, but that took a toll on them. If they wanted to hang out for long periods of time, it meant Zackery had to wait to start using their energy to remain visible. So, he didn't move, just watched as Devin kneeled beside the ring of mushrooms. She plucked out the mushrooms and in the hole the stem left behind, she covered it up with dirt.

"Is Jasper still holed up in their room?" Zackery asked after a few minutes of Devin working in silence.

"Whenever they aren't here, then yeah," Devin nodded absently, too absorbed to really put an effort in the conversation.

"They don't have to try so hard," Zackery muttered. Devin couldn't tell what he was angry about, the fact that Jasper's studies made it so they couldn't visit Zackery as often, or the topic of Jasper's studies.

"I don't want to talk about that," Devin said quickly. She didn't like Jasper digging around materials for crossovers or exorcisms, either, but they seemed hell-bent on finding a way

for Zackery to get out of this forest, even if it didn't include being alive. Unfortunately, part of her understood why Zackery was complacent with his spiritual form; he was still on Earth, and he could still be with her and Jasper and Krystal. Thoughts of their time together in what must have been the faerie realm still scorched her dreams, watching as her friend died for her, with nothing she could do but walk away...

The idea of disappearing forever after suffering through all of that meant, in Devin's eyes, that the pain was for naught. And she would do anything to make Zackery more at ease, unsure how he managed to stay sane when his world was so limited and so monotonous.

"I don't want them doing any supernatural spells behind my back, okay? You need to tell Jasper that, remind them that any crazy idea of theirs needs to be run by me, the actual dead guy, first," Zackery said, half-smiling. Devin offered a smile in return, unsure where his joke ended and his serious reprimand began. "If you're done, then let's go."

Zackery brought her to the pond that just days ago had entangled Krystal in awe. Devin understood why, even if she wasn't as captivated by it, nor was she able to find it with such ease that Zackery and Krystal could. There was a beauty to it that made it hard to keep herself from running head first into it; the other side to its appeal was darker. The pond felt alive, haunted. There were times Devin could swear that the ripples on the surface of the water matched with a distant beating, the rhythm matching that of a heart. If this place wasn't located in the center of the forest that had killed Zackery, had nearly killed her, maybe she would have been able to truly appreciate this nature sanctuary for what it could have been. Anywhere else, a hidden gem like this would have been where she would feel safest; here, she felt like she was willingly entering the jaws of a giant beast.

Directly into its gaping mouth, Devin placed a leaf boat that held a puddle of wine. She pushed it off so that it would float across the pond. End up where it may, it always disappeared by the next time she and Zackery returned.

Although Krystal and Jasper had both visited the pond, they weren't allowed back if Devin and Zackery could help it. Neither of them had been susceptible to the faerie realm thus far, and both of them wanted to keep it that way. In hopes that when both of them did join Devin in the forest and visited Zackery that they would be safe, she and Zackery made it a habit of visiting the pond weekly and placing offerings as Jasper had done when Devin was stuck in the faerie ring. There was no sign that this kept them any safer, but there was also no damage done by doing it, and so it had become a habit. Zackery and Devin were able to wander through the forest with an ease that Krystal and Jasper were unable to master, even while using the witchrock. That ease had come with a price, though, that Zackery and Devin didn't want them to pay.

"You had seen something different than I had, at first," Zackery said, testing the topic by checking Devin's facial expression before continuing. "What was it like there? I mean, we're thinking that was the faerie realm, right?"

"I don't know," Devin whispered, eyes locked on the bobbing leaf boat. "I honestly thought it was the afterlife. I thought I was dead. Then I saw you, and I was like, ninety percent

sure I was dead.” She offered a weak smile in his direction, which he returned. “Until, of course, you started... and I realized that wasn’t possible.” She pursed her lips into a tight, straight line, her lips turning white. “Were either vision of what we saw real? They both could have been whatever the faeries wanted us to see. We still might have no idea where they come from, and what it looks like.”

“There’s one way to find out.”

Devin rolled her eyes. The two of them talked about the same things over and over, circling around subjects without ever actually breaching them or coming to a decision. Zackery and Devin’s moment together in that expanse which looked like their forest and field, but wasn’t, was something they had kept secret even from Krystal and Jasper. “You plan on including or skipping over the gory details of your death while describing the view to Jasper?” A bit of a bite, harsher than she meant it to come out, but the sight was still seared to the backs of her eyelids. Having no one to talk to about it except Zackery--which meant having no one to talk to about it--was painful, tormenting.

He shook his head, but didn’t say anything. The two of them remained side-by-side, kneeling together as they watched the pond. Without changing position and in barely the time it took to blink, Zackery was kneeling just inches from Devin, a shiver coursing up her spine and goosebumps popping up along her arms. She wondered what it was like when she or the others weren’t there to give Zackery the energy he needed to retain his form, what it felt like to exist without a physical form. She wondered if he really did exist when they weren’t around, or if he was only truly here for their sake. Both options seemed sad and lonely, emotions enhanced by the negativity that often washed over her whenever Zackery drew energy from her. She wasn’t sure if Jasper or Krystal were the same, but with him so close, she could feel what he was feeling--or he somehow managed to make her feel what he was feeling, her own emotions pushed into a backburner. She didn’t know if he did this on purpose, or if he knew he was capable of this at all.

Amongst their ghost studies, Jasper was also looking into what extent the sharing of a faerie ring had had on both Devin and Zackery. They assumed their lifelines were now somehow connected, and were afraid of what the ramifications were because of the situation. She and Zackery agreed that they would only tell Jasper about their connection after they had burned out from studying. The last the thing the two of them wanted to do was encourage Jasper’s studying craze. Even while not being the major focus and purpose for their tunnel vision, Devin still felt like Jasper was studying her, putting her under a microscope and probing her.

“Just tell Jasper to come when they’re free, okay?” Zackery asked, standing up. He didn’t so much walk away as he floated away, something he did when his mind was too preoccupied to bother putting in the extra effort it took to appear more human and less *ghostly*. Devin felt weird following after him, the way his feet not only dragged behind the rest of his body like he was leaning forward, but also the way his feet hovered a few inches off the ground.

This was his way of walking her out of the forest.

“I’ll pass it along,” Devin assured him, nodding her head even though he couldn’t see her.

Zackery stopped moving, an action done with ease for him but which caught Devin off guard and nearly walking straight into him--straight through him. She followed his eyes, turned to the side of them.

White star lilies, all blooming in a circle as if they had been growing for seasons, and weren’t just planted minutes earlier. A shiver coursed down Devin’s spine, shocked by the speed and too aware from the gold sparkles above each flower that faeries had just been here, or were still here, hiding and unseen. Even in the midday heat, she was freezing, her right arm burning from the cold.

She looked at her arm to see a pale hand gripping onto it, though the touch was nothing more than ice cubes pressed to her skin. Devin looked up at Zackery to see his lip quivering, mouth slightly agape as he stared at the flowers that encircled where he had lost his life not once but twice.

“It’s a cruel tease, isn’t it?” Zackery asked, even with misty eyes. “I know that it was done with kindness, but they still need to leave their touch. They need to remind me that in here, it’s by their rules.” He bowed his head. “I won’t lie and say I’m not afraid of this place, sometimes. It’s only bearable when you guys are here with me.”

“We’ll keep coming back, okay? We won’t leave you alone in here.” Devin said. It was the truth. Even if she didn’t consider Zackery a friend, she wouldn’t leave her worst enemy alone in this place, not after what she experienced. The guilt would eat her alive.

The storm clouds that were brewing far above their heads were blocked from view by the thick canopy. Even so, Devin could hear the rain, even while she couldn’t feel it, couldn’t see it. The forest, dark as it was, offered solace from the shower.

Devin settled herself down on the ground. Zackery stared at her, eyebrows raised but mimicking her actions as best he could. She reached a hand out to the lilies, gold dust flickering across her hands. “I’ll wait out the storm with you, okay?”