

The Lunar Agent

First Ten Chapters

Chapter One

I collect memories like the neighborhood kids collect trash to sell and feta rolls to get high off of. Everyone collects them, of course, but I channel extreme care into curating my... let's call it a mental portfolio. My mental portfolio has less space than my two-room house that's too small to house the four people who occupy it. This means I can't afford to cling to anything that won't contribute to the survival of my family, nor can I bring myself to preserve pieces of the past that haunt me.

I live by a simple principle: keep the useful, discard the useless. It helps me pretend I have a say in what gets kept or discarded.

Sometimes, I faintly feel the remnants of what I've forgotten as dull aches pulsating through my bones, muscles, blood—*everything*—but these reveries are emotions without facts, timelines, or characters attached to them. Anchorless feelings are easy to dismiss.

Yesterday, my younger sister Yasmin knocked a pitcher of water onto the floor, dampening the patch of dirt under it with dark splotches. Mona, my older sister, chuckled at the grievance before playfully hurling a glistening clump of dirt at Yasmin's stomach. Considering who Mona usually is, it was a surprisingly heartwarming display of good humor from the girl, who usually wallows in hatred and self-pity. The memory itself had been rare enough to deserve to be kept.

Today, Mona's less amicable. My limbs are strewn across the floor and my body, frail from fatigue, absorbs kick after kick. *Thud. Thud. Thud.* Mona's bare foot crashes against my sides and into my chest, and with every kick, I gasp for a little more air, feeling my heart creep a little closer to exploding. Am I crazy for feeling *gratitude* that Mona's been kind enough to spare my face and neck? If she wanted to kill me right now, she'd be able to in a matter of seconds. She hovers over me at almost six feet tall, and her stocky body is toned and muscle-dense. I don't know how, since she's the laziest pig I know, but she's a honed killing machine against my weak, scrawny body. She's *sparing* me for some reason... but what did I do again?

I curse mentally as my body burns insistently, throbs violently, begging me to get myself out of this situation. A surge of adrenaline ignites my rage and for a second, I'm tempted to fight back, but my common sense extinguishes it just as quickly. If I fight back, I die. I can't prove this, but I know it almost instinctively, just like I've always known without having to be taught that water cures thirst. So I have no choice but to lay there, frozen in dissociative shock, vaguely recalling that just moments before she delivered her first kick tonight, Mona had heavily berated me for giving her "bad feta." She claimed the stuff didn't work on her today, and I was in the middle of explaining that maybe her tolerance had just grown too high—maybe she now needed *ten* ounces to feel what *one* ounce made her feel a month ago...

As pain continues to sear through me, I feel a strange sense of comfort overwhelm me all of a sudden. My body has entered a dream-like state of shock that makes me feel like my body isn't even *mine*, so neither is the pain, right? Plus, pain doesn't mean anything if it can't be remembered. I know I'll forget all of this by tomorrow morning—that's always how it goes—but something still nags at me. Though I'll forget this assault, my body won't. I don't need memories to know my skin prickles when Mona's near me. When she opens her mouth, my heart rate skyrockets, and before I even process a single conscious thought, I'm hyper aware of a million things at once: all the escape routes available to me, where Yasmin is, and what kind of story I can cook up to diffuse any brewing conflict. Well, "conflict."

I can't remember a single thing Mona's done wrong to me, barring this assault, yet I *can* remember feeling afraid of her millions of times before. I can't forget emotions no matter how hard I try. And those emotions are the very essence of pain.

Chapter Two

I wake up and prop myself up by my elbow, then immediately drop back to the cloth-padded floor when a dull pain thuds up my right arm. Why am I in pain?

"What the heck?" I mutter, taking three seconds to unblur my vision and realize my words have an audience. Crouched directly in front of me in a ridiculous frog-like pose, one that looks downright uncomfortable, is my younger sister Yasmin—the *good* one. She's probably the only friend I have left. There are people I used to consider

friends, but none of them maintained contact with me after I had to move out of my old home... what was left of it, anyway. I don't think I'm really the friend type anymore, so I'm not very bothered by this fact. The acts of building and maintaining friendship require a certain kind of patience that I desperately lack.

Yasmin, on the other hand, is the goddess of patience. She constantly tests mine with her clinginess and attention-seeking behavior, which can get grating when I need alone time, but I can't blame her. Who else does she even have? I think I'm her only friend left, too, because the three of us have been trapped in survival-comes-first limbo for the past few years.

Yasmin's annoying little kid tendencies become worth it each time I get frustrated about my memory loss because each time I vent, she lends me a thoughtful ear. Yasmin's the only one who knows about this, and somehow, she actually *believes* me. I can't tell if that makes me crazier or her, but I don't care—just the fact that she's *that* open-minded makes her indispensable to me. She makes me feel safe, too, because she gives me a reason to push for more than just staying alive.

I have so many memories with Yasmin compared to Mona. I don't think I've ever forgotten any good memories with her, or good memories in general, but based on some of the inexplicable bruises I've seen on the kid, I highly doubt I haven't buried away some traumatic sights. My fists clench at the thought of anyone hurting Yasmin. And by anyone, I mean Mona.

As ridiculous as Yasmin looks in her jittery, unstable crouch, her face is solemn and stone-like. Whenever she can tell I'm hurt, she slips into therapist mode, yet I can never take her seriously because therapist-Yasmin acts like a middle-aged widow instead of an adorable 12-year-old. I have to give her credit for sometimes being as wise as middle-aged widows must be, though. I mean, those women know how to set themselves up for life.

“Jana,” she sings.

My shoulders relax a bit. Mona isn't here—she's usually gone for most of the day, doing who knows what. Daytime is when I feel most alive. I love getting doused in Sollight as I work up a satisfying sweat day after day, doing honest work growing food for all of us while teaching Yasmin how to live off the land. During these

work/educational sessions, there's no Mona-related anxiety. *That* ramps up around Solset, when the world and all its color plunge into inscrutable blackness.

All of a sudden, I notice I'm more hurt than I initially felt. My right elbow's funny bone shoots jolts of pain up and down my right arm, as sporadic as sparks spraying out of a loose power wire. The sparks dull and flare up according to how I move my arm, and right now, as painful as it feels, I keep my arm stone-still to avoid making it even worse. Though I can't assess the damage through my thick wool sweater, I know my chest is bruised from the way aches seem to bubble beneath my skin and I sense almost no blood. The only blood seems to be a wound on my left knee leaking a thin trickle of blood.

What *happened*? I feel numb, separate from the world around me, even from Yasmin. She has to repeat her question a few times to make reality come back into focus.

"Jana," she repeats, and although she pats my arm gently (I don't tell her each pat feels like an electric shock) and feigns nonchalance, her voice quivers. Even Jana the esteemed pre-teen therapist can't help but betray her fear every now and then. "Do you remember what happened?"

Tears begin to well up in my eyes, and when my gaze meets hers, the curiosity in her face quells. I don't have to tell her the answer. Her beady black eyes, which I've teased her about being rodent-like, flick to the ceiling, as if there's something more interesting than a cheap metallic roof to look at up there. I silently appreciate the privacy she gives me, and I turn away to snivel—my shame at sniveling only makes me snivel more. Why do I have to be such a baby? I have the luxury of forgetting my pain and I still act like I have to feel it.

I compose myself, reminding myself of how much worse Yasmin must have it than me. When my breathing steadies, her raspy voice fills the house again.

"It's okay, Jana. You're okay. I did what you taught me, fixed you up a little bit. I don't think you remember. But I gave you some medicine I, er... made."

My eyes widen in surprise. Yasmin can already concoct medicines? How long have I been out? I don't even remember having taught her about medicinal plants yet. I've only just begun to teach her about soil quality and fertilizers (a topic she thinks is stinky, rightfully so).

“Someone’s been doing some independent studying, huh?”

Yasmin does a quick, giddy bounce in her crouch, sensing my pride. “Yeah,” she shrugs, trying adorably hard to seem casual. “It’s just a painkiller, but it seemed to help you sleep, which you definitely needed. You didn’t get any before because of your elbow.”

I cringe at the word *elbow*. It’s as if hearing the word makes the pain flare back up to maximum heat, and I suppress a gasp of agony I know will kill Yasmin’s cheery energy. Smiling through gritted teeth, I mutter as calmly as possible, “Not bad, kid. I don’t even know how you managed to reach my copy of Medicinal Herbs. I keep it on the top shelf!”

Her smile falters, bringing mine down with it. “Oh, that... that was already on the floor from last night. You really don’t remember anything?”

What could’ve hurt me *and* brought down books?

Not earthquakes. Everyone who managed to survive Armageddon crowded together in the center of Armagedda, a mountainous land mass squared securely between two fault lines. It’s immune from almost all natural disasters because if it weren’t, its inhabitants would’ve died with the rest of humankind two centuries ago. People talk about how the rest of the world was swallowed up by molten fire, roaring water, crazed bloodthirsty animals, and violent earthquakes that swallowed everything in their wake. My father taught me these disasters were punishments inflicted upon humankind by Luna, goddess of the moon, supposedly because humans weren’t grateful enough for her. (She sounds like a real peach.) She “generously” decided to spare a handful of lucky souls by allowing them to live on Armagedda, where they got a second chance to show Luna proper respect. I’ve tried to feel grateful for being a descendant of one of those lucky few, but all I’m able to feel towards Luna is resentment.

Not only was Luna egotistical enough to commit mass murder solely because she didn’t feel *appreciated* enough, but I also suspect she’s somehow behind the constant fog lingering in my brain that swallows up my memories without notice or consent. It always happens at night—when Luna herself rises and falls through the night sky—and I feel like this *can’t* be a coincidence. It’s bizarre to acknowledge the existence of a

goddess and the material effect she has on you *without* worshiping her. It fills me with dread that one day, she'll rob me not just of my memories, but my life as well.

Yasmin's question returns to the forefront of my mind. What don't I remember? As I scan our dwelling, I observe that it's left in a state of absolute disarray. My bookshelf, given to me by my father, lays broken in heaps of splinters that weave in and out of all the books strewn across the ground. If this wasn't a natural disaster or a burglary, which definitely wouldn't have ended with us being spared, that left one thing to suspect—or rather, one person. *Mona*.

"That witch," I hiss, feeling my cheeks burn as my two sides go to war. One instinctively knows Mona is dangerous, someone who has hurt me and Yasmin both, and it longs to remove her from our lives for our own safety—no matter the cost. The other, equally in control of my whole self, feels an obligation to protect her. She's still my sister. In a way, I'm being unfair to her, hating her based on pure intuitive distrust instead of concrete memories or evidence of her wrongdoing.

I correct myself: there *is* evidence. The fact that I keep waking up to chaos, including injuries and property destruction, without remembering what *caused* that chaos indicates that I routinely forget traumatic events at night. Also, the gaps in my memory are almost always directly preceded by memories of Mona. If Mona isn't the one who did this to me, who else could it have been?

And why do I still work an extra two hours a day just to plant and harvest extra food for her? Is it because I think she'll steal from me and Yasmin... or is it because I still care about her?

For the next thirty minutes, Yasmin narrates what happened. Turns out she was outside peeping in, through a hole of her own creation, watching my entire assault unfold. I had been making "Tomato-Potato soup" (gross, in my opinion, but it's also Yasmin's favorite—which makes me question her fondness for me) when Mona stormed through the door and flew into an explosive rage. Yasmin had been bathing outside when she heard the commotion and decided to peer through the hole drilled into the wall of our house, exactly at her eye level. She's so short it actually escaped my attention,

which surprises me. Usually, I'm hyper attuned to everything around me—at least, I think so? I guess if I weren't, I wouldn't know.

Yasmin's eyes widen as she tells a tale I've never heard before, one that sounds so wrong. She gets out of her comical crouch and crosses her legs, looking surprisingly poised.

"I look into the hole and see Mona approaching you, screaming 'Where's the good feta?' over and over again. She's so addicted to that stuff," Yasmin sputters angrily, referring to the crumbly powder that's been popular to smoke for ages. I've never tried it, but I've heard it turns you into a zombie. Feta addicts seem to lose themselves slowly and steadily over time. It starts with a gentle numbness, I've heard, the type that makes the world feel a little brighter by dulling out the pain. Then the numbness turns into apathy. You stop caring about the people you love. And soon, you stop caring about yourself. I don't even know what it means to forget yourself, but you forget yourself entirely, too.

"That witch," she adds emphatically when she notices my lack of response.

I cringe at Yasmin's use of the word "witch." Though Mona *is* a witch, Yasmin's probably too young to be using that kind of language... right? I'll have to be careful about mouthing off to her, which is hard to do when a little kid is also your therapist and only source of catharsis aside from farming.

"Don't say that until your fourteenth birthday." The end of my statement slightly curls up in doubt as I begin to question why I chose the arbitrary age of fourteen. I mean, why can't she cuss now? Whatever. It's not like I didn't cuss well before her age. "Yeah. Mona is a fiend for that stuff. Promise me you'll never go near feta, Yas. *Promise.*"

She sighs and rolls her eyes, which stings a little. I know I can be overprotective, but what else can I be when my sister is so woefully *underprotected* without me? I may be fifteen, but I can take care of her. I have to, so I can. Still, she nods after, which placates me for the moment.

"Never," she says robotically just to humor me. She isn't lying, I know she has zero interest in smoking feta, but she also doesn't seem to understand the importance of avoiding it. She thinks of feta as gross and undesirable. I think of it as pure danger, the

slow insidious kind that creeps into your life and ruins it before you even notice—surely, you can understand why I’d avoid the thing. I’m already paranoid that there’s a side of me lurking in my forgotten memories that I’ll never know. I don’t need to lose even more of myself.

She continues her story: “Anyway, after she screams at you for a bit, she starts shoving you around as well. And like usual, you don’t *do* anything.” Her lip twitches in annoyance. I know she thinks I’m a coward. “I wish you would defend yourself. You don’t even try to tell her off. It’s like you just... *freeze*. You go limp and she kicks you around until I think you’re ‘geddon dead.”

Where’d she pick up that expression? That meant near death, in a state worse than death, praying *for* death. It was an idea that filled me with despair to think about even vaguely. How had Yasmin felt seeing me in such a hopeless state? Had she mentally prepared for my death?

I swallow the questions. They don’t matter. I know I’ll just forget this conversation anyway—being told about what happened is traumatic in and of itself, so I’m almost certain I won’t remember this conversation after Luneset, which is when Luna begins to descend from the heights of the night sky. In fact, I’m sure I forget a *lot* of what Yasmin tells me. In my mental portfolio, most of the therapy sessions I can recall are riddled with holes. I hate forgetting because forgetting is what allows me to keep giving Mona the benefit of the doubt, chastising myself for feeling “unjustified” anxiety around her, and satiating the part of me that *so badly* needs to take care of her. Family is family, and even if I feel like she’s dangerous...

Speaking of Mona, where is she? She usually returned by Solset, but Sol had left the sky hours ago and she hasn’t yet returned.

Yasmin crosses the room and looks at the night sky through her peephole. “She’s out,” she whispers. For a second, dread creeps up my spine and I think she means Mona, but Yasmin’s giant grin makes me realize it’s the *other* she—Luna. Her beauty is the only aspect of my father’s admiration for her I can understand. He’s an eccentric man of endless questions who always tries to weave science and religion together, passing down to us a tapestry of contradictions disguised as explanations. I have no idea how such an empirical man can also be so... superstitious. Sure, Luna and Sol undeniably exist. They’re the moon goddess and sun god respectively, siblings with endless influence over

the natural world and all sorts of different branches of science. I mean, understanding Sol and Sollight is critical to anyone who wants to maintain a prosperous farm. But why do Sol and Luna deserve worship just because they're powerful? Doesn't it take more than just raw power for something—someone—to be ordained a god?

Yasmin and I are as far from Luna worshippers—Luneists, I think they're called—as you can get, which I'm sure disappoints my father. Still, I can't help but fawn over her beauty each time she's in the sky. There's something about the silky glow she emits that soothes even the sharpest of my pains, which is particularly nice after I receive a royal beating. I rush outside to see tonight's Lunerise.

Blazing outside our house, Luna—a shimmering celestial being I can only describe as a giant diamond—floats in the sky, suspended by a divine force that can't be captured by a word as simple as “science” or “magic.” She gently rotates while she rises higher into the sky. Our world orbits both Sol and Luna in the shape of an 8, and while Solrise and Solset are beautiful, they're easier to take for granted because Sol is in the sky for much longer than Luna ever is. Solrise and Solset are twelve hours apart, while Lunerise and Luneset are only around ten minutes apart—somehow, the relative rarity of spotting Luna only adds to her visual magnificence.

My father always used to say loving Solrise, and by extension Sol, was blasphemous. For some reason, Luna and her brother Sol are rivals, after all, but it always seemed ridiculous to me to pit two wildly different, yet strikingly beautiful forces against each other. I love Lunerise *and* Solrise, just like I love all my crops just fine, so why turn it into a competition? You either worship Sol, Luna, or neither. *Never* both. I've always wondered whether the rivalry between Sol and Luna is the *cause* or the *effect* of how much hatred exists between their followers. I can't imagine hating someone because they like daytime more than night.

After Luneset concludes and the world sinks back into dark stillness, I scurry back into the house, marveling at how much better my elbow feels after only ten minutes of being under Luneshine. If we ever have enough time and resources that my days aren't consumed by subsistence farming, maybe I'll devote the next chapter of my life to studying Luneshine's healing properties. When I re-enter the house, Yasmin is nose-deep in a book (she prefers fantasy to more practical stuff on survival, but I can't

complain—she has brilliant moments when we need them), and Mona is still gone. What a perfect opportunity to visit our father.

Chapter Three

Our modest home isn't exactly open for tours—our neighborhood has its suspicious members—but if it were, the tours would only take about five minutes in total. That is, the tours that display the parts of the house you can *see*.

We have a sturdy wooden door with a deadbolt lock. It took me forever to scour through my library for instructions on how to build it, forever and a half to scavenge for materials, but I got it done and it's been done for the past three years. After our old home burned down with our mother in it, we fell into destitution so bad we were forced to go on the run. Eventually, we relocated to the Stragglers Land, where there's plenty of nice land here to grow food—but also desperate people who have lost everything. They're the same kind of people who are willing to *do* anything.

Once you get past the door, you enter our first and biggest of two rooms, a combined living room-kitchen. Some call it poverty, I call it an open floor plan. The entire room is “carpeted” with random pieces of cloth I've fished out of a stream full of garbage, cleaned, and dried. The living room half has extra cloth heaped in piles that we like to lean against while we sleep, chat, play cards, and read books from the bookshelf that was once propped up right near the kitchen. Which isn't much of a kitchen, by the way. We have a small propane stove, a cardboard box full of utensils, a blanket that hides our food supply pit (filled with snow I collect from the mountain bases near us), and a well—a blessing we stumbled upon after becoming homeless, one I decided to construct our house around. The house itself is made of a different, flimsier wood than the door, and the scrap metal ceiling is fixed to the walls with twine. It's a mansion, all right.

The second room is our bedroom, *our* meaning belonging to me and Yasmin. Mona sleeps in the kitchen to make sure we don't steal food in the middle of the night. It's hilarious seeing her act like she decides how much everyone eats when I'm the reason we're able to eat at all. One time, I was so hungry I tried to sneak a potato to eat

raw, but she caught me. The last thing I remember before blacking out was her scowling at me—and my skin going extra cold at the sight of her the morning after.

Finally, there's the "pond" outside, which is what we call a little divet in the land where we can bathe ourselves in relative privacy. The mini-valley conceals everything except the top of my head from the peephole, according to Yasmin, so I don't have to feel conscious about Yasmin or Mona realizing I still look childish at an age that's supposed to be grown. Whenever we have to relieve ourselves, we go out a little farther from the pond and do our business in a different pit, which I later use (disgustingly, yet justifiably) to fertilize for our crops.

A bit to the east of the "fertilizer pit," as we call it when we aren't in the mood to cuss, is my pride and joy: the farm. I cultivate a variety of crops, some of them more successfully than others. Armagedda is chilly, being high enough above sea level to protect us from Luna's watery wrath, but thankfully, our home is situated in the sweet spot where it isn't *too* chilly to grow food. I grow crops that thrive in the cold: broccoli, turnips, and potatoes, mainly, along with shriveled tomatoes just for Yasmin. The main farm stinks to high heaven, but I'm able to ward off pests with products from my *other* farm: the herb farm right next door, where I cultivate medicinal plants and, I'm ashamed to admit... feta. I don't use it, I just grow it and give it to Mona so she leaves me and Yasmin alone. The more feta Mona uses, the more often she's gone, I've noticed. It just so happens to be my top-priority product.

That would conclude any public tour, but the private tour would have one more stop: underneath our bedroom is a cellar, whose door is concealed by a giant canvas tarp. Yasmin trusts me too much to scrutinize the room, and Mona, miraculously, actually keeps out of our room—probably to guard the kitchen obsessively. We owe our privacy to Mona's paranoia.

I lock the bedroom door (the lock is flimsy and easy to break, but it sends a clear message—stay out or have an awkward conversation), tug the tarp to the side, and swing an unlocked door open to reveal a ladder that I then descend about ten feet into the ground. This was my secret project as I built this house: building a place hidden away from my sisters to conceal my father, who's been in a horrible state ever since the fire.

When I get to the bottom of the ladder, I duck my head, take three steps north, and straighten again upon entering the cold, stuffy room. The walls are made of repurposed scrap metal, reinforced with wood, so that the ten feet of ground above me can't collapse into me and bury me—*us*—alive. It feels like I'm alone, so I have to remind myself that my father is now in my company, sprawled across a canvas cloth in the middle of the room, lying motionless. He's paralyzed, completely unable to move, speak, or even communicate, yet I keep him alive anyway. Mona would probably murder me, try to take over my farm, and end up killing herself and Yasmin out of incompetence if she ever found out I was "wasting" food on what's essentially a lifeless body, dead weight that doesn't contribute to our collective survival (which makes Mona what, exactly...?). To be honest, I don't know why I keep him alive. I don't know why I haven't told Yasmin—maybe it's because she's finally cheery again since he "died" and I don't want to bring grief back into her life. I don't want her to become emotionally attached to a live corpse, either.

My worst fear is that my father is conscious. I hope he isn't because I'm keeping him in dismal conditions—not that I have a choice, since I suspect I have to keep him well-hidden to protect him from Mona—and even if I weren't, being fully conscious and unable to interact with the world is no way to live. I wonder if my father mentally screams at me every time I visit, begging me to extinguish his light, put his suffering to an end. Does he hate me? Is there even a *him* that's able to feel hatred? He draws breath ever so slightly each time I visit him, twice a week to force-feed him semi-liquefied mush and clean him up. Sometimes to talk to him, too. Today is one of those days.

"Father," I croak, my hand rushing to his mouth to confirm he's still breathing. Mechanically, I begin to administer my biweekly care. I pump my homemade liquid nutrition down his throat using a plastic balloon I found in the trash river—it's amazing how much of a treasure trove that area is—before cleaning him up as gently as I can. I wonder if he's embarrassed, if he's awake at all. His eyes are glassy and don't move. Don't conscious people have that spark of awareness in their eyes?

Just in case he is, I have to keep him going. Even if there's a chance he wouldn't want me to... because that would mean there's a chance that he *does*. Also, the longer I keep him alive, the more likely it is that I'll piece together some kind of cure from

everything I've learned from his books. If Yasmin has enough discipline to self-study, surely I can hit the books as well.

"It's almost Lunerise," I say after clearing my throat. My internal clock is confident in this—I can feel an inexplicable fog creeping into my headspace, starting to cloud my memories already. I know Yasmin and I talked just moments ago, but the details of the conversation are already starting to elude me. It was about why Mona... where Mona is? No, how I got these bruises. How my elbow got so messed up. How I set Mona off...

"How *did* I set her off?" I mutter to myself, breathing through my mouth to avoid inhaling too much of my paralyzed father's fecal matter. It's no use, I realize deflatedly. Trying to cling to the memories is like trying to contain fine sand with a fishing net. Hopefully, the reason for Mona's assault on me wasn't important. Maybe I deserved it, at least partially... why else would she fly so far off the handle? Then again, can I *really* deserve it every time, and does Yasmin deserve it when it happens to her? Of course not.

Am I crazy?

As I gaze at my pale, technically lifeless father, the answer creeps into my head and overshadows the final remnants of my conversation with Yasmin. The type she has with me over and over again with the utmost patience, the type I so badly want to remember. The answer hits me almost as hard as my elbow suddenly jolts with hot, quick pain that makes me want to die. It feels how I imagine a lightning bolt through the soul must feel.

The answer hits me again. And again. I am crazy. I am crazy. And I don't fully know why.

I am crazy. I am crazy. I am a coward.

I am crazy. How can I know myself without knowing everything I've endured, everything I've *done*?

Suddenly, something in the room jolts. And I freeze. It feels like the air in the room drops fifty degrees, and I sense what happens before I see it and even begin to process it: my dad's cold, flaccid eyelids spring open, and where I expect to be dark brown eyes bordering on black, there are two pale blue pupils that shimmer, almost like diamonds...

Chapter Four

In the next few moments, I'm not even sure who's talking to me. It's my father, but it's not my father. My father's body rises with a creak, and some of his joints pop for the first time since his fall paralyzed him. If he had known he'd suffer this fate, would he have chosen to leap out the window or burn to death with my mother?

However, his eyes are still alien, and in a way, hauntingly beautiful. They seem just shy of natural, betraying an ethereal presence I can't place. Then it hits me—where have I seen this color before? It's the color of what I saw in the sky just moments earlier. Luna.

I gasp. My veins ice over. It *can't be*.

"Jana," he murmurs in a low baritone. The voice is his, but I've never heard the tone before, and I can't help but feel like some force—Luna, dare I think?—is talking to *me*, wearing his voice and body like a costume. Suddenly, anger displaces the dread lurking inside me. How dare someone treat my father's body like a vessel? I can't confront what this means—in order for a vessel to be filled, it had to have been empty.

"Who are you?" I whisper back, forcing my anger down to a simmer. I can't fight this thing. And if I try, I might fade away and wake up somewhere else. I might forget this happened, and I can't—*won't*—forget.

My "father" doesn't answer. He stares me down while I stare at him in disbelief. I start to back towards the ladder, feeling cornered by the unknown. "Answer me!" I demand, my eyes beginning to water. "Luna, if this is you, tell me why you're inside my father! Bring him back, *please!*"

My father's mouth shudders open again. "I only have until Luneset to speak to you, child. We don't have much time."

So it's true? Luna is real?

Luna continues, her eyes enveloping the room in an eerie, icy glow. Her eyes pierce my soul. No, I take that back—her gaze saps me of energy, making each passing second feel like a weight dragging me and the bottom of this cellar deeper into the earth. Her eyes, which I no longer see as part of my father, make me feel soulless. "I need your help. You must stop my brother from destroying the world."

I don't allow her words to sink in. All I can think is that Luna is a hypocrite. Before I can think about the consequences, I let my anger get the best of me and blurt out: "Why *me*? Why not just leave me alone? Didn't *you* already destroy the world?"

Immediately after speaking, I fear getting instantly eviscerated. Am I really bold enough to risk inciting Luna's wrath? If she can trigger mass catastrophe and tempests, disasters, and plagues that have already destroyed most of the human race, she can destroy me easily and without explanation. Yet she doesn't.

"All will be clear," she says. "I wish I had more time to explain things to you, but all will be clear. I'll make sure of that."

"Why would Sol ever pose a threat to the world?" I demand. "He has so many followers. Why would he want to see them destroyed?"

Luna winces using my dad's face, which I haven't seen budge in years, and I can tell I've struck a nerve. It's no secret that Luneism has always been less popular than Solism, even before Armageddon—after Armageddon, worshiping Luna became taboo as well as unpopular. I silently wonder why the moon goddess doesn't have better things to worry about than a popularity contest. I must be to these gods what ants are to me, and I sure don't care whether ants like me or not.

"The pendulum threatens to swing in the opposite direction—violently. My brother threatens to destroy anyone who *doesn't* follow him. He will incinerate your crops, engulf what remains in flames, because he's upset that I'm trying to...." She pauses, clears her throat in an oddly human manner for a god. "...to gain power. I don't want to only be in the sky for ten minutes a day. I want *more*."

I cannot for the life of me understand why Luna, a freaking *goddess*, is suddenly confiding in me. I bite back the urge to tell her my therapist kid sister's right upstairs if she needs emotional support. She continues:

"You consider us gods, but we are not. We are tyrants. We cannot help it—we each crave power over the other, and right now, he's angry I'm pushing back against his dominance. You need to help me gain power. I must chart this world's orbit closer to me... this time, *without* messing up..."

"*How?*" I demand. Messing up... was she referring to Armageddon? Is she implying that was *accidental*? I add, "Why do you care about helping if you're a tyrant?"

She smiles faintly. “Because I want to continue being one. If I don’t gain enough power to stand up to my brother, the threat of incineration will *always* hang over the heads of anyone who doesn’t worship him. Sol doesn’t retract threats. And I can’t be a goddess without subjects.”

My dad’s Adam’s apple ripples down his throat as she swallows nervously. Another weirdly human action that makes me feel strangely bad for her, this... *thing* that seems more like a sad, confused, misunderstood spirit than a goddess.

Before I can probe for more information, Yasmin’s scream yanks me out of my stupor. My head whips towards the ceiling of this cellar-like hideaway, which I hear her voice through faintly. If we weren’t surrounded by silence, save the occasional bandit, I would’ve shrugged it off as random underground vermin, but it’s crystal clear—my baby sister is distressed, and I have to help her. Whatever this goddess—no, *tyrant*—Luna needs can wait.

Chapter Five

I scurry up the ladder faster than I ever have in my life. A wave of adrenaline washes over me, temporarily shielding me from the way my body throbs in pain each time my limbs shift. Yasmin whines, begs, cries, and laughs in a way that sounds like she’s distressed, but she never screams like this—at least, she hasn’t since the fire. That blasted lunar fire... I momentarily consider that I’m now using a goddess’s name in vain, as a curse, and push any fear that I might get smited to the back of my mind.

When I emerge from the hole in the ground, the bedroom is still empty. I told Yasmin and Mona that when I’m in this room at this hour, I’m working with dangerous plants that emit airborne toxins. Neither of them are interested enough in science to question any part of this, including why I’d be working with stuff that could kill me. Maybe they just assume I’m concocting some sort of poison to use on future intruders. I have no clue whether they think about how I ventilate the “toxic fumes” out of the room before I open the door. Then again, starving kids don’t have much mental capacity to think about hypotheticals.

Yasmin screams again just as I pull myself up to ground level. I fling the door to the main room open and rush in, frantically whipping my head side to side.

“Yas!” I scream my baby sister’s name once I spot her. She’s lying on the floor, getting kicked around by... you guessed it... Mona, the witch herself. I can see Mona’s leg muscles ripple as she kicks into Yasmin repeatedly. I silently thank Lunerise for just having passed so there’s no risk of me forgetting this before I can intervene. I only lose memories right at the onset of Lunerise, which itself is only a few minutes away from Luneset. It’s insane to think about the sheer quantity of memories I must lose on a daily basis in a matter of *minutes*.

I lunge for Mona, but I miscalculate my move. She’s got at least fifty pounds on me, and there’s no way I can bring her down even with my weak running start. Right when the realization hits me, so does she—right in the stomach. I reel backwards, gasping for air. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Yasmin scurry outside as Mona’s attention centers right onto me. Good. Yasmin would die enduring what Mona seems to do to me all the time, and is about to do yet again.

“Hey, freak,” Mona sneers, her words beckoning my deepest insecurity to surface. My memory. I can brush off what’s untrue, but when Mona forces me to confront what I know is real, I feel my confidence shrivel up and fall deep into some hole within me, irretrievable until the next Lunerise. When I can forget that I’m a freak, until I’m reminded again. It’s a vicious cycle of self-hatred. Mona interrupts my internal pity party with a slap directly to my left cheek, which sends me flying to the right and against the wooden door Yasmin has just slammed shut. It hurts less than the blow to my stomach, but it somehow stings more, feels more personal. It’s a motion of pure hatred.

As I stagger against the wall, pulling myself upright, I barely have time to suck in a lungful of air before I’m back on the floor. The kicks ensue, painting my body in an assortment of colors I’ll see tomorrow when I hesitantly peel my clothes off to bathe and assess the damage. My skin, once a consistent dark brown, will likely sport a mosaic of blue, black, and purple hues soon. It’s messed up, but I think they’re kind of pretty.

And I think Mona is the ugliest person I’ve ever known in my life, inside and out. The resentment inside me bubbles to the surface, mounting in pressure until it culminates into a kick I deliver straight to Mona’s groin area.

At this moment, I wish she were my brother instead of my sister, but for the moment, it does the trick, relieving me from pain for a second. Her lips part slightly, more out of surprise—is that a trace of amusement?—than pain. “Look who’s grown a

pair,” she cackles, delivering a punch to the same spot on my stomach almost giddily. This time, it’s twice as hard. I can’t believe I’m stupid enough to keep this witch alive. No, I can’t believe Luna has cursed me to forget the torment this witch puts me and Yasmin through. Over and over again. How must Yasmin feel? By god, how must she feel, having to walk on eggshells night after night and fear for her safety?

What kind of protector have I been?

I find random thoughts flitting through my head as Mona kicks me back into submission, as if my brain is trying to distract me from how distressed my body is. What I had for breakfast today: broccoli with spices and a little meat from a rabbit I caught in a snare. How bad Yasmin is at tilling soil and doing manual labor, and how brilliant she is at memorizing information and connecting dots more quickly than I ever could. How if she cared more, she could achieve what I do for the three of us and more. From now on, I vow, I’ll be working for the *two* of us—this witch is getting out of here, no matter what it takes.

Then, I think about the voice that still rings through my ears, that empty, uncaring voice that gifted me with a cryptic mission. One line in particular chooses to echo through me: “The pendulum threatens to swing in the opposite direction—violently.”

I started having memory issues from the moment my mother died in the fire, and those memory issues, I now realize, have always been about Mona. Mona changed after that fire, and I merely reacted to her shift. Something deep inside me tells me she may have caused the fire, with how careless she can be igniting rolls of feta to smoke, and who knows? Maybe the guilt ate away at whatever remained of her conscience after it happened, and all it left behind was a sadistic witch with a warped sense of reality. Even more warped than mine.

I’m only reacting, I tell myself. She’s swung too far in the direction of violence, and now, something must happen to balance things out. When things swing too far in one direction, I rationalize—when a freak like me is pushed to her breaking point—things need to swing in the opposite direction. *Violently.*

That’s why when my trembling hands accidentally grope a splinter from my bookcase, I barely hesitate before my fingers curl around it and I thrust it into my older sister’s right eye.

Chapter Six

Mona is dead by Solrise. I don't know when exactly she dies in the middle of the night, I just know she does because at some point, I wake up to her shuddering in a pool of blood that spills from her head. She says something I can't make out in a raspy voice, then jerks once or twice before going still forever. I don't feel anguish, regret, or relief—I feel nothing. Not even Yasmin, who's curled up against me on the living room floor (where I somehow managed to fall asleep), can evoke any sort of emotion in me.

I can't wait to forget this all tonight. As much as I hate my memory loss, sometimes, I wish it happened more often than once each night. Poor Yasmin can't forget anything, but at least Mona won't be able to hurt her now. We'll even have more food to ourselves, free for us to enjoy whenever we want. No more cowering at night, begging our growling stomachs to somehow lull us into even the shallowest of slumbers. As good as this decision objectively was, I still feel blank, which I know is wrong. Mona is—was—still my sister, and I ought to feel grief, right? She once had goodness in her. I *do* have good memories with her, mainly of us as small children playing around by throwing mud cakes and pieces of food we didn't like at each other.

Wow, what a luxury it was to actually *reject* food. I pride myself on my farming abilities, but that doesn't change the fact that every single calorie I harvest is ingested. We have no other choice if we don't want to succumb to fatigue, physical and mental.

Sollight streams through the cracks in the door. I stretch my limbs, afraid to move too much and aggravate the electric nerve pain... only to find that the nerve pain is all but gone. Well, it lingers a bit, but in the same way that a bad dream lingers, or like how an evil ghost of a memory delivers its fading goodbye before leaving me forever at Lunerise. As I stretch, I wake Yasmin up, who peers up at me in admiration. I feel my chest swell with pride—I've protected her, saved her from almost certain serious injury or even death. Then, I deflate. I wasn't able to protect her without murdering my sister. Mona's lifeless body reminds me that she was physically powerful, sure, but mentally, she was as frail as I am. If not more. All she needed was help...

No, I can't blame myself. I have to try to be grateful and move on. Onto what, I'm not entirely sure.

"Janny," Yasmin calls. I'm surprised to hear her call me something she hasn't called me since she could barely walk.

I flash back to my mother, a woman who resembles me perfectly aside from being prettier and full-figured, taking Yasmin by the hands and walking her down the hallway of our old house. Yasmin teeters from side to side as my mother leads her down our lengthy, yet modest hallway. Our old home wasn't fancy by any means, but it had more than enough space to raise three girls. I even had a closet just for my own clothes. We lived in a neighborhood far north of here, where crops grow more abundantly and people generally live more fruitful lives. As my mother led baby Yasmin down the hall, the three of us shuddered with laughter—my mother's laugh deep and stable, like rich, staccatoed notes being sung by an alto with a voice sweeter than honey. Yasmin's laugh bright, bubbly, and raspy, like a frog's goofy croak mixed with a giggle. My laugh, almost muted, the type that's silent but consumes you like a seizure.

Yasmin shifting against our shared pile of cloth brings me back to the present, where reality makes gravity feel like it's suddenly multiplied tenfold. "You saved me," she says, in a voice that's slightly more babyish than her usual voice. She must know I secretly don't want her to grow up. I feel grown up, despite still looking boyish enough to never attract a grown man's attention, and I think everything about it sucks. When you grow up, paranoia and self-doubt drown out curiosity. Cynicism replaces awe, and what little moments of joy dot your life only appear when you forget you're grown and imagine you're a kid again. That's what I try to do right now, all while hoping Yasmin never has to know what it feels like to have the weight of the world threatening to crush your skull at a moment's notice.

Her beady black eyes stare at me expectantly, making me realize I have yet to respond. I'm so out of it I resign to conversing with her on autopilot, retreating into my own mind instead of fully listening to her. She deserves better, the way she always gives me her full attention, but I'm too hollow to be anyone right now. I feel like my sense of self has died with Mona and I'm going to have to figure out how to feel things again before I can feel like a *person* again.

Yasmin's smart, though, and she gives me space, retreating to the farm to draft up a crop report status for me. I don't really need it, but I can tell she's happy keeping busy, so I give her "essential tasks" to do when she isn't reading or goofing around. When I'm alone again, I can't stand the sight of Mona, so I decide to drag her body outside. I pant heavily as her head thuds against our floor, then the mud and gravel right outside our door. Somehow, her body is even heavier than it seemed before, and it's gotten stiffer than the wood I stabbed her eye with.

The wood I stabbed her eye with. I'm a freak. Maybe *I'm* the witch.

I summon every last ounce of strength within me and eventually lug her body to the trash river just uphill of our house. I position her body by a tree near the bank, then let it roll down a gentle decline until the roaring trash-treasure waves carry her away, never to be seen again. Mona is gone, just like that. Her head thrashes against the waves violently before they carry her beyond trees that obscure my vision of the river. Out here, in this neighborhood, no one cares about stumbling upon dead bodies. Armagedda doesn't bother wasting police forces on this area when they'd likely end up dead, too. Police have a way of being detected by every resentful, bloodthirsty criminal within a ten-mile radius. They don't know how to lay low and be invisible like people who have lost everything.

Well, almost everything. I'm still so shaken from seeing Yasmin get brutally assaulted by Mona... the person I just murdered... that I dash back down the hill to the house, not caring that I'm still exhausted from lugging a body, and suck in a breath of relief when I see Yasmin diligently counting crops and making notes in some kind of notebook I never check. She looks adorable doing it, her curly pigtail springing behind her each time she takes a step. She seems curiously unbothered by what just happened. Why should she be? She's safer now, and she's got me to thank.

Why don't I feel good about myself?

Chapter Seven

It turns out when you have three mouths to feed instead of four (if I count my father as a mouth to feed, which I'm torn about continuing to do), it's possible to not just *live* off your land, but *profit* off it as well.

I distract myself from the feeling of dread that doesn't stop bubbling in my chest, refusing to subside, by plunging myself into the task of making as much money as possible. I have yet to develop a specific plan once I have a lot, but at the very least, I'll get Yasmin to a better neighborhood. We'll get a real house, where we can bathe indoors, have closets full of warm clothes, enjoy the luxury of windows, and most importantly, have even more arable land to grow a wider variety of crops. I've heard rumors that in some areas of Armagedda, you can even grow tropical crops. It's been ages since I've had a pineapple. I don't know how to grow those, but I know my father has an old book on tropical horticulture that's doing nothing but collecting dust. It'll be nice to crack that open. It'll be nice to crack a pineapple open, yum...

Just like Mona's skull cracked open when she fell.

Apparently, Mona died a few days ago in a freak accident. She was kicking Yasmin up when suddenly, she slipped on one of our father's books, hit her head against a fragment of his broken bookcase, and died instantly. Yasmin somehow managed to dispose of her body—to be honest, I didn't ask for details. I feel too sick to think about anything other than the fact that Mona's gone. She made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and I'm sure she has something to do with the cuts, scrapes, and bruises that adorn our bodies... but she didn't deserve to die. I wish I had seen how it happened. Not because I would've enjoyed the sight, but because I'm worried that Yasmin had to see it and deal with it all on her own.

What was I even doing when that happened? I shove the question to the back of my mind, shoving the mounting feeling of insecurity away with it. My memory makes me such an incompetent caretaker. I'd better make it up to Yasmin tonight by striking an amazing bargain for my goods.

A thought nags at me, a piece of the important puzzle the moon goddess herself—no, the moon tyrant, witch, *demon*—needed to possess my father to deliver to me.

“The pendulum threatens to swing in the opposite direction—violently.”

In spite of everything, I'm grateful that I haven't forgotten about that creepy encounter. It gives me yet another way to distract myself from the loss of my sister. I repeat the words to myself like a mantra, trying to eke any possible meaning out of them and failing repeatedly. My mind feels like it's just sprinted five thousand miles.

I shake the thought out of my head as I haul a wagon filled with several potatoes, cauliflower stalks, and broccoli heads to the nearest marketplace. Marketplaces are seedy places, especially for girls and women, but I've improvised a solution I hope works—my dark wavy hair is chopped to above my ears, and I sport one of Mona's old caps, a baggy shirt, and pants that conceal my skinny legs. Though I look nothing like a woman, I have the sort of slenderness only a weak, underweight girl can possess, and I know I need to look stockier to avoid getting exposed.

To add an extra layer of security to my disguise, I've even caked my chin in a mixture of ashes (now that nighttimes are safe, Yasmin and I enjoy the occasional campfire) and pin-shaped herbs that, combined, simulate the look of stubble if no one looks at me closely enough. I also leave moments before Solset as darkness begins to engulf everything around me. This way, I'm less likely to be pegged as a girl.

I saved enough money to buy the wagon by selling most of the crops we would've used to feed Mona. We're decently isolated from the rest of the occupants of our neighborhood, but there are also travelers, merchants, and good folk looking to buy cheap food if you know where to find them. I followed age-old advice from my father to find the initial traders (head downstream to find people), and now, I rely on that same advice as I seek out a marketplace of any sort. Bazaars are signs of wealth, so I know I have to go far out, but I've loaded my cart with enough goods to make the trip worth the effort—hopefully. If I sell even half my goods at my target prices, Yasmin and I will amass enough money to buy a horse and another wagon from the village that encircles the marketplace.

I cart the wagon past the house, past the farm, struggling to hold it back from rolling all the way down the hill. When the wheels clunk against gravel, my exertion multiplies tenfold as I now have to keep myself *and* the cart from skidding down a perilous gravelslide. Thankfully, I don't lose my footing, and well after Solset has passed and I'm plunged into near-total darkness, I find myself flocking towards a faint glow in the distance, just like a lost moth.

Sure enough, it's a night market. For the first time since Mona's death, my heart soars. Could it really be? I'd expected more trouble on my journey here—even looking like a man in the dark, I look like a young man, a boy even, and I'm still alone. I must seem like an easy target with no one watching my back and my energy being steadily

drained by pulling something double my weight across uneven land. As I trudge my final few steps to the night market's entrance, I can't help but feel like something's been watching over me.

Isn't Lunerise soon? I doubt I'll forget anything tonight. There's been very little pain in my life since Mona passed, and surprisingly, my brain has allowed me to cling onto the memory of Mona—the pain of remembering that she's dead, too—instead of taking the coward's way out by forgetting her. I suppose memories of sisterhood, and family in general, run too deep to ever fade away—the ones that don't involve serious bruises, at least.

The night market itself feels like one large organism and an ecosystem all at once, teeming with more life than I've seen in years. All of my senses are so hyperstimulated I don't even know where to focus first. This place is complete chaos. Right at the entrance, a pretty lady haggles with a large-bearded man who towers over her. She tugs her shirt down ever so slightly, and based on how the man's gaze shifts, I know she'll be striking a bargain very soon. I find myself admiring her for being bold enough to not only show up to a night market alone as a woman, but also flaunt her womanhood, exploiting it for her own gain. I know I could only achieve what she just pulled off by stuffing potatoes up my shirt, and even then, I'd have to sport a charismatic personality to match.

Next to her, several tense men are shouting at each other, unsubtly flexing their muscles as hard as they can. I idly assume they must be haggling over prices when I notice the knife. My heart drops—before I let panic set in, I remind myself that I'm partially concealed by trees uphill of the entrance. My wagon is safe right now, tucked away between two bushes as I rest and study the scene. Unless I get jumped right now, I'm safe. But then my gaze darts back to the woman, whose awareness seems to be juggling between the man (now overtly ogling her breasts—she is brave) and the knife. So she's noticed.

Then, I see the large-bearded man stumble to my right. He's drunk. I've never even let alcohol pass my lips before, and based on how people describe its effects, I don't think I ever will. My mind is hazy enough as is—why would I make it even hazier? Whatever the appeal of drinking is, this man seems to recognize it, because he takes a

big swig of something before taking a bold step towards the woman. I grimace, silently wishing she was less pretty, but thankfully, he only puts his arm around her shoulder.

Then, he drags her over to the group of men, who are feeding off each other's anger so intensely that the incoming violence is palpable from where I am. My fight-or-flight response kicks in, and I force it to quiet down. I'm safe. The question is... is this woman?

I feel a natural sense of protectiveness towards other women. Rich coming from a "woman" who isn't even a hundred pounds yet, I know, but I've read accounts of what men do to women who are too pretty, too smart, too funny, too whatever crime women always commit by being anything other than invisible to men. Suddenly, any individuality displayed by a woman makes men regard them as threats—I know my father wasn't this kind of man, but they still exist in large numbers, especially in areas like this where there are no police. I'm suddenly conscious of my chin, hoping that my ash-herb mixture is still creating the illusion of testosterone.

The bearded man is large enough that when he saunters over to the group, he effortlessly pulls the woman along with him. Panic begins to bloom in her expression, making her pale face somehow turn even whiter. She looks like a ghost, and I suddenly dread that she'll soon *be* a ghost, too. The man boasts loudly enough for me to hear:

"Why are you men fighting? Come look at my fine jewelry, perfect for any woman you need. Nothing like a good *woman*—" when he says the word, he hugs the poor lady tighter against his stocky build— "to diffuse tensions, huh boys?"

"Who are you calling a *boy*?" I'm surprised to hear a voice that sounds like a teenage boy's, ironically, probably one that's just barely overcome the embarrassing voice crack phase. It sounds dangerously cocky, like its owner gets into scuffles purely to heal his bruised ego. The voice belongs to a tall, lean frame whose features I can't make out since his back is turned towards me. I wonder why I think I'm good at psychoanalyzing people like this. It's just a frivolous hobby of mine. For all I know, this boy is nice and humble... although he's still hanging out in a crowd with a knife. *At least* one.

The bearded man scoffs. "Have you even kissed a girl, lad?" The man probes before laughing boisterously. His laugh is infectious enough that a few men in the circle actually seem to relax, though the knife-wielder hasn't budged an inch. I almost start to

like him when he suddenly grabs the woman, twirls her face towards his, and plants a big, sloppy kiss onto her lips.

She stands there, frozen, and for a second, I'm reminded of myself. I froze like that every time Mona entered a room. I know exactly how she must feel—well, I've never been violated by a man, but I know she must be burning with rage, paralyzed by inaction, and ashamed of herself all at once. Suddenly, the men in the circle, even the one with the knife, seem to experience a shift in energy. Before, they were furious. Now, they seem... hungry. And that terrifies me.

This woman is about to die, or much worse.

I glance at my vegetables helplessly—they now seem so stupid. I should've stayed home and relished the safety of our little plot of land, tucked away hidden from the main roads by the density of trees that enclose our house and farm like a safe haven. Even the trash-treasure river protects us by concealing any sounds we make with its mighty roar. Out here, I'm completely exposed. I don't even have a weapon, unless you count my left hand's throwing abilities combined with the thickest potato in my arsenal.

I'm also being completely selfish, thinking about myself when a woman is in deep trouble. I have to do something, *anything*, even though I know intervening is risking leaving Yasmin alone in this world without a sister. I don't care. This woman could be someone's sister, too.

I get into a crouch, trying not to think of Yasmin's froggy crouch and the feeling of nauseating homesickness that floods me when the image crosses my mind. Yasmin, I miss you. My plan right now is to sneak towards the group and use a sturdy rock I've found to bash in the bearded man's head. From there, the woman will just have to run for it, as will I. I no longer care about turning a profit. I'll gladly go back to my farm and live out the rest of the days with Yasmin, subsisting off our crops and not daring to dream of a better life anymore.

Yes, I mean it. If I make it back to Yasmin alive, I won't dare dream of a better life ever again. There is no better life than being able to be alive itself. Although my father, who's technically alive rotting away in my makeshift cellar, might object to that idea...

Then, I notice the woman begin to glow a pale, baby blue. For a split second, I sense that she's enshrouded in a mirage of some sort. Maybe it's the way the air around her is rippling and shimmering under the lights of the lanterns hanging above the

crowd. I barely have time to process my theory before she grows brighter and brighter, blinding enough to make ten ravenous men back away from her in alarm. It eventually becomes so bright that I have to shield my eyes, ducking into the same bushes that conceal my now irrelevant produce.

When the light vanishes and I emerge from the bushes, the woman is gone. She's just... gone. I blink a few times to make sure I'm not hallucinating from the bright light, which has faded into a milky afterglow that lingers in the center of all the men and is the only thing that seems to remain of her. Shouts of protest emerge from the night market entrance, and as the men's eyes begin to dart around in confusion, I realize I need to conceal myself even further. I'm too close.

I leave the produce behind and make a run for it, blindly crashing through trees and feeling gravel slide beneath my shoes, which nearly trips me over every ten seconds. I barely manage to see the path ahead of me using pale, misty moonlight that, if not for the impossibility I just witnessed, would be calming me down right now in a hauntingly beautiful sort of way.

Then, before I know it, I crash to the ground. It isn't just tripping on gravel—it's impact, into something a lot lighter than a tree. A lot lighter than any of those men could've been. I groan, peeling my cheek off the ground in a daze. My vision finally adjusts enough that I can see what I've crashed into, but what I see makes no sense at the same time.

I see myself.

Chapter Eight

I'm stunned to see that this beautiful woman... is actually me.

No, I'm not being self-congratulatory. She's the woman from the night market, dressed in the same exact clothing, except now the clothes look baggy, near-literal burlap sacks hanging off her wiry frame. She's also six inches shorter. When I say she's *me*, I don't just mean that I still don't quite know who I am anymore. I don't mean that she looks like someone from a distant memory, one I can't reach. I mean... she has my dark brown skin, my wavy hair chopped to her ears... a little longer, though... and my

round face that makes me look like some sort of small, scared animal. Her eyes aren't as wild as mine are when I look in the mirror, though—they seem steady and self-assured.

She may look like me, but she clearly isn't me—she seems to know who she is. And she's magical. A shapeshifter?

“What... how...” I stutter, dumbfounded that shapeshifters exist outside of stories.

My mouth continues to hang open, and I must look like an idiot. I wonder if she can tell I'm a girl. I wonder if she sees the resemblance we share. I get the rest of my question out as one of her eyebrow cocks up, the same way mine does when Yasmin says something weird:

“You looked different at the night market.” My voice is hoarse. “You looked... better,” I say, trying and failing to express my thoughts without insulting both of us in the process.

She laughs. It's *my laugh*. I quickly extinguish a little tinge of rage that boils in my stomach—why do I feel possessive over a laugh? I can't seriously be self-centered enough to think I own an entire sound. Still, I can't help but feel like I'm in a dream, scrutinizing the version of myself chuckling in front of me like she didn't just evade a brutal assault. Like she didn't just *change her appearance*. I stand there dumbly as she amuses herself, trying to ignore the throb coursing through my cheek. I feel gravel stuck to my skin there, but I'm too self-conscious to start picking it off my face, so I just pretend it's supposed to be there.

Then, she speaks in what sounds like my voice, but happier. Which irritates me. Maybe it's just that I can't stand to hear the sound of my voice, not like *this*.

“Well, look at that!”

Her finger guides my view up to the sky, where Luna hovers in the sky beautifully, *ominously*, skirted by puffs of clouds that float lazily as the glimmering diamond rotates. I don't see any moons right now, but I can somehow sense that one is behind the clouds to the diamond's right... but how? How do I know?

“Lunerise,” she sighs fondly. I wonder what she'd think of Lunerise and Luna in general if I told her about my encounter with the goddess in the cellar—not that she'd ever believe me. People who claim they can actually talk to Sol and Luna are either hailed as priests or dismissed as quacks, with no in-between. Speaking of talking to

Luna, it's been so long since that happened that I hardly believe my own memory of the incident. Was that just some ridiculously fantasy I fabricated to give myself a mission, make myself feel special—distract myself from real issues?

No, there's no way I could make up something as confusing as what Luna told me. The words ring in my head once again:

“You consider us gods, but we are not. We are tyrants. We cannot help it.”

Tyrants.

If Luna and Sol are tyrants, why do so many people worship them under the guise of pursuing enlightenment and scientific advancement? Did my father worship Luna out of curiosity, fear, or love? And why Luna over *Sol*, who honestly sounds a lot better? After all, he helps me feed myself and Yasmin by making my crops shoot towards him. He's warm and nice and not that bad, and even if he's a “tyrant,” he gets bonus points for *not* having purged the world or scared me half to death in my cellar. What high standards I hold my potential objects of worship to.

Maybe Armagedda wouldn't be the last human civilization left if Sol's children piloted our world instead of Luna's. Maybe Luna didn't *mean* to devastate us—what if her kids were just screw-ups who somehow miscalculated our route and messed up the delicate interplay of tides, winds, and plate shifts?

My attention turns back to the shape-shifting witch before me, and my eyes narrow. A scowl spreads across my face as I realize something: why is she taking *my* shape, of all people? What a *coincidence*. Is she trying to frighten me? Throw me off my guard? She seems to read my mind:

“You're suspicious. And you're right to be.”

She pauses, carefully considering what to say next, before settling on something simple, yet impossible.

“My name is Jana.”

It seems rehearsed, and she looks at me warily, as if she has no idea what to expect from me.

Well, neither do I. Blankness engulfs me once more. I somehow feel even more detached from reality than right after Mona died. Nothing is real anymore. Here's a girl who looks exactly like me, telling me her name is *my* name, laughing my laugh, smiling

my smile. It's nice that I don't even feel any emotions, so I don't have to worry about hiding them—my response is equally simple, and I'm certain she already knows it.

“So is mine.”

She looks unsurprised. “Yes... we've gone through the exact same thing, Jana. I am you, and you are me. I was hearing myself say this exact same thing a week ago, and in a week, you'll be saying this to yourself. Time is *cyclical*, Jana. Not linear. Try not to think about it too much.” The last part comes out breathily, like she can't fully understand what she's even saying—and that scares her.

“Let's make this less confusing. I'm Jana B, okay? Janab. You're Jana A. Or Janaa. No, that's too similar to Jana...”

The blankness ensues. I am probably dead. The night market psycho men likely murdered this girl, then found me and had their way with me, and now I'm in some weird endless purgatory of riddles and mind tricks before I plunge into hell for being a religious skeptic. Maybe I died that night in the cellar, who knows?

“Jana A. Ajana. You are *Ajana*.” She shakes my shoulders in emphasis. “In seven days, you will be *me*. I am Jana B. Janab. Whatever, we can change the names later.” Her eyes widen in a flash of panic, but she conceals it quickly enough that her face goes blank a second later, as if she's become possessed. As if... *I've* become possessed? She continues:

“You need to prepare for your encounter with the new Ajana. Instruct her just as I've instructed you.”

I decide I can't take this anymore. I don't care what I need to do for “Janab,” or “the new Ajana,” or whoever else. All I know is my name is *Jana*, and this girl is insane. I curl up on the freezing, spiky ground, ignoring the tears of shock and protest that begin to fall down my face, and I promptly pass out just after I hear a fragment of “Janab's” final message: “...chapter 15.”

Chapter Nine

When I wake up, it's Solrise, and I feel the knots in my back loosen as the Sollight bathes my skin in what feels like a warm, gentle hug. I almost feel relaxed... before I

recall what happened the night before. It was so mind-breaking I'm still not convinced I didn't just dream it all, but apparently my mind decided it wasn't quite traumatic enough to forget last night.

I curse myself for being careless enough to fall asleep in the wilderness, at the complete mercy of Janab. No, *not* "Janab," but some strange witch who wanted to get inside my head. Who knows what she wanted from me?

It's cyclical, Jana, not linear.

When I realize I've woken up buried deep in a bundle of familiar blankets, I pause, inhale familiar scents deeply, and relax. I'm somehow back home like it's any ordinary morning, yet I'm *certain* that these events weren't a mere dream. I jolt up and scan our house for confirmation—immediately, I notice the glaring lack of wagon in our kitchen's storage area. The crust isn't even out of my eyes before my veins go cold and dread pumps through me.

It's cyclical, Jana, not linear.

Try not to think about it too much.

If my mind were a stove with two burners:

- **The front burner**, upon hearing that it shouldn't be thinking about time cyclicity, is thinking about time cyclicity, or the idea of it, anyway. What "Janab" said made no sense. Time isn't cyclical, that's just blatantly false. Before doesn't come after *after*. I can't just swim around in a lap and bring Mona back.
- **The back burner** is consumed by the difficulty of successfully ignoring something you're *instructed* not to think about. My father taught us this principle by asking us to try spending the entire day not thinking about pigs on fire, then asking us whether we'd succeeded (we never did). If Janab really *were* me in the future, wouldn't she know this, too?

The two burners burn hotter and brighter as my thoughts get more tangled the more I try to untangle them, and frustration takes over my body. I start to shake, tears of confusion streaming down my cheeks. I feel ashamed for even entertaining such

insane ideas, yet I can't help myself—last night was real, and until I make sense of it, I am insane no matter what. There's nothing more I hate than not understanding something, and this time, I can't even blame my memory.

My silent crying doesn't wake Yasmin up, thankfully. She's somehow the heaviest sleeper I know. The moment I hear a stray animal outside, I'm already wide awake, but even the sounds I make while putting together my mediocre breakfasts—clanging carved wooden spoons against pots, cursing as I knock things over—don't even make her stir. Soon, I manage to smother the last of a few weak sniffles, stretch my limbs out a bit, and rise clumsily, noting that my pain has subsided almost enough to be ignored. I whip up mediocre breakfast number 3 (pan-roasted potatoes with spices and sunflower seeds) as silently as possible. Not out of fear of waking Yasmin up, but out of habit—my body still feels like Mona is here. Like Luna is watching me, categorizing my every move as “right” or “wrong.”

By the time Yasmin's woken up and Sol has risen directly above our heads, I've devised half a plan, etched out in one of my journals, riddled with doubts and gaping holes. Yasmin and I will lay low, continuing to save surplus crops and trading them with my best guesses at low-risk people. Then, I'll get another wagon and reattempt a market sale, *definitely* at a different market. I could try to make a friend to sell my crops for me and cut them a portion, but then again, who could I ever trust enough not to run off with the money?

A memory drops into my plan like a pebble drops into a pond, distorting all its clarity in a series of ripples. The ripples obscure my plan and center around one thought, one recollection: the shapeshifter, the witch, *me*, telling myself—in my own voice—something about “chapter 15.”

I spring into action, thankful to have something to do that isn't just wallowing in self-pity and confusion. My bookshelf is still broken, unfortunately, but all of my books are intact and unharmed. One by one, chapter by chapter, I sift through my books, most of which have some sort of chapter or section 15. None seem particularly striking or relevant. Botanical diagrams. A farmer's essay on regenerative soil practices. A story chapter involving a prison escape. I frantically wonder if I should be connecting dots I'm

unable to see—what if there are multiple chapter 15s? None of them seem helpful on their own.

Clarity dawns on me when Yasmin strolls over sleepily, poking me in the shoulder. “You fell asleep with this behind you, Janny,” she mutters half-lucidly, plunking a book down next to me and yawning on her way over to the kitchen. She then reaches right into the pot of potatoes and stuffs some into her mouth—I’m not entirely sure if she’s awake while she does so. I examine the book and notice I rarely notice and have never read:

“Luneism”

The word, textured and emblazoned in gold foil, stands out boldly on a cover that’s otherwise black and devoid of decoration. I roll my eyes, wondering why the standard holy text on Luna worship was anywhere near me when I woke up. Maybe “Janab” put it there, for all I know—I still don’t know how she managed to haul me home, or where she ran off to afterwards. If she’s *me*, why doesn’t she live here?

I enjoy reading about Luna to understand how the world works, but this book couldn’t be any further from useful. It’s essentially a manifesto on why Luna is the greatest, most glorious being to ever come into existence. It posits that Luna’s mass murder of humanity was justified, which I find distasteful at best, sick and delusional at worst. The older I became, the more I silently judged my father’s scientific obsession with Luna mutating into a religious one... yet I humored him anyway. I wonder how much of the real me my father knows, or will *ever* know.

I thumb through the pages, skimming past gratuitous descriptions of Luna’s good deeds, until I land on chapter 15, titled “Agents of Luna.” Though I’m sure this chapter is the important one Janab instructed me to read, it’s so dense with words I can’t help but skimming again.

“Agents of Luna exist to provide Her Grace with a steady stream of power...”

Well, that isn’t a good start.

“...by sacrificing pieces of themselves in exchange for slivers of Lunessence...”

I almost toss the book away at this very instant, dismissing it as more outrageous than one of Yasmin’s fantasy novels, when something in the sea of text catches my eye. I

freeze my breath in place before it has the chance to leave my throat, clenching up as I read:

“...upon receiving selective memory training, Agents of Luna gain the ability to exchange memories for abilities derived from Her Grace’s light.”

What happened to the mindless Luna propaganda? What in the world was I reading? Selective memory training... I read on, hunting for any connection between these “agents of Luna” and my selective memory issues. It suddenly occurs to me that “sacrificing pieces of themselves” must mean sacrificing memories. But for what?

“...her powers aren’t well-known or documented, but those who feed Luna’s children their past in turn receive artistry, the craft of illusion and deception, the innate ability to warp perception...”

I blink. Warp perception?

“...Agents are able to tap into their reserve during the Window of Lunessence, which lies between Lunerise and Luneset, and the size of their reserve is directly proportional to the magnitude of their donations.”

After I skim chapter 15, I read it in its entirety. Then, I pore over all of “Luneism,” amassing as much information as possible. The more information I collect, the greater the likelihood that I see some kind of pattern within it—something, *anything*, to help make all of this less abstract and inconceivable. I’m so absorbed in studying the religious text that it’s Solset when Yasmin returns from the fields, clutching her inventory count notebook and a basket of herbs that envelop the room in a pleasant fragrance. I bombard her with inane questions like “how was the weather” (I saw it myself), relieved to have an excuse to take a study break, when she notices what I’m reading and casts me a smirk.

“Someone’s trying to follow in father’s footsteps, huh?” She teases. Then her face turns beet-red. “Actually, I think that would be good for you, Janny,” she says apologetically. No doubt she’s just remembered that even the stubbornest heathens sometimes turn to faith and worship after traumatic experiences. I laugh, but the laugh dies as soon as it makes me think of Janab laugh. Her *identical* laugh.

“Don’t worry,” I spit out against my better judgment. “I’m over Mona.” I lie so poorly Yasmin gives me a look of pity that makes me feel even smaller than I usually do.

She shakes her head at me like I'm a dying animal, then extends her arms in my direction.

"It's okay, Janny," she says softly.

"It's true!" I protest. I hate her suddenly—no, I don't hate *her*, I just hate what she's doing. If there's anything I can't stand, it's receiving a pity party. I don't want to think of myself as the victim of this situation. Victimhood makes me feel out of control. Swallowing the acidic pain of my sister's death is the only chance I have at moving on. I also can't stand the pain of... well, feeling at least a *little* relieved that she's gone. I can't deny that life has gotten better without her, which fills me with guilt that I've made a habit out of ignoring.

Unfortunately, Yasmin's style is not to swallow pain. It's to *marinate in it*. I have an upper limit on how much of her I can handle per day, no matter how much I love her, because she forces me to confront the things I'd rather hide from. I don't know why she bothers when there's never any guarantee I'll remember what she says, anyway. I could never tell her this, of course, but she's about to subject me to a therapy session I've never wanted less.

She and I go back and forth. She validates my feelings, she tells me I'm "allowed" to feel however I feel, as if some legal doctrine on emotional privileges exists and grants me rights. She says all the right things, all the *objectively* right things that I'm sure professionals are taught to say, too. Usually, her sweet words make me feel safe, and they just feel *right* to hear, but right now—while I'm already confused and my sense of reality is displaced—it all feels fake. Meaningless platitudes that sound nice, but ultimately achieve nothing, just like the stupid inventory I have Yasmin take in the fields.

I feel myself boiling over. I bite my tongue hard enough to draw blood as her well-meant advice fills our home, urging myself to keep my insidious thoughts in my head. My lovely sister doesn't deserve to hear such toxicity. One awful sister is enough for a lifetime, and I'm determined to be the polar opposite of Mona—I would rather die than harm her in any way. Yet right now, as her words drive me closer and closer to my breaking point, I know I'll explode soon unless I miraculously pass out again. Can I find a way to end this conversation without hurting my baby sister's feelings?

“You don’t have to be over her,” she asserts, patting my shoulder gently. “And I think turning to religion to process her... accident... is a great idea. Maybe it’ll help you feel more connected to father, too, you know?”

“Yas.” I do my best to soften my tone and bury my burgeoning panic deep below me. “Please. I’m okay, I mean it.” I throw in a fake chuckle for good measure, and she gives me a long, silent look. Finally, she just sighs.

“You’re a bad liar,” she says. Luneshine starts to filter in through her little peephole, which I now see she’s widened significantly. “I don’t feel like I’m getting through to you. You don’t have to be okay. *Why* do you always want to pretend?”

The more important question is *why* am I such a bad liar? Yasmin may know me better than I know myself, but if anything, not knowing yourself must make it easier to lie. I should be better at this. I peer into her long face, her beady eyes demanding out of me what I cannot give, and urge myself to just *be better*. Be better at lying. To Yasmin and to yourself.

The luneshine feels different tonight. It feels like instead of flooding the room with its usual icy glow, it’s flooding *me* specifically. I feel as if there’s a missing part of me, a hollow space within me, that gives the luneshine space to enter me—through my mouth, nose, eyes, ears, even *pores*. I felt emptier than I ever had right after Mona’s death, yet right now, that emptiness feels like it’s been an asset all along.

“I’m fine, Yas,” I state calmly. This time, a foreign instinct activates within me, guiding me in a direction I’ve never considered before: she *wants* to believe you, she *wants* you to be okay. Don’t resist—help. *Create the lie with her*.

“I feel better, honestly. Just knowing I have you to talk to makes me feel better.” It’s what she wants to hear, and I can tell she’s burning every word I say into her brain.

This time around, the energy in the room shifts. My eyes feel cold like they’ve never been before, as if my eyeballs themselves are caked in a veneer of ice, and as my cold gaze meets my sister’s, I see her eyes widen in understanding, then relief. The corners of her mouth actually turn upwards, and miraculously, we share a much-needed moment of silence. The luneshine in me invigorates me, and for a brief flash, an overwhelming sense of devotion towards Luna washes over me. Her light has had mild effects on me before, things like expedited healing or mood boosts, but never has

anything like this happened before. For the first time since the fire, I feel like a whole human being.

And I actually do feel fine.

Chapter Ten

As the sky darkens the next night, my world lights up once again. Growing crops is fun, but it pales in comparison to the world of Luna agency. I've determined I've somehow figured out how to "harness Luna's power," a surprisingly automatic process, which has made me go from being a nobody to someone who can harness the power of the freaking *moon*. I haven't quite figured out the selective memory thing yet, but I have so many forgotten memories stockpiled that it doesn't matter. Right now, the "reserve", the gaping hole within me that grows a little larger with every memory I forget, seems like it can contain all the luneshine in existence. Over the past few days, I've been putting my new abilities to use.

The past few nights have been morally questionable, admittedly, because I've been practicing by deceiving my sister. I keep the lies lighthearted, but I still feel bad. It's the only way to practice, and it's actually *working*. I've gone from a bad liar to someone who controls the truth itself.

"Did you know I actually hate Potato-Tomato soup?" I lie effortlessly. We're both stretched out under the luneshine, enjoying the sight of Luna rotating. What does she do all day, aside from rotate and possess near-dead old men?

Also... do I seriously become "Janab" tomorrow? She and I still feel miles apart. *Time is cyclical*, I remind myself... whatever that's supposed to mean. It makes no sense that I'd need to deliver instructions to myself after *just* having received them. I need to find a way to talk to Luna and unscramble my mind. At least the luneshine makes it easier to forget the collapse of logic itself.

I resolve to pay father a visit during lunerise again at some point. It's the only way I've ever successfully communicated with Luna, so it's worth a try. I need answers.

Yasmin recoils in horror. She's bought the lie hook, line, and sinker... only strangely, it doesn't quite feel like a lie anymore. Maybe because I'm too inexperienced

to keep myself from lying to *myself*, too. Occasionally, the “lies” I tell Yasmin end up confusing me, and upon reflecting on them for a few minutes, I realize they were true after all. Earlier tonight, I told her I was sad about father being dead, for example. It was a lie, of course, but as soon as the words left my mouth, it felt like a gale of wind spiraled straight into my chest, rendering me unable to breathe. It felt like I was learning of my dad’s death for the very first time.

Truth be told, that feeling is part of what motivates me to check on him tonight... just to make sure he’s okay.

“All this time?” She cries in disbelief—well, *belief*. “I feel betrayed. You’ve been eating that stuff for my sake this *entire* time and you *hate* it?”

I laugh, shoving her to the right as I wrap her in a clumsy side-hug. Luna rises higher and higher, and as I feel her light growing stronger, I can’t stop the lies from streaming out of my mouth. I feel like a child who’s been given a lump of clay and taught that clay is moldable.

“Yep, all this time.” I venture perhaps the boldest lie I could possibly muster. “In fact, I hate farming.”

Then, I sit there in astonishment as Yasmin goes into complete shock. The luneshine has turned her into the world’s biggest chump. “Janny...” she whispers before beginning to cry. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know that. I appreciate how hard you work to feed me.”

Now I feel bad. I try to backtrack, but it’s too late—the lie has rooted in her mind, and it’s there to stay, as far as I know. The weight of what I’ve just done finally crashes into me. How many hours have I poured into studying agriculture, expanding my farm, and teaching my sister to love the practice? She may not get her hands too dirty, but the fact that she has any interest in a lifesaving craft is a blessing, and now, I may have just ruined it. My stomach sinks—she wouldn’t be half as interested in farming if it weren’t for *my* passion for it. If she thinks I hate it, she won’t want to subject me to more of it. She won’t study. Her passion for medicinal plants will die.

I draft ten different counter-lies in my head as she looks at me pleadingly, begging me to explain why I’ve feigned passion in something I hate for years now. Before I can get a single one out, the last wisps of luneshine disappear from the sky without a trace. Lunerise and lunset are far too close.