

Trinity College
Trinity College Digital Repository

Student Creative Fellowships

Watkinson Library

2013

The Door Jumper: a Watkinson fellowship novel

Georgia Summers
Trinity College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/fellows>

Recommended Citation

Summers, Georgia, "The Door Jumper: a Watkinson fellowship novel" (2013). *Student Creative Fellowships*. Paper 6.
<http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/fellows/6>

The Door Jumper

By Georgia Summers

A Watkinson Fellowship novel

2013

“All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveller is unaware.”

- Martin Buber

It started when Peregrine was eight, at her grandparents' house in the summer that broke records for its extreme weather. Mid-afternoon carried with it a heat so fierce that ice cold tap water went tepid in minutes, even inside the kitchen. At first it had been fun. Her grandparents let her make ice with red and orange food colouring, and her drinks swirled with strange chemical colours as the ice melted. She could jump into the pool and surface to watch water slop over the edge, drowning several unfortunate ants. In the face of the heat, her grandparents occasionally gave into her requests for fizzy drinks and she'd get to sip Coca Cola while on the hammock.

But then there was the drought, and no more sprinklers, and even more heat. It crept in everywhere, even at night, when the air conditioning was on at full blast and the windows tightly shut. It prickled at the back of her neck and made her little brother – who was barely five and already irritating – cry with gasping, blubbery tears. Her grandparents stopped giving her Coca Cola – “It'll make you even more dehydrated, poppet, and it's not good for you, anyway” – and the funny coloured ice ran out. It seemed like every five minutes, someone was coming to put more sun lotion on her, or Deet insect spray, which was worse because it stung.

Now she was stuck inside for the hottest part of the day, instead of lounging in the pool. Peregrine pressed her cheek against the living room window and felt the heat pulsing through the glass. Her small hands left smudgy prints. She was desperate to go outside, to walk along the beach and dip her overheated hands and feet into the water. Her grandparents wouldn't take her, though; they were too worried about her little brother, who had already got heatstroke once and spent most of the day before in a cold bath. He, she noted with some envy, had been allowed to have a Coca Cola.

If there was only some way to get to the beach by herself.

She imagined a great big tidal wave to simply carry the house down to the beach, whether her grandparents liked it or not. But then she still might not be allowed outside and the ocean would drive her crazy with its closeness and not-closeness. It would be better if there were some way of getting to the beach without the others.

She closed her eyes and wished, but no magical portal came down to suck her through the window and to the beach. Feeling vaguely disappointed, she turned away from the window. Her grandparents' living room was a shade of yellow that was attractive in winter, but in the warmth of the sun, it was dark and oppressive. The porcelain figurines of shepherdesses and milk maids intimidated her with their cold stares. Usually, there were two doors leading from the room: one to the kitchen, and one to the hallway.

Now, there was another one, shoved in the space where the fireplace should have been. It was more like an archway, made up of rough slabs of rock haphazardly stacked on top of one another and cemented with green moss and vines that curled around from the other side. The room was suddenly swelteringly hot, as heat poured from the archway, bringing with it the tang of salt and fish. Peregrine took three steps forward and stopped. She could see the ocean on the horizon, and four paces away was the beach. Gains of sand shifted with the wind onto the carpet.

Peregrine hesitated. Five minutes later, she came back in her bathing suit with a matching yellow bucket and trowel. The archway was still there, shimmering slightly. She supposed that she'd better cross it before it faded, which it would – and soon. She didn't know how she understood that, but the thought arrived pre-formed into her head.

Quickly, she crossed the last two steps and felt the crunch of hot sand underneath her feet.

No one noticed the arrival of an eight-year-old girl from apparently nowhere, and no one mentioned anything as she sat down at the edge of the water and let the surf wash over her feet. They certainly failed to notice the air pressure pop as the archway dissolved in the air. Only Peregrine rubbed at her ears, and looked around for the source of pain.

At half past five, her grandparents received a call.

At six, they arrived on the beach to find a tired and incredibly sunburnt Peregrine sleeping at the back of a café. The owner had notified the police, and they had, in turn, advised the owner to let the girl keep sleeping in his café. On the car ride back, they'd let her rest, but in the morning, an onslaught of questions had ensued. Where had she been? Did a stranger pick her up? *How did she get to the beach?*

Peregrine couldn't answer most of the questions. Even at eight, vague alarm bells went off in her head to remind her that no, she wasn't supposed to speak about the door and the strange incident. "I don't know," seemed like the only thing to say.

And for the most part, it was true. She didn't know what she'd done. When she tried to get back, the door refused to materialise. Years later, she'd recognise it as the archway off an old tumbledown cottage near the beach, but by then, the memory had faded, and she only felt a vague wash of confusion as she drove past it.

Since then, she'd used door jumping several times, once to trick her friends and another to sneak out of the house. On more than one occasion, she'd used it when she was late for school. It wasn't difficult; she simply thought about where she was going,

turned around, and there the door was. Her hands tingled with pins and needles and out of the corner of her eye, the door would manifest out of nowhere. There were a few rules, though. It had to be a door that she knew. It had to exist. And there had to be another way back.

She had tried several times to door jump both to and from a location. Each time, she'd got dizzy and thrown up, or had spent the rest of the day lying around with a splitting headache. It had made things problematic at times – she had got in serious trouble once after being found in school after hours – but in the end, she decided to give up. The pain and the disappointment weren't worth it.

So she learned to work around her limitations, and for the most part, she did okay. Except for when she didn't.

On a day like today, she was tempted once more to try door jumping there and back. Her mother worked on the local university's campus as a librarian at the rare books library and she often dragged Peregrine with her. Apparently she couldn't be trusted around the house anymore, which was mostly untrue. That time with the fire and the oven had been a mistake. Everyone got careless at some point, didn't they?

It would have been different if her mother took her to work during the semester. Peregrine would have tons of college boys to eye up, and at least the time would go by faster. The coffee shop was open, then, and it was always fun to sit and chat to the students, who mainly listened to obscure hipster music.

But it was the beginning of the summer, and the only students who were here were also busy, at keyboards in windowless, airless rooms, or on the phone to angry

parents, or guiding tours around campus. They had no time to stop and talk, especially not to a senior in the local high school. The coffee shop was closed, and instead of lounging around on comfy chequered couches, she was inside playing Space Invaders on one of the public computers. It was always her and this other guy, who sat opposite her and one down. They never made eye contact, and they never spoke because frankly, it was too awkward to ask someone why they spent seven hours in a library on the computer.

Today, she'd spent the first hour and a half reaching level fifty-four of Space Invaders, then she'd got bored and had meandered upstairs to create a book fort. One of the librarians had caught her, though, so now she was back downstairs, swinging on the wheelie chair. What she wouldn't give to jump straight back home for most of the day, and then return in the evening. Her mum wouldn't suspect anything, and she'd be a lot less bored for it.

At lunchtime, her mother found her. "Peregrine, come and give me a hand. We had a researcher in on Tuesday and there's a list of books for us to move back into the stacks."

"Ugh, fine."

It was better than hanging around the computers, but only a little. She didn't like the stacks much. It was okay when there was someone else there, but when it was just her, every noise she made magnified in intensity, and it always sounded like someone else was there when they weren't.

Two days ago, she'd been in the stacks and she'd been positive that she'd heard footsteps. Not her own, but *someone else's*. Which was okay until she realised that everyone else was upstairs.

Peregrine shifted the researcher's books to her other arm and descended the carpeted staircase to the basement. Since, then she hadn't heard the creepy footsteps, but she still rushed to put the books back, taking the steps down two at a time. As she pulled open the heavy door to the basement she took a deep breath, and then turned on the light.

No one was there.

What she was expecting, she didn't know, exactly. Of course there was no one else down here. Overhead, the atmosphere control rattled, echoing off the tiled floor. The scent of vanillin grew stronger as she opened the door to the B stacks, where the compact shelving was.

At first she didn't hear it because of the noise from the humidifier, but as she got closer, the crackling of a big band record filtered through the room. It was *Begin the Beguine*. She recognised it from her music class, but this was a much older version. It sounded warmer, softer.

She was wrong. There must have been someone down here, after all. The researchers that travelled in from Boston were always interested in these kinds of things. Her mum must have forgotten to mention them.

"Hello?" she said, confused.

The music swelled as she grew closer, but no one answered. Maybe they were too close to the music to hear her.

“Anyone there?” she said.

Prickles of unease rolled down her spine. If anyone were there, they would have heard her by now. She put the books gently on top of a filing cabinet and moved closer towards the break in the compact shelving where the music escaped. She felt dizzy; it was like someone had plunged her head underwater and now she didn't have enough breath to surface to the top.

Her feet shuffled forward quietly. One step. Two steps. And then she was in front of the gap in the shelving. She couldn't see anyone, but that didn't mean that they weren't there.

“Hey!” she said loudly.

There were a few last strains of clarinet and then the song ended. The player kept going, however, and there was only the sound of the vinyl record popping. Then footsteps. The record player clicked off.

Oh God. Peregrine felt ill from the adrenaline that rushed through her. She wanted to run – she wanted to throw up. The footsteps grew closer, just about turning the corner.

And then she saw it.

The door was tall, and unmarked. Considering how well she knew the area, she'd never seen it before. A bluish light seeped out from under it. There was no one else around.

“Hello?”

She rapped on the door a couple of times. It sounded hollow, but no one opened the door, and she could no longer hear the footsteps. Whatever had happened, it was

creepy. Afraid, she backed away from the door and walked towards the exit. She forced herself to walk because if she started to run, or even jog, it would be admitting to the fear that curdled in her stomach. When she got back upstairs, however, she couldn't help but sigh in relief.

That night at dinner, she asked her mum about the library. She stirred her pasta with her fork and tried not to look too concerned. After all, she didn't want her mother to confuse the question with *actual* interest about the library.

"So, uh, my friend told me about the strange things that happen in the library," she said.

Her mum glanced up from the book she was reading at the table. "What? Oh, they're just silly things. People think the library is haunted by the original donator to the library, David Watkinson himself. He was actually a pretty interesting guy. He –"

"That's great, Mum, thanks," Peregrine said quickly.

She finished her pasta and bolted upstairs before her mum could drag her into a conversation about the intricacies of nineteenth-century pottery, or whatever else was stored down there. She slumped onto her bed and stared up at the ceiling. Was that what she'd really seen? Was the ghost of David Watkinson making his presence felt? She doubted it. Already, what had happened seemed like some kind of crazy dream. She tried to hold onto the terror, but the sensation was slipping from her memory.

Over the next few days, she'd avoided the library as much as possible, and she didn't come across any more freaky footsteps or unexplainable things. It had probably all been some kind of hallucination. Libraries did that to a person.

The weekend still came as a relief, however. Peregrine had a party to go to, and she was more than ready to get away from the library. It was a casual kind of thing, and she pulled on jeans and a t-shirt, then tied the laces on her shoes and walked downstairs. Her mum was by the door, though, waiting for her.

“Don’t forget your phone. Call me when you get there and when you’re on your way back,” her mum said.

Peregrine rolled her eyes. “I’ll be fine.”

“I mean it. Don’t forget what happened last time you forgot to take your phone.”

She groaned. That *one time* she’d forgotten to take her phone out with her, she’d door jumped to the other side of town, and she’d had to walk the way back in the rain. It had taken her two hours in the pouring rain to get home, and she’d had to lie to her mum about how she’d got there. The lie didn’t matter, but she’d been in big trouble, and she didn’t exactly want to repeat that.

She was down the drive when she realised that her phone wasn’t in her pocket. It wasn’t in her bag, either, where she always kept it. It wouldn’t have been upstairs in her room. The only time she remembered taking out... was in the library. Peregrine swore under her breath. It was closed on the weekends, but she could jump in. The only problem was getting back out. Her mum’s code would work, of course, and then she’d be able to go to the party, not get in trouble *and* have her phone.

The jump would have to be out of sight, so she slipped around the side of her house, and closed her eyes. The library’s glass double doors swam into her head. She imagined herself grasping one of the handles, feeling the door’s weight as she pushed it inwards. Her hands would leave fingerprints. There would be some resistance.

When she opened her eyes, the doors were there, just as she'd envisioned them. Beyond them, the library was dark, a thin sheet of light coming in from the windows at the back. The latest display was halfway dismantled, with half of the cases empty. Peregrine really didn't want to go in. It was, quite frankly, creepy to the point where she almost dissolved the door and walked away. But she could see her phone lying on the front desk. All she had to do was go in, grab it, and then get out.

Before anyone could see her, she opened the door and walked in. It swung shut behind her and closed. When she turned around, instead of the house, she could see the rest of the library, dark and gloomy. Quickly, Peregrine swiped her phone off the table and then turned around. Her hand was on the door when she saw the small light flashing in the corner of her eye.

She swore out loud again. Of course. She hadn't thought about it five minutes ago, but this was a rare books library. Rare, as in valuable. Rare, as in something to steal. Rare, as in needed doors with alarms. How was she supposed to get out without activating the alarms?

There had to be another way out. All of the other exits in the main room were alarmed, but what about in the stacks? Peregrine hesitated. It was worth a shot, but the stacks were also creepy. She didn't want to go down there in the dark. *God, I wish I hadn't left my phone here*, she thought.

Holding her breath, she punched in her mum's code and opened the door. She walked down the stairs and opened the door to the stacks. It was pitch black. Heart pounding furiously, she fumbled around the wall for the light switches and flicked them

on. After the dim gloom of upstairs, it was too bright, and she shielded her eyes from the glare.

Okay, so where next? There was no point in going down to the C floor – the staircase was always alarmed – so she started to walk around all of the exits. To her dismay, they all had blinking lights above the doors, like the main entrance. It looked like no matter what she was going to do, she was stuck.

Fine. It was time to call her mum. She dreaded it, but it was either that, or stay here for the weekend, and she didn't fancy that. She clicked on her phone. Nothing. Frantically, she clicked it again, but the screen stayed blank. Great. So she was out of power. What was she supposed to do? Go through a door and trigger the alarm.

She certainly didn't want to stay in the library all by herself.

Then it hit her. She hadn't seen a flashing light over the metal door. If anything, that was her way out. She opened the door to the east stacks, and flicked on the light. The hush in the previous room had disappeared, and instead, humidifiers rattled, groaned, and clattered. Peregrine jumped as the door behind her snapped shut. It smelled a little like burning paper, although she wasn't sure where that came from.

When she got to the place where the door had been, it was no longer there. *Odd*, she thought. Maybe she really was going crazy. Even so, all that talk about ghosts at dinner made her nervous. She had to remind herself that ghosts weren't real. That was more crazy talk. Ghosts. Ha, ha.

Then the light went out.

She couldn't help it; she screamed. Her voice cut through the noise and reverberated in the room. When it died away, she stood stock still, terrified. The

electricity had blown. Either that, or someone else was in there with her, and she didn't dare think about that, in case she screamed again. Slowly, fighting terror, she shuffled towards what she thought was the wall.

As she moved, she heard it. Footsteps. Again.

She started to run. She crashed into bookshelves, into the wall, into something that skidded away when she tripped and fell. In desperation, she scrambled back up. This was like a bad horror film. The blonde girl always dies, the blonde girl always dies. The thought repeated like a mantra in her head. She wasn't blonde, but what did that matter?

Suddenly, a blue light spilled over the floor from a gap in the compact shelving. Peregrine saw it and dashed towards it. It was the way out, and she was damned if she was going to stay in this place a second longer. The footsteps behind her grew louder. She couldn't look over her shoulder. She didn't want to.

She dove between the compact shelving and all the way down to where the door leaked blue light. Her hand closed on the handle and turned it, but it wouldn't open. She tugged on it frantically.

"Come on, come on," she muttered.

The footsteps were closer. She heard them stop as they came to the break in the compact shelving. With the last of her resolve, she shoved on the door with her shoulder. There was a click, the sound of surprise, and she fell forward.

"Oh God, my head."

Peregrine groaned. Jesus, she'd really hit it hard. What *had* that been? She sat up and glanced around, relieved to see that she was out of the library. And then she stopped and blinked. She must have hit her head too hard because the vision in front of her wasn't fading. Where were the tennis courts? Where was the rest of the city?

Because what was in front of her was most definitely not the city. She was in a ruined church, with sky where a high vaulted ceiling would be. Vines climbed through empty windows and twisted around broken pillars. Peregrine stood up. She could feel the flagstones beneath her feet, but they were covered with long grass that tickled above her ankles.

She glanced back, towards the metal door. But there was no door. There was only an open archway in the middle of the church. Experimentally, she stepped through it. Nothing. She stepped through it again.

"Oh God." She sat down heavily. "Oh no. This isn't happening. This can't be happening."

She tried to focus. Something had gone wrong, clearly. She was hallucinating. She was drunk, or high, or dying from a brain haemorrhage. That would suck. A tiny voice in her head whispered two words: door jump. That was ridiculous, though, and she shook the idea away. She couldn't door jump. You could jump there, and not jump back. She had to be in a physically different location before it would work, and maybe it was psychological, but she sure as hell couldn't jump back.

It was impossible. *This is it*, she thought. *I'm insane. Delusional. Hello padded walls and men in white coats.*

At the very least, whoever had been following her was left behind.

“H-hello?”

Startled, she whipped around and punched the person in the face. Clearly, she had been wrong on all account. She prepared herself to run, and then stopped. The person in front of her wasn't intimidating; in fact, he clutched his face in pain.

“Is that how you say hi to everyone?” he said, his voice muffled through his fingers.

Peregrine backed up. “Who the hell are you? Were you following me?”

Now that she wasn't trying to run, the guy in front of her looked relatively harmless. He was lean, and fairly tall, but his stooped shoulders diminished his height and made him look afraid. To be fair, he probably was afraid, given that she'd just hit him.

“I'm Charlie,” he said.

She waited for the explanation, but apparently there was none. He was there. And she was here.

“Can you tell me where I am?”

He blinked. “Um, oh, right. Sorry, door jumper, I'm new at this.” He straightened up. “I've been waiting for someone like you. You're in grave danger, and if you want to stay alive, you'd better follow me.”

“No.”

It registered that she'd also been called a door jumper. He knew what she was. How? She'd expected anyone who found out about her ability to run screaming, but he was calm, more timid than anything.

“What?” He sounded surprised. “You're... you're in grave danger,” he repeated.

Peregrine put her hands on her hips. “Yeah, I got that part. But I’m okay. Just tell me where I am.”

“But the grave -”

“Where am I?” she shouted.

Charlie jumped, startled. “You’re in the Heartlands. In the old church.”

“Oh, brilliant. A lunatic.” She turned away from him to stare at the landscape.

“Fantastic.”

Behind her, she could hear riffling pages. She turned back around and watched as he shuffled through a book.

“Okay, I’ve got it,” he said. “Greetings, door jumper. That’s what the book says, so I’m going to go with it. Greetings. As this is your first experience in the Heartlands, you may find yourself disoriented. Luckily, your guide is here to help you.” He perked up. “He or she – it’s me, so a he then – will give you an in depth explanation of the Heartlands and will take you to the library. The library?” He looked uncertain all of a sudden. “Actually, do we have to do the library trip? I’d rather not do the library trip. Libraries. Ha.”

“Where am I really?”

Prickles of unease ran through her. The dreamlike confusion she’d felt was beginning to disappear. This guy, Charlie, didn’t seem like he was fooling around. He didn’t even seem that crazy. *Where had she jumped to?*

“I explained this already,” Charlie said, replying to her question. “You’re in the Heartlands. The heart of your library.”

“It’s not my library,” she said quickly.

He shrugged. “Regardless, you’re here.”

“How do I get back?” She took a step towards Charlie and he flinched. “How do I get back home? I don’t want to stay here.”

“Uh, that’s kind of difficult, I’m afraid…”

He explained it to her as they sat in the grass underneath the archway. The Heartlands didn’t exist in her world – the real world. It existed in the library itself, made up of pages and words and map and whatever else happened to be in the library. When Peregrine had jumped, she’d jumped here by accident. And there was no way to get back.

“No way?” She didn’t believe him.

“Unless you know how to jump back,” he said.

No. That was ridiculous. If there was a way in, there was a way out – that’s what she’d always believed. It was one of her personal mantras. The other was something about trying not to panic in tricky situations. It was proving hard to follow because this was more than tricky. It was impossible. She couldn’t exist in some made up place. Didn’t she remember that time with the Narnia wardrobe?

Charlie saw that she was starting to freak out. “Don’t panic, please. I might not know a way out, but there are other people. People who can help.”

“I’m not panicking,” she said quickly. “And who? Who’s going to help me?”

“I will.”

“Really?”

She was surprised. Why would he help her? She would manage on her own – she always had in situations like this – but it would be so much easier if she had the company.

Charlie smiled at her. “You look like you need the help. Besides, I don’t mind. Better than staying out here.”

‘Out here’ turned out to be an abandoned village in the middle of overgrown fields. If there had been a dirt track leading out, it had long since grown over. Most of the houses lacked roofs. Sometimes walls had fallen away. One or two houses had collapsed entirely.

“What is this place?” she asked. “Is this what the Heartlands looks like?”

He shook his head. “This is a tiny part of the Heartlands. The rest looks much more civilised, trust me.” He gestured to the ruined village. “I’m not really sure what this is. A leftover of an older library, perhaps. Or maybe it crumbled after a significant book shifting. It’s impossible to tell.”

It was easy to listen to Charlie’s amiable chatter as they left the abandoned village. He liked to talk, it turned out, and she didn’t mind listening to him, especially when she was too busy drinking in the landscape to talk. For the most part, they could have been somewhere deep in the English countryside. It was only when they came across other landmarks, like enormous lakes ringed with exotic birds, that the foreignness of it all came back to her.

Before they’d left, Charlie had also given her a knife. It was small and almost weightless, with a pearlescent handle that changed colours when she examined it in the sun. It came with a small sheathe, which she slid over the blade. It was all very Tolkien,

and Peregrine was uncomfortably reminded of what had happened to the hobbits. She broke through Charlie's inane chatter in an attempt to divert her mind.

"Where are we going again?" she asked.

He sighed. "I didn't want to go to the library, but it looks like we might actually have to. There's an old friend there. Possibly. It's likely she's moved on, but then again, she might not have."

"That doesn't sound particularly encouraging," she said.

"Unfortunately, it's all I have to go on."

Eventually they found a small, rutted path that led out of the fields and towards a better kept area. The fields here were used for corn and other crops, which swayed gently with the breeze. Occasionally, they'd see houses, but Charlie would pull her off the road and they'd walk far around it. It was okay at first, but then Peregrine began to wonder. She stopped him as he tried to go around a farmhouse.

He made a face. "You're not from the Heartlands, and people will notice. You might not, but I certainly did. It's your clothes, your walk, your accent – everything. It's a better if we don't come across anyone. Outsiders don't come to the Heartlands."

"How did you know I was a door jumper, though?" she persisted. "No one at home knows."

"There are always signs."

She wanted to ask more questions, but he suddenly fell silent and put a finger to his lips. They'd moved into a copse of trees to avoid the farmhouse, and there were voices ahead. Fear coiled in her stomach. What if they weren't human? What if they

were some kind of vicious hybrid alien specifically designed to eat door jumpers? She didn't know what it would be like here.

"Follow me," he said.

Quietly, they went further into the copse. Peregrine was careful not to tread on any twigs, but it was difficult, and every snap seemed to reverberate through the forest. In adventure novels, this sort of thing had always been fun, written as a challenging adventure.

They lied.

Charlie led her back around the track, and she breathed a sigh of relief. It was incredible how catching fear was. If she were by herself, she probably would have run straight into them, and then what? She might have been welcomed.

"They wouldn't have liked you," Charlie said when she voiced this. "This is on the border of the Heartlands, so they're used to seeing strange things, but that doesn't mean that they like them."

As they continued, there were more houses, and the roads grew busier. More than once, Charlie had asked her to hide in the bushes by the side of the road while he scouted ahead. Twice, people had come onto the road unexpectedly.

"We can't keep doing this," he said eventually. "It's not going to work for us much longer. We need to rest."

"Agreed."

She would never admit to it, but Peregrine's feet were starting to hurt. She wanted to stop right now and take a break, eat something, maybe, but Charlie was all gung-ho for getting to the library on time. They paused while he thought.

“There’s an abandoned house not too far from here,” he said, mostly to himself. “If we go there, chances are that we’ll be safe for the night. The alternative is to keep walking to the library. That might be too dangerous, though.”

Neither choice sounded especially appealing to her.

“You could teach me,” she said. “Teach me how to act like one of you. You said that I’m not like you, but I could learn.”

He thought about it for a moment. “It’s a nice idea, but I don’t think so. There are some things you wouldn’t be able to do, no matter how good an impersonator you are.”

She tried to get him to tell her what they were, but he didn’t say anything else. They kept going. Charlie led her further off the road and they were back in the fields, wading through long grass and overgrown crops. It was easier to stay hidden in the fields, but there were other things to watch out for, too. Charlie pointed out an emerald green snake coiled up in the grass. On more than one occasion, she’d tripped over a rock.

The house was on the other side of the field, tumbledown, but with the roof intact. Charlie went in first, and shoed out a stray cat. Peregrine sighed. She missed her bed already, and her home. She should have been at her party by now.

“It isn’t the Ritz,” she said, attempting to joke about it, “but it looks cosy enough.”

He smiled at her wryly. “There are worse places to sleep.”

That night, it was difficult to get comfortable. The floor was strewn with damp straw, and things crawled under her all night. She knew that it was only mice – probably – but the thought made her shudder in disgust. She couldn’t imagine managing to sleep

here. She glanced over at Charlie. He was sprawled on his back, fast asleep, mouth open. However, despite her misgivings, she managed to doze off anyway, and awoke to sunshine streaming through the empty window.

Charlie was already up. He handed her a hunk of fresh bread, which she devoured. She hadn't realised she was so hungry.

"I thought you might like that," he said, grinning. "I went out this morning and did some bartering." His shoulders slumped. "We're also closer to the library."

Peregrine got up and brushed her hair from her eyes. "You're really not looking forward to this, are you?"

"It's complicated."

That's all he would say, so she dropped it. He was a lot quieter today, occasionally pointing out objects of interest, but otherwise silent. Like the previous day, he took her around several villages, but in the forests and fields, there were a lot more people, and it became harder to avoid them. Peregrine was also fairly sure that the large blister on her foot had burst.

It was towards the evening when they arrived at the library. Peregrine could only stare at it. It looked more like a bank, or some kind of mansion. All of the libraries she knew were small and poky, tucked away into a shabby building. This was...

"Brilliant," she said.

He glanced at her. "If by brilliant you mean terrifying, then yes."

Her smile faded as she got close to it, however. Boards covered up the windows, and there was a dusty coating on the floor. It looked derelict.

"Are you sure your friend still lives here?"

“No,” he said. “It was worth a shot.”

They approached the door. Peregrine went first and opened it. Chalky blue paint clung to her fingertips and she wiped them off on her jeans, where they made streaky lines. She squinted into the gloom and tried not to cough. This place was old – and musty enough that dust motes swirled in the light that poured in from outside. She could just about see the silhouettes of stacks of books.

“I don’t like this,” Charlie said from behind her. “I could get my badge revoked.”

“For what? Intruding on a library? You’re a *librarian*.”

“About that. I may have somewhat... edited the truth.”

She turned to look back at him. “You lied to me?”

“Well, I’m a librarian, yeah, but it’s not your definition of a librarian exactly-”

Peregrine held one hand up to silence him. She could hear something coming from within the library. A low buzz of whispers emanated from the darkness, reaching out towards her. Evidently, she was not the only one to hear it, as Charlie took a couple of steps back.

“The books are talking to us,” he said in a hushed voice. “We should go. Now.”

But instead of retreating, Peregrine took two steps forward, as if entranced. Then the door slammed shut behind her.

“Crap,” said Charlie.

For a moment, darkness surrounded her and she panicked. Then lights came on, one by one, illuminating the library. She stared in awe. If her mother could only see this. The stacks of books she’d seen in the gloom were barely the tip of what was in the

library. Ancient fat tomes sat next to each other on shelves of dark wood with knotty whorls visible in the grain. Books were all over the floor, either stacked or open on their spines, so dusty that it was impossible to make out the writing.

“Mum would go mental,” Peregrine whispered to herself.

Whoever worked in the library had made a fine art out of disorganisation. There was a faintly visible trail cleared of books and other debris that meandered through the chaos and down the hallway to where, presumably, more books rested. Peregrine took a step forward and accidentally sent a pile of scrolls rolling across the tiled floor. The sound was enough to make her flinch, her heart racing. Which reminded her that she was, for the time being, completely alone.

She turned around to open the door, but the handle wouldn't turn. Behind it, she could hear Charlie's muffled protest as he, too, tried to open the door.

“Can you hear me?” she called.

Although her voice echoed down the seemingly endless hallway, Charlie obviously couldn't hear her. He pounded on the door several more times and then she heard him sigh.

She turned back around. The library seemed slightly more formidable than before, and she pulled out her knife. Not that it would do much good here. What did she think she was going to fight? Bookworms? And how? Charlie had given her the knife, but he'd not even bothered to explain how to use it. She swiped at the air a few times and then fumbled the last move. The knife clattered on the tiles. She swore.

“You won't be needing that.”

Peregrine swore again and backed up against the door. Where there had only been empty space, a woman stood rigidly. Her hair was pulled up into a sharp knot at the back of her head, held together with what looked like two bookbinding awls. Peregrine had seen her mother use them, and they were in her house frequently, but as hair accessories? The woman's blue and gold striped waistcoat held several other tools Peregrine recognised, including a Hastings magnifying glass dangling by a chain around her neck.

"Who are you?" She was unable to keep the fear out of her voice.

The woman took a few steps closer. There was something off about her eyes, and the way that she cocked her head, not directly at Peregrine, but off to the side, as if she was listening instead. Spectacles peeked out of her waistcoat pocket.

"I believe since you are the intruder, I have the right to ask questions." The woman took another step closer, but there was nowhere else for Peregrine to go. "This is a restricted area. The doors are always locked."

Peregrine jiggled the handle again, but the door remained steadfastly closed. "No! It was open just a minute ago. I walked straight in. How else could I have got in here?"

The woman tilted her head. "As you know well, not all doors are permanent and nowhere is forever locked."

A chill ran through Peregrine.

"Do you think that you are the first?" the woman asked. "I recognise a door jumper when I come across one and you bear all of the hallmarks. It's a dangerous thing to be a door jumper." She paused. "Your friend is becoming quite anxious outside."

The woman waved her hand with an air of indifference and the lock on the library entrance door clicked. Charlie tumbled in.

“Jesus, couldn’t you have opened the door any sooner? Did your hands fall off or-” He trailed off as he saw the woman. “Oh. Oh no.”

“Charles Liberist. Guardian. Or would be, if not for the atlas incident.”

Charlie’s face was a deep red. “There’s no need to bring up the atlas incident.”

“Atlas incident?” Peregrine asked.

She felt a little more comfortable now that Charlie was with her. He was intimidated, but not afraid, and that made her feel a little braver. The woman didn’t attack him, even though she was looking at him in the same curious fashion that she’d examined Peregrine. The knife was still on the floor, out of reach.

“It’s a good thing that you two have come here first,” the woman said. “There are others looking for you, and they are not so welcoming.”

If this was a friendly welcome, Peregrine thought, then she’d hate to see what unfriendly looked like.

“In fact, you have blundered your way here, alerting just about everyone to your presence. Charles, as an assistant guardian, I expected more of you.”

Charlie twisted his mouth, but didn’t say anything.

The woman continued, “I suppose it is irrelevant now. I assume that you’re here because you have questions for me.”

“A couple, yeah,” Peregrine said. “Who are you? How do you know about me? How do I get out?”

Charlie nudged her. “I think we should probably just go.”

“No, it’s quite alright,” the woman said. “You came here seeking answers; it is only fitting that you receive them. My name is Leahr, and I serve as the head librarian.”

As she spoke, she turned her eyes up to the light and Peregrine understood immediately why the woman hadn’t looked at her directly. Her eyes were a pearlescent grey, and instead of a pupil, there was only a dull sheen, as if the iris had swallowed it. The effect was unnerving.

“With the knowledge in this library, I have learnt much about your door jumping skills. And you are not the first to visit.”

“I’m not?”

Leahr turned and started to walk down the corridor. Both Charlie and Peregrine followed suit. She picked up her knife as she passed it and shoved it back into her boot.

“No. But you’ve certainly lived the longest.”

In a small room, crammed with books and overstuffed armchairs, Leahr poured tea from a large teapot into several cups. She handed them to Peregrine and Charlie, who took them gratefully. Lavender and sage drifted up from the cups.

The last door jumper Leahr had met had died on her doorstep. The jump had been too big to manage, and she had cradled his head during his final moments. There had been blood all over his face – tacky, she described it, like glue – and he had taken no more than half a dozen gasping breaths before he died.

Then there had been Juniper, who had never even made it to the library. She had materialised on the Audubon shores and died with seven arrows in her chest. Leahr had only figured out that she was a door jumper from the unfamiliar texture of the

clothes and afterwards, from the conversations that she'd had with people. Juniper had been in the Heartlands for about half a day before she had been attacked.

If there had been others before them, Leahr didn't know. She certainly didn't expect that they lived long.

Peregrine clutched her teacup nervously. "Why are they all dead?"

The blind librarian sighed. "Your kind are dangerous here. You come in with new ideas and strange objects, and the fabric of our world is disrupted every single time. The safest thing to do is kill you."

"But you're not going to do that," Peregrine said.

"No. I'm not." There was a relieved pause. "Others will try to."

Peregrine tried to imagine the danger and failed. There had been a moment in the library, just before Leahr had let Charlie in, where she'd been afraid, but she'd never really believed that anyone would kill her. Charlie had been nothing but helpful since she'd arrived, and it was difficult to believe that anyone else would take such a unrepentant hatred of her.

"So what you're saying is that I'm sort of a miracle?" she asked hopefully.

Leahr shook her head. "You are going to have to be careful here. That is what I'm saying."

"Wait, wait – I want to *leave*. I'm not sticking around."

"You might not have a choice."

For a second, Peregrine couldn't quite hear anything other than the blood pulsing in her ears. "Of course I have a choice. I came here to find out how to get back. There's got to be a way to get back."

Leahr stood up. “If there is a way, I haven’t heard of it. Door jumping seems to be a strictly one way business.”

“But there must be a way to get out.” A note of desperation crept into Peregrine’s voice. “I’m not supposed to be here.”

The blind librarian thought for a while. Then she said, “There might be one way. On the Audubon shores, there are a series of caves that only a few people know about. Inside the deepest cave is a door that has always been locked. And that,” she ended, “is the door out of the Heartlands.”

Peregrine looked at Charlie, who shrugged. “That sounds great, but if it’s always locked, then how do I open it?”

“That is something that you will have to learn for yourself. However, I recommend that you start with the White Bear.”

Charlie hesitated. “I don’t think so.”

Peregrine could feel Charlie grow tense next to her. Whatever this white bear thing was, it sounded like something to be reckoned with.

“If there is anyone who knows where the key is, it’s the White Bear.”

He looked visibly panicked. “I haven’t seen him since the atlas incident.”

“Then you are well overdue a visit.” The blind librarian smiled at them. “Anyway, I assume you will be requiring a map of some kind. Supplies, maybe?”

Peregrine wanted to ask what the White Bear was, but she also didn’t want to upset Charlie further. He shot her a dark look when Leahr’s stood up, and she had the feeling that he’d start to argue with her as soon as they set off.

“Supplies would be good,” she said gratefully, trying to avoid Charlie’s stare.
“And a map.”

Leahr put the teapot and other utensils on a side table and fiddled with something inside her pocket. Peregrine noticed how graceful her movements were, even though she clearly couldn’t see anything in front of her. It was a little eerie to see her cock her head to one side and then move whatever she had to move in front of her.

“Charles, I would like to speak with you alone,” she said, and beckoned for Peregrine to leave the room. “Don’t worry, it will only take a moment.”

Still avoiding Charlie, Peregrine left the room and shut the door behind her. Alone for the first time since she’d got here, she let out a deep sigh and sank to the floor. She put her head in her hands and tried to breathe, tried to *think*. How had she got herself into this mess? She didn’t want to stay here, and she didn’t want to go off on some crazy, half-assed quest to get some key that sounded like it didn’t even exist. More than anything else, she wanted to go home, flop down on her bed and pretend that the entire thing had been a nightmare.

She closed her eyes and pictured the door to her house, but instead of the usual buzzing at her fingertips, there was nothing. She didn’t even feel ill. Only empty, as if someone had drained her of energy and left her lethargic.

“I’m dreaming,” she told herself quietly, whispering it so that the others wouldn’t hear her through the door. “This isn’t real. I’m asleep. Or really, really high.”

If she was asleep, then it was some kind of dream because when she pinched herself, it hurt like hell, but nothing else changed. If it was drugs, then it had to be some kind of super drug because she certainly didn’t feel hazy, or relaxed, the way that drugs

were supposed to make you feel. The hallway around her remained, cramped with books and dusty vases, smelling of vanillin. It should have been a comfort to her, but now all she wanted to do was get away from it and back to her own room, which smelled of floral air spray and her favourite shampoo.

When Leahr opened the door, Peregrine was back up on her feet, eyes dry and looking as cheerful as ever. She'd already decided that if she was going to be upset, then it wouldn't be in front of the others. She hated crying in front of people.

"Are you okay?" she whispered to Charlie, as they followed Leahr.

But he remained tight-lipped and wouldn't speak to her. She guessed that he was angry, maybe, that she'd left him to the mercy of some crazy woman, or that because of her they were now on some kind of quest to meet a bear. By contrast, Leahr was serene.

"This way, if you will," she said, turning sharply.

They entered a circular room with a domed glass ceiling. Through it, the moon threw light onto the floor. Peregrine tried to guess at the different constellations, but even the stars were foreign to her, making patterns that she would never find on an astronomer's map in her own world.

Leahr walked up to one of the curved shelves and reached for several scrolls. "These are the ones you'll find useful, I expect. I also hope that you'll bring them back," she said to Charlie. "They are only loaned to you."

"I understand," he said.

The librarian turned to Peregrine and dumped them into her hands. "You should take a look at them before you set off. You are welcome to sleep here a couple of hours, of course, but I must insist that you leave before the sunrise."

“Why?” she asked.

“The library is a sacred place. I do not want any of the outside interfering with how I run this space. They will try to if they know you are inside and perhaps they do, but they will not attempt to invade until the sun comes up and they have better bearings.”

“Sleep sounds good.”

Only now did Peregrine realise how tired she was. She had spent the entire day figuring out what was going to happen to her, and anxiety was exhausting. Plus, if she could go to sleep, maybe she would wake up at home, and wouldn't that be fantastic?

“There are some sleeping quarters further down that way.” Lehr pointed to an unassuming door off to one side. “You will be comfortable there, and Charles will wake you when it's time to leave. He knows the way out.”

“Thank you.”

Lehr smiled and Peregrine was struck by the change in her demeanour. “I will leave you to your duties.” She reached for Peregrine's free hand and clasped it in hers; for the first time, their eyes met. “I wish you all of the luck in the world, young lady. It's a dangerous road, but there is an ending to it all, I promise.”

The words were small, but they comforted Peregrine. “Thank you. Maybe we'll see each other again.”

“Maybe,” the librarian agreed, and she released her hand.

Peregrine watched as Lehr walked out of the room and out of sight. Even though the room was huge, her footsteps barely echoed and it was impossible to pinpoint when she had gone out of earshot.

“I suppose we should get some sleep,” she said to Charlie.

He waited until they were in the room before he started to panic. “Oh God, oh God, I can’t do this. Do you know what the White Bear said to me the last time he saw me? He told me that if he ever saw me again, it would be the last time I drew breath. And you know what? I believe him.”

She tried to process all of this. “I don’t know who this White Bear is, but I’ll make sure that he doesn’t hurt you. You’re my guide,” she said. “I need you.”

This seemed to ease him ever so slightly. “Leahr said that she would send word ahead to him about us, and maybe that will buy us some time... or maybe he’ll just kill us on his doorstep,” he added morosely.

Peregrine ignored him and laid the scrolls out on her bed. Unlike Leahr’s cramped meeting room, the sleeping quarters were fashioned sparsely and with pragmatism. There were several bunk beds lined up on the walls, along with a partition for changing in private. She found fresh linen in the large chest of drawers that ran alongside one wall, and a jug of cold water on top of it. Through another small room, there was a bathroom complete with flush toilet and towels.

“What did you expect?” Charlie asked her when she mentioned this. “This isn’t the medieval ages. We have plumbing.”

“It’s not like this place came with a tourist guide,” she said.

Because it was late, she took a quick bath and got dressed back into her clothes, wishing that she had pyjamas. She supposed that it didn’t matter too much; in a few hours, they’d be up again, and she didn’t know where they would go next.

“Do we want to check the maps?” she asked, re-clothed and cleaner. “I don’t know if you know where we’re going.”

“I know,” Charlie said. “The maps are for later.”

“Okay.”

“Well, goodnight, I guess.”

She yawned. “Night.”

It only felt like a few hours later when Charlie shook her awake and told her that it was time to go. A part of her was disappointed that she didn’t wake up in her own bed, but by now, she figured that it wasn’t going to happen. There were two neat backpacks at the end of the bed, stuffed with various odds and ends. She didn’t have time to look at it, however, so she slung it over her shoulder and followed Charlie out of the room. She glanced up at the sky as they passed underneath the glass ceiling; the stars were fading and there was a reddish tinge bleeding into the navy-purple clouds.

She blinked sleep out of her eyes and tried to keep up with Charlie’s hasty footsteps. They turned corridor after corridor, weaving through the small path that Leahr had cleared. As they moved hurriedly, he explained to her that they weren’t going through the front entrance, but rather, through the back.

“There’s a side door that will take us out of the library.”

“And then what?” she asked.

“And then we’re in the wilds.”

As soon as they pushed the side door open, weak light spilled into the doorway, filtered through trees. Peregrine couldn’t stop staring. She had never seen trees this big

only in pictures of the Amazon. Roots big enough for her to walk under pulled tree trunks off the ground and into the sky, higher than she'd ever believed trees could grow. Golden and red leaves tumbled to the ground slowly.

“What is this place?” she asked.

Charlie obviously didn't feel the same kind of awe. “I told you before, it's the wilds. Come on, we've got to get moving before they figure out where we've gone.”

“They?”

“The people trying to kill you,” he said. “I checked out the front entrance while you were still sleeping and there are a lot of people there. Certainly one or two of them just seem curious, but others look like they're ready for blood. Aka, yours.”

She yawned. “Fantastic.”

The wilds, as it turned out, weren't really all that wild. It was, as Charlie explained, the space between books and shelves. It didn't conform to the binding rules of the Heartlands like most other places, which meant that anyone could come here, and do anything.

“Are you sure that this is a good idea, then?” she asked.

He nodded. “We won't alert anyone to our presence if we go through this area. And okay, yes, it's dangerous, but it's better than going through someone else's territory. We'll go through this way until we meet the White Bear's agents, and then from there...” He twisted his mouth.

“Okay, who is this White Bear? Or what, should I say?”

They were passing under several large roots. Peregrine thought she heard a crack and glanced behind her, but Charlie appeared unfazed, so she ignored it and continued.

“He’s not actually a bear.” Charlie shifted his backpack onto his other shoulder. “He’s one of the guardians, like Leahr, and he watches the edge of the wilds. He can’t see us here, but he can do his best to ensure our safety.”

Her own backpack felt heavy on her shoulders. “So not a bear. Human. And scary?”

“Fierce. Terrifyingly so. You wouldn’t understand; you’re not a guardian. He can choose to unmake people at a second’s notice.” He saw her uncomprehending look. “That’s when you’re unmade. Forever. It’s only for us assistant guardians, though,” he added. “We’re the only people he has jurisdiction over outside of his realm.”

As Charlie explained, Peregrine found her mind wandering. There were so many rules here, and all of them were difficult and had their own little exceptions and loopholes, but only within their own territories. She wished that she’d paid better attention to her mother’s work. Maybe if she’d actually worked in the library on a more regular basis, instead of surfing the internet, she’d understand what was going on.

After a while, she became aware of the silence. He had stopped speaking. It was awkward to find herself unable to say anything to a stranger. Charlie had been helpful and kind, but she didn’t actually know him. She found herself searching for questions – any question – in order to keep the flow of conversation going.

“So what about your parents? Do you have any brothers and sisters?” she asked, trying to make small talk.

He looked at her and frowned. “Brothers and sisters? I don’t -”

There was another sharp crack from behind them. Charlie grabbed her hand and dragged her underneath one of the small roots. It was just tall enough for her to stand upright in.

Charlie pressed a finger to his lips and mouthed, *stay here*. He crept out from behind the root and out of her sight. Peregrine could hear the sound of her heart thumping and she reached for the knife in her boot. If he got killed, then she was by herself.

From close by, she heard his voice. "What are you doing here?"

And then, a female voice. "Are you suddenly patrolling the wilds now? Got on James' good side?"

"I didn't ask for your sarcasm. What are you doing? This is too far away from your guardianship for you to have any business here."

The girl snorted. "Oh, really? And how far away is this place from *your* guardianship?"

"I'm here on business for James. Now, if you would so kindly leave me alone, then we can all be on our way." He sounded tense, angry, but Peregrine could detect a hint of fear in his pushiness.

"I'm not interested in you. It's that girl. The one who was with you. I haven't seen her before and I wondered if all the rumours were true."

Peregrine's heart stopped for a second. She'd been caught. They were going to die and she had barely started on the journey to go home. She clutched her knife so tightly that the handle bit into her skin.

Charlie sighed. "You can come out now. It's fine."

Still holding onto the knife, she edged out of the roots. Despite what Charlie had said, she didn't entirely trust him. There had been malice in the girl's voice. Now that she was out in the open, she could see who Charlie had been talking to. The girl was dressed like he was, in a loose shirt and dark linen trousers. Her hair was loose, though, and it fell in long wavy curls. Very attractive.

"This is Kaye," he explained. "She's an associate."

Definitely ex-girlfriend material. "Hi."

Kaye gave her a once over that could only be described as scathing. "Do you have a name?"

"I'm Peregrine."

She sized Kaye up. The girl had serious muscles and it looked like she would be the winner in just about any fight. But despite that, there was something about her that set Peregrine's teeth on edge and made her want to take a swing. She shook her head and told herself to stop being so irrational.

"So you're the door jumper," Kaye said. "Must have been a bumpy ride getting here. I'm surprised you figured out how to access the Heartlands."

"I try."

Charlie cleared his throat. "Anyway, we're heading off."

"I get it," Kaye said, putting one hand on her hip. "You don't want me to follow you on your super special adventure. That's fine. I have my own business to attend to. See you soon, Charlie."

She turned around and started to walk back the way she'd come. Charlie waited until she'd disappeared before moving on. He took long strides, and Peregrine found herself half walking, half jogging to keep up with him.

"Slow down. Explain to me what just happened," she said, slightly breathless.

He slowed down fractionally. "That was Kaye. She's an assistant guardian, like me, and an all round troublemaker. If I'm bad news, then she's the apocalypse."

"And how long did you date her for?" she asked.

Charlie gave her a look. "Never. This isn't a silly tit-for-tat lover's quarrel. There's nothing romantic about Kaye. She's cruel in a way that most people never even consider."

"Sorry," Peregrine said. "I didn't – I was only teasing."

"I know. It's okay. Besides, you don't want to know what happened to the guy she did end up dating. I think they found his bones at the bottom of the ocean."

She looked to see if he was joking, but he retained his intense seriousness. "Wow. That's, uh..."

"Crazy? Psychotic?" he suggested. "Yeah. It is."

The rest of the day was equally uncomfortable. Charlie wasn't exactly a natural conversationalist, and he seemed more focused on moving on so that he could get rid of Peregrine, rather than getting to know her. She didn't really blame him. She was ready to leave this insane world and get back to the real one.

In the evening, Charlie picked a shaded spot for them to sleep in. By this point, Peregrine was so tired that she could barely focus and getting a blanket out of her

backpack seemed like too much effort. She was only half aware that Charlie was speaking to her.

“We’ll be up again in a few hours,” he said. “We’re not safe until we reach the other side.”

She didn’t reply. She was already fast asleep.

Charlie waited until he was sure that she’d fallen asleep before he took the pendant out from underneath his shirt. The cylindrical object hung from a length of string around his neck and it glistened in the last of the evening’s light. There were a series of holes cut out at various angles in the metal.

He stared at it for a long time, remembering what Leahr had said to him before they’d left. He had to keep Peregrine safe. That was the only thing that mattered now.

A few hours later, Peregrine was up again, her blanket stuffed back into her backpack. She couldn’t stop yawning.

“We’ll get to the other side by the end of today, right?” she asked sleepily.

Charlie also looked tired and anxious. “I hope so.”

“Because no offence, but I don’t think that walking on a couple of hours of sleep is going to do it for either of us. We’ll be excellent targets for your creepy friend Kaye, and whatever else that decides to follow us.”

“She’s not my friend,” he said, irritated. “And in case you haven’t noticed, I’m the one with the expertise here. All you need to do is keep quiet and follow me. Save your energy for later.”

She glared at him, but kept quiet. If he was going to be like this for the entire journey, then she would rather be alone. She could do that, once she'd figured out where things were. The rules of the Heartlands were difficult, but not impossible. She didn't need some grumpy guide telling her how to behave and whether or not she should even speak.

She could tell when they came to the edge of the wilds because suddenly the light wasn't so green and there were fewer roots to trip over. Charlie became more tense, though, which didn't put him in a better mood.

"Come on, keep up," he snapped. "The light's already starting to fade."

It was true. The sun had already begun to set in the sky. Peregrine had watched it slowly, trying to ignore the blisters on her feet that made it impossible to walk without searing pain. She didn't want to be weak. She wanted to prove to Charlie that she was more than capable of holding her own. She didn't need protection from someone who so clearly didn't want to give it.

The shadows in front of her moved, but not in time with the wind. She stopped.

"There are people ahead," she said quietly. "Four of them."

Charlie nodded. "I hope he's brought more than four."

So this was the White Bear's territory, then. She tried not to feel intimidated by all of the bows and arrows as they got closer. They were a collection of men and women who looked like they were capable of taking both Charlie and Peregrine down with ease. As she passed, they didn't relax their postures, but instead kept their bows drawn taut against whatever else might be in the wilds.

“Quickly,” Charlie said. He lowered his voice. “Be polite here. Please. For my sake.”

“Your sake’s been pretty grumpy so far,” she muttered, but he had already gone ahead and was too far away to hear her.

When she stepped past the warriors, a gust of hot wind almost blew her back. Suddenly, the air was muggy and humid, and her skin prickled from the warmth. This had to be the border, then. In front of her was a young man, not much older than she was, with dark, almost sunburnt skin, and tawny brown hair. The first thing that came to her mind was a grown-up Peter Pan.

“Welcome,” he said. “My name is James. I trust that you had a good journey?”

He looked at her so intently that she stuttered on her words. “Y-yeah, it was okay. Good enough.”

“I’m glad.” He smiled at her and then turned to Charlie with a great deal less enthusiasm. “Charles. Still assistant, I see.”

He straightened up, although there was still an unhappy thinness about his mouth. “Yes.”

“Charlie’s been a good guide,” she said. “Resourceful.”

It was sort of true, and sort of a lie, but she didn’t like seeing him look so defeated and she had promised herself that she wouldn’t let him be bullied around. James, or the White Bear – she wasn’t sure what to call him – raised his eyebrows and folded his arms.

“Huh. And you are the door jumper.”

The way he said it made her feel uncomfortable, as if there was suddenly a huge weight pressed against her shoulders. To her, door jumping was merely an odd quirk, albeit something that she could never tell anyone. Her parents would first suggest a therapist, and when she proved that she really could open doors, well, it might lead to darker places. Government experiment facilities, if those places existed, or maybe her parents would kick her out of the house.

“My name,” she emphasised, “is Peregrine. Like the bird.”

“Yes, yes.” He didn’t seem interested in her name. “I’ll take you to your lodgings. Follow me, please.”

Charlie fell into step next to her. “Thanks for that.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“It is to me,” he said quietly. “You don’t know – he’s capable of -” He didn’t finish his sentence and Peregrine didn’t push him.

The woods were still present, still large, but they felt tamed in a way that the wilds hadn’t. Blue and silver lanterns hung in the trees, illuminating the path ahead. They passed several archways, hung with silk ribbons that fluttered in the breeze. The people were tanned, long eyelashes framing dark eyes that stared at her with more than a little fear. James was more comfortable in her presence, but even then she could still sense the tenseness that never left his stance.

She wanted to make some kind of small talk, but it was too hushed, like being in the middle of a library. Instead, she smiled at Charlie, who gave her a tight smile back. Compared to the others, he seemed shorter, smaller, or maybe it was the way he hunched over his shoulders.

“So, door jumper. What’s that like?”

“Actually my name is Peregrine. Say it with me.”

James looked back at her, surprised. “I have never met anyone quite like you before.”

“That doesn’t surprised me,” she said. “But if it’s any consolation, I’ve never met anyone quite like you before, either. Or been to this place. It’s amazing.”

She wanted to map out everything she came across, to memorise it to the point where she would remember how she felt in this moment for years to come. It was strange, and a little frightening, but incredible, too. They had come to a more residential area, and she could see the houses high up in the treetops, lights flickering. More silver ribbons were strung from doors and windows, and sweet smelling incense drifted down to them.

“You’re bold for a stranger,” he clarified.

Charlie nudged her shoulder, but she ignored him. “Thank you? I think?”

“You’re welcome,” he said, and smiled.

After a few more minutes of uncomfortable silence, they came to a series of trees with doors set into them. They were more elaborate than the rest, with a carving of fig leaves and birds set above each door. Wind chimes hung outside, ringing delicately in the breeze.

“These are your lodgings,” James said. “Charles, yours is to the left, and door – I mean, Peregrine, your room is to the right.”

“Wait – we’re not going to discuss some things?” she said. “I have a death penalty on my head, apparently, and I’d rather get this over with as soon as possible.”

James gestured to the men and women around him. “If anyone tries to kill you, they have to cut through the warriors. You will be safe here. We can discuss what you seek in the morning, after you’ve rested.”

As much as Peregrine wanted to get on with things, it sounded like a good plan. Her feet were blistered and sore, and she desperately wanted to lie down and soak in a hot bath. Charlie might not be so grumpy tomorrow, as well, and that could improve things.

He smiled at James. “Thank you for providing for us.”

The words sounded oddly formal in Charlie’s mouth. Peregrine was used to him talking to her casually, so it was strange to hear the peculiar exchanges.

When Peregrine opened the door, she was taken about by how foreign everything looked. She felt as if she’d stepped onto a *Lord of the Rings* set, only without the elves and ring quest. The room was a hollowed out tree trunk, but certain areas had been left to be used as natural furniture. For example, there was a desk that the workmen had worked around, and now it sat attached to the wall.

She tried the bed. It was comfortable, and the silk felt cool against her skin. To be honest, it could have been a rock and she wouldn’t have minded sleeping on it. Carefully, she pulled off her shoes, wincing.

“They better have plasters,” she muttered, and went to take a shower.

In the morning, she was sore and stiff, but feeling a lot better. Her feet still hurt like hell, though. Sun shone through the window, suggesting that it was later, rather

than earlier. She got dressed quickly and opened her door. In the late morning, the world looked a lot less alien, although she noted the ribbons and chimes that hung from doors.

Evidently, she was the only one to sleep in because Charlie was alert and dressed when she knocked on his door. For the first time, she noticed a certain level of determination in his eyes that hadn't been there last night.

"Good morning," she said. "Is it late?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Sort of. But don't worry about it. The White Bear has taken an unusual liking to you." He said this as if it was a bad thing.

Peregrine remembered the way he'd spoken to her the night before. Was she supposed to blush? Was she supposed to feel grateful that he'd called her bold for asking questions? She frowned.

"Why do you call him the White Bear, anyway? When you told me that, I had visions of -"

"A polar bear?" Charlie grinned.

She smiled back. "Yeah, exactly. And he's anything but."

"He killed one, a while back," he said, the grin fading. "It was huge. They called it a deviation because it wasn't supposed to be in his territory, and it was ambling through, destroying everything. If it was a polar bear, I couldn't tell you. I've seen the head, though, and it's huge. Bigger than anything I've ever come across, and I've been almost everywhere in the Heartlands."

"Where do you think it come from?"

"I think," he said slowly, "that it might have been a door jumper." He saw her surprise. "They're not just people, you know. They can be animals, too."

Peregrine thought about that for a minute. Then decided she didn't care.

"Okay, where's James? I have to get home."

It turned out that James had slept later than either of them and was barely awake by the time they entered his study. He ran a hand through his tousled hair and blinked blearily.

"I didn't expect to see you up so early," he said, stifling a yawn.

"Yeah, well, time waits for no man and all that," Peregrine said.

He gestured to the seats by the empty fireplace. "Please join me. I want to discuss some things with you."

They all sat on one of the stiff chairs. Although comfort was clearly a factor when designing the guest rooms, no one had been thinking about it during the furnishing of what had to be a stateroom. The head of the white bear was mounted above the fireplace, and it was huge. An enormous, looming reminder of what Peregrine really was to people like James.

"Leahr sent a message to me the moment you two arrived on her doorstep," he said. "She told me that you were both in need of protection, and that you were searching for something. Whatever it was must have been too dangerous for her to put into an imperceptible message, but I believe that I've guessed it. Nevertheless, I would like to know for certain." He laid his hands out on the table in an open gesture. "I would like to help you. As a door jumper, Peregrine, you cannot be allowed to roam freely through the Heartlands. You have the potential to cause serious damage, and as one of the guardians, I cannot allow that."

Charlie was the one who spoke up. “We’re looking for a key. Leahr mentioned that you knew what we’d be searching for.”

James hesitated. “I hope you understand what you’re undertaking. This won’t be easy.”

“All I want to do is to get home,” Peregrine said.

He sighed. “Then you will need this.” He pulled an angular object out of his pocket. “I do not give this to you lightly, and other guardians may not give you theirs at all. This is a part of the key.”

He passed it to Peregrine. It was old, and the metal felt greasy, but it looked more or less like one part of a key. She didn’t know how it would fit in with the other pieces, but she was good at puzzles. She’d figure it out. It probably wasn’t even too hard once she had all of the pieces. If she ever got them. She quickly tucked the first piece into her pocket.

“So who has the other pieces?” she asked.

He twisted his mouth. “The other guardians, unfortunately.”

Charlie glanced at her. ‘Unfortunately’ did not sound good.

“They won’t be as willing to give you the key pieces,” James explained. “We may all be guardians, but that doesn’t mean we don’t disagree on certain things. Some of them might even try to hurt you, or kill you.”

Peregrine shot a look at Charlie, but he seemed unfazed. He’d been expecting this. She felt in her pocket and closed her hand over the piece of key tightly. What happened when the other guardians didn’t want to hand over their piece of the key?

“Charles, you know where to find the others, correct?” he said.

Charlie nodded. "I know what to do. Leahr spoke to me."

"Good. I can give you a few days in my realm. No more, unless I want a riot on my hands." James stared at the ground. "I wish I could give you good news. The truth is, I don't know what the other guardians will do. They might try to invade, or send spies. It has happened before."

For a moment, nobody spoke. Then Peregrine stood up.

"Is there anything else that we should know?" she asked. "Because if not, I'd like to reconvene with Charles" – it felt strange to call him by his first name, but she doubted that anything else was suitable at the moment – "and see if there's anything that we can do to prepare ourselves."

"That is probably your safest bet," James said.

Peregrine left the meeting feeling resigned. It sounded like she would die before she got the next piece of key, never mind the entire thing. Not for the first time, she wished that she hadn't door jumped. She would have rather taken the punishment, than be here now. What was her mother thinking? Time felt normal here, but she'd read enough C. S. Lewis to know that time could fluctuate between worlds. The Heartlands wasn't real, exactly, but it didn't work like how things worked at home, either.

"You handled that well, I thought," Charlie whispered to her. "Congrats. You just went up against the White Bear."

She rolled her eyes. "He's not that frightening. At least, I don't find him so. All of those intimidation tactics are tricks. If you stood up to him the way you stand up to me, then I don't see how he could coerce you. You would simply dominate him."

Charlie laughed. "I like that. Dominate the White Bear. You must be joking. Or ill."

"Why don't you just call him James, then?" she reasoned. "At least start with that. I don't see how he has to be the White Bear all the time."

"If you insist."

There was a certain amount of irony for Peregrine, since she was coercing him in the same way that James did. But at least she knew that he wasn't afraid of her.

She spent the rest of the morning in her room. She'd tried to go outside, but the guards at the door had blocked her way, aiming their bows at her. Unlike James, they had no confusion about her worth, and she was forced to remain in the windowless room. There were a few books, but written in an unintelligible script that made her head hurt. Lunch arrived on beautiful china. Tomatoes garnished a leafy salad slathered in lemon and a strange, unidentifiable spice. It was delicious, but Peregrine played with it for a while, if only to give her something to do.

Towards late afternoon, James knocked on her door. She wondered if he would simply stride in, but when there was nothing except a questioning hello, she got up and opened the door.

"Am I allowed to go out now?" she said, irritated. "Are you done imprisoning me?"

To his credit, James looked embarrassed. "It's for your own safety as much as ours. But I thought you might like a walk."

Actually, the last thing Peregrine wanted to do was walk anywhere. Her feet still hurt and her muscles ached. She wanted to lounge about in the sunshine and read,

like she did when it was warm enough outside of the library. On the other hand, she might get to see some of the Heartlands without the constant fear of death. The fear that had started to feel like a reality, instead of some far away, distant prospect.

“I’ll take the walk,” she said.

He waved away the group of warriors behind him, and they fell away, melding into the shadows. Peregrine turned around, but James drew her attention back.

“You’ll be safe with me,” he said.

She raised his eyebrows. “You’re awfully confident.”

“This is my domain. Of course you’ll be safe with me.” He sounded confused, as if confidence wasn’t part of the equation.

Peregrine filed it under a mental list to ask Charlie about later. The ribbons were on the list, and so was the guardian’s role. It was silly to assume that he knew everything, but she didn’t trust James. Charlie, at least, seemed like he understood more about the real world than the other people she’d met. Not that there were many.

“I have so many questions to ask you,” James said. “This world must seem so bizarre, so foreign. And yet I can’t imagine a world beyond the Heartlands.”

“I do have a lot of questions,” she admitted.

He smiled at her. “Maybe I can help.”

Although the warriors had disappeared, other people came to stare at Peregrine and James. Their gaze prickled her skin. This was it, then. Slowly, but surely, she was starting to realise that this was what the rest of her visit – she refused to think of it as a possibly permanent location – would entail. No friendliness, no sympathy. Only cold stares and fear and hatred. And possibly curious guardians. No wonder she felt used.

“Can I talk about the key here?” she whispered.

James hesitated, then nodded. “This realm is safe for you, at least for now. I promised you that much.”

“Okay.” Peregrine thought carefully before she spoke. “How many guardians are there? What will they want from me? What can I give them?”

He didn’t appear to be surprised by any of her questions. “There is Lehr and I. There’s Margrit, but she goes by Captain Jinks. There’s the Waltzing Lady. Birdman. And Xavier. That’s seven pieces of key.”

Seven pieces. Peregrine wanted to slump to the ground and cry. Seven pieces in a world so impossibly against her, and all she could think about was the fact that she had five more people to impress and convince. They wouldn’t hand over the keys as easily as James or Lehr. Charlie had told her that on the way to James’ realm.

She let out a deep breath. “That’s a lot of guardians.”

“I don’t know what they want,” he continued. “I’m sorry. I can’t help with that. You’ll have to be careful around the Waltzing Lady, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s difficult, unpredictable. She’s also mildly insane.”

Peregrine laughed in a hollow, unhappy way. “Great, only mildly insane. That’s perfect.”

James put one hand on her arm and looked at her. “You’re not used to this.”

“Oh, you think?” Peregrine tried to remember the strength that she’d had only a few days ago and wondered where it went. “I thought it was going to be easy to get home. I didn’t realise I had to do *politics*.”

That was only half of the truth. Part of her was hoping that this would all be one bad dream, or a drug trip, or concussion, or whatever it was that made people believe that they were in a different world. It had been fun at first, when she pretended that this was true. A new world – great! Things were different now. They were hard.

She closed her eyes and mustered courage from somewhere. “This is going to be okay,” she said.

“Yes,” James said. “It will be.”

“What matters is getting home. And I have Charlie,” she added.

This, at least, was some kind of consolation, although it was starting to fade at James’ doubtful look.

“Are you sure? I can provide you with some more escorts.”

She thought of the warrior men and women. They were probably taking bets right now as to how long it would take before she died. She doubted that they would be particularly invested in her wellbeing.

“Thanks, but I think I’ll stick with Charlie.” Then she smiled. “So tell me about this atlas incident.”

James’ eyes darkened. “I don’t think so.” He brightened. “It’s my turn to ask the questions.”

His questions were simple, at first, and progressively grew more complicated. She was well read, but for the first time, she struggled to articulate her feelings. How did you describe an entire world in five minutes? Sometimes she would start to talk about something – like trains – and he would quickly dismiss her because of course he knew about trains. How silly.

How silly, indeed.

James led her around side paths, further away from the people who had stared so openly. Either they were going into more private spaces, or someone had shooed them away. After a while, it was just the two of them. She saw that the people had cultivated gardens around the trees, carefully pruning away the weeds to make room for blossoming red and gold flowers. Ivy clung to the enormous trees and fell down the branches in long, feathery curtains.

“Your world is so odd,” James said eventually. “I almost want to see it.”

Peregrine fell quiet and in the stillness, realised how much she’d been talking. Her throat felt tired from explaining, and she had a headache. Plus, she felt sort of cheated. She was the one who was supposed to be asking questions, and instead, he’d manipulated her into talking about the real world.

“Of course,” he added, “that would be impossible. We were not meant to exist in your world, much like you’re not supposed to exist in ours.”

“It’s okay, I don’t think you’d like it much anyway,” she said.

Unless he wanted to spend the rest of his life as a crazy forest boy.

He shrugged. “Maybe. Even if I could visit, though, I wouldn’t be able to leave my realm. If I left, all of this would disappear. I’m tied to here until I relinquish my position of guardian.”

“And when would you do that?”

“I’d have to be dead.”

There was a silence. “Dead? So you’re trapped here?”

“When you put it like that, yes.”

Peregrine sighed. "That really sucks."

For the first time, he looked much less like the White Bear, and more human. His eyes lost their steely flint as they closed in resignation.

"I have books. Those help. And visitors, when I get them, usually have stories to tell."

"It's still not enough, though," she said quietly.

He shook his head. "No, it's not. But it'll be okay. I have all of this." He gestured to the gardens around him. "I have loyalty and friends. I also don't have that many people who want to kill me."

It took a second for her to realise that he was joking. "Yeah, you've one-upped me there."

The walk back was a lot quieter than it had been earlier. The stars had come out, and Peregrine tried to map them out in her head, but failed. There were too many foreign stars for her to remember, and she didn't know how they shifted in the night, or if they even shifted at all. Too many things to remember. It was like trying to hold a see-saw in perfect balance; if it tipped to one side, then everything would come crashing down and she'd lose it entirely.

There were no warriors at her door, but she suspected that they were out there somewhere, watching every interaction. James smiled at her, and she smiled back, less apprehensive than she had been that morning.

"Thanks for the walk. Am I free?" she asked.

With some reluctance, he shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I can't afford to have you wandering around when so many people are afraid of you. You're safe in this realm, but that won't stop people from warding you off. They have a right to do that."

Her mood deflated. "Cheers for the evening."

She ignored his protest and closed her door in his face. After a while, she heard his footsteps walking away. She was mad at him, but she was mad at herself, too. She didn't want to argue with people. She'd already fought with Charlie on the way here, and the only reason why she hadn't fought with Leahr was because she was far too intimidated. There was something eerie about the way that her eyes slid over her.

When it was late, she opened her door. Several warriors pointed bows at her, but she pushed them aside.

"I only want to talk to Charlie. He's next door. Or is that also too dangerous?" she asked, laying the sarcasm on heavily.

It wasn't, so she knocked on Charlie's door and waited. After a couple of minutes, she was about to leave, but then he opened the door and let her in. He looked tired, she noticed. Really tired.

"What did you do today?" she asked, trying to be cheerful. "I spent most of the day pacing up and down, and then I more or less yelled at James."

That elicited a smile. "I heard."

"I'm sure your day must have been better than mine. Were you allowed out, at least?"

He nodded, although there was something about him that was off. "I walked around a lot. People didn't really care that I was there."

“Anything else?” she prompted.

“Nope. It was just me.” He twisted his hands round and round each other. “It’s just weird being back here, that’s all. I don’t sleep too well at night.” He pointed to the dark circles under his eyes. “When I get stressed, I stop sleeping.”

“I can relate,” she said, although in truth, she’d spent most of the night sound asleep. “It’s okay, though, because you’ll be able to catch up on sleep while you’re here. That’s got to be good.”

She related her conversation with James to him. Dinner had once again been provided on a tray by a surly warrior, but at least she wasn’t eating alone. She watched Charlie wince as she told him about the part where she slammed the door.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he said, annoyed. “He’s not someone to cross.”

They sat cross legged together on the floor, spooning wild rice from a pot into their plates. Peregrine put her spoon down and thought for a minute.

“I’m not someone to cross, either,” she said.

The next few days alternated between being imprisoned, and the evening walks. James wasn’t as bad as she’d initially thought, although sometimes he caught him laughing at her when she asked certain questions. It wasn’t unkind, but she hated the condescension. Still, she sucked it up and tried to ignore the murderous rage that occasionally rose up in her.

Despite the attempt at confinement, she had been able to sneak out for a couple of hours at a time to wander throughout the gardens. People stared at her openly, but she didn’t get the same kind of hostile glances that she’d received on the first day, and

after a while, they left her alone. Obviously, someone had gone around to make sure that people wouldn't try to throw vegetables at her, or whatever it was that people threw at foreigners they didn't like.

She was out now, enjoying the last of the sunshine. It had been difficult to sneak past the warriors, but all she'd had to do was say that she was meeting James and they'd let her through, rather than risk the guardian's wrath. She'd gone to the only place that she knew – the gardens that James had taken her to before. She liked the wild flowers, which curled up around the base of the trees. It reminded her of her mum's garden at home, even though it had lavender instead of exotic blooms. She sat on the bench and put her head in her hands.

“You're getting better at the whole diplomacy thing, I see.”

She looked up. James stood in front of her, arms crossed. He didn't look particularly surprised to see her outside.

“You've been monitoring me,” she said.

He made a nonchalant gesture with his hands. “That's true.”

“Well, then, I didn't think that this would be a problem.”

“It's not a problem.”

“Good.”

He sat down next to her and stared at the flowers. His hands made a steeple, and then he touched his thumbs to his fingers on the opposite hands. Peregrine watched until the motion became too much to handle.

“I'm sorry, do you need help?” She couldn't quite keep the acid out of her voice, although she tried.

He winced. “Actually, I only came to say goodbye. I know you’re leaving tonight.”

That was true. She had talked it over with Charlie the night before and together, they’d decided to leave in the middle of the night. It was a gamble, since they’d travelled like that for most of the way so far, but no one had tried to kill Peregrine in the middle of the night, either, so there was something about it that had to work. She hadn’t intended to say goodbye to James. If she was honest with herself, she had completely forgotten about it.

“Ah, yes. That thing.”

There was an awkward silence.

“I have to say, I wasn’t impressed with you at first,” he said.

She frowned. “Uh, thanks?”

“But then you surprised me,” he said, completely oblivious to the insult. “You showed strategy.”

“Great, strategy.”

This time he caught the acid tone and had the decency to look abashed. “I, uh, guess I underestimated you.”

“Damn straight.” But she was smiling.

He smiled at her, but it faded quickly. “I hope the other guardians will underestimate you, but I’m afraid that they won’t. Some of them are old, and clever.”

“I know.” She wasn’t smiling anymore, either. “I’ll be cleverer than them, though.”

The last of the light dipped beneath the horizon. Overhead, the spirit lights came on and glowed in the new darkness. The foreign stars had started to feel a little less foreign, but Peregrine still couldn't identify them. Maybe she recognised one, or two.

"I'm not going to ask you who you're going to see next. I don't want to become a liability," he said.

"That's probably for the best."

James put one hand on her shoulder. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

"Thanks," she said.

They stayed like that until long after the shadows had lengthened. Eventually, Peregrine stood up and left. She had things to do. She had a map to pore over with Charlie before they caught up on what little sleep they could get, and then they were off again. It had only been five days, but she had grown used to her walks, and the silk sheets, and not aching all over. The knife in her boot had even stopped scratching at her skin, although she never forgot it was there.

When she got back to the room, Charlie was waiting for her. He held up their backpacks, filled fresh with supplies. On the bed lay the first part of the key.

"We should put that in a safe place," she said immediately. "I've been keeping it in my pocket, but I don't feel safe doing that. What if it falls out?"

Charlie handed her a piece of twine. "Put it around your neck. It's safest there, I'm sure."

She strung it onto the twine and hung it around her neck. It dropped like a stone, icy against her skin. It would warm eventually.

"Any ideas of where to go next?" she asked.

He pulled open one of the maps that Leahr had given him and spread it on the desk. Peregrine leaned over, intrigued. The Heartlands spread out before her like a vast quilt of different sized patterns in endless colours. She could see that the Heartlands were split up by guardian territories, with narrow strips of the wilds between them. No man's land to fight over, she supposed. In a small corner of the map, she saw Leahr's guardianship. The territory was barely a tenth of James', which sprawled from the tropic south all the way to the mountains beyond the north. There was a lot of blank space, too, she noticed, mostly surrounding the outer borders of the territories.

"The closest to us is Xavier's realm," Charlie said, pointing to a light blue coloured splash on the map. "Xavier is a little unpredictable, but he's the oldest guardian of them all. He's a historian."

"Will he want to kill me?"

Charlie rubbed his chin. "Honestly, he's the one who knows the most about the door jumpers – at least in terms of their visits over the years – so he'll probably want to collect your story more than anything else."

Peregrine didn't ask him what that meant. She was too busy trying to pinpoint which territory belonged to which guardian.

"There are more than seven territories on this map," she pointed out.

Charlie shrugged. "It's an old map. There used to be more guardians, but things happened."

"Things," Peregrine echoed.

He didn't elaborate, so she let it drop. She was learning very quickly that when Charlie didn't want to tell her something, it was best not to push.

They decided to leave at three in the morning. Peregrine would sleep in his room to minimise the possibility of noise – “One door closing is better than two,” said Charlie – and everything would be ready for the journey ahead.

Peregrine was rummaging in her pack when she found a note. Written in elegant script was her name, and then an ornate J underneath. Under that was a small note: *please don't open until you get out of here. Stay safe.*

“What’s that you have?” Charlie asked.

She blushed and shoved the note back into her backpack. “It’s nothing. Come on, aren’t we supposed to be asleep already?”

Charlie fell asleep almost instantly, snoring gently on the floor. Peregrine watched him for a while, the moonlight casting his shadow all the way to the door. How had she managed to trust him, a complete stranger? It gave her a deep glow of warmth inside of her to know that someone wanted to help her, not because they would gain anything, but because they genuinely wanted to make sure that she was okay. He was a good guy, she thought sleepily, even if he was a little crazy at times. Good was enough.

The air was heavy as Peregrine pushed open the door to outside. It swung heavily, but without a sound, and she breathed a little easier as she took her first steps outside into the night air. The sound of Charlie following behind her was deafening, even though it was a slight scuffle that only she could hear. She put her finger to her lips and raised an eyebrow. In response, he raised one back: *what do you expect?*

Charlie led the way, since he knew the paths much better than she did. He seemed to have the map memorised in his head because he took her along a winding path

that went past the houses, past the gardens, and further into James' realm than she'd been before. The lights did not come on in these areas, and it was relatively easy to slink into the shadows.

But as they continued, they could hear yelling. Peregrine twisted around and saw smoke snaking up into the sky, blocking out the stars. Just beyond the treetops was the unmistakable glow of fire. Both she and Charlie stopped for a minute.

"That's where our rooms were," she said quietly.

Charlie's eyes followed the smoke until it dispersed, and then he continued walking.

"But what about James?" she demanded. "We have to go back!"

"Going back is about the worst thing to do right now. You'll almost certainly be killed." His voice had a leaden quality to it. "We press forward."

"But -"

"What do you think you'll do if you get there?" he snapped. "Most likely, you'll be killed and that'll be the end of that."

Peregrine bit back an angry retort and instead hoped that he was right. *I have to learn how to use that knife*, she thought, feeling its weight bump against her ankle. She tried not to worry about James. He had his warrior people to protect him; he would be fine.

They pressed on with much more urgency than before. The shouts diminished in the background, and when Peregrine looked back, the plume of smoke had disappeared into the sky. She wondered if James caught the arsonists, of if they were still around, searching for her.

Towards the sunrise, Charlie made them take a break. He looked worn out already, his shoulders pressed up closer to his neck. He offered her some of the food that James had sent to their rooms the night before, but it stuck in her throat on the way down.

“I’m worried about them,” she said.

Charlie dismissed her. “People invade different territories all the time. They don’t get far. It might have been one of James’ own people, or it might have been an outsider, but whoever it was mostly likely was a loner. You have to be pretty nuts to go up against James.”

His words were meant to soothe, but Peregrine noticed the furrow of his brow and the way that he wouldn’t look into her eyes. He was just as concerned as she was, and that made her more anxious than she’d been before. She didn’t sleep well that night, or the night after that, and by the time they arrived at the border between James’ realm and the wilds, she was finding it hard to keep up with Charlie. Her feet ached and slipped over roots and shrubs that should have been easy to navigate. She felt like she was trapped in one of her nightmares, where she’d go running through endless white corridors, her feet slapping against the tiles, only to come up against the nameless horror she’d been running from.

Charlie noticed it and wasn’t happy. “You’re not sleeping. You should eat more. Look.” He broke off a piece of loaf and gave it to her. “It’s still fresh.”

But it hurt to eat it and she had to shake her head. Even doing that made the world tilt, aggravating her headache. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt like this, and wanted it to stop. Every time she lay down to sleep, the first flutters of anxiety

would go through her and then she'd be trapped in a dream. When she woke up, the dream would be gone, but the fear was still with her, and she'd have to check that Charlie was still breathing – just in case.

“Okay, look, let's take a break,” he said.

She slumped down against a tree and closed her eyes. She was about to nod off when she heard Charlie's voice and reluctantly opened her eyes again.

“You're worried about James, aren't you?” he asked.

She was surprised to hear the faintly sour note in his tone. “I mean, yes, I am.”

“He's fine.” Charlie held out a scrap of paper with a blue and silver crest on it. “I got word today that he's okay. There's been some damage, and they didn't find the person who did it, but they managed to put out the fire before anything happened. No one was hurt.”

It should have come as relief, but the anxiety knotted in the pit of her stomach didn't lessen. Behind her eyelids, she could see the men stalking up the hill towards her, their sockets empty where eyes should be. She dreamt the most often about these men, but there had been women, too, and zombies – terrifying, flesh eating zombies that couldn't be evaded no matter how fast or far she ran. In the dreams, she ran through a liquid soup that made it impossible for her to move quickly.

“Peregrine?”

Her eyes fluttered open again. She hadn't even realised that she'd closed them.

“I'm fine,” she said breathlessly. “I'm fine. I'm okay.”

Charlie put one hand on her knee and she flinched. “They're not going to get you.”

But wasn't that what every hero said before the blonde girl got mauled? She wasn't blonde, but the rules still applied.

"I'll teach you how to fight back," he said. "Not now," he added, seeing her expression, "but later on, when you're more well rested."

She put her head in her hands. "I'm worried *now*. I need to learn how to fight back *now*."

"Let me put it to you this way. You know that people are out to get you. These people might be clever and ruthless, but they might also be stupid henchmen who would just as likely put an arrow through their foot as through you."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"Sort of. All we have to do is get to Xavier's and then you'll feel safe. I promise. He lives in a fort."

Peregrine brushed back her hair and nodded wearily. "Okay. I'll try to hold on until then."

They didn't have any more brushes with the arsonists, and there were fewer nightmares, but Peregrine was still relieved when Xavier's border became visible on the horizon. There were no guards, as with James, and in fact, they slipped by pretty much unnoticed.

"I want you to keep quiet when we get to the fort," Charlie said. "Let me do the talking."

Originally, Peregrine would have argued, but she was almost drunk tired, and so she didn't say anything. But she made a mental note to tell Charlie that she could speak for herself next time.

The new territory was different in subtle ways, at first. The air was drier, and Peregrine's head swam as if they'd climbed in altitude, or maybe it was just the lack of sleep. The trees here were slimmer, and the paths more developed. Her feet hit stone pavement instead of dust, and cherry blossoms shucked their petals from overhead. Their perfume was intense, almost cloying.

Xavier's fort rose from the end of the path. A moat stood between them and the entrance, and currently the bridge was closed. Peregrine could hear noise coming from behind it. There was the sound of creaking wood as one hundred guards raised their bows and aimed them at her from the top of the wall.

Charlie waved his hands in the air. "Stop, stop. We're here to meet Xavier."

"The exalted one does not wish to see you," one of the guardsmen said. "The atlas incident destroyed many of his precious relics. I believe his words were 'bugger off.' So bugger off, Charlie, no one wants to speak to you."

"I have the door jumper with me."

Bow strings relaxed slightly as the men and women looked at each other in puzzlement. Then they were tightened again.

"Excuse me, I will be back." The guard nodded to his underlings and then did a sharp one hundred and eighty degree turn.

"Where's he going?" Peregrine whispered.

Charlie was still smarting from the atlas comment. "Where do you think? He's going to go and talk to Xavier."

One of these days I'm going to find out exactly what this atlas incident was, Peregrine thought. Whatever it was, it hadn't made him too popular with the guardians. How much trouble could you cause when it had an atlas involved, though?

The guard returned after about half an hour, and this time he looked less triumphant and more unhappy. He muttered something to the other guards, and the bridge was winched down to allow Peregrine and Charlie to cross. Charlie eyed the guard smugly as he passed. Peregrine rolled her eyes at the display of macho, then yawned. Sleep would be good.

As they passed under the wall, she was amazed at the amount of people crammed into the fort. It hadn't looked that big on the way here, and it couldn't be, backed up against a mountain the way it was. People of all ages moved about, pushing past her, bartering with street vendors, or ducking into shops. The lack of attention was a relief. No one stared at her, open mouthed or with narrowed eyes. No one whispered about her as she passed them. Only a few people watched her go by, but she couldn't tell if it was because they were curious, or if they knew who she was. They weren't openly hostile, so probably not.

The walk was all uphill, and she struggled to make the final steps. Her feet felt heavy and clumsy, plodding mechanically across cobblestones. It felt like there were weights on her ankles. All the while the hot, arid air clung to her clothes and plastered them to her skin. By the time they reached Xavier's residence, she was hot and sweaty.

She finally realised how it was possible for so many people to live in such small quarters. Xavier's residence was built *inside* the mountain, backed against the entrance of the tunnel wall. One side of it jutted out into the night sky and she could see what

looked like an observatory on the highest level. *Now this*, she decided, *is what I want my house to look like.*

A young man greeted them at the entrance of the house, dressed in a smart butler's jacket and trousers. Gold and silver piping ran down the outer legs of his trousers and the inner silk of his jacket was a dazzling emerald green. In the heat, he must have been stifling, but he looked cool and refreshed.

"Andy, is that you?" Charlie said.

The young man grinned and thumped Charlie on the back, man-style. It was totally at odds with his formal outfit.

"Charlie! I haven't heard from you for ages. Where have you been?"

"Away, here and there. Nowhere, really."

Andy nodded sympathetically. "I know, laying low after the atlas incident. Smart guy. I empathise. Xavier was so mad at me I thought he might actually fire me. Too bad he didn't. I guess I'd have to murder someone before that happened." He turned to look at Peregrine. "Oh, you've got a girlfriend now. Cool. Didn't know you had it in you."

"I don't," Charlie said, and laughed. "This is Peregrine. She's the door jumper. We've come to visit the old buzzard and see if he can give us any advice."

Apparently, Charlie and Andy were not that close because Peregrine noticed that Charlie did not mention the key, or the fire in James' territory. She planned to ask him about it at some point.

Andy wrinkled his nose. "Good luck with that. The git's been frantic for at least a week and a half now. I've had to get down all of the really old tomes, and the soup,

and he's about five seconds away from throwing something at my head at any given point. I don't know what's possessed him, but it's demonic, whatever it is."

Charlie and Peregrine exchanged glances. She didn't know about him, but she remembered the way what Lehr had said. Even if normal people didn't know about her, the guardians almost certainly knew that she was coming to see them about the key pieces.

"Lead the way, Andy," Charlie said. "We can deal with Xavier once we're inside."

"I'll announce your arrival," Andy replied.

He opened the door – olive green wood waxy to the touch – and led them through a series of corridors. Peregrine was reminded of Lehr's library, and the way that it sprawled. It had been light and airy, though; in comparison, Xavier's residence felt somewhat stuffy with its muted green and red tones. Gold braziers hung on either side of the walls with fat candles dribbling wax. The carpet felt plush underneath her feet, and she suddenly had the mad desire to collapse onto it and fall asleep. It would be more comfortable than sleeping on the ground.

She barely paid attention to the conversation that Charlie and Andy had, although she caught her name a couple of times. She would have listened closer, but she could barely keep her eyes open, and the house's gloom made it easy for her mind to drift. Two weeks – that's how long she'd been in the Heartlands. One week felt like a dizzy, whirlwind holiday of dreams and false living, but two weeks was different. Fourteen days. She tried to figure out the hours in her head, and gave up. It was more than enough time to know that she was really in the shit.

“Here you go,” Andy said, bringing her back to the present day. “This is your room.”

“Where’s Charlie?” she asked sleepily.

He pointed to the door next to hers. “He’s in there. Xavier will see you tomorrow – maybe, depending on his mood. You’re welcome to sleep, is what I’m saying.”

“Thank you,” she said.

She didn’t register the room. Instead, she collapsed on the bed, kicked off her shoes, and buried under the covers.

At some point in the night, Peregrine woke up again. Everything felt muzzy, as if she’d shoved cotton balls between her head and allowed them to sprout overnight. She wanted to shower, though, and slowly, achingly got out of bed.

She was just reaching for the towel when she heard a noise. It was coming from Charlie’s room – the sound of serious talk, amidst other things. She would have left it alone, but then she heard her name, and she leaned closer to the wall.

“.... It’s not right,” Andy said, his voice muffled through the wall. “You’ve got to tell her.”

Charlie’s voice was weaker and harder to hear. “She trusts me. She thinks I’m a ‘nice guy’. That’s what she told me.”

“Does she know about Birdman?”

“No,” he said, “and I’m not going to tell her, either. She doesn’t need to know.”

Peregrine sat down on the ground and pressed her ear to the wall. Birdman was one of the guardians that James had mentioned. What had happened to him? Was it serious? Why wouldn't Charlie tell her? She heard him sigh.

"We were ambushed a few times in the night. She was asleep. I was lucky most of the time. She never even knew. And then there was the assassin..." He trailed off. "That was far too close."

Assassin? Peregrine sat back and rubbed her eyes. She had no idea that people had been slowly trying to pick her off. What happened to Birdman? And then another thought: what else was Charlie keeping from her?

She listened to see if they would say anything else, but everything else fell into mumbling made unintelligible by the wall between them. She got back into bed, wide awake. Part of her wanted to storm into the room and demand to know what else she didn't know, but then she would have to admit to eavesdropping, and she doubted Charlie would be thrilled about that, either. No, better to play her cards safe and wait until the opportune moment came to bring it up.

Sleeping was out of the question, so she struggled into her clothes and quietly opened the door to her room. The hallway was silent, and most of the candles were burning low, flickering in the sudden breeze. She left the door slightly ajar because everything looked the bloody same and she couldn't imagine that opening every door until she found her own was going to go down well.

The next few rooms that she entered were filled with odds and ends. Mainly books, but there were also gears, glass elephants, empty perfume bottles, a stack of newspapers from 1856, several puzzle boxes that looked like they were missing pieces.

There was one room that was full of medieval manuscripts locked carefully away under glass. Peregrine leant over one to try and read the annotations, but the script felt foreign and illegible, even though it was obviously English. Above her, the vaulted roof made her footsteps echo, and she tiptoed away.

At the end of the corridor was a large, oval room. One wall consisted of rock face, while the other three displayed portraits of different sizes. Leahr's portrait was here, her head tilted to the side as she stared at Peregrine with her opaque grey eyes. The sigil on her waistcoat was a dusting of silver swords over an open book. James also had a portrait up, and she lingered by it. The painter really had done him justice; the oil crested on the canvas like meringue tips and thick brush strokes outlined the bridge of his nose, the curve of his chin. The artist didn't quite get the eyes, though. They'd picked a cool green that made him detached and almost haughty. She stared at it for a long time, trying to map the face she remembered onto the one portrayed.

"They're fascinating, aren't they?"

Peregrine whipped around. Her heart bashed against the inside of her ribcage as she searched for the source of the question. An elderly man leant against the hallway, dressed in a plum coloured robe. Small glasses hung from his nose, and he squinted through them as he watched Peregrine.

"I'm sorry – I didn't mean – I couldn't sleep –" Peregrine tried to come up with an excuse for snooping around someone else's house and failed.

"I also couldn't sleep," the man said. "My mind buzzes with thoughts unfathomable to all but the greatest minds – and I, young lady, am not necessarily one of them."

Peregrine didn't know how to reply to that, so she stuck out her hand. "I'm Peregrine."

"Ah, yes, the door jumper." He grasped her hand with a leathery grip. "My name is Xavier. I am the historian. I have existed here for as long as the library has been in place. These -" he gestured to the walls of portraits "- are my co-workers, friends, and members of the library, as well as the guardians."

With a shock, Peregrine saw Charlie's portrait amongst them. He looked more serious, his eyes gazing into the far off distance to the side of the viewer. There was a symbol on his collar, as with Leahr – a door crossed by what looked like a crude flute. It was hard to tell. Next to him, a woman with sunset hair smirked proudly.

"I'm looking for something," she said, tearing her eyes away from the portraits.

"My piece of the key, yes." Xavier nodded. "There are few things more precious than the sliver of key that I possess." He pulled a gold chain from around his neck, and dangling from it, was a metal object – the key part. "It was my idea originally. They say that a guardian's role is to watch over their realms, but that isn't the half of it, oh no. Our true task is to maintain the boundaries. Too many crossovers like yours and our world would come crashing down. The Heartlands flourished in your ignorance, and it will die if door jumpers continue to expose our existence to the world."

She was silent.

He went on. "The easiest thing to do would be to kill you."

"I could go home," she said quickly. "I don't particularly want to die. After all, this is as much of an inconvenience for me as it is for you. Even more so."

Xavier gave her a smile, which could either have been friendly or unfriendly.

“That’s debatable, but no matter. I want to help you.”

“Really? No demands?”

“I have but one,” he said. “I wish to hear your story, and one secret.”

Peregrine blinked. That was it? “You don’t want me to run through fire, or eat a live chicken or something?”

She’d been expecting some heavy demands from what Charlie and James had told her. From what she understood, James owed Leahr a couple of favours, and she’d owed Charlie a big one. James had warned her that the other guardians would not be so welcoming, but Xavier seemed friendly, if a bit odd.

Still, she hesitated. “What do you mean, a secret?”

“I am the historian,” he said. “I know everything within the Heartlands. Outside of it, however, is a different matter. Your secrets are important. But there is a price to pay. The secret I ask... you won’t get it back.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You won’t remember it. The memory will disappear, absorbed into one of these books.”

Peregrine stared at him. “And if I refuse?”

“Then I’ll allow you to leave,” he said, “but you won’t get the key piece. It is far easier to let you die. You will cause a bit of a disturbance, yes, but ultimately you will flit out of the Heartlands and it will snap back like a rubber band. We are quite resilient people, you will find.”

He smiled at her pleasantly, but she was disgusted. Suddenly, the 'wise old man' façade no longer amused her.

"So I don't have a choice." Her tone was flat.

He raised his eyebrows, surprised. "My dear, you have a choice. Come with me. I have something to show you before you make up your mind."

Unconvinced, Peregrine followed him nevertheless through the various corridors. They passed back through the medieval manuscript room and he paused briefly to show her around.

"This is what most people come to visit me for," he said. "The manuscripts here are irreplaceable. Monks were a fascinating and sometimes persecuted group of people. Their legacy lies with me. It's my responsibility to uphold and maintain their creations."

Peregrine nodded, although she wasn't sure what this had to do with anything. Xavier had a misty look in his eyes, as if he, too, was once a monk. She doubted it. He seemed to enjoy luxury far too much, given the almost ostentatious décor.

He led her through more corridors and rooms filled with objects. Whether they were actually useful was another question, but he didn't stop for anything. They reached the end of the corridor and stopped. Glass double doors led out to the balcony she'd seen from outside the house. The night sky shone brightly with a spill of stars. Xavier pushed open the doors.

"After you, my dear."

"Don't call me that," she said, but he had already closed the doors behind her.

She turned around quickly, and tried to open the doors. They were locked. She turned back, panicked. She pulled out the knife from her boot and held it in front of her.

Someone was going to pick her off right here, and without Charlie, she was as good as dead. Why hadn't she just rolled over and gone to sleep?

She backed up against the door and waited. And waited. No one came for her. If there was an assassin, she'd be dead by now, surely, but here she was, alive, breathing. Still there. She glanced up at the sky. It was beautiful, the stars shimmering like tinsel at the beginning of Christmas. Below her, the town lit up, flickering lights in every window. Even in the wee hours of the morning, people were out and about. And then beyond that, the wilds. She couldn't see James' valley, but she knew it was there beyond the horizon. She hoped that they'd caught the fire starter.

After a while, the doors unlocked and Xavier stepped outside with her. He had a thoughtful expression.

"I didn't mean to cause you alarm. I wanted you to see things for yourself, without me present. It's important to know what you'll be leaving behind."

She glanced at him. "I want to go home. That's all I want."

"I understand. You are not the first door jumper to come here, and if you chose to stay, you wouldn't be the first to do so, either." He smiled at her, and this time it seemed to come from a more genuine place. "It is much easier than gathering the pieces of the key."

This sounded unusually out of character. She stared at him suspiciously. She didn't like the way that he was trying to persuade her to stay when all she wanted was to go home. The Heartlands were beautiful, yes, and okay, she'd been charmed by James, but no boy was worth staying for. Her parents would be frantic with worry by now –

what did they say about missing people? Forty-eight hours? Two weeks to them probably meant death. It was a horrible thing to think about.

“I’ll give you my secret,” she said, “and then I’ll want the key piece.” She paused.

“I want to ask a question.”

“Go ahead. The question is free.”

“What happened to the Birdman?”

“Ah.” Xavier readjusted his spectacles. “You heard about that.”

No. “Yes.”

“It was a terrible incident. I’m afraid for us all, after this. Murder is never a nice thing, but this was political. Someone wanted his spot.”

Peregrine stopped herself from gasping dramatically, but the breath hitched in her throat and she had a coughing fit. Eyes streaming, she wiped them with the back of her hand.

“Someone? Who?”

Xavier gave a half-hearted roll of the shoulders. “Your guess is as good as mine. Now, our bargain?”

“Right, yes. A secret.”

Peregrine thought carefully. What memory would she not mind giving up? What secret was important enough? She couldn’t think of anything. Most of her secrets were silly. The crush on James, for example. The fact that she’d lied to her mother numerous times. Door jumping. Aha.

“I have one for you,” she said. “It was the first time I door jumped.”

She started to explain the story to him, and as she did so, details fizzled out of her mind. What had she done again? The way the house creaked in the heat, the pool. She grew disoriented and sluggish.

“It’s done,” he said to her suddenly.

“What’s done?” she asked.

He unhooked the clasp of his chain and pulled off the key piece. It looked almost glittery green in the light. He handed it to her solemnly.

“Hold onto this as if your life depends on it,” he said.

Her fingers closed over it. “I will.”

The next day, she found a moment to speak to Charlie about the Birdman. She caught him as he was packing up his belongings in his room. A flute-like object fell from underneath his shirt, attached to a piece of string around his neck. He hastily shoved it back under when he saw her.

“Hey, I got the key piece from Xavier. He also had some interesting information on hand. Has something happened happened to the Birdman?”

Well, there was no need to play all her cards at once. She could find out what he was willing to tell her and fill in the rest from the conversation she’d overheard. She waited for his reply expectantly.

He ran a hand through his hair. “He was murdered.”

“By who?” She tried to feign horror, but she was never going to be an actress.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Do you know what this means? Someone else has the Birdman’s key piece. We’re going to have to go after them.”

Peregrine was silent. She hadn't considered that. It had been easy to gain the first three key pieces, and with only four more, it felt like an easy task. All of a sudden, she'd run into a large brick wall called death.

"What are we going to do?" she whispered.

"I don't know." Charlie looked stricken. "For now we have to keep going. I would."

There was a knock at the door. A few seconds later, Andy opened it. He grimaced apologetically at Charlie as Kaye strode into the room. She swept past Peregrine.

"Hey there, Charlie-o."

"Don't call me that."

"I have a message from the White Bear. Seems like you've got a summons from him. What have you done this time?" She smirked as she handed it over. "He wants you back in his realm to chat. Maybe to promote you. He didn't say."

Peregrine had been quiet the entire time, but now she spoke up. "That's not going to happen, I'm afraid. We're busy. James will simply have to wait."

Kaye turned around and looked at Peregrine. "I didn't know you were making all the moves now, door jumper."

Door jumper. When someone called her that, it was usually in fear, or with some amount of curiosity. She had never heard it said like this, though, with undisguised malice, spitting the plosive sound of an otherwise gentle word. Shivers sparked up her back and she clenched her fists to stop herself from taking a step back. The key pieces underneath her shirt burned ice cold.

“We have our own business,” she said, attempting to sound confident and even chirpy, as if she hadn’t heard the ice in Kaye’s tone. “In fact, we were just packing.”

Kaye’s eyes narrowed. “I wasn’t here for you.”

“Look, you’d better go,” said Charlie. “Tell James we’re unavailable. Make up whatever crap you want, I’m not going to go. You could tell him it’s Atlas 2.0 for all I care.”

Kaye looked furious, and Peregrine was struck once again by the similarities between herself and the angry girl. They had the same turned up nose, the same way of angling themselves against the enemy. It was odd, though, when it came from another human being instead of a reflection in the mirror.

“You can leave now,” Charlie reiterated.

Kay stalked out of the room and slammed the door shut, but not before Peregrine heard “bitch” hissed to her. In the enveloping silence, she released the grip she’d held on her hands. Little half moons beaded blood from where her fingernails had dug into her skin. Charlie stared at them, half in fascination, half in horror.

Peregrine looked up and smiled weakly. “Let me guess, you’re going to tell me that Kaye’s not actually that bad and I’m overreacting?” Which was understandable, given that everyone was trying to kill her.

“No. She’s batshit crazy and if we can avoid her, we should.”

Xavier was waiting for them at the end of the corridor. Peregrine had her backpack slung over one shoulder, and it felt lighter than it had in days, even though she should be terrified. She’d taken a peek outside in the morning and the day was beautiful.

Thick, puffy clouds for shade and the sun to keep them warm. She would have liked to go and walk through the town once again, to see what it was like, but Xavier had mentioned another way.

“You’ll like this,” he said, as he led them towards the back of his house. “There’s nothing quite like travelling in style, and this is about as stylish as it gets.”

Style, indeed. When they came to the ‘ride’, Peregrine sucked in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. They stood in one of the rock tunnels that whistled away into the darkness, but instead of finding more carpet or another room, they came out onto a platform. A sleek train hummed powerfully, waiting for them. The roof curved over, much like a bullet train, and gold pipes ran across it in a zigzag motion that gave the impression of an eagle about to take flight.

“It’s incredible,” she breathed.

Charlie, she couldn’t help noticing, was not so impressed. “What are you thinking? This isn’t exactly incognito.”

Xavier shrugged. “Style, my dear, is something far more important. I am currently supposed to be at a summit with two other guardians in the High Meggas. Why do you think I’m here?”

“We’re you?” Peregrine grinned. “We can slip out and no one will even know that we’re gone!”

It was a good idea, Charlie had to admit. He opened the door to the first carriage for Peregrine, and she got on. There was air conditioning, and the carpet underneath was soft and shaggy – nothing at all like the trains she’d been on at home. They were all hard linoleum and gum stuck to the bottom of her shoe and toilets with the blue

disinfectant water that only suggested cleanliness. Even in first class, all they did was give you a comfier chair, a complimentary cup of coffee, and charge you an extra fifty for it. This was luxury.

Charlie stepped in after her. “Huh, I remember it being bigger.”

“You’ve been in this?”

“Yeah, a few times.” Seeing her surprised look, he grinned. “I get around. Not easily, but I don’t do too badly.”

“I’ve noticed,” she said.

Although, if truth be told, she’d barely paid his status any attention. He didn’t seem to have any ties to people like James’ warriors did, or even Andy. Even though he said he was afraid of the guardians, when push came to shove, he stood up to them as an equal. He’d managed to push her towards meetings with all of the guardians, which must have been a hell of an ordeal, given their animosity towards him. She filed it away as something to ask him later, when they were further away from Xavier and his unsettling smile.

She made her way down the carriage and sat in one of the overstuffed chairs. She knew she should kick off her shoes and fall asleep to the rhythm of the train, but her mind was wired. Instead, she watched the dark rush by, pressing up against the windowpanes.

“I’m sorry about Kaye,” Charlie said suddenly. “I heard what she called you.”

Peregrine turned away from staring out of the window. “What’s her problem? She seemed to be a little unhinged, or bent on revenge, or whatever you want to call it. I was joking about the relationship, but it seems like you two have history in some form.”

He sighed and interlocked his fingers. "Kaye's an assistant guardian."

"Same as you, right?"

"She wants to be a full time guardian. Technically, she's under all of the guardian's care, but no one wants to pay attention to someone who so blatantly seeks power for the wrong reasons."

The train began to increase in speed. "Being the errand runner isn't fun, though."

"She's got worse as time's gone by," he said. "Whatever sympathy I had for her is long gone. She's dogging us. She knows something."

"Not much, I hope."

The train lurched. Peregrine was thrown out of her chair. She landed on the floor with a heavy thump. Her elbow connected to an end table and she groaned in pain. Next to her, Charlie was already up and alert. His eyes took on a focus that she'd never seen before, and his muscles tensed, standing out against his clothes. There was a large knife in his left hand, and he twirled it up and against him in a defensive manoeuvre. Peregrine scrambled to her feet, pulling her own, smaller knife out of her boot. She held it against her side nervously.

"What's going on?" she whispered.

"I don't know. Wait for me here."

He took several strides towards the carriage door and disappeared around the side. There were scuffling sounds, a surprised cry, and then he came crashing back into the carriage. A tall, beautiful girl stood in the doorway, rocking in time to the train. She saluted Peregrine and then grinned down at Charlie.

“Charles. Haven’t seen you around for a while. How have you been keeping? Found my atlas yet?” Her tone was conversational, but she held a sword under his chin.

He smiled tightly at her and tried to extract himself from the sword. “Margrit. It’s such a pleasure to see you again. I can’t remember the last time I had so much fun.”

She pulled the sword away and sheathed it, then offered Charlie her hand. He accepted it and pulled himself up, giving Margrit a sheepish smile. She embraced him in a tight hug.

“I’ve really missed you,” she said, and to Peregrine’s surprise, Charlie blushed.

“Really? Because I remember you saying –”

He was cut off as Peregrine stepped up. “I’m Peregrine. The door jumper.”

Charlie sighed. “Are you going to announce yourself to everyone now? Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

Peregrine glared at him. “I’m pretty sure she’s not dangerous if you’re flirting with her. At least to me,” she added, seeing Margrit’s affront.

“I’m as dangerous as anyone else,” Margrit said, and pushed Charlie to one side. “In fact, you’re now my prisoners. Go out there and bring your backpacks with you. Let’s see what that geezer gave you.”

Peregrine found herself being manhandled by Margrit, while Charlie shot death stares. She began to regret her speech as she followed Charlie and Margrit through the carriage doors and onto an adjoining car. Two cohorts, each tattooed with an intricate diamond pattern on the back of their hands, made sure that there was no chance of escape.

The breeze whipped at Peregrine's face, pulling hairs out of her ponytail. The carriage door was open and banging against the side of the train repeatedly as they rushed into shadows. Another, much smaller train, kept pace on an adjoining track. Margrit and her comrades had laid a bridge across the gap, which bucked and buckled at every jerk and turn.

"After you," Margrit said.

Charlie looked pale. "I don't think so."

"You'd better," she said, "or your friend here will die. I have no qualms about killing the door jumper."

And just like that, Margrit went from being someone Peregrine might have trusted to someone she didn't like at all. Charlie took a deep breath and then climbed onto the bridge, swaying with the movement. Peregrine waited until he was on the other side before she got on. The wind whipped her hair across her face, making it difficult to see where she was going. There was a rope to hold onto, but it twisted and snagged under her touch, making it difficult to get across. She looked down. The train tracks swam underneath her, making her nauseated.

"Come on!" Charlie said.

Her head snapped up, but she allowed herself to linger for a moment on the bridge, staring into the darkness ahead. She had a crazy moment where she wanted to lift her hands off the rope and spread her arms out, as if embracing the death that would inevitably result from doing such a foolish act. Instead, she turned and calmly walked the rest of the way to the small carriage.

Margrit came behind her. “Are you mad? What were you doing standing there? Silly fool.”

Peregrine didn’t respond. She had never felt that kind of rush before. Even though she was captured – *by pirates, no less*, she thought – she had a certain kind of freedom that she’d never had before. She had just jumped across a train! She’d survived an assassin attempt. That she was important enough to be assassinated in the first place was dizzying.

Charlie was also unimpressed by her stalling. “I thought you were going to jump, or do something insane.” He glared at Margrit. “This is your fault.”

“Actually, I was expecting Xavier on this train,” she said mildly. “He owes me money for some maps he bought off me, and I was going to collect in one way or another.” She put her hands on her hips, her dark hair curling over her elbows. “So why are you here instead?”

Charlie lost some of his sheepishness. “That’s not really any of your business.”

“It’s interesting you say that because a week ago I heard that two people, a male and a female, were travelling across the Heartlands looking for pieces of the key. Nothing but rumours, I told my crew. Only then you showed up at Xavier’s place with a door jumper. And Xavier, who hasn’t met with the guardians in decades, agrees to a last minute summit just like that.” She snapped her fingers. “Isn’t that simply fascinating?”

“Isn’t it just?” Charlie replied, raising one eyebrow. “But what would I know?”

Margrit grew irritated. “Don’t play with me, Charles. I know what you’re after.”

“We’re after your goddamn key piece, alright?”

Both Charlie and Margrit turned to look at Peregrine. She'd had enough of the coy chat back and forth and was ready to own up to it. Maybe it wasn't the smartest thing to do, but she didn't see how she would get around it. Margrit looked like an impossible person to steal from.

"What do you want for it?" Peregrine asked. "I've got to get it, one way or another, and I would prefer to do this the easy way."

"Are you threatening me?" Margrit looked coolly at Peregrine. "Little girl, you don't know what you're playing with."

Charlie nudged Peregrine and whispered, "This would be a good time to shut up now."

"Besides," Margrit continued, "I wouldn't be able to give it to you no matter how friendly I was with you. I'll only pass it on to a member of my crew. Nice try, though."

"Okay, fine."

Margrit sighed. "I just told you -"

"So make me one of your crew," Peregrine said.

Charlie shook his head vigorously. "No, don't do that. She doesn't want that," he said to Margrit. "She's got no ties to you. She's just being silly."

"Back off, Charlie," Peregrine said. "If being a crew member is what it takes, then so be it. Put me in your crew."

Charlie ignored her. "She's not doing it. I won't let her."

"I said back off!"

“It’s not your choice, Charles,” Margrit said coolly. “If the door jumper wants to be on the crew, then so be it.”

The small train took them all the way to the ocean. There were no windows, but Peregrine could smell the salt in the air. She sat nervously as one of the crew members, June, prepared ink for the crew tattoo.

“Will this stay on forever?” she asked.

“Probably not,” Charlie muttered.

He refused to talk to her throughout the journey, and didn’t even turn around when the needle punctured her skin and she gasped at the pain. The diamonds design was outlined on the back of her right hand in pen, and she watched, half fascinated, half in pain, as the needle dipped in and out of her skin. The diamonds slowly took shape on her hand in black ink. Half of them were merely outlines, while the other half were filled in. On one corner of the pattern, a ‘D’ had been stencilled in instead of a diamond.

“It’s because you’re a door jumper,” June explained. “We all have our own signifiers.”

She held up the back of her other hand to show a sewing needle crossed over with a sword. The design was both intricate and beautiful. How long had it taken, and how much had it hurt?

“That’s not a tattoo needle,” Peregrine said.

June nodded and bent her head back to the task. “I did not start out as the tattooist. I was a seamstress, forced into labour after my family lost their money. I sewed until my fingers bled, and then I sewed some more. Eventually I was sold and put on a

ship. When Margrit intercepted it, she asked me to join her crew, so I did. Most of us came from some form of slavery.”

When the tattoo was finished, Peregrine flexed her hand. It was a beautifully sleek design, the kind that she would have vaguely considered if she'd been at home. She would never have got it, though; her mother would have killed her if she'd spent any of her summer money on something “for vanity's sake”.

June looked at her, frowning. “You'll need new clothes, too. Those are far too conspicuous. You'll have to wait until we get to the ship.”

“I didn't realise that I had to change my appearance,” she said.

“You're a member of the crew now,” Margrit said. “As such, I expect you to dress like a crew member, fight like one and value the crew before everyone else. Including your dear old friend Charles here.”

Charlie ignored this. He wouldn't speak to Peregrine, or even look at her. She could feel the anger radiating from him, like an unchecked fever. She, in turn, was furious. What right did he have to be angry? He didn't get to choose what she did. If she wanted to strip naked and announce that she was the door jumper to all of the Heartlands, then so be it. He wouldn't be able to stop her.

Besides, it wasn't as if she was planning to stick around. Joining the crew was a diversion, and gave her an edge that she wouldn't have had as a prisoner. All she had to do was figure out where Margrit kept her piece of the key, take it, and then scarper with Charlie in the dead of night, or something. It was a crummy thing to do, but so was threatening death, which Margrit had already done. If Peregrine had any qualms about double crossing someone, they had disappeared.

The train came to a halt. Margrit opened the carriage door and Peregrine had her first glimpse of a platform near a dock. Crew members, all female, hauled wooden crates of God knew what onto a ship. Most of the hull was patched together in various discoloured pieces of metal, but the trimmings were all rare woods, waxy with polish. There was a mast, but it seemed more decorative than anything. Smoke plumed out of a large chimney towards the end of the ship, as if the devil himself lived below the deck. Everywhere she looked, manic activity took place. Peregrine had never seen a ship like this before, not even in bad historical pirate films.

“You like it?” Margrit asked.

It was both beautiful and ugly. Peregrine could never admit to liking the clash of metal and wood, and the black smog that rose up from it made her wince for the environment. It was striking, though, and she couldn’t wait to see what was actually underneath the deck.

Margrit took the silence with an amused smile. “No, she’s not beautiful, but she’s powerful, and that has a beauty all of its own.” She sighed suddenly, and the chance in the atmosphere was dramatic. “All of my crew have, at some point, been powerless. I was a slave for a long time in the wilds, where no guardian could reach me.” She pulled up the sleeve of her shirt and exposed three large black marks on her upper arm. “That was how much I was worth. Three coins. It’s hard to imagine that something so silly could define a person’s worth, huh?”

“No, I believe you.” Peregrine didn’t really know what else to say.

“You believe, but you don’t understand. No one really does.”

A loud foghorn bellowed in the distance. Magrit grinned and pushed Charlie out of the carriage first, Peregrine behind him. As she grew closer, she could hear the noise that the ship's engine made, a low bass sound that shook the ground gently. On the deck, it would be deafening.

“Come on, this way. June will show you around. Charlie, you're with me.”

And with that, Charlie walked away with Margrit. Peregrine felt an odd tug of sadness as she watched him go. They'd never actually been separated, and although two and a half weeks wasn't a long time, she'd grown used to his presence. She felt like she'd shed her clothes and was now completely naked in the Heartlands.

June led her to a large stack of linen and told her to take it. It would be easy, right? How heavy could linen be? However, when Peregrine picked it up, her arms started to ache almost immediately. By the time that she'd finished, her back and shoulders hurt, and she was ready to call it a day. June had more tasks for her, though, and she spent the rest of the afternoon running around in the hot sun. Lucky for her, June was there to help and keep her company.

“Is this all of Margrit's territory?” Peregrine asked, somewhat out of breath as they hauled a wooden crate through a side door.

“No.” June's breathing was even and relaxed. “This is the wilds, technically, but she and Xavier made a pact to look after this place. Only your friend Charles burned the working atlas and almost caused the downfall of the Heartlands.”

“What? Charlie? I don't think so.”

June lowered the crate down to the ground. “It makes sense that he didn’t tell you. If I caused chaos like that, I would have gone underground a long time ago. He’s certainly putting himself at a considerable risk to get you your key pieces.”

Huh. Peregrine had never actually considered that before. It didn’t make sense. When he’d met her, it was as if he’d been expecting her. Leahr probably set him up to the task, she mused. She imagined that he wouldn’t have been pleased. She remembered what Andy had said to Charlie at Xavier’s house. *She trusts me. She thinks I’m a nice guy.* Well, she didn’t know about ‘nice’, but she trusted him. Who else could she turn to? He may not have wanted to do the job, but he’d done it anyway, and she could respect that. Soon, things would be over. Once she had Margrit’s key, she’d be over halfway done.

She’d be able to go home.

When they’d finished, June led Peregrine to the lower deck. It smelled like oiled varnish and wet wood. Peregrine’s arms and legs ached from the work, and she rubbed her shoulders wearily as they turned corner after corner. The walls were metal and the gentle swaying of the ship felt jarring. She put one hand to her head and closed her eyes. It had been better outside when she could see the horizon, but below decks did nothing for seasickness or her claustrophobia.

“This is just a tour,” June said. “You’re not actually living here. Apparently your buddy Charlie did some begging and prostrating, and so you’ll get to live in the suites for a while.” She pulled a face. “I suppose they want to talk about the terms of your loyalty.”

“My loyalty?” And then Peregrine remembered the deceit she’d played and shut up.

June nodded. “Your employment, what’s acceptable, what’s not. It doesn’t often happen, but your case is exceptional, so I guess there are a lot of things Margrit wants to finalise.”

June led Peregrine away from the metal walls and towards a new door. She paused outside of it.

“This is the captain’s guest quarters,” she said solemnly. “Your room is the first one on the right.”

“You’re not coming with me?”

She shook her head. “I have my own duties. Babying you is not really one of them.”

“Thanks, I think.”

Peregrine’s first instinct was to deny that she needed babying, or any instruction really, but another, small part of her knew that without Charlie as a guide, she had started to panic. There was no chance of her becoming comfortable with the Heartlands – there was still so much that she didn’t know about – but she should at the very least have learnt how to defend herself. She wished she had taken some kind of self-defence class before deciding to jump to the Heartlands. Really, she should have done it before now, but confidence and thoughtlessness had made her lazy.

“Take care of yourself,” June said.

“Thanks.” Peregrine opened the door and it swung heavily shut behind her.

Quickly, she walked into her room on the right. Unlike Xavier's plush, and somewhat tacky, decorations, everything in here was haphazard. It looked more like a storage room for rare and exotic artefacts, with a low hammock slung between them for good measure. She was about to touch a particularly beautiful Victrola, when Charlie opened the door.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," he said, annoyed.

She paused, her hand hovering over the Victrola. "Why not?"

"Just don't."

He lounged by the doorway, obviously deciding whether or not to enter. Peregrine rolled her eyes and dragged him in. She sat on the hammock and gestured for him to follow, but he refused.

"It was the only way," she said. "You know that."

"The hell I do."

She glared at him. "What, do you think that we would just *waltz* off with the key piece and be done with it? She wanted me as her crew member, so be it!" She became aware that she was shouting, so she lowered her voice. "It's only to buy us more time. I have to figure out where she hides her key, then time it so that I can snatch and run. I don't like it, but I need to get home."

Even that felt like a crummy justification for what she was about to do. From Charlie's unimpressed reaction, it apparently wasn't enough, however.

"She keeps it around her neck," he said. "All of the guardians do."

She thought for a moment. "There must be something we can do. Some way to get off the ship, too."

“You don’t understand!” Charlie was yelling – something she’d never seen him do. “You’re in this for life now. Whatever you do, you’ll be at her mercy. You didn’t need any more enemies, but you’ve got one now!”

“Charlie,” Peregrine said quietly.

“What if you don’t get the other pieces? What if you’re stuck in the Heartlands for a while? Maybe the rest of your life? You didn’t think about that, did you?”

The small room felt hot and uncomfortable. He had taken a step towards her and now he was too close. She wanted to get away from the conversation, to go away and think for a minute, but she couldn’t do that with Charlie still fuming at her.

Peregrine narrowed her eyes. “Do you not think that I considered that? I know what kinds of risks I’m taking. But they are *my* decisions. Not yours.” Her voice had a dangerous tone. “Don’t try to take away my choices.”

“You’re being idiotic. I’m not trying to take away your choices. I’m trying to stop you from making another goddamn mistake,” he said.

“Are you even going to listen to my plan?”

Charlie shrugged with a defeated expression. “You’re not going to win this one. Even if you do figure out how to get the key, how are we going to get off the boat?”

“I’ll sort it out, okay?” she said irritably.

“See that you do.”

Charlie left, slamming the door behind him. She sat down on the hammock, fuming. How dare he try to take away her decisions? Belittle her? She knew what she was doing. The risks were there, but was the alternative – staying in the Heartlands – better?

After about an hour, June came in with a new outfit. She smiled and left. Peregrine frowned at the strange clothes. Dark linen trousers with suspenders, and a light, loose fitting shirt. She put on everything but the suspenders and pressed the rest of her clothes into her backpack for going home. There were rubber-soled shoes as well, which fit her feet snugly.

She spent the next hour trying to come up with some sort of plan. There had to be lifeboats somewhere for emergencies, which would take her off the boat. The actual key piece part she'd have to come up with later. Could she not simply grab it from her neck and run? It was hardly a genius thought, but she didn't really see how it could get any smarter.

There was another knock at her door, still June. "Margrit wants to see you. Go through the corridor and down the stairs."

June left, presumably to go back to running the ship. With the knife hidden in her right shoe, she left her room and strode down the stairs to the main foyer. For a pirate queen's lair, it was surprisingly restrained. Not a single portrait of the fearsome woman hung in the foyer, and there was not one piece of gold to be found. The walls were painted a muted red, and dim candles dripped candlewax onto small brass plates set into the wall. Without any windows, it felt claustrophobic.

Charlie met her at the bottom of the stairs, one hand outreached. She didn't take it. Annoyed, he folded his arms and walked behind her.

"Just make sure you don't do anything stupid."

When she didn't reply, he said, "You're not speaking to me now?"

"When you trust me to make the right decisions, then we can talk."

They walked down the rest of the corridor in silence. Margrit wanted to convince him that she was more than capable of staging her own theft, but there was nothing else to say. She'd actually have to prove it.

Margrit met them outside of a pair of doors. "Greetings. I was hoping that you'd accompany me for dinner. Charles, I understand that you want to speak to me?"

"Thank you," Charlie said gratefully. "Your time is appreciated."

Peregrine watched with a certain amount of confusion. Had Charlie tried to intervene on her behalf? She'd been so annoyed with him that she hadn't asked what his thoughts were.

The dining room was a small table at the bottom of another cramped storage room. She'd never seen so many objects. The entire ship was her grandparents' attic, it seemed. She spied a set of broadswords at the side of the door and gulped. She wasn't going to try anything here.

Margrit sat down at the table, where food had already been set out. It was normal fare, and Peregrine was relieved to see that none of it was too strange to try. Out of all times, she didn't want to upset this guardian. At least if she did that, then maybe Margrit wouldn't chase her so fiercely when she made off with the key.

She had to think maybe. There was no if.

"Sit, sit," Margrit said, waving her hand towards the chairs. "I'm sorry about the mess. We were supposed to hit Birdman's trade point. Most of this is his."

They fell into silence. Margrit swallowed once or twice. Charlie patted her hand awkwardly, and instead of brushing it away, she took it in hers. Then she let go and continued.

“I’m going to be blunt. Andrew wasn’t murdered for his guardianship. Whoever murdered him took his key piece and left. Now, the only two people I know that are searching for the key -”

“God, no! What are you thinking? I would never do that.” Charlie was outraged.

Margrit smiled at him grimly. “I know. Andrew was the only one who stuck up for you after the atlas incident. I know you were allies.”

“We all are,” Charlie said.

She waved him away. “You know what I mean. True allies. So I have a proposition for you. I want you to hunt down whoever is doing this and kill them.”

“What?” Peregrine said, disbelieving.

Charlie sighed. “I don’t think so, Mags. As much as I want to, we have a job to do. Peregrine needs to go home.”

She nodded vigorously and dropped her fork onto her plate. “I have to go home.”

Also killing wasn’t really her thing. Even if they were killing a killer. She couldn’t imagine using her knife to do more than swipe the air. The thought of blade sliding into flesh made her gag, and she hastily took a deep breath.

“I’ll strike a deal with you.” Margrit leaned towards them. “Find this person, bring them to me, and I’ll give you my key piece. I promise. I won’t cheat you.”

Charlie was very still. “Do you know who might be doing this?”

“I don’t – well, I do, but you’re not going to like it.” She glanced at Peregrine.

“You can trust her.”

“The only person I can think of is Kaye.” Margrit wrung her hands, distraught. “God, I don’t want to think it, but she’s the only one who was due to visit Andrew that day, and she’s the only one other than us who even knows about the key. Everyone else suspects, but that’s not enough. His own people wouldn’t kill him – they love him – and I can’t think of anyone else!”

“Mags, I don’t think – I can’t imagine – Kaye wouldn’t do that,” Charlie said.

But even as he said that, his brow furrowed and his shoulders slumped. Peregrine certainly believed that Kaye was capable of it. That hatred she’d seen earlier still gave her flesh goose bumps, and that was without the girl present. Given Charlie’s mood, however, it probably wasn’t best to mention it.

“If you’re convinced that Kaye isn’t the culprit, then find the person who did it,” Margrit said earnestly. “I’ll give you all of my resources. I’ll do whatever it takes. You want that key piece? You’ve got to help me first.”

Charlie looked torn, and for a moment, Peregrine was afraid that he’d agreed to search for the killer. She jumped in before he had a chance to respond.

“I understand that you’re upset, but we’d like some time to think about your offer. Particularly since it diverts from our mission,” Peregrine said.

She was pleased with this last statement, but Charlie looked furious, unable to say anything. Margrit didn’t look happy, either, but she at least didn’t try to disagree.

“That’s acceptable, I suppose,” she said.

“Thank you.”

The rest of the dinner was in a tense, tepid silence. Peregrine occasionally tried to make small talk, but Margrit was distracted, and Charlie wouldn’t look her in the eye.

Sliced fish piled high on the plates, rainbow trout, salmon and tuna, but she found it difficult to eat anything. She broke the fish into flakes with her fork and pushed them around the plate, hoping to make it look like she'd eaten a lot more than she had. There was too much at stake and she wasn't sure if she'd even made the right choice.

As soon as they finished the dinner, Charlie rounded on her. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm trying to buy us a little more time," she said, fighting the urge to shout at him. "What do you think you're doing?"

He stopped in his tracks. Disbelief crossed his face.

"What am I doing? I'm trying to stop a silly fool like you from doing more damage than you've already done."

Peregrine could feel anger bubbling beneath her, ready to burst, but she pushed it down. She needed Charlie on her side. Someone had to distract Margrit, and if they got away, he was the only one who knew where to go. As much as she hated it, she still needed him.

"What do you propose we do?" she asked.

"Get some sleep," he said curtly. "Tomorrow, we'll figure it out."

He stomped into his room and slammed the door shut. *Nice, real charmer you are.* She went into her own room and made a point of closing it softly. Then she flopped onto her hammock. She was probably supposed to be doing something with the ship at the moment, but she wasn't a real crew member. They knew that, right? Maybe Charlie had been right to warn her. Too late, though.

The crash outside her room jolted her awake. She glanced around, panicked. The ship gently rocked, but it sounded as if there were people jumping up and down on the deck. Quickly, she got dressed and stepped out of her room. She knocked on Charlie's door, and when there wasn't an answer, she pushed it open. He wasn't there. She could hear noise coming from the stairs, and so she climbed them.

Upstairs was chaos. Chunks of metal and splinters of wood that sliced skin flew through the air. Peregrine couldn't see Charlie anywhere. She spotted June, who shoved a man overboard, and then pulled back.

"What's going on?" Peregrine asked.

She had to yell over the cannon fire. A man noticed her and moved towards her, brandishing what had to be a spear. She had the knife in her hand, but only now realised just how pitiful it was. How was she supposed to fight that with this? Then the man fell backwards, blood blooming from his chest, and bubbling up his throat. There was a sound like a chunk of meat hitting the floor and then June was there, standing over him with a bloodied sword.

"We're under attack," June said, and pulled her to one side.

"Yeah, I got that. Where's Charlie?"

They both ducked as another attacker swung at them with a wooden pole.

"Haven't seen him. Can you fight?"

Peregrine wanted to say no, but her head bobbed up and down twice. Yes, yes. Then she froze. The last time she'd really fought was with her brother when she was younger, and as he'd grown up, he'd started winning.

“Then go and make yourself useful.” June ran back to the side of the boat where more people were trying to come onboard.

Anyone could fight, Peregrine told herself. She just had to be the winner.

And that’s when she saw her.

Kaye climbed over the edge of the ship and stood there, smiling a little triumphantly. She didn’t seem to be aware of the chaos around her, even though there was blood wiped across her cheek. No one else seemed to have noticed her, either, although Peregrine stiffened and backed away again. It was going to break Charlie’s heart when he found out.

“How dare you!”

Magrit stood on top of the quarter deck. She plunged her sword into someone - a girl, probably no more than fourteen - and pulled it out, the muscles on her arms taut. The girl toppled off the side and thumped onto the deck, where she lay still in front of Peregrine. The girl’s eyes were white and wide open, and Peregrine took a step away, one hand over her mouth.

“This is my ship!” Margrit shouted, barely audible over the noises of the fight. “I have right of passage here.”

Kaye laughed. She sounded completely, utterly deranged.

“I am the guardian now!” she screamed.

Wildly, Peregrine looked around for Charlie. Where was he? She hoped that he wasn’t one of the bodies strewn across the deck. Her heart hammered in her chest. No.

That wasn't possible. Charlie was too tough, too strong to be one of the fallen. He would have made his way out alive and well.

Kaye screamed again, a wild animal roar, and ran towards Margrit. They clashed on the quarter deck, parrying and delivering blows with an intensity that stunned Peregrine. While they fought, she pushed past people, trying to find Charlie.

He's not dead. He's not dead. He can't be dead.

On the quarter deck, Kaye lunged for Margrit. There was a gasp of breath as she nicked the pirate queen's arm. In response, Margrit grabbed Kaye's arm and twisted it. Kaye screamed again, but this time it was a cry of fear, rather than fury. She tried desperately to disentangle herself, but Margrit's grip was strong.

"Tae! Forrest!" Kaye shouted.

Several of the attackers glanced up and ran towards the quarter deck. Peregrine saw what they were going to do. They would outnumber Margrit and kill her. Without thinking, she ran towards the quarter deck after them, slipping on the blood that washed the deck. She caught the first one by the back of his shirt and pulled him off the stairs. He fell, but rolled away and jumped back up.

"You're going to pay for that." He moved towards her.

She ran up the stairs two at a time, and he followed her, trying to grab fistfuls of her shirt. It was all she could do to keep ahead of him. She passed Margrit, who was battling both Kaye and the other bodyguard. As she ran, Peregrine changed her knife from her left hand to her right and gripped it as firmly as she could. Her hands were sweaty.

"I've got you now, little girl," the guy said, advancing towards her.

He had her against the wall, and there was nowhere else for her to go. He put one arm on the wall, trapping her. Without thinking, she plunged the knife into his arm. She yanked it out again as he jerked backwards and fell.

“We’ve got what we want! Fall back!” Kaye shouted.

Margrit’s crew started to chase after the attackers, but they vaulted off the ship and onto their own, leaving bodies strewn behind them. The man who’d attacked Peregrine got up and looked at her, as if memorising her face, and then he disappeared, clutching his arm. She stared at her hand. The knife slipped from her fingers and clattered on the floor, but she didn’t pick it up.

Next to her, Margrit was breathing heavily. “They got what they came for.” She held out a broken silver chain. “They took my key piece.”

Peregrine’s heart sunk. If they’d taken the key piece, then chances were that she’d never get it. She was going to be stuck here as a crew member on Margrit’s ship for the rest of her life.

“Where’s Charlie?” she asked.

It came out as a whisper. She hadn’t searched the bodies. She wouldn’t.

Margrit was stone-faced. “I don’t know. I didn’t see him.”

Oh God. That was it, wasn’t it? Charlie was dead. He was probably stabbed to death by some maniac. He would be lying about somewhere on this ship, most likely on the deck. She might have stepped over him. She might have even stepped on him in her haste. Peregrine’s vision started to blur, and Margrit put one hand on her arm.

“Come on,” Margrit said gently. “Let’s have a look at who’s left.”

Peregrine didn't want to look at the bodies. She didn't want to see the blank faces of people that she didn't know, but recognised. But she forced herself to look anyway. They had fought for Margrit, for themselves. By all rights they were heroes. She hadn't realised that this was what heroism really looked like.

She spent the afternoon wrapping the bodies in old linen, folding eyelids over, trying to straighten stiffening bodies, so that they looked asleep, and not dead. She poured soapy water over the deck and scrubbed until her arms ached, and then scrubbed some more. Her hands bled from the rough mop handle, but she only rearranged her grip and continued. It was the only way to stop herself from thinking. *I should have been there. I should have seen what happened. I should have fought alongside him. I should have apologised.*

"Enough, Peregrine." It was Margrit.

Peregrine continued to scrub harder. "It's okay, I can get the stains out if -"

"Peregrine." Carefully, Margrit took away the mop. "You should get your hands seen to by June, and then we have to talk."

They'd found Charlie's body. That's why Margrit had such a pitying expression. That had to be it. Peregrine's legs felt like lead, but she followed Margrit anyway to where June tended the wounded. June had a cut on her forehead, but it had already been stitched up. When she saw Peregrine, her face fell.

"Let me see those hands," she said.

June wiped a salve across Peregrine's hands, which stung, and then told her not to do any heavy work for a couple of days. It was quick, too quick for Peregrine. She

didn't want to sit there, feeling Margrit's sympathy, as she talked about how heroic Charlie had been.

But that's not how it panned out.

"He's not dead," Margrit said.

They sat in her cabin on nailed down furniture. Peregrine felt a weight lift off her shoulders.

"H-he's not?"

Margrit sighed. "Not yet anyway. He's not on this ship."

"Then... he's on the other ship. Kaye's ship."

The weight settled back on her shoulders. Of course he was. Kaye was crazy, and she seemed to have a vendetta against Charlie. He was as good as dead.

"It's not over yet," Margrit said fiercely. "We can still get him back. But you know, as a guardian, he'll be under more security than anyone else."

Peregrine frowned. "Assistant guardian, you mean."

"Is that what he told you?"

There was a long silence. Peregrine waited for Margrit to nod and say something like *yes, of course, my mistake*. But she didn't.

"He can't be a guardian," Peregrine said. "He's, well, Charlie."

Margrit coughed. "He's a guardian. I thought he would have told you."

"I... he said he was in training, I think. Assistant?" Peregrine rubbed her forehead, confused. "He isn't a guardian. Definitely not guardian."

"Yes, he is." Margrit was firm. "He was probably one of the greatest guardians we had before the atlas incident."

Peregrine put one hand up, exasperated. “Okay, what exactly is this atlas incident? Just about everyone I’ve met knows about it. What did Charlie do that was do bad?”

Margrit explained it. “About a year ago, we all had a summit about guardian borders and decided that it would be best if we were confined to them. Charles requested a change. He was denied.”

“So what did he do?”

“Nothing, at first.” She huffed a sigh. “It was only later that we found out. He burned the maps detailing all of the guardian territories. It was a disaster.”

“Why?”

Margrit brought out a large map = the one that Charlie had brought with him, funnily enough – and spread it across her desk. Peregrine recognised several of the territories this time. Leahr’s pocket, yes, but also James’ and Xavier’s. Margrit’s seemed to be all over the place, barely brushing the wilds. Much of hers ran alongside another territory; Peregrine guessed it was the Birdman’s. There was one final territory in the north that ran alongside Margrit’s for a couple of miles before diverting again.

“That’s the Lady’s,” Margrit said, tracing it with her finger. “She really hates Charlie for what he did.”

“I don’t get it. He burned a map. That’s it.”

She shook her head. “Peregrine, he burned *all* the maps. Paper here isn’t like paper in your world. It changes things for us.” She sighed again. “Suddenly none of us had territory – everything was like the wilds. It took me years and years to reclaim my territory and I had to fight for it. James got his back quickly – his folk are pretty loyal –

but no one likes the Lady. No one wanted to be part of her territory, and the way that things work in her court... well, let's just say that there's a reason why so many people moved out to the wilds in the first place."

"Why, though? Why did he do that?"

Margrit looked thoughtful. "He wanted out, and they wouldn't let him. You have to understand, none of us were ever appointed guardians. It came to us. I don't mind being a guardian. I love the ocean and I claimed it for myself. But Charlie... he's a wanderer. He hates being tied down. I think he was desperate." She rolled her eyes. "It's lucky that Leahr likes him otherwise he would have been tried by the guardians. Xavier and the Lady would have demanded it."

Peregrine thought back to Xavier and shuddered. Dodderly old men were supposed to be nice and lollipop giving, but he wasn't. She remembered how cold his eyes were, despite his smile.

"It's execution, usually," Margrit added. "But Leahr got him out of it, thank God. He's paid for it in other ways since then, and he's still a terrible guardian, but no one deserves execution."

"No one," Peregrine whispered back.

She couldn't believe this. All the time she'd thought that Charlie was merely a troublemaker underling, placed in an out of the way location to avoid more problems. If he was really a guardian, then what was he doing there? Why had he been helping her? She'd assumed it was his job, and it sort of had been, even though June had pointed out the risks involved.

“You said he didn’t like being a guardian,” she said slowly. “So what was he planning to do?”

Margrit shrugged. “I think he wanted to try and leave the Heartlands.”

It hit her all at once. The church. The footsteps that she’d heard constantly. She hadn’t door jumped; the door had opened for her. Someone else had turned the handle, pulled her in. Someone who had been waiting for her. Someone who’d also wanted the key.

Charlie.

The prison was dark, so dark that Charlie could barely see his hand, much less the girl in front of him. He knew it was Kaye, though. It was impossible to mistake her soft voice for anyone else’s. It sounded like the way sugar tasted.

“She will come for me,” Charlie said conversationally. “You know that, right?”

He couldn’t see her, but he imagined that Kaye rolled her eyes. “Oh, yes, your dear beloved little flower. How sweet of you to imagine that such a thing could happen.”

“Why? Am I being optimistic?”

Charlie rattled his chains experimentally. They held to the wall. Despite the bravado in his voice, he was terrified. This was Ariadne’s domain. *The* Ariadne, who had wanted him executed. Ariadne, who performed monstrous experiments and called them beautiful. Charlie hated her, and he feared her, like most of the other guardians. And Kaye was her newest weapon.

“Does she know that you’re a guardian?” Kaye asked. “Does she know that the powers that protect you won’t protect her?”

Charlie took a sharp breath. “You won’t – you can’t. You need her. She’s the door jumper. Only she can put together the key.”

Kaye laughed, and it sounded like tinkling glass. “Oh, Charles. You don’t think that I don’t have a backup? There are always more door jumpers. I have my own.”

Oh no. Charlie slumped against the wall, his chains clinking. If Kaye really had her own door jumper, then Peregrine was in trouble. He couldn’t – he had to warn her somehow – but how? How? In a sudden fit of anger, he strained at the chains, his muscles corded with effort. The cuffs bit into his wrists, but he didn’t relent until he heard the sound of the prison door unlocking.

“Now stop that,” Kaye said. “I want you in one piece. After we deal with your door jumper, Lady Ariadne would like a word with you. Or several. Maybe she’ll even give you a conversation before she starts the experimental process.”

Charlie felt tendrils of fear creep over him. “I’m a guardian. She can’t make me one of her own.”

“You think that’s what this is about?” Kaye laughed again in a sing-song way. “No, she’s interested in much more than that. I’m sure you can use your imagination.”

Charlie could. He’d only once seen Ariadne’s experiment room. More like a torture chamber. To go back there, not as an observer, but as a victim. His mouth was dry, and he could barely find the moisture to speak.

“She will come for me,” he repeated hoarsely. “Peregrine will come.”

Kaye took two steps towards him until her nose was inches from his. “Yes, she’ll come. And I will take the utmost pleasure in killing her.”

Charlie strained at the chains again, but Kaye only laughed and stepped away. He heard the sound of the cell door closing again and then footsteps leading away from the basement. He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes in horror. Peregrine would come for him. She would fight the only way she knew how. And she would die.

I'm sorry, Peregrine. I'm so, so sorry.

Peregrine wanted to cry, or to smash something. Charlie had happily agreed to go searching for the key pieces. After all, it was a perfectly sound idea to pretend to help the door jumper, only to take the key at the last minute and leave the Heartlands. How could she have been so naïve? How could she have ever trusted a stranger? She felt sick.

“He was using me,” she said dully.

“I’m sorry,” Margrit said and genuine sympathy tinged her voice. “He’s not a bad guy. He really hates being a guardian.”

“He used me,” Peregrine repeated.

“So do you not want to rescue him anymore?”

Peregrine stared at Margrit. Not rescue Charlie? It was a thought. She could do that. For the first time in the Heartlands, she had a true choice at hand. If she decided not to do anything now, there was nothing stopping her. There would be no one to tell her that it was the wrong decision. Margrit couldn’t make her do anything. And Charlie... he’d lied to her. This entire time, she’d trusted him, and all the while he’d been waiting for the opportune moment to run off with the key.

But it was Charlie. Charlie who’d fought off assassins, who’d done his best to protect her. He’d fought for her to be recognised as an equal.

“Where do we start?” she said.

The map was covered in red ‘x’s and arrows. Peregrine checked it one last time before tucking it into her belt. She would need it later. Her knife was with her, too, no longer in her boot, but hung on her belt, where it would be easily accessible. Someone had picked it up from the quarter deck and handed it back to her once the bodies had been cleared. She’d cleaned it until the pearlescent handle shone. Her hair was up in a tight ponytail and her clothes were dark.

She was ready.

Margrit wasn’t going to go with her. There were other things that she had to do. This time, Peregrine was going alone. The ship glided quietly with the tide, rather than with the engine’s rumble. They had to be as quiet as possible, or this wasn’t going to work.

“Be careful,” Margrit said. “Kaye’s in the Waltzing Lady’s realm now, and she’s the most dangerous of us all. Ariadne is unstable. You’ll need this.” She handed Peregrine a satchel. “It’s waterproof. Good luck.”

Peregrine nodded. They were as close to shore as they could get within Margrit’s domain. Peregrine secured the satchel around her waist, and then dove from the ship. Icy seawater hit her like a sledgehammer. For a moment, she was frozen, unable to swim. Blackness surrounded her on all sides; the evening had been fairly warm on Margrit’s ship, but this was no longer her territory, and the wilds were cold tonight. Finally, she found a sliver of warmth within her and used it to push upwards. Her head broke the

surface of the water and she gasped in lungfuls of air. She waved one hand towards the ship, and then started to swim.

At home, she was about to quit the swim team. She loved the ocean, but racing in straight lines up and down did nothing for her. She wanted to feel the current push her back and then traipse back up to the beach with sand squidging between her toes. The chlorine made her eyes sting, and the smell stayed with her hours after she'd showered.

She was grateful for the skills now, however, as she broke into breaststroke. There were faster ways to get to shore, but she wanted to make as little noise as possible. Margrit had emphasised that. Slowly, Peregrine's body grew warmer, although she found it difficult to contain the shivers that ran through her.

When she hit the shore, she turned back. The ship was already crawling away in the distance. Margrit had her own business to attend to, she'd said, but she hadn't gone into further detail and Peregrine didn't ask. As quickly as possible, she made a fire and stripped down to her underwear and tried to dry off as best as possible. Goosebumps prickled on her skin, but it didn't take too long to warm up.

Once dry, she inspected the satchel that Margrit had given her. Inside was an evening dress, 1950s style, made of silk taffeta. Peregrine put it on, and after a moment's hesitation, wrapped her mostly dry belt around the waist. She had no idea if it was authentic enough, but she needed to have easy access to her knife, so it would have to do. There were a couple of hairpins in the satchel and she tried to arrange her damp hair into something more appropriate. She half succeeded, but it would have to be enough.

"You can do this," she told herself firmly. "You are a fifties girl."

It sounded ridiculous, but that's what Margrit had said, and Margrit knew more about the Lady's domain than Peregrine did. She stashed her still-wet clothes and the empty satchel, then set off at a brisk stride. Her shoes were soft-soled, but she was still grateful when the path appeared. She could tell that she'd crossed over to Ariadne's realm because she could suddenly hear music, and the air was just warm enough to ease the goosebumps on her skin.

In a clearing ahead, there was a large white mansion, linked to a gazebo by a tiled path. Peregrine recognised the music immediately. It was 'Begin The Beguine', which she'd heard in the stacks much earlier. It seemed like forever ago. Girls in kid gloves and evening dresses danced hand in hand with men in suits. Those that weren't dancing sat on the steps leading up to the mansion and giggled to themselves. Overhead, the moon hung fatly in the sky.

As she walked towards the gazebo, the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. This was something different. Something about them didn't seem quite right. Their poses were supposed to be relaxed, but she noticed how wooden they were. Their smiles were broad, but as she passed a group of guys, their eyes were flat. And watching her.

Nervously, she reached for her belt. It was the belt, wasn't it? She put one hand on the handle of her knife. Her heart started to race. Why were they staring at her?

One of them came up to her in a dreamlike trance. "You don't belong here," she said melodically.

"I belong here." There was no other way to respond.

The girl shook her head and her blonde curls swayed. "You don't belong here." She giggled. "You don't belong here."

Other men and women took up the chant, at first quietly, but then louder and louder. They surrounded Peregrine. She glanced around quickly, trying to figure out how to escape. And then something happened. Their smiles became glassy, huge, and then their grins split across their cheekbones, right to their ears. Their jaws dislocated, and Peregrine saw the gleam of sharpened teeth amidst thick, glistening tongues.

She didn't stay to see the rest of the transformation. She dove past them, shoved past their groping hands. Her feet skidded as she turned a corner, back towards the mansion. That's where Charlie would be. That's where she had to go.

There was a hissing sound behind her. *Don't turn around*, she told herself, even though she very badly wanted to. She could feel their ghostly fingers wrapping around her arm, tracing the delicate knot work of her spine. It could be in her head, but if it was real, then every second of speed counted.

She bounded up the stairs two at a time and burst through the mansion door. Her dress was getting in the way, but she had her knife out, and she slashed at the monster nearest her. It was sexless, and the eyes that rolled backward were set too deeply into its head to be considered human. One arm, twisted at the joints, reached for her, and she whipped her knife through the air.

This was what Margrit had warned her about. While she was free of the creatures, Peregrine quickly searched for a cellar door, or a way down to the basement. She threw open doors, feeling, not for the first time, intense frustration. If only she could door jump to him! Instead, she had to go through all of the doors in the house, slamming them shut behind her. The scratchy noises at the door fuelled her urgency, and when she

found the basement door, she plunged down it without much thought, and shut it behind her.

It was almost pitch black, and Peregrine had to take her time going down the stairs. Was it too late? Had they seen her and decided to kill off Charlie? She reached the end of the staircase breathing heavily. Panicked, she could only think, *wow, I need to go to the gym more often.*

“Charlie?” she called out tentatively.

Her voice echoed disconcertingly throughout the basement.

“Peregrine?”

She ran towards where Charlie’s voice came from. “Where are you?”

“Peregrine, don’t! It’s a trap!”

Too late, she heard the sound of sliding metal, and then a click. Overhead lights came on, and blinded, she couldn’t see who was in front of her. But she recognised the voice.

“God, you are so stupid,” Kaye said, disgusted. “You knew that this would be a trap. You knew, and yet you still came.”

As Peregrine’s eyes adjusted to the light, she could see Kaye standing in front of her. And behind Kaye was Charlie. Before she could get to Charlie, however, she had to get past Kaye, and the menacing creatures beside her. Several of them had large, lamp-like eyes that bulged over short snouts and wide, tight mouths with razor blade teeth.

Peregrine’s grip was sweaty, and she adjusted her knife to get a better grip. This was it. Now or never.

Kaye held up the key pieces tauntingly. She'd attached them to pieces of string, and they dangled like sun catchers in a breeze.

"This is what you want, isn't it?" she said. "So does Charles. So do I, and I promise you that I will be the one to walk away from this alive."

Peregrine took a deep breath. "Charlie, is this true?"

There was a pause, and then, "Peregrine, I'm sorry, I'm really -"

"Enough!" Kaye screamed.

She's mad, thought Peregrine. *Absolutely insane*. Peregrine didn't have time to ponder further, as Kaye let loose the creatures. Peregrine took two steps back as they stalked towards her, dripping saliva from overstretched jaws. She could feel the heat coming off them. Her knife felt slippery in her hand.

This was it. Adrenaline kicked through her and she charged towards them. A small part of her knew that she was going to die, that these creatures were going to shred her limb from limb. She raised her knife just as one of them opened its jaw and raised its head to –

An arrow buried itself into the creature's mouth and it fell down, dead. Arrows flew through the air, hitting all of their marks. Kaye's mouth opened in surprise, and then she whirled around and barrelled through a side door that Peregrine hadn't noticed.

"I'd hoped that we'd meet again under better circumstances."

Peregrine turned around, and her heart soared. James released the tension in his bow and came down the stairs, flanked by his warriors. She smiled at him.

"How did you get here? How did you know?" she asked.

James put his bow to one side and embraced her. “Margrit warned us. Just in time, it seems.”

Peregrine turned back to where the hidden side door was. “You have to get Charlie out of here. Keep him safe. Thank you.”

She pulled out of James’ grip and ran towards the hidden door. She’d wasted time greeting him, but chances were that Kaye wasn’t far ahead. Peregrine pushed open the side door and kept moving, aware that the floor suddenly turned slick underneath her. Water droplets formed and fell from the ceiling, and onto her head. The evening dress was cumbersome now, and she paused to rip the bottom off it with her knife. Freeing her legs made it much easier to run.

The narrow tunnel ended with a manhole leading up to the top. There was a ladder propped up to it, and Kaye’s foot was about to disappear upwards. Peregrine grabbed it and yanked it with all her strength, pulling Kaye back to the floor. Kaye snarled and lashed out, grabbing at Peregrine’s hair fiercely enough to make her cry out.

In turn, Peregrine shoved Kaye against the wall and tackled her. If it was going to be dirty fighting, so be it.

“It was supposed to be mine!” Kaye screamed. “All of this! I was supposed to be the guardian.”

Kaye had Peregrine’s arms pinned, and with one hand, was trying to choke her. Peregrine scrambled at her neck, trying to pry apart the fingers that cut off her breathing. Dark spots danced between her eyes. She couldn’t lose to Kaye. She had to win. She had to fight. She had to live. Desperately, she tried to kick Kaye, or push her away, but her lungs were burning. She’d be unconscious soon, and then dead.

And then her hand found its way to the hilt of her knife and buried it deep into Kaye's throat. Kaye fell backwards, releasing her grasp on Peregrine's neck. Peregrine clutched her throat and gasped, sucking in air. Half-delirious, she waited for Kaye to jump back up, but the tunnel was silent apart from an odd gurgling noise.

Peregrine looked down and saw Kaye. The whites of her eyes showed, and her hand had clawed itself around the handle of the knife. There was no movement, and the gurgling noise had stopped.

Still unsteady on her feet, Peregrine walked back through the tunnel and towards the light.

By the time Peregrine became aware of other people, she was back in Margrit's ship with a blanket around her. Two concerned faces peered into hers.

"Is she going to be okay?" James asked.

Margrit shrugged. "She's been through a lot."

Peregrine looked up at them, not quite comprehending. Their voices sounded like they were underwater; what they said didn't make any sense. She tried to remember what happened last night, and failed.

"Why are you all looking at me like that?" she asked.

"Peregrine." James put his hand over hers. "Kaye's dead. There was a fight in the tunnels."

Slowly, Peregrine started to recall what had happened. The tunnels had been so dark, too dark to see what she was really doing. She put one hand across her neck and

felt the bruises from Kaye's hands. The knife. Peregrine had killed her. She started to shake.

"She would have killed you," Margrit said. "You didn't have a choice. Unless that choice was death."

Peregrine didn't say anything.

"We don't know what happened in the tunnels, but I know Kaye." James sat down on the bed beside her. "Kaye was ready to fight. She was going to kill you, and nothing but her own death would have stopped her. After you, it would have been Charlie."

"Where is he?" Margrit asked.

Peregrine spoke up. "He's avoiding me."

"Why?"

"Because I know that he lied to me."

Charlie was in his room packing up when Peregrine walked in. He didn't notice her at first. His mouth was set in a thin, hard line, and he folded his clothes aggressively, pushing them down into his satchel. Peregrine coughed, and he looked up.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

He wouldn't look her in the eye. "I'm leaving. Tonight."

"Where to?" she said.

She was aware how cold she sounded, but she couldn't bring herself to smile at him. She felt numb, as if she'd never got out of the ocean.

“Probably back to Xavier’s. Maybe I’ll stay with Leahr and help her reorganise her library.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I don’t know if she’ll take me back, but I can give it a try. I’ll do my best to help her.”

“No,” Peregrine interrupted. “I mean, you can’t leave. You can’t leave me.”

He shook his head. “I have to. You don’t need me anymore. You can take care of yourself.”

“That’s not your decision to make,” Peregrine said angrily. “I still need you. I don’t have the other key pieces.”

“They’re in your room. Ariadne’s, Margrit’s and Andrew’s. They’re on your bed.”

Peregrine’s bubble of fury burst. “That’s it? That’s all you have to say? I don’t know where to go next. I don’t know where this magical door is. I need your help. You owe me that.”

“I don’t owe you anything,” Charlie said.

“You lied to me!” she shouted.

Neither of them said anything. *Because of you*, Peregrine thought, *I killed someone. Because of you, people died.*

“Yeah. I did,” he said, defeated.

“You owe me,” she repeated. “After everything that’s happened, you owe it to me to finish the journey.”

“Then I suppose we should get this over with,” he said. “Tell Margrit to turn the boat north to the Audubon shores.”

“I will.”

Only after Peregrine closed the door did Charlie sink his head in his hands. He stayed like that for a long time, listening to the boat head north. It was time for him to be a guardian again.

Peregrine stood on board the quarter deck, the wind tugging her clothes. She’d put her jeans and t-shirt back on, so that she looked like a normal girl again, instead of the wild pirate she’d so briefly been. She kept the soft soled shoes, though. How long had she been in the Heartlands? At some point, she’d stopped keeping track of the days.

Margrit joined her. “I suppose you are leaving my crew.”

That reminded her. Charlie wasn’t the only one to deceive people.

“I’m sorry.”

“You lied to me. I should have expected that. If you ever come back, you owe me two months of hard labour on my ship.”

Peregrine waited for an accusation, but it didn’t come. “I don’t think I’ll ever come back.”

“Stranger things have happened.”

Margrit left her. A few moments later, James came by.

“You’re leaving soon,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Forever?” he asked.

Yes. “Probably,” she said.

Unless she learnt to door jump back and forth, she could never come back to the Heartlands. She didn’t know what would happen to the key, or if she’d be able to go back and forth using it, but probably not.

He frowned. “You’ve changed, you know. I don’t know what it is, but something’s different about you.”

Murder does that to a person, she thought. But instead, she said, “Really? I guess

“If you ever come back, visit me, okay?”

She smiled sadly. “I will.”

Charlie was waiting for her when she descended from the quarter deck. He had his satchel in his hand.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

The deck felt oddly empty, and in that moment, she realised that something was different. “You’ll see in a second. Not everyone can do this, and if I’m honest, you’re not supposed to witness this.”

“I’m going home,” she said. “I don’t think it matters anymore.”

Charlie rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and stood in front of the cabin door. He closed his eyes. There was a kind of electricity in the air that she recognised with a jolt of shock. He was door jumping. The cabin door turned blue at the edges and then morphed into an empty arch that she didn’t recognise.

He opened his eyes again. “You go first. It’ll close if I go.”

“How can I trust you?” she asked, still staring at the archway. “You never told me that you were a door jumper.”

“If I told you, would it have changed anything?” he asked.

“Maybe.”

He sighed. “You need to go through it. The door’s starting to collapse.”

Peregrine took a deep breath, and walked through.

“Where are we?” Peregrine asked.

Gulls shrieked overhead. The wind snarled at her hair as she stood on the shoreline. Damp sand crunched under her shoes, and she watched the tide surge back and forth, leaving froth on the beach. Gulls shrieked overhead.

“This is my domain. I am the keeper of the door.” Charlie looked exhausted. “I neglected this place for so long that other creatures have moved in. When you are gone, I will have to deal with them.”

Charlie suddenly didn’t look much like a teenage boy anymore. There was a subtle shift in the way that he held himself. Frown lines appeared on his forehead and his eyes were fathomless, gazing into some distant past. Peregrine wondered how she could have ever pictured him as an easily coerced teenager. There was so much she didn’t know about him, so many questions she had overlooked. The guardians had been human to her, but they weren’t, and it was difficult to see now how she could have ever presumed them to be mortal.

The key pieces lay in her hands, but she stopped trying to fit them together. They gleamed dully in the grey light.

“I’m sorry for everything I’ve done to you,” He said. “All of the lies and deceptions, the traps I led you into.” He took off the flute-like instrument from around his neck and

gave it to her. “This is the last piece. You’ll be able to put them together now. It’s the handle.”

Peregrine stared at the piece. “This is it, isn’t it? This is the way home.”

She looked around at the ocean. The Heartlands had started to feel like home, too. If she had stayed here for a little longer, if she had been a sliver too careless with Margrit, or Xavier, or any of the guardians, then she might never have got this far. She would be in the Heartlands forever, or at least a little longer. There were so many things she still wanted to do. So many things she hadn’t seen yet.

A tiny thought went out to James, who had disappeared without a trace after the recovery. What would happen when she forgot his face, his name? What if she told herself that this place wasn’t real?

“You can’t stay here,” Charlie said, reading her expression. “Look at this place. Really look.” He gestured to the landscape around him. “You can’t see it, but I can. The Heartlands may be a manifestation of your library, but we are still only novels and newspapers. Even our ocean sounds like shifting pages. We are just paper. You’re real.”

Peregrine closed her eyes. If she concentrated, the ocean *did* sound like paper of some sort, maybe pages riffled by the breeze. But it also sounded like the ocean, and she knew that the Heartlands would be real to her no matter where it came from.

“You’re real, Charlie,” she said, and tears blurred her vision. “You’re real.”

She grabbed him in a hug, the key pieces falling around them. He stood still for a second, surprised, and then put his arms around her. They stayed like that for a while, the wind ruffling their hair.

But the door was waiting, and after a while, Charlie extricated himself from her grasp. To her surprise, she saw that he was crying, too. One tear fell from his cheek and landed on his shirt.

“You’ll take care of yourself, won’t you?” he said, and smiled. “Learn things. Be brave. Forget that the Heartlands ever existed. You’ll never be normal, but maybe you can have a normal life after this.”

She nodded and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “You be careful, too. A lot of people are going to hate you because of me.”

“If I can handle you, I can handle anything,” he said, grinning through his tears.

“I know.”

With great care, Peregrine picked up the key pieces and brushed the sand off. Now that she had the last piece, it was easy to see where everything fit. It took maybe three minutes to click everything together. When she did, the key didn’t glow, or merge into something else, which she’d half expected.

She glanced up at Charlie. “I guess this is it.”

“Yeah.”

Together, they walked away from the ocean and towards the caves that dotted the bottom of the cliffs. Charlie didn’t say anything, but he knew the way and she followed him. *For the last time*, she thought. After this, she wouldn’t need someone to guide her.

The caves were damp and sand clung to her shoes. It made a gentle squelching noise as she walked towards the darkness. There was a rusting lamp to one side and Charlie picked it up. He lit it. Light pushed back the darkness, stretching their shadows

onto the wall. Water from overhead dripped, and more than once, Peregrine felt drops of salt water hit her head.

“I really am sorry,” Charlie said. His voice echoed.

They were going downhill now, further into the earth.

Peregrine shrugged. “You wanted freedom. You can’t feel bad for wanting that.”

He didn’t say anything else, but she thought about it for the rest of the journey. She didn’t know if she could forgive him for lying to her about so many things. God knew that Margrit might not forgive her. The diamonds on her hand would remind her forever of her deceit.

“Tell Margrit I’m sorry, okay?” she asked.

“Does it matter?”

“Yes,” she said. “Please?”

Charlie sighed, and his breath made the lamp flicker. “I will tell her. I think, though, that she already knows that you’re sorry. She’ll be angry with me for a lot longer, I think. You may have deceived her, but you didn’t really owe her anything.”

Peregrine held up her hand. “My allegiance?”

“You did what you had to do,” he said simply.

The sand floor gave way to stone and then smooth granite. Each step felt slippery under her feet, but the key was in her hand. A tremor of excitement went through her. She was going home! Home to her bed, and to her family and friends. Home to the other side of the library.

And then, the pathway abruptly ended. A metal door appeared to be set into the stone wall, gleaming despite its age. An unassuming keyhole sat underneath the handle. Peregrine recognised the door.

She took a deep breath. “This is it, isn’t it?”

“It’s time.”

“Thank you,” she said, and gave him one last hug. “Thank you for everything.”

His voice was muffled. “You too.”

Then they broke away and Peregrine turned around. The key was in her hands. She pushed it into the keyhole and then twisted it. There was a click from the other side of the door. She turned the door handle and blinding light spilled from the doorway.

“Bye,” she whispered.

She stepped through.

Light. Too much light.

Oh, God, her head hurt. Her temples ached like she’d been beaten with a small, but sturdy hammer.

Shadows stood over her.

“Peregrine, can you hear me?” The voice sounded distant, underwater. “Listen to me. You have to open your eyes.”

But the water voice was too slow and the light was too dazzling. It would be much better to sleep. Undisturbed sleep. The shadows faded out of her vision again, and then so did the light.

The next time she woke up, her head still hurt, but the light no longer blinded her. The ceiling had plaster tiles on it, and when she sat up, she realised that she was in a hospital bed. *What the hell am I doing here?*

She pressed a button on her bed to call for the nurse and waited. What had happened? It all felt like some hazy, swoony dream that she'd made up. When the nurse came, it was one of the first things she asked.

"You hit your head, honey," he said. "You fainted in the library and hit your head pretty hard. We're going to run some tests to make sure you're okay, and then you'll be free to go home."

"When did I hit my head?" Hadn't she been out for weeks and weeks?

"Yesterday. You woke up a couple of times, but if you don't remember it, that's perfectly normal."

As soon as visiting hours happened, her mother arrived. She hugged her tightly.

"What happened?" she asked.

That was the question they all asked. *What happened? Where were you? Why were you in the library after hours?* Peregrine wanted to answer, but her tongue felt thick and fuzzy.

"I don't know," she replied. Every time.

But she did know, sort of.

College started. When her friends spoke to her, it sounded as if it was coming from far away. Everything they talked about seemed hollow. Didn't they know that there was a whole other world? How could they not see it? It was as if they'd opened the cupboard door to Narnia, and then deliberately turned around, uninterested.

“Peregrine? Hey, I’m asking you a question,” one of her friends said.

They were in the cafeteria, taking shelter from the rain. Peregrine pushed her food around her plate, but everyone else ate ravenously.

She blinked twice, and yawned. “Go on.”

“Where’d you get that tattoo? I was thinking of getting a similar one for myself, and it looks so good that I want it done at the same place.”

The tattoo was supposed to have come off by now. Charlie said it was temporary, and would fade quickly in the real world, but Peregrine had been home for over a month now and if anything, the diamonds looked darker, more permanent. Charlie was such a liar, she thought, and smiled. Then it faded as she recalled the goodbye that hadn’t been goodbye at all.

Her friend put one hand over the tattoo. “Are you okay? I was only asking –”

“Excuse me, I have to be somewhere.”

Peregrine got up from the table and walked through the main doors of the cafeteria. Outside, it was pouring with rain and she could barely see the library, even though it was opposite her. Her tattoo itched as she ran forwards, dodging umbrella spokes and anoraked students. When she stepped into the library, soaking wet and dripping all over the doormat, several people shot raised eyebrows towards her. She must have looked half-mad, with her hair in a tangled snarl around her head and a wild, desperate look in her eyes. Her tattoo burned against her skin.

When she got to the elevator, she hesitated. She still had a key to the basement, courtesy of the staff at the main desk, but would it work? If they had finally got around

to installing the new alarm, she would undoubtedly set it off, and she wasn't sure that she could come up with a good reason to be in the Watkinson basement after hours.

But they were all distractions from her real fear.

She'd hit her head pretty hard, they'd said at the hospital. She must have blacked out for hours before someone found her. Who knew what kind of things she could have created while unconscious? All of it – the White Bear, Margrit and her misfits, Kaye's death – could easily be explained away as hallucinations. Charlie didn't even bear thinking about.

In the end, she stood at the unmarked door. It didn't glow blue around the edges. It was as she'd first seen it, plain and unremarkable. She closed her eyes and touched the handle, allowing herself to feel the power behind it. When she opened her eyes again, blue light spilled from underneath it.

She could turn the handle. She could go back and find out if everything had happened was true. It had seemed so real, but did she really want to be a murderer? A liar? Did she want to be the person who had done all of those things?

She took a deep breath. And walked away.