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These chapters contain significant spoilers for Silverskin, Book 1 of the Portlock Trilogy. If you have not read Silverskin, it is recommended that you leave this page and read the preview chapters of Silverskin instead, [which can be found here](#).

Chapter 1

Ellie eyed her magnificent, sprawling childhood home and tried to swallow the sick taste of fear gathering in the back of her throat. “I bet she knows we’re here.”

The silence in the truck thickened and Ellie squeezed the steering wheel, glancing at Oliver. He was sizing up her former sanctuary through narrowed eyes, the oblivious afternoon sun casting playful rays across his handsome, soot-stained face. Ellie gave a tiny shake of her head. The day was far too beautiful for what had just happened.

Then again, she thought, if the sun dimmed every time something terrible or unfair happened, the world would never see daylight.

Oliver rubbed a hand over his face. “If she *is* here, she’ll have a—”

Ellie flinched as he broke into hacking coughs. Hunching, he turned away, hiding his face in his elbow. Ellie reached over and rubbed between his shoulder blades until his coughs subsided, then held out her water bottle.

“Thanks,” he said.

“If only we had time to shower. The steam would probably help your lungs.” Ellie wrinkled her nose at the smoke that still clung to both their bodies. It wasn’t the sweet, comforting smell of woodsmoke—*that* she could tolerate, even enjoy. No, *this* was the harsh, acrid smell of a burning building, the stench of helplessness, horror, and despair. In short, all the things she’d felt when her brother Sam had run back into that hellscape to save his new sister-in-law’s life. Then tenfold when Oliver had followed him. His mad dash back into the flames had been the bravest thing Ellie had ever seen.

And she was going to have nightmares about it for years.

“Sorry,” Oliver cleared his throat. Or tried to; his voice was still raspy and hoarse. “At least she’ll have a harder time sneaking up on us in broad daylight than she did last night.”

“She floated right through a solid log wall,” Ellie pointed out. “She doesn’t have to sneak.”

“True.” Oliver eyed the cabin for a moment longer, then shook his head. “And I’m sure Wormwood’s told her we were on our way back. The idea of them working together is ...”

“Absolutely terrifying?” Ellie supplied.

Oliver nodded. “Yeah. I think we have to assume they’re communicating, though.” His voice lowered to a frustrated growl. “And since I can’t seem to get Wormwood out of my head ...”

Silence took the truck in a vise grip.

“We could just go,” Ellie said softly.

“We could,” Oliver said, “but if we end up road-tripping, I think we’ll wish we had our stuff.”

“That’s true.” Ellie scanned the windows, resolve hardening within her. Oliver was right. Even in the best-case scenario, where nothing was waiting for them inside, where they got on a plane and were at Helen and Henry’s house in Seldovia by this time tomorrow, *she* still needed clothes. And worst-case ... Well, if the worst case happened, she’d be glad she hadn’t unpacked very much during the last few days. At least she’d have clean underwear and a toothbrush. *If* they could get out without being killed by the Lady.

Though if that happens, she thought, then I guess clean clothes are really a nonissue.

Ellie threw the truck into park. “Let’s go get it, then.”

In seconds they were striding side-by-side up the walkway, the crisp scent of mountain sage thick in the air. They reached the porch, passing the swing where they’d sat the night before, which creaked in the afternoon breeze. Last night, it had been romantic. Now, even in broad daylight, it somehow managed to look sinister.

Ellie stopped in front of the door, curling her fingers around its smooth silver knob, and hesitated. She loved this house so much. Through all the turmoil of the last few years of her life, it had always been there, solid, strong, and beautiful. But now it offered no refuge.

A warm hand twined into Ellie’s free one, and suddenly Oliver was at her shoulder. For a moment, his eyes—irrationally calm for the situation—met and held hers. Then, he reached for the door and eased it open.

Ellie tensed as she peered into the entryway, but nothing stirred. Oliver squeezed her hand, then let go and stepped inside, the calm on his face undermined by the tension in his shoulders. Ellie followed him, her eyes darting into every corner, but there was only the usual: polished tile, knotty pinewood, and floor-to-ceiling picture windows that afforded incredible views of the mountains, the forest, the Denver metro far below ... and nothing else.

They made it through the entryway, the kitchen, and to the stairs with no trouble, the deep, soft carpet muting their footsteps as they climbed. They hadn't bothered to take off their shoes, but under the circumstances, Ellie was sure her mother would have understood. Oliver stopped at the top of the stairs and peeked into the long hallway. Ellie pressed against his side, craning her neck so she could see as well. If someone had come out of one of the rooms, they probably would have looked comical. Like two overgrown kids caught in a game of hide-and-seek.

Which, Ellie thought, *isn't that far from the truth*. It was just the worst game of hide-and-seek ever invented.

Ellie peered back down the stairway. From here she had a bird's-eye view of the entire kitchen and the formal living room. The house looked like several dozen friends and relatives had been in and out over the last few days: there was a dried spill on the granite bartop, the pillows and blankets on the couches and armchairs were ruffled and askew, and Ellie's music stand still sat in the corner with her concerto on it, which she hadn't touched in two days. Not since she'd played it for Oliver.

Ellie grimaced. Her violin teacher would *not* be thrilled that she was abandoning her rigorous practice schedule to run off to Alaska with some guy. But she'd worry about that when she made it back.

If she made it back.

"Still nothing," Oliver said, and Ellie seized upon his quiet baritone, letting it drive the morbid thought to the back of her mind.

"I don't see anything, either. But," she added as he made to move, "I think we should stay together. Just in case."

Ellie wasn't sure if she masked the fear in her eyes before Oliver looked at her. She wanted him to see her as brave. Hell, she wanted to *actually* be brave. She'd give anything for even a scrap of his courage. But, as always, her nervous system had other ideas, and she knew he could feel her hand trembling.

But Oliver just nodded and drew one thumb across her cheekbone in a light, comforting caress. "Okay."

Then he was tugging her after him, his steps quick and sure. Ellie clung to his hand and concentrated on breathing deeply as she followed, glancing into rooms on either side. Empty. All of them. And when they arrived at the last one on the right—the one Oliver had spent two of the last three nights in—it, too, was empty.

Oliver released her and jogged toward the room's private bath, snatching some clothes out of the suitcase as he went.

"Is there anything you want me to grab while you're changing?" Ellie asked, edging toward his luggage. She'd been so focused on the Lady that she hadn't given a second's thought to the fact that they'd want to change their clothes. Her once-beautiful bridesmaid dress—elegant, pink, and perfect until about three hours ago—swished around her calves, still breeze-light despite the ash all over it.

Oliver's muffled voice issued from around the door. "I think I've got most of it packed. Unless you want to check for loose socks."

"Depends. How badly do your feet smell?"

Oliver laughed. "Depends on the day. Yesterday and today, probably not too bad."

Ellie was already rounding the side of the neatly made bed closest to the window. There was nothing on the floor. And more importantly, nothing was flying across the tops of the trees with death in its pitiless black eyes.

The doorknob rattled behind Ellie and she turned in time to see Oliver step out, dressed in comfortable-looking hiking pants and a black tee shirt. He'd washed the soot off his face and moved with purpose and grace. If Ellie hadn't known—and known *him*—she never would have suspected he'd nearly died in a structure fire only hours earlier.

"I couldn't find anything you missed," she said, hurrying toward him.

Oliver tossed his sooty clothes and toiletries bag into his suitcase and zipped it up. "Neatness is a habit you pick up quickly on a fishing boat."

He met her eyes and smiled, then fell into step beside her as they headed for the door, rolling his left shoulder awkwardly. Ellie didn't think much of it until he did it again; she was too busy peering into every room, just as she had last time. But the movement caught her eye, and when she noticed his strained expression, she frowned.

"Is your shoulder okay?"

An odd expression crossed his face; he looked forward. "Yes."

"I'm ... not sure if I believe you."

"A falling board hit it when I was in the Luxembourg House. It's bruised. That's all." He flexed it again.

"Well ..." Ellie hesitated as they stopped in front of her closed door. "*This* probably isn't the place or time, but when we get ... wherever we're going ..." She swallowed. Butterflies had joined the bats in her stomach, and she just wanted them all to calm down. "I know my stomach isn't the strongest, but if you want me to look at it, I will."

"I checked it out in the bathroom, and I'll be okay."

Oliver stared at her bedroom door, his face a mask, his voice more brusque than she'd ever heard it. Ellie felt a sharp pang of hurt before realizing she'd let her guard down; she shook the feeling off and reached for the handle. It was perfectly reasonable for him to not need her help for a superficial injury, and his sudden coldness was probably his nerves finally breaking through.

And for good reason, she thought. So far, there had been no sign of the Lady—or any other demon. But *her* room had been where the madness had started, where the Lady had gone first. The creature knew. It was personal. What if the demon was in there waiting for them, knowing they'd come back? Could she be that clever?

Ellie gulped. *I should've left the door open.*

Oliver let go of his suitcase and slipped a protective arm around her waist. "I doubt she would have waited this long to attack us if she's here."

"That's probably true." Ellie's hand trembled on the doorknob but she set her jaw, turned it, and shoved.

The door creaked open to reveal an empty room.

All the same, both she and Oliver eyed every corner before stepping over the threshold. It felt ... muted in here. Heavier. Like the room hadn't quite recovered from last night's events, either. Oliver squeezed Ellie's shoulder before letting her go. She raced to her walk-in closet, grabbing jeans and whatever shirts happened to be on top of the pile.

"I'm not sure how to be helpful here," Oliver said as she dumped the clothes in and hurried to the bathroom.

"Just keep watch," Ellie called over her shoulder. She shut the door and changed quickly, then shoved her toiletries into her travel bag.

"Still nothing?" she asked as she pulled the door open. Oliver was standing by her window, looking out over the mountains, his back to her rumped bed and the neatly rolled-up sleeping bag in the corner where he'd left it.

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"Okay." Ellie threw her sad, defeated-looking bridesmaid dress on the bed. It could wait until she got back—if Mandy, their housekeeper, didn't have it dry-cleaned first.

Oliver kept his back to Ellie as she threw in a few extra pairs of underwear, his keen eyes scanning the mountainside. Ellie was grateful for that, and not just because of his vigilance. Maybe someday they'd get to a point when packing her intimates in front of him wouldn't feel awkward, but today wasn't that day.

“Ellie.”

The way Oliver said her name froze the blood in her veins. Slowly, Ellie raised her head. He’d gone taut as a bowstring, staring at something on the mountainside. For a second, neither of them moved.

Then, Oliver whirled. “We have to go.”

Ellie fumbled the zipper shut on her suitcase and ripped it upright, adrenaline cutting its weight in half. “She’s here?”

“Something is. It’s coming from the northwest. Flying.”

Panic turned Ellie’s vision white. She stumbled over the threshold and into the hallway, and Oliver caught her by the shoulders.

“Stay with me, Ellie! We ran her off last night and we can do it again.” He touched her cheek, then grabbed his suitcase and yanked it around the corner and down the first few stairs. “Come on!”

You ran her off, not me! Ellie bit down on the inside of her cheek not quite hard enough to draw blood and started after him, heedless of the jarring thud her suitcase made with each step. Oliver’s eyes kept darting to the huge windows as they raced down the stairs and into the living room.

“Do you see it?” Ellie gasped.

“No.” He hit the landing with Ellie hot on his heels. “I’m not sure if it was really there. It might’ve been an eagle or something. But we can’t take chances.”

Memories of those hateful black eyes filled Ellie’s head and she gritted her teeth. “No, we can’t.” She skidded around the corner, nearly upending her suitcase, and cast one final look over her shoulder.

Outside, a skeletal figure wrapped in a ragged black dress skimmed over the trees. It was heading straight for them.

Ellie screamed, caught between freezing and running but no, if she wanted to survive—if she wanted Oliver to survive—she had to control this fear, to beat it, to *own* it.

“ELLIE!”

Oliver was turning back for her, his expression desperate, fierce, the same one he’d worn the night before when he’d thrown himself between Ellie and the monster. But he was tired, worn out by his near-death in the fire. He couldn’t fight. One or both of them would die if she didn’t *move right now*.

Later, Ellie couldn’t have said whether the force that erupted in her chest was raw, wild courage or fear of the highest magnitude. If it got her moving, what did it matter? She forced her

feet forward, forced her mind to concentrate on the steps ahead of her, and suddenly she was free, moving, *running*.

For a second, Oliver looked like he might come back anyway, until his eyes focused on something over her shoulder. He paled. Then, he jerked into a run, reaching the door and wrenching it open. He hauled his suitcase through and down the front steps, then reached back for hers but she'd already ripped it through the doorway and onto the porch, where it skittered madly across the concrete.

"I got it!" Ellie yelled. "Go!"

"Okay!" Oliver broke into a full-on sprint, reaching the truck seconds ahead of Ellie. He heaved his suitcase into the back and turned just as she reached him. "Start the truck! I've got it!"

Ellie tugged the keys out of her pocket and scrambled into the driver's seat. A bone-jarring shriek tore through her ears, obliterating Oliver's low grunt of effort. She whipped her head around in time to see the Lady glide right through the cabin's wall. Effortlessly. As if the logs it was made out of were as insubstantial as Alaskan mist.

Whimpering, Ellie shoved the keys into the ignition. The engine turned over just as the passenger door flew open and Oliver landed in the seat next to her. "Drive!"

Ellie hit the gas. The truck's tires furrowed lines in the gravel as it rocketed forward. Oliver cried out, then Ellie heard the sound of his door slamming.

"Sorry!" she gasped.

"It's fine, just go!" He twisted, looking out the back window. "She's gaining, Ellie, you have to go faster!"

Ellie pressed harder on the gas, as hard as she dared on their private gravel road, watching the speedometer tick past thirty, thirty-five, forty— "We have to be losing her!"

"We are! Keep going!"

The main road was half a mile ahead, an asphalt snake winding its way through the gold-green Colorado wildlands. Ellie gritted her teeth as she barreled over a pothole, then slowed as she reached the intersection, where a big, red stop sign loomed.

Oliver glanced forward and his mouth fell open. "What are you doing?"

"There's a stop sign! I have to at least *look*—"

"She's catching up again! *Run the stop sign!*"

Ellie let out a screech, half of fear and half of defiant rage, and did, sending the truck coursing down into the valley below.

“Yes! Good!” Oliver turned, watching their backs again, and Ellie stepped on the gas. They were approaching seventy miles per hour now, on a winding mountain road where the speed limit was forty for a reason.

“Where is she?” Ellie yelled, taking a turn so hard she could swear the truck’s tires lifted off the ground.

Oliver braced his hand against her seat. “Falling behind! Don’t slow down, though!”

“Don’t slow—” *Have you seen this road?!*

But then Ellie narrowed her eyes. *She’d* seen this road a thousand times. She could do this.

“I can’t see her anymore,” Oliver said, “but don’t slow down yet.”

Ellie threw every ounce of energy she would have used to reply into staying on the road instead. They careened down the mountain at a speed that made her hope her guardian angels were both real and on duty, winding around corners and down steep sidehills until they reached the valley floor a thousand vertical feet below.

“I think we’ve lost her,” Oliver said as Ellie negotiated the last turn. They dropped smoothly onto the plains, gliding through golden wheatfields that rolled out on either side of them.

“Good.” Ellie took a deep, shaky breath, willing her core to relax. “I think I might have a heart attack.”

Oliver put a hand on her shoulder. “You did great.”

Ellie snorted.

“Seriously. Maybe you should street race.”

“Not in a million years, Oliver.”

He chuckled and let his arm drop, slumping against the seat and closing his eyes. “I’m glad there was no one coming at that stop sign.”

“Me too,” Ellie’s voice was trembling. *Everything* was trembling; her hands, her arms, her legs. She fought the urge to squeeze her eyes shut against the fog that threatened her vision. *Anxiety attack plus driving. Not a great combination.*

“The Lady—” Oliver broke into painful-sounding coughs again, hunching.

“Here, take ...” Ellie scrambled for her water bottle with one hand. He could find it on his own, but she wanted—*needed*—to do something useful for someone else. “Take this.”

“Thank you.”

Ellie nodded. She glanced in the rearview mirror as he drank but saw only the familiar mountainscapes of home, steadily falling further and further behind. She swallowed, tears welling in her eyes as she remembered ... “I didn’t close the front door.”

Oliver lowered the water bottle. His head tilted sideways, and for a moment, Ellie was afraid he was going to call her out about how stupid it was to focus on *that*. But he just set the bottle in a cupholder, reached over, and began to rub her back. His touch was so soothing that Ellie let out an involuntary sigh, nearly closing her eyes again.

“I’m sure it’ll be okay,” was all he said.

For a moment, there was silence, and Ellie wondered if he was working up the courage to say the same thing she was thinking.

“Ellie, I don’t think we can fly.”

There it is. Ellie took another deep breath, trying to steady her voice, keep the tears from coming. “No. I don’t think we can, either. She’s too fast, and there’s too much waiting. Security, boarding, flight checks ... she’ll catch up to us.” Ellie shuddered as she thought of Darien’s words from the night before. “And I bet she’d bring down a whole plane just to stop us.”

Oliver shook his head slowly, and when she glanced at him, he was staring at Boulder’s tidy, chic outskirts with an expression that looked as bleak as Ellie felt. Then, his jaw tightened and he sat up straighter. “We’ll just have to drive, then.”

Cold fear grabbed Ellie by the spine. “I guess so.”

They didn’t speak again until they’d passed through the city and accelerated onto the Denver-Boulder Turnpike. Ellie couldn’t help but glance in the direction of the Luxembourg House—or what was left of it. There was no smoke, no indication of the madness that had taken place there only hours earlier.

“I need to let Helen and Henry know,” Oliver said, rubbing his eyes as if they were still sore from the smoke. “And while I’m at it, I might as well tell them the truth about closing the gate.”

Ellie glanced at him. “They don’t know?”

“I told them in general terms. But they don’t know that I ... that someone’s going to have to die.”

Ellie’s still-pounding heart sank to the bottom of her stomach. “There must be a way that no one has to die. And even if that *is* the only way, which I doubt, it doesn’t have to be you.”

In fact, she thought, *I won’t let it be you.*

Oliver just put his free hand over hers, staring through red-rimmed eyes at the road ahead of them. For a moment, Ellie just let herself enjoy the feeling of his warm, callused fingers on hers. When they approached a turn, he reluctantly let go.

"I should tell Sam and Darien, too," Ellie said. "They need to know."

"Yeah—"

Another coughing fit seized Oliver, and Ellie waited for it to subside. The EMTs had said there would be no permanent damage. That as young and healthy as he was, rest, hydration, and relaxation should take care of it in a day or two.

Ellie watched out of the corner of her eye as Oliver pressed the water bottle to his lips again, and sighed. They had exactly *one* of those three things.

"Sorry. I agree," Oliver said. "Sam and Darien should know the Lady attacked us again. But ..." He gave her a small smile, "you might want to wait to send *that* text until they're already on their plane to Hawaii, or else they might run us down and demand to come."

"That's a fair point." Ellie frowned at the thought of what her brother and Darien would say when they found out. Darien would likely accept it with her usual levelheaded practicality, but Sam ... *Oh, Sam.*

Only when Oliver started chuckling did Ellie realize she'd said the last two words out loud.

"You know he'd try," he said.

Ellie shot him a look, a dry smile twisting her lips. "Yes, he would. I think Darien would prevail in the end, but we should spare the poor woman the stress."

"Yeah. While I have complete faith in the strength of their relationship, this isn't the kind of decision that needs to be dumped on two newlyweds. Especially after the day they've had."

"Your aunt and uncle on the other hand ..." Ellie let the words fade as she guided the truck into thickening Denver traffic.

"I lied to them, Ellie. The sooner they know the truth, the better."

"What *did* you tell them?" Ellie asked. She felt for the Calls. Oliver hadn't told her someone needed to die for the gate to close, either, and when he'd pulled her into his room right before the wedding and finally let the truth spill out, it was like being slapped. Twice. Once because he'd decided not to tell her something vital about the problem they were trying to solve *together*, and then again by the raw pain and fear on his face. She could have helped with that. With *both* issues. But instead, he'd borne the burden alone.

Ellie still didn't know whether she was angry at him or touched. Maybe both.

“I told them the gate could only be closed at a solstice,” Oliver said. “When I left, they were making plans to go up there in December.”

Ellie set the cruise control, then poured every ounce of her exasperation into the sideways look she shot Oliver. “I assume you were trying to protect them, too?”

Oliver met her eyes, sheepish. “Now that I’m on this side of things, I realize how stupid it was, but yes. Them, you, the crew ... *everyone* I care about.”

For a moment, the silence stretched.

“In my defense,” Oliver finally said, “I was doing the best I could with the information I had.”

Ellie’s heart softened. “I know. And you had Wormwood in your head the whole time.”

Her lip curled at the memory of that voice—the one that so closely resembled her own in her worst moments—whispering in her ear, magnifying her insecurities, taking her past mistakes and ballooning them until they were all she could see. In three short days, Wormwood had nearly destroyed not only her relationship with Sam and her extended family, but also the blooming affection between herself and Oliver. She still felt sick every time she thought about it. “I can’t imagine he helped.”

“No.” Oliver’s voice was a low growl. “He did not.”

“Have you heard anything from him?”

“Not since the fire.”

“Huh. Well, maybe we’ll get lucky and outrun him, too.”

Oliver didn’t say anything for a moment.

“I don’t think we will,” he finally said.

Ellie bit her lip, taking the truck around a slow-moving semi that was parting traffic like a rock in a river. “They’re all so different.”

“Yeah. There doesn’t seem to be a ... pattern to how they work, either. Wormwood can *literally* crawl inside someone’s head, and followed me even on an airplane. The Lady can pass through walls and shapeshift, but we seem to always be able to see her, and she’s clearly not as fast as Wormwood. Silverskin ...”

“He could just ... appear.” Ellie shuddered, remembering her encounter with him at the Luxembourg House, and ... she frowned. In her room as well. “I’m still not sure why he didn’t kill me in my room this morning. Unless ...” She put it together even as Oliver spoke.

“If we’d found you dead, there would’ve been an uproar. He was too smart, too disciplined for that.”

“He wanted to make sure everyone who knew the whole truth was all in one place, so he could finish us all at once.” Ellie shook her head. “That level of cleverness is scary, Oliver.”

For a moment they were quiet, each lost in their own dark thoughts. Then a faint rustling reached Ellie’s ears; Oliver was pulling his phone out of his pocket. “If you don’t mind, I’d rather not put off this call any longer.”

“I don’t blame you. I think I’d rather fight a grizzly bear than Angry Helen.”

A rueful, nearly silent chuckle escaped Oliver as he hit a few buttons, then pressed the phone to his ear.

Chapter 2

“Sam, I need a hamburger.”

Darien couldn’t help but smile as her husband of less than a day looked back at her with those gunmetal grey eyes of his. A slow grin spread across his face and he turned, walking backward, his suitcase gliding almost soundlessly over the polished, gleaming floor. As she’d expected, the Four Seasons was gorgeous, and Sam—with his good looks, tanned skin, and white linen shirt—only completed the perfect scene in front of her.

Still, it wasn’t quite enough to make her forget the madness their wedding had degenerated into, the horror of nearly losing both him and her little sister, Ana, in the fire. Nor did it quell the worry she felt for those she cared about who were still recovering—her parents, both of Sam’s grandfathers, Oliver, the surviving kitchen workers ...

But it certainly helped.

Sam waved his hand in an overly grandiose gesture at their surroundings, returning Darien to her gleaming reality with a grateful bump. “Darien, my dearest wife, I have brought you here so that for the next five days—and four nights—” He winked, and Darien smirked—“you can have whatever you want. And if what your heart wants right now is a hamburger, then a hamburger is what you’ll get.”

“You’re the best husband in the whole world.”

“Yes!” Sam pumped his fist. “Twelve hours in and you still like me!”

Darien laughed as he pressed the up button and the elevator doors slid open. “Love you. Don’t forget it.”

She stepped inside and watched him pull their heavy suitcase in after him, letting her eyes wander happily over his muscled arms and shoulders. As the doors closed, he caught her admiring stare, and his eyes softened. "I feel the same way about you, you know."

Darien tilted her head up as he closed the distance between them. "Belly and all?"

She tried to keep her voice carefree, but a little thrill of nerves shot through her as she thought about the new life she'd bring into the world in a few short months. Sam—who she couldn't seem to hide *anything* from—must have seen it, because he searched her face, his eyes filling with gentle concern.

Then a smile tugged one corner of his mouth upward. "Yes. You look amazing."

Darien forced a smile onto her face, still trying to put down that nagging little flare of angst. "I'm excited, I really am. And I'm sure I'll recover just fine afterward. There'll just be ... a lot of changes."

Darien's breath caught as Sam leaned down. "And you'll still be wonderfully ..." He kissed her forehead. "... ravishingly ..." He kissed her cheek. "... angelically beautiful, Darien. Through all of it. And I will love you through all of it."

He kissed her lips, slowly and passionately, and her pulse accelerated even as her knees went weak. Three years. *Three years* they'd been together, and he could still do that; in fact, he seemed to be getting better at it as time passed.

"I am *really* looking forward to spending the rest of my life with you," she whispered.

The elevator door slid open, so smoothly it was almost noiseless. Sam held her gaze for a moment longer, his eyes dark and grey and beautiful with open ardor. "Shall we go to our room?"

"Oh yes." Darien hitched their backpack higher on her shoulders as she stepped into the hallway. "But before we do too much more of that, I really, really need that hamburger."

Sam burst out laughing. "Seriously?"

"I'm dead serious. Our baby is eating me alive."

They stopped in front of their door, Sam still chuckling as he pulled the key card out of his pocket. "Do you think that means it's a girl or a boy?"

"I think that means it's hungry. Which means *I'm* hungry. So hurry up."

Sam pushed the door open. Darien stepped over the threshold and took in the spacious, casually elegant room with delight. Dropping the backpack onto the couch, she noted the wood furniture, the sprawling king bed scattered with rose petals, and the sliding door that opened onto their own private patio. The opulence, the luxury, the romance of it all...

Darien, you are one spoiled wife, she thought. And she was thrilled about it.

Moving to the patio, Darien slid the door open. The ocean spread out underneath her like a vast, living thing, moving and dancing in the light of the full moon that refracted off its surface in a thousand little motes of silver. A gentle, salty breeze skimmed her dark hair back from her face and shoulders. She smiled in delight, letting her eyes fall closed, and breathed in the smell of the ocean.

Then another scent joined the first, sweeter, headier, and far more familiar and beloved: Sam's cologne. He wrapped his arms around her from behind and rested his chin on her shoulder. She leaned back against him with a sigh, and ... guilt pricked her as she thought about the loved ones—and the mess—they'd left in Colorado.

Darien did her best to ignore it. "This is so beautiful, Sam."

"You deserve it. You deserve everything good in the world." Brushing the hair away from her neck, Sam kissed her skin, and the feel of his lips finally drove the rest of Darien's guilt to the back of her mind. She turned in his arms and stared up at him. His eyes were dusky, and the desire kindling in them made her blood warm. Reaching up, she kissed his lips. He returned it with slow, untroubled enthusiasm, twining his fingers through the ends of her hair. It was a long kiss, and she basked in its comforting joy and the perfection of the man she shared it with.

Then, her stomach growled.

Darien looked down, then helplessly back up at Sam. "It's not my fault you gave our child your appetite."

Sam let out something between a laugh and a groan, dropping his forehead to hers. "Better call for that hamburger."

He released Darien and she moved toward the phone. "You want anything?"

"Nah." He'd paused by the desk, examining what looked like some papers and a few brochures sitting on its dark, glossy top. "My motion sickness wasn't too bad this time but I'd better not push my luck. I'll wait until morning."

"Okay." Darien sat on the edge of their bed, dialed, and pressed the phone to her ear. "Sorry to be such a starving hyena."

Sam picked up several papers and flopped down next to her, crossing his long legs. "Hey, that's what vacations are for. We both slept on the plane and we're on Hawaii time now, so the night's still young." He shot her a grin. "And we can sleep in as long as we want in the morning."

"No kennel duty at 6 AM, no calves being born at midnight—" Darien broke off as the operator answered the phone and placed her order. Then she lay back, snuggling against Sam. "Did you find anything interesting on the desk?"

“General hotel info, the WiFi password, a local channel guide, the usual. But ...” He held up a little booklet and smiled when Darien perked up immediately. “They also have a restaurant guide, and a couple little brochures about things we could go do.”

“Let’s take a look,” Darien said. Other than tomorrow’s visit to Oahu’s famed cultural center and a luau later in the week, they’d kept their itinerary sparse. The best adventures always seemed to happen that way.

They perused a few leaflets about kayaking, snorkeling, waterfalls, and ancient Hawaiian cultural sites before Sam picked up a brochure with a dark cover. He grinned. “Hey, wanna go see a lava tube?”

Darien came up on her elbow. “Um, yes. I thought those were only on the Big Island, though.”

“I thought so too, but apparently not.” Sam turned the paper over, glancing at the back side, then started to unfold it. “I guess—”

Movement out of the corner of her eye caught Darien’s attention, weird and ... and *spastic*. She whirled, heart in her throat, only to see a rose petal dancing across the floor. Another followed, blown by the gentle breeze drifting off the sea and through their still-open patio door. It was a beautiful sight; romantic, even. *Completely* innocuous.

Sam sat. “You okay?”

“Um ...” Darien pressed a hand to her face. After last night, after seeing that ... *creature* in Ellie’s room ... And after another one destroyed her wedding, killing people in the process ...

Well, she could understand why her brain had turned the flash of movement into a scuttling shape with claws.

“I guess I’m just a little jumpy after today.”

“That’s understandable,” Sam looked away, but not before something vulnerable and uncertain flashed across his face. Just as quickly, it was gone. His arms stole around her waist and she let herself melt against the hard planes of his chest and stomach. He rested his head on hers and they simply sat there, gazing out at the ocean.

“Are *you* okay?” Darien finally asked.

He tensed. “Okay enough.”

Frowning, Darien pulled away and looked up at Sam. His expression was troubled, his eyes more like storm clouds now than the liquid silver they’d been moments before. Gently, Darien took the lava tube brochure and set it on the bedside table. He watched her movements without saying anything as she sat cross-legged on the bed, facing him, and took his hands in hers. “Okay. I’m not a mind-reader, but I just *feel* like there’s something bugging you, Sam.”

Sam let out a deep sigh and looked down at their entwined hands. "I know it's our wedding night, and I *told* myself I wasn't going to do this, but are you okay if I try and call Ellie?"

Darien nodded, unsurprised. "Absolutely."

She glanced out at the ocean again. Ellie and Oliver wouldn't fly over it; they'd fly over half of North America instead.

If they could fly.

She swallowed. "I'm really worried about them, too."

Sam stood, went to the couch, and rummaged in the backpack for his phone. "It doesn't seem fair that we're here in this gorgeous place, able to do whatever we want, and they're out there being chased by the Lady and Wormwood and whatever *creep* lit the Luxembourg House on fire."

"I know," Darien said. "There's still a part of me that thinks we should have stayed."

But Sam jerked his head as he pulled his phone out. "No. My very first priority is making sure you and our baby are safe, and there's no safer place than an island chain in the middle of the ocean."

He crossed the room and settled on the bed next to her, looking stressed. Darien wondered if she looked the same way. After a moment, she laid a hand on his arm. "I'm sure they're okay."

Sam stared down at his phone. "What if their plane didn't make it? What if we made the wrong call?"

"You're her next of kin, right?"

Sam nodded.

"If the demons were going to crash their plane, they probably would have already done it, and you probably would have already gotten a call."

"Probably, but we don't know for sure."

"No, we don't, but it's a logical assumption."

Sam nodded slowly. "True. I just ..." He dropped his head again. "Even though everything in me screams to keep you safe, I can't help but wonder if I should've gone with them, too."

Darien raised her eyebrows. "What, so you and Oliver could have killed each other?"

He shook his head. "I don't think it would've come to that—"

"Sam." She paused, choosing her next words carefully. "You weren't ... kind to him, there at the end."

“Ha. That’s a very charitable way of putting it, my dear, and I appreciate it. Doesn’t change the fact that I used his confidence in me against him. And basically accused him of trying to rape Ellie.” Sam smacked his forehead. “Which I can’t *believe* I said. In hindsight that was such a stupid assumption. I know him better than that. I know his story. His *actual* story, not the thirty-thousand-foot version he tells people to get them off his back about it.”

Darien blinked. “Really?” If Sam and Oliver had been that close of friends, it was no wonder Sam was feeling this guilty. She hadn’t realized.

“Yeah. He told me when we were up in Portlock looking for my dad. We shared a tent with some other guys and, well, he tried to hide it but he’s got ... some scars ... that I saw when he was changing once. I didn’t ask him about it, but he saw that I’d noticed. Later that night the other guys were asleep, but neither of us could, so we ended up having a long talk. He opened up to me. Told me everything.”

Self-disgust marred Sam’s features. “The guy trusts me with that much and *what* do I do? I turn around and spit it right back in his face.”

Darien’s heart squeezed; she reached a hand under his chin and lifted his face so his pained eyes met hers. “Hey, you stop. You were under the influence of a literal demon from an alternate dimension.” She grimaced. “Or something like that, anyway. The point is, you weren’t yourself.”

“My actions and words were my fault, Darien. It doesn’t matter what drove me to say them. The point was that I *said* them.”

“It *does* matter. Yes, what you said hurt Oliver, and it was stupid. But you fought it, Sam, and you didn’t let it win in the end. And Oliver gets it. He’s been fighting Wormwood for weeks now. He knows what it’s like.”

Sam sighed. “He’s a good guy. I’m glad Ellie’s with him. I’d honestly be glad if she stayed with him long-term too, after this is all over.” He paused. “And I don’t think the demon followed me here. There was ... a weight, almost, that I felt I was carrying, and that’s gone now.”

“Good.”

“I still feel so protective of Ellie, though.” He looked up at her. “Maybe too protective?”

Darien smiled and took Sam’s hand again. “Maybe a little. But I think that’s just part of being an older brother. Plus, she’s the only family you’ve got left.” She shrugged. “It makes sense.”

“Letting her run off on a dangerous trip while being chased by demons who want to kill her doesn’t feel very good. I’m not feeling like that great of a brother right now.”

Darien stared at him for a long moment. “Tell that to Ana.”

Sam's eyes went wide; his mouth opened, then shut again. Darien pressed on. "My little sister's alive because you were willing to run into a burning building to save her." She reached up to touch his face. "You're a good brother. The four of us talked it over and made the best call we could. Both Ellie and Oliver are smart, competent, and capable, and they understand the risks. Now we just need to trust them."

Sam held her gaze, then let go of her hand and reached for his phone. "Darien, you're wise and comforting as always. I would be a basket case without you."

"Yes, you would."

He smiled. "Ten here is what..."

"One o'clock Mountain Time, I believe."

"Do you think that's too late?"

"No. If they're flying they won't pick up no matter what. And if they got grounded, I'll bet they're still driving and we'll be a welcome distraction."

"Okay." Sam paused, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I'm not sure what'll be worse: Ellie picking up or Ellie *not* picking up."

And before Darien could reply, he hit the call button.

Chapter 3

The sun had gone down hours ago, and the moonless night was blacker than the asphalt underneath the truck's wheels. Ellie squinted through puffy, red eyes at the clock on the dashboard. It was almost 1 A.M.

She stole a look over at where Oliver slept. He'd been great company for the first few hours, driving from dinnertime until well after the late-summer sun dipped below the horizon. But then, somewhere on the empty Wyoming prairie, his words had started slurring.

At that point, they'd switched drivers. And quickly.

Once they were settled, Ellie insisted he lean the seat back, close his eyes, and see if just *maybe*—on the wild, off chance that he was *tired*—he could nap. He'd fallen asleep as he was telling her he'd never been able to sleep in the car, and she'd smirked for nearly ten minutes afterward.

Now he rested against the rich leather with his arms folded loosely over his stomach, his face turned toward her. Those expressive blue eyes that always betrayed him were closed, the planes of his face peaceful. She'd never seen him this relaxed before. He always seemed to be in a state of casual alertness, attuned to his surroundings and ready to act—or react—at any moment. The fact that he'd fallen asleep was a powerful reminder of how harrowing the last twenty-four hours had been.

Ellie returned her gaze to the road, scanning the barrow ditch, the back seat, the shadowed truck bed ... but there was nothing out of the ordinary. No human figures in places they shouldn't be. It was just her and Oliver.

For now.

She changed lanes to go around a slow-moving truck, wincing as the tires hit a pothole she hadn't seen. Oliver stirred, then relaxed again, and Ellie breathed a sigh of relief. She'd done remarkably well these past few hours, but now she was starting to droop. And this godforsaken prairie just ... kept ... *going*.

A clamorous ringing burst through the truck's speakers and Ellie jumped. The truck swerved, and Oliver jerked upright. "*What—?!*"

"It's okay! It's just Sam calling." Ellie scrunched her eyes shut for the briefest of seconds. "Sorry. I forgot my phone was connected to the truck's Bluetooth."

She glared at her brother's name on the screen even as relief seeped through her—both at hearing from Sam and at Oliver's return to consciousness. He needed the sleep, and she regretted letting more be snatched from him, but at least now she wasn't alone.

Ellie pressed the accept button. "Hey. Status update."

"We're in Hawaii, safe and sound," Sam said. "And given that you're not on a plane, I'd much rather hear *your* update."

Oliver's seat droned upright as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

Ellie shuddered. "It's not a happy update. The Lady attacked us at the Shack. We had enough time to change and get our stuff packed, but—"

"*Hell*, Ellie! Are you okay?"

"It was close, but we're both fine. And we've learned we can drive faster than she can fly, so that's reassuring at least."

Darien's voice joined Sam's. "Where are you now?"

"I don't know. Somewhere in northern Wyoming."

Light bloomed out of the corner of Ellie's eye; Oliver was squinting down at his phone screen. "Closest town is Sheridan. We're about fifteen minutes away. The next big one after that is ... Billings, in Montana."

"Holy ... you've made it clear to Montana?" Sam asked. "When did you leave the Shack?"

"Around three," Ellie said.

"No kidding," Sam said. "That's impressive. Good driving, you two. Have you seen any ..." He paused, and when he spoke again his voice sounded almost reluctant. "Any demons?"

"Nope," Ellie said. "Which is good, because we're exhausted and need to sleep. We may end up spending the night in Billings." She suppressed a sigh. "What's left of the night, anyway."

"Please do," Sam said. "I don't ever want to get a phone call about a family member being in a wreck again."

Ellie closed her mouth; there was nothing to say to that.

After a moment, Sam spoke again. "How're you doing, Oliver?"

"I'm okay." Oliver coughed, then cleared his throat. "Sorry. I sound worse than I am. How're you?"

"I've been better. But physically I'm bouncing back. I didn't spend as much time in the smoke as you did."

"It's amazing what a difference two minutes makes," Oliver muttered, leaning back against the seat. Then, louder, "Tell us what's going on on your end. What happened after the fire?"

"Well, Darien and I are all right, obviously, and we made it to Hawaii with no issues. The baby's threatening to eat Darien alive, so we're waiting on a hamburger."

Oliver chuckled. "I wondered why you were calling us on your wedding night. That makes more sense."

"The hamburger is part of it, yes," Darien said. "But it's also because Sam has been worrying like a mare with her first foal ever since we touched down and got your text. And honestly, so have I."

"The stars happened to align to favor you two with our presence," Sam said with a mock gravity that reminded Ellie suddenly and sharply of their father. "You should be grateful."

"Otherwise yes, we would have been far too busy for you peasants," Darien said.

Oliver chuckled and Ellie smacked a hand over her reddening face. "Can you just tell us your update already?"

"*Your majesties*," Oliver added.

Ellie caught his eye, grinning, as Sam replied.

"Well, since you asked so nicely, peasant ..." He paused as if gathering his thoughts. "We stayed as long as we could to help pick up the pieces after the fire. We nearly canceled our flight—"

"Once we knew everyone was going to be okay, though, my parents wouldn't hear of us staying," Darien interjected. "Neither would your grandparents. And Grandpa Forth can be pretty hard to argue with. I think he would have marched us to the airport in straitjackets if he'd had to."

Ellie snorted. "Probably."

"You don't have to justify yourselves to us," Oliver said. "We would've shoved you out the door, too. In fact, I'd have tied the straitjackets' arms myself."

Sam sighed. "Thanks. It feels terrible being here in all this luxury when everyone else is—"

"Sam, stop," Ellie said firmly. "Just enjoy it. You deserve it. And we'll be a lot more effective now that we don't have to worry about you two being safe."

Darien's whispered "I told you" floated over the truck's speakers and Ellie cracked a tiny smile. "How's everyone doing? How are Ana and Carlos?"

“Ana and Dad are still in the hospital but the prognosis is good for both of them,” Darien said. “They’ll probably both be released sometime tomorrow.” To Ellie’s surprise, she chuckled. “Apparently she’d snuck back into the chapel to meet Matt because they have a thing.”

Ellie smiled. “That’s kind of cute.”

“He’s been keeping her company this whole time,” Darien said. “Who knows? Maybe we’ll end up having another De Leon/Forth wedding.”

“Maybe we won’t even blow everything up this time,” Ellie muttered.

Sam chuckled. “Given our track record, that’s a good goal to set.”

“Any update on the kitchen workers?” Oliver asked.

“The ones that got out are all going to be fine eventually,” Sam said. “Most need skin grafts and serious pain meds, and recovery will take a long time, but luckily there’s a lot they can do for burns.”

“Good,” Oliver said.

Ellie gave an amazed little shake of her head. Was it only ten hours ago that they’d been in that gorgeous, lavish ballroom, looking forward to the promise of an afternoon spent celebrating with family and friends? What an incredible luxury. She couldn’t believe it had taken a literal explosion for her to recognize it as such.

Sam’s voice came over the speaker again. “There were three others in the kitchen who weren’t so lucky.”

Ellie’s heart dropped. Oliver rubbed a hand over his eyes, resting his elbow against the window sill. When neither of them said anything, Sam went on.

“The preliminary findings indicate that there was an explosion in the kitchen.”

“That is *brilliant* detective work,” Oliver muttered.

Sam laughed humorlessly. “The kitchen workers—the ones lucid enough to give accounts anyway—said that’s exactly what happened. It was caused by a bag of flour.”

Ellie frowned. “What? *Flour*?” The glance she shared with Oliver told her he was just as confused as she was.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “I guess one of the workers was carrying an open bag and she tripped, and it poofed up everywhere just like when Ellie tries to bake brownies and turns the mixer on too high a setting. Only there were twenty pounds of it instead of a cup or two.”

“And it’s flammable?” Ellie asked, too baffled to acknowledge Sam’s dig at her baking abilities.

“Flour is more combustible than gunpowder under the right conditions,” Darien said. “And there *were* open flames: the commercial gas range was probably on, and we were having

creme brulee for dessert. I made that once in my high school culinary class and it definitely involved a cooking torch.”

Ellie shook her head. “Wow.” She paused. “Do you think Silverskin was involved?”

“Wait,” Sam interrupted. “Just so I can keep everything straight: this *isn't* the Lady or Wormwood we're talking about, this is the new one. The one you thought you saw in the ballroom, Ellie?”

“Yep. And we—well, Oliver—named him Silverskin.”

“Why Silverskin?”

“Because he had silver skin?” Oliver caught Ellie's eye and shrugged, which she returned.

Sam grunted. “Makes sense. How do we know he wasn't the same demon that was trying to get me to rip Oliver limb from limb?”

Ellie glanced at Oliver. “You're the one who has the most experience with these things. Do you think Silverskin and Sam's demon were the same?”

Oliver considered for a moment. “Sam, did you ever see him?”

“I don't think so. I ... sometimes I thought I'd see ... like, a shadow out of the corner of my eye. Mostly at night, or when no one else was around. But I just chalked it up to pre-wedding stress.”

Ellie looked over to see Oliver nodding thoughtfully. “I only encountered Silverskin once, during the fire. But—and Ellie and I actually talked about this earlier—he didn't seem like the ‘hide in the background’ type. He seemed too ... intelligent. Focused. He planned too well.”

“Based on...?” Sam asked.

“Back in Seldovia, Slubgob and Wormwood and whatever was attacking Henry didn't seem to plan, they just fed. But everything about Silverskin implied forethought and focus. He was there to get the job done. He was going to ... rip my face off. Literally.”

Ellie shuddered. “You didn't tell me that part.”

“I'm sorry. I'm not sure I interpreted what he was saying correctly. I was in a stressful situation.”

“You don't say,” Sam said.

Oliver gave a wry chuckle. “Something about facing your own violent death makes it hard to think clearly. But his threat tracks. There were a couple stories that started circulating in Seldovia about wildlife that had been ... mutilated ...” He trailed off at the look on Ellie's face.

“Jeez,” Sam said softly.

Okay, I have a question,” Darien broke in. “If Silverskin wanted us dead, and he was the driven type, then why didn’t he just kill us all in our beds this morning?”

“Well,” Ellie said slowly, “if he couldn’t kill without ... mutilating ... and they don’t want to draw attention to themselves, then he would have had to find another way, right?”

“I think most rational people would’ve just blamed a messed-up serial killer,” Sam said.

“That’s possible,” Darien said, “but there are also plenty of people who think more ... supernaturally. For example, my family believes in spirits, and the afterlife, and demons. Murders like that would have made national news. Maybe someone in Alaska would’ve seen it and put it together.”

“Specifically, maybe it would’ve given Helen and Henry enough evidence to convince Seldovia—and Homer and Nanwalek even—to fight,” Oliver said. “And then the demons would’ve had three whole towns up there trying to close the gate. Their strength is in secrecy. That’s what the Nantinaq said.”

“And they’ve acted accordingly,” Ellie said. “Even with the growing incentive they have to kill us.”

“Do we know how many there are?” Sam asked. “Because if we’ve all successfully outrun the ones that are bugging us—”

“You think you left yours behind?” Ellie asked.

“Yes,” Sam said. “I feel lighter than I have in days. He’s for sure gone.”

“Good,” Ellie said.

“That is good,” Oliver said quietly. He cleared his throat, his expression turning businesslike again. “We don’t know how many of them there are. There could be only a handful, or there could be hundreds. Based on my experience in Alaska, though—and what the Nantinaq implied—my money is on there being lots of them.”

“I think you’re right,” Ellie said. “I saw ...” She fought the urge to bury her face in her hands as that memory rose in her mind, focusing instead on the lights of the town in front of them—Sheridan—and the feel of the steering wheel’s smooth leather under her fingers. “At the cave the ... the first time. With Dad. Before I passed out, I think I saw them come out. And there were *lots* of them, probably hundreds at least. They were still coming when I lost consciousness.”

“Great,” Sam grumbled.

“Well, I think we should use what we know instead of speculating too much,” Darien said. “And we *know* the Lady was also around. You said she’s a shape-shifter, Ellie?”

Ellie stared at the tar-black road, still fighting the memories. “Yep.”

“So how can we rule out that Silverskin wasn’t just her in disguise?”

“Oh,” Oliver said, straightening. “I told Ellie but not you guys. I killed Silverskin. The reason we know the Lady and him aren’t the same is because he’s dead.”

Ellie could practically hear Sam’s jaw drop. “Are you *serious*?”

“What? How?” came Darien’s voice at nearly the same time.

“I stabbed him with a board that had fallen from the ceiling. It had splintered and its end was all sharp. I think it might have still been on fire, actually—”

“That’s hardcore,” Sam said. “Oliver the demon slayer.”

Ellie smiled at the embarrassed little grin that crossed Oliver’s face. The lights of Sheridan, though the interstate skirted most of them, were a welcome change from the moonless, velvety darkness that blanketed everything outside the truck’s headlights. It was nice to be able to see him better. It was nice to be able to see *everything* better.

“I just got lucky,” Oliver said. “Anyway, he shriveled up into a little puddle of goo, which burned along with everything else in there.”

“Except you, luckily,” Ellie said.

He nodded. “Luckily.”

“I’m just glad to hear they can be killed,” Darien said.

“Me too,” Ellie said fervently. “And the fact that we haven’t seen any since leaving the Shack is also encouraging.”

Her eyes tracked a Comfort Inn that appeared on the side of the road until it fell behind them. *Billings*, she reminded herself. “I’m starting to let myself hope we can actually sleep tonight.

“Yeah ...” Oliver murmured, then hesitated, as if he really didn’t want to say what was on his mind.

“Spit it out, Oliver,” Ellie said.

He rubbed a hand over his eyes. “We’ve lost the Lady, yes, but Wormwood’s still here.”

Thick, heavy silence settled over the truck.

“You’re sure?” Sam asked.

“Without a doubt. He’s here, right now, in my head.”

Ellie stared at Oliver as the last of the town’s lights receded behind them. How could he look so *calm*?

Oliver flicked a finger toward the windshield. “You’re swerving.”

“Sorry.” She corrected, feeling slightly sick. “And he’s in cahoots with the Lady ...”

“As long as Wormwood’s in my head, the Lady will be able to find us.”

The four of them fell silent again.

“Well,” Darien said slowly, “there’s not a lot we can do from here, but if you need support, please call us.”

“We’ll keep our phones on,” Sam said. “You can beat him, Oliver.”

Ellie tapped the steering wheel, only half aware that she was beating out the rhythm and finger pattern of one of her violin exercises. “There has to be a way.”

Oliver nodded slowly. “There’s always a way, even if it’s ‘close the gate.’ And if that’s the case, we drive fast, take lots of car naps ... and if we can, we find a way to kill the Lady.”

There was another beat of silence, which Darien broke. “I have so many questions. And thoughts.”

“Don’t we all,” Ellie said. “Pick your favorite.”

“Why hasn’t Wormwood just killed you? *Both* of you. He’s had plenty of chances.”

“I’ve wondered that,” Oliver said. “My best guess is that he can’t. The Nantinaq said they were all individuals—”

“Which we’ve seen pretty hard proof of at this point,” Sam said.

“Yeah,” Oliver said. “So maybe, for whatever reason, he *can’t* kill. Just play mind games.”

“Ugh, he sounds like mine,” Sam said. “Here’s hoping that monster doesn’t show up on our honeymoon. That could make things awkward.”

Darien let out a little “urgh,” and Ellie repressed a revolted shudder. “Okay, moving on. What other ones do we know about? What was yours like, Sam?”

“He just ... made me angry over silly things. Never at you, Darien, but people who try to mess with my loved ones—”

A muted series of thuds—like a knock—sounded through the speakers. Sam’s voice was muffled when he spoke again, as if he’d turned his face away. “Darien, your burger’s here.”

“Yes!” Darien said.

Ellie smiled. “We can let you go.”

“We’ll stay if you want,” Darien offered.

“No, it’s okay,” Ellie said. “You enjoy your hamburger and get some rest.”

“You sure?” Sam asked.

“Yes,” said Oliver firmly. “We’ve left the Lady behind for now, and we’ll stop to sleep soon. It’ll be okay.”

“We’ll update you tomorrow,” Ellie added. “Thanks for checking in on us. Love you both.”

“Love you, too,” Darien said.

“Love ya, sis,” Sam said. “And Oliver, you’re all right I guess.”

Oliver chuckled. “I’ll take it.”

After they hung up, Oliver yawned, rubbed a hand through his black hair, and coughed a couple of times. “Sorry I fell asleep. I didn’t mean to—”

“I hoped you would. That’s why I suggested you lean the seat back, you know.”

“Well, it worked.” He rubbed his eyes again. “I can’t believe I’m still as tired as I am. Or that my eyes still feel like they’ve been sandblasted.”

“I wish I could just tell you to go back to sleep, but ... I really need your company.”

“It’s all right. I honestly feel bad I left you alone for so long.” He shook his head. “I’ve *never* slept that long in a car before.”

“Hey, there’s a first time for ev... ry... thi...” The rest of Ellie’s sentence drowned in a huge yawn, which turned into a low moan. She hadn’t known she could feel this tired. Or, rather, she hadn’t realized she could feel this tired and *still keep going*. But she was reaching her limits, and fast. “Oliver, even if we just stop to switch drivers, I think I need to call it quits in Billings. At the latest.”

He put a hand on her shoulder and she let herself look at him again, long past being worried about the bags under her eyes or the messy remnants of her makeup. It was dark anyway.

“By the map, we’re an hour away. Can you make it that far? I’m happy to switch you now if you want.”

Ellie glanced at him again, this time more shrewdly. The exhaustion was so clear on his face that she wanted to cry. “I got it, but thank you. The *real* question—that I’m not sure is actually a question—is whether we risk stopping for the night or just switch drivers and keep going.”

Oliver drew a long breath in, then let it out just as slowly. “I think we need to stop. Sam and Darien made a great point: exhaustion could kill us as easily as the Lady.”

Ellie didn’t bother to hide her sigh of relief. “Excellent. Let’s sleep in Billings.”

Oliver propped his elbow against the windowsill and rested his chin in his palm, staring at the asphalt speeding underneath them. It was starting to look to Ellie like *it* was what was moving, and that the truck was just floating, suspended, above a yellow-striped treadmill thousands of miles long—

“Anything in particular you want to talk about?”

Oliver’s voice jerked her out of her daze. She reached for the air conditioner and turned it up. “Um ...”

In the silence, Oliver let out a little chuckle. "Drawing a blank all the sudden?"

Ellie smiled. "After today? I'm trying to narrow it down." She thought for a minute, then swallowed as she remembered Sam's words about the people who hadn't survived the explosion. "I feel *really* awful for the ones who didn't make it out."

"I do, too."

For a moment they were silent, Oliver staring out the window. At what, Ellie had no idea.

"Anything else besides your survivor's guilt?" he finally asked.

Ellie sighed. "Lots of ... stuff. I might be too tired to unpack it all right now, though."

"No problem. We'll have plenty of time in the next few days. If you want."

"I'm sure I will." Ellie yawned again, then shook herself. Maybe they could do a little digging, figure out how to get Wormwood out of Oliver's head. But ...

Ellie hesitated. Based on her own experience, Wormwood attacked the most sensitive, painful territory possible. She wanted to be delicate, as compassionate and kind as Oliver himself had been when she had bared her soul the night before the wedding.

"What I'm curious about is *your* day," she said.

Oliver stared at her. Then he burst out laughing. "We sound *shockingly* domestic for the situation we're in."

Ellie was surprised by the chuckle that rolled out of her, and even more surprised at how natural it felt. "Yes, tell me about your day, honey. I hear you killed a demon by stabbing him through the chest with a broken board."

Oliver looked over at her. "Yes I did, dearest. Thanks for taking such an interest in my work life."

"Well your work has just been so interesting lately, it's hard not to."

"Has it? I've hardly noticed."

Ellie giggled, reveling in the sound of Oliver's quiet laughter until both faded into companionate silence. She let it stretch, sure his face was shadowing like it always did when he was brooding.

"I wish we knew almost ... anything!" he finally said. "I *killed* Silverskin and still feel like we're sitting ducks."

Ellie chewed her lip, her frustration as keen as his. "Want to analyze it? See if we can find a pattern or something?"

"We might as well. It'll keep us awake."

"Okay." Ellie willed her tired mind to work. "Just so I can keep everything straight, Wormwood appeared right after you killed Silverskin?"

“Yeah. I tried to stab him too, but the wood passed right through him. Just like when I tried to punch him back in Seldovia.”

Ellie felt a pang and stole another glance at him. As she suspected, his eyes were brooding, his brow furrowed. She wanted nothing more than to reach out and smooth those lines, watch those eyes change as they looked into hers—

Oliver looked at her and his gaze softened, a half-grin raising one corner of his mouth. “If you keep swerving like this, you’re going to get pulled over.”

“Ha! By who?” Ellie jerked her eyes back to the empty interstate, correcting the truck’s trajectory. “I’m concerned about you. I was really hoping to let you rest more and now you’re over there worrying like Helen in a roomful of orphans.”

“Aaahh Helen.” When Ellie glanced over again, the expression on Oliver’s face was somewhere between fond and sheepish. The Calls had taken the news of their road trip—and the truth about closing the gate, *and* Oliver’s wild, impulsive plan to sacrifice himself to protect them all—just like Ellie had thought they would. Henry had rumbled a stern rebuke. Helen’s ire, on the other hand, had struck like a hurricane made of pure, elemental anger, worry, and love. Oliver had been quite shamefaced when he’d finally hung up.

At least he’ll probably never try something like that again, she thought.

“Was Silverskin *in* the fire?” Ellie asked.

Oliver thought for a long minute. When Ellie finally looked at him, his face was set in grim, haunted lines.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “I don’t want to make you relive it—”

But he shook his head. “It’s okay. It’s ... not the worst thing I’ve ever been through.”

Ellie’s mouth fell open. What could be worse than nearly being burned alive?

“Anyway,” Oliver said, “Silverskin was in the fire at first, but stepped out of it as he got closer to me. Wormwood *was* in the fire. Almost the whole time.”

“So, it seems like fire isn’t the answer,” Ellie said. “What about wood?”

Oliver shrugged. “We tried wooden stakes back in Seldovia and they just went right through the demons, like everything else.”

“Was there something special about *that* wood in particular?”

“I don’t know much about construction or woodworking. I’m sure it’d been treated with something. Some ... chemical. And it was burning.” Oliver paused. “Maybe that’s it. A fire-weapon.”

Ellie’s eyebrows lifted. “Well, good thing I packed my flaming sword and all my fire arrows.”

Oliver snorted, then cocked his head. "Actually ... I think there's something about flaming swords in the Bible. I can't remember, though. I was so young when my mom dragged me to church, I only remember fragments."

"Well, you know more than I do. We never went to church. And besides, these aren't Bible demons." Ellie leaned over the steering wheel, stretching her back. Though her thinking still felt sluggish and off-center, the conversation had perked her up. She no longer felt like her head was about to sway right off her shoulders.

"So a flaming weapon." She gave a bemused lift of her shoulders. "Or a wooden weapon."

"Or something that was used to treat the wood."

Ellie nodded. "Those seem like reasonable guesses. I'll do some research on the wood thing tomorrow. While *you* drive."

"Deal."

Ellie and Oliver were quiet for a long moment as the dark road slid smoothly underneath them, uninterrupted by ... *anything*. The absence of people in this wild corner of the country was unnerving, and made even more noticeable by the lack of artificial lights along the roadside. It was just the two of them gliding along the black highway, kept company only by the stars and the cool, incessant wind.

"So ... what have you heard from Wormwood?" Ellie asked quietly, then realized how absurd that was. *As if lowering my voice could keep him from overhearing.*

When she stole another look at Oliver, he was frowning, considering her question. Despite their grim situation, Ellie felt an odd little burst of happiness that he was there beside her, that they were doing this together. She felt so at ease with him. So far, her worry that romance would somehow taint their friendship had proved unfounded. So far, it had been the best of both worlds.

But that 'so far' had only been about twenty-four very strange hours. *And he hasn't even told you what he did.*

Ellie sobered immediately.

You know that's going to come up. And probably tonight.

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. Had *that* been Wormwood? Or just her own fear talking?

"I hate this." She glared at the lights of the little town that emerged in front of them. **Wyola, Montana**, the green road sign said. *Population? Probably around seventeen, including the dogs.*

“You hate ... what?” Oliver said cautiously.

“I hate not being able to trust my own thoughts anymore. How have you survived the last month?”

She felt Oliver’s eyes on her and met them briefly. They were grave, sympathetic. Then he half-smiled, the strong, angular lines of his face softening. “You had a lot to do with it.”

“I really tried.”

Oliver reached out and touched her cheek. “I can’t overstate how much you helped. Helen and Henry too, and Sam.” He withdrew his hand, leaving her skin tingling. “Anyway, it’s just been more of his usual little jabs. Has he attacked you at all?”

“I don’t know,” Ellie said. “I’ve had thoughts that *could* be from him, but they also could just be from ... me.”

“Thoughts like ...?”

“At the moment, like how much I hate driving.”

“I’ve been enjoying it, believe it or not.”

“You’re not the one driving.”

“My offer stands. Say the word and I’m happy to take over.”

A fresh wave of weariness crashed over Ellie; for a moment, she was tempted. But stopping would only delay them further. Plus, there was no guarantee she wouldn’t flop into the passenger seat and immediately fall asleep, leaving a still-exhausted Oliver to drive these dark, deer-filled roads alone. “No. I’ll get us there.”

“And *I’ll* drive the first leg tomorrow.”

“Sounds great. I’ll start my list of entertaining stories to tell to keep us both awake.”

Oliver smiled. “Not that *I’ve* told many entertaining stories on this trip.”

“Well, we still have forty-five minutes. Feel free to start any time.”

Ellie snuck a quick look over at him again as the last lights of Wyola capered across his face, a face that was losing its smile, growing subdued again. Her own smile faded, and she wondered if his thoughts had gone where hers had: his real story. Whatever the specifics of that time spent with the gang had been, whatever was clearly still eating him up on the inside.

A thrill of foreboding shot through her. *Will I ever be ready to hear that?*

She hit the gas as the speed limit increased, her heart rate accelerating with it. Did she dare ask? Did she dare not? She wasn’t a therapist; she couldn’t help him work through whatever had damaged him so badly. But if he got it out in the open, and she could actually *support* him through it ...

She gave a tiny shake of her head. *That’d be a nice change.*

Ellie took a deep breath. “The other thoughts that I can’t tell if are mine or Wormwood’s are ones about ... what you did.”

After a short silence, Ellie snatched another look at Oliver.

He looked anguished.

Her heart thudded and she snapped her eyes forward again; she didn’t have the social alacrity to deal with this right now. She should really just shut up. But it was weighing on her so heavily, and he’d seemed like he wanted to tell her that morning in his room, and a conversation like that would *definitely* keep her awake ...

She swallowed. “I think it’s reasonable that I’m concerned—”

“It is.”

“But I can’t tell ... is Wormwood amplifying my fear? Is he ...?” Ellie paused. It was incredibly frustrating trying to talk to him about something this important while driving in deer country at night. She wanted to see his face, read his eyes, comfort him if she could. But the opportunity was here, right now, and she found herself suddenly wanting to take it.

Oliver willing, of course.

“How scared should I be of you?” she asked.

For a moment, there was silence.

“Not very,” he finally said.

She stole another look but Oliver was staring forward, the lights of the dash etching his profile in lines of luminous blue. There was steel in his gaze, the same look she’d seen just before he’d run into the burning Luxembourg House after Sam. Her heart pricked, a deep empathy stirring within her.

“What I was part of was disgusting,” he finally said, his voice a whisper. “I learned skills that make me dangerous. How to fight, how to shoot, how to steal, and how to get away with all of it. And then I learned that I didn’t have it in me to actually *use* any of them. At least, not in the ways the gang wanted me to. And that part I don’t regret.”

He paused and Ellie waited, unsure what to say, unsure what to feel. She was having such a hard time reconciling the Oliver she knew—her brave, hardworking, kind *fisherman*—with the man he was convinced he had been.

“Do you want me to tell you now, or do you want to wait until we can sit down and really talk?” he asked in that same resigned voice.

Ellie batted away the part of her that screamed for him to tell her *right now*. “What would make you more comfortable?”

He ran a hand through his hair, then reached for his phone. "Let me check how close we are."

Ellie waited, tapping her fingers in the rhythm and pattern of her violin concerto now.

"Thirty minutes," Oliver said softly. "I guess now's as good a time as any."

Ellie swallowed, her hands closing on the wheel. "Tell me your story, Oliver."