The Characters

Magdalena Romanov: Daughter of Nydollean leaders Ida and Jon. Headstrong and dependent, filled with fiery spirit and inner anger. Fierce and determined. On the run for her life. Doesn’t trust or love easily, but knows that she won’t survive on her own in the wilderness. Coping with the loss of her parents, and thirsty for revenge against the Aboresian sector—the leader of the army in particular. She goes by the fake name Juliet when she is on the run

Physical appearance: Small and athletically slim. Raven black hair, normally worn in a braid but comes to just above her butt in length when it’s down. Shocking blue eyes, which tend to be her characteristic trade. Very fair, porcelain skin. Slightly crooked smile, and a musical laugh. When she’s mad, her glare can chill to the bone.

Levi Norring: Leader of the Aboresian sector. Ruthless and cold. Wants Magda to become the king’s sex slave, and it torture her for information. Has no problem killing. Killer of Magda’s parents.

Physical appearance: Tall and muscular. Smug, upturned face with gray eyes.

Harrison Heathfordshire: Escaped member of the Aronian sector. Meets an unconscious Magda in the woods while she’s on the run. Builds a fire and keeps her safe until she wakes up. Works hard to befriend her. Member of the rebel army that had only been rumored about until now. Asks Magda to come meet the army, and eventually she leads it. He becomes her love interest. He turns out to be Charles Jacoby, the son of the king of the Aboresian sector. He knows who she really is all along, and intends on capturing her. He is discovered through a letter he’s writing to his dad which is intercepted by Veronica. He is killed by Magda.

Physical appearance: Very tall and muscular, broad shoulders and back. Tanish skin. Emerald green eyes and dusty blonde hair. Wide smile, deep entrancing voice. Hair is kept short, but just long enough to fall into his eyes. Good fighter.

Jonas Grant: The only one who knows who she truly is, and the only known survivor of the sector other than Magda. Covers for her until they’re alone, and then talks to her. They become good friends and he becomes her main consultant as far as moves for the rebel army to make in their attacks. Loves Magda deeply, and always has. Respects her position with Harrison though, but he doesn’t trust him at all but doesn’t express that to anyone but Magda. Him and Harrison are always butting heads. Was a member of the Nydollean army right before the attacks (often called a deserter for not fighting to the death, but he was knocked unconscious and presumed dead and didn’t come to until the end).

Physical appearance: Tall and slim, but still all muscle. Prestine fighter. Longer black hair that is normally touseled in a care-free way. Golden brown eyes, like the color of honey and flecked with brown. Cooked smile. Defined, stubborn jaw. Also very pale.

Veronica Hart: Escaped member of the Aborisian sector. Fiery temper and a lust for blood. She saw her whole family slaughtered, and because of this her and Magda bond. She comes across as a calloused bitch, but Magda often sees the real scared and hurt her. She becomes Magda’s main confidant, and Magda eventually confides who she is to her because she over hears a conversation between Magda and Jonas. She doesn’t trust Harrison at all and makes that even more known than Jonas does, and ships Jonas and Magda.

Physical appearance: Slightly taller than Magda and muscularly built, but more just in shape. A pixie cut of shocking red hair, and a slight irish accent. Fair skin with tasteful freckles and a slight blush. Smile that hardly shows her teeth, and normally walks around with RBF.

King Jacoby: The King of the Aboresian sector; Harrison’s father. He wears a crown inlayed with one jewel from each important family he has killed. Including a the ruby from Ida Romanov’s wedding ring.

Physical appearance: Older and fatter than others as he’s never seen battle. He has the same eyes as Harrison, emerald green. A cruel smile and a venomous voice.

Shane: Quiet messenger for the Aronians. Minor back ground character.

The Timeline of Events

\*Magda witnesses the death of her parents and realizes that she is the next target

\*Magda narrowly escapes into the woods and makes it to the river where she walks up stream until she faints

\*She wakes up alone near a fire, unsure of where she is and instantly aware that she’s not alone.

\*Tries to kill Harrison

\*Harrison explains who he is, and Magda makes up a story which he buys.

\*Harrison tells of the rebel army and explains that he was just on a hunt and is heading back, and convinces Magda to go along. She does since she knows she can’t be safe out in the woods alone while she is being hunted.

\*Magda meets the rebel army, but stays withdrawn. Veronica shows her outspoken self and questions how they can trust Magda if they can’t trust Harrison, which she is not supported in.

--End Chapter One

\*When Magda and Harrison arrive, Jonas sees and recognizes Magda instantly. He doesn’t say anything to give it away though

\*Jonas finds Magda by the river alone and they talk about Nydollea

\*Magda meets Veronica in the woods – Magda is having a panic attack about her parents and Veronica helps her. Magda passes out and wakes up in Veronica’s tent. Veronica tells her past and her and Magda start to become friends.

\*The camp is attacked by the Aboresian soldiers that are there to hunt Magda. Only two lives are lost, everyone else manages to kill the small party of soldiers.

--End of Chapter Two

\*The remaining memebers meet to discuss a game plan. Upon seeing Magda fight, they ask if she will lead them through battle. Reluctant, because of her past, she says yes because she knows she has experience.

\*Veronica makes the point of suggesting that only a small party of them should be involved in planning, to make sure all can be trusted (she shoots a look at Harrison here.)

\*Jonas pulls Magda aside after the meeting to express his concerns about Harrison. Magda gets defensive, but tells Jonas she appreciates his concerns. She asks if he will help her run the army since he knows of her parents and has been in the army. He says yes.

\*The camp moves and resets up farther into the woods the next morning.

\*The next night, Magda can’t sleep and sees the fire is still going so she goes to sit near it. She sees Jonas is there.

-“You’re not asleep either?”

-Jonas’ eyes were different, troubled and sad. “I can’t sleep.” His voice was tight, and he hesitated for a moment. “My mind has the scary capability of being very dark and demented.” I understood what he meant.

-“You are afraid of your dreams.” I stated this and placed my hand on his knee comfortingly, as if anyone understood this it was me. His eyes met mine.

-“Yes.” He whispered. I knew he could see in my eyes that he needed to say no more.

-“Sometimes memories are the worst form of torture.”

\*They begin sharing their memories of the attack. Then Veronica hears and comes to join. They confide everything to her.

--End of Chapter Three

\*The next morning plans for battle begin. Magda suggests meeting with the leader of the Aronian sector for support.

\*The meeting happens and they unite. Shane is sent alone with them in order to be a go between for both sectors, to keep the Aronians informed.

\*Harrison and Magda get closer and closer. They end up sleeping together in his tent, and he says he loves her. She doesn’t say it back. Jonas overhears this from outside the tent when he is heading to his own tent

\*Magda is captured by the Aboresian soldiers

--End of Chapter Four

\*Magda is taken to a cell where she is tortured for information about the rebel army.

-“You have information we need Magdalena.”

-“I’m not sure what you mean.” His hand connected to my check hard, and I spat blood at his feet. “Now I have less to say than I thought I would.” The next blow was on the back of my next and caused pain to explode in my entire body.

-I had yet to let out a scream, a cry, even a moan. Of course it hurt, it always hurt. Each blow more than the last. But the more you screamed, the more blood they took. It was their sick pleasure.

\*Magda is brought to the king. His proposal is that he will spare her if she promises to stay with him and fulfil all his wishes, as well as giving him all of her knowledge about the rebel army.

-“Kill me if you must. But I shall not bow to a king who wears a crown studded with jewels of every life he has ended.”

\*Magda is sentenced to death and returned to her cell where she is beaten unconscious. She comes to a little and hears a part of a conversation about her fate and one of the voices sounded like Harrison. He was being congratulated on a job well done

\*Late that night she is rescued by Jonas and they escape narrowly. Veronica had managed to set fires in order to distract the soldiers in the compound so she could steal weapons and they could escape. They meet outside a part of the wall which has crumbled and is rarely guarded.

-“Small fire! I said set a small fire, Veronica! This is not small!”

-“Oops.” She said with a laugh.

\*Harrison is no where to be seen, and hasn’t been since Magda was taken.

\*Veronica is nursing Magda when Jonas rushes in. Magda tells them about how she thought she heard Harrison’s voice that night. Jonas confides about the letter he found in Harrison’s tent, a letter to his father about Magda and the capture. Despite her anger, Magda is heart broken. Jonas stays behind to comfort her while Veronica leaves her tent.

-“We’re alright, you know?” he says quietly, stroking my hair from my forehead. My chest aches, and I nod. “Nothing else is alright” His whisper tickles my cheek as I feel the darkness that milk of the poppy brings with it. “But we are.” I thought I felt him place a kiss on my forehead.

--End of Chapter Five

\*Harrison returns and everyone tries to act as if nothing is wrong.

\*Him and Magda take a walk into the forest together where he makes up a story about how he was hunting and got lost. He lost his goods because he encountered a team of soldiers. Magda kicks him hard behind the knees and, with a sickening crack and a scream, he falls. She throws the letter at where he lays, tears in her eyes.

-“This was found in your tent.” My voice shook slightly, annoying me at my own weakness.

-“That’s not mine, Mag. Someone must have planted it there!” He was pleading. His voice brought back the fresh memories of dark rooms and broken bones.

-“There is no point, *Charles*.” I spat the name at him with as much venom as I could muster. “I know you were at the compound the night I was sentenced to death. I heard you. I wasn’t sure at the time if it was you. Then I saw the letter. I trusted you!” I yelled, more emotional now than I meant. I inhaled sharply, trying to regain my composure.

-His eyes grew cold once the realization had set in. He knew he could not talk his way out of this. “Well, then you can’t exactly blame me can you? It was your mistake.”

-I took a step closer. “You betrayed me. You betrayed all of us. We counted on you.”

-“You want to know the saddest thing about betrayal, Magdalena?” He tried to scoot back and winced in pain, I knew it was no use. The force of my kick had dislocated both knee caps. This much he knew as well, for he stopped struggling and propped himself up against a nearby tree so he was sitting. “It’s that it never comes from your enemies.”

-I began walking towards him, unsheathing my dagger. I was standing over him now. The sadness and ache inside had hardened to bitter hatred. “I loved you.”

-He looked at the dagger clenched in my fist and his jaw clenched. “You don’t have to do this.” His voice shook.

-Tears stung my eyes again. I breathed deeply and knelt next to him. Our eyes met and I felt my stomach churn. “I wish that was true.”

-I inserted the dagger into the side of his neck. His eyes grew wide with fear. I began to cry harder. I slowly pulled the knife to the side, and the blood began oozing. I sliced the carotid artery. Withdrawing my knife, he grabbed at his neck, struggling for breath. His eyes never left mine as the life faded from them.

-I stared at my bloodstained and shaking hands as I backed away from his body. “I’m sorry.” I whispered, silent tears running down my cheeks. I turned and walked back to the camp. I made it close before the dagger slipped out of my hands and hit the snow, leaving a red tinge. I sank down the trunk of the tree and sat in the snow, staring straight ahead as the tears fell, images of my parents and Charles and the people of my village dancing in front of my eyes. I didn’t know how long I had been there when Jonas found me. He sat next to me and pulled me close to his chest.

-“It’s okay.” He said, wrapping his arms around me as I shook with terror. “It’s over now.”

-“No, it’s not.” I whispered back. “It hasn’t even begun.”

--End of Chapter Six

\*The rebel army finalizes their plan of attack

\*The day before battle, Magda give a great speech.

“Most people fear the dark—the shadows, the cracks, the spaces that lie between and what can and can’t be seen. These individuals walk about blind, however, for the worst evil is that which walks among us in the light. These men have killed our families, and have shed the blood of those we love most. Now it is time they pay. I’ve learned over time that you can’t run from the shadow. But you can invite it to dance. They’ll be talking about the war for a thousand years. Let’s make sure we are the ones remembered in victory.”

\*The plan goes into effect and they go into battle with the Aronian sector with them.

\*They win the battle, and this book is over.

-Jonas and I stood together as the rain came down, unaware of our pain and victory, washing the blood from our hands and the hatred from our hearts. I looped a finger around his. One small connection while the world as we knew it fell apart around us.

--End of Book

The Battle Plan

Combining resources with the Aronian sector will allow enough people and weapons. In the middle of the night, the night before the battle, Jonas and Veronica will go plant explosives on the three watch towers and at three points on the wall. These are set off right before the battle begins. The explosions on the towers take out a huge amount of the guards and the troops flood through the holes in the walls to take on the rest. There is a massive battle. Veronica dies. Magda has to run into the castle, as her goal is to kill the king before he can escape. She goes in with Jonas and three others by her side and they take out many people in the castle along the way. Magda gets to the king and there is a conversation about how she is not only avenging her parents, but all those whose blood is on his hands. She then slits his throat and rejoins the fighting. Once the fighting dies down and the battles is declared a victory, Magda sees Veronica lying on the stairs to the King’s castle. Then Jonas joins and that’s when the last line happens.

Chapter One

The snow fell in thick, heavy flakes the way it does only when the temperature is well below freezing. My breath came out in short puffs, the small clouds lingering in the air. There was a stillness in the trees. Though the silence was deafening, I felt a deep calm that could only come in these solitary moments. Outside of the quiet woods was real life, and there was nothing peaceful about real life.

There was a time, so I had heard, when it was peaceful. Sectors united, food and water were plentiful, and everyone contributed to each other’s wellbeing. When I was born, this way of life was crumbling. Recently under new leadership, the Aboresian sector began applying new sanctions. They cut off all trade with the Nydoellan and the Aroanian sectors, and stated that anyone caught associating with them would be sentenced to execution with no chance to appeal. A wall was built and anyone seen trying to cross in either direction was to be shot on sight.

With the trade routes gone, food grew scarce in all sectors. War broke out everywhere. Originally the Nydoellan and Aroanian sectors remained united against the Aboresian tyranny. Eventually supplies grew too scarce, and Nydollea had to cut ties with Aroania in order to be able to sustain their own community. It was every sector for themselves, and the land was united no more. Nydollea tried to remain neutral, but they now had enemies everywhere and war could not be avoided.

Ida and Jon Romanov were the leaders of the Nydollean army and the entire sector. They were in charge of the toughest of calls, and because of this they had a high price on their heads and a lot of enemies. When Nydollea closed the gates to the outside, Ida and Jon were now the most wanted people in the land.

I knew them as mom and dad.

I closed my eyes and exhaled deeply before hoisting my bundle of firewood and the days catch of rabbits over my shoulder. I began to retrace my tracks from my sanctuary back to my village. I walked slowly, mostly meandered through the trees. The crunch of the snow under my boots was the only thing that I could hear in the woods, along with the occasional scurry of a creature trying to retreat to safety. There was always such a peaceful feeling in the forest that came with the stillness. Here, there was no war. Here, I wasn’t Magdalena Romonov, next leader of Nydollean and the only daughter of Ida and Jon. I was just Magda, 19 year old girl.

As I approached the village, the calm peace in the air tensed and began to feel suffocating. Something was not right. I walked with a little more urgency. The first thing I noticed as I approached the edge of the wood was the black tendrils of smoke curling their way into the gray sky. That was when I heard the screaming. I dropped my goods and approached the edge of the woods, crouching. I unsheathed my hunting dagger, but remained hidden.

The last thing I wanted was to run in and try to play hero just to get captured. “Always stay out of sight, Magda. Stay safe and trust us to do the rest. You’ll know if you’re really needed, but you must worry about your survival. If something happens to us, you’re the heir. Without you, the community falls apart.” I could hear my father’s stern voice in the back of my head.

I found good cover behind a cluster of shrubs. I could still see the gate rising right in front of me. I saw two soldiers standing at the entrance, their backs turned to me watching the village. They were adorned in royal green coats; Aboresian. I slowed my breath so there was minimal sounds and condensation and adjusted my crouch so that my ankles wouldn’t ache. I had a feeling I would be here for a while. Another soldier approached the gate and addressed the other two.

“I think we’ve got all who didn’t manage to escape during the raid. There’s a patrol that’ll go into the woods to see if they can track down any others.”

One nodded with a grunt in response. My breath caught.

“What about—ah. Good, mission accomplished then.” I heard more footsteps approaching.

“You’re not going to get away with this, you bastards!” My heart stopped.

“Oh now, is that any way for a lady to talk?” The dirty soldier cupped my mother’s chin.

“You get your hands off of her!” My father yelled as my mom spit in the soldiers face. The back of his hand met the side of her face with such force she fell to the ground. The soldier grabbed her hair and pulled her to her knees. My mother didn’t make a sound, but spit and the snow turned red. Another soldier kicked my father behind his knees and he fell to the ground next to mother. I couldn’t find my breath.

“Ida. Jon. This can all be avoided, all of this horrible trauma spared, if you just do as we ask.” The general, Levi Norring, crouched in front of my parents, looking back and forth between then expectantly.

“Irreversible trauma has already been done. How can you expect anything of our compliance when you’ve burned our village and slaughtered at least half of our people?” My father spat viciously. My hand covered my mouth. Half of the village?

Levi clicked his tongue. “Now, now Jon. You know I could do worse. Your darling Ida is still here breathing next to you. If you’d like to keep it that way, I suggest you do as I ask.”

“You obviously don’t understand the bonds of family.” My mother’s voice was strong and unwavering.

“Well, I know the bonds a child has with her parents. I know that you’re in no position to refuse, or those bonds will be severed. If you tells us where dear, darling Magdalena is hiding now, she will remain unharmed and so will you. We’ll just take little Magdalena back with us, and leave you to rebuild your city in peace… for the time being.”

My father laughed. One of the guards connected the hit of his sword with the back of his head, my father cursed under his breath.

“Jon, Jon, Jon. I suppose we can do this the hard way. Liam?” One of the guards lunged forward. I saw a flash of sliver and then there was a blade at my mother’s throat. Liam jerked her head back by her hair and pressed the blade in slightly. I was shaking all over. My father tensed.

“Jon, here are the options. You can tell us where Magdalena is, or you can watch your wife die now in front of you. Then, if you still refuse, Magdalena will become an orphan before you can even blink. No one wants their daughter to become an orphan now, do they?” Liam pressed the blade harder and I saw a speck of red emerge on the porcelain throat.

“Don’t you dare, Jon.” My mother half choked out through clenched teeth. I could tell my father was desperate as he searched the snow for answers. “Jon.” My mother’s voice sounded afraid for the first time. “I will always love you.”

The sound pierced the air and time slowed. She choked and gurgled as red spurted from her throat like a fountain. Liam stood and placed a boot firmly on her back, then nudged her while he cleaned his ruby blade on his handkerchief. Time stopped all together as her face hit the snow, red pooling in the pure white all around as her raven hair splayed around her open eyes.

I head the end of my father’s scream and then everything was in motion again. He had broken free of his restraint and was shoving men as hard as he could. I gripped the hilt of my dagger so tight I couldn’t feel anything anymore. By the time I tore my eyes away from the lifeless form with a crown of ruby, one green coat was lying on the ground in a grotesque position. I could only hear my heart beat. My father had taken out three guards and was turning on Levi when the rest of the raid party joined. They managed to wrestle him to the ground.

It was just another flash of sliver and a grunt from Levi. Then the party stood and looked down. My father was still, the hilt of a dagger protruding from his temple, red beginning to pour down the side of his face, eyes fixed open and locked on my mothers.

I couldn’t hear anything. Not my breathing, not my heart beat. I couldn’t feel the cold of the snow. I couldn’t feel the cold hilt of my dagger. I couldn’t stop the scream before it erupted. I saw four pairs of eyes fix on me in slow motion. I saw the command roll of Levi’s lips, and saw the finger point in my direction. The men moved in slow motion towards me.

Then everything was in motion and the trees blurred past, tears freezing on my face as I ran with all of my power, instinct taking control where reason had failed.

Tree branches whipped my cheeks, slicing the skin as I pushed myself to run as fast as I could. I made a couple of turns at random, hoping to lose the guards. I didn’t know how long I had been running when it occurred to me that they would be able to follow my tracks like a map. I took a sharp left and slowed my pace. I needed to get to the river so that they wouldn’t have footprints to follow.

I stopped for a moment, placing my hands on my knees and hanging my head down, panting and willing the fire in my chest to ease. I heaved and felt the contents of my stomach rush up, filling my mouth with the acidic taste of bile. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and began running again. I couldn’t allow any more time for them to catch up when I didn’t even know how much distance was between us.

I finally reached the river and stepped in without thinking. The water was cold enough that I could feel its icy fingers through my boots. I began heading up river, thinking that my search party would probably head the opposite direction. I slowed my pace a little, I had to due to the water. I figured I could afford to. I had a feeling I had put enough distance between us.

I continued upstream for I didn’t know how long. The sun began setting and I thought I could now rest. There had been no sign of the soldiers since I had met the river. The water was to my waist now, and I had grown so cold I couldn’t feel anything. I waded to the edge of the river and trudged out. I could instantly feel the water on my clothing turning to ice.

Once out of the water, my body began feeling hot and a wave of nausea hit me. I felt hotter and hotter, and my hands began shaking. My whole body was weak and I collapsed to my knees. I willed myself to breath as darkness overcame my vision. Struggling, I laid back on the snow. I could feel the world spinning and the sounds of the river turned into a ringing in my ears.

I woke with a start, as if I were having a dream where I had been falling. I felt very disoriented and dizzy. My limbs felt as if they had been filled with lead and I felt like my blood had been replaced with the icy water from the river. I opened my eyes and saw a fire crackling next to me. I was wrapped in a blanket. I didn’t move as I willed the memories to come back to me. They slowly did. The woods, the smoke, the screaming, the pool of red against the white snow. The running. I had fainted. I remembered that now. So where was I now, and how was this fire made?  
 I heard footsteps crunching in the snow behind me and I tensed up. I slowly pulled my dagger from its holster on my hip. I moved as slowly as I could and shallowed my breathing so that I seemed to be sleeping still. The person in question made his way over to the fire in knelt next to it in front of me, setting a bundle of wood in the snow at his side. He began poking at the fire with a long stick. I could tell his shoulders were broad, and definitely those of a male. Gripping my dagger tighter, I forced my muscles to cooperate. I realized I was too weak to get to my feet, so I reached out and balled the back of his coat in my fist and yanked hard. He fell back onto me and I pressed the dagger to his throat.

“Who are you.” I half growled through clenched teeth, more with effort than intimidation. The man held both hands up in innocence.

“Woah woah woah! Calm down! It’s alright! I’m not here to hurt you.” He sounded scared.

“Don’t make me repeat myself.” I stated firmly.

“Okay! No need for such hostility. My name is Harrison Heathfordshire. I’m a hunter. I was fishing when I came across you by the river. You were unconscious and your clothes were frozen and your lips were blue. I thought you were dead. When I felt your pulse, I brought you here and set up camp and that’s all.”

“How long was I unconsicious? Were you followed?”

“What? No. I wasn’t followed. Why would I be? Look, this really isn’t necessary—“ I pushed the dagger a little closer to his throat.

“How long was I unconscious?”

“I don’t know by the time I found you. A couple of hours maybe? I found you two days ago. You really can let me go. If I meant hostility, I could have acted upon it thousands of times by now.” I hesitated for a moment, but decided he had a point and let him go. He rubbed at his throat.

I felt prickling head encroaching again and a small moan escaped. “Okay, okay. Easy now, killer. Lay back. You’re still too weak to exert yourself like that.” Harrison eased me back into the pillow and tucked the blanket in closer.

“You’re sure you weren’t followed?” I panted out through clenched teeth as my vision went black around the edges.

“Take deep breaths. I’m sure. Focus only on breathing.” I closed my eyes and listened. In a few breaths I felt the buzzing in my head subside and the heat died down. I opened my eyes again to see Harrison’s concerned face. “You better eat.” He helped me sit up and tucked the pillow behind me so I could lean against it and a tree. He handed me a hunk of what I recognized as cooked rabbit and I began eating. Only once the food entered my mouth did I realize how hungry I had been. Ravenous, really. Harrison smiled and turned by to his fire, continuing to stoke it.

Once he had gotten the fire to a satisfactory size, and I could feel the warmth envelop me, he sat across the fire with his own hunk of rabbit. “I would offer you more, I’m sure you’re hungry. But if you eat too much too fast, it’ll just come back up.” I waved a hand. I knew this already.

“Thank you for your hospitality.” I was annoyed with how weak my voice sounded. “I’ll only stay until my strength is back. I’ve used enough of your resources already.”

He chuckled a little. “How about we just focus on getting your strength back first. It should only be a few hours, maybe a day at the most, before you begin feeling better.” He wiped his fingers on his pants and stood. “Here, let me help you lay back down.”

“No.” I said, shaking my head. “It feels good to sit up. To be awake. My head is starting to feel less cloudy.” He nodded and sat back, tossing me another hunk of rabbit. Although I wanted to swallow it whole, I ate it slowly. Mindful of throwing it up. “So,” I said once I had finished. “Who are you, Harrison Heathforshire? You look… Aronian?”

He smiled and looked at the fire. “I am. Well... I was.”

“Was?” His eyes met mine for a second before returning to the fire.

“My family… was murdered by someone in our village. I knew who and I was young. So I got revenge. I was due to be hung, when a friend helped me escape. They didn’t come looking because everyone knew the story and knew the reasoning. They were going to hang me out of procedure, a formality. I’m sure you know of the laws.”

“I do. Which is why I know he would have swung for his crime. So why did you not tell, if you knew who was responsible?”

“As I said, I was young. 16 at the time. I couldn’t control my temper, and I wasn’t very logical. I wanted his blood for myself.”

“Why are you being so honest with me, a stranger?”

His eyes met mine. They were emerald, and the orange flames of the fire made them glow as they danced in them. “I don’t know. I’m not ashamed, and I guess I feel as though I can trust you.” We were quiet for a moment. I couldn’t make my eyes break the gaze. His finally did, and I felt as though I had been released from a spell. “What about you? You must have a story if you’re worried about being followed.”

What was I supposed to say? I didn’t feel the same trust that he did, and I knew I couldn’t tell the truth. Not to him or anyone. It was just easier if Magdalena Romanov just disappeared entirely. I cleared my throat and looked at the fire, as if the answers would be glowing in the coals.

“My name is Juliet Frank. I am escaped from the Aboresian sector. They were doing a slave raid and my village was chosen. I managed to escape, but I was followed by some guards. My family was taken, but I knew they would want me to live.” My voice caught in my throat at the mention of my parents. Silence fell between us as the darkness grew deeper around us.

“What was your plan? You know that there is nothing out here.”

“I do. But I was hoping to make it to Aronia and seek solace.” His face grew hard at my mention of Aronia. “What about you? You said your escape was when you’re 16? How old are you now?”

“I’m 23.”

“How have you made it so long? Surely you found solace somewhere.”

He chuckled. “The rebels.”

I froze. “I’m sorry? Did you just-”

“Yes. The rebels. I found their camp while wandering and told them my story. They took me in. First I stumbled upon a group of crouchers. I made it with them for a couple of years. Then they were taken when we stumbled upon a soldier camp. I’ve been with the rebels for a couple of months now.”

“But… the rebels aren’t supposed to exist.”

“I know. They’re merely a breath of rumor, but I assure you they’re alive as ever. They’re making plans too.”

“Plans?”

“They long to take down Aronia.” My pulse quickened.

“They’ve never done anything though.”

“No. Not yet, but they have great plans. They’re simply waiting to have the right amount of people. They’re small in number now, and lack training. But their spirit is strong.” He smiled a little, and I thought I saw something dark in it, but just like that it was gone. His eyes met mine again. “You won’t find solace in Aronia. They don’t take in strays. Everyone knows that. They only have enough to provide for themselves. But you can find solace with the rebels, as I have. They happily take in anyone needs security.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I feel as though my journey is one I have to do alone.”

He flat out laughed at this. “I’m sorry, Juliet. But these woods are crawling with soldiers whose only order is to kill or capture everyone they meet. Whatever it is you need to do, doing it alone is a death wish.” I knew he was right. My jaw set in defeat and he noticed. “It’s settled then. We can see how you are in the morning, and then we can decide when to head out. The camp is located two days to the east.”

I knew he was right and that I couldn’t go alone. I didn’t fully trust this man yet, but perhaps I could find help among the rebels. Anyone with the interest in defeating Aronia could prove to be a useful alliance. And, he had a point when he said if he had ill intentions he would have carried them out. At the very least, he could help me by providing protection.

“We should rest so you can get your strength up for the journey.” I nodded and laid down, I had already begun to feel more myself. He followed my lead. I watched the flames until my eyelids grew heavy and closed of their own will.

Sometime as the sky was turning pale with dawn I stirred. My eyes opened to see Harrison writing on a piece of parchment. He finished and folded the paper in thirds, as if it were a letter, and then began coaxing the fire again. I rolled over and fell back asleep, hearing his footsteps retreat into the forest.

I woke again to him returning. It must have been sometime later, as the sun was up now. I eyed him skeptically as he dropped a bundle of fresh wood and two rabbits. We cooked the rabbits in silence and once they were ingested, he spoke.

“How are you feeling today?”

I began to stand in response. “Strong and my head is clear. I think I can make it fine.”

He smiled, totally thrilled at my response, and began packing up the camp. “Right, well we can take it slow for a while to make sure your strength will hold. We don’t want to wear you out right away. The sooner we make it to the camp, the better.”

I nodded in response and began to extinguish the fire. Probably a half an hour passed and we were on our way east.

“You said your family was take in a slave raid? In Aboresia?”

I nodded.

“I hadn’t realized that they were making slaves of their own people.” He cast a sidelong glance towards me.

“Well, does it surprise you? They are the most ruthless sector.” I couldn’t help the hate that escaped with my words.

“Hm. I suppose that’s true.”

“Why did you say I wouldn’t find solace in Aronia? They’ve always been known to be a kind people.”

“Kind, yes. Selfish, yes. They can only provide for those within their walls, and though they would like to, they can’t let anyone in without the suffering of their own. It’s interesting, how you guessed Aronian by my looks alone. I must not have as keen of an eye.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I would have sworn you were Nydollean.” My steps faltered and he caught me by the elbow. “Are you alright?”

Our eyes met, and something was strange in his. Just as last night, though, it was gone as soon as I noticed. My paranoia was getting the best of me. “Fine. I just stepped wrong on a rock.” He let go and we continued on our path in silence.

We walked in silence for a few hours until we sat for dinner and to make camp for the night. Harrison built a fire as I retrieved the bedding and food. He expertly skinned and gutted his catch of fish and had placed it in a pan over the fire.

“Why would you say I was Nydollean?” I asked, watching the fish sizzle.

“I only meant you were far too beautiful to be Aboresian, and I knew you couldn’t have been Aronian, so that only left Nydollea.” He smiled and I felt my heart in my throat.

“I see.” I looked down, unable to keep the smile from showing through,

“I mean that, Juliet. I don’t think I’ve ever laid eyes on someone so beautiful.”

“Oh, stop now,” I threw a chunk of snow at him and he laughed as it his his arm. “It isn’t polite to flatter someone you don’t even know.

“Well, I did save your life. I think I deserve the pleasure.”

“That’s fair.” Our eyes met again and I smiled. He retrieved the fish from the fire, placing them on two plates and bringing mine to me, sitting on my bedding with me.

“You know, you’re the only person who hasn’t thought differently of me after I voiced my story.” He said, not meeting my eyes.

“Well, we’re both fugitives. And, had it been my family…” I trailed off as images of their cold faces filled my mind. I cleared my throat. “I would have done the same.” I meet his eyes for a fleeting moment before diverting my gaze.

“You miss them?”

“Very much.” My voice shook slightly.

Harrison placed an arm around me comfortingly. “Well, you’ve been through a lot. But you’re not alone now. And you don’t have to face any of it alone.”

“Thank you.” I whispered as a silent tear escaped down my cheek. Harrison brushed it away without saying anything and we fell into silence again.

I awoke the next morning with my head on Harrison’s shoulder, his arm still around me. Seeing his face, peaceful and handsome with sleep, I smiled to myself. His dusty blonde hair was falling across his forehead, resting slightly on his eyelids. I gently pulled myself from his embrace and stood. He looked innocent and vulnerable. I shook my head and found the pail that I knew he had with him and went to the river.

When I returned to the camp and situated the bucket of water over the fire, Harrison stirred.

“Well, good morning beautiful.” He mumbled. “You should wear your hair like that more.” I had taken it out of its braid and it was falling down my back. I smiled, feeling the heat creep into my cheeks. He must have noticed this, because he chuckled before stretching and rousing himself to gather breakfast. Today it was a handful of berries and two apples each. The water was steaming, and I splashed some on my face and over my neck. Drying myself with a cloth, I sat back and bit into my apple.

Harrison met my gaze and looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry if I overstepped my boundaries by staying with you last night. You fell asleep and just looked so peaceful I couldn’t bring myself to disturb you.”

I shook my head in response and I swallowed my mouthful of berries. “It’s fine. Combined body heat is never a bad thing.” He smiled at this and began packing the camp again.

“We should reach the camp by sundown tonight. Then we should have a proper meal and proper mattresses.” I smiled at the thought of that. It was truly the most glorious I could imagine at that moment.

We began walking again with a little more haste now that we were sure I could manage without collapsing. We had been silent for probably an hour when Harrison cleared his throat.

“I assume you’ve heard about Nydollea.” His voice didn’t sound as sad as you would imagine.

“Um. Yeah. I have.” I looked at my feet.

“I heard there were no survivors.” He cast me a sidelong glance as if to gauge my reaction. I felt my face harden as I suppressed any sign of emotion. I wasn’t from there anymore. The time to grieve was when I was alone.

“Pity.” I said lifting my head and looking straight ahead, only allowing a hint of sympathy creep through.

“I can’t imagine what it must have been like.” Suddenly his voice was trembling with anger. “Strangers just storming in and destroying everything in their path. An entire sector, destroyed. For what? I heard Ida and Jon were the last to die… I imagine they didn’t mind. I wouldn’t even have the will to carry on. I heard a rumor that their daughter escaped. Now the king is scouring the land for her. I suppose he won’t rest until she’s found. I can’t imagine what he would want from her though.” He spit in the snow at his feet as it passed.

“You seem to care a lot for someone who didn’t even know them.” I kept my voice steady.

“They’re still people. Mothers, fathers. Children.” He trailed off with a shake of his head and we fell into a tense silence. Neither of us wanting to break it, we remained that way until we saw the tents pop up in the distance.

“That’ll be the camp.” Harrison quickened his pace as he spoke the words, and I matched them. We reached the camp in twenty more minutes, and I arrived out of breath from jogging to match Harrison’s long strides. People began to gather around us.

“Margie.” Harrison strode up to a small, elderly lady. “This is Juliet. She needs protection and shelter.”

“Hello, child.” Margie’s voice was frail and strong at the same time, like wind chimes. She grasped my hand. “What’s your story? I see pain in your eyes. What have you gone through that brought you here?”

“She-” Harrison was silenced with a raise of Margie’s hand, her almost clear grey eyes never left mine.

“I escaped Aboresia.” A hush fell over the gathered crowd. “My family was being taken for slaves. They hid me, and I managed to escape. I was followed and ran for… god only knows how long. I finally evaded the party of soldiers, but I fainted. From exhaustion, I assume. That’s when Harrison found me. He saved my life.” I cast him a side long glace. He smirked and looked at his shoes. “I was planning to seek solace in Aronia, and then Harrison told me about you.”

Margie squeezed my hand reassuringly. “All strays are welcome here.”

“Margie.” A small, slight but strong figure was pushing her way to the front of the curious crowd. Margie rolled her eyes slightly. A shock of red hair, and pail freckled skin emerged. “I don’t think that’s smart.”

“No, Veronica? Pray tell, why.”

“Well, mister. Handsome over there has only been here for a few months, and we STILL haven’t decided if her trust him.” Harrison glared at the girl who was shoving an accusing finger at him. “And now, he just shows up with some chick. How do we know we can trust her? They could be in on something together, and they would be more powerful together. It’s pretty weird that he goes on a hunt, disappears for longer than needed, and then shows up with her.”

“Veronica, we’ve decided we can trust Harrison. It’s you that hasn’t. We have always been a community that offers help. We live by the codes and morals of the old world, and so long as I’m in charger everyone will be welcome unless they prove undeserving.”

“But-” Veronica was silenced by a stern look from Margie. She mumbled something and crossed her arms over her chest, shooting me a glare.

“You’re welcome here, Juliet. Let me show you your tent. I’m sure you’re exhausted.” Margie took my by the hand again and led me to a small tent. “You rest now.” I smiled gratefully, and with a squeeze of my hand she turned and left.

The tent had a bed, and some other furniture that I didn’t focus on. I collapsed onto the soft bit of heaven and pulled the heavy quilt up to my chin. I closed my eyes, and fell into a deep sleep in seconds.

Chapter Two

I didn’t know how long I had slept, but the sun was beginning to go down when I rose, I emerged from my warm tent to see the sky painted with pastel orange and pink. The air was crisp and the camp was alive. I walked towards the edge of the camp, not meeting the skeptical glares that followed me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a shock of red. I felt her glare burn a hole into my back and I walked into the tree line.

I walked for a few minutes until I found a spot that looked like it hadn’t been touched by humans yet. Closing my eyes, I sat and breathed in the familiar scent of safety. When I opened them again, I saw a movement in the trees. I whipped my head, my hand instinctively going to the dagger at my waist, only to see a lone deer. It looked young, and lost as it foraged for food. It didn’t look old enough to be without its parents yet.

That thought sent a wave of grief tumbling through me. Images of my parents flooded my vision. Their smiles, their laughs, my mom stroking my hair. Them dancing together in the living room while I watched from the stairwell. Their kisses and kind words. Their immense care for the village and everyone in it. Their inner burn to do what was right. Their faces in the snow, turning it deep red too quickly. My father’s broken hearted scream as my mother’s body fell limp next to him. My mother’s plea through gritted teeth. “Don’t you dare, Jon.” Don’t you dare give me up. Don’t tell them where to find me. Even in her last moments, protecting me was her only though. And then, her fierce final words “I will always love you.” She didn’t even sound terrified, though I knew she must have been. That was how my parents were. The moment that my dad screamed was one of the few times I had seen his collected composure fail him.

It was probably for the better. If they had lived, they would have to face that their village had not. Harrison’s words rang through my head *no survivors.* How had this happened? And for what, to find me? How was I so important, that they killed the entire sector and my parents for not giving up my location? I knew then that their deaths, my parents, my friends, the elderly, and the children were all on my shoulders alone. If I hadn’t gone to the forest and delayed myself for so long, the soldiers could have taken me and maybe everyone would still be alive. Why didn’t my parents just give me up? They could have just gotten me later. Saved me, and saved everyone.

My head fell into my hands and the sobs that came shook me to my core. They were all gone because of me. I saw my parents cold, lifeless bodies again in my mind and heard my dad’s screams along with my own. I would never see them again. Through my life, death had never been a stranger. I had known loss. My parents being the leaders, we grieved loss of every soldier or citizen who died of injury or illness. My grandparents had passed when I was about 7. I had lost a childhood friend when I was 12. All of those losses, all of those times that I felt the pangs of tragedy hit my heart, combined could not compare to what I was feeling at this moment. This grief penetrated past my heart and shook my soul.

I didn’t know how long I cried. It had grown pitch black and cold. Once the pain ebbed, I felt a hollow nothing. I sat in the snow, feeling my back supported by the solid strength of a tree, and felt numb.

Finally, I got up and turned to make my way back to camp when I saw a figure heading towards me. The figure was moving with obvious intent right towards me. I pressed myself to the side of the tree and when the figure came close enough I grabbed him and pinned him against the tree right where I had been standing moments before. He let out a surprised scream and a grunt as his body hit the tree.

“Woah! It’s okay! It’s okay, I’m not here to hurt you. I’m from the camp!”

I eased off a little. “What are you doing out here?”

“I could ask you the same. I saw you head out here hours ago and never saw you come back. I followed your tracks. I just wanted to make sure you were alright.” I could make out some of his features in the dark. Long, sharp nose and eyes widened in innocence. I let him go and he rubbed his chest defensively. “I’m Jonas. You’re… Juliet, right?” Jonas extended a hand towards me.

“Uh, yeah.” I grasped his hand. “I was just heading back, so thanks for checking on me.” I brushed past him and started walking to the camp.

“Well, wait. We’re both going to the same place. We can walk together.”

“I don’t need protecting.”

“Okay well sorry then. You were just gone for like four hours.”

“How do you know that? Watching me?”

“I watch everyone.” He paused. “Okay, that sounded weird. I just mean it’s my job. I help watch the perimeter. Make sure there’s no trouble.” He sounded proud.

“Hm.” Was all I could manage in response. We walked back to the camp in silence. There was a fire going strong when we approached the edge of camp, and it looked like everyone had retreated to their tents against the cold.

“Uh.” Jonas started uneasily as I walked past the fire towards my tent. I stopped and turned around. By the glow of the fire, I could make out the rest of his features clearly. He was tall and slim, and had a long sharp nose as I had seen. His hair was shaggy and tousled. His alabaster skin was soft against the light of the fire, and I could tell his eye were brown because of how dark the night made them. I looked him up and down. He was tall and slim, but all muscle. He looked like the soldiers from Nydollea. Something about his face felt too familiar. He cleared his throat. “Margie left some food here for you when she heard you were awake, if you’re hungry or whatever.”

“Oh. Yeah okay, I should probably eat.” My stomach rumbled in agreement. I sat on one of the logs by the fire and took my plate from Jonas with a smile of gratitude.

“Um, I could like… stay. If you want company…” He trailed off as our eyes locked. He ran a hand through his hair awkwardly and I patted the log next to me. He seemed to be one of the few people who didn’t suspect me of something. We sat in an awkward silence for a while I ate, both staring into the fire.

That was when I was hit with flashbacks. A little boy, with jet black hair, quietly observing the happenings around him. Shy and withdrawn, he had hardly any friends and no one really noticed when he was around. He was an observer, not a participant. Then, the same boy grown up, being sworn into the army. The Nydollean army. He had dark eyes and alabaster skin…

I inhaled sharply and looked at the boy next to be. Could it be? Could he possibly be from my village? From my army? I heard Harrison’s voice in my head again *there were no survivors.* So it couldn’t be possible then. Jonas’s eyes met mine for a moment, and in that moment I saw my home. I looked away quickly and diverted my attention to the flames again. How could I believe Harrison? How could he even know so much information about Nydollea so soon? Things I hadn’t even known yet. There was no way word had spread so fast… But how could this boy be from home and not recognize me? My face was known just as well as my parent’s in out sector. I cast another sidelong look at Jonas. His face looked as though he were just as preoccupied with his thoughts as I was. I felt as though I knew nothing, and I never would again. I was doomed to a life of uncertainty.

Tears began to try to fight their way to the surface, and I stood abruptly. “I’m going to bed.” I turned and retreated to my tent before Jonas could say any more, though I heard him mumble something under his breath.

Bursting through my tent, I halted and let out a small noise of surprise. Harrison was there, sitting in the arm chair that I hadn’t notice before. “What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you.”  
 “Clearly.” I eyed him carefully, I felt my brows knit together in suspicion. “Why are you in my tent though? How long have you even been in here?”

“Oh just a couple of minutes.”

“That’s not possible. I was just sitting out at the fire for a least a half an hour. I would have seen you come in here if it were just a couple of minutes ago.”

Harrison raised his hands in surrender and smiled widely. “Alright, alright. You caught me. Margie told me you went into the forest. I wanted to check on you and see how you were feeling, but she didn’t want me to go after you. So after supper I came in here to wait so I wouldn’t miss you before you went to sleep.” The knot in my stomach didn’t loosen.

“Okay well you found me. I’m fine. You can go now, I’m tired.” He stared at me with a blank look on his face, but didn’t make any effort to move. “Seriously. Thanks for the concern, but I just want to rest.”

“Okay.” He stood slowly. “I was just hoping we could get to know each other better…” He trailed off as he closed the distance between us. I stepped to the side so that we had now switched positions. “What’s the matter? You don’t have to be afraid of me. Like I said, if I meant you harm it would have happened already.”

“Yeah, I know that. I’m not afraid of you. Trust me. I just… need some space right now. I need to work through some things on my own before I decide who I can trust, and where I should go.”

“Go? You aren’t going anywhere.” I met his eyes as he said this. There was something hard behind the deep emerald color. Something, angry. As before, it flashed and was gone. “I mean, why would you? You’re safe here. It’s not safe out there alone.”

“Yeah… well like I said, I just need my rest right now.” He watched me for a moment more before sighing in defeat.

“Alright. Well if you need someone to talk to, you know where to find me. Night.” His form disappeared through the tent door and I eased myself onto the bed, pulling the heavy quilt up over my face and closing my eyes. I willed all thoughts and uneasiness away and waited for sleep to take me somewhere peaceful.

The next couple of days were uneventful. I walked around alone, a hollowed shell feeling nothing but numb. I kept to myself and ignored the prying looks and hushed whispers. I avoided Harrison and Jonas, although I caught them watching me on occasion. Harrison looked as if he was studying me, and Jonas looked pained as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. I wondered what I must look like to them. Margie also studied me with a soft, kind expression on her worn face. Every time I met her eyes, I felt as if she knew more than anyone thought she did.

It was my fourth day in the camp when the attacks set in. I was in the forest again, looking for any sort of edible berries this time. It was a cold and cloudy day, with a slight breeze that held the promise of a forthcoming storm. The crisp smell of snow wrapped around me as the breeze tickled my hair. I came around into a small clearing, and froze. The breeze picked up and it carried the sound of laughter towards me. Laughter so familiar that it pained me. High and happy, as if she had not a care in the world. A laugh so contagious, it couldn’t help but infect everyone around. My mother’s laugh. I shook my head, knowing that this wasn’t possible. Then I heard it again with the next breeze. I started walking slowly in the direction from which I thought the sound had come, all my senses heightened as I listened. A stronger wind came and brought with it a heart shattering scream of a man who had just lost his wife. I wanted to run, but I couldn’t make my feet move. Every new gust of wind brought with it a new sound, or the smell of smoke and death and blood. I felt a sob burst through me as the wind brought my mother’s laugh to my ears again, and I sank to my knees. I curled up, trying to force myself into a ball and covering my ears, willing the noises to stop.

“Juliet?” The voice was quiet and distant.

My eyes flew open “Mom?”

“Juliet, what are you doing?” I sat up, looking around wildly. The voice had been hers, I was sure of it.

Looking up, I saw her face. Clear as the sunshine. Porcelain skin, full lips, and eyes so blue it was like looking into the clearest part of the ocean. She smiled and tilted her head, causing her raven black hair to spill over her shoulder in delicate waves. That was when I felt hands on my shoulders. “Mom.” I whispered.

With a sharp jolt, my vision came into focus and I saw a shock of red where moments ago my mother had been. “Juliet look at me.” I felt another sharp shake, and that was when the sobs came again.

“She was here. She was just here again.” I whispered through my sobs.

Veronica looked perplexed and worried, and I think for the first time not suspicious. I felt her pull me to my feet, and instincts must have taken over and allowed me to walk. The sobs were still ripping through me and Veronica had to support me so I wouldn’t collapse. I felt her lay me down, and felt the weight of something being pulled over my body, and then everything went dark and there was a ringing in my ears, and my body felt prickly and hot, and then nothing.

My eyes flew open and I felt a wave of panic wash over me. I flung myself up, but was instantly eased back into the bed.

“Hush now, it’s alright child. You’re safe.” Margie’s hands, soft as butterfly wings but with the authority of a lion, pushed my shoulders back until I was lying down again.

“What happened? Where am I?” My tongue felt dry and heavy in my mouth, making it hard to push the words out.

“You… well you had what I can only describe as a grief induced panic attack. Veronica found you in the woods, lying in the snow crying for you mother. Once she got you back here, you fell unconscious. She came and got me and we’ve watched you for about an hour. How are you feeling?” The memories slowly came back to me with her voice, and my head felt like it had been split in two.

“My head hurts terribly.”

“Yes. Well that will subside soon. Here’s a cool cloth. Lie that across your forehead and rest. You’re safe here, don’t you worry yourself at all, Magdalena.”

My heart skipped a beat and I felt my eyes grow wide with shock. Before I could recover enough to respond, Margie glided out of the tent and Veronica came in, hauling a bucket of steaming water. She looked at me from the doorway, shifting her weight uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“Hey…”

“Veronica. Thank you for your kindness. I’ll get out of your bed and go to my own.” I said, trying once again to sit up. She was pushing me back before I had even noticed that she had moved.

“No, no, no. It’s okay. You just rest. We set up a cot for me that I can use until you’re better. It should only be a couple of hours. That’s how it always was for me.” Her mouth snapped shut and he face flushed with embarrassment. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to say that out loud.”

“That’s alright. What do you mean, how it was for you?”

She sighed and ran a hand through her hair before sitting in her armchair facing me. She watched me for a couple of minutes as if trying to decide whether or not she could tell me. She shrugged her shoulders and drew in a breath,

“I lost my family too.” She began, not meeting my eyes. “I came here about a year ago. One of the patrol boys found me wandering nearby, confused and delirious. Looking for my parents, just like you. Margie took me in and helped me. The attacks happened every so often, and sometimes they still do. I’ve learned how to control them before they get so bad. You saw her right?”

“Saw who?” My voice was hoarse.

“Your mom. Right in front of you, touching you, smiling. It was like she was right there, but you knew that was impossible…” She trailed off and sat in silence, staring straight ahead. With a small shake of her head, she regained her composure.

“Anyways, you and I have more in common than I thought. But I have to be honest with you here, I don’t trust Harrison as far as I can throw him. Because of that, I can’t trust you fully… yet.”  
 I nodded. “I understand how it must look, but…”

“It’s okay, Juliet. You don’t have to explain yourself. I know you’re not together, and like I said. Yet. I’ll trust you in time.” She smiled a small smile and squeezed my hand gently, standing and leaving the tent as briskly as she had entered.

I closed my eyes and exhaled deeply, begging my head to stop throbbing, if only for a second. I heard the tent doors flap open, but I didn’t open my eyes. I didn’t want to talk anymore. I just wanted to lie still and see nothing but darkness.

I must have fallen asleep at some point, because I woke up to the camp being dark and Veronica’s sleeping figure on the cot that had been set up in the corner. My head no longer ached and my limbs no longer felt like weights. I sat slowly and hung my feet over the bed. No dizziness, so that was a good sign. My stomach grumbled and I pushed myself to my feet, slipping on my shoes and exiting the tent as soundlessly as I could. The fire was still going, and Jonas was sitting next to it. He sprang to his feet when he saw me.

“Juliet! You’re up.” He smiled a big smile that showed all of his teeth. “I tried to come see you… but you were sleeping. Uh, Margie left you a plate again.” He turned and picked up the plate, extending it to me.

“Thank you.” I said, taking it gently and sitting on one of the logs. Jonas sat next to me cautiously. We were silent again, but this time I could sense the uneasiness radiating off of Jonas. He had something he desperately wanted to say.

With a sharp inhale, he stated “My name is Jonas.”

“I know that.” I smiled.

“No, you’ve just… you’ve got to let me say this before I change my mind again. My name is Jonas Grant.” He turned to face me. Grant. That name was definitely familiar. I stopped eating and locked eyes with him. “And you’re Magdalena Romanov. Daughter of Ida and Jon, heir to the sector of Nydallea. I fought in their army. I’m not surprised that you don’t recognize me, I didn’t hold a high position or anything. I was just a soldier. But, I was there…”

“But, how? I heard… I heard that there were no survivors.” My voice was shaking as badly as my hands, and I clasped them together in my lap.

“As far as I know, I was the only one. I was knocked unconscious during the attack, and didn’t come to until well after. They must’ve thought me dead. Magdalena, you have to understand. I fought, I tried…” He trailed off. I could hear the pain and tears in his voice.

“How can I believe you? I only just met you.”

“I could see it in your eyes. You recognized me.”

“It’s going to take more than that.”

“I’ll speak the soldier’s oath.” I froze. The Nydollea soldier’s oath was one that no one but a soldier could know. It was spoken once at their inauguration, and then never again. He locked eyes with me and held my gaze. “Luro tibi gladium meum. Nydollea umbracculum diei magni ad honorem. Iuro ego vitam honrario munere populum meum iurare defendere religuis diebus meis. Hinc est, miles ero.” I whispered the last line with him.

“You can’t tell anyone you know me. Did you tell Margie?”

“I haven’t told anyone, and I won’t.”

“Margie knows. She… she called me Magdalena earlier. Jonas, I am so happy you made it out.”

He smiled and looked away from me. “I couldn’t believe it when I saw you… you realize that because of the oath, I’m sworn to protect you from all harm.”

I smiled at him, though he still wasn’t looking at me. Tears welled in my eyes. “How lucky I am, then.” I whispered. In all of the chaos and uncertainty, I had found a little piece of home to hold on to. We fell into an easy silence, warmed by the fire. The flames had died low, and we had not spoken another word, when I rose to go to my tent.

“Goodnight, Juliet.” Jonas smiled at me.

“Goodnight to you, Jonas.” I returned the smile and retreated to my bed.

Not a minute later, Jonas poked his head through the flaps.

“Juliet.” He whispered. I turned, slightly startled. “I have to tell you,” He started, coming fully into my tent. “Harrison is not to be trusted. I don’t know why… but I just have a very uneasy feeling. I have to urge you to be careful.”

I nodded. He smiled and left the tent again. What was it about Harrison that made people so uneasy? He had saved my life after all. I sighed and let my hair out of its braid, and flopped onto my bed. I felt a little lighter now than I had, though there was still so much to sort out before things were clear again.

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I had been at the camp for two and a half weeks before Harrison approached me. I had retreated to the forest, as I did incredibly often here. I liked being alone with my thoughts. Every day, I felt like I was getting a little stronger. I hadn’t even come close to accepting my parent’s death, but I was growing accustom to the pain and learning how to live despite the numbness. On one of my treks I stumbled upon a little babbling stream, and this had become my spot. The sound of the water trickling over the rocks in a hurry to join the river calmed me and helped me sort through my thoughts and worries.

I was sitting there, my head comfortably empty. I hadn’t noticed his footsteps until he cleared his throat behind me. I jumped and turned, hand flying to my heart when I saw Harrison standing there nervously.

“Jesus. You scared me half to death.” I laughed and he flashed me an easy smile.

“I’m glad it was only half. I don’t know how I would’ve responded if you just died.” The sound of our laughs intertwined. “Do you mind if I join you?”

I nodded and gestured to the spot next to me, welcoming him into my sanctuary.

“I couldn’t help but notice you go off on your own a lot. Is this where you come?”

“Yeah… it’s calming. I like being alone with my thoughts sometimes. And the forest has always given me a calming feeling.”

“I see. It is nice out here. Peaceful.”  
 “It helps me forget about what’s going on outside of the trees sometimes.”

“I’m sorry I intruded. I just… I wanted to talk. I wanted to give you your space, and I kept hoping you would be ready and come to me. But, I just…. I don’t know. I know what people say about me here. I know you’re getting close to Veronica and Jonas, and let’s face it, they aren’t my biggest fans. I couldn’t stand the thought of you walking around thinking something awful about me that wasn’t true. They don’t know me.”

I held my hand up to stop him. “It’s okay, Harrison. I don’t think anything bad of you. I’m not one to make snap judgments based on what other people think. I like to find out for myself. I’m sorry I’ve been avoidant, I just… I had somethings I needed to sort out for myself.”

“I know. I know how much you’ve been through.” He was quiet for a moment, contemplating his next words carefully. “I would like to know more. I understand though that you don’t want to just open up to a stranger.” He was sort of squinting while he concentrated on the water, as if what he was saying was very difficult. “I don’t like opening up to people. But, I would. I mean I will, if you want. I want to get to know each other. I don’t want to be just the guy who saved your life.”

“I’d like that.” He met my gaze, sight shock in his eyes. He thought I would shut him down. Against the snow, his eyes were the brightest green I had seen. His signature easy, cooked grin broke out and I had to look away so I didn’t look like a freak for staring.