

Cloud 9: Serus' Beginning

A.L. Mundt

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue	5
Two Years, Eight Months, and Four Days	11
Two Years, One Month, and Sixteen Days	21
Six Months and Twenty-Six Days	27
One Months and Eight Days	32
Five Hours	35
After	46

PROLOGUE

Dill pickle chips should have been an odd thing to see in the heavens.

The crinkle-crunch of the bag provided an amusing contrast to the swizzle of the eternal night sky, shiny chartreuse foil screaming “*family sized!*” into the abyss. But really, the chips were just another ordinary possibility in the gods’ kingdom, where there were no limitations, even on the human food they could procure from thin, oxygen-free air.

The girl eating the chips looked like she should have been cramming for her art history final, not leaning against the pristine marble walls of a castle. She was slender, slumping, hair dyed in the shade of a rooster’s crown. Her eyes were heavily framed in liquid-liner wings that looked like smiles, her jeans were shredded and a size too tight, and her sneakers had hearts doodled into the sides with Sharpie. She looked every bit deceptively human, and decades too early—down to the My Chemical Romance concert T-Shirt.

She looked up at the sound of celestial rustling. “Whoa, dude, what are you all dressed up for?”

The god before her looked down. *Way* down. He had to have been at least eight feet tall, feathery wings tightly pressed like a dress shirt across his back. A long robe dripped past his feet, and the hands poking from long sleeves were silver, painted in red and blue lines that felt like they should have been in a De Stijl piece.

He blinked, and knew when the girl met his eyes, she was seeing rolling azure marbles.

“I came from another appointment,” he said, a little sheepish. His voice came out eternal and booming, complete surround-sound, and he would have blushed if it were possible in this form.

“Stop talking like that and sit down,” the girl said. “Preferably normal-sized.” She shoved a chip in her mouth and talked through it. “I called you here because I have some news.”

The boy before her shrugged, and with the motion, shrugged off his god form, too. It was the only form mortals were ever allowed to see, but it came away as easily as face paint and stage props. He shucked his wings into shadow, shook out his arms until he felt flannel refurbish the thick canvas of his robe. Genuinely-necessary glasses poofed against the soft bridge of his nose.

His joints felt loose again, not the tightly-wound bundles of the skies, all strung-through with their show of power and untouchable poise. He felt much better. He hated his work uniform.

The girl didn’t even comment, utterly unfazed as the seat next to her was suddenly occupied by a hipster-looking kid in a beanie and Converse All Stars. He grabbed a chip, and salt prickled his tongue.

“So. Komi,” she said. He could see her more clearly now, Darkbi the Sender, at eye-level and with crumbs on her lap. They both liked the simplicity of the rumpled, red-haired college-kid look. They’d stick with it for a few decades until the humans caught up to it. “I got a new prophecy from the Higher-Ups today.”

Komi leaned forward, aware of how his voice skittered over the cold marble. “For something on Earth? Really?”

“Mhm.” Darkbi raked her bangs from her eyes. “And I don’t even have a Receiver right now, so it’s super weird. I basically just got told to leave some inscribed rock in an old ruins site. Underground. On an island. In *Canada*.” She said the word like one might say, “*withdrawal fee*,” or, “*sorry, there’s a fifteen-minute wait on the buffalo wings*.”

“That is weird. Even for the gods.”

There was a brief moment in which they both ate more chips, and Komi considered what sort of mortal might have the means to discover an underground prophecy. An explorer, like Magellan or Gertrude Bell? Did humans have explorers anymore?

Aloud, he asked, “Did they tell you why? Or, why *now*?”

Darkbi sighed. “Just to watch for some kid who’s about to be born two thousand miles away. What was it—Nightingale? In Detroit? You’re in on it, too.”

This startled Komi immensely. “Me? What—why?”

“They want you protecting this boy, making sure he survives until he gets to my magic Canada rock.” Darkbi propped her feet up on the spotless table. “They’ll be contacting you soon.”

Komi groaned with the helpless noise of a child whose mother had just informed them they were about to be picked up early from Susie’s birthday party. “You know I hate getting missions that make no goddamn sense. I should be making Messengers. Earth needs Messengers. Have you *seen* the state of this place?”

Darkbi’s head bobbed in a slow, sympathetic nod.

“What’s so important about this Nightingale boy, anyway? What’s the prophecy say?”

“Oh, lots about birds and darkness and stuff.” Darkbi didn’t look in the mood to bring out her sky-high god voice and indulge him. “Beats me. But the boy has to get there and read it.”

“Underground. On an island. In *Canada*.”

“You already said it doesn’t make any goddamn sense,” Darkbi reminded him, and then they were both laughing. The chip bag was empty, and she batted at it like a cat toy. The blue and yellow-green design reminded Komi of Earth as it rolled back and forth between the god’s fingers.

After a few moments, as though she understood a change in the stillness, a look of surprising sincerity replaced Darkbi’s humor. She cleared her throat, looking instantly more heavenly.

“Alright, listen up. I’ll tell you everything I know about this boy so far—his tragic beginning to his fiery end...”

~

1986 was not a kind year to Kammi and Maxell Nightingale, and the blue-tipped stick on the table was not helping in the slightest.

The young couple sat at their red-cloth kitchen table, across from each other, hands clasped together and white-knuckled as if the roof or the world or the truth could collapse over them at any moment and spray them with fallout.

Blue. The end of the little stick was still blue. So inconsequential, really—a dot of color. Just that, and an empty cardboard box strewn on the table beside it, a picture of a smiling woman plastered to the side.

The woman seated at the table was not smiling. She was, in fact, sobbing into the collar of her floral dress, smearing the rosy petals with watercolor tears. Her husband fought not to join in, seeing Kammi’s shoulders duck inward to shield her body, her hair fraying like rope.

“Oh, god,” Maxell said, and Kammi’s sobbing grew that much more audible.

Kammi took a ragged, jagged breath. Then pulled one of her hands away to cover her nose and mouth, as if she might otherwise scream instead of whisper. “Max, Maxie, what am I going to do? I thought—*god*—I thought this was over.”

Maxell could not think of what to say. He smelled the remnants of their dinner, roasted chicken and mashed potatoes, choking them from a pile of unwashed dishes. Nausea smacked half-digested carrots around in his gut as if they were tennis balls.

“They caught him,” Kammi went on, a reminder that normally would have calmed her. “No bail posted. Life sentence-

to-be. Is that not enough?” Her voice was dark now, anger flushing in. “Why should I have to bear this, too, after everything?”

“You don’t,” Maxell said. Hushed. Tentative. His hands grew clammy in hers, and his face was grim. “Not if you don’t want to.”

Kammi’s lips pursed with some small measure of horror. “You mean—?”

Maxell was the one to pull away this time, wiping his hands on his jeans. “It’s your choice, Kammi. There are—things that can be done, if you’re pregnant and you don’t want to be.” They both held their breath, and it was the first time anyone had directly addressed the smudge of blue coloring on the table. “But I would love this baby as if it were my own. You need to know that.”

Kammi’s face contorted like a smeared oil painting. Maxell got the sense that if he hadn’t already taken his hands from hers, she would have ripped them apart. “You’d love a monster’s baby?” Her voice was loud and horrible. “A rapist’s baby? Really?”

“Heavens, Kammi—I’d love *your* baby.”

“I wanted *our* baby.”

Maxell felt haunted. He knew they both sensed it—like there was a ghost, a shadow, looming high above their heads. It had no voice and no power anymore, but yet it watched, grinning, tongue out like a child’s, and sent nasty wet chills down their spines.

“How could I look this thing in the eye knowing how it got inside of me?” Kammi’s eyes were the same blue as the pregnancy test now, clinical and honest. “How could I love it? Care for it?”

Maxell took an enormous breath, hands threading through limp strawberry hair. “It’s your decision,” he repeated. “You don’t have to keep it. You don’t have to *have* it.”

Kammi said nothing, just stared up, as if seeing the haunter's smirk.

"But it wouldn't be the baby's fault," Maxell pressed. "You know that. They'd play and laugh and shit on the floor just like anybody else. They could grow up to be a teacher, or a senator, or an advocate for rainforest preservation. They could be exactly like their mother."

The room seemed suddenly small and cold, and Kammi's gaze seemed even more far away.

"Are you listening? You don't know what this kid will be. You don't *know*."

Kammi put a hand on her stomach, small and pale, and it looked as though she were shaking, though her eyes stayed still and ghastly. Evening shadows painted her dress a dull, deathly scarlet. "But I do know, Maxie," she whispered. "I just do."

TWO YEARS, EIGHT MONTHS,
AND FOUR DAYS UNTIL THE
DEATHS OF KAMMI AND
MAXELL NIGHTINGALE

Serus adjusted the great golden horns atop his head. His costume was blowing in the thin, razor-sharp breeze, draped in rich cotton so green, you could almost smell emeralds and envy and wintergreen air whooshing out of it with each gust.

“The evil Loki,” his six-year-old brother crooned. They stood in their driveway, Halloween all around them. “Brother, you will pay for your crimes against Asgard!”

“It’s *az-guard*, not *ass-guard*, Jesus,” Serus snapped, and wriggled in the getup. His mother frowned. A disposable camera clicked and whirred, flashing a mean bolt of light in two faces: one beaming, one sour. “You’ve never even read the comics.” Serus had. At thirteen, he’d read them all. “You’re a baby.”

Skyhe Nightingale, fitted in an oversized, homemade Thor costume, pouted like the brat he was. His shining helmet sagged into his frown, and he looked so ridiculous, Serus almost thought this was worth it.

Almost.

“*Mom*,” Skyhe wailed from beneath the red and black cotton. The stitches held on for dear life.

“Serus, be kind to your brother,” Kammi said, fixated on the camera. “He’s very excited about this.” Her words were the same temperature as the October frost on the gutters.

Serus’ lip curled, and he wiped his nose on his costume. He wondered, and not for the first time, what would happen if his mother were struck with an illness that rendered her unable to glare or snap her words at him.

“Ready to go?”

Skyhe cheered and whooped.

It was such an ugly sound. Serus wanted to knock that plastic Mjolnir candy pail right out of his baby-fat hands.

The streets were quiet as the Nightingales took to them, a bashful and secretive quiet, like a child pretending he wasn't up to something. But even ten miles from the brooding city, even in the sunken-in pseudo-suburbia of Wyandotte, Michigan, shadows played and splashed in the dark. It took a few steps before Serus could hear the other children, whooping like Skyhe from some adjacent block.

He grimaced. Kammi led them down 9th, and Serus was grateful for the lack of streetlights so he couldn't see how gray-black-taupe-*blah* all the houses were. They were photographs with all the saturation sucked out. The whole neighborhood was an overcast, before-it-storms wash with no silver lining. The sky seemed to hang lower south of Detroit—Downriver—smothering everything in an eerie, permanent gloom.

Skyhe yelled again, pointing to some girl's Sleeping Beauty costume, hammer pail swinging, taking up the whole sidewalk with his cape and his energy. Kammi cooed and held his free hand, provoking his toothless, nontoxic smile, but Serus wasn't so convinced. There was absolutely no way anything that grotesque could swindle the whole world into believing it was adorable and harmless.

God, he thought. Thirteen shitty years old and still forced to trick-or-treat just because Skyhe didn't want to be a Thor without a Loki.

Kammi and Skyhe started chatting all enthused and child-like about Kit-Kats and comic books neither of them knew anything about. They ignored Serus, and Serus ignored them, and they kept walking. Skyhe pit-stopped at neighbors' houses to fill up on chocolates, and Serus stood with his arms crossed on the

gritty, stamped-out sidewalk. Kammi smiled at her golden boy, and Serus glowered into his empty bucket.

This went on until—finally—something out of the ordinary lit up the blackness.

It was fire, just a twist of it, spouting from the building at the end of the block, the one no one could recall the exact purpose for. Demolition? Abatement? Cleaning? All of the above? Either way, it was quite an ugly thing, short and stocky and red-bricked, no sign on the door. An unfamiliar presence without a nametag.

And now, it seemed, something behind it was brightening to life in flickers and spurts.

Skyhe gaped, blue eyes sky-wide and cloudless as flames burst within them. Serus knew that look on his face, the one all little kids could whip out in a moment's breadth, the one that screamed, "*Awesome!—I wanna see!—I wanna save the day!*"

"No, sweetie." Kammi yanked Skyhe's cape down the block to the left before he had time to do anything more than gasp. "What do we always tell you about fires?"

Skyhe simmered. "They hurt. Their smoke is bad. Makes you sick." Then his head whipped back to the dark end of the street and its single candle. "Dad would let me see!"

"No, he wouldn't," said Kammi. "Big kids are dangerous on Halloween—especially if they're out starting fires for kicks. It's not fair for trick-or-treaters, but it's true. Stay close to me."

Stay close to me, *Skyhe*, Serus corrected as the two of them veered away, not even noticing he had not followed. His teenage feelings stung a bit at "big kids are dangerous," but he figured it was probably true; he did feel a little dangerous as he stared down the needle-thin blaze somewhere behind the dark. He felt transfixed, entrenched, hearing a crackle and hiss, the sounds of snakes in the undergrowth.

Kammi still didn't notice their Loki was gone. If anything, she would be grateful for the lost green burden once she realized it.

The swooshing tail of fire curled and beckoned him. On a whim somewhere between a sudden, rearing gut feeling and the very thirteen-year-old notion of “oh, fuck it, why not,” Serus walked down to the hideous red building, which was a dark dried-blood burgundy against the gray night.

Kids were generally not permitted to come close enough to see the teal trim winging out from the windows or the anonymous nature of the door. The place was every stranger you weren't supposed to get in a car with, every pair of eyes glinting from deep-woods brush, and yet it was right smack at the end of Serus' street.

Skyhe had been given numerous lessons on not straying too close. Serus had not.

As he moved quietly toward it and its fire, Serus began to hear a tickling whisper—it felt almost imaginary, like a brush of hair on his neck. He figured it was the whine of the flames, which were growing in size, but he wasn't sure.

Some urge he did not understand yanked him to the side of the building, where he crept low in black costume boots: around a bricked corner, through the open mouth of the chain link fence, past the dimly-shimmering garbage bins—until he could see the source of the suburban inferno.

There were no “big kids” in sight, or anyone at all who might have lit a match or poured gasoline. It was just a dumpster in an empty back lot, ordinary, stamped with gum residue and industrial stains. And it burned.

Curious enough to continue, Serus went around back and peered over the dumpster's edge, standing high on his tip-toes. The source of the fire was not apparent. In fact, it seemed to be nothing at all, just empty air being eaten alive. The fire was flecked with violets and greens, jade and olivine, fluorite and amethyst, crystallized in flashes.

The whisper grew into a hiss, guttural as a snarl. It was not a noise of fire, nor anything mechanical—or human.

Fear twisted Serus like a screw to his gut, but he forced himself to plant his roots and let his eyes water at the brightness. It blinded him to everything that was not ablaze, and he could no longer see anything to either side, behind him, above him, below. Only this hissing, furious flame out front.

It screamed, softly. Something metallic banged to Serus' left.

He clamped his teeth to his lip so he would not squeak in shock, and he could have sworn he heard a sigh of laughter coming from all directions at once, somewhere on the same frequency as the hiss.

Now terror erupted in his chest, thump-thump-thumping through his veins until they were ice. Something jittered behind him. *It's just rats, just rats.*

He convinced his mind of the impracticality—and frankly, cliché horror movie-ness—of the sounds and situation, and convinced his heels to come back down to Earth and get him out of here.

Serus turned, and his light-streaming eyes found nothing in the dark but *dark* as they fought to adjust. There was another sound in front of him, this time a *whomp*, and when his eyes found purchase on the gravel and grit, he could see a book. A soft mist of dust wafted up from it; clearly it had just fallen.

The air reeked of ash and sulfur, and Serus swore the book's edges were sparking like flint. When he blinked, it was only bound and black and earthy-smelling, the same shade and thickness of Downriver's sky.

Pale fingers reached for its pages, and with a jolt, Serus realized those were *his* fingers, and he was bringing the dark bundle into his arms with tentative care. He half-expected it to burst aflame at his touch, but its leather was soft, welcoming.

Some long-broken gear groaned and whirred to life in Serus' chest. Unseen pressure eased. *Oh*, said a part of him he had not known was there.

Then he choked back a mangled scream.

The fire behind him had lurched out of the dumpster and stationed itself in his path, spitting at his shoulders indignantly, like he had stolen something out of its crystal-flecked hands. Perhaps he had. Bloody red sparks smacked his shoes, creating a gory mess of flame against the ground.

Serus scrunched his eyelids shut and waited to be burned, melted, raw, but the fire was not touching his skin. It just wreathed around him, so slender and serpentine, as if observing. Appraising.

Then it sigh-laughed, as it had before, and flushed itself into the sky. Into nothingness.

All was dark. The leather book was warm enough in Serus' arms to be alive.

He did not stop to consider any of this. He just held his breath and ran, tucking his flame-fallen mystery under his costume where his family wouldn't see. His mind was blank and shrieking. He didn't slow until he could see the coffee-and-walnut twist of his mother's hair, the sewn-on cotton wings of Skyhe's helmet, and he didn't stop until he was between them, panting and sticky under layers of thermal sleeves.

Kammi didn't ask where he had been, why he smelled of crackling smoke, or if he was alright. She only cared that he had left his candy bucket and his plastic helmet two blocks back without realizing.

Serus shook, hard, despite the sweat on his back and the warm pages against his ribs. The neighborhood looked different—just a hint more color. Translucent violets, greens, buttery golds.

Skyhe was still laughing, oblivious and sparking, shrill and bright against the dark.

The spaces under Serus' skin itched furiously until he was home—finally, *finally*—and could rip the cheap fabric from his back, plop the heat-soaked book on his bed, and take a look at what he had dredged from the night.

It had a slew of black ink on its leather cover, thick and tangible and swerving in a crude pentagram. Something straight out of those shitty paranormal documentaries the kids at school liked gluing themselves to.

It regarded Serus curiously. He hovered his fingers over it in the dark, his desk lamp washing the room in eggy light. He did not touch it for a long moment, in case it reared its head and erupted like the fire it had come from.

Serus was not sure he could process what he had seen. It all pointed to magic, cat eyes and forked tongues, an immortal and supernatural underbelly to an otherwise colorless suburb. He did not know if he could believe in it—but then, he remedied, his family treated him like a devil anyway, so perhaps it stood to reason that toothed shadows and sentient fire were not out of the realm of possibility.

He shook his Loki costume onto the floor, but still came out of it with black hair that curled where it met his neck and eyes a gem-laced green. He looked absolutely nothing like Skyhe, who had Kammi's summer-blue gaze and all of Maxell's lightness. It had taken Serus years to learn he was genetically near-impossible. That was another sort of magic.

Serus considered this for a moment, then frowned.

He sat down on the bed and picked up the book.

For the second time, it did not explode or sizzle between his fingers. In fact, the leather purred and softened submissively, and he peeled open the first page. The whole book was browned like an apple core left out on the counter to spoil. It smelled sooty, though not unpleasant.

“Hierarchy of Hell,” Serus read aloud, and quirked an eyebrow at the drama of it. *Wonder where Mom thinks I fit in there.*

Curiosity once more overrode any fear that might have been spoiling his nerve. He flipped pages, and realized the book was in sections: Shinto *Oni*, Demons of Judaism, rinse and repeat around the world. The book’s leafy paper was warm and pulsing, and Serus could not tell if it was the pages that were alive, or if his own heartbeat in his fingers were being reflected back at him.

Kiyohime, he read. *Kitsunes*. Flip. *Yamata no Orochi*. Flip. *Asmodeus*, *Lilith*. Flip. *Mazikeen*, *Shabriri*.

Finally, his fingers stopped, and the strange pulse faded with it. Cardiac arrest. Serus checked to make sure his human heart still beat. This was a book of demons, unlimited by religious or geographical taste—their ranks, habits, preferences, inked illustrations sometimes contoured realistically and other times scrawled with amateur haste into the margins.

He should have been afraid. But he was fascinated instead.

Serus traced the page he was on, his touch something close to reverent. Like this impossible treasure might curl into smoke if he did not handle it with care and respect. Even Serus, who had not cared for or respected much in his life, forced his fingers feather-light for it.

Shabriri, *Demon of Blindness*. He was surprised the page was in English; it didn’t look as though it should have been. Its letters were stilted, foreign, telling of ancient Jewish myth. The picture was of a massive dark shape looming over a river that winked below a bath of moonlight. Black hair flew back on either side of a long head, wing-like and menacing.

Serus stared at the sloppy illustration until he was sure he could see scale-hard eyes peering from the smudgy face. Their gaze was a challenge, even two-dimensional, even shadowed in an artist’s cross-hatching.

Breathlessly, underwater-feeling, Serus' eyes swam over the rest of the page. A sketched pentagram padded in restless circles around the bottom of the yellow-brown paper. It was accompanied and watched by a set of specific instructions for summoning.

Summoning? Is this for real?

Serus peeled his tongue from the roof of his mouth, hypnotized by the impossible eyes of Shabriri. He immediately understood how someone could go blind from the anger coiled spring-tight within them.

Did Serus' eyes look like that? Something ropy tightened in his chest.

There was a knock at his bedroom door, and Serus shoved the book under his plain wooden bed in a frantic shuffle, pretending to examine the nothingness of the stripe-papered walls.

A wooden creak. "Serus, it's after nine," said Maxell in the door's threshold. "Lights out."

Serus released a sharp breath that nearly speared him. "Kay, Dad." He reached for the lamp and tried to make it look casual.

Maxell's face disappeared, preceding a soft call of, "Good night."

Serus rolled his eyes. His father should stop acting all warm and homey when he was just going to tuck Skyhe in and disappear the next morning, leaving Serus to Kammi's formaldehyde scowls.

Shaking himself, Serus changed and shuffled into bed. He was very conscious of what was beneath the springs of the mattress, the ten-year-old frame. The book of demons felt like a secret, a hush-hush whisper soaked into his skin. It was like watching a movie with the ending already spoiled. It was a tangible flavor.

He adored it.

It was his.

Serus fell asleep with Shabriri's eyes drilled into his dreams.

TWO YEARS, ONE MONTH, AND
SIXTEEN DAYS UNTIL THE
DEATHS OF KAMMI AND
MAXELL NIGHTINGALE

Serus hated the zoo. He hated the howling infants, the plastic chairs that roasted your ass off in the hot summer months, and most of all, the sad apathy in the big dumb eyes of the animals. It was like they either didn't realize they were prisoners, or were too stuffed full of tranquilizers and nutrient pellets and Stockholm Syndrome to give anything close to a shit. It made him want to punch them all. Individually.

But Skyhe loved the zoo, so here they were.

The stupid purpled water tower grinned out at Serus, painted animals traipsing around its lower ring in an endless round-and-round circle. Its cheesy, weathered sunset passed over a wasted day. Much like the one Serus was *currently* wasting.

"I'm thirsty," he snapped at his mother.

"There will be a fountain eventually—just wait, for now. Skyhe's feeding the giraffe."

Serus looked, and he was; a halo of blond poked up from a boy perched on Maxell's shoulders, rendering them some sort of bizarre two-headed red and gold creation. Skyhe squealed in delight as he leaned over the railing. Enormous velvet lips nuzzled the feed from his hand.

Little shit, Serus thought, and tried to silently communicate with the droopy giraffe. *Push him off, eat his hand, anything.*

"Don't I get to feed it?" he said aloud.

"You wouldn't want to," said Kammi, already taking her camera out to snap in Skyhe's direction. Today her dress had

magnolias on it, in an ugly wallpaper pattern that peeled from her sunny skin.

Serus rolled his eyes like any almost-high-school kid, turning from the threat of the hot May sun. It was such a thick, blistering day; he could practically feel his throat coated in sand.

Eventually Skyhe finished his performance and they all walked on through the fishy reek of the penguins, then past the humming vibrancy of the butterfly gardens, where a blue and black pair of silky wings brushed Serus' elbow and all he could think about was pinning them to something so they would stop making his skin itch.

He asked to see the snakes—his favorites—but Skyhe was scared of anything that looked like an undercooked noodle and had the physical capability of slithering down his throat, so they bypassed the reptile house. Wuss. Serus wanted to imagine talking to those scaly noodles like in the first Harry Potter book, maybe get a king cobra to head-butt the glass into starbursts and go for his mother's head.

Serus rattled with that thought all the way to the lions, somewhere between guilt at the wish, and fascination at the knowledge that he had meant it.

The family parked in front of the ancient safety moat, across from the thin fence and gray rock wall that looked as though it had been spray-painted onto the sky. It was the same monochrome of his neighborhood, a dreary assembly of neutral tones and unflattering shapes, broken only by pale life—in this case, Katie, the lion rescued from a dripping crack house basement, and her companions. Classic Detroit, Serus figured.

Maxell dropped a hand to his shoulder. “Can you see alright?”

Serus blinked, realizing the words were for him. Then nodded.

Skyhe beamed up at him from his right, saturating the scene with gold and blue. “The lions are my favorite,” he declared.

“Well, they have the same hair as you,” said Serus, pointing to a sandy, shaggy mane.

Skyhe hooted at that like it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard, and Serus almost smiled, just the tensing of his lips, for once not recoiling from the boyish laughter.

“Don’t get him all riled up,” Kammi snapped, and all humor was extinguished. Skyhe’s mirth was poisonous again. The kid was made of darkness, not sunshine, just like his mother.

On their way from the viewing area, Serus tripped over a sliver of jutting rock and landed face-first in the gravel. He spat grit from his mouth, hands splitting with the impact.

Maxell turned back, like he might have meant to help, but Kammi cut him off before he could so much as squeak one word. His head dropped pathetically.

Kammi said, “God, look at you, Serus, you’re filthy. Go wash the dirt off your face and meet us by the wolves. There was a bathroom back the way we came.”

Skyhe giggled at Serus as he walked past, with a toothless grin and candy freckled onto his nose. He was covered in sprinkles and snow-cones, and Serus had never even gotten his damn bottle of water. Suddenly he wanted to whirl back in time, urge the giraffe to eat his brother’s whole head, not just a couple of fingers.

“Dirt face,” pealed Skyhe’s bell-bright voice as he moved away, and Serus shoved hard at him from his position on his knees, throat burning, malice in his bleeding hands.

“Serus,” Maxell started, pleadingly.

“*Enough.*” Kammi backhanded Serus hard across the cheek, yanking Skyhe away as though Serus was one of these basement-grown lions, escaped and volatile. Maybe he was.

He was left to pick himself to his feet alone, face burning with the salt Kammi’s slap had been to the wound of his fall. Rage swathed him for a moment, hotter than the metal plaque he leaned on, hot enough that he almost passed out from it. In that glistening second he wanted them all struck down by lightning or polar bears

or whatever was nearest. Even gentle, asthmatic Skyhe—especially him. If Skyhe hadn't been born, maybe his parents would take Serus to see snakes and buy him an iced grape soda. Maybe.

Serus walked to the fountain, letting his skin cool. He scrubbed, hands at his eyes, lips, cheeks, blood swishing against the drain.

Then he turned and walked straight out of the zoo.

Perhaps he was afraid of what he might do if he found his family again—or what he wouldn't do. So he walked with a dripping face and raw hands until he saw a southbound bus make a whining halt at Woodward. He boarded, thankful for the dollar bills in his pocket that had been through the wash twice or thrice, and transferred stop after stop in a numb haze, finagling his way home.

No one questioned a fourteen-year-old riding alone, not downtown, not even with red fingerprints below his eyes and bloody skin-strings dangling off his hands. No one even lingered too long with him in focus. They just let him sink below the surface, into his seat, and wait for the heat to melt out of him.

He shouldn't be this mad anymore, he figured, and he didn't just mean today's trip. He knew his mother had always loathed him, even though he was well-minded and quiet enough and not even that angry of a kid until one slap too many. Usually he could vacuum his hurt back in under his skin, sew it there with neat stitches. But as he observed his handiwork, he could see the red frays, the threat of bursting thread. Maybe he had always been a deeper kind of furious.

Serus blinked, and he was walking home, legs cycling. He didn't even remember hopping from the bottom step of the bus, but he was already almost down the overgrown length of Eureka Street.

He wondered how long it had taken for his parents to realize his absence. How many scarlet stings Kammi would add to the first. He didn't care.

The gray-on-gray house confronted his scowl with a raised eyebrow, slivers of sun on the roof, and Serus saw his shadow take on a fighting stance. He forced his muscles to soften, snatched the spare key under the mat. Didn't bother to flick the nub of any switch on his way upstairs, even once he was there. He had nothing in his room to look at.

He slouched into bed, sneakered feet kicking idly until they connected with something stiff underneath. His heart fluttered. Right. He still had that. He had nearly forgotten his discovery in the swarm of the holidays, the drowsy rise of spring.

The book still felt alive in his hands, albeit a little neglected, and Serus frowned at the uneasy comfort of it. The leather shivered under his fingers, as if it were admiring each one for how they slotted into its divots and criss-cross scratches.

Serus sighed. A supernatural book that had burst from a fire and gave demon-summoning instructions could hardly be a healthy source of praise.

He opened it anyway, and the pages obediently creased, favoring the place his touch had lingered the longest. Two sketchy eyes lifted to his, daring as ever, two thumbtacks pinning him to the page. Shabriri's eyes.

Serus' gut tangled into a Boy Scout grade knot. For the first time, he looked more attentively at the Latin—he figured it was Latin?—scrawled below the inked-in pentagram. It whispered along with his voice: “*Visu ruptor. Daemonium eiceret de aquis resplendent. Te invoco ab inferno. Adiuva me itinere.*”

The words felt dusty on his tongue—ancient, crumbling. Tasteless but weighty. They suffocated him, like he had inhaled a cloud of impenetrable ash. He understood nothing, not the words or their implication. Just that they might bring darkness, pain: the things that had been done to him, that he wanted done to others.

He swallowed Shabriri's page whole, over and over, memorizing myth and fact until he was seeing the words behind his eyes, catalogued in his mind.

From somewhere, a door slammed.

"Serus Miles Nightingale—the bus driver told me some slimy, bleeding disgrace had come this way. You awful, insidious, irresponsible—you—never should have brought you, never should have given you this kind of freedom—"

Serus closed his eyes, and the book's scrawled letters were still perfectly visible across his shuttered vision. With them came the slow, viscous seep of red once more, the heat that had overtaken him at the zoo. He ignored it, and mouthed Shabriri's promise of pain until his lips tingled and ears heard only pounding.

SIX MONTHS AND TWENTY-SIX
DAYS UNTIL THE DEATHS OF
KAMMI AND MAXELL
NIGHTINGALE

When Serus awoke to the hard, glinting edges of winter on December 9th, he didn't expect anything. Especially not on a Monday morning. He would be lucky to get breakfast.

He took the trudge downstairs slowly, feet clomping on the steps with the same clumsy effect as though he were wearing rain boots. Skyhe was already at the table, two waffles brimming with sticky sugar on his plate. He didn't look up; his demeanor was all unintentional, absent-minded flippancy.

"I've gotta go in a sec, but do you want anything to eat?" Maxell called, halfway out the door already.

Serus stared. Waited. Usually his father would at least have something for him, a couple dollars crammed in a Hallmark card or something he'd gotten half-off at the Best Buy where he worked. If Serus was *extremely* lucky, maybe a new Batman comic, or a manga where the parents die at the start.

Today, Maxell had only a blank blue stare, the same shade that was missing from the winter sky outside. It matched Skyhe's perfectly.

"I'm fine," Serus said. "Just go."

Maxell waved once, then receded.

Serus, annoyance dripping through him, sat next to Skyhe. "Do you know what day it is, shithead?"

Skyhe had syrup on his nose. He was eight now, a little older, but dumb and doe-eyed as ever. Serus still figured there had to be something deep down in him just as monstrous as in his parents, but he hadn't found it yet. That almost made it worse.

Today Skyhe had on a Rugrats sweater that didn't match his purple socks. He said, "It's sixteen days until Christmas," and gestured to the chocolate advent calendar on the wall.

Serus lifted his eyes to the ceiling and gave up. Skyhe chomped into his breakfast.

After a long pause filled with chewing sounds, Kammi came down in another of her hideous floral ensembles, and wordlessly helped Skyhe into his snow pants and bright blue boots. She seemed to be deliberately ignoring Serus.

"The bus comes in ten minutes," she said to Skyhe, her hair and brows severe. "Wash your face." Even as she made the directive, she was already procuring a damp washcloth anyway, and she pressed it to Skyhe's cheeks with pats like soft little kisses.

Then they were both gone, and Serus was alone to wait for his own bus, staring in useless disappointment at the ceiling. So that was that. Quick, abrupt, pulling the Band-Aid right off his feelings. "*Visu raptor*," he said to the eco-friendly light bulb above him, confident now in the pronunciation. "Shabriri, you haven't made my parents blind, have you? Like, blind to the calendar? I can see it. It's right there. The ninth."

School dragged on that day, with the woozy, throbbing pulse of a sore and open wound. If Principal Marley said his name over the loudspeaker, he didn't hear it. No one stopped him in the halls. No cut-out decorations were planted to his locker. Roosevelt High was as lackluster and overrun with dusty books and dusty teenagers as ever.

Serus spent most of the day drowning in doodles, trying to get the shape of Shabriri's eyes down.

When he returned home, hunched over from his backpack, he was dumb and naïve enough to let hope flare again, seize up into his muscles and make him race faster through the door. Enough time had passed and blurred the morning's events for Serus to think that Maxell might have brought home dinner and an

apology, or Skyhe could have drawn up some ugly doodle for him in art class. Maybe Kammi would make a Warheads-sour face and begrudgingly buy him a new jacket to replace the frayed thing over his shoulders.

One by one, the rest of the family joined him at home. Serus waited at the table, ankles tucked under the chair, leaning with one wrist draped over the armrest and the other scratching graphite words onto his homework. Hierachy of Hell words—not *Pride and Prejudice* words.

Kammi, when she came, said nothing. Her silence was the most expected, the least disappointing.

Skyhe, when he came, screamed. “*Serus*, I got my secret Santa gift today! Kaisa had me! Look look look!”

It was a metal racecar, green splatters bolted into its sides. Serus made a face like he had swallowed a shot of vinegar.

Maxell, when he came, asked him about school—a primitive kindness, at least. He gave his vague smile and plucked off his nametag. Kammi made a potato casserole with gunky cheese and freezer-burnt green beans that *dared* Serus to protest. He couldn’t seem to ungrit his teeth to take a bite.

He wanted to drive his fork through the table like a trident, get up and holler, “It’s my goddamn birthday! Just like it is every year! Can’t you spend one day pretending I’m a part of this family?”

Serus hated it when three tears drooled out from his bottom lids. Hated it even more when everyone settled in to watch the news and left him at the table with a sink full of sloshing dishes.

He sat there long enough to stew in his own pathetic aching, long enough to hate himself more than he hated his family. Of course they remembered his birthday—but why would they acknowledge it, hold it up to the light? His mother could barely look him in his olive eyes, like he was some dark secret, like

meeting his gaze would turn her inside out or Medusa her into stone.

On the most basic level, Serus knew he didn't fit into the Nightingale dollhouse. For a while he figured he and his thin-nosed, ink-haired looks were adopted, but why would anyone adopt a kid they didn't even like? Besides, he had his mother's pout, the pale lips, small jaw. The anger in their faces was all they shared.

And what was that anger, really? Where had its head first emerged? What had Serus done that was enough to render him more vile and useless than Skyhe, who could barely write his name and still had all his bubblegum dreams granted?

Skyhe was nothing, a golden feather-duster, a few sprinkles of stardust. Empty, sugary fluff, like cotton candy. Get him wet and he'd shrink into nothing but a tooth-rotting core.

Serus realized too late he was crying, and nighttime was creeping around the panes and gutters of the house, and everyone had gone to bed. He could see the snow outside; he felt like it was right there with him, shooting ice through his veins.

He rubbed his fingers into his eyes until they screamed, got up and pulled the muffin from Skyhe's packed lunch. There were candles in the cabinet above the stove, and he stabbed one into the bread, feeling the alluring slice of the gesture.

When he lit its wick, it sparked a match in his chest, giving full reign to the hot tears, the bubbling magma in his stomach. The now-familiar redness that wanted to stop hearts.

What would the demons in his book do? Would they wait for the clock to swing the executioner's blade down onto a lost birthday, then blow out the candle and cry themselves to sleep?

No, no. Serus set his jaw, arms sweating defiantly through the December cold. It was as if something decided itself deep within him, clicking into place like a long-broken gear. An itch for violence, curdling in the heat of his body. The itch to blind, tear, scrape, cause an unfathomable ache.

It should scare him. Maybe it did.

But he let it settle in him and make a nest, fed it with his own breath and blood. Allowed it to reach and grow, curiously, toward the source of the heat.

Serus did not blow out the candle. He nuzzled close to it, inching his nose as close as it could go. *This will be the last birthday of mine you'll forget*, he thought.

ONE MONTH AND EIGHT DAYS UNTIL THE DEATHS OF KAMMI AND MAXELL NIGHTINGALE

The anger didn't fade, not this time—it grew, was fed its proper rations each day, became big enough that it choked Serus every time he swallowed. The cooing warmth of it made him thirsty for chaos, imagining blood under his nails, between his teeth, behind his eyes. Floral dresses in ribbons, blond hair muddied with scarlet.

No one even had to provoke it anymore; it was just *there*, like he had already summoned a demon from between those leafy pages and it now thrived wickedly within him. He hadn't, not yet, but he practiced the summoning words enough when he was alone that he could pretend the energy behind them was in his veins.

He could feel it right now. He tried to tell himself it was just because he was hungry and sweaty and Earth-loving Kammi wouldn't crank up the AC.

She had her apron on, a very disco-inclined shade of chartreuse, making her even more mismatched than usual. She hummed tunelessly, cooking Skyhe his macaroni. He would be home from his half-day of school any instant, dropped off by a friend's mom's bulking van.

Kammi's back was turned, no attention on Serus whatsoever. He was a fly on the wall, not a nuisance until he buzzed. It would be too easy to catch her from behind, slam her face into the bubbling pot, pin her as she thrashed and burned and drowned. *Ignore me now, bitch.*

Serus licked at his lips, a little freaked out by the sudden desire in his twitching fingers. But it was a distant sort of fear, an inquiring fear, a, “would I really do that? Shit, I think I would, huh,” kind of fear.

He didn't have time to simmer in it—Skyhe was here, waving a pipe cleaner creature that perhaps was supposed to be a dog, or a dragon. A bear?

“Mom, I made you something,” he chorused. His blue backpack bobbed, dolphin-like.

“It's wonderful,” said Kammi, taking the creature reverently into her hands. “What is it?”

“A bird!”

“Oh!”

She gushed over it, sweetness practically coming out of her pores, prattling on like someone was paying her to do it. Pathetic.

Serus' stomach growled as Kammi scooped Skyhe his lunch. “Can I have some?” he asked.

Kammi poured Skyhe a sippy-cup of apple juice, then unloaded his extra shoes and a dinky inhaler from his backpack. It was a good thirty seconds before she responded. “You never said you were hungry—you just sat there, not even doing homework on your day off. So I didn't make enough.”

Serus felt the vines wrap around his heart, squeeze it until it heated to a boil. Could he hit her with the kettle hard enough to knock her brain around? Skyhe would be easy enough to kick out of the way or smother. He'd be able to pass it off as an accident, he was sure. Living alone with Maxell might be bearable.

He pictured it, experimentally: school, Best Buy, TV dinners, awkward conversation wrapped around the bookends of the day. He frowned. No, that would be an excruciating way to live, decomposing in this house. Besides, where was Maxell now? Certainly not standing his ground for his oldest son, or ever telling him *why why why* things were the way they were.

This was Maxell's fault too, this anger, the choking. He couldn't take another two years of this slow burn crawling around under his skin. He had to end it.

Today?

Serus watched Skyhe eat; he was slurping in total bliss, the edges of his lips sun-yellow with cheese powder. He glowed in the spots of early summer that made it through the window. It was almost endearing.

Maybe not today—but soon. Serus didn't think he would last much longer.

He wondered how it would happen, what they would say to him in their last breaths. Imagining the potential of all those words was a sick comfort, the same feeling all the demons in his book gave him: dark, empty, but home.

Serus smiled, and waited.

FIVE HOURS UNTIL THE DEATHS OF KAMMI AND MAXELL NIGHTINGALE

On the day that it happened, it was steaming hot. Hot enough that it felt like the air was sautéing Serus' skin; even the house was just one big frying pan. The thermometer said ninety degrees, and Serus felt every last one. It was hellish, and as evening slipped over Downriver like a nightgown, it refused to let up.

Maxell was home, bursting through the door with a grin and head of limp, sweaty hair. Serus watched him come in from the living room, invisible to his parents behind the half-wall that separated him from the kitchen.

"*Hawaii*," Serus heard, and "*sweepstakes*," though he was too far away to make out the remainder of the words.

Having no desire to be pushed from the conversation but still wanting to listen in, he moved closer on silent socked feet, creeping up under the divider like a thief breaking and entering. Neither Maxell nor Kammi had noticed the movement. He was a ghost, their personal shadow.

"I can't believe you won," Kammi crooned.

"You never want me to enter these things, but I figured I'd give it a shot."

"Never mind that! When is it? And where exactly are we going?"

"Late August. Somewhere on the main island; I don't know. But..." Maxell sounded troubled, though Serus couldn't see his face. "They only gave me three tickets, Kammi."

Kammi clearly did not comprehend. "So?"

"So, should I buy one for Serus, too?"

"Why would you?"

Kammi said it like it was a stupid question. Like Serus' entire existence was a stupid question.

"He's your son, Kammi," Maxell said. "I—*our* son," he amended.

"Tickets this time of year are very expensive." The words were frigid, dunked in an ice bath. "And he needs to be preparing for the ACT, doesn't he? He can't be snorkeling around instead of practicing geometry."

"Kammi—"

She was clearly done with the subject. "Forget about it, Maxie. Let's go out for dinner to celebrate."

~

They went to Brooklyn's, a dim bar masquerading as a family-friendly sit-down. Serus tried to block his thoughts out with headphones, but his brain was stuck on those words, replaying and replaying, unable to get past the smudge of them: "*Why would you?*" "*He's your son, Kammi.*"

He felt like he was holding puzzle pieces he did not quite know how to line up. Not yet. Was that why he couldn't bring himself to kill them now? Because he didn't know *why*? Did it even matter?

Speaking firmly, Serus ordered a burger. Skyhe, of course, asked for macaroni and cheese, this time with sprinkled-in breadcrumbs. As the waitress—Shauna—left with their order, Maxell began to give the news Serus already knew: that he had won a Fourth of July drawing at work for a week-long trip to Hawaii, all expenses paid sans souvenir money.

Skyhe went ballistic, hands shooting up, and a pearly older couple gave him a filthy look from two tables away.

Then, silence. Serus lifted his eyes to both his parents in a challenge, a bull staring across the arena at its fighter. He saw nothing but red. Dared them to tell him he wasn't going.

Kammi, the heartless bitch, was the one to say it: "There are only three tickets."

There was no question of who was the fourth, the outlier, the one left behind.

"Serus," she continued, "will stay home with a babysitter."

This was new. This was deplorable. "*Babysitter?*" The words came out snarled. "I'm sixteen."

"You're still a child."

Serus seethed, the leather seats sticky against his bare calves. "Since when do you care enough to hire someone to give a damn about me? It'd practically cost just as much to buy me a ticket to come with you. Why not do that? Then at least you'd know no one's home treating me like a human person—your worst nightmare."

Maxell paled.

"Or have you realized this vacation would be a fabulous excuse to get away from me?" Serus pressed, and leaned forward, right into his mother's space. Everything was muddily orange with incandescent light.

Kammi didn't take the bait. She sighed into her lemonade, breathing ripples against the plastic cup. It only made Serus want to wring her neck, right here, in front of Skyhe and Shauna and every biker in Wyandotte.

"You have a lifetime to go to Hawaii," she said.

"I don't give a *fuck* about Hawaii."

"Serus!"

"Are you ever going to tell me why you hate me so much? Huh?" Serus shattered even more of the distance between them, chin jutting forward, and felt a cool curl of satisfaction when

Kammi flinched. She looked afraid of him, his words, those green eyes. *Good.*

Maxell looked like he wanted to rocket-launch off through the ceiling. Skyhe, meanwhile, was coloring, and unsuccessfully undoing a word scramble. Maybe pretending he couldn't hear what was happening.

“Serus, the food is coming,” Kammi said, stiffly, with a gesture to movement on their left. “I’m not doing this with you now.”

Serus shifted back into his seat and Shauna passed Kammi her sweet potato fries. He did not remove his bulleted gaze from between his mother’s pinched brows, not for the whole meal; she was a bull’s-eye in his sights and he was ready on the trigger.

He liked the way her face twitched when she was forced to look back at him, mousy terror eating at her smile. He wanted that to be the last way she ever looked at him.

Hell, all of their faces were perfect: Maxell squirming like an earthworm on hot cement, a coward about to piss himself; Skyhe stuffing his face as usual, oblivious as tail-swinging cattle; and Kammi, twisted up with fright by the monster she’d let uncurl its claws beneath her white-trimmed roof.

~

Serus trembled all the way home, like he was stuffed full of earthquakes, breaking apart stitch by craggy stitch. The raging presence within him had him in a chokehold again, squeezed like a coil around his heaving diaphragm, but he was glad for it.

The red haze did not inhibit him. He felt focused—on the sun almost vanished, sending out its final bleat before dusk—on his mother mousing around in the kitchen and Maxell watching *Everybody Loves Raymond* at a whisper’s volume—on the seam-

ripping hatred at its apex inside him—on the knife Kammi always procured cuts of meat with, in a rack directly before him.

Serus had never held that knife before, had never sliced chicken breasts or hunks of ham in his life. He didn't have a proper grip, or safety measures numbered in his head. He was not, generally, a knife person. But he wanted to hold it, and so he did.

Kammi wasn't watching. She never was.

A soupy sweatiness masked the air. Serus could feel the heat in everything, his hands shaking so badly, he could barely hold the knife by its plastic handle. He heard the painful *lub-dub* in his throat, rising higher. This was what he wanted, right?

He squinted through the gloom of almost-sunset. He probably should have saved Kammi for last, for theatrics, so she could watch her golden-ticket boy and nine-to-five husband bleed out at her feet. "*Your fault,*" Serus would sneer. "*Look what this family's made of.*"

But she was right here, now, breathing and thrumming and clad in a blouse of bleeding hearts. She was right here, wiping down the table. Serus couldn't take how alive she was. The dark things inside his mind shrieked.

He moved, so suddenly that he couldn't retract the movement even if he wanted to. He sprung like a snake, fangs out, and pinned Kammi to the back wall of the kitchen, right between the ruddy swirls of the wallpaper. One hand slapped over her mouth, and the other held the knife right against her pulse.

Her eyes flew wide, the steam of her summer breath on his palm.

"If you scream for your husband, I will kill you," Serus said into her ear, matter-of-fact.

He knew it would be nothing to overpower her; she would wilt like a flower. Helpless tears lined her mascara as she nodded, painfully close to him.

Carefully, Serus peeled his fingers from her lips, and she stared at the space between his eyes, legs buckling until she had to

jerk her chin up to meet his height. She might have had a lovely face, if it hadn't spent sixteen years in a gnarled frown.

"I want you to tell me," Serus said, "how come I'm here, holding a knife to your throat."

"*Serus.*" The word was a choked whisper.

"Why do you love Skyhe more than me when he's just a spoiled little shit who's going to grow up to be a bumbling bully, hmm? Why am I your black sheep when I'm the only kid you've got that might ever get a scholarship?" He felt his voice morph into a growl. "Why can't you *look at me*?"

Kammi shook her head, and silent tears fell to darken the petals of her shirt.

"*Why?*" Serus repeated, and let the blade dig in, just enough for Kammi to wince.

She said nothing, still.

"*Anything? Anything at all?*" Now there was blood, just a thin crimson ribbon.

Serus felt every movement of her throat as she swallowed. "You have his eyes," she said, thickly, and when she looked at him, a storm rolled out between them. Blue pleaded against rainy green.

A pause; hearts thudded. "Whose eyes?"

Kammi's gaze dropped, and everything in her drained away all at once. She said nothing more, and somehow Serus knew she never would.

He thought inexplicably of his eighth grade graduation—how he had worn a simple suit that darkened his hair to ebony. His classmates had whispered instead of clapped. Kammi had watched him from her tweed auditorium seat, crossing the stage, breathless as he approached the other side. For a moment, just one spasm of time, Serus had thought she might smile, might give a nod to send him somewhere new, greener. At the last second she had turned her head, and he had reeled into the light alone.

Today, he spiraled into the dark. His demons took his mouth, his hands.

His lips twitched up. The knife moved.

Kammi was soaked in red before she could elaborate.

It was a refreshing rain, somehow, watering her flowery print. She screamed all the way through, as if she could call her breath back into her lungs, but it didn't matter. In seconds Serus was able to drop her to the floor and listen to her gargling spurts decrescendo.

Maxell had audibly moved from his chair at the sound, but Serus was viper-fast, crossing to the living room with his blade still dripping. He felt nothing but a buzz.

Eyes locked. Maxell took in the bloody knife, the bloody son, gaze darting around like it might shatter if it settled. "Serus?" he said, and his voice was weak. His skin seemed almost translucent under the lights, like any soft touch could bruise it.

"Your turn," Serus said. He had never been drunk, but he thought it might be something like this: blood singing a whole heavenly chorus. "Can you tell me how we got here, Maxell Nightingale? Can you tell me why you hate me?"

Maxell, at least, was smart enough to pick up the pieces of the situation. It was almost instantaneous. He backed away, hands up, eyes straining to see through to the kitchen.

Serus prowled closer.

"I—I never hated you," Maxell protested. "Is Kammi alright?"

"Shut up," said Serus. He liked the control that flexed in the words. "Whose eyes do I have?"

"What?"

"These green ones. Whose are they?"

Maxell wheezed. "Serus—let me go to Kammi—I don't—
"

Serus wasn't having it. He brandished the blade, and tried to do so with bravado, though his fingers still felt innocent on the

hilt, unsure of where to settle. “Why am I ‘*your son, Kammi*’ instead of ‘*our son, Kammi*’? Why have I never met my grandparents? Why won’t you leave me home alone with my own brother?”

“Kammi,” said Maxell weakly.

“*Tell me*,” Serus repeated, howling the vowels out. He wished the room would rattle at his voice, give it the effect he felt he deserved, but he settled for the tremor in his pulse instead.

Maxell ducked around to the chair, held a pillow against his chest in useless defense. Serus liked how his face collapsed into ruin. No—*loved* it. He was all crumbled pillars now, melted wax and tears.

“Serus,” he said, quietly. “Serus, sweetheart, your mother was assaulted. By a known offender, downtown, coming home from a workout class. She wanted—to keep the baby. I don’t know why. I never knew why.”

Serus felt his mouth go limp and numb. His legs stopped working. Everything seemed contained, far too contained, into this small room.

“I’m sorry,” Maxell went on, crying now, just like this whole goddamn family. “Serus, I always wanted to—I mean, you—it wasn’t your fault. It isn’t. Please, let me go to her.”

Serus was sick and dizzy, vomit inchworming up his throat. He forced out, “How can I accept your apology when it’s about as overdue as Skyhe’s library books?”

“Please,” said Maxell.

“You never stood up for me.”

“*Please*.”

“You never *told* me. That’s all I wanted. Just a reason.”

“Would it have changed anything?”

Serus thought, as hard as he could in the blink of an eye. “No,” he eventually decided. “Probably not. We’d still be here: a mistake and its bystander.”

“Your happiness would not have been a mistake.”

He was going to throw up if he heard another word. He was going to pass out if Maxell looked at him like that one more time, as if he wanted to hold him and wipe Kammi's blood off his cheeks like a lipstick mark.

So he cut Maxell off, much in the same way he had cut Kammi off. Slitting a throat was easier the second time, and Maxell, predictably, did not fight.

Numbly, Serus went upstairs, each step Kilimanjaro and Rainier and Everest. His blood felt heavy, and the anger had gone, like a shock wave that had passed through the soles of his feet and outwards, away. Where had it gone? To heaven, with Kammi and Maxell? Serus even didn't believe in heaven.

He turned in the narrow hall, knife weighing three tons. He hoped he had enough of his fury left for his brother—half-brother.

Usually his attention to Skyhe was tireless. Skyhe had always been the one to get the worst of Serus' wrath near the end, though never once had he laid a finger on Serus in return. Skyhe didn't know any better. He didn't know anything. He was the world's best punching bag. Serus' arms should be aching to run him through with a flash of silver, but instead they just ached with brutal exhaustion.

From in front of him, Serus could hear crying, and muffled, startled movement—already. Skyhe must have heard everything, the damned rat.

Serus got to the doorway, and saw Skyhe shoving his inhaler and a bundle of clothes into his backpack. He looked like he could barely see or breathe through the deluge of tears.

He should have been asleep. That would have been better.

Serus moved, and the floor creaked. Skyhe jumped, hurtling back against his rocket ship bed. His eyes were enormous and opalescent.

“Wondering what happened to Mommy and Daddy?”

“I heard you yelling.” Skyhe whimpered. “I heard Mommy scream—”

“Well, they’re dead,” Serus dismissed.

He wished he had a camera for the look on Skyhe’s face. Absolutely gutted, wholly scooped.

“No,” Skyhe screamed, and tried to squeeze between Serus and the doorway, but Serus caught him with one arm and shoved him back across the blue blue room.

There was nothing to him. He was practically an infant, empty and waddling and lighter than cotton. He was harmless, soft-edged.

Skyhe had never once hated Serus. Not when he pulled his hair or stole his tapes or kicked him until he bruised. Never.

But he would now.

That was almost too much to bear—the idea of Skyhe, set on revenge for always, aging into a darkness that starved for family and justice. He would be dangerous the way Serus had always seen him. He would never be able to feign sunshine, ever again.

Serus suddenly hated *him*, loud and hard and whole. Even at his lowest, most self-loathing lows, Serus had never wanted to be golden Skyhe Nightingale.

Especially not now.

Serus slashed forward with the knife, expecting skin as sliceable as butter, but Skyhe cried out and blocked with his backpack. Fabric ripped with a vibrating sort of zip.

It was not what Serus had been expecting. He startled, hands twitching for someone who was not there, and then Skyhe was halfway across the room, backing toward the second-story window.

“Serus, please, please,” he said, an echo of his father. “I want to be Thor and Loki again. I want Mommy. I want you to stop. I want my brother.”

Serus shook composure through his veins, willing his limp, dead hand to raise the knife once more. “Loki tries to kill Thor,” he said, dully. “Because he’s not his real brother.”

The implications—and the irony—were lost on Skyhe, who managed to pull enough water from his eyes to rain new tears against his shoes. “Serus,” he said. “You are my brother. You’re the best brother, and I want you to stop, because I love—”

Serus lunged again, this time pulling new vigor from the air between them, blue and violet, redness darkening into a hotter flame. Skyhe leaned aside like a dancer, dipped backward in a silver blur of moonlight, pale and soapy in the gloom, everything happening faster and faster—

And then he was flying.

Arms and then legs cartwheeled out the window in a purposeful sideways tumble, busting straight through the screen. Skyhe’s backpack flew up behind him, and his fingers plucked the strings of the wind. He was a baby bird who had jumped from the nest, as bright as moonlight.

As bright as a spark of fury, suddenly pinched out.

As bright as the knife that slipped from Serus’ bloody fingers and soundlessly struck the carpet.

AFTER THE DEATHS OF KAMMI AND MAXELL NIGHTINGALE

Serus knew there was no way he could follow Skyhe into the streets—out through the window or front door or otherwise. The usual neighborhood troublemakers were lining up as the evening drawled on, fireworks and other dangers strapped onto wagons and between fingers. It would be quite a scene for a blood-soaked teenager to tackle an elementary school kid to the ground, and Serus wanted anything but another scene.

Skyhe's clock, a plastic thing with caricatures of trains for each hour, proclaimed it 11 PM, and Serus knew it was July 3rd. Maxell and Kammi Nightingale were dead. Skyhe was hobbling down 9th Street nursing a crooked leg and a slashed backpack bleeding T-Shirts all over the sidewalk.

The deluded bastard couldn't fly after all. He had landed hard in the bushes and screamed and started running.

Serus smirked, but it felt strange. He was empty and satisfied and furious all at the same time, and his blood heaved like a headache against his skull. He couldn't decide whether to panic or not.

One thing was certain: Skyhe was getting away. He might get the police, or find a firework to blow in Serus' face. Serus hadn't thought this through one way or the other; his fantasies of plans always ended at "*they're dead, I'm free, I'm free.*" But he realized now, soberly, he was not. Where would he go? What would he do? Scrape up some change and get on a bus? Change his name and hitchhike to Missouri?

No, no, not with Skyhe still alive. Someone would come looking. Skyhe would grow, day by day, disgustingly *living*, always looking.

Serus gritted his teeth. Now the panic came through, and he stamped it down.

The crowd outside thickened with night, stew-like and smelling of saltpeter. Serus couldn't see Skyhe anymore. He could barely see anyone. He felt blind.

Blind.

Visu ruptor.

The idea struck him so hard he tasted blood.

Serus tore to his own room, the only place yet untouched and unruffled, and reached a hand out for the monster under his bed. His shirt brushed against the floor, and it left a painting's worth of red smears in the carpet. He was dimly aware there would be no question to the police who had committed the crime downstairs, not without a seamless escape, or a silenced Skyhe—not without help.

Fingers traced the shapes of the pages, the book bending open with familiarity. The text was warm as always, homey as the meals Kammi had always cooked for Skyhe. It was as if the book could taste the blood on his hands and liked it.

He took his demons back to Skyhe's room, finding it more fitting for the occasion. For the next eight minutes, Serus shoved the bed against the far wall, kicked racecars and figurines from his path like he was Godzilla, and let the edge of red anger slice him just enough to focus on his task.

The pentagram was made from what little remained of Skyhe's wardrobe, pant legs and long sleeves knotted together. It was wobbly and childish at best, but it would have to do.

Serus stepped back. Observed. Compared it to the one in the book.

"Looks like haunted laundry," he said aloud.

He grimaced. It wasn't like he expected it to work, anyway. It was the idea of a madman. A murderer. A kid who had walked toward an unfamiliar fire and clung to what had come from it.

Serus put the book down—he didn't need it for this part.

He recited, clean and clear: "*Visu raptor, daemonium eiceret de aquis resplendent. Te invoco ab inferno. Adiuva me itinere.*"

He waited, proud of his rehearsed Latin, the Zim and Gir posters beaming at him from Skyhe's walls.

Nothing.

Someone hollered outside, threw miniature poppers that rattled like bone against the pavement. Serus pretended he hadn't startled at the sound.

He frowned, then opened his mouth to read again. "*Visu raptor, daemonium eiceret—*"

"I heard you the first time, kid."

A man stood in the circle of jeans and sweaters, completely serene. He looked at Serus expectantly, like he was just a guy from between the streets who'd asked him for a light-up, and his fingernails were long as he picked dirt from beneath them.

He was so suddenly *there*, Serus didn't even have the breath to be shocked; the new presence punched his exhale straight up his throat until he squeaked with the jolt of it. Then froze in embarrassment.

The visitor arched a dark, perfectly-angled brow. Serus stared.

Lanky and commanding, the man was no doubt the tallest person who had ever stepped foot in this room. But the longer Serus examined him, the more perplexing he was, not terrifying—he just looked like a slightly aged scene kid, the likes of which had begun to emerge in Midwestern high schools. He had punk-rock black hair that could have been fake fur, and what Serus thought was an AC/DC T-Shirt.

However, his cold green eyes did not look amused, or concert-ready.

Serus jolted. He knew those eyes, more than he had known Maxell's or Kammi's.

“Shabriri?”

The familiar gaze from Serus' demonology book promptly rolled to the ceiling.

Serus blinked. There was no way this was a demon. No way. This was a living garage band materialized in front of him. He pinched himself just for the hell of it, but the guy stayed, combat boots and all.

“There is no Shabriri,” the man said, voice low and without melody. “Only Before-Christ wanderers drinking tainted water and blaming their blindness on mythology instead of idiocy.”

Serus' understanding—and his heart—plummeted sixteen stories down. “You're...not Shabriri?”

A sudden smile filled the man's face, all blinding teeth. “Oh my god, kid, your *face*. Shit. You look like you ordered a stripper and she turned out to be seventy-six.”

Serus frowned.

“Sure, I can be Shabriri,” the man went on with a shrug. “I mean, I'm every blindness demon, probably. I'm also second in command of Hell, and a mighty fine dancer. Why are you wasting my time?”

His tone was vicious. Serus, thoroughly rattled, took a step back. Not-Shabriri pantomimed it. He was out of the pentagram now, kicking Skyhe's socks aside, crossing the binding threshold like it was nothing.

“You aren't supposed to do that.” Serus clutched his book to his chest like it was a bulletproof vest. He remembered the spell listed within it, the one that would make this stop. “Shit—um—Shabriri, briri, riri, iri, ri—”

The demon positively *cackled* at that, and the fact that his knee-slapping wheezing sounded so human only made it more terrifying.

“Are you deaf, kid? That’s not me. That spell is trash.”

“Then how come I could summon you?” Serus asked, trying to regain composure. “If you’re really the ‘second in command of Hell,’ then why are you taking walk-ins? Who are you? And don’t call me ‘kid.’”

He didn’t know where the defense came from. Fear? Adrenaline? The drill of those poison-ivy eyes through his head, mouth, ribs?

The demon quirked his smile higher, as dangerous as a concealed carry. He made no move to answer the questions.

“How old are you, thirteen?”

“I’m nineteen,” Serus lied, out of spite more than anything.

“Hmm.” The demon looked him up and down again, with a gaze that felt like a rake full of claws. “Cool. So, what do you want?”

“Huh?”

“Your deal. Why you called.”

“I don’t understand.” Serus felt as dumb as Skyhe. “Are you here to...help?”

Not-Shabriri looked at him. Then the pentagram behind him. “I have to. You summoned me. Those are the rules.” He sounded annoyed. “So ask.”

“You still haven’t even told me who you are!”

“Does that matter?”

“*Yes?*”

“Fine.” He kicked around a few more of Skyhe’s clothes. “Danaeris, Satan’s right-hand bro. Good at blinding things. PhD in the art of not giving a shit.”

“I don’t think you can get a PhD in art.”

“I don’t give a shit. See how that works?” Another flash of teeth.

Despite himself, despite everything, Serus almost grinned back at him. He covered it with a scowl. “Um. Well. I. I want you to find and kill my little brother, I guess.”

The demon—not-Shabriri—Danaeris—examined the room, as if for the first time. Serus’ cheeks heated when he realized this guy probably thought the cartoony kid’s room was his.

“He—jumped through the window,” Serus said, quickly. “*His* window.”

“Mm. Why do you need him dead?”

Serus took a long breath. “I don’t want him squawking that I killed Mom and Dad. Plus, I sort of hate his guts. He’s just as screwed up inside as I am, I think, only he has no idea. I want him out of my way.”

Danaeris gave a low whistle, but he didn’t look impressed. “So, I kill him, then? That’s all?”

Serus shrugged self-consciously.

“*Seriously*, kid?”

“You barely look older than me,” snapped Serus. He tried not to feel small, when this was the only night of his life he had felt big. “And yeah. Seriously. That’s what I want.”

“You call me out here,” Danaeris said, “*on my birthday*, you don’t get me a gift, and you want the lamest favor of all time.”

Serus very much wanted to know how murder was “lame,” but he didn’t ask. Instead, he said, “...*Birthday?*”

“Anyone could do a favor like *that*,” Danaeris continued. “Even *Rowan* could do a favor like *that*. And yes, birthday. I’m fifty-six forevers today.”

This time, Serus didn’t react to the joke, and Danaeris glowered. Serus held his breath, tightly, like it might be stolen from him if he didn’t.

“Alright, I guess,” said the demon after a hard few moments. He watched Serus visibly deflate with relief, and his searching gaze made it seem as though he were deciding

something. Though with those eyes, any back-and-forth contemplation felt much like Russian Roulette.

“Not like you have any choice,” Serus said, carefully.

“Not like I do,” Danaeris agreed, unpleasantly. “Onto the terms and conditions, then. Unlike Livejournal, I actually make you read mine.”

Serus’ palms began to sweat. He was so far in over his head, he couldn’t even see the surface. “Conditions?”

“If you’re willing.” Danaeris’ smile was the perfect predator, and at last, Serus fully realized he was dealing with a demon of Hell. One he had summoned. On purpose. After killing his parents with a meat knife. There was absolutely no going back; he was belly-deep in a python, wrapped in six coils of boa constrictor.

Serus thought: should he have turned back years ago? Walked away from the flames on Halloween, tried to be the sky-reaching superhero instead of the Disney-villain evil brother?

There were flames in Danaeris’ eyes, violet and beckoning as the ones years ago. His young face was a flash of skin on MTV, a velvet stage curtain swooning open, satiny-seductive in its dark anonymity. He looked impatient.

“I won’t burn you alive, you know,” he said.

His gaze seemed to threaten the opposite, as pinning as the one on the yellowed pages. Serus closed his own green eyes, but he could still see Danaeris, even in the blackness. Even blind.

Serus stepped forward, let a hand extend. “Read me your terms of service, then.”