

A  
BLADE  
SO  
BLACK

L.L. MCKINNEY

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MAKE YOUR MARK  
NEW YORK

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A part of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

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Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-250-15390-6 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-1-250-15389-0 (ebook)

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Book design by Heather Palisi

Imprint logo designed by Amanda Spielman

First edition, 2018

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## Prologue

# C U R I O U S E R

**A**lice couldn't cry. She couldn't scream. All she could do was run.

Her boots slapped the vinyl floor. Light flickered in the red leather. Someone shouted her name. Maybe her mother. Maybe a nurse. A hurricane of rushing blood and her thrashing heart wailed in her ears.

Out. She had to get out.

A feeling like a hammer beating at the inside of her skull made everything fuzzy. She didn't see the white man in the middle of the hall until she was on top of him, but she couldn't stop. It was like hitting a wall. Then they both hit the ground. The smell of bleach and disinfectant coated her throat.

She fought to untangle herself from him.

"Dammit, kid, hold on a second!"

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“Alice!” Mom’s voice chased her past the lobby and through the sliding doors.

*Get. Out.*

Bright red letters danced in the puddles peppering the concrete.

EMERGENCY

Grady towered over her, casting a shadow across the night.

Warm water misted her skin and hung in the air, a rain that wasn’t really committed to falling.

She raced into the street. A car swerved to avoid her, horn blaring and headlights flashing.

“You crazy?” the driver hollered at her back.

Alice had no idea where she was going. She just ran. Past parking garages and a couple shops. Squat, beige buildings lined the street. The GSU campus. She kept going.

*He was okay.*

*And going.*

*All day, he was fine. Why did he do this?*

*And going.*

*Why did he leave me?*

Her lungs kicked at her rib cage, strangled by the hollow feeling clawing at her chest. Her legs pumped until the burn in her stomach rolled to her feet. When they refused to carry her any farther, she dropped to the ground. Water soaked her gloves. Dirt stained the white fabric. Uneven asphalt dug into her knees, scraping them as she crawled the last few feet to sink against a wall.

Tears and snot ran down her face. “Daddy.” But he was gone. Dead.

“Poor child,” someone nearby whispered, the words dragging across their tongue in a growl. “So alone. So afraid.”

Panting around hiccups, Alice shook her head, her face in her hands. “Go away.”

“Oh, I can’t just leave you. Not when your fear is so . . . inviting.”

Alice lifted her head to search the emptiness around her. She sat in the mouth of an alley, god knows where. Her tears made it hard to see. Snot and the stink of something sour made it hard to breathe.

“I can take it away.” The darkness shifted with movement deeper in the alley, coming toward her. “Let me help you.”

A dog stepped out of the black. Huge paws ended with long, wicked claws that clacked against the ground. Inky skin, no fur, rippled as it moved. Illuminated eyes blinked at her; one pair, then two, and three. Lips curled in a flash of teeth the size of her fingers.

The trembling in Alice’s gut rippled through the rest of her. She screamed.

It lunged. Teeth snapped shut just inches shy of her face. Drool that smelled like rotten meat splashed across her chest and cheek. She scrambled backward, trying to call for help, the words choked in a wail. The roughness of the brick at her back caught her clothes and scraped her skin. She was trapped.

Instead of attacking again, the creature collapsed and flailed, ripping at the ground. “Traitor!” it shrieked.

“Yeah, yeah.”

The air quivered, steeped in shadows that seemed to recoil

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as a white boy stepped into view. He gripped the end of something sticking out of the monster's back.

A sword, Alice realized. The thunder of her heartbeat against her skull sharpened.

What little light that managed to thread the gloom hovered along the length of the blade, as if afraid or unable to touch it.

"You will suffer! You will all suffer!" Pinned to the ground, the monster thrashed. Yellow blood slid against the blade, coating the onyx metal, dripping onto the ground beneath it.

"What's that? I couldn't hear you over the sound of . . ." The boy pulled the sword free and drove it in again with a *slurch*.

Alice jerked. So did the monster. Then it fell still. The glow in its eyes slowly faded.

Stepping over the body, the boy wiped his sword clean then slid it into a sheath over his shoulder. As the hilt clicked into place, light poured in from the street, saturating the alley.

Confused, Alice blinked against the stinging bright, trying to focus on what and who was in front of her. Dark jeans, boots, and purple T-shirt with the words *We're All Mad Here* scrawled across the front, he looked like a regular dude. With a weapon strapped to his back.

She didn't realize she was staring until the beast's body jolted with a loud pop, startling her. Its leathery skin bubbled and folded, shrinking in. A smell like old milk and mold filled the air. She gagged, her stomach roiling.

*Oh my god.* There was really a dead monster. She was going to be sick.

Unfolding his lithe frame from a crouch, the boy turned to go, though he paused as if noticing her for the first time. Blinking, he shifted to the left, then to the right as Alice watched. “You see me?” He had an accent. Sounded English.

It took a second for Alice to realize he was speaking to her. She nodded, her eyes darting between him and the dissolving creature. “Curiouser.” He tilted his head to the side and came toward her.

Alice jerked back, fear cold in her limbs.

“Whoa.” He lifted both hands and went still. “I just wanna make sure you’re okay.” He took another, slower step. When Alice didn’t move—she wasn’t sure she could—he took a couple more, then knelt in front of her. Light from the street slid across his moss green hair and spilled into gray eyes looking her over from beneath a furrowed brow. “Anything hurt?” he asked.

Alice stared. She couldn’t manage words. Her thoughts tumbled over themselves as her mind tried to make sense of . . . she wasn’t even sure. Talking dog-monsters, some dude with a sword, he killed—what the hell just happened? She couldn’t breathe. When she tried, sour air stuck in her throat. Her stomach quivered.

“Hey. It’s okay.” His quiet voice managed to fill the alley. The gray in his eyes shifted, colors catching and dancing like a kaleidoscope in the dark.

Chest heaving, Alice shook her head. Blond strands from her wig clung to her face. Her thighs stung where she’d crawled across the ground. The pounding in her head worsened, made it hard to think. She had to get up. She had to go.

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Dad was waiting to take her to the con. Only he wasn't. He was gone.

“Can you walk?”

“Wh-who—” She couldn't get the rest of the words out. They weren't even words anymore, just small sounds on the edge of more sobs. *No*. She gripped her mouth with both hands, her fingers digging into her cheeks. *Stop it. Stop. It*. The ache in her jaw spread to her throat and slithered behind her eyes as she fought back tears, bottling them up to throw them away. She wouldn't break down like this. Not out here. Not in front of . . . whoever this was. Hiccupping around slow breaths, she fixed the boy with a stare and pushed the question free. “Who are you?”

“Oh good. I thought you might pass out on me.” He pressed a hand to his chest. “I'm Addison Hatta.” He offered her the other. Bands of silver gleamed on each of his fingers. “Can I help you?”

She watched those fingers for a long moment. When he wiggled them, her eyes shot to his face, then the hilt of the sword peeking over his shoulder.

A freaking sword.

*This is too much.*

She took his hand.

Addison stood, drawing her up as well. Her legs shook but held, though she braced her free hand against the wall. Dirty water and lord knows what else stained her gloves and her sailor fuku. Her costume was ruined. She'd worked so hard on it.

But that didn't matter anymore.



Swallowing thickly, she forced words over the sand in her throat. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcommme.” He drew out the last syllable, trailing off with a lift of his eyebrows.

“A-Alice.”

“You’re welcome, Alice.” A smile stretched his face, and the color of his irises shifted again, brighter now.

“Your eyes!” She pointed, nearly poking him in one. “They changed!”

“Yeah.” He rubbed at the back of his head. “That happens when I come to this side . . . of town.”

“This side—where are you from?”

“Not anywhere near here.”

The burbling body nearby gave a loud *crack*. It was nearly gone, the ground stained black beneath it.

She aimed her finger at that mess. “What was that thing? Where did *it* come from?” The questions leaped free on their own, her brain latching on to something, anything to try and make sense of what she was seeing. Shifting to the side a few steps, she eyed Addison and his sword once more.

“The same place as me?”

“And where the hell is that?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” Addison chewed at his lower lip, watching the body before looking to Alice. He eyed her up and down, then nodded himself. “But I think I will.”

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One

# HERE WE GO

**A**lice ran her fingers over the ivory handles of the daggers on the desk in front of her. Cold light filled the blades, their surfaces more like silvered glass than steel. You'd think after three months of knowing Addison Hatta, she wouldn't be surprised whenever he pulled random weapons out.

"Pretty." She plucked one up and raised her eyebrows. "Light. What are they?"

"Figment Blades." Addison dug around in the drawers where he sat on the other side of the desk. The old metal rattled and creaked. "The only things capable of killing Nightmares. Well, part of the equation at least."

"What's the other part?" She trailed her fingers over the flat of one of the glittering blades.

"Muchness."

"Munch-what now?"

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“Muchness.” He slammed a drawer then jumped with a curse, shaking out his hand. “*Your* Muchness, to be precise.” The fingers he’d shoved into his mouth muffled the words. “The part of you that believes in yourself, even when the rest of you doesn’t.”

Alice blinked a few times then set the dagger down. “Right. They look a lil small for killing monsters.” She’d only ever seen one Nightmare, when Addison rescued her the night her dad died. While it wasn’t huge, it was big enough to be scary as all hell.

“That’s not the part that matters.” He slammed another drawer.

The desk took up most of the cramped space he called his office—more like a slightly large broom closet—along with the small love seat that Alice sat perched on. There were a couple lamps, but the place was mostly bare. No file cabinets, no computer, just a little shelf in the corner with a funky teapot on it.

“Says the dude who carries around a big fuck-off sword.” She’d glimpsed the black blade a couple times since that night. When he wasn’t fighting monsters, Addison kept it in a metal locker that filled a corner of this “office.”

“Aha!” Addison straightened and set a leather belt beside the daggers. The sheaths strapped to it clapped together. “You’ll have to be specific; I have many swords.” There was a room in the back of this very building full of weapons, but they were blunted for training.

Alice twisted her lips to the side and leveled a look at him. “You know the one I’m talking about.”

“Do I?”

“Addison.”

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“So many.”

“Addison.”

“Well, firstly: It’s not a Figment Blade, and secondly: I’m not human, meaning I don’t have Muchness, so I need a little something extra.” According to Addison, he could destroy a Nightmare’s physical body, but it would just reform after a while. Since Nightmares were a physical manifestation of humanity’s fears, humans were the only ones who could put them down permanently. That’s why people like him trained people like her.

“And last: you play too much.” She narrowed her eyes at him, but there was no real heat behind it. “Talkin’ bout some ‘you’ll have to be specific.’ Specific deeze.”

Addison grinned, his dimples popping into view, as he came around from behind the desk and tilted against the front of it. In the harsh fluorescent lighting his hair was dark green, his eyes a subtle though somewhat rainbowy gray. Piercings lined his left ear, shining silver as he cocked his head to the side. Metal glinted over the rest of him, too: the studs in his shirt at the shoulders, the chain around his hips, the zippers and buckles on his boots. A punk rock Prince Charming. Damn, he was fine. Lucky for him.

She turned her attention to the weapons, picking one up, the ivory warm in her palm. “This what you wanted to show me? I mean they’re cool and all, but you made it sound like you had some big surprise set up.”

“This is part of it. Those are now yours, luv.”

Alice nearly dropped the dagger. “For real?”

He nodded, his smile widening. “You’re ready.”

She jerked straight in her chair. “So soon?”

“I wouldn’t call three months soon, but yeah. I knew there was something special about you.” He angled forward, closing off a bit of the space between them.

Heat filled Alice’s face. She turned her attention to the daggers, hoping he couldn’t see her blush. Not that she actually turned red or anything—she don’t blush for real, for real. “Special how?”

“Well, you were able to see me, for one thing.”

She smiled. “Hard to miss a dude stabbing a monster to death three feet in front of you.”

“That’s not the p—I’m trying to be serious and give you a compliment. May I get through my serious compliment?”

Alice lifted her hands, fighting laughter. “Excuse the hell outta me for having eyeballs.”

“That somehow see me even when I mean not to be.” Addison narrowed his eyes before folding his arms over his chest. “Nope. Never mind, moment’s ruined. I now deem you unspecial. Give the daggers back.”

“Wait—” The laughter burst free.

“Nope! Damage is done. Come on, hand them over.”

“No, no,” Alice said, still laughing as she waved off his reaching hands. “No, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

“And they’re so fragile.” He grabbed for one of the daggers.

“Waaaiiiiiit.” She pressed her hand over his, still snickering. “Go on, serious compliment away.”

He watched her, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he fought his own smile. “Where was I?”

“I was special.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

He finally chuckled. “Right, then.” Lifting her hand and

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the dagger she still clutched, he curled her fingers around it and his fingers around hers. “I knew you were special. That’s why I told you about the Veil, the monsters that cross it, and my duty to stop them. Well, my duty to train someone to stop them. I have trained three others before you, and none of them learned so quickly. It was a pleasant surprise.”

Hell, if Addison was surprised, she was floored. He gave her a sword to start, and it was like she’d been carrying the thing her whole life. Maybe not her whole life—she did smash a table once. And a few chairs. On accident. But when she got her hands on a pair of daggers, that was a whole different story. It was like in the movies where someone says something about becoming one with the weapon, blah blah, it’s an extension of your body, blah. No joke, it really felt like that, like her body somehow knew what to do. She still had to practice, though. A lot.

“I had motivation.” More like a need to beat the shit out of something. Ever since her dad died, whenever Alice was alone she was just so . . . angry. She swallowed it. Bottled it up. Her mom needed her. Her grandma needed her. She got through the funeral. She got through the first days back at school. She cried. She hugged it out. But she wanted to punch things.

So when Addison presented her with the chance to be like him, to kill monsters that crept across what he called the Veil, a border between the real world and the world he came from, a realm of dreams called Wonderland, well . . . she called him crazy. Then she apologized; that was rude.

But she’d seen the monster. She’d smelled the damn thing. She’d felt its breath hot on her face, and after going back to that

alley near the hospital the next week and seeing that stain on the concrete, after talking with him out in the open and noticing how no one else seemed to notice him, she decided to take him up on his offer.

“Alice?” Addison’s voice sliced through her thoughts.

“Hmm? What?” She blinked up at him, her cheeks warm again. “Sorry.”

“Right in the middle of my serious complimenting.” He huffed, but she could tell he didn’t mean it. “Where’d you go this time?”

“I was thinking about that night.” And meeting him, but “that night” was safer. “And how everything changed.”

“Mmm. Well, it’s about to change again. Strap those on.” He gestured to the daggers, then pushed away from the desk.

Alice fought with the belt for a few seconds before managing to get it fastened around her waist. Her hands shook, a combination of nerves and excitement. For three months she’d been coming here, learning how to fight with a handful of blunt weapons. When she figured those out, Addison said he would give her real ones and take her across the Veil. Now, it was happening. Like, for *real*, for real. These were real daggers hanging from her hips.

She pressed her fingertips to the hilts again, just to make sure. *Dude. This is really going down.* She took a slow breath. *Keep it together, Kingston.*

“You ready?” Addison stood at the door, holding it open for her.

Alice swallowed and nodded. “Y-yeah, yeah.” She followed him out into the hall.

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“Need to let Maddi know we’re going through.” He led the way out to the main part of the building that had served as her training grounds.

The Looking Glass pub was every bit the midtown Atlanta dive it pretended to be, from the mirrored wall of liquor behind the bar to the pool tables, high-top tables, and chairs grouped on the worn wood floor. Strategically mounted TVs meant you could see a number of shows or games from any spot on the floor. Her first time here she didn’t believe this was some secret gateway to another world; it just looked like a bar.

“Looks can be deceiving, which is the point,” Addison had said.

A patchwork of memorabilia from ages past covered the pub’s walls. Hats, pocket watches, monocles, beat-up old canes and parasols, photographs of flappers in Paris and World War II vets in London, an autographed picture of someone named the Big Bopper. A cacophony of sight.

A cat-shaped clock hung on the wall behind the bar—the creepy kind where the huge eyes swish back and forth while the tail wags to mark the passing seconds. Black stripes covered its dark purple body. A grin spread beneath its wiry whiskers.

*Tick-tick-tick-tick.*

Underneath the clock, Maddi mopped the countertop in slow, lazy circles with a dingy rag. A mousy girl with a round, brown face, she was the pub’s bartender, although Alice believed she took more naps than she mixed drinks. On cue, Maddi yawned, covering her mouth with the rag.

Alice grimaced. *Gross.*

Like Addison, Maddi was from Wonderland. The two of



them were stationed here to keep an eye on one of four openings in the Veil, called Gateways. As a front, they opened the Looking Glass, a functioning bar with drinks and food and regulars, which just happened to have a portal to another realm in the back. Addison owned it. He and Maddi looked young, late teens, early twenties, but they were both super old. Like, immortal old. Still fine, though. They looked like regular people until you got a *good* look at them, especially their eyes.

“Madeline.” Addison knocked against the bar as he stepped up to it. “I’m taking Alice through.”

Maddi blinked her big blue eyes slowly. With each fall of her lids, the color of her irises shifted, first green, then brown. “Whistle while you work?”

“Yup. She’s ready.”

A thrill slid through Alice at those words. She’d worked so hard. So many long hours, sleepless nights, and sore-as-hell days. This was it, though. She made it. She just had to keep telling herself that. And to breathe.

Addison ducked around behind the bar, glass clinking as he searched for something. He emerged with three small vials of purple liquid, most likely Maddi’s handiwork. The girl was a bomb-ass Poet, but not in the Still I Rise way.

In Wonderland, Poets were like witches or wizards, mixing potions and wielding the magical essence of the realm in spells called Verses.

Alice never saw Maddi do more than mix mild potions to help Alice heal faster after training. Still, the stronger the Poet, the more potent the Verse, and the weirder they talked as a

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result. Alice figured Maddi was powerful as hell, the way she barely made sense half the time.

“Hold the fort—we’ll be back in a tick,” Hatta said.

Maddi saluted with the rag. There weren’t humanlike races in Wonderland, at least not the way it was in the real world, but people had different skin tones and features. Maddi, with her warm, copper complexion and high, round cheekbones looked Latina to Alice. Addison was white. Like, super white, saying stuff like “in a tick.” They both spoke English, Spanish, French, Japanese, Russian, and pretty much every other language on the planet. That’s what happens when your homeland is the collective unconscious of the entire world.

Hatta offered Alice his arm. “Let’s go, luv.”

While the front of the building housed the pub, the back was a labyrinth of hallways and random-ass rooms. Bathrooms. Bedrooms. A kitchen. Hatta and Maddi lived here after all. There was even a room that looked like a hotel somewhere downtown, had windows and everything. It was fake—the building was magic, but still, it was wild.

Alice wondered which of these rooms held the Gateway. She’d never seen it, and now she had that feeling like getting ready to open Christmas presents: giddy, bubbly, and kinda worried that you wouldn’t like what you got. It was as if her stomach didn’t know if it wanted to do the butterfly thing or tie itself in knots. It left her feeling gassy and decidedly unhero-like.

*Keep it. Together. Kingston.*

Addison stopped in front of a ratty-looking door. Inside, he flipped on the light.

Alice blinked, staring at the buckets in the corner and the shelves lined with stacks of toilet paper, towels, and cleaning supplies. The sharp scent of bleach hit her nose. “A broom closet?” Was he playin’ with her?

“The last place you’d like for an interdimensional doorway, right?” Addison bowed and waved her in. “After you, milady.”

Shaking her head, Alice stepped into the narrow space.

Addison followed, shutting the door behind them. “Okay, the next bit is a tad . . . intense. It’s probably best if you hold on to me.”

Alice blinked. “Hold on to you.”

“The first time through can be a bit rough.”

“Um.” She cleared her throat before swallowing thickly. “All right. How should I—” She stepped forward, lifting an arm to wrap around his shoulders. “Like this?”

He nodded, watching her with those slightly shimmering eyes. “Whatever you’re comfortable with, so long as you’ve got a good grip.”

“Right.” Alice stepped in a little closer, trying to concentrate on anything but how he smelled faintly of spiced rum, cologne, and something sweet she couldn’t place.

His arm slipped under hers, hooking around her back. The other reached out to flip the switch, plunging them into darkness.

“Last chance to back down,” he murmured, his lips near my ear. “You’ve accomplished a lot. No one will think less of you.”

She couldn’t say she hadn’t thought about walking away—he was talking about fighting monsters—but she wanted this.

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Needed it. She shook her head, then nodded quickly. “No, no, I’m ready.”

“Here we go,” he warned. His voice rippled through her.

The ground dropped, and a sudden sense of falling yanked her stomach against her diaphragm. She screamed, the sound lost to a howl of wind and thunder. Her heart thrashed in her chest. Her hair slapped at her cheeks and ears. She latched on to Addison.

*I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die!*

Light burst across her vision. She shut her eyes against the sting and buried her face in Addison’s chest. His arms tightened around her. His hand cupped the back of her head. The shrieking rush grew louder, drowning out the pounding in her ears.

She whimpered. *Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease . . .*

When solid ground pushed up beneath her feet, her knees buckled. She would’ve dropped if not for the arms holding her up.

Everything in her stomach curdled, her last meal climbing toward the back of her throat. Shoving away from Addison, she stumbled across the floor toward what looked like a rosebush and threw up everything in her gut.

“Oh god,” she groaned between retches.

A hand pressed between her shoulders. Addison knelt beside her, his brow furrowed. “Told you it would be rough.”

“Rough? No, Mondays are rough. The first few days of your period are rough. That?” She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “Was three kinds of hell.” She groaned again, spitting to clear her mouth of that coppery taste. “Uck.”

“Here.” Addison offered one of the vials. “You can rinse your mouth out.”

She snatched the vial. “You coulda warned me I’d puke all over the place.”

“Didn’t expect you would.” He shrugged. “Wouldn’t have helped, anyway.”

She tipped the rim against her lips. The liquid was cool and minty with a hint of . . . banana? After swishing thoroughly, she spit it out at the roots of the rosebush as well, and was wiping her mouth when she realized those weren’t roses.

It was definitely a bush, though the coloring was off, more blue than green, but the bursts of red she thought were flowers were actually little orbs of what she could only describe as fluffy light. The tufts glistened softly, shivering as they hovered close together. Alice stared, filled with a sudden want to see what they felt like, but also an understanding that touching random shit is how people lose fingers.

“That is a Flit.” Addison stood and offered her a hand. “They grow here in the Glow.”

“The—” Alice took his hand, glanced up, and froze.

They stood on one side of a marble terrace, the surface opalescent. Pillars cut from the same material encircled the structure, giving it the look of an ancient, open temple. At the center, the very air had split but was falling closed with a sucking sputter. The world filled in the open space, leaving the structure whole. The whole thing shone, reflecting the light from the forest surrounding it. From the trees’ silver bark to their sparkling leaves, everything glistened as if spun from glass.

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“Glow,” Addison finished. He guided Alice along the terrace. The clap of their shoes resonated outward. The pillars hummed faintly in response, like massive tuning forks. The sound rose into the air and then fizzled out as they moved down a set of steps to the ground below.

Addison shifted around in front of her, and she looked to him, her eyes widening. Her breath caught, just as it had the night they met. Everything about him had changed and yet . . . not. He was brighter, his skin moon-kissed, his hair more pale than moss green now. It stood up a bit instead of pressing against his head. And his eyes, now more silver than gray, glowed gold at their center.

His smile was exactly the same, though, stretching his face in that way that always left her feeling warm. He swept his hand out in a wide gesture. “Welcome to Wonderland.”

Two

# BEYOND THE VEIL

**A**lice held to Addison, her eyes wide, her mouth open. He'd tried to describe Wonderland a few times, but always wound up saying it was like talking about a memory that was half-forgotten: a dream faded at the edges of your mind but somehow whole in your heart. None of it made sense until now.

He led her farther along, an amused twist to his lips. She didn't walk so much as shuffle. Their steps stirred the mist creeping along the ground. It crawled over the white grass and hung just beneath the silver branches in a few places.

"Beautiful." She looked to him, then to the forest again. Actually, she looked everywhere she could—this place was incredible.

"This is Wimble-Di'Glow Woods, though most just call it the Glow." Squeezing her hand, he turned them around to face

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the pillared platform. “That’s the Gateway. It’s closed at the moment, and now you must defend it from Nightmares seeking to enter your world. With my help, of course.”

“Oh, right.” A shiver slid like an icy finger down the curve of her spine, banishing the joy that had been bubbling up. The mention of the monsters sunk like a stone in her gut. “Are we here to stop one?” She hated the slight tremble in her voice.

He nodded. “Small one. Not far. I said you were ready, and I meant it.”

*Oh shit.*

This was really happening. She was really here. There were going to do this.

*This is what you wanted.*

She cleared her throat and squared her shoulders.

*This. Is. What. You. Wanted.*

“Everything all right?” Addison watched her from nearby, a single eyebrow arched.

“Fine. I’m fine.” A deep breath helped calm the flurry of anxiety skittering through her. A little.

“We can go back if you don’t think—”

“I said I’m fine.” Though the fearful flutter in her chest was distracting.

His other brow shot up to join the second one. “Very well.”

She didn’t mean to put that much bass in her voice, but she had to hold on to this. But what if she didn’t come back? No. No, she had to do this. But her body wouldn’t listen to her. She just stood there, frozen.

“Do you remember why it’s best to slay a Nightmare before



it crosses into your world?” Addison asked, those multicolored eyes still on her.

Alice nodded. Of course she knew. They’d gone over it a hundred times. Humans were the source of a Nightmare’s strength, and the closer the beasties get to people, the more powerful they became.

Humans were the source of everything, really. Wonderland was the literal world of dreams. Now-I-lay-me-down-to-sleep dreams. Good dreams made this world healthy. Bad dreams messed it up. Get enough bad in one place and *poof!* Nightmare. Maybe not *poof*. And nightmares . . . affected people.

Folk might not see the monsters themselves, but they sure saw the end result. On the news, reports about someone snapping and killing their whole family, or shooting up their job for no reason? Yeah, people were still messed up, dudes not able to take no for an answer, KKK mofos, the ‘lone wolf’ bullshit, all that mess . . . but sometimes? Nightmare. And she was here to face one.

*Oh god.*

“Can you tell me?” Addison’s voice cut through her thoughts.

Alice swallowed thickly, her fingers twisting around each other. Something sour coated the back of her throat. “Um, s-so they don’t get bigger.”

“Good.” He tilted his head to one side then slowly to the other as he spoke. “And what it is that actually kills a Nightmare?”

She pressed her shaky hand to one of the pommels at her side.

“That’s just part of the equation.” His fingers folded over hers, his touch light but warm. “Remember?”

*Part of—?* A combination of her growing fear and Addison being so closed filled her mind, but his words from earlier rang clear in her ears. “M-Muchness.”

“Right. What’s in here.” He gently tapped the tip of one ringed finger against her forehead, then her chest. “And in here. You are the one thing capable of ending a Nightmare’s terror for good, and now you stand between them and their goal. If there is anything to fear here, it’s you.”

As Addison’s words poured over her frenzied thoughts like water over coals, pounding between her ears began to fade. “Me?”

“You.” His hands fell to her shoulders, squeezing gently. “But only if you believe you can do this. I think you’re ready, do you?”

Alice continued to breathe deep, in through her nose, out through her mouth. In and out, in and out. Seconds ticked by. She even counted a few in her head. Gradually, the pressure behind her eyes lessened. The wild dancing of her heart evened out. The buzzing in her limbs subsided, eventually fading completely.

“I can do this,” she whispered. “I can do this.” Louder this time.

Addison smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “I know. Let’s go.” He turned to lead the way further into the bright haze of Glow.

With another deep breath she followed him, now able to fully concentrate on taking in the . . . well, the wonder of it all. Every so often, tiny, hazy arms and legs materialized in the branches, accompanied by bell-like laughter. She jumped a

couple times, even took a swing at something bright blue that dipped in front of her face.

Addison laughed.

“Hey, it was a reflex.”

“Few things here will harm you.” He paused, tilting his head to the side. “Intentionally, that is.”

“So comforting.” Some of the tension melted from her muscles. She half listened to Addison’s tips as they went along.

“Remember to keep your core tight when you move, especially when you jump or dodge.”

*Maintain your grip. Eyes on your opponent.* All stuff she’d heard before.

“And, I haven’t mentioned this before, but you’ll need to adjust for your newfound speed and strength. It’ll be—”

“Wait, my what?” She blinked at him.

“When a trainee crosses the Veil for the first time, the same essence that feeds this place empowers them, enhancing their natural abilities and bestowing a few new ones.” Addison continued on, leaving Alice staring after him. “That’s when, and how, you become a Dreamwalker.”

“Wait, wait wait wait, wait.” She hurried to catch up with him. “You never said anything about superpowers.” She was hearing this right, right? That’s what he was talking about, *right?*

“It only happens *if* you cross the Veil, so there was no need to mention it before, in case you decided not to.”

“Uh, I kinda think *superpowers* are something you bring up when training to fight monsters.”

“I didn’t want to influence your decision in any way. Crossing was your choice to make.”

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—+1

She looked to her hands as they moved along. “I don’t feel any different.”

“You will. Trust me.”

She curled and uncurled her fingers, grinning a little. *Cool.* Dad would flip if he knew she was pretty much a superhero now. Only, he would never know.

Her vision blurred, and that hollow place in her chest deepened. *No.* She sniffed and wiped her eyes. *Not here. Not now.* She couldn’t come apart here.

She smoothed her hands over her hair, fingers catching the coils a couple times. That trip had blown her hair all over the place, so she worked it into the ponytail holder she always kept on her wrist. She stole a glance at Addison, who looked to be caught up in searching their surroundings for something. If he noticed her brief break, he didn’t say anything.

“So, what else haven’t you told me about this place?” She waved a hand. “Not wanting to ‘influence me’ or whatever.”

“I can’t very well tell you everything. Wonderland is as wide as your world, and as immense as the human imagination.” He shoved his hands into his pockets.

“Uh-huh. So this is you sayin’ you don’t know everything.” A corner of her lips lifted.

“What I’m *saying* is your training covered a lot, but ‘there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’”

Alice snorted. “You know poetry don’t work on me, right?”

Addison grinned. “I’m simply saying there’s a lot here. A lot of history. A lot of . . . complications.” His tone dipped around

that last word. “And I’m here to be your partner and tour guide all rolled into one. And that wasn’t poetry.”

“You know what I mean.” She wanted to ask what he meant by complications, but they’d reached the end of the Glow. At least, she assumed they did, because everything was suddenly less bright.

A meadow opened before them; a sea of tall grass—at least it looked like grass—waved back and forth in the night. The color shifted in a gradient of pink and yellow. Purple clouds drifted overhead, rimmed in silver, and bloated from soaking up moonlight. *Blue* moonlight. The moon was freaking blue.

“Wow,” Alice whispered, stepping forward. The grass brushed against her thighs. She could feel the tickle through her jeans. She was so focused on the sky, the moon, that when a luminescent blue blob bounced out of the grass, she yelped and stumbled back.

Addison laughed.

Alice puffed her cheeks, trying to ignore the burn in them. She slugged him in the shoulder, which only made him laugh harder. “It’s not funny.”

“No.” He snickered, trying to breathe. “It’s hilarious. And these little guys are harmless. Frubbles. They just want to play.”

She rubbed her arm as a few more Froo-bles, Frubbles, whatever, rolled around at her feet, shining different colors. “Play?”

“Yeah. They’re like puppies. Round, glowing puppies. Just run, you’ll see.” He smiled, those dimples appearing again. “Go on,” he urged when she hesitated. “Fast as you can.”

She looked to the Frubbles, then to the meadow. It was

—-1  
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about a hundred yards or so to the next tree line, which wasn't as bright as the Glow. With a quick breath, she took off, crossed ten yards in a burst of speed that shook her core, and promptly tripped over her own feet. "Whoa!"

She hit the dirt with a *whuff* as all the air was pushed out of her lungs. "Uggghhhh." Cold from the ground seeped through her jeans and her shirt. She shivered and struggled to her knees, then hugged herself to ward off the nighttime chill. The rich smell of damp earth mingled with the sharp scent of moss and fresh water from somewhere nearby.

Addison knelt beside her. "You all right?"

"Yeah." Though her torso ached a bit, but the pain was already starting to fade. "I didn't—I was so fast, I couldn't keep up with my damn self. How does that even work?"

"Heh, told you you'd feel it." He offered her a hand up. "Try again."

Alice took a second to gather herself, flexing her arms, shifting her legs. The Frubbles rolled about in the grass, trilling softly like birds. She grinned. They were so cute!

*Okay.* She glanced across the meadow again. *Super speed.* Well, not super, just faster. *I can handle this.* With a deep breath, she pushed into a run. Slower at first, getting a feel for her Wonder-legs? Now that was corny.

She stumbled a bit, but didn't fall. She turned at the tree line and kept going. Faster now. Faster. Faster! Luminescent blobs bounced out of the thigh-high grass, racing beside her, surfing the meadow like dolphins. The Frubbles trilled cheerfully, dipping in and out of her path, arcing through the air like shiny beach balls.

She pushed into a full run, her head buzzing as her chest heaved. Her legs and arms pumped. Wind swept over her face and through her hair. She whooped and kept going until she pushed off into a jump. Her momentum carried her forward, propelled her up.

“Whoa!” Her arms and legs flailed, throwing off her center of gravity. She managed to get her feet under her before hitting the ground and tumbling to a stop.

On her back again, she stared at the starless sky and the moon overhead. Her muscles sung, jerking here and there. Her nerves were alight, practically buzzing. She laughed and whooped again, panting.

The Frubbles rolled back and forth beside her, cooing like doves. She patted a pink one gently, her hand black against its shine, gliding across the smooth surface. Sitting up, she glanced around for signs of Addison when an odd sort of pressure slid along her limbs, like dozens of tapping fingers. Goose bumps prickled her flesh. The Frubbles gave high-pitched trills before darting away into the grass.

“Um . . . okay.”

“Alice?”

“Over here.” She brushed herself off, glancing around. She was at the edge of the forest across from the Glow. It was much darker. Shadows filled the trees. Tangled branches and vines choked the canopy, keeping the moonlight at bay.

Alice tensed when she thought she saw something move out of the corner of her eye and scanned the undergrowth.

“Alice?” Addison called again.

She lifted a hand out of the grass and waved, not wanting

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to shout again. Something was out there. Her senses strained to take in everything they could.

The forest remained still, quiet enough for her to hear the wind sweep through with a low, heavy *whuush*. *Whuush*.

Not wind. Breathing.

Movement to her left.

*Oh shit*. She pushed to her feet, scrambling back from the forest just as a roar shattered the quiet like an air horn. Her ears rang. Her bones rattled.

“Alice!” Addison was racing toward her when the Nightmare burst from the brush, looking like a hippo with more limbs than a squid.

The beast charged. She twisted out of the way, barely avoiding a swipe of claws. She screamed, fear jolting through her as she tried to get her legs to work.

“Alice!” Addison stood a short ways off, gold eyes wide and dancing between her and the Nightmare. “You can do this!” He gripped the hilt of the sword at his back but hadn’t pulled it free yet.

“It’s too big!” She backed away from the Nightmare as it lumbered around, looking back and forth between her and Addison as if trying to decide which of them to eat first. She shook her head, feeling the sting of tears. “It’s too much!”

“But you are much more!” He sidestepped, putting distance between them, drawing the monster’s attention. It sniffed the air and growled, turning to focus completely on him. “You can beat it. You trained for this. You’re faster, stronger than you know.”

Alice whimpered, shaking her head. She drew back a few more steps, her whole body cold and shaking.



The beast charged Addison. Alice's heart practically uppercut her it jumped so hard, but Addison spun out of the way, unsheathing a sword and slicing across the beast's side in the same move. The monster roared. Yellow blood splattered the tall grass.

Addison slid into a ready stance, his weapon lifted, the silvery blade shining against the night.

"We can go back," Addison called without taking his eyes off the beast. He dodged again, rolling under a swipe of claws. "I can stop it, and we can wait for it to re-form. Try again later."

*No no no.* Alice lifted her trembling hands to the sides of her face. How could she suck so hard at something she trained so hard to do? But she couldn't. It was too much.

*Breathe, Baby Moon.* Dad's voice filled her head. It did that a lot lately, memories of him laughing with her, talking to her, chastising her. The tears spilled free and she shook her head. "I can't," she whispered.

*Breathe.*

*"I can't."*

*Breathe . . .*

*"I'll try."*

*Ain't no try. You know that. What you gone do?*

Alice's hands fell to the daggers at her hips. She palmed the pommels before gripping them tight and yanking them free. Azure moonlight filled the crystalline surfaces of the blades.

Across the meadow, Addison fended off a swipe of claws, the shriek of grating metal filling the air. He leaped back and shot a glance Alice's way. Their eyes met.

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*What you gone do?*

Her fingers tightened their hold on the daggers. Something swept through her, pushed outward from the center of her chest to the top of her head and the soles of her feet. “This. I’mma do this.”

The Nightmare whipped around to face her. It loosed a roar and pounded the ground with its feet.

Alice adjusted her weight, then pushed off into a run. The smell of grass and dirt snapped crisp against her senses. Her steps thudded against the ground, mirroring the pounding of her heart, a storm in her chest. She darted across the meadow, coming around the monster’s flank. It stood out against the black, her vision sharpening. Before the Nightmare could turn to take her head on, she jumped.

“Aim for the core!” Addison’s voice reached her above the scream of wind in her ears.

The Figment Blades burned against the night. Their fire stampeded up her arms, filling her, fueling her, igniting something inside her that would never dim again.

As she came down on the beast, she tightened her grip and threw her weight into the thrust. The monster roared.

So did she.

They collided.

## Three

# D R E A M W A L K E R

One year later . . .

**A**lice dropped into a slide as a barbed tail lashed through the air overhead. The Nightmare, a massive thing with a rhino's body and spindly, almost human arms sticking up from its back, tumbled past. She twisted out of the slide and caught her balance in a crouch before exploding forward to drive her dagger at the monster's side. The blade glanced off with a crack like striking stone. Armored hide. She spun outside another swing of the tail and leaped, aiming to land atop the creature. It swatted her aside like a gnat instead of her tall-ass self.

The impact robbed her of breath and the ability to scream when a white-hot throb lanced up her arm. She hit the ground in a roll, then twisted out of it, her knees on fire. Blood ran warm and slick where claws had torn into her forearm.

"Dammit." She swapped her weapon to her other hand,

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shifting to shield her wound. “Hatta!” Her eyes flickered between the monster and the treetops. Where *was* he?

The Nightmare howled and came at her again.

Every inkling of self-preservation shouted to jump, dive, get out of the way. At the last instant she jerked to the side. The beast crashed into a tree, tearing it up from the roots. Wood groaned and snapped. Leaves shivered and fell like rain. Blue moonlight spilled into the clearing.

Alice ducked a spindly, talon-tipped arm. She jabbed the dagger into the rippling flesh of the monster’s underbelly and yanked. Something wet, thick, and rank spilled over her hand. She gritted her teeth and pushed.

*Come . . . on . . .*

The knife sank farther into the creature and, with a snap and hiss, pierced its core.

*Yes!* A thrill blazed through Alice. She smiled. *That’s right, you sonuva—*

The Nightmare loosed a keening cry and lashed out, slicing into the trees and scoring the earth. Alice shuffled aside, dagger ready as her target staggered, limbs twisting, body buckling. The creature collapsed inward like crumbling stone. Its wounds popped and fizzed, spewing yellow goop across the dirt and onto her shoes.

“*Augh.*” She danced backward and wobbled as she shook each foot. Too late—the pus had already soaked into the material. “Really? Really.” Another pair of kicks ruined. Along with her good mood. “Perfect.” She couldn’t afford a new pair of shoes right now! Or jeans. And asking her mother was not happening. Who knew being a superhero meant going broke.

*Pop.* The body started to dissolve. She pinched her nose against the stink, which no doubt clung to her, thick and gross.

As she wiped the dagger on her already ruined jeans, a second shadow dropped from the branches of a nearby tree. She whirled, body sliding into a defensive stance, weapons up.

“Easy, luv.” Silhouetted in shadow, Hatta’s face was hidden, but Alice knew he was smiling. Bastard was always smiling. “It’s just me.”

Alice straightened and glowered at him. “It’s just me,” she mimicked, scrunching her nose and pitching her voice higher. Releasing a heavy breath, she sheathed the blades and tilted against the toppled tree to assess her injuries.

Her legs throbbed but held. Scuffed knees peeked through holes in her pants, stinging with each subtle movement. A torn sleeve revealed nearly invisible slices in her dark brown skin. They burned and bled a fluorescent green mixed with deep red as her body expelled toxins from the Nightmare’s claws. One of the *actual* perks of being a Dreamwalker, along with getting to stab things, not some bull like “the honor of serving her fellow man.” Was her fellow man gone pay for a new pair of Converse? Or keep her mom from wringing her neck if she got this crap on the carpet?

Didn’t think so.

“Nothing serious, I hope.” Addison Hatta gestured to her arm as he approached. The rings on his fingers glittered. “May I?”

She snorted and thrust the injury toward him. “Where the hell were you?”

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“Close.” His long fingers curled around her wrist, their press gentle as he inspected the wound, his head bowed slightly. In the Wonderland light his moss green hair paled, the wavy strands clinging to his forehead and face. His white skin shone like polished porcelain.

“Close,” she repeated, hoping the darkness concealed her flushed state. He’d know, though. Hatta had this way of *knowing* when he was getting under her skin. Usually, she was annoyed, but sometimes? Sometimes heat filled her face, her palms prickled, and her stomach tried to wedge itself between her lungs. Like now as he traced the edge of one of the cuts with a gray-painted fingernail.

“I was ready to jump in if needed.” He glanced up. His eyes practically glowed. Over time she’d noticed the gray wasn’t just one color but a mix of different flecks and dabs, like stained glass at sunset. Weird but gorgeous, and god, she was weak. And sappy. And staring. And he was smiling again.

“Uh-huh.” Alice withdrew her hand, certain he’d feel her rising temperature or heartbeat in her wrist. “So helpful, considering you said we were after a Chihuahua, then ran into a pit bull.”

“That . . . was unexpected. I’m sorry.” He shoved his hands into his jeans pockets, slouching a bit. “But you’re strong, adaptable. I could tell you had things handled.”

Okay, so that lifted her mood somewhat. She smirked. “Thanks.” He hadn’t even brought his sword, so he must’ve really thought she had this.

“And my plan worked.” He glanced at the Nightmare carcass.

What was left writhed and squirmed as the land absorbed the remains, leaving a shadowy scorch mark.

“It was a stupid plan.” Alice yanked a dagger free from her belt. Seriously, having her sit out in the open like bait? Here’s a human, come and get it! *Ass*.

“It still worked.”

“Meh-meh-meh.” Covering her nose again she drove the blade into the tainted ground with a “Cosmic moon power!” The dirt gave easily, and the blade lit up like a Roman candle. White sparks skittered across the ground, leaving jagged marks like lightning in the earth. They pulsed a few times, brighter and brighter, before fading entirely and taking the taint with them, leaving no trace of the fallen Nightmare.

“Why do you say that?” Hatta tilted his head to the side, eyeing her. “The moon has nothing to do with it.”

“True.” She yanked the dagger free and resheathed it. “But it feels cool.” Purging Nightmares so they wouldn’t rise again didn’t require moonlight or magic words, just a Figment Blade and Muchness—the Wonderland equivalent of believing in yourself or something like that, it didn’t make a lot of sense whenever Hatta tried to explain it—but the words didn’t hurt, so Hatta could suck on that with his logic.

He chuckled, eyes on the newly purged ground. “If you say so.”

“Yup.” Alice started toward the Gateway, happy to put as much distance between herself and that lingering stank as possible. Hatta moved at her side, seeming to glide over the brush while she plowed through, smacking leaves and vines out of her

—-1  
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—+1

way. Cool, crisp air gradually banished most of the foul smell, though a faint whiff did follow them. No doubt her shoes and clothes. *Ugh.*

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Hatta watched her from the corner of his eyes. “You’re favoring your left leg.”

“Eh. Hit my knee pretty hard when I landed. I’m cool, though.”

“Mmm.” He didn’t sound convinced. He drew a hand from his pocket, fingers wrapped around the handle of an ornate mirror, the kind the Queen of England would own, and much too big to be carried around in someone’s pants but, y’know, Wonderland. An intricate curl in the mirror’s metallic back formed the raised profile of a woman’s face. Alice had seen the mirror a number of times and asked about it. It belonged to a friend, Hatta explained, and that was all she got.

“I’ll have Maddi prepare something for the pain.”

Alice rolled her eyes. “I said I’m fine.”

“I know.” He knocked three times against the reflective surface of the mirror. “Open my eyes.”

The glass rippled before swirling into itself. Color poured through the chaos, like drops of paint in water. Alice had a similar mirror, though much smaller and less fancy. Hatta gave it to her after she killed her first Nightmare. Was in it for the long haul, then.

The mirrors acted like magic phones, but you could only use FaceTime. She preferred actual phones and kept her mirror buried in her locker. It used to stay in her room, until Hatta “called” her one evening, and Mom was certain Alice was



smuggling boys into her room. She took the door off the hinges and kept it. For a month. *Who does that?*

Finally, the swirl of colored light and silver evened out to reveal Maddi's yawning face. "Twinkle who?"

"Madeline, wake up!" Hatta said cheerfully.

"But it's star time," Maddi huffed.

"I know, but Alice got a little banged up and needs something to set her right."

"Nuh-uh," Alice called as she stepped around a large pink stone. "And no, I don't."

Hatta ignored her. "Do you think you could whip something up by the time we get back?"

Maddi blinked again, her eyes now orange. She nodded, and a veil of stringy black curls fell around her face. "Full moons mean empty glasses." She gave a thumbs-up.

"Great. See you in a tick."

Maddi waved before her image faded and the mirror was a mirror again.

"Do you not know what 'I'm fine' means?" Alice cut him some side-eye.

"Yes," Hatta drawled, and shoved the mirror back into his pocket. "And you probably are. But if your knee bothers you in the morning, you'll have something."

Yeah, he was right. And it would likely help her arm, too, which still throbbed slightly. She'd had worse, but this didn't tickle.

Finally, they broke through the forest's edge into the meadow. Another cloudy night hung over them, pale green clouds puffy

—-1  
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and shining with blue moonlight. Breaks in the billows revealed the splintered, starless sky. A faint golden glow peeked through the cracks. The Midnight Breaking had come and gone, but that didn't mean anything. Time passed much more erratically here than in the real world. Sometimes, an hour back home could equal a day here. Or a week. One of the reasons Hatta suggested she never spend more time here than absolutely necessary. Across the meadow, Wimble-Di'Glow Woods stood as a beacon in the night.

"Curiouser." Hatta glanced around as they approached the Glow.

"What?"

"Nothing. But maybe everything."

*Oh boy, here we go.* Wonderlandians may speak every language, but sometimes they don't make a lick of sense.

"That was the ninth incident this month," Hatta said.

"Tenth," she corrected. "There was the twofer this past Saturday." Nightmares tended to rise often enough.

"Right," said Hatta. "How're you doing?" His voice softened and sent butterflies skittering through her insides.

"Better." She swallowed. Said twofer hit a little close to home.

Normally, Dreamwalkers were immune to the influences of Nightmares, but if it was a fear close to your heart, it could get to you anyway.

A week before the fight, police shot a black girl, seventeen, same age as Alice. Her name was Brionne Mathews. It happened in the parking lot after a football game at a school across town. Nothing the news said made sense, something about a fight between gangs and some people had guns. The girl had

on one gang's colors, but so did a lot of people. They were the same colors as one of the teams playing that night.

Over the next few days, things were kinda chaotic. Protests and arrests. Course some mofos came in trying to start trouble. So many people were hurt, angry, and so afraid. It was enough to create *two* Nightmares. Alice had felt that fear, a physical thing that ate away at her from the inside. It left her hollow, shaking, and useless. If Hatta hadn't been there . . .

"Alice?" Hatta's voice pulled her from her thoughts. He stood at the edge of the Glow, eyes on her, concern illuminated in their light. "Are you all right, luv?"

"Fine," she breathed, and nodded. "Just tired." She was seriously feeling every bone and muscle in her body right now. A hot shower and her bed were singing her song.

"Ahh. Let's get you home, then." He curled his fingers, beckoning.

She grasped his hand, the rest of her body stiff with chills, and followed him into the Glow. Its haunting shine wrapped around her. In all of Wonderland, this was her favorite place.

She swatted at bouncing Flits and Sparks as they dipped in and out of her vision like fiery cotton balls, and she took care not to step on the blossoms scattered across the ground like Christmas lights. Flowers never wasted an opportunity to whine about being trampled.

They walked in silence until, eventually, soft earth gave way to the hard stone of the Gateway platform beneath their feet. Hatta released her hand. Her skin prickled at the loss, and she tucked her hand under her arm.

At the center of the terrace, he stretched out his arm. For a

few seconds, nothing happened, then the air in front of him split down the middle and curled outward like a well-used scroll. Pale light spilled out around him, the Gateway drawing open to about the size of a large door.

Turning to her, he angled forward and extended a hand. “Your chariot awaits, milady.”

Feeling a familiar warmth crawl up the back of her neck, she grasped his hand and stepped through the Gateway and into his arms. They wrapped around her, muscle concealed by lengthy sleeves.

As light enveloped them, he settled his chin atop her head. Her arms wound around his waist, and she got a faint whiff of Nightmare stink. It amazed her how the smell didn’t seem to bother him. Every time she ended up covered in the stuff, he took her into his arms like it was nothing. Her cheeks warmed at the thought as the Gateway folded in behind her, the air sewing itself shut. The light faded, leaving them floating in darkness.

She closed her eyes and held her breath.

Man, she hated this part.



When the scream of wind died away, and the floor solidified beneath her feet, she stood shaking and trying hard to keep her stomach in check. She hadn’t eaten before going through the Veil; what was even in there to come up?

“You okay?” Hatta murmured near her ear.

She nodded rapidly, fighting to regain control of her

breathing enough to manage words. “M’fine,” she half gasped, half burped, then groaned. *Sexy, Kingston. Real sexy.*

“After all this time, still not used to it.” He chuckled and let go, taking with him her means of stability.

One hand shot out to brace against the wall. “My stomach does not appreciate being spun through the universe like old socks in a washer.” She flapped her other hand at him. “Open the door.”

Light and sound burst into the space as he stepped out. Stable, Alice moved to follow, but something caught her foot. With an undignified squawk, she fell against the doorjamb. A mop lay across the floor, snagged on the toe of her shoe. Grumbling, she kicked it into the closet and slammed the door.

Blessed with increased speed and agility, incredible strength and dexterity, abilities no normal human being possessed . . . and she trips over a mop.

“Complications?” Hatta had stopped at the end of the hallway, where it angled to the left and out of sight. The sound of laughter, music, and clacking billiard balls poured in from behind him.

Shaking her head, Alice waved him on. “I’m fine. Gonna clean up.” She steadied herself against the wall, the faux wood cool beneath her fingers.

“I’ll wait for you out front.” He disappeared around the corner. A chorus of cheers greeted him.

Alice shuffled after him but veered left into the ladies’ room. She locked the door and turned the water on full blast. Cupping her hands beneath the spout, she splashed her face again and again. The sudden shock of cold helped tamp the

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—0  
—+1

nausea churning in her gut. She snatched paper towels from the dispenser to wipe her face and jerked when their roughness scraped a tender area near her temple.

Staring at her reflection, she pushed her hair back to reveal scratches on the side of her face. They were barely bleeding. Smoothing her fingers against her brown cheeks, she wrangled her ebony locks and tied them off. If she didn't count the stains on her jeans and shoes, she looked presentable. She couldn't do anything about the smell, though. It wasn't so bad anymore, but her nose still scrunched whenever she caught a whiff. Yeah, this outfit was definitely done. She'd spent a grip on these shoes, too. After a few finishing touches, she made her way out front.

Hatta stood behind the bar, talking to Maddi. Above them the cat clock ticked and wagged away. 10:34 p.m.

*Crap.* It wasn't *too* late, but Mom would still probably have a cow.

"Hey, I need to head out. Pretty sure my mom's already gonna bust my ass, better not make it worse."

"Right." Hatta sat a small vial of purple liquid on the counter. "Maddi worked her Poetic magic."

"It was," Maddi muttered, her head tilted against her hand on the bar, "nothing not worth everything."

"Thanks." Alice pocketed the vial as Hatta produced her backpack and purse from behind the bar. She traded him her belt and daggers, then hurriedly pulled out her phone. Technology didn't work in Wonderland, so she usually left it at the bar or with her best friend, Courtney, who would cover for

her. Court had tennis practice today, so Alice was on her own. Six missed calls and twice as many texts. *Yikes . . .*

She didn't read any of them, but caught a glimpse of a threat to put her ass in traction if she didn't pick up her phone. "I'll see you guys later," she said as she struggled into her pack with one hand, the other speeding over her phone to let Court know she was back but probably wouldn't be at school tomorrow since her mom was going to eat her alive.

"Be safe." The door swung shut behind her, cutting off Hatta as Alice stepped out onto the street. Downtown Atlanta sparkled in the distance.

She took off toward the nearest MARTA station, praying the Red Line hadn't run yet. Hopefully, by the time she made it home, Mom would be asleep. Alice *really* didn't wanna have to explain why she was burning a brand-new pair of shoes.



As Alice raced up the sidewalk toward her house, she grimaced when she noticed a glow from the living room windows.

*Shit.*

And the front door wasn't even locked.

*Oh shit.*

Ruined shoes in hand, Alice slipped inside and headed straight for the stairs. She took them two at a time as quietly as she could. In her room she dropped her shoes and bag at the foot of her bed and peeled off her clothes. Those and her Converse went into a shopping bag, and she tied it up to throw

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away tomorrow. She'd scrubbed the last of the Nightmare gunk from her arms and pulled on her pajamas when, "Alice?" Mom's voice floated in from the kitchen.

*Hnnnnnnnnnnshit.* "Yeah?" Alice stuck her head out of the door.

The soft thump of her mother's footsteps preluded her appearance. She stood in yoga pants and a T-shirt, her hair a bushy halo around her head, somehow perfect. Alice never managed to get her hair to look that good.

Mom folded her arms over her chest. The curious look on Alice's face flattened under a stormy stare. "Where the hell you been?"

Every muscle in Alice's body stood at attention. "I fell asleep at Courtney's." The lie leaped free with ease now. A year of practice helped. "She put in some sappy love movie, and I was out."

Hopefully, Court would be okay with a retroactive cover-up. What're best friends for, right?

"And you didn't—Get down here."

Resigned, Alice exited the safety of her room and slumped back down the stairs.

Mom met her at the bottom. "You didn't hear your phone? I called at least twelve times." The dim light from the nearby lamps painted her rich brown skin in gold flame, intensifying the irritation rolling off her.

"It was on vibrate." Another lie. And Mom had only called six times, but she wasn't bringing that up.

"Mmmmmmmhm." Mom pinched her lips and arched



an eyebrow. “I don’t appreciate these games, Alison.” She shuffled toward the kitchen.

Alice flopped against the stairs. She buried her face against her arms, a sudden heaviness pouring through her. “I’m not playing games.”

“—late enough this week. And don’t blame the phone, it ain’t ignoring my calls.”

“I’m not ignoring you.”

“—got too much to do around here and can’t do it by myself. Specially since I’m leaving town next week. I’ll be gone for four days. This house, work, your grandma, I can’t do it alone.”

Alice stiffened. *Alone? Alone!?*

For months after her dad passed suddenly, heart failure the doctors said, Alice did everything. She spent hours before and after school, when she wasn’t training with Hatta, cleaning the house from top to bottom. Every day. She cooked, she did the yard work, she fielded calls from family and friends, lying to them. Then, when Mom recovered, she kept it up. She’d felt that if she eased even the smallest burdens—like mating socks or making sure the dishes were always done—it would lessen the chances of her mother sinking into herself again. If *anyone* had been alone, it was her! She wanted to scream the words, tasted them and the anger charring the back of her throat, coating her tongue with ash.

Instead she swallowed it all, like acid, and croaked, “You’re not alone.”

A hand squeezed Alice’s knee. Reluctantly, she lifted her head, and blinked in surprise to see.

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Mom held a culinary offering aloft, the heady spice of shrimp scampi mingling with the sweet tang of olive oil and tomatoes over angel-hair pasta. Her favorite.

Alice's wide eyes lifted to her mother, who settled a warm plateful of food into Alice's somewhat shaky hands. Then her mom leaned in to kiss her forehead and smooth her hands over her hair.

"You're all I got left. I can be worried."

Alice's throat swelled. Heat filled her face, stinging her eyes lightly.

"Especially after what happened to that baby." Mom came around to sit on Alice's stair and slipped an arm around her shoulders. She was talking about Brionne. Had to be. That's all anyone was talking about anymore. Well, anyone around here.

Mom kissed Alice's temple and smoothed fingers against her baby hairs. "The story was on again tonight, and I just . . ." Mom pursed her lips, her eyes shining with tears. "With you not answering your phone, I didn't know what to think."

Alice rested her head against Mom's shoulder, careful to balance the plate on her knees. "Anything new?"

"Same old, same old." Mom kissed Alice's head and rubbed her arm. "That baby's gone, and nobody got answers. It wasn't even a full story, just some words on the bottom of the screen saying the investigation is still ongoing in the death of a young woman and some other mess. Won't even say her name."

Alice straightened when Mom stood up. "Promise me you'll be careful. I know you already are, just"—she lifted her hand from Alice's knee, made a fist, then forced her fingers loose to

pat her knee again, squeezing—“even when you’re careful, even when you play by the rules, it might not be enough. Gotta go the extra mile out here.”

“You’re scared I’ll end up like Brionne?” Alice asked quietly, her shoulders hunched.

“Maybe. Maybe like those little girls down the street. That boy you used to catch the bus with.” Mom sighed, shaking her head. “A lot of us are scared, but I don’t wanna scare you, baby, I just want—”

“Me to be careful.”

“For you to be okay.” Mom leaned in for another kiss, this one on Alice’s cheek. “Eat. Then go to bed.” Mom headed for the kitchen again. “I don’t wanna hear no mess about you too tired to go to school tomorrow.”

“Good night.” Alice headed up to her room.

Stretched across her bed, she couldn’t bring herself to eat more than a few bites. She pushed the rest around on her plate. Normally, she was starving after a trip through the Veil, or anytime really—a girl burns some serious calories fighting monsters and motion sickness—but her appetite was MIA, even for her fave. Something wet and cold brushed her feet. Peering over her shoulder, she spied a familiar face of dark fur and blue eyes. “Hey, Lou.”

Lewis, her Siamese cat, purred and pressed into the attention as she rubbed his ears.

“Been keeping my bed warm?” She kept scratching. “Where’s Carol?”

Lewis paused in licking his paw to pin her with a look.

“Right, Mom’s room.”

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The stub-tailed tortie preferred Mom's California king, fit for feline royalty.

Alice sighed, her gaze drawn to a picture of her father on her desk across the room. It had been a year and some months. That's one Father's Day. Almost two birthdays. Almost two Christmases, Thanksgivings, everything else. Two anniversaries for her mom.

But it wasn't all bad. There was a whole year of Hatta. A whole year of Wonderland. A whole year of being a secret hero. Beating the shit out of monsters was what kept her from losing it. Doing something, saving people. Now, everything was okay. At least, she thought it was okay. She needed it to stay okay.

Setting aside her now-cold plate of pasta, she crawled under her blanket, turned off her lamp, and curled up in the dark. Mom's words from earlier played through her head.

"Even when you're careful, even when you play by the rules, it might not be enough. Gotta go the extra mile out here."

Having special powers might count as going the extra mile. But was she faster than a bullet? Was she strong enough to survive one? She could fight monsters, but she couldn't fight this. She was out there protecting everyone from some bad shit from another world, but bad shit still happened in this one. What if it *did* happen to her? What would the news say? No one would know she was a superhero. Would it matter? Or would she be another story with people waiting to hear both sides but only listening to one before forgetting her completely? She'd protected this world, but would anyone protect her?

Mom wasn't alone, but if anything happened to Alice, she

would be. And like Brionne's family, Mom would be left with all questions, no answers, and no one else.

*No.* Alice curled tighter under the blanket and squeezed her eyes shut. No, she couldn't let that happen. *Wouldn't* let that happen. She couldn't control Nightmares, and she couldn't control bullets, but she could control this. She could quit. She could stop putting herself out there like this. She could just walk away, and the sooner the better. Tomorrow. She'd do it tomorrow.

Her mind made up, she relaxed a little. This was for the best. For her family. There was no arguing with that. Still, she sighed and tried to ignore the sour twist in her chest.

She was going to miss him.