

ONE

Another night, another dead body that isn't Momma.

I stop digging and stare at the young woman crumpled in the hole. Small, pale, and fragile-looking, a porcelain doll even in death. She hasn't been dead long. A few hours perhaps, a day at most. The bullet hole in her forehead still shines with blood, dried crimson against a purple-tinged face.

May your spirit find rest in òrun rere. I mumble a quick prayer to Olodumarè as I take in the rest of her innocent features. The Night-walkers must have gotten to her, just like they did Momma. Despite what villagers whisper about her and Felipe, I know those skull-faced monsters are responsible for both of their disappearances.

And I'm going to prove it.

I stab the ground with my shovel, grip tight around its rust-eaten handle. Beads of sweat trickle down my face, widening the wet patch on my shirt. After hours of shoveling, I can barely pick my way through the growing pile of debris. The Agbajé foothills have become a labyrinth of skulls and bones, some old enough to crunch underfoot, others crawling with maggots and rot.

It takes three bleeding hours to dig through the hard-packed earth, only to find the next hole empty. With a grunt, I toss the shovel, letting it clatter against the mound of dirt gathered to my right.

There, beneath the rubble of turned soil and uprooted moss, a bud of fabric blooms, petals of golden thread winking in the night.

"Gods above."

For a moment, I can only stare at the àdàre scarf, the shifting sunburst patterns dotting the length of the fabric. With a shaking hand, I reach for it, letting my mud-stained fingers trace the letters stitched along the hem: *A.S.*

Adeline Shade.

Memories I struggled so long to push away come rushing back: rusted needles breaking between calloused fingers, threadbare stitches unraveling after hours of struggle. Momma's beaming face as I draped the scarf around her neck. The crack in her voice when she said *I'll be back soon.*

But Momma never returned. Worse, they never even found her body.

The ache in my chest swells, and tears gather in my eyes. I clench my jaw against the sob threatening to break free. One by one, I shove each memory away, turning my focus back to the present, to the scarf clutched in my hand.

A hot mountain breeze sweeps across the brush of the hills, swaying the light from my lantern. The darkness is thick now, a black void pressing in on all sides. Somewhere in the distance, the village bell tolls eleven. An hour left to curfew.

I don't have much time.

If I leave now, I could make it back to the village well before the Nightwalkers arrive. The queen's patrol guards are never late, pouring into the village at midnight like rats on a deadly mission. My eyes flick to the corpse a few yards away, and a shudder skitters down my spine. *I should* leave now.

Yet, the scarf in my hand roots me in place, and I can't help but wonder what else might lie beneath the dirt. I only dug four feet deep. *Two more feet.* Two more and perhaps I'd find Felipe's bloody dashiki, Momma's battered sandals, maybe even their remains. Anything to quell the rumors that Momma ran off with my best friend's father. Anything to finally put her memory to rest.

I set a brisk pace. Scoop. Toss. Repeat. But even with the sun long gone, the heat is still a terrible companion, making it harder and harder to keep up my speed. Stifling a groan, I gather another clump of dirt and hurl it to the side.

I spot two brilliant lights on the horizon, and my stomach clenches.

A roar splits the air. Two airships slash across the sky, tendrils of light trailing behind their wings.

Nightwalkers. They're early.

Move, Sloane. Now!

I drop the shovel, panic lancing through me. One second is all I have to douse the flame from my lantern, hoping to gods I'm not too late. Surrounded by the darkness of the foothills, even a light this dim is like waving a flag and screaming, *Here I am. Come kill me!*

Two columns of white light stream down from the airships, basking the hills in a ghostly glow. The beams dart from slope to slope as they search for sudden movements. I scramble down the hill and head straight for the trail. Swarms of fireflies chase me down the rocky terrain. Their low buzz rends the humid air. Beneath the canopy of trees, I can only make out tiny slants of the airships' lights, each one fighting to cut through the dense boughs. Low-hanging branches snag the ends of my braids. The thorny ones prickle my bare skin. But my only thought is of the patrol guards. Anyone foolish enough to be caught by them is executed on sight.

No questions. No pardon. No mercy.

I'm going to die.

A flash of light streaks across my vision as the beams descend on me, trapping me in their glare. In that instant, I'm seized with a paralyzing terror, and I can't bring myself to move. Then the airships come swooping down on a nearby hill, the sound of engines rattling the ground. My survival instinct returns, and I dash through a stream snaking along the foot of the hills. Water sloshes against the rocks lining the creek, drenching my boots, but I don't stop running.

Through the thicket of baobab trees, I spot a small clearing. I veer right. Acres of grassland lie beyond, dotted with thorny shrubs and

acacias, their silhouettes menacing in the dark, open space. But my eyes are on the flame flickering beyond the plains.

Agbajé village. Home.

I look over my shoulder, listening for the guards over the sighing of warm wind. Behind me, the Agbajé Range rises and falls like a sea of jagged fangs gnawing at the full moon. They could be anywhere on those damned hills. My breath echoes raggedly as I steal another glance around.

Something flickers at the edge of my vision. I reach for my dagger, ready to stab my way free if need be. Instead, a firefly twirls out of the darkness, flapping just above my head. With a sigh, I start toward the plains.

A strong hand yanks me back by my shirt and slams my body to the ground. The dagger slips free. I gasp as air rushes from my lungs. My shoulders burn, the skin scraped raw from the impact. A burly figure straddles me, pinning both knees on my arms. The acrid blend of palm wine and taba on his breath sends my head spinning. One hand clamps tight around my throat while the other holds a gun to my head.

“Going somewhere?”

The voice is cold, colder than the harmattan trade winds, and edged with equal menace. A metal skull clings so tight to the man’s face, his head may very well be carved in black iron.

Nightwalker.

On his uniform, the royal crest of the Lucis gleams—a gilded flaming torch with golden-feathered wings spread wide, as if readying for flight.

I stare at him wide-eyed. Never in my life have I seen a Night-walker. Now, cowering under such a fearsome thing, it’s easy to see why villagers call them the horrors of our night.

I thrash in his grasp, but it does no good. His fingernails dig deeper into my neck, squeezing until all I can think is *breathe, breathe,*

breathe, and I'm gasping for air, hacking up spit as my vision starts to blur.

"Please—" I'm struggling for words, choking from his iron grip. "I ha-haven't done anything wrong."

He frees my neck and leans over, his masked face close enough I can see the hunger growing in those two slits. They creep over my body and linger on my heaving chest. I don't need an oracle to tell me what he's thinking. It's right there in his predatory gaze, like I'm his first meal after a harsh dry season. A cry escapes my lips. The Lucis guard shoves a gag in my mouth.

His thumb grazes my cheek. "I haven't had a dark skin before." I shudder from the touch. "Such beauty. Hard to believe from a scrawny little thing like you," he murmurs, fingers tracing the edges of my lips.

The shudders grow until I'm a trembling mess. He smiles, satisfied with my reaction, and busies himself with a small black box fastened to his waist. When he brings the strange thing to his mouth, a low buzzing sound breaks out.

"Caught a good one," he says into it, regarding me the way a vulture would a carcass. "Told you flying here early would be worth our time. Over."

The second soldier's voice spills out of the box. Such fear roars through every inch of my being that I don't even hear him. But I'm sure it won't be long now before he, too, arrives, hoping for a piece of the captured prey.

The Nightwalker's hand roams freely until he finds the *ilèkè* Momma strung around my hips years ago. Oblivious to their meaning, he hooks his claws around the tangle of beads and tugs, letting them rattle.

My belly churns, and I wish I could somehow reach for my dagger, wish I could put up a real fight, wish I could do much more than groan and wriggle pathetically. But no matter how hard I squirm

beneath him, his knees only sink deeper into my arms, his grip tighter around my neck, his weight heavier on my body.

He's going to have his way with me. Then he's going to kill me. The way the Lucis do all their victims. A show of power. To remind us just how vulnerable we are. It doesn't matter if they capture a young child or an old maid. We are all targets, all prey to these skull-faced monsters.

They say just before death, life flashes before your eyes. They are wrong. I see nothing but the reality of this moment, the drumming of my heart inside my chest, spurring my body to act, to move. Even in the face of horror, Momma taught me not to give up.

Her scarf flutters in the wind, and an image wrestles its way into my mind. The fall of Momma's brown locks, the spark behind her golden eyes. Each memory cuts deep, like the machete she always carried in her pack, a painful reminder of what the Lucis took from me. What they're *still* taking from me. These bastards ruined my search. Because of them, I may never have another chance to make things right. And for that, I will fight. For that, I will make them pay.

Blood rushes to my face, bringing with it warmth and courage. When two fingers snake inside my mouth, I don't hesitate to clamp my teeth down on them. Hard enough to slice through calloused skin. Hard enough to feel the tangy taste of blood on my tongue. Even when the Nightwalker points his gun at my face, I don't stop biting. I'd rather die. I'd rather die now than be raped and killed later.

Do it. Shoot me.

He doesn't. Instead, he strikes the butt of the gun on my head, sending sharp bolts of pain through my skull. I loosen my teeth's grip on his finger and spit blood in his face.

"Bitch!" His hand comes down hard on my cheek, drawing tears to my eyes. Crimson gathers between my lips. "I'll enjoy making you scream, girl."

Another hit. This time, a fist right to my head.

A scream erupts from my throat, and I bite the insides of my cheeks to keep from crying. My head rings, a loud buzzing sound that drowns out the Nightwalker's brassy voice. White spots dance across my vision, and I see two of him: two skull masks moving above my face, two iron hands hurling blows at me, two mouths coughing up phlegm and spitting on me.

My eyes close.

The slimy blob running down my cheek stirs a burning sensation deep within. Time slows. I hear the Nightwalker's heavy breathing mingling with my own. The roar of my heartbeat in my ears. An echoing clamor in my skull. The heat, wretched as it always is, closes in around me, coating my skin and setting every nerve on fire. A familiar rush of life and power thrums through my veins, begging me to set it free.

No, no, no. Not here. Not in front of him.

With every bit of strength I can gather, I push back against the àse already flowing through my blood, tamp down the magic humming in the deepest parts of me, knowing what the consequences will be if he finds out what I truly am. But the more I fight it, the worse the pressure in my head flares, sending daggers of pain across my body.

My àse swells. It unfurls, a dormant beast awakening from its slumber. Within seconds, my entire body is drenched in a sick sweat. Heat, pure and raw, blazes in me like wildfire, consuming every inch until it becomes impossible to contain.

Flames crackle to life on my arms, flickering in and out of sight, but not before the Nightwalker notices. The blood drains from his face at the tracery of fiery veins bulging against my dark skin.

His eyes flash. He rolls off my arms at once, fumbling for his gun.

Fear ripples through me. *Run*, my mind screams. *Run!*

I push off the ground and slap my hands hard against his uniform, taking what little chance I have at freedom. Red sparks burst from my fingers into his chest.

A shrill cry spills from the Nightwalker's lips. He tumbles to his side, releasing me. I push myself backward as fast as I can. A cloud of dust kicks up into the air as he thrashes around in the sand, calling for help, reaching for me. I scramble farther away.

The metal skull on his face reddens, a deep scarlet that glistens like liquid fire in the darkness. The Nightwalker howls in agony, clawing at the flaming mask. It stays put, melting onto his face.

"Make it stop," he cries. "Make it stop."

Even if I could, I don't know how. Years of suppressing my *âse*, hiding my power from those who would easily kill me if they knew who I was, have made me just as much a stranger to the beast as he is. I can't stop this.

And why should I?

Even if I could, I wouldn't.

Something else snags the Nightwalker's attention. With maddening haste, he tears through layers of his uniform, revealing bare, pallid skin.

I gasp in horror at the fire spreading beneath his flesh in a growing mass of red. I've never seen it like this before, and I can only watch as clawed fingers chase the spider veins of heat fanning out across his chest.

The Nightwalker's skin starts to blacken. The smell of copper and burnt flesh sears my nose. The air is thick with it. *With him.* It clings to me like a second layer of skin I want nothing more than to peel off.

My heart hammers against my ribs. *Leave*, the voice in my head warns. *Get out of here*. But shock grips me with desperate claws, and I'm powerless against its hold.

The screams come to a halt. My gaze fixes on what's left of the man before me. His scorched face moves, twitching where his lips once were.

“I know what you are.” His garbled voice barely rises above a whisper. “Scion.”

For a second, the word hovers in the fiery space between us.

Scion. A descendant of the ancient Orisha gods.

Scion. The same people the Lucis have hunted and killed for over three centuries.

Scion. Scion. SCION. The word echoes over and over in my brain.

I grasp my head, wanting to claw away the thought, his voice, all of it. I don’t need to hear it to know what I am. *Who I am.* It’s written in the àse raging inside me, a fire born of Olodumarè’s divine energy, flaming bones and blood underneath my skin.

I am a descendant of Shango, the god of heat and fire. I am a living inferno.

I am a dead girl walking.

“You will die for this,” the Nightwalker growls with the last of his strength, a deep, guttural sound that’s more animal than man. “Your family, your friends, every last one of them. They will bleed for—”

He crumbles before my eyes, leaving behind dark plumes of smoke and ash. The flakes hit the ground like a downpour, coating my face with soot. I scream, a wretched sound twisting into the night until my throat gives out.

I’m a quivering mess, too weak to do anything but stare. For a second, I almost want to believe this is all a dream, a horrible nightmare. I will wake to the mud-caked walls of my hut, the morning sound of axes biting into wood, the strong aroma of Baba’s ègúsí soup. But the churning of hot, seething embers floods my senses like a ruptured dam, drowning me in a pool of heat and pride and fury, and I know this isn’t a dream.

My breaths come in sharp, ragged gasps. Tears I didn’t know had gathered trickle down my cheeks. I wipe them away quickly. Now isn’t the time to cry. I have to get out of here. I have to make it home.

Bushes rustle in the shadows of the clearing. Amid the chaos, I'd almost forgotten about the second Nightwalker. If he catches me, he'll discover who I am and realize what I've done. The punishment for killing an officer of the crown is death.

Cold fear bleeds through me at the thought of being carted off to Avalon, the capital island, to face the Lucis and their royal bloodlines as they scream for my execution. I'm sure it won't be a quick bullet to the head. It will be planned, torturous. A slow death. I'm a Scion who killed one of their own, and they will rip me apart for it.

No. I shake my head, refusing to accept my fate. I won't die tonight. Not here, not in Avalon, not after everything.

I snatch my dagger off the ground and push myself up, stifling a moan. My body aches, my muscles throb, every part of me overwrought from the horror that just took place.

The Nightwalker's charred face swims into my mind. With one final glance at his scattered ashes, I do the only thing left for me to do:
I run.

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