

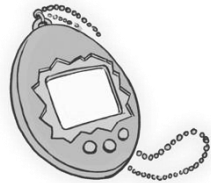
HAUNTING

Melody



And so Iliony plunged into the abyss marked by Death, her hands outstretched, until she could pluck the blue souls of her Ancestors from it. Once that was done, she cast them into the Beyond, where they were saved, and would watch over her forever.

—“Verse 3: The Ballad of Iliony,” *Thistlefeayr Tomes*



Prologue

Three kisses for good luck. Forehead, nose, and lips. It’s a ritual I’ve shared with Brynne since our sixth coffee shop date two years ago, and I’m all the more grateful for it because tonight is my First Sacred Hunt, so I need all the luck I can get. She holds me ever so briefly before stepping back and letting me put on my gear. Dad upgraded my cap-can before tonight, and the silver hose attachment has been polished to the point of perfection, my reflection visible on its surface. The pockets of my cargo pants are stuffed with bags of freshly blessed salt. All my years of training alongside my parents have led up to this.

I am ready. More than ready. *Born* ready.

So why do I feel so nervous?

Brynne frowns, her lower lip protruding in a childlike puppy pout. She rubs my shoulder affectionately, but there’s a stiffness to her touch. “What’s wrong?”

“I—I don’t know.”

Her brow furrows. “Don’t psych yourself out, Melody. You’ve got this. It’s one little ghost. You’ve bagged them on your own before.”

Yeah, but that was different. When I was accompanying my parents on a mission, they were there to help if anything went awry. They were always one floor above me, or one hallway over. Tonight, I’m entering this giant Victorian mansion surrounded by foreboding, jagged trees to capture a ghost entirely on my own—such are the rules of the First Hunt as it’s written in the *Thistlefeayr Tomes*, the sacred text of our people. Brynne lucked out on her First Hunt. The Apostles’ mission for her was to track down a little girl ghost living in an abandoned carnival on the other side of Harbor’s Edge, a city about a half hour away from Mountain Ridge. She even figured out how to turn on the carousel and go for a ride while waiting for the will-o’-wisp to appear.

With how wretched this place looks, I’ll be lucky if I don’t fall through the floor. The foundation is so lopsided, the house seems to quake in the August breeze. Many of the roof tiles are missing, and in their place are clumps of visible spores—an unfortunate side effect of too much ectoplasm in a poorly insulated environment. The fuzzy white masses pulsate with a sickeningly slow rhythm, like the lungs of a chain-smoking cancer patient. Instinctively I pull my mask over my nose and mouth. I’m pretty sure I won’t inhale spores from standing here, but the last time I had ectochitis, I was laid up for three weeks, hacking blue phlegm into the trash can beside my bed.

“Melody.” Brynne nudges my shoulder a little too aggressively.

She nods in the direction of my parents and our family’s Apostle, Simon Wallace, who have gathered at the base of the rickety porch steps. I glance overhead at the crescent moon hanging high in the sky, glowing a radiant amber even through the cover of clouds obscuring it.

It is time.

We walk over to the others and Mom squeezes me a little too hard, forcing all the air from my lungs. Dad smiles at me and tousles my russet-brown hair before giving me a kiss on the head. They're all joyful, except for Simon. For as long as I've known this man—which has basically been since birth—he hasn't liked to smile. Dark expression, dark hair, dark energy. He clears his throat, as if such a display of affection is offensive to him. With watchful blue eyes, he pinches his fingers together, touches them to his tongue (gross), and uses them to flip to the proper page in the *Tomes*. As Simon begins to recite the incantation, my mother rubs my cheeks and forehead with sea salt salve for good luck. The gristly goop seeps into my pores, and I can already feel tomorrow's breakout erupting underneath the surface of my skin. Again—if it'll help me out, I'll take it.

"Spirits in Sanctity, Spirits of the Beyond, and Spirits Ancestral, heed our prayer. Melody Myere, Whisperer in Kind, shall begin her First Sacred Hunt, and on this most precious night, we ask that the Three Bodies watch over her..."

In the light of the moon, listening to the low rumble of Simon's voice as he recites his prayer from the scripture, my heartbeat quickens. Not even the smiling faces of my girlfriend or my parents can comfort me. *What is wrong with me?* I've done this before. I bagged my first ghost when I was ten years old. It's burned into the surface of my memory like a Polaroid. Little boy in a yellow rain jacket, in the heart of the Canopy Woods in the Western Wildlands, his gray paper-thin skin melting into the open receptacle of the roaring hose—

"Melody."

I jerk my head up, my gaze fixing on Simon's unfriendly face. The tome is closed, folded tightly across his chest in the same way a young girl would protect her diary from prying eyes. It would be comical if this wasn't supposed to be so serious. I try to nod my head slowly, like I've been listening this whole time and appreciating the recitation, but Mom knows better. She touches my sticky forehead.

"What's wrong? Are you feverish?" She turns to Dad, the pace of her voice quickening as her anxiety climbs. "Honey, she's hot. I don't think she feels well."

I brush Mom's hand from my forehead. I wish that Brynne would say something, but she regards me with this bizarrely icy look, her pupils mere pinpricks, her jaw clenched like she's chewing a tough stick of jerky. What, is she disappointed with me? Why? I haven't failed yet. No, I *won't* fail.

"I'm fine, Mom." A lie. "Just...can't believe it's really happening." Well, that's true.

I felt like my First Sacred Hunt was never going to happen. When you've known about it from the age of five, but can't do it until your sixteenth birthday, I mean, the anticipation builds and builds and builds—no wonder I feel fit to burst. I'm fine. I double-check the placement of my mask on my face, flick my capcan on and off to test the battery, and drum my fingers against my chest to quiet my pounding heart. Underneath my button-up shirt, my tactical chain mail vest, crafted from the finest of blessed silver, bears no gaps, tears, or imperfections. And why would it? It's brand new. Bought special for me. Special for today.

"Honey?" Dad asks, his smile kind but his voice stiff.

He's getting freaked out the longer I stand here. So am I. He nods in the direction of the house, encouraging me to go inside and start the ritual.

I hope my eyes are smiling. "I'm all set."

I walk up the steps of the ramshackle house, each one creaking underneath my weight as I go. Once on the porch landing, I take a deep breath, then wrench open the door. It creaks loudly, the hinges threatening to snap off the rotten wood frame, but miraculously stays intact as I maneuver inside. I squeeze my eyes shut as the door closes behind me, and when I open them, I'm greeted by tarnished floorboards, weathered wallpaper roses, and a crystal chandelier with a missing light bulb. Although extravagant, the light fixture is grimy and sad, like an engagement ring that fell down a drainpipe.

Most of the furniture was ransacked over the years, judging from the scuff marks and less dusty spaces outlining where things used to be. Some stuff remains: Sun-faded family portraits hang from the walls, the

bleached eyes of their subjects ever watchful, even underneath years' worth of dust. A stained red Persian rug runs down the length of the hallway. Decades ago, I'm sure it was beautiful. It doesn't deserve to rot in a place like this—and rotting it is. The stench of ectoplasm, sticky-sweet but noxious, clings to the walls. I tentatively place a gloved hand against the peeling wallpaper, and a mucus-thin layer of blue goo sticks to it in weblike strings. The resident of this house staked their claim a long time ago, and they probably won't be too happy to see me.

I flatten my back against the wall as I walk by the staircase. This is an easy place for a ghost to jump you from above. *You're always vulnerable going up or down*, Dad told me. *You never want to leave your back exposed for too long*. As I make my way through the foyer, I pull out one of my little bags of salt and sprinkle a trail behind me. Should I need to retreat or retrace my steps, this will keep me protected. Most ghosts don't like salt. For whatever reason, if they touch it, it burns little holes through their forms. Maybe they don't feel pain, but they sure don't like watching themselves disappear.

A ceramic clatter echoes from the kitchen, and I stick my cap-can's hose around the corner of the doorway before looking inside. It's empty, aside from the lone plastic mixing bowl rattling in circles on the counter. Nothing in it. There's a giant gap between the scratched-up marble countertops where a stove used to be, rust and rot staining the wall a putrid shade of brown. No reason to be in this kitchen, but if the ghost is making noise, he's letting me know he sees me.

The end of this mission might come sooner than I think.

I sprinkle a little more salt behind me and walk through the kitchen into the dining room. Scattered newspapers and crumpled-up coupons carpet the floor, signs that someone has been here recently. A pathway guides me into the center of the room, the other side of which is walled off by an overturned dining table, cardboard boxes, and piles of trash. Something is etched on the underside of the table.

SUZIE WUZ HERE

AUGUST '00

I can't help but crack a smile. In creepy, ghost-inhabited spaces, it's always nice to find signs of people who once lived here, no matter how many years ago it was. For some reason, it helps me feel a little less alone. I run my hands over the table, pulling away tiny droplets of ectoplasm. Suddenly, a chill courses through me, and in the pocket of my cargo pants, my EMF reader whistle-whirs anxiously, its pitch undulating.

Someone is in here.

Panic flutters in my chest. I pull back the trigger on my hose, and the cap-can rumbles in warning. No point in staying quiet anymore. This is the part of the hunt where the ghost will try to assert dominance over the intruder—where they'll try to scare me into fleeing the scene. Although there's a dead end in front of me, the wall of boxes looks smaller and easier to push through a few feet down from where I'm standing. I walk over and unceremoniously kick over the boxes, then trudge through. But as my foot hits the ground, something slick grips onto it. *Ew*. More ectoplasm, gobs of it, smeared on the floor. I turn my back to the wall and grit my teeth, trying to free my boot from its clutches, but the sound of something else fills the air. More whirring from my EMF reader? No. Not the same. Then I realize it's not a whirring but a buzzing: a flurry of buzzing from desperate, hungry flies. Swirling through the air ahead of me, a cluster of them is swarming something—no, someone.

Someone is sitting on the ground.

The EMF reader whirs, its shrill screams piercing and painful like a tornado siren. Even the flies are fearful; they disperse immediately, darting toward the wilting rafters overhead. Their absence exposes the face of their last meal: an old man whose bloated blue tongue hangs limply from between his lips. A soft, rose-colored foam nestles at the corners of his eyes and nose. A gaping hole in his chest, its fleshy edges shriveled from dehydration and putrefied blood, serves as a window into his broken rib cage. The splinters

of crisscrossed bone inside resemble a bird's nest. Solidified gore, dried after the Spirits know how many days, surrounds the hole, staining the ends of his plaid shirt and denim pants.

I resist the urge to shit myself and instead grab the radio from the holster around my waist. My trembling fingers fumble to press the Talk button, and my heart quakes within my chest when I hear the chattering static.

“Mom, Dad, wrai—”

Before the words can escape my mouth, a hideous screech shreds the air, rattling the walls. My breath comes out in icy puffs as the air rapidly cools. I already know where the wraith is, but I can't help my morbid curiosity.

I tilt my head back and look at the ceiling.

The wraith floats above me, its black cloak billowing around its formless figure like a cloud of smoke. Its face resembles a mummified human, the skin so thin and tattered it's almost skeletal. Eyeless, its sense of smell and hearing are keen—it's the strongest of all the ghost types. Its mouth is full of sharp, crocodile-like teeth: prehistoric and gnarled, but tough, stained red with blood.

Wraiths are born when a living being dies in an extremely traumatic way. It's as though the trauma destroys their minds, leaving their souls lost and left to wander for decades, usually centuries. They're one of the worst ghosts you can encounter, as they are the only type that feels inclined to *eat* humans, despite that they don't need to eat to survive. Another fun fact about wraiths? They can't be sucked up into cap-cans easily. Unlike other ghosts, whose clothes stick to them stiffly underneath the layer of ectoplasm, the cloaks of wraiths are large and tangled—and can easily clog the hose attachment. Now, as for how to capture wraiths? I have no damn clue.

A drop of blood from the creature's mouth smudges my cheek, right above my mask. I grimace but remain still. The blind husk hovers menacingly over me, its spindly hands stretching toward me. I tuck and roll out of the way, which frustrates the creature enough to make it shriek. Spirits, that *shriek*.

Eager for a taste, the wraith claws at my back with sharp, bony fingers, but it hisses in pain and recoils as it grazes the blessed silver. Outside, the panicked commotion of the others grows louder as they realize what's in here with me. My radio crackles and snarls, Mom's cries desperately trying to break through, but the wraith's presence is overpowering it. I take a deep breath, spring to my feet, and sprint back into the kitchen. The bowl on the counter violently rattles and whips in my direction with intimidating force. Somehow I duck just before it hits the wall with a resounding slam, leaving a crater riddled with spiderweb cracks. My lungs feel empty and my eyes are blurry from tears, but I have no choice but to keep running.

Exiting the kitchen, I scramble through the foyer and make a beeline for the door. The salt trail I left behind earlier does not ward off the wraiths; they're tougher than that. The wraith springs after me, its claws digging into the moldy runner that lines the front hall, tearing it seam by seam from the floor, tripping me with a tumultuous wave. I crash headfirst into the railing of the stairs. The trigger for the hose jams and the cap-can switches on.

Head throbbing, I roll onto my back before the wraith pounces on me. It screeches like a pterodactyl, gnashing its teeth, and I scream, gripping its jaws and prying them open.

This is not how I want to die.

As it claws away my mask, the stench of ectoplasm fills my nostrils, and fingernails strip the flesh from my cheeks. The heat gushes from my face and the cold air stings the fresh wounds. For a brief moment the wraith recoils at the sting of the salt salve, then it goes back in for the kill. The tattered ends of its cloak wrap around the lower half of my body like a python—paper thin but constrictive, nonetheless. Over its screams, the cap-can sucks away, high-pitched and shrill. This thing won't hold it, but it's the only shot I've got.

I keep one hand fixed on its bottom jaw and use all the muscles in my arm to keep it at bay. With the other hand, I reach for the hose and jam it into the wraith's head. It screeches, twisting away from me, its sharp claws trying to tear into the hose, but unable to shred the reinforced carbon fibers. Breathless, I

stagger to my feet, but I'm woozy, and my vision is whirling before I can make it three steps closer to the door.

Thankfully, someone kicks it open, and everyone who's been waiting outside scrambles in. My mother blows her whistle, which emits sounds at a frequency only specific types of ghosts can hear. The wraith stops screaming but keeps snapping as Dad raises the Phantom Prod high above its head. He brings it down on the creature's skull, and as the weapon cracks against it, purple sparks fly. The creature collapses to the ground in a heap and deflates, the spirit leaving its shell for good. Mom takes her own vac hose and gobbles up the cursed little soul, a blue orb wriggling desperately in midair. It swirls and bounces through the silver-lined tunnel with a loud, wet *SCHOOP*, then finally enters the canister.

Mom switches off the cap-can before enveloping me in her arms, and soon after, Dad embraces both of us. They murmur apologies to me, their voices trembling—terrified yet relieved that I'm somehow still alive. Dad removes a cloth from his pants pocket and ties it around the lower half of my face, but I can feel myself bleeding through it mere moments after it's secured. Dad squishes his hands against my cheeks to try to stop the bleeding and tells Mom to call for an ambulance.

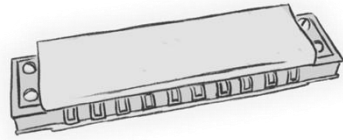
In the corner by the entrance, two people watch us, aghast.

The first—Simon—doesn't surprise me: his standard expression is one of displeasure; his nose is always pinched up about one thing or another.

But the second—Brynne—cuts me just as deeply as the wraith's claws.

Honor can only be earned through valor; such is the way of the spirit whisperer. To outsiders, one would view their society as unempathetic but ambitious. To the spirit whisperers, this is all they know.

—Peggy Harthorne, *My Year of Ghosts: An Anthropological Account of Life with the Spirit Whisperers in the West Province* (1978)



Chapter One

It's rare that someone fails their First Sacred Hunt, and even more unexpected that I, the daughter of two talented ghost hunters, would fail so miserably. Your First Sacred Hunt is supposed to be a rite of passage—a way to demonstrate to the other hunters that you've come of age. It doesn't matter that I faced off against a wraith, which not even an expert ghost hunter would've handled well. That little factoid didn't spread around as much as the reality that I failed. In our small, insulated community, the only thing that counts is appearances: who's a winner, and who's a loser. In their eyes, I'm a loser.

Especially to Brynne, who dumped me shortly after. Not that I blame her—not only did I fail horrendously, but the gnarly scars from where the wraith tore me up have flushed my attractiveness score straight down the toilet. We went to Pyke's Overlook, where we'd had our first kiss. She stared off into the distance as she monotonically told me her feelings had changed, that she wanted to commit her time to other activities, and that I was “honestly too much to deal with right now.” I cried into the strawberry cheesecake ice cream she'd bought for me and asked her if we could still be friends. She assured me that we would be, but after that, it was like *I* was a ghost. When I showed up to school the following Monday, she didn't bother to say hi. She stared straight past me and kept on walking. Icy, like the wraith that scarred my face. And our mutual friends followed suit.

So began my stint of wearing stained sweatpants and getting out of school by telling Mom I had stomachaches, which were at first fake but became real after the copious amount of cheese puffs and gallon tubs of ice cream I consumed. My nightmares were plagued by memories of the wraith, and during the day, it felt like anything—a smell, a sound, an object—could send me right back to that house. My parents scrambled to set me up with a therapist so I could regain *some* cognitive function, but in some ways, it was too late. Sure, I learned healthy coping mechanisms, but by the time my junior year ended, my grades and social standing had plummeted—while my weight was at its all-time highest.

In short, I've hit rock bottom.

Tonight I enter the kitchen to see my parents sitting at the table with a take-out bag from my favorite Indian place. After inhaling the mouthwatering savory smells, I cast them a suspicious look.

“It's not my birthday, and I know we're not celebrating my success or anything.” I plop down beside them and eagerly open the bag, but don't eat.

Mom and Dad exchange a look of concern. Dad passes me a plate and gingerly spoons chicken dum biryani onto it. The multicolored rice shimmers in the auburn light of our kitchen, but I resist the urge to dive into it.

“You're right,” Dad says. “We're not celebrating anything, but we do want to have a serious discussion.”

“About...? The suspense is really killing me here.”

“Well, the Council contacted us, and they said there’s a town in need of our help.” Mom launches into her explanation: Murkmore, an isolated island town, is suffering from what they believe to be a ghost problem. Five young men, ranging from their teens to late twenties, have turned up as mutilated, ectoplasm-covered corpses. No one in town can figure out where the ghosts are coming from, but even if they could, there’s no community of ghost hunters to take care of the problem.

Being so small and isolated, Murkmore is quite unattractive to our people, as it’s harder for us to find business. Islands only have so many ghosts, and while you could probably find business on the mainland, that means hopping on ferries to do anything. Whole lot of hassle when you consider how much equipment ghost hunters need.

But it’s not just bad because of the economic reasons, the environment is also kinda-sorta-terrible. Murkmore isn’t some tropical paradise. I met a girl from there in school once, and she gave a whole PowerPoint presentation on the place, complete with visual aids. It’s woodsy and bug-ridden and iced over in the winters. The kind of island where there’s no point to it being an island, since the waters are often too cold to swim in even during the summer. A real shithole that keeps trying to reinvent itself as a tourist trap to the unfortunate and deceived.

If that doesn’t convince you it’s bad, consider this: up until about a year ago, the place was considered a Fantastical-free zone. That means no one of Fantastical descent—witches, vampires, and yes, also ghost hunters—could live there. Even dismantling its bigoted and dusty old laws couldn’t convince folks to move there and revitalize the place. I’ve wanted to be the first in a lot of things—first to get to class, first place in a competition, first to capture a ghost—but being the first Fantastical teen on an island is not something worth bragging about.

“We know these past few months have been rough for you, and it’s been rough for us too. That’s the thing about hunters: They’re a catty bunch of people. They’re unfair and prideful.” Mom bites her lip, ashamed to admit this. She looks to my father, and he rubs her hand in support. “So...perhaps it would be good for us to move to a town where we would be the only hunters.”

“But we know that that’s asking a lot from you,” Dad chimes in. “I mean...we’re possibly dealing with wraiths there or something worse.”

When Dad says the word *wraith*, an involuntary shudder escapes my chest. The face of that soulless monster resurfaces in my mind like a wolf returning to its hunting ground. But I swallow down my fear with the first spoonful of biryani and nod slowly—after all, I’ve spent enough time in therapy now to at least somewhat control my trauma responses. Besides, I know that my failed hunt reflected poorly on my parents as well. They used to get hundreds of jobs per year and were contracted by a few rural municipalities to be their on-call ghost hunters. But in the last six months those contracts dried up, the phone stopped ringing, and a suspicious number of bills have piled up on the kitchen counter. Hunters make a living based off their reputation with the nonhunters and their governments; they hire us for ectoplasm cleaning and ghost extractions based on word of mouth. If Mom had to go to the Council to get work, shit is really, *really* bad.

“You’ve also grown up here,” Mom murmurs, her eyes sad. “And with you only being a couple years off from going to college, well, we don’t want to upend your whole life.”

Dad pipes up again. “But we also think this could be a great opportunity for us all to have a fresh start.”

He says this so calmly and kindly, yet the undertone cuts through: *Your failure has ruined our lives, and now we’re being exiled.* There is only one choice; it’s time to redeem ourselves.

What better way to do it than by facing my greatest fear again?



So, that was that. There was no send-off party, no tearful goodbyes. By mid-August, we had sold the house I took my first steps in, boxed up our things, and traveled cross-country to Murkmore.

Four days in a sweltering car and a nauseating forty-five-minute ferry ride later, we've arrived.

Mom and I walk off the ferry while Dad inches the SUV down the ramp, us waving and guiding him along. The boxes and equipment precariously strapped to the top of our car wobble violently as the car crunches onto the hole-speckled pavement. Mom cheers, raising her arms over her head. Dad rolls down the window and gives us both a smug smile.

"Like a pro," he says.

"Like a dork," I reply.

"You want to be grounded on your first day in a new town?" Mom asks.

The first thing that hits me is a foul odor: a deadly combination of rotten fish, salt from the sea, and sulfur, like rotten eggs. The ferry unloads at Murkmore Visitor's Center, which consists of a square white brick building and an asphalt courtyard filled with patches of scraggly trees and flowers quarantined behind ankle-height rusty iron fences. One of the benches has a hole smack-dab in the center of its seat, like some monster took a bite out of it. Discarded bits of bottles and trampled trash form a disgusting caulk for the sidewalk's many crevices. But nothing is quite as impressive as the seagull poop that litters the tops of the suspiciously full trash cans.

What a dump.

We get back in the car, and I can barely buckle my seat belt since stuff has shifted. Dad drives agonizingly slow through the streets, which are empty save for a few kids biking around in their still-wet swimsuits—today is fairly humid, so I guess it's the one time they can take advantage of the "good" weather. One kid, no older than six or seven, sticks his tongue out at me.

Nice.

Eventually, we pull into the crumbling asphalt driveway of our new home, a single-story ranch-style house sitting atop a plot of scraggly grass. We pile out of the car, eager to stretch our legs. Dad jingles the keys as we approach the front door. A withered ivy trellis clings to the wall beside the door. From the stoop, the imperfections in the house are more apparent: Paint chips off the white window frames, and the sconces all have cracks in them. Empty flower beds form graveyards for—ew, what are those? *Dead bugs?* I glance over my shoulder at Mom, whose brown eyes are wide and simmering with excitement at the possibility of finally implementing all those fixer-upper techniques she learned from HGTV. *There go my weekends.*

"It's cute!" she chirps, placing a hand against the trellis. The wood cracks at her ginger touch, and she recoils. "Okay. That might have to go."

I point to the distressed windows. "*All* of it has to go."

Dad rolls his eyes as he puts the key in the lock. "Nothing a fresh coat of paint can't fix."

"You guys got the place inspected for termites, right?"

Dad remains suspiciously silent as he jimmyes the key in the lock.

"Cool, cool, cool."

He twists the doorknob, and the door creaks open. The kitchen and the living room are in the same area, separated by a half wall. Piled up in front of the fireplace are most of our boxes and furniture—the realtor agreed to show up a few days before our arrival to help the movers bring everything in.

Mom scrunches up her nose as she approaches the pile of boxes. "I would've thought that they'd...put boxes where they need to go." She picks up one labeled *GARAGE* and points to another labeled *BATHROOM*. I can't help but laugh, and she laughs too.

Dad is way too literal to find it funny. "No. A mover only brings the stuff in; they don't care about putting things where they need to go."

Mom stares. "I know, hon."

"Oh." Dad blinks and looks at me with a grin. "You want to go check out your room?"

"Which one is it?"

"Down the hallway, to the left. There might be a surprise in there for you."

"What is it? A feather duster?"

"Very funny. Humor me and take a peek."

I shrug my shoulders and head in that direction. The hallway is quite narrow, the edges of the cream carpet yellowed and fraying against the walls. I can't tell if that's cat piss or water damage, but judging from the smell of this place, it's both. Behind me the windows shriek and rattle as Mom throws them open; the noise is so bad, it's like they were rusted in place. This house is so damn old I'm surprised it's not haunted. Imagine having to haul boxes around all day long and then having to suck up a soul into your cap-can. I'd lose it.

I walk to the end of the hallway and open the door. The room inside is smaller than my old room for sure, but it should have enough space for all my stuff. I gasp when I see what Dad was grinning about: built into the wall beside the closet is this small enclave, and within it stands a glorious vintage vanity. The white paint is peeling in places and the mirror has streaks, but it's beyond cute. Plenty of drawers for all my things—and wall outlets. It's also got the classic little bulbous lights I love so much. A perfect place to do makeup, unlike the bathroom I used to have at our old house, which had little to no counter space.

Okay. So maybe this house will grow on me.

My bed frame and mattress are already in the room collecting dust, but none of my other furniture is in here yet. After I've helped Mom and Dad unpack the kitchen and bathroom things, they help me move in my furniture, and then leave me to my own devices. I wonder where they're planning on setting up the workshop. At home—well, our last home—they had a dedicated room above the garage. But the garage here isn't meant for two cars, and there's no way Mom would allow Dad to park the SUV in the driveway.

Mom answers my question when she sticks her head in the door. "Can you come help me in the basement?"

"Basement?" I shudder.

I know that place has got to be filthy, given the state of this house. Mom and I tiptoe down the wobbly wooden stairs into the inky-black abyss. It's ten degrees colder down here than it is upstairs.

"Melody, the light."

I fumble in the darkness for anything: a light switch, a control panel, a button. All I feel is grime and layers of dust. My fingers meet wooden grooves—I guess there's paneling on the walls?—and I shudder at the thought of getting a splinter. Mom giggles behind me and suddenly the world erupts in light. I spin around to face her and she points to a string hanging above her head.

"Old school," she says. "But we'll get it fixed up soon enough."

Doubt it. Electrical work probably costs thousands of dollars we don't have. But I know better than to be a smart-ass right now. The movers somehow managed to bring the EctoChamber down here—a spherical object that resembles an oversized light bulb. It's meant to serve as a holding cell of sorts for captured souls, until they can be funneled through the Ingress. Speaking of the Ingress, I have no idea where ours is. Must still be packed up in a box. I'm not digging the musty smell down here, but it beats the uninsulated garage attic we had before.

Mom passes me a broom and tasks me with sweeping up all the dead bugs and dust bunnies while she and Dad haul down box after box. Soon, the space is cluttered yet clean, and Mom and Dad begin setting up their workshop. Dad beams, his smile full of hope.

Hope, which I took away from them by being a total fucking loser.

"Sweetie," Mom says, "do you want to maybe take a break and go into town? It's almost dinnertime."

I nod. "You think this place has an Indian restaurant?"

Mom laughs.



While there are unfortunately no Indian restaurants in Murkmore—a fact that almost brings me to tears—there is a sushi restaurant. This *almost* makes up for the devastating realization that I may not be eating biryani or palak paneer for the next few years (unless I'm willing to suffer through a ferry ride to the mainland, and my gurgling stomach says that I will *not* be prepared for that anytime soon). Since we're right

on the water, the sushi's cheap and high quality. Quiet, too. When we walk in there are only a few people eating. Mom points in the direction of a couple of teens clearly on a date, their fingers laced through each other's.

"Look!" she whispers, with the awe of someone witnessing a man walk on water. "Other people your age!"

My cheeks burn. "Mom, don't point."

I would honestly rather spontaneously combust than have anyone my age glance in my direction. I'm still dressed in the sloppy sweats I was wearing earlier, and plus, I didn't put on any makeup today. Maybe I should have made the effort, because the hostess flinches when she notices the scars on my face. 'Least she doesn't stare.

We're escorted to our table, and before long a waitress arrives to grab our drink order. My parents enthusiastically ask for sake while I sip on my water.

"Move-in day—done! Mission accomplished!" Dad cheers, clinking his cup against Mom's and mine.

"We still have plenty to do. So much cleaning." Mom groans and rolls her eyes. "Had I known the place was gonna be this dirty, I would've maybe sprung for a professional to come in and clean."

"No use doing that. The carpets need to be torn out altogether. Vinyl wood floors, baby." Dad takes another sip and smacks his lips in satisfaction. He looks at me with a twinkle in his eye. "You excited to start school soon?"

"Well, it beats spending an entire summer packing boxes."

There's nothing worse than an uneventful summer. Things have been so bad, we didn't even take a vacation this year. The last time we didn't take a trip I was thirteen, and that was because Mom was still recovering from her open-heart surgery. But this is going to be a fresh start. No one here knows about my failures, and because there are no other hunters here, they're not likely to care about them anyways. I'm going to slap on a flawless makeup look, a fave outfit, and walk through those school doors tomorrow a changed woman.

At least, that's my plan.