

P R O L O G U E

It is the end of all he knows. He is surrounded by a vast, flat plain. Unbroken and unending. There is nothing ahead of him but emptiness, nothing behind him but pain.

He knows he is the first to arrive in this unspeakable place. Yet he still looks from horizon to horizon, straining to see someone—anyone. But he is alone.

He is on his knees, his hands buried up to his wrists in what feels like sand but isn't really. He doesn't want to look at his wrists; they are still weeping blood from the chains, both from the actual metal cuffs so recently removed and from the newly branded black marks that have taken their place.

The churning in his belly rages like the sea. The air tastes metallic and stale. He doesn't want to draw that alien air into his lungs. He wants to savor the taste of home for as long as he can. Even if it is as fleeting as a sigh.

He has only just arrived and already he is filled with regret. How will he last a month in this place? How, when it already feels like he has been here a year—a lifetime?

A tremor travels up his arms, rolls over his back, and

lodges in his legs, turning his knees to jelly. It is good he is already down; he is not sure he could survive another fall.

He closes his eyes. Faces swim up through the darkness. His father. His mother. His brother. It is for them that he has done this. That he agreed to do this. He chooses to focus on the faces of his family. It is better than focusing on the other faces that hover in his memory. The faces of the dead. So many. More than he thought there would be.

Another face crowds into his thoughts. A narrow, lean face with eyes dark and cruel. A grin splits the face like a blade. Long fingers offer up a single envelope containing life and death, a promise and a threat.

The man who had worn that face had indeed been an angel—an angel of destruction.

Hate sits on his tongue like a thistle, spiked and bitter.

He swallows it down, grateful for the sharp edge that lingers behind his heart. It's easy to hold on to pain. He welcomes it. It helps him resist the crushing pressure that weighs on him.

He is finally forced to breathe, and the last summer-sweet gasp of his past life vanishes like a wish, like a dewdrop at dawn, like a falling star at midnight. He feels his heart beating in his chest, but it doesn't mean anything. It is only muscle memory now, a habit his body doesn't know it can quit.

He opens his eyes. The faint, flat light betrays no hint of time. It could be twilight; it could be dawn. It could be now; it could be never.

It doesn't matter, though. Nothing matters anymore.

He almost laughs. Almost. Almost.

What has he done? What has he become?

He looks again into the distance, as though he can see what waits for him in the future, but all he can see is emptiness.

No, not quite. There is a sparkle on the edge of his vision. A glimmer of something that doesn't belong here any more than he does. Deep in his inner ear he can hear a chime, a bell. A snatch of music in a rising tide. He almost recognizes it. But there is something strange about the tone. A dissonance that makes him think of dark shadows and jagged edges, of teeth about to bite.

He manages to stand. If this is the end, he wants to face it like a man.

The glimmer of light widens, lengthens, takes on shape and dimension. A whiteness cuts through the flat gray of the world. Light fills a tall, narrow space. It is a doorway into forever.

He squints and turns away, but the light pours over him, coaxing him to open his eyes.

Does he dare?

He remembers standing before the other door—the towering black door that separated him and his fate. He remembers the choice: life or death. He thought he had chosen correctly. But perhaps not. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps—

The light intensifies until he can no longer bear the darkness behind his eyes.

He looks. The door of light opens, and he sees what waits for him beyond.

And then he falls to his knees, grateful that this moment has the possibility of lasting forever.

Standing before him is an angel clothed in light, her hands on the edges of the door as though poised for flight. The shadows hovering behind her ripple like wings.

She steps through the door and glances around. Surprise flickers on her face. But not fear. Did she expect to be here? Is that possible? Has she come to save him?

She is the one bright spot in an otherwise dark world.

She is breathtaking.

She is his lady of light.



When she steps forward, the darkness seems to part around her. The heavy air shivers with the sound of chimes.

And then the doorway closes behind her. The light is extinguished. They are alone in this strange space.

She looks at him and an almost-smile crosses her face.

He opens his mouth, though he knows he has no words to speak. No words to explain what has happened. No answers. He has nothing to offer except more questions.

To his surprise, she crosses the intervening space, heading directly for him. When she reaches him, she throws her arms around his shoulders.

He doesn't know her, but he welcomes the embrace, suddenly realizing how hungry he is for contact. How fearful he is of being lost and alone. Of being forgotten.

Her hair is damp; her skin is clean and cold. She smells like the sea—all distant horizons and salty tears.

“Leo!” she says. “I can’t believe it. You’re here; I’m here.” Her laugh is almost a cry. “I made it.”

He wants to turn around, to see if there is someone else behind him, but her focus is fixed on him and he stays still.

Then she covers her mouth with her hand and surprise flits across her face. “Oh,” she says. A mouse-squeak of sound. She bites her lip. “I mean, Orlando. Your name is Orlando.” The squeak turns into a laugh. “You look so young. But of course you are. This is the beginning. This is the moment we meet and the start of everything we know. I can’t believe it,” she says again with wonder. “This is the beginning of *everything*.”

Her accent is odd. She is not speaking Italian, but he can understand her perfectly. There is a hesitation in her speech, as though the words she says are delayed reaching his ears. She doesn’t seem to notice, though.

“How do you know my name?” he says. He feels he must be careful with his words, careful with his movements. He feels like glass—transparent, translucent. He does not want to break again.

Her face lights up with wonder and understanding. “I’m here to help you,” she says. “If you’ll let me.” She smiles again, and this time there is no *almost* about it.

Questions pour from his mouth so fast they leave behind tracks of fire in his throat: “Who are you? Where did you come from? Where are we? Do you know how to take us home?”

She sits down in front of him. Her eyes reflect a faraway

memory. Her hand drifts to her neck and she touches a heart-shaped silver locket. “You passed through a door, didn’t you? A black door covered with carvings and marks?”

He nods. “They said it was a time machine.” The black bands around his wrists throb and itch. They weep. He forces himself not to touch them; he doesn’t want to remember the darkness.

He looks instead at her hands, at her fingers that are holding a heart. Her wrists are smooth, bare of any chains at all, but she has other marks, other scars. A thin pattern of links lies on the side of her neck like the shadow of lace.

“It *was* a time machine,” she says. “And it worked. And now you are outside of time. Beyond the reach of time.”

“Am I . . .” He hesitates, not sure if he should ask the question, not sure which answer he wants to hear. “Am I dead?”

She takes his hand in hers. His heartbeat is suddenly in her hands. She is not afraid of his wounds. “No,” she says gently. Her eyes are bright with determination. “No, you’re not.”

“Then where am I?”

“You are on the bank of the river of time,” she says. Her smile is a little lopsided on her face. “A . . . friend explained it to me like this: Time is a river. The river bends and loops and meanders, but it always, only, flows one way—away from the past, and toward the future.”

He listens, mesmerized as she speaks of the river of time and of the endlessly barren bank that runs parallel to it. She tells him the rules of his new life, of the need for balance, of

how to avoid the dangers that exist for him now both in the river and on the bank.

She is patient with him, answering his questions and explaining and reexplaining until the abstract becomes concrete, until he understands. And then, when he does, when the full weight of the truth crashes down on him, she gives him hope.

“How do you know all this?” he asks. “Did you come through the door too? Are you like me? Is that why you are here?”

Her lips part; she is about to speak. Then her eyes flick up and over his shoulder.

Emotions ripple across her face, one after the other, almost too fast to identify. Almost.

Unwelcome surprise. Untapped anger. Pride and hunger. Vengeance and justice.

But also, for the first time, he sees a touch of fear in her eyes.

He starts to turn, to see what she sees, but she stops him with a touch.

“Do you trust me?” she asks.

He thinks about that question for what feels like a long time. He thinks about the last time he trusted someone, the last time someone trusted him. Does he even know how to do that anymore? Or has it been torn out of him, trapped by a slim white envelope of betrayal, burned out of him by the searing cold darkness of the black door?

He is not sure he knows the answer. He is not sure he *wants* to know the answer.

But she is waiting for him to speak. And as the reflection of fear grows in her eyes, he knows there is not much time.

If he says no, she will take flight and disappear.

His heart decides.

“Yes,” he says.

She meets his eyes. “Then don’t look back.” She jumps to her feet, pulling him with her. Their hands lock together. They run, heading into the vast unknown.

The bank slides beneath his feet, unsteady and uneven. He doesn’t know where they are going, but he keeps his eyes fixed on the girl in front of him. He doesn’t want to lose sight of her.

He can hear music rising in the distance behind him. But not the silvery, shivery chimes that accompanied him through time. This music is layered, a harmony that seems to reach out to touch the deepest part of his mind, the most secret part of his heart. This music whispers, cajoles, demands. This music is dangerous.

“Don’t,” she gasps, and he doesn’t know if she is talking to him or to the music or to whatever it was that she saw that caused her to run.

He stumbles a step trying to keep up with her. “Wait—”

“We’re almost there.” She increases her pace, lengthens her stride.

“Where?”

The music seems to increase in volume, dogging their every step, chasing them. He doesn’t want to know what might happen if it catches them.

The girl veers to the right, and even though nothing about

the landscape has changed, he knows they have reached something different. Something special.

Skidding to a stop, he looks down. Just beyond his toes is a crack in the world. A deep chasm of light and motion. Fragments of shadow move in rhythm, coming together only to separate in a dance that has no beginning or end. Watching the ceaseless waves, he can hear the faint melody of the past, feel the delicate magic of the future rising up like mist.

He looks into the unspooling river of time, then down at his hands, at the shadows smudged across his wrists. He will never be free of the darkness. He knows that now.

The music is closer, heavy and insistent, trying to turn him inside out. The notes are sharp as claws, burrowing and searching and finding and taking. But the attack is not directed at him. The music wants the girl.

He sees her shoulders hunch under the onslaught. Her eyes fill with tears.

It is too much. He can't stand aside and let her suffer. Not if there is something he can do to help.

He touches her back, her shoulder blades. She trembles like a trapped bird. He turns her to face him. He smooths back her hair, wipes the tears from her cheeks, and covers her ears with his hands.

She wraps her fingers around the black chains on his wrists. The pain is sharp. He grits his teeth. His blood smears. He shudders as a strange sense of foreboding fills him.

She closes her eyes as a flash of pain twists her face.

He can feel a shadow growing behind him, a presence close enough to touch. He can hear someone else breathing.

He tilts his head to the side, turning to see who—or what—has been pursuing them.

She tightens her grip on his wrists. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

And then she falls backward into the river.

He has no choice but to follow.

Braced for impact, he falls into the shifting, shining water. But before he goes under, he manages to catch a glimpse of the man they left behind. A man still standing on the bank of the river, a golden beam of light in his hands and a bone-white grin across his face.

For a moment, the river encircles him, embraces him, welcomes him home.

And then all is forgotten.