

# Sidney

I can barely see my hands at this point. Something brushes against my leg and I hold back a scream. The fog thins slowly. I am standing on a truly enormous tree. I pinch my arm, praying silently that this is another dream, but the sensation is all too sharp. I feel something brush against my leg again and look up. A squirrel the size of a garbage truck is standing over me.

It's all I can do not to stumble right off the tree branch. The squirrel makes a low chittering sound like laughter, then barks. It sounds like words. I pinch myself again, but I can't seem to wake up...

*Hello, Sidney*, the squirrel says. I just shake. There's no way this is real.

*Oh, I'm real*, it assures me. *Certainly more so than you hope*. It creeps slightly closer. *You've always been a thorn in my side and now—it stops. What are you doing?*

Nothing, I thought, then I look down. There's a faint light rising off my skin and my clothes seem to waver slightly. The squirrel glares at me suspiciously.

I don't give it any more time to think. I just run. The squirrel races after me, but somehow, I'm faster. I've never felt so full of energy. Nevertheless, I run out of branch pretty quickly. I put my back to the trunk as the squirrel approaches, laughing again. I can feel a tingling in the bark behind me. My thoughts blur past in a panicked rush, but one rises above the jumble: I need to get out of here. The squirrel pounces on the branch where I'm standing, but I'm not there.

I look around, blinking in the sudden light. There's no sign of the squirrel, thankfully. I am standing in an unfamiliar neighborhood, brick houses arranged in a circle. The air is dead still and silent. A slight shiver runs down my arms.

A slight rustle comes from behind me, but in the surrounding silence it might as well have been a gunshot. I flinch, turning to face the sound. There's a boy standing there. His eyes are a strange, startling orange.

"Perfect," he says, seeming genuinely happy to see me. A small spark of hope flares in my chest, then quickly dies as a fiery sword appears in his hand. He advances, and there is nothing friendly in his expression.

My glow flares up again. I'm not sure what's going on but I'm tired. Tired of nightmares and nothing making sense and random things trying to kill me. Light sparks off of me, bathing the ground in pale green. I bring my hands together and the world seems to explode. The fiery boy and the neighborhood around me vanishes in a column of light. When it fades, all that remains is a field. I hear someone running up behind me and I whip around, ready to face whoever is after me this time.

"Whoah, whoah, no need to take my head off," Luca says, hands up in mock surrender.

Relief washes over me, taking my strength with it. Whatever that stuff with the light was, my body seems to think I just ran a marathon. My knees buckle and the last thing I see before passing out is her troubled expression.

*Battle has always come easily to me. I sling my armor effortlessly over my head, buckling it into place. Today is the fifth of many days of fighting. The enemy is arrayed a few hundred yards away, their line bristling with weaponry. A smile carves itself onto my features. They don't stand a chance.*

*I draw my swords, just starting to glow. My force is smaller, but the air shimmers with our power. Storm clouds gather over our side of the battlefield, rumbling ominously. A murmur rises among the enemy, but they stand their ground. We do not, racing forwards. After a brief hesitation, the enemy does likewise, rushing to meet us with an almighty clang of steel meeting steel. Lightning rips through their ranks. I dance through the combatants, my swords singing. I do not enjoy the slaughter, but there is a dark beauty to the movements, their power and precision. Someone takes hold of my shoulder and I whirl around, blades at the ready. I stop short of attacking, though. It's unmistakably Luca, though older and dressed for war.*

*"No need to take my head off," she says, eyes sparkling with humor.*

I wake up in my room. Nothing has changed. It must have been a dream, after all.

I get out of bed. My arm is lined with bruises where I pinched myself. I'm wearing day clothes, not pajamas. There is no sign of the fatigue that overcame me, but...

I shower and change in a daze. Hiro seems relieved when I show up at the bus stop.

"Where were you yesterday?"

I hesitate a moment, then decide to go with the truth, "I don't know."

Hiro seems oddly unsurprised. "Can you describe it?"

I blink. "Um... sure."

He pulls out a notebook jam packed with notes. I recount my experience and he writes it down. I decide to add all the strange dreams I've been having. I'm not even halfway done by the time the bus comes. Hiro promises to take down the rest of the story at lunch.

I climb aboard the bus, and for once I don't sit alone.

"Luca. We need to talk."