

## PROLOGUE

Cian had been looking for his badge for about a week now, everywhere from his bed to the family's training room. He'd even begun to suspect his younger cousin Janae of stealing it. She always wanted to follow him around, he enjoyed spending time with her, however, he didn't enjoy her sneaky little outbursts.

Cian hoped he hadn't dropped it in the garden. Firstly, because the garden was enormous, accompanied by hundreds of trees and even more nooks and crannies for his badge to get lost in. Secondly, because ever since he had wandered into the forest like grounds a week ago, when he was supposed to be in bed, he'd been grounded to the mansion.

He had sworn that he couldn't remember how he'd gotten out there but no one believed him. It was annoying too since he had been telling the truth... well that time. He, in fact, didn't know how he'd gotten out there. Maybe sleepwalking? Even so, it wasn't as if there were any Frights in the gardens so where was the harm.

"Master Cian" a familiar voice called, a touch of disapproval hanging on their words. A fairly young and attractive woman stood exiting the basement kitchens. There was one of the maids, who dressed in the traditional black clothing associated with working with Titleholders. Just like Cian's dad.

"Janet!" Cian beamed, "any dessert mix leftover, I'd be more than happy to help you with its disposal. I've become very good at it if I do say so myself"

"I'm sure you have. You, however, have not been able to keep your belongings out of your dirty laundry"

"What?" After many lectures of making sure he removed his belongings from his clothes, Cian had been careful the last few months.

Janet pulled out a shiny gold plated badge. Cian gasped.

“You know, that pin ended up pricking Juno when she was washing your laundry.” Janet handed over the pin.

Juno was another maid, one Cian wouldn't want to get on the bad side of. She was also the funniest of the maids.

“I'm so sorry” genuine concern took over his face, “I thought I had been-”

Something began to poke at the back of his mind, it felt almost physical, like something was trying to come to the forefront of his mind.

“Nevermind master Cian, just please be more careful in the future.”

“I will, I promise.” Janet walked back down to the kitchens.

Parallel to the kitchen door was the garden. A sprinkle of the physical force in his mind seemed to break through, not enough to make sense of, but there was a question that formed from it. Why had Cian been in the gardens at night? Usually, he'd be watching the stars at night with his cousin. But he'd never gone into the woods.

If Cian was being honest, despite knowing there were no frights in natural habitats, he'd always still felt a little off, as if something was watching him.

A sudden thought came to mind, one which he had forgotten. He had seen a Fright in the forest, or at least he had seen something. A flash of black which had faded deeper into the woods. Janae hadn't believed him, thinking he was just trying to scare her, but he was sure he had.

*Or it could have just been your mind playing tricks on you.*

It could have, it probably was.

But later, in the dead of night, Cian couldn't help but be consumed by the niggling feeling in his head. He had to go and check.

So Cian found himself under a midnight blue sky. The green trees turned to black. The air a biting cold. Cian was at conflict with two sides of himself, one telling him not to be a dumbass and go back inside. A stronger and overwhelming need pushed through though. Find out what's happening.

Cian made it further into the eerily inviting darkness. He knew the exact distance between himself and home. Every step taking him further away.

"Hello again Overgrunder," A voice from above said.

A girl unfamiliar, until she wasn't. Cian turned around.

The girl with the purple eyes spoke again, "remember me?"

## **20 years later**

The alarm was still blaring, it had been for a while now. Maybe twenty minutes? Where were the guards? the Warrior Halls should have been overwhelmed by them. Why were there so many Frights? Cian had been injured, a claw from one of them cut right across his arm. Losing blood he had to think fast, losing blood he could barely think at all. The major concern, what was the major concern right now, he had to concentrate.

He was almost certainly going to die. He was overwhelmed and the only Manifestor present other than himself was not to be trusted.

His thoughts needed to have a focus. As the Titleholder of the Warriors he had to remain focused, it was his damn job.

Focus.

He didn't want to die, so many things he would have wanted to do over.

Focus.

He needed to pass on the mantle of the Titleholder, he needed to think of someone to become the next Titleholder.

He thought of her.

“No! Stop thinking of her.” Cian thought, he couldn’t allow that to happen. A figure came into his periphery.

“I am sorry Cian, but I did warn you...” He saw her blond hair from the corner of his eye.

Cian hoped, that the leadership of the Warriors would not be passed on to her, or any of his family, the incompetent, the young, or the unknowing. The elderly, too stuck in their ways, the adults, too proud... or the youth, too free and innocent.

Whilst Cian laid there. His mind became numb and allowed his thoughts to wander again. He’d tried, with the little amount of effort he could, to make his mind go Blank. As to not let a single thought enter his mind. Not thinking of a person himself would allow the source of the Manifestory to choose its own host, maybe then he could allow for the leadership to be handed to a worthier person, one who hadn’t been corrupted by the power. The source would find the holder it thinks to be right. He tried, and as he started to go, he hoped he had succeeded.

He didn’t want her to have it. So, he tried.

- Chapter 1

Dillistra Dale, exited the caves down in the Lower Grounds. Her gloves, which would need to be replaced, were worn to just ragged pieces of fabric. Small holes gave way to skin where pieces of dirt lay trapped. Accompanied by the disgruntled cloth was Dillistra's dirtier appearance. a large mixture of water and dirt had fallen on her nearing the end of her workday, an unwanted present from one of the other workers. Luckily, her helmet had taken the brunt of it. Unluckily the liquid ended up on her clothing as well as her side satchel, which she had been trying to keep clean. She had hope that it wouldn't stain too much but looking down at herself she didn't see that happening. Now with the dirt latching to her clothes, Dillistra joined the line to sign out behind one other.

"Hello Little Dilly, how was the shift" a large man spoke. The familiar black eyes of a Warrior met Dillistra's normal brown ones. He was a regular who's name was also Dilly. Often referred to as Big Dilly by those who both knew him and Dillistra. The man was into his late forties with greying hair, he had two scars which ran parallel to each other down the right of his chin. The man gave the appearance of an old brute. But anyone who knew him would never think of him as such.

Big Dilly had transitioned over with Dillistra and a handful of other Lower Ground residents after an attack back when she had been about ten, or was it eleven. Frights had attacked the messenger house where she'd used to work. The memory was a bit blurry.

"Um, it was the same as usual, but I do have mud on my bag."

"Aww that's alright, just shows you're a hard worker."

"Yeah" Dillistra agreed half-heartedly out of respect.

The man in front of Dillistra was being checked out by another Warrior guard. However, this one didn't wear the traditional preserver's uniform, no, this was a student. His school uniform, an off white accompanied by a Blue band which wrapped around both triceps. Dillistra couldn't quite remember which year the colour meant, but she could recall it was one of the higher ones.

Dillistra might have seen some students with purple bands, which were the last years, but that usually was a very special case.

Dillistra recognised the man in front of her as a worker from the other side of the caves. The elderly man was named Coris. The student was informing Coris he had another twenty hours for the rest of the week. Coris gave a small nod before giving an ugly dry rough cough.

“Um, Sir, I can take a few hours for Coris” Coris gave a small smile. He reached out his hand and patted Dillistra’s shoulder, a silent gesture of gratitude, before quickly retreating his hand to cough into it again. The weight of his arm had been relatively heavy, showing his exhaustion from his shift.

The student raised an eyebrow at Dillistra as if her statement was ridiculous, “Is that allowed?”

It was Dillistra’s turn to raise a brow. Big Dilly clapped his hand on the student’s arm before speaking “Yes, Dillistra here is a helper, aren't ya Dilly”

“A helper sir?” the student asked.

“Yeah, she’s not quite old enough to work full time, the people here have a system for the orphans and other youngins. They’re able to take some of the older residents hours. It places less of a strain and helps out the community”

“That’s not procedure sir”

“It’s just accepted among the community” Big Dilly looked towards Dillistra “He’s new, had to get some more help. So, how many do you want to take?”

“I can do twelve”

It was now Big Dilly’s turn to raise an eyebrow, “how many are you taking off your guardian”

“She’s working the night shift, it’ll be cooler for her to work so I’m not taking too many hours off her”

“How many kids?” Big Dilly turned to flip through her charts.

“About sixteen hours left from her, doing another twelve won’t be bad”

The elderly man shook his head. With kindness in his eyes he raised his arm slowly, displaying six fingers.

“Alright, I’ll let you take some hours off Coris’s shift, wanna do six more?” Dillistra was going to protest, but Dilly cut her off “ you’ll owe twenty-four hours for the rest of the week. I’m not going to give you more.”

“Okay” Dillistra said, a slight blush took to her cheeks at having been slightly reprimanded.

“Right, get home now before it’s dark”

“Alright” Dillistra awkwardly waved at the three men before quickly turning to leave.

As Dillistra got further away from the cave, she started crumbling and rubbing away at some of the dried dirt in a poor attempt at getting it off of her.

Her eyes focused on the pieces and as she did the rest of the world blurred out, she couldn’t help but notice as the little pieces crumbled, some looking like faces, not detailed, just two dots and a line. It then shifted into those things that grow on trees, the big bulges that grew and made the tree look ugly. Dillistra recalled the trees that grew on the other side of the wall. At the Middle Grounds.. She had always wanted to climb one, to be able to see over the whole city like she had seen the Middle Ground kids doing.

There was a shocking bang causing Dillistra’s head to shoot up. The sound garring her from her thoughts of trees straight to thoughts of Frights. The suddenness of her turning her head resulting in whiplash.

Looking at where the noise came from, she noticed nothing, but couldn't help but feel as if someone was watching her. She stayed there a while longer frozen. Staring in the direction of the noise.

Dillistra quickly looked towards the sun and its horizon. With a twinge in her neck, she extended her arm fully and placed her hand above the horizon. She counted the number of fingers between the horizon and the sun, each finger width representing approximately 15 minutes until dusk. Four fingers. A single hour left.

"It couldn't be a Fright right, they only came out at night." Dillistra thought "Or maybe it was."

Maybe they had done that evolution thing and were able to adapt to shift from their daylight selves to their night-time selves before it became night time and maybe now that it was the case she would be the first to go.

Maybe she wasn't the first, she hadn't heard from her guardian lately, Shannae was often taking night shifts, but maybe it was different this time.

Maybe she was dead and it hadn't been reported.

Maybe they weren't the first. There could be an infinite amount of people who hadn't been reported.

Well maybe not an infinite but still a lot.

Dillistra smacked her head. "Get out of your head," she said under her breath as she started on a light jog. But even though she tried to focus on getting home she still felt as if something was watching her.



Dillistra knew her home as... well home, but not in the way most pictured. When thinking of home someone might think of four walls and a roof. Dillistra knew it to be the entire Lower Grounds, unlike most people in Human's Place, who often stayed in one sector within their Grounds, Dillistra had been all over the Lower Grounds.

Unlike Lirah, who sat watching the Lower Grounds from her comfy space within the Middle Grounds, she knew better than to enter the Lower Grounds at night.

Currently, Lirah stood with her cousin and watched through the gates, resenting the setting of the sun which was behind her. The warmth from its rays were softer, allowing for the chill of the air to invade her personal space.

If you did look at the Middle Ground from a birds-eye view, as Lirah was currently doing, it would seem perfect. Each roof lined in a linear formation, all dark grey in sync tiles and a harmless amount of Fae droppings. Trees were also structured, patches placed here and there with careful deliberation, just enough to lighten up the areas and allow for there to be less hostility between the Frights and the residents.

The residents of the Middle Ground, currently occupying the lanes, rarely thought of the structure of their homes. But what hadn't passed their notice was the fact that there were only Manifestors in training standing on guard, as opposed to their superiors, Preservers.

Said Manifestors, were dressed in their designated school uniforms, cream coloured clothing with lined gold seeming, and their appointed coloured armbands signifying which grade they were in. The Manifestors walked around, calling their warning of curfew. Lirah had noted most of them had black eyes signifying them to be Warriors.

A few weeks back they were out of place and became the topic of interest with most of the Middle Grounders, especially the younger kids. But now they didn't hold as much interest, some but not a lot.

As the warnings continued, Lirah and her cousin Lyda allowed the warning to lightly enter their mind. Lirah's concentration remained mostly on responding to what Lyda had just said with a smack on the shoulder.

"See that's why everyone says you'll be a warrior," Lyda said, "because you're so aggressive."

“You know what, you’re gonna be the annoying sociopathic Intellectual who gets beaten up because you choose to ask questions you already know the answers to, and you’re gonna be begging for me to be a warrior and defend you against people who don’t get your ‘humour’”

lyda stuck out her tongue. “I won’t need you for anything because I’d have back up plans for my back up plans, which will probably- maybe, almost certainly work.”

“Yeah, and get you expelled”

“Only if I get caught” Another call for curfew was announced.

“You scare me”

With a genuine smile, lyda thanked Lira. The girl coming up to Lira’s nose was only two years younger and was also her only cousin that was close to her age, others being closer to her older brother or ten years younger.

The girls walked along the gate boundary, its bars obnoxiously high and only wide enough to fit arms and legs through.

A Manifestor, this one with dull silver eyes showing him to be an Intellectual, walked towards them giving off an annoying insistent pestering presence. “We’ve called for curfew now it’s time to go home”

With a roll of her eyes Lirah acknowledged the Manifestor with a nod. When the Manifestor left Lirah turned back to her cousin.

“Alright I’m going to head home now, mum didn’t go to the meeting since Pesto is sick and she’ll notice me missing”

“Okay, I’ll head home later, nobody’s there.”

“Lira” Lyda sighed.

“What calm down I still have an hour and home’s only twenty minutes away. It’s not like any Frights actually come up here”

“Final last words...”

“They don’t, the curfew is basically only a way to keep us on track.”

“...There lays the moron, never followed the wisdom of a system put in place to protect her, because she’s so above the law”

“If I die I’ll let you say I told you so.”

“Ha nobody tells me what I can and can not say.”

“Sure, go home before your mum catches you”

Lira sat down, sticking her legs and arms through the bars and letting them dangle off the side. The Middle Ground was built slightly higher than the Lower ground, probably about a steep meter and a half above before it leveled out onto a slope which would take you to the Lower Grounds.

She gazed out at the view she had seen a million times before, but didn’t quite pay attention to any of it. Subconsciously she was aware of how the Lower lands were getting darker, the houses casting long shadows as the sun went further down.

Eventually, her thoughts turned to Manifestors. Not the ones currently patrolling, just the subject in general. In just a handful of days Lira herself would be joining the group. In just a handful of days Lira would be a Manifestor. Most likely a Warrior, like her cousin thought. She knew she could be a Fire Manifestor, since it did run in her family, or an Intellectual maybe. Any of the seven Manifestors really, other than an Air Manifestor since that didn’t run in her blood, or an

Earth Manifestor because there were only one of those, and he was still very much alive. So yeah, most likely she would be a Warrior, it did fit her personality the most.

Lirah was so consumed by her thoughts that she didn't notice anyone behind her until she felt something hard hit the back of her head. When she turned around she noticed them. The Pacheco's.

If dumb had a face it would be theirs. Three boys in the same year Lirah had been in since she first started school. They all oozed annoying especially when they laughed in unison. With hair which looked like it was permanently styled as bed hair, they were tall and gangly with awkward-looking arms seemingly too long for their body.

"Watcha doing short trunk?" The oldest of the Pachecos said, his name being Varli. You could identify him by the way his hair was parted. Left to right. Annoyed at their presence as well as irritated that one of them had hit her Lirah responded with disdain.

"What's it to you? hair for brains" At this point, Lirah was already standing, not that it made it all that better, she was still a head shorter than the morons.

"Nothing from you loser"

Lirah let out a breathless laugh "Oh that's weird considering you threw the rock at me. What did you think would happen." Lirah paused, as if contemplating something "Ah I see, I'm going to become a Manifestor and you want to see me up close for the last time, you know, since and you aren't going to become one yourself. Really, all you had to do was ask"

That got a frown from them and their posture turned tense. Lirah changed her tone from condescending to straight out hostile "My family's manifestory chamber surpasses most any other so you can shove off because we both know if you didn't have your mates around I would force you to coward"

Lirah obviously knew there were more of them, but words often left her mouth before she could filter them. Varli's lanky dumb self walked up to her. She wasn't scared of the fool by himself, but... three against one wasn't quite the best of odds.

"I'm not a coward"

"Prove it then, a test of courage, just me and you loser"

"I'm not scared of anything, I'll choose"

'Yeah' Lirah thought, 'you're so brave and that's why you're choosing'

The boy looked back and forwards. The area was now clear, with only a handful of Manifestors around. The boy then gave Lirah a devilish grin, which would have made Lirah nervous, if she ever got nervous that is.

"No ones around dufus"

"You know why that is don't you"

Yes, Lirah was aware of some of the theories going around. Everyone knew that a new Titleholder for the Warriors was being chosen since, to the shock of everyone, the last one had been badly injured in a raid. There hadn't been any official statement from the other Titleholders as to how Lord Ciain had... been beaten. Some thought it had been an over extortion of the source within him. Others, only a few, thought it was betrayal.

"They say he was overwhelmed by Frights, they say they tore him limb from limb"

"Rubbish" Lirah called out "No way Lord Blanc could be taken out by Frights, they don't even come to our lands"

"It was unexpected, and they ganged up on him, thousands where there, why do you think only the trainees are here and not the professional preservers to defend us"

“You’re talking shit,” Lirah said, but couldn’t help but feel a twinge of doubt. There were an awful lot of Manifestors; not a lot of Preservers.

“They say there are still some left, down in the Lower Grounds, where less nature is there to protect them.”

“So, what’s your point?” Lirah was starting to have a terrible feeling about this.

“The task is we go to the gate and into the lower grounds.”

“Are you out of your damn minds, It’ll be nightfall soon and it’s already past curfew”

“Who’s a coward now, it probably runs in the family”

“I’m no coward! Find out how to get rid of the guards at the gate and I’ll do it”

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Lirah wouldn’t admit it to anyone but, she had hoped that the boys wouldn’t have been able to get past the Manifestors. Not long after the dare was put forward Lirah found herself with only courage and stupidity at the entrance for the Lower Grounds.

Apparently, dumb people had enough time to memorise guard shifts, and apparently there was a two minute gap between the last patrol and the nex, Which Lirah would have been mad about but then came to the conclusion that the Manifestors obviously didn’t think anyone would willingly enter the Lower Grounds at all, never mind during a curfew.

Lirah was going to let common sense pull her back from the situation but Varli had to open his mouth.

“Come on then, unless you’re too much of a fairy to play it out”

Lirah looked at the wastes of space, “You lot are such Ogres” But she continued walking towards the gates, “What’s the task?”

“Whoever can stay out there the longest wins”

“And if the guards come back?”

“My guys will hold them off for a while”

“Yeah right” Lirah thought. Sure the guards weren’t Preservers, but Manifestors could still take them down. Which was probably something Lirah wouldn’t be so against in that moment.

“Whatever, come on,” Lirah said out loud. With that she walked through the gates. The change in scenery was immediate.

Perhaps it was the sun setting, the elongating of every shadow that she wouldn’t have paid any serious mind to before within the safety of the Middle Grounds. The lack of greenery was evident. Ever since Lirah could remember, she had been taught a lack of natural scenery brought more Frights.

She seemed to notice everything, from the noises of the houses, if you could even call them that, they were all small and looked like they’d be blown down by the strong wind that she could feel on her exposed neck. Everything seemed cooler.

Just when Lirah was about to give up on this, it really hadn’t been worth it, she heard the loud clanging of metal sliding against metal. Next thing she knew there was a sharp blow to her shin and she was falling forwards.

She heard heavy, fast paced footsteps growing further away and a shout, “Hey get back in here!”

She looked up, there was Varliy already to the almost closed gate. “Hey” she called out.

With no time to spare she sprinted forward. All sound void except for the closing gates. The gap got smaller and smaller. So small that realistically even if she was already at the gate she wouldn’t be able to squeeze past.

When she reached the gate it was already too late. The loud noise of locks setting into their place was an overwhelming sound. Louder than anything Lirah had ever heard before.

“Hey let me in!” she called in desperation.

“We can't open the gate once it's locked ” one of the Manifestors said. She had blue eyes, she was a Water Manifestor. A second, silver eyes, Intellectual, spoke.

“You need to find shelter immediately, we'll make aware the Preservers, we'll find you but you need to go now”

“But-”

“Now.” The cold, quiet and slightly panicked voice stalled any more of Lirah's words.

Not needing to be told again Lirah ran as fast as her feet would allow it.



## Chapter 2

Dillistra had been home for a little while now and although she knew she shouldn't get too into her mind, she couldn't help it. Taking into account that there was a curfew and nobody, except obviously the Preservers, were supposed to be out. Even Manifestors in the top year wouldn't be allowed in the Lower Grounds at night. Dillistra didn't expect there to be any Frights. But still.

"Okay Dillistra take a deep breath, in and out." she looked at the door, wooden and totally breakable. The noises outside only added to her panicked state, it was probably just wind or something... but then again.

She repeated the mantra: *Stay in at night, stay in, away from the Fright.*

Dillistra wouldn't usually be so shaky, she knew the guards would patrol the streets, every person had a purpose and that was theirs, but her guardian being on the night shift wasn't helping and there were less Warrior Preservers then usual. It was kind of strange, usually, Dillistra would be able to hear foot-steps every 30 minutes, but they seemed to be every hour now, sometimes even longer.

Dillistra only knew this because she had been staring at the clock. Waiting, despite knowing that she shouldn't, to see if her guardian would make it before curfew. She hadn't, obviously, because of the night shift. Dillistra hated the night shift.

Dillistra heard one of the warriors' steps as he ran by. He was 20 minutes early, or a monster. But it was lighter than Dillistra was used to, and getting closer. And closer. And closer until she heard the knocking on her door and jumped.

"Hello, is anybody there? I need help" It was a female voice, a girl really. What was she doing outside after curfew? Was she crazy? Was Dillistra sure she wanted a crazy person in her house? She was alone in here, but the girl was alone out there.

She started to reason with herself, making arguments as to why she shouldn't let strangers in. The first thing that came to mind was obviously stranger danger, a phrase brought over from

where humans first lived and remembered with a seriousness only fools would discard. Another being it was dangerous to draw attention. Her last argument was that the guards would come soon. Probably.

Hopefully.

The girl called again, voice tight and scared. Dillistra immediately went to open the door.

“I think something is behind me,” the girl said, barging in without giving Dillistra time to move out of the way.

Dillistra didn't speak, instead just took in the girl's appearance. The girl was bent over panting, obviously from a run. Her clothes were slightly dirtied by powdered ground which was highlighted by her white clothes, who'd wear white in the Lower Ground? That wasn't the only questionable piece of clothing. The girl wore open shoes which showed her toes, and it didn't appear to have been worn away like her gloves since her other shoe was identical, no one Dillistra knew would intentionally have those types of shoes. The girl had curled hair which was pulled together using a band. Dillistra would never have let her hair be simply put away like that. It would be a nightmare to detangle every day and way too much time wasted. she would always put her hair into a platt. The girl's eyes were a simple brown like her own, her skin tone a few shades darker though.

Dillistra was about to ask if the girl was a minor but found the words stuck in her throat. Dillistra's stutter hadn't happened for some time but when it did it was usually because the person was a stranger. She hadn't seen the girl around but it was a big place. The girl could have been a messenger, as far as Dillistra knew only thirteen and under could take those kinds of jobs. So, the girl may have been a year younger than Dillistra.

“Could I get some water?” Dillistra didn't respond but instead went to fetch the water. When Dillistra handed it over the girl looked at the scratched glass with a distasteful look but drank it anyway. A moment passed and the girl looked at her, holding the cup with both her hands “So do you talk?”

Dillistra continued to stare. She knew more often than not people would just get uncomfortable and leave, but the girl didn't seem all too bothered with Dillistra's silence and with nowhere to go continued talking.

"So, this is the Lower Grounds? I imagined it to be a lot worse, like houses made out of the mud and stuff" The girl began walking around the area, before stopping suddenly and turning back to Dillistra and gasped. Dillistra thought that the girl would apologise but instead, she simply said "Oh yeah, I'm Lirah, by the way, Lirah Hetter, what's your name" Dillistra muttered out her name, "what? I couldn't hear you"

"Dillistra Dale," she said a bit louder. So the girl was a Middle Grounder, perhaps higher. It did explain- everything.

"That's nice, kind of rolls off the tongue"

"Why are you here" Dillistra found herself asking.

"What?" Dillistra repeated her question louder "Oh, yeah it was kind of a challenge"

"A challenge?"

"Yeah it's a long story, I'm from the Middle Ground you see, and this complete Troll challenged me to see who could stay out in the Lower Grounds the longest, I won obviously"

"You accepted a Troll's challenge" Dillistra had let a crazy person into her house.

"Well, not a real Troll obviously" Dillistra was confused. Did Middle Grounders make Trolls?

"There are fake Trolls?"

"No, it's just something you call someone who is dumb, an insult" That made even less sense to Dillistra.

“So you accepted the challenge of a dumb person?” Where were the guards?

“I mean if you say it like that then it’s much worse than it actually is”

“You accepted the challenge of a dumb person and willingly came to the Lower land during a lockdown”

“Mmm, you know what that is a Troll move. My mum’s going to kill me” Dillistra really wanted the Preservers to come now, “Where is your mum anyway?”

“I don’t have a Ma, my Guardian is on a late shift” she looked towards the clock if the guards were on time they shouldn’t be more than ten minutes away.

“Oh, I’m sorry” Dillistra gave a small smile to ease the girl’s worries.

“It’s fine”

“Is it?” Taking the glass, Dillistra eased away from the sympathetic girl, feeling the slightest bit uneasy. Dillistra didn’t like talking about her mum, what was there really to talk about. She wasn’t here because of whatever reason and that was just life. A lot of kids lost their parents, it’s just life. Why focus on it?

A noise coming from outside extinguished any feeling that might have slipped through and covered it with worry. Dillistra froze.

Lirah noticed “Hey are you okay?”

“Sh”

The noise was footsteps. The footsteps were not from a guard, they were way too heavy, hadn’t the girl said before something was behind her.

Dillistra refused to falter. The closest thing to hide under was the sink cabinet. She dragged Lirah with her.

“Hey what are you doing?”

“Sh.” The unforgiving sound of the door breaking down caused Dillistra to bite down on her tongue hard to keep from making noise. Lirah let out a watery gasp.

Why hadn't Dillistra chosen to leap up the stairs. It would have been so much safer.

“It'll be very bad for us if the fright has heightened smell or hearing, but I don't think he has good sight,” Dillistra thought to herself.

Their crouched position behind the kitchen sink seemed so much more exposed then Dillistra had ever cared to notice, the many holes potentially giving them away.

She caught a glimpse of it. Every Fright was bone-chilling, this one was no different. An overwhelmingly large humanoid figure. Its fur looked coarse. Certain parts of the fur on its arms longer than others. Arching and forming bridges. Its posture was hunched and yet it still reached the ceiling. Sharp claws accompanied its hands. The face was long and narrowed with glowing red eyes peeking through the twig-like hair present on its face. No mouth could be seen.

Dillistra moved very slowly towards Lirah's ear and whispered, so quietly that Lirah could only just hear, “I'm going to pass you a piece of chipped wood, very carefully.” Moving as slow as she could Dillistra looked to her right, picked up a piece of debris, lifted her arm and placed it into Lirah's open palm.

“What am I doing with this,” Lirah said slightly louder than Dillistra was comfortable with, but the Fright didn't seem to notice, perhaps it didn't have sensitive hearing, it didn't hurt to find out for sure.

“Flick it through the gap and make noise in another part of the room.” She watched as Lirah placed the debris on the edge of her right thumb and then placed her right pointer finger behind

the debris readying herself to flick it. Lirah propelled the chipped wood as far away as she could. It landed outside the sink's holy door onto the floor, purposely away from the place she assumed was the staircase. It made a dull thud.

The Fright didn't move. Its focus still by the main door "Were not working with a Fright with a heightened sense of hearing, but it must have something, maybe touch"

Lirah thought back to her schooling "That's... not as bad as it could be I guess"

"Please don't test our luck"

"Yeah, you're probably right. It wouldn't be good for it to get its hands on you, they are pretty strong and fast. Well, I mean, it's not good to let any fright get its hands on you, cause you know"

She mimed something being crushed between her hands. The fright began to move around the room, searching for something. Probably them.

"Hey, please stop it."

"Yeah, yeah, okay. How long until the next patrol guard appears?"

"I'm not sure, tonight they've been irregular, they usually come every forty-five minutes to an hour,"

"Well, how long has it been since the last one came?"

"I don't know exactly, maybe fifty"

"Well, I've been here for, what, ten, fifteen minutes" Lirah seemed to be thinking "But, it won't matter if they're coming at irregular times."

Had it only been fifteen minutes, it had felt like at least thirty to Dillistra.

“Well if the fright relies on touch, and it seems like it’s blind, since it hasn’t seen us yet, then then, I don’t know what to do. We should just wait it out, right?”

Dillistra had no idea but the plan seemed reasonable. Just wait until the Warriors got here and saw the broken door.

The plan would have been fine if the door to the sink cabinet hadn’t fallen just then. The Clock chimed five minutes till midnight.

“Go, GO, GO!” Lira Whisper in urgency and they ran towards the flight of stairs, every creak of the faulty staircase seemed to echo around their stomping feet. They heard it following, its feet clipping against the floor at a regular and fast pace. Tap tap tap tap.

“In my room” Dillistra pulled Lira into her room, entering through the drapes.

The main town clock’s muffled chimes could be heard ringing through the house. It was midnight. The Fright was just outside the door. Lirah had arrived at least twenty minutes ago. Dillistra silently begged that someone would arrive soon.

“Keep quiet” Dillistra whispered. The shallow pants coming from the Fright’s breathy exhales mixed with the clock chimes was creating a rhythm almost like a song. The clock stopped chiming. Dillistra could feel her heartbeat taking its place, quickening, becoming increasingly louder.

Her breaths became sharp and choppy. Dillistra covered her mouth with the palms of her hands for a moment before feeling suffocated and releasing her hands from her face. “Where’s your safety alarm?” Lirah asked.

Lira saw its shadow. A monstrous thing consuming the narrow path, a path toward its prey, and the path toward the girl’s doom. It’s footsteps coming to a slower pace, more careful, that scarred Lira even more than its rampage.

“Our what”

“The alarm you pull to get help, or maybe a weapon’s hideaway cabinet, something” Lira said with more urgency.

“We don’t have that” Dillistra looked at the window “But chucking stuff out of the window normally helps get attention” Lirah gave Dillistra a look.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah”

“For the love of...” they heard the fright coming back down the hall towards them and Dillistra put a single finger to her lips.

The Fright seemed to be only moments from the room. The drapes which acted as a door.

“Why did this girl not have a real door,” Lirah thought, of course, it didn’t matter since the fright would have been able to break into the room anyways.

If they were dealing with a tough Fright its force behind its touches would decimate anything in its path.

“Okay then, we’re throwing things out of windows” Lirah made her way to the bed positioned under the window and threw the first thing which came to hand.

That’s when, as if out of nowhere, the Fright caught ahold of Dillistra’s leg. The force of the pulling caused Dillistra to smack her head on the floor. Hard. Her sight went blurry.

\*

Priority was in the eye of the beholder and Janae’s Priorities were not of the Lower Ground. Amongst almost a thousand others in the Higher Ground, in the Manifestory Hall, from the new Preservers aged eighteen to the wisest of ninety-four.



Janae was consumed by thoughts of the Warrior Spirit, currently lying still. Its form metamorphosed into only the outline of its original self. Identical to cats which originated from where humans first came from, the Warrior spirit had sharp thorns which ran along its tale and the tip of its head. The Warrior Spirit, containing the Warrior Source which would grant the next Warrior as the Titleholder for the rest of the Warriors.

The, what some may say, celebration didn't only hold Warriors. The announcing of the Titleholder resulted in all Manifestories gathered.

The clock chimed its warning, five minutes till midnight.

Warriors took the front stage, whilst the rest of the Preservers stood behind. Warriors, Intellectuals, healers and elementals all slightly excited for the new Titleholder of the warriors to be named, whilst also being slightly guilty for why they were all there.

"I recognise that face" The Earth Titleholder, the only one of his kind stood with Janae. The elderly man would be placed in the wiser section of the group. His hair, although grey and short, was tied in a neat ponytail. "I recall my transition, it was more persona, different from yours and the other Titleholder's, but still a confusing time"

"It's always been such a conflicting time for me, and well now... I don't know why anyone would call this a celebration"

"Well, whilst my prior mentor wasn't a family member, the bond was still strong. Losing someone close, even, and sometimes even especially because we take their Titles, their legacy, their teachings."

Janae couldn't help but laugh slightly "I seem to remember some of the Titleholders calling him a childish dreamer."

"I still stand by that" The Titleholder chuckled, "And yet I think that was one of his best qualities. whilst... unorthodox in his ways, he still was a great Warrior. A breath of fresh air"

It was quiet for a moment, both contemplative, before Janae spoke again “The other Titleholders don’t think I should become one of them, don’t think I’m ready”

“Nobody is ready in the beginning” He however didn’t say all he felt about the young woman standing next to him. It wasn’t his place to make judgment on her character.

“Cian always seemed ready, and he was young as well when.”

The Earth Titleholder gave a soft chuckle, “He was young, wasn’t he? I feel ancient myself” he was quite old and had seen six transitions with leaders in his life, his own being one in itself. “Honestly, I think my time is up as well”

“Oh come on now, you still have a few years in you”

“No, I feel the source pulling away, the new batch of manifestations will have the opportunity to gain leadership, and then I’ll teach them what I know”

“Seems I’ll be working to become ready alongside them. I’ll be honoured to spend the next few years with you”

“As well I”

The clock struck midnight, “Its time”,

The Warrior Spirit turned a bright blue before slowly, starting from the tip of its nose became a flame. The flame rose, towering over the crowd before turning and twisting violently. The fire seemed to lose its colour, turning to a dark grey colour before becoming smaller in size. The flame became an oval shape, condensing into a ball before spinning slower and going to a standstill. The source slowly floated in the room, heading towards the obvious choice. The younger cousin to Cian. Janae. But suddenly, the source flew out the window.

One voice in the crowd spoke the thoughts of the many. “What just happened?”

“Check with other family members, the fool was often sentimental towards the children, his mind may have split towards one of them in his final moments.” another spoke.

The Earth Titleholder found it half-humorous, half irritating how people’s minds turn when they don’t get what they want. You never know a person’s true self until they show what happens when they don’t get what they want. He glanced at Janae, the woman stunned and silent.

But still, a question which latched onto every person in that hall took priority: “who was the Titleholder?”

A handful of people ran towards the source. It’s blue fluorescent light leaving a slight trail as it exited the window. Whilst some tried to catch it The Earth Titleholder noticed some of the higher class keeping a close eye on its direction. Janae, suddenly snapping out of her shock, seemed to be tracing her finger, keeping track on where it was targeted. Suddenly, the light disappeared into the darkness.

Janae turned 180 degrees and without a word headed towards the doors, whilst many tried to talk to her she ignored them. She only had one thing on her mind.

\*

Dillistra watched as it happened. Lirah had been about to throw her pillow which was meant to be a signal, at the fright when a fiery blur flew past her, striking her right in the chest. She fell to the floor.

The fright had gotten her, but when had Frights developed Fire. What the hell was that thing?

The Fright freaked out, its large clumsy footstep making a ruckus as it dropped Dillistra. Trying to get away from her. The commotion with the glowing thing was just what was needed to divert its attention.

As Dillistra stood up, readying herself to move out the way, a burst of hot burning pain erupted in her chest. She fell to the floor once again, not able to get back up.

Lira was scared the Fright was going to step on the girl. Dillistra was starting to struggle, continuously moving and moaning, seemingly in distress.

“Shhh” Lira tried desperately to call for the girl to stop but there was no use in it. Being quick on her feet Lira picked up the first thing she could see, a manual slate, and threw it, aiming for further down the hall. However, handshaking, she failed. Instead, the flat stone hit the edge of the doorway, ricocheting towards the fright.

To Lira's surprise instead of the expected noise of the object hitting the floor, there was an accompanying one. Downstairs. The Fright ran towards the commotion.

Lira sighed with relief before recalling the girl on the floor, had that been what she thought it was. Was this girl, Dillistra, a Titleholder.

“Oh for the love of every Fae!”

## CHAPTER 3

In the early morning Lira was startled awake.

“Lira, you need to wake up” Dillistra whispered, Lira sat up near what was left of the bed.

“What?”

A warrior came into the doorway “common kids, let’s get you down to the front room”

There were now multiple warriors walking downstairs. One walked towards a weapon, which was embedded into a wall. With one firm tug it was pulled out leaving a large hole in the wall.

The Warrior, a large man with a greying beard, directed Lirah and Dillistra to sit down on the couch.

“Do you remember what happened?” Dillistra asked.

Lira was bleary-eyed, but it did all start coming back. She recalled the blue orb immediately, it couldn’t have been a source, could it? Lirah sighed, Of course it was. She remembered it in her classes, a picture of the orb during a brief ‘manifestory and what to expect’ class.

“You got hit with the warrior source”

“What?”

“You got hit with the warrior source” Lira could admit when tired she was very blunt. well, she was always blunt, but that wasn’t the point.

Lirah looked around the room. It was trashed. Pieces of glass were being cleaned up off counters and the floor. Shrapnel had been indented in walls tearing them up and exposing a hollowed out wall. Lirah hadn’t noticed before but looking up at the ceiling was what looked like recycled pieces of reinforced straw.

“But I don’t want it,” Dillistra whispered.

Lirah gave a confused look, “Want what?”

“The Source” Dillistra sounded exasperated.

“Oh, well, I don’t know what you want me to say” Lirah tried to rub away the sleepiness.

“You can’t tell anybody about this, please!” Dillistra said louder. A Warrior turned his head towards the girls before getting distracted again. Dillistra turned her head away, a small blush marking her cheeks.

“Umm, I’m not sure that’s how this works, they’re gonna find you eventually” and then Lirah would get busted.

“Listen I don’t want this,” Dillistra complained.

“Yes, you’ve said that already, but Dillistra I don’t know what you want me to do about it. Just deal with it, and get over it. It really is an honour you know.” Just then the Warrior came over and knelt down to be at face level with the girls.

“Where are your guardians?”

“Work” Dillistra replied at the same time Lirah said “meeting”, Lirah continuously rubbed at her face, she turned to see Dillistra who only seemed slightly tired.

“Okay, do your guardians know where you are?”

This time only Dillistra replied with a yes whilst Lirah continued to feel like she might drop dead with exhaustion.

“Fine, I can see you're tired, we'll deal with the house's destruction, and get your guardians to fill out the sheet later,” the Warrior said, directing his attention towards Dillistra.

Dillistra's mind was all over the place, she looked at Lirah, was she going to tell anyone? “We don't have anywhere to put you, we'll set up guards today and will continue tomorrow, is that okay.” Dillistra nodded, but there was no response from Lirah, she had fallen back asleep.

“Hey, girl, where's your house, you're going back now” she woke up with a sudden jerk of her head and stood up.

“What do you want?” Grouchiness taking the reins, Lirah scowled.

“Excuse me?” The Warrior said with narrowed eyes.

“She isn't from here sir” Dillistra spoke.

“She's not?” Dillistra shook her head, the man turned back to Lirah “Go to the Warrior outside, he'll take you home. His name's Jouk”

Lirah rubbed her hands to her face, trying to wake herself up as she started to walk out without saying goodbye. Dillistra thought that she should say thanks, but then felt awkward. She then remembered it was the girl's fault anyways, so she left it alone.

\*

“The lower class was kinda crazy,” Lirah thought as she stepped over the busted down door. “Who wouldn't want to become a Manifestor, and a Titleholder at that.”

A second thought came her way. How come none of the Warrior family was selected? Were they all dead? That couldn't be possible right. Lirah knew that it was dangerous to be a Warrior in the olden times. The war between humans and Frights was awful and all but it wasn't the olden times anymore. And sure, Lirah didn't keep up with news as regularly as her cousin, but she was pretty sure she would have heard something about the entire family being wiped out.

A thought struck her just then. An Obvious one but still. Lirah Hetter had gone up against a Fright... and it wasn't registering with her that she should have probably been terrified, and yet she wasn't.

"Loraino will be taking you back to your house, where do you live." The head guy said.

"The middle grounds" The man stopped what he was doing.

"Not the lower grounds? What are you doing down here"

Lirah looked back at the house, should she tell the guy about the Source entering Dillistra's body. It would almost certainly divert the attention from her and get her out of trouble. Oh for Fae's sake, she wasn't Dillistra's mum, she didn't even know the girl, who was she to tell this girl's secret. So, she lied. "I was visiting my friend"

"You make friends with the lower flock?" He gave her a suspicious look, his pointer finger tapping the side of his gadget.

"Yeah and what?"

"So, you were visiting your friend from the lower grounds, at night?"

"It was a sleep-over"

"Kid I think you are going to cause me more trouble than you're worth, we'll just have to ask your parents."

"Oh yeah," Lirah thought, she had parents who would unravel her fabrication, and then her existence. She was so tired, so she just nodded and said out loud "mhmm" then they left.



“Lira you have better come home with at least one broken leg because I don't want to have to come up with a plan to hide the fact that I, myself will have done it!”

Lira heard the dishes in the sink clinging and clanging with her mum's harsh actions, which were not a good sign. The references to the dark times in their civilisation was a normal occurrence, one their family hadn't given up on. But angry physical labour was a completely different thing.

Turning to her dad she pleaded “Dad, please let me go to my room. I beg you”. The look on her father's face was all that was needed to be said, he was in no mood to humour her. He took her shoulder and forcibly guided her into the kitchen.

Lira's mother's back towards her built-up anticipation worse than the actual confrontation.

\*

The child was going to be Hanna's end, so many idiotic things that children could do, and she chose to get stuck after dark in the lower grounds. Hanna had tried her hardest to never have her family be exposed to that life until they were old enough, and her daughter willingly went.

Hanna had seen Frights first hand, fought them, lost people to them.

Not being able to handle her emotions quite yet. Confusion between relief, despair, happiness and anger, Hannah kept her back towards Lira.

“Lira, don't I give you quite a lot of freedom? I Don't ask too much out of the basics...” She sighed and turned around. “How could you act so idiotically?”

“I didn't mean to get stuck on the other side mum.” Lira's voice was quiet, which was a rare case. It showed remorse, that was a good thing, and at least she hadn't done it out of boredom. Lira's posture was smaller, her innocence radiating off of her. Hanna often found herself amazed at kids. Thinking about herself at their ages she wondered if she'd been that small and naive, it felt like a week ago she was starting school, yet then again it felt forever ago too.

“Okay, What was so important you had to risk your life and go into the lower grounds, hm?”  
Hanna was using everything inside herself to not blow up.

“I was challenged.” Her voice was quieter than ever. Hannah hoped anything and everything that her daughter’s voice had gone that low because she realised how ridiculous she sounded. Hanna wanted to scream or cry and Ryo, being married to her, must have seen her explosion coming because he stepped up and wrapped his arms around her.

“Lira I am so furious at you that I’m not even sure what to do with you, grounding you is nowhere near a decent enough lesson to give to you!” she shouted, before saying with a calmer, but in Lira’s opinion worse tone “I’m so disappointed in you.”

Ryo stepped in, “Lira go to your room.”

“But I-”

“Right now!”

After she was gone Hanna turned her face into Ryo’s chest before giving out a half sigh half cry.

“She doesn’t understand love.”

“I know”

“The middle and higher grounds aren’t exposed to life outside their bubbles.”

“I know”

“But they’ll learn, Han, They’ll understand soon enough.”

That was the hardest truth to come to terms with. Hanna knew her little girl would learn, and knew she had to, but she also didn’t want her little Lira to have to know. She wanted a change, one that, if she was going to be honest... She never thought would come.

\*

“What happened to the door?”

Dillistra woke up, feeling slightly uncomfortable as if she needed to pop her back and release some pressure. Her spine had an unpleasant tingling feeling and it seemed to be concentrated in the centre of her back. As Dillistra sat up she tried to stretch it out, then she turned to her side, pulling on the bed frame to try and crack it out of her system. which ended up doing nothing for her.

“What the hell happened to the door?” Shannae’s bent posture covered the entryway. Her eyes furious and tired from her night shift, tight curls with more white than her original auburn coloured hair tied into a messy bun. Her clothes were covered in coal and bits of dirt lay on the edges of her face. She wore the traditional brown uniform of workers.

“A girl called Lirah from the middle grounds broke in with a fright” Dillistra spoke quietly. Dillistra finally managed to click her back to release some tension from her spine’s centre, but it seemed to fan out instead of dissipating.

Shannae covered her ears and screwed up her face, “Stop that, it is gross, also speak up when talking, you know my hearing isn’t good”

“Sorry” Dillistra apologised and stood up.

“Good, now seriously, what happened to my door?”

“I am serious”

“About what?”

“Frights”

“Oh no!” Concern lined her face, her anger immediately turning into a frown as she walked towards Dillistra “Are you okay, any bruises?”

“No, I mean-” Did she really want to tell Shannae about the whole Titleholder issue. Dillistra herself hadn’t decided how she was going to handle the situation. She had either been too tired or busy to deal with it. “Um the Warriors will be back” probably “But I need to go to work now”

“I think you can skip out on work today”

“I can’t I took some of Coris’ hours, he didn’t look well and I offered”

Shannae seemed hesitant for a while. Her dreary eyes looked far darker than her complexion, almost like a bruise of her own. Dillistra couldn’t help noticing how heavily Shannae was leaning against the doorpost. Getting up Dillistra went to help the woman but she simply lifted her hand “I don’t want you taking too many hours Dillistra”

“What else am I going to do?”

“Go play”

“With who Nae-Nae, there aren’t many places around here with kids my age”

Shannae sniffed. “I still don’t want you in those caves too much, your body’s still growing”

“The Healers come and help us with that every year”

Shannae gave Dillistra a look, “No speaking back to me young lady, my word is law in this house”

“Okay but I’ve already committed to these hours”

Sighing Shannae said: “Goodnight Dilly”

Dillistra took that as permission to go.

“Morning” Dillistra stood up and stretched once more, “common” she grunted. Ducking under her bed and pulling out her draw Dillistra fished out her work suit. Brown cottoned clothing with a singular white patch, which was sewn on her shoulders so she could see if the item of clothing needed washing. It did, but it would be fine, if she had been working as a messenger then that would be different. She pulled on her side bag and took out her gloves, the secure fitting of it around her hands comforting, although it had developed a small hole which would soon turn bigger.

She looked around her room. The scene was slightly obscured by the lack of light from the sun, only slithers were available since the building opposite blocked most of it out. When she went down to the kitchen/front room where things were out of place, the cupboard under the kitchen had its doors torn off and the door was a poor attempt at a door only leaning slightly against the wall.

“Woaw” rubbing the sleep out of her eyes she walked out of the barely-there door.

The Mine was a half an hour walk. Dillistra’s neighbour’s child must have gotten up earlier and taken the shared bike so she’d have to walk.

She arrived at The Mine, having taken some alleyway which she probably shouldn’t have, but since it was day time. Any Frights that hang out there would have been their mini size, basically the common pest, and she’d be able to kick the little beasts away.

“Dillistra, my girl, you clocking in today? I heard you were hit by Frights” Big Dilly called.

“Yeah Dill, just till lunchtime though, wanna make sure the door gets fixed, especially since...”

The Fright could potentially find its way back, not that it should since now there should be more guards.

“Hey, little Dill. You spaced out again. After today you’ll owe eighteen hours”

“Right, sorry, just need to get some stuff done.”

“Aright then, but did you eat?”

“Not really hungry,”

“Which means you forgot to eat” Yep. “here kid, you can’t be working that long and not eating, it’s gonna get hot as well.” He passed her a seeded bar.

“Thanks, Big Dill, See you later”

“See ya little Dilly”

Getting into the cave and picking up the pile of bags from its designated area she walked over to her space and got ready to collect the tin ore that had dropped from the older workers.

“I’m here Lawk,” shoving her helmet on her head she got to work, catching one one of the raw ores as it fell, running to the trays to shift out the dirt and then running back.

After a couple of hours, Dillistra and the other miners were starting to feel the heat. Building up sweat and a pungent smell. There was a call for a water break, bringing section A to a halt to have their fill of water. Dillistra was in section C so she had to wait.

“Dilly rest a little longer till after our call, we’ll get back to work after,” Lawk said, the man didn’t talk much but it was fine, Dillistra liked to think and come up with stories in her head. If she could do it she’d do it all day long.

Just then Big Dill walked up to Group C and B who had joined them in their rebellious resting period.

“You know one day you lot will get caught”

“They can suck my toe,” Ginga said, collapsing next to Dillistra and two other kids who had joined. “Those prim and proper lots wouldn’t be caught dead down here, and the guards this round are cool, one’s my cousin Jerda.”

“That’s true. Besides,” Dill said. He positioned himself next to Dillistra’s, “There minds are on the mysterious new Warrior Titleholder”

Lawk took off his safety hat, one of the kids, who must have been new since Dillistra hadn’t seen him before said: “Don’t you have to wear that at all times, protocol says so.”

“Fuck protocol,” Lawk said.

As the new kid began taking off his own helmet Ginga smacked his head to keep it there, “you don’t get to fuck protocol until your 21, you hear me kid” the kid fastened his helmet back on.

“So, what do you mean ‘mysterious new’ holder, what happened?” Lawk said stretching his legs out.

A loud announcer called out “Group B go collect your water” one of the youngest kids from group B left to bring back the water.

“Well, my great uncle is married to one of the Warriors right, and he told me the thing just went flying out of the window”

“What, why would that happen?”

“Well, either the Warrior family are actually dead or the late Lord Blanc didn’t think of anyone to give over his title to when he passed and the source just didn’t think any one of ‘em worthy.”

“Why wouldn’t the Lord have thought of anyone, and why wouldn’t any of the family be worthy?” Dillistra spoke up.

“Well, Little Dill, he may have been brain dead before he was incapacitated, so no thought, that is the best guess people have. Otherwise the next in line would have been his younger cousin. Well we assume anyways, and for your second question... I don't know, maybe they just weren't ready, or the right ones for the time”

“So, it could go to any random person? How would the person be able to know what to do if they're inexperienced? How would the person give it back” Dillistra would have asked more questions but the announcer called out for group C

“Go on D, it's your turn,” Ginga said

“Oh, just tell me quickly,” Dillistra looked desperately at Dill

“Why are you so eager? later, go on, it's hot down here.” Lawk said swatting at Dillistra to go.

Once Dillistra came back with the water another announcement rang through, “Years younger than sixteen, you've been ordered to finish for the day, conditions have grown too hot and we have been advised to send you out, everyone else continue with your service until one pm when you'll be dismissed. You shall all make up the time missed from your absence another time.

There was an echo of groans, plans made by miners would probably have to be rescheduled. Dillistra wanted her answers, but she was already being herded out of the cave.

\*

Lira was hesitant to come down the stairs. She hadn't wanted the event yesterday to spiral out of control. Looking back on it it was dumb. Those types of situations happened a lot with Lirah. In the moment it seemed fine. It was supposed to be an in and out job, not taking any time at all. how was she supposed to know that the gates were closing earlier? and nothing had really happened anyway. Sure there was a Fright, but she was alive wasn't she.

So, as she waited in the hallway she braced herself for what was to come next. She could hear subtle sounds coming from the kitchen.



“So I heard you messed up yesterday,” Lira jumped at the voice, she turned around to see her older brother, Jaze, he was eighteen, already in his final year of Manifestory Academy. “How is it? to mess up that is” he laughed.

“Shut up Jaze”

“I’m just kidding” he turned serious then, “so you’re okay, no parasitic illnesses right?”

If Lirah was being honest she hadn’t even thought of that, was that a possibility, but she immediately replied with “of course not!”

“Because there is one which-”

“Jaze, leave her alone” her mum had come into the hallway, grabbing them both and dragging them into the kitchen. Lira grabbed the bowls and spoons, whilst Jaze grabbed the food.

“When did you get back?” Lira asked her brother, not sure where she stood with her mum.

“Sunrise” went back to quiet.

Lira decided to try to break the tension with her mum. “I’m really sorry mum.”

“What is it you’re sorry for?”

“Making you and dad worry about me, it must have been awful.”

Hanna replied with a sigh before continuing. “Lira, we were worried, it's so dangerous out there.”

“I know”

Jaze intervened “No you don’t”

“Yes I do”

“Nope, you’re bubble brained, apparently I don’t even know, according to my coach, which as you should know is quite out of the ordinary.” Jaze smiled, while Lira groaned.

“Neither of you knows yet,” Hanna said, making the kitchen go quiet again. “Lira I’m still not all too sure of how to teach you without you experiencing it first hand for yourself, but when you do learn I you’d better remember what you did, then come to me and apologise on your knees, till then you’re grounded until you go to school, and I expect you to never, ever break my rules again, do you understand?” Lira nodded.

Jaze leaned over the kitchen table and ruffled her already messy bed hair “awe you’re just so cute, cutie wutie” Lira smacked his hand before trying to pull at his nose, “beat it dandruff head.”

“Says you ego the size of a house.”

“If you guys don’t stop I’ll knock both your heads together.”

“You know,” Jaze said, “I think I know where you get your violence from.”

“Watch yourself”

“Yes ma’am, I love you, ma’am”

“I love you too”

“Who loves who?” Ryo asked, just having walked in.

“Jaze” Hanna replied.

“I love you too!” Lira cut in

“And Lira”

“Yeah loves giving you heart attacks,” Jaze said.

“Jaze”

“What?”

Lira snarled at Jaze.

“Oh, dad, who do you love the most now that it’s obvious Lira is a delinquent child?”

Ben gave him a look before going towards Lira to give her a kiss on her bed hair. He answered with no hesitation “Your mother”

“Smooth” Jaze said. Ryo gave him a wink

“What why?” Lirah asked.

“Because she doesn’t give me headaches-” under his breath he added ‘most of the time’, and she replied

“I heard that.”

“Oh see, my statement about your smoothness is now rescinded,” Jaze said.

“- And I chose her, whilst I had to take you mutants in, she also doesn’t drain my wallet.”

Hanna rolled her eyes “thanks love, you too”

“Wow dad, you’re really showing a person why they should love someone”

“Why thank you, son, I’m glad to be of help.” he walked over to Hanna before twirling her around, making her squeal “Thank you for helping me a good role model to these minions who were obligated to call our children.”

“Ben you’re so stupid” but she was smiling, the atmosphere no longer tense of anything.

“I’m you’re stupid”

“I think I just threw up in my mouth,” Lira said.

“You must have contracted some kind of disease from all that parasite you call hair,” Jaze said.

“I think it’s just from being around you for too long”

“Whatever, I wonder if you can feel the bacteria growing” Lira’s hair did start feeling itchy.

“Why don’t you go back to your girlfriend, miss mop, I’m sure she’s missing you in the janitors closet down at the lab.”

“Shut up pipsqueak”

“Make me broom lover.”

“Alright, alright,” mum said, “I’m gonna be going down to the company, we need to issue a search of Human Hail.”

Ryo put his bowl into the sink. Lira didn’t know how the man had been able to multitask with conversation and eating, Lira’s bowl of cereal had gone soggy, but of course, she still had to eat it. “They didn’t find the source within any of the family member”

“No apparently not, they now need the warrant to search outside.”

Lira saw her opportunity to talk about Dillistra “I know who it is.”

“Excuse me?”

“What?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, its a girl named Dillistra, I saw her yesterday, you know, when... anyways, the blue source thingy blew into her and she kind of spazzed out-”

“Spazzed out?” Hanna asked, very much engaged “Lira why didn’t you tell the authorities, or me yesterday.” Hanna got up and started to rush around the kitchen, putting things away and moving towards the phone network.

“Well, you told me to go to my room and be quiet-”

“Shhh... hello, we have new news about the source... be prepared to receive my report and send it to the middle ground guard... okay, thank you.” Hanna hung up and immediately went to her daughter. “Tell me everything”

\*

“So, Miss Hetter, you say there was a Fright report in the lower ground, in sector 3?”

“err, I got caught out in the gate next to the fountains and the twisty tree”

The guard raised an eyebrow before looking up at Hanna “Yes sector 3” Hanna clarified.

“Well that narrows it down to three that night”

“Three in one night! How is that right?”

“There was a break-in two nights before. Most were held back but there was a few which got through, seemingly just five minutes before, and five minutes after the Titleholder transferal”

“That’s awfully weird”

“Indeed it is”

## CHAPTER FOUR

It had been an entire day since the Lira girl had left, which was partly reassuring for Dillistra and partly worrying. Dillistra hadn't wanted to talk about the problem further, she wanted the issue out of the way. Then again, Dillistra was curious. What did it mean to be a Titleholder? She had seen a Warrior Titleholder before, he was nice, the man had been patrolling her area since there had been a breakout of Frights and they had needed more patrol, Dillistra had been about 10 and in a different sector of the lower grounds, further North which had been some of the safer areas, until fright had been able to breakthrough. Dillistra was young, not old enough to work in the mines yet. Instead, she had waited at home for her previous guardian to come back. The man had been alone when he was patrolling when he came to her door. He'd asked a number of questions that she couldn't recall now.

The sun was currently right above Dillistra, her hair providing the only source of cover since there were no shadows. The safest part of the day, usually occupied by a crowd of younger kids, the ones who didn't work in caves but instead ran messages or deliveries for the Middle Ground, but it seemed as if they had taken shelter from the sun.

Dillistra normally felt fine when it was sunny outside, no need for fear of Frights, but that wasn't the case now. Dillistra had what others called, a wild imagination. Dillistra called it solitude. Sometimes. Mostly, she'd be able to just do her work and imagine stories in her head, young females being able to become stronger and fight, she often imagined them with older brothers who would joke with them, or protect them fiercely.

She might imagine climbing trees or flying over roofs. Or, on the occasions which she would allow herself, she'd imagine her parents. However, other times her thoughts would lead her to darker places, having to run away from dark figures, things lurking in the corners. Often scaring herself silly.

There had been rumours about children from the Lower Grounds being snatched away, reminders of the olden days, where human children were snatched from where humans originally came from and brought here. Children being sold to the Fae.

Without a second thought, Dillistra brought both hands harshly to her face hard, before immediately squealing from the sore thumping she received from it. Shaking her head she hurried on. It probably wasn't good to be in the sun for too long but was running in the sun any better. She slowed for a moment, trying not to think, and then caught herself thinking about not thinking which made her think back to last night.

"Damn it Dillistra just move" With that she ran back home, hoping that the little bit of air which brushed past her would be enough so that she didn't faint.

She was near to her house when there was a cut in the quiet, voices could be heard. Dillistra cautiously moved around the corner. She saw two people, two Preservers standing, with Shannae at the door. But not any regular ones, other than the standardised fingerless gloves that classified them as Preservers, they wore dark blue as opposed to black, which was the norm.

Her mind buzzed with questions, was she being relocated again? But that didn't make sense unless the Fright attack was a bigger deal than she had first thought, but then again, she had never seen these types of Preservers. Was it to do with the Titleholder position? It had to, there were no other reasons unless she was being sold off to become a changeling. No, that couldn't be right, not in broad daylight, she would just be snatched up, they wouldn't talk to her guardian. She stored that away, but it still tangled in the back of her mind, they were stories told to children to keep them in line, 'except it hadn't always been a story' Dillistra thought. Urgh, her mind was all over the place.

What was she to do? There's no way that they were going to want a young Titleholder, she was only, maybe, fourteen. At once Dillistra's mind placed two scenarios in her mind. One, they were going to take back the Titleholder position somehow, there had to be a way that didn't involve her dying. Two they were going to get rid of her, it would be easier that way. So, instead of having the more logical thought which the first had provided her, her mind immediately went to them selling her for being a changeling and disposed of.

She was so preoccupied that she didn't notice the person coming up behind her.



“Hey, what are you doing?”

Dillistra turned around and squealed, she stumbled but was also ready to bolt when he grabbed her arm. “Hey get off me” she yelled.

“Hold on”

The commotion had gotten the attention of the other, and to Dillistra’s slight dismay she heard a voice that she wasn’t particularly overjoyed to hear.

“Hey, Dillistra, nice to see you again” Dillistra turned to see Lirah.

“Not you again,” Dillistra said before she could stop herself.

“Ouch, but understandable”. Lirah gave her a half-grin half-shrug. Dillistra put her hands on her head.

\*

Dillistra wished she wasn’t here, she wished that the dumb light hadn’t shown up and she wished she wasn’t sitting down. The three Preservers had remained standing whilst Dillistra sat feeling sticky and uncomfortable and wiggling her fingers. Lirah had been sent somewhere else but Dillistra wasn’t thinking about her. She felt alone, Shannae was getting them some water and wasn’t really speaking up.

Lirah’s mum thanked her before turning to look at Dillistra. “Hi dear, before we start, I want you to know that you’re not in trouble, but there are a few things that needed to be discussed”

She really didn’t want to be here. Dillistra didn’t reply. Lirah’s mum sat down beside her. “Must be strange, I imagine?”

Dillistra still didn’t reply, simply wiping away the fog that formed on the edges of the glass.

“I’m Lirah’s mum, also known as Hanna. That’s Bob” she pointed to a man who had a grey beard and a slight smile on his face. “And Andy” She pointed to the other man, who Dillistra couldn’t imagine had ever smiled in his life. “Were here to take you to the higher grounds to-”

“I don’t want to go” Dillistra proclaimed softly, “I would prefer to stay here”

Hanna stalled, “We can’t really allow that to happen I’m afraid.” She continued to think “There are many questions you’ll have, you can find your answers there, unfortunately, we don’t have the authority to tell you much”

“So you can take me to someone who can give me answers?”

“Yeah”

“Will Shannae be given a new helper, I’m not going to- I mean, I can’t go if Shannae doesn’t get help- its not fair” Dillistra mentally face palmed herself, she was not portraying the authoritative figure she imagined herself to be. She had been planning to just say no to them, to demand to stay, but of course, like always she hadn’t.

Shannae walked into the conversation then, offering drinks to the Preservers. “Dilly, there’s no need to worry about me.” She then turned towards the adults “Dillistra will be treated well, and be looked after” It was a question, it was demand, and maybe a touch of a threat.

“Of course Ma’am, she’ll be staying with me and my family before heading to her new destination.”

“Where will that be?”

“You’ll be given information later on, as we said before, this is confidential.” The man said then directed his attention to Dillistra “If you want to bring anything you’ll have an hour to pack”

Pulling at her side bag she answered “No”.

“Alright then we can leave”

\*

Lirah hadn't been allowed in on the conversation, which was irritating, hadn't it been her who had helped find Dillistra. “Why were you running?” she asked the girl once she saw her, the girl looked startled.

“I don't know, you just do when you're down here, someone's chasing you, you run.”

“But it makes you look suspicious”

“Yeah well I thought it was suspicious for 4 fully grown adults to be chasing a girl in the lower grounds, what if they wanted to sell me off to a troll and make me into a changeling, I don't do scary.”

“Oh, please that doesn't happen”

“What kind of clouds have you been living in?” Dillistra whispered. Dillistra knew of a number of lower ground people who had gone missing, but Dillistra guessed you'd have to live there to know that.

They entered through the gate. There was an immediate difference, whereas the lower ground's flooring was made out of soil and sand, in order to be able to keep the noise level of the inhabitants down and not attract unwanted attention, the middle ground was paved with concrete and pavings, the buildings toward over each other, but in the far off distance was the tallest. That was the higher ground residence, you could even see it from the lower ground if you climbed the roof of the tin mining shaft. Dillistra didn't realise how chaotic the lower ground looked until she saw the middle ground, all its houses were perfectly lined up neatly, and all looked the same. How was anyone meant to find their way around? Leah's mum seemed to know exactly where everything was though, crossing streets, turning left, turning right.

“So, Dillistra was it?”

“Um yes ma’am,” Dillistra said or more like mumbled.

“I’m sorry hunny, I can’t quite hear you,” Mrs said, turning her head back to Dillistra she smiled.

“Yes, yeah that’s my name”

“It’s a lovely name, what about your last one.”

“Dale”

“Dillistra Dale”

“has a nice ring to it, if I do say so myself,” Lirah said, she began to steady her pace joining Dillistra at her side. “So, where are you going to stay?” Dillistra shrugged, she hadn’t thought about it, was she staying with Lirah and her family? If that was the case she wasn’t sure she would like it, what about Shannae and Big Dilly and the others. Perhaps she’d be able to make it over like Lirahdid, then again Dillistra was pretty sure that Lirahwas in trouble for sneaking over. Well, she’d just not get caught. But then again there was the monster thing.

“She’ll be staying with the Warriors”

“What, the actual mainline?”

“Well where else would she be staying”

“I don’t know, it’s just, wow” Lirah looked at Dillistra, “that’ll be pretty awesome, living in the higher grounds, especially from where you came.”

“Lirah that rude”

“I didn’t mean it in that way, it’s just, you know, a really different atmosphere. I heard that there are only like 10 buildings total out there and that they’re complete snobs.”

About 40 kilometres from where Dillistra used to live, where the upper class were, and three girls. Dillistra being the newly added part of the group, Lira and her cousin, who had just arrived, were sitting in the kitchen, Lira's mum was getting ready for a meeting to discuss having located Dillistra.

Just... 'snacking' on carrots Hannah had left out, whilst the girls also tried to find the hidden '*Naughty*' cereal that Lira's dad had apparently hidden from her mum.

"You're not going to find it, your mother can't so I don't understand why you believe you could"

"I still think you're lying about having any of that rubbish in my house"

"It's beautiful rubbish" he retorted.

"I'm going to find it and when I do I'm going to devour it" Lira interrupted.

"the brain decapitation drug which will turn you into an idiot like your father"

In which said father responded: "which makes you the idiot who married the idiot."

"The only way you could justify me being an idiot is by that reasoning, and even then it can be argued its for the greater good of the universe to have me, one so nimble and wise, to train you, you who couldn't tell the difference between a beetle and a fright."

"Okay number one, that happened only once and I was new to this whole world of fighting Frights, number two, Fae, modest much? "

"Yes, I am, considering all I hold back".

You could see where Lira got her '*unique character*' from, but Dillistra could see it was all for fun, it was quite nice as well. The interior of the kitchen, like the rest of the house, was designed

with what Dillistra had heard of called fabrication elf magic which allowed them to see out and yet keep protected as well. Dillistra knew her prior caretaker used to work to mine the ore. So, it seemed while Lira and her cousin, Lyda, were minding their own business searching for the late-night snack, Dillistra was just looking at this weird family.

“Okay, I’m leaving now. Dillistra makes yourself at home okay” Dillistra nodded. She probably wouldn’t

“I’ll be going to my office now, Dillistra calls me if these two start something.”

‘Start what?’ Dillistra thought but just nodded whilst both adults left, ‘Something was very vague’

\*

“urgh, where in the Giant’s stomach is it, your parents are really annoying with what you lot eat,” Lyda said, looking in the ‘hidden’ compartment next to the ‘hidden’ weaponry cabinet.

“It’s your hippie dad’s fault for showing my mum the dietary book” Lira responded indignantly prowling the floors for any actual potential hidden compartments. “You know mum’s an intellect, they process everything.”

“Why couldn’t your mum be one of those fewer cliché types, you know the riddling savvy types”

“Because they’re bloody lame, and there isn’t any real point to them, may as well be normal.”

“How rude, your mum says every role is an important role, even the shit ones.”

“Yeah she would probably to make you feel better for when you actually do get a rubbish Manifestery”

“Hardy har, so funny” Lyda started to move on from the cabinets, instead of feeling the walls “I’m jealous of you ya know, everyone is going to the academy and I’m not going for another year, but it’s okay” she sighed dramatically “I’ll just be alone with the Non-Manifesters staring at the loser at the table, and then know my luck when I finally get there I will end up with a shit manifestery.”

“No you won’t, look I’m sorry, I was acting like a massive prick”, she added on an “if anyone you’ll probs be one of those, ‘hey look at me, I can do everything you can do and better’ types that everyone hates... pretty much how you are now” Lirah did feel kinda sympathetic towards her younger cousin, and it was true she had the misfortune of being the youngest, currently in the Hetter family until one of the other Hettters had a kid. She was going to sincerely apologize, actually feeling bad, until...

“Massive Troll” Lyda agreed to nod her head vacantly before giving up on the search for cereal and chewing on her carrot stick that Hannah had left in the fridge. *Alright then, that issue was solved.*

“Well alright, you didn’t have to agree so readily,” Lirah said grabbing the last carrot stick from Harper’s plate.

“Hey!”

“What?”

“Urgh” Lyda shook her head, “Do you know how lame that was, I’m so deprived of sweets over here that I’ll complain over the natural sugars of a carrot stick, A carrot stick Leah!”

Lirah laughed “welcome to my world”

“So anyway what do you think you’ll manifest then?”

This had been the talk of the year by the children of the Preservers. Who would enter what placing, many had Lyda pegged as some sort of intelligence, but Lirah wasn’t sure about that for herself, her dad being normal and mum being an intellectual, most of the family were either Warriors, part of one of the elementals, Fire, Water, but no earth, that position was held by solely a Titleholder and one chosen other, the possibility of getting the Earth manifestation was beyond rare, the source would be the deciding factor of who got it, and since this planet was such a delicate one only one person every 50 years could inhabit it.

"I don't know, probably a warrior."

"Yeah, I could see that you've got a hard head and I'm pretty sure you're brain cells are gone, you know, now that I think of it you might be the most intelligent person ever, having no brain cells and yet still being able to functio-" Lirah punched her in the shoulder hard, "Ow, you realise you're only further proving my point."

"Shut it loser-"

"Brilliant response-"

"Or else I'm gonna introduce our diet to grandma and she'll force it on you." that got Lyda to be quiet, for a second.

"It's not my fault your a brute"

Lirah sighed, she could take on anyone outside of her family and win in an argument, but within the family, she was kinda hopeless. "Alright, you win" She looked at the time 20:28, it was officially dark now, *Stay in at night, stay in, away from a Fright*. "It's probably gonna be another quiet night." Fright only really came out of hiding when people were out of hiding, and nobody would be thick enough to leave at night, well as Leah's cousin said, Lirah was less on the intelligent side and more on the head straight into danger.

"Another quiet night'? Are you forgetting yesterday" Just then Lira remembered Dillistra, the girl was staring off into nothing, it was kinda weird how quiet she was, quite a forgettable girl, with brown hair tied back into a messy bun, dull clothing and normal brown eyes. Lyda's focus turned towards Dillistra.

"So, you're the next Titleholder... sounds cool" when Dillistra didn't reply Lyda shouted to get her attention, "Hey!"

Dillistra jerked "Sorry what did you say"



“The head of Warriors is gone, and you’ve replaced him, what’s that like?”

“Don't they have another heir?”

“I mean, I presume they did have a backup, but Warrior titles aren’t the safest out there.”

“I’m just gonna pass it back over,” Dillistra said quietly.

“Is that possible?” Lira asked. Lyda shrugged.

“I’ve never heard of it happening”

“You haven’t?” Dillistra asked.

“Well have you?”

“We don't get too much information in the lower grounds”

“Oh right”

It just then went quiet, nobody having much else to say. Lira looked at the clock noticing the time.

“We should get to bed, mum will flip her top if she comes home and sees us out.”

“Yeah, night” Lyda went straight up, but Lirah stayed, just for a little bit longer, helping Dillistra to her room and then left the odd girl to her own devices.

\*

Messenger Hailock the 8th was a partially recent arrival to the job, being around for six months. His predecessors each performed the role with honour and a rigorous passion. Not yet Head of

the messenger squad he was positioned as a simple deliverer of messages, however, he had the 'honour' of meeting with the Titleholder, well who was presumed to have been the Titleholder, if not for the mishap of the source leaving. Hailock moved at the pace of which he had been taught as a child, a steady but fast pace, not making too much unnecessary noise, as to not disrupt anyone around him, and not to the point where he seems to be standing out. He was not to move ruggedly or without rhythm.

Five feet away from the main door now, an enormous majestic door positioned with six guards covered head to toe in armour, where there used to be two. The doors reinforced with specially made mechanical locks. Hailock the 8th new only slightly more than the majority of the population did about the attack on the latest Title holder, which had occurred a week prior. The general knowledge had been somehow a mass amount of Frights had infiltrated the building, however, Hailock the 8th had heard it was a coup, someone had betrayed the Titleholder, and it had to have been a higher up.

One foot away from the door and Hailock showed his badge to the guards, he was about to walk past when a and hit him in his midsection, before he knew it he was inches from the floor, his white prestigious becoming wrinkled slightly in its descent from the force. The guard's foot is the only thing stopping him from touching the floor.

"You must answer the password" the guard who was centre-left spoke.

Hailock had almost forgotten, it was a foolish mistake, one shouldn't be making within his work, or within this tense time period. "Amti closarous was the first to gain the Earth source in three hundred and nineteen years, her manifestation lead to the seventh Source being presented within the council." He was gently lifted up.

"Your Hailock's son, yes?" the guard who had had him suspended said.

"The 7th sir" Hailock the 8th started to fix his clothes.

"You must be more perseverant, you are lucky I was aware of your father or else you would have been in much more trouble"

“Yes sir, sorry sir.”

The guard on the far left began typing into a controller, emitting a noise once the sequence had been completed, before a second guard who was on the far right starting entering a code and the door opened with a mechanical clicking sound. The guard who supposedly knew of Hailock the 7th gave a subtle nod.

Stepping into the room there was almost a blinding amount of white with hints of black, brown and silver within computers, tables and chairs. Standing at the head was Leader Janae and her right-hand woman. Being brought up in the family she had been thought to have been the next obvious Titleholder. Until the Source flew out the window. Now, whilst her aunt grieved, she was only stepping into the role until the next Titleholder was found and trained. The woman had blond hair, tied back in a bun, her uniform a pure white covered by black armour with two swords at her sides and a multitude of medals lining her arm sleeves, a determined look on her face. When her eyes met Hailock the 8ths, it immediately made him feel as if he had done something wrong. She waved her hand as if to say, speak.

“Maam it has been reported that the new Titleholder has been located, currently held within the middle grounds at the house of Hetter. The participant is spoken to becoming of the legal manifestation age, female, her record hasn’t been up-kept to a substantial amount, so she doesn’t have an exorbitant amount of data present for us to look into.”

“And is there a name?”

“Dillistra Dale Maam.”

“Has Lady Nour been made aware of this”

“She has,” Hailock the 8th paused, “She’s not responsive” A second pause, “They say she’s still grieving”

Janae seemed to have aged half a decade in that sentence alone.

“Where does she reside now”

“There have been arrangements for the new TitleHolder to be placed within the house of Hetter”  
Hailock didn't notice as he had been looking at his forms, however, perhaps he would have caught the Woman's shift in posture.

“Great, thank you for your import, you may leave now.”

## CHAPTER FIVE - 11pg

When Dillistra woke she felt the thrumming she had continuously been experiencing them since that night. Seemingly, whenever she'd lay still for a long amount of time. She stood up and stretched, that had been helping somewhat.

The room was still dark, it's only light peeking through the curtains. She stopped moving, trying to hear if anyone else in the house was awake. Should she stay in the room, wait for somebody to come, or maybe just wait downstairs, was it rude to look around someone else's house?

Dillistra's mouth felt dry but she chose to just live with the uncomfortable tingling and moved over to the window.

The first thing she saw was the branch filled with leaves at the very edge of the window.

It was... really nice.

Dillistra presumed the bark was darker than usual since the sun hadn't completely come up yet. Soft rays lightly blanketed the branch facing away from Dillistra, only letting her see a thin line of the light on the top and bottom of the branch. The leaves were different. The sun's ray shone through the leaf exposing the veins. Her gaze found the background. Hidden behind other buildings was her home. Or what used to be her home.

The dryness in her throat became overwhelming by this point and Dillistra found herself having to swallow her own spit to try and sooth some of the roughness.

It wouldn't be too bad to get a glass of water would it. Hanna had said make herself at home. Placing her bag onto her shoulder she went for the door. She carefully turned the knob and opened the door. Coming to the beginning of the staircase she tipped toed onto the first step, expecting there to be a creek, Dillistra was aware that when it was dark every noise seemed infinitely noisier, but there hadn't been any creek. Out of habit, she continued on her tippy toes.

Reaching the kitchen she made her way to the cupboard she had seen Hanna take a glass out, but just as she was about to reach for it she stopped herself. Hanna wouldn't mind her using one of the glasses, Dillistra knew that she wouldn't, despite that, she didn't go for the cup, she felt too anxious. She was going to go back upstairs but didn't want to risk it, instead, she sat at the table.

Rubbing her throat she looked towards the door she pictured herself just leaving, walking out the door and living in the forests somewhere.

She felt stuck, like whichever path she chose she'd lose. She could leave, and then probably be eaten by Frights. She could go back to the lower district, Lirah had managed it, but they'd probably find her. If she went to the higher level maybe they'd see how she was not meant for the job, maybe they'd send her back. Maybe.

Her eyes started to water, she had never felt such a strong feeling to be somewhere else, she had been moved around a handful of times, but she had always had the constant of familiarity. The air here didn't have a scent. She hadn't realised how wonky the ground was back at the lower grounds, it gave it character. Here everything was too straight, and the trees weren't as colourful as she had imagined. There was a pit in her chest and it made her feel sick.

She sat there for what felt like days, her face buried in her arms, even her clothes smelt foreign.

"Hello" Dillistra's head went straight up, "Couldn't sleep?" A man stood at the entrance of the kitchen, a soft smile there. Dillistra simply stared, she was always up at this time, she shook her head. "Well that's good, your name is Dillistra correct?"

Her throat suddenly felt restricted, she let out a soft yes, being careful to be discreet while wiping her eyes.

"Are you hungry, want something to drink"

Dillistra wanted both of those things "No thank you".

“Are you sure?” He cocked a brow, giving a challenging look, “As far as I’ve heard from my wife you didn’t eat much last night”

“Yes” no.

“Okay then.” He turned around going towards a fridge and opening it, “Well, I might not be a Manifestor, but I have my own powers,” He preceded in taking out a variety of brightly coloured foods. “It’s a secret, but I’ll let you in on it.” He began cutting up the colourful food. “It’s called Dad power, it gives me the ability to tell you what to do, it’s like adult power, but stronger.” With that he turned around and grinned at her. “Eat what you can.”

She gave the man her own smile, and gave a small, delicate laugh.

“I’m Ryo”

“Hi,” Dillistra said, some strength behind her voice now, before quickly adding “It’s nice to meet you”

“You too” He sat down at the table, picking from his own plate. Dillistra also started to eat, the first one a deep red colour, she bit into it and tasted the sweet juices.

There was a noise upstairs, “Oh, here they come ” There were fast paced footsteps coming down the stairs, no care in the world a boy came down the stairs shirt half way on, Dillistra looked away embarrassed for him. “Boy don’t you have any decency”

“What?” The boy, Jaze, said before looking at Dillistra and giving a sheepish grin “Oh hey” Dillistra lifted a hand. He then proceeded to look at the food on the table and snatch up one of his dad’s “Oh Cornas”

Ryo smacked his hand away before he could take a second “You know where they are”

“Jeeze dad, aren’t you supposed to provide?”

“I’ll provide you with a smack if you’d like”

Jaze lifted both his hands in the air, “I see how it is”

“Mhmm”

There then came another pair of footsteps on the stairs, these ones less obnoxious, before disappearing for a moment and turning into the sound of fabric sliding across a banister.

“Ello” Lirah announced, running towards the fridge “Ooh, Cornas” she grabbed a whole one before sitting at the table and taking a bite.

Jaze walked to the fridge and opened it, “Hey, you took the last one”

“Oh no, I feel so bad,” Lirah said in a monotone voice, staring her brother in the eye before taking another bite.

“Should have gotten it earlier,” Ryo said, picking up another piece of his Cornas.

Dillistra pushed her dish towards him “You can have mine if you want”

Lirah immediately pushed it back, “Na’a, he missed it, why don’t you go have some wheat”

“Why don’t you go away”

“Why don’t you suck a toe!” Lirah said, looking irritated.

“Children” Ryo sighed.

Jaze stuck his tongue out before grabbing a box of wheat and a bowl. Then with a grin on his face he took something else out “Hey, L, dare you try this” He held a yellow thing in his hand.

“Na’ah, you first”



“Chicken” but then he popped it into his mouth, his face was fine for the first three seconds, even cocky, but then his face contorted, eyes closed, lips tense. Lirah laughed, and Dillistra found herself doing the same. “Your turn”

Lirah took one, popped it in her mouth before spitting it back out. “Ew, who bought these.”

Jaze offered one to Dillistra “Wanna try?”

“No thank you” and this time she meant it.

“The only normal person here, and she isn’t part of the family” Ryo said, but he had a smile on his face.

“Gasp, farther, how dare you” Jaze said “Where a perfectly normal family, except that one” he said pointing towards Lirah “She was adopted”

“At least they wanted me,” Lirah responded, not missing a beat.

Dillistra found herself smiling at the craziness of this family.

Ryo looked at a clock on the wall, “Okay, Dillistra, someone will be coming to get you soon, we better have you ready”

Dillistra's smile immediately reverted.

An hour later, a Preserver wearing black arrived and took her away. She left as quickly and she’d arrived.

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“This miss Dale is where you will be living outside of school” Dillistra stepped into the biggest house she had ever set eyes on. The flooring was a type of rock she wasn’t familiar with, mostly

white with parts of brown and grey swirls scattered across, covered in a dark red carpet. The walls were also made out of the same material as the floor, it must have been expensive.

“The family regularly have dinner together at curfew, unless one is out on business” He pointed to a double doored pathway. Dillistra couldn’t help but wonder why there was a need for two doors for one entrance.

“Further down there is the living room, where the family can relax” Dillistra couldn’t help but think that the recurring “the family” was said to say she wasn’t a part of them, and well, it was true, Dillistra didn’t have family. She really didn’t belong here, everything seemed too big and amazing for her, it was a dream come true, but it was a dream designed for someone else. Dillistra’s internal monologue prevented her from hearing what the butler said, and she wasn’t going to bother the man by asking him to repeat it.

“The final room with access to you on this floor is the play room” He opened a final door, yet another double door, and inside was not what Dillistra imagined. Instead of some high tech beyond her belief technology she and some of the other kids in the lower grounds had thought of, there were other things. There was a boy running in the same spot on top of a machine. Another kid, this time a girl who was older than her was upside down and lifting her head up to touch her head to her knees which were wrapped over a bar. “This is where you’ll do your extra training.”

“Yay” Dillistra thought.

“Would you like to view the upstairs now Miss Dale?”

“Um I - okay”

When they were about to leave the little boy, who had been running in place, jumped off the machine. “Are you the new TitleHolder” He seemed to say rather than ask, well more like barked. Dillistra stepped back.

“Master Haery, this is Miss Dale. She will be staying in the mansion for the foreseeable future.”

“Yes, I know this. So is this your house now, are you gonna kick us out.”

Dillistra was about to answer but was beaten by the older girl. “Of course she is not going to ‘kick us out’, it’s our home.” The girl was muscular and didn’t seem afraid to show it. With her shirt sleeves rolled up and her head held high. She began to walk over, right next to the boy. Her hair was a dirty blond and eyes black.

“I would never,” Dillistra said.

“It’s more the fact that you could never. This house has been in the family for generations, just because it so happens that the Titleholder was a part of the family, doesn’t mean that the Titleholder owns the house.” The girl turned around. “It’s a courtesy really. We could have left you to stay in the middle ground from whichever no named family you came from.”

Dillistra was actually from the lower ground and didn’t have a family, but she wouldn’t correct the girl, if the girl had, what Dillistra suspected, no respect for the middle ground, then she did not want to know her opinions on the lower grounds. It wasn’t as if the lower grounds were awful, they just weren’t as expensive looking as the higher or middle grounds.

“Miss Dale, the tour upstairs?” The butler spoke, jogging Dillistra out of her own mind.

“Oh yeah.”

“I’m coming too” the little boy, Haery, said. He raced out of the door ahead of Dillistra. “Can I show her around Dajid, please, I know all the things around here”

“Master Haery, I do believe you haven’t completed your training, then your bathing before supper”

“Oh but please Dajid, let me take her around with you, there is only 7 minutes left, oh please, please.” He came over to the butler, Dajid, both his little hands closing around the cuffs of his sleeves and peered up at him.

Dajid sighed, "Master Haery"

"Please!"

"Okay, lead the way"

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"And finally this way is the library and the opposite door, down the hall is the community bathroom/toilet"

"Community bathroom? Isn't that just a bathroom" Dillistra spoke, Haery had skipped over some of the things that might have been interesting, including pictures that hung on the walls.

"Well yes, obviously, but for everyone" and then he walked off, heading towards the stairs.  
"Come on, upstairs is the coolest"

"Master Haery, we don't have access to the upstairs area," Dajid said, making sure not to look Dillistra in the eye.

"Oh, why not?" Haery looked at Dillistra then to Dajid. It was obvious to Dillistra, they didn't trust her, or think her as part of the family, which was fair, she was a stranger, plus she was from the lower ground, which seemingly they didn't know about, so actually wouldn't count towards a reason for her not to be up there...

"Master Haery, please go see Ms Junet now, it is nearly time for supper."

"Okay" Haery jumped down the last three steps, before speeding towards one of the rooms Dillistra had already forgotten about. "Miss Dale, perhaps you'd like a more detailed tour" he looked at her for the first time and smiled, he was about to speak again when he was interrupted.

"Would you mind if I show her around Dajid," Dillistra turned to see an older woman, her hair a blond and wearing a uniform of a preserver, her eyes a solid black, the most distinguishing

feature being her red prominent lips. "It would be a great way to become associated with Miss Dale," she turned to Dillistra "would it not?"

"Yes Ms Janae, as you see it," and then he left, but Dillistra couldn't help but feel some reluctance from the man.

"Come, we can start from the beginning of the corridor and make our way up yes. My youngest sibling does have the best of intentions, yet lacks patience for... detail. Well anyways, the pictures you probably noticed as you were rushed through are of the alive family members."

The first image contained a thick toned woman sitting down in a chair, she looked posh, her head tilted to the side and her black eyes peered into the very soul of Dillistra, she was accompanied by another figure who stood to her right, the woman had a kinder look in her eyes, dirty blond hair laid over her shoulder. Sweet blue eyes that gave away some mischief. Both wore an elegant flowing dress which flowed past their feet, which Dillistra thought was kinda impractical but did make them look beautiful, the dress exposed their arms which showed off their muscular arms.

"We should probably make our way down stairs now, you must meet the family"

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There were a handful of people already around the table, The little boy Haery, Shahn and some others Dillistra haven't met yet. Janae sat down near the end of the table.

"You sit there," Janae said, pointing next to her, at the head of the table. Dillistra froze, she could almost physically feel the tension emanating. "Go on, we don't start until the head is seated"

Dillistra felt her throat clog up for the hundredth time this week while sitting down. At this moment Dillistra really considered if she'd rather have been eaten by Frights, maybe if it was a quick death.

"Can we eat now" Haery asked, he seemed to be targeting his question at Dillistra.

“Dajid, will grandmother be with us tonight”

“She’s requested to eat in privacy ma’am”

“I see” Janae said, “Dillistra, would you like to give the order”

Dillistra gave a confused look.

“To eat, perhaps before the food grows cold”

“Sure” Dillistra said quietly.

A man made a tsk sound and shook his head in disapproval before beginning to eat. Dillistra felt like garbage.

The only sounds for what seemed like eternity where knives and forks scraping at plates, Dillistra thought hers to be the loudest.

“What’s it like in the middle grounds?” Haery asked, he was already finished with his food, now swinging his feet back and forwards.

Not wanting to gain another displeasing look Dillistra attempted for a raised voice, but it came out squeaky, clearing her throat she tried again “It was nice”

“Just nice?”

“Well, I wasn’t there long”

That caused the man’s head to rise, “You don’t come from the middle?”

“No, lower”

A part from Janae’s knife scraping as she continued eating there was silence.

“You come from the lower?”

For the first time Shahn spoke up “Where did you attend secondary school”

“The lower grounds don’t have secondary schools” the man said in disgust.

“She attended primary school” Janae interjected “She should know of the basics”

“The basics!” the man said indignantly.

“Why don’t we stop interrogating the *Titleholder*,” Janae spoke in a clipped tone “I’m sure she has her own questions” Giving Dillistra a pointed look, she gave her the option to speak.

Dillistra took a deep breath “I-I think there was a mistake, the- the source... I would rather not be, I mean-”

“You’ll need to speak clearer”

“Is there a way, a way to have a different Titleholder”

“Yes, you could die”. For the billionth time that evening, stone dead silence arose. Even the man looked shocked.

“Shahn!” Janae said, looking annoyed.

“I was just answering her question.” Shahn said “There are only two options, one you’re killed, the second the source could be forcibly removed, however, that’s the likely result of death. The first happens to us all, the second isn’t something you should be concerned about.” Dillistra had nothing to say to that.

Janae cleared her throat and turned towards Dillistra, she pulled at her cuffs before starting Dillistra in her eyes. “There is a bond between the source and a Titleholder, you see, when you

are bonded together it somewhat attaches to your- what would call- soul, the detachment would end up killing you in a number of years, that's why a Titleholder won't pass on the source until the end of their time or if they are mortality injured”

Dillistra wanted to ask if that was why the current- prior, Warrior Titleholder wasn't dead but knew better.

After a long uncomfortable silence, occupied with eating and the scraping of utensils Janae spoke up again “Perhaps it's time we all retreat to our spaces, if i'm needed I'll be in the garden” With that janae left.

Dillistra went to her room and didn't sleep for hours.