



XANTERA

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GUARDIANS & MONSTERS VOLUME 1
MARIAH MONTOYA
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AUTHORS' NOTE

This book contains subject matter that might be difficult for some readers, including graphic violence, violence against children (off page), forced partnership and birth control, and threats of sexual assault and rape. This book also contains explicit sexual content.

For everyone trying to break free.



THE UTOPIAN CITY OF
XANTERA
MAPPED
IN THE PRESENT AGE

BLOOD MOON
PALACE

W
V
N
S
T
R
E
E
T

SENTRIES
STATION

HOUSING COMPLEXES
EDUCATIONAL
INSTITUTION

CHILD CARE
CENTER

HEALING CENTER

PRODUCTION
FACTORY

CONSTRUCTION &
REPAIR CENTER

ASSISTED
LIVING
FACILITY

RECREATION
CENTER

TEXTILE
DISTRIBUTION
CENTER

XANTERA FARMLAND

TO SOUTHERN
FORESTS



THE TWELVE CARDINAL RULES



1. Don't question your Guardians.
2. Don't seek out attention.
3. Don't think about yourself.
4. Don't ask unsolicited questions.
5. Don't listen to idle gossip.
6. Don't express personal opinions.
7. Don't engage in arguments.
8. Don't wish for more than necessary.
9. Don't create strife among neighbors.
10. Don't keep secrets from authorities.
11. Don't change without permission.
12. Don't venture near the Wall.



SASKIA

The Choosing is tomorrow night, and I'm more desperate than ever for them to pick me.

Not because I'd get to live the rest of my life in the Blood Moon Palace and be revered from one of those ivory-wrought balconies, a symbol of our city's continued hope and protection of the future. Not even because I'd finally get to see what our twelve Holy Guardians look like up close—their marble skin, their crimson eyes, their pointed fangs.

No, there's another reason I want the Guardians to choose me this time, but it's buried so deep in my bones that I don't allow myself to inspect it. Instead, I focus on blocking out the thing that has been tormenting me every Sunday night since the month I turned twenty-three:

The guttural sound of a man snoring.

Malcolm is my newly assigned civil partner, but neither of us have given each other more than what we're required to in the last six months of our official union. We share the same living space, eat dinner across the table from one another, make polite conversation, and go to sleep in our separate rooms—unless it's Sunday, that is. On Sunday, every couple in Xantera is required to “keep their spark alive.”

That's what the Twelve Guardians call what I just pretended to moan through.

Now, I'm slowly shifting aside the rumpled sheets with Malcolm's snores rattling in my eardrums and his cum drying on my thighs. There's no way I'm getting a wink of sleep if I stay here, and as far as I know, there aren't any rules saying I have to let my ears bleed after keeping our spark alive. I'm pretty sure the Twelve Guardians would want me to be bright-eyed and alert for my shift tomorrow morning.

Just as the pads of my feet touch the floor, however, the howling starts.

The noise erupts from the distance, a kind of lonely, echoing peel that scrapes through the air with jagged claws, surpassing the Wall that surrounds Xantera and settling over the city in eerie waves. It lands on my skin, painting me in goosebumps that I

can never seem to shake off no matter how many times I've heard them throughout my life.

*Round and round the Monster prowls,
Starved for meat and bone.
Beware its eyes, resist its howl,
Stay within the stone.*

If it weren't for the nightly howling, I'd almost wonder if that childhood lullaby of ours was nothing but a silly rhyme. If nothing prowled outside the Wall that our Twelve Guardians built for us five hundred years ago. We certainly can't see over the immensity of it, and nobody has gone in or out in centuries.

Well, except for the few citizens who disobey.

But that howling—it's enough evidence for me. It definitely isn't human, and there's always something hungry and yearning in it that makes me want to bolt.

Instead, I continue to my room in the slowest of tiptoes, my weight creaking against the floor until I'm safe in my own cube of a room across the kitchen. Maybe I'll give myself the pleasure that Malcolm is never able to now that I'm alone.

But I'm not alone. The howling continues, and as I fold my arms over my breasts, I can't help but wish, once again, that I'll be Chosen tomorrow night when the blood moon waxes.

Because beyond that secret reason buried deep in my bones, nowhere is safer than with the Guardians who vanquished the Monster in the first place.



“Good morning,” Malcolm says just before dawn, when we slide our plates onto the kitchen table and sit down opposite each other.

“Good morning,” I echo.

Breakfast today is porridge, peaches, and milk, delivered to us via a pair of graceful hands through the metal slat in our front door. I never get to see the person who makes their rounds before sunrise, distributing even portions of food to everyone in our complex, but their hands are as familiar to me as my own.

I swallow a spoonful of porridge before dabbing at my mouth with a cloth napkin. “How did you sleep?”

“Good.” Malcolm nods, running a hand through his mousy brown hair. “You?”

“Good, thank you.”

For a few minutes, the only sounds between us are the scraping of our spoons and Malcolm's open-mouthed chewing. I keep wondering if he'll ask why I wasn't in bed with him when he woke up, but he's staring off to the side with an absentminded expression, as if the silent, blackened screen mounted between cabinets is more interesting than me.

I make another stab at conversation.

“Did you dream about anything?”

“No. I don't usually dream.”

“Oh, okay.”

Malcolm frowns, his gaze flitting back to me. “Do you?”

Yes. Last night I fell asleep to the sounds of those howls dragging down my eyelids and dreamt of the Wall closing in around me, tightening like a cocoon until I couldn't breathe.

“No,” I say. “I don't dream either.”

“Oh.”

At that moment, the screen between the cabinets lights up with a ping. Static skates across the surface, breaking into a half-baked image of a sun rising over a grassy knoll. The familiar female voice that has instructed every moment of my whole life rings out from the loudspeaker above the screen with the usual, “*Eligible citizens of Xantera, day shift starts now. Please proceed to your duty stations, and remember to...*”

“Have a good day,” I finish with her.

Malcolm has already shoveled in the last of his breakfast and jumped up, readjusting the scarlet badge pinned to his shirt before throwing his school bag over his shoulder. He works at the Educational Institution, where he teaches twelve- to fifteen-year-olds about the history of Xantera, from when the Monster first overcame it to when the Guardians saved us five hundred years ago.

I don't particularly envy him. To have to talk about that every day... well, that particular wedge of history is always the bloodiest.

And I know a lot about blood.

“Have a nice day,” Malcolm tells me.

“Have a...”

But the front door has already swung open and shut.

Alone now, I scoop my hair into a messy bun and tie it in a knot before checking the outline of my reflection in the fading screen to readjust my own scarlet badge—a marker of my place in life right now. Every new couple wears one in public, an indication of the honeymoon stage. In three years, we’ll get new green badges to specify that we’re in the family-making stage. That we sleep together more than just on Sunday.

Not yet, though. Now, I open the middle cabinet drawer next to our screen and grab the tiny blue pill that keeps my womb empty. I’ve heard so many women in my age group complain about the medication, but me?

My mother must have dropped me on the head as an infant and failed to report it to the Guardians, because I only ever feel a surge of relief when I pop this pill into my mouth. Maybe it’s selfish of me to like the way my body feels as is, to dread those upcoming family-making years, but...

I shake my head. I shouldn’t be having these thoughts. And I *definitely* shouldn’t be analyzing the shape of my body in the glossy darkness of the screen, wondering why Malcolm doesn’t seem as interested in me or my appearance as I secretly crave he would be.

In our schooling phase, we’re taught a Cardinal List of Rules that becomes engraved in our psyches, and *Don’t think about yourself* is high up there. Number three, to be exact.

Turning away from the screen, I follow Malcolm’s footsteps out the door and into the narrow strip of space running between complexes that stare at each other like perfect mirror images. It’s always dark in these walkways, every ounce of sunlight blocked by the metal eaves looming overhead. I quicken my pace, eyes straight ahead.

“Good morning.”

I nod at one of my neighbors as she passes, and she echoes me with a soft “good morning” of her own. Soon, I’ve made it to the light spilling from the main walkway, where streams of people do the same to everyone they pass.

Out here in the open, the sun is making a watery appearance between thin films of clouds, and the air has a fresh, clean bite to it that makes me take a large inhale through my nose. A few birds twitter from their perches on the powerlines that run along the street, toward the Blood Moon Palace squatting on the high hill in the distance.

I let my gaze stray to that palace for a moment, its domed crown fluttering with twelve different flags. It can be seen from any vantage point within the city, like a beacon, a symbol, and an expression of all that is good here.

Still, all those ivory pillars remind me of the legs of a spider, as if the entire structure is hunched and waiting for whatever will crawl into its open mouth. But of course, all those balconies need support, and there are a *lot* of balconies—space for the Chosen Ones to wave to their past friends and family during the Viewing on Sundays. Then, they’ll lean over their designated railings, gazes sweeping over the city they were once part of, but right now the balconies are empty. Lifeless.

“Good morning,” someone says, and I jerk my head back down to nod at them.

“Good morning.”

It’s the same every day: good morning, good morning, good morning.

Briefly, I wonder if anyone has ever had a *bad* morning.

I continue past the other buildings that make up the spokes of our society’s ever-turning wheel: the Sentries Station, the Recreation Center, the Production Factory, the Childcare Center, the Educational Institution, and countless others that I don’t bother to glance at.

As I near my own destination, however, that feeling of suffocation, of the Wall closing in around me... it eases ever so slightly. *This* is why I know the Guardians chose the right partner for me, why I had no business questioning my union with Malcolm this morning. The Guardians know exactly what everyone needs at every phase of life. I know so because they chose the perfect *job* for me.

Healing.

I smile up at the building I call home.

Settled between tidy strips of lawn, the Healing Center glitters with windows, its entrance a welcoming spread of sliding glass doors that sweep open of their own accord when I step up to them. The interior is already bustling, some healers in scrubs scurrying to their assigned floors with masks strapped over their faces, others pushing residents in wheelchairs or checking in newly-approved patients in the lobby. The sound of it all—clacking footsteps, beeping monitors, and incessant chatter—is enough to ease the rest of the tightness in my chest.

Even in a perfect world where monsters can’t reach us, people get sick or injured. I’m honored that it’s my job to fix and heal them. Honored that I get to see so many walk back out those sliding glass doors with repaired bones, cleared lungs, and beating hearts.

I make it to the locker room just as the night shift healers are undressing.

“Morning, Saskia.”

“Good morning, Gaia.” I smile at the portly woman in the corner. She’s a bit slower than the others, mopping her dark forehead with her sleeve before slowly peeling off her scrubs. Meanwhile, I open my locker beside her and pull out mine—

freshly washed and dried, courtesy of the Healing Center laundresses. “Any newcomers in the night?”

“Oh, just an older farming gentleman. Fell down in the shower, apparently.” Gaia lowers her voice to a gravelly whisper. “Says it was an accident, but between you and me, I wonder if he didn’t get a *little* too excited with his partner, considering it was Sunday and all.”

I snort. Anecdotes like this are exactly why I have faith Malcolm and I will fall into a groove with each other if neither of us are Chosen in our lifetimes. By the time we’re sixty, we’ll be doing dangerous things in the shower, too, won’t we?

“Well,” I say as I shimmy out of my regular pants and hike up my scrubs, “let’s hope he didn’t bang *just* his head before he had to come here.”

Gaia claps a hand over her cackle, her face darkening with a flush.

“Oh, Saskia. What am I going to do with you? You’re like a Monster on my shoulder.”

“And you’re my biggest inspiration,” I shoot back with a grin.

It’s not entirely a joke. Gaia’s badge is bright purple, indicating that she’s in the empty nest stage. That her two children are both older than fifteen, living in a complex specifically designated for apprenticeships and other pre-work training.

Maybe that’s why she feels so much like a mother to me... I haven’t seen my own since I was fifteen, too. Gaia’s presence is the steady, nurturing one I look forward to every morning—even if she always seems to toe the line when it comes to the gossiping part of the Cardinal List of Rules.

“Well, let’s hope I’ve inspired you enough to save some lives today,” she says now, hefting herself up and hobbling past me.

“No one dies on my watch,” I reply automatically. It’s been my motto since I first began my training, and I’m happy to say it’s held true so far.

“Have a good shift, Saskia.”

“Sleep well, Gaia.”

I watch her retreating figure until she’s gone before changing my shirt and re-pinning my scarlet badge. Fully clothed and ready for the day now, I exit the locker room and fall into my usual rhythm.

I take vitals, administer medications, and change bandages—all under the watchful gazes of the Guardians’ portraits, framed and hung up on every wall, as well as the cameras blinking in every corner. When I swish through the curtains to meet the gentleman who fell in the shower, I don’t let my eyes so much as blink, even as I feel the surprise ripple beneath my chipper expression.

His face is one giant patch of purple around his eye, with a fresh cut still oozing through the bandage above his left eyebrow. The badge on his patient apron—gold—tells me he’s in his sixties: a stage of life where injuries are harder to recover from.

“Hello, Diggory,” I say, glancing at the information on my clipboard. “How are you feeling?”

The man looks up at me, lips pinching together. “Like the stains in a toilet bowl, actually.”

I stop myself from choking on my next words and breeze forward to wheel the patient monitor closer to him.

“I’m very sorry to hear that. Do you mind if I check your vitals?”

Diggory grumbles something about minding very much but sticks out his arm anyhow. I clip his finger with a pulse oximeter and fasten the blood pressure cuff around the spot above his elbow. The monitor beeps at me, flashing numbers across the screen that make me frown despite the good news they convey.

Perfect blood pressure, strong, slow heartbeat, 100% oxygen saturation... this man is the healthiest gold-badged man I’ve ever cared for.

“Is your shower slippery, Diggory? Do I need to get a Repair Crew out to your complex to retile it?”

I eye his lean, toned body beneath the apron, more muscular than I would have anticipated. With health and attentiveness like this, my gut tells me he should have had the strength to break at least *some* of his fall, whether a partner was in there with him or not. And how could he have tipped *forward*? What did he even *hit*? The faucet knobs are way too small for a bruise like this.

Diggory blows out an unsmiling laugh.

“I’m fine, thanks. Just a clumsy old fart.”

My frown cuts deeper into my cheeks.

“Did someone push you?”

It would be unspeakable, an act of violence like that. If his partner did it, I have no doubt the Twelve Guardians would vanquish her just as they did the Monster five hundred years ago. Just as they do to all the rare civilians who choose to break the guidelines that weave our entire society together.

But Diggory shakes his head with a lazy wave of his hand.

“Nobody pushed me.” He closes his eyes and mutters something else under his breath, but I don’t quite catch it, and it would be rude of me to insinuate he’s lying by prying further.

As I remove his pulse oximeter and blood pressure cuff, though, jotting down his vitals information, I can’t dislodge the feeling that I’m missing something.

That the patient I am supposed to keep alive didn’t fall in the shower at all.



I don't have much time to ruminate on it, unfortunately. The day whizzes by in a blur, and soon I'm back at the apartment with Malcolm, eating dinner with my knee jiggling in anticipation.

Six hours. Six more hours until the Choosing.

"How was your day?" Malcolm asks in the same tone he does every night, his gaze drifting off to the side.

I swallow a mouthful of broccoli and nod.

"It was pleasant. How was yours?"

"Pleasant as well, thank you."

The sound of his chewing is like fingernails scraping in my ears. I have a fleeting thought that I would tear out my own eardrums if I could, just so I'd never have to hear that sound again. I have another fleeting thought that maybe I won't have to. Maybe one of the Guardians will choose me tonight, and I'll be waving to Malcolm from one of those ivory-wrought balconies by this weekend, and he'll get assigned a new civil partner who can tolerate all this chewing and snoring.

After dinner, we clean our dishes side by side and retire to our separate rooms, but neither of us go to sleep. Not tonight. Tonight, the entirety of Xantera will be wide awake, waiting for that smooth female voice to announce the same thing it does every few months when the sky begins to bleed and the doors to the Blood Moon Palace crack open.

After what seems like an eternity of waiting and staring at the ceiling and waiting some more, static rolls over me. The loudspeakers crackle.

I'm up and out of bed before the announcement can even finish.

"Eligible citizens of Xantera, please report to the Blood Moon Palace for the Choosing."

It's time.



THE MONSTER

My hackles raise as my back arches, and I howl again at the red moon: the largest one I've seen in years. My life is measured in them.

This year's third quarter brings one in August. At the top of its arc, a sliver of orange fades to white—almost like the moon is being drained of its blood. Like it could die, if it was even alive in the first place.

There's a change in the air, something sweet. I can smell it on the wind that carries between the spikes of the Wall before it twists through the woods.

I want to get in. *Need* to get in. Like it's encoded in every atom humming through me. The white-hot rage that crosses my vision never ceases, but the blood moon only intensifies it.

I will stop at nothing. Otherwise...

No.

Time is running out, but that Wall *will* come down.



SASKIA

Eligible citizens of Xantera, please report to the Blood Moon Palace for the Choosing.”

The female voice repeats her message every few seconds, and I’m a whirl of movement in response.

Hair up. Shoes on. Cloak fastened. Badge pinned. Breath unleashed.

Malcolm, on the other hand, takes his time. I know it would be rude of me to make the long walk to the northern lip of the city without him, but impatience makes my fingernails dig into my palms as he takes his time pulling on his shoes in the living room. How is he so quick to leave for work every day, but so slow to report for the most important part of our lives? A sliver of me wonders if he’s one of those citizens who dreads the Choosing, who doesn’t *want* to be picked.

I can’t fathom it. Sure, the Healing Center is my home, my safe space, but the Blood Moon Palace has...

“Alright,” Malcolm says finally, straightening as he fixes his collar. “You ready?”

I stare at him. Of *course* I’m ready.

He nods, as if he realizes the exact words that would be too impolite for me to say.

“Let’s—”

“—*report to the Blood Moon Palace for the Choosing,*” the female voice says, drowning out his.

Out in the street, we melt into the flow of thousands of bodies surging toward the ivory building in the distance. I can practically hear the mixture of a thousand heartbeats and breaths as all the healthy, able-bodied citizens over the age of eighteen make their way to their potential future. But the other sound is louder.

The howling.

It’s always extra vicious on nights like these, when crimson slathers the full moon above our heads. As if the Monster can sense all its untouched prey moving like blood in an artery within the walls it cannot overcome.

I bask in the chills it sends down my body. The Monster cannot reach us in here, so let it howl. Let it rage. The Guardians

will protect us as they always have, and tonight, twelve of us humans will sustain their strength so that they can keep on protecting. They call it a sacrifice, but it's not a sacrifice in the literal sense. The Chosen Ones must let the Guardians drink from their necks, yes, but they don't die. In fact, they're rewarded—with a lifetime of comfort and ease and a place in the Blood Moon Palace until the day they pass of old age.

As always when I near the giant courtyard before the palace, I find my gaze flitting up to all those balconies for proof.

The Choosing is the only other day the previous Chosen Ones come out besides Sanctuary Sunday. Now, a few dozen of them are leaning over the ivory railings, their cloaks and hair flowing in a slight breeze as they observe the crowd pooling below them. They look poised, regal, strong. A few wave.

I swallow a sudden lump of disappointment.

Turning around, I find that I've lost Malcolm in the flurry, but there's no time to go looking for him. Sentries are stationed in a semi-circle around the courtyard, herding everyone into position until I'm standing exactly twelve inches from my neighbor in every direction.

The movement dies down. The jostling comes to a halt. Even the heartbeats and breaths seem to come to a standstill, silence settling over the night like a shroud.

Only the Monster howls on, and I can't help my eyes from wandering to the Wall stationed behind the palace.

One hundred feet tall, its spiked top scrapes the silhouettes of midnight clouds in every direction. I can almost picture the Monster pacing back and forth on the other side, occasionally sitting on hideous haunches to fling its fury to the bloodstained moon.

The screech of ancient doors rips my attention downward again.

They're coming out.

They're here.

I sense rather than see them. I almost *always* sense rather than see them. There was only one time, after I had just turned eighteen, when I got to observe one of them with my own two eyes: the Tenth Guardian, a beautiful black-haired female with red, red, red lips. She'd passed me by without even glancing my way, but I'd felt the swish of her presence like a whisper grazing my skin. Felt her otherworldly grace and strength that sang of her superiority.

These people are truly a gift from heaven. Our saviors. Our idols.

Now, I feel that kind of presence again, crisscrossing through the crowd. I see my neighbors go even more rigid. All around me, spines straighten and knees begin to shake. I keep my eyes forward, trained on the back of the person in front of me.

Pick me. Pick me. Please pick me.

Nobody ever admits they want to be the Chosen One, but here I am, admitting it.

I hold my breath tight in my lungs, waiting.

At first, I'm almost positive this will be just like almost every other time, where I don't even get a glimpse of those pointed fangs, crimson eyes, or marble skin. The disappointment from earlier is sinking deeper and deeper into my gut until—*there*.

A flash of brightest white.

The people around me stir. Everyone seems to inhale as the beacon of light flows closer, and then I see one of them—*him*.

The Third Guardian.

I'd recognize him anywhere because his picture is everywhere. Hung up on every wall, threaded into every flag, carved into every statue alongside his eleven brothers and sisters. Wrapped in a rich, velvet cloak, he has wavy, golden hair, skin the color of bone, and eyes that flash the color of the moon above us.

And as he moves like silk closer and closer to me, I see them when his lips pinch up.

His fangs.

My breath burns in my chest, aching for me to release it, but I can't. The Third Guardian is moving so close that I can see his nostrils flaring as he smells each citizen that he passes, eyeing the badges pinned to their cloaks. Silver, red, green, purple, gold. His gleaming fangs seem to reflect each of the colors, but it's only when he approaches me that I hear the small, purring sound he makes as he passes each potential sacrifice.

"Hmmm."

The voice shocks me straight to my core.

Two crimson eyes flick to my badge, and I swear my heart sinks straight to my toes. I can almost *see* the future five seconds from now. His gaze will slide up to my face. He'll tilt his head ever so slightly, golden locks falling to the side, and I'll never move again, never *breathe* again as he'll pin me to the spot with that single glance and realize I'm exactly who he's looking for. Even now I'm entranced. Enthralled. *Elevated*.

But the Third Guardian doesn't lift his eyes to my face.

He simply shifts his gaze from my badge to the person behind me and moves on.

My breath whooshes out of me as if the moon pummeled me in the stomach.

What happened? Was I not good enough? Not worthy enough? Why didn't he pick me?

Heat rushes back up my legs, urging me to turn around and track his progress. I don't, of course, but I can hear him do that

purring “hmm” again from behind me, and my ears don’t even process the howling rage of the Monster in the distance as I hear another woman gasp.

“Yes, I think you’ll do nicely.”

The Third Guardian’s voice spins through the crowd, and then there’s a shift of movement as everyone stands aside. My head whips around to see him place a hand on the small of another woman’s back. Lifting her chin, she lets him lead her through the parting crowd, toward the front doors of the Blood Moon Palace.

I don’t see another Guardian all through the rest of the Choosing, but I can sense the stirring of the crowd as eleven other citizens are picked and led into the palace—and all my hope fleeing with them.

The Monster howls on.



“Diggory’s gone” is the first thing I hear from Gaia when I walk into the Healing Center locker room the next morning.

“What?”

The bags I can feel under my eyes are still weighing me down, but every healthy, able-bodied citizen over the age of eighteen is probably feeling the effects of the Choosing right about now. The twenty-four-hour period afterward always feels off-kilter, as if someone cut into our routines and scooped out a hearty chunk of it. I’m used to this feeling.

So why am I blinking so long and hard at Gaia, unable to comprehend what she just said?

“What do you mean Diggory’s *gone*?” I ask finally. “He... those injuries shouldn’t have... he was fine!” I’m reeling, staggering toward the bench and slumping into a position where my hands can cradle my face. No one dies on my watch.

But some die when I’m not on shift. I just didn’t think the gold-badged gentleman with the perfect vitals would be one of them.

Gaia surprises me by scooting herself closer to me, passing a quick look at all the other healers either getting dressed or undressed on the other side of the room. We’re not supposed to gossip, but I don’t stop her when she whispers out of the corner of her mouth, “He’s not dead. He disappeared during the Choosing—just up and snuck away when everyone else was looking the other way.”

“*What?*”

Again, that question falls out of my mouth. Again, I’m blinking rapidly at Gaia.

The only citizens exempt from the Choosing are sentries, children, and the sick or injured in the Healing Center... plus a very few select caregivers and healers who stay with those left behind. If there was ever a time to run off, it would be during that singular hour when most of Xantera is standing in formation before the Blood Moon Palace.

But I’ve never, *ever* heard of anyone doing such a thing. It’s ludicrous. Horrifying. Unspeakable.

Yet I find myself speaking anyway.

“Did staff report it?” I ask under my breath. This isn’t knowledge that should spread throughout the Healing Center. The fact that Gaia even knows about it is just a testament to her spectacular eavesdropping abilities.

Gaia nods. “The night clerk told the nearest sentries as soon as she noticed he was gone. The Twelve Guardians should have been alerted by now.”

“They got his exit on camera?”

Another nod. “Footage shows him sneaking out the front doors and into the passageway between Complexes 360 and 361. But he never returned to his housing unit, and as far as I know, he’s not showing up on any other cameras after that.”

Missing. My patient is missing, and I’ve never wanted to stitch up a situation as badly as I do now. I must have missed something when I was caring for him yesterday—some sign that the injury to his head damaged his brain, too, because no one in their right mind would risk being thrown over the Wall, fodder for the Monster, for a transgression as perplexing as running away from the Healing Center.

“It’s not your fault, Saskia.”

It would be impolite of me to argue with Gaia, but I can’t help my fingernails from digging into the metal of the bench at her words. Of *course* it’s my fault. If I had just asked him some more questions...

I pull a deep inhale through my nose and nod. “Thanks for the information, Gaia. Have a good sleep.”

“Saskia.” Motherly concern follows every line of my friend’s face as she registers my formal response. She’s the only person I’ve ever joked with after turning fifteen and leaving my original family unit.

“Really, Gaia. It’s okay. I’m sure the sentries will find him and bring him back to the Healing Center so that we can continue our care.”

Yes, that has to be the bright side I can cling to. The Twelve Guardians wouldn’t throw out someone who is clearly delusional with a bruised and battered face.

I spend the rest of my shift trying to mull it over, but unfortunately, my remaining patients are too curious about the Choosing they had to miss.

“What was it like?”

“Who was picked?”

“Did you see any of them?”

To that one, I pause with my eyes on the young patient’s face. Odette’s been in our neurology wing ever since her parents reported her unconscious on the floor about a week ago. We’re still running tests to figure out what’s wrong.

“Yes,” I answer, watching her little eyes widen at that single word. “I saw one of them.”

“Which one?” she breathes.

I hesitate before blowing out, “The Third one.”

“Oooh. My friend Cheryl has a crush on him.” The girl is practically vibrating with excitement, her heart monitor increasing to 105 bpm. “She thinks he’s the most handsome of the Twelve. Do you think he was just as handsome in person?”

I glance at the monitor. I should probably remind her of the Cardinal List of Rules right about now. Number four: *don’t ask unsolicited questions*. This type of prying curiosity is stamped out of kids by the time they receive their blue badges.

But I also know a conversation like this is one of the only bits of normalcy she’d be able to have in the Healing Center now that she doesn’t have children her age to trade improper questions with, so I relent with a soothing, “Yes, he was very, very handsome.”

Too handsome, maybe. I don’t think I’ll ever get that perfect face out of my head.

The girl squeals and claps her hands. “Oh, I knew it, I knew it. Cheryl is going to *die*. Did he notice you? Did he?”

I think of the way the Third Guardian’s eyes flicked to my badge before moving on— how he didn’t even raise his eyes to my face, but how he inhaled after passing every citizen, as if taking note of each of our scents.

“Of course he noticed me,” I whisper. “The Guardians notice everyone.”

They’re always watching, I keep to myself, not daring to glance to the corner of the room where I know a camera is blinking and recording every moment of this interaction. *They’re always watching*.

So how did Diggory manage to disappear?



After hours of taking vitals, administering medications, and changing bandages, I’m finally tearing off my scrubs and sighing off the day of work.

Sweat has dried all over me like a second skin, and I can’t wait to get back to my housing unit to lather myself in soap under a scalding shower. Usually, I wish the automatic operation was longer than five minutes, but today I’m pretty sure I’ll be grateful for every second until the spray shuts off on me.

I loiter, though, on the steps of the Healing Center, my eyes darting treacherously past the flow of civilians to the complexes across the street: 360 and 361. The space Diggory melted into.

I’m sure the sentries already tried retracing his steps. I’m also sure it’s not my place to wonder if they found anything or not.

Still, my healing motto clangs through me: nobody dies on my watch. What if Diggory is somewhere in the labyrinth of complexes, hurt and unable to ask for help? What if this still, technically, falls under the job designation the Guardians gave me? He never checked out of the Healing Center the proper way, after all. He’s still my patient.

By the time I exhale, I’m already stealing in between that dark lane sandwiched between Complex 360 and 361.

It’s just like any other walkway in here. Symmetrical doors line either side of me, with knobs and metal slats for meal-laden trays to fit through. I’ve never really studied the corners and edges of these walkways, though. My eyes have always been focused on the light spilling from the end of the darkness, not the darkness itself.

Now, I allow myself to slow my steps and look up. Down. All around.

The first thing I notice is what *isn’t* here. Flags. Loudspeakers. Screens.

Cameras.

The lack of color, the monotony, the symmetry—I’ve always considered it a no-man’s land between point A and point B. Now, it seems like a perfect crack for someone to fall through, especially when the end of this walkway splits into spiderwebbing intersections where I waver, uncertain whether to turn left, right, or continue straight ahead. I have a vague idea of the Xantera map etched into my mind from my schooling days, so I know that clusters of complexes bleed into other clusters on either side of the main road. Diggory could be anywhere within the walls of this city.

Up ahead, a door opens. Somebody exits their housing unit, their red badge gleaming in the shadows. I nod politely as she makes her way past me, as if I live in one of these complexes, too, and I’m just heading home after a long shift.

Which, on a technicality, I am. I’m just taking a detour.

To where? I don't know. I don't *know*.

Watching out for signs of bloodstain or a struggle, I continue on a meandering path until something snags my attention, and I stop dead to pivot back around. For a second, I don't understand why the door I'm staring at seems *off*, but unease trickles down my spine.

Then I realize there's no metal slat for food to fit through above the doorknob.

I gawk at the smooth absence of a slat for several seconds, feeling my pulse skitter up my neck. This... this can't be right. Unless whoever lives here doesn't need food, they should have the same door as the rest of us, the same means for receiving daily meals.

Before I can pull myself back, my knuckles are knocking against the door.

Oh, I shouldn't have done that. I *really* shouldn't have done that. Invading the privacy of someone's personal housing unit is reserved for sentries and sentries alone, unless it's Sunday. Sanctuary Sunday marks the day of balance, a reprieve in our routine. The Recreation Center unlocks its doors, the Blood Moon Palace welcomes visitors in the courtyard, and citizens can accept visitors, too.

Today isn't Sunday, though. If someone opens that door and sees a random uninvited civilian in front of their space, the sentries might be knocking on *my* door soon enough with a whole host of questions.

But nobody answers. The door doesn't open.

And when I abandon all sense of courtesy and self-preservation and try to turn the knob, I find that it won't budge.

It's locked.

Now that same unease spikes in my lungs, making it difficult to breathe. Nothing is ever locked except for the front doors of the Blood Moon Palace, but I've never heard of anyone even *trying* to open them anyway. To lock a door is a sign of distrust. And there is no reason to distrust this society the Twelve Guardians have built us from the ground up.

Almost as if something about the door repels me, I find myself hurrying on, taking turn after turn until I'm back in the last remnants of faint sunlight leaking from a pink-tinged sky. Soon, it'll be dark and the Monster will begin its nightly howling. Malcolm will be wondering where I am. Everyone is either back at their housing unit or starting a night shift, so the main road is practically empty as I sneak back onto it.

Which is why, when a scream splits the air, I have a clear view of who's making it.

The patient I thought I'd find bleeding out somewhere in between complexes is currently on the main road, kicking and thrashing, as several sentries haul him away.



THE MONSTER

The deep screams fill my head, and I already know this is over.

A taste.

A tease.

Like biting at fucking smoke and trying to rip it between my canines. Useless.

One second, I'm howling, and the next, a man's voice echoes through my skull.

Are you there?

Like he knew. He knew he could talk to me, be present in my mind, communicate beyond the Wall—which means not every citizen of Xantera is an empty, vacuous body to be controlled.

For the first time in my life, I have a link to the inside. How this man found the necklace laced with the blood of my ancestors doesn't matter right now. If the Guardians take him while it still hangs around his neck, he'll die for nothing.

This opportunity cannot be wasted.

Throw it, I yell in my head.

Anyone, anything, would be better than one of those Twelve parasites getting their hands back on the one, tiny part of me I have on the inside.

Rip it off your fucking neck, I urge him further, more vicious, forgetting his name he told me mere hours ago. *Do not let them take it again.*

The man's mental grunts are like punches to my gut, and I take off running through the mist of the forest. It's so thick it feels like rain against my face. A chill follows it. But I need to be closer, to feel the stone against my body.

My veins ignite as I approach it, a chaotic energy wrenching through every nerve. My spine straightens, I stretch my legs, and my arms reach out.

I press my claws against the ten-foot-thick Wall, ignoring the pain that zaps me. There's a path that winds to the left and right from the amount of times I've paced the perimeter. Scratch marks rise above my head from the number of times I've tried to climb it.

I was so close this time. So close to instructing this man how to open the Wall, only to have the hope ripped from my heart.

Anger surges again at the sound of another scream. I slam myself into the stone and growl, *Throw the necklace if it's the last thing you do.*

I'm met with only silence.



SASKIA

Immediately, my healer instincts kick in.

I zone in on every detail of Diggory as the sentries drag him toward the Blood Moon Palace, from his ragged screams to the trail of blood splatters he's leaving in his wake to the crooked dip near his collarbone as the sentries tug even harder on his arms.

Guardians, they actually *dislocated* his shoulder.

I don't hesitate this time. Several straggling passerby gawk at me as I sprint toward Diggory, but for once in my life, I don't have time to assess whether my manners are appropriate or not. My focus is *him* and the way his cries of pain are shredding my insides apart.

"Hey. Hey! Let him go!"

The sentries crank their heads in my direction. Like every other citizen of Xantera, they wear badges pinned to the front of their cloaks, but *unlike* every other citizen of Xantera, they get helmets and weapons, too—not to be used against us, but against the Monster in case of a breach.

Now, though, I find my eyes shooting to the rapier swords sheathed against both of their hips as their eyes widen then narrow at me through the slits in their helmets.

"Back away. This man is a danger to society and must be—"

"No, no, no."

I'm close enough that I can see Diggory's face now. The bruises have yellowed slightly, but fresh cuts and scrapes glisten on his cheeks and forehead and...

"He's one of our residents at the Healing Center," I explain as quickly as I can, trying to fabricate a good enough story using what I think is the truth. "He just has a concussion that I missed during my initial assessment. It's made him loopy and

disoriented, but I promise if you can just escort him back to the Healing Center, I'll get some meds and fluids in him, and he'll be good as new by next week."

At the sound of my voice, Diggory's gaze travels to my face, blood vessels spiderwebbing in the whites of his eyes. They widen in recognition before glazing over, as if he's straining to listen to something or someone beyond me.

The sentries only pause for a moment.

"Guardians' orders," one of them says firmly, and then they're dragging him away again.

I watch them go, rooted in place and scrambling to come up with something, anything, to say to get them to stop. But a direct order from the Guardians isn't exactly something you can argue with. I'd be better off stealing one of their rapiers and slicing off my own head.

Yet I can't quit staring, evaluating every move Diggory makes and every move made against him, as if I can still fix this by writing a report on his health condition when I get back to work.

And that's why I notice him scrabbling at his throat, tearing something from the folds of his cloak, and chucking it to the side in the midst of his struggle to resist.

The sentries don't stop, don't notice, but I follow the arc of the glittering object as it lands on the ground between the Production Factory and the Childcare Center.

Time seems to waver in the space between my breaths as I try to tell myself to leave it alone. To turn around and hightail it back to my housing unit so that I can eat dinner with Malcolm and tell him that my day was pleasant and ask "How was yours?"

But of course, I can't. I stay glued in place as I watch the last of Diggory and the sentries fade into the distance, until they're no more than three dots before the Blood Moon Palace. Only after the doors open up to inhale those dots do I jump toward the place where the object glitters.

It's... I don't know *what* it is.

I swear I've seen or heard of something like this before, but I can't remember the name. It's a long chain weighed down by what looks like a solid miniature vial bracketed in elaborate swirls of gold. The vial itself is red, as red as the blood moon, as red as the Guardians' eyes, and I can't help but think that it looks like it was cut from a heart that ended up turning to stone.

My fingers stretch out to touch it...

A noise to my left sends me into a flurry of quick movement. I jerk upward. The Production Factory doors squeak open and a stream of manufacturers flows out. One of them glances over his shoulder, eyebrows scrunching at the way I'm standing in the middle of the two buildings. His eyes flick down to the space between my shoes.

"Good evening," I force out with a fixed smile, breezing out of the rich black of the shadows and into the shallow gray of a dying dusk.

"Good evening," he echoes with a smile just as wide.

I walk past him, eyes trained on the road ahead. It's *way* past time for me to head back to my unit, but I force myself to move at a steady pace, to not attract attention, to not reveal how viciously my hands are shaking at my sides.

As far as I know, there aren't any rules against picking up strange chained vials and stuffing them in the inside pocket of your cloak moments before someone spots you.

But I don't want anyone to find out and tell me otherwise.



When I get home, Malcolm is already seated at the dinner table, waiting for me. To my surprise, he hasn't dug into the chicken, rice, and peas that must have been delivered to our unit a good half hour ago. Both of our trays sit there, untouched and no longer steaming.

"Good evening," he says.

"Good evening, I'm sorry I'm late. There was a commotion."

I already decided on the walk over that half the truth would be better than none of the truth at all. Lying would be extremely rude, but my civil partner deserves at least *some* kind of explanation.

Once I'm settled in my chair and we're both eating, therefore, I tell him all about Diggory and the sentries in between bites, and how I hope the Guardians don't toss him to the Monster, and I wish I would have done something at the Healing Center to prevent this from happening, and...

"Are you even listening, Malcolm?"

I don't know where my temper is coming from—maybe last night's Choosing coupled with what just happened—but something is simmering beneath my skin. Agitated. *Angry*. I've only been angry a handful of times in my life, and all of them involved other kids on the playground at the Childcare Center. I've never been angry at another functional member of society before.

Today, right now, I'm angry at all of them.

"What?" Malcolm is saying, stray peas falling out of the corner of his mouth as he gapes.

I can still feel the weight of Diggory's object in the inside pocket of my cloak, but the weight in my heart is even worse. All I want is a civil partner who can *pretend* to care for even a fraction of a minute. Malcolm waited for me to eat dinner, but the absent-minded wander of his attention is clear: our union is a routine for him. Nothing more.

"Would you have chosen me if the Guardians hadn't picked me for you?" I dare to ask.

Tears burn against the back of my throat. Malcolm gawks at me as if he's never really seen me before, his jaw slack, his pupils racing back and forth across my face.

"Well?"

"Saskia." He clears his throat. "I can't... this isn't something we should be... the Guardians never choose wrong—they're... they..."

"But say they *do*," I blurt out. "Say that they *do* sometimes choose wrong."

I bite down on my lip, even as more wicked thoughts race through my mind: *say the Guardians choose wrong because they sit in their palace and view us through cameras and read their pairings through loudspeakers and never feel the actual spark—or lack of spark—between a couple and never realize that you, Malcolm, have always looked everywhere but at me.*

"Saskia," Malcolm says again, an ache beneath the admonishment in his voice.

And I know. I know right then and there, as if I'm making a clinical analysis, that Malcolm does not and cannot and will never love me. Not in the way I want him to. Not in the way that I could ever love him.

I stare at the grayish brown lumps of my uneaten chicken, my anger crashing back down into the pit of my stomach and shriveling up into something else. Something smaller and sadder.

"I understand," I whisper.

"What? You—I..."

I look back up at him and gather a deep breath. Refusing to glance at the camera above the screen in our living room, I lean toward him and whisper so quietly that nobody else would be able to hear if they decided to listen in to our individual unit in this exact moment of time, "We won't be in the family-making stage for several more years, you know. We don't have to... be together on Sundays—not in that way. There's no camera in our joint room. Nobody will ever know if we just take a break from pretending and forcing ourselves." I try to gather the words in my mouth. "We can just be friends behind closed doors."

Malcolm tips his head like he didn't hear a thing I just said. Like he's in as much denial as I've always been. "Are you feeling okay? Did you pick up a fever from your shift today?"

"No," I insist. "I mean, yes, I feel fine, and no, I don't have a fever. Admit it, Malcolm."

"Admit what?"

"That you don't feel for me. Not like you should."

"We shouldn't think like that," he replies much too quickly. "That would be irresponsible of us."

"Irresponsible?" I laugh despite the sadness sitting in my chest. "It's our private life, isn't it? No one else has to know what we do in our own home. Maybe we can start as friends since we were never given the chance to get to know each other." I can't help but glance at the camera this time, and now I lower my voice even more. "Just one little difference behind the door of our bedroom. How would they know?"

Of course, what I'm asking of him is a lot more serious than 'just one little difference.' It's the Cardinal Rule I hate the most, the one I've never been able to fully follow: *Don't keep secrets from authorities.*

"As long as no one asks us," I press, "then we're not lying."

I see the moment all pretense drops from Malcolm's face, leaving nothing behind but that ache that echoes mine.

"Friends?" he says, tasting the word as if it's something foreign that he can't comprehend.

"Friends," I whisper back.

Six long months seem to flash between our eyes. Six months of him pumping into me while I stare at the ceiling and push moans out of my throat, wondering when it'll start to feel good for me, too, or if I'll always have to do it myself. Six months of polite breakfast and dinner conversations that amount to nothing more than the same twelve words recycled over and over again until he's more of a stranger than when we were first assigned to each other.

Finally, relief shutters in Malcolm's eyes.

He nods.

I nod back and settle into my chair again.

Malcolm and I might be civil partners in the system, but we aren't together like that within these four walls. We'll still have to spend a few hours in our joint room together on Sanctuary Sunday, but if we just lie there without doing anything... well, what the Guardians don't know can't hurt them. Or us.

And for the first time in six months, Sunday doesn't sound too bad.



After washing our dishes side by side, Malcolm and I bid each other goodnight with slight smiles on our lips and retire to our separate rooms.

I shed my cloak, hearing the small *thunk* as the thing inside it hits the ground. But I don't inspect that thing yet. First, I shower off the day's events, letting the water blister my pores until my skin flares with patches of red. When it automatically shuts off after five minutes, I take my time drying my hair, slipping into my nightgown, and pulling the covers up to my chin.

Then and only then do my thoughts explode.

Diggory. Oh, poor, poor Diggory.

What could he have possibly been thinking?

What could he have possibly been doing?

Did he really get a concussion, was he really loopy and delusional, or did he have another motive? Was he trying to break into someone's unit? Did he succeed?

And what is that thing he threw as they were dragging him away?

I can't resist much longer. I tip sideways, reaching for my cloak that I tossed onto the floor and dig for that chained vial in the inside pocket to inspect it.

As soon as my skin makes contact with the object, I yelp.

An electric current seems to shoot through me, there one moment and gone the next. I toss it onto my bedspread where I can observe it without touching it, a frown tugging on my mouth as I stare at it in the red-tinged light of my bedside lamp.

I don't remember feeling that same electricity when I touched it the first time to throw it into my pocket. But I grabbed it by the chain then, and this time I swear my fingers skimmed the vial itself. Was the shock just a figment of my imagination, or...?

I touch the vial again, and that same electric shock flits through me, as if trying to connect with my pulse and make it skip a beat.

"What *are* you?" I marvel quietly.

The answer scratches at the inside of my brain. I have a very distinct feeling my old instructors taught us about these kinds of things in our history classes, that similar objects were used as decorative markers of power and prestige. Selfish. Greedy. Excessive.

So why do I want to put it on?

I close my eyes and throw my head back into my pillow, thinking, thinking, thinking.

Diggory had it around his neck, I'm sure of that. He was clutching at his throat when he ripped it off, and while the folds of his cloak may have been hiding a majority of it at the time, I would have noticed it on him in the Healing Center. Which means he found them *after* he ran away—both this strange object and a cloak.

Maybe he really was just crazy. A lost cause.

Or maybe if I mimic his last action, something will click in my brain to prove that he wasn't.

Opening my eyes again, I sit up and grab the object by the chain. Careful not to touch the vial, I raise my hands slowly over my head.

Selfish. Greedy. Excessive. The words clang through me as the vial gleams right in front of my face, its golden bracket winking in the lamplight.

Then a familiar howl erupts from the distant night, jolting me from my trance.

And I let the chain drop around my neck.



THE MONSTER

One second, my heartbeat is my own.

The next, another heartbeat latches onto my pulse, a new, foreign presence sprouting in my blood.

Someone has found the necklace.

If it's one of the Twelve—that third one specifically, here to taunt me—I'll make sure my revenge on him is extra sweet.

What is wrong with me? A female voice fills my head: gentle and warm, like a sunray stretching out to caress you. It's too rich, the timbre too colorful, to be a Guardian, but I know she must feel our connection, too. Must be aware of the electric tether now connecting us from either side of the Wall. *Maybe I'm going crazy too*, she thinks.

I wait.

Whoever this woman is, I need a second to figure out my tactic. If she doesn't have a rebellious spirit like the other one, then how can I use her? I need to find the advantage.

It feels alive, she thinks, *but it can't be. It's not real.*

And I just can't help myself.

Actually, it is, I reply angrily. For too long have the people of Xantera thought of me as a distant threat, a near-myth always prowling beyond their horizon of reality. I'm real. And I will *not* fade away.

Her gasp shoots through me, almost like she's stolen the oxygen from my own lungs, and her thoughts go haywire.

I try to sort through them as I seek shelter from the chilly evening air.

No, that was my imagination. Take it off anyway. I don't even know what it is. No, it had to be Malcom through the wall. Yes, it was Malcom.

Who the hell is Malcom? I ask.

Her response is a muffled scream followed by *Get it off! Get it off!*

I'll admit, this is actually a little fun. For two hundred years, I've been tormented by the marble-cold voices of the Twelve. No one so naive has ever graced me with their mental presence, and her mind is better than sitting alone with my own thoughts. It reminds me of a prism, rich with color.

Let's forget about Malcolm, I offer. It goes silent mid-scream. *I'm much more interested in your name.*

Who—who are you?

There's a faint echo, like she whispered her disbelief out loud, and my chuckle turns dark.

That's not how this is going to work.

But I'm the one with this thing around my neck... I could just take it off if you don't answer?

She poses it like a question, almost to herself: a fleeting, threatening thought that she tried to suppress but let slip out anyway.

Perhaps I underestimated her.

Whoever it is that picked up the necklace, she doesn't know who I am. She doesn't know *what* I am.

Maybe she's exactly what I need.



SASKIA

Your name, he demands.

I'm paralyzed—more with fear or curiosity, I'm not sure. When I first put the necklace on, the vial settling against my chest, something within it seemed to reach out and *grab* onto my heartbeat.

Now, there's a literal voice in my head. And even though I'm fairly certain I must be hallucinating, that voice is so dark and rough and *masculine* that I can't help but wonder how my own mind could conjure something so... not me. It reminds me of the rich soil on the southern end of Xantera, where our farmers tend to our fall harvest. And I want to keep unearthing it.

But I shouldn't be curious. It goes against the Cardinal List of Rules for me to wish for more. I should be ripping this thing off my chest and chucking it as far away from me as I can.

I don't know who you are, and you won't tell me your name, I say instead, despite my better judgment. Maybe Malcolm was right earlier when he asked if I have a fever. I must have caught a bug from the Healing Center. Or maybe the vial itself radiates some kind of sickness.

You're not sick, the voice growls in my head, cutting through my own thoughts. A trickle of uneasiness filters into me at how *real* he sounds. *What do you look like then?*

Excuse me?

My patience is wearing thin at how rude this fever is.

You refuse to tell me your name, and I'd like a sense of who I'm talking to, the voice says.

I—I— I stutter, trying to piece together his words and the confusion they pump into my veins. I look down at the crimson vial laying over my heart. *I don't know. I don't know what I look like.*

How can you not know what you look like? he questions me.

Why would I need to know?

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